CONTENTS

RUNES

by

Members of the Connecticut Writing Project 2001 Summer Institute

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# CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon Fisher, “Unasked Questions”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim Tobin, “Summer 1982”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie Francis, “Lucky Girl”</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronwyn Commins, “Apartment F2”</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacqueline Marek, “For Hannahj”</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenna Holowaty, “The Untitled Tales of Garvey Douglas”</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadine Keane, “Patience and Fortitude”</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Ann Singleton, “Cobblestones”</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deb Hickox, “Pleasant Street”</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangeline Abbott, “Untitled”</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefanie Carbone, “The Painting”</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annette Hart-Carpentino, “Persistent Reminiscences and Hammer”</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fran Cohen, “Untitled”</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The Connecticut Writing Project offers opportunities for growth and professional development to teachers of writing in all disciplines who recognize the worth of using writing as a means of learning any subject matter. A program of the University of Connecticut Department of English, the Connecticut Writing Project is affiliated with the widely acclaimed National Writing Project, which now has 166 sites in this country and abroad.

In the project, experienced classroom teachers are trained as Teacher/Consultants in an intensive Summer Institute where they share their expertise and practice writing themselves. During subsequent school years, they present workshops on composition theory and practical strategies for teaching writing to teachers in participating districts.

The approach has proven effective by generating widespread interest in good writing and by upgrading students' abilities as writers and learners. For further programs, please write or call the director:

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Unasked Questions
Sharon Fisher

A young girl, twelve-years-old (or does this make her a young woman?), sits by the window of her bedroom. Actually, she kneels on the bed, one hand holding her steady against the cold panes of glass, the other lightly brushing back the ruffled white curtain which frames her view.

The view, yes, that is what called the girl to the window, stirring her sleep so that she was there first in her dreams, then, without realizing it, awake, and searching the luminescent landscape below her. It was the view that first filtered into her mind, sharpened by the crystalline silence of snow that was icing over in the bluish cold of night outside.

No, it wasn’t so much the view itself as the sparking, sparkling quality of quietness that only a frozen night can bring. Perhaps somewhere in the woods beyond the house a tree’s limb succumbed to the icy pressures of the night, cracking open the hard shell of the drift below, only to be buried by the softer snow which hides it from view. But as the girl looks out at the scene before her, she prefers to think it was the crystals forming from the snow that called her from her bed. Can you hear, actually hear, no, sense a snowflake, seemingly soft and two-dimensional, reshaping itself into the hardness of three dimensions, angles jutting out unexpectedly into the sound waves borne unseen into the cold night air?

***

I pass by you often, and only occasionally do I acknowledge your presence, and even then, only with a quick glance away, ashamed as I do so. I see you sitting outside the beach house, crowded in by clotheslines and walls of neighboring huts. I want to ask you questions, reach out to you, hold your hand, and laugh like we used to, but you are too remote from me now, or am I too remote from you?

Ann, your round face is more prominent than usual since your wavy, wild hair is pulled back into a stub of a ponytail. This helps me see the struggle of your mouth as it tries to hold back the grins and laughter so often stilled and silenced by the felt presence of your father. But it is your eyes, as always, that really show what you’re feeling, and today, they are bursting with brightness, the corners crinkling with joy.

How you come alive, away from the small minds and big mouths of your family! Are you now far enough away from them to capture your own joy, or have they recaptured the you I don’t see in the red picture frame?

***

Before and after. Before and after. There are dividing moments in life, moments which separate all that has come before from all that happens after. I remember a first kiss, thinking I cannot go back to being the little girl I once was, but looking forward to all the experiences ahead, certain I could master them all. I remember driving down a road, late afternoon shadows highlighting the angular images cast by my car and the trees I pass, and suddenly realizing the freedom of movement and speed, knowing that driving alone will now always be filled with such moments of wonder.

I remember meeting you, then someone else’s, and feeling a “click” somewhere inside, as if everything around me and within me softly settled into a predetermined space, comfortable yet
shaky at the openness of time ahead. I remember the joy of first realizing love, the fear of it not being returned, and the motion of blood in my veins when you said you loved me, knowing then that a lifetime could never be enough. I remember the startling precision of silence as we moved away from shared desires and happiness, and recognizing that even as we filled in the silence with new hopes, something had changed.

I remember the surprise two pink lines brought into our lives, thinking that we had embarked on a new journey of change. I remember the fear in your eyes as I lay in a bed, tubes trailing life, wondering how your young face came to look so old in the space of a week. I remember handing an unbelievably small, unbelievably beautiful piece of our shared life and love into your arms, knowing she would be gone when I was returned to you. I remember empty arms, full eyes, and no words to speak with you, except before and after. Before and after. This is where we have been before; can you tell me where we will be after all our befores hereafter?

Summer 1982
Kim Tobin

Eleven-year-old Kara Francis sat dejected and shivering on the cracked concrete edge of the club pool. Her only comfort was a thin faded beach towel which clung desperately to her damp bony body. Kara had grown two inches since the beginning of the summer. This made her appearance a bit unnerving because her bones appeared to be threatening to pierce through at any moment. Despite her anorexic-looking state, somehow you knew she was going to be breathtaking when she grew up.

With one long leg tucked under her and the other bent so she could rest her head against a pointy knee, Kara began to replay the day’s events, as she distractedly brushed one of her long black braids back and forth against her cheek.

Danny Foley was two years older than Kara and would be starting high school in the fall. He was loud, cocky and good-natured—everything Kara was not. He was the reason she had been sequestered to the edge of the pool for the rest of the day. Earlier, he had tried to pull her baggy green bathing suit with its pink piping off as she floated by. After untangling her limbs from his and swimming to the low end of the pool where her sisters were pretending to be synchronized swimmers, Kara plotted her next move. She followed Danny and his rowdy friends to the snack bar line, tapped him on the shoulder, and when he turned around, she simply “kneed” him—hard, where it was sure to hurt the most. He dropped instantly. Unfortunately, Kara’s mother had witnessed the “kneeing” from her morning poolside bridge game. Within moments of Danny hitting the tile, Kara’s mother had efficiently folded her card hand, pushed in her chair, excused herself, and arrived at the snack bar in time to grab her unsuspecting daughter by one of her fragile arms.

“Wait until we get home young lady,” she hissed through a clenched smile.

Kara was seen shortly after, with a trace of a smile at her lips, being dragged off by her “I am less than amused” mother. Danny, on the other hand, lay writhing on the dirty wet tile with his friends laughing at him.

Kara smiled to herself knowing that the yellowish bruise forming around her upper arm had been worth it to see Danny Foley turn beet red from pain and embarrassment.

“Serves him right,” she thought to herself as she began thoughtfully sucking on the wet end of one of her braids. It tasted like chlorine, Breck shampoo, and revenge. Just then she looked up to see Danny flip her off as he jumped into the pool, trying to splash her in the process.

That’s how it all started, summer 1982. Kara developed the strange, yet satisfying, habit of sucking on her hair. She was seen from that point on with a braid or section of hair hanging from the corner of her frowning mouth. Somehow the hair sucking helped her to deal with the unfortunate lack of being born an introverted daydreamer into a family of practical extroverts. Her mother found her to be sullen and withdrawn and her sisters thought she was boring and no fun. The hair sucking only added to her family’s bewilderment.

Kara’s tennis playing, Junior Leaguer of a mother tried various approaches to nipping this habit in the bud, most of which seemed to involve chastising her in public.

