1995

Bearing witness

Marilyn Copley
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BEARING WITNESS

A Creative Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of

English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Marilyn Copley

December, 1995

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ABSTRACT
BEARING WITNESS

by Marilyn Copley

This creative project consists of twenty-one lyrical and narrative poems and one short story, which collectively addresses the themes of separation, and of story-telling as a means of interpreting the life cycle. It deals with the renewal of life that results from the birth of one's child, and the urge to preserve the memory of one's antecedents. Both are seen as expressions of the human Chain of Being, and as an individual course correction.

Literary art is often the artist's way of enduring if not containing the overflow of powerful emotions. Grief reminds us of our mortality; in poems and stories we honor lives that might otherwise pass uncelebrated, and we assuage our own fears of dying. In telling the joys of a child's birth, the artist is reborn—for a time—in hope and compassion. All life stories can transcend death and other inevitable separations.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband, Leon,
for his constant, enduring support and encouragement,
and to my children—Julia, the daughter soon to arrive,
and those ahead—for helping me find wonder and peace.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Keiko Hilton gave me much-needed free time by providing child care so that I could finish this project before the birth of my second child.

Dene Barnett has remained my dear and constant friend throughout the years.

My family and friends continued to have faith in my ability and in my determination to achieve my goals.

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INTRODUCTION

This creative project consists of twenty-one lyrical and narrative poems and one short story, which collectively addresses the themes of separation, and of story-telling as a means of interpreting the life cycle.

In some parts of the world, in particular China and Japan, anticipated separations become formalized affairs through which those involved can mourn the passing state of affairs and usher in the new; thus, they can recognize and prepare for impending change. Some literary excerpts help to illustrate this phenomenon.

In his essay, "Listening and Making," Robert Hass defines poems of leave-taking in the Chinese and Japanese tradition. It is a rather long excerpt, but its entirety offers a fine explanation.

Goodbyes are powerful, and Americans, who say them all the time, don't seem to write about them very much. In *A Zen Wave*, Robert Aitken's book about [Japanese poet] Basho, he observes that the Japanese, customarily, wave until a departing guest has disappeared from sight. [Westerners] are more likely to turn away before that happens, not so much erasing the other person as turning inward, toward our own separateness, and getting on with it. [Japanese poet] Buson doesn't do that; he lets the moment define itself, lets the distance speak. And, in imagining his own separateness, he imagines his friend's.... Basho makes something different but similar of the fact that parting is like the process of individuation.... Many worlds, many subjectivities become one world which includes, among other things, all the individual worlds. How sharply you feel that world emerging, how sharply the self dissolving into it, he leaves up to you. (110)

There is a kind of death when lovers part; each loses the other and part of the self.

In Junichiro Tanizaki's novel, *Some Prefer Nettles*, the protagonist, Kaname, discusses the "right time" for him and his wife to separate. It is possible that, dreading the separation, they delay making their decision by making excuses.

"I spoke of a time that's good for all of us, but one of the things I wanted to consider was the season. Some seasons would be so much sadder than others. It would be hardest to separate in the fall. Much the saddest time of the year." (46)

In traditional Japanese society, women marry and leave home according to their birth order. In the following excerpt from Tanizaki's novel, *The Makioka Sisters*, the youngest sister, who has had an illicit affair with, and a child by, a man of lower social class, solemnly and against tradition takes leave of the secondary branch of the family house. She leaves her home, her family, and her childhood, all of which are part of her past and present.

Taeko...went to live with Miyoshi in second-floor rooms they had rented in Kobe. She came quietly on the evening of the twenty-fifth to take her leave of the Ashiya family...and to gather her things. The room that had once been hers was gay with Yukiko's trousseau.... No one would have dreamed that Taeko would be the first of the two sisters to have her own home. After rummaging through the belongings she had left with Sachiko, she packed what she would need, talked to the family for an hour or so, and was off to Kobe. (529)

Western society, too, has its ways of formally marking anticipated separations. For example, we preface long or faraway journeys with *Bon Voyage* parties; we visit relatives and friends at the end of a trip to our home town; and to make peace for the end

of our lives we prepare wills. Nineteenth-century etiquette books commonly included a chapter on choosing one's dying words, as an attempt to make a clean finish of life for the dying and soften the grief of those left behind.

Although some separations can be foreseen, many come unexpectedly, and for those occasions planning and performing formal leave-takings are not possible. Planned or unplanned, despite efforts we might make to prepare, all separations create a feeling of loss. Virtually every occasion in life can be viewed as a separation and therefore holds the potential for loss. We lose the mother's body at birth. Then come the losses implicit in aging: we lose our home when we move away; we lose our privacy when we marry; we lose our health when we fall ill; and we lose ourselves when we love. We lose what is familiar, we lose our bearings—those things with which we mark our position, location, and direction in the world—and we lose a part of ourselves.

Death of a loved one is the ultimate goodbye, and in her essay, "A Woman's Work," Louise Erdrich writes of the deep sense of loss she felt when her grandmother died. She realizes that the separation brought the loss not only of a generational guide but of a part of herself.

As the old go walking into the night, we lose our sense of time, we lose our witnesses, our living memories. We lose them, and we lose the farthest reaches of ourselves. (44)

A death need not be physical to create the residue of one. Although most commonly viewed as a beginning, childbirth can be perceived as a kind of death. A survey of modern, best-selling literature on pregnancy and childbirth reveals little, if any,

discussion about the sense of loss that accompanies the end of pregnancy and the beginning of motherhood. Much of a woman's emotional state is attributed to the drastic hormonal changes that occur during the postpartum period and the extreme fatigue she might experience from delivery and caring for an infant (Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway 545-549). Other factors cited include the mother's disappointment in the baby's appearance and unmet expectations surrounding the birth (Samuels and Samuels 438-440).

These clinical discussions ignore a significant emotional aspect of pregnancy. One need only to talk to a handful of new, primarily first-time, mothers to uncover these feelings, which are often shared as a dark, guilty secret confessed to in whispers, instead of acknowledged, mourned, and accepted as part of the natural birthing process. Pregnancy is often a time when a woman feels whole, complete, self-contained, and self-sufficient for the first—and, she may later discover, the only—time in her life. She is recreating and sustaining another life that is separate from, yet dependent on, her. When the child is born, there is an irrevocable separation. The intimate relationship she has formed with this other human being is no longer hers exclusively: she is obligated to share her child with the rest of the world, often with others who want to form deep attachments to it, before the mother may be ready to let them do so.

Pregnancy literature assumes the woman's focus is always on the birth and what comes after it; however, for a woman carrying her first child, caring for an infant usually falls into the realm of the unknown. She is aware of only her pregnancy and the

increasing physical existence of another being within her. Perhaps she views the child as the best part of herself, which she can love without reservation or restriction. When the birth occurs, this aspect of herself is no longer purely hers but is running out into the world and seeking its own satisfaction. The separation is twofold, from her child and from herself.

