



Crosscut

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Editorial Staff

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Matt Pifer

Cover Painting

“From the dock at Greg’s Camp, Summer Breeze” by Dave Haskins

Thanks to Robert Clark, Julie Green, Stephanie Gross, and Frank Hubbard

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Introduction

The 2010 edition of *Crosscut* collects a variety of writing and visual art, including short stories, poems, photographs, paintings, and a few tinctures. The aim, if necessary, is to provide an open forum, like buying vegetables at the street market, and discovering something has been hidden beneath the kale.

In the agonistic context of the academy, this approach seems crisp, a whisper from the study where the coffee grinder so often muddles things. In this collection, you'll find refreshing sincerity ("When I was a Student" and "Ovens"), just how near heartache can be ("Daughters" and "Haikus"), and the occasional bit of levity ("A Change of Heart"). These works are grounded among stunning visual art that remind us feeling is just around the corner, revealed by angles and accentuated by the quaver in a line.

In compiling the collection, we sought works that had something of the quality Neil Gaiman describes: works that use "a lightening flash of magic as a way of showing . . . something we have already seen a thousand times as if we have never seen it before" (*Stories* 6). This lightening flash is something that makes us want to read further, lingering on a line and reflecting on not only what but how something means. Add to this weather, Cynthia Ozick's sense that a story that matters has "a certain corona of moral purpose" (qtd in Gaiman 6), and we have a collection that is worth reading and rereading—a collection that gets closer to "what's really important—motive, feeling, belief" (Wallace 273).

Notes:

Gaiman, Neil, and Al Sarrantonio, eds. *Stories: All-New Tales*. New York: Haper Collins, 2010. Ebook.

Wallace, David Foster. "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky." *Remember the Lobster: And Other Essays*. New York: Back Bay-Little Brown, 2006. 255-74. Print.

The Editor

Experience is a Cracked Brick

Ulrike Guthrie



"Paddy Murphy's" (photo by Liz Grandmaison)

Beth Clark

When I Was a Student....

Recently, I approached the dreaded head-to-toe physical, the final practical exam for the advanced health assessment class that I was taking. My dread came from the fact that I shared the class with six of my former students and it was co-taught by three of my peers. A failure in the final assessment would shame me in front of my peers as well as former students.

As I discussed my trepidation with some colleagues, they began to talk about their experiences. One had to perform assessments on three different age groups. Another had to do hers on a stranger in an inner city clinic. My experience seemed trivial compared to the challenges they had faced, yet I found little comfort from the comparison. The stakes were raised, as a failure in such a controlled environment would bring even greater shame.

What craziness possessed me to pursue this degree at the age of 57? My kids were grown and on their own. Wasn't this the time for me to relax and spend my evenings reading or quilting or painting or watching a movie now and then? Now I was pursuing a degree that I had started over thirty years ago. Back then I had abandoned my educational plan to marry my husband. Here at Husson University, I was presented with the opportunity to accomplish a long-held goal. It was both a blessing and a curse.

College professors, especially those whose careers have spanned decades, are known to say, "When I was a student...." I often ponder what purpose this statement serves. Is it to validate the importance of that professor's own experience? Is it to convey a sort of elitism? Does it minimize the challenges faced by today's students, challenges that may be different but perhaps no less demanding?

Driving to Bangor, I pull out the study notes that I have written on index cards. I try to maximize my time by studying

during the morning and evening commutes. I recall doing the same in my undergraduate career, trying to grab a couple of extra minutes of study time as I negotiated the incessant construction and jammed traffic on Interstate 93 to Boston. I had more time and fewer responsibilities then, and yet I remember the challenge as being every bit as daunting as the challenges I am facing now.

I reflect back on my experiences with my best friend in the Northeastern University nursing program. We partnered for each of our science labs, and our relationship was a comedy of errors. Though each of us graduated with highest honors, there were times when we thought we wouldn't graduate at all. In our chemistry lab, the beaker of liquid boiling over a Bunsen burner broke in a perfect circle along its lower edge creating a fountain of boiling solute. Simply turning on a faucet in the biology lab sent the goose-neck faucet flying into space with the water covering both us and our science experiment. The final straw was the physiology lab where our kymograph never worked and our "anesthetized" frog went hopping across the laboratory tables. We tried to record the actions of the frog's gastrocnemius and the rat's uterine muscle. Nothing produced the anticipated results. The kymograph slowed and speeded up. The paper jammed. Our frustrations increased exponentially.

My partner and I approached our physiology professor. We broke into tears as we outlined our multiple frustrations with the equipment, the lab specimens, and our stalwart efforts to secure the coveted grade of A. After listening to our story calmly, the professor uttered these long remembered words: "I know that you think you have a big problem. But to me this is not a problem at all. When I was young in Germany, I was sent to a concentration camp. I escaped, barefoot, across the frozen ground. All my family and friends perished in the camp. I alone escaped. I went to college in Europe where I was discriminated against not only because I was a Jew but also because I was a woman. Many people wanted me to fail. I persevered as I said to myself, 'I will do the best that I can. And if I fail, I will work in the bakery. I will knead the bread, and I will be the best baker that I can be.'"

We said little more after hearing her words, but

lowered our gaze and left her office quietly. We felt shame and guilt at burdening her with our petty difficulties. We never approached that professor again. We now understood why she would not kill the lab rats as other professors had, but rather performed hysterectomies so that we could study the smooth muscles of their uteri. We now understood her thick accent and her gentle actions. For me, the shame and guilt persisted and would resurface over the years as I tried to process the difference between my life and hers. My life would never be as horrific as hers; but my small difficulties still presented challenges and I benefited from mentors who recognized that sometimes it is valuable to meet a student at his or her own level. Does it really matter to that student if the professor has had a more difficult road?

My physiology professor gave me a lasting lesson. From that time forth, whenever I faced adversity, I would repeat her words like a mantra. "I will do the best I can. If I fail and have to be a baker, then I will knead the bread and be the best baker that I can be." There are countless times when these words have given me inspiration and perspective, a centering in a stormy world. She also made me more sensitive to the young students who have a limited perspective, branching out from a relatively sheltered life. Do my stories really matter to them? Which ones will have the greatest meaning and the most lasting value?

I thought back to my colleagues telling the stories of their head-to-toe assessments. My experience using my husband, who I had used extensively as a practice partner, would never compare with theirs doing three head-to-toe assessments or performing with strangers in a busy inner city clinic. But my experience was what it was. I had the stakes of failing before my colleagues and former students. A failure might shame my husband as well. My time and effort and sleepless nights would be negated by a failure. I realized that sometimes comparisons do not serve the intended purpose. I need to be sensitive to that fact when I work with students. Their world is different than the world of my youth. My experiences are no better or worse than theirs. Our experiences are different and that difference brings richness to our sharing

in the educational process.

My education was overshadowed by the Vietnam War. Hundreds of students from Northeastern and neighboring colleges and universities streaked down the streets of Boston – the picture of their naked bodies stares at me from the pages of my college yearbook. Free love; sex, and drugs and rock and roll; ban the bomb – these were the phrases that interwove the fabric of my college years. *Hair* was playing at the Colonial Theater. Friends were going to Woodstock. One of my brothers served in the army in Vietnam while the other applied for conscientious objector status, tearing my family apart. When I was a student, I straddled two cultures: the world of my parents and the world of my own generation. These worlds spoke different languages (“like... you know...”), had different values and norms, and asked different questions. It was not easy learning to be bicultural, while at the same time pursuing a demanding college education.

I am glad that I am still a student. My age and history means that I will never be able to connect with students who are younger than my youngest child; yet the experience of being a student keeps me sensitive to the hopes, fears, and stressors of being in the student role. I cannot fully understand the experiences of Generation X, Y or Z, but I can honor the experiences and ideas and values of those students. Making comparisons for the exercise of motivation, one-upmanship, or minimizing the experience of another probably has little value in the context of educational growth. When I was a student, the world was different. It was at times both challenging and overwhelming, but nowhere near as complex as the world faced by the young adults of today. I hope I can pass on to students the wisdom of my experience in a way that inspires rather than shames. That is not an easy task. My ego as a student is often fragile. The stakes are high and the challenges enormous. Thank goodness for educators who recognize the challenges inherent in the student role and support and affirm. When I was a student....

Cliff Guthrie

Husson University Fight Song

Stand up for Husson

Stand up for Husson we've got spirit.
Stand up and cheer right now! (Rah, Rah, Rah!)
Cheer for the Green and Gold, let's hear it,
We're gonna show them how! (Fight, Fight, Fight!)
And when the game is won the bells will
Ring out ol' Husson's name, (Go Husson!)
Sending our hearts to soar like Eagles,
Over the skies of Maine.

(Music and original lyrics: Gordon Bowie, 1985; Rev. 2009 by
Cliff Guthrie)

Terri Baker

OVENS

The Hecatomb ovens
 Accept no loaves,
 Only bodies
 Unrising
 The bread of our
 Ovens stoked
 Ashen snow
 From unhinged jaws
 And on their
 Snow that never
 On the tongue.

Gaping wide

Unresisting cattle.
 They have become
 Affliction.
 Morning to night,
 Floats

Searing breath;
 Melts

9

THREE APPLES

Oh Paris!
 Troy's mistress
 Has laid siege
 To your heart.
 Which three apples,
 Golden, perfect and round
 Will you toss behind?
 Now I have become
 A gray-eyed
 Jealous goddess,
 Slighted goddess.

Listen you, Paris!
 For you
 Virginal goddesses
 Would lay down
 Their cloaks

For a single night
Or just a second look.

In that moment,
Between past
And future yet
To come,
Did I feel
Your lips
Against my skin?
The glisk
Of sweet pain
Race through
My beating heart?
Did I
Imagine that kiss,
Placed there
And gone in
A breath?

Did you think
It owed
Or did it
Travel the
Air and space
Between us?
I imagined that
Kiss again,
The out of
Time instant
Fading to past,
Placed and
Gone too quick.

If it were Night and I was Alone

Ulrike Guthrie



"Downtown Bangor Building Backsides" (photo by Liz Grandmaison)

Sammi Herr

Girl's Night Out

I have discovered that no matter how delicious the masculine psyche, mastery of the buzz kill comes factory installed. While I serve femininity like pouring tea for an elegant guest, he, a heretofore cheerful life form, can simply re-enter the room clothed in his obsession with schedule and send my brilliant ideas plummeting with utter disregard. What divine flaw manifests in me so that I am repeatedly surprised at this ironic demonic feature of the masculine mind?

