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My microscopic field

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My microscopic field

by

Lisa Michelle Kadous

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Major Professor: Debra Marquart

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This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

Lisa Michelle Kadous

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program

For the Graduate College
It's amusing to see how, even on
my microscopic field, minute events
are perpetually taking place illustrative
of the broadest facts of human nature.

—Alice James, from her diary
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EXACTLY WHAT I MEAN

Mave Satter had an Aunt Tish with connections. Tish had worked nineteen years in Kansas City or KC (everyone in the Midwest called it that) for Manwright Cards, the second largest greeting card company in the nation, number two in sales only behind *When you care enough to send the very best*. She’d started in the clerical ranks and trudged right through, not stopping until she’d reached Executive V.P. of Marketing.

Mave had been named after her paternal great grandmother, mother of Tish and her father. Mave thought her given name, Mavis, sounded terribly dour, a name for an old, gray lump of a woman. She’d never known Great Grandma Mavis, but in the daguerreotypes her father sometimes pulled out, she looked basically like an old gray lump of a woman. In addition to *Mave*, which people started calling her in ninth grade, Mave had also been called Mavey and Mavis within her lifetime, a triptych of titles that detailed her evolution from child to adult. If people didn’t ask about her real name, Mave didn’t reveal it. Embarrassing.

Manwright had just begun to develop a new subdivision called *Exactly What I Mean* and needed the right sort of individuals to create the cards. Tish had said that quite often, the right sort of individuals were related to individuals in upper management positions. Tish claimed there were Manwrights (by blood or marriage) everywhere you turned, even pubescent Manwrights running the Xerox machines. The company’s slogan: *When you gotta do it right, Manwright Cards*. Mave thought the slogan sounded shabby and not at all eloquent, the company name resembling caveman talk. *Man Write Cards!*

“Write cards? My degree is in Classical Studies!” Mave told Tish over the phone, then
looked around the shop she managed and thought about how little mileage she got out of her classics now.

“Mave,” her aunt said. “You’ve been living in Benton for six years! I know people get attached to the place where they went to college, but don’t you want a change, some excitement?”

Mave sighed.

“You can write cards,” Aunt Tish reassured. “It’s a great job, honey. Everyone wants to do it. And there are lots of young eligible men in the area!” Tish added the last part as bait, Mave knew. Tish had never been married and wasn’t big on boyfriends, said they got in the way.

“Why does everyone want to write the cards?” Mave asked.

“Why?” Tish repeated. No one asked that, none of the shoe-in interviewees—the Manwright sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, step- and foster-children. They just wanted to write the damn things. “Well, the greeting card author is really the mouth of the entire nation. Everyone buys and sends cards, so in effect, you’d get to put the words in their mouths.”

Mave crunched loud on a carrot stick, right into the mouthpiece of the phone.

Tish seemed not to notice, kept on talking. “You’d be a visionary, in a way, anticipating what people will want and need to say in the future.”

*Crunch crunch.*

“Besides, this boys’ club is just begging for more strong women to come in and stir things up.”

Mave was no newcomer to the strong woman speech, which ultimately involved talk
of Tish pulling things: I’ll just pull a few strings or I’ll pull rank. “Hmm,” Mave said.

“Honey, you just put together a little portfolio for me. Write some verse, you know, basically poems but something that suits a card. I think we’ve got a bad connection, dear.” Mave put the carrot down, turned on the TV but muted the sound. Race cars zoomed silently around a track.

“Do verses for a few different occasions. Nothing too…” Tish paused, “ambitious. Keep it simple.”

“Simple?” Mave asked, waiting for an explanation.

“Right. Simple,” Tish said. “Oh, and you might try to work a little rhyme in there too. I’ll show that to Clay Winslow, and we’ll get you an interview if I have to pull his stupid little head off. I’ve got another call, honey.”

At the Kaleidoscope Shop, Mave sat at her desk behind the cash register, her pen poised above a crispy sheet of shop letterhead, trying to come up with verse for the portfolio Aunt Tish had asked for. The Kaleidoscope Shop sold overpriced arts and crafts, the majority of which had been created by, the shop sign boasted, primarily Iowa artisans. Because the place teetered constantly on the brink of financial disaster, the owner couldn’t pay Mave more than $15,000 a year to manage it, which she’d been doing since she graduated from college two years ago.

She thought she ought to move on from the shop sometime, hoping she could find something more closely related to her major, but she began to think that wouldn’t happen, not unless she got a Ph.D., which would give her father a heart attack. Waste of time and money,
he’d say, an eccentric whim. College had been one thing. Everyone went to college, but Wade Satterm wouldn’t be able to stand seeing his twenty-five year-old daughter going to school when she was old enough to get married and have children. “Keep going to school and you’re gonna turn out like your Aunt Tish,” he’d told her.

Making her way to the back of the shop, she stood in front of the mirror that people used when trying on the macramé vests. A moon-faced girl with round, olivey eyes, a delicate nose, and sandy hair stared back at her. Hopelessly naive. She wished for wary Slavic eyes, almond-shaped and aquamarine, eyes that didn’t give you away. Mave walked around with the whole world in her eyes. She caught glimpses of herself reflected in the huge windows of the shop where she worked, and never failed to be astonished at how lost and dreamy she looked. At the grocery store, the stock boys always asked if she needed help, as if she radiated this need.

Going back to her desk, she decided to write a *birthday for grandma* card, though she found it difficult to focus on, impossible to take seriously. Where to start? The essence of *grandma*, perhaps. She had one living grandmother, her dad’s mother, who had Alzheimer’s and lived in a nursing home near Mave’s parents. Mave couldn’t use her own grandmother as any sort of paradigm. Grandma Satterm was all about Depends, drool, and not calling people by their right names. It made Mave uncomfortable to visit her, so she rarely did, and felt ashamed.

The prototype, still-with-it grandmas baked cookies and gardened. They sent birthday cards with two-dollar bills in them, and cooked big family dinners, making everyone’s favorite foods. No matter how old you were, they were not really all that old. The front of the card,
Mave decided, would say For Grandma’s Birthday, and on the inside:

Grandma, you lovely matriarch,
Baking goodies with almond bark
On this anniversary of your birth,
I wish you a day filled with joyous mirth.

The bell on the shop door jangled and Mave looked up. An attractive blonde woman walked in, smiled and said hello to Mave, but it came out Allew. Foreign language professor, Mave guessed, French, maybe. The town divided itself essentially into three factions: The faculty, the students, the townies, and Mave didn’t take the woman to be a townie.

“I’m visiting from Quebec,” the woman said, only she said Kebec, “and I’m looking for zee souvenirs to take back for my friends. You have zee souvenirs?”

Putting her hands on her hips, Mave got out from behind the cash register and thought about this. “Most of what we carry is original art created by Iowans,” she began. The woman looked puzzled. “Let’s see what we can find,” Mave said, and led the pretty woman over to a card table. It had a shiny, bubble gum pink blob displayed prominently in front of a stack of small boxes that were full of pink blobs.

“Zis is some type of sculpture?” The woman asked, poked at the blob with her index finger.

“Well,” Mave hesitated. “These are Priscilla’s Prissy Pies. Priscilla and her husband have a farm near Osceola. She lets these dry out, then paints them.”

“Pies?” The woman asked.

“Pies,” Mave confirmed. “You know, from cows. Cow pies.”

“Oh,” the woman said, “Zis is not really what I had in mind.”
"All right. I'll see what else we've got around here." Mave felt like she'd let the woman down, but then the pies had been made in Iowa and fit the bill. "Here's a Flood of '93 picture book and audio tape. Some local musicians got together, wrote and recorded songs after the water receded. It seemed like half the state was underwater for a while there." Mave held up the book, which had a photograph of a flooded corn field on the cover. "The song 'My House Went Up the River' is pretty good." The woman just shook her head, looked daunted.

Mave moved on to some framed photographs on a wall, taking the woman past a rusty scrap metal reindeer that hadn't gotten put away after holiday season. "These photos are of tombstones in a cemetery near Iowa City," she pointed to the photos. The woman tilted her head to check out the price sticker on the frame. "The tombstones are rather elaborate," Mave added. She couldn't think of anything else to say about them.

"Zis price—oh, it cannot be right."

Mave looked at it. $150. "It's right," she said apologetically. The place sold on consignment and couldn't get out of the red, so the owner stuck outrageous price tags on everything. "I'll tell you what," Mave took on a deal-making tone. "Where are you flying out of to go home?"

