



Parting Gifts

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Grandfather's Fingers

Alison M. Brett

The car smells like wet cigarettes. Aaron watches his mother's cheeks cave in while she sucks in smoke from her Viceroy. He named one of his battleships after her cigarettes, painting the name on in slow detail under the bright light in the basement. Out in the rain orange and gold leaves swirl in rivers formed by the gutters in the street.

"Mom?"

"Mmmm?"

"How old were you when you started smoking?"

Beverly takes her eyes from the road to fix them on her son.

She looks at him as she would a stranger who seemed to recognize her, blank and steady.

"Don't even think about it, Aaron."

The windshield wipers travel their route back and forth. Beverly turns her attention back to her driving. She watches her hands on the steering wheel, her right one holding the cigarette just like her father used to.

"I was a year older than you are. I was fourteen. I stole one from my father."

Aaron hears the hiss of the cigarette being snubbed out in the ashtray. His eyes are closed; he is thinking about his grandfather. He tries to remember what his mother's father was like. It seems a long way back, six years old, he can only think of his grandfather's right hand.

"Mom?"

"Mmmmm?"

"Tell me again how Grandpa lost his fingers."

"In a machine. A big machine called a transformer."

Beverly does not look forward to telling her husband John that Aaron was asking about her father's accident again. She looks over at her son. He has his eyes closed. His hands are tucked down between his thighs. The psychologist had suggested that they play down the questions and give short,

direct answers. She stops for a red light and flicks the directional to turn left. The tick, tick, tick sound fills the car.

Aaron wonders how badly it hurt to have fingers pulled off in a machine. Thoughts come fast, like the leaves in the gutters. Did his grandfather faint? Did the other men there faint? Aaron thinks he would faint. Whose job was it to clean up the machine? What did it sound like? He knew that other men had lost fingers, too. He pictures that big machine somewhere now, filled with ghosts of fingers floating around in it. Would he know it if he saw it? Aaron looks out the window as they turn into the driveway, their yellow house still the same.

“Mom?”

“Aaron.”

“If that machine hadn’t taken Grandpa’s fingers, I wouldn’t remember anything about him.”

Beverly turns the key; the car engine begins its settling noises. She holds her keys in her lap, examining them, as if trying to read an answer in their bumps and gouges. Only a minute passes. Then she and Aaron get out of the car and unload the groceries as if nothing had happened.

K-Train

Hilary Sloin

 Kimm spelled her name with two m's. I always meant to ask her why, whether that was how her parents had written it on her birth certificate: Kimmberly. She was only 12 and already had to be detoxed off alcohol. They had her on Librium. She had a pale scar across the side of her mouth and had been raped in the woods by someone who she'd gone for a walk with. Someone she'd thought was her friend.

 Usually the people I grow really attached to scare me. That is the first thing I feel when I meet them. Kimm should have scared me but she was only 12 and I was 15. And the first thing she ever did was tell the crazy guy, Matt, to stop whipping it out at me or she would rearrange the whole area. Protect me once, from any evil in the world, and I will never forget you.

 When we got out of that place we talked on the phone almost every night. And sometimes she'd come spend a weekend or I'd go there. But it only really worked on the inside. Out in the world all Kimm and I could do was get smashed and talk about that place.

 Remember the group therapy session where Dawn was in the center in a body bag and we had to listen to her scream for three hours? Remember the crazy guy jerking off in his pajamas all the time? The guy with the swastika? Julia with her epileptic seizures who used to blow everyone in the phone booth? Remember the furniture, all sort of mushy and plastic like teething toys? Remember when you couldn't take a shit for two weeks because someone was sitting in the fucking bathroom, watching you? Remember what we had to promise to get out? Remember when they searched your asshole for blotter acid or joints?

 Like I'd really smoke a joint that had been shoved up my ass all day.

 I got out on my sixteenth birthday. My mother invited all my friends for a surprise sweet sixteen. Everyone promised to go straight but took turns sneaking bong hits in the garage. I started having some kind of problem talking that night.

Someone would ask me how I was doing and it was like my brain and mouth weren't communicating. My jaw would lock, my tongue like an old brownie just stuck there, dead. I wondered if Kimm went through this. Like a side effect.

Inside you could be important. Whatever you were in for was like your own thing. People described you that way. Yeah, he was an arsonist. He hit a guy with a crowbar. She's a drunk. She got raped. She's addicted to all kinds of shit. Nobody was lost there because we all knew why we got there.

When I lived in Washington Heights I'd take the K-train home alone at 4 a.m. after rehearsals. Me and four or five drunks, crack addicts. I'd curl up on the seat and fall asleep while the train sat on the tracks for an hour or so, waiting for the work train to move out of the way. I wasn't scared. I felt in my element. I wonder where Kimm goes now to feel at home. Where she finds the inside out here.

