

College Writers' Festival
October 21 and 22, 1996
Schedule of Readings

Locations: Rebekah Scott Hall Conference Room
Dana Fine Arts Building
Dana Fine Arts (reception following)

Dana Fine Arts
Dana Fine Arts

led before Ms Williams's reading.

Department wishes to thank President Mary
Tchens, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for

Agnes Scott College
Writers' Festival
1996



Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival Distinguished Participants

...ed eight volumes of poetry (including *A
The Imaginary Lover*, *Green Age*, and *The
Biblical Visions and Revisions*) and five of
cluding *Writing Like a Woman*, *Stealing the
and Feminist Revision*). She teaches in the
ers University.

...d two collections of essays (*Bachelorhood:
and Against Joie de Vivre*), two novels
The Rug Merchant), one "disguised novel"
Children), and two volumes of poetry (*The
Stay Open* and *The Daily Round*), and has
The Art of the Personal Essay. He teaches
of Hofstra University.

...l three novels (*State of Grace*, *The Change-
ntering*), two collections of short stories
a history and guide to the Florida Keys, and
ig, the environment, and travel. She lives in

...ed from Agnes Scott in 1985 and has pub-
Dear Bunkie, and a wide variety of poems,
aches poetry and writing at Oregon Coast

Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival 1996

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 Alicia Ostriker, Philip Lopate, Joy Williams, and Sally Ann Stevens. Other recent guests have been Michael Harper, Peter Carey, Carolyn Forché, Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, Rita Dove, Robert Coover, Sharon Olds, and Gloria Naylor.

Spring, 1996

Editor

Steve Guthrie

Selection Committee

Bo Ball

Christine Cozzens

Steve Guthrie

Cover

Gustave Doré, *Jephthah's Daughter*

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Send all correspondence to Writers' Festival, English Department, Box 747, Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA 30030.

Contents

Poetry

Carole Anderson, *Spring*

Paul Farr, *The Soul of Don Domingo*

Stephanie Gordon, *Stealing Fire*

Katherine Nelson-Born, *Crossing the Rubicon with Great Aunt Ruth*

Valerie Park, *Kissing the Border*

Jessica Pierce, *Front Porch Dreaming*

Jill Russell, *Beauty Pageant 1982: My First Lesson in Beauty*

Fiction

Marisa Clark, *Ebo Rolled Over*

Kelly Craigmile, *All Other Ground*

Jeffrey Mack, *Vanzola and the Jazz Singer*

Cheryl Reid, *A Good Catholic Woman*

Personal Essay

Eulalie Drury, *Olga's Daughter*

Marisa Dunlevy-Tingle, *Lilac Blossoms*

Cecelia Heit, *As Time Goes By . . .*

Maura Mandyck, *Nothing Like the Sun*

Spring

Tents, small and laughable,
sprout in the woods,
and each frames a flower:
focused,
alone.

Photographers who know
their business
close in on trillium,
while the woods enfold them in virginal whites
(foamflower, ghostpipes,
and sweet white violets).

Adjusting the light
on toadshade,
working in teams,
stooped couples lean
in the blooming face of sex,
and shoot,

while nearly in silence water moves
toward the feet of the spring beauty
and the basking trout lily,
waking bloom after bloom.
How will it end that begins so freshly?
The photographers need to know!

Tell them, heartleaf.
Wild stonecrop, show.

Carole Anderson

The Soul Of Don Domingo

Don Domingo lives across the street
from his soul.

In the morning he watches
through the dry narrow curtains
as it passes along the calles
in the breeze.

At work, it is his
clandestine meditation.

In the evening Don Domingo
stops on the sidewalk
across the street with his satchel
to smile at his soul
as if beholding a vision,
and to talk about nothing
as if he had only met her yesterday.

At dusk Don Domingo
climbs an empty pine
and whispers his secret to the moon.
At night he sets her name on fire
in the streets at the center of town.

And every Sunday
the soul of Don Domingo
comes to the edge of his garden
with a pitcher of cold water.

Paul Farr

Stealing Fire

Never mind that she said a cigarette fell
while she was reading Proust or Mario Puzo,
with whom she once laughed and drank wine
in New York City. Maybe she simply touched a match
to her pillow, as my sister claims, but by then
I'd learned my mother's way of making a good story
even better. The trick is to believe your own words,
because lying makes the truth more bearable.
My mother could make art of wrong numbers, a sidelong glance,
a chance encounter. Wasn't I born in the same hospital
as Clark Gable's son, same month, same year? To my mother
that made Gable her lover. Once in London

my mother saw Elizabeth Taylor at high tea and could
scarcely move past her for the actress insisting
Call my agent, darling, for a screen test. My sister,
too, practiced this art. After the fire, she wrote me:
"Praise God I am alive!" although I later learned
she ran out the door long before danger. Mother had set
her bed on fire, Katie wrote, and locked the door.
Mother's reasons were simple enough: daydreams,
the amazing passage that causes the mouth to drop open
in awe, cigarette forgotten. But I knew then,
as I do today, that she stood under
the naked light bulb in her room and as

the flames race to the edges of the bed,
while hands frantically try, then pound
the apartment door, deep voices yelling,
there is a single suspended moment
before the battering ram splinters and splits the door
when the room fills with light, and she things *I brought
this gift to the world, this fire I stole from the sun.*
Her body is a radio of silver voices cutting in and
out, and her dark hair swings forward
and begins to sing as she says *I am the fourth
who walked among the Hebrew children and
like them I too will burn and burn and not die.*

Stephanie Gordon

Crossing the Rubicon with Great Aunt Ruth

The pockmarked organ player sits in her corner.
 Yesterday's spread manure ferments the fields outside.
 The church window fogs with the breath of the faithful,
 their voices rising among the rafters' carved angels
 disguising the murmurings of Great Aunt Ruth,
 her eyes empty as winter fields.
 It is April, 1968. I am eighteen. Aunt Ruth is eighty.
 Surrounded by generations of pitched raw voices, her lips barely
 moving,
 she is whispering of walking China's great wall, dancing Versailles'
 halls,
 and something about the blur of bones exposed one May
 among cows dotting the slow climb of a field
 into the dead air of some lost summer. "Remember,"
 she breathes to me, "don't tell father," mistaking me for
 whom? She speaks of pink roses, frowns polite reproof at some distant
 offender,
 and reaches for my hand. Among the pine wood pews,
 my fingers entwine with the soft leather of hers, and I am holding on
 to the legendary bones of passed-on travelers, their legacies
 etched in the lines of a palm that once slapped a waiter in a Pont
 Mirabeau.cafe.
 Recalling her muttering brings to life again the flattened grasses of an
 ancient riverside,
 a clandestine picnic in Pompeii, white wine flowing freely from upended
 glasses,
 a young man's eyebrow arched as if carved out of olivewood.
 Among a congregation full of young mothers already hardening
 like pounded stumps, I remember stroking Aunt Ruth's slender fingers,
 listening to the unschooled choir of voices, the organ's somber music,
 savoring once more the last small dot of field disappearing in frosted
 glass.

Katherine Nelson-Born

Kissing the Border

You only let me go because I said I would drive safe and
 be sure to take my medicine.

You were impressed by my fake ID and by
 the fact that I could make it from Toronto to Ann Arbor
 in less than four hours.

I was impressed by your greying temples and
 your thick accent, which I tried
 to imitate but somehow it
 just didn't sound right.
 Didn't matter, it would still make a good story
 on Monday.

You didn't have a coat- it's never this cold
 where you're from- and they wouldn't serve you wine
 at Denny's, something about your passport,
 and God knows you were already not too happy
 about stuff, not me of course, just the tour
 and the gig and the cold I probably gave you.

We walked back to the hotel and
 ordered you an omelet from room service.
 A foghorn sounded over the murky
 river, alerting the few barges loaded with
 malt or steel or toxic waste.
 Alerting me my time was up.
 You can tell everyone you got laid,
 I thought of saying.
 But I didn't. You weren't that
 type of guy.

Yeah, you saw me naked, that's no big deal,
 but you didn't see me cry, which we both know is a lot
 worse, and shit, I just don't know you well enough
 for that.

Who knew that for years I would be haunted by dreams of Detroit
 upon the horizon, like an oasis, trying to find you on the ninth floor,
 through the window? How could I have told you that you would
 be smothered by guilt and regret and red-hot highlander blushing

that *always* gave you away?

I left you on the sidewalk,
waving, underfed, and cold,
and I drove back into the
comforting winter whiteness and
my pathetic teenage life.

I would try to explain at home why I smelled of burnt rope and
why I was limping slightly.

Yeah, the 12th grade class was impressed.

And I slept with your shirt for a week.

But I wonder how long you stood there,
blowing kisses at Canada

Valerie Park

Front Porch Dreaming

She has clichés in her mouth like
tacks
and tangled fingers who trip
on words unless she keeps them in their
cages
with her
so please don't ask her to dance
yet
'cause her feet are heavy in these
cinderblock shoes
Maybe you should start with
dandelions not roses
and sit with her on the front
porch
of that summer yellow house through
sunset
with the lawnmower humming down the
street
and wait until she
quiet
with fireflies in her
hair
leans
to rest her head on your
shoulder
eyes closed
in the wavering
haze

Jessica Pierce

Beauty Pageant 1982: My First Lesson in Beauty

Kindergarten, I won nothing,
 a miniature trophy placed in my hands
 for participation, like all the other
 inconsolable ones, trying not to cry
 or hate the girl up front, not wanting to go home
 and hear the endless mocking of my brother,
 vowing next year would be different.

The gown gleamed through rows and piles
 of crinoline, chiffon, satin,
 the most beautiful blue,
 caught between my eyes and the sky,
 the sleeves pinching a pinkish ring
 around my bony arm.
 A bell to the floor,
 hiding well scratched knees and shins,
 near-perfect ruffles at my feet
 floating me across smooth hardwood,
 that would lead me down the catwalk
 to the celebration of beauty.

Running to get Tabitha Anne, the one with pink fleshy freckles
 and two brown yarn pigtails,
 swept away in my brother's arms
 to go in the pool filter, hang from his ceiling,
 under the king size bed with the mean unnameable things,
 screaming while mother made chicken pot pie and yelled
 to stop running, and the fatal
 trip, yellow velour swivel chair stopping my flight
 with my mouth, the hole of my first lost tooth
 bursting with pain and blood,
 screaming
 now I'll never win.

The next night,
 my mouth swelled full purple,
 my smile glaring putrid off the blue sheen of satin.
 I walked slowly down the stage,
 small and six suddenly

in the glare of too bright lights,
 the crowd fuzzy as I searched for familiar faces,
 couldn't find my parents, my brother,
 the third place trophy placed in my shaking hands,
 more than I had ever won before or would again,
 the night that planned perfection had been spoiled,
 I would discover my flaws would save me.

When she grows up she wants to be a veterinarian
 (I later discovered I was afraid of needles,
 passed out watching my cat be wormed).
 My beauty intact in the proof of my difference,
 my swollen gum a fuzzy lump under my lip,
 the only one that would grow up and leave
 the town that expected shining perfection
 even from a six year old, even from me,
 who would place the trophy in the windowsill
 and let the sun hit and reflect every morning,
 not letting me forget, even after my mouth
 had healed and teeth had grown in, later to require
 braces and rubber bands and the tortures of modern beauty,
 that one night, my mouth had exploded
 and won me the world.

Jill Russell

noise in the kitchen, rummaging through cabinets, opening and slamming shut the refrigerator and the freezer and the pantry.

"We need everything," she announced. "We're completely out of dog food." The coffeepot wheezed and let flow the last of the coffee.

"It's on my list," Dooley said. "I already put the coupons in my pocket."

Miriam poured herself some coffee and, spoon in cup, stirred out the steam. "Just don't forget to use them," she said.

"I wonder where it's going." Dooley tapped the window. "The train."

Miriam took a sip. "That's more like it."

In their cage, the cockatiels leaped to life. The morning light had reached them. One hulled a piece of seed. The other turned its head fully around and ran its beak along the feathers on its spine; the coy look of its round onyx eyes and coral-rouged cheeks made Dooley laugh aloud.

"Crazy," Miriam said. It was enough to cut short his laughter. She coiled a wisp of her long, fine white hair around her finger.

Dooley finished his coffee. It was cold and tasted plenty strong to him. He crossed his legs under the table. The toe of his sock nudged the dog lying there.

"Well, hey there, Chocolate Candy," he said cheerfully, talking under the table. "I didn't even know you were down there." With the bottom of his foot, he rubbed the big dog's side. She didn't budge. He leaned over and stroked her against the lay of her stubbly fur. "Candy?" He gawked at her. She was stiff, death-stiff. Dooley jerked his hand away; it was grimy from the dog's coat. "Oh no," he said, "oh Candy," and he dropped to his hands and knees. Beyond the dog and the table legs, he saw Miriam's flapping slippers and billowing hem come rushing. She cried out before she could possibly have known what was wrong.

At the Baxters' front stoop, Dooley paused to catch his breath. He had just fought his way along an overgrown trail in the woods that divided his property from his neighbors'. He took off his hat, his good brown hat, and swiped his hand over his head. The soft bristles of what little hair he had stood defiantly at attention.

He knocked on the screen door. It was unlatched and slapped back at him. No one answered. He knocked again and called out, "Hello? Hello in there. Is anybody home?" To his ear, his voice sounded girlish and fevered. He tried to lower it. "It's your next-door neighbor come to

call." He spotted the doorbell and pushed it. It buzzed inside the house, and a moment later, Frank Baxter's stocky silhouette appeared. He was holding a fork and a plate of something.

"It's Mr. Dooley from next door," Frank said over his shoulder to someone in the next room. He put down his plate and nudged the screen door open a few inches. He was no taller than Dooley, but his wide shoulders blocked the doorway. He stuck out a hand for Dooley to shake. "Well, well, stranger, so pleased to see you again. Come have some coffee with us. The wife is just picking up our breakfast dishes."

"No, no, can't do that," Dooley said. "I'm afraid I've come to beg a favor of you, Mr. Baxter."

Earlvene Baxter pushed her husband aside and said, "What can we do for you, Mr. Dooley?"

He beckoned with his hat to the dense woods. "We've got some trouble next door." Earlvene covered her mouth with her fleshy fingers. "I don't know if you recall that old mongrel of ours--Chocolate Candy, we called her--but she went to sleep under the dining room table last night, and that's where we found her this morning. Dead.... She's a big dog, eighty, ninety pounds' worth, and I can't pull her out from underneath the table. The old muscles just aren't what they used to be." He raised his shirtsleeve and showed the hard, thin knot of his bicep.

"What an awful thing to wake up to," Earlvene said. She ushered Dooley into the house and sent Frank to get his shoes. She slipped into a pair of pale yellow sandals that matched none of the many colors in her bell-legged shorts. In fact, the color most closely matched the scrambled eggs left on Frank's plate. She took the plate into the kitchen and scraped the eggs into the garbage disposal. "How old was she?"

"Nine, ten, thereabouts."

"Such a companion." She started taking down tomatoes from the windowsill over the kitchen sink and putting them in a brown paper bag. "Your poor wife, how's she taking it?"

"Not very well." Dooley turned his hat round and round in his hands. "She shut herself in her room."

Earlvene cradled the bag of fat tomatoes in her arms. "I'll bring these. They won't help, but it's the thought that counts."

