



Quercus

a journal of literary and visual art

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(kwûrkûs) Latin. n. The oak genus: a deciduous hardwood tree or shrub.

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Marta Currier

Striped Carpet on 12th Street

2009, oil on canvas, 35 inches x 50 inches

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Sarah Wurst

Goldfish Haiku

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Searching

2008, digital photography

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*Their tapping fingers
and ugly faces won't stop
your dreams of the sea.*

Say Nothing

Suffice: when the rain came, it came
all at once and reset the gray branches

into green—it was the start of a season when
birds stuffed homes into boxes, birds came

into being. Slicked with egg, each chick
came up for air. We forgot we were breathing,

which is how we discussed death with ourselves
without mentioning it. On the lawn chairs,

on the window boxes, snow's fading testament
clung as dust. Honesty, a woman

told me, was a mood that came on you
suddenly, like finding a road, or a good place

for a road, or like throwing open the window
to a sudden-woven downpour. When

the rain came, it kissed everything fatly
—the broken leaves against the curb,

the brackish worms washed from the lawn,
the wasted nests. It was the heart of heaven,

what St. Catherine of Siena called God.

—*Sarah Gardner*

Every Sun Shining at Once

All day a woman drew her hands up
from her lap
 and in her wheeled seat
worked the air—knitted, purled, dropped
empty stitches.
 The universe got larger.

All day shadows seeped into the nothing
between stars
 and the nothing
beyond them. No matter how tightly
we wound the mantle clocks
 this continued.

Night came, rifling through the bins
 in search of a new pendant
for its northernmost lapel.

—*Sarah Gardner*

Mother and Son

The image is clear; it will always be . . .

As I glance around the restaurant—as I do now as a ritual every time I am out in public, looking for others with a story—I see them, clear as day. Two people sitting directly across—mother and son.

They are in a booth, much like the one I am sharing with my two boys, ages two and not yet one. The woman is elderly—gray hair, small in stature—and seems to be swallowed by the booth in which she is sitting. Her son is twice her size, strong yet not confident, head low. He has on a flannel shirt and a red baseball cap. It's hard to guess his age, but I decide he must be around forty, though I know he is mentally still a little boy.

I imagine what their days are like. They share every movement, every moment. She picks out his clothes, makes sure he didn't forget to brush his teeth. Mornings are filled with cereal at the table, a bit of the local morning show. They work on a puzzle, she reads to him, and occasionally for a special treat they go to a movie—an afternoon matinee at the local theatre.

Their meal is not one of great conversation. I can't see her face, but I know it well. She is overwrought with love for this child. She is his best friend.

She eats slowly. He does also. And although I did not see them arrive and will leave before they pay, I can imagine their arrival and departure. She walks a bit hunched, careful to make room for her boy at her side. He holds her right hand, not for her support but for his comfort. They are a pair, joined at his birth—content and happy to be together yet swallowed by the world, much like they are in the booth of the loud and bustling restaurant.

As always, I scan the restaurant again to see if anyone else is looking at the woman and son. And as always, they are invisible to most.

Once I get home and put the boys to bed, I call my husband, who is on a business trip. I tell him about the mother and son, much the same as I have described them to you. I ask him if I will ever be that mother, the woman in the booth. He responds as I knew he would

. . . I was looking for a bit of confirmation on my future. He says, “Of course you will be. You are that woman in the booth.” And I then visualize myself, old and frail with my youngest son, Jack, my life-long companion.

—*Peggy Delaney '91*

Dryer Sheets and Dry Erase Boards

Stepping outside
he notices the earth
smells like cigarettes
and fresh dryer sheets.
He stretches.
The sun slips toward
the backs of trees.
The air is cool.
It's May.
He goes for a walk.

Creeping up
to the open door
of the classroom
where she's teaching,
he leans against the jamb
and watches her write
poets' names and verses
on the board—
listening until she turns.
She scolds him,
apologizes to her students
and smiles.
Her class laughs.
She rolls her eyes, shakes her head
and returns to the board
full of his heroes.
He sulks away, outside,
and sits on the steps.
A sadness fills him
when the students empty their rooms
to drive back to Chicago,
 Des Moines,
 or Grand Mound.
The grass keeps growing.

—Jeremy Burke '99

Unbroken

Only when the top bites back against the pressure of an emphatic hand is the dispute over and the day of the week remembered. She angles downward at the waist, stuffing the overflow of torn-apart mail, cereal boxes, and compacted dust balls of vacuumed treasures back into the plastic sack. Cross, loop, tighten, and knot with methodical movements that appear disengaged from absent eyes. She lifts the sack by its plastic red handles, up and out, then over to the door. The dog sniffs at the lingering smell of last night's spoiled supper—an experiment of potato soup and cornstarch gone wrong. She abandons this first load at the door, walking down the hall to retrieve the others. It is his cue now. The husband types in a final few numbers, minimizes his windows, and saves his work—the work he's done from the time he returned home from “work.”

The two layer on sweatshirts and coats at the door, leaning on one another for balance as they wriggle into their shoes—a rare dance of touch, support, and strain. He's into his first: a size-12 pair of ankle-high galoshes bought on clearance from the local Farm and Fleet. Soon after, she's following him out the front door, content in the grey wool boots with sheepskin soles he had scoffed at her for buying. He travels the short distance to the garage alone, fists stuffed into jean pockets, walking with the slightest favoring of his left side—a tendency only she would notice, and a story only she would remember of a ten-year-old farm boy stepping on a nail with his bare right foot. The truck backs out of the garage with urgency, quickly across the gravel drive and precisely to the edge of the lopsided brick ground.

She is already at the scratched-up black can, shooing the orange windowsill cat from diving into the gulf of their discards. With just enough strength, she's able to lift the week's worth of milk caps and orange peels, dog hair and grocery lists, dried-up ink pens and perished batteries into the lone canister. He swings open the driver's door, allowing the old truck to beep over the low music. It's not a song he recognizes . . . probably some duet about the eternal flowering of love or the gripping sting of heartache. He sees her at the side of the house, arms shaking slightly as she braces herself to lift the heaviest of the

bags over the can's threshold. He remembers when she climbed the five-foot wheel of the tractor, straining just as hard to pull herself up to his driver's seat, long enough only for a hello kiss. The tailgate slams down on his release; he folds the topper upon itself—just enough space created. She begins to pull at the unbalanced, unlatched can, moving it mere inches until he relieves her station. With a familiar sigh, he has lifted the great black monster into the bed of the truck. She has already taken the impressive step up into the passenger's side, hoisting herself onto the dust-breathing cushion and closing the door to the evergreen-scented, two-seated pickup. Soon they have backed out of the first bend of the drive, turning the vehicle around the corners of a tree on their left and then the mailbox on their right, staying on the narrow path that will lead them to the edge of Chapel Hill Road. The trees brush at the windshield as they shift out of reverse and speed the acre and a half over the spit-up of gravel and dust. They pass the two unbroken horses at the landlords' stable, ankle-deep in muddied snow left over. The uncertain eyes of the horses stare back at them, their matted tails whipping to the left and the right.