It's Saturday morning now. That's all it is. It's hot and I'm on the fire escape with a pack of Camel Lights. I've gone straight, too. Sometimes I feel like that's all I've gone. I don't know how to describe myself now, on the outside. I'm not a part of anything. Nothing stands out. Kimm might be somewhere juggling a bottle of Jack Daniels and a mean old man. Maybe she's a dyke. Maybe she's on the inside, or maybe she's on the outside. Like me. Always on the outside of everything. You take that world and you try to make it bigger. You try to make the rules apply. The food or the scenery, those tennis courts I watched from the window but wasn't allowed to play on. That guy who raped me. Kimm with her slurred speech and green eyes, sitting across from me, telling me we'd always be friends, she'd always protect me if I'd just sit there and look sweet, make her feel like someone was gentle and wouldn't fuck with her head.

Like people who get sent to space. Like those guys who walked on the moon. Always missing the guys who walked on the moon with them. Always comparing things to walking on the moon. Seeing everything once through their eyes, once through plastic goggles. Hearing things slow and distorted, feeling their feet lifting like air. That's the inside for them.

Directional

Pointing to the wall:
two high-heels, red.
One is upside down, capsized.
“You want me to leave,”
she says, peeking over her knee,
“but are you man enough
to make me?”

I know of only one thing
she is proud of: stripping
to the nub during class discussion
at the experimental college.

She is grittier than the winds
of Santa Ana, a ravager of palm trees.
Without her I never
would have found California.

Paul Hadella

Two Poems by
Alysia K. Harpootian

It Is Easy to Get
What You Did Not Ask For

This is true of structure.
Cavities in every other tooth.
A chin that isn't.
That back without.
Of performance.
You see, you are that place
Where I missed my mouth
And I had the fork
In my hand this time and
Everything is red.

How I Got to Like

It all started with red. When I was 5.
Red crayons. Red markers.
Red dresses. Red.
Then my mother asked me what color
I wanted my room painted.
I told her. She said, "Choose another color."
I said, "No, red."
Sometimes there was no reasoning.
She took me to the paint store.
We looked through the swatches.
There was one I wanted called blazing pink.
She ok'd it and Russell the painter
Started brushing it on the walls
The next day.

Evening Ocean

The air beneath the trees cools
as dim little ceremonies of dust
and air take over, their hush
inhabits the body.

Hurry loses its way. The sky slows.
In the stunned fields of summer,
the heavy-headed grasses
can't say how they got there,

no more than a granule of pollen
can say which bee made it a flower.
Twilight goes mindless then, as swifts
on the wing, or the quiet ocean

watching air play its favorites.
That's where evening simplifies us.
It's how night turns the page
and how the sea closes.

David Sumner

The Last Judgment

It is just as it appears
painted on the ceilings of cathedrals.
The souls, poor and wrinkled,
wandering as though in a railway station,
but they are outside.
Their clothes smelling faintly of linseed
and flower roots, old linen stored for too long.
Lost, looking as though
just moments ago they were ironing,
or thinking of slowing the car down,
or sleeping, or angry that Hamlet sold out.
As if awaiting fireworks, fear and awe
in their eyes, with dark circles,
or too much make-up, smeared with tears,
not their own. God is saying:
The rules of the afterlife are not exactly
what you may have thought, or interpreted.
You'd be surprised how divine I am,
and how only human I remembered you were.
What I am saying is, no one is going to hell.
Except... some of you had Stop signs?
in your dorm rooms and apartments.
Please stay, I'd like to have a little chat.
The rest of you may go.

Leonard Gontarek

Gerard Throws a Snowball
Outside St. Bonaventure's

My snowball cries out the victim's name.
Before it strikes the refugee
I wake, wonder why I marked
the Jew's chest for the soldiers.

In the dormitory
I feel the boy's shadows on the wall,
but tread moonlight
beneath the leaded windows.

Soon, however, I pass my rumpled
companions, notice the vacant bed,
and call out, my voice
heavy as stone.

"Your mother's stockings withered
in the soldier's hands.
You spoke her name every night.
If her broken teeth could grow
her sweet voice, you'd plant them.
As you turned to the wall,
my cold feet knew I could betray you.

"Oh for the Germans who arrived
in their truck to inspect
the maginot lines:
shivering boys in nightshirts.

"Every friend needs to be butchered,
a shadow that coiled inside me whispered.
Then an officer rehearsed his evil:
Engel nicht, Menschen nicht,
he chanted into dirty snow.

“I threw the ball to tip
your silly beret, expose black hair;
your palm closed in the sunlight
to darken its goodbye, your wounded cry
muffled by the soldier’s surprise.”

