

Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival

— March 23-24, 1995

Winter Theatre, Dana Fine Arts Building

All events are free and open to the public

Thursday, March 23

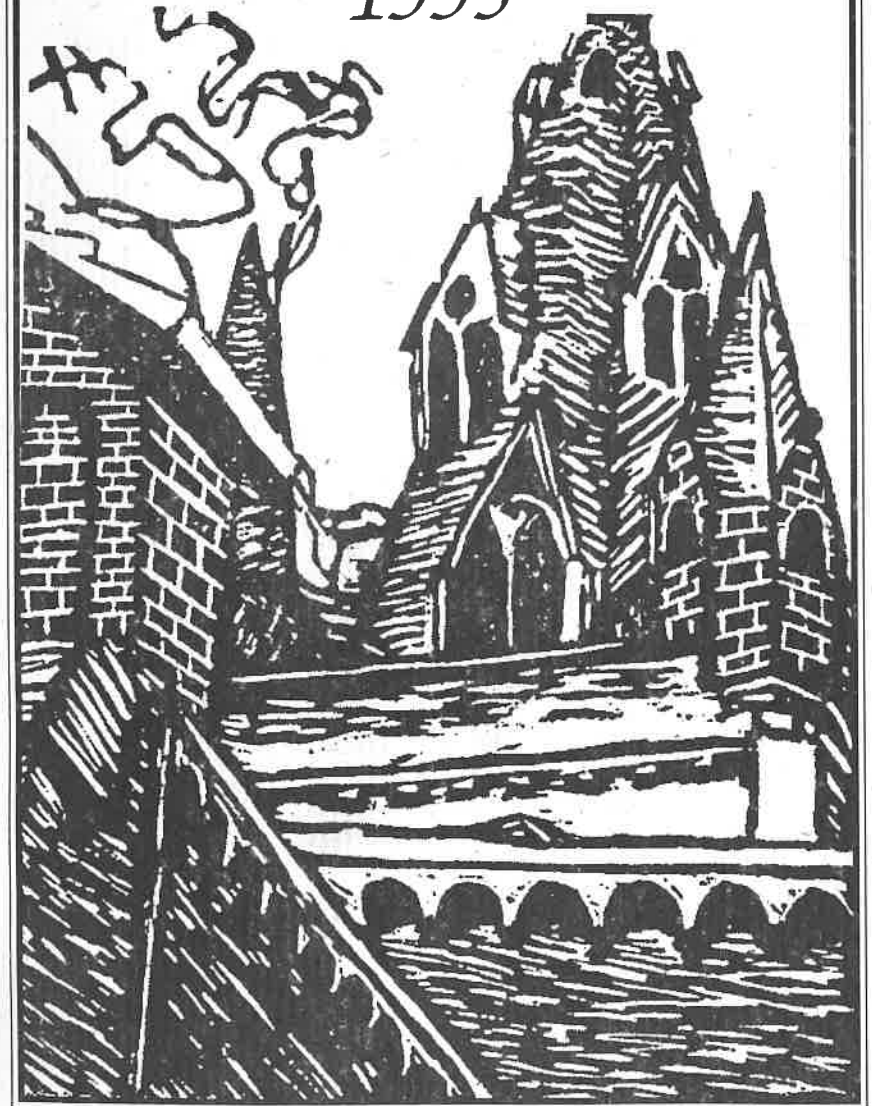
4:00 p.m. Reading by Julie Kalendek
8:15 p.m. Reading by Michael Harper
Reception to follow

Friday, March 24

10:00 a.m. Coffee and doughnuts
10:25 a.m. Reading by Peter Carey
1:00 p.m. Reading by student writers
2:00 p.m. Panel discussion of student work
Memye Curtis Tucker, moderator
4:00 p.m. Awarding of prizes

For further information call 404-638-6294.

Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival 1995



Agnes Scott
Writers'
Festival
Magazine
College

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring distinguished writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. This year's participants are Michael Harper, Peter Carey and Julie Kalendek. Other recent guests have been Carolyn Forché, Lee Abbott, Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, Rita Dove, Sharon Olds and Gloria Naylor.

Spring, 1995

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Wintering

I am deep in my skin, my legs and arms
 bone, marrow, calcium. I am
 a fossil, reduced to dry earth.
 The color of grieving. I speak
 softly, whisper to the walls
 listen for the hum of the lightbulb. A fan
 spits new pale air waves into the old. This
 is the only motion until the telephone rings,
 vibrates the air waves into listening. I wake
 but cannot speak to his voice, echoes of circumstance,
 chance, habit. Some other arms release me
 before I can see, buried in walls.
 I find myself prone, wanting.

I have been dreaming, dreaming of
 God on his mountains, waiting
 for me. I go. It is not what I meant, blood
 of the slaughtered is everywhere, skinless bodies
 preserved like salt pork. I am not willing and will
 refuse this. I move toward my century, pass
 ghosts, shadows. I remind myself to be
 horrified at these, to be afraid of the dark
 to refuse the evil eye.

I return to the wilderness,
 pictures of places I cannot remember. I think
 of crop circles, the path, the origin of
 language. The songs I know but have not
 learned. *i want to grow fur*, I think, *eat
 with my teeth*. I find the holes, fill them
 up with new words for fire, breath.
 I see the beginning, add this to myself.

—Rachel Howell

How to Say Rock

Reach for me.
 I am the only one close enough
 to touch. This cave is filled with morning,
 try to hold onto this. We come here
 to unearth, to kiss, be born. It is discovery.
 Look for the edges, trace the lines.
 Pretend we are blind. We are.
 We fumble, feel for dead ends.
 There are thousands. We breathe
 each other, thin but heavy, think
 of dying. The possibility keeps us on.
 Walking not instep but making the effort,
 there are carvings to tell us the details. We know this.
 We have both tried before, this time write it down.
 The light, the turns, you make a map. I love you
 for the effort; reach for you in the
 darkness, promise I will not forget.

—Rachel Howell

Junior Senior

Dragging in from the last breakfast,
 his tuxedo wilted,
 Jay turns off the tired car.
 Across the blue yard
 his father, in a yellow pane of kitchen,
 pours water into the Mr. Coffee.

Jay unclips the bowtie,
 imagines that tongue tracks
 lap his lips, that eau of necking
 pulses from his damp face
 like a fever.

He wants his father to ask,
 but fears saying
 what he didn't love doing—
 how cold in the overwarm car
 Jenny's soft tongue was,
 slipping over his chapped lips
 and into his gullet.

How can he fear the touch
 of the woman he has prayed to?
 Jenny loves horses and rain,
 trails Tea Rose,
 wells small breastfuls
 of yielding.

His father sips coffee in his undershirt,
 kisses his sleepy wife.
Daddy, Jay thinks, all long loves are more than me.

His heart is acres of grass.

—Gordon Johnston

The Future Farmers of America Judge Land

It rained.

They wore blue corduroy jackets, who
they were scripted in corn silk over stumpy hearts—
Jeff Gay, who wasn't, Ray Sutton, Sam Sully.

They wore men's boots, crossed fields,
stuck fingers in other men's farms,
said "Tomatoes" like saying it sowed them.

They put on rubbers and stood kneedeep in
a suck of pasture drainage, plotting a stock pond.

Smelling loam, crumbling it.

Ray kicked shit in the paddock,
scooping a handful to read like tealeaves.

The boy from Cairo, a natural, won it.

All I saw him do—wriggle one wet creosote post.

Like he wanted out.

Third place for us—a gold plastic plow
on a marble pedestal. We howled in Mr. Kay's pinto,
wolfed burgers fatted on the land we knew.

On the way home we played truth or dare.

No one chose truth.

I was to french Deborah Josey, my farmer's hands on her hips.

Jeff would squeeze Denise's peachy left cheek,

and touch the neck of the homecoming queen on his bus.

Tuesday in algebra, I asked Deborah in a note,
smelling her corn tassel hair:

my seed fell on stony ground.

Denise's boyfriend, a Wagness, kicked the shit out of Jeff.

Ray did french Amanda. Sam turned out gay.

The land hasn't changed. We don't judge it.

—Gordon Johnston

Queen Esther

Superman never was real

not even in 1970 when I was young enough

to hope somebody could save Queen Esther

from that closet she used to get beat down

and locked up in

when she lived in the projects

and she was the lady next door

because when it started Daddy

turned the TV up and closed his eyes

and Mamma went to her room to read *True Story*

and I crawled into our closet to

listen for when Queen Esther

stopped breathing or in-the-nick-of-time

for Captain America to come

crashing through the chalkboard walls

to save us

knowing full well she'd be butterflying

out the next morning

wearing her smile like a frozen flower—

"Oh, I just fell and broke a wing."

Nobody came

not even one real person

hard and long as we were begging.

—Jeffrey Mack

Like a Family

Thank God
The wisdom of semi trucks
has not escaped the affluent minded,

such as women praying in their bathtubs
with pink bodies like clean poultry
stripped of the texture of their skins,
women who later garnish themselves
as delicately as their chicken,

Chicken Primavera, Chicken Cacciatore, Fried Chicken,

And understanding is not beyond grandfathers,
who praise the lord for their food,
the safety of their children,
and the filling of the congregation.
They humble at the morsels of the sermon,
and swallow each word intensely,
their goosebumps hidden.
They are good men,
they are well fed.

There are days when the children are starved,
they wrench their limbs like boiling vermicelli
in the pew.
There are days when young people forget
and hobble in with the tender fluttering
legs and gaping chins of a hangover,
a sin so bad they were purged in the morning
of their fine chicken dinners,

Sweet and Sour Chicken, Chicken Noodle Soup, Baked Chicken,

But, Thank God,
when the roseate flush
of their ignorance is warmed,
when they age to a pure white,
they will digest the sage words
of the Tyson truck, they will find
sustenance in the phrase,
"We Feed You Like Family"

—Liz Peterson

Daily Elephant

I was eating the elephant
when I found disorder
in the lumbering trees
I was hunting in the soil
for the essential elephant
The ground was littered
with hard bits
of gnawed off fingernails

so I looked above
for the fundamental elephant
splintered by the flying,
the vaguest of grays
was torn in the head of the sky ...

my friend had claimed to find it
she hailed her sky and clutched
the flawless elephant list.
What ashen plain she has
spread out on her days
I take fragments of elephant—
the trunked phones
snorting their voices,
the heavy shadows in the offices,
the dusky romance posters.
“Eventually we’ll finish. It’s like
eating an elephant. You have to
take it a day at a time,” she said.
meanwhile I’m full of rotten meat.

—Liz Peterson

Blue, Orange, Red
(A Painting by Mark Rothko, 1961)

A window of blue,
framed by orange, opened
enough to let the blue come inside.
Simple rectangles of color that seem easy,
But this window opens my eye to
the world of blue—
May I crawl out on the ledge of your window
and go to sleep in that deep
mysterious blue night?
May I float out on the waves
and then dive deep down into
the caverns of violet to find
the red under the blue?
I don't mind that the blue floods over
the boundaries of the red and orange frame.
Just let me swim and splash in the blue
and if I reach too far, the red flames will lick
my hand and I will quiet the burn in
the cool waters.
To jump through the fiery
window into the blues
of meditation, the pool of
life giving blue!
Envelop me—
like the cool water that I
pull my arms through to move
and from which, breathless,
I lift my head to breathe.

—Cheryl Reid

He Reproves the Heron

X-rated soap-opera; metastasized melodrama; Punch and Judy with sharp objects, broken hearts, breasts, balls and woe galore. A paradox; a contradiction; life imitating O. Henry and De Sade, fiction's flotsam and jetsam—who could've co-written this story, for all its fleshly mortification, sentimentality, and phony-seeming plot twists. Or Shakespeare, when he pandered to the groundlings, the Shakespeare of *Titus Andronicus*. The protagonist of this story is both an exemplar and an anti-hero, someone who helped show me the error of my ways and then succumbed to his own. And why do I need to tell it? I may be freighting the story with too heavy a cargo, but I see it as essentially a tragedy—in the Aristotelian sense—despite its bathos and Geraldo Riverishness. Cathartic, at any rate, for me. Or perhaps I need to tell it because Charles's story is true. For after denying truth for so long, I have a debt to pay him—and if Charles's incredible tale can be credibly related, I will have paid another installment—though I must be aware that I could be, even now, playing a subliminal, pedantic, postmodernist game, the object being to demonstrate—what? That truth is not only stranger than fiction, it can be as tawdry and contrived?

There is of course the therapeutic hypothesis: This as an attempt to *process* grief, as Stuart, my psychobabbling onetime counselor, might say. Or the motive to tell Charles's story could come from feeling obliged to him. To a certain extent I owe my sobriety, hence my life, to Charles. You see, I used to contend that drunkenness was the only appropriate response to a world void of meaning. But this was denial masquerading as dysteleology. If one can speak of Schopenhauer between shooters, swish a stirrer in his schnapps and ascribe it all to Weltschmerz, then it is easier to be a lush. It also helps if one can swaddle self-loathing in the blue gown of a literary pedigree, fancy himself a *manqué* when he is just a sorry drunk.

I met Charles at Richland Institute two years ago. Though anyone was acceptable whose insurance company would pay the \$14,000 cost of the twenty-eight day stay, Richland attracted health professionals—physicians, pharmacists, dentists, nurses—from all over the country because of its special chemical-dependency program for such people. (Health professionals have a higher rate of addiction than any occupation, though I'd wager academics aren't too far down the list.) Charles was a surgeon from Denver, an intravenous Demerol user. In group therapy, which we had three times a week, we told our life stories. Each of us had thirty minutes to explain how he or she had been brought low by his or her drug(s) of choice—how we'd "hit bottom," in twelve-step-program parlance. Stuart, the group counselor, insisted on specifics, blow-by-blow Bukowski-ite drunkalogs, Burroughs-esque junkie sagas. If Stuart didn't get what he wanted, he'd denounce you as being in denial and "not getting with the program," which could result in expulsion from treatment—and meant loss of livelihood to some of us, jail to some. Many of us were there because judges, employers, certification boards, and/or spouses had warned that their patience was wearing thin. In any case, I heard Charles's story in group.

