

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Tanya Treat for the degree of Master of Arts in English, presented on April 18, 2000. Title: Elementary Music.

### Redacted for Privacy

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Marjorie Sandor

The four stories and one essay within are linked by themes: love, sex, truth, and music. Three of the stories are told by first person narrators who are also musicians. In "Elementary Music," a young girl views her parents' divorce through the lens of an orchestra concert in which she participates. In "Laying on of Hands," a woman contemplates abandoning music for an imagined love, and in "I Say All That to Say This," a woman finds herself in love with her pianist, substituting music for sex. In all of these stories music and the act of performance prompt questions about love and truth. The essay, "Unsayable Life," addresses questions about the differences between fiction and life, between living a story and later fashioning it into art, or artifice. "Grammar is Life" is a direct response to those questions, featuring a protagonist who tries to gain control over her fear of loneliness and the future by fashioning her life into grammar lessons. All of these stories deal with loss on some level; music and the search for truth in fiction--in art--act as counterpoint against that loss.

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Elementary Music

by

Tanya Treat

A THESIS

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Tanya Treat, Author

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Laying on of Hands	1
I Say All That to Say This	21
Unsayable Life	42
Grammar is Life	52
Elementary Music	69

## Elementary Music

### Laying on of Hands

I used to think it was the Germans and their damned mustard gas that condemned me to a childhood as a Reorganized Latter Day Saint, but now I know it was just ordinary lust at the wrong time of the month. My mother's father, Owen, was a soldier in World War I, and the story always went that he was gassed and left three days for dead in the German counter-attack on Cantigny. This afforded the Angel Moroni enough time to take his soul on a tour of heaven and hell.

*Soldier's life is spared, and he returns home a Christian.*

There is a moral to this story, like all my family's stories.

*Goes on to raise a family in the church he builds and pastors.*

Even though I am now twenty-seven--nine years older than he was during the war--and I'm not too impressed by morals, I've never had reason to doubt this story--or at least not until this summer, when I moved to Sparta, Wisconsin to live with Grandma Claire. A few days after I got there, I was sifting through papers in the basement and found a folder of front-page clippings from June, 1936. So that night at dinner I asked her why she'd saved them--why *those* stories, why only *that* month--and her hands started to shake, tea cup in one, Melba Toast in the other. "That was a long time ago," she said. "I'm sure I wouldn't have the foggiest idea." Then she leaned over the table, her face pinched so tight I had to lean back, as if all that hurt might be contagious. "Owen thought the world of me, yes he did. That man just thought the world of me."

She said this so many times it became one of two constant refrains, and I started paying attention to details, wondering what kind of evidence might exist to refute her. It didn't take me long to realize Owen was in Cantigny when he was nineteen years old, and didn't join the church until he was thirty-eight. That was the year after he built the house she's still living in, the year after my aunt and uncle were born.

And this is the problem with the stories in my family: significant details have been deleted. Recast. Completely transformed. And so when my mother and grandmother told me their lives, they were not reminiscing, but instead performing. Set pieces. Memory pieces. But told not from memory, from moral. They spoke, when they told stories, in Sunday School voices: a bit too high, overcharged, the inevitable lesson obvious from the start. And even though as I child I could not have told you why, this odd timbre to their voices always made me think they'd never lived those stories, and now I know they didn't, not really. They lived their lives as spectators of themselves, and if I could say I have a family legacy, this is it. We are unable to fully inhabit our own bodies and minds and hearts; we are always half in and half out. It is imperative we have an audience. Does it surprise you I have a degree in performance? I am twenty-seven years old, I have been on stage my entire life, and I have just now figured this out. My grandmother is eighty-seven, and my mother is dead. She never figured it out, and she died surrounded by family, but also completely alone, crying out desperately for God.

Grandma Claire thought I was living with her last summer because I was practicing for a round of auditions and needed to save my cash for plane



fare. She wished—and how she has told me—I were there to find a man. The first was true and I didn't want to think about the second, but I was really there because she moved to a retirement village in September, and gave away all the evidence of this family's life to the Reorganized Latter Day Saints garage sale and the truck that collects for disabled veterans. Let me be clear: it was a totally selfish mission. I was not there to help her clean out the basement; I was there to lay my hands on a snapshot, a velvet dress, a red leatherbound set of *Scribner's Radio Music Library*.

My teachers say I am good--solid technique, lovely tone. "But it seems you are somehow also distant," they say, "that you are not connected to the cello in front of you." My body is battered from this search, this desire for connection: dented breastbone, tendonitis, fingers that ache, and flake off at the tips. But in spite of all this, I sense that they're right. What is to be done? My teachers shrug and I know they are thinking that if I do not know on my own I will never know. Inhabiting one's own life so fully that it spills effortlessly through the cello, quickening heartbeats in the audience, bringing old women to tears: this is something one is either born doing, or not. "It's like Duke Ellington said about rhythm," one teacher tells me. "If you have to ask, you ain't got it."

The next morning after Claire's refrain—*Owen thought the world of me, yes he did*—I called my aunt, asking about the clippings. "Then I guess you don't know," she said, and sighed, and started in the fall of 1935 when Claire's sister Eva took the train from Fort Wayne to La Crosse with her three young sons and her mind set on divorce. Because Eva was 30 and Claire only 20, they hardly knew each other at all. And because Claire stood

just under five feet and Eva a few inches shy of six, Claire had to step back, in the doorway, just to get a good look at her sister's face. Eva had clearly once been beautiful—striking in her height and angularity—in a way the petite Claire never could be. Yet in spite of a small flare of jealousy, Claire's smile couldn't have been wider in that doorway, her tone more smooth and modulated. She was so very pleased, to be in a position to help. She and Owen had been married five years, all of which, except the previous month, had been spent living in the same construction trailer that housed the family business. But because Owen was the foreman of Brokken Brothers Construction, and was responsible for getting all of the road and bridge contracts from the WPA for Polk, Clark, and Van Buren counties, they'd been able to build this house, even in the middle of the Depression.

*Now we can start*, Claire had thought their first night in a bedroom with walls. *Now we can start living our real life.*

And while the arrival of Eva and her boys might have been a small disappointment to another type of person, for Claire it only heightened the pleasure of her new reality. She had the prosperous, good man, the four-bedroom house, and the town's admiration as her wayward sister's savior. The talk of divorce was such a scandal then, and playing the patient hostess cast Claire in a very good light.

But Claire has never told me any of this. I take the facts from my aunt; the feelings are my own. How many times have I signed a lease, or fallen in love, thinking exactly the same thing: *now life begins*.

When Claire saw me on the phone with my aunt, she winked and left the room, thinking I was talking to Allan. He was the second boy I loved when I was sixteen years old, and we had met again the previous week at a tag sale, both of us eyeing a defunct Underwood. Decoration, for

his new office, he said—it seems he is opening a clinic. I congratulated and exclaimed—had enough time really passed for him to make himself a doctor?—and then I told him he could have the typewriter if he'd take me to dinner somewhere out of town, somewhere I could drink a lot and not read about myself in the paper the next day. He laughed—bless his heart—and at first he shook my hand, but then he took my arm and kissed my cheek. I saw him look hard at me—the long, tanned, slightly bruised sum of me—and I saw his face soften, Thank God. I realized I must look good to him, and the joy and shock of it rushed through me like an unbidden prayer. When he asked about me, my job, my plans, I said “auditions,” and shrugged.

After dinner we went for cones at the Tastee-Freez, just like old times, then snuck upstairs to my room, where the cones melted into puddles on the dresser. Lying beneath him on the carpet was just like old times, too, and suddenly I felt sixteen again—felt hopeful, and careless, and loved.

Eva arrived in August and was pregnant by Owen by October. There was a long Indian summer that year, according to my aunt, which may have aided the lovers' cause. At any rate, the unusual heat was also responsible for lots of open windows—open windows in the bedroom the night they told Claire. Eva was outside with the boys when the shouting began.

“Without Eva,” my aunt said, “I would probably think my own birth was just a poorly-timed accident.” But when years had passed and the time came to talk, Eva told her son—my uncle—who told his sister, who told me. This is important to make clear—that I am not imagining this moment—because it is this moment that most shocks me about Claire.

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“You owe me,” she hissed at Owen, that night with the windows open. “You owe me at least this much.”

She is sitting naked on the chenille spread, for once not concerned how her belly folds in this posture, or how her breasts turn pendular, almost touching her knees.

And I can picture this scene so clearly, even though the window was too high for Eva to look through, because of Claire’s other refrain. She was always bringing our conversations around to marriage; I know she was thinking of Allan. She took my hand while she talked, and rubbed her thumb back and forth over my smooth skin. “Men think they know a lot about women,” she said, “but whatever you do, never let him see you naked in the light.”

I withdrew my hand—her thumb had started to dig.

“You’re a pretty girl,” she said, “but if men saw all there is to see, we’d all be widows.” Her face clenches up. “They’d die from the fright.”

But Owen didn’t die, of course. He gave in to demands, and Claire’s baby was born just a month behind Eva’s. Because birth control was not readily available in rural Wisconsin in 1935, and because Owen and Claire had already been married five years without children, it is not hard for me to imagine Claire’s shock and disgust about sex. I can picture her the month they were engaged—the year she was fifteen—lying in her own twin bed with her heels spread to the corners. I can imagine her dreaming of kisses, caresses, in no way prepared for his knees nudging against her thighs, or for his hands actually reaching down and bending her legs.

I can also feel her relief that warm October night when he unhooks his belt and drapes his pants over the chair. With every motion, he erases the words she has just been made to hear.

*Eva, pregnant--gone as he sits on the edge of the bed.*

*not Charles--erased with his calloused hands on her belly.*

*The baby stays--vanished as he lies on her, prodding.*

So pleased she is, to have a different story to tell, she is overcome with love. She forgets that this man who is now saving her is also the one who cast her aside. She puts her arms around his shoulders, tries to raise up to kiss him, but he is already rocking, eyes firmly fixed on the wall behind her.

As I lay in my own bed in the upstairs of Claire's house, I replayed this scene over and over in my head, siding with each of them alternately, trying to imagine how the future would have unwound had Owen won. Usually I sided with him because I know fifty more years of stories that demonstrate how self-centered Claire is, and also because her neediness drives me up a wall. But sometimes I sided with her, too, because I can't imagine living out my life knowing I have failed to inspire love in the people closest to me.

And when I was not lying in bed alone, pondering the past and its relevance, if any, on the present, I was lying in bed with Allan, in Claire and Owen's old bed, under the same chenille spread. Sometime in the sixties they upgraded to a king size, and their old bed got moved upstairs, used like that by more than one child and grandchild, I'm sure.

One night in June Allan saw my cello lying on its side. He asked me to play something.

"I'm off duty. Busman's holiday."

"No, really. It's very sexy."

"You've only ever seen me play in church."

"Why do you think my jacket was always in my lap?"

I could have slapped him, but managed a weak smile instead. "And here all this time I thought you were a patron of the arts."

He moved closer on the bed, and I felt like I might be suffocated by the heat of him. I stood, picked up the cello. "My current repertoire is limited," I said. "Orchestra committees—they want William Tell, they want Don Juan, they want Beethoven's Fifth. And they want them crisp, clean, and articulate. Not beautiful, but *blended*."

"How about a little Don Juan," he said. I didn't return his smile.

It was true, I had my good and bad days where practicing was concerned. It was true I was often ambivalent about auditions. But this instrument I had given ten years to—it was not a lascivious joke. So I was happy to play the Don Juan for him, because the cello part bursts out of the gate like dogs on a racetrack. It's fast, and chromatic, and a little bit scrubby, even if you play it well. Especially if you play it well.

"That doesn't sound very Don Juan."

"It's Strauss. What do you expect."

"That's funny. I usually like Strauss. Die Fledermaus—The Emperor Waltzes."

"That would be Johann. This is Richard."

He stood behind me, rubbed my shoulders. "Keeping me humble," he said.

I picked up a rag, started scraping rosin off the strings. "And I could say the same."

At first he looked baffled, but then the dawning crept over his face. I continued to scrape, which made a high-pitched squeak, like a rat.

He took the rag, and set the cello on its side. "I'm a technician," he said. "A body mechanic."

I let him pull me out of the chair and into his chest. "But you're an artist. A musician. A higher form of life, on the evolutionary scale."

It had been a long time since someone had known me well enough to know exactly what I wanted to hear. And it had been a long time since someone had paid close enough attention to read my every move, which I think is the true act of love.

That night, after he'd gone, I didn't think a second about Claire or Owen, lies or legacies. I lay naked on top of the sheets, listening to the click, click, click of the fan, thinking about who I'd have as bridesmaids, and then wondering who he'd have as groomsmen. I wondered if they'd be tall men or short--how they'd look in a group photograph--when I realized I had never met the people he called friends.

I have always known my aunt was born in a hospital while Claire lay under anesthesia—quite unusual for 1936—because she has told me a hundred times how the doctors thought her hips were too narrow to give birth. "They almost cut me!" she says with real fear in every telling, then adds "but you won't have to worry about that. You're a nice big girl. Have lots of big babies."

A few weeks after my uncle was born and Eva went back to Fort Wayne, Claire tried to strangle herself with a belt. At about 4:30 in the afternoon she pounded a nail into the bedstead, then put on a white, gauzy nightgown with a generous V-neck. She intended to slip the noose of the belt around her neck and hook the flap end to the nail, then slowly scoot down the bed until Owen came home at ten minutes after five. She reasoned she might be slightly blue by then, and a little short of breath, and she also thought the sight of her like this—eight and a half months pregnant herself—would inspire in Owen something resembling love.

What really did happen is that Owen came home a few minutes early, as he had started doing since his son had been born, and caught Claire turned around on the bed, hooking the flap end into the nail. Instead of a pale, pregnant woman laid out nearly lifeless, he saw a flush-faced industrious one fixing the twisted belt.

“Don’t know about that necklace, Claire. Don’t think it quite favors your dress.”

With Owen standing in the doorway, shaking his head in disgust, Claire only had one option. She had been caught in the act of becoming her own victim, and when you are a performer, all that matters is what the audience sees. Of course I know this all too well. This may have something to do with why my teachers call me reserved, distant, stony. Perhaps I am afraid of going too far, like Claire did, and can’t stand the prospect of being unmasked as the fool.

But like I said, Claire had raised the ante; she couldn’t afford to lose. She put on a dress and packed the nightgown and a few other things. She pushed her swollen feet into heels and walked the dozen or so blocks to St. Mary’s Hospital, head held high. Claire’s plan, before that day, had been to



raise the babies as twins—only the midwife would be the wiser. Now, because she had checked herself into St. Mary's, there would be doctors and nurses who would only have to tell a few people before the whole town would know there'd been a scandal. Claire was placed in a private room, "for observation," and the doctor sedated her during the birth not because of the width of her hips, but because she had developed a reputation as a woman with an opinion. I imagine he preferred deliveries that ran according to his schedule.

