

THE MAN IN THE RED CAR ⚡

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NOTE

The short stories in this book were originally written in the late 1980s–1990s. Though human nature remains constant — one of the few things that does — technology has changed radically since then, as have other aspects of our world especially post-9/11. When pulling together this material, I thought about revising the stories to reflect updated technology and societal shifts. But I soon realized whether a character is using a 5G smartphone or a rotary dial landline is beside the point; likewise any form of ‘cultural correctness’. The stories stand on their own ‘timeless’ merits, as do the poems, for which timeframe always was irrelevant.

⚡ SHORT STORIES

DRAFT

DOROTHY'S DAY

SOUND FILTERS THROUGH the depths of her sleep as Dorothy swims to the surface. She wakes to luau music, or some ad exec's idea of it, as the radio alarm signals the start of another new day:

"...arrive from the airport by limo to Luxuriana West, a Garden of Eden even Mother Nature would envy. Take a horse-drawn carriage or lagoon launch to your secluded tropi-condo while viewing exotic wildlife — macaws, ostriches, flamingoes, monkeys, zebras, and much much more. Gather for early evening drinks and gourmet hors d'oeuvres on a floating bar that drifts around a lake edged with waterfalls and computer-synchronized fountains. Swim in a pool so vast it's dotted with 'islands', each with a little grass shack and its Man Friday serving refreshments to the 'shipwrecked'..."

There is more — the litany rolls on, the liquid voice gilding old Hawaii with the new improved version — but Dorothy, now wholly conscious, is distracted. She is fantasizing a tropical getaway with Max. She will bait the hook tonight at dinner.

Not long into her reverie, she scowls. There is a problem: her boyfriend hates getting hot and sweaty. But maybe in an artificial paradise they'll have that one under control too.

Still in bed, Dorothy moves body parts sector by sector from head to toe. She elongates, arching it all like someone about to be drawn and quartered. A few spots are stiff, no doubt from yesterday's session with PowerMan. Mid-stretch, Dorothy recalls a bizarre dream: something about an old farm house, fields of corn, a dog, the sky darkening and her rushing to a storm cellar. Another disaster dream. She's been having quite a few of those lately.

Dorothy gets vertical and follows her nose to the kitchen where freshly brewed coffee awaits her in the carafe. Max, a whiz with gadgets, has programmed the coffeemaker to turn on when Dorothy's alarm goes off. She pours and sips, then pads to her computer. She selects The Daily Organizer: other than "work out with PowerMan" and "dinner with Max," the day, unaccountably, is blank. She checks the backup; that's blank too. Again she sips, pondering the oddity of a day without errands. She's uneasy enough about it that she conjures some up.

Dorothy decides to take care of her faulty telephone answering machine over lunch hour; even the whiz has failed to cure it of speaking in tongues. The radio ad, seeded in back of her mind, bears fruit: the dinner as luau. Max would call it one of her "inspirations." So she plans a stop at Mega-Save on the way home for pork loin and pineapple and some of those hydroponically grown kiwis Max is so crazy about. She keyboards "ans machine, lunch hr; bring yogurt" and "M-S after workout for luau stuff, espec kiwis" and prints a copy of The Daily List for easy reference later on. Just then the phone rings, but before she can answer it or even check caller ID, the machine clicks on with its mystifying gutturals. Dorothy calmly pulls the plug and bags the machine for transit. In the shower, she congratulates herself on not sweating the small stuff.



Dorothy is employed as office manager at Workout Wonderland. The place was an ordinary health club — the usual weights, rowing and skiing machines, stationary bikes, tanning booths, whirlpool and sauna — until the owner had a vision: he saw that clients needed strokes as much as trimming and toning. So he retooled to a battery of computerized personal trainers that greet

you by name, coach you by task, and keep track of your individual progress. Dorothy was a club member, not an employee, when the new machines went in. But they were such a hit that retooling prompted restaffing, and she jumped at the chance to work and work out at the same place.

Now nearly every day at just past five, Dorothy wriggles into spandex and seat-belts into a cockpit whose touch-screen dashboard circles a video monitor. The monitor blinks as the trainer takes her mass, weighing her in the process. Weigh-in activates silver monotone: PowerMan asks for her ID number. She enters it. The machine hails Dorothy, displays her weight without comment, then asks her to select options from the dashboard menu. She touches icons, in sequence, for what she wants. “Ready?” the trainer asks. Dorothy blasts off.

Dorothy’s high mood is dented this morning by technology marching backwards. She calls PowerMan Inc. about an aberrant machine. Dialing the toll-free number, she endures the obligatory recorded spiel:

“Press 1 for our latest catalog of computerized trainers and accessories; press 2 for information on purchase and installation scheduling; press 3 for billing inquiries; press 4 for...”

The litany rolls on. Dorothy presses 8 for repair, endures another spiel, presses another digit. The live human she finally reaches puts Dorothy on Musak-hold to pull the file; can’t find the file; grills Dorothy about the account; puts her back on hold; tries to find the file once more and fails again.

“Are you *sure* you have an account with us? The computer can’t find you, and I don’t see hard copy either. Maybe you’re confusing us with—“

“Look,” Dorothy interrupts, “I’m not confusing you with *anyone*. I’m the office manager at Workout Wonderland, which owns twenty of your machines. I can give you a purchase order number for every one. We have a service contract with you. I already gave you the account number for that. I can even describe the service tech: he’s tall and skinny with red curly hair and John Lennon glasses. Looks like a few rounds with PowerMan wouldn’t do him any harm.”

Dorothy waits it out. The white noise of the open line is Musak to her ears.

“I’ll have to check further and call you back later.”

Dorothy knows about *later*. She hangs up in disgust. It’s a toss-up which is worse, the recorded messages or the live ones.



At noon she walks two blocks to Avalon Mall, conveniently located near Wonderland, and makes a beeline for Discount Jack, where she bought the answering machine just long enough ago that its warranty recently expired. Customer Service is busy: she waits in line behind other consumers also dedicating lunch hour to maintenance. Only two windows are open despite the line.

“You’d think they’d have more help at this time of day,” the elderly gent in front of Dorothy complains to no one in particular. No one in particular responds.

Dorothy wonders whether he’s recalling a time when it was otherwise: when stores were neighborhood stores; when shopkeepers knew all their customers, took pride in what they sold and stood behind it personally. When service meant something other than keeping the customer waiting. A time of — Dorothy gropes for the right word — *honor*. Was there truly such a time?

Dorothy sees the old farm house from her dream. The farmer and his aproned wife, framed in the doorway, wave to her as a sharp-nosed biddy bicycles by. Dorothy shudders.

“Can I help you, ma’am? *Ma’am?*”

She has reached the head of the line.

Dorothy describes her problem with the answering machine to the customer rep, who asks a lot of questions while he fills out a form in triplicate. His hairdo is the latest — a roadmap of shaved strips — but his typewriter (!) and skills are from the proverbial Stone Age. Dorothy can’t understand how someone who hunts and pecks so slowly, so deliberately, can masticate a form like Roadmap does. Once the boxes are X-ed and the blanks are filled, he still doesn’t know whether the machine will be repaired or replaced and whether the warranty, now defunct but in force when the trouble began, could actually apply. Dorothy signs the mess and is handed the pink copy as her receipt. The rep files the yellow copy and tapes the white original to the machine; he drops the tagged item into a bin hip deep with other misfits. The bin appears bottomless. Dorothy visualizes holes dug in sand all the way to China by small children with plastic shovels.

“Processing will take about three weeks,” Roadmap announces.

Dorothy knows about *processing*. She sighs.

She walks away, feeling uncertain about what just transpired. She hears her telephone ringing and ringing to no reply. She’d better call her mother, who’ll think something’s terribly wrong when neither human nor machine responds. Preoccupied, Dorothy bumps into a T-shirt proclaiming *GO FOR IT!* The teenager sporting it doesn’t seem to notice the jostle. Dorothy apologizes. He doesn’t notice the apology either.

“Go for *what?*” she puzzles out loud. “Just what is it we’re all *going for?*”

In the ten minutes left of lunch hour, Dorothy sits on a bench at the edge of the mall, resting her legs which ache from standing in line and pacifying her growling stomach with strawberry yogurt. She watches cars creep along the fast-food drive-through near the bench. The disembodied voice takes the orders, then repeats them — amplified — for verification:

“...two double bacon cheeseburgers, one without pickles and tomatoes, the other with the works, one extra-large fries, no salt, with two packages of ketchup, one medium Mr. Bubbles, one cherry vanilla shake, and one coffee with milk and sugar...”

After the third order, Dorothy moves to the far end of the bench to avoid eavesdropping on what seem like the intimate details of other peoples’ lives. The dent in her mood grows. She thinks about dinner with Max the electronics account man, whose life lays out like a spreadsheet. Hopes that Mega-Save isn’t out of kiwis. Worries whether Max will warm to the idea of the tropics.

“Is that asking too much?” Dorothy appeals to no one in particular.

Her watch beeps a two-minute warning. She hobbles back to Wonderland, praying to a power she would like to believe in that nothing else — not machines, not relationships — breaks down for a day or two.



In the belly of PowerMan, Dorothy is in control. She touches icons for chest press, leg press, arm curls.

“Ready for all that?” the trainer queries, faux-concerned. “Touch CANCEL and then the icon to void the menu selection.”

Dorothy punches GO with a vengeance.

Fueled by the day’s frustrations, she pulls, then pushes, on the bar above in time to the hip-hop beat. The monitor flashes with the music. Several sets in, she hits her stride, gets a second wind.

“Nice work, Dorothy,” PowerMan booms with a coach’s pride. “Keep it up.”

Dorothy, body on autopilot, floats free. Her edges dissolve. She drifts in a zone devoid even of white noise. There are no relationships here — personal, familial, spiritual, sexual, sociocultural, commercial, legal, ergonomic, electronic, cybernetic. No toll-free numbers. No voices — live, recorded, faceless, bodiless. No Daily Lists. No maintenance: there is nothing to buy, nothing to manage, nothing to break down. She is grateful to have escaped, however momentarily, pressing numbers, touching icons, to access life.

Dorothy looks down at her double. She’s shocked by the intimacy of the scene: PowerMan embracing the pulsating form underneath. She retrieves, from memory bank, the feelings; tries them on like new clothes. They fit perfectly but Max has no cash to buy them. *I’ll charge them* he resolves. *But Max* she hears herself say *You can’t buy love on credit*.

Dorothy is jolted back to Planet Earth as the trainer counts down the last set. DONE zooms to fill the monitor.

“You’re in fine form today. Rating on chest press is 99.”

PowerMan sounds pleased. Dorothy sure is.

But what comes next, the leg presses, is tough. Maybe the aftermath of waiting in line. PowerMan notices too.

“Must have been that marathon you ran this weekend, Dorothy,” the trainer jokes.

As Dorothy falls farther and farther behind, PowerMan sobers. “I’m afraid you’re not keeping up.”

“If you’d had the lunch hour I had, you’d be more sympathetic,” she retorts. The machine, the strong silent type, doesn’t say a word.

Dorothy overcompensates with the arm curls.

“Heart rate rising above target,” the trainer warns. “No need to overdo. You don’t have to be Atlas.”

But Dorothy’s not so sure about that. She knows she needs strong arms to hold the world at bay. Besides, she needs to feel she’s accomplished *something* today. And she doesn’t want to let her trainer down.

“Overall rating is 97.5. Way to go, Dorothy.”

The monitor instructs TOUCH GO AGAIN IF YOU WISH TO CONTINUE. Dorothy touches END.

“Bye, Dorothy. Lookin’ good. See you soon.”

The moment Dorothy unbelts, the monitor goes dead. She reorients; remembers dinner with Max and all its uncertainties. She wonders why Max never says “See you soon” as warmly as PowerMan does.



Max is nonplussed, and not for the first time, as he unlocks the door to Dorothy’s place. She is nowhere in sight, but her “inspiration” is everywhere. The furniture has been pushed back to

accommodate a large straw mat ringed with silk flowers, and someone sounding suspiciously like Don Ho is singing.

Max persists in applying logic where logic has no business. He has analyzed IT, *the relationship*, to shreds. IT, the mythical beast of yore, lion's head on raptor's body, wings plated with scales: an abomination of Nature that thrills and horrifies all at once. He sees how the old saw "opposites attract" operates. Sees how a guy like him could fall for a woman like her. The trap is this: what he *falls* for is what he can't stand *living with*. Which is where analysis always dead-ends.

Feeling lightheaded, Max settles on the arm of a chair at the edge of the mat as Dorothy rounds the corner. She gasps.

"My God, Max, I didn't hear you come in. You scared me half to death."

But she doesn't look scared. She looks ravishing in a hastily constructed sarong. She is barefoot and bare shouldered, garlanded, perfumed, and, Max finds out when he touches her shoulder, coconut-oiled.

"Okay, Dor, I give up. What's the deal?"

"Deal, Max? *Deal*? It's after hours. Leave the salesman at the office. This isn't business, it's..." — Dorothy pauses for effect — "...*pleasure*."

Max hates it when she calls him a salesman, but lets it pass. He can't afford to waste energy when the beast of yore is flapping its flightless wings.

He immediately rubs the back of his neck, a sign of confusion. She knows the sign and, taking the hand that started rubbing, leads him to the mat. He sits on unspoken cue and waits for her to bring the sacrificial knife, say the incantation, slit the throat of his folly. She returns from the kitchen with banana daiquiris and a pineapple boat heaped with sliced kiwis.

"Kiwis, Dor. How wonderful! You take *such* good care of me." Logic is drawn and quartered. Analysis flies to the four winds. "Maybe we could grow these here in your terrace garden..."

Fate seems suddenly magnanimous as Max savors kiwis and Dorothy savors the perfect opportunity Max unwittingly provides. He is deep into the second drink when she puts out the bait.

"Maybe we can't grow them here. But I know where you can saturate."

"Hmmm?" Max responds with half a mind.

He nibbles.

"There's this awesome vacation spot I heard about on the radio this morning. Luxuriana West. The perfectly replicated tropical paradise..." She spins the pitch.

He feels a sharp prick.

"Tell me, Max, when was the last time you took a vacation?"

Max has to stop and think about this because, in fact, it's been a while. He dredges the daiquiried depths.

"It was, uh, just after the efficiency analysis. Just before we reorganized and installed the new database system. I — I can't remember exactly when that was. Last winter. No, maybe midfall. Anyway, since then, whenever it was, we haven't had a breather."

He works at shaking the hook.

"Besides, we've got the PowerMan people coming in soon — remember? — thanks to you. Vanelli's counting on me to handle it."

Dorothy's thoughts stray to the morning's phone fiasco. She's not sure "people" is the right word to describe whom Max will be dealing with.

"The place sounds great. Better than the real thing. But you know how uncomfortable I am in hot humid climates. I get this rash..."

He's gone.

She reels in line, re-baits, re-casts.

"Dinner's ready."

She goes not into the kitchen but down the hall. Returns with a pair of wildly flowered bathing trunks.

"You don't come to a luau on *my* island in jacket and tie."

He is feeling lightheaded again. He rubs the back of his neck.

"It's not hot and humid *here*, is it?"

Max undresses on the mat amidst the flowers. It's not until he's bare-ass naked that he grasps what the first course is.



It is nearly midnight, the moon high overhead, when Max leaves. He never stays the night during the work week and always leaves before twelve.

"Otherwise you'll turn into a pumpkin," Dorothy mocks. Max, discarding island wear for street clothes, is not amused. He approaches being annoyed.

"I have my patterns, Dorothy. You know that. I'm used to doing things a set way," he lectures.

"Yeah. Set. As in set in concrete? Max, you're so compulsive. You watch the world go by from your safe little box —" Dorothy, realizing she's starting a fight and not meaning to, breaks off.

She apologizes and asks him to think about the vacation.

He says he will.

She wonders whether the trip has a chance.

He wonders the same about the relationship.

Nevertheless, he tells her, as he's nearly out the door, how terrific she looks in a sarong. And out of it.

"Thanks to the loving attentions of PowerMan," she muses privately as the door clicks shut.



Dorothy walks out onto her terrace, where the moon spotlights what grows there in her mini-garden — three dirt-filled whisky barrels. She recalls waking one morning with the urge to plant a garden.

Another "inspiration."

"If you're from the heartland, you're used to growing things. It's basic. In your blood," she'd answered Max, who hadn't asked.

"The *heartland*?" Max rubbed the back of his neck. "I thought you were raised in southern California."

Setting up the garden had taken an entire Saturday: borrowing a truck for hauling, renting a dolly, loading and unloading the barrels and potting mix, making umpteen trips with the dolly in the elevator, inconveniencing other tenants. Scattering dirt, like manna, everywhere.

Dorothy waters the planters by moonlight. She thinks about the problems she's had getting life to flourish here: birds smelling out and digging up the planted seeds; air pollution browning and shriveling the leaves, tainting the crop in who knows what insidious ways.

"Damn, another kohlrabi lost to the rats," she despairs.

But the tomatoes, the size and shape of robin's eggs, look perfect. The rats have ignored them.

"My gourmet rats, interested only in the exotics."

Dorothy looks out over the city. The events of the day drop away. The city lights wink like fireflies on a summer night.

Fireflies?

Dorothy sees a dog run across the alleyway below. It sniffs around, barks twice; sits and waits. Acts nervous, as if a storm's brewing.

"Since the house fell on her, everything's different," she explains to the dog. "Sure doesn't look like Kansas to me." ✎

DRAFT

DOROTHY'S DAY AFTER

DOROTHY KNOWS THIS morning she had too much luau last night. She swats the radio alarm dead — she's beyond snooze — and thinks about calling in sick to work. This makes her feel marginally guilty. She gets up to take a couple of pills to damp the dull ache in her head but as she does, her left ankle buckles beneath her weight and she goes down. Dorothy pants with pain. Her eyes water. She curses Max for not being there.

Dorothy limps to the phone and, *now* feeling justified, calls in sick. In truth, there's some prestige to having a musculoskeletal injury regardless of how you come by it where she's employed, at Workout Wonderland. Next she calls her doctor, whose office, the recording drones, won't open till nine. It is seven fifteen. She considers going to Quik-care, the new 24-hour clinic she's seen advertised, but prefers pain to total anonymity.

Dorothy thinks she's supposed to ice the ankle but, unsure, decides to Google for advice. She hobbles to the coffeemaker first, then the computer. But as she's about to enter "sprained ankle," she remembers MedInfo, proprietary demo software Max gave her as a gift — his first — which she's uploaded but never used. She opens it and scans the directory for "sprained ankle," hoping it's not too pedestrian a complaint. Evidently it is. It's not there. She tries "ankle, sprained" but that's not there either; then "twisted ankle" (nope); finally "sports injuries," which is such a broad category it spawns another directory.