"Des Moines."

"Okay, they have a gift shop in the airport that has some salt and pepper shakers, spoon rests, stuff like that says Iowa on it," Mave offered.

The woman just stared at Mave for a moment, then managed a tight smile. "All right, well, thank you," she said as she walked out the door.
Quebec, Mave thought. Far away. She wondered if her family would miss her if she moved somewhere like that. After Mave’s college boyfriend had graduated and moved away, her father had talked about absence making the heart grow fonder, only he’d said *larger*. But after a couple months, Mave quit missing her boyfriend, and began to suspect that absence made the heart forget, or at least to examine with suspicion what it had regarded as fondness.

The bell on the door jangled again. The daily patron tally usually fell between five and twenty-five, and sometimes Mave spent hours alone. She jumped up, recognizing the shop’s owner, doughy, soft-spoken Phil, whose jeans always rode low on his hips, even before retro came back.

She moved the merchandise in the shop around a lot to keep things looking new, but she hated to clean, didn’t do enough of it. But then everything got done, and she made neat displays, hanging stuff from the ceiling, on the walls, stacking glass blocks on the floor to display stuff on, stacking stuff on top of stuff, until you couldn’t decipher the merchandise from the display materials. Sometimes people asked to buy the milk crates, two-by-fours, and glass blocks Mave used for display, mistaking them for art. What the hell—she sold them.

Phil smiled, said, “Morning, Mave,” and began to give the place the once-over. She grabbed a dust rag from the shelf beneath the cash register and tried to look purposeful. The day before, she’d rearranged things, sticking a collection of small sculptures by a single artist—nudes—in a front corner of the shop. They looked like a church choir of naked halflings, propped up the way they were in two rows of five. Phil stood in front of them for a moment with his hands on his hips.

He picked up one of the sculptures to examine it more closely, and Mave could see
him taking note of the dust, which turned sooty when you allowed it to build up, layer upon layer, in the cracks and crevices of things. She could tell the dark dust crud in the lines of the sculpture troubled him and he stuck his sausagey index finger into the thing’s eye, tried to wipe it out, but it didn’t work.

Mave deserved to be scolded, but Phil wouldn’t do it. He put the sculpture back, sighed, and looked over at her. He jammed his hands deep into his front pockets, taking his jeans down an inch or so further than they already were.

At home in her apartment that evening, sitting on her bedroom floor with a legal pad in front of her, Mave decided to try her hand at another type of card. Sympathy. It’d be a generic card, intended to address the death of no one in particular, not the dead son, great-grandmother, or friend. Just your average, anonymous fatality. The front of the card would say, I feel your pain. This seemed like something she’d heard before but couldn’t place. The inside would read:

This thing you’re going through is rough
and I’m sure you think you’ve had enough
but hang on through this darkest night
The morning sun will be shiny-bright!

She wondered if a sympathy card ought to rhyme; she’d have to work on that one a bit more. Or would she? It sounded just like the verses on the cards she leafed through at the grocery store, even better than some of them. Within the past year and in light of the whole PC movement, Manwright had launched a multicultural marketing campaign: cards tailored to ethnic groups whom they felt they’d been ignoring. Mave remembered one sample card Tish had shown her that had illustrations of what was meant to be gefilte fish on the front. She
decided her sympathy card wasn’t half bad.

Around holiday time, the company often sponsored TV movies starring Lindsey Wagner with plots that neatly tied in with the holiday at hand. But lately they’d been thinking that Lindsey, with her golden hair and faded denim eyes, didn’t exude the perfume of diversity, and rumor had it she would be let go in favor of an actor who did. The movies, however, would not lose their happy endings.

Mave was skeptical of happy endings. She never sent cards—waste of money, full of trite sentiment that people ought to be able to come up with on their own. Letters were another thing, pages and pages long, written with fountain pens on onion skin paper, letters expressing every nuance of the writer’s mood, sometimes rambling on about nothing, other times divulging the deepest secrets.

Mave kept a black trash bag in the walk-in closet in her bedroom full of letters from people who had inhabited all different times in her life. There were crumpled, yellow pages her parents had sent her when she’d been away to summer camp in 1982, Pink Floyd postcards from that awful red-haired boy, Gene, who’d been obsessed with her, freshman year of college, and airmail letters in red and blue-trimmed envelopes from friends touring Europe. Mave would empty the letter bag onto her bedroom floor, then sit in the middle of the monstrous pile and begin to read. The result: a montage of voices that combined and achieved a sort of pH balance, the acid of some of the letters neutralized by the alkali of the others. When Mave read her letters, she had brief lightning flashes of self-understanding. They told her who she was. The rest of the time, she had no idea.

Standing in front of the dresser mirror in her bedroom, Mave smiled at the image, tried
to coax it out of portrait pose. The girl in the mirror smiled back with what seemed a will of
her own, made the pale hair on Mave’s arms bristle. Mave offered her hand to shake and the
mirror-girl anticipated it, offered hers at the same time.

Nobody said How do you do. Card writer had a dull thump to it, like someone pounding on a
wall.

“Nice to meet you,” Mave said to Mirror-girl. I’m Mave Sattern,” she cleared her
throat, donned what she considered a professional pose, “Greetings Technician.” No good.
Made her sound like a peon. Technicians were never in charge. She was entitled to more
than technician and more than a measly $15,000 a year. She could hardly live on that.

Her parents were aware of this and periodically sent her short letters describing the
weather and their general health, as well as a disclaimer of some sort for the check they
included with the letter, the check that would fall out of the single-page correspondence and
flutter to the carpet like a feather when she’d unfold the letter to read it. Her mother always
wrote the letters, said things like Get yourself some new clothes and then wrote New Clothes
on the memo line of the check. Her father wouldn’t talk to her about anything serious, except
in cliche. Serious talk produced a tic in the right upper corner of his face, invisible to the
untrained eye, but Mave could always detect it. Nonetheless, he and her mother both worried.
Their worried letters went right into the black garbage bag with all the rest.

“How do you do? Mave Sattern,” she tried again, thrusting her right hand at the mirror for a shake.

“Sentiment engineer.” Mirror-girl extended her hand at the same time and the two of them
touched fingertips. Mirror-girl’s were cold, smooth. Drawing her hand away from the mirror,
Mave glanced out the window, then back again. The image looked at her, smirked, said
"You tawkin' ta me?"

Two weeks had not even passed before Manwright Cards called Mave for an interview.
When she'd graduated from college with the classical studies degree, Mave had applied for a
number of real jobs, so she knew that companies usually took forever to get back to you,
even with a flush. Not this company! They were all over her. She told them she could make
it to Kansas City anytime for an interview, so they scheduled her for early Monday morning,
giving her only two days to prepare. *Pull a few strings, get you an interview right away*, Tish
had said, but now Mave started to believe those strings were more like nooses dropped
silently over the heads of those in the position to hire, nooses that adorned necks with the
loosest of warnings.

They had scheduled the interview for 9:00 a.m. and the morning rush hour traffic
intimidated Mave, though she'd never tell anyone. She kept having to exit it off the freeway
to stay on 35 South, and sometimes those exits involved strange roller coaster loops that
made her break out in a cold sweat. It was Kansas! You didn't get worked up about the
traffic in Kansas. New York City, maybe, but this was *The Wizard of Oz*, and a sky so big it
induced agoraphobia in some diehard city dwellers.

Arriving safely at Manwright headquarters, Mave sat in her Buick, a hand-me-down
from her parents, and tried to pull herself together as cold air from the AC blasted her in the
face. August and humid, hotter than it would be in Iowa. Ahead of her, the building seemed
to bend and distort behind a curtain of heat. A mirage, maybe. Company headquarters
looked more like a snazzy hotel than a center of commerce. In front of the five-story building stood a sculpture—an enormous shaft with the same obsidian look as the windows on the front of the building. Pink flowering bushes ringed the base of the shaft, which appeared to have grown up out of a small, man-made pool. Wrought iron umbrella tables were arranged nearby, the perfect place to eat lunch or just step outside for a break, Mave thought, but they were unoccupied. Not a person in sight.

Mave walked up the graduated steps that led to the long sidewalk in front of the building, then walked slowly from there to the building’s main door, like a bride walking down the aisle. She began to softly hum a wedding march, but stopped when she walked past the sculpture. She felt watched. Maybe they had a security camera in the sculpture, a guardian eye in the tip of the shaft.