When he was in medical school, Charles met a Mexican-American woman named Dolores. Despite their parents' opposition, Charles and Dolores married. WASPs haven't cornered the market on prejudice, of course. Loli's—my fiancée's—parents, Miami residents for thirty-five years, speakers of idiomatic English, Republican to the roots of their gray hair—aren't pleased that their daughter is engaged to an Anglo, even one who knows the language of Unamuno, Martí and Neruda almost as well as his own native tongue. I should explain that I have "fallen" in love, and this time see more aptness than inanity in the metaphor; love requires relinquishment—of conditions, doubts, control; like a freefall into hope's blue yonder, love does not admit impediments. After Dolores and Charles married, his father refused to pay for Charles's tuition any longer. So Charles could remain in med school, Dolores dropped out and took a secretarial job. Charles didn't want Dolores to do that, but she insisted, and they agreed that after he was established in practice, she would go back. Charles said one of the things he would always regret was that he never had the chance to repay Dolores for her sacrifice. At that point, his eyes filled and he wiped them with the back of his hand, which is only remarkable because he was otherwise so unemotional in telling his tale—and in usual comportment. About which more later. Charles said though they lived in virtual poverty, the days with Dolores were the happiest of his life.

Then Dolores took ill. Statistically the odds of such a young woman dying from breast cancer are about the same as her being struck by lightning. Of course, that also happens. Loli has a scar from where the lightning melted the clasp to the top of her bathing suit. We had driven down for the day to Bahia Honda and were on the beach when the sky darkened and the lightning began to flash. It struck as we were gathering our things together for the ride back to Miami. Both of us were bowled over, literally. When I regained my senses, I saw that Loli was not breathing. Somehow, I was able to recall my CPR and resuscitate her. I'm told there's no better feeling than holding your newborn child; not having had that pleasure, I'd have to say that saving the life of the person with whom you hope to have children must be a very close second. But enough digression. When Dolores died, Charles was devastated. He wanted to give up. I can hear his Henry-James rotundity (so unlike the other physicians' third-rate sportscaster diction) as if it were yesterday: "I determined, however, not to yield to despair." (Here I might paraphrase Pilate, and ask, What is determination?) At any rate, Charles got his M.D. He went on to become eminent in his field, which after Dolores' death he'd switched from plastic surgery to oncology. This part of Charles's story is perhaps the most O. Henryesque: the symmetry between Dolores' death and Charles's medical specialization seems too neat; if such a correspondence were encountered in a work of fiction, a reader might justly cry sentimental contrivance. But this aspect of Charles's story also brings to mind Kundera's assertion that life is in fact "novelistic": What's lamentable is not fiction's fascination with "mysterious coincidences," but our inability to perceive how symmetrically composed life is, for in our obtuseness we deprive our lives of a dimension of beauty. In this light, Charles's becoming a mastectomist, his decision to go

hand-to-claw with the Crab upon the battleground of the human breast, appears artistic. As if he were claiming the terrible beauty of his grief and asserting his right to shape its dimensions. This is not to scant the role of irrational guilt in his decision (i.e., Charles became a breast-cancer surgeon to *atone* for surviving Dolores). But I see guilt more in evidence in the Sadean episodes of Charles's story, and less so in this O. Henry one. In any case, responses to subconscious imperatives are usually neither chosen nor poetic, and Charles's was both.

We discovered that we had more than addiction in common. We'd both written books, for example. Charles showed me a copy of his. It was used in a lot of teaching hospitals, according to another surgeon in treatment. Charles was well-read, unlike most physicians at Richland, whose reading seemed limited to *The Wall Street* (and perhaps an occasional medical) *Journal*. Charles and I spent an evening once talking about poetry. He knew his Yeats. And Calliope was not his only muse, for he sculpted. Charles claimed sculpting helped him maintain the dexterity he needed as a surgeon, but I think sculpting was more than just exercise for him. Like surgery, sculpting was an objective correlative for his real life work, mourning Dolores. In the evenings, he'd bring the piece he was working on, a bust of a woman—I assumed it to be of Dolores, though I never asked—into the atrium of Cottage A. ("Cottage" was one of the quaintest euphemisms employed at Richland). He'd ask the night nurse for his small, knifelike sculpture tool, which he wielded with great care and tenderness, as if rather than an inert lump of clay, he were incising a flesh-and-blood woman.

Some years after Dolores died, Charles remarried. He'd endured all he could of solitude and celibacy when he met Diane, he said. In exchange for her company and caresses, Diane got the wealth and prestige that came with a husband who was a well-known surgeon. Though the marriage quickly became troubled, as such marriages do, it had seemed more convenient to remain nominally married than to divorce. Both partners had affairs. Charles said his was a brief one that he undertook only after Diane began refusing him sex. Claiming to gear pregnancy (a friend had allegedly become pregnant despite carefully taking the pill), Diane said she would not be sharing Charles's bed any longer. And now we move from the merely incredible to the luridly incredible. But nonetheless true; may I die drunk tomorrow if it's not. Immediately after Diane proclaimed the conjugal-relations moratorium, Charles stalked into the bathroom and, with a scalpel he kept around the house for sculpting, vasectomized himself.

Grotesque as it was, with the exception of the watery eyes when he spoke of Dolores dropping out of med school, Charles told his story without emotion, as if he were reading a bus schedule. The dispassion and detachment with which he recalled the atrocity had an eerie, other-worldly—dare I say it—Kafkaesque quality. Indeed, in my bookish brain, where the shortest distance between two points is the neural autobahn joining perception to a literary analog, Charles's manner evoked Gregor Samsa. At that moment the Rorschach of Kafka's most famous story resolved into a parable of how feeling can harden in insect exoskeleton, the heart into a numb, dead stone. The irony

of such a metamorphosis is that its cause is intense feeling—grief, guilt, despair, addiction: Overload an electrical circuit and it will fail. I had a vision of where I'd been heading, of where the real bottom lay, and saw I did not want to hit it. The insectlike *apatheia* that Charles's detachment suggested seemed a species of death worse than the conventional, premature physical death that awaits addicts and other desperadoes. I felt as if I had come to a juncture where two paths diverged: one leading directly to Thanatos, the other wending first through the Land of Flat Affect, a featureless, weatherless wasteland called *Acedia* in former times, after the deadly sin.

Following Charles's startling revelation, Stuart asked him why he had done such a thing to himself. Had he been using drugs at the time? "To call her bluff, as it were," Charles answered. He said his use of Demerol began only after the vasectomy. (Charles called his drug of choice, *the meperidine*, as if it were a foreign country: *the Lebanon, the Argentine*.) I alluded earlier to the Sadean aspects of Charles's story; I was thinking primarily of this incident. But there is something gratuitous and vulgar in the association, one that is not fair to Charles, for his self-destructiveness, though grotesque and pathological, was not vulgar or gratuitous. It may be more appropriate to invoke Van Gogh. In any event, Charles said after Diane had seen what he'd done, she told him to cut his throat while he was at it. Though they were still married when Charles got to Richland, he had moved out the night of the vasectomy incident. Diane had been vetting attorneys, Charles said, and as soon as she found a sufficiently bloodthirsty one, they would be divorced.

As if things weren't bad enough, Charles discovered he'd become impotent. This complicated relations with Gloria, the hematology resident at the hospital with whom Charles was having an affair. He took to using papaverine, a substance which he said produces a formidable and long-lasting erection when injected at the base of the penis. At this point, Paul, a cocaine-dependent psychiatrist from Syracuse, interrupted. He said Charles's *self-mutilations* with scalpel and hypodermic indicated a serious problem, one he needed help for apart from his addiction. But Stuart said addiction *was* everybody's most serious problem, and that we were all getting the help we needed. "You're a patient now, not a doctor, Paul," Stuart told him—in other words, shut up.

Charles became addicted to Demerol. He acknowledged that he sometimes made rounds at the hospital with a syringe in a vein, tied above the ankle so he could fix discreetly while tying his shoes. Somewhat like the vodka-in-the-coffee-mug ruse I employed at Kennesaw, as loathsome as that is to recall. But no addict can hide his use forever, and one night Gloria found him in his apartment in a meperidine haze, syringe and Demerol bottle on the coffee table beside him. Though you might think a doctor could tell, Gloria had no idea Charles used narcotics. (Nor had she known about the papaverine.) She was appalled, Charles said, and left him. A few days afterwards, late on a Saturday night, Charles ran out of Demerol. He drove over to his office—he had a practice with two other doctors—and started shooting up the Demerol from the safe. They found him on an examining room floor Monday morning, all the Demerol gone. A

week later, Charles was in Richland. His license had been suspended, pending revocation. He'd been expelled from his practice, and it was not yet clear if the state would bring criminal charges against him.

I've never been one to feel much sympathy for medical doctors. Greed and condescension seem more common among them than compassion; the AMA behaves a little better than the Cosa Nostra *vis a vis* the common weal. Spending four weeks with two dozen chemically-dependent physicians didn't substantially change this opinion; and it's impossible to look at a physician the same way after you've seen one in withdrawal, flopping about on the floor like a mullet. I never thought I could feel sorry for someone who earned five or six times my salary, but I feel sorry for Charles. He'd never gotten over Dolores' death. Grief had virtually eroded his ability to feel anything but grief, but its depth testified to the former greatness of his heart, as a single artifact from an ancient tomb can testify to the richness of the culture that produced it. And he'd made a difference; people literally owed him their lives. When Charles was forbidden the practice of medicine, his *raison d'être* had been taken away. One would've needed a cold heart indeed—"a mind of winter," as Stevens had it—not to feel sorry for him.

Charles's story is bathetic enough, maudlin enough, sordid enough; I don't want to make it more so. But this also needs telling. In giving my life story in group, I dredged up and stood naked before all present my humiliations and cruelties. No—if I claim to be looking truth straight in the eye, *humiliations and cruelties* won't do. I told of the night I went to the doublewide of a woman called Stumblelina (sometimes to her face); I can't recall her proper name. I, who hated country music and professed feminist sympathies, had been frequenting a country-and-western strip bar where shitfacédness and people like Stumblelina were the norm. In the literature of addiction the behavior is called *drinking with inferiors*, though who is the inferior of whom is hard to determine in the event. No one I knew drank as I did; such drinking could not take place in a respectable establishment; so I got me to the Country Kitten. I told of how, that infamous night, I'd been too drunk, too flaccid to consummate the adultery. I told of awaking the next morning in a bed of piss, three hours cold. Of searching for my pants and finding them in the catbox, smeared with the shit of Stumble's calico. Of my wife lying in Kennestone Hospital, where, unable to reach her husband the whoremonger, she had driven herself. Where she'd been transfused with nearly twenty pounds of blood. Where the cause of the hemorrhaging was determined to be an ectopic pregnancy. Of putting my head, Plath-like, in the oven; of pulling it out to drink one last John Courage and losing the will to die; then driving and checking in to Richland.

My voice had begun to crack. I feared if I continued I'd deliquesce, become a puddle of whimpers. The idea was repellent and terrifying. I considered displays of emotion to be symptomatic of intellectual anemia, of acute Weltanschauung deficiency. Irony, coolness, grace under pressure, the Beckettian cosmic smart-ass quip: these were a few of my favorite things. Unfiltered, disheveled, come-as-you-are emotion, that is, emotion unmediated by a text, could not be admitted to my smug cognitive club. I'm

much better at distancing myself from emotion than in expressing it, even now. Moreover, Stuart liked us to cry, and I would have killed before satisfying him.

Charles sat next to me. "It's all right, Jack," he said. He put his hand on my shoulder. Stuart told me to go on. He told Charles to stop "rescuing" me, to quit enabling me to dodge my feelings; I'd "stuffed" them for too long. Stuart was right of course, but being right is never enough. You must care, you must have joy and passion, else a great prince in prison lies. Charles kept his hand on my shoulder for a moment longer, then removed it.

Rather than effect catharsis, *sharing* this sordid, shameful episode in group made me loathe myself even more deeply, and called the dark raptor of despair down upon me. Richland, sobriety, marriage, work: What was the point? Kneewalking or marching, we all move toward the grave. Plus, I had a life, I carped: I wasn't going to make a career out of recovery, exchange an addiction to alcohol for an addiction to a simple-minded, religiose pseudo-philosophy *a lá* Stuart and his twelve-step apostles. It was a relapse into the symptomatic, self-pitying rationalization drunks have used since the discovery of fermentation.

Stuart had no ready-made phrases at hand; he glared at me. But Charles spoke. "You know, Jack, addiction is not a fucking nosebleed. It's not a poem, it's not a dream, it's not a concept, and it can kill you. Books won't help you. Your languages and degrees and intellectual poses won't either. You're here so you *can* have a life. Now will you please face facts and stop sniveling." The unexpectedness, the forcefulness, of his remarks, plus his uncharacteristic use of profanity, took me aback. I had no response, other than to get up from my chair, walk to the urn and with trembling hands draw myself another cup of coffee.

Today, the compulsion to use alcohol has for the most part disappeared. Yet I call to mind Charles's admonition to stop sniveling whenever the dark bird is upon me. He visits, though less frequent, continue; but no longer does he gorge upon my liver. The words drive him back to his dwelling place, a cold Gobi strewn with the fossil hearts and beetle carapaces of the drunk and the desperate.

