Teresa Carmody

Requiem

REQUIEM

First edition published in 2005 by Les Figues Press, Los Angeles, as Book 4/5 of the TRENCHART Material Series.

Second and revised edition published in 2024 by Les Figues, an imprint of punctum books, Earth, Milky Way.
https://punctumbooks.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-206-8 (print)
ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-207-5 (ePDF)

DOI: 10.53288/0561.1.00

LCCN: 2024951361
Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress

Les Figues is an imprint established under the punctum books Special Collections initiative.

Teresa Carmody

Requiem

LES FIGUES

Contents

for
Michael P. Carmody
1943–2001

Introduction

David L. Ulin

Teresa Carmody's *Requiem* reads like a folk opera, a lament for the unexamined life. Constructed as a series of voice-driven narratives, it unfolds in the most prosaic of settings—a diner, a barroom, a garage, a sidewalk—resonating in a kind of harmonic cacophony. The subject is loss, plain and simple, but it's a nuanced sort of loss, made more substantial by the memories it dredges up. In "Hurrah Hurrah," *Requiem*'s most ambitious piece, a family wrestles with the sudden death of their father, whose legacy is recounted by his children one after the other in a sequence of dramatic monologues complete with stage directions, as if the action were unfolding within us and without us all at once. In "I Am Their Musick," a strange young man, touched by "God Himself or another one of [his] favorites, good 'ole Bugs Bunny, that Wascally Wabbit" (22), constructs a fence, inspired by "those cartoons where the animals—usually cats and dogs—line up on a fence and start singing" (32), with a platform so he can be serenaded as he lies in bed. Carmody's is an austere vision, wholly recognizable and yet wholly fantastic, and nowhere is this more clear than in the closing piece, "Coda," which returns to the landscape of "Hurrah Hurrah" to trace, in prose gone numb with longing, the journey home of a prodigal daughter for that same father's funeral. There's something impressionistic at work here, a realism so nuanced it seems experimental, although at the same time, *Requiem* never loses sight of the fact that these are real people, experiencing complex situations, struggling to cope as best they can. Even more, the book operates out of an entirely American idiom, in which faith and credulity, spiritual yearning and the pettiness of human

desire bleed together, until often we're not exactly sure just where we stand.

What is the nature of this American perspective? I'm wary of making too many claims for it, since like any work, *Requiem* ultimately must stand on its own. Still, it's no coincidence that the book opens with an epigraph from William Faulkner—"Between grief and nothing I will take grief"—nor that in her essay "A Catechism of Aesthetics for a Time of Religious War" (collected in Les Figues's *TrenchArt: Material Sampler*), Carmody expresses an affinity for Flannery O'Connor and her mysterious grotesques. As Faulkner and O'Connor have done, after all, Carmody writes about what is, in many ways, a disregarded landscape, a corner of America (in this case, rural Michigan) that official culture goes out of its way not to see. These are the flyover states, home to "the base," as the president likes to call it, yet such designations only serve to flatten the people here into metaphors, into two-dimensional mirrors of our fears or our desires. This is what mass media brings us, a tendency towards oversimplification, a reliance on cliché. Carmody, however, understands her subjects; she respects them, she is of them, she knows who they are. Because of this, *Requiem* is marked throughout by its own quiet tone of authority, which works to peel back the surface of what we imagine and examine what is going on underneath.

The measure of Carmody's writing is that she not only recognizes this, but expresses it with delicacy and grace. The voices that propel *Requiem* are real, authentic, less the expression of an abstract aesthetic than a scrupulous attention to life as it is lived. When a character complains, as Joanne does of a niece's name in "Hurrah Hurrah," that "we still think Brooke is a bit, well, there is a soap opera character named Brooke English. Jane says she has no idea, but then she found out, and still goes ahead and gives Brooke the same name. I mean, what does she think, that it sounds quality or something. Well it doesn't" (40), Carmody is not being postmodern or ironic; she's not trying to illustrate a point. Instead, she's revealing her characters at the deepest level, where soap operas become a way to frame long-simmering family rivalries, and opportunity means junior college

or church. The same is true of the biblical language, the references and phrasings, which Carmody weaves throughout *Requiem* to highlight her characters' belief. This is not art as social commentary, in other words, but art as observation, a literature constructed of the most minute details, a lens that allows us to see.

It is in encouraging this type of second sight, of course, that literature is at its most essential—if it can be said to be essential at all. We read and write (at least, I do) as a means of communicating, of reckoning with the world around us, and in the process, maybe, learning who we are. In saying that, I don't mean to suggest that literature can save us, any more than these characters can save themselves. Like them, we are alive only for a minute, and if the pieces here have anything to tell us, it's that connection is fleeting, that as much or more divides us than we can ever share. Still, if we are lucky, we might find occasional whispers of reconciliation, of communion even, and at the very moments we least expect them to occur. This is what *Requiem* offers, a quick flash of understanding, even as it reminds us that, in the face of loss, understanding may never be enough.

Los Angeles, 2005

Teresa Carmody

Requiem

Between grief and nothing I will take grief.

—William Faulkner, *The Wild Palms*

Plainchant

The man slid into the booth at the northernmost corner of Johnnie's Restaurant. It was a good thing they didn't bolt down the tables as he could still push the whole thing back, make more room for more of his middle. There you go, he said to the young gal placing a glass of ice water on the table and offering him a menu. You keep that, he told her, just send Sally.

The youngster smiled and walked away. New girl. Nice little figure, though she'd blow right up as soon as someone popped a bun in that pretty oven. He'd known enough puffy knees and padded elbows to sort the naturally trim from the bread and butter gals: the first are always stalks and the others just pockets of yeast pitted perfect for seed. Of course, it's the puffies who take you in quicker. Curse man's fate, he used to tell his boy, the easier the lay, the wider she'll lie down the road.

Sally came over with a hot cup of coffee and a fresh bowl of creamers. How are you, this morning, she always asked, and will it be your usual? Yes, and how about a date on the side, he'd smile and wag his eyebrows, and she always said we don't have dates in these parts, but would he care for a little cup of raisins. He'd laugh and tell her to get his breakfast and hurry up, and she'd give him a wink and leave. She had nice gray eyes and long lashes; that was enough. He'd pretty much learned his lesson with the last one. Annette. He'd found out where she'd lived by hanging around late one day and sort of accidentally on purpose following her home from work. She had a duplex, prefab from the seventies, rented it from some company in Lansing, he figured, with a young couple and their dirty baby living next door. After that, he couldn't help it. He drove by her house every time he was out, sometimes parking down the street, just to

watch and rest, listen to a little radio, until he knew her whole schedule. Work at 6:30. Home by 3:00. From the looks of it, she'd take a nap, shower, then chat on the phone in her baby blue robe, fiddling with that stuffed bear she kept on her couch. Come happy hour, she'd lower the blinds and walk down to the bar like she was on her way to an important business meeting, chin up, brown eyes scanning the sides of the street for familiar faces, though she wouldn't do more than nod if she saw one she knew. She always wore a skirt and those slender black ankle boots that laced up the front, and usually ended up in some guy's car by 10 pm. He must have watched her do just about everything that can be done in just about every position, before she paired up with this particular fellow who only liked it one way and only liked Annette. And that was that. She moved out of the duplex and settled down with the young fellow in that new trailer development with the carports. A short while later, they moved away, somewhere south, she'd said on her last day at work, and suddenly, his life was over. He quit going in for breakfast for a good long while, had a hard enough time keeping food down. When he finally made it back, here was Sally.

I Am Their Musick

Pete pulled into the driveway, around the rear of the house, where he turned off his van and sat. An odd job man, Pete always liked this drive, the way it circled Ma's house and back onto the road, a good design for not worrying about which direction you're headed: you'll come out either end, like spoilt meat or one drink too many. Of course, Ma wasn't Pete's mother, who'd been dead so long he barely remembered her Christian name. Ma was his wife's Ma, batty old gal who gave most of her money to the church by tithing ten percent whenever she touched the pot. Pete could see her house from his own, or his house from hers, except he'd pulled in facing the wrong direction, so unless he messed with the rearview mirror, the only thing he saw was Ma's sagging porch littered with empty corrugated cardboard boxes and the foil pie-tins she used to feed the cats. The porch light was on, a dull miserable glow, and Pete knew Ma was sitting in her wheelchair at the dining room table, playing solitaire, reading *Catholic Digest,* waiting for Pete to show with her arthritis medicine. He'd gone into Lansing to get it that very afternoon. Pete restarted the van instead; the stones crunched and broke beneath its wheels as he turned on the radio. *You know me better than that,* he shifted and hummed along, *you've seen me lose all my charm.*

Ten minutes later he was at the Wagon: Wheel & Bowl, just for a minute, as was his usual intention. He didn't see any of the other guys' cars, not even his brother-in-law's, the stinking drunk. Probably at home, easier to keep that girlfriend of his if she's kept in the house. She's a piece of work, alright, putting her sticky hands and sloppy mouth all over you, saying she ain't married into the family, so what's the problem.

Jesus Christ who'll judge the quick and the dead, glad she's not blood is all, her and that other tired cow, the nephew's wife. Woman'll sit there at Easter supper and foul-mouth her boy's wife for calling the cops when she caught him fiddling with their baby girl. What kind of sick pup would do that? Sure, boy's mother is singing for sympathy 'cause the baby-toucher's the only baby she's got left, and he's all locked up. Then she goes dragging her dead son into the dinner, what a joy, according to she, forgetting the fact that the boy hung himself, a slow hang, knelt on the floor, belt about the neck, leaned forward, let gravity take care of the rest. The sheep will go astray, is all Ma says about it. Well, sheep stray without a good strong shepherd, and that poor mother has had a rough go, losing two boys like that and a no-good husband to lean on.

Pete lost one himself, but he had more sense than to bring the boy up, aside from funny before-stories everyone likes to hear. He slid out of his van and closed the door without locking it. Pete'd lived in Plainfield his whole life, minus a three-year stint in the army, and it was a good place. Safe. There'd been no violence except domestic, and the only serious stealing in town was about ten years ago, a series of horses, right from their barns. He could still remember when the Wagon: Wheel & Bowl was simply a western-style building of painted gray cinder blocks with a giant wagon wheel planted out front circled by white stones. They added the alley twenty years ago, with its own set of now-faded shiny new doors and pin-shaped bottles of beer, the result being a lopsided place popular with old and young in this and the other small towns around. Pete liked the alley, not for bowling but as a place to go through on the way to the bar, see who might be passing the hours tossing balls, having a few, watching their pins fall, or like them, wobble and stay up. There was no one much there that night, only the barber, down on lane twelve with his boy and some of his barber buddies. The barber, that's one who can't hold his tongue, always telling stories of his older son, the auctioneer. His boy, he said, pulled in buckets of money, a smart use of his God-given gift of gab, rewarded handsomely in the here and now. Pete's most common response, to anyone but the barber,

was he was lucky a trim only took ten minutes because otherwise Pete'd have to tell him how he couldn't tell a talent from a twat. Man has never lived outside of Plainfield, not even once, so what's he know of the ways of the world, Pete liked to point out, though not to the barber, but only because he couldn't get a word in edgewise, the barber babbling on about how his chatty son sold barrels of unknown bits just by saying what might be in there. Kid must have sold those barrels a thousand times, for as much as any one man heard about them. Pete picked up the pace and ducked into the bar; no way no how did he want to get tangled in some stretched-out barber's tale.

The barroom was the same as always: a red booth-like bench running the width of three walls, with plain unbolted tables pulled up to it and thin-legged, thin-cushioned wooden chairs sitting opposite. The same tables and chairs lined the center of the room, three lines in all. The carpet was off-burgundy and patched here and there with a lighter red shag. The walls were slight-wood paneling. A long mahogany bar ran the length of the unboothed wall, with half-full bottles shelved behind it and brown vinyl swivel stools bolted straight in front. Pete picked one of these, looked down and saw Mark Fedewa there by his lonesome self, arms resting on the counter-top, palms open and fingertips touching. Mark was watching his hands pull apart every few seconds, his fingertips tapping back together with a small dull thud. Pete leaned a bit toward Mark, "You already throw your balls tonight?"