“Kara, that is un-ladylike and frankly disgusting,” her mother would say at the checkout line of the grocery store, more to the uninterested teenager scanning the Charmin than to Kara.

“Yeah! Gross!” Her Bobbsey Twin sisters would chime in.
“Kara, take your hair out of your mouth! I will not be seen in public with you looking like that. And stand up straight, for Christ's sake.” She would say as she clicked through the clothing racks at Bloomingdale's.

“Yeah, for Christ's sake!” The two girls would shout from somewhere underneath one of the racks of clothes.

This went on for quite some time. Kara honestly tried to limit her hair sucking but it was difficult for someone with an over active imagination and two sisters and a mother who fueled its darker region.

The entire Francis family, including Kara's rarely there father, stood in the winding line for the Saturday matinee of *E.T.* Kara's mood could almost be mistaken for being pleasant. The anticipation of two quiet hours in the dark with her imagination and her hair made her dark green eyes sparkle. You see, there was very little alone time allowed in the Francis household. Kara's mother felt that she would be far less gloomy if she had some fresh air and read fewer books. So she was pushed out of doors to play with her sisters all four seasons of the year. To her mother's dismay, Kara would often just sit in the back yard motionless, as her sisters ran around her playing tag or ballerinas, until it was time to come in. So for Kara, rainy days and movie days were treats. It didn't matter that at that moment her beastly sisters were hanging off her exhausted father like monkeys vying for his attention.

Kara was glad that her father had suggested *E.T.* over the dumb *Annie* movie her sisters had wanted to see. He had winked at her while he explained to her mother why they should see *E.T.* instead of *Annie*, knowing how much Kara would like this movie over singing orphans. He was right. It was the best movie she had ever seen. Much better than *Star Wars* which had thought was pretty good. When the lights came on, Kara was still wiping the tears from her eyes wishing an extraterrestrial would come live in her closet. That's when Kara saw the look in her mother's eyes. She didn't know what it was but she was afraid. Her mother's mouth was pursed so tightly that her lips were turning white.

“What was it?” she thought.

Then she heard one of her sister's exclaim, “Ewwww!”

She looked down to see what they were looking at. There in the emptying movie theater Kara stood with white specks of popcorn clinging to the end of her damp braid. Her mother abruptly turned around and marched out of the theater. Her sisters practically danced out after her in anticipation. The car ride was silent except for the whispers and snickers from her sisters.

“That's so gross. She was eating popcorn with hair in her mouth,” one sister whispered loudly.

“I know, they should put her in a zoo.” The other sister boldly announced.

Kara's father shot them a look from the rear view mirror while her mother stared straight ahead. As Kara tried to read the back of her mother's head, she felt the dread building in her stomach mixing with the popcorn, twizzlers and soda from the movie theater.

At home Kara bravely followed her mother into the kitchen not sure what to expect. Her mother yanked open the junk drawer and began digging around the rolls of adding machine tape, batteries, and instruction booklets for things that had long ago broken and been thrown away. Finally, her mother's hand reached the orange handled scissors tangled in a bit of Christmas ribbon. Just then, Kara did something she rarely ever did. She spoke.
"You lucky girl!" barked an elderly, Asian woman, poking my arm as she passed by.

I was startled by the woman's abrupt confrontation. I fought to keep my balance, and yet, a pair of black Gap jeans and my favorite cocoa-colored cardigan fell from my over-stuffed laundry basket onto the sidewalk. Even though they were already dirty, coming in contact with the filth that lives on the sidewalks in New York City made me think I'd wash these items twice.

I put down the basket and began rearranging the laundry so as to make room for the jeans and sweater again. As I flopped them back onto the heap and started again for the local Laundromat, I experienced a feeling of deja vu. This was the second time I had been poked since I moved to the city a month ago after graduating from Smith College.

The first time I was poked, Sara and I were moving into our apartment off 1st Avenue. We started our moving day at six that morning and had just sat down on the front stoop of our building for a coffee break. I heard "Lucky girl!" and remembered watching the Starbucks' Cafe Mocha in my cup undulate and hit the front of my tee shirt like a tidal wave hits the shore. When I looked up after jumping to my feet, a petite woman was already fifty feet from us and had reset her walking pace in a typical New Yorker fashion; I only caught the sight of black hair tied up in a bun and a flat profile as I saw her turn to enter the local Asian market.

It was only after switching my coffee cup to the other hand that I recalled the poke that accompanied this woman's words. Standing frozen like a statue with arms and legs out-stretched, pelvis tilted away from the coffee dripping from my arms, I relived that random moment with Sara. Wiping the coffee from my arms, I felt a delayed ache when she dragged the Kleenex from her purse and threw it to the ground.

We decided it hadn't made sense for a little old lady to startle us both just to announce that I was "lucky." How did she know, anyway? At that moment, we were both feeling "un-lucky." We had just graduated from college in June, decided to move to the city and had to settle for this one-room apartment until we could find jobs.

Sara and I had met at college. We were both fortunate to have been accepted to our first choice of schools. At Smith, we bonded immediately freshman year. Thrown together as roommates, we were a perfect match. We shared our most intimate secret one night over Margarita-flavored wine coolers and the smell of incense: we both had been adopted.

Unlike Sara, I grew up knowing that I was adopted. It was never a secret that I came from my birth mother's tummy. Nor was it a secret that the United States was not my first "home." My adoptive parents had seen to it that I was aware of how lucky they were to have been blessed with a baby like me. My earliest memories are of sitting on my father's lap in his study as he pointed to this large yellow shape on a globe. He would call this blob of yellow, "China... your first home." Both my father and mother would spend hours telling me all about this place I came from. Often, I would sit between my two parents on the red, velvet Victorian couch in Dad's study as they reminisced about the day they met me in China.

When I was seven, I remember looking up during one of these storytelling sessions at my blonde, round-eyed parents and thinking, for the first time, that I didn't look like either of them. My petite, stocky body was predictive of the short height I would reach and my silky black hair would remain straight. My face was wide and my tightly drawn eyebrows sometimes hid the color of my irises. Contrary to my appearance, my mother and father were tall people (five-foot-eight and six-foot) and their thin frames were conditioned to stay that way because of the vegetarian diet they had adopted since their undergraduate years. Mom had a heart shaped face, and when you looked closely, you could see a faint bridge of golden freckles going up over her nose and down each of her cheeks. Her eyes were a Jade green. My father's eyes were dirt brown, but his smile was as clean as a washed porcelain plate; he smiled a lot.

Actually, both of my parents seemed to smile often. I especially noticed their smiles emerge whenever they relived the adventures they experienced traveling to China to bring me home. From feeling the spirits of ancestors who built the Great Wall to the brilliant colored fire works from the parade welcoming in the year of the rabbit, my parents filled my ears with memories of a place I only regarded as the yellow blob on Dad's globe. To me, home was 92 Mohegan Road, New London, Connecticut.

Home was a plain, white Cape that was officially considered off-campus housing provided for staff that taught at Connecticut College. Both of my parents were tenured professors at this small liberal arts world tucked away, up on a hill above the Thames River. My father taught European History and International Politics for the History Department, and mother nurtured students through their studies of the Romance languages; she was fluent in French, Spanish and Italian and only dabbled in Russian and Chinese. They both met in college at Amherst and wanted to stay in the New England area after graduation and marriage. The story goes that they were driving back to Amherst after an interview my father had at Fairfield University when they saw a sign on the highway announcing Connecticut College was off the next exit. Not in a rush to get back, they found their way up the hill to this community of old, stone buildings that overlooked Long Island Sound. One look and they both decided they wanted to make it their home.