As they near the lineup of their only neighbor's sturdy bins, she smiles at the tree corpse across the road. Although she has never been close enough to touch the monument, she knows that it would feel soft like driftwood. She finds it strange still, this assaulted body so near the road, a combination of knotted roots and gnarled appendages, with an outer skin that appears tender. They come to a halt, truck facing tree with the road dividing. Soda bottles separated from their unscrewed caps roll at her feet, spilling out as she jumps to the solid ground. She retrieves the empty plastic, just as his voice begins to remind, five cents a bottle. There at the edge of the drive, headlights steady, truck in park, they deliver their contribution. Two sets of arms lift and lower the bounty as they refit their steps into the hardened molds of footprints past.

—*Lindsay Schaefer '05*

Going Gently

Bess sat in an old gray wheelchair in the Avalon Nursing Home, waiting for them to come, almost wishing they would forget. It was Memorial Day, and the family should have been here a half-hour ago. Perhaps they thought she had forgotten how to tell time. Or perhaps they felt she didn't have anything else to do, and really, she had to admit that she didn't.

She had been ready for nearly three hours; the staff at the home was nothing if not efficient. They had dressed her in a pastel-blue outfit that was too big now and made her look even paler than she was. She used to think the color brought out her sparkling eyes, but now those eyes hid behind pockets of wrinkles and thick glasses. The crispness of the heavily starched fabric made her skin hurt, but at least all the wrinkles were gone. More than she could say for her skin. She could feel the bulk of the diaper, the humiliating reminder of how little control she had over her body. Her color-drained hair had been pulled into a tight ponytail by Lizzy, the nurse, who didn't know how much Bess hated ponytails. Nor did Lizzy seem to care how much they accented Bess's thin face and taut checks. Lizzy was nice enough for a girl in her twenties, but Bess could tell that Lizzy would have preferred to be elsewhere. Maybe it was the way she gave simple orders in a raised singsong voice, a voice Bess recognized as one that she herself had used when her children were small. Or the way she sighed when Bess's roommate, Hazel, began to go on again about "the boat sinking." Bess wondered if Hazel had perhaps been on the Titanic—she was certainly old enough.

She saw them come down the hall, her youngest daughter and the granddaughter who was in from out of town. She saw the tears well in the younger woman's eyes and knew that they were not tears of joy but tears of mourning for the grandma who used to sing her to sleep when she was a child. Bess wished she could comfort her but knew that she didn't have the words or the strength. They hugged; the younger woman clung gently as though she could break Bess's bones with love.

They loaded her into the car, and Bess felt like groceries, a big old sack of potatoes that had to be lifted awkwardly in and out. She was

embarrassed by their hands in places where they shouldn't be, yet she did not have the will to help them. The short ride to her grandson's house was silent save the voice on the radio singing softly about love lost.

Everyone was gathered for fun and celebration, as they always had on holidays. Bess felt the mood sober momentarily as she was wheeled into the house. Everyone approached gingerly. Some shouted simplistic sentences as though her hearing were defective. Some just skirted the wheelchair, smiling politely as though they feared she would reach out and grab them. As though old age was a virus. Soon, though, Bess was lost in the bustle of busy youth. She had trouble keeping up with their scattered conversations. She smelled the grill and the slightly burnt hot dogs and hamburgers. Caught a glimpse of a plate piled high with potato salad. She longed for a taste but knew that her trembling hands could not support a fork. She knew the family would help, but she didn't want them to feed her. Didn't want them to watch the food dribble down her chin.

She wanted them to remember the mother who had read them *Goodnight Moon* by candlelight during a storm, taught them to pitch in the backyard, baked her special chocolate oatmeal cookies for the PTA fundraiser, and held their hand in the delivery room during the birth of their first born. She wanted them to remember the grandmother who had brought them flowers in the hospital, had taught them the twist for the big 50s dance and comforted them when the right boy hadn't asked them to the prom. She wished she could bring them joy and wisdom again, but she was so tired.

She motioned her daughter nearer and whispered, "Home." She was being helped back into the car after less than an hour visiting the family she would never again play a vital role in. She was back at the home in time for Jell-O and Hazel's tirade about the sinking ship.

Unlike Hazel and many of the other folks in the home, Bess knew where she was, what she had become. And Bess knew that it could be worse. Avalon was clean and the staff was kind, but there were so many residents in all states of decay—many of them rambling day and

night. Some just a name on the chart—alone, abandoned by a family who was either too far or too tired to deal with the needs of the aged. At least her girls visited. They were short visits, and Bess knew that the family was frustrated by her refusal to speak. They didn't know how hard it was these days to find and form the words. "Old people are like babies," she had heard someone say once when she was young enough to laugh at the statement. It was true, she supposed, but babies were fascinated by the new discoveries made each day—each tiny step, each syllable new and exciting. For the aged, each syllable was a memory of how easily the words had once come, each step a tiny patch of grass on the field they ran through in days gone by.

She had had a full and happy life. She had been a dancer, a painter, a liver and lover of life. She had borne two girls and watched them grow to become mothers and grandmothers. She had lived and loved and lost. She did not mourn for her lost youth, she realized. She had simply had enough of life and was now waiting for the end to come. In the past eighty-seven years she'd said all there was to say and tasted the stuff of life, and now her plate lay before her, empty.

That night as she closed her eyes and was lulled to sleep by the faint beeps and buzzes of the various monitors down the hall, she felt her soul leave her body. At first she was frightened, but then she realized that this was not simply a new stage of old age. She was floating, feeling so light, so free. She looked down to see her withered body peacefully lying on the small, white bed—the empty shell it had become. She peered into her lifeless face as she floated close. She softly kissed the slightly smiling lips to thank her body for the full life it had given her and then slowly floated up, pausing only to do a backward somersault in the air.

—Susan Jameson

Hall of Fire

The civic girl reaches for me
wet with fire and hardened smoke.
Her red hair is shorn of darkness.
Her blue rivulets of breath still hold
in my hands with the tears of memory.

City streets are blowing
out to sea as the fires turn
trees into silver ash, a crystal dynasty
outlasting headlines or death.

