TAMER OF HORSES: Chapter TWO

Lao Tsu was keeper of the imperial archives at Loyang in the province of Honan in the sixth century B.C. All his life he taught that "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao"; but, as he was riding off into the desert to die—sick at heart at the ways of men—he was persuaded by a gatekeeper in northwestern China to write down his teaching for posterity."
(intro to Tao Te Ching, tr., Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English; Vintage Books, div. of Random House, NY, NY; c 1972).

"99 dreams I have had
and every one a red balloon.
It's all over and I'm standing pretty
in this dust that was a city.
If I could find a souvenir
just to prove the world was here,
and here is a red balloon.
I think of you and let it go." --Nena (80's Pop song)

"One does not rejoice to see the death of his country." – Gore Vidal

Chapter TWO

Who is my gatekeeper? The New York division of my publishing company has been razed to the ground. I've been asked to teach one class at the University of Pennsylvania.

I think this will be my only chance—the only class. I know now, this is the only way to teach. I grab the ten most important books I've ever read from my bookshelves. Elie Wiesel's Night is the hinge upon which all the other books hang. What does he say about gatekeepers? That we must not make the mistake of entering the garden by someone else's gate. We must find our own.

I've just learned that Joyce Larson escaped from the 20th floor of the World Trade Center before it collapsed. For six months I've grieved her dead. Watch her now: Vomiting corpse-dust through the apocalyptic streets she once described as "pure jazz": smoke rises from her business suit; flames rake her white-blonde hair. I remember a moment in Boston ten years ago. We were both going through divorces. She took my hand in hers, tears creasing her face like a veil: "Someday-- *some day* --I will rise from my own ashes."

'But not me,' I think, as I step into a classroom of eager, young faces. I pick up a broken piece of yellow chalk and write the quote for the day: "Not all who wander are lost," (J.R.R. Tolkien), which implies that some are lost indeed. One student, a petite, athletic Black girl sitting in the front row looks indomitable in her starched ROTC uniform. She is the first to answer nearly every question. These were the days before Bennett Hall had been renovated, so everyone had to shout as the helicopters flew overhead, shaking the windows nearly out of their panes on the way to the University Hospital. The spectre of war clings to me like chalk dust. This young, Black student is training to fly fighter helicopters--not a workhorse like the Huey or its successor the Blackhawk. No, something nimble like an Apache or Air wolf—maybe a Sea Sprite with Hellfire laser-guided missiles.

After her first essay on Flannery O'Connor knocks me flat with its passion, music, perfect grammar, and the illumination of an Irish monk scrivenning madly in his monastery, I know I must do something. I keep her after class one day and, staring at the wooden floor, I whisper: "You do not want to be in this war, La Shonte." Then, my voice rising, I state, "Helicopter pilots will be the first to die. This is going to be a long,

horrendous war and you do not want to be in it." She wonders aloud how I know this. She may as well ask why my synapses fire in a certain direction, or why I knew, in 2 seconds, which 10 books to choose for this class. I've seen it before—a thousand years ago; a century ago; now; and next week…

"...I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,
Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles I saw them, ...
I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war...."
("When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Walt Whitman)

"But it's the only way I can afford this university," she protests, "and they say the war will only last a couple of weeks anyway."

I snap awake to the present day and hour. Forgetting the rule never to touch students, I grab this kid by the shoulders: "They're lying! They *always* lie! Get a loan. Apply for scholarships. What is your life *worth*!?"

Seven years after that Freshman student quit ROTC two weeks before the Iraq War began; years after she graduated with grants, scholarships, and loans; the years, the lives, the lectures later, I find myself driving through musical scores of light. I've just fled Philadelphia for Marco Island, Florida. And I just dropped off my daughter for her first day of Junior high. The sun is rising. Half the light is as sharp as the second hand on my watch. And half the light is soft, like powdery gold-dust sifting through an hourglass of sunrise. Squadrons of helicopters fly in formation above the Mimosa trees. Swarms of Sundragons, or are they Smoky Shadowdragons, or is it too far South for Dragonhunters and Variable Dancers?—hard to know—but they click and drone in the thousands. Over the Gumbo-Limbo trees, hovering just above the sawgrass—they battle. It is the most

delectable carnage. Their wings glint like gold leaf. Their eyes contain thirty-thousand lenses, each. *There* flicks an Eastern Pondhawk and *there* zips a Wandering Glider. It is also the season for the Halloween Pennant with black and orange striped wings. They perch like 16th notes jotted quickly on crimson, star-shaped flowers, then whhhiiirrr!—a terrza rima ascendance. In the rotating skein of veins; in the chaos of this voracious combat, I fear their wings will shatter like blown glass; mosaics of mosques. It must be too far South for the Sparkling Jewelwing, the *calopteryx dimidiata*. But it's just the right place for Blue Corporals, with their four epaulets flashing. Schoolchildren walk straight through this iridescent violence without fear, without harm, as though dipped by their heels in a protective coating of incorrigible love.

1968: a grade school Christmas pageant: my 4th grade class sang "… and wild and deep the words repeat of peace on Earth good will towards men"—but all I see is a newsreel of Hueys landing—monstrous blades matting heavy jungle grass flat like combed hair; blowing back medics struggling to load convulsing soldiers into those helicopters; the hemorrhaging rain; the bleeding sun —"but in despair I bowed my head, there is no peace on Earth I said, for fate is strong and mocks the song of peace on Earth good will towards men." My dad will not be home by Christmas.

Is anything more divine than dragonfly wings mirroring the first light of day? Odonata is an ancient order of insects—300 million years old. Why, when humans imitate nature, do we always pervert organic design? Because our eyes do not contain thirty thousand lenses? Each? Because our motives are truncated; not, say, 300 million years old? In Japanese mythology, dragonflies carry ancestral spirits back to their living family members. Dragonflies are a Japanese symbol of victory in war. Da Vinci envisioned dragonflies as weapons, and so we have the Army's workhorse, the UH-60A Blackhawk, with its gyroscopic stability and two General Electric T700 engines with 1600 horsepower each. Imagine a cavalry of three thousand, two hundred horses galloping towards you. We mimic nature's design and blaspheme Native American culture; we

create weapons that so violate the Earth: the Apache; the Longbow Apache; the Chinook; Super Stallion; Gazelle; and Little Birds—a bestiary of weapons equipped with 30 mm cannon rocket pods; Aesop's coded laser-painting targets; FFAR rocket-pod grenade launchers; anti-tank and anti-sub missiles. American helicopters painted Vietnam thick with Agent Orange. Iraq used American helicopters to spray genocidal chemicals on the Kurds.

