The Red Wheelbarrow

Nov. 1995
Experience is not what happens to you; it is what you do with what happens to you.

--Aldous Huxley
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1
Kevin Wilson

Grace
for Andrea Maio

Her pockets seem stuffed
with herbs, sweet basil
for pesto, blooming
mint for comfort, pale
sage for hope,
fireweed for longing...
Ice plant, Ice plant,
why are you still,
so far away and quiet,
preferring the frost to
this autumn's warmth?

Long pause. Her fingers stroke the
long sand; she sees in the rippling waves
a thousand snakes driving their way towards her.
Drawing in the sand,
she thinks about how, in giving
two almonds to a beautiful man
for every day she knew
him, the man would tremble
the unmanly way,
the shaking
of hands and leg
when her hand dropped
down lissomely
across his knee
and it pressed up like leaven.

Her neck becomes sore; she looks across
the shore, telling
herself that this
carly fall is like
a bright twilight.
(her hair falls)

The wind's breath is moist against the
late green yellow of leaves. It sends
a boat through rough water.

Clinging to fireweed, she knows
a swan will land like a white shiver;
its wings will beat like two great mirrors.

she wonders
if she
will ever leave.
Like Jesus, Christianity, Religion -- you became a saint during your life and after your death; most of America worships you and children's children begin to doubt you. I doubt that your actions before and after stagelight did you any better. But how can you do better than God.
You were spinning on the edge of a saucer CD, something you never heard of. You were singing with me all the words to the song I felt like I could have written, should have written. You were high-pitched and singing over bubbles of bong water, destined for preaching underneath dizzy heads and giggles and some strange chick saying “I can play all these songs,” just to look tough, trying to be intimidating to the male 16-year-old driver.

You didn’t even know that you would be like a fist and a rifle for a weak 15-year-old in the back seat of a Toyota, years after your irresponsible death. I could have died like you did. Drugs. Explosion of the heart. Explosion of the spirit.
I can’t. Can’t look strong, can’t write lyrics, can’t sing low waves married to guitar licks.
I can’t play a Fender with my teeth or call hazel purple like you. I’ve never seen what it looks like from the inside of a fetus, never thought anything wrong about my parents.
I just wanted to be home safe by eleven o’clock.

III.

Life seems so full when the bass takes over the rhythm of my heart. "Jimi Hendrix, Jimi Hendrix, is God," Dave told me as he handed me some gum from the shelf. Dave worked over at the twenty-hour store near the beach. The cash register plunking, I sat on the newspaper after school and sunset, and I told him, “YA GOD.”

Mika Perrine

We All Carry Our Own Dark Stories

In the town where my mother grew up, a girl was riding alone on open roads, her hair flying like the tassels of the corn she was passing when the truck pulled over and the man got out. She was found ten days later, a bruised body in a drainage ditch, her sweet face buried in Iowa dirt.

In my mothers’ voice there is always a tremor if I listen hard, a weakness I have vowed not to match, but suppose there is no choice — a rough hand against my lips, a slippery struggle of knees as I try to protect the only thing I own: who says I’ll ever escape this thick grip, this stifling of my fiery heart.

On Second Street in Ashland at nine p.m., a boy smiles greasily and says, “Hey there, pretty girl.” But I walk quickly, my lips pursed, my breath hot as I hear his slick offers and wonder at the wild rush behind his words. Which of them are the ones who’ll turn sour as old milk, the stench of their desires laid thick upon the skin of a woman, their eyes like pointed guns, their faces
a blur of white heat as I pass.

I have hiked the gravel backroads around my house
for years, my tires worn thin with age.
I know each ditch, each tumble-down barn and each
barking dog, but I don't know
the white car with the out-of-state plates that cruises by
twice before stopping. Two men, red-faced and grinning,
ask for directions and I speak without thinking,
give them what they want, a moment to look
me over. A sweaty, brown-eyed girl with firm legs
and an easy smile, the road a rimmed tunnel of trees,
no houses in sight. Their questions come quick,
where do you live and I point, how old are you and I stop,
and begin to see. I am lucky.
Another car comes and they peel away to leave me
alone, my heart a wild bird, my hands
wrapped tight around the black rubber handles.

That is all of my story,
but the lonely stretch of road is still there,
and the strangers sailing
down some other highway;
And in Iowa, in a certain ditch,
wild flowers bloom recklessly,
the spreading riot and blush of late summer.

Jerra Tauber

Letter to Jimi H.  A.D.

I.

Farlboy got a Fender
six strings, red body like your bloodshot eyes.
Ivory necklaces hung around your neck and screamed songs for
every generation.
Your images moved along sometime
in that freedom you helped lead with Dylan,
charted the years you were born in, just like every other trend.

Saying what you see, by every dawn's earliest light,
no one could define scribbles on manuscript like you.
And the proudest and most humiliating you let hail
hard on the heads of those hippies, not to mention
in the ears of their children.
But how were you to know.

Hero, like a thousand blank parking lots staring at the sky,
your audience reflected the greys, the indigos, the white highlights in
blue;
like the sky at night,
you were their falling star,
but not even a comet could speed
across the universe like your fingers
over strings.

II.

Hendrix, you are "cool",
like the time I was riding in the back of a truck with my friends.
“Mama!” she cries, and Ellen is beside her in a moment, touching and kissing and cooing. It is good, she thinks, to hear her daughter crying. She folds the hand inside her own, presses the beaded blood back down where it belongs.

“It'll be okay,” she murmurs. “Everything'll be all right.”

When the car pulls up like a drone, and the men come in, laughing and smelling already of beer, Ellen is in the living room, rocking her child. Before the men come in, Mary leans forward, touching Ellen’s ruddy-skinned elbow, her fingers fleeting, gentle.