Clay Winslow, Mave’s interviewer, had a long, potato-shaped face and a lipless smile. He had the job of interviewing potential card writers as well as overseeing the work done in the entire department, a big job. So many occasions! Birthdays for people and pets, anniversaries, bar and bat mitzvahs, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, winter’s solstice, new jobs, deaths, near-death experiences. You name it, they had a card for it.

When Mave entered Clay’s office, he rose to shake her hand, a brutal little squeeze he administered while handing her his business card with the other hand.

“Clay Winslow,” he said by way of introduction, then motioned for her to sit down. Coffee, Ms. Sattern?” he asked, sitting down himself. He did not waste words.

“Yes, please,” Mave said.
Clay Winslow pushed a button on his intercom, “Sheila...”

“Yes Mr. Winslow?”


“Black,” she said, nodding her head. She really preferred hers with a splash of skim milk.

“Black,” he assured the intercom, then rubbed his forehead. The unrelenting sun shone in, painting a stripe of light like a girl scout’s sash across Mave’s chest and up into her face, blinding her if she moved the slightest bit. She squinted at Clay.


“So,” Clay began, fingering her resume. For some reason, Mave expected him to say *What brings you to this neck of the woods*, but he didn’t. He said, even though he had to know she was Tish Satter’s niece, “What made you decide you’d like to write greeting cards for us?” He sounded a little bewildered, like all those words strung together in one question made him dizzy.

Sheila tiptoed in with two cups of coffee, which she set on Clay’s desk apologetically. She looked frazzled, hair zooming out in every direction.

Mave just started talking, unsure about what was coming out of her mouth. She felt like one of the last three finalists in the Miss America Contest. She’d just stepped out of the soundproof booth and now had to answer the big question, which would have something to do with changing the world, making it a better place.

It didn’t matter to her whether or not she got the job, but something buried deep inside
compelled her to tell people what they wanted to hear. Habitual politeness prevented her from being disagreeable to Clay Winslow, and this irked her but she didn’t know what to do about it. Her first impulse always was to be polite. If she made eye contact with a stranger, she had to smile at them, just a little, couldn’t help it. Sometimes she said hi to people and they wouldn’t respond, looked over their shoulders, didn’t know who she was talking to. This made Mave angry at herself and at them.

“Everyone buys and sends cards,” Mave heard herself say in response to Clay’s question, “so in effect, card writers are the mouth of the entire nation. They speak for everybody! Card writing, it seems, is an important job that requires a sense of vision on the part of the writer. Both personal and collective vision.” *Personal and collective vision?* Her hands were fluttering like a pair of finches in the air. She put them in her lap, and wrapped up the monologue.

Clay sat watching her, glancing down occasionally at her resume. Mave thought he probably wanted to know what classical studies was, but he didn’t ask. They never did.

In the bedroom of her apartment back in Iowa, Mave dumped the trash bag full of letters out on the floor, then cleared a space in the middle of them, and sat reading in her ratty blue terry cloth bathrobe. Anxious, like a drug addict in need of a fix. Three o’clock in the afternoon and Phil had stopped in at the Kaleidoscope, told her he needed to do a few things around the shop and sent her home early. She hadn’t argued. Her head throbbed, the dull pain drumming its cadence into her temples. Five days had passed since her interview. She supposed if they offered her the job, she’d have to take it. Her parents and Tish would call her crazy if she
didn’t. “You can’t look a gift horse in the snout,” her dad had said.

Clay had made the job sound almost appealing. *Exactly What I Mean*, the company’s new subdivision, catered to those who were particularly uncomfortable expressing their own feelings, those who might not even know what their own feelings were until they read them on a card.

“It’s situationally-bound sentiment,” Clay had explained Mave. “These cards don’t express holiday greetings or good wishes to the bride and groom. What they do is bridge the gap caused by miscommunication. They convey sensitivity and feeling, and they often do it better than people who give the cards could do themselves. That’s why they’ll want to buy them.” He’d become animated when he told her that, spun around in his swivel chair.

Clay had given some sample verses to Mave to take home and read over, a few copies of rough drafts one of the writers had submitted for the new line, reminding Mave that they still needed to be tweaked here and there. Mave read a verse aloud, hearing her tinny voice fill the room.

*I know I made you unhappy, darling, but sometimes people hurt those they love without meaning to. I was insensitive and I apologize. You deserve someone who realizes your true value and from now on, that someone will be me. My heart swells with love for you. Can you give this big, swollen heart another chance?*

Now Mave put the verses down, closed her eyes, and reached down into the mess of letters surrounding her like a pile of unraked leaves. She came up with a letter from crazy Gene, who had sent her at least fifteen letters within a few months their freshman year of college, even though she lived just blocks away. She really hadn’t even known him, had gone...
out with him once and that’d been it—he loved her! “Whatever, Mavis,” he said to her polite rejection, tears streaming down his face, washing over pale red freckles. Gene’s letters were intricate braids of pathology—sometimes pathetic, other times cruel. He loved her one moment, lashed out the next. Loved, lashed, loved, lashed.

_I would do anything for you, Mave. I think about you all the time. Last night I had a dream that we got married under a waterfall and we didn’t get wet at all. Who do you think you are? You think you’re so much better than me? You don’t know what the hell you are._

She put that one back in the envelope, closed her eyes, and pulled out another letter, one from her mom.

_Baked a cake today. Canning tomatoes too. Dad going to see Doctor Gordon Friday to get bunion checked out. How’s work? Okay on money?_

What had happened to her Classical Studies, to Greece, Rome, Dionysus, and Pandora? Pandora had no real world application, that’s what happened.

The phone rang and Mave jumped, crunching letters under her feet, to get to the phone on the night table.

“Mavis?” the voice on the other end asked and she winced. No one called her that.

“Clay Winslow.”

“Oh,” she said and her heart raced. She should say something other than _oh_. Inquire as to his welfare maybe.

“How would you like to come to work writing cards for us in KC?”

“Oh!” she said more emphatically this time. Her vocabulary seemed to have disappeared.
"That a yes?" Clay Winslow asked.

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Mave cast a desperate look around her bedroom. Safety. Where was it? She looked to the Apollo and Daphne on her dresser, a small reproduction of the Bernini sculpture depicting the moment of metamorphosis. Metamorphosis, that frozen pose? Daphne’s hair had sprouted leaves, but otherwise she and Apollo just stood looking up and to their left, like spectators at a golf tournament. Mave looked to her pile of letters on the floor.

"Can I have a few days to think it over?"

Two weeks later, Mave sat in her very own cubicle staring at a glowing chartreuse computer screen. “You can change the color,” Ken Brouwer told Mave right away, but he didn’t tell her how. She’d left poor Phil at the Kaleidoscope in a lurch with no one to run the shop, but Manwright insisted she put in her two weeks’ notice and come to work for them as soon as it was up.

Mave knew nothing about computers. She tried to give Ken Brouwer the Help look that worked on the grocery store stock boys, but he proved immune to it. She couldn’t force that look; it just surfaced on her face when she didn’t need it. Ken had been assigned as Mave’s training buddy (which was how he’d introduced himself) and only a flimsy partition separated their two desks.

“I don’t know what you’ll prefer, but I like to write them by hand,” Ken said and for a moment, Mave had no idea what he was talking about. Then she remembered: cards. He pulled open Mave’s bottom desk drawer to reveal a stack of legal pads, “I type them up
afterwards. Your desk should be stocked with everything you’ll need.” He spoke with a faint lisp, his tongue catching on his teeth with every s. Mave just stared at him, taking him in feature by feature. He was trying to help her. He had soft gray eyes, a pleasant face, and small, straight teeth. “Clay thought you could just practice for the rest of the afternoon. He didn’t want you to be overwhelmed the first day. Write some stuff, I’ll try to help you clean it up a bit, then we’ll let Clay a look at it. If you have questions,” he pointed at the partition, “I’ll be right over there.” He turned to walk back to his desk.

“Let me ask you something,” Mave grabbed the sleeve of his shirt, “How did you wind up here?” she croaked.

