

Ezekiel

Also by Gail Sher

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Ezekiel

Gail Sher



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for Brendan

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White Dew, Summer Ends

CHIN TO KNEE, SHOULDERS HUNCHED, EZEKIEL SAT
IN A SPOT OF MORNING SUN.

With the instinct of a cat she had picked that spot,
spread out a towel, and chin tucked perfectly in the
little niche of her right knee, looked to be admiring
her toes.

Her toes were long. They came straight out of her
feet and evenly spanned the whole width of her
metatarsus.

But her feet, she knew, felt unwelcomed in her body.

o

‘What lovely feet you have!’ The girl had taken off her shoes.

The instep was high. The line from her big toe mound all the way to her ankle, to Ezekiel’s eye, looked perfect.

‘Oh that.’ She saw the girl shudder.

Ezekiel had felt a darkness in her escape and pass into her.

The memory returned now.

Ezekiel was alone. By the light of a skinny moon she was watching a woman’s shift sway back and forth on a clothesline.

A shallow breeze would inflate it.

“It looks happy,” she thought, watching it bloom quietly.

Probably it was the unusually hot weather that had made the child dress so scantily.

She had slung herself on a bench outside an ice cream parlor.

An older man was also on the bench. Ezekiel could tell—by his studied respectful distance and by a certain casual tension in his body—that he was charmed by her.

The girl was just a kid. Her rolled up shorts and pony tail were simply what she had when she'd left the house.

Yet her very long legs—so long that they hardly fit under the bench (she had to screw them up awkwardly)—and her lean, sylphlike body that the pony tail somehow sexified for him.

He was eating ice cream which gave him something to do. Was the girl eating ice cream?

No. She was sitting in the sun waiting for a friend.

Her tortoise shell barrette gleamed in the noonish light.

Getting her legs under the bench—it was the turnout—that was what Ezekiel right away had noticed.

I should have been her. The girl, she saw, was very aware of her body.

But Ezekiel had never liked pony tails.

It was her skinniness, the sharp line of the girl.

Her soul was like a tree. Her limbs, though thin, were strong and knobby.

And flexible. Like a rubber band.

She wouldn't eat. Her not-eating had come from god, she felt.

Thus her thinness had always been redoubtable.

“SO IT’S SUMMER AGAIN.” Ezekiel examined the light. The longest day of the year had always held for her a certain charm.

Sparrows were cheeping on the hill outside her room as she was considering what to wear.

They’d been even louder the day before. A whole group of them had been jumping and incessantly calling.

Today, however, the nervousness that she’d noted was gone.

Some other birds joining them were quieter and less given to jumping.

The glow of their wings and the fresh color of their breasts made them seem new to the year.

By comparison the sparrows looked old and used up.

“Those are very pretty roses,” Ezekiel said, pointing to some yellow ones.

She'd been wandering through a flea market. Actually she wasn't feeling very well.

She waited while the vendor finished with someone else.

Her mind was on the girl, the image of her in her short shorts and flats.

“Madelaine,” someone called.

A rather large mutt with a very pink nose perked up its ears. It had been lying, chin to cement, paws splayed awkwardly.

While the animal had very long toes and beautiful, pristine toenails, its rear ankles were wrapped in manes as if they were a lion's.

“Madelaine,” someone called again.

The dog roused itself and wandered over to a dirty SUV.

'Flare you toes!' The voice had been imperious. And Ezekiel had lacked the ability.

'I can't,' she'd finally said.

'Can't,' he mimicked, then turned again to the class.

From her futon she was looking at the roses and curling her toes by the light of them.

"At least they work," she muttered, flexing and flaring them wide.

It had been a rainy day. The sun, as the class ended, was rising on yellow roses.

"It's good to exercise your toes," she parroted. Supporting her foot she allowed her toes to yawn.

When her mind wandered, they tightened like a monkey's.

Rose. That was her name. The startled expression in those eyes.

If she touched her face, her face receded further behind her eyes.

'She protrudes into sky like a cat,' averred her mother.