Streetlights saturated all day with
onlookers, and hoarders have shaved
their heads in exchange for rain.
The margins once married
in secrecy, no one remembers.

But the civic girl is standing.
She is raising a glass
to her temple and looking into
the room mirrored beside her.
Half a room on fire is all she sees.
The other half has fallen
off the ring sprouted on her finger.

She will be awake in my arms
all night. She remembers the sirens
flaming as if from a brass toy.
She brings the grace of rituals
and will become the lanyard,
frayed, towed out to do battle
pushing up the plushy heart of sleep.

—*Chuck Blair '76*

Mississippi Song circa 1957

The fire escape has been raised all night.
This is why I'm awake dreaming.

The night is longer that way.

The night is waving again
from the valley heat.
If you look, you will find:

a wisp of shadow that follows
warmth from cigar smoke
entered into a bedroom contest:

the moon judging a rain cloud
passing south: the nightlight

burning off its skin to reveal
the shiny eye from a cricket face.

My father is on the balcony
listening to the Mississippi whisper
across the highway. His thoughts
wander there away from us.

I'm in bed next to my mother.
We are both watching my father.

We are so quiet with my father.

I've forgotten my father's name.
And my mother's name vanishes
into a last name I still remember.

I'm thinking, what are they thinking,
my mother and father, and my sisters

lost in another room?

I dream my mother is sleeping.

What is she dreaming?
Of my forehead she has touched
like the grain of sleep?

Her name is Helen, like Helen of Troy.

What is my father's name?
What is he thinking?

Does my mother dream of my father?

Her dream and the Mississippi
swim together against the currents.
This must be what she is thinking
even as she sleeps.

My father's name is Robert, or Bob,
Bob of the Mississippi.

I like my father when he sings
to himself under city lights.

I think my father and mother
must love each other. One standing
guard while the other dreams.

The waters pass slowly between us.

—*Chuck Blair '76*

Epitaph

Over time
The calliope sang
A riverboat tune

The gambler arrived
With a buffalo nickel
Which became a penny
For your thoughts

Discounts fell into the Mississippi
On Senior Tuesdays
Flooding the final resting place
Of the knotted spiderweb
That upset you in the shower

Hours seemed shorter
Muscles quieter
Your beard began taking
Afternoon naps
And then taking time off
Your lap grew rich

Over time
There was dust that fainted
On your front porch
And would not be swept away
The Mississippi flooded again
And yet again
Stubborn dust became silt

There were women who breastfed you
And some who refused
A halo of blood
And an emergency visit to the zoo

The world closed its eyes
Ferris wheels ignored you
Propellers stopped in midair
And all the while
You smiled at cartwheels
Licked salt out of wounds
And spat it back in

Over time there was
Not enough
Or too much
You were forced to choose
Until arrows suffered the most
Of all your armaments
On the hairs of the shafts
Crouched in the fall
Of sunlight's weeping

Inside a poverty
Compelling time
At the shoulders of daybreak
You tapped your toes
Told your fish stories
Repeating yourself
Only one per beat one
Per beat always

Over time
These words
Surveying distant stars
Whistled for your alone
From the hip of sleep
Just beyond the waiting
To catch up
In weathered bliss

—Chuck Blair '76

proxy

It sits in the far corner, on a small table, away from the light. It's easily available—on a small cushion, propped against the wall—but it is also out of view of most curious eyes.

After all, you wouldn't want just anyone to notice it, would you? It is a fine line to walk, to be sure. It must be kept simultaneously safe, convenient, and comfortable.

There is a temptation to place all focus on safety. Safety and secrecy. You must resist the powerful urge to hide it from sight and guard it from harm by locking it in a fire safe. After all, what could you do if it was locked in a box?

Despite your best efforts, it's an odd-looking thing—a doll of beige canvas in the roughest approximation of a human shape, nearly two feet long, and wrapped in coils of tarnished silver wire. Aside from the wire, it is undecorated except for the brown smudges on its head suggesting facial features.

You'd never let anyone get close enough to notice, but an odd odor hangs about the thing. It smells faintly of sweat and rotting meat. It is slightly damp to the touch and far heavier than it looks. It rattles and sloshes if shaken. When it thinks you aren't paying attention, sometimes you see it move, from the corner of your eye. Sunlight has never touched it.

The other urge you feel is to keep it with you at all times. This is an easier impulse to resist. After all, to have it on your person would be both awkward and foolish. It's just too heavy to carry easily, and doing so would make it more than useless. But after all the trouble you went through to make it, it's difficult, sometimes, to let it out of your sight. Other times, you never want to see it again.

It hates you.

It has hated you for some time now, and it's probably too late to do anything about it. Most of the time you don't want to. Most of the time you hate it, too.

At first you tried to take care of it and give it at least as much pleasure as pain. You tried to remember to keep some of the pain for yourself. That's what you were told was best. Never forget the feeling of pain, they said. They told you, To be human is to feel pain.

But then came that night when you should have died.

Was it the time you were drunk and stumbled in front of a truck? Was it when you did too much smack cut too many times? Maybe it was when a betrayed lover shoved you a bit too hard and you toppled from the fire escape ledge to the alley three floors below and broke your fall with your head. It doesn't really matter which came first. You should have died. At least you should have felt the pain.

But you didn't. You didn't feel even a single twinge. Like a twisted god, you kept right on going and the sweet rush of stolen life blew away the buzz of the drugs and adrenaline. It was a delicious pleasure like you'd never known, and you kept it all to yourself.

The high finally ended and you made your way home. You felt guilty before you opened the door. It was the first time you felt it glaring at you. Its reproach was palpable, emanating from the blood-smudged eyes.

You could have paid it back. You at least could have tried. But you didn't. The thrill you'd felt was too great to resist, and you wanted more.

It had been your back-up, your insurance. Your comfort when things got a little too hard, too intense to handle. It was temporary. You always ensured everything balanced out. They had told you, warned you, repeatedly: You can't bottle away the pain forever.

But first you forgot the warnings, then you forgot how to feel pain. All kinds of pain: from black eyes and broken bones, to heartache and heroin withdrawal. You let it eat it all. And the joy of cheating death pushed you ever onward.

Perhaps it was after taking a swan dive from the top of an office building, or maybe it was after driving your car off a bridge and into the river. You'd lost games of Russian roulette. You'd consumed massive quantities of drugs never intended for human consumption. You'd played chicken with a train and "won." You began to lose track of it all.

It swallowed every death, and it hated you for it.