Mark sighed and tapped; the kingdom of God is at hand.

Most knew about Mark Fedewa, the way he never spoke. Some said he wouldn't and some said he couldn't, though Pete himself didn't much care, for the boy wasn't likely to say anything worth hearing. Pete looked around for Joe instead. Joe was still unmarried, wore the whitest shirts Pete'd ever seen and drove a sky-blue Firebird. "That's what I like, barkeep," he said, catching Joe's eye. "Scotch on the rocks."

Joe flipped up a glass and poured the drink, pushed it at Pete, sniffed twice and kept watch on the wide-backed television hung close to the ceiling at the opposite end of

the bar. Michigan versus Ohio: Michigan was down zero to seven. Plenty of time to turn.

"What's his problem anyway," said Pete. "Trouble spending all that money?"

"Dishonest money dwindles away," said Joe, "and the human heart gets damned depressed with hope's delay."

"And the Lord always backs a loser, that's what I say."

Mark could hear them talking, but he held his tongue, flame of fire, sword of truth. He'd grown accustomed to their wickedness. Even before that life-changing moment—that's how the family calls it—people talked about Mark like they didn't believe he was standing right there beside them. Invisible presence, like God Himself or another one of Mark's favorites, good 'ole Bugs Bunny, that Wascally Wabbit. Mark could change outfit and personality like either one, right there in the eye of his beholder in-between blinks. His mother used to say it was his way of being such a lamb: meek and tender-voiced, padded with wool enough to pull some over the sharpest pair of eyes. Mark laughed, silent as the heavens, though he wasn't one to hold folks in derision, especially if they've suffered a recent loss. Mark's just someone who stumbled on the truth of Lady Wisdom: hold your tongue and you'll have half the troubles and ten times the blessings besides. Why Bugs himself wouldn't have any hassles if he would only stay in the rabbit hole, not be popping out and up, asking every last hunter from here to Albuquerque what's up, never mind the Doc. Better to be like Mark, the boy whose mother let him stay home longer than the others, whose brothers beat him less, who, on more than one occasion, was given extra credit for unusual understanding. And this is how Mark came to be the only Fedewa left in Plainfield, the only one who didn't have to move away to feel more at home, the only one who hadn't lost something in uproot and replantation. Mark could see it in the school photos he received every December in the mail. Even with the name of a niece or nephew written on the back, there was nothing familiar about the face on the front, so Mark covered them all with Family Circus cutouts: Billy and Dolly, Jeffery and PJ, and the best of the bunch, Not Me. His refrigerator was covered with children who didn't change, and Mark would look at them and say, Thou

art my son, this day have I begotten thee. He lifted his glass and washed back the rest of his drink, a nice sharp tingle up the back of his sinus cavities. Cutty Sark. Used to have a dog by that name.

Mark motioned for another set of drinks, one for him and one for Pete, the one whom the Lord has chosen. God does love a trial, that's for sure, surely as he knows the inside of a man's heart and which pockets of impurity need to be sanctified, you bet.

Pete eyed the younger fellow. Little hands for a guy so big. Little wrists poking like twigs from those long work shirt sleeves, though Pete knew sure as he knew dog shit on a shoe, Mark didn't do a tongue's lick of work, especially not since his ma died, leaving him all that cash. Now she was a strange gal, kept right on cleaning houses even after Mr. Fedewa won the lottery, some few plus two million dollars. Of course Big Mark Fedewa was one to stay away from, good-for-nothing before, worse-for-nothing after, carrying on with that ass-ugly girlfriend of his. Picked her up at a karaoke lounge in Grand Rapids was what people said, settled her in a trailer at that park where Pete's boy, Paul, had lived with his girl those past two years, right down the way from Pete's niece and her family. It was a nice little park, real respectful, every trailer with its own bit of yard and gravel-floored carport, and then came Big Mark Fedewa and his whore, trashing everything up. The girlfriend had the face of a pug-dog and a rack the size of honeydews, and while Pete wouldn't mind getting a hand on those, he'd need a paper bag for that head of hers. Meanwhile, Mrs. Fedewa was fixed as the foundation of God's holy mountain, said she'd married for keeps, and for keeps she'd stay, absolutely not would she give Mr. Fedewa a divorce. She'd fought the good fight, kept the strong faith, and what kind of example would that set for the children, no matter them being full-grown with marriages and divorces of their very own. Anyway, lucky thing for Big Mark, because when a late-night bar fight landed him in a coma, his big-titted babe was nowhere to be found, and it was Mrs. Fedewa who came, said she'd been through the worst, and would stick through the sickness as well. She nursed him daily as any devoted wife; did nothing else that whole year, and in the end, he died, leav-

ing her all that money. And what did Mrs. Fedewa do but pick right up where she'd left off, straight back to cleaning other folk's houses. She said there was no use trying to seek that which was lost, or dwell on what had been driven away. There were enough broken-down widows who couldn't do their own cleaning, and she'd just as soon help them out for five dollars a pop, give the proceeds to the Church, than sit around her own living room trying to fill her days. She went on this way for a year or two, bought a new Virgin for the Rectory, a ball field for the school, complete with scoreboard, and then up and died herself, dividing the rest between the Parish and her own poor kids. Pete could tell you one thing, the Church sure loves a sucker, but then again, so does the State lottery, for like his boy, Paul, used to say: that Lotto's a rigged deal and only sorry shit-heads well past sixty ever win. Better buy my ticket now, said Pete, I'm in the prime demographic.

Joe put the drinks down and sniffed again. "What," said Pete, "now you have a problem?"

Joe shook his head, frowned. He was known for being a bit sulky, a small guy with a thin face and a low colorless ponytail. "Michigan still down?" said Pete. Joe looked at the television and gave up a sigh. Pete glanced at the screen: halftime show, blue and yellow jackets, marching knees kept high, happy faces under tall hats, singers and players of instruments. He almost remembered something about his daughter, saw her face floating for just a glimmer. Seems she wanted to play clarinet, wasn't it, but was built more for the tuba, polkas and such. He couldn't remember what she ended up with, something enough so she was always asking Pete if he saw her in the half-time show. Used to tease her, he remembered that alright, said he'd heard her notes from the hotdog stand and the pickle relish made them all the sweeter. Good kid. Big as a horse's ass, but couldn't ask for a more sensible child, especially for a girl.

Pete glanced at Mark. Man, that boy was one more reason for Big Mark Fedewa to hang his head. He tried to catch his eye, but Mark was staring straight into the dead-end of his own arm's crook. Pete's glass was already half-empty, though he wanted half-full, so he raised it, "Here's to you," he said to Mark, "and all that god-damn

money." He kept his eye fixed on the boy as he took down his drink, wiped the back of his hand against his mouth, heard a noise at the door, the one leading directly to the lot. Some young kid, didn't seem old enough to be free of his mother's tit, opened the door partway, started through but turned back to the sound of some voice pleading on the outside. The kid wasn't from Plainfield, already looked a bit loaded the way he was woozing between worlds, starting in but still giving part attention to the must-be-a lady behind him. In the end, the pleading voice won; the kid said, "Oh, baby," and let the door slowly pressurize itself shut. Pete snorted and looked back at Mark, who was grinning at him with a mouth full of the smallest teeth Pete had ever seen.

"Be not afraid, big man," grinned Mark. His voice was low and flat.

"Holy Shit," smiled Pete. "Didn't know it could talk."

Mark grinned.

"Dammit if I used to ask all Paul's friends, dads too, and not one of them shitheads could repeat one word they'd heard from your mouth."

Mark grinned wider, and Pete's smile slipped.

"Better be careful," he said. "Keep your mouth open like that, and you'll be catching flies between those baby teeth of yours."

Mark continued to grin.

Pete felt a little cold then, strange for the season. He turned toward the television. Joe must've put it on mute; soundless cars winded up a hill, fast and always the same. Wouldn't mind driving one of those new Mustangs if they weren't such a rip, a third of their value gone soon as you take 'em off the lot. You'd have to have enough cash not to care about losing some. Then again, it's always the rich bastards who know how to hold their buck. Do or don't, you're damned by both.

Mark, meanwhile, was staring at Pete's profile. He liked to use his secret x-ray vision, not unlike Superman, though he would have preferred Bugs to have that particular gift, for he's a true weakling and not just in disguise. With a prophet's laser-eye, Mark saw past the few gray hairs hanging from Pete's big nostrils, up into the sinus region, clogged as one would expect, boogers tinged with blood and dust, no wonder the big man was

always pulling at his nose. He's trying to make space. His jowls laid low with layers of fat and his head a butternut squash, a brain of vegetable flesh, unsprouted seeds and stringy broken connections. According to your apportion, O Lord, according to your grace. Pete had always been a big man, high and round as Mr. Wilson, the one most menaced by Dennis, though the cartoon kid never meant any harm. Unlike Paul, Pete's human son. Paul was a sneak and a thief, a real problem, rest his troubled soul. They'd been the only two non-athletes in the class, but unlike Mark who could mind his own business, Paul made a big hubboo about it, picking on Mark to make up for his own lost face, snaking Mark's math book and milk money, the J.C. Penney underwear advertisements kept hidden in the bottom of his gym bag. Mark knew it was wrong to lust after those good ladies, and Paul was his right rebuke, the wicked who triumphed in place of God's servant. One time, Paul snapped a photo of Mark while he was changing, said he was going to show it to the girls, see if they liked Mark's underwear as much as Mark liked theirs. That night, Mark burned all of his magazines, and thereafter wore his gym clothes beneath the school uniform so to avoid the locker room. He confessed to the priest and started his habit of saying prayers and meditative reminders inside his head: Our Father, Hail Mary, Peter Parker, Jacob the younger and his son Joseph, Moses the stutterer, Clark Kent, David the weaker, Linus young brother of Lucy, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew, James and John the fishermen, and yes, please Jesus, my Lord and Christ.

Mark's father couldn't stand the way Mark was so unathletic; a weakling for a namesake, he'd spit. Oh, but it was just a gesture, common as the wind. Life had cheated Mark's father of the chances he would have had if his Pa hadn't died so young, left his older brother in charge of the family savings. Big brother opened a hardware store up North somewhere, said the money should go to the one most likely to succeed, and he'd turn ten talents to twenty, and send Mark's father something of his own. Seems hardware didn't sell so well, for the only cash that ever arrived was one hundred dollars in 1976. But by then Big Mark had a fistful of children and barrelsful of bills. Cheated and screwed he'd been, but

look who got the earthly reward. Not big brother. Nor big-mouthed Paul and his big-bodied Pop. For the Lord loves a faithful servant, that's what, and honors the weakling who stays ever true. Mark was faithful as a dog, as was his sweet mother; the spirit of poverty was broken and Mark reaped the blessings along with the trial. So if Big Man Pete Volen, father of Paul, was the beast brought for saving by the Lord's pack of hounds, then Mark would face Pete Volen and kiss the Son, lest He be angry and we perish from the way His wrath is kindled just the littlest bit.

"Mr. Volen," he said. "Mr. Volen, I'd like to talk to you. I've got an offer for you, Doc, something that might just bring you happiness."

Pete's head snapped back like he'd been shot. He looked at Mark, "God-dammit if you aren't still grinning."

Mark waved to Joe for another round before taking a carefully folded men's white handkerchief from his shirt pocket. The ensuing sound was like a pup whining to be let out.