And I wonder, how many of these schoolchildren will be flying military helicopters in the future? What new, eternal war will that be? For what righteous slogan will that war be coined? And in the skull-eating confusion of combat, will they remember this orchestral sunrise throbbing with dragonflies and dew?

* * *

I insist on driving the last 30 miles to my Grandmother's farm in Kentucky. My husband relents and we switch places. I turn off the main highway onto the back roads—paved–over horse-and-buggy roads from another century. He says I am lost. He fidgets with maps: his face intense as a crayfish. He won't find it there. I have never, in my life, been more certain of my location. *There* is the overgrown footpath to the one-room schoolhouse where she walked to school as a child. She will not be there to greet me. Instead, the Narcissus greet me along the sides of the road. They wave papery hands clumsily in the harsh wind. *Trees greet me*. He insists, again, that I am lost. *Rough skin of trees*. He wonders aloud how I can see to drive: "Stop crying," he demands. There are caves underneath these hills. There are springs. *"Here are your waters and your watering place. Drink and be whole again beyond confusion"* ("Directive," Robert Frost). Russell Cave Road. Allen Pike. One more hill, one more creek, and the farm appears. I turn down the long lane to the farm, stop the car, and drop my head on the steering wheel. Two hundred yards to go.

* * *

The only person missing at my Grandmother's funeral was her lover. Otherwise it was standing room only at Leesburg Christian Church in the middle of nowhere in Kentucky: three-hundred people crammed inside; one-hundred people spilled out into the church yard. Warren Mallory stops me on the way into my grandma's funeral and says, "Your Grandma—she was my buddy," chin quivering on the word "buddy." Another farmer stops me and describes how my great-grandfather churned up the stubborn fields with a wooden plough pulled by a team of Clydesdales. He describes great clouds of red dust stirred up by the horses's hooves—huge and round as masons's mallets. Then he says, respectfully, "Why, you *could* say that Mabel was one wonderful person."

Craig Irvin, overhearing this statement, adds, "Weren't no better."

"Why," the farmer repeats, as if to temper Craig's remark and reassert his own, "you *could* say that Mabel was one wonderful person."

Craig's whole body trembles, as he says, fiercely, this time, "*Weren't* no better."

* * *

What I feel when the towers falter impossibly and implode is a team of muscular Clydesdales breaking loose from their harnesses and tackle. As in a waking Guernica nightmare I chase the giant, panicked horses all over the farm. My boots slip over and over in the muddy vermilion clay. My palms blister then bleed from the sodden rope. Their silvery silky feathers redden with mud from hoof-head to fetlock. Their necks arch and spring high and away like oblique bridges breaking. But I must catch and calm the horses because, in their frenzied terror, they could become dangerous. Blinding-bright squares of rain flood the farm as I rope one horse, only to lose another. The blue-black sky pours reams of sparkling hand-written opera. I spin in erratic circles trying to catch the soaked pages as they fall, but they crumble in my hands like papier mache. Horses

and rope and opera. Tornadic Clydesdales. Ears laid flat against their heads; intelligent eyes wide and white with lightning; broad hooves kicking out at me, and within the darkest depths of me: primitive, equine. Wet music falling; never to be caught and collected. Never silenced; never heard.

* * *

"Enraged I write I know not what; dead, quick, I know not how."

("Elegy on the Death of Sidney," Sir Edward Dyer)

* * *

What I love most about flight is that no mathematical proof exists to explain this phenomenon. Theories fill libraries, but they cannot mathematically pin down exactly how flight occurs. There are facts and figures, but none add up with precision. The cruising speed of the 767 is 0.8 mach or 850 kph. The real-life final horsepower out of two large turbofan GE 282.5 kN engines is influenced by the tip clearance of the rotating blades, the amount of choke to which the inlet vanes are adjusted, the turbine inlet temperature (TRIT), and the number of sets of blades being used to extract power from hot air. Slight changes to any of these factors will alter the final horsepower. Physicists express energies in joules (J), and torques in Newton.metres (Nm) to avoid confusion. But they cannot, finally, explain the mystery of flight. All factors considered, the 767 airliner has 76,000 horsepower. What was never considered is a basic tenet of war. Each time a new weapon is created, the balance of power is disrupted. Horsepower and flight. Imagine a cavalry of 76 thousand horses at your disposal—cut loose with the primitive slice of a box-cutter. As historian Colin McEvedy so simply explains the Fall of Rome: "it was never able to measure up to the requirements of the cavalry age."

* * *

Driving down the tortuous dirt roads from the Sunrise, Kentucky cemetery, Grandma makes us stop to speak with kinfolk along the way. My father is along this time. It must have been the 70s. The cousin-farmer asks my dad where his farm was located and how was his tobacco crop this season. My dad smiles, scratches his head, and says, "Well, I'm not a farmer."

"Then what the heck are ye?" asks the incredulous cousin. Proudly, my father states that he's an Airline Captain.

"Ya mean, yer one of them fellers what makes white lines in the sky?"

"Uh, yeah," dad answers with a new career perspective.

"Well, then I reckon you got a mighty poor occupation."

* * *

Before the second plane hit the second tower, I knew. Perched warily upon an over-hanging rock ledge within my internal landscape, months earlier I had begun the impossible climb up towards this isolated cliff. I looked like another highly polished executive standing in a corner office over-looking Independence Square Park in Philadelphia. Look closer. I am barefoot: I've kicked my brand new loafers aside. I no longer wished for titles or money: all I wanted was a compass of rain. A red-tailed hawk--architect of air of dream--lands on the weather vane opposite my office. And the weather vane trembles like a divining rod. Heavy black rotary phones ring, and ring, and god-bless-it ring, but I don't answer. I cup a dead kestrel in my right hand; in my left I raise a photo of a WWI dough-boy in canvass spats--my father's father. And the photograph is burning.