"Won't be necessary," he said. "You keep your tomatoes for yourself." The vines in Miriam's garden had already produced more tomatoes than they could eat. But when he and the Baxters squeezed into Frank's truck, Earlvene rode in the middle with the bag of tomatoes in her lap.

Dooley hadn't expected to find Miriam dressed for company. She had done away with every trace of the morning's misery. She wore a blue denim dress, buttoned to her throat. Her hair was braided and twisted into a bun tight at the back of her head. She had even put on makeup, given herself eyebrows and red lips, startling against her moon-white complexion.

"Come in. Make yourselves at home." She enunciated her words like a foreigner.

Earlvene entered thrusting the bag of tomatoes into Miriam's arms. "I'm so sorry it's a tragedy that brings us together." She tried to embrace Miriam, but the tomatoes came between them.

"Yes, it has been a sad morning." Miriam was staring over Earlvene's shoulder, at Dooley. He saw that the arch of one of Miriam's eyebrows was drawn darker and slightly higher than the other. It seemed to be hexing him. He took off his hat.

The four of them went directly into the dining room. Miriam had already moved all the chairs into another room and cleared the table. Her sewing items were nowhere in sight. Her box of chocolates was squared away on the kitchen counter near the coffee maker; Dooley had never known her to keep them anywhere except on the dining room table, near her as she sewed. The two birds perched rather quietly in their cage, as if they sensed death in the room and respected its presence.

Earlvene had noticed the wheelbarrow in the kitchen. "For the dog," Dooley explained.

"Oh, a kind of hearse?" she said.

Dooley and Frank crouched down to figure out a way to move Chocolate Candy. She was an obese black dog of mixed breed, her muzzle and chest grizzled, and she lay rigid amid the five spiral-grooved table legs.

"I can't bear to touch her," said Miriam, "and even if I could, I wouldn't be much help." She opened the refrigerator and began placing one tomato after another into the vegetable crisper. "We're all out of everything else," she said, "but we have enough tomatoes to last us the summer." She laughed, a crooked sound coming from her.

Earlvene, her yellow-sandaled foot mere inches from Dooley's hand, said, "This is such a beautiful table. Is it new?"

"It's an antique," Miriam said.

"I can see it's an antique."

"She refinished it herself," Dooley called. He wrapped his hands around the cold legs of the dog, grunted, and pushed. Even with Frank helping, the dog didn't move.

"What if we tried from the other side?" Frank suggested. The men crawled out backward from under the table.

"Well, I know *these* weren't here before." Earlvane referred to the cockatiels with a showroom sweep of her hand.

"They're the latest additions to our family," Miriam said. "My present to myself two or three Christmases ago." She went to the birds and tapped the cage. Their wings flapped, scattering seed everywhere. Earlvane shook some out of one of her sandals. Dooley and Frank ducked under the table, clutched Chocolate Candy's massive paws, and rolled her over. The dog's fangs were bared in a kind of smile, as if she were between bites of food.

Frank counted down, "One, two, three," and the two men dug their knees into the carpet and slid the dog from under the table. "This dog weighs a hundred pounds if she weighs an ounce," Frank groaned.

"Miriam fattened her up on snacks," Dooley explained. "A bite for Miriam, a bite for Chocolate Candy." They walked backward, dragging the dog by her legs toward the wheelbarrow.

Earlvane gaped at the sight with horror or sympathy and said, "Is that how she got her name?"

"Dooley made the cage himself," Miriam remembered.

"That's not it at all," Dooley said. "It's because her poop looked like little bites of chocolate when she was a puppy."

Miriam ran her hand over one of the cage's sanded-smooth bars. "It was his Valentine's Day present to me that year," she said.

"Tootsie Roll would have been a good name for her too, in that case," said Earlvane.

"One, two, three," Frank counted again, and the men hoisted the dog up, but Dooley couldn't keep a good grip and dropped her on her haunches. A sob wrenched free from his throat, and he feared that he might actually cry. "Maybe it'd be easier if we raised her from underneath," Frank said. He lifted Chocolate Candy and gently lowered her into the wheelbarrow. "Where do you want her?" He pointed the wheelbarrow toward the back porch and began to push.

"Dooley can do that himself," Miriam said with such absolute authority that Frank dropped the wheelbarrow.

"It's private, Frank," Earlvane whispered as if only her husband could hear. She patted Miriam's thin, erect back.

"Thanks anyway," said Dooley.

"No problem, no bother," Frank said. He squirted dishwashing liquid into one of his palms and washed all the way up to his elbows. Dooley wheeled Chocolate Candy onto the back porch, out of sight. He

returned and saw Frank, neck craned forward, whistling and chirping at the birds. "Cracker?" Frank said. "Polly want a cracker?"

"Their names are Ebo and Ibo," said Miriam, "after the nursery rhyme."

From her post at the bay window, Earlvane said, "My heavens, you can see clear back to the railroad tracks from here."

"Ebo want a cracker?" Frank asked a bird. To Miriam he said, "Which one's which?"

"We let the woods grow up," Earlvane said. "I can't stand the trains." She chattered about the nuisance of the trains, their noise, how they made the earth shake, how they reduced property value; and Dooley, who never could remember how to tell the two birds apart, missed Miriam's introduction.

"Hello, Ebo. Hello, Ibo. Don't you want to say hello?"

"It's no use talking to them," Miriam told Frank.

He looked at her. "But they're talking birds, aren't they?"

"That's what the pet store told us," said Dooley. "These birds make a lot of noise, but they don't actually say anything."

Miriam unhooked the cage door. "They'll let you hold them," she said. She put her hand in the cage and held a finger to the perch. One of the cockatiels stepped onto her finger and pecked at her ring. "See?" she smiled. When she withdrew her hand from the cage, the bird spread its wings and stood tall, extending and lowering its neck with accordion-like repetition.

Hands on her hips, Earlvane was now lamenting the death of the dog. Her throaty sympathetic clucks sounded to Dooley like an imitation of the cockatiels. "Will you bury her?" she said.

"I already dug the hole." Dooley looked at his hands, blistered from shoveling the hard dirt.

"Frank Baxter, you put that bird down right this instant!" Earlvane said, turning sharply.

On Frank's finger, a cockatiel sidestepped this way and that. "A little bird like this can't hurt me."

"That's not why I want you to put it down, and you know it. You heard what those doctors said."

"What doctors?"

"On CNN, don't you remember?"

"What in the world are you talking about, woman?" Frank's booming voice startled both birds. One flew up to the dusty philodendron hanging from the ceiling, and the other flew into another room. Frank glowered at his wife.

"They'll come back." Miriam smiled icily. "Now what were you saying, Mrs. Baxter?"

"I'm sure it's nothing, really." Earlvane's voice dipped gravely as she continued. "We heard a news report saying that exposure to bird droppings can cause cancer. It's been turning up in pigeon breeders a lot."

"Don't be ridiculous," Frank said.

Dooley chuckled and jangled the loose change in his pants pocket. "If you paid me what a doctor gets paid, I could find a connection between bird shit and cancer too." Everyone laughed--everyone but Miriam, whose face remained as pale and still as a cameo except for the faint trembling of her bright red lips.

In another room, a grandfather clock chimed eleven times, and when it had finished, Miriam's unblinking eyes were locked on Dooley. "Won't you stay for lunch?" she asked.

Again and again, he shoveled the loose damp dirt from the mound and fanned it over the dog. Although he worked in the shade, sweat streaked from his temples and dripped from his chin. Wave after wave of grief or hunger swelled and subsided in him. He had had no breakfast, no lunch, nothing.

The Baxters had departed within minutes after Miriam's invitation to lunch. Those were her last words to them. She didn't thank Frank and Earlvane; she didn't even say goodbye. Dooley escorted them to the front door alone. He wrung his hands and stammered his gratitude. When he returned to the dining room, Ebo or Ibo, whichever was the whiter-feathered, was back in the cage, busy husking seeds. Miriam, however, was gone. Most likely, she had locked herself in her room again. Dooley headed through the kitchen, seized the wheelbarrow, and steered the dead dog out the back door.

Now Chocolate Candy's body was only a vague imprint beneath the dirt. Dooley leaned the shovel against the pecan tree. Then he leaned against the pecan tree. He wiped his bald head with his shirttails. His heart thudded in his chest. Although he had chosen the burying place with care--far from the house, near the train tracks, in the shade of three trees--now he questioned his choice of gravesites. It was true about the trains. Their passing shook the earth. How could any creature rest in peace here? The day was not even half done. He felt more than ever like the old man that he was.

Things were quickly back to normal. Miriam washed her face, put on her robe, and arranged her chair at the bay window. When Dooley left for the store, she was sitting in a flood of sunshine, going at her needlepoint furiously, pausing only to select a chocolate. Both birds were in their cage, with the door latched.

Back from the store, Dooley set about the business of putting away the groceries. Miriam was not at the bay window, nor did he hear her stirring elsewhere in the house. Her array of sewing things was messy on the table: swatches of coarse cloth, an instruction book for stitching borders, her sewing box with its colorful rows of spooled thread, her good scissors with the flame-orange handle, and her tomato-shaped pin-cushion. Her scrapbook was turned to the last page. Pasted on it was a sonnet Dooley had long ago copied in his best hand and sent to Miriam.

The box of chocolates was open, pushed out of the sunlight. Miriam had made a meal of over half of it. That was a bad sign. Eating too much candy sometimes made her ill, gave her headaches and dizziness. Dooley selected a piece that Miriam had bitten into and rejected. He nibbled off a taste and put what remained back in the box. He stood idly at the window and hummed an upbeat tune of his own invention.

Then he saw her outside, a white speck in the distance, beyond the old chicken coop, beyond the garden, almost to the railroad tracks. He thought she might be paying last respects at Chocolate Candy's grave, but she was out in the open, hunched over the burn pile. Long before he reached her, he could tell she was trying to start a fire, but the rain-soaked debris only smoldered and hissed and stunk. She pinched at a corner of her needlework as if it were a mildewed dishrag.

Dooley wanted to turn away, but she had heard him approach. Her eyes were rimmed with tears, and her face shone with an oily, unbeaded sweat. "Get this thing started," she demanded. Her robe rippled around her as she handed him the box of wooden kitchen matches.

"What happened?" he said. "Another chocolate smudge?" It had happened before, with the same result.

"Give me those." Miriam snatched the matches away. She lit one with such a quick jerk of her arm that the wind of the motion put the flame out. With the dangerous way her sleeves draped, Dooley fleetingly imagined Miriam setting fire to herself. "Fifty-five years," she said. "Fifty-five years of work, and this is what it amounts to." She shook her sewing at him. "It was for *you*. For our anniversary." She gripped it by a folded-over corner. Dooley could see words stitched a deep garnet color. "*How* do I love thee?" she snarled, lighting another match. "*Let* me count the ways." It was her favorite poem, the one

pasted to the last page of her World War II scrapbook. The match she tossed onto the burn pile fizzled out the instant it touched the damp ashes. "I need lighter fluid, Dooley."

"Why burn such a beautiful thing, Miriam? Why not try to wash it?"

Her voice was violent. "It's been destroyed. Now would you please go and get the lighter fluid, Dooley? I'm losing patience."

He gaped at his wife, a tiny woman, not even a hundred pounds. She had taken down her bun and left the braid; a few ends had straggled loose. She looked to be on the verge of lashing out at him, whipping him with her needlework. "If it has to be done now," he said, "why not just burn the material?"

Miriam pushed it at him. "You do it."

He had no choice but to take it from her. "But why?"

"Ibo," she said bitterly. "I put it on the hutch when the Baxters came over, and Ibo did his business on it. The nerve of that bird. Set fire to it, Dooley. Do as I say."

She gave him the matches. He held one in his trembling hand. The stain was in a corner on the back of the fabric, which looked to Dooley salvageable, easily cleaned. "How do you know it was Ibo?"

"Ibo was in the plant. The plant is near the hutch. Set fire to it, Dooley. Burn every last thread of it. Do as I say."

He rolled the stiff cloth, sewn side in, and lit it like a torch. The blaze surged, and he held the cloth until he could feel the heat. He dropped it at the edge of the burn pile.

Miriam headed for the house. "Do you think it's true, Dooley? Do you think we have cancer?" A soft breeze blew, and a wisp of her hair caught between her lips. "It's something to think about." Her fingers forked through her braid, and she shook it free, with languid side-to-side motions of her head, as a young woman would.

Ebo and Ibo pecked greedily at the bread crust Dooley poked into their cage. With the sudden shrieking-open of the door to Miriam's bedroom, Dooley dropped the crust. The cockatiels skittered to the bottom of the cage and battled over the treat, a tug-of-war that lasted until the crust crumbled between them. Dooley listened to the clapping of Miriam's slippers; she was not headed in his direction. He stared blankly at the leftover sandwich crusts on his plate.

A strange wail sounded. It was Miriam. Dooley rose, afraid, expecting her to call his name. Instead, he heard the clatter of curtains yanked off their rods and falling to the floor.

In the living room, Miriam was at one of the windows. She unrolled the curtains and spread the pleats to inspect something. It was the splatter of dried bird droppings. Dooley and Miriam had joked about it in the past, watched it happen on many occasions. Daily the birds were free to fly through the house, and inevitably they perched for hours on one or another of the curtain rods. It was only fitting.

Miriam raised herself up precariously on the ottoman and reached for the curtain rod. She teetered and turned. Her face was glazed with perspiration, like a piece of colorless porcelain. "It's everywhere," she said. "Everywhere I look, it's there." She pushed on the rod, and the curtain fell toward her. She staggered back off the ottoman and lurched away, trampling the curtains.

"What on earth are you doing?" Dooley said. "You'll hurt yourself."

Miriam gathered the curtains distastefully in her arms, careful where she touched. A cloud of dust motes rose and glittered in the streaming-in of afternoon sunshine. "Come see," she said. "It's everywhere." She thrust the bundle into Dooley's arms and led him down the hall. Miriam had already stripped her bedroom windows. "Look," she said. The toe of her slipper nudged aside a crumpled curtain and poked at the carpet. "It's everywhere. We'll never get it clean. I hate that woman. I hate what she's done to us." Miriam slumped onto her bed. "Every day of our lives, we sit by that cage. Every day of our lives, they make their messes where they please. It's everywhere, Dooley. We've got to tear down that chicken coop and get this place clean, and we've got to get rid of those birds before they're the death of us."

"Get rid of them?" Dooley said. "Miriam, they're our pets." He thought of the morning he had spent, of the tears that had sprung into his eyes as he stomped on Chocolate Candy's grave, packing the dirt. "They're our only pets."

"It's us or them, Dooley, and the odds are against us. They've got to go. Now. Today."

"But the pet store won't take them back," he said, "and we don't know anybody else who'd want them." He sat down beside Miriam. "So you want me to set them free."

"I don't want you to set them free."

Dooley stared at the wall. It blurred. "You want me to kill them."

"I want them out of my house. I want them gone today. They're destructive. They've destroyed everything. Dooley, they're destroying us."

"Gone today."

"I hate her," Miriam said. "Why would she say a thing like that if it wasn't the truth? You will kill them, Dooley, won't you? It'll be like the chickens. Break their necks or cut their heads off. You did it to all our chickens." She plucked a chocolate from the yellow box and ate it whole.

