GETTING IT ON HOME: WAYS OF TELLING THE STORY

DISSERTATION

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

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Mary Vanek, B.A., M.A.
Denton, Texas
December, 1995
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In this collection of poems and essays, the author demonstrates two different methods for examining the same theme: the notion of “home”—how to get there, how to remain there and bear articulate witness to the forces which drive that author to write. The introduction sets forth an explanation for the use of the specific form chosen for expression, with an analysis of the intent behind that form.

In these essays and poems, the author accounts for her years on the Texas Panhandle, in Montana, and a year spent teaching in Prague, Czechoslovakia. These locations furnish the moments and incidents of conflict and resolution that make up the dramatic incidents of the included material.
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INTRODUCTION: A POETICS OF SORTS

If you are everywhere you are nowhere.

—Montaigne

Sooner or later, every writer faces the same task—defining a poetics to describe one’s work. “Poetics” is the public and acceptable word for “obsessions,” the black energies that drive a writer back to paper again and again. In the pages that follow, I offer a collection of poetry written in the same ten years as the included prose essays were written. All this material tries to answer one question—where is my home?

Leaving the United States for a year in what was then Czechoslovakia taught me dis-location in the most physical of manners and reinforced my own sense of the absurd. My surname is Bohemian. I look like any number of women one might find in Prague—square-faced, plain cheekbones, hair neither blond nor brown, light-completed. I look enough like the natives they often thought my inability to speak Czech was a deliberate ploy on my part. Toward what end, I am still not sure.

Imagine—a poet caught for a year in a place where most words sound like gibberish to an obsessive ear. And Czech is a Slavic language, heavily trochaic, with the initial stress on the first syllable of most words. And Czechs do not use phrasal rhythms or a particularly verbal syntax in their
spoken speech—either of which might help a foreigner catch some sense of what is being asked of her or said about her. I could have, maybe even should have, been one of them. I had the right name, though without the -ova suffix all Czech women have attached to their surnames. I carried the right look, but proved to be only illiterate and ignorant in the language. For the first time in my life, I had no words from others picking at me, provoking me from every angle most of the day. Like any sensible creature determined to survive, I learned what I could of the language and kept to myself. And wrote. Long letters, full of philosophy and doubt and often sheer wonder, showed up in the mailboxes of my family and friends.

In Prague, I lived in a cosmopolitan city with a river running through it. I tried every day to walk across Charles Bridge spanning the Vltava or on the streets of its east bank. Tides I learned as physical phenomena—both in the river and in myself—that carry along with them the weight of their own laws. The river taught me to pay as much attention to the water as I had paid to the wind speed and its direction on the High Plains of Texas where I grew up. At thirty-six, I found myself starting all over again. Not what I had planned when I took the job with the United States Information Agency.

I needed to escape the same dull sonic patterns that kept tightening my poetry and prose to the point where they
began to swallow themselves and choke. I needed to discover a new music, much the same way I had found my own first poet in Richard Hugo's work.

The writers I know—poets, novelists, and essayists—all have a similar story to tell. An early hunger for language kept them reading most anything they could get their hands on. And somewhere in that frenzy, they heard a voice whose music they recognized. For me, after a steady diet of readings from the established canon of British and American writers, Richard Hugo's blunt rhythms, reminiscent of Theodore Roethke's dark tones at work in the greenhouse, hummed true as a tuning fork struck on bone. The poem "Distances" rang at once familiar and foreign to me. "Clouds move on and the day opens to distance" (Hugo 1984, 434). Using the fifteenth line in a twenty-nine-line poem for his lever point, Hugo neatly balances the two halves of the poem with the word "distance" as the last word in the line. Animals become "whole symphonies" that "live between/here and a distant whatever we look at" (434). I had spent most of my life listening to the same sort of music playing out over the High Plains. I had my poet, despite his death four years earlier, in 1982. And I had a Rand McNally road atlas—I could get to Montana.

Making the fourteen-hundred-mile drive from Amarillo to Missoula taught me "place" in the most physical of ways. My sinuses expanded and contracted as elevations rose and fell
and rose again. Thick yellow light irradiated the car's wind-
shield in southern Wyoming on the flat outside Cheyenne. The
air took on weight with a steady overcast rain from the
Little Big Horn Battlefield to the Jefferson River Valley. By
Butte, real cold stung the late August air. I bypassed
Phillipsburg with all its degrees of gray wrapped round it.

Three years later in Missoula, I had strained some of
the twang and heavy two-four rhythms from my speaking voice
and my voice on the page. I had even worked through a
reliance on one-syllable Anglo-Saxon words gained from read-
ing too much of Hugo’s work at a sitting. But I could not
hear where I would go next with my own work.

What follows is a work very much in progress. The essays,
concerned with the part of Texas where I grew up and the year
I spent teaching English in Prague, will eventually form a
single, continuous narrative. That narrative will, I hope,
take the shape of a memoir of sorts, leaving behind a record
of what it took to live and grow up in those places. I have
always been curious about the creative process. Richard Hugo,
a fine teacher of creative writing, thought of place as the
"triggering" subject for his own work. In a poem written
shortly before his death from leukemia in 1982, Hugo wrote,
"The writer was wrong. You can go home again/but you’ll
arrive one day late for salvage" (1984, 438). Reading those
lines as a practicing poet, I decided not to be that "one day
late.” I turned to prose, not out of dissatisfaction with form but with the aim of reaching a larger audience.

I first read William Kittredge’s *Owning It All*, then *Hole in the Sky*, Patricia Hampl’s *A Romantic Education*, James Welch’s *Killing Custer*, and made my way back to Montaigne’s *Complete Essays*. These books all have a freedom and intimacy that I wanted for my subject. Not that the life of one woman born in the middle of the twentieth century is of any particular or arresting interest on its own. My own life is unremarkable, but it is touched here and there by enough odd moments and strange tensions that it keeps me at work, trying to get it down. I write, not for myself especially, but to fulfill part of a contract made with what Václav Havel calls the “absolute horizon.”

I was born and raised on the Texas Panhandle, so the word “horizon” resonates for me, and I know it well. Going from the visual, physical thing to what provides the haunt beneath it led me to adopt the following as a guide of sorts:

> We are awash in transience, and if we do not wish to surrender to it entirely—that is, to give up on our journey (and thus on ourselves)—we must feel that “everything is to some purpose,” that it has a direction, that it will not simply perish of itself, that it is not simply enclosed in its own temporary fortuitousness. (Havel 1988, 230)
In an increasingly secular age, the closer a writer, or an individual, can get to a meaning that carries the weight of witness—sacred or profane—the better off both the writer and her readers will be. And if some good stories are told along the way, even Chaucer's pilgrims to Canterbury might travel the same road agreeably.

Teachers and students of literature often get caught up in theoretical debates that frequently lose sight of their subjects. Ernest Hemingway has been rendered to the thinnest gruel. William Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies have had much violence done to them by critics riding in on behalf of one -ism or another. James Joyce's work has remained the ground zero of critical wars he hoped to incite and continually inflame, keeping the professors busy with *Finnegan's Wake* and its web of meanings. What gets lost in these investigations—however useful such exegesis might be to the student of business administration or linguistics—is the sheer joy of language. *Finnegan's Wake* is as much symphony as post-modernist text. The Wake is one book that must be read aloud and savored for the rhythm of the silences between the polyglot words and phrases as much as for the knock-kneed noise of the words themselves, the sound of all language muttering to itself. Joyce ended as he began—a poet fitting words together, sometimes literally, but always with a base metre informing his choices. The process is as fascinating as the
product. The work, in a word, defines the years Joyce lived through and bore eloquent witness to with his books.

Because scholars often come to such work with dissecting tools, they lose sight of what it took to put together in the first place. I suggest they try approaching such investigations from the other end of the spectrum, writing out of their own obsessions, perhaps realizing the difficulty of such expression, before they cut into the weave of another’s witness to particular times and places. Then their own commentaries, informed by actual sweat and tension, might be more widely read and awarded the dignity of public discussion. If such dignity is possible in these times.

My personal aesthetic consists of trying to avoid confusion about the place I choose to call “home.” American literature is the account of an individual seeking to identify and claim a right to and reason for existence. That existence begs a context, a story be told, citing the choices made by a writer or a writer’s character that produced the history the reader is taking the time to digest. As a courtesy, such a contract demands the writer return the reader’s investment with a clear and provocative narrative. Moving from the demands of the poetic form, with its emphasis on music and sometimes technical matters of composition, to the equally intricate demands of nonfiction, the writer creates layers of meaning the reader may then mine or merely scratch on the surface.
This process has led me to let one form shape the other. With each essay, I learned more facts about the places I choose to investigate. Being the investigator myself, some things I would perhaps avoid became apparent and demanded my attention. To create an absolute horizon for myself, and any readers I might acquire, took me back to the essays started when I realized Texas is a foreign country, and once outside its borders, I had best understand why that is so—if I am to say or write anything worth the weight of its own memory.

The pages that form the drafts of the essays-in-progress reflect such transitions. Learning to read as a writer, to pay attention to another writer’s lateral moves at the line of scrimmage, has given me hope for what’s left of the twentieth century. That “hope” carries Havel’s definition of the word: “not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out” (Havel 1990, 181). And that is the writer’s task, to make sense of the world bounded by literal horizons, warped and shimmering as a damp mirage in a dry place, and the thin layer of skin separating the writer from the air that horizon defines.
One day, in Prague’s early and uncertain spring,
I sat dozing at the feet of Saint Prokopius,
one of the statues lining Charles Bridge.
The air, cool enough, let thin silver
sunlight through. Like any other
winter-stricken animal, I dozed, stunned,
sprawled loosely in the lavish heat.
Sweat oozed from winter-clogged pores,
heat radiated from my navel down.
I squirmed at the sudden moisture.
One more time, the grace of urge,
the solar surge toward procreation.
Numb under that white sun, I thought
two complete sentences in Czech,
remembered three whole stanzas
of Rilke—the promise of lilacs
on a small breeze, my name become
flesh of that one instant.
FOR JOHN HUSTON

John Huston died when I turned thirty-three, and that's enough to make ill at ease, with meaning, omens, portents expressed, but not yet read. Don't get me wrong. I'm no Macbeth, not ready to believe the stars disrupt themselves for my benefit. But that old man knew God's not dead, just drunk, and means to stay that way. With that in mind, I'm careful what I ask for, knowing what I might get comes from a force more in mind of mischief than redemption.

The body is our hope, the poet wrote, together with a mind at play, a terrible clarity meant to make the night pass with telling tales of wild adventures, true deceits, and the will to die a long time before leaving this life. So I am a bit cautious, keep my skin nearly whole, my mind ready and able to edit each shot I see every moment of each day.

When the message comes, and it will come--how can it not? Remember the gleam in this man's grin. He took his last breath on the day I took my first.
He's still got something to tell me, and my lungs are clean enough to wait while I learn how to tell tales of a world where love is bent to purpose, how to choose a death, and how to see it through to the final shot, edited in the camera from that one, true angle.
BLOOD ENOUGH AND TIME

In the center of a cemetery made green as spring
by the gray Confederate dead, I sit
near midnight—the black dog
who guards this place sleeping at my side—
cool on the cold cement base of this monument
made by the pride of Southern womanhood.
We all pay our debts in different ways.

The story is, where blood’s been spilled
ground will speak if we’ll but listen.
I ease a blade through the pad of my thumb,
the drops pulse out, and it begins:
wind strong enough to strip brown leaves,
a rattle like bones in a clattering bag.
Then nothing. The dog licks his yellow teeth.

I believed they would return, given blood enough
and time, but now, steadied by the throb of the wound,
I doze, legends dying all around me, the last stroke
of the clock tower echoing into silence.
Power comes from what we are,
not what we think we’ll be.
Witness Odysseus staining
a trench red for Tiresias,
the old man deeply drinking,
speaking full of mortal heat.
FOR FOUSTKA

Though Shakespeare gave Bohemia a seacoast,  
you know the only salt to season  
your flesh will be your own sweat,  
raised best at play in bed,  
risking no words, only kisses,  
those quick promises that fade,  
saliva drying on well-heated skin,  
arms and cheeks sponged clean  
after the act of love so you may  
deny with clear heart and light conscience,  
ever said, never staining the air  
with conviction, with the art of the possible.

So, here you are, tiny Faustus, satisfied  
at last, or merely sated--it does not matter.  
You send her kisses in your next letter  
not knowing she burns the thin airmail sheets  
at night under a new moon, saying the words  
you will be bound by when next you slip  
into her arms, into her heart, into your own  
kisses she wears as wax in the hand-shaped  
black ball pendant between her white  
and--so you wrote--perfect breasts.
She wears a wolf tooth round her neck.
How long will she finger the bright yellow tooth
before sleep takes her when I am not near?
I cannot begrudge her the warmth
of another man's breath in the hollows of her neck,
the soft words of half a consciousness
settling for a long winter's night
of rest and contentment while I walk or work,
unable to sleep in the dark, in the nameless dread
of childhood fears--the upraised voice, the dull, wet
thumps of reconciliation meant for no ears but the two
who began and ended each quarrel, the same quarrel:
who owned what right to which part of the other's body.
I swore I'd not be party to such a contract and have
kept my word, living alone in towns whose names
I can barely pronounce, whose languages are strange
music to my ears. There's nothing for it
but to wander and hope that one return
will have the weight to hold me
where I was born, where I was meant to be.
Until then, I walk, eat strange foods,
dream summer fields of bluebonnets
and autumn acres of tall yucca,
God's candlestick, if you believe such myths. 
Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. 
Yet I seldom pass a wayside shrine without finding 
some small coin to earn the match to make fire 
and offer a prayer to the saint there.
I cannot go home, but I keep headed west 
where home once was 
and hope someday to find it there.

She will be there, or she won't. I'll bring 
fresh marigolds for her mother, 
tequila for her father, 
one rosary blessed by a pope for my grandfather.
And one garnet ring set in a gold band 
bought on a bridge in Prague for marriage.
For now, walking into the sun each day pleases me, 
and I often howl with coyotes at the rising moon.
Butts flat up against the sink in our friends' kitchen, M. and I agreed, this had to come to a halt. We took inventory, canceled out the long and recently married, the partners working on the same house payment, and stood looking at the finger with your name on it--lucky you. We agreed you are a true joy to contemplate, loose and lean, smiling most of the time--a requirement, given what we had in mind.

No love, we assured ourselves, was needed, just a friendly roll in the sweet, dry hay, something to work out the collective kinks being untouched too long had knotted our necks and bellies into. We even prepared our separate speeches, almost legal pitches of companionable intent, then laughed when we caught a friend's growing horror at our Halloween plot to relieve our sorry lot. And let it go.

With a smile on my face, the fiery thud of a migraine settling in, I try to remember--was it fuck a fever
or rub a headache into the glide

two bodies in motion make easy and slow

between them? It's been too long—I'm truly

sorry to say—I can't remember.

—For the three M's
ON BECOMING A WRITER

There was nothing to show for it once
the bleeding stopped—bright red surgical
blood, the echo of the doctor's words
pulsing hard as the first migraine
I ever had. It would not have been human,
conceived too soon after the dose of nuclear
medicine, irradiated salt water, meant
to dissolve the tumor wrapping itself
round my voice box. The tumor attached
itself to the gland that regulates the flow
of hormones to the proper channels of bone
and blood and marrow. What I did not say
was conception took place in a fit of rage
mistaken for passion. A pounding, literally,
of the words, "Pregnant, now you can't leave,"
but I did. The cramps the vacuum pump
sucked out of me snaked up my backbone
to the base of my neck and blossomed
into the purest pain I've ever known.
I did put both holes in the bathroom walls
of room 238 of the Holiday Inn, Lubbock, Texas.
When I came home, climbing back up onto the Cap Rock,
to the pure, thin air, I brought a hand
broken in two places and an empty womb

I meant to fill with words, words, words.
I keep the bat, a black paper toy,
in my window to guide him back.
If he chooses. He won't. That was the charm,
the remorseless joy of it. We lay
in the clear moist light and promised we'd be
true as the moon, the gliding, sliding,
melting moon. All wet and warm, full of him,
I agreed. There's the end of that part.
The bat's still in the window, the moon's one night
past full, giving me the bellyache.
I don't sleep, dislike what I eat, and don't care
to drink. Almost time to go home. I know.
Question is, where will I go,
going home? To Texas, where my mother
lives and waits, those low plains
that shimmer in the dark,
the first geography of my heart?
To Montana, to my friends who will not
question the need of a bat in the window?
Or do I find another window
on Prague to guide him back to me?
And what use will any of this be
when I must wait
on the goddamned and beautiful moon?

