THE WOMAN IN THE BOX IS SMILING

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillments of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Vicky Lee Santiesteban, B.A.
Denton, Texas
December, 1998

The Woman in the Box is Smiling is a collection of poems, prose poems, short-short stories, and short stories. The introduction is a personal essay which discusses form as a devise used to gain control over subject matter.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following poems have previously appeared as noted:

The Denny Poems
My Babylon

Madison Review
Sightings
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Seventeen years after writing my first poem (a childish diatribe portraying a failed magician as a metaphor for love), I discovered the most important element of successful writing: control. I say I discovered control because, in my experience, control has appeared to be something that can’t be taught and is, at best, absorbed. I had been instructed to make my poems “charming” and was directed to read countless other poets, but these oblique instructions only frustrated me. I realized something was missing from my writing. I could witness control in others’ works, but I couldn’t reduce it to a specific rule. I knew painters planned their canvases, celebrated chefs started with menus, and musicians chose their rhythms. What I didn’t know was that writers often devise their form even as they consider a subject.

Finally, under pressure to create for a workshop, I stationed myself on my Denton duplex porch and forced myself to write. There was no inspiration, no sudden voices to record. My poem appeared to me to be a “non-poem.” Prior to "My Babylon," my poems consisted of short lines and my using line breaks to emphasize the obvious or fantastic. Having spent seventeen years writing free verse I was ill prepared to appreciate what was happening on the paper before me. That night I experimented with a style not yet my own and wrote “My Babylon.” The subject matter of “My Babylon” is dangerously close to sentimental and deals with a young narrator’s need to fabricate exterior illnesses in order to gain her father’s attention. The central issue of the poem, though, is the narrator’s real illness: a severe depression that keeps her in bed and ultimately makes her a victim of her father’s caring too much. Yet despite its dangers, I think "My Babylon" stays clear of sentimentality. The symmetry of its placement on paper (three
block paragraphs, each equal in line and stanza length) does something to "tidy up" the emotional upheaval of its subject matter. The blocks are authoritatively placed and ultimately, comforting. The gesture appears to be a frank whisper—a small yet convincing voice from the dark. The "look" or form of the poem is tight, strict, confined, and controlled.

Thus, I discovered how to assert control over my writing by utilizing form. Although form might seem a simple, obvious tool to more experienced writers, it became for me a liberating constriction, an exciting paradox. Soon after my discovery, no subject was taboo; I was capable of maintaining a voice without subjecting the story to a melodramatic presentation. And although the story, the emotion, the evocation of a mood are all important factors when I am creating, these aspects of the poem took a back seat to form. Ultimately, the form is what moved me sufficiently away from the personal mode. Form gave me the opportunity to make space for the reader, to distance myself and let the narrative take precedence.

Because form presupposes control, I spend little time concerning myself with what I can and cannot say. Instead, I trouble over how I might say everything I shouldn’t. I’ve been able to revise some of my earlier works and appreciate the level of control form places on my subject matter. For example, "Drive," a poem which depicts a sexual encounter in a speeding car, is now in iambic tetrameter as opposed to its prior shapelessness. As an open form poem, "Drive" is nearly laughable and borders on pornography. In its present form, "Drive" reads more like a controlled, erotic composition. Form forced me to delete unnecessary descriptions (i.e., "thick black steel machine/ wrapped around my throbbing, aching nerve extensions" is now "this bored pout, a thick, black machine/ wrapped around my aching nerves") thereby toning down, reshaping, and enriching the poem. As Alberto Manguel states in his introduction to The Gates of Paradise: The Anthology of Erotic Short Fiction,
To write an erotic story in English, or to translate one into English, requires from the writer new and crafty ways of making use of the medium so that the reader is led, against the grain of meaning or through an entirely separate imagination of language, into an experience which society has decreed will remain unspoken. (xxii)

Utilizing a strict form for "Drive" has enabled me to lead the reader through what Manguel sees as "secretive." And as trivial as it might sound, I must admit I am far more pleased by the look of the revised "Drive." Rather than using line breaks to emphasize the obvious, the line breaks now hide the blatantly sexual thereby creating a reserved tone. "Drive" is now a shorter, more compact poem. Its almost frivolous subject matter is sedate, cool.

I spend a lot of time mimicking form. After reading Lewis Turco’s "Kamelopard," I noticed how perfect a weave that rhyme can add to meter. "Kamelopard" is in iambic pentameter, and its rhyme scheme is ABBCCA. I was fascinated and challenged. At about the same time I was reading the poem, two paramedic vehicles and a fire truck were stationed at the end of my block, summoned when a squirrel ignited on an electrical wire. I watched the watchers, Turco’s poem playing over and over in my mind, and wondered, "Can I use this form?" Realizing how sad our little neighborhood is, I remembered a ride home from Miami Beach about twenty years ago. I was sunburned and couldn’t wait to get home, but when my mother noticed a fresh accident on the exit ramp of I-95, my family did like many others: pulled over to watch. This memory, combined with the lyrical quality of "Kamelopard" and the dancing lights of a Denton fire truck summoned to save a burning squirrel, started me writing. Because I had just finished reading Turco, and because he had done such a brilliant job with rhyme-scheme in his poem, mimicking the form was almost painless; however, I have to admit, after typing the title for my poem, "Sightings," I was concerned that I wouldn’t be
able to sustain the meter and rhyme scheme. Much to my surprise, “Sightings” ended up being three pages long. I managed to maintain the ten syllable line for all 90 lines and the rhyme scheme for all 15 stanzas. The end result is a poem that employs personal, felt experience without ever becoming insipidly personal, or worse, sincere. It is the rhyme that lightens up the dark subject matter while the strict meter merits regard. Because I adhered to such a strict form, the lines of the poem are both gruesome and challenging.

Whereas I used to consider reading poetry a virtual pain in the neck, I now come to the text eager to learn. Like many "young" writers, I had viewed form as Louise Bogan states in her article, "The Pleasures of Formal Poetry," as "pedantic and trivial" (Gibbons 204). Bogan continues her description of the naive writer as afraid and disgusted by form: "The matter of form as opposed to non-form or free form sometimes slips over the field of aesthetics into the moral plane. Nowadays young poets avoid form as they would some stupid or reprehensible action" (204). I agree with Bogan that certain formal verse patterns have been exhausted, but I know that using a strict form will often-times enable me to write a tighter, more controlled poem. Although I might not always adhere to my chosen form, form acts as my pattern, magnifying glass, and sieve. Much like Gunter Kunert, I write "because the process of transformation in which I become a text is a dialectical process of regeneration: I lose and win at the same time" (138). All this because of form.

Forms of poetry are not all that intrigue me. After writing a flash fiction story in a workshop, I wondered if there were such a thing as a respectable short-short. According to James Thomas, editor of Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories,

The minimal and rapid trajectory is of course much of the appeal (and challenge) of these stories—but it is interesting to note that public taste for brevity in fiction has fluctuated over the years. Fifty years ago very short stories could be found in such magazines as Liberty, but fifteen years ago
it was unusual to come across a story of under five pages in the respected magazines and literary journals of this country. (13)

I was delighted to find out that several "flash fiction" and "sudden fiction" anthologies have been published in the past eight years and journals such as *North American Review* and *Quarterly West* are publishing "flash fiction" and "sudden fiction."

According to Fred Chappell in his contribution to the Afterwords of *Sudden Fiction*:

[Sudden Fiction's] two requirements are that it be quite short—two thousand words are almost too many—and that it be troubling. Unease, whether humorous or sad, is the effect the short-short aims at. Even if the story achieves resolution, it cannot be a simple resolution and it should not give the impression of permanence. The self-containment of the short-short is incomplete; this form does not create a world in the way that a poem or short-story may do; rather, it inhabits a larger world which it must take pain to imply. (Shapard 227)

Flash Fiction, on the other hand, differs in length—the minimum word length being 250, the maximum, 750 (Thomas 11). Both sudden fiction and flash fiction share the same fundamental quality--life as analogue--and are:

Highly compressed, highly charged, insidious, protean, sudden, alarming, tantalizing, these short-shorts confer form on small corners of chaos, can do in a page what a novel does in two hundred. If they can stop time and make it timeless, they are here for you, above all, as living voices.

(Shappard xvi)

After reading a brilliant flash fiction piece by Margaret Atwood entitled, "Bread," I experimented with her form and made my attempt to mold that form into my own vehicle of control. Although I did manage to write a flash fiction piece, "Evidence in
Four Parts," my story fails where Atwood's story takes full shape. Like Atwood's "Bread," I fashioned a flash fiction story in parts. Each part is representative of an "off-stage" whole, but the breaking of the entire piece into small parts is successful. The simple blank spaces of these breaks act as both silent rhetoric and transitions without words. To Atwood's credit, she uses a distinct metaphor and consistently calls attention to that metaphor in each piece of her flash fiction story. By doing this, Atwood's story has a thread that leads the reader through some semblance of a beginning, a middle, and an end. "Evidence in Four Parts," on the other hand, does not seem to lead up to some climactic moment.

The form of Gregory Burnham's flash fiction piece, "Subtotals," also caught my attention. Burnham's narrator lists such obscure events in his life as "number of hunches played: 1,091, number of times born again: 0, and number of magazine subscriptions: 41" (Thomas, Flash Fiction 98). By putting this data in the form of a list, the pertinence of each minor bit of information is made to seem more important, almost dire. In turn, I borrowed Burnham's form and wrote a flash fiction story in list form entitled "Ways to Kill a Bird." Because I chose the list as my form, the story reads as if these instructions—"Tie fishing wire around its leg, swing it over your head and yell, 'Fly,'" or "Shove a magnet down its throat. Stick it to the refrigerator"—are designed to be followed. Because this list is in flash fiction form, I, much like Burnham, can stop while I'm ahead. Maintaining this level of absurdity is difficult and works best when kept brief.

Inasmuch as control is concerned when it comes to my utilizing the flash fiction form, I find flash fiction a freeing form. After writing poetry for so many years, I wondered if I'd ever be able to expand the story of the poem to the story of a short story. I don't necessarily see flash fiction as a stepping stone; the flash fiction form has become an integral part of my writing and I intend to continue using it. But it did act as a catalyst
for the longer story. If I were to consider it merely a step, I would have to say that flash fiction form taught me how to expand while still maintaining control. Because of its length, flash fiction demands that I remain within the parameters of control but still allows me the freedom to elaborate in areas where poetry constricts. Although poetry forms and flash fiction offer me the space to tell a story, poetry’s stories are infinite in nature. Flash fictions stories are more finite—they encompass an entire world within their strict parameters. According to C. Michael Curtis, "Very short stories need to be free of dithering, or false starts, of shallow exposition or commonplace dialogue. They require a writer to know just where he or she is going, and to be there swiftly" (Shapard, *Sudden Fiction* 250). I expect to write a beginning, middle, and end when working within the flash fiction form. Any poetic form requires that I disregard the beginning, skim the middle, and insinuate an end.