On a bright, March afternoon in 2001 a fringe Islamic sect called the Taliban blew the Bamiyan Buddhas out of their hallowed mountain home in Afghanistan. I ran down seven flights of stairs to get the newspaper for myself. A harrowing voice whispered, *'All the wars your ancestors fought will be obscured by the red dust of these exploding*

Buddhas.' I froze on the corner of 6th and Walnut watching waves of office workers rush past. Dressed in a smart business suit, Ann Taylor, size 2; extra-heavy starched shirt fresh from the cleaners; hair cut thick and short; muscles tight and lithe as a springbok, I stopped in alarm and stared at Washington Square Park. And standing on that corner, reading about the Bamiyan Buddhas on the front page of *The New York Times*, the sidewalk shimmered like a river of mercury. I raised the newspaper like a torch as my stomach sank, and a voice whispered: *'This is why you must turn your back on money. Only the stopwatch of Poetry can save us now. Only the rhythm of prayer. The water-clock of History has begun to crack. The floodwaters of time have begun to pour.'*

* * *

After the City of Philadelphia forced my publishing company to close, I ran to Brook's pre-school to pick her up and take her home. All of the parents were somber and quietly, quickly picked up their children. No one wanted to talk; a few parents privately wept. The city seemed deserted as I briskly walked Brook home in her stroller. A few cars sped past on Pine Street, screeching as they went. I wondered if I, too, should get the hell out of the city.

Hall Street was a dead-end half-block in South Philly. And there, on my doorstep, Jack sat holding a half-empty bottle of vodka.

"I thought you were in New York today," he stated in a slurred, almost accusatory manner.

"No. That meeting was scheduled for tomorrow."

"So, I guess you'll go tomorrow."

"No. That meeting is cancelled forever."

"Really?"

"*Really*!" I wondered how much of the news he had seen and how drunk he was. Once we all got into the house, Brook wanted juice and a nap. I just wanted vodka.

I was so relieved to have Jack with us, but as we watched the day's events unfold on TV, I noticed that he seemed unshaken.

If I noticed anything about myself, it was the feeling of falling--a sleeping bird falling--sheer dead-weight falling--without end; then landing hard over and over; until I found myself kneeling on a rock ledge overlooking the violent convergence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers. Crimson stripes of fresh peregrine blood began at my cheekbone and followed my fingertips down my jaw.

Jack loved, but could not piece together, the history of my mercenary heart. On 9/11 he wanted apocalyptic sex, whereas I had been removed to a sacred landscape beyond his understanding. On 9/11 he wanted to hold me, but I was suddenly gone; kneeling and keening; sharpening a quiver full of arrows, one at a time, with precision and longing.

* * *

Brook is 4 years old. I've protected her from the news, but I cannot hide my red, swollen eyes, so I say I'm allergic.

"To everything?" she asks.

"To the T.V.," I answer, "so we can't turn it on right now."

I suddenly remember a photo exhibit I wandered through in Amsterdam over 30 years ago. Phalanxes of young boys are dressed from head to toe in black. Crude green headbands are tied tightly around their foreheads; and written in Arabic their headbands scream, "Jihad." Goose-stepping in perfect rows, some boys wave green flags and shout: "Death to America!" Some march hoisting AK-47s. The youngest—the one the photographer focused upon--was about 4-years-old. He robotically grips a wooden replica of a machine gun. From the multiplicity of photos in that exhibit, the visceral, death-stare in that little boy's eyes is the image I never forgot.

My daughter's school and my publishing company are both closed for over a week after 9/11. So I drive us down to Cape May—to my favorite hotel. Refulgent waves pivot and twirl like glimmering fractals of office paper exploding in a merciless sky. After I pay a familiar lifeguard to baby-sit my daughter, I surf out and out, near the dolphins. The

waves are not high enough to surf, so I make my board hit the water like a skipping rock. I feel a rage deeper than the ocean. The weight of my tears could capsize the ocean.

That evening I can barely eat dinner. Again, I struggle with tears.

"What's wrong mommy?" Brook finally asks.

"Must be too much saltwater—it stings." She rolls her eyes at this excuse, as do several restaurant patrons who are eavesdropping on our conversation.

"Okay. A very bad thing happened to my company. I've lost some people—I've lost co-workers and some very good friends; the best."

"Where did you lose them?"

"In New York."

"If they're lost in New York, can you find them somewhere else?"

"Maybe in Heaven," I sigh deeply. I'm not going to pretend or lie to this child, not to this beloved child, who is grasping the gravity of my mood and a reality I could not have imagined for our lives.

"Did you lose Delois?" she asks cautiously.

I start fishing for pasta with the tines of my fork, then tell her the truth: "Yes."

"But you love Delois. She's your favorite boss. She lets me play with her son's toys. What will happen to her son, Jared?" And her mouth purses into disappointment as she sucks in her own tears. Three years old and she's already bargaining with God.

"He will probably live with his grandmother now. Yes, she's my favorite."

I glare at the eavesdroppers, struggling with their own tears now.

"No more questions, Sweetie. Time for ice cream."

When we return from Cape May and were summoned back to work and school, Brook slips her perfect, small hand into mine and asks a question that changes the color of the sky.

"Mommy--are you going to die at work today like those people in that burning building?"

* * *

"Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?"

-- Duino Elegies by Rainer Maria Rilke

* * *

She wants to sleep in my bed that night. "Tell me," she says, "tell me about a happy place."

* * *

A syzygy of the dying sun and the gibbous moon blinks open and shut like a great owl's eyes as we ride up and down hills in the station wagon towards Leesburg, Kentucky. At the age of 65 my Grandma married a friend from her youth, Kirtley McDaniel, and moved from Charlestown, South Carolina to her childhood farm. I'm 8 years old and anxious about this change in my Grandma's life; but I'm comforted by this rural landscape, as though seeing my fingerprints for the first time. The road narrowed as the sky swept magenta against the dark green leaves. The roads were so niggardly thin and the embankments so steep that two cars could not pass alongside each other. One driver would have to pull off the road to allow the other car to pass and avoid a crash. It was always a game of chicken. This was better than any thrill-ride in Disneyland.

Suddenly I see a huge heart-shaped sign cut out from corrugated metal that reads: "Get right with God." And mom blurts out to dad: "This is it! This is the spot I warned you about!" I hear the tires screech and watch my father struggling with the steering wheel —turning it hand over hand fast enough to keep all four wheels on the hairpin turn. Once

the car screams safely around that treacherous turn, we all laughed with relief, and dad says, “So-- are we ‘Right with God’ now?”

* * *

Sun, carbon, and liquid water compressed again and again into the dark, glowing veins of the Earth where they sat in the chairs of forgetfulness for billions of years--long before dinosaurs: We stop at Aunt Thelma’s farm for the night. And there, my sisters and I sleep on worn, musty sofas in front of a fireplace. But logs were not burning there; instead, something I’d never seen before: chips of coal—black, but red from within.

