
MORGAN'S VOICE



POEMS & STORIES

MORGAN SEGAL

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Morgan Segal

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The gift of sharing so intimately in Morgan's life, through her prose and poetry, is one all will commit to their hearts. Here are remembrances, emotionally inspired, of personal journeys through a landscape of experience that has been both tranquil and turbulent. Her poems are "pearls dancing," shimmering like her own life in an all too brief sunlight; her stories portraits, at times fragile, at times triumphant in their will to witness lasting humaness. She is truly a talent and a presence too soon lost.

-James Ragan, Poet
Director, Professional Writing Program
University of Southern California

Morgan possessed a rare and beautiful soul. Those wide brown eyes of hers shone forth with a child's curiosity and innocence. But her heart was the heart of woman who was haunted by unfathomable darkness.

Morgan's words are infused with depth, wisdom, honesty, courage and insight. Her descriptions reveal the intense thirst she had for even the most mundane aspects of life -- a fingernail, the scale of a fish, a grandfather's breath, a strand of hair. The attention she pays to details can help us to return to our lives with a renewed reverence for all the subtle miracles that surround us each moment. Although Morgan's life has come to a tragic end, her voice lives on as a source of eternal inspiration.

-Rabbi Naomi Levy

Dedication

Morgan often spoke of her need for a voice of her own. To this end she devoted six years to intense therapy, never feeling that her goal was accomplished. She wrote all the while, mostly for herself. This book that so clearly speaks in a unique voice that is hers is dedicated to those who think they have no voice. Take heart, never give up -- your longing to speak is the assurance that you have something very important to say.

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-Jeanne and Robert Segal

Introduction

Leslie Sue Segal was born on September 28, 1967. Her aunt, an artist, always said Leslie reminded her of a Byzantine mosaic with her large luminous eyes with heavy lids made more prominent by thin fair skin and the exquisite delicacy of her nose and mouth.

She was a quiet child, a model child, who, in hindsight, was often overlooked as we met the needs of her older brother and younger sister. She took the role of peacemaker, a caring witness rarely insisting that her needs come first. Though shy, she had close friends who were creative and curious and who loved her. Leslie's gentle selfless ways inspired love, especially from her father, her grandparents and her dog Honey.

Junior and senior-high school were socially difficult for Leslie who lagged behind in her physical development. She reached puberty late and it wasn't until her nineteenth year that her little girl silhouette became that of a tall curvaceous woman. In high-school she first found her voice as a writer for the school paper and yearbook staff. Journalism would be her major in college.

Leslie chose to go to the University of California at Santa Barbara considered by many "a party school". Perhaps, the choice reflected her need to catch up socially. The high point of her early college years were the trips she took. First was an intern semester program in Washington, D.C. where she worked for the Latino Congressional Caucus. The position reflected her love of Latin people and their language. A year later she participated in the Semester at Sea program where she traveled around the world visiting a dozen countries. The following summer she backpacked throughout Eastern Europe with a girlfriend. Leslie lost her shyness in the role of traveler and adventurer. These travels also afforded her the opportunity to

begin to take extraordinarily intimate photographs of young and old people around the world. This focus on the human condition is reflected in all her writings.

Leslie returned for her senior year empowered and high on her adventures but something happened and she was unable to maintain her energy and momentum. Something lay heavy on her heart. She began drinking more at parties and attempting to control her weight in unhealthy ways. She became uncharacteristically irritable. We interpreted the change in temperament as a late adolescence.

After graduating, Leslie returned to Santa Monica and worked for a year in the family business. She then enrolled in a masters degree program in psychology at Pepperdine University. Recognizing her lack of self-confidence, Leslie also began therapy. She changed her name to Morgan -- "woman of the sea" -- in an attempt to wash away the qualities that her old name "Leslie" had come to represent. Therapy seemed to provide her with the rationale she needed to explain her anger. Then, after a painfully disappointing love affair, she began taking anti-depressant medication.

A summer's work with emotionally disturbed children led Morgan to feel that psychology was not the career for her. Her call was as a writer. She began attending writing classes. Just two classes short of a masters in psychology, Morgan abruptly left for New York and another masters degree program in creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College.

The year in New York fed Morgan's sensibility as a writer but was emotionally turbulent. By the time she returned to Los Angeles a year later, she was on a combination of anti-psychotic as well as anti-depressant medications. She became increasingly intellectual and impersonal; old relationships became strained and she made few new friends. Morgan's stories and poems continued to focus on intimate portraits that contained elements of humor absent from her own life. Morgan applied for and was accepted in a masters level creative

writing program at USC. She was a feature writer for the Daily Trojan and a literary magazine called Rapport.

Increasingly, Morgan isolated herself from people and activities that had brought her pleasure in the past. More medications were prescribed. When nothing else seemed to have meaning, she persisted in writing stories and poems. All of the poems and many of the stories published here were written in the last year of her life. Her poem “One” was written very close to the time of her death.

On October 12, 1996 Morgan (Leslie) Segal ended her life with an overdose of the medications meant to heal her.

Later, when the time came to pack up her apartment, we found that her laptop computer held several hundred entries — stories and poems in progressive drafts. We believe many had never been seen by anyone else before. We were inspired as we read this very personal work. As a tribute to Morgan, we created an event where twenty of her stories and poems were read. This produced such an outpouring of appreciation that we were motivated to produce this book. We hope that you the reader will be similarly moved by the depth of her compassion and the penetrating clarity of her observations.

Jeanne and Robert Segal

Make-Believe

She was one of the Oddie kids, the youngest of five girls, vigorously independent and unwieldy. The sisters were feared by the other kids on the block because it was believed they practiced witchcraft. They were often seen meandering in alleyways, befriending stray dogs and collecting unwanted trash.

They would leave home early in the morning and return late at night pushing squeaky shopping carts loaded with dried leaves and flowers, twigs and branches, speckled eggshells, cracked aquariums, and lost pets. Rumor had it that the dried leaves, flowers, twigs and branches — along with rat's tails and dead birds — were then brewed in a large black cauldron that hung in their fireplace.

Before I knew Cybele, I used to hold my breath when I walked past their house, fearful of breathing in the shadowy smoke that crawled out of the chimney.

If by chance Cybele played with us, she was endlessly changing the rules to old games or inventing new ones. No one objected to her inclusion in our street play, despite this constant (and quite often tiresome) re-making of rules. Although slightly undersized compared with most of the kids her age, Cybele's will magnified her somehow in the presence of other children.

With stringy brown hair in self-cut bangs which rode an inch and a half above her brow and bright green eyes that never closed, Cybele was a force to be reckoned with. She always wore the same chocolate-colored pants that hung high above her ankles, drawing attention to her tar-black feet.

She was certainly the fastest kid on the block, faster than the boys — an unbeatable player in touch tag. When Cybele was chasing one of us, we knew there was no escape. She was an over-charged

battery — flapping her elbows in the air and spinning her legs madly. When she caught you, she wouldn't just grab you but would yank your hair, pull you down to the ground and tickle you until you cried out for mercy.

Sometimes, if she felt you didn't run hard enough, she'd clamp her fingers around your wrists and spit on your face. I'd close my eyes and stiffen my muscles until she was done. At bedtime, nestled in the warmth of my feathered bed, I'd cry.

Summer days then were long, unending. By the time mid-afternoon rolled around, the sun had burned through the clouds and the next couple hours were a bright, warm haze. Our moods were most transparent at this time of day, the sun's glare taking our shadows. We'd lie on the wettest lawn we could find with our backs to the sun and suck on a handful of sweet grass. Our imaginations would move beyond our hot, tired bodies and soar in dreams. Cybele's dreams were by far the most entertaining. She chose colorful and evocative words that illustrated her love of animals and desire to become a vet. I would be mesmerized by her tales, by the readiness of her words to evoke a feeling.

Sometimes the bright sun would awaken our slumbering shadows, lightening the darker area of our lives. One ordinary afternoon, the sunlight crept into a shaded area of my life.

Cybele and I were at Christina's house. Christina, a tall, plump Hungarian girl, lived directly behind my house. A high, overgrown ivy hedge separated the two yards. We spent many afternoons with Christina so that Cybele could scale that hedge.

"Just climb over," she'd barked when she was over it herself.

"But I hear rats scurrying inside," I said.

"Rats don't live in ivy! I just said that so your sister wouldn't follow us," she snapped impatiently.

"Are Christina's dogs on a leash?" I asked to delay the climb.

"They're chained to the fence! If you ask me another question, I'm going in the house," she threatened.

"No, please don't leave yet. I'll climb over."

I looked at the tangled nest of uncut branches and sharp bark hidden in a mass of dark, spaded leaves. I grabbed a protruding branch, coated with dirt and leaves so it felt slimy in my palm. I let go.

"You're too slow! I'm going in the house," Cybele yelled.

"No, wait, just one more minute," I begged.

I gripped another branch, my face an inch from the forested wall. I could see snails on twigs, enjoying the damp interior of the vine. I climbed faster, then hoisted my leg over the top of the hedge. My cheeks were flushed and wet with tears as I started down.

"About time!" Cybele said, lying on a pile of newspaper and twirling a strand of her shoe-string hair. Christina was sitting next to her silently, plump legs on the newspaper.

I wanted to ask Cybele to help me the rest of the way down. My arms were scratched. One felt like it was bleeding. I knew if I looked at it I would start to bawl and I didn't want to show defeat in front of her.

When I landed on the ground, they didn't lose a second of playtime, jumping off the newspapers.

"Let's pretend like we're alligators and forage for food in the swamp," Cybele said, making it off the papers and into the fresh mud below where the sprinklers were turned on.

Christina followed at Cybele's heels.

"Come on, Leslie," Cybele yelled, scooping up a handful of mud and throwing it. "Stop it!" I said, whimpering and protecting my face with my hands. Still, pebbled soil stung my cheek.

"Don't be afraid of a little dirt! It won't bite you!" Cybele yelled.

I took a couple steps forward, my feet sinking into the mud. It felt cool and slippery between my toes. The air above was hot and stiff, locking me in an inferno of observation. I watched Christina's whale of a body roll around in the swamp. Blubbery folds kissed the soil as Cybele stretched her lips over a sprinkler head and her cheeks ballooned with water. She slid her lips off the sprinkler cap, water dribbling out the corners of her mouth. Then she clapped her hands

against her chipmunk cheeks, hurling the water drugged with saliva at Christina.

Then a thunderous voice bellowed, 'head's up!' and what felt like a two-ton tractor plowed me over. A second later I was lying face down in the swamp.

"Don't be a crybaby," Cybele ordered. I remember staring up at her, my tears melting the icy sheath that secured my world. I plunged into deeper waters, swimming beyond the buoy that marked the entrance into the underworld of the sea. I searched longingly into her eyes, past the silvery flecks of light dancing on the surface of her solid green eyes. I searched for understanding and for sympathy. I opened my heart to her, widening my vision by showing her my pain, and, magically, I surrendered to her witnessing. I was no longer watching Cybele, but I was with her. I was crying in front of her, asking her for concern, desiring affection.

"It's about time you fell in the mud," she said, blinking, as if to turn off the mood that still lingered in the air.

"I didn't exactly fall," I retaliated, armed with self-preservation.

"Well, it doesn't matter how you landed in the dirt. The point is you're there, so dry your eyes and roll around in the mess," she said, eager to leave the convalescent ward and return to the alligator swamp.

I had no objections. I would have preferred not to have been shoved into the mud, but to have stretched my arms over my head and dived in on my own. But who's to say that would have happened? I leaned my neck back against the ground and unearthed the dirt, caking my hair in the mud.

I looked over at Cybele and laughed out loud at how silly she looked. Her stringy, lifeless hair was now matted with dirt. She looked like a Disney caricature, her narrow face disappearing in an unruly black wig. What you could see of her face looked as if it had been smudged with charcoal. Her emerald green eyes burned with life against all the black.

“What’s so funny?” she asked, shaking her head like a wet seal.

“You!” I said, happy to be out of my gloomy concentration with myself.



Fishing With Grandpa

Somewhere on the edge of nowhere in Los Angeles a marooned grocery market still stands. Flanked by two empty lots and supported by a Colored community, an old Russian Jew is still seen totaling daily receipts by hand with a magnifying glass. He leans backward on a beaten-up vinyl swivel chair, gnawing on a number two pencil as he takes stock of his life. He spent his earlier years in the Dakotas — a trapper, a peddler and a poet — filling time with a pistol, pushcart and pen. With the outbreak of war, he recycled his energy, acting on the boom in trade. A grocer of wit and wonder, his jokes and sonnets earned him only enough capital to remain standing. Forty-two years later, still with a head for the profane, the kill of the hunt reverberates through his brain.

As a child, I'd never thought he was as harmless as did the waitress who served us at the corner Delicatessen where he would sit on the booth side of the table, smiling up at her. My brother could not eat with his mouth shut and my sister could not keep her mouth shut. I kept my mouth shut, and he never looked at me. With my crayolas, I colored for him and with my allowance I bought presents for him. I went to visit him last week, many years after those crayola days. A wave of rioting had passed through the city and I'd thought of him.

Grandpa appeared to me like a vine — glued to the ground but resonating in the wind. He had a quick temper that shook the ground beneath him, but lacked the force to make a quake line. He was a born woodsman, strapped by the fervor of the hunt and love of the wild. At dawn on any given day, grandpa would tickle my chin with his whiskers and we'd follow the rising sun with a bucket of black

worms and our fishing poles to the panacea of blue and white wonder that was the lake. The line of division between the sky and the water disappeared with the last of the Oak and Eucalyptus trees. Grandpa would roll up his trousers and I'd slip off my knee-highs, scouting out a peninsula with an overturned tree to make home on. Together on the log, Grandpa and I would watch the sun burn off the fog and drop it into the lake. Grandpa would amass my simple observations into a fable for all seasons. Out of the woods and away from the land, we watched the water ripple and I pretended the breath of the sky was kissing my skin.

With one foot on the ground and the other on the log, he'd slide a rusty hook into a slippery slug.

"V'ytgadal...Amen," I heard him mumble.

He dropped the line into the lake and handed me the pole — all without removing his eyes from the horizon.

"Did you go to school with the Rabbi?" I asked, wondering if I too spoke words that sounded strange to him.

Dropping his line into the water, he climbed over the fallen limb.

"You ask good questions," he said. "Bass and trout swim in the same school, like old men who share the same heritage," he continued.

"Is a heritage what Dad eats on Sunday mornings with bagels and cream cheese?" I asked.

His eyes rolled in off the water like the early morning haze. He squeezed me.

"Your Dad eats herring. A heritage is an inheritance of language, of practice, of belief - all the ingredients of ourselves that bake into our personhood," he said.

"Since I don't understand the funny sounds, I must not swim in the same school," I said, feeling as if we were sitting on opposite ends of the log.

He lowered his pole between his legs and hugged me.

"Hopefully the school you swim in will have improved. There will be less hate and prejudice where you are being taught," he said.

A swan floated on the surface of the water, bathing her feathers in the sun. The surface of the water was as smooth and pure as crystal. I gripped the back of the log and leaned forward — letting my imagination fall into the blue abyss. Dizzied by a rush of impulse and panic, I stroked the curves of the sea clouds and felt the crawfish wrapped in buttery seaweed. I watched myself peel off my clothes and jump into the cold, frightening the little minnows biting at the bait on our lines. Numb and stiff, I circled my limbs to heat my blood, slipping deeper into the sea. Underneath the watery mist I swam with the larger fish, blowing bubbles and making waves to send off communication. I had arrived someplace big — someplace far away from guppies and goldfish.

Back on the log I felt a tug on my fishing line. “It’s a bite! It’s a bite!” I squealed, pulling at the pole.

“Give me the line!” my grandfather screeched. “The fish has to be yanked from the water at precisely the right moment.”

A 5-pound trout skimmed the surface of the water and flew out over our heads to land in the pail of worms.

“The moment came and went!” I hooted, jumping up to admire my catch.

“You caught a *bedlam*,” my grandfather shuddered, closing the roundest, greenest eyes I had ever seen. The fish thrashed its tail among the worms, not ready to admit to being caught.

“The fish is dying grandpa,” I moaned, watching the moonshine of his scales fade. I bent down to be closer to the fish, surprised by the humanness of his wiggling body. I looked up, dazed by the bright sky.

“It’s too late. The trout will die in or out of the water,” my grandfather said.

In a high voice I asked, “Will you recite the Rabbi’s prayer?”

Reaching for my hand he pulled me to my feet and clasped his hands under my chin. I listened to his chest rise and fall with air as he breathed his own life into the words. The melody of the psalm floated on the water like light bark. I looked past the trout back into the woods, to the calm I had depended on. Air seeped from the

stiffening trout and its gills drew less blood. I reached my hands up around my grandfather's neck. With my face to the sky, my head up against his heart, I heard him say, "With death, we pass into life." His voice was low and lyrical.

I walked to the lakes edge to pull our fishing lines out of the water. "Grandpa!" I screamed, my voice echoing across the lake.

Nearly tripping over the log to get to me, he said, "The fish won't invite us back if you carry on like that."

Pulling back on his pole, I said, "You had a bite." I stared at the size of the trout thrashing on the shore. Holding hands above our captive, Grandpa started to recite the Rabbi's prayer, "V'Yitgadal . . ."

I wanted my own private eulogy for the trout to be a flattering one. I wanted to sing a hymn that celebrates life underwater. I wanted to pretend like the years below the water deserved a memorial. I knew, though, that the trout could never return to the lake to swim in and out of plants or in a school with others. The trout had eaten my grandfather's bait, somersaulting up toward death. I looked out on the illuminated water and closed my eyes, turning my back on what I sort of knew. I opened my eyes as my grandfather slid his hand from mine. The trout had contracted its body for the last time and lay motionless at our feet.

My body felt taller and lovelier than it had in months, my limbs strong and ready for work. My grandfather and I fastened a prong inside the mouth of each trout, hooking them to our belts. With my pole over my shoulder and my catch at my side, I reached for my grandfather's hand.

"Let's go home, Pappy."



Pablo and The Painted Eggs

On Saturday I drove into a part of town where I don't normally venture. From Santa Monica I took the Pomona Freeway to Whittier Boulevard and entered an area of greater Los Angeles where hubcaps are missing from cars and graffiti is splattered across storefronts. The billboards were in Spanish and English and the crowded take-outs advertised *pupusas* and *tamales*. I drove slowly with the doors locked and the windows rolled up — watching the traffic from all sides of my head. I found Lorena Avenue, then Guirado Street and then Inez Road and parked on a hill overlooking splintered rooftops. A bouquet of pink and blue balloons was tied to the gate in front of 3222 Inez and children in party dresses and sailor suits were chasing each other round the yard. Mariachi music echoed from the porch where adults were talking loud and cheerfully. The women wore their church clothes, so I felt at ease in my the floral dress. I stood at the bottom of the porch steps with Valerie's gift under my arm and waited to be noticed.

"Allison" Rosa exclaimed. Her sharp black eyes were directly on me.

I smiled shyly, touching my flushed cheeks. I knew that any sound I made would come out throaty.

"I didn't expect to see you here," she said.

"Is it okay? I wanted to see you...and Melba, too," I said, lowering my eyes.

"Of course it's okay! I'm just surprised," she said. She took the present I was holding and put it on top of a heap of brightly wrapped packages. A girl in a red velvet party dress was clutching the edge of the table to peer at all the gifts.