In July of 1993, I picked up a collection of short stories by the author who has, to date, been the most influential on my fiction writing: Raymond Carver. His minimalist style intrigues me. I realize that most critics consider minimalism to be a tradition, but I am interested in the form that makes minimalism. According to Kim Herzinger in her article “Minimalism As a Postmodernism: Some Introductory Notes:”

Most of minimalism’s essential characteristics are agreed upon by promoters and detractors alike. Minimalist fiction is a) formally spare, terse, trim; b) tonally cool, detached, noncommittal; “flat,” affectless, recalcitrant, deadpan, laconic; c) oblique and elliptical; d) relatively plotless; e) concerned with surface detail, particularly with recognizable brand names; f) depthless; g) comparatively oblique about personal, social, political, or cultural history; h) often written in the present tense; i) often written in the first person; j) sometimes written in the second person. Minimalist fiction’s characteristic mode is a) representational/hyperrealistic/
superrealistic; b) not fabulist. Minimalist fiction's characteristic "subject matter" is a) ordinary, mundane ... (78)

Carver's stories utilize three areas of minimalism: minimal plot, minimal character and minimal language. What most attracts me to Carver's form is that the story is not apparent, but it is happening. Minimalist form insists that the reader involve him/herself more intimately with the story.

Minimalism showed me that the years I spent practicing poetry, painstakingly choosing the exact word and line, were invaluable. In his essay, "On Writing," Carver states: "For the details to be concrete and convey meaning, the language must be accurate and precisely given. The words can be so precise they may even sound flat, but they can still carry; if used right, they can hit all the notes" (27).

What formal restrictions did for my poetry, minimalism avails for my short stories. Minimalism forces me to be aware of every description. The characters are molded by precise attributes and not by my superfluous representations. According to Carver,

It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power. It is possible to write a line of seemingly innocuous dialogue and have it send a chill along the reader's spine—the source of artistic delight, as Nabokov would have it. (24)

Minute details carry little significance in the minimalist form. I feel it is necessary to attach some "meaning" to description. In my short story, "Worms," the narrator's dress is described as being brown and lacking in any real style. By wearing this dress for a picture, she looks like a worm, void of any exterior brilliance.

I read What We Talk About When We Talk About Love one night,
and woke the next morning with the line, "Sarah Hayne calls me and says, 'Richard Carlos is dead'" playing in my mind. I wrote the short story, "Richard," fashioning the male character after Raymond Carver. I tried to depict the kind of intimacy Raymond Carver depicted in his stories. I wanted to get to know my Raymond Carver, the author of my own invention. Recently, I read "On Writing." In this essay, Carver discusses the beginning of his story, one that "wanted telling."

For several days I'd been going around with this sentence in my head: "He was running the vacuum cleaner when the telephone rang." I knew a story was there . . . I felt it in my bones, that a story belonged with that beginning, if I could just have the time to write it. (26)

By mimicking forms, I've been able to gain control of my writing. I'm looking forward to the many other forms I will discover in the future. As Jonathan Holden states in his book, Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry, "... the fully achieved poem [or short story] evidencing a 'discovered' structure is . . . 'experimental' in a far deeper and non-trivial sense of that word" (109). Through form, my voice has matured, and I intend to nurture further maturation by discovering, experimenting, and mimicking whatever other structures I find conducive to my subject matter. Some might think I am creating in a box, stifling my voice and allowing myself only a small place in which to write. But I like the place I've come to. I am the woman in the box. And I am smiling.
WORKS CITED


MY BABYLON

I had the sort of fever that made the walls breathe, and the dolls on their pedestals... I knew they were desperate to dance over the edge—their plastic toes pointed. I was close to sleeping, denying the disease, falling off for awhile. But when I sensed him coming down the hall, carrying a small paper umbrella or a go-go can or some stupid gift from the beachside restaurant where he worked, my determination to be ill intensified. Oh, Papa. Oh, my pretty Papa. Make me good.

He laid beside me, blew lightly on my face to spread the stray hairs of my bangs back. I knew then that he would never be angry with me for succumbing to such wilds, that the rains were too warm, that I had strange fascinations. I counted the pocks in his face. I told him to hum while I played with his lower lip. I promise you a chestnut. Please Papa. You will always be beautiful. Oh Papa. Go now. Sleep. I never felt him leave my bed. I'll never understand how he could.

I was often just that sick. It was either the children who rubbed mud in my hair or the neighborhood ghosts or seeing a car catch the back of my dog. Sometimes, I was so simple even my knees would ache. Anything. Anything real. Not one bit of it was created. I didn't mean to frighten him. I only knew too much to ever want to leave my bed. It was easier there. Still, the dark was a cruel place to keep me. He must have known that. I said it so many times.
I find myself longing for a fast drive,  
the whip and sting of my hair cutting  
this bored pout, a thick, black machine  
wrapped around my aching nerves,  
and a painfully pleasant fear of crashing  
headlong into virtue.

He’ll know, my driver, how to downshift,  
how to avoid quiet suffering, will think  
better to finger me in fifth gear.  
I don’t want to be in love: it isn’t fast,  
it isn’t dangerous, it isn’t illegal.  
I like this scenery speeding past,  

the music too loud to speak, the engine.
ANTONIO PICKS GRAPES IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE.

FOUR SUMMERS NOW HE HAS FELT THE JUICE OF DELUSION
DRIPPING DOWN HIS FOREARMS, AMBITIOUSLY RIDING
THROUGH THE MAZE OF CURLED BLACK HAIR THERE
AND FALLING IN TINY, SWEET DROPS UPON THE EARTH.

HE HAS A FRIEND WHO SPEAKS PATTERNED ENGLISH,
WHOSE EYES ARE ROMANTIC AND PUNCTUATE
HIS BROKEN DIALOGUE. WE DRINK STALE, FLAT BEER
AND ANTONIO HAS HIS LIKE WATER. LITTLE WORDS
IN DRUNKEN TONGUE STAIN THE RIMS OF OUR MUGS.

THE TWO MEN DANCE THE SERVIANA WHILE I WATCH.
ANTONIO'S ANGRY FEET POUND INTO THE STILL
AFTERNOON SIESTA. WHEN THE MUSIC ENDS, THE FRIEND
BOWS BACKWARDS AND ANTONIO KISSES HIM ON THE MOUTH
LOOKING AT ME AS IF HE HOPES I WILL BE OFFENDED.

THAT NIGHT WE FIND A PARK IN THE RONDA HILLS.
OUR CLIFF IS CARVED DEEP AND THE BRIDGE HAS KILLED MEN,
THE FRIEND TELLS ME. ANTONIO IS RESTLESS,
HE INTERRUPTS, HIS VOICE ECHOING, MOVING
beyond the three of us and into the gorge.

_Era loco edificar una puente como aquella_,

Antonio shouts, spitting smoke and throwing
his cigarette out into nothing. I watch it
catch rocks, tenuous sparks battling the wind.
The beer in me anticipates a fire in the brush.

I sleep on the train ride back to Madrid and dream
I am on my knees in a vineyard when a dark haired
angel lets a slow trickle of wine wash over my face.
My neck is warm and I am drunk with knowing
that later I will digest him.
I'm glad for the answering machine.
My life is simpler now; I don't have
to talk to people. This is a new rule.

But I might talk to the skeleton.
Let me explain: If you were young,
five years old let's say,

and you dreamt that your mother
was brushing your hair; you were going
somewhere and there were other

people there, no one important,
and you looked up and saw a skeleton
standing outside the window, looking

at you. Your mother and the others
didn't see anything and you couldn't tell
them to look because you had dream

muteness. So you looked at the skeleton;
it looked at you. You knew this meant
something. Then it was over. You woke up.

Now you are afraid for the rest of your life.
This fear surfaces and you hear male voices when no one is talking or radio signals

when you need to sleep. These are sounds, nothing more, but you make them into words.
Sometimes, you forget how frightening

this is. You make brave plans and end up alone. This is good.
But some nights, you can't help it,

you expect the skeleton.
You stare at the wall, turn your back on life and wait for the visit.

You invent the apparition. Nothing will seem more true than its return.
You do this for many years.

The skeleton never comes back. People you don't know live in the house where you had the dream, but everywhere
you go there are windows, always
windows. You force yourself to look.
Are you disappointed no one is there?

If you never make the connection,
you might be all right, might believe bones
can never hurt you, but still you’ll sleep

with your head hidden. You will never
be able to make up your mind. This
indecision will always make you real.

And if someday, if you take the call,
there might be nothing either of you
can say. There might be only the dead
tone of the wire, a hum somewhere
in the background, and then,
when you find your voice—a click.
Like any normal kid, I wanted to go home.
I even acted sick, held my sun-burned stomach with one hand and said I was going to puke if we didn't leave soon. My dad just gave me the keys to the car and said wait. For thirty minutes I sat there listening to the radio, alone.

You shouldn't trust me—this was a long time ago—but I think everyone made it out of the lake except the driver. He landed the car in a cake of mud and wouldn't give up the wheel; instead, he gripped with his legs refusing to be led, and with his fists threw remarkably tough blows.

By the time the paramedics arrived, the car's front-end was tipped forward, the grill kissing water. Even though I wouldn't look, when I heard my father say oh my god, I twisted the keys back and listened.
I still count that act as the greatest of my sins—that moment I became one of the crowd's liars.
The falling away, the stupid sound that splash made
was silenced by an _ahh_, an _ahh_ for fireworks
or grand prizes, an _ahh_ so expectant it hurts,
an _ahh_ for when something fascinating happens,
an _ahh_ just deep and harsh enough that it deafens,
defines, makes sense of violent hungers unnamed.

All the way home, my mother talked about a tick,
a strange movement the driver made when they tried
to save him—as if he wanted to be revived.
I rolled down my window, pressed my head in the seat.
I burped and the taste of my acids was sweet.
Nothing was a game anymore. I really was sick.

II.

Imagine 9 a.m. in a suburban
neighborhood—imagine housewives and pre-schoolers
those artificers, or if you will, rulers
of the morning, bathed in red and blue flashing lights,
wearing shorts or flesh-tone, knee-high hose so tight
their calves fold and bulge like cottage cheese. Disturbed?