The next morning I explored the farm and found a coal heap— black, hard, and bright — casually thrown into a sloppy mound as though it were not treasure. Kentucky coal is from the Silurian age and is bituminous, which has the highest heating value of all coals because it is the oldest. I imagine coal seams beneath my feet; the karst features of Kentucky’s underside: vast cave systems and fresh springs. I rub a shiny flake of coal in my hands and think how it was once a wet, shimmering forest. Whoever loves me in my life will need to understand that this hard and antediluvian darkness lines and lights the veins that moves my blood—that my heart is the sun turned inside-out.

* * *

That same day Uncle Charlie was taking his brand new blue truck back to the dealer to have it painted red. Why? Because his favorite goose preferred the color red. The goose would not nuzzle the new truck nor run after it as Uncle Charlie drove away from the farm. Uncle Charlie, ornithological wizard, figured it had to be the color red his goose was wanting—that the poor bird was detached and distraught about the color blue. I like to imagine the troubled thoughts that disturbed the truck dealer when Uncle Charlie told him why he had to paint his new blue truck red: “for the sake of my pet goose. He prefers red.” Was the dealer going crazy—was he “right with God?” Five hundred

dollars later and Uncle Charlie drove his newly painted red truck towards the farmhouse. The goose waddled towards the truck and honked, well, with glee. The goose was happy.

* * *

That day, when we reached Grandma's farm, she began to tell the story of her first heart attack. "Here come a gullywasher like to take out more'n a few trees." And at the foot of a tree a newborn calf curls frightened in a slight depression of earth. A safe spot before the rain, but now rain begins to pool up around the calf's hooves and legs. Streaks of water darken the newborn's hide. He struggles to stretch out his legs. He kneels for a while on all limbs then, exhausted, topples back onto his side. Only a few hours old, he hasn't the strength to stand. Water laps at this chest and tail; the pool deepens. Hypothermic calf shivers. Grandma think she's torn a chest muscle—yes—no—yes—as she locks her arms around the calf's flailing limbs and lifts him out of the rising pool of water. She jogs across the field—'must get calf to higher ground.' For a moment she thinks she's carrying her young son, Jarvey, up to bed—the calf's soft hide feels like hand-me-down flannel pajamas. Vellum. The uneven field moves beneath her feet like an old staircase; then the cold rain runs down her collar; spring rain splashes at his face and mouth, sputtering. She is laying Jarvey down to sleep, but as she tucks the blanket around him it shatters like ice; the small bed becomes a large hole in a frozen lake and he sinks down, down; fire shooting up her left shoulder then down her arm as she reaches for him; lunges for him; nausea; refusal. Her sternum becomes the exact spot where her son punctures the ice; heavy snow boots; sinking, whirling down, down the lacustrine basement of heart attack and waking dream.

* * *

"True hearts have ears and eyes, no tongues to speak:
They hear and see, and sigh, and then they break. -- (Sir Edward Dyer)

* * *

So many years later I'm running on a treadmill on an island in Florida. At first I'm angry that I'm only running an 8-minute mile. Then some cute guy hops on the treadmill next to me, so I slow down. I let him start the conversation and soon figure out that my daughter and his son attend the same Middle school. He yammers on and on about his three kids and two ex-wives, and how rich he is, while all I'm thinking is 'What a hunk.' I'm careful not to run faster than him. He mentions something about "working on his walk with God."

I cannot resist, and ask, "Is God that short?" And Mr. Hottie looks surprised and cannot help but laugh.

I remember a time in Washington Square Park in Philadelphia when a celeste green nymph landed on my forearm. Jack was about to flick the insect away, when, panicked, I said: "Don't! What if it's God?" And Jack answered, "Would God be that small?"

Then Mr. Hottie says something surprising: "I never loved my wives. How about you, did you love your husband?"

"He was never my husband; but I loved him. I love him still."

* * *

Again I'm running at the absurdly expensive Y on Marco Island. I'm relieved that I'm nearing a consistent 7-minute mile time. Suddenly the ticker on the news-screen states that John Updike has died at the age of 76. It's like someone strikes me in the chest with a 50-lb. weight. I click the speed down to 2.0. For so many years I was proud of my note from Updike: "Ms. Sutton: You are a very severe editor. John Updike." Now, I am ashamed. I had asked him to rewrite a stanza in a poem about his mother's death. And yeah, sure, it needed re-writing, but did I express any empathy over the death of his

mother? Probably not. No. My favorite poem by Updike is "Crab Crack." A few weeks after Updike's death, new scientific studies confirm that crabs feel and remember pain.

* * *

Twenty years ago I walked in from a snowstorm into the *National Poetry Review's* office, a few blocks from your new apartment in Philadelphia, and asked, "What can I do?" The three men working there shyly and awkwardly put me to work logging in manuscripts and proofreading. After a few weeks I get to know them all a bit.

There's Mitch, the advertising manager, who sits alone in his cubicle and does not like to be bothered. He tries to explain that there are certain ways that things must be done: coffee made this way; poetry manuscripts logged in that way; mail opened and sorted another way. He's stocky, rough, and muscular, but not attractive, really, because I sense an anger management problem. He was in the Navy and worked on nuclear subs, but never saw any action in Vietnam. I mention that my dad was a fighter pilot in Korea and Vietnam because I think this might shorten whatever abyss seems unbridgeable between us. It seems only to push him back into the darker recesses of his makeshift cubicle. One morning he's ballistic over the way the Poet asked him to open a Fed Ex package. As though talking to the ceiling tiles, Mitch rants about wrapping a phone cord around the Poet's neck and strangling him.

'Whoa,' I think, 'this is America's most important *Poetry* magazine?' I remember Mitch mentioning that he was formerly employed as a Postal worker: 'O.K., that figures.'

Dave, one of the magazine's editors, and a seemingly harmless little Sicilian fellow, tries to explain in a fumbling, embarrassed way that Mitch really has good reasons to hate the Poet. 'Uh huh,' I'm thinking, 'but strangulation via phone cord?' In my own taciturn manner, I attempt to give Dave the skinny on my code of expected office conduct: I've worked as a Crime Reporter; I've traveled pretty much around the world often alone; I'm a rock-climber and a surfer and I'm not afraid of anything or anyone. I tell him I'm English, Scotch-Irish, and American Indian. I'm basically saying: 'Don't fuck with me,

pal.' Never mind that I weigh about 100 pounds and look like a dark Irish fairy wearing combat boots and a leather jacket not warm enough for this weather. No gloves.