Well, then, you say, confer your brilliant ideas on one of your own kind! Elementary, my Dear, as if I hadn't already thought of that! The caveat here is that once left to its own schedule- obsessed devices this beautiful masculine soul becomes melancholy that I am no longer sharing my innermost thoughts which, he correctly intuits, means my devotional energy is being channeled into my brilliant ideas instead. Trust me, brilliant ideas can be exquisite companions as they can carry you off to exotic places and catapult you into the most intriguing circumstances, not to mention they can make you rich. In fact, they can spend days or weeks with me without wearing out a single welcome! Not so the masculine soul! Without warning, a take-your-breath-away-romantic can abruptly morph into a verbal villain and never miss a beat! What flawed mechanism of female logic permits me to endure this incivility? It seems to be innate, inescapable-pretzel logic!

I hear the door open and the play begins. The curtain opens, Act 1: First there are the wide, soulful puppy eyes, the thumping tail, seemingly oblivious to the fact he just left muddy paw prints all across your clean, open heart.

"As if," you say inwardly-what-e-v-e-r! Same soulful eyes, the tilted halo, the thumping tail.... (God, no disrespect, but are you POSITIVE this is the same creature whose electric soul-kisses curls my toes in the predawn hours?) Your emotional life begins to flash before your eyes like a vintage Batman script; then the inevitable female sigh of surrender.

(Oh, Come on! Even you couldn't stay angry with a straight face now.) At this point, the masculine soul who has practiced this skill from birth on every possible configuration of the female psyche, correctly intuiting your vulnerability to his wiles and promises you diamonds on your fingers and bells on your toes, if you will graciously forgive him this once-in-a-lifetime lapse of reason that caused him to treat you in a manner unworthy of the princess you are. You hesitate....remembering for a moment the pain of his cold-hearted insensitivity!

But wait--before your reason can be fully reinstated--the whispers, the lost puppy eyes, the electric kisses, the utter honesty of his emotions converge on your objections like heat-seeking missiles destroying your strongest resolve. Game over! Just to make sure the terms of surrender are understood, you stand tall and declare that you will n-e-v-e-r forgive this circumstance should it ever happen again. Sparks fly from the victor's eyes, the halo straightens, and you could almost swear you hear ch'ching! Curtains close, and guess who's taking a bow?

๑

Five American Sentences

1. He wears his culture like a button down shirt, opinions on his sleeve.
2. Her bare feet touch the floor like a flat stone skipping across the water.
3. Someday she'll find you playing in the rain sweet torchy saxophone jazz.
4. The city sits on top of the hill laughing at me beckoning still.
5. Tyranny of shoulds, opus of coulds is the chorus of wannabe.

๑

David Casavant

Joy of Ages In Her Eyes:

A tribute to my Aunt Alberta

She had the
joy of ages
 In her
eyes
Three
hundred-
sixty plus
seasons
 Shone
through
upon us.

Many
seasons
were hard
 The
Great
Depression,
Wars
Mixed with
 Unforese-
eable
advancemen-
t of human
technology.

Yet of these
she had no
desire
 The
simple

season
 change-
 Color, snow,
 blossoms,
 greenery and
 brilliant
 colors-

Brought
 her serenity
 and peace.

Try as we
 would to
 relieve her
 struggles

She
 found joy in
 her everyday
 burdens
 Through the
 simple
 pleasures

Of the
 passing day.

“Write a
 book” we
 would say.

“Even if I
 did you
 wouldn’t
 Have time to
 read it.”

Came her
 reply.

Despite the
 many
 challenges

During
her life-time
She
remained
true to the
Simple
essence of a
humble life.

Not masked
by
possessions;
Worn
true by
compassion;
Softened by
God's grace;
She had
the joy of
ages in her
eyes.

May She
Rest in the
Eternal Joy
that
Shimmered from her eyes.

Nature Between Our Toes

Glenn C. Davis



"Cobbosseecontee Lake"

Scott Misler

Haikus

Persistent clocks heard
Woodpeckers flit about
Basement now quiet

Six jars of jelly
Firewood cut but not stacked
Nights turning cooler

Maple leaves redden
Potatoes pushing upward
Firewood now stacked

No one goes without
Mom's raisin bread cooling—but
Who gets the last piece

Children sleep wood warms
Wondering what to do next
Heavy rains again

Spaghetti drying
Marinara bubbling
Children come running

๑

Dr. Susmita Chatterjee

The Poetic Journey of Rabindranath Tagore¹

It is not the events of the life of a poet that can entirely reflect the many moods that the poet is likely to experience. Nor is it possible to capture the upheavals that take place in the great mind of the poet. His ideas, yearnings and longings, his visions and imaginations and most of all his aspirations as expressed in his books of verse. Yet his readers are keen to know more about his poetic journey.

In his book, *Morning Serenade* (Prabhat Sangeet in Bengali language), a poem is the *Unraveled Dreams of a Fountain*, when translated. The poem speaks of the great urge of a fountain to make a break into the wide world for it has heard the call of the ocean. A ray of the bright sun light has roused the little fountain so long imprisoned in the mountain crags. The poet bursts out in verse:

I know not how the rays of the sun
Has entered into my life
I know not why after so long
I am awakened I am awakened
And the water swells and I am
Unable to check my life's passions
And my life's urges.
For I have heard from afar the call of the ocean

His poetic genius gushes out in many a color like the rainbow and flows through the wide world for it has heard the call of fulfillment.

He was deeply influenced by the Vedantic vision and he says:

I know not how my heart has opened up
And the world has come to embrace me.
Music is his vehicle of unity and so he says:

¹ Born on the 7th of May 1861, Rabindranath Tagore was a Nobel prize winner for literature in 1913. He passed away on the 7th of August 1941.

When I look at the world through my music
 I recognize it and I know it.
 In the language of light the sky fills with love
 And then I find that I am in whisper with all.

The poet was deeply influenced by Vaishnavism which is a religious order that believes in universal love, which lies deep in the heart of every individual human soul.

Human soul is symbolized by Radha the lover of Krishna, the Lord God. The poet took a pseudonym Bhanu Singh and wrote: The Ballad of Bhanu Singh in a language of yester years. It is a language that poet Vidyapati used to write in the middle ages, about the love of Radha and Krishna. After this many books of verse follow. In the beginning the poet is full of romance and beauty- longs for human love. Some of his poetic works of this period are, Portrait and Songs(Chabi O Gaan), The Loud and Soft notes(Kodi O Komal), and Manashi. Romance, beauty and love predominates in this work. Manashi is the lady love. She is also the lady of the mind. Perhaps she is the eternal feminine in the mind of the poet.

In his book of verse, the Golden Boat (Sonar Tari) he is more philosophic yet in tune with romance and beauty. Some of his famous compositions are in this book. The poet is waiting on the bank of the river and the boat comes near. The boatman takes all his produce and fills the boat but never gives the poet a place in his boat to sit, for he says that it is a small boat and there is no space for the poet. The poet is desolate and forlorn. His life's achievements are separated from him. A travesty of life.

He loved the river Padma that flows through the province of Bengal. Tagore's family estate was around this river and his ancestral home is situated at Shilaidaho , a place on the banks of the river Padma . The name Shilaidaho is after Mr Shelly, the indigo planter who lived in that area which is in the eastern part of undivided Bengal and now is in Bangladesh.

The poet was entrusted with the duty of taking care of the Tagore estate by his father Maharishi Devendranath Tagore. The poet could see much of rural Bengal which he has immortalized in his lyrics, songs and writings. In a torrential

flow of poetic exuberance he captures the cloudy sky of Bengal, the monsoon rains, the green paddy fields, the thatched cottages and the people around the shores of the river Padma in an endless variety of poetic themes and short stories. His famous poem the Dark girl, is composed against the background of an approaching storm. The dark doe eyed damsel looked at the sky with knitted brows and listened to the rumbling clouds. She is in a hurry and had no time to put her veil on her head, for she had to get her cows back before the storm struck. On the edge of the fields of Maynapada village the poet has a glimpse of this dark doe eyed girl. He wrote - the villagers call her dark but however dark she is, I have seen her dark doe like eyes---. A description of a dark doe eyed damsel is made immortal in Bengali literature by the poet. Only a poet can recognize a creation so beautiful.

His relation with nature is an affinity that is almost emotional and close to his heart. Nature stirs the deepest feelings in the heart of the poet and he ushers each mood of nature in joy, in thrill, and in ecstasy. Even a blade of grass is significant to him. He wrote:

Many lands I travelled
 Much money I spent
 To go and see the mountain ranges
 And to see the ocean
 What, I did not see with my eyes open
 Taking a step or two from my abode
 Is, a single dew drop placed on a rice pod.

The seasons are very distinct in India and he wrote on each of the six seasons songs and lyrics in abundance. It has remained on the lips of the Bengali speaking people and they usher each season in joy with Tagore's music just as they sing his songs in each of their festivals like Dewali and Holi.

Despite personal tragedies like death of near and dear ones, he loves his life. In a poem of great popularity he gives vent towards his love of life. And he wrote-

I do not want to die, in this beautiful world
 I want to live among human beings.

Nature, love and life sometimes make a harmonious trio in his poetry. The true meaning and the unity of it all is

revealed to the ardent reader or listener of his songs. Together they unfold the poet's dreams, his imagination, his pain and sorrow and his joy. He wrote, for example:

The creeper and the jasmine flower were sad
When we met on a honey night on the banks of
Yamuna
And we did not talk.

Kheya or The Boat is one of his poetic works. It is as if the poet is crossing some deep waters and reaches the other shore of his poetic journey. It is reminiscent of the Buddhist journey in a great big boat or a small one, that take the pilgrims of life to their rightful destination as the boat plies through the turmoil of life.

Tagore was initiated at a very early age into the philosophy of the Upanishads. The essence of this Hindu scripture is the oneness of the world and the universe. The Isa Upanishad says that God envelopes the universe. In fact, it is the eternal universal that man longs for and he yearns to find in his own self the pulsations of the eternal universal. So he writes:

The sky is filled with the sun and the stars
And the world is filled with the jest for life
The ebb and flow of endless time
Make the universe swing
I feel that bubbling in my veins.
And all that flows in my blood stream.