Fast getting nowhere when time is of the essence, Dorothy quits and Googles "sprained ankle." So many hits come up she's unsure where to start. She is still only marginally conscious. As she randomly clicks and reads and clicks some more, her vision blurs from the pulsing ads and her mind is swamped with products when all she wants is information.

"This should be *simple*," she rails at the screen, thumping the desk with her fists.

The gesture jostles the coffee cup, which dumps its contents all over the keyboard. Dorothy puts her head in her hands and cries in earnest. Her ankle throbs. Her head pounds. Coffee and tears drip onto her thighs. It is seven twenty-seven.



"I can work you in at ten fifteen," the medical receptionist says when Dorothy calls at nine oh-two. Dorothy envisions Cinderella's wicked stepsisters trying to squeeze their big clumsy feet into the glass slipper. She labors to sound grateful, but knows about *getting worked in*.

She sets the appointment nevertheless, then phones Max at the office.

"Run it under cool water," he advises, enjoying the rare experience in their relationship of being in control. He certainly wasn't the night before, not after three (or was it four?) banana daiquiris, too much pineappled pork, and coconut-oiled Dorothy in, and out of, a sarong. Luau-for-two: definitely one of her "inspirations."

"The ankle?" Dorothy queries.

"No, the keyboard."

How often he feels she expects him to fix it when he's rarely sure what IT is. Well, *this* he can identify and take care of.

"Run it under... The *keyboard*? But Max, the electronics —"

"Dor, believe me, I know what I'm talking about. You know I know." He pauses for return fire that doesn't come. "Then disassemble it — see those three little Phillips screws on the back? —

turn the keys upside down to drain, and let everything dry for a day or two before putting it back together. I'll drop by tonight and check on it."

Max feels inflated with authority as he hangs up. But his balloon bursts once he realizes he's failed to follow up about the ankle.

Dorothy realizes too. But her ankle hurts worse than her feelings. It's begun to swell. By the time she's dealt with the keyboard, it's begun to color. MedInfo and Google be damned, she knows she should've iced it.



The waiting area is cavernous. Seven doctors share a space that, Dorothy figures, must serve hundreds of patients. It looks like most of them are there now. The battery of nurses is impressive, which is more than she can say for the magazine assortment: *Sports Illustrated*, *Hunting Today*, *Golf Digest*, *U.S. News and World Report*. One redeeming feature about going to see the doctor used to be reading *People* magazine without the embarrassment of having to buy it. She looks forward to getting her teeth cleaned twice a year; her dentist takes *Architectural Digest* and *Rolling Stone*.

Dorothy comes prepared to wait. She knows the clientele isn't called "patients" for nothing. She brings an article she's meant to read for weeks, about calcium intake for women, but hasn't managed the time. It comes from the Should Pile: the stack of self-improvement clippings she builds with righteous intent but never quite gets around to. She brings a card she bought to send to her friend Janice, a trainer formerly at Workout Wonderland, who's just had a mastectomy, and a survey received in the mail from a citizen's lobby, something about rating environmental priorities. She usually recycles junk mail unopened no matter how eloquent the pleas printed on the envelope, but despite Max's cynicism — "They want your money, not your opinions" — she was seduced this time.

She works through the calcium article quickly, highlighting key points with a yellow marker. Then she pulls out the card but doesn't know where to start. Dorothy heard about Janice secondhand and, lacking details, is unsure what tack to take. She hates to think she needs to take *any* tack. Somewhere along the line in all her schooling, shouldn't there have been a course?

"Dear Janice, I'm so sorry to hear about your — problem? misfortune? diagnosis?"

It sounds so cold, so stiff, so remote, as if she's afraid to get too close because mortality is catching. She doesn't know whether to invoke the C word; how to be light without seeming jocular, serious without seeming gloomy; whether to sound cheerful, hopeful, empathetic, indignant at the cosmos, or all of the preceding. She doesn't want concern misconstrued as pity or, worse, relief-it's-you-not-me. Dorothy stares at the blank inside of the card long enough that her eyes smart from not blinking. She puts the card away. "I'll call instead," she decides, knowing she won't for the reasons she's not writing. She feels *truly* guilty.

Dorothy drags out the environmental survey. It comprises two sections. In one, you're asked to rank priorities numerically; in the other, to check *Always*, *Usually*, *Sometimes*, *Rarely*, or *Never*.

"It *isn't* that simple," she says out loud.

Surfacing, she notices several people looking at her. She wonders how long she's been talking to herself and what else she's said. The waiting room still seems full. It is ten fifty-one.

Dorothy gazes down the long expanse of carpet, beyond the clusters of chairs and sectionals, to the glassed-in compound where the medical corps oversees ops. They patrol the perimeter

like white blood cells defending the body's boundaries, but just whom they're protecting — the patients? the doctors? the system? — isn't clear.

Beyond, somewhere in the maze of offices and labs flanking halls lit too brightly with fluorescents is Dorothy's doctor. She thinks about their relationship, wondering whether that word even applies. He periodically provides her a service, but does he think of her outside those times? Will he wake tomorrow morning wondering how her ankle is? Does he recall her history, match her name with her face before opening the examining-room door? If she left him for another doctor, would he care? Would he even notice?

A familiar sound filters through Dorothy's reverie. She recognizes it as her name. *Her name?* By God, they're calling her. She's been worked in. It's eleven eleven.



Margie, the doctor's assistant, ushers Dorothy into one of the examining rooms, weighs her, takes her blood pressure and pulse.

"Hmmm, blood pressure's a little elevated," Margie tsks.

"*You think?*" Dorothy keeps this to herself.

"He'll be just a few minutes," Margie says brightly as she leaves.

Dorothy slumps. She knows about *just a few minutes*. A battered issue of *Woman's Day* sits in a magazine rack, but she ignores it. She stares at the print on the wall, a pastoral scene: like something you'd find at a cheap motel.

For once, it truly is just a few minutes till Dr. Hazlitt appears. He's in his mid-thirties, with a high, shiny forehead and, even this early in the day, five o'clock shadow. He sports a flashy floral tie, reminding Dorothy of last night's luau, and an attitude to match.

"Hi," he says, her file in hand. "How're you doing?"

This pleasantry strikes Dorothy as ridiculous. If she were fine, she wouldn't be here.

It occurs to her maybe he thinks she's come for her annual exam. Then it occurs to her that he hasn't looked at her file. *Then* it occurs to her that no one bothered to note in the file why she's here and he didn't bother to ask. So much for their relationship.

Dorothy explains what happened. The doctor looks at the ankle, probes a few spots, checks the action of the joint.

"Hard to say for sure from clinical examination if anything's broken or not. Probably just a bad sprain, but we'd best be sure. I'd like you to go to X-ray."

He pulls out a pad of forms, checks some boxes, fills in some blanks, tears off the sheet and hands it to Dorothy.

"Margie will direct you." And he's out the door.

It's eleven twenty-one.



The X-ray tech, whose name tag reads "Al," escorts Dorothy to a changing booth.

"You can wear your own shirt," he says, handing her a pair of pink paper shorts with a drawstring waist. She's relieved it's not one of those demeaning gowns. "I'll come get you when I'm ready."

To pass the time — there are *no* magazines — she strikes a pose and regards herself in the mirror. Not enough definition in the upper arms but improving. Well-developed lower body: long, shapely thighs; calves a little too muscular. The rest hidden by clothing, she completes the

picture from memory: hard abs, especially the uppers; no hourglass figure but no love handles either; flat butt with minimal sag. She nods to herself.

"Those sessions with PowerMan are paying off."

She twists her left flank toward the mirror, hoods her eyes and tries a sultry smile. She nods again.

"Not cover girl material, but noteworthy."

Curtain of silky straight chin-length chestnut hair emphasizing large hazel eyes a little too close together. Bridge of the nose sporting a small bump, the vestige of a childhood fall; an "interesting" (Max's expression) nose. Full lips, especially the lower, with (her mother's expression) "curly corners." Square jaw. Long neck. Smallish breasts; not prominent but nicely shaped and well placed.

"Janice." She aspirates the name.

She tries to imagine herself without a breast. She thinks of Amazon warrior-women, said to have burned off the right breast which interfered with marksmanship. (Or would that be markswomanship?) Her ankle throbs at the notion. She thinks of this month's show at the Harrier Gallery — "Torsos: Homage to Sisterhood" — photos rendered all the more disturbing because the mastectomy scars look arty in black and white. She recalls a recent locker room scene at Workout Wonderland: one woman explaining her breast-reconstruction job to another. "After this heals" — she pointed to an angry red scar bisecting skin stretched tight over an implant — "they'll tattoo me a new areola and nipple." The woman actually laughed. Dorothy caught sight of the scar and had to sit down. Even the recollection makes Dorothy light-headed. She puts her hands on her breasts, to be sure they're both there, just as Al draws back the curtain.

The X-ray room is cavelike, a grim place, she thinks, to spend your workday. Al leaves the impression he lives here; his skin is pasty and his pop-eyes give him the look of a nocturnal animal, something perfectly adapted to dim light. His hands, which arrange her leg, are cool and clammy.

"Sorry. Poor circulation."

Al points to her ankle. "Accident?"

Dorothy tells him the story. Al's face expresses concern.

"Nobody at home to help you?"

"No, I live alone."

As Al goes about his business, alternately taking film — "Don't move a muscle now, hold it, hold it" — and repositioning the ankle, Dorothy wishes she hadn't told Al about her living situation. After all, she knows nothing about him. Suppose the guy becomes fixated; he looks kind of lonely. He could get her address, her phone number, from the medical records. Dorothy's mind gallops down disaster alley. She's especially glad not to be wearing a paper gown.

"That's it. You can get dressed now."

"Did I mention I'm moving? Next week? Out of town?"

Al appears confused.

It's high noon.



Margie leads Dorothy to a different examining room, this one decorated with a print of an American Indian chief. Her stomach growls and the dull headache of hours earlier returns.

An unfamiliar doctor enters and shuts the door.

"I'm Dr. Ballantino," he says. "Dr. Hazlitt was called away on an emergency."

Probably lunch.

"What seems to be the problem?"

Didn't Hazlitt tell him? Didn't Margie? Don't the people who work here talk to one another?

Dorothy gives him long story short.

"Let's take a look."

But Hazlitt already did that.

Dr. Ballantino examines the ankle. Abruptly, he leaves. Dorothy stares at the Indian chief, whose stern look seems to soften. Minutes later the doctor is back with her X-rays, which he slaps up on wall-mounted lights.

"Looks clean. Don't see any fractures, though something hairline might not show. Probably just a sprain," he says to the X-rays, his back to Dorothy. He wheels to face her.

"Painful?"

Without awaiting a reply, he runs on: "Elevate the leg and ice the ankle. Try the over-the-counter anti-inflammatories first for pain, but fill this just in case." He hands her a prescription. "If you continue to have problems, give us a call. Could be a tear in the soft tissue. We might need an MRI. Take care now."

As the door snaps shut, Dorothy asks, "Who was that masked man?"

She could swear she sees the Indian chief wink.

It is twelve thirty-five, the height of lunch hour, when Dorothy gets in line at the pharmacy's drive-up window. She's behind two other cars. The one directly in front of her, a mini-van, is full of children who bob in their seats. Dorothy envies them their energy: she is beat from the morning's ordeal.

In the van, a red-headed boy maybe eight waves to Dorothy. He waits to see what she'll do, his anticipation palpable. Dulled as she is, she can't resist; she waves back. Red is delighted. She watches him engage the others and point to her. They all turn her direction, grin, wave. She returns the gesture. They wave again, the momentum building; they bob even more vigorously than before, becoming the kind of silly you become only in a group. The driver, somebody's mother, turns around to tell them to cool it. Dorothy is surprised it took her this long.

Red moves from waving to slapping the rear window with the palms of his hands in a kind of remote high-five. The others follow suit. Pairs of hands beat the glass like fleshy pink wings. The woman turns around a second time. Dorothy sees, by the contorted features, that now she is yelling. Wings retract, bodies revolve, but it doesn't end there.

Red rides too big a wave to quit. He is on a dare; straining the limit, pushing the edge of the envelope. He rotates back, smiles broadly with teeth too large for his mouth, and gives Dorothy the finger. She flinches, as if deflecting a blow. The woman, watching through the rear-view mirror, reaches for the boy and whacks him good. The limit is reaffirmed. Red cries hard, unaware that boys don't cry.

Dorothy feels responsible, catalyst of a chain reaction whose consequences she couldn't foresee. And — *again* — guilty, voyeur of a drama that rips her heart but that she's helpless to do anything about. It's a familiar feeling, one she has watching the evening news.

As the crying winds down, Red wipes his teary face with pudgy hands that some day may do more damage than his mother's. The cars inch ahead, the mini-van now at the pharmacy window. It is twelve fifty-seven. The boy looks one last time toward Dorothy, but her sunglasses screen him out. She has severed the connection. She observes from a safe distance. Total anonymity is beginning to have real appeal.



By the time Dorothy stretches out on the couch to *finally* ice the ankle, it is quarter to two. Her head chatters. She rewinds events; freeze-frames; fast-forwards. She turns on TV where, talk show after talk show, people gorge on the world of hurt. They do penance while millions watch, trading pain for "fame." She is incredulous at the stories people tell on themselves. A woman whose husband divorced her to marry her mother. A wife who knowingly had unprotected sex with her HIV-infected husband. A blind woman terrorized by...

She and Janice are shopping for bras. She accuses Janice of buying bras too large and secretly padding them. In the store dressing room, she yanks down Janice's straps to prove her point; sure enough, crumpled tissues fall out. Then Janice does the same to Dorothy with the same result! Suddenly, Dorothy is no longer in the dressing room but in the middle of the store wearing only her underwear, sunglasses, shoes. Janice is nowhere in sight. Dorothy tries to find the dressing room but can't. She asks a sales clerk, who doesn't know; she asks another, who gives her the wrong directions. The sunglasses offer false security — people can see everything but her eyes — but they're her only shield. Desperate, she clicks her heels together...

The click of the front-door latch startles Dorothy awake. Every neuron goes on red alert. Every body hair stands at attention. Her heart slaps her chest wall like children's hands slapping glass. She is dimly aware that her ankle aches, that the couch is wet from melted ice. The VCR's digital clock glows five oh-five: as good a time as any to die. She only hopes *this* psychopath makes quicker work of her than the one she heard about on Oprah.



Max materializes with a bouquet in one hand and take-out in the other.

"One of your 'inspirations'?" she teases to cover her relief, as he hands her the flowers.

More like damage control, he thinks.

He puts the take-out, four containers of Szechuan, in the oven to keep warm.

Dorothy recounts the events of the day like a soldier telling war stories. Max sympathizes, something he's learned to "do" when he feels responsible but can't "fix it." He offers to get her more ice for the ankle, which she declines. He brings her a blanket, which she accepts. She's impressed he knows where the blankets are kept but doesn't let on. He wipes the couch's wet patch, soaking up the worst of it. He puts on water for tea at her request. Evidently he doesn't know where the tea is — she hears cupboards opening and closing — but hunts it down without asking.

"Chamomile?" he calls out like a barker at a fair.

"Perfect."

Still, he cleaves to technology for the bailout.

"Did you use MedInfo? It should've helped."

"I tried," Dorothy says. "But nothing came up for sprained ankles. Go figure. You access this series of directories and, well, maybe if I'd used the FIND command...I don't know...Jeez, I was in *pain*, Max, it wasn't time to read the bloody manual. Then I Googled but the amount of information was overwhelming and *then* I spilled—"

"Think of it, Dor," Max says, circumventing the rise in her voice, the edge to her tone, while handing her the steaming mug. He drops on the arm of the couch. "We're zooming down the Information Superhighway with greater and greater capabilities and access to our world."

"Excuse me?"

Max's brain zooms past her perplexity down a Superhighway of its own.

"Internet 2.0, 3.0...a wealth of ever-expanding information not just to retrieve but to interact with. And all at the speed of light." The account man spins the pitch.

Dorothy steps on it and passes.

"Max, Max, Max, we don't need more speed. We're already moving too fast. I mean, where are we all going in such a rush?"

"And more information? *More*? When we're already inundated with so much we dedicate most of every day just to managing it."

She's on cruise control.

"And — have you noticed? — the more so-called information we have, the less we know because so much of it's *noise*. The more we have, the more numb we get. Did you realize, Max, studies show that sensory overstimulation leads to *numbness*? And the more numb we get, the less able we are to act. Oh, we consume, mistaking consumption for action, and then wonder why we feel so empty, why all the stuff we've bought and *interacted with* doesn't satisfy."

Max rubs the back of his neck.

Dorothy changes gears.

"And the resources to support all this? Information is unlimited and, God knows, so is noise — hell, they're created out of thin air — but resources are finite. Do you think we can techno-fix-it-all? Do you *really*? Are you that naïve?"

Max feels off-balance as if listing to one side. The air appears hazy.

"And what about human relationships?" Dorothy wonders for the second time today whether that word even applies.

"What incentive will decentralized employees and social networkers have to venture from their electronic cocoons and physically meet? To make eye contact without a video cam and software to mediate? To catch each other's smells? To touch? Interacting isn't talking, Max. Transmitting isn't communicating. How many people already have deeper relationships with their devices than with one another?"

Failing to right himself, Max sinks to the floor.

Dorothy floors it.

"And who are the gatekeepers? Who protects my privacy? Or, should I ask, who defines or maybe redefines what privacy means? Who makes the rules? Enforces them? Government? Ha! And who agrees to play by the rules? Nameless, faceless international cartels responsible to no one and nothing? *Ha!* Sounds like a jumbo case of big boys playing with even bigger toys while the house burns down around us."

Dorothy slams on the brakes.

"What's that smell?"

Max sniffs the air.

“Oh shit, the take-out!”

Max jumps up so fast he nearly blacks out and runs into the kitchen. Smoke seeps from around the oven door. He turns off the oven at the instant the smoke detector goes off. He rips off its cover to silence the awful screech. Gingerly, he cracks the oven door — smoke billows out — and closes it before the rush of air flames what’s inside.

Dorothy hobbles to the kitchen door. She watches, though not from a safe distance. There is no safe distance. There are no surveys, no cards, no battery of nurses, no sunglasses, no TV screens, to buffer her this time.

“No system is inviolable, Max. Even a fail-safe can fail. What happens when the fiber-optic umbilicus gets cut? When the Supersystem goes down because it gets infected with an HIV-like computer virus, or because an info-terrorist short-circuits it, or because someone leaves the oven on too long?”

✍

Total anonymity, guilt, responsibility, the world of hurt, drowse on the doorstep while Big Brother slouches toward Bethlehem and Dorothy and Max talk till twelve thirty. Dorothy transcends the ankle. Max, who never stays over on weeknights, unexpectedly stays. The flowers he brought wilt, never making it to water. Dinner is neither mentioned again nor missed. The day’s events hang like smoke, ignorant of the speed of light. The keyboard, forgotten, drains on into the night. ✍

DRAFT

LUSTRUM

TONIGHT ALONG THE avenue, street lights and store lights, automobile headlights and taillights, flicker across puddles born of days of rain. I find myself watching women.