Now you can barely stand to enter your own apartment. The hatred is intense. It hits you like a hammer between the eyes the

moment you open the door. It's more than you can take. You move it from its place on the table, where it had sat since its completion. It seems heavier than you remember, and its stench is stronger. It stains your clothes with an oily liquid as you lug it to the closet.

You know better than to lock it away completely, but you figure that you won't feel its hateful stare when it is inside the closet.

You won't.

You also won't notice when its binding wire starts to fray.

—*Brian Peters '08*



Leslie Bell '72
Soft Breeze in the Footlights

2008, oil on canvas, 55 inches x 48 inches



Leslie Bell '72
Girl with Dog

2008, oil on canvas, 50 inches x 38 inches



Andrew Moeller '05
Nebulous Hotel

2008, acrylic, graphite, transfer on board, 24 inches x 24 inches



Tien Chang '08
Iridescence Blue Corner

2008, oil on canvas, 12 inches x 15 inches



Kristin Quinn
Sanderling's Signal

2007, oil on canvas, 60 inches x 72 inches



Kathryn Anderson
faux phoenix

2008, digital photo illustration, 5.12 inches x 6.83 inches



Dan Haughney
Project A

2009, acrylic on canvas, 30 inches x 40 inches



Matt Sanchez
Sonido de la Guerra

2008, digital collage



Matt Sanchez
El Patio

2008, digital collage



Katie Payne
Burnt Shadow

2008, digital photography



Kim Maher
Re-creation

2007, digital collage



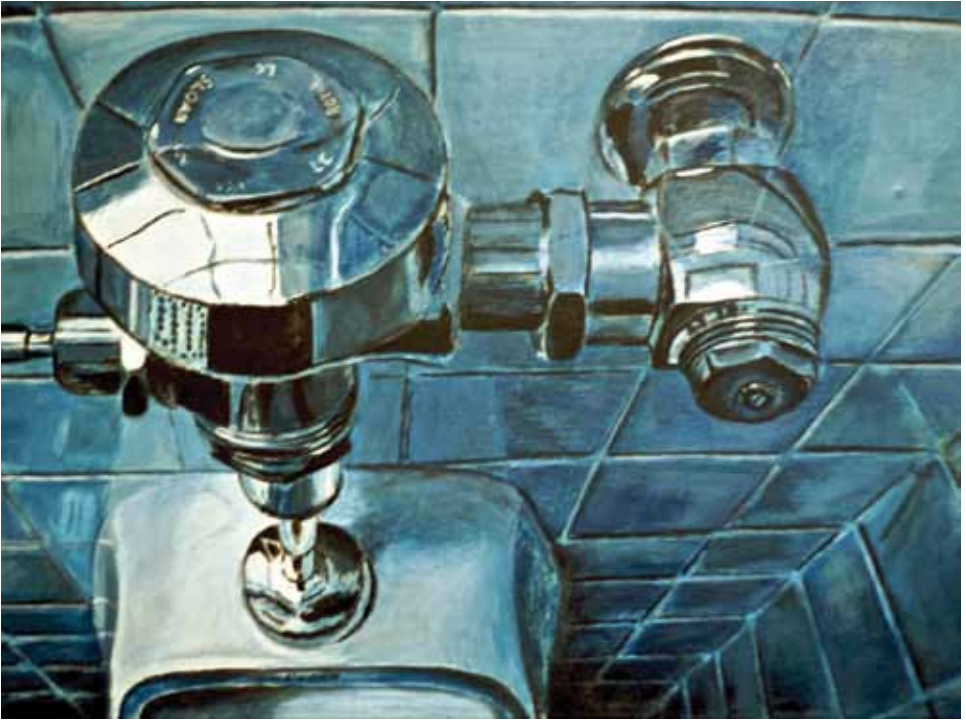
Heidi Hernandez '05
Coney Island

2007, oil on canvas, 38 inches x 50 inches



Katie Seiz '08
Vintage Garden Utopia

2009, mixed media, 22 inches x 28 inches



Munir Sayegh
Take Aim

2007, acrylic on canvas, 24 inches x 18 inches



Rachel Longstreet
Sweater

2009, photo of installation, 1 inch x 7 inches

Folding Tees

Home briefly from Ames, he lets me
kiss him on both whiskery cheeks.

My heart dancing, I turn to the three
bags of laundry and begin to sort into piles—
 reds and oranges
 greens and grays
 navies and blacks
 light blues and yellows
 black towels
 orange towels
 off-whites
—seven loads. Seven ups and downs
at three-quarter-hour intervals.

Separate stacks on the ping pong table:
boxers, shorts, jeans, sweatshirts,
and tees.

Taking each warm, bounce-scented tee
from the dryer,
I press it to my chest, front in,
snap it twice to shake out the hems,
and fold back the left third, sleeve first,
with my left hand,
the right third with my right hand smoothing
one sleeve across the other.
With a bob forward, I make a center
fold at my midriff, matching the tee's shoulders
to the lower hem.
Slowly scooping the rectangular packet
off my stomach, I unbend
and carefully tote the tee
to the converted laundry table,
laying it on the proper stack
and ironing it gently with one more stroke.

I do have a life.

—*Nancy Hayes*

rag doll

i'm falling apart at the sutures
clumsily done by shaking hands—
an amateur's work at best.

now, outside the limitations of this body,
i roam the night,
less than a shadow,
heavier than the oil
slick on the street outside your house.
i leave no footprints,
slipping inside
through the mail slot
to wait, crouched and breathless.

the taste of metal on metal—
your arrival is punctuated
with the chirp of keys back
into a coat pocket,
like birds at daybreak
mock the insomniac
digging in for another day,
as your smile makes light
of this splintered form.

last night's been on repeat,
stuttering behind my eyelids,
pausing at all the best scenes
when words floated gracefully
from your lips to crash, haphazard,
between my ears.

you didn't even look me in the eyes—
a singular explosion snowballing
into nuclear armageddon
propelled by disdain

and the force of already
having moved on.

each part of speech
zigs, zags, avoids containment,
searching for an exit.
i give none, keep
lips and teeth locked tight
until i'm split, words
streaming out of me
like so many rays
through a vampire caught
out at dawn.

so, i've come to regard
this pain as yours,
show it off.
my shell drops to join the dust
in your carpet,
the big reveal—
aha!

do you see?

—*Jenn Flattery*

Last Rites

Tonight you look
washed out as old film,
hospital sheet like a screen
stretched up to your neck.

I flash back to the last night
your fading body flickered,
casting light instead of shadow.
We drove past the old movie palace,
shuttered since the mall opened,
where on Saturday afternoons
we once made the world wait,
whistling Dixie while Atlanta burned.