"Have you met Valerie?" Rosa asked, smoothing the girl's silky hair with her fingers.

"No," I said, watching Valerie pull a bow off a present with small, pudgy hands. She stuck the bow on my knee and squealed delightedly.

"I'm not one of your presents," I said, crowning her with the bow.

"Now I have to give myself to someone," she said, touching the bow sticking to her hair.

"Or you have to unwrap yourself," I said. Valerie looked at Rosa and me. Her dark, penetrating eyes were full of puzzlement. She turned back to the gifts on the table, sliding sticky, punch-stained hands across the boxes. Then she took the bow off her head and ran off excitedly to join the other children playing musical chairs on the front lawn. There were five children walking around four chairs. Instead of walking behind a boy in blue-and-white striped coveralls, Valerie decided to start her own circle and walked beside him. When the music stopped, she was further away from the chairs and was left standing. She rubbed her eyes with balled fists and waited for the music to start again.

"She won't give up," Rosa said, watching Valerie move a little closer to the chairs.

"I don't think Valerie's playing to win. I think she's playing to learn," I said. The music stopped and again Valerie was left standing. She looked up at the porch at all the gifts on the table and stayed where she was. I wanted to run down and explain to her that she'd continue to feel left out as long as she played outside the circle.

But, instead, I sat down on a folding chair against a tall, rambling wall of ivy. The leaves were as big as my hand and when a breeze passed they tickled my neck. I was sitting next to Rosa's mother, Marguerite, a much more somber woman than her daughter. She'd just recently come back from El Salvador and often her eyes would fill with tears. Her skin was thick and dark from laboring on cotton and coffee plantations but, when she spoke of her country, it was gently, of the aquamarine sea and exotic fruit trees. Closing her eyes, she recalled the sensation of her bare feet against damp cellar floors

built deep into the earth. I could almost taste the corn as she told me how she ground it in a clay pot with a stone.

"Marguerite, will you tell me more about the boy who raised hens to sell eggs in your village?" I said.

"Pablo is no longer a boy," she replied. "Pablo is a strapping young man with shoulders as wide as an ox cart."

"Is he still selling magic eggs in the village?"

Marguerite nodded. She was still for a minute. Her eyes were closed so that she might be in a light sleep, her thick black lashes resting on her cheeks. When she opened her eyes, her pupils had expanded and I could see my reflection. Slowly, like a seer, Marguerite spoke: "Pablo is selling eggs as we speak. I see him in a booth at the entrance of the village bazaar. He is painting scenes of village life on the clean white eggs. On one egg, mustachioed soldiers are marching in a national parade, their stripes and medals dazzling the country people. On another egg, a romantic poet is sitting on the edge of a pier, wiggling his toes in cold lake water, serenading a swan. On yet another egg, a group of revolutionaries are at an outdoor cafe, arguing madly and passionately about what it is to be free."

Marguerite paused, clasping her hands in prayer. "Pablo is less troubled now," she whispered.

"How do you know he's less troubled?" I asked.

"The scenes on the eggs depict a town that is no longer in siege. The battle is over and now a manifesto of peace has to be written," she said.

"Will Pablo paint this manifesto on the eggs?" I asked.

Marguerite nodded, miles away from the little house in East Los Angeles. She took the pins from her tightly braided bun and her silvered hair spilled over her shoulders. She loosened the scarf around her neck and fanned herself with a paper plate.

"Pablo used to tell me I should defy the hot weather and wear my hair down. He said I had the prettiest hair he'd ever seen, and I should let men look at it," she said.

She shut her eyes for a moment and the red in her chestnut skin deepened around her neck and upper arms. When she opened her eyes for a second, I thought I saw her shiver with rapture.

“Marguerite!” I said, bewildered. “Pablo is young enough to be your son.”

Marguerite looked down at her body. Her breasts swelled beneath her dress and wide hips flattered her small waist. “Pablo suffered from a kind of interminable sadness. He never saw the fruit trees blooming; their boughs always drooped and wept in the sun for him. He would paint the fruit trees in back of my house without ever looking up from his easel. What he saw was inside him. With Pablo I was pure and radiant and soft...”

She paused, biting down on her lip. “I had no idea he'd fall in love with me.”

In a tone reserved for lovers she added, “I miss him.”



Tree People

A sturdy tree stretched her shapely neck upward. A perfumed white mist partially clouded her foliage. Violet petaled her branches, dressing her in summery radiance.

I was entranced with her communication with the wind. I'd watch her bow her head to the winter chill and later lift her chin to the furnaced sky. She could also hear the wooded whispers and see the desert smoke. In her presence the tumbling sky rocked the earth, murmuring a lullaby. The heavens slid refracted light along a chute of chance, pulling the unstated over the projector. Beside her, I smelled the salty sea air and dipped my toes into the moist soil.

I would shinny up her trunk, hugging her solid body. My fingers clutched her damp bark, skinning splinters as I inched upward. She would sway patiently when I stopped for a rest, her leaves playfully tickling my neck. If I dawdled for too long, a vine would wrap around my waist.

I hugged harder and reached higher. A series of branches forked from the trunk of her body, each mounting the billowy breeze that led to nowhere. I opted for a flat, wide branch drizzling moss. I swung my leg around the slippery bough, digging my chin into the sprouting fuzz as I hoisted my body on top of the limb. An icy wind blew up my spine as I lifted my eyes from the bough and scanned the ground below. I was higher than rock and dust, nestled in a cloud of mist. Tingling vapors cleaned away the lust, calling on the magic.

"There's no hurry, child. Rest your cheek on the soft moss and we'll begin your training on the morrow," spoke the lilting voice.

A priestess draped in folds of pale green silk faced me.

"Who are you?" I quivered.

"I am a healer — a seamstress of sorts. I mend tears in the human spirit," her voice echoed.

I shivered. An early evening breeze shook the tree.

"Why are you here?" I said faintly.

"Why are *you* here?" she asked, her voice reminding me of a Pachelbel melody.

"I have nowhere else to go," I whispered. I felt feverish. My cheeks were burning with shame.

"You have come back to the crib, to a fruitful tree to be embedded in early memory. The future is buried in the roots of the tree. We will descend the tree together. When we reach the ground, you will be ready to travel alone," she comforted.

"Sliding down the trunk of the tree is easy," I said, "I just wrap my limbs around her body and hold on. I don't need a helper to hook my arms and legs together. I appreciate your offer, fair lady, but I can manage on my own."

"Come, scoot a little closer to me," she said. In a twinkle, silver netting flapped behind her and she was floating two inches above the branch. The netting appeared to be attached to her shoulder blades and beat rapidly against the wind.

"Not everyone learns to fly," she murmured, folding her wings behind her as she returned to her perch.

"What must I do?" I stuttered.

"You must learn to whistle in tune to the rhythms of your body and the rhythms of the land," she instructed me.

"I don't know how to whistle," I said. The sun was melting into the mountains — yellow, orange and red wax dripping down pointed peaks.

"Before you whistle, before you fly, you must hear beyond the whirl of the wind, sharpening your senses so that you hear the faint call of the Monarch butterfly. You cannot miss a beat of the softest-souled creatures. Your gift will lie in your ability to mute out noise and listen to stillness."

I shifted on the branch, stretching my legs behind me.

"Where does the magic live?" I asked.

She cupped her hands over her mouth and chirped into the wind. A spotted sparrow flew behind her ear, kissing her quickly. We

watched the flight of the mother bird as she lifted her young with her beak, returning it to a nest of other pink, hairless fledglings.

I clapped my hands, delighted with the trick.

“More magic!” I called, forgetting that dusk curtained the world in sleep.

My mentor brought her fingers to her lips. “In order for my next trick to work, you have to believe in the outcome,” she said. “Are you a champion of magic?” she asked.

“I ... I am a champion,” I stuttered, terrified of her holy green eyes.

“Good...” she said.

“You will adopt the magic of the tree in no time.” A nightingale glided through the night air, gently landing on my shoulder. I turned my head and an evening lark clipped my lips with his young, soft beak. The nightingale fluttered away as the muted cry of a coyote traavailed through ripples of stillness. The cry was pillowed in calmness, in a readiness to merge with the tree. I slid my hand underneath my shirt, nearly falling off the tree with astonishment. Web-like wings protruded from my shoulder blades, flapping clumsily against the air.

I cut the force of gravity and I too floated above the tree.



Horses

Stallions galloping along a beach
hoofs pocking the sand
their mane flying like shoestring behind them —
whipping the wind
strands bending.
The sky expands
jewels slide into the atmosphere
horses travel further
their backs glistening with sweat
damp
like the sand
stretching across the continent
water tumbling back into the sea
a blanket pulled up to the neck of the coast
white caps strung out in a line
pearls dancing on a blue lake
shimmering in the sun
pounding the flanks of the horses
red-brown hair pasted to their legs
a coat — chestnut --
worn like mink on a woman's skin
a parade of horses
running through an arbor
rectangular.

Wonderful Room

Her name is Jacobina and her favorite perfume is Tea Rose. I usually see her once a week, like many of the young people with whom she's friendly. I sit on a green chair with little daisies stitched into the quilted satin. Jacobina sits across from me, perfectly composed. Her eyes are ice blue and sparkle like mountain water. Sometimes I think they see through me, know what I'm made of. I sit back in my chair, cross my legs, fidget with the hem of my skirt. I feel the intensity of her stare. I look up, meet her gaze, wonder what life was like for her when she was my age. She looks so poised.

"How have you been?" Jacobina asks, breaking the silence.

"Okay," I say. I wish I could say I was great but lately I've been feeling kind of *blah*. I'll bet Jacobina never felt *blah*. Not with her vigor. She was a dancer. A Ginger Rogers kind of gal with red hair and creamy white skin.

Rose petals, sage and books scent the room. Lavender light streams through the glass, dusting the woodwork. Ballet slippers sway with the gentle motion of Jacobina's rocking chair. I tinker with the china tea set on the glass table between us.

Jacobina spoons sugar into amber liquid, stirring slowly. Poised, she sips from a china tea cup, studying me with her sharp blue eyes. The cup chatters against the saucer to break the silence.

"Would you like a butter cookie?" she asks.

I take a cookie from a white plate trimmed in gold.

"Did Jovi make these for you?" I ask, touching a photograph on the table. The photograph is of a child with dark, inward eyes. Although the frame is dusty the eyes shine through the glass.

"No," she says, pulling a knit shawl over her shoulders. A gardenia-scented breeze brushes the lush house plants. A narcissus sways with it, painting pollen through the room. Smelling it,

Jacobina leans toward the plant. She spoons her finger into the soil, measuring the moisture.

"It is thirsty," she says, touching the petals.

"It's so healthy," I say, admiring the dark-veined leaves. A book of poetry rests on the table, unread sonnets between us. I open it, turning to a blank dedication page. Books with dusty bindings line the shelves of a floor-to-ceiling bookcase. Books stacked on top of one another fill more space. Titles of books that I have read draw me closer to Jacobina.

"Tell me again how you knew Anais Nin?" I ask.

"She lived in New York when I directed 'Day Top'," Jacobina says nostalgically, sifting through old memories. Her luminescent eyes shine like moons.

"Is that the play you staged with drug addicts?" I ask.

"Well, they were actors with drug problems," Jacobina corrects. She closes her eyes, lightly rocking. The movement matches the quiet harmony of our breath. She paces her body to and fro in her rocking chair. I help myself to another butter cookie, looking at the old movie posters on the walls. Orson Welles stands gallantly in one of the posters, his violet brown eyes romancing the room. I dip my cookie in my tea, eating like I did when I was a child. Moist and crumbly, the cookie melts on the roof of my mouth.

Jacobina sticks a sugar cube between her teeth, sipping the tea through it. Steam bathes her skin in its warmth, tinting her cheeks. She pushes the silver tray closer to me, making it easier for me to help myself to another butter cookie. I gently lean back in my chair, entranced with the dreamy eyes in Jovi's dusty photograph.

"She looks like a porcelain doll," I say.

Jacobina rests her eyes on the dark-eyed girl.

"Did I tell you what I told the nurse who put Jovi in my arms for the first time?" "No," I say.

"I told her to take this one back and bring me a prettier baby."

"Jacobina!" I exclaim. I sit up in my chair, looking from Jacobina to the photograph, wondering how she could miss beauty in her daughter's portrait.

“She grew lovelier and lovelier,” Jacabina says almost apologetically. She stared at the expressive eyes, communicating privately with them.

Two blue birds fly into the patio outside, resting on the railing. Sunlight dusts their dark feathers. I open the lid of a music box and the tune from *The Wizard of Oz* floats through the room. The yellow of the patio reminds me of the yellow brick road Dorothy started her journey on. I imagine Dorothy meeting up with the tin man in much the same way that I met up with Jacabina. On either side of the road there were stretches of prairie and we were following it to a castle. Yet in our story, Jacabina and mine, the castle was a garden.

“Do you remember your first impressions of me?” I ask, remembering how grand Jacabina appeared to me when I first met her.

Jacabina’s hands flutter to a small brooch pinning her scarf. The stones reflect, dazzle. “You just want me to flatter you,” she says.

“I won’t let you flatter me,” I giggle.

Becoming very serious, she says, “Your eyes spoke to me.”

She pours more tea into our cups, apparently thinking about it.

I sip at my tea. Warm steam rises, moistening. An antique silver candle snuffer stands on the table beside a Menorah. Two candles in it are lit, orangish-blue flames dancing in the shadows. Jacabina seems so far away from the light and the story of the Hebrews. The flame flickers, romancing the dark, as Jacabina’s stares at mine. I looked from her to the patio, to the bearded cedar trees that shrub the view. I watch the bluebirds outside preen a moment longer, thinking of Jacabina and her own self-preservation. I sip more tea, peering over the rim of the tea cup at her.

The wind stirs the leaves of the cedar tree, reminding me of the season ending. The leaves are turning a reddish-brown. I think of the naked sycamores on the East Coast and the start of school — brick and stone and long winters. No more summers on the sand, gulls floating on driftwood and painted skies. Dark melodies serenade New York City. Did Jacabina once hear them? She dips a sugar cube into

her tea and puts it on her tongue. Her blue eyes sing sweetly as the sugar melts.

“Tell me again how you used to fill the pockets of your pinafore with candy from your father's store” I say.

Jacobina leans back in her rocking chair, closing her eyes. While wax drips down the candles, she remembers living in New England during the early part of the century.

“When Papa had his back turned, I'd reach into a jar of lemon drops, hiding the hard, sugar-coated candy in my apron,” she says. Her eyes fog with memory drifting back into youth.

“Were you ever caught?” I ask, remembering my own firewalk with my mother. I'd sneak dollar bills from her wallet when she was in the other room.

Jacobina slides her thumb along the frame of Jovi's photograph. Cleaning dust from the wood, she gazes at her daughter's picture. Jovi's violet brown eyes catch her like a trance, sweeping her into the fields of her memory.

“Papa didn't pay much attention to me,” she says.



Rose

I have half an hour to practice before Rose gets here. I've had all week to learn the piece and here it is less than an hour from my lesson and I can't even play the first chord. I bang my hands down on the keys, blaming the piano for my inability to play. A cacophony reverberates through the room, as frustration knots my stomach. I drag the piano bench against the floor, not caring if I scratch it. I wish it wasn't Monday night. I wish I still had the weekend to practice.

I turn toward the window. Royal blue hangs like a backdrop behind the glass. If I look up I can see beads of light — stars — shimmering in the night. I search amongst the stars for the one that is furthest away, faint and unglimmering. I wish on that distant star; I wish for more time. I bring my gaze indoors down to the polished keys, then to my watch. If Rose is on time, she'll be here in fifteen minutes. She'll want to get started right away. I'll position my hands on the piano, study the song sheet, then breathe for a miracle. My fingers will come down on the wrong notes and I'll feel Rose squirm beside me. I can't bear her disappointment. Worse than her disappointment is the disappointment I inflict on myself.

My Mom walks by the living room on her way upstairs. I am sitting in the room's shadows — away from the light from the hallway. I hear her shoes rub against the carpeted stairs like a whisper. As she walks away from me, the melody of the song becomes ever more distant.

My mom is why I am taking music lessons and my Mom is why I'm not learning the music.

The wind howls. I stare into the dark, out onto the lawn glistening with moonlight. I watch Rose's shadowy figure come up the walkway. When she's at the front door, her features are knife-sharp, not fuzzy like they were far away. I play the first chord

of the composition, this time with precision. I prepare to play the second chord, hoping for harmony, but the keys I come down on just make noise. I look up and see Rose shiver in the evening breeze.

Rose rubs the chill off her hands as she steps into the house. She heads purposefully into the living room and I traipse behind her, not knowing where to put my anger. I'm mad at myself for agreeing to take piano lessons. I could have told my Mom that I wasn't interested. It's just that I could see her lip curl down. She frowns when I refuse her. What else would I do with this time anyway? Most nights I just lounge on my bed dreaming about a life other than the one I'm living. I dream that I'm pretty and popular. I want a boy to follow me around the playground with wet, satiny eyes. I've never told my Mom how much I want a boyfriend. She must see the yearning in my eyes. I want to tell her that piano lessons won't make me any less wanting. Piano lessons make me more wanting. I feel less and want more.

"I didn't learn the piece," I whisper as we sit down. I stare at Rose's hands which are clasped on her lap. Her hands are unmoving, like my will.

"Why don't you play as much as you know?" Rose says.

I crease open the music against the stand, studying the first couple bars of quarter notes and eighth notes. I put my hands on the keys and breathe in. Rose rests her hands peacefully on top of one another. I play in time up until the third bar, stopping to study the new set of notes. I play the music like a child who is learning to walk; my fingers waver over the key like a child's foot wavers over the ground. Rose grips the edge of the piano bench and I play a wrong note. I feel her cringe beside me and I hold my breath as I play the next note. The sound catches my gut and I look up hopelessly at Rose.

"Why haven't you been practicing?" Rose asks. Her voice is gentle, not threatening.

I shrug, bowing my head. Her kind brown eyes search my face. I probe inside myself, recalling all the times my Mom nagged me to practice. When she nags me, my whole body stiffens with resistance. When she pushes me to do something, I back away from it. I nod at

her like I agree but internally I'm at odds. My mom wants me to be a miniature of her, and I want her love. In order not to upset who she thinks I am, I move further from who I am. I say what she wants and do what she doesn't. I tell her I'm going to practice and then I don't. It's easier living in my Mom's precepts, but maybe if I stood by myself, I wouldn't be split; I'd be whole.

Rose crosses her arms over her chest, watching me. Her expression changes, her lips thin with impatience.

"You won't learn this piece unless you practice it," she says.

"I'll practice," I insist. I sound whiny, desperate, unhappy.

"Maybe we should set smaller goals."

Beams of moonlight through the window shine luminously in her eyes.

"That would help. I get frustrated on a bar and then I give up because I don't see how I'll learn the whole piece. If I can just concentrate on a bar without having to think about the rest of the piece, I'll be less likely to give up."

I look away from Rose to the lamp that clamps down on the music stand. A sweet buttery light brushes shadows off the page. I compose my fingers on the keys and start the piece. The music turns and rolls in and around me like a blanket of fog snuggling against the sea. I play through the first line as if the music is playing me. Beside me Rose's breathing is light and shallow. I start to feel good — great — and then my fingers sound dissonance. Rose holds her breath, waiting for me to play the next chord and when I do, the piano screeches.