"They're our only pets," he said. He prickled with sweat. He stared at the terror in his wife's pale eyes, and he too was terrified--not of what Earlvne Baxter had said, not of cancer, but of Miriam.

The cockatiels looked bored in their cage. "I can't watch this," Miriam said. "Tell me when it's done." She dragged a cumbersome load of curtains past him.

Dooley looked at both birds. They sat serenely on the same perch. He unlatched the cage door and let it drop. The birds jumped and fluttered. He put his hand in the cage and stuck out his finger for a bird to climb on. One did. Was it Ebo or Ibo? He could not say for sure. He lowered the bird to a corner of the cage and tried to trap it there, but it flew off his hand and back onto the perch, watching him with its empty round eyes.

Again he reached for the bird. Both cockatiels scrambled about the cage. A gray feather shot to the cage floor. Finally Dooley was able to slide his circled fingers over the head of the darker bird. He straitjacketed the bird's wings within his fist. By now he was crying; he wanted only to take the bird outside and let it go, but somehow Miriam would find out. For all he knew, the bird might have a homing instinct, might recognize Miriam sitting in her chair and attempt to fly through the bay window. Then Dooley would be exposed for all his cowardice. He removed the bird from the cage and hurried to latch the door to keep the other one inside.

The cockatiel in his hand struggled and pecked. Its rounded beak pinched the knuckle of his thumb and wouldn't let go. In the cage, the second bird leaped from perch to perch and screeched with an onlooker's panicked excitement. Seed sprayed everywhere. The bird in Dooley's hand held fast to his thumb but didn't draw blood. Its talons clawed at and pedaled air. Its spiky yellow crest was extraordinarily erect. Its tail feathers swept the underside of Dooley's wrist. He moaned and tightened his grip on the bird. With his other hand he took the bird's head and expertly snapped it back. When he let go, the bird's head dangled to one side, limp as a sleeping child being carried off to bed. Dooley held the dead thing in his unrelaxed fingers and suddenly didn't know what to

do with it. He placed it on the table. It lay like a sleeping, trusting child.

"Ebo and Ibo went to bed," he mumbled.

It was the first line of a nursery rhyme Miriam had been told as a child. She had told it to their own son and, many years later, to their grandchildren. "Ebo and Ibo went to bed," Miriam would whisper, a smile playing about her bright lipsticked mouth, held close to the ear of this child or that. The child, knowing the rhyme by heart, would giggle and coo and join in: "Ebo rolled over, and Ibo was dead." Dooley said it to himself now, the whole rhyme. There was nothing funny about it--in fact, it was sinister

--but he hadn't noticed until now.

He unlatched the cage door and grabbed the second bird--Ebo or Ibo, it didn't matter which any more. Dooley had stopped crying. He popped the bird's neck. He decided to dispose of the cockatiels in the shade of the same three trees where Chocolate Candy was buried. He picked up the other dead bird and headed for the back door.

When he returned, Miriam was sitting at the dining room table. "It's done," she said. "You buried them."

"I buried them."

She was winding her fine white hair around her finger, tighter and tighter. "I'm sure going to miss that dog. She'd be right here by me now, just underfoot, wagging her tail, waiting for dinnertime." Miriam tipped her box of candy and rustled through the empty brown papers. "I've run out," she said.

"It wasn't on my list," Dooley said.

"We can take a quick trip to the store."

He jangled his keys. "I'm tired, Miriam." He fished them out of his pocket and slid them across the table at her. "You go." He walked to his bedroom and closed and locked the door.

The sun shone the rest of that day and the two days that followed. It dried the earth. It dried the wood on the burn pile. Dooley made a fire. At its center was the birdcage. Its slender bars were soon charred and skeletal; then they collapsed in upon themselves and were ashes.

Marisa Clark

All Other Ground

Everyone is in a different place in the house, which is as glorious and shining as the spring day. Standing in the doorway to the deck in the backyard, Marshall watches his stepdaughter. She is lying on a blanket in the grass, and then she sits up to rub suntan lotion on her arms, on her stomach. He can smell the coconut in the lotion. She wears a yellow two-piece bathing suit with a cut-out heart on the top. She is thirteen. He watches, but tells himself that he is not watching her; he is watching two squirrels chase each other in the walnut tree. He's waiting for a phone call, because he's about to close on a new strip mall by Indian Creek. The sooner the better--one group was saying the ground was sacred, and there were hints of a lawsuit.

The stepdaughter's name is Kathy. She dabs suntan lotion in the cut-out heart, would love to have a tan heart in that spot. When she sees him watching her, she draws her knees up. The phone rings and he goes into the house. There's always a certain tension in his presence, and when he's gone it's like letting her breath out. She closes her eyes and tries to remember what it feels like to fall asleep, because in remembering she might actually do it. She can hear him talking, laughing, in that English accent that has made him a success in California real estate.

In the house, upstairs, Kathy's mother, Francine, looks at her face in the bathroom mirror. This time of year her allergies to the walnut trees behind their house are always at their worst. Now she looks even worse than she thought, and today of all days. Her eyes are red slits in the middle of puffy mounds of flesh. Her nose is red and dripping. She looks out the window at the black walnut trees, sees a squirrel jump from the telephone wire to the tree. She looks down and sees Kathy in her skimpy bathing suit, hunched up in the sun. An odd position--it makes her think of an old, old woman in a hospital bed.

Down the hall, Kathy's brother, Tommy, sits cross-legged on his bed. His friend Miguel sits on a swivel chair by the closed window. The heavy red curtains are drawn. A bath towel is stuffed at the bottom of his door. They've just gotten back from the record store, and are listening to a new album, "Stairway to Heaven," and passing a joint back and forth. Tommy finds a roach clip and attaches it. One sliver of red-tinged light is coming through the curtains, and in that sliver dust motes dance.

Sleep fails her, even in the warm sun. When Kathy goes back in the house, her stepfather is on the phone again, chuckling that real estate

chuckle. She walks in front of him quickly, hides behind the refrigerator door and pours herself a big glass of cranberry juice. She goes upstairs and knocks on Tommy's door. He pulls the towel away and opens it just enough for her to squeeze in. Kathy smells the pot smoke, sees the cloud of it. "Are you crazy?" she says to her brother, glancing at Miguel. "Marshall's right downstairs."

"Fuck him," her brother says, "Fuck his English real estate ass."

Miguel laughs. He holds out a joint to her. "Spot of tea?" he asks, in the practiced English accent that her brother and all his friends use in reference to Marshall.

"No way," she says, clinking the ice in her glass. She suddenly realizes she is standing there half naked in her bathing suit. The skin under the cut out heart feels cold.

"Too good, eh?" he says, his voice his own, mean. "Come here, sit on Uncle Miguel's lap. I'll show you *good*." In the muted light of the room, with his hands reaching out to her, Miguel looks like a devil, which is what their mother calls him.

"Fuck you, Miguel," she says.

"I'd like that," he says.

She goes in her room, takes off her bathing suit top and looks in the mirror. No tan yet under the heart, just shiny from suntan lotion. She makes the usual assessment: she likes her long hair. She likes her breasts. She hates her widening hips. She lies on her bed, wishing she could fall asleep like a normal person. She starts out okay, her thoughts wandering to warm and soft places, but then something happens in her mind like an alarm going off and she is thrown into wide-eyed wakefulness. She's tried counting forwards and backwards. She's tried prayer. Nothing works, and she can only catch a couple hours sleep before dawn. Now she looks at the model horses still on her shelves. She remembers that she forgot to ask her brother about tonight, about helping her see Matt when she's supposed to be at the church potluck. She hears her mother knocking on her brother's door. Tommy? she's saying. Tommy! but quietly. Kathy knows that her mother doesn't want Marshall to hear that she's having trouble getting Tommy to open his door.

Their church sits on a hill above town. It is Presbyterian, and almost everyone who attends is rich, but they still want to do things like church potlucks with casseroles. Kathy's mother has been taking them since they were babies, when they lived in another part of town, when there was no stepfather. In the late sixties being rich in California was not the point, and there were still cherry orchards that bloomed pink in the

spring. The church was built in the thirties, and has a history and character that most buildings, especially the million dollar homes that have been popping up in the foothills, lack in this town. There is the feeling that real lives have been lived here, that there is more in this particular place than a parade of cars and clothes. At the edge of the patio where early morning services are held in the summer time is a turquoise tiled drinking fountain protruding from a wall with the same tile. Gold and navy blue tiles in the middle of the wall spell out "Gloria Patri." Tommy and Kathy have always agreed that the water tastes unique; it has a green, rich taste, like moss in a grotto.

She sits now in the empty choir loft of the old chapel and looks down at the pews below, the carpeted aisle, the altar. This small chapel was built before the other buildings, and when she was little she used to think that pilgrims went to church here, imagined them in their simple black and white clothes in these very pews. This is where her mother married Marshall when Kathy was nine-years old, a junior bridesmaid in ringlets. It is cold and has a comforting odor of mildew and polished wood. She lies down on the carpet where the ceiling meets the floor and looks up into the bell tower, sees the rope hanging down. One of the church elders used to let Kathy and her friend Heidi ring the bells once in awhile on Sunday mornings, and she remembers the sensation of letting herself be pulled up by the rope. She turns on her side and watches out the small window from which she can see the front patio of the church. She is waiting for Matt's sister's car to pull up, to watch him get out of the car, look up and see her, to come to her. Tommy said he'd drive him home, but he didn't say how. Ever since the suspension he has not been allowed to drive.

Francine and Marshall sit at one of the long tables with two other couples. Marshall is talking to his friends--Bill Rush who is a lawyer and Ray Singer who owns a title company--about the deal he is trying to pull off and the problem with the supposed bones under the ground. He's so handsome, Francine thinks. When she first saw him standing on her front porch selling insurance, she thought of the song "String of Pearls", and had the feeling of greeting a date for a college formal. Now she thinks it was his teeth that made her think of that song. Very white and shining, like pearls. Every morning, he polishes them with a hand towel. She looks at the other wives at the table who are younger than she. Esther, Ray's wife, flirts with Marshall by asking him if she can cut up his meat for him. "Where are the kids?" she, childless, asks Francine.

"Well, you know teenagers," Francine says, "They're always off somewhere."

Marshall glares at her, and she hopes that at least he's not thinking she's ugly with her puffy allergic eyes. She looks down at her hands to hide her eyes and is disturbed by a passing image of the bones of them under the ground. After she's dead for a while that's all she'll be: bones. That bothered her after her first husband died, the thought of his actual body rotting under the earth. It bothered her so much that she avoided the subject of his death with everyone.

Bill Rush says, "We have the same problem. They tell you one thing and they do something else. It's nothing new; it's just teenagers."

Yes, Francine thinks. She hopes it will sink in with Marshall, who tells her all the time that her kids, especially Tommy, are terrible, and that it's her fault. She asks him if he wants her to get him some more ribs. Marshall says yes, please, and the other wives get up to get more food, too.

Bill Rush tells Marshall not to worry much about the lawsuit, that it doesn't sound like this group even has a lawyer yet. Marshall does not feel reassured. He is instead aware of a sense of dread like mud on his skin. He feels it like the smallest whisper whenever he enters Richard's Hall with its high curved ceilings, the bad lighting, the pale plaster walls. It reminds him of the Underground where everyone from his neighborhood camped out during bomb raids in London. That smash of bodies close together, sleeping on the floor with his mother and sister and two brothers, and then just his mother and brother after Susan and David were hospitalized for inhaling small particles of shattered glass. But this is California, he thinks, breathing deep. I got away from that place and that time, and I'll never have to go back. It makes him stop and stare in bland security at his mashed potatoes, but not so that anyone would notice. Nobody knows how much debt he's in, how much he needs to close this deal. He tries to act casual, which goes against everything he grew up to be in London, but which seems to be the key to success in the Golden State.

Tommy is down in the janitor's closet under Richard's Hall near the Sunday School classroom where, when he was little, he made a picture of God with construction paper and balls of cotton. He's with Ginger, his girlfriend. They've been making out and now they're smoking a joint. She keeps giggling and talking to him about nothing. She's the kind of girl who thinks that any moment of silence is a bad sign. She talks about their Relationship. He's already growing tired of her. He's

jammed up against a steel janitor's bucket on rollers, the long handle of a mop sticking out. Ginger lies back against his chest. Empty plates of desserts from the potluck are scattered on the floor. The top of the mop looks to Tommy in the dim light like a human head. Like a human head he'd like to crush. "Mop Head," he says, while she's talking. He's not sure if he said it out loud.

"What?" Ginger says.

"Nothing," he says, and she keeps talking.

Kathy opens the wide door to Richards Hall. She'd been with Matt for almost an hour, and decided she had better put in an appearance before going back to the choir loft where he waits for her. From across the room Kathy sees her mother talking animatedly to the wives, her hands floating in the air like the fragile hummingbirds that come to the red feeder outside her kitchen window. She is wearing a turquoise sundress with a beaded belt that Kathy has never seen before. Her mother turns and sees her, looks at her suspiciously, and waves her over. Kathy says hello to Esther and Joyce, and answers their questions about summer school, camp and tennis. The men stop talking and listen.

"What a looker she's turning out to be," Ray says to Marshall, loud enough for Kathy to hear but as if she's not there at all.

"She does okay when she tries a little bit," Marshall says.

Kathy walks away without saying anything, a fire burning in her chest. Her mother follows her and grabs her arm as soon as they get through the door.

"You come back and sit down with us a little while. Do you know how rude that was?"

"Mom, did you hear what they said? How embarrassing."

"What? About being good looking? Don't take it so seriously. It's a compliment." Her mother's eyes are red as if she's been crying, and Kathy feels a pang of guilt because maybe her selfishness has made her mother cry again. Then she remembers the walnut trees.

"I'll come back in a few minutes," Kathy says, pulling away. She doesn't turn around to answer her mother who is asking her where she thinks she's going and where her brother is. When she passes the church nursery, Kathy longs for a moment to go in like she used to last year. She liked to help out during services, to be in there with the gentle, grey-haired ladies and the little babies whose warm, fuzzy heads felt so soft against her cheek.

When she gets back to the choir loft she doesn't see Matt. She looks around, calling his name, and then he jumps on her: he is hanging on to

the rope from the bell tower. He lets the rope go very carefully so that the bell won't ring, but it rings a little bit anyway. He pulls her to the floor and they roll over and over, laughing. They kiss and then she stares at his face, his sleepy, watery eyes, his long, sandy-colored hair. Staring at him like this, her eyes close; he becomes breath and bones and her mind rushes to that place of elusive sleep. She begins to dream without sleeping, a dream that begins with the comforting smell of dirt in the fort behind their old house.

They hear a door to the chapel open. "Hide!" Kathy says. They crawl on their hands and knees down the short steps to the railing of the balcony. They lie on their sides, Matt behind her, his arms around her. She feels his heart beating against her back, feels his breath in her hair. They hear footsteps on the hardwood floor. Finally she peeks over the balcony and sees Pastor Brynne standing at the altar. He seems so alone standing there, but Kathy thinks it could just be the contrast that makes him seem that way. Usually when she sees him he is with some or all of his four little girls: holding one, zipping up the jacket of another, giving another one a cracker. She trusts him.