Gumbo of dirt and stones and leaves spills onto pavement that shuttles it this way and that. Even so, some things still seem thirsty: those rhododendrons, leaves hung down like empty sleeves. Men glide past me heading home for dinner. But I don't want to go home now, for dinner or anything else. Home is not what it used to be. No one's there. Never really was: just the illusion of someone, a flicker of light on a wet surface.



I walk into a grocery store to get out of the rain. In the store are mostly women shopping for the food they will cook tonight for the men heading home for dinner. I take a grocery cart out of habit and push it left, down the produce aisle. I always go left first. And think: *Here comes the bride down the aisle; down the isle; to the desert isle*. Two men scan the neat piles of apples, the pears, the oranges and tangerines, the grapefruit, pineapples, melons. They analyze. Their eyes make the selection, then their hands move the fruit into bags. The women have no eyes for fruit; they see it with gently probing fingers, building the form of each. This is their way, learned millennia ago while gathering. As if praying, a woman lowers her head to smell what she probes. The children do not touch the fruit unless given permission; at least someone is teaching them something.

The aisles are full of color: once past the fruit, more blue than anything. And they overbear with scent: coffee, soap, bread, fish. I pull items at random off the shelves, drop them into my cart, so no one will suspect my presence here — runaways must cover their tracks — wondering all the while if he is heading home for dinner now; if he is with a woman who cooks him dinner; with a woman who shops in this store, is shopping in this store at this moment.



I notice a blonde with tawny skin halfway down the aisle ahead of me. Even from here I can see she has placed two large cans of sweet peas and pearl onions into her grocery cart. I'd know those peas and onions anywhere: he adores them, especially with Virginia ham. He once told me, a brunette, that he prefers blondes. Perhaps those were words to heed, but it was hard to know what to cue on: he was always joking. I follow the blonde from aisle to aisle; mimic her cadence; attend to what she considers and rejects, what she ultimately chooses. He likes nearly everything she puts in the cart. When we get to the meat aisle, I strain to see if she buys a ham. She does. But she also buys frozen game hens, which he disdains: too many bones and too little meat. I think, actually, he fears chewing on bones as some people fear walking on graves. But maybe, with a new woman, he's shedding old fears, learning new tastes.

The blonde is heading for the checkstand. I would like to follow right behind her to overhear the pleasantries between customer and cashier, the timbre of her voice, of her laugh; to watch her fingers flutter in her wallet for bills or plastic. To catch her feel, her smell, like a woman buying produce: a woman left wondering how a man knows his mate when he can't even tell which avocados are ripe.

If the blonde wrote a check, I might, if at just the right distance, the right angle, learn her address. Then I could follow her home, where he would help her unload the groceries from the car; see her shake the mantle of raindrops from her hair and shoulders before closing the door,

locking me out. Spying through the kitchen window, I could watch them put the groceries away; him uncork a bottle of wine and pour some into two glasses for sipping while she prepares dinner and they exchange news of the day. She sprinkles spices onto meat dressed in oil and soy sauce; washes and dices vegetables; measures water to boil for rice. I could hear her tell him the meat needs to marinate for half an hour and him respond, *Good*, giving her a knowing look. See her turn out the overhead light in the kitchen and turn on the hallway light that illuminates the stairs to the bedrooms.

I don't want these groceries; haven't the money to buy them; would only embarrass myself standing in line behind her or anyone else.



The store is hot. I can't get my breath, begin to hyperventilate; discharge the loaded grocery cart as if it were electrified, the jolt projecting it into a stack of cardboard boxes filled with cans of creamed corn. All the turnstiles go the wrong direction, so I manage my escape through an unoccupied checkstand. Miraculously, I avoid trying to exit through the "in" door, something I am prone to doing. I would like to tell him right now that only men would construct a world with "in" and "out" doors.

Gasping for breath and nearly free of the store, I pitch headlong into the night and the tawny blonde emerging with her groceries. I cut my shin on her cart, packed with chubby brown sacks; the one sack she's carrying goes flying, its contents dumped into a puddle that splatters us both good. I apologize, stumbling over my words as I stumble over cans shedding labels, boxes growing soggy, in the wet. Together we put the items just recovered, loose and dripping, atop the sacks safe in the cart. She smiles at me, tells me not to worry. That's more than he ever did. *Then* I notice I am handing her several jars of baby food and a brand of aftershave I don't recognize.



She and her groceries are gone before I find myself laughing uncontrollably, laughing and crying all at once, trembling from laughter and cold wet legs, one bleeding a little, and soaking wet hair plastered by the rain into a shiny cap like holy men wear. Beside my right foot is a can of sweet peas and pearl onions: a runaway like me. I am suddenly famished and, can in hand, head home for dinner. ✎

WHEN HE'S GONE

SHE DOESN'T KNOW how to explain it, what comes over her when he's gone. It's as if, when he's around, all the energy she has goes his way, feeds him and the life they have in common. It's not that she doesn't have a life of her own; more like the energy powering her life comes from an auxiliary source, the main power station reserved for him, him and her in tandem.

When he's gone the charge piles in on itself, heaping like oily rags that in the end spontaneously combust. It goes on all day, the buildup: when she makes the bed, does the dishes, rakes leaves in the yard, sews a button on a cuff with one eye peeled while watching TV with the other; when she goes to the market, the post office, the gas station, to and from her job and when, at her job, applies herself to the work with verve and not a *moment's* thought to him. As the car idles at every red light, she engages other gears. It goes on all night while she sleeps: when dreaming, in between dreaming, at levels of consciousness that don't show up in psychology texts because the mind can't study itself *that* completely. Whatever it is unleashes the double, the alter ego; not exactly Jekyll and Hyde: not hideous, not raging or demented, no thirst for blood or taste for flesh. No one imperiled but herself, if you can call it peril. More like stalking the one rare plant that blooms only at midnight under a full harvest moon.



Saturday morning begins ordinary. She puts on music. She thinks, as she lies in bed carrying on their ritual of drinking coffee and reading the paper, maybe she'll go to the library, stock in some novels for the long evenings of reading she plans to fill the time when he's gone. She could stop in to see the show at the art center (something she always *means* to do but never quite gets around to). She makes a foray from bed to desk for the lists, the endless lists, to see which one she in her arrogance believes she could decimate in one afternoon. Lists of this and that: a bigger bathroom rug, some new CDs, a thermos, ginseng capsules at the health food store. Nothing terribly important to have or, for that matter, to do without but, like the phone ringing, like a child crying to get a mother's attention, insistent as hell. She puts them off, the lists, till she has time, as if time — precious commodity in endless supply — could be *had*. The cold gets her out of bed (again) to turn up the heat that he's always turning down as if, when he's there, he should supply the heat.

Tonight, she decides, she'll go out. Better call one of the group to find out what's happening. She knows the drill: they'll tank up and stay out late just so that, Sunday morning when they habitually meet for omelettes and lattés, they can indulge themselves in dragging ass and feeling sorry they're no longer young and indestructible.

She proceeds with further rituals: showering with no soap (morning only); examining her body for signs of decay (but not too closely; she already doesn't like the way the light falls where thigh meets buttock); avoiding the fact that her left breast is noticeably larger than her right. Slightly darkening the eyebrows, a skiff of mascara, for the natural look. Pondering which jeans, what level of fade; how many layers of shirts and sweaters and in what order, the colors, the patterns. But the closer she is to being ready to emerge, the less inclined she is to leave this house where she already spends too much time. It's really not a matter of inclination: more like the less *able* she is to leave. The plan for the day receding, she nevertheless continues the ritual of dressing. One earring or two? Matching or not? Watch strapped on even though she doesn't need to know the time.

It is important that the ritual not be rushed.

It is important that the ritual be completed.



When it's done, all of it, every last detail, she empties the garbage in the house to the outside can, feeds the cat, has another half cup of coffee, shuts off the music, puts in a load of wash (not necessarily in that order except for the wash, which is always last). As the water fills the tub, the hard jets foaming the detergent, she *flares*, life in tandem charred to ash: makes with the ash a sign on the door so the angel of death knows to pass over. ✎

DRAFT

THE LIST

“WILLIS, YOU MUST turn out the light. You’re bothering James, and it’s hardly the first time. He’s complained before how you turn the light back on after curfew and keep him awake. It’s unacceptable for you to disturb another resident.” She says “resident” but means “patient.” I wish they’d just say what they mean.

I look at Nurse MacDougall. Her features are so pinched it seems like someone’s zippered up her face. She always looks that way, whether she’s just come on duty or is about to go off. I bet she even looks that way when she does it with her husband. Actually it’s hard to imagine her doing it with anyone. Probably James can imagine it though; that’s the kind of thing he’d spend time thinking about without even meaning to. It’s part of why he’s here.

Most people feel sorry for us, James and me and the others, living out our days at Cedarwood Home. But I feel sorry for Nurse MacDougall. She suffers more than we do. You can tell by her face. I only suffer when I’m deprived of words — like now, late at night, when I have to turn out the light so as not to bother my roommate, James. It’s part of why I’m here.



My doctor tells me I got lost in the world of words long ago and can’t seem to find my way out. I just nod my head when he says that. I did get lost at first, but now I have a purpose. That’s the first thing the doctor doesn’t understand. And it’s not that I can’t get out, I just don’t want to — I mean, with my purpose shining clear. That’s the second thing. I’ve tried to explain this to my doctor and some of the nurses but they tell me that’s part of my problem too, that I don’t see how deep I’m in. Fine: let them think what they like. I have power ‘cause I have words and words have power. Words *are* power. The main trouble is we have too many words, so many that the power of each one is diluted. Our words are weak. And weak words, like weak bodies, can sicken and decay. Weak words, like weak souls, can be twisted.

It’s up to me to rectify this situation. That’s my purpose: to re-empower words. That’s why I turn the light back on after curfew, to read some more and write in my secret notebooks. Even though I tell James there is not a moment to waste, he doesn’t understand and gets angry and tells on me. He gets as pinched looking as Nurse MacDougall, which makes me feel sorry for them both. But I have no choice. You cannot buck your fate.



No one around Cedarwood Home comprehends the point of my reading. Their view is narrow. They think either that I’m trying to escape into fantasy to avoid the outside world, or that I want to know everything. I have told my doctor several times that I’m reading for The Key — The Key Within The Words. The New-Age Rosetta Stone. I speak haltingly, deliberately and slowly, so he can jot all this down, which he does, in the folder he keeps on me. That folder is getting thicker and thicker, but my doctor is just where he started. Nowhere. I’ve tried writing it down for him myself, thinking maybe he can’t read his own handwriting. For an educated man he’s not very smart. Meanwhile, in between sessions with the doctor and the “daily program,” I am reading and writing down all the clues I uncover. So far I have filled six notebooks, college rule, one hundred pages each. I keep these notebooks locked up in one of my dresser drawers. After all, they are invaluable, and I want to be sure none of the other patients pee on them or burn them up or who knows what. People are in Cedarwood for all kinds of problems. I don’t want to take any chances. James, for example, used to think I had girly magazines in there. He loves

to look at girlie magazines: that's part of why he's here. He started hanging around my dresser, so curious it gave me the jitters, so one day I unlocked the drawer and showed him the notebooks. I even let him flip through to see for himself no dirty pictures were hiding between the notebook pages.

"I told you it wasn't girlie magazines."

James looked heartbroken. "What in hell you want with all that scrawl?"

He growls when he's disappointed. I might have been offended but I wasn't. It's just James.

"Words are a thing of power and beauty," I said to James.

"Yeah," James spat back, "well so are tits."

He left to play cards. It was two pm. James always plays cards at two.



I turn out the light like Nurse MacDougall orders me to. It isn't a good idea to get on her wrong side. I wait till James goes back to sleep; you always know when that is because he starts sucking in his breath and then blowing it out like he's trying to inflate a balloon. It isn't snoring but just as annoying if you're inclined to be annoyed by things like that. Fortunately, sounds don't bother me. At least not when I have words. Once we had a fire drill and I didn't hear the bell 'cause I was reading. The nurses thought I was being contrary but I wasn't. I really didn't hear it till they shook me.

Anyway, when James is sucking in and blowing out so I'm certain he's under, I resign myself to the last resort, a tiny battery-powered reading light I hide under the covers. This never seems to bother James. He's never complained about it anyway, which is the best indicator. It's the last resort because I hate being confined under the covers: it gets close down there and it's inconvenient for writing in my notebooks. And sometimes there's a problem replacing the batteries when they wear out. But tonight I shove my paraphernalia down under and turn on the little light because, as I said, I have no choice.



The first thing that happens is that a small blue sheet, maybe three by four inches, falls out from between pages 46 and 47. It's been cut from an application form for a hunting license; I can tell that from the printing on one side. A small reddish-purple stain mars the bottom right-hand corner of the side with the printing. Maybe jam; it's a little sticky. There's a ghost of red purple on page 46 where the blue sheet was pressed against the book page. That mark'll be even more of a mystery to the next person who takes this book out from the mobile library that stops at Cedarwood once a week because the blue sheet will be missing. I intend to keep it. This is a find. Possibly the first step. What I've been looking for.

I begin to write about the mysterious blue sheet in my notebook but am stopped cold when I turn the sheet over. I discover a list of ten items, written in pencil. Number three pencil, I'd say; pretty light. I prefer number one myself — number three looks tentative — but number ones are hard to find. I tried, once, to get Nestor, the maintenance man around here, to buy some for me in the outside world. I gave him some of the money I've squirreled away. He said he went to four stores and couldn't find any. So I settle for number twos. The handwriting is loopy and erratic, a lot like my doctor's. Oh yes, I forgot to mention: three items are crossed off, but again in light pencil, so I can still read what's underneath. When I cross things off a list, they're

demolished. I mean, there is no way you could tell what they once said. I am very sure of myself. At least in that, the doctor and I agree.

I mark my place and close the book. I close my notebook. I fold the blue sheet very small and nest it in my fist. I turn out the little light and emerge from beneath the covers. There is no point in continuing to read: the list has taken over. I need to conserve batteries now. I'll need every resource I can muster. I may even have to bribe Nestor; I've done that before. He's a proud man, but he doesn't make much money here. He pretends to be offended when I first offer him a bribe, but in the end he takes it. It's how things are done *everywhere*. People think a place like Cedarwood is so different from the outside world, yet as you can see, it's not. Money is money, politics is politics, diplomacy is diplomacy. You learn how to operate. You have to, to survive. I've learned a lot here at Cedarwood that will serve me well when I get back to the outside world. The doctor always looks a little startled when I talk to him about my release. But that just confirms my feeling he's not very smart.

Maybe I'm not so smart either. Maybe I should get myself another doctor.



The next thing I know, it's morning. I can hear James brushing his teeth in our bathroom. Each semi-private room at Cedarwood has its own bathroom. I am really grateful for that. James is a decent person to share a room and bathroom with; there are others here, like Mr. Abbey, I wouldn't want to share with. Mr. Abbey is a sorry soul, always muttering to himself and moving about, shuffling and turning and popping up and down like pistons in an engine. That would be trouble, especially in the bathroom. He should probably have a private room, but those are terribly expensive and I doubt he can afford it. I wish they would make an exception in his case but, as Nurse McDougall frequently reminds me, there *are* no exceptions.

"Mr. Ordmann, let me assure you we would have utter chaos if we began making exceptions," Nurse MacDougall pontificates periodically, like a person who's lost her memory and keeps telling you things over and over because she doesn't remember she's told you before. We have patients like that at Cedarwood too. She calls me Mr. Ordmann only when she wants to impress something on me. I will admit it gets my attention. I feel like a senator or something, although I doubt that's what she has in mind. I guess it would be okay with her for me to be a senator if she were president. Nurse MacDougall shivers ever so slightly when she says "utter chaos." It's one of her favorite phrases.

James comes out of the bathroom, but I pretend I'm still asleep. He dresses quietly and leaves for breakfast. When he leaves, I know it's seven-thirty. He always goes to breakfast at seven-thirty.

You have probably figured out by now that James is what the doctor calls obsessively methodical. That's part of his problem too, though that part doesn't seem so bad to me. The doctors and nurses also are pretty methodical, but it must not be the obsessive kind. I'm no expert but I can't tell the difference. I feel guilty when I keep James up late at night because I must read. You'd think that, being obsessive himself, James'd recognize that I'm obsessive about reading. Unfortunately not. But even though he gets angry, he doesn't hold it against me. James is not the type to bear a grudge. I'm realizing, as I am telling you all this, how much I like James. How many people in the outside world can honestly say they live with someone they like?

I suddenly remember the list, which I'm grasping as if my life depends on it. My eyes snap open. I unfold the blue sheet and read the list over and over and over. Tonight I will copy it into

my notebook; no, into several notebooks. I will cross-reference the entries, to be on the safe side. It will be in invisible ink in case any of the notebooks should fall into alien hands. Maybe I'll read the list to James. I'll have to think about that. As I plan strategy, a beam of sunlight illuminates the name "Daisy" on the list. *Names*. This is the sign I've been waiting for. I throw back the covers and swing into action. Now I know where to start.



I skip breakfast and head straight for the nurses' station. Nurse Converse, round and red cheeked as an overripe tomato, is on duty. I say "Good morning." You always have to start the day with that. It's not a rule exactly: it's a courtesy. Something you have to understand to really operate. The nurses especially put a lot of stock in courtesies. Unfortunately, some of them are slow to realize that patients like Mr. Abbey are beyond courtesies.

The list is safe in my breast pocket, close to my heart. I am hoping the list is muffling my heart's wild thumping so Nurse Converse doesn't get suspicious or worried. Luckily, Nurse Converse is too busy to get suspicious or worried. I take a deep breath and ask her, very matter of fact, if anyone at Cedarwood is named Daisy or Elsa or Mateo. Elsa and Mateo are the other two names on the list. Nurse Converse smiles her best official smile and reminds me it's against policy to give out information on residents to anyone. And that includes other residents. Nurse Converse shivers a little when she says "policy," like Nurse MacDougall does when she says "utter chaos." Of course I know there will be no exceptions, so I don't waste my time on that one. Right off I've struck a dead-end. I say "Thank you," another important courtesy, and return to my room. James is back.

"You missed breakfast," he clucks. He is always mothering me.

I don't answer him. James thinks I'm mad at him because he called Nurse MacDougall last night. He feels guilty. Let him. I drop heavily onto my bed.

"Wanna look at some of my magazines?"

He *does* feel guilty.

Without waiting for a response, he rummages through his drawers and pulls out several. Nestor procures them for a fee. James sits down next to me, very close, closer than most people would ever sit to anyone but a lover; this bothered me at first but I got used to it. It doesn't mean anything. It's just James. He rips through one magazine after another, making funny sounds, his breathing ragged, turning pages like they're on fire.

"James, do you know a Daisy or Elsa or Mateo?"