Blond hair in my eyes,
I beseech angels come forward, rescue
a friend beading the distance,
but the officer who chanted
draws my breath to the floor.

I think how every morning
the ice fields inside us froze,
melted when Daniel and I were alone.
Now I stare blind at my toes
while wind shapes its kiss
to the glass
of Daniel’s truck groaning down the road.

Russell Thorburn

The Finger Painting

White smeared on blue,
dark crosses
for windblown birds,
a dab of yellow
for the sun.
Red dots
are danger flags,
green hooks the curves
of storm-tossed palms.
Unframed,
my lost child's
painting leans
against her closet wall.

Fran Portley

It's Going to Be
a Hard Winter

Your doctor wouldn't look at us
although he tried to smile.
This year our scarlet maple
lost its chlorophyll too soon,
the leaves like bright red blood.
If love were medicine enough
next spring would find new green
on stretched-out bare branches,
and you would be well again.
Still, even dust motes look radiant
along October's path of polished
brass, in sunshine reflected through
colors that mellow late afternoon.
The black-capped chickadees
predict a palette of grays, a sharp
wind swirls these last leaves;
but before the sun goes down
we'll walk in the warmth of this gold.

Fran Portley

And Now, Interrogation,
Merely Routine

The first questions are easy.
How many raindrops manage a river?
Where does the wind howl when it dies?
Come off it, man, it's a hoax.
You can switch on a light, call a number.
Silence will read you,
darkness finger the words.
Out there, look, stars, the horizon.
You clear your throat and turn over.
Midnight is bolted. The floor whimpers.
Now courteous voices enroach.
Something about memory, elsewhere, tomorrow.
The hard questions begin.

Donald W. Baker

Lines Written in Dejection
a Few Miles Above
the Early Warning Installations
at North Truro

Walk the beach whenever you can.
That's good duty, exploring eternity.
You can put worlds together like that,
glistening snarls, profound and tough,
like that seaweed floating just
out of reach at the end of the jetty.
There, in its rubbery subterfuge,
the ultimate waits, all tooth and eye.
Dull luck today: a dead cod,
a McDonald's hamburger bag, clots
of petroleum. But you never can tell.
That wink of a golden eye up ahead
may not be the blind end of a beer can.
That siren thrashing alone in the surf
may not be a crone in the wrong bikini.

Donald W. Baker

All That Is Drowned

This rain
turns to a sleep-man's eye
who looks and looks
but he is dreaming.

The sunlight is under the wind.
It is morning.
All the roosters of the neighborhood
are mechanically crowing.

All that is rained upon this night
is washed innocent and clean.
The world is gone.
The sleep is done.

The dream is the drowned fish
cut open on the table.

Joyce Odam

At My Father's Grave,
Montefiore Cemetery

1

There are no crows here. Ginsburg's caw-caw over Naomi's grave is elegiac: mourning raised to Divine Awe. But there is no Naomi here, and no Lycidas or Hallam, either: only my dead among the dead, crushed in their Perpetual Care as they were in life, sardined together in horizontal perpetuation of apartment living. Walking a careful path between the markers, I feel a child's fear that I will wake someone, hear the cries of outrageous anger: "Fer Chris'sakes, ya little bastard, it's Sunday morning, let us sleep!"

2

My father rests stripped of his outrage, in his grave near 36 years' occupied, and my horror is gone: I can picture him—not looming over me with his Marine Corps leather belt and sterling buckle at the ready—but as I stand over him, as he is now: moldy gray double-breasted gangster suit, rotted prayer-shawl, bones fallen away to dust, only the skullcapped skull remaining. Past outrage, and past hurt: past even the decompositional rot that ran alongside the year of mourning.

3

He is a name and dates on a stone: when my wife
saw his grave, that one time, she felt a wave of fright,
for she wheeled his namesake, our baby firstborn son,
in the stroller before her, the only Jacob
she knew. I knew the other, but saw him now through
the wrong end of the telescope, ironically distant,
a memory fading into a tragicomic fiction.
I tore out some weeds, half expecting the mandrake's cry,
dropped a stone on the grave, and carried my son in my arms.