They had gone to his office early in the fall for a family counselling session. Tommy had just been suspended for smoking pot on the football field during lunch, and Marshall had been bringing home brochures for a military school on the east coast. The session had been full of silences and the ticking of the clock, the soft rain of her mother's tears, the tired, so tired face of the pastor. He had wanted to talk about things that nobody wanted to talk about--the death of her father, the relationship between herself and her stepfather--not about Tommy's problem of getting in trouble all the time. From where she sat, Kathy could see the framed picture of his family that sat on his desk. Pastor Brynne sat in a big green leather chair with his index fingers arched thoughtfully on his upper lip, elbows resting on the arms of the chair, as if he was planted there and slept there at night and was not going to move, not for anyone. At one point he interrupted Marshall who was talking about the problem with Tommy and Francine and said, "We're all just hurtling toward death you know, and the only thing to do is to forgive ourselves and each other." The drive home had been silent and still. Before the car turned into the driveway Francine had said, "It's as if he doesn't even believe in counselling," and that was that: the decision not to go back a second time.

He stands now by the altar a moment longer and looks up at the stained glass face of Christ. "He's praying," Kathy whispers. She remembers the long letter she wrote him in the middle of the night after

the family counselling session. *I couldn't answer your question there in front of everyone*, she wrote, *but I want you to know that my relationship with Marshall is not good*. At dawn, she burned the letter in the bathroom sink. Now she watches the pastor as he walks slowly out of the chapel.

Kathy, Matt, Tommy, Miguel, and Ginger all stand by Marshall's baby blue Jaguar--chosen because the color matches his eyes--in the church parking lot.

"I can't believe you're going to do this," Kathy says. Tommy is holding a key that he had copied from Marshall's key. His and Ginger's eyes are barely open from smoking so much pot. Ginger is leaning on him, giggling. Miguel, by contrast, looks alert, dangerous. He glares at Matt. "You're just going to take Matt home, right? And then come right back?" Kathy asks.

"Right."

"Why don't you take Miguel's car?"

"We want to take this car."

"Then I want to go, too. It should only take about twenty minutes."

"No. You have to go back in there and sit with Mom and Marshall and make sure they don't come out to the parking lot for any reason. Then I'll come in, and we can all leave together, like the happy family we are."

Kathy says good-bye to Matt and watches them drive away: Matt and Miguel in the back seat; Ginger and Tommy in the front.

When Kathy goes back into Richards Hall, all the food is cleared away and people are drinking coffee at their tables. They are watching Pastor Johnson, the elderly senior pastor, speak from a microphone on the stage. Kathy finds an empty chair and pulls it up next to her mother. "What's going on?" she whispers. People are too quiet--it is not usually like this. She sees Pastor Johnson's wife and son at a table near the front. There are six empty chairs at that table where Pastor Brynne, his wife, and four girls should be. She remembers him coming in to the chapel to pray.

"You won't believe it," her mother whispers back.

Pastor Johnson is saying something about forgiveness and the body of Christ. He takes frequent small breaths between words. He says that a search committee will be formed as soon as possible. Then he asks them to bow their heads with him in prayer. Kathy looks around and sees some people whispering to each other instead of praying. She hears

her stomach growl because she didn't eat dinner. When the prayer ends, there is a moment of stillness and throat clearing, like at the end of a church service. Then people begin to get up to leave.

"Why is everybody leaving?" Kathy asks, panicking. "I thought there were supposed to be skits and entertainment after the meeting, like last year." She watches Frances Smith, a jolly Sunday school teacher, put a sweater on over a costume that looks like it's supposed to be a cow.

"After what we just found out, Kathy, nobody's really in the mood for skits," Esther says to her primly. She picks up her purse and stands up.

"There's been an infidelity, Kathy," her mother says to her, standing up.

"A what?"

"I'll explain later."

"Mom, sit down. I want you to explain it to me now."

"No. We're leaving," Marshall says impatiently.

"Let's wait for Tommy. He'll be here in a minute."

"He can find his own damn ride home," Marshall says, knowing nobody but Kathy and Francine can hear him.

Kathy realizes there's nothing she can do but follow them out to the parking lot where there is no car. It is dark outside. Ray stops them to wish Marshall luck on his deal, and tells Marshall to give him a call to let him know how it's going. When they get to the section of the parking lot where the car should be, Marshall looks around, confused. "Lose your car, Marshall?!" somebody calls. "I know it's here somewhere!" Marshall calls back. Just as it's beginning to dawn on him that the car is actually missing, and that if it was stolen he's got no recourse because he had stopped paying the insurance premiums until this deal closed, the Jag slowly drives up to where they are. Kathy can see that now it's just Tommy and Miguel.

As Miguel and Tommy get out of the car, Kathy notices a doll's tiny ballet slipper on the pavement near the curb. It is made of powder blue satin the same color as the car. It lies there daintily where some small girl dropped it, its ribbons curling out from it in the most beautiful way. It catches her attention the way some small thing always does before a confrontation.

Francine watches Marshall's jaw clench and unclench. She feels tears welling up in her sore eyes. "What is *he* doing here?" She asks, pointing to Miguel. Miguel steps into the shadows, near where Kathy stands. The expression on his face is one of pleasure, of satisfaction. He says nothing.

Kathy sees that Tommy, standing in front of his stepfather by the bumper, does not physically shrink into himself like he has always done in all of the hundreds of confrontations they've had since Marshall first came into their lives. He has always let himself be whipped by the words his stepfather has used to describe him: lazy, weak, lying, stupid, disgusting, worthless. And Kathy has always been there, too, the words ripping into her own flesh and making her bleed out of love for her brother, trying to bear some of it for him. But this time Tommy stands up tall, and Kathy can see their stepfather taking notice of this and struggling with his own stance.

"Go ahead," Tommy says, "Hit me. Right here in front of all your church friends."

Instinctively Marshall looks to his right, to his left, and behind him to see who's around. The last cars are pulling away; if anyone is watching they're hiding to do it. He looks back at his stepson who has inspired such mysterious rage in him since the first time he saw him when he was just a little boy, just a kid looking up at him from his tinker toys. He feels his blood, hot, rise to the surface of his face. He gets ready to let that rage express itself physically for the first time, to actually hit this boy. The muscles in his arm twitch.

"Anything I can do to help here?"

They all hear Pastor Brynne's voice before they see him. He stands under the streetlight pale and still.

"I think you came just in time, sir. My friend here was about to get beaten by his stepfather." Tommy looks at Miguel whose lips are curled in a half smile, and his shoulders slump.

"Shut up, you bloody punk," Marshall says to Miguel before he can stop himself. "Pastor Brynne, of course I wasn't going to hit him. But he drove my..." He turns to look at the pastor, who he has not seen face to face since the counselling session, which had been so different than he had hoped: there had been no moments of knowing eye contact between them when it became clear to Pastor Brynne how much of the problem was Francine's coddling of the boy, no moment of Marshall's gracious understanding that the pastor had to keep this truth to himself until they all were finally ready to accept it. Marshall feels angrier now at the pastor than at Tommy, but finally there is nothing to do with his rage. He feels it deflate, feels it leak out his pores.

Francine opens and closes her mouth and her fingers twist the beads of her belt. She tries the smile she usually uses to speak to the pastorate, but nothing seems right. Finally she gives in to staring. She can't help but picture him with the divorcee he was counselling. Did they do it in

his office in that green leather chair? On the big oak desk? In a car? It even could have happened right before their counselling appointment: no wonder it was such a disaster! But something about him now makes her mind shut up, and finally she's just quiet there.

The pastor turns to Kathy and looks at her as if he's going to ask her the same questions he asked in the family counselling session: How is it with you, Kathy? What is it like to be in this family right now? She remembers the picture on his desk, thinks of his four little girls. Will he go home to them tonight? Will he tuck them into bed, and will he sit there a long time while they go to sleep? Will he sing them a song, will the moon be shining in the window, will the earth feel firm beneath them, will they feel safe, despite everything? Yes, she is sure all that will happen.

The rest of summer passes in a flurry of family counselling sessions with a pair of professionals from Care Counselling, provided by the church until they can replace Pastor Brynne. They are eager and sure of themselves, and put the family through all the techniques: repeating things back to each other, hitting each other with foam bats, moving to various parts of the room to show who they think they are in relation to each other. They participate with blinking acquiescence, like the feelings that pop out of them may or may not be the right answers to a test.

Kathy finds her way to sleep each night after that, but awakens at three in the morning and listens. She has a picture in her mind from a recurring dream that she had when her mother married Marshall and they moved into this imposing home, that the house is slowly sinking into liquified earth, through layers that contain remnants of this region--the bones of wildcats, the layers of rock, the decomposed bark of once magnificent trees, the spirits of Indians. She lies awake and listens to the house breathing and the sleeping bodies in it. By daylight, a tenuous peace is being made: Marshall no longer attacks her brother, Tommy has stopped smoking pot in the house, and her mother has stopped crying. At night, though, the whole house groans.

Kelly Craigmile

Vanzola and the Jazz Singer

"If a dog bring a bone," Grandma Vanny said, rocking steadily on the front porch, "he'll take a bone."

I listened intently to Grandma, watching her rock back and forth, wondering what in the world she meant. She was always rattling on about something.

"The thing is, boy, don't let 'em bring you no bones, and they can't take none from ya."

"Yes mam," I replied, still not knowing what she was talking about. There were a few squeaks from the board planks that Granddaddy was supposed to have fixed but never got around to it. I listened to Grandma's voice and the steady rhythm of the squeaky boards as I sat on the top step, resting my head on the banister, watching our hen and her new biddies parade around the flower bed. I watched her as her steady clucks encouraged the biddies to follow her while she searched for food. When she found food, she signaled them by a long cluck and a few short, rapid clucks, and the biddies came-a-runnin'.

There was one biddy, she had seven, that never reached her in time to get anything. He was always too far away from the mother to reach her in time. He'd run to her, but there was nothing left by the time he arrived. So, he'd go away again, until the next food call. But, then too, he'd be too late.

"Skeeter! Boy...you hear me?" Grandma huffed.

"Yes mam," I said, not knowing what was going on.

"Go fetch us sumpum' to sip on. My throat dry. This sun ain't too good for me." Going back to the kitchen, I heard her yell, "Make sho it cold, now." I filled two glasses with ice water and scurried back to the front porch. "Thaaank ya, baby. Grandma loves ya." She took one of the glasses and turned it up and didn't stop until nearly half the glass was empty. Trying to breathe and talk at the same time, she said, "Oooo, baby. That sho'll is some good watuh. Jus' what I needed." I sat back down on the step and listened as the board planks resumed their squeaking. "Yo daddy came by here the other day."

"Yes mam," I said, fearing where the talk might be heading.

"He said he caught you at that stuff again. I thought we had a understandin'." I looked out at the flower garden, watching the hen and her biddies.

"Yes mam...I ain't gonna do it no more," I lied. "I promise this time."

"Baby, Grandma loves ya, Lord knows she does, but it ain't right for no boy to like dressin' like no woman. It just ain't right..."

"I ain't done nothin' wrong. I was just playin'." I stared at the garden and thought about my attic. Listening to Grandma make a fuss over nothin', I wished I was there, now, away from this talk with her and playing with my friends in my attic.

The attic was my one refuge. There, among near-forgotten clothes and furniture, I was free to be whatever I wanted. No script had been prepared for me, no one would become embarrassed when I mangled my lines, and most importantly, no one waited to correct me. In this very special place, far away from my family and those who might be called friends, a twelve-year-old with a too-large head and too-thin arms played at creation.

Washed only in the faint glow of the solitary bulb above the staircase and whatever light managed to come through the grimy windows, I looked for a truer vision of myself in my parents' collection of dusty, yellowing photographs. In that wonderfully secluded spot, I found bits of my lost self in each face and frozen attitude which had been laid to rest there. Desperate to be valued and cared for, I breathed new life into the musty clothing which had been packed away in the attic. The rough, manly wool coats and the tattered, wafer-thin dresses fired my imagination with the words and rhythms of black folks doing what they had to do in other, more exciting times than my own.

The dreary, poverty-stricken days of the 1960's faded away as I pranced before the old mirrors, jiving and laughing, acting as low-down or high-tone as I pleased. While I was growing up, the happiest hours of each day were spent in that attic. There my halting speech and dark, imperfect skin could be set aside. I was released from the confining roles of family misfit and neighborhood oddity. Within those magical sloping walls, I became the people anybody would be proud to know. One particular afternoon I was lost in my rendering of "The Jazz Singer." My parents lived on jazz and blues records in those days. I still know all the old standards inside and out. Anyway, The Jazz Singer was my favorite impersonation because with each change of song she became whatever I wanted her to be: she slipped from bopping, good time Ella to ol' dirty blues Bessie with little effort. Though I suspected Billie was much too puffy-looking for my mood that afternoon, I remember having a terrible time deciding whether I felt more like Lena Horne or Sarah. I finally conceded that my voice wasn't deep enough to do Miss Vaughan justice. "Stormy Weather" or that song from *Showboat* that Mom liked so much was the next decision. Choices, choices. That's what I was like up there in that attic--in a world of my own.

The heat from the lights felt terrific on The Jazz Singer's exposed back as she turned away from her audience, seductively adjusted the strap of her gown for the boys in the band. She hummed the interlude with the woodwinds and winked at The Count seated at the piano. Oh, she was a flirt, all right, tapping her foot and rolling those big eyes of hers. When she was ready to bring the last sixteen bars home, she threw her head back, laughed deep down in her throat, and turned ever so slowly into the spotlight. Her arms, growing more elegant every minute, were stretched out as if she were embracing every fan in the audience. The Jazz Singer knew just how to please them. She was so wrapped up in her performance that she didn't notice my father when he entered the room.

"What are you doing up here? Dressed like that?" my father spat out from the top of the stairs.

If he'd slapped me in the face, I couldn't have been more startled. Oh God, I thought, oh dear God. I tried to speak, but my stammering was so bad the words were incoherent gibberish.

"Your mother said you were up here play-acting again. You were making so much noise I guess you didn't hear. . ."

His voice dropped first to a whisper and then, losing conviction altogether, fell silent. My dad looked at the outfit I was wearing--a sloppy wig, old nylons, and open-toed heels which were way too small. The same pained look of disappointment that followed me from morning till night was spread all over his face. I wanted to die. I prayed that God would just come down and carry me away. But my dad's sorrowful look didn't last long. It never did. I watched as his lips curled into a sneer.

"Daddy, I can explain."

"No, you can't," he cut me off. "There ain't no way on God's green earth that you can explain why you're dressed like that. Don't even bother to put some story together because I don't want to hear it. Just take all that stuff off and come down to dinner. Everybody's waiting."

I remembered that he avoided looking directly at me. Instead, he dragged the toe of his shoe back and forth across a bit of unravelling carpet at the top of the stairs. I felt as though I were going to be sick to my stomach. I tried to figure my chances of making it past him to the bathroom downstairs.

"Are you deaf?" he shouted, rushing at me. "I said take this shit off!"

He snatched the wig off so quickly, I felt my heart just in my chest. The air was cool as it licked the back of my neck and head where the wig had been. I put my hand up to cover my shame. My dad read this as a sign of protest and struck me with such force that I slammed into a box of clothing. I wanted to disappear, to be somewhere, anywhere else. I slid

down the side of the boxes and tried to make myself as small as possible on the floor.