Ezekiel put her hands in her pockets leveraging a shrug by pressing them down deep.

'She steals from you, mama. You should fire her. Why don't you fire her?'

'Oh I don't know, honey.'

'It's in here. I put it in before I left.'

'Take you time,' the salesgirl said, watching the woman rifle through her bag.

From a little ways away Ezekiel saw that her mother had stolen something.

She opened her eyes and looked at her hands. One still held her toe while the other fiddled with the clippers.

"You have nice hands," someone once commented.

Ezekiel could smell the dark blue serge of her long stylish skirt.

The uniform that she had worn at school was of a similar serge but the smell was evoked by the stolen one that her mother, as soon as they got home, urged her to try on.

'It looks pretty on you, honey.'

'I don't need a skirt.'

'It may need shortening. You'll change your mind.'

'No I won't.'

'Your mother is beautiful, isn't she?' He was following her with his eyes.

The day was gone. As she looked, the sky had turned a very sweet wine color.

'What knocks about the sky . . . '

Seeing the light uncoupled from her . . . the bonelessness of her blousy body.

The thinness of her fat, dowdy like a slut.

'Come with me.' Someone had appropriated her arm. It was a policeman and he was leading her back to the store.

He didn't say anything, but as he steered her, he was holding her arm firmly.

'What's in your pack?'

'Open it please. Put everything here.' He waited while she'd clumsily loosened the drawstring.

'Have you done this before?' He asked this as he was looking up her history.

'No,' she lied.

Apparently he hadn't found what he'd expected.

'I'll be right back,' he said, leaving the room. It was a dingy office smelling of cigarettes.

After a very long time he returned.

'Since this is your first offence, I'm only going to give you a warning,' he said a little more gently.

Ezekiel was sobbing. All the food she had stolen was still laid out on the desk.

'You're free to go now.'

The officer waited. 'Next time you'll go to jail.'

Three Evening Bells

“SO IT’S AUTUMN,” EZEKIEL MUSED, DETECTING IN
THE AIR A FAMILIAR CRISPNESS.

The night was young and she didn’t feel like going
home. For awhile she just walked, taking in the
evening.

*‘I want to be with sky. I’m going to sky. There is a time
for sky in people,’ she exuded.*

The sounds of day, the shouts of kids at once filled
her and at the same time left her with an absolute
sense of nothing.

'Look at that wrist! Just look at it!' Her mother, barging into her room, had grabbed her wrist and was shaking it.

Ezekiel had been reading. She herself didn't see anything wrong with her wrist.

Actually, she liked her wrist. She'd been purposely not eating to make her wrist exactly that way.

Ezekiel simply sat. She was trying to picture the wrist her mother had so disliked.

The memory returned now. She was in a car amidst lanes of stalled out cars.

A rabbit was stuffed in the rear window of the sedan just ahead of her. It lay on its side. One pink ear flopped back awkwardly.

The animal seemed content riding along with no one to bother it.

'I bet it's rocking inside its head.' She peered into the Ford. There was some junk in the back seat.

She pictured the mother, harassed, yelling, hurling it anywhere to get it out of the way.

o

Stop her! Just stop her! I'm going to kill her if she doesn't stop.

“It's an accident.”

Two or three bikes had been pulled off the road. The lane to her left was starting to clear up, however.

Her mother was screaming and her father didn't know what to do.

I'm an accident! I'm an accident!

The car with the rabbit darted to the side and vanished in a throng of suddenly-relieved cars.

THE CANS IN THE WINDOW WERE LAUGHING.

Pointing their fingers and smirking. One had hair, its smile sinister.

*'We have calories. Calories will make you
FAAAAAAAT FAAAAAAT FAAAAAAAAAAAT'*

Ezekiel woke. It was raining. Big drops landed with a thud.

“Zeki-san! Did I wake you?”

“He’s too tall for his body,” she flashed.

“I was just resting.” She had on leggings, an old practice sweater and sagging hand-knit socks.