He gives me an odd look, like I have secret information I shouldn't have. Then he rummages around in his drawers again. Finally he thrusts something at me. It's a fuzzy-looking picture of two women. One of them is dark skinned. They're both naked except for lacy stockings and some jewelry. Their nipples are as big as saucers. They are intertwined in an unusual, contorted way. James is grinning.

"Daisy and Elsa. No Mateo. They don't go in for that kinky threesome stuff in here."

I look at James, uncomprehending. I look back at the picture. Sure enough, the printing below names the women "Daisy" and "Elsa." I feel as if I'm in a little boat at sea, the waves like frenzied hands tossing me from one to the other. I'm doubly glad I didn't eat breakfast. James seems to be swaying. His eyes are crossing. Maybe it's *my* eyes that are crossing. I grab onto the headboard to steady myself. I worry I'm about to throw up.

"Whatsa matter?" James barks. When he's scared, he sounds mean.

“Can I borrow the picture?”

“Borrow the — ? But you don’t even — “

Crosscutting his words, I repeat, “Can I borrow the picture — the magazine?” The waves begin to calm.

James is long in answering. Finally he says, “OK. But just *borrow*. Not for keeps.” His voice is husky, another sign of fear. James can’t cope with uncertainty: it upends him. I feel bad about upending him, but it is necessary. He must feel *really* guilty to even consider loaning me one of his girly magazines.

“Don’t worry, “ I reassure him. “It’ll be safe with me.” To emphasize my point, I go immediately to my dresser and lock it up. After that, I go into the bathroom, lock the door, and turn on the water. James will think I’m washing my face and hands, which is what I often do after I get upset. The warm water feels soothing. Sometimes, if it’s really bad, I take a shower. The doctor says that’s therapeutic. This time, though, I have no need of therapy. I remove the list from my breast pocket and place an X next to “Daisy” and “Elsa.” The list actually says “Call Daisy,” “Write to Elsa.” I will figure out how to deal with the other words later. Right now I am thrilled at making such unexpectedly rapid progress.

When I come out of the bathroom, I find James where I left him.

“You okay?” he clucks.

“Yes, James. Fine. Just a little lightheaded from not eating.” I pause for effect. “And thanks for loaning me the magazine.” Above all, I mustn’t forget the courtesies, especially with someone I really like, like James.

At lunch I play with my canned peaches and bananas. The list, still in my pocket, has me deeply distracted. James notices I am not myself. He clucks some more, encouraging me to eat. He suggests we take a walk outside after lunch since it’s such a nice day. This upends me: James detests the outdoors regardless of weather. My behavior must seem exceedingly strange for him to conclude it will take more than his pictures to set me straight. I can see I’d better watch it, otherwise some of the nurses might notice, which will mean an extra session with the doctor. I can’t waste my time on extra sessions now. I choke down my dish of fruit and ask for seconds. James looks relieved and pleased. As we exit the cafeteria, he turns the corner fast and disappears down the hall: it’s free time, which means he can do whatever he wants, like look at his girly magazines without fear of interruption. James has already forgotten about our walk.

Undaunted, I go outside. It is a nice day. I stroll to the edge of the wide expanse of lawn that drapes Cedarwood like an apron. A stream at the edge forms a natural barrier so there’s no need for a fence. I’m glad there’s no fence. The doctors, who can be thoughtful when they want to be, probably helped the architects plan it that way. The stream is soothing, like the water in my bathroom; not warm of course but burbling. I have often felt the stream is trying to tell me something, something to aid me in my purpose.

I sit down on an old wooden bench covered with bird do. Usually I look up into the tree that overhangs the bench and the stream to see if an birds are in residence — it would be awful if one decided to makes its mess on me — but today I am, as I’ve said, distracted. So far I’ve been lucky with the birds. Or maybe it’s not luck at all: the birds also may know about courtesies.

I extract the list from my pocket and study it, wondering how next to proceed. A wave of fatigue swamps me. The burden of unlocking and interpreting the meaning of the list is an

onerous one. I hope I am up to it. I promise myself not to skip any more meals for the duration; meals will cost me some time, but I need the sustenance. Besides, the nurses mark down on their charts when you don't eat. They are ever vigilant. One thing I really dislike about Cedarwood is this lack of privacy. The nurses and doctors make everything their business. I bet they'd go crazy if we had to know every little thing about them. Nurse Meacham and I had a talk about that once. She said, in her calm and tender way, that the staff is only trying to help the patients. Nurse Meacham rarely says "residents." But "help," even coming from Nurse Meacham's lips, is another one of those weak, twisted words.

I stand up, trying to get ahead of the depression that is settling in like winter. Across the lawn, Mr. Abbey is popping up and down as usual. I can hear his muttering, which gets louder when he goes outside. It is almost like chanting but not as rhythmical. Nurse Vargo is in the background, just in case: Mr. Abbey must always have someone in attendance. Mr. Abbey is pirouetting. Some birds fly near him and he shoots up a geyser of arms in response. Then he takes off after them, his sticklike limbs and long patchy hair pinwheeling in all directions. He is headed my way. But I am in trouble. I feel weighted down. I don't see how I can move out of his path fast enough. Beginning to panic, I call out to divert him but his mutter is now a whine that drowns out my pleas. His eyes are glazed and spittle peppers his chin. Nurse Vargo, running in pursuit, can't keep up; she is young but not the athletic type. Her iridescent blue eye shadow flickers in the sun. Her cap sails off. If only the birds would veer in another direction, but they don't. They and he are coming straight for me.

All at once I hear a familiar voice. James is barreling across the lawn from the other side, the side near our room. My cries must have wrenched him from his ogling. Only a dire emergency, like a civil defense alert, can do that. He is yelling something unintelligible at Nurse Vargo, who trips and falls. The birds swoop low and then arc up into the tree overhanging me. At the last minute I garner the strength to uproot my legs and dive head first under the bench.

The next thing I know, James is looming over me, redfaced and panting. Mr. Abbey has tumbled down the stream bank. A disheveled Nurse Vargo limps toward us; the front of her uniform is torn, revealing a satiny slip and more flesh than she realizes. When James sees Nurse Vargo, his eyes go blank. He is done for. I can tell he's inserting her into the girlie magazines, decking her out in a peek-a-boo peignoir bordered with ostrich feathers and black net stockings and a red garter belt. Mr. Abbey is moaning softly, so we know he hasn't drowned. I am relieved to find the list pinned between my fingertips. A fleck of spittle rests next to "Write check." A blob of bird do stars "Talk over expenses." I get up, brush myself off, and proceed inside. No one else moves. Free time is over.



Fortunately, this is not one of the afternoons I have a session with my doctor. Nurse Converse tells me I can arrange a special session, which means she believes I should, but she doesn't push it and I pretend to be exhausted, acting like all I want to do is sleep. She will tell my doctor, for the next day's session, that I'm depressed. Let her. That will keep him off the scent. She stands at my door too long; apparently, she is not too busy to be worried this time.

"I'll reschedule James so you can sleep undisturbed," Nurse Converse whispers. I am stunned. She has made an exception. I vow privately *never* to reveal this to Nurse MacDougall. "Reschedule" is another one of those words, but I let it go this time. I am amused that the tables are turned: usually I am the one disturbing James. But I also am touched at what I believe to be

Nurse Converse's concern. Pretending to fall asleep, I watch Nurse Converse, through a crack in my eyelids, watching me. She writes down something on my chart. Maybe it's something flattering. Finally she leaves.

I tiptoe to the door of the room and open it a hair's breadth, to see if Nurse Converse has put the "DO NOT DISTURB" sign on my door. Bless her, she has. I unlock the dresser drawer, withdraw several notebooks, the only number one pencil I have, a pencil sharpener, a pen with invisible ink, and my little light, and return to bed where I retreat under the covers just in case. You can lock the bathroom door here but not the room door; go figure that one out.

I print the words "Write check" and "Talk over expenses" in pencil on one notebook page. Then I corral all the vowels in one column, all the consonants in another. I also arrange the vowels and consonants in rows. The columns and rows form a square. I randomly connect letters around the square by drawing lines between columns and rows; I examine the patterns and record my interpretations. Next I count how many of each letter I have and record the sums. Then I tear out several sheets of notebook paper and tear each sheet into small pieces. I print a letter on each piece, preparing as many pieces per letter as I have summed occurrences of that letter. I pile the lot of them in my hand and throw the I Ching of pieces, interpreting the configuration without benefit of a reference book. Nestor couldn't find me one. I record my analyses in pencil in one notebook, in invisible ink in another. In the third notebook I cross-reference the other two, again in invisible ink. I notice my breathing is labored, my muscles are stiff. My back is aching, maybe from the tension or from being stuck in one position under the covers too long. Or maybe from my life-saving dive under the bench earlier this afternoon. The excitement, almost sexual in its power to arouse, is making me sweat. I am rocking back and forth. There is a deep whir in my throat. I am James and Mr. Abbey rolled into one — which is so confusing that I gather up everything under the covers, including the list, lock it all in my dresser drawer, strip off my clothes, and stand under the hot water in the shower until my body turns the color of Nurse Converse's rosy tomato face.



I don't see James until dinner. He acts subdued. I'll bet he missed playing cards at two. I'll bet he had a special session with the doctor instead. *Damn*. I'll bet they upped his medication after he saw so much of Nurse Vargo. Maybe *that's* why Nurse Converse "rescheduled" James. If only they'd say what they mean.

I thank James for coming to my rescue. I mean it. He nods, but his eyes look like marbles — they've upped his dose for sure. Mr. Abbey is nowhere in sight: probably in isolation. They do that when they don't know what else to do with you. They say it's for your own good but really it's for theirs. They're scared. The most scared are the doctors. They won't go near you till you've been "resettled."

James is so out of it I give up trying to talk to him during the rest of dinner hour. I myself am beginning to feel the effects of the day as well. I eat more than I really want to keep up my strength. I notice James is toying with his food like I did at lunch. I am about to encourage him, as he tried to with me, but he puts his head in his hands and starts to cry. *Double damn*: they've overdosed him. Nurse Meacham, noticing before I can rise to alert her, is gliding toward us, her fingers fluttering like butterflies. Delicately, she removes James from the cafeteria. I drag into the lounge to watch some TV but am not there ten minutes when Nurse Meacham taps me on the shoulder with her butterfly fingers.

"He'll be okay, Mr. Ordmann, don't you worry," Nurse Meacham consoles, calling me Mr. Ordmann out of respect. Unlike Nurse MacDougall, she doesn't have to impress me with her authority to get my attention. "We're keeping him in the Special Care Unit just for tonight, to get his medication regulated properly. Then he'll be back with you." Before I can respond she glides away.

I am beyond words like "Special Care Unit" tonight.

It is my turn to feel guilty. If it weren't for the list, James would be his normal self now. The doctors would like to change his normal self, but I like him as is. My purpose is feeling like a curse. Joan of Arc must've felt the same when they lit the first sticks under her feet.



It is nearly three am when Nurse MacDougall comes by for bed check. The light is on and I am reading and writing. The list is nestled in the bedding; I can hide it in a flash. Even though the rule says the light should be out, the doctor will have noted on my chart that I need "leeway." Allowing leeway is different from making an exception. I know Nurse MacDougall makes bed check at this hour, but I'm not afraid of getting on her wrong side. Not tonight. Not with James gone. I've thought about what I'll say. She'll know about the events of the preceding day because they'll be noted on my chart. And on James'.

"Poor Willis, can't sleep? Would you like some help?" Nurse MacDougall queries. By "help," she means a sleeping pill. I figured she'd ask that. But I can refuse a sleeping pill; some patients don't have that choice but I do. They consider me more "responsive" than some of the others. If you go to isolation, you lose your right to choose.

"No thank you," I answer with maximum courtesy. "I think I'll just read awhile longer. Reading's very soothing." I figure she'll fall for this because it's consistent with my problem. Besides, without James here, there's no one she can accuse me of bothering.

Once Nurse MacDougall retreats, I return to the list. Five items remain unaddressed — well, six including Mateo ("Make plans with Mateo"). The most troublesome is "Call doctor." That's a tough one: Cedarwood is rife with doctors. I mull over the pros and cons of several possibilities. I could stand in the hall and literally call "Doctor!" and see who shows up. But that would attract too much of the wrong kind of attention. I might end up in isolation. I could treat "Call doctor" like a mantra, chanting it over and over till I attain the heightened awareness needed to access The Key. If only I could tape the chanting and play it back while I sleep, to extract the subliminal message. Unfortunately, I have no tape recorder and don't have enough money for Nestor to buy me one. Besides, it would disturb James once he returns. Of course, I could just ignore "Call doctor"; it may be a red herring, like a false passageway in a pharaoh's tomb. I record all these possibilities in several notebooks, in pencil and invisible ink. I'll have to reserve judgment. I proceed with what remains.



An intricately related quartet of items completes the list: "Buy tape," "Mend book," "Borrow fix-it manual," and "Get film." It is the first three of these that have been crossed off. But I don't know in what order, which could be important. I begin writing scenarios revolving around the quartet. Maybe it's the hour — it is just before dawn — but my pencil takes on a life of its own. I am wondering if this is automatic writing; I have read about that. Automatic writers are said to be most sensitive to suggestion at twilight and daybreak. I've sharpened my last pencil to a stub I

can barely grasp. I will have to swipe one from the nurses' station when no one is looking and make do till I can send Nestor to the store. I will have to settle for whatever he can find, even a number three. I must remember to have him buy more batteries too 'cause I'll need them once James returns.

James. I am looking forward to seeing James. I notice his bed is perfectly made, his pillow plumped for a nice welcome home. One of the nurses must have attended to that last night while I was watching TV. It is nearly six am. Pretty soon the cafeteria will open for breakfast. I'm hungry for the first time in days; staying up all night will do that to you. But I plan to wait, to go to breakfast at seven-thirty. To eat with James.

James is not at breakfast. I keep looking at the big clock on the cafeteria wall. The hands of the clock keep moving, my oatmeal is congealing, but no James. I crane my neck to look around. I angle my chair so I can see everyone entering the cafeteria. Various people come and go, but none of them is James. In frustration I stab the gluey brick of oatmeal with my spoon. But the spoon is held fast, slim metal tombstone marking the demise of my appetite and my patience. It occurs to me then that James may have eaten in the Special Care Unit. I return to our room, hoping he'll be there.

He is. But he isn't. It's another James, not my James: James the Tornado. Going wild. His eyes are utter chaos.

"Whadja do with 'em?" he roars.

"With what? What...what're you talking about, James?" My voice sounds disembodied. Far away. My brain is tracking slowly: I am tired from being up all night and weakened from not eating. Maybe I'm even hallucinating. James is ripping the sheets off the bed.

"Where *ARE* they? I left 'em here on my bed when I ran outside to help you. They were *right here*" — he stabs the bed like I stabbed my oatmeal — "I left 'em *RIGHT HERE*. Now the bed's made and my magazines are gone."

James is toppling furniture. I expect Nurse Converse or one of the burly attendants hired just for trouble like this to burst through the door but no one comes.

"I...I didn't do anything with them, James. I didn't see them. The nurses made the bed. I don't know anything about the magazines. I came back to the room and — "

"I loaned you the one. *JUST LOANED*. And I didn't say you could — "

James freezes, leaving me and his sentence hanging. We are in the eye of the storm. He stares at my dresser and grins. It's not James. But before I remember to breathe, the demon is at my dresser, dumping every drawer. He claws at the locked drawer: the reservoir of my notebooks and his one magazine and the list. But the drawer resists. He swings the dresser free from the wall and with one power punch springs the lock. It must be his medication. It's *definitely* not James. He clutches at Daisy and Elsa but sees, like I said, that's it.

"Where're they? *WHERE?! Where've you hidden 'em, you — I'll show you, I'LL SHOW YOU — "*

James grabs the wastebasket and crams it full with the contents of the drawer. I grab for James, but a second power punch knocks me flat.

"*W-I-L-L-I-S, I'll show you!*"

I lunge for James in a last desperate effort but miss. He is out the door, down the hall, into the stairwell, by the time I can mount a posse from the nurses' station. Hugging the bulging wastebasket to his chest, he is flying across the lawn, Nurse Converse and two attendants in his

wake. I am bringing up the rear but cannot move fast enough. Dread retards my every step. It is variations on a theme from yesterday.

James has the list.

He has the notebooks.

The nurses probably took the magazines.

The doctors probably told them to.

I am slowing down. Stopping. Stopping and standing in the middle of the lawn. Sitting down. I open my mouth to speak but nothing comes out.

I am watching a movie. My movie: the movie of my life. I am me but not me. James is James but not James. The light has yellowed and everything goes in slow motion. I hear voices . A soundtrack? Mr. Abbey speaking in tongues? Suddenly I am calm, calmer than I've been for days. Maybe I'm out of my body, near death even.

I continue to watch the movie — the movie in which James arrives at the wooden bench, my favorite spot, and in one sweeping gesture thrusts the wastebasket and its contents into the stream that washes them clean and carries them away.

↗

Nurse Meacham tells me I was in isolation for three days. I remember her visiting once. But that's impossible: they would have had to make an exception, and they don't make excep —

They have rescheduled me, and I am ready to return to the regular ward. To my room. I have no worries about the past: about James, or the list, or my purpose. That is all behind me. I feel fine. I feel confident. I will have a session with the doctor today now that I am resettled. I will give Nestor some money to buy James some new magazines.

Nurse Meacham accompanies me to my room. A stranger is in James's bed.

"Where's James?" I ask Nurse Meacham, puzzled but not alarmed.

"We've moved him to another ward," Nurse Meacham answers, plain as day. She could have said "re-situated," but didn't.

"This is your new roommate, Willis," Nurse Meacham says, turning toward the stranger. "Say hello to Mateo." ↗

STILL-LIFE

(FOR MY PAINTER FRIENDS, G.B./G.A. AND E.L.)

THE ORANGE LOOKS like moonscape under the magnifying glass, a grainy pitted sphere.

Maybe once, in another incarnation, smooth as glass like ice before skaters.

Now, pierced and re-pierced, the voodoo totem of a demented spirit.

The color is surprisingly even; unnatural.

Someone once told Maud that oranges are injected with dye commercially to make them undeniably *orange*.

Yellow-green pallor won't do: no customer would cast a second glance.

Abutting the orange, broccoli: phallus-hard and self-assured rising to delicate floral clusters, like male rising to female.

Beside the broccoli, the orange seems paunchy: someone's old uncle, a soft wide lap to sit on.

The light glancing off orange skin makes broccoli pulse evergreen, the deep green of trees that have seen some time.

Maud envisions a forest of broccoli stems rooted into the pitholes of the orange skins.

My, how still-life has possibilities.

Cluster of grapes, dull red bulbous fruits, fencing off the orange and broccoli spears on one side.

A few strays dislodged, rolled to the edge of the broccoli where they're piled and nested like brooded eggs.