Ken looked confused, caught off guard. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Mave sighed hard. “Nevermind,” she said, letting go of him. He shuffled off to his cubicle smoothing his sleeve. Mave fiddled with the contrast dial on the computer monitor, blacking out the screen. The department was situated somewhere in the middle of the building and had no windows, no link to the outside world, existing simply as a labyrinth of cubicle-forming partitions. They had the air conditioning set too cold and Mave shivered in her short-sleeved blouse. She had left the August heat outside to be monitored by guardian eye of the obsidian sculpture.

Mave had spent the morning and part of the afternoon in new employee orientation, going over the card company’s employee manual, filling out papers for health insurance, and learning general Manwright protocol, like where she should park her car when she arrived to work. She had eaten lunch by herself in a windowless break room that did offer free coffee, she learned that morning. The human resources rep in charge of orientation warned, “The
CEO doesn’t like people loitering in front of the building, so don’t sit at the umbrella tables on your breaks and don’t eat lunch out there. They’re only for visitors. Employee use is against company rules.”

Two more hours and Mave could escape to Tish’s condo near the Plaza, the closest thing she had to home. Tish had insisted she stay there until she found a place of her own. Nearly all of Mave’s things were still back in Iowa.

Pulling a legal pad out of the desk drawer, Mave tried to concentrate on writing. It shouldn’t be difficult; they’d let her write any situational verse that people could relate to (as long as it did not go beyond twenty-five lines). Besides, this was just practice, rough drafting. Still, she couldn’t relax and had a sinking feeling in her stomach. She started to write.

They’ve stuck pins through fragile wings,
placed you under glass to be admired
Butterfly, you should have known the swish of their nets and the scent of euthanasia when they put you in the jar.

Mave got up from her desk to deliver the verse to Ken Brouwer, who examined it quizzically.

“Maybe you can work on this more tomorrow, and we’ll wait until then to show Clay. You’re probably exhausted today.” He scratched his head.

“I couldn’t think of anything to rhyme with euthanasia,” Mave told him, feeling genuinely stumped.

***
Later that afternoon, the morning sun vanished and the sky turned dark, threatened rain.

Mave sat at one of the forbidden umbrella tables in front of the building, hoping no one would see her. She’d gotten a ride to work with Tish, and now waited for her father, who was bringing some things from her apartment until she could get back to Benton to pack.

“Did you have to bring the pick-up?” Mave asked him, as she climbed into the old blue Ford. He’d insisted on coming to get her at Manwright, wanted to see where she worked.

“How could I get your bicycle here with the car, put it in the glove compartment?” Wade Satter laughed heartily. “Besides, Tish wanted me to bring that thing to her.” He pointed out the back window to the truck bed, which held a short Doric column. “She wants to make a coffee table out of it somehow.”

“Did you get that garbage bag that was in my closet?” Mave asked.

“It’s back there,” her father said.

It took a moment for this to register with Mave. She looked out the back window and eyed the large trash bag, which had found its way into the corner of the truck bed closest to her. It was still tied shut, the way she kept it in her closet, and seemed to be pinned to the truck bed by her bike wheel. “You put it in the back of the truck?” she asked, amazed.

Her father looked surprised. “It’s okay, it’s been back there like that for over three hours. What’s in there? It’s pretty light.”

Mave said nothing, just sighed hard. Trees were bending against the wind, which whistled softly through air leaks in the truck doors. Fifteen minutes to get over to Tish’s. Mave’s bike rumbled slightly when they hit bumps in the road.
“Did you stun them at work your first day? How was it?” her father asked. It began to rain. Fat, slow drops.

“Fine,” she told him, and kept looking out the back window of the pick-up.

When her father took the exit to get to Tish’s, Mave’s bike slid over to one side of the truck bed. This freed the garbage bag, which slowly began to spin in a circle, bumping into the sides of the truck bed on its way around. Still, the bag didn’t fly out. It caught on the rough inside walls of the truck bed, which ripped the plastic. Letters slipped out of the holes in the plastic bag, and the rain promptly pasted them to the bottom and sides of the truck bed. Staring ahead at the interstate, Mave and her father sat in silence, listened to talk radio, watched the broken yellow center lines slip under the pick-up.

Mave turned to check on her bag and she saw it: letters, all over the truck bed. All the letters she knew were in the bag: ones from Erin, her best friend from eighth grade, others from boys she had dated in high school, some from Tish that said Don’t worry about boys, worry about school, and a couple from her mother that said Your father worries about your Aunt Tish.

“Stop!” Mave yelled at her dad, making him jump. He swerved into the other lane but quickly recovered and pulled over to the shoulder.

“What?” he asked, startled.

Mave just pointed out the back window and he turned to look. “What are those, Mave, bank statements?” he asked finally.

“They’re my letters!” she said, getting out of the truck.

“Letters?” her father repeated, confused. “Well, all I know is it’s a good thing they
didn’t go all over the place or I could’ve gotten a helluva fine if a trooper had come along.”

Her father began to chuckle.

Mave climbed over the sides of the truck and into the back. The rain began to let up.

Her father quit laughing. “Come on, Mave, get back in the truck,” he said. “This is no time to be messing around outside.”

But Mave did not get back in the truck.

“Mavey,” her father said, “There’s no use crying over spoiled milk.”

She didn’t hear him. Even the letters that had stayed in the garbage bag were drenched. She just kept pulling soggy letters, one by one, from the envelopes, trying to find one she could still read. She tried to unfold the wet letters but it was no use. They just tore apart, nearly disintegrated in her hands.
ON STARVING PEOPLE AND NASTURTIUMS

This is a poem with flowers in it
but it is not a poem about flowers.

Poems do not feed starving people,
but if they did, starving people would

not eat flower poems, they’d eat big,
important poems, maybe poems

about starving people like themselves.
Starving people is a hackneyed term

that describes something that has
nothing to do with food or flowers

or poems. Sally Struthers is the TV
spokesperson for all starving people.

We turn the channel on her. Fashionable
people who are not starving do not eat

poems either, but some do eat flowers—
tiny nasturtiums mixed into salads of

baby greens, or on top of pink-frosted
tea cakes in restaurants with menus all
in French. When I was three, I plucked
the petals off a tulip and ate them. I was
not being fashionable. I did not understand.
It is not fashionable to not understand.
THE BOUNTY HUNTER

There’s one that I’ve been trailing for days. She’s long-limbed, elegant, so formal. Don’t know her real name—I call her Grace. My fountain pen scares her; she’s afraid of being impaled on the page. I limp after her, down the dark alleys of that musty left hemisphere, but she stays two steps ahead, clicking along effortless, while I’m starting to huff. She cranes her first stanza around to look at me, says You know, sir, you’re really starting to become a nuisance. Then she’s gone, and my page is still empty.

There’s another I call Lenny, a greasy-haired skulker who’s got the grace of a car crash. He’s small enough to hide in the shadow of a synapse and when I think I’ve got him, he jumps out wielding a knife. I saw you coming, you fuck, he says, then laughs, aims his unblinking glass eye at me. Then comes the get-a-way car to drive him away from this whiteout landscape, over to the right hemisphere, out of my jurisdiction.

I stand between piano lessons and sculpture class, trying to figure out what crime has been committed.
THE MARQUIS PLACES AN AD

Gone are the days when a guy could
pick up some bad wine and rent
a good snuff film, or just a porno,
if she’s shy, and call it a date.

de SAYD, one girl called me. I’m French, it’s
SAHD, I said. So she laughed and settled on
Sadie, like I’m a dog. Her nose ring
caught the light, flashed silver, mocked me.

I haven’t written in two years, am full of aches
and complaints. My last book sold well but didn’t
have the edge: Iowa farm wife, intriguing drifter,
covered bridge. I need to get a flu shot.

I climbed in my Buick today, went to the store,
picked up a paper for the personals, and a
magazine for its article “What Women
Really Want,” but I think I already know.

They want to bring you cold tea with your
cookies before bed. They want to let you know
that what used to be racy raconteur is now old pervert.
When you play Scrabble, they want to beat you.
My whips and rusty chains bore them to tears. I tell her, *Crawl across the floor naked, with my heating pad clenched between your teeth.* She shakes her head, mutters *Old school,* clicks the remote.

I jot down *Likes Lawrence Welk, mall-walking, bondage,* then stuff it in an envelope.
WHEN DEATH TASTES LIKE GINGERBREAD

for Sylvia Plath

Accidents happen but you
couldn’t wait for one.
Then again, you never know
how an accident will go.
Fall off a ladder, choke on a bone

Heimliched back to health,
or frogmarched on to death,
it’s all a surprise—you can’t
name your terms.