"Man even grins while he blows," said Pete. Of all of the Fedewas to stay behind, town's stuck with the blackest of the flock. Mark had been in class with his Paul, there at St. Augustine's. The Fedewa kid never played sports, and wouldn't cheer from the stands. Heck, even Paul did that, bringing along his camera, even going to the away games, snapping photos of the boys giving each other wedgies or stuffing balls in their jerseys so to fake they had tits. Other guys loved that stuff, and as much as Pete would've liked a ball player for a son, at least he'd gotten a joker, the class clown, and that was alright with him. Paul's mom used to say it was hard sometimes at St. Augie's, the classes were small and if you didn't go along with the group, there simply wasn't anybody else to go with. Pete said Paul proved different, and the plain fact was that Mark Fedewa was just weird, no matter what size his city or school. Mark's Pa agreed; even he wouldn't let little Mark come close to him in public. He'd seen Old Man Fedewa chase his son right out of the Wagon: Wheel & Bowl. What kind of life was that, never mind the millions.

Mark scooted across the stools between them, sat directly at Pete's side. "Mr. Volen," he said, still grinning. "Doc, do you ever sing?"

Pete didn't answer, even as Mark kept eyeing him, his big nose and big belly and the big tops on the tips of his big shoes. Mark could see his muscle, far beneath those layers of fat, dormant, that's what's happened, still tissues still waiting for a chance. The man was a mixture of Elmer Fudd, aching for a wabbit, and a regular Porky Pig, happy enough with the radio on, like Mark himself, singing along with Toby Keith, *I like talking about you you you you usually. But occasionally, I want to talk about me.*

Pete faced forward, staring at the shelved bottles but focusing on nothing. If only Paul hadn't gotten sick. The country singers never realize what they're kissing till it's gone, and Paul's ma was much the same. She'd been moping around the house, got herself so worked up, her bones were stiff every night. Now she says Paul was her favorite child, the only one who took after her, he even had her eyes and ears, and she's only lonelier since he's been gone. It's got so Pete can't stand to be around anymore as she moans herself to bed.

"Do you, Mr. Volen? Do you ever sing? Would you if it earned you extra cash?"

Pete looked at Mark and asked what the hell he was talking about.

Joe was already putting down another round; he winked at Pete as he pushed the Scotch forward.

Pete scowled. Mark was grinning again, his teeth pale, gray as tiny tombstones, not like that nice marble marker they'd chosen for the boy. No expense spared.

"Because I have an offer for you, Mr. Volen, a chance to make out, and there's nothing wrong with honestly earned cash. You could buy yourself a new front door, repair the porch, or get something nice for Mrs. Volen. She's a real fine lady, precious lamb, must live a real interesting life. I bet she likes flowers and candy. Petunia Pig sure loved it when Porky brought her sweets. Same with Minnie and Mickie's gift of milk chocolate. Heart-shaped box, sure, and daffodils. Or is Mrs. Volen more wife-like, so she'd prefer the doing of an extra chore. It's always easier, you know, when you have the cash. You could hire some help, and she'll make you a Dagwood

afterwards, or cuddle up like Hi and Lois. Either way, it's the surest way to break into joy, sing together, see eye to eye, as the Lord commands. What do you say, Doc, do you want to hear my plan?"

Pete stared at the chattering monk. Gifts for the missus? Well, sure, she's taken it pretty hard, but there's no need for another useless antique. Damn house has gotten so full of mahogany lamp tables, American Empire vanities, geegaws and knick-knacks that Pete could no longer find the wet spot when one of her damn pussycats peed, so he's stuck with the stink. She says the pieces are investments; Pete's had his side projects, the Le Cars and Renaults he was always fixing and never selling. He told her she should have learned something from his poor example, but she said her pieces were already restored, and that's all the difference. Their value keeps rising, and she could sell them anytime she pleased. It's for the future, she said. Yeah, and he supposed the smell of kitty piss added to their worth and she thought if he'd quit letting the dogs in the house, they'd at least remain intact, it's the chewed-up legs that are the problem and yeah yeah yeah, he's heard it all before and will again. That's the future, my friend. He looked at the game. Third quarter; Ohio's tied up. "Damn wolverines," said Pete.

"Never mind that, Doc. Look here." Mark lifted his fresh drink in Pete's direction.

"To health, happiness, and carrots everlasting," said Mark.

"Long lives for the young," said Pete, "and for the old, ends short and sweet."

"And for he who proclaims peace upon the mountain to lost and lonely sheep."

The men tapped their glasses together, drank, and sat silent.

"Seriously, Doc," Mark finally said, "Do you want to earn some cash?"

The old man looked at Mark and scratched the back of his head. "Go on," he said.

"I have," Mark paused, "an unfinished fence outside my window, six feet high and the length of two of my property sides. I need a singing man to finish it."

Pete snorted. "Did you try the circus?" He tipped his glass back to finish his drink, but found it already empty. Mark probably thought that was funny, the way he was grinning again, waving his arm for Joe's attention. Another, that's what they needed. Another and another.

The men watched Joe flip two fresh glasses onto the counter, draw the silver scoop from the ice bin, drop small clouded cubes into one glass then another, grip a bottle by the neck from the shelf behind, grab another with the other hand, pour amber liquid into one, caramel in the other, return the bottles to their original places, turn and face the men. "Does one drink," said Joe, "justify the other? Must one door always close to open another? Must there be death for life, or does life only lead to death?" He pulled shots of soda water from a black ribbed hose, picked two thin red straws from an Old Fashioned bar glass, pushed the finished products toward their amen.

On the television, players ran like imaginary rats between imaginary walls. Paul was the only one of Pete's boys not to play. Never could understand it. Said he was more effective on the side, would rather snake treats to the players than waste time where he lacked talent. They were all friends anyway, damn good ones at that. Couldn't have had better friends if Pete had picked them himself. They all suited up and showed for the service, even Tim Shopenheimer, kid drove up from Indiana with his roommate and his mother, though everyone knew Tim didn't like to leave home. Pete still remembered Paul telling about that hunting trip, how Tim turned green as a granny smith, tried to talk Paul into leaving early. Paul said he couldn't figure it out at first, Tim's big hurry, and he knew it wasn't because Tim didn't like shooting. The boy used to peg squirrels in his back yard, clean 'em up and stuff 'em, had a whole collection, all in different poses. Even had a mother with her infants. No, the boy just missed his mama, was what Paul finally figured out, took her with him when he landed that job in Indiana. He looked at Mark, "You see Tim Shopenheimer came into town with his mother?"

Mark lost his grin and nodded. "I'm sorry about your son."

"Drove all the way up from Indiana, can you believe that? Got to be almost 600 miles, round trip."

"He was a good builder, sir, steady and gifted as one of God's own."

"Who? Paul?"

Mark nodded.

"Nah," said Pete. "He was a lazy sonovabitch, like his Pa." He laughed and shook his head. "Never much for work, but always up for an adventure, I'll tell you, the kid could make friends with anyone, anyone he wanted. Don't think he had but one enemy, maybe a few old bosses, still grumpy about how he'd just up and quit one day. That's the thing, he came and went as he pleased. But shit, even if you run into one of those guys, they're still full of funny Paul-stories."

Mark drew in his breath and swallowed. "He could be a joker all right, but I'll tell you, Doc, he built me a beautiful shed. I still got it, yes sir, painted greenish-gray, like he recommended. He prepared the way, he did, like a straight path through the wilderness." Oh, the Lord does test his servant, calling on him to hire Paul like that. Paul hated it too, weasely Mark wiping his ass on him was what he said to Tim Shopenheimer. Mark overheard him on his mobile phone. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, nor to smile at the thought, dear Jesus. The last thing he wanted was to lord his loot over Paul, no use and plus God says we must forgive. Everyday was a struggle, imagine the strength of Superman and Bugs Bunny's wits so he wouldn't smirk at Paul, even if he didn't mean to, even if it was funny, even if he had to unconvince himself Paul was planning a poor job just to piss him off. Turned out, Paul was a prideful man, took pleasure in making things just so, and the shed turned out as fine, sturdy as the rock, steady as the light.

"I'd forgotten he did that for you. He did a good job?"

"It's a nice shed, Doc, that's what I said. So nice, I built a fence to match it."

"How 'bout that." Pete paused. "Is that the unfinished fence you're talking about?"

Mark nodded and pressed his lips together. Joe, unasked, brought more drinks.

"The way it goes, I needed a special design, something extraordinary, and just as the Lord calls his apostles and

prophets, so it is with carpentry, Messiah aside, if you catch my drift. So I got this young man from Michigan State, see, studies architecture, designed and built the fence just to my particular specifications."

"But what, he didn't know how to finish it?" Pete was getting annoyed, beginning to feel like a bull in a pen, didn't know what some college kid had to do with putting up fences, and there's his boy, still stuck in the shed. The Scotch seemed like water now, hydrating his muscles, flabby, weak and sore.

"No sir, it's not that, not that at all. But listen, Doc, now I'm serious and I keep trying to tell you. I've got the money, and I'm prepared to pay you. But see, you've got to promise to give your all, no more, no less, and I'll tell you, I prayed about tonight and you're the one God sent in, so that's something to consider."

"You could pray 'til the cows come home, I don't give a rat's ass or a good goddamn, what are we talking about in real money?"

"Ten thousand," said Mark. He'd been thinking less, more like three-four, but the Lord was pressing on his heart that night, he could feel it, whispering ten in his ear as loud as a voice right there in his head, behind the left eye.

Pete smiled, despite himself. Ten thousand! That would cover the cost of a cross-country trip, or even a good new-used RV. But, "How big is the job?"

"Just tonight, Doc. Just tonight."

Pete eyed the boy. He had big ears and creases between his eyebrows. A thinker. He was watching Pete back, and yet his eyes seemed okay, blue and mostly steady. "Alright," Pete said, "let me hear what you have to say." Mark smiled.

"Okay, Doc, listen up. I'd give you a cigar if I had one, but how about another beverage instead." Mark shifted back and forth on his stool. "All right, you're fixed for now, well, let me ask you, have you seen those cartoons where the animals—usually cats and dogs—line up on a fence and start singing? Oh, Garfield is one, but there's plenty more, from Looney Tunes onward to today, and the animals, everyone, they think they're singing in unity, and probably they are, Doc, to their own more sensitive ears, but the plain fact is their noise hurts the

human head, and so there's always a tomato or a shoe thrown, trying to break the beasts up, sour their hearts, stop their song. It's a problem of translation, are you with me? The animals are singing in vain, for humans can't appreciate anything but their own meager notes. But it's a beautiful notion, don't you think so, Doc, a creature sitting outside your window, singing just for you?"

Pete nodded. Maybe he'd take the money, go down to the county auction and cash out on something he could turn around and resell for a bigger chunk. Fixer-upper, or even parts. That was it, and this time he'd actually have the cash to get what'd be needed to make the resell work. Too bad he hadn't held on to some of those mowers he was always gonna fix up, or that mostly rebuilt bobcat.

"I'll tell you what, Doc, my mother would be glad to know I still go to Mass every Sunday morning, don't risk being tossed to and fro with false truths or teachings, and one week when I was returning, I saw this vision of a fence so clear I knew it couldn't have come from my own mind. It starts right there on the edge of your boy's shed, runs down the north side of the lot and turns west, right past my bedroom window. This college kid, he was a real gem, he designed it just so there's a platform perfectly placed on the top, wide enough to hold a lawn chair, sturdy enough to stand a heavy man, because remember, Doc, it's a problem of translation. We can't appreciate the song we cannot hear, so we have to hear the song we can."

A short while later Mark was lying between his crisp clean sheets, fresh-pressed and perfectly layered as a priest's robe. There was a cricket in the closet, scraping its legs along to the man outside the window, the father who'd licked his lips and nodded when Mark gave him the list of acceptable songs. There were options, of course, thirty-three titles, and Pete could sing either six or twelve, though neither one more nor one less nor any number in between. And so he sang, a burst of joy sweeter than a birdsong after a night's hard rain. Mark could see himself, swaddled in the heavenly clouds of Zion, how beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good tidings, drifting in his cotton

sheets, he smiled and started to suck his thumb, death could come now, death could come.