I grew up in this world of academia high above the people of New London. The other professors' children and I were like brothers and sisters. We played hide-n-seek among the bookshelves in Shain Library, shared the blame when we picked the Botany department's prize flowers in the arboretum, and used our title as professors' children to befriend the students who ran the bookstore in order to get a few candy hand-outs each week.

We were a typical family. We shopped at the local Stop & Shop. Mom cooked dinner. Dad shaved. I hated piano lessons and loved Barbie dolls. (Mom would buy a box of Childrol no. 6 and dye the doll's hair black to look like mine.) I was a Daisy and then a Brownie. Even when we drove back from Brownie meetings, I would be that American little kid influenced by commercialism and plead with my mother to stop and buy a Happy Meal at McDonald's so that I could get another Care Bear plastic figure to add to my collection. I even punked out my hair and wore a torn sweatshirt to be Madonna for Halloween.

Later on, when I went away to college and compared stories about childhood, it seemed as though I had a very typical childhood. My adolescent experiences, though turbulent in dealing with issues of identity, were mostly typical as well. As an adolescent, I wondered who I was.

It was that first day of middle school that made me contemplate my identity. Since there was an early childhood laboratory school run by the Child Development Department and a high school on campus connected to the Education Department, there was only a need for us to venture off this campus for our pre-adolescent years; we car-pooled down the hill for three years to go to Nathan Hale Middle School. I remember feeling nervous about going to a new school and meeting new people, but not fearing the experience because I had my childhood friends by my side as I entered the building. Everything was going to be fine. It was going to be as normal as every other transition had been in my life. And, it was normal... right up until the moment a kid asked me if I was from China.

Yes, I knew I had come from China, but I didn't feel as though I came from China. I had never had anyone else formally connect me with this place other than my parents. It was easy for me to assimilate to the American culture because I was brought here when I was eighteen months old. Both subtly and unsubtly, my parents placed many things in my environment that were
reflective of my Chinese heritage. Chopsticks were always a utensil choice for meals. Rice was a staple as much as potatoes. We drank green tea as frequently as coffee. I had fans and a kimono in my trunk of dress-up accessories. (I loved putting on the emerald green, embroidered silk dress that buttoned at the neck.) I learned to sing songs in different languages; my mother told me one of my favorite songs was a Chinese song about a little bird. My parents even invited each and every visiting professor and exchange student from China for dinner to offer a way for us to learn even more about the customs and language of my first home.

I was given a Chinese nickname. “Little Rabbit” called my father and mother when they wanted a hug. I was especially proud of my nickname the January we welcomed in the year of our Chinese family.

Their daughters, Jennifer and Lisa, were also born in China, but were a year older than me. Growing up in a progressive environment, where diversity was celebrated and respected, I was exposed to many ethnic holidays and practices. For many years, it was tradition to celebrate Passover and Hanukkah with Professor Lesser and his family. And, in turn, they were invited to our Christmas party and Easter egg hunt.

From the references to my Chinese heritage, as well as to many other cultures, it was difficult to figure out my “true” identity when I was a teen. I identified with all of the people who had crossed my path; they all influenced my evolution as a person. When I tried to pinpoint who and what I related to the most as a people and as a culture, I remember becoming more confused; I wanted to relate to one specific culture.

When I wanted to know more about my past in China, there wasn’t “more” to find out. My parents had told me everything they could about where I came from; they had little to offer about the specific people I came from. Perhaps, there were many lingering questions during those years. Who did I come from? Who were the specific people that gave me up? Who made me? What did they look like? What were their names? Did I have brothers and sisters? Did they look like me? Did they think about me? I had related to my American parents for so long, but now I wanted to know more about my biological parents. I wanted to know more about my Chinese family.

It was difficult not to have answers to these questions. It was difficult to accept that I could never have answers to these questions. Yet, when I went away to college and met others who were adopted from China who had the same interrogative thoughts, it became less important to know specifics. A bond grew that satisfied the urge for identity. I think we were able to generalize together about our past, each person contributing something their adoptive parents had told them, each person adding a piece to the big puzzle. We never would be able to finish the puzzle, but we saw enough of the emerging picture to get a sense of our shared history.

I left college feeling confident about myself as a person and satisfied with my career path as an interpreter. I had followed in my mother’s footsteps and majored in the Romance languages, but I wasn’t ready to go directly on to graduate school as she did. Instead, I decided to follow the majority of my graduating class to New York City after graduation to taste life.

***

The blaring of a cab’s horn startled me out of my thoughts and back into New York City. I was surprised to see that I had come within feet of the Laundromat without even realizing it. “Closed.” I read the sign and swore under my breath. Now, I’d probably have to walk another block to find the next Laundromat. I had no choice really; I had not one pair of clean underwear. Waiting while the sign turned to WALK, I thought about how much I hated doing laun-

dry. I was used to having a washer and dryer ten feet down the hall from my dorm room. Now, I had to lug this basket down three flights of stairs and down a block. And, today, it would be down two blocks.

No; it was three blocks before I saw the next Laundromat sign. I hurried to the first available washer and dropped the basket on its closed top. From the weight of the clothing and a full detergent bottle of Cheer, the plastic handles on the basket bent completely upward and made indentations in my fingers.

I was hot from the walk and took off my powder blue, cotton shirt and put it into a machine. Then I began separating and placing my clothing into two tandem washers, color in one and whites in the other. I added a cup of dark blue detergent and pushed in the ten quarters to start the wash cycles. Sitting down on a mustard-yellow plastic chair reminiscent of the Seventies decor, I rubbed my fingers over the word “PEACE” that had been scratched into its surface. My eye caught an April issue of Vogue abandoned on the chair across from me. I couldn’t turn to the featured article because someone had folded the corner of that page over a piece of pink gum. So, I started to read the “Question and Answer” page about dating.

As I flipped through the rest of the magazine, I looked up to see many people hanging around the Laundromat. Some of them were on chairs like mine, some on top of the washers and dryers, and some leaning against walls. It wasn’t a very big place and held around twenty brown washers and dryers in total. Its walls were painted mint green and were peeling near the entrance. Against one wall, there was a recycled candy machine; it now gave customers packets of liquid detergent when they deposited money and pulled out a handle. In the rear of the room, there was a counter with a sign above it that listed prices for dry cleaning services in fluorescent pink and green lettering. Below the sign I noticed a woman sitting at the counter reading the paper. A teacup sat to her right.

She looked up and smiled when she sensed I was looking at her. Shyly I redirected my eyes back to the paragraph I had left off reading that talked about what to expect on a second date. Since I wasn’t really concentrating on the article, I quickly glanced up and noticed my machines were still; my laundry was ready to be moved to dryers.

I was pulling out my wet clothes when I heard someone whisper, “You lucky girl.” I was on guard. I took a jump away from the direction the words came from. But instead of receiving the anticipated poke, a touch as gentle as the breeze ran across my arm and lingered there for a minute. The woman from behind the counter had touched my arm and was lifting it up to move it closer to her eyes, squinting at it as if she were examining a diamond through an eyepiece.

“You are a very lucky girl to have family that love you.”

“What?” was all that I could manage to say.

“You see mark. It is mark of your family in China.” She offered these words as she pointed to the scar at the top of my right arm.

“No. That’s a scar from an inoculation I needed to get before I was allowed into the country.”