“Her hair is young,” observed the visitor. “Its rich dark depth has the snap of a young girl.”

Luciano was not youthful. That is he did not appear to be youthful.

Rather than youthful he seemed untouched.
Innocent in a pure, clear way.

His intelligence hid it however.

And his thinness.

Sensing the fib he stuck out his hand. “This is for Unn. It’s a recording from Kyoto of New Year’s temple bells.”

“Would you mind holding this for me?” A tall, young woman with cuffs around her wrist, had handed Ezekiel a clutch-bag.

Bulky blue rhinestones made a pattern on her dress.

The dress was red. It was ankle-length and sleeveless and shaped in such a way that her ribbed green t-shirt, also sleeveless, showed through its several cut-outs.

But it was her hair—very black and very cropped—as if an adolescent had taken a scissors to it wrathfully.

Its blackness and wildness gave her slightly exotic features an indescribable edge, that along with her flushed face and unexpected visor, added up to a girl that in an odd way was breathtakingly beautiful.

“She’s a model,” Ezekiel thought. “Those shoes. No one wears wedgies that are that high and that outrageous.”

Shortly she got off.

Ezekiel sat back for the long ride to her stop.

The girl had been tall but her tallness was like a force,
a tallness of mind that spilled over to her body.

Her tallness had utterly absorbed the dress.

It was tall, so tall that it slumped over and made the hills seem as if they were laughing.

It had been toward the middle of June when she'd seen the grass flower into bluish—almost peacock-blue—blossoms.

Like a phosphoric sea continues to portray itself, the grass was continuous with none of the monotony of a color.

'I have lost the respect of the color,' she thought.

A DARK, DRIZZLY MORNING. UNN, IN HER CHAIR,
WAS RELISHING THE QUIET.

One bird chirped with a sweet nonchalance.

It was just a chirp yet Unn's body flushed in the
pleasure of it.

After awhile she noticed a pattern—several chirps
then stop, several chirps then stop. It was slow. So
slow that when it started back up, there was the sense
that even the bird was a little surprised.

“Perhaps the bird is tired.” Though it didn't sound
tired.

Her mind drifted off to the many things that might
have made the bird tired.

o

“That was a good sleep.” Unn roused herself slowly.
The smell in the air was heavenly.

One white azalea streaked and stained with
crimson—she could swear she saw it rise, hovering in
the air, as the moon played with its petals.

Washing felt pleasant. Fibers of light attached to
early hours of day looked to Unn to have already
accomplished day.

She had a sudden desire to sew.

o

October passed and the rains settled in.

The sky was full of caws and leaves.

Witnessing the hill fall strangely silent, its subtle way
of heightening a final strain of light.

Still the shadows between some branches laid
promiscuous, and to her sense redolent, super-
shadows on the undergrowth.

“It’s freezing!” Unn muttered as the hygienist snapped a bib around her neck.

“Is it possible to turn that off,” she persisted. The girl was behind her, arranging something on a tray.

“Off? I don’t know. Maybe.”

Unn, tilted back by this time, tracked down the vent.

She hadn’t thought to bring a sweater.

Her chair faced a window against which a fluffy pine branch swayed. One huge cone was opening its wings. She could actually see inside the dark, cavernous fruit.

Since the office was small and the branch huge, it fairly filled her view.

Around twenty minutes passed.

Now the dentist was leaning over the spot, probing it with a pick.

“It’s what we call a ‘gum boil.’ It’s infected,” he said.

Perhaps because of the pressure in her mouth, she felt a little giddy.

A spray of white light flowed past her closed eyelids—a spray rising from behind a mammoth body.

The dentist, turned away, was saying something she didn't catch.

It had been spotted and the beach closed. The whole town was waiting for it to reappear, maybe closer in.

“There was only one left in the storeroom,” his assistant said, reentering the room. She was jotting something on her pad.

It was high noon and the whale had jumped such that for all the world there was just the spray, the light and the blue flesh of its great body.

The dentist was handing her a mirror.