Languid collection: the bunch reclining, taut skins over formless pulp, stems lost to flesh but for one branch where the skeleton protrudes.

I've known people like that. And if you pick away at them, grape by grape, you can get to the bottom of them, and sometimes you're surprised.

From the bottom of the ocean, Nature's filigree: coral.

Another skeleton.

This one, chosen for its mushroom shape, Maud finds exquisite.

You can almost see spores that aren't there, smell must, dirt, old bedding of leaves.

Its rose color is early morning.

Under the magnifying glass — *BLOW UP!* — fine bas relief is catacombs, inner city polyp territory: another set of unimaginable lives.

More history and filigree in the tablecloth, scavenged at a garage sale.

The cloth, old hand work, has a few places in need of repair; is blemished with several faint stains.

Maud uses it as is: reproduces it — the holes, the stains — exactly, to calcify memory.

To catch the viewer unawares: provoke him, make her wonder just what got spilled and when, what fork skewered the lacy pattern and, wrenched free, rent it.

Maud delights in the thought, however unlikely, that the original creator or owner of the tablecloth, or someone habitually gathered around the table it dressed, would see her painting, recognize the cloth through the faithful rendering.

Few viewers could be affected like that.

Maudie, Maudie, fantasize the interchange, the reminiscences. The gratitude.

The outrage: *Ms. Buchanan, you've used our tablecloth without permission; have not properly credited nor remunerated us; paint it out or we'll sue.*

Maud leaves the studio on days like that.

The background.

So-called.

Matrix of these collected (carefully!) and scrutinized (everywhichway!) items.

Here's where Maud is in deep.

She remembers childhood friends taking great pains with their flowers or trees or houses and then hastily filling in *the rest*.

Never understood the sacrilege of that — positive dead without negative — the rich malty agar of context holds so much promise.

So, relating intimately with orange and broccoli and grapes and coral and tablecloth are tiny scattered wallpaper rosebuds floating in thick sweet cream; a stellar array, each bud a jewel to be polished.

Maud, scanning with her magnifying glass, follows the roadways of minute cracks, bubbles, other imperfections, up and down the wall, around door jambs and window frames, along floor and ceiling moldings.

Maud: carried away again.

Come back, Maud.

Anchor here, at the easel.

Inhale this elixir of paint and fruit and vegetable and flower and salt and time.

Put it all under your glass to inspect, inch by inch, for the secrets enfolded there.

Step back; walk around; hunker down; levitate; go outside and spy through the keyhole.

This is your still-life, Maud. Still, Maud. Maudie: your life.

You can see her now: Maud.

Look — she took up the brush; is painting. ✎

SECOND GLANCE NO. 5

"...But the Kabbalah also knows of a more esoteric possibility..., no doubt heretical, that there shall come a day when...[w]ords will rebel against man. They will shake off the servitude of meaning...'become themselves, and dead as stones in our mouths'." — After Babel, by George Steiner

MAUD REMEMBERS AT first fearing the stump of Julian's arm. He must sense this in people: the fear of mutilation. Natural enough. He keeps the stump covered, even on hot summer days like these, the flap of his shirtsleeve tucked under and secured with a pin. Maud thinks, perversely: wrapped like a gift begging to be opened.

Julian runs the produce stand where Maud buys the fruits and vegetables for her still-lives. In the beginning Julian doesn't realize Maud is a painter. But after she shops at his stand several times, deliberating hard about her purchases, about their shapes and colors and sizes and textures rather than their freshness or ripeness, the idea seeds itself. Assuming he is right, making a game of it, Julian sequesters several mangoes, variegated gourds, a lacy purple cabbage, and presents them to Maud when she next comes to buy. Before she is out of the car he hands her the boxed assortment like a beau bringing candy.

You paint, don't you. He states it as a fact.

Maud nods and smiles at this acute observer who is the produce man.



But the painter who is the customer also is an acute observer. When Julian volunteers one day, for no obvious reason (Maud has never asked, never remotely broached the subject), that he lost the arm in an accident, Maud notices his eyes wash the color of eggplant. Cradling avocados in the crook of her arm, the right one, the one Julian doesn't have, she mumbles acknowledgment. What can you say to someone talking about his lost arm? That, for one thing, you don't believe in accidents? And even if she did, she suspects his story. Like one of her still-lives, it's deceptively simple. What lies on the surface is only where the truth begins. Maud wonders if the diamond stud Julian wears in his right ear cost him the arm. She can't help thinking a man wearing a diamond earring wouldn't be running a produce stand.

She drops two avocados while thinking this.

Julian bends down to pick them up. And as he does, another car drives up. Three elderly women get out and move with one mind toward the bushels of peaches. They buzz like bees.

Julian, returning the avocados, jokes with Maud: *You don't need two arms to sell produce.*

Maud: *Or paint.*

The bees: *Oh young man...*

Maud, glad for the diversion, pays for her purchases, the avocados and some papayas. *Well, you've got other company. See you next week.*

Right.

He watches her retreat. His diamond chip winks in the sun.



Maud sets up to paint. This particular painting is No. 5 in the series "Second Glance," intended to shock observers into re-viewing what they think they see.

It is early afternoon, and the studio, a converted garage, is still cool. She clusters avocados and papayas around a cut-glass pitcher, rearranging the fruit several times until she is satisfied with

the composition. She mixes colors. She lays out an array of brushes and palette knives, several pans of water. She places clean rags within easy reach.

Today the fruit yields to paint and brush like wax melting in the hot sun. But the pitcher is defiant. Maud scrapes the image off the canvas and tries again. She repaints and scrapes several times. The heat, piled up from sunrise, has drawn tiny flies that hover especially around the papayas: customers at *her* produce stand. Maud stabs the halo of flies with her brush. Reflexively they scatter only to return. She stabs again, this time upsetting the pitcher, which crashes to the floor. She launches the brush. It misses the flies but hits the wall where it snaps in two. Splintered wood protrudes like broken bone.

The flies cheer. They converge on her, Lilliputians to her Gulliver, drag her to the canvas where they stake her three dimensions to two. The papayas and avocados would like to wait for Maud to ripen but know there isn't time; they rotate her bundled form to catch the light just so. The ill-fated brush, down but not out, hobbles over to dap-dap-daub, to stroke curves not unlike the fruits' with the once tapered sable, elegant instrument now a crude probe. Self-righteous, it invites the other brushes to join in. In their zeal, they don't miss a spot. The palette knives hoot on the sidelines. The pitcher's shards reconvene like Humpty Dumpty couldn't. They cleanse themselves in the pans of water, towel off with the rags, armor in paint, ring Maud's perimeter like deadly jewels. Their work done, the rebels consider it, the statement it makes. They know what they like, but is it ART?

Maud's thoughts, fish patrolling an ancient sea, crawl up on land. Art — like evolution, like revolution — takes its toll but also transfigures. She picks up the shards, what-was-the-pitcher, an accident (but she doesn't believe in accidents), and deposits the lot on a red velvet drape. She throws the papayas and avocados, the fractured brush, in the trash. Most of the flies, fortunately for them, have vacated the premises. Though the water is unsullied, she empties the pans. She cleans the untouched brushes in the utility sink; the other paraphernalia she ignores. Before shutting down for the day — delivering the coup de grâce — she scour the canvas clean.

First thing next morning, Maud reads the classifieds in the paper, circling the garage sales with bold blue marker, checking the addresses on an old map from the local chamber of commerce to plot the most efficient course. With newspaper, map, and thermos of iced tea, she drives the course, stopping to browse at every blue circle. She finds what she's after once she sees it: a myrtlewood burl, maybe once someone's hobby project, polished to silky nut-brown perfection. She has never painted wooden objects, but the burl beckons like an exotic fruit. The sellers want twenty dollars. When Maud gets them down to sixteen, she snaps it up.

In her studio, Maud makes a space among the pitcher's shards and sets the burl in their midst. Some dead flies have collected in the shards; Maud lets them rest in peace. She steps back to examine the setup but doesn't change a thing.

When Maud next arrives at the produce stand, Julian is nowhere in sight. It is nearly five pm. Maud thinks maybe he's already closed up shop and, on that impulse, walks to the shed where the produce is stored overnight. There are sounds inside. The door is ajar. Maud peeks through the crack into the dim interior and sees, standing in the narrow lane that bisects the jumble of boxes, Julian misting the fruits and vegetables to keep them fresh. He is bare to the waist. It takes Maud a moment, her eyes adjusting, to realize she is looking at the stump. A fleshy burl.

She sucks in her breath, loud enough that he hears and turns. She moves inside so he can see it's not a stranger, not someone about to beat him up and rob him of the day's take. But when recognition dawns, he moans and shuts his eyes.

Maud walks down the lane. She is close now and reaches for him, for the stump. Her fingers probe its contours like a woman selecting fruit while he paints the picture.

We robbed a store, some buddies and me. It was a long time ago. Didn't intend to... One thing led to another. We were young and stupid. We didn't know how to back down. I ran through a plate glass window trying to get away.

Evolution again takes its toll.

Maud grabs Julian's shirt, hanging nearby, and slips it around his shoulders. She is tender, careful, knowing the wound is still gaping. She too is sore, from being bound. She takes him by the hand — you don't need two — and moves them toward the door. He doesn't argue. He wants to be led out of his pain. In the late-afternoon sun Maud sees the earring isn't a diamond after all.

✎

In her studio, the light falls softly on No. 5, finished now for several days. Julian looks alternately at the painting and the setup, which has not yet been dismantled: the burl amidst the shards, the dead flies, the red velvet drape.

Maud: *You don't have to hide behind your fruits and vegetables any more.*

She realizes, neither does she. ✎

DRAFT

CORPUS DELICTI

REX MOORE CAME to town in a pickup truck loaded down with all his worldly possessions. He took a room at a cheap motel on a Thursday night and rented a studio apartment by Saturday noon. It was all he could afford. He moved the necessities of daily life into the apartment and stowed the rest in a storage locker three blocks away. By the next Wednesday he landed a job at Onyx Secondhand Books, stocking shelves and handling customers' special orders for the antique Mrs Agnes Moriarty, whose greatest delight was polishing to a brilliance the even more antique cash register and then, almost incidentally, ringing up sales. As far as Artie and I were concerned, anyone who handled books the way Rex did, as if they were newborn babes, needed no further credentials.

Evelyn just nods, hearing our retelling. She is sipping coffee, mesmerized by the checkerboard of floor tiles. The red of her lipstick on the rim of the thick white porcelain cup is startling, like the events of the last several days. I feel sorry for her. She could be bitter or angry but she isn't, just sad. Even after all this time and everything that's happened, he's got a hold.

Rex was gentle, even-keeled: most people would have said unassuming. Artie, who suffers from an almost paralyzing case of kindness, found Rex shy. I thought him dreamy-eyed. But now, knowing what I do, I would say armored, masked. Controlled.

Evelyn explains, with generosity, it's just that he had his own agenda and no need to post it.

Artie and I are book junkies, likely to be found at any one of several bookstores on a Saturday afternoon. Whereas many couples spend their honeymoon on a white sand beach under the palms, we'd spent most of ours between the stacks of Archers, the most venerable bookstore in the state. Nowadays our ritual is to have brunch out late Saturday morning and then meander on bloated stomachs to Four Eyes or The Fireside to browse as we digest.

The Onyx, once our favorite haunt, is defunct. Evelyn didn't look for a buyer. She just shut it down.

It was an old house first converted to a pet shop, then a weaving supplies outlet, finally a bookstore. On damp days you could tell that animals had once lived there; the aroma of stale urine wafted up from the floorboards in waves. Artie once smelled something else, wondering idly, then with deepening concern, if animal carcasses had secretly been disposed of. Artie's like that, sensitive to the slightest innuendo of wrongdoing and a rabid protector of those he believes can't protect themselves. Rex didn't seem to notice the smell. Neither, apparently, did old Mrs M, who just kept polishing the cash register.

Delicately, you might say effortlessly, Rex slid his presence into our browsing, now and then pointing out a new arrival or commenting on a volume we were considering. He tended to seek out Artie rather than me, which I read as unease around women. I can see now that I must have reminded him of Evelyn. Artie says I look nothing like Evelyn, but I am not talking about looks. As his conversations with Artie about favorite authors or writing styles or the publishing business (*e-books, what a terrible notion!*) gained breadth and depth, I fantasized Rex to be a closet writer — he had, as I mentioned, that dreamy look — and half expected him to one day produce a box brimming with the frayed, yellowed pages of a manuscript, his *magnum opus*, for us (or at least Artie) to read.

Rex Moore came to our door punctually at six on a Sunday evening, a bottle of riesling under one arm and (what else?) a book under the other. The inevitable had come to pass: Artie had invited him to dinner. The protector was always taking in strays. Rex seemed right at home, maybe because our walls are nearly solid with bookshelves, and circled the living room several times like a dog fixing to lie down. He cocked his head, sniffed the air, patted the arms of the sofa and chairs. Artie thinks I imagined this, but you can be sure I didn't.

Evelyn, absently wadding up napkins, nods silently. She almost smiles.

As we sat down to dinner and I offered Rex a glass of the wine he'd brought, which he declined in favor of my homemade cider, he thanked us for the evening that had barely begun. Artie doesn't recall that either, but he sure as hell won't forget what came next.

Rex asked me, not Artie, "Do you have children?"

A sensitive question, which he didn't seem to realize, and none of his business, which he didn't seem to realize either.

Nevertheless I told him, "No. Not yet."

"Didn't think so." He said; paused. "I've got four of my own."

Artie dropped his fork. I gulped my wine. Rex, unperturbed, kept on talking.

He'd married in his mid-thirties, so he told us, a woman named Evelyn (well, at least *that* shred was true) who was grateful to have a husband supporting her so she could stay home and bake and sew and tend babies. (*Really?* I suppose there are still a few like that around, though I don't personally know any.)

This arrangement suited him: "My nesting instinct is unusually strong. For a man, I mean."

He was not a man's man or a ladies' man either.

"I worked as an auctioneer. Did some local traveling to conduct estate sales but otherwise stayed close to home."

It was after their third child was born and Rex already talking about another that the trouble started.

"Evelyn was feeling smothered in our little house with the three kids. And she worried about money. We were already pretty strapped, it's true, and she didn't see how we could provide for any more."

After the fourth child was born, she got herself sterilized, Rex told us. That's when he packed up the pickup and left.

Rex's eyes got glassy, and not from my cider. Artie tried several times to engage him in conversation about books and the Onyx, but Rex's mind was adrift. I do believe even kind-hearted Artie was relieved when the stray got up to go.

In bed that night, I told Artie I found Rex's story odd and was leery about returning to the Onyx, uncertain how Rex would react to us now that we were privy to some of his secrets. But Artie, always the protector, maintained that the story was consistent with the man and Rex might read our failure to show up as a vote of no confidence. That ticked me off. I reminded Artie I wasn't bound to pledge my allegiance to strays. That ticked him off. He turned his back to me and didn't bother to say good-night.

The next Saturday I gave in, shelving my reservations like so many secondhand books. At the Onyx, Rex greeted us like a happy child, thanking us again for our hospitality while herding us toward the sci fi bin. He showed no recollection of pouring his heart out.



When old Mrs Moriarty died suddenly of heart failure, Rex bought the business. He just did it, as if he'd planned to all along. When I fantasized he'd murdered Mrs M, Artie cautioned me to keep a lid on my imagination. Artie did, however, admit to being mystified at how Rex could finance a business, even a used-book shop, when he couldn't afford more than a studio apartment. Finally we concluded that, like other people, Rex had scraped together some collateral, maybe savings from working the auctions or stored valuables he'd turned into cash, to take out a loan. I wondered about the bank, or whomever Rex had borrowed from, uncovering the existence of Evelyn and the four children in the inevitable credit check but kept this troubling thought to myself.

Meanwhile Rex ran the Onyx as if it had always been his. He put up a discreet sign, "UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT," in a corner of the front window but rejected the notion of advertising. We assumed he couldn't afford it, though he never said or even implied that. He seemed to desire simply that the old customers remain faithful. Artie and I were puzzled and could only conclude that Rex wasn't much of a businessman. For his sake *and* ours, we hoped he'd make a go of it.

He did.

Rex the whirling dervish pulled every book from the shelves and dusted it, wiped down the naked shelves with linseed oil, rearranged the dusted books on the refurbished shelves by subject areas identified with neatly hand-lettered signs. He soaked the glass ceiling fixtures in a bath of sudsy ammonia till they gleamed brighter than old Mrs M's cash register. He washed walls and waxed floors. He expanded into what had formerly been the bedrooms of the house, fortifying the underflooring to bear the added weight, and even into the basement, putting in the new wiring the fire marshal had mandated. He laid up dozens more shelves and stocked them to overflowing with books and books and more books. It was bewildering how many volumes he had amassed in such a short time. But he politely ignored any suggestion of sprucing up the shop's image by, say, painting the outside, which was in dire need of a facelift, or installing a new sign, and we again were rebuffed when trying to persuade him to advertise. For a businessman he was strangely disinterested in selling his wares.

Six months after taking over the Onyx, Rex surprised us again. He bought an old farmhouse with acreage about ten miles from town. We wondered what he might want with a big place like that. And, once again, we wondered where he got the money. He bought a car too, though he didn't sell his pickup. Then, several weeks later, he invited us to *his* place for dinner.



The farmhouse looked like a saltine box stood on end rising from the river-bottom flats. It glowed friendly as a jack-o-lantern at dusk as we drove in. Vacant nearly a year before Rex bought it, it was the victim of vandalism; several upstairs windows had been shot out and the front door spray-painted day-glo orange. It's a wonder someone hadn't started a fire in the barn, whose floor, he said, was littered with empty beer cans, moldy cigarette butts, and old hay. The grass around the house had grown spiky from going to seed, and the trellised roses, old stock run riot, badly needed pruning. But to hear Rex tell it, he was revivifying the property much as he had done the Onyx. Artie marveled at his commitment. I was unnerved by his zeal.

Entering the place gave us both a shock. That the interior was tidy was no surprise; Rex had demonstrated a penchant for order at the Onyx. That the woodwork shone and the walls were fresh were simple evidence of ardent restoration; also not unexpected. It was the furnishings

that threw us: antique end tables and armchairs, a massive sideboard, a Victorian settee, several hand-knotted rugs, a gilt-edged mirror centered over the fireplace, a curio cabinet with a curved glass front. Artie and I hardly are experts, but we can smell the real thing. It seemed incongruous that these were the furnishings belonging to a family barely making ends meet.

Oblivious to our conundrum, Rex led us to the dining table, yet another antique, for a dinner that was, thank goodness, ordinary. Nearly anyone could have made the beef stew and green salad, and the rolls and pie were store-bought. We really couldn't have handled the discovery that, on top of everything else, our host was a master chef.

Unable to stop myself, I blurted out, "So this is what you've stored in the locker all along!"