No, wait—that's nothing compared to the _real_ tale:
two boys, skipping school, throwing rocks at canal cans
see something strange and make bets on their little hands,
who’s got the best aim, what the hell they’re aiming for
and one won or lost—this depends on who keeps score—
because his rock hit dead-on and up popped a dead male.

A television crew films the excavation.
A flowered woman comes forward and reports
that she heard the shots and thought they were fireworks.
Later, the police pull her aside for questioning.
She goes, half under her breath mentioning
there’s coffee at her house—a stiff invitation.

When they raised the body, no one made a sound;
the noise of the separation was loud enough—
the thick sucking tonus of his body, the tough
draw of stale water letting him finally go,
a mechanical mouth snapping shut and the show
ended when everyone knew what it looks like to drown.

Someone mentioned tragedy as if it fit this stage.
It was a long time before anyone had strength
enough to go home and clean their toilets, angst
biting the backs of their thongs and fuzzy slippers.
One woman took to her gardenias with blunt clippers
while our two young heroes cried in their mothers’ legs.
You can lose the things you love a lot of ways. 
That’s what makes this life so goddamned interesting. 
But what’s even better is you can keep guessing. 
Say a good friend disappears one day, just like that, 
like some well-trained magician slipped her in his hat 
when no one was looking. You’d have to be amazed. 

But no one knows her. There’s nothing dramatic. 
It’s an austere disappearance, for instance 
an appointment she had to keep, a circumstance 
beyond her control, so she misses dinner 
and you’ll call anyone wondering if they’ve seen her. 
Hey, trust me: you were made just right for this: thick. 

No, it’s not the simple things that will bother you. 
It’s not even the strange ones, or the violent 
mistakes made when no one seems to be intent 
on troubling you. Just hope you’ll get to be 
one of the watchers, or the watched—you’ll see 
how entirely entertaining it is. And true. 

Make up stories about what happened to your friend. 
Why waste her life on some casual mistake? 
Why, you can even videotape the well-caked
newscaster when she mispronounces the name, again.
Be offended, write letters to the station, demand
that they get it right. Tell them you’re gonna suspend

*everything* until there’s some formal apology
made to you because you are someone in all
of this—say it’s not fair because you waited a long
time to be on the other side of the story,
on the side that knows no answer will worry
you so long as somebody marvels your suffering.
BODY PARTS

Now I don't cut off body parts for love.
I mean this to mean something about lies
I tell to keep parts removable in tact.

What is true is that I needed a man once,
and that need saw the shape of an ear
in a walnut shell—this is why I broke

walnuts all night in my sleep, woke wet,
feral, as if I'd nearly drowned in a canal.
The sun remade the sky a sick purple

and I lay there, knowing the man I needed
would bleed on the morning to save me.
Still, I had nothing to give I didn't already want.

For the beloved a body is piecemeal,
painfully auspicious, detached, arbitrary.
The selfish offer the unbelievable,

the box that is empty of corners,
the invisible, transcendent, sublime.
I gave a man I needed once a walnut shell

watched him press that shell to the window

and he looked at me to ask what else?

My fever changed. The world broke. That was all.
I gave in with nothing left
to give; when he said *All's fair*;
when I balled my small fists,
aimed for the air, but missed.
His gut gave and the connection
sounded like pithy gunfire.

I'd never missed before.
Everything I threw, chairs, shoes,
any handy, heavy find,
flew past him and my unkind
gestures made rich, profound holes
in what could have been his body.

So he always knew I had it
in me, had enough command
but no sense of skilled patience.
I was rude yet tenacious.
Why, in fury I'd break glass
in places no one dare step.

But he said *All's fair* and moved—
moved strategically, moved
like he needed to be hurt—
and my balled fist, accurate
in its attempt, landed solid.
I'd missed the point of attack.

It was the first time any sound
resounded between us; his first
trick, my last attack, the source
of a new battle, but what's worse
is he'd won the war I needed.
My hand scarred. I conceded.
EVIDENCE IN FOUR PARTS

Part One
When Scarlet went back to Tara

That scene when Scarlett is tripping over the war, wearing what's left of the romantic South around her ankles for the last two minutes of her childhood and no one answers her questions—every word she says sees another glass break so she's more careful about where she steps and passes her father who is sitting in the one chair that didn't catch fire. She goes into that room, opens both doors with one hand, parts the waters, breaks the noiselessness, tears a seam, finds her mother dead. My mother leaned over and said, "She's a good actress. Watch, her chest won't move. It's not easy pretending to be a dead person." She was right. Scarlett was like a statue.

Part Two
The misinterpretation

Cats sleep all of the time. Cats fall on top of you because they want to stay. Cats don't eat when you're watching. Cats don't play because it's cold out. Cats still use their box. Cats howl on the front porch because they smell someone else's pee. Cats breathe funny when they're excited. Cats don't move because they're content. All good cats want to be held when they die.

Part Three
Why I can't sleep in my bed

This winter has been unsuccessful; it hasn't pretended to snow, threatened to snow, it
hasn’t snowed. I wanted the house for the windows. The back room is covered in glass. My bed faces north and from it I have seen: squirrel races, a baby wren fall from its nest, my dog eat the bird, my neighbor’s shadow change clothes, a woodpecker work on a telephone pole. First we sealed the edges. Then we covered it all in plastic. We talked about thick curtains, another heater, more blankets. I woke one night and thought I was on a slab; my bed has become that hard. I’m picking ice off my teeth every morning. I do not pretend to sleep. Some nights my lover wakes and says I am frightening him. I say I will sleep. I don’t.

Part Four

Explain a wake to me now

My father phones. We need to talk about what I should do if anything should happen. I have this habit of carrying on other conversations when he does this. He does it every time he flies. One day I think I’ll tell him that he’s old and that it isn’t a flight that’s going to do it. He’s lived past the accidental type of death. I might say, “Tell me how we know enough about living to bury our dead ASAP. What do you think about flowers? You blow out a candle if we’re ever wrong, okay? Do you remember Scarlett? Well, I’m getting to be more like her every day. I’ll never go hungry again, don’t you worry. I can dig holes with the best of them.” I’ll hang up when he starts to answer. I’ll rip the plastic off in handfuls, go to my front porch and howl. It will be July and the sky will fall white on my hair. There will be no room to wonder. I will leave many clues.
THE WOMAN IN THE BOX IS SMILING

I have a photograph: a young woman stands on a busy New York street wearing a box over her torso. The box is fashioned so that passersby might put their hands through two strategically placed holes and touch her hidden breasts. A man, fifty, fifty-five, is in the box up to his elbows. He looks at the woman. She looks at him. A crowd watches. The woman in the box is smiling.

A Comanche medicine woman hears peyote and heals people with crow feathers, white otter fur, glass slivers, and red paint. She can remove cataracts with *puisasene*. She says, "Then you just scrape the eye until it bleeds. Put sugar water on it after you scrape it." She raised her niece from the dead, took ghosts out of the living. She's bound by supernatural sanctions. No one talks to her much anymore. She washes stones, makes potions, says she's waiting for death.

I know a woman who stabbed a man through his hand with a steak knife. The woman and I were cocktail waitresses in an Italian restaurant. I wasn't around for the initial insult. All I know is what I saw: a cancelled bill, a trail of blood, and the woman picking stray hairs from her apron. Tables were better than usual that night. I made a lot of money.

A story: a Polish family is on ship to America. There is a husband, a wife, two
young girls, and a teenage boy. The wife wakes babbling one night, tells her husband she can’t stand the fish biting her feet. She rages against some passengers, spits in one woman’s face, keeps asking, “Why is it so hot in here?” The son holds her down on the floor, one hand over her mouth. She’s dead in the morning. The husband helps wrap her for a funeral, but kisses her first, hard, on the lips. I knew this story at thirteen. My mother said, “If you forget, you won’t be forgiven.”
STORM

I

She can't help thinking that he makes the rain come. She hears it rumbling off in the distance, probably over the Glades, while he kisses her upper lip, then the bottom, lightly. She hears thunder, too. And through the window of his tiny apartment, she sees the lightning wave a white arm at her as the darkness moves in and around them.

II

When he leaves for juice, she throws a lazy leg off the side of the bed, slides the rest of the way to the ground. Not far. He sleeps on an old mattress without rails. He is makeshift in a lot of ways and she appreciates this poverty. It comes out to be much cleaner than the way she lives.

He calls from the kitchen that the orange juice is good, is she sure she doesn’t want some? She doesn’t answer, but walks into the hallway to watch him stirring. She tells him that a storm is moving in and that she left her car windows open. She always feels anxious out of her lover’s bed, and her attention span is short when she is frightened. He knows this. His stomach tightens with seeing her closed this way. He hands her his glass and says it’s nothing to worry about. They’ll walk to the car.

She fits into his clothes. He picks a shirt from the floor, shorts from a basket and begins to dress her. He tells her to lift her arms as he slips a thin t-shirt over her head, his fingers tangling in her hair, his palms gliding over her chest. He helps her step into a pair of elastic waist shorts and pulls them high, knowing that the material will cleave to her wetness. He will sleep with these shorts when she leaves.

III

The first night she came to him, distraught over what they almost did, he laid back
on his living room floor and stared at her. She had a strange way of petting her thighs that seemed to calm her. He thought of asking her to touch him. He thought about convincing with easy words. He didn’t think that she should confuse physical with emotional. But watching her wring her hands together, looking at him as if he could give her some reason, his penis went limp. And other parts of him felt as if they were hardening.

IV

They walk to the convenience store where she parked the borrowed car. He calls her husband “Fred” since she won’t tell him the man’s real name. He makes casual jokes about Fred seeing the car one day, thinking his wife is getting a soda or a chocolate bar, not realizing she’s in another man’s house getting her candy. A part of her thinks she should be offended, but she quickly lets it go.

They both find it glorious how the trees pose as umbrellas, shielding them from the drizzle. There isn’t much to say, so they walk silently in the light rain, his bare feet sucking the ground, her sneakers soaking up water. She worries that he might step on glass and thinks about saying so. Still, she isn’t sure whether or not it will be all right to protect him.

They round a corner and find a blue crab hunched on wiry legs. Neither of them know where it came from. This is the dry part of Miami—the part in the middle. But somehow it is, this once, a tropical forest, and here is this crab, eyes like black seeds on the ends of antennae. The rain falls steadily now.

