

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Tracy Boothman Duyck for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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Title: The Yogiebogeybox

Abstract Approved:

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Marjorie Sandor

The Yogiebogeybox is a novel-in-stories. This novel explores spiritual transcendence and the connection of art to that spiritual journey. A variety of points of view are employed in the narrative in order to depict the journey of the protagonist, Ant Malo, through this journey. Some of the narrative threads are layered, told through filters, and filters are central to the theme of this novel. In each story, the narrators, many of whom speak through the author (a character named Tracy Boothman Duyck) comment on these journeys. In "Practical Jokes" a neighbor of Ant's, Sally, has a physical experience that is orchestrated by Ant, who rests secure in his good deeds. He believes that his deeds alone, inspired by a spirit of goodwill, make him a good man. "Prince Lovely and the Little Bigs" offers a portrait of Ant's daughter Regina, an adolescent girl whose opinion of her father, in the light of events that happen in her life, would differ from his own. "In the Company of Bards" illustrates Ant's late coming-of-age and acceptance of his transgressions in the physical world and depicts how the consequence of those transgressions compel him to seek a penance that shadows his daughter's fate. Stories like "Jimi Hendrix's Banshee," "Liturgy of the Hour," and

“2001- A View from a Dreamscape Out West” and “More in the Way of Dreams,” bring the spiritual and sub-conscience life of Ant Malo together, and couple the presence of the metaphysical with the mystery of existence. “Mama Junk,” “The Salt of Time” and “Kennedy Plaza at Dusk” examine loss, a sense of obligation to self-preservation and the limitations that individuals bring to marriage, relationships and parenthood. Levity is provided through the sections that chronicle the process of the author and her muse, both of whom sincerely and vicariously experience events in these stories. Those sections further illustrate the reality of the writing life. Work is accomplished while the author and muse slog along, gossiping, sniping, mothering and imagining elaborate book deals and Hollywood options. Incidentally, all sections depicting the author-as-character are strictly fictional. Any similarity to the actual author’s personality, temperament, appearance, predilections, or habits are purely coincidental.

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The Yogiebogeybox

by

Tracy Boothman Duyck

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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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Tracy Boothman Duyck, Author

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I am honored and proud to note that the poem, "My Trip Through the Afterlife," on page ninety-two was contributed by Dr. Christopher Anderson.

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DEDICATION

For that sharp-witted muse
Gregory P. Duyck

Prologue – August 1947

Anthony Malo Ventures from the Nest

There were boxes on the floor, boxes of all shapes and sizes; Anthony's mother brought them in. She brought them in filled with clothes, clothes she got from a man who enlisted her help in returning them to the Outlet Company, a department store downtown. When she and Ant were successful at returning them there was reason for celebration. Sometimes there were toys – toys that she took out of her large purse – more often she gave him candy.

When there were no toys Ant played in the boxes. He imagined how first grade would be, pretended that he was the teacher.

It did not smell good in the apartment. There were no sheets on Ant's or his mother's bed. Long ago the sheets were soiled. They sat in a pile, gathering flies, in the hall outside the bathroom. Ant made it his job to push them there, out of the bedroom.

When the pile was too high Ant took some dirty clothes and moved them into the kitchen where he made smaller piles along the wall. They were separated, his clothes from his mother's, but the whites – underwear – all went together. Some day when they had time, Ant figured, they'd start bleaching these again.

Ant also made it his job to take out the trash. He collected it and put it into his pillowcase. Then he dumped it into the neighbor's trashcan. He did this on Tuesdays, trash day. He felt lucky because he had quite a few clothes, and he was always getting more. His mother went out to get them. When she returned, there were clothes for him in the big cardboard boxes. There was also make-up for his mother, wigs in many colors that she wore out. She always looked different. She called herself the "mistress of disguise." To Ant, this talent merited a greater title. It ranked her among superheroes.

Many nights Ant was alone. He didn't sleep then; sometimes he went to the neighbor, Mrs. Catala, for food. She was a nice lady; she fed him. Sometimes she took a washcloth and cleaned his face and hands. She said under her breath, one word, bouton. It made Ant angry – clearly this word was meant for his mother – who was too sick to work a regular job. This was the reason that she had to leave Ant alone. She was not bad. She was sick but this idea seemed difficult for some adults to understand.

One day it seemed to Ant that Mrs. Catala had been gone a long time. He had gone to her house repeatedly, looking for food. There was some food in his refrigerator but it was green and blue with mold and this food, he knew, would make him sick.

He began to worry, when some time has passed, about his mother.

No mother, no Mrs. Catala, and the sun kept at it – going up, going down. It was summer and he was tired of the apartment. Frustrated. There was no radio and he saw from the third floor window that other kids were playing stickball in the lot. He wasn't supposed to leave the apartment. He had been given instructions not to answer the door for anyone, not to open the door to look out, not even to stand in front of the window. But Ant wanted to open the door; the apartment's smell kept getting more sour and the few flies that gathered around the toilet when his mother was home had multiplied.

When he'd been bored, once, a day or two before, he'd flushed some paper and old food down the toilet, and then there was toilet water and poop on the floor. This mess he'd covered with newspaper. But, afraid of making the bathroom dirtier, he'd been tinkling in the kitchen sink. He stood on a chair to get up there. That had been pretty fun.

All of the rooms were baking though, the heat rising from the floors in steaming waves, and because the sun beat into the parlor he avoided that room, plus the bathroom, almost entirely. The rooms were filled with a terrible buzzing.

For these reasons he decided to disregard instructions. He sat against Mrs. Catala's door waiting for her to come out. He knocked. After a while he figured she was just not answering. He stayed there anyway, bumping his head against her door, staring into his own apartment. He noticed fewer flies; he must have tricked a few into following him out.

Finally, Mrs. Catala returned with her beach bag. She was a teacher, so in the summer she had a long vacation. He noticed her plastic sandals and the glittering mica

of the sand on her toes before he heard her let out a cry. He didn't know if the cry was meant for him or because of the smell coming from his open door. He had tried to clean but wasn't sure when it would be garbage day. His plan had been bold. He'd intended to throw out the oldest piles of clothes.

He was about to ask for some cookies but he didn't have to say anything. Mrs. Catala didn't need an explanation. She carried him inside, slamming the door harshly, as if to ward off some evil in his house. She ran cool water in the tub for him, commanded him to strip down, and made him sit in the water. She made him drink a glass of Fanta ginger ale. Then she put his clothes in the sink, wringing them in soapy water. She brought another glass, this one filled with water, and told him to sip it slowly and to wash his hair with her pear-smelling soap. When he was too sleepy she scrubbed his scalp gently, with her hot sausage fingers.

After she rinsed his hair with warm water from a gleaming silver kettle he sat in the tub watching the water drain out in a gray swirl, and he listened to her mumbling to the operator. He felt sad and happy all at once when he heard it: "Mrs. O'Malley?" She had been dialing up his grandmother Zadie.

Real truth, truth that man would lay his life down for, is essentially subjective: a truth passionately apprehended by the subject. To say, then, that truth is subjective is to say that its significance lies in the subject's engagement with it; it does not mean that it is not objective in any sense: indeed if it were objective in no sense, if it were simply a collection of subjective impressions, there would be no engagement, and consequently no question of truth at all.

Kierkegaard

PART I

1. 1952

Wishing for a Muse

How could it be that a woman as ancient – or ancient-looking – as Zadie O'Malley could wade into the surf just before a hurricane warning? Was it that she imagined herself after the great mermaids of Ireland – merrows they called them – or had she simply wanted to ride out on the brine of Finn's Point to her destiny? She was far too experienced to have not seen the ribbons of seaweed, to have not felt them as they twined around her fat ankles. And yet, she returned from the beach, her thin hair blowing, exposing the bald spot on top of her head. Usually, the spot was covered by a ratty straw hat. But the hat had blown into the bay and she watched it, much as a lover watches a seafarer pull unceremoniously from his harbor.

Anthony Malo sat watching her from the small porch of the cottage. He lived with her there, in a section of Warwick, Rhode Island, known as Oakland Beach. In 1952 he was twelve years old, and happy to be there, living with Zadie. His mother had run off for the third time and he knew that he was a comfort and relief to Zadie, who counted on him for company and to bolster her income.

When Ant saw Zadie there in the surf, as the waves swelled, as the clouds darkened the sky, he could imagine no explanation for her behavior. She had told him about the dangers of storms and there had been official warning of this one. When he saw her with her arms raised and her legs planted firmly apart, as the tide swirled around them, he figured that she was beckoning someone. She had a bit of the witch about her. She was always talking about fairy wraiths and putting dabs of honey on the window ledges or milk in little dishes for some superstitious purpose or another.

Ant imagined though, that she was beckoning for some ocean spirit to take care of him. Perhaps she had a premonition that she was coming to the end of her days and had some alternative mother in mind for him, because more and more it seemed that his real mother was going to blink and fade like a quick-blown birthday candle.

Ant wanted it to be a muse that Zadie was calling. A fairy mistress, like the kind she was always talking about, the kind that attended the great poets of Ireland – County Cork to be exact – which was Zadie’s home in “the old country.” But if she was successful in conjuring a muse how would he know that it had come?

Maybe he would start to write poems. His mother was a poet and he knew that the tingling that he got at the base of his spine when he saw a giant black crow or a dead

crab in the surf or a sunset tinged with the strangest blue could only mean that he was a poet, too. When he pointed these things out to his mother she had said that most people did not see things with such a discerning eye, and that it was even more rare for that eye to be accompanied by passionate emotion.

So there Ant sat, watching Zadie call the muse just as her hat flipped up, up and away. He knew that it had landed in the tumult of wave and he sniffed the air wondering about that hat; it had always smelled sweetly of straw. It bobbed for a minute, was pulled out suddenly and disappeared from sight. He decided then that if it came back, somehow blew ashore or even came in on the next wave, where Zadie could reach for it, it would mean that the muse had grasped the brim and returned it. And it would mean too, that she was to walk next to him, huddle over the poems that he wrote, brush the hair from his eyes. Until then, he would accept the same niceties from Zadie, who seemed glad to extend them.

Ant loved Zadie because she was quick with stories, stories that were never quite believable. She always had one on hand – it seemed he could not put her on the spot. When he asked why his father had died and his mother had left she told him that they had on them the curse of the noble families, and that “the curse that took its toll in human potential first stripped the gild from the cup.”

Later, when he asked why his mother had come in the night – he’d seen her from his window – and left with his bike and all of the clamming rakes that they used to dig for steamers in summer – she told him, “Your mother got the lust for stealing because of me.

I was spinning wool on a wheel when I was pregnant and I pricked my finger, drawing blood. On the window I grew a pot of poppies for the soldiers gone to the Great War. Upon that plant a swollen drop of blood fell. That's how it began. Lucky for you I didn't teach your mother how to set the wheel. So there is no worry where you are concerned. You were born with the skin bonnet on your head, also, an omen that says that through learning or visions you will break family curse."

Grandma Zadie, as far as Ant knew, had never, ever tended a plant. And he didn't understand what stealing had to do with blood on flowers.

The story was odd, but it reminded him of what his mother told him when she stuck the needle in her arm to take her medicine. She did that with Ant, in the living room of their old apartment in Providence, the capitol city. She used his suspender to tie off her leg. He would sometimes watch, pants sagging, and she would tell him that she was sick and that the best cure was to plant flowers in her veins.

He got the feeling that both stories were fairy tales, made up almost completely from scratch. But he loved and forgave. Especially his grandmother.

People took to Zadie. He could see that. She was known around the neighborhood for saying things plainly and she worked hard. Even as the years passed, she was never so old or proud that she didn't put on her bathing suit and wade out into the shallow waters of Oakland Beach to dig for quahogs that she could sell by the pound, denoting the difference in the blunt clams by passing them through a ring that determined the price they would fetch.

The smallest and choicest of clams that did not fall into a class that disallowed them to be taken were cherrystones, a delicacy on the half shell. Tender and sweet. The next size up were the littlenecks, and these were ideal for steaming. Zadie said that the Italian women, in the neighborhood on the hill, bought these in abundance and used them to make *zuppa* or clam sauce. These were popular because they were cheap and Catholics who worked in jewelry factories could make a quick meal with them on Fridays and Wednesdays. The diggers always sold out, at least during the Lenten fast.

She had taught Ant how to dig for clams, where to find them and how to sell them. Zadie said that the largest clams were the chowder hogs that could weigh as much as two pounds each. She demonstrated weighing one by throwing it into the air and catching it in her palm, letting her hand give in to its weight. She guessed laconically, "Twenty-five ounces." Then she handed it off to Ant who went to the grocer's scale that they kept in the musty cellar. "Twenty-six, Grannie," he would call out. If she wasn't within an ounce or two of the correct weight Ant would hear her cursing. Later they had contests to see who would get closest to the proper weight.

Zadie almost always won, by the slightest margin.

She taught Ant that chowder hogs were the least expensive clam to be sold per pound but that the shuck house would buy them without question. Ant learned that these clams were old, sometimes having filtered the bay for forty years. He felt bad for them even. He felt bad that they were ground up, mixed with paprika and bread, stuffed back into their shells and baked.

He ate them anyway, stuffed and sprinkled with Tabasco. He liked them also when they were dumped into red chowders, with onions and potatoes and salt pork. He ate them like most Rhode Islanders did. They were a source of monotonous pride.

When the accumulating dusks gathered around Ant and Zadie they listened for sounds, the rush of the tide, predicable in its rhythms, the tick of the clock. Ant felt lucky then, when the darkness gathered, because he had Zadie, her stories and the bay full of clams that they could dig for their dinners. But it seemed, even then, that they were waiting for someone. Ant had convinced himself he wasn't waiting for anyone, that his mother simply wouldn't come. He assumed that he could quickly forget that he'd ever had a mother, that he'd be able to settle into life without any sort of aching for her. During those evenings Ant was wishing still, wishing for a muse. When he saw his grandmother looking out through the shaded windows into the street, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, he told himself that she was waiting for the muse too.

2. 1952

Mrs. Lafferty

Ant was sleeping in his bed, one morning shortly after Zadio had stood in the hurricane tide, dreaming. He was still twelve and having Mrs. Lafferty come to his room was a pleasant enough experience.

He had started the winter delivering the thin local newspaper to many people on the block, but his last house on the route belonged to the old Lafferty couple. He had lost another customer, Mr. Jim, because of an article that he had seen with which he did not agree, so Ant had an extra copy of the Warwick Beacon. This copy he had kept, instead of calling the paper up and canceling it. He paid for it out of his tips because he enjoyed giving the extra copy to the Laffertys.

Ant did this every week by walking into their kitchen smiling, holding the two copies. They were usually there at a small table sipping tea, waiting, and he would place the papers next to each of them. Above their heads was a calendar from Saint Rose's Church down the street and Ant eagerly sought the approval of the Jesus emblazoned above the Formica.

Mrs. Lafferty was a little woman who wore a tattered sweater closed at the neck with a safety pin. It was light blue. Her skin had turned to paper.

It was so pale and fine, parchment, the lines across her cheek looked like they had been placed there by God's own pen. This was an unusual thing to find, skin so smooth and delicate on the face of a woman who lived by the bay, who spent many days with the skin of her face catching the reflected light off the water as she dug her heels into the sandy bottom and twisted down, feeling the smooth shells of quahogs with her toes. Sometimes she waded out – like they all did – and dove deep, bringing the clams up with her hands. The salt of the water on her sunburned skin, day after day.

She was beautiful. Thin as a stalk of dune grass yet stooped. Because of her fragility Ant brought her and Mr. Lafferty food. Through the cold months he brought bits of things his grandmother cooked; lasagna, stuffed peppers, deviled eggs, fried chicken leftovers. He wanted to put meat on her bones and imagined it possible. He was not young enough to think food could pull the wrinkles from her cheeks, but old enough to hold it as a secret wish.

Ant was sympathetic toward the couple also, because his grandmother had told him a story about how they had lost their livelihood. The Lafferty family had been

commercial diggers and shuckers with some success until what the locals called “the Oyster Wars.” A lot of natives had been. They had hogged for a living, taking only clams while there were others, people called “oyster tycoons” who owned beds in Narragansett Bay that they seeded with oysters. These the clammers left alone. The beds were owned mostly by people from Connecticut, and had been for years. These people were educated, aqua-culturists, who knew quite a bit about the ocean, and worked closely with local government.

Anyway, Zadie had explained that the robber-tycoons fell into a spate of bad luck – after the Great Hurricane of 1938. The hurricane had started the run because when a real hurricane blew in it disturbed the sediment at the bottom of the bay. All of the tidal shifts pulled it up, pulled up the algae and such. This choked off the oxygen in the water and for this disturbance the delicate oysters paid with their lives.

The hardy quahog, however, became the king, enjoying the extra sediment. And so, after the damage of ‘38’s storm the tycoons recouped by charging the diggers to harvest their own clams, though they had never seeded them with hogs. They charged them, Zadie said, though they never intended to grow the vines for oysters again. They charged them as long as they could get away with it.

During these decades the local commercial diggers were put out of business because they could not afford to pay fees, upfront or otherwise, to dig the bay. Others started to raise cane over the hypocrisy of their native waters being dictated by Connecticut outsiders who had less of a stake than even the poorest who dug, but owned the little cottages that bordered the bay.

Mr. Lafferty was old even during the wars and so he dropped off, afraid of poaching by moonlight, and having nowhere legal to dig.

Ant knew all of this. He knew that the neighborhood was full of people who had counted on digging, people who had lost their livelihoods. He saw it in the porch railings that warped against the sea air. He'd heard about it. About a stabbing that happened down the street, about the girl he knew slightly, the one who had left her storm door open one night. She was also twelve, and asleep on the floor, someone had come in. She had been raped. He was reminded that the people in this particular bay section had nothing to do. On Friday nights they sat outside, and on Saturday mornings he saw the beer bottles, some still whole and empty, others shattered along the rocks of the hurricane barrier. It was sad because he'd imagined that this new home would be a perfect place. But it was not a perfect place.

The Laffertys were a reminder. They were not the only ones forced to cut and shine the purple from quahog shells as they washed up on shore to sell to jewelry factories in the city. In the houses around the bay there were many fingers striped by knife cuts that stung with the iodine of clams, and fingernails cracked and brown. He could almost hear the polishers humming.

He thought of the Laffertys often as he walked from their house on Fridays. Other times his thoughts were more typical of a boy his age. The shape of a girl named Donna had starting to rise in his mind, like the resin from the hardwoods at Hillsgrove roller skating rink rose when he skated over it, and he was always thinking of baseball,

imagining days of putting line drives up the third base line, something that lefties couldn't always do.

But sometimes, when he left Mrs. Lafferty among spreading yellow shadows, her life was his own stretched out before him. How quickly would it pass, turn frail, bend? Not always of course, but often, more often when the sky was painful blue than on the days of ice and snow, he felt a lump grow in his throat, her face too vivid in his head.

So he was not surprised when, on a morning shortly after the storm – it was 3:18 a.m. – he found her sitting at the foot of his bed. He had been sleeping under his blue wool blanket and the afghan that Grandma Zadie crocheted for his mother. He could hear his grandma snoring in the room below his own, while Mrs. Lafferty gazed at him. It was a cool April night and he had opened the window, anxious to smell the first forsythia blossoms and sea salt. The winter had been long and Ant had been forced inside, smelling wet wool, because the wind chill kept him from venturing too far from home.

Mrs. Lafferty stared at him, and in the dark he made out the frayed sleeve of her sweater but her face, silhouetted, looked like that of a younger woman. His room suddenly smelled of mothballs, something that he had never noticed at her house. Her house smelled like waxy candles. She touched his leg and told him to watch after Marty; then she told him he was a kind boy. He stayed very still beneath the afghan. A breeze passed through the window, lifting her hair like a bridal veil, but he wasn't afraid. She was patting him gently, and it was plain that she felt what was happening in his insides – how could it be any other way? She shook his leg insistently. He nodded his head, that

yes he would care for Mr. Lafferty. She lifted her hand, which was slender by moonlight. He knew that she was signaling that he should close his eyes and so he did.

Next morning was sunny and when he looked out at the bay he noticed that some rocks were scattered about from the storm but Zadie's old straw hat was there, flapping in the pile of wild sticks that would later bloom into a blueberry bush. He brought it into the house and sniffed it. It still smelled like straw but the smell of the ocean was there too and he decided that it was the smell of his muse. He carried the hat like a great crown and, after much deliberation, put it on top of the refrigerator. If it were the crown of a muse, or the muse herself, he thought, what better place to leave it/her to get dry and warm than a kitchen? Sometimes he imagined sitting on top of the fridge himself, how it would vibrate beneath his bum, how the heat would rise off the back.

Two days after the hat arrived, when he was walking up the driveway to the Lafferty's house Ant saw their cat, a hostile yellow Cheshire named Muffy. For once the cat looked at him kindly. That brought back a little image somehow, an image of Mrs. Lafferty in profile. Then the image shorted out.

The breezeway that Ant was accustomed to walking through to the open back door was locked. He knocked and was greeted by a woman nursing her own thin wrinkles. She was brusque and when she turned from him she yelled, "*Marty!*"

The image that shorted sparked and he remembered. The hairs on his arm stood on end. Mr. Lafferty touched Ant's shoulder telling him that his wife had passed and a sorrow of knowing flowed through Ant. He was sad, but not for her.

He was thinking of the times he had walked across certain stretches of land, feeling a thickness in the air, a static charge that he could not explain. He thought of the dreams he had dreamed, of hope or death or something dark in between. He had always discounted them, reminding himself that Grandma Zadie laughed at his whopper of an imagination. Now he walked on the street, imagining the parade of casseroles he would march up the driveway. Ant was happy to have been chosen, but frustrated that there hadn't been a flash of light through his open window that night.

Sometimes he added to the memory later, a strobe from a police car, one spectacular thunderclap followed by a bolt of lightning, even an unexplained flicker, so that he might have seen Mrs. Lafferty's face. He imagined her skin resuming the smoothness of youth, and thought it a fair enough request because he had wished it .

3. 1972

Kennedy Plaza at Dusk

Ant Malo is sitting in Memorial Square in downtown Providence on a bench across from the Federal Building. This is his daily habit, to sit here, and talk and pass out food, liquor, sometimes even mild drugs like pot and downers. He always sits here just after work gets out, before returning home to his wife. On the weekends he leaves Louise, explaining that he is going to fetch something for her, a little surprise, from the store. And he tries to return with something for her, he tries hard to remember. Today Ant sits with a boy that he has never seen before. The boy is wearing dirty jeans and a navy blue blazer, the kind all the kids who go to Moses Brown School wear. Ant is not sure if the blazer belongs to the boy, but it could, especially if he is a runaway. Some

rich kids seem to have it bad. The boy's eyes are glazed. He has reported to Ant that his name is Jimi Hendrix.

Ant knows that most people who find themselves in Kennedy Plaza, or the area known as Memorial Square, at dusk on a Wednesday night are not waiting for a bus. In 1972, before Providence's renaissance (and occasionally after) people who roam the square are junkies; they could be hookers or runaways, or a combination of all three. It is a clear night and the sky has started to turn a dusty lilac. Both Ant and the boy who calls himself Jimi have their feet resting on a blue ice chest.

They are eating beef jerky, a spicy variety that is tough on the jaws. They both stare straight ahead, as though they are sitting on a bus. Ant thinks that the boy is relaxed. Passersby glance their way, friends nod in Ant's direction.

Ant leans his head toward the boy as he talks, to create the impression that he is sharing a secret but he does not, at any time, look directly at Jimi. He remembers a time when he was sat on that same bench, listening to an older man talk. He had come that day to the square for the first time. He had come to find his mother. But he hadn't.

Ant makes his voice quiet and far away sounding and the boy, probably against his better judgment, leans in to the sound of the elder, though he keeps his arms tight across his chest, protectively.

Ant starts with this: "The idea isn't based on any kind of solid dogma or biblical study, so in as much as it is intellectual I can't say."

Jimi shifts in his seat, keeping his eyes peering straight ahead. Ant gets the feeling that the boy is no stranger to conversation with men on park benches, even as darkness looms.

Ant continues, "The idea does have an intuitive part. Let me put it in a nutshell. God gave us the Ten Commandments, as a sort of survival guide for the moral idiot. That said, I don't think that it is true what they say about divine intervention or faith or any of it. What happens is this. Now Jimi, I know that you've got songs to write, but stay with me because here it becomes a thing that needs to be visualized."

Jimi looks skeptical. Then the boy stares toward the courthouse at a bag lady who lifts her skirt at the foot traffic from College Hill. Ant chews on the jerky and then shaking it like a finger continues. "God has the world, and he creates it, sure. But to him it is just a small thing, one story in a book full of stories." Here he motions for the boy to look at the burnt, brown grass of the square, as though it is a great kingdom.

"So he sets the earth to spin. We are here in his image; wear his figure casually, like you throw on a sweatshirt to drag out the garbage pails. Look at peoples' postures! Hunched over, slouched. When we're wearing the big man's body for heaven sake?"

The boy sits up a bit and removes his feet from the ice chest.

"So he gives us the 'do unto others,' and then he lets us go. He gives us good, and he gives us evil. Sure he does. The possibility has to be there or all bets are off. He wants us to do good in small gestures. And if we do nice then we are up. Collectively."

Here the boy knits his brow warily but nods his head.

“Like Heisenberg’s Principle of Uncertainty, you mean? So that even as we are studying, say, how warm a liquid is, we are putting a thermometer in it that can’t be the exact temperature of the liquid, and thus we change the results.”

“Yes. That would play an intricate part. Now, if I see a guy who needs some change, probably some shell-shocked veteran, or a guy down on his luck, what should I do? No real sermon here, just stating the facts. I should help out. If everyone just ekes out the smallest bit, then we win. If not, we are led almost directly to events of catastrophic loss. I could give you a laundry list of examples, times when power and greed resulted in great loss but you can probably think of more examples than I can.”

The two sit in silence for a couple of minutes, passing a half-gallon of orange juice that Ant grabs from the cooler back and forth.

“Samuel Taylor Coleridge used to say it to Wordsworth, ‘Did you ever hear me preach?’ And Wordsworth right back, ‘I never heard you do anything else,’ so we are in pleasant company, lad.”

“Here, everyone views the game in an individual sense. Like God has enough time to sit around judging the living and the dead. They take that literally. Well, if anyone is going to get it, you are the man Jimi.”

Jimi stares down at the ground. Ant looks at his watch, and around the square, where darkness is falling. “Okay, you are born of a mother and you have a navel and so does she. And this provides some physical evidence of the chain of humanity, which can also be linked by deeds. So every time you steal or kill, or go to work with Mother

Theresa, you become further entwined in the web. It is so interconnected that you can't get out, your soul can't. How to escape? You have to move the whole web. Do you think God punishes people who steal to feed families or that *individual* grace exists? He gives a hint, Jim. The word 'neighbor.' It plays a big role in the commandments, doesn't it?"

Jimi stares down at his feet and replies, "Yes. And like Garrett Hardin said when he wrote 'The Tragedy of the Commons,' 'That morality is system-sensitive escaped the attention of most codifiers, of ethics in the past. Thou shalt not...is a form of traditional ethical directives which make no allowance for particular circumstances.'"

"Right. And he goes on about the fish, and sheep. How whenever there is common space there will be abuse of resources. And here we sit in a square, itself a sort of commons."

Ant looks at Jimi and then leans down and retrieves several beer tabs from the ground. He puts these in his pocket.

There are night people gathering in the square grouped around, waiting. Ant recognizes some of them, and he smiles all around. He takes a wet bag from the cooler. It is filled with: BBQ beef jerky, three packages of partially frozen Twinkies, a peach, pear and one nip bottle of Smirnoff vodka. These he places on the boy's lap.

Ant shifts on the bench and sits forward. "So endgame is this: we are all going up or down. He watches us like a trader watches the stocks. He gave us rules and mountains and streams and the ability to shed tears. So either we'll all keep at it, or not.

And if we don't we're all fucked. Excuse my French, Jimi. Keep the cooler. Pass out the goodies."

With this, Ant rises from the bench. He is no student of Latin so it is lost on him when Jimi asks, "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodiet?*" Who shall watch the watchers themselves.

4.

Same Time, Different Channel

Here we try to explain to you an event of import for us. But the language we seek does not always come. Words are nebulous, tough to get at. When we write about our experiences, it is slow going. It goes through a writer, who is a translator of sorts. There are mistakes. It is like we are leading a dance while learning the steps. When we talk from the writer's view it is easier. We are privy then to her intellectual property – language and such – for in those places she, accustomed to the dance, leads. We hope some day, in the body of this work, to dance together, as partners do. But for now, we are learning. Please, be patient with us, with our garbled narrative. (Here goes...)

It was at the end of the third day of bright sunshine, just as dusk settled that we saw Ant Malo. He was sitting on the park bench, smelling the river with his arms and legs folded against the heat. Ant was wearing the buffalo sandals that, we have on good authority, he purchased years before in Jamaica.

The heat of the summer sun was on the people in the city; it drew them in, left them angry and dripping. It causes more than a few domestic arguments and even if we couldn't see them, we could feel squabbles carried on the air, carried over the cool, dark shady spots right below the bridge. On evenings like this the earth's heat was radiant, beating the sand of Rhode Island beaches, and farther out heating the equatorial seas, heating the water until it evaporated in great amount, until clouds started to fill with moisture, until the off shore breeze from Narragansett Bay whirled and pulled, until the temperature dropped.

The air was heavy with the ionic charge of an impending storm, and miles off, where the neck of the bay opened up to the sea waves broke against each other in a tumult of hoarse yelps. We gathered back around the shaft of the World War I monument, the one in the middle of the square, waiting for it to begin as if it had been promised, because in fact, weather indicated that it had.

To anyone else, people passing through the square, people walking to the post office across from city hall, or to the Ming Garden Chinese Restaurant, Ant was no oddity. But to me, and to the others who stood gathered around him, he was a solemn

sight. He was special because there, sitting with his feet propped up on a blue ice chest, he could *see* one of us.

Now, he was not the first, surely, who could see us. People see us often enough, scurrying about in the shadows, hanging on their shower curtains, perched on the edge of sugar bowls. They see us, people surely do. But then, almost always, they shake off our images and look away.

We who are not like you are at a bit of a disadvantage. And the disadvantage is this: we are in our second ages, without material. Otherwise we are like you in almost every respect.

The reason that the man called Ant became an object of hope to us is not so difficult to explain. He became a hope to us because that dusk, he could see so clearly the one who called himself Jimi Hendrix. And this was inspiring because hitherto Jimi's (and our) interviews had been nocturnal. But before I tell you that, I am obliged to explain who we are and why we gather.

We are here, in an in-between place. We can see some things and hear still others, but we can't read every person's thoughts. We remember little of our times of quickening, if any at all. As days advance we think we are learning our way but then, in a blink, we forget. We are the Alzheimer's victim who puts his wristwatch into the refrigerator. We cannot write by ourselves, not with hands. We can hear the thoughts of only certain people.

We can always hear you when you are reading, the text or sound, something we recognize and decipher with ease, as it rolls past. We can hear you or read over your shoulder, when you write by hand. And when we are very, very lucky indeed, we can dash our thoughts onto paper *through* one of you. Sometimes this person will have a knack for seeing our shadows, or hearing them. Sometimes not. Sometimes the person will be in an altered state, which opens certain doors. That is how we are learning: from those still in material, those who are old, those who remember, those who write.

We gobble memories – we follow them and order them – even when they are scattered. We can piece them together to form a tapestry. It is a custom among us to follow you in dreams. We can meet you there. We can see you there and talk to you and even show you something of ourselves.

We love music and art, listening to people read and following memories. We love also and especially kitchens. Our writer cooks there, and we grow accustomed to the bubbling vats of tomatoes that she calls 'gravy.' We cling to the lace of frisee, and broccoli rabe with its yellow blooming bitter, prickly artichokes with purple hearts, all fragrant flowers. It is the same with ancient bulbs of kohlrabi, fennel, the tight lips of endives.

We don't like things that flash.

What we love is being near you at night. It is a harkening time; earthly sounds and colors are muted. So there we may, if diligent, catch your attention. This is something that we long to do, because we are afraid of the night; in it we seek company.

Sometimes we get lost. We have trouble finding our way and we amuse ourselves with the thought that some other helped us come together. The three of us did that, when we found Ant, and as time flips along, like pages in a book, others come and go. We get lost though. Sometimes, during stormy times, or on tremendous blustery days, if we are not alert, an offshore breeze will whip one of us out to the sound or past, to the great Atlantic. Then we get lifted like a dry and brittle leaf, spinning. Twirling. Or we can be dragged down, to underwater caverns deep. That gives us a terrible fright.

Sometimes we know for three hours at a time, and other times we doze, and lose ourselves. Once, I was without the spark of it, a knowing self of any kind, for some ten years. I was in Ant Malo's house – quite still – with my head propped on his toolbox. He seldom moved it because he has no gift with such things and I could not be roused. Meier and Jimi tried, but to no avail.

And so, our presence is tenuous. We are here, learning what we need to know to bolster our courage. We believe that, when the time comes, we will need great courage.

Lately, we have become frustrated and so in tracking and recording the memories of others, we have set upon a difficult task. We have set ourselves to the task of recording through a human writer, one who is as yet, untried. We do this by searching and panning, gathering memories. The writer of stories marries it to the paper. She thinks sometimes that her own imagination has inspired the tales. Other times, she knows better.