As for Pete, he laughed the whole drive home, thinking of the boy he'd bedded up. He was surprised when he'd started in on a seventh song, but then it seemed suddenly right to sing the whole damn dozen, *The Gambler,* and also *Amazing Grace* and *Folsom Prison Blues,* followed by *A Boy Named Sue* and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.* He'd ended with *The Prayer of St. Francis,* they used to belt that one out at school Mass, Sister Albina leading on the organ, come to think of it, it seemed that number was one of his wife's favorites, so serious to be such joy. She'd probably like a copy on a cassette or CD, though he couldn't imagine where he'd find such a thing. Could get her a CD player, maybe even a stereo. Then, he was back at Ma's house, where he turned off the van and patted the bulge of bills in his shirt pocket. Happy is the man with a stomach full of Scotch and a pocketful of cash. That'd make a good proverb; he'd have to remember that one, share it with Joe. He took the money and shoved it beneath his seat, between the gum wrappers and empty paper cups. He pulled his hand out and saw it covered with lint, and there was dust beneath his nails and the slightly sticky feeling of something spilled and handled.

Hurrah Hurrah

> O God, who hast commanded us
> to honor our father and mother: in Thy mercy
> have pity on the soul of my father and forgive
> him his trespasses, and make me to see him
> again in the joy of everlasting brightness.
> Amen.
>
> —Prayer for Deceased Parent,
> Traditional Catholic Mass

> I am standing over an anthill. It is tiny, insignificant as a Midwestern town, pavement ants piling grains of sand around a hole in a sidewalk crack. Dad poured this path when the family first moved in, six squares of concrete connecting garage and house. The ants insist on making their homes here, despite constant traffic, frequent flattening; I have been as stubbornly standing, watching their dull bodies building their nest. I've heard ants move in patterns, but the only logic I see is this: each one emerges into mayhem, joins a swarm of similar beings, runs around looking for something, is lost in the mass before he circles back to a hole and disappears.

(A rosy glow begins on the horizon. A shadowed figure stands between wooden shelves stacked with boxes of car parts. He is the youngest child, wearing brown work boots, and his feet are flat as his father's. A barrel of unopened chrome sits in the foreground; empty beer cans randomly dot the shelves. He reaches over and turns on a single row of fluorescent light. He speaks.)

DAVID

They call me Davey-come-lately 'cause I take my time. That's my cue to pause, eye 'em real slow, and go, Well, the way I see it, God created in His own rate, and all else ensues when it do. Take me, baby of this family I wouldn't trade for the rarest-of-rare Mark McGuire rookie cards, though that card would be something now, wouldn't it?

They say Dan was set on me being a boy, had his bags packed, ready to jet if one more female entered the family. Tell you what I recollect is Dan on Saturday mornings, sitting in the kitchen, eating Wheaties while eyeing the back of the box. Hungry, Janice and I would face him as a set, sneak in for a bowl, try to sit far from him as possible. Still, he'd find some reason to beat us: chewing too loud, coughing, heck, if he heard our very breath. Ma couldn't settle him. She was working overnights then, sleeping during the day, mattress on the basement floor. Man, I hated that downtown post office, Mom never being around anymore. See, I'm not like Dan, hands up ready for a round. I mean, I'll defend myself and all, but, well, let me put it this way: the girls say I'm sensitive. A cuddler. Always have been. I like having sisters around, plenty of tender advice, shoulders to weep on. Figure it's living proof *the Lord's hand is not so shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear so heavy, that it cannot hear.*

I'll tell you, this family's been enduring, what with Mom's cancer, now Dad's death. I think we've got close in a way seldom seen. I mean, I look at other guys my age—twenty-four, twenty-five—see them being as if nothing will ever change, no one will ever leave, save them. And here we are, realizing what we have, who each one is. Take Dad, he wasn't perfect. Like this letter I found from this woman, Lori. Found it in a locked box with his pink slips in the garage. Seems they'd been involved, and when he called it off, she wrote telling of her everlasting love. I'm pretty certain I remember her, from St. Patrick's. Must've been—oh I don't know—six, seven when she would come over, perch about in the barn while he was working. Couple of times, I remember being in the car when he fetched her to ride along on an errand. In her letter, she mentions this stuffed Garfield

she gave him; I remember that alright. Dad kept it on his truck dashboard for years. His always preaching about keeping sex between the wedded. News gets me damn depressed. Disappointed. I mean, heck, each of us has *our iniquities,* I know that, sins *separating* us *from God,* so *His face is hidden from* us, and *He will not hear.* Still, I wish it'd been cleaner, better: Dad didn't cheat, Joseph didn't have a wife before Mary, and under the equation Mary + God = Jesus, Saint Joe's only life had been being the earthly father of Christ. Easy to imagine, but nothing's ever straight as it seems. Not even a stuffed cat, that's what I'm seeing.

Still, I'm indebted to Dad. He really helped me, paying for my education, I mean, that was just a big relief to me, just like it would probably help Mom settle down if I got employed in my field. Problem is, after working my co-op job, I figure I don't much enjoy management. Never told Dad that. Don't get me wrong, I don't think college was a waste. I learned a lot, being exposed to things I couldn't have learned elsewhere. It's just, I can't envision spending the rest of my earthly existence in middle management.

Just like I can't imagine never going in the barn, not seeing Dad there, leaned over the engine of a car.

But every time, it's empty, and what else am I gonna do? Someone has to deal with these car parts, though I'll tell you, I could spend the next thirty years out here: identifying 'em, selling 'em on eBay, shepherding parts to swap meets. Carlysle's coming up in Pennsylvania next month; can't tell you I'm looking forward to it. First time without him, everyone will be asking, where's your Dad? I mean a few of the guys have heard, but most have no idea. It's like now, with the phone, I mean, I must get two, three calls a day, sometimes more, guys from all around everywhere, looking for a car part. A lot of 'em met Dad, or spoke with him once and then I have to tell 'em: Nope, he's not here. He passed away. Yep, it was a surprise. Some have this big shock, or they'll get all upset, keep saying, I can't believe it. Yep, neither can I. I mean, I must have had to say Dad's dead five, six-hundred times, and let me tell you, it doesn't get easier the more you do it. I hate it every last single time.

Still, gotta get rid of these parts: crates laden with fenders, seals and weatherstrips, quarter panels creaking from the ceiling, whole dealership stock still new-packaged, bought wholesale by Dad when a local dealer updated his merchandise. See Dad, he knew exactly what all he had, that's what's incredible. He remembered the piece, where he kept it. He could look at almost any Buick part from say the late '20s to what, '79, and could tell you its name and if it was a special edition or not. Man knew each shift in an engine from one year to the next; kept it all right in his head. Heck, he could buy cars same way, sight unseen, just from a few details. That's how we got the Electra. Gallegher was in Florida, called up Dad, told him about a '69 for sale on the side of the road. Dad asked a few questions, then said to offer $1200, see what the seller says. Well, we got the car, and it's damn nice too. Excellent condition.

I'll tell ya, he had a story for every one of those cars. He'd recount the days when him and Fox had that Sunoco Station up on Michigan Drive, back in the late 60's. There's this one, a customer had a real nice Ford 427 they did all the regular maintenance on. Well, one time, man came to have the oil changed, said it'd be the last time they'd work on her. Dad asked him why, and the man said he was selling that evening to a fellow in Eatonville. Dad asked how much he was getting, the guy told him, and Dad remarked, But does he have the money? Man said, Sure, he'd better. So Dad goes, In cash? Well the man didn't know if it was cash or no, so Dad pulls out a roll of bills, says he'll give cash right there, right then, but $10 less. He got himself a real nice car, can't barely take that one on the road, it's so fast—the Ford Four Twenty Seven Four Door See-Dan.

He liked that story. Told it often. That, and another one from the station, this old man held this real old truck, from the early '30s, though this was in the late '60s. Dad and Fox did all the regular work on it, said it was real fine, just old. Well, comes the day, this old guy asks them how much it'd cost to put a new engine in, and they tell him, you know, you can do this that or the other, but your truck's getting old. It's pretty dated. You could purchase something newer for less than the price of putting in even a restored engine. Dad said the old

man just looked him straight in the eye and said, Yeah, but I knows this truck.

I knows this truck.

Heck, that became one of Dad's favorite remarks. He held his head real still and he said, But I knows this car, how I knows this muddy car.

> I squat. I've always lived here, this house, with its backyard stretch of dirt and crab grass. The west Michigan sun sweats the back of my neck and my eyes dizzy with ants, swimming in sameness. I pick one out and try to follow its path, but cannot be certain if the one I see emerging into the light is the same one retreating into darkness. I sigh and keep still, holding my breath. Dumb ants, I think, as I fill my lungs with air and press my tongue hard against my bottom teeth. My *hands* ache to be *defiled with blood, and* my *fingers with iniquity.* The sun is bright as a spotlight. My back itches. The ants keep swarming in their same way, and I pray their world to change. I exhale: Hark ye, hark ye, danger is coming. The ants pick up their pace, just for a moment, before slowing to their former gait.

(Daylight scissors darkness as the second oldest daughter opens the window drapes. She stands in the kitchen and the yellow formica-topped table is covered with cereal boxes and baby rattles, empty glasses and a round clear-white Tupperware container of chocolate chip cookies. She pushes her dark hair away from her face; it is coarse and thick like her father's. She walks around the table before moving a stack of clothes piled upon the seat of a chair. She sits. She opens her mouth to speak.)

JOANNE

> Can we
> just
> not
> discuss it?

You can't argue, say it's not true: it has been difficult. But Jane's the only one going around pronouncing his

name, buzzing on about her troubles and tribulations. And always at the worst of times, like when we're hunkered down, ducks at a dinner table, munching and needing no more noise. But Jane, who must live on her own planet, lunges into her very own song of woe. Poor me, she'll moan. Poor us. She's like the camels in that Christmas play, complaining 'cause they had to carry the wise men to Christ's birth. Poor us, they sang. Poor us, goes Jane.

Of course, she makes it even worse by going on about how she saw this man at the doctor's office who reminded her of Dad. Well, we've all had this, right? You see someone who talks like Dad, or sort of looks like him, bulky upper body, no butt. But can Jane just note this, like a normal person would, and move along? No, she goes right up to this poor man and tells him she's really sorry, but he reminds her of her dead father. She can't explain it, she says, but there's something bearish about him. And peaceful. And then she started crying, right there on his shoulder, of all places. Can you imagine? Some unknown girl, with babies no less—'cause you know she had Allison and Brooke right there with her—crying on some man's shoulder. She's an utter nut. And then don't even get her going about the children. They'll never know their grandpa, she moans, it's so sad, and she's just grateful for her great memories of her own grandpa. Unlike the rest of us, 'cause she seems to forget we were too young when he died. Just like my Johnny, and this one now in my tummy. They're never gonna know their grandpa either. But that probably doesn't matter to her.

Did you hear what she said when I told her the names we're considering? Madison, she said, oh, that sounds like a fat girl's name. Well, it does not, and can you believe that rudeness? She probably thinks Michael for a boy is too plain, but then, we still think Brooke is a bit, well, there is a soap opera character named Brooke English. Jane says she had no idea, but then she found out, and still goes ahead and gives Brooke that same name. I mean, what does she think, that it sounds quality or something. Well it doesn't. I mean, it's a soap opera name, for Pete's sake, but it still doesn't matter, because no matter what, she can't change the way we just don't come from fancy stock. I mean, Dad was a builder:

he put up barns mostly, by himself, or with Danny, at least when Dan would show up. The rest of the time he was fixing old cars, and there's a practical junkyard of car parts right there by the barn to prove it. No matter what Jane does—calling Dad a contractor who restored antique cars as his hobby—the frame isn't gonna change the facts. Dad worked with his hands. That's who we are, and if it upsets her, she can go cry on her strange man's shoulder about it. Leave us to our supper.