When I began to work on this creative project eighteen months ago, I proposed to write a collection of poems that would describe various aspects of separation—from one's home, childhood, perceived self, and so on—and the resulting process of experiencing loss, bearing grief, and, finally, accepting and understanding the separations. I knew grief, which universally reminds us of our humanity, as a natural result of separation and loss. I would show that grief connects us and elevates us as human beings.

At the time, I may have seen my life in terms of successive separations and losses. I had grown up, moved far from where I'd spent my childhood, changed homes, lost family members and friends to marriage, death, and geographical distance, experienced the end of romantic relationships, and saw myself getting older. Rather than thinking that I and my accumulated losses were unique, I recognized that separation and loss are universal experiences, and my creative project would reflect how I interpreted them. In doing so, I also expected the exercise to provide a means of healing the pain caused by the losses.

Two events occurred during the period in which I worked on this project. The first was the death of my maternal grandmother, after she had suffered for many years with Alzheimer's disease. Even when expected, the death of a loved one is perhaps the most difficult separation to come to terms with, because it is irreversible. My grandmother was, for me, one of those witnesses of life whom Erdrich describes, and we were especially close. She knew me from infancy and later told me many things about that time. As a witness to my life, she was able to help me reclaim those years that might never have existed to me, years that I was incapable of remembering.

The second event was the birth of my first child and the unexpected, profound emotions the experience has given me.

These events together caused the topic of my creative project to take somewhat of a different turn. Now I was not only interested in exploring the subject of leave-taking, but I felt it necessary to bear witness to my child's life, to my life, and to the lives of others. Leave-taking, I discovered, is only a first step. A haunting follows, after which the progression naturally leads to remembering and recording the people, places, and circumstances surrounding the separation. For the artist, this memorializing takes the form of story-telling. I would do this by interpreting the renewal of life that results from the birth of one's child and the renewed urge to preserve the memory of deceased loved ones, as an expression of the continuation of the Chain of Being and a human course correction, from the fear of death to the hope of renewal. Thus, we can affirm our

existence in the world, and honor lives that might otherwise pass unnoticed and uncelebrated.

The idea of story-telling as a means of preserving and evolving the past and marking the present has been explored in literature. In her essay, “An End to Audience?,” Margaret Atwood asks, “How do you distinguish between story-telling and literary art?” (47). She answers, “I don’t.... Literary art is simply the means by which the story-teller feels he or she can most efficiently tell a particular story” (47). She continues to say that story-telling involves timing, gestures, embellishments, the tangents, the occasion, the expression on the face of the teller, and whether or not you like him—all in addition to the story’s plot (48). She writes:

Literary critics talking about fiction may call these things style, voice, and narrative technique and so forth, but you can trace them all back to that moment when the tribe or the family is sitting around the fire or the dinner table and the story-teller decides to add something, leave something out or vary the order of telling in order to make the story a little better. Writing on the page is after all just a notation, and all literature, like all music, is oral by nature. (48)

We ourselves are the products of such art. Much of what defines our existence in the universe lies in the perception and memories that others have had of us and in the stories they chose to tell. In her book, *The Playgroup*, Nina Barrett describes the human condition in terms of the stories we accumulate.

The embryo in the womb mimics the historical states of human evolution, from single cell to shrimp to fetus, of which we are both the end and the beginning. The stories of humans are like that, too; if you view the cross section of a given moment in an adult life, you find the elements of all the stories that have gone into that moment, and all the stories that will come out.... Everything new that happens to us is

filtered through an enormous index in our minds containing the gist of all the other stories that have happened to us, and thereby achieves its meaning relative to those other stories. (12)

What shapes our character, what makes us unique and individual, is not merely the facts of our lives. That I was born on December 30, 1954, in Concord, New Hampshire, doesn't tell much about me. But my father's memory of how my mother hiked up Craney Hill—a mile or so from my grandmother's back yard—and jumped up and down at the summit to hasten overdue labor is a story. Of the same occasion, my mother remembers that, when I finally decided to arrive, she and my father drove through a terrifying ice storm to get to the hospital on time. These two different memories of the same event have become part of my (and my family's) definition of me.

We are perhaps most poignantly reminded of our past and urgently persuaded to associate it with the future at the birth of a child. Erdrich describes motherhood as a form of "self-erasure," which is another kind of death.

...Love of an infant is...twinned love, all-absorbing, a blur of boundaries and messages. It is uncomfortably close to self-erasure, and in the face of it one's fat ambitions, desperations, private icons and urges fall away into a dreamlike *before* that haunts and forces itself into the present with tough persistence. (35)

After my daughter was born, I felt compelled to record every gesture of her body, every sound from her mouth, every change in her development. In all the real joy and excitement of new motherhood, I felt an element of sadness as well, because I knew that these things I saw in my child were fleeting and would soon be forgotten, lost, replaced by anything more immediate. I reasoned that, because my daughter's life was so firmly

and permanently entwined with my own, I needed to observe and record her life in the first few years if I wanted to understand myself better. Otherwise, all the memories that made up my stories of her would easily become part of the “fast forward” that Erdrich describes:

...Time with children runs through our fingers like water as we lift our hands, try to hold, to capture, to fix moments in a lens, a magic circle of images or words. We snap photos, videotape, memorialize while we experience a fast forward in which there is no replay of even a single instant. (36)

Popular psychology says that our bodies are capable of storing and recalling certain physical and emotional responses to stimuli that occur when we are infants. Although my daughter’s physical being—her muscles, bones, skin, nerve endings, and so on—might have been capable of doing this, her mind could not yet understand and store these events and her responses to them as memories. It then became important not only for my purposes to bear witness to her life in the early years, but for hers as well, so that later, when she could understand and remember, I could fill in that early void for her. Then, my stories of her would become her own stories and thus part of her definition, just as my parents’ memories of my birth have become part not only of their definition of me, but my own of myself.

There are two incidences to my daughter’s birth that I remember very clearly. They are stories which have become part of my definition and which will later become part of hers. When I was in labor with my daughter, I was given drugs and fluids intravenously. They were administered by a machine which buzzed rhythmically,

signaling each drop that went into my veins. In the dull hush of the hospital room, and only half asleep, I could not help but pay attention to that buzzing. After awhile, in my groggy, confused state I began to hear the tune “Frère Jacques” in the sound. Over and over, without missing a beat. If I let my mind wander, I could return at any time and pick up the beginning of the tune on any buzz. Anyone else in the room would have heard only the low, steady sound in the background. For me, however, it was a song.

The other incident occurred during the moment of her birth. With my eyes closed and concentrating only on relieving the intense pressure in my lower body, I gave the final push. Simultaneously, the thought came to mind that this was the moment of our separation, when we finally and for the rest of our lives became two distinct, individual beings.