Kenneth Wolman

Possessiveness
black fences of travel lean into
the long envy of night behind you
to hold back distance and guard
the creeping occupant who lets his eyes
learn where you are going
never slow down
a gate might open from any point
he might slip through
and put his foot upon the ladder of
the very train you are on
he might come through the aisle
and sit beside you looking out your
window and when you doze
he will change the reason for your travel
you will fade backward
and return through the very same gate
of the long black fence
he left ajar for you

Joyce Odam

Vacation Accident

Walking across the sand, crabs
looking like lice on glass, moving
with the westward sun, high
afternoon until dusk, when

the steam rises from shell and sand
like gasoline vapors from a hot hood
or unguent poured upon the naked feet
or powder-room perfume, puffing up

as if to gently advertise
the broadcast, I am the sweat
of what has endure⁴ I rise like smoke
from unseen ashes, from unstoked lumbet

like a girl in her summer dress getting
warmer. The aluminum furniture
heats up and burns and reflects
duty's last pinch of us before we relax

and redux. Come to my arms
my parents are calling. In this heat
I am young and elemental again,
three years old, beginning to walk.

I have a long way to go, but that's not
saying anything. Some of us tire sooner,
more gratefully, than others; others
have nothing. I am reduced to cliché

because I see the light that I am yet
complex. Staring out from the very back
of the station wagon, I move sticks
back and forth, imaginary windshield

wipers, dream about the big, boxy trucks
and eighteen-wheelers, black and shaggy,
that passed us on the road to our vacation,
sunburning my unprotected eyes,

visions of glory reflecting from flanks
of tanker trucks, like the one I got to
lean on his horn when Dad insisted on
driving at the speed limit; I raised my

eyes and stuck out my tongue and he pushed
us. My mother and sister are nearly
insane with fear, my mother casts a look
over her shoulder, catches only me.

By then he was halfway around us,
closer than brother boa constrictors.
My father slacks off the gas, lets it by
as memory. Love is no accident.

We could have created death here;
they'd remember my father giving it
the gas, then being run off the highway
into a sinkhole off the embankment.

My father is smoking a cigarette
in the front seat. My mother appears
asleep. I have dropped the wooden sticks.
Steam rises from the engine, much like blood.

Gale G. Aeuff

A Poem's Reason

Ross Tharaud

For me the point in writing a poem resides chiefly in the act of writing itself, in the effort and excitement of reaching for a way of saying something memorable about something worth remembering. Yes, I want the poem to speak to a reader, but first let it speak to me; let it reflect with its process—the integrity of its form and substance playing together—not only what I mean it to say, but also the intense care I have put into its saying.

Poetry is language at its most efficient (truest) artistic level. It uses every rhythm, sound, line break, punctuation mark, connotation, and denotation to enhance its effect. How marvelous, then, that so much of the writing process is extra-conscious. The more I write, the more I reach to enhance expression, the greater the possibility that past efforts, successful or otherwise, will inform what propels me to write in the present.

Here are some general considerations made conscious:

- Substance. What do I write about? Whatever draws me.

Levels of interest often become clear only after poems are completed and reviewed.

- Form. How can my voice best say what I want to say?

Start, try, change, err, restart, rechange... Also gives, since form changes and shapes what I say.

- Process. How well do substance and form play together?

No unwanted seams or questions, please.

The working poem will exceed anything that can be said about it because it is its own best saying. Its wholeness, suggesting my own, will surprise and please me and make me want to share it with others. Once at a friend's house I found one of my poems on a bulletin board over his desk. He told me that it meant that much to him. If there is any greater compliment to a poet, I can't imagine it.

The Builder

Every day I build the city over from
a scrap heap of dreams. I lay down the streets
with their potholes and sewergrates
raise stoneface and steelface buildings
join mazes of pipe, cut acres of window and
everywhere cover up nerve-like cable and wire.

City of concrete slabbed on bones of villages
City of soil squeezing up through cracks
City of worn soles and tires without end
City of fenders, buckles, locks, handles

Eyes of passersby flicker with hurry.
Hands mark strides, clasp, burrow in pockets.
Mouths hold messages, heads swarm
with thoughts. A million heads for
a million bodies, and in every head a city.

City of mine where nothing belongs to me:
not grit, not steam, not neon or mannikin wealth;
not hiss, honk, clatter; not styrofoam
bits scuffed onto the river.

At night I work my way out past regiments
of stoops waiting for news and restaurants
bristling with thickets of chair legs.
My lullaby is the last train's rattling
as it carries me toward impossible hills.

Ross Tharaud

Camp Followers

Talkers to the street
have no homes where they can catch
runaway tongues.
Their tones rape the air with
numbness of standing,
stiff walks, spasms.

Stampers on vents and gatherers of garbage
camp near the army they can't join.
Grime hands grope for wool comfort.
Foul lips crave nourishing host.
Those who rely on passers-by
are lost.

Once for a few days
stripped of rank I searched the street
a lone mumbler.
Pity the poor
pity the hopeful
pity minds
whose fixtures are fire.

Ross Tharaud

Trace

Going isn't the problem

I stood here with my compass
watching the needle waver,
trees lean, clouds move.

Stars came with night, grew in
like flowers, pinpricks of light.
I rested on iron-cold ground.