*

The moon’s nearer when it rises and brighter,
and if dogs will howl, this is the moment
they’ll choose. Or ought to. One can never
rely on dogs. I recommend wolves,
but there are no wolves in Prague.
The communists declared them romantic
claptrap and shot them, one by one,
before the mostly silent populace.
It’s quiet now in Prague when the moon rises.

*

Jesus, what we do to the moon—
make it every little thing
but itself, then complain when
tidal pressures signal our bodies,
fulfilling their half of the contract,
doubling us over in a fit of fertility.
I could make a baby tonight,
a child wild with exile,
begin her in Prague, in Bohemia,
where my mother says my father's
father began. But that's way beyond
this moon, one night past full,
pushing my guts in the direction
of creation. Salvation? One child
paying the passage of another?

*

I do not want to know my mother's dreams.
My own give me nightmares enough,
things I'd never tell her but for the screaming
that woke the house, how a shadow
of wings, imagined bats, could petrify me.
Now, I sleep beneath a paper bat,
a Halloween confection mailed
across the Atlantic by my mother
who knows how dreams become plain desires.
Still, I do not want to know my mother's dreams,
my place in them, the nightmares I've bred
in my absence the moon keeps cycling her
through—they're not something I can grant
or ease with a simple paper bat, and the real
thing, the thing itself, still terrifies me.
LOWRY’S ADVICE TO THE TOWN PUNCH ON HER 35TH BIRTHDAY

We’re all dying. But that’s too easy
a line. You’ll never suck on sweet necks
under the moon with that one. Unless perhaps
you go on about guilt, remorse. Threaten
to make a good confession and you’ll be the cause
of cold sweats and confusion in half the male
congregation for two counties.

But that’s all
in the past. You’ve given up God, and now
you root in books for something good and right
so you can sleep the night through. Still,
the dark lights dance among the white stones
calling you to join them. It’s hard to breathe
knowing the air feeds the thing killing you.
Kisses, always kisses you send, in place, perhaps, of the words you hoard, cannot say without your beloved’s face between your palms. So you send kisses, sometimes—"I kiss you," the act implied in a general sort of vague and pleasing way. But these kisses you send to friends, to all you miss and who miss you, so what of the words, those ripe containers of the sweet old sweaty demi-urge, lurking as you well know always on the lip of the horizon?

Being caught by the tickle of your mustache on my mouth, your lips parting mine, your tongue touching the tip of mine, the soft hiss of shushing syllable—your name—conjuring me from an ocean away, dreaming in English, waking with the wet imprint of smoky Czech on my covered mouth. Kisses, always kisses you sent, and I took intended or not, am here now, grinning at the pearly red seed of a sun setting down the Vltava, the flag on the Castle--
"Truth will prevail." I'm waiting to see,
dreaming of kisses, the trickle of your words
on mine, salty and wet, the arc of a spark
between blood and impulse, nerve and synapse,
firing on the exact, the correct verb.
THE TASTE OF HISTORY

In the heavy glass jar, dulled coins from another time, another country my mother robbed me of when she left early one clear and resolutely cold December day, homing south toward Texas. Those coins I recognize now, have even added to the collection I pack from house to house to house. I used to count them once a year on the Day of the Dead, coming as they do from a country now dead to all but old people’s wandering memories and the mustier history books in any library. They come from the same country my blood does—Bohemia, now the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic—a conglomerate that pleases no one save politicians and some patriots of superpower games. The coins are more than a promise of rolls fresh from the baker, butter, milk, maybe meat. The grit of history resides in their serrated edges, the sharp taste of those stories in strange rust all pungent on my tongue when I suck on the coin in my mouth, something my mother would have my head for if she saw me. But she’s in Texas still—all her running took her back to where...
she started from, which is, after all, 
the point of all true journeys. I think. 
I'm here in Montana with friends I love, 
friends who love me. No lovers. Lovers are 
too much like the coins whose inscriptions I can read but cannot translate. I have 
no luck in love, and I keep the mason jar, 
cloudy with light and the metallic dust of dry coins, with me, counting them 
once a year now at the poet's grave, 
the one who understood what it is I do 
and why I do it. His marker reads,  
"Believe you and I sing tiny and wise 
and could if we had to eat stone and go on." 
Each year my fingers eat copper, silver, and one soft gold coin from no country but my own.
THE LAYING ON OF HANDS

My hands are spotted, flecked with a lack of pigmentation, the raw patches of pink skin almost new in their apparent smoothness. Most shudder, pitying what they think must have been an awful burn, the long months of oozy gauze, oily ointments, my horror when the doctor peeled the bandages off. Wasn't like that. At twenty-six my body revolted, grew a tumor in the flesh of my neck, twined round the larynx. I'd married too young a boy I thought a man in my mistaking size for content.

Which is not to paint him mean or even arrogant, just confused, falling back on old stories, myths dead through misuse. The night I could no longer swallow beer cold enough to numb the raw heat I believed strep throat third time that month, I knew I needed miles and miles of two-lane
blacktop snaking out under the last moon

of late winter, everything sure to be what it seemed
in the clarity of cold air at six thousand feet.
So I left him the house, the dog, a life I thought
I wanted, and my body taught me pain as a palpable

thing. Pain became color—tiny Fourth of July
pinpricks—white, red, and navy blue neon
showering down bland walls before the veins
at the stump of my neck clamped shut

and a steady metronome of thuds lay me down
in dark rooms to watch the movies of what
I’d done with my life. What I thought was crazy
turned out to be an excess of chemicals washed

away by two warm ounces of irradiated
salt water. The tumor feeding on my voice box
dissolved, took healthy flesh with it
for good measure. My throat opened.

I drank thick milkshakes with ease,
relished the sweet snap of vanilla
and berries. Laid basking under the dry
sun in a sky that reached all the way down
to ground my feet knew how to walk on.
I was at home until I began to fade.
My mother took my hand, traced what
then were relief lines etched

around my knuckles, turned my palm up,
frowned at the familiar lines still in place,
all the colors right in hue and shadow—
turned again and traced the scar from the night

the church key slipped, ripped a groove
in the soft flesh next to the web
of my left thumb and forefinger. These
were her daughter’s hands fading

faster than her own. I left, fled not
the long leach of color from my hands
but the pressure, light not lasting,
of the trough she wore rubbing softly

the furrow she dug on top
between my two big knuckles,
down and past the white patch spreading
there. Medicine’s an art, member
of the uncertain sciences, the same ones
bodies practice, mixing what may
or may not be healing elixirs. It took
ten years for me to find a horizon

I recognized the first time I saw it.
My hands hold enough color, people
stare almost politely, but seldom offer
touch. A friend I’ve known two years

now, bowed one night from a deep excess
of pleasure in a public moment, took
my spotted hand in his, raised it
to his lips, kissed the white patch of skin

in a wet language whose sear pitch
hummed high as twin tuning forks
expanding the air—veins opened,
dilated and expanded, forced color

back again into my patched and pale hands.
My mother will be pleased to see
I still have so much whole blood in me.
WHERE THERE IS TO GET TO

Tell me a secret, he said, and I thought to lie, to rescue my dead, or at least resurrect the beast still breeding nightmares in my insomniac sleep. I’ll say because it was late, because I was drunk, his tap on my elbow unhinged and startled me. I told the truth about the night I’ve lied to myself about. “I was young,” is the usual bleat of this beginning, but I wasn’t. And the man was beautiful, black-haired, hardly in need of buying what he could have had of me with the right touch of his neat, blunt hands. Between us, we made a whore of me, set me free in a way I could not have been without the abandon of cash money on the bedside table.

That’s the secret I told ten years later to a man I didn’t know, though I trusted him for his words—living and dying, as he advised, in what I had left.
KEEPING COMPANY WITH THE DARK

Find your salvation through fear and trembling.
—Jim Harrison

What the light was like—that’s an important question to ask of someone scared stupid of the dark. In the dark, we heard it—the snipping snick of a plastic cap being screwed off the lip of a glass bottle—later, the dull, wet thumps of reconciliation. I never liked indoor dark. I still don’t. Which explains why I stay up all night to keep an eye on it. That’s what I was doing the night John Wayne died. June 11, 1979, and I had my first full-bore case of strep throat, though I didn’t know that’s what it was. What it was then was me lying on the floor of a ready-built tract house dumped in what passed for the middle of Eagle Nest, New Mexico, watching Rancho Deluxe on late-night TV from Albuquerque. The print of the film was all chopped up, and I was higher than Baldy Peak out back, sailing through the night on NyQuil, when the screen went white with noise and static. A young reporter in a wrinkled blue shirt, his eyes raw as his red tie, stared into the camera. “John Wayne is dead,” he said and dropped his eyes to the typescript to read the wire service obituary. I could not stop shaking. My temples ached. I couldn’t get my right eye to focus. The worst part, aside from the world
being lighter with the old man’s passing, the worst part of it was I had no one to tell. The man I’d married two years ago lay asleep on our king-sized bed. I’d holed up in the front room with my bottle of NyQuil and two leftover Darvons from the winter before when I’d damn near broken my ankle skiing in the wet powder that hardly ever fell so far south. And he hated Rancho Deluxe. He was a big man and mostly trusted other men who worked with their hands. I’d watch him grin and reach for a man’s hand, keeping an eye on his mouth to see which corner of it dropped at the touch of a smooth or callused palm. We were young, the both of us, and we didn’t know any better than to watch each other close.

So I’d lain out on the floor, wrapped up in an old heart quilt my great-grandmother had made. The movie came back on. I did not believe what I’d heard in my ringing ears, which are still ringing, and John Wayne is still dead.

The husband has gone the way of a good many first husbands--out the trap door of a divorce court. I didn’t know it then, but the day John Wayne died gave me my first true look inside myself. It was not a pretty sight, and besides, it was dark.

I have since taken to wearing black or the darker colors to soak up whatever light might be available. So far, it’s worked. I’m still upright and occasionally functional. I tell stories a lot to tell myself who I am, continually reinvent-
ing the world I fall in and out of, trying to convince myself that I do have a future. Whether I do or do not doesn’t much count. All that does matter are the stories. Through them, I keep my family and its history of mirage glimmering on the horizon.

We lived on the rim of the Cap Rock of the High Plains where mirages—those tricks of heat and a certain dance of light that cast what look like shadows of the thing itself—have lured many a rider or lost troop of cavalry out onto the Staked Plains of the Texas Panhandle. Coronado and his soldiers named it Llano Estacado for the stakes the Spanish Jesuits drove into the ground to set buffalo skulls on top of, marking the locations of watering holes sometimes fifty to eighty miles apart in the dry season. If you believe in such things. The older I get, the more geography I believe in. Better that than in what I see in my own memory. Sometimes.

Other times there is the light. Once a year, rich or poor, the family went north and west. Daddy always started the trip home late, so we ended up on the shank of a Sunday evening helling down out of Colorado, hitting Dalhart, Texas, off a long smooth glide from Clayton, New Mexico. Daddy drove with one hand—one finger more like—on the power steering wheel of a Cadillac Sedan DeVille, always deep purple or white
trash cream, sliding out of our lane and ahead of respectable men and their families in long cars.

Mama cheered or loved on one of us, holding one of the boys or me or Jae on her lap so we could get our heads out the window and hang in the stinging air of what white men called "the Great American Desert" when they first saw it. True to our mongrel pedigree, we were passing through, snatching at what we could get hold of on that wind. Always the wind, ten, twenty miles an hour at dawn, picking up windage and elevation as the sun rises. So we traveled at dusk and in the dark, Mama and Daddy smoking cigarettes, drinking beer then whiskey when drinking and driving were matters of private choice and not of public morality. We kids fought or slept in the back seat, grimy with road salt-sweat, or didn't sleep from being high on the sugar and caffeine of sweet, canned Coca-Colas. Which may account, I know now, for us not being able to sleep even when we reached home. The road still buzzed and hummed in our ears. Jae jerked and kicked more than usual in our double bed at whichever house we could afford to live in.

When Daddy worked dirt, running the big Cat front-end loaders on landscaping jobs, pouring field dirt in flat squares for tract houses to be sold to the families of the Strategic Air Command at the air base, we lived in houses on the north side of town. And we went to school with spare change in our uniform pockets, knee socks that stayed up
because the elastic was new and thick. When the air base shut down, closed as one of the first executive orders Lyndon Johnson signed as Potter and Randall counties had the gall and pure stupidity to vote for Barry Goldwater, Daddy went broke, and Mama worked the blood bank some nights after she left Dr. John’s lab. She cooked a lot of pan-fried potatoes with purple onions and ladled out brown beans over scratch cornbread with hands that ended in nails stained perpetually purple from the formaldehyde tissue-culturing demanded. We thought all mothers had purple crescent moons in the middle of their long nails that scratched backs more deliciously than other nails could because they were strong and hard from their daily chemical bath.

Daddy took up selling insurance. He knew half of everybody’s family from Amarillo to Plainview. And he could talk—still can—when he’s not drinking. Let me just go ahead and say it—my daddy does drink to excess. He learned how from his daddy and his granddaddy going along on wheat harvest from Brownsville, Texas, to Wolf Point, Montana, every year from the time his legs were long enough to reach the clutch pedal of a grain truck. I still think the drink got to be a true problem from his selling insurance. Daddy has got the black ass bad as anybody else, but he has a sweet soul. What other sort of damned fool would marry a woman in her late twenties with four kids from two other men? Like my mama...
says—third time’s a charm, so she tells me I’ve two more tries coming.

Insurance got Daddy and us rich and broke three or four times. The last go-round led to bankruptcy, so we ended up living with my grandparents while Daddy drank, talked to bankers, and bought guns.

I still hate guns. I’m not too fond of bankers either, though my little sister, Jae, is one. Mostly, it was the guns that made us dread dark.

I’ve been afraid of the dark as long as I can remember. The long twilight on the Texas Panhandle gave me time in summer and late spring to get to sleep, but come fall and winter I was up for the duration. The other kids—Jae, Joel, and Guy—would sleep, knowing I was awake and watching. For years, I knew just when to creep out from a bedroom hallway and cry about monsters, vampires most often, an occasional werewolf crouched there in the lean dark of my bedroom, their white teeth wet and shining. Mama always made me go back to bed, but not before she’d stop and smooth my hair or let me lie in her lap with my back turned to the television, hearing her and Daddy’s steady breathing in the static quiet, or the clink of ice cubes into a glass and the snick-snick-snick of a cap being twisted off a bourbon bottle.

But none of that worked after Doug Wherry died, and plans for the insurance company he and Daddy would have
founded got crushed along with him in the car that flipped off a Houston freeway. In Amarillo, where we lived, where the land is so flat anyone can see what’s coming long before it gets to them, Daddy went a little crazy. He saw the same elephant that got to a good many of the men and women who made it past the Hundredth Meridian only to find space a real and tangible thing with no intimacy to be had. They needed recognizable forms, familiar blank spaces, to fill in.

Not me. Give me a clear shot of horizon and enough air that I can give the rest away to other people. It’s been my experience that when a gun gets pulled, or a rifle leveled, the air closes up, concentrates, grows dense with all the implied threats two people conjure between themselves. That’s what happened in 1969, ten years before John Wayne died, and Daddy still believed in the Code of the West: Never apologize, never explain—either is a sign of weakness. Mama had seen the elephant too, but she’d already seen it twice, so she went home to her mother and took us with her. We remembered that part of the drill, but we’d never been tracked before then.

