1989

Bread for the moon

Jennie Elizabeth VerSteeg

Iowa State University

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DEDICATION

For the Joyous Abigail, my mother,
and to the memory of my
maternal grandmother,
Marguerite Elizabeth Graham Cook
1890-1934
Thank you, St. Jude.
It Will Rain

A thunderstorm is trundling in along the interstate. The sky is the color of pondwater, filled with clouds, pink with dust, sliding, colliding, gathering in rows like abacus beads. The air is full of seasalt, and sweatsalt, and lightning riding dry. Crackling leaves as big as my fist skate along my path. They fall like sparrows, and the wind walks down my spine, pushing me home, and to you.

It will rain tonight, and all the trees will be dark as leather, gravied dust settling like silt in the hollow crooks of branches. The rain will crash like sheet metal against our windows. The clouds will string out like hot taffy--gather, crash, clot; we'll follow suit, strung out and rushing together as clouds sift and vanish like branches of smoke.
1939

You pass your thumb so lightly over my mouth, as though I am a fading charcoal sketch of a woman who could have loved you once--in France, in a daguerrotype, with absinthe, belly hair wet and curving in a bow.
Words That Have To Do With Him

Death

He has a taste for this kind of death.

It is an acquired taste, the hunger for assassins. Who would think, he asked me, something so hot, I mean, how could you die from feeling good?

The fear of AIDS took awhile to come here, rolling in, crisp, to the center, thin, like old paper, to the center of the country. To him. To me.

Now everyone is scared, hearts slipped from sleeves. At the gay bars some dance as if with death, wonder if they wake up with their assassins. Those hired guns. The breaking down of resistances.

Places

The dirt on the heels of Cherry Street. Away from the Loop, the only tattoo parlor,
and all of the downtown used car lots,
lights arcing away, arcing
away from each other
in thick, flashing skies.
And worlds away from City Drug. The cops
cleaned out all the Mexican whores there,
when I was younger, night
after night, dragging them by the elbow,
away, ripping pavement, high heels.

His places, at the feet
of the older hotels, are unnamed
and unlit. Old warehouses,
wide planked entrances graded for trucks
full of what?
Sbrocco's Valencias. The navel
orange. Scavo's wholesale tomatoes.
Or ottomans, armoires,
French Provincial headboards
for little girls' rooms.
But all are gone now, or late for leaving.

Now they are his bars and clubs, spilling
ferns and mirrors and dance floors
shining. Shining
like the eyes of children
full of fever.
Brass rails, liqueurs sweet as
violets, and pictures
of men. The men he knows
how to love.

And I know nothing. Nothing!
Except that the turn of a shadow-
boned ankle, an unnamed dance,
some kind of night sweat
is taken root here
at the back of the familiar.

People
There's his mother. She braids
his hair every night, the air
of a Christian martyr. Her fingers
never kiss his
neck a moment longer
than need be.

There's the boy who borrowed money.
The one who didn't.
The night manager of the IHOP,
who always kissed so long, so
long, he said....

There's Marcy, and Dee Dee, and Honey,
Honey Brown. Six sleek feet,
skin too soft for this real life.
One night after the floor show
he tossed Honey
a rose.

Honey,
rose.

Teeth,
petals
raining
on the dance floor.

**Things**

Once I found these in his car.

Rattail comb, barrette, eyeliner, China blue.

A half a pack of cigarettes, Dylan tape,
bootleg, three
empty sixes of Heileman bottles.

Sling back pump, a rose
on a strap to lash
each ankle. An envelope, toothpick.
And two glossy magazines, all
nudes and soft to the core.

Death again
These hot words.
Loved to death.
A hunger to be murdered, acquire
these weaknesses, Jesus, this
taste for assassination.
I worry. I cry. "How
will you die?" I ask him.
"With a smile"
he says. He says
with a smile. "Just
say of me, the food
at his house was almost
always
beautiful."

I'll say it was a taste that I acquired.
Emmaline (1854)

The good die young.

Well, our Emmaline is a good girl.
The scarlet fever may come yet
this winter, or a lingering
consumption. We'll keep vigil
with long, hard bayberry candles
and watch her wither, weaken, die.

Maybe an accident. Her mutton
out just that much
too large, or a tragic vacation
to the shore, her mouth
flowering red on some hungry water.

Limestone is in good taste.
The genteel often have lambs or angels.
Our Emmaline would be all fair, wreathed 'round
with ice and roses, pale as rind,
cool as a cloud, hard
like marble.

I wonder, would our letters
go faster on their way
bordered in black,
tear-streaked,
smudged
with the blood red blood
of our good girl?
Does Emmaline look a mite peaked
to you?
I. A girl has a problem during wartime.

Mothers tell of passes made, stretching three days and beyond.
Powderburns, kisses dying on letters unanswered.
Nail wounds.
Girls in trouble bear the scars of a furlough romance,
quinine and hot baths,
medicine colored prayers ride the bombs down.

2. I say a girl has a problem during wartime;
patriotism makes virtue from vice and pleasure increases geometrically.
For the boys we do anything,
everything...
innocence rises like smoke from a gun.
I may write a letter. A shallow arc of longing stains some German wall.
I may buy a bond as the sparks fly ever upward.

3. When it began we went to work, munitions mostly.
Girls fresh as laundered linen caught their hair in the machinery.
In full view of the newsreel cameras, Veronica Lake put up her hair and broke our hold on the sweet life.
A girl has a problem during wartime.
Perfect Milk

There is a herd of cattle in Wisconsin, owned by Carnation, that provides bull semen for many of the cows on dairy farms throughout the Midwest. The majority of the calves born today are products of artificial insemination, producing the better beef or milk.

She has been in standing heat
since just after dinner on Tuesday.
Does she quiver?
Have they told her all they know about him?
The good calves he's thrown,
that his mother fairly gave cream?
She has been to the fence; does she pray? Some maiden rosary, her eyes
of meat turned soft.

And how is he? The men without the women,
lonely but together,
like a logging camp or pronyard
in God's country: apples, beer
and cheese.
Do they meet in the cools of the evenings there,
shrugging and squinting, slugging, leaning,
staring hotly south?
A grim labor of love, eyes averted,
spilling his seed for her. She is chaste,
after a fashion;
every conception is spotless,
Immaculate—
but for the man who brings the stuff,
soothing, patting.
Shooting.

My god, the young bull is on fire:
hot fat, a fine skullful,
set on the woman, these women interred
like Hiroshima maidens, hooved
and nudging, ready for love.

Do you ever dream of beef
or orchids, of opium
and hoof jelly? Can you see
her perfection and what lies beneath
the hide.
Bob drove Sue's braid into
the desktop with a penknife.
Bob sent Sue Valentines.
Bob wore the pants with
the fashionable cuffs and hid
his cock as if under an Amish
cap.

Sue and Bob, slick with sweat
and the promise of the future
ate peas from the same knife.
And Bob swallowed hard.
And Sue swallowed harder,
no gagger, this one, not
our Sue; she's a sharp one,
that one, full of pluck, pluck, pluck
and resource.

Nine years, nine years
for Bob and Sue.
There's Felix the Cat.
There's crullers, the VFW.
There's the way to salvation—
right there—
like the eye of a needle.
See Sue. Sue's gun.

Sue's tired.

Sue's family cookbook.

Nine different ways to make box brownies.

Sue would shoot out the streetlights if there were any.

She sees the tendons in the clouds.

How the sun splints the sky.

Sue cramps the sky.

Breaks the clouds.

Ties the interstate hairfistknots.

Ragged metronome.

Ticking thunder.

Sue's gun.

Bob.
"I don't think you love me.
You're in love with love,"
you say, then smile,
as if to say that
you'll let me keep my delusions.
Like a favorite toy,
like an old woman, dry,
as if she'd been baked in a kiln,
taken to calling a mama doll
Julianna,
or Baby Nell,
crooning songs into cool canyoned ears.
Barren as shale.
"Mama's here."

It's a lie, as they say, of old poetry,
of new,
that I would love love, for
why waste any heat loving love when
love cannot love me back?
Does love calm the gut?
Did love part the waters?
Is it there in my tooth dreams, hair dreams?
The dark handfuls, clotted roots,
like candies falling clear.
The surprise of what's hiding in your
center--cordial, caramel, nougat, froth.

"I take it you love me, then--
what do you love about me?"
As if I could say: shaving kit,
comb, blue sweater, blue eyes,
veil of muscle, vows,
vowels--
of abandon, entrapment, at
last, of nothing.

If you gave me Valentine candy
I wouldn't know the end
of the chocolate from
the beginning of you.
Cordial, caramel, cherry froth.

If you were to give me a mama doll
whose curls fanned over a paper white pillow, I'd
croon, I'd keen.
I'd nurse her into age.
Gone, That So-Hot Babe

She's gone, good lookin'.
That chorus girl in those swim pictures,
all flutter, flutter, kick, kick, breast and
stroke. Teeth chlorine slick.
The Aqua Follies. The Wham Girl. Gone.

Oh, but she would've liked a sweet
little thing like you, boy.
She'd make it some Stage Door Canteen thing, probably,
(do you dance?)
dare you to take a hothouse lily
with your teeth.
And maybe find, after all, no Hershey bars
in that pocket
of yours.
"Funny boy!" she'd say, mouth petal stretched.
Funny boy want to play?
Boy, this is no time for games. She's gone.

Well then, see this: her again.
Now bare bulbs, all on her, a man taking pictures.
She all in light, the camera all dark,
and posing. The neck gone off
at full tilt. An arm pulled tight,
a strung bow, snap! He got that one.
Teeth flash like tossed bones.

Hair glows like sheets,
puffed and gathered 'round your ankles.

Is this what you're looking for, little boy,
the light of pears, the warm of oranges,
the skin like apple fresh shaved into a spoon?

Even that picture refuses to last.
Gone, the picture perfect girl, gone.
Gone, glitter girl, gone glamour gams,
gone, that so-hot babe, gone
daddy, gone.
Solid Gone (A Beatnik Responds)

"What do you mean, she's gone?"

I mean she's gone.
She's gone like a blast off
MacDougal Street, ripping
up the pavement like a field
of old bedclothes, jagging the stones, riffing
up the oil cans. Or gone
like girl knees set up jammed with cinders,

Soot. Or
the fruitmonger's shoeleather,
day done, near rotten,
thin and all but spent.
I mean, in this wide lungful of
lovebeads, gullet gritty with ganja,
this crazy head crashed full with berets,
runned, rammed, with leotards, she's

History. She's one for the mission
box; gone. Not here,
baby; far away, daddy.
I mean that she's
gone.
Solid gone.
A Witch, Five Years Barren, to Her Husband

And surely there is in all children, though not alike, a stubbornness, and stoutness of mind arising from natural pride, which must, in the first place, be broken and beaten down.

John Robinson, minister to the Plymouth colonists, 1618.

I danced with Satan in the trees after thou fell into slumber. I fell, faint from dancing, across the stump of a tree. Tonight thou may see my oozing knee, angry as a lye pot, under my skirt.

Why dost thou not beat me? Why dost thou not lead me to be drowned? Thou dost pour thy seed into me until thou growst milky in the limbs like a newborn kitten. Fond, fruitless man. Sir, five years I bear thee no sons, no daughters, either; I am useless to thee as a felled log sweet with rot. I flow with red rivers of ants, and like an ant leave bites on thee like the prints of a shod horse. I have ways of taking life, not giving it.

I have red hair, the color of oak leaves under a wheel. This hair, the sign of a witch. Thou knew before we were wed what lay beneath my cap. "Not just the hair, but the head as well, full of evil notions," thus saith my father. Sister Prudence, with much wringing of hands, told thee about my midnight dances, the shoulders shining like silver stones.

But thou wert fine and mild, ate cake off the flat of thy hand. Licked the crumbs, smiled, and said thou wouldst take me.
And so thou didst.

Oh, I listen in the meetings, dost thou think I don't? I hear how the child must be saved, this beating and breaking, the leaning hard over primer and horn. I hide my mirth, beyond salvation. Surely the issue of a witch would be thus, and twice more, a true vessel of Hell. Yet thou dost look at me with the soft eyes of some saint, and track the cycles of the moon. Thou dost want this witch's child.

So be it, only think - thou wilt have this child long after I am in Hell. Select the wet nurse with care. Milk is a reflection of the soul's condition. See the child is bound tight, or the liquid thing will drip like tallow to the floor. Now see what I have for thee hid in my skirt. Dost thou want a witch's child? Come stand close behind me. Thus saith the barren witch.
Wires

To A. R.

We spoke of the incidence of twinning when last we spoke, jumping into the hiss of a distance too long. But I came here alone; were you there? A bicornuate uterus perhaps, when that quiet world folds into chambers. Then I knew your unexpected softnesses.

I mark a fat X on most of September's days. I want to walk in scenes from Caldecott books. I bite the cord as if to hurt you. Christ, some never finish the journey; why, some are simply hanged in utero, others--there are other ways. We survive to be apart.

What are you thinking? I gesture though you aren't here to see it; I count your breaths and put them in boxes - this one is happiness, this one fear, this is passion, and this, and this, until passion ends "Are you there?"

You describe me with saddlesoap and pumice stone; I say we are ripening now, gaining juice and seed. A quickening from wire to wire. Our wires are crossed.

We say

"I haven't changed the sheets."

"I leave the light on."

All the answers left unquestioned. Good-night.

The wires we cross hum into day with no one there to hear them.
Spotting

I could've become pregnant last Friday. He said I was like a red flag to a bull. And I am.

Today I'm spotting. It makes me a fortune teller. And I know why they call it spotting, like a search for answers. It's like fortune telling; I see a swirling Tarot card; tea leaves flour the cup.

The people at Planned Parenthood talked to me about side effects, and how and why the Pill works. I honestly didn't believe them; how can it be? The right hand knowing not, walls growing for phantom children. I guess you can trick the magician after all. Magic pill, a disappearing act.

Some spotting at mid-cycle is fairly common, they tell me. Breakthrough. The ashes of roses.

If I'm telling fortunes, I must've turned up a face card just now, the King of Hearts. He's the suicide king, plunging his own sword through his head. See for yourself. In some decks it goes through at an angle. That is goes through at all, there's the miracle. It's a wonder any of us are here.

Do you see it there; yes, I spotted it.... I spy....

I see it, threads and lashes of blood. I bring my hand closer.
God, I suppose I send myself to hell twice, even three times a month. But I never know when I'm there, and that worries me; hell should have its landmarks, different qualities of light. Strange birds. I only know I've been to hell when I find myself back in limbo, full of slush and steaming.

I tell you, I see. A tiny clotted fist. A perfect ear.

I see it. Spotted it. Right there. Waving me good-bye. Don't tell me what's possible.

The end of this month's children. Should I cry? Wear just the barest spot of black?
One of Those Things

I can hear your heart beat though you didn't even say a word." - "I Can Hear Your Heart Beat", as sung by The Partridge Family.

Just you and I, Keith, and you will love me. You will stare at doors long after I shut them behind me, want the imagined path I leave in the air. Ruffles from a bird's wing. And I will pluck my eyebrows. The barest slices, thin as children's voices. All our clothes will have too many zippers.

I don't want one of those all lit up from behind, hair falling in a curtain, kisses soft as ammonia kind of things. I want one of those, oh you know those teeth marked sweat-strand sheets all torn to streamers fevers fingernails kisses all open oh Keith, oh Keith things.

Birds caught in a chimney.

All of you will love me. Danny and Laurie and even Tracy. Even little Tracy and her tambourine, and the music of bells on the curve of a slipper. Come on Keith, everyone knows what the back of the bus is for. When I shut my eyes that tambourine sounds like gypsies in the driveway. Every night you will come home to me. Sloe gin drunk in secret.
A ping pong table. Maybe then it will be
teeth marked sweat-strand sheets all torn to streamers
fevers fingernails
kisses all open
oh Keith...

(I can hear your heart beat, though you didn't even say a word.)
Hurry

I remember when it was enough to go to your high school parties. We'd sit on some sectional sofa and you'd touch me through my clothes. And the notes you wrote me, remember Keith? on your mother's good stationery, linen paper shot through with splinters. "Meet me by the carport." And I would.

But I broke your goddamn lava lamp. On purpose.

Last night I left a bloodstain the size of a shotglass on your sheets. Now you ties my wrists together with the rayon scarf that says "Groovy!" and "Love" in and around the fabric flowers. Everything drowns in punctuation. "Groovy!" Look at me. I'm ticking.

You keep sending me daylilies, and marzipan. You keep playing "Michael, Row The Boat Ashore," and glancing aside at my knees, beside you on the sofa. You make me wait when I want to hurry. You leave smears of marzipan all over your guitar.

Here I am, by the carport in culottes. I'm going to leave you like a communion wafer. You'll pink and redden, and your ribs will stand out like bamboo under your skin. You'll scud up under my fingernails in ribbons. There isn't a hair on you. You're my egg to walk on.

I thought you weren't showing up tonight. So where can we go? Come here. Talk to me. Shut up. Slow down. Hurry, Keith. Hurry.
Well, I guess this is it,
huh. It's really been super,
Keith. It's been three foot long
parade sparklers, cotton candy;
it's been the way you smell.
Never stronger than peppermint.
How I've got it bad for you and you never once
made me open my mouth.
But it's time for you to get on
the bus, because we weren't meant
2 last
4-ever.
So, stay sweet, Laurie;
be good, Danny.
Remember me always, RMA, my Keith. Go on
now. This is the part
where you sing.
Watch me wave
and close up like a telescope.
Three-two-one.
"You don't have to tell me if it makes you feel—if it makes you feel," I tell him.

"Hell no, it doesn't make me feel," he laughs. "At all. It's just over between Julie and me, and that's all." He puts his glass to his lips, and I watch the glass go to hand go to arm go to shoulder.