Now, when I suggest a show,
your old glimmer is restored
before you slip off at last
to a Technicolor heaven.

—Jeff Dick '77

Our Final Duet

In the summery September breeze
my sister sits on her small front porch
with me as I play my guitar
and together with my children
serenade the neighborhood.
I turn to look at her as she sings.
Her face is puffy from the steroids
they give her to control the tumor in her brain.
Her voice has more vibrato than mine,
but I match each of my unwarbling notes to hers
—a patient argument in harmony we've carried on for thirty years.

“What other songs do you know?” she says.
“What songs would you like to hear?” I ask,
unaware how rapidly her memory has faded.
She is preparing for a passage
to a place where time and space do not exist.

But she remembers the words to our song
and sings along with me
as I affect gaiety to protect us all
from the unvoiced pain of our final separation.

We sing another
and she sobs uncontrollably
as together we sing our last goodbye.

—*Bob Louisell*





To(get)her

In dark caverns
of linguistic taste
light shot through from our gut feelings

pantheon of spirits
our heads shot up in the clouds
swapping what's alive as syllables and souls

grace fell over us
wrapping her matriarchal arms through
our own embrace:

a matrix arch of quivering bamboo,
leaves [rustle] beneath our breath
and
shelter
this
one
moment

over a stupa mountaining
out of our one mind's
corpus callosum brushing

the fontanel, buzzing with
s y n a p t i c e l e c t r o n i c e l e c t r o n i a
tongue flick, drum bass
swooning ambiance like
our breath wetting the bamboo
like

our soul's light:
a halo circumambulating the stupa

Anger

Death dyes color absent stains on veins dripping tears from rain,
Prepositional pre-packaged bombs like propane—
Displeasure for insane names pain,
Hype in different ideas enveloping might,
I might be
Tight as ice.
As an accidental type I fight stars on cloudy nights
Just because I devour angered hours,
Split sick from Legit Poem wit,
Devour torture,
Escaping torturous,
Treachery mentally meant for me,
Steadily I stand to be,
Faded . . .
Molested my own views till they jaded,
Candid love raided,
Played it.
My upbringing raised me to be diverse,
Taught me to psychologically
Abuse dudes who think the cliché norms to do make them cool;
I am Ill Logical type new.
Mad mental,
I develop sentences instro-incidentaI,
Rewrite the future with my pencil,
Crazy patterns when your body's my stencil, smell the instrumental
Sour reactions like fennel—
Leave cats dumbfounded.
I got rhymes.
You sellouts pawned mine.
Hear their rentals,
Original ill subliminal refillable un-killable syllables,
Straight un-rippable description, Addiction.
Who'm I kiddin',
Skills spittin' writtens
Fitting in,

Punching out dividends,
Replenishing vocabulary.
Should be glad I'm not famous,
Think the government would be blameless,
Ignoramus wasted,
Face it—
I displace kids similar to politics,
Instructing quick licks on structure shifts,
Obscure disorder,
I'm talkin' 'bout order,
Closing the US border,
Slicing egos shorter,
Corporate major,
Ridiculous on paper.
We're the cleaver reapers,
Sleepers attack neater
Than cats with mics 'n speakers,
New-developed teachers and preachers,
Listen'n
While the world unfurls—
Intellect so fierce we make toes curl,
Bow down to the underground sound,
Shaved clowns with hip-hop grounds,
We teach real aspects of life,
If not certified, we're classified articles with pain and strife.

—*Graham Squires*

It Was and It Wasn't

Somewhere in my early teenage years I started losing track of my memories. I couldn't tell the difference between the things that had made me who I was and things that had never even happened. The first thing I remember is trying to stand as still as I possibly could. I was three years old. My feet were stuck to the top step of the basement stairs at my babysitter's house, and though the light was turned off I could see everything. I was wearing an old windbreaker jacket that couldn't zip up the whole way to the top and a pair of blue jeans that let my skinny knees poke out through holes. Standing at the bottom of the steps facing me was the sitter's oldest son. Neither of us could move, and that was all there was. I hated it. Honestly, I'm not sure if it ever really happened, but it is still my earliest memory.

The rest are all just jumbles. There were people at a picnic drinking root beer out of cold glass bottles. I played soccer barefoot. I walked through a forest with a girl and stomped on a foot-tall mound of dirt that turned out to be an ant colony. A pet dog relaxed in the grass, and I pressed my head against her belly to listen. It's not the mess of them all floating around and mixing together that's so bad. Once in a while I'll catch myself recalling a dream as if it were absolute reality. Sometimes it's really fantastic stuff—the kind of stuff that now, years down the road, I have a hard time believing. When I was a teenager I saw two separate UFOs. It's hard to believe.

There were a couple quick knocks on my door, and I turned in my chair to see Jack shaking a pack of cigarettes at me. He had a white plastic Bic lighter stuck between his teeth and was grinning real wide like a crocodile. They say white lighters are bad luck, but I never really believed that. Jack was about my height but a lot skinnier with close-shaved dark hair and a padlock hung around his neck. He was a punk from the south shaking cigarettes at a ginger living in Michigan. It was a well-timed interruption, but that wasn't unusual.

We headed outside. After not having seen each other for a full year, we had finally met up a few days ago. Since the last time we hung out he had been committed to a mental ward for a couple weeks. There was some story about a long drug binge and Pentecostal parents. The ward had been named "Anchor," and after getting out Jack had a nautical anchor tattooed on his shoulder.

The whole experience was pretty serious, I guess, but the tattoo was the only change I saw. It looked nice—a lot better than some of his

do-it-yourself attempts. Earlier that day he had shown me a new one on his foot. Late some night he had taken a needle and ink to his big toe. There was a crooked capital “F” on it. The one next to it had a wobbly “U.” Next to that a slightly smaller “C.” Just those three letters. He told me he started sobering up after the “U.”

Jack had a lot of good stories for a young guy, and I couldn’t blame him for telling them. We got outside and lit up our cigarettes in salute to the evening’s setting sun. I handed him back his lighter, and he shoved it in his pocket. I got a flash of Christ removing the scales from a leper’s eyes, or a big fat belching comet tearing up the sky and putting every single living, breathing, eating, and sleeping godless dinosaur out of its misery.

“You ever heard of cognitive dissonance theory, Jack?”

“Nope” He took a hard pull from his cigarette. He always rushed them.

“I read about it a couple years ago, and it’s been stuck in my head ever since. As far as I can tell, the whole theory boils down to a simple fact. If you hold yourself to a set of beliefs but find that at any point your actions contradict those beliefs, you are much more likely to change your beliefs before you change your actions. The book I was reading said that smokers were one of the best examples of the theory.”