Daddy did his best James Dean, roaring by the house in the Pontiac station wagon, tearing up the hot asphalt. Mama took the phone off the hook and marked the “Help Wanted” ads, even though she knew she could go back to work for Dr. Richard, Dr. John’s brother. He’d already helped to bail
Daddy out of county jail for drinking then defending an imagined slight against Mama’s character in the parking lot at closing time for the Avalon Ballroom. This time, though, Mama didn’t drink. She slept a lot, and I didn’t sleep much at all. So it was a relief the night Daddy broke the glass on my grandmother’s front porch door to punch the wooden door open with the elephant gun in his hand. He’d bought the .270 Mannlicher-Schoenhauer four weeks before with his share of the seed money for the insurance company promised by Mr. Wherry’s banker in Houston. The terms of the loan were declared null and void when Mr. Wherry died. Daddy went back to freelancing for a crop insurance agency out of Oklahoma City to pay our monthly bills.

My brother, Joel, eleven and round as a boulder, went straight for Daddy’s knees in a textbook clip we’d all learned from Mama’s following the career of Ray Nietzsche in Green Bay. Daddy slapped Joel behind a wing-backed chair and raised the back of his hand to Guy who cried and pulled his own hands back down close to his bony chest. Mama screamed something over and over again. I ran for the kitchen and the phone.

My fingers jerked, got caught in the rotary dialing wheel. I heard Jae begging Daddy to stop, put the gun down, Mama screaming whatever she screamed. A dull thud shook the china cabinet, same as thunder in a storm that brings tornadoes will thud. I lost Jae’s voice in the voice that
answered the ringing in my ear, telling me it was already morning there in the dark at the Amarillo Police Department. My voice wouldn't come out. I croaked, cleared my throat, felt my vocal cords open and close, but nothing like words came out. The woman operator woke up, said in phrases evenly spaced that I was to give her my address. Daddy wrenched the phone out of my hand, ripped it, cord and all, out of the wall. I watched Mama hit him high on the back with the flat of her left palm, her eyes black as the dark glowing in the window behind her. He stared down at me, still for that one moment, his eyes shiny and focused, his teeth bared. I went for the gun.

Mama yelled, "Goddamn it, Dale," and he whirled on her, jerking me along, caught as I was by my hand stuck between the gun's sight and top of the bolt action.

He shook my hand off, and I fell flat on my back on the tea-brown carpet.

"Stop," my mother said.

The boys and Jae got into the kitchen and put their hands on Daddy, his arms gone slack, the rifle pointing down at the floor and away from me. I'd seen the elephant from the opposite end of the gun's sights. I'd like to say I was the elephant, but I don't believe I've ever put the fear on anybody, not even my daddy. If I had, we wouldn't have had to ride around in that damn Pontiac with him and that rifle for
four or five hours until he rode out the end of all the adrenaline he’d pumped into his bloodstream.

I remember falling asleep, all four of us kids in bed, set up in the sewing room at my grandmother’s house, so Mama and Daddy could sleep in their own room alone. The dawn light seeped in thin and gray through the venetian blinds. I dislike the dawn and will avoid it whenever I can, even now.

Twenty years and two business ventures later, the last one still successful, Daddy and Mama live mostly by themselves in a thirty-one-hundred-square-foot house. Joel is still married, for the first and, he claims, last time to a woman who has given a lively daughter and lovely son. Guy looks to get married the second time to a woman who has seen him through drug rehab. She loves both his daughters, quick and beautiful girls from his first marriage. My sister is married for the second and, if it holds up, she says, last time to a man who has helped to adopt a son and a daughter. I write poems every month or so to my nephew, Jarred, a good-looking Mestizo boy, and to Kelsey, a slim, bright Anglo baby.

When I got back home from my own try at marriage, Daddy could hardly stay in the same room with me unless Mama was there. It has taken six grandchildren before he could stand me near him. They’re none of them my children, but they belong to him and to me through the tidal pull of our own love for them—I don’t know what else to call it. They reach
out to him or to me or to Mama with the same delighted cries and give back to us what we give to them. But what they want more than touch is the steady rhythm of a story's words as they lie down to sleep in the safe, quiet dark. And that I am good for.
SURVIVAL CAN EQUAL AFFECTION

It took me years to get these souvenirs
and I can’t believe they’ve slipped
away from me.

—John Prine

Outside of the occasional terrifying late night phone call, nothing much has happened to me and mine in the recent and historical past. We have all the usual horror stories of marriage and divorce, addiction incited and overcome, or at least held to a manageable level of excess. We are, all of us—my younger sister and two younger brothers—in the process of becoming middle-class citizens, and it’s making us all a little crazy. Strange things happen—like I can’t remember the word “quicksand,” and the roadrunners turned up again to eat chicken scratch with Sully, the peacock, guardian of my parents’ place south of the Canadian River Breaks.

My youngest brother, Guy, one test away from being a licensed master electrician, rolled the pickup he’d asked Daddy to cosign a note on. That night Guy tried to make the border run between Wheeler, Texas, and the Oklahoma state line along Sweetwater Creek. It was past closing time, and Wheeler is a dry town, and Guy was feeling fine for the first
time since he'd had to leave his wife and two baby girls in Amarillo to take a job at the feedlot in Wheeler to get their monthly bills paid. He was not hurt. The truck was.

Guy has never been able to drive for spit, drunk or sober. He takes me literally when I tell him to keep it between the fence posts. Bar ditches lie between any two-lane blacktop in Texas and the four-strand barbed wire of a landowner's property. Guy has so much pure juice in him that if he does not drink or work hard--running Romex through a two-thousand-square-foot house in half the time it would take most men working for an hourly wage to run it--he comes close to losing a leg from all his jiggling up and down of that leg. So he drinks--too much.

Not so much anymore, though. Not since that truck's back end started sliding on the dry dirt of FM152, and he could not steer far enough into the skid to stop it. He took down Wanda Brown's mailbox, clipped the sturdy metal box set on a railroad tie packed into the red dirt. He clipped that creosote tie damned near in half, and the truck sailed up into the air then whacked over twice before it smacked down into the red dirt washed up out of Sweetwater Creek and into the bar ditch.

The ditch was dry and Guy, pumped full of adrenaline and dread, was sober. He got out of the truck, set Wanda Brown's mailbox on the ground right next to the five-inch stub of
railroad tie, and walked the four miles to a phone booth on State Highway 83 beside Cotton's Texaco to call the sheriff.

Guy reported the accident for his insurance, then called Daddy later from the Wheeler County jail where he was held on a DUI charge under a fifteen-hundred-dollar bond.

It was 1:15 in the morning when the phone rang. Mom, Daddy, and I were up late watching *Reds*. Jack Nicholson, as Eugene O'Neill, had just said to Diane Keaton, as Louise Bryant, "I'd like to kill you, but I can't. I love you," and the phone rang. We figured someone we knew and loved was dead or had killed someone.

Mom didn't talk to Guy that night. Daddy made sure Guy wasn't hurt, made sure how much the sheriff, at whose desk Guy stood to make the call, was asking for bail, and told Guy to get some sleep if he could. Daddy hung up the phone and told me and Mom what had happened. He didn't call Janet, Guy's wife. Guy asked him not to, so Daddy didn't. We finished watching the film and went to bed.

Mom and Dad got up early, left me to open the shop and feed the peacock. The Amarillo National Bank teller gave Daddy two lemon suckers when he withdrew fifteen hundred dollars at a little after seven in the morning. That was in mid-August. The suckers melted a little bit, sitting in the bank envelope on the Pontiac's dashboard all day in a parking lot outside the Wheeler County courthouse. They are still on
the icebox door in the kitchen at home, held in place by a red apple magnet. Mom and Dad won’t tell anybody who asks why they keep those suckers on the icebox and won’t give them to the grandkids who get damned near everything else they ask for. I haven’t said anything yet about the suckers, and Guy hasn’t asked me.

Here lately, Daddy’s been buying Ozarka water for his whiskey. The new well for the house drilled up sandy, sweet for a month before it turned off salty and thick, so Daddy’s buying water from Arkansas while he sits with my mother on the northwest corner of Potter country at the edge of the Canadian River breaks above the Ogallala Aquifer. They still raise sweet wild plums with that high-chloride water, and Daddy occasionally drinks Chablis from the XIT Winery, but neither him nor Mom will drink what comes gushing out of their sulfate-chewed pipes, much less let the grandkids at it.

Daddy’s been strange these past five years. He turned off quiet after my oldest niece, Jacquelyn, was born. I would never accuse this man who sent Ronald Reagan campaign donations of being anywhere near liberal, but last year he subscribed to Audubon and sent the Nature Conservancy enough money that they’ve sent him a steady supply of mail since then. He put their green-and-white bumper stickers on the car and on the pickup he hauls Hagies with. He makes his living
selling high-clearance crop-spraying machines. Look like something out of *War of the Worlds* with their spindly legs and thick bodies.

Last summer, when I worked for Daddy and walked up from the bottom of the pasture at the end of a long, clear sunset, the machines lined up on the lot looked like insects. Insects are what they kill with chemicals that evaporate into the air or leech up into clouds that spill acid rain onto the High Plains. Daddy’s territory runs from Brownsville, Texas, to north and west of another manufacturer’s rep’s territory in central and southern California.

Daddy’s been in hospital twice, sick from 2-4-D after working all day on machines gone down in the field during August, the custom applicator’s high season. He quit selling chemicals after that and drank only beer for a while. Then Jimmy Carter decided not to sell wheat to the Russians. After that, Mom and Daddy had to move in with my grandmother for a while. Daddy sent more campaign money to Reagan. Subsidy payments to farmers picked up under the Republican administration. Even the smaller operators needed to keep fallow fields disced and sprayed, no green growth, actual or otherwise, allowed to show if they were to collect their government checks in good order and on time.

Reagan got reelected. Farmers began to buy heavy equipment again. Daddy bought the house with its fifteen acres next to the Amarillo Rifle and Pistol Club and built
his shop. My niece, Jacquelyn, was born. Then Marlana, her
cousin, was born, then Ashley, Jacquelyn’s sister, and
finally Jarred, their cousin, was adopted into the family. We
had four generations on the ground.

As Frederick W. Rathjen says in *The Texas Panhandle Frontier*,
“Contrary to persistent myth, the only source of recharge to
the Ogallala is precipitation upon the surface and the annual
amount of recharge is almost insignificant—certainly less
than one inch” (136). Professor Rathjen’s book came out in
1973. In 1986, Ralph Beer, writing for *Antæus*, reports that
the “Ogallala Aquifer in the Midwest has been pumped so hard
that grandiose schemes suggesting diversion of water from the
upper Missouri River to ‘recharge’ it have recently been
seriously proposed” (186). Also in *Antæus*, Jim Harrison,
whose novels can double as botany texts for the regions he
chooses to let his characters inhabit, characterizes Texas as
“not a bad place if you ignore the inhabitants and their
peculiar urge to mythologize themselves against the evidence”
(201). That evidence, writ large in declining water tables
and the falling number of arable acres, is dire and in need
of redemption through the body for the body by the body.

We have a lot of little bodies, and not so little bodies,
around the house now. We can put the four kids in the square
tub off the southeast bedroom if we put half a capful of
water conditioner in the water first. The kids all squeal and have a good time batting at the bubbles. The water conditioner does not cost all that much. Daddy buys it by the case out at Sam’s when he goes into town to buy Ozarka water to mix with his Weller and make ice cubes that will not sour the whiskey. His paycheck, which is oftentimes quite hefty, is written by the son of a rich man. As a younger, hungrier man, John Hagie, Senior, saw flat land and chemicals as near-perfect purveyors of possibility. He was right, up to a point. He lives in Arizona, now, for the clean air and clear skies.

We still live in Texas with the humidity index rising higher every year on the High Plains. I quit on the idea of having a family this past August. Like everyone born on the Cap Rock of the High Plains, I require distance to see clearly. As a poet, I crave the music of strange, rough voices, voices that do not lapse so easily into the rhythms I know as well as I know the rhythm of rotations the winds from different directions will push the windmill’s blades through. I went north for the sensation of true cold so I’d recognize warmth. So far, I’ve been cold to the bone twice. The counter workers at the Hellgate station of the U.S. Post Office know me on sight and can tell by looking at me whether or not I got mail that day.

I even got a letter from Jim Harrison after I wrote him one hot night in Texas, crazed with wind and the sound of my ears ringing. He told me, “Work out your salvation with fear
and trembling." I have the trembling down. I know fear from the same thing that drives my daddy to guns and whiskey and selling machines that spray chemicals on an unstable groundwater table, so I'm set up north and west of Missouri River headwaters. I'm up here, I'm cold, and I'm not above mythologizing my past to help save what's going to be left of my family in the salt waters of the Canadian River drainage.
I call him "Daddy" because he's the only father I've ever known. My mother's third husband, he is the one who made it, who hung on. Mama finally found a man she could shape into what she needed, but he has kept part of himself separate from her and from us kids. Only way he can get to that part of himself is to drink and get mean or work all day in the shop where he rebuilds, tunes, and modifies the Hagie high-clearance sprayers he sells for a living. The shop is neutral ground for us, as close as Daddy will let us come to that soft part of him, the rough work maybe taking the place of words he knows but cannot bring himself to say.

We still have not found our way to that soft part of him. We never have, but the kids have. He's got six grandkids, four girls, two boys, from my two younger brothers and sister. Me, I have yet to find the man to take to me. I tried once. It didn't work out. So I keep coming home, circling in and out of the gravitational pull of home ground.

Last time I swung home for a summer tour of duty, I worked all day with him on one of the Hagie high-clearance...
sprayers he sells to local framers and commercial sprayers, scraping clean the corroded bottom of the tall, spidery frame that held the oil pan of a Perkins diesel engine in place. He wiped the flaking, red-painted steel down with paint thinner. With a double-edged razor blade, I scraped the last of the corroded gasket stuck to the frame, peeling the black gunk off the sharp beveled edge.

Since my hands are small and I don't have any fingernails to speak of, I helped Daddy shove the oil pan over and up onto the machine bolts at the front and back of the oil pan he'd cleaned with gasoline. The pan scraped and grated, still out of place. Black, greasy dirt sifted down, fell into the corner of my left eye. I grunted, shoved the motor mount to one side and the oil pan rang home.

"Okay?" he asked.

"I need a nut," I answered.

His hand, black with oil, pushed down between the grimy hydraulic hoses and dropped a brass nut into my hand. I pinned it between two fingers and scrabbled it into place.

There was no room to get a grip on the head of the nut and screw it tight onto the bolt. Daddy got up under the machine beside me and shoved the oil pan flat against the bottom of the machine, then started twisting nuts onto the right side of the mount where there was some free hand room. I worked at the one nut a quarter-turn at a time. My eyes burned and teared.
It was hot inside the shop. Outside the wind blew thirty miles an hour out of the south-southwest. Daddy’s mother lay dying in a hospital fourteen miles north of town.

Hissing sheets of dirt rained against the gray steel building. I had a fever from a strep infection. Sweat dripped down the sides of my face and my sweatpants stuck to my shaking legs. I kept one hand flat against the front bottom half of the oil pan, twisting the nut until the bolt filling the hole appeared.

"Need another nut," I said and held my grimy hand out. Daddy dropped a steel nut onto my palm. This nut spun on easily.

It took us all afternoon and into early evening to bolt that oil pan back into place. Mama came over from the house around five o’clock with a glass of ice water for me and a frosted mug for Daddy.

I went to the shop sink to scrub my grease-stained arms and hands with Comet cleanser. Daddy wiped used oil off his hands with a red shop rag and pulled open the under-the-counter icebox to grab a cold can of Coors out of the twelve-pack. He poured the beer from the frosted can into the ice-smoked mug.