He takes a stick from the side of the road and touches the back of the crab. This time she isn’t sure if she is protecting him or the animal, but she instinctively protests and he brushes her off saying the street is nowhere for a crab to play. He nudges the crab into the grass.
V

There is something about the way she looks, her hair wet and sloppy, that inspires
him. He wonders if it isn’t the way she kneeled across the driver’s seat of Fred’s car to
roll up the passenger window. After she dropped the keys in the pocket of his jeans, he
held her hand for the first time. She tried to pull away, said her hair was in her eyes. He
took his free hand and moved it back across her forehead, kissed her there, made a line
down her cheeks with his tongue and then opened her mouth with his. A car sped past,
beeping its horn, and she fell into his shoulder, hiding. He hates her husband.

VI

When they are back in his apartment he clears the balcony and brings his mattress
to the back door. She moves aside to make room for the bed, whispers that it’s going to
get wet, that the rains smell strong. He works without acknowledging her and she re-
treats to the edge. He finishes tucking a sheet and turns her to face him, casually forces
her down onto the mattress, cradling her head in his right hand.

She knows that some things work like mechanics, that there are steps in most
exercises, but he surprises her. He mistakes her face for her breasts, her wrists for her
stomach, her knees for her crotch. And still she comes, without him undressing her. She
arches her back as he licks her fingers and she swears that the rains kiss her legs.

He waits until she has finished, until the muscles have contracted one last time
and then peels his clothes off of her, the rain sweeping now. She is always tighter and
more tender after orgasm so he penetrates her slowly, his face upturned, mouth wide,
catching drops of water on his tongue. He rocks back and forth and she moves with him,
but when they are still they look like an alabaster waterfall, slick.

She moans something unintelligible. He stops to listen. She speaks again, this
time the thunder drowning her voice. Lightening clips a neighboring antenna and he
saturates her, partly because he is shocked by such light. He falls over her like a shield
while she extends a free hand past the wrought iron rails of their room and tries to catch electricity in her palm.

VII

He watches her walk. Usually she showers before going back. He towels her dry, combs out her hair. But this time she didn’t. This time she put her panties in her bag, tied her sneakers together and slung them over her shoulder. She rounds a corner and disappears leaving him wondering why she wears his smell this time. Wondering if she can keep that part of him for long. Wondering what time Fred comes home. He looks up to see gray clouds rushing past.
A STORY FOR THE MAN I LOVE

This summer a bat fell into our front yard. I was watering the porch plants, talking on the phone to a friend, and I spotted the thing inching its way across the dirt driveway. I threw a laundry basket over it. I would have stayed with it only I knew it wanted to bite me and this need made the tiny thing nervous. And when the Humane Society came to get the bat, a man in gloved hands showed me her wingspan. He said, "She fell out of the trees," and then he twisted her around. Five baby bats held tight. Their weight made it so she couldn't fly.

That is how this story feels.

The man I love took walks in the evening and came home smelling of the trees. I would wait for him and when he was here we wouldn't talk but were always moving. We were both busy with moving from one part of the house to the other. This house, our house, is small. We furnished it to make it seem smaller. I'm not sure either of us ever liked it this way, but it became our habit. Something we did without realizing.

I told him about the bat. I told him about the bat so he would think we were unusually lucky. I am guilty of making up stories, though. I'm one of the world's greatest liars. This is neither art nor perversion. But the bat story is increasingly true. Each time I told it, he believed how wicked its tiny head seemed and how very humane I was by calling for help. But I know he didn't give the story much thought. I lie because I love us both very much.

Sometimes when I am sleeping, I dream about the man I love. This is troubling because it is in dreams that the things I know best about him come to life. I used to wake and stare at him sleeping. Innocent is a word for children. And if I said he looked
blameless, I would be lying. He was only still. Even when he has been dead for a very long time, he will always look selfish. And then no one will forget he was ever a child.

I want to write a story for the man I love and then my story will be like that bat, taken to an open field where no one would think to look. My story will be like that bat and her babies hanging from a tree during the day only the babies will have become weightless and the real bat, the tired one, will want to fly again without being afraid. I am sure a bat is an stupid creature. A bat won't remember falling, but a bat has the sense to know something is wrong. I can see her now, flying into branches, making the silent sound bats make, wondering why what she knows isn’t working, smashing her head into something cruel, forgetting the driveway, the stranger in gloves pulling her wide open, my ignorant face staring. She will not know which is better. She will not have the ounce of sense it takes to make anything better.

I am not sure where the man is. I say to myself when I get in the car, “You will not look for the man you love on the street. You will not be afraid to go places.” This is a dilemma I cause myself. Of course I will never see him. I will certainly always be afraid. I do not own this town and I do not belong here, going places. When I drive, I pretend to listen to music. If he sees me, he will think I’m singing even though he will never hear the song.

I want to write a story for the man I love but with a different ending. I am the world’s greatest liar. I will think of something.
WAYS TO KILL A BIRD


Feed it. Don’t feed it. Stuff it. Roast it. Fry it. Toast it. Microwave it. Barbecue it. Boil it. Eat it. Introduce it to your friends. Give it to a friend. Tell all your friends you have a bird. Hate it. Tell all your friends you have a bird you hate.


Electrocute it. Put it in the washer. Put it in the dryer. Iron it. Take showers with it. Get shampoo in its eyes. Put it in the dishwasher. Force a magnet down its throat. Stick it to the refrigerator. Tape it to a stereo speaker and turn up the volume. Make it sleep. Make it sleep in the medicine cabinet. Wake it up. Make it sleep. Nail it to a heavy perch.


Blow smoke in its face. Set it on fire. Make it swim in beer. Play games with it. Glue it to a pool table and aim a cue ball at it. Flick it. Thump it. Make it dance. Hit it with a racket. See if it can catch. Keep it in your pocket. Keep it in your glove compartment. Leave it in a pillow case for a couple days.

Hate it. Blame it. Make excuses for it. Make a necklace out of it. Bury it alive.
Give it a name. Call it names. Never let it go. Make it understand it has nowhere to go.

Love it. Stab it.
Marcus says that I shouldn’t be afraid all the time. Marcus is easy with his words. Sometimes I go downstairs to his apartment just to hear him say things simply. He doesn’t mix words. He doesn’t mix anything, not his food, his friends, not even his furniture. I’m not sure that we are even real friends, but we’ve eaten together, sitting on the fire escape. There aren’t chairs in his place and he has never come upstairs to eat with me even though I’ve invited him.

Marcus is building another time capsule. He has one for every year of his life since he hit forty-eight. He’s fifty-four now, he tells me. “They’re easy to build. First one I made out of the cardboard ring from a roll of paper towels.” Since then, the time capsules have become more fancy. This year, he’s building a time capsule out of a plastic milk carton, decorating it with bottle caps.

Marcus and I met one afternoon at the mailbox. He had my mail in his hand and in a friendly gesture, whacked me over the head with it. I tried to laugh. Marcus tells me he knew right then that I am too nervous for my own good. “It’s a good way to feel a person out. Touch them and watch,” he advises.

The second time we met was the day the children came to my door. I was drinking a beer and listening to the radio when they knocked. The first boy, the leader, smiled big at me and asked, “Do you wanna buy a worm?” I looked past him and watched the little girl, maybe his sister, inspecting the hem of her dress. A second boy stood on the top stair, leaning his curly head over the landing. Before I could say no, the leader pressed the fingertips of his open palm into my stomach. I looked down and saw the worm twisting itself over. “It’s only ten cents,” the little girl told me. I never said a
word, only closed my door and listened for them to leave.

"Entrepreneurs," Marcus called them when I asked him if they had visited his apartment, too. He was wearing a pair of boxer shorts and a tank-top. He cracked his knuckles by pressing them backwards on the door frame. His fingers looked as if they were covered in dried glue.

He invited me in that day, and that’s when he told me about the time capsules.

"People tell lies about the way things were."

We shared a bottle of cold wine. "People think it’s better warm because that’s how the Europeans have it. Ice is a nice thing this time of the year," Marcus told me. I agreed and drank myself giddy, laughed at all of his jokes, and said things I worried about later.

When I was leaving, he told me that he had bought the worm. "They quoted me a quarter. Must have liked you for a dime." I told him that I didn’t expect so and that I thought he was a fool for condoning their mischief. "Ah," Marcus responded, throwing his head back. "Them is fightin’ words." I made my way up the stairs and looked back down at Marcus. I asked him what he was planning to do with it. "Well, right now it’s drying out on the windowsill," he said. I didn’t need to ask what next; I knew.

Today, Marcus is going to take my picture. He says I’ll go in the fifty-four time capsule. I put on the dress he asked me to wear and do my hair. Marcus said, "No make-up. None. Promise?" and I did, but today I wish I hadn’t. My skin looks washed out in this color of brown.

I’m coming down the stairs when he opens his apartment door. He must have been listening the whole time because there he is, the camera cocked to click, the flash ready. He looks up at me and says, "Now, say worm," and I start to say something else, not ‘worm’ but ‘What?’ and he snaps me like that. He laughs and steps back into his apartment, leaving the door open, the invitation to come in. I stand on the stairs and wait
for the light in my eyes to vanish, gripping the banister with one white hand.

I walk into his apartment, and he's pulling the black paper off the back of the picture. I tell him, "That isn't what I expected."

He looks up at me and smiles big. "Nothing is. That's what makes you so interesting." He waves the picture in his hand, airing it out to quicken the developing. He looks at it and says, "Perfect."

I stand in the doorway, shifting from one foot to the other. Marcus rolls the picture and before placing it in the milk carton, he puts it up to one eye and says, "See you." Then he pushes it in the hole at the top of the carton.

"Marcus," I start, but he motions for me to sit in a new chair he has positioned in front of his window. "Go on and sit," he tells me. "This next one will be for you."

We spend the rest of the film. My favorite picture is the one Marcus says he likes the least. "That's not what you look like."

"Of course it is," I tell him. "I ought to know what I look like."

"You're right," Marcus agrees and snaps the tops off two beers. "See," I say, holding the photograph next to my face. "See how my eyes seem... I don't know... focused?"

Marcus laughs and hands me a beer. "Okay. I get your point. You keep that one. Build yourself a time capsule," he says.

"I think I will," I say as if it were some kind of threat.
Kerr has his hand down the front of my shirt before we’ve even left the parking lot. Most of the time his grabs annoy me. But tonight we’ve been laughing a lot and even though it doesn’t feel good—like sexy good—it doesn’t feel cheap either. So I let him do it and he looks at me, smiling big. He pulls me out of my bra leaving the underwire in place. I stick out like a mannequin. Kerr says, “That’s nice. God I love you,” and I tell him, “I suppose God might love you too, Kerr.” He looks at me and laughs. I could say things like this all night, boobs jutting out in front of me or not, and Kerr still wouldn’t get it. I pull my shirt up over my head and toss it in the back seat. I can tell Kerr’s having a hard time deciding what he’s supposed to do. I turn the radio way up and lean my seat back a little so no one will see me half naked. Kerr keeps driving, one hand on the steering wheel, one hand on me.

