

redwind daylong daylong

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Gail Sher



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For Brendan

BOOK ONE

The Painter's oils were flat

The painter's oils were flat. Single-toned except for the dribble down the linen's periphery. Sometimes it soaked in. Or left wedges of naked cloth. Sometimes little globs of color piled up in one spot. Within the canvas, the crosshatch of opaque/transparent sections, like windows on clay or brownstone yellow.

Caressing the color or the movement of the color, framed or gathered up.

A woman will emerge at the edge of a skirt. Not the woman but her emergence is what the brush captures.



A gust of chirp. First light flickered through the trees and onto the drenched pavement. "It must have rained during the night," she'd thought, surprised, tiptoeing over the courtyard's shallow puddles.

Her pleasant dream resurged. Woodwinds, pianos,
violins, bassoons – in what had once been a rather large,
shabby room with Formica tables and linoleum floors.

Reaching toward the dream . . . slipping back . . .
toward the color of hay. Her urge toward this color,
its precise, crisp (nay brittle) mix of yellow, brown
and green.

What did it hold, she wondered.

Black sky and whirling flares

Black sky and whirling flares tailgated her – some place. Should she stop here? There was nowhere else, but “here” seemed like it was still road. She slowed down. Her hands trembled in the spinning lights.

New sun oozed its way over slimy land-fill water. Mount Tam yawned like a cat behind the Golden Gate.

The previous day, as she’d gotten out of her car, a sable cat, comfortably curled on a neighboring hood, had stared her down. “What’s he doing here?” she’d found herself wondering. She imagined some scenario where the owners had run back to their apartment for a moment, but when she’d thought about it, it made no sense. They would have left it inside the car. Still, the cat seemed settled, not about to budge.

Slowly the tears formed.

Wind howled and pellets of rain

Wind howled and pellets of rain – bop bop bop.
The world was black. Her neighbor's light, off.

She lay still. The window above her bed was partially raised. Sheer curtains fluttered, then poofed crazily over her head. Shriill wind sounded like a cat.

Spray, first a film then dribblets down her neck and onto her sheet. Wind, aired out, smelled clean as it poured mistlike through the slot in the dark glass. Then it pooled and felt sloshy.

The front part of her room faced a quiet street. She rarely pulled the blinds. An evergreen had blown across one of the windows. From her bed it resembled a (huddled) homeless person.

Just then she heard a cat. A real cat.

Pink light from a street lamp distilled its way through the storm. A pack of dogs was pacing under it, lurking, carousing, sniffing. One sharp nerve panted its way over two front lawns.

The floorboards creaked. “The old woman is restless,” she thought, helpless to even think of assisting her.

The four children

“The four children playing twenty questions downstairs in the children’s room could be heard clearly on the second floor.” Such was the opening sentence of (in her opinion) a way-too short story.

The quickest child turned out to be the youngest, a second-grader, who correctly guessed the word “raindrops” from four hints. The precocious boy’s mother was insisting that the neighbor’s child (the child who asked “Does it sound like – drip drip drip?”) had clearly known the answer and “let” her child win. “If rain makes noise, it’s raindrops,” she’d said.

“That’s not true. The sound of rain and the sound of raindrops aren’t the same,” retorted a supporter of the second-grader – not his mother – who, it turned out, was, to begin with, embarrassed by her other (older) child’s choice of the unpleasant word “raindrops.” She felt that the neighbor’s youngster, knowing that her boy (when leader) always picked unpleasant words, would easily have guessed “raindrops.” It was obvious to her, and therefore doubly humiliating, that he had more or less “given” her little one the glory of winning.

The squabbling of the children plus the symbolic distances of both the parental eavesdropping and subsequent commentary, duplicated later in their

own marital squabbles and distances, fascinated her. But the real hold, what carried over to the next day and even the next, was the author's unequivocal distinction between the sound of rain and the sound of raindrops. Of course it was so, but she had never thought about it.

“Well, that isn't entirely true,” she thought, now that she was thinking about it. Quite often, especially at the junctures of the day – dawn, dusk, midnight – she found herself particularly relishing the multi-layered – “screened”? – sounds of gushing rain, the whoosh of it, against the weighty drip drip drip from the eaves. She would actually stop work, close her eyes and listen.