The glow of a town I may
have seen across the hill.
The incomplete moon
working into my view.
Rustles of bodies around
me. Leaves.

These turned me
to a path. And though blisters
ached to break
when daylight came I left
and left only this.

When I know where I'm going
I'm gone.

Ross Tharaud

Retrospect, Regret

Rowing out through the summer
lake, to the marsh where the fish might be,
you tell me you are dying.
“Everyone is dying. Living is
dying bit by bit,” I quip. But you are serious.
You are dying now, you know
what the doctors don’t and are angry
with me for denying you
this intuition.

“R~v,” I say, “I need to think.”
We cast our lines out, fishing
for something to say, hoping,
and reel them back slowly,
as if that’s all we’re here for.
The hooks come back with worms, halved
and bloated. The sun sinks into the lake. We’re cold
and haven’t caught anything;
I turn the aluminum boat toward home and row.

Kristin Herbert

Heaviness

Big Mother is swallowing her dream.
She is so huge now
all love has abandoned her.

She is floating upon
a long, drowning mattress,
her dress pulling into threads
beneath her, unraveling into death.

She complains and wakens
and vows no sleep against that night.
She walks the cold house,
looking through rained-upon windows,
watching the wet streets shine for her.

She loves the rain.
She stares into its night-reflections
and hums a love-song
to her sadness.

Relaxed and hypnotized at last
she lies down upon the floating mattress.
She sleeps.

Joyce Odam

The Croaker
and Other Fish Who Try to Speak

I've tried to tell you about the fish. You laugh,
say we'll talk about it in the morning.
But listen. My father first told me about them,
how in 'Forty-five, they moved in by the thousands,
into the mouth of the Chesapeake,
passing through the submarine nets,
gathering in schools around the hydrophones,
making low, guttural whispers. I remember that night,
strong hands lifting me from my bed,
how I looked out the window, saw not a single light.
I didn't know then it was the fish,
not until I was ten, when I caught one. My father
called it a croaker. Then he told me about the blackout,
about German U-boats
poised at the edge of the continental shelf, about the fish
with a voice no one had heard.

These nights they slip behind my eyelids. I tell you,
not just the croakers: other fish who know my name,
fish who speak of the cold, wet darknesses
where they glide,
touching my night hands with slippery bodies,
offering a fin to grasp, to ride to their nests,
their shadowy dens, hidden in caves, in deep crevasses.

Tonight about midnight, I'll look for the hydrophones,
hoping you'll be listening,
hoping you'll understand my ways. When my croaking
sounds reach your ears, don't hide.
Don't turn out the lights of your city.
I've been out in my ocean again.

Now I'm threading my way up the bay. By dawn
I'll be back in the body you know,
leaving my wide fan tail between the sheets.
It's safe there, lying flat, barely quivering,
every silvery scale feeling a parched tingling,
first at the edges, then beneath,
where the white flesh begins: a pulse beat
counting the daylight hours.

Milt McLeod

A Second Opinion

You wore what eloquence
was left you, with the city in tatters
all around like a pensioner under the knife.
They had taken out its teeth—anything
the good doctors found too artificial,
extraneous (or streetwise tough)—
then scooped away as much disease
as they could get at with the money
they had at hand.

In a place where health was measured
in decibels, just a firewall's remove
from the wrecking claw, you sat,
studying insurance over beer. Hair
still black with rain-wet in the front,
sandy dry on shoulders no one would credit
with holding up so much architecture.
Stone on fragile dripping
stone, I saw it come together
like a puzzle.

Lee Passarella

Cutting the Lilacs
on Sunday

I bow the reachable branches
wedge the clippers around wet bark.

The metallic snap echoes against
the abandoned farmhouse.

Wet leaves and branches slap my face,
my arms, the pain
of new bruises darken
the ones already there
from last night when you
put your hand under
my shirt and said "Your eyes
are glowing."

In the overcast light the lilacs
shine like small neon signs, smell
like dime-store perfume.

I know the flowers will lose
their iridescence and tenderness,
my bruises will fade
from black to blue to yellow
to nothing,
and this romance will go
to pieces.

But, arms loaded with branches
dripping and shining, I'll meet
you again and again.

Marianna Hofer

Rabbi Schulz's Son
Sleeps at St. Bonaventure's

Russell Thorburn

I'm moonlit. When I stand still the wind thuds against my body. The room of my parents spins inside me, until I feel like a drunken uncle.

It's the fear of being pursued by soldiers that sucks the breath out of the long-distance runner. I stagger frozen like the wind down the path. I wear my father's wool coat buttoned up to the neck. The shouts echo in my thoughts—my mother's excitement, her voice I've heard at parties when the roast was burnt, my father's voice like a pulpy thing smashed open.