“This tooth has already had a root canal. It means the root must be dead and bone is being reabsorbed. That's what creates the wobbling and consequently the gum boil.”

The fat feathery pine with branches that looked like arms was waving wildly.

Unn got home late. Ezekiel's door and window were open and she was sleeping soundly under a pleasant cross-breeze.

Ezekiel, never home, always kept her door closed.

"She had a root canal. The periodontist squeezed her in. She came home about an hour ago." Töl was whispering lest she wake Ezekiel up.

Stunned, Unn said nothing.

Lately the girl had seemed more and more agitated.

"Hello," she'd one evening early.

Her discomposure showed.

"Best leave it," Unn thought, and said nothing.

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL EVENING, MILD AND STILL.

“It falls into different zones of emotional timing,” Ezekiel mused as her train sped forward.

Aloneness, she felt, was settling into her body.

Her eyes fell on a small black purse with a long slender shoulder strap.

The purse looked new. Its shiny paten shone and the flap had the sort of clasp that gave it an exclusive air.

She found herself starrng. The strap flopped across the seat. When occasionally the car jerked, the strap slid forward.

It never slid backwards however.

To her surprise, at the next stop, a young woman in a pink fur coat came bounding through the car and grabbed the bag.

She cast a grateful look at Ezekiel as if Ezekiel had been its savior.

Beneath her coat she had on tights, and very tall, high-heeled boots that matched the bag.

That had been Saturday. The next day Ezekiel went for a foot reflexology treatment.

The girl at the desk spoke only a little English.

The masseuse placed a cloth over her eyes.

Removing her feet from a bath he began to rub, deeply, one at a time.

Ezekiel cried out and started calling for him to stop.

'Is this yours? Is this your bag, mister?'

It was the same bag with the long shoulder strap that she had seen on the seat of the train.

But he disappeared as soon as she passed the store.

Only the handbag was left in the middle of the road. A wad of bills jutted through the clasp.

'He stole it and is trying to pin the blame on me.'

Later she wondered if the store was really there. What would a stylish window with a mannequin be doing in the middle of a country road?

The mannequin was naked except for the purse. Its

long shoulder strap was slung across her chest so that the little bag, on the opposite hip, perched precariously.

The window, brightly lit, gleamed through the dark night.

'He might not have intended to drop the bag. Maybe he was running and hadn't realized that it was missing.'

The slosh of a wet towel on her legs, then the rubbing of her legs woke her.

"O-kay," the man said loudly, as he started to help her up.

There was a sweetness in his face with only a trace of age.

The sky was clouding at the end of a long late-autumn day.

Ezekiel was standing at the bottom of the hill enjoying the evening haze and the patches of moss that it was coloring with charcoal shadows.

Higher on the hill a single firefly beeped.

She stared unblinking at the pines where she had seen it.

A second beep from the moss. Its light, also bright, also quickly vanished.

“Are you just standing there?” It was Unn.

“I thought I saw some fireflies.”

“Fireflies?”

She was less and less distinguishable from the hill’s general undergrowth.

The Sound of White

IT STARTED SNOWING JUST AS EZEKIEL WAS GETTING UP. She saw it start. The very first flake.

Then it snowed all day and on into the night. There was a vast depth to its reflection on the hill far to either side.

“Is that a wren?” It was perched on a branch. A starling too was whistling and talking.

It was alone, but not solitary. The wren on the branch had been solitary.

She'd woken up feeling low and the last fragment of a dream—one of those stupid dreams—something about bathrobes a street person was selling.

She brushed her teeth gloomily. The house was still with a soft sense of nothing.

Her candle had blown out. She stared at its charred and drooping wick.

The candle was new. And fat. Its shrimpy little wick suddenly looked ridiculous.

o

Finally the snow stopped. Each tree stood under a thick coating of white.

Ezekiel, having stepped outside, was taking it in slowly.

The quiet of the snow . . . she watched some flakes swirl jauntily upwards.

“They seem lonely. They seem separate from the sky.”