"Why don't you start from the beginning of the second line," Rose says calmly.

Our eyes meet. Mine are apologetic and hers are forgiving. I study the musical notation of the second line, familiarizing myself with its pace and rhythm. From sight I can almost hear the melody. I wonder why only now and not a half an hour earlier the music is starting to feel like it's a part of me. It isn't the symbols that are so charged with meaning. It's the way I feel right now, with Rose, with so little of the world behind me and so much of the world in front of

me. It isn't the piano that I want to play, it's Rose who I want to know. Does she ever just stare into nothing in order to run from what's hurting her? Is she afraid of her Mom?

I reread the second line, almost humming the melody.

"Rose?" I ask shyly.

"Yes."

"What do you think about late at night when the whole house is asleep?"

I want to tell her how empty I feel under the covers as I listen to night sounds stirring around me. I listen to the wind knocking against the window, to the telephone lines snap and buzz in the bluish-black sky and to the faint cry of coyotes over the ridge. Inside I feel hollow and mute.

Rose puts her arms around me and pulls me into her. I let my face rest in the side of her neck. Her skin feels soft like a petal.

"I usually think about teaching and playing music," she says. She rocks me in her arms for a while before she continues. "I also think about my relationship."

I lift my face up so that I can see her eyes. They are staring past me, out the window into the dark. Is there hope in her field of vision? Does she look inside herself for a way or does she just do as she's told?

"I don't have a relationship," I say. The word *relationship* bumps against the sides of my mouth as I say it.

"You have some growing to do," Rose says. Her voice is soothing, as if she's remembering herself years ago.

I look away from her past, wishing I could forget my own. I wish I could start new, right now, as a star piano player. I want to play music as richly and intricately as Rose, belting out sound that shoots through every nerve of some insecure kid's body. I want someone like me who loves to watch someone like Rose traverse a spectrum of sound, stepping up and stepping down, making places. I want a place like Rose has next to a very frightened girl. I don't want to be the frightened girl, I want to be the worldly woman.

“Why don't you start again on the second line,” Rose says. She speaks in a cool professional tone, and I pull myself in from the night, nearer to her. I re-orient myself with the notes, coming down softly on the keys. I play a bar further into the composition and then my finger presses down on two keys at once. The piano moans and I slide back on the bench. I want to tear out the page of the classical Jewish music I'm playing, crumple it up and throw it at Rose. I want to play a song that's new and modern, something that was written in my lifetime. I don't want to play folklore that keeps alive a tradition that cost lives. Maybe if there was no folklore there wouldn't have been a Holocaust. Why is my grandfather always reminding me of the Jews who were incinerated in Nazi gas chambers and why do I feel like their survivor? What do all those kids in the camps who lost their lives before they'd lived them want from me? How can I somehow give back to them what was taken from them? How can I let myself live on in their ashes?

“Leslie?” Rose says softly, affectionately. Her voice rises on the second syllable of my name like she's asking a question. I can feel my grip loosen; my hands drop onto the piano bench. Rose lifts my chin with her forefinger and our eyes meet.

“I'm okay.”

I look away from her, ashamed. I have to be strong, in control of my feelings. I can't let her know that I'm hurting. I can't let her know that living with the past means living with despair and living without the past means forgetting. Jews can't forget; they're taught not to forget. Every year at Passover we remember. We remember our ancestors that were enslaved. We are taught that we are a nation because we have suffered. It hurts to be someone who is of their suffering.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Rose asks.

I shake my head. I don't really want to crumple up the page. I don't want to throw away my past. I also don't want to be only my past. I don't want to be ashes on the ground. I want to breathe memory into the future. Maybe what I'm trying to say is that I don't

want to be covered like a scar; I want to be open, and I don't want more wounds.

Rose stirs beside me, and I reposition my hands on the keys. My breathing becomes less irregular as I synchronize my mood to the timing of the music. Rose's breathing slows and for a few brief moments there is harmony between us. My lungs fill with elation, dizzying my head — and I lose the musical time. Rose coughs like there is a cold draft in the room and my chest constricts. I slam my fingers down on the keys.

“I'm *never* going to learn this dumb piece,” I say.

Rose sits up, straightening her shoulders.

“You're not going to learn it if you sulk,” she says. Her voice is cold like metal in wintry air.

I sigh loudly. I know she's right. I won't learn the piece if I'm in a mood. I don't know why I pout. I'm mad because I can't play sheet music at a glance like a virtuoso. I have to play a phrase of a composition again and again until my life and the lettering become fused. I don't want to have to put in the hours. I want it all, all at once.

Once again, I reposition my hands. I start on the third bar in from the second line. I don't have to look at my fingers. They are connected to my eyes which are reading the notes. The notes which once looked like complex eighth notes now look like simple half notes. I rest at the end of the third bar, moving onto the fourth, glimpsing a sixteenth note. I shudder as if an open window is fanning me with cold air. My diaphragm tightens as I inhale. I remember learning about the cardiovascular system in science class; that the chest cramps when it is excited. I exhale and the tightness eases. I play the chord with the sixteenth note in pitch and my chest feels like it has expanded. Rose slides her hands under her thighs to control her excitement. I am advancing and she is pleased for me. I play to the end of the second line, stop and breathe. I lean against Rose, resting my head on her shoulder as if it were a pillow.

Rose pulls away from me, angling her body so our shoulders are squared and we are facing each other.

“If you spend thirty minutes a night practicing, you’ll have this piece learned in a week.”

“Okay,” I say earnestly. I tell myself that I’m going to take the time I spend day dreaming and use it to practice the piano. Instead of making myself up in my head, I’ll show myself in songs that I play. Maybe if I really show the world how lonely I am, I won’t have to wear costumes when I’m alone. I won’t have to dress up in the pretend: I’ll be able to wear myself.

Rose wraps her shoulders in the shawl which has slipped down her back. Pieces of purple yarn stick to her black cashmere sweater. I pull a piece of yarn off the sleeve of her sweater and twist it with my fingers.

“Will you play a song?” I ask sheepishly.

She glances professionally at her wristwatch.

“I have some time before my next student,” she says. She links her fingers, turns her palms away from her, distending her arms. Her joints crack as she stretches them. I move away from the center of the keys and Rose moves in. She positions her hands so that her fingers from her thumb to her pinky fan away from Middle C. Her chest fills with air as she breathes in, numbing me with anticipation. As her fingers strike the keys, sounds jolt through my body. All of what went unsaid — the disappointment a teacher feels when a student doesn’t try — is now in every scrap of wood and metal the piano is made of. Her body rocks back and forth on the edge, infusing life into the somber blues notes she is playing.

I watch her with the awe and ache that I get from television shows about families with caring exchanges. My eyes brim with sadness, wishing my family got along like Rose’s music does. I wish I loved myself as much as Rose loves playing the piano. I want to believe in more than a sound, something God gave me because he didn’t give me me.

Rose plays the last chord softly, quietly. The sound drifts away from the piano, spreading and thinning through the house. I want to chase the sound, envelope it in my arms and push it through my body. I want the sound to pulse through me, to fill me with hope

and renewal. I listen to the music fade, curl into smoke and disappear. Rose lifts her hands off the keys, kisses me on the forehead and then bends down to pick up her shoulder bag. "I'll see you next week," she says, smoothing my bangs away from my forehead.

I watch Rose move along the brick walkway, her dark sweater becoming one with the night. When all I can see is a black canvas, I lift my tired body off the bench and make my way upstairs. I drift past my parents bedroom, into my own and fall into bed. I'm too tired to make-believe, to pretend I have a boyfriend. I wrap my arms around a pillow with blue and plum ruffles. I squeeze it into my chest, close to the part of me that feels so hollow. I don't know where to go to find comfort. I don't want to make up my life; I don't want to feel more lonely and lost than I already do. I stare out the window, sweeping the stars with my eyes. Tonight the stars are many, a panel of white, fronting all the black behind them. I want one star, one star that is by itself, that isn't afraid to be by itself.



Edith At Prayer

Edith brushed her dark ruby lips against my lips when I arrived. Her brown skin was warm and damp and her kiss tasted salty. She wore a sapphire blue dress with a low neckline and a string of saltwater pearls. She brought my hands to her high bosom and murmured a prayer. Her eyelashes were as black as coal, reminding me of the dark nights I spent curled up in her arms as a child. I remembered the fear and the loneliness and I stepped closer to her.

“Amen,” she whispered.

“It’s been a long time,” I replied, looking around the small living room. A striking photograph of a woman of Aztec lineage sat on a glass table next to the couch.

“She’s been gone six months,” Edith said, picking up the photograph and sliding her finger along the glass.

“Your mother was a beautiful woman,” I said, putting my arm around her shoulders. Edith leaned into me, resting her head against my chest. Her body was limp, like mine when she held me as a child. Edith still smelled like lilacs, and I inhaled her sweet scent.

“I miss her,” Edith said, putting the photograph back on the table.

“I miss my grandmother too,” I said, seeing again the glassy stare of lifeless blue eyes as I remembered my grandmother lying motionless in her casket, the blood drained from her once rosy cheeks. I remember bending over and kissing her pale purple lips, touching her stiff, icy skin and sensing her disappearance.

“We’ll see them again someday,” Edith mused. Her amber eyes searched the room and found a worn, leather bible to rest on. She put her arm around my waist and ushered me toward it.

Pictures of a curly haired, dark-eyed and swarthy-skinned Christ hung on all the walls. I touched the gold star around my neck, symbol of my own faith.

“It’s chilly in here,” I said.

Edith moved toward the window, the moonlight whitening her tawny skin. She pulled in the rickety window frame and moved back toward the bible.

“I want you to have this,” she said, handing me the tattered book.

“I couldn't...” I stammered.

“Why?” Edith asked, touching the yellowed pages.

Again I touched the gold star around my neck. As I felt its points, I recalled a childhood memory. I was no taller than the dining room table, a sleepy-eyed child watching her mother bless the Sabbath meal. My mother's hands were suspended over the braided *chalah* as she recited a prayer. I remember staring at the stuffed hen and potato *kugel*, watching the steam rise and cloud the chandelier as the prayers were said. I remember wondering what it all meant.

“Maria,” Edith said, rubbing my shoulders. Her hands were strong and firm, like a man's.

“I can't take the bible, Edith. I'm not Catholic,” I said, turning around to face her.

“I want the best for you,” she whispered, picking it up and bringing it to her chest.

“I have to find my own way — one that hasn't already been traveled,” I said. I put my hands around Edith's and squeezed them. She put the bible down.

“Yes, your relationship with God is your own and no one tells you which to have,” she said. Then she walked into the kitchen where Heidi and Mercedes were making tamales and rice. She sat down at the kitchen table and folded her hands in prayer.



Daffodils

Daffodils
arching their necks upward
petals billowing outward
flapping
like cotton sheets
Sunshine splashing
in waves
across a field
stems dancing
Their hips curving
like marionettes
sashaying across a stage
An atomizer of pollen
sprays of wind
Beads of light
blowing over the flowers
A horizon of daffodils
carpets the earth
a spongy mat of yellow.

Family

I stare at the little yellow daisies embroidered on Daddy's shirt. The petals are wide like my tongue when the doctor puts a popsicle stick on it to look at my tonsils. I want to pluck one of the petals off Daddy's shirt and hold it between my fingers. I press my thumb and forefinger together and squish an imaginary petal. The petal rolls and slides around on my skin leaving a trail behind it. I wipe my hands on my skirt even though, really, there isn't anything on them. My skirt edges up my thigh, showing my light blue stockings. I think of tights rolled up in little balls like cocoons in my dresser drawer. Are butterflies going to hatch from my tights and dart and spin around my room? Sometimes in the dead hot heat of summertime I sit on the lawn and watch them flap their wings as they suckle from a flower. Right now I wish it were summertime and I were outside under the wide blue sky. I don't feel like being indoors on a cold, snowy night having Shabbat with my family.

The floorboards creak as Mama enters the dining room. I hook my ankles around the legs of my chair as I wait for her to sit down. The branch of an old oak tree knocks against the side of the house. Next to me Grandpa puffs on his pipe. Smoke thins and curls away from the bowl. Mama lifts her napkin off the table and my sister slides into her chair. I watch Mama bring the rim of her wine glass to her lips. Light from the chandelier catches on her fingernails. I look down at my own hands, at my short, nubby fingers. The skin around the knuckle is scraped from playing handball. Lately I've been hitting the ball really far. I hate when we're in the middle of a game and the bell rings. Sometimes I'm tempted to keep playing even though we're supposed to head back toward the classrooms. I wonder if Mama ever broke the rules when she was my age.

I look over at Grandpa who is lighting his pipe. Holding the base still with his tobacco-smudged fingers. Light from the chandelier arcs and dips across the room. Outdoors, the wind howls like a coyote.

Dreaming on Wheels

Grace sat in the back row next to Kim. She stared up at the chalkboard, at Mrs. Fernandez writing down arithmetic problems. Math was Grace's worst subject. She still had to count on her fingers even though she was almost twelve. She looked over at Kim who was busily taking notes. Kim would probably get a perfect score on the next math test. She always did.

Kim was Grace's best friend. She lived two doors down from her in a big white house with blue shutters.

Grace followed Mrs. Fernandez as she worked out a problem on the chalkboard. She seemed to understand long division when it was being explained to her but as soon as she tried to do it on her own she froze. Many a night she'd sit at the dining room table, her math book opened in front of her, struggling to do her homework. She would attempt the problem like she was instructed, but she never got the answer that was in the back of the book. The loose-leaf notebook paper she did her homework on was practically in shreds from erasing. Eventually she'd seek out her Dad, a woebegone expression on her face, and ask him for help.

The school bell rang — a shrill clamoring that jolted the class. Students stuffed books in the cubbyholes of their desks, pushing their chairs back and jumping to their feet. Kim swung her backpack over her shoulders, her hair flying behind her as she ran to the door.

Mrs. Fernandez swung the door open and kids scrambled out into the hall. Kim was waiting for Grace by the stairs, twirling a strand of her hair around her finger.

"Want to go roller-skating when we get home? We can do our homework tonight." Kim was looking up at clouds — soft and fleecy like fresh snow on a mountain.

"Maybe we should do it first?" Grace said. Sometimes it took her two or three hours just to do a page.

"It'll be dark by the time we finish it. Let's go now."

"Okay."

"Last one home is a rotten egg," Kim said, sprinting ahead. Grace stared after Kim, watching her legs move like bicycle spokes. Grace started running, but was out of breath after only a block. She wasn't an athletic person. She always came last in races. She tried though. She could get notes from her Mom to excuse her from P.E. because she had asthma, but she didn't. She'd just slow her pace, continuing to run the track and come in last.

Kim was a block ahead of her now and Grace wanted to slow down and walk the rest of the way but she knew Kim would get impatient if she had to wait. Grace kept up a slow jog even though her lungs were burning. When she got to the house, Kim was stretched out on her stomach, picking blades of grass. Grace plopped down on the grass beside her untying her shoes and taking off her socks.

"You had a head start," Grace said.

"I know. You're not a rotten egg. It wasn't a fair race."

"I ran the whole way." Grace was proud of herself. She lay down next to Kim and looked up at the sky, watching the clouds move like boats.

Why did Kim like her so much? So many girls were dying to be in her shoes, to be Kim's best friend. Kim was an honor student, she usually got picked to be captain of athletic teams and she was awfully pretty. Grace was slow and awkward. She studied all the time but her grades were still just average. And then, too, she was chunky. Sometimes Grace wondered if Kim felt sorry for her.

"Wait till you see my new roller skates," Kim said.

"Do they have metal or rubber wheels?" Grace asked, thinking how unfair it was that Kim's toys and clothes were always newer and more expensive.

"The new rubber kind that don't make any noise when you skate on the street."

Grace had seen these in the windows of toy stores. They had big, thick rubber wheels that could go over pebbles and asphalt. Grace's

skates bumped along the street. If she hit a pebble, she was sure to fall flat on her face. She was afraid of going too fast and not being able to stop, of feeling really out of control.

“You were faster than me on your old skates. Now you’re going to be ten times faster,” she said.

“It’s not a race,” Kim said. “We’re just out there to have fun.”

“I’m going to go get my skates. Should I meet you in front of your house?”

“Yeah,” Kim said. Grace’s bare feet slapped against the pavement as she ran home. She kicked open the front door and dashed up the stairs. She reached under the bed for her skates which were worn and scuffed, the wheels barely turning. They were too small too; she had to squeeze her feet into them.

Carrying the skates, Grace ran out of the house. Kim was sitting on the sidewalk lacing up. Grace looked at her, at the golden brown hair spilling down her back, at her olive complexion. She was so pretty. After school boys would come up to Kim and ask to carry her books home. Grace felt like a lamp post at Kim’s side, a fixture that no one paid any attention to. She sat down on the sidewalk and stuffed a foot into a skate. The cement was cold against her bottom. Kim was already way down the street. Grace put on her other skate and stood up. The wheels didn’t feel like they were screwed right on the axles. She felt like she was going to fall. Once, skating with Kim, she’d scraped her knee pretty bad. A wheel had caught on an acorn and she went sprawling across the pavement. She didn’t like roller-skating much anyway. It was scary. But she wanted Kim to like her so she got up and set off after her.

“Do you want to make a choo-choo train?” Kim asked when she caught up. She looked excited, eager to play, her pale blue eyes ever so big.

“Alright,” Grace said. She put her hands on Kim’s hips, praying that Kim would go slow.

“Here we go,” Kim said, pushing off. Grace squeezed her tightly as they picked up speed, wind blowing their hair. Grace felt her legs shaking as her skates rolled over the broken sidewalk. Then, ahead,

she spotted a curb and more than anything she wanted to let go and skate onto the grass to stop herself but she held on.

They soared off the curb and somehow, miraculously, Grace landed on her feet. She was excited for a moment but then, before she knew it, there was another curb to go up. She jumped when Kim jumped, but not high enough. The toe of her skate hit the curb. Her elbow skidded across the pavement and, with the pain, tears flooded her eyes.

Kim stopped and knelt beside her, but Grace couldn't look at her. She was pissed at her for going so fast and at herself for not saying she didn't want to go skating at all. When Kim reached for her hand and tried to help her up she pulled away.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"C'mon Grace — don't be a baby!" Kim said.

Grace looked at her, hurt. Was she being a baby? That was the thing about Kim. She was always pushing ahead, doing this and doing that. She had to be busy, in motion, like a metronome — moving constantly. She never slowed down, she never stopped for a breath. All of a sudden Grace felt sorry for her, realizing that Kim *couldn't* be still.

Kim wasn't perfect after all.

Grace sat up and looked at her knee, at the blood trickling down her leg. It wasn't that bad; she'd be okay.

"You go on ahead. I'll meet you down at the school," She said.

She watched Kim skate down the block — T-shirt flapping in the wind. Then she laced up her skates tighter and stood up. She almost felt like she wasn't on skates but just on her own two feet. Rolling down the sidewalk, picking up speed, she wasn't thinking about getting her homework done. She was just enjoying the ride.

When she got to the corner she thought she'd try something fancy. Without fear, she turned her skates outward and went around in a circle. When she stopped she just stood listening to her heart pound. She couldn't wait to get to school and show Kim.