See, Jane always tries to make out like she knows more than the rest of us, like we're undereducated and unworldly. Well, I know I've never been further west than Colorado or more east than Pennsylvania, but I also know Mom wasn't gonna help me like she did the other girls. I mean, Mom and Jane never told me for sure, but I suspect Mom was putting money in a bank account for Jane to use while going to school in Tulsa. Meantime, she wouldn't even lend me the $400 I needed for Junior College. Not 'til you rouse yourself, she'd shouted, move out on your own. I mean, I was taking classes and working full time at the dental clinic, but if I tried to tell her, she'd just say *your lips have spoken lies, your tongue has muttered perversity.* Fine, I said. I'll get it from Dad. See, he was the one on my side, even when *no one* else *called for justice, nor did any plead for truth.* But I've always gotten the short stick around here, just look at my godparents. I've got Uncle Bill, who liquored himself to death while recounting story after story of his one day as homecoming king, and then Aunt Sue, already strange before the brain aneurysm, stacking newspapers around her house in big To Read columns. I mean, who needs fancy pillars, her "colonnades," as Jane calls 'em. Just have Aunt Sue come over and stack her papers up. What's funny is how much Dad liked her, they really got on. And that was unusual, because Sue couldn't stand her older brother, and she didn't much care for her sisters either. They *trust in empty words and speak lies,* she'd say, *conceive evil and bring forth iniquity.* But she loved Dad. They were always chumming it up on the phone, swapping the same jokes back and forth, like that pair of Christmas pajamas they'd disguise and send back and forth every few years. They were so funny and weird.

I'll tell you something about Christmas. Jane wants to draw names, change the tradition to a single-person gift exchange, but if that's what they all decide, I'll just bow out. See, what Jane doesn't understand is that I liking buying something for everyone. Nothing big, just a little thing I know they'll like. I mean, I might even pick it up at Goodwill, like that leopard-print shirt I got for Janice. But she really liked it. Plus, what if I drew Danny's name? What big horse and pony gift could I get him? Anyway, Janice and I began doing our shopping together a few years ago. It's become our annual custom: make a trip to the Outlet Malls near Flint, plus a couple more outings a year. Now Janice, she's a talented gift-buyer, has this uncanny ability to pick out just the right stuff for someone. That's why Mom has Janice do all her shopping. Well, that and the fact that Mom becomes such a mess at Christmas; sunken, she gets, like the old woman, too many children in too tight a shoe. If it were up to her, she'd stamp out the whole holiday, forget the set-up, the buying, the one day everyone sits around trying to act nice. What about the rest of the year, is what she always asks. Well, everyone expects Christmas to be something, and so Mom tries until she snaps. I still remember the year she smashed all the ornaments 'cause us kids hadn't put them away; then she got mad next Christmas 'cause she couldn't find the decorations. Where did you guys put them, she'd shouted. Um, Mom? You broke them all. Remember? See, she's funny and Jane's dumb, 'cause as it is now, we take care of Christmas and Mom doesn't have to worry. Not anymore.

Not like me. Man, I've been pushing to get this house clean all day. Plus I'm supposed to bring treats to church tomorrow for the hospitality table. I made some cookies a couple days ago, was gonna make some pecan turtles today, homespun being naturally superior. But instead, I've been caught in this same spot, doing nothing, null, motionless, well, minus munching some cookies myself. Perusing the circulars for coupons. See, I'm like Mom: things build up, and I shut off. I was slumped down in this same chair yesterday when John got home from work. Busy day? he asked, 'cause understand, I was plunked right here when he left. Well, I'd moved, I told him, shuffled down to The Blind Pig for a cup of coffee,

pushed little Johnny in the stroller, picked up a banana nut muffin to go along, then trudged back home. But still, for all he knows I'm unmoving as a sleeping bear, holed up in the same spot for winter hours upon winter days.

I'm supposed to be preparing this room for the new floor John's putting in. I've picked a tile pattern, plus an unusual way of laying it down. But Jane and Mom keep bugging me, asking if I'm sure. Just because Mom can't make a decision without Jane's approval, she forgets not everyone thinks Jane makes fabulous choices. Come to think of it, I don't believe Jane would've chosen to settle down when she did if it hadn't been for her condition and all. I mean, I'm not rebuking her son and I don't think she regrets him, but it was a huge difference, her needing to be nested, fast turning to Mother Hen. And I mean, sure, John and I pushed our wedding through a bit quicker, considering you-know-who was on her way. But still, that's what I wanted, see. We probably would've married anyway. And it's always rough and bumpy in the beginning, but you have to build your house somewhere, now or further on, and better to use family customs as your foundation than, well, anything else I can think of.

As it turns out, plumbers pull down pretty good money, so long as you don't have to put it all back up in taxes. Still, we've paid off the house in only six years, not counting the change. Dad would've been proud. Did you know he unsaddled their mortgage in seven? He always said you should take on as little debt as possible, put as much toward the principle as plausible, and squirrel away a good-size store for when trouble comes your way. All is unstable, so shoulder the traditions of your family; furrow alongside their sense of right and wrong; build your house upon the rock, and with each generation, improve your lot; and isn't that our American-way. So John finished a huge job, pulled in quite a sum, and went straight to the bank, put the whole nut on the house. And that was that, the command of the father kept, the law of the mother not forsaken. What's sad is John said his first thought was, wait until I tell Mike. Then he remembered: Dad's gone. Strange, the timing; strange how memory bites the wound.

(The sunlight looses its shadow as clouds cover the sun. The father speaks of a hierarchy of spiritual authority: he is the head of the household, the mother the torso, the children his arms and legs. God is the unseen grand master, the life-giving leader of righteousness, and God surrounds the family in an umbrella of protection, so long as the members obey. For the world is filled with those who hatch vipers' eggs and weave the spider's web. So says the father, his blue eyes clear and bright, reflecting shadows of our night.)

> But then, my legs ache; I stand and look around. Nothing but brown crab grass and the same gray-green house. I tilt my head back. The sky is curved as a blue eye's inside, spotted with clouds thick as balls of wool. I watch the wind sculpt a bulging clown nose on a cloud's edge, an open-mouthed grin cuts in, growing longer deeper wider wider. I close my eyes; spots of light dance across my lids. Now, slow as a cloud in an infinite sky, I roll my neck forward and down, unfolding each knot in my vertebrae, until I am arched over the anthill. This is your final warning; I whisper my intentions to the unsuspecting creatures below. *He who eats of their eggs dies, and from that which is crushed a viper breaks out.*

(In an upstairs bedroom, the youngest daughter kneels before an open trunk. Envelopes lie about her, mismatched stacks wrapped with rubber bands. Their edges, dog-eared and faded-white, reflect the pale yellow walls she painted herself. She notices this with her moon-shaped eyes, the same shade blue as her father's. And then she sighs, for what, but not knowing, she says.)

JANICE

I think, and I don't know, maybe I'm not even sure, but I thought, or I do think you can't worry too much about what you cannot know. Accept it, yes. Accept that people are the way they are, and go along with them. Otherwise, you'll drive yourself crazy, no doubt. Like with Joanne. She does go on and on about Jane. But what can you do except try to listen, and know whatever you say could

impact your own relationship. No, it's better to just go along, nod and know she's just the way she is, with her own personal torch to burn. After all, you can't deny her light. Now don't get me wrong, I don't share all her opinions or anything, but she is correct to say Mom's been overly critical of her, and as for Jane, you must admit she can be kind of a weird-o.

For example, just look at this business with the new Baby. Okay now, Joanne's chosen Madison for a girl, Michael for a boy. But Jane and Mom continue to bug her, constantly asking if she's sure. Well it turns out, they're asking because they have a different name in mind. According to Jane, one day the words "Sophia Claire" entered her head, and just hung there, very heavy and constantly present. Jane says she had a strong feeling this name was related to Joanne's pregnancy, but she knew Joanne wouldn't listen to her. So she just waited, and when two days passed and she was still thinking about that name, she called Mom, because you know she just had to tell somebody. Mom confessed she'd had the very same name lodged in her head for two days, so they knew it couldn't be a coincidence. Then they found out Dad's mom was supposed to be named Claire, but for some reason the midwife wrote Sophie on her birth certificate. At her baptism, however, she was christened Bernice. Of course, she called herself Betty. So you see, the whole thing is confusing, except this one fact: according to Jane and Mom, the baby might end up with the wrong name, and so who knows if her *webs* will ever *become garments,* or if she *will cover herself in* proper *works*.

Now, this is all Jane and Mom's perspective, but I don't think it's the only sign. I mean I can't say for sure, but I've witnessed Joanne's own confirmation, if that's what you want to call it, and this one, you'll note, couldn't be more absolute. A few weeks ago, Joanne and I were taking the girls on a combined shopping trip, back-to-school and early Christmas, and we decide to go to the outlet just outside Flint. We try to get out there at least once a year anyway, and this time, we decided to take Northland Drive over, having heard the road was actually shorter because you could cut directly across mid-state. Plus, it was getting to be fall and we thought it'd be kind of pretty. Anyway, we'd been driving for a

while, and Joanne was talking about something, when suddenly, and I'm not exaggerating, I see this road sign, one of those announcing an upcoming street. Now you won't believe this, but the street up ahead must have been one that changes names, with Northland being the divider, though by this point Northland had become M31. Anyway, the sign literally says, Michael St., with an arrow pointing left, and Madison Rd., with a right arrow. Well I just freaked out; I yelled, Joanne! Look! And she tightened her grip on the wheel and shouted, Girls! Girls! Oh my God, I mean for Goodness sake, I can't believe it. Now that's an omen, or at least it's something, because isn't that too strange? Both names right there on one sign?

And maybe I don't know what to make of it all, but it seems some sort of absolute counterproof. Like Joanne has her own way of being in the world, and her way is just as confirmed as any other. Who's to say what one way things should be anyway, and the main choice seems to be whether or not you're going to put your own crappy stuff down and accept another person, two way signs and all. I don't think it has to be so difficult: just be honest with yourself and anybody who asks, and your own sort of thing will naturally grow between you. It's like with Dad, he was the way he was, and I don't believe I began seeing him until I accepted the fact of his opinions. He thought boys to be more naturally interested in cars. I don't know. Probably. But I still wanted to know about the Skylark, because he'd worked on it and given it to me. And so I started stitching in time to help him out, change my oil, for example, or any repair really: brake jobs, coolant flush, timing belt. At the very least, I'd look on as he did what needed to be done. Sure he was, I don't know, a little funny about it at first, you know, he'd sort of tease me in that way, like I was being a silly. But, I guess the thing is, I just kept going out there anyway. Kept showing up. After awhile, he started showing me more things. Starting treating me different, I don't know, like I was one of the boys or something. Same thing with those bookshelves we built. I think we actually had a pretty good time putting those together. I mean, maybe this sounds strange, but we got more comfortable with each other, closer, and I think, I think he started looking

at me different, like I was one of the boys or something. A son in whom he was well pleased.

But the whole point is I had to let go first and resolve to forgive. I couldn't hold his not being around against him anymore. I had to give up my bad luck of being born between the boys and recognize that if I wanted to know Dad, I needed to go hang out in the barn. See, for the longest time, I'd only go out there if I knew for certain he wasn't home, I mean not when we were kids because then I loved playing in the barn, but later, when I'd grown. And by that time, whenever he'd come in the house, I'd try to avoid him. If he'd asked me a question, I'd just shrug. Or if he sat in the same room, I stood and left. To be honest, I wouldn't even look at him, only his outline. I guess I was so mad at the way he favored the boys, it got so I saw each of his *works* as a *word of iniquity, and the act of violence ever present in his hand.* And he did favor the boys, or rather, he thought boys were one kind of way, and girls another, which was pretty annoying. Still, that didn't excuse my own *feet,* which were running toward evil, and my own hands, which *made haste to shed innocent blood.* I mean, I treated him so awful that I couldn't, well, I couldn't even see the things he did do.