Could “raindrops” (the word) be ugly? (She had been reading a translation.)

Kawabata's fifty-ninth birthday

Kawabata's fifty-ninth birthday had been only a month away when the collection of stories was published. That was her age now, she thought, unsure of the import.

The story, entitled "This Country, That Country" was the byline of an article featuring England's Princess Margaret who apparently had changed her mind about her betrothal to Group Captain Townshend.

Four years previous (while visiting Balmoral) the lovers had hoisted a stone onto a mound of similar stones, publicly acknowledging their feelings. The article showed a picture of the very mound in question. The journalist made the point that while it was impossible to tell which stone the Princess and Group Captain Townshend had added to the pile, since none looked as though the Princess alone could have lifted it, they must have lifted it together.

When reading the article, Takako, Kawabata's heroine, had tried to picture the Princess as she would have looked hoisting the stone onto the mound in tandem with the Group Captain, but the image that came was simply an image. Whereas the previous day Takako had felt sorry for the Princess (who was forced by church law and royal custom to abandon her beloved) that

feeling was now gone. Her empathy itself seemed like a foreign story.

That an image which one day earlier had held this person enthralled was today simply an image – that the empathy she had felt (not hard to imagine feeling for one pushed to such an extreme) had evaporated – the accuracy of the depiction jolted her.

Rich night air

Rich night air, liquid air, soft and bubbly (champagne air).

Soon it would be morning air.

The memory of that other air, close to morning, but not as close. Funny how a few hours made such a difference.

That other air had stars. So numerous their ring echoed through the mountain valley. Indeed you could smell them. They lay at your feet throbbing.



Snails and roots. The dug earth exuding, breathing a calliope of themselves. She had belonged. Home was here, though she knew nothing about the land.

Gushy mud. Slobbery and clay-filled. The wetness had oozed its way inside, soiling her. (The mold as she dried.)

Be sleeping in it. Upright, though not at first. Upright walking and at first seeming-to-be.

But that was not the night's fault. The shiny stars would have held her had she been weightless. Goey mud was burdensome in addition to being black, skulking.

So what was the dread? Why did she fear the black part of day?



A lamp draws to it night. A collection of lamps, night and the smells of night-pushing-on-toward-morning and light and morning-sounds already throbbing. Making things.

(A policy helps. “I will do this under these circumstances.”)

That other air held policies out. “Here,” it said. Here she felt none of that.

The rain had stopped

The rain had stopped. She plumped her pillows and lay back. “It must be a new moon,” she thought. Not a shred of light in the sky.

A wave of anxiety pulsed through her body then lodged in her abdomen and inner arms. Like a short, its after-buzz a limp shivering splattering through her being.

Was she worried about something? She couldn’t tell, which was odd.

She ran through the gamut of her potential worries. “Moon or not, my mind howls,” she thought picturing a coyote’s throat, curved and taut beside a cactus.

Once she’d found a pelt. It was warm as if a hunter had recently skinned it. When she’d taken it to be cleaned, the proprietor had said, “It’s coyote. I’m sure of it.”

The skin had been cream-colored with beautiful brown spots. Strange. She had always pictured coyotes as gray, light wolf-gray.

A gloomy day

“A gloomy day,” she thought, brushing her skin in its quiet light. She opened the window to a moil of birds, peeping, screeching. Sun spilled through the vines.

She shut her eyes, tracing the flickers through the flesh of her closed lids. Dawn clung to its last full flush, gleaming brilliant light.

Nothing was in her mind. She wasn’t even sure what drew her to the window.

Earlier she had pulled her car into the garage. Following its rising gate, she’d caught sight of a woman partially behind a curtain. She had felt the woman’s eyes drilling into her features, porcelain pupils in the pre-dawn shadows.

“It’s good to brush your skin,” a polarity therapist had told her. Recently, a massage therapist had told her the same thing. Victorian women brushed their skin. “And they were famous for their glowing skin!” the therapist had exclaimed, pointing to the places she had not brushed carefully enough.

She herself couldn’t tell. She’d started brushing because it felt good. Her limbs tingled. “They’re smiling,” she thought.

“Animals love to be brushed,” the massage therapist continued, but when she’d pushed for a reason, she simply got, “It makes their skin happy.”