“See how good we are together, Baby?” he says.

We’ve had a lot to drink. Kerr said, “Vodka’s a drink for good girls who need to be bad,” so I said that’s what I want. I think between the two of us we cleaned a fifth off the bar. Kerr thought he was teaching me something and maybe that’s why he’s feeling better. Maybe he’s thinking to himself, ‘Now we’re on a roll.’ The truth is I’ve been drinking a long time and I’m holding my liquor better than Kerr. And even though I’ve had a lot, things I maybe shouldn’t let matter are creeping in on me.

Like last night. I told Kerr, “I’m getting a little bored by all of this.” He came up out of his seat at that and asked, “What’s it gonna take?” I had a million answers for that one but I didn’t have the ounce of courage it would take to tell him. I didn’t say anything and neither did he. I went back to what I was doing and Kerr got dressed to go to his
bird-watching class. He’s studying to be a bird-watcher. Kerr says he can identify sixty-eight different kinds of birds by their call. I don’t believe him. Sometimes, he walks around the house making sounds in the back of his throat. The noise he makes doesn’t sound like any bird I’ve ever heard. He says that pretty soon he’ll be mating with sparrows. He tells me the female sparrows will believe he’s a male sparrow. I’m not sure this joke has ever made me laugh, but Kerr tells it to me anytime I tell him to shut-up. He says, “They’ll be laying eggs in trees and calling me ‘Dear.’”

We get on the Interstate and Kerr must be going eighty miles an hour. Maybe if I wasn’t so drunk I’d tell him to slow down. Mostly I don’t care. That’s one thing I might tell Kerr tonight: vodka’s something that makes it so you don’t care what happens. Going this fast is making it cold, so I reach around and get my shirt. Kerr says something about turning on the heater and I ignore him. When I’m dressed Kerr asks, “What’s the matter . . . you bored again?” I want to defend myself, tell him I’m just cold, but there’s something in his voice that tells me not to talk. I fold my arms across my chest and look out the window.

It’s quiet in the car for a few minutes. Then Kerr says, “Should’ve known you’d have to ruin a perfect night.” He shuts off the radio. He opens his mouth halfway, pinches the skin over his Adam’s apple, and for the first time, it sounds like he’s doing it right. Kerr’s making bird sounds. “Gonna get me a sparrow,” he says, laughing hard and slapping the steering wheel. I can’t wait to get out of the car so I can fix my bra without him seeing. It’s hurting my chest so bad I could cry.
Cristobal is naked and sitting on my bed when I come out of the bathroom. I don’t think I even take a step back but I can’t control my eyes. He laughs and leans back a little, giving me a better view. I don’t laugh. I don’t want to. Not that this isn’t funny.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Seducing you,” Cristobal tells me. He runs his right hand through his hair.

Cristobal is a terribly attractive man. And I suppose he could sit there naked and laughing and seduce me, successfully. I’m easy.

“You’re doing a beautiful job of it, oh baby.” I’m working my best at being sarcastic. “Oh yes, baby.”

“And you want me, no?”

And just when I expect him to lay on his back, keep eye contact with me and brush a hand across his chest, he does. The romantic move. Gross. But I’m going to do him anyway. He knows it. I knew it all along. My friends at the bar are probably taking bets. Anyway, I’m too tired to say no. But I can tell this won’t be much fun. The romantics never are. Especially not the Spanish Romantics.

There are two dog buddies who pee in the vicinity of our hotel. I usually see them when I come out of the market. I guess some people buy them a treat. One’s a thick Dalmatian, gray with soot and black dots. The other is a brown dog, breed unknown.

The first time I saw the dog buddies, I assumed they were involved in some dog-love relationship. I called them husband and wife until a friend pointed out the two sets of balls. This realization was a great disappointment.
Some mornings the dog buddies walk us to classes. Most of my friends pay them no mind, but Andrew, the man who saw balls, and I save the dog buddies a bit of our breakfast bread. The dogs stay with us, taking pieces of bread. Before braving the courtyard, we give them the rest of the bread and Andrew and I take hold of each other for warmth. The courtyard is surrounded by mountains. The wind cuts across the concrete space, through us and takes our eyes and squeezes them. Sixteenth century architecture at its best.

It might be the dogs, I don’t know, but Andrew and I are working on something.

What Cristobal and I have in common is not much. He tells his friends I’m teaching him English. I think he knows English just fine. Just enough to get what he wants. Just enough to get what I want. Just enough to avoid conversation.

The other night was just as I expected it would be. Deep, long, soulful stares. Dismal embraces. And I don’t speak Spanish, but I could almost swear I heard a gracias or two. Gross. I woke up and of course he was gone. Sunday, church. When I made my way to the hotel hallway sometime mid-afternoon, there was a breakfast tray outside my door with a long stemmed rose and some scribbling signed “Cristobal” that I couldn’t bother reading. I sat on the floor, my back against the wall and sipped the Coke-a-Cola. Nice guy. Too nice. At first I thought it was a sham of a breakfast because when I lifted the serving tray there was nothing inside but an envelope. I couldn’t eat a letter and I was hungry. I opened the envelope and noticed the handwriting had changed: Lily, I won the bet last night. Thought I’d use the money to buy you a burger today. Knock when you wake up. Andrew. PS. I took your breakfast rolls to the dogs.

Andrew is from Jersey. The Jersey isn’t in his mouth, but it’s in the way he moves. It’s the fists brushing thighs kind of walk that makes him Jersey. It’s the quick
step, going somewhere, out of my way walk that makes him Jersey. I'm very involved with looking at him move.

Andrew isn't in his room when I knock so I walk to the Chirosterra. When I come out the door of the hotel I see the dog buddies across the street and a yell an "Hola." Neither of them look. I try the kisses and whistles that most dogs love, but these two aren't impressed. Not today.

I wave hello to Sebastian, the owner, when I walk into the restaurant. He says something to me, but the music is too loud so I keep asking, "Huh?" until Sebastion, exasperated, points to the back of the bar. I nod a thank you and make my way to the booths.

One thing I've learned from being in Spain and not really knowing how to speak or understand Spanish is that bars are impossible. The loud music, the many voices, even the smoke in the air makes it hopeless for me to interpret what the Spaniards are trying to tell me. This isn't such a bad thing all the time, but I like Sebastian and I hate not being able to understand him.

Andrew is bent over, reading another Spanish history book. I sit across from him and take one of his cigarettes. He looks up and smiles, then goes back to reading.

"How much did you win," I ask after awhile.

Andrew dog-ears his book and looks at me.

"I did win?" he asks.

"Is this a trick question?"

"You fucked him?"

"Andrew, are you still buying me a burger?"

He sits there for a minute and I swear to God I think he's going to cry. Not bawl or sob, but I think he's going to look away from me any second now and I'll get the profile view of a fat tear streaming down his face. But then guys from Jersey, at least
the guys from Jersey I’ve known, aren’t full of surprises. After the “moment for effect”, Andrew reaches in his pocket and puts a joint and 10,000 pesetas on the table.

After lunch, Andrew and I smoke the joint while walking the monastery gardens. Even in the dead of winter, the Catholics can make some things grow. No great greenery is here, but the bushes and short trees are charming. The rose bushes are cut back and wicked, thick thorns jut out from their trunks. It’s a good day, bright and cloudless, but the wind is still sharp. The marijuana makes my eyes and skin more sensitive to the cold.

“It’s freezing,” I say. “Let’s go inside and look at the ceilings.”

Andrew tosses a rock over the side of the garden wall. “We can’t go in the cathedral stoned.”

“Why not?”

“Sacrilegious.”

“Oh please, Andrew. My God doesn’t care about shit like that.” I walk up behind Andrew and whisper down his neck. “I’m cold. Let me in your coat.”

Andrew turns around and smiles at me. He’s let his long hair down and it tickles my face. “Your God,” he says, taking me in. “I’d sure like to talk to Him.”

When the wine in Cordoba is ripe, the city celebrates. For eight days the children tend to themselves, bulls paw the ground of their private, dark pens, and the wine, every drop, is drained from its vats. It is a sickening sweet wine, thick and disturbing, but it makes its drinkers sing. In some bars a sign reads “No Cantar” because the noise can shake and ruin the walls.

I have come for the bullfight with Cristobal. I’m drunk and happy and excited to see the contest. In the fields surrounding the arena, the matador mounts his horse and Cristobal leads me by the hand to see. We make our way to the front of the crowd. Everyone smells like wine and garlic. I’m drunk enough to be in love with this foul
smell, to want to bottle it and bring it home with me.

The matador glitters in the sun. I look up to see his face and have to shield my eyes against his clothes. He is gold and black haired and proud on the back of his horse. I love him. I swear to God, I love him. Cristobal shouts something to him about the American and the matador responds by touching his hat to me and smiling. Then Cristobal leads me away saying it’s time to find a good seat for the fight. All I can think is what a great story I could tell my friends. Nobody bets about me doing a matador. That would be something to tell.

When they let the first bull into the ring, it does something I never would have expected. At first, it is this raging lump, charging into the middle of the ring. But then, I guess once it realizes it’s surrounded, it stops. It stops in the middle of the ring and looks around. I wonder if it is seeing us. I wonder if it can smell what we’ve come for. The bull puts its big, stupid head down to the ground and snorts.

“It’s afraid,” I tell Cristobal.

Cristobal kisses my neck and squeezes my wrists together.

“It isn’t,” he breaths.

“No,” I say pulling away from Cristobal’s mouth. “It is afraid.”

Cristobal looks at me and laughs. The matador stands on a pedestal outside the ring and raises his right hand. The crowd cheers. The bull pulls to the left, slightly, then gallops right. Maybe I’m going to be sick. The matador is blinding me. Cristobal is stifling me. And the bull is ramming his head and horns into the wood arena wall. Cristobal puts a cold hand on my face and turns me to face him.

“He is born for this. A bull is proud. He knows to die,” Cristobal tells me. Then he kisses me on the mouth and I lose myself in the warmth of his tongue and the taste of his drunkeness. The crowd cheers.

The fight is short and brutal. I fall out of love with the matador when I realize he
needs a weakened bull to win. The picadors successfully drain the bull of its life before
the matador braves the ring. I don’t smell garlic and wine anymore. The steam the bull’s
hot blood makes floats to me until all I can smell is animal.