I have found my place amidst all this
And in surprise I keep awake
And keeps awake my awakened self.

I have poured my soul in the bosom of the
earth
I have tried to search the great unknown
Amidst all that I have known
So surprised am I and I keep awake
And awakened is my soul.

A very impressive picture is to see the flight of birds known as Balaka. Tagore immortalized the flight of the swans that fly in triangles in the sky of Bengal and in other parts of

the country as well. After these flying swans he names his book of verse *Balaka* or the *Flying Swans*. Here in the book we see the feelings of the poet for an unusual dynamism that encompasses the world. The flight of the swans brings home the idea of motion. The poet feels as if the mountains are craving to be like the loose clouds that float in the sky of a summer day. A resounding moan is heard -not here somewhere else, somewhere other than here. The poem conveys a picture of motion and the poet feels it in his heart that the mountains are unable to stand in their place for they want to be like the uncontrollable clouds of *Vaishak*, the first summer month and float in the sky.

In his book of verse *Chitra* or paintings his poetry focuses on great poetic challenges. The poet here has moved to a different horizon. From horizon to horizon is his own flight and he faces new challenges, No longer can romance and beauty satisfy him. He now has a strong urge to turn to life. Beauty is always his goal. But how can he forget the pursuit of the Good and the pursuit of Truth for those are the triune truth of the Being. Tagore is an ontologist at heart, and he is deeply influenced by the *Upanishads*. He ardently wants to return to life and wants to find the truth in life. In *Chitra* we find that his poetry is strewn with such challenges which his mighty pen brings out in poetic magnificence.

Kalpana or *Imagination* is a unique book of verse. Here we find in some of the poems an agony that the poet suffers from. The poet's agony is due to his inability to unfold his poetic vision further. His dream of merging his poesy with the ocean of bliss seems to be very far. And so he is agonized. His poetry is passing through a languishing phase and is not ready to move ahead, for he is tired. In his poem *Bad Times* he tells of a lonely journey of his poetry through great obstacles. He appeals to his bird of poetry not to close its wings for it has to fly through the deep dark night that waits beyond the approaching dusky evening. The flight that awaits his bird of poetry is desolate and has no place to rest, no home, no welcoming flowers and no hope for hope only beguiles. But he has his wings of poesy and the vast blue sky which he needs to fly through, only with the strength of his poetic wings. He is

lonely and feels lost. There is no music and darkness pervades, and yet he longs and his longings are for his final fulfillment. He cannot rest. From afar he can hear the incantations of feeble voices welcoming him with folded hands. So he appeals to his bird of poetry to flap on its wings:

O bird, O my bird
 Do not close your wings the crescent moon has
 Swam through the lingering darkness
 So do not close your wings
 For someone is calling
 With folded hands." come thee o come"
 Their voices are full of ardent request
 For they are welcoming
 So do not close your flapping wings
 Flap on through the darkness.

Another fascinating poem found in the book Kalpana is named Unending. The poet wants to rest but is not allowed to. He is tired and wants to fall asleep. But the goddess of poetry will not allow him to rest or sleep. So he bursts out in pain and agony and asks "Why me?" Why is he chosen by the goddess? She has taken his days and now wants to rob him of his nights too.

It appears that all the efforts that he makes is to touch his soul and keep on seeking till he touches it. His effort is to shake off his small ego and find the great touch of the Divine. The book of verse that made him famous and brought him the Nobel Prize is full of longings for the Divine and he dedicates himself to this pursuit. We find his yearning for the grace of the Divine in his Geetanjali or Song Offerings. He says:

Let my head bow down at Thy feet
 Let all my pride drown in my tears.

And then again:

Forgive my Lord, if I am tired
 Forgive me if I fall back in the path.

Geetanjali made him the poet of the world. He had the longings to see the world as a perfect place and a place that does not lack in human values.

The poet and his poetry moved from the world of

feelings to the world of the beyond and enormous strains of the grace that he was seeking fills his heart so he sings:

Oh Compassion infinite
What compassion Thou bestow

And then again

What an amazing Beauty I behold
Oh Thou Beatitude, Thou God of my life

And then,

I hear Thy name ringing, oh ringing
In the abundant fullness of the sky.

In his book of verse Utsarga or Dedication, the poem that tells about the unity of humanity is presented

I have a home every where
That home I am in search of.

The concept of the universal man is in his mind. How man deals with his fellowmen and how he deals with his own nature are his concerns. Human dignity is of utmost importance to him and he believes in individual freedom and so did he believe in the political freedom of dependencies like India. He wrote:

"Where the mind is without fear
And the head is held high
Unto that freedom Oh Lord
Lead my country"

His book of verse Janmadine, on my birthday, he writes in a deeply philosophical almost in a metaphysical tone about transcendence. Dissolution of the individual self in the great Self, an Upanishadic concept predominates. It is not a desire for extinction. It is an aspiration for a new fulfillment, a yearning for endlessness. If God is endless, he has given man an aspiration for endlessness.

In 1941, when the dark clouds of the Second World War had gripped the world he wrote in deep agony

Vipers are spitting venom
Breathing poison all around
Before I leave I call those
Who are getting ready in each homestead

To fight these demons.

And again

God you have sent Thy messengers to this
merciless world
They told to forgive all, they told to love and
purge hatred
But I have seen secret violence under the garb
of deceit of darkness
Destroy the defenseless.
My voice is choked and my flute is without
music
In the prison of a dark new moon night
Has drowned my world in a bad dream
And so with tearful eyes I ask Thee
Those who have poisoned your air

And extinguished Thy light, have you
Pardoned them, have you loved them?

His whole life and work are dedicated to the good, the
beautiful and to truth. He is full of the ardent spirit of
righteousness. If Einstein is the man of the century, Mahatma
the moral conscience of the world, Tagore is the spirit of
humanity.

May 7th is the 149th birth anniversary of poet Rabindranath
Tagore.

Sheila Buck and Katherine Hamilton

A Change of Heart: A Story from the World of Carthage

Ogden and his son Oliver sat on a branch in a tall oak tree. The Lore Tree had picked the parents of this year's baby seedlings and they were watching to see who the Lore Keeper would deliver the babies to. The small markings spiraling up the smooth bark of the lore tree glowed softly in the morning light. That was their history. The genealogy of generations of seedlings was there, as well as the important events that transpired in their village.

The naked skin of the seedlings matched the brown of the branch they perched on, and their hair and ears were the same dull green of the leaves. Seedlings were able to camouflage themselves in any environment. They looked around and noticed some of their friends were also sitting in trees waiting. It was easy for one camouflaged seedling to spot another, but not so easy for any other being.

The first new seedling was delivered to Octavia and Orin. They were so happy to be picked that they did a dance around their home before taking their new child from the Keeper. "Oh, that's wonderful. They will make fine parents." Ogden told his son.

"Tell me the story about how you became my father?" Oliver asked. "I always like to hear that story."

Ogden sat on his doorstep with a scowl upon his fair face. As the rest of the seedlings in the grove skipped by on their way to the Seed Ceremony, they gave Ogden's tree a wide berth. His scowl deepened.

'Every year,' he thought to himself, 'they pass me by. This year I won't even show up.' He rested his head in his hands with

his elbows propped on his bony knees. Many years had passed since he had obtained his majority, and the Lore Tree had yet to bless him with a child. He knew it could not be because he had chosen not to take a new mate after Olissa had passed into the great wide world. She had a bigger fate than to be his companion; she had gone on to become a new Lore Tree in a different part of the forest. Normally he would have gone to become her Lore Keeper, but she had refused him when she saw how bitter he was about her coming change. Instead she had taken her crop-brother, whom she had remained close to over the years.

For many years after her exodus, Ogden had participated in the rituals to be a prospective parent. He had gone to the Lore Tree and planted his blessings at the roots of the tree, and bowed his head in prayer to the Goddess. Year after year, he was denied. And year after year, he became more bitter at the lack of companionship in his life. Over the years the other seedlings had started to avoid him, and finally, he had no one left.

As the night deepened, the proud parents began to trickle by with their new bundles of joy. Ogden could not bear to see the happiness in their faces, and jealousy took him. He sprung up off the doorstep and vanished into the forest.

He never knew if they wondered about where he had gone or what had happened to him. He wandered for days in the forest, with no direction or clear understanding of where he was going or why. He only knew that he was going away from the hurt and pain that haunted his every day in his village. He took no sustenance as he wandered, and as the days passed he became weakened.

Time started to run together and he lost track of where he was and how long he had wandered. Visions floated before him, of Olissa in her radiant beauty. Oh, how he missed her! He longed to see her once again, even as a Lore Tree, if just to feel her presence. Tears rolled from his big green eyes as he fell to his knees in the forest, alone.

He came gradually awake as the voices grew closer and easier to understand. Children, it sounded like. 'I must be dreaming,' he thought, 'Why would there be children here in the woods, and why would they be around my undeserving soul?' The children were startled when they came upon his prone form, lying in the leaves in the forest around their home. They were from the crop of a few summers ago, and were not allowed to stray far. Without knowing it, Ogden had come within a short distance of another village of seedlings.

The children cried for their parents to come and see what they had found. Ogden made an effort to rise and greet these new seedlings in a manner that befit a stranger entering a new place, but his journey had left him without strength. As the adults came round to discover what the children were yelling about they cried out in dismay. They had never seen such as this. Seedlings are not generally subject to depression and despair.

They brought him to the Lore Keeper in their village to see what he would say to do about this strange newcomer.

Owen's eyes widened as the sight of the bedraggled seedling that had been carried to the clearing by the lore tree. "It is Ogden!" he cried. "What has become of you my old friend? Here, let us make you comfortable and ease your hurts. Then we shall talk of tidings and news." With that he had Ogden carried to his dwelling and made comfortable. Ogden was given food and drink to nourish him and help him regain some of his strength.

"Owen, child, you have grown into a fine young man," Ogden finally said to him at last. "Olissa chose well when she took you over me. I have to admit, though, that a great sadness has grown in my heart since I saw her last, and I have missed her with all my being. I would like to see her, if I may."