Had the therapist tried to explain it scientifically, she probably wouldn’t have paid attention. As it was, her answer had instantly seemed right. Ever since, she’d brushed her skin first thing in the morning.

She vividly recalled the day her polarity therapist had said, “You should brush your skin.” She’d felt bewildered and mistrustful. “Why?” she’d thought. “What good would it do?” Her belief had been that though it may be beneficial, it wasn’t worth the effort. Even as he talked, inside she knew she wouldn’t do it. Indeed, she’d forgotten about his suggestion until now.

Lately, she has become aware of this mistrustful side to her nature. Having thought of herself as erring on the naïve side, it came as a shock. Sure enough, she watched herself mentally be quite stern with an acupuncturist who was running late. Only an accident prevented her from expressing her annoyance.

The acupuncturist had been highly recommended by a person she respected. “He mostly treats lamas and other spiritually developed beings,” the person

later remarked. Right then she'd felt her position change.

Probably she had not brushed her skin because she hadn't trusted the polarity therapist. "What does he know?" is closer to what she'd thought. All these years she hadn't admitted it.

A full moon dripped

A full moon dripped through the gray-green dawn. She lay still, enjoying the warmth (it was just beginning to graze her room) and intense quiet.

A part of her loved waking with the light, with the birds and early morning sounds. An equally strong part preferred puttering about in utter darkness.

“I almost forgot about blue sky,” she heard herself murmur, glancing at a portion through the trees. An inexplicable tiredness had crept back into her body.

She wondered what kind of day it would be. (There had been drops on her window earlier but then they had stopped.)

And what was this resistance that kept coming up, the nagging, a tangible depression in her heart?



The odd leftovers from her dream . . . the cap of a woman pianist and Tibetan hat of a bass player.

Her grandfather had been rummaging through her closet, its numerous wire drawers full of nightgowns and house dresses. He couldn't find what he wanted and seemed displeased with her, as if her choices had been wrong.

He chose something pink, very short, with no bottom. When her grandmother had remarked, he shushed her in a manner that said, “I can’t be bothered to explain the obvious to you.”

She lay there recalling the disgruntled face of her grandfather.



Whiskers was the word that came to mind. Perhaps because he was short. (His gray and white scratchy-looking hair.)

So that her impression was of rather a gruff person. That had been confirmed once, over the phone, when, to her surprise (she had asked that his shop make a small adjustment in its routine) he began screaming at her and slammed down the receiver.

Yet examining his collection of carved rosewood animals – turtle, snake, rhinoceros, porpoise, rabbit, albatross – buttery and gleaming – something clean filled her chest.

“They’re not for sale,” his tall wife (her woolen trousers also scratchy-looking) offered.

Though she admired them, she wouldn’t want to “own” one, “owning” implying an emotional

investment. At her age she needed not to overwhelm her heart.

She guessed his wife was Scandinavian, probably Swedish, since the shop serviced Swedish cars. She seemed wholesome or that in her youth she had been.

Blue

“Blue! Are they really blue?” She had never heard of blue tulips.

It was exceedingly early in the year, even for the precocious tulip.

She looked more carefully at the four small stems. One of the heads was opening. Sure enough it was blue. Or sort of blue-violet.

The pot stood on a wheelable reading stand, a segment of which tilted. A person wanting to read could adjust her book at just the right angle, while still having tea and some writing utensils, let’s say, at her fingertips.

Or one could simply station the cart alongside one’s chair. For awhile now, it had stood in front of a window next to a chaise lounge. Soft morning light beamed in through the blinds.

Several days earlier she had placed a pot of clamorous red tulips on the dining room table. Their yellow centers had been shedding and some of the petals looked loose.



And now that the flowers were falling, the black earth in the grove’s shadow looked white.

So that when she passed through the garden, hours before dawn, the vista was ghostlike.

Four small, softly curved petals flared out on the sod. Their stamens were long. “They look like they’re stretching,” she thought as she bent over to examine the blossoms. Some stuck together in little piles. Others formed a cross.

“When had they started to fall?” Strange that she couldn’t remember. They hadn’t accumulated. Though dozens fell, they seemed to simply melt.

She wondered if it happened this way every year only she forgot. These gorgeous flowers bloomed and fell on the periphery of her mind.