Cristobal stands and pulls me with him. I may be sick, but I have to see the end.
Three swords pierce the bull before he is hypnotized to his knees by the matador’s red
cape. A small dagger is plunged into the back of the bull’s neck and removed. The
matador cleans his bloodied blade on the bull’s dead face.

The Dalmatian has deep cuts on its back. Andrew is in the market, speaking his
best Spanish. Soon he comes out with a bottle of peroxide and a stack of paper napkins.
I don’t know how he convinced me to get up this early and sit with this dog.

“Have you seen the other one?” he asks me. His gloves are getting in the way of
his opening the bottle.

“No. What are you going to do?”

“Clean that. Maybe the other one will come soon.”

“Maybe it’s dead,” I say standing and taking the bottle out of Andrew’s hand. I
snap it open and hand it back. Andrew stares me in the eye for a second.

“He doesn’t look good,” Andrew says, and he’s right. The Dalmatian sits on the
sidewalk, its head on its front paws. He is bleeding a lot. I notice a trail of blood.

“We can follow the drops for the other one,” I say.

Andrew bends over the dog and pats its head. He mumbles the typical “not going
to hurt you” speech and then dribbles the peroxide on the dog’s back. The blood bubbles
and the dog scraps its front paws on the sidewalk to get away. I put my hands over its
ears and rub fast.

“You know this isn’t going to be enough,” I say.

“Go on, Lily, say something else.”
“Did you bring bread?”

Andrew caps the peroxide and smiles.

“No,” he says, “but I got these,” and pulls a package of hot-dogs from his pocket.

We feed the Dalmatian the hot-dogs and Andrew tells me the owner of the market says the dog can stay outside.

“No problema,” Andrew says.

“How did you get all of that? You understood him?”

“I’m understanding them, Lily. It’s not that hard.”

Following the trail proves unsuccessful so we spend the rest of the morning walking the town and trying to find the other dog buddy. We check on the Dalmatian a few times. While we walk, Andrew tells me stories in between dog whistles. I see Cristobal in a hotel restaurant drinking coffee with his brother and wave.

“You like him?” Andrew asks.

“Of course not.”

Andrew looks at me sideways and laughs.

“Liar,” he says.

We decide we should check the courtyard and monastery gardens. When we get there, we grab hold of each other for warmth.

I take the bus out to Madrid. I like going by myself, waving good-bye to the beautiful, clean little town, leaving the mountains and their wind behind. I’m getting good at moving around Madrid. I don’t get lost in the subways anymore. I know how to get in the museum and find what I want. I can walk Retiro Park in the dark.

We’re five minutes out of town and in a neighboring village when I spot the dog buddy. He pees on a tree, kicks up some grass with his back feet, and trots off on his way. I get off the bus and follow him, doing the dog kisses and whistles that he always
ignores. I don't know why this is important to me—getting his attention—but the strangers of this town are staring at me.

Andrew and I found the Dalmatian dead last night. He was curled under a parked car in front of a house. We thought about knocking on the door and asking if he was their dog. Neither of us ever said it, but it was obvious that we really didn't want to know. The Dalmatian was Spain's dog. That's what we needed to believe.

We wanted to bury the dog. Andrew thought we could take it up one of the mountain trails. We sat on the curb across the street from it and smoked a cigarette. I thought we'd never make it that far; the dog was too big.

"We can do it," Andrew said.

"That's almost a mile away, Andrew. We can't. I can't. I can't carry a dead dog that far."

"Yea. You're right," Andrew said pulling a flask from his jacket. He took a long swallow and handed the bottle to me.

We stayed there for a long time, looking at the dog. When it got too cold we made our way back to the hotel. Before I went in my room, Andrew grabbed hold of my hand.

"I've got a feeling you've been kissed a lot," he said.

I didn't know what to say. He kissed me and turned to go to his room.

"You and me," he said over his shoulder, "could have made it."

I had no idea what that was supposed to mean.

I pick up a big rock and throw it at the brown dog. I've always been a bad aim and today is no exception. The rock skids across pavement probably ten feet away from the dog. A heavy woman stands on her front steps and shakes a broom over her head. A few men in a tapas bar twist their stools around and raise their beers. The wind rolls off the mountains; I can hear it brewing in the highest trees. The dog shifts gears and speeds
away from me. I stop running and lean over, my hands on my knees.

Siesta screws up my system. A big lunch followed by a long nap can get me wired at the wrong time of night. I swing open the shutters and pull a soda off the window ledge. It must be in the 40’s outside. My breath floats heavy and white in the dark air. I fit my legs between the metal bars and let my feet dangle naked in the cold.

Lately, I’ve been thinking that I want to go home. From where I’m sitting now, I can see the public phone and I’m tempted to run down there in my pajamas and ask my dad to say something that’ll make me sleep. Some of the students, mostly the girls, have boyfriends or fiancées they’re aching to see. Me, I just want to go home so I can have some normalcy. My dad, the television, my bathroom. And I know that one day when I’m too old or poor to ever make another trip like this again, I’ll swear this was the best time of my life and everything about it was good.

Everything is good. I have enough money. Cigarettes are cheap here. Madrid loves me and I love Madrid. Sometimes I even feel soft and different when I go into the cathedrals. My favorite is in Toledo, where they have the stone Mary stepped on. The stone is surrounded by strips of metal but the people have found ways to reach in and touch it and where they’ve put there fingers for hundreds of years, an indentation has grown. I stood over that stone for a long time thinking I’d be breaking some religious code if I rubbed it. I’m not Catholic. I’ve never been baptized into anything. Finally I convinced myself that it’s not really a stone Mary stepped on but an example of the kind of stone Mary would have stepped on and touching it wouldn’t make me obvious to God but might bring me a bit of good luck. So I rubbed it real quick and walked out. So far, nothing’s changed.

I can hear a radio and soft mumbling. I suppose I could wander the halls and find
another insomniac to play cards with. I could knock on Andrew’s door and wake him up. But my feet are numb and it will be nice to warm them in my blankets. I stand up and lean out to grab the shutters. Somewhere, on some vacant street, a dog is howling.
My sister answers the phone in that cheerful phone voice of hers that I can’t stand.

“Chris, listen,” I tell her.

I hear her son in the background talking to the dog. I can see him on the couch with a toy car or the remote control trying to keep the Pug off his lap. I can see everything. The last time I was in Chris’ house I memorized the place. She had gone out one night, left me with the kid and the dog. I walked around touching everything.

“Do you remember that story I told you? The one about the birds chasing that owl?” I ask.

“What about it?” She’s lost the voice. Good.

“I think birds really do kill birds.”

“Yeah? So?”

“This morning I found a wing. A whole wing and a few feathers.”

She yells at the dog. I don’t know what I expect her to say. I guess what I really want is for her to pull some textbook answer from the air.

“What do you think?”

“I think it was your cats,” she tells me.

“Yeah, well I think it was other birds.”

“Do you want to talk to Jessie?” And before I can answer, she’s calling him to the phone. He babbles my name. He’s two now. I know he remembers who I am, but for how much longer? I see the two of them once, maybe twice a year. I usually come late at night, wake him up, try to convince him that it’s time to play. Chris puts up with it. She knows I’ll leave and they’ll get back to sleeping regular. I hate trying to talk to
him like this. He doesn't have any idea where I am. My voice floats through. Simply. I could be anywhere or anything or maybe even anybody.

"Jessie. It's Nikki. I love you."

"Chawie," Jessie says.

"Where's Chawie?" I ask. It's always the same conversation. Charlie is the dog. Jessie tries to tell me something about the dog. Someday it will be different and I'll probably wish it was like this. Right now, it only makes things worse.

"You playing with Chawie? What are you doing?"

"Ikki."

"Yeah. It's Ikki. You watching TV?"

There's no response. I think he's dropped the phone. Yes. There's this background noise. The television. His baby feet slapping the tiled floor. I can hear the sliding glass door closing. I'm on their kitchen phone. I can tell.

"I hate that damn dog," Chris tells me. "Jessie! No!"

"I want to tell you about this bird, Chris."

"What do you want to tell me about the bird?"

Maybe she's listening. Maybe she's thumbing through coupons, a 100 cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth. Maybe she's watching television. Maybe Jessie's in her lap and the two of them are just looking at each other and she doesn't hear a word I say. But I tell her anyway. I tell her about the cawing this morning. I tell her how I heard it and wanted to look outside but was running late. I tell her how it sounded like someone was angry. Nothing sounded hurt.

"And when I came back from driving Marty to work, I went out back to feed the cats. And they were hungry so that's why I think they couldn't have done it. We have a back porch and then some steps that lead down to the yard. At the bottom of the steps was the wing."
"And this is bothering you?" She is listening.

"Well... yeah. Wouldn't it bother you? A whole wing, Chris."

"You're really weird. Are you finished? Is that the end of your bird story?"

"I guess." I can't say I'm frustrated. I can't say I'm anything.

"Good."

We talk for a while. I tell her I want to move again. I want to go somewhere else to start something else. I take too many chances, she tells me, something I already know. There's nothing I own now that I owned a year ago. Chris has never left our home, not really; a lot of things about her are the same. And when I do come back, every time, she gets hold of something of mine and keeps it. She still has clothes I used to wear ten years ago. Last visit I found an old compact in her bathroom and an eyeliner I used to burn and circle my eyes with. She's somehow sharpened it down to a little less than an inch. I don't understand how she manages to keep these things.

Before we hang up, she starts to laugh hard.

"What?" I can't understand what she's saying. "What's so funny?"

She takes a deep breath. The laughing sounds canned. Like she's trying too hard.

"Send me a feather," she manages to get out.

"That's not funny."

"Yes it is, Nikki. You should think so. Bye."

"Bye." Then I think of something else to say. "Kiss..." But it's too late. She's already hung up.

I spend a good portion of the day looking for the rest of the bird. If it wasn't so hot outside I'd probably be obsessed with finding the thing. Instead I take breaks in the shade, smoke a cigarette, drink tall glasses of tea.

On my third trip around the yard I find a feather. I don't touch any of my find-
ings. That would mean head lice or something sticky on my finger that I'll remember three years from now and shake. I make mental notes: one bird wing at the bottom step, stuff attached; several feathers surrounding said wing; two feathers at the back of the yard (probably blown there by the wind); one feather (latest find) on west side of the house.