5. 2002

Introducing the Writer

Today we entered Ant's dream. This is something that we can do with some people but not others. He is a young man in the dream. He is dreaming that he is making love to a woman on his bed. There is a dark haired woman in the door, watching. She sees him kissing the scrawny body of a red head, and comes at the two with a ladder-backed chair. Ant's grandmother is rocking in the corner yelling, as though she has been cheated at the fish store, "You call this cod. Huh! Eighteen dollars a pound for the WOP salted stuff. And it smells like dog, like wet fuck-ing dog!"

Ant thrashes, eager to escape the chair about to crash down on him, or to hide his bottom from his grandmother – we know enough about him to see that this is a waking moment – and we decide to hop out into the bedroom. When we do we find ourselves in

his old room. It belongs to a couple. The bedroom of a husband and wife of a different age. We see at first the high bed and the china blue pillows tossed about; we hear the yelling of children.

“Look, look!” Meier follows the sound of their voices into a big playroom that has a television. It has been long since we have been near children, any of us, and these two are tiny. We like children and smaller is always better.

The children are singing funny songs, opening their fingers like mouths, their pink lips the soft beaks of baby birds.

Open, shut them, open, shut them, give a little clap, clap, CLAP!

They run in circles, out of breath and yelling.

Open, shut them, open, shut them, lay them in your lap, lap, LAP!

Creep them, crawl them, creep them, crawl them, right up to your chin, chin, chin. Open up your LITTLE mouth but do not let them in, In, IN!”

The father is exhuming slimy spinach, lettuce, and smeared, clear disks from the ice box. And somewhere else we hear a tapping.

Jimi, always curious, follows the sound.

And so my friends and I came upon the writer. Jimi had found her work room. And when he saw her he called us in too. After we watched her passively for a bit of time we heard the house go quiet. The man had left with his children. She was alone.

We saw into her mind easily, as is usually the case with artists, and we felt a bit lucky that we were able to see the words in her head that she typed upon the screen. We

don't like computer monitors so this makes things easier. By simply looking inside we surmise several facts about her.

"She is thirty-four, and she thinks that it will be a banner year." Meier announces this.

"Dante fan. She has illusions of the *Inferno* all over this thing that she's writing now."

Jimi is quite right. I add, "She knows too, that Dante was thirty-five when he embarked on his journey through *The Divine Comedy*."

We are quiet for a minute, resting with the possibilities.

"What do you make of the nose? French?"

Meier and her curious sense of nationalism. "No."

"Do you think that she is any good?"

They hate it when I name drop, when I mention having been the muse of W.B. Yeats, when I tell the story of how I left him in an angry storm for James Joyce, so I leave it at, "Good, schmood."

Jimi left his first age at a time that youth are still saucy, "Tell us again about how the muse is a conduit between the fierce and passionate ghosts of the ages and the writer. Tell us about how the gift and power of women, the power of creation that blessed them with motherhood in the first life, is in the second life conferred upon the rarest gems, the *leanan shiede* and her lesser sisters. Please. I'm curious about that story."

I take care to avoid haughtiness. I change the subject. "Look! There on the window ledge. Ant's book! I'd recognize it anywhere!"

“Yes. In fact, it is. He must have left it when he and Louise split up and left this house. How curious.”

Meier moves closer to the writer. Closer to the book, which is the Mandelbaum translation of the *Purgatory*. She attempts to move it, to toss it to the floor, unsuccessfully. The writer, immersed in thoughts of marrying Dante images to a story about an urban high school, doesn't flinch.

We take note of the washing nook that doubles as a study, and a quick inventory of the writing table.

“She loves her children.”

Meier points out rocks (treasures, we presume, from the wee ones) that are piled on the table, parenting magazines, picture drawings, greeting cards with Pooh bears, stencils, the bent limbs of Mr. Potato Heads who have long since gone to their resting place in their blue recycle bin.

“No. She is an artist. Look at the writing magazines, the little bits scribbled on candy wrappers and napkins.”

As Jimi points these out he brushes the writer and she jumps up, gasping.

“Sssshhh!”

We all move away, press ourselves thin as wafers against the walls. The writer twirls around and with her eyes wide surveys the room. She does not see us.

She opens the door and runs out into the hall, arms akimbo, screaming,

“AAAAHHHHH!”

“She's a bit aggressive, yes?” Jimi whispers.

Neither Meier nor I comment. We stay pressed against the wall while Jimi follows the writer around the house. "She's checking the window locks!"

We start to hoot and bounce, to make ourselves small. It is okay that she doesn't see us. She senses us, which -- with a writer -- is all the better. I know this from experience, but for Meier and Jimi it is intuitive.

"Easily angered as well as frightened. She is checking the door locks."

Meier and I hop into her pencil holder, an old glass mason jar. Meier yells, "Has she looked out the windows," and I flinch against the great echo.

"No."

"Not very logical then. Will that suit us?"

This question, pleasingly, is addressed to me. Leave it to Meier to surprise me with short bouts of deference.

I climb onto an orange scented highlighter and shimmy up, eager to get a view of her books, to make a determination. She has *A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend and Folklore*, by my own W.B. Yeats! Also, she has the Ellman biographies of Yeats and even... ! The biography of J., and by J., I mean, o best beloved, the genius James Joyce, though I remember him as "Jim." I am startled, but not convinced. I am only superstitious when the occasion warrants and this fact is not so unusual for a writer. She has some books piled next to an NEC printer, collections of stories by Grace Paley and Donald Barthelme. These sit buried under a copy of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. This may be intentional, our first indication of a disposition toward an ironic wit.

I drop from the rim of the jar to the hard wood of the table, approaching the edge of the writing desk. I notice other books, books littering the floor that have been less fortunate than those pig-piling the desk.

These faceless victims are scattered, covers shredded. I note this as the writer returns, and spikes the volume on her computer speaker so that the blasting noise of rap artist Eminem almost turns me to dust. I can barely make it out, but it seems that there, on the pulpy book corpses, I see the name Alice Munro. I also note that she has penned in *Hoochie Mama Talk Literary Genius Sometimes, Volume 1, 2, 3, and 4*.

I have made my decision.

Jimi turns his attention to Eminem and then points out a mouse pad on the table. It says Prozac, *fluoxetine hydrochloride*. The writer touches it, just as Jimi points and then we all are lucky indeed; we hear her thought. It is a memory, and it reveals that the mouse pad is a gift from her mother. It reveals too that she does not know whether it is meant as joke or hint.

Joyce's mother used to put his head in the toilet and yank the chain.

We huddle around, sniffing her, as she eats chocolate morsels by the handful. We watch Jimi compute. He figures she types ninety words per minute with about 98% accuracy, and I note that she has written one thousand words in ninety minutes time. She keeps all that information in a log that she throws on the littered floor when she is done with it. All agree that she is productive. Sloppy, but productive.

"But what about our material?"

Jimi is pragmatic.

I see his point. We hear the narrative as she writes it, its echo in her mind. The story is about an Asian girl who is trying to win a high school essay contest. The story is fair, entitled “Ghetto Punch.” A bit ornate – self-indulgent and not wholly creative.

It does seem that she may be better suited for realistic narratives.

“Her sensitivity to our presence can help her get over that.”

“If only she were single, a bit younger.”

“Dare I say? A poet. That would be more encouraging.”

All of these concerns are valid, but I do what I’ve always done when selecting an artist, be it writer or poet. I go with the gut. I am about to declare it. To praise her until my ambivalence fades. I grow, like most muses, ruddy with the challenge posed by rising opposition. Conversely, I retract and fade when pandered to or patronized. I have been fortunate. Having chosen both Yeats and Joyce through this arduous process, I am secure.

Just then the door crashes against the wall and there they are again! It seems scarcely a moment has passed. They return from their sojourn, her children, and the big one, a boy, flings himself into her lap screaming “Surprise,” while the small girl pounds the floor mercilessly yowling, “We gots smarshmellows, yes we do!” Then the little ones disappear from the nook, as quickly as they arrived.

The writer moves adeptly, using what she will later call “keystroke commands” to save her document. Then she remembers a few words that need changing. She attends to them while her little one hops off the potty and turns her shining upturned fanny to the sky yelling, “Wipe my bottttoooooommm.”

The writer sighs, still in the world of essay contests and ghetto punch, saves again and lumbers toward the bathroom.

Why we chose this woman to tell these stories, to create the art that we hope will allow us freedom to depart this stifling realm, I still can't say.

But choose her we did.

6.

Practical Jokes

It was the summer of 1972 and Douglas and Sally lived in a cape cod house and so did Louise and Ant. Most of the houses on the street were capes, except for a sprawling ranch at one end, the home of the builder, an old misanthrope who had designed the plat in 1926. When you looked at the two houses, there were a few notable differences.

The front lawn of Sally and Douglas was strewn with a plastic garden. Big Wheels sat there, fading, with their little cracks full of rainwater; there were bright blue shovels under the bushes, and abandoned Tonka trucks. That wasn't the only distinction.

Douglas and Sally's house was a teeming bed of activity. It was so active, in fact, that when Sally left Douglas at home with the kids, pulling out of the drive in her VW

Bug, she inadvertently thought of bees. The presence of the children was that strong. It created a warm humming and whirling that made it hard for Sally to think straight, even when the children were sleeping, which was odd. Sally always thought that the swarming and buzzing would stop when their hot little bodies were turning and curling in their beds, but it never did. And the house continually smelled like Play Doh.

Louise and Ant lived directly across Faire Street, which afforded Sally a good opportunity to get a look, and keep on looking, at the place. This was convenient because she was the landlady. She had been the landlady of that house even when she was single. But now she was married, and was almost always pregnant.

She and Douglas liked their tenants, and they especially liked to socialize with them, sitting out on their front lawn on still, hot summer nights. They would sit there, wearing shorts, and listen to Ant tell his stories while their backsides waffled against the mesh of their lawn chairs. In the light of Louise's tiki torch, Ant's nose was exaggerated and his eyes flickered wildly. Sally sat with one eye on her house – the kids were all asleep, but she needed to keep watch – and Douglas did just the opposite, sitting with his back to his house. Ant and Louise sat opposite each other. Ant always brought out a cooler, on these summer nights, a blue one filled with Black Label, and blocks of ice that he ordered special, to fit inside the cooler, and Douglas would use it as a footrest as stories got underway.

Ant was a Teamster and worked steadily with one outfit during good times. Whenever the economy fell into a slump he would switch to another. If he had trouble finding another company he worked out of the union hall, in order to keep his benefits.

Sally loved the stories that came out of the hall best, because they seemed to make Ant laugh the loudest. Sometimes she didn't even understand what he said, but the way that he said it made it exciting to just be there, listening. The last story he told today had something to do with a guy who tarred roofs, which sounded abysmal, considering the heat.

"So there he is. You got to picture it, Doug." Ant pushed Doug's feet off his ice chest as he pulled out a fresh Black Label. He held one forward and when nobody claimed it, he popped the top and put the tab in a glass jar by his feet. Doug put his feet back up on the chest, stretching and crossing them slowly.

"It's hotter than a glassblower in hell, with his pants full of sand, if you catch my drift. Doug, do you catch it?" Doug worked in insurance and sometimes, Sally noticed, Ant took care to make sure he got the finer points. Sally liked that about Ant, the way that he took pity on her husband. He gave him special attention like they were true friends.

"I get it all right. Sure. Hot." Doug looked to Sally who leaned forward and with a smile, pushed Doug's feet off the ice chest.

After pausing to take a big swig, Ant sighed and said, "Done some roofing and let me tell you, the tar, it rises and it'll singe the hair in your nose, flies up in hot waves, and it is black. So, it absorbs the heat from the sun. It's hot." Ant swallowed up his beer hard, as though swigging it down would provide some needed fluid for the roofer.

"So, I won't belabor the point. The guy is hot. The job is at a manufacturing plant – Kenny Manufacturing – over by Arnold's Pond. So, yeah, it's against regulations but

he takes off the blasted safety helmet that this particular outfit made him wear. Doug, I know that you're in the insurance business, so you have an eye on the details and possible risks. But still. Heat rises. And this roof is wide, and flat. No slant at all."

Doug pulled another out of the cooler and took to guzzling, then threw the pull-tab into the jar.

A wall of smoke rose straight up from Louise's cigarette. She liked to exhale with her bottom lip pouting, though Doug, to Sally's embarrassment, had more than once told her that it made her look like a sad fish.

"Yeah, it was hotter than a witch's tittie," said Doug, looking at Louise, and then turning with a smile to Sally.

She felt the color rising in her face, followed by a pinch of anger, so she leaned across, yanking the brown hair on Doug's leg until he flinched.

Louise threw her head back and laughed. When Louise laughed it echoed against the houses of other neighbors, and changed the stakes, Sally thought. It was a man's sure laugh, but it suddenly made the evening jovial. It made Sally want to find funny points to enjoy. Smiles didn't come easily to her. When Louise laughed it made Sally picture her tenant reaching a climax with Ant. She didn't know why she related the two, maybe the release of tension, but she kept that information to herself, for fear that Douglas would somehow weave it into a future conversation.

Ant looked around, as though he was offended on behalf of Sally, and then he looked at his wife and shook a naughty finger, before starting back.

“Anyway. Poor bastard – he’s no suit, no offense. Just a Charlie Lunch bucket – a working stiff like me. I mean he’s an Indian too, Narragansett tribe. But still, a working stiff’s a working stiff, so I can relate. He just wants a bit of relief from the damned heat and he takes off the blasted helmet. He wipes the sweat of his brow with relief and despair.”

Sally was on the edge of her seat now, batting away a mosquito. “Why despair, Ant?” She touched him gently on the wrist, then let go. With her neck bent back, she took her own thirsty swig.

“Well, thanks for asking, Sally.” Ant turned a movie star smile on her.

“He knew the foreman would be blowing the whistle, and he just wanted a minute of relief, didn’t have any of that magic Florida Gator potion on hand, and potassium loss takes its toll. So guess what the hell happens to the poor bastard?”

Douglas was poking roughly inside the cooler but looking at Ant. “He got turned in.” Ant laughed with his head thrown back and Sally noticed how a vein in his neck bulged a little, in a vivaciously pleasing way. Douglas looked around with a dim smile. He liked giving the correct answer; he liked making Ant laugh.

“No, Bud. That’s where you’re wrong.” Ant took care to toss the tab from his new can into the jar, looking, with a short pause, at Sally. “A turtle of all the darned things, a turtle comes flying out of the blasted sky and cuts him on the head. Good sized snapper.”

Sally smiled in Ant’s direction. “Was the turtle killed, Ant?” The moment it was out she realized it’d been a stupid thing to say. Surely this story was about the man, not

the turtle. They were all looking at her. It seemed, by the torchlight, that Louise was smirking.

Ant said, "Dead. Turtle was already dead, Sal."

They laughed quietly, in a puzzled way.

"Okay, so here it is. A chicken hawk picked up the turtle and dropped it, from quite a height, to crack the shell. Like gulls dropping clams. And of all the times, that's when the Indian decided to catch a little breather from the helmet. And worst thing, no workmen's comp. The whistleblower had his way, and the doctor thought the Indian was off his gourd. Kept him under observation. Twelve stitches later."

Sally watched Ant now. His belly was quite flat, and it started to quiver and heave in a beautiful way. It started with a Heh, heh. And he shook his head, unable to fill in the rest of the story – he caught a strangled breath – and came out with a, "but the doctor..." and then the guffawing started in earnest, and the real shuddering that made the line of his jaw protrude. The shadow of a beard stood out on his thin red cheeks, and a little mucous came out, in a bubble, from his nose. When that happened Ant started pounding his foot on the ground, in his favorite storytelling rhythm, and he wiped his nose. Sally and Louise and Douglas shook their heads, and because their friend was shaking the green grass below their feet, and tears were streaming from his eyes, but still he couldn't get past, "...and the doctor sees him coming," hoo, hoo, Hooooooooo! they started a little, too. Louise with a sultry purr and Douglas who turned purple but didn't let out a sound, while his shoulders shook up, down, up. And then, when they were all on

the edge of their seats, sure that Ant had given up the story, and was going to enjoy laughing for laughter's sake, they laughed too. It was funny to hear him.

He wasn't the least bit shy about it. Then the turning moment came, a moment Sally waited for, when nobody, not even Douglas, stayed quiet. She listened for her husband's quiet, panting laugh. The others laughed loud and in unison, until the metal frames of the lawn chairs squeaked from the melody and the tikis danced. It went on for a hearty couple of minutes, while neighbors poked noses from behind curtains. Then with a last hooo, Ant crossed his legs, and sighed, wiping his eyes with his hankie – which was white, and monogrammed – then shook his head, and held his stomach. His stomach must have been sore, Sally's was, and she was warm and achy.

When it was quiet Ant said, "But you were right, Sally. The guy is an Indian, and they put a lot of stock in the animal world, and turtles have a special meaning, so. Bad news for the Indian." It was quiet for a good while, like it usually was when they stopped laughing. Ant's expression turned dark and he grimaced at a bird, cawing on a wire.

Douglas and Louise rose to blow out the torches and Sally watched Ant roll his little cooler away. Their lawn chairs let out quiet squeaks as they were folded. They said their goodbyes to Louise.

As they walked across the street Douglas scratched his chin, saying to Sally, "Big deal. You understood about the Indian. Anybody could have figured it out. Anybody who saw *Little Big Man*."

Sally did not reply but her feelings were hurt. Doug was clearly jealous, but not of the attention that Ant had given her. He was jealous that he hadn't had anything smart to say himself.

Later that night, when Doug was far-drunk and snoring, Sally pictured Ant's open mouth. And then she was thinking about climaxes again. She had four children, twin six-year-olds, one four, and her two-year-old girl, so she figured that much was her private right. She had never had one with Doug and this made her sometimes think she had chosen the wrong man.

When she had met Doug Sally had been dating a boy named Harold from her high school. This boy had been a tall blond, with slender limbs and an intelligent brow. He kissed Sally with an indifference that made her growl with the implicit challenge. When he kissed her neck one night, during a particularly long make-out session on her parents' back porch, Sally had climbed atop him. There she wiggled and squirmed against his worn jeans, faster and harder, until she felt a sudden warmth shiver and pop inside her.

Harold had never been one for big responses, but at that moment he had grunted deeply. Sally enjoyed the grunt, the spoils of her first feminine victory, then cast herself off him and smiled, as though the entire encounter had been her exact plan. Harold had called her "the wild redhead" then walked soggly to his Plymouth. And this had been her too-fleeting brush with orgasm.

The topic was hardly at the forefront now; it hadn't been a topic at the Pre-Cana class, when discussing the obligations of marriage. Instead, Father Kane taught her and Douglas about the marital act itself how it secured their places as representative members

of the Roman Catholic faith. Father Kane said that marriage wasn't a question of natural instinct or emotional need. It was a friendship in which the couple shared everything, even when it was inconvenient, and it called for the partner to love not for what they could receive, but to love the partner for the partner's sake.

When Sally asked about the natural cycles of the female reproductive system, the priest explained that using this strategy could help a couple keep successive births spaced, if dire need arose. Father Kane sat slouched, with his hands in his lap between his legs and pressed together, as though he were praying up near his gonads. He told them about the calendar of a woman's menstrual cycle, and how Sally could take her temperature to determine her fertile times. Then he explained something about feminine discharge. Something about the egg dropping, and looking at the stickiness of the discharge. It was disgusting, especially coming from him. And just as he said it, "clear feminine discharge," he took out a hankie and blew his nose grimly. Sally had looked at Douglas in embarrassment, but Douglas was staring and glassy-eyed. He was probably thinking about the gagers they would eat at Haven Brothers afterwards.

She tried to respect Father Kane as a revolutionary because he discussed contraception. But in the last years he had sided conservatively, going along with Pope Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae*, that banned all but natural contraception. Sally thought that this had been a wrong decision.

She didn't broach most of these controversial topics with Douglas either, not with the church in such disarray. She would love to use birth control, to have a tubal ligation even. But Douglas took these topics to heart. It was a fragile time, and she was a good

wife, a woman having a deeply personal relationship with her husband. She had borne four of his children, so they were united in the closest intimacy.

One part of her said that she shouldn't be so particular. Wasn't it the 'deny yourself nothing' attitude that was destroying the country? Despite all that, she did share with Douglas her concern and curiosity about climaxes, because that was the least of it.

So she brought it up when they were first married, during intimate moments. But, the effort to please her overridingly resulted in a frustrated prodding and poking on Douglas' part, and a soreness on hers, that was far worse than simply keeping quiet and going through. Whenever she mentioned it, or even hinted, Douglas had been receptive. He began with some concentration, gusto even, but inevitably lost track of the task at hand.

Sally brought it up with her friend Maggie Sanger, also a good religious woman, who had discovered an article called "The G-spot revisited". Maggie had never experienced a climax either, and thought it a matter of some concern. The g-spot piece sounded encouraging, but Maggie was in the hospital now, after delivering her second, and she wouldn't be out for another week. The baby had been breech, and she was slowly healing from a twelve-stitch episiotomy. Sally tried to bring it up visiting her at the hospital, but every time she got close to the topic, someone came in to examine Maggie's bottom – it looked like the doctor was making shadow puppets under the drape – and she had to keep her knees askew, exposed to the application of a heat lamp.

On weekdays Sally tended her four children – the shorties, as Douglas called them – and ran errands in the Volkswagen Bug that he'd bought for her, because he

thought it made her look sweet and efficient. He liked organization, and efficiency, the two things that Sally most sorely lacked. It was an impractical car for a woman with four growing kids, she had asserted, but Douglas insisted. She also followed Douglas's instructions, tracking the gas that was pumped into the car and the mileage that corresponded to it. This request, although seemingly minor, added to her stress.

One day, before an evening of sitting out with Ant and Louise, Sally thought about making a snack, a grapefruit stuck with pineapple chunks and cherries. She wasn't sure. Ant was a fantastic cook. He did all of the cooking, Louise said, and Sally could often smell sauces cooking or meat crackling, from her near-grassless front lawn.

She also was at a loss for what to wear.

Louise wore peasant style dresses, of the new wash-and-wear variety. She wore avocado and fuchsia and cotton crepe. Stylish. Sally knew. She knew because she had been a buyer for The Outlet Company, the biggest department store in Providence. She knew fabrics. She still had two Chanels and a Pendleton shoved toward the back of her closet. Suits that she had worn until she couldn't because she was pregnant. Now, she was as angular as a cow, with jutting bones in the shoulders and hips, but sagging all around the soft spots. Since the children her hips had widened, and none of her nice clothes fit.

After the kids were in bed that night, Sally and Douglas marched over with their chairs and waited for Ant and Louise to emerge, as was their custom. The tikis torches were staked but hadn't been lit, and the chairs and blue ice chest were assembled. Also, the jar, the enormous pickle jar, half filled with beer tabs. The couple opened their

chairs, and Douglas lit the torches while Sally looked at the jar, which was sitting by Ant's chair. The tabs were meshed together and there were quite a few, possibly two hundred. Sally tried to remember when they had started filling it. The previous summer, on the night that Ant and Louise bought their hibachi. They'd had ribeyes.

Sally opened the cooler, proud and assured that she felt comfortable rifling through her friends' liquor, and grabbed two beers. Then they waited, sipping and shifting, with their chairs in the traditional alignment. Sally had decided in the end to bring Concord grapes; they were fat and fragrant, in a wicker basket that she placed on her lap. When Ant and Louise emerged it looked like they had been tussling. Louise had a strand of her long black hair stuck in the corner of her mouth, and Ant was flushed and kept his hand at the small of his back. Sally drank her bitter Black Label, suddenly and acutely aware that Ant and Louise had been having sex. She sniffed the air for confirmation, but smelled only her grapes. They exchanged greetings and nestled into their spots. The sun was setting and to the east there was a mackerel sky.

After a moment Louise started.

"Okay, you two. Tell us. We are going to ask you your opinions. Right Ant?"

Ant looked flustered, and waved his hand at Louise.

"Let's see if they flip for this, okay?" Louise looked around, raising her glass.

Louise was sipping Inglenook burgundy, a wine that reminded Sally of blood.

"Spill it, Ant."

Ant waved her away with his hand again, and picking the glass jar up, plopped it into his lap.

“Okay, me then.” Louise looked round and voluptuous. She was wearing another peasant style dress, this one in flame and brown, with a smart tie up front. Sally noticed she wasn’t wearing a bra. Her nipples shifted and changed at the whim of the breeze; Sally couldn’t avoid noticing them. Her own brassiere was stiff and chafed her across the back.

“Mr. Ant Malo has decided to invade Mrs. Mahuika’s back garden.” She said it as though he were about to rob a bank.

Sally and Douglas waited. They drew in their breaths.

“I can tell, you two have already guessed. Another gag. Well, right. Exactly.” Louise looked around, out at the street, over their heads, while her mouth shared a private moment with her Pall Mall.

“I prefer the term practical joke, Louise. It’s just a little – excitement. Just for laughs. I’m not replacing them with Whippersnapper cherries. Now, that would be cruel, L.” Ant furrowed his brow.

“Well, now. We’ve got a captive audience so let’s just inquire. These two have lived on the bookish diet their whole lives. Can’t hurt to ask now, can it?”

Ant looked at Louise like he was angry with her. Like she was an annoying pest. Sally noticed this with more than a little glee.

“He is going into Mrs. Mahuika’s garden and placing tomatoes around her plants.” She looked back and forth, kissing the butt of her cigarette in the silence.

“Give them the context now, dear. Only fair.” Ant touched Louise’s knee for a moment and she let out her smoke with bottom lip extended. Douglas had been right, Sally thought. She looked like a fish, and a sad one at that.

“Okay. Mrs. Mahuika has been working in her backyard for the last month, staking her tomato plants. She’s kept the skunks out, and she has given each of the various breeds, Big Boys, whatever, a little stake, but,” Louise lowered her voice, “Ant is stuffing the garden with Beefsteak tomatoes.”

“Okay, now. Here, first, she had Boosters, an early season tomato. No luck.” Ant counted on his fingers. “Then, the Chathams. Nothing. The size of dimes. Now, she’s waiting on the Golden Girls. Last chance, here, with the Golden Girls.”

Douglas looked reproachful and anxious. He crossed his arms.

“What gives, Ant?”

“Well, it is just a way to keep her, you know, up. She gave us a bunch of squash flowers, for a dish I make. Right, Louise? I just want to make her to feel good for a little while. When she wakes up, she’ll have a moment of *kupua*, as the Polynesians say. Magic. It’ll make her happy. She just lost her husband. It could be her last season, for Criminy sake.”

“Okay, Sally. Now you.” Louise was not looking; she was pouring another glass of wine. Sally looked at Ant but stayed silent.

“Come on, Sally.” Louise sat forward and wiggled like a woman getting comfortable on the commode. “Was it nice when Ant put the brown shoe polish on my wood tone toilet seat, and you sat on it last summer?”

This would have been an embarrassing incident, had it not happened after dark. Sally had long forgotten it. And in her heart she knew the gag was meant for Doug. But it *had* ruined Sally's favorite miniskirt.

Douglas piped in with, "Not right, Ant. Not fair. Leave it alone."

Sally looked at Louise, whose cleavage gathered in the circle of her peasant blouse, "Well, it was all in fun. That's finished now." Then Sally turned to Ant. "It sounds sweet. I can understand it."

Sally detested those who quoted scripture as though it were absolute truth, but Douglas was all for any behavior that embraced a passion for tradition. To keep him from criticizing her later she added, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Sally scratched along the back of her brassiere and unhooked its hinges from outside her shirt. Then she put her hand inside the armholes, and pulled out the right loop of her bra, and then the left. She yanked it out from under her shirt and, bending down, folded it cup into cup and stuffed it into her pocketbook. Ant and Louise looked to each other with surprise and cheered. Sally felt her husband's eyes upon her. It seemed that he was never satisfied and that realization sparked her to anger. She turned impetuously, gawking at Douglas, boldfaced and taunting. Then she pointed her elbows to the sky and stretched, trying to recall a summer's night when she had felt cooler.

"Okay, good Sally. Good for you. So, he should let her think that by some magic a few tomatoes bloomed out in the moonlight, that she has grown some big, wonderful globes? Sally, give." Louise said it rather commandingly.

Sally looked to Ant as he fingered the tabs. He looked like her twins, brooding over lost toys.

“Yes, Louise. He should fill her garden with tomatoes. He should do it like mad.” Sally snapped her purse, angered by Louise and her breasts. Just because she had an hourglass figure and was a natural born smoker didn’t mean that she was the absolute queen of the universe. Of course, if she were to ask Ant, or even Doug, she suspected their opinion would differ from hers. Sally smoothed her shirt, so that her own breasts could take part in the dark night.

Then she stood up and flopped home.

She heard Ant behind her stirring, and then he said, “Well, that does it then. I’m off.”

The screen door slammed like an exclamation point as Ant sought out tomatoes of the beefsteak variety.

Louise and Doug talked into the deep night, while Sally felt the satin of her nightgown make contact with the sheets. When he arrived home she was awakened to an insistent contact against her bottom. Douglas was rutting against her and biting her neck. His breath was hot and sour; she could smell it as it puffed over her shoulder. He pulled the hair at the nape of her neck in a way that he had not done before. It hurt, so she turned toward him. Then he yanked her nightie up and with his face close to hers, had his way. He grunted and whispered in her ear, “Don’t take your clothes off like that again.”

A minute later he was asleep and when she went to the bathroom to wipe herself with a tissue, she found it speckled with blood.

In the morning, getting ready for church, they were silent. She watched Doug tilt his chin up as he buttoned his shirt with his heavy fingers. Then he went to work on his cuffs – she usually helped with that – and when that was completed she noticed that he fluffed out his arms like a bird straightening his feathers. When he tied his tie he considered his reflection in her vanity mirror and cocked his chin. The belt he slid into the loops of his pants and then he turned with his spine arched to consider his backside. The twins were running in the backyard, sweating on their church clothes.

She went to check Mary Catherine's diaper, feeling a sting between her legs. Her hair was frizzed and as she glanced in the mirror across from the crib she thought she looked just like a clown.

The next morning she awoke to the sound of slapping. The boys were wrestling and she broke it up by washing their faces and dressing them. Then, while she was pouring coffee, she noticed her wicker basket. It was out in the back yard, on top of the cesspool cover. Inside it were four big tomatoes. She saw it in the early light, as the steam rose out of her cup. She put the children in front of the television set, which was what she did when something needed doing, and she tiptoed out into the back, aware that she was wearing only her favorite pink nightie, which was quite sheer. Today she did not feel like finding a robe.

The tomatoes were large, glowing, perfectly ripe. Ant wasn't gardening this season, although he had a green thumb. She suspected the tomatoes came from Dorrison's Farm. But they were each without a spot or bruise. She lifted the one that

faced her – it fit exactly in her cupped hand. On the bottom was a piece of duct tape and the scrap of a torn envelope. On the back, in Ant's sprawling hand, it said: Ahmed's Den, 8:00 Wednesday.

Sally thought, with an angry thrill, what a nerve.

The hours until Wednesday dragged. Sally couldn't bring herself to think about meeting Ant, though she felt she had no choice. She couldn't miss it. She pictured herself telling him that she was flattered that he wanted her. Then asking, "but isn't Louise enough for you? She is a voluptuous woman." Afraid to hear what Ant would say, even in her imagination, she turned her attention back to household tasks.

She took the kids to the swimming pool up the road and then, with the late sun streaming through the open windows, and their hair all smelling of chlorine, she went by Dorrisson's Farm. There were no tomatoes there that looked like the ones in her basket. The kids were fighting and screaming in the hot car, and all of them had sunburns. One of the twins was in the front next to her, and then two in the back and the baby, just out of her Moses Basket, hopped in the black well just above the engine. They were laughing, howling and yelping, flicking towels from the front to back seat, until she screamed, above the din, "If I hear another word from the four of you, I'll knock you into next week. Shut your little mouths, for the sweet love of Jesus!" It was quiet then – except for the cries of the baby. Sally felt bad. She would explain to Doug that this car was simply too small, even for such small children. They were growing all the time and she would not be subjected to being marooned at home. They needed a station wagon.

Later that night, when the children were asleep – Doug was out with a client – she sat on the wet grass in the backyard, and ate the tomatoes, salted and dripping, one by one. The stars were sharp points in the sky as some green seeds made a trail down her blouse.

Wednesday finally came and Sally told Doug she needed to see Maggie. She had arranged for her mother to come watch the children. It wasn't that Douglas couldn't do it – he could – but not as well as her mother. Her mother was organized and smart and always looked pretty even when she had something fierce and cruel to say about Sally's mothering skills, or her housekeeping, or the piles of paper that were stacked all about. Sally left a pot roast drying on the stove, with the little potatoes that her mother loved. She popped one into her mouth and checked the mirror, to make sure that she looked like a woman going to visit a friend, one who'd had a baby.

She sat at the table in Ahmed's, a Middle Eastern restaurant in downtown Providence, ten miles from the suburb of Warwick where she and Doug lived. He worked in Providence, on the northwestern side of town, by the banks and department stores, but she was near Brown University, waiting for Ant. The place was packed with people; the band set up. They were carrying instruments that looked foreign to her, a little guitar that looked pregnant, a flute long enough to soothe snakes, and a series of drums that were stretched with rawhide.

Sally dimly recalled that there were dancers here, clubs or troupes of women who did a dance of the seven veils. She strained her neck to look for Ant; her heart was throbbing in her throat as she tried to swallow the tea that she had bought at the counter. While she waited for him she milled about, clutching her tea, and looking at a case filled with little finger cymbals called zils. Then she took a seat, nervously snapping and unsnapping her purse. It clicked pleasantly and she shifted in the blouse that she wore buttoned up to the neck. She had planned what she would and would not say. She would tell Ant that if there was any question about the rent, he could ask her at home next time. Or that she couldn't have an affair, no matter how much she yearned and ached for him. This she wasn't sure she meant, but she at least wanted to see if he thought she was worth convincing.