I approach a church called St. Bonaventure's, a stone wall surrounding it that's caked with snow. The inner courtyard contains a school dormitory. One of the windows, with black ironwork in the shape of angels, is lit. I feel myself drawn to these images. I feel I could be anyone, and strive to embrace the first name that's hurled. I want to climb into that name: be it. I know I must pass into the light.

When I step toward the window I see a young priest reading, his table cluttered with dishes. His hair has receded, and he wears a sour face, his mouth set into the words. I wait for his eyes to lock into the empty spaces of mine, my appearing like a ghost. The wind rattles the pane.

The priest looks up from his page. What eyes freeze me on the other side. I watch his shadow tread the floor, when he rises. His milk-white skin could be any boy's. He pulls on the handle that becomes a burden, his sandy wisps of hair brushed from his forehead, and then the cold pours in with my glance.

I am a zero, a bit of nothingness that has blown to his window, a person soon to be without a history. The Germans are intent on making this a reality. They can erase all the names, faces, burn the photographs and books—I will become someone else. This is what I think, the cold flowing into the heat. I will whisper the first name that comes into my head. Jean Eluard—there it is. I tell him the Germans burned our house down, my father suspected of being in the Resistance.

“And your parents?”
The tears flow: “Dead.”
“Any other relatives?”
“Moved away.”
“And you have nobody.”
“I am nobody.”

Reluctantly he reaches a hand through the curtain of cold; I grasp it as if it were manna. “Strip,” he commands, pointing to my frozen clothes.

Moses, I think, staring at him. I glance at his book; its split spine says Proust. But I see my mother’s face, how the fists of the soldiers baptized her brow, dragged her feet through the snow, as if she were in a novel all her own. They tore away her meaning like critics. Her heels made a trail to the snowbank. They viewed her bare legs beneath her lilac-colored housedress, the stockings withered at her knees. Her dress torn at the shoulders, a breast peeping. They carried my father like a haunch of meat to the lorry. I whispered God’s name and fled.

What do these moments have to do with this present striptease? I stroke my father’s coat and think of him lying naked in a field. My stiff fingers pluck at icy buttons. For all I know there is a Jean Eluard who exists, whose body trembles. He may attend this Catholic boarding school, for that’s what this place is, where the priest lives. He may be as beautiful, delicate, intricate, fierce, pale, sorrowful, and confectionlike as I am.

Here I am undressing. The coat opens, laughable almost as I discard it. I concentrate on the buckle; it’s difficult with frozen fingers. I fumble. I rushed out of my house to run for miles. I sidestepped past houses with lights on, a Jewish boy who once played accordion, his father bearded and a rabbi. I entered the snowy woods, an orphan.

The priest insists I strip, so my head is lowered to the task. Does he suspect anything? The priest reads me like a page from his book, hurrying me to the end. I undo the buckle and my gray trousers, expensive looking when they’re cleaned and pressed, begin their fall. I hope he doesn’t suspect I am a masturbator, that I have an erection in my underwear. The trousers at my knees, I think of retreating, tracing my footprints back through the snow,

but I hear God whisper: "Tomorrow I will take care of you." His stern eyes make me self-conscious, and I kick away my trousers frozen at my feet. He senses my slowness in getting naked. He claps, as if announcing his career passing before his eyes. I pluck at my shirt buttons. I struggle for a second with the shirt raised over my head in a little dance. There's no delay to my nakedness now. I imagine he's seen many boys undress at school. He knows the shapes of their bodies as well as his own. My undershirt flows through my fingers. I am undressed except for my underwear and my soggy socks. His brown eyes inspect me. "Off with those," he commands. I comply.

He points for me to take a blanket from him. I remember once standing before a mirror in an examination of my body. It seemed as if I could pass through this mirror and into another life. I grab the blanket and drape it over my shoulders like an Indian.

The priest gestures for me to follow him. But as I walk from the room numb with zeroness, my history of a Jewish life disturbs me. What can I say? I am speechless—how awkward I waddle. Back to dust I go, like a molecule, a part of the plasma, hoping to be assembled where he's taking me.