My hair grows down my neck for this moment, and has been growing for him, for months.

Last spring I saw them at a party, holding each other up, he swallowing the light, she throwing it back. And they looked altogether good, ripe to splitting, sweet to powder, and ticking, ticking. No one would've thought.

But I burned candles to bring about this breaking-up, for months.

We will never go to parties. If we do, we'll send the guests spinning home, their nails ground into their palms, to waiting lovers. A stomach full.

When did he and Julie come to an end? He tells it to me this way.

"It started right about the time summer broke. Remember? The trees in her front yard were full of those seed pods, like chocolate shavings. You know?"

I say, "I know." It was a hot summer. Our summers will send grass flashing into fire, concrete buckling, make tires shuck their treads on the smoking interstate.
"It happened when some farmer decided enough was enough, and shot his wife and kids, all heavy and shining with the weight of all that, all that, all that.... I don't know," he says.

"It's okay."

"I think I'm drunk."

"I think so," I say, and take his drink from him. We will have no need for anything but water, water.

The phantom crying, the aching arms, for months. All classic symptoms of a woman without her baby. Don't laugh. Spells work.

"Maybe I should leave, go someplace new. Make a clean start. What do you think?"

I think it's a straight shot to Missouri, your throat. And a further stretch to Indiana. Your mouth. We can go to the border for illegal fireworks and set them off inches from our hands.

I've been stockpiling fire, for months.

"That bitch." He shakes his head, forehead on the cloudy bar. I take his hand. "You know, the day we split up the grass was as green as something green. Stop me if I'm making you--"

"No, you're not making me."

Planting fingernails, arranging shoes, herbs from the co-op in poultice bags.

He brought me to their house once. She sat under those same trees. She was knitting, keeping off the devil's playground. And who could resist her invitation: to come on over here and sit down beside me?
"Still and all, she was quite a woman." His arm around me. "She could drive me to distraction. Just thinking of her could make me go harder than bone. God. Imagine me saying that to you. I'm sorry. But you've always been so good to me. What do you think?"

You will turn me to cartilage. I'll bend for you. I can see it, afternoons drawn out slowly, slick light through drawn shades.

"Here," he whispers, "why didn't I ever go for you?"

Now his breath is here for the taking. We will always breath the same air, for I've been waiting to breathe, for months.
Time Travel

Last night you came to town. We drank how many bottles of that damn rock and rye? I remember breaking a smokey glass, turning the bottle all the way over. Helping you unpack. Saying it was high time.

Today, choking on cashmere and weak at the knees, I teach the children their letters. I want to tell them about the closeness of A and B, and B and C, and to illustrate it all with abacus beads, again, again, again. This is known as the teachable moment.

We print them, fat loops on oak tag. The children draw rows of Os in primary colors, with fat fingered crayons pared clean of paper. All letters start out as shaky hoops shot straight from the shoulder, the kind you draw in the air with sparklers, then dwindle over time to fit the hand. To fit the hand, to fill the mouth.

I taught you to foxtrot last night; we pushed back the fruitwood coffee table, stared at our feet, and I beat time.

Slow,
a quick quick
Slow,
a quick quick
Slow.

The children curled into fists for naptime, I reel to the drinking fountain, bend there for water. I can't get enough water today, water for the cashmere and to wet our dreams.

Last night we went into the garden and you picked all my humid roses. (Thorns be damned.) All the flowers snapped off at the neck and piled on
the kitchen floor, pink on flecked linoleum. That hot night. Those roses. Thorns catch, finger sucked, time stopped, take it all.

One of my children trailed in from the jungle gym in tears today. It seems the first graders have learned that old song, you know the one: kindergarten baby, made out of gravy, born in the Navy. I tell him the first graders were kindergarteners, too, just last year, but this time travel is cold comfort.

This morning I felt your travel clock hard under my heel, fallen from the dresser, and I bore down and broke it into the red rug fringe. When I get home tonight I don't want to find you sleeping this off. Give me a kiss and we'll go

slow,
a quick quick
slow,
a quick quick
Slow. Slow. Slow.
Throw out your travel clock. Now
I'm not a kindergarten baby.
A Story About Your Mother

We all knew who your brother Troy's father was, that lame man who taught chair caning at the Y. My sister Nell, your mom, said he was a good teacher. He took her to a Jeannie C. Riley concert at the old KRNT theatre, and Troy, Nell said, was just her way of saying thank-you. But we never knew who your dad was, sweetie. Remember when she told a storeclerk that she'd won you pitching pennies at milkbottles at the fair? Hell, maybe she did. Maybe she did.

You know, they tore that old theatre down. In the cornerstone there was a newspaper, and fifty-one cents, and a history of the Shriners with pictures. I wouldn't give fifty-one cents to save a sinking ship of Shriners. But no matter, honey.

The summer your brother was born we had this picnic. It was the summer of love; that's what they called it on the radio. Nell was just getting her figure back and she was too damn simple to be decent, kept showing off her stretch marks like they were the stripes of Jesus, and saying that she wasn't all that sure that she wanted her figure back; her figure'd gotten her into trouble in the first place.

"Look here," she said, tracing the purple tracks on her belly, "You take the interstate to the Quad Cities, see...."

Your Uncle Gus was sitting in the grass with his spooky Mexican wife, Sordita. You wouldn't remember her, sweetie. "Christ Nell, it's like showing us your fingernail clippings or something. Isn't it, Mag?" he says to me.
"You wanna see my fingernail clippings?" Nell asked. "I bury 'em under a tree. I'm tryin' to grow me a man who keeps his mouth shut."

Your mom was laughing. She was always laughing. She turned a running one hand cartwheel and you clapped. You were just this big.

It was an old-fashioned kind of picnic, covered dishes and silverware with yarn on the handles to keep it all straight.

And Nell was a picture in an aqua blue sweater, with cloth covered buttons as flat and wide as plates, armholes cut big and falling away. And the skin like maybe she had some kind of worm, so pale. Her hair was just the color of oleomargarine. So is yours, hon. So is yours.

And it was the summer of love; at least, that's what they called it.
Playing the Violin

My daughter's last asthma attack happened on vacation. We were heading west, but quickly, too quickly. We do everything too quickly to do it well, trying to fit it all in between Shannon's asthma attacks. Picture an old man with bundles, staggering from parking meter to bus stop bench to storefront window, shifting and balancing along the way.

Shannon, eight, stops to rest at the doorway of every room in our house. We call out, "Hell of a trip, right Shan?" and she pants and grins and sticks out her tongue. Her cousin's old dance recital costumes, which Shannon loves to wear, hang off her everywhere but her chest. Many asthmatic children have barrel chests. Ribs rise to the occasion. They are, in every sense, adapting.

Shannon's little brother, Sam, walked into our hotel room this morning. "Shannon's in the hall. She sounds like a violin."

"How bad?" Joy, my wife, asked.

"Real bad."

My wife decided Shannon's asthma sounded like a violin when Shannon was just a baby. Like someone who didn't know music was just whacking away at a violin. Not with a bow. With a hairbrush. It's a pretty way to say she's not breathing, isn't it?

After Shannon stabilized, she propped up in the hospital bed and apologized for ruining our trip west. She always has those dark smudges under her eyes, like a costume party hobo. Sam tugged at my pant leg, yelling he was "a million percent hungry."
Sam, five and full of breath, wanted pizza. My family has eaten at many restaurants. Hospitals often give parents discounts to eat in their deadly cafeterias, but my wife and I have never brought ourselves to eat in one. Not a one.

This restaurant is within walking distance of the hospital. There are often lots of little restaurants near hospitals; sickness makes us crave the battered, sauced, carbonated. My wife can read a restaurant by its menu: the paper, the shape, the presence or absence of logos or mascots. Joy liked the looks of this one.

There are candles in low, fat bowls. The tabletop is green and cloudy.

Shannon is in with cystic fibrosis kids a lot. They all hack together into small green plastic basins, nametagged, and save them for the nurses, who interpret the mucous. The kids bring up crystal balls.

These people want to feed us. These people want to choke us, with a steaming, waxy mound of cheese. Rinded pepperoni. Sam is delighted and plows through, dripping sauce and smiling.

"Do you think he'll come up for air?" I ask.

These people at this hospital know what they're doing, Joy assures me between bites. The mist tent, the inhaler treatments, all is in place. Shannon coming up for air.

The waitress smiles and says, "Are we full? Do you folks have someone in the hospital?"

"Chronic asthma?" (As if we're exaggerating, surely.) Because everyone knows asthma, has an asthma story, has an asthmatic aunt.
who went on to win swimming trophies. You might as well say chronic sniffles, chronic common cold.

What I wouldn't give for some short night of barking they call asthma.

Full! Yes, we've had enough. I can feel fat pressing my eyelids down, feel the food make me struggle for breath. I'm covered with pizza. It will surround me the rest of the day.

This afternoon Shannon will probably want to play checkers; she's really very good at it. I'll play checkers with my daughter. I'll play the violin, sweating oregano, and breathing. Breathing all the time.
Bad Girls...

You know that awful old thing about here lies so-and-so. "He died maintaining the right of way. His right was clear, his aim was strong, but he's just as dead as if he'd been wrong."

That night I helped Eddie with his make-up. I told him to drive carefully, and to have fun. It was Friday night, and he had the right.

My son Eddie is not dead. He is in, they say, a semi-deep coma. This is the second of four categories, in descending order. Reflexes. Groans. He tries to draw back from the water when we bathe him. He did when he was little, too.

When he was little he wanted to take the name Veronica for confirmation. Maybe that should've been my first clue. He'd found her in a book somewhere, found out that she'd wiped the face of Jesus on His way to His humiliation. And while I was trying to explain nicely that boys didn't take ladies' names, he turned on his heel and walked out.

The policeman that pulled Eddie from the car didn't even know at first. Called it in on the radio as a white female. I was almost proud, hearing that. Of course, with what blood there was, and Eddie dressed up for the evening, it would probably be harder to tell.

But I always knew it was Eddie in there.

"Sounds like the name of some whore - um, bad girl," Darlene said. Eddie told her about the Veronica business. Right after he talked to me in the kitchen he wandered out into the T.V. room and told her.
His sister slipped up there. None of those words like "whore" in our house. Not just because they're dirty, but one girl calling another girl that? It's like walking under a ladder. Asking for it.

So not slut, not whore. But "bad girl" we all knew and used.

I came out from the kitchen, drying my hands on my shirt and telling Darlene it probably wouldn't do her any harm to read about saints.

And Eddie said the funniest thing. "Maybe sometimes bad girls can be saints." In that dreamy, but very adult way kids have sometimes. For some reason, Darlene and I started laughing, and the more we tried to stop the more we just couldn't, and he got mad and stomped out but neither Darlene nor I had the strength to go after him. We just hung off the end tables, and each other, crying. Yes, crying.

I guess the truck just crumpled up the front of his car. I don't know how these things happen.

Some of my church lady friends said Eddie turned out different because I'd hung my underwear up to dry in the bathroom where he could look at it. Imagine them saying that to me. I told them the sight of my underwear had just the opposite effect on his late father. You can bet that shut them up.

Maybe he didn't have a fighting chance, just Darlene and I, an older sister chasing him around with lipstick all the time. Sometimes now Darlene comes in and does his face. She bought him all new colors. (The summer colors go jaundiced on his now.) His face relaxes. He looks maybe thirteen.
And you know what they say about women drivers. I taught Eddie to drive.

There is a lady employed by the hospital who comes in and does things with him. Water, music. The water on his hands, warm, cool, sometimes with ice cubes, with bubbles and without. She steps around the O₂ tanks, the crash carts, with her basins of water. Will it help? I don't know.

But it might. Things are always so close to the surface. It's like those stories of people wandering out of jungles, still fighting old wars. His eyes move back and forth beneath his eyelids. Still waters. The hair grows and the nails grow. We let them.

I can't help thinking maybe bad girls can be saints.
Like Bread

I shoulda took you like bread. Yeah, I shoulda swallow you whole, left a stain, said no, or wait, or somethin'. But you say you was my boyfriend, so I never said nothin' but: yeah. Okay. All right, Keith, we do it just like you want it.

Bothered me after every class, for days. First you say you be all the family I need, my man, my mom, everything. Then you say, come on, once won't do it; what if it do? You say I wouldn't have to go to school, leastways not after awhile, and always there be somebody to love.

And I like the school part.

Remember that the moon was like a tooth from off a jaw. Put in a necklace, hangin' out the window, that's what you say. Show up at my house, say to my mom, "I come over to help your pretty daughter with her math." Mom say she shouldn't never had left right then. Gone to the store. But she did.

And then we did it. Remember on T.V., someone laughin' and clappin'. I didn't think anythin' funny right then. But smile, yeah. I made you smile.

After I stopped goin' to school, Mom say, if it a girl, we name her Suffer, on account of that's what this family's women are born to.

I name our baby Armel. Suffer not no boy's name.

The doctor say Armel's heart weak. Somethin' inside took a wrong turn, blood gettin' off at all the wrong stops. A blue baby. I think a weak heart he get from me.
Keith, you sure a ghost these days. Your son like a little angel, nurses say. What the matter, no time for angels? Shit.

You leave me with a bad taste anyhow. Man, I shoulda done you like bread.
Central Line

A central line? It's a needle, smaller, probably, than you'd think. The size of a sewing needle? Smaller. A blade of grass? No, smaller. And he grows smaller, too, a vein of himself. We're keeping track of his blood counts. His blood relatives. Here in the heart of the hospital, nurses come in and out, in and out; the heart scarcely holds the chambered flow.

And it is a tight connection, from tiny fracture of chest to the needle to the tube, and tied off clean. "The nurse is a Boy Scout," I tease him. "Ask Miss Gaylene if she learned that knot in the Scouts." Miss Gaylene's wide, vanilla smile. His smile coming through a burning-off fog.

But it's not tied at all, only clamped, pursed shut. The tube lies quietly on his chest. Mouth closed hard against him. Blood scissors. It's coming straight from the heart. Straight from the heart.

This way to his heart is surely not through his stomach. This way, the most direct way, is for the convenience of the intruders, to snap the joint and pour him full of the poisons, some in bottles, some in shiny bags. His hair mists from his head, dies on the pillow.

"Hello, it's your mother. Hello, hey, I'm calling on the central line." I pretend to talk to his heart. This is more practical than love letters, I say. Saves postage. And he giggles, says, "Mom!" and I keep calling, calling.
Central line? Lovers' lane? At night, when the heart is at rest, I want to snap the joint, ride the river, whisper, "I love you" so he can hear it, all down the line. Love spreading to a stain.
Cardiac (for Mia)

Her baby fingers are colding glass. I am the heartbreaker. Tomorrow we will have medals, and candles, and other ways to keep away angels. She would fit me like my own child, blood-slick in the nest. She has secrets hidden for me to find. Candy on the lawn. Tomorrow we will cardiac.

Scars. See what you've done to me; you measure them in kisses. Did I hurt you? Good. I trace bruises in garlands, like children chasing Christmas. Tomorrow she will river and pool in my hands, but we stream together in our bed tonight. I want to sleep like Passover. A bloody print says mine. And I say faster. And I say cardiac.

We spend our blood like bootleggers, in streaks and wisps and watercolor fringes, trailing kites and Mardi Gras beads. Sheets in brown water, every night some kind of murder. Her scar will be raw and royal and its song will be mine, mine, mine.

The softest moonslices fall on the steeples of night churches. I take your kisses like flowers from other gardens, then we climb together. Until you unwant me. Until I ungive. We must go faster. Faster is cardiac.

You offer yourself like some kind of scar--how many kisses long? I am full up with you, red handprint on a soft shoulder. Faster now, needles in knocking veins, faster, incision, faster, pounding, faster. Faster. Mine.
Smoke from a grate, and flowers.

Tomorrow, her heart will fall to candy slices in my hands.
K-tel Records

Abigail Joy, she was always distracted, breathless. She chewed her hangnails and looked for falling stars. We were very sweet with each other and we both liked old music. Not that godawful fifties stuff everyone is supposed to feel nostalgic about, but the really good, campy stuff, music I vaguely remember from maybe second or third grade, old K-tel mono LPs and scratchy 45s missing their jackets. That summer we'd always sneak down into her aunt's root cellar, just as the afternoon was getting hot, and make out furiously on the old tartan blanket. We'd sing "Dead Skunk in the Middle of the Road" and "The Night the Lights Went Out In Georgia," and joke about the Supremes' hair-dos. Then Abby would cry, filling my collar with her tears, because I was leaving for college in August. And she'd talk about how she'd write to me every day and call me on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And she'd cry some more.

So in August I went to college.

I met some people--well, I met some girls--there, and we became very close in a very short time. They say that happens a lot in college. And the Army. We all congratulated ourselves on being liberated enough to be friends with one another. But then Cissy would sit on my lap, and Kimbra would play with my ears and call me their own private gigolo, and I would begin to wonder. After that I didn't miss Abby very much at all.

Cissy accidentally spilled ice on my Soc book over in the commons. We ate lunch together and I took her back to my room to listen to my Monkees Greatest Hits album. She told me that she had the original Archies record of "Sugar Sugar" she'd cut off the back of a Super Sugar
Crisp box. Playable? I asked. She said "Of course." We were friends after that.

I found Kimbra in my chem lab. She looked very poised, almost iced over, but her shoelaces didn't match, and she wore a T-shirt a couple of sizes too large that read "Father Gonder Ursuline's Aqua Man." Who is Father Gonder Ursuline? And why is he in possession of an aqua man, singular, and not men, plural? I realized that she probably didn't know herself, and that made it even better, a private joke we were playing on everyone else, and they didn't even know how stupid we made them look. I said "Hey, I really like that shirt," or something. She thanked me and began to cry, all in an embryonic coil over some Phi Gam, so I took her home to Cissy, like a present, a fistful of drooping dandelions in a milkbottle. Then there were three. But then I met Ivy.