Just tonight, for instance, I finally decided to put away some of this wedding stuff, which meant getting into this trunk I haven't opened since we moved into this house. I've been putting if off, because I just knew there were all these memories in here, plus pictures and letters from my last boyfriend, which, I don't know, even though I'm so over that relationship, there's still a lot of stuff tied to it, if you know what I mean. Anyway, I did think I would just put this stack of papers away, but when I opened the trunk, all these memories popped out, and I'm left covered here in a cloud of feeling. So I've been going through things instead, because I can't resist, and I was folding over this one pile, when underneath, I saw the flap of this envelope I'd totally forgotten about, but as I soon as I saw it, I knew. I mean, I knew exactly was it was, and I just, I don't know, that's when I started crying.

See, when I moved back after my year in D.C., I was so angry, all the time. Grumpy and angry. That was a really bad year for me. I'd given up on George Washing-

ton, and was in debt for no real reason since I couldn't transfer any of my classes. I'd started community college, was running into all these people from high school who would ask about my life, and I didn't so much want to talk to them. I guess I'd always thought of myself as better than them. I know that sounds awful, but I was one of the top students, and always just thought I'd go to a four-year school, not community college. So, I don't know, I sat in my bedroom a lot that year, listening to music or reading. I didn't have any friends, and I'd broken it off with my boyfriend, and I think, well I know anyway, my thoughts were the *thoughts of iniquity, wasting and destruction* were *in* my *path*. And so Dad, well I think he knew nobody was going to give me a heart on Valentine's Day. Why would they? I didn't know *the way of peace.* I was horrid to be around, and there was no justice in my ways. But when I woke that morning, there was this envelope lying on the table next to my bed, with some candy hearts and chocolates. Dad had written my name on it, spelled wrong and everything, like he'd always done. It made me so mad, him misspelling my name, and then the card, the card, one of those mushy, to-a-daughter-on-Valentine's-Day sort of cards. So weird. I mean, this was a card from Dad, right? Not a gushy guy. It didn't make sense. And so, well, I just never mentioned it to him. Not even a word. I mean, I guess at the time, I'd *made* myself such *a crooked path,* I couldn't see how I was contributing to the problem. I mean, here's Dad, and he's doing something nice for me, and well, I never said thank you.

I mean I don't think Dad ever asked about it either, because you know, he wouldn't. That's not the point. Plus, it's not Dad's style, you know? I mean, he was more likely to give you a car, though not just any car. No, he'd give you the one that was right for you, and he did a really good job of matching up cars to his kids' personalities. I'm just grateful I finally realized what I was doing, holding so much against him, for *whoever takes the way of* unforgiveness *shall not know peace.* It's like I had to recognize Dad for who he was, and once I did that, I could see him more, and it didn't matter if *justice* was *far from us,* and *righteousness did not overtake us.* As Grandma always says, that's just the way it is.

You know I held onto that Skylark way past the time it was practical. It was bad in the snow, barely drivable, and always breaking down. But to be honest, I liked working on it with Dad. He even got me that nice "Miss Janice" license plate, with my named spelled correctly and everything. I mean, maybe that's just how the company sells them, but then again, I don't think so. I think he ordered that plate just perfect, pink cloud letters and all.

(*We look for light, but there is darkness; we search for brightness, but walk in blackness. We grope the wall like the blind; we grope as if we had not eyes.* For darkness lurks, inside and out; paralyzed with light, we pray for blindness. This is our comfort: *to stumble at noonday as at twilight;* for *we are dead men in desolate places* and still: we matter.)

The ants keep moving in their ant way. I straighten my back, *growl like a bear, moan sadly like a dove.* I raise my right foot, *looking for justice (there is none), for salvation (it is far from* this place). I am wearing the white replacement sneakers Grandma Irrer bought me at Meijer Thrifty Acres. Joanne and I were visiting, and out for a walk, we decided to shortcut back to Grandma's by walking across a cornfield. The dirt was wet but we didn't care, for what's life without living, or Paradise without the fall. So Joanne and I ventured with fortitude of faith, marching two by two, as the soldiers say, hurrah hurrah. Yea, halfway across, my left foot sunk, and then my right in line with the other, and *lo, our transgressions are multiplied before You, and our sins testify against us.* Sunk, in my family's soil, as muddied bubbles rise in quick, small pops about the foot's parameter. I tried to lift my left foot then, but the weight of my body only pressed the right further in. I tried to lift the right, and the left regressed further. *For our transgressions are with us, and as for our iniquities, we know them.* Now, nothing happened, not even a slip or slide. Joanne was laughing, ha ha, look at you. The skin creased between my eyes. I can't move, I said, and let loose some giggles. Joanne's cackles increased to cachinnations. No, c'mon now.

> No, really, I can't move. What do you mean? What do you mean what do I mean? I can't move my feet, I'm stuck here in the mud. A cloud covered the sun, and Joanne hedged back, away from me. Wait right there, she whispered, rubbing her palms down the front of her thighs. She picked her way through the swampy field, and at the shore, she ran.

(Now, in a basement, in the dead of night, a woman works beneath the glow of an overhead light and two side lamps. She's the oldest child, and she can't sleep, though she doesn't mind as much as she likes the time to creep about on padded paws, complete a floral swag she's made from peonies and lilies grown in her garden. She has her father's nose, long and straight save the slight bump in the bridge. Her own children are slumbering, their sugar-scented breaths rising, relaxing as ripples on a great lake. It is so difficult, says she, to do my work when they're awake. She curls baby's breath into her arrangement, continues on, for there's always that which needs maintaining: bellies to fill, dust to swipe, weeds to pull. She stands to check a forget-me-not, still drying in the corner.)

JANE

Can't get his voice out of my head, I couldn't, not for the first thirty days after he died, I still carried his words within me, I did, the best I could, he said. I did the best I could.

Maybe. I mean, the best I know he did. His best, at least part of me knows, some cubbyhole in my soul satisfied with the way he labored, days in, years out, furnishing his family with hearth and home, the love of a father, husband's careful yoke, honest duty honestly fulfilled, yet see here my heart's still broke, still breaking, for all that yammering doesn't change the finality of our final conversation. We fought. I never thought anything would happen to him. Why, who would worry about the father when the mother had so recently been ill. And so I kept the week before his death as any other, full of ongoing obligations and daily activities, and was, in fact, planning out my garden shed just then, the lovely one

my loving husband has since built. But this was before, while I was still planning, and yes, I had a very particular image of how I wanted it to be, yet didn't know if my dimensions were exactly reasonable, or if the ground I'd chosen was good enough to maintain and drain. So I asked Dad for his opinion. It's what he did, after all, he was a builder. But he didn't answer, or rather, he started, then stopped suddenly, saying I never know what I want and he won't make my decisions for me, especially those I'll complain about later. Why, I certainty didn't expect that.

Honestly, I can identify many ways I tried his patience, probably more than the others. Why, I'm always working on something, you realize, a project to beautify my home, and Dad had so much expertise, he was very savvy, even if his taste was, shall we say, lacking? Anyway, I was always asking questions, seeking advice and information, a story or a prophecy, and yes, I did call the house on and off throughout every day, but I wasn't trying to pry. I just wanted contact, counsel on the basics. It's the advantage of living so close. I can call Mom, then fly over to see the new flower shoots, or ask her to pop in for some coffee and a homemade scone, still hot from the oven. Dad would let loose a long-suffering sigh when I'd give him news or opinion, tell him anything, really, which hurt my feelings, by and by, and then it came to the point where I'd call and he'd just say, here's your mother, before I could say anything, about my day or not. And those last few months, of course, nobody knew they would be the final months, but those last few months, I didn't really care anymore, which is to say, I cared, I was just slipping into *transgression and lying against the Lord, departing from our* God. I guess I was weary with trying, frustrated and stymied. Why, I guess, we both were.

And so the last time I saw him, we fought, *speaking oppression and revolt,* our patience fully frayed. That was two Sundays before he died. Sean and I didn't bring the children over to Mom and Dad's that last Sunday because truth be told, and I've no interest in being the one *conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood,* we'd mostly stopped going. It was too tense with Dad, me all keyed up, compounded by Joanne's gnawing

comments, the constant back-biting and hairsplitting, always directed at me. It seemed justice had turned her back, while righteousness stood far off. Her dear hubby was even worse. Sean would say hi to him, and he'd simply grunt in reply. No hello. No how-are-you, which is just a plain point of basic politeness regardless whether or not you like somebody. It was the weirdest thing, the upright rudeness, the way *truth* falls *in the street,* while *equity* never *enters.*

But then, our family isn't exactly known for their manners. Mystified by them, perhaps, not following the basics, definitely, but still, I don't think a simple thank you or please is too overwhelming a request. I don't mean to be catty, but you would think Joanne and John's children have never heard this sort of language, much less use it, the way they carry on. You say thank you to any one of them, and they just stare back at you, as if you're speaking in Tongues. And that's just the beginning. Take birthdays, for example. I always get my children together, and we call and sing happy birthday, in person or on the voice mail. But there's only a few who even bother to call and say, thank you for thinking of me. I still call, regardless of response, for that is the point: to give a blessing. Otherwise, *truth fails.* And yet I know that *he who departs from evil makes himself prey.* So like a scythe reaping spite, I expect their scorn, including the way my insistence on common civility yields Joanne's constant sly asides about how I fancy myself above the family, how I bear a better-than-thou attitude. Says she.

Of course, she says this during dinner, most untimely and wholly inappropriate, merely showcasing her rudeness. And she's hardly alone. The whole family is guilty. Sean noticed it right away, oh, how should I say, well, we're uncouth. Actually, at first he just thought nobody liked him because when I initially brought him home for a family dinner, nobody spoke to him. I was the only one attempting conversation, asking questions, pulling answers between teeth, and poor Sean thought he was immediately sinking. He was reeling when he later realized they were just this way: nobody talks, and participating in a social engagement, even one dictated by propriety, is practically impossible. Yet, I will say that particular dinner was probably more trying, Sean being

measured in full yards against that yahoo who left me unwed and with child. Everyone was suspicious of any guy I brought home, surveying his intentions, for by then I had Hunter, and the family could see how weary I was, being a single mom, just as *the Lord saw it, and it displeased Him that there was no justice.* A child ought have two present parents, don't you agree? A mother who mothers and a father who fathers, and manners that show civility and responsibility equally yoked in God's family plan. So yes, Sean asked Dad for my hand, and still teases me about Dad's response. Well, if you want to, he said, do you want to? Not exactly the father-to-future-son-in-law heart-to-heart I was hoping for, but the effort was made, which is more than most can say. Yet it was only right for Sean to ask, just like I'll continue to conduct myself with decency regardless of what others do. As the eldest, I must set an example. I must continue to take interest in them at the supper table. I'll still turn to say, tell me about your day, even when they find me annoying, which I know they do, now and then.

Anyway, Dad was under such stress, handling so many incidents about which he never grumbled or complained. I mean, as youngsters, we never did have to worry, not seriously, even if times were tight and the purse too-skinny. Dad hid that stress from us. I mean, he was a good father, and I do thank God he was a Christian. What a blessing to have this man, symbol of protection and responsibility, a man not stagnant, but whose faith increased toward maturity, like a storehouse gathering wheat. And when I think about this past year and a half, what reserves were required of him. First, Mom's cancer, then arranging the services and overseeing final legalities for three great losses: Grandma, Great Aunt Ruth, and his own sister, Ann. And as if grace were not already half-buried, he began his battle with the township, defending his right to keep car parts in the backyard, despite the new safety and zoning laws. Under such stress indeed, the great heart quits. What's strange, and this I'm slightly loathe to admit, but I've always thought he would die before Mom. That's how our family is: grandpas die young and grandkids grow up knowing only their grandmas. Never those storybook grandfathers, grumpy old men rocking in their overstuffed

La-Z-Boys, wizened gents yammering sweet stories to their firstborn's firstborn and subsequent sons. We never knew our grandfathers, and I knew my little ones would probably not really know theirs either. I just didn't think death would come so soon.