“That’s kind of scary.”

“Definitely.”

“I don’t really want to think about it.”

“Me neither.”

We stood outside smoking more cigarettes until we both had things to do.

Jack wanted to visit me later in the year and hop trains around the country. I told him he should really think about it.

A couple of months later, I found myself back in the Quad Cities. It was warm out and all the cars were shiny from a previous night’s rain. I grabbed my backpack and headed outside on my bike.

There’s this funny part in the Bible where all of Christ’s disciples are having a hard time seeing the point of his mission. At the same time, Jesus is running around the countryside healing the blind so they can see. It’s really simple and true and kept coming back to me.

I headed down to the river, flying past half-condemned apartment buildings and big old houses that hadn’t been taken care of in a long time—the only things separating me from the water. As I rode downhill, the sun beat hard and I dreamed I was sitting on the floor of my

future apartment with some friends. We talked about all the different music we wanted to make before we died. My cigarettes were sitting in the kitchen, and as I got up to get them so did one of my friends, except he hadn't moved at all. I stood and saw in the reflection of a window that it was his shadow standing with me. His material body stayed completely seated. It was exciting, but maybe riding down to the river wasn't the same day I dreamed of his shadow standing. The important part was that it was the day I made it to the river and lit a cigarette and that it was so dry it sucked all the moisture from my lips and clung there. When I pulled it from my mouth the filter took the skin with it and my lips stung and bled. I took it slow, careful not to let it stick again.

There was a man on a speed boat in the middle of the water. Shirtless, he was tanned dark from the waist up. I tossed my cigarette butt to the rocks; he didn't notice me standing on the shore. The boat suddenly became part of him, like a tattoo or a toenail.

My bike's handgrips were warm and soft from the day. I rode slowly across the bridge to Illinois. Wind blew strong the whole way, pushing me to the hand rail and then back toward the road. There were cars coming and going but no one else outside. Everyone was probably hard at work somewhere.

Once in Illinois, I headed for the rail yard. There was no one there either. I tossed my bike behind a pile of railroad ties and walked heel-to-toe along a tire track on the ground. The hundreds of train cars and the huffing and puffing engines spoke to me. They whispered a message of salvation. Squealing metal should never have been such a soft gospel. Their wheels clacked staccato. I spat a tiny strand of blood onto the dry dirt.

Two weeks later I found myself in a different city in a different state listening to the same trains. Maybe this was the time they spoke about God, and not that time before, when my lip stung. There were miles of tall green oak trees in every direction. This was my second or third time coming out here. It was a spot close enough to a city that the trains were still running slow, but far enough away from the city that no one would see me or suspect anything.

The first train that passed me was all silver cars filled with tractor parts, or cell phones, or whatever. There weren't any good spots to

hide on it, and it seemed like it was carrying something someone cared about. Nothing I had any business getting on. So I sat and counted the tread on my shoes and tried to make bird calls with a piece of grass.

The second train was made up of green and blue and tan cars. There were places to hide, but not great ones. Really I just wasn't bored enough to jump it. It flashed on by and made dumb metal faces at me. The train couplings laughed and called me a child. I just smiled back, knowing it wasn't quite right or wrong. For some reason, I was reading a lot of books about dogs at the time, and I took one from my bag along with a blue pack of Pall Malls. Thinking about the gospel trains, I was careful not to let my cigarette stick to my lips. I had so much time. Hours later and halfway through a story about a dog who loved snow, the third one arrived.

Earlier that year an old man had told me a secret about trains. "The good ones are always red. They're always red. You remember that."

I had told him I probably would, but at the time it was a lie. He explained how in the past, trains were easier and safer to hop. Things had changed, but he knew one thing. Any train that was old like him would be rusty and not new and silver or blue or green. That rust painted the trains red and kept him safe for as long as he could live.

"The good ones are always red."

As that third train got closer, all I could pick out were the broad patches of crumbly red rust covering the sides. Most of the cars were empty scrap metal cars. It was perfect. Maybe this wasn't the time I remembered the old man telling me his secret, but I felt good about the train, and it even seemed to slow a little as it got near me. I jumped out of the woods and bounded up to it. There was dirt on my hands from sitting around for so long. A good amount had collected under my finger tips. It mixed with all the dust and grime on the side of one of the cars as I hauled myself over. There's normally a rule to follow with this sort of thing, but I didn't need to be careful. It was a good one.

—Patrick Wehe

Finding Shelter

“They say it’s going to be a bad one,” Doris said moments before the lightning cracked and thunder shook the house. She sat in her favorite chair reading a paperback, an afghan covering her legs. “They say we could get three inches and hail the size of golf balls. They say we should take precautions.”

Outside, dark clouds passed across the sky overhead. The hard wind rattled loose windowpanes.

“You shouldn’t stand so close to the window, Larry,” she said, still reading her book.

Larry looked at the cover. *Victoria’s Secret: An Ingrid Risberg Mall Walker Mystery*. Doris liked mysteries. She always had one going and would never leave the house without taking at least two with her.

“What will I do if the show doesn’t start on time?” she had answered one time when he asked. “What will I do during the intermission, or if the doctor is running late? Doctors run late, Larry. You know that.”

“So why take two?” he then asked.

“I might finish the first.” And so he had grown used to her reading while he waited for things to start. He lived a lot in silence.

While Doris read, he watched the sky and the trees whip in the gusts. Then the soft roar of rain began, followed at once by the drumbeat of a deluge so heavy the earth could not swallow it.

Doris glanced up and said, “I’m worried about Toby. You know how much he hates thunder. He barks. He barks a lot.”

“The vet thought he should stay for more tests.”

“He’s been with us for a long time, Larry. He should be with us now.” She waited until he looked at her. “We know how this will end.”

He nodded.

“Then he should be with us.” A flash streaked in the West. Their lights flickered, faltered, and returned. “It’s bad,” she said, returning to her reading.

“Remember,” he said, “how we met in the rain? Outside the theater. Both of us waiting for cabs.”

“You said we could share.”

“Either that or me watch as you sped away. You had gotten there first, you know.”

“Self-serving?” she said, turning a page.

“I also wanted to meet you. I thought we might have things in common. And I found you attractive.”

“I think we should go downstairs,” she said.

“We discussed the play. We laughed. You told me where you worked, and I said I’d call.”

“You waited two weeks,” she said.

“I didn’t know if you wanted me to. I wasn’t convinced,” he said.

“I didn’t want to look eager.”

“I don’t think you were.”

She turned the page. “It was complicated. Back then I thought it was complicated.”