Mist cowed the sky, the grass, the creepers and, seemingly, the old man. At 5:00 A.M. most of the residents were asleep. “What could he be doing?” she asked herself as she softly said, “Good morning.” Hadn’t she heard that he was unwell or becoming unwell?

“How does one become unwell?” she wondered as it registered that he had been alone, disheveled, wearing only undershorts.

High beams hardly helped. “It’s only vapor,” she said aloud, rolling out of the drive. It felt like molasses.

Slow birds swinging low, then soaring upwards toward the navy light.

She scanned the rear-view mirror. The last time, just as she'd approached the tunnel, someone had cut her off, almost causing an accident.



Not a beer belly. Which is hard. Like an accessory or lump. No. The mist's billows were more like the soft rolls of a fat man's stomach, tubular and large as they flair from the groin.

Fog was thick all over the city. "HEAVY MIST ON BRIDGE" flashed in neon on the beltway. Even so, traffic flowed smoothly.

She'd glanced up at the sky. Tremulous smoke spewed from – she'd thought a building, but nothing was burning. No sirens, no flames. "What could it be?" she murmured to herself. She had never seen fog so boisterous.

Fog developed throughout much of the San Francisco Bay region Sunday night and has continued into the Monday morning commute hours. Visibilities of 1/4 mile or less have been reported at several locations.

Areas of dense fog are expected to continue through about 10 A.M. this morning.

Visibility in fog can suddenly drop to near zero making traveling hazardous at any speed. Be prepared for sudden visibility changes. Drivers should use low beam headlights and allow extra time to reach their destination.

The newspapers were covered. Except in the higher wind-sheltered valleys, fog prevailed across the bay.

Listening carefully she could hear the shriveled berries from her neighbor's hollies rolling around the driveway.

She nestled into her robe, scrunching her feet in a woolen throw. "Strange. I missed the whole thing!"

That morning she had gotten up before dawn and driven straight through the fog bank. Of course she had noticed damp, eerie, highly volatile mounds, but she had just assumed that that was the way it always was. Lights from other cars had made the lanes easy enough to see. She would never have guessed that the situation was building to a crisis.

The sun cup

“The sun cup,” said the writer, “is in the evening-primrose family. Sprawled flat on the ground in a rosette of leaves, it is among the earliest flowers of spring.”

She had been reading the bulletin while standing in a post office line. A Monarch, a swallowtail, a bumblebee and big black beetle hovered around a feather.

“Only on the coast from southwest Oregon to San Luis Obispo, and only where soil, sun and moisture mix in perfect sun-cup combination has this flower been able to survive,” the botanist continued. While its yellow petals glow, its seeds lie buried in a sturdy capsule.



She peered out at the new grass. “The hill is awake! Or beginning to awaken,” she corrected herself. It had been dead for a long time.

Soft breeze. Mudflats and the birds of the mudflats, their smell so fresh and distinctly springlike. A Monarch flapped around a tree.

Will the eucalyptus last? She’d read that they, along with three kinds of ivy, threatened the hill’s rich oak forest.

Rapacious thornless blackberry vines threatened the willows along the creek.

If residents cut them just before blossoming, the plants would “lose heart,” the bulletin had stressed. Their rallying-power was limited and concerned citizens needed to capitalize on that weakness if they wanted to save their rare orchids and Nootka roses, for example.

Out of 134 native plants (including 2 orchids, 3 different roses and 7 kinds of fern), 8 may have already disappeared and several others had only a few remaining specimens.

She was worried about “her” hill – its flower-filled meadows, thickets and tree-lined riparian corridors.

She lay back. A virile pinaceous scent of the sweet trees lining her drive plus the fragrant flowering wild white Pink wafted through her window. From a distance the meadow looked patched with snow.

A few drops

A few drops splashed against the glass. The weatherman said rain and here it was.

A slight breeze had, a few hours earlier, carried the smell of spring. Darkening sky and now a full-fledged downpour brought the season home.

One bird chirped. A moan almost. Had she heard it before? It seemed to be coming from her bushes.



Her dream in the turbulent night, sprawled, under sea, though the sea was housed. Its mansions covered blocks, rolling hills, flowered valleys, tree-lined slopes. Water-full rooms themselves held aquariums – odd little coral fish with lacy serene bodies.

Human inhabitants, one or two. All care-takers of sorts. All silent. She, a guest, drifted across the august grounds.