And I must admit, I still wonder why? And why now? I know God did not lay out this death, but nothing can occur without His allowance, and doesn't it say in First Corinthians He will not supply more than you can handle? I guess that's what I need to believe right now, that all is in God's hands, and as for Dad, he really was trying. He really *was* the best he could be. And just like light comes into the world with purpose, he loved us enough to give us everything he could, and to believe in him, not as an unsleeping soul or lingering spirit, but to believe in our ability to make reparation, that's what it means to not perish in vain, but to continue into greater life.

You know, Mom tells me, always with the precursor of her need to forgive, but she tells me she still resents Dad, a little anyway, for the way he was so disappointed when I wasn't a boy. She says while he definitely loved us and did what he could, and yes, she'll even acknowledge how he got better about this, but that what he really wanted was a first-born son. That's the one person I could never be.

(We are frozen in inadequacy. The path is narrow; the road is long; no one hears the tap at the door *for everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light; but He who does truth comes to the light, that his deeds might be clearly seen.)*

> She told me to wait right there and I watched her go as Zebedee watched his sons leave, motionless, observing the necessary. It was spring, the sun tunneled through clouds, the earliest signs of ministry. I couldn't see Joanne anymore. I couldn't see why I sank in glops, while Joanne walked without sinking one bit or jot. Joanne, bigger and taller, like Jesus on the water. The sun warmed my skin, but my bones were cold and brittle. I *saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor.* I could cut off my feet, cast them away and be reborn footless

and without blunder. But does one gouge an eye for seeing evil? Where is the problem: in my heart or in my foot?

Joanne appeared at the field's edge, a scurry in the crack between two trees. She had Lorraine with her, the aunt who did not speak, and Aunt Lorraine had two pieces of plywood with her, one square-foot each. Lorraine looked at me and nodded, dropped a piece of wood onto the mud, and stepped upon the board before felling the other. Feet on the second, she turned and pried the first, dropped it another step in my direction. Slowly she moved toward me: grabbing, turning, dropping, stepping, finally stretching out her arms, she placed her sturdy hands around me and pulled. I did not move. She pulled again, a hard tug, eyes closed, face puffy as sheared wool. Nothing. She stood back and said, untie your laces. I did, and she lifted me easily from my shoes, swinging my bare feet to the empty, waiting board. *Therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; and His own righteousness, it sustained Him.*

The next day, Grandma took Joanne and I to Meijers where I got these new shoes. They're fake leather, hard and unbending, the cheapest ones I could find, eleven dollars and thirteen cents with tax. Back at Grandma's, Aunt Lorraine said, Don't go walking through any fields with those new shoes now, you hear me, Stuck-in-the-Mud? She spoke little thereafter, except to say, Hey Stuck-in-the-Mud, still got your shoes?

(Did Zebedee long for his sons? Did he shake his head as he watched them go? Not one child, but two, walking away from their father's business to follow another. And then there is this: a man stands in the side yard of his dead father's house. He's wringing his hands, square-tipped fingers, and wondering what to tell his ma. He borrowed the work-van, a ten-foot truck, over her protestations, and now he's gone and decapitated it with a height bar at a drive-through restaurant. He's hidden the truck behind the barn for now, but it's only a matter of time before she'll notice it missing and set out to search its whereabouts. He won't have the money to fix it for

three, four weeks, and what is he going to drive in the meantime? In the shadow of death dawns a light.)

DANIEL

Stand it, I can't stand it. A cat'd think they'd wait a few days before asking my intentions. It's Dad's brothers and sisters, that's all, approaching me each one at one point or another, saying, What're you gonna do now, Dan? What about Grandma's house, Dan? Gonna take over your father's business, Dan? It's like, give me a break. We're at the frickin' funeral parlor, for Chrissake. Maybe I'll take over his business; maybe I won't. But I'll tell ya what, I'm not moving, no house-shifting ache in my belly, no sir-ree, I'm damn sedentary. Ya know, I've heard hearsay, they think I shouldn't buy Grandma's house. They want Joe in it. Or Andy. Hell, even Ed. One of their own. More responsible, they say, more accountable, of elevated character or some such similar bullshit. Phhfff. You tell me, who's done the work on that place for the past seven years? Who put the new roof on and redid the cellar? *Who has believed my report?* Do they think I've been laboring like this so your Joe'll have a nice place to live My ass. I mean geez, *to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?* Do they think I've worked my sorry tail off so they'll get more when they sell out? Get thee behind me, Satan, that's what she'd say.

I'll tell you what, Dad and I had a deal: I'd take and buy Grandma's house, and he'd float me the first year's loan 'til I could qualify on my own. Assignment, that's what it's called, and I don't see why I can't carry on with the plan. I'm a grandson too, Dad's son, firstborn male, fact is, the one who's growth was marked *as a tender plant, a root out of dry ground.* So I gotta be tough, hardy, turn so hardboiled I'm hardshelled. In any way, Dad's the one who always did the most for Grandma; he for her like me for him, steady as the sun, even if I have *no form or comeliness.*

Pah, you're right to *see no beauty* in me. Neither do the ladies, I'll tell you that. No matter, I haven't had the cash to date anyway, and shit, I just need to take and have some time to figure things out, collect unemployment, work odd jobs. Heck, once word gets out I'm

available, I'll probably have jobs lined up for the next two, three months. Everybody wants me for some sort of something. *Multitudes.* Repairing their house, fixing their car. Chuck's girlfriend needs new brakes, asks me, I cast up my arms and call, who knows? *Am I* desired or *despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief*? Though don't *hide your faces from* me, just 'cause I've born *your sorrows,* you see me as *stricken, smitten by God and afflicted.* I'll tell you what, I don't cry at this wound. Gotta be tough, tough as nails and the father who bore them, bare the *chastisement* alone, the bruise for *your iniquities,* so you can take your peace. Sure I'm in debt, don't have enough dough to fix these spotted and crooked teeth, gnarled roots and dim pearls twisting in on themselves, yellow and brown as a banana jelly belly. Still, they're stains you witness with relief, thanking the good heavenly Father your chomps don't suggest streaks or stipple, but look closer, now closer, and, ah-ha, hurrah and hallelujah, by these *stripes* you *are healed!*

Shit.

Anyways, like I was saying, maybe I'll get my builder's license. Did call to find out what I need to do. Thing is, sometimes keeping on with the business, casting nets in the known sea, don't make much sense, 'cause *all we like sheep have gone* astray. *We've turned,* every Fucking-A one of us, turned *his own way.* And the honest truth is, there's gotta be an easier gig. I mean, I'm real grateful to Dad, don't get me wrong. I worked for him a long time, since I was thirteen, and he taught me everything he knew, hell, all I needed to know. Oh sure, it's like my sisters say, like he used to say, I could take over his work. But let's be honest, I'm not so sure I want to, not so sure I want to take and do hard labor my whole life long. I mean, it's a daily grind of donkeywork, and maybe I am a jackass, but when I stop and think, it's like, is this the way I want to make my way? No offense to Dad, but he worked himself ragged for hours every day and for what? A pittance, and a litter of little nippers to divide it by. The *Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all,* that's all. And sure, he almost always had work, the man did a good job, people liked him and his work. Plus, he was dirt cheap. Poor and cheap. *Oppressed. Afflicted, yet he never opened his mouth, honest worker led as a lamb to the slaughter.* He'd

charge what he thought fair, though he could've asked for more, shoot, the quality of work he did, his hourly was way too low. She complained about that, all right.

I'll tell ya what, I'd rather do something like Dave. Man clears fifty grand a year, easy. Doing what? Buying and selling. Holds those auctions, and he's talented, but still, first rate day'll bring him in twenty, twenty-five grand. A day of work. You have two days like that, and you're done for the year. No silent *sheep before its shearers* there, shit, ya gotta *open* your *mouth, sound off and be heard.* But look at the reward, man, the share of bacon you're bringing in, money free *from prison and judgment,* the declaring glare of your *generation*. 'Cause all they care about is if you got cash, no matter how you got it, money makes you a better man, means to be respected. Dad's a dying breed, and shit, even I don't know how he did it. I'd go crazy, cut off from the land of the living all day every day for thirty, thirty-five years, then coming home to slave away in the barn. Truth is, I almost couldn't handle as much as I did, working for him, and just between you and me, I'd take and go smoke dope at break, pot, ya know, grass, cannabis. I'll tell you what, that was sheer maintenance, *stricken* is what I am, *for the transgressions of my people.* I'd rather make my grave with the wicked, with the rich at my death, *come up* in the truck, roll up the windows, and ree-laax. Who knows how Dad regarded my activities, never said anything anyway. The way I calculate, smoking makes me mellow, I *do no violence, nor* keep *deceit in* my *mouth,* my anger calms and I can work all the livelong day. It's like, whatever man, I'll just be over here. Laboring.

Oh I know, it was different for him: too tough for you meant just right for me, that's what he used to say. Besides, he needed the cabbage, so many mouths to feed, backs to adorn, rooms to keep alight. He raised us up, and see how *it pleases* the Father *to bruise* the Son. So he gave me *grief,* and I vowed to become callous, strapping and stalwart, I swore nothing would be too hard for me, and that's a ball-breaking promise to keep and sell. As He says: *When you make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand.* Amen to that.

Don't know if Dad saw *the labor of his soul,* and was satisfied, but I'll tell ya what, I don't want any of it. I like having a life, like mornings to dink around, days to do stuff, and at night, play some ball. Fuckin-A, I'm third base for this first-rate team, Division A, Co-Ed, way better than the team I was on last year. Fact is, my new team kicked my old team's ass at tournament last year. I was about the best player in that line-up, but those half-baked asswipes didn't ask me back. See, it's all political, and Joe, the manager, has a couple relatives on the team this year, along with guys from Richmond & Co., the sponsoring company. Doesn't look like they're much interested in baseball anyway, don't practice worth a damn for the way they go gallivanting after a game, always at the same location, College Street Bar & Grille, over on Lake Drive. Fucking-A, I carried their lameasses last year, yet they never realized *my knowledge justified many as I bore their iniquities,* you bet.