1127 El Cholo Drive

The house is a bungalow with a car port, a roll of grassy lawn and a wood shed. Sherbet-orange paint dresses the home, breaking the continuity of matching white track homes. A rope hammock is tied between the car port and the porch and a child the size of a monkey is hiding in the net. Hickory smoke, grilled onions and stewed beans trip the senses as new arrivals stumble to the front door.

A cluster of guests with dark orange skin and pearl white teeth are twisting their tongues to the double beat of the language. Salsa music comes from everywhere. Small children swing from colorful patchwork skirts, testing the strength of their lungs. Women with longer skirts and flatter shoes occasionally stoop down and grind a knuckle against a child's scalp. The child looks dolefully up at the parent before skipping away.

I swam through a current of people, coming up for air when I reached the kitchen. "Rosa," I blurted, "half of Mexico is on your front lawn!"

Clicking her teeth she said, "In my home we speak Spanish." She stepped forward and kissed my cheek, standing on her toes with the height and poise of someone who is tall.

"Where's the birthday boy?" I said quickly.

"The last time I saw him he was playing Ping-Pong," she answered, handing me a plate of white rice, refried beans and skirt steak. "There's coffee and soft drinks in the back yard. I'll join you in a minute."

I walked down a cobblestone pathway, turning sideways to pass a young couple who could not remove their eyes from each other. At the intersection of paths a grizzly, red-faced man was charbroiling — transforming limp pink meat into black, tough steaks. A sign reading 'oversized load' was taped to his back.

"Passport please!" he ordered, stepping in front of me.

"I'm on assignment," I whispered, gazing over my shoulder for spies.

"Passport please!" he repeated unwaveringly.

"You immigration officers have no sense of humor," I said, reaching into an imaginary pocket and pulling out I.D.

"This passport is expired; I can't let you into the war zone," he said grimly, putting a hand on an imaginary holster.

"Come on Oscar . . . we're not playing war games. We're celebrating Danny's birthday," I said.

"According to the American press, Mexican immigration officers receive sexual favors for passing undocumented aliens," he replied.

"I'm a foreign correspondent," I said thrusting an imaginary press card in his face.

"I love hotheaded American women," he said, wrinkling his lip into a half smile and standing on his toes to kiss me.

"Don't think I'm not going to report you to your supervisor," I said, pushing my way past him.

"Gringas!" I heard him mutter.

Stepping from the side of the house into the backyard was like leaving Baja California and entering Mexico. Aware of my alien status, I tip-toed to the end of the picnic table. Dozens of brown eyes followed me as I ripped a flour tortilla in half, swirled the contents on my plate and scooped up the slop with it. I doused the mini burrito in a bowl of peppered Salsa, stuffed the prize in my mouth and looked up at the crowd for a rating. The voice machine had resumed playing so I was left alone, gagging on a mouthful of red hot chiles.

I unscrewed a liter of coca cola and put the lip of the bottle to my mouth. Sensing a pair of young eyes on me, I leaned my head back dramatically, bringing the bottle level with my chin. As I lowered it, my eyes fell from the girl's eyes to her stomach. Even in a loosely fitted jumper her condition was evident. Receiving her cue, she approached me.

"When is it due?" I asked, patting her taut tummy.

“The doctor says in two weeks. I’m a month early,” she said, smiling. ‘Early’ was the operative word here. Fifteen seemed years early to be having a baby.

“Are you nervous?” I asked quietly, shy about such matters.

“Lately I’ve been wondering if my life is real.” she said. “I squirm under the covers when the sunlight pokes through the cracks in the blinds. I shinny down my mattress to the foot of my bed, to the entry into the dream world. I ask God to open the gates, to pedal me backward into the night air. I imagine myself in an open field with the soft, wet tongue of a friendly dog licking the chill off my face. When the tingle returns to my cheeks, I journey upward, pulled by a hand that is as large as I am,” she said softly, her eyes bathed in the moonlight of the dream.

“Tell me more about the hand,” I said.

“The hand is screwed onto my father’s wrist. The back of his hand is suntanned with patches of black fur around the knuckles, while the belly is pink and blistered. I remember him smoothing the hair off my forehead with his ulcerated hands, thinking how strange it was that I was the child and he the parent. I thought that I should be pulling the blankets up to his chin and kissing him goodnight. He worked so hard at comforting me from the creatures of the night that they were jailed in his soul. I could see them taunting him, demanding release, whenever he was close to me. I wanted to whirl plates at them, to smash their presence from our lives, but I did not know in what direction to throw,” she said.

“Did you ever see the face of one of his prisoners?” I asked, sliding the moisture on my palms along my skirt.

“Years ago we were hiking in Big Sur. The sun was directly overhead, lightening the shadows in the earth. He was in the lead, setting a quick pace with his long, efficient strides. I had to trot to keep up with him, the ground vanishing beneath me.”

“Occasionally he would stop and look through the viewfinder of his camera, allowing me to catch my breath. If I was quiet enough, he would turn around with the lens in front of his eye and scan the distance behind us. If I made a noise, he would motion for me to

scramble onto the closest rock in front of us and pose for him. That day there was a lens between us filtering out the glare. No . . . I never did see the naked face of the prisoner . . . at least not directly," she said stiffly. "I saw only his."



A Walk on the Boardwalk

Swing my long legs out of bed and stand up. Blue jays chirp outside my window. Push the window open and breathe in the smell of dogwood and forsythia. I've been longing for the weekend when I could put on my play clothes and peddle down to Canella's. Run to the closet and pull a pair of jeans off the hangar, pulling them up over my narrow hips. What time did she want me over? *Early*. Play all day under the hot sun. Bumper cars and cotton candy and Cokes with lots of ice. *Ahhhh*, summer is like heaven.

Run downstairs, slipping on the hardwood floor as I turn the corner into the kitchen. Dad is making breakfast. Flour and eggs and milk sticking to the waffle iron. Run by him barely saying 'hello.' The air smells sweet as I wheel my bicycle out of the garage. I feel free without my backpack weighing me down. Dig my hand in my pocket to make sure I have money for the pier. Three dollars for junk food and rides. Canella likes the Merry Go Round; I like the bumper cars.

I get on my bike and coast down our pink paved driveway. Single story homes with newly manicured lawns line either side of the street. I breathe in the fresh air as the wind whips my hair. Gardeners with bluish-black curls mow the lawns of homes I've passed hundreds of times on my bike. I think of how bad Canella wants to live in a house, how small her apartment is. Sometimes I wish I could trade places with her. But things are what they are and I live with a Mom who keeps me on a rein and she lives with a Dad who isn't concerned about where she goes.

Rest my foot on the curb on Montana. I can see the red roof of Canella's apartment just past the storefronts. Peddle across the street as the light flashes green. Hope Canella's Dad isn't home. Last week he left early for work. Dirty clothes littered the apartment and the ashtrays were stuffed with cigarette stubs. Canella tried to clean up.

She sprayed Lysol around the apartment but a sour, day-old smell of urine still hung in the air. She tried to act real cool but I could tell her eyes were puffy from crying.

A bus coughs exhaust in my face as it passes. Black syrup that pollutes the sky. I wish Canella's Dad knew how much his drinking hurts her. Sometimes when we're lying in bed, covers pulled up to our chins, I hear her whimper like a puppy. I think it makes her sad to see my family so close because hers is so distant.

Pull into the alley behind Canella's apartment and lock my bike to a post. Run up the stairs and knock. The door is open a crack and music floats outside. I push it open. A blanket lies in a heap at the foot of the couch. I cross my fingers, hoping he's left for work. In the kitchen Canella's hands are elbow-deep in dish water and she's dancing to the music.

"Hi," I say, surprised at her uncharacteristically good mood.

"Hi." Suds splatter on the floor as she takes her hands out of the water and reaches for a dish towel.

"Your dad must've got an early start this morning," I say, looking around the apartment. There's a pile of loose change on the coffee table and a beer can on the carpet.

"Yeah he did. But before he left he gave me ten bucks for the pier. He said he won a bet at the bar last night."

"That's cool," I say, thinking that now Canella has extra money to play the games down at the pier. She's usually flat broke and I end up sharing my allowance with her. Which I don't mind. Canella is like a sister to me and I want her to have as much as I have. We always even out our money so we both have the same amount. I usually end up taking a loss.

"You should have seen the wad of money he pulled out of his pocket this morning," Canella says. "He must've won big last night. Maybe we'll get to move into a house."

She takes Cokes out of the refrigerator and sits down at the kitchen table. She slides one across the table toward me.

"Houses cost a lot of money," I say, flipping open the tab on the Coke.

“We can move into a small house. It's just the two of us.”

I want to tell Canella that anything's possible but for some reason I don't think her Dad won enough money to buy a house. I stand up and walk toward a pile of laundry which is heaped on an armchair in the living room. I start to fold the clothes, thinking of how my Mom is always doing things to take care of me. Sometimes I wish my family could adopt Canella and give her the kind of care that she needs.

“You don't have to do that,” Canella says, taking a long, slow swig of Coke. She stares dreamily out the window, probably imagining what it would be like to live in a house with a swimming pool.

“I don't mind,” I say, folding one of her sweatshirts.

“We can catch the ten thirty bus,” Canella says, looking at the clock. I feel for change in my pocket. Remember how I stole change from my Dad's dresser. Canella's the one who taught me how to steal money from my Dad. When her Dad is dead drunk, she slips his wallet out of his back pocket and takes a few dollars. Doesn't feel guilty. Says what's his is hers.

“Can I borrow your windbreaker?” I say, looking out the window at the grey sky. Canella and I are the same height and we can wear each others clothes.

“Sure,” Canella says. I take it off the back of the armchair and put my arms through the sleeves. Canella stands up and walks out the front door. I follow her. We swing our arms as we walk down the alley, whistling a tune we learned in school. A group of boys pass us on their bicycles and Canella sticks out her chest. She's been acting really funny around boys lately. Whenever they're around she totally tunes me out. Like I don't count. I feel like I'm losing my best friend.

Wait by the bus stop. Lean against the bench and watch the cars drive by. Mesmerized by sunlight refracting off metal. Remember that Mom told me to be home by supper time. I wonder if Canella would like to spend the night. Last time she spent the night we stayed up and watched the Late Show. Canella doesn't have a big-screen TV and so all she wants to do is sit in front of the tube when she comes

over. She keeps me up real late watching late night stuff. After Canella spends a night I'm tired and listless.

Bus pulls along the curb. I follow Canella up the steps, putting my change into the bus driver's thick black palm. We sit midway down the aisle, Canella in the window seat. I listen to two old ladies talk about the weather, wondering what it would be like to be old. My grandma is eighty-five and she talks like the life she's living is an echo of the life she lived — that her real life was fifty years ago. Sometimes I feel like I haven't really started to live, that I'm waiting for my life to begin. Older girls have more fun. They know who they are. I don't know. I want to go on dates and drive a car. Who would ask me out on a date now? I have a flat chest and freckles. Maybe if I were older I'd be popular because I'd be all filled out and stuff.

“Want to spend the night?” I ask Canella.

“Sure,” she says, rolling her sleeves up. She does that when she wants my sympathy. On the inside of her arms are little pink sores that itch a lot. She says she has eczema which will go away when she starts her periods. Neither one of us has gotten ours though a lot of girls in our class already have. Mine will mark me a woman. I'll shoot up tall and then my brother won't be able to boss me around anymore.

“Maybe my Mom will rent a movie,” I say.

“That would be cool.” Canella looks out the window, a faraway look in her eyes.

As we approach Colorado, I stare out the window at the waves breaking against the pier. The bus stops and Canella and I walk down the hill that leads to the boardwalk. Canella goes to a lemonade stand while I sit on a bench and watch a young mother push a red-headed kid in a stroller. I think about how short I was with my mother this morning. I've had such a short fuse with her lately.

“Want one?” Canella calls from the lemonade stand.

I shake my head. Canella comes over and sits down next to me. I listen to her suck on an ice cube and try to remember the day we met. We were standing in line in the cafeteria when Canella turned

around and asked me if I was Francine — the girl who had a swimming pool. I told her I was and we've been best pals ever since.

Now, through a sea of people, I see a group of boys I recognize from school coming toward us on their bicycles. Canella takes her lipstick and compact out of her purse. She fusses with her hair as the guys ride toward us. My stomach tightens and I secretly hope that the guys won't stop. It isn't that I don't like boys, I just don't know how to act. My tongue gets all twisted inside my mouth and the words come out backwards. I feel like I have to perform when I'm around them. I suppose if I were really pretty like Canella it would be different. I wouldn't have to say anything. They'd just like looking at me. But my features are kind of plain and I'm chunky for my age. I back up a little so I'm standing behind Canella. I'll let her do all the talking.

"Hi girls," the leader of the pack says. He is tall and thin; reddish-brown curls frame his face.

"Hi," Canella says walking toward them, flipping hair out of her eyes. Breeze blows through my T-shirt and I shiver. I watch the waves reach for the shore, feeling really alone.

"I'm Roy," the leader says. He spits on his palm and runs his hand through his hair.

"I'm Canella."

Whenever Canella is around boys, she forgets about me. I dread the day Canella gets a boyfriend because then she's probably going to stop being my friend. She'll treat me like I'm invisible, like she did before she found out we had a swimming pool. I wish boys noticed me too because then we wouldn't have to stop being friends. We could talk about our dates together.

"Want a ride?" Roy says, getting off his bicycle so Canella can get on. Canella turns and looks at me. I shrug. She gets on the back of Roy's bike and the two of them ride off. I walk along the boardwalk kicking at the planks, feeling really sorry for myself. I know though that Canella will be back, that Roy will probably treat her like her Dad does.

I guess from now on I'm just going to have to compete with boys.

Sky

Pine-needles
Resting on the forest floor
Sparse
Like a plum
Purple
Flesh like garnets
Glittering in the desert
Sweeping wind
Hailing
Sand rising
Like rain hitting the sidewalk
Pine-needles spreading
Lattice covering the ground
Edging out
Splintering
A halo of sunshine
Rippling through eyelets in the twigs
Curving
A butterfly opens
Its wings
Swimming in an ocean of perfume.

Frog

She lay in bed listening to the rain drum against the window although rods of sunlight cut through the glass, exposing dustballs and the weariness of her life. At night she could close her eyes and wait for sleep to descend on her, to soar then on the wings of dreams. She had big dreams. Where she got them she didn't know. No one knew about her dreams. No one but Frog, her best friend, Frog.

Soon she would be out of school for good. She'd have her diploma. That was all she needed before she swung her Dad's old army bag over her shoulder and left the lower East Side for good. It was all she had of him, all he had left behind. Not even a note, an explanation. Just his absence. An absence that lived in their run down apartment like another person. Her mother wouldn't talk about him. Took his leave as a death. A death that had invaded their lives like a sore between them. Later, she'd learn that they each blamed the other, that his disappearance robbed them of their love for one another.

She kicked the covers off and sat up in bed. A radiator sizzled in the corner. Soon winter would frost the windows. She hated the way the cold blew through her thin coat, years old. Her mother didn't have the money to buy her a new one.

She thought how she could get a job like her friend, Frog, work at a Wimpy Burgers. But she had to study. School didn't come easy to her. Nothing did. Nothing just came to her on a plate like it did for kids on TV shows. She had to work for what she wanted. Out of the go-nowhere life of lower Broadway, where kids just loafed around the street bored and restless. She wanted more. Much more.

Climbing out of bed, she stubbed her toe on a nail in the floor.

"Damn," she muttered, hopping over to the bureau, not wanting to look down and see blood. Instead she looked back over her shoulder at the nail, squinting her eyes mean-like, as if she could put a curse on it.

"Are you okay?" her mother asked from the other side of the door. She'd obviously heard her swear but sounded as if she had to ask, not really wanting to. She and her mother drifted in and out of the house like borders, neither concerned with the other. Their lives were their own; each with maps to their own lands. Maps read with one legend, a legend their own history had given them. That, alone, they followed blindly.

"I'm fine Mom," she called through her teeth. She stood waiting for her mother to leave. Finally she heard the floorboards creak as her mother turned from the door. Listened to the footsteps fade silent in the worn rug. She wondered if she'd miss her mother when she was gone on her own, faraway from the docks where she'd grown up. Would she miss stumbling into the kitchen in the morning, sunlight glinting off the steel spoon her mother was stirring her coffee with. Maybe that's all she could miss. They didn't have memories, real memories. Joy and pain. When was the last time she saw her mother laugh? She knew her mother didn't cry. Her mother was made out of cardboard. A packing box for shipping. Her mother thought she could put her problems in a box, an imaginary box, and they'd disappear.

She glanced at the clock on the bedside table then whirled around, opening the bottom drawer of her dresser. She reached for the first sweater on the pile, pulling the neck over her head and tugging her arms through the sleeves. She hated being late. Hated what people might say.

"Oh that Carly," they'd say. "She just can't get her act together."

She worried a lot about what people thought of her, cared about her reputation. Truth is, she didn't have a reputation. She was invisible. Like one of those telephone poles that you never paid any attention to.

She pulled on her jeans and laced up her boots thinking about Frog, wondering what would become of him when she went away. He wasn't interested in learning like she was. He didn't want to leave the neighborhood. He had his chinks and as long as he could draw on the sidewalks, he was happy. She knew he wouldn't yell at her for

being late. He'd be sitting at a table in the window of the bakery watching the rain fall on the sidewalk and slide like a twisting snake into steam grates.

The rain blew in her face as she walked out of the apartment block but the bakery was only a half a block away. The street was crowded. A sea of umbrellas stretched out before her and the rain had rinsed away the stale smell of garbage that usually hung in the air. She glanced in a shop window. Steam bathed the glass like snow. The clerk's features were barely visible.

She remembered how, as a child, she used to stare at her reflection in shop windows, struck by her reflection looking back at her — at her timidity. On the inside she felt like a warrior, nothing could destroy her. She wasn't even afraid of gunshots in the street or the sirens that screamed down them. But when she saw herself in the mirror, she looked weak, helpless, like someone who couldn't take care of herself. She'd seen gunshot victims take their last breath, she'd looked into the eyes of the dying and seen their humiliation, unable to stop their end. But she wouldn't surrender her life.

As she rounds the corner, she sees Frog at his table in the window. Steam curls away from the lip of his coffee mug. He doesn't really drink the coffee, just warms his hands on the Styrofoam. She pushes open the door, bringing in the wind and rain, aware that she is sopping wet. Frog looks up. A shy smile crawls across his face.

"Hi," she says, plunking down in the seat across from him.

"Hi."

"Have you been waiting long?"

He shakes his head.

"Did your old man get mad at you for coming home late last night?" she asks. Frog doesn't say much when his old man has been beating at him. It worries her the way he's just resigned himself to the beatings, like he deserves to be slapped around.

"He's just an old drunk."

"He shouldn't be hitting you."

Frog shrugs. A tired and listless expression that frightens Carly. She's always been able to see past her circumstances. Has had to.

She's never really let herself look at the graffiti on the walls or the stolen hubcaps. If she did, she feared she might become where she's from. That's the difference between her and Frog. He thinks he belongs here, that this is the end of the line for him. Carly knows that her life is going to start as soon as she gets out of here.

"Have you given any thought to college?" she asks, her voice rising with hope.