"You called the hospital?" he asked my mother.

"No. Jean said she’d like to talk to you tonight."

I slipped past them, pulled myself hand over hand up the operator’s ladder to pick my way through the loose tools
scattered on the catwalk. I sat on top of the tire well, sipping the ice water Mama reached up to me.

"You’re flushed again," she said to me. "Still running a fever?"

"I’m fine," I said, the cold water scraping down my throat.

Daddy stared out into the blank distance of the prairie dirt storm and lit a cigarette. Mama went over to him and finished pouring the beer into the mug steaming with refrigerated cold. I took a deep drink and swallowed, the cold water finally numbing my throat. Daddy squinted down at the phone, rolled his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, then reached for the receiver. I fumbled a three-quarter-inch wrench off the machine. The brass drain in the concrete floor rang loud. Mama turned around. Daddy kept punching buttons and drank half his beer down.

"Momma?" he asked. I stood up on the machine to turn and watch the dirt blow up from the cotton fields down around Lubbock, one hundred and twenty-five flat miles south of us. Daddy’s voice rose and fell under the steady hissing of the dirt.

We had a full hour of daylight saving time until dark. I raised the plastic glass, let ice clink against my teeth till I found the chunk I wanted to suck on. Mama walked over and held her hand out for the glass.
"I'll call you tomorrow, Momma. Have Vivie call me if you need us," Daddy said and set the receiver back on its cradle. He took a last drag on his cigarette, then flicked it onto the dirt and grease under the machine. I wiped my sweaty hands with a shop rag I'd stuck in the waistband of my sweatpants at the small of my back. The rag was as wet as my hands were.

"She all right?" Mama finally asked.

"Hell no. She can't hold water down. Throws everything up. Now they're going to do a systosomy or some damn thing on her in the morning, going to run a light down her throat to see if they can find where the blockage is. She's got another doctor, Dr. Boova, Barvoo, something like that. Said he came in, sat on the side of her bed, patted her hand and told her he'd take care of her. Goddamn, Patsy, where does she find them? As long as they tell her what she wants to hear or they talk nice to her, she does whatever they say. Christ."

He got up, shoving the chair away with his knees and went to pick up the wrenches we'd need: a three-quarter-inch crescent, and the bigger ratchet wrenches, and his two-foot-long screwdriver, the one with the orange-and-black handle.

"We need to get that filter back on and bolt that pump back down, or the whole damn thing'll blow on us when we try to start it," he told me. Reaching the tools up to me, he stepped on the bottom step of the thin aluminum ladder set up under the machine.
"I’ll call y’all when I put the spaghetti in to boil," Mama said. She pulled open the back door of the shop. The building sucked in, its vacuum pressure disturbed. My ears popped. The door banged back on its hinges, jerked out of Mama’s hand by the wind. I tensed, waiting for Daddy to yell at her.

“You seen that oil filter wrench?” he asked me. Mama got the door pulled shut behind her.

“Yeah,” I said, quick, my voice hoarse on account of the strep pustules coating my windpipe. "I’ll get it. It’s on the tool bench."

I backed toward the operator’s ladder at the rear of the machine. My foot went wrong on the first step and I banged my shin hard, kicking at the second step to catch it with my right foot and keep from falling the eight feet to the ground.

“That’s all right. I don’t need it. Fit some flat washers over these bolts here, and we’ll get that pump on.” He nodded at the four bolts, nuts, and different sets of washers near the tire well where I’d been sitting, holding a drop light for him.

I picked up bolts, pushed the different washers around, and chose a wide washer to thread on before pushing on the thin washer clipped open in the middle. I got the four bolts ready to reach to Daddy. He loosened the long bracket mount for the pump, the belts to the air conditioner and the engine
fan slackening, some of them brand-new red. Daddy laughed and plucked at the new fan belt.

“That’s to the air conditioner. Son of a bitch wouldn’t hardly change the oil, but he made damned sure he didn’t have to sweat no more than he had to. Grab hold of that edge there. Watch your fingers. What am I caught on there?”

“Hose of some kind. Hang on.”

I pinched my fingers together and reached into the machine’s oily guts to move a thin grease-slick tube away from the back of the pump mount.

Daddy pushed the pump flat up against the machine’s frame and reached for the bolt and washers I had put together. I gave it to him and got a nut ready. It was a tight squeeze. We got the four bolts in place, the both of us sweating and sniffling from the dirt, radiating body heat. Daddy had sweat through his shop jumpsuit twice. I left wet ovals from my sweats every time I sat down.

The last nut was the worst.

“Hold your light right here.” Daddy reached up without looking, grabbed my slick wrist with his greasy hand and angled the drop light so he could see into the machine’s housing. The last bolt was on the back of the pump bracket. My arm would not reach that far and besides the nuts were hard to turn in the long lateral grooves of the pump mount.
“Come on. That’s it, baby. That’s it. I got you now, you bitch,” he muttered, blinking to keep the sweat out of his eyes.

The phone rang and both of us jumped. My hold on the pump, loosely bolted in place, slipped, and the nut popped off the bolt that clattered to the filthy floor below us.

“I’ll get it,” I said and bumped down the ladder to grab the phone. Daddy clumped down the ladder to hunt the bolt and two more washers.

“Good evening. Omni-Ag Distributors,” I rattled off.

“Mary,” Mama said, “the spaghetti’s boiled. Are y’all ready to eat?”

A flare of temper made my eyes ache.

“How long, Daddy?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Tell her to wait.”

“I don’t know, Mama. Ten or fifteen minutes maybe. We got to get that pump bolted down.”

“Tell your daddy I forgot to put potatoes in the sauce. Tell him he can have his fit over there.”

“All right,” I said and hung up the phone.

I climbed back on the machine, held the drop light where he wanted it. Sweat dripping off the end of his nose.

“Mama said to tell you she forgot to put potatoes in the sauce.”

“Damned if I’ll eat sauce with no potatoes in it. Got you, bitch. Now,” he said, grunted and leaned back, taking
the drop light out of my hand to peer inside the engine housing. He pulled on the fan belts. They each snapped back into their proper places.

"She said," I went on, "for you to have your fit over here."

"Piss on it. Climb on down. Let's have us a beer break, then we'll ratchet those bolts tight."

"Can't drink. I'm taking antibiotics, remember?"

"You want to go on to the house?"

"No, I want to finish up here."

"Well, get you a glass of water then."

We both washed our hands and forearms with Comet, scrubbing the thick gunk off our skin.

"Damn that stings," I said and tried to swallow. The strep infection was swelling my throat shut.

"You look like shit," Daddy said. I leaned back against the edge of the shop desk. He leaned over and reached into the small icebox for another beer.

"Now I know what happened to your hair," I said. "You rubbed it off the top of your head butting up against the bottoms of these machines. They all get this dirty?"

"I steam-cleaned this one three times before you came in. How's school?"

"Dull. Not like this. When you get done, this machine'll look new as those four out front."

He grinned at his beer. "They're all used machines."
I looked out the window at the machines glowing dull in the long blue twilight. Their beige paint shimmered with waxy polish.

"They don’t look it. That’s what I mean. At least you can see what you’ve done. Teach a good class, and all I’ve got left are memories of an hour when everybody stayed awake, and I can’t trust my memory."

He sipped on his beer.

"You want a ratchet wrench?" I asked when I saw he wasn’t going to say anything else.

"Naw. Give me a smaller one, and I’ll get those nuts up flush against the motor mount."

We got back under the machine and went to work. Daddy tightened the twelve bolts on the oil pan while I got the four in front and back nice and snug.

The sun went all the way down. We climbed on top of the machine, and I held the drop light while Daddy ratcheted the pump bolts tight.

"That’s it for today. We best get our butts to the house or your mother’ll boot us both halfway to Dalhart."

We washed at the filthy shop sink. The gritty cleanser burned my red skin, but I still scrubbed, working the sludge out of my pores. We used up half a roll of paper towels to dry our hands and arms, then to wipe the sweat off our faces.
"Your mother says I should wear gloves," he said when I picked at the grime wedged under my short nails. "I hate 'em. Can't feel anything with gloves on."

"Me neither. I did all right for a rookie?"

"Real good. You work hard."

"Hard enough to have around all summer? You pay me what you think I'm worth."

"Sure."

"No, I mean it. Eight to five. Regular work, out here or in the office."

"Okay."

"It's a deal?"

"Deal."

"Good. You want me to close up?"

"No. You go on to the house. Tell your mother I'll be there directly."

I let myself out the back door, though I had to grip the metal doorknob twice to keep my greasy hand from slipping off it. The building sucked in and out. I pulled the door shut behind me and stepped out into the cooling heat at the end of that summer day. The wind had laid, and it was quiet. Baked dirt in the air burned my nose. I walked the side pasture between the house and the shop, my wet feet sliding inside socks squishing against the sides of my running shoes. At the hedge line, I stopped, put my head back, and looked for the
North Star, dim but right there above me in the clearing Panhandle sky. The western horizon glowed pink and purple.

Daddy’s mother lay dying fourteen miles north of town. She wasn’t a woman I knew well. I had a summer job—shop monkey at thirty-four years old. Standing in the air, I shivered, my skin taut with dried salt. In the fall I would be in Missoula, Montana, starting over one more time.

The aroma of oregano, garlic, and basil steamed in imported tomato sauce drifted past me. My mouth watered and I had to swallow. The spit scalded my raw throat.

That was the first day I spent with my daddy without any real pain. Seemed fair. I pulled open the back door of the house and watched Mama swat at the ripe air dense with burnt garlic toast fumes. She always burned the bread.

I smiled, reached for the crumpled toast, and said, “I’ve got a job--I’m home.”
CROSSING THE BORDER

Things separate from their stories have no meaning.
—Cormac McCarthy

Czech is a Slavic language, not Teutonic, despite its harsh initially trochaic syllables, though to the English-speaking American ear it might sound like a softer version of German, what with Czech’s hissing elision of certain consonants and muted verbs. Which explains why I did not recognize the sound of my own last name being spit out by the harassed cultural attaché of the American Embassy sent out to the airport on a Sunday to collect myself and another American. That and I kept bumping into things, falling past surfaces I thought I saw, only to have them dip farther from my hand than they looked to be. I’d lost my depth perception in the strangely flat light.

I’m not quite sure what time of day the plane from Frankfurt landed at Prague’s Ruzyň airport. My physical disorientation was driven deeper by the plane stopping on the concrete tarmac in front of the small terminal. An old-fashioned jetway of metal stairs let the passengers stumble down onto the cracked gray runway, the day itself overcast and dull. I tripped over my own feet in the chilled September air, staring up at “PRAHA” spelled out in dark chrome letters
on the squat building. I hadn’t set foot on an airport runway
since my friends and I had nearly gotten arrested for riding
the rubber baggage treadmills in and out of the loading docks
at Amarillo’s airport. That was in the early seventies, our
world still innocent of terrorists who favored the use of
Czech Semtex for blowing up airplanes and airports. We were
committing adolescent mischief, not acts of terrorism, with
our bored raid on the local airport. So, that day early in
the last decade of the twentieth century, I felt guilty
walking almost unattended across the airport grounds,
especially in a country newly emerged from behind the Iron
Curtain. An almost audible hum settled just below my left
ear. I shook my head, tugged at my earlobe. And bumped into
the metal door swung back against me when the passenger in
front of me neglected to hold it open for the remaining
passengers straggling in behind her. Public manners were
largely matters of private convenience in Prague that year. I
reached for the door and missed the handle I was sure I’d
grasp. My depth perception had gone south on me.

Inside the building, dimly lit by the overcast light
filtering in through streaked windows, the only sound was
feet scraping across dirty linoleum floors. I looked around
for signs directing me to Customs or wherever the hell I was
supposed to go first to make my formal entry into the
country. The only signs I could find were printed in Czech,
German, and the Cyrillic alphabet of Russian, reflecting, I
suppose, the demographics of the usual tourists allowed into the country in its socialist incarnation. No signs in English, not in early September of 1990, not that I remember.

I watched my fellow travelers shuffle toward a group of plastic cages behind whose plasticine windows bored men in green uniforms sat, staring mostly above the heads of the small crowd. People seldom looked one another directly in the eyes in public. I frowned and headed for one cage with what looked like "Pasport" printed in the black words running around the marquee of the station. I know I smiled at the man behind the plasticine shield, probably said "Good afternoon."

He started, grunted, snatched my brand new passport—my first such document, obtained with much grief and trepidation in a record eight days—crumpled the rich blue pages under his fingers. It still has the initial crease he bent into those pages. He whacked it with a metal stamping machine, leaving the figure of an airplane and the day’s date in pale blue ink on the visa page.

I asked where I should go next. I’d begun to sweat, a cold sweat that chilled the underside of my arms. He jabbed his thumb in the air, gesturing over his shoulder. I would learn in my year in Prague that the thumb and not the forefinger is the first finger on one’s hand and should be used to point and count. That first day the gesture looked merely foreign, and I’m afraid I stared. I committed my second transgression by smiling my thanks and went on to
follow my fellow passengers who’d gone on past the passport control cages into a drafty, high-ceilinged room where two men in faded blue overalls and thin blue cotton jackets threw our luggage on a carousel that creaked under the accumulated weight.

I started to panic when my large duffel bag did not appear in the second or third batch of luggage the two men heaved onto the metal circle. Most of my clothes were in that bag. In between looking for the bag, I looked around for someone from the embassy, the someone I’d been told in D.C. would be there to meet me. I spotted a few people who had to be American, given their clothes and luggage, but it was oddly quiet, not the usual noise one hears in the arrival and departure facilities of most airports. Then again, there was a series of doors guarded by young men in green uniforms with guns on their hips that we still had to get through once we collected our luggage. For some reason, these men carried more of an air of threat than did the soldiers walking in pairs through Frankfurt’s airport, machine pistols hanging from their shoulders. People glanced nervously over their shoulders at the soldiers.

A short man, hissing out names, brushed past me, setting me back on my heels. A taller man, his clothes crumpled from the long flight, said in loud, American-accented English, "That’s me." The shorter man pulled up, stared back, squinting with bloodshot red eyes at the man who spoke. I
saw, with relief, that the shorter man had on a navy blue sweatshirt with the American eagle seal, the words, "American Embassy, Prague, Czechoslovakia," imprinted on it. I hurried over to tug at his elbow, asking him if he knew how to get to the embassy. He frowned at me, asked my name. I told him. He turned red, sputtered out, "Didn't you hear me calling your name?" I blushed, said, no, I hadn't, and he repeated my name. I look blankly at him. He repeated, "Von-yeck," again, the accent heavily Germanic, spitting out the last syllable of my name as though it tasted foul in his mouth. I said, "No, that's 'Van-ick,'" the accent easy on the first syllable, sliding into the lighter vowel. "Not here," he said and repeated the heavier version of my name.

By then my last bag had appeared. The agitated Cultural Affairs Officer slung it onto the baggage cart, flashed some kind of ID at the young uniformed officials who smirked or smiled timidly and waved us through the stations where other passengers had their luggage open while the guards poked through what they found there. Welcome to Czechoslovakia.

The Cultural Affairs officer wore contacts. Given the particulate grit in Prague's air, I'm sure they were not a comfortable convenience. And he had his son with him, five or six years old, whose attention was barely distracted by a hand-held electronic toy that squeaked and squealed while the three adults exchanged the usual, empty pleasantries about
where in the States we lived and worked. The men sat in the front seat of the Ford station wagon. I sat in the back seat with the child, who sniffed and swiped at his nose at regular intervals. There were no hotels, gas stations, or the usual signs of commerce that ring most airports in the area around Ružyně. Only flat fields, mostly green, rolled unfenced in all four directions. I squinted at the gray light, the hum under my left ear nearly audible to my hearing, trying to get some sort of fix on the dream landscape the car sped through on a two-lane cement highway.