When my aunt was eight or nine she took piano lessons from the doctor's wife (there was no one else, in a town of eleven hundred), and the old coot would sit in the living room, glass in hand, telling the same story—the story of her birth—every week until he spooked her into quitting. When my aunt asked Claire why that man told that story, why he said every week she *weren't any twin*, Claire brushed her aside with a good tap on the head. "Who are you going to believe?" she said. "A carpetbagger and a drunk, or your own mother?"

Owen visited St. Mary's between 11:30 and noon, where every day for a month he read to her the front page of the Sparta Sentinel. Usually it was news about Roosevelt, but sometimes there was a fire or automobile accident, and for a whole week there were gruesome details about an explosion at the grain elevator. When the front page was read Owen creased the paper and crossed his legs, folding his hands so calmly in his lap.

"Is there anything I can bring you?" he would ask. And Claire would cast her eyes away and shake her head. She often wished he would bring flowers, or sweets, but she had too much pride to ask. Whatever he brought

wouldn't be worth it, if she asked. And that's one of the funny things about Claire. She didn't see the connection between daffodils and sticky buns and babies. For whatever reason—with one notable exception—Owen was a man bound by duty. He would do exactly what was expected, nothing more, nothing less.

On that October night in 1935 Owen climbed on top of Claire and impregnated her in less time than it took Eva to walk into the house because that's the kind of person he was—he did what people asked of him. He gave his brothers raises and days off when they asked him; he took in his sister-in-law and her three children when Claire asked him; he taught me the six principles of the gospel the summer I was eight because I was his youngest grandchild and because my mother asked him.

*Faith, Repentance, Baptism, Laying on of Hands, Resurrection, Eternal Judgment.*

Because I know this much about him I imagine it must have been Eva who asked him to join her by the creek. It must have been she who first picked up his hand and placed it on her cheek, she who leaned in and kissed him and then moved the hand cautiously to her breast.

Mostly I don't go in for all this nonsense people spout about cause and effect and who is to blame. My friends are desperately unhappy because their fathers only took them on one fishing trip. And they have fears of commitment because their mothers told them too often they'd look very pretty if only they'd put on a little lipstick. Please. Chuck the Prozac and go on a five-mile hike.

But I must confess. This story of Claire's--this story no one has really told me and I have pieced together from my aunt's snippets--this story feels like one that begs for a little blame. And I realize I do blame Claire. I blame her for being so fertile a few random encounters with the man she called her husband could produce my mother six years later. I blame her for alternately ignoring her daughters and loving them to death. I blame her for making Owen join the church as his penance for adultery. I blame her for not realizing Owen didn't love her, and I blame her for not taking the train from La Crosse to Milwaukee or Chicago, getting a bed in a roominghouse and a job in a factory or a brewery. This is what I would have done--or at least I'd like to think so.

During June and July, I thought of everything *but* leaving. My days were split between cleaning and practicing, then evenings with Claire and Allan--supper, dishes, drives, ice cream. I would come home around nine, giving Claire a kiss as she shuffled off to bed, while Allan drove his car back to the Tastee-Freez parking lot, walked the three blocks to the house, and snuck in the open basement window and up two flights of stairs. On Saturdays we went to tag sales together, ostensibly to furnish his office, but I also started collecting antique linens--gorgeous embroidered pillowcases and tablecloths and quilts, and started noticing what lovely old pieces of furniture people were practically giving away just because the finish looked a little worse for wear. How cheaply one could furnish a house, I thought, with a little patience, imagination, and skill with a paintbrush.

And of course Claire couldn't stop talking about Allan. In June she said, "The way he used to look at you, when you were kids. Practically

stared a hole through you, he was so smitten. And going to be a doctor now. Imagine that. All grown up." By the fourth of July she was talking about December weddings, how beautiful they could be, with all the greenery from Christmas, and for my birthday, on the twenty-second, she gave me my present at breakfast, before Allan came by. A two-foot tall china doll, wearing a floor-length, pink satin gown with matching pink slippers painted on her porcelain feet. "For the baby's room," she beamed. "Think how beautiful this will look in a baby's room!"

"What baby?" I said.

"Well, after you get married, of course," and here the thin-lipped smile, the lowered head and voice, "but I don't think you should wait too long. Twenty-seven's no spring chicken."

I thrust my left hand in her face. "Do you see a ring?" I asked. "Do you see a ring on that hand?"

She was still beaming, if a little confused.

"I am *not* getting married," I said. "I am flying to Louisville on the fourth of September, and assuming I don't win that audition, it's on to Des Moines and Grand Rapids and Kansas City."

"Oh, just you wait--" she said, but I didn't wait to hear what was next. I grabbed the idiot doll and ran up to my room, where I almost broke it in half and stuffed it in the trash. I stopped myself, though. It occurred to me Allan might want it for the office. I imagined him pulling it off a shelf to calm a screaming little girl, and I imagined her hugging it. In spite of my rage at Claire--my rage because she had spoken what I thought was secret, given words to desire so strong it was bringing me to my knees--in spite of this rage, I let myself think that little girl was ours.

Speaking desire, if you are a performer, is like punching a hole through that fourth, sacred wall. If you say what you want then you surely won't get it, because you have just admitted you don't have everything to offer.

Things changed in August. For starters, Allan's loan came through and he started working on his office in earnest. Where once we had discussed curtains and frames and colors to paint the tag-sale chairs, now he was talking about the EPA and the FDA and regulations concerning the disposal of bio-hazardous waste. He was also gone a little over a week in a town near the U.P. where he'd heard through a friend of a friend that there was a clinic closing where he might be able to get equipment, cheap. He came back elated in a U-Haul with three examination tables, an x-ray machine, and lots of tools and lab equipment which were as mysterious to me as the reasons we hadn't slept together in nearly three weeks.

When he got back from his trip I made a little side trip myself--to La Crosse--then went over to his office, freshly showered, and wearing silk. I locked the door behind me when I came in and sat on a table while he stuffed jars with tongue depressors and gauze, but then picked up my bag and slid to the floor when an hour had passed and he had not yet uttered one complete sentence. As I slid off the table the champagne flutes in my bag clinked against the bottle and I wished like hell he would ask me what that was, or at least look up and notice my not-quite-opaque blouse. Instead he sliced into another box with a razor blade, and said he would come by that night around ten. In the moment I was thrilled, but I was making the

same mistake Claire had made. Duty and desire sometimes look a little too much alike.

As he lay across the bed that night, not having moved since he walked in and fell across it, I told myself men sometimes like to be pursued, sometimes like not always having to do the undressing. I summoned more courage than it had ever taken to play any recital or audition and took off my own shorts and blouse before kneeling over him and unbuttoning his shirt and khakis.

Sometimes I am amazed when I think I was closer to thirty than not before I had to feel my first soft penis. This should be the real loss of virginity, I think. Not the urgent, naive proddings of late adolescence--that's not loss, that feels more like being found. No, real loss is straddling a clothed man while wearing a black lace bra and underwear, also purchased in La Crosse, and feeling only putty where desire should be.

Allan shook his head and removed my hand, touching it like it might be biohazard itself. I walked to the window, saw the moon, and informed him it looked like it might be full.

"Day after tomorrow," he said. "According to the Farmer's Almanac."

"Is that what you're doing when you're hiding from me? Reading the Farmer's Almanac?"

"I'm not hiding. I'm working."

"But we used to work together."

"What the hell is that," he said, pointing to Claire's doll on the closet floor.

"That," I said, "was my birthday present from Grandma Claire. I only saved it because I thought you might want it for the office. For the kids."

"Why in the hell did Claire give you that?"

"Because she's a senile old woman who wants another great-grandchild."

His face turned stony, and I was briefly pleased. Any reaction is better than none. "You're not saying--"

"No, Allan, I'm not. I'm saying she's a senile old woman. History does not repeat itself, not like that."

I stayed in my spot by the window, not wanting to go and get dressed because I knew he'd take it as his permission to leave. After a while a car came rolling down the street, and I watched it pull into the next driveway, watched a woman get out and leave what looked like a sack of tomatoes on the porch. The sight of those tomatoes stung almost as much as the sight of Allan removing my hand. Summer is brief, as is the bounty of gardens.

Grandma Claire has always been very sensitive about charity. In the Inspired Version of the Bible, the version Joseph Smith "transcribed" from the words of the Angel Moroni after completing work on the Book of Mormon, the word love is often changed to charity. In the famous thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, it says "Charity suffereth long, and is kind." I know she must have figured this out sometime that winter, locked up in the house with her sister's pregnancy only a month ahead of her own.

Even though I was living in her house and I should be the one who felt beholden, she thrust wadded up bills into my palms every time I so much as picked her up a quart of milk. This is what I've learned from her,

via my mother raised in the aftermath of a drama she never heard about until she was at least the age I am now. This is my inheritance: I always feel beholden to the men I am with. I am so grateful for their appraising gazes, their grazing lips, their greedy hands. They can almost do no wrong. The smart ones quickly figure this out and run like hell.

I haven't seen Allan since that night, when I finally dressed and he rose, wordlessly, and buttoned his pants. He then kissed me on the cheek and went out the open basement window. Later that fall I got a job with the Grand Rapids Symphony, which isn't quite full time, so in the afternoons I teach lessons to children. I have a student with Down's Syndrome who fell in love with the doll, and her mother and I hold it out as a carrot. It usually works.

I do think of calling him, of course, and almost did under the guise of needing help with my student, but then I thought of those tomatoes in a bag on Claire's neighbor's porch, and heard her say *Owen just thought the world of me*, and decided against it.

That night is one that still haunts me, one that often turns up in my dreams, turned inside out. Allan is my teacher, or conductor, or I am my mother, and Allan my father.

And as I live out this winter alone, trying hard not to think of summer, I wonder which scenes have haunted Claire the most. The belt? The birth? *You owe me this much?*

And the more I wonder, the more I know it has to be the scene at the creek. Not just because it's the site of her betrayal, but because she wasn't there--because she has to imagine. And of course so do I.



Perhaps Eva is out clearing her head, walking down by the creek--there are such lovely shade trees--great oaks and birch and huge canopies of willows. Claire is in town, the boys playing with cousins. Eva doesn't feel thirty-one, she feels positively sixteen, and couldn't she be? She grew up not far from this spot, walking lots of other creeks with lots of other boys. There were so many back then. Couldn't there be again? Surely life isn't sewn up with one bad choice.

And perhaps Owen is hurrying from the other direction--a tool he forgot? Maybe ripped his shirt on a protruding nail?--not walking home by the road because following the creek is so much faster than the grids of streets laid out around it.

He stops, of course--*good afternoon, what a pleasant surprise*--and he is a little breathless, he was practically running. Perhaps, watching him, she is becoming so herself? Does she touch his wrist--*likewise, of course?* Does she put her hand right on his chest, right over the tear in the shirt?

No. No.

Better, this. It is after supper--many suppers--always Wednesdays and Sundays when Claire takes the boys eighteen miles to the nearest RLDS church. A friend picks them up; she is not brave enough to drive a car. Eva stays home--*nerves, rest*--and of course Owen does too because he is not yet a member of the church. Eva finishes the dishes, the towel making circles around the edge of a rose-rimmed plate.

First he takes plate, then towel, then hands, and leads her outside, just in case.

He unzips her dress and unclasps her brasierre, neither of them needing to speak. He takes hand, breast, waist, easing her down onto the hidden, grassy bank. She closes her eyes and expects it to be over too soon,

but when she opens them he is still there, holding her face without urgency--just desire. This is something that will never be over. Joy escapes them in sounds like giggles from teenagers, and they simply cannot stop.

I don't want them to.

In spite of what comes next--*guilt, shame, church*--I want them to lie there a bit longer than they dare, until the drone of cicadas cancels the voices of children. I want them to forget it's only grass at their backs; I want the temporary stars to freeze, luminous.

It's so very fleeting yet so very perfect. She doesn't have to ask for a thing.

## I Say All That to Say This

The year I fell in love with a married man, the rains came late, and I wore a lot of linen. By late October the maple outside my living room window was reddened and dropping, but the sun was shining, and the air was seventy degrees. To an Oregonian, this is confusion of the highest order.

It was a fall of firsts in many regards: I bought brown shoes, to go with the linen; I got two fillings and a root canal, and began flossing regularly; I began eating food in bits--a boiled egg, a red pepper eaten like an apple, a handful of dried apricots; and I got my first series of professional concert gigs because my closest friend Michael, who was also my pianist, struck up a relationship with a lonely viola professor at Chico State who liked to summer in rundown vacation cottages on the abandoned sections of Oregon Coast. The professor fell in love with Michael, which is not a hard thing to do, and he also recognized his tremendous talent, which I knew would only be a matter of time. I am a very good musician--a cellist--but I am not half so good as Michael, and so rightly suspected that year would be our last together, musically speaking. It was true, but it's not the pianist I miss. It's the man of course--the only one I've ever known who hung on when he hugged me, like a coat draped on a hall tree. Now that he's gone, I think of him and ache like I ache when I hear the Brahms piano trios, especially the first--which was also the last--the opus 8, the B-major. Brahms wrote it when he was twenty-one and living with the Schumanns; it was his first mature work of chamber music. And then he went back to it not long before his death--revised much of it, including a theme in the last

movement. He constructed a melody with the letters of his beloved's name: Clara. He had to make two substitutions--for the "L" and the "R"--but that seems like nothing compared to the substitutions they had to make in life. That trio was written at the beginning and end of his love, and it is the music I want played when I die, when they scatter my ashes from the mountaintop.

As much as I love to perform, however--and as much as I love Michael--I am a teacher first and last. I am nothing without my students--without their mostly wretched playing, their playground stories of woe, and even the puddles their boots leave in my hall. I have never had a child, or for that matter even lived with another person as an adult. There is a joy that scares me in finding messes I did not make. When my students play, they all carry tension in the shoulders, and I love to put my hands down--shake that tension free--and feel the narrowness and also the warmth. This may sound confused to you--the classical version of "getting love in all the wrong places"--but I don't give a damn about right and wrong places. Johannes Brahms spent all of his life in love with his best friend's wife. Musicologists speculate they probably never had sex, and that Brahms probably never slept with a woman. They say he went to prostitutes for stimulation, only to go home and finish the job himself. I'm highly skeptical of a profession that publishes scholarly articles on the sex lives of the great composers, but I say all that to say this: love is not a boiled egg. It is a raw egg, a plate over easy, the best platter of eggs Benedict you've ever had. It is no respecter of boundaries, and it is the only reason I know to get up in the morning--rain or no rain--and put my feet on the fucking floor.