Ellen looks down at her daughter’s face, the lids fluttering shut, settling down for the night. She hears the clamor in the kitchen as the men come in, followed by the boys with their shouts of “Papa!” They are happiest now, in the evening hour, before full darkness and the last drink, which is always one too many. Before the stagger and shout after the children have been tucked into bed, their ears sealed soundly to the wild, drunken truth. That is all hidden for now, impossible as a nightmare in full daylight. Only a quick touch between the two women, a promise that can never be fulfilled. They have made their choices, Ellen thinks; these dog-voiced husbands, these children wrapped tight as nooses about their necks. There is nowhere to turn. But it is a comforting thing, this meeting they dream of. They both know what lying is for. Ellen listens to her daughter’s breath, watches it rise and fall in the tiny white chest like a tide, a sweet female rhythm, old as the moon.

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Clare Nathan

**Havva**

Havva is the oldest of my sisters, and my memories of her aren’t very clear because I was only ten when she left. Eighteen is not so young to leave home, but it still surprised my parents. I also don’t remember much about her because she stayed in her room most of the time.

She was very tall, almost as tall as my father, and she had long, shiny brown hair. She didn’t look anything like my mother, who is very short and has hair that is dark and frizzy. My mother used to say that Havva was lucky because she had a Goyish nose; my mother and my sisters Leah and Sarah and I all have bumps on the ridges of our noses.

One of the few things I remember about Havva is that she could sew beautifully. I guess it’s because when she was younger, girls still had to take Home Economics class. Once she sewed a skirt all of eyelet lace that she made herself. She used a crochet hook that was thinner than a needle, and I watched her bending over it for hours, drawing the hook in and out, somehow extracting tiny flower-shaped holes outlined in thin white thread. Her fingers were slender and dark, almost honey-colored, and I liked the way they looked against the white lace. She lined the skirt with raw silk and then put it away because it was too fancy to wear to temple.

The summer she left was very hot, and since we hadn’t inherited my grandparents’ house in the suburbs yet, we still lived in Detroit. The city is a miserable place to be when it’s hot because there is nowhere to get away from people, and everywhere smells like sweat and frustration. The armpits of my mother’s shirts were always soaked with big, wet rings, and she was in a bad mood most of the time. I remember that Leah was still nursing and got earaches. Sarah and I started taking violin lessons from an old woman who had bald spots on her head.
and was going deaf. Sarah and I shared one violin rented from our school, which made practice times complicated and we fought a lot about who would get to practice when. I remember those things better than Havaa leaving. Originally she left for the summer, with my parents permission to visit Aunt Rachel in Cape Cod. She couldn't have gone, except that Aunt Rachel sent her a train ticket as a gift.

Sarah and I slept in the living room that summer because it was too hot to sleep in the bedrooms upstairs, and when Havaa came down in the morning to leave she sat at the table, her hand clutching her suitcase lightly, as if afraid someone was going to take it, and she asked me if I remembered what I'd dreamed that night. It felt strange talking to her, and I said that I didn't remember my dreams. Her eyes looked nervous, a little sad, and she told me that she always dreamed of stairways leading nowhere and of the smell of burnt fires and rain.

When fall came I stopped taking violin lessons because I was worse than Sarah and that was the agreement; whoever played better by the end of the summer would get full possession of the violin twice as many lessons. I remember that I was embarrassed because Sarah was a year younger but could still play better than me. Mostly, though, I was glad not to have to practice anymore.

When school started it occurred to me that Havaa was supposed to come home. One night when my mother came to the room that Sarah and I shared to make sure that the light was out, I asked her when Havaa was coming home. It was very dark and I could feel her standing there, her heavy figure leaning against the side of the door.

"Havaa is not alive," she said.

I felt nothing except a small pang of blank wonderment and asked when we would say Kaddish for her.

"We don't say Kaddish for one who was never born," I heard her walking across the room to my bed, and she bent over me. A thin line of street light slid in from between the window frame and curtain, making a pale blue streak across her cheek. I felt the darkness all around me, lying heavy across my face like a wet blanket; I felt it obscuring me, erasing me. "You see," she

Ellen remembers the night, less than a month ago, under the full moon that dragged itself like a sick animal up over the garden. Mary was different that night; she lost all her power for a glimmer of time, a few raw hours under the scale-sheen of moonlight. She had come to the back bedroom window and tapped lightly, and Ellen, who lay sleepless next to her husband's thunder, had risen and padded softly outside. Mary was shaking when they embraced, her body collapsing, letting go for once of its eternal hardness. On her face was the bruised cheek where he had slammed her, the black eye beautiful as a marble in the cold white light, and Ellen touched it tenderly, her hands gilding across Mary's body like waves. They walked out to the edge of the garden, next to the day lilies that were closed for the night, and sat down. They did not need to speak. Together they were beautiful, and impossible, shoulder to shoulder like Siamese twins, sisters of the Same heart, the Same blood. They sat that way until the moon fell, and Mary rose barefoot, her face swollen, her body regaining its hardness.

"We should meet," she whispered. "In another life, we should meet in air." And she left with a touch and fleck across the fields that led her back to the man. That was beautiful. What she said later was not, when Ellen met her in town at the grocery store, saw her face lathered in foundation to hide the truth.

"Mary?" Ellen had asked, carefully arranging her voice, unsure of what should be said. "How are things?"

"Every woman's a whore," Mary said, her voice thick and cold as a slice of meat. "I cannot communicate." And they had left it at that, five miles apart, and they hadn't spoken for over a month, afraid of what could happen. Until now, this meeting the husbands had arranged, the drunkards and their silly wives. What fun. A picnic. And what could she say to these words in the air. "You doing okay?"

"Oh, Mary," is all she manages to say after she finds her voice, and Mary withdraws her hand from her arm, still standing close. It would be easy enough for Ellen to reach out. But she does not. The baby begins to cry; the mother cat has returned and scratched out a tiny red warning on the girl's soft hand.
like hell; you ought to get them out of here."