Dave is very confused. And over the weeks I notice he's being crushed by stress like a wrongly accused Puritan squirming beneath a 400-pound rock. He and his wife just adopted two children from the slums of Brazil. The children's previous adoptive American parents couldn't handle the stress or the cultural difference. They changed the children's Brazilian names from Leidy and Luis to Tiffany and John. They didn't like that "John" was so dark-skinned—or that he had a seizure disorder. The adoption agency found Dave and his wife who anxiously but joyously adopted these needy children. Dave and Kathy gave them back their South American names. And sometimes Dave has to leave work because Luis, about 2 years old, is having a seizure.

One day I'm proofreading with Peter, a handsome, fun fellow who also hates the Poet. "Well--Why?!," I finally wonder aloud. "What the hell's wrong with this man I've never met anyway, who everyone here hates, and why is he never here?" The only answers Peter can give are that the Poet is unusually terrified of cancer; and well, there's his ego. Hmmm, well; not attractive traits, but not exactly hateful. Just then the Poet walks in, strides over to his desk, props up his enormous feet, begins smoking a cigar, and makes about a dozen phone calls in 10 minutes. My eyes moisten. I lose my place where Peter and I were proofreading. Someone's calling my name, as from a defeated country in a future century.

The Poet, Jack, saunters over to my table, and asks me a question.

"I can't remember," is all I remember to say. Jack hands me a fistful of grapes. "These will help you remember. *And* they'll prevent cancer," he says. His eyes are slate blue. His hands are square and thick as the grapes tumble from his to mine.

"This one's quiet. How can she proofread?," he asks Peter.

My dark auburn hair wants to go in every direction. I answer for myself: "I have a Master's degree in Journalism from Northwestern University and I just moved from Chicago."

"Why?"

"To live with my boyfriend."

"That's nice. You're not dressed warmly enough."

"This is not Chicago."

"My best friend, Jeff Marks, is from Chicago."

"Then he must be a great person."

Jack thrummed his fingers on the desk and smiled. His I-teeth were slightly longer than the rest. His black hair sprung in thick curls around his short sideburns. He yelled over to Mitch's cube to give Dave a raise so he could travel whenever needed to help out with his newly adopted son. Jack walked out of the office, and with him, the future as I had planned it.

* * *

For weeks, instead of sleeping, I watch "Out of Africa" over and over until dawn. When I do sleep I dream I'm his physician. I administer venipuncture solutions. I listen to his heart under the fluorescent haze of hospital lighting. I scream at the nurses to work faster, faster. I scream. I wake. I cannot believe this. Not Joe McClatchey, my favorite English Professor, not bone cancer, not now. I climb upstairs to watch "Out of Africa." I replay the scene where Merrill Streep and Robert Redford fly over the Rift Valley. I watch the pink V of flamingoes over and over again.

* * *

I'm on Chincoteague, a barrier island off Virginia, and I'm sitting in a theater with my boyfriend, Nathan. It's supposed to be a funny movie: Macauley Culkin smacking his face and screaming. Instead of laughing, my lungs heave with terror. I leave the theater for a drink of water—for air. The sunset looks like a page torn from the Book of Kells: cryptic and illuminated—beauty beyond explanation. I'm gasping for air. The teenage girl behind the concession stand follows me outside and asks if I'm okay. I walk back to

the hotel and sit on the balcony, fighting for each breath, watching the tide carry the sun away. *"And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!" (Hopkins)*

Nathan bursts into the hotel suite. He's yelling and throwing things about. He doesn't understand my behavior. I calmly tell him it's Joe—it must be Joe McClatchey. I'm losing him. I can feel him dying. Nathan thinks I'm crazy. He hates my anxiety. He resents my love for anyone but him. Even though he also had classes with Joe and understands what a beloved and ingenious professor this awkwardly shy man really was. Nathan was his student too. Why can't he understand some facet of my terror? But no, he continues yelling. I have no energy to respond. For hours I watch the sun extinguish its flames in the sea. It is May 17, 1991.

* * *

My therapist tells me there is no connection between my grief reaction and reality. So, one day in July, when I've convinced myself that Joe is still alive and suffering, I receive my copy of *Wheaton Alumni* magazine. I casually flip through the pages until I come to a picture of Joe in his Episcopal Reverend uniform. The caption reads: "Dr. Joe Hill McClatchey, chair and professor of English, died of cancer, May 17, at Central DuPage Hospital at the age of 55."

The obituary includes a tribute by one of his students: "He had a face, one with a capacity for bursting delight as well as profound sorrow. It was Joe's face I read, along with Lewis's book, Till We Have Faces. Looking back, Joe's face was the better reading."

* * *

Months earlier, while my favorite English professor was dying, the Poet's best friend, Jeff Marks, was dying too. All winter I slogged through the freezing Philadelphia rain and

arrived at work to find him lying on his office floor, day after day, wearing all black. Polaroids of Jeff lined his office walls. Books and manuscripts spilled from his desk onto the floor. I tiptoed over stacks of papers, his rock collection, smoldering cigar butts, unframed art, and empty bottles of Vodka to quietly deliver phone messages. I woke him if they were important—gently shaking his foot. I stared at him, sometimes, if they were not, and taped the messages to his door.

* * *

One night I dream I'm in Russia. I struggle through a blizzard looking for shelter. I find a familiar door and it opens. My clothes are soaked and frozen, so I strip out of them, and, wanting to thaw, I step into an antique ball-and-claw tub full of steaming water. It seems to have been prepared for me. As I cup the hot water over my back and shoulders, Jack steps into the room. He pushes his black sleeves up to his elbows and starts washing my neck and shoulders. His hands are strong and kind. I ask him to stop. He stops, says something, and leaves the room. I finish the bath, towel off, and wrap in a silk robe.

I step into the next room, which is very Eurasian. A brass pot of tea has been set on a trunk covered by a Persian rug. The cup of tea has a light, smoky flavor. I'm intrigued by an open doorway.

I step into a room that isn't a room at all: it is a simple Asian Folk temple suspended in mid-air. It is a house of cards balanced together with polaroids of Jeff. The Poet sits cross-legged on the floor, his back towards me. He cannot see me standing behind him, but silently knows I'm there. A candle singes the edges of the wind. And the wind is a map of heaven—a single bell warns of its nearness. I kneel behind him and place my arms around his chest, hugging him tightly, swaying back and forth in a rush of wind. The candle flame rips; the bell rings deranged; the temple of photographs shivers.

* * *

When I realize I love a man who is not my Nathan, I try to get a publishing job at Saunders. After the botched interview, I sit in Washington Square Park and watch the Indian summer light fall through the falling leaves. I lie down in the grass and let the leaves blow over my body one by one until I am buried.