Did you find it so divine to be
lighting crew, director, and cast
that in line you would stand
for this brittle commodity,
last production?

That’s what they did in Auschwitz
Actors extracted from the audience—
they flubbed their lines
No script and no time.
Hansel and Gretel found a death-house
in the woods, broke off pieces, ate it.
Tasted good until they knew what it was:
sugared mortality melting on their tongues.
But of course they got out (and lived happily...)

So the important thing is not
if you do it well or if it feels like hell,
but whether you would still want to do it
if someone held the oven door open,
gave you a little shove.
MEDUSA REQUESTS A NEW ‘DO

She doesn’t even say hi or kiss my ass, just walks into my salon, this Medusa, head swaddled in red bandanna, says, So Poseidon and I, we’re having a rummy party, just friends, you know, snaps her gum as I gesture to my chair, and Poseidon’s saying how we three Gorgon sisters look just the same, all snaky manes and too much rouge. Yeah, too much rouge, I think, trying not to stare but she doesn’t even notice, just keeps talking: All the while, Dionysus pounds down lagers like they’re going outta style, giving Artemis, a prude as usual, the eye. Maybe shaggy layers, I think, but they don’t work for everyone. And those dogs of her—Weimaraners, I believe—jump and slobber all over my
new sofa. Medusa pats her bandanna. So what can you do for me? Think about a wedge, I say, a nice way to add a little movement. If you feel especially daring, perhaps a pixie, cropped close to the head.

All depends on the texture of the hair, I say, then I pull the bandanna off. A few seconds pass. Whatever you think, start anytime,

Medusa says. I do have an oval face, so most anything will work. Another few seconds pass. She says Did you hear me? I said go ahead, then she cranes her neck around to look at me. Oh God, not again. Medusa sighs. The serpents hiss agreement.

She rises, snatches the bandanna from my hand, all but the corner that I won’t release, then has the gall to just split, doesn’t even leave a five-spot on the counter for the consultation.

You know, I have an itch the tip of my chin... Would you mind?
MAKING ART

Sometimes there are different textures and it's a collage, the smooth skin around her eye turning mulberry, the rough dried blood rising off the surface of her arm. This technique is called impasto, when you can feel the paint after it dries, when you can see how it rises off the canvas. She is the canvas; he doesn't say it but this is how it is. It could be a tree or maybe a cloud painted on her arm in blood, depends how you look at it, straight on or, as most people do, out of the corner of the eye. She wonders if he feels inspired today and if so, what the product will be. Perhaps his muse is away. He can't seem to finish the project: he'll make her one way, then start over and make her again. The canvas begins to look a bit second-hand, but the work is always fresh and new.
HIGH RELIEF

He’s not what you’d call
a sculpture in the round.
Though surrounded by people
who cock their heads and stare,
the Louvre is not
where you’ll find him.
Swollen from the sting
of the hypodermic bee,
he’s on exhibit at the hospital
this week.
View him for free, but no cameras,
please.
The flash hurts his eyes.
The curator tootles around,
swings his stethoscope.
He’ll tell you in low tones
they found him face-down
in the snow, then brought
him in to be appraised.
Like Michaelangelo’s David,
he’s silent, hewn from stone,
but the David didn’t have
those new flannel pajamas,
or the junkie’s stigmata creeping
up his arm.
MARTHA STEWART PREPARES A SIDE DISH FOR THE THIRD WORLD

To make a proper pilaf, one should use a short grain rice like basmati, then add some garlic and fresh-cracked pepper.

I like to toss chopped leek in for flavor. If your corner grocery doesn’t carry leeks, a gourmet produce market surely will. If you do not have a gourmet market nearby, scallions will suffice.

Because this dish lacks color, you should serve it on bright yellow plates, like I do, lovely next to your grandmother’s sterling flatware. Use those beautiful linen napkins you always get for Christmas gifts.

A fun project, when there is extra time, is to stir up one’s own pottery glaze, and make dishes in all colors. I have forty sets of dishes, myself. Of course, the glaze won’t work on tin.
AT THE LITTLE GIRLS’ BEAUTY PAGEANT

Miss Brittany Noble is favored to win
on the merit of dimples, though she’s nervous.
Another tiny doll has put quite the spin
on her speech about community service.

The angel in the corner is Amber West,
etereal in a cloud of face powder.
Though you’d have to say her tap-dance is best,
there are those who do their tapping louder.

Some little ladies are bumping around,
Vision obscured by clumps of mascara.
Still others look for Mom, their tights falling down,
their minds filled with dreams of tiaras.

Twenty-five little girls, sashes draped across the chest,
Ribbons and curls in their well-sprayed hair.
Twenty-five little girls, each knowing she’s the best,
and the stench of pink is everywhere.
ENNUI

Grim reaper
with a cell phone
calls home
talks of fish bones
sheep clones
foster homes
how lonely it is
to be alone
in a world of
unknowns,
Ph.Ds, killer bees,
Aunt Jeans
and Seventh-Day
Adventist dentists
who won't floss
on Saturdays O
despair! World
of transplanted hair
steaks medium-rare
linguist in a wheelchair
with rusty wheels,
teal beagles nip
his heels
old banana peels
for love
and love for brunch
MARLIN

My father sits at his supper table, paunchy and combed-over. My mother in high coiffure, stomping around the kitchen in my old socks, terry cloth apron flapping as she goes oven to table to fridge, then wipes down the counter with a vengeance. *Mr. Clean* my father calls her, looks to me for back-up. I give him none. I readjust my ponytail. Wounded meat loaf in the middle of the table makes me sad, ketchup zigzagged on top, a neatly-bleeding laceration. “I’m moving to California with a woman named Olive,” I say, then take a sip of 2%. “She’s my partner.” My mother says, “You startin’ some kinda business, you and this partner?” I look to my father and he says, “I knew a fella who went to California marlin fishin’ every year.” His eyes are filled with fish jumping out of the water. I lean back in my chair to shun the splash. He grabs his spoon and shoves it into a bowl of peas, like he’s trying to hurt them. My mother: “Would it kill you two to wait for me?” My father, mouth full of peas, looks surprised and then amused, tilts his head back, laughs, then starts to cough. We watch in silence as he
coughs himself crimson, yanks an ironed hanky from his back pocket, places it over his nose and mouth. A moment passes, the coughing stops. He pulls the hanky away, makes tweezers out of his fat thumb and forefinger, and pulls a perfect pea from the center of his hanky, like he’s extracting a pearl from an oyster. “Well I’ll be damned,” he says. “A fella at work said he once blew whole Chiclets from his nose but I didn’t believe him.” My mother throws her apron on the step-stool, takes her place at the table. I pull my ponytail tighter, wonder how tight it’d have to be for my face to split open, right down the middle.
DENTIST IN THE ELEVATOR SINGS ZIPPITY DOO DAH

The ones who do themselves in
are those who spend days filling holes
(dentists, psychiatrists).
His wife told him this at dinner one
night, but not in so many words (Y'okay?).
He nodded (yes or no?) as she
tore a piece of sourdough
from the loaf, handed it to him.
He put his head down on the table,
next to a bowl of (weary) lima beans.
His wife passed him the butter.
It looked obscene yellow (like a
crazymoon). He hated the nights
when even the butter went wrong.