I've watched my youngest cat stalk. I remember a conversation a friend of mine and I had one night. I don't know how we got into it, but he told me that the domestic cat is the only animal that kills for some instinctual "pleasure" rather than need. So, Chris might be right; it might be the cats. Maybe they left the wing to thank me for something. I've heard that cats do that, too. But what I heard this morning didn't sound so much like an attack as it did an angry call. I've been feeding the birds seeds since the beginning of spring. Some weekend mornings I watch them pecking the ground, tails pointed to the sky. Sometimes the larger birds prey on the smaller one's ground, stealing seeds and cawing in victory.

I'm pulling my hair up off my sweaty neck when I see another feather. This one is on the east side, next to our den. I can hear the television through the window. When I bend over to take a closer look, I notice a board missing in the crawl space. I don't want to think about this. If the bird went under the house, I suppose I'll know in a day or two. In this Texas heat it won't take long for the smell to make its way into the house.

I think about getting a board or a few small bricks to cover the space, but think better of it. If something got in it might want to get out, mutilated or not.

By mid-afternoon, it's too hot to continue. I crawl in my bed, ready to do what I know I'll do: sleep until the worst of the day is over. Before I doze, I think about what Chris said. I imagine that if I did send her a feather she'd probably keep it in a book or a photo album and that late one night I'd be thumbing around through her business and find it.
The phone wakes me. It's Marty.

"Are you picking me up?"

"Marty?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I was dreaming. I didn't hear the alarm."

"Well, come on now. I don't want to spend the night here."

"God, it was the strangest dream."

"You can tell me in the car."

"I'll be right there," I lie. We hang up and I thumb around through my top drawer for my journal. I love this little book, picked it up somewhere in Vermont a long time ago. Chris was eleven then. It was the year before I left the house for the first time. I can still smell Vermont. I can still see Chris' skinny, bare legs sticking out from her blankets. We were staying in a ski lodge. I took a picture of her like that that I lost. I'm glad my memory is good.

I start to write the dream down when the phone rings again. When I pick up, Chris starts talking.

"Scott says birds kill each other."

"How does he know that?" I ask her.

"He had a cockatiel once that killed a parakeet he bought."

"That's different."

"Whatever, Nikki. I just thought you'd want to know."

"I think I know what happened to the rest of the bird."

I can hear Scott in the background. He's yelling something about territory and prey.

"Did you hear that?" Chris asks.

"Yeah. Thanks. You want to know what I'm doing?" I ask Chris.
“What?”

“Remember that little book I bought when we went to Vermont? The one with a picture of a wizard in a chair with a unicorn next to him?”

“Of course not.”

“Well, you would if you saw it. Anyway, I’m writing a dream in it that I had about you.”

“Now that sounds interesting. What did you dream?”

About three sentences into the dream, I get this funny feeling. Like deja vu. But it’s different from regular deja vu. As if this isn’t deja vu about what’s already happened but about something that’s going to happen again.

“This happened before,” I tell Chris.

“What?”

“I feel like this happened before.”

“Yeah,” Chris starts. “It happens all the time. I spend my money calling you and you act like a weirdo.” She laughs.

“Chris?”

“What?”

“What do you remember most about Vermont?”

“God, Nikki. What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me. I’m just wondering.”

Chris breathes long into the phone. I wait, tapping the wizard with the tip of my pen, freckling his face with tiny blue dots.

“I remember two things,” she starts.

“Yeah?”

“One: you were normal back then, and two: you kept complaining that you wanted to go home.”
“I did not.” I honestly don’t remember this. I remember the loft we slept in. The indoor hot tub. The fire the manager started in the fireplace where he later popped popcorn. I remember wanting to stay there until it snowed. I remember being happy.

“Yes, you did. Mom thought you were being impossible. You drove all of us nuts.”

The second phone line beeps in my ear. I remember Marty.

“I can’t talk now. I have to get Marty from work and I’m late. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t finish telling me about the dream,” Chris complains.

“I will. I didn’t finish telling you about the bird either.”

“Like I care. Bye.”

“Bye,” I tell her and hang up the phone. I’m pulling up a pair of shorts when the answering machine picks up the other call. Sure enough, it’s Marty. I grab my keys and walk out the door, the sound of his voice calling my name ringing in my ears.

Marty’s standing outside the bank with his arms folded. I won’t blame him, I tell myself, I won’t make a single excuse. He gets in the car and kisses me on the cheek.

“Okay,” he starts, “what’s wrong with you?”

I fumble with the cigarette lighter, a cigarette hanging on my bottom lip.

“There’s nothing wrong with me, Marty.”

I turn on the radio and a song I used to like is playing. I want to talk about dinner and about the dream I had that afternoon. I want to tell Marty that I think there’s a dead bird under our house. But I’m too nervous to make small talk. I’m afraid that if I talk, I’ll start babbling like a kid who knows she’s caught. I move a lot instead; I act like the song is the only thing on my mind. And I’m not sure if Marty knows how much I need to avoid the whole subject of why I was late and why I’m always anxious, but he sits there, looking out the window, scratching his face every once in a while and doesn’t ask anymore questions. I’m not sure if he’s really mad or if he understands.
In a few minutes we're in our driveway. Marty slams his door and walks up onto the front porch. I fumble for a minute, try to get my things together, my lit cigarette in the way. I look up and see him standing there, waiting for me to come unlock the door. He looks back at me and sort of smiles.

I don't want to get out of the car. I don't want to walk up those steps, unlock the house, and then have to go inside. I've done it enough times now that it isn't even dull. I want to yell 'Marty, there's a dead bird under the house . . . I swear to God . . . don't go in there . . . let's just leave, okay? Let's just leave everything here and go somewhere.'

"What's taking you so long?" Marty asks.

I drop my cigarette on the ground and snub it out with my foot.

"I'm coming," I tell him.

When we get in the house, Marty tells me he's beginning to wonder if my taking the summer off is a bad idea. He says every day it's something new with me, that maybe I need to be doing something constructive.

"Last week you bought a fish tank for Christ's sake, Nikki. What do we do with a fish tank?"

"We're going to put fish in it. Or snails. I haven't decided yet. Maybe I'll turn it into a terrarium." I tell him.

"Why can't you just relax? How long have you wanted that?"

I feel for Marty. I don't respond to the relax question. I can't. If he knew what I do that I don't tell him about he'd flip. And I know I won't tell him about the bird. I'll tell him about the bird being dead somewhere, but I won't tell him about looking for it. When I don't say anything he sighs and heads for the shower.

"I really wish you'd tell me what's eating you, Nik," he yells from the bathroom.

I walk into the bathroom and sit on the floor. Marty's already undressed and is in the shower testing the water. I can see his shadow through the curtain, bending, stand-
ing, reaching for a bottle of shampoo.

“There was a bird’s wing at the bottom step this morning.”

“What kind of a bird,” Marty asks.

“A blue jay, I guess.”

“Hmm.”

“Chris says she thinks it was the cats. Then she called later and told me Scott said . . . “

“You called Chris again?”

I should’ve known this would happen.

“We only talked for a few minutes.”

“Do you know how much our phone bill was last month, Nikki?”

“Marty, I don’t want to talk to you about the phone bill. I don’t want to talk to you about who called who for how long at what time. I just wanted to ask her a question.”

“Then ask her questions on Sundays before five o’clock.”

If I weren’t so tired, I’d do something awful like flush the toilet and ruin the water pressure for him. Instead, I stay sitting on the floor, my head pushed back on my neck, eyes closed. I think he thinks I’ve left.

“Do you think you can do something with it later?” I ask.

“I can’t hear a damn thing you’re saying.”

“The wing, Marty. I can’t stand seeing it there,” I yell.

“Why don’t you just get the shovel and move it?”

“Never mind,” I say and get up to go in the bedroom.

My dream journal is lying on the bed, folded open. I fall onto the bed and stare at the little book from Vermont. If I think about it too much, I know I’ll start to see that the picture is stupid. I wish I hadn’t made these pen marks on the wizard’s face today. In ten
I call Chris from a pay phone in Memphis.

"Did you get it?"

"Did I get what? Where are you?"

"I'm in Tennessee. I'm standing at a payphone on a street called 'Foster.'"

"That's funny, Nikki."

"I thought you'd think so."

"Nikki, Marty's called here every fifteen minutes for the past two weeks."

"Tell him I'm fine."

"Are you going back? What are you doing?"

"I left him a note, Chris. Don't worry about me. Did you get the package?"

"Yes, and I don't understand."

I play with change in my hand. Three minutes for $1.80. A car pulls up alongside me and a big woman gets out, child in tow. The kid is barefoot and has a sticky red mouth. I smile at the two of them.

"Chris, someone else needs to use the phone."

"Wait a minute."

"I'm okay. I'm gonna call Marty."

I want to tell her I'm sorry, but I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because I couldn't pick up the feather. Maybe because I lost that picture and should have been more careful.
“It’s the book from Vermont, Chris.”

She breathes an angry sigh.

“I have to go, okay? Kiss Jessie.”

A computer voice comes over the phone.

“I really have to go.” I don’t wait for her to respond. I hang up and put the rest of the change in my pocket. The woman moves to the phone. Her little girl leans against the door of their car and plays with the hem of her dress.
“Richard Carlos is dead.” Sarah is standing in my doorway, newspaper in her hand.

I sit up in bed, pull the sheets around my chest, and thinking I didn’t hear her the first time, Sarah says it again, this time waving the paper over her head. “He’s dead. Listen: ‘Richard Carlos, critically acclaimed author, died this morning at his mother’s house in Argentina.’ It’s in the Herald. I didn’t know Carlos was Argentinean.”

“He isn’t. He’s from Missoula. He moved his mother to Argentina. Does it say anything about his wife?”

“Um, yeah. It says that she was in Ontario when it happened. It says here it wasn’t even the cancer. He fell from a rafter ‘in a barn’? Jesus, Richard Carlos in a barn? That’s odd. Do you want me to read the rest?”

“No. Maybe later, Sarah.” I reach for my pack of cigarettes. Sarah’s eyes skim the print. I want to tell her that I’m tired of her coming in when she feels like, news or not. Maybe I’ll steal my house key from her. “Listen,” I tell her, “I want to get back to sleep. Okay?”

“Sure.” She looks hurt. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for? I didn’t know him. Not really.”

“No, I’m sorry for waking you. Go back to sleep, Beauty,” Sarah says. She turns to leave. The sound of my lighter turns her back around. “Those things will kill you. Not everyone’s lucky enough to fall from a rafter.” She laughs.

“That’s funny, Sarah,” I say. “You’re a regular riot.”

I take a long drag. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I expected Richard to
die. I had grand, romantic schemes in my head. The woman in the back no one knows. The casket kiss. The way I would follow the cars to his house and sit in his chair while the recognized guests eat dip. But I never thought Richard would die in Argentina. Or so soon.