* * *

Ten years later Jack says, "Remind me where you're from."

"Wauconda, Illinois." It's the same question the Dutch police asked after Bertus's murder. "Wauconda, Illinois." The Dutch have a saying about their police: "Where are the police when you need them? In their uniforms."

Wauconda should be spelled Wakonda, which means "universal spirit" in Ojibway. But the Dutch police didn't ask that question, nor did they ask about vision quests and how all living things had supernatural powers that could be accessed through guardian spirits. They didn't ask anything relevant to the murder. There was no mystery to solve. Two heroin addicts needed money and, as usual, they killed to get it. I remember a sentence from Brothers Karamozov: *"Habit is the greatest human motivator."*

* * *

"Having seen all things red,
Their eyes are rid
Of the hurt of the colour of blood forever."
--Wilfred Owen, "Insensibility"

* * *

I'm blissfully dizzy from hours of sex. Jack orders Greek food from Demitri's, and, while I'm eating, naked and entwined in the sheets; he inserts "Pulp Fiction" into the

VCR. I refused to buy cable TV because no one should have to pay for TV. Reading my mind, he says,

"That's what I love about you--you're cheaper than Jack Benny."

About 20 minutes into the movie, my hands begin trembling. Droplets of sweat bloom on my forehead and temples. Color drains from my face, neck, and torso.

"Turn it off," I plead quietly. "Please turn it off."

"But it's a hilarious movie!" he protests. Then he notices I am pale and trembling. "Okay. Okay!" He yanks the tape out of the VCR, then places me on his lap and rocks me gently; he strokes my sweaty hairline and wipes my face with the tail of his open shirt.

"What have I done to you? What have I done?" He continues to hold and rock me as out of a trance. "Why can't you watch that silly movie?"

"Oh, I had a difficult experience when I lived in Amsterdam."

"I thought it was the best time of your life."

"It was," I sigh, returning to myself. "But I had a boyfriend there. I had a co-worker. There was a robbery--heroin addicts--it happens all the time in the red light district of Amsterdam."

"Oh, that's all," he says, setting me aside as he shoves calamari down his throat.

"Yep, that's all. So I can't watch violent movies; never could really. The images replay in my memory: the nightmares don't end. Even as a little kid I would pass out during scary movies, and if we were at a neighbor's house, my older sister, Summer, would have to carry me home."

"*Summer*; Autumne; Gail: stupid, silly WASP names. Who did your parents think they were kidding?! Okay, I like *your* name," and sensing my growing outrage, he changes the subject: "You really fainted from scary movies, like blacked out?"

"Yeah, especially space alien movies: out--gone. And we're not *so* WASP. There's American Indian on both sides: on my mom's side going way back, and then my dad's mom was entirely Indian, but they tried to hide that from us because they were ashamed."

"*So sensitive*," he comments to himself, then adds, "You've seen "Jaws," right?"

"Right."

"How the hell did you make it through that?! I mean, you love the ocean. And you still go surfing for Christ's sake."

"After that movie I did not sleep for an entire week. I couldn't place my legs under the dining room table. My mom wanted to take me to a psychiatrist. But I got over it."

"*How*?"

"Well, in Hawaii the natives think sharks are gods--and that the gods will protect you--ya know, if you're respectful. I think it's true. I had an experience in East Asia that verified the mythology."

He looks at me with a broad grin, and laughing, asks, "What the hell was that?"

Warmth returned to my face and extremities; humor to my mood. I decide to tell him about the time I went swimming off Macao.

"Me and Alan Akana, a real Hawaiian, well, one-fourth, which is a lot, were running around Macao."

"Where the fuck?"

"Look at the tags on your clothes--well, not *your* clothes, but most American clothes--and you'll often see a tag that says, 'Made in Macao.' But they didn't have any clothing factories when I was there. Anyway, it's an island off Hong Kong."

"Alan and I were 19 and hungry...." We had no lunch. So we entered a folk temple and stole rice wine and leechee nuts that some Asians left as an offering of filial piety--ancestor worship.

"You *stole* food left for some ancestor *Gods?!!*"

"Yeah, well, we were pretty sure they wouldn't miss it."

Then we found a secluded beach with Chinese junks off shore shuffling around like a deck of cards. The beach was pebbly; the South China Sea was tannin brown. A flat, Volkswagon-sized rock floated like a raft about 100 yards from shore. And then I told Jack the story.

Alan and I had a lot in common: he was one-fourth Hawaiian; I'm one-fourth Native American. The Native coincidence drew us together. So, there we were, eating and

drinking the ancestor-god's food and wine, as we stood together on a private beach. Our young bodies rippled and shone under the East Asian sun.

Alan shot one challenging glance at me, and we were off: sprinting into the water and racing to the flat, square rock. Almost a tie. We sat there for hours just basking in the moment, as though that rock was a broken waterclock that no longer measured time. We talked about our ancestors: our maternal grandfathers who both had committed suicide, wondering why and what this meant for our lives. The rock seemed a missing chunk of heaven.

Just as it occurred to me to kiss Alan, the Star Ferry's whistle blew. Doubting we could even make it to the Ferry in time, Alan noticed a caucasian man striding the beach and shouting something gibberellic like "invested!!" Alan laughed at the peculiar, gangly Brit and began to play with the wet curls that circled my head like a wreath. Columns of clouds buoyed up the sky. Then the Brit cupped his hands around his mouth and screamed, "Shock invested!! This beach is *shock invested* !!"

We both understood his statement with alarm. Of course: a deserted beach, no shark net, Junks anchored a few hundred feet off shore, and Asian fishermen tossing garbage to the begging sharks below. Alan threw himself smack onto the rock and began kicking, screaming, and crying. It would have been funny were it not the appropriate response. Still, someone had to take control.

"C'mon Alan! You're Hawaiian! Trust the Shark Gods !!" This halted his baby fit.

"Hey--you, you're right!" he said, just as I was thinking, 'We--are--so--screwed.' I continued with a survival plan: "Now all we have to do is swim calmly and quickly--no splashing, no panic--but smooth and fast as speedboats towards that British geek. Okay?"

"O-KAY!" Alan's compliance was frightening, but with no other plan, we dove into the murky water and raced to the shore and on up the gravelly beach, past the Brit, and just kept running, past other beaches with shark nets and swarms of Asians, all the way back to the Star Ferry just as the boarding plank was being pulled away.