Who then, you ask, is this married man? Michael's brother, Emmett, whom I met one night while we were practicing at Michael's house.

Emmett stopped by with a blackberry pie. His wife had made it for Michael--he was too skinny, Emmett relayed--and we all three polished it off on the porch with a few bottles of cold white wine in the candle glow of jack-o-lanterns. Technically speaking it was November the second, but it would have seemed like a crime against nature not to drink wine by candlelight when the sky was clear with stars and the temperature at ten p.m. was still fifty-five degrees. It bothered none of us a bit that the tart of the berries brought out the acid of the wine.

Emmett walked me home that night, and in the space of twelve blocks told me that he loved his wife and that they had not slept together in four years, not since their son Elliot had been born. "She loves me very much," he said one time too many, and took my hand as I pulled the key out of the lock. The rituals from front door to bedroom were sweet and unhurried--each kiss, each piece of clothing in its right order, its right rhythm. I am a vocal person in bed, so much so that I was a little bit afraid I was scaring him, sounding somehow wounded or untuned. "On the contrary," he said, "it's music to my ears." And that's when I knew this would go on a very long time. He didn't laugh, or say it sarcastically. He was wholly unaware. He was speaking in the worst of musical cliches, but he was speaking from the body, and he meant it. Emmett is also a teacher, but at the high school. He teaches history. The mind alone can be a terrible place to live.

All that fall I saw Emmett twice a week, when his wife took Elliot first to tumbling class and then to violin lessons. And even though the weeks sauntered by, installing Emmett and his surprising sensuality in all the corners of my memory, I was always confused about time and place because the rains, stubbornly, refused to stay. By Thanksgiving in Oregon we are

supposed to be getting tumultuous squalls, fifty-mile-an-hour winds, and twelve foot waves that attract more tourists to the coast than the whales. When it did rain that November, it was the gentle, spitting rain that you only notice because it feels like a gentle hand to the face. I kept complaining of this to Michael--the psychic dissonance of confused time and place--and he looked up from his score, frowsy-eyed. "The weather should be beautiful in North Carolina," he said. We had a gig at Duke just after Christmas. And a few more in Michigan just after that. "I think I'll prefer East Lansing," I said. "It's likely to snow. There's nothing confusing about snow." Michael gave me a quizzical look, then went back to the score, asking me could we please try it again, we weren't hooking together on the hemiolas. Telling him about Emmett was constantly on the tip of my tongue--in fact, I was convinced it was written constantly across my face--but I knew he would love me much less, and I couldn't bear for my simple addition--Michael's heart, Emmett's body--to dissolve into fractions of betrayal. Would life be better if I had the heart and body of the same man? I was starting to view Johannes and Clara in a new light. I used to think it tragic that they never married, or even consummated. That she was too stubborn to accept his help, and that after Robert Schumann's death, circumstances of employment and emotion kept them in distant cities for the rest of their lives. I have memorized every line of Michael's jaw; I know intimately the sound his shoes make when the eroding sole gets caught on the pedals. I have heard about his large Catholic family, of his and Emmett's four other brothers and three sisters. I have heard of his father throwing him down the stairs more than once, and of his mother bursting into tears and disappearing into the woods for six hours when he told her he was gay. I have felt more than a simple stab of jealousy when one of his sisters has

come into town and grabbed him up, rocking him back and forth. "My little Mikey," they all say, because he was born six years after the youngest of them and they all had a hand in raising him. I have also seen him many a night listening to a recording with singleness of mind, sitting cross-legged on his living room floor, hugging a pillow in his lap, rocking just a little back and forth. It breaks my heart not to be able to touch him then, but it would be as intrusive and discordant as my hands on his keyboard. He doesn't know, in those moments, that I can see how much he needs to be loved, just as he doesn't know--*we* don't know--what the audience sees when the music unmask us. Maybe this is why we do what we do. Maybe we want secretly to be unmasked.

It was just before Thanksgiving that Emmett and his wife Amy decided to switch Elliot from violin to cello. He had started to develop a slight hearing loss in the left ear, and the doctor was skeptical of the violin, of its punishing upper range. So Emmett called and asked if I'd teach Elliot cello.

"I don't do Suzuki," I said.

"But he's almost five. He's almost reading."

"I don't think I want you to write me a check every week."

He didn't laugh. "Please," he said. "Elliot will love you."

"Like father like son?"

"Please," he said again, then I heard him speak to his wife. "She'll do it. Can we make Thursdays?"

"How many ways are you trying to break my heart?"

"We can do Thursdays," he said. "And Amy says she wants you to come to Thanksgiving. We're having Michael, of course. We have ulterior motives. We're hoping you'll play a recital."

"Emmett," I said. "You must be joking."

"So you'll come, then?"

I sank to the floor with the phone in my hand. "I think you know I'd like nothing more."

After that call, and also in other moments when I desperately wanted to be with Emmett but couldn't, I called Michael. When he answered I said, "Why couldn't she move to Hamburg instead of Berlin?" He knew I meant Clara. He knew I was living in 1857, but that it had everything to do with 1998. Sometimes I wished he would ask--he had to know *something* was happening--but now I see it was best he didn't. And when I would call with such details, such wonderings, he had one response: "Oh, sweetheart. She had to think of the children."

There was always a plate of something experimental waiting on the table--chocolate-maple scones or anise-apricot biscotti--and Michael made tea or cocktails or opened a bottle of red wine. "Who gives a fuck about matching," he'd say. "If we're talking about love, it's all about appetite."

And he would graciously start in with the funniest details of his many affairs--the balconies he'd slid down, the wives he'd lied to, all the phone calls he'd never returned. I was always most interested in those--those boys who thought they'd fallen in love. I wanted to know why Michael never fell back. He would shrug, sip, tear a corner off a scone.



"Why did Schumann insist on only eating calves' foot jelly the last weeks of his life?"

"You're not suffering from mercury poisoning."

"Oh, but my dear, this is only speculation. My point is, who knows why we do the crazy things we do?"

"Have you *ever* been in love?" An old refrain for us, but one I never tired of.

"No. You?"

"Yes. Every time."

He took my hands in his, folding my fingers inside his palms. "It's a pity," he said. "All that wasted energy."

"Wasted," I said, pushing my plate away. "You really don't think anything could come of this?"

"What do you mean--this?"

What did I mean? I had no idea. Of course I meant Emmett, and then Michael--the whole strange math of it. But I didn't want to talk of the particulars. I wanted to talk of the possibilities, of the odd richness and balance. "His last few days, he licked wine from her fingertips."

Michael nodded, then stacked our plates and folded the mats. He was tired, he said. And he needed to practice.

"It's a pity," I said, "that you make such terrible scones."

Then he did pull me up and wrap himself around me like a parka. "Trio tomorrow," he said. "Go home and practice, my dear."

"Did Emmett tell you?" I said. "Elliot's switching to cello."

"No. But he did tell me you're coming to Thanksgiving. And that we'll be playing for our supper."

Michael was in the kitchen by that time, washing dishes, and so didn't see me sink back in my chair, didn't see my gaze list off, crazy with desire.

"I was thinking the F major," he said.

And of course we both knew he meant the Brahms sonata, and I think we both knew it was our grand stand-in for love.

We started Elliot's lessons that week--two before Thanksgiving--and my heart stopped when I saw Amy and Emmett both get out of the car I had so often ridden in with him, alone. Elliot was beaming and dragging the little eighth-size cello, and because of the huge lump in my throat, I had to thank God that Elliot started talking a hundred feet before he hit the door. He didn't stop until his father gave him a little thump on the knee halfway through the lesson. "Listen to your teacher, son. She has lots of smart things to say." Elliot looked a little stricken, after the thump, and I wanted to pull his head to my chest and kiss his hair. I didn't, though. Instead I picked up his bow, arranged his right hand around it, and explained the responsibilities of ownership. "Lefty-loosey," I said, "and righty-tighty. Loosen the bow after you play, and tighten before."

He studied my motions with serious concentration. "But why do I have to loosen it?"

"Because if you leave it tight all the time," I said, stealing an unwise look at Emmett, "it will break from all that tension."

His eyes got big with the seriousness of my words, and then I loosened his bow as far as it would go, until the screw came out of the end and the frog detached from the wood. It was nothing then but a stick and tangled hair--it looked completely ruined. I had Elliot's rapt attention.

"And this is what happens if it gets too loose," I said, "so remember four turns," and here he joined me, "lefty-loosey, righty-tighty."

I began to reassemble his bow. He turned to his parents, seated on my couch. The same couch where just the day before I had undressed the father and he had come in my mouth. "Oh my God," Elliot said, "I thought she broke it. Mom! Dad! Didn't you think she broke it?"

We all laughed, and I slowly restored his bow to its original form. "Always trust the teacher," I said, "but don't you dare try that at home."

Amy was the first to stand and take my hand in both of hers. "You're a natural," she said. "I'm so glad you agreed to take him."

Emmett was packing up the cello and Elliot was leaning against my thigh. "It's just a process of breaking things down," I said. "Every week a small, new task." I glanced down at Elliot, put my hand on his back. "It's just important not to get overwhelmed."

Emmett finished the packing and joined his trio, intruder that he was. Amy finally dropped my hand and Elliot switched to his father's thigh, and there was much smiling and a chorus of thank-you's before they finally drove out of sight. Maybe you won't believe me, but it wasn't until they were long gone that I thought about the couch, that I studied their check that Emmett had written so I could become intimately acquainted with his handwriting. I did not feel a single twinge of guilt when she grabbed my hands, nor did I have any difficulty looking right into her eyes and telling her I thought Elliot and I would have a terrific relationship. This is not to say that I am not often thinking about Emmett at other times of the day, that I don't roam the supermarket aisles and suddenly flash on an image of him standing in my shower, still aroused even though we've been at it all afternoon. But maybe what I'm saying is this: a good lesson feels like a good

concert which feels like Emmett lifting me off the couch and carrying me to the bedroom, all the while still inside me. Can I stack these things up in the overtone series? Can I live in the constant hum of sympathetic vibration? And if I did, which would be the tonic? Sex? Love? The tenderness of children? Maybe I'd rather not answer that question. Maybe this is all entirely too much metaphor. I don't doubt that it is, but this is the way a person has to think when so many notes are missing--when happiness comes in little bits, like cookies.

After the lesson that day I went to the supermarket. I was out of eggs, and I had a craving. I put on my putty-colored linen because it made me feel invisible and because for once I wanted to walk outside duplicity: what you see, I wanted to say to the produce man, is what you get. The incredible invisible woman. I wandered the aisles picking up anything that looked good: a grapefruit, a kiwi, a triangle of Stilton, a box of caramel popcorn. For once I did not wonder what kind of a life the checker fashioned for me in his head while ringing up the contents of my basket. I did not compare myself with the other women in the market, wondering if I looked older or younger than the one over there with the baby. I did not wonder if that man's eyes lingered because he found me attractive, or because he was thinking I should not wear skirts above the knee.

Standing in line, I felt a slight nudge on the shoulder. I ignored it. I was studying the heavy cream on the conveyor belt, noticing it was ultra-pasteurized. Its due date was over a month away. I was suddenly grateful for this small favor, since my meetings with Emmett were becoming more sporadic. We used to meet during lessons, but since I was the teacher now,

we were in the process of negotiating a new schedule. I was buying the heavy cream for him. He had developed a particular liking for my chocolate mousse.

I felt the nudge again and turned around. It was my dentist. I had seen him so often that fall it felt like we were almost friends. I imagine that day we probably had the requisite conversation about the weather or the holidays or some other useless thing. I don't honestly remember. All I remember is staring down at his sausage-like fingers and thinking of the first time I'd sat in his chair, when he'd put on his rubber gloves and used those hands to feel every inch of my mouth, both of his index fingers at once scanning the interior of my lips. I remembered thinking that first day that the smell of latex reminded me of condoms and that that dentist had no idea where all of our mouths had been, even perhaps that very morning. Thinking this, it made it difficult to watch him unload his cart, or remember the date when I went to write my check.

In the car I ate most of the popcorn, then boiled a few eggs at home. I still had a carrot in the crisper. I ate all of these things standing up in the kitchen, then followed them with two beers even though Michael and I had a rehearsal that evening. At least then I'd had all of the food groups, even if none of them touched.

It was during this time that I realized that the most perceptive men are not half so perceptive as women. Let me explain. Michael--sweet, artist-child Michael, never suspected a thing. He never wondered what might be going on that I was suddenly staring out windows and losing my place in the music. On the Wednesday before Thanksgiving I did not have to teach,

and so we spent most of the day in rehearsal. Our first concert was a week away, and we also had our holiday soiree to consider. We couldn't play the piano trios because our violinist was spending the holidays with family, so we spent that Wednesday on sonatas. My favorite. A work of chamber music for usually not more than two players. We started with Bach, then Beethoven, then Brahms. Not because we are traditionalists or believe in any kind of symmetry, but because those are the pieces that most stir our souls. Bach's counterpoint, Beethoven's equinanimous commingling, and then Brahms' harmonies, his fire. Controlled fire, strictly within Sonata-Allegro form, even though he was writing in an era when people were starting to explode the old forms.

After a few hours that morning we took a break. I began poking through his kitchen, asking him about the fresh pumpkin puree that was straining in the refrigerator, quizzing him on the reasons he went to so much trouble. "We need to talk," he said. His professor friend had gotten him some lessons in New York. If they went well, he would move. This teacher knew everybody. This could be the start of something.

I began to cry, but got out the necessary words. *So happy, brilliant, deserve*, et cetera.

Michael pulled the pumpkin out of the fridge and a cookbook off a shelf. "I'm making a cheesecake," he said.

"A cheesecake? A pumpkin cheesecake?"

"I'd hate to get in a holiday rut."

"You'll need a new pair of boots," I said. "The heels flap when you use the pedals."

He put two bricks of cream cheese into the mixer and added lemon juice. "You'll still have your teaching. You do love it best?"

"My babies. I'd be lost without my babies." I started to cry in earnest.

"I suppose there will be a lot more men for you to fuck in New York."

"I've thought of this." In with the sour cream, and the pumpkin.

"Have you been happy here, Michael?"

He turned off the mixer and tasted. He got a spoon and dipped, held it out for me. I opened my mouth, and he fed me. "I haven't been unhappy."

"But this wasn't your dream--this town, this house, all the children, all the teaching."

He shook his head. We were on old, familiar ground, but filling in the other's thoughts, almost as proof we'd been there together so many times before.

"The recipe says I should bake this in a water bath, like a custard, to keep the edges from crinkling. What do you think? I've never heard of baking a cheesecake like this."