We were going to do 'shrooms. Kimbra had done it and liked it a lot; Cissy and I were just curious. For awhile we were mushroom obsessed. Every word game was a 'shroom game. We talked about the book "Other Voices, Other 'Shrooms." We lived with our 'shroommates. Well, you get the picture.

Ivy's second cousin sold some to Cissy when he came through from Topeka. Cissy bought enough for all of us to really get off, forty dollars worth. Kimbra said that was more than enough. But then Cissy stuck the 'shrooms in the freezer. That was a mistake. She said she wanted to keep them fresh, but when she pulled them out her mistake was obvious. They looked really gross, I mean, even as 'shrooms go. Cissy really bitched. All her Sunday dinner money for the whole month shot to
hell, she wailed, and held them to her breast like dying Vietnamese children. So I was over at Cissy's room, mourning the 'shrooms, and I met Ivy. She lived on Cissy's floor over in old Lydia Hall. It seems like it was right after Cis went on the Pill, because I remember her complaining about her hands swelling. Anyway, she and Ivy were sitting there drinking J.D. By the time I got there it was all gone, but I didn't mind. In fact, I think I liked Cissy better when she was wasted because she didn't ask as many questions.

Ivy said that she was a mythology major. I asked her if she was planning on opening her own little mythology shop after graduation. She glowered, picked up the empty bottle, and threw it at me. So then there were four.

After my eyebrow healed, we were all in Cissy's room one night. Dave stood Kimbra up, and although none of us blamed him, we all gathered to comfort her, that fragile black Irish queen. We tried to make her more cynical out of concern for her survival, but never succeeded. I brought over all her favorite music. Kimbra herself arrived lugging a twelve pack of that Minnesota beer with different outdoor scenes on each can, you know; they all look like those fluorescent velvet reproductions of the Last Supper sold in gas station parking lots. Kimbra wasn't sharing that night, either.

We told each other that we were all romantic misfits, shunning love for one reason or another. Cissy said she was protesting sex roles, or something equally as obtuse. I grandly told them that the truly noble man
is called away to something bigger than hearts and flowers. Kimbra hiccupped.

Ivy said we were all full of shit. She sat behind me on the floor, pressing her hard, bare feet against my spine, humming the second soprano part of Palestrina's "Gloria Patri." She used to bring her music home from choir and teach us her songs, little parts of motets, requiem masses and seven-fold amens.

Kimbra huddled in the corner drinking beer out of a jelly jar.

"Hi Kimmy," I said.

"Hey, good looking." She reached for me and messed up my hair. It was almost to my shoulders. I have a double crown, and there's no way to keep your hair out of your eyes if you have a double crown anyway, so I just let it go to hell. I knew Mom would shit when she saw it, but the girls liked it, so I kept it. "What a radical looking young man."

"When are you going to pierce your nose?" Cissy asked.

"Never, never, never." I shook my head, watching my hair fly before my eyes.

"What are you, trendsetter, scared?"

"I'm cautious."

"He's cautious!" They enjoyed that one.

I grinned. "I'm trendy in a cautious way."

"Or cautious in a trendy way." I turned to look at Ivy, waiting for more. She smiled at me. How small her teeth were. I startled myself.

I suppose it started in me then.
We listened to the Partridge Family's second album, the one that has everybody's birthdate on the front in psychedelic pastel numbers. My older sister used to have David Cassidy birthday parties in junior high, complete with Hostess cupcakes, Shasta Tiki punch, and screaming girls in our rec room. I'd sneak down the stairs in my jammies, blinking at the light, and sit on the landing until they noticed me. "This is my brother," D.J. would say, and roll her eyes in exaggerated annoyance. Then they'd call me down and feed me Fritos and Deej would sing a duet with me on "Let Me Call You Sweetheart."

Cissy nudged the wastebasket a little closer to Kimbra. Kimbra belched. She lay on her side in front of the window, tears sliding across the bridge of her nose, each patiently following the next across her face. "You guys make me feel better. You really do. You're the best friends a girl could ever have, and I want you to know that I just love you all."

Ivy said, "We love you too, Kimmy."

"I thought I loved Dave too, though, you guys." She sat up. "And look what happened to that. I'm a born loser, gang." No one contradicted her.

"How long do you have to know somebody before you know them? I mean really know them. I've only known you guys since the beginning of the term and I feel like I've known you all my life. And I thought Dave and I had something special, but it went--" She whistled a perfect bomb noise. I imagined it hurtling ever earthward, screaming high pitched hysterical ruin to the pitiful masses below.
"I don't know, doll," Cissy murmured.

Impulsively, I reached out and tickled Kimbra.

"Ouch, God damn it! You bastard, that hurts!" She wrestled away from me. "There now, see? See what I mean? Guys are always hurting me. One way or another, they always do."

I withdrew. I hated it when they used me as some kind of symbol of male oppression.

"What are you thinking?" asked Ivy.

"Nothing." I closed my eyes. That reminded me of a joke about Descartes going into a bar. The bartender asked him if he could get him anything. Descartes said "I think not," and he vanished. I laughed out loud.

Later, Cissy played my 45 of "Betch By Golly Wow" by the Stylistics. It was one of my personal favorites, the last of a dying breed, a song that virtually writes its own choreography. We all sprawled over Cissy's room like the Sunday paper. Ivy threw a pencil at me. I opened my eyes. She smiled again and looked more real to me than anything ever had before, more than three dimensional. My gut slammed into my knees.

I looked at Ivy, the three deep grooves of her neck and her wide shoulders, her breasts and her flat, bare feet, rinded with callouses. She wore a ratty green suede skirt, another DAV miracle. It looked like something Buffy St. Marie would wear to church.

How would it be, crushing the heavy, musty folds of it in my fists?

We sat and listened to the music, a fat, contented silence between us. I was at the edge of Cissy's bed. Ivy methodically unlaced my
sneakers as I looked down into her hair. Kimbra said she was starved and tore into a cheerful pink bag of animal crackers. She poured some into her lap and tossed the bag to Ivy.

"Open your mouth," she said. Ivy fed me an elephant, or maybe it was a rhino. I closed my mouth around her finger.

She drew her finger out across the roof of my mouth.

Kimbra's beer was gone. "Precious and Few" played on the stereo. It's one of those slow, sentimental songs that seem only to have been written to serve as themes for high school sweetheart dances. Kimbra said, "I went on the Pill for him." It hung on the air like laundry.

"What?" Cissy pushed her bangs from her eyebrows.

"I blew off my English class, walked to Planned Parenthood and went on the Pill for that son-of-a-bitch. And for what?"

The knees of my jeans were worn through and only threads crossed my knees. Ivy wove one finger under them, winding the frayed ends slowly around it.

"Now you're safe, though," Cissy said.

"Don't want to be safe. Want to be in love."

Cissy said, "I'm on the Pill, too."

We nodded wisely at each other.

"I have a diaphragm," Ivy whispered at my knee.

"You have a what?" Kimbra asked.

Ivy nodded. "'s in my purse."

"Oh gag." Cissy wrinkled her nose. "My mother has one of those. My
mother! If you wanted a good old fashioned way to stay childless, why
didn't you just get yourself a chastity belt?"

"I've got high blood pressure, bitch." Ivy stared at Cis.

"Let's see it." I wanted to see. I wanted to know.

"I've never seen one," said Kimbra.

"Show us." She looked up at me for a moment. I couldn't read her
face.

"Okay." She rummaged around in her gypsy-colored carpet bag and
pulled out a beige shell shaped case, like the shell on Shell Oil signs.
She snapped the case open and removed a small circle of wrinkled rubber,
the color of aging celluloid window shades. She blew into it, smoothing
it out gently, almost lovingly, and held it up between her thumb and
forefinger, turning it in the light.

"Bizarre!" Kimbra clapped her hands.

Ivy put it back in the case and handed it up to me. It looked like
the moon, palm sized.

I was damn uncomfortable. I never knew how they wanted me to act in
situations like that; I mean, isn't that something girls talk about at--I
don't know, slumber parties? It felt like a test. Yes, they were testing
me, some kind of coy, sexual test. How much can he take before he jumps
on us or something. It made me mad and I needed to take a whiz.

There's something about pissing with an audience. In a guy's john
everyone tries to be very nonchalant, but you know every last guy is
looking to boost his ego. In front of girls it's a different thing. It's
defiant, angry, a show of power, really—Look, I can go wherever I want to and you can't.

I took the screen off the window. (They can fine you five dollars for that.) I climbed onto the heater, and after taking careful aim, sent an angry ribbon of piss into the neatly clipped hedges three floors below. Of course, they all laughed and said I was crazy. Kimbra complimented my ass and they talked about how convenient it would be to pee without using toilet paper. I got a round of applause as I finished. I fastened the screen in and climbed off the register, tucking my shirt back in.

Ivy stood watching me, as if I was the only one who mattered. I waited for some kind of cue.

"I'm not afraid of you." She was cruelly, specifically quiet. One step, two steps and she was a breath away from me, looking into me. I put my arms around her. She kissed me, or maybe I kissed her.

A pole of light striped through the window to my bedclothes.

"Is this your famous record collection?" She knelt by my records.

"Uh-huh." I was on my side, watching her.

"Cissy says you have some pretty good stuff."

I nodded.

"Have any Iron Butterfly?"

"No. No, I don't."

"How about Jefferson Airplane?"

"Huh-uh. Come back to bed, Ivy."
She shrugged me off, flipping through my albums. "You don't have Abbey Road! You really don't? You call this a record collection?" She sounded irritated. "Have you seen Polythene Pam...."

I realized then that she probably wouldn't be impressed by the jewel of my collection, the very first K-tel record, "Believe in Music," with the Raspberries singing "Go All The Way" and Cher (when Cher was the height of fashion) singing "Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves" a song I remember thinking was very risque. Ivy more than likely wouldn't appreciate the fact that I remembered the dance my babysitter taught me to "How Do You Do?" a forgettable song by a forgotten group. They were Swedish.

Ivy sat on the edge of my bed, pulling on her blouse. "I have to go."

"No you don't."

She stretched her arms over her head and yawned. "I have a fucking eight o'clock tomorrow."

"Oh." I watched her leave me. She brushed her lips against mine, business-like.

"Be seeing you."

"Okay." She crossed the room, her mouth full of bobby pins. "Ivy." She turned in the doorway, looked over her shoulder like a picture in a magazine.

"Nothing, I guess." She smiled, waved her purse at me and eased the door shut.

That was that.
I wanted to talk to Abigail. I missed the mosquitoes on the Hill in July and sharing a sno-cone and her good soft tongue pressing into my mouth. But it wasn't Tuesday or Thursday and I didn't know what to say or how to say it. I thought maybe the only thing we'd ever had in common was the Cowsills, and then I didn't know what to think.

I guess I cried for awhile. Then I fell asleep and thought no more that night.
We'll Miss You

"Where did we park?" I ask again, but he's already gone, down past the shoe store with all the summer sandals in the window. And I run after him. "Hey--hey, Rick. C'mon. Where's the car?"

He just dances on uptown; he looks back once to smile, and jumps up on one of the benches the city put on Main Street for old men and heavy bundles.

"You're drunk." He is, and I am too. His cheeks are pure temperature. We can't catch each other; he just skips over the benches, stopping long enough for me to come close. It's a trick.


I met Rick in the student lounge at the campus Catholic Church. Every Monday and Wednesday evening a group meets there to train to be volunteers at the local phone Crisis Line. Experts come to speak and show us their filmstrips and pie graphs. Everything has ten warning signals. Three stages. I take notes in the margins of the training manual. "Seven suicides attempted, '83." Rick leaned over my shoulder and wrote "Are you doing anything after?"

When I catch up with him he leans heavy on my shoulder, breathes out summer. They say summer is in the air.

"I love you." Rick laughs into my collar. His mouth on my neck. "I love you. Do you believe me?"
"You love me." I back him against the cool storefront window. "Who do you love?"

"You."

"What's my name?" Cars full of high schoolers grind past over the railroad tracks. His hair is wet against his neck, and he can't remember.

I work at the Little Garden Preschool. The importance of names is stressed again and again at the weekly teacher conferences. Label things. Call the children by name. Hello, Sarah. Very good, Joshua. Write it on oaktag in big, sturdy letters. The bigger the better.

But there is nothing to remember. He never knew.

Rick touches me. I can feel summer.

"Do you want to?" His voice goes in a sweet slur. "Like, do you want to?"

We are tangled against the storefront, and I know this is when I should unravel. I am supposed to make a space. But it's summer on Main Street and tonight I don't have a name.

"Want to," I echo, "I don't...." In Crisis Line training we learn to communicate. It seems we learned it all wrong the first time. Listen, they say, what do you mean? But what do you really mean? Still, the group leaders are always apologizing for themselves, "We aren't the experts." I guess no one is actually good at anything anymore. We eat our words.

But Rick keeps talking. He talks a ribbon and rubs my shoulders.
"Because if you do, I think it would be..." He whispers. "I could make you scream."

This morning I told the children "Little Red Riding Hood." I used bright flannel pieces on a black flannel board. I made sure everyone could see. The red of the hood, a little girl's hat of death, some say. The great jaws of the wolf--there are several interpretations: the male, danger, the unknown.

"Are you my children?" I sing out.

"Yes, ma'am," the children sing back, swinging hands in a ragged circle.

I insist, "Are you my children?"

"Yes, ma'am." They know what's coming.

"Are you my children?"

"No!" They shriek, "You old witch!" The circle is broken. Every child runs from private witches. They aren't my children in the end.

"Let's go." I break the spell.

Rick slumps to the sidewalk, knees all the way up under his chin.

"Go?"

"I know a magic place. Come on." I pull him up. "Can you drive? I want to show you something."

He yawns. "Baby--" He tries to pull me down. "Let's go someplace we can be alone."

"I promise, we'll be alone." Keys crunch in his hand. I follow to the car.
I lied. Here you are never alone. We weave through the stones and stop where the magic is. This is an unusually well kept cemetery. Most graves have a plastic lily or iris whenever I come here. This part of the cemetery is called "Angelwood." It is a field of children. Most stones have only one date carved neatly under the name. Some have no name, Baby Boy or Infant Daughter. Angels stand out in relief. Some cling unhappily to lambs. Hearts. And tonight, not long after Memorial Day, pinwheels grow next to some of the graves. When the wind walks down the field, children's toys click and whir like blood in your ears.

"This is it."

Rick and I stand like well meaning guests at an unhappy wedding. He shoves his fists in his pockets. "You're crazy." He shakes his head slowly. One, two. "A graveyard. You're fucking crazy."

"No." I hold onto his collar with both hands. "I come here a lot. I sweep the leaves away. So you can read the names. Names are important."

The wind is picking up and blowing away all that summer.

Something changes.

I write about children every day. Observation is a teacher's best tool. Details always tell. But no matter how accurate I become, I can never give you the children. I can only give you, if I'm lucky, a soulless twin. If I write about apples, the best I can give you are mind apples.

The children are the apples in my eye.
Pinwheels are louder; Rick moves behind me. I hear him breathe.  "Hey, what do you think?"

A stone reads, "Diana - 1947. We'll Miss You."

"I mean, what do you think?" He just won't stop talking. His hands are hard on my thighs. "You wanna do it here? Wouldn't you like it here?"

What do you really mean? All I hear are pinwheels. I pull away hard.

"Hey, hey." Rick breathes stale summer and beer and excuses. "Okay. I'm sorry. We don't have to. Listen to me." He puts his legs between mine. "Just give me a chance. Let me turn you on. I only want to make you happy. But it would be so nice on one of those flat stones." His mouth all around my ear and something still roars through to me. "It would be so fine."

"Can you feel it?" he whispers.

The Crisis Line training manual lists feeling words on a continuum—from disorganized to puzzled to trapped to terrified.

"Can you feel it? Say you feel it."

"We own our own feelings," said one expert with a chart.

"Say it."

I am pinwheeling.

"Come on," I say. This can't happen fast enough. We don't have much time. Rick kneels over me, swaying slightly.

"Don't you want to—" He hesitates.

"Come on." The pinwheels scream. I pull him down to me.
"But, are you--"

A speaker from the University handed out an alphabetized list entitled, *Sex-Related Vocabulary*. "**Intercourse** (coitus): An act in which the male inserts his penis into the female's vagina."

"Shut up," I say.

"Common slang terms: to get laid, to screw, to ball."

Rick says, "Christ...."

"To go all the way, to make a homerun, to fuck, to bang."

"Please."

To bang, bang. You're dead.

There is to be no gun play at the Garden. But on the playground the children shoot each other no matter how I try to stop them. They run from witches and fall around me like a field of children. "Bang, bang!" they yell. "You're dead!"

We'll miss you.
Colors

I brought John home to die. Nino, one of Olesia's neighbors, smiles shyly and slips a rosary into my hand at the funeral, each bead as hard and smooth as his own roping muscles last night. I am not a Catholic. And Nino is not a good one.

I brought John home to die. It was cold and we waited for the plane, his eyes sunk into a mustard colored face. He kept trying to say things. I looked away, shivered; John was late for leaving me.

Our Missouri winter, his last, brought every morning's sun swelling up in the sky like a cancer, only thinner, as John was thinner, weaker than the summer sun, the summer son. One morning there was the very slightest twig of blood on his pillow. And one morning not long after that I called his sisters, "I'm bringing John home to you."

To the sisters: Olesia, the eldest, and her good, steady man, and Daylynn, the youngest, the beauty, the alto section leader at the downtown Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. John made me stare at the pictures, recite back the histories; now I can't call Olesia's man "good" without calling him "steady." John always laughed, said no one could. And we went home.