After you were in treatment for three weeks, you were eligible for therapeutic leave. TL was intended as a way of letting you ease back into the world a little at a time. Leave lasted from 9 a.m. Saturday until 7 p.m. Sunday. The only conditions were that you attend at least two AA, CA, or NA meetings (you were given a card for the person chairing the meeting to sign) and that you not drink or use. If you failed your post-TL, Sunday-night urinalysis, you were expelled from treatment. Charles and I got TLs the same weekend. I spent Saturday at home, with Jill. I hadn't put three sober weeks together in a long time and it was one of our best days, one of our last. As I said, after I got out of Richland things were good for a while, but Jill and I soon discovered that alcohol was not the cause of all our problems. In fact, it had camouflaged a few. Such as: In terms of emotional warmth, I was a zero; Jill took to calling me Frosty. Such as: Living with a sober, competent husband meant fewer opportunities for self-abnegation, but Jill

needed the perverse, familiar comfort of a martyr's mantle; I dubbed her Mrs. Christ. Such as: Deceit, distrust, recrimination and guilt had withered our love, despite good intentions and best efforts; what remained was a relic, the shriveled, entabernacled ring-finger of an obscure saint. Thirteen months after my release from Richland, we divorced. Wanting to make a clean break, I resigned from Kennesaw State, left Atlanta, moved to Miami and this job at FIU.

The Sunday morning of my TL, Jill had to leave for Jekyll Island, where her special educators' conference was to convene that evening. Charles and I had arranged to go canoeing. I picked him up at his hotel. Charles said he'd stayed up most of the night finishing his sculpture. We went to an 11 o'clock AA meeting, then drove to the river to rent the boat. It was a warm, April day and everything was in bloom. The dog-woods, the azaleas in the backyards along the banks. We paddled for a couple hours and then put up on some rocks in the middle of the river for lunch. After we'd finished, Charles asked about my plans. I told him that my goal was to be a decent and honest husband, teacher, and scholar. Freud slightly overestimated the libido's hegemony, but the wellsprings of happiness—*Leben und Arbeiten*, love and work—he accurately discerned. No doubt my pink-cloud plans, contrasting so starkly with Charles's loveless, jobless prospects, depressed him, though that certainly wasn't their intention. Nor do I believe they influenced his actions. I believe by this point Charles had a plan as well. Then came a sudden banshee keening. We twisted on our rock perches to see the upstream heron, solitary, eminent, gray as wet slate, casting its affectless gaze upon us. We watched in silence for some moments, the bird dipping and raising its head, as if nodding to signal accord with some momentous decision. Then, quietly, Charles began to recite: "Cry no more in the air, /Or only to the water in the West; /Because your crying brings to my mind /Passion-dimmed eyes and long heavy hair /That was shaken out over my breast; /There is enough evil in the crying of the wind."

I didn't recognize the poem then: it's Yeats, of course; I've since memorized it. When Charles stopped, as if on cue the heron lifted off and beat its way upriver, out of our line of sight. In the wake of the recitation the Chattahoochee's burbling had turned mournful. I couldn't look at Charles; his recitation of the poem was so heartfelt, so stunningly, spiritually apt, that I was embarrassed to the point of confusion, even a little afraid. I hadn't thought him capable of summoning such pathos. I put the lunch things in the canoe. We pushed it off the rocks, hopped in and paddled to the take-out.

I understand the incident now as Charles's last will and testament: The poem embodied all that was left of passion and beauty in his life and he needed a witness who would be able to comprehend that. As I said, I believe he'd already made his big decision, and two days after our river trip, Charles hanged himself. He used his belt for the noose, a chair and a ceiling fan as a gallows. You'd have thought a fan would come out of the ceiling before it would support a 200-pound man. I took the pieces he sculpted. People say it looks like Loli.

It was the first suicide Richland had had in almost 18 months. Of course Paul,

who'd spoken up when Charles was telling his story, shit he'd seen it coming. In fact, it was Paul who contacted Diane, Charles's estranged wife, and suggested she sue Richland for not preventing Charles's death.

The trial, for which Stuart, Paul and I were subpoenaed, ended last week. The jury awarded Diane eight million dollars. I don't feel comfortable about my role in the affair, though I told the truth, and the verdict was proper, if not just: Richland can't be absolved of blame; the staff of a psychiatric hospital should be able to recognize that a patient who talks of cutting and sticking needles in his genitals is a suicide risk, as Paul contended and Diane's lawyer argued. My discomfort arises from the disposition of the damages. I wish the money could have gone to a good cause—say to establish a Charles and Dolores M. Foundation for Cancer and Addiction Research—instead of to Diane, who neither needed nor deserved it. But however welcome another sprig of poetic justice might be for clearing the air of thanatos' burnt clove and bathos' cheap cheroot, this story does not have to totter under any more overwrought irony. Though it does need to ask a final question: Charles's; tale, full of blood and thunder: What does it signify? Though Charles didn't heed his own advice, though he couldn't or wouldn't help himself, he helped me. That may not amount to a redemption, but it means a great deal.

—George Michael Donahue

The Merlinda Pictures

One of her steady customers, the art teacher, had offered Merlinda a job modeling, saying her nipples and the roundness of her belly were perfect. They held the essence of the old masters, the ruddy glow of Helga. He had even brought a postcard of this Helga woman. She would have needed make-up in Merlinda's profession, and Merlinda said so. But the art teacher kept coming back and he kept offering her more to model, though the sex cost the same, and one afternoon as he laid across her work bed pale, smiling, not a muscle on him, he looked at her where she sat in front of the dresser mirror and started describing her nipples.

"They're wine-brown as roses. Wine-dark, like in Homer," he said. "They're like baked apples. Cinnamon. Soft. Wrinkled."

He had gotten ideas saying that, so she had gotten back to business, or really just let him get back to it, but afterwards he had asked her again to model. He offered her one hundred dollars for a two-hour session.

"For just you? Nobody else there?"

"Just me. Private studio."

"No way, then. It's weird. I don't do weird."

He kept a cool demeanor, acting like the ways of prostitutes were well known to him, but she could see he was surprised and confused at being rejected just when he had a foothold. His mouth opened, the lower lip drooping. But he rallied quickly.

"You mean you want other people there? Like a class?"

"At least then I'd be teaching somebody something. Like trying another vocation," she said. She liked the word vocation. It reminded her of junior high school when she had taken a class called Careers and had walked to a different place to work one afternoon each week. She had made onion rings at a drive-in (the ingredients—milk shake mix and cornmeal—had surprised her), stocked greeting cards, watered plants at the feed and seed. She had even learned to check oil. She smiled.

The art teacher smiled too. "I'll call you," he said.

They set it up over the telephone. The next Thursday Merlinda put on new jeans and a white blouse buttoned to the top and rode the bus to the university. She got off at the art school, a big place with a porch held up by brown granite columns and students scattered across the steps. In the middle of the lawn in front of the building stood a pile of old bricks and girders with a slab of crumbling concrete propped against it. She wondered what they could be doing to renovate such a nice place.

Merlinda spotted the art teacher. He had been leaning on a column, and was now walking toward her smiling, his little dangling rawhide earring swinging. "Welcome to academia, Vanessa," he said, using the work name she had picked up ten years ago from a beautiful, rich, conniving brunette on "The Guiding Light." He nodded at the pile on the lawn. "Do you like that? One of my students did it. Part of his senior seminar."

Merlinda looked back at the little jumbled hill of bricks and twisting rusty metal.

"It's real nice. I guess like in Germany," she said after a minute, remembering the Berlin news footage from her last month in New York. She had seen reports in The Auberge, one of the hotel bars she had used for initial meetings with prospective clients. For a month con men on the street had spoken to her from behind propped-open trunks and cardboard boxes, offering chunks of the wall. The pitch was always the same—a piece of history.

Inside, he took her to a huge second-floor room. The back wall was all windows and Merlinda felt a little shock at the early autumn light blazing in. The art teacher went to his office for some things, leaving her standing surrounded by odd benches that had desktops at one end. The floor was slick concrete like in a movie theater and in the middle of it was a little unpainted plywood dais, the nails at the corners still silver.

The art teacher came back with a painted splotted wooden tackle box, smiling broadly at her again. "Want a Coke? Coffee? Anything?"

"No thanks. Where are they?"

"Oh, they'll be here," he said, busy unloading the box onto a little table beside an easel. "Class doesn't start for five minutes. You can hang your clothes in that room to your left."

"Why not out here?"

He looked at her. The smile again. "Well, wherever. They say seeing the model undress makes students uncomfortable, but whatever you want to do is fine with me, as long as you end up naked." His eyes were full on hers in a way Merlinda knew was supposed to look businesslike.

She felt the first urge of worry. It occurred to her again she didn't know shit about what she was doing. Years ago, when Merlinda first worked in the city, she had done almost everything imaginable short of what she and the other girls called dog tricks. She had acted it out with women, had mimed doing it herself, and had worn outrageous costumes. She had been a cluster of grapes, Joan of Arc, Peter Pan, Laura Ingalls, one of those green women from Star Trek. Everyone but herself. And that was the secret. That was still the secret now, years after her best-paying customers had gone the way of her teens and limberness and she had settled quietly, happily, in a college town where living was cheap and competition so scarce she had twice been sent flowers by customers. But Merlinda hadn't been personally naked in years—not stark, buck bare, the way she was when she was fourteen and had looked out the window, across the alley, through his windowpane, and into Frank Tucker's eyes as she was on her way to the bath. She had paused, fully facing the window, watching his eyes watch below her belly. He never looked up to her face. She walked slowly to the bathroom, pushing her toes, then her heels, into the floor as she went. *Feel your feet into the floor* she had once heard a ballet teacher on public television say. She did that whenever a man looked at her.

"So I have a few minutes?" she asked.

"Sure. You'll hear the students coming in. Just come out and step up on the dais."

"But what do I do?"

"Do?"

"On the stage."

He looked at her levelly. He had never looked at all like a teacher to Merlinda until now.

"Don't do anything. Just stand there. Here, like this." He stepped onto the dais, kicked one black boot out a little and held his straight right arm at the elbow, looking down. He straightened. "Or you can sit if you want. I'll get you a bench or something. I mean, these are first year people mostly, some of them might have some trouble drawing you that way, but, you know, if you want to sit..."

"No, I can do it standing up. No spreading or anything?"

The smile again, with a glint this time. "Maybe later. But for the class just stand there. No sexy stuff. Don't look at them."

"Why not?"

"Well, they're kids, most of them. Like I said, they get uncomfortable."

"They do or you do?"

"Come on, Vanessa, time's wasting."

The dressing room was a closet that smelled of turpentine lit by one hanging bulb. On the back of the door somebody had painted a single gigantic deep blue eyeball, the pupil as big as a beach ball and the iris so huge that the blue overlapped the door and spread onto the walls on either side of it. The pupil had a long curving white window painted on it to make it look 3D.

"Maybe I ought to climb out of it," Merlinda said. She slipped her blouse off and felt the air on her upper arms and shoulders. It always seemed cool to her until she got everything off, then she reached room temperature and it was all right. Someone had left a white cotton robe hanging on a nail in the wall. She wondered briefly if she was supposed to wear it, then decided there would be no point.

Merlinda heard the students now—shuffling feet, the teacher mumbling to somebody, the dragging of benches, heavy paper warping. She looked at the eye and stepped out of her panties.

Merlinda let it get completely quiet. When she opened the door a dozen students sat on benches around the little dais, all of them turning to look at her as she tried not to walk too fast up the aisle. The concrete floor was cold and jarred her feet; she was used to heels.

Merlinda stepped up onto the stage, the plywood warm and rough against her feet after the cold floor, and came to a full stop—a little stiffly, she thought—with her back to the students. The cool air circulated around her hips and thighs and seemed oddly active. Remembering to breathe, she turned, rounding her shoulders and standing exactly as the teacher had, looking down at the concrete beyond the edge of the dais.

There was a general rustle of paper and scraping bench legs. The students in their sneakers and boots and jeans began to move around her. A boy wearing a baseball

cap backwards stopped to her left, just within her peripheral vision. A girl in some kind of red top and black hose—she thought they were black but couldn't be sure without looking—stood right in front of her, sketching rapid strokes. Merlinda could smell her perfume. Poison. She wore it herself sometimes, but not that much of it. The other students eddied around her, looking so hard she could feel it. But not where she had expected to.

They settled gradually, some of them—some of the boys even, that she had expected to move in close, right in front of her—sitting or standing behind her, their pencils and charcoal scratching intermittently at first, then steadily. To relax, she pushed her mind away, willfully lost her focus on the gleaming floor. The lead sketching on the coarse paper reminded her of grade school—fat red pencils and thick paper with traceable, broken-line letters. As a girl she had wanted to be a teacher, had lined up dolls and second-hand stuffed animals into rows and taught them. The only time she remembered her father playing with her before he died, they had played school. She remembered his hand raised, but not the answer he gave when she called on him, only that it was wrong. She couldn't recall his voice, only dimly his holding her on his lap, silently reading Peanuts from the comics page.

"Okay, that's one," the teacher said suddenly. She looked up from the floor and he met her eyes. "Thanks. Ready for a break?"

Merlinda walked around the dais, looking down at the plywood. The teacher brought her a cup of coffee and smiled.

"See. That wasn't so bad, was it?" He waved her to a stool.

"I guess not. I thought it would last longer." The stool was cold on her ass. She hesitated, then sat on her hands. Why not? Sex didn't matter here.

"Sometimes it does. This is a drawing class, though. They're learning broad strokes, how to see quickly and get it down before their brains interfere."

"Oh. So can I see what you've done so far?" She looked at him straight, naked. It was a look she had created, factoring her nakedness into it: payment due when services rendered.

"I would love to show it to you, but it's all up here." He tapped his temple. "I mean, I've been teaching. Haven't you noticed?"

"Yeah. I heard you." So now he was paying her to pose in front of a dozen kids? "I just wondered. You were so up for this."

"Yes, I was." He looked at her, then away. Merlinda knew it was the look of a man who wanted something he couldn't ask for.

"You know, I didn't think much about sharing you like this. I don't know." He looked at his watch. "That's five. Better get back to it."

For the next session the teacher moved the stool onto the dais and asked Merlinda to put her right foot on a rung and rest her elbow on her knee, chin in palm.

She did, choosing a bright yellow Ginkgo tree beyond the back window to focus on. The students shifted and flipped to new sheets of sketching paper.