A cruel wind blew. Gray fungus, like drooping beards, and creepers recondite in the native forest.

The air was filled with the scent of plants.



Dawn's pale light eased over the carpet. Bitter air blew across the hill, puffed the faded jacket of an old Chinese

woman. She looked sad. And terribly foreign. Black cap, bangs, but too old for bangs. Too heavy. (Her lumbered stride.)

The dove's moan lingered, beyond the eaves, above the shrieks of coarser appetites. The buzzing she'd been feeling in the center of her forehead, for days unassailable, now gone.

A distant shower, its blue slanting streak, arose far away, across the horizon. Her dark eyes scanned the sea and the bare trunks of trees.



"We have ants in our kitchen," grouched a young Japanese mother to her condominium's manager, a surly man, with few "people skills." He passed her on to Mrs. King.

Mrs. King was president of the Homeowner's Association. Monthly meetings were optional, but, unfortunately for the mother, it was here that quotidian concerns found their rightful airing.

Overhearing this, her mind, for no reason at all, leapt to someone who, when asked what he "did," answered that he worked in advertising. While technically this was true, his real job was sales rep. He made the round of drug stores and pharmaceuticals introducing

pharmacists to new brands of medicines. Since the average person had little information when it came to selecting the right antihistamine, for example, clerks were often solicited for a recommendation. Clerks knew what their sales rep told them. This man's job was to sweet talk clerks.

On the fourth floor

On the fourth floor was a sunny room with plants and women sleeping. On sofas, on rugs, in armchairs, in hammocks. The center provided this space explicitly for rest. Women are tired, they'd said.



A cool breeze sloughed its way through the late August afternoon. "Go on. Get up. Get on with you now," (urged its unforgiving mother). It limped along. Not quite ready.

A young breeze. Her young nasturtiums likewise were toppling. Once they had sprouted they shot up strong, a little belligerent, jockeying their way toward the sun. First one fell. Now the other six were cowing. "The thought of flowers weighs them down," she persuaded herself.

She bent over the pot where seven days before she had planted seven seeds. "Germination takes eight days," the package had said. She had wondered how it could be so exact.

She had bought the seeds after reading an article on nasturtiums featuring many wildly-colored examples. "What stunning flowers!" she had thought. As a child she had not liked nasturtiums. Before she'd read the article, she'd considered them a nuisance.

“I’ll take these,” she’d said selecting a small bag of gourmet-looking pellets.

Her excitement was uncharacteristic. It was also uncharacteristic for her to choose seeds over seedlings.

Skinny stems, snappy petals, billowy leaves straggling over the clay pot’s edge. The directions had said, “Do not feed for flusher flowering.” “Good,” she thought. “They want neglect.”

“Annuals.” It meant they would bloom and die. But she couldn’t picture it. More likely they’d bloom, die out for the season, then rebloom the next spring. “But that’s what ‘perennials’ do!” she blushed.



She gazed across her room. From the window rose the sound of wheels bumping against the courtyard path. “Mail time,” she thought, glancing at her watch. It was almost six. “Six is like tomorrow!” she inwardly screamed. From the time she’d moved in, delivery had been an irritant.

But she was tired of getting upset. She had dutifully filed a complaint with the city’s postal service. A very slow man had recorded all the minutiae and assigned her a case number. That was months before.

Her thoughts veered to another incident, which (like the mail) had excessively affected her.

At the home of a friend she had seen a rectangular bottle plugged with a large cork. “Czechoslovakian cut glass,” her friend had said, empathizing with her visitor’s awe. Its distinctive emerald shade was impossible to duplicate.

However, it wasn’t just the color, though its luster and clarity were certainly unusual. Each of the glass’s tiny indentations had acted as a mirror. When light reflected off of them, especially soft late-afternoon light, a trajectory of objects (in varying sizes and intensity) had gleamed through its prisms. A cigarette lighter, for example, swaggered in glowing curvatures as its black engraved initials danced hula-like through the dust-filled living room air. Looking at it from the viewpoint of her velvet chair, she had felt a surge of energy well up.