Certainly a rhetorical question, since I'd had to ask him how to boil eggs. "I can't imagine a warm bath is ever a bad thing."

"Marvelous point." He filled an oversized roasting pan with warm water. "Will you open the oven door?" I did, and he started walking carefully. If I had been thinking, I would not have said what I said, but how can a person think with a cacophony in the head, and the heart, and a shaking in the legs, from such loss?

"Emmett and I are having an affair."

Michael managed to set the pan on the shelf but much of the water sloshed over the side. He only stared at it, so I got a towel. When I stood up and faced him again, he said "I'm not sure what you want me to say. I don't think congratulations are in order."

"They haven't had sex in four years."

"Affairs are not about sex."

All I could do was stare. What was this kind of talk from a man who had a distinctive wrist scar from a time a spurned wife tried to brand him with a curling iron?

"For Christ's sake," he said, "think about Elliot."

He shook his head, then started cleaning up--every little spice bottle back on its shelf, every inch of countertop wiped down with disinfectant spray. I didn't know what to do, so I sat back on my stool in the corner, where I had so often sat as Michael cooked for us, where for years I had said things to him I wouldn't have dared say to any man I was sleeping with. The sun was streaming in through the kitchen windows and I wished like hell it wouldn't. It was giving me a headache, and making me hot in my sweater.

When the kitchen was clean and the cheesecake was nestled in its watery bed, Michael closed the blinds and turned off the lights. "Let's play," he said.

"Let's play? *Let's play?* "

"Yes, let's play. It's what we do best."

He seated himself at the piano and made a production of arranging his score. There were difficult page turns which necessitated photocopies and fold-outs. I sat down next to him and threw all the pages back together, out of order and in a heap. "*It's what we do best?*"

The jumbled score fell off the stand and hit a dozen random keys on its way to our feet. I was leaning over the piano so as to be able to stare him down. He removed my elbows from the instrument and carefully closed



the keyboard's lid. When he bent over to attend to his precious score, I fled to the corner, to his afghan.

Finally he came over to me, but several beats too late, in my estimation. "Sugar, sugar, pumpkin pie."

"You're back," I said.

He kissed my forehead. "If I were a straight man I'd be a fool not to buy this house and make you my wife."

I have never felt more naked than I did at that moment in my wool sweater with the afghan pulled tight. In years past I might have stared at my boots, but because I was able to instead reach out and kiss his stubbled cheek, and tell him that I loved him too--because I was able to do that, I knew Emmett had been good for me. Emmett who stared so hard into my open eyes while making love that I couldn't bear to close mine, as was my usual habit. Emmett who was starting to convince me I was the kind of woman men had daydreams about. You see, there are things the mind knows, and things the body knows. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, they have to be taught separately. Wisdom, unlike love, comes slowly, and in pieces.

When I arrived for dinner the next day with my cello and a plate of deviled eggs, Elliot's exuberance nearly knocked me over at the door. Emmett was in the living room, and I suppose I should be honest and say he was watching football. None of us are perfect, after all. "Performance art," he said when he saw my skeptical gaze. "It's really just performance art on turf."

Elliott was tugging at my skirt. "Mommy and Uncle Mikey are in the kitchen. I had the turkey's neck for lunch!"

In the kitchen the turkey was resting, I was informed. Michael appeared to be in the heat of battle, reducing wine and giblet stock in the roasting pan for the gravy. At least that's what he told me he was doing. I try not to ask too many questions. I would never want to distract a person in such beautiful concentration.

Amy, on the other hand, was fluttering. She'd been up since 4:30, she said, and even though it was four in the afternoon and she'd been in the kitchen most of the day, she was wearing a silk blouse with a scarf in a square knot at the neck. She was beautiful, and I told her so. Then I asked her what I could do, and she recited a treatise on crystal, where each dish was in the living room cabinet, and what would go best in each one of them. Footed are for relishes and chutneys, flat for butter and pickles. I could hear Emmett's voice in my head. *We haven't had sex in four years, not since Elliot was born.* I started to understand. She had a few other things on her mind.

I went back into the living room to see about crystal. Emmett motioned me over, picked up my hand, and kissed the back of it.

"What about Elliot," I said. "He could be anywhere."

A moment later, though, we knew exactly where he was. From upstairs we heard his little cello. So far I had only taught him the open strings, but he was sawing away with gusto. He even tried a little left hand, but he abandoned that quickly because he wasn't actually playing pitches, but rather just muting his sound. I started to go to him. Emmett stopped me.

"He's just doing it for the attention."

"Which is exactly why I'm going."

"I can tell you've never had children."

"You don't give him attention when he asks for it?"

"He asks for it around the clock. Parents learn to be selective."

I wrestled my hand free and started for the stairs. We had seen each other the day after the lesson the week before, and he told me, while we were in bed, how much he liked to watch me play. How sensual he found each movement. Was this selective? I wondered. Could he give me this attention because he only saw me twice a week? I went up to Elliot and listened for a minute, but I was suddenly too angry to focus. I went back downstairs and got the crystal, then went back to the kitchen for a refresher course in pickles and relishes. The only thing immediately edible on the counter were the deviled eggs I'd brought and I downed two of them in quick succession. I picked up a third and went to Michael. I put it in his open mouth.

The gravy was nearly done--bubbling and fragrant--and I stood mutely while Michael made a slurry of flour and giblet stock. "This prevents lumping," he said while pouring in the white liquid, "and also reduces the foul chalky taste of flour."

"You're a genius."

"No. I just read a lot."

I put my arms around his waist. "No, Michael. You're a genius. And you're leaving us."

His body moved in tight little circles, following the motion of his arm. The steam from the pan clouded his glasses. I took them off and cleaned them, then put them back on his face.

"There are two chutneys in the fridge," Amy said. "But don't confuse the chutney and the relish. Do you know the difference between chutney and relish?"

Do you know the difference, I wanted to ask, between duty and desire?

I leaned up and kissed Michael on the steamy cheek, then went to do chutney service, alone. Elliot was still sawing on the cello, and the football game was still chattering in the living room. Michael and Amy were both silently absorbed in gravy and dressing, but the stove and the chopping block were sighing with process. Little red gems, I put, in sparkling crystal bowls.

Of the three men at our holiday table, Elliot proved the best conversationalist. Michael was quiet because he is often quiet in groups, and also probably because I'd told him I was having an affair with his brother. Although maybe not. Maybe he was thinking of our upcoming concerts, or of his lessons in New York. Watching him cut his turkey into precise little bites, I realized a day like this was only for him a nibble, while to me it was the entire critical feast. Once the thought struck, I would have done anything to reverse it.

Emmett was also unusually quiet, but I realized, sitting there, that I really didn't know what usual was. I had seen him and Amy at a few functions, parties, in the past, and he always seemed a bit sober when she was around. It could be a coincidence. Maybe it was the crowds he didn't like. But there were only five of us at his table, and I don't think he spoke once when he hadn't been spoken to first.

Amy asked him how the turkey was and he looked up and said good, very good.

"I tried a cheesecloth this year," she said. "Browns the top but keeps in the juice."

"It's very juicy," Emmett said. "Maybe the best we've had."

And so it went. Halfway through dinner it started to rain. Amy tried to turn her questions on Michael, the expected ones about his recent good news, but he only echoed his brother. "Yes, it's lovely. Yes, I'm quite happy." I started to wonder about the delicate chemistry of belonging. I started to make small talk about turkeys.

After we had established the difference between hens and Toms, and discussed the pros and cons of stuffing vs. dressing, it was time to clear the plates. There was talk of postponing dessert, but Elliot started a song and dance about cheesecake. Emmett relented and Amy started the coffee. Michael went to do the unveiling.

Emmett and I stayed at the table, and he was just reaching out to touch my thigh when his son came through the door with dessert. He was holding it high and strong, no doubt as instructed, but he was holding it so high, and with such stiff, uplifted arms, it would have been impossible to deliver. He tripped on a chair leg and child and cheesecake went down in a tumble.

Michael and Amy came to the door. To her credit, she did not gasp, and to Michael's credit he rushed to the wailing Elliot, scooped him up in his arms, and didn't look once at the mess.

"We have pies in the freezer," Emmett said. His hand was still on my thigh, under the tablecloth. "Come to the garage with me. Help me carry."

In the garage he pinned me against the freezer and kissed me, and when he came up for air I said "There better really be pies out here. I'm very cold. We can't go back empty handed."

He ran his hands up and down my sides, slipped them underneath my sweater.

"Elliot is crying," I said. "Your wife is pouring coffee."

He pulled two boxed pies out of the freezer, set them on the hood of the car, and began kissing me again.

What bothered me in that moment was that I knew I wanted him to stop, but I couldn't figure out exactly why. It was not ordinary guilt, because I seem to possess a less-than-average quantity of that. If other things had been right I would have immediately disrobed in the shadow of the familial van. What I hated about the feeling I could not place was that this impulse to stop was now placing me in the company of women with children--placing me in the group of people who think of details, and who always do the right thing. These were people, I had thought earlier in the day while observing Amy, who probably experience little joy, but maybe lots of contentment. Was I looking to make this trade? Earlier I'd thought not, but now I was trying to wriggle free from the man I thought I loved, and realized this would be the first move in such a transaction. Apparently I was already such a creature, but I was there without any of the benefits: no refrigerator art, no hallways of photos, no small bodies to warm in the middle of the night.

I thought of Michael with Elliot in his arms, and my heart neatly broke when Emmett put his tongue in my ear. I wrenched away from him, picked up the pies, and walked back in the house. It was the first time I'd made a move in his presence without scanning his eyes for response.

In the living room Michael and Elliot had moved to the couch, and Amy was bent over the mess with a spoon and a mixing bowl. Thankfully they had wooden floors. She looked at me with an intensity that scared me. "Most of it didn't touch the floor," she said, silently nodding toward Elliot.

"We won't need the pies. We're going to eat what didn't hit the floor, and we're going to eat it in bowls."

Elliot was giggling under Michael's embrace. "Too much tension!" he yelled at me. "My arms had too much tension and they snapped."

"I think that sounds like the perfect explanation," I said. "There is a point when there is no such thing as mind over matter."

And we ate in the living room from bowls. Michael and I never played our sonatas. He started talking about New York, and Elliot did his best impression of a circus master. When it was dark and he'd stood on his head for forty-seven seconds, Amy picked him up and kissed him just below the ear, on his soapy-white neck. I watched her carry him up to bed.

We sat there together, the three of us, in the near-dark, silent except for the drum on the roof. We heard the rituals of teeth, pajamas, protest, and accepted it as counterpoint to the rain.

Finally Emmett turned to Michael. "I wish you nothing but the best."

"And for you, brother," Michael said, "the same."

I looked left to Michael, then right to Emmett. Neither one was looking at me. I went to the window but couldn't see much, with the raindrops clogging the screen like lace.

I heard Emmett reach out and pat Michael's knee. "Be careful," he said, "in your new life."

I went from the window to find my coat. More foolish words I'd never heard spoken. It was the beginning of the end of love.

## Unsayable Life

Lorrie Moore's lips hang above my desk. A perfect lipstick print on the back of a diner's napkin, they are open, they are red, and sometimes I imagine they speak to me. When I write, I look up and they say, "*in the bucket*. You don't know what you have until it's *in the bucket*." Or if I am not writing, but maybe balancing my checkbook or doing my taxes, they say "I have a convenient personal principal about artists not abandoning art." Or sometimes, late at night, when I write to my former lover, they say, "Why is everything with you a joke?"

The lips arrived two Decembers ago when I was teaching elementary music in the heart of the heart of the country. They were a gift from David, a pianist I befriended in college, who, in the tradition of most brilliant, gay, musicians, became a waiter. It so happened he ended up in Madison, Wisconsin with a job in the trendy little diner where Ms. Moore frequently took her lunches; we became official literary voyeurs. After a long day of miming "Where is Thumbkin" and "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes," I would come home and call David long distance for the delicious details of the post-primary life.

"She sits all afternoon with lemonade, peach pie, and the Spiegel Catalog," he said.

"Spiegel?" I said. "Someone get that woman a Crate & Barrel."

"Sometimes she has manuscripts or interviews, but almost always peach pie and lemonade."

A year or so later I went to Madison to visit David and congratulate him on his promotion to assistant manager and occasional pastry chef. One



night for desert I made peach pie, and he liked my recipe so well he started making it at the diner. Then early one morning last fall he called. "Go read *Mirabella*," he said. "I served them during the interview." And sure enough. Lorrie Moore was named by the magazine as one of the 25 most intelligent women in America, and *my* peach pie was lifted by that journalist's pen off the writers' plates and onto the page. My fiction, after all, may never have a national audience, but my pie already has.

Every time we talked David had more personal details: she drinks white wine with salads (a *faux pas*, in his book); when her husband joins her they often read the paper. She will return a salad if it doesn't "look right"; she once tried to order a half-glass of wine. The day she pressed the napkin to her lips and left it on the table, she walked out without paying the bill.

On the back of the napkin she had started a list: *bathmat, saline solution, videotape for John*. I can't help but think of a passage from *Anagrams*. In the chapter, "Water," Benna is a newly-appointed, deeply unhappy art history professor. The narrator says "'for this,' she thinks, 'I've uprooted my life?' Whatever money she might save, moreover, she usually spends consoling herself. And it is hard to make any job financially worth its difficulties, she realized, when you're constantly running out to JC Penney's to buy bathmats."

I can hear my fellow graduate-student writers after I tell this story at a party--the kind where people sit in near total darkness wearing too much polyester and using annoying words like "tangential." Someone will lower his or her microbrew, raise an eyebrow wisely, and say, "Ahh, yes. It seems life imitates art."

Pondering Ms. Moore's need for a new bathmat, I doubt she was thinking of *Anagrams*. I imagine there was an incident involving diarrhea or projectile vomiting (I hear she has a child now) that seemed too ugly to try and launder. Or perhaps with her last sale to the *New Yorker* they added a bathroom onto the dog house. Or perhaps she's just incredibly moody and impulsive and decided the lovely berry color she bought last year now reminds her of a boa in a drag show. I don't particularly want to know.

Writing fiction, we get to make up packs of wild lies in an effort to tell the truth. We get to orchestrate and invent--and even steal--every last detail in hopes a whole reality will spring forth that lives and breathes and sings the gut-wrenching blues. We get to *try* to do this, at least, even if we never succeed, and that's enough to keep most of us going for a lifetime, or at least long enough to finish our M.F.A.s.

Grace Paley, perhaps, says it best. In "A Conversation With My Father," the narrator calls plot the "absolute line between two points which I've always despised. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life." I'm sure every story writer worth her salt has this line tacked to her bulletin board. But what about the destiny of tragedy? What happens when babies are involved?