I met Richard Carlos in a graduate workshop. He was a guest professor, the underpaid visitor of the week. I don’t remember anything about him being particularly interesting. He struck me as too casual to be taken seriously. But he was clever. He read us passages from Monasteries, his work-in-progress. He read to us from his journals. He showed us pictures of the home he was building. It seemed that every hour he was unbuttoning another button, peeling back another layer. He was showing us everything and nothing. “Look here,” he’d say. “I’ve built an outdoor shower. The water heats in this . . .” He made jokes about editors, parties he’d been to, his dog, Gretel, who farted in her sleep. “Most dogs dream about chasing something. My dog dreams of taking a good shit.” I wasn’t sure what we were learning, how he planned to educate us, but I listened. Like everyone else that week, I laughed at his jokes and looked at his photographs with one mission in mind: finding the secret.

Mid-week he invited us to a local bar. He waved our stories in his hand and said, “Let’s talk about these over a few beers.” And we did meet in the bar, but he never mentioned our writings. By the time we arrived, Richard was already drunk and nobody seemed to mind. The famous writer was lighting the wrong end of cigarettes he never smoked and excusing himself to the bathroom. When he’d leave the table, we’d watch him stumble, pardoning himself to chairs that happened to get in his way. By early evening, he put his head in his folded arms and said, “Richard’s drunk.”

A few hours later, Marty, the bartender and a good citizen at heart, asked if anyone needed a lift. I raised my hand and waved. “And the drunk man?” Marty asked,
pointing. Richard was curled up on a Naugahyde booth. “You wanna help me lift him to
the car?”

“Couldn’t we just leave him here?” I joked.

Richard was a small man, certainly no problem for a guy Marty’s size and me to
lift. Still, he was dead weight in our arms and it took a while to get him to the car. We
shoved him in the back seat, both Marty and I heaving under our breath. When we
mustered up the strength, we loaded my bicycle into the trunk. I took the front seat,
looking behind me every once in a while to see if Richard was still there. He was too
quiet. During the ten minutes it took for us to get to his hotel, he never made a sound.
Even Marty was a little unnerved by the calm.

“Are you sure he’s just drunk?” Marty asked.


“Jeez,” Marty said, “the least he could do is snore.”

When we got to the hotel, Marty let the car idle.

Finally, I turned around and said, “Mr. Carlos? Mr. Carlos, we’re at your hotel
now.”

Marty turned around and tapped Richard’s leg. Nothing. He tugged at Richard’s
shoe and said, “Hey. You. Wake up. This is too creepy. You better check to be sure
he’s breathing.”

“Me? I’m not going to check. No. You’re the professional.” I folded my arms
across my chest.

“Professional? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You see this sort of thing all the time, don’t you? I mean, people, I don’t know,
they choke when their drinking.”

Marty laughed. “We can sit here all night,” he said.

“We could call 911,” I suggested. Marty laughed again. “God Marty, did you
know that he’s terminally ill?”

“Ah, fuck. In my car? Really?”

I looked Marty in the eye and nodded. The flashing lights of the hotel sign hit his face red, blue, red, blue.

That’s when it happened. Marty checked me and I checked Marty. It could have been either of us, and I know both of us were relieved that it wasn’t. It was Richard Carlos. Richard Carlos farted.

After we carried Richard to his room that night, Marty chuckling and holding his nose in the elevator, I stayed. I’m not sure why. I didn’t know him. I can remember thinking that my being there when he woke the next morning would seem a bold intrusion. But Richard Carlos thought nothing of my handing him a cup of coffee at eight a.m. He never asked why I was there or what had happened. He took the coffee from my hands, smiled, and lay back in bed, the cup resting on his chest. When I started for the door, he casually asked me to breakfast. So I waited for him to shower. When we got in a taxi, Richard asked me my address. I looked at him, carefully, and he said, “I thought you might want to change.”

“I do. Thanks. 1109 Grand,” I told him.

We never made it to a restaurant. Instead, I made eggs and toast while Richard thumbed through my house.

“What are you reading today?” he asked.

“Sleeping in Summer.”

“Trying to flatter me?”

“I’m really reading it.”

I put the breakfast down on the table and told him it was ready.

“What do you want to drink?” I asked.

“Do you have a beer? With tomato juice.”
“No.” I opened the refrigerator. “Milk, but I’m not sure about it, it expired three days ago. Apple juice . . .”

“I’ll just have the eggs.”

“I have vodka in the freezer.”

Richard gave me a funny look. “Not that,” he said. “Not just yet.”

We sat at the bar. Richard dipping his eggs in ketchup and reading his own book. I didn’t want to interrupt him, so when I finished eating I didn’t say a word and went into my bathroom to shower. I was just starting when he knocked.

“What?” I shouted over the sound of running water.

I could hear the door opening, the shower curtain clung to my leg from the breeze it made. I held my breath, my hands still testing the water, and waited for something to happen. Was I supposed to poke my head around to talk or ask him to sit down or tell him to get the hell out of my bathroom?

“I should have changed this line. Listen, ‘We were getting ready, her green dress packaged, my prescriptions filled. The only thing we were afraid to do was fly.’ It should be ‘We were getting ready, her green dress, my prescriptions filled, but we were afraid to fly.’ Don’t you think so?”

It was such a small change. I didn’t catch it then; and if I’m not careful, I can miss it now. But Richard Carlos was in my bathroom asking for my advice. And there was something in his voice that let me finish showering. We talked about that poem. He read it to me while I shaved my legs. He asked me if I knew what he was trying to do with it while I scrubbed my back. When I turned off the water, he asked me if I wanted him to leave. I pulled my towel from the shower rod, wrapped it around me, and opened the curtain to answer.

Richard Carlos and I spent that day in my house. We talked mostly about the comfortable: graduate school, publishers. I didn’t tell him that he was failing miserably
at teaching us. I didn’t tell him that most students can’t afford what he charges to be
entertained. I never asked him to read anything of mine, not then. He wasn’t charming
or rich or even very smart that day. He was just Richard Carlos and I think we liked each
other a whole lot.

When it was time for class, he called another cab.

“It’s only a few blocks away. We can walk and still make it there in time,” I told
him.

Richard laughed and waved me off while he gave the dispatch my address. After
he hung up, he grabbed his sweater and started to put on his shoes.

“It would tire me out is all. Lately, I get tired easy.”

“Oh, the uh... the cancer. I’m sorry,” I said. “I forgot.”

“Well, good for you,” Richard started. “Good for you. You know why?”

I was afraid to answer so I shrugged my shoulders.

“Because nobody else forgets. Nobody.”

“I... well... I don’t know. I mean, I guess I thought, you seem... well, you
seem fine.” I was fumbling for words, rubbing my hands together. I couldn’t believe I
had forgotten. “I just thought you could...”

And then I said it. Maybe I really wanted to know or maybe it was just my nerves
talking, but I looked at him and it just came out.

“How’d you get it?”

Richard was bending over a shoe when I asked and for a moment it seemed I’d
stumped him. I wanted to say something else to make him forget the question, to cover
myself. I was standing next to the door, looking at him hunched over his shoe when his
shoulders started to shake. He didn’t make a sound. When he looked up at me, his face
seemed like one of those clown pictures, the ones where the clown is crying, the kind that
are affixed to finished wood and hanging on paneled walls across America. His wide
mouth reached up to touch his falling eyes and in between those two places were thick, red-blotched cheeks. And still his shoulders shook.

“No one has ever asked me that one before,” he said slapping his knee.

It took me a while longer before I realized he was laughing. When I did, I laughed along in relief. I laughed until my eyes started to sting. Richard fell back against my sofa and buried his face in a pillow. I laughed until my ribs started to ache. Richard laughed without making a sound; but every few breaths, he’d snort. Before it was over I was out of control and squealing. I was begging him to stop, as if he were tickling me until it hurt. When we heard the cab blare its horn outside the door, both of us made a vain attempt to compose ourselves. Richard pulled his sweater over his head and wiped his eyes. I was outside with my keys in the door waiting for him. A breeze went past me and into my house. It struck Richard in the face, blowing his hair back, and I watched him feel it, every bit of that cold air smoothing his skin. He looked at me and winked.

“I got it from living,” he said.

After our last class, Richard approached me and asked if he could spend the night. “To be honest with you, I can’t say I remember the first time we tried this,” he told me.

I didn’t hesitate. I called in sick to work. We bought a few bottles of wine and picked up a pizza. The plan was to drink all of the wine, sleep it off, and get Richard to the airport by 2:45 the next day.

Richard Carlos was a candle and music kind of man. He didn’t smoke, but he didn’t seem to mind that I did. I couldn’t keep up with his drinking and he didn’t seem to mind that either. In fact, I think most of that night we were going in different directions. The pleasure we found in one another’s company didn’t come from the ways we were alike. Neither of us was interested in convincing the other. We knew we didn’t have the time to do that. I didn’t know where he was going but it impressed me that he moved.
And with every candle lit in my house, the stereo almost a whispering third party, his movements, all of them, were quite sensible.

When our conversation came to the topic of his disease, he looked at me and said, “I guess how I get through it isn’t all that nice. Some people get better at living when they know they’re going to die. I never believed in magic. Everyone’s got to die. I just happen to know about when.” It didn’t seem that he needed to say anything more about it. He said enough to make me envy him, and now I suppose that’s just another way to love.

When we went to bed, it wasn’t Richard Carlos fumbling for me in the dark. He said, “We’re too good for that. You know better,” and I believed him. We slept off the wine and he made his flight. I haven’t heard from him since.

In a perfect world, Richard Carlos would have died a writer’s death. Certainly not from falling in a barn. But I can’t shake the feeling that no matter how it happened, any death for Richard would be dull.

I move around the house nice and slow, and find the Herald on my kitchen table, turned to the article on Richard’s death. Sarah, the terminal pain in the ass, isn’t going to let me forget this day. Three full news pages on the famous writer. Pictures of him, his wife, his house in Ontario. Excerpts from his books, quotes from friends, a funny anecdote or two. And the last quote in the article is from Richard. The reporter probably dug through countless interviews to find just the right words to end Richard’s obituary. It reads, “I have no secrets to impart. I drink too much, I sleep too much, and in between I write stories and poems. It’s not magic. It’s just a little trick I do fairly well.”

I never thought I’d cry for Richard Carlos. But I’m thinking that I might cry now. I might buy myself a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of liquor and drink. I might just let myself go like that for a little while. I wish I could punch myself hard enough to make it
hurt. But I won't. I can't think of a single reason why I'll stop myself except for Richard's reason: I know better.