In the hospital, in the middle of all the lights and needles and everything rubbed so raw, he always smiled and said thank you. Thank-you for everything. His blood counts would go so low some days, a kiss could've caused a bleed. The bleed that could've stopped it all, the blood under the skin. Sometimes now, especially this winter as I refuse
to tend to myself as I should and I open my scalp with my fingernails, I
still think I smell him in my hair. That his memory scabs under my
fingernails.

At the airport I scanned the crowd, John leaning into me, fitted like
rice paper in folds. John once wrote a poem about an African queen, but
later confessed to me that he never even tried to blacken her, how he
wrote all the time of me, my billboard-sun hair, blue-rivered palms,
chapel glass nose, thin, pinched Pilgrim. And when that poem won a
contest, he never did cash the check.

But at the airport most of the people waited like Pilgrims, children
with the high color of carnivores, men in overalls, powdery old women who
looked as though they still called their purses pocketbooks. Butter and
eggs. And when I saw John's sisters in the crowd I said Here, then.
Here.

Olesia lifted him, effortlessly, off my arm. John tried to make
introductions; what did he finally say? This is my girl? My woman? Or
my bloodless queen? I felt, I remember, as though I had chosen the wrong
hat for church.

Olesia and Daylynn said nothing. Only took one good look. It would
be two months.

I ascribe to the viral theory. How the world gets wicked. Viruses,
as I understand it, never die, they just lie in wait, waiting for a
weakness to bid them welcome, a chance mutation. Now we know that
radiation is poison; one can be ruined by too much light. Christ. Who would've thought the light could ruin everything?

People always want to know about the first time. They do, don't they? They ask me, though never in so many words, is it true what they say about black men? I never let a single thing go. Well, is it sex you want? Romance? Would you like to see a virgin sheet? Hear that I cried?

All right. All right. Why don't you just come lie down beside us. We're in college now. It is before I found out about how the light ruins everything. A dark night, the sky is the color of patent leather. My belly quivers.

Don't cry, he says.

I do.

Go ahead. Make up the rest. Only know that even bruises couldn't make me dark enough.

Black people aren't always candy colors, chocolate or jet or coffee with top cream. John said "Color is a powerful thing." The black children who played in our alley were the color of celluloid window shades, saffron, urine. I used to hide behind our curtains in the morning, watch them.

The organist plays "The Old Rugged Cross," and the family hides behind a curtain with rubber trees in pots. I hear the sisters crying, the good and steady men, pallbearers. I remember what John said about colors, then I forget myself, stare sidelong at the faces under hats—the colors are smoking ash, slate, bone meal, apple butter, char.
Something bobbing in a broth, vegetables slowly orbiting the pot, wait for John to stop studying and eat. And I am content, as they say, to "put him through," to clean for him. Feed him. He teases me, calls me his Japanese wife. Never seems to care that my schoolbooks sit all term, on the floor, unread.

"What are you reading?" I ask, leaning over his shoulder.

John pushes his chair back from the table, snaps the book shut. "They're just love poems," he says next to my ear, "You'd hate them, I'm sure." We both laugh; I barely balance, almost drop his soup. Taking such good care of him.

I boiled the meat until it fell from his bones.

After the crepe, and the commissioning of this Christian to the Iowa soil, all the cars follow us from 14th to Center Street, backing up through the stopsign. Daylynn and Olesia have realized now that I have nowhere else to go; that, at least for now, I must be with them. We all sit together, pigeons on a line, and they set their amen mouths, ball up their handkerchiefs, refuse to give me the meanest bit of their tears.

We're hungry. Everyone snakes up to Olesia's; she will feed us.

And I am hungry. I want to be made drunk by well-meaning strangers; I want to be made much of, like the missionary who became a goddess just by being new and easily burned.

There is bourbon at this party, and gin that smells like pine needles. I'm sitting here with my gin, cloth coat still on and buttoned to the chin. Some of his high school friends say things to me, stop at
the side of my chair. They court this queen, and I know they are finding color words for me, too; they are, in order: embryo-pale, milkweed, come colored, cold.

The last day John breathed more quietly, his blood looked cleaner, and he cried out only once, right before dusk. His sisters sat by the hospital bed in stone. I didn't know what to do when they killed him. I stood by the window, watching the sun try to set, snagging and catching like a nail in oak-colored storms of cloud.

Now I wait for his sure resurrection.

He has to come back. I raked my tongue across the rough terrain of his mouth, the backs of his teeth, the earth's first day, falling into nicks and scallops where cave artists once dwelt. I used to live for, live in John's mouth, never knowing, never caring where we were found kissing. Where we kissed. Two stupid gardeners entering Eden, shears in hand.

I couldn't kiss him good-bye at the funeral. They stuffed his mouth with cotton; he can't open his lips to me now; Eden has gone stiff as an overshoe.

Jazz filters through the kitchen door. The reverend Somebody Somebody is here paying his respects, and we sit alone together in the kitchen, both of us staring into my glass of pine. John will come back. I will tell John wicked stories, the kind he likes, about the evil intentions of this preacher sitting beside me, spin a story about these long fingers, the color of blackstrap molasses, the palm, worm white, now
resting delicately just above my knee. He will be proud of these words I just chose, and I will sit on his lap and write it in his big blue ledger. He'll ink in smudgy corrections. My letters and his letters. My words and his words. So close the ink will bleed together. We will, at last, share blood.

How old was I? Old enough, like people say, to know better. And he was older. He read his poetry, one lunchtime, in the chapel of the student union. And I leaned in the doorway. I'll admit that I didn't know enough to think of the light, how it ruins. He smiled. I smiled. He told me I had an accent, that weird backdoor Carolina slur. He told me he was, most of all, angry. Could I hear it in his work? I said Yes. Yes, dear. Yes, yes.

The junkman on Forest and Michigan sent flowers to the apartment, with a card. "I remember Johnny when he was just a boy. Maybe it's for the best. Which of us knows God's will?" Olesia gives the card to Daylynn, who throws it away. They choke on Amens; some of the party backs into the kitchen; everyone looks at me, slag circles under my eyes, perched on my chair. Olesia and Daylynn slide by me to reach more glasses, more plates in the cupboard. Daylynn thrusts another drink into my hand. She, all muscle and bone under rock candy skin, turns away, smiles at someone else.

A Mason brings a Bible in a leatherette binding with four color illustrations of Hell between the Testaments. I hold it.

John and I were phagocytes, cell-eaters. We ate each other alive, came out each other's fingers and toes like Chinese fireworks. He kept me
alive, in my mouth and my nose; I can still taste him.

He tasted sweeter than Nino and Fiore, who live one door down from Olesia. I taste them all the same. Ever since I brought John home they've come to see me, bringing me things to read in the hospital, the leftovers from their suppers. Olesia has no more use for them than a couple of sweatbees at a spigot, but they flatter me, feed me; they are anxious to help me, a widow, so far as they can see, and lonely. They cry when I cry, and bend me all the way back; they laugh and pinch me where the skin is thinnest, then say "That didn't hurt," when I show them the bruises.

I'm drunk, damn tired with this cold party. The gin won't fill my cheeks or soften my hair. Daylynn is drunk too, and giving away all her heat; she's dancing in front of the refrigerator, all alone, swaying and snapping her fingers, beating time. I recognize an aunt, all in magenta, staring sadly into the sink. Olesia is wearing amber beads, nine strings; they swing to her thighs and swell her neck. Her hair is losing its press. I used to work on John's hair - Vaseline, Royal Crown, Klassic Kurl, Jheri, TCB. I catch Olesia's man staring at me, trying to see what their Johnny saw in me. I hardly look the part of some Siren, colorless, lank, leukemic, isn't that right? Or am I the light that ruins everything? Did I say that out loud?

Someone has found his grandmother's old 78s, scratchy old blues. The sound tints out, flat, through the apartment. I could recite a history to
these people, about these records, Ida Cox and Peg Leg Howell, bluesmen from the 20s. The labels: Bluebird, Black Swan, Savoy. Race labels. I know the race labels.

The little nurses were all afraid of me. I bathed him, dressed him, even after the sisters couldn't bring themselves to touch him anymore. I yelled to leave him alone, and they all edged out of the room, eyes averted, blushing, little beaten biscuits, damn little girls.

Blood is something. There's so much of it. When I took care of him, the color, the thickness of it was new every morning. I wiped it on the hem of my skirt, each day's water colored like tobacco spit. I washed him brown, rinsed him brown, the blood of a black man returning to the body. A black man going home.

Dead. He's dead. Sewn shut, in the ground, hard against kissing. The earth people call the blackest. And I am the unknown, bright white X that introduces destruction. I ascribe to the viral theory.

How did I get out here? It's too cold to sit on the front steps. I should go back in to find my bones, the gin stole my calcium shell.

Daylynn steps outside, one arm in her coat. She staggers, hesitates, jingles cold keys in her pocket. Drunk and drinking yet. She won't meet my eyes. Instead I see her in a set of three, photographs, like any good sadness, this way: she mumbles advice, syncopated, out one side of her mouth. Hands me her beer.

She says - be cool.
One: she snaps her fingers.

Two: reaches back to adjust her heel.

Three: under the farthest street lamp, one hand rims up her coat collar

and then

Daylynn, she slides on, edging down Center Street, in and out, each X-ray more shadow, less bone; and the street is darker, and darker, and dark. Dark. Dark.
About The Not-Knowing

Mother sent him to me three days ago. She said I'd been alone in the city too long. It's times like these you need blood relatives, she said.

So my little brother Jack Lee sits in the waiting room. Right off the elevators so he can watch the nurses. It's all I can do to keep him in waiting, every day a trip down to the hospital gift shop. Three comic books, one an "Archies for Jesus" one I slipped in for the good of his soul. Sixty-four Crayola crayons, with the one color called flesh that don't look like any flesh I've seen. (And I can say that. I've seen some.) Two coloring books, a crossword puzzle book, and, after Jack Lee nagged enough, a tiny pocketbook about superstitions with a lady on the front.

She stares at him and he stares right back.

They keep the tiniest babies at the end of the hall. It's the room you go to when you're not new enough to be newborn anymore. I don't know how they tell. Maybe it's something in their eyes.

My baby's eyes are blue. "Don't get too excited," the nurses keep saying, "most babies start out with those milky blue eyes. Besides, his mama's eyes are brown."

That they are. Isaac's eyes are two spots of blue in purely the oldest face I've ever seen. Looks like one of those dolls Grandma Visser used to make with dried-out apples for heads.

He's in the last row of the tiniest ones. There is a window. Not much of a window. And the oxygen tank coming out of the wall looks like
something you could play with.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Brammer." A nurse comes up behind me. She
scares me, even though she's not any bigger than a doll herself. She's
taking morning temps. Something new I've learned.

"Good-morning. How was his night?"

"Pretty stable." She looks at her little dollhouse clipboard.

"Uh-huh. He rested. We had a good night, didn't we?" Isaac arches his
back against her hand. There is a Turkish towel rolled up against the
soft of his spine to keep him on his side. He remembers to breathe better
on his side. "Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes, we did," then she says, "You came
just in time for breakfast, Mama."

"Oh good." Well now, what is so good about it? I wonder. I wonder
who that nurse's real mama was, and if she ever taught her any manners.

They said Isaac didn't know how to suck. They let me go dry and they
brought in the tubes. The very most slender one, seems like no wider than
a blade of grass, is taped to his cheek. The tape thicker than the cheek.
It goes through his nose and down into the stomach that can't seem to keep
anything in it. No matter how smooth.

I say, "Are you hungry, baby?" The nurse hangs another bag of waters
on the pole. I wonder if it tastes familiar. And it comes sliding down
all those tubes.

"Now look at that." Isaac's little grandma mouth, all snugged in, he
is sucking air. I swear it. "He wants me to feed him." It's too late,
even though once, when he had been inside me, I could go wet for thinking.
Just the thought of him. "Please look." I tug on her sleeve. "He does
know how to suck."

She smiles at me. "He's having a good morning, isn't he?"

Christ, I don't know. Is he? He's like no color in Jack Lee's crayon box. Waxed paper.

He coughs. His ribs move in and out. Don't cry now. They don't think I can do anything, either.

The first cigarette of the morning and Jack Lee is playing one of those games you play with string and kids.

"Ruthie, here," he says, "stick your hand through here."

I stick my hand through the middle of the web. He yanks back tight on either side and my hand puffs out like a balloon on a string. He says he'll pull till I'm blue, and I have to hit him with my purse to make him leave go.

"The hill of Zi-on yields a thou-sand sacred sweets-"

"And you're one of 'em," he whispered. We were scooted down behind the last pew, hiding from his daddy, Pastor Dean.

"Be-fore we reach the heav-n'ly fields-" Pastor Dean was singing, and leading the youth of the church in marching around the sanctuary. He beat time with the flat of his hand on a maroon "Service of Christian Worship" hymnal.

Gene and I, when we couldn't stop kissing, hid under the stained glass window that showed Jesus suffering the children. The sun would shine mostly through His face and the window sky above the children was so blue a person could say it was "azure".
"Be-fore we reach the heav-n'ly fields,
Or walk the golden streets--"

"Ruthie, would you walk the golden streets for me?" Gene pulled me down closer to him. You see that with us it didn't matter what the question was. I always said yes.

"We're mar-ching to Zi-on-
Beau-tiful, beau-tiful Zi-on-"

Gene, just eighteen, with the eyebrows that followed the curve of his eye just-so, and the blood of pheasants staining the seams of his jacket sleeves. And me, with the ring that said "84" and "Eugene" and showed a swimmer just ready to hit water that was azure, like the window.

"We're mar-ching upward to Zi-on,
the wonderful city of God."

"You are God's army!" yelled Pastor Dean, and slammed the hymnbook down on the lectern.

"You are God's treasure," Gene kissed me and snuck for the door, and the last thing he said before he left church for good was "Mrs. Brammer."

Isaac has morning tests. They look through him time and time again, tracing every little pathway through his body. I bet that I could see through him if I could take him out into the sunlight. Jack Lee needs the sunlight, like any little boy, so we go out this morning and sit on the steps of the downtown Methodist church. He takes off his shirt and we watch the nursing students on their way to lunch, already starting to pink from the May sun. I feel like leather around city girls.

"Ruthie, does Isaac have a mirror?" Jack Lee is starting to freckle.
He hugs his superstition book tight to his chest.

"A mirror?"

"It says here in my superstition book that some people don't let babies look into mirrors. 'Cause of the evil eye." Jack Lee's eyes get big as saucers. He loves things that make big people sick. It's his age talking.

"Heathen talk!" I make to slug him, but he knows I'm kidding. "If Mother were here she'd skin you."

"What do you think?"

"'Bout what?"

He waves his fingers in my face, "The evil eye!"

"If there is one, it's in your own pinhead."

Jack Lee clenches his fist and eats at his thumbnail. "Ruthie?"

"Yeah?"

"Is the baby gonna...."

"It's too damn hot for May, Jack Lee. Here, blow on me." I blow in his face, hard. He blinks, sneezes.

"I ain't gonna blow on you." He wipes his nose on his sleeve. I've embarrassed him.

"We oughta get back."

"Here, Ruth, I made something for Isaac. Maybe you could put it where he could see it." Jack Lee reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a folded up piece of paper. He's torn off the back cover of his dinosaurs coloring book and drawn a basketball player, in green and gold, driving for the basket. The ball comes down off his fingers like it couldn't help but swish right into the basket, and the huge grin like a
"C" on its back said, well ma'am, he can't help but win this basketball game. "For Isaac Eugene Brammer," written across the top in fat crayoned cursive. Jack Lee won't look at me even when I catch him by the ear.

"This is so sweet."

Jack Lee jerks away from me so hard he takes two steps back before he catches himself. "It is not!" he yelled. He runs two traffic lights ahead of me before I can even try to catch him. Tell me what I said.

The monitor, no bigger than Isaac himself, screams. It is the size and shape of a television screen; hangs in front of Isaac's not-much-of-a-window. Isaac is tethered to it in three places. The red one to his leg, ending in a red dot of plastic the size of a half-dollar. The white one to his back. And the black one? Straight to his heart. He tugs his fist to his face. Lines snap tight.

I can't move, but I never have to. My baby can't remember breathing. The nurses call it a blue spell, like something that happened in olden times to ladies with tight corsets.

"It's so cold in here. Is he just too cold, do you suppose?"

A nurse with tiny blue china hearts in her ears puts her hand on my shoulder. "That one wasn't so bad, just another nasty blue spell. All he needed was some suction and a little more oxygen."

"I can't get used to this not breathing. Let me hold him."

I can't get close enough to him. His skin is like paper. Is he warm enough? Does he seem warm enough to you?
Isaac open his eyes. I only see the blue of them for a second.

He's asleep.

"Come here." Gene pulled me into the bathroom. "Don't you know babies come from cards and dancing?"

"Gene honey, you'll wreck my dress." My wedding dress, peacock blue, that's what the saleslady said. "Don't now, they'll miss us downstairs."

I heard Mother say, "The only time Ruth has ever been sick or laid up was when she was five years old."

"A real handful!" Aunt Ruby yelled.

"I won't make you dance." Gene put his hands flat on the mirror. Me on the sink, my mother's house - I don't know why I'm telling you all this.

"And she fell off the toilet - well she did - pretending to be a ballerina on top of a music box." We heard them laughing through the vents. The three of us. Isaac was there even then. He was my secret, no bigger, they say, than a walnut. I made love to him as much as to his daddy.

More.

"Mrs. Brammer." Isaac's doctor, with eyes like an old poodle, talks to me today in the waiting area. Jack Lee is spread out all over the floor with his crayons, and ladies are stepping over him and hanging me these looks like I should tell him to get up from the tile. I won't.

Isaac's doctor holds both my hands in his. "And how are we today?"