“No, little one,” she said with a seriousness as she looked up into my eyes. “Family in China can only have one child. If family have more, they leave child at orphanage. They will not want baby to think they not love them. They cut name of family on baby’s arm. They hope baby will know they love them forever. They have no choice.”

“Are you sure?” I asked touching the symbolic mark consciously for the first time. I guess it was a different shape than most, lines creeping outward from a central point, not forming a perfect circle of inoculation I had seen on the arms of others. The more I stared, the more my
imagination painted the picture of that day this woman spoke of, recalling the images I had created of my biological parents to insert into this significant moment in time.

“Yes,” she confirmed with a gentle, but firm tone.

“How do you know?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“When I live in China, I was your age. I have two baby. A boy. A girl. I could not keep my girl. I cried. I very sad. So many people give away their baby. So many people feel sad. People know most babies go to other family in other country. They get adopted. Many people were sad they never get to see their baby again.”

“Never?” I interrupted.

“Never. Because they not tell you where baby go.”

“But why cut their arms?”

“So they know they have Chinese family. They know they have family. They know they love them. My husband cut family name in daughter’s arm. He sad to hurt her. But, he want her to know we love her forever. We did not want to give her away. My friends did this to their baby, too. They . . . ?”

Suddenly, she exhaled and stopped. She reached for her cup and sat down gently, as though there were a cushion upon her stool. Silently, she took a sip of tea and stared forward. A single tear, left over from that sad day in her past, managed to escape and fell directly into her tea. Instantly, she set the cup aside, and once again, she spoke.

I didn’t know what to say. I just pictured this woman and her husband in China . . . on the doorstep of the orphanage, wavering over whether or not to leave their baby, mother clutching the baby tightly as she rocked and kissed her. Then, taking out a small, ornate knife, her husband gently cutting into their daughter’s arm. What was more painful, I wondered . . . the cut or the last kiss goodbye?

I didn’t realize I was holding myself for comfort as the woman told the story. And, I suddenly realized my fingers had found their way back to my scar. I began to wonder what happened the day my family kissed me good-bye. The old woman sensed my exact thought and offered again, “They love you very much. You lucky because they want better life for you. It was very hard for you mother and father to leave you. I know . . .”

Was she my mother? I thought for a moment. And then, again, the woman read my mind and added to lighten the moment, “No. I not your mother. You too tall to be my daughter. You tall like giraffe. Tall for Chinese girl. It American food! It make everyone giants and fat!”

I had to laugh. I had to cry; I just pictured this woman and her husband in China . . . on the doorstep of the orphanage, wavering over whether or not to leave their baby, mother clutching the baby tightly as she rocked and kissed her. Then, taking out a small, ornate knife, her husband gently cutting into their daughter’s arm. What was more painful, I wondered . . . the cut or the last kiss goodbye?

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The little old woman in the laundry shop has given me something I never knew I still needed. She has given me another piece to my puzzle. I may never get to complete it, but with her insight . . . this piece, I have so much more. This piece reveals that I am indeed a lucky girl.

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**Apartment F2**

**Bronwyn Commins**

The people in the apartment above me have the loudest sex. It’s not the subtle “Oh, God” here and there sex; it’s the noisiest, most distracting sex you have ever heard. I have been inspired to write about it because last semester I took a graduate writing course, and one night when the activity level was especially high, I thought “there is a short story in this somewhere.” Although I never got a chance to write about it, I think the three of us deserve to have our story told.

This particular sex situation bothers me for three reasons: 1) It does keep me awake; 2) I’m hearing sounds that I really don’t want to hear (the adult version of nails on a chalkboard as it were); and 3) I’m afraid that people will think that I’m the one making all of those awful sounds. After all, never during the course of their lovemaking, do either of these people shout, “I love you, guy (or girl) from apartment F2!” Even now, I can hear the following comments from elderly but concerned neighbors: “That lady that leaves so early in the morning with the tote bags, she looks so mild-mannered, but you should hear her at night; she’s an animal. I think she’s a teacher.” Of course the last sentence would be said in a very low whisper, because that would be the most shameful part.

The idea of “sounds that I really don’t want to hear” also has to be explained. The absolutely worst part about this is the guy involved. I don’t think I have ever heard a male voice reach the octaves that his does, and it is really, really not flattering. All I can compare it to is when my little cousin really hard onto his bike “banana” seat, that combination of pain and surprise.

Again, it’s not too flattering.

The only semi-positive part about this sex thing is that it is very predictable, and I kind of like structure. It’s somewhat like an old famous man who falls in the tub; you know within a week he’ll be dead. George Burns, Jimmy Stewart, you know how you always hear after they died that they were fine until they slipped in the tub six or seven days before? Well, that’s like this because it’s ugly and unpleasant, and you don’t want to picture it more than you have to, but at least it’s predictable. For example, the activity above me almost always happens on a Thursday night. The pattern within which it occurs has also become fairly predictable. First, I hear some slight interjection from the woman (usually just the generic “oh”). Then there is about thirty seconds of silence, that heavy and eerie silence that precedes a tornado, the one that says “get ready” because something forceful and rapid is going to happen. Next, enough, after about thirty seconds, the ceiling fan starts to rattle, and then there is a thunderous sound that races through the room, as if a train has run across the floor of the apartment overhead. Then there is the eerie quiet again, and thirty minutes later, contradicting everything I have ever come to know about male sexuality, the same sounds start again. Only this time there is no quiet noise to start; it begins with the shaking of the ceiling fan, into the train overhead: kind of an a-b-c-b-c pattern in a warped way. This is all punctuated with an occasional swear here and there.

One of the problems that worries me about this overhead sex situation is that I might be in a position to have to explain these noises to someone one day. For example, I enjoy having my nieces and nephews stay over during the summer, but I would love to know how I would ever explain this one away. “Those people upstairs must be moving some furniture. It sounds very heavy.” Or, “let’s play a game. Who can hold their hands over their ears the tightest? Isn’t this fun?”

Caring friends have given me many suggestions for this problem, none of which seem quite appropriate to me. These include: 1) bang on the ceiling with a broomstick; 2) call the
rental office to complain; 3) pull the fire alarm to see who runs out of the apartment; and 4) tack a copy of this paper to the laundry room bulletin board. I don’t think any of these would work, and when you think about it, there are not many people to whom you can seek advice in a situation like this. Short of having a priest come to the building, there’s little I can do. There are also small suggestions here and there that all of this might end, but nothing to get too excited about. One time I heard them fighting, and I thought that was a good sign, but they have made up since. Once, it also got quiet right afterwards, and I thought “Oh, God, he’s killed her,” but obviously I was wrong about that too.

Sometimes when I really can’t sleep, I try to figure out who these people might be. My sister’s boss is having an affair, but I know it can’t be her, because she’s a librarian, and you would think that even at the height of a passionate moment she would discourage the noise. The Jesse Jackson scandal was just coming to light when all of this started, and I thought it might be kind of neat if he were the guy involved. (I could make a reference to the name of his company here, but that would be too obvious.)

Although they have no idea that I exist, I feel that in a way I have become a part of this relationship. Despite the loss of sleep, and the feeling of disgust that washes over me whenever I hear these nice people, I have to remember that they are obviously quite fond of one another. Also, without knowing it, they have left me with some rather lasting memories.

“A-o-o-o,” first the mom, then the dad, finally the little girl as they gaze at the moon during their nightly walk around the block.

So many reasons—
to get some air,
to tire out,
to refresh,
to exercise,
to think,
to observe,
to be alone,
to be together.