Artie colored, concentrating on his salad.

Rex said, "Yes, well, that's right. In the, uh, locker, yes."

I looked at Rex but he was miles away. I looked at Artie and found him glaring at me. What I called honest he called rude. We had a problem that way.

Rex returned from the stratosphere and said, "How about a tour of the house after dinner? There are four bedrooms upstairs and another bath. And of course a basement."

There seemed little point to me in looking at empty bedrooms or creepy basements, but Artie jumped at the chance to compensate for my alleged *faux pas*. He all but shouted, "Sure. Great." It was my turn to glare at him.

The bedrooms weren't empty. Neither was the basement. Three of the bedrooms were filled to capacity with rows of shelves on which boxes and crates were neatly stacked and labeled. There was hardly room to walk between the rows. The fourth bedroom held bins, footlockers, more furniture. The basement, a cavernous space, was jammed with hand and power tools, chains, winches, bird cages and live-traps, buckets and washtubs, lamps, small appliances, you name it.

We couldn't think what to say.

Rex said, "Let's go to the barn. More there." We followed dumbly: I mean, what else could we do?

✈

We'd been out of town the weekend Rex died. The way we heard it, Rex had failed to open the Onyx that Saturday, which struck several of his regular customers as odd. It would have us. When he didn't show up on Monday morning, somebody called the sheriff, who drove out to his place and found him pinned beneath toppled shelves in an outbuilding we hadn't been into. The sheriff learned about Evelyn however the law learns about things and tracked her down.

Almost afraid to ask, I nevertheless do ask Evelyn, "How are the children taking it?"

Evelyn appears baffled. She echoes, "Children?"

I pursue it. "Yes, your four children?"

Evelyn scowls, her brain working overtime. Artie, yet again embarrassed on my behalf, is about to be kind, but I signal him No, don't be kind this time, Artie, it would be cruel to be kind.

"There are no children," Evelyn states flatly. "There was no room for children, with all that junk stored all over the house. My God, is that what he told you, that we had children?"

She runs on.

"He stole from the auctions and trucked the stolen goods home and then when the house and garage filled up he started stashing the stuff in storage lockers. I did find out that much, but I never knew where or how many. He was very secretive. I got pregnant and he bullied me to get an abortion. Which I did,

and immediately regretted it. Damn him! And then, who knows why, he left. Well, I was angry, sure I was angry. Maybe he thought I'd tell the cops. I never would've. I didn't give a hoot about his collections. They didn't mean a thing to me. But he cared about them. They filled some kind of — hole. He tended them as if they were his children. Why wasn't I entitled to mine?"

Evelyn momentarily breaks off. Her face is wet from crying but you don't hear it, she doesn't make a sound. She picks at the red fingernail polish that has begun to chip.

"He wasn't like that, you know, when I married him. It was when the drinking started..."

Artie and I chorus, "Drinking?"

"It was the bottles that killed him." Evelyn leans back in the booth; her shoulders slump. She shakes her head, her eyes then finding each of us in turn. "You don't know, do you? Sweet Jesus, you don't know."

She runs on again.

"The shelves knocked him down, then out, and he bled to death from the cuts. All those bottles had once been full. He kept them, every last one — another goddamn collection — as if they were something...precious."

Evelyn draws herself up, knowing it's time to go. I think, in a funny way, she now feels sorry for us.

I ask, I don't even know why," What're you going to do with — everything? Well, I mean, whatever the police don't, um, confiscate?"

"No idea. Haven't decided," Evelyn confesses. "I don't want any of it. It's tainted. Jinxed. Like he was. I'll probably consign it for an estate sale. Know any good auctioneers?" ✍

THE DARE

FRANK AND ELLEN met when both were on the rebound. Ellen didn't want to be involved with anyone for a while and told Frank so, right up front, even though they'd just met. It was a heady way to start out, but Ellen preferred all the signals to be plain from the first. She wanted Frank to know, in no uncertain terms, that she needed space like she needed food and air and water. The underlying message was *don't push, don't tread on me*. Frank read it loud and clear.

Whereas Ellen was feeling invigorated, uplifted, from the change she'd made, Frank was feeling vulnerable. He wasn't the type of man who was afraid to admit such things, so he admitted it to Ellen, partly because he needed to tell someone and partly because he felt it would set her mind at ease. He was in fact relieved her ego wasn't seeking in him a barometer of her appeal. Frank had just come through a divorce. His nerves were raw, his emotions steamrollered, and, not incidentally, he was impoverished and expected to be for some time. As his marriage to Rita had begun to falter, Frank had taken up running, and the rockier the marriage got, the harder and faster he ran. It was a good way of discharging anger. Once the marriage had expired, it was a good way of doing something alone. And it didn't cost anything. Running had become for Frank the metaphor that characterized his life: a frenetic loop that never got him anywhere.

Frank and Ellen had been set up by a mutual friend who liked to make matches. They both agreed with some trepidation: each had reservations about going a blind date at all. But for different reasons — Frank needed the contact, Ellen was simply feeling brave — each decided to go through with it.

Neither was sorry. Frank found Ellen's forthrightness a refreshing change from Rita's circumnavigations, and her self-confidence was inspirational at a time when Frank needed desperately to have hope. Ellen welcomed Frank's openness; and he was funny, sometimes at his own expense. Ellen had planned to have only a drink or two, then make her move to leave. Yet the time slipped away unnoticed. At the end of the evening — and it really had become an evening — the pair shook hands in the parking lot before going their separate ways, agreeing to make contact again soon in the way people often do who have no intention of following through. Nevertheless, Ellen decided, on her way home, that she liked Frank and hoped he'd call. Frank, on a late-night run, concluded the same about Ellen and wondered where he'd get the nerve.

About a week later after several false starts, Frank called Ellen with a last-minute dinner invitation. Ellen, already halfway through her chicken niçoise, had to decline but, to be sure Frank didn't misunderstand, suggested the following night. Frank couldn't the following night, and the disappointment in his voice was evident when he said so. After a pause, Frank asked Ellen if she ever ran. Ellen, taken aback by the non sequitur, said no, she did aerobics for exercise. Frank asked Ellen if she'd consider running. Ellen said she might. Frank, garnering all his courage, asked Ellen if she'd like to run with him sometime, maybe early on a weekend morning or at sunset; those were the most pleasing times to run in his experience. Ellen began feeling cornered. But fearing to reject Frank twice in one phone call and not wanting to reject him at all, she agreed. Frank felt strangely jubilant; he had tried, late in their marriage, to interest Rita in joining him, and her rebuff still stung. Frank and Ellen agreed to meet downtown at the start of the bike path at eight on Saturday morning for a one-mile run. Nothing ever was resolved about dinner.



Saturday started out misty. The sun would delay its appearance that morning which Ellen, putting on her sweats, wished she could have: she was normally in bed at this hour on weekends. Driving downtown, Ellen saw people running. The runners seemed ethereal, maybe because of the mist, and lost to another world. Approaching the meeting point, Ellen noticed quite a few people, even children, running on the bike path. She pulled over and waited in the warm car for Frank to show up. Her mind wandered. She watched runners go by: a father and son, a family in matching outfits, three chattering teenage girls, even an elderly man and his elderly dog. A man in royal blue sweats and bright yellow hat who seemed to be looking for something. Ellen realized it was Frank — she hadn't expected him to *run* to the meeting point — and stepped out of the car just as he would've sped past. He smiled when he recognized her, admitting he couldn't remember what her car looked like. He was panting. Ellen offered to reschedule if Frank had already had enough. But he shook his head and said he could run for miles.

Frank showed Ellen some standard runner's warm-ups. As it turned out, Ellen was familiar with most of those from aerobics class. They were easy for her, which gave her needed confidence at the outset. Frank, who'd had second thoughts about inviting Ellen as he was running to the meeting point, was encouraged at this auspicious beginning. After the preliminaries, Frank sketched their proposed route with a stick in the dirt beside the bike path so Ellen would know the turnoffs in advance and so, if she had reservations, she could veto or modify the route. She just said it looked fine, and they started off.

Ellen expected Frank to coach her periodically as they ran, but he surprised her by saying nothing. Once past this expectation, past the initial exertion, the anticipation of fatigue and discomfort that psychologically handicaps any novice, she found herself, like the runners she'd seen on the drive downtown, in another world. Though the morning was still misty, the colors around her intensified. She noticed the interplay of light and shadow; realized someone not running might have said there were *no* shadows. But Ellen could see, or sense, the contrasts. She became acutely aware of sounds which, like the colors, were enriched; could hear the din of hundreds of leaves falling, the roar of her pulse, the thud of her step. She had noticed these sounds before of course, but now felt she had never really *heard* them. The barrage of sounds, the light show, the heightened colors, invoked a dance whose rhythms set Ellen's pace and banished ordinary life.

As the sun at last began burning holes in the mist, without breaking pace Ellen removed her sweatshirt and tied it around her waist. The cool air rushing over bare arms and through t-shirt mesh made her gasp, which broke the spell. Pain shot up the fronts of her shins, into her groin, through her solar plexus. Frank reassured her they were almost at the end of the loop. She nodded, both sorry and relieved.



Frank and Ellen, after cooling down and again stretching, got into Ellen's car and drove to a small downtown café renowned for its hearty breakfasts. Frank saw this as a substitute for the overlooked dinner. Ellen, feeling righteous, saw it as a reward. At the café, Frank — forgetting to be nervous — asked Ellen how she'd like the run. Ellen told him she'd been pleasantly surprised. The truth was, she wanted to describe the sensations she'd experienced but wasn't sure how Frank would react. Inadvertently, Frank removed that obstacle himself: he talked of the euphoria of running, the so-called runner's high. Ellen smiled, grateful for the opening, and

admitted she assumed you would've had to be an expert runner to experience that. Frank said no one would stick with running if you had to wait *that* long. Emboldened, Ellen talked about the run as a dance, about the pleasure of the pair of them moving in sync. A funny look crossed Frank's face and he blushed. Ellen asked what she'd said to embarrass him, but he wouldn't answer. Ellen held Frank's gaze as the waitress brought his tea and her coffee and cream. Then Frank confessed that when he'd characterized running to Rita in much the same terms as Ellen had just used, Rita'd quipped that running sounded like an impotent man's lovemaking.

The confession opened a gate that unleashed a flood. In between bites of eggs benedict, an unaccustomed splurge, Frank said he believed two people who wanted to communicate could, if they worked at it, communicate anything. It was a matter of intent. That he and Rita *had* communicated in the beginning, when the blush was on the rose. But as the rose passed its peak, faded, withered, its petals falling one by one, the intent too seemed to fade and die.

Rita, not the introspective type like Frank, grew impatient. She shifted her energies elsewhere. First she spent more time with her women friends, which Frank noticed fed the fires of her dissatisfaction. Rita was touchier than usual and argumentative after an evening out with the women. Later her attention wandered in more dangerous directions; she became evasive about her whereabouts and with whom she spent her time. She grew sullen, sarcastic, volatile. The harder Frank tried to reach her, the more she withdrew. That's when Frank started running.

Sometimes when he ran he tried to think things out. But mostly he tried to escape, as if running could distance him from pain. Frank concluded that maybe he'd expected too much. Maybe no real state of togetherness ever exists, just the illusion of it. Downing the last bite of eggs and placing his knife and fork across his plate in an X, as if marking the spot where all had been lost, Frank told Ellen he'd prefer to live alone than alone together. The latter he considered a cruel cosmic joke.

Ellen now became the pensive one. She thought about Tony. Ellen had been longing for romance when she met Tony. Martin, a research chemist, had always brought logic into bed with them. Tony had captivated her with the elements of whimsy and surprise. Once, he had flowers and pizza delivered at daybreak. Another time, at the beach, he'd pitched a huge tent, spreading rugs and pillows inside while playing Middle Eastern music on his portable tape deck. Ellen loved the fun and games until the fun mysteriously disappeared and only the games were left. Tony waxed peevish, then critical; his remarks about her friends, her opinions, even the clothes she wore, grew so cutting Ellen felt sliced to the bone, a whittled-down version of a former self whose taste and judgment suddenly were suspect. He moved to condemning her social behavior — how she'd talked too long with so and so and hadn't circulated enough, how she'd drunk too much and become raucous or insulting — although Ellen could never quite recall the picture Tony painted. Tony was busy remolding into his chosen image an Ellen who invariably fell short of the mark.

The waitress took Frank and Ellen's plates. Frank asked Ellen if she wanted anything else, which jolted her into the present. Ellen said *YES* — she wanted to know why it was that men and women seemed like disparate species who, by happenstance or ironic design, had crash-landed on Planet Earth eons ago and had the misfortune of being myopic enough to mistake one another for the same kind. Frank didn't know what to say, so he paid the check. He did know, however, that this novel view of creation warranted serious consideration.



Frank and Ellen continued seeing one another, each acting casual about it but feeling a mounting tension between fears that needed to be assuaged and desires that needed to be fulfilled. They met occasionally for lunch or dinner, and they continued to run. They were falling into a pattern of running twice a week, but neither would acknowledge this, Frank because he was leery of the illusion of togetherness, Ellen because she was skittish about any man reconfiguring her life. Yet within Frank's mind, the metaphor of running was undergoing transformation: he felt, despite the loop, that he was beginning to get somewhere. Ellen had to admit she liked the new shape to which she was conforming; she was pleasing herself, not Frank. Anyone standing outside the situation could plainly have seen that Frank and Ellen were skirting the edge of involvement, not with the attenuated strides and labored breathing of runners, but with the mincing steps and barely audible sighs of those falling in love.



Over a glass of wine at Ellen's after a Sunday sunset run, Frank told Ellen about an upcoming race he had entered, one in which runners of all levels could participate through three distance categories. The experienced — masochistic, Frank wisecracked — runners would compete for the entire route, ten kilometers; the less ambitious could choose the five or two k. Frank had planned to run the five and wondered if Ellen might like to try the two.

Ellen just stared at Frank. Then she asked if his suggestion were a joke. Frank, surprised at her reaction, assured her it was in earnest. Ellen pointed out to Frank that a neophyte like her was in no shape to race over the hilly course he'd described, and that her interest was not in competition. The room seemed hot and stuffy to Frank. Ellen, chilled, drew in her knees. Retreating out of habit, Frank asked Ellen to just think about it. Ellen insisted she didn't want to think about it: there was nothing to think about.

Frank and Ellen knew they were having their first fight. Although both felt terrible about it, neither saw how to make their way through it now that they were in it. Frank instinctively recoiled from fighting; he had never won a fight with Rita, a skilled and vicious combatant. Ellen recalled how Tony relished fights because he relished making up. Watching the evening crumble around him, Frank put on his sweatshirt in a preamble to leaving. Ellen was about to apologize — she knew she'd overreacted — when Frank, feeling an unfamiliar urge and reminding himself, of all people, of Rita, *dared* Ellen to race. Ellen's face darkened. She started to cry. Baffled by conflicting impulses and overwhelmed by his bafflement, Frank fled. When the phone in Frank's bedroom rang near midnight, he hardly recognized the small voice that blurted out *I accept* before the line went dead.



The race was nearly three weeks off, which gave Frank and Ellen time to train. They set themselves a schedule, which they held to assiduously, and still met occasionally as before for a meal. But neither mentioned the fight or the dare. That they had had such a fight was significant new information for each to process privately. And as the gears whirled, the balance of fears and desires shifted. While they were training, Frank found himself drawn to the glow that developed in Ellen's cheeks as she got her second wind. Ellen absently focused on the rivulets of sweat that snaked their way down Frank's back. Not knowing what it meant, other people noticed the shift too. Rita, dropping by Frank's place on divorce-related business, tried to get a rise out of Frank and failed. Tony, trying to remold Ellen by phone, was hung up on.



Ellen awoke at four in the morning on the day of the race. Her stomach had butterflies, and her mouth was dry. She tried to go back to sleep, knowing she needed the rest but, failing, got up and made herself a cup of tea. This season of year it wouldn't be light for some time.

Nevertheless she sat at the kitchen table, scouring the dark to keep from thinking about anything — not the race, and especially not Frank. While Ellen drank tea and distracted herself, Frank dreamt that he and Ellen and Rita were swimming across a large lake. The women's strokes seemed effortless, while his were labored, and the harder he swam, the farther behind he fell. Stopping to rest, treading water, and still a long distance from shore, Frank saw the women emerge from the lake in tandem and turn to see where he was. Then they laughed and walked off arm in arm. He marveled at how camaraderie like that could flourish between two women who were so different. Then he began swimming again, wondering whether he could ever reach a shore on which Ellen and Rita were buddies.

When the black of night began to gray, Ellen showered and dressed. She tried to eat but wasn't hungry. She tried to read but couldn't concentrate. The clock couldn't move too fast for her today. When gray modulated to slate, Frank's alarm woke him. He felt stiff and fuzzy, as if he'd slept too long, and vaguely recalled a dream about swimming. He dozed off several times before forcing himself out of bed. Frank still wasn't fully awake when Ellen dropped her weight onto the passenger seat, the abruptness of her movement alerting him she was nervous. He again questioned his wisdom in inviting her to race: he hadn't meant to push, she could always have said no. Ellen angled toward the window, cleared condensation, pressed her nose to the streaky opening, slamming the door to interchange in one smooth move. Rita would've been talking a blue streak. The inadvertent comparison called up Frank's dream — the three of them swimming, him falling hopelessly behind, the two women walking off together. No, he chuckled to himself, not likely: how bizarre dreams could be.

Frank slowed to check in with a man in a bright orange sweatshirt holding a clipboard, who motioned them up the course to the drop-off points. Frank was glad to see several contestants clustered for the two k; he had hoped Ellen would have company to stretch and talk with to work off pre-race jitters. He'd planned to give Ellen some last-minute pointers but decided against it. Instead, he simply extended his hand to wish her good luck. Looking disturbingly like the Ellen in Frank's dream, she bypassed the hand and kissed him full on the lips. On the drive to his own drop-off, Frank wondered out loud if he would ever, should he live to be a thousand, understand women.

Ellen knew she'd have time to kill before the first of the longer distance runners crossed the two-k starting line. So she sat on the curb, sipping tea brought in a thermos, observing the other contestants. Slowly, other runners arrived. Some, like her, kept to themselves. Others, familiar with one another from other races, talked casually while warming up. Without meaning to, Ellen thought about Frank. She thought about Frank and running. She thought about Frank and Rita and running. When Rita withdrew from the marriage, Frank was so shattered he literally ran out the door and had been running ever since. At first, running was the analgesic that gave temporary relief. Then, running became a partner — making demands, seeking commitment — that Rita chose not to be. So where did *Ellen* fit in? Like a scientist analyzing data, Ellen computed and re-computed the sums of the givens. It didn't all add up. But further analysis

would have to be deferred, for around the bend in the road came the first of the longer distance runners. Lost in her reveries, Ellen had neglected to warm up.