I clutched my cheek and stared at him, more confused than rageful. Why did all our disagreements have to end like this? He wasn't a violent man, not really, but somehow he never missed an opportunity to take a swipe at me. I was an embarrassment to him. I always knew that.

My father was a big man. Though he never hit me more than once or twice at a time, I suddenly felt menaced by him, so I called out: "Daddy, I'm sorry. Please don't hit me. I'm sorry."

He looked down at me, this scrawny little boy, all arms and legs, homely and clumsy to boot. I'm sure he felt I never seemed to be doing the right thing--always off in some corner, hiding from the world, dreaming my life away. I read in his eyes a singular sense of defeat. What had he ever done to deserve such a son? "I'm not gonna tell you again. Take that mess off. Now! And, come down to dinner." He mumbled something about "faggot-ass bullshit" and about givin' me an "ass-whippin'" I'll never forget as he disappeared down the stairs.

The Jazz Singer would have apologized to the audience, but embarrassed by this tasteless show of domestic violence, her audience and band had long since disappeared. She and I sat for a short time, each rubbing our cheeks, confused by the harshness of the world and its real men. I rose first, pulled off the gown, the shoes, the nylons, and lazily scratched my kinky hair. The Jazz Singer carefully folded the clothes and put them away. When she finished, she drew me close to her. She wanted to go backstage to see if anyone in the band would take her back to her hotel. She simply couldn't manage a late supper with all those noisy Negroes tonight, she laughed. Until the next time, she smiled. I watched as her delicate figure was absorbed into the darkening theater wings. And, I wanted to be folded up in that illusory blackness because I knew I would find so little beauty, so little acceptance or peace of mind until she returned.

"Baby, Grandma only wants the best for her little man, but you gots to stop with that dress-up mess. You's a handsome young man, and any gal would be happy to be with ya. Shoot, I know two or shree gals right off."

"Yes mam, I know," I said.

"Ain't nobody wanna to be round nobody who all mixed-up-n-stuff."

"Yes mam..."

"You gots to promise Grandma that you ain't gonna be doing that stuff no mo'. You know I'm old, and I want me some great-gran young-uns some day."

"Yes mam," I replied, not really listening. The next time I met up with The Jazz Singer, I would have to tell her about all the trouble she caused me. She would have to learn to be more careful.

Jeffery Mack

A Good Catholic Woman

She had been married to him for 13 years. Married him in the Catholic church. Had three children by him: a girl, 12, two boys, 8 and 9. The daughter of the Lebanese grocer, married to the son of the other Lebanese grocer, all of them Catholics, praying to Mary like she is God.

She has long ago run off without her daughter and one of her sons, ran off to Michigan to live with the man that helped her do what she did, if she did it, if he did it. Her one son, the eldest, ran with her, rode in the front seat with her, the man in the back. Now she is an old woman and the man is an old man, and has never been seen again. She has never been accused, nor has the man been accused after all these years. Her husband's murder has never been avenged.

Only, she is angry. Her father paid her off with less than her share. He said, "Take this and get the hell out." She is still angry after all these years over the events of two weeks in the middle of summer some 40 years ago. You can see her when someone in her family dies. She will sit by Maddie and Maddie's daughter at the funeral and she will whisper to her great-niece. She will whisper to her about how her father did her in. She may whisper (and you can see her eyes, how bright they are). She must whisper her account in that young woman's ear. She may tell her the truth because she knows that girl is smart like Maddie May.

She'll drive down from Michigan and drive back up right after the burial. She will stay one night with her daughter and in a hotel the other nights. And when you look in her eyes, you can see she knows something.

It was almost July and it's hot in Alabama in July, especially if there are not any trees in your front yard. She'd been out there in her front yard, a yard without trees, raking the dust. She was a pretty woman. Long, dark hair. All her family's noses were beautiful one minute, grotesque another. But hers was a gently sloping nose, unlike any other in their family. She looked like some sort of foreign princess with her hair pulled back, her skin glistening with sweat. Her eyes were unlike any other eyes they had ever seen in that part of Alabama. They were green and brown and yellow all at the same time. You would just want to look into them for a long time--somehow those eyes were centuries old. Her little niece--Maddie--had them too. They were not like the shiny new blues and browns of the dull, town and country white people.

Some people called her a temptress because she would wear shorts outside without shame. She would wear shorts in that neighborhood where she lived, defying God and everything decent. Her legs stuck out for every man, woman and child, black, white, and green to see. But they were sculpted legs and curved. Made people want to look at them just to try and figure out where they were going. She sweat with her work, she sweat so much you could almost see through her shirt--it stuck to her body. And she dressed and worked like this in front of that child, that bastard girl-child of her brother's. The one who dances around for them all. The one with the eyes the same as hers.

Mary, she had long legs, long dark legs, and people wondered what if she danced? They all had it in their blood. To dance like Gypsy fools. If she could show her legs, there was no telling what else she did with those legs, dancing and a number of other unspeakables.

They lived not in the good part of town, but the part that was bordered with trash and the blacks. It still was a pretty place. It sat right on the edge of Decatur proper, where all the old houses, the ones built right after the war, sit dignified and people on their porches have their bourbons and their whiskey sours, while bare-legged Mary rakes her yard in front of the half-Lebanese, half-trash bastard girl.

That's when the Sheriff of Morgana County drove his black Chevrolet up in her yard. The child was skipping around, practicing her dance steps. Mary was bent over in shorts, dripping with sweat, raking her yard. Almost like she knew who it was and what he was coming to tell her. So she just kept on scratching the earth as hard as she could.

Her children were off at their grandfather's grocery store, their grandfather on their father's side. Ralph Lucie, her husband, took them with him that day after he had found out. He had walked in on her. He saw her sweaty body nakes and beautiful, sleeping under a ceiling fan in her bedroom in the middle of the day.

He said, "You are not fit to be the mother of my children. Not decent." Woke her from her sleep. "Cover yourself."

The next day he took the children from their mother's care. The children could have gone to her daddy's store and worked. Took them away that morning from their mother's home.

Mary walked to Eva's house that morning to get the child Maddie to stay with her on this day of all days, the day her husband took her children. No one would set foot on her place to say or do anything in front of that child. Even told Edward, Maddie's father, when he came to get her, "She's coming with me today. I need her, Eddie." The child,

trusting her Aunt Mary, followed. Knowing they'd be fine and happy together.

The man got out of the police car. He was loaded down with the heat of that Alabama town and his sweat, his gun and his badge. She didn't stop working until he reached out and grabbed hold of the rake handle. Had to use his muscle against her muscle to stop the action of the rake. Then she looked up at him with those eyes and he stepped back away from her person. He couldn't keep looking in those eyes, had to look down at the dust-raked yard where his feet stood flat, a little apart.

"What can I do for you, officer?" Mary asked. She wiped the sweat off her brow with her forearm. She stood, her feet set apart, her legs, her torso, her head held tall.

"Ma'am," he said, and took off his hat. He looked hot, hotter than physically possible, like he was going to boil over. "Ma'am, I'm afraid I have some bad news to tell you. I have something to tell you, what might be shocking."

"Yes," she said. She had not moved from her tall position. Maddie had stopped dancing and flitting. She stood two yards away--a smaller, mirror image to Mary.

"Maybe, we can step away . . . the child probably should not hear this." He pointed his hat toward Maddie.

"That child has already heard anything that will ever shock her. Please speak your peace, officer, so that I can finish my work before my children come home." She said it like she knew he wasn't coming home. Like she knew Ralph Lucie was not coming or going anywhere except in the ground, the cold ground.

Ma'am, I am truly sorry, but your husband--Ralph Lucie is your husband?" She nodded. "He has been shot to death, ma'am. In the store, ma'am. He was shot in cold blood for the money in the cash register."

"Were there any witnesses?" she asked, like she knew all along that there wasn't *supposed* to be any witnesses. "Did anyone see who did this thing?" Not death, not atrocity, just *this thing*, she says, like that's all she is worried about.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. She had not moved from her stance. Not a trace of grief or fear or anger on her face. Those people were cold, and she could see that sheriff's deputy did not understand--how could he understand? His face asked, she could tell his expression. "Surely, this woman will shed a tear any moment now--she will bow her head down in reverence to her dead husband." But he could not say this to her.

"Yes ma'am," he did say, "Your son saw the man who shot his father walk out the door. There were no other witnesses."

"Where is my son?" she asked.

She saw relief creep over the officer, because he thought she showed some sign of worry for her child. He said, "He is at the police station, ma'am. They wanted to question him, to get a description, to apprehend the suspect as soon as possible. We will bring this murder to justice." He tried to wax on, to comfort her, but she interrupted him.

"No, they will not question my son about the murder of his father," she said. She drooped the rake handle and motioned Maddie May to follow her. They got into Mary's car and drove to the city police station, which wasn't a large building only a white stone building with two floors and a basement. She drove there through the city with little Maddie May sitting beside her in the front seat. She drove and did not stop or pause at any stop sign or pedestrian. She drove with her naked legs and walked into the station with her naked legs for all of Decatur to see. She walked in and said, "Bring me my son. Hand me my son."

She walked in and when Ralph, Jr., was not presented to her immediately, she walked on through with her bare legs through every office until she found her son. "Where is my son?" she asked every man she met. And with her ancient eyes, she looked straight through each and every one of those men until she found her son being questioned in an almost empty room.

She stood by his side and gathered his hand in hers and led him out of the office, out of the maze, out into her car where Maddie May was sitting in the front seat. People had gathered outside that police station. They had seen that woman, Mary Lucie, go in there with nothing on her legs and they waited for her to reappear. Wanted to see what they might do to a woman without her legs covered in the Morgana County police station. The Reverend Michaels of the First Presbyterian happened to have been walking by when she went in and he stood there til she came out and drove off.

She drove that boy on home, drove him straight home. But people saw her talking to him all the way home. Her mouth moved the whole time. And not the way a mother's mouth moves when she comforts the child who has just in the same day seen his father shot and killed. The child who could have run after the killer and touched him on the back. No, she was not comforting the child. She looked as if she were angry with the child, possibly directing the child.

All that time, little Maddie May sat up from with her and looked out the window. There was no fear and no pain evident on that girl's face

that looked out the window of that car. The window in a car that had no air conditioning remained closed on a hot July day in Alabama. All the windows in that car rolled up. And no tears to be seen in that car that had lost a husband, a father, an uncle--just sweat rolled down their faces.

The funeral came and Ralph Lucie, Sr., was six feet under. His wife sat under a veil, a dark veil, all through the wake, all through the funeral. She sat tall, with good posture, her head held high. Not at all like a woman grieving. A woman grieving holds her head like it's a heavy burdensome thing. Her shoulders droop. A quiet desperation in her walk. And she wants to show people her face if she is truly grieved; she wants them to see the pain, to feel her loss with the heavy weight of her body leaning in on them. Mary Lucie kept herself hidden behind that black veil, and only now do we think we know where her eyes rested at all through the ceremonies.

It is for certain that Mary kept her niece Maddie by her side at all times, not even her children stood by her as long as that little girl. Her children kept creeping off to play outside, made people wonder what kind of mother would forget to mind her children as their own father's death and what kind of father children would not mourn. Those children were soon to be leaving the town to return to their school, which was a Catholic boarding school--the only boarding school in Alabama and it was run by monks at that. They were going back the next week to start their summer session. So Mary kept Maddie beside her and she kept her eyes on the man standing in the corner.

The man standing in the corner kept his eyes lowered looking down in the pitcher of water he held. He kept his eyes down and only looked up to see if Mary were keeping herself straight and strong. Surely they wanted to go to each other, him drop his water, her drop the hand of the little girl, them come together right there in the room with Ralph's cold dead body lying out. His body laying out there in that room, the room that sits four rooms down from the room where Ralph walked in on his wife laying naked under the ceiling fan in the middle of the day. Her body glistening wet with perspiration. But she had been alone. She had not scrambled out of bed, she had not moved from his gaze. Only she had laughed at him. Laughed at him and smiled and laughed and spread her legs wide apart so that he could see.

"Woman," he said, "get dressed or I'll beat you. Get dressed. I'll beat you, dammit."

She laughed at him and left her legs spread far apart and laughed until he took off his thick brown, buckled belt and he hit her and hit her

until there were welts and traces of blood on her back. He held her by the arm and belted her. Trying to make her cry. But she did not cry. She laughed at him. She threw punches at his crotch, must have hit him hard, because he must of stopped beating her or she would have been the one laid out. She must have laughed at him more, she must have told him who had taken her clothes off. Told him she was not going to stop lying down in the middle of the day, told him she was satisfied. Told him he better get a good look at a satisfied woman's body, that he'd never seen one and wouldn't ever see one.

The man across the room saw that bruised back the next afternoon. The afternoon before Mary's kids were taken away, before she walked to Eva's house to get little Maddie, before they raked the yard, scratched the earth til they couldn't scratch. The day before Ralph Lucie, Sr., was shot to death in front of his own son's eyes.

The man saw her bruised back--he cried and his tears fell on her olive-toned flesh that was bruised. His strong brown hands glided over her back. He barely touched her so as not to hurt her and his tears fell like a soothing ointment for her pain.

"No man is going to hurt you this way, Mary." He stood and turned his back from her. To hide his rage. "I don't care if he calls himself your husband or not." He held himself, hugging his own body because he could not hold her bruised body in his arms. "Mary, I will not let you suffer," he said, "I cannot see you suffer by this man's hand and if it takes my last breath, he will never harm you again."

"Joe," she said, because Joe Brown was his name, "please don't do anything that's gonna take you away from me." She wasn't the type of woman who would plead or beg of any man, but she held her face in her hands and she cried then. She cried until he came down in front of her on his knees. He tried to pull her hands from her face. She sat on the edge of the bed, she, half-naked and crying, her dress unzipped to show him the marks caused by their love. He pulled her hands away and they were eye to eye.

He said, "You are a woman, Mary, a woman I love and they ain't no man alive on this earth that's gonna lay a finger on you. Not while there is breath in my body." He said it slow like each word, without each word, they would fall and break.

She said, "Please don't get yourself strung up, Joe. If you do a damn thing, they will kill you."

He said, "If I don't, he will kill me anyway. It will kill me to see you under his thumb."

She said, "Let's leave, let's leave and forget about this place. We can go up North. We can leave all this craziness. We can just go away after the kids are back in school."

He said, "We will leave, but we will leave when this thing is settled."

Ralph, Jr., came home about then, seen those two in the bedroom. His mother's back naked, the black man holding her face, kneeling down in front of her. The man close to his mother like a lover. But he was an unnatural child because he was loyal to his mother in ways that boys rarely are loyal and he did not run from the scene. He saw his mother's back and wept. He saw his mother's back, and he pitied her. His love so strong for his mother and his hate so strong for his father's marks on her back. He knew Joe, too, knew Joe to be a good man who helped his mother with her work, bought groceries from his father. Only later would he know what it was between Joe and his mother--still he was blind to Joe's skin and wise to his father's marks on his mother's back.

Ralph, Jr., must have heard the conversation, must have understood what was being said in that bedroom, must have agreed with the consequences his father would pay because he never warned his father, never told him there had been a black man in his mother's bedroom--his mother's back naked in front of that black man. He never said anything to anyone, not even the police when they questioned him, not when they threatened him. For some reason, he wanted his father dead, like a child wants a father to die, and he would not admit any knowledge of a conversation between the Negro and his mother. He must have overheard, must have known, because he was the only child of her three that she took with her, took away from those salty summer nights.