Owen took him by the hand and led him out to the clearing. There, Ogden fell to his knees and wrapped his arms about the Lore Tree. Tears rolled down his face as he held his beloved again. "I was wrong to be bitter, I know. It was hard to

let you go, but now I realize that it was my own folly that led me down such a dark path. I missed you so much, and I never want to leave you again!"

To the great surprise of all who witnessed it, a branch of the lore tree came down to caress Ogden. She had apparently not forgotten her love for him either. At the tip of the branch a pod grew, one that had apparently been hidden from sight during the ceremony of five nights ago. on the outside of the pod, in flowing script was the name of the parent for the child held safe within. 'Ogden,' it said. Owen was shocked, and exclaimed, "She must have known all along that you were coming, for here she was holding something for you!"

As Owen placed the small child into Ogden's waiting arms, a smile began to creep over his long scowling face. He knew he could go on and be happy in the shadow of one beloved with a new beloved to care for and nurture.

Owen told Ogden that he could stay in the new oak grove and raise his son near his wife. Ogden never returned to live at his former home, but did visit once to show off his son, Oliver. They were shocked that any Lore Tree would choose him as a parent, but then they began to see how happy he and the young seedling were and the love they had for each other, and finally understood.

"And that is how I became your father," he said to Oliver with a smile. "I wouldn't have had it any other way."

The Line Shuddered

Dave Haskins



"Teworgy Strawberry Field"

Michael D. Skinner

SOLIDARITY

It is late October in the Berkshire County seat of Sprague. A dense mist hangs over the valley, giving cover to the timid deer and turkey as they cross fields and roads outside of town. The fallen leaves, once crisp and bright, now clump like rotting seaweed in the gutters, damming the runoff at the corners and crossroads of the town. On Main Street shoppers and merchants dodge the puddles as they venture out, catching up on errands and the latest gossip.

The town fathers and business owners crisscross the street to meet with each other behind closed doors. Their brotherhood sport lapel buttons on their faded blue blazers that are as colorful and indecipherable as military ribbons. Like nuthatches, their necks twitch as they look up and down the sidewalks seeking a political or business confidant (Sprague has few female leaders to speak of, except for Judy Mason). This Monday, the talk is excited, as the town of Sprague is enjoying a particularly delicious rumor.

“I heard that he had an affair with her, and her husband found out.”

“No way! She’s 20 years older than he is, for God’s sake. He fired her because she made him look bad.”

“You guys are both nuts. My brother knows his secretary, and she said there was a revolt by the staff against him and he got ticked because she put them up to it.”

One of their own was the object of their twittering. Theodore ‘Ted’ Simpson is the youngest business leader in town, but this did not qualify him for the traditional

circle-the-wagons loyalty. That had to be earned. Tall, lean, early thirties and ex-Army with a night school MBA, he is Executive Director of Sprague's Chamber of Commerce, hired last year after earnest accolades about his energy and enthusiasm. Simpson is always impeccably dressed in a business suit of muted colors (beige, tan, gray, or dark blue), blue or white shirts lightly starched, and narrow silk ties that lightly brush the top of his belt buckle in military style. He is quite a contrast to the previous Directors and not the traditional gray slacks and blazer type. Judy Mason, the Chamber's Board Chairwoman and his boss, liked that about him.

When Simpson suspended Donna Smith a week ago, he tried to alert Mason first; unfortunately, she was on a Caribbean cruise. By the time she returned, it was too late, the

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damage already done. When Mason rushed in to Simpson's office to talk with him, his secretary, the usually sweet and kind Kristin, was icily professional toward Simpson when announcing Mason: "Are you available?"

"Ted, of course I believe you, but the whole town is in an uproar over this." Judy Mason, middle aged with blonde hair combed too perfectly in place, blushed and shifted uneasily in her chair. Now, she said, it was time to decide how they were going to calm the business leaders and town officials. Did he have any ideas?

Until that moment, Simpson hadn't considered whether the Board would support him once they heard the full story; of his decision to delegate the Painter Project to a more qualified staffer than Donna Smith; how she barged into his office and slammed the door after learning

of it; how she confronted him at his desk, hissing “Who do you think you are? You will pay for this”, and, how, finally, on her way out and back straight, she turned her head and muttered “Asshole!” Calm and resolute, she had opened the door softly and walked out, the profile of a proud but wounded warrior for all the staff to see.

“Judy, I need your support here. She was in my face for godsakes! Look at this cracked drawer on my desk; she kicked it in. I have never seen anything like it. And I can’t have an employee treat *anyone* like that. I have to let her go before she causes more problems.”

Mason stood up from her chair.

“You mean fire her? Jesus.” Mason paced between the office door and Simpson’s desk. She thought for a long minute before saying, “It is ultimately your decision, of course; she’s your employee. I will tell the Board that I support you doing what you feel needs to be done in the best interest of the Chamber. But I’ll stay neutral on the facts of the case. You need to know I worry that this may cause a long term problem for you in town.”

She went on, “I’m sorry about all of this, Ted. I really am. My first concern has to be for the future of the Chamber. I will call you later after I think about this more. Please don’t do anything until I decide how we might proceed together.” Mason closed the door behind her, and he heard the soft murmur of voices outside.

Simpson knew everyone wanted this whole ugly incident to go away quietly; he had never felt so lonely. He suddenly remembered Private Vincent, another recruit with him at Fort

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Dix. He hadn’t thought of him in years. Vincent, who had acted effeminate, was covered in a wool blanket one night while sleeping, and beaten by other trainees who were

offended by his manner. Simpson remembers him sitting alone in the mess hall with his bruises. No one bothered with him, including Simpson, nor did Vincent ever approach anyone. His solitude was palpable, but he wore it with his head held high, a perpetual light smile partly in stark contrast to the bruises. Back then, Simpson had thought Vincent could have avoided the beating by at least attempting to be friends with the others, or at least fought back. He now wanted to find Vincent, to talk to him, to learn from him, to apologize.

Sitting in his office, with no more angry emails or phone calls, all his meetings cancelled, and an angry staff, he could almost taste the relief when he told everyone that it was over, that he and Smith each apologized, and things would go back the way they were. It was clear Judy Mason had been through this sort of thing before, and was looking to the future. She knew he had much to learn.

He rose from his chair and went to the window that looked out over Main Street, and he saw the brotherhood flocking on the sidewalks with dependability, as they always have. Their solidarity had many advantages to a young leader like him, he could see that now, and, of course, they knew it, too. Yes, things could certainly get better soon.

Simpson sat down, opened up his rolodex, and wrote down the phone number. He sat up straight, took a deep breath, and dialed the phone.

“This is Ted Simpson. I am informing you that you are terminated from your job as of today. Come clean out your desk by this weekend. I will follow this call up with a certified letter.”

He gently hung up the phone, put his feet squarely under the desk, held his head high, composed a light smile, and waited.

Louis Panagotopoulos

DAUGHTERS

Joel raised Crystal like a daughter, sometimes forgetting she was his granddaughter. And he found it much easier to forget these days since she now had a little girl of her own. Joel's step-daughter, Teresa, had given birth to Crystal the spring of '69 during her third, and ultimately last, year of high school; and it was almost seventeen years to the day that Crystal bore Tanya, who would soon turn three.

"What the hell kind of name is Tanya?" Joel would say to the boys at the bar. "You do that again, I'll take my belt off and tan ya." Joel's nature was such that he dwelled on his granddaughter's choice of names, but rarely questioned the life choices she made, especially when it came to her men.

Crystal wouldn't say who Tanya's father was. She told Joel she had it narrowed down to a couple of guys, but she was too drunk at the time to remember. Joel had a feeling she knew, but kept it secret so the father didn't have to help with child support.

"Why are you protecting that son of a bitch?" he'd argue. "He should be helping you with this kid, not me."

Crystal never gave him the satisfaction when he got like that. She would just stand there, her legs apart, hands on her hips, and give him a look that said, "It's my body. I'll do whatever the hell I want, old man."

And Joel always felt bad for the baby during these exchanges, so he took Crystal's grief, and tried his best to keep things peaceful.

But there were days he just couldn't swallow her behavior. He told the lunch crowd, "This morning, she's in the tub with the door locked and the radio on and all her perfumes and candles and things, like she's the Queen of Sheba. And I swear I smelled something burning in there, and it wasn't tobacco." A couple of patrons let out groans at the blatant disregard. "She had the phone tied up too, calling all her girlfriends, trying to find someone to skip work with. Her kid

was fussing, wouldn't stop screaming, 'Mommy! Mommy!' Just lying there kicking the bathroom door."

"So, what does she do? She turns up the radio. 'What the hell kind of mother are you?', I shout. I tell ya, I just rolled in from a long night. I needed to wash up and shave. I don't have time to be raising another kid while her highness sits in her morning bath."

Joel took a long swig from the bottle of tonic water he kept at the server station. "Boy, I shoulda let her have it right then, but like I said, I had to get to work. I swear, one more screw up and she's out."

None of the men at the bar said anything. They just looked at him, fascinated by the outburst.

"Aw, she's not a bad kid." Joel said settling down a bit. "She's had a rough life, no mother, no father. Seems like yesterday she was standing there in her little pink Easter dress, her hair all curled, wearin' those patent leather shoes. She used to make cards for me and write, I love you, in big letters. I was with Mil back then. I think the old gal had a lotta good influence on the kid. But then what happens?" Joel threw his hands up. "How do they go from these sweet little girls to such floozies? I mean, they're wearin' bras on the outside now, and carryin' rubbers like they're working the strip or something. What ever happened to 'the girl next door'?"

Crystal stayed in the tub until she heard Joel's car pull out. She cursed him, and vowed she was going to get the money somewhere and find her own place. She knew Joel's problem. It was her problem right now, too. She needed to get laid. It had been a while, and these long baths just weren't cutting it.

Crystal put on a cover-up and wrapped her hair in a towel. She took a drag from the cigarette smoldering on the rim of the tub, and tossed the butt into the toilet. She pushed the wet towels aside, and then opened the door.

Tanya dove into her legs.

"Ow. Careful, honey."

She lifted her daughter aside and made for the coffee pot. The child followed, trying to get her arms around Crystal's

legs.