Larry stepped away from the window a moment before lightning struck what seemed only blocks away. He felt the thunder. “Nice for us things have become less so.” He cleared a place on the couch and sat. “I have my job. You have your job. I have my projects. You have your books. We have season tickets to the symphony and the theater. You attend that mystery conference every year and collect autographs. I attend my annual convention. That’s the way it’s going to be, isn’t it?”

“I think we should go downstairs,” she said again. “Weatherman Robert said conditions were right for a tornado.”

Larry thought about that. “No, let’s not. Let’s fix dinner. For a tornado you need a purple sky, an eerie calm, and then you hear a freight train. This is just a thunderstorm.”

Doris marked her place with a finger. “We can solve all this if you just turn on the television.” She resumed reading, then paused again. “Go ahead and fix dinner if you want. What I know is what I’ve heard. Other people are taking precautions. We’re discussing dinner.”

“Alan has his lights on. Marge and Henry do too. They must watch a different channel,” he said. “It’s dinner time. It’s time to think about what to eat.”

“At least check to see that the flashlight works and the radio has batteries. And make sure the sump pump’s working, too. We don’t want the basement to flood again. The last one ruined your mom’s antique quilts.”

“And while I’m doing all that . . . ?”

“I’ll set out the candles.”

He picked up the newspaper from the coffee table. “Says here the day will be in the sixties with clouds gathering by late afternoon. Doesn’t even mention the possibility of rain until Wednesday.”

“Which are you going to believe? What you see or what you read?”

“Larry tossed the newspaper back on the table and crossed his legs. “It was a day like this—remember? No rain in the forecast, and then late afternoon it came. A gully washer, my mom would have called it. Two hours of rain hard enough to tear up a lawn.”

“And the next day we had the sump pump installed.”

“Not the next day,” he said. “That came later, soon after the second flood.”

She put her book down and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. “You’re right, it did come later. Sometimes I move events around and change their sequence. You never do. It’s one of your traits.”

He smiled at her. “I’ll check the basement,” he said, and she resumed reading.

Minutes later, Larry returned carrying a small package wrapped in white butcher paper. He ran water in the sink, testing it with a finger to make sure it was warm. Satisfied, he filled a pan, then placed the package into the water to thaw.

“Batteries okay?” she asked. “The rain’s not letting up.”

“I remembered storing enough spares to keep us charged for an entire forty days and forty nights, if it should come to that.”

“And the pump?” she called.

“Fine, fine. It’s all fine, Doris. Power’s on and the basement’s dry. I brought up sirloin for dinner. Thought I’d make a stir fry.”

“I’m afraid all we have is broccoli and carrots.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” he said.

“Marge and Henry don’t have their lights on anymore,” she said.

Larry went to the front door in time to see lightning strike in the west. “But Alan still does.”

“Since when do you put any weight in what Alan does? You’re always making snide comments about his landscaping work.”

“Landscaping?” he said, returning to the kitchen. “He mows,

edges, and fertilizes. That's not landscaping."

"Anyway," she continued, "Alan's the type of man who'd just as soon wait out a tornado in his den, sprawled back in his recliner. You know the kind you read about. A grandmother somewhere is found in the front room still knitting while the remains of an unlucky family who took shelter are scattered over five counties."

"You're proving my point, Doris."

"I was afraid you'd see it that way. But you never read about the stubborn ones who did nothing and are themselves scattered."

"Au contraire," he said, opening the refrigerator and removing the vegetables. "You know about the hurricane parties along the coast where brave folks gather to wait out the storm over cocktails and appetizers. Then their own Weatherman Robert upgrades the storm to a category four, and, well, we read about the carnage for the next several weeks."

"Now you're proving my point."

He put the cutting knife down and thought. "Those stories are morality tales to remind us we must always listen to authority."

Doris put her book down. "Now, that's bad advice," she said in her best sarcastic voice.

"I suppose it doesn't hurt to listen," he said, "but then we must question."

"You've been reading too many bumper stickers," she said.

"I detest those things. I don't know whether I'm getting too old, if I've become more impatient, or if there's just more of them. Everyone has a point of view and no one's hesitant to share it. It's as if our entire educational system has failed."

"Lucky we don't have to worry about that. I mean, the school system." When Doris paused, Larry glanced at her. She had turned to the window. He counted the seconds to himself, waiting for her to say more. When he got to six, she said, "We left that for others, didn't we?"

Larry said, "In a way we have, if it's children you mean." Doris turned from the window and noticed Larry watching her. He shifted his attention back to the cutting board. "Still, we pay property taxes. We have a right to complain. Shouldn't we demand value for our

money?”

Doris watched the storm while Larry sliced the vegetables on a bias. The rain continued pounding.

“Larry,” said Doris, “we should do something this spring. Take a trip. Go somewhere we haven’t been. Somewhere exotic.”

“Does that book of yours take place in Cairo? Tahiti maybe?”

“Ingrid Risberg never leaves Minneapolis. I’ve read so many I can draw you a map of the Mall of America. No, I mean somewhere so different we’d have few, if any, points of reference.”

“Then why not Cairo? Beijing maybe. No, I’ve got it: Katmandu. I’ve always wanted to visit Nepal.”

“That’s the idea. A challenge. We’ve become too comfortable.”

Larry sliced the partially frozen sirloin into thin strips. “Somewhere where if it stormed, you wouldn’t have a basement to run to, or a supply of batteries. There’d be no Weatherman Robert to explain the jet stream or describe the amount of precipitation to expect or give a long-range forecast. A place where after a good hard soaking, or a shift in the tectonic plates, we could find our hotel buried under twenty feet of mud. We’d, of course, be all right and tell our stories to some CNN reporter before pitching in with the relief effort.”

Doris smiled. “Sounds fun.”

“I’d like not having a weatherman describe what will invariably not happen. You know how it excites them to exaggerate. If an inch falls, it means they predicted four.” Lightning snapped in the dark sky, followed by more thunder. “We have become too comfortable, haven’t we?”

“That happens,” Doris said. Larry saw that she now stood in the kitchen entrance, the afghan around her shoulders. She continued, “It gets easier to stay put and harder to move.”

The lights flickered. “Unless it’s to go to the basement,” he said and laughed. “Did you find the candles?”

“I had to finish my chapter first.”

“And did you?”

“Then I started another one. Don’t look at me like that. It’s not like you insisted.”

Larry checked the oil temperature in the wok by shaking in water

droplets. “What wine should we have?” he asked, dropping in the strips.

“Red, silly. We have that bottle we got last month at the co-op.”

“For a special occasion,” he said.