Because we become the stories that people tell of us—embellishments, omissions, and all—there is a danger in story-telling. This is why history can be only created, and not recorded factually. The pieces in this collection are stories. They are my perceptions of events as I want them to be remembered. As a writer and a story-teller, I have that dignity.

Atwood states that it is not enough for writing to merely express the author’s feelings, thoughts, and ideologies; to be good writing it must evoke those responses from the reader (56). I believe that the writer’s responsibility is not to say “Understand me,” but to say “Understand yourself.”

Often, I have been told by readers and listeners of my writing “Your work moves me,” which pleases me, because that is exactly what I want it to do. When I hear such comments, I realize there is an element in each piece enabled by voice and language that touches the audience and helps them remember that they are human. I believe the element is an expression of grief, an emotion everyone has experienced.

The collection of work in this creative project is divided into four parts, the first three moving in chronological order. Part One comprises poems that represent experiences from childhood. The poems in Part Two describe aspects of motherhood: conceiving, carrying, giving birth to, and raising a young child. The poems in Part Three move somewhat out of the experience of the self and into that of others. Part Four, a short story, “Bearing Witness,” expresses the notion that the stories we remember and tell have a life of their own and can transcend death and other inevitable separations.

With the exception of a few, all the pieces in this collection are about someone—me, my grandmother, my sister, my mother, my child, victims of the bombing of Hiroshima, and so on—in an attempt to bear witness to their lives. The subjects of the family poems are almost exclusively women from five generations in my mother’s family. I chose to focus on their stories because I knew these people well, because my child is a female of the sixth generation, and because I believe that the natural familial line is the maternal one: after all, children are born from the mother’s body.

The poems in this collection are written in nonmetrical, unrhymed verse. Each makes use of metaphor to represent its intent. For example, the residual smoke from a

locomotive is the memory of dead loved one; and the speaker likened to matter spinning in orbit becomes the loss of one's memory as one ages. All of the pieces have been written with attention to precise detail to set the mood and give individual personality to the subjects. Details about place, the sensual stimuli and response, and so on, give credibility to the subject of each piece. In addition, I have attempted to craft each one such that it speaks directly to the heart of my audience and can, as Atwood writes, evoke rather than express meaning for my audience.

My work has been influenced by that of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Japanese authors, such as Yasunari Kawabata, Natsume Soseki, Yukio Mishima, Junichiro Tanizaki, and the ancient poets Buson, Basho, Issa, and Rihaku (Chinese poet Li Po). I have also been drawn to the dark undercurrents of human nature described or alluded to by the modern Japanese writers. Of particular interest is the "floating world" style used by Tanizaki and the ancient poets, which is sensual and suggestive of possibility and which invites the reader to delve into the text to find meaning and draw conclusions.

Western writers who have influenced my work include Emily Dickinson, whose poetry employs dashed pauses to imply, rather than state, meaning. Another model has been Elizabeth Bishop, whose work, in addition to using travel as a metaphor for isolation and alienation, explores the realm of possibility by juxtaposing opposites of light and dark, reflections, memory, and the linguistic techniques of interrogative, negation, and conditional tense to express perceived reality and sight that's not limited to

the eyes. All of these allow the condition “to be *and* not to be.” My poem, “Beyond the Lighthouse,” was heavily influenced by Bishop’s work.

In addition, my fiction has been influenced by the stark language, lean structure, and eccentric character portrayals of Raymond Carver; the snapshot, vignette-like technique used by such writers as Evan S. Connell (in his novels, *Mrs. Bridge* and *Mr. Bridge*), Susan Minot (in her short story, “Lust,” and her novel, *Monkeys*), and Sandra Cisneros (in her novel, *The House on Mango Street*). Not only do the spaces between the vignettes invite the reader to supply information, meaning, and connections; they imply the loneliness of the characters. Finally, Margaret Atwood’s ability to draw the reader into the story without calling attention to the writing itself is a technique I strive to perfect.

As we go walking into that night that Erdrich identifies, we discover that we carry the culmination of a life’s worth of stories. Life is never a linear process; instead it is circular, recursive one. By collecting and telling stories, we anchor ourselves to the present and reach far back into the past. We can then bridge the ages and, in doing so, heal the grief of separations, all without losing our way.

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A physicist is the atom's way of knowing about atoms.

—George Wald
(source unknown)

PART ONE: PAST LIVES

New England, a Reverie

I ache for the smell of cold metal from your dirt cellars,
the fermenting of wet leaves, a glimpse of rows and rows
of sugar maples bursting, flamelike, against a field of green.
I strain for the buzz of cicada in your blazing July heat
and May's putrid odor of thawing earth.

Where are those icicles that glisten, and drip
from your eaves, and the old ghosts that haunt the attics?
Living rooms with their yellowed photographs
of oiled heads, and the unfashionable furniture,
the smell of dust up from the carpets, African violets
in trays below south-facing windows?

I am as far from you as an age. This winter,
as always, your citizens wake and dress, eat their meals
around tables graced by the father, and
drive to work down glittering asphalt roads,
across rivers that gurgle thickly downstream from the mills.
They haul rusting ovens to the dump beyond the lake
and hang towels out to stiffen in the sharp air. They cough,
and shovel snow from the back steps one more time.

Inheritance

On baking day, sleep crumbles in the corners
of my grandmother's eyes. She gazes at her dough rising in its bowl
on the table. "All from my mother's starter," she says.
Long ago, I know, when I fed wide-mouthed as a robin
and scratched out my words to speak. Greedy wings flitting,
I'd puncture her dough too soon
like a dream flattened before dawn.

She recalls as she kneads: Her father built homes
and carved dolls from his leftover lumber. At night
he brushed the endless hair of his wife, stretching
to stroke the strands that draped, shimmering, across their floral bed.
Grandmother draws family portraits in the flour:
her mother gnawing splinters from his palms, and now
grooming his fingers with her tongue.

I'll remember her story
wherever the moist, raw odor of bread fills empty spaces.
She pinches off a handful of dough and
replaces it tightly in the cellar jar. In the gathering quiet
she slides her fingers across my eyelids,
where dough settles into the folds. "You have my eyes," she says,
"and my mother's hunger for bread."

Grandmother's Life

She waited nights beneath the ancient maple tree
at the turn of the Merrimac River
(just before it charges under the bridge to town)
in her white Eastern Star dress, her palms
pressed to her ears against the river's roar.

Waited for her sweetheart, who wrote love letters
(*Dear Dolly*, they began) which she tied
in a red ribbon and stored in a pine box
with rusting hinges and peeling shellac.

She bore twins, who looked like her dead father—
a girl with full lips, a boy with olive skin.
In the summer before their birth, she rocked by an open window
and unbuttoned her dress to show them the sunlight,
hear the jays, and smell the lilacs that bobbed in the breeze.
Evenings, they heard the crack of thunder and smelled the turn of air
through her pale belly flesh.