"What are you doing? You know Mommy needs her coffee." She brought a cup to the table and then lit another cigarette. "I'm not a bad mother, am I?"

Tanya scrambled onto her lap. "You're a good mommy."

Crystal waved away the new smoke and unclipped her daughter's barrette. She combed it through the fine hair using her fingers to form a new part. Maybe it's too soon for the jewelry box, she thought. But, Tanya was asking questions. The kids at daycare had fathers. Where was hers?

Crystal got the box from Joel on her tenth birthday. It belonged to her mother. She remembered her disappointment at first - the few pairs of earrings, the little gold cross, the cheap plastic 'love beads'. When she opened it in front of Tanya, the three year-old went right for the colorful necklaces. But there was more. Under the lining, the packet with the letters, and pictures, and newspaper clippings. Crystal had forgotten how they made her feel.

"It's the dust, honey. Makes mommy's eyes water."

She read the words 'local' and 'crash' in the headlines of one of the articles. There was a picture. The name under it read, 'Howard C. Black'. She found the high school photo, the one that had, 'To Terry, Love Always, Howie' written on the back. Crystal remembered how she went to the mirror that first time, and saw the same eyes and mouth. She watched Tanya play with the beads. How could she possibly understand?

"This is my father, Tanya."

The child gripped the picture. "Where is he?"

"He's dead, honey. Like when kitty ran into the street."

"Does it hurt to be dead?" Tanya asked.

"No, honey, heaven is a wonderful place."

"Is my father dead?"

Crystal laughed. She was doing her best, but she was no psychologist. "It's funny with grownups. Sometimes you get a father right away, and sometimes it takes a while to get one. We're going to find you a father, believe me."

The explanation seemed to satisfy Tanya. To seal the deal, Crystal drove them to the toy store at the mall. She told

her daughter she could pick anything, to take her time, and that mommy would be right out front having a smoke.

Crystal guessed right about Joel. Except that he had already taken care of his 'problem' the night before, which was one of the reasons why he was so impatient about tying up the bathroom. Joel took what he liked to call, 'the cure'. Around nine, he'd left his partner alone to close up the bar, and headed to the Dalton Club. The Dalton was a hangout for the over-forty crowd: divorcees, widows, widowers, cheating husbands, cheating wives, old maids, and bachelors, the category where Joel placed himself. He never liked the pathetic sound of widower, and besides, his wife Helen had been gone nearly twenty years. The club featured a deejay playing oldies, a small, well-worn dance floor, a cluster of small tables and chairs, and rivers of cheap booze.

He knew a lot of the regulars, and had been out with several of the girls. Joel spent his first Scotch sitting at the bar, surveying the crowd and figuring his odds. He spotted Toni and Sta sitting at one of the tables against the wall. It looked like a good place to start. Toni was the younger of the two, although she had a butter face; great body, but her face wasn't that great. Sta was a couple of years older than Joel, but unlike a lot of the women that age, she still enjoyed it. Joel liked that in a woman. He'd had enough of these moaners who just lay there like they were dead.

He waved to the two women. They motioned him over. Joel knew that if anything was going to happen with Sta, he'd have to find someone for Toni. He noticed Johnny K and Freddie at the bar and figured maybe he could get one of them to go. But, he'd work that in later when the dancing started. Joel sat next to Sta, and gave her a peck on the cheek just to let the two girls know who he was with. He called the waitress, Rose, over. He hadn't thought of Rose. That would have been nice, but it was too late now. He tossed back the drink he'd brought from the bar, smacked the empty glass on the table and said, "What'll you have, girls?"

Three rounds later, the deejay had the turntable fired up, and was getting into the Elvis and Roy Orbison. When

Oobey Doobey came on, Joel grabbed Sta's wrist and said, "Let's dance."

Wow, she still had it, he thought. Even though her stomach and ass sagged a bit, Sta could jitterbug like a teenager. By the time they'd finished a couple of numbers, Joel's shirt was darkened with sweat. He needed a drink. He stepped off the dance floor to the sound of Elvis,

"Wise men say, only fools rush in..."

This time, it was Sta who grabbed him, and pulled Joel back onto the floor. He held out her right hand, and let his other slip down to her lower back. As they swayed around the small square, she nestled her head into his damp chest and rubbed his shoulder in a slow, massaging motion. Sta didn't let go when the music ended, and only pulled away a few moments later, when a Chubby Checker tune came on.

She whispered, "Let's get out of here."

Joel was surprised at the timing. She wasn't even drunk yet. "But what about Toni?"

"She's a big girl. You wait right here. I'll get my purse and tell her good night."

Joel hustled to the foyer so he didn't have to face Toni. He stayed put until Sta came up from behind and slipped her arm around his waist. They walked to her car, not speaking. She handed him the keys and said, "Let's stop and get a bottle."

Joel held the passenger door open for her, staring at her long legs as she slid into the roomy front seat. After settling behind the wheel, he leaned over and gave her a long kiss. She responded like she was waiting for it.

" 'Scuse me, ma'am."

Crystal didn't look up. She wasn't a ma'am. But, when the voice called again, she found herself staring into the most intense eyes she'd ever seen.

"Hi. Do you think I could borrow one of your Marlboro's?" The man smiled and pointed to the pack.

"What?" Crystal hadn't heard a word he said.

The stranger brought two fingers in the form of a 'V' up to his mouth. "A smoke. Can I have one of your cigarettes?"

"Oh, sure." She snapped out of it and offered the pack.

He took one, and patted his pants pockets, front and back. Crystal took out a lighter and traded it for the cigarettes. Her hand touched his in the exchange. It was warm.

She watched him take his first drag. Crystal couldn't take her eyes off him.

"I'm Bill."

"Hello, Bill." She eyed his western-cut denim jacket and cowboy boots. "What's a guy like you doing in a place like this?"

Crystal couldn't help flirting. She flicked the ash of her cigarette, and shook her head to toss back a few locks that had fallen forward. Then, she took a long drag and pretended to brush a bit of tobacco off her bosom.

"I'm Crystal." She extended her hand and he took it.

"Pleased to meet ya, ma'am."

"You southern men and your 'ma'am'. I am not a 'ma'am'," she said. "My mother, if she were still around, would be a 'ma'am', but I am definitely not a 'ma'am'". Crystal smiled to let him know she was kidding. "You're not really this polite all the time, are you?"

Bill's grin faded. He looked as if he'd been caught in a lie. Crystal saw something in his eyes then that told her there was a lot more to this man than, 'please and thank you ma'am'.

"So.. What are you up to?"

"Nothing much, just passing through," Bill said.

Crystal laughed at the cliché. "You're not on horseback are you?"

"No, Harley. Care to go for a spin?"

The idea sounded fabulous to Crystal. Motorcycles were a real turn-on for her. Times like this, she was ready to throw it all in right here. "I don't even know you, Bill. And how do you know I don't have a boyfriend who's going to show up here any minute?"

"Suit yourself, 'ma'am'."

Crystal sensed a challenge. "Maybe some other time, Bill."

"Is that a 'yes'?"

Just then, Tanya stumbled out of the store with a look

that was slowly erupting into panic.

"Over here, baby."

Tanya ran to her. Crystal turned her back and quite slowly and quite deliberately bent to pick up the child. She felt her jeans tightening around her. What do you think of this, Bill? She wasn't even out of first gear, yet. She introduced Tanya. Crystal had used her daughter more than once to disarm a man.

Bill winked. "How about you? Like to see a shiny motorcycle, little girl?"

Crystal held back her smile. The bastard. She dropped her cigarette onto the marble floor, and squashed it out with the toe of her high heel.

"What about my toy," Tanya whined.

"That's right, Bill. Tanya's getting a new toy. We'll have to take a rain check."

Crystal was more flattered than surprised when Bill showed up in the doll aisle a few minutes later. And she was more grateful than unnerved when he pushed her hand away and laid his twenty down at the cash register. She felt no more obligation than if he'd bought her a drink. A few minutes looking at a motorcycle should call it even.

The only problem with the Wayland Motel is that a lot of truckers use it. They usually leave their rigs running all night, and if not, they start them up around five in the morning. Between the bright sunlight pouring in the picture window, and the grumble of the Kenworth engines, Joel's head was exploding. He tried to sneak over to the drapes and shut them before someone walked by the room, but stumbled instead, on the empty Seagram's bottle he'd dropped just before falling asleep. The last thing he remembered was Sta begging him for a little more loving, and him telling her that he was done. Now, he was sprawled on his stomach, bare-assed, with his face in the stinking rug, trying to reach for the draw cord. He finally found it, but not before he heard a voice outside say, "Hey, would ya look at that."

Sta wasn't stirring. Joel figured he could slip out and save them both the awkward talk that usually followed one of

these 'dates'. Besides, if he left now and hitched a ride to the Dalton for his car, he could get home and clean up a little before work. He crawled around in the half-light, and gathered his clothes except for the shirt. He started to dress and then remembered. Sta wanted to wear his shirt to cover her moles. At the time Joel thought, here I am ready to screw her every which way but Sunday, and she's worried about how she looks.

He would have let her wear his socks on her ears if she had asked him at that point, but now it was a problem. He kept an eye on her. Sta looked so small and bird-like lying there. He was tempted to climb back into bed and hold her and protect her. But then she moved suddenly. He almost jumped when she let out a loud snort. He quickly slipped into his loafers, grabbed his sport coat, and ducked out the door into the blinding sun. Fortunately, no one was around. Joel was in no mood for ribbing from any truckers. He put on the coat, hooked the two waist buttons, and turned the collar up trying his best to cover himself.

How the hell am I going to catch a ride looking like this?, Joel thought. He walked along the shoulder toward downtown. The Friday morning traffic was light. He turned around a couple of times with his thumb out, but there were no bites.

At the interchange over Route 23, Joel figured he'd have to hurry to get across the on-ramps. The cars were zipping by. No one was giving an inch this morning. He spotted a break in the line of cars and hustled across, only to find himself trapped on the traffic island. Joel cursed and sighed, "I'm never getting home." Just then, a new white Dodge came up the ramp and, for no reason, stopped. Cars behind it screeched. A woman's hand came out of the driver's window, motioning him to go. Joel hesitated, then jogged across, glancing at the line of cars building up. He tried to make eye contact with the driver, but with the glare, the only thing that stood out was this screwed-up wiggy thing. Joel just smiled and nodded his head. When he reached the curb, he spun around and stuck his thumb out.