"Yes, well, David says we ought to drown them," Ellen says, coming round to join her friend in the kitchen.

"Not a bad idea, really. They're more trouble than they're worth," says Mary, giving a dry laugh.

Ellen kneels down and takes out her cutting board from the bottom cupboard, her shining knife from the silverware drawer. She looks over at her friend for a moment, her eyes travelling from the dirty sandaled feet to the sheen of ankle, the floral skirt moving slightly with each movement, the thick waist, the full, rounded breasts, the hair pulled back in a haphazard bun. The face hard-set as Mary works. She looks down and catches Ellen off-guard, then gives a wry grin, holds out a hand.

"Get back on your feet, old woman," she says, and pulls Ellen up. Ellen finds a potato and begins to slice, the two women working side by side, the boys' shouts drifting in through the open front door.

"I put the chicken in an hour and a half ago," says Mary after a few moments. "And the rolls are rising."

"Good, good," Ellen mumbles. She feels a headache coming on; the heat of cooking and the smell of cat shit swirls through her. Her daughter is gurgling, cooing in the corner. Her back aches from bending over so long in the garden. A car will come soon, bringing the men. Mary finishes the last tomato and slides the cores into the compost bucket under the sink. She stands next to Ellen, watching the way Ellen's hands move, slicing.

"How you doin', baby," Mary says after a moment, and Ellen feels the soft hand on her arm, hears the voice so close, a murmur like a mother in her ear. It is a voice that knows, a dark readiness which she cannot meet. Her hands hover in the air, hesitating, then keep on slicing as if nothing has been said. She could go on forever, it seems: slice the potatoes to a pulp, slice the counter top, the kittens in their ugly brown box, her daughter the dunce-child who will not cry, the two doomed boys in the darkening yard, her own sweet skin. She feels the beauty of the brown-handled knife; she will not speak.

"You doing okay?" Mary says again, and it hurts to hear her; it hurts to hear somebody try when there is no use. They have had their chance.
Pamela Gourley

Highway 93

Driving home across the lonely belly of Nevada, my father and I have been silent since we crossed the border from Idaho.

To me, this solitary dust-covered road, our yearly migrations, my father, are all the same.

I am young, but I no longer remember the day, five years back, when he kissed me "goodbye" and flew out East to a city I would not know for years.

For now, he is my father again, my companion on this wind-blown journey, though the white whiskers from his beard remind me that he is not the same man who left years ago, that he cannot make up for the past, that another year will go by with the long-distance phone calls and postcards from the Cape.

But this desert holds a timelessness we both feel. It lies in the slow pulse of our same blood and this narrow highway that crawls into the shadows of the Sierra Nevada, cradling itself against its unmoving cliffs.

Mika Perrine

In the Garden
Based on "Lesbos"
a poem by Sylvia Plath

Ellen is hunched over in the last corner of the potato patch, her bare feet sunken in the black garden mud. With the flashing white trowel she is digging them up, mindless tubers already beginning the saga of reproduction; tiny pink buds have formed like warts on the outer skin. Life after death, she thinks or is it life after life? These little hopes will cling even as she slices the potatoes for frying, slides them into the vicious hiss of oil. She shakes her head as she places the last one into the old bushel basket at her side, then rises, her mud-stained dress falling around her legs. She wiggles her feet free, listening to the resounding suck as mud closes back around itself, sealing off the place where she had been standing. Then she turns, and moving slowly, heads across the overgrown lawn to the house.

Inside, Mary is already at work in the kitchen, the babies playing at her feet. Ellen's three year old is chasing Mary's five year old; they stumble around the cramped kitchen and out into the dining room, their gleeful shouts filling the house. Ellen's year old baby, the only girl, is sitting quietly by the cardboard box that holds the kittens, transfixed by their dimwitted movements, little black scrawls of fur in their flimsy prison. Ellen wonders why her daughter doesn't touch the animals, doesn't pick them up and fling them around the way boys do, already exercising their tiny, dark powers. She wishes her daughter would move, quit sitting like a fat little snail, the eyes so weak already, none of the fire she wishes she could see, none of the rage that might give her hope.

She sets the potatoes on the counter and rubs her muddy feet on the front rug.

"Well, you're back already," Mary says, hardly looking up from the tomatoes she is slicing. "I've sent the men to our place for cold beer and watermelon I left in the cooler. You know those cats stink
I sit, my flesh bundled against me, reddened by the steam of the shower room.

This time it is my mother. She is in the ruddiness of my skin, in its thickness, in its ability to respond to water, its new found joy in moving through it. She is in my small face, red lips, long tongue, my midriff that is pale, my stomach that rests in three folds, larger than I would like. My knees pulled up to my chin, I notice the fullness of my thighs, the density of flesh. Like my mother, I have a freckled back and forearm and face. I have constellations on my body: Orion on my left forearm, Cassiopeia at my collar bone. The Seven Sisters convene at the nape of my neck. There are more.

I like the thought of my body as a Universe. There are planets too, unexplored, spinning silently, becoming solid. And the solidity is what is new to me. What has found a center, created an order among the stars completing the spelling out of names: Nora, who died in 1968, who Aunt Tressie says was beautiful, whom my grandfather loved so much, who made a great meat sauce. Pearl, who had eyes like her name but filled with sadness, who grew up in Gary, Indiana with only an iron hotplate to keep her warm, who mothered her own mother, who beat her daughter with a wooden hair brush. Whose daughter ran from her and still does. Whose daughter had a daughter who may some day have her own.
Winter Convocation

I

It's the first time I've ever noticed it.
In a photograph that a friend took, the day when the light
was so good.