Well, I don't know about you, mister.
"I hear we had another blue spell today."

"Yes, and -"

"We are trying to decrease his oxygen, and he is responding as well as we could hope - " He stops. He's so damn careful with me. Like talking to a five year old. "You know and do remember how we described his lung condition?"

I nod. "He just didn't have enough time in u - inside me - to...."

The doctor smiles like a widow reading newspaper death columns. Sick babies keeping him in money. "To secrete the hormone that makes the lung expand and contract. Oh, then, we'll just wait. Every day is a miracle." He squeezes my leg, then walks away.

"Yeah, what does he know about miracles? You know, if Gene were here he'd look him in the face and say, 'This hospital ain't worth a plug nickel'." Jack Lee looks up from his colors and puts his hand on my foot. "He's just a faggot anyway," he says. He sounds all ragged. "Jack Lee!" I grab his skinny little arm. "Oh well, I can't very well slap you into heaven, can I?"

"Ruth?" Jack Lee says, "do you feel chastised?"

"What? Do I feel what?"

"Mom says that Isaac is a sign from God, like to take you down a peg or two. To chastise." And he says "chastise" like a hard word for something easy. Urinate when piss will do.

I stare at the sign that says to not let kids under fourteen past this point. The little bastard. What kind of question is that? When I
don't answer, Jack Lee watches me. I know he won't forget me looking like this, because he is of an age, you know. All of nine and the most man I have.

Jack Lee jumps up and sits beside me. "I'm sorry, Ruth. That was dumb. Here - um - I'll sing you a song.

Onward Christian Soldiers!

Marching as to war,

with the cross of Jesus going on before."

I was a bride yet, not even a wife. We hadn't even sent out all our thank-you cards. Mother moved Jack Lee into the back bedroom with all of Grandma Visser's clothes and the necklace with all the hair of her dead babies in the locket part. Just like when she lived there.

He'd come into our bed at night and crawl between us. It seems he felt Grandma there. "She says it's sad being dead," he kept saying. "She wants to take me with her." To where, Jack Lee?

"To Heaven. And I don't want to go!"

Gene said a few good licks would take care of ghosts. You can't blame him. He would go to lift my nightie, and I just couldn't. Jack Lee needed me.

Gene left that night, like some other nights. "I'll be back, sugar," he said.

He was so proud of his rifles. We had pheasant for Sunday dinner all November.

Mother came to the door and said something like Jesus - oh sweet Jesus -
Jack Lee sat up in bed beside me.

"What's wrong, Mother?"

She said it was Gene. Jack Lee ran for the door, and Mother grabbed him by the shoulder. Threw him up against the door, and him kicking like a rabbit. Tell me. Tell me.

"There's been an accident. Oh, don't go, Ruthie." Bitch. Tears. Where'd they come from?

We all fought at the door. She had me by the armholes of my yellow nightie. The one with the big red strawberries. "Leave her go!" yelled Jack Lee. He bucked free and ran for the stairs.

"Let me get to my husband!"

We all got to the shed at the same time, me running after Jack Lee, Mother running after me. The grass was slick. Warm dew.

So this is what they mean by washed in the blood.

And I remember how she wouldn't let me look. "This isn't a sight for someone in the family way." She pushed my head to the ground. I was wearing the earrings I'd made with copper wire from the phone company and safety pins and tiny green beads. They found one there later. How dost thou, visage, languish, which once was bright as morn?

"No Eskimo pies!"

"Why, Ruth?" Jack Lee can eat even in this place. Mint green plastic trays. The milk tastes like sugar water.

I slam my tray on the metal conveyer. It's like school lunch all over again. "'Cause I've spent too much money as is.... Here, fill up
on the macaroni noodles.... I swear, I don't know how Mother thought I was planning on keeping a nine year old's gut in food."

He won't take anything now. I put things on his plate and he takes them off. The lady who runs the cash register is tall as a man, with skin the color of dark Karo syrup. There is a birthmark like a sugar maple leaf on her cheek.

The waiting area fills up with daddies after dinner. They come off the street, some still in workclothes, sweat on their faces. Jack Lee is excited to be left with the men.

"Wait for me. I want to say good-night to Isaac."

"Say good-night for me, too," he yells after me. "I'm the uncle," he tells the man next to him. The man doesn't answer.

I didn't see Isaac smile today. He never reached for me like he needed me. All I see when I see Isaac are tiny lungs all hugged up and scared to breathe.

Isaac sleeps. The machines don't. I see cars, so many cars, out the window on the street. A long hot drive before bed. No stars.

When Isaac is sleeping he looks like a baby. He looks like nothing else at all. Only the machines to tell you different. Good-night. And the nurse says, "We'll call you."

There is a calico cat with a frayed ear crouched by our door. Jack Lee chases it across the gravel parking lot. The motel is very clean, and the air conditioner is wedged into the window with crumpled up magazines. Field and Stream. I think.
Jack Lee won't stop waiting, even in a room that wasn't meant for waiting. He plays solitaire on the bed. Crosses his fingers for a red jack.

The phone rings.

"Ruth. Bless you darlin'. It's mother." That lavender voice.

"Mother." I listen to the wires hissing. How many miles? I could imagine traveling that distance. Burning a gulley through Iowa. Burning my bridges behind me.

"Now, Ruth. Is Jack Lee behaving? And how is my grandbaby today?" Mother won't call him by name. It's easier to kill him that way, isn't it?

"They say no change, Mother."

"Well now, Ruth, the ladies are here for prayer meeting again and we want to help heal that precious child. Mrs. Aubrey received the gift of tongues just last Wednesday."

"Praise the Lord."

"Yes, and she wants to get on the extension and pray with you for the miracle we -"

"Ruthie?" Mrs. Aubrey on the extension in my old room. A little blue phone, with buttons. "Hello, Mrs. Aubrey." I can see the old knot of a woman, the phone on its black iron stand near the oval window. She could hear the Catholic church bells. Whenever a Cervetti dies. "The Bible has many promises in it, as you probably know."

"Yes ma'am." Not too far down the road was that Sinclair station.
Is it a Dairy Sweet now? Things turn into things at home.

"In Phillipians it says ask and it shall be given to you. Do you believe that?"

"Oh yes, ma'am."

"Then ask, child! And if it's God's will you shall receive a healthy child. Every promise is like a blank check. I want you to pray with me. You just claim that promise. You just sign that check."

Just get me a well Isaac. If I could've done that I'd've sent off a check. With XXX and 000 running along behind the signature. That's what I'd do.

"Ruthie?" Jesus. That lavender voice.

I feel like I'm in a pie," says Jack Lee.

"You what?" Jack Lee and I lean on the screen door.

"A pie." He wipes his forehead. "Like I could scorch the bed."

"It is hot."

Jack Lee pushes his nose against the screen. There is a used car lot across the road with red, white and blue pennants flapping, and a Volkswagen on top of a platform that says "A-1 Used Cars." "How did that sawed-off little thing get up there?"

More questions. How things get where they are. The not knowing is like nettles working out of my foot. The not knowing keeps us here.

And my baby in that place, all drawn up like an Amish purse.

And me here with my own blood.
Jack Lee leans up against me. I think about the not knowing, and healing. Rain could heal the heat. But it won't. Not tonight, anyway.
Where Are All The Crossing Guards?

My mother calls me the transient. She goes, "This is my daughter Marcia Sue. She goes to Parkway South Transitional. Guess that makes her a transient." Then she laughs, and with a jingle of her car keys, she's off, as she says, "like a herd of turtles in a forest fire."

Wish I was a transient. I'd ditch this place as fast as you can say "Depeche Mode." I could hide in the city. A lot of people do. Just glide in and out, in Alice's Antique Clothing, out Alphonsi's Reading Centre, in, out, in, out. I could hide in the city. But I don't. I'm like one of those turtles.

Have you seen those runaway hotline ads on TV? They show some girl running toward the camera with this really long hair and these really lame bellbottoms. Bellbottoms! If I looked like that I'd run away, too. They should call it the Brady Bunch hotline. "God, I ran away and I'm so scared and I'm starting to look like Eve Plumb." I mean, get real. I run away in fashion or I....

Shit. Or I sit like that turtle.

I hate living in a place where there are big stone markers on every corner telling you where you live. In a five block radius from my house there are Gracious Estates, Country Court, Meadowbrook Park, Valleyview Heights, and Sunnybrook Farm. Who names these places? What are they good for? It's just more bullshit for me to deal with.

I should tell you why I'm mad.

It has to do with fourth hour study hall. It all happened one day
when my sneaker split and we made George cry and I ruined a perfectly fine name.

There's a guy named Phillip Calducci in my study hall. I mean, he's really in my study hall, you know? From where I sit I have a great view of the back of his head and both ears, sometimes. Phillip is very much the popular one and quite the babe, besides. He really has guts, that guy. He has a pierced ear.

That bastard. That's about all he has.

I guess I should also tell you that I'm the second-most-hated-girl in the seventh grade. (The most-hated girl is a real pathetic case, but she doesn't have anything to do with it.) I don't know exactly why I am, but it probably has to do with me coming in two weeks after the term started. It probably has to do with me being yanked out of Holy Family and plunked down to live here with my mother while Daddy went to Wales to gaze at sheep and get his head together. But it doesn't really bother me anymore.

During study hall Phillip gets stoned over by the air vents near the big spotlight. Not "Oh wow, slow-mo stoned," but stoned. You know what a joke study hall is. They get some space case office lady to pop in the auditorium a couple of times and look distressed. You could kill a sixth grader and leave him to rot in the aisles for days. Maybe weeks, even.

I never tell on Phillip. I never tell on anybody; in fact, I don't talk much at all, except to the neat lunch lady who does the fries. I go, "Hey, fry lady." She just smiles and gives me the hottest ones. There's a special place somewhere for lunch ladies and playground workers, but I don't think I believe in heaven. This upsets my mother, who says that God
is the privilege of children. I don't know what that means.

Anyway, in study hall the paper airplanes were zinging around, and Jeremy was selling these diet pills two for fifty cents in little Kleenex wads, and I sat and thought about English notebooks with perforated pages and how much louder they were when I did the ripping. And I picked the blue fabric off my notebook. I was looking at Phillip's ear. He wore a little green stud that day. His eyes were dreamy and he looked totally pleased with himself. He was fried. Two rows in front of me, he leaned over talking to one of the Arquette twins, but I couldn't tell which one because she was turned the wrong way, and I couldn't see whether or not it was a pink streak in her hair, which is Alanna, or a purple one, which is Alta. Suddenly I looked down and noticed the rip in my sneaker.

Well, it upset me because first of all they were almost new, and they were the only pair of gray Converse hightops that fit me in all of St. Louis County. So I leaned down to get a better look at it and that's when they started.

Spitballs.

They slushed over my head and landed in the balcony seats. I sat up, careful at first to check and see if they were being aimed at me. Of course they weren't--second-most-hated-girls don't even rate spitballs.

Phillip was laughing in slow motion, like any English villain you might see on cable TV. He was looking right up in the balcony and Alta (I think it was Alta) smiled at him. She wore a Jim Morrison button. I don't know why I remember that. Then everyone in the auditorium sat up a little straighter. We all snapped to attention when Phillip threw his
royal wad. You know?

I still didn't know what was going on, so I craned my neck and looked toward the balcony. Finally I saw what Phillip was using as a target. It was only George Pejsach. I say only because I know what people think of him. He's dark and quiet and has long, nervous hands. My mother saw him at the Christmas-Hanukka concert and asked who the sad looking Iranian was. He's Greek, damn it, and he makes--used to make--origami during lunch time. Everyone says he's gay, but around here everyone different is automatically gay. I'm gay, and I don't do anything with anybody.

I saw that both of the spitballs had hit their mark. George sat with his books piled in his lap, wiping two spitballs away from his nose. I hadn't realized Phillip was such a good shot.

George just sat there. He sat through it like he had a wiper blade stuck up his sweater. What was I supposed to do? Before I go on, just tell me what I did that was so wrong. I told you I don't talk much. I could just see me telling Phillip to stop throwing spitballs at George. Besides, George didn't fight; he didn't even move. He was like me. You can probably guess the second most hated girl didn't jump to defend him.

There was another spitball and another. They whizzed softly past my ears like blood does when you've run too fast. I saw Jennifer Weisner and Isaac and Brenton look at each other over their sunglasses. George still sat, slapping away hits and near hits like they were moths. I could see the green that portrait painters insist we have under our skin in his face.
I don't know when they all started. I guess everyone had figured that Phillip had come up with another fun way to make it through study hall. "Look at the little faggot," Phillip yelled. Spitballs started coming from all directions. Other people said other things. You know what kind of things. No new news.

I tried not to look. I tried not to listen. But I could smell the collective spit, like a huge mouth. They stuck to his face and hair; he couldn't even wipe them off fast enough.

His biggest mistake was when he looked right down at me. What was I supposed to do?

I make the best spitwads, these really tight, spitty spitwads. Even from where I was sitting I could see it flatten when it hit his cheek. Even from where we all were, we could see the tears before George finally put up his hands and surrendered. We watched him leave. We heard his books hit the floor.


Later, Phillip, who is, as they say, very much the popular one and quite the babe besides, came up to me. "Good job," he goes. "You new? What's your name, anyway?"

I told him my name was Helen. It means courage, I think. Bummer.

And since then he's called me Helen, at two Friday night mixers and a volley ball game. I'm not Marcia to him, I'm that girl with real balls,
George didn't crack up or drop out or anything like that. That only happens in books. He's even quieter now, and he never makes origami or smiles at me any more. He's still in the balcony, Monday through Friday, sitting like a martyr, only without origami.

Do you know what I'm thinking right now? I'm thinking of this fat, old lady crossing-guard at my school—at my old school. Without her all the kids might've run into the street and gotten hurt, but this nice old lady, this big old crossing guard, she led them all across the street like an angel with reflector tape. I never really knew her—I didn't cross in that direction. What I'm thinking now is, where are the crossing guards when you need them? Who is there to tell you that George without origami is like being a turtle in a shitty old forest fire? Where are all the crossing guards? Where?
"Hi, Jimmy."

That's what you said, Mary Lynn. At first. You came out into the living room, and you smiled, and your mom was sitting in the big chair snapping beans, watching an old "Honeymooners" show on T.V., just looking from you to me and back again.

"Hey, Mary Lynn," I went. I didn't kiss you. Do you remember? Did you think then that something had happened?

You was still in your little beauty operator smock. Must've just got off work. I didn't know if you'd be there. It had been a long time since I'd stopped by. I don't know why I stopped by like that, after work, just like you'd be expecting me.

Were you?

"What." You threw your mom one of those looks. "You gonna sit and keep score?"

Your mom just heaved herself up in the chair and picked up all her bowls. The one with the whole beans, the one with all the pieces of beans, and the little Cool Whip bowl with the shrivelled up ends. "I didn't know I was watchin' the Dating Game." Then she bounced into the kitchen. She was wearing her shirt from the ladies' bocci ball club. "The Belles of St. Mary." My mom played on the Our Lady club. She will next summer, too.

Things aren't all that different.

We were alone. I was real nervous. You wouldn't move an inch,
standing there, still smiling, over by the T.V. I thought, for a second, just three steps, Jim. Three steps away from you.

So I fast held out the present. And Mary, your face lit right up like a little kid's. I'd still love to see you happy, Mary Lynn. Whether you believe it or not.

We both sat down on the green couch. How much change, how many combs and ballpoint pens have we lost in it? And that picture of the old guy praying over bread, is it still hanging right there where I used to bump my head on it when I sat down?

You ripped all the wrapping off and threw it on the floor. I helped you pick Scotch tape off your fingers. You sat there with it, my present.

That's when I figured out it was all wrong.

I remember when you used to go down to Francie's Tap. Please don't think I'm trying to start something now, Mary Lynn. It's water under the bridge. But I remember. You'd go out with your beauty school friends and try to pick up men. Okay, not exactly. But you got into some situations. That's about the time you asked me to please not call you Mary Lynn anymore. "My friends call me Marley. You know, like Bob Marley. You know."

I didn't know.

I guess I gave you a Mary Lynn present. It was a tiny teddy bear. I wonder do you still have it. Pink, with a little heart. And you turned it over and over in your hands.

"So what's your girlfriend's name?" Your voice, it was so old. You wasn't looking at me.
"Vicki." So soft I was hoping you wouldn't hear me.

"Oh my god," you whispered. "Oh my god." You squeezed your eyes shut, rocked back and forth on the couch. The teddy bear dropped to the rug. You took your little nametag thing off your smock--"Mary - Hair Works"--and started stabbing it into your thumb. I made to grab it.

"Mary Lynn - "

"Give it to her!" you go. You yelled at me, just like that. You threw the bear in my face. I tried to put my arms around you, just to comfort you. Like a sister. Really.


You walked to the door, and just before you went onto the porch, you looked over your shoulder and said, "I'm too old for toys." Flat. Like that.

I followed you.

It was pretty hot last summer. Remember? We stood on the sleeping porch. What there was to stand on, most of it was stacked with shoeboxes, and newspapers tied up with twine. The air conditioner was still up on bricks. Did your dad ever get it in?

I was in the doorway. You tried to get as far away from me as you could. You sat on a stack of newspapers. I was holding the toy still, and you still had that nametag. Never did let go.

"So tell me," you go, "what's so special about her?"

I just told the truth. "She don't scream at me."

"You fart and it's a gift from God, right?"

I shook my head. "You don't understand."
(And you didn't, Mary Lynn. You've never seen her, her beautiful smile. If you did you'd understand.)

That's when you finally looked at me. "Oh, yes," you said, waving your nametag at me. "Yes I do."

I looked out into the front yard. "The pontoon looks good. Your dad been working on it?"