But then, with the lights at the counter still up, with the counter behind her still serving coffee and tea, the guitar player spoke. He explained that he was a musician, who had met his wife Gretchen through her dance. He advised them to sit back and listen to the music. It was happening too fast for Sally. Where was Ant? She felt tears sting her eyes.

She wanted to walk out, but she wouldn't leave now. Sally was worried for Ant. Of course she'd come to meet him, regardless of the circumstances. She couldn't deny him anything. He did have a restless nature; always in one fix or another, and it seemed suddenly she didn't really know him, but wanted to, maybe not as a man, but as a person. She closed her eyes and let the fear of this knowledge pump through her. She listened to

the guitar and smelled foreign spices with her eyes closed, imagining that she was enjoying the experience just for what it was, dangerous and different.

When the first dancer came out, Sally stopped thinking of Ant. She wanted to see what the invitation was really about. It was a code that she needed to figure out. What message was he trying to send? There were veils, thin, sheer veils that the women carried, and those tiny finger cymbals, zils, that she had seen in the case. There were dancers all around, all kinds of women, tall and small, blondes, brunettes. They were dressed in shimmering costumes. They smiled for each other. They smiled in unison as each new dancer came out; everyone did. They were an extended family, watching, huddling and hooting, yelling out Yah, yah, yah, yahhhhhh!! The room was intimate, but it was anonymous too. Nobody even looked at Sally. All eyes were on the dance.

The first girl was in her early thirties, about Sally's age, and she had a pitiable number of stretch marks across her belly. Sally could almost feel the girl's nervousness. There were people in the audience watching and looking at her face as she raised the veil, at her body as she made it shimmy. She was wearing a skirt that fell around her ankles, and a short top with silver coins hanging down. The music started low and quiet and with a twang it set the pace for the dancer. Sally thought about her, and the task that she had to perform with her body; she needed to make her body rise to the wild tickle of the flute and the patting of drums. She had to keep her face still and pretty, showing no sign of pain or embarrassment, no hunched shoulders, and she needed her zils to clash and ting in time with the music. And she needed to succeed at this half dressed.

Sally felt uncomfortable looking at the woman, so for little bits she watched the audience. There was one man in particular – behind him some passersby were peering from the other side of the glass window – who looked foreign. The man had a pointed beard and he looked Middle Eastern, his brows knitted and heavy in shadow. His face seemed angry when the music started but then as the dancer shimmied he stared at her luridly, and finally, when she neared the finish, he looked happy. Sally felt sorry for him. He must have been homesick. Perhaps he was teaching at the university.

Sally was sure that she had figured him out and then his eyes turned and he rose and walked to the counter. When he came into the light she realized, with some fright, that he wasn't foreign, that he in fact, looked like Doug. The long shadow lifted from his face as he considered the coffee menu. His beard, no longer pointy, was full of cheer, like the beard of Santa Claus. Then he kissed a dark haired woman who had slipped in by his side and the two scurried to his booth. In that moment Sally realized she didn't know anything. She was just a little mommy, a mommy and housewife.

Everyone was watching the dancer, tables were flung back against the walls and men were looking brazenly at the woman's stomach, her pelvis, and her eyes, until she shrouded herself behind the veil. When she lowered it, standing on tiptoes, she did so with a thick smile because it was over. Sally clapped with relief. Her skin was tingling and hot. Ant was still not there and her mouth still held the blandness of potato.

Sally looked around to see who would come to such a place. There were couples leaning into each other, perhaps thinking of the night that stretched before them, and there were men seated stiffly alone. There were young hippies sipping coffee, eyes red,

no doubt, from marijuana. There were husbands and wives who let their kids twirl in the narrow aisle around the coffee counter.

The second dancer was announced as Nora, and Sally noticed, with a little shock, that they looked alike. They had red hair of the same type, and color, and length, and they both bore the Irish stamp of freckles. The woman walked through the crowds and as she did, two little girls, who looked strangely like nieces of Sally's, clung briefly to her skirts. They could have been twins to Sally's own children, had she married another man, a blond or a redhead. But Douglas had dark hair, and so did her children.

When Nora danced she stared boldly at the audience, daring them to look away. She moved in a jerking way, less fluid than the last dancer, but more controlled. She played her zils until the audience followed her beat, clapping softly, while she considered her shimmy.

The band was playing, and Nora was moving with them, but controlling them, especially the guitar player. Nora set the rhythm for him so that he needed to match her turning and grinding. He needed to match her beat. The pauses were best – she made them pause with the way she turned her hips – and she smiled and hit the zils, quieting the crowd, slowing the song. The guitar player crooned, and while his guitar could not set the pace without destroying the melody of the piece, his voice rose to meet the dancer's beat.

When Sally tried to make out the words it sounded like, "Cousin from the grave, twinnn, twinnn, twinnn. Twang." She knew that wasn't right, and she followed her instinct; she stopped listening for meaning. Then what she heard was some foreign

tongue, Arabic or Farsi, ancient. When the guitar man sang he seemed to command: shimmy, shimmy, shimmy. Turn, turn. *Ya, ya, ya, ya, ya*. Shimmy, shimmy, turn. Shake, shake, shake. Nora moved first once, as though she would comply. Then she shook, away from his song, breaking stride anew, and she didn't do what he asked. What she did instead was float toward the drummer, curving her hips to the right and the left, rolling her pelvis and clasping her zils between hot fingers until she moved into a frenetic shake and shake.

He played to her movements, on his drums, matching the furious clanging of her zils, until finally he moved – with his drum strapped to him – off stage. He moved to her place on the floor, to the place where she rolled her stomach and covered herself with her veil. When she felt his heavy approach, she tossed it aside. Nora made the belt of coins that sat around her waist jingle and jangle, and she hit the zils one last time, commanding one clap, forcing the crowd and dancers and musicians into the same steady beat, until finally they clapped their hands harder and louder, singing their song, her finger cymbals guiding imploringly, while the drummer continued pounding his drum, heavy and hard. Nora faced him slowly; approaching with a sway and a swagger and a jerk she seized the drum by its barrel. She plucked the sheer veil from the floor. Curling behind its sheerness, she rapped it around her head, slithered out of it like a cobra, rolling her stomach, moving her breasts and pelvis closer and closer to him – until finally that large instrument was the only thing that kept the dancer and drumming man apart, and then – only then – she slowed her gyrations, allowing him to pound at will.

She thrust her hips with him, forgetting the veil. It floated to the floor, wet with the salt and sweat of her body. The room was hushed, the band and crowd silent. The dance was done. Sally knew then that Ant was not there, that some insulting trick had been played upon her. She left the restaurant abruptly, legs quaking, face flushed.

When she opened her car door she saw it, over the steering wheel, a thin pink veil. It was exactly the color of her favorite nightie.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she felt a zap of shock. The smell of the night city was in her nose, mixed with spice and fruit, sumac and curry and pomegranate. Her car's little dome light was not playing tricks. She took out the veil, cool and delicate as an Easter lily, and headed toward the streetlight. Holding the veil over her head she saw that it was the exact pink she'd imagined. She shut her eyes; a breeze was rising from the Providence River.

Sally unbuttoned the top button of her blouse, and then she put the veil over her face. It felt smooth and smelled of braised meat. Sally returned to her car through the glow of pink light.

She put the veil in her lap and drove to the other end of the lot, toward the alley. There she sat, heart pounding. At first she was afraid, because how could Ant have known that this was the color of her nightie if he hadn't been watching, spying from his window? Or even! Through a pair of binoculars. It was frightening to imagine, yet a warm glow spread through Sally, making her heart contract violently, while a slow throbbing grew and extended and radiated toward her knees where it pulled the tendons of her calves with yearning.

She tied the veil under her chin and then she waited for him. After a while she started rubbing the veil between her fingers while squirming miserably in her bucket seat. She finally started the motor. She'd been sitting with the windows up and the doors locked – she was in the city after all – and she was covered in sweat. Surely by now Doug would've sent her mother home and fallen asleep. She drove slowly, letting her foot come lightly off the clutch as she shifted. The vibration of the car – it seemed tonight to be purring – excited her further. She was still not ready to go back to the smell of Play Doh and she needed to think. She drove by her favorite houses in Providence, the ones on Benefit Street. They were in the process of being restored by the preservation society. They were quite old and beautiful. When she drove up Congdon Street, by Prospect Park, she slowed to watch the college students necking by the statue of Roger Williams.

The pink veil was on her lap and when she hit the long stretch of Narragansett Boulevard, the part with a view of the bay, she had a thought. One day she had been trying to show off for Louise. She had told her that Douglas loved fuchsia and that he was forever buying her pink nighties. She stopped the car by the side of the road, and staring out into darkness, realized with a start that Louise might've orchestrated her evening at Ahmed's. Maybe she had been in on it, or had an opinion on the joke. She seemed to have an opinion about everything. What had she done? Sally felt a sting of panic and humiliation. What did she know about her tenants really? Now they had something to hold over her.

She hoped that when she got home she'd see some sign at the Malo's that would calm her, but when she glided into the drive their house was dark. Still, she wore the veil like Jackie O., walking into the house with her head back. She was still excited, and had the acute feeling that she was being watched.

Inside, Douglas was indeed snoring on the couch, and the children were tucked in. Sally closed the door of her room, feeling a restlessness that would not easily be quelled. She went to her closet, and turning on the light inside, took off her clothes and slipped them neatly on hangers. The veil she slipped from her head, and tied around her neck. With the closet light still on and the shades up she slipped the pink nightie on and leaped on her bed. The Malo house mirrored her own. The lights there were still off. She propped the pillows up behind her back, took the veil from her neck and spread it over her legs.

Sally felt like she had with Harold, that day on her mother's porch. She knew that she should lower the blinds, but if Louise had in fact played a part in the evening, she wanted to impress her somehow. Louise, for all her worldliness, could still be shocked. And if she hadn't played a part, if she was sleeping in her bed, while Ant watched with a set of binoculars, all the better. She had been issued some sort of challenge. This much was clear.

She started by rubbing the veil over her legs, enjoying the gossamer against her skin. Earlier she had shaved her legs with a straight blade, and applied baby oil to them. This was a rare luxury – she had been lucky that the children had all napped at the same time. She felt a chill from the fabric's contact. She heard a strangled snore come from

the couch and a restless turning that made the luxury of careful consideration less optional. Sally got to her feet and turned the lock on the doorknob, still clutching the veil. Then, in one moment's time she decided what she would do. She shut the closet door almost completely, so that only a dim light filled her room and then she stood in front of the window. There she stripped off her nightie and stood wearing pink satin panties, holding the veil.

The neighborhood was dark and because she couldn't see movement anywhere, she was at ease. Sally took the veil and approached the window, then began rubbing it between her legs, each hand gripping one end and moving it, as though she were shining a precious jewel. While doing this she started to slowly tilt her pelvis and rock her hips. Her breath came faster and she tossed her head back. She put one foot up on the radiator that was under the window, and moaning came in a moment, so violently that it left her seeing stars. She was at once euphoric and stupefied to find that this elusive thing could be so easily mastered.

She repeated this process, staring out at Ant's house, this time with the closet light off. Then she slid onto the cool sheets and drifted along with the echo of Douglas's horsy snores.

The next morning she took the veil and slipped it into her husband's briefcase, feeling a mirth she'd not known before in married life. She did not know at the time that Doug would find it, notice that it was soiled, and simply throw it into the hamper when he returned home. But that is what he did, assuming that one of the kids had stuffed it in his bag for fun.

That weekend Sally sensed summer dying on the vine. Soon the sugar maple in her back yard would droop with red leaves and after that the frost would overpower them. On the day of the first frost she would tug down a leaf and hold it in her palm. She would search for it in the frost – winter – and would find it in the superimposed image of a snowflake. She always waited for that image, taking solace in change. Season to season, it strung her years together.

In the neighborhood Mrs. Mahuika bragged about her Golden Girls and Ant worked on another practical joke, one that he described to Sally and Douglas, on one of their last nights out. He was waiting on his lawn, in the gloaming, as the sun limped toward the horizon. The blue chest was conspicuous in its absence, and the tikis burned. Sally and Doug settled their chairs. When that was through Sally asked her husband to switch spots.

Doug, never liking change, was sharp in his reply, "This is my spot, for the love of all that's good and holy. I work hard all week and I ain't movin'. *Roma locuta causa finita est.*"

Sally stood by Douglas' chair, hating to be mocked, and hating how he mocked the authority of that which he held in highest regard – Rome. It was hypocritical coming from Mr. Tradition, and a sacrilege. Sally pulled her chair squarely away, placing it between Ant and Doug's, but considerably closer to Ant's.

"He's always saying that. Rome has spoken; the case is closed. I am sick of being the one with an eye to the house, Ant. You can understand that, can't you?"

Ant sprang up in his seat nodding. Louise hadn't emerged, though they heard the roar of a blender.

"How about frozen drinks tonight? Picked up some rum from a guy I had to see. How 'bout it?"

Sally and Doug never brought liquor, never even offered, so to Sally the answer was obvious. She glanced at Ant, feeling a brazen thrill – she was sweating though the night was cool – and she let the thumping of her heart rush through her, a happy drug. It was the only option she had, because if she didn't act completely matter-of-fact, she knew she'd lose control, that she'd run screaming back home.

"But Ant," Douglas said, tilting his head like he did when he was upset, "where is the blue chest and the tabs? These old dogs are barking and I was hoping for a place to put them up."

"The jar is full and the tabs'll go to their rightful place. On that matter that's all I'll say. And the chest I gave to a guy down on his luck, downtown, Wednesday night."

Sally cleared her throat with a leap of fear. She had been waiting for the evening on the lawn, even if the three had had some sort of creepy vicarious intimate experience. She probably hadn't had an audience, she decided, and if she had, so what? Who could they tell? Surely not Doug. Ant wouldn't hurt him that way; he was not cruel. In her pocketbook she held a pair of zils that she'd purchased at a music store. She had wanted to pop them into the cooler. Now, she didn't know what to would do with them.

Louise was sun-kissed and grand, emerging with a tray of Trade wind cocktails. They were cold on Sally's tongue, too sweet. She'd have preferred the beer but she tried to drink them with abandon.

Ant started up. Doug and Sally settled quickly, listening intently.

"So you know Mookie the Pollack got himself a new car?"

Sally had seen it, a blue Impala that he boasted about all over town, and polished, and drove up and down the street .

"Well, he's been a bother down at the hall, griping about every little thing. He doesn't want to abide by the call list, thinks there is some sort of conspiracy giving him the bad breaks."

"Okay, so Mookie's Roman Catholic. No offense, we're Protestant now, and we orange and green agree on most things." And here Ant rolled his eyes sarcastically.

"We were married Catholic, but converted after Vatican II." He touched Louise's knee like she was a sweet package that somebody had left on his doorstep.

"Okay, so Mookie the Pollack is the kind of guy who doesn't think much." Ant took the pitcher of drinks and offered to refill Sally's glass, but with the flick of her hand she refused him.

"Now, no offense getting into the business of the Catholic family, but he's constantly got his panties in a knot because he's got, like, what Louise?" He massaged Louise's leg, "Ten? Yeah. Ten kids. And the guy is only thirty-three." He looked around, raising his hands, like the rest of the story would tell itself.

Doug sat forward, looking earnest. And then he looked over at Sally, "So, are you saying he's miserable because he followed the *Humanae Vitae*? That he has some stress about providing for his family? Or that he's stupid because he's a Catholic, or a Pollack?"

"I'm just saying, it's no good. Ten kids. I don't come from a large family. But Louise does and her mother was dead at forty-eight. It's not healthy in this day, with the Pill and every other, excuse me Sally." Ant's face was red in the light of the tiki. "He can barely keep track of them. They're always in my yard, bare-assed, and the wife's so busy she doesn't even notice. Then he yells at her. Maybe she's got something better to do. That's all." Ant squirmed.

The foursome was quiet. Then Sally, looking at Doug, spoke up.

"That might be true, might be right, Ant. Maybe she does have another thing in mind." Here, she turned, looking up from under her lashes at Ant, her face burning. He did not give her a sign.

Doug crossed his legs.

"Thanks, Sal. Anyway, the guy thinks he can control everything, the way the bid list works, the gas in his car. He was telling me he even tracks the mileage in the Impala. He's wound too tight. I could give you a long story; take my word. No telling tales, but he's overstepping."

Louise looked proudly at Ant. "So Ant's been messing him."

Doug stiffened. "How?"

“Well, I wait until after dark and get down under his tank and add gas or subtract it. Depending.”

“How’s that?”

“Sometimes I siphon a couple gallons, other days I top it off.”

They shook their heads. After a silence Doug said, “Ant, you’re unbelievable. But we put up with you because we are all in love with a good story, and when you can finish one, you give yourself up to imagination. We hold that in our highest esteem. Yeats would say that you can make something from the most ordinary of circumstances. It’s your Irish parts talking.”

“I’m not creating anything. It’s already there. I just want to show Mookie that you can’t control every blessed thing.”

Doug said, “Okay, now, Ant. I can see that. You might just do some good, get him to lighten up.” Sally sipped her cocktail reminding herself that she had first loved Yeats, though Doug could always quote him verbatim.

“Just Doug, do me one favor. If you see him, ask about the mileage.”

After a moment Doug said, “For you Ant, I will.” Sally couldn’t see Ant’s face. The tiki blew wildly in the wind.

That night secrets were whispered – a rough estimate of the number of tomatoes that had been placed in Mrs. Mahuika’s garden – an account of her story of their miracle. They conspired, deciding to upgrade the gasoline that Ant added to Mookie the Pollack’s tank. Next, they’d try the new high test.

As the stories died Louise made a business of announcing a surprise for Sally, and then stubbing out her Pall Mall fiercely, went into the house. Sally sat with the men, her eyes bugging slightly from fear and guilt. When Louise emerged it was with a zippered bag on a hanger. They were all silent, and in the torch glow they were long of tooth, their noses hooked, their eyebrows bushier. Louise unzipped the bag slowly, letting the teeth open. When the cover came off Sally heard a jingle.

Inside was a vest made entirely of beer tabs bent together, tab into circle, circle into tab. It looked like the vests that some of the dancers had worn at Ahmed's. Sally felt it with a trembling hand, avoiding the gaze of her husband and friends.

She smiled and touched the glow, whispering, "You made it from our tabs." Sally didn't know where to look. She certainly wasn't going to look at her husband. She stared at her toes as a production was made of trying on the vest. When Sally looked up and smiled, Ant and Louise burst forth with an eruption of cheers and then hugs. Louise returned the vest to its bag and Sally walked it home, putting it in her closet.

Once that was done she sat in the darkness of her room listening for the buzz of her children. All felt quiet. She checked them, feeling their warmth against her cheeks.

Then she returned to the bedroom and stood before the open window, looking at her husband and neighbors. She stood waiting to see if Ant or Louise would look. She turned the closet light on, hoping for something. If they looked over she'd take it as a sign that they'd seen. But neither neighbor even glanced her way. Sally sighed, then sauntered across the street to brave more drinks and stories. But when she arrived the

laughter was subdued and because of the chill that grew in the air the couples went in early.

Later that night Sally excused herself while Doug settled on the couch, waiting for the television to warm up. She ran to her room where she took the veil out and stripped down to nothing but panties, and then, with the challenge of taking matters in hand burning, put on the vest. All of this she did with her shades up and the light on. Then she walked lightly into the parlor and climbed onto Doug, who was watching *I Love Lucy*. Doug was vulnerable, slow in his movements, slow from the drink. Sally felt giddy as she closed her eyes and did an ancient lap dance on her husband. She moved her hips teasingly for a while, until she settled herself on him and began to squirm.

She wrapped her arms around Doug's neck, moving her fingers behind his head as though clanging a pair of zils. He reacted by moving her up and down like she was a rag doll. His reaction seemed like the movements of some primal being who didn't even notice the room around him. He was vacant, even oblivious to the television. He bit her – more pleasantly this time – which made her heart beat frantically for just a moment, as though she were in mortal danger. Saliva rolled down her back as she climaxed, jangling atop him. He looked dumbfounded, like a startled animal. He moved with her a moment.

Then he sputtered and shook and sat perfectly still and all she could think about was the similarity of the motion to that of her car. He shuddered like the Volkswagen did when she popped the clutch.

Her hips hurt – he had gripped her so hard that he left eight finger-shaped bruises across her bottom. Sally, having recovered from the initial startle of his gruffness, was flattered to have stirred him. Smiling, she slipped off. Her mind was occupied with thoughts of triumph as she imagined that she had created a sex life with one daring and adventurous move.

But with the turn of his cheek, Sally felt Doug change. When she looked at him, he wasn't smiling. He was gaping at the ceiling, while beads of sweat rolled down, panting like a man running for his life. He was a man who treasured tradition and this was not their traditional way. He stood to pull his underwear up and stepped into his pants. He followed this by buttoning his oxford shirt, with unsure fingers.

Then, glancing back at the television as though it were a foreign object, he went to work on his shirt cuffs. When his shirt was completely buttoned he smoothed it, flapping his arms. He put his belt on and turned, wiggling his bottom. Cloaked again, he wiped his brow and hands with his handkerchief then walked softly to the kitchen.

She heard the cabinets clicking and water running. She followed him, naked but covering her breasts, and looked on while he made coffee and Fluffernutter sandwiches. The sound of coffee perking became suddenly sad to her.

Doug carried his plate to the garage to get a lawn chair.

Sally watched him through the kitchen window as he stooped to put his coffee and plate on the concrete patio, then settle himself. He looked small and old as he straightened. Her heart sparked with that somehow, and she dressed hastily, leaving her

bra on the parlor floor. She stood on tiptoes to pull her chair from its garage peg and joined him under the sapphire sky. She closed her eyes sadly. The air held a hint of cold.

There they sat for a long while, Doug's jaw working on chewing and gulping, and Sally feeling the grooves and bumps of the patio cement against her toes. When he finished his sandwich he touched Sally's arm, then moved to fold his chair.

But she rose and faced him asking, "Sweetheart, do you think it will be cold enough to kill off the mosquitoes tonight?"

Douglas told her it might, and then he sniffed the air, as she had done earlier. He said, in a soft tone, "I don't know. I don't know about that."

She kissed his cheek carefully and Doug agreed, at Sally's suggestion, to leave the chairs out, hoping in the morning that they would find them covered in frost.

7.

Meier Solicits Praise

- It's quite good, isn't it? I mean, for a neophyte?
- What?
- Why, the story of course.
- That "Practical Jokes?"
- Yes.
- I suppose it has its charm, although you took certain liberties.
- How do you mean?
- Well, Meier, I don't know how it was created exactly, how it went through the writer's filter, but didn't you dumb our Ant down?

– Not really. He can adapt to speak with anyone. I think they call it “code switching.” All good storytellers can do it. Besides, if I did, it was necessary.

– For whom?

– For the reader. In order for the readers to feel the awakening that Sally has.

– So Ant couldn’t be given the gift of intellect and still appeal?

– No. Sally was too timid for that.

– Well, why didn’t you make her more forceful then?

– Well, I got the material from the original woman’s memory. I did my research by listening to the memories of Sally, the writer’s landlord. You do know that she lives across the street from the author?

– I know, but still.

– Fiction is all lies, lies that create great truth.

– That sounds like propaganda.

– It isn’t if you believe it.

– He’s just a big, big beefcake, there on the page.

– Read it again, more carefully next time. I did maintain the integrity and spirit of Ant. And the events, as you know, are quite accurate.

– Well, now that we’re on it, whose bright idea was it to name him Ant anyway? What kind of name is that?

– It’s short for Anthony.

– And the last name?

– Malo?

– Yes, Malo.

– What of it?

– Is it supposed to be Italian? Doesn't it mean 'bad'?

– I don't think so.

– But the writer is an Italian American?

– Yes. But as for the name, I think we favored it because it is the Hawaiian word for 'loincloth.'

– How loathsome.

– Well, she added a lot of elements of Hawaiian folklore into the story.

– So that is how our hero got his name, because she was reading to her children, books about Maui, Maui full of tricks?

– Yes.

– Smarten him up in revision, if you can get a word in, will you? To maintain the continuity for the other stories that will appear in this volume.

– No can do.

– Well, what should we do in the meantime?

– Just enjoy the story for what it is.

8. 1947

The Salt of Time

If you were a man like Anthony Malo, sitting in Kennedy Plaza, about to meet the boy who called himself Jimi Hendrix, the boy who wasn't there – the boy you saw nonetheless – you might be coming to a conclusion. You might have finally decided to put the decision into practice, the decision to forget that you ever had a mother. After coming to this inevitable conclusion you arrived at the fact that the sacrifice of family was necessary for self-preservation.

If you were sitting on a bench the last time you went looking for your junkie mother, you'd realize all this, but you'd still allow yourself an indigo memory.

In this memory you stand next to your mother, stock still. She has taken you to the big beach, south of Providence where city people dwell, beyond the coves of your grandmother's house.

The bus lurches to a stop, arriving at Snug Harbor, where the marshes around Roy Carpenter's Beach smell perpetually of low tide.

If you were Ant you'd let yourself remember her clearly, in the salt of time, how she looked that day. You'd remember so well that you could draw her picture up in your mind like a shaded postcard.

You'd remember everyone on the beach turning to look, to stare at her calves, large and firm, the muscles that move beneath her skin.

She carries herself like a mare surveying a pasture. The flip flops she wears are blue and white, almost completely flat when her wide heels come down. She does not have your pail, you remember; you recall the way you followed, whimpering for it. A gift from Grandma Zadie, it is red enamel with a white shovel.

Your mother doesn't talk much but when you cry for the pail she wraps the towel around her neck casually and says, "I've got something better for you. Wait."

The dune grass scratches you both, although she doesn't notice.

The other passengers from the number 9 hoop up a racket, disperse, spread towels, run for the surf. Your mother stops suddenly and you bump into her. With a quick apology you watch as she pulls the cover-up over her head. Her back is covered with freckles, soft and brown as leaves in fall.

You see this, and eager to please, take off grimy tennis shoes and yank at your graying socks. They are reluctant though – you struggle – imagining they are snakes refusing to regurgitate prey.

Approaching the water's edge your mother measures her steps, shifting, in search of the best place to stand, "Okay Ant. You need to find the spot where the sand pulls you down by the heels. Get in."

She looks intently at the overhead sun.

You step on the mud reluctantly. Even then you question her judgment. Still, you are just a boy, so you stand close. She smells of banana and coconut and this fills you with sudden joy. You grab her, hugging, and bury your head in her soft stomach. She jerks away, walking out. Water rings her ankles.

She spreads her arms and all you see is her shadow, great, like the silhouette of some platinum goddess.

"Get away from me, Ant. Now, move over so that our wings are an eagle's width apart. Imagine it. Both eagles."

Spreading your arms in measured form, on this perfect day, you find the courage to ask, "Mom, how about seagulls? Can't we be gulls?"

"No. Eagles. I said *eagles*. Seagulls are the rats of the sky. Now move over."

When you find your perfect spots you look back to where the waves press the hot powder of sand. The tide is coming in, just as the tide chart said it would.

The surf pulls. Water shines like fragments of glass, tiny mirrors, around your feet. You look down knowing there has never been a day with such a scalding sky, with

a breeze so cool across the mica-laced sand. On this day sky and waves compete, vying for the most brilliant blue. Where the sun hits your reflections you and your mother glisten, framed together in brine. You stare at your ankles transfixed and as the undertow starts to gain force you two stand on tiptoe, spreading your arms. For a moment your fingertips touch. You can balance your thin legs there, against the great force of the sea, while a glimmer of water rushes away.

Shadows fall long. The more intently you watch the tide engulfing your feet the more you realize the sea doesn't move, you do. When you are in the surf, poised in the perfect spot – balanced – the sea is still as a stone, while you move backwards, gliding along the wet sand, as though being pulled on a dolly. The harder you stare at the sand the faster you are pulled backwards.

After a timeless span of alternating between standing on toes as the surf pulls out and digging in heels as the tide rushes in, your heart falls in time with the movement of tides. Your blood has the perfect balance of water and salt; your blood has the same elements – in the exact same proportions – as ocean water.

Your mother yells, "See Ant! We are eagles. We can flyyyyy-----!"

You hear her but what you remember best isn't the movement of your body with the sand and waves. It isn't the shared equilibrium between you and the stone still, timeless sea.

What you remember most is the breeze whirling around your mother, lifting her hair in a golden halo. The halo turns though, and the tendrils of your mother's hair are caught in a wild wind that whips her face. Despite the force of this wind she is not afraid,

she flips her head, raising her arms, eager to meet the salt horizon that turns the breeze wild, the same force that carries her voice quickly away.

PART II

1. 1952

Boy Meets Dante

The day after Ant's mother stole his bike and the clamming rakes, Grandma Zadie got pissed. Pissed was the word that she used for drunk and drunk she was. Drunk and swearing out loud. Swearing like Catholics don't ever swear.

"Jesus Christ on a Popsicle stick and all the saints!" She was banging around looking for something.

Ant had never seen his grandmother in such a condition and though he wanted to ask her about his mother and the clam rakes he figured it was not the time.

"If I get my hands on that girl..." Her words hung there in the air, as she fiddled with the stripped screw of the doorknob that was housed in the breezeway door. She pulled the door a little and it gave way, thumping her head.

“OH!” It seemed that with the bruise on her forehead her task was complete; the etched glass doorknob tumbled to the floor.

Ant went into the kitchen. He had just gotten up and he could see the bottle of whisky on the counter that Zadie had used to spice her coffee.

“I’ll fix her wagon!” Now Zadie was dumping all of the doorknobs, which were tied up in her apron, onto the pedestal table in the kitchen.

“First one hurt the most, gold bangle bracelet. But this. This takes it.”

Ant knew that Zadie was talking about his mother.

“Go out and play now, boy.”

Ant went quickly, and walked the gray shoreline. It was cold and even the tide seemed slow and lethargic.

When he came back Zadie sent Ant to her friend Ethel’s house where he watched Ethel’s husband work on his car. It was fun handing him all of the heavy tools. Ant liked to help.

When Zadie picked him up it was dark and it seemed to Ant that she had been gone forever. He knew because he had eaten two meals. A bowl of red chowder and a plate of spaghetti. Both with warm bread.

Zadie was herself again when they walked in the cold twilight back to the cottage.

They sat in the kitchen and Zadie pulled three leather bound books from her embroidered bag. They looked old and the spines were cracked.

Ant noticed that all of the doorknobs in the house were gone. So was the radio. And his grandmother was missing the wedding band that she had worn as a widow longer than she had worn married. Her nose and eyes were red, either with the cold or from crying.

"Ant, these are for you, my little prince. But wherever you go, while you are a boy we'll keep them here."

Ant was not particularly fond of books but he feigned interest.

"These are three volumes by Dante Alighieri, a man so famous he went by just his first name."

Ant squinted, trying hard to look impressed. He shook his head, as he'd seen Zadie do when she was listening to a sad story as she took a cup of tea with Ethel.

"Yes, my dear. I read it in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Dante wrote these stories in a book called *The Divine Comedy*. Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. We're going to read them. But we'll start at the end, since that's what impatient readers like to do."

"Why are we reading these?"

"Well, the Post said that in Italian houses children know the beginning of the book about hell just like our children know Mother Goose rhymes. So I thought that you might want to know them, too. Since your father was Italian."

"Did my father read them?"

"When he was about your age I imagine he did. I'm not certain, in truth, but let us imagine that he did. Let's us two imagine that he learned about life's ways from them. Let's imagine him as a clever, clever boy. A boy just slightly less clever than you."

And so it went that night and the next and the one after that. Zadie started reading to Ant about Dante's character as he passed beyond the human realm, beyond earth, as he floated light as a feather to heaven with his lost love and muse Beatrice.

2. 1962

Floating Uncle Post

The second visitor, Uncle Post, came to Ant in much the same way as Mrs. Lafferty had. Ant had been away, on a fishing vessel called the Anabel Lee. When he returned it was late at night, after tying one on.

Anyway, Ant staggered in and kissed his Grandma, who was sleeping in her room. Got up early the next day to settle some debts. He noticed, as he left the house, that the tide was going out. He waved to Zadie, who was sitting in her chair in the backyard, with a blue ratty hat on, her feet flitting the sand.

He was gone all day, visiting friends, thinking about the date that he had later that night with a woman named Mandy, doing all of the things that men of twenty do when they have a day of leisure spreading out before them. He looked for an apartment of his

own, too, though he hadn't mentioned it to Grandma. When he got home she was not in the house and he thought at first she was playing rummy down the road with Ethel. He went out to meet Mandy.

Next morning he returned just at sun-up. He wanted to share coffee with his Grandma. He had brought her coronets filled with raspberry jelly and cream because the bakery was just below Mandy's apartment. He had met the girl going there for the coronets in the first place.

When he got in he sniffed the air for coffee because Zadie always perked it at sunrise. It was a superstition that she had, something about never perking beans after the sun began to rise in the sky. But the pot was not even out. Zadie was not in her bed either. Ant went to sit in the yard, and her chair was there still, overturned as if the wind had given it a twirl.

He looked down at the shore and there she was, lying with her legs askew, the tide lapping her about the waist. Her hair was in wet coils and her eyes open, as though she were staring at the clouds. But the collar of her shirt – he would swear to it – was still dry.

He cleaned out her things after the arrangements were made. He donated it all to the Travelers Aid, down in the city, over by Grace Church on Mathewson. Then he started finding the mints.