Lorrie Moore's story, "People Like That Are the Only People Here," has a few things to say about destiny. In the story, a couple has just learned their baby has cancer. The mother is having a conversation with a deity who resembles the manager at Marshall Field's. The mother is trying to bargain with him, bargain for the baby's life. "To take the surprises out is to take the life out of life," the manager says. "To know the narrative in advance is to turn yourself into a machine."

"Is this the kind of bogus, random crap they teach at merchandising school?" the mother asks. "We would like fewer surprises, fewer efforts and mysteries, thank you. K through eight. Can we just get K through eight?"

Then the husband returns to the bedroom and calls the Marshall Field's management policy "The Great Havoc that is the Puzzle of all Life."

I first read this story a few years ago when it appeared in *The New Yorker*. I fell in love with it instantly and read it over and over and I'll admit, fell into every one of its traps: Appleton, Janesville, the sleepy midwest. The University Hospital, the mother who is a writer and a teacher. Brilliant! I thought to myself. Brilliant piece of autobiography. Excellent example of how to turn life into fiction. But after I read it a few more times, I changed my tune. "She's yanking our chain," I said. "She chose the world's worst horror story--a baby with cancer--and then threw in a bunch of personal details just to yank our collective chain. It's not a story about babies and cancer at all. It's about genre and voyeurism and the whole slippery nature of truth. That Marshall Field's management policy? She could have called it the bogus, random crap they teach at *writing* school. It's ultimately a story about the essential open destiny of *art*."

But it doesn't feel like open destiny while we're living, now does it? It doesn't feel much like hope when you make your last pass through the art museum where your former lover works--your very last pass before you climb into your used Toyota and head west. You feel like a curator yourself when you stop in the gift shop and purchase two mugs, a poster, a coffeetable book (40% off) and a little cloissone box no doubt made by an arthritic widow in a third-world country. Mementos, you say. Evidence. But evidence of what? Chaos, pathos, beautiful life-altering pain. That's the

list above your desk--next to the lips. The list of things you'd like your stories to have.

My man in the museum purports to be an artist himself. He carries a sketchbook about and wears lots of unironed linen. His walls are covered with his own work (mostly black charcoal skulls) and there is a band saw in his living room. He has, in fact, sawed his own couch in half. I should have known better, when I saw that.

But the realm of symbols and foreshadowing and theme--that's the world of fiction, I told myself. This is life. This is chaos. And that is just a couch. But what about that over there? Just a picture of his ex-girlfriend. So she's naked. She's a photographer. That's not lust--that's Art. And what about that other pair of earrings on the window ledge--the same window ledge where I place mine just before climbing into bed? Let's call those earrings Sculpture. Let's pour a gin and tonic and make a joke about piercings. Let's pick them up when he's not looking and throw them down the garbage disposal. This is not fiction--this is *life*. We *hate* capital S symbols in life. We love, however, the sound of metal grinding his disposal to a halt.

Just after I left town to go west, where I could no longer make significant contributions to the narrative of love, but just make jokes, I wrote a story about an artist and a writer and a tricky little abortion. After the workshop in which it was discussed, we were all having beers at a local tavern, and my fellow students were quoting lines of the story back to me. Whenever the character's name was mentioned, two hands came up that drew quotation marks in the air, as if to imply the story had a strong autobiographical slant. I sat mutely grinning. Little in the story was actually

true, but I sipped smugly--triumphantly!--thinking I had convinced them it was.

There may not have been a tricky little abortion, but there was a tense trip to Fred Meyer where I bought a pound of hamburger, a bottle of ketchup, some apricot-scented hand lotion (there was a dollar off coupon), and a pregnancy test. I could tell the cashier was not convinced. When I handed her my money, I saw *the look*. A quick check of the left hand. Remember that look for a story, I told myself. If, after this, you are ever able to write another story.

I was reminded of a line from "People Like That."

"Are you taking notes for this?" the husband asks.

"No."

"You're not?"

"No. I can't. Not this! I write fiction. This isn't fiction."

Later she adds, "This cannot be designed. This cannot even be noted in preparation for design."

A confession by the mahatma of manipulation herself that some things are too gritty for stories, too brutal for banter. But, of course, the confession comes within a story. I thought of this, carrying my cookout home. I thought of this, worrying that I was not coordinated enough to pee correctly on the stick, and that I may have to go back to Fred Meyer and come up with another shopping list (maybe a barbecue this time, with ribs) if the test failed to work. But I've never failed a test in my life, and this one seemed to be no exception. That plus means I pass! I win! Open destiny of disaster. I poured myself a gin without the tonic.

That evening, waiting for the artist's line to clear (What a chatty little *bastard*, I thought. Doesn't he know I'm *dying* here?), I picked up the story

that had become an unnatural obsession. But even this could not hold my attention. When the line was finally free, our conversation was deceptively simple. He would send a check. I would slit my throat. "Are you okay?" he asked, getting ready to hang up.

"I'll be fine," I said, "when I finish this bottle of gin."

"Take care of yourself," he said. "And remember I'm not going anywhere."

Of course you're not, I thought. You're not going to the doctor or the clinic or the deepest layer of grief.

Just about that time, a few weeks after *Birds of America* was published, I went to a dusty August fair with two professors and an eight-year-old. We were all discussing the book (except the eight-year-old, who was chasing rabbits), and I said something like "it's not just a story about a kid dying from cancer. It's a story about memoir vs. fiction and all the delicious layers of truth."

The professors stopped. "Dying from cancer?" the woman said.

"Of course, dying from cancer," I said. "The ending may be wonderfully ambiguous, but all the arrows point toward death."

"But the kid's alive. Lorrie Moore came to read where I used to teach. Her son really did have cancer, but he's fine now. Just down one kidney. She said it's really every mother's dream--he'll never be able to play football or go to war."

This I did not want to hear. In my reading it is *not* true, the baby does *not* live, and it is *not*, in the end, about a baby at all. It is about *writing*, goddamnit, about imagination, about the fact that life is merely preparation for design. Oh, wait. I seem to have misspoken: "Life that cannot even be noted in preparation for design."

After school had started in the fall, after the rains had finally come, I got a note from my pianist-friend in Madison. He included a Lorrie Moore interview and told me he had served them lunch. "She had the salmon burger w/fries. She doesn't eat the top bun, but eats the burger and bottom bun with a knife and fork. French fries with a fork also. Twice now she's had this meal." As I read the note, alone in my new kitchen, I closed my eyes and saw him watching her, saw him leaning against the counter beside the pie carousel, pretending to tally tabs as he saw her slide that offensive top bun away. Oh, to be watched like that, the way a parent or a lover watches.

I tacked up the note, written on a green-and-white guest check, next to the lips over my desk. I poured a glass of Chardonnay and put on water for pasta. I kicked off my school shoes and put on Ella Fitzgerald. I bent into the refrigerator--and the memory was there to flatten me. The memory of cold linoleum; of my body hunched over, hook-like; of my fingers curved around a sweating glass. When the pain started that morning, the first thing I did, after seeing the blood, was get a glass of cold water. My mother always prescribed cold water for the flu. Whatever humiliation or treachery might occur while one is hunched over in a bathroom, at least you will not be parched.

Standing in the refrigerator far too long, I forget what I've intended to make. I turn off the water and carry the wine bottle and the telephone to the couch. First, I call David and thank him for the grist. He tells me she was in that day with the kid. "Cute kid," he says. "I got to serve them."

"But I thought you were management now."

"I am," he says, "but no one else likes to serve her. She can be a lot like her characters. Ascerbic. Off-putting. I love it, of course, but I'm the only waiter who can appreciate the literary value of testiness."

Next, I call my artist because I'm feeling witty in a mildly alcoholic kind of way. But instead of making us laugh I find myself speaking in the drippiest of cliches, words I am embarrassed to hear myself say. I mention things like the "circle of life" and "nature's demand for re-birth." He has no idea what I'm talking about because he thinks we're done talking about *that*. He misses cue after cue, so finally I say, "I can't talk to you like this. I'll send the story."

"What story?"

"*You* know. The one I wrote. About the artist and the poet and the tricky little abortion."

"But you said that wasn't about us."

"So I lied. I'm a writer. It's what I do."

And this is what I've come to, I think. It is not me giving words to my narrator, but my narrator talking to my lost-in-real-life man, saying what I cannot bring myself to say. Everyone's a character, I think, like the writer spied upon in the diner.

I imagine if I really knew Lorrie Moore, and not just her lips, we might have pie together in the afternoons. We might sit at her kitchen table watching the children play (hers real, mine imagined). And I'll bet she'd still be witty and insightful, though not nearly as often as she is on the page. Who could be, in real life?

Sitting on the couch I hang up the phone and pour the last of the wine. I lean back and close my eyes, and I am in Madison, trying to tell her it really *is* easy to make a great pie. The children are in the next room,



playing with trains. She shakes her head and insists she prefers mail-order to baking. Then we hear shrieks and run in to them. Her son is standing open-mouthed and wronged; my daughter has taken his train and is pushing it away, off the tracks he's so carefully built. I should go to her, take it back, set it rightly on the tracks. But I go to him instead, seduced by his howls, by the way his lips work so hard to speak against grief.

## Grammar is Life

Introduction: There is always a pen in Lucy's hand, but never to write a poem. Lesson plans all day, it scribbles, then postcards to Tom at night. When idle, that pen is poised above texts, ready to strike at anything with meaning. Texts on the teaching of writing, books on the processes of poetry. Thesis, Illustration, Exhaustion, Analysis, Conclusion. Take notes, she thinks. Take notes. Speaker, Metaphor, Morning Sickness, Tenor, Vehicle. Life can insert itself in the most illogical places.

Thesis: Grammar is life. Really. It's true. The construction of one's life is painfully close to the construction of one's verbs.

First example: *Use the simple present tense to express habitual action that could continue indefinitely.*

Tom fucks Annie. On the bed, on the couch, pressed against a parking ramp pillar. The parking ramp next to Tom's apartment, no less, the one for which he had given Lucy a key. Silly, literary Lucy--how she cherished those useless symbols. An extra key on her ring that gained her entrance to his complex. The secret code that raised the garage door on Annie's errant skirt.

*Habitual action that could continue indefinitely.* Cruel, but accurate, that simple present tense.

Second example: Present perfect tense. Tom has been fucking Lucy for the better part of two years. Now it is fall, and Lucy has moved west to teach writing. Because she is a writer, she worships the particular. When it

comes to her love life, however, this turns out to be an unfortunate trait. Acquiring particular knowledge about the beloved is not the same as acquiring the beloved.

*Do not use the present perfect tense to refer to actions that have been completed.* Tom has been fucking Annie since last spring. Lucy is certain this action has not been completed, but because she talks to Tom all day in her mind--because she tells him that her key sticks in her office door, because she tells him of the secretary with the Prozac smile who found her retching in the women's room, because she tells him that the post office is on a one-way street, and that the best way to get there is to go too far and loop back--because he is there with her learning how to live in a new place, she can almost forget about Annie. His presence is so comforting she can almost forget what Annie's presence means. She can almost forget he is a man who has never fulfilled a lease, much less a woman.

Third example: progressive present tense. Tom is fucking Annie. *Use the present progressive form to express ongoing action that will not continue indefinitely.* Tom is fucking Annie now, but this will not--cannot--continue forever. Lucy likes to imagine what forever could look like. She likes to imagine that as the months grow colder and she grows larger, they could become the kind of people who spend as much time shopping as fucking. Shopping for bunting and Burleys and bassinets. What exactly is bunting? Lucy is not sure, but she will go home and look it up in her book. She has bought a *What to Expect*. She reads it exclusively now--no poems, no stories. This mustard seed is now the only story she has ever lived.

She likes to imagine Tom could like it out west. He is a biker and a hiker and a lover of beaches. Maybe this is how she will tell him. Maybe she will send two helmets--one adult, one infant--with a note attached:

you've got the helmet, I've got the babe. Maybe this would be just the right touch.

As she drinks her decaf every day in the Union, she ponders the delicate chemistry of language that is the bond of all life. It is not so much what is said, she knows, but how one is able to say it.

One last example: The dreaded passive voice. *A sentence that contains a form of the verb "to be" often excludes the agent of action, including only as the subject the noun that is acted upon.* Tom is fucked. Annie is fucked. Remember class, always avoid the passive voice. *Sentences written in the passive voice are often flat and indirect.* Lucy begs to differ. Sipping her decaf, thinking of helmets, she remembers riding one day in the park with him. She remembers running suspiciously into Annie, and watching Tom grow hard under his spandex.

Tom is fucked. Annie is fucked. Succinct, direct, and full of energy. What's this hooey about passive voice?

Postcard: He gave her a box of one hundred on the ponderous occasion of her departure. One hundred artistic masterworks, complete with text on the painter and the painting.

"Postcards?" she'd said. "You're giving me postcards?"

"It's perfect--don't you see? I supply the pictures, you supply the words."

"Looks to me like you panicked in the gift section at Barnes & Noble."

"Don't be such a cynic, Lucy," he said, leaning in and kissing her twice. He had a grin that could send her common sense camping.

"What better mode to express true love," said the grin, "than the epistolary marriage of our arts?"

Lucy tipped her head back and howled with laughter, but the mouth kissed her neck, then her chin, then her lips.

They stood in the dark, leaning on her Toyota. She had returned the garage key months before, telling him she'd take her chances on the street. All that gesture had meant, in the end, was that she became an expert at parallel parking.

He thrust his hands in his pockets, looking up at the stars. "Go west, young woman," he said in a Ted Koppel voice. He laughed at himself.

She didn't laugh.

"Hey, now--what's this?" He was practically whispering, her face in his hands. "Don't lose your sense of humor over a shit like me."

"Never," she said, as his hand reached up to push a strand of hair off her forehead. Heartbreaking, that move. How did he do it?

"But this isn't a joke," she said, arms around his neck. "Two thousand miles through Wyoming and Utah are definitely *not* a joke." He pulled her closer; she spoke sotto voce.

"I could be ravaged by coyotes, or seduced by Mormons."

"You wouldn't make a good second wife."

"No?"

"You're a solo flyer. You'd resent doing all those dishes."

She laughed, softly, into his neck. "You would be much funnier if you were right."

"Right?" he said, running his hands under the back of her shirt.

"Polygamy beckons?"

"Togetherness beckons."

He stepped back and crossed his arms, as if negotiating the sale of a used car. "I'm afraid I don't follow."

"No. You don't." A cat walked by and snapped a twig. "And you never will."

He leaned over to pet the cat. "I don't think I ever misrepresented myself."