“Ta-da,” she says proudly as she hops onto the step just off the sidewalk. It doesn’t matter that it’s not her step, it doesn’t matter that it’s the seventh such step she’s encountered. What matters is that at each such moment she has the full attention of her mom and dad as they clap for her.

She’s the star simply because she’s there on the step alone in the spotlight of the moon her hands held out taking her bow.
The air outside the car was dense with humidity. Garvey could actually see the air when he stepped outside of the baggage claim area, following the ordinary-looking man who had come to retrieve him from the bustle of the airport. The van was a catastrophe in itself, and Garvey immediately regretted his decision. I should have just stayed home this summer. But his coach, along with the little boy of adventure inside, talked him into traveling to the foreign lands of New England. So, Garvey stepped into the dumpy gray van, careful not to step in any of the rust-formed holes. It was, as many things in his life, the call of baseball.

He thought back to the days of little league. A soft chuckle escaped, causing the ordinary-looking man to glance over with curiosity. Garvey merely glanced out his window and returned to the memory. His father had been so eager for him to pitch. Garvey, you’ve got one hell of a hand. You keep this pitching up and you’re gonna go places. Yeah son, you gonna go places. It was somewhere in the midst of these thoughts that his father would glance off to the sky, and it always puzzled young Garvey, for he never saw anything in the span of his father’s gaze. It wouldn’t be until a few years later that Garvey would truly understand.

“So, you red-shirted this season?” Mr. Ordinary-looking man asked, with another quick glance to the passenger seat.

“Yes, sir,” Garvey returned from his daydream quickly. “Our starting shortstop’d been there for four years, and he was real good. I didn’t want to spend most of my senior year on the bench, so my coach and I figured red-shirting was a good idea. Not to mention it gave me more time to work on my game.” Garvey surprised even himself with his elaborate answer.

“Oh, well at least you got to practice,” the ordinary man replied, as his eyes looked out to the expanse of highway ahead of him. “So how many games have they played already?” the boy so far from home asked.

“Yeah, four,” Garvey guesstimated. “Our pitching’s been off so far.”

Despite his confidence in his abilities, he was still a little anxious about joining a team after the shoulder operation. He thought back to the days of little league. A soft chuckle escaped, causing the ordinary-looking man to glance over with curiosity. Garvey merely glanced out his window and returned to the memory. His father had been so eager for him to pitch.

Reading Garvey’s thoughts, Mr. Ordinary-looking man assured him, “It’s not that much of a stretch, you know? Not everyone’s got hands like yours, soft and quick. And everyone sure don’t have that arm of yours. Take care of it, you understand? Keep workin’ on that swing, you’re almost there. Just don’t you go wastin’ away your talent. Don’t you ruin your dreams. But Garvey had realized by then—he’d actually realized it sometime around the close of his Little League career—that it wasn’t his dreams that his father was talking about.

The van once again slowed to a stop, this time in front of a rather ordinary-looking, somewhat rundown, brown house. The porch out front was cluttered with a couple of plastic chairs, a deteriorating desk chair, the skeleton of what used to be a weight machine and a porch swing. The worries about the van crept back to the forefront as Garvey wondered if everything in the room was salvage from his shock.

“Hello,” the man yelled to no one in particular.

“Up here, Woj,” a voice from what sounded like upstairs called out.

“Well, come on down,” he replied somewhat tersely.

From the worn-down, grungy wooden staircase hopped a figure in shorts beneath his knees and a silver chain that Garvey was certain held some sort of large, tacky charm. Upon closer review, Garvey realized that this was merely a boy who had emerged from upstairs. Well, I guess all kids go through a stage, he thought to himself.

“Garvey, this is Milton Marcus—or should I say Coach Marcus,” the still mystery man whom this boy had referred to as Wedge, or something to that effect introduced the two.

Interrupting the exchange, the man continued, “Milton is one of the assistant coaches. He works with us here at Eastern as well, and he also works on the field.”

What? This kid’s a coach? Never mind that, he’s my coach? “Oh,” was all Garvey could salvage from his shock.

Reading his face, Garvey’s guide/chauffeur/bat supplier added, “He only looks like a little kid. Don’t let it worry ya.” With that, he chuckled to himself, as a mischievous child does when he’s done something bad.


Note to self: Milton is sensitive to comments about age; avoid at all costs.

“Well, that’s it for me. Milton, you’re in charge now. Make sure you and Garvey are at the field by four,” and with that, the ordinary-looking man was on his way down the front steps.

“All righty, Milton said as he rubbed his hands together in what appeared to be anticipation. “You can put your stuff in here, this’ll be your room.” He led him to a doorway approximately twenty feet away from the front door.
Hey, at least if I ever need to make a quick getaway, I'll have no problem, Garvey said to himself.

And upon seeing his summer accommodations, Garvey was almost certain that his quick getaway would be now. Milton was talking, but Garvey didn't hear the words. Before him was something that, well, resembled nothing he looked forward to inhabiting. The room was small, but that wasn't the pressing issue. Covered in hideous stripes of flowers, the walls were even decaying. Holes peeked out every now and then where it looked as if someone might have taken out an aggression or two; or perhaps the walls were just plain falling apart. A crooked chandelier, if you could call it that, hung from the ceiling. Only two of the four bulbs were in working order. A small door hid in the front wall. Hmm, perhaps an entryway into Willie Wonka's chocolate factory, Garvey thought with a grin. And speaking of doors, the room had three; which was odd not only because, well, there were three in one room, but because the room was slightly bigger than a closet. In one corner was a heap of clothes strewn upon a large cardboard box. Garvey began to wonder if he weren't going to be the only occupant in this hellhole. Which could make things quite interesting, seeing as how in the center of the room were two mattresses, one crappier than the other, piled on top of each other. A sheet was thrown carelessly over them and, as far as Garvey could see, there was no pillow. Ah, but there were three doors!

On the bright side, the room did have two windows.

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Patience and Fortitude

Nadine Keane

Sunlight crept beneath the shade and tauntingly stroked her cheek. Patience rolled over to accept the caress, but the sharp corner of a book pressing into her cheek jolted her awake to the realization that she was not deep in a story but in her own life.

Kneeling on the bed, she inched the shade up and squinted cautiously at the world. She quickly snapped the shade shut at the sight of a pair of women dressed in business suits and sneakers walking briskly down the street. Heart pounding, Patience stumbled over the heap of jacketless books next to her bed and made her way into the mirrorless bathroom. A quick glance at the tub reminded her once again to buy soap; she had run out days (or was it months?) ago.

She walked to the kitchen, hopping over the piles of books that lined the hallway, remembering the sixth-grade playground hopscotch champion she had once been (had that been she?). While waiting for water to boil, she tried coaxing a withered spider plant to drink, but it mutely refused and silently begged for light. The keening of the kettle abruptly ended her ministrations, and she poured the steaming water over yesterday's tea bag into yesterday's mug (or were they last week's?).

Clearing a stack of books off a kitchen chair, Patience sat and sipped at her tea, distracted by the beast's pacing as it started to make its demands. (Ironic, she mused, that in an attempt to bond she had christened it Fortitude.) Patience denied the beast immediate gratification, intent on ignoring it until she finished her tea. She savored the uncurling anticipation that wove through her body, warming her, teasing her. Odd how first thing in the morning she could delude herself into believing she could make the beast understand the nature of Patience, teach it who was master.