You nodded. I went out the front door. The pontoon boat took up the whole front yard. I couldn't help but stare at it. Did you ever get out on the water last summer?

"I'll kill myself," you go.

Jesus, Mary Lynn! I turned around and you were right behind me. Hadn't even heard you sneakin' up. You were crying, and there were two blue streaks on either side of your nose. You scare me when you say things like that, Mary Lynn. Remember in high school when you went after Melody Hiracheta with your mother's copper letter opener? 'Cause you'd heard she had a crush on me? And your mom just laughed and said it was a good thing you didn't know where the shotgun shells were? Yeah. It was like that.

"Damn you," I said, "don't you start up. Don't make me love you."

"I love you," you go. You rested your forehead on my chest. I'd forgotten how small you were. Are.

"Well, I love you too, but - "

"Yeah, you love everybody, don't you?"

And you hit me then. Across the face. You told some people that I was the one who hit you. No, I'm not tryin' to pick a fight. I just want
you to remember it like it was, and the way it was was that Jim never hit no girls.

After you hit me, you ran. You ran out to my car, where I'd parked. "You love everybody, every wench of a waitress who lets you down her pants. What. I live in this town too, you know. I knew you was fucking her way back last fall." Then you wheeled around and spit on the Vega.

I'm sorry, Mary Lynn, but that was taking it too far. You don't talk about her like that, and you don't spit on nothin' that's mine.

Maybe I grabbed you too hard, Mary Lynn. But you know me. "Where'd you get that?" I asked you. "You didn't used to have a mouth on you." I had you by the wrists. One on top of the other.

You were smiling and trying to jerk free. You'd stand real still, then you'd try to break free, then you'd just be still, real nice, then you'd jerk back and try to make me lose my balance. "I guess you just ruined me, huh?"

I really looked at you, Mary. You with your blue eyes, all red from crying. You'd had your ears pierced twice since I'd seen you. Is that something new they do?

I let you loose and you rubbed your wrists. Fast, like in the winter when you want to thaw.

"You're so beautiful, Jimmy." You stood on tiptoe. Kissed me. What was it like? Did I kiss you back? You turned and wrote in the dust on the hood of my car. J=H.

Jimmy equals hunk.

I remember when Uncle Frank sold me the Vega, right after graduation.
You named it Veronica, after your favorite saint, you said. Was that a joke?

Then you asked, did I remember when we was happy? I remember lots of things. I remember when you was at Lincoln High and I was going to Tech, and I'd pick you up at school after swim practice. I wouldn't even wait to dry my hair, and it'd freeze, and you'd let me come into the auditorium to watch you practice plays. I'd melt all over you. Or I'd pick you up after I got off work, when I was at Sarcone Printing, with ink sometimes still on my fingers. I'd leave my mark on you. You're blonde, blonde all over.


But all of a sudden, no warning, you grabbed the teddy bear and ran into the house.

And left me there.

Your mom came around from the backyard, tossing a bocci from one hand to the other, squinting into the sun. She looked at me like I should say something. I rubbed my eyes, watched myself rub my fingers together.

"I'm really tired," I go.

She looked like she knew. "Try being her mother." She patted my shoulder. "You tell your mom Our Lady is headin' for a fall. The Belles, we're hell on wheels.

"Jimmy," she says, "don't look like that."

I passed your house the other day. It's gettin' slick; I practically
didn't make it up the hill. I remember your dad jumping my car and
calling me son, winking at me and calling me son. When do you suppose
they'll tear down Washington School? Here, you live right across the
street from it; how long has it been closed?

Remember when we went there, and we ate lunch in the gym? Remember
how after basketball games you didn't smell like sweat but like those
little pie pieces of lasagna? Do you suppose we're still running around
in there - ghosts?

It's snowing now. Vicki and me are still together. I expect you
know that. I love Vicki, Mary Lynn. I think you'd like her. She says
you sound nice, too.

I'm still working at the Shopper. Vicki says it's great, that we can
get our invitations printed almost for free.

Yeah.

I thought you should know.

Mary Lynn, I remember how we was gonna live someplace green and
quiet, with kids all around.

I wonder, did I leave anything out?
Labor Day

You get a lot of advice in this life. You'll look back on it and laugh, they say, and you do. What you laugh at is the advice.

What I've been thinking about is Jerry Lewis. Jerry and his telethon, and Labor Day when the working man should rest. The year Ray and I were married had a labor day in it, a hard day that cut summer off for good.

Something you look back on the most and laugh about the least, I suppose.

You must believe I love him. I do, I swear it. But it's been a long time of everything halfway and nothing beautiful for me, and all I have left is the love. It's turning into background noises, every day a little more.

You could say we squandered our youth. I think we just spent it, a little here, a little there. But you've got to understand how it was then. We were in grade school when Kennedy -

Well. When Kennedy.

It was cool to be in love. Love was in, and we were in love. We graduated from high school the year they stopped electing homecoming queens. Then we got married.

Remember when Cissy on "Family Affair" started going out with a hippy? She started wearing orange and yellow paisley lounging pajamas with fuzzy chenille balls hanging off the sleeves. Uncle Bill came to the pad they hung out at and hustled her right back to the penthouse. He knew.
Cissy wanted to leave. She liked the flowers and said that things were groovy and far out, but Cissy was Cissy and that pageboy hair-do was in her blood. That's the way I was then, playing at being radical. "Cissy drops out," you know. Folk songs were nice, and a little grass was, of course, groovy, but Ray still wouldn't call black people anything but niggers.

Still won't.

It couldn't've happened to a nicer couple. That was the tragedy. But we would be the first to tell you most people misuse the word tragedy. A tragedy doesn't need sad things and orphans. All it needs is love.

We had a little apartment over the hardware store, a hide-a-bed and two beanbag chairs. We were doing all right. No, we really were. Sit tight and stick it out, they say. So I got some extra hours at K-Mart. I couldn't get the "59th Street Bridge Song" out of my mind. I was sitting tight. I was sticking it out.

Labor Day steamed then. The sun made the lawns brittle as hipbones. At night the moon shattered through our windows in dusty waters drier still. It's those days I find fault with this place, the breadbasket of America, they say.

It was only one of those twenty-four hour things. Sunday night I was running a fever, and I couldn't keep anything down, not even applesauce. When I was little and got sick, my mother would give me an enamel dish full of applesauce with a big souvenir soup spoon, and turn the radio to dance stations.

Ray pulled the couch out and went to bed. He doesn't like sick
people. He doesn't even admit it when he gets sick; it seems to insult him. So there was nothing for me to do but sit there beside him in the dark watching Jerry Lewis and the totals on the board in far away Las Vegas flashing through the night like motel signs.

Ray breathed like the quiver of a bowstring beside me. I felt hollowed out. In my family being sick wasn't a quiet thing. I'd be up, then Mom would be up. Then we'd talk a little too loud and Judy'd be up. On with the light. Sooner or later enough of us were up that there wasn't any reason to go back to bed. Then Dad made big greasy fried egg sandwiches, and they'd move out back to eat on the sleeping porch so as not to make me any sicker. But they'd leave the screen door open and yell in at me until the stars faded and the grease congealed on the skillet. Being sick was a friendly thing.

Ray would say we were just the kind of people who ate in the kitchen and we didn't know any better.

We didn't know any better because there wasn't any better.

Ray rolled over in bed and looked up at me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay."

"How okay are you?" He wasn't quite awake. He put his hand between my legs.

"Not that okay."

He sat up beside. "Jerry Lewis."

"Uh-huh."

"Why do you have the sound all the way down?" Ray threw the covers off and went to the window. He looked down at our car. He did it every night; it was muscle memory. He'd built the whole thing up from the
frame, and it stood like glittering granite as the fog ran up from the river, the fins Ray'd pounded out of sheet metal, tense and hungry.

"I can't stand listening to him," I said.

"He's funny."

"He's stupid." I sighed and closed my eyes to a headache flitting around me.

"He's a genius in France, Midge," he said.

"He's what?"

"He's a genius in France."

"They think he is."

"No, he is." Ray yawned and scratched his face. "Jerry Lewis is a genius in France."

"They call him that." I got up. I switched on the lightbulb. It swung from the ceiling like the announcer's mike at the fights.

"He is, though, in France." Ray followed me to the Frigidaire and we both stood in front of the open door, the cold, white air breaking over us.

I slammed the door. "Jerry Lewis is not a genius!" On television, a chorus line kicked in mute precision.

"Is so, in France," my husband said.

"You're either a genius all over or you're not a genius at all." My stomach turned over once. "God Ray, leave me alone; I'm sick, I'm a sick woman, go away," I said. I went to our little phonograph and put on Simon and Garfunkel. The songs whined out, heavy on treble, warped and unsteady as an old drunk.
"I'm sorry," said Ray, though he wasn't, and stood very close behind me. He hesitated, then went to the refrigerator again and pulled out a hunk of orange cheese wrapped in waxed paper. He grabbed the filet knife out of the drainboard. "Most of this cheese is hard." Ray passed the knife from one hand to another, quick little tosses.

"Cut it off."

"God." Ray threw the knife into the sink. "Midge, it's almost all hard, all the fucking way through."

"If it bothers you so much, throw it out." There was to be no sleep that night.

Ray pushed the cheese down the disposal and ground it through. It sounded like all the bones in the world breaking. The sink jumped and shuddered under his touch, like he would have me.

"I just wish you'd be more careful, you know, with the cheese." Ray looked into the sink, clutching the edge as if to save himself from drowning.

"How do you know it was me?"

"You think it was me."

"You're quick, Ray," I said. I said "You're a real sharp one, you are." The hum of the refrigerator suddenly clicked into a lower buzz.

Ray snapped his gaze. "I don't need to take this shit from you," he said, his voice hard--fast, flat and bitter as the interstate.

"What is with you?" I saw tiny lights dance over him. My fever made the night even more nightmarish. Simon and Garfunkel pounded on the phonograph and Jerry silently watched us from a crazy land without
horizontal hold.

"Nothing is with me. Nobody is with me."

"No." I shook my head. "Huh-uh. Nobody is with me! You - I hate you." I flew to the neat row of cupboards above our thirdhand stove. "You know, I arranged the spice cabinet, okay, and I put parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme right in a row in front, and I've been waiting for you to notice, because it's something you would've noticed. You would've told me how cute I was for doing that."

"You're mad because I don't read the spice cabinet."

"You're a jerk because you know Simon and Garfunkel is our group."

"You arranged some spices three months ago and I'm supposed to just shoot off over it."

"You know the rest of them are in alphabetical order from allspice on down to white pepper, you shithead!"

Ray stared at me for a long, terrible time. "Well, screw this," he said raggedly. He sagged onto the bed.

Simon and Garfunkel sang "The Boxer." The part about the whores on Seventh Avenue. It made me feel like an extra in one of those street scenes from "Midnight Cowboy."

But the only reason I knew what an extra was, was from reading those movie star magazines.

And the whores here in the breadbasket of America are old, tired women in heels.

"You don't love me," said Ray.

"Of course I do."
"You're not in love with me," he mumbled, and hid his face in my nightgown.

"What's the difference?"

"Plenty of difference. You can love a parade, but you can't be in love with a parade, see?"

"Depends on who's marching," I said. I didn't know what I meant. Still don't.

I picked polish off my fingernails like slivers of cherry candy. I threw him a look. He threw it back.

"I'm sorry" I said.

He said "I love you."

"I know."

"Are you okay?" he asked, and this time I proved that I was.

After Ray went to sleep, I made a paper flower and hung it from the lightbulb. The fever broke around dawn and Jerry topped the year before in pledges.

A little while after that Ray and his friend Jim got in a fight over a bet and Jim took a sledgehammer to Ray's car. He cut a fine figure in the night. The happy assassin.

I'm sticking it out. Ray works at Firestone.

Here with the sad things and orphans, the tragedy is thick as mortar and slows me down.

Nobody says groovy anymore.

I'm stuck.
This Saturday the window to the fire escape stands open.

Midge is up to her wrists in cherries, and her almost-husband, Ray, sits, hangdog slouched, on Audrey's Hollywood bed, left over from nursing school days. But Audrey is gone and the whiskey is gone when Wayne walks out of the bathroom. The open icebox gives that kind of light as Midge eats the cherries from a blue and white china bowl in the icebox. Hand to mouth.

"Where's Audrey?" Wayne says. They'd all been playing the game when he'd excused himself. "Remember," Midge had said. They looked at each other across the apartment, snapped their fingers, then someone yelled "Walking in the Sand!" There had been applause.

Now hair ribbons are tied, blowing away, to the floor fan. The fan was a wedding present from some Dutch uncle of Audrey's. It came from an old Toledo scale warehouse.

Midge leans into the icebox; her necklace, salmon-colored shells on a string, swings down. And Ray sits on Audrey's throw pillows, that close to sleeping, surrounded by dead Grain Belt cans.

"She took the hootch," Midge says.

"Where'd Audrey go to?" Wayne stumbles a little in the archway. Ray lifts his head, opens his eyes.

"Audrey says...Audrey says...." Midge hold a cherry to her cheek like a flower.

"She's gonna break her neck," Midge says. She smiles. The stucco
Walls go pink as the sun goes down.

Wayne breathes hard, his mouth all open, looking out the window to the fire escape, its rails and rungs bowed from old weight. Black iron. Audrey leans hard at the waist, pitching tiny bundles over the rail to the alley. Wayne shakes his head, squinting. He has to think hard before he sees it. What's happening. She throws his socks. The tidy balls unroll, then flutter like kitetails to the hood of Wayne's car, a mix of rust and primer the color of Spanish peanuts. They fall. The heels of Audrey's so-red shoes wedge between the rails. Wayne can't see her sweat. She's too far away. But she is wet and his and very close to the edge.

"Hey Audrey. Who's walking down the streets of the city?" All the game is, is filling in the blanks. The answer to the musical question. The parts of song titles that go in parentheses, extra words.

Audrey turns to the window.

"Come on babe, everyone know it's Windy. Right?"

Audrey holds half a fifth of Ten High. By the neck.

"This is your old Wayne-o here. Come on in. You'll hurt yourself."

She shakes her head, takes a drink, tipping her head all the way back. "Don't be stupid." She walks toward him, digging in a little with her heels. She leans in the kitchen window, hands Wayne the whiskey, and puts both hands on his neck. Fingernails in a row, just so. "Why don't you get your ass out here and save me?"

There is enough room for them both on the fire escape but Audrey is two rungs down on the black ladder to the alley, holding on, blinking.

"If I could fly, I'd shit right on you from the sky."
"Oh, Audrey," Wayne pulls his fingers over his forehead, and over. Over and over. "You're drunk."

"Yes," she says sweetly, all penny candy, sweet and hard.

"What're you doing out there?" Ray and Midge are a picture in the frame of the curtains, holding each other, their hair tangled together on their cheeks.

"Nothing!" says Wayne.

"You wouldn't happen to know where your 'Ball of Confusion' is?" Midge asks. "It's not in the case."

Wayne smiles. His 45s are in a cardboard case that says "Tune Tote" in fat, flat letters. "No," says Wayne. "I don't know where my 'Ball of Confusion' is."

It could just as easily be her, that shoe; God, it dangles on her toe, then falls on gravel.

"Ginsberg's Seven Floors of Beautiful Furniture" in near transparent whitewash on a brick building.

The alley nearly dark, downtown long dead, the day almost gone.

Audrey, are you okay?" Wayne grabs her wrist. They watch the shoe fall.

Audrey's eyes widen, her hair falls all over her face, and her mouth is only just that open. She isn't a good color, the color of pulse or choking. "I can't come back in," she whispers, "You know why?" Audrey climbs onto the fire escape. She presses both hands, hard, on his chest. She walks him backward; Wayne, smiling, rubs her back, all bare and slick under her dress. Audrey snatches the Ten High off the window ledge.
"I can't come back in because I'm drunk and because the hootch is bye-bye, Wayne." The bottle hits the car.

Audrey laughs.

Wayne's teeth are the only hard thing in his body.

"Jesus, Audrey. You are fucked up and I don't mean maybe." He stares over the rail. "That's my car, damn it! That's my--vehicle."

Audrey stumbles toward him, a half step. "You love your car more than you love me."

She cries.

"That's right, Audrey."

She cries harder, on her hands and knees, bone on iron, knuckles pounding slats.

"Wayne? Wayne-o?" Ray and Midge lean out the window. "Midge and I are going out for some beer."

"We're going out for some beer," Midge says.

"We'll be back pretty soon," Ray says, and Midge says "Pretty soon."

"This is sure some kind of Saturday," says Wayne.

"Come on--Audrey? Come on." They sit beside each other on the fire escape. Audrey's legs are folded under her as if they're just all air.

"Am I as gone as you are? 'Cause if I am, we're one sorry couple, honey."

"One sorry couple." Audrey leans back on his arm and blows her hair from her eyes. The three gold studs running along her ear catch light.

"Look there. The moon is like a great big fingernail clipping."

"It's pretty," Wayne says.
"It isn't." Audrey throws up her hands. "Some of these days we're gonna have to have a talk, Wayne." Her head is in the soft part of his shoulder, the spot where things come together. His T-shirt is soaked clear.

"About what?"

"The dumb game."

She turns to stare at him.

"San Francisco," Wayne says.

Audrey says "What?"

"San Francisco." He smiles, playing their Saturday game.

Audrey stifles a yawn. "Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair."

"Good! Now, 'Indian Reservation'."

She struggles to her feet in one so-red shoe.

"Don't be like this, Audrey, it's the game. 'Indian Reservation'." 

"'The Lament of the Cherokee Nation'. Now shut up. I mean it."

"Do you want me dead?" she asks him. "Do you want me dead?"

If Audrey goes over right now the car will break her fall. Her hair will fan out by her cheek. She may look like she's sleeping.