Zadie had always loved Wintergreen mints. She had sugar, so she ate the sugar-free kind. The two of them called them "fartmints." It was a joke between them for

obvious reasons. Ant loved to sit with her in the little house, laughing. He would yell, in his best Irish brogue, "For the sweet love of Jesus, Grandma Zadie. Enough! Away with the fartmints!" The sorbitol content in the mints was high and diabetic patients were often informed that they should not overindulge, but they were one of Zadie's few remaining vices. Ant ate them with her, passing the time by turning the lights off and gnashing his teeth so that she could see the sparks.

Anyway, there were hundreds of packs. Wintergreen, sugar-free, mints in big packages, in shiny cellophane, in tiny tins. The damned things were hidden everywhere. Half packs and whole packs, packs, packs, packs. Ant found them one by one, and some weren't sugar-free after all. They were frozen, wrapped in foil; they were smelly in the toes of long-forgotten boots. They were in all the nooks and in the window ledges.

And every time he found a pack Ant went to the bathroom, heart aching with loneliness, and there he shut the door, pulled the shade, clicked off the light, and clattered his jaws on the mint (some were Lifesavers) waiting for sparks. Sometimes, if he squinted just right, he could see Zadie there behind his right shoulder, laughing. He waited often in the dark, and squinting sought her out or sniffed the air for her particular potion, but more often than not he was alone there seeing nothing but the bathroom tile, smelling nothing but soap, Irish Spring.

It was, ironically, after he found the last tin that his mother returned.

She blew in predictably, just as the last of his hard work was done. It was fine to have her home he guessed, but he was disgusted that she came after Grandma Zadie, who

prayed daily for her safe return, was gone. And, upon learning of her mother's death, she simply shrugged.

His mother came back wearing linen, white linen that made the skin on her nose seem to shine in contrast. She had so many freckles that they made her face appear to be tan, which wasn't possible. Also, her hair was blond.

Ant had hoped that when he saw his mother again, he might witness Grandma Zadie beating her, screaming, yelling, and maybe, eventually, laughing. Instead, it was just the two of them and Ant would not blame her or ask for explanations. If he did that than it would feel like he was asking for forgiveness.

A few weeks later Ant was in his bed, alone, sleeping. This time he was on his side facing the narrow doorway that lead out to the second floor landing. He was home for a break. He had been fishing on a tuna boat off Block Island Sound and it was just he and his mother there.

Anyway, he was lying there when he heard a noise. He looked up to see a giant figure looming in the doorway of his room. Although he could be brave, on this particular morning, he was not. He had been fishing with men who were not afraid to kill, who were used to slicing and gutting the wildness of the sea. And, when he saw the figure looming in the doorway, he assumed that it was one of them. He feared for himself, and for his mother. Her bedroom was downstairs, directly below his own.

He decided to stay still, feigning sleep while he considered his options. He could jump out the second story window and get back in the house to see if his mother was

okay, or he could run next door for help. His heart was thumping in his chest and he was having trouble staying still; his shoulders quaked.

That was when the strange thing happened. The man in the door crouched and raised his hands, as though to indicate that he meant no harm. It was then that it occurred to Ant that this was not a man who could cause harm to him. It occurred to him then that it was a shade like the one's he'd read about in Dante.

The shade did something to reinforce the thought. He started to raise himself, awkwardly, as though he were straddling and climbing a rope. He jerked himself up, bit by bit, until from Ant's view, all that remained in the frame of the door was a bright white pair of leather sneakers, perhaps Nikes, Ant had thought at the time.

The next day he told his mother the story while she chain-smoked at the Formica table. His mother looked well. She never ate and barely talked but when she sat in a room she filled it up.

The methadone seemed to be helping even if it made her a bit hazy. This was not nearly the first story of this kind that Ant had relayed. He was comfortable sharing the details with his mother now and she, being naturally inclined to see that which inhabits the other place, voiced her concern.

"Who do you think it is?" She went over a long list of big-ish men they knew who were in decline and might call upon Ant for some sort of favor, or to ask his assistance in delivering a message.

Although she did not voice it, Ant knew by the way that his mother bit at her cuticle that she was exasperated that he had been frightened. She probably expected that the message was meant for her.

After a long list of living friends and relations was exhausted the two drank some green tea and took to waiting. Two days later his mother got the call. Uncle Post had been admitted to the hospital for pain that they had associated was a gallstone. Through some botch, he had died.

He didn't die the night that Ant saw him. He died the next night. On the night that Ant had seen him, and at the exact time, Uncle Post had been in surgery.

By the time this transpired Ant was back on a commercial fishing vessel, having set off from New England's second largest fishing port, The Port of Galilee. He did not attend his uncle's services. He thought of him though, lulled by the rocking of the sea, as the spray rose above and around him, while they crossed Block Island Sound and headed into the wake of the Atlantic. A soft mist was falling that evening, and as it fell on Ant it refreshed him and in this mist he recalled his uncle, his fine singing voice, his kind heart. When he hit his rack that night he did so peacefully.

When he returned ashore, by way of Great Island, Ant learned that his Aunt Pam was not adjusting to the loss of her husband. She had been walking to all of the neighbors' houses, asking for tools that Uncle Post had lent, even if the tools were at home, in her own garage. And she was chastising others for various affronts they had made to her husband through the years. So Ant phoned her, at the suggestion of his mother, and related what had happened the night that Uncle Post had been in surgery.

When he was finished he said into the silence, "I think that Uncle Post was planning to tell me something, maybe to let you know where he was going, or to say goodbye."

Aunt Pam hung the phone up without another word.

A few days later his mother got to the bottom of it. During the morning, directly before Uncle Post had been rushed into the hospital, he had been dressing for work. Ant and his mother and everyone else knew that Uncle Post worked at the bar of his own uncle. He was the manager. It was a neighborhood bar called the Crow.

Every day for seventeen years from Monday until Friday Uncle Post had worked there. What he did was this: he got up at six o'clock in the morning, dressed in his white pleated tuxedo shirt and black pants. Then he put on a black tie and thin cold socks and the formal shoes that went along with the rest.

The morning of the day when Uncle Post got sick was a Friday. It was the end of Uncle Post's week. When he looked at the clothes that he was used to wearing, on this particular day he said to his wife, "No. Today I will not wear these clothes. Today I am wearing my jeans and a polo shirt and those new white Nikes. I love them when they are so white they glow."

Aunt Pam returned from the hospital after Uncle Post passed with the clothes and the sneakers in a plastic bag. These were all that she had left because she had, sadly, just finished the washing and the sheets, when she had first gotten the call about Uncle Post. Now, all that she had that smelled of her husband was this one bag of smoky work clothes, clothes he had worn for three hours.

Leaning against the banister at the foot of the stairs she considered bringing the clothes upstairs to their bedroom, where the bed was still stripped. But she couldn't go there. She knew that she would not soon sleep in their marriage bed, and she wanted to keep the last bits of his scent near her. So she hung the whole business, shirt and jeans, underwear even, over the banister. That was close enough. Now she was sleeping on the living room couch. So there the clothes remained, near where she slept.

But she could not bear to touch them.

When her nephew Ant called her she had assumed that he was playing a prank. He must have been there, at the house after the funeral. He must have seen the clothes.

It was explained to her, by Ant's few and unreliable relatives, that Ant hadn't been at the house after the funeral, or even at the funeral itself, that he had in fact been out fishing. It was explained further that he'd had the good fortune to catch a giant tuna, which had weighed in at over six hundred pounds. And that his good fortune, combined with good timing, allowed him to cut the fins off quickly, which he then sold to a Japanese fish trader. It was confided too that Ant had gained a bit in the bargain. Aunt Pam knew this however, because Ant had sent a generous 'place' to his Aunt – he had been forced to take places at the funeral – to defray her expenses.

Being helpful, but ultimately unappreciated, was becoming the theme that undercut all of Ant's experiences. So he accepted with bitterness the fact that Aunt Pam, despite all that she knew about Ant and his circumstances, refused to find comfort in the fact (or even believe) that he had truly seen Uncle Post, that he hadn't made it up and telephoned in meanness, that he hadn't been playing a joke.

3.

The Night We Found the Poem

It was an unusual night because the writer was working. The husband had gone to work, on something called a 'proposal.' He had a deadline at his work but was supposed to be home by nine o'clock. When he got home, we knew from frustrating experience, there would be no more work, only the watching of movies on the television, tapes and DVDs stacked up on the armoire, the two of them staring at nothing. That is not altogether true, I suppose; the writer often interrupted, confused, and the husband was forced to use a small device to freeze the action. They froze it often too, in order to herd the children back to bed, get little sundry snacks and sugary treats, and to use the water closet.

This was not the case on the evening that we discovered the poem. On that evening the husband was late. Our Tracy saw it first as an advantage, giving her a chance

to engage more fully in her material. But she is one with a jealous streak, prone to the most uproarious fits in the love arena and neither childbearing nor motherhood had lent her a rational bone or tempered her paranoia.

She had some reason to doubt, always, in her own mind.

She was writing the last section and was saddened by it to some degree and looking for distraction. The clock read 10:49 P.M.

She picked up a little black phone and called the husband directly. He did not answer. She called what we believe was the office line.

Nothing.

We were encouraged by this, of course, the sudden rise of passion, because be it the rising of the blood in love or anger, or some combination of the two, it stokes the creative fires.

11:06. She is cleaning the toilet when a thought hits her in regard to Jimi Hendrix. She rushes back to the nook and begins a section that she calls "Jimi Hendrix's Banshee." We believe that this section was a success, partly due to bad behavior.

11:45. The ring of the hand-held phone echoes through the nook like a scream and we start. Well, Meier and Elizabeth and I do. Jimi has left, upset and not unduly, by the section she had just written.

She answers the phone coolly and we hear only her side – electronics can never be penetrated, as you know:

– Hello?

– Where the FUCK are you?

Be prepared because our writer can swear in the tradition of the homegrown, 1980's generation Rhode Islander.

- I called your office at (she consults a small pad with times) 10:46.
- So, if you were at the office why didn't you pick up the office phone?
- So you mean to say that you ran over to HER office, where SHE is proofing her section.

It is no great wonder that the line goes dead. He, with good reason, has severed the connection. But here we find the writer in a complete tizzy. Her breath is quick and she pulls the roots of her hair, successfully removing several strands. We are mesmerized – remember we have no television here.

We are not surprised when she picks up the phone and rings him again.

- LISTEN TO ME. It is clear, quite clear, that you are stalling for time, answer the question.

- Why didn't you answer either phone?
- You were recharging it on the charger and walked over to HER building to check the document.

–Don't you call me a psycho, Fuckstick.

The line goes dead again. She is hyperventilating.

Meier and I, and even Elizabeth, although we are aware of the outrageousness of her behavior, find ourselves questioning the man with raised eyebrows. No one says it, but we feel guilty about playing with her keyboard earlier in the evening. We can sometimes mess with the margins by bouncing, all three of us – at Jimi's suggestion – on

the Tab bar, while she writes. It is naughty we know but great fun. But perhaps it has lent itself to her disposition.

She dials again. And again. And again. Finally:

– If you don't pick up the phone some of your possessions may fall into harm's way.

– You better check the messages.

She picks up a pair of scissors from the kitchen and lets them *snip, snipp, snipppp* menacingly into the receiver.

– I thought that you might like some summer suits, *snip*.

Then she picks up Ant's book! She presses it to her chest. She smells the woody rot of it. An old book. The phone rings, startling her.

The husband appears to have received the messages. The call comes in at 12:20. She drops Ant's copy of the *Purgatorio* and a stapled poem drifts to the floor before all of our eyes.

– Really, I need some proof. Nothing personal.

– Like, I'll get on the computer, go into your work email and if you have actually been sending copies of the sections back and forth the whole thing makes sense.

– Well, you just can't have three AWOL hours without any accountability.

– You are simple too precious to me to allow that kind of risk.

– A handsome commodity.

– What's the password? Okay, entered.

– Oh. Okay. I see it here. And all of the times are on the messages.

– Embarrassed? That would be ridiculous. For protecting what's mine? It isn't a matter of insecurity. It's simply a matter of smart marriage management. I know what sort of temptations are out there for a thirty-two year old redhead with a full crop of hair. It's part of my personal identity as a wife.

– To be wild and passionate and keep you in check.

– Okay. I'll make you some decaf and I promise to act sorry, very, very sorry.

– Okay, sorry and embarrassed, upon your return.

– I love you. No, I didn't cut the suits.

– Yes, I am terribly insecure.

It is sad. But it's the dark side of brilliance isn't it? Of creativity.

– Okay, I won't go overboard. See you soon.

Click. We can see into her mind and know that she has faith in nobody, in nothing but her own writing, her ability to make a go at it. In this way she is like all the others. To us, because her talent cannot meet her expectations, this insight is a perilous one. She bends down, lifts the poem up and reads it, while tears stream down her reddened face.

4. The Poem!

My Trip Through the Afterlife

The Inferno

The first time through
the monsters really scared me,
especially the lizards that kept
changing into people and back again.
But the second time I made them
pets. I slipped a leash around
Geryon and suddenly he shrank.
His scorpion tail became plastic.
They all still followed me around,
horns glinting, but every face
looked like mine in the fifth grade.
The rivers of blood were just
my arteries, my veins.

*

I was so happy in hell.
It smelled bad and there was
all this wailing, but I never paid
attention to the punishments,
the whirlwinds and the hackings
and the boiling pitch. I knew
it was just a poem, with levels,

and it was the levels I loved.
 I laughed in the Malebolges
 when I finally saw everything
 fitting together, and I think Virgil
 smiled a little, too. He looked
 just like Dad did the first time
 I didn't pop the clutch.

The Purgatorio

Climbing the Mountain of Purgatory
 was like hiking in the Cascades
 with Leo--we talked and talked--
 except Purgatory was a lot more structured,
 and we kept running into people we knew:
 Emily Dickinson, Mr. Crooks. And I kept
 getting lighter. At the end of each ledge
 an angel would brush my forehead
 with its wings and I'd lose a few pounds
 until finally I was almost floating.
 That's why we would choose such
 suffering, the carrying of the stones
 or the running in circles or the wall
 of flame, even for hundreds of years:
 to get in shape. We want to fly.

*

And I slept so well in Purgatory.
 I was tired from climbing,
 and the stars were out, and each
 of the three nights I was there
 a figure came to me in a dream,
 an Eagle, a Maiden, a Wheel,
 pulling me to the next cornice.
 In the morning Virgil and I
 would talk, like in therapy,
 but then I'd look around and see
 that the dream was true. I was
 a whole ledge higher.

*

The other thing I really liked
 about Purgatory is that there
 wasn't any preaching. People
 were too busy running around
 chanting or singing or reciting
 poetry to get into arguments
 or tell you what to do. They'd
 stop and explain things if you
 asked, but they didn't need
 the explanations. They were too
 happy. There was art everywhere,
 hanging on the side of the mountain:
 The Starry Night, the Elgin Marbles.
 They'd just point to one of those.
 Or they'd look out from the mountain
 at the ocean all around, miles of it,
 and the stars. They'd say: see?

The Paradiso

One of my favorite parts was when
 Beatrice stopped bawling me out
 and we shot into heaven. I saw
 the Earthly Paradise recede,
 the meadows and trees, and when
 I looked up I understood space
 isn't empty really but like water,
 silver, then red, then gold,
 band after band. I loved being
 weightless. My body shot higher
 and higher and I was bathed
 in light and Beatrice knew everything
 I was thinking. People think heaven
 is boring but it's not. Music pours
 from the Empyrean. Mr. Rogers
 is there, in his sweater. Lincoln.
 Grandma Gottwig dances in a circle
 of saints, hair just as blue as ever.
 Behind her the Big Bang is happening
 again, matter is flying everywhere,
 and she laughs and laughs.

– Chris Anderson

5.

Discouragement Sets In

- We are not making much progress.
- We have gotten the writer to lift *Purgatorio* and we have unearthed one of Ant's creations. That is tremendous progress!
- Excuse me.
- What is it, Jimi?
- *Who* has gotten her to lift the volume of Dante from the sill?
- Okay, she did it in her own jealous fit.
- Or we could give the poor husband some credit.
- Let's do that.
- I just don't think it's Ant's. Why would he use a pseudonym like Chris Anderson?
- I think he wrote it.
- It was in Ant's copy of the *Purgatorio*.
- Tell us, Miss Missy *Muse*. You've been around him longest. And surely you know. Did he write it?

– That is not something that I'll divulge to you.

– Why not?

– You should be able to surmise it from the subject matter and the style. Let alone the word choice and the tone. The underlying tone of the work. For pity sake, you can see into the man's thoughts, into his dreams!

– I say yes, because of the eagle.

– I say no because there is no mention of the sea.

– There is mention of the sea.

– Well what about that wheel?

– No. It's not his poem. He locks away or destroys all of his creative work, thinking that the process is the end, not praise, not anything but process. The verve of creating.

– Says who?

– Says me, so there.

– I say the reference to Grandma Godwig, Godwig? Anyway, the reference to the grandmother seals it.

– No. No, I think that is exactly the point at which I decided it was *not* his work. He would not mention her there. He never seems to even think about her. He would consider mentioning her too sentimental.

– He wouldn't either. With all that we know about Zadie! That is preposterous.

– People love their grandparents. It's universal.

– True.

– Who was it that said, “If you are not risking sentimentality you’re not even in the ballpark?”

– Who cares? I’ve had enough of the irrelevant literary quotes. You are getting as pretentious as the writer. Really, it’s getting hard to take. It’s of no use to us now who you’ve inspired, mentored, call it what you will. Unless you can conjure Joyce or Yeats on the spot to write the bloody novel, or whatever this is – for us.

– You know I can’t do that.

– Let’s just sit tight for now then.

– Trust that she’ll find the poem and know just what to do with it.

6. 2001

Dreamscape: A View from a National Forest Out West

Up in the high bough of a sugar pine Ant crouches with his knees poking out at peculiar angles. He is wary, looking down through the canopy of the forest, noticing the saplings that grow precariously from the roots of rotting, downed aspens. They have come to the end of their live spans and now, decomposing, provide nutrients to the emerging conifers.

Ant notes this with some sadness, although he knows that it is the best alternative, the natural way. If he stands on the highest branch, with his hand hugging the red trunk of the sticky pine he can see the extending grasslands covered in juniper, and beardless bluebunch wheatgrass. Also, there are patches of clover, crimson in the living center of the blooms, and rusty where the spiky petals have started to wither.

If Ant stayed very still, and if he were comfortable, he would see the spotted owl. If he were in a place he knew, back east, he would search for the gray squirrels and chipmunks. But here there are few and he observes this although he does not connect it to an understanding of the presence of birds of prey, peregrine falcons, bald eagles and spotted owls that perch, like he, in the places atop the trees.

He knows a bit about ornithology but he is a city man. He knows for instance that the peregrine falcon roosts in the niches and overhangs of skyscrapers in New York because he saw it on television. He knows that they, like whales swirling for krill, fly up among the pigeons and set the flock off with a wild flapping. He knows that when a weak or young pigeon starts to waver – to lose balance – the peregrine falcon strikes, with its sharp beak, or grips it in its talons. He knows too that the falcon perches with the kill, and pulls the flesh from its breast before dropping the carcass of feather and bone.

Ant knows that these falcons, so often pictured in Egyptian hieroglyphics, are also found in Providence. He has seen the piles of feathers along the sidewalks, frayed but still distinctly the two-tone color of pigeon. Falcons roost in the twenty-eight-story Industrial Trust Company building, the one that Cooper and Schoedsack used for the high wire scenes in their 1933 version of King Kong.

He also knows something about the owl. He knows that the owl is slower in flight than the falcon, but that the owl is equipped with feathers that are serrated, much like a bread knife, and this serration allows the slow moving owl to approach prey quietly. The cuts in the feathers break the air molecules up so that their flapping is never heard at all.

He sees the wild horses, their coats creamy, out in the open meadow, the grasslands, past the neck of the deep and shady forest. He does not know that they graze quietly, that they whinny and sway, standing lightly over a mound of earth that has been upturned. He leans to look at the horses, feeling a catch in his throat. He has never imagined such beauty and it frightens him because he believes it is can only exist when coupled with predatory savagery.

Once, he read about bands of wild horses. They lived in the parks out west. He had read that once two were found mutilated and burned, by some lunatic out camping in the woods somewhere.

Ant hears rustling far below and he looks, seeing the sweet moss in its chartreuse richness, and then the lichen that pillows the rocks below. A girl, not exactly like his daughter Regina Marie, scoots out running around the base of his tree. She beckons him and he indulges the impulse to jump by leaping out as far as he can, so that when he hits the outmost branches of the trees their tender needles will touch him gently, guiding him to a soft landing.

To his delight and amazement the needles do not slow his descent and he lands crouching as he did in on the highest bough. He gives chase to the girl, calling "Regina Marie!" and she leads him through rusty clover to the bearded bluegrass that is now awash in white butterflies. The horses are gone and there is not one breath of wind.

He loses the girl and as he turns in the field the butterflies dive into his hair and fly for his eyes. At the same time he hears a plaintive wail. He stands as still as he can,

there, at the mound upon which the horses grazed. A tremble alights him and he cannot move.

He wakes in his bed, clinging to an image of his own daughter chasing him with her arms outstretched. And as he opens his eyes to the new day that gleams through his windows he feels her there. He smells her. He gets up and tries to telephone her, just to see if she is okay. But when he does the line is busy. He eats a salami sandwich and does his laundry before he thinks about trying her again.

By then it is dinnertime out west and he does not want to interrupt her and her mother as they share the pot roast he imagines Regina prepared. He knows that when she is on school vacation she tries to help out. He imagines his daughter and Myra sitting side-by-side, hands clasped, dishes steaming in the strainer.

7.

Liturgy of the Hour

*And I: "If there's no new law that denies
 You memory or practice of the songs
 Of love that used to quiet all my longings,
 Then may it please you with those songs to solace
 My soul somewhat; for – having journeyed here
 Together with my body – it is weary."*

From *Purgatory, The Second Book of the
 Divine Comedy* as Dante considers the
 Shore of Ante-Purgatory.

So, the routine that we have established has borne some success. A few weeks ago we were sitting in our usual arrangement around the monument in the plaza. We have been doing certain exercises to build up our spirits, many which have been honed from Ant's recent re-reading of Dante. He found the Chiardi translation but started

pulling the bookshelves apart to find the Mandlebaum. Of course you know that he was unsuccessful. But how that man can curse! If he knew that the writer had it we have to wonder. Would he be disappointed? Or inspired? With him it is hard to say.

We decided to do the exercises here because the square is large and close to the bay. It is a place that Ant goes. It is a place of longing for him, of promises unfulfilled. We want him and the aura of his that draws us is a strong one. It is as though his core is full of liquid, mercury perhaps, that glows and shines. It has its effect on human eyes. And it has an effect on us. When we see him, Jimi and Meier (myself to a lesser degree) become ecstatic. We run all around him and even follow him to his car where he sometimes sits. When we are present the cigarette smoke of his dances strangely, feeling our energy. It is a breeze that stirs.

Often times, more in the evening around dusk – our favorite time – he catches a glimpse of Jimi or Meier. He has seen Jimi before, blown up to fit his expectation of a human boy, but he can see him even at other times. At dusk he sees them all, all of them but me. I have been with him too long and because I am a muse I am not meant to be seen. I do not try to be seen. None of the other people I've followed have seen me. They feel me there instead, which I think is better. In any event, we have all lost our way and are trying to learn a bit from Ant, but it is slow going. We know little things, of course. That Ant loves to eat chilidogs loaded with onions, which do no good for his stomach we have found.

Today we did an exercise to build our spirits, as I've said, to make ourselves luminous, and maybe, when given the opportunity to pop into a material being, a baby

still bubbling in the womb, we will take it. Until then we practice songs that make us happy, and sing the songs that Ant is studying. The whole thing is called the Liturgy of the Hours. We learned about it because that is what the spirits do in Dante's Comedy, just outside of Purgatory. They practice chanting the Psalms. But it wasn't an invention of Dante's of course. It was the practice of many monks, most famously the Gregorian monks of the thirteenth century. After hearing Ant's music CD, one filled with chanting, we decided practice it, to do just what those monks did.

So we sit in the square and when the bells at the many great churches of Providence toll we start singing. We have sung one hundred and fifty psalms, five times per day, over the course of seven days. It has been quite a project. Sometimes we get some results. During rush hours as the busses pump through the square, with their pluming gray fumes, people look our way. But tonight was different.

Tonight we had the premonition of good results because it was a Saturday. All of the stars seemed aligned. There was a thunderstorm brewing, and the drop in barometric pressure always makes people more sensitive to us. We knew that Ant would be coming. The red rolling cooler was set up and full. It stood by his back door as though it were impatient to get on with things. He was reading when we took a break and went to him. This is something that we do often, check on Ant by walking up the road to his apartment on Benefit Street. There we like to make ourselves small, and perch.

Earlier today we perched on our man's khaki corduroy pants, on the little armrests of his chair. We kicked up a racket, making ourselves tinier still, diving into the fibers of the smelly shag, amused when we found a cucumber seed, a great dog hair.

We whispered in his ear, "Listen to us...Listen. We will sing. Sing! Let us sing. You just listen." Ant put his finger in his ear and twisted it. Then he went off for a cotton swab!

We rushed back to our monument, the World War I monument created by an artist named Jennewein for the city of Providence, and we practiced. Ant arrived an hour later, rolling his cooler, which looked so much like the little red fire truck that sits in his memory, filed around the age of six, before his mother became an addict.

Usually Ant arrives with this sad cooler and sits on a bench. But not today. Today Ant passed the bench and rolled over to us and with a great, weary sigh, plopped down in the middle of our little group.

Well, we were hoping for something like this; we were surprised but not distracted and after a bit of squabble decided to sing him a psalm from Vulgate, called '*Delecatasti me.*' There is no doubt that it is one of our best. As you may have guessed, it is performed in Latin and just to set the record straight, know that this language did not come naturally to us. We learned it with much patience and difficulty.

Nonetheless, we were fired to begin because he came to us. It gets tiring to hunker after someone all the time, to always roost or loom, in that ghastly way that is so necessary to us. We were hoping that he would hear us, see us, the whole performance. And when he moved to the monument this small encouragement gave us a real thrill.

So there he sat, waiting it seemed, when Meier popped up to standing.

She decided, that we would have a better chance of all being seen by Ant, all at once, if we were to, "Marry the song to the experience of dance." That was how she put it.

To which I countered, "We may be jeopardizing the whole thing, if our voices are weak for the shuffling. Then he won't hear us even, possibly."

She told me then, "Be the artist, possess vision! It is all that we have. Follow or risk losing your chance." Then, her nose in the air, petulant as a child, 'Art is either plagiarism or revolution.'"

I thought, enough with the Gauguin quotes, and made myself content to sit.

We heard the crackle of plastic wrap and I noted, with some annoyance, that Ant was tearing into the beef jerky. This is not at all good for his material self, we have discussed it and on that one point we all agree. But we are in no position to judge.

Jimi didn't seem particularly bothered. He was pulling himself up. He glared at me with the "I'm with Meier" stare. What could I do? I stood up. Quickly we decided on letting me start. The chanting is antiphonic – done in rounds – and my voice was the sweetest. I sang the first line, but would not dance. Meier was next, joining my song and I scoffed. She was jumping into the air in great leaps while she pointed her toes and kicked out as though she was swimming. Her legs were quite straight. She had good form. Jimi joined, adding a deeper melody to the mix and he jumped too, with his feet flexed, toes pointing out like a tin soldier. As he jumped he spun himself around, in circles.

I let my voice boom and tried to shuffle back and forth in the motion of dance, watching Jimi's feet. They were together and flexed, as I've said, but when he twirled and jumped his feet reminded me of great oak seeds falling from a tree, or the propeller blades on a helicopter.

Our voices grew in that familiar chorus and this psalm of thanksgiving had the spirit of just that. It was a bit eerie though, and weak with hopping. Jimi and Meier started to really raise the volume, something I'd encouraged from the first, and then they started to incorporate some arm movements.

Jimi was letting his arms give force to his turns, still singing, while his feet jutted with heels drawn together.

Meier took her arms and put them straight up in the air like a diver, in front of her mouth at first, which muffled our song. Then she moved them to the side of her face and when all of their movements were in line the two started to move frenetically.

Their attempt to dance was in no way artistic. They were flailing!

Be reminded that the psalms are sung in Latin. We learned it with some struggle. Don't be surprised. It did not come 'easily' to us or 'magically.' Meier and I had to learn it from Jimi, who is a vile tutor.

Nonetheless, I continued, adding a sad beauty to the song and was glad for the melody my timbre provided.

When it ended Meier and Jimi still danced and hummed a chorus. But I could see the disappointment in their faces. Soon, I knew, they would grow frustrated, lose their good humor, and scatter into the approaching night.

I let out one last note and held it.

Ant smiled, as though in response. And with an explosion, lively and loud, he clapped for us! What happened then was this: Meier and Jimi rose up, up, up, with every clap. They started to rise. Those two helped the process along. They began their swimming, this time with success.

They didn't float. It was jerky instead. With each clap and the fine trill of his laughter, they rose. And so they went, rising about a foot with each thunderous meeting of Ant's palms, with every happy tear that dropped from his eyes. Finally, they were at the highest point of the monument, twirling and kicking, flipping their arms around, howling and yelling to me, "Look! Look!"

I stood closer to Ant and placed my too-pallid hand on his shoulder and felt the joy for life that glowed, a hot red coil within him. It is our belief that he heard it all.

The energy of the storm was gathering then, making the air thick and cool and I saw Ant's nostrils flare to welcome summer in its deepest blush.

He stopped clapping with this distraction and Meier and Jimi fell like leaves. They tumbled, all in good time. When they met the ground they did so laughing and rolling, smiling from ear to ear, on cement that had grown supple to receive them, supple for the storm.

We circled Ant in gratitude. The first raindrops pelted and splashed as we held hands around him, all a little more luminous and greatly astonished.

And so it went, our first Liturgy of the Hour.

8.

Of Poltergeists and Caffeine Fits

My little group “missed the boat” spiritually and we must endure it. We are not in the flesh and within our current realm have received not the slightest inkling that the situation is less than permanent. We are in the dark in regard to these issues and so, we have been following the notion of Ant Malo, regarding the collective responsibility to the flesh, for some thirty years. It seems like a long stay but time here does not function well. Sometimes an afternoon can drag on for what would seem mortal years, and then other times twenty years can slip by while we are adrift, unaware of our thoughts, alone and without ambition to find others. That is how it has gone.

And so, we are waiting, hovering, as those ten men and ladies in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. We are somewhere, staving off our own plague, which is an utter void that looms, presenting us with not a few dangers. Boccaccio sent his ten characters into the

mountains of Tuscany to wait out the scourge that raged in Florence. In the year 1348 it killed 100,000 people in five months. If only it were so easy for us. Just waiting for death would fill us with hope!

Instead, we gather around Ant, who is kind but gray, and it is with more desperation than sadness that we realized that his time grows short.

How do we gather information, you might be wondering. You know that we listen to memories and string them together like so many pearls. Gleaning information this way is uncertain and difficult. It does not happen that way nearly often enough.

It is sad to say that one of your experts on us, a man named Joe Nicholls, has an eye for some of the details. He is right about how and where we *cannot* gather information. For instance, when he says that we are not fond of strobes or flashing lights, or loud noises of any kind, he is right. They travel through us and make us quake, threatening our papery presence even in this sphere. So in order to gather information, or find our courage we cannot go to discothèques. And this is a pity because we do love to dance. It is actually a matter of grave disappointment to us, if you will allow me the pun. (Meier and the writer have scratched almost all of my awful puns, but here I insisted on just this one. I hope that it will not distract you.)

Again, we cannot be entertained as you can, at movie theatres, any form of strobe or flash or fluorescent lighting is harsh, if not excruciating to us. On the other hand, we love fire. Bonfires, burning piles of leaves, fireplace blazes, festivals of small twinkling lights, fireflies. *They set our toes to tapping with their fierce and smoky crackling.*

We can hear the thoughts of some living, and of some on our own side. As you know we can always listen to people reading, and we can easily follow what is going on in the minds of certain authors, which is wonder and curse to us. It is a wonder to watch the writer at work, and curse to become, as so many of us do, embroiled in the writer's process.

If you are a writer, or even if not, this may give you a fright. But whatever your vocation if you are true, you will reflect. You will think and then most of you will recognize our, at least occasional, presence. You might think of me as the "muse," "inspiration," "*Leanan Sidhe* (lan-awn shee)" of Irish fame, but in so much as these terms act as euphemism, the creative one must herself determine. Suffice it to say that we are around more often than you think.

As you know, Meier's visitation to our writer's landlord gave rise to the first long story in this volume. And through our relationship to the writer.

It was on a particularly sunny day that the writer came upon another one of us, a new addition to the group. Through a circumstance that we need unravel this chance attachment came to mean a sad end, an end to our great friendship with our man of flesh. It was in fact no fault of the writer, but it was something that, in these pages, must be reconciled.

This writer's name is Tracy Boothman Duyck, although we know that she plans to write under the name Tracy Accinno Boothman (pretentious), dropping her husband's surname and (perhaps in homage) substituting her mother's maiden name for her middle. On this particular day she was writing a story about a character based upon her father's

uncle. He had returned deaf from World War II. After getting four pages into the work she realized that it was without song. And so she did what her contemporaries do, upon such realization. She took to the Internet, where, beneath a cloudless dome, she imagined *she* had found her subject.

It was a weekend day, a day like all the others, and her husband had taken the little boy and girl out to the park so that she could write.

Though by no means brilliant, she is a perceptive woman, with a family predilection for chasing shadows and sharp manic fits that she tempers with doses of caffeine and chocolate. Such was her condition on this particular day. On this particular day she saw the still of the girl. Her true name was something we will not share.