Indeed as she came nearer, the flakes, as if hoarding their brightness, retracted to a looming void.

*The memory of void, not as a sound but of far-off light,
a distant cold light.*

*A face, also cold, was at once in front of her and, at the
same time, afloat at the foot of the sky.*

It had pale cheeks and cropped hair.

*From the window of a train she'd watched the image
drain into a flat, dispiriting landscape.*

*Factories and the chimneys of factories had sprung up
and silently vanished.*

*Ezekiel knew that each one spoke of many lives, yet at
dusk, against the withered plain, they seemed empty.*

*The train too was empty, the light inside dim. Its
emptiness, like the land's, droned on endlessly.*

o

“Have I ever not been?” It occurred to her that her whole life could be seen as a defense against admitting it.

Her loneliness and lethargy like an icicle.

It resided in the air but it resided in her skin and beneath her skin, as if she'd been born in precisely this atmosphere.

The bright stars too suddenly looked like icicles.

o

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Luciano’s voice was low.

The night was clear with a brisk, soft wind.

“You can see each individual star.”

“Even the silver dust,” she said, after a long pause.

Both were enthralled by the massive voluptuousness.

“I saw it as a kid. ‘That’s the Milky Way,’ my dad said.
But ‘milky’ didn’t seem right.”

“I know.”

“My eyes are watering it’s so cold.”

Her cheeks were flushed. He thought he saw them flicker for a second.

“It’s just my eyes. Everything else is fine,” she added, blinking rapidly as if the action itself would warm them.

“We’re lucky it’s so clear.”

Luciano didn’t feel like talking. He was looking at the sky *and* looking at Ezekiel.

Silence filled the air as though the universe were voiceless now.

As though a core, a point of reference, had irrevocably been torn away.

When it fanned out spreading higher and higher and higher, it left Luciano and Ezekiel in darkness.

“WHAT TIME IS IT?” UNN’S MIND LINGERED IN HER
FACE AND TIRED LEGS.

Clouds in a rising wind had moved across the sky,
hiding her and the sudden flooding in her body.

“It will fall again by morning,” she muttered.

The window was wet and rattling slightly.

It was an atmosphere more than a scene, like
everyone had gone but the place still held the embers
of them.

Her thoughts turned to a dream.

She had come into the kitchen and in a little tray her husband had laid out all their kitchen sponges—counter sponges, scrubbers, the floppy kind for bottles. They were bone dry as if they'd just been through the microwave. Intent on his task he didn't look up.

The previous evening Unn had read that it's good to put your sponges in the microwave.

Why had it never occurred to her?

In her dream it also hadn't occurred to her. It had occurred to her husband instead.

So attuned was he to her mind that even before she had discovered it, he was *practicing* her revelation.

Perhaps in her failure to put herself in his place, and guilt about that failure, she had simply made an example of the extent to which he had done the opposite.

Even in the dream—that it was couched in absurdities easy to dismiss—was it not because she feared uncovering this quality and finally, inescapably, having to face it?

And the fact that upon awakening she had difficulty remembering—that certain details and expressions had been blurred—might this be because at the moment of consciousness a kind of cunning went to work to erase its accusations?

When she finally got up, the earth was still. The day had the aspect of an end though it wasn't yet five.

It did not snow, either that night nor the next day. It was bitterly cold instead.

“Would you like to come?” Maybe it was nine. Ezekiel, sprawled before the hearth, was scouring a local paper.

“You’re going out!” She twisted around.

The scent of Ezekiel’s hair came to Unn pleasantly.

“She’s lonely. Her back looks lonely.”

“Okay. Yeh.” Her body was moving slowly, however.

She let the ‘yeh’ soak into the air as if it were the only word left.

“*That is a raven.*”

A large black bird from a snowy branch peered directly into her eyes.

It didn’t caw.

“It’s as strong as the snow, those eyes under the thick sky.”

Ezekiel cracked the frame.

An edge of anger seemed to emanate from its flesh but also an acceptance.