Then, there are times like these,
when he's sure he could ride the elevator
all day long, no responsible
fifth floor exit (to impacted wisdom!)
He, in his stark white dentist's
coat, hands folded, could just ride
(and sing!). Right now he can love
everyone and everything (sing and ride!),
even the snub-nosed blonde (with the underbite)
standing next to him.
YOUNG WIFE RETURNS FROM MEETING OF THE SKUNK RIVER CLOGGERS

Past midnight when she crawls into bed.
He feels her lips graze his cheek; not quite
a kiss. She smells like donuts. He pretends
to be asleep but he's not, waking when she
came in and kicked off those clogs, one thumping
against the dresser, wood against wood. Soon
she'll close her eyes, dream of that baker in her class.
Last night, around three, he could swear she mumbled
Crullers in her sleep. What will it be tonight? But he
can't accuse her; he's got no proof, not yet. He'll
just have to wait for that telltale bit of dried cream
puff filling around her mouth, or the receipt for a single
long john in her pocket.
FORMER DRINKER’S COMMENTARY ON SOBRIETY

The gin put away, no beer in the fridge?
I need a tool to alter my mood,
but no crude shank of steel.
A screwdriver would do,
that cool splash of vodka, a fine device
to euthanize the rabid dog of boredom;
he’s tearing my heels raw.
And with my drink, a bunch of peanuts,
I think. What’s more, I’ll spit the shells
on the floor for the girl to sweep.
Then I’ll jump in my car, weave
my way in and out of lines meant
to hold me together.
VERA JACOBOWSKI'S THOUGHTS ON NOT BEING MARRIED BY AGE 35

I don't know if I could stand some man's ass crossing over that imaginary line in the middle of the bed, onto my side, to press against the small of my back as he constructs cabinets or fashions that set of wooden salad bowls—he must be doing something with all those LOGS he saws in his sleep, lying next to me and what if I have to spend thirty seconds readjusting his random dent in the toothpaste tube, then another five minutes stewing about it, seems all very trivial when he's wanting me to do things like change my name, now mine is no wind chime, full of dull metal, but I'm used to it.
Today, I pitched Rich’s,
a once-sturdy red Colgate
who’d seen better days,
and probably knew his time
was up. Mark’s striking blue Crest rests
on top of Tom’s cheapie in the drawer,
their heads pushed together,
as if reading each other’s thoughts. Mine—
supine and on top of a new box
of toothpaste on the counter, next
to the stump of a burnt-down votive.
She has gold sparkles in her translucent handle.

It’s all running smooth until Mark says,
“That’s not mine” when I hand him
a toothbrush I’ve wet and frosted
with paste. “Whose is it?” This is when
you’re caught, face hot, you stammer,
“My god, I’m sorry. That’s the dog’s.”
But the dog looks away
and tromps out of the room,
shows he knows what you’re doing,
that you’re starting to slip.
You can’t keep it going,
and he doesn’t want to use Tom’s toothbrush.
THE LIARS' OLYMPICS

The uneven parallel lie is without
doubt your best event, the way
you catapult over the truth,
then swing down under it, dismount
and land, lift up your hands,
take a bow. The judges give
you a 9.8—could’ve had a 10
except for those low-scoring
Rosenbergs; you’d think they’d
help out a fellow American
but they just sit whispering,
drinking vodka, looking cross.
You’re looking pretty good
in the 100-meter freestyle too,
lie in short, quick strokes;
cross the finish and you’re through.
Don’t forget the competition,
goggle-eyed merman by the name
of Nixon, and he’s got one hell
of a denial stroke—so steady, so smooth.
Before we can say that you’ve
won the games, you’ve got to place
first in the lying luge.
Be careful not to capsize—
the track is narrow,
and far from smooth.
Bow your head so they can’t see
your eyes, take a deep breath,
zoom down the chute.
Now you’ve done it,
you king of tales, so step up
to collect your prize,
a tailor-made, strap-on,
long wooden nose.
THE KING OF CAT LITTER

At the third grade conference,
Jake heard Mrs. Brown say *uh tentshun*
dead-*uh-sit* and *Riddlin*, but Jake
told Mom he didn’t wanna

hear no jokes. Jake ain’t gonna do no
homework cuz homework don’t got
nothin’ to do with his life. No one’s gonna make
him do it either. Mrs. Brown

never gets mad at Jake, just purses
her pink lips, looks at him, don’t say
nothin’, like what she’d say is so big
it just gets stuck in her damn mouth

Jake can do some things good,
like shoot aliens on the Nintendo,
smash roaches on the wall,
those bastards (hard to kill)

If he feels like being extra good, Jake might
clean the cat box for Mom, haul
the dooty out to that dumpster he sprayed
his name on in red, and maybe Mom will tell
him what a good job he did, how sweet
he is for doing it without being told.
Jake'll smile and carefully write the cat’s
name in the clean litter with his index finger
Hieroglyphics

[Jimmy Stewart's Big Toe]

The foot doctor is in bed next to her, sweating, probably dreaming of arch supports. Well, podiatrist. That's what she should call him. She's careful not to wake Max when she gets up, pushes back the comforter and creeps out of the room. She's been doing Max for a year now. Doing his dictation, she means. She does medical transcription at the clinic—types diagnoses that he and the other doctors record on cassette tapes. Until last night, she'd never seen Max, but nearly every day she hears his voice on the tapes that she transcribes. Last night at the Christmas party, she'd heard *Eggnog, Dr. Gordon?* and turned quick to get a look at the guy. He doesn't look anything like she expected.

He looks like Jimmy Stewart. But young. Jimmy Stewart just died, was eighty-nine or something. She saw his picture in the paper. Max is long-faced and lanky with no features that really stand out (what color are his eyes?) but an overall charming look. Dimples.

It's February but they just held the Milan Medical Center Christmas party last night, delayed because of the weather. Christmas ornaments still hang from telephone poles, giant candy canes and reindeer that usually stay up until after Valentine's Day. The weather is always delaying things in Milan, which is up north by the lakes, where winter seems to last seven and a half months of the year and snowmobile fatalities outnumber rapes two to one.

People new to town pronounce it *Mih-lawn*, like they're in Italy. This is no Italy. Just a small, unrelenting *My-Lan* with a pork plant at its nucleus. A culture defined by its lack of *culture*. It's snowing again now.
Misty sits on her living room sofa, flips through magazines, wonders what she’ll do until Max wakes up. Can’t really do anything, she decides, too distracted, strange man in her bed. Oh, but not a weird man, strange as in foreign, she’s thinking. And foreign as in unknown to her, not as in a foreigner. There are always Canadians driving down across the border into Milan to fish for the day, but rarely any foreigners.

She’ll let him sleep a while longer. She goes into the kitchen, under the sink, and pulls out her journal. It’s lavender with Precious Moments kids (or are they dwarfs?) on the front, a gift from Grandma for her fifteenth birthday. Grandma had loads of those Precious Moments figurines, a china closet full of big heads and thyroid eyes.

Returning to the sofa, Misty sits down in the middle so that she can see into her bedroom, see Max’s big bare feet poking out beneath the comforter at the edge of the bed. She bets he has nice feet, didn’t look at those. She opens her journal to a list on the fifth page, and at the bottom, writes yesterday’s date, and then: 10. Max Gordon (Dr.).

This is the Sex List. She used to include more detailed accounts, anything she could remember, a catalogue of human idiosyncrasy. Sometimes she’d make symbols next to their names that stood for the things they’d done together—dangerous. Writing it down, that is.

She eyes Max’s name on the list once more, then erases it, writes Jimmy Stewart instead, a code that only she knows, and makes an asterisk behind it, the only symbol she remembers the meaning of. Long ago, she’d made a key for the symbols. Thought she needed it to guide her through the machinations of her own strange brain. What did she do with that? Burned it, if she was smart. Shouldn’t have things like that laying around to tell on you. In fact, she should make a list of lists that she needs to get rid of.
One time Grandma found a note in the wastebasket that she’d written to her friend in church. On a church program. It had something to do with Quint, the first boy she ever slept with. Slept? Not in that Honda hatchback. Fucked, she means. That’s what she wrote in the note. She doesn’t mean *fucked*, feels sorry for the fourteen-year-old girl who meant that.

But Grandma had forgiven her, or at least acted like it never happened. *A joke!* Misty had told her. Maybe she wants to get in trouble, she thinks, though there’s no one to scold her now. Maybe everyone secretly wants to be caught, forgiven, delivered.

Misty gets up, presses her journal against her chest, tiptoes into her bedroom, and stands at the foot of the bed. Max’s lips are parted slightly and he makes soft whistling noises when he exhales. The bed is prissy—ivory and lace with fat feather pillows in ruffled cases. Max looks strange nestled in the middle of it, like GI Joe on top of a wedding cake.

She looks at his one foot protruding out from beneath the blankets. What did she expect? It looks okay, smooth soles without calluses, neatly trimmed nails. Maybe he’ll give her a call some time. But the second toe is much longer than the great toe, as it’s technically called, looks weird. Or will he think she’s a tramp and is she? The heat of embarrassment in her face. She shouldn’t be doing this. Looking at his feet without his knowledge, she means. Worse than spying on someone naked.

Max stirs under the covers, mutters something she can’t make out, perhaps *Don’t look at my feet*. She freezes, thinks for a moment he’s waking and there she is staring at the things, clutching the journal in which she just wrote his name. Well, Jimmy Stewart’s name. The name that stands for Max’s name with the asterisk behind it that stands for fucking. No! Sex, she means. But sex tinged with an emotion she can’t identify. Something embarrassing and
blurred that has more to do with the way she feels about herself than the way she feels about him.