There is my grandmother in my face,
and the wind of that day around me, and the glaring light.
And what is not my grandmother is my mother.
And what is neither is my father's mother.
And I think: This must be what it means to become a woman,

To turn into myself and
into my mother.
My mother's mother.
My father's mother.

To be part of the earth that repeats itself.
To have winter winds full of old spirits shaping the
bones of my face.
My grandmother's spirit whistling through me,
when I stand still in the glaring white of day.
And when I turn toward a camera, she is there.
She has found her way with the wind under the coat that my
father gave me, over my skin, raising small mounds, shaping
me.

II

I will notice it again, later. In a mirror. In a hotel.
Where, in the nakedness between bathing suit and bath robe,
Brita Siepker

Late September on the Beach of Green Lake

Warm wind whips through my hair,
tangling strands together.
Sand sticks to my cheeks.
irritates my eyes.
Sun hiding behind haze
leaves a faint light on the waves rolling in.

The leaves have changed their color,
Green to red and orange.
Hills look like a painting by Seurat.
each leaf a pure color.
blend together from a distance.

Fallen leaves tumble along the beach,
carried by the wind.
They leave a trail in the sand.

Lisa Noonan

Mama's Girl

Little Dora sitting on
a railroad track kicking
pebbles with the toe
of her shoe. Got nothing
on her mind. Just sitting
there and whistling.

Don't know what she's
whistling. Some notes
from that old jazz band
the one that plays the
downtown streets.

Those notes jumbling
together making her
own little tune.

She stops her whistling
to look at her pants.

Finds a hole in the knee.

Swears to herself because
she knows Mama's going to
get mad. Didn't mean it.

Must have happened when
playing with those alley boys.
Better think of a better excuse
because ladies don't play with
those dirty boys -- they're bad news.

Starts whistling again, but forgets
the tune. She hears a clickety-clack
coming from down aways.

Must be the five o'clock train
connecting to Kalkaska. Late again for
doing her chores. Mama's going to be
real mad. Yeah -- real mad. Dora stands and wipes the dirt off her pants and takes off like those jazz notes she was whistling. Fast and free, knowing when she reaches home she'll forget them once again. Back to being Mama's girl.
“What?”
She didn’t answer him. She knew he understood. It had been
time. She had only needed time. Slowly, with her arms outstretched,
she reached out to the blue of the very first piece. It curved out gently
towards her, a perfect shade of cold next to her pale skin. Everything
was silent. Everything was as it should be.

Naomi Millan
Phoenix Rising

Melissa reached for another bottle and threw it against the far
wall of the living room. More clear light was beginning to fold the
kitchenette as she took the bottles down from the glass shelves. Green
beer bottles, blue imported water bottles, delicately spun perfume
bottles with their brown and pale gold liquids still inside. Her boy-
friend liked the way the colored light splashed on the suds while he
did the dishes. She held the wine server, and watched the color slip
through the tall vessel and on to the veins of her wrist. It was im-
ported from Italy. The six tiny glasses that matched it looked at her as
if their pure blueness could save them. They made a perfect sound,
their thin bodies blooming into a thousand shards.

When there was nothing else to throw, she knelt beside the pile
she had formed. With her long pale fingers she stirred the shards, a
thousand multi-colored spearheads. All the dishes she had so care-
fully wrapped in newspaper when he had moved to her apartment.
The transparent champagne glasses with thin necks he used to enter-
tain his loud friends. His bottles, his beautiful children that he col-
cected from garage sales and junk piles, as if he were saving them.
She wanted to crush them, crush and rub them down between her
hands into the finest blow of powder.

Instead, she picked up a thin blue piece and pressed it gently
into the wet plaster she had smoothed over the fireplace. She sat
back and looked at its irregular body trapped in the gritty surface.
Then she added a piece of orange fiestaware. And then bone china
with faint blue scrolls along the border. While she worked, she
hummed songs without bodies, low mumblings that rose without
notice in her throat. She could feel the heaviness of the undisturbed
air on her shoulders. It reminded her of the stillness around her as
she slept through the long winter nights of upper Michigan. If the
night was especially cold, her mother would add extra wood to the
small fireplace in the corner of her room, the added warmth pressing
her into the softness of her mattress. The only sound would be the wind licking the windows with frost.

But she had moved to Ann Arbor for college and stayed there, working in a flower shop. She had grown used to the sound; the sound always there of cars and feet and voices. The customers arguing with her if an order didn’t arrive on time, or if the flowers weren’t exactly what they wanted. Their worried voices scratching at her ears, shaking her roughly.

In her apartment, it was quiet. She didn’t own a radio or a TV. She kept her windows shut until night, when most people were inside with their voices. Every night she would drink a small cup of coffee and read the newspaper. Or think. Her thoughts were like the sound snow makes when it’s falling.

And then she met Joseph. He came in every Friday for bouquets for one of his many dates, and every Monday for a sweeping bunch of daisies for his home. He always asked her to do the arrangements. Once, while he was paying, he took her hand. His hands were soft and warm.

“Veronica loved the flowers. Thank you.”

“It was no problem, Mr. Summers.”

“Please call me Joseph.”

She slipped her hand out of the grasp of his short fingers and gave him his change. “Have a good day, Mr. Summers.”

His only reply was a smile.

And so it went every week until finally, about a year later, she went out on a date with him. They went dancing and drank fluorescent drinks. He told her, as he kissed her long neck, that she smelled like the wind.

Not long after, he moved into her apartment. She remembered carrying the boxes full of tapes and CDs out of his car. The TV, the furniture that smelled of many people’s bodies, the scents of women blooming out of the bed covers like opulent flowers. She never quite replaced their smell with hers, and they hovered above the bed while she and Joseph made love.