We lay on the deck that night near the anchor, life boats, and ropes thick as trees. The bow's rough wood felt uneven, splintered, perfect. The shark god blessed us beneath the stars' apocryphal light.

Jack wipes his mouth with the back of his fist, gulps down some Vodka from the bottle, Ketel One, then offers me the bottle. My hands are trembling as I lift the bottle to my lips: Dutch vodka, warm all the way down.

"I'm glad you didn't kiss that Hawaiian guy. So tell me again about that robbery in Amsterdam. What did they steal? They didn't hurt you in any way did they?"

"No, it's just that ever since then I've been a nymphomaniac."

He laughs and pins me down. I try to wrestle out of his embrace.

"God, you are strong for a little person. I love your size."

I love your size," pulling him closer.

He laughs again, then takes me again and again until I feel faint. *Instead of Jack's lion limbs and his violent mercy, I remember Bertus: pumping Bertus' chest, frantically trying to hold his blood in, until my hands and forearms looked like they'd been immersed in vats of ink.*

Instead of Jack's thick chest hair tingling against my breasts, *I remember being coated in blood and milk. I was not embarrassed when Nigel, the Hostel's manager, undressed me and gently laid my limp body in a warm bath.*

Nigel tried to look away from my naked body as he handed me soap, but he wanted to make sure I wasn't seriously injured.

"You are an ath-the-lete," he stated in his thick East End accent. "What's your sport?," he asked as blood, milk, and soapy water swirled down the drain. And, looking away, he handed me a towel.

"Oh, I go rock-climbing and running mostly; but also surfing, ice-skating, and soccer."

"You mean 'football'."

"No, I mean 'soccer,' and sure as hell not rugby--your sport."

"You are a wee small for rugby," he joked as he handed me an oversized robe that spilled beyond my feet. "You look like a church mouse," he laughed; then, dropping his head in his scraped-up hands, he quivered with sobbing, "O God, O God...."

I remember, in dissonant unison with Jack's ecstatic "O God, O Jesus God--wet--tight--silk," *Nigel's agonal choked soliloquy, 'O Jesus. O my dear God, why didn't I see this coming?'*

Then Jack's "Ohhh, I'm coming, Jesus, God, coming."

And Nigel's "O my Jesus, my dear Lord Jesus, I should have seen this coming. I'm the manager. It's my job...O my Jesus."

"It's not your fault, Nigel," I tried to comfort the over-muscled, weeping Youth Hostel manager. "Evil cannot be predicted, especially by those who are good." I was thinking, 'especially by those who are naive,' but I could not say this to the man who had just saved my life.

I found a bottle of Scotch in the youth hostel's medicine cabinet and held it out to Nigel. "Please, take a drink." He wiped his wet face roughly with his hands; he pressed his fingers against his eyes like a prayer to be blind, then took the Scotch and gulped it like Gatorade after a Rugby match. He offered it back to me to drink.

As Jack pins my wrists to the bed with his strong hands and slows his rhythm, *I remember Nigel trying to collect himself by getting on with the work at hand. This tough East Ender, this former officer of the British MI5; this convert to Evangelical Christianity, gently sat me on the bathtub rim and discreetly uncovered my knees. He began teasing out splinters of glass embedded in my knee-caps. Like a surgeon, he did the same with the palms of my hands, then soaked the puncture wounds with rubbing alcohol.*

Later that afternoon, as Jack holds me against his chest, he asks, "So, of all your travels where is your favorite place in the world?"

I tenderly touch the nook in his upper lip, and say, "Right here."

As the late summer sky grows into an orchard of warm rain, he asks, "Where are you from, *really*?" So I tell him about Wauconda. I mention Mers Restaurant—the only fancy restaurant in town. In winter my family went there on Sundays. We ate sirloins as snowmobiles crisscrossed the ice-hardened lake. There was a town raffle each spring. It worked like this: In the middle of winter someone would drive an old Buick out onto the middle of the frozen lake. Then townsfolk would choose a date they thought the ice would soften enough for the Buick to sink through. Whoever guessed the right date won the raffle each spring. God alone knows how many Buicks are stacked and rusting on the bottom of Bangs Lake in Wauconda, Illinois.

But that's all I tell him about Wauconda. My best childhood friend swore the town was built on an Indian burial ground and this gave us both special powers and protection. I'm from so many places I cannot begin to explain. I'm from the Netherlands riding on the handlebars of a street bike as Nico peddled and Janneke rode on the back fender. Any moment our trio could tumble onto the cobbled streets, instead, Nico squeezed his chest muscles against my back and all three of us yelled "AAAHHHHH!!!" just to hear the vibrato as Nico steered his bike down a steep, bumpy hill.

I'm from the countryside of Taichung, Taiwan sitting on two-thousand-year-old gravestones planted like monuments up a sun-bitten cliff. Nothing tasted better than cold orange soda as I sat in some ancestor's giant stone ear.

I'm from Boston where me and Kathryn and Matthias rode in his faded blue '69 Chevy truck weaving through rude, schizophrenic traffic—three young grad students on their way to their professor's house.

I'm from King Henry VIII's hunting lodge where me and charmster Daniel sponged off some rich Canadians for a week in England. So much Lasagna. So much old wine. I discover Percy Bysshe Shelley's great-aunt's private Catholic chapel on the wooded property. It was no larger than a shed, but as ornate and crenelated inside as St. Peter's Basilica. The virgin Mary statue stared through to the back of my aching bloodshot eyes.

I'm a young Cherokee woman on a vision quest, which is normally reserved for young males, but I cannot hide my gift for possessed songs. There have even been rumors of sorcery among jealous tribal members; but among the wise there has been compassion. They see the strain in my face and tendons--they understand that no one wants the gifts of vision and possessed songs. Gifts this powerful are a terrible burden. My village has sent me out into the wilderness alone. They want to know if I can see how far inland the English will invade? I stand on a lone crag jutting out over the collusion of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers. I cup a dead kestrel in my right hand; in my left I raise a vision of future tribal warriors: one will die from green smoke; another will fly thunder-birds that throw lightning and set the world on fire; yet another will count coup, only touch the enemy. I am overcome by visions and voices too horrible, too crazy, to reveal to my people. I return to my tribe without a word. And the whole tribe says: "Isn't that just like a woman?"

I'm from Antietem, a young Confederate soldier rushing and shooting towards the Union line. Bursting spheres of lead churn through my uniform, my ribs, and out-flung arms. The last thing I see is a field of golden cornstalks running and tousling my hair...cirrus clouds.