Frank was absent from the early pack and Ellen reluctantly took off without him. Surrounded by runners but lacking Frank, she felt oddly alone, out of sync, in a dance she didn't know. It was strange to set her pace irrespective of him. She forced herself to concentrate — to engage first not the body but the mind — to visualize the process: lungs sucking in vital ethers; heart pumping full on, flooding the system with big red; arms and legs, the rotors, the thrusters, propelling matter and energy forward. When the scenery brightened, light and color and sound intensified, running started at last to feel right. Exhilarated, Ellen quickened her pace, her body gaining a will of its own, her mind cut free.

The runners left the flatlands behind and headed into the hills. Ellen knew this would test her mettle. She and Frank had done some trials there which had left her gasping and discouraged; but Frank assured her that during a race adrenaline would kick in and take over. Ellen was counting on it. The first inclines — long low rises that a driver of a car would barely notice — made Ellen's shins ache, but she altered her breathing to keep pace. The downsides, as Frank promised, gave exquisite relief; Ellen could recoup there by slowing her speed enough to nearly catch her breath. It cost her time, but she was determined above all to finish. Other contestants occasionally overtook her, and the gap between her and the front runners continued to widen. But she knew she was far from last, and she was at once perversely pleased and mystified at being ahead of Frank.

When Bailey Hill appeared, Ellen lurched involuntarily. Most of the other hills hadn't even looked like hills, but Bailey was another story. It began gently enough; then the grade sharpened around a turn carved deep into rock. Once past the turn, the steepness mitigated to a domelike top. As Frank had instructed her, Ellen set her sights on the fluttering ribbon. She pressed forward, her body straining against gravity. Every movement now was designed to conserve energy: her arms hugged her sides; she shortened her stride. Looking toward the dome, Ellen wished that Frank were there to cheer her in. She'd envisioned that he would be. Where the hell was her partner anyway? Nothing, not even a race, met expectations. Was it all just illusion, as Frank had cynically proposed? Her thoughts a tangle, Ellen crossed the finish line without even noticing.



Ellen felt sheepish once she finally determined Frank's whereabouts. Less than a kilometer into the race, he had suffered a freak accident, twisting an ankle under full weight and tearing a ligament in his knee. By the time Ellen walked into the hospital emergency room to retrieve him, Frank was in a full-leg cast, woozy from pain and drugs. He was miserable. Ellen sat down next to Frank. She smiled shyly and, looking him straight in the eye, said she'd dropped out of the race part way up Bailey Hill. Frank saw she was lying but let the lie stand. He remarked instead, philosophically, that nothing quite turns out as expected. Ellen thought she would die laughing.

Ellen took Frank to her place, ensconcing him on the living room couch like a Roman emperor on a divan. She made a fire in the fireplace. They picnicked in the living room, in front of the fire, on account of Frank's leg. Both knew that Frank wouldn't be able to run for some time, but the subject was ignored. Frank and Ellen both were worn out, and neither had much to say. In fact, staring at the flames, each was preoccupied. Frank was thinking how Rita, never empathetic,

would've complained about having to cater to his injury. Ellen was thinking how Martin would've had to explain the injury anatomically, how Tony would've indulged in playing wounded soldier.

When the fire started burning low, Ellen made a bed of blankets and pillows on the rug near the fireplace, helping Frank maneuver and curling up beside him. Frank told Ellen he didn't think he'd miss running. Ellen told Frank she wasn't surprised. Then she admitted she'd finished the race. Frank mumbled never mind.

Frank and Ellen both saw new possibilities. They slept sweetly. ✍

DRAFT

THE MAN IN THE RED CAR

(FOR M.S., WHO WAVED TOO)

ROSE

I was seven months pregnant — we were heading into town for my monthly doctor's visit — when we first saw the man in the red car. It was on the Harpole Road, near the lone twisted oak that guards one end of a sweeping S-curve. You can drive fast on the Harpole Road — no speed traps — which is why Ned preferred to go this way. It was for him a daily commute. My reason, when I went along, was the sky, brilliant and moody by turns. That morning, light sliced holes in the clouds as the man swung the red car toward us through the curve. When nearly even with us, he waved. We waved back.



We have friends, Willem and Madeleine Steiner, who are renovating the old farmhouse on their twenty-one acres in Moses Valley. While ripping down walls to studs, peeling away layer upon layer of paint, wallpaper, paneling, tile, they uncover the stratified midden of other peoples' lives. A rifle butt. A lace collar. A mouse skeleton caged in a live-trap. A daguerrotype of a man on horseback, his black-suited torso comically erect, a stiff white collar upholding his head like a pumpkin on a post; Maddy guesses, the circuit rider who built the place. Part of a letter from a father (the circuit rider?) to a daughter (the circuit rider's? Minor Evans, Maddy's neighbor, told her he had one), giving grudging approval of a suitor she hopes to marry because he fears she is "slipping past marriageable age," can't afford to "lose this solid prospect." Maddy and I like to think such mindsets are gone forever, deader than the mummified bat in the bedroom wall. But we know better. My friends the Steiners are learning, and I through them, that history is not about *who they were* but *who we are*.

MADDY'S JOURNAL

August 16: Week 7 renovating the farmhouse. Or, to be exact, day 50. And I *am*, for once, being exact, documenting our progress in this journal and in the renovation scrapbook: what we've pulled down, put up, where and why. I've never chronicled anything before. Even my bookkeeping is, to use Willem's word, casual.

It's the finds, what the house disgorges from its innards, that, more than anything, impel me to document.

They sucker me.

They succor me.

Yesterday we found a blue and white baby bootie lodged inside the wall of what we call the study. Might it once have been a nursery? The bootie was dirty but intact; nothing — no bugs, no mice — had nibbled away. I washed it with our clothes and hung it with the rest on the line to dry. This time I want the real thing for the scrapbook, not a photo; and I want it clean and serviceable, ready to wear.

Willem gave me a wild look when he saw it hanging, as if to say, Maddy, I thought we'd settled that. We have, Willem, officially. We've had The Official Conversation, or should I say round of conversations: a moveable feast beginning (where else?) in the bedroom, flowing like day-old gravy into every other room in the house. Even out the door. We've had The Conversation while the chickadees and grosbeaks waited for me to fill the feeder, while you hoed to plant corn and lettuce and dug holes for cabbage

starts. You're always prepared, plated with an armor of whys and why nots. Yet for all the times I've run this around my head, I'm never prepared and, in the end, accept your pain so you don't have to.

Why do I do this? Why do we? What kind of dance is this we two-step around the pair of us?

It's not our "selfish lifestyle" or our "eccentric personalities" (your arguments) that keep us childless. We're neither that selfish nor that eccentric. It's your fear: of being the father *your* father was, of disappointing me, of disappointing *yourself* by, God forbid, creating someone in your own image. I guess you just can't take the risk, even knowing, as you know well, I have enough nurture for both of us, not to mention a talent for salvage.

ROSE

One Saturday I find Willem weaving baskets out of cedar and maple, grape, iris, trailing blackberry, like the ones the native people made before the trappers, with authority, dispatched them. He says "Maddy's up the hill." His cryptic instructions to find her — "Just follow the path to the village" — lead me to a moss-covered hut where she's ensconced, queen of the woods. She's grinning like a ten year old. Then I see other little huts scattered beneath the oaks.

"Gnome Village," she announces, as if that explains all.

Minor told her the circuit rider's granddaughters, by now as mummified as the bat, had constructed this childhood playland. I wonder by what energy it still stands. What beings seen only by those who believe re-thatch the roofs, shore up the rotted frames? Whose sacred duty is it to make sure the chain is never broken?

Send \$1 to the person whose name tops the list at the bottom of this letter. Cross that name off and add yours to the end of the list. Make ten copies of this letter and send one to each of the remaining names on the list. If you do, good fortune is assured. Brenda Jarvis followed these instructions and received \$3,142 within a year's time. But if you don't, bad luck will dog you. Richard Salvino threw the letter away and, within a week, had a serious car accident. We are keepers of the chain; don't be the one to break it.

Maddy walks to the center of Gnome Village, mistress of all she surveys.

"We plan to die on this land," she states flatly, she who is not yet thirty — a commitment to place, to continuity, that in this day and age astonishes me as much as the man in the red car waving.



Ned reported daily on the Harpole Road encounter, and if he forgot I'd ask. It's one of the few rituals we've observed. Occasionally he and the man in the red car would fail to connect, and we'd hypothesize why: he overslept, left a little early or a little late, was ill, on vacation. When I rode with Ned, I'd concentrate on seeing the man's face, as if physiognomy could lay bare the mystery. But his face remained a featureless blur, indistinct, an Anyface, obscured by dark glasses worn even though he was driving west, the morning light at his back. Sometimes at night, nestled in bed, we'd knit stories, speculating on who the man was, where he lived, where he worked and in what line, what kind of life he led, where he came from and where he was going

when Ned passed him on the Harpole Road. We were reluctant to accept that he, too, was commuting, preferring a more exotic explanation.

As Ned dropped off to sleep and I quieted, the baby inside would push and poke, impatient to emerge. Once I saw what we awaited: the baby, larger than life, Superbaby, talking in full sentences — *we are keepers of the chain* — telling me all about itself as it made its entrance, sticky white and bloody, proof positive of unimagined lives unseen, unheard, long gone, to come.



On Wednesdays I visit Irene Haniotakis. Ned and I met her the year we came to Moses Valley at the annual potluck that catches everyone up on everyone else's business. She wore crisp jeans and a red-checked shirt; silver wisps strayed from beneath a red bandana. She sat tall in her wheelchair, as if ready to take command. When Maddy told me Irene had had a stroke the year before, could barely move or speak, I was stunned. She had such presence.

Irene and her husband, George, had retired to Moses Valley. After George died, Irene stayed on. But the stroke changed all that: she went to live at her son Robert's, in town. It is Willem, with whom Irene shares a love of gardening, who sees to it that Irene attends the annual potluck. He makes sure the chain isn't broken.

IRENE

It is Sunday. The adults are in the throes upstairs. The children, conveniently, are out. An age-old routine: we did it too, George and I, long ago, or so the tenant of my mind prompts.

I am dispatched, also conveniently, to the picture window in the wheelchair that now delimits my physical world like circumference bounds circle. But it really doesn't matter where I am, here or in front of the TV, in my room, in the recesses of my mind where the tenant bustles, or where they are, upstairs, across town, in the most faraway place I can imagine — on the moon! — they have trouble penetrating my circumference. Even when they're standing before me looking me straight in the eyes though they're not sure what I see, exaggerating their words with rubbery lips and gesturing like mimes because they think I can't hear.

It's not entirely their fault. Since the stroke — I heard them call it that — it's hard for them to tell how diminished my capabilities are. They rely on the doctor who, despite the fancy certificates on his office walls and his high-powered tests, knows virtually nothing. Besides, I rarely see him now that I am "stable." Maybe I'm a perverse old lady, maybe my mind is going — I rely on the tenant, not the doctor, to tell me things like that — but the discomfort of his ignorance amuses me. We have something in common, the doctor and I. His circumference bounds him as mine does me.

The fact is, I see fair enough. And I hear, better than before. I speak a word or two now and then, but this frustrates more than relieves me. The words are few and far between, and like naughty children they pay me no mind. I no longer command them, no longer possess them. And it's this loss more than any other that diminishes me — me, my literal self; not my capabilities. I shrink a little, I shrivel, every time a word escapes. I become a little less defined. And if I'm still here once the words have gone altogether, what then? Will I be rendered prehistoric? This query ricochets. The tenant complains of a headache. My only recourse now, I see, now that words abandon me, is to search out new code.



I try transmitting to Robert, who smiles a lot, a sure indication he doesn't get my signals. In his life-long memories, I take a different shape. I see fear in Robert's eyes. I see confusion. How I hurt for him. He is my son, after all, and he is suffering.

I've given up trying with Alicia; it's a waste of time. She also smiles a lot, to mask not fear but anger. She is angry with the burden of me, now squarely her burden. In that I can't blame her; it appalls me too, my dependency. When she dons the duty mask I watch her, though she doesn't see me watching because she doesn't expect me to be. I notice the rise and fall of her chest and wonder what it signifies. Anxiety? Concern? Impatience? The programmed moves of life support incarnate? My nurse, Lorraine, who's paid to serve, is much freer than Alicia, who's indentured by circumstance. My daughter-in-law and I, it seems, have something in common after all.

I try transmitting to my grandchildren. The youngest mothers me as she does her dolls, with love and authority. When she brushes my hair, I am thrilled to be touched by someone not strictly performing maintenance. The middle girl flits in and out, chattering nonstop, her phone always in her hand like some kind of deformity. But her words say less than her hips, which now gyrate when she walks. She is, I think, just discovering boys. My grandson reads to me in his new-found baritone despite — maybe because of — his parents' braying that I don't hear. The children's attentions feel real, untainted by other agendas. But do they copy loud and clear? The tenant and I have trouble deciphering.

I try transmitting to Lorraine. Hers is the first face I see every morning, even weekends. The grandchildren aren't allowed to enter my room before Lorraine "just in case." And to be on the safe side, the adults don't enter before Lorraine either. Lorraine begins the business of my day as if we had a plane to catch. She bathes my mannequin body, dressing me with what must be the deftness of a mortician. Once put together, I'm slid into the wheelchair, and we enter the breakfast nook with Lorraine humming. I used to suspect humming was the signal for the adults to put on the right faces. But the tenant and I have come to believe that Lorraine just likes to hum.

Between meals, Lorraine deposits me where Alicia ordains and checks regularly on my — what shall I call them? — personal needs. The loss of dignity is indescribable. Yet Lorraine's doing what she's trained to do, what Robert has hired her to do. She brings experience, not rancor or history. We are symbionts, Lorraine and I, she needs me as much as I need her, which puts her in another category altogether.

I do best with Rose, who visits me on Wednesdays. Neither family ties nor money obligates her. It worried me at first that she'd taken me on as good works. But then I saw that, like me, she's lonely. Wants a friend. She's only just discovering what I learned long ago: that marriage may not fill the hole.

A man storms your body, but your soul? Well, very few will venture there. He'd rather run off to Antarctica or the Himalayas or the headwaters of the Nile — or to a restaurant for 37 years, like George did — than face the real danger that the life he feels responsible for providing you isn't picture perfect. That it's not his responsibility doesn't occur. He tries to do something to remove the affront to his manhood because millions of years have primed him for action. He doesn't think to talk. Talk isn't action. Besides, his brain is tuned to the silence of the hunt. The bravado of talk, the male embroidery, comes after, and it doesn't converse, it tells. Another kind of male member, it swells. It re-paints the picture perfect.

But when tears streak your cheeks like comet tails, he only knows one question and, evolved as he is, he knows it's the wrong one. Again, he acts, making a fire with wet wood and only one match, a trick he repeats like a trained dog, then hangs his tail between his legs because you don't applaud your palms off. It's an old story, old enough I could've written it myself, old enough it was tattered parchment, weathered stone, long before I was born.

Rose's visits remind me, paralyzed as I am, that I can feel. And feeling is movement, the micromovement of neurons in flight. And movement signals I am — the right word comes! — A-LIVE. More than anyone, Rose gives me hope for new code.

MADDY'S JOURNAL

August 30: Marguerite Evans called this afternoon to tell me Minor found several vertebrae and a skull, a human skull (!), while digging for the septic tank clean-out. I grabbed my camera and drove over.

Suburban Connecticut, where I grew up, also harbors bones: the bones of squirrels and rabbits and birds, of peoples' pets, of (no doubt) the occasional missing person. But nobody was interested in bones, at least nobody I knew. It was when I came West that I discovered bones and began to collect them — or, as Willem puts it, they began to collect me. I remind him I'm in good company: the painter Georgia O'Keeffe had a barrelful shipped to New York after her first summer in New Mexico. One glimpse of eternity through the hole in a cow pelvis and she was a goner.

But it's people gone to bone long ago who finally explained to me my fetish. The ancient hunters who brought down an animal understood it as body *and* spirit. They burned bones as fuel but also to raise the fallen animal from its skeleton. They built shelter with bones, carved them into tools, notched them to keep records. But they also displayed bones so new animals could spring from them, and they ate the bone ashes of the dead to ingest the sensitive soul. *Bones symbolize not death but rebirth: they're the reservoir of life.*

The bones rested on the seat of Minor's bush-hog. He said, pointing to the skull, that whoever this was smoked a pipe ("See that dip in the lower front teeth?"). I remarked on how straight and cavity free the teeth were, a model mouth, suggesting that the several missing teeth probably fell out after he was dead. Marguerite said it could've been a she: some women smoked pipes in pioneer days. The skull seemed small, but none of us had much of a frame of reference. Not to mention, none of us knew how to sex a skull.

Marguerite wondered whether the bones might have come from the old cemetery between their place and ours, now mostly under poison oak, but we couldn't fathom how they migrated. Might be runaways, Minor mused with a dry wit that still catches me off guard. Seismic movement? A subtle shift in the Earth that disjoined the skeleton, launching body parts into an underground flow? The area is rich in springs, Willem and I learned to our dismay when excavating footings for what was to be the solarium. I wondered aloud about foul play, but the Evanses swatted away that notion like a pesky fly.

We agreed I'd take the skull to the county archivist. Then I suggested we dig some more to see what else we might find. But Minor demurred, less concerned about archaeology than the clean-out, which he still hadn't located. To document, I took a picture of the bones next to the excavation hole, and one of Minor and Marguerite cradling the skull between them like a babe in arms, before carefully wrapping it for

transit in an old, soft flannel sheet Marguerite pulled from an antique trunk whose contents may hark back to pioneer days too.

IRENE

It is Monday. As usual after breakfast I am at the picture window. The rain that began last night in fits and starts falls steadily now. The last school bus has splashed past, and by my calculations the mailman won't arrive for a while. Lorraine is on duty because Alicia is out. The tenant proposes that, when Alicia's gone, Lorraine sneaks in a boyfriend who nuzzles her ample bosom while they watch soap operas and eat corn chips.

A red car pulls up to the curb to the right of the picture window. Perhaps Lorraine is expecting someone. The windshield wipers stop and I anticipate people getting out, but nothing happens. The car windows begin to fog, yet I make out the gestures of the passenger, a woman, her back toward me, and the grimaces of the driver, a man. The signals are clear: the woman and man are arguing.

George and I used to go at it when the seasons changed, as if the change in temperature or humidity, maybe the barometric pressure, shifted the balance of pain in love. Sometimes you'd see it coming, twisting the air, turning it dark and murderous. You could sharpen your weapons while you watched and waited; gather energy; calculate, standing at the edge of the storm cellar, when precisely to take shelter so you might live to fight another day. Other times the calm was torpedoed by a word, a look, a fear, the shadow of a fear. George hated what he became then.