"Guys like me don't go to college, Carly." Frog drags out her name like he always does. Saying her name slow, with so much grace, making her feel special.

She leans across the table. Looks him in the eyes. Black like the sky on a moonless night.

"This is a dead end. You know it. There's nowhere to go but down on the streets."

"I stay out of trouble."

"I know you do."

She looks away from him at the haggard faces in the bakery, dark shadows under their eyes although the sun hasn't been up for more than two hours. A woman with skin like a prune drops a few cents into the fat palm of a clerk. He hands her a hard roll which she clutches at her throat like a brooch.

"Are you going to get something?" Frog asks, digging in his pocket for change. He's always giving her money he doesn't have — needs for himself to buy his chalks.

"Thanks Frog, but I'm not hungry."

She wants to feel beaten down like the people in the bakery line but she can't. She knows she has to keep going, but a wave of numbness washes over her, numbness that circles her heart like a steel band.

"Don't worry about me, Carly. I can take care of myself," Frog says. He looks out the window. The rain is coming down in sheets. He watches the rain run into the gutter. His face is open with excitement and then a shadow settles and he brings his gaze back inside.

She scoots forward in the booth. “That’s what you *say*, Frog. But no one can take care of themselves on the streets. *No one.*”



Owl

Moonbeams cross the river like planks
nestling into the murky bottom
an owl hovers on a bough above
her shadow resting on the water
A leaf floats down from the branch
gently falling
landing
on the bank
A wind blows
through the grass
underneath the surface turtles swim
their fins circling
making tiny dents in the water
The owl hoots
her wings extending
stretching
a banner of gray
across the sky.

To Limbo

Jacobina always smells good when I see her and her hair always looks like it has been powdered with white flour. She wraps paisley scarves around her head and pins her knit shawls together with an ivory brooch. She says she has shrunk a half an inch since I've known her, but to me she is tall and brave. Especially now . . .

I haven't seen her in a couple months. She's left two or three messages on my answering machine, the last one being a sort of plea. Her voice was high and tight and shrill and I knew she was scared and I knew I could not comfort her. I dialed her number twice and hung up on the second ring. I dialed a third time and talked to her answering machine. I talked at length about nothing and told her I would call her after my exams. I've finished exams . . . I've finished an entire year of graduate school and I can't finish what I've started with Jacobina.

I picked up the phone last Sunday morning out of desperation. I didn't sleep much the night before and all I could see and hear and smell were sunsets when I sat down to write. I want to do more than evoke color when I write, so I turned off the power button on my computer and I scanned the titles of five unread novels on my desk. 'The Annunciation' by Ellen Gilchrist caught my eye. I read the words three times out loud and I wondered what I needed to tell Jacobina. I wondered what Richard was trying to tell me last night when he told me about his dream. Richard's dream had something to do with sex and *papier maché*. Who was I in the dream? Was I the woman made of *papier maché*?

I lifted my thumb off the receiver and I dialed Jacobina's number. She picked up on the fifth ring. "Hello," she said. I heard a whistle that was so high and shrill it was almost no noise at all.

"Jacobina, it's Margo. Am I catching you at a bad time?"

"Just a minute, I have to adjust my hearing aid," she said. I could just see her taking the wired device out of her ear and turning down the volume. Jacobina made no bones about fiddling with all the accoutrements of age that most people try to hide. "Hi dear," she said.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Just terrible. I had to go to the hospital this morning. I woke up feeling lousy."

"Did you go alone? Did you get a ride? Did you receive bad news?" I asked all at once. I saw her sitting by herself in the waiting room.

"Joan Bester took me. I thought of calling you. But . . . well . . . I didn't want to wake you," she sighed. "Now, tell me, how are you?" she asked. Her voice was perking up.

"I'm O. K. but I'm not sure what to do with myself during the break. I'm not use to having so much free time . . ." I paused. "Let's not talk over the phone. Let's talk in person. Do you have dinner plans tonight?" I asked.

"Now I do!" she said.

"Be in the lobby at six," I instructed.

"Are you going to be on time? I just can't wait around for you, Margo. I'm not young anymore," she said.

"I'll be there at six," I snapped. She clicked the receiver leaving me angry and irritated and defensive. I hung up the phone and walked back to my desk. The computer screen looked dark and spooky with the power off. I sat down and turned all the way around in my swivel chair. I reached in back of the computer and turned on the power. I entered a command and I watched the computer bring up the program I wanted to use. I watched the cursor blink in the top left-hand corner of the screen. The cursor was a dark, rectangular box that flashed on the half second. I typed something about loss of innocence and the cursor moved across the screen. The cursor moved back and forth across the screen for the next three hours. The last stanza of the poem I wrote read:

Time follows us when we are worried.

The heart opens us when we are brave.

I looked at the clock and grabbed my car keys.

Jacobina was waiting at the curb when I pulled in front of the apartment complex. Her snow white hair was tucked into a purple paisley scarf and her beige lambswool shawl was clipped with the usual brooch. She made a visor with her hand and squinted into the sunlight as she walked toward my car. With my foot securely on the brake I leaned over the passenger seat and unlocked her door. The car was parked on a slope and when she lifted the handle the door swung open, scraping the sidewalk. I bit my lip to keep from cursing and Jacobina clasped her hands in an apologetic gesture. She gently lowered herself into the car and shut the door.

"You still look the same," I said.

"I don't feel the same," she replied.

"Are there side effects from the treatment?"

"I have flu-like symptoms when I return from the hospital," she said.

"Have you thought about getting a nurse? You're going to be making a lot of adjustments. There will be more visits to doctors and hospitals and you don't drive," I said. I looked over my shoulder to check for traffic and then pulled into the right lane.

"I don't need a nurse. I'm not that sick and I like my privacy," she said.

"I know you're going to make it through this. I know you will. But the tumor is malignant, you are an older person and radiation will weaken and tire your body," I said.

"I don't need a nurse to watch me sleep. End of subject! Now where are we going for dinner? I haven't been to *A Votre Sante* in a long time," she said.

"Okay, we'll go there. But I still think you should get help. You should have someone to help you get around town. You don't have to talk to this person. Just pay him or her to cart you around. Have you talked to Jovi about hiring a nurse or a driver?"

"Jovi does enough for me," Jacobina said.

"I know . . . I know . . ." I whispered, wondering why Jacobina could ask me and Jean and Frank and the others for favors but not her daughter. I had grown up with Jovi stories, listening to Jacobina wrap her daughter in greatness. Jovi had been a straight 'A' student and was the most popular girl in her class from grade school on up. When she wanted to be an actress, she was cast in the leading roles in the high school plays. Then in college she wanted to be a reporter and six months after being on staff she became editor-in-chief of her college newspaper. She had dated the high school quarterback, gone steady with a Rhodes scholar in college and married her professor in graduate school. Jovi was infallible — excelling everywhere and stopping nowhere. I hated Jovi. I hated all of her smarts and her wits and her beauty. I hated her for being everywhere but with her dying mother. I hated Jovi for making me be something I'm not — Jacobina's heir. Yeah, Jovi is flesh and blood and all that, but I am the one who has weaknesses. Because I'm the class dunce and the class nerd, I can be with Jacobina and her cancer and still love her.

"But Jacobina" I whispered. "I'm not Jovi, and I don't want to fill in for Jovi."

"Margo!" Jacobina said.

"Yeah?"

"You just passed the restaurant!"



Alvarado Street

The family lives on Alvarado street in a part of town where the innocence of youth has been reshaped by great poverty and violence. The streets — the only playground available to the children — are marked by splintery fences and beds of weeds. A sprawling mass of factories and warehouses blankets the neighborhood in soot and a thick layer of smog hides the squalor from the hundreds of commuters who drive past this fertile area of prostitution, drugs and crime each day.

I maneuvered my car into a tight driveway next to the family's apartment, pleased with my luck at finding a parking space so close. If anyone was to steal the beat-up Ford, it would be here, off Hoover on Alvarado. The drawn faces of jobless men loitering on the streets, tightly gripping beer bottles in paper bags, sharpened my apprehension.

I climbed the stairwell leading to the family's 'nest'. My senses temporarily shut down in the musty corridor where greasy paint trapped the dirt. But then, at the top of the stairs, Jose awaited me with a beaming smile that crinkled the skin at the corners of his mouth. His hair was neatly parted and combed, and his shirt collar looked as if it had been delicately pressed. He held up two small fingers, then shyly turned his head once to the right and once to the left. At each turn a little girl jumped out of hiding.

"Hola Morgan!" squealed the little girls in unison.

"Hola mis hijas!" I responded, softly kissing each on the cheek.

I turned past the girls to the boys who I was not taking on the outing. I rumbled their coarse, black hair and tickled their stomachs, touching them both lovingly and equally. They did not demand my affection but, rather, lapped it up like love-sick puppies. I wanted to take the boys out too, but just didn't have the means to watch five small children who spoke little English.

The apartment was like the stairwell — and not much larger. A card table covered by a lime-green table cloth separated the kitchen and the living area. Apart from the table, the only piece of furniture in the room was a stained couch with mis-matched pillows tossed onto it. Two black and white photographs hung on the wall opposite the couch — one of Jesus and the other of the children — emblems of Faith and Family.

A plump woman labored over the gas stove. Beads of sweat shimmered across her brow as she scooped yellow dough off a small cutting board, flattened it with her hands and fried it in lard. When the dough turned crisp and golden, she removed it from the pan, spread it with *creme* and folded it in half. Her reflexes were surprisingly quick, protecting her from the scalding oil. Sensing another person in the room, she turned her head calmly, moving from her dreams to accept my presence.

“*Hola hija,*” she welcomed me gently, amber and rose dancing on her deep brown eyes. She nestled my hands in hers, resting them against her bosom. Age showed in her hands; lined and leathery, they twitched in mine.

“*Hola Senora,*” I greeted her formally, as one would a matriarch of a long Mayan lineage. I bent down to kiss her, tasting salt on her heat flushed cheek. I pointed to my watch and then turned toward the two girls in the hallway to establish what time I should return with them.

She ignored my question, pulled out one of the two folding chairs for me to sit down on and went to the stove to get me a plate of what she was cooking.

I started toward her, then hesitated. I had seen her spoon the lard she cooked with from a dented soup can with the label half peeled off. I rubbed my stomach with an exaggerated motion and rolled my eyes to indicate that I wasn't hungry.

The girls stood behind me, silently mimicking my behavior. I noticed this when I leaned down to caress the smallest boy's cheek. His sister Susanah imitated my movement with the same slow tender feeling — as if she, too, hoped to draw a smile from him. Then I

picked up the child — not showing my surprise at his lightness — and bounced him on my hip. He giggled, parting his lips to disclose a mouthful of badly decayed baby teeth. When I set him down, Susanna embraced him, struggling to lift him with the ease which I had and then abandoning the effort with a long sigh. I kneeled down to Susanah's level and scrunched up my face like a clown. The gang broke into fits of laughter.

When I gently took each girl by the hand, I told their grandma that I would return at seven.

“Would you like to go the beach or to the movies?” I asked as the girls waved goodbye to their brothers.

They looked at one another as one looks in a mirror, then lowered their eyes bashfully to the ground and stood silently. Still silently we drove through the streets of downtown Los Angeles. Susanah sat in the back with her knees pulled up to her chest playing with a charm on a string around her neck. Ruth sat motionless in the front, staring blankly ahead at the traffic. To make conversation, I acted as a tour guide, pointing out sights, then put a Madonna tape into the cassette player. I started humming to ‘Material Girl’, hoping the girls might sing along. At first, as I swayed to the beat of the music, I held their attention. But they soon lost interest and returned to their own reveries.

The afternoon continued in such isolation. We saw a film. I was relieved when the lights dimmed. The responsibility of making conversation was lifted from my shoulders. In the dark I could not see the children, could not read their glances. Our eyes were fixed on the screen, glued to the animated characters: Not seeing real life. Watching a film in a language they could not speak with a woman they vaguely knew, Ruth and Susanna stared at the screen without questions as if these circumstances were quite normal.

As we left the movie house, we were blinded by light. We squinted to shut out the glare like an over exposed movie.

I took them across the way to an ice cream parlor. Their eyes widened as we approached the counter. I pressed my face to the glass and peered down at half dozen buckets of ice cream.

"That one with nuts and marshmallows is Rocky Road," I said, pointing. "The pink one with gum balls is Bubble Gum."

The girls followed the motion of my finger, entranced.

"Do you know what you want?" I asked.

"Bubble gum," Susanna replied, color flushing her cheeks.

"Would you like it in a cone?" the clerk asked, deaf to her shyness.

She looked at him as if his question had not registered.

"Susanna, do you want to *lick* the ice cream?"

I pretended like I was licking, pressing my tongue against the air and twisting an imaginary cone.

She watched me curiously, not sure what I was doing.

"Yes, Morgan," she answered in her timid voice.

The clerk, by now impatient with our deliberate decision-making, scooped up a heap of the pink flavor, shoved it into a cone and pushed it across the counter to me.

"What do *you* want?" he asked, staring down at Ruth.

Ruth, fearing his eyes, immediately pointed to the flavor directly in front of her.

The clerk scooped up a mound of sticky, chewy chocolate and brusquely extended an arm for Ruth to take the cone.

She looked at me impassively.

"Go ahead, Ruth," I said.

She stepped forward to receive the cone, looking at the ice cream and not at the clerk.

After I paid, I led the children to a corner booth because it seemed the most private.

"Did you like the movie, Ruth?" I asked.

"Yes, Morgan," she said politely.

"Did you have a favorite character?" I asked again, hoping her answer would be more than one word.

"The mother dog," she answered.

"Yeah, I liked the mother dog, too. She had so much love for puppies and you, Susanna, did you enjoy the movie?"

She nodded, widening her eyes.

The children slept as I drove them home, Susanna stretched out on the back seat and Ruth resting against the door, chin pressed against the window. She gazed into the oncoming traffic, her silky brown eyes moist and glassy. Although her eyes were open, I guessed she was not awake; her sprightly spirit had been destroyed by an explosion in El Salvador years before. What remained was a deep knowledge of the depths where demons lurk.

A tear slid down my cheek. I felt more love for the girl beside me than I did for life itself. I wanted to pour love into Ruth's eyes. I wanted to fill her loneliness, to drain my internal well to give life to hers.

When I dropped the children off, I didn't drive away immediately. I sat in the car drifting through my past, wandering into rooms that had long been shut to me. As I dusted away my own cobwebs, I felt into the child's. Then a tap on the passenger window startled me. I turned to see Ruth standing next to the car. She was holding a red carnation. I rolled down the window, and she handed the flower to me, letting a beautiful smile spread across her face. I blew her a kiss and she ran inside.



Blackbirds

Blackbirds
their toes
curled around a telephone wire
They watch the sky
an embassy of blue
Wings flutter
ripple
like slow-forming waves
A caw
summons more blackbirds
until they are hundreds stretched out on a line
their feathers
sharp and tipped like an arrowhead
glitter
magenta and scarlet green
colors swirling
The sky opens
sunlight splashes through the clouds
a yellowy film
arched
The blackbirds watch the light.

Leaving

I'm lying in bed listening to birds outside my window. It is dawn and the house is still: No one is up. My eyes are open even though my body feels sleepy. I tossed and turned all night, knowing that I had a big day ahead of me, that I needed a lot of rest. All I could think about — all I can think about — is college. I don't really know what to expect. Santa Barbara has a reputation for being a 'party school'. That's one of the reasons why I want to go there. I figure at a school with a big social scene I'll learn how to connect. I'm kind of bookish. I spend a lot of time reading by myself. I used to read because I was lonely. I guess I'm not lonely anymore because I've found a way to be at home with myself.

I throw back the covers and sit up in bed. I look around my room, at the flowered wallpaper my Mom and I picked out together. Really, she chose it: I went with her, liking the pattern she selected. I was only nine or ten and I didn't have my own sensibility of such things. I mean, I like the wallpaper, I like my Mom's taste. But now I have my own taste. I'm aware of color and form and pattern, of the dialogue between line and space. I'm looking forward to decorating my new room, to blending scheme with notation.

I hear the low murmur of my Dad's voice from my parent's bedroom. My parents and I are going to caravan to Santa Barbara. I think they are excited for me. Neither one of them went away to college. I think my Mom has big hopes for me. She wants me to go places she couldn't. My Mom didn't have the schooling I've had nor the exposure to the arts, not until she married. My Dad just wants me to be happy. No matter who I am or what I do, I'm always going to be his little girl.

I hop off the bed, pulling the blankets up to the bed frame and then tucking them under the mattress. I straighten the pillows, recalling early childhood memories. I remember sharing a bedroom

with my brother in our house in the Palisades. He was such an angry child and I was such a safe target for his aggression. He smacked me around a lot, not because I ever provoked him, just because he could. He could get away with stuff just because he was bigger than me. He pushed me around like the boys in school. I'm determined I'm not going to let boys push me around in Santa Barbara like I did in high school.

There's a knock on my bedroom door and then it slides open. My Mom sticks her head in. "Will you join Dad and me for breakfast?" she asks. There is a note of sadness in her voice.

"I'll be down in a minute or two. I just want to put on some make-up."

I listen to my Mom's slippers on the carpet. I dab blush under my cheekbones, rubbing it into my skin. Then I brush my eyelashes with mascara, darkening my eyes. Looking in the mirror now I see *myself*, not myself blended into a background. I pull on a pair of jeans and slip a sweater over my head. The smell of eggs sizzling in butter travels up the stairs as I head toward the kitchen.

My Mom and Dad look up as I enter the kitchen. They are wearing long faces — not wanting to let go of me as their little girl, maybe. I smile shyly, afraid that if I speak I'll start to cry. I take a plate from the cupboard and serve myself some eggs. I sit down at the table, afraid of leveling my stare with my parents! I'm afraid that if I look up, gazing innocently and adoringly into the eyes of my parents, I won't want to go to college. I'll want to stay their little girl, pleasing them. But I know that as much as they want to keep me near them, they want me to explore myself in a context larger than childhood. I eat my eggs, thinking of my Mom and Dad as people, not just parents.

"Are you going to come home for Yom Kippur?" my Mom asks, already thinking about the next time she's going to see me.

"Yeah," I say, anticipating driving home full of adventure, eager to tell my parents about my first month at college.

"You can call us before then," my Dad says.

“She knows she can call us,” my Mom says, resting her hand lovingly over my Dad’s.

“How about if we leave in an hour?” I say, pushing back my chair and standing up. I walk to the sink and rinse off my dish, stacking it. I have a view of the avocado tree and of rays of sunlight jetting through clouds. Leaves that have dropped from the branches litter the pavement, carpeting the ground. I close my eyes and let my memory take me back into my childhood when my Mom and Dad were my world. I am climbing up the avocado tree like a squirrel, digging my fingers into grooves in the bark. My arms circle the trunk, hugging it, not wanting to traverse a limb.

Now, I open my eyes wide as if I am bravely venturing from the trunk of the tree. I am crawling away from my Mom, exploring more of the world. I am enlarging my world, broadening it by going to college.

Behind me I hear my Dad rustle the pages of the newspaper and my Mom clear the table.

“Go ahead and finish packing. I’ll straighten up the kitchen,” my Mom calls.