Patience brought her cup to the sink where she was jerked from her sensual haze by a very real mountain of food-encrusted dishes. She stared in horror, thinking she had just washed the dishes and scoured the sink the day before yesterday (or had it been the month before last?). As if to distract her from her fear, the beast began pacing faster and faster, compelling, no longer a pleasant stroking but a throbbing demand for fulfillment. Patience yielded to its blatant hunger. Clumsily maneuvering another literary obstacle course, she hurried down the front hall.

The sight of the living room with its windows darkened by the drifts of books that blanketed the furniture soothed her. If only the beast within were so easily placated. Patience shoveled aside those books already read, already used, already wearied of. The beast began to roar in frustration as the pile on the floor began to grow. Frantically now, Patience plowed through the remaining drifts, searching for an untouched tome, but none was to be had.

Impossible! She remembered placing a huge order and having hundreds of books sent to the house a few months (or was it years?) ago. After all it was ridiculous to keep running out every Monday and buying fourteen at a time. She was being efficient, saving time, saving money . . . saving face. Waiting in line at Walden's, arms brimming and aching with the weekly purchase—two classics, two science fiction, two volumes of poetry, two mysteries, two fantasies, two romances, two bestsellers—sne day snickers slithering into her consciousness . . . blessedly stifled by the beast's contented purring. The bag breaking . . . returning to the familiar, friendly cashier . . . "Yeah, she's bizarre all right; here like clockwork every Monday morning, dressed like a bag lady but always paying cash, big bills too" . . . face flaming . . . humanity squelched . . . the familiar, Janus-faced cashier and a pair of women garbed in business suits and sneakers glancing shamefacedly away.

Funny she had always seen herself as the heroines of her beloved books: if not beautiful,
then glamorous or striking; if not brilliant, then witty or resourceful; if not adored, then loved or respected. Out in the mall, a shop window served as the mirror of truth: not beautiful, but plain, even homely; not brilliant, but strange, even aberrant; not adored, but shunned and alone.

The beast pounced, dragging her back to the present. Wildly, Patience tore through the house, ransacking mountains of books for an unread title—atop the refrigerator, on the counters, under the kitchen table, on the bed, next to the bed, under the bed, on the dressers, in the drawers, in the hamper, under the sink, in the vanity. In a desperate panic, she ripped the shower curtain to one side, only to be confronted by a bathtub overflowing with filthy clothes swirling in grey, almost black dingy water. The shriek of rage and frustration that tore from Patience’s throat momentarily silenced the beast. But only momentarily. It resumed its relentless stalking, nearer, nearer, ready to attack, ready to devour. Patience sank to the floor, near to surrender.

A possible, final hope of salvation lay behind the dead-bolted closet door, locked for many years (or was it just one?). Emotionally drained, Patience seemed to observe herself as a character emerging from the pages of a book: a small woman, hair and clothes in disarray (chaotic even), crawling down the hall, prying up a loose floorboard, tearing fingernails, retrieving a key deliberately placed out of sight, out of mind.

Patience suddenly found herself in front of the closet, hesitating, undecided, apprehensive, her hand trembling as she placed the key in the lock. What new beast would she be uncaging? A deep spine-chilling growl prompted her to action. To a god she knew of only from books, she silently prayed for strength and endurance and yanked the closet door open.

Book jackets rained down on her, burying her in an endless collage of the women she had imagined herself to be . . . auburn and graceful, blonde and elegant, brunette and poised, loved, adored, admired . . . entombing her in the reality (not the story?) of her life.
ness and conversation are more tiring than when he worked at the factory. The drudgery of conversation, wine, and memories are as monotonous as the assembly line.

"You're late again. A bunch of old men singing and drinking your lives away is shameful," clucks his wife as soon as she sees him pass through the doorway.

"Cherie," he calls out in a voice false with cheer, "As usual, dinner smells terrific!"

"Well, it probably would have been great twenty minutes ago when it was ready!"

"MMMMM... chicken, roasted; potatoes; and cooked raisins," he notes as he lifts the lids from the pots on the stove. His compliments and the smell of the food chase away her anger. Her mood is allowed to quickly change.

"Well, come sit down while it is still edible." She serves him a plate as she chatters about the neighbor's new baby. Many details assault his ears of measurements, labor pains, and a rush to the local hospital. This talk of new life temporarily restores his.

Slowly her gushing lights the bleakness that daily clouds his soul. As she sits, a sense of normalcy returns. Her hand reaches across and pats his. "Eat," she laughs.

He chuckles nervously and begins to taste the fowl that has soaked in spices, wine, and broth most of the afternoon that he has sat with his friends. Potatoes, soft as the butter they're brushed with sit on his fork only a moment. Raisins soaked with honey follow shortly afterwards.

After she is satisfied with his attempt at eating, she pats her apron pocket. "Our grandchildren have sent us a picture they drew of the new ducklings on their farm. Our daughter included a letter, too. Do you want to hear about how you're going to be made a grandfather again?" Her smile anticipates his quick nod.

She reopens the letter with the end of her knife. The paper crackles as she unfolds it and slips her glasses onto her nose. Her hand shakes and her voice trembles as she begins, "Dear Maman and Pere..." Her voice then steadies and rises until it joins with the smells of chicken, potatoes, and honey raisins and floats out of the open window, joining with other smells and sounds from other apartments and rooms that lie so close together, and yet so far from my own.

I find myself wishing that tonight was one of the nights that the old woman would come and bring a plate of dinner to me. She always made the excuse that she still cooked for a family, even though it was only she and her husband now. I pretended to believe the lie. She pretended that she didn't know that I knew the truth. Loneliness makes for strange companions.

I step away from the window as I realize that their tight circle doesn't include me. I drown out the scenes of togetherness with a piano concerto on the stereo. I turn the music up and loud to let the noise of the player's fingers pounding the keys pound away at my unwanted solitude. But, the music doesn't hold my attention for long. Soon I find myself staring out the window once again.

I observe the sky become dark and velvet. Stars twinkle in the distances, and fail to compete with the bright lights of the cafe. These lights reflect orange against the white and green canopy that covers the tables. The lights cause the bricks to appear as if they are burning, an image enhanced by the red carpet that covers the sidewalk. Gas lamps are interspersed throughout the diners. Sun is recreated to ward off the dark of night.

Soon it's time for the accordion player to go home. The evening crowd replaces the dinner crowd as a small jazz band replaces the accordion music. Loud, boisterous music calls down the street, telling its hearers, "Life is a party! Come and celebrate!"

The crowd becomes less chic and more hip. My voyeur's eyes focus on clove cigarettes that lie encased and pursed between the lips of men with too long hair and goateed chins. Their costume is black to emphasize their affiliation with Sartre and the beatniks. There is nothing new under the sun.

The women who filter in in pairs of twos and sets of threes are lithe and scantily dressed. Their bouncing hair and swaying hips call to the dark-attired men as provocatively as the gas lamps call to the moths that flutter at the edge of this society.

Since the chairs are uncomfortable and the music is raucous, people are up and out of their seats before long. Dancing, mingling, flirting people rearrange group patterns and friendships quickly. No real intimacies are formed. No commitments are made. The joyousness of the moment is the driving force of the interactions.

The music and noise peaks and crests. As the church bells down on the plaza strike two, laughing couples leave arm in arm—whether to help each other stand despite the haziness of wine or of a love bond that has caused them to become lovers in pain, memories, or pride.

Laughing and stumbling, they leave the cafe. I see a tall brunette fall against her partner as she twists her ankle because her high heel has caught in the spaces between the cobblestones. Champagne, ashes from cigarettes, and tears of laughter flow in those spaces between the stones and become rivers that flow into the cobblestone street.