The attaché explained I would be spending the night in a student hostel. From there I could catch a taxi to the embassy the next morning where two of my fellow teachers would fetch me and take me to my "flat." I wondered why he couldn’t take me himself. Maybe there were papers I had to fill out at the embassy. He volunteered to keep my two larger bags with him for me to collect at the embassy tomorrow. I asked where the embassy was. He said, just tell the taxi driver you want to go to the embassy and he’ll get you there. Fine.

The one thing I’d done before we left the airport was exchange American cash for the curiously colorful Czech currency. For fifty dollars, they’d given me nearly fifteen hundred “crowns,” the American name for the Czech currency “koruna.” I counted the odd-sized bills, tucked them in my billfold.
The other American, a businessman from somewhere deep in the Middle West, was staying at a hotel in the city center. He didn’t get out of the car when the cultural attaché stopped in front of an eight-story rundown building in a neighborhood that had me looking over my shoulder. We pushed through the double doors colored by peeling orange paint. The lobby was dark, one desk light shining from an office shut off by two small sliding glass windows. An older woman, her hair rigorously permed a bluish white, slid one of the glass panels back, and frowned at us.

The embassy official spit out a stream of Czech. The woman continued to frown, flipped open a much-thumbed ledger book, took her time finding an entry. They exchanged a few sentences. He thumped his thumb on the window’s outer shelf. She sighed, turned, and produced a key she kept in her hand. I stood behind him, swaying on my feet by then, a little dizzy. He turned on me. I stumbled back. He explained that the woman would show me to my room. There was a pub, small café, across the wide boulevard of a street outside where I could get something to eat, and I should be at the embassy by ten o’clock the next morning. And then he left. I’m afraid I stared stupidly at him, unable to get a question out in the time it took him to get the hell out of the ringing dark of the building’s foyer.

I turned back to see the woman looking me up and down. Was she smirking or frowning? Neither one of them had looked
at me through the entire exchange, though I did my best to smile and nod at the woman. I tried smiling again. She looked over my shoulder. I turned around to see if the embassy fellow was coming back in. The entryway stood empty.

The woman waited for me to follow her. We walked down a hall, dark with one red light burning dimly at the other end. An exit, I supposed.

She stopped before a metal door set back in the wall and fired a burst of Czech at me. I smiled and shrugged, said "Sorry," in English, which deepened her frown. Some piece of machinery clunked. She pulled the metal door open, waved at me. I hadn’t been on a lift before. The small metal closet had me staring at the tiny enclosed space, a little worried. The woman nearly stamped her foot at me. I smiled again and let her push me in.

The lift bounced to a halt on the fifth floor. The matron slammed the door open. That metallic crunch echoed down the dark empty hallway. Empty--the entire building shimmered with unoccupied space. She unlocked the door to a suite of two rooms, both barely closets, cold, with a water closet in between. A toilet and wash basin. I’d learn the difference between a bathroom and a water closet that year. A plastic orange phone that looked like a grown child’s toy rested on a shelf of drawers between the pebbled glass doors of the two rooms. She showed me how to unlock the door to the
room I'd been allotted, left the key hanging in the lock, spun on her heel, and left me to myself.

I didn't cry. Not then. Just then I was too dazed to do anything but stare at that ridiculous phone. I went into my room, looking for a lamp, found none, so I switched on the overhead light that turned out to be a fluorescent fixture that took a few moments to hum to life. I may have cried then. I can't be sure.

The plane trip had dehydrated me. I looked around for a glass of one kind or another, found nothing, so I cupped my hand under the cold water faucet, and turned the tap. After a horrible gurgling sound, bright orange water ran over my fingers. I snatched them back. Two full minutes later, the orange faded, thinned to a yellowish stream. By then I didn't care, cupped my hand and swallowed two mouthfuls of bitter, brackish water. And started to laugh. It was either that or howl.

I splashed my face with the water before looking for a towel. The one thin metal rack hung empty. No towels of any kind. Dripping water going cold on my face, I pulled out the drawers in the hall. Nothing but the gray dust of lack of use. I dug a packet of tissues out of my book bag, dried my face and hands.

Nothing for it but to head across the boulevard, try and find something to eat. I'd been too nervous to eat since leaving D.C. the day before. I thought it was the day before.
That's what my watch said. I'd forgotten to ask the local time. Outside the evening dusk had started to seep up.

The trip back down to the foyer was something out of a bad Cold War thriller. No one but me seemed to be in the building. The blue-haired lady was gone. An older man in suspenders over a dull white shirt looked up, startled from the small newspaper he held close to his eyes.

God alone knows what I said in English. I don't remember. I do remember the irritated frown he gave me, shaking my words off, motioning for my key. Which I reached over to him. He ran his thick finger down the ledger pages, said something that sounded almost familiar. It took him two tries before I recognized my own surname. I nodded, pleased at this sudden moment of communication. He almost smiled but caught himself in time to give away nothing.

I stood there awkwardly, miming the motions of eating. This set off a rapid barrage of machine-gun-paced Czech and a good deal of arm-waving at the street outside. Finally, exasperated, he emerged from the office, carefully locking the door behind him, walking toward the dirty windows, and pointed at the third storefront in the squat block of uniformly gray buildings the other side of the deserted four-lane boulevard. I asked, "Café?" and he nodded, then turned on his heel and melted back into the dark foyer.

The pub scene was a disaster. I must have been marooned somewhere in Strahov, a working-class district of Prague.
where the School of Economics has their dorms. From what I could tell after my entrance literally stopped all conversation in the garishly lit, smoke-thick room, young women do not go unescorted into even the local pubs. And, after asking permission, you sit wherever there is an empty seat. I picked the only two people who looked to be under fifty in the place, gestured at the empty place on the bench, said, “May I?” or some such empty phrase. The young man blinked slowly while his bottled blond girlfriend squinted at me. By then I was too tired to care that people mostly frowned heavily at me every time I opened my mouth.

And you do not try to attract a busy waiter’s attention. That’s the one sure way to get ignored wherever you go in Czechoslovakia to eat or drink. You wait until he slaps a felt pad coaster down in front of you and then stares down at you. I did not get that far in the process that first evening. The two younger people did not offer to help me. They continued their conversation in irritated, tired tones until I asked if they understood English. The young man shrugged—the essential Czech gesture—said he did and went back to his conversation. By then I knew I had to get out or I would burst into tears. Being from Texas and all, I do not cry in public, no matter what the provocation.

I shoved the bench out from under me, again bringing the conversation in the place to an abrupt halt. I stopped at what looked like the dishwashing station on the way out and
after much gesturing, left with a bottle of what appeared to be orange juice. A heavy glass bottle that the man behind the counter insisted on opening with a church key on a heavy twine string before he let me leave, having loudly, scrupulously counted out my change into a dirty white china dish on the metal counter. He'd balked at taking the paper bill out of my hand. Another lesson learned. You do not hand clerks or waiters cash money. You lay your bills down in the inevitable china saucer you see beside most cash registers or cash boxes. They, in turn, count out your change into the same china dish.

Outside of trying to talk to the Middle Eastern fellow who handed me my key only after he'd spent five minutes paging through my passport, and the low muttered sentences I heard when I answered the phone all night in the small hall outside my room. That was it for my first night in Prague. I wasn't in hell so much as caught in a long tour of one of the lower depths of a gray, cold purgatory. And, I knew I deserved such treatment for all my past petty sins of discourtesy and slighting lies. I spent most of the night writing a semi-hysterical letter to a friend back home in Idaho.

There's something good, almost essential, to be said for being raised by people who still believe showing grace under pressure is the true measure of one's breeding and is the proper courtesy to extend to the mainly indifferent world
around you. I made it through the next day on nerves and stubbornness. Yet another sullen individual took my key from me when I left the dorm to stand in a light haze of damp and wait for the taxi. I'd had enough of that cold building. All I wanted was air, however chill, around me.

The taxi driver spoke no English but understood "American Embassy." I was already worn out from getting the middle-aged guardian of the dorm office to actually phone for a taxi for me. I think it was the angry tears starting in my reddened eyes that did it. By then, she'd had enough of me.

I remember one brief flare of hope and enthusiasm when the taxi crossed the Vltava and I caught my first glance of Hradčany, Prague Castle, on a hill above the gray city. Mostly, though, the relief came from being under open sky for the few moments it took to speed across the bridge. Amarillo, where I was born and raised, sits square in the middle of the Cap Rock of High Plains. Horizon sprawls three hundred sixty degrees around you up there at nearly thirty-five-hundred feet before the rolling prairie dips down into the Canadian River Breaks. I'd become claustrophobic even in the riverine valley Missoula sits in, its elevation barely eleven hundred feet despite its being in the backbone of the northern Rocky Mountains.

Tržíšťe ulice, Tržíšťe Street, where the embassy sits wedged up in the hills ringing the Vltava, is a two-way street so narrow two trucks can barely pass one another. Like
many of the streets in the older districts of Prague, Tržište ulice is made of cobbled bricks unevenly worn and spaced. It’s a trick not spraining your ankle on them. I’ve got bad ankles and spent more than my fair share of time limping during my year there. I did try to pay attention to where I put my feet while out walking. The air in Prague is thick with haze from soft brown coal burnt for heat and energy. Such air is hard on your lungs. Some people, a good number of Prague’s people, do not hesitate to relieve themselves of this pressure by hawking it out. I watched where I put my feet.

The attaché still squinted at me, but smiled when he saw me clearly exhausted by my night in the hostel—the sound of the word aptly descriptive of the night I’d spent there. He reunited me with my bags, had me sign some papers, explained the two-tiered exchange rate for crowns. As a recent arrival, I’d get the more favorable tourist rate, so I ought to take advantage of it and let others in on the deal if somebody from the embassy asked me to change money for them. But, under no circumstances should I exchange money with the gypsies and other black market operators who’d approach me in public. I wondered how they’d know I was an American, but I didn’t ask him. He paused in his set speech to ask if I had any questions. I blinked twice, slow, trying to get my eyes then my mind to focus on what he had laid out before me. He tapped the messy spread of paperwork covering his desk and
told me the two teachers coming to fetch me could answer
other questions I had, and gave me an invitation to an
orientation session for incoming Fulbright scholars and
assorted other USIA appointees—called "USIS" overseas, say
the word the letters form quickly, out loud, and you’ll
understand what help they give their employees.

I took the hint and left to camp in a wingback chair
shoved up against the wall in the larger outer office with
two secretaries, a black American woman and a thin, white
Czech woman, working their typewriters and phones. I found
myself sitting next to a large paper-shredding machine. I did
grin right out loud at that sight.

I waited over an hour for the promised teachers. From
the tall doors pulled almost shut beside and behind me, I
heard the occasional rumbles of a deep voice that sounded
familiar enough I began to wonder about the density of my
auditory hallucinations. My ears still buzzed with a low-
level hum. Finally, someone pulled the doors opened. I looked
up and saw Jack Anderson, the syndicated news columnist,
locked in conversation with a red-faced man, his white shirt
starched stiff.

Two young people stopped at a desk in the next room,
looked up, saw me staring at the two men bent toward one
another in conversation. I got up, smiling at the slight
blond-haired young man with wire-rim glasses and the trim
Asian woman at his side. Chris is Canadian, Carina Wong had
come from Los Angeles. Both taught at the Higher School of Economics where I did. We all spent a month or so in a suite of rooms, a true suite on the bottom floor of a better maintained dorm, until Carina and I landed jobs, moonlighting as English tutors to deputy ministers in the Ministry of Economics and Ministry of Strategic Planning, the old Ministry of Central Planning that essentially ran the socialist state of Czechoslovakia. In exchange for two hours a week with our deputy ministers, we got a flat in the ministry’s boardinghouse in the working-class district of Jižní on a mostly quiet residential street. The important part of this arrangement was our escape from the Anglophile, sexist boys the school had us sharing the suite with. Had we not escaped, I’m sure Carina would’ve committed physical mayhem against Chris before then.

Czechoslovakia, in 1990, was shaking itself awake from the long, bad dream of neo-Stalinism at its worst, still caught by an indifferent but highly institutionalized and effective communist bureaucratic control. Equality between the sexes had no place in that world, a world whose social conventions had frozen somewhere in the early sixties. Unmarried women were supposed to be comforted by the thought that, if they were young enough, there would still be time to catch themselves a man and settle into a “normal” life. Men thought nothing of leering at attractive women in public, and Carina is a striking young woman. Everywhere I went with her, she
was hissed at or commented on loudly enough we heard each word. Not that I ever understood exactly what was said. We didn’t need a literal translation. The tone of the men’s voices said it all. Carina, on her second passport by then and only twenty-three, never even slowed down. She looked right through those men and kept walking.

I didn’t have that problem. With my light brown hair, wide cheekbones, mostly thin lips, and slight height, I looked Czech as long as I kept my mouth shut and remembered not to look or smile at people in public. And remembered to wear plain clothing—even my good cotton clothes attracted the attentions of the gypsy money-changers working Václavské náměstí, Wenceslas Square, where I went every day but Sunday to buy English-language newspapers. Without Carina to attract attention, I went unremarked upon most everywhere in Prague.

Which made my year in Prague one long private moment. I didn’t ever retain enough of Czech’s complicated linguistic structure to do more than make my most basic needs understandable. And my Texas accent, however slight to my own ears—speaking English ever so slowly, enunciating each syllable clearly for those Czechs who did speak English or were learning—mangled horribly my few attempts at an entire Czech sentence, anything beyond the stock phrases needed to buy groceries or ask directions. I spent most of the year perpetually lost.
Prague is a city built and rebuilt on itself. My sense of direction was permanently skewed—without the sun in the sky, I couldn’t tell east from west. That autumn was cold and overcast. A good month passed before the sun began to break through to shine for more than a few hours. Then it settled down into the quick, deep dusks of winter at so northerly a latitude.

I found myself dis-located in every essential way, provoked into a profound dis-ease, a sensation so physical it doubled me over in the bends. Carina didn’t know what to do when I came to a dead halt on one of our city walks, trying to catch my breath. That child sets her mind on things and goes, hellbent for leather. I’m more inclined to gawk, most times in sheer wonder of what I’m looking at, sometimes in a futile effort to get my mental or physical balance. In that, I suppose my Czech blood shows. I went out to watch a “Softbal” practice announced in a poster at school. High above the city on the Letna Plain, on a soccer field paced off for the Czech idea of a baseball diamond, I watched the kids fanned out in the correct places. But none of them moved right. Even the true athletes jerked arrhythmically, trying to bend and scoop a ball up then throw it with the natural motion that starts with your weight shifting from one foot to the other, that contraction turning your shoulder, which in turn provides the snapping force to fire a ball out and cut off the runner running down a baseline. Even the better
athletes, male and female, threw from their elbows, snapping a wrist at best. And while some could fake a fluid swing at the dingy pitches hanging fatly in the air, none hit through the ball with their bodies fully engaged. Baseball is foreign to Czechs and Slovaks in a way that tennis and basketball are not.

I got to where I craved the grace of unconscious gesture as badly as I craved the sight of just one well-dressed person. As I suppose anyone suddenly uprooted and marooned in a foreign culture will tell you, it’s the details that make you crazy. I spent a good deal of time the first three months of my year in Prague accommodating myself to the culture. I learned you do not simply walk into the local potraviny, foodstuffs store, where you buy mostly canned goods, bread, milk in plastic bags that resemble nothing so much as the thick plastic bags blood is stored in, a lovely metaphor, eggs, and some meat, mostly cold cuts and brick-hard frozen chicken carcasses. No, you go in, look around for a small, almost child-sized wire shopping cart. If you’re lucky enough to find a free cart, you may then wheel it through the turnstile gate and shop, picking cans with no photos on them--I took my lexicon with me to the grocery store for the first month, looking up words to the grim delight of my fellow shoppers--paper packets of spices, fresh bread, unwrapped, uncut, great broad loaves of dark, rye-tasting bread (one of the main staples of the Czech diet), or small conical rolls
of white bread, the occasional, more expensive baguettes. If you wish to invest in the purchase of a chicken carcass for your Sunday afternoon dinner, you wheel your wire basket to the white, waist-high open freezer, bend over, take a deep breath to make sure the refrigeration unit is in good working order, then choose the stone-hard carcass of your preference. Which has no price marked on it. Once you’ve made your selection, you join the line of fellow shoppers with carts lined up before the glass deli case holding strings of various sausages, rolls of processed meat products, head cheese, white and yellow cheeses. Park your cart in the prescribed manner—as close to your predecessor as possible, usually side-by-side in my local potraviny as the aisles are narrow, and wait until it’s your turn to be served. The girl, always a woman behind those counters, will look in your general direction—over one of your shoulders, the top of your head, right between your eyes, but not at you—say “Prosim,” pronounced “Pro-seem?”, meaning everything from “please?” to “thank you,” to “Okay, it’s your turn,” or “What do you want?”