‘May my green feet fall,’ she prayed silently, passionately. Seeing them floating in a cloud of pairs, they looked nourished and watered there.

o

Shutting it again she wiped the wetness off her cheeks.

She was aware of the bird still motionless on the branch.

It's *not* cawing came loud to her.

She brought her hand to her face then drew a line across the pane.

The misted-over glass made her X into a word.

o

“That old worn bell sounds cracked,” she thought.
Luciano’s recording drifted from the living room.

The raven had flown away. A light through clouds
sparkled off the limb washing the spot clean.

The white of the snow and the black of the bird—
both had been still but the stillness moved in the
undercurrents of her life such that Ezekiel for a
second lost touch with her real life.

Without the bird would the snow exist?

Without the snow would she exist?

It was a realization more than a statement.

AND NOW THE SNOW WAS MELTING. They'd said six or seven inches but already there were puddles, and stacks of sludgy snowmelt.

"It's melted quite a lot," she thought, passing a number of snowplows.

It was the beginning of February. The light in the kitchen was low. The light outside as yet had no qualities.

Unn realized this without any reactivity.

It occurred to her that snow—it was its sound beating in her mind, warming her mind, that she felt so strongly.

It congealed in her chest, like mounds of sound piling up.

Actually there were two sounds, the piling up of snow and then the warm burning at the snow's center.

More than an image it was a premonition.

o

“The sky has turned such a summer color,” Unn
muttered, fluffing her pillows to sit awhile longer.

From a dawn sky tiny flakes fell.

Some landed on the pane, shattering, then dribbling
slowly.

One or two stuck. Flattened against the glass their
delicate shapes disappeared.

“They’re nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

Later, peering into day, there was just a little smudge.

“Well, it’s not freezing.” Thrudging through slush she felt the same as on a normal day.

She had on a hat, a scarf, and hand-knit mittens from Ezekiel.

“It’s almost too warm.” She pulled her hat higher on her head to expose it to the air.

The freshness of the snow made the eaves look even deeper, as if all the earth were at rest.

A flake landed on her tooth.

“The cold here is different. When you touch something, it feels different.”

She listened to the frost monotonously dribble from a tree.

Her mind was blank yet the blankness had a color.

Now there is sky away from any color.

And little bumps of grayish hardened snow.

As when winter is over and there are no birds.

The Deepest Blue of Sky

SOMETIMES THE DAY WOULD BEGIN WITH A PARTICULAR WARMING LIGHT, VERY CLEAR, ALMOST SUMPTUOUS.

“Why am I so happy?” Ezekiel thought, watching a rosel sun rise.

As she walked the thought returned, yet it didn't register as a thought. Instead it was a color.

On the sand lay a small starfish. Its rays were short. And it seemed young, hardly more than a baby.

“Should I put it back in the water?”

Two or three sea-birds, lustrous black, had their long necks thrust out on the waves.

o

“What an uncommonly lovely day,” Ezekiel reflected.

Really it was May but it was April with its turgid air and fat, plethoric clouds, barely blue, beginning to swell in space.

Shortly they formed banks. Mountains and towers of billowy whiteness.

Above them there was nothing. Above *that*, a few wafts of puffiness.

The next day there was rain, a hard spring rain.

Sandy water near the shore swished back and forth quietly.

“But it sticks to my toes and the holes between my toes!”

She wished she had a better word.

Five or six papery white flowers waved in the sea air.

She'd passed one earlier on her bike. It was bowing gracefully toward a stretch of barren shoreline.

Such an incredibly beautiful flower, slim and erect, seemed rather suited to a hot house than a rough, unprotected coast.

'She's beautiful alright, but . . . ' Ezekiel couldn't think of the word.

Still-wet hair, parted to the side, hugged a blondish head and fell to the back.

She'd been leaning against a railing. Elbows bent and anchored against her breasts, her hands were by her ears as if she were checking her earrings. Ezekiel didn't see any earrings though.

A shadow had crossed the girl making her all the more striking.

EZEKIEL, EZEKIEL, someone was calling.