The car door swings wide and the woman emerges. She starts walking fast, almost running, in my direction. The man gets out and lopez to catch up with her. When he does, he grabs her shoulders and spins her around. They are nose to nose. Their mouths work. They are directly in front of the picture window. She tries to shake loose of his hold but hasn't the strength. She fires another salvo, and whatever she says gashes him good. He pushes off, staggers back a step. His color goes. That's when he slaps her. That's when she sees I'm watching. She doesn't know, cannot tell, that I have no choice, that in my state and positioned as I am, I cannot not watch. Her nose is bleeding, but she isn't crying yet, she's so stunned at the drama — and the audience.

She hugs herself, but her focus doesn't waver. It high-centers on me. She nods. I signal what I can. Now she starts to cry. The rain pours down. She licks her lips and puts her hands to them, around them, as if discovering them for the first time. She confirms that she is bleeding. She fishes in her coat pocket for something to wipe away the blood but comes up empty.

Unexpectedly the man takes her gently by the elbow and guides her toward the car and, as unexpectedly, she acquiesces. The rage is spent. Opening the car door, he produces a handkerchief, which she accepts along with his guilty goodwill as she gets in. In one move he closes the door and the incident, then rounds the rear of the car to enter on his side. They drive away, the distance swallowing them. They've done this, in one form or another, before. I swallow too, a lump in my throat, but it's not what I think at first.

SHE TOO IS LONELY.

Words escape me like runaway slaves. They tumble over my tongue through lips and teeth that remember to part out of longstanding habit.

WHAT IF HE TALKED?

WHAT IF SHE ACTED?

WHAT IF I MOVED? MADE CONTACT?

CAN I? HAVEN'T I?

CAN'T I AGAIN?

LORRAINE, LORRAINE, WHEREVER IN THE HOUSE YOU'RE STATIONED, DUSTING OR IRONING, SPEEDING YOUR BOYFRIEND OUT THE KITCHEN DOOR, I'M CALLING YOU...I'M SIGNALING...I'M MOVING AT THE SPEED OF SOUND...

No, not running away. Words aren't running away. Words have re-shouldered the yoke of meaning. They are resurging, repopulating the blast zone, re-engineering the shape I take: redefining me.

ROSE

When I arrive at Robert's, Irene is stationed at the living-room picture window where, like it or not, she spends much of her time. I notice she no longer wears jeans or checks or bandanas. Alicia, who decides now for Irene, smiles too brightly when she greets me at the door. Anger props up the corners of her mouth, anger at having this incapacitated old woman interrupt the smooth curve of her life. Lorraine, not Alicia, ushers me into the living room, then disappears into the bowels of the house till noontime, when I leave to meet Ned for lunch. Alicia avoids the living room while I'm there. She prefers not to face the possibility that her mother-in-law is sentient.

I read to Irene, usually detective stories. She parceled out the word *MIS-TER-REE* when I asked her what she liked to read the first time I visited, and when the next Wednesday I brought an Agatha Christie, her eyes signaled what her tongue couldn't manage. Alicia says Irene doesn't hear, something about doctor's tests, but as far as I can tell, she hears remarkably. I'll bet Alicia would be red-faced to learn what Irene hears if her sense of shame weren't boxed and stored like so many of her other emotions seem to be. After reading, I give Irene news of her old friends in Moses Valley.

When I told Ned, over brunch Sunday morning, that Irene's a great listener, he shrank visibly from what he called my sick joke about someone who's in the worst sense a captive audience. He perceives in me the latent cruel streak he's sure is there because his mother has it. I explained to him, for the *n*th time, that I am tired of living with his mother between us, her persona the overlay to mine. He rolled his eyes. We are worse caricatures of a married couple than Desi and Lucy.

"Irene is a great listener," I insisted, realizing Ned will not be convinced, Ned who accepts on faith the force of gravity but questions how a child knows its mother.

"Don't delude yourself," he said, "visiting Irene is an act of charity."

"Charity has little to do with it," I retorted. "Irene and I have ESP" — I said this solely to annoy him — "we are confidants who don't need words."

"Maybe you and I'd be better off without them," he huffed.

Touché.

We didn't talk for two days.

WUH-MAN. MAN. AR-GYOO. Irene deposits the words this Wednesday like lost finds: midden from the Steiners' farmhouse, bones from the Evanses' front yard. Anthropologists have built cosmologies on less. I give Irene a long hard look. Maybe we *do* have ESP.

MADDY'S JOURNAL

September 7: We found the remains of a *human baby* while pulling up the old kitchen floor. It's been twenty-four hours and I'm still having trouble documenting this find. By what seismic movement, what underground flow, what twist of fate, was this clothbound parcel delivered to our dirt-stained hands?

We never could have guessed what we had till we unwrapped it, and even then we stared at the shrunken form without really comprehending. Flesh like onionskin about to tear; taut as bow hair, wrinkled as raisins. Hands curled tight, the thumbs tucked in, and toes like withered nuts. Pits where eyes should have been. Seeing is *not* believing.

Willem called the sheriff, who showed up twenty minutes later with his holster unsnapped. Maybe he expected a lunatic. Maybe he got one. My mind held the baby like a magnet holds nails. He examined the corpse (*his* characterization) and the scene of the crime (*my* characterization). But was there a crime? The current kitchen was added by latecomers who might have been ignorant of an existing family burial plot. But why would it be so close to the house? Could there be more bodies? We've only just begun the floor.

I wonder what Minor and Marguerite might know.

Looks old, the sheriff said about the remains, as if that were news. I guess that meant he didn't suspect us. He got his camera from his car and took pictures of us, some of our tools, the hole in the floor, and of course the baby (front and back, each from several angles). Then he unceremoniously dropped the remains (a baby!) in a plastic evidence bag like you see on CSI.

I'll get back to you, he told us as he walked out, holding the bag like garbage.

I look around the kitchen. *How the hell will I cook here?!*



Willem buried himself in woodwork today, more introverted even than usual. And me? Well, I guess I got my baby after all. And I don't even know if it was a boy or a girl.

ROSE

When Chloe was born, Ned plastered a banner on our car's grill — *IT'S A GIRL!* — but the man in the red car only did as he always did. He waved. I was relieved: I wasn't sure our relationship could bear the weight of the thick black letters. The words we speak — *IT'S A GIRL...BUT THE EMPEROR'S NOT WEARING ANY CLOTHES...I CAN'T STAND THIS ANY MORE I'M GOING TO KILL YOU* — conjure realities to be reckoned with, and I feared the banner would crystallize what was only meant to be ephemeral.

When Chloe became old enough, she started waving too. As soon as we'd cue "There's the man in the red car," her small hand went up like a flag. Soon she spotted the red car before we did, making a game of cuing us.

When inevitably she asked us, "Who waved first?" we told her he did. When she asked, "Why?" we said, "To be friendly," which, we explained, is why we waved back. When she asked, "Can the man come to our house?" we answered no, we don't know him well enough, to which she responded, "But you said he's our friend..." "Well," we said, beginning to struggle, "he's a

different kind of friend,” which quieted her for the moment. While she was processing what this might mean, I was too.

I thought about her questions and our answers which, like the circuit rider’s loop, ended where they began. What is it that delimits us, like circumference bounds circle, *or* sweeps us through life’s S-curves to — the right word comes! — *FREE-DOM*? What’s the area of a friendship anyway, a circle whose area can’t be tallied thanks to never-ending pi, whose missing links *don’t* break the chain?



The time came, as I knew it would, for us to move into town. Chloe and I needed the sociability, Ned had tired of the commute. When I told Irene we’d be moving and I might be able to visit more often, her eyes flooded with tears Alicia couldn’t have acknowledged even the idea of. At the farewell party our Moses Valley neighbors threw for us, we were presented with a basketful of notes — reminiscences, funny stories — commemorating our time there. The basket was one of Willem’s.

I thought about the man in the red car as we disassembled life as we knew it, packed it up in boxes, carted boxes into town, reconstructed the contents in new rooms in a new house facing a new street that doesn’t lead to the Harpole Road. I wondered how he’d take it, this disappearing act: breaking the chain. He wouldn’t think anything of it the first morning he didn’t pass Ned. But when our car failed to show the next morning, and the next? Well, he might assume, he might surmise — *and then?*

We did the worst of the move on a Thursday and Friday, and got the basics like beds in place over the weekend. Monday morning, Ned left the car in the driveway — it’s virtually mine now — and rode his new acquisition, a bicycle, the mile and a half to work. Like a swimmer in a sea of mud I navigated the boxes and piles and began, like First Woman, making order. By garbage day, which I learned is Thursday, I had all the boxes collapsed, baled, stacked curbside, for the men with the thick gloves and big noisy trucks and giant recycling trailer to haul away. By lunchtime, the residue of the move was gone. Well, not quite. There was still the man in the red car.

It hit me halfway through my tuna sandwich. I saw, suddenly, where pi dead-ends —

Him, cruising through the S-curve that feeds the straight stretch where we almost always cross, us flashing our lights on and off — *one if by land, two if by sea* — sounding the horn, rolling down the windows and waving our arms outside like semaphores; braking; slowing down, way down; stopping dead in the middle of the road, lights, horn, arms going; the doors opening; all three of us emerging. Him responding, stopping, backing up, getting out too, removing the dark glasses, his face taking on detail *finally* in the morning light. Shaking hands, exchanging the first words of a friendship that hadn’t known or needed any. Us explaining. Him nodding, touching the child on the cheek the way people do; getting back into the red car and, through the open window — a variation — *of course!* — waving.

I kept picturing it, that wave, through the afternoon and into the evening. Ned, seeing me distracted, seemed to know not to ask. I carried it to bed with me like a childhood hurt. It followed me into sleep but failed to appear in my dreams. For the next several days, it ached.

Then the ache receded. Then the memory sped furiously down the road to an undisclosed destination. ✍

DRAFT

⚡ SELECTED POEMS

DRAFT

✧ There in the Forest

Walking silently the forest loop trail
One footfall at a time we leave behind the
Chaff of daily life
With every step along the trace the
Care-worn world slips away

We snake our way through ironwood thicket into
The wilds within ourselves
The map is not the territory —
The gentle bell calls like the *kahea* of a hula dancer, signaling us for
What comes next

We help one another, wordlessly,
Down a muddy slope through a gulch up the other side where
I am lifted to a place far older than grandfather eucalypt
Whom I embrace with both arms and then,
Spine to bole, lean against for all I'm worth

A laughing thrush sings wildly
The ground barks when an unseen branch lets go
I squat close to the earth to hear
Stillness thrum

At trail's end we break out into the open like
The newborn
And we are still there —
There in the forest we never entered and never left

2012 / In memory of Gavin

The Black Dog Still Wags His Tail ✓

The black dog stands by his grave and
Wags his tail at
The sight of me
He hasn't seen me for a while but
That means nothing

Friendship has no expiration date

His coat is thick and shiny as in his prime
His stance is strong, his
Ears are up, his eyes clear and knowing
He knows it all now

The last year he dug for rabbits with
Conviction in the powdery high-desert soil
On occasion he found one too
But maybe he also found the deeper earth
To his liking
A good smell, a cooler feel, a
place safe from the thunder that
made him quake
He is there now, facing east as if beginning again, in
His own burrow
Maybe the rabbits will dig for him?

The black dog stands by his grave and
Wags his tail as
I drift off to sleep
He tells me he is happy and free —
He always was, wasn't he? —
He stands guard over the black night to make sure
Love is safe under the covers

2013 / In memory of Hala

At the Lo'i

While we pulled *kalo* and
Toted it by the *lau* to
The 'auwai where we
Stripped roots, shucked mud,
Severed corms for today's cookpot from
Huli for next year's

While we cradled *huli* like newborn babes and —
One by one,
Calf-deep in mud that
Threatened to reclaim us —
Returned to the Mother what she called out for.

While our fingers weeded and our
Mouths chattered and our
Skins beaded and our
Hearts opened and our
Stomachs growled for lunch

A heron waded where
No one toiled, where
Kalo dreamt in its watery world
Undisturbed

It stalked the *lo'i* on
Huli-legs

Then plied the air on
Lau-wings

1995 / Inspired by a day in a traditional lo'i (taro patch) in Waipi'o Valley

✧ What Happened to the Cat

She goes to the lava to sit

She waits

The Earth comes up through the

Holes in the bottom of her body

She sees the cat slip out of the pool

First one soft furry black leg, then

Another, then a third, a fourth, a fifth — *fifth?*

She smiles: no mistaking *her* cat

The cat comes up through the

Holes in the bottom of her body from the

Sunken red cave where it

Licked its wounds and its tale of how it got there.

She wants to know this, and more

The cat and its tale come up through the

Holes in the bottom of her body from the

Sunken red cave where the

Night creature hauled it, wrapped in its scream,

Before the long silence began

The cat is wet from the pool

As it shakes off the water

She goes through the holes in the

Bottom of her body and finally

She and the cat embrace and cry and the

Air is blue parachute silk and the

Pod lifts off

1995 / In memory of Pearl

⚡ Beware of

The puppy was a foundling and they didn't know his mix, his
Lineage, till he got older and began to show himself
Then they saw he was a guard dog with a scary mouth and sharp bark and defiant stance
Fiercely protective of the place, his turf, the man and the woman
No one could pass without his say-so

And then one day he bit someone entering, someone who came too quickly through the gate
Failing to show the dog the respect he demanded, and
The man and the woman were surprised because the dog had never done this before but
They should not have been surprised, not
With a dog whose every cell says *guard*, it was only a matter of time
So they put up a sign *BEWARE OF THE DOG* as a warning

After a while, the man and the dog left and the woman remained, alone,
Though in truth she had always been alone, and now
It was her turf to protect, though in truth it had always been her turf
The man did not know this and the dog could not know it, not this dog

The sign *BEWARE OF THE DOG* remained posted on the gate,
Lit by a bleak winter sun, strafed by wind and rain, till one day, arriving home after errands
The woman, in a fit of pique that cleared the way to cross over, wrenched the gummy silver tape and
Tore down the sign

There is no warning now
Only an understanding:
BEWARE OF THE WOMAN — SHE BITES

2006

As she drove home that night *pueo* swept across the road
Heading in her direction and
As she neared home there *pueo* was again, on a fence post
She stopped the car and they regarded one another and then
Pueo flew off into the fields and she went home

That was two

She was gardening and heard a large smooth stone call to be moved and
As she picked it up and cradled its heft, she knew the stone
Had had its back to her all this time and turned it around
She seated it in a shallow bed of soil and surrounded it with smaller stonemates
Its front facing towards the gate, the entryway to the property
Then she saw *pueo*, *pueo* in the stone

That was three

While relaxing in the house at deep dusk out of the corner of her eye she saw
A large shadowy bird fly across the cemetery next to her house and
Across the road and into the fields
Hana hou pueo

That was four

She spoke about her relationship with *pueo*, expressing appreciation,
And nearing home that night
Again saw *pueo* sitting on a fence post
Again she stopped and they regarded one another and then
Pueo flew off into the fields and she went home

That was five

Again in her house at deep dusk, she heard a bird call and the sound
Caused her to look out the front door and
Over the gulch and into the trees flew a large shadowy bird
Pueo

That was six —
In eight days

She once saved the life of a young injured *pueo* and the word went out after that
They saved her life once too and stand guard now as
She sits, now and then, on a fence post and flies over the roads and fields and gulches into
The unknown

Pueo bridges worlds
She bridges worlds too

2006

Next Act

Sacred rites have
Hidden players

Anticlimax, unbidden,
Steals the scene

The trap door opens
The protagonists fall through

Their lines forgotten
They laugh and scream in the dark

Above, an audience of corpses
Applauds with gusto

The curtain closes
Everyone goes home

Abandoned, the protagonists consume the dark
And are enlightened

They comprehend, at last,
The futility of rehearsal

Shed of old constraints
They vow to improvise

Without seeking
They find the door

And once again on stage
Begin performance of

An act so new
Its lines are yet unwritten

They play their greatest roles
To an empty house

Later, in the dressing room,
Removing their grease paint

They sip champagne
Eager to read the rave reviews

1980; rev. 2010

Dark Side of the Sun

The girl walks along
Her shadow behind
Another shadow in front
Hers also
One cast when the
Sun arcs high
The other when the
Dark side of the sun shines

The girl calls and
Her dog runs and leaps to join her
He barks his delight
The dog pays no attention to
Her shadow behind
It is nothing to him

The girl calls and
Her wolf pads in
He circles her in silence
His eyes, pinpoints in the gloaming,
Nail the shadow in front
It is why he's here

The wolf riffs and
The girl takes her cue from that
And howls a giant's song
Once heard in a dream

The shadow in front wavers and
A man steps out
His hands are bound
A rope is around his neck,
A knife in his heart
He kneels, bending forward to
Give his neck to the ax

Killed and killed and killed again, this man who
Could not make amends in life and
Cannot seem to make amends in death either
Or can he?

The giant's song, now the girl's
Enormous
The wolf lies down, waiting
The dog waits too, on the other side

The girl cuts the bindings of the killed man
They walk together for the
First and last time on the
Dark side of the sun
The knife falls out of his heart
And out of hers

2012; rev. 2020

Terra firma conversation while
Sun rises
Voices enter morning like
Velvet spears
Moon soon gone from
Fickle skies
Day comes
Flat on

We dress and leave
Soulful refuse lumped on the
Bedroom floor
Heaving viscera are set aside
Hearts carefully boxed
The day promises
To be hot

In the car
The stereo brings us
Together
We sing along to
Blot out the battering
On our windows
Of impinging forces
Suddenly
St Helens looms
Grimly truncated and barren
And we fall ceremonially
Silent

Terra firma conversation while
Sun sets
Voices enter evening like
Silver dogs
Sipping coffee and sea air
We wonder just what
Brought us here
And why

As the ferry plows
Black waters
I am reminded
There is no terra firma
Only terra incognita

1980 / 5 months after Mt St Helens erupted

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

WHEN THE RENOWNED children's author Dr Seuss was asked where his ideas came from, his responses were as creative as his books. Once he said he traveled to the Arizona desert and picked the brain of a retired Thunderbird, a response that always resonated with me. Thus the dedication.

In some North American indigenous cultures, the Thunderbird is a supernatural being of power and strength — *not* one to joke about. Story ideas may come from *that* Thunderbird as well, should he choose to so honor a mere human. ✨

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAROL ROSENBLUM PERRY is a writer and editor by profession and a land whisperer and Earth worker by calling.

She is the author of *The Fine Art of Technical Writing* (1991; revised 2011), a writer's worthy companion and the capstone of her editing career; and *Land Whisperer / A Guide to Partnering Energetically with Any Environment* (2019), the distillation of 15 years as a practitioner. She is currently at work on *The Shards / Selections from an Earth Worker's Journal* and *Ruby and Vera Dreaming*, speculative fiction for young adults.

A New Yorker by birth, Carol has lived in Oregon and Hawai'i and now makes her home in the San Francisco Bay Area. Visit www.handonthecavewall.net to learn more about all aspects of her work. ✨