I head upstairs thinking about the wardrobe my Mom bought me for college. Last night, when I was packing my clothes, I debated which outfit I wanted to wear today. I asked myself what kind of first impression I want to make. I guess I want to create an effect similar to my sister’s. I want to walk into a room and dazzle people with style. I want to turn heads like she does. I want to be looked at — seen — noticed — made a big deal of. I’m going to wear a solid rust-colored dress with matching cowboy boots and a couple of gold bracelets that clink when I move my arm. I want to look like a girl — no, a woman! — a woman with cosmopolitan tastes.

At the top of the stairs I turn toward my room. The door is wide open and clothes and blankets and posters are piled in the center of the room. I push open a window to bring in a breeze. Then I kneel down on the carpet, stuffing socks and shirts and jeans in a duffel bag. I kind of feel like I’m packing for summer camp, that college will be like camp. I’ll eat in a cafeteria, swim in a big pool and do

arts and crafts. I hope college is as fun as camp — that I'm going to learn through play!

I put my toiletries in a cosmetic bag with my hair-dryer and jewelry box. I open the lid of the box and take out a gold S-chain necklace with a floating heart. I put it around my neck and touch the heart which rests against my collarbone. I close my eyes and slide the heart along the chain. I feel myself drift across a mysterious, unnamed body of water, approaching a barely perceptible line where water and sky touch. I feel the mixing of life and death in my blood and I am seized by a perception of myself as small. I open my eyes, touching the charm around my neck.

I fold and stack my comforter and blankets in a neat pile and carry them down to the car. My Dad is outside hosing down his car. A stream of water shoots from the hose, splashing against the windshield.

“Dad, will you help me cart my stuff down to the car?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says, turning off the hose.

I put my bundle down on the lawn and we head in to the house to fetch the rest. My father is about to put his arm around me affectionately and then he stops himself. I don't look like a little girl anymore with a flat chest and narrow hips. I look like my mother. My breasts swell and my hips sway. There is a tense moment between us; we are both aware of my maturity.

“You've really blossomed,” my Dad says.

• “Thanks,” I say.

We walk up the stairs quietly, thinking our own thoughts. If I were younger, I'd reach for my Dad's hand. But I'm not a child anymore. I don't need him to protect me from whatever I thought I needed protection from. I have myself. I am responsible for myself.

When we get to my room, my Dad slings my hanging bag over his shoulder and picks up a suitcase. I bend down and pick up a box full of sweaters and we make our way downstairs. I feel with my toe for the stair below the step I'm on. When I reach the last stair, the box I'm carrying feels lighter. Without the fear of tripping and falling, my equilibrium evens itself out. I feel as if the Pole that aligns me

with the earth has shifted and the weight of my body is redistributing itself.

Through the open door I can see my car parked in front of the house. I feel as if my body is walking in tandem with the air; that my physical body is communicating with a larger body of space and time. I don't feel like I am an alien, like I am a meteor that fell to earth.

I set the box I'm carrying down on the lawn next to my car. My Dad puts my dress bag and suitcase next to it.

"Why don't you start loading? I'll bring down the rest," he says.

I watch him walk up the footpath leading to the house. He is tall and composed. I see my mother in the doorway. She looks like she has been standing there for a while watching us. She is still in her housecoat and her hair is tousled. She brushes past my Dad as he enters the house. I watch her lean over the spigot that controls the water pressure for the hose and turn it. She holds the nozzle in the direction of her plants. A gentle stream of water splashes the leaves of a rhododendron. I watch my Mom water her plants, mesmerized by the day's brightness. I half-consciously open the hatchback of my car thinking of my mother. Yeah, she hollered a lot when I was a kid but I guess she was entitled to it. Marriage and family aren't always everything they are cracked up to be for women. I think the forces of culture fed my Mom ideas about marriage and family that proved to be different when she experienced them.

I pack suitcases of clothes and boxes of paraphernalia into my car. I close the hatchback and walk up the footpath. My Mom is picking dead leaves off the azaleas in the window box. She looks up from her flowers as I walk up the porch steps.

"I'll be ready shortly," she says. "I just need to change my clothes and run a brush through my hair."

She walks toward me, putting her arm around my shoulder, pulling me into her. I rest my head on her shoulder. My body doesn't feel like it's shrinking like it usually does. I'm aware of my body as important.

"Will you hurry, Mom?" I say.

"I wish you weren't in such a hurry to leave," she says.

"I'm not going to be that far away. I can come home on the weekends," I say. My voice is choked with love.

"I know," my Mom says, hugging me. She walks down the hallway toward her bedroom. I hope she wears her shimmery pastel sun dress. I want the people in my dorm to see what a pretty Mom I have. Everyone always likes my Dad. He has an endearing personality.

I walk into my bedroom and look at the dress and cowboy boots laid on my bed. I take off my jeans and T-shirt. I pull the dress over my head, slip my arms through the sleeves and slide the hem down my legs. The dress fits snugly, accentuating my figure. I pull on my socks and boots and cinch a silver belt around my waist.

I glance around my room one last time before I leave. My doll collection is a doll collection, my stereo is a stereo and my plants are plants. Then I touch the charm around my neck and my dolls are a showcase, my stereo is a symphony and my plants are breath. With the charm around my neck I feel like I can infuse material with spirit. I can go places that are closed and open them, I can make the opaque translucent, and I can harmonize discordant sound. With the charm around my neck, I can leave my room and have room. With the charm around my neck, I know when to be invisible and when to be seen.



Yolanda Dancing

Yolanda lived on Wisconsin Boulevard in Washington, D.C. with her mother in a sparsely furnished studio apartment. Heavy off-white curtains were drawn over the two front bay windows, shutting out the grainy black and white of the city. A low watt light bulb dangled in the center of the studio and a ceiling fan was mounted near the front door. Two Andy Warhol prints leaned against the wall opposite Yolanda's futon and stacks of art history, geography and French textbooks lined the wall opposite the bay windows.

I lived forty-five minutes outside the beltway. The apartment's Pinesol scent seemed to match the lavender and green floral print of the walls, but my memory of my room there is as vague as my memory of my roommate. I know she had strawberry blonde hair and freckles, and a boyfriend who called every evening at eleven o'clock sharp Eastern time. Her boyfriend seemed able to peg the exact time I returned from the city — calling as I turned the key in the deadlock. As I pushed open the door the phone rang. I'd like to think there was a mysterious connection between her boyfriend and myself, but the reality is her boyfriend simply called then.

I never worked late, tasks finished or not. I was an intern in a Congressional office. There was no incentive to stay beyond five. I was unpaid staff with very little interest in legislative procedure. I'd thought if I gave my time to a Federal agency I might receive a favorable recommendation which would land me an important job someday. It was naïve, that's all. I was twelve units away from graduating from the University of California but terrified of recognizing my existence as a nobody.

At work I daydreamed about meeting senators and foreign dignitaries. I would answer the phone half hypnotized by my fantasies. The only person who called me on it was Yolanda.

"Wake up, child!" she'd scream into the mouthpiece with uncontrolled Southern excitement when she telephoned me.

"Who are you calling a child?" I'd say, holding the receiver away from my ear.

"Honey, you haven't begun to learn about life!" she'd retort, as if I were ten and not two years her junior.

"What do you suppose I've been learning about for twenty-two years?" I'd ask impatiently.

She'd pause — tapping a fingernail against the mouthpiece.

"*Religion,*" she'd say, raising her voice. "You've been living the lives of the Prophets. You hate your job yet you stay there because someone somewhere told you to sacrifice pleasure for pain. *Guilt!* But you want to be a writer - not a policy maker! Quit your job and talk your way into one at the *Washington Post.*"

There would be a longer pause between us at this kind of thing. I didn't know what to say. She was right. I was letting my childhood religious instruction get the best of me.

"There you go again, leaving me talking to myself," Yolanda always snapped. "Lori, I don't have time to be ignored! A group of us are going dancing at Club Acropolis tonight. Dahlila and I will wait for you at ..." She paused and I heard her slide across the wood floor of her apartment to lean out the window. "*Damn!*" she screamed through the wind and the traffic. "I just missed the bus!"

I looked out of the window in front of my desk. Five floors down, the first of the evening commuters were crossing the street to the subway station. Red, purple and green scarves were wrapped around the collars of ankle-length trench coats. Umbrellas, briefcases and newspapers swung at the sides of both men and women. Above the flagpole on the roof of the subway station the sky was a pulpy gray and I had to squint to make out the color of the flag. Rain was inevitable tonight. In my ear I heard Yolanda mutter something about a twenty minute wait for the next bus. I was half tempted to skip dancing, stay home and read the novel I'd bought on my lunch hour but I heard myself say, "Where will you and Dahlila be waiting for me?"

“Dahlila and I are opening at the Paper Moon tonight, so we'll be the first off. Meet us at ten o'clock,” she said. The Paper Moon was where they waited tables.

“What am I going to do for five hours?” I whined, as if dancing would be the highlight of my evening. In fact, I hated the ultra-loud sound systems and crowds in most of the clubs we went to. I only looked forward to the two hours we would later spend at the French Bistro after the clubs closed. Then Dominic would bring us complimentary cappuccinos and brush my cheeks with his lips as the French do. He'd return with a snifter of brandy and slide into the booth beside me. I'd look nervously at Yolanda, knowing she'd be the one to respond to his flirtation.

“Hello. Lori, are you still with me?” the voice asked on the other end of the line.

“I haven't gone anywhere,” I said.

“I told you to come into the Paper Moon early, and Dahlila and I will talk to you between tables,” Yolanda said, her voice disappearing midway into the sentence.

“What are you doing? Why did your voice just fade?” I asked.

“I'm getting dressed. I have to walk to work since I missed the bus. My shirt isn't ironed either. I hope Moses doesn't show up today. Otherwise, he'll give me another warning. Lately they've been watching me like a hawk, waiting for me to slip up. Last week Frederic got the boot because he was under-tipping the bartender. I've heard through the grape vine they'd like to catch me. But I'm not worried, I know how to cover my tracks. So, are you coming in early?”

I put Yolanda on hold and thought about what I wanted to do. I'd have to kill three to four hours in Georgetown. I could wander up and down M street, hugging myself in the cold as I stared at my reflection in the shop windows, spending a whole evening watching other people have fun and wishing I was at home with the strawberry blonde roommate I barely knew. I remembered the Ann Taylor novel in my purse and I said, “I think I'm going to pass tonight.”

"*What?*" Yolanda screamed. "What do you mean?" Suddenly the phone clattered to the floor. "*Chloe!*" she screamed and I knew her cat had jumped out the window again.

"Did she make it?" I asked when Yolanda got back.

"I almost took her head off," she said.

I wondered if Yolanda had ever wished she could take off her own head too. I reached into my purse and pulled out the Ann Taylor novel. I slid my fingers over the title page, eager to be on the subway and home on my unused couch. "Yolanda," I said gently. "I don't want you to take offense, but I need time out from the clubs."

"You only live once, girl! Who knows when you'll be back in D.C.?" she said. Her voice sounded shriller, and I wondered if her mascara was running.

"I can't keep pace. I'm not used to the loud music and the champagne until twilight six nights a week. My brain is pure mush until it's time to party again. Once in a while I'd like to experience clarity in the daytime and obscurity at night."

Yolanda sighed, "California just isn't as hip as D.C."

"You got it, girl. California just makes movies that dictate trends around the whole country," I said.

Then I snapped my mouth shut.

"You think I'm shallow, don't you?" Yolanda said.

"I didn't use that word."

"I got the drift," she said.

"Sometimes I think you act more worldly than you are," I said and sighed. "Night life is only one facet of D.C. and I want to know what happens in this town after the sun rises," I said.

"Don't let me stop you," she said. The phone line clicked and I heard dial tone. I hung up the phone and put the Ann Taylor novel in my purse.

I still go out with her but just not as often.

Let Me Talk

I hadn't been to Patti's house since her grandmother's funeral, and I wondered if I'd sense her absence. I didn't know Maria before her funeral, and I'd only gone for Patti's sake. As I'd walked to the open casket where Maria slept in a cool cotton gown, I saw a woman who had simply shut her eyes in a decision to die. Her skin was as smooth and fine as powdered ash and her hair was a clean, snowy white. I was struck by the beauty of this motionless woman and I did not want to leave her side. I touched her stiff, cold fingers and I asked her if there was safety where she was. I bent over and kissed her pale lips and heard her tell me to accept the passage of life. I felt the dark, earthy hands of her people on my back and I kissed the chilled body one more time before I walked away from the casket. I didn't cry until I saw Patti's loss. She leaned against her brother Sergio as friends and relatives kissed her wet cheeks. I held her hand and closed my eyes — knowing who the old woman had stayed behind with.

“They died for us,” I said, remembering how I imagined the blood draining out of my grandmother's body and into my own.

Patti squeezed my hand as fresh tears slid down her cheeks.

“I know Maria . . . I know,” she whispered.

I let go of her hand and moved down the line. Patti's mother and two sister's were quieter in their grief. I felt the grandmother's reserve as I shook their hands. The sisters' hands felt like they had been preserved on ice, as if they too had died and were waiting to be buried. I wanted to back up and warm my hands on Patti's flushed cheeks but the line was only moving in one direction. I followed Vilma out the church. She was one of half a dozen Hispanic women at the funeral who had been my nanny at some point or other and why I knew the family and Patti.

I remembered my reactions at the funeral as I walked across the wet lawn toward Patti's apartment two weeks later. Cars whizzed by behind the palm trees and I heard the drivers gun their engines as I stepped on palm shadows, thinking how lucky I was not to be lying in a casket. I looked up at the jewel of a blue sky and quickened my pace. I was almost skipping as I went into the courtyard of Patti's apartment, skipping with a new found sense of freedom. But this subsided in the open doorway. Oscar, a small round-faced man with black hair as coarse as straw, was the first to notice me. With a crossword puzzle on his lap and a pencil between his teeth, he looked up and said, "C'mon on in!"

"Hi Oscar," I said, moving over to the couch he was lying on. He pointed to his cheek and I bent over and kissed him where he indicated.

"Where's my present?" he said quite seriously. "Where's the apple pie you promised to bring?" His soft eyes were full of disappointment.

"You told me to come like I am!" I protested.

"And you listened to me?" he said.

"Silly me," I said. "From now on I'll just watch your lips move."

"Don't listen to him!" a woman shouted from the kitchen.

"He never says anything important!" another woman echoed.

I shook my finger at Oscar and turned toward the smell of butter, garlic and pepper. In the kitchen, a large table was set with assorted blue and white china and a wooden board was laid across stools so even more people could sit together. Two dark skinned women were stirring sauces over the stove while another was washing out a huge metal pot. I perched on the wooden board and watched the women with gold capped teeth crush garlic, grind pepper and grate cheese over a black iron cauldron of stew.

At that moment Patti entered the kitchen through the back door. Behind her staggered a young man, her brother Sergio, with two grocery bags. They wore identical smiles, a long line like a mark across their faces to hide sadness or disappointment. Patti blinked, then saw me.

"I didn't expect to see you here," she said, walking around the table to greet me properly.

"I was driving down National when I saw Rosa's van in front of your apartment," I said. "I've been meaning to stop by . . . to see how you and Sergio and your Mom have been getting along since . . . well since your loss."

I found I was playing with the soft silky fringes of the tablecloth. I was nervous and Patti picked it up.

"Well, Sergio goes for chemo only once a week now," she said. "The doctor says the treatment is working, so we're all happy."

"Has he been under a lot of stress?" I asked now that it was in the open. Sergio was putting away grocery items less than five feet away, neatly stacking cans of creamy corn, pitted olives and refried beans in the cupboard.

"The doctor didn't want him to take summer school, so he has a lot of free time," Patti said. "He's become a neat freak, vacuuming as much as three times a day!"

Watching us, Sergio was tucking his shirt in under stiff, square shoulders.

"What else does he do?" I asked.

Patti sat down beside me on the board, resting her head on my shoulder. Her frizzy brown hair scratched my neck and I smelled Wella balsam shampoo.

"He likes to bake," she said. "Wait till you taste the *creme caramel* he made for us tonight."

As Patti spoke, Sergio went to the refrigerator. The mold he took out was garnished with red and purple petunias and sprinkled with cinnamon. He grinned at me as he set it on the table.

"It's beautiful, Sergio," I said. He smiled shyly, his cheeks reddening. Then his head drooped and he turned away from us.

"I think you know more about Sergio than he knows about himself," I said to Patti as Sergio started drying dishes his mother handed him from the sink.

"He doesn't talk a lot, my brother" Patti said, sitting up.

"I don't talk a lot either," I said. "I ask a lot of questions because I want to understand, but I don't give a lot of answers myself."

Sergio folded the dish towel in thirds and left it on the counter. He removed the trash from underneath the kitchen sink and slid the backdoor open. When he returned, he smiled at Patti and me.

"Why don't you join us?" I said.

"Yeah, join us Sergio" Patti echoed. "Mom and Rosa can serve dinner."

Sergio brought his index finger to his lips and shut his eyes.

"We don't need to brew the coffee until we're ready for dessert," he said. It seemed he was thinking aloud.

"C'mon Sergio," Patti said. "Don't make me beg."

"How are classes?" I asked.

"The doctor doesn't want him to take summer school," Patti said.

"I can answer the question, Patti," Sergio snapped. "The doctor doesn't want me to take summer school," he said to me.

"But how are you feeling?" I asked.

"OK, I guess. The chemo wears me out but I'm only tired for a day."

"The chemo is working because the doctor says the tumor is almost completely gone," Patti blurted. "My brother isn't going to let cancer get in his way!"

Sergio pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket and handed it to me.

"*Gag her!*" he said. His face was as stiff and still as the hot summer night.

I put my arm around Patti, hoping to calm her. She took my arm away, her eyes as black and wet as a dog's nose, stood up and ran out of the room.

"I shouldn't have answered," Sergio tried to apologize.

Sergio pillowed his face in hands, elbows on the table. Through the cracks between his fingers, I could see his open eyes. He shook his head two or three times. "I know she means well . . ." he sighed. He rubbed his eyes angrily with the heels of his hands.

"You're doing well," I reminded him, "She cares, is all."

Sergio opened his eyes again to stare at me.

“My sister and mother put words into my mouth that I have to uphold. They tell me who I am and respond as if I am like each of them! But I am a man and my thoughts are like those of a man.”

“Do men think different from women?” I asked.

By now Oscar had entered the kitchen and was hovering near the stove with a napkin tucked into his belt.

“Men think *more* than women,” he said, coming to the table.

“The question was not aimed at you,” I said, glaring at him.

“Patti didn't think about *why* I don't want her to answer for me” Sergio said.

“She's still thinking, Sergio,” I said. “Patti is sad because she thinks you don't need her and so won't love her,” I said.

I was twisting Sergio's handkerchief into a tight, spiral rope. I handed him the handkerchief and he carefully tied it around his elbow like a wounded soldier.

No one spoke.



Grandma

My grandmother appeared from the bedroom with her coat and purse.

“Where’s your coat? You’re sure to catch pneumonia without one,” she snapped.

“Don’t worry about me Grandma. I’ll be fine,” I said gingerly.

“It’s the middle of winter. How can you possibly think of leaving the house without a coat?”

She was fumbling nervously through her purse for her keys.

“Grandma, we live in Southern California, not Minnesota. There are no winters here,” I replied calmly, hoping to put her mind to rest.