"You have five minutes," the teacher said. "Find her."

From the corner of her eye she thought she saw several students smile. She risked a look at a boy straddling a bench near the glass wall. His arm moved in long strokes down the paper. His eyes seemed fixed on her throat. She realized he must be working on her chin and hand. But why the long strokes, then? He looked at her face. She looked back at her tree.

The five minutes felt like half an hour.

"Okay, last strokes everyone," the teacher said, strolling between the crooked aisles.

"Now show her."

Merlinda looked at him, surprised, but he was walking to the back of the room. A few students looked at each other, at the teacher, briefly at her. No one came forward.

The teacher turned. "Don't be shy now, people. Whatever you have she gave you."

There was a small pause of shifting eyes. The Poison girl sitting a couple of steps to the right got up and turned her spiral bound pad toward the dais.

Merlinda stood and straightened herself before looking. On the pad three sketches of her body orbited, three points in a crooked, inverted triangle. None had eyes or a mouth, only a crossing of two curves, though the hair was true and made her hope she'd brought a brush. Her pubic hair, shaved to a strip, wasn't there.

What should she say? Pretty? Nice job? My nipples aren't that dark?

"Thank you," she said, smiling too widely. "How pretty."

The girl smiled back, squinting slightly, as if she were puzzled. Merlinda wondered if she had offended her. The girl closed the pad and began to put pencils and charcoal into her tackle box.

"Why don't we have Vanessa come around and see for herself?" the teacher said. "Touch up if you like. When we've been by you can go. Vanessa?"

He offered her a hand down from the dais as if it were some kind of carriage. She took it, feeling a little silly. Her feet slapped on the concrete.

The teacher led her to a boy with a ponytail. He held the pad on his lap, hunching his shoulders as he shaded lightly with the edge of his molar-dented pencil. He had drawn her face alone, a little fuller along the jaw than she remembered or hoped it was. Something about the shading of the cheeks drew her eye and she realized suddenly, surprised, that they were flushed. She had sweated. She smiled at him with her lips and moved on.

The teacher hung back, offering pointers.

Merlinda stepped to the next bench. A girl hovered over a dusty charcoal sketch of Merlinda's full figure standing with her foot in mid-air.

"Looks like you forgot the stool, honey," she said. A titter went around the

room. Merlinda felt encouraged. The girl blushed.

Merlinda pointed to the stomach. "And maybe when you put it in you could erase some of that."

Another chortle traveled the room, louder than the last. The girl smiled.

"Oh, you're not fat. Look at you."

"You're sweet," Merlinda said. She looked back at the sketch, tipping her head.

"I like your drawing."

The next one was by the girl in the hose—fishnet hose, Merlinda noted. The girl started talking before Merlinda had taken a good look at the paper. She did makeovers at the Merle Norman place in the mall and had changed Merlinda's makeup. Did she like it? It would make her eyes look larger, her lashes thicker and longer.

"Oh. Thank you," Merlinda said. For a stunned instant she had thought the girl was calling her by name. Merlinda looked at the drawing. The body was a vague outline below a detailed face. That was not her nose. "Don't take this the wrong way, but don't you have to, you know, draw what's there?"

"Well," the teacher said, behind Merlinda once more, draping a robe smelling of turpentine over her shoulders, "you draw what you see. To Stacy, this *is* what was there."

"You don't like it." Stacy sagged.

"Oh, no, I do—" Merlinda began, but the teacher cut her off.

"Stacy. Look harder. See under her makeup before you start adding layers to it. Clarify." He smiled. "And stop worrying about pleasing everybody. See it clearly. Make it new."

Stacy looked again at the sketch, her mouth small and red as a fruitcake cherry. They went on.

The other students had drawn Merlinda full figure. One girl had not given her a face at all. The boy in the baseball cap had drawn Merlinda's mascara and lipstick in dark, thick lines that contrasted sharply with the outline of her body, its whiteness on the page broken only by nipples and navel. Another girl had drawn Merlinda's breasts with erect, squared nipples and covered her genitals with a triangle of hair. It was the student's last sheet of sketch paper. Along one side of it were abandoned attempts—an arrangement of bottles, charcoal rubbings of quarters and pennies, somebody else's ass.

Merlinda nodded at the students and smiled as she walked from bench to bench. She was glad when it was over.

The teacher offered her a ride but she caught the bus instead. She got on across the street from the art building, taking a seat near the back.

Merlinda had barely sat down when she looked up and saw the lanky boy in the baseball cap moving awkwardly down the bus, tackle box in hand, a bookbag slung over his shoulder. He saw her and smiled. Merlinda smiled back. He hesitated at an empty seat, then came over.

"Do you mind if I sit down?"

"No, not at all." Merlinda moved over.

"Thanks for what you said about my sketch. You were fun to draw. A great change of scenery from the guy we had last week. He was really skinny. Once you got his angles down he was a snooze."

"Thank you, I guess." Merlinda wasn't sure what to think of him. She hadn't had one this young before.

"Hey, I didn't mean that in a bad way. I just prefer curves and contrasts, you know? You're the first I've sketched with makeup on."

"Posers don't wear makeup?" Merlinda heard the insecurity in her own voice.

"Well, you can. I just hadn't known any to before you. But it adds a challenge. In a way you have to paint what someone else has painted, you know? See what's underneath and draw that and then try and draw the color and the brushed-on highlights over it. I love it."

Merlinda looked out the window doubtfully, worried. Looking silly was dangerous in her profession, vulnerable. Not as dangerous as it would be on the street, but a misplaced moment—a few seconds without a sharp edge to the world—could mean getting stifled or, worse, a beating or rape. Either meant no work until she healed, maybe no work until she changed locations.

"Hey, did I say something wrong?" The boy was apologetic. "Really, the makeup is no big deal. I've wished I had some before. One time I had a girl I'd been watching for weeks draw me with a zit like an iceberg on my chin."

Merlinda looked at him. "You've posed?"

"Yeah, sure, a few times. When I needed the money."

"But only if you needed money?"

"Mostly. I don't care much for being naked in front of crowds. I admire people who can do it so calmly."

"Did you ask her out?"

"Who?"

"The girl who drew your zit."

He looked at her, then away, and smiled.

"No, I mean the woman had put in all my acne scars, maybe even added some."

"You're lying aren't you?" Merlinda didn't have to ask. He didn't have acne scars.

The boy looked back at her uncertainly.

"She saw you butt-naked, was that it?" Now Merlinda smiled, firmly in control.

The boy bit his lower lip. His eyes shifted under the baseball cap back to hers.

"Actually," he said, "I got an erection."

A week later she was back at the art school, doing the second of three sessions of modeling for an oil painting class. The first of the fall rains wound in streams down the wall of glass at the back of the studio, and she watched its faint shadows undulate on

her legs as she looked down.

"Paint the light," the art teacher told the students. "Where is the light? What does it want with her? Don't decide these things. See them."

The rain guttered in the drainpipes outside the windows, stilling and graying everything. A few charcoal pencils etched canvas, then one by one ceased, leaving the room quiet except for the rain. The room filled with the serious smell of paint and oils. Merlinda watched the rivulets trailing down the back window, her left foot on the bottom rung of a paint-spattered ladder, her hands gripping its sides as if she had just descended. She imagined the streams of rain running down her body, finding its riverbeds and floodplains, a thousand small streams wanting to be one.

After forty-five minutes she was given a break. She blinked, streams superimposed over the art teacher's face, the styrofoam cup of coffee he offered her, the students themselves as they milled about and headed for the door. She shook her head.

"You know, Vanessa," the art teacher was saying, "you can move your eyes once in a while."

The world cleared.

"I thought you said looking at them makes them uncomfortable."

"They're painting, Vanessa. Once they get started, they're lost in it."

"OK. Thanks, I guess."

By the end of the session her legs and forearms ached. Sitting down brought her a small, distinct thrill of physical gratitude. As she rested on a metal folding chair, the white robe pulled around her, the teacher had the students turn their easels to face her. She sat confronting three versions of herself, each tightly focused on her form and dissolving into canvas around the edges, as if she were coming out of nothing. An older Puerto Rican girl had given her perfect skin and darkened her eyes to black. Merlinda smiled. She had been brunette in 1986 and she hadn't looked like the painting at all.

As the students left, Merlinda stretched her arms over her head, fingers interlocked, popping her back audibly.

"Three paintings I've done just today," she said. "It's been a long one."

The art teacher laughed and sat down on a bench near her chair. Merlinda thought he looked tired. Why not? He had been walking around from easel to easel for as long as she had stood with the ladder.

"You shouldn't joke about it," he said. "This is real work you're doing. It's difficult."

"Have you done it before?"

"Well. No." He frowned.

"Then let me tell you. It's a lot easier than my other job."

"Yes." His mouth tightened at the corners. "I can imagine."

Merlinda laughed, crossing her legs at the knee so that they emerged tanned and aerobic from the split in the robe.

"I'm only teasing," she said. "Even when you're working you're not working."

It was a professional line of hers, not altogether insincere in this case.

"Really the two aren't so different. Get naked and be still while someone makes you into somebody else."

He didn't reply, only watched her. Merlinda knew she had crossed a line. Stupid move on her part. She sighed.

"At least this way you see what they make you into." She smiled.

"No. You see what they see."

He came quickly that night and acted apologetic afterwards. Merlinda was too grateful that she hadn't lost him to worry about his awkwardness after the screw. He left half an hour after he arrived. She moved around the apartment, a towel she didn't really need between her legs. Later she stripped the polish from her toenails and washed her face three times, then stood looking in the bathroom mirror.

"The River Merlinda," she said, the corners of her mouth turning up. *I've been parted many times.* She watched her blue eyes in the mirror. She leaned into her reflection until she felt the cold porcelain sink against her belly and thighs. Her face was grainy as eraser rubbings. She had blonde eyelashes and without makeup her eyes were tiny, the beginnings of crow's feet inching from the corners.

Merlinda didn't see the art teacher again until Tuesday, the day they would finish her in the oils class. She changed in the same closet she had used the first day, looking again at the eyeball on the back of the door, its window long and curving. She considered digging the eyeliner out of her purse and sprucing it up. Maybe adding some mascara or scratching "Merlinda was here" in one of the windowpanes. She dropped her bra down her arms and caught it by the strap, folding it cup on cup before she put it in her shoulder bag. The robe felt good in the chilly air. She decided to leave her socks on until the students arrived.

Merlinda opened the door a crack, then stepped out into the empty room. Two students had brought their canvases in, leaving them set up on easels. Merlinda browsed over them, feeling oddly luxurious in her socks and terrycloth, as if she lived there, in a glass-walled gallery, early autumn Ginkgo leaves stuck by rain to her windows. She looked at herself in the paint, the body stroked into being by students' hands. One boy was painting her with a pallet knife, a little spade used to mix colors. The painting looked harsh—choppy, the paint smeared on by flat metal—but Merlinda liked the idea of being painted with a knife. It suited her.

"Vanessa. Hi." She turned; it was the art teacher. "Michael's doing a good job on that one, huh? Tricky triangulation."

"Does it do me justice?"

He laughed softly, in a way she hadn't heard before. She looked at him sharply. He was shaking his head.

"No way," he said, his hand tossing away the possibility. "Not even close."

"Well thanks. I guess that means something coming from you."

He smiled. The students returned, carrying Cokes. The Puerto Rican woman came in, smiling under a floppy denim beach hat. There was a general bustle as tackle boxes were opened. The sharp smells of paint permeated the room. The art teacher rubbed his palms together and clapped them once.

"Okay. Let's bring her into the world."

Merlinda tugged the socks off and poked them into the pocket of the robe before she sloughed it off and dropped it to the side. She took a step onto the ladder's lowest rung.

"I've been here all along," she said.

That night she soaked her sore arms and calves in a hot bath, then dried herself. Leaving her old pink robe on the back of the bathroom door, she walked slowly into the bedroom, arching her feet so that her toes met the floor gracefully. She felt the air on her, under her ass, around her arms and knees, in her wet hair, just cool enough to remind her of every limb of herself. It was her night off, but she went to bed naked anyway.

—Gordon Johnston

Omaha and Charlie

Peg didn't stop when the sock fell from the mound of dirty laundry piled high on her chest. She kept her eyes straight-center and slid her foot over the ridge of the next step. She was the kind that took it all at once. There were no second or third trips back up the stairs even though she knew both ways probably took the same amount of time. Peg had been an overachiever all her life.

"Did you gat my underwear, hun?" Charlie asked while gathering the deserted sock behind her.

Peg was concentrating. "If it wasn't in the hamper, it's not in my hands," she muffled through the clothes.

"I think I left a couple pair in the corner on the bathroom floor. You didn't see them?"

"I didn't look there, only the hamper. Open the door, will you?"

"So, you didn't see them?"

"No. Open the door! Thank you."

"Show starts in five minutes. You coming?"

"Be there in a sec."

Peg let the clothes drop to the floor and began sorting for whites. She sighed and thought that doing it twice was far worse than this. "Go get your underwear," she yelled to Charlie who had already sunk deep into the couch.

Peg took pride in cleaning house. Even the carpet after vacuuming was a thing to boast about. Charlie could always get some clue to her mood by studying the lines in the carpet. He had figured out a method and it went something like this: If the carpet was without a pattern, irregular and spread out with neglected corners and spots under the coffee table, Peg needed a little snookie and some baby talk, more than Charlie's usual kiss on the cheek after a hard day's work. If the carpet looked like it was covered with little Chinese paper fans, well then he was off duty. On these days, Peg would get this crazed look in her eyes and he would say, "Earth to Peg, earth to Peg, come in Peg." After the first couple of months without a response, Charlie chalked it up as "just a woman thing" which he figured Peg was given an abundance of when she was born. He wasn't supposed to understand. It wouldn't have surprised Charlie if she darted out the door naked when she was like that. He could never tell what she'd do, but one thing was for sure. It did not matter whether he was there or not. Peg was off in her own world, far away from Omaha and Charlie.