She died, with the white feather of her mastectomy scar
tickling the place where her wilted breast had hung,
her stories all zipped in. They said
she stuck her blue fingers in her ears to deaden the rattle,
but we knew it was an ancient gesture remembered.

When My Sister Cried

Boston, summer. My sister in her closed room
at the end of the long hallway.
In the night I heard her clipped breathing and
her rasping, like a cat in a box.
And then down the long hallway her
oh my darling oh my darling.

The hallway too long, I switched on the light.
Sister, she would never cry to me like that.
A cricket bounced off the dim bulb hanging from my ceiling
and sent it swinging ever so—
Shadows became liquid,
dolls on the dresser grew swaying beards,
book titles in languages I didn't understand.
The mirror reflected a hollow figure who might be me.

I listened for more clues from my sister,
but along the floor crept only the soft purring of sleep.
Darkness again, and the cricket on the dresser, the shushing of cars
down the street, the sounds of him and her, my own heartbeat, all
in the same steady rocking of the night.

Invisible

On my eighteenth birthday I wanted to float down a staircase
in a yellow dress. I wanted a sweetheart, a gold ring.
But there was only Mrs. Bakerman, who lived in four rooms above the grocery.
Mrs. Bakerman and I sat in her living room
and sipped tea from her teapot, ate cakes from her oven
on that day in autumn, which was gilded in the light through the leaves
outside the undraped windows of Mrs. Bakerman's rooms.
She and I on a couch near the door: her children had moved away
long ago, she was once an artist, her paintings were in storage.
I watched the wrinkled fingers of Mrs. Bakerman
close around the handle of her teacup.

She began to speak, and her mouth moved slowly
like a wax heart in the sun.
At that moment the power failed. The clock stopped ticking,
the refrigerator whirled and stilled. The light faded.
We sat in the gray rooms of Mrs. Bakerman
and waited for rescue.
Outside, birch leaves, curled like the hair of girls
bouncing in a game of tag, scratched the sidewalk
and schoolboys hollered from a field beyond the trees.

It was my eighteenth birthday, and I could choose.
In the darkness I no longer saw Mrs. Bakerman. She was dim
as a ghost, empty as a wish. She was no one
I knew, only Mr. Bakerman's wife,
someone else's mother.

Evidence

I remember you
crouched on the cement steps to the back door.
A drapery of wrinkles puckered your forehead
and pleated your jaw.
To one knee you pulled a dripping girl—you let me
spatter you darkly—and cupped her head in your palm.

I remember a locomotive crawling across a plain on a windless day,
streaming smoke that hovered and rolled in the still air
long after the train had passed.
It was a perfect shape without form
that cast a steady shadow up the tracks.

Gradually, I shifted your swells and dimples (as the loving will)
until at last the hot gasses rose and the ashes fell
and you dispersed,
leaving in the silence the residue
of an unending thread of smoke.

PART TWO: PRESENT LIVES

The Storm

At the back door a baby strains from her father's shoulder
to touch the rain that falls in front of her eyes.
The drops slide along her fingers, her wrist, arm.
They splash her eyelids, her lips, her chin,
and leap from the curl at the temple
to spatter the carpet near her father's large, brown shoe.

At the sink her mother dries a plate
and watches baby in the rain. Ahead
she sees a torrent between mother and daughter,
and an ocean deep as anger.
Daughter's arms are too short to reach across the gulf
and mother cannot swim.

But for now they are all sheltered, the family,
all on the same shore,
where mothers hum lullabies
and babies finger golden rings with rain-moist hands
before rubbing their eyes to sleep, safe from the storm.

Mother to the Child

My girl knows that grandmother polished the silverware
and laid it on blue velvet in spearlike rows.
She knows the flowered apron edged in blue bias tape, the Vermont-shaped stain
at the breast, the smudged cheek, the smell of paint and cinnamon.
She knows the double-ring of the phone by the staircase,
the dried water streaks on the table, the low vibration
of grandmother's voice when my girl sits in her lap past bedtime.
She knows how it is to awaken on a chenille bedspread
(its pattern etched pinkly into her skin),
the fireflies startling the brambles across the road,
cigar smoke through an open window, the squawk
of a porch swing, how the air turns chilly in September,
the metallic smell of earth and school paste in the basement of the Methodist church.
She's heard the churn of the river below the granite bridge
which she spits from regularly.

My girl knows how it will be—
a Chevrolet turning onto a sandy driveway in early evening,
the fraternity boys swinging by one arm from the eaves
of the gray-shingled houses in town, how they kiss with soft, sour lips
(they strain and then relax damply in a darkened car,
touch her jaw with their fingertips)—
until she chooses one who matters.
My girl knows these things
as surely as she recognizes her face in a spoon.

But she doesn't know enough,
and I, awake, think of walkers, moving days, and tarnished forks,
the glint,
of mosquitoes in the cemetery.
I know the suckling of my girl and the gnawing of grandmothers.

Mother's Work

Then, I saw my mother's hands
speckled, burrow-veined, dripping dish suds
like soggy bride's lace. Her rings
twisted over her knuckle knot
and set on the window sill to gleam.
Cracked hands, red-lined,
sloughing skin in the bath water,
on her pillow, in my ten-year diary,
and my father's pockets.
Hands I've seen in photographs
clutching my chest as I reach for something
beyond the scope of her despair.

But tonight, I wash my infant daughter's hair
in the sink. I brace her head with one hand
and pour water over her scalp with the other.
She smiles at me, my eyes, and then my mouth.
When the water turns chilly, a trickle
of confusion crosses her brow.
It's a face I recognize from butter knives,
the ice on skating ponds, family photographs,
and a long-ago mirror.
I see my shivering child
and my mother's hands now caressing my own head.

Bidding the Savior

The woman lies swaddled in paper
on the vinyl table, to hear the first heartbeat.
She has called for the savior, has whispered his name,
soft and warm as her water,
because she's heard only static and her own pulse
like slow ocean waves. She calls again.

The light beyond her lids is bright. She squints.
The savior lies beside her. He unclenches her fist,
finger-by-finger, and bears her palm to his cheek.
She spreads her knees and smells her sweat and fear.
The doctor inserts a rubbered finger
to feel for the life knot inside.
The savior presses his ear to her womb
and parts his lips, ready. She hears it—
like wings fluttering underwater—she hears it.
She grasps the savior's head and swabs it over her stickiness,
listens again for the liquid pulse.

When it is done, she turns away.
The savior can go
until she calls him again.

Before the Flight into Egypt

Christ, child, glowing like a sunset on sand,
your birth is as certain as the grave.
Had you waited until your mother crossed the border
you'd have lain in soft cotton, instead of this bed of straw
under the cold, prickly sky. Already you carry a burden
of separation: each fragile gesture pushes your mother
farther from your loveliness.