“In the old days, it just wasn’t proper to leave the house without an overcoat,” she went on. “I don’t know if I’ll ever adjust to the carelessness of this generation! Yesterday I saw a girl your age wearing only sheer undergarments in the supermarket standing in the frozen food section . . . thrilling herself.”

“Where should we go to dinner?” I said quickly.

“Far away from the frozen food section at Ralphs, for sure! I don’t want to expose you to such indecency,” she answered, having now found her keys.

“Grandma we better go, so you don’t miss ‘60 Minutes’ later. Did you think about where you might want to eat?” I said, knowing that it was probably all she thought about.

“I’m very finicky about what I eat, and so I called a few local restaurants this afternoon” she said. “There are two well-recommended restaurants close by that will prepare our food without an ounce of butter or salt. Have you been to the Fish Kitchen or the *Belle Vue*?”

“I like the *Belle Vue*. I've been there with my other grandma and afterwards we went to the ice cream parlor next door for dessert,” I said enthusiastically, remembering which flavor of ice cream I'd had.

“Well, I will certainly not stand by and watch you put all that cream and sugar into your body, watching you harden your arteries, so we'll go the Fish Kitchen. Did you park in the garage like I asked you to? It's a shorter walk for me.”

“Yes, Grandma,” I said, nodding like a mechanical doll. I offered her my arm to hold onto as we walked to the car, adjusting my pace to hers. I looked at her as we walked in silence, noticing what a classically beautiful profile she had — her small, rounded chin, high-cheek bones and smooth, unlined skin. She really was the lady that she had worked her whole life to become, aloof and dignified, a faint breath of air. A surge of pride filled my lungs as I breathed in deeply, straightening my posture. I pressed her arm into my side, wanting to draw her closer to me.

We were silent until we got to the restaurant. I drove slowly and cautiously so as not to alarm my passenger, my attention ahead of the windshield. Occasionally, I would glance her way and see her long fingers clasped neatly in her lap and her distinguished head held high.

“Should we park on the street?” I asked, remembering that my father thought it was wasteful and lazy to pay for valet parking.

“I can't walk. I have a bad leg,” she said, reminding me of the story that she has told countless times about how she was crippled in an automobile accident years ago. The telling of the story itself seems to keep her frozen in a sedentary lifestyle.

The valet parking guy assisted my grandmother out of the car — lightly for she managed quite well on her own when she forgot about the bad leg.

“Here,” she said, slipping a couple of bills into his large black hand without making eye contact.

“I make a general rule of rewarding *Schvartzes* for working hard,” she said in a tone that could easily be overheard.

“*Grandma!*” I exclaimed, horrified by such an overt racial slur.

“Blacks just don't work as hard as Jews and I speak from personal experience. Your grandfather and I hired dozens of maids — all of whom were endlessly trying to slip out of their responsibilities while demanding higher wages. Bertha was an exception and your grandfather left her handsomely in his will — more than I would have liked, in fact,” she added without a trace of shame.

I lowered my eyes. I could easily refute her — knowing many black kids who were fine students — but I kept silent.

On seeing us arrive, a young man jumped up from the bar and held the door open. A succulent aroma of garlic and butter greeted us as my grandmother walked proudly up to the hostess stand.

“Mrs. Segal, we have been waiting for you! We have a lovely table for you and your grand-daughter in the corner,” the restaurant manager said, taking the menus from the hostess and leading us on.

“It's away from the smoking section like I asked, right?” my grandmother said.

“Yes ma'am, the air is as pure as our virgin olive oil you asked about,” he assured her, guiding her along with finger tips lightly on her back.

I followed as they made their way carefully across the restaurant, moving at my grandmother's speed. She seemed to be concerned only with her destination, shutting out all the rest and I was reminded of her furniture back home which was protected by a thin plastic film that shielded out what was not in order. So, she was here now.

“Grandma, should we help ourselves to the salad bar?” I asked when we were seated. I'd noticed the long smorgasbord of vegetables and fruit as we entered.

“Dear, we just sat down,” she sighed. “Let's wait for the waiter”

She looked like a child in the candlelight, sitting stiffly against the tall back of the chair, clutching her purse in her lap.

I opened the menu so she wouldn't think I was studying her and pretended to examine it instead.

“I urge you to order off the fresh fish board,” my grandmother said, breaking the silence.

“Grandma, I'm not too crazy about fish,” I said.

“You should be eating fish at least three times a week. It’s the healthiest food you can eat!”

“OK, I’ll order salmon,” I said — choosing the first thing I saw on the fish board.

“Salmon is a fatty fish. You really should try a white fish. How about orange roughy?”

“Fine,” I said, bored with it now. “Tell me a story about grandpa.”

“Your grandfather was an exceptional man,” she began. “He worked to the day he died, putting in long hours to provide for his family. He was the only son of poor immigrant parents who scraped snow off streets and pedaled second-hand goods in nearby towns, so he learned how far a single dollar could go. Knowing nothing about the rambling, carefree days and ways of most children, he disciplined himself, committing himself to the welfare of the family and the mind. He put himself through college, then later law school, going as far as one could in his profession by defending a case in the Supreme Court.”

The blue and orange candle flame flickered on the table so it seemed to be speaking with my grandmother. The soft light brought color to her face, drawing out the blue of her eyes and her rosy skin.

“Was grandpa lonely in his work?” I asked quietly — then had to repeat myself for her to hear me.

“Your grandfather was sought-out by the great political leaders of this country” she replied. “Hubert Humphrey was one of his closest allies. His profession provided for a full social calendar and we were constantly entertaining or being entertained by high-society families. I had many exquisite evening gowns for the many, many affairs we were invited to.”

I noticed the candle flame was sinking in its blue glass shield, dimming the light between us.

“Were you lonely?” I asked, again too softly for her to hear the first time.

“Dear, I hadn’t the *time* to be lonely! I had a son to look after and a large home to oversee. Fortunately, your grandfather allowed me

to have full-time help. Even so my mother-in-law would make surprise visits at odd hours during the day and early evening. My house had to be in order and my son well-groomed when she arrived.”

The wick of the candle was now in a pool of wax. A crescent moon was peering in the window behind my grandmother, silvering her hair.

She swallowed her last bite of fish and delicately dabbed at the corners of mouth with her napkin. Then her long, shapely fingers glided back into her lap.

I wanted to reach for her hands, to hold them, to hold her and rock her in my arms. This woman, my grandmother, had made her way through life for others. Now, in the last years of life, she was turning the show over to me; she was giving me her life and her history so I could use it if I chose. She was giving me more than a hand to hold onto, she was giving me her experience. She was giving me an essence of the past, of the lives of women to hold onto and carry with me into the future.



Ash Boy

I looked out the bus window at a city block of human decay. Black spray paint marked the walls of the Baptist church and smoke lingered still around its steeple. The bell survived the fire but was already rusting from the fire brigade's efforts. The ruins of a liquor store lay next door and skinny black children ran through the ashes rescuing what they could. A black kid with a near shaved head climbed the gate in back of the church and ran, balancing, along a wall. Then he disappeared, skinning down some slide of rubble and emerged again out of the frame of the front door.

Our bus pulled up in front of the church — the bus driver swinging the doors open just as the boy came out into the bright light. He watched us emerge in single file, marching in step with brooms and shovels swung over our shoulders. He glanced down at his skinned knees and then across at our smooth legs. I winked at him but the mid-day sun was in his direction. He pulled the neck of his shirt up over his eyes and off his back, disappearing inside the church again.

Behind it, ruins showed the nursery school also had not survived the fires. There, a good-looking black minister and his three children were rummaging through the ashes looking for textbooks and bibles. The Reverend was not wearing a circular collar but had a white bandanna tied roughly round his neck to catch the sweat from the heat which was about all the fire had left.

He stood up as our troupe approached, twisting a gold ring on his finger. The kids lined up behind him like goslings. The youngest poked his head between his father's knees and said, "Who they?"

"Hush, Solomon," the minister said, picking the child up and cradling him as the community organizer who was leading our platoon stopped the line-up in front of him.

"Sir, we're with radio station FM 103.1, and we're cleaning up areas that were hit in the riots. From the bus we saw your children busy in there. We'd like to show our sympathy and our sorrow for the senseless behavior that caused your loss."

"Bless you," the Reverend whispered. The boy looked from the speaker to his father, then hid his eyes in his father's neck.

"Troupe, disband!" our sergeant called out. I took my shovel from my shoulder and walked into what was once the playroom of the school. As I shoveled debris into a trash bag, I unearthed the head of a Raggedy Ann doll. As I bent down to examine the burn victim, the boy from the church came out of the shadows. He squatted down in front of me, combing the doll's hair with his fingers. He was shoeless and even his underpants (which was all he wore) were gray from the ash and so was his skin.

Without looking up from the doll he said, "Her hair used to be red."

"Your hair used to be black," I teased, squeezing his chin with my thumb and forefinger.

"The black won't go away," he said, glancing toward the Reverend.

He dug his hands in the ashes, scooping up a handful and burying Raggedy Ann's face.

"She's better off dead," he said.

I pulled the doll out of the dirt and shook off what clung.

"Maybe in order to survive she had to change colors? Instead of being white and delicate, she's now black and brave. Now that she's lived through the war she has even more reason to live."

The boy stared at me.

"What good is that if you don't have any arms or legs?" he said.

"She still has a voice to speak her mind with," I said. "Look, your hands and feet are covered in dirt but you're far from dead. I watched you struggling to sound the bell on the roof of the church, so people would stop and look. The bell did not sound, but we saw you try. You acted alone and without fear to bring help to the Reverend and his family, didn't you? We stopped, you know, because we saw you."



Lust

Traffic is noisy
cars inch along the freeway
tiny insects in an aerial view
crawling along the black asphalt
all thin and papery.

The sun is blinding in my mirror
I squint and pull down the flap.
Turning the knob to the left
Carol King bursts from the speakers
silencing my head.

I tell myself it will get better
he'll apologize tomorrow.
We'll barbecue in front of the building
sunshine blazing through the clouds.

He'll swerve his body like he was swinging some bat
thin frame rippling like water.

I pull down the skirt which fits perfectly
remembering when I saw him eyeing me
I was a piece of meat.
Oh! my heart thumped loudly —
boom boom a tribal bass drum deep and resonate —
blood sucking through me thick as honey.

I'll brush the marinade on the chicken —
smoke spirals into the air.
As I lift the cover a car is coming down the street;
he taps his foot on the pavement
the song is Christopher Cross or something
blaring from the open windows.

I remove the chicken from the flame
put it on a paper plate and walk to him
face in chicken like he'll like me if I'm silly.

The sky cracks and rain falls
he grabs the plate and runs upstairs.
I dash after him.



The Apartment

I'm sitting in my car. Through the windshield, I have a view of the stairs leading up to Kevin's place. Ordinarily, I'd wait upstairs but today I don't feel like being alone in his apartment. Mainly because I don't trust myself. I won't be able to resist the temptation to go through his stuff. Last week I read what I think was his diary. Most of it was his reflections on the consequences of his actions. I was surprised at how thoughtfully written it was. The Kevin I'd been dating didn't care about anything other than getting laid. But this Kevin, the Kevin in the diary, was sensitive. After I'd read some I felt guilty. I felt like I had seen a part of Kevin that he hadn't been willing to show me. I also felt bad that he didn't talk to me like he did to his diary. I was jealous of his diary. Imagine being jealous of a piece of paper!

I listen to the whoosh of cars shooting down Beverly Glen. Traffic never ceases on Kevin's street. The sound of tires on the pavement comforts me after we've had sex. Usually Kevin just rolls away from me. I turn over on my side and stare at the dirt on the window sill. As I lie waiting for sleep, I think about telling him that I'm going to clean his house. Maybe then he'll hold me after we have sex.

I haven't seen Kevin in a whole week. Why is it that I'm always going to him? How come he doesn't ever come to me? Whenever I've suggested that he come to my place, he says to just forget it. We'll get together another time, he's too busy. I don't even bother asking him where we're going to meet anymore. I just ask him what time I should be over. Before I hung up the phone, I was thinking about what I was going to wear. And then I was in my car. And now I am standing just a few feet away from him and he doesn't even see me. That's how involved he is with work, how little he is aware of anything outside of it.

Kevin almost bumps into me before he notices me. "Did you just get here?" he asks.

"A few minutes ago. I was sitting in my car when you pulled into the driveway. You didn't even look over at me."

I glance down at the pavement. The driveway is cracked. The cement is crumbling.

"Just be lucky you aren't me," he says, shaking his head.

"What's wrong with being you? You're a terrific person."

"Yeah, I should just be thankful I'm not you," he says. He stares at me for a second or two, thinking about what he's just said. Then he steps toward me and puts his hand on my shoulder. He squeezes it as if he were trying to say he didn't mean it.

"What's wrong with being me?" I say, pulling away from him. I start to walk toward the apartment. Why does he have to put me down? It's like the more I try and make him feel good about himself, he makes me feel lousy. I don't know why I stay with him.

"I'm sorry baby. I didn't mean it," Kevin says, grabbing my elbow as I turn the corner.

"I don't know why I go out with you."

"You know you can't resist my charm."

Kevin puts his arm around me and pulls me toward him. Grudgingly, I fall into his embrace. He kisses me lightly on the lips. Wind blows my hair across my cheek. Kevin brushes it away.

"Let's go upstairs," I say, putting my hand on the stair rail.

"Yeah, we'll be more comfortable in bed."

"First we're going to watch a movie."

I look back over my shoulder to make eye contact. To let him know that I'm serious about not just being some kind of screw.

"Yeah, I know," he says, following me up the stairs. I let myself into his apartment, knowing that the backdoor won't be locked. The kitchen counters are covered with spaghetti sauce, dishes are stacked in the sink and the floor is caked with dirt. I wonder how long Kevin's gone without cleaning up. He's such a typical bachelor. I've often thought about cleaning his place for him. He's even asked me to in a joking kind of way but I never have. If I did, he'll think I'm a

pushover, that I'll do whatever he tells me to do. But if I thought some good would come out of it, I would.

"What are we going to watch?" I ask, walking through the kitchen like I'm unfazed by the mess.

"I brought home a movie I'm working on. We'll check it out."

Kevin kicks off his shoes as we enter the living room. One flies across the room, hitting the wall. I plop myself down on the couch, look around, checking to see if the place has changed since the last time I was here. A roll of paper towels, the TV guide and a comic book are lying on the coffee table. I don't see his diary anywhere. Has he been writing in it? Anything about me?

"Have you been getting a lot of work?" I ask as Kevin sits down beside me.

"Been really slow," Kevin says. He looks down at the floor. I inch closer to him, bringing my legs up on the couch.

"It'll pick up. It is the nature of your work. Slow some days and busier than ever on others."

I rest my chin on Kevin's shoulder and look up at him. I want to stroke his cheek. I know how much work means to him. It's who he is. Work gives him worth. I want him to know that he's so much more than his work. He's funny and attractive and smart. It's a shame that he overlooks these great sides of himself. The only thing that matters is whether or not he's getting jobs. With me, work isn't that important. It's just where I am during the day. Kevin is much more important to me than any job I'll ever have. I guess that's how men and women are different. Women put relationships first.

"Do we have to watch a movie? Can't we just go in my bedroom and fool around?"

"I told you that if you want to see me you have to be willing to spend quality time with me," I say, sitting up.

"Relax will you? We'll see the movie."

He gets up and walks over to the television set. I watch him kneel down to slide a video into the VCR. Sometimes I can't get over how handsome he is. From the side he looks like a movie star. He has a straight nose and lashes that are as black as coal. I often wonder why

he goes out with me. Not that we're an official couple but we date pretty regularly. There are far prettier girls he could date, but for some reason he keeps calling me. I think its because he can talk to me. He told me that one time. I caught him staring at me one morning when we were waking up. Embarrassed, I looked away. Then out of nowhere he tells me I'm easy to talk to. It was the first kind word to me in the six months we've been dating, but it made me feel good.

A blue haze flickers on the TV and then the picture takes shape.

"I don't know if its any good." He stands up and walks back to the couch. I sit up, cross my legs and watch the credits roll across the screen.

"There are some really bad movies out, huh?"

"Are you the kind of person that has to talk during the picture show?" Kevin says as he sits down, putting his feet up on the coffee table. I pull my knees into my chest and hug myself. Why is he always in such a bad mood? He didn't used to be like this. When we first met, he was so attentive to me. He always had to be touching me. Then after about a month — after I had slept with him — he stopped making me feel special. He stopped taking me out. If he had it his way, he'd have me come over late at night and leave early in the morning. I told him if he wasn't interested in spending time other than when we were in bed, then to just forget it.

Moonlight from the window yawns across the carpet. I lean back and rest my head against the wall behind the couch. I don't feel like watching the movie anymore. Usually, Kevin doesn't even care if I'm around while he watches — or if he does, he doesn't let on. Sometimes, though, in the morning when we're waking up, he asks me about the movie. He'll speak in a tiny, little boy voice, his head barely out of the covers and ask me if I liked the movie. Then, after I've told him what I think, he'll lie silently beside me. Sometimes he'll curl his leg around mine. I'll watch him sleep, his long, dark lashes resting against his cheeks.

Kevin sets the remote control down on the coffee table and reaches for me. I crawl toward him, resting my head in his lap. He lays his

hand on my breast. He just leaves it there like there's no better place for his hand to be. Then he slides his hand under my top. His fingers edge down toward my nipple. I move away from him. We're suppose to watch a movie before we fool around.

Kevin says he'd like it if I treated him like a boy toy. But once when I was obsessing over him, I called him in the middle of the day and asked him what he thought of sex in the afternoon. He said he was all for it and that I should hurry up and get over to his office. Afterward, when we were sitting on the carpet, our clothes off, he started to pick at me. He said I had a thick waist. I got up and reached for my pants trying not to cry.

"You don't have to go," he said. And then, as I was buttoning up my pants, the tears just spilled out of my eyes. Kevin got up and put his hands on my shoulders. He looked confused. Like my feelings startled him. But I could see he wasn't afraid of my tears; he seemed to like that I had cried.

Now he draws me onto his lap and holds me. His breath feels soft against the back of my neck.

"Kevin, I don't want this to be just about having sex," I say, sitting up. I pull my legs underneath me and lean against the couch.

"This isn't just about sex," Kevin says.

"It isn't?"

"No. You're my girl." Kevin scoots toward me and rests his head on my shoulder. All I can hear are the words "you're my girl" floating around in my head. Feeling like a new person, someone with a boyfriend, I climb on top of Kevin and cup his face with my hands. Playfully, he bites at my lip. I rub my hands on his chest, something I know he loves.

Then he flips me on my back.



Favors Repaid

What if compassion is a curse and crime a blessing I thought as I climbed the stairs. The steps were steep and slippery and the walls smelled like anumonia. My sandals echoed against the concrete as I took each step one at a time. I heard heavy breathing somewhere and I quickened my pace. I swung open the door to the second floor and went into the hallway. Brown carpet softened the echo as I walked down the corridor. The apartment doors were painted lime green with off-white numbering. The air was stiff and no one's window's were opened. I crossed my fingers, hoping I hadn't entered the Twilight Zone.