You hand her your prized chicken carcass. She takes it, puts it on a thin sheet of wax paper, reads the scale carefully set on the counter so that you can read along with her. Figures the weight, totes up the price, which she marks on the opaque paper that she uses to wrap the already plastic-wrapped carcass, the price plainly displayed in
indelible black grease pencil. Asks “Prosím” one more time to see if you want anything else from behind the meat case. You say, “Dekuyi.” I was frowned at for a couple of months, then barely smiled at for persisting in my effort to say “thank you” in Czech, something most Czechs rarely bothered with in their commercial transactions. Then you joined the line of carts waiting at the check-out counters, each with a woman in a white lab-looking coat working the electric registers. And you’d better have brought along a bag to carry things home in. Chances are you would push your cart to the first person in the line that had formed behind the register, often longer than the line moving through to check out, waiting for a wire cart so they could gain entrance to the shopping floor and buy what they needed. Get caught without a cart, and you got thrown out of the store. Control, as I said. Power, in a word, disconcerting, reinforcing the dis-location that sometimes made me physically dizzy or ill with panic.

Standing in those lines, waiting, could unnerve me. Standing on line, as New Yorkers say, is closer to it—staking out your space and defending it with your bodily presence. I spent a good deal of that time, watching, taking mental notes. When I first arrived in Prague, I thought nothing of pulling out a small notebook to write down what I saw—I have a wretched memory. I quit doing that when I realized it made the Czechs nervous, at best. For forty years, they’d lived under the constant threat of secret
police informers at work in pubs, cafés, any public and sometimes a good many private places. And there I was in my monochromatic, good cotton clothing, watching them in normally unremarkable, ordinary moments. What the hell did I find so interesting that I had to write it down? What had they just said that caught my attention? Well, nothing since I could hardly distinguish one word of Czech from another. So I stopped taking notes in public, but I still watched.

And I got better at the quick glance, sometimes a snapshot side glance that took in my neighbors walking past me in a plate glass window. I'd tick off how many bags hung from people's hands, anything from the regulation woman's purse to a man's briefcase or bookbag, along with the requisite plastic sack advertising everything from American cigarettes to German cameras to Czech football teams or large industrial firms that manufactured beer or cars. In that plastic sack most citizens carried home their potraviny purchases or whatever fresh vegetables were available that day from street vendors set up near the tram stops in the city's center on Havelská Street at the bottom of Václavské náměstí. Maybe a piece of red meat or a round rump of pork bought after standing on line in the mazo shop, the butcher store. Maybe a runty head of lettuce along with a long green stalk of purple-headed garlic bought after standing on another line in the ovoce/zelenina, the fruit and vegetable storefront. Shopping is a demanding, physical sport in Czechoslovakia.
And like American football, there are long moments of waiting for your chance to play in the game. During those moments, I watched.

I lived in Žižkov most of my year in Prague. Žižkov is a solidly working-class district. Our boardinghouse, sat on the dividing edge between Žižkov and Vinohrady, the district of Prague where its first democratically elected president, Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, had made his home. Six floors of flats in a long line of concrete and brick buildings marched up Velehradská Street just above the aptly named “Prick of Prague,” the television broadcasting tower whose main purpose was to jam programs from the West rather than facilitate any kind of reception. The street was quiet, made up of people who worked for a living, Czechs, Slovaks, Gypsies. But enough of a racial mix that weekend evenings the air held a bit of menace. Fights might erupt at the disco on Olšanské náměstí, Olšanské Square, where the main tram stop was. You didn’t go out for an evening stroll past a certain hour. If you were a woman, you didn’t go out alone after dark. Which seldom deterred Carina and me.

We owned the stupid arrogance of Americans living far from home. Not that we were so much arrogant as hopeful. In short, we believed more in the goodness of our fellow human beings than in the more basic instincts that drive people to acts of random violence. Carina is deeply, profoundly
Christian in her apprehension of the world. I am a thoroughly lapsed, cradle Roman Catholic, meaning I have a highly developed, deeply ingrained sense of guilt, and a black and white sense of good and evil. Not that I let these qualities stop me from going where I have no business going. I am way too curious for my own good, a devoutly superstitious coward. With Carina to egg me on, I went places and did things I would not have done or seen on my own. For that, she has my profound thanks—she bore my whining better than I had any right to expect.

Then again, I entered wholeheartedly into her ongoing existential crisis. The meaning-of-life conversation we carried on that long year when circumstances threw us together. At thirty-six, I’d decided getting to the bottom of things was beyond my powers of comprehension—that and I didn’t really want that question answered. If I did come up with some kind of codified answer to that question, I’d be obliged to take on a responsibility for my life that I’d just as soon sidestep. Not Carina. Any child named “Carina” by tough, Chinese-American emigrant parents was not going to have an easy time of it. Carina’s other sisters, three of them, had among them a husband, a high-powered career, an education from one of the Claremont colleges. Carina herself had graduated from Georgetown’s school of foreign studies. Her year in Prague was her one deep breath before she dove back into law school, some other professional school, or
perhaps marriage to the fellow she’d met and more or less committed to during her last year at Georgetown. She’d helped build houses for Habitat for Humanity, worked with inner city kids (she was fluent in Spanish), worked in homeless shelters and old-age hostels. All the things I couldn’t do for the same reason I wouldn’t go to Auschwitz. I knew my limits, or thought I did.

When Carina and I moved into our ministry flat, we found to our delight that we each had our own room, airy, high-ceilinged, longer than they were wide, with nondescript linoleum for floors, but each room had six-foot tall windows that opened onto the narrow confines of Velehradská Street five floors below. Our across-the-street neighbors could see into our rooms as clearly as we could see into theirs, but we had the requisite white lace Czech curtains for the daylit hours and thicker mustard-colored drapes for evening. But we had that most cherished of essential things--privacy. We’d spent our first month in a dorm room so small we could put our hands out and touch the edge of one another’s couch-beds when we lay down to sleep. Again, we had day beds rather than real beds, but we had our own rooms. I hung my Leibowitz photo of Magic Johnson on the wall above my bed first, then taped up my poster of Havel’s presidential portrait on the wall opposite. Carina giggled when she saw my choices. She’d hung a poster for a black-and-white photo exhibit at one of the Castle galleries, that and her hand-lettered sheets of
Czech verb conjugations. I got my Chatham poster, "Summer Thunderstorm," up and I was home. Carina added a color poster of Klimt's "The Kiss." The next morning I got up to find her copy of Havel posted in the bathroom. We had our own water closet and bathroom in the flat—a true luxury—even if we did have to share a small icebox with the rotating occupants of three other flats. The icebox stayed in its own small room near the lift.

Carina's the one started the running joke about "Bathing with the President." My obsession with Havel tickled her. As a scholar, she read everything I had by Havel, and we'd argue up one side and down the other about his apparent sense of relativity. How could he claim he was "living in truth," Carina demanded to know, when he was a married man who openly had other women? I didn't try to explain this lapse. Carina's a young woman who believes in the sanctity of monogamy. I hope she doesn't have to modify that belief to live her own life in the future. For the most part, though, she admired Havel as much as I did—for his insistence in keeping ideals physically present in a world afflicted with situational ethics. Havel chose not to participate in the subjugation of his country by communists. For that, as most people know, he got by as best he could, practicing his profession, writing plays though they could not be performed in his home theatres, speaking his heart even when it landed him in prison, testifying in public even if got him elected
president of a country whose political and economic fate is still not a sure thing. He has said what he thought was right, what was wrong, and has taken the physical and metaphysical consequences of his thoughts and actions in public and in private.

Besides, he’s got that grin, the one that pulls up the left side of his mustache, sets the light clear behind his blue eyes.
And I think it's about forgiveness.

—Don Henley

Prague is a palimpsest. Scrape away one layer of acid rain dried to a cracked chemical film and you might find a plaster statue of a heroic worker in the best of all social realist poses, arm upraised in a gesture of honest labor, then discover the Art Deco flourishes of the turn-of-the-century pedestal the worker’s sensibly shod feet rest on. Make your way to the Letna Plain above the Vltava and you find the flat stone base for one of the largest statues of Stalin ever raised up in Central Europe. Now empty, the dirty gray pedestal is layered with graffiti in six or seven languages—my favorite being the traditionally misspelled—"PUNK'S NOT DEAD." Or, in late April, if you happened to be in the Smíchov district of Prague in Soviet Tankists’ Square you would have seen a palimpsest in progress, a footnote to history being etched indelibly in lovely pink paint.

On 28 April 1991, a twenty-three-year-old avant-garde artist gave the citizens of Prague an artifact no one could overlook. David Černý picked that Sunday to conduct his "happening." The use of that word, dated as it is in the States, illustrates Czechoslovakia’s cultural dilemma neatly.
The last free exchange of cultural, intellectual, and general hoohah knowledge between Czechoslovakia and the rest of the West before 1989’s Velvet Revolution took place in the summer of 1968. Prague itself was caught in that cultural time-warp. Hence, Černy’s “happening.” By late April of 1991, after a celebrated and formal showing of Andy Warhol’s silk-screen graphic portraits at the National Gallery and the much ballyhooed Rolling Stones tour stop the previous August— “Tanks are rolling out, the Stones are rolling in”—such a “happening” made perfect, even predictable sense. Around five o’clock on the morning of the twenty-eighth, Černy, a student at Prague’s Academy of Fine Arts, showed up in Soviet Tankists’ Square. He brought with him a group of fellow artists, carefully forged permission papers from City Hall, material to make papier-mâché, and many gallons of light pink paint. In the cold, early spring light, Černy and his friends, the self-proclaimed “Neostunners,” mounted the three-meter-high stone plinth in the square and painted the Soviet no. 23 memorial tank with a thin wash of pink paint. To make sure their gesture would be clearly understood, they added an oversized replica of a middle finger pointing upward to crown the cupola of the newly pinded tank.

The police arrived around 6:45, and Černy thoughtfully presented them with a sheaf of phony documents properly stamped and notarized, giving Černy and the Neostunners permission to make their graphic statement about the machines
of war in general and this tank in particular. Number twenty-three is said, by legend, to have been the first Soviet tank to reach Prague in 1945, freeing Prague from the Nazis. Number twenty-three is, in fact, a tank of 1950s vintage installed after the pre-arranged Soviet liberation of Prague. American tanks, under the command of General George Patton, could have gotten to Prague much earlier on an eastward sweep, but Stalin cut a deal with Roosevelt and Churchill that prevented American ground forces reaching farther east than Plzeň. And, in a good many contemporary Czechoslovak minds, Soviet tanks are identified with the fraternal exercise conducted by the Warsaw Pact powers in the summer invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. So Černý and his Neostunners painted no. 23 a light, iridescent pink and then crowned their work with the quintessential American gesture of defiance and disdain.

I knew something serious had happened when I found myself upright in bed, Carina's hand locked on my ankle, demanding I dress and go out with her. Dress? In what? Who died? And where the hell were we going before noon in Prague on a Sunday, the day the city remained quiet, its public thoroughfares deserted. Most people were still outside the city at their country "cottages"--tiny shacks on dwarf plots of ground where they grew most of the fresh fruit and vegetables that saw them through the long Central European winters.
Carina flashed her well-maintained white teeth at me—her father is a dentist in Los Angeles—and said, "Get up. Get going. If it's not worth your lost beauty sleep, I'll do your laundry."

That did it. In April of 1991 not a single self-service coin-operated laundry could be found in Prague. Living, as we did, on three thousand crowns a month—a median income worth about eighty U.S. dollars—we got by as most middle-class Czechs did, hand-washing our clothes, leaving jeans, shirts, and undergarments to dry on thin clotheslines suspended above the large plastic sink that passes itself off as a bathtub in our government-issue flat. If nothing else, I'd get my socks scrubbed for free. I got up, dressed, and let Carina march me down Ondrickova Street to the no. 9 tram stop. Since it was Sunday, the trams ran on the half-hour, not the weekday schedule of every ten minutes or so. And, it being late April, at that northern latitude the sun had barely cleared the tall row of shops and housing estates that boxed in Olšanské Square.

Carina did a jig in her long, black overcoat, reciting for my amusement the Roethke poem she was memorizing. I'd introduced her to contemporary American poets and novelists. In return, as a graduate of Georgetown's foreign studies program, Carina gave me the short course in late-twentieth-century European history. So I knew the saga of the USSR's loss of the East Bloc, courtesy of Carina's storytelling and
a quick reading of Timothy Garton Ash’s *The Magic Lantern* and *Disturbing the Peace*, by Václav Havel. Reading Havel’s book, I discovered it had been translated by Paul Wilson, a Canadian writer, a friend I’d made two years before at the MacDowell Artists’ Colony in New Hampshire.

Carina could recite “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Bob Wrigley’s “Moon in a Mason Jar,” and Dick Hugo’s “Distances.” She spent that Sunday morning regaling me with a lascivious rendition of Theodore Roethke’s “The Waking.” I tried hard not to crack a smile and so ruin my reputation of being an early morning bitch of the first water, but I lost it when she hit, “God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,/And learn by going where I have to go.” The dour Czechs around us frowned at such a display of frivolous and incomprehensible behavior in a public place conducted not only in a foreign language but with much relish.

The tram, the only one in Prague painted British Airways gray, not the regulation red and yellow, screeched to a halt at our stop, blue electrical sparks showering down from the dirty cables sagging overhead. Carina herded me on, making sure I punched my green cloth-textured tick. She had her own monthly tram pass. The only time I was ever checked by transit police, either on trams or the metro, was when I traveled with Carina. Her dark Oriental skin and crow-black hair attracted the attentions of Czech males. With my light
brown hair, wide cheekbones, and dark, drab clothes, I could pass for Czech as long as I kept my mouth shut and remembered not to smile at strangers. My few phrases of Czech came out garbled, mangled by a Texas accent. Carina did nicely with her toneless pidgin Czech and high-tech southern Californian smile.

From Olšanské náměstí, the no. 9 tram headed through the Žižkov working-class district of Prague on to Nove Mesto, New Town, by way of Vodičkova Street. As always, I gaped at the progression and regression of architecture ranging from the Art Deco flourishes of late-nineteenth-century apartment buildings crammed in next to the disintegrating façades of twentieth-century socialist housing estates. Prague’s is a ruined beauty, no surface left blank for long.

Once past Hlvaní nádraží—main train station—the no. 9 tram banged its way to the Jindřišská stop. St. Jindřišská’s Chapel, St. Henry’s Chapel, finished in A.D. 1348, stood on a cramped lot on the left side of the tram. A block of palace buildings and a clock tower of the proximate vintage stood across the street, the clock tower mostly unchanged, the long block of stone palace buildings now housing one auto parts shop, a fishing tackle shop, and several abandoned store fronts. Free enterprise and freefall capitalism had not yet yielded tangible dividends to the emerging Czech entrepreneurial class. The Czech currency, the crown, was still
not freely convertible, and Western business interests were leery of investing in a state still operating under the patchwork Communist constitution.