Nevertheless, her house was never dirty. Sometimes disorganized she would say to Charlie, but never dirty. She'd even go so far as to make him pull the refrigerator out from the wall before he left for work. No corner was unworthy of a good cleaning.

At the beginning, the cleaning was mostly for Charlie. She'd get quite a thrill pleasing him with his favorite dish, chicken and dumplings like his mother used to make. The weeks that Charlie was working on a big account, Peg would surprise him by mow-

ing the lawn so that he wouldn't have to sweat it out on the weekends. Anything could set him off when shower curtain sales were low. A call from his mother or the batteries going out in the remote and he'd be sandwiching himself between two pillows and not asking for second helpings. So, *of course* Peg would be driving that lawnboy across the yard in her sun hat and wave and grin. She was that kind of woman and she knew he hadn't told her how tired he was three times for nothing on the phone that afternoon.

Things changed over the years. Peg did her best to keep it exciting, but her fears became true after too many years of sharing the same bath towels, the same deodorant, the same dishes, the same sheets, the same roll of toilet paper. They were no different from her mother and father who lived to clip newspaper articles and to remind each other it was time to take their medicine. There was just no use in denying it.

She didn't clean anymore for Charlie's sake; she cleaned to forget how boring it all was. Sure, habit was part of it. She didn't stop mowing the lawn so as not to disappoint Charlie, but out of fear. Change was not a familiar word after fourteen years of marriage. Besides, what the hell would Charlie have done if she just threw up her hands and said "I quit?"

By 10:30 it was their bedtime. Charlie nudged Peg who was just about asleep on his round stomach. "Come on, honey. Get up." Peg groaned. "I know, hun, but you'll have a crick in your neck tomorrow if you sleep down here." She lay there all curled up in a ball like a pup with its mother. He shook her leg. "Up and at'em. Come on Peg. Up and at'em."

"Ugh, I hate it when you say that. "Up and at'em, up and at'em."

"Got you up though, didn't I?"

Charlie got ready for bed while Peg put the last load into the dryer. By the time she made it up the stairs she had wakened enough to tell Charlie again how much happier they would be if they'd had separate bathrooms from the start. If Charlie had remembered how to *correctly* squeeze the toothpaste, she would not have been forced to nag him so. She had told him this many times and it was especially a topic of conversation on their rides back to Little Rock. If he insisted on being such a slob, she was forced to correct his behavior, especially before spending a long week with Peg's parents.

Peg, with a mouthful of blue foam, motioned to Charlie who was busy with the remote. "Hun, I can't hear you. Go spit, why don't you."

Still, Peg grunted to him something like, "Watch me, like this. Twist off the cap, place it on the *counter*, and start from the bottom. P-u-s-h from the bottom. Charlie, are you listening to me?" Reluctantly, she spit the runny foam from her mouth and added once more, "Are you listening?"

"Yes hun. Start from the bottom."

"That's right, my dear, from the bottom. And, when you're done you just twist the little cap right back on. See how easy?" Peg forced a wide grin into the mirror to inspect her work. After a gargle, she slipped sideways into bed and pressed her cold feet against Charlie's back. "You got a big week coming up?" she asked.

"Yea, yea. The *Sleep and Eat* account is due Friday."

"The motel chain?"

"Yea, going to be a tuff one. If Simmons accepts the account, we'll be producing a new color of shower curtains, a new line. Scarlet and ginger. Can you believe it? Scarlet and ginger shower curtains. Who ever heard of it? I call it business expansion and I think I've got Simmons right where I want him. Big profits. I keep telling him they'll be big profits. Hun, hun, you awake?" Charlie leaned over towards Peg. "You awake?"

Peg wasn't asleep but she at least acted like she was. "Huh?"

"Anniversary's coming up. Should I go ahead and make reservations at Bailey's again?" he asked whispering.

"Yea, yea. Of course. Bailey's. Friday, right?"

"That's the twenty-third, yea." Peg performed her roll to the right side of the bed, tossed the covers, matted them down, and sighed. Charlie flipped the light.

They decided to meet at Bailey's at 7:00. Charlie was still convincing Simmons that scarlet and ginger shower curtains would equal big profits for the Kaiser Company. Peg would have to take a cab into the city, but she had secretly hoped it would be this way. Without Charlie, she could take as much time as she wanted doing her hair and makeup without feeling guilty she wasn't spending her free time on something more worthwhile. Charlie had told her before that he wasn't *intentionally trying* to make her feel guilty. He just didn't see the point of staying hours in the bathroom only to criticize herself and pluck out every gray hair she could find. He would tell her time and time again that it didn't make any sense. The gray came back and he loved her just the same, but it was never quite enough for Peg. After years of complimenting her and just getting a "Charlie, I look just horrible and you know it," he just gave up, but Peg didn't blame him for it.

She turned the music up higher and danced sideways into the bathroom to plug in the hair rollers. She fantasized about the frisky jogger she had been watching routinely for the last few weeks. At approximately 5:30 each night, he would jog past with his smooth black hair that lifted in waves from his head, and his coal black eyes that she had caught a glimpse of one evening when she had gotten up enough nerve to check the mail the same time he whizzed by the house.

She would have to tell Charlie that she was visiting her sister in Little Rock when the two took off for a romantic weekend in the Caribbean because he was the kind of man that wouldn't take no for an answer. He would fill her stomach with tender salmon and cold watermelon and convince her to leave her boring life back in Omaha. Peg would ultimately have to choose passion or safety, the red dress or the suit, cotton or silk. She'd give it all up to learn that, for a woman, sex began after 40.

Peg always opted for the suit, and this year was the same. The black and gray tweed won the draw, but the hair stayed down. She gave it a toss or two and was somewhat pleased. She flipped the light and grabbed the keys like she had somewhere important to go.

At dinner, Charlie damned Simmons for being a fat-headed, ungrateful, and unintelligent excuse for a boss who knew nothing about economics. "How in the hell did he get that job anyway? A two-year-old could do what he's doing. Damn it to hell."

Peg reassured him that Simmons was an ungrateful ass who didn't know a hill of beans about smart business. After appetizers, Peg's affirmations about Charlie's good sense and two glasses of wine soothed his nerves.

The waiter approached the table and Peg gracefully studied his sleek figure. She was even more pleased with his accent. "Our specials tonight include a scrumptious almond glazed leg of lamb and chicken cordon bleu. Both come with a side of angel hair pasta alfredo, asparagus, soup and salad, all for only \$14.99."

Speaking from the side of his mouth, Charlie interrupted, "That's definitely the best price on here." He pointed at the menu and shook his head approvingly. "Peg, sound good?"

"Yes. Delicious."

"And which will you be having, ma'am?" Peg looked confused. The waiter smiled. "Oh, hun you go first. I haven't decided," Peg said finally.

"Um, the chicken, chicken cordon bleu."

Peg gazed her large eyes at the waiter and twirled her hair around her small fingers. "Can you come back? I believe I need a little more time."

"Sure, take your time, ma'am."

"Thank you." Peg twirled her hips and popped her tightly folded legs out from under the table. She arched forward weighing her options with her index finger on her brow. She had heard from her brother-in-law that lamb tasted like venison, but she had never eaten either. Charlie had lamb once at a Kaiser Christmas party, but remembering that night forced him into thinking up ways of destroying the piss ant that he worked for, even though he knew profanity didn't agree with him. Just as planned, Peg chose the chicken almost as impulsively as she had chosen the wool tweed suit hours before.

Not much else was said. Peg continued with thoughts of her young lover, now the young waiter, José, who she imagined was playing footsy with her under the tablecloth. Charlie force fed himself and between bites said, "To hell with shower curtains, to hell with Simmons, who needs them anyhow...I'd like to show him a thing or two."

Before the last sip of wine, Charlie offered a toast to their fourteen years of marriage and both of them threw the last gulp back. Peg considered sex and cherry scented candles, but her eyes were growing heavy and Charlie picked his back teeth with

his pinkie finger. After he decided on how much tip to give the waiter, Peg, full of chicken cordon bleu and a bottle of wine, gave the waiter an *adios* and smiled her wide purple-stained grin.

On the way back to the car, Charlie had Peg walk on the inside of the sidewalk, but she thought she was doing just fine by herself. "Why don't we come out here more often, Charlie. I love all the lights. And would you just look at that building. It's huge! There must be a least a million rooms. Why do they leave all the lights on?"

"For safety reasons, I suppose." Charlie shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, you don't know. They leave them on because everybody has to. Because it's the city. It wouldn't be a city without all the lights."

"Well, I certainly can do without all the damn lights, and the cars, and morning radio mumbo-jumbo. I get so sick of this place. Everyday I drive by the same street, the same buildings. They never change. Same ole' stuff everyday."

"You and me, we've always been different like that. City life's not for everybody, Charlie."

"I'll take the mountains any day. You can't beat Little Rock and the way the leaves change color every year. That's all we need. That's what's wrong with this place. We haven't got any damn trees."

A short dark-haired man no more than 25 began to walk in their direction. Peg thought it very odd the way he stared right at her. She must have looked better than she remembered. She lifted her back and walked tall, twirling her hair with her fingers. He saw through the wool tweed that screamed to be silk, some rare, fine silk. He knew she was something special the moment he saw her. She belonged with a man of such confidence. And here he was coming closer, daring her to scream it from her lungs.

Even before she could heave in another hot breath, the man held a gun at Charlie's side and grabbed for his wallet. Peg stood baffled at her aggressive new lover. Charlie screamed, "Don't hurt her. Peg, give him your purse!"

"Good, mister, very good. Do what you're told and nobody gets hurt. Ma'am, now it's your turn. The purse."

Charlie's eyes gazed wildly at her. It could have been a wink, but she wasn't sure. He might be telling her to run for her life, but Peg stood without a movement, without a thought. Charlie swung around on his tip toes and threw a punch, quite a good punch Peg thought, and she gasped with excitement. "Oh, Charlie!" And without one ounce of respect for Charlie's courageous deed, the man jerked the gun back into a firm grip and shot him square in the chest.

His body flung back onto the pavement and Peg ran to him, screaming for God's mercy. The dark-haired man put the hot metal barrel in her side and told her once more to shut up. "The rock, lady. Give me your goddamn rings and take his off too." He waved the barrel to Charlie who lay still on the sidewalk. She did what she was told but Charlie's wedding band wouldn't budge from his round finger. She licked and sucked hysterically up and down, trying to remove it with her teeth. "He's heavier than

he used to be. I told him to get it widened. I told him," Peg sobbed.

The man shoved Peg from Charlie's side and grabbed for his knife, but she tore Charlie's hand back and held it close to her breast. "Oh, God, no. You can't. Oh, God, just leave us alone!" The dark-haired man pressed his knife deep into her small arm, but she did not stop her screaming. So the knife went deeper, tearing her skin from her bone. Her shrill cry echoed into the street and the man took off, throwing Charlie's finger to the pavement.

She scurried on all fours as it rolled toward the street. His finger slipped from her grip as she grabbed for it, the blood coming faster from its center. She managed to cup it in her small hand and fumbled to shove it back in place, the piece already looking like it didn't belong there. "Oh God, Charlie don't leave me now. Don't you die. Don't you die Charlie." His lips turned upward slightly and he squeezed her wrist awkwardly. It wasn't as though the blood came gushing out from his insides, but it sat heavy on him, resting in the grooves of his neck. She couldn't find his wound and so she lay her small body over his chest and squeezed as hard as her arms would let her. God, she loved him, and as though she had never felt it so strong in her life, she knew it was enough. She was full of Charlie and his smells lay on her like cement.

A strange calmness came over Peg with the screaming of sirens rushing through the streets. She gave a description of the man to the police as they escorted her to the hospital. She did not call home to Little Rock, but wrapped and re-wrapped the rags tighter around her swollen arm and sat in a warm vinyl seat in the emergency room. She did not wish for coffee or for kleenex. She did not explain the blood to the ladies beside her. She sat still within the flesh that God had given her and felt painfully real. She longed to be with Charlie, to feel his flesh and mash her lips against his warm teeth.

It took less than an hour for the doctor to come out with his soothing voice and his hand on her bruised knees to tell her what she already knew. She hardly remembered getting the thirty-six stitches in her arm, nor the escort home. Within twenty-four hours, family from Little Rock had arrived in Omaha to feed Charlie's body to the soil.

Her mother and sister stayed a week before Peg could rightly convince them she'd be just fine. But it took all she had not to scream for his large body in the night, to smell his after shave and fix him coffee in the mornings. Dark-haired joggers became as strange and forgotten as dusty corners and lawn mowers. Months grew into years and Peg thanked God for wine and good TV and for her scar that she rubbed late in the night when the lines in the carpet were hardly perfect fans. She'd even roll up her sleeve and show it to her lady friends when she was up for it.

—Alana Noble

The Back Bedroom

The old woman always locked the door and hid the key. Her husband knew where the key was kept, but he was not brave enough to trespass on the old woman's domain. The grandchildren and the old woman's cats had brief access to the room, but the children were only interested in the figurines of clowns that decorated the dresser. When they were old enough to discover her secrets, they were no longer allowed to accompany her into the room. "Tell that greedy Claude-mama of yours not to put you in the middle," the grandmother said.

Now that the old woman was dead, Claude-daughter could smell the treasures hidden there. The smell made her hungry at the funeral home, at the gravesite, and at the post-burial. Family brought pies, egg salads, fried chicken, green beans, baked beans and blackeyes in Corningware dishes. Claude-daughter ate clean one heaping styrofoam plate after another. Family all thought she acted so because of her grief. But she thought only of the money that old hag had kept from her. And she ate.

Her father frowned and bowed his head at the appropriate times, but he snuck into the corner for some comforting words from Mrs. Primm, her mama's so-called best friend. He could flirt forever, as far as Claude was concerned.

"Honey, maybe you should say something to your father?" Jerry said—blackberry stains from Miss Daniels's cobbler rounding his mouth.