She lived in #210, the only apartment with potted plants, rocks and wood sculptures. A bottle of Sparklets drinking water, a stack of newspapers and a box of used clothes sat outside her door. A note was pinned on the door reading RING BELL. I followed the instructions three times before the door opened. She was wearing flannel pajamas and a short Chinese housecoat. She wasn't wearing slippers and I could see the effect of years of dancing. Her toes were pink and swollen and smashed together. She curled her toes, and I looked away.

"Hi darling!" she said, reaching up to hug me. Her voice sounded unusually high and squeaky.

"How are you feeling?" I said, leaning over to kiss her cheek. She didn't smell like scent and I remembered that she had been in the hospital.

"What did you bring?" she said, looking at the grocery bag in my hand. "I hope it wasn't too much trouble," she continued.

I wondered just how concerned she was with my being bothered. She had left three messages on my answering machine asking me to stop at a bank, a restaurant and a newspaper stand on my way over.

"I brought you a hamburger," I said.

She stooped over and poked her nose in the bag. Her white hair was thinning. I closed my eyes when I saw how colorless the skin on the back of her neck was.

"I hope the hamburger's hot," she said.

"I got your message after the banks closed. Do you have enough money for the weekend?"

I resented having to ask the question. I looked around her apartment, not quite sure if I was indoors or outdoors. Bookcases and glass tables were strewn with dried flowers, leaves, pine-cones, eggshells and rocks. At either end of the living room, growing toward the light, lived her plants. She was fiddling with a nasturtium and I walked into the kitchen.

The telephone rang five times before she picked up the receiver.

"Hello," she said loudly, "hold on a second!"

I knew she was turning down the volume of her hearing aid. A short while passed before I heard, "Hi dear. Tell me how you are?"

I didn't hear her again until I re-entered the living room with our dinners.

"Dear, I have a visitor. Can I call you back?"

She hung up the phone and watched me set up our dinner trays.

"Have you been out of the house since you got home from the hospital?" I asked.

"Jovi and I went for a short walk before she went back to Arizona. She re-arranged her whole schedule so she could be with me," Jacabina said. Her pupils narrowed and her voice tightened: "You were suppose to come over Monday night."

"I called two or three times during the day and the line was busy," I said. A photograph of Jovi in her twenties leaned against a stack of books. Like me she had dark hair, dark eyes and pale skin. Jacabina often tells me how much I remind her of Jovi. I cringe at this because the Jovi I know is just a black and white photograph.

"Jovi was an angel all weekend long. She bought groceries, she ran errands and she cooked. She stayed with me in the hospital until the end of visiting hours. She even bought me those white mums to look at," Jacabina said.

“You must have enjoyed the visit,” I said, looking at the mums. The petals reminded me of short, evenly cut hair. A breeze whispered through the screen door, gently moving the petals. I stood up and walked over to the couch. The mums still looked trimmed and the air had no temperature. I looked at my watch and the little hand was still pointed at three. I shook my wrist and brought it to my ear but I couldn't hear any ticking. Jacobina watched me with half closed eyes, like someone watching a television re-run. I wondered if she was watching a drama or comedy or the news or all of the above.

“I'm glad you could come,” she said, barely opening her eyes.

“I see you've had lots of visitors,” I said, looking around the room at all the flowers.

“You're my favorite,” she said. She blinked and widened her eyes for a second. They looked bleached and the room suddenly started to smell like a hospital. I remembered the bottled water, the stack of used newspapers and the box of old clothes outside the front door. I felt overwhelmed with self-dread and wanted to get up and run but Jacobina looked so feeble.

“I see you have a good appetite. Your strength and morale must be up,” I said.

She looked down at her plate and sighed. “I don't want to say I'm fine until I visit the doctor and find out the results of the surgery. I have an appointment on Tuesday. I don't want to go alone,” she said.

I pictured her by herself in the doctor's office. Still in his white coat and surgical mask, the doctor would show her the pathology report. Then, with the clock ticking noisily on his desk, he would resume his rounds and she would be left alone with her cancer. I could take her. I could console her. My mouth moved but no sound came out. I remembered I was not her nurse and I said, “Maybe your sister can accompany you?”

“What are you doing Tuesday?” she asked.

“I have an exam Wednesday,” I said, hearing my voice rise.

“What are you doing *Tuesday*?” she repeated. Her stare was sharp.

“I have to study,” I answered.

Her tone lost all friendliness. “Do you have to study all day?”

"There's a community meeting at the Baptist church near my house," I said helplessly.

"A minute ago you couldn't take me because you were studying. *Now* you can't take me because you're going to church. Make up your mind, kid," she said hotly.

"I don't want to take you to the doctor," I practically shouted, mouthing each word slowly and deliberately. Forgetting she was 89 and harmless, I still clenched my fists.

"Why didn't you say that in the beginning?" Her tone was ice cold.

"Why did you continue to question me after I told you I had to study?" I said.

"You don't *have* to study; You *want* to study!" she exclaimed. Her eyes looked like big blue whales pushing through the waves.

"*Just don't do me any favors!*" she said, standing up abruptly. She picked up her dinner tray and marched into the kitchen.



Arriving at the Leonard's

Yellow petunias flowered in a window box on the verandah, bougainvillea grew up the posts. A liquid blue sky bathed the porch in summer heat. I smoothed my hair as I climbed the steps. My clogs drummed the wood, orchestrated with buzzing crickets. I was bringing my luggage to the Leonard's. I glanced over my shoulder at it propped on the lawn as I fished through my bag for my key. I caught the ring of my copper key with my finger and slid the nose into the latch. The door creaked open and I stepped into a dark room. A thick masculine smell of shaved wood and musk filled it.

I peered out beveled window pane to admire a gangly pine tree. Then I moved through the unlit house. I climbed the narrow stairwell, careful not to clap my clogs against the hardwood. A gush of hot air hit me at the top of the stairs as I began another flight. Sweat filmed my skin as I walked into my new room and touched the cool wood of the bureau.

An hour later I heard footsteps on the floor below me and then a women's voice hit a C sharp as she called my name.

"Mrs. Leonard," I called back, leaning over the banister.

"*Welcome!*" she replied, climbing the stairs. She wore a slim-fitting navy dress clinched at the waist with a three-inches white belt.

"It's like a sauna in here," she said, reaching the top of the stairs. Brushing strands of silvery hair away from her face, she scanned me.

"I'll acclimate," I said, hearing the martyr in me speak.

"Why should you suffer?" she asked, bemused or annoyed.

"Gertrude Stein suffered. She broke rules of gender propriety. She smoked cigars when women wore bonnets. In risking social effacement she found herself. Then she found Chopin," I said.

"George Sand found Chopin," Mrs. Leonard said dryly. "What Gertrude Stein did was dress like a man in the name of self-interest.

She cared more for her individual rights than she did for manners.” She sounded even drier.

“Well, anyway, it's hard for women to be troublemakers when they are expected to be amenable” I said, flopping down on the bed and frowning.

Mrs. Leonard sat at the foot of the bed, smoothing her skirt over her legs. Her face was drawn. Sleepless lines cornered her eyes.

“Do you have to be a troublemaker?” she asked. She had a sturdy look, as if she was not accustomed to showing affection.

“Yes,” I said.

She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, “*Ahhh.*”

I got up, moving around her side of the bed. I felt the hot night steam my skin. Opal stars were at the window now.

“Do you ever talk to the man on the moon?” I asked, walking toward it. I pressed my palms against the glass, watching my breath cloud the pane.

Mrs. Leonard's reflection sat very still and starry light silvered her hair.

“Yes,” she said quietly.

“The moon is spell-binding,” I said, turning to embrace the night's blue glow.

“You're a romantic,” Mrs. Leonard said, standing up. Her skirt clung to her shapely legs, outlining her figure.

“The tides gravitate with the moon,” I said, really without thinking. I was aware of my crotch as I squeezed my legs together.

“Well, there is a magnetic pull between the earth and the moon,” Mrs. Leonard said. “They govern us too.”

She spoke as if she was cross with me.

I felt my reflection in the glass, blushing with immodesty. I wondered if she guessed. I admired her figure, the graceful curve of her hips as she went to the door and turned. She stood with her hand on her hip, studying me. Her square jaw spoke of defiance, I thought, of a tigerish strength.

“Would you like to join me for a cup of tea?” she asked.

“Will you give me five minutes to freshen up?” I asked. A bead of sweat trickled down my face.

She nodded, walking out of the room.

I listened to her heels tap against the stairs and made my way into the bathroom. I filled the sink with warm water. Cupping my hands, I leaned over and splashed my face. I breathed in our encounter. My cheeks tingled clean when I dried them and studied my reflection in the mirror. I felt new and old in my attic bathroom, cheeks cherry red but eyes showing age. I heard the tea kettle whistle as I examined freckles, wondering who would be going downstairs and to whom.



Dating Daniel

Pressed up against the vinyl seat, I wait. Cigarette smoke fills the subway car. Curls and thins. Sleeps on top of the seats. I like coming into the city to see Anita. Her heels click against the wood floor as she takes me back to her office. Her legs are long. They shimmer in her nylons. I dream that I am as sexy as she is. Anita is helping me find myself. I come into the city once a week. The air is cold. My breath frosts. Where I'm from, it doesn't snow and there is blinding sunshine when I'm driving. There the trees are furnished with leaves all year long. Here they're bare in winter. I step off the train, watch passengers toss newspapers into a bin and enter the station. Anita is expecting me at four. What'll I tell her? There's nothing new in my life.

Out on the street, taxis cough plumes of exhaust into the cold. I walk along Lexington bundled inside my coat, ice crunching under my boots. The sidewalk is crowded; mid-town is full of businesses. People leave work early for the long weekend. I don't have plans. Maybe I'll go to a museum, study Monet. Lose myself in his watery images. Dreaming. Pictures soothe my mind.

Suddenly I bump into a young man. His face is soft - drawn with care. Long chin. Wistful.

"Where are you from?" he asks, holding my arm from the shock of contact. He can tell I'm from out of town. Looks people in the eyes. "California."

A bus splats gutter water on the sidewalk. Should I tell him more? He seems safe. Last guy I met talked real close to me.

"What are you doing in New York?" he asks. Glances at me from head to foot. Notices I'm tall. He's tall too.

"I came here to go to graduate school." The wind bites at my ears. I have to catch a bus that goes down Broadway. Is he going to ask for my number? Don't have a lot of time.

"I'm a talk show host," he says. A celebrity! Don't know too many of those. Went to school with kids of the stars. Fancy prep school.

"I have an appointment." My hands flutter to my throat. Don't know what to do with themselves.

"Take my card." He says.

Hand bus driver the fare and sit toward the back of the bus. I read the name on the card over and over again. Watched him walk down the street with his umbrella under his arm. Walked like Charlie Chaplin. Feet splayed out.

Can see the tops of cars as the bus rolls down the street. Should I tell Anita about Daniel? Or put his card away and wait for a rainy day when there's nothing to do? Don't have friends in New York. Don't try. If classmates didn't scowl when I talk, maybe I'd make more of an effort. Pride. Mom would walk with her head high. Mom would stand up for what she believes in. Truth is, I want classmates to come to me. Revere me like I revere Mom.

Pull the long metal cord that signals the bus to stop. Doors open. Wind blows through my coat as I step onto the curb. Walk down Eleventh Street. Woman passes me walking a poodle. Anita's brownstone is on the corner of Eleventh and Sixth Avenue. Only a half a block away. Should I have given Daniel my number? Why am I so passive with men? Men shouldn't always have to do the asking. I say I'm a modern woman but a part of me feels old-fashioned. Want Daniel to honor me for that.

Standing at the entrance to Anita's brownstone. She buzzes me into the lobby and I wait for her to let me into her suite. She's pretty, like the ocean at dusk. At that hour, the sky fades like blue jeans — soft and worn. "Hi," I say.

"Follow me back to my office," she says. I sit on the sofa. Look out the window wanting to pull Daniel's card out of my purse.

"I met a guy at the train station," I say. All along, Anita's been telling me that I'm going to meet men. That it takes time. That I have to learn how to relate to them.

"You have?" she says. She crosses her legs, clasping hands over her knee.

"Yeah. I just sort of bumped into him in front of the train station. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

I talk excitedly. Haven't met a guy in months. Then remember how the last one lost interest.

"What's wrong?" Anita asks.

"Why would he like me?"

"Because you're a beautiful and intelligent woman," she says. She stares at me with such intensity that I can't look away. I want to believe her. My eyes swim with tears. I stare back.

Sitting at a cafe on the corner of Sixth Avenue. Windows sweat from steam that curls from gratings in the sidewalk. Put my mouth to the lip of my mug and blow. Think about the guy I met in front of the train station. Want to dig through my purse for his card. I think I stuck it in the side flap.

Why would he want to date me? Okay looking. Tall. Thick hair. Has a sheen. Except I wear glasses. Mom wants me to get contacts. Don't like sticking things in my eyes. Don't look like Mom. More like Dad. Have his disposition. Gentle. Soft like the tips of his mustache when he kisses me. Remember how Dad would read me bedtime stories. Blankets tucked under my chin. Smelling toothpaste on Dad's breath.

Waiter sets a bowl of french onion soup in front of me. Cheese floats on the top of the broth. I smile at the waiter who is swamped with customers. Remember when I waited tables back home. People poking at me for more coffee. Worked long hours. Had a mattress that didn't give but slept soundly anyway. Didn't have time to think about being lonely. Didn't have friends then either. Didn't talk. Was shy.

Dig through my purse for Daniel's card. Set it on the table. Read his name in black lettering. Should I call him? What if he doesn't remember me? Pretends he doesn't know me?

Look out the window of the cafe. The glare of the traffic lights reflects off the slippery street. Banks of snow hedge the sidewalk.

Pull my attention back inside. A man walks over to a pay phone against the wall. I could call Daniel. Have him meet me here.

Hot soup steams my glasses. Look at the people in the restaurant through a fog. Think of home. The ocean. Fog rolling gently off the hills and into the sea. Swimming. Turning with the waves. Coming up for breath.

Listening to the conversation at the table next to mine. Man and woman are talking about how they met. He was abroad at a conference in Belgium. Saw her from across the room and fell in love. She has long legs and small breasts. Did he fall in love with her or with an image? What did Daniel like about me when we stood on the street corner and talked? Am I as pretty as the woman next to me? I have smooth skin that is soft like flour. Can touch my skin and your fingers feel like they are sinking into something light and airy. The man holds her hand and her wedding ring glitters under the cafe lights.

“Would you like something else?” the waiter asks me.

“Some more bread,” I say. The waiter turns and walks toward the kitchen. He keeps coming by my table. I think he may like me.

The waiter sets a basket of bread on the table. I smile at him. He has nice eyes. Green like the color of gum trees. Look over toward the phone. No one's using it. I could call Daniel. If he answers what will I say? Tell him I'm the girl he met in front of the train station? I'll stammer. When I'm really nervous my upper lip starts to quiver. My whole body shakes. A talk show host. Who would think a celebrity would want to know me? I have big hopes. Dreams. I'm going to be an important person. Daniel has a reputation big enough to match what mine is going to be. I take a big breath thinking about my success to come. Then realize that I'm dreaming.

I listen in on the conversation of the couple next to me. They're talking about retirement. Think how nice it would be to grow old with someone. How much my life has been about starts and stops. Never a gradual progression. Would like to stay with someone. Can't imagine a talk show host getting boring. I'd be his audience. Let him

perform for me. Why do I keep dreaming? Why can't I just march over to the phone and call? Stopped by fear. Fear of intimacy.

I'm just going to do it. I'm going to call. Push my chair away from the table and walk across the cafe. A cacophony of voices rises when I pick up the receiver. Can barely hear the dial tone. Butterfly wings beat against my stomach. I hope he'll be excited to hear from me.

Can see Mom frowning. Doesn't think ladies should do the pursuing. Inch my shoulder up over my ear to block out the noise. Waiter walks by me and smiles. Daniel answers the phone.



After work

I stumble into the post office, worn out from working all day and wait at the end of the line. Sunlight streams through the window — a gauzy yellow thinning and spreading through the room. Ahead of me, two Mexican women gab, their tongues clicking, their gold-capped teeth gleaming. I stare at their dull black hair — long and straight. They move up in the line. I start thinking about work. Wondering if Mark likes me. We would make such a perfect couple. We're both tall. Come from good families. Have lots going on in our lives. I don't know why he doesn't look at me. Sometimes I think he's fighting his feelings. He wants me, but he doesn't. I mean he's always trying to start up a conversation with me. I just want to do my work. But then he starts to pay attention to me and I can't help but wonder if he likes me. It's not like I'm a dog or anything. I have my imperfections but for the most part I'm pleasant-looking. But then, looks are just looks. Substance is what counts. Right? Who knows. I should move up before the people behind me get upset.

Instead I step out of line and walk back outside. I can mail these letters tomorrow. Who will know that they didn't go out today? The line is so long and its so hot inside the post office.

The letters were never mailed. Morgan ended her life the next day.



One

The wind snaps at my cheeks as I walk from my car.

A young woman sleeps on a bench,
her hair, long and knotted, spilling onto the sidewalk,
The ends, split and forked, forming a tributary —
two rivers that lead to nowhere.

A bus casts a shadow over her —
her features disappear into the darkness.

I walk past her

Telling myself that I am different.

My hand trails the railing of the doctor's office,
the paint is worn and chipped;
How long have I been coming here?

At the top of the steps I catch my reflection in the glass —
I look away, into the room, at a painting —
a sea-scape, waves tumbling and crashing, break-tides
overflowing onto the shore.

The door to the second room opens,
the doctor ushers me in.
I sit and stare at my knees,
thin and bony
I don't have anything to say.

The doctor's eyes look through me —
I think of the woman lying on the bench
her pupils constricting in the sun —
I tell the doctor that I am no different.
Bands of sunlight filter through the blinds,
the doctor says we are all the same.

I think of a meadow of sunflowers
their necks arching in the wind.
I touch a strand of my hair —
the end breaks off onto my palm,
Splinters.
The woman on the bench is gone.




The Frangance Lingers On

This is the conclusion of a eulogy that Morgan read at her grandmothers funeral .

. . . A couple of days before you died, I bought you a tall, slender white rose. The rose was a bud whose paper-thin petals, wrapped neatly and tightly around her pollen, were yet to open. The flower has now dried and withered, seemingly dead herself. Yet, the drooped neck and wilted petals only feign death, a soft scented, willowy frangance lingers on. The flower's aroma is a metaphor of your living presence in my life. An essence of you surrounds me, sweetening the air I breathe, reminding me of your love.



 WHEN MORGAN SEGAL DIED, SHE TOOK WITH HER AN EXTRAORDINARY TALENT. I had the privilege over the few years preceding her death of reading her stories and her poetry, and I was in constant amazement at the versatility of her skill at so young an age. She wrote whimsy as well as she wrote tense and somber drama, reflecting elements of herself, as a writer must, in such a way as to reveal both the light and the shadows that alternately brightened and darkened her soul. In this wonderful book her genius emerges in careful stages and we are one with a soaring talent which, like a bird in flight, fell too soon to the earth below.

Al Martinez

Columnist, L.A. Times

This is an extraordinary collection of work. Morgan had an almost uncanny knack of seeming to recount the very ordinary, the almost predictable, and yet within her text let us see what a fragile base most lives rest on. Her sense of this dangerous balance is what we can recognize now; the sadness is there'll be no more.

Roland Starke

Novelist