The other people were always there. In the dirty dishes and cups that she cleaned but never used. In the laughter that kept her up at night, at the parties Joseph was always giving. Motion was necessary. The eternal craving to feel alive measured by how much electricity was pumping through his veins. It showed in the way he touched her, as if he wanted to tear off her rice paper skin and refold her into a more magnificent bird. A phoenix forever being reborn in fire, newer, shinier. It had been many months since she had lain quietly in her bed, the coolness of still air caressing her like a perfect lover. It had been a very long time.

She didn’t hear the front door open and shut. She didn’t hear him walking towards her, calling her name impatiently. Even when he placed his palm on her shoulder, she didn’t turn around until she had pressed the last bit of glass on to the fireplace. With one hand she pushed a wisps of hair away from her face. The fireplace glittered dimly with the shades of water and sky.

“Melissa!”

She turned to him, annoyed that he had distracted her again.

“Yes?”

“What is this?” His arms pointed like arrows around the room. She followed their paths with her eyes.

“This is my apartment.”

“Don’t play games with me, Melissa. What happened?” He stood very close to her and shook her arm. “Say something!” She stared at him as if she didn’t understand why he was annoying her with his loud voice, these questions. He let her go and ran his hands through his hair, glancing once more around the room. Then he saw the lack of bottles above the kitchen sink. He walked over and touched the air where they had been. His voice mounted, but he held it down, like a parent dealing with an unruly child. He often talked to her like that. The sharpness of the syllables hurt her ears.

“You’ve shattered my bottles!”

“Yes.”

“Melissa, I don’t understand. Have you lost your mind?”

“Now there is less for you to pack.”
her into the softness of her mattress. And the only sound would be the wind licking the windows with frost.

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Not long after, he moved into her apartment. She remembered carrying the boxes full of tapes and CDs out of his car. The TV, the furniture that smelled of many people’s bodies, the scents of women blooming out of the bed covers like opulent flowers. She never quite replaced their smell with hers, and they hovered above the bed while she and Joseph made love.

The other people were always there. In the dirty dishes and cups that she cleaned but never used. In the laughter that kept her up at night, at the parties Joseph was always giving. Motion was necessary. The eternal craving to feel alive measured by how much electricity was pumping through his veins. It showed in the way he touched her, as if he wanted to tear off her rice paper skin and refold her into a more magnificent bird. A phoenix forever being reborn in fire, newer, shinier. It had been many months since she had lain quietly in her bed, the coolness of still air caressing her like a perfect lover. It had been a very long time.

She didn’t hear the front door open and shut. She didn’t hear him walking towards her, calling her name impatiently. Even when he placed his palm on her shoulder, she didn’t turn around until she had pressed the last bit of glass on to the fireplace. With one hand she pushed a wisps of hair away from her face. The fireplace glimmered dimly with the shades of water and sky.

“Melissa!”

She turned to him, annoyed that he had distracted her again.

“Yes?”

“What is this?” His arms pointed like arrows around the room. She followed their paths with her eyes.

“This is my apartment.”

“How play games with me, Melissa. What happened?” He stood very close to her and shook her arm. “Say something!” She stared at him as if she didn’t understand why he was annoying her with his loud voice, these questions. He let her go and ran his hands through his hair, glancing once more around the room. Then he saw the lack of bottles above the kitchen sink. He walked over and touched the air where they had been. His voice mounted, but he held it down, like a parent dealing with an unruly child. He often talked to her like that. The sharpness of the syllables hurt her ears.

“You’ve shattered my bottles!”

“Yes.”

“Melissa, I don’t understand. Have you lost your mind?”

“Now there is less for you to pack.”
“What?”

She didn’t answer him. She knew he understood. It had been time. She had only needed time. Slowly, with her arms outstretched, she reached out to the blue of the very first piece. It curved out gently towards her, a perfect shade of cold next to her pale skin. Everything was silent. Everything was as it should be.

Melissa reached for another bottle and threw it against the far wall of the living room. More clear light was beginning to flood the kitchenette as she took the bottles down from the glass shelves. Green beer bottles, blue imported water bottles, delicately spun perfume bottles with their brown and pale gold liquids still inside. Her boyfriend liked the way the colored light splashed on the suds while he did the dishes. She held the wine server, and watched the color slip through the tall vessel and on to the veins of her wrist. It was imported from Italy. The six tiny glasses that matched it looked at her as if their pure blueness could save them. They made a perfect sound, their thin bodies blooming into a thousand shards.

When there was nothing else to throw, she knelt beside the pile she had formed. With her long pale fingers she stirred the shards, a thousand multi-colored spearheads. All the dishes she had so carefully wrapped in newspaper when he had moved to her apartment. The transparent champagne glasses with thin necks he used to entertain his loud friends. His bottles, his beautiful children that he collected from garage sales and junk piles, as if he were saving them. She wanted to crush them, crush and rub them down between her hands into the finest blow of powder.

Instead, she picked up a thin blue piece and pressed it gently into the wet plaster she had smoothed over the fireplace. She sat back and looked at its irregular body trapped in the gritty surface. Then she added a piece of orange fiestaware. And then bone china with faint blue scrolls along the border. While she worked, she hummed songs without bodies, low mumblings that rose without notice in her throat. She could feel the heaviness of the undisturbed air on her shoulders. It reminded her of the stillness around her as she slept through the long winter nights of upper Michigan. If the night was especially cold, her mother would add extra wood to the small fireplace in the corner of her room, the added warmth pressing
real mad. Yeah -- real mad. Dora stands
and wipes the dirt off her pants and
takes off like those jazz notes she
was whistling. Fast and free, knowing
when she reaches home she'll forget
them once again. Back to being
Mama's girl.
Brita Siepker

Late September on the Beach of Green Lake

Warm wind whips through my hair,
tangling strands together.
Sand sticks to my cheeks,
irritates my eyes.
Sun hiding behind haze
leaves a faint light on the waves rolling in.