She nodded, arms still crossed, thinking of the night before, thinking of their slow and silent lovemaking, thinking of his face a few inches above hers and of his flagrantly tender kisses. Tom was usually more of an acrobat in bed. He had a habit, Lucy had noticed, of climaxing in positions with minimal eye contact. Yet last night he had taken both of her hands in his and not looked away, not once. He had barely even blinked. In the afterglow of his snoring, Lucy had mentally disassembled his drafting table to see if it would fit in his car. She had pictured them at rest stops, with soft serve, and hadn't been able to sleep, for the thrill of travelling tandem.

Watching him shift in the street like a salesman, she thought of facing the plains alone and swallowed a bucket of tears. Was it too much to ask for someone to drive with? Just once, couldn't there be someone to drive with?

"I don't want to make this trip alone."

"Take solace in the open prairie. Think of it as the open destiny of life."

"That's Grace Paley," she said. "I read you that."

He nodded.

"That's plagiarism. You get an F."

"When I see you next time, will I have to call you professor?"

"Next time?"

"Remember. Open destiny."

"When next?"

He smiled the camping smile and she forgot about the lilting end of her questions, still hanging. He unfolded his arms and she fell into them, like a simple exercise in gravity.

Postcard: On the back of Manet, "Dejeuner sur L'herbe," Lucy sticks to straight illustration. She decides to keep it light, for now. She has several weeks before the second trimester. Before they have that discussion--about the options of the first trimester--she decides to try to remind him why they maybe once fell in love. She can't allow herself to think that that discussion could go either way.

"Went to the farmer's market today and bought a bunch of tiger lilies as big as my head. They practically bring tears to my eyes, they are so vibrant in that vase we bought last year in Westport. I have never before lived in a place where every last scrubby bush blooms. I feel like Eve--before the apple. I must find a field guide so I can write you in exquisite, latinate terms. What is a poet, after all, without her proper nouns? I bought a basket of blackberries for lunch and squeezed one between thumb and finger just to watch the purple stain my arm. Nature's got us artists whipped."

Lessons in rhyme: *Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds which results in something like half-rhymes, often pleasing to the ear.* Preparing for class, Lucy writes this on a transparency. She is in her office during her office hours, but she puts out a sign--caffeine crisis--then turns out the light

and closes the door. She is remembering one of the first nights, one of the sweet nights, one of the pre-errant skirt nights.

They were seated at a crooked little table under the microphone of Big Billy O'Dowd. The music was grand--who doesn't love the Irish!--but made conversation difficult, all the same.

He held out a piece of fish for her to taste.

"What kind of fish?" she asked.

He smiled and shook his head.

She mouthed it bigger the second time, "What kind of fish?"

He stared a long minute, put down the fork, touched the back of her neck. Oh, that seductions by words, wished Lucy's poet-self, could be half so liquid or so grand.

For a brief moment she thought it was passion, but then she heard the rhyme:

What kind of fish.

Give me a kiss.

She smiled, she laughed, she drained her beer.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"The infinite wonders of the imagination."

"What?" She knew he couldn't hear a word.

"The thought of Big Billy in green tights and a tam-tam."

Alone in the darkened office, she stares at her lesson: Half rhymes are often pleasing to the ear.

Can half love also be pleasing to the heart?



Thoughts on The Speaker: Never assume the speaker of a poem is the poet. Speakers and poets are actually painfully different things.

Speakers, in poems, get to make things up. They don't have to listen carefully for the pleasure of consonance or the cadence of breath; they get to rush unthinking into the heady spin of action. Speakers are the ones that get to frolic and tumble and fuck. It's only the poets who have to stay home and make tedious little notes. It's only the poets who have to try to scribble mess into meaning.

Illustration of the Speaker/Poet Disconnect: Later that beautiful night, after Big Billy and the mistaken, fishy kiss, conversation in the car began with nude models and figure drawing. Tom had seen a girl in the street he thought had once been one of his, although he couldn't be entirely sure. Lucy, every inch the speaker, chose not to ask how he could possibly forget whether or not he had seen a particular woman naked. She turned the conversation instead to nudist colonies, since she had just seen a book of photographs of people living in them. She commented on the fact that most people should not be photographed nude, particularly in full daylight playing a game of darts or pool.

Conversation, then, turned to nudity in general--the pros and cons for daylight or darkness, nearness or distance. Lucy said that she, come to think of it, had probably never studied a man completely naked from a distance under bright light, and so of course Tom was obliged to make a little joke about his obliging her, which wasn't a little joke at all. Lucy ignored his little joke, ever fearful that was all it was, and got around it by saying she preferred her men not to be objects of contemplation, but rather

agents of transportation. Tom was obliged to laugh, and to comment on the fact that he was currently driving the car, but when the car stopped, was there any other place she might like him to take her, tonight?

The speaker can joke; the speaker can laugh big laughs. She doesn't have to suffer form and meaning; she doesn't have to labor for months to find that beautiful, last best line. She can ramble on and on without thought, discarding clothes in the inevitable way autumn trees drop their dying leaves.

Lessons in rhyme, cont'd: *Consonance is the identity of consonants with a different main vowel: bad--bed, full--fool, summer--simmer.*

Lucy stares at the book, then writes the sentence on the film. It seems even the text mocks her. This should be in a manual for new teachers, she thinks. If you cry on transparencies while writing them, the ink will run away.

And if you say everything you could say to your love, he will surely run away.

She takes the transparency to the coffee room and watches the blue ink run down the sink, but the mixture of smells, of marker and coffee, suddenly turns her stomach and she flees to the bathroom, praying it's empty. Leaning over the toilet, searching her bag for a bottle of water, she hears a knocking on the wooden stall door.

"Everything all right?"

"Fine," she gags. "Fine."

"You don't sound fine."

"Who are you?"

"Stephanie. From your poetry class?" Lucy can't stand the way their voices lilt at the end, as if everything in the world is in question.

"Go away, Stephanie."

"I could get a glass of water. Wouldn't you like a glass of water?"

Still fumbling in her bag, Lucy has none. And then she has no breakfast, sputtering into the toilet. "Yes," she finally says. "I would like a glass of water."

And Stephanie is there when she opens the door, her face a pink doughnut of scripted concern. "Is there anything else I can do?"

Lucy gulps water with one hand and gathers her hair with the other. She waves Stephanie on and is so grateful the girl leaves. It is hard to sound stern about attendance and revisions when they have seen the ends of your hair tipped in toilet-bowl water.

*Is there anything I can do?* It is a question Tom would never ask.

*The difficulty of rhyme in English has opened up a wide variety of inexact rhymes--off- or slant-rhymes--that the poet may use with considerable freshness.*

Bad--bed, summer--simmer, first fool--now full.

Postcard: Chagall, "Above the Town"

"The clouds have rolled in--the natives say for the winter, although that seems absurd in September--and I'm not sure anything called a horizon still exists. It feels like living constantly wrapped in wool, or being hugged persistently by strangers. This is, I suppose, better than being hugged by no one at all. This was my theory when I agreed to be with you. Is this a good

theory? I have begun to wonder. I have begun to think it is a barbarism to give water to a dying man."

Lucy reads this one several times before she sends it. It is neither sexy nor playful. It is needy and acid-tongued. She told herself she would not get emotional. She told herself emotional was not attractive. She drops it in the mailbox anyway.

Walking to class that afternoon, Lucy sees Stephanie entwined on the grass with another student--the only one who ever smiles and nods from the back of the room.

There he is with his arms around her. And there he is kissing her, her cheeks and nose and mouth. They have no idea there is anyone else, no idea there is a moon or a tomorrow or a bicycle bearing down on their path.

In class someone turns in a poem about childhood. The boy slides his hand up Stephanie's thigh.

Lucy lets them go with twenty minutes to spare.

Lessons on metaphor: *Language itself is deeply metaphorical. For example, we speak of the eye of a needle, the spine of a book, the head and mouth of a river.*

*Metonymy and synecdoche are modes of metaphor involving substitution.*

*In metonymy, substitute one thing for something associated with it: He lives through the easel; she speaks through the pen.*

*In synecdoche, substitute a part for the whole or a whole for the part: His two hands cradled her grief; a thousand sails docked in the harbor.*

Reading this in bed, late at night, Lucy only wants the hands. The sails have docked, and now she wants the hands. Fuck helmets, fuck Burleys, fuck bunting. All she wants are his hands wrapped tight.

She picks up the phone and calls, even though it is 2 a.m. two time zones away.

"Can you please hold me," she says, "from two thousand miles away?"

"One human being can never contain another."

Lucy puts her hand on her belly. "That's absolutely not true."

She hasn't told him yet. "All right," he says, "but it's wildly unhealthy and unattractive."

"Oh, fuck you, Tom."

"I think you already have."

She holds the phone away from her face and considers all of the options. She tries to think what he could say to make it better. She almost tells him, to shame him into some kind words, but somehow she can't imagine it. There is nothing he could say to make this better.

How could *she*, of all people, suffer such a failure of imagination?

It is too late to be thoughtful. Apparently the hands were too much to ask. She hangs up the phone.

Postcard: Miro, "Women, Bird by Moonlight"

Wine is a girl's best friend. I run three miles every morning to confirm the fact that I am still alive, then drink a bottle of wine every night expressly for the purpose of forgetting said fact. I'm assuming I will not be able to do this for long, which is good, because it is getting quite expensive.

Restatement of the thesis (in postcard form): I am. You are. He/She/It is. I am, like the verb, in irregular form. *He/She/It is*. Really.

I will send a ticket. Two weeks from Thursday. It would seem unseemly to have to call a cab after such a procedure.

She sends these words on the back of Magritte. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, with the picture of the pipe.

She makes up a little mantra, to get her through the days:

*Ceci n'est pas un bebe*.

Sometimes she puts it to music when she does the dishes or pays the bills. She can make the words fit any theme--Mozart's 40th, Beethoven's 3rd, Yellow Submarine.

Other times she hears it as one of her teacherly lines, and practices delivering it in a number of intonations.

*Ceci--n'est pas--un bebe?* Spoken slowly, leaning over, quietly iambic.

Or, if she has just finished calling and getting his answering machine (I'm out in search of enlightenment, the recording says) she chooses the mode of the wild claim, made with one's finger in the air, all the words in a rush, the last two syllables fired off like gunshot.

*Cecin'estpasunbe--be! Cecin'estpasunbe--be!*

Wait, wait. What was that? What are you you saying?

Non, non! *Cecin'estpasunbe--be!*

"There is not room," Lucy writes in her lesson plans, "for the poet to doubt the power of language."

There is no way, she thinks, for language to have power over *this*.

Analysis: If you cannot see how the illustrations fit the claim being made, then you must have bricks in your head.

Lucy makes fewer and fewer lessons plans, writes more and more postcards. She can always improvise in class. She's always been good at improv.

Questions for discussion not addressed in the text: Who thinks Lucy might be mentally unstable? Hmmh, yes, most of you it seems. Put your hands down now. Who thinks she is acting the only way a person in such a situation might be expected to act? Yes, good. A few of you smart ones. Those of you who raised your hands the first time, don't bother coming back to class. You are clearly all dumb as stumps. You and Tom should meet for coffee. I'm sure he'd find a few of you twiggy young tarts quite attractive.

Postcard: Duchamp "Fountain"

"I like this man. He takes a pissoir and calls it a fountain. I drink a bottle of wine every night not just to put myself into a boozy sleep, but as an exercise of insurance over impulse. I could not give birth to a child with a purposely artless face, or for that matter raise a child with a slow, dull mind. I would have already deprived it of the only real joys I've known.

Lucy stops writing, looks up into nothing: pours. She is lying now, even to Tom. If he came tomorrow with a pair of booties, she would become an advocate--an expert!--on fetal alcohol syndrome. She would charter a private school and go on 20/20 and Dateline.

But why can't she be strong alone? Why can't she drink carrot juice and take iron pills and start researching day care? Surely these are not monumental tasks.

Lucy drains her wine and picks up her pen.

"Maybe you could stay a few days and we could take a little trip, just to put this all behind us. Or maybe I could learn to stop loving you, and pray very hard this does not ruin the rest of my life.

She sinks onto the bed and sees the *What to Expect*. The cover is pink, like Stephanie's face. From somewhere there are yet more tears.

She never expected that being two would make being one an untenable position.

*Metaphor: Conventionally the subject, the thing that undergoes transference, is the tenor (life); the source of transferred qualities is the vehicle (grammar).*

There is a moment in a successful poem when the action opens up, when the shades are thrown open and many levels of meaning become clear.

The next morning Lucy sees the bottle and the card and throws both in the trash. She opens the phone book and makes a call. So far it is as simple as changing your oil.

In the waiting room, she stares at the paintings. Since this is almost a coastal town there are bridges, harbors, sailboats. All the frames are green, she notices--seafoam green. The color of the carpet in her bedroom in the house on Hart Avenue, the years she was nine, ten, and eleven. Also the unfortunate color of her prom dress and her maid-of-honor dress for her



only sister's wedding. The eighties were very green, she thinks. She smiles to herself, remembering the wedding reception, remembering catching her sister's bouquet even though she was standing over to the side, and way in the back. Remembering how her mother faked a swoon but then slid on a real strawberry and fell into the cake table--thank God it had already been cut and eaten, thank God the worst of it was a fallen and flummoxed mother of the bride.

Past present future.

Now there is a nurse handing her a clipboard, to which there are clipped several papers. Some of them are half-sized, some of them are pink and yellow and green. Insurance, history, allergies--sign and release.

The sight of these slips makes Lucy think of a little poem he once wrote her on a scrap of a paper from his pocket.

A scrap, she thinks. This is just a scrap. Of tissue. Be strong.

He'd written it before a cleaning date they'd made, to eradicate the mold, so she could spend the night without crying herself to sleep.

I'm so looking  
forward to  
you visiting and  
passing the evening  
talking and removing  
the dust from all  
the corners of  
my apartment  
and all those other  
recesses.

It is barely bigger, Lucy says to herself, than a speck of dust.

Conclusion (in postcard form): On the back of Picasso's "Weeping Woman"

"It's not so unseemly after all, to call a cab. Cash in your ticket; do with it what you wish. There are no words here, only weeping."

Lucy studies the card. She is wearing a hat. The woman in the picture is wearing a hat. A red one with a blue and yellow flower. In her hair there are streaks of purple and green and gold. Her mouth is white and blue, and also her hands; the lips are peeled back and there is steely white space between the teeth.

What would she say, if she spoke? Would it be about him?

Well yes, of course, but no.

Lucy lies back on the couch and lets the card fall to the floor. In a few hours, maybe, or a few days, she will again have legs to stand on, to take her to the mailbox and back. But for now she drifts in and out of sleep, falling through dreams, tumbling through reason. When she wakes it is dark outside and she vaguely realizes she is hungry. She makes her way to the kitchen, glad for the bagels on the counter, glad that there is just enough milk left for cocoa.