Homage to the Square

I do not want the fountain
and pigeons and flowers
whose names I do not know
to be sculpture in the waiting room
of Marcel Duchamp in heaven

For them to be what they are
To see them for what they are
The more I stare
the stone vanishes
like misted landscape

The feathers of the pigeons
move like a slide
under microscope
and I still do not know
the names of the flowers

that glow and ripple and hum
and incandesce
and I think
I am getting somewhere
No

To see
the fountain and pigeons
and flowers
as fountain pigeons flowers
I am in Rittenhouse Square

and I am a square
A little boy
walks around a tree
a tree enclosed within a circle
of earth, walks

around and around the tree
picking up a stone
stopping to place it
in a new spot
picking up two stones

placing them
in different places
I believe he is duplicating ancient ritual
I begin to believe
he is creating

strange and marvelous mythology
No
he is just a little boy.
walking around a tree
the way a kid does, playing

He catches me watching him
I smile with my new-found
knowledge of the world
This little boy looks at me
and says, You little cunt

Of course, a new world
must have a new language,
a nomenclature,
exact, odd, hard to learn,
and all its own

Leonard Gontarek

Mother as Tattooed Lady

The train up north is late
Its whistle gathering like fog
Over the harbor in Duluth.
Wan and afraid, Mother's here
to marry and bear. She shies
As March wind fingers her frock.

Their families sigh and clouds
Snuff out the sky that day
My parents wed. Then hot
In lust's lavender dusk
Father taps into his patch
Of Mother's untouched skin.

She fears that stain will fester,
Sink, make pictographs
Her children will find inside
On her dark walls. She fears
More needles, blunt as stone
Babies flecked like birch.

Dad looks around, touches
The brim of his hat
With the flap of his cane
Like Chevalier and sings
I paid ten cents to see
The French Tattooed Lady

Then twirls the cane, dips
To one knee, holds his hat
Out to Mother, a trooper, fat
With me, doing her tune
Lost in the words of her song
o Artie, why do they stare?

Stephen Dunning

Grand Canals

There are places still young—
I'm thinking of a Chinese restaurant
in Amsterdam, the largest meal
ever eaten, the ridiculous bill
and fried bananas for desert.

Then walking past the square
where ragged travelers slept
among their packs and smoked hash,
waiting for the wire from home,
as alien here as the bright tourist boats.

On a Street next to the canal
women were arrayed in store windows
and alleys, their cigarette ends
glowing in the dark, fortune tellers
all beautiful and nonchalant.

Good to get away then
from the buying and selling to
the waterfront: clean, drab;
ships unloading, and down the street
houses with flowers in each window.

In a cafe, watching the procession
of china plates and cups,
tea and coffee, breads, jams:
the daily soul of a gentle country
in its pourings and quiet gestures.
The hands curled around cups
and butter knives, holding newspapers,
touching gloves and earlobes,

tamping a world into place
• the world will never touch.

Here the gray weather and the even terrain,
mistaken for dullness, bring a way
of looking and remembering: the old men
carefully straddling their canes,
the women married or not, all the
hopeful historians of childhood
and inconceivable war.

Oh merciful flat land, merciful rain!
Leaving the city a bus stops for
a family of ducks; into the country
past crumbling bunkers, defenseless,
the way free of obscuring mountains.

At a stand alongside a river road a well-dressed
man and woman were eating smoked fish
with elbows raised, heads tilted up to bite.
I imagined them king and queen
as they got into a car and drove away.

In a town church the apprentice organist
practiced through the afternoon,
racing through Bach
with brilliant errors, and
the answering steadiness of the teacher.
At the end of the country
Nijmegen welcomed us home,
its four-day walking festival—

no nations, only people—and met
ourselves in a funny dance club
on a second floor, just a room
where young people sat on the floor
and got the nerve to ask.

Later I walked through
the patterned stone streets,
through a gate laced with moist green.
In a tiny room I fell asleep
that night, the breeze along my lips
tracing a longest promise.

Geoffrey Polk

Thinking About
Skinny-Dipping in February

A fat moon rolls on her side and blinks
through bare trees over the last
of the dead leaves in a cold pool.
It has been months since we stepped
naked into this still water, months
since we drifted, breath
of jasmine heavy
in the air.

Laurie O'Brien

Possession

The snow had been falling all day, heavy enough to turn windows to blank gray slates, and was going to fall all night. He'd just been out for the last time with a broom, knocking what he could from the smaller trees to keep them from breaking. Now he sat, wet with melt, drinking hot cider and watching the branches begin to bend down under new loads. Of course it was beautiful out in the failing light: the apple tree now an eerily luminous dome, the dogwood a nebula, or some such form he remembered from photographs he'd never understood, though they'd always moved him, the whole valley beneath him erased of all suburbia, given back to itself. He could almost forget even his wife, trapped for the night in the next town—he knew she was safe, imagined her enjoying this solitude as he did. In the unbroken night, he glimpsed a whole world, new, created by his mere seeing, rushing forth from the house as from a nest. He did not want to share it. Until the power lines broke, he would sit there, gazing, yearning into the silent dark from what seemed pure space, a pod of light.