She paused thinking she might have heard her name.

*She was immaculately dressed in her new white jacket
and the weather was perfect.*

Ezekiel turned over. The room was dark. Her clock
was facing away so she couldn't see the time.

The feeling of the caller shouting her name and the
pause, the vague turn of her body, as if she had heard
a sound, but no, it was nothing, and she'd walked on.

Immediately there was rain, a hard spring rain.

*She'd felt the presence of the rain, as if it were both
inside her and simultaneously falling all the way down
to the water.*

*EZEKIEL. EZEKIEL. The cantilena of the word was
like the muffled noise of drops.*

She peered at the sea barely visible in the mist.

It had the same clean beauty as the girl.

“IT’S PINK, ISN’T IT? THAT SKY IS PINK!” Unn was trying to remember if she’d ever seen such a sky.

The cabby said nothing though his neck swiveled to the left slightly.

“It’s pink! The sky’s never pink!” Amazed at her outburst, Unn slid back in her seat.

From the musty smell of his shirt she had gotten his “What-of-it.”

He left her at the sea. The sand, dead-white, sparkled in the sun.

Swarms of insects whirled around restlessly.

“They’re almost frantic,” she was thinking. Tiny wings crowded her legs.

Likewise the palms. She noticed that their tips, even on the stillest day, trembled slightly.

“Nathan. Point to the sun. Show me the sun.” A mother was holding a book in such a way that both of her children could see.

Her daughter who was older immediately pointed to the sun.

“No Maddy. It’s Nathan’s turn.” Nathan slowly put his finger on the drawing.

“That’s right. Maddy, point to the fence. Very good.”

“He’s smart isn’t he, Mama?” Maddy was turning away.

Nathan had turned and was giving his sister a hug.

“He likes me, doesn’t he?” Maddy’s face beamed.
She pulled her brother closer.

Maddy looked to be four. The boy, two or three. His hair was black. Both children were chubby.

“What a pleasant family,” Unn thought, descending a path toward the tulip field.

A small pond with several big fish lay to the right of the beds.

“I picked a good day,” she thought, wandering over to a stand of Asian Willows.

That night Unn had a dream.

A table with a lamp and a single glass of water stood at the head of a deathbed. The lamp, turned low, lent the room a quiet, attended-to feeling. As Unn approached she could see her mother's face, but its shape was like a tulip. The thin neck was bandaged and the head also, though it appeared in the shape of a tulip, resembled a cast.

The soul of the deceased flower . . .

She glanced at the clock.

Unn had always associated tulips with her young, beautiful mother.

As the woman aged their relationship had failed. Yet it would seem from the dream that something of the earlier warmth had been maintained.

As if the true nature of her mother had pressed the badness into a flower. On the outside there were bandages but on the inside, sculpting them to herself,

she had preserved to the end those aspects Unn had so adored.

Unn thought she recalled that the blankets were richly colored giving the whole bed the feeling of a garden.

EZEKIEL SAT AT HER MIRROR AND SLOWLY UNDOED
HER BRAID.

It was late and she was tired.

“My hair smells like train,” she said. “I’ll wash it in
the morning.”

When she sniffed at a bunch it smelled fusty.

“Oh I’m sorry.” Ezekiel paused. She sensed that she’d interrupted.

A girl, muttering something she didn’t catch, was half-facing a window.

Her dress was from the 50’s. It had capped sleeves and an empire waist that immediately flared into a calf-length skirt of butter yellow satin with an overlay of lace. The lace was scarlet and stopped just below the knee leaving a wide border of yellow in turn bordered by a very thin ribbon of red. But what stood out for Ezekiel was the hoop. Circling her hips it organized the drape such that from the band of the empire it fell, first softly, then billowed down gracefully.

The line was clean and fresh which the girl’s aristocratic, very long, somewhat nervous body addressed.

A huge yellow flower with two green sprigs perched on her ring finger.

“It’s gorgeous. She’s gorgeous.” For a minute Ezekiel

forgot what she'd come for.