## Elementary Music

The year I was eight--the year my parents divorced and my father lived alone in the little apartment with one bathroom and no porch--I joined the preparatory orchestra as a second violin. When he signed me up and shuttled me off to practices, he said, "The world is a large and interesting place! We've got to get out there, sweetie. We've got to mix it up!" As he talked I watched the deep lines on his forehead jump together and apart, and I liked to stare at him and imagine them flat and still, like when he was sleeping, or when he was happy. But in spite of the dancing lines, I decided it would be all right to go because the alternative was to stay home and listen to him mutter in any one of five languages. That year he was working on a manuscript about the French civilizing mission in Morocco--about their policy of peaceful penetration--so it was likely the mutterings would be in Arabic or in French. It was not a stretch to see how lectures on the value of a half note would be an improvement over that.

And meet new people we did. Miss Maia was the first teacher I knew who didn't have a single hard sound in her name or in her walk, although her shoes were far from sensible. The heels curved up in such a way as to lift and accentuate the tender bone at the side of the ankle, so much so that at times I thought it might snap. Her feet were never still, while we played, and after I had mastered the difference between quarter note and half, my attention was free to stare at her ankles, to imagine my father kissing that all-important bone.

And where does an eight-year-old get ideas like that? Well, we had had babysitters, my sister and I--we'd stayed up late and watched R-rated movies. We knew about kissing and babies and the French. To my

beautiful older sister, who was starting to get phone calls from boys, my father would wiggle his eyebrows and say "Une femme chaste est une femme chassée!"

"Oh, Daddy," she sighed, turning away from him, wrapping the phone cord around her waist. "You are so not right."

A chaste woman is a chased woman. Maybe if I'd really been listening I could have learned something. But I wasn't thinking about my future, when he said it. I was thinking of him with a woman, I was thinking of Miss Maia splayed on our couch like the women in the movies. But what next? I couldn't think. They were both frozen like that--maybe holding hands, maybe even kissing. I once found a mysterious hair clip in the bathroom, something bigger than what my sister or I would use, but just right for her long, thick hair. Had she used my Minnie Mouse hairbrush when she left that clip on the counter? I scoured the bristles for offending longer hairs. When I tried to force myself to think why she would be fixing her hair at our apartment, I could only see my father's bushy eyebrows shooting up and down, could only hear him muttering in Arabic and French. This is not how it went in the movies--those men had smooth faces and said things in English that made me giggle into a throw pillow. And so I could absolutely not imagine that Miss Maia had stood in our bathroom some morning fixing her hair, and as soon as my father's maxim became a refrain where my sister and her phone calls were concerned, I did not have to imagine anything at all. I could clearly see him taking her hand, helping her on with her coat, opening the car door and closing it behind her.

But then there was a moment somewhere in the fall when my father was making dinner--peeling a cucumber for a salad, in fact--and happened to ask what I thought of Miss Maia. I might have skipped right over it, except

as he waited for my response he held the peeler still, poised a few inches above the half naked vegetable. This from a man who typed words in the air as he spoke them, from a man who jiggled his feet under the sheets at night. I knew about the jiggling because I had taken to sleeping with him, choosing my parents' old bed--minus the headboard which my mother got--over the new twin one he had bought for me. It was too hard and it smelled too new, as if it were still a showroom bed. I fantasized that that was the reason he'd left the plastic on the box springs--so that it would be easy to return when this uneasy experiment was over.

But my choice was about more than that, of course. That year he lived alone I learned how to make a carrot salad and a cucumber salad from scratch, both with a yogurt sauce, and also a half dozen things with boneless skinless chicken breasts--everything from teriyaki to lemon pepper to a l'orange. We had to watch the cholesterol. When he took off his shirt at night I could still see the stripes where they'd shaved his chest to take the picture of his heart. I wouldn't let myself go to sleep until the jiggling had stopped, when his breathing became slow and deep and sure. I had lost so much already. I had visions of him dying in the night.

But what did I say to him as he stood so noticeably still? Absolutely nothing. If I said nothing, he would have to say nothing back. His words felt like when I sometimes forgot and dropped sharp knives into the sink full of soapy water. My father would put on a rubber glove and reach in to drain the sink. Then he'd find the knives, wave them around a bit, and say "That's a little too much blade for my taste. Better safe than sorry!"

So we stood there in silence for a long minute before he went back to the cucumber, before he asked me to look in the crisper for the scallions and parsley. Did he notice how I dragged my feet to the refrigerator? Did he

notice how I slapped the plastic bags on the counter next to him, then went over and turned on public radio? He was the one who usually did that--turned on the radio--and I usually hated it, how he shushed us to listen to the drones of strangers. But I was starting to see how silence could be a good thing, if the alternative was talk that brought images of ankles and hairbrushes to mind. Miss Maia's name was not mentioned in our house again until the preparatory orchestra gave its concert, some time deep in that winter. I don't know if that kindness was plan or accident, but I'd like to believe, as he stood motionless with the peeler, that he saw me take two steps back; I'd like to believe his silence was not an accident, but a gift.

Every other week we went to live with my mother. I couldn't decide whose apartment was worse--my father's with his lone couch, his two cheap bookcases, his television with manual dials, or my mother's. She had the loveseat and matching chairs, the new TV, and everything else piled in boxes two deep in the hallway. The boxes had been there so long I had forgotten there were real things in them--things we used to read and touch and drink out of every day. Then one afternoon a few weeks before the concert, my mother sat on the living room floor, opened the lid of a box and pulled out a wreath of dried roses--something small enough to be worn in the hair. She said it had probably been from a wedding, although she couldn't remember whose. I reached out to try them on, but she promptly threw the roses in a garbage sack, a reinforced lawn and leaf bag she had just dragged from her bedroom. The roses fell on top of two discarded bras, gray and permanently stretched at the seams.

I picked up the flowers, put them on my head, then took a dried bouquet from the kitchen table and began processing through the living room in tight little circles. The couch, the chairs, and the coffee table blocked anything that might look like a path.

My mother stopped her sorting and leaned back on her hands. She was very thin, then, and with that leaning motion her t-shirt clung to her breasts and sagged a little at the neck. Her collar bones looked long and sharp. They reminded me of my violin bow when I had tightened it too tight.

She began to sing. "Here comes the bride, fair fat and wide. See how she wobbles from side to side."

I'd been told my whole life that I took after my mother, in most areas of looks. I had her straight, thin hair and her narrow frame. I was so skinny I could have been the one they sent down a well to rescue the dying, if we'd lived in the country and fifty or a hundred years earlier. That was the kind of thing I liked to read about in books--narrow rescues in wells and apartment fires and children who got around town on roller skates. I didn't know any children like this. But I thought I might meet them any day. We would all become fast friends with fast skates and purposeful things to do, and I would be the one to volunteer for the well.

I stopped walking when I heard her words. I tried to shoot her a wounding look, but she wasn't looking at me at all.

"Who's fat?" I said, throwing my bouquet back on the table.

It took her a minute to come around. "Just an old song." She reached into the box and pulled out a handful of pictures, curled so much at the corners they could have been cannoli.

"But you had it at your wedding." I already knew this. There was a home movie. Could adults change the past, just by saying it, like they could change the future? "You'll never be more than an insufferable narcissist," was one of her favorite lines for my father. "You'll never learn to consider my needs." How did she know this? Whenever I didn't want to go to Brownies or swimming lessons, she said "It's all approach. Only fun if you make it that way." When my mother came home one day and put a signed lease on my father's plate for dinner, I wanted to say to her, "Only fun if you make it that way."

She looked up at me from the floor, looked down at the pictures. From a few feet away, nobody in them looked familiar. "Yes," she said. "I suppose we did have that awful song. And also the Taco Bell Kanon and the Water Music and your father's cousin's band that only knew polka standards and the theme from Ice Castles." She stopped to inspect the pictures, but she would have needed both hands to hold the curled edges apart. She was still leaning back on the one hand, and must not have wanted to move. She tossed them into the garbage. "That's what was popular on the radio that year. The theme from Ice Castles."

I didn't want to hear about the radio. "Wouldn't Daddy's cousin be my cousin, too?"

"Yeah," she said. "Sure. Second cousin. Except that cousin died the next year." She gave up looking through the box and lay back on the floor, her arms and legs outstretched like a snow angel. "Abdominal aortic aneurism."

I reached up and touched the roses in my hair. I thought it miraculous they were still there. Maybe someday I could be a bridesmaid, or maybe even a bride. And if I ever were, I vowed, I would not let my



underwear turn gray. I would put all of the pictures in albums. I fingered the rose petals and pulled them down firmly on my head. They were fitted to a wire. I don't know where I thought they could go.

I pondered. Abdominal aortic aneurism. I knew the aorta was part of the heart. We had studied this, in school. I had paid particular attention since my father had had to go and have a picture made--a picture of his heart. So how could the heart also be in the belly? Hearts went with ribs and muscles and chests like my father's I could lie on while watching TV. Bellies were loose and fluid and even small ones, like my mother's, had to be held back with control top hose. I decided my mother must be wrong. She had been wrong before. I would look it up, or better yet, I would ask him. And why didn't I just ask her, splayed out on the living room floor? She was a smart person, after all. She had a master's degree. It was even from Stanford. But she was also the kind of woman who would stand in front of the pantry and say, "What shall we have for dinner? Do you see any supper lurking in there?" Then she would suggest something like chili, and it would be up to me to remind her that we didn't have tomato paste, or pinto beans. My father made menus and shopping lists. He would be the one to know about the heart.

The week before the concert was my mother's week, and so she was the one to take me to the dress rehearsal--she was the one whose bent head I saw when I looked out into the auditorium dotted with reading or sleeping parents. I had never been on a proper stage before, and I couldn't believe how small and dim she was when the house lights went down. It was as if we had not had dinner together, had not driven there together, me eating

cookies in her car and she scolding me for the mess the crumbs were making. It was as if I were suddenly the one who was five feet, eight inches tall--as if I could also wave my arms around and scatter a family like a flock of pigeons, or start a whole group of musicians to playing. In spite of the fact of Miss Maia, I was suddenly very glad my father had made me join.

At the rehearsal that night, we started and ended with "March Heroic." It was a last minute decision, on Miss Maia's part, to play it twice for the concert, and she told us we were doing it because she was terrified we would play everything else badly. She actually said that. She actually stood up in front of the orchestra and said "This is the only thing we play well and so we're certainly going to play it twice." This made me like her and dislike her all at once. I liked that her voice was low and strong and sure--nothing high-pitched and false about it--but with that voice she had just deprived us of pretty dresses, pictures, and punch and cookies. Not literally of course. All of those things would still come to pass, but now I could not sit on stage and pretend I had worked so hard to get there. I could not pretend--despite how grand it made me feel--that my first performance had anything to do with me. I would have preferred to keep this as a secret. Then I could look at it sideways, at will, and have debates with myself about whether or not I was right. After all, I had practiced my violin a few times. I was not one of the chatty kids to whom Miss Maia always had to give the eye. So maybe I had sort of earned the applause, after all. I was very good at talking myself into things.

For example, one night my sister was very upset--a lost ballet solo--but didn't want Mom. She tried to call our father, but he didn't answer. It was almost midnight. Mom had gone to bed. She turned to me and said, "He must have a girlfriend."

"But what if he just went out to dinner?"

"For being the smart kid, you can be pretty dumb."

My sister played soccer and the recorder, but her real talent was ballet. She had also tried to play the violin when she was my age, but she seemed better suited to activities in groups that called for larger muscle movement. She was a natural and gorgeous ballerina and only played the recorder because my father gave her lectures about well-roundedness and joint degeneration. "You'll have to have something left to do when you're old and lonely," he said, "and when you can't leap around anymore, either." I couldn't picture my sister in any of those conditions, though, because even when she was trying to be difficult and ornery—even when she sat with her legs over the arm of a chair and let her hair fly in every direction, she didn't look pouty, as she probably wanted to, but beautiful like I almost shouldn't touch her.

I had no such power. I could play music and look things up and make dinner for three, which is exactly what I did most afternoons as the babysitter snoozed. I was careful to set out matching plates—not such an easy thing, since the split--and I lit candles and put on music. My father hugged me and said, "What a sweetheart," when he came home every night, and that was enough to convince me that during the weeks we were with Mom he could be out eating alone, even at midnight.

My other objection to Miss Maia's pronouncement was that I hated "March Heroic." It was all brash chords and double stops and even a little foot stomping thrown in for the second violins. That was the life of a second violin in the preparatory orchestra--half notes and foot stomping.

"How many beats does a half note have?" she asked at every rehearsal.

"Two," we groaned.

She leaned over and spoke to us eye to eye. "Full value," she said. "Don't even think about playing those notes unless you hold them full value." She straightened, as if addressing an audience. "It's a very good thing in the world, when a half note gets its two counts."

Knowing, of course, was not the problem. Which was why we were still in such a bad way come concert night. I knew full well how to play every piece in our folder, but sometimes I had better things to think about. Like why, in musical parlance, half equaled two. I decided it must be a sign that God and the cosmos and the history of Western music all agreed with my math. Two people did not a family make. Four equaled whole, and whole we had been, or at least until my mother came home one day and served up the lease, talking about narcissism and the cost of a moving van. Sometimes this is what I thought until Miss Maia would shout out something like "Measure 39!" and I would be brought back to a march or a waltz, wondering who had been playing my violin in my absence, who had kept my bow arm so rhythmically pumping.

The concert was a Friday night, and I had thought all day of what to wear. I came straight home to my mother's after school and rummaged through my closet until I found the dress. I had forgotten we owned it--something my sister had once worn as a flower girl--but when I saw it hanging there, mashed between two others, I decided that dreams could come true, after all. All lace, with a silk slip that rustled when you walked.

On the way out the door I saw the roses, rescued from my mother's cleaning frenzy of the past few days--and hung by me on the corner of the bedroom mirror. I put them on my head and decided this was the best day in a long time. Outside the open blinds the sun was just going down, bathing everything golden. For once my mother was home when I got there, and she was even in the kitchen, making lots of promising noises. And then we had big plans for the evening, a rarity, plans that meant cookies and roses and my father seeing me on stage for the first time ever.

I took the dress, still on its hanger, out to my mother in the kitchen. It was winter. She was chopping orange rinds into tiny little pieces. She'd gotten it into her head to make marmalade.

I stood in the doorway. "Is this all right?" I said. She continued chopping as I watched the juice running to the edge of the board.

I tried again. "Do you think this will be all right for the concert?"

She finally looked at me, holding her gaze a long moment while she sized me up. She nodded and said, yes, it would be fine.