She was sitting at the computer and had written about nine pages that she was reading aloud. There was the background music of water, splashing and brown as it traveled through a hose into the laundry room sink.

Just as the spin cycle began its violent rotation Jimi pronounced it.

- She is going to delete the work in its entirety.
- Delete it? No, that would be too wasteful.

There and then, as if to prove Jimi's point, she surrendered the draft to eternity.

Tracy went into the long string of expletives that often follows the purging of material from her awareness and then to the bedroom for load two. She headed back and put the whites, little pairs of ruffled panties that her mother bought on Federal Hill for the girl, faded Pokemon's, BVDs, heaps and heaps of towels in every size. She added (from my estimation) too much bleach, some stain remover called Oxi Clean, and entirely

forgot the detergent. Then, with more than a little exaggerated toil she flung the wets into the dryer, and we heard it proceed to tumble, tumble, tumble.

She returned to the computer, and though we cannot look at the screen, directly, for the light is too intense, we saw what was happening and we heard too the account of the child, as Tracy read it off what she later calls “the CNN website.”

Tracy saw her on the screen and immediately named her “Elizabeth.” Elizabeth’s face must have been cold and flat, trapped behind the monitor. Coupled with some news that we will not divulge, Tracy sat before her picture enthralled. We saw it in the way she leaned her face in closer. The way she clicked from story to story, and by the sheets that poured out of her printer like tears. We saw it in the way the goose bumps puckered her flesh. It is something that I have seen in poets and writers before. It was clear enough. With the bard’s maiden attachment, the first reaction, always, panic.

She grew clammy about the hands and there was a delicate-sharp pain in her chest. Having never known the marriage of artist and subject, when filtered through us – as it so often is – she took such quaking to indicate she had indulged too heartily in her addiction to the Columbian bean. And so she used the energy to pull laundry from the dryer and erect tall monuments of tiny shirts and pants, dresses in every shade of pink. This did no good. She threw the second load into the dryer to tumble. Then she set off to get a drink of water.

But to no avail. When she sat at her desk again she realized with some certainty, that she had been snared.

If you asked the writer why the room felt coldly charged, cavernous with turmoil upon her return, why silence there found weight and form (the dryer had stopped somehow) she would place blame upon the nature of her contemplation. Or she would explain that caffeine is an alkaloid, which means that it can be produced by dissolving the active ingredient of it in acid, and then neutralized with ammonia. She knows that in 1803 Friedrich Sertuerner of Paderborn, Germany discovered this process by pouring opium in such a mix, resulting in the invention of *principium somniferum*: morphine. Knowing this, she places caffeine in the alkaloid family, where it is gentle sibling to atropine, cocaine, and quinine. She reasons that by relation the elixir is no substance to be abused.

But, vices aside, if she had *looked* she would have observed with some assurance that she had not found a subject, but that the subject had found her. The one who waited for her there, in the laundry nook, and on the other side of that too, too flat screen, had a current not often noted among us three.

When Tracy returned we circled around her thrice, holding each other to protect ourselves from the monitor's glare. Even without this though, the incantation would have been complete.

Her Elizabeth was one with purpose. And here is our point: Tracy no more wrote the story that appeared upon her screen than a stenographer writes testimonies at court. Something else transpired. And how that concerns us is the next matter that I must explain, but first: read it.

9.

Prince Lovely and the Little Bigs

Elizabeth and Gina had not been friends. Later, they were described that way, but it hadn't been true. They knew each other, like girls in a school do, but that's a long stretch from friends, at least to thirteen-year-old girls. Elizabeth and Gina – if you ever asked Gina – were different in lots of ways. Elizabeth was a little taller and did better in school. She lived with her mother and her father along the back of the Sleepy Meadow Apartment Complex. Gina's mother called Elizabeth's father "the yeller in D." Elizabeth had a little brother named Dryfus, who caused trouble, always talking back.

At school Elizabeth had a lot of friends, and she twirled in the halls, and laughed too loud. She also scowled in a goofy way at anyone who told her to shush, as teachers did. She was charming – at least some people seemed charmed by her.

Gina knew her from the time she first moved into building 'C' with her mother. They had come from the east to a place with a giant, wide sky that seemed to loom over everything. Despite the sky the clouds hung low, and Gina scared of them. It felt like they were there watching, powerful like God, always knowing what you were doing.

They brought so much rain, dumped it in sheets, starting in fall, and continuing until spring. It came out of nowhere, and that first season Gina's mother made her wear a raincoat with a ladybug on it, of all the crazy things, even though she'd turned ten.

But the summer before the rains came, the two girls had played, and even had a sleepover. They'd sat in Elizabeth's room playing Ouija board. They asked the board or Allah, whoever made the ship sail across the board, who'd have the best boyfriend, who'd have more kids, who would die first.

The girls played in hushes and shrieks, until that yeller came in and threatened to separate them. It was a warm night and he had to get up later for work. So they never closed the board, like you should, to keep spirits from staying in the living zone.

Now, three years later, at the bus stop Gina leaned against the telephone pole, imagining what it was like to be Elizabeth. She had boys visit her at home all the time. Gina liked to look at Elizabeth in the morning, noticing everything. Elizabeth had an expensive backpack with a reflective strip. She always had on some jewelry that Gina had seen, a silver drop necklace that hung on a delicate, leather strap. Gina noticed that and liked it so much that she looked for one at Target. The Target version was too shiny, tinny even, so Gina went without, instead of buying something that looked like a Barbie doll cast off.

Elizabeth wore blue nail polish, a porcelain color that went with her denim jacket. And she wore glitter blush across her cheekbones. Gina wished that she could have some of the same things. But other things Elizabeth wore were too girlish. She chose pastels that looked like baby clothes, and by reminding herself of this Gina felt better about what she wore, what she had and what she didn't have.

Boys liked Elizabeth, but they weren't the only ones. She even had a grown man, a man called Mr. Lovely, pull up and talk her into his truck some mornings. Leaning against the telephone pole Gina saw him even as he got out his back door – because his house was across from the stop – across the country road, but set back, on an acre. Mr. Lovely was handsome with dark hair and an auburn beard. His shoulders were wide. He wore Levi jeans and work boots. The jeans were faded at the seat, and he wore a big rawhide belt with a little case with a snap on it, also brown leather. Gina imagined it held a hunting knife like the one her friend Anita's parents used when they went for elk. He wore a baseball cap that was so dirty you couldn't tell what the lettering said. She liked that, because her dad always said that a man who wore a cap with fingerprints along the visor was the only kind worth his salt. She wasn't sure what that meant, but Mr. Lovely's cap looked like her father's. At least, the way she remembered her father's.

Mr. Lovely used to pull up in his white rig, and say something to Elizabeth like, "Hey Fly girl, what are you doing kicking' it here, on a day like this? You don't belong in a day like this, surely don't."

Gina watched Elizabeth flip her hair and roll her eyes like he'd said something dumb. But then she headed for the truck. The two talked – Gina snuck peeks while

pretending to find something in her notebook – as the rain fell in big, rhythmic, fat drops. Soon the truck windows were steamed so he and Elizabeth looked like they were in a shower together. Gina always figured they were talking about her, so she looked down at her rubber boots. Her feet were cold as she rubbed them together slowly at first, then more quickly, until they made long, obscene squeaks.

Sometimes Mr. Lovely looked up, with sleepy eyes, and rolling down his window flicked his tongue at Gina fast, perversely she thought, or maybe it was more like a snake flick. She couldn't be sure. It made her heart jump and something swell lower in her, like she'd seen something she shouldn't, something thrilling, because Mr. Lovely was Elizabeth's. She averted her eyes, and tried to keep her face blank. She wanted to look like she wasn't feeling anything.

When Elizabeth got out of the truck, before the bus came, she had little glowing lipsticks, a fistful, in purple, and black and blue. Or expensive candy bars. When she ate them, which she did immediately, she looked at Gina, taking a hard little nip. Then she turned her shoulder, putting her stuff in the red mouth of her backpack. Gina noticed how pretty the reflective strip was, glowing through all the wet.

At the bus stop it was uncomfortable because they never talked. They stood there, ignoring each other, as they waited for the bus to make a hot stop, steam rising all around it. The town was tight, Gina's mother said, so it wasn't a yellow bus. It was secondhand and bright blue. While she waited, Gina liked to lean, staring at the fringe of Hemlock trees above. The needles swayed and flicked at her like eyelashes, and when it rained the

night before she could hear the gentle hush of branches as drops fell from mighty arms. They fell in pounding drips on and around her, when Elizabeth got there first. Whoever got there first was always a little safer, because the rain wouldn't bother you so much when you stood against the pole. There was a big transformer at the top that provided shelter from the rain.

Gina was usually first to arrive and so she got the pole. She thought of it as a safe zone as she stared at the empty street, her apartment complex, and the wooded drive. It felt substantial against her back and she could see the friendly lights of the bus, even from far off. The girl who didn't get there early stood back, closer to the woods. It was always wetter there, even after the rain stopped, because the trees were saturated and when the wind whipped they spit a misty spray.

Every morning from seven twenty-five until seven-forty, the two waited. Gina was not sure exactly when they stopped talking altogether, but she knew it happened because she and her friend Anita made fun of Elizabeth at practice. Anita rolled her eyes at the way Elizabeth threw the baton, up and up, determined to catch it, even though sometimes the silver baton with the white rubber tips bounced off Elizabeth's head.

But Elizabeth didn't seem to care. She hopped after it, grabbing eagerly, then did her twirl like it didn't matter. Gina and Anita thought that was ditzy, just gay. How do you do that *all* afternoon, instead of taking a break to smoke on the log behind the practice field? That was what Gina liked to do, smoke cigarettes or even pot, if her mother was going to be gone all evening, in the gathering dusk. She and Anita did that when Anita could get the pot. She took little bits from the stash her father kept in his

underwear drawer. Gina thought that was thrilling, that Anita's dad smoked pot. Her own mother had told her once, "If I find out you have done drugs, any drug at all, I will get the Luger and take you out. I brought you in, I can take you out."

This Gina believed completely because her mother had a German Luger, a slim, nickel-colored gun that her father had given her when they moved. Her mother had certain expectations and if she didn't get her way she had quite a temper.

Elizabeth did not enjoy sitting out, smoking. It seemed she enjoyed intense practice. And one day, as the squad of ten practiced, Anita clicked her tongue at Elizabeth, saying, "Some people are so dense."

Everybody stopped marching; some even laughed.

Gina thought that Elizabeth would ignore the comment, but instead she said, "That's how you get better, like you might know something about it, Home girl."

Gina had been a little shocked by that, because it was true that Anita barely learned her moves. Regardless, people usually didn't say things back to Anita. Maybe because she had pulled a chunk of hair out of the scalp of an eighth grader the year before.

For a moment it was quiet, while the girls stared hard at something else. Then, out came a couple of muffled snickers.

Elizabeth rocked back on her heels, and said, "Oh, and Bob Driscoll thinks I throw just fine."

Gina cringed; Bobby Driscoll had been Anita's boyfriend the week before. He'd even bought Anita a delicate gold bracelet, thin as a thread, for her birthday, but then

dumped her without explanation at the fall mixer. He never even said "Hi," to Anita or Gina after that. He'd also started meeting Elizabeth by the lockers near the gym.

The exchange made Gina angry because she was with Anita when she saw Bobby Driscoll and Elizabeth stroll down the hall, days before. Gina waited, sure that someone would say something to Elizabeth, but nobody did.

It occurred suddenly to Gina that Elizabeth was cruel. That Elizabeth needed a dose of her own medicine.

So Gina exclaimed, "So I guess that you can be with him, and Mr. Lovely, too. Oh, that's right, Mr. Lovely tried to rape you, right? Is that what you're going to say about Bobby? And by the way, you are just so irresistible, with your butterfly belt buckle!"

Everyone had either laughed or gasped.

Later, describing the scene to some friends in home economics, Gina said Elizabeth had opened her eyes wide, dramatically, like she'd been hit, then strode down the hall. When a couple of girls from the team followed, she shoved them away with wide arms and walked faster, like her legs had control of her whole body. Like her brains were there, in her legs.

After that Elizabeth didn't talk to Anita and Gina at all. She had her own friends from the team, and Bobby Driscoll, and Mr. Lovely. Aside from being cute, Mr. Lovely owned the stadium snack bar at the high school where they practiced. So after he worked at the mill, on game days and practice days, he sold chocolate and cookies, Nutty Buddies, and snow cones. He even had nachos with a hot, thick cheese. So Elizabeth

saw him, sometimes in the morning at the stop, and in the afternoon, then she had Bobby when she was in school.

And anyway, what Gina had said was practically true: Months before, in September, Elizabeth accused Mr. Lovely of trying to rape her. Nobody had believed her. Not the teachers, or her parents. It was a little strange, Gina thought, considering the way that Elizabeth sat in Mr. Lovely's truck, even after all of that happened. Elizabeth had even been grounded for accusing him, Gina thought. She heard Elizabeth fighting with her mother about it on her way to the apartment building from their car, and then later, from the lawn of building 'C,' Gina watched Elizabeth drop a bag of groceries on the ground and race in through the door of her building. Gina's mother would never allow that kind of behavior, and it wasn't Gina's style.

Gina was proud that her mother never yelled, that their little family knew how to be civilized. Gina hadn't fought with her mother since they first moved west. She had wanted to fly home to see her dad – he couldn't get out to her because he worked long hours on a loading dock – but her mother hadn't allowed it. She told her to wait until he came to her. He would make time if he cared. He hadn't yet, which proved her mother right in a sense, and that made it not worth arguing about. Elizabeth seemed to fight with her parents a lot. And Gina was aware that Elizabeth viewed adults with the judgment usually reserved for those already grown. She was a know-it-all.

What happened with Mr. Lovely was one example. When he first came into town in the fall the girls had seen him come across the street to say "hi," before work.

He had seen their silver batons with the white rubber tips and said, "I'm Mr. Lovely, and you two must be the little bigs."

Gina hadn't known what to say.

But Elizabeth put her hand on her hip and said, "And little bigs are..?"

Mr. Lovely explained that he knew they must be Memorial Middle School majorettes. He gestured at their baton cases, explaining that he'd read about them in the local paper.

The two girls looked at him questioningly, and he explained, "Major means big, and 'e-t-t-e' means little. Little bigs."

Elizabeth replied, "Wouldn't that be big littles then?"

Gina's heart beat faster. She didn't think she could ever question a grown man, especially not one who talked like that.

A month later some of Elizabeth's friends from the team gossiped with Gina about what went on between her and Mr. Lovely in the snack bar, after the front cover had been rolled down, but you couldn't really molest the willing, could you?

Gina tried not to be jealous of Elizabeth, of the attention she got, of her looks and clothes, but it didn't seem fair. Gina had dark hair, and a smart-girl look. She was a girl that was more than sugar and a rosy, pie-face with nothing but meanness underneath it. She liked animals and wanted to be a horse trainer. She stuck up for kids, even Brenda Sound, who hadn't made the majorettes squad. Their coach, Mrs. Dicker, said that it was

because she wasn't graceful, but Gina knew that was another way to say Brenda was fat. So Gina had encouraged Brenda to order team uniforms.

But boys didn't care if you were kind. None of them paid her any attention. Except a few whom she didn't like – that was the luck – and except for her mother's boyfriend. Her mother had promised, when she got divorced, that she was done with men, but it hadn't been true. There were always a few she met out dancing, and brought home. Usually they didn't get to stay over. She asked Gina if Edgar could start sleeping over before the first time, and Gina could tell by the look on her mother's face that there was only one right answer. Now her mother let Edgar sleep over whenever he wanted, and Gina saw him in the kitchen when she was walking from the shower to her room. He craned his neck from behind the cracked door, and the first time he looked at her the drips of water rolling down her back felt like cold fingers.

Lately, Gina wore a robe, even over her nightgown, because he was up and around more and more, even though he worked nights as a guard at Wal-Mart. He looked at her like she was a place, not a person, but some island beach, where bananas and coconuts hung loosely from trees. Where you could eat all day.

Christmas vacation stretched out in front of Gina like a long hike. Her mother was working and Anita was away with her family. Gina stayed home, did homework, and then tried on and washed her mini-skirt, and reread the Christmas cards her father sent. It was fun to watch television upside down. The blood rushed to her head.

On the nights Edgar came, she went into her room, and pulled bottles of nail polish out of her stocking. She painted on a blue that gave her skin a ghoulish tone, and a white that made her ashy. The polish remover felt cold on her nails, and left little swirls of color around her cuticles. She looked at the layers of color as she flipped through her mother's *Vogue*, and watched cartoons on cable.

Gina's mother worked on Sundays. So the day before school started back Gina cleaned and made her mother's favorite, Gina Casserole. She was ready for school, she had plucked her eyebrows and put on polish and topcoat – she decided on a shade called sand – and she liked the way it sparkled as she put the dishes into soapy water. The bubbles were iridescent, and danced in the light from over the sink.

Everything was done. Gina had washed and ironed. Her mother was pleased because the counters were cleared of coupons; the rooms smelled of lemon. The two sat back on the nubby couch and Gina got her mother a cold beer and put in the movie she'd rented earlier from the convenience store down the road.

It had been a while since they'd been alone without Edgar, with their clothes waiting fragrantly in their bureau drawers. The television flashed, stabbing the dark parlor. A tiredness like growing pains spread through Gina, and she was happy. Before all of the coming attractions roared by, she curled across her mother's lap, and was warm and sleeping.

The next day Gina helped her mother get ready for work, cleaned the coffeepot and put out the recycling. The apartment was quiet when she was alone there, and she

was ready for school early. Gina was tired of being alone in her house and since she knew the morning convenience store clerk, she walked down there and bought two six packs and returned her video. Then she carried the beer back to the apartment. This would surprise her mother when she got home from work. She locked the door on her way out, noticing that the extra tasks had made her late. She walked first, then ran in little spurts, craning her neck toward the patch of gravel where the bus always pulled up. She noticed, with alarm, that Elizabeth wasn't there. Had the bus already come and gone? Tears stung Gina's eyes thinking about how angry this would make her mother.

As she got closer she could see that she'd been mistaken, she hadn't. Elizabeth was not leaning against the pole; she was down at the mouth of the woods, talking with someone. Their heads were close together and tilted. The light from the bus headlights caught her eyes before she could make him out, but as Elizabeth ran to the bus steps, the figure registered as Bobby Driscoll.

As the bus pulled out Gina looked toward Mr. Lovely's. His truck was under the carport, and he was loading something. Gina looked at Elizabeth, who was sitting in the seat directly across from hers, to see if she was looking, too. But Elizabeth's eyes were fixed on the trees. All of this was scary because if Mr. Lovely saw he would be angry, maybe even jealous. Maybe that was what girls did, got other people who cared about them jealous. When Gina looked over at Mr. Lovely's she noticed, with some relief, his truck was gone.

Gina watched Elizabeth who was quiet and spacey, in social studies, while they learned about the civil war. She was still also in math, and Gina didn't get a chance to

talk to her about Bobby. Class was bored because of that, and because Anita had still not returned from her trip.

The next morning, Gina overslept. She ran all the way to the stop and then leaned against the pole huffing, while she looked for Elizabeth. Gina suspected that she was in the bushes again, with Bobby. The two had been walking around school holding hands the day before, and Gina had been planning to somehow let Elizabeth know that this would upset Anita.

She tried to think of what to say about it to Elizabeth – she could offer some sort of truce – as she pulled her hood up. The rain was colder than usual and today there was a frozen fog over the road that smoked like dry ice at a concert. When it was cold like this, the sky cast a shadow over everything as though it were night. The horizon seemed to gape and huddle down over Gina. Elizabeth did not make the bus that day.

Gina saw Anita before first bell and the two ran to each other kissing and hugging. It was nice to be in school without Elizabeth. Gina didn't have to worry because Anita wouldn't see Elizabeth with Bobby, who they saw in study hall. The girls figured that she was just absent, until the study monitor asked if anyone had seen Elizabeth before class or school. No one had. Even Elizabeth's mother hadn't seen her.

By the second day the whole team knew that Elizabeth wasn't skipping. Some started to talk, because they thought that maybe Anita had beaten Elizabeth up. But Anita's mother had driven Anita to school that Monday and after questioning her briefly

the police let her go. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Elizabeth wasn't skipping. If you skipped you couldn't go to practice, and they had a competition coming up. Elizabeth didn't miss practice, or even the county art classes that they had taken when they were ten. Elizabeth knew how to throw herself into activities.

For the first three days after Elizabeth disappeared Gina rode with her mother to school— her mother got permission from her boss to go in late. The car was hushed and neither of them speculated when they went by Mr. Lovely's house. About the police cruiser parked out front. They were relieved, because the police were questioning everyone.

They had even called Gina's mother at work with a few questions. All that Gina could think of was that Elizabeth had last been seen waving goodbye to Dryfus on her way to school. How her parents had already left for work. He was only eight and her heart swelled for him. She wondered what the family had told him; she wondered what he was thinking.

On the first Friday after the disappearance the news reported that Elizabeth had been classified as officially missing for three days. The whole town seemed to hold its breath, sitting in front of TV sets tuned into KF 9, the local news station. The cameras, and the vans with the satellite disks started at the apartment complex, and then migrated to school.

The school was strangely quiet. Everybody just followed their routines, even the girls at practice. Elizabeth had a big solo march in the middle, and Anita, her stand-in,

was trying to learn the moves. She chased after the baton when she missed it. A couple of the girls whispered, but hadn't said it aloud – she looked like Elizabeth when she did that.

The police and volunteers started the search, up through the mountains, to the campsite at the west end of town along 99, back through fields, looking for traces of fiber, the raincoat that Elizabeth's mother described, the hat she wore when she left for school on Tuesday morning. They asked about Elizabeth, showing her picture in gas stations and stores up to the state's northern border.

Gina and the team didn't join the search. They were not allowed. Gina imagined walking through tall yellow grass, pushing it aside as though she were wading through water. She'd be afraid to step forward, of what she might feel under her feet.

They didn't talk much about it; they just practiced their routine. They agreed to be perfect; they agreed to win. The mothers and daughters would have a bake sale and the money would go toward the search. They would sell the brownies and the Neiman Marcus cookies – Anita's mother got the recipe off the Internet – and all the rest, including the Rice Crispy treats that were Elizabeth's favorite. To those they added green dye, to represent school spirit.

Hearing the buzz of the reporters' phones, smelling their coffee, was nice for Gina on the first day that she returned to the stop after Elizabeth disappeared. Her mother told her not to talk to them, to wait for the bus and get on it without looking anywhere but at Carla, the driver. Gina's mother said reporters were liars.

Gina didn't talk to them, not even to say "hi," but she did look across the road, through the trees, over to Mr. Lovely's. Sometimes she could sense things without seeing or knowing for sure. Like when her parents were married, and she woke up in the morning. She knew when they'd been fighting, even if the house was silent. And now, when she woke up, she knew if Edgar was there; she felt it. And sometimes when she woke up in the apartment, feeling the expanse of the space that she occupied by herself, she shivered.

Mr. Lovely worked at the mill during the day, then at the snack bar at the field where they practiced for majorettes. He lived alone. So when his car wasn't there she assumed that he had gone to work for the day. When Gina looked at his house she got the feeling that Elizabeth was there, looking out at her, but she knew without question that the house was empty. These conflicting feelings made her heart beat fast, so she hopped up and down, first on her left foot, then her right. She didn't look, wouldn't look over there.

The next day alone at the stop, the rain slapped her legs – she was wearing her new skirt – and battered the arms of her raincoat. Mr. Lovely's truck was not in the carport and for a moment Gina imagined that he had taken Elizabeth to some romantic spot, because who would understand that the two were in love, really, like people can be? He was around twenty-five; his whiskers were all separate, and looked hard, and that was the clue that helped Gina guess his age. He was old, but they could still be in love.

As she imagined their getaway, the school bus pulled up. Mr. Lovely's truck approached too, behind it. He was going in the direction of his house, instead of the way he usually went at this time, toward the mill in town. It rolled up just as the bus stopped. She noticed that the truck rattled, as she boarded the bus. It had never made that sound when he visited before. It sounded like something had been knocked loose and was about to fall off.

Gina bounded down the bus aisle, looking from the safe, high distance into the truck; it had pulled up, parallel to the bus. It inched forward slowly. Mr. Lovely craned his neck, and pulled on his beard. It seemed like he was trying to catch her attention, so she stood by the open window. The rain was streaming down and the small window allowed her a glimpse of something – someone – lying across Mr. Lovely's lap. She could just make out a denim-clad leg, and a bare arm, both looked solid but soaking wet, like the marble of a statue. Gina blinked hard, drew in her breath and dropped to her seat. The bus groaned forward, leaving Mr. Lovely's truck behind. As it did, a sudden heat released from between Gina's legs. It formed a puddle on the floor. She sat there thankful that the windows were open, that the bus was splashed with raindrops and would fill with kids in sodden clothes.

She sat there with the window still open, hoping the smell of urine would not be obvious to the Dudley twins, who were sitting in the back, taking turns spitting at the ceiling. She wiggled down, before they reached the third stop and slipped her underwear off, shoving them into her backpack. The last thought she had, before she went to see the nurse, was not of what she'd seen, but that she was thirteen and she'd peed herself.

When she told Nurse Craigal about the truck, the old woman scratched the details on a pad, then gave her a washcloth, and told her that it was a scary time, that it was normal for the imagination to play tricks. Then the nurse did something Gina appreciated. She ran to the Dollar Store down the road, and bought Gina pink panties, while Gina sat, sniffing her skirt. It was wet in the back, but she couldn't smell anything. When Mrs. Craigal returned she smiled, smelled Gina's skirt – it smelled fine they decided – and wrote her a late pass to class.

The next two nights Gina slept on the trundle bed in Anita's room. The two had been practicing their routines for the upcoming performance, and each day Anita was twirling obsessively. Gina thought that was creepy, like Elizabeth had hopped into her rival's body to keep the team competitive. It gave Gina the feeling that Elizabeth was gone for good. She couldn't eat; her throat was tight.

Gina sat with Anita on her bed choosing their make-up for the next day. She told Anita about Mr. Lovely in the truck, how she thought he had someone lying low, across his lap.

Anita looked hysterical, whining, "Are you kidding? He had her *dead*, cold body in the cab? And you didn't *tell* anyone! Is that what you think? It was Elizabeth?"

Anita looked like she did when they watched horror movies. Anita hated it when Gina rented them. They gave her nightmares.

"Come on," Gina said, "she wasn't dead. I could hardly see. Here's what happened: They were running away. He was taking her out toward the coast. For a

month she'll stay there, in a condo he'll rent, and he'll go meet her with flowers and candy. Then he'll go to work, from there, in the morning. So she gets to read magazines and be away from her mother and the yeller. He's Prince Lovely of the Sleepy Meadow Complex. She's his princess. Know what else it means? Bobby Driscoll lost." They smiled unsurely, pulled out the trundle, and turned off the light.

These two nights at Anita's house, Gina dreamed of snow cones and fields of crimson clover, where the sun was so bright that it left spots before her eyes. She walked through meadows, gathering purple flowers, putting them into a red backpack. She almost knew it was a dream, because she was nibbling on the flowers, on their tight buds. She couldn't resist; they tasted so sweet. There were bees humming in harmony, hovering and diving all over the meadow, but they were white, every one. When she passed from the meadow into the woods, the canopy of trees made it dark. There she saw dry places, hollows under rotted tree, places that girls couldn't fit, but she crawled in anyway. She was happy in them for a little time. She crawled out covered in wood splinters and dirt. Gina brushed off as she went to where the clover met the woods. She saw her father there on the boundary; he sprang from the high limb of a Sugar Pine. He called to her, yelling her full name, "Regina Marie." Then he sped off.

She chased him, through brittle and fragrant needles. She hadn't seen him in so long! She was happy as she sprinted behind him. But she lost him in the sunlight. She sat up – awake – still smelling pinesap. She was yearning for her Dad, and tired. And it seemed she had spent whole nights running.

That next day at school Gina longed for her bed. When she got home from school she slumped on the couch, dozing. She went right to her room after dinner, and slept soundly through the night. In the morning she woke with a roaring behind her ears. Her face felt swollen; her tongue was thick. When she went to the kitchen she saw a note confirming that her mother had left early. The phone rang, piercing the silence, and she grabbed it, to stop its shrillness. One of the reporters asked where she thought Elizabeth had gone.

She had imagined what she would say after she saw Mr. Lovely's truck driving by her bus. She was alone at the stop and there was only one way to help him, so that he wouldn't come after her next. She knew what could happen when people got into jealous rages. The two were probably somewhere in front of a fire, making up. She was surprised by how smoothly it came out: "I have known Elizabeth for a long time. We are friends, and I'm sure that she went somewhere, with a boy. She has boyfriends at school. Boys like her, and she probably just took off with one of them."

The line went quiet for a minute and then she heard a sound coming from the reporter's throat, a sound that made her think another question was coming. She hung the receiver up too hard, like it was a live thing that could only be silenced by smashing.

After that, her arms quaked, and her heart fluttered. When she got into the shower it was with the feeling that she had done something bad. She lathered the slick Love's Baby Soft that her father sent her for Christmas, and scrubbed her thin neck. The gel smelled too strong and she wondered if he knew none of her friends used that baby stuff. When she pulled the towel around herself her hands felt like balloons.

At the bus stop the reporters were long gone. They had joined the search – it would be going on all week – and the attention of the town moved, shifting away from its center toward the western border. The searchers looked in different places for Elizabeth now, for clods of dirt, smells and hair, things that didn't run. Her mother took the day off; a lot of them did, to join the fathers who had initiated the first search. Gina's mother had reported at six – she had offered to drive Gina into school the night before – but Gina didn't want to get up so early.

At the stop the pole wasn't occupied, of course, and Gina stood against it waiting for Carla. She was behind on her schoolwork and she worried about catching up. If any grade fell below a 'C' she couldn't perform. When Mr. Lovely's truck came along there wasn't a car on the road. The bus was nowhere in sight, as she waited for the train whistle that usually beat it. The high arms of the trees waved with every gust of wind, and the sky behind them looked too bright.

Mr. Lovely approached, and as she heard the rattle of his truck, her vision fell out of focus. She saw the gravel beneath her platform shoes, and her thin ankles shook slightly. She decided to look only at the ground. But when the rattling stopped, she knew that the truck was idling, between herself and the trees, at the soft shoulder, so she stared hard at him. He smiled, rolling down his window.

"Well, little Miss, friend of Big Little. And then there was one, huh?"

He laughed a purring laugh that sounded so friendly she felt sad when he stopped.

"I guess." She was proud that her voice sounded so calm. He didn't see her tremble, she was sure, so she was doing well.

“You got a good, sunny day, full of big blue to be in, and to smell the air. There’s nothing foul in the air for you to smell, just the joy of being alive.”

Her mind drew a blank. It was hard to figure what he meant, but after a silence she cleared her throat and said, “Yeah, good day when there’s no rain.”

It was easier after that – Gina knew how to be polite – and she tried to be pretty, pulling her Love’s Baby Soft hair around her shoulder, stroking it. The train whistle reassured her; it would only be a second until the bus. She smiled, but didn’t say anything more.

He looked at his watch saying, “You said something good on the TV. I assume it was you. I heard. Something about Elizabeth going with all her boys. Took the heat off. Now you get to smell all your pot smoke and the air. You get to have a sunny day, because they don’t come around this way often, at this time a year, do they, Miss Missy Miss?”

She crossed her arms; he was threatening to tell her mother about what she did on the log. It was crucial for her to give the right answer.

“No, they don’t. I thank you for this day, I mean, for mentioning it, I mean. You’re right. I’m really enjoying the sun just fine.”

Her eyes blurred as she saw the bus chug toward her, and then she waved him off. He smiled at her approvingly, and lifted his hand. It was full of something shiny, little peppermint patties; their wrappers caught the light. When she saw them, something ripped through her like lightning. She hadn’t realized he noticed what she bought at the snack bar, what she liked to eat. She thought about walking toward him, to take the

candy. He wanted her to. It would make him happy; she knew it would. But she turned her back instead, and, flipping her hair, hurried for the bus. She wanted to say “hi” to Carla, but when she looked, she saw that it was a different woman, a woman who was pale. Carla must have joined the searchers.

It wasn't the next day, or the day after that, but gradually the fear left Gina. It turned into excitement. The day of the recital was sunny and with it came the sweetness of sequins. Go-go boots. Costumes with soft, white, feathers. Like the costumes of angels.

The team performed with the high school band, without flaw. Anita was beautiful in green and white; she didn't miss one throw and she stood tall, not slouching or noticing Bobby Driscoll, who was quiet and mean lately.

Bobby waved to Gina urgently, like he wanted to talk, before she went out onto the field. But she turned away – needing to focus, and she wouldn't give him a minute because of the way he ignored Anita.

Everyone in the town had been at the recital; more people than there ever were. Gina went with her mother, who put on her make-up, and bought her a new candy apple lipstick as a surprise. After their act, during the second drum solo, they bought frozen peppermint patties from Mr. Lovely, and a pack of Red Vines. He only charged them for the licorice, looking past them to other customers. Gina noticed that his hands were pressed, palms down, against the orange counter of the stand. She wondered if he felt the vibration of the drums as they boomed. She felt it, too.

They had come to the performance alone – Edgar was putting in overtime – so afterwards, Gina sat with her mother, in their Le Baron. The two of them gnawed the Red Vines down, in the parked car, discussing every step, every twirl. Most of the cars headed out, while the band kids knocked around and the bandleader gathered his things. They tried to make out if he was wearing mascara; Gina had been almost sure of it during the performance. Her mother had not been surprised, explaining to Gina that performers did that sometimes.