Audrey kicks him in the ribs, very quick, very hard, with her bare foot.

Wayne spans her ankle with one hand. To twist takes nothing, a flick of the wrist. Not even that.

"Jump," he says. He has her somehow, his mouth near her hot neck and the straps of her sundress. The one with fraying lollipops in rows.

"Go ahead," he says. "We'll all be better off without you," he says.
Audrey's wheat penny hair is in his nose and in his mouth.

"Liar." Audrey breathes and breathes.

Ray snaps on the light in the apartment. Ray and Midge carry two sixes of Old Style and a jar of banana peppers in oil. Ray leans out the kitchen window and offers the jar to Wayne.

Wayne climbs back into his little kitchen. "Why do fools fall in love?"

The two men eat peppers from the jar. Olive oil runs golden down their shirtsleeves and neither wipes his mouth. Midge stares into the green cupboards: Rinso detergent, spinach noodles, glycerine soap, tins of smoked fish. Audrey is still out there, lying on black iron. Wayne's cheek touches the cool of the curtain. He could say, Hey 98.6. Hey, Jude. Good-morning, Starshine. But he says "Audrey. Audrey."

She sits up. In the moonlight, and by the junk jewelry shine of the courthouse clock, her shoulders show white, light pools in her collarbones, her brown eyes shine almost as if.

When she comes in through the kitchen window she holds him tight.

But Wayne holds on tighter and tighter.

And he can't let go.

No.
Americanization

"AMERICANIZATION a mer i kan i za' shun The process of gradual assimilation of alien peoples, reshaping their customs and ideals to meet the American requirements of good citizenship, and developing in their consciousness a just appreciation of the land of their adoption."

The World Book Encyclopedia, 1935

Saint Ambrose Cathedral is one of those downtown churches. Downtown people go to downtown churches. Look out for those downtown Catholics, those drunken Knights of Columbus. Bad as the Shriners. He knew.

He said it was built to honor the pope. He said the pope was an evil man who thought he was the only one God listened to. And his damned misbegotten flock sat over there across the street, praying to the cold stone idols and kissing unnatural things, the air heavy all around with smoke and fire. They can't buy their way out of it, Dorcas, never.

Then your father took you by your hand and led you away from that place, down High Street to the municipal garage, to the car.

You explained, fought for, even apologized for that tumbledown faux pas your family lived with. Your parents, you know, should never have been together.

Your mother said not to worry about "those dirty, dirty sons-o'-bitches." She whispered in your ear; Father allowed no swearing. She pointed out that the phrase "common law marriage" contained the words law and marriage, and that she and Papa were every bit as married as Mr.
and Mrs. Finnegan across the way. Everyone knew about him and that Lupe Cuevas, that--b-girl. Didn't she and Papa raise you up a good, sensible child? And didn't Papa take you to church every week, even twice on Sundays?

Don't blame Papa now, she'd say. He had wanted to marry her, she said. Even now, after all these years, he'd probably take her down to Brother Owen's and marry up like two grubby necked teenagers. But I, she'd say (and she'd wink at you, as if to entice some long ago beau to fill her dance card), I am a free spirit.

Yet you prayed for the salvation of their souls, these two people not quite one flesh. Every time an evangelist came in to do a healing you prayed for the healing of your clandestine family. You could tell by the furrow between your father's eyes, as he sat there next to you in the pew, that he also was praying. Praying the very same thing.

When you were in college you went to a wedding. I guess you could say you knew the bride. But you didn't really know the groom, some Chem E major from Polk City. She clung to him in the receiving line, thumbs hooked through his belt loops like two horny high school drop-outs at the stock car races. You were in a strange land.

The hesitant irreverence of the service startled you at first. But everyone tried to be a little unacceptable then. You felt fussy, overdressed, maybe the hat was too much.... The bride wore daisies in her hair, and they were barefooted, the whole lot of them, groomsmen, bridesmaids, right down to the runny nosed flowergirl, their feet brutal
and black from the tile of the fellowship hall floor.

You sat outside on the parking lot with one of the groomsmen. He wore a top hat and overalls. Called himself Pan, "the god of the woods, the fields, the fuck-hungry shepherd." There were rainbows in his beard. You two discussed the craziness of it all, invoking this maybe-god. You drank a bottle of champagne without glasses. You kissed each other, full of yourselves and champagne, dizzy, tongue wrestling. You had your Tarot cards with you, proud of them, as if this one quirk made you worthy of membership in the Pepsi generation. His future was pregnant with organic elements, until you turned over The Lovers and found them reversed. A card upside down is an ominous thing, and you were terrified as the rice sifted silently down around you.

Badmouthing the Roman Catholics. He called them commandment breakers, pagans, sister bangers. Your father said they even made that streetwalker Mary Magdelene a saint. Leave it up to Papists, he told you, to seat a whore with the bridal party. Your mother smiled a slow motion smile and poured sweet cream and Bourbon in her cup. They say you just get yourself a piece of one of them saints and rub it on what ails you, like liniment, she said. Oh what miracles that poor girl must be responsible for! He laughed and pulled her into his lap. She wrapped her legs around him, pushed the heels of those ridiculous blue spikes through the back slats of his chair. As you turned to leave he put both hands up her skirt, and her laughter danced behind you all the way down the darkened hallway.
The noon whistle screamed. They began. She opened the window and sent his sock drawer crashing into the hollyhocks. You watched them fight in shimmering admiration. They were good.

They were in the pantry, circling and glaring as if bipedalism was new to them. Your mother wore a sleeveless cotton housedress, her arms bare and round in soft, papery folds, mother's arms. She blew smoke in his face, letting the snood fall from her hair, letting him see who he was dealing with—a free spirit.

What happened? You saw it in his eyes. The trembling hand. He reached for her, took her by the wrist. Softly, slowly he drew it to his lips, pressed his lips to her wrist, his mouth greedy on the arteries and veins, the seamless underside. You got a headache over one eye. He kissed her in the slashing place. The slashing place. You didn't know who won.

After sitting through every feature at the drive-in, you went to the truckstop on 60 for one dollar hash browns with cheese. In the grainy dark there was only you and him and old, hollow-eyed truckers half-wired on white cross and coffee. You talked.

He closed his eyes lazily and bit your neck until you quit talking. You thought it was terribly risky, insane to be conquered that way. Above your booth hung a huge print of a male pheasant in flight.

He put his gum in the awkward little ashtray that folded into the back of the front seat, where popular boys kept Kennedy half dollars and furtive, jealously hoarded Trojans in those birthday present wrappers. He
always kissed you as if to consume you, but so gently at first you were captured. Fitting together, warp and woof, your lips hydroplaning in some slick dance. By the time you realized what was happening it was far too late to stop, and you were consumed. A starfish on the beach.

He said he couldn't wait. You didn't want to wait (Here then). He sank into you, a millstone to the sea. Your breath unraveled in his ear. Still you wondered why making love, why not doing love or being love, which to you seemed more precise.

In the end it didn't matter.

But nothing ends, or maybe they just keep ending and ending and ending. He faded in and out like a Mexican radio station on a clear night. Gradually the outs prevailed and he faded away entirely, leaving an impression flat and sturdy as a WPA mural. And the sad, dull roar of the semis shifted down and down again until they were halfway to morning.

LuAnne Civitate's name first appeared on john walls when you and she were still in grammar school. Her reputation often preceded her; she was on the wall at West High two years before she got there. There was nothing very special about her. She didn't know the latest dance steps. She couldn't flirt or tell a good story. She didn't even have the kind of breasts that were in fashion then. In fact, LuAnne didn't have a thing going for her. She was just incredibly, pitifully willing, everyone's favorite dirty joke. She charged a quarter for a blow job, but going all the way cost a dollar. Once someone told her only a tramp would take money for making nasty with high school boys.
So LuAnne stopped charging.

"The transformation of an immigrant is shown in the two pictures. The first is from a photograph of a woman and her baby on their arrival in America, the second was taken a few years later. The homemade dress, the scarf for the head, and the coarse shoes have been replaced by modish clothing. The youthful appearance of the woman suggests that she might be the daughter of the immigrant. The contrast emphasizes the miracle that is possible in the Americanization of the alien."

The World Book Encyclopedia, 1935
Keeping Up In America

It was 1953 when Tanta Rose married Dom, sweetheart--and your mama was, what?--this is why God gave us fingers--twelve years old. My little sister! I was twenty-five then, and so was Tan'a Rose, and Dom was only twenty.

Mostly I was there to sing--even though Ro was my best bosom friend, (not really your aunt at all, any more than Dom is your uncle) I probably wouldn't have been there because it was her second marriage and she wanted it quiet and small--but she wanted me to sing "Oh, Promise Me." So I did, exactly like I'd been told. But not at the wedding. It was after. No, your mama wasn't there, dear--only twelve, what would Judy be doing there? I took better care of her than that! But you know Dom's sister at the Maid Rite? She was there. We called her "Babe" then. Babe had asked me to "sing that one song, you know; you sang it for Judy and me last I was over to your place."

And I say "'Come On-a My House'? That's no wedding song, Babe," and then Rose says "'Oh, Promise Me,' okay? And I'll cry," she says.

And did, later. Rose and I were weepers. We left a trail of tears like--like Hansel's breadcrumbs, you know? In high school. We could've bawled all night.

But she didn't right off. I stopped singing and this awful old apartment where we had the party afterwards, this damn closet we were in, just sort of ate it up. Ol' box of windows and splinters. Babe came with a jelly jar full of gin, and Mike (you don't know him--he moved) and
Johnny (you know Johnny—he's a Vinovich) sort of stood there, stared past me, nodding. "That was nice, Mag." They just wanted to drink and dance.

Men wanted to dance then.

But I couldn't dance.

You know now how they say that all of have—urges?—say that we all feel like loving people of both sexes? I think I always felt a little of that for Rose. Oh, blushing? Not you, Miss Free Love. I don't mean I ever copped a feel. But the day she married Dom was one of the saddest days of my life. I wished all kinds of horrible things on him, like to drop off bridges or to have his thing freeze up and Rose to divorce him. When you married back then it was like—you know—good-bye to all that. I could hardly move. I was so sad. I thought if I'd moved at all that everybody would know. Too far gone to hide.

But that Rose. She couldn't not dance. Pulled Dom's shirt. "Dance honey," she goes. "Da-a-a-ance." Well he was already three sheets—that's "drunk" to you—and sat on the sectional next to that Mike's girlfriend Sandy. You really don't know her—she came in from the country when she was in the family way and went right back again when it was over. No, not the old country. The country country. Cows. She was staying at St. Monica's Home for Wayward Girls down by the KRNT Theatre and we always snuck her in after curfew. Okay, Sandy and Dom were on the sectional, Johnny and Babe on the Murphy bed. I was at the window. Always was the quiet one of the bunch. I told the morning after stories. They all used to call me. "What happened last night?"
Know what? Sometimes? I made it all up.

Anyway, Rose and her stepbrother, Mike, who taught social dance at Authur Murray, were jitterbugging out on the backdoor landing. They came twirling back in, bit by bit, and Mike tracked in thick black off his shoes. Rose wouldn't stop for love or money, though, her pink chenille wedding dress (Chenille! Can you believe it?) whipping 'round her boney knees. I was saying "Go Rose! Don't step on him, girl." She was always dancing like she had something to get rid of. She was such a scrapper. I always had this angel face here--yeah, this one right here. In high school, on Senior Ridiculous Day, she dressed me up like St. Ursula. Patron of girls.

Her Dom took all us girls on bed rides. Know what a Murphy bed is? He'd take it down out of the wall and position one or two of us upside down on the mattress. Dom's sister Babe--she was all of fourteen--too young, maybe, to drink, took her drink with her, trying not to spill or drop it. Dom yells "Here we go" and pushes the bed into the wall. Then, crash! Babe comes back out of the wall, giggling and holding this handful of broken glass.

Not bleeding.

I never married. It's like that thing I said. I wonder if--what is it? subconsciously?--I thought I was saving myself for Rose. I'm not asking you. I'm telling you.

Strange spring in '53. The trees blown all flat, doubled up like thumbs at the joint. Cold. Dom and Rose broke the news at Alma Cebuhar's
St. Joseph's Day party. No darlin', you don't know her either. Wouldn't like her anyway. Well, there we were, all of us fallen Catholics, and Rose had never seen red beer before. She's walking around looking through her beer like some kind of telescope and Dom walks after her yelling "She landed me like a fish!" Holding her by the small hairs at her neck. Everybody yells for them to kiss, and I turn to Johnny and say "Let's go somewhere." He took me home after the streetcars stopped running, and the next day he called up and asked me what happened.

Do I need to tell you more, or do you understand?

Johnny had stood up with me at the j.p.'s house when Dom and Rose got married. He was stepping out with Babe, and his wife was from the old country. Clara. That was her name. She didn't know about Babe (or any of the other girls). In those days, these poor gals with these arranged marriages, well, you know, there was no comparison to an American girl. We used to think, so much for you. The name of the game is keeping up in America, and the married men just keep turning up like bad change. Fair game.

Clara pulled the weeds around her clothesline like she was proud to have to eat them.

And Johnny'd rented the walk-up over the hardware store "for entertaining" he says! Rose was so thick sometimes. She stood up to her ankles in a big pile of leaves on the j.p.'s parking and said "We'll have the party there, then. For the wedding and for Halloween." She, Sandy and me took the truck and drove over only to find Dom's sister Babe (but
he never called her that, he'd always called her his best girl, since she'd been in diapers—fishy? What say?) sitting on this cheesy old orange throw rug, filing her nails, pretty as you please.

Well, our hands were tied. On the one hand, Dom should've kicked Babe straight home, but on the other hand, Johnny was his friend, and for all we knew, maybe he and her loved each other.... It was a hard one, and who were we, you know.

But Rose. Dance, dance, dance. Poor Sandy, all sweet and country and out to here, sat and tended the hi fi, until Mike quit with a stitch in his side. Finally I danced with Rose, or tried to; she steered me past the heavy ashtray with a running Airedale curved up over it, past these two lamps coming out of china lady heads wearing real pearl earrings on fake china ears. You'd buy those now and think they were funny, wouldn't you?

That's when Dom and I went out to the kitchen together, for more drinks. Rose said something like "If he gives you any trouble out there, just holler." "Okay," I say.

That very night Dom and Rose moved in with his parents and his sister Rafaella, who we called Babe, and Dom called his best girl, and their Grandpa Amadeo called "Little Stick"—only in Italian, into a little house by McHenry Park and the public high school practice field, just in back of the streetcar line. They lived there for two years, until Dom could swing his own place. I was living then in this cement block house way out in Valley Junction—-that's West Des Moines to you—-past the last paved road
and city sewers. My neighbors were these sad old grandpa railroad pensioners and leftover miners with the black lung. They didn't know what to make of me and Judy. My mom—Grandma Jean—paid me fifteen dollars a month to keep Judy. She slept on my couch. Grandma Jean didn't have room for Judy after she found Fred McConkey sitting in the cocktail lounge at Air Lanes. Never knew Fred either, honey—and you didn't know Bub or Fran either. Grandma Jean has always attracted these old salesman types, and when she got 'em, boy, she'd do anything to keep 'em. Fred made her throw out all her pots and pans! He said they caused cancer!

In the kitchen, Dom was all teed off about Babe and Johnny. He kept opening the cupboards, one after the other, leaving them open, getting madder and madder. I wish you could've seen this place. Pretty gloomy place for some old married Serb to do his business with little girls. All these awful drawers and doors and cupboards painted like, a combination of shit and canned salmon. All completely empty. There was nothing. Not just no pots and pans. Not just no colanders or roasters or copper bottom skillets. Just these dark caves, and there wasn't any light in there. There was one bulb for the whole place, and you'd carry it with you to the loo; Christ, what a mess.

Dom was saying something like "It doesn't take a fool to see what's going on here," and I was saying I was sorry.

But I really wasn't, you know? I mean, sure, Johnny was married, and Babe was just a girl, but—well, a girl needs a teacher, yes? And there's nothing like an older man; he goes slower, I guess, and with Johnny, he
was such a shit, always yelling and taking charge. It was thrilling.
Don't you think?

Dom and I started arguing. Oh, baby! Uncle Dom and I could never agree on anything—even in goddamn grammar school, pardon my French, the three of us fought, Rose and Dom and me, every day at recess, all recess long, and he was just a little kid. Rose was on him like paste on paper, and I followed them around, kicking up the asphalt. "Dommie!" I yelled, "Stop hurting Rose!" "I'm fine, I'm fine" Rose yells, "Just kick him!"

Even then he was sweet on Rose; he paid about as much attention to me as a sweatbee at a spigot.

That night, Dom grabbed me and damn near broke my arm, skidded me back up against the icebox.

"Leave go," I'm whispering, with all of the others out in the other room.

And I'm looking at the little bones in his neck, and his Adam's apple. Thinking about Babe and Rose and what time of the month it was. Whether he could make love to me.

Don't be surprised, Rosemary. The fifties weren't so boring. I was twenty-five years old, a good looking woman. He was a damn dreamboat. And maybe I thought, making love with Dom would be like—hurting Tanta Rose. Or even making love to her.

But that's when it started.

Dom slung me over his shoulder like a sack, and started twirling around and around, and I couldn't breathe we were going so fast. This
smell came up—like sweat and cigarettes and gin—all that gin! It smelled like peat. I kept calling him a flathead wop. "Put me down!"

And he finally did put me down. We stood there laughing at each other, 'cause we were both staggering like bums and had forgotten what we'd been arguing about. "I forget we're not slugging out in the cinders anymore," he says.

Wham! There was this thud from the living room, and Rose yells "Cut her off," and Babe saying "I'm all right, I'm all right, I'm all...." The music stopped and Dom comes to me and kisses me, pushing me back against the icebox.