The crowd in the stable begins to roar. They need you
to save them: grandfather demands a second chance,
the milk maid captures your coos in a jar,
and a wise man snatches your slow, quiet gaze.
They command you to make them whole again,
reclaim what they lost in beds of clay, under pool tables,
and in wine-lidded nights.

Mother lifts you and carries you into the silent night.
The breeze stirs the brush to whisper, the sky ripples,
and the moon rises above the black, distant hills.
She looks down at you and asks only, baby,
Jesus, how did you get so beautiful?

The Memory of Bones
(for J.K.H.)

Love will sleep in your infant bones
that crowd and feather over mine as we lie in this twilight.
Beneath your tender temple where the brown hair curls and
dampens my cheek, love will hibernate.
The flesh that cocoons these clenching fists, these bursting thighs,
this rising, peaceful body
will incubate in its core what you will come to name—

Until your lover runs a cheek up the valley of your spine,
until your child pulls at your hair tickling her lips,
until you tighten the shawl across your shivering shoulders,
when love, sleeping, will remember this night and stir
(as you do this moment) and awaken.

Then, your toes will uncurl beneath your lover.
Then, you'll wedge your nose into the folds of your baby's sour neck.
And on that winter night I will wrap myself around you,
press my bones into your withering flesh,
kiss your temple where the gray hair has thinned,
and hold you close until dawn.

For My First Child

They say you were common, normal,
acceptable, as a point on a graph.
Less common than a cold, and more than the thief
with whom you shared a potential for mercy (and all things human).

You and I were common, of the same platelets and cartilage
(not yet bone, but there was that possibility).
The uncommon thread that defined you betrayed us:
you cried for blood and I blood let. Still, you were
more than a raspberry of tissue, a cramp, a fisted clot.
Given time, I would have understood mothering
as a joyous resentment.

The difference between you and me
is that I can name: grief, a birthday, my child.
Unlike you, waiting without memory for me
at our common place,
because all things I can name exist somewhere.

PART THREE: OTHER LIVES

For an Old, Old Lover

His eye sting bleeds into the sea as he bobs
on the surface, waiting in each trough
for the big one. Cresting, he sees
two lovers on shore writhe under a towel
like a colorful sea animal.
A silver ring sears his brown hand,
his leather necklace stinks like the tide.
Strands of hair in crusty spikes scratch his eartips
and settle like graying kelp down the channel of his back.
His soft wheeze mingles with the low applause
of wind and surf and gull caws overhead.

He turns to the horizon, scans
for that wave and a curl thigh-strong
to enfold him, bruise, propel him toward shore
in surrender, to leave a salt taste in his mouth,
burn his nostrils, and coat his body gum-white.
This one? but it passes—he lets it go
without lifting his body from the board, and
watches it palm the shore with bridelike foam.

Adrift, he waits for the one
he can recall over and over, to wipe out all desire.
The crushing arms, the drowning—oh, the drowning—
and rising and sinking, rising and sinking,
and the wet licks like a body slap of cold blue brine.
How he tumbled into cavernous beds of sand and
the dank bottoms of rowboats that rubbed,
moaning, against the docks.

Hiroshima Girls (August 6, 1995)

Whatever we were before that morning, we became girls
who grabbed for our father's sleeves
and screamed as from the bottom of a nightmare.
In that voiceless city our days were shovels and brooms.
You were happy to find family to burn.
The stench that scorched our nostrils,
the dry, cracking thirst and no water.
How could a babe suckle when her lips were peeled away?
At night we breathed the dust
of hearts and bones and unmourned souls
as we slept under a sky that crushed our bodies
like a lead blanket tucked tight into an abrupt horizon.

The nation turned its back on us:
we were an abscess, a chancre, a bloodstain in snow.
So we trawled east and dragged our shame up the shore,
learned to mix martinis, write a will, switch off the news.
These nights, startled awake by the silence, we lie and wait,
feel for the searing in our wombs, and listen
to the ticking in the marrow.

The Waiting of an Old Woman

All my life I am waiting for the snow to melt
and the ground to thaw into mud and stink sweet like rotting eggs and lilac.
For the bus to grind open and pluck me, for the traffic to part, and take me
away from here, there. I am waiting
for a baby to turn in my belly, to shudder, to do something.
Waiting for my husband to stop beating my head against the dryer.
Waiting for him to piss in the toilet, for once, and go to sleep, to die.
Waiting for an answer, for an explanation.
I am waiting for an apology.

I am waiting for the doctor, waiting, God,
for that injection to work. I am waiting for the bell,
the mailman to bring a check,
the water to boil and the clock to strike.
I am waiting for morning, for sunset,
for a hand to hold. I am waiting to be asked to dance,
waiting to fall sleep, waiting,
for my mother to say her good wasn't good enough.
Waiting to tell my kids I did my best.
I'm waiting in closets, on vinyl couches that stick to my thighs,
on splintering bus stops. In beds of crumbs and blood,
by pay phones with slush glued to my shoes,

Waiting
in a white-sheeted room with this black phone,
for my Oprah to begin, for the nurse to bring my tea.
The snow falls outside my window, and
I wait for crocuses to sprout above the drifts.

What Love Was Like

What was it like when you went to wake him
for supper that night, after he'd died so long he could only sip?
With the oil tank in the cellar nearly empty
and the furnace cold in the dead of winter,
did you call the doctor, or the undertaker,
or your son to fix the heat? Did you change the bed,
or shave his face, sponge his belly,
or take the screaming kettle off the stove?

Did the futile tears roll the moment you felt for his hand,
or when they carried him to the grave?
Or later, when you cleaned a drawer
and found the tie pin he wore the night you met?
(You knew because it pressed a mark between your breasts.)
Or when you tried to recall that room of your first home,
the one behind the kitchen: what color was the floor;
how tall the windows (can't you remember?);
the pattern in the pillows; how the daylight faded on his forehead,
glowed behind his fingertips, and glinted off the gold tooth?

Did you wonder what love was on the dance floor
that night, when your lips touched his cheek
and you smelled the sweet starch melting from his collar?
Did you wonder in that old room, while the dishes soaked
in the sink and twilight rested on the sill?
Do you wonder in the empty house, as you inspect cluttered shelves
and poke under dusty beds, searching for the signs of love?

Along the Outbound
(for L.H.)

Today I watched you hurl a rock into the sea.
You stood on a cliff above the water and faced the setting sun.
Wind ruffled your hair in a dance
and the fading light painted brilliant relief on your dusky skin.
You bent to choose a rock from the ground
and drew back your arm.
You propelled the rock into perfect orbit before it dropped
below the cliff, out of view.
You trembled then, like the surf against timber.