The two laughed quietly – it still didn't seem right to laugh too loud – happy with the team's victory and the success of the band. It had been something, the blasting of the brass, the fierce pounding of drums.

The next day when Gina returned to the bus stop it was raining. It was raining like the giant, western clouds were dumping every bit of moisture they had down on her. A chill went through her despite her decision to wear her rain pants and boots.

The figure that walked toward her through the fog was dressed like her, like one of the searchers she had seen on TV. And though she didn't recognize him, she knew who it was. He sauntered, and she leaned against the pole, feeling its reassuring greasy black under her palms. He was coming from the direction opposite his house, just as the train whistle blew. Gina was surprised that the bus hadn't come; it was never that late.

As he came closer she saw that he carried a pan. Maybe an iron skillet that would rust out in the rain, she thought. What a strange thing to carry. He must have been borrowing it from some far-off neighbor. She wanted to call to him through the rain, as

he came closer. It was only another minute until the bus, so there was no reason to be afraid. How could a person be afraid of someone who was walking around like he was about to cook eggs but had lost his kitchen?

Silly. Dumb. And stupid. Goofy even. Gina giggled slightly, smoothing her hair and raising her hand to wave. He picked up the pace slightly, raising the pan to his waist and outward, like he meant to protect her by crushing something on the ground near her, like a mouse or giant rodent. Her blood flowed faster and she stiffened, afraid. When her body responded she sidestepped, and hopped, looking down to see what could be near.

Then he was on her, and she was confused. What was he doing? Didn't he know that the bus was *just* about to come? It came at seven-forty, and it was past that. Hadn't he heard the train? She couldn't get her legs to move or work; even her knees seemed locked and her arms were heavy. She had them drawn up to her chest, protecting her small breasts. She was rooted to the spot.

He heaved the skillet around – the puff of his breath smelling like coffee and peppermint - it hovered for a moment; then it took a murderous dive. Gina saw a shadow, the shadow that was the skillet, rimmed by clouds. Then she heard a hot cracking, and a sound like the pounding of a great drum, reverberating. It sounded just like it did when somebody got brained in the cartoons. Her neck burned; electric-blue lit up her vision, and dark red dots that looked like flower buds flowed inward. They ate their way toward her nose. Then all at once, her head felt open to the light, and buoyant. She thought she heard the rustle of bushes, and the familiar lurching of the blue bus, but she couldn't open her eyes to see.

She didn't fall, but felt lifted instead, like a sleepy girl being carried into the house from the car, or twirled by her father. She was pressed by strong arms, as the world went warm and black. The trees winked from their quiet place, and for a while, she felt no rain.

9.

Ant and Myra

Ant was sitting on the stool under the air conditioner, the one that he always chose after his Aunt Pam sold the bar. He had seen the girl sitting across from him many times. She came in at about eight and sat opposite him wearing a Rocky Point uniform that consisted of khaki pants – they looked all wrong on women – and a red polo shirt emblazoned with a lobster who stood balancing a waiter's towel hospitably over one swollen claw. In his other claw he held a tray. On the tray was – grossly – a lobster. Things cannibalistic never appealed to Ant. He wasn't a lobster of course, but he still considered it wrong. Also, he critiqued, there was no sense reminding the world of hungry diners what lobsters really *did* eat, which of course was anything on the ocean floor and dead, whale shit, other lobsters, lost fishermen. He'd heard all kinds of stories from his diver friends. They wouldn't touch the stuff. Plus, there was no irony greater

than the price they charged you to eat a scavenger. Ant had tried to remind himself of these facts about lobsters because he was trying to give them up. They were high in cholesterol.

The girl always came in with her cheeks flushed, wearing black nail polish. Also a number of bracelets that appeared to be rubber, ran up both wrists. It looked to Ant like she was selling bracelets, selling them as she modeled them. He wanted to yell across to her to put on a trench coat, to suggest she go down Weybossett and try to sell them like the watches they sold over there. He called them one lungers.

Something about her made him angry. He was angry but something else there, coming off the same girl, made him twitch and squirm in his seat. She looked hot, the flush did not end at her cheeks, it went down her neck and covered the small triangle of flesh that stood out between the white buttons of her shirt. The flush made it look like she'd been working hard all day. This was a trait he admired, someone who was dedicated to working hard, working, if you will, off the sweat of her brow. He wondered if her skin was salty.

If it was salty it could be from sweat but it could just as easily be from the breeze that blew off the bay. The bay breeze often carried a cloud of fog up through the amusement park as well as the shore dinner hall, which was too big to air condition. He knew because he had a friend who worked in the park and they often went into the hall for clam cakes and chowder. He had noticed, while seasoning a clam cake, that the staff had added rice to the salt shakers. Still, though, the salt stuck together from all of the humidity. He guessed that her hair, long and chestnut in color, smelled of salt too.

He was on a vodka kick and he took a quick little nip, then let out the noise that was reserved for the true alcoholics of the world, the breathy little sigh that would have been truly effeminate, had it not been for the peanut shells and shot glasses in its wake.

She must have been barely legal. The drinking age had recently been raised to twenty-one. Didn't she have to be twenty-one to work tables at the shore dinner hall?

She looked his way, not for the first time either. She really was young. It was there in the tilt of her head. Young, but very, very pretty. Full lips, red, full. Lips. She might actually have been a little older than she looked. Maybe twenty-three. Yes, twenty-three. Maybe older. Who knew? He really needed to take a closer look to be sure.

Ant turned back to his papers. He was served papers, had been served them yesterday. Had been warned, by his wife Louise, and then served. She had never really fought with him about it. His drinking and tendency to exhibit, what she called, "the generosity that was only conferred, mysteriously, upon the working class."

Louise was quick to say ugly things like that, in retrospect. He was not, although he often thought of quick responses, responses that made him smile, even as she belittled him. He wanted often to tell her, for instance, that *she* had the sense of entitlement that can only come of being wildly spoiled, liberal, condescendingly rich, and the wife of a poor man. He hadn't said it because he didn't want to hurt her, and because he enjoyed the pleasure of being the bigger person. And she had been a good wife in some ways, good, but truly cold. Unyielding and cold.

And now, peeking up at the girl he had seen, and had seen looking – quite directly – at him, he felt free. He felt like he could do anything. He was drinking vodka, a liquor that he associated with Russians, men all of great and perilous strength, and no doubt courage. He too had courage. The vodka was hot and it seemed to travel straight from his tongue, which by now had grown numb, to his thighs, where it sat, a hot, fluid coating under his skin.

He was almost positive that the girl was young. He decided that he would not approach her. He would avoid contact. Now, if she were to make contact with him, well, that was another matter entirely. As she walked to the head he turned, noticing the back of her khakis. Down low, there was a line denoting the cotton crotch of her panties. What was it about the makers of underwear? Right here in his own state they were, the manufacturers and designers of Fruit of the Loom. Little did they care if they made the kind of underwear that flaunted itself in bars and high schools, cotton crotch waving itself like a flag off the unsuspecting bottoms of girls. It was negligent. And where were the mothers? Didn't they get a good look at these girls before they left their houses? He was no prude, but still...

When she returned from the bathroom she hopped up on the seat next to him. She was smiling dangerously, he could see it from his peripheral vision. She was drinking Tangueray and tonic, and she stared at her glass across the bar. She did *not* say hello. Ant, still determined to not initiate, cracked a brittle peanut shell on the bar and flipped his ugly paperwork over. He noticed, as he crunched the shell between his thumb and

forefinger, that his hands were speckled in caramel colored freckles that someone more vain might call age spots.

There was a heavy silence in the air as Ant pulverized, considering the lyrics to a Bob Seger song that was playing softly in the background. The song had a melancholic beauty though it made no sense to him. Something about being on the road, lonely, and then, boom, wondering if you were a woman or a man, or people not knowing if you were a woman or a man. Strange. He had little problem discerning that.

He saw the girl's beautiful young hand adeptly fingering the dust of his shell pile, and this, combined with the lyrics that he didn't understand, moved him to the brink of tears. He was about to turn to her, but then he gulped, got off his barstool and walked across the galley that was the narrow, neon belly of his own ship of misery. He then picked up her sweating glass. He returned it to her and went to work again, cracking shells. This time though, he didn't pop the naked nuts into his mouth, but placed them in a neat pile on a damp cocktail napkin between them, a silent offering. She ate them slowly, delicately. From the sound of the biting, Ant ascertained that she was snapping the nuts into their natural halves by way of her front teeth.

It was something that a young filly would do. Ant didn't really know this for sure, never having ridden a horse, but he was still powerfully enamored with the black stallion books.

Walter Farley had written them and by the time he read them as a boy Ant realized that he was not going to be a man of privilege but that knowledge could be a great equalizer. Often he had taken comfort in the knowing that he got from books about

sailing, riding, croquet, and English society. She crunched again, so delicately, and taking a fiver out of the drinking fund that he had nestled between sodden napkins, she gestured for the bartender, a woman named Sam, to bring them a round. This was a brazen move and it angered him. He didn't know what was wrong but the words of comfort ran through his head, *curry comb, calling card, the Arabian can be distinguished by its wedge-shaped head and dignified carriage, quarter horse, cupola, seventeen hands high, austere, drawing room, flared nostrils, coquette, paddock, gunnels, rook, tack, tacking, Satin reared violently, coming about...!*

And then he wanted to kiss her. Hard. He wanted to touch her thin arm, which had no freckles at all but was covered with a layer of soft blond hair. The ball of her wrist bone undulated as she took a cocktail napkin and swabbed up peanut dust.

The barstool rocked like a dingy in an angry sea by the time Ant realized that they had started talking. He didn't know who had initiated it but she sat on her stool facing him, with her knees askew. His own knees, old and knobby, were pinched together between hers. When had he swiveled away from the deck?

They were talking about Linus Pauling. The girl, her name was Myra! had met Pauling in Oregon. And this was the exciting part! He *loved* Linus Pauling. He loved his discoveries, and the gentle humility with which he discussed them. But that was not the biggie. The biggie was that Ant had also met him. He had recognized the man and approached him. Yes he had. At the Boston Aquarium. He was telling Myra the story, he heard his own voice, and in his drunkenness, enjoyed the opportunity that comes only when the drinker is at the point between the height of clarity and utter incoherence. That

opportunity was the telling and the listening of the story AT THE SAME TIME. He loved it! Ant heard his voice as though it were not his own. It sounded intelligent. It sounded a bit world-weary, but still, so dignified. He was proud of himself. One part of him was politely listening, head cocked, hands folded in his own lap, to this mirror image of himself.

The other self said, "And I just walked up to him and said, 'Sir, I hope that this is no inconvenience to you, no affront to your privacy. I just had to thank you for what you have done for the world. I was not going to leave this jellyfish tank until I asked to shake your hand.' We shook hands and then, I said to him, I said, 'I want to shake your hand, Sir, because some day I want to tell my grandchildren that I shook the hand that shook the world!'"

At this Myra raised her eyebrows and asked him if he had kids. He answered no, explaining that this was just the kind of thing you think when you're talking to the man who discovered the double helix, the man who was the only man *he'd* ever met who had won the Nobel prize not once but twice! And if the greedy corporations had steered clear of it, he would have captured the honor five-plus times.

She was listening with the kind of rapt attention that made his hands tingle. She was listening with her nose pointed high in the air, poised, like a rabbit, sniffing. She herself looked to Ant to be a young scientist. She looked down her nose, yes there was the definite impression that she was sniffing something, and then, when he said something funny, she pushed her shoulders forward as though experiencing a pleased sort

of shudder, a shudder of pleasure, and she opened her mouth up wide. He waited. He waited but no sound came out.

She gestured, and as he kept on talking he realized that he associated these gestures with science. Why? He associated them with science because there had been a boy who lived down the street from his grandmother, Hank Reilly, who had done just the same things, the same sniffing and shuddering and gaping about the mouth, when he told stories. This Hank, his neighbor and friend, had been one of the human beings that Ant considered closest to him. He had been so close in fact that he had let Ant in on a certain line of experiments that he was conducting.

He was ashamed to associate Myra with this Hank. And for a good reason. Because he and Hank, for several weeks, had scooped their own shit, together was the embarrassing part, out of the toilet in Hanks mother's house. There they had measured these turds on her vanity, placing them on newspapers next to her make-up mirror and extravagant wig collection. These measurements, and any observation that went with them, were chronicled in a journal. A journal that they had both considered very scientific at the time. Serious science. A scientific journal complete with hypotheses. Hank had gone on to research herpes. At Harvard University.

Later, Ant would learn that Myra and Hank were related. Hank was Myra's strange, probably homosexual, hermit uncle. But for now Ant did not ask. Rhode Island was incestuously small. That was one of its biggest problems, a problem that hung a mantle of shame over every sexy bar encounter. You never knew when you could be whispering into the ear of your second cousin on your father's side. So you had to either

stay on your best behavior or just give in to the fact that you could find yourself in a very embarrassing situation indeed, around some Thanksgiving table in the not-so-distant future.

That night, regardless of the thought of turds, regardless of the thought of Myra's possible relation to those clandestine experiments, there was sex. Sex and sex and sex and sex. There was sex until Ant was spinning, pinned under a coffee table in Myra's tiny living room. There was sex on the bed in the wee hours. There was sex until Ant smelled the alcohol seeping through his pores. There was sex, finally, until Ant tried to pose the question that his lips could scarcely form: *How old are you, anyway, Myra?*

She was nineteen.

He was near fifty.

Ant had never been one for tears, but that thing about Myra that made Ant angry, that thing about her that made him want to give up, could easily bring him to tears. And so they came, first in a little rivulet that ran into his right ear and then in gasping guffaws. He cried for all of the times that he knew that Louise was going to someone else, long before he had been served papers. He cried because that someone, he had long known, was a woman, and he could neither join them nor compete.

Finally, when the tears stopped, he blew his nose, realizing that he had taken solace with a girl, not a woman, and the knowledge of his weakness was right there in front of him, in his face, too pretty and too close to push away.

PART III

1.

More in the Way of Dreams

After Regina disappears Ant remembers some dreams but not others. He always remembers the dreams he has about the girls. The girls going by in an ancient trolley car, a trolley car that he learns from a book on Rhode Island transportation is a funeral car. He sees his daughter Regina in it. Although she is gone he imagines that she is alive and well, alive but mourning for him. She sits with a beauty, a girl with raven hair and pale skin. The two wave to him from behind velvet curtains. The trolley has the swooping painted word "Oregon" on the side. He looks down to see that he is wearing a French soldier's uniform that looks as if it was worn hundreds of years before. He is carrying a sword, a sword in a sheath. He waves the white handkerchief, whether in surrender or as a gesture to the ladies, he does not know.

One morning he finds himself, awake, standing in front of the window of his apartment, as university traffic rolls past. He remembers the dream because he finds himself naked and indeed he is waving a handkerchief, the white monogrammed handkerchief that Louise had given him. Covering himself he returns to bed.

More often he dreams forgotten dreams, dreams of Jimi y. In them they are musing about the concept albums of the seventies, as they scrape the cobbles of North Main Street to the central artery of college hill. He smells flowers in the dreams, flowers bursting from window boxes and sidewalk buckets, rose of Sharon casting its bittersweet, pissy smell. In dreams it is their custom to observe a moment of silence before The First Baptist Meeting House. Ant enjoys sharing the beauty of the great façade with the boy because the church represents the fabric of Providence, never centered on one single approved church. Before the meeting house was erected there had been forty or fifty families living in the city. Though the community was small there were three distinct Churches, each with congregations differing in principle but practicing without molestation.

He loves to describe local history. In dreams it all makes sense. The Baptists were the first, erecting a church to celebrate their congregation. The architect, Mr. Joseph Brown, designed the structure influenced by a book he had read called *Book of Architecture* by James Gibb. The church, with a towering gable-roof, and clapboard design is sturdy, capable of seating one thousand, a testament to the vision of the families who put it up in the summer of 1775. That is Ant's favorite part of the story, the size of

the congregation and the distinct hope of filling the square plan with generations of family.

Within the general area of First Baptist are churches still standing at Benevolent and Benefit Streets, where Episcopal, Catholics, and Congregationalists met two centuries before. Their paths crossed on Sundays. They met on those streets, shared parades to celebrate Easter. Up beyond the slope of College Hill – a bit newer – sits Temple Emanuel.

Jimi and Ant visit them all. In dreams they sit in on masses, “feeling the vibe.” Ant believes Jimi to be right at home in a Moses Brown School uniform while he feels conspicuous in his Teamster’s Local 251 cap. Then suddenly the two stand in front of the Baptist church, gazing at the entrance tower at the west gable.

They stand, noting that the clock perpetually strikes nine. The spire is the tallest structure on the hill and is a pity to think that it had been culled from a rejected scheme for St. Martins-in-the-Fields in London, yet that is the truth. Ant knows from reading that New England’s most inspiring structures are toss-aways from the Royal Mum. He takes care to keep these realities from Jimi.

He is careful, considerate, in dreams. He protects Jimi y, fearing that certain kinds of knowledge will shatter his appreciation of substantial structures and what, for a youth, they need signify.

In these dream Jimi is Ant’s son and neither are afraid of family. During the waking Ant knows better. He knows that there is nothing more terrifying than family.

In these dreams the boy and his father are just that though, related but never separated by the generational chunk that stands between the best father-son teams. Instead they share a certain predilection, a passion for the rock and roll concept albums. Together they are untold genius. They shake their heads in unison.

Ant looks in Jimi's eyes, green, glowing, flat. Ant notices but he does not care. What he does care about is this: that they count the concept albums together, smiling favorites, on extended fingers.

They are each other's mirror image saying slowly, "Okay one, *Slow Train Coming*, 1979, Bob Dylan. Two, *Imaginos*, 1988, Blue Oyster Cult. Three, *Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, 1974, Genesis. Four, *Aqualung*, 1971, Jethro Tull. *Tull Rules!* Five and Six, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 1973, *Wish You Were Here*, back-to-back greats, 1975, *Syd come back, poor, poor Syd, we love you!*"

The two laugh and shake their heads, silly in their forgetfulness, "Seven, *Machina*, 2000, Smashing Pumpkins." Then they shake their heads a bit. The Smashing Pumpkins can't be overlooked, but that album is not so good.

They never talk about the rock opera of Styx. They sing them together instead. Styx is way more than a given.

2.

A Parting of the Ways

At this juncture we shall take a moment to reflect, perhaps to tell you why we chose fiction as our art. Why we needed to write a volume that you could read, peruse, contemplate. Our man Ant, although he does not commit his art (poetry and fiction) to paper, had looked at early Christianity discovering that some of the devotional practices that Christians decided upon to invoke the holy mystery were appropriated from the Greeks.

One definite way that Greeks bolstered the spirit was through the creation of aesthetics, art, literature, music. They called this *Paideia*, and it was an ideal of theirs. To create. And there are Christians (and perhaps other religious people too) who believe that they can bolster their spirituality by developing artistic sensibilities. Some sing, some play, others dance, a few pray the Rosary. Some build churches, stain glass, write

bible stories (Song of Solomon comes to mind). All of these, according to our man, put the material being closer to the end of the spiritual journey. We trust him implicitly on this point. The connection of art to the mystery is even described to Dante at the end of his walk through purgatory. In the Garden of Eden Virgil tells him, "Here is the nectar that the poets praise."

This is true of all of your great storytellers. They thought story was there to help spirits rise. William Butler Yeats agreed. He said, "The Church when it was most powerful created an imaginative unity, for it taught learned and unlearned to climb, as it were, to the great moral realities through hierarchies of Cheribim and Seraphim, through clouds of Saints and Angels who had all their precise duties and privileges. The storytellers of Ireland, perhaps of every primitive country, created a like unity, only it was to the great aesthetic realities that they taught people to climb."

Of course, in some ways, Yeats was a fool. For instance, he claimed that the Fairy Mistress of Ireland (Leanan Sidhe), "fed upon the vitals of its chosen (the poets)." This is an exaggeration of the tallest order. Imagine blaming her for poets losing their minds, indulging in opium and alcohol, hearing voices, as a result of the Fairy Mistress leaving. Clearly, this is a greedy and presumptuous attitude, thinking that one could share the company of the Leanan Sidhe for a lifetime.

Could, as Yeats suggested, the gentle muse turn the artist to Laudanum, the drink, the needle even? We might be closer to agreeing with his longtime acquaintance and sometimes critic, James Joyce (and friend Gogarty), who thought his society for the study

of such things, “The Hermetic Society of the Order of the Golden Dawn” be named “The Yogeybogiebox.”

It would be hard enough to put up with a poet who speaks so ardently (commandingly) about the duties of his muse, but to tolerate one who doesn't support the new talent, is another matter. And by “new talent” oh best beloved, I do mean the luminous and talented Mr. Joyce. Yeats said of (then aspiring poet) J., “Such a colossal self-conceit with such a Lilliputian literary genius I never saw combined in one person.”

Given these facts it is hard to imagine a respectable fairy mistress who *would* stay. And if I do say so myself, I am a respectable mistress indeed.

But no more bile beans. Back to our pursuit of spirituality.

There is further local and historic evidence of the dedication to the aesthetic. It is here, in the city that we move through often enough. Two architects, an Englishman named Richard Upjohn, and an Irishman named Patrick Keely, were part of the Gothic Revival movement in the mid-1800's. These architects were convinced that liturgical and architectural traditions of the medieval church created an unparalleled devotional attitude.

So they created a medieval design in the Episcopal (Upjohn) as well as the Roman Catholic (Keely) churches they built. Many English architectural artists were so involved with the Anglican ecclesiological movement of the 1830's that they converted to Catholicism to link the medieval style of their creations to their own spirituality.

If you travel to Providence you will see the link is quite strong, one that you will realize when you consider the off center tower and spire on the Brownstone structure of

Grace Episcopal Church downtown. You will notice that it set a precedent especially for Episcopal churches. There is Christ Church on Eddy Street, St. Martin's Church on Orchard, and far up the hill, near Moses Brown School St. Stephen's.

All of it started after England's movement by the Cambridge Camden Society. They spread their ideas about devotion and the aesthetic and how it harkened back to the medieval period through the creation of Gothic Revival. Ant loves these facts as we do, and we all have a secret theory that the Cambridge Camden Society was reading Dante as our churches were being drafted, drawn, created.

And so, inspired by writers and architects alike, with the wisdom that these truths hold, and the evidence that we find in a simple tour of Providence, we wrote this volume. Which brings us to the matter of Meier and Elizabeth.

You may be thinking, why not Gina? Why not more of her? If only we could. We can not tell what we do not know. Even here – especially here – we have no ready answers. As I have said, we are not so different from you after all.

So, as you know, Jimi and Meier and I were of the belief that Elizabeth came to us through the writer. We thought that the writer discovered her material form (a picture of her still in living flesh) on the dread Internet. In the end we find that this was not the case. Our writer is an adequate visionary at times, but she did not beckon Elizabeth. Nor did Elizabeth find the writer purposely. None of us have ever been able to conjure anyone – another great disappointment – but in the particularity of the fact, as it relates to this story, we take solace.

The problem, however, is far greater. Elizabeth found our man Ant, and then us, by emerging with him from a dream. We have given you the facts about us in a simplified form, but now we will elaborate on the issue of dreams.

We can see you in dreams. This means that we can arrive in your dream, as ourselves, and wreak what havoc we will. That is why, so often, there are dreams that make so little sense. Everywhere we are popping in, and like egotistical stage actors who are loathe to take direction, we improvise. We might try to dance with you, and later, upon waking you will think, how awful, who was that little gnome? Well, that little gnome could have been any one of us, looking like we look to each other, or possibly appearing even more distorted as we travel through your optic nerve, or as our image is projected upon your iris or pupil or retina, whatever physical part of you that sees to the task.

This dream play is not the sunniest of our habits. We are aware of this but it does get lonely in the second life and this dream play is effective by way of cure. As I have said we cannot relish in the forms of entertainment to which humans subscribe. Remember, our problems with bright light and all matter that creates noise, clashing and the like. And so it is.

Now that the essential business of our cameo appearances has been put to rest there is another matter.

We can sometimes delve into the dream for purposes that are a bit more lofty. We can alight upon you to share your space, to give you a sense of peace, to offer warning. We don't do it often and it is not foolproof. For example, there is the matter of waking

you during REM sleep. If we do not wake you during this sleep phase, this lulling deep sleep, you cannot remember us, or the dream. And so you will not remember the message relayed, and goodness knows you will be unable to retrieve the dream memory. And so, we try to help, if there is any such thing as help in the world. Often we fail, just as Elizabeth did.

The one that we call Elizabeth was not being wholly creative in the last story. She was not fictionalizing when she explained (through the writer of course) that the one we named Gina had a dream of her father. That she longed for him and chased him, just as he sprung down from the branch of a tree. No. She dreamed it. She dreamed it because Elizabeth was there. She had brought our Ant into the forest, the forest where her bones clatter beneath the soil.

She knew what was going to happen to Gina, and she was confident that she could stop it. So she led our Ant into the forest. She did so with noble intentions, picking our Ant for a specific reason. Gina had been his daughter. So Elizabeth hoped that by placing the two together in that space, those woods of abominable tragedy, the taking of Gina could be avoided. Elizabeth hoped that the foreboding image of trees, which so often represents death in literature, would be recognized as a prophesy by our man.

Elizabeth came to be among us when she popped out of our man's dream. Somehow she pulled him in while he was sleeping, into Gina's dream, and she herself got in there. Then she popped out and we found her there, spooning behind Ant, clutching the tail of his Alice Cooper t-shirt, the one that he so often wears to bed at night.

As for the matter of Meier and Elizabeth the two have each authored a story, through our student, and they have found themselves at odds. So from this pursuit of Art, competition has arisen. Competition is always close to Art; it is Art's shady cousin.

Meier is wrathful, given to fits of impatience and anger. She has been here for a long time, in this realm, and from what we can gather, the longer one remains the less they recall of their other time. She knows nothing of her material self. I do attest to the fact that she is French; it is there in her attitude, the tilt of her head, in every gesture. There is no shaking our cultural fabric I believe and Jimi agrees.

Elizabeth is like no one we have encountered. She found us here. She found Ant. None of us knows how or why. She remembers the events that led to her being parted with the world. And she is a tyrant, if you will allow me the term. She runs and jumps, furious in her pursuit of certain ideals. She is newly initiated in a realm where no initiation exists.

She has shaken the balance between Meier and Jimi and I. Meier does not take to her. Those two are constantly debating. Meier questions everything as a result of Elizabeth's coming. She has started to meditate yet she scoffs at our methods for seeking spiritual fulfillment. She wanders, looking for someone who is either practicing or reading about Eastern forms of spirituality.

Meier also questions Elizabeth's methods for seeing her story find paper. Elizabeth has gotten the story down, quite accurately, by entering the dreams of the writer, Tracy, who was frightened and taken aback by the process. Meier calls

Elizabeth's technique into question, claiming that she has put the entire project in jeopardy, by taking this tact. Our writer has not been producing the same way since Elizabeth's got her story down through dream play.

In temperament Meier is placid, except of course during her fits, but Elizabeth is always pestering, arguing, trying to fly. It exhausts us just watching her. And we thought that she would leave us after a time. She is not good for our man. Jimi thinks she is even doing him more damage. He has thought that all along. Well, as it turns out, he was almost right.

3.

Sniping on November Eve

- Oh. He’s all up in the filing cabinet.
- No.
- YES!
- May I be as bold as to ask...
- What else could he be doing?
- I have seen many a strange sight. Ant on the poteen notwithstanding. Is it any coincidence that it should happen on the gloomiest evening? The first night of winter, when fairies of the world dance with ghosts.
- Get out my grill with all that Irish folk-faith talk.
- As if...
- As if what?
- Nothing “city girl.”
- Don’t be blowing up my spot.

– I never thought, even on an eve like this, on any eve before he slept in his coffin
– that narrow house of death – that he would ever...

– But will he find the key?

– It is in a box, with my hat, on top of the ice box. He could scarce forget such a
thing.

– Where's Jimi at?

– He is out making music, somewhere.

– To the fridge then. We shall take occasion to rattle the blessed box of cool.

– What a time for foolery! Don't mock me, Elizabeth. Consider this fair
warning.

– I'm going to get small and try to shake the key box off. Could you rattle the
kitchen window?

– I'd rather force him out with a scare to his office.

– Whatever.

– Criminy, Elizabeth, he is fetching his house key. Off to Haven Brothers, for
another blasted chilidog. It's as I knew it would be. Haste makes waste.

4. 2001

After Losing Regina Marie
Ant Takes a Gander at Old Work

On another day Ant stumbles upon the key. It is just the color of a 1945 nickel. The drawer of the filing cabinet rolls open and he takes out the story that he wrote in 1969, after researching Vietnam, the attack of hill 937.

He remembers much about it. He remembers that he wrote the story careful to use the image of a pearl. When he decided upon it he was interested in medieval dream visions and he knew about the poem. He knew "The Pearl," was a poem about a man who loses his daughter, a daughter who becomes, in death, the maiden queen. The narration by the father stuck with him as did the structure. He noticed that the structure of the poem shrouds the sadness of the father's mourning. When he re-reads his story now he relates these memories to his own structure, the one that he has created, the one that cradles him in his world.

In the poem, the father, standing across a river, stares at a virgin in the celestial host, a virgin who had been his daughter, a virgin, holy, frozen, once a girl, now trapped

on the other side of waters wide and black. The girl is there, there shimmering in her goodness, too good to see or hear her father, even when he cries.

5.

Ant's Story from 1969

Taking the Hill

It was certainly an inopportune time to discover that I had become a spermatozoa.

Perhaps I would go so far as to say it was a terrible time. I don't usually use words like 'terrible' when referring to personal matters, or to the shifting and tragic matters of man.

I am a pragmatist. Yes I am that, as well as hardworking and committed. Perhaps that is why I was first chosen to turn. Perhaps the commander recommended me.

I knew that I had transformed into a sperm upon waking. I don't know why or how I knew. Perhaps I knew because I'd been a ferocious masturbator before beginning my tour of duty. I took this activity to its extreme, saving samples in Petrie dishes, placing little man splats on slides that I dyed with an iodine solution I'd learned about in biology from Mrs. Wiggins. I imagined a generalized and intensive study was perfect companion to that most agreeable activity and I approached the sperm with the same gusto that I applied when mining the precious fluid from its indispensable and seemingly bottomless well. And, if truth be told, the night before the transformation, I'd been at it. At it in the pounding rain.

Upon waking I smelled different. I was used to the saccharine sweetness of burning flesh, of vegetation turned to cinder, the stink of Napalm. I had the smell in my pores, which have always been too large.

I had the smell of it in the short, velvet hairs in my nose, and coating the villi that ran up my lungs. It stuck to everything – Napalm did – as had been intended, as the engineers from Dow Chemical had wanted. It was in all of our throats and ears and eyes, and the smell of its destruction traveled with us. We accepted it as part and parcel of the arduous task put in our path by men of power.

This new smell was different. It smelled of homecoming dances when the fields were full of hay, it smelled of my mother's Plymouth wagon on Saturday nights. It smelled of wet grass and the white load of tube socks I washed from baseball practice, sprinkled carefully with bleach. Molly used to say that – about it smelling like wet grass and bleach – and upon waking I found myself in total agreement with her description. It

did smell of grass: fecund, opulent, the deepest emerald of bluegrass. I smelled of sweetness and light. I slipped about on my poncho liner, madly enjoying it. I thought that I was dreaming. Then in the early light there came the sounds of morning and I grew eager for battle. We were at the midpoint of hill 937, a hill that the Montagnards called “the mountain of the crouching beast.” It was a crucial staging area, a peak we intended to take.

We had been dropped in from a Marine H-34 Sea Horse helicopter, and I’ll tell you, that was not SOP. Usually Hueys, round choppers that shake and clatter, dropped us into the theatre. The Sea Horse is the type of chopper that perches quietly on hilltop outposts at highest altitudes. They don’t hold troops. They do recon or take overheads of jungle trails. Perhaps that is why they used it, to get us into that tight spot.

The Ap Bia mountain is part of the western A Shau valley, on South Vietnam’s border with Laos and in the month of May that mother is rainy. And so when I awoke I thought this was the reason I couldn’t make it up. Instead I was slipping and slopping, slopping and slipping, hiping and hopping, hopping and hiping. It was quite strange. But the mud was black as blood all around us. Everything was wet and our weapons were caked, but we did our best to keep them dry; they’d briefed us about the valley and conditions. We knew this fucker was no cakewalk. And I, for all of my eccentric leanings and eloquent talk, was no candy-ass. I was the hardest working grunt in the whole outfit. There was no task too large, or – here’s the key – too small. I didn’t mind doing it, whether it was hauling water, running ammo, digging latrines. I did it with a smile on my face.

I did have one shit month when I couldn't get quite so much done I'll admit.

Molly had written me a letter, one that I received just out of Danang. She'd been reading about the fighting, shit about old ladies and babies being slaughtered, and the bitches at her sorority were harping about the savagery, about her being a part of it, on account of the fact that she was waiting on a soldier. Waiting on me. So, that was one shit month. But I picked up after that and as I flopped about on my poncho liner, noticing the incredible flexibility of my spiked tail, I wondered, with a guilty start, if this transformation had anything to do with all the action I had going with boom boom girls I found in brothels.

There were immediate upsides to the condition of course. My tail was slithery and no doubt powerful, though I had scant opportunity to enjoy it. The rain was pouring down as our first lieutenant, Twills yelled, "Move it out. Move it! Move it!" I looked over at my buddy Kirby Slue and I knew that we were readying. My makeshift tent was down, my green poncho flapping like a flag, as I tried to draw myself up. Kirby was packing it in like the devil himself had given chase and I called out to him, "Kirby, Sweet mother of Christ, grab on to me and pull."