The leaves have changed their color,
Green to red and orange.
Hills look like a painting by Seurat,
each leaf a pure color,
blend together from a distance.

Fallen leaves tumble along the beach,
carried by the wind.
They leave a trail in the sand.

Lisa Noonan

Mama's Girl

Little Dora sitting on
a railroad track kicking
pebbles with the toe
of her shoe. Got nothing
on her mind. Just sitting
there and whistling.
Don't know what she's
whistling. Some notes
from that old jazz band
the one that plays the
downtown streets.
Those notes jumbling
together making her
own little tune.
She stops her whistling
to look at her pants.
Finds a hole in the knee.
Swears to herself because
she knows Mama's going to
get mad. Didn't mean it.
Must have happened when
playing with those alley boys.
Better think of a better excuse
because ladies don't play with
those dirty boys -- they're bad news.
Starts whistling again, but forgets
the tune. She hears a clackety-clack
coming from down aways.
Must be the five o'clock train
connecting to Kalkaska. Late again for
doing her chores. Mama's going to be
Andrea Malo

Winter Convocation

I

It's the first time I've ever noticed it.
In a photograph that a friend took, the day when the light
was so good.

There is my grandmother in my face,
and the wind of that day around me, and the glaring light.
And what is not my grandmother is my mother.
And what is neither is my father's mother.
And I think: This must be what it means to become a woman,

To turn into myself and
into my mother.
My mother's mother.
My father's mother.

To be part of the earth that repeats itself.
To have winter winds full of old spirits shaping the
bones of my face.
My grandmother's spirit whistling through me,
when I stand still in the glaring white of day.
And when I turn toward a camera, she is there.
She has found her way with the wind under the coat that my
father gave me, over my skin, raising small mounds, shaping
me.

II

I will notice it again, later. In a mirror. In a hotel.
Where, in the nakedness between bathing suit and bath robe,
I sit, my flesh bundled against me, reddened by the steam of the shower room.
This time it is my mother. She is in the ruddiness of my skin, in its thickness, in its ability to respond to water, its new found joy in moving through it. She is in my small face, red lips, long tongue, my midriff that is pale, my stomach that rests in three folds, larger than I would like. My knees pulled up to my chin, I notice the fullness of my thighs, the density of flesh. Like my mother, I have a freckled back and forearm and face. I have constellations on my body: Orion on my left forearm. Cassiopeia at my collar bone. The Seven Sisters convene at the nape of my neck. There are more.
I like the thought of my body as a Universe. There are planets too, unexplored, spinning silently, becoming solid. And the solidity is what is new to me. What has found a center, created an order among the stars completing the spelling out of names: Nora, who died in 1968, who Aunt Tressie says was beautiful, whom my grandfather loved so much, who made a great meat sauce. Pearl, who had eyes like her name but filled with sadness, who grew up in Gary, Indiana with only an iron hotplate to keep her warm, who mothered her own mother, who beat her daughter with a wooden hair brush. Whose daughter ran from her and still does. Whose daughter had a daughter who may some day have her own.
Driving home across the lonely belly of Nevada, my father and I have been silent since we crossed the border from Idaho.

To me, this solitary dust-covered road, our yearly migrations, my father, are all the same.

I am young, but I no longer remember the day, five years back, when he kissed me "goodbye" and flew out East to a city I would not know for years.

For now, he is my father again, my companion on this wind-blown journey, though the white whiskers from his beard remind me that he is not the same man who left years ago, that he cannot make up for the past, that another year will go by with the long-distance phone calls and postcards from the Cape.

But this desert holds a timelessness we both feel. It lies in the slow pulse of our same blood and this narrow highway that crawls into the shadows of the Sierra Nevada, cradling itself against its unmoving cliffs.
like hell; you ought to get them out of here.”

“Yes, well, David says we ought to drown them,” Ellen says, coming round to join her friend in the kitchen.

“Not a bad idea, really. They’re more trouble than they’re worth,” Mary says, giving a dry laugh.

Ellen kneels down and takes out her cutting board from the bottom cupboard, her shining knife from the silverware drawer. She looks over at her friend for a moment, her eyes travelling from the dirty sandaled feet to the sheen of ankle, the floral skirt moving slightly with each movement, the thick waist, the full, rounded breasts, the hair pulled back in a haphazard bun. The face hard-set as Mary works. She looks down and catches Ellen off-guard, then gives a wry grin, holds out a hand.

“Get back on your feet, old woman,” she says, and pulls Ellen up.

Ellen finds a potato and begins to slice, the two women working side by side, the boys’ shouts drifting in through the open front door.

“I put the chicken in an hour and a half ago,” says Mary after a few moments. “And the rolls are rising.”

“Good, good,” Ellen mumbles. She feels a headache coming on; the heat of cooking and the smell of cat shit swirls through her. Her daughter is gurgling, cooing in the corner. Her back aches from bending over so long in the garden. A car will come soon, bringing the men. Mary finishes the last tomato and slides the cores into the compost bucket under the sink.

She stands next to Ellen, watching the way Ellen’s hands move, slicing.

“How you doin’, baby,” Mary says after a moment, and Ellen feels the soft hand on her arm, hears the voice so close, a murmur like a mother in her ear. It is a voice that knows, a dark readiness which she cannot meet. Her hands hover in the air, hesitating, then keep on slicing as if nothing has been said. She could go on forever, it seems: slice the potatoes to a pulp, slice the counter top, the kittens in their ugly brown box, her daughter the dunce-child who will not cry, the two doomed boys in the darkening yard, her own sweet skin. She feels the beauty of the brown-handled knife; she will not speak.