Joe stayed around the Namie house after Ralph Lucie, Sr., had been shot. Came around that same day. He watched the police car drive up and Mary and Maddie drive away. He waited there, waited until Mary came home. And she fed him on the porch. Family members wre coming over and the body was carried home and she stood on the porch with Maddie's hand in hers and Joe sitting on the bottom step eating his supper. She didn't look at him when he stood up and handed her the plate, but she made sure she laid her hand over his when she took the plate.

He stood up and began to do his work around the house, the work that Mr. Lucie had given him of tending the garden. He hoed and watered and gathered up some vegetables, picked some corn and peas--took a long time til everyone had come and gone, til her children were taken by their Lucie grandparents--and he went inside.

Mary had to tend to the body, had to clean the body of the dead man who beat her yesterday. So the grandparents took those kids, with the exception of Maddie who was not their relation. Joe came in with his harvest, walked in the front door because nobody could see him in the cover of night. And he helped her tend the body. No one spoke, no one smiled. Maddie slept safe in a bed. And Mary and Joe stood over the body and their hearts were light.

After Ralph was dressed and laid out proper in a room with a door, Mary and Joe laid out the garden's food and began to prepare for the coming together of the family. He stayed with her all night, helped her and watched her body move across that kitchen, looked down her blouse at the glimpse of her breast when she bent over.

He shucked the corn, snapped peas and sifted flour. They cooked and baked and boiled all through the summer night. They even kept the windows and the doors open so if anybody had gone down the road, they would have seen him in there with her. But no one did and there was silence except for the crickets. Before daybreak they must have spoken, must have gone into each other's arms and whispered in each other's ears.

"Joe, we can leave after this. We can go."

"Yes, baby, we can go now."

"Please, tell me, Joe, you didn't kill him?"

"Yes, baby, I will tell you I didn't kill him."

"But now he is dead, Joe, and we can leave."

"Yes, baby, we can leave and you can be a woman with me, and I can be a man with you. Sweet darling."

They did not have to say much more. They held on so tight to each other that Mary's back ached and bled from the cuts. They made love right on that wooden floor, so that anyone walking by could have seen.

Three days after the funeral, a body was hanging in Joe Brown's neighborhood. It looked like a black man hanging from a tree, hanging there and the only reason anybody could think of was for Ralph Lucie's murder. But when the neighbors got close, they saw it was a scarecrow. And Joe Brown, being one of the men to help cut it down, saw that it was a scarecrow.

Four days after the funeral little Maddie was still staying with her Aunt Mary. Her mother was not the kind of mother that worried over her child and so Maddie was happy to be with her Aunt Mary who cooked for her and washed her clothers and tucked her sound in the bed at night. She had even taken Maddie to buy three new dresses and a pair

of new shoes. Her own children had been taken to the boarding school by their Namie grandparents--all except Ralph, Jr., who Mary insisted on keeping with her. She offered no explanation to the Lucies and they supposed she felt she needed to watch over him, comfort him. The child could have been in shock after seeing such a horrible deed.

Mary loved the little girl because she had not been loved by anyone else and surely she hated to take that girl back to her momma. But one morning Maddie woke up to find Joe loading suitcases into Aunt Mary's trunk.

"Are we going on a trip, Aunt Mary?" she asked.

"Honey, come here," she said and sat down, her arms opened for Maddie to come to. "I am going away now. And you cannot go with me."

Maddie said nothing. Just looked into the eyes that belonged to her and her aunt.

"I can't take you with me. I wish I could. But I can't." There were no tears: Maddie had learned that it was best not to cry. "I have to take you home, but I love you, Maddie. I won't forget you; I will send you things.

"I'll write your Papa and he will tell you where you can write me. He told me he would. I won't let you go without, so you let me know..."

Maddie's clinging arms cut off her words. The only thing she might stay for was not hers to stay for. Maddie must have hung on tight, squeezed tight over the healing bruises and cuts on her back. She must have prayed it wasn't true, that she had to leave Mary again. But it was true.

Mary drove hr home and let her out. Little Maddie just stood on the edge of the dirt road with her bag and her new dresses. She looked down at her new shoes and stood there til her mother saw her and came out to get her. Mary drove back home. She didn't even look back at that child standing on the edge of the road.

She drove home and Joe was standing in the doorway. Her son sat in the front seat with her and Joe lay down in the back seat. They drove away together, mother and son, like they were going to visit the other two kids at the school. Probably it was that they changed positions somewhere after Tennessee so that Joe drove some and Mary drove some and Ralph, Jr., sat in back looking out the window. And so that was the end of the marriage made in Sacred Heart Catholic Church of Ralph and Marie Lucie.

Olga's Daughter

The summer I went back to Alaska, I left night behind. I dipped into it briefly in Seattle when I stepped off the plane to walk around and stretch in the north Pacific air and watch the twilight deepen to darkness while the wait for connecting passengers delayed our departure for Anchorage. It was worth the wait. Seattle is always clean-looking, but that particular night even the streets looked fresh. The rain changed night velvet to satin, a deep, shiny black that displayed grids and scatterings of city lights that made me think of Ali Baba's trove. Diamonds, topazes, rubies, and emeralds winked at me from the ground; beads of auto headlights sparkled along invisible strands bridging lakes and inlets. The rain clouds gently covered my whimsy, and with the plane still climbing I turned back to the book I'd been trying to read since Atlanta. Mostly I stared at the page while my mind repeated, *This is it, the last leg of the trip. You're finally going back.*

Two blank pages later I sensed a stir around me. Sleepy eyes opened all over the plane. I looked out the window to find the inky blue draining out of the sky--just as the light had flowed away earlier--to leave an edge the color of a robin's egg. *How strange to fly north into a sunset*, I thought. *Usually they run away to the west.* The band grew wider and faded until the whole sky looked like a tin wash on an endless inverted bowl, its original copper just visible way ahead of us.

A tear in the cloud cover opened over Prince William Sound. Below me endless glaciers oozed around charcoal mountains toward water the color of gunmetal. I had forgotten about the size of Alaska, how vast it is. Perhaps memory doesn't work like that anyway. Maybe in an equation of its own it whittles down whatever overwhelms to fit the space your mind has to offer. On the last trip, there had been three of us to share the bigness. This time I was on my own, and it was too late to turn around. Locked into both the plane and the trip, I was on the way back to Alaska for two and one half months, my borrowed backpack and sleeping bag somewhere in the baggage hold near my more familiar travel companions: the maroon suitcase with the three-cornered rip in the top and my wheels, the collapsible luggage cart on which I hauled the torn suitcase around.

The plane skimmed Cook Inlet. Wheels barked onto the runway. It was 1:00 A.M., and it wasn't even dark. It was barely dusk. People gathered their coats and bags. Flight attendants advised caution when opening overhead bins. Toddlers wailed for blankies and bed. My fingers gripped the armrests. I had successfully bargained for a summer of

camping, hiking, and study in the forth-ninth state; I'd been awarded the first sabbatical the school had ever granted a non-teaching faculty member; but now that I'd arrived I wanted to resubmit a proposal for something tamer: a course in Indian Art in Albuquerque, a leisurely exploration of the California Missions. Someplace I knew. Anyplace but here.

I deplaned, bravado trailing behind me like the jacket slipping off my arm. I nudged myself through the jetway door and saw what looked like the entire population of Anchorage milling about to hail loved ones and friends. Hugs twined around laughter; tissues absorbed tears and swept candy smudges from children's faces; voices bumped and bounced off walls, ceiling, and people. Everyone was coming home except me.

Nausea attacked. I raced for the Ladies Room to get out of the crush. To hide. Perspiration ran down my back and dripped between my breasts to soak the waistband of my skirt. I thought of Sylvia on her way to Nairobi for the summer, of Sue already on site at the dig in Kalavassos. Would they panic, too?

How did you ever think you were going to pull this off? I asked the pale reflection in the mirror. After mopping up, I took a deep breath and jostled my way back into the crowd. Rocking like a sixth grader timing her leap into a jump rope rhyme, I stepped onto the escalator. At the far end of the baggage claim area hung a sign, a homing device promising order in the chaos of my emotions. INFORMATION. I made a bee-line for it.

I undertook the trip to Alaska in celebration of my new independent life. Bill and I had worked briefly at a reconciliation, to which I had agreed more from the bottom of my sorrow at the death of my dearest friend, just one year after my mother's passing, than from a desire to chip away at the accretion our differences and, later, our silences had layered on the marriage. The attempt, a poor effort on my part, was doomed to fail even as we made appointments with a counselor.

So for the last eighteen months I'd lived on my own, gradually building a new world. Like a thief, I looted the marriage house of my belongings: Mom's table and bed, the dresser I'd bought and assembled, the blue, hand-blown Mexican glasses, and my wicker trunk. I think every woman who lives alone owns a wicker trunk she uses as a coffee table. Inside it she stores pillows and blankets for the sofa bed. It is her hope chest for visitors. During the first solitary months, and while sitting timid and silent in my grandmother's rocking chair, I stitched

colored squares into an afghan to keep me warm while I kept the heat down.

At school, I increased my college load to two courses each semester. Together with the demands of my job, the work swamped me, but I found I loved the Southern authors crowding my bookshelves: Walker Percy, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner.

My daughters embarked on their own journeys. Away from my steady prodding, the older turned her back on alcohol and cocaine and set about reclaiming control of her own life; the younger blazed steadily through her course work, the first woman in three of our generations set on the path to completing college in one try.

Now it was time to concentrate on me. Time to go back to pick up the outdoor things I loved but never did despite my stint as a Girl Scout. In the '50s, Girl Scouts in my eastern Massachusetts troop did little more than identify trees on walks through Laurel Hill Cemetery (several elms, many maples, two blue spruce, and a birch) and toast marshmallows in the town forest. Still hungry after these expeditions, I returned home to devour the articles and advertisements in my brother's copies of *Boys' Life*--outfitting myself with imaginary hatchet, compass, and an Official Boy Scouts of America poncho--and to dream of summers tenting on the trail at Philmont Scout Ranch. And now, thirty-eight years later, the part of me slung with packs and cameras believed I could still try it. The me pulling the suitcase securely attached to the cart said, *Who do you think you're kidding?*

My first two nights' motel reservation about to run out and the *Dollar Wise Guide to Alaska* in my hand, I walked miles looking for a place to live. My finances would not permit one of Frommer's "Luxury Leader" hotels, nor even a "Middle Bracket" motel. I finally settled on a two-room furnished "Bargain Basement" apartment in the Anchor Arms Motel because the name of the place and the fragrant lilac hedge next door suited me.

In a strange way the location also suited. Equidistant from the strippers' hotel and the Sheraton, the Museum of Art and History and the shelter for the homeless, my home for the month of June sat in a neighborhood caught between what it had been and what it would be. Each day the breeze played with fragments of outdated wartime melodies from the bar in back on 5th Avenue, and starting at 11:00 in the morning, bits of "I'll Be With You in Apple Blossom Time," "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," and "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" drifted in and out of my bedroom window. Out front on Eagle Street, taxis honked at the natives from the shelter who rummaged through the dumpster for

recyclable aluminum. I felt privileged in my third floor aerie which included a view of planes landing at Elmendorf Air Force Base, a television with adjustable rabbit ears so I could catch *General Hospital* and the NBA playoffs, and--in the kitchen--one fork, a bent knife, an iron skillet, and a two-cup saucepan.

At last independence and flexibility were mine. But in a two-edged Delphic way, that hard-won freedom came cloaked in loneliness. I could decide one moment to go to the baseball game and be out the door the next, but once in the stands I sat alone, cautious as a cat ready to jump back from the unfamiliar, surrounded by people I neither knew nor knew how to approach.

It was in the city that I practiced my outdoor skills. I shopped three-quarters of a mile away and packed the groceries home in my day pack. One day I rented a bicycle for a thirteen-mile odyssey along Anchorage's coastal trail, a bicycle path winding six and a half miles around Point Woronzof to Fort Campbell and back. In a breezy birch grove, from which I could have watched Cook sail past in search of the Northwest Passage, I camped for an hour to rest and to eat the B.L.T. I'd thought of for miles. Later in the month, warm and dry in my rainsuit, I mounted a solitary exploration of Seward in a slow seaport rain on a 46° day, the air scented with the tang of wood smoke and ocean.

Everywhere I walked I saw people together. Groups of happily noisy children swarmed over jungle-gyms; couples stood crook-necked staring at turquoise glaciers hanging in high valleys; in gift shops trios of vacationing schoolteachers consulted about which pin or what earrings to buy.

Between outings I fought with myself. When my mother looked back at me from the mirror, my hair, so like hers, ended on the bathroom floor. I scissored it from my head in denial of the prophecy of her life. I refused to resemble her. My grey curls would never, like hers, bend for months over painstaking embroidery. I would never leave to my daughters fuschia, golden, blue cross-stitched flowers on a tablecloth, the cloth I both hated and treasured as her legacy to me. My pen, unlike her needle, would argue, persuade, would capture mists which trail lacily from the hem of a cloud cover, would describe glaciers that freeze centuries of water and spit it back into clattering rivers that push, jostle, tumble to the sea. Then that same pen betrayed me by probing the past to extract from years of inadequacy the impacted knowledge that, though flawed, I was still worthy of love.

In counterpoint to the deliberations within my mind, my body reminded me, several times each day and night, that I was stepping rapidly

through middle age. I wasted untold amounts of time opening and closing windows, taking off and putting on the jacket to my blue warm-up suit, and stripping off nightgowns only to drag, moments later, the damp sheets back over my chilled body. I resented my hormones forcing me to accept my own aging. I wasn't ready to get older. It seemed as though I'd just started living. On that rainy-day hike to Byron Glacier, I'd sung aloud to the foggy valley my carol of change:

She was born in the summer of her 47th year,
Comin' home to a place she'd never been before.
She left yesterday behind her,
Y'might say she was born again....

At the end of June it was time to move on. I sat in the gatehouse waiting for the flight north. I wanted to go south. Home. I ached to go home. Tired of my daily battles with myself and being courageous, I wanted the comfort of sitting in my chair--feet on the hassock, cat in my lap, glass of wine in my hand--with my head bent over a book.

Through threatening tears I watched arriving passengers scan the crowd to find the people who were to meet them. Uncles greeted nephews who quickly hoisted book packs onto their shoulders to deflect hugs, a grandmother scooped up the little girl who greeted her shyly with a bouquet of wildflowers: Shooting Stars, Goldenrod, Bluebells. I swallowed hard. I refused to think of the cat or the Chardonnay. Gathering up my camera, purse, and boarding pass, I stepped onto the plane to Fairbanks.

The University of Alaska confirmed that I was registered for the second summer session. I was anxious for the meat of the summer, two courses investigating native issues and culture, to begin. And because I know that if you wait until you're ready you never start, I studied the outdoor trips the student center offered. My sabbatical money was running out, but it would support two outings: a day of canoeing a section of the Chatanika River north of Fairbanks, and an overnight camping trip to Denali National Park and Preserve.

Safe among the numbers of our canoe party, I nevertheless hung back, not knowing what to do and not wanting it to show. All I could recall from those long-ago pages of *Boys' Life* was Rule #1, Never Stand in a Canoe, and which end of the paddle to stick in the water. My pattern would be careful observation and absolute mimicry. A rookie awaiting the veteran's tutelage, I took my place in the bow of one of the two staff canoes. Fortuitously--from the standpoint of observation--we were to be the last canoe.