Max scratches his face, then seems to smile, eyes still shut. Who the hell is he? She doesn’t even know him. He begins to snore. Okay, he’s still asleep. She can breathe. Outside, the snow does not let up.

[Trans Am in Aces]

A jittery Monday afternoon at work. Misty keeps tearing sheets off the memo pad to make new lists: groceries, movies to see, things she needs to do around the apartment. Vital that she write these things down while they’re in her head. She can tell it’s going to be one of those nights when her character count is low, but hopefully no one will say anything (that she lacks character?). You can’t type at the speed of light every day. Or night.

Misty works nights, four to twelve, the only shift available. She asked to work days, but she’s only been at the clinic a year and too many women have seniority over her. It’s only women who do the transcription.

“You look pretty today,” Rose Johnson says to Misty. “Gonna sit at my desk tonight?” She puts her hand on Misty’s shoulder for a moment as she walks past.

“Yeah,” Misty says, smiles at Rose. She doesn’t even have her own cubicle, just flits around, sits at a different desk each night.

“Okay, honey. See you.”

The desks actually belong to the day transcriptionists. She doesn’t really mean belong; the women who work days don’t own the desks, just get to decorate the small areas
however they want, get to fill the desk drawers with their own cough drops, paper cups, and aspirin, get to put their calendars on the cubicle walls. Misty sees them for about an hour, until their shifts end and they start heading home at five to cook supper for their families. Everyone has a family. Drives her nuts when they call it supper, but that’s what people call it around here and these women are products of Milan, just like Misty is a product of her own creation.

“A couple tapes for you to do,” Anita says, putting them on Misty’s desk. Rose’s desk, she means. The desk where she’s sitting, which could be called hers for the next eight hours. Anita’s the medical secretary coordinator. “Have a good one,” she calls to Misty, swings her purse over her shoulder and she’s on her way out the door, up the winding stairs and out of the cold clinic basement.

Rose’s cubicle has pictures of her family all over the place. Whose photos would Misty put up if she had her own space—one of her moony-looking self, a strand of chestnut hair falling over dark, distracted eyes? Unmarried, unsiblinged, never a father, and where is her mother? Maybe she’d put up a couple of Grandma except it makes her feel unsettled to see pictures of Grandma since she died a few years ago.

Without looking at it, she puts the tape in the Dictaphone, which is like a cassette player, and scans it for length. She adjusts the headset over her ears, the cord of which attaches to the Dictaphone, then presses her foot down on the middle of the foot pedal on the floor to hear the doctor’s diagnoses that she’ll type.

Words appear like magic onto the computer monitor: *peristalsis, abscess*—words that surprise her. She’s not thinking about them, just hearing and pounding them out. She
starts the tape. *This is Dr. Gordon. Chart note on Edna Wisebaker, patient number 20-36-98-1. Edna complains of a shooting pain in the dorsum of the left foot.*

It’s him, Max, on the tape. She always does his dictation but today it startles her. When he holds the little tape recorder up to his mouth, does he think about her? Think about his words rushing into her ears? Not ears, *tympanic membranes*, she means. Someone taps her on the shoulder.

“T’m looking for Doctor Milken’s Friday p.m. tape,” Sue Everhart says. “Who are you doing?”

“Dr. Gordon,” Misty says, blushes deeply, but Sue’s already down the aisle, asking the same question to whoever’s in the next cubicle. Misty sits back in her chair, reaches out to the keyboard in front of her, presses her foot down on the floor pedal. It’s almost like driving, she thinks. She lurches across the terrain of cancer check-ups, fungi, sore feet.

By eleven p.m. she’s one of the last left working. The department’s quiet except for the muted clicks of her fingers against the keyboard.


“Can I help you?” she asks. Too shrill.

“Yeah, I was wondering if you would…,” he pauses, hardly looks threatening. No janitor clothes. “My name’s Jamie. This is my first night, and Anita said I should let Sue know if I needed anything but Sue’s gone home.” His hair is black as shoe polish, and he’s got big eyes, clear with light brown and green in them, like a turning leaf.
“Your first night doing what?” Misty asks, pulling her headset off.

He gestures to her computer. “Typing,” he says. “Training to do transcription. The night shift was all I could get, but Anita said I might be able to start working days soon.” A flash of gold around his neck, a small cross on a delicate chain. “What’s your name?” he asks.

“Misty.” She turns in her chair to get a better look at him. “She told me the same thing a year ago.”

“I can’t understand what the doctor’s saying,” Jamie says quietly, like he doesn’t want to disturb her. “It sounds like he’s saying Trans Am in aces, but that doesn’t seem likely.”

“It takes a while to get the hang of it,” Misty tells him. “I’ll come over and listen.” She follows him back to his cubicle, puts his headset on. “Transaminases,” she tells him, pulls the hefty Dorland’s medical dictionary down from the desk shelf to show him the spelling.

“It’s a test.”

“Oh,” Jamie says, looking at the dictionary. “Thanks.”

“I’ll be right over there if you need anything else,” she tells him, returns to her desk. Anita has left her with a full night of Dr. Gordon. She can’t get away from him, would kill to do some gastro about now, anything but more Max. More feet, she means. Podiatry, to be technically correct. She gets halfway into a chart note on an Achille’s heel when Jamie returns.

“Sounds like,” Jamie begins and Misty starts to feel like they’re playing charades, “he’s saying Ooh, oh my,” he says.

Misty gets up and heads over to his desk, sits down in his chair and puts the headset over her ears again. “He’s saying EUMI. Don’t ask me what it means, something to do with...
the eyes. Then he says *PERRLA*, which means pupils are round, equal, reactive to light, and accommodation.” She smiles. It’s usually she who’s asking someone to interpret a string of mangled syllables.

“Wow,” Jamie says. “How long have you been doing this?”

“Just a year.”

He looks his computer monitor, then back at her. “Do you want to get some lunch?” he asks.

She looks at her watch. “It’s almost midnight,” she says, rubs her eyes, which are starting to burn.

“Oh,” he says, seems disappointed, then perks up. “Maybe some breakfast?”

*Moons Over My Hammy*

They’re at the Denny’s where nothing has changed for as long as Misty can remember (the seventies). Grandma used to take her there for blueberry pancakes when she was a child. It’s one of the only places in Milan open past midnight, filled with lurid hot pink and orange booths. The carpet is an optical illusion, a dizzying checker design that seems to surge up then recede.

“How long have you lived here?” Jamie asks.

Misty takes a sip of coffee. “Always,” she says. “Well, except for the two years I was in Jamaica going to school.”

“Jamaica!” Jamie exclaims.

“It’s twenty miles south. I went to JCC—Jamaica Community College—to learn how
to do transcription.” She shivers, still has her down jacket on. A predicted low of ten below zero tonight. Why has she stayed here twenty-eight years? The first eighteen were out of her hands, but what about the last ten? A trail of clerical jobs. Utility company, pork plant. She looks over the menu.

“Why did you move here?” Misty asks.

Jamie fingers the gold cross on his necklace. “For a change, I guess. That and I need to save money. My mom’s a G.P. and I used to do her dictation at home. That’s how I got this job. I don’t have the whole medical vocab down like you do though. I don’t know the specialties.” He looks out the window.

“I don’t know all the specialties,” Misty tells him. “They take a long time to learn. I’m learning gastroenterology now, and I do internal med, podiatry and peeds.”

“Peeds?” Jamie asks.

“Pediatrics.”

“So you do peeds and feets,” he says. “Hey, are you gonna take your coat off?”

The waitress comes to the table. “You two ready?” she asks. She’s middle-aged, strawberry-blonde hair in a bun, skin like a dried apricot.

Misty turns to order. “Just a side of fries.”

“I’d like the Moons Over My Hammy,” Jamie says, pointing to the picture of it on the menu. “Over easy.”

“Be right up,” the waitress says, takes their menus away. Besides a couple truckers in the smoking section, they’re the only people in the restaurant.

“What are you laughing about?” Jamie asks her.
"I'm not laughing." Misty says, finally takes her coat off. "What are Moons Over My Hammy?"

"It's eggs and ham on toast," he says. "You think that's funny, Misty?"