“You doing okay?” Mary says again, and it hurts to hear her; it hurts to hear somebody try when there is no use. They have had their chance.
and was going deaf. Sarah and I shared one violin rented from
our school, which made practice times complicated and we
fought a lot about who would get to practice when.
I remember those things better than Havva leaving. Origin-
ally she left for the summer, with my parents permission to visit
Aunt Rachel in Cape Cod. She couldn’t have gone, except that
Aunt Rachel sent her a train ticket as a gift.

Sarah and I slept in the living room that summer because it
was too hot to sleep in the bedrooms upstairs, and when Havva
came down in the morning to leave she sat at the table, her hand
cling her suitcase lightly, as if afraid someone was going to
take it, and she asked me if I remembered what I’d dreamed that
night. It felt strange talking to her, and I said that I didn’t remem-
ber my dreams. Her eyes looked nervous, a little sad, and she
told me that she always dreamed of stairways leading nowhere
and of the smell of burnt fires and rain.

When fall came I stopped taking violin lessons because I
was worse than Sarah and that was the agreement; whoever
played better by the end of the summer would get full posses-
sion of the violin and twice as many lessons. I remember that I
was embarrassed because Sarah was a year younger but could
still play better than me. Mostly, though, I was glad not to have
to practice anymore.

When school started it occurred to me that Havva was sup-
posed to come home. One night when my mother came to the
room that Sarah and I shared to make sure that the light was out,
I asked her when Havva was coming home. It was very dark
and I could feel her standing there, her heavy figure leaning
against the side of the door.

“Havva is not alive,” she said.

I felt nothing except a small pang of blank wonderment and
asked when we would say Kaddish for her.

“We don’t say Kaddish for one who was never born.” I
heard her walking across the room to my bed, and she bent over
me. A thin line of street light slid in from between the window
frame and curtain, making a pale blue streak across her cheek. I
felt the darkness all around me, lying heavy across my face like a
wet blanket; I felt it obscuring me, erasing me. “You see,” she
Ellen remembers the night, less than a month ago, under the full
moon that dragged itself like a sick animal up over the garden. Mary
was different that night; she lost all her power for a glimmer of time, a
couple of hours under the scale-sheen of moonlight. She had come to
the back bedroom window and tapped lightly, and Ellen, who lay
sleepless next to her husband’s thunder, had risen and padded softly
outside. Mary was shaking when they embraced, her body collaps-
ing, letting go for once of its eternal hardness. On her face was the
bruised cheek where he had slammed her, the black eye beautiful as
a marble in the cold white light, and Ellen touched it tenderly, her
hands gliding across Mary’s body like waves. They walked out to the
edge of the garden, next to the day lilies that were closed for the night,
and sat down. They did not need to speak. Together they were
beautiful, and impossible, shoulder to shoulder like Siamese twins,
sisters of the SiUleheart, the S<U11e hlood. They sat that way until the
moon fell, and Mary rose barefoot, her face swollen, her body regain-
ing its hardness.

“We should meet,” she whispered. “In another life, we should
meet in air.” And she left with a touch and feet across the fields that
led her back to the man. That was beautiful. What she said later was
not, when Ellen met her in town at the grocery store, saw her face
lathered in foundation to hide the truth.

“Mary?” Ellen had asked, carefully arranging her voice, unsure
of what should be said. “I lost things?”

“Every woman’s a whore,” Mary said, her voice thick and cold
as a slice of meat. “I cannot communicate.” And they had left it at
that, five miles apart, and they hadn’t spoken for over a month, afraid
of what could happen. Until now, this meeting the husbands had
arranged, the drunkards and their silly wives. What fun. A picnic.
And what could she say to these words in the air. “You doing okay?”

“Oh, Mary,” is all she manages to say after she finds her voice,
and Mary withdraws her hand from her arm, still standing close. It
would be easy enough for Ellen to reach out. But she does not. The
baby begins to cry; the mother cat has returned and scratched out a
tiny red warning on the girl’s soft hand.
“Mama!” she cries, and Ellen is beside her in a moment, touching and kissing and cooing. It is good, she thinks, to hear her daughter crying. She folds the hand inside her own, presses the beaded blood back down where it belongs.

“It'll be okay,” she murmurs. “Everything'll be all right.”

When the car pulls up like a drone, and the men come in, laughing and smelling already of beer, Ellen is in the living room, rocking her child. Before the men come in, Mary leans forward, touching Ellen's ruddy-skinned elbow, her fingers fleeting, gentle.

Ellen looks down at her daughter's face, the lids fluttering shut, settling down for the night. She hears the clamor in the kitchen as the men come in, followed by the boys with their shouts of “Papa!” They are happiest now, in the evening hour, before full darkness and the last drink, which is always one too many. Before the stagger and shout after the children have been tucked into bed, their ears sealed soundly to the wild, drunken truth. That is all hidden for now, impossible as a nightmare in full daylight. Only a quick touch between the two women, a promise that can never be fulfilled. They have made their choices, Ellen thinks: these dog-voiced husbands, these children wrapped tight as nooses about their necks. There is nowhere to turn. But it is a comforting thing, this meeting they dream of. They both know what lying is for. Ellen listens to her daughter's breath, watches it rise and fall in the tiny white chest like a tide, a sweet female rhythm, old as the moon.

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Clare Nathan

Havva

Havva is the oldest of my sisters, and my memories of her aren't very clear because I was only ten when she left. Eighteen is not so young to leave home, but it still surprised my parents. I also don't remember much about her because she stayed in her room most of the time.

She was very tall, almost as tall as my father, and she had long, shiny brown hair. She didn't look anything like my mother, who is very short and has hair that is dark and frizzy. My mother used to say that Havva was lucky because she had a Goyish nose: my mother and my sisters Leah and Sarah and I all have bumps on the ridges of our noses.