From Jindřichovická, no. 9 banged up through the middle of Wenceslas Square, where the current prince of the city, Václav Havel, presided over much of the public theatre that made up Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution in November and December 1989. More a long, wide boulevard than a true square, Václavské náměstí had held more than one hundred thousand Czechoslovak citizens in those days of freezing drizzle. They stood, stamping their feet, clapping, cheering exuberantly whenever Havel took a turn at the microphones set up on the balcony of the Svoboda publishing house. In a gesture no political pundit or historian has yet to explain, those one hundred thousand plus freezing, ecstatic citizens pulled their key rings from their pockets and let that tinny music form the background against which the blue, white, and red tricolor flags of their country whipped back and forth in the wet air.

Number nine pushed on, across the Vltava river to Smíchov náměstí and Soviet Tankists’ Square. That morning I was surprised to see people crowded at the edges of the square. Then I got my first glimpse of something pink. Pink? Carina started giggling behind me.

We got off the tram and pushed our way through what turned out to be a loosely packed crowd of smoking, drinking,
laughing Czechoslovak citizens. Not that it was unusual to see folks drinking beer in the morning from green and brown pint glass bottles of Prasdroj and Pilsner beer. To spend an enjoyable late Sunday morning or afternoon was as simple as finding which of the obcestevni (hot food) stands would be open for business on the borders of the Olsany cemetery. I had my own favorite on the south side of the large municipal cemetery. The older Czech gentleman who sold beer out of the tin-roofed building actually kept a case of bottles just inside the back door so that the beer was often cool. Not cold, mind you. Czechs don’t drink cold beer, but this gentleman’s stock tasted of the cool green air to be found under the tall trees of the well-kept cemetery.

The crowd around the tank was festive. Half a dozen kids in faded black, gamy clothes circled around a fellow with a six-string guitar yodeling out John Lennon’s anti-war anthem, “Give Peace a Chance.” It almost sounded like English. Older people circulated in two’s and three’s, bunching up to laugh or mutter one sentence after another in rapid-fire Czech. Two older gentlemen dressed in faded blue workers’ coveralls and jackets scowled at the well-tended flowerbeds and smoked rank Sparta cigarettes. Mostly, people looked up at the tank, the thin pink paint drying, the stink of latex in the cool morning air.

Carina and I said nothing. I watched people stare and point at Carina, heard them mutter, “Č inské,”—Chinese—when
she walked past. She gave no sign she heard, kept moving, smiling at me now and then. We made our way through the crowd then circled to the tram stop as more and more camera flashes went off, fixing the tank's pink light onto the emulsion of high-speed film.

We rode the no. 9 tram back across the Vltava to the National Theatre, where we got off and headed north on Smetanová nábřeží to get to Charles Bridge. The bridge, now closed to all but pedestrian traffic, had been built by King Charles the Fourth, Holy Roman Emperor. Tall, ornate towers marked either end of it. Statues of assorted saints, martyrs, bishops, Christ, and the Virgin Mary lined the bridge at ten-meter intervals. Now, in the spirit of free trade, vendors of everything from lace collars to Bohemian crystal to the latest in heavy metal studded jewelry set up card tables and sold their wares to German, French, Italian, Canadian, British, and American tourists whose pockets bulged with nonexchangeable Czech crowns.

Carina and I marched to the middle point of the bridge. She came to an abrupt stop just past St. John of Nepomuk, the spot where the good bishop was thrown from the bridge on the orders of Václav IV. The bishop had refused to break the seal of the confessional and reveal to the king what the queen had confessed to him. The good saint cradles a graphic crucifix in his left arm. Carina looked up, past the finely drawn figure of an emaciated crucified Christ and began to giggle.
Such a thing made me understandably nervous. It was Sunday, after all.

"Was that worth getting out of bed for?" she asked, nodding back up the river in the direction of Soviet Tankists' Square.

"It was a tank, right? And pink? And it had that finger?"

"Yes," she said, and we both burst out laughing, then jumped up to exchange one of the clumsiest high-fives ever attempted. The lace vendor two saints down looked up and scowled. We laughed harder.

David Černý was quickly arrested and charged with "hooliganism" under paragraph 202 of the patchwork, still mostly communist constitution Mr. Havel's government found itself operating under. This same paragraph was the law used to jail Havel himself as late as September of 1989. The minister for national defense offered an apology to the Soviet generals arriving in Prague for traditional May Day celebrations. The tank was divested of its offensive digit and repainted a more somber and appropriate martial green. The Soviet generals, mostly World War II veterans, drank vodka toasts to their former and fallen comrades and left the city.

Carina and I wondered what the equivalent gesture in the United States might be. Paint the Washington Monument pink?
Crown the local WWI doughboy statue in Elwood Park back home with early May lilacs? There was no equivalent gesture. Our country had not been invaded in recent historical memory. Not the continent anyway. We had not ever had to listen with our breath stuck in our throats, our ears ringing, straining to hear the first clank of tank treads or rumble of low-flying aircraft.

David Černý suffered from and benefited by the spotlight of sudden notoriety. He gave interviews, saying “art should consist of conflict,” and sold what pieces he had at prices of Warholian splendor. Why not? The joke might have passed, relegated to a long and intricate legal debate even as the country’s constitution was being rewritten had it not been for the second band of merry pranksters.

On May 17, a group of fifteen members of the Czecho-slovak Federal Parliament took the matter into their own hands. Jiří Ruml directed this group of former dissidents dressed in blue coveralls with “FS” stenciled on the back, identifying them as members of the Federal Parliament and hence immune to prosecution under civil law, to the fresh, green no. 23 tank in Smíchov. Armed with new paintbrushes and pails of thick, lustrous paint, they repinked the gleaming tank. They did it, they said, to protest Černý’s arrest, declaring that the notorious paragraph 202 should never be abused again.
Carina and I once again went on pilgrimage to inspect the deputies’ work. The tank glowed in early summer’s pollen-laden air. White and purple lilacs perfumed the grainy brown haze from coal burnt for heat, the aroma of sausages grilled over open fires, and centuries of beer spilled on Prague’s cobble-bricked streets. The paint, a better quality than Černy and his Neostunners could afford, smelled of garlic. Carina sneezed twice in rapid succession. She always did. I waited for the second sneeze before I said, “God bless you.” She laughed.

“They really slathered it on, didn’t they?” she said.

The tank would make a fine contribution to the deep pinks and faint purples that graced each day’s lengthening dusk in Prague.

“Government money,” I said and sidled upwind of the garlic-scented paint. My sinuses expanded and contracted, my eyes filled with salt-stinging tears. “Damn. I wonder what Havel thinks of all this?”

Carina shook her head and watched a thin knot of teenagers light each others’ cigarettes. We both started for the tram stop.

On 7 October 1989, a photograph of Havel had appeared in the communist paper of record, Rude Pravo, with the caption, “Ferdinand Vánek of Maly Hradek celebrated his birthday on 5 October, 1989. His fellow workers and friends thank him for
the hard work he has done and continues to do in his life and to wish him good health and further success in his work in the years to come." Since Havel was persona non grata in the eyes of the then-legal communist government his well-wishers used "Ferdinand Vánek," the name Havel gave to his character in a cycle of three plays he says are the most blatantly autobiographical in his body of work. "Vánek" is listed as a more formal diminutive of "Václav," Havel's given name—my surname. Ferdinand is a passive character, a fellow who provokes those around him to sometimes absurd, self-justifying behavior.

After members of parliament repinked the tank, I sent off a letter to Paul. Publicly, President Havel had chided the pranksters, asking why they didn't act to change paragraph 202 legally rather than break the law. Paul wrote that private citizen Havel may well have relished the prank, but public citizen Havel had little choice but to rebuke the pranksters. That assessment made sense despite its being less than satisfying.

To dampen the controversy, tank no. 23, still glowingly pink, was removed from its paint-spattered pedestal and sent to an obscure military museum, presumably to be repainted a proper camouflage green once again and stand as a symbol somewhere safe behind a glass-enclosed display. The stone
plinth in Smiď ěov stands as empty as the base for Stalin’s statue on the Letna Plain.

My last day in country, August 21, was the twenty-third anniversary of Czechoslovakia’s invasion by Warsaw Pact powers in 1968. I woke much too early, even considering all I had to get done that last day. Out of habit and with a sense of dread, I switched on the FM radio tuned to the BBC World News and its hourly broadcasts. These, plus the International Guardian and the International Herald Tribune, were my only sources of news, though I was finally beginning to understand a Czech phrase, maybe even an entire sentence of Czech if the words were spoken clearly and slowly, a rare occurrence. And that day, ironically, was the day tanks were reported in the streets of Moscow. Gorbachev had already been said to be too ill to continue in the execution of his duties.

Late August in Prague had been hot, muggy—typical summer weather. That day turned off cool enough I wore my navy blue pullover sweater on my errands around town. The Czechoslovak Army was said to have mobilized men and tanks to reinforce Slovakia’s common border with the Soviet republic of the Ukraine. This report could neither be confirmed nor denied by the BBC offices in London. President Havel returned early from a summer holiday, where he had, it turned out, written a series of essays on the nationalist tendencies threatening to break up the federal union of the Czech lands.
and Slovakia. This collection of essays also examines the nature of power and how it changes those suddenly exposed to it.

On that cool day in August, I walked the city, shooting the only roll of photographs I would take home from my year-long stay in Prague. I got a shot of the empty pedestal in Smíchov, one of the National Museum of Bohemia at the top of Václavské náměstí, taken close enough to the building that I could plainly see the white-pocked craters left in the graying stone by bullets from the Soviet tanks in 1968. Bats still escaped nightly through the empty glass frames. The communists hadn’t been able to correctly replace the glass in the museum’s cupola towers, not even in a country renowned the world over for its glass products.

At three that afternoon, I bought papers from the same two young men who had sold me papers every day I lived in Prague. Their English was better than my Czech. Looking around the bottom of Václavské náměstí, I picked a spot under a lamppost in front of the Obcanske Forum building where Czech TV broadcasters had built a stand for their cameras. At four o’clock O.F. invited any interested Czechoslovak citizens to attend a rally in support of Gorbachev and Yeltsin against the hard-line Soviet communists who had seized power, declared a national state of emergency, and set tanks loose in the streets of Moscow itself.
All day long, everywhere I walked, from Staroměstské náměstí, Old Town Square, to Malástranské náměstí, across Charles Bridge, I saw people watching television sets in shop windows or listening to radios tuned to news stations. All day long, I heard, sometimes for the first time, bits of Czech that made sudden sense. Yeltsin was seen outside the parliament building, the Russian White House. Havel told his people not to panic, the Czechoslovak borders were secure. Large blue helicopters ferried back and forth from the airport to Hradčany, Prague Castle, all day long. I watched them from Charles Bridge, saw the vendors checking with one another, dialing around the radio bands, listening to Czech broadcasts, BBC broadcasts in English, Voice of American broadcasts, and even news bulletins in French on Europa 2, the pop station.

Rumor had it President Havel might show up at the “Support Gorbachev/Yeltsin” rally conducted from the balcony of the O.F. building. I got there early, staked out my spot, and read newspapers until the cool summer sun began to lose heat. The rally finally began as the sun slid toward the tops of the buildings. Being near the front of the loosely packed crowd, I couldn’t tell how many people had gathered around and behind me. In front of me, people stood with enough room to turn easily or walk back and forth in front of one another. All the buildings at the bottom of the square had open windows full of people. It wasn’t until Jan Urban, an
O.F. deputy and master of ceremonies of sorts, mentioned Havel’s name that I began to realize how large the accumulated crowd really was. Those of us at the front clapped, hooted, and hollered what sounded like "Ahzhee Havelle," long life to Havel, until our hands were too sore to clap any more, our throats to dry and raw to continue the chant. The cry washed back over me with the sound of a violent cloud-burst of summer rain on a high mountain reservoir. Goose flesh rippled my skin. I shook once from the top of my ringing head to the bottoms of my throbbing feet. “Long life to Havel,” in Czech, rang over and over again from the stone walls of the tall buildings enclosing the bottom of the square.

It took fifteen minutes to die down. News photographers wedged in the tall windows of the O.F. building looked out at the crowd in almost gap-mouthed wonder. An older man to my right raised a huge American flag with a press release photo of George Bush pinned to it and pulled the heavy flag back and forth in the cool air. The photographers risked the shallow, flimsy edges of the open windows to focus on the man and flag. He was gray-headed, dressed in plain clothing. I stared at the flag, thinking it didn’t quite look right. The flag had forty-eight stars, some of them less than regularly spaced. It was home-made, perhaps of a 1945 vintage.

For every five or six Czech tricolor flags I saw, I spotted one American stars and stripes. I just stood there
and shook, unable to scrub the goose flesh off my arms. Jan Urban interrupted one of the speakers. Urban was smiling, pleased, glancing down at a scrap of paper in his hand. The square went nearly quiet. Urban announced, in a rush of Czech I had little trouble understanding, that President Havel had received word that the Soviet tanks were withdrawing from the streets of Moscow and Gorbachev was—. The last of the sentence I lost when the crowd broke out in cheers of "Long life to Havel," with occasional shouts of long life for Gorbachev and Yeltsin too. The tanks, though, were leaving the streets of Moscow. I was certain of that much. Soviet soldiers had refused to fire on their own countrymen and women. The tanks were returning to barracks.

The rally continued on into early evening. I walked down Narodni Street, the same route the students had tried to take to reach Václavské náměstí on 17 November 1989, to protest against the then-legal communist government. That crowd of students was bottled up by security police forces, then herded into half a block of the street well short of Jungmannovo náměstí, crowded under the arcade of one of the buildings. Once the students were trapped, the security police waded in with thick, plastic batons and riot gear, and beat the students through a narrow gauntlet that was their only means of escape. That bloody incident started what came to be called the Velvet Revolution, remarkable for its lack
of violence and its lack of retaliatory vengeance once the communist regime fell.

I lingered long enough in the arcade to take a quick snapshot of the bronze plaque of hands held up, the palms open and empty, with the date 17.11.89 under them. The walls and sidewalk around the plaque were scorched black from the thousands of votive candles burned there in the past year and a half. No one had replastered the arcade walls a pristine white.

Though the thick pinks and deepening purples of true dusk had settled over the Vltava, I walked down Smetanovo nábřeží to Charles Bridge. Three different but equally large circles of young and middle-aged people sprawled out around three guitar players. I picked my way through the first crowd listening to what, to my ear, sounded like classical music. The second circle of people, kids mainly, sang along with "Massachusetts." The third circle, the one nearest the middle of the bridge where I was headed, joined the middle-aged guitarist singing about Neil Young's miner searching for a heart of gold. I found St. John of Nepomuk and watched the last of the light leach up into the bluing night.

When the spotlights began to click on, lighting Hradčany and St. Nicholas Cathedral in Malostranské náměstí, I straightened up in the now-cold air and walked stiffly over the cobbled stones back across the bridge, the people singing different tunes, most drinking from pint bottles of Pilsner

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and Prasdroj, to the no. 9 tram stop in front of the National Theatre. It was an unseasonably cold night in Prague. There would be fog before dawn. I know. I watched the dark change into light, listening to the trams whack and clang up and down the tracks on Vinohradská every half-hour.

At midnight I watched the BBC World News and saw Soviet tanks clanking full speed out of Moscow. Jack Thompson, the commentator, smiled at the conclusion of the broadcast. So did I.

It’s traditional to go to the Jewish cemetery, write a wish on a small scrap of paper, then wedge it into the cracks of Rabbi Löw’s tombstone. Rabbi Löw was the Jewish elder said to have created the Golem, a Frankenstein-like figure to protect the Jewish ghetto. The good rabbi removed the creature’s animating wafer each day at dusk. One day the rabbi forgot, and the Golem went on a rampage and had to be destroyed.