It was a no-go. Kirby was wiping and folding, tightening his bootstraps. Then he was on my gear, shaking and stuffing, taking my ammo. Hiding my fatigues in my sack.

Again, I'm a realist, I determined early that he couldn't hear me. He didn't even glance my way. I had to do the only thing I could when placed in such a precarious position, when the battle cry has been raised, when the chain of command has set the

wheels of fortune in motion. I doubled back, unable to move at first. I vibrated, fluttering weakly. Then with a burst I was swimming like a salmon against the stream. Euphoric, playful, I took a leap of phallic triumph landing firmly, solidly, on Kirby's boot. Just before he snatched up the liner too.

It was an important mission. I could feel the gravity of Twill's words as he hunkered, wiping the rain from his nose. "We're clearing this trail as a part of Operation APACHE SNOW. This is the route of Uncle Ho, the route these zips have been using to bring supplies through. We take this hill and it's over. We've got a bead on them. But it ain't gonna be easy. You are the bravest fighting men we've got. Stay low."

Kirby was nervous. I knew that directly. And this suspicion was confirmed when he went out looking for me in the woods. He even said, "Where is that bastard Nerdy," as he took a squat. It seems like a little thing I'm sure – this concern – but to me, as I swam toward his instep to give his ass some privacy, it was heaven.

When we found our brothers, we crouched there, seventy-five strong, in formation. We took to the trail with heads low and weapons high. It seemed to happen in slow motion. There was the radio guy, Marzetti, to my right, there was Jackson, humping artillery rounds to my left. Slightly ahead was Stumps McGee, a butcher with a thing against the black boys like Jackson, and a habit of counting coup. There was Little Henry too, behind Kirby and me, and I heard him as he dropped. Kirby ran and it took every bit of energy I had to get under his waterlogged shoestring and because of the ferocious rain I was almost knocked clear off.

I was there, cowering I'll admit, between the boot tongue and shoe string. I was keeping a close lookout on the terrain, searching for toe poppers, bouncing betties, booby-trapped souvenirs, tripwires. I had imagined grabbing on to some leg hair in order to issue him warning. In wartime there is simply nothing better than a second set of eyes as the battle rages. But, it soon became clear that the angle was too treacherous for that.

It was an NVA hand grenade that got Kirby, blew his arms off and sent him reeling onto his back. I was looking up, and saw the terror and shock behind his eyes and then the helmet. What happened to his helmet was even more frightening than the streams of blood that flowed down the wet hill. It seemed at first to puff outward, and finally take on the shape of a straw mushroom. This would be of no import to most people but to me it was substantial because the changing shape of his helmet made him look like the enemy. He was wearing the helmet of the People's Army of Vietnam Nationals.

When his body started to turn his helmet changed: his head itself shrank, then distended sharply until it took on the shape and image of my own. I was thrilled because we were there, in the muck and mud, together. We were once again side by side: soldiers, comrades, friends. Still, a clear substance like blood oozed from him as I peered into his dead man eyes. I screamed for our medic, loud as my sperm lungs would allow. When I looked up I saw the face of the enemy. The enemy was deep in bunkers and fortified trenches. They were above us, looming. They had the higher ground.

They were Charlie-gooks-in-the-box, popping up with their weapons, firing, screaming, throwing grenades. All the while I heard a song. I heard it when we checked our ammo, mounting the hill... *All around the MUL-ber-ry bush...* and as we threw out smokies and charged... *the MON-key chased the WEA-sel....* then slower, as the gray coils rose and we discharged our weapons... *the monkey thinks its all in good fun...* then as the faces and bodies and flesh: yellow and white and brown, flowed red... *but then, POP goes the WEA-sel...* until finally they slept on drenched ground.

The men were dead but still, they turned as they fell, first their helmets and then their bodies. The noise that I heard was subtle, beneath the blasting of shells. The heavy thumps of men.

Some of the ones that trudged on, up and up, fell alive, but then they disappeared. Their weapons discharged ammo as they were dropped from arms that had clutched them, hitting the ground with skittering sprays. Empty fatigues still kept the shape of soldiers for a moment, then flapping like gossamer, crumbled, wet, in slushy puddles. The boots of the soldiers were the eeriest. Some of the boots remained standing, while others tumbled like downed skyscrapers. Still muddy. Caked. Tightly laced. Empty but for wet, army-issue socks.

I couldn't see what had happened to those up ahead but I knew. We were there still; we were all sperm. We thought for a moment that we were free as pollywogs squirming in rice paddies, free as amoebas and lice and fungus, free as the organisms in

contaminated water. Single-celled, life-giving, dangerous, equipped each with a permanent weapon of plunder: the spiked tail of dragons, to carry us on.

But the bellowing command shook us from our reverie and we moved away from those who had fallen. We moved away from our own dead, slowly, like children reluctant to break up a game of ball. Our brigade commander, James Comanche, was there, ordering us back into formation. "Let's not tarry soldiers. This way through that stream, Maggots! Swim, thresh, shake those tails! Don't drag your dicks."

When we were safe and assembled two giant G-men stepped forward. They loomed like the Stalinist statues we'd seen in photographs. They were blond, with chiseled lips, faces white as leprosy. We were reminded that we were part of the most elite of soldiers. The G-men, with considerable aplomb, introduced us to the M-16 Marauders produced and designed by Mattel. These tiny toys were equipped with sperm saddles, which we needed now, because we had no arms. We saw those saddles, sitting in the palms of the G-men. They extended their hands like lifeless tools, and sprinkled them outward. We sought cover, as weapons tumbled around us. It was true, all of the rumors about the M-16s being made by a toy company. We were ordered to back into those weapons. We were briefed about using our threshing tails to squeeze the triggers. It was difficult, but we accomplished it.

It is always exhilarating and frightening to become part of a test group. The soldier spectators who stood on aircraft carriers at Bikini Atoll outside the Marshall Islands could tell you about the feeling they had as they watched the A-bomb detonate, as could the men who tested Napalm during WWII. Our own soldiers can tell stories about

their introduction to orange striped barrels, the reddish brown fluid that the barrels held, how it seeped under their fingernails. They can describe the weight of the rapid-fire 5.56 mm assault rifles they held in their hands.

Holding your weapon is something you are methodically taught, and that first time, you never forget it. This experience was much the same. I remember each detail, the explanation of how we were had been transformed into the most efficient of fighting machines. Comanche told us that the “spray fire” of Mattel was in this covert mission, indispensable. Also, they squirted us with an alkaline formula to protect us against the acidic, hostile environment.

Our Marauders were destined for greatness, just as we were. They were loaded with nitric oxide, mounted on our sperm saddles. These weapons were all that was necessary, for when we got to the top we were going to crack the whole mission. Operation APACHE SNOW had turned into Operation OVUM PEARL. What that meant for the boys from Kentucky – we were going to find it – OVUM, the pearl, giant jewel of our success – surround it, and drill.

It was confided that Uncle Sam had played the big researchers to get at these secrets. How did this affect us? To crack the OVUM we needed to spray it. Then, one of us could fire, could infiltrate the cell. If we accomplished this, using our newly acquired resource, that grunt would become sort of immortalized, that’s what they said.

I was up for it. I knew the terrain. I could eat C rats, drink high fructose drinks, rest. I could travel 3 mm per hour, and relative to my tiny size, I figured that rivaled the best stock car driver back home. Of course, that hill was a mother fucker, but traveling

upstream, smelling sex on myself, wiggling through the tasty warm wet, beat anything else I'd done in the last ten months. I set off, with the others who were now unrecognizable. They say war is hell. It's true.

Still the rain fell.

I traveled with rapid, straight movements, pacing myself through the long days, sleeping through misty, sweet hot nights. I watched the horned moon, the thick stars.

I became entangled in the brush, up near the summit. But then a sticky membrane covered me and I felt a relieving burst – energy. I forged on, my head oozing a substance that reshaped my upper region until it look much like a warhead. I saw this in my shadow, as the sun peeked through.

Up above a bird is cawing, circling. The sun beats down on my black lips while the others die, one by one. They sputter and twitch. Those closer to the hill's base went off course, or they didn't pace themselves. Perhaps they stopped to look at the dead NVA sperm and got burned in NVA acidic streams, or in NVA DNA. Maybe Charlie sperm was booby-trapped. Who can say? I just know that I kept my nose clean. I kept squirming the course, straight and true, remembering the mission before me, looking for that pretty pearl.

Now I've swum the peak more times than I can count. The sun casts a fierce brilliance. I look down the hill and see a scant few brothers flailing. They lift their heads like guppies kicked up on the shore, while thin streams dry. I too grow stickier. There is a thick heat, and an enormous fly hovers overhead. Still, I remain the good

soldier. I feel a sweet mountain breeze cross over me and imagine it crossing Molly too, as she lies in the sun, on a green chaise lounge. I shift my congealing weight, positioning my Marauder. I look high, I look low, but still I see no pearl.

6.

Jimi Hendrix's Banshee

"Noctilucent clouds (popularly referred to by the abbreviation "NLC") are high atmosphere cloud formations thought to be composed of small ice-coated particles; their precise nature remains a mystery. They form at very high altitudes - around 82 km above sea level - and are, thus, a quite separate phenomenon from normal weather or tropospheric cloud."

<http://www.nlcnet.co.uk>

We stood together the two of us, Elizabeth and I, because now we were the ones who are left in the small and warm apartment, where the windows do not open easily and

the sound of others out in the common space often moves us to fright. We watch him still with our slim arms encircling each other's waists. He is not so gallant and brave as he was before and at times his presence is so delicate that we circle around him and move in to press our frames against him.

He is slipping.

We are about him always now, and we wonder if this is by some higher design. It had not occurred to us until the unhinging began. Our responsibility now, lies heavy as a stone. For the two of us a change of mind has occurred.

For Jimi, the change was more pronounced. For Jimi took a long journey from the heart of the spire the monument that remains our anchor. This is no easy matter for Jimi, who grew lighter and weaker each day though he felt well. He cast a light upon us even in the dark hours during those last nights, a gentle light. The light was blue and though it flickered, it did not dwindle, and that encouraged us then, in regard to his fate.

A few days past, Jimi went down beyond our monument, to the river and there, beneath the bridge, with us hovering on the great wall of the bridge above, he bent and lowered and crouched, fiercely clinging to that great rock that he carries lately. We are fearful of water in such a concentrated form, although rain offers sweet relief. He was brave though, making a joke about the darkness of the water, even as the sun refracted upon it casting the reflection of jewels against his face.

Maybe he was doing something for Ant, something like a sacrifice, that is what we think now. Dipping his head he found contact with the murky sludge of the Providence, and to our joy, he did not disintegrate or burn or fly, or do any of the awful

things we had warned him might occur if he took drastic measures, even in serving a just and worthy cause.

We expected that, perhaps because the Providence River merged with the Woonquatucket before channeling out into the bay, that it may have represented the Lethe and the Eunoe, the rivers that allow Dante to forget sins, like Virgil's great river of oblivion. We expected, at least, that there would be some ceremony, some phenomenon to mark this act of courage. But there was only the soft murmuring that Jimi set off of words, words that refracted, water words like *shine, flow, shimmer, shimmer, sheen, gurgle, gurgle, glisten, glow*.

His *florelegia*, the sequence and beauty and rhythm of his chant, set the waters, brackish though they were, alight. Here Elizabeth drew great tears from the sadness within her that formed a stagnant pool. As the muse must, I stood, unable. Instead I thought about water facts. Little bits of which I keep track. I thought about the shellfish, *mercenaria mercenaria*, buried deep under the silt of the river, called Northern quahogs. They are there in great number -- forty thousand in fact -- forgotten, because fisherman can never take them up. The river water is too filthy. Instead they sit below darkest bottom, beings existing in fresh or salt water, filtering the river. I wished their flesh a healthy white, although I knew that the mercury and other metal, turned them orange.

Jimi plunged his head in homage to Ant.

When we returned home, Ant had dreamed of Regina. Through Elizabeth's meddling he had seen her burial site.

We found him, mouth agape, at home after Jimi's dip. He was wailing a dreadful keen, eyes wide and pleading. We found him and tried to comfort with caresses. Gentle, they sooth when offered carefully. Perhaps we were too harsh. Perhaps, through suffering, he felt us.

Perhaps he felt our touches and that was why he did harm to himself, digging the flesh from his face. Jimi, weakened from the river, could not bear the rebuff. He quivered and shook. Perhaps the unholy pain was akin to that of the first life. It set him to thrashing above our man, who howled upon his bed as if the devil himself had gotten hold.

In truth Elizabeth and even I felt distress, akin to physical discomfort, from the fierce alarm that was sounding. His scream was not muffled or darkened or gargled. It was clear as a church bell.

We backed away taking our hands from the man. Elizabeth and I that is, but not Jimi. Jimi could not move, such was his agony when he found himself there on top of the man. With a reeling and tussling we had not seen mingled, we spotted the tears pouring from Jimi. They held the scent of the man. They were falling into Ant's mouth, still agape. Ant tasted them -- he must have -- mixed with his salty, red blood. Knowing for a moment what they were.

We felt it, his knowing. It happened quickly and was gone. The knowing, it was little more than a flash.

Jimi, who had been clutching his great rock, rolled it away. Jimi rose, floated along the ceiling of our man's bedroom, and came to rest by the window. Through the

panes we saw Septentrion, one star that revolves around the North Star. He stayed pressed against the window and the ceiling, flapping in the breeze from the heating duct, looking like a wilting, greasy-blue balloon. Just the color of his navy blazer.

We took heart that he rested with a view of that star, a part of the lower seven of the Big Dipper.

When Ant emerged from his bed, blowing his nose, gingerly touching the cuts, he stopped. With me and Elizabeth and Septentrion he put hands to hips, considering, under what had been our Jimi. He lifted his hand. He lifted his hand toward the greasy blue balloon-ish Jimi and made a noise. It sounded like, "huh."

It was not sorrowful, nor joyous, nor frightened nor angry. It was the sound one makes lighting upon a hopeful discovery. He raised his finger gently, slowly, then with a snap, and poke. The Jimi we knew broke quickly into tiny fragments of blue ash. The ash hovered then floated down. We took occasion to sing a farewell.

We sang Psalm XXXI like the angel choir. Ant listened, holding his crotch, bladder full to bursting. Then we sang a favorite of Jimi's: *Come Sail Away* by Styx. We sang it joyously and perhaps because it is a sweet song of memory for him, or perhaps because we sang it loud and with force, Ant began to sing it too.

When I imagine what became of the blue ash, the fragments of Jimi that fluttered gently into our playground of shag, I see high altitude ice clouds – wispy noctilucent clouds – that glow blue through twilight skies. You see, they first became visible in the Northern skies, at our latitude, soon after Jimi left. And so perhaps the clouds shine, floating on the edge of space, seeded by Jimi's neon.

7. 1969

Mama Junk

Ant stands with his fingers grasping the bars of the cell where his mother waits. The first thing that he notices is not his mother, but the gold band that glistens, still without patina, on his own left ring finger. Louise insisted that he come and now that he is there he wants instantly to leave.

His mother shares the cell with one other, but she has center stage. It looked like his mother, he supposed, but her hair is no longer blond. It is long and red, curling around her shoulders, cascading down her back. She is stark naked and standing in a pool of thick blood.

The shock of her nudity comes first. The shock of her chanting doesn't come until the cop starts talking.

"She's been at it all night. Chantin'. Yellin'. Bleeding."

"Is she sick?"

“She was covered in vomit when they brought her in. We think she’s having her visit. We were gonna transfer her over to county as a Jane Doe and then we found your name and address in her pack so we thought that we’d do her a favor.”

Ant stands looking at his mother. Her body is tanned and a patches of bruises cover her legs, arms, stomach. The chanting is loud and strangely lyrical. Then it changes in pitch and she sounds like a bird.

“What is she cawing about?”

“Sounds like some kind of Indian. Check out her feet.”

Ant looks at his mother’s feet, which are a sooty black up to the ankles. Then he notices she has some sort of feathers around her calves. When he looks closely he can see that the feathers – they look like eagle feathers – have been stitched through her skin, attached at their quills.

It seems a long time before she turns to him.

When she does she called him Catcha. He has no idea why.

“Mama Junk, hello. You missed the wedding.”

“For you I walk the spirit path.”

“Mom, you’re bleeding on the floor. Why don’t you put the clothes on?”

“I found the ‘final fix.’”

“That’s for sure. What was it, peyote?”

“Ayahuasca.”

“Aya-what?”

"Beyond the body the medicine powers heal. I saw you there, a blue blue day, a little Cape Cod house, with your dark, shiny-headed bride. I saw Auntie Pam, at the bar, but gray-gray sad, reeking with gin. I saw too the land of my mother, County Cork, rolling hills of green. Hills and clods of chocolate earth that in its moist warm place could draw from me my suffering. The quest will heal or return me."

Ant does not say anything about Pam, who was, in fact, a gin-soaked gray, or about Louise.

"Well, Mama Junk you're bleeding."

"Don't call me that, son. You will soon regret it. As for the life flow, I sought healing during my moon."

"You're a little old to see your moon still, aren't ya?"

Ant knows all about a woman's moon. The Indian is always telling him about his wife's moon, while they loaded trailers.

"Potent women bask long in their moon."

"I think you ought to bask long in some, ah, Kotex, okay?"

"I am beyond you, small-small-Anthony."

The blood flows down her thighs, then oozes over her feathered calves as if on command into a thick pool. He stares at the blood watching, until she stands in the center of a wide crimson circle.

"Well, Mama J., o best beloved, I think I've got you beat if they want to test our blood for iron. Could you put on your clothes?"

The other woman in the cell is wearing open-toed shoes and looks like a hooker. She pulls her feet up onto her bunk, crinkling her nose.

“You live a small life, safe in the boundaries of your belief. Not I.”

“Why? Because you stick yourself like a pincushion?”

“I walk the road that, rising, merges with my death. The death I choose, the death I know. I please only myself. I’m different from you. Very different. I choose.”

That night Ant chooses too. He chooses to let the police take his mother to the state hospital. He figures he will pick her up later, if she lets him, when she’s clean.

But when she is discharged she doesn’t call and though he looks for three years, he never does see her again.

8.

The Writer Presents Us with Problems

The writer, a foolhardy gag of a woman, has a mind of her own. She has made some discoveries that have affected us, particularly Meier. And perhaps we should have delayed committing this to paper because, of course, it must be channeled through the writer. This would be fine, if it weren't for writer's tempestuous nature. If it weren't for her need to always exaggerate, create, and romanticize every little bit of what is given her.

Instead of writing it straight, she fancies herself the most proficient of hard-boiled detectives, able to sort out every last detail, in order to create a vision. And in some ways, she has struck a nerve. She seems, for instance, to have uncovered my fierce love/hate relationship to *The Irish Myths and Folktales*, edited by Yeats. This in and of itself is not so noteworthy, but I had not even been aware that such a vehement antipathy

existed in me, until she took the text and with it ran amok, noting the small details in his introductions, laughing at his jokes, that are meant for the Irish people alone to understand. I am also annoyed by her dismissal of J in all this (and by this o' best beloved I mean the master James Joyce). It is confounding, and I do not know how the connection was made to these texts, or when it struck me so much like a blow, but it did.

The same can be said for her research where it applies to Meier. The writer caught wind of the fact (she typed it, read it, edited it) that Meier had been around for ages, it seemed, even to those who exist between the pages. And through her research she came upon a monument that can be found, to this day, in the cemetery at North Main Street. This cemetery is no more than a short walk, a stone's throw from the monument in Kennedy Plaza where we met Ant. Within this cemetery is a monument, dedicated to our French allies in the Revolution who were housed in an encampment, upon the campus of Brown University. The memorial is dedicated to the memory of those soldiers, who were ambushed either on their way to join General Washington at Yorkshshire or upon their return through Boston.

And so, close to the east side of Providence, where we believe that Jimi was schooled before he ran away from Moses Brown, close to all of the churches that have been built in the Gothic revival style, and just a stone's throw from that First Baptist Meeting House, lies a grave filled with the bodies of those French who perished in Providence. They lie unnamed there beneath the stone.

The writer cried when she saw the monument, and yet she was also filled with something like glee at her discovery. It indicated to her, somehow, that our Meier is a

widow of one of these soldiers. She felt this at the monument as she ran her hands along the granite of it, and felt it stronger still as she touched the bronze plate on the north as well as the east side.

Her depiction threw Meier into an awful fit. She howled and whirled for days. We had never thought of Meier as beautiful before – we care little for such things – but in the midst of this discovery she became one of the great queens of history. A brush with human tragedy, whether her own or not, opened the petals of her beauty like a spring rosebud.

It is no wonder Meier was upset. She is undoubtedly annoyed by the cultural limitations of the writer. The story must always center on the United States. Noble hero to the French and others on the continent! Instead of actually seeing things through another lens. Perhaps a French lens! We would expect a little stretch, especially from such a fan of the Hollywood.

Take for instance this scenario:

Meier gets caught up in a zephyr, or a hurricane, some variation of a blustery gale. Add to the picture something that would truly give her reason to loathe the particular fiction being thrust upon her.

Perhaps she is not a widow of a resistance between partners – allies – a French widow of the American Revolutionary war.

Perhaps she is this: a movie producer. A woman working in Paris during the period in which French film became the artistic and intellectual giant of the world. Meier is a member of the *Cinematheque Francois* of the 1930's. She is one who, like the early film critic Langlois, wants to collect and study every film ever made. By doing this, she dreams of creating magical films. She dreams that she will be a star.

Imagine further that in 1939 the Nazis occupy France. Films are still made and Meier keeps at it, though it is dangerous.

After the Nazis are overthrown, after the war is over, France needs to be restored to its former grandeur.

American producers are in the right place at the right time. They are close to Washington. They have produced war propaganda films for the US government, films that depict America's white picket fences, 8 mm dreams of brave soldiers and smiling tomatoes in victory gardens, from sea to shining sea.

Now, those producers are there, helping to create a vision. They produced 1576 films between 1946-1948 and they have not even yet to released in Europe the films of 1941: Citizen Kane, Laura, The Maltese Falcon.

So when the United States "generously" allows foreign aid to rebuild France the American government includes (in the GATT Treaty on July 1, 1946) stipulations for French foreign aid. Among them a prevision that states that for every 13 weeks of films released in France, 9 can be for "any film" (namely American films since no other country made many during wartime/occupied years), only 4 of the 13 weeks in the film cycle need be French.

And so, anxious to put the horrors of war behind them French citizens flock to the movies. There they see the back catalogue of American films that is waiting for them – 2,212 films in all. Those films, the ones that Meier took pains to make during the occupation, are shunned. No one wants to see them, even in France.

Young filmmakers and moviegoers sing the praises of the Hollywood films. The French even create the term “film noir” to characterize films that picture war veterans as heroes, war veterans readjusting to life afterwards. Films that use low-contrast lighting, cityscapes as backdrops. And so begins a period of what Meier and others past their prime would call cultural imperialism, the great respect that had burgeoned for French art films wanes, dies. And with it Meier, embroiled in literary existentialism, and dark realism at the heart of these American (as well as pre-WWII Gallic) films, takes her own life.

Imagine it.

That could be Meier’s story, couldn’t it? It is, if not better, certainly more French.

So much for speculation about what we don’t know.

What we do know is this:

Meier did not return home to us, but we found her circling the monument, through days of sleet and snow. She spent nights walking the incline of the street named for the French commander Count de Rochembeau, who led those hundred to their fate.

This street, directly adjacent to the cemetery, is often noted today for its proximity to Benny’s hardware and a kosher deli restaurant called Gregg’s. The writer long served

food there, and she can attest to the quality of the roast beef reubens that she orders, rare, on grilled, freshly-baked pumpernickel.

The writer has a mind of her own, she is not doing what we expected, and this is putting us behind. It all began before we lost Jimi, back when he was refusing to help, insisting instead on humming rock songs and synthesizing the sound of shaking tree branches with the clanging of ocean waves against rock. He had grown sullen then, withdrawn. He did not sing, except on occasion, and unless he placed something on top of his lap – which he did when he met Ant in Memorial Plaza (now Kennedy Plaza) – he was always floating a foot or two above the ground.

This was okay for Jimi spiritually, but it presented practical concerns. It was difficult for him to get around. And so, we worried for him.

Meier, after being subjected to the writer's "poetic license," flew. She followed Ant to see a friend of his, a Laotian shaman – the rest of us were afraid of that encounter – and she has not returned. We believe that this was done to put an end to her second age, and it makes us wonder if perhaps, she ended her first also.

But the in-depth speculation we leave to the writer, who we believe is surreptitiously writing a story about the whole sorry ordeal into "Yogeybogiebox" blue scientific notebook #3, the one with the photocopy of a quahog taped to the cover. And this is particularly infuriating because it is our purpose to create the story, not to be so devoured, not to *become* the story.

With Tracy's mounting awareness of us, we dread the descriptions that she will write about us now, or perhaps later, in another volume. We long to write that nugget that James Stephen professed to J. (and by J. o' best beloved I mean the genius James Joyce) "You should engrave on your banner and on your notebook the slogan 'Rejoice and be exceedingly bad.'

Of course Elizabeth reminds me that in all good fairness to Stephens I should note that this was a retort made to J. who had voiced his own naughty commentary of Stephens work (something generally about the ugliness of usage, more specifically attacking his overuse of the semicolon.)

In any case the writer is a bit superstitious about us, and our mischief. She has taken to hiding her notes. Now, with Meier gone, most of our time is spent together, just Elizabeth and I, with Ant.

Elizabeth had convinced the writer, somehow, to take out two antique typewriters. One is a black Underwood that the writer was given by her friend Colleen's father, who was planning on throwing it out. The other, a black L.C. Smith and Brothers #5 is of similar vintage and color. The writer has gotten these machines, lovely machines that they are, into working order. She uses them by day and then at night Elizabeth and I make ourselves small, and try to pound and dance about on the keys, but thus far we have had no luck in conveying the messages that seem so important to this process.

The light from the computer monitor is sheer agony to us and we thought that these old manuals would allow us to tap out messages, suggestions, edits even, scraps of

encouragement (a line from one of Ant's favorite books: "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy") but this task is onerous. We tried also lifting a red pen, and a #2 pencil to make corrections, but they were far too heavy. In a fit, just before Meier left though, the two (she and Elizabeth) did manage to get one small, gnawed #2 up off the desk, but it dropped to the floor without a glimmer of notice.

But to the problem with the writer. She is not doing anything to get part three done. Instead, she engages in tomfoolery. She mires herself in research about Rhode Island, which, sadly, has no state history book. And so she finds out facts about the Brown brothers of Rhode Island, about John who was involved in "triangular trade" with the West Indies, which of course means that he was a slave trader. She studies also his brother Moses, who was opposed to the sale of slaves. She searches and finds monuments and the names of streets that were dedicated long ago. She knows about transportation in the state, all matter of disaster from the blizzard of '78, to the great hurricane of 1938.

It appears that she plans to sell our tome to the Hollywood. We know because she doodles plans all about it in her precious blue notebook. Can you imagine?

Not only does she imagine that she will find an agent willing to sell it, as if that isn't enough, she seems to also be creating some terrible sort of song list. She imagines that she can include the CD in the back of the book. With a play list that reads "Songs for reading chapter 4." She has jotted down songs by artists that we do not know, artists like Prince, and Sade, Miles Davis, Bob Dylan, and even a ballad by Dusty Springfield

called “Ode to Billy Jo.” She imagines that she will sell a CD with the novel, or the song list along with what she calls “the option.” As if anyone gives a fig about the writer! Even we know that. It is absurd, ironic, considering we possess every bit of the artistic vision. It is painful, this discovery.

Well, Elizabeth reminds me, she does grapple. We must take pains to be reminded of her opaque struggle. Elizabeth is right. The writer does keep a highlighted copy of an interview that a man called Larry King had with Mario Puzo, the writer of a book called *The Godfather*.

In the interview he says that he had “written it better.” But he was off to Europe and if he had written it better he was afraid that he would not get the \$450,000 advance that they gave him for the book. So she, through her criticism of other Italian American writers (she can’t touch De Lillo or Russo) is somewhat aware.

However, Elizabeth’s prodding or not, I must remind, the writer is not one to talk. No one dare deny the way she toils over the J. Jill catalogue, scouring the thin, glossy pages for “poetic-looking” blouses. In this way (and in this way only) she is not wholly unlike the genius J. who was, in his perfectionism, always searching for the perfect ring or waistcoat or shoe. What a story about shoes he has! His story and a story for another time.

Additionally, she is taking notes from some wretched magazine that advice her to understand her “promotional responsibilities,” to the novel. As a result of she composed a task list.

She plans to:

1. Have 5 X 7 "glossies" printed (?)
2. Prepare a list of reviewers she hopes will "big-mouth" the book (to be printed on mailing labels)
3. Compile a personal mailing list of friends (in anticipation of the publisher's mailing of postcards announcing the books' publication date and order forms) that she will also print on mailing labels
4. Create press kits (?)
5. Call publicists to ask about their price ranges and their experience setting up readings, signings, workshops

Her goal is to produce a list of 1,000 names, names and mailing labels of people who took classes from her, friends, aunts, uncles, the like. We indulged when she waxed romantic in the blue notebook about Dante but when she scrawled a ten page position paper about why she is justified in adding the 2,000+ mailing labels from a database she created of the members of the Providence Teachers Union, we lost patience. If only the fanciful notion of poltergeists was anything but rubbish! We would crash her hard drive and revel in the spite.

The most difficult part to write is yet to come, and either she knows this and is procrastinating, or she is simply oblivious. We are not sure which is the worst. We two, Elizabeth and me, are putting our heads together (trying to compose the last story) but neither of us is ready to take up the mantle from Meier, who was quite smart. If only our Meier hadn't considered visiting the dread shaman. But, we must persevere, despite the material and commercial priorities of our scribe. What a pity we couldn't get a poet!

9.

In the Company of Bards

To take pity on people in distress is a human quality which every man and woman should possess, but it is especially requisite in those who have once needed comfort, and found it in others. I number myself as one of these, because if ever anyone required or appreciated comfort, or indeed derived pleasure there from, I was that person. For from my earliest youth until the present day, I have been inflamed beyond measure with a most lofty and noble love, far loftier and nobler than might perhaps be thought proper, were I to describe it, in a person of my humble condition.

Giovanni Boccaccio
from
the preface to
The Decameron

On the day that Ant Malo got word that they were going to search the national parks along the I-5 corridor west in Oregon he contemplated buying a plane ticket. Two nights before his daughter Regina Marie went missing he'd dreamed that he was chasing

a girl who looked like her through a meadow filled with butterflies that started out gentle, circling him while he stood in fragrant clover. When he smiled they flew for his eyes, momentarily blinding him. He awoke with the feeling that someone was tugging violently at the Alice Cooper t-shirt that he always wore to bed, and he kept saying, "I didn't know that death undid so many. So many. So many."

What he did about it, when he got the news, was stop picking the mail up from the front hall, from under the mail slot. He watched it accumulate though, looked at it, fooling himself, at first, that it held a special meaning. For instance, after he got the news that she was missing he noticed that he had received the L.L. Bean Camping catalogue, a renewal for his NRA membership, and a reorder form for the beef jerky that he ordered in bulk for wholesale prices. This kind of mail all related to the outdoors. This frightened him. It was ominous.

What he did in reaction was to strip his bed. He put the bedclothes into the back of his Vega. It was the first step. He could not sleep anymore in comfort, not with her out of doors. In his mind, from the first mail drop, she was out of doors.

"It's just odd, because Regina Marie was always dreaming of butterflies." Ant told his ex-wife Louise all about it, the dream he had, everything, even about the distressing day that her mother Myra took the girl away, to move out west.

He fingered his keys, the flat gold circle of the apartment key, the silver ignition key for the Vega. They were hooked together on a safety pin. He touched them, saying, "The day before I took her to the carousel at Roger Williams Park. She picked a

palomino with a blue saddle. She was getting too big for that crap, but I hadn't realized it until that day, because she was a girl, and I figured it was best for me to let her stay with her mother. If I let her be with her mother they could go shopping and talk and be a little family together. I wasn't gonna disrupt everything by making a pest of myself. It would have been wrong."

All the time that Ant was talking about Regina, he was looking at Louise, wondering if she had any feeling about what might have happened to the girl. Women had a good intuition for such things and Louise was gifted in that department. She had a reputation for seeing the writing on the wall, at times before it appeared. They were divorced but they were friends, though Louise was living with one of the women who lived down the block from the house they'd rented in Warwick years before. Anyway, as Ant talked about Regina, he saw that Louise had something creeping into her mind. Perhaps it was jealousy, or doubt about Regina's fate, or worry for him. He was not sure. He was sure though, that even now, even considering these dire circumstances, Louise wasn't thinking of him. She was, instead, distracted.

Ant wasn't sure if she had a bad feeling about it but he most certainly did. He had slept little and fitfully since he got the news and he hoped that by sitting with Louise for a little longer he might summon up the courage to fly out to join the search team that was being assembled. It was only right to search for her.

She was his daughter, his only blood family.

He and Louise were sitting in The Coffee Exchange, not far from the little apartment that he had on Benefit Street, because he couldn't stand to wait there alone anymore.

His Aunt Pam had called him to see if he knew anything about Regina, as had his cousin who lived out in Toledo, and if he had to think about hearing the shrill ring of the telephone one more time, he might pull his hair out by the roots. He had talked first to Myra, before the story broke in the news. Another child had been taken from the area, six weeks before. Then Regina had been out there, at the same bus stop. He had known about the first disappearance. He had seen the news on the CNN website.