Just as well. I mean shit, don't matter if you can throw money at a team, can you throw a ball, that's the issue. And don't go saying, oh, I'm still wet behind the ears, 'cause if you're playing with a league, you shoulda been playing a few years at least. This team I'm on now, who knows where they come from, the riverbanks for all I care. But they can play some ball alright, and man, they keep me moving, 'cause that's all they care about is if you can play. Like the girls on the team, they're all dykes! Shit, that don't cause me no headache or hitch, 'cause they can play some mean old ball, praiseworthy and to the point. Some of the other guys get all agitated, won't really address 'em one way or another. Not me. I'm just like, Hey Dude, what's up. I mean, they look like dudes and heck, who wouldn't want to date a lady? *Divide me a portion with the great, I say, and I'll divide the spoil with the strong.*

Speaking of which, ya want a kitten? Just gave a couple away last week, but Manther Bee's gonna have another litter. Multitudes, I tell ya, multitudes and mouths to feed. Chuck's new girlfriend, the one with the bum brakes, wanted one. She talked and talked all about it. Fuckin-A, I knew within five minutes, heck, eight seconds, there was no way in hell or grave I'd ever subject a cat to that. Poor thing wouldn't get a moment

of peace and I'd be *pouring out* my *soul unto death, numbering* up *with the transgressors.* Man, ya shoulda seen this last litter too. Ooohhhh, so cute, just like Manther Bee. I gave away the tiger stripe, kept the two black and white ones with me, and they're growing larger every day, just the most adorable ever. One of 'em, Tiny Bee, must've walked on prickles or something, 'cause he had a little thorn in his foot. I caught him limping, and when I checked him out, I found this sliver that needed to be pulled. Yeah, he let me. They'd all let me. They follow me around the house, out in the yard, heck, Manther Bee tried to bear her first litter on my lap. I come home from work, sat down, there on the sofa, and she got right up on my lap and starts in crying and contracting. It was like, Oh Manther, I don't know if this is such a great idea. It took awhile, but she let me move her to a box in the basement. I stayed with her all night all right, waiting. I mean, it took her all night to birth. The first came a little after eleven, and the last waited 'til dawn, 6:12 in the morn, to be dead on. Ever since, she likes me to pet her during labor. I mean, she's doing hard work, and me rubbing her real gentle, careful and slow, down the nose and behind the ears, calms her. I soothe her side too, long and easy, in between kits. She's had six litters and every one, she waited for me before she begun, and I always stay the whole while through as we bear *the sin of many, making intercession for the transgressors.*

> I hover my new shoe over the ants, sounding their voices in a squeaky high pitch: He's coming! He's coming! They scurry around, still the same, and I can see their pinched eyebrows and bitten, worried lips. I lift my foot even higher before lowering it in a slow, deliberate push, until my sole presses the hill's center. I step back, observe the flat cake, and in a sudden rush, I begin to stomp and jig: boom boom boom, rid-a-tit, did-a-bit, tra-la-la. The ants are screaming now, though its been so long in ant-time, they've forgotten how this began. They are creatures of reflex and instinct, running and dancing as I pull on their threads with a-one and a-two, swinging with Daddy at the father-daughter square dance. I lift my feet and hang from his arm as he twirls me round

and round. He is the strongest and best-looking one there. I stand on his shoe tops, who cares how closely we follow the director's call, or if we don't follow it at all, stomping about with a giggle and guffaw, nothing bad can happen when Dad leads. He's bending over me, a striped beach umbrella, a blue wool coat, a sweater for fall, a spring hat, his protection my protection as I step, step, stamp and thump, wiggle, hee-haw and galumph. Some ants escape, and some are smashed. I stop and squat, inspect the damage. The anthill is nothing now, a toss of sand across a hole in a sidewalk crack. Ants still scurry in and out, and I call to them in a low voice: Too bad, ants. Next time, *put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on your heads.*

They pay no attention, though the current of fear remains in their blood. They run, and as the sun begins to set, I see another anthill form in another crack.

Coda

Pastor Bill meets with us to plan the service. We sit in a circle, on steel-gray folding chairs. Sometimes our blue eyes meet, sometimes my head fills with four hundred stars in an avoided cosmos. Dan is missing: he must be running late, held up maybe but certainly he didn't forget. Still, we must move on, one step upon its other, we listen to the pastor who says ghosts are not biblical, only sinners seek them, we don't know where the soul goes, he's not here, if you hear a voice, it's not him. We must move on, the service must be planned and that's specific, particular words spoken by particular lips, songs sung through that throat and this, viewing in-coffin, standing in the lobby for one last look. Look. We must move on, we settle for an altar call, as he would have wanted, designate donations to the Missions Fund, we must go forth and spread the word in every land, we must listen and we must obey. Pastor says he remembers Dad's plain faith, how when the Church was buying the building, they needed just a few more thousand dollars, so Dad sold a Buick for the exact amount. Such love for nameless sinners, such comfort to hear of our poor father giving what little he'd gained to do the Lord's great work. We must move on but are still starved for stories, we say, yes, let's save a spot in the service for people to share. Pastor says it's best for a family member to begin, and they all look at me, and I know I must speak, for it is my father's funeral, our final affair, and we must move on.

I arrive on Thursday, in from the West, *the coastlands* where *He will fully repay,* off the red-eye and into the bright morning sun. Janice meets me at the airport and we drive to the house where seventy-seven bouquets and seven more plants fill the house with broad-leafed sympathy and potted regret. Fortified soil of others, for-

giveness. Joanne says they've arranged the parlor, picked the coffin, pressed his only suit for burial. Jane says she's proud of the way everyone pitches in. The boys say nothing, for they're nowhere to be found.

I go with Mom to the cemetery, nod as she selects the marker they will share, *his* and *hers* carved in a stone, a stone not cast in a heap or a corner, but a flat white tablet cleanly waiting her death. We drive to the funeral home, the moon is full, the day appointed, we pay the bill, then stand and greet the visitors. When he comes, what shall I answer him? Who shall be remembered; who will be revenged? What on earth should she wear? We search sale racks at the store, and Mom finds an elegant dress, simple and somber, and she is gracious and exhausted; she lacquers her nails with good clear polish and cannot, cannot sleep.

No one sleeps. They come to her house carrying silent babies and crying children. They do not want to sit alone in their homes, at the kitchen table or in the basement, before open trunks or shamefaced Bibles. Besides, there is still so much we must do, water the flowers, and decide the final music. Joanne and I crouch in the living room corner, behind Dad's chair, searching songs on a CD, until we find—*But when I leave I want to go out like Elijah. With a whirlwind to fuel my chariot of fire*—we collapse, sobbing. Joanne yells to her daughter, Go get Grandma! Quick!

Dan, Janice and I sneak outside to smoke, a small huddle beside three pine trees Dad planted when the family moved in. The trees are fat and tall, they make a hiding place between them, a preserve of raw dirt and thin brown branches, shadowed from sun and rain and sight. Everyone has a different way of dealing, Janice says. Some talk, some say nothing. Some drink wine and slur unrelated regrets, some quit caring, some worry what others think: they cry easily and swear, sin comes from living, and death is not sin's victory, but life's final hurrah. Davey drinks beer in the barn, telling tales to the assembled, his friends, fair young men of fortune and promise. He is newly wise among them. Jane stoops in the bathroom; the ceiling fan blows and a gold-framed mirror reflects her mother's hand, older now, stroking

and patting her back. There, there, there is nothing to do.

Mom called on Wednesday. Dad is dead, she says, and I don't understand. Dad is dead, she says, consonant confusion. What? I ask. Dad died, she says. Dad? Yes. My Dad? Yes. I didn't wake this morning at the usual time. When I did, I did not hear him. It was late and I called, Wake! The day has come, darkness has slipped away. And when he did not answer, I thought, this is ridiculous. So I went to him, lying alone in our bed chamber, and when I touched him, he was cold. I cried for an ambulance, but it was too late. Darkness and light are alike to him now. Darkness and light seized his too great heart. It is Wednesday. She stops. The kitchen cupboards are painted white. The kitchen floor tilts to the south. I need you home.

I make phone calls, buy tickets, send announcements: I won't be coming in today; I don't know when I'll return. I count back nine days to our final conversation. The kitchen walls are painted white, the floor is white, and light gray and sky blue, and it is falling, falling away. I open the refrigerator, I don't know when I'll return. I slice pears and bake crisp; I offer bowls with fresh cream to visitors. I say, my Dad died today and I'm flying home at midnight. I don't know when I'll return. It is still Wednesday.

I stand at a podium with a piece of paper. These are the words I have written: We loved the Lord and we loved the world and we argued and we refused to be a doorkeeper and we agreed upon the sparrow and the swallow, a home for him and a nest for her, and we love the word of God, spoken with eloquence.

It is Monday and I have finished my dinner of broiled fish and soda-bread. I call my mother, but father answers. We speak of cancer, Communism and corporations, genetically-modified organisms, how great-grandpa stole both horse and visa to come to this land. We argue who *shall fear the name of the Lord from the west,* insist we see *His glory from the rising of the sun.* I don't want to talk to him. He doesn't matter to me. He believes girls were made to make marriages and babies, and boys to make up business and minds. He accuses me of not loving him or my mother. He asks me how I can do this

to my mother, moving so far away like that. He says a college education isn't worth much if I don't know how many pounds equal a ton or how to make a Firebird run. He says he saved sex for marriage. He listens to Rush Limbaugh, chewing on about liberals and Sodom. He says, be careful.

He calls on Tuesday to see if God has answered his prayer. Yes, I found an engine for my car in a junkyard with a service center. Yes, it is less than one-thousand dollars. We are happy with each other. He owns his own business. He pays all his bills, bowls every Monday night, and makes Keilbasa with fried potatoes for Christmas brunch. He gives a Bible to each of his children. He rises in the early morning, boils water for coffee, opens his Big Book and reads some from the Old and some from the New. He recites Proverbs. *There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.* He folds his thick fingers, bows his head, he prays for his children, calling out our names, one by one, so God's kingdom will come and His will be done in each of our lives. Believe me when I say how much he loved me. Believe me when I say unto you he was good man.

On Friday, he says he knows one thing for sure. In Psalm 84 it says, *one day in God's court is better than a thousand of your best days elsewhere.*

So it says. Let me say it again, one day in Heaven is better than your best thousand days on earth. What can I say? I cannot imagine a best thousand days. He can. He says, he'll tell me what, that's like him going to Carlyse and selling all his spare car parts every day for over three years straight. How I knows this car, how I knows this bloody car. An hour passed, he says, I love you, I say I love you too.

Believe me, *when the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him. The Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob.*

I sit down. It is Saturday. My aunt speaks. My brother's ex-girlfriend speaks. My dad's friend speaks. My brothers and sisters stay silent and sit still. My mother is gracious and overcome with guilt. Dad's grade school friends are the pallbearers. Dad's body rides in Rance's '38 hearse. Mom and Davey follow in the '36, Dan and

Janice in the '39, I'm in the '49, Joanne and Jane are in '68 and '73. A hundred cars line up behind us, one hundred cars, thirty-three of them classics. Thirty-three sons and daughters of Jacob, thirty-three days a woman must wait for purification from bleeding, thirty-three more if the babe was not a boy, and thirty-three children run from thirty-three homes yelling, Old Cars! Old Cars! Old Cars! What joy in death and resurrection. I weep and watch his body lowered to rest.

As for Me, says the Lord, this is my covenant with them.

All slows and speeds.

My Spirit who is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth.

We tear our clothes and shave our heads.

Shall not depart from your mouth.

A grain of sand is buried in the American Midwest.

Nor from the mouth of your descendants.

The earth stands still, the temple veil untorn. As the sun sets in the west, I walk up from the barn, past his garage, down six slabs of concrete, up the wooden porch steps, and through the steel backdoor.

Nor from the mouth of your descendants' descendants.

The kitchen light casts shadows upon these creatures whose red eyes peek beneath swollen lids. Babies cry and children's mouths peal, Uncle Dan Uncle Dan, me next. Dan growls and lifts a child above his body, warning, I'm gonna drop you, let you fall right on your little head.

Joanne yells for them to settle down, and Jane proclaims the toilet has overflowed.

Janice sneaks outside for a second smoke, past Davey, who leans against the counter, drinking a glass of cold milk.

I sit across the table from Mom, who *from this time and forevermore,* lifts her eyes toward the heavens and moans.

Acknowledgments

A portion of "Hurrah Hurrah" was previously published in *Roar: Women's Studies Journal*. "I Am Their Musick" contains brief lyrical excerpts from Toby Keith's "I Wanna Talk About Me" and George Strait's "You Know Me Better Than That." In "Coda," the italicized reference to Elijah and his whirlwind of fire is from the song "Elijah" by Richard Mullins. "Hurrah Hurrah" and "Coda" contain passages from the book of Isaiah, chapters 53 & 59.

For the first edition of this book, I remain grateful to the following people: David L. Ulin, Stephanie Taylor, Pam Ore, Jessica Mintz, Kate Chandler, Carol Muske-Dukes, Sara G. LaBorde, Jennifer Calkins, Maude Place, and Fergus Lee Place. Thank you also to Lorena Emma Irrer, Barbara Laforge, and Mrs. Porter. And to Vanessa Place. Always.

In making this edition, thank you to: Johanna Blakley, Selah Saterstrom, Prageeta Sharma, and to all of the Les Figues authors, interns, editors, and readers. And to Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei and Eileen A. Fradenburg Joy at punctum books: queer visionaries, thank you.