Suddenly I wasn't so concerned with my outfit. She was in the kitchen up to her elbows in food, but there was no little snitchel of anything to steal off the counter. Who wants to steal a bit of pulpy orange with the rind still on? There should always be something to steal--the pinch of cheese that promises pizza, the bowl of frosting to lick that gives away cake. Furthermore, she was making a mess. As she looked at me the juice started to dribble over the edge of the counter. When I pointed this out to her she pushed the cutting board back from the edge and swiped at the dribbles with a sponge. It didn't seem to make a bit of difference.

"Never mind," I said. "I'll wear my plaid jumper."

She shrugged and went back to chopping.

A few hours later she found me in my room. I was already dressed, in the jumper, and I was practicing my violin one last time. It wasn't that I was really such a good student, but my sister had claimed the television and I wasn't in the mood for a book. If I opened a book there would be people--my old friends--rescuing kittens from trees and having dinner with their families.

I had left the lace dress on the bed. I was not playing "March Heroic"--or rather "March Aerobic," as my father had renamed it--but instead the Brahms, the waltz in G. My mother picked up the dress and held the hanger at arm's length. She picked up the sleeve of the dress and they waltzed. My parents had taken ballroom dancing the winter before they divorced. That's what the counselor had suggested: take a class together. So they had gone off every Sunday night in their soft-soled shoes, and I always hoped, when they came home, that they might be holding hands, that they might shuttle us off early to bed. But my father usually went off to his study and my mother fell on the couch where my sister and I gravitated towards her, like leaves fallen from a tree. I was six that winter. After a few weeks of this, I said one night, "Mommy, I know what's wrong." I had just seen Cinderella for the first time. "If you're going to dance, you have to wear a big, long dress." She burst out laughing and laughed until she cried. She even called my father out, and repeated my remark. Amidst all the laughing I snuck off to my room. I had been racking my brain all week. I was sure I was on to something important.

And now my mother was dancing with a dress. I was surprised at how well she moved in sneakers on carpet. I was surprised at the way she held her head. I had never noticed before that she had my sister's beautiful, long neck.

She held out the dress. "What's wrong with this? I thought you were going to wear this."

I shrugged. "I thought you didn't like it."

"But I told you I liked it. Put it on." She handed it to me and fell across my bed.

"What about your marmalade?" I said. "Shouldn't you go check on the marmalade?"

"I've just set it on to boil. It'll take awhile."

And so I turned my back and put on the dress while she lay there, and then packed my violin and put it by the door. I went and checked on the oranges a few times, stirring to make sure nothing would burn. When it was almost time to go I fished her car keys out of yesterday's coat, and when it was exactly time to go she got up and went into her room to put on her own black suit. The jelly had just come to a boil, and from what I read in the recipe it was supposed to boil for twenty minutes and then soak for another twelve hours. That meant she would have to get up at 6:30 in the morning to put it into jars. The only thing my mother ever did at 6:30 in the morning was sometimes sit in the living room, in the dark, with a cup of coffee. She always startled us, those mornings, calling our names out when we thought we were the only ones awake in the house.

My sister and I sat on the couch while she stirred for twenty minutes in her suit, and then we all ran to the car. My mother assured us they wouldn't start without me.

And they didn't. Miss Maia was just lining everybody up in processional order when I ran in and threw off my coat. She continued to call out names for line-up as she tuned my violin and secured my shoulder

rest. By the time I had checked the cuffs on my lace socks and the security of the roses, she had everything ready for me to slip into line.

When we got on stage I found my parents sitting together with my sister between them, near the back and on the left, under the green glow of the exit sign. I found them quickly, even with the house lights down and the stage lights nearly blinding us, because that green sign illuminated my father's nearly-bald head--a small, white beacon. It was important for me to know where they were--important for me to know where to glance, briefly, between numbers, and important for me to know in which direction to point my perfectly turned out wrist. They could both appreciate this. My mother because she went to lessons with me and dutifully played along, as the Suzuki method insisted. She, too, had a difficult time keeping her left wrist straight, not letting it collapse under the natural forces of weight, pressure, and gravity. And my father could appreciate good form because he had also started violin lessons when I did, but not Suzuki. He couldn't endure it, all the insipid little songs played for months (to the death, he said), and the parents and the group lessons--the sight of ten of us in a row, all cranking out the same damn song. My father went somewhere else for his lessons, in the middle of Saturdays, and played longer, sadder songs. He also played klezmer music and fiddle tunes, and because he was not learning at the pace of eight-year-olds, he was always a bit ahead of me in terms of technique. He was the first to learn the low second finger, and how to slur two notes to a bow. He was the first to learn vibrato.

And so, thanks to the glow of the exit sign, I knew exactly where to point my attention. Miss Maia had lectured us for weeks--"One eye on the music," she said, "and one eye on me. Nothing is more important than staying together." Exactly what I thought, which is why I didn't look at her



at all. Miss Maia standing there, waving her arms, had less to do with what we would play than the ambient temperature in the hall, and what we had had for dinner. And what we would play had less to do with why we were there than anything. As far as I could tell it was all about being on stage, watching my parents clap together, and wearing a dress that touched my ankles when I sat down. The music and the instruments were just an excuse for this night to turn us all into different and better people. People who went out at night wearing ties and flowered tiaras, people who watched and listened and sat in rows between parents.

Of course my father would have disagreed. He was the one who made me practice my parts, and when I complained that they were boring, he said it was all about harmony, about blending with the group. This was exactly what Miss Maia told us every week in rehearsal, too, saying that the firsts and the cellos were like two pieces of bread, and the seconds were the peanut butter and jelly. "You're invaluable!" she said when we grumbled. "Your harmony is what holds us together." I knew that wasn't true. I knew the outside parts could go right on without us.

My mother never said it. She never made me practice my orchestra music at all. She agreed with me that it was dull, and also that the firsts had the only good part.

After we played, there were more roses. The head mother on the parents committee had gone out and bought a dozen for Miss Maia. There were words, and more clapping, and then the concertmaster got to get up

and carry them across the stage, because it was her mother who had bought them.

They were red, with a big tulle bow, and the vase was so heavy and so tall I don't know how she managed not to drop them. After the clapping stopped and the lights went up, Miss Maia took them out to the lobby and set them on the table with the cookies. By the time I found my parents my father was reading to my mother off the program. "La Donna e Mobile," he said. "The woman is fickle. I wonder why they didn't print that in English?"

"Oh, Paul," she said. "Is that your expert translation?"

French, English, Persian, Arabic, Hebrew. No, I realized, my father did not speak Italian.

"An odd choice," he said, "for a children's orchestra."

"I thought they sounded lovely."

"I'm not disputing that. I'm just saying--"

I went off to find a cookie. My sister had already eaten hers, and she was doing cartwheels and pirouettes at the end of the lobby with at least a dozen other kids. How could she do that? How could she go off and leave them?

Because there were too many people stacked up in front of the cookie table and I wanted to get back to my parents, I snuck around back. I took a plate and started loading: gingerbread, sugar, chocolate chip. And then I was stopped by a leaf in my face. By a couple of blood red roses at nose level. The arrangement, sitting on the table, was taller and wider than I was. I almost ducked around it, deciding to forego the lemon squares on a plate in front of it, but then I realized I was nearly invisible. I could see outlines of my parents through the leaves. They were talking to Miss Maia. I could see

the hands of people taking cookies, but unless they were looking--and nobody was--they couldn't see me. The only searching going on was for the choicest cookies, for ones imperfect enough to be homemade.

I reached up and touched a leaf. It was dark--too dark--and waxy. It could not be real. And then of course there was baby's breath, lots of it. At the end of one stem there was a leaning spray. I had maybe broken it off, in passing. Since it was broken I reasoned it must already be dead. I plucked it off. I thought for a moment, then stuck it in the wreath in my hair. Maybe my mother would look twice at me, not able to figure out why I was suddenly more beautiful.

I was just ready to go back to them with my cookies, and the shortbread I had also gotten for my mother--her favorite--when I saw through the veil of leaves that my father was touching Miss Maia's arm. It was light and quick. Then Maia and my mother shook hands, and I thought I could almost hear my father and mother both say "You do such a good job with the children." That was all it was, then. He had meant it like a handshake, but maybe he had taken her off guard. She was holding a glass of punch. She just hadn't had time to shift it to the other hand.

Then Miss Maia walked away, cornered by other parents and children. Mine were still talking to each other, and I almost ducked under the table--the fastest way back to them--but then I saw my mother run one hand through her hair and put the other hand on her hip. Why couldn't she understand? You shouldn't mix black suits and silk blouses with hands on hips.

I stayed firmly planted behind the bouquet, studying the flowers in front of me. I stared at several different ones, and noticed that they each had a different pattern of opening. While one spiral was perfectly round,

another seemed to have a pattern like a star. I would have to ask about this, but since just the week before in the car my father had been unable to differentiate between a spruce and a fir, I thought I might have to look it up.

But just as soon as I thought this--as soon as I constructed the whole scene--my father not knowing, finding the entry in the World Book, sitting up in his bed with the book propped against my bent legs (we were to go home with him, it was to be his weekend)--as soon as I thought all that I heard a terrible shriek. We all heard it. The adults around the table ran, while the children began to walk slowly toward the scene, I suppose hoping that any real treachery or danger would be under control before we arrived.

That statement might strike you as false. You may think that real danger is what we all hope to see, why people slow to a crawl around accidents even though the lane is perfectly clear. I don't think so. I think what we hope to see is just the opposite--the evidence of danger thwarted, missed, or even already overcome. Wouldn't we much rather see a body lying calmly on a stretcher, the paramedics easing it into the ambulance, than splayed on the pavement, the seriousness of injuries not yet assessed? It could be only a concussion, or it could be a ruptured spleen.

At the other end of the lobby it was my sister, already with an ice pack to her forehead by the time I saw a thing. I later learned she had been trying to execute her ballet steps with a toddler on her shoulders. She tripped and they both fell, but my sister somehow landed first with the little boy on top of her. It was the baby who had shrieked, and was in fact still shrieking. He seemed to be fine. My sister only sat there stunned, with the ice, now the one to be on stage.

My mother was on the floor next to her, while my father stood a few feet away, holding my violin. I grabbed his other arm and tried to drag him

into the scene, but he wouldn't budge. He said, "Your mother has it under control." Was it him who had hit his head? My mother never had anything under control. She needed him. My sister needed him. He should have been on the floor asking her to name the year and the president and to follow his finger with her eyes. That's what they did in the movies. That's what the smart doctors did on TV. He should have been on the floor next to my mother, their legs and arms touching and crossing as they reached out to save her.

Since he wouldn't move I decided to stay next to him, and I remember his hand first on my shoulder, then my cheek, which he stroked a few times before he leaned over and kissed the top of my head. At least he did this much. The night had been drained of hope, and I wanted to lean all the way into him, to feel the change and keys in his pocket pressed to my back. But I couldn't do it with all those people watching, and leaning back would have crushed the roses on my head.

During our dress rehearsal, Miss Maia had said that when we stood to accept the applause we should smile, and smile big. She said that because we were on stage, we would have to exaggerate to be seen. But somehow I couldn't do it, I felt completely silly. I felt as if the blinding lights were stripping away my roses and my lace dress and even the double layer of tights and anklets beneath my patent leather shoes. It felt as if a smile would strip me right down to my birthday suit. Even my sister and I wore robes in and out of the bathroom, and turned our backs from each other when we had to open them to put on our underwear.

Everyone went home after the fall. I wanted to be home, too, with both of them, but my mother lifted my sister and carried her to her car, my father trailing behind. I knew she would win. "Wait here," my father said. "Eat your cookies." I stood at the end of the now vacant table and I watched Maia move up and down it, filling a plate, then somehow unfolding a napkin and covering it, securing the ends like a handkerchief. I had never seen anyone do that. Her hands, up close, were much smaller than I'd thought.

When my father came back the plate was sitting on the edge of the table. She was some feet away, already cleaning up. She tipped her head in its direction, and he looked down at it and smiled. "A demain," he said, picking it up and heading for the door.

He couldn't see me standing a few feet behind her. But I could see the picture of his retreating back and I ran to him. "You're coming with me," he said, putting his arm on my shoulder as if I'd been there all along.

That night I slept in my own bed. We didn't talk about it. He just went in there and turned down the covers and then left so I could change into pajamas. I can still see him sitting on the edge of the bed, his tie long gone, his top button undone.

"Where is the aorta?" I asked.

"Everywhere," he said. "It's the biggest artery in the body."

"Be more specific."

"Well, it loops around the top of the heart--"

"An artery takes oxygenated blood away from the heart."

"Yes, that's what I said."

"No, you said--"

"It's late. Let's talk about this tomorrow." He kissed my forehead.

"Goodnight, sweet pea." He started to stand, but I pulled him back.

"Can the aorta also be in the stomach?"

He thought a minute. "Yes, I believe so. It has to take blood--"

"Why do roses all have different patterns when they open?"

I didn't want to hear his explanation about the aorta. Suddenly I wanted to be with my mother, so I could remind her to get up at 6:30 to finish the marmalade. In fact I wanted to get up and do it for her because I knew she would never finish it alone. It would seem like the least I could do, for doubting her.

He shook his head. "I don't understand the question."

I decided to let that one go. He was standing in the doorway, a dark silhouette.

"What does 'a demain' mean?"

He knew very well I knew what it meant.

"Why are you asking me this?"

He was going to make me say it. "Because that's what you said to Miss Maia."

His white head nodded in the dark. "C'est vrai," he said, starting to back out the door again.

"You haven't answered my question. You haven't said what it means." I felt bold and crazy. He was leaving. He was leaving without telling me that I was wrong about what I'd heard, that everything would be okay, after all.

He came back to my bed and kissed me again. Leaning over me in the dark he said, "Until tomorrow, which is when we should finish this conversation."

I waited.

"It's been a big night. Things are much clearer in the daylight."

I did not speak, and he kissed me once more and left.

Until tomorrow, he'd said. I didn't like the sound of that. Anything could happen. Thinking back, that was probably exactly what got him through the hundreds of days and nights as the one who had been left.

But it was no comfort to an eight year old. I curled up tightly in my bed that night, clinging to the middle as if I might be thrown over the edges. That bed was a raft, or a helicopter. I tried to remember sleeping in my old bed at the old house, but the memory wouldn't stick. I tried to think of the worst things that could happen--tried to picture a wedding or a baby or even a different house--but these wouldn't stick either, because they weren't half so bad as what had already been. And I don't just mean the divorce. I mean the picture of my father walking out of my room, not knowing, or not able, to console me.

What was left for us, then? Everything.

Until tomorrow when he might wake me with the smell of onions frying, for omelettes; until tomorrow when I might follow him to his lesson, and listen to him play Brahms; until tomorrow when I might learn to speak from across the border where he'd left me, alone in the province of grief.