You girls don't have to worry about having babies anymore, do you? It's a wonderful thing, this Pill, no matter what the Church says. But it's changed sex for the worse, too. There was always this—I don't know, a feeling like you were just tossing everything to the wind, this risk was like someone else standing outside it all, watching you. You were giving more then.

"I need a drink." I pulled away and knocked down this shot, just like Tanta Rose'd taught me (She drank like a sailor, Rosemary.), wrist and neck stiff, only your throat moves, like a heart beating.

"You need a man," Dom says, and opens his arms to me.

It started out sweet, doll, it was easy. Staring out through my hair, holding onto his neck. There was a vein in his head that was—tick—like a clock. I remember thinking I could make love with Dom and Rose and Johnny, hell, with Mike and Sandy, Babe and Judy...that I was so
drunk and it was so dark and I was sad, but happy, too--like making love to the world.

Then Dom couldn't. We tried everything we knew, but poor Uncle Dom stayed just plain limp.

I thought about Rosie.

Nothing.

I could see her nappy hair and her damn spaniel eyes.

More nothing.

Dom says "I love Rose."

I said I did too. We stared at each other.

He leaps up "What do we do? What do we do?" He's pulling his pants up and I'm skating around the floor looking for my panties, and he's knocking his head against his hands and saying we should come clean to Rose. I say "What we need to do is to love Rose." You know? She needed both of us.

So I stood up and said "Come on. Mind yourself."

We went out to see the bride.

Do you see? You got to love your friends and love your family and you got to find a man to love—or a woman; who am I to say? You gotta do all these things, Rosemary. Your mom would say the same thing.

And life goes on, you know. We had a Halloween party the very next week. Rose dolled me up like St. Ursula again. And now Tan'a Rose is still going strong and Dom is keeping up. Little Judy grew up--where does the time go?--and here you are, the picture of her.
No, Johnny and Babe never got together. But where was the guarantee? They were happy for awhile. And isn't that enough, dear heart?

Is there really all that much to keeping up in America?
"I can't see," I kept complaining. I bounced up and down next to him in the cab of the truck. "I can't see," craning my neck at the mountains.

"Can't see what?" John Paul shifted in his seat, guiding us farther into British Columbia. John Paul, a miracle of blonde geometry, squinted over at me. He saw what was there--spindly trees tethering the slopes, November Ponderosa pines, and firs a tired green, the rest of them some kind of torched spruce. Candy on fire.

"I don't know," I said, taking a pull on my homebrew. "I guess I can't see what else is there. Or what's on the other side."

"I believe there's more mountains on the other side, lady." He kissed me. "Unless I miss my guess."

Last November I was in love with John Paul.

This November, I'm still in Wallace, Idaho. John Paul is elsewhere. I'm lactating, and very tired.

In Idaho, it difficult to see. Impossible. There is no place in this state where I could stand on a flat spot, my eyes pinned to the edge of the land where it cleaves a blue bowl of air. I can't track snowstorms or funnel clouds knocking down fenceposts, phone wires, the mile markers on county roads. Wallace snakes between mountains. They shed more light than the sun or one of the several slivers of moon. The sun can only be seen coming into this valley at flat out noon, when, even then, it's like oyster liquor through a sieve. Too. I almost always have rain for lunch, anyway. It rains here.
The geologists come out when it rains. I don't know what they do, but they pock the clam colored rock and crowd the few lunch counters, and they father innumerable children, who will all, it seems, come to sit in my classroom in St. Rose of Lima grammar school.

"Who was here before anybody?" I ask my class. I spent much of last night making transparencies and ditto masters detailing the many features of the Coeur d'Alene Indians. Since the '50s there has been a shift in the teaching of elementary school history. We are no longer to impress upon the children their share of White Man's Burden, but are supposed to emphasize the melting pot. I'm supposed to make them forget the Coeur d'Alene lolling sullenly on the streetcorners here, and in Coeur d'Alene and Sandpoint, drinking their government checks, slinking home with sleepy drunk Irish mothers, to trailers and lake shacks and motels.

Before anybody? My twenty-five taffy-boned, milktoothed second graders scuffle and murmur in their pastel desks. The chairs are bolted to the tables. A tiny, pinched piece of a girl, legs swinging under her uniform, raises her hand.

"God?" she asks.

The girl who answered my questions is right. Of course. I'm still a new teacher, a second year teacher, and sometimes I don't know how to ask the questions I need to ask to get the answers I'm supposed to get.

"Very good," I say to the class. "Of course, Our Father has always been here. I didn't ask the question correctly; I'm sorry."

Three of the more devout make the sign of the cross and wait for instructions.
When I was in grammar school in Des Moines, in between elaborate games of guessing the letter of the day and annual visits from the dental hygienist and her flannel board pieces illustrating the four basic food groups, I watched, we all watched, the Apollos slam into the ocean. We all got out of classes to watch them on T.V., "the future happening now." The sky was falling. History.

The girl who answered my question is named Rehoboth, which is, I've found out, Hebrew for "room enough." She's the youngest of seven rabbity children born to a couple who drive the whole brood to Coeur d'Alene every Sunday and Wednesday night for charismatic Mass and prayer meeting. Rehoboth heals the sick. Rehoboth speaks in tongues. Rehoboth's brother Peter, a skewer of bamboo in Miss Delaney's fifth grade homeroom, interprets her chanting, gasping streams on the playground after lunch, while a ragged circle of children look puzzled and finger their medals. The parish is embarrassed, the diocese concerned.

Rehoboth worships Mary.

Sister Mary Joseph is beside herself. In Religion class Rehoboth sits, smiling, hands remarkable in repose, a piece of papyrus or silk, a smirking Byzantine Madonna, spacey and holy.

"We adore Mary, the Mother of God. We pray She will intercede for us. We do not worship Mary. Do you understand?" Sister slaps a ruler into her palm.

Rehoboth gazes at the broken slate of the blackboard. "Yes." The cardboard alphabet cards with all the Palmer Method letters paired upper and lower case, the discrete little arrows indicating the correct stroke.
"Now. Do you worship Mary?"

"Yes." Rehoboth smiles as if in pain, or ecstasy.

I am interested in prostitutes. I want to tell the children about the whores in Wallace. A town full of men, all shifting, squinting, starting, smoking, smiling, has brought them to spread like hot jam on one whole story above the bar just a block from St. Rose. And the hunters. After a summer of drought—and rain, and fire—the seasons open and the men come over from Spokane and up from Moscow to paint the town with elks' blood, drying into smokestains in truckbeds, dripping from snapped, streaked deer, pheasant, rabbit, dripping into the gravel lots behind the prostitutes. "This happens here," I want to say, "This is history."

John Paul had worked spotting fires over the summer. He had worked on oil rigs, in the silver mine, in the Potlatch and Kootani sawmills. There were pictures of him posing with the heads and immense racks of dead elk. The animals looked wizened and tired.

"But what are they like?" In John Paul's bedroom, and in his bed, we were the only light and heat. Flour sack curtains drawn against a high window full of branches. The knotholes in the walls were papered over with grey electrical tape. The bedsprings wheezed. Although I never saw him naked (not once; it was always night), I felt him under me, winged hips awkward and apologetic as a boy's, his smooth chest, fisted nipples, the veins in his arms and neck surfacing. It was never right—his cock too long or my hips too shallow. "Let's try it this way." One of us always hurt, our faces wet. I asked John Paul about the prostitutes.

"They're like," I rocked forward, kissing him. He murmured,
"Oh--they're like whores, I guess. Nice enough gals." He traced my wince.

"But you had a favorite girl," I whispered, kneading his shoulders. "You knew her."

John Paul laughed low. "I knew her and knew her, lady," John Paul breathed in hard, damp, "but that's about it."

"Didn't you ever--ouch--careful, sweet love--didn't you ever talk to her?" I stroked his scrotum, hoping his penis would find someplace softer. I wanted him to have talked to her, to have taken her out for a hamburger or to a rodeo. I wanted her to pull away with some kind of dignity and say he shouldn't feel obliged to treat her nice, or to treat her at all. Then he sits her down hard on a barstool. "Tell me about yourself."

I was a cheerleader. I am an only child. I was the second soprano in a gospel trio. I like to dance. I like pizza. I was named after Patsy Cline. I'm in love with you.

"I talk to you, gal," he whispered.

I met John Paul because a kind man was concerned that I wasn't meeting any nice boys. My landlord worked in the sawmill with John Paul. "He's an okay fellow," he said, "and he went to school, too, down at the university, so you two can talk books, or whatever." He winked at me.

After John Paul left, after the month of tea colored stains on my underwear, and sitting down suddenly in the middle of giving spelling tests ("Attic," I'd say, the world buckling, "Apple"), I ventured out one
night to the Oasis Tap, walking down the narrow streets of Wallace, keeping time with the St. Ignatius River, imagining the sunset beyond the scrubbed mountains. The district was kind. The geologists pragmatic. I was a young girl who'd made a mistake. They forgave me for things I've never done.

The Tap sees few women. Few good ones. The whores are upstairs. They have their rooms, their Chinese lamps, their transistor radios. I caused a stir at the bar. Two women I'd seen before came out from under the Ranier and Heidelberg signs and came to my booth with a yellow cheese sandwich and ginger ale. One had a tattoo and the other had a baby. They'd gotten them the same winter, before they knew each other. They'd seen me around, too. Girl or boy? High or low? Daddy or not?

I'm from Des Moines, Iowa, a strange place. A surprising place, like the old billboards said. My father would roll down the window when we drove to our Wisconsin vacations. As we passed the flat, shimmering fields, or the hog shit in the confinement pens, he'd say "Smell that?"

"Yeah." It was a gas station restroom smell, as reassuring to me as the smell of my own shit.

"Know what it is?"

"What?" I shifted and reached over the seat to touch my mother's shoulder rounded against her bedpillow and that morning's smudged and crumpled Register tossed out.

"'at's the smell of money, kid," Dad would say. The sun is hot there, the ground roiling with fossils and earthworms, the leavings of
glaciers and herbicide, shit and money.

Hey sweetheart--

By the time you read this your old loverboy pain in the ass is off to parts unknown. Yeah, I don't know, gal-- the sawmill's going bust and I'm feeling that wanderlust. I figure I'll go on up to Prince Rupert, or Alaska. I still know some guys and I could get on up there on a rig. Hope you don't spend too much time thinking about old long lost John Paul. You know we didn't have an awful lot in common, lady--you were far too good for me and put up with my backward Western ways in fine Iowa style. But no amount of good loving can make two people as different as we are stick together. I do thank you for all that. Remember me whenever you drink a beer! And sorry for the lack of a proper farewell, lady-- I don't go for all that sturm und drang-- just a coward, I guess! Ha!

Thanks again--
J.P.

He owned a topographical map of Mexico, two rifles and a stack of Jack London paperbacks. His pubic hair was clover honey. I crushed the dead flowers his old lover had sent him into his soft fur. His old lover was an angel, off to the Sorbonne and then married. His mother, too, was an angel. A dead one.

How did I get here? Maybe it was the ancient pull of going west, young man. I thought of forests, Yellowstone and cowboys enough to cotton eye Joe with in a barroom, giggling drunk, wearing a skirt. I left a land of shit and money to come to the dying West. I subscribed to the Seattle
Times and caught a ride in a van with a girl who lived on my dorm floor, bound for a hot summer with her Western boyfriend on lonesome Highway 2.

I went to the state university back home. The motto was "Science with Practice." So I was taught to teach as though it--teaching--is something that can be taught. A science. They videotaped me teaching mock lessons to rows of empty chairs, then the tapes were critiqued by my classmates, who suggested that I make better use of the educational media available to me--films and filmstrips, dittoes, transparencies, worksheets. Chalk.

I spent a lot of evenings in the library reading articles in Instructor and First Teacher on how to motivate children to read. Gold star charts still work. Anything you can put in neat columns or boxes clearly labeled with a child's name. My students at St. Rose are hard to design these things for, though, because they're in second grade. This is the age for changing your name, probably because until you're this age, six or seven or eight, I don't think you know you can do it--can do whatever you damn well want to with your name. Toss it out and start over clean. Most of the time it's not serious. Matthew prefers "Matt," or the other way around. Jennifer wants "Jenny" or even "Niffy." My last gold star chart had all the names correct because I took each of the children aside during recess and asked "What do you want to be called on my next reading chart?"

"Daisy," said Rehoboth breathlessly, breaking away from her brother.

I put up the chart on a Monday in October. Across the top was a
green and yellow bookworm, bespectacled and smiling a huge half circle, wearing an aviator cap and a long, fluttering red scarf. The worm was sitting in what was supposed to be a space capsule, but after an evening of shredding brown cardboard, it was only a tube trailing globs of cotton ball exhaust. Arching above the worm, in blue paper covered with glitter, were the words "Reading is Out of This World!"

The children crowded around before the bell rang, locating their names. After the Pledge, roll call and morning prayers I introduced the chart to the students. "There's something new in our classroom. Who can tell me--hands, please!--who can tell me what it is?"

The children had questions. How many stars? For how long? What if a kid reads a whole bunch of Clifford the Big Red Dog books--do they all count as one star?

My favorite student, Luke, a big seven year old with a "Masters of the Universe" lunchbox, raised his hand. "What's that thing the worm is in?"

I smiled and nodded, taking one step toward the children. "That is a very good question, Luke. It's supposed to be a spaceship, but I don't think I did a very good job."

The children agreed. "Looks like a loaf of bread," said Jenny.

"Wormy old bread!" crowed one of the twins.

"Wouldn't send bread to the moon; ain' no people there."

Rehoboth was red from the effort it took to use her mother tongue,
rocking a little in her desk.

"Don't need no bread, don't need no nothing, just spacemen up there gonna toss it all back down." She quivered.

All eyes turned to me.

I call Des Moines every Sunday night and reverse the charges. I call with Baby fastened to my breast, near the furnace, surrounded by my students' work, kneeling in a sea of cheap, soft paper. When I was a girl there was so much of it. In Wallace now, even at St. Rose, the teachers are given a stern paper conservation speech to deliver on the first day of classes, having to do with spitwads, airplanes, cootie catchers, and passing secret notes. I tried to relate it to the children's lives by talking about trees and sawmills closing. I scared them.

And Rehoboth, I see, still transposes her ps, bs and ds. Silent e escapes her. I have to decide whether to hold her back.

Statio nuzzles my mother's voice. "Oh darling, you just sound so quiet."

I stare around the room at my calendars. Everyone gives away calendars here: the credit union, the bank, the gas station, the beauty parlor, pool hall and church. I didn't know what to do with all of them; it was slapstick, me staggering down the main drag, baby in one arm, a stack of calendars in the other. I've never thrown away a calendar. They're all thumbtacked neatly in a line on my cool wall, low, as if for a child.

"It's just the connection, Mom." I squint at the calendars. It is Armistice Day. "Remember your soldier dead." "Stop and smell the roses."
"You sound so far away!" Mother sounds like she's yelling down a laundry chute.

"I am far away," I whisper. I imagine downtown Des Moines tonight, conventioneers' headlights fanning rainbow puddles of street grease. Teenagers and transients dodging each other on the Loop, past the Plasma Bank, the pawn shops and wig shops and delis, all lit up in red neon from the Traveler's Insurance umbrella and the KRNT Weather Beacon, newly lit for the first time since the energy shortage.

"Please come home when the term ends," my mother is saying.

"Send pictures of that baby," orders Dad on the cordless.

The history lesson for tomorrow is about the Jesuits and the Cataldo Mission. I'll look out the windows at the rain. There are still mineshafts enough to throw yourself down, if you're alone and free in the West. My students will work on their lesson, drawn across their desks like delicate bows. The school's furnace and their pencils scratch.

I think I have my history confused. I kneel and squint at my row of calendars. What day is it? I forget what has happened and what I wish had happened, what could happen and what will happen. I wait at night. I can make myself think John Paul is coming in from working graveyard, opening his shirt, the tawny sawdust falling from his chest, raining on my neck. Only the whores are constant. And the nuns. And Baby.

And I do love the prostitutes for the gifts they've given me, dreams of the sturdy stock that compels a girl to run—from the strap, or a strict Mormon mother with a ramrod spine, or lucky babies cracked open on the tiles of gas station bathrooms. Gone for good. I didn't run from
anything.

The hunters must leave their mark all over them. In the little store pinned to the road outside town, the licorice haired wife won't let the hunters touch the beer, preventing accidental feather prints on cool cans tacky with wild animal blood.

"History is happening. Look!" I want to say to Niffy and Megan and Luke. I want to say to Daisy and Peter, "There are cool women covered with feathers and blood."

The money comes easier in Calgary, and I understand the girls are going north this spring. The old nuns, too, die unexpectedly of influenza. I take my customary lunch at my desk: high, flat noon, my cup of rain.

I'm not tired of Baby. I'm just tired. The nuns don't offer to babysit and neither do the whores. My parents send checks and have helped me buy a junior bed on time, for when she's older.

Her name is Alene, after the Indians. "Coeur d'Alene," I've found out, means "heart of an awl" or "needleheart." I like to think that the whole city, the river, the race, were named after her tiny, bounding heart. This hidden sunless town is the Body broken for us, and Alene is the heart, is the Blood; I drink in all of this and remember him. But I choke on the Host, sweet Mary! This bitter Eucharist, the reeling wafer that is Idaho, not my home. Tonight I ache with milk. Alene's eyes begin to follow me everywhere, drunken blue in her hot skull.

Tonight I'll walk out in the street with Alene deep in ether. I'll stand out there squinting into the dark dark. And I'll pitch these words,
finally, chuck the whole damn story into the air: my misfit, my lover, my daughter, my Idaho not mine, I throw you all toward where I imagine the moon, and I wait, my face turned toward the trees, for it all to rain back down in pieces, bread for the moon.