I am still watching as pink-skied morning brings a lone street washer who sprays water into those rivers to wash away memories of the night and day that has passed before.
Pleasant Street
Deb Hickox

My father grew up on a farm tucked away in the rolling hills of Central New York—the son of a long line of Yankees who could trace their roots to the Mayflower. On the farm, he played with engines and machines and, yet, failed algebra in high school. He was ambitious enough to study it again when he needed to learn what the company required him to know. After the war, he drove to Connecticut in a 1946 Oldsmobile named Nellie Belle when harnessing x-rays was considered high-tech. He was able to meld together the algebra with his work and advance in his career. He boarded in a nine-room cookie-cutter house on Laurel Street in East Hartford, which was operated by Mrs. Wierzbecki. Mrs. Wierzbecki was a round cheery woman with one of those distinct Eastern European accents who believed that every girl should be married. That’s how he met my mother. Mrs. Wierzbecki knew Mrs. Olenard, who had married my father’s cousin.

The serenity of the homestead had to wait until the weekends for my mother. Finding daily transportation in 1952 from North Canton to Hartford was costly for a secretary. She figured the payroll and did the bookkeeping at the County Farm Bureau. She hadn’t failed algebra. She paid room and board to Mrs. Olenard and her husband in the two room upper within walking distance to the Bureau. They didn’t charge much and this, along with saving on transportation, allowed her to squirrel away a rainy day fund from her modest salary.

One Thursday evening, Mrs. Olenard deposited my mother in a red dress and then sent her jitterbugging down to the Polish National Home. There, Johnny Stoika and the Polish Princes would knock out a storm. My father, at the urging of Mrs. Wierzbecki, had skipped his algebra class that night and strode into the ball. He ordered his standard Virgin Mary from the barkeep and surveyed the field before him. She caught his eye. Bang! They made their own numbers.

Among his muffled conversations flowed laughter probably caused by one of those distinct Eastern European accents who believed that every girl should be married. That’s how he met my mother. Mrs. Wierzbecki knew Mrs. Olenard, who had married my father’s cousin.

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Two of them, my sister and I. I was born nine months after the wedding and have always had a question.

Shortly after my birth, we moved from a dingy flat near Mrs. Wierzbecki to the upstairs apartment in the two family Victorian that my Aunt Jeanne and her husband, John, owned. My Uncle John was a tool and dye maker and made a considerably good wage for the time. He definitely knew algebra. On the next street over from ours was a tavern. Uncle John preferred to take his supper there at the counter rather than home at the dining table. At the pub, he could play cards until all hours—well, at least until eight. When he would come home, and he always did, he had a nasty habit of half-closing the parlor door and talking on the telephone just within earshot of my aunt. Among his muffled conversations flowed laughter probably caused by one of his many flirtations flaunted without regard for his wife. She, on the other hand, turned a blind eye, but never closed it, to this behavior—eventually avenging it. My aunt, out of necessity, worked scheduling deliveries for the local oil company. Dipping into your sister’s meager resources to save your husband’s Mafia-leaded ass had to take an arduous emotional toll. But, at least he was “saved”—for now. They birthed my cousins, Bob, and Stan.

So, there we were for seven years—my two boy cousins, my sister, our parents, and me. For better, or worse, on Pleasant Street.

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My favorite color is blue. Blue like the ink sky the night my sister was born. I was awakened at what seemed like an ungodly hour for a three-year-old, but I’m sure it was only about 10 p.m. I remember because I was wearing yellow pajamas with feet in them. I remember because even at three “regular” clothes could never quite cover my daddy-long legs. The feet kept pulling

at my crotch so that my hands kept getting embarrassed as I tried to alleviate the itch of the coarse piqué. All the while, my cousin tried to cover his smirk and disguise his gleaming eyes as my aunt pulled me from my father’s arms. I didn’t really know, or care to know, at that point, the reason for this encroachment on my dreams. In fact, the sooner they put me back down, the sooner I could feel normal again.

My makeshift bed was the turquoise lounge chair right next to the front door. It was the mate to my Uncle John’s forbidden seat, forbidden because it was his television-viewing chair. In those days, if an adult told you to do something, you in no way questioned it. We almost never sat in it for fear that the stuffing would shift, and he would discover that someone had been sitting in his chair, and that would lead to fingers pointing until someone ‘fessed-up, and that would lead to a twenty-minute lecture on property rights. So, there I was, pillow under head, thumb in mouth, next to “Forbidden,” trying to reconnect with Mickey and Minnie who were waiting for me back at Disney Land.

It couldn’t have been more than three or four hours when, once again, I was awakened from Never Never land. The pounding was enough to jolt everyone, except my cousins. My father was on the other side of the door. This I knew by the soft calling of my aunt’s name. I heard shuffling feet as she silently left her room. Pink curlers adorning her hair, she fumbled for the key in the deep recesses of her wrap, turned the lock, and drew back the door. There he stood with one eye, oily face, white-toothed grin, and a thermos under his crooked right arm. A baby girl named Karen was the news he relayed. He told the statistics, but I was never good at numbers. He said it was a long night and it would be best for me to stay put. What was he thinking? Didn’t he understand I had spent the entire day figuring out how Peter Pan could fly? After all, everybody knew that fairy dust really only worked on Tinker Bell. I must have scraped my legs in ten places just jumping in the air and spreading my wings. Of course, it was beyond my playtime reasoning to comprehend the noisy, eight-hour, machine-shop workday, which would soon be upon him. The door closed, the lock turned, and I crept back to the chaise, buried my head in the pillow, and dreamt of Captain Hook.

The baby came home about three days later. I knew her name, and I knew she was mine, and I was excited because now there were four of us on the second floor in the house on Pleasant Street.
Like disease, they are there all winter, waiting for perfect time
To make their entrance into the scene.
Often at a time when things seem to be going so well.
The early spring garden with so much promise.
Then the arrival, like a diagnosis, seemingly unreal.
They rev their engines, hover just above the crabgrass bed they love
And speed off, disgusting to me, their fringed legs dangling.

Parked head first, sucking life out of tender greens and bright petals.
It is a silent attack, the destruction evident only after they fly off or die.
Raising their ugly heads as they are doused with the only remedy.
Is the cure worse than the disease?

Like those words that one-day weren’t there, the next day, there.
Death was there that day before, right?
Why does it change so much to hear those words?
Music is never quite the same, the blue sky is somehow different too.
Sex seems a trivial desire when compared to life.
Sure, so much to desire, pleasure, prodigy, suspense, comfort, warmth.

But that desire is what will kill them.
Sex can kill.

Slowly, silently, death spreads through the body.
Like a chill, a premonition (c’mon—it was there all along).
Like a curse or a jinx, like a hunch or a suspicion
Pushed away to a corner.
Where it need not be thought about till the issue is forced
Out into the bright noonday SPF-30 sunlight.

Think about it now.
Sex can kill.
Lured to the odor they love more than food, they fall into the traps set.
Down into the, disgusting to me, pile of their squirming kin.
Do they have any regrets?

Do we?
The Painting
Stefanie Carbone

Growing up, my sister Aimee had one of those almost completely yellow Van Gogh sunflower paintings in her bedroom. Even the wooden frame was dull yellow. Aimee hated those sunflowers, but for some reason I still cannot fully comprehend, my parents would not let her take it down. It hung there, fading more with each passing day, directly opposite her bed. So, in the morning, as soon as she opened her eyes, the first thing Aimee saw was that mustard yellow atrocity. Every single morning.