"A little." She leans back in the booth. Sometimes she almost forgets her own name, shocks her slightly to hear it. She thinks she would prefer any other name, something plain that didn't make her sound like a stripper, which she isn't. But she's the daughter of one. Well, topless server. Her mother would bristle at stripper. And the topless serving was only done in the late hours. Until 11, she'd been a haltered server. Where is her mother?

Sometimes the urgency of her curiosity surprises her. Other times, she doesn't care, feels like she's been injected with emotional anesthesia. "Why do you want to type?" she asks Jamie, interrupting her own rumination.

He thinks about this for a moment, bites down on his bottom lip. "I don't, really," he says. "I'm saving to go to culinary school in Minneapolis. What about you?"

The waitress brings their food. Misty can just imagine the rumors that'll fly about this typing, cooking newcomer if he stays here long. No matter how long he stays, he'll always be a newcomer. "Oh, I don't know," she falters. Cannot remember choosing to do transcription. Choices? No one had told her she'd had choices. Or that she didn't have choices. No one said anything. Grandma died. Mom danced. Or didn't dance, just served. Whatever.

"Yeah," Misty says, shrugs. "I'm probably saving for something." What does that mean? She shakes salt on her fries. "The hours are bad but this is probably the best job I've ever had."

"The hours aren't that bad and the company is good," Jamie says. He cuts into his eggs. Yolk bleeds across his plate. "What are you smiling about?" He reaches over, brushes
her hair out of her eyes.

"I'm not smiling," she says, touching her mouth as if to check.

[The Best Darn Secretary in the World]

Jamie has begun to go home with Misty at midnight, after they get off. Get off work, she means, after they finish their shifts at midnight, punch out, and leave the clinic.

Tonight at midnight, he comes up behind her in her little cube, and says, "You done with feets?"

She turns off the computer, rolls backward in her chair. "I'm done with feets," she announces, referring to the podiatry dictation she's been working on. Their voices break the silence of the Milan Medical Center basement, which houses the transcription department. They are the only people working and fluorescent light gives the empty place an eerie glow.

"I'm hungry," Jamie says, his voice keening like a child's.

"My place?" Misty asks.

Jamie nods and pulls their coats off the wall hooks.

Back at Misty's little apartment on the top floor of a ramshackle Victorian, she sits on the couch with the electric blanket watching TV. Jamie's whipping up something to eat in the kitchen. She has her journal out, wants to include him in it, but not on the Sex List, of course. She hasn't done that, doesn't want him next to Jimmy Stewart anyway. Seems dirty. She flips to a blank page, decides to code him as Julia Child. The wrong gender, yes, but a chef, like him. Like what he wants to be. She'll think of something better and change it later.
"I'm going to be a pastry chef," he calls to her from the kitchen, like he's reading her thoughts. She looks up, watches his profile flip thin crepes in the pan, then dart out of her visual field, toward the refrigerator. She sticks her journal under the couch cushion.

"A pastry chef?" Misty says. On TV, a booming voice insists that the Amazing Garden Wombat cannot be found in retail stores. "Why don't you want to cook, you know—entrees and stuff?" A fierce wind blows the snow around outside.

"I can't hear you," Jamie calls from the kitchen. He walks into the living room with a pan and a chocolate bar, sits down on the tweedy green ottoman by the couch.

She watches him break the chocolate into small, jagged pieces. "I just asked why you wanted to make pastries," she repeats.

Jamie looks down at his pan. "Pastries are fun, very fragile. You have to be careful with them. You have to make them look perfect." He gets up and goes back into the kitchen. She hears him open cupboards, hears the rush of the facet.

"You know what I'm going to be when I grow up?" she shouts, doesn't wait for an answer. "A secretary." He doesn't laugh, not that she can hear. It's not funny, she knows. Not a joke. Sort of a joke. However he takes it is what it is. She's tired. Jamie was over last night too and she stayed up after he fell asleep last night and labeled everything in the refrigerator, the leftovers in old plastic margarine tubs, the drinking water in the juice pitcher. She wrote H₂O on masking tape, stuck it on the pitcher.

In the kitchen, Jamie clangs pans and utensils, claps cupboards shut, shouts out requests for unusual ingredients. "You don't have to be a secretary if you don't want to be, you know," he says finally. She thought he hadn't heard her. "You could go to school and
study whatever you want. Do you have any amaretto?"

“No,” she says.

All kitchen sounds stop. He pokes his head out around the door frame.

“I don’t have any amaretto,” she says.

“Have you ever thought about what you might really like to do?” he asks.

She says nothing. She had been a smart child. Her title at work is secretary and some of the women have little plaques in their cubicles that say *Best Darn Secretary in the World.* It embarrasses Misty somehow.

She past Jamie with his arms folded in front of him, standing in the kitchen doorway. Walks over to the window and looks out. “You know that you’re the only person I’ve talked to today? I mean, I asked the bank cashier for fifty in tens, and I said *bye* to people at work as they left to go home, and I told Anita that the lemon bars she brought in today were good, even though they tasted like plastic.” Puts her cheek against the cold window pane.

Jamie walks over to the window, stands next to her. “It’s okay,” he says.

“No it’s not,” she says.

She turns to look at him. “There are lots of days when you’re the only one I really talk to. I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

He kisses the tip of her nose. “You live here,” he says.

*[Feets, Feets, and More Feets]*

The antiseptic smell hits her every time she walks in the clinic door. Misty passes the podiatrist as she’s going to work and he’s leaving. He sees her, says, “Hi,” pause, “Misty.”
Has to think about it for a second. The surprised Jimmy Stewart look on his face tells her that while she’s been listening to him drone on about feet every night for hours, he’s forgotten about her. His white doctor’s coat rustles. She catches a whiff of his too clean scent (Eau de Clinic?) as they brush shoulders in the narrow hall. The same scent that had permeated her sheets, kept her awake the night after they’d been together. She had finally gotten up, washed them, washed her hands of him. Well, washed her sheets of him. Cried. Eaten a pint of Cherry Garcia. What’s wrong with her?

[Moon Madness]

“It’s like staring at the sun,” Jamie says, getting out of the car in front of Misty’s house.

“What smells bad?”

“It’s the pork plant,” Misty says. The vague odor of rot lingers in the air. It’s just after midnight. The full moon reflects bright off the fresh snow so that they nearly have to squint their eyes.

“It’s like standing in a tanning booth,” Misty says.

“It’s like staring at the sun,” Jamie says again. The snow crunch-squeaks under their feet as they walk toward the house. “Do you know I’ve been here a month now?” he says.

Misty looks at him. “I know,” she says. She wrote down the date they met at work. They walk around the back of the house to the stairs leading up to her apartment.

Jamie sits on the bottom step. Misty sits next to him. “You always have this look on your face like you’ve just been scolded,” he tells her.

“Huh uh,” she disagrees, screws up her face so she won’t look that way. “Let’s go
in," she says.

Inside, they kick off boots, unwrap scarves, pull off mittens, unzip jackets. She goes into her bedroom to change clothes, leaves him in the living room.

She comes out in long underwear, a flannel shirt. He’s sitting on the couch. The Precious Moments journal is on the coffee table in front of him. She stands in the bedroom doorway looking at him.

“What’s this?” he asks, holding it up. He’s read it, knows everything. Can’t know everything because it’s in code. Whatever it means, it’s weird. She’s weird. Indicted. He’ll go off to culinary school, leave her alone in a cold, bright Milan.

*It’s my diary,* she could say, but that sounds silly, school marmish. Or she could feign stupidity, say she’s never seen the thing before, doesn’t know what it is or how it got here. Or perhaps she could say it’s a wedding guest book that somehow wound up in her possession. (*Bedding* guest book is more like it). “It’s my journal,” she says, walks into the living room.

He laughs. Laughs! Must be hysterical how weird, how awful she is.

“What are these little cartoon people on the front?” he says.

“It’s just something my grandma gave to me a long time ago,” she says. *What about the little people inside?* “You read it?” she asks.

He hands the book to her. “Of course not.” Shakes his head no. “Sit down by me?”

Misty flips open the book. The Sex List. Little symbols: asterisks, Xs, smiley faces, a pair of lips. Symbols with no key. Can’t remember what they mean, doesn’t want to know.
They are without verbal equivalents, things no longer shackled by words, but things that have meaning without interpretation. The pure white, paralytic heart understands. Misty flips the book shut.