The river ran fast from the rain that week. My paddle dug deeply into the current to keep us in the channel and away from gravel bars and sweepers, trees overhanging banks undercut by the river. We weren't even around the first bend when my arm and rib muscles began to ache. My knees were already numb from kneeling in the bottom of the canoe. Once again, it was too late to turn back. I began to think that this was the way to get things done; you just start, then worry about how to finish later. I gradually loosened my hold on the assumption that simply because I was an adult, I should be able to do everything that other adults could do. After swatting away the third hint about paddling on the outside of the curve and aiming for the channel in the turn, I called over my shoulder, "Forget the manual. Talk Beginner! Tell me 'left' or 'right.'"

Hoo-hoo, I chuckled to myself.

At the end of our paddle, and after a day on the river, my muscles, which had been screaming at me for five hours, revolted. Just seconds shy of the time they were needed to haul the canoe out of the river, they refused to obey. I stood knee-deep in the shallows, the remaining twenty feet to shore an impossible journey.

I overheard "my" staff member talking to the other. "You know," he said, "she's a strong paddler."

I almost hugged him.

The camping trip in Denali National Park came on the eve of my departure from Alaska. Three years earlier, with purse and camera looped like ammunition bandoliers over my shoulders, I spent a dust-covered day on the bumpy, school-bus ride, charmed by the ptarmigan and ground squirrels, in awe of the bears, caribou, and wolves, and terrified at the narrow gravel road which clung like a limpet to the mountainsides. With all of this plus the anticipation of a camper, I approached the Visitor Center to ask if The Mountain was out.

The Mountain, always capitalized, is Mt. McKinley. Denali, the Athabascans call it. The Great One. People ask if it's out because in summer The Mountain is only visible about 30% of the time, the peaks obscured by the weather their altitude generates. On my last trip, I asked a park ranger how I would know which was Denali. She told me I'd know. If I had to ask which one it was, it wasn't out.

On this trip I chose to take a day hike with six of the others in our group. No trail. Just a compass and a scrawled diagram on the back of a pink phone-message note. After stopping the bus so we could watch and photograph a grizzly sow and her two yearling cubs, the driver eased out the clutch, and we rattled on to the bridge over Tattler Creek. Our group

piled off and waved good-bye as the bus ground off in a cloud of dust and a clash of gears.

Whistling nervously past the "Danger: Bears" sign, I followed the others up the creek bed. I stretched, teetered, and balanced my way from rock to rock for a quarter of a mile up the creek bed and caught up with the group at the base of a near-vertical rocky ravine. The water seeping into Tattler Creek from the ravine bore mute testimony to the torrent it must have been last spring. I weighed my options. *Do I keep going?* I started upward. The pitch of the climb quickly rose to 50°. I kept climbing. *Do I turn back?* I stopped, tied my bandanna around my head. The ravens' cries wheeled in disorienting echoes off the ridge behind me. I didn't dare look back.

Déjà-vu, I thought. *I'll never be able to keep this up.* I had no choice. If I went back, I might have to deal with Mama Bear and the Baby Bears. Besides, I would miss whatever was at the top. *Can't go back.* I turned and climbed uphill. Took smaller steps in the shifting rock shards. Took sips of water. In the razor-sharp scree, tiny leaves fed on the trickle deep beneath the rock.

Kept going.

For an hour and a half I huffed, scrambled, and sweated my way to the top of that impossibly steep rocky draw. It was the roughest climb I'd ever made. Used to the Appalachian Trail with a beaten path along which to step with blazes to mark the way, I saw only one trail during this climb: a three-inch-wide track made by Dall sheep traversing a rocky slide; the only blazes were marmot holes torn apart by a grizzly.

One moment I worried about holding back the younger hikers, the next found my enthusiasm soaring like the ravens circling on thermals. Then each time I stopped to catch my breath, the excitement would come to roost with the unbidden thought that plagued me throughout the summer.

You're too old. You're like her. You waited too long to do this.

I trudged on.

Then I was at the top. My head swam. I paused for breath. I'd made it. Rock no longer shifted under my feet. I was on tundra, a thin layer of vegetation that drapes like a cloth over the jumbled rock to protect the mountains from erosion.

Suddenly I was as high as the ravens again. It no longer mattered that I hadn't done this years ago. It was enough simply to be there at that moment, to try, whether I finished first or not. I may have been the last one to reach the saddle above Sable Pass that day, but I reached it. When I did, the others cheered and pointed off beyond the drop on the

other side. I sidled closer to the edge. There it was. The Mountain. Still seventy miles distant, Denali elbowed the horizon out of the way and claimed its place in the sky.

I used to think that revelations happened on the Damascus Road with scales falling from the eyes. My epiphany came in the hot sun of Interior Alaska, in the endless light of that strange ten-week-long day. I reeled, colored dots floated before me. Looking closer I saw, scattered in the tundra, tiny red bearberry leaves, tufts of yellow cinquefoil, delicate stalks topped with clusters of tiny blue forget-me-nots.

Stunned, motionless, I greeted the insight that although she had died three years ago, my mother wasn't really gone. She was there with me, had been with me the whole time. What she'd been unable to live, I was living; what she couldn't change, I succeeded in turning around. The flowers she'd embroidered for me during those nine months were finally at my fingertips. And as I bent to touch them, I was at last able to understand that although she was flawed, she was worthy of love.

I breathed deeply. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to be standing there, her flowers at my feet and nothing but wind between me and the top of the continent. I was finally home. Not just home outdoors, but home inside myself. I felt strong. I laughed out loud.

"Hey!" I called to the group, to the ravens, and to my mother. "The Mountain is out!"

Eulalie Drury

Lilac Blossoms

I will always link my father's madness with a bird's nest the size of a teacup and the color purple.

When globes of blue and purple replaced green leaves and my mother burst into the house, outstretched arms bulging with flowers asking "Where shall we put all of these?" we knew Spring had arrived. She would rummage through crowded cabinets for mismatched vases, wine bottles, spaghetti jars--pleased with the abundance.

Bruised blossoms spilled from shelves, counters, and dusty table tops, as overdone as my mother's flashy clothes. The pale fragrant blossoms covered the rough edges, messy clutter, and neglect which our old house had grown accustomed to.

My father's rough edges were not as easily hidden--his wet weary eyes, slow shuffle of a walk. When we left the house, we had to help him dress as if he were a small child. We would comb his hair, straighten his shirt, and shine his shoes. Still, eyes followed us wherever we went. He returned each stare aggressively as if it were a threat.

His unhappiness was like a scab which he could not let heal. He would lie in bed scratching his head for hours, in a patient, almost inquisitive manner. Whenever I entered the room he stopped, resting his fingers under his nose as if to inhale his own scent. A strange scent, inanimate and dry, like clothes kept in storage. His hands were never still.

He liked to watch birds which nested in the lilac bush outside our kitchen window. He sat at the table, eating awkwardly as if wearing heavy mittens. Hardly chewing. His hair now wispy white, his hands large, always fumbling, always scratching.

He watched them build their nest every year. Their eggs, the delicate blue of his eyes, so fragile I feared they would crack under the force of his gaze. He watched the blood pump beneath the skin of the newly hatched chicks. Their persistent cries muted through the windowpane.

One morning, a dull noise woke me. Through the kitchen window I watched my father, back stooped, hacking away at the lilac bush, face gleaming with sweat, arms flying in his plaid shirt. I saw the peeling garage, the untended garden. My father's pale face red from exertion. As I rapped on the window, he laid the saw down on the grass and stood back to admire his work. He looked alive, even happy--as if he had defeated the enemy.

The mother robin abandoned her eggs, though my father sat at the window waiting. Flowers in a vase before him littering the table with

gray transparent blossoms. How fast the purple faded. He didn't realize that the birds would not return to a nest which felt so unprotected.

When I go home to visit, I look out the kitchen window at the thin branch which remains of the lilac bush. It does not flower, nor put forth many leaves but it lives, and inch by inch it grows. At the top of the branch, the bird's nest remains, light as dried wheat, looking as if it could fall and land unnoticed on the soft wet grass. It rests there, as if out of habit, as my Dad rests in bed, all day and all night, the radio pressed to his ear, never moving, never changing.

Marisa Dunlevy-Tingle

"As Time Goes By..."

You must remember this,
 A kiss is still a kiss,
 A sigh is just a sigh.
 The fundamental things apply
 As time goes by.
 -- Herman Hupfeld

False expectations. That's what my life is about. I get them everywhere: from the shows I watch on television, from the movies I see, from the songs I hear on the radio, from the romance novels I read. No matter where I go, no matter what I do, someone is trying to feed me false expectations. Even my friends perpetuate the lie. For my birthday last year, they gave me an 11-inch vibrator. What man is ever going to live up to that?

Kiss me with your mouth
 Your love is better than wine
 But wine is all I have
 Will your love ever be mine?
 -- Artist unknown

My first major false expectation was kissing. You hear about it all the time. Kissing the man of your dreams is portrayed in literature as an incredible experience involving lots of fireworks and shivers down the spine and magnetism. This is what my romance novels told me, and vicarious experiences were my only ones up until spring of my senior year in high school when I finally had my first boyfriend, Peter, a destroyer of many fake illusions. Before that "magic moment," my lips had only touched one male who was not related to me by blood or marriage. His name was Billy Forney, he was the cutest boy in the third grade, and he played Bambi in the school play. I played Faline, his girlfriend, and I got to kiss him on the cheek. I was the envy of all the other girls in second grade, but the ten years between Billy and Peter were long ones in which I had plenty of time in which to imagine my first real kiss.

By the time Peter and I were "set up," I was ready. At the end of every date for two months I held my breath, waiting, wondering, "Is this finally it?" And every Monday morning for those two months, when I walked into homeroom and my friends looked at me with faces that

asked, "Well, did he?" I had to shake my head, no, he did not. I began to wonder what was wrong with me that Peter had no desire to kiss me.

Finally one night, he did it. He was leaving the next day to be gone all weekend, and I had driven over to his house. After we wandered around the block, he walked me back to my car. As I began to move into the familiar hug we had shared so many times before, I saw that this time he was moving in a different direction. Even as I raised my lips and closed my eyes, I was prepped in my imagination. It would be a soft brush of our lips, perhaps then deepening into...eeeewww. All of a sudden I felt his open mouth grinding against my closed one, a process that left the lower half of my face wet and my lips damaged by his teeth. What was he doing? My eyes popped open, and I saw his eyes closed in supreme concentration. I couldn't say anything to him, he looked so proud of himself. As I drove home, I bit off the fingernails I had carefully grown for two months.

Do you love me
 Do you want to be my friend?
 And if you do
 Then don't be afraid to take me by the hand
 If you want to.
 I think this is how love goes
 Check yes or no.
 -- George Strait

I assumed that when I got to college, I would be a participant in wonderful, beautiful, sexy, mature relationships. Ha. I found that while we became women once we entered college, boys had not yet turned into men and that meeting guys in college was a process very similar to meeting boys in junior high. "My friend might like your friend, but only if your friend likes my friend first." I met two thirds of the guys I've dated in college at Phi Kappa Theta, the fraternity to which two of my best friends' boyfriends belong. When I started dating Harry, I knew exactly what he was thinking because Frank would talk to him and report back to Cathy who would then tell me what was going on.

Finally, we started talking to each other. We broke up two weeks later.

How bad could it be
 If you should lose yourself in me?
 How bad could it be

Sex-u-al-ity
-- k.d. lang

Once upon a time, there was a girl. For the purpose of maintaining interest we'll say she was pretty, and we'll call her Angela.

Angela was a fairly normal girl. She'd had enough experience to know that she couldn't believe a boy when he said he loved her while her shirt was off, but she'd never "gone all the way."

Then one summer, when she was home from college, Angela fell deeply into lust. Forgetting years of modern Catholic indoctrination that had taught her that sex was bad unless she was married or at least in a strongly committed relationship, she threw herself at Matthew, as we shall call him. One night, they ended up sharing a bed in a friend's apartment. Angela was quickly divested of her Victoria's Secret pajamas as was Matthew of whatever he had worn to bed that night. After a couple of hours of what could be called "heavy petting plus," Angela yawned, "It's been a long night. Why don't we get some sleep?"

"Are you sure you want me to stop?"

Assuming Matthew meant to continue in the non-penetrational activities in which they had been participating all night, Angela sleepily replied, "Whatever."

The next morning, Angela contemplated the night's activities with no little confusion. She seemed to remember Matthew moving above her...but she couldn't remember feeling anything, pain or pleasure. So, she decided with relief that her virtue was still intact. Only weeks later as she perused the pages of an old issue of *Glamour*, did she begin to doubt her assumption. Her eyes widened in disbelief as she read number five of the top seven incorrect things to say to a lover: "Is it in yet?"

Can you hear them
They talk about us
Telling lies
Well that's no surprise.
-- The Go-Gos

Realizing that I'd lost my virginity was a blow, but having really felt nothing, I had no difficulty denying the experience once I'd returned to college.

Then I went home for Christmas.

I saw all of the people, mostly guys, I had "hung out with" during the summer. "So, Amy," they'd say with a smirk, "Heard you slept with Marc."

"Yeah, whatever....He wishes."

"Oh, come on. We heard all about it" or "Are you sure you didn't have sex with Marc?"

"Quite."

"Really? 'Cause you know, he's saying you did."

"Oh?"

Oh.

In high school, my best friend's boyfriend used to call me "the Eternal Virgin."

I guess I showed him.

Papa don't preach
I'm in trouble deep
Papa don't preach
I've been losing sleep
--Madonna

After ascertaining that I'd contracted no sexually transmitted diseases, scientifically basing my knowledge on *Seventeen* and *YM* articles, I realized I was going to have to do something I'd avoided doing for a long time.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been seven years since my last confession." His eyes widened at that one.

"Well, what do you wish to confess to God?"

"Well, let's see, I lied, I took the Lord's name in vain, I had sex, I lied, I had some impure thoughts...Did I mention I lied?" He caught it.

"Well, this is a serious thing, but I can tell that you've thought about it a lot, and I think you've probably given yourself your own penance. The Lord forgives you. Let us pray and thank God for His mercy."

That's it? "Wait, Father. I don't think you understand...."

Cecelia
You're breakin' my heart
You're shakin' my confidence daily.
-- Simon and Garfunkel

False expectations. No matter how many of them shatter, I always have more. One in particular I especially cherish -- his name is Paul.

He is tall, he is thin, and he is beautiful. In high school, he played a slightly bewildered Ducky Dale to my neurotically imagined Andie. For my first birthday away from home at college, he sent me a birthday kit that included a video of home and friends, a soundtrack, and a llama-like bunny that was supposed to resemble my dog. My friends say he's in love with me. The last time I was home, he agreed to go somewhere with me, saying that hell would be fun if I was with him. I didn't see him again for the rest of that vacation, even though I had three more weeks.

As far as I know Paul has never kissed a girl.

Cecelia Heit

Nothing Like the Sun

I was the object of desire and loathing. Mike wanted me, but wished that he didn't. He told me so often. I didn't feel irresistible, either, just blamed. And after some time, every word he spoke to me, every gesture became charged. I was overcome when he kissed me, when he took me in his arms, with guilt. My stomach began to hurt all the time. When I did feel a flicker of physical yearning for him, it made me cry. And he didn't like it when I cried.