Mark Anderson

It Turns Some Women On

The idea of the act
she wriggles to meet
much like the last three
hundred years
in west caniticutt
siturate betwixt sheets
in beds at vnkachak & sequatake

Dad a Methodist
the body in its cave
opens ancient scars
easy to conquer that country
plaster and negative space
wriggling to meet
took a slice of Indian pie
they bought the saide partis that was
Mother was Catholic- Roman
barely hidden in their masques
dressed in silk and chiffon
coughs of the ribs
and battered woumb of reflect
died young, between the idea
the motion and the shadow
in the "fourth ward" of 1644
aboute the medowes thay exsepted
threw him out of town
for being a Quaker
small world to paste on
the cave in the body

the dead woman paints
surrounded by pockets
of motion and migration
to do what they will
misspelled in power
she didn't know which one
of their masques to hide in.

Joan Payne Kincaid

A Class Break

We would smack the damp bullet-ball
hard-crack against the outdoor court wall;
the other side, a whitewashed monastic brick
two younger boys, hips thrust in glee
for a height along the wall they compete to pee
hosing dark-damp the whitewash with gallantry.

A waxen rector in blackcloth, oiled with age
whistles an air-raid-on-London end to the jostling
charades
calling us into lines with a discipline of fear,
his scallion anger, a scorn from priestly celibacy
—he sees no comfort in a cobbled playground
of eyes from distant loins; then he recalls
the harsh crusted touch from the memory of home—
“Through him,
with him,
in him,”
the solitary sense of loss.

T. Colm O'Callaghan

Couscous

Sonja Greenlee

Katherine and Henri stand together at the center island in her kitchen. Henri is teaching Katherine how to cook couscous; Henri is Algerian. Katherine does as she is told. Their roles are reversed because Henri is one of Katherine's students. Henri cuts the lamb and Katherine chops zucchini, carrots, celery. She peels the potatoes and hunts in the cabinets among her spices for tumeric, ginger, allspice. She strains to remember exactly what goes in. Cooking is a passion and Katherine's pantry is well stocked. But she knows she is not an artist and that she needs recipes.

Henri likes being able to cook on something besides a microwave which is all he has in his trailer, but he misses his couscous pot. Henri confides in Katherine that he is engaged to a woman who lives on Martha's Vineyard. He pronounces her name with the accent on the second syllable, "el-LA." He does not need to tell Katherine that she reminds him of Ella. Katherine asks Henri how he met Ella. On the Greyhound, he tells her. It was too hot to sleep and they talked through the night from Washington to Boston. It was like in a movie, he says. Henri stirs the steaming pot and skims the scum that rises from the lamb. He calls couscous the "soup of the desert." Katherine sifts semolina through her fingers; it is fine as sand.

Katherine's husband Dave spends his Sunday afternoon under the carport working on his motorcycle and listening to blues tapes. He doesn't like the smell of lamb. Dave is thinking about Rollo, his oldest friend. Rollo is in jail in Atlanta. He was arrested for stealing a street sweeper. Rollo says he wasn't trying to steal the street sweeper, but what he was trying to do, no one really knows. He says he doesn't remember much about it and for someone just to please get him out of jail. Dave thinks about Rollo's problem as he listens to his Lazy Lester tape and adjusts the carburetor on his '67 Triumph. Last

night Dave tried to call Rollo's mother in Washington but couldn't reach her. Then he called Rob's sister in Asheville. The mother was visiting the sister, it turned out. It was the cocktail hour and neither of them were amused. Dave thinks maybe he should send Rollo a copy of Lazy Lester's song "Don't Write Your Name on the Jailhouse Wall." As he twists up a joint Dave wonders idly whether you can Federal Express a cassette to jail.

Ella watches the snow fall. She blows and wipes the window pane with her sweater sleeve. Her cottage is off the main road. Ella waits for an old lover. He is a fisherman who spends his summers in Alaska fishing salmon. Now he is back on the Vineyard. Ella has been reading a British novel of life in a county parish. It reminds her of Jane Austen. The female characters make her impatient. She hopes Henri will not call. But she dare not take the phone off the hook; she has never been certain of this fisherman. She wipes the pane again. Her eyes strain over the snowy road watching for his car. The field before her house is becoming a white desert.

Rob sits in the Atlanta jailhouse holding forth. It amuses him to think that he has a captive audience. He is about to get a sock in the nose from a cellmate who is trying to sleep off a drunk. Rollo feels strangely cheerful. Somehow it is a relief to finally be off the streets. Rollo imagines how practical Katherine took the news. How often he has thought of robbing her of her high virtue. When they bail him out, he will catch a bus to Florida and pay Dave and Katherine a visit. He will rent a room in Daytona and spend the winter walking on the beach. He will study the cries of seabirds. He will get a tattoo of Mr. Natural. He imagines it on his chest, just over where his heart would be.