"Hell, I can't tell him anything. Would you cut me a piece of that coconut cake?" He handed her the whole thing and went back into the living room to watch reruns of *Bonanza*.

The visitors began to empty the remnants of the Corningware into plastic baggies and wash out their dishes to take home. Miss Daniels made her way over to Claude.

"I'm so glad that your mama didn't get her last wish. It would have been such a shame to euthanize that sweet cat of hers," she said. Claude rolled her eyes and grunted. Miss Daniels stopped to pat Jerry on the shoulder as she left.

Mrs. Primm was the last to leave. She took the daughter's hand in hers and clutched it. She squeezed and sniffed like a rabbit. Her lips contorted into a sympathetic grimace. She gave her condolences and waited for the grandfather to walk her to her car. When her approached the old woman, the concern that was mapped out on her face turned into the look of the leopard stalking its prey. The grandfather was an easy target—they giggled and flirted all the way to her car where he opened and closed the door for her. Little did the daughter know, as she watched this display, that they were making plans to flee. She didn't really care what her father was up to as long as she thought of a way to search the room.

The old man and his wife had been stingy their whole lives. Shovelling away money since the daughter could remember—money earned from the rental houses they'd sold just before the mama died. Over the years, most of the money had been put in the bank and forgotten about. She tried to figure the amount of interest accumulated in

forty years but the thought made her hungry again. Before she could wait for her father to finish his good-byes to Mrs. Primm, she was back looking through the refrigerator.

The father had recaptured his forlorn look. "I guess I'll be going home now, dear."

Stay and have a bite to eat with Jerry and me later," she said in a not so persuasive voice.

"No, I guess I'll be going. I've got a lot to do before tomorrow."

"Well, I'll help you, Dad. You just go home and rest and I'll be over in the morning to clean out Momma's room," she said.

"I may not be there when you come over, but I'll leave you what you need on the kitchen table. You know I love you? Why, you're the spitting image of your Ma." He paused, hoping to give the words some special effect. Then he said, "See you later. And, Honey, don't you worry about your old man!"

She stood and watched him walk out the door dignified like he'd just won a prize or heard that he was as fit as a twenty-two year old. And then she heard whistling. She shuffled over to the window to see if it was him, but he was already speeding off.

Jerry, still chewing on cobbler, walked over and put his big, clumsy arm around her and said, "Honey, are you doing all right? I know what a hard day you've had and I want you to know if you need me, I'm here for you. I am always, always here for you. I love you and I want to help you carry this burden, hon, so if there's anything—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Jerry," she said. She twisted her shoulders until his grimy paw let go. "Now, I need to think and I don't need you to be hanging all over me."

"Okay," he said. "I know it is only the grief that's talking. But you know I'm here for you when you're ready to lean on my strong shoulders."

His damned fat shoulders. Jerry had married her for two reasons: her eating habits (which were the same as his) and her Daddy's wealth. He hadn't gotten much money from his father-in-law, but what he had got paid for the house and his riding lawn mower. He kept feeding his wife and laying on the love in hopes that when his old mower broke down he might get a new Craftsman SLX—the SLX stood for super luxurious.... It had a massaging chair and a cab with an air conditioner. Her mother had left him zilch.

She knew her husband would be a hindrance to her once she found the money. Claude's brain began to map her plans to divorce him while the larger portion concentrated on what she might get in her mother's back bedroom.

She spent a restless, sleepless night. She sent Jerry to the couch for his snoring. But she did appreciate the sleepless hours he gave her to think about all the money she would have to herself—to spend, spend, spend. By dawn she was so hungry that she fried every egg in the refrigerator. She made homemade biscuits and gravy. Jerry thought the spread to be a gesture of love for her coldness. She left him the dishes.

She arrived at her father's old Victorian house before 9:00 a.m. She expected to find him inside reading obituaries in the morning paper. She knocked. No answer.

She called out. She used her key. The safety chain latched. She walked around to the back door to the kitchen. It was locked. Patsy Cline was singing loud inside. She knelt down to the cat crawl and shoved her head through. "Daddy!" she screamed. She twisted her neck around and up to look. A woman gasped and her old man muttered, "Clothes, clothes." They came into her view: Mrs. Primm holding what seemed to be a Bloody Mary. The two old flabby people—both in their skivvies.

She wanted to scream aloud, to stomp her feet, to avenge her sweet dead mother. But all she could do was scramble her head back out of the cat crawl and land sitting on her butt. The spectacle aroused Claude's nausea and blurred her vision which resulted in her fainting in a large thud on the ground—face down in her mother's daisies.

When Claude came to, the cat was on her belly and Mrs. Primm was slapping her cheeks. Claude grunted a few syllables, picked herself up from the ground, and hurried to her car. She peeled out of the driveway and cussed her father all the way to E. Main.

"I'll be goddamned if that conniving witch didn't get her hands on my mother's hard earned money—Can you believe that Dad would be doing that only one day after Mother's funeral?"

"I tried to tell you, honey," Jerry answered. He sucked his gums for last night's blackberry seeds.

"Oh, shut up. If I want your opinion I'll ask for it." Momma always said he was nothing but a no-good lawn-jockey.

A migraine later, Claude received a phone call from her father. The old man apologized. He told her to come over the next morning, that he had something for her. Claude perked up and her appetite came back. She ate supper and a snack and slept like a baby.

She drove over the next morning before full daylight. This time she rang the doorbell. When he did not answer the door, she used her key and called out, "Daddy, it's me...Daddy!"

She looked around the rooms. He was nowhere to be found. What if he'd had a heart attack in the back yard? She sauntered toward the window to look outside. A piece of paper on the fridge caught her eye:

My Darling Daughter,

I'm sorry I could not tell you this yesterday in person, but now I know you can understand. Darling, you have Jerry but I have no one. I must find comfort in the arms of another before I die. So I have taken your mother's and my bank accounts. . .

My money! that was mine mine mine!

and I have created a fund for myself in a European bank. I will be on

a Mediterranean beach with Mrs. Primm by the time you read this. Please do not hate me for this, but I must live before I die. Please take care of yourself and the cat. She loves Sheeba cat food with a bit of skim milk and on occasion give her a can of tuna. . .

Goddamn that stinking cat, always spraying everywhere!

The house and the car are yours. Please feel free to rummage through the house. I have unlocked the back bedroom for you. Take care. I'll send a postcard soon.

Love,
Dad

She sat, unmoving, the letter dangling between her limp fingers. She flinched. The paper floated to the floor. Slowly she regained consciousness. He had probably rummaged around and found all that was of value. She stumbled back to the room. Her belly rumbled. How mad her mother would be if she knew her husband and her best friend flew to the Mediterranean on her money! Angry was not the word; only raving, foaming-at-the-mouth madness would describe how her mother would have felt. The mother had only kept her husband because there was nothing else to do with him.

The daughter's stomach quivered with the ire of her mother's ghost. Her feet began to pick up and she marched into the room. She paced to get a sense of the different drawers and closets. He had been in there; she could smell his musty cologne. But she searched. One drawer after another she pulled out. Turned them upside down. Emptied them and broke them into bits and pieces of wood. She ripped apart the garments, the socks, and the handbags that filled the drawers. She found nothing, save some old photographs which became a part of the trash pile that she built.

Only two drawers waited, but the greed was making her hungry again. She kicked the rubble into the hall with her puffy legs. She shut the door behind her in a precautionary maneuver and walked on towards the kitchen.

She found some weenies turned brown. She put them in a pot to boil. She found mustard, relish, and sauerkraut. She laid down the condiments, picked up the phone and called Jerry.

"What is it that you need, honey?" he said.

"Well, Daddy's really in a bad state and he doesn't want to see anyone...and, well, I think he really wants me to stay here with him tonight."

"Do you want me to come over and help, hon?" he said.

"Why, no! Good heavens! You just take care of things at home," she said. Her weenies had begun to boil. "I was hoping you could bring me some groceries and leave them on the front porch."

"Can't I come in?" he asked.

"I just don't think Daddy could handle anybody seeing him like this. Trust me, he's on his last legs."

"I can understand how he feels. If I ever lost you...."

She rolled her eyes and answered, "Just ring the doorbell and honk when you drive away."

"Okay, honey. I'll be thinking of you every minute," he said. But she was already removing the receiver from her ear. She went to check on her weenies.

Jerry did just as she told him. She waited until he left and she moved her suitcase and the bags of groceries in. She took great care of stocking the refrigerator. She was, for an instant, proud of her husband for bringing most of the right foods.

She resumed her search. Emptied the other drawers. Still she found nothing. The junk was piling up under her feet. She trampled over the only photographs of her grandmother. The dead woman looked up at her with half a face. She opened the window to the backyard. A fence framed the yard's edges, and she was able to throw out all the debris without the neighbors seeing. The dresser was a skeleton of wood, but she was not satisfied. She walked out into the backyard, past the pile of old memorabilia and wood, to the tool shed. She took the ax in one hand and the chainsaw in the other. She struggled, but she had the will to carry on. She walked past her mother's flower garden at the back step. Her mama had always loved those flowers, almost as much as her cats. An idea struck her. She would shovel up the flowers and vegetables after dark. Her mother spent a lot of time with those flowers, and she could have very well hidden a tin box full of money. She kept that idea fresh on her mind and stomach.

She found the strength to crank the old chainsaw. The motor purred with the sound of money. She took the saw down the center of the dresser. Her heart raced and her stomach growled whenever the saw reached its highest blur. She let off the throttle and it sputtered less and less until the air was empty of the noise. She laid each half on its back and proceeded to chop the wood into movable pieces. She flipped them over and flung them out the window, for they had no reward for her.

She rested a moment on the sawdust-covered bed. She kicked at the bottom of the dresser and a piece of wood popped out of place. She saw green. She squatted down to the floor and flipped the slab of wood over. Her heart beat so fast she had to breathe to the count of ten and bark. Her mother had taken a piece of plywood and cut it to the size of the bottom of the dresser and lined it with stacks of money. She took the ax and hacked and chopped and mauled it to pieces. The money came free. The room smelled of sawdust and money and sweat.

She lay in bed and slobbered on the pillow. The sawdust made her thirsty so she skipped her plump body to the kitchen and gulped down a glass of milk. Then she ran back to the room to slow-dance on the sawdust and the money.

She did not want to raise any suspicion, so she gathered up the money and put it in a grocery bag. Every stack that measured a handful she bound with a rubberband. She filled one paper bag to the brim—every bill a Ben Franklin. She did not want to

count it until she had scored all of her earnings. So she hid it away in the closet of the back room.

A storm passing over darkened the sky early. While she put her little green babies to bed, she mapped out a plan of destruction for the house. She knew there must be more money. Money, money, money, money. She thought about sledgehammering all the walls and the staircases. She would rip up the carpets, cut the furniture and pull out the stuffing. Her mother's quilts had to be ripped open. The plumbing dismantled. The bed mattresses cut and torn apart. All the furniture hacked to firewood. She'd have to get rid of Jerry or he'd want some of the money. Never would she give that idiot a cent.

She turned the light off in the room. The sky had begun to rain. She was ready to search some more. Hunger gnawed at her stomach but she would wait to eat. Since it was dark outside, she thought she could safely begin to dig without being noticed. She found the shovel in the shed. The mums, the posies, the basil and the tomato plants were soon uprooted. Dirt flew over her shoulder as the rain pounded heavy on her back. Soon a trench was dug where the mother's flowers once grew. She needed a metal detector but she couldn't wait.

Lightning lit the night sky. A gift, for she could see easier. The thunder crashed but it did not hinder her. For some strange reason, she began to sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" to the thunder. She hit something metal with the shovel. She bent down on her knees and began to dig with her hands. The thunder and the lightning were hitting closer together. The rain and hail came down. She felt something cold in her hands. The hunger in her belly growled like the wind. She grabbed on tight to the metal object. She could feel its weight. Ha, pay dirt, and she pointed her chin to the heavens and laughed a wicked laugh. A large piece of hail hit her in the mouth. A bolt of lightning followed. She let go of the metal object and began to roll in the mud until she was coated in red clay. "More money, money, money," she whispered.

The thunder clapped again and the sky was bright. But she paid no heed to the weather. She wanted to pull out that box of money, caught up in roots. She planted her feet wide apart. She squatted down and grabbed the object. She pulled and strained and hollered for Sweet Jesus in heaven to give her what she needed. The lightning struck just about then. She knew because her body shook and shivered.

The next day brought blue skies and singing birds. Claude's hump of flesh lay over the trench, her eyes wide open, her hands on the handle of the tin box. A breeze blew later in the day and she fell over into the mud.

A neighbor happened to come over to see the grandfather the next morning. Claude's eyes were open and she could see the old woman but her voice was stuck. Then, the police were standing over her, talking on CBs. She heard something about a dead cat in a tin box. What about my money? she wanted to know, but her mouth would not work with her brain. They can't have my money she screamed inside her brain. "I am getting no responses from her," said one of the white-clad men. Then Claude heard

the words "brain dead."

The next time she opened her eyes she saw a yellow stained wall. She smelled urine. Jerry was looking down at her. Thank God, she thought, tell them I'm alive Jerry. You can see. I'm not brain dead. Tell them she tried to say with her eyes. Why have they got me tied down, Jerry? She moved her tongue, but only slobber came out. His shape drifted away. Noo, Noo she whined inside her head. Don't go—don't leave me here Jerry! She tried to move her head to catch his eye. No movement came. He was gone.

She heard voices. Jerry's and a woman's. She knew that voice—it belonged to Miss Daniels.

"Jerry, sweetie, there's nothing you can do for her now. We've got to go to catch our plane," the voice said.

"I know," he said.

"She's just a vegetable. It's best just to let her die in dignity. We need to go now. The poor cat's waiting in the car."

Two heavy nurses were leaning over her now. She tried to catch their eyes. But they just kept moving their arms over her.

"It's so sad," one of them said. "I heard her husband found a bunch of money and sold their house."