I felt a strange sibling satisfaction in the ugliness of that painting. Hell, her whole room was ugly, and that, as her older sister, made me more than a tiny bit happy. I never hesitated to point out how the rust orange color of her carpet resembled throw-up, or that the hideousness of the orange and yellow floral striped wallpaper made me dizzy. Not to mention, although I often did, that my bedspread was prettier, my bed was softer, and my room was bigger. I think I also told her that mom and dad must love me more.

Despite all that, Aimee still let me be “Auntie Steffie” to all of her stuffed animals. She even let Peppermint the koala bear sleep over in my room sometimes and named her tiny brown stuffed squirrel after me. I paid her back by convincing her that Baker’s unsweetened chocolate tastes just like real chocolate and by filling her red Snoopy thermos with dirty dishwater. Still, I was the only one in the family who would dare to wake her up when she slept through her clock radio alarm, as she often did. My sister was a bear in the morning and would growl at anyone who ventured into her orange and yellow cave. Except me. She never got mad at me. I’m fairly certain one reason is that I was the only one who knew enough to stand directly between Aimee and those sunflowers.

Just last weekend my parents took down that painting. They also gave away the old furniture, tore down the dizzying wallpaper, and are preparing to replace the throw-up-like carpet. Even though neither Aimee nor I have lived there for years, I still feel a bit sad that the room will no longer be as it was when we were growing up. So many memories lived in her candy corn room. Soon it will be unrecognizable with an off white carpet, lightly painted walls and a fancy new bedspread. Part of me hopes that my parents put that old sunflower painting back on the wall where it belongs.

Persistent Reminiscences and Hammer
Annette Hart-Carpentino

I remember Chuckie Lons. Maybe that wasn’t even his name, but I remember him. He lived just two houses down from my family on Stratford Avenue in a drab gray Cape, the gray almost like a cemetery stone or a dismal gray day when it seemed as if it should rain but didn’t.

His yard was strewn with garbage, the litter of passing cars from the busy road that was the back yard of his house. Rotting branches from the old swamp maple and leaves from the autumns of many years past occupied the rest of the small lot. If there was any grass, it was overgrown, and poked out between the debris. No nicely shaped shrubs or flowers surrounded this house, unlike our house with rhododendrons, roses, and manicured hedges encircling the blue and white two-family home.

I don’t know if he had parents. Since he was my age, six or seven at that time, some adult figure should have been there. Their absence from his life was apparent in his lack of bathing and dressing like the rest of the neighborhood kids. I have his sallow face full of dirt and long dirty blonde hair committed to my memory, a picture stuck in my mind’s childhood photo album, but I don’t recall the color of his eyes. Were they gray, like his house, or blue like mine? His tube socks were always around his ankles, too big to stay up on the scrawny scabby legs. His shorts, already short due to the trend of the 70’s, were made for a child half his age. With some obscure logo, and looking as if it was never laundered, his shirt hung haphazardly on his frail shoulders.

I’m not sure anyone ever talked to him in our small working-class neighborhood. The Bagoly girls, my sisters, and I mostly taunted him when he came two houses down to our area. The six of us screamed and ran in all directions when he came near. Without inviting him to play in our game of chase, he became “it.” We darted through our connected yards as Chuckie attempted to catch one of us. If on the seldom occasion he was able to grab hold of one of us (usually he gave up long before this was possible), a cootie shot needed to be administered at once. We told ourselves it was the only way to avoid his disease, the disease of isolation and sadness.

Once Bootsie, our mean mutt, bit Chuckie. My grandmother had to take him in her car to the hospital for stitches and shots. She put him in her car and went without telling anyone at his house. I watched my grandpa yell at Bootsie, and I remember saying, “It’s not Bootsie’s fault; he deserved it for coming into our yard.” Secretly I thought he deserved it for how he looked, or maybe because he was not like us; he was lesser than us. After grandma returned from the hospital, Bootsie remained tied up in the yard. It seemed so unfair.

Another time, as I played in my new Radio Flyer on the road, pretending I was driving my car, Chuckie came over to me with a hammer in his hands. He awkwardly held the hammer over his head, and then whacked it into my back. I didn’t stay “Stop!” I sat there during the repeated thumps before my dad, who still lived with us at the time, came out and chased him away. I don’t think I cried.

Why did he do that? I still see me, a young child, sitting in the wagon in the middle of Alfred Court, and feeling the hammer pounding my back, as if he was saying, “See, you’re not better than me. I can hurt you like you hurt me.”

As quickly as he came to our world, Chuckie and whoever he lived with left the unappealing gray Cape. The house stayed vacant for many years. Then, without notice, it was demolished to make way for a professional office space. The neighborhood at the corner of Stratford Avenue and Alfred Court, which hasn’t seemed to change even before the 1970’s, saw only one change: Chuckie came and went.
I just ran into another one today on the way out of class, a former "student," that is. Our workshop ends tomorrow. Our response group broke up early (3:20 p.m.) to go home and tie up loose ends. During class, I'd been facing the windows, while on the outside a tremulous, long arm, reminding me of Mike Mulligan and his steam shovel, Maryann, in Kermit-the-Frog green, hovered and swayed in the breeze.

One of the window-washing aerialists' faces looked so familiar to me, but I couldn't place it—I don't generally hang out with a "high-flying" crowd, yet with each swirling swipe of the wiper blade (I couldn't help but think of some poor ear being raided and left a paraplegic with only one wiper blade arm!), he stared back with a shily half-hidden, "I-wonder-why-that-lady's-face-is-so-familiar?" expression on his face, too. Quietly, efficiently, his partner moved on, washing more windows, a young father spit shining the faces of his kids as he waits to proudly show them off to his boss.

Just as Kim and I were about to cross North Eagleville Road and plod on up to T lot, dragging heavy bags of books like twenty-first century versions of the twenty-mule-team-Borax donkeys on their way across the California desert, this crazy Hispanic guy comes sauntering across the dust-covered street, wildly gesticulating and calling for us to stop. At first, my stomach plummeted. Oh, no, not another non-English speaker seeking directions or assistance in a garbled admixture of his own language and English, while his body's anguished movements added pathos to his frustrated pleas for comprehension.

"Miss, Miss, wait up! Hey, didn't you used to be my teacher? Hey, don't you remember me? Yeah, that's right, you used to be my teacher, remember?"

Oh my God, oh my God, it was Mr. Cruz! Laughing, smiling (relieved!) we clasped hands and I drew him close for a motherly kiss on his sweaty, sun-browned temple. "How are you? How are you? Yes, I remember you! What are you doing here? You look wonderful. What's new with you?"

"See? See? I told my partner you'd remember me! I knew it! I told him you were my teacher, but he didn't believe me; he didn't believe I ever even had a teacher nice as you! Yeah! I got married, nice little Italian girl, oh, real nice! Yeah, and we got a daughter, four-months-old," he beamed, as he proudly made rocking, arm cradle motions.

"That's wonderful, sweetheart! I'm so proud of you! It's so good to see you, again! How are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm doing good. Yeah, me and my partner there, we got us a little company now, and we're here on a contract to work. I'm staying out of trouble now, best I can, you know! Getting my act together, trying to stay clean. But what you doing here?"

"Well, you always were one of my special people. I never did understand why you were there in that place with me; it wasn't the place for someone like you, but I appreciated having you there with us in class. Oh, it's so good to see you!"

"Well, you know, it was girl trouble, you know, girl trouble, but that's all behind me. I got a wife now, and a beautiful baby!"