The cars behind 'wiggy' beeped in unison. She pulled off to the side where Joel stood. She powered down the

passenger window and leaned over.

"Where 'ya headin'?"

Joel approached the car. His coat had fallen open from his maneuvers through traffic. "A few miles up the road." He motioned toward downtown. "The other end of Main." He noticed she had a pretty face.

A passing car beeped. The driver swore and then sped off.

"Some folks just don't know enough to go around. Hurry, get in."

The front seat was immaculate. Joel pulled his coat closed. All of a sudden, he felt the need to be presentable.

The woman introduced herself as Betty. She told him she worked downtown, but didn't mind going a little out of the way to drop him off at the Dalton. She'd heard of the place. She was new to the area, and had not yet ventured to that end of town.

Joel couldn't keep from staring at the flipped up wig. Apparently, she didn't know, and he didn't want to say anything. She caught him looking, though.

"What?" Betty turned the rearview. "Oh, my gawd! Not again!" Her face flushed. Joel continued to study her in amazement. She was quite the looker.

"Don't worry about it, you look great. Really." Joel tried to hold back his smile.

Her mouth widened and then she smiled, too. "Imagine if I didn't pick you up, and walked into work like this. I hate these things."

Betty removed her hands from the wheel, steadied the car with her left knee and pulled the wig in place.

Joel took the opportunity to study the woman's legs as her skirt rode up.

"I'd just as soon not wear it, but my hair's just growing in, and I deal with the public, so I have to live with it"

He was surprised by her candor. Joel was quite taken with this woman.

"What do you do?" he asked.

"I'm a loan officer, you know car loans, mortgages, small business loans. I just give away money all the live long

day." She laughed at her own little joke.

Joel detected a slight Southern accent. "That's the Dalton Club up there, on the left." He added the word 'club', as if saying it would make the place less of a lousy gin mill. "I really appreciate the lift, Betty."

She was quiet. Betty stared straight ahead and stopped the car.

Joel sensed she didn't like the looks of the place or the situation. Not wanting to frighten the poor girl, he wasted no time opening his door and getting out. He leaned in through the window and extended his hand. "I'm Joel."

She took his, the same way she must shake a dozen hands each day. "Good to meet you, Joel. Have a nice day."

In his car, driving home, Joel felt a warm glow. He touched his hand to his face. It still had her scent.

In the daycare parking lot, Crystal tried to reason with the crying Tanya.

"But you promised, Mommy."

"Sometimes grown-ups have to change their plans, honey. You know that." She ushered the girl into the center. "Go show your little friends your new doll."

Crystal loved her daughter, to pieces even, but to care for her all the time just wasn't practical. Besides, she was already paying for the full day. She left a message at the house for Joel in case she ran late.

Hearing Bill say her name was what sold her, the way he drawled out the 'a'. "Come on, Crystaaal, it'll be fun." And she knew it would be. She loved tearing off down the road, throwing up rocks and dirt, the hum of the engine seeping into her bones. Crystal balanced the helmet on the crown of her head so as to not mess her do, and then settled into the low saddle. She pulled tight against his hips and said, "Let's ride 'em cowboy". When he asked where she wanted to go, she yelled into his ear above the noise, "Just go. I don't care. Just go."

They rode until the sun was low in the sky. They were in New Hampshire when it started to drizzle. "I'm turning back," he shouted.

"Okay." At that point, Crystal was as placid as a fixed

addict. She was riding a hundred-mile high from the speed and the vibration and the Siren howl of the rushing air. A little rain made it even more intense.

About ten miles back into Mass., a downpour, which had been threatening all day, opened up. The two riders were soaked. A couple of times, the front tire caught a puddle. After a near spill, they pulled off the highway. Travel was just as treacherous on the secondary roads. Whatever Bill had hoped would come out of this little joy ride, was not worth wrecking the bike for. When he saw the blue neon glow of the motel sign, he pulled in.

Crystal stood shivering under a small overhang. She couldn't believe herself. "Not again," she whispered catching her reflection in a window. Please, tell me, not again. It suddenly hit her, the mess she was in. Why did she do this to herself, to her little daughter? In the middle of nowhere with some stranger. Again. She saw the phone booth across the parking lot and ran to it. Joel would be pissed. Hell, she didn't even know what town she was in. The phone rang and rang. Did she really want to talk to Joel? Did she really need to hear again, what a screw up she was? She hung up and pressed the coin return.

Bill came out of the office. Crystal watched him pull the bike up onto its stand, and then chain it to a column. She had decided she wasn't going to sleep with him on the first date. That she was even going to see if she could get past the second. Back at the mall he looked like such a keeper. Now she wasn't so sure. Her teeth chattered. She remembered his words, that empty look when he said, suit yourself. When he finally came to the booth, she let him squeeze in.

"What are you doin'?"

"I'm thinking of getting a ride. Call someone to pick me up. I have to work in the morning. I skipped today. I'm already in deep shit."

He said her name again, "Crystaaal."

"It was supposed to be just a little ride." She glanced at the motel sign. "I didn't plan on this."

"Well, I didn't make it rain, Crystaaal."

"But, my kid.."

He looked into her eyes. "You know she's okay." He took her hand. "We'll leave first thing."

A few minutes later, they were inside the stale, moldy room. Neither seemed to be bothered by the flaking paint or the rusted fixtures, or the cigarette butts in the ashtray. Crystal sat on the stained bed cover and took off her wet high heels. She fiddled with the clock radio until she found a station and set the volume at a good level. Then she stood.

. Bill had his shirt off. His chest was flat and sinewy. He towed his hair. "I wish we had a bottle," he said. "Somethin' to warm us up."

Crystal felt his eyes, again. It was the same look when she first turned to him at the mall. She felt naked. He raised his eyebrows and said one word, "Maybe.."

"You just hold on, Bill."

Crystal took her purse into the bathroom and locked the door. She surveyed herself. Her hair was a stringy, dripping mess, her eye makeup smeared. She sat on the commode. Her toes were blue from the dye in her shoes. Both feet. Crystal laughed at the idea of it. That's how it had always been with her. Both feet. Jumping in, no caution, no consequences. She laughed harder - imagine trying to get past one date with this guy. She'd almost come twice on the motorcycle. She opened the diaphragm case, lowered her briefs, and began to insert it. Crystal laughed again. She pictured the clever little birth control device tucked up inside her. It was about to get more of a workout than a trampoline at a fat kid's birthday party.

Joel worked nine to three, went home for a few hours to catch a nap or run errands, then, at six, returned to the bar until closing. He hit his bed a few minutes after three and didn't budge until almost five-thirty when the ringing of the phone slowly made its way into his conscience. When he picked up, he heard a woman's voice. It was familiar, but he couldn't place it.

"Mr. Peirsen? This is Happy Times daycare center. Your daughter Tanya is still here, and we all want to go home."

. Joel couldn't shake the image of Tanya standing at the end of the driveway with one of the teachers. So forlorn,

watching each car like the next one might be coming for her. The poor kid looked like an orphan. Joel had to pay the late fee out of his own pocket, even though he apologized to the woman, and made up an excuse for Crystal, saying she had car trouble. And he used up a lot of favors. Mrs. Leonard, the old widow downstairs, who didn't mind watching the child once in a while, would have liked a little more notice. And Blackie, too, handling the evening crowd on his own for over an hour. Crystal was going to hear about this.

Joel was behind the bar doing the opening.

"Well, she did it again, Black. Crystal never came home last night."

"You must be pissed."

"No, actually, this morning I feel like a great load has been lifted. Seriously. I haven't felt this good in years. I've been struggling with the decision, and last night she helped me make it. Crystal is out.

"And the kid?"

"She's not my daughter, I need to face that. Not my responsibility. No more. I'm getting' my life back." Joel hesitated. "And the timing is perfect. I met someone."

Joel's partner raised his eyebrows.

"No it's not like that. She's different. And there was some spark there. I saw it, Black "

Joel wanted to explain the sweet bird singing in his heart, a sweet bird named Betty. He was already planning his next move. He would go downtown some morning and find out where she worked. Then, he'd walk in looking for a car loan, and act as if it were fate that he chose her bank. He'd ask her to lunch and then maybe to dinner. It didn't matter if that was all that ever happened. He just needed to see her again.

The phone rang. They let it go to the machine. It was too early to start dealing with meddling wives. A minute later, it rang again. The third time, Blackie got it.

Joel was mildly peeved at the interruption. He was still wrapped in the glow of new love, the fatigue of old lovemaking and the dizzying burnout of a hangover. He wanted to talk more about Betty, about his plans. Telling someone made it seem more real, more possible. He looked over at Blackie. He

was sure taking his time. When he finally came back, he didn't look so good.

"What's the matter?"

Blackie didn't say anything. He tried to reach out, put his arm around Joel's shoulders, but he wasn't used to this kind of thing.

"Black?"

"I don't know how to say this, Joel. I'm sorry. There's been an accident. It's Crystal. She's dead."

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Brian Parker

This is good-bye

My grandfather passed away on the night of Sunday, January 13th, 2008. His name was Romeo Moreau, but more often he went by either “Buddy” if you were a friend or “Pépère” if you were my brother or me. He was a month away from his eightieth birthday and he had been in the nursing home for nearly four years. It wasn’t for any physical reason that our family had stepped in and moved him out of his house—he had always been a strong man in that sense. I remember the time we were moving furniture into the basement at the house and he lost his balance and fell down the last five stairs or so, landing on the back of his head on the concrete cellar floor. Within minutes he was back on his feet, an ugly purple bruise on the back of his bald head but nothing else to cause concern.

No, the reason he had to be moved out of his house was strictly mental—Alzheimer’s, to be more specific. For some time before the move, he had been unable to find his way back home when he took the truck out to do errands. We never really knew how he eventually ended up back on Caron Street at the end of those excursions; we only knew the sense of relief when he did. As somebody who spent much of his life driving—first as a delivery driver for Drake’s and later for Pepsi—it was frustrating for him that he couldn’t deal with it as easily as he’d done before.