On the night Mike discovered my most serious flaw, we had gone to bed early, not for sex but for surcease. Mike ran his fingertips over the skin of my back. It felt good, but I was not fooled into thinking he was being tender. This was an examination. I felt like a safe being cracked, some man's sandpapered fingers on my lock. He listened to the roll and click of tumblers within and I felt tears gather behind my eyes.

"What's this?" he asked.

I talked into the pillow I had my arms around. "What's what?"

"This spot, this mark on your back. Right here."

There was a curious numbness where his finger pressed. I felt his hand touch, then a dead spot, then touch again.

"I don't know, Mike."

He was silent. I felt eyes on my back although the streetlight outside didn't penetrate our heavy curtains and he couldn't really see anything. We kept most of the lights out as much as possible. I hear my father's voice all the time. "You'll ruin your eyes," he said, over and over. He was right, my eyes are ruined. I wear contact lenses all day, glasses at night to watch TV and grade papers. In bed, I surrender to near-blindness. I can't see the numbers on the alarm clock. They're just a red smear, like an emergency light.

"Go to sleep, please," I said. "I have to get up so early." Mike didn't say anything because we didn't say goodnight anymore. We fell into sleep separately, climbed out of it alone. I pulled the sheets up around my shoulders, moved my feet, which had been creeping toward the center of the bed seeking warmth, closer to the edge.

Mike was the first to find gray in my hair. He noticed when my slip was hanging and when my skin was dry. I am amazed by women who want their husbands and boyfriends to notice more, to remark on new haircuts and clothes. I would have given anything to step out from beneath that scrutiny, to have lost consciousness for a few minutes every day of what I look like, what I think, what I am. Mike wanted me to stop

biting my nails. When I lifted a hand to my face, I would look at him first, daring him to comment and asking his pardon simultaneously.

The next morning, I strained to see what he had felt on my back. The bathroom mirror was fogged over and I turned round and round myself, looking and not seeing. I held a hand mirror to where I thought it would be. I stood in my underwear and watched my own face while I put one tentative finger on the quarter inch of skin that felt different from the rest, a little taut, a little like a vinyl patch over torn canvas. Mike was right. There was something wrong with me.

A week later I was in the office of John A. Broyles, Dermatologist. Dr. Broyles is immune to the whimsy of his name. This is a serious doctor's office, concerned primarily with finding skin cancer, identifying the small spots on the surface of my body that have spent too much time outdoors, seen too much of the life-giving sun. The venetian blinds on these windows are slatted firmly shut. Surrounded by pamphlets on skin cancer, I think of all the broiling summers I have spent on the beaches of childhood, unconcerned with sunscreen.

My parents raised me haphazardly. Every time I see a modern child, wedged into the hard plastic womb of a car seat, I remember my own car seat. It was canvas, like a tiny little director's chair, and hooked over the back of the broad front seat of my parents' Ford LTD. I had my own little steering wheel; a soft orange knob in the middle was a horn. The horn lost its honk almost immediately (I was an aggressive driver and used it too often), so I supplied the sound myself, "beep, beep," riding along, elevated to look through the impossibly long wide front window, a potential projectile.

Children today do not put their feet into roller skates or swing skinny legs over bicycle seats without knee pads, elbow pads, helmets. They do not leave the house without cellular phones and beepers, without parental instructions on who to avoid (drug dealers, child molesters, serial killers), without the name of a good pediatric orthopedist, and the office number of the family attorney. Nor should they. I shudder at the idea of looking after a child myself. I can't think up the many lurking dangers fast enough to plan to protect a child from them. I would be a frantic, possibly neurotic mother. Even my pets have been overprotected.

Apparently, though, my parents never loved me. Every year they drove me to the Gulf coast and exposed me to the sun, a roiling ball of gasses, 100,000 degrees blazing away through an expiring ozone layer. My skin is white, inherited from the generations before me who lived their lives in the cool mists and early twilights of Ireland. My hair is red. I was, as a child, freckled within an inch of my life. And I took my thin white

shoulders out onto the white sands of St. Petersburg beach and into the light green waters of the Gulf of Mexico itself and I baked myself, over years.

During the days, the grownups sat in the shade of the porch, idly observing through huge, round, almost opaque dark glasses. Aunt Mil Ann sipped her drink, yellow Coca Cola I was told (I was twenty-three before it occurred to me to think, hey there's no such thing as yellow Coke), and rattled her ice cubes. Mom read magazine articles on how to be a good wife and mother. Granddaddy wore, as he did every day of his adult life, dark suit pants, a starched white shirt and a thin black tie. Grandmother sat plumply in an unsteady lawn chair and told stories of the family.

No one thought, and I bless them for this, to tell me to come in. My father, who grew up more than a thousand miles from this warm sandy place, was deeply suspicious of the beach, but it was the marine life he feared, not the bright gentle light overhead. He entered the water only on days when the water was perfectly still and clear, so that he could see his feet on the bottom. He was careful never to lift his feet high enough for anything to swim under and sting or bite him. He was young, so thin and handsome, but he looked like an old man in the water, shuffling and peering down at his vulnerable toes. Back then, he never looked up fearfully at the brilliant sky.

In the evening, when I was lured into the beach house by popsicles, I was red all over and too hot to touch. My grandmother would spread a beach towel for me to lie on over the orange flowers of the bedspread in my room and smear Noxzema over all my blistered skin. The Noxzema melted on contact, like frosting on a cake still too warm to frost. I lay in my bed, feeling my skin throb, feeling the memory of the waves drag at my legs and arms, smelling my own warm menthol smell.

One year I had a canvas raft, yellow on one side and red on the other with a sturdy rope woven through holes all around. I rode it like a bronco through the waves, flat on my bare stomach for the outbound journey, straddling it and pulling hard on the reins for the rough ride in. So that day, in addition to the unfiltered sun, I was exposed to the repeated chafing of my bare skin against rough canvas in salt water.

When I retired my steed for the day, I had a spectacular rash, raised hot pink welts on my stomach and on the insides of my arms and legs. My Grandmother tried the Noxzema cure; I screamed like she had applied the lash. I slept on my relatively unscarred back, unable to bear the weight of even a cotton sheet, and sucked self-pityingly on the ice chips my mother

brought, trying to cool me from the inside. The next day, I put on a T-shirt and shorts and hit the waves again.

But I am being unfair. My parents took some precautions with me against the hot white sun, I know, or why would the slightest whiff of Coppertone give me such shattering flashbacks of youth? How were they to know that we were all in such danger?

It is the reckless joy of my childhood that lands me in this doctor's office today, reading about Sun Protection Factors and surrounded on all sides by huge pink cross-sections of skin, dermis, epidermis, embarrassingly large hair follicles. How deep does my damage go? I avert my eyes and fill out the forms. They read like a makeup consultation, asking if my skin is very fair, pink, freckled, tan. Yes, yes, yes, never. I never tanned, only burned. My hope was always that my freckles would run together and make me smooth golden brown all over. They came damn close sometimes, but I remained on the mottled side of tan.

The forms accuse me as well. How many hours do you spend in the sun each day? I thought we were supposed to spend hours in the sun each day. The adults sent us out into the sun so regularly. Aunt Mil Ann once refused to let me in the house because it was "nice out." I stood dripping and shivering in my wet bathing suit on the back stoop of my grandparents' house and heard the key turn in the lock. Later someone passed me a peanut butter and mayonnaise sandwich through a crack in the door and forced me back out into the sun, my young arteries storing up fat, my skin soaking up lethal light. Honestly, my childhood was like a Grimms fairy tale. I was fattened and roasted all day every day.

The forms want to know if I use sunscreen regularly. I think, I tell the forms, that my makeup has sunscreen in it. Not good enough, I know. As a teenager, I "laid out," for the sloth, not for the sun. Daddy would wait till I was good and sleepy in the heat, having shimmering dreams of surviving adolescence after all, and then put his cold beer can against my back. I went to an all-day outdoor concert when I was in my twenties and was so badly burned that a scab developed on my nose. I have had so much sun that I've been sick from it, shivering and nauseated, with strobe headaches.

But since I have been a grown-up, I don't spend much time outdoors. My adulthood has been a pasty white period. No matter. I am already the sum of all the suns I have not counted. The deck is stacked against me. The forms ask the most damning question of all: how many of your immediate family members have been treated for skin cancer? All of them. I am the last to succumb.

My mother has had skin cancer, the first blotch located in exactly the same spot as this suspicious blemish of mine. (In my family we inherit precisely that which will harm us most.) And some years ago, the dermatologist had peered closely at my mother's sweet face and seen such significant damage that he prescribed a chemical peel. The object, to save her from her own skin. The damaged and dangerous skin would be sloughed off and virgin facial skin revealed, innocent new skin that must be guarded even more zealously, like a maiden locked in a tower.

She went along, applied the prescribed ointment in the prescribed manner, and within hours her face was so swollen and disfigured that the tears could barely squeeze out of her slitted eyes and onto her ravaged cheeks. The doctor was consulted by telephone, my father describing in a horrified helpless tone how his wife was suffering. She was given permission only to lessen the dosage, not to discontinue the treatment, so she wept through the week, crimson and suffering. Finally she was reborn from her cancerous chrysalis into a new and even more delicate face. She has beautiful skin and looks a decade younger than she is. She has been through the fire.

It's not over yet, though. The sun god is still punishing us all. When my family was in England, our tour guide in Bath told us about the health benefits that people believed they could derive from the waters there, crowding unhygienically into unchlorinated water. My mother touched a drop of the warm algaed water to a small slick red spot on her knee, massaged it in, willfully confusing this water with the miracle waters of Lourdes, or the healing water of Warm Springs, Georgia where our crippled president Roosevelt spent his last days. We believe all the wrong things, seek all the wrong cures, on purpose. Mother wears a large straw hat now, to garden.

We've had a lot of this. We are familiar with small circular wounds, small circular Band-Aids, and sample size tubes of yellow ointment. My father, on whom local anesthetic has no effect, has endured several small slicings, the doctor nicking away a little bit at a time, my father simply bearing the pain, like a Civil War soldier. Finally, they put him under and carved deep into his upper lip, halving his smile. The smooth scar that was left behind will not grow whiskers. My father often threatens to grow half a mustache, but he's joking. We don't do things by halves in my family. It is full exposure or none.

Daddy shuns the sun like Dracula now, shuddering at a break in the clouds and scurrying under awnings and overhangs. At my sister's graduation, there was nowhere to go to escape the glare. The girl graduates were dressed in dazzling blinding white, reflecting and

intensifying the sun, shining it into the crowd like they were so many sheets of tin foil tilted to the light. His own daughter, Daddy must have thought, turning the sun against him like that. My father winced and fidgeted, clutched his handkerchief, squinted at the sky as if he expected bombs to drop. And I am now medically paranoid. It began in graduate school when literary analysis became a way of life. My full-time mission was to poke around, look underneath, find what glowers back at us from the shadows. I began to feel like a child standing at the top of the stairs, ordered to descend into the basement. It's dark down there, I protest, even while testing the steps. In graduate school, I developed allergies and mysterious ailments. The nerve under my left eye jumped and twitched for an entire ten week quarter. I felt nauseated in the morning. And if I sat very still and listened hard, I could hear the tumors grow.

For several months I believed with all my heart that I had AIDS. All summer I sat in my German class and knew that I was dying. Our teacher had a sinister way about him, conjugating on the board with squeaking yellow chalk. I smiled bitterly to myself, thinking that I would spend my final days in this dark struggle with German verbs. I expected in that dank horrible classroom, under flickering fluorescent light, to burst into fevers and boils, to develop pneumonia, blindness and dementia. I would be found clutching a Langenscheidt dictionary, Beethoven's ominous Fifth playing on the stereo, the needle skipping, a heavy chord played over and over in the disease-ridden room.

I didn't have AIDS. I probably had skin cancer, said Dr. Broyles. Dr. Broyles had the poreless skin that all dermatologists have, like they personally didn't have acne in high school, but know what's best for those of us who did. Doctors make me think of missionaries. They stand tall and healthy among the sick and emaciated. They can save us if they will. Dr. Broyles had me describe the spot then expose it, by pulling my T-shirt up around my neck and turning my back to him. While Dr. Broyles ran a professional finger across my back, I felt, unpleasantly, like a whole person, like this would be a sexual experience except for the damage stored in my body, festering now to the surface.

Mike had loved my body once, but never without reservation. Mike lived, while we were together, in a very small space under the rafters of an old house. On Wednesdays and Sundays the house was a church. At all other times too, because the Presbyterian minister lived in the rest of the house. All this religion, and my naked body, was jammed up under the slanting roof of Mike's room where we lay on a mattress on the floor, looking at the ceiling an inch above our noses and hearing Mike's priest making coffee in the kitchen.

It was a tiptoe and whisper relationship from the start, and I should not have been surprised when the fear in Mike's heart began to wash over me as well. He broke up with me several times. Once in a restaurant, we had just been given our meatball sandwiches, which looked raw and dripped tomato sauce. The sandwiches were tucked into green plastic baskets. Mike explained to me in the earnest way that I had found so appealing several months before that our relationship was wrong, that there had never been a time that I had left his bed that he did not immediately drop to his knees to pray for forgiveness. I wish to this day that I had emptied my basket of bloody meat over his head. I did leave him to make his way home in the rain. But not long after I took him back.

Because I couldn't blame him. I love and loathe my body too. I rejoiced when my breasts finally appeared. I see my mother's lovely shape in my hips and in my hands. But I have seen myself at my worst, hanging over the toilet throwing up. My nose runs. My body grows hair in places I do not want hair. The hair that I do want, on my head, can be lank and uncooperative. I can stand naked before the mirror and know that something will kill me. My lungs will clog up, or my hidden heart will stop beating. My kidneys will quit or my liver will. Or this small pinkness on my back will grow and spread and devour me whole, like the hot little light bulbs in our old film projector used to melt film, like photos of Hiroshima, a white hot flash and charred bodies.

I lay face down on the table and the nurse gave me a tiny little shot. It didn't hurt. And when Dr. Broyles cut into my back, I felt only pressure. He made conversation, even, like he was doing my hair. I said Hail Marys over and over, remembering how to pray for my flawed and failing body, remembering that the mother of God was fully human, that she gave birth in pain and with blood. I smelled my own flesh burning while Dr. Broyles cauterized the wound.

Mike wanted to see it. And after the doctor had called to say that it was cancer, carcinoma, but not bad cancer, melanoma, I let Mike peel away the bandage to look. He said it looked like someone had put out a cigar on my back, which made me feel like I'd gotten a warning from the Mafia, that worse would happen if I squealed. When it began to heal over and itch, Mike rubbed around the tiny perimeter of the wound. It felt good.

And so I developed a general sense of vulnerability and victimization (which is not as bad as a *particular* sense of vulnerability and victimization), and I developed a scar, a smooth pink pillow of skin. Every man since Mike has asked me about it, and I tell the story of being just a little bit endangered, of suffering consequences but not badly. Because I stored all that light, all the years of sun, on the inside as well,

the inside of me that is stronger and will fare better than my poor pink
suffering skin.

Maura Mandyck