"You know what he's going to do, don't you?"

"Yeah, it's easy to see. That woman's found her ticket in that loser," the first nurse said.

"You know she was the neighbor? And now they're off to Mexico. She even got Miss Claude's pet cat."

"Poor girl, to stroke out and lose all your senses and have a no-good man to leave you alone to die. At least she doesn't know a thing. That's the only mercy."

"Did you get that chart? I guess it's time to call the doctor to pull the plug, if that's everything."

"It's everything."

—Cheryl Reid

"Mind Yourself..."

Light, yellow-gray like the colour of an old bruise, slips softly in through the net curtains as I sit in the kitchen of my grandmother's house in Ireland. I wonder why this house continues to have such a powerful effect on me, even after living away from it for almost thirty years. Part of the reason, no doubt, has to do with the *sameness* of the place. The house looks much the same. The same Aga cooker sits in the kitchen. The same clock sits on the mantle in the front room, its hands now perpetually frozen at a quarter-to-three. The same pictures of Jesus and Mary still gaze complacently down from every wall, and the same "Blue Willow" plates, once my grandmother's pride, tip precariously back on the top of the dresser in the back kitchen.

But, I notice wistfully, the house has taken on a defeated Sunday-afternoon air, like a once dignified woman who has become blowsy and doesn't know it. My bachelor uncle lives there alone now and doesn't seem to notice that all the cups are chipped or cracked, that the tea-cloths are gray and dingy, that the putty around the windows lets the wind and damp in, so that you wake up in the morning with your breath rising in soft bursts above you.

Shortly after my birth, my parents, mad to escape Ireland's numbing poverty, left for London to find whatever work they could—my father most often working on the building sites as a labourer, my mother cleaning offices in the evenings. They were on the waiting list for a council flat, and, in the meantime my brother John and I had been left in my grandmother's care.

Now, as I sit slipping sods of turf into the Aga's voracious mouth, the kitchen fills with that sweetly acrid turf-fire smell, and the old feelings resurface. As I remember my childhood in that house, time is torn away, and the furious roll of history halts.

One of my earliest memories is of lying in the field behind my grandmother's house, staring at the sun through a pin-prick in a piece of paper to see if you really would go blind. My cousin, Esther, and I had a long-standing competition to see who could stare the longest without blinking. When neither of us went blind, as my grandmother had warned, we began to wonder if other things we had been told were really true. Did the nuns at our convent school really have to shave their heads before they could become a nun? This occupied our thoughts incessantly for a while since both of us had decided that we would become nuns. We would dress up—using one of grandmother's petticoats draped over our heads like a veil, and with a rosary around our waists—and walk around the field with hands held in prayerful pose while we practiced being holy. We were intrigued by the idea of living in the mysterious convent, with its sacred silence, but we couldn't bear the thought of baldness. There was no-one to ask—all of the nuns were much too formidable to approach—so we finally decided that we would go along with the initiation into the convent, but then run away the night before we had to get our heads shaved.

Another subject that came up for nightly discussion as we fell asleep was whether

there really were banshees. In the lore of childhood mythology the banshee was, perhaps, the most terrifying possibility. The legend went that just before someone died you would hear the banshee wail—a high-pitched devilish cry—signaling that the person's soul was being taken to hell. The banshee often left a comb with several teeth missing, and I remember the cold horror of finding just such a comb as I meandered slowly down the road one day. While we confidently dismissed this spectre in the cold light of day, waking in the middle of the night to hear the wind shrieking found Esther and me huddled together with pillows over our heads to drown out the sound.

Listening to the adults talking was one of our favorite pastimes. One day as Esther and I sat listening to my grandmother and our next door neighbor, Molly Burke talking, we gleaned something that was to perplex us more than anything else. Mrs. Burke was telling my grandmother how, as a child, the priest had told her that if she ever set foot in the Protestant church at the end of the town, she would be struck dead. She proudly recounted that she had never—and would never—go into that church. When my grandmother caught sight of us mimicking Mrs. Burke's facial expressions behind her back, we were quickly ushered outside to play. Once outside we soon started talking about whether God would really strike you dead for just going inside. It filled us with a delicious horror to think of what must lay inside the Protestant church. The following Saturday we were sent down to the town for *the messages* (groceries), and we decided to go and look at the Protestant church at the end of the town. As we stood outside the idea gripped us that we should just open the door and look around—surely that wasn't the same as going inside? We lifted the great iron latch and pulled the door open. Cold silence resounded. In contrast to our church, with its stained glass windows, gold tabernacle, and stations of the cross, this church looked so *plain*. There was nothing but the pews and the altar—no statues, heavenly fresco, or burning candles—and yet the very air was laden with forbidden enticement.

Suddenly Esther pushed me and I fell forward into the church. Sprawled on the cold flagstone floor I looked up...up into the rafters expecting God's immediate retribution. The full horror of my predicament descended and I panicked. I began shivering, then crying, then bawling as I pushed past Esther and started running home, with Esther running after me. I ran—expecting to be smitten with every step—until I reached my grandmother. Sobbing I told her that I was going to die. When she finally managed to calm me down, she gave me a vile concoction of whiskey, hot water and sugar to drink. Then she told me that what Mrs. Burke's priest had told her wasn't true. I couldn't believe her. The last image I saw before sleep overcame me was of the picture on the wall at the foot of my bed. Jesus gazed softly back at me, a look of wounded innocence on his face as he pointed to his exposed heart—crimson red and encircled by a crown of thorns.

When I awoke from a fitful, head-laden sleep, my grandmother took me down to see the parish priest. Now he would know, too. I waited outside the church while my grandmother told him what had happened. When I was called in to his office, I sat

sullenly staring at the carpet, unable to look at him or say anything. I felt his frosty glare as he told me that I was not to go into the Protestant church because the Catholic church was God's chosen church, but I wouldn't die since I hadn't intentionally gone into the church. He ended by saying that he hoped that this would be a lesson to me not to be meddling in places where I wasn't supposed to be. As I left I felt almost faint with relief that I had been spared. The fear quickly dissipated on the walk home and I arrived back ready to avenge myself on Esther.

The church bells rang out in Abbeyleix at twelve noon and six in the evening for the *Angeles* and everything stopped for prayer. Every night we said the rosary, no matter how tired or disinclined we might feel, and every morning we had a school assembly before our classes—but getting there on time usually posed a problem. My grandmother fully believed that if you dressed children warmly enough they wouldn't get sick. Esther and I had to be inspected by her every morning to be sure that we had on our vests, petticoats, woolen tights, dress, cardigan, coat, hat, gloves, and boots. The final assault on me came in the form of a scarf which she would wrap around my head, cross in front and then tie in a knot at the back of my coat. Then we would wait by the door while my grandmother dispensed the holy water.

Making a cross on our foreheads with a dab of holy water, she would gently admonish us to "mind yourself." We knew—with the intuitive understanding of children—that she meant we were to protect ourselves and each other, and stay out of trouble. But the command also communicated a warning—be careful of "them"—the outside world of priests and nuns, shopkeepers and tradesmen, neighbours and locals that comprised the town's finely layered class system. Somehow we knew our place in the social layering and knew that she was cautioning us not to overstep the bounds. Born of the pained pride of the poor, my grandmother's terse dismissal sent us forth every morning, sure that we had to protect her from some failure of ours but not knowing what or how.

By the time we had walked the mile to school we were usually late. Then came the ordeal of trying to get out of the coat and scarf. In the cloakroom I would stand heaving and sweating as I tried to get the scarf untied and get out of the coat. Finally we tried to sneak into assembly before some eagle-eyed nun would catch sight of us and make us march up to the front—their punishment for late-comers.

In addition to the usual subjects at school, the girls had to learn to knit. I hated knitting. Everything was going well until one day I dropped a stitch and couldn't gather it back. Somehow over the next few weeks my scarf turned into a hopelessly tangled glob of wool. Sister Anthony would walk around the classroom, her red jowls shaking in consternation if she detected shoddy work. I hid my shameful secret by clicking my needles furiously together whenever she came close to my desk. My knitting dilemma was interrupted however, by the news that my parents were coming to Ireland to collect my brother and me and that we would be going to England to live with them. Although I hated the thought of leaving my grandmother, I was thankful that at least I wouldn't have to show Sister Anthony what I had done. I sometimes wondered what she thought

when she discovered the hideous truth hiding in the corner of the craft cupboard.

Now when I return to my grandmother's house I remember my life there. I think of how much I have changed and how little that place has changed, yet still I feel bound to it in some deep and unfathomable way. I visit the same shops in the town, often served by the same shopkeepers who remember my grandmother and inquire about my life and family in America, as they wrap my purchases with brown paper and tie them with string. The church bells still peal out at twelve noon and six in the evening, and the convent school still flings open its gates for the town's reluctant students. My aunt keeps me up to date on the local gossip and the neighbors down the road stop to ask me if I remember when I lived there.

I always assure them that I do.

—Geraldine Amis

Reconstructing Lost Mountain

For the first eight years of my life I lived in cities: Atlanta, Charlotte, Richmond. Then my family moved out into the country where I soon became fascinated with things which used to seem common: the movement of the sun, trees, wildlife. Walking through the pathless woods that surrounded the foundation of our new home, how could I have anticipated the bright tangle of shadow and light and shadow that passed underfoot? The acidic smell of summer pine needles so high they were not heard? How could I have anticipated the sudden thunder of ruffed grouse rising out of the brush? or, even more startling, the sheer space that swirled beyond a rock cliff, a space so wide that it threatened to lift me up like a mimosa seed in the slightest breeze?

I had never dreamed such a place could exist, and yet, there I was, with everything that I had never seen laid out before me. But now, unless you know what to look for, you can't even find the place where we lived on a map. I have yet to see one that puts a name to the space hunched between 12 o'clock Knob and Bent Mountain. If you travel south of Roanoke on the Blue Ridge parkway, though, there is a "Lost Mountain Overlook" and from there, if it's past leaf-fall and weather permits, you can spot the brown shingles of what used to be my family's house before we sold it earlier this year—or, rather, before my father sold it earlier this year. He never would talk directly about his options, but I have to take for granted that he did everything he could to stay put because this was the place he saved for, the place he built and raised us in, and where now, just recently removed from the privilege of a yearly visit, the place I have begun to revise, its context of sights and sounds and smells becoming somehow worthy of the kind of attention one gives to birdwatching (the only difference being, of course, that you are not the one holding your breath to steady the lens but the one in flight, the one who scrutinizes the shape and sound and smell of the land below, verifying long familiar patterns.)

II. Construction

Our house was built from the ground up. Most houses are of course, but this fact isn't quite so apparent when you're eight years old and have always assumed that houses are planted full grown and perfectly suited for a flat plot of land like the trees city crewmen haul around in their white pick-ups. Even so, as the skeleton of our house was going up, I began to take more and more interest in the final shape that it would take. All summer long I watched the construction crew pour concrete, lay brick, raise 2x4s, and tack shingles. And for a long while I carried bricks to the masons laying the walk and the front porch, or I helped stack scrap wood for burning. The crew made steady progress; finished the outer wall on the sides and front of the house; and only once did they have to undo something they had completed, and that was just to refit the leaky corner boards of the two dormers that looked out of the attic and into the valley below. By late

fall, though, and without explanation, the workers stopped coming. The house had windows and doorways but no internal walls, and no back walls. The flooring, sheetrock, paint and wallpaper had been left up to us. I remember standing on the second floor at the back of the house and peering into a dense tangle of trees that descended sharply to the creek below. I felt I could step right off the edge of the unfinished floor, in between the naked supports of the missing wall, and into the arms of the closest trees; I felt I could climb over the deep valley without once touching the ground. But then I wondered what might be out there, if it could ever find its way up here where I was still standing and where I slept come night.

After the construction workers left, the four of us—mom, dad, my brother Devin, and myself—worked, ate and slept in the unfinished house. Every weekend, Devin and I helped out where we could, which usually meant fetching tools or just cleaning up. Devin, however, who was two years older than myself, seemed to begrudge any amount of work that separated him from the land of Spiderman, Batman, the Incredible Hulk or Captain America. He didn't even care about getting to put the floor planks down, which from my perspective at least, was the best job of all. The planks had come out of a Tom's Peanuts Plant half burned to the ground, so we had to make several trips to the old plant, but Devin wasn't even interested in helping me look for the old bottles or the wooden packing boxes that littered the grounds of the half-fallen building.

The planks were white pine, and because they ranged from eight to about fourteen feet in length and were about an inch-and-a-half thick, Devin and I helped our Dad carry the planks from the driveway to the house where we laid them down one at a time. We would stand on one end to keep them straight while our father and a hydraulic jack did all the real work on the other end: pressing them flat: jamming them tight. With one hand he worked the jack to hold the planks in place, and with the other he would hammer in the long square iron nails. Laying the floor took a long time and was what some people would even call boring, but the process of construction was as foreign to me then as the Emperor of China, so I came to welcome the cold weekends—the work, the picnic dinners, even sleeping on the floor come nightfall without lights or TV. After all, how many eight-year-olds could say that they had spent the weekend building a house?

After we got the flooring down (which we had to do first for fear of warping when the wet weather came), my father set a hurried pace to have the walls up before winter. Nevertheless, I soon began to perform my duties with less urgency. As fascinated as I had been with the house's slow construction, strange sounds kept coming out of the

trees and misdirecting my attention. At first, there were just the sounds of construction: hammer and nail, the circular saw cutting and dropping wood, the swish of my mother's paint brush. But before long I noticed that if I stood still long enough I could hear all sorts of things: a dog on the opposite ridge, water fast in the valley below, the far away scream of a hawk. And there was something else behind that even, a roaring like the ocean that would come out of the sky, that would roll throughout the tops of the dark pines and paradise trees, and through the poplars silver and bare. It was a roar that could drown familiar voices, swallow time and hold me in suspension.