“It may be real special before this storm’s over,” she said. “Look across the alley. The entire street is pitch black.”

He looked up. “Maybe they’re all off visiting relatives. Doris, if we lost power, would the gas range still work? I can’t recall.”

Doris hummed, pretending to weigh the answer in her hands. “Gas, electricity. Shouldn’t they be independent from each other?”

Larry shrugged. “And water. Do we lose that? You know, if the water pump requires electricity and should we lose power, then we’d have no water—right?” He lowered the heat under the pan. “Then again, maybe it’s a pressurized system requiring no electricity at all.”

“The thought of this interconnected web is disturbing,” she said.

“Dominos,” he said. “One system fails, they all fail. And before it’s all over, we’re incapacitated.”

“Then you’d better finish the stir fry before we lose everything.”

“If we would lose everything. We can’t seem to remember. You can help by getting the rice started.”

“Before I get the candles? The dark is closing in on us.”

“Like an evil hand snuffing out the light of existence,” Larry said. He removed the sirloin and dropped in the carrots and broccoli. “Are you sure we don’t have cabbage? Cabbage would be good.”

“No cabbage. I put it on the list, but someone forgot to get it.”

“I didn’t see a list,” Larry said.

“Exactly.”

“What else did this phantom list have on it?”

“Oh, let’s see. Dental floss, I believe. Tabasco sauce, fresh dill, garlic, cashew butter, orange juice.”

“We’re out of Tabasco? Don’t tell me that.”

“You might be able to shake out enough for one more meal. I thought you’d be more concerned about the floss.”

“Something you don’t know is that I keep an emergency supply in my travel bag.”

“You don’t carry a supply of Tabasco?”

“I did. Had a bad experience once. Consider what a rough baggage

handler can do to a glass bottle.”

“Ouch,” she said. “Stains too.”

“On a white dress shirt and tan slacks. Had just enough time to buy clothes before the meeting.”

“Is that before you met me? I’ve not heard this one.”

“Not long before. I’m sure I told you. God, it’s one of those horror stories that gets told and repeated.”

“No, I would have remembered.” When Doris saw the water boiling she poured in the rice, covered the pan, then turned down the flame. “Make sure this doesn’t boil over while I get the candles. We’re on borrowed time as it is.”

“Put in the new CD while you’re looking. The piano concertos.” Larry stirred the broccoli and carrots and tapped his wooden spoon on the edge, knocking off the excess. Raising his voice so that she could hear him, he said, “That garlic would have been good, too.”

“Use the powder,” Doris said from the other room. “It’s fine in a pinch.”

He put the sirloin back into the pan and turned down the heat. “I’ll get the wine,” he said.

When he returned from the basement he found Doris sitting at the kitchen table with unlit candles in front of her. He said, “About to chant?”

A lightning bolt exploded nearby, followed by a thunder clap that shook the house. The rain fell so hard she could not hear the music. Doris smiled and said, “Maybe we both should.”

“It’s not letting up, is it? If anything, it’s getting wor . . .” and before he could complete his thought, the lights flickered, steadied for a moment, and then went out.

Doris said, “You were about to say worse?”

“Well, it’s here. We’ve come to the moment of the unknown. And it couldn’t have arrived at a better time. Food’s prepared and the wine’s in my hands.” In the dark he saw a match strike and watched as Doris touched the flame to the candles.

“Hope this doesn’t spoil your good time,” she said, shaking out the match. “Having some light now, that is.” Larry smelled sulphur and burning wax, and tried to recall the last time he’d seen Doris in

candlelight.

“I could use the light to find the corkscrew,” he said.

“Even Neanderthals had fire,” she said. “Going primitive doesn’t mean living in darkness.”

“I like candlelight,” he said. “It softens things, puts mystery back into shadows.”

Doris said, “I have a book of short stories I’ve been wanting to read. Crime stories to fit this mysterious mood. After dinner maybe we can read to each other. I used to do that, remember? On long car trips.”

Larry opened the wine and handed Doris a filled glass. “Of course. Then we stopped making trips.”

“My mother died,” she said. “Then your father. We didn’t need to travel so much.”

“And plane fares dropped,” he said.

“Staying at home became easier,” Doris said, taking a drink. “My clubs. Your projects.”

“Your books,” he said. “My work.” Larry set the table and placed serving spoons into the bowls. Sitting, he said, “Bon appetite” and raised his glass for Doris to toast. After touching glasses, they took a drink.

“The wine’s good,” she said.

“Good wine makes any meal better,” he said.

She took a bite. “And the meal’s good, too.”

“I had to work with a limited palette,” he said.

“True art is having a limited palette and still creating a masterpiece.”

“Spoken like a true patron,” he said, and reached out his glass for another touch of hers. “More wine?”

She nodded. “Aren’t you even a little curious what Weatherman Robert has to say? The wind’s picked up. The roof could fly off, taking your wok and everything we own with it, and we’d still be here chatting about masterpieces.”

“He cradled his wine glass in both hands, becoming more aware of the turmoil outside. “When was the last time we had dinner by candlelight?” He noticed her smiling. “You know,” he said. “I can tell.”

“On our second anniversary,” she said. “It coincided with your

first raise. We had reason to celebrate.”

He remembered. “We went to Au Petit Paris. They sat us at a small table in the back. It wasn’t crowded that night. We had their full attention all evening.”

“The next month we moved into this house,” she said. “We had plans. We needed more space.”

“Then your mom died, we took in Toby, my sister ran off with that South American businessman, I lost my job, got a better one, the basement flooded, you discovered the Boucheron mystery conference.”

“You left out the doctors.”

He nodded. “Before your mom died. The years spent with the specialists, the tests, the insurance forms, the waiting. Soon after we moved here. No, I hadn’t forgotten.”

“I guess we still grew into this house, though we didn’t need the extra bedrooms.” Doris looked outside. Larry watched her and noticed how through the candlelight he could see individual strands of her hair and the shadowed contours of her face. He hadn’t looked at her like this for a long time. Hadn’t time or reason, life having become a series of practiced lines and familiar routines. The dinner was good. Maybe garlic and cabbage wouldn’t have made it any better. He would have liked more Tabasco, though.

“I miss Toby,” she said. “He should be here.”

“I know. We’ll bring him home tomorrow morning.”

He watched her hands in the flickering light—the raised veins; the brown spots, or freckles as she claimed; her long fingers; the unadorned nails—and knew time was passing too fast. He covered her hand with his own. “Let’s go to bed and read stories to each other by candlelight.”

“What about the dishes?” she asked.

“The water,” he said. “I’m sure it’s not working.”

—James O’Gorman