I'm from Canterbury cathedral where stained glass brands the sun's voice on my open hands; where flocks of white stone flutter; glass trumpets shape and shatter; where limned books whisper secrets only the dead and their sparrows decipher; where the sun is always setting, always spinning and unfolding, always tearing through the paper ocean. I'm from Canterbury where the stained sun and a knight kneels, is beloved, and breathes still.

* * *

Jack leaves me with a Chet Baker CD and tells me that Chet Baker lived, for a while, in Amsterdam's **American Hotel**, until one day he leapt to his death from a 7th story window. My favorite song becomes "My Funny Valentine." How could Jack possibly have known? The **American Hotel** was one of my favorite haunts in Amsterdam.

There was nothing American about the **American Hotel**: the fin-de-ciecle decor of the lithe, elongated lillies stretching in stained-glass and metal-work in each ceiling-to-floor window seemed from WW I France. And in the palatial hotel lobby the only American there was me. Otherwise it was my Dutch friends and clannish groups of Arabs playing chess. I spent hours in the lobby of the **American Hotel**, drinking espresso and writing; and watching Arabs play chess with hypnotizing concentration. The only time Arabs did not flagrantly flirt was when they played chess.

Otherwise, the flirting was aggressive, hystrionic, and constant. But it never seemed menacing or even offensive. At worse, their flirting was a hilarious nuisance. I'd be walking around the Damrack on my way to the Athenaem bookstore, when some Arab would begin to follow me and effusively yell: "Hey American girl! I love you! I love you! I love American girl!"

I wasn't even blond or busty. I looked more like a Japanese Anime cartoon: petite, dark, wiry, with large, dark eyes and thick, auburn hair cut shoulder-length and layered. My hair had a natural tendency to stick straight out from my head, so it looked like a punk haircut even though it wasn't meant to be.

When working at the reception counter of the Shelter Youth Hostel Arabs would flirt while hanging around the reception area waiting for an opportunistic moment to ask me for things. "May I have moss?" meant that they wanted a Mars bar.

"May I have plaster?" meant a band-aid.

"May I have fire?" meant they wanted their cigarettes lit. These simple requests led to more personal questions?

"Where are you from?", and I'd say Chicago, which they pronounced "See-ka-goo." Pretty soon they nick-named me "See-ka-goo Bang-Bang." They'd look my way and say, "Gang-stars, See-ka-goo, bang, bang," and spray me with imaginary bullets from an imaginary Tommy gun. I'd pretend to fall down dead, which sent them into throes of laughter; but the joke soon got old and I became tired of throwing myself on the floor in mock-anguish.

It wasn't long before I began to distinguish Egyptians from Saudis; Algerians from Lebanese. Egyptians were deeply offended if you called them Arabs; they were different than Arabs, they insisted. There were, in fact, so many Egyptians staying and playing chess at the Shelter Youth Hostel in the off-season that we dubbed them "the Cairo Club."

One Egyptian challenged me to a chess game. I won the first game easily; so he challenged me to another and another until he finally won. There was no flirting in this contest except I was an American girl, so he was determined to finally win. He was a guest, and what's more, his manhood was on the line. I didn't exactly let him win; he was good; but I slacked off finally and didn't care if I lost. The fact that this Egyptian would deign to play chess with a female was compliment enough.

The Youth Hostel staff was rooting for me, but I didn't want to hurt this intense Egyptian's pride, and the customer should always be right, so after he finally won two of three matches, I called it quits and the other Hostel staff took me to the **American Hotel** to celebrate.

There I discovered a beer that tasted like liquid, buttered bread: Trappiste bier made by Trappist monks in Belgium. I ordered bottles of Trappist bier for everyone: Janneke; Kirk; Scott; and Paul, a Brit from Cornwall. After just one bottle of Trappist, my legs turned to rubber, as did pretty much everything else: speech; thought; sight; common sense. Because our group was so loud, or goofy, or young, the concierge of the **American Hotel** sent us home. But we would not leave without a flourish. Janneke got the revolving door spinning like a gyroscope. She jumped through the first open 3D triangle and miraculously popped out the other side; then she re-entered the same way. Kirk spun the revolving door even faster, and out he went; then back in. Then faster, and Paul jumped in and popped out the other side; Scott, always the gentleman, offered an opening in the deadly pinwheel of heavy glass, wood, and metal to me. Whoooosh!! In I jumped and popped out the other side. This went on for some time, spinning the revolving door faster and faster, each one of our group in turn, jumping through this spinning gauntlet of fin-de-ciecle death: out the **American Hotel**; in the **American Hotel**; out, then in, then out, then in, then out, and out, and out.

* * *

"Though it were in the halls of hell
what thou lovest well is thy true heritage.
What thou lovest well shall not be reft from thee."

Canto X, Ezra Pound

I'm looking at condos to buy in Florida. In my mind I give the realtor the name "perky porcine lady." Why do they all look like this? They run up and down enough stairs, why are they all sort of fat? Why the manic, perky stare? Why the short-cropped, highlighted hair that bounces up and down like a fishing bobber as she trounces up staircases ahead of me? But she finally leads me into a condo that stops my spinning thoughts. I look out on the lanai at the mangroves. An alligator slicks forward like the cargo ships that plied their way up the Delaware river in Philadelphia. How did I just leave? Just pack up my house and leave? Oh, that's right, it's my greatest talent: leaving, without a word.

I'm stunned by the feeling of a houseboat—like someone hit me in the gut with an oar. The realtor thinks I've found the place I'm going to buy. I look out at the canal, the swamp-life, the egrets, ibis, mangrove roots, the changing colors of the water; but what I see, what I remember for the first time in the history of my life is a winter night in the city; the streets piled with new snow; Jack is walking ahead of me, and suddenly I recognize someone I know I will love as long as I'm alive. He turns, his curls catch snow, his dark blue eyes are all I see as he holds his hand out to me. If I take it now, there will be no letting go. And I take it. And it is twenty years later and it is still that snowy alley, the street lamps light up only him and his outstretched hand.

What did I say to him at "La Bucca"? "I would rather have 5 good years with him than a hundred with anyone else." We met at that bar almost every day. It was just us and the

bartender, a sweet, gentle Italian we called Gepetto. He may as well have been a priest presiding over a sacred, permanent ceremony. This was it. This was my real marriage. This was my real church: this basement bar at the end of Washington Square Park. This was my real life and love. This poet, his blue eyes, and the 25 years between us. I knew someday the door would close on those years, almost like a gate closing on Washington Square Park. And the day has arrived. It just occurs to me now, in this condo in Florida.

* * *