At my apogee
I will have forgotten how the sand crunched under our shoes
as we climbed the cliff, and that my eyes watered in the wind.
I will have forgotten how your brows raised in wonder at the horizon,
the grace of your bending, the strength in your arc.
Returning, I might only recall:
The rock whistled in the wind. Your arm drew back.
There was the moment of release.
The rock disappeared from view, your fierce hair fought the wind,
your arms stretched to soar above the churning sea,
the twilight body, its landscape gleaming.

The sun was lowered into the sea.
The surf received the rock we no longer saw.
There was a cliff, where once you stood.

Beyond the Lighthouse

The road to the lighthouse loops through dairy farms
and grasses so green your eyes sting from staring
under the sharp midday sun.
Here a cow, udder full, lounges in a field of buttercups.
She raises her head to the quick turn of birds
that freckle the sky. Around the corner
the odor of brown earth from a weathered barn burns your nostrils.
Beyond the fields the headlands nudge the glassy water
like the dense, thick skulls of sperm whales.

Before we learned to fold light into a straight beam,
ships cresting the horizon saw the diffused glow from shore—
as on a day like today, dull and gray.
You lose count of the steps down to the lighthouse
when you see the monument on the cliff edge:
Drake's splintered mast, a barnacled ruby pendant from the *Lusitania*,
the petrified hood of Moses' basket, and others, all
bound like cooled lava. A sound from the lighthouse
(or is it from the tanker heading north? or the islands
on the horizon?) meant to blast
reaches you as a moan. Out on the horizon
a low fog blends water and air, and from a spot in the sky
the sunlight spreads across the water like pale oil.

You could continue—
you could flow beyond the three hundred steps,
past the lightkeeper's cottage, where the scent of unwashed hair
drifts from the small, open window,
past the fence with the sign that forbids crossing.
Out to the gray bend of light that is like the seam of the world.

Amelia Earhart's Maiden Voyage

Amelia rode shotgun across the ocean
eating the sponge cake and jam her mother packed. She wore her white.
Nine hours from Newfoundland (they'd circled once for luck),
she wrote in her log (shaky): "Clouds all round, lurching through the wind.
No ocean, no sky. Too heavy to climb, ceiling too low to descend."
She gripped the seat until her bones ached.
The pilot and navigator joked up front. She read their lips
in the roar of engines. The fumes made her eyes water.

The clouds cleared. Under a half moon, whitecaps gleamed on the black sea.
Above the noise she heard a hymn, full strained. She dozed
and dreamed she picked hundreds of red roses from the floor
and carried them away in her skirt, like an awning distended with rain.
Below their belly a collared cormorant dove by yellow torchlight
and followed their course. Awake, she wrote:
"So tired. We are traveling too far, too fast, too soon."

Dawn, and rain on the windows like brocade. She saw a sapphire coast
framed in lace. The port engine coughed, gave out. Then the starboard.
They glided with the tail winds, floated through the silence.
She was receding from the sky.
Through the floorboards all streamed the heaviness of her body,
her weariness, the day she was born. She felt full, holy.

Later, after the mooring in, after the champagne,
the ribbons, the rounds of applause in the luminary glare,
after the slow, slippery bath, and bound in ivory satin
she wrote: "I saw him in the clouds, wearing a morning coat."

Leaving the Station

I liked to count the columns outside my window
as they glided: one...two...three...four...
and the spaces between
when trains I rode pulled out of the station.
I liked to feel the sliding, even leaving,
clack-clacking away from my origin toward an end.
The strength of the locomotive humming across the couplings,
turning the wheels, shaking the seat beneath my hips.

My lovers used to lie over me like damp sheets
when the rubbing and grinding was done.
In the moments when our souls receded into themselves
I slipped away, slowly at first—
as when the world outside startles and then begins to sway—
and then pulled away, and I knew
I was leaving.
The way I left my mother:
in tremors of muscle and a gush of salt water
I was expelled to begin to breathe, to begin to die.
And the leaving when she touched my cheek the day I married.

The years roll over in thuds, until a funeral train
frilled in black like a drunken widow
pulls away from the station, slowly, like any other train.
She collects her elegance, gathers her grace for the journey,
and then skips down the rails, past her old beaux
lined up tall and mournful along the tracks.

PART FOUR: BEARING WITNESS

Bearing Witness

I ended a love affair with a married man at the same time my grandmother died. These events happened some years ago, and I'd always remembered them in separate moments. Recently, however, they began to appear as deliberately related—one happened because of the other—when memories of my lover and my grandmother began to reawaken.

There were more differences between the two than similarities. Enough time has passed now that I have no more sentimentality for my former lover. The loss of my grandmother, on the other hand, I feel even today. My lover was wealthy, and my grandmother was barely getting by. One set of memories is from childhood and the other from when I was more or less an adult. My love affair was by necessity a secret, and my lover was an exceptionally private person. But my grandmother broadcast her adoration of me to anyone with ears to hear. She kept track of my business and the stories of me since my birth, before even I was aware of myself and the world around me. My lover knew very little about me, although his narrow knowledge contributed to what “me” became. When my grandmother died, her definition of me might have died with her, and then that aspect of me would have dissolved. Stories, like transplanted organs, need a host to survive.

My lover lived with his wife and two children in the foothills, in a house he described as an “architect’s dream.” Once featured in *Sunset*, it was the last stop of the annual homes tour. Entirely secluded by privacy construction and clever landscaping, his house was his hideout. Apparently, from no window in the house or area in the yard could one see a neighbor; likewise, passersby could catch not a glimpse of my lover where he lived. From anywhere on the grounds one had only vistas of hills on one side and valley on the other, with blue sky in between. My lover was virtually non-existent once at home.

I often wondered what he thought of the small apartment I shared with my cat and fifty neighbors who all argued, played their stereos too loud, and hung clanging, melodious wind chimes on their balconies. I wondered what he thought of the outdated shag carpeting, the dark woodwork in the kitchen whose scrapes and dings told of the brawling and careless housekeeping of years of tenants. What did he think of the crack in the bedroom window—like a bolt of lightening—and the unmatched furniture? It must not have bothered him, because he continued to show up at my door, dripping with rain or perspiration, or with dust in his hair and eyes, on his way home from work or out running errands. When he did, I would pull him inside and wrap myself around him, trying to rub his dust and sweat permanently into my skin.

For long after we parted I wondered why I had loved him. Maybe it was because I was young, or because he was so much older—fifteen years older—than me, a fact that led me to believe he was also wiser. Or because his eyes were blue and heavy lidded,

even in the bright of day, or his skin was soft and pink. Because he was rich or he was married. It doesn't matter now why I loved him. The gestures he showed me, the bits of kindness he gave me, that he made me laugh, I accepted all as love. I listened bewitched to the things he told me: the tales of his cross-country trip when he should have been in school, the silly inventions he created, like the fee meter for a lawyer's desk, to satisfy a current national whim. His face had begun to slacken, and the skin hung loose along his jaw and under his chin. My grandmother would have sniffed and called him a walrus. But I thought he was supremely handsome, and my heart actually hurt whenever I looked at him.