That was one of the conditions of the move, actually. Even though he was getting worse at finding his way around and even though we were becoming more aware of the liability he posed, he refused to move to the nursing home until we assured him that he could keep his truck and drive himself around. It wasn’t even a particularly nice truck, to be honest—the salesman had certainly recognized him as an old Franco-American who could be easily persuaded into a purchase. It was too small—the only people who could drive it were Pépère or his wife, Mémère, whose eyes had long since resulted in her

own license being taken away. The bed was too short—his previous truck had been a pickup sold second- or third-hand from Pepsi that he'd been able to load lawnmowers and snow blowers in when he used to make his neighborhood rounds. This new truck could barely accommodate the clothes that were making the move to the new home.

About a year or so into life at the nursing home Pèpère got into a minor traffic accident. We took away his license. Even as his Alzheimer's got progressively worse, even as his overall state deteriorated, he never forgot that his freedom had been taken away from him, and he certainly never forgot who was responsible for it. Right up until the day of his death, he and Mémère continued to talk about how they were going to find an apartment to live in so that he could drive again and they could be away from the other old people at the nursing home. It didn't matter that Mémère had Parkinson's, sat in a wheelchair all day, and needed to be cath'ed every few hours just to get through the day. It didn't matter that Pèpère was on a lockdown unit at the nursing home because one day he had gone out the front door when nobody was looking and wandered up and down the main drag in Auburn, Maine until finally somebody from the nursing home found him a few miles away, confused and trying to find his way back home.

I was not there when my grandparents were moved into the nursing home. I had selfishly gone to Japan for the first time to visit my cousin—it hadn't really been intentional, an honest coincidence, though my parents joked that I had chosen a good time to make the trip. I was not there for the end of my Pèpère's stay there either, having recently come back up to Orono to settle back in for my final semester of graduate work in the English department.

My last words to my grandfather came on Christmas Eve 2007, as we were leaving his unit after supper to bring Mémère back to her room. My family and I were wheeling her through the locked doors and Pèpère tried to come through with us. I had to physically stop him by putting my hand on his shoulder, and I had to look him in the eyes and say, "No, Pèpère, you can't come with us," as though I were addressing a disobedient child or pet. Those were the last words I spoke to

my grandfather. I closed the door behind me and saw him begin to cry—he was always emotional in the last few years of his life—through the window. That was the last time I saw him alive. That was my good-bye.

๑

These parts...

They say that human beings
are
not
monogamous creatures

Marriage, a holy institution
50% end in misery
the other half in
divorce
(so the old joke says...)

Myself
I have
never
been unfaithful

But I, we
are not
amnesiacs

Remembering the parts
of me
that I once shared
with another

The parts of me
that are mine alone
until I
trust
enough
to let others
use them

Not just the
fun
parts
mind you
(though they are important)

The mind that I
opened
thoughts
no one else could hear

The heart that was
returned
not in
original condition
but no worse
for wear
still under
warranty
made stronger
even

The eyes that once sought
only her
in a
crowded
room
oblivious to the
non-essentials

The arms and hands
necessary for
embraces
caresses

intertwined fingers

This chest
makeshift pillow
breaths across
tufts of hair

The lips
chapped in
December-January air
smoothed with
this tongue

I have been
reclaiming
these parts
overwriting
past data
renaming
these files

She was saved
in a folder
all her own
 (lessons too
 important
 to just delete)
but only the
present
sits on my
desktop

And I wonder
will it feel the same
with someone new

in the future
and do I
want it to?

Will I say
the right name?
(this is new with
someone else)

Should I just
occupy
my lips
to keep
my voice
silent
and let
these parts
do the talking?
๑

Matt Pifer

Crossing the Fence

Our 20-year Class Reunion

In the dull light of the bar, music jangling from the far-set stage, all of us haven't aged a day. Still wet eyed and giddy at the sight, we thump once again into existence—classmates come to flounder at the edge of the dance floor—a surf of sweat, perfume, and spit surging around us. Clenched lips resist the words that accumulate with each sip of beer; inhibition having little chance against them. We reminisce, carefully avoiding the trap—that memory of hurt feelings, the surge of pubescent desires, the need to justify a weakness leading us into each other's arms. Yet the trap, being a wily thing, was sprung.

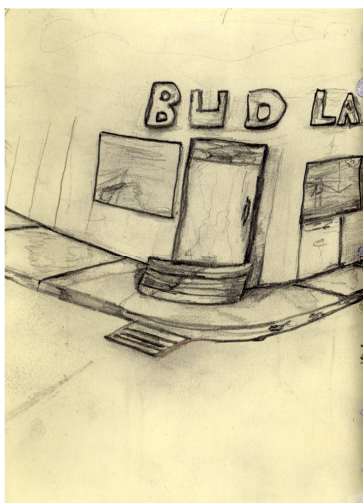
Among us, children had been dreamed in drink and fostered in seed eventually tickled and tossed into the womb and a final, screeching existence: chubby legs and arms the length of our middle fingers, a large head lolling

behind cross-eyes, a lanky and awkward mishmash of parts splashed down loins thick with worry and work.

But in this wrenched waking, hope fell from us into those tiny gaping mouths; our futures fleshed out.

Houses rose in our hands, over the soft skulls of these children, and was paneled with the whisper, "I need you," dusted with the fear, "I'll lose you," fitted with creases that reached beyond our lives into that taint of middle age and a view, now clearly drawn, of loss.

Outside, this moment is contained by a shadow, and we



squint, fraught with constellations, to see through it. Across the horizon line, across that singularity, pines lean in moonlight from the face of a sandy hill, and we teeter as children might from beneath the eave of the dugout. But we aren't children; we have wandered away from our 20-year class reunion, down dark streets, among places I trace onto the palm of her small hand; I follow a crease that ravels across it, crisscrossing to the margin that meets the cool air. We stop on the edge of the high school ball fields, and I stoop to kiss her. She closes her eyes and I notice a faint crease that runs from the bridge of her nose to her cheekbone—not a wrinkle (some weathered mark), but a hint carried with the body from childhood, a dim memory left before her dawn. I felt a turn at the nape, and with it I saw her.

Loss

I point toward a flat field, spanning the gap between two old homes. “My grandmother’s garden was here,” I say. “I used to climb up that knotted tree and watch her pick beans.” In the street next to me, Amy listens, wavering in the leaden light; the moon high overhead and bright. “Grandma would wash the fresh beans in bowls and we’d take them to the house. Sitting in folding chairs, grandma would snap one end then the other and break what remained in half.” It was a reflex and she moved through bowl after bowl without pausing, water running through her wrinkles, bending off the end of her fingers. Each drop seemed touched with starlight.

Amy and I lean against the fence. I am drunk and talking. Through its jaundiced eye, the security light glares at us. We furtively slip into the dugout shadow to hide from the light, from that sense of being known.

“I can’t believe I came here with you” Amy said.

“Why?” I asked, touching the lace edging her yellow blouse. The stiff ruffle touches her face rudely.

“I’m, ya know, fettered; I’m not unfettered.”

“I know. I do, but we’re just talking.”

Amy braces her back against the fence, smiling down at her flats, which seem a half-size too small. Her ankles appear swollen.

“Talking, yes. But you know we can’t.”

“But shouldn’t we,” I laugh, “for something like old times sake.”

“For whose sake?”

“For our sake. How often does someone get this chance?”

“No one would believe we are here.”

“We have a chance to reconnect,” I say taking her hand and twisting her wedding ring.

“It’s a small stone.”

“It’s nice.” I hold her head and lean toward her.

She shakes my hands away. “Not like that,” she says, placing my hand at the nape of her neck. She is so short that I feel as though I’m about to topple over her as I lean to kiss her.

“I almost remember those lips,” she says.

“Shouldn’t we?”

“It would be great, but also not great.”

“Focus on great.”

“What is great; tell me. What are you feeling?”

“This leg, its smooth skin, its slope, is great. I feel like I’ve always known these.” I ran my hand across and under her inner thigh; felt the dip of her ass. Amy giggled and pulled away.

“It would be too nice; it would. But we can’t; we’re not doing this.”

I held her to me, and said, “I feel like I’ve always been here.”

“You have . . . and haven’t. Anyway, what could this be?”

“What . . . is what?”

“Is this real or?”

“Or . . .”

The Fence

I lift Amy onto the fence.

“Don’t drop me,” she whispers close to my ear. Her body is warm around me. I lean in and feel the strength, the smooth



slope of her thigh; rest my lips on the firm test of her breasts, close my eyes amidst her quickened breaths; and kiss the softened skin—innocence’s last refuge—at the frayed fringe, that mortal edge, of her skirt.

“We’re not doing this,” she laughs, “we aren’t, right?”

I play the fringe up an inch. “You’ll have glitter on your face,” she says.

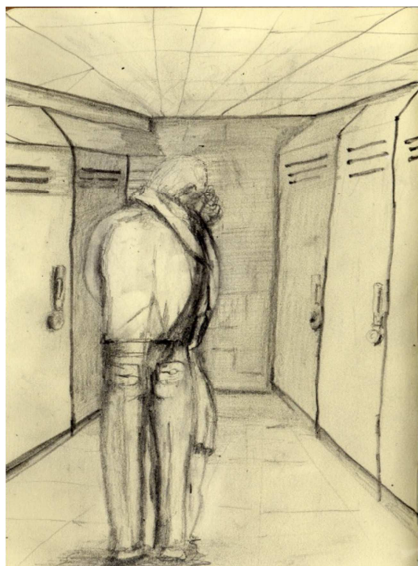
If so, what might I trace among those points of light, from little bits of girlish glitter? The faint lines imagined between, merging into this haunting mask. Youth’s self-portrait, now aged and bedraggled, lingering in the resilient places of the face—the chin, nose, ears, and lips that meeting, as long ago, fit into the warmth of the same giving touch first offered to the other when only children.

The Lockers

The image is one that emerges during long trips alone, or when returning home. An old song, a smell, a familiar stretch of road, and it resurfaces with a numbness that pulls you out of time—the moment that leaves you sitting in your car on the edge of some darkened parking lot, turning dials, struggling to put the specifics of that moment in line so you can play it like a movie. But you can’t; it is just the image, the momentary feeling of it that lasts. And you can feel it going even as you try to hang on, try to put a name to it. But it is going and will not wait.