I did not make such a wish or go through such a ritual. I spent my last outdoor hours watching the dark waters of the Vltava flow under the arch of Charles Bridge presided over by St. John of Nepomuk, one of the patron saints of Bohemia. If you look in the Prague phone book, when you can find one, you’ll see any number of Váneks listed. No Ferdinand Vánek, though. I assume he celebrated his birthday in early October of 1991. Havel’s new book of essays, Summer Meditations, is being translated into English by my good friend and tour
guide, Paul Wilson. Carina and I promised each other to meet in Prague in 1996. Right now, I’m safe in the deep heart of a Montana winter. Paul still writes to catch me up on what’s happening in Prague, and I still dream, occasionally, of Tank no. 23 in its full pink splendor against the hazy May sky, the air around it ripe, redolent with the scent of white and purple lilacs.
Let it go—I took a deep breath, stepped out of the fluorescent shadows of the flat’s carport, and turned left up Velehradská, determined to make it down to the Vltava River, half the city away from my Ž iž kov neighborhood. Dumb, dumb, dumb, as it was two in the morning on a Sunday. I was crazy with grief-for-no-reason. Something had to happen, and I needed to see the city with clear eyes, with no one watching me watching them.

Ž iž kov is known as a “working-class district” in all the Western guidebooks, which translates: nothing to see or buy and you might get mugged. No one had bothered me in the seven months I’d lived there. Of course I did keep my head down, wore plain clothes, and remembered most of the time not to smile at strangers, damn sure not to greet them. If I opened my mouth to try out my halting Czech, I gave myself dead away as an American.

The early morning air was cool, a relief from the muggy weight of the long July day. Not a real summer heat, more like something you could wash off your skin with strong Czech soap at the end of the day. I wrapped up in a used black
topcoat, flipped the thin velvet collar up, and walked as if I knew where I was going.

Walking through the electric light that passes for dark in that city at night—listening to the occasional thump of tires as a single car or truck raced through the intersection just below the National Museum—had me humming with expectation. The hisses and shrieks of trains switched through the rail yard at Hlvaní nádraž í, Main Station, the tracks lit with the flat pink of halogen lights. In a moment of sudden quiet, the buzz and high hum of the floodlights illuminated the cupolas of the National Museum at the top of Wenceslas Square. The holes left from machine-gun bullets fired from Soviet tanks in 1968 show up white against the pollution-darkened façade. I stood with my back to St. Václav’s equestrian statue, “under the horse’s tail,” where guidebooks tell you the natives make assignations. Who’s to say?

In the blue shadows, I remembered the night I walked around the mission grounds of the Alamo with my parents. The place glowed, seemed to float in and out of the bright white shadows the lights created. I had walked up to the scored wooden doors, put my finger in the round holes punched into the mission walls by the bullets of Santa Anna’s soldiers. History made by invaders of a sovereign republic. Texas is the only state to enter the Union by renouncing its status as an independent country, one of the few places in the
continental United States that has suffered invasion and
driven the invaders back across a border won through treaty
and stupid bloodmindedness. Part of the reason Texas is
neither Southern nor Western, is simply Texan, is that a
sovereign republic, in a moment of political machination,
gave up what it had earned through blood and imagination. Its
future citizens found themselves stranded in a new country
where they had to learn to draw the borderlines to keep them
and theirs safe.

My year in Prague I did not touch another person. That’s not
to say my words didn’t draw up a shiver or two from the
people I talked to. I touched buildings, handrails on
bridges, stairs winding up the interior of church bell
towers, flattened my palm on the rough pitted surfaces of
statues, cathedral stones, dipped cold fingers in holy water
founts in Prague and Krakow. I shook hands with the people I
met, Ivan Klíma and Ludvík Vaculík, writers whose words still
ring in my dreams, but I did not touch another person. Which
is strange for me, as I am affectionate by nature, have been
known to wrap up people in hugs that leave them short of
breath, their ribs aching. Why that distance for an entire
year? I had nothing to give them. No real reassurance, for
that’s what touch is, isn’t it? A moment of trust, if not
hope, in the certainty that things will turn out to have
meaning.
Why? For fear of leaving part of myself there? That fear was taken from me the moment I looked up from the backs of all the heads in front of me that day in Václavské náměsti, waiting for Bush and Havel to speak to the crowd on the second anniversary of the beginning of the Velvet Revolution, hearing Dire Straits on the sound system booming out “Once Upon a Time in the West.” I looked up into the gray sky at the low, wet clouds hovering above the crowd that didn’t care about the rain that might fall, watched my breath frost on the air, watched a large stars-and-stripes being whipped slowly back and forth, the heavy cloth of the homemade flag stirring the thick air. The flag didn’t look right. I counted the stars. Forty-eight. How long had the bearer had that flag, where had he kept it these past forty years?

The two presidents showed up two hours late. The crowd thickened to chest-to-back density. It was the first time I had difficulty drawing a clean breath in a public place. Helicopters surged over the heads of the people pushing forward. Sirens sounded. Men with guns leaned over the edge of the buildings lining Václavské náměsti. I nearly tripped, but was kept moving anyway. That old terror—lack of distance, of not being able to see—shook me. A low growl swelled into a cheer of “Long life to Havel,” “Long life to Bush.”

President Bush gave the Czechs a small replica of the Liberty Bell. The Czechs sang “The Battle Hymn of the
Republic” in English, then came a long pause and the first lines of their national anthem, “Where is my home? Where is my home?” That much Czech I knew.

I made it to the Vltava River that early Sunday morning. In the low, gray light, the river ran almost quiet under Charles Bridge. The white, crusted rim of a stagnant pool under the near archway scuttled shallow against the blackened stone. Pea gravel crunched under my tennis shoes. That instant was the most foreign of moments for me—standing above black water running deep through a city breathing in its sleep, the long exhale of trams on all-night schedules, nothing but the occasional thump of a delivery truck or VB patrol car rolling through the cobbled streets. The summer had been cold, the air a gumbo of car exhaust, stones sweating through another century of beer spilled, sausages fried, bodies washed on a European schedule. That morning on the bridge there was only clean air, a green air the river gave off. The same aroma I could find under wild plum trees back home on the Texas Panhandle. Dislocated in time on the fourteenth-century bridge, shivering in late summer, wondering how the hell I’d make it back across the city, I let my own small past go.

Made a deal with the saint depicted in the statue above me. St. John of Nepomuk, the patron saint of Bohemia, lost his life on Charles Bridge. Good King Wenceslas’ retainers pitched him into the river when he refused to tell the king
what his queen had revealed to her confessor under the seal of the confessional. Seven stars reportedly appeared above his head as he sank under the water. Seven gold stars in a worn iron mesh mark the halo crowning the statue of the good saint. St. John of Nepomuk is the patron saint of secrets kept, of absolution. Put your finger in any of the small indentations on the bridge’s edge, make a wish, and the good saint will grant it—if you keep your wish a secret. I had no secrets worth much to anyone but me, only a growing sense of guilt at no history but one found on a Sunday morning in Amarillo, Texas, standing half-asleep, leaning from one foot to the next, warming my backside with the heat from an open grate on a gas stove. I was six that morning. My great-grandmother gave me my first cup of coffee, more warm milk and sugar than any real dose of caffeine. And, though I was well and healthy, she set a brown prescription bottle beside my china saucer. I’d been reading for a year by then. On the bottle was my first name and a strange last name, foreign, too many consonants, the last one a "k," making that name a word to be spit out. My name, she told me, my real father’s name, from a country whose name she didn’t try to say. She handed me a plate with the picture of a factory and a famous American general on it, “Plzeň, Czechoslovakia, May 1945.” Who was this father? What did he look like? He left no photos behind. Those came years later from his sister in Michigan to me in Prague. So, that early Sunday morning, I wedged my
fingertips onto the cold stone and asked to come back, to find what I was leaving there, what I was supposed to take home, as soon as I found out where home was to be.
In April, when the prairie greens up, my mother and I tease each other about looking good for death. Living in Amarillo, Texas, on the Cap Rock of the High Plains means living twelve or so miles from Pantex, the Department of Defense plant that is the final assembly and disassembly point for my country’s nuclear bombs. In the fields surrounding the plant, farmers grow winter wheat and milo but not much corn. At nearly four thousand feet above sea level, Amarillo is too high for corn. A short growing season of one hundred ninety-five days complicates things. And, like most other natives up here, the farmers prefer a clean shot of horizon so they can see what might be coming for them over home ground. Then again, the prime value of living at ground zero is that we will not ever know what hit us, will not be able to dread what we have no say in. All we will see, if we see anything, is the first burst of light heated beyond incandescence that will, in turn, ignite the world’s largest known supply of helium trapped in the Mesozoic rock beneath us. As fire rushes through the porous fissures of calcareous rock, the Panhandle of Texas will become one big Roman candle. Knowing all that
lends a certain doomsday frenzy or stolid indifference to the average Panhandle native’s spirit.

The bombs couldn’t care less. Unlike the Comanches after Colonel MacKenzie slaughtered their pony herd in Palo Duro Canyon, the A-bomb and all its attendant bombs is passive in its resistance to the campaign waged by Peace Farm Tenants camped outside its gates each summer. Bishop Leroy Matthieson developed an ecumenical vigor in his dissent against the Pantex plant in 1981. In 1968, I was an eighth-grade student to the then Monsignor Matthieson at Alamo Catholic High School. The name fit the school’s perpetual financial dilemma. Monsignor Matthieson taught my reading class such novels as Animal Farm, 1984, The Grapes of Wrath, and Brave New World. He spoke well while warning us about how we should interpret and/or trust any figure of authority’s public statements.

In 1981, as bishop, he issued a parish encyclical directing those Catholics employed at Pantex to question the morality of their work and to resign if their consciences so directed them. In Amarillo, Pantex was one of the few major employers where persons of color and women could get a high-paying, relatively secure job. Few Pantex workers resigned. Attendance at Sunday Mass all over the Panhandle fell off. Bishop Matthieson made 60 Minutes.
I have not ever slept well. My insomnia has been diagnosed as everything from a chemical imbalance to a bad case of nerves. This final time Dr. John told me I had Graves' Disease. The tumor growing on my thyroid wrapped itself around my voice box so closely that the surgeons refused to cut on me. A radiologist and an endocrinologist decided between the two of them that I should swallow two ounces of radioactive salt-water to dissolve the tumor. Stupid with Inderal, designed to calm my arrhythmic heartbeat, I agreed.

Dr. John directed my parents and me through gray doors in the hospital basement with yellow and red "Danger--Radioactive" warning stickers on them. A technician dressed in a long lead apron that bumped against his shins pointed at me with a white glove and said I should follow him. He pushed at a door, which opened for me with a hiss. Pulling the other glove on, he tapped his surgical cap to make sure his hair was covered. From a metal sink, he reached both his gloved hands around a dark gray gritty metal square with a regular hospital drinking straw kinked at the right angle for drinking. I reached for the straw. He said, no, put your hands behind your back, lean over, and drink the water. I leaned forward and sucked up what tasted like sun-warmed seawater.

The nuclear cocktail dissolved the tumor and part of my thyroid gland. The blocked space in my throat cleared. I could swallow easily and fill my lungs with one deep breath.
I take small blue pills every morning now, and I haven't heard any glow-in-the-dark jokes for a while.

Three weeks after I joined the ranks of the nuclear-medicated, my daddy left town for Corpus Christi to see about a used ground-spraying rig. My mother and I stayed up late to watch a new talk show David Letterman had started for NBC. Local television signed off with sudden static as Letterman said good-night. Maybe the abrupt conclusion was part of the new show's acerbic style. We waited for the usual flag-waving, jets-flying patriotic message that the local channel signed off the air with. Nothing--only the dirty snow of televised static. We flipped through the other three channels, looking for something to ease our insomnia, found nothing but the same static. Even Channel 7's Art Deco station signal was absent. January was the wrong month for electrical storms. Besides, it was a warm night for mid-winter on the Panhandle. We switched the radio on and found the same auditory static. The lights all through the house worked. No power outage. We couldn't figure out what had happened.

Mom opened the back gate enclosing the small patio. That's when we saw it. A low pink glow blanketed the horizon northeast of us. Mom thought the Phillips 66 plant gasoline storage tanks in Dumas forty-eight miles away had exploded. I reminded her that Dumas is northwest of Amarillo. This deep
pink glow pulsed and seemed to push itself higher into the
dark sky of that moonless night with each beat. It had turned
out almost warm for a January night.

Mom called the Potter County Sheriff’s department. Or
she tried to call. When she finally got a busy signal, I
stopped praying. On the third or fourth try she reached them.
She listened with the phone tucked between her chin and
shoulder. She relayed his words to me. “The deputy says the
glow wasn’t anywhere near Pantex. It’s the Phillips 66 plant
in Borger, not Dumas. Lost two natural gas wells and eight
storage tanks.” Mom put the phone down. “Where the hell’s
Orson Welles when we need him?” she asked, laughing. I got
twenty-five dollars for a poem I wrote about that night—“A
Hometown Prayer.”

I left home for graduate school in Denton, Texas, only
twenty-eight miles from Fort Worth, with Carswell Air Force
Base and the home offices of General Dynamics. Not exactly
Ground Zero, but still listed on that year’s Top Ten Soviet
Hit Parade. I had the twitch.

Summer of 1989, I went home to work for my daddy. I watched
the sky east of the house and shop until I finally had to go
for myself. I drove over to Pantex by way of State Highway
136. To get there, I left the house on Farm to Market Road
1719, clearly marked as a “Hazardous Cargo Route.” I started
out just as the bottom edge of the fat summer sun touched the
western horizon. The prairie had turned off green in late August with two whole days of rain. Cool seeped up with the twilight. Blackened yucca swayed above bunches of cheat grass grown up through the saw grasses and cattle-cropped blue and hairy grama grasses. The evening light worked its way from yellow to soft orange to reds that bled into grape and violet blue. Mesquite trees, stunted as they were, threw long shadows that ran through the double rows of high chain link fence topped by razor-edged barbed wire circling the Pantex plant.

From the road, I couldn't see all that much. Long, low buildings looked as though they could house any commercial activity. On the prairie where the Defense Department had once grown wheat lay the tombs. Everyone, from nuclear activists to Pantex officials to the anonymous, colorless voice of government documents, calls these storage facilities the tombs. Pantex, besides being the final assembly plant for the bombs, is also the disassembly point. Old bombs are shipped there to be deactivated, taken apart, their redundant parts stored in the earthen structures. The Llano Estacado, the Staked or Stockaded Plains, so named by Coronado in 1541, has lived up to its name.

I pulled over to see just what would happen. The truck's engine was still pinging down in the cool evening air when an unmarked car pulled up behind me and flashed a spotlight on me. I got out of the truck—an old habit from driving with
people who drink alcohol in a dry county—and the security officer asked me to stop. I did. He kept his hand on the butt of his pistol, its draw-flap unsnapped, until he got close enough to see I was a young woman in shorts and a Lakers t-shirt, unarmed. He was polite but firm about my moving on, speaking in the same twang I did. I left, glancing back at the long, orderly rows of barrows in my rearview mirror.

I live in Montana now, more than fourteen hundred miles from any ground zero that is native to me. I pay taxes here and I have Montana license plates on my car. It’s April. Back home in Texas, the prairie is greening up early this year. Mom calls me once or twice or a week to tell how many semi-trucks—no “Explosives” stickers or “Hazardous Cargo” warnings on the side panels—have driven down the road in front of the house. Leading and trailing these trucks are plain white station wagons with six or seven long aerials bent back over the car bodies. We laugh about the “peace dividend” now that the Soviet Union is no more. And Mom makes wisecracks about how honest our new president is with the general tax-paying public about just what strategic services we are offering the new Russian Republic. Mom has voted Republican ever since I can remember. She asks me, “What are you thinking about these days, Mary Catheryne? What are you writing about?” I tell her, “Living at ground zero.” She says, “Well, keep your nose in the wind, your butt down”—
same as she always has, living there on the Panhandle all these years. We’re in it, she thinks, for the duration now.
Works Cited