At that time, I worked as a lab technician in the ophthalmology department at the university. I had my own office, a large, uncarpeted room with a desk, a gray lab table, and a few metal storage cupboards. My job was to examine human eyeballs, which had been removed from their cadavers, and perform various procedures on them. I measured irises, prodded corneas for glaucoma, poked scleras for stress limits, vivisectioned and examined optic nerves under the microscope, and then recorded my observations. Eventually, the research would speed up matches for transplant recipients.

Surrounding me were the specimens on which I worked—as in an olive market were stocked shelves and shelves of jars filled with human eyeballs, all staring soullessly, bewildered from their preserving liquid. When I first began working in the lab I felt the million eerie stares all around. I often whispered “excuse me” before cutting into one of them. But, in no time in my isolation I was doing private things like picking my nose

without a Kleenex and putting my feet up on the table when I ate lunch, talking to myself. I'd come to realize that the eyes weren't connected to anything that understood who I was or what I was doing there. I was all alone in that room, even though those eyes once discerned light from dark, saw the coming of twilight and the beginning of dawn, and gazed on a beloved, heartbreaking face. It astonished me to think what this collection of eyes had seen and what sights they had gathered, the memories they helped to store, the thoughts they helped to form, the last images they recorded before death. They were nothing now but cold, dead tissue for me to inspect.

When I first described to my lover what I did, he grimaced and asked didn't it make me shiver to be around all those eyes. Even after I explained what they once might have been, he said just the thought of them gave him the creeps. If he wanted to see me during a work day, he called and arranged to meet somewhere other than at my lab. I believed his worst nightmare would have been to get locked in that room alone with the eyes. I was sad to think we saw things so differently.

My sister and I spent most of our summer vacations at my grandmother's house, which for a long time was the telephone office of a small town in central New Hampshire. Her house was in the middle of town, and traffic from New London, Weare, Hillsboro, and Concord all converged at the intersection marked by one blinking, amber light just yards from her front porch.

My grandmother was the chief telephone operator, and she supervised a crew of young, mostly unmarried, women who wore full, puffy skirts and red lipstick. My sister and I soon knew their lives because they were often the topic of dinner conversation: Doris's braces were coming off in a month and she could then chew bubblegum again, Maria had come in late for her morning shift and was seen eating Saltines between calls. "I expect she'll be leaving soon," my grandmother said to my grandfather in a low voice.

The telephone office was in a front corner of the first floor, adjacent to the porch, and had a good view of the Esso station across the street and the pharmacy next door. In the summer my grandmother had to close the windows in the telephone office to shut out the noise from the street. To keep the air moving she turned two fans on high. When her shift finished on those days, she would emerge from the office, her hair flattened on top from the headset and sticking up in back from the constant, shifting gale on the other side of the door.

She was less concerned that callers wouldn't hear each other over the street noise than she wanted to hear every word that passed between them. On a dull shift she listened in on calls. She had tricks for hiding her indiscretions, like twisting the mouthpiece up over her head. Her favorite callers were lovers. If the interchange was juicy, she sat quietly and listened. But when conversation turned to the weather, or when she felt an argument was in order, she twisted her mouthpiece back down, murmured something like "you jackass," and then waited for the ensuing sparks to fly.

She knew the gossip of six counties. She knew which girls were “you know, *pregnant*” (in a whisper) and by whom. She knew who was going bankrupt, who lost his mortgage in the poker game in Hillsboro, that Olive Twiss had bought new lace curtains in Manchester, that George Whorton was really murdered (it wasn’t suicide) because he was such a rascal. She was the first to hear about the stock market crash, when a reporter from New York called the Concord *Monitor* through her switchboard. Later, she was the first in town to learn about Pearl Harbor.

After my grandfather died, she moved to a large, white, two-storied home on five acres of rolling, stubbly land outside of town. She no longer worked for the telephone service because she would have to drive, which she’d never bothered to learn. Besides, she said, people had grown up, moved out or died, and it wouldn’t be the same, talking to strangers on the other end of the line.

Instead, she set up in her new home and began accepting suitors. These men all carried hats and drove heavy, shimmering cars that ticked in the gravel driveway after their motors were switched off. On those evenings my grandmother wore a sleeveless, flowered georgette dress, draped a scarf around her neck, and floated in Evening in Paris cologne. She walked carefully out to their cars, so as not to twist her ankle in her high heels, with the flesh of her upper arm sagging into the dimple of her elbow as she steadied her stride. Just before they rolled down the hill, she turned and blew kisses to my sister and me. There were nights she left us to ourselves until midnight when, below

our bedroom, we heard the shifting tones of my grandmother and her date saying goodnight on the porch.

My lover discovered that his wife had taken up with the contractor who had worked on the renovation of their house. Marriage had been long and dull for years, she said, and she wanted to live life before it was too late. She wanted him *out*.

He moved into a third-floor apartment of an older building a few blocks from my lab. He bought a few good pieces of furniture—a dotted yellow couch, an antique dining table, a tall ash bed and matching armoire, and a set of blue-willow dishes. He learned to cook one meal—chicken broiled with olive oil and rosemary—which he served to all his dates. He bought an espresso machine, a huge TV, and a stationary bicycle on which he hung his cashmere sweaters.

To my mind this change brought a shift in our affair: maybe now we could act like a normal couple, be seen together in public places, kiss in daylight. To him, the realization only reined him tighter to his soon-to-be-ex wife. “Our souls touched,” he said one evening after dinner.

With that, it was clear to me that his and mine did not. We sat in folding chairs at the dining table in his apartment. Outside the bare window, the sun was setting behind the hills in a cloudless sky. The light drew a quiet, coral rectangle in the room so gradually I didn’t notice until it had faded. As we sat in the cool of night, I could hear his

voice and the occasional car on the street below. Soon I could no longer see the photograph of his family on the wall behind him.

My grandmother told me many things. My favorite dress was made from curtains printed with wildflowers arranged in squares. The bodice was red, she said, and I wore it on my fourth birthday. When I was two I slept with a fish that my grandfather had caught in the river. I howled when my grandmother announced she wanted to cook it for dinner, so, instead, she put it in a plastic bag and laid it on the pillow next to me. Its tail flipped against the sides of the bag long into the night. (Somewhere is a black-and-white snapshot of me sleeping beside that fish, both with our mouths open.) Each time I crossed the bridge into town I demanded to be lifted up so that I could spit into the frothy, rushing water below. I wore diapers until I was three and took them off only when my older cousins teased me about it. A bed I was hiding under fell on me when my sister jumped on the mattress. Where the springs cut into my scalp is now a path of white scar where no hair will grow.