Beneath the gray light of the low-hung ceiling, the lockers were lined up in two columns with six rows. We did not lean against them as the other kids did, but stood between, directly between, not hiding but meeting there wide eyed and softened with the expectation that rose in us like a blush. Closer, and we are shapes in a fog—insubstantial, a warmth of warmed lips wetted with want that is soul-bound—emanating from the subtle movement of breath and eye, muscle and bone. The figures are us and enmeshed—sound to light to smell an ancient recollection, formless in that it is becoming form. A figure I can nearly grasp, and wish to remain near—the pietá of rural youth.

Memory resides as much in the touch of tongues as in the caress of fingers or the want carried with sight and words. I lean back and feel near this waveform of impression, coming clear and fading away, turning in perspective: the flash of cheekbone, an index finger with a ring wrapped in yarn, the breast curving, the lips arching to meet its compliment at the corner of a warm mouth. The feel of an erect nipple at the edge of a chilled embrace, drawing sensation toward knowing, the rough gods riding, unfurling along a dirt road near a small lake—a lake that like the word, like the feeling drifting across it, is *ancient*. Isn't it this sensation, as old as time, of holding a lover, of bathing in another's want, that every kid knows? After awhile we give it up, and instead eat, drink, and sink into numb middle age. But what is *not*, what is silent, is color and words, the tick of time as we knew it then. Details adhere to those shadowy figures, and past plunders the present and present the past—a shirt from now, a blouse from then, hair some mixture of both, smells intermittently mingled with those at my desk as I tap out this word and the next and next. Coffee is cooling and bent paperbacks are stacked beside my arm, offering little consolation.



The figures among those lockers embrace (it must be), but overwhelmed by shadow, then light, then there is the sense of sound, a bell, lockers clanking, shoes scurrying across a tile floor, teachers beginning lessons: “today” and “this test will be” and “turn to page.” In the smell of disinfectant and polished tile floors, the heavy-hanging urge of children butts against, is confused by, the imperceptible curtain of adulthood. We seek a way through—that essential sight that might illuminate the

gap: the focused moment of a child's first breath; the pleasure that still resonates in our aging skin; a sacrifice for the happiness of another, saying quietly and forever, "I do"; or the strength of our first embrace, and then our loss of it.

Parking

Like a tattle, the tree leans over the hood of the truck, boughs peering in through the windshield. The spruce's limbs, like chubby fingers, point, wagging with the occasional gust. A dusting of snow falls in light clumps on the hood, melting and running off to hang as ice from the grill.

Our breath spills white, climbs, and then falls to the floorboard; frost crawls like ivy from the edge of the driver-side window. We release our excitement in a rush, in biting gasps; we have almost no time. I dream of this all week—these few minutes alone after a game, after I've run up and down the court, or thrown passes and made tackles. Amy is armored in a wool cheerleader's outfit, a light and sweet sweat having risen along her arms and neck. I don't fumble with her clothing. After months, I know how it comes off, how much to remove, how long it takes for her to straighten and smooth it all out, so she can walk inside and smile prettily at her parents. Teachers say children can adapt and so we adapt and find minutes, string them together, to create intimacy and pick from it a sense of love, of what life with another might become. We have taken health class, we have read books and watched movies, but nothing tells us the truth, and we will be wrong and wrong. We don't know it, staring for a few minutes in silence as the snow filters through the spruce needles, but the only truth is in doing, placing our arms around each other and waiting for the next breath or that whisper shaped by sincerity by the instinct and not the decision to speak.

I pull in the driveway on time. I worry for the both of us. Amy is just a year or so from rebelling and sloughing off her parent's rules and running into the life and love of another boy. In a fit, nearly biting his tongue in half, this boy will propose. He will fish the question from black plastic letters and fidget them into place on the sign outside the hardware store.

She will say, blushing “yes,” hug him, as I fumble with the clasp of Melanie’s bra. My parents will continue to trust me, and I will feel their obeisance like a weight, as I give years, so many years, to college, my job in Detroit, graduate school, and the hate sodden stupidity of northern Michigan.

Before she leaves, Amy leans toward me and we kiss gently, the light from the truck’s dash cascading across her face. Small shadows recede from it, and as they do they bend her lips and create valleys beneath her eyes that narrow to resist a vision she is having of the future. This thought irrepressibly gathers behind the dam of her need that powers the act, felt like a pit in her throat, to cast me away.

Husband

In marriage a man pledges to husband a woman, to do for her as he might a horse or cow or pig. Of course, this is not how we think of it, but something of the concept remains in this ancient tradition, though muted by more evolved sentiment: to be a husband now is merely to be *with* a woman.

He had, like a husband, lied awake to listen while Amy whispered her fears about the thyroid cancer that had made her sick. She gained weight, she couldn’t sleep, and—something she never told him—she saw faces in the shadows. The faces were noiseless, mouthing something carefully she wanted, felt she needed, to know. But she never did understand them, and eventually, the visions faded while the uncertainty remained. Beside her, he knew he had no solution, and struggled with the silence that dented the sheets and pillows around them. He should speak, he thought, and say something real, something that would turn her mind from those cells growing in her thyroid, wrecking it. Something about how he loved her, how he had loved her desperately as long as he could remember. Yet how can words reach that far, that deeply, he thought. Above him the shadows grew from corner to corner, as her breath stirred his eyelashes.

She whispered that the treatment required her to leave her home and her daughters, who were still so small. She, the doctor said, would be toxic for weeks. “I’m gunna be a ghoul,”

she sighed, trying to laugh. Over the next few days she packed, reluctantly placing items she would take with her inside the small satchel. For a moment, the sight of her dropping a t-shirt into the side packet caused him to panic. Her face was set and she looked at him with dry eyes, her mind set on survival. She felt him draw away from that, so she brightened saying, "This day first, then the next." He loved her smile and needed her reassurance just as she needed his. "I know," he said, "and the last will come."

While she was away they would talk on the phone, guarding against despair, "this is the most curable form," and he would watch television, and go to work, and wait. In the mornings he would feed the children, take them to his mother's, and again wait. But this was not a solution; this was treading water.

At work he would fumble with the wrench and ratchet; why can't the body respond to cursing and coaxing the way a car engine does? When all else fails, reef on it. The doctor said, no: this will take care and time; the condition will be monitored and managed. "Our target is five years," he told them. "In five years you move into statistical certainties. That's where we want to be."

After two weeks, she returned pale but fixed. A kiss at the door proved this, and later they bent together in bed, rolled gently in the sheets; they pledged to believe in the life of the other. Like a memento, they wore mutual concern until it faded and ambition for more returned: he to his simple ratcheting, emotions muted by oil; her to moving minds toward profit, what she had learned was the measure of success. And how could they not do this? No one can live long with a hand to another's back. Fear is not cut to catch the light nor reflect the life they had made, and what they had made did indeed shine.

Yet, even with this pledge, the smell of the stable lingered; they would remember the horse ride they had taken years before having two children and buying two homes. They did not see it, would never reflect on it, but it was there—the confined space designed to encourage an animal's productivity, its focus, was defined and built by others, founded on traditions of fears so deeply embedded that they felt like the words of

God.

At the non-denominational church down the road, they prayed to this God and watched their children sitting next to them for signs of drugs and sex. Were their eyes wet with experience, did they see through their parents from across the kitchen table; were their mouths moist and eager with food or a glass of pop; did they have a listless countenance like a distempered calf craning mad-eyed toward water? But the reality was less dramatic: one then the other daughter would express her love for a boy, unworthy boys each. These boys did not know how to work, to take care and watch for illness, hanging rugged responsibility from their necks to keep their backs straight and eyes forward. In the end, though, she smiled her way through it and her husband watched, waiting to quench her anger or mute a mother's madness.

Most of all they are happy: what else might anyone need? He has a sense of humor, is handsome, and she loves the vestige in him of home. A sense she had been denied as a child. Still though, she stumbles over a question, and this question is the dust on the furniture, the dirt on the floor, the moats of light in the air; it feeds her life, has always done so, and can't be closed between the thin pages of the bible or hidden in the loose ends of the table cloth. The question does not have words. If it had, even just enough for a phrase, she might answer it, and so, be done with it. But this question is a feeling, the mind knowing, and that is its power, its presence with them.

The Question

The question is diffuse as the wash of a wave across the sand—so much water sifting quietly away. I am between Amy's legs; they are strong and smooth. She rocks slightly on the fence: "Don't let go," she repeats; if she did fall would she disappear? If I held on would I remain with her carried to some (to what) end?

She mutters toward the dark off to one side. I can see my shadow play across the clear curve of her eyes; it has no life, it is static, a painting that cannot be revised that is forever a haunted remnant of the painter's mind—that painter comparing

his work to a photograph. I smell her, feeling for a moment the length of her body, the curve to waist rising again to hip and sweeping down across the softness of her inner thigh; I imagine her stretched out before me a hand resting between her breasts, breathing cautiously, near a giggle, anticipating my weight. There at navel depth, I hear a line from an old poem, “So let us melt / and make no noise.”

She rests her forearms on my shoulders, “I remember you looking at me,” she says. On one of our first dates, I watched her watching me through the rearview mirror. We had gone out with friends and she was sitting in the backseat next to hers. That furtive glance, when still so young, has stayed with me through these years of teaching students to read and write, hoping they might find and hold such a moment of mind, and all that is refracted through it. Yet exposed to the real world that look fractured; the icy shards—love, honor, compassion—melted and the waste—a slick of hurt— seeped in, and the feeling rusted until the wake of our passing destroyed it, blowing the pieces away.

“Should we go back?” I nod, but want to hold onto what I now know. But the mist is burning off and morning is pushing at the crest of the hill. The shadow we are in is fading.

“We should return,” she says, then adds when I lower her to the ground, “What if someone asks where I’ve been? What should I say?” She laughs, and I feel the presence of it between us—the vibrations fleeting warmth.

“Lie,” I say.

Outside the bar, I notice that her car is navy blue. Inside she is small, not made for hulking technologies. Then, aside for an instant, I see her walking down a dirt road in a summer dress, years of loving and mothering bending her gait. An impish spin at the edge of the forest before she melts into pine needles and gummy bark; laughter on the wind winding through sumac berries and the silk of tent worms; the smell of earth worn deeply into the lines of my face—the grit of my life.

Barry Kitchen



"Sunset"