Myra said that it had been a cold, rainy morning with low-lying fog (they called it frozen fog out west) on the last morning that they saw her. Ant pictured it: the fog standing against the bushes and flying through the sugar maples, Douglas fir and the hemlock trees that bent and hovered around the apartment complex. All of it was standard for a February morning in the country.

The people who lived in Regina's town later agreed that the weather was perfect for the crime, that a cold, low blanket of clouds could have provided some lunatic the perfect cover, a cover like night, cover that would coat the road, coat the field, coat the meadow.

Ant had been home, oblivious through it all, making espresso in the little silver pot that had been his father's. He had perked the espresso and had been drinking it while he squinted out the window, admiring the bright glare that sprung up off the new fallen snow. Ant remembered he drank the espresso at about ten. He had four fat artichokes

sitting in a wicker basket on the counter and he planned to stuff later that day. Regina disappeared some time after seven so it had been about then, since she was in a different time zone. She didn't make the bus. She disappeared while he was warm, sipping espresso, looking comfortably out at the glare of the white snow.

Myra had explained that on that last morning Regina put on a pair of jeans, a Gap shortie T-shirt (if only it had been a fleece or wool sweater!) and her yellow rain pants with the matching jacket. Ant remembered that Gina hated to be wet. When she was a baby, just two, she would say it if she spilled even a drop of water on her shirt, "Daddy, I take it off. It's wet, yuck, I got awl wet. Awl, wet! Awl *whhhetttt!*" The baby would twist and hop then off the clothes would come, Pooh sweatshirt, pants, everything.

She had worn her boots too, that day, because she was forever cold. Ant speculated that by late February she had grown tired of cold toes in fashionable shoes. All this was reported to the police, and from Myra to the family, to friends, and to Ant. Ant had been calling Myra to find out exactly what they could do. Myra had been a little shaky, saying God would tell.

This made Ant nervous. Myra didn't believe in God and so he asked her if her boyfriend Edgar was there with her. He was. Ant wondered if the slur that he heard in Myra's voice was caused by an Oxy that some merciful doctor had slipped her, or if she had started drinking again. She had been a heavy drinker when they met, but she'd quit when she got pregnant with Regina Marie, he'd thought, for good. By the time she left to go west Ant suspected that she'd started up again, but he'd never been sure. Myra was good at drinking discreetly. She never caused a scene, rarely got too angry, hadn't even

staggered when she was stone drunk. She just smiled a lot. Maybe it had been the smile, finally, that kept her from slurring, because surely she was not smiling now.

Ant was doing things to stave off dread, dread and panic. He was not crying but instead filled with a terrible energy. And so he watched the mail pile up on his floor, touching it with a Hermann Survivor work boot. He couldn't believe that it kept coming, and to resist the continuous onslaught of it – the rising of the sun, the envelope of cold air that passed with so much paper through the mail slot – he refused to move it or touch it or alter it in any way. Fearing any news, because he knew that it was bad, he kept the television and the computer off. He noticed too, some Granny Smith apples that were sitting on his counter, attracting fruit flies. Someone had told him once, or he had read, that fruit flies had the closest possible DNA to humans, that they were often used in research. This was an interesting fact when paired with their life span, which was only about twenty-four hours. One dawn, one dusk. Ant hoped that to the fly that one day felt like a lifetime.

He spent a day walking down by the Providence River at Waterplace Park. He carried his copy of the *Purgatorio* with him, sniffing the garlic in the air as it wafted from the kitchen at Café Nuovo.

He looked at the people seated inside the restaurant. He noticed how their faces, behind frosted glass, turned to the river and seemed to float. When summer came, the river walk would be packed with tourists. They'd wander around, ready to drop their children off at school. They'd spend the weekend. They'd walk, tipsy on dessert wine,

watching the fires that burned in an art installation called Water Fire. It set braziers ablaze upon the Providence River.

The parents would meander there, along the smoky sidelines with their children – Ivy league parents, Ivy league children – talking about the medieval chanting that accompanied the fires. They would hold hands discussing the artist who put the project together. The children would describe it in loud, patronizing voices. And the parents, clad in expensive, ugly sandals, would saunter, shaking their heads, impressed. They would repeat, “Oh, Barnaby Evans. What an *apropos* name for an artist. Lovely. Just lovely. And breathe deep.” Here, they would do just that, “Mhmmmmmm. Smell the wood from the fires! Could it be cedar? Lovely. Lovely, lovely!”

For now the half-frozen river lapped the posts, whining.

Ant would not think about Regina, a nose-pierced Regina, wearing black, a student at Rhode Island School of Design (best art school in the world), or a tennis-sweatered-Regina attending Brown University. For Ant everything was a bit blurry, like it is when you are really terrified by something, and he tottered as he climbed the walk to the bridge up above. He was walking to clear his head, and he knew to avoid the spot across from Waterplace Park, the place where he usually went, because he would not see the boy that he kept a lookout for there. It felt like the boy who called himself Jimi Hendrix had been gone for years.

Ant met him when he was spending time there, waiting for his mother to return. His mother had been a woman who didn’t stay in one place for too long. She could be found though predictably, in certain places at certain times, if he was thorough and

diligent in his search. Ant knew that Kennedy Plaza had been the place to find her. That was where she always returned, eventually.

He could have gone to look for her somewhere else, up on Pine Street. He knew that she must have been there, sometimes, with one leg hiked on the bench by Alvarez's market, or leaning against a greasy telephone pole. He did not go there now, hadn't gone there since he started to refuse to bail her out when she got picked up for solicitation, for shoplifting, for larceny.

But, years ago, he would sit in the plaza waiting for her. He hadn't found her, never did. What he found instead, on the last day he decided to stop seeking her out, was a young boy who looked like he had too, was an addict. Some people will say that it is difficult to have some sort of sympathy for a heroin addict, but to Ant it was not so hard.

His mother had gotten hooked when it was fashionable for poets in the 1950's. During that time there had been a rush of H. going into the United States through forged alliances with the warlords of the Golden Triangle, who then paired with Corsican gangs to get it in. His father had been Corsican, and his Grandma Zadie had told him he'd lost his life wrapped up in the business of selling. That was, she'd told Ant, how his parents met.

A love story.

It was no wonder he had been a terrible father. No wonder his own daughter had never had a chance.

The drugs had gotten through on the fishing boats that came into the Port of Galilee in southern Rhode Island and more came through the Port of Providence less than

a mile from the river walk. Slaves had come through the Rhode Island ports before, alcohol, then cocaine, and every other shitty thing that kept some people up and others down.

None of it was a shock to Ant because he knew that John Brown, back before the American Revolution, had built the bloody docks to support the triangle trade that he set up with the West Indies. Every time he looked at the John Brown House, which was on Power Street (what other street could his house possibly be on?) or he passed Brown University he thought about it, how it was all built on slave blood, and then supported by the vices of ignorant and working class people, or pseudo-intellectuals, like his mother. He'd thought that Regina had escaped when Myra took her away to a place filled with forests and trees.

Ant wanted to find someone else to blame for what was happening. His opinions were colored in the extreme, a series of theories and histories that intermeshed in massive webs that were always centered around the establishment's power and greed. He was aware of it. He was also aware that when he read too much history, too many "current events" books he put himself in danger of becoming the strangest of animals, the impassioned conspiracy theorist. But there was no conspiracy that he could imagine, or even create, to blame for the loss of his daughter. He hadn't been there. He could have been. Period. End of story.

He loved to dramatize theories, to make them more interesting for what had been his favorite sport, the telling of stories. They were one whole genre and he always started conspiracy stories in bars, opening his eyes wide, and crouching down like a turtle,

saying, after a pause, "This is going to Blow-Your-Mind. Ready? I bet you didn't know that in 1968..." Being the center of attention had been great fun.

Ant took the river walk and pulled himself up to the little footbridge near Cafe Nuovo. That evening he had decided that he would not stay in his apartment. He had a plan. He would go to a poetry slam at nine o'clock. Until then he would either read, which was what he did now since he'd kicked the booze. If reading could not calm him the plan was that tonight he would keep busy all the time, until he returned home around midnight.

He had a strong feeling that he would get a message tonight, because the search had taken place, was still taking place, and from what he'd read about child disappearances and abductions he knew that there was almost always some news, when the child was dead, in the first twenty-four hours after the search. He knew that there would be a message on the machine tonight, certainly, and that later there would be more messages. Terrible messages. For now, only the answering machine would know. He'd been walking around since five and the sun had gone down. It was cold so he went to the car, figuring that he could warm up and read until they let the crowd in.

Ant drove downtown, found a space and then alternated between turning the engine on and off. He finished the last six cantos of the *Paradiso*, which he re-read every year. Then he thumbed through Dante's *Purgatorio*, looking for a quote. The pulpy smell of the pages rose up reassuringly. He planned to walk over to the club, called AS 220, on Westminster Street. He was desperate for something to do and he figured, how

bad could a poetry slam be? He was not a poet; he had sworn it off after writing one hundred poems in his early twenties, but it would be nice to listen to some young poets. The sky was purple and so he turned on the car's dome light. Before he went to the slam he wanted to re-read what Virgil said to Dante, just as the poet guide gave the character of Dante over to his lover, Beatrice. He loved the whole story. How sad it was because the older poet, Virgil, was not allowed to follow Dante to the *Paradiso*. Virgil had been born too long before Christ.

But Virgil wasn't the least bit bitter about being barred from heaven because he was born too soon. He simply told the younger poet, "You now have seen the torment of the temporal and the eternal fires; here, now, is the limit of my discernment." As Dante is about to exit purgatory Virgil reminds him that he has free will. Then he says, "Lord of yourself I crown and mitre you." Ant loved the way Dante had the character of Virgil use Catholic symbols there. Ant didn't know what Dante looked like, but he imagined the character of Tony Soprano, a favorite of his, donning a pope hat.

He liked the rivers too. He was going to have to look up the river Lethe in the *Aeneid*. He remembered that the footnote in Mandelbaum said it was in Aeneid VI, that Virgil created a river of oblivion, a river that had the power to make anyone forget their former existence.

He was strumming through his Chiardi translation, wishing that he could hold this speech of Virgil's up against his old Mandelbaum translation. He would have to try and dig that out.

Ant parked where he usually parked when he needed a space downtown, over by Traveler's Aid. He had parked there a hundred times before and he never had come close to having any trouble – he had begun to think maybe he was immune to that kind of trouble actually – and so he was more hurt than shocked when he first saw the figure of a man in an old leather jacket pushed up against the window of the driver's side door. The man was wearing a ski mask over his face but that was typical winter garb.

When he rapped on the window Ant noticed that the man was wearing a pair of dirty suede gloves. They looked to be lined with some sort of fur because they were thick about the fingers but the tips were cut off. It seemed, to him, that given the weather, this could only be for the sake of utility. The man would either need his fingertips bared to get the cash in his pocket or to pull a trigger. He noticed the tips initially because of the rapping the man's hands made on the window. It was the sound of cold bone against glass, not the muffled sound that a truly gloved hand would make at all.

He raised his hands to indicate to the man, who was squinting in the dark night, that he didn't have a weapon. He liked to give away money, to people, especially those in dire need – like junkies – but tonight he didn't have any food, or even cash. He had planned on stopping at an ATM on the way to the slam. He shrugged to the man and then he turned to look at the rear passenger door. There was another man standing there, his body pushed against the back door. These guys were not armed, he didn't think, instead they were “chumming.” That was the word that professionals used. It was funny because when Ant had been a fisherman and they'd a good run they called that “mugging.”

They had approached the car from either side and the front guy was signaling that he wanted money. The rear guy was tapping now, something metal, for sure, against the window.

Ant knew that the experienced crook learned that intimidation can get you a lot of money, the kind of money that armed robbers are used to getting. But if a cop comes along the back man crosses the street and stands waiting patiently for his friend, while the front guy tells him he'd simply asked the person in the car to spare some change. Nobody could charge them for anything more than panhandling. Or the back guy could have a piece.

The front man signaled for him to roll down his window. Ant was parked parallel in a space and he couldn't even think of pulling out.

He rolled down his window far enough to talk, but not quite far enough for the man to reach in and grab his throat. The cold air hit his face and when it did he drew in his breath. For a moment he thought of the men, and he really did wish he had some money, but then a stubbornness rose up in him.

As if on cue the man shook his head, he was getting impatient now, and said, "Hey brother, spare me some change to go up Broad Street and see my kid."

Ant put on his city mug. "Mac, where you need to get at? And what about Ralph Rugged Rocks back there? Why don't he come around this side and show his face."

Ant could see the reflection of the rear guy in the eyes of the guy up front. They were glittering under the light from the fluorescent streetlight and the whites were a bit

yellow. Ant turned to look back at the rear guy with a timed nonchalance, one that he knew made the back of his head vulnerable.

The rear man did not move. He knocked his metal, which was in a brown paper bag, on the back window instead.

Ant had a 357 magnum under his seat but the situation seemed hardly that dire, using it now would not be appropriate. Still, the thought of the pistol throbbed in his brain. A buzzing had started in his right ear and an angry feeling flamed up suddenly; he wanted to act.

Instead he said, "Listen Pal. I *know* the concrete mama, the hooch-pa, the can. We be chumming now, ain't that what they say? Fancy footwork but I'm tapped." His voice sounded loud and strained.

The men looked at each other. They didn't leave.

Ant was quite angry when he finally said, "You know Boo Reinowitz?"

There was no such person, but Ant thought that this name sounded plausible – there were guys all over named Boo – yet funny. He thought that his muggers(?), chummers(?), would be thrown off by it.

"He in medium?" The front man was scratching his lip, for a moment brought back suddenly, Ant thought, into the can.

He knew when the front man asked about medium security that the talk had turned social. He was sure, too, that the rear guy was in reluctant agreement. He had taken his weight off the passenger side of the car. Ant had his blankets and sheets – he'd planned on tossing them out to someone who was outside, in some gesture of balance,

hoping that someone somewhere, in exchange, would do the equivalent for Regina. He leaned into the backseat to grasp them and rolling down the window handed the whole bundle to the front man.

His legs were throbbing and tears stung his eyes. No matter what he did, these guys couldn't tell him from anybody else. A car pulled around the corner and the men, without any sense of gratitude, grabbing the sheets together, took off. After they left he sat very still, feeling as alone as he had ever felt.

When he returned from the slam he noticed that the frost on his windshield had made intricate, beautiful patterns across his windshield. The snow was falling in huge, wet flakes onto his windshield. There had been a time when he had seen flakes like that and thought that they were magic. No two alike. Now though, he knew the method for constructing Koch's abstract snowflake. He knew that the crystal of the flake first formed something of a single, equilateral triangle. He knew also that several triangles, all one-third the size of that first 'kernel' then attached to form a six-point star. From there other crystals attached to expand the structure, until it was a fractal, a dancing parachuter in icy white.

At one time Ant had seen all of his faith in the universe forming in the same way, one tiny triangle at a time that fused in some sort of desperation for togetherness with all of his other theories. He had imagined that this confluence of theories was sound and good. It had protected him. He based it all on the original principle that if we were good to those in our own immediate vicinity, somewhere others would do the same. For instance, he gave blood every six months. By signing a contract to do that (when Myra

and Regina lived in Rhode Island) they were put on a list. This list guaranteed that they, regardless of blood type, would never go without blood if they needed it. He had imagined that this was how the whole world worked. He'd believed that his behavior, random kindness, could directly shape his fate in the world. He still gave the blood and would continue because one thread of hope still clung to the notion that there was some cosmic unity keeping score somewhere, looking out for him and his. Even if it weren't true that shouldn't motivate him to stop.

Now, looking at the flakes splatting down on the glass of his car, he imagined that they are each suicide divers, not different and magical each, but a bunch of crystals bound together by the cold, crystals that didn't have any more harmony than the theories that he had packed together to make his life comfortable, comfortable and convenient.

The poetry slam had been another thing. He had looked forward to it, but it had been filled with little girl poets pouting and singing about their vaginas, not what he'd hoped for at all.

Ant pulled up in front of his apartment and sat out front for a while, smelling the sour interior of his car –it smelled slightly of pickles – and then he cut the engine, taking the silver ignition key off the safety pin, sliding it back into the ignition slot.

* * *

He notes, with pride, that his revolver is going to remain beneath the front seat. He will not harm himself. He is going to ride the whole thing out. He won't let himself get off easy.

Back in the kitchen the answering machine light stabs the kitchen darkness red.

He lets it keep right on stabbing.

Instead of listening to the message that he knows cannot be good, he drags his bed out onto the curb. First he takes the mattress, then the box spring. The bed frame is easier to haul and it makes music when it contacts the concrete sidewalk. On the way back in he slips on pile of accumulating mail. Now there are bills that stare up at him, sitting above remittance envelopes, bills peering at him through cloudy windows. He notices, with detached interest, that something from a Mexican labor union that he'd helped start, has come in the mail. It is there, on the floor.

That had been quite a trip. He'd stayed with an activist's mother, a poor woman who didn't speak any English. One night she made him salad and a thin pork chop. He'd looked at the salad, knowing that it would make him sick to eat it, but he'd eaten it anyway. Somehow, he had reasoned that not refusing her food, that good manners alone would save him. He'd ended up taking an emergency flight home to find out that he had an intestinal infection caused by amoebic dysentery. Even taking Flagel he'd lost thirty-four pounds, had diminished liver functions that turned his skin the color of putty, and shat yellow for a month.

He returns to sit on the bedroom floor. The minute that he is still the panic starts and it seems that the skin on his cheeks is crawling with something, bugs. Yes, bugs. He staves off the image of bugs on a whiter image of his daughter, but his cheeks still crawl and he can't get rid of the image of Regina now.

He moves to the area where his bed was, feeling the hollowness of the room. His clothes are in cardboard boxes because he left his first bedroom set with his wife Louise and he bought a second for Gina's mother Myra. He never had the energy or the money to buy a third, and the open topped boxes are convenient. He always knows just what is in them.

He still feels the creeping of his skin. He is all goose bumps as he tosses a rolled up sock aside and lies down. Then he feels a stroking against his cheeks, a gentle touch, a mother touch. He thinks he is imagining this physical contact against his face, imagining some person there, to compensate for the fact that he has no one. Alone in a cold world. Was it Bugs Bunny who had said that, carrot hanging obscenely from his mouth? No. It wasn't that. It was, "What fore you bury me in the cold, cold ground?"

Regina loved that cartoon. He imagines Bugs laughing his trilling laugh, laughing about how Ant had put his daughter there, somewhere, in the ground. The bunny shakes his head at him and shakes his giant bunny finger, saying, "Boss. Bad job, Boss." The rabbit tisk-tisks him.

Ant shakes this image off. He concentrates on remembering the people he has helped over the years. He has had fundraisers for sick kids (steak dinners that he calls simply 'times,' as in, "We're having a time for Bobby's daughter, little Margaret." Then

from the side of his mouth, softly, "She has leukemia.""). He has bailed out would-be friends. He helped to start the tree planting program in Providence as well as the community garden project. For the homeless he got shopping carts from the defunct Almay's. So that when the cops wanted to shake those people down for theft, below the many overpasses in Providence, they couldn't. The Providence homeless were each given a cart, a cart with a little plaque that read, "*Donated personal property of a Person Experiencing Homelessness. Remember, Always still cares!*"

But regardless of those he's tried to help over the years, now, he finds himself anonymous and foreign, detached, in the face of his own tumult. He wouldn't even know who to call for help. Louise would be the only one.

With some effort he raises his hands to his face. His cheeks still creep of contact and it makes him feel like a miserable fool for having lived his life the way he has. To feel some sort of contact on his skin now, seems the most absurd of jokes. He keeps seeing the face of Regina Marie, perfectly white, pupils dilated, as though lit by the flash of a camera bulb or a clap of lightning. He can not blink it back or shake it off. The waves of disbelief that gave him some comfort shift to a shimmering hysteria.

He feels like he is sailing on a ship that is floating, drifting, moving away from his own body. His breathing is heavy and difficult. The air around him is different even, wavy, like he is wearing a pair of goggles, viewing the world from under water. These feelings, and the continuous, insistent sensation against his cheeks frightens him and his heart contracts, an implicit warning. To reunite himself with his own flesh, to stop the creeping, he begins to claw his cheeks, raking his fingers from his ears forward, to the

delicate skin of his lips. He continues until he feels blood in his mouth, against his palette. For a moment he pauses to taste, imagining that the iron and salt on his tongue is a mingling of his living blood with the tears of the dead.

Regina's tears.

This time he does not stop himself. He pictures her tasting blood in her throat, trapped in some windowless van – cold – in a forest or familiar grove, under the shade of a man who looks like him.

He goes to the thermostat and cuts his heat. He paces until he can wait no longer. He goes to the answering machine and without turning on the lights he jabs the button. It is Myra's voice, sounding even slower, even more garbled. She says that they found Gina's backpack in the bushes near her bus stop, on Meadowlane Avenue. It was filled schoolbooks, including her History text and a copy of *Go Ask Alice* that Myra had recently given her. Myra asks for him to come. Myra asks for him to call her no matter what the hour. But now his head is full of the story. He sees it in slow Technicolor. He pictures the backpack, as it was, then filled with tiny, fresh blossoms, the kind of flowers that cover the meadows and parks he has seen in postcards. The kind that can only be found later, after the cherry trees blossom.

Ant is shaking. He is lightheaded, cannot catch his breath. He goes into the kitchen and looks at the refrigerator. On it is a picture of Regina at three and her most recent school picture. In the old picture, the frame has yellowed slightly, like photos of long-dead relatives. The other picture is not yellow, and Regina looks at him with the

ironic stare of adolescent curiosity. It is a lively picture, a picture that blames him, too. It says, "I see you. You didn't come."

He scratches the face out with a ballpoint pen and for one minute he can inhale. Above the sugar bowl the fruit flies circle, dancing their grim, short dance.

The artichokes are shriveled now, blackened.

Ant does not remember walking back into his bedroom but he hears a screaming, a hoarse pathetic sound that reverberated against the horsehair plaster of his apartment. To his ears it is a piercing, lonely siren. Not until he loses his voice entirely, until his throat is red and raw does he realize that it comes from him.

* * *

Ant wakes with no notion of the time. He feels a sweet pain, the need to urinate. He is lying down and as he rises, sees the night sky out his window, and the glimmering of stars, so clear after a recent snowfall. He moves to the window. Above him in the blue-ish darkness is what looks like a body, a bloated dead body, a body of a boy, up on the ceiling, against the window. The body appears to be billowing, floating as though it is in water. When he looks closely he notices the blue blazer. It is the blazer of his old friend Jimi. The eyes are closed, the nose wider, the cheeks a green, pulpy mess. But he is sure that it's him.

Ant is not afraid. The look on Jimi's face is peaceful and in the sodden span of his body, Ant recognizes beauty. He reaches his hand out to touch the boy, timid at first.

When he reaches up he cannot exactly get to him, so he hops. When he does he pokes the form more sharply than he intended.

He watches Jimi burst into blue bits. The shards are tiny; they rain down on him. How long he stands there he does not know. But this color blue, a shade he has never seen, makes his heart race. He is illuminated by the strange lightening of joy. He feels his breath catch in his throat and then expand his lungs. It is as though he is breathing pure oxygen. His ears tickle and he feels a flush that starts in his feet and blossoms up to his nose. The hair on his head stands akimbo. And it seems as though – suddenly – his blood is effervescent. Unexpectedly he bursts into song. A tune rises from his throat, the words float in the air like bubbles. The song sounds pleasant, his own voice is pleasant as it sings a song he has sung before. It makes him want to cry and laugh all at once. For a moment his body, the space he occupies, feels lighter. His bare feet, the heels first, then the soles and finally the toes lift up off the grimy carpet.

He enjoys a moment of disorientation that feels like all the ordinary minutes in a person's life, like the endless string of time before, one ordinary moment. Then the soreness in his throat combined with the pain in his groin claim him. He stops mid-verse, and rushes to the bathroom where he urinates, sitting, like a child.

As he unleashes the yellow flow he feels relief. The air in the apartment is frigid. There is a great difference between the temperature of the air and the stream that flows from his body. It is much like taking a piss after getting out of the ocean and it makes him shudder. He realizes that he must have been dreaming when he found himself

standing in the corner of his room. He had woken up dreaming a song, a song that is on the tip of his tongue, something he had once known, happy, long forgotten.

When he returns to his room he stands where Jimi had been and rubs his toes against the carpet. He tries to pull the song into his mouth – it is so close – but it doesn't come. He does not feel shards in the carpet, nothing strange or out of the ordinary. He looks out at the mantle of stars rubbing his hand against the roughness of his face. His lips are cracked and salty and his mouth is dry. He goes to the kitchen and unplugs the phone and the answering machine and then he gets their boxes from the hall closet. He repacks them and puts them over by the door. There is a place downtown where families with AIDS get housing. He will bring the machines there. He returns to his room and puts his face against the pillow – he did keep the pillow – feeling the coldness of the cotton against his ear. When he closes his eyes he falls immediately to sleep, and he remains there, still as a stone, until the sun is high in the noon sky.

Next day he starts to think about the espresso pot. It is in the small tube of a shower stall. The pot has been in there since he got the news about Regina. It is in there because Ant likes to clean it that way, to get all of the tiny coffee grounds out at leisure, while the hot water pounds his back. He lets the water run over the pot while he washes his hair. He washes other pans in there too. He has no dishwasher and this is what he considers his bachelor luxury.

He will need to do something creative with the pot. He will need to give it to the right person. This will create some sort of balance and maybe the balance will help Regina. Maybe somebody, somewhere at the exact same time as the time he was perking the espresso, would do the right thing too. Or do the right thing now. He thinks this as though by rote, and realizes that he has no belief in it, no enthusiasm for it. He hears something banging in the shower just as he thinks this, a noise that sounds like the pot is trapped in the funnel of a small tornado, in the plastic stall.

His hands are sweaty and he wants to use the toilet but he is afraid that when he gets there the pot will be sitting next to the hairy chunk of Irish Spring in the drain. He is afraid that even as he looks at the still pot he will hear it banging.

He avoids the bathroom. He urinates in the kitchen sink.

Next, he sits in the front room where the afternoon sun warms the floor. His couch faces the television, which is now just a dusty box. Ant can't bear to turn it on for fear of more news. His Goodwill couch is comfortable enough, and this too seems wrong. He pushes it back against the wall. Then, looking out the window, he notices that someone has taken the bed from the front walk. He wished that he could have watched. He takes a seat on the floor and feels a lump in his throat forming as the warm sun warms his head. He feels like a contented but guilty cat.

He pulls all of the shades in the apartment down with a snap, so that the light is diffused. Outside his window enormous black crows sit on the phone lines, click clocking their beaks at him.

The sunbeams that he chokes out with the blinds are awash with dust. Ant remembers reading somewhere that dust is mostly human skin. He swears for a moment that the dust is squeaking at him.

He has to go to the bathroom but he is shaking with anxiety. If he goes in there he thinks that something really bad will happen. The sun outside is still shining and warm. Regardless of how he treated Regina, whether he ignored her or doted, it would still be there. Regardless of the fact that he did not tell Myra that he had retired, that he did have time to come to visit.

Time passes.

Ant paces. He still needs to go to the bathroom; he still sleeps. He decided to take his files out of the filing cabinet. It is his paper life. Ink, stained proof. As he goes to the bedroom he hears the Vega's engine start.

Some lucky person turned the silver key.

He scatters some files: cancelled checks in Louise and Myra's hand, charge and electric bills, medical records, decades worth of concert stubs from every conceivable New England rock show, marriage and divorce papers, his mother's old photos, court records, family information, clippings of cartoons from Bloom County and finally his research files about Providence history, scandals and lore, the heroin files and books, mafia exposes and his worn copies of *The Divine Comedy*, *The Godfather*, as well as *The Last Don*. Then he moves to the refrigerator and pulls a small key from a box. He stares for a moment at the old straw hat that he keeps there with the box.

Then he moves to his office and opens the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet slowly and pulls out hundreds of pages filled with poems and stories that he wrote in his youth. The files are thicker than he had realized. The papers fall on top of all the others. They are different though, easy to distinguish among the rest. They smell older; the paper has yellowed. Finally, from the box that holds his underwear, Ant pulls his grandmother's passport and immigration records and Regina Marie's birth certificate. They fall like bricks. He pushes the papers around abruptly, with his feet, so that they are scattered through the apartment, stars in his dusty heaven.

He walks down to Kennedy Plaza, where he orders a hot dog. Smelling it he realizes, with some certainty, that Jimi Hendrix has left the world. The steam rises up in swirls from the Haven Brothers hot dog. It mingles with the puffs of breath that his own warm body makes in the cold air. He can't even remember the last time that Jimi came to the plaza, or sat with him by the World War I Memorial Monument.

He takes the bus over to the AIDS residence on the west side. He has always imagined being brave enough to even step inside that place to see if any of his dope fiend friends are there, or his mother.

The hot dog is stiff and soggy in his hand.

For the first time he goes inside. The girl at the reception looks clean. She gets up and offers him something to drink and a clipboard to fill out information. He takes off his backpack and gives her the boxed answering machine and the wireless phone. He explains, by shaking his head, raising his hand, but silently, that he is not an incoming

resident. He takes a volunteer flyer and stuffs it into the back pocket of his dungarees. On the front step he reads about the opportunities for volunteers, that he could go there to hold the AIDS babies. They need volunteers to work the nightshift. He imagines himself sitting in a rocking chair in some antiseptic room, holding a doomed, pink bundle. He feels woozy and he stumbles as he goes down the icy stairs, heading for the bus stop. He feels some pressure that lets him know that he needs to find a bathroom quickly.

When he returns home the apartment is still. He does not hear the espresso pot in the shower. The pot is still. He takes off his empty pack and places it gently by the closet that is filled with beef jerky, tarps, small bottles of Tang. His coat and his boots he places neatly in a pile, on the outside stairs. He fills the pack with food. Then he takes his key off Regina's safety pin, a diaper pin that he has long used as a fob. He pins it to his shirt and tilts the key in the light. It is gold, glowing in the afternoon sun.

It is the second of the keys in Dante's *Purgatorio*. There are two. The silver and gold keys that Saint Peter is entrusted by Christ, the silver one that is a sign of the science of judging the nature of sin and the absolution of the sinner. This one, his silver key, he left in the Vega. The gold key however, is more complicated. It represents the priest's authority to absolve the sinner. It is far more difficult to get resolve, complex.

He sits down on the toilet and as he releases his bowels he puts the gold key in his mouth, fat end first. Swallowing, for a moment, he gags. He feels the slow cutting path of the key as it travels into his stomach. When is all the way down he takes a ragged

breath. Finished using the toilet he washes his hands. Then slowly, slowly and quietly, he uses his wet hands to open the shower stall door.

The espresso pot *is* next to the drain, and it is not moving, which is a relief. But there is a naked girl in the shower. It is the girl from the dream that he had before Regina was taken, the girl he chased through a forest, a girl who he mistook for his daughter. Now he sees that her hair is lighter, her lips fuller. Her heart-shaped face holds the charm of Lolita, his idea of the classic American beauty.

She looks at him with a dissatisfied pout. She is every girl he's ever seen, longed for, pitied, imagined. She is every silent lamb of movie fame; she is every secret love of his, she is Myra, Louise. She is his daughter and his mother, singing poems to the west, to their vaginas. He does not want to wait for her, or speak or try to please her.

She is white as paper and covered in tiny cuts, cuts that look like they are made by a razor blade or X-acto knife. They are placed carefully. They go horizontally across her face, neck, arms and lower. They cover every inch of her, even the soft tuft of pubic hair that looks like down on a thistle. There are so many cuts, so evenly and carefully applied that her skin has taken on the texture of bark. The bleachy bark of the Paper Birch. New Hampshire's queen of the forest.

Still, she is quite pretty.

He shivers. Then he steadies himself, wondering what to do. It occurs to him that he will do what he wants, instead of acting polite, or scared, shocked or surprised. He is none of those. He looks into the eyes of the shower girl. In that moment he is happy, strong – celebrated hero in his own eyes – as he takes up the espresso pot. He smashes it

cleanly against the mirror, and when he does it, he does it with neither hope nor rage. It is a relief to see his haggard, whiskery face shatter into something like grains, like hers. Sharp fragments, asymmetrical but beautiful in their concentric circles, their intersections, their webbed pattern.

He winds up and hurls the pot almost happily, with all his might, through the paned window. It shatters the glass of the first pane and *yes*, he has hurled it hard enough for it to go through the storm window. A few shards pop back at him. There are only a few slivers about, glimmering on the sill like diamonds in a tiara. The pot lands mutely on his lawn, on a blanket of snow. He looks into the shower to find that the girl is gone. Ant is neither happy nor sad. He is there, while she is gone. He has not disappeared. He feels the brisk wind, the honeycomb tile, solid beneath his feet.

From the bathroom he wades across the pulp of his existence.

Beyond Ant's front door is the foot traffic of Benefit Street, where students with faces still fresh return from class. In Kennedy Plaza the night people will begin to gather as shadows lengthen. Rush hour will come and with it the pull and huff of buses. Downtown will teem with people destined for home, eager to return to husbands and wives, sons and daughters. Just beyond the plaza – visible from the highest office towers – is the bay, where the sky balances itself precariously against a winter sea. Ant pictures it all, the crystal-blue dome of the world, frigid, but welcoming.

He feels cold air as it rushes in through the bathroom window. The only sounds he hears are a rustle and the bluster of the North wind, as he turns the knob of the front

door. It's pretty how the wind makes all his papers dance, blowing there, through shattered glass.