One of the few things I remember about Havva is that she could sew beautifully. I guess it's because when she was younger, girls still had to take Home Economics class. Once she sewed a skirt all of eyelet lace that she made herself. She used a crochet hook that was thinner than a needle, and I watched her bending over it for hours, drawing the hook in and out, somehow extracting tiny flower-shaped holes outlined in white thread. Her fingers were slender and dark, almost honey colored, and I liked the way they looked against the white lace. She lined the skirt with raw silk and then put it away because it was too fancy to wear to temple.

The summer she left was very hot, and since we hadn't inherited my grandparents' house in the suburbs yet, we still lived in Detroit. The city is a miserable place to be when it's hot because there is nowhere to get away from people, and everywhere smells like sweat and frustration. The amphis of my mother's shirts were always soaked with big, wet rings, and she was in a bad mood most of the time. I remember that Leah was still nursing and got earaches. Sarah and I started taking violin lessons from an old woman who had bald spots on her head.
a blur of white heat as I pass.

I have hiked the gravel backroads around my house for years, my tires worn thin with age. I know each ditch, each tumble-down barn and each barking dog, but I don’t know the white car with the out-of-state plates that cruises by twice before stopping. Two men, red-faced and grinning, ask for directions and I speak without thinking, give them what they want, a moment to look me over. A sweaty, brown-eyed girl with thin legs and an easy smile, the road a rimmed tunnel of trees, no houses in sight. Their questions come quick, where do you live and I point, how old are you and I stop, and begin to see. I am lucky. Another car comes and they peel away to leave me alone, my heart a wild bird, my hands wrapped tight around the black rubber handles.

That is all of my story, but the lonely stretch of road is still there, and the strangers sailing down some other highway. And in Iowa, in a certain ditch, wild flowers bloom recklessly, the spreading riot and blush of late summer.

Jerra Tauber

Letter to Jimi H.  A.D.

I.

Farmboy got a Fender six strings, red body like your bloodshot eyes. Ivory necklaces hung around your neck and screamed songs for every generation.

Your images moved along sometime in that freedom you helped lead with Dylan, charted the years you were born in, just like every other trend.

Saying what you see, by every dawn’s earliest light, no one could define scribbles on manuscript like you. And the proudest and most humiliating you let sail hard on the heads of those hippies, not to mention in the ears of their children. But how were you to know.

Hero, like a thousand blank parking lots staring at the sky, your audience reflected the greys, the indigos, the white highlights in blue; like the sky at night, you were their falling star, but not even a comet could speed across the universe like your fingers over strings.

II.

Hendrix, you are “cool”, like the time I was riding in the back of a truck with my friends.
You were spinning on the edge of a saucer CD, something you never heard of.
You were singing with me all the words to the song I felt like I could have written, should have written.
You were high-pitched and singing over bubbles of bong water, destined for preaching underneath dizzy heads and giggles and some strange chick saying “I can play all these songs,” just to look tough, trying to be intimidating to the male 16-year-old driver.

You didn’t even know that you would be like a fist and a rifle for a weak 15-year-old in the back seat of a Toyota, years after your irresponsible death, I could have died like you did. Drugs. Explosion of the heart. Explosion of the spirit -- I can’t. Can’t look strong, can’t write lyrics, can’t sing low waves married to guitar licks. I can’t play a Fender with my teeth or call haze purple like you. I’ve never seen what it looks like from the inside of a fetus, never thought anything wrong about my parents. I just wanted to be home safe by eleven o’clock.

III.

Life seems so full when the bass takes over the rhythm of my heart. "Jimi Hendrix, Jimi Hendrix, is God," Dave told me as he handed me some gum from the shelf. Dave worked over at the twenty-hour store near the beach. The cash register plunking, I sat on the newspaper after school and sunset, and I told him, “YA GOD.”

Mika Perrine

We All Carry Our Own Dark Stories

In the town where my mother grew up, a girl was riding alone on open roads, her hair flying like the tassels of the corn she was passing when the truck pulled over and the man got out. She was found ten days later, a bruised body in a drainage ditch, her sweet face buried in Iowa dirt.

In my mothers’ voice there is always a tremor if I listen hard, a weakness I have vowed not to match, but suppose there is no choice -- a rough hand against my lips, a slippery struggle of knees as I try to protect the only thing I own, who says I’ll ever escape this thick grip, this stifling of my fiery heart.

On Second Street in Ashland at nine p.m., a boy smiles greasily and says, “Hey there, pretty girl.” But I walk quickly, my lips pursed, my breath hot as I hear his slick offers and wonder at the wild rush behind his words. Which of them are the ones who’ll turn sour as old milk, the stench of their desires laid thick upon the skin of a woman, their eyes like pointed guns, their faces
Like Jesus, Christianity: Religion --
you became a saint during your life and after your death;
most of America worships you and
children’s children begin to doubt you.
I doubt that your actions before and after stagelight did you any better.
But how can you do better than God.
Her pockets seem stuffed
with herbs, sweet basil
for pesto, blooming
mint for comfort, pale
sage for hope,
fireweed for longing...
Ice plant, ice plant,
why are you still,
so far away and quiet,
preferring the frost to
this autumn’s warmth?

Long pause. Her fingers stroke the
long sand; she sees in the rippling waves
a thousand snakes driving their way towards her.
Drawing in the sand,
she thinks about how, in giving
two almonds to a beautiful man
for every day she knew
him, the man would tremble
the unmanly way,
the shaking
of hands and leg
when her hand dropped
down lissomely
across his knee
and it pressed up like leaven.

Her neck becomes sore; she looks across
the shore, telling
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herself that this
carly fall is like
a bright twilight.
(her hair falls)

The wind's breath is moist against the
late green yellow of leaves. It sends
a boat through rough water.

Clinging to fireweed, she knows
a swan will land like a white shiver;
its wings will beat like two great mirrors.

she wonders
if she
will ever leave.
Experience is not what happens to you; it is what you do with what happens to you.

--Aldous Huxley

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