“Are you leaving?” The girl was making an effort.

“I have a headache.” Ezekiel didn't want to talk but more than that she felt the girl didn't want to talk.

“It must be here somewhere,” she muttered, shuffling through what had become a gigantic pile.

She felt herself blushing.

“She had on sandals!” It was Ezekiel’s first thought the next morning.

Her naturally slim, straight toes had lain comfortably on the soles, so fine-boned and slender.

Ezekiel had averted her eyes. The exposure wasn’t being given to her and felt indeed too intimate for her.

It wasn’t until now, in an unguarded moment, that she even remembered that she had done that.

Her thoughts shifted to the girl. She wondered if the fact that her image remained within her . . .

She didn’t even know her.

What would it mean to know her? And how would she know that she knew her.

Her image of the girl flowed through time, but was her image simultaneously in the girl?

Of course time would flow differently in her.

Even if she knew her, she would never know how time flowed in her or how, within herself, the girl experienced time.

Ezekiel was a bird. She wore a chocolate-brown crêpe-de-chine pinafore with a black velvet yoke and feathers down the front.

'Just flutter around,' had been her instruction.

She remembered hovering near some pussy willows at stage left.

It was early afternoon on a beautiful springlike day.

A colony of rooks had distilled into the sky after hovering around the breakwater.

Immediately a gull treading the air, angling its body to a wave—she was betting with herself as to when it would nab a fish when it sailed backwards and upwards and vanished in a burst of sun.

“The certainty of that bird’s body, its musculature, its control, even its foggy color seems ideally suited to its life.”

Ezekiel stared out brutally aware of her own not-ideally-suited body.

ONE MAY MORNING UNN FELL INTO A HEAVY
INCOMPLETE SLEEP.

She'd been cleaning the house with the television on when her husband's face appeared on the screen. As soon as it was visible, a little mouse that he used to feed began to scramble up the wall toward his face. In its excitement it got very high up, impossibly high. It didn't squeak but its fur spread out and seemed to soften and thicken as if its body were purring.

She had thrown off all her covers. Her old body lay flat.

Time felt palpable in her chest.

She wondered if the fact that things ceased to exist in her meant that they ceased to exist.

Does time cease to exist or does it flow parallel to what looks like one's existence?

What is one's existence? What is the relation between time and one's existence?

Snatches of conversation, a strained trombone, the hilarious glee of laughter making its slow way to the river.

She was hanging out a window, trying to see through the masks and drowning voices, was it candy they were throwing and the children screaming and the float just beyond where she could still make out the mast?

Previously the parade had followed the narrow streets typical of downtown St. Louis.

She could almost hear the creak of the great wooden wheels turning at a crossroad.

KASURI DYEWORKS the sign announced. A faded cotton curtain flapped in a breeze.

Unn paused at the door. The young couple specialized in traditional Japanese fabric. Apparently, even in Japan, increasingly it was no longer obtainable.

Unn knew that they were thinking of closing the shop.

She glanced at the sign. Its weatherworn calligraphy bore a mark of standing but in the event, it seemed weak, as if the owners had lost their faith.

To the ordinary passerby it simply looked to be decorative.

KASURI DYEWORKS. The fabric shop had closed. In its place was a bike repair garage.

It seemed that the garage had bought the convenience store as well. A flower vendor stood in front with a small cart.

“All I have is some plain wildflowers,” the woman said when Unn approached, obviously looking to buy something.

“I like wildflowers. They look so fresh, as if they were just gathered this morning.”

“I go every morning, ma’am. I like wildflowers too.”

“The shop that was here before . . .” Unn began. She thought perhaps the woman might have heard what had happened to the couple.

She seemed not to be very intelligent. “These here,”—she was pointing to some lupine—“I’d recommend these ma’am. They’re very fresh.”

Ezekiel

is set in Minion, a typeface designed by Robert Slimbach in the spirit of the humanist typefaces of fifteenth-century Venice; it was released by Adobe Systems in 1990.

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