After work, nightfall came fast. We ate dinner and talked about what we'd done, and what still remained to be done. But because we didn't have electricity yet, there was nothing to do after dinner but sleep. Devin and I would unroll our sleeping bags in the back of the house and talk some more or we'd see who could hold their breath the longest. Long after I'd zipped my sleeping bag all the way around my head and Devin had fallen off to sleep, I would hold my breath to hear the slow repetition of my heart. I would let it build, slowly, until the sound of it would shoot out of me like a nameless thing, travel through the woods, up, and out, before returning, finally, somehow weighted, like a small air-borne particle which though lifted above the tree line of the tallest mountain, eventually must come crashing down in the form of a dark drop of rain on the leaves all down and nearly dry; but then there is another drop, and another, until the sound of you does not matter anymore, until you dream again like the night before that you are a black mountain lion, searching, and you can see everything, even in the darkest night.

III. The Stonemason and His Boys

The summer after we finished the construction, I discovered four boys, all blond-headed, swimming in a fishing hole below our house. I told them where I lived, and they told me that they were brothers, and lived on 12 o'clock Knob with their father, who, it turns out, was a blind stonemason. I grew to like them because they knew where all the side roads led, where to pick up fire trails on the far side of the mountain, and where the best fishing holes were along Back Creek. Devin, however, called them *the mountain boys*, and rather than play with them like I did, he would sit around with his comic books or work on model airplanes.

I'd bike up the mountain any time I could, though. Even if the boys weren't around, the fast ride down the narrow and twisting road was worth the trip up, which took a while. After a number of trips up and down the mountain, I began to notice a few things. The boys lived on the leeward side, which stayed dark and sometimes misty until about mid-day. Because of the dim light, the familiar sound of wind in the trees, water rushing through a narrow gap, or even the sure call of a bobwhite in the hollow below were greatly magnified. But there was also the smell and then the sight of garbage dumped into the ravines of the sharpest curves, mostly common garbage—paper, cans, bottles,

plastic of every shape—but there was another kind of garbage too: tires without cars, rotten sofas without living rooms, mattresses without beds, anything really, that had worn out its purpose or whose purpose had been forgotten. At first, I thought the people who lived in the valley hauled this stuff up so they wouldn't have to go all the way to the county dump and pay for the privilege on top of that. But according to the oldest boy Jesse, "ever-body around here does it. The garbage man don't come up here all the time, and besides, he won't haul off ever-thing a body's got."

The further up I went though, the more I began to notice that the roadsides were cleaner and that all the houses had stone foundations, or rock walls in the front yard. Some of the walls were recessed and worked perfectly into the landscape; others curved along with the road and had a central gate. A closer inspection of the stones revealed a hard-won economy. The fit of each rock was judged by its shape, by its weight in the hand, not by coloration or by the texture of its surface. Made of native rock and very little cement, the walls and houses seemed unweighted, as if they had grown right up and out of the ground. The boys' house, which stood well off the road near the top of the mountain, was cemented together with the same sure style.

I think about the stonemason's remarkable achievement, and then I wonder about his boys, one of whom wound up in jail for breaking into Rierson's, the country store just off the base of the mountain beside the school. The store wasn't of much interest to them when I first met them. In fact, it was a place to be avoided. Old men with button down shirts tucked into their dickeys used to sit on the long bench in front of the store and chew tobacco, or talk about neighbors or national security. But that was before new owners changed the store's name to Country Way, started buying packaged bacon that my dad refused to buy, and added video games and pinball machines. I'd want the boys to fish the creek with me like they used to, or to go up to old man Sumter's overgrown orchard to throw rotten apples, but when Rierson's became Country Way, the boys practically vanished. They'd be at the store smoking cigarettes and playing pinball. They'd even started cutting school, slipping off throughout the woods between the playground and the store during lunch and recess.

One day I rode my bike down to the store to buy a can of corn. I had planned to fish off the bridge made of railroad ties that spanned the creek behind. I found the corn and was standing around at the counter waiting to pay when I noticed three of the boys standing around in the back. They were sucking on cigarettes and grape soda, and Dougie, just 6 years old was playing a pinball machine that had a cowgirl on the scoreboard. She wore a mini-skirt and was about to bust out of her leather vest; in one hand she held a lasso and in the other a six-shooter. Dougie could hardly see over the top of the glass, but he seemed to be doing quite well. Every time he won bonus points or an extra ball the gun in the cowgirl's hand flashed red.

I paid for the corn, and then decided I'd play a round of pinball with them before I left. I played a round with Jesse (I didn't exactly light up the scoreboard), and then I asked sort of offhand-like if anyone wanted to go fishing, but as I'd expected, they

all declined. I said OK, and started to leave, but then I turned and looked back at Jesse, who was a year older and four inches taller than I was. I wanted to ask him why they didn't want to go fishing or swimming anymore, but instead I asked him how they got away with it—skipping school in the middle of the week like they did, staying gone all day on weekends. "Nothing to it," he said, grinning. "We give him the finger, and he can't even see us."

IV. The Pond

The following summer Jesse told me about a pond that he assured me had bigger fish in it than I had ever seen. I asked him how to find the pond, and despite what seemed like simple directions, I failed in my several attempts to discover it. I pestered him all summer long about the pond's whereabouts, but every time he gave me directions, something had been added or left out. He remained secretive, grumbled about creeks and horses, barbed wire and a certain 80-some-year-old doctor who owned the land by right of his double-barreled shotgun, so I began to doubt that the pond even existed.

Several summers later, though, I was walking up the creek that ran behind both the store and the school when I came up on a rabbit that had come down the bank for water. He had seen me first and instinctively frozen. But when I turned towards him he bolted up the bank and disappeared beneath a mess of brush and honeysuckle. I followed, slid beneath a barbed wire fence running behind the brush, and then found myself in a broad pasture. Beyond the pasture was a tall hill cleared but for a few stands of hardwood and some fruit trees. A horse was standing under one of the trees trying to pull down what looked like a green apple, so I started out across the pasture, climbed the hill, and followed the horse into another pasture on the far side. From there a long slope with a zigzag path led down to the open end of a pond.

The pond was small enough for a twelve-year-old with a fairly decent arm to throw a rock across lengthwise, and dark-deep in the middle. The front end was shallow and unobstructed, but the far end backed up to a rising wood of honey locust, oak and poplar. Into one corner shaded by weeping willows a trickling spring entered, and along the bank that ran to the adjacent corner tall grasses grew. They bowed out and hung over, dropping insects regularly down to bluegills nesting near the bank, and to large-mouth bass that sometimes rose out of the darkness.

During school months, I went there as many afternoons as I could, and summers nearly every day until I left town for college. Nobody else ever showed up, not even the mountain boys. Not my Dad. Not my brother, and certainly not any of the other locals. This was partly because of the armed doctor—to hear them tell the story though, I figured he's been 80 for at least twenty years, and if he really was a doctor he wasn't going to shoot me dead—and partly because of the pond's proximity to nowhere. Sometimes when I crested the hill I could make out snapping turtles sunning on half-

submerged logs, and sometimes too a great blue heron fishing in the shallow end would suddenly lift up and disappear over the tree line behind the pond.

One day in particular the sun had just hit the wet leaves of the trees—so it wasn't too hot or too cold—and I was sitting on the bank watching the bobber I had set deep in the center of the pond. I had had to beg my Dad to let me come out so far this early in the morning. The pond was a two-mile bike from home to the school, and then the twenty-minute hike across the pasture, up the hill and down the slope behind it. Eventually, he said "Fine. Go," but he wanted me back by noon so we could pump water out of the creek and into fifty-gallon barrels after lunch. I would have to help him arrange the pump's conduit so it wouldn't suck up silt or leaves, fill the barrels, and then drive back up the mountain with him. He'd park the truck on the road about forty yards above the garden, and then I'd have to sit siphoning water out of each barrel with a hose that was attached to a sprinkle nailed to a picnic bench in the middle of the beans. The well was getting low, he had said, two gallons a minute down from five. So, when the sun hit the trees I knew I had to leave. But I couldn't move. Everything around me seemed to magnify in shape and sound. Shadows were creeping out of the woods and towards the edge of the pond, the mist was all out of the trees and the dew was now gone from the grasshoppers' wings. They were flying from stem to stem across the back edge of the pond snapping in short bursts. I sat there like I had a hundred times before, but this time I started to look around for people or animals just behind the brush, standing on the ridge, spying on me from the woods. I found that I was sweating, but more than this I found that each hair on my body was slowly heating up, one by one but in a flash like tiny radar; in that moment it seemed as if they were not hairs at all, could never be just hair again, but were a million tiny and individual wires irrevocably linked to the invisible light that was slanting sharply now through the tall dark trees. That's when I put on my clothes, reeled in, grabbed my tackle and then bolted through the upper pasture, down the mountain, across the lower pasture and under the barbed wire fence I couldn't see for the late summer grass but knew was there.

V. The Graveyard

Although I didn't know it then, this past December was the last time I would visit the house that I grew up in and helped to build. The weather was milder than usual, so my wife and I took our three-year-old for walks. We would go up the road or down through the woods to the creek. All week long, we couldn't keep her indoors. She wanted to roll down the hill in the pasture, to name the fruit trees, to see what a crawfish looked like.

Every afternoon I took a walk by myself as well. On the last day I hadn't planned

to go very far—dinner was on the stove—but I wanted to find a stand of white pines low enough to cut evergreen for the sitting room wreath. On the back edge of the pasture I stopped to look at the sunken foundation of an old house my brother and I had discovered clearing land the year we put in the fruit trees. The foundation was made of stone and to the west it looked directly across the ravine of an active spring to a graveyard on the top of the opposite ridge where my brother and I used to play. I followed the path that led from the old house, into the woods, and down the ravine to the spring's origin. I hopped over it, and picked up a deer trail that climbed the ridge and skirted the front edge of the graveyard. From there the trail descended again and into a dense hollow which rose sharply to the top of the next ridge. That's when I found a second graveyard. It was smaller than the other one, and underneath a white oak too big to hug. There was no fence and no cedar trees, just two graves sunk deep in years of black leaf-mold. An adult-sized grave was marked by a fieldstone, leaning about a foot tall; there was a child-sized depression next to it, unmarked. Upon closer inspection I discovered two more graves under the leaves and rotten branches that must have been infants, also unmarked. I stood there for a long time looking down at the two small graves between my outstretched feet and couldn't help but wonder. Despite rough terrain, this was only a couple of miles from the house and under one of the biggest trees on the mountain. As many times as I had crisscrossed this area before, how could I have missed this spot?

VI. Tracks

About a month later I called my dad and found out he'd probably be relocated to Charlotte or Raleigh because some interstate bank had bought him out (what they call on *Moneywatch* a "friendly merger"), but all he wanted to talk about was the panther tracks he'd found somewhere on the Henderson property.

"Panther tracks?" I said, disbelieving. "Panthers are supposed to be extinct in the Appalachians."

"Well, now, I'll tell you what I saw, step for step, then I'll let you be the judge," he said.

"All right," I said.

"I'm coming up out of the woods about twenty minutes from the road. I'm past Sumter's now, and coming into the upper pasture where Henderson lets the few cows he's got left go wild."

"Yeah," I said.

"Well, I'd been following deer tracks, nothing special, and they start into the pasture, walking, and up the hill for about thirty yards; then all the sudden they've dug in and turned."

"I go back down and the deer has leapt, swear to God, about half-way back to the woods. He touched down once and was gone. What do you think of that?"

"Strange," I said. "Nobody hunts up there."

"Well, I didn't think much about it at the time, really. It was getting kinda dark actually, so I start to go back home when I get curious. What could have made him turn like that?"

"Not a cow," I said.

"That's right."

"So I go back up to where the deer turned, and look around. I don't see anything, so I start walking right where the deer would have gone. About twenty yards and I'm about to turn around when I see it. Just one, and it wasn't from any bobcat either. It was at least as wide as your hand. What do you think of that?"

"Sounds like a panther."

"Now suppose you're me and it's all but dark, and..."

"He wouldn't still be around, though, more than likely, much less bother with me if he was."

"Maybe so," he said, pausing. "But you weren't there, all but dark and like I said. So I don't mind telling you I got the hell out. I did. And in a hurry too."

—William King

1995 Agnes Scott Writers' Festival Distinguished Participants

Peter Carey, novelist, screenwriter and teacher. Winning the distinguished Booker Prize for *Oscar & Lucinda* (1988), he became a best-selling novelist in his Australia and the U.K. His first novel, *Bliss*, won multiple prizes including Australia's coveted Miles Franklin Award; the film resulting from his screenplay won Australian Film Industry Awards, including Best Screenplay, Best Director, and Best Picture. Six of his novels are available in the United States, including *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, released in February, 1995. He teaches creative writing at NYU.

Michael S. Harper, poet and teacher. His eight volumes of poetry include *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* (1970), *History Is Your Own Heartbeat* (1971), *Debridement* (1973), *Nightmare Begins Responsibility* (1975), and *Healing Song for the Inner Ear* (1985); he coedited with Anthony Walton the anthology *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep* (1994). He teaches in the graduate creative writing program at Brown University, where he is I.J. Kapstein Professor of English.

Julie Kalendek, poet and artist. Her poems have appeared in various magazines, and she is the author of *The Fundamental Difference* (1991). She received her B.A. from Agnes Scott College in 1988 and her M.F.A. from Brown in 1990 and lives in the Baltimore area. She is Agnes Scott's Outstanding Alumna Writer for 1995.

Memye Curtis Tucker, poet and teacher. Author of *Holding Patterns* (1988), she is widely published in poetry and arts journals. Her most recent awards include the Vassar Miller Prize in Poetry (1994), several Callanwolde Poetry Prizes and Agnes Scott's first Alumna Writing Award (1993). She was a Bread Loaf Scholar in Poetry in 1994 and a fellow of the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in 1993. On the Editorial Board for the newly launched *Atlanta Review*, she regularly teaches workshops at Kennesaw and Callanwolde and assists the creative writing program at Agnes Scott.

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