We thought my grandmother must have had extraordinary abilities to see and hear. Beyond the stone wall of her back yard was a forest of grand possibilities through which trails had been worn generations before. Well up the path that began at the stone wall lay a log. On it grew a carpet of moss, and termites, salamanders, and beetles whose names we didn't know called it home. This log was always the first stop of any day; it

was where we sat and peed while we planned our adventures. Far from sight of my grandmother's kitchen window, with our underpants around our ankles, we huddled: would we hike to the big rock? Would we eat blueberries along the way or bring them home for breakfast the next day?

For a week I'd been scratching and rubbing the raw, red rash that sprouted on my behind. Finally, when the pain became unbearable, I went to my grandmother for relief. "That's what you get for tinkling in the woods," she said and went for the calamine lotion. For years we wondered how she had known the culprit.

Years later, I brought a college boyfriend to her house for the weekend. We'd gone to see a movie and returned home to a dark house. On the bed in his room off the parlor, his fingers became very persuasive and I soon forgot where we were. "It's getting so *hard*," he begged.

Then we heard my grandmother's voice on the other side of the door. "Oh, it's you two. I thought it was a mouse and went to get the Raid." In a moment I was upstairs in the bedroom I shared with her, my hymen intact.

She returned to bed, with her pink, net curler kerchief knotted at the very center of her forehead like a third eye. "A girl should save herself until she marries the man she loves," she said. This was the same woman who'd said, "Better to marry at thirty-five. If he's good, your life's only half begun; if he's bad it's already half over." I'd mumbled something like "Times have changed." I wasn't going to wait until middle age to lose my virginity. Maybe it *was* better to marry than burn.

After my affair had ended, I understood what she meant. Maybe there was something to that corny axiom, because love in the form of my lover was a swindler. Love like that was too easy to give away and too painful to reclaim.

One night, after making mad love on his couch, my lover and I went for dinner at a restaurant near his apartment. He was acting uncharacteristically bold that night, out in public with me like that. Perhaps it was in defiance of his wife, with whom he still hoped for reconciliation. Our affair was still a secret.

During dinner we shared a bottle of wine that had an unusually strong effect, we were so relaxed and delighted with each other. By dessert we were both saturated with alcohol. Out on the street he swayed on the pavement and put a cigarette to his lips. I lit the match. "Stand back," he ordered, "I'm liable to explode." We laughed so hard I nearly fell off the curb. We were so silly.

Still snickering, I took his arm and guided him across the street toward the university. We joked all the way. "Where are you taking me?" he asked in mock horror. At the door of my office I leaned him against the wall to unlock the door. "Where are we?" he asked again, now truly confused. I planned to leave him there overnight. In the morning he'd awaken to the millions of eyes boring into that selfish, beautiful soul he shared with his wife. I wanted to send him to insanity, but I decided I wasn't ready to leave him so soon. I closed the door and guided him back home.

This is what I knew about my lover: he ground his teeth when he slept, and it sounded like someone sharpening knives in the dark; the nails of his big toes were lined with white, callused skin that, despite otherwise meticulous grooming, he ignored or overlooked. Before he went to bed, he stood by the armoire and scratched the side of his head and then patted down the hair to rearrange it. When his skin smelled like mildew, I knew he hadn't washed his towels for awhile. When we made love, the silhouette of his face and body above me, the feel of his skin against mine, the gleaming outlines of his muscles all wrung me out. There were many times I had to keep very still to hide that I was crying wet, warm tears that rolled out of the sides of my eyes and sank into the pillow. It was impossible to leave him in the mornings. It was nearly impossible to not tell him I loved him with all my heart.

My grandmother began to forget things, like where she left her glasses and the names of her children. At first it was almost amusing, but when she left the gas on too many times we became alarmed. My grandmother was fading from us, and from herself. She died in a nursing home two years later, with the people she loved all forgotten.

I learned of her death on the same day my lover invited me to his house—his real house—for the first time. His wife and children had gone skiing with the boyfriend, and the house was his for the weekend. Wouldn't I like to see it?

The rooms of my lover's house flowed like water through a hollow horseshoe. The parlor at one end moved into the dining room so smoothly that I hardly noticed the

transition. The dining room blended into the kitchen. We drifted slowly along. “These panes are from Germany,” he explained like a tour guide, “the rug from Greece.” The master bedroom pulled me along in an undertow.

We returned to the kitchen, which was a room too large for intimacy. The exposed beams were stenciled in blue-and-cream hearts, flowers, and ducks. He found an open bottle of wine in the refrigerator. We clinked and drank. The perspiration from my fingers drew moist prints on the crystal. He asked if I was nervous. I said yes; I wasn’t so sure I wanted to be in this part of his life.

He took my hand and led me down the long, carpeted hallway lined with family photographs, past the bedrooms of his children, to the far end, to their bedroom. It was furnished in yellow and orange, mouth-watering colors. Yellow striped pillows. Her bathrobe hung on a hook on the door. “Come in,” he urged from the middle of the room.

I stepped like a burglar, or light like an Indian as my grandmother would have said. He held my breasts through my blouse almost lovingly. “We could really mess up this place,” he said. “Are you ready to tell our secret?” And then I understood why he’d called me to his house.

There was no lovemaking that night, no dampened pillows. That night I fucked him. Over and over. Somewhere in that white, cold determination, I wondered if he saw my silhouette, the hair falling toward him, the eyelashes, the outline of my breasts, the profile of my nose. I wondered if he saw anything holy in that pit of me.

When he lay exhausted and asleep, I moved beside him and pulled the covers over us both. Then I thought about my grandmother and how, liberated by death and the fog of faded memory, she must have looked down at her hospital bed and wondered, perplexed, how did she get there. I hoped she couldn't see me then, lying in this bed next to a man I now despised, rubbed raw and thinking of her.

After awhile, I turned to him and his sleep-sagging face. I began to talk to him, to tell him stories. My favorite dress had pictures of flowers on the skirt. My sister and I used to pee in the woods behind my grandmother's house. I lost my first ring—an emerald—somewhere in her stone wall, the first boy I kissed slobbered down my blouse, I didn't want to go to college away from home. I remained a virgin until twenty-five. All night I whispered to him everything I could remember. He might not have loved me, but he was surely going to learn about me that night and remember me until he lay on his deathbed. I would be one of his last memories, no matter which direction his mind was traveling then.

Before dawn I left his bed. I washed the fingerprints from the wine glasses and put them back in the cupboard. I collected the hair from my pillow and from where I'd lain. I wiped the toothpaste from the basin in the bathroom, checked under the bed for stray lipsticks. No earrings under the pillow, no panties on the night table. There was not so much as a scratch on his body. Despite why he had asked me to come, there remained not a trace of my existence.