Reading *The Sound of the Mountains* by the Japanese novelist Yasunari Kawabata had brought to her attention the fact that she was more impressionable than she’d thought. The degree to which the characters in the book wrestled inside her – for days a part of her consciousness remained absorbed and distracted –

was quite alarming. Shingo, for example, age 62, around whom the story revolved, held the image of a girl, now dead, to whom he was attracted in his youth, closer to his heart than the members of the family he had borne by marrying her considerably less handsome sister. As a result of his passivity, the marriages of both his children were flawed. Even now, as head of the family, he ought to intervene on their behalf, yet time goes by and he does nothing.

As wanton acts of his grandchildren caused the death or near death of others, his own part in it shocked and immobilized him. The cumulative effect, for example, of his preference for his son, out and out favoring him over his disappointingly homely daughter, pointed an accusing finger toward him, Shingo, in the lunatic behavior of his daughter's even homelier offspring. This understanding arose not so much as a thought as a gradual accretion whittling away at his conscience.

For days now, like Shingo, she had felt a mounting disparity between her actions and her confidence. Repercussions of one's smallest deed she realized (and can an interchange with another ever be considered small?) reverberate to infinity. There is only one opportunity to exert control and that is over the initial idea. One must be vigilant about one's state of mind and she wondered if she had the energy. "Merely thinking these things

does nothing,” she muttered out loud as she straightened the house, fluffing the pillows and emptying the wastebaskets. “That is precisely what Shingo does!”



“The way the human beings carry out each others’ unconscious lives can be staggering,” she mused as she toted a rather light load of groceries home from the grocery store. “Shuichi, for example, newly married to sweet and lovely Kikuko, blatantly goes out on her. Meanwhile, his father, scrupulous even in his dreams about remaining faithful to his homely wife, has longed for her sister who died at the peak of intense, and for Shingo compelling, beauty. It was the sister he had wanted to marry and one supposes that it was the gesture to remain connected with her that after her death he married her less attractive sibling. Even the memories of her that he and Yasuko share, Shingo remains silent about. Thus he presents himself as someone who long ago cared whereas in truth the image of Yasuko’s beautiful sister is rarely far from his mind. Was it on the altar of the palpable though well-manicured passion of the father that the son sacrificed the fidelity of his own marriage vows, not really understanding this, not really choosing, and not really being chastised by his father who on some level ‘got’ that this was an enactment of his own unfinished emotional business, however inept

and aborted? Kinu, the other woman, of lower class and education, exacted the greatest authority. Helpless though she was to change the misguided circumstances of her husband's death, when it came to Shuichi she was pretty much the master, at times flagrantly so."



It would be easy to criticize Shingo for his procrastination. His wife certainly did. Yet one sees in her very criticism a shortsightedness that is pitiful. Shingo's paralysis, indeed sometimes it did seem to take these proportions, objectively was inexcusable, yet he had found himself using this very term, paralysis, regarding his son's moral and emotional life. Shingo, unable to move forward, was at least the more conscientious. With information surging through him at such a pace, immobility was fortitude. Taking action before one is ready, forecloses and thereby stunts. "It can actually be cowardly," she was thinking out loud. The connection between action and cowardliness (which heretofore she had associated with inaction) startled her.

Is it raining?

“Is it raining?” She thought she felt a drop.

The day had been clear. In fact, though it was only January, there had been a moment earlier when it had actually felt like spring. “How could it be raining already?” she blurted out, glancing at the hill.

The night before she had turned on the television, for the news presumably, but really to hear the weather forecast:

The system that brought wintry weather to the deep South yesterday will push off into the Atlantic bringing breezy and cool conditions [it began]. High pressure will provide sunny to partly cloudy skies for most of the West.

“They’re always wrong,” she’d reminded herself, validating her instinct to distrust the very report she had stayed up late to watch.

One drop and then another grazed her arm. She was leaning over the edge of her porch, admiring a row of lilies the gardeners had put in. None of them were blooming, but the lively green of their straight-backed leaves was splendid against the russet mulch.

The gardeners were Mexican. They chatted in Spanish as they worked. This year they had installed an elaborate

sprinkling system over whose nighttime purr she had already grown quite fond.

She looked more closely at the hill, its jaundiced mud, sickly, too shiny, moments from sliding away from itself. “One more drop could be disaster,” she thought, peering again at the sky.

“There it is. There’s the rain.” Her upstairs neighbor banged his window shut. She couldn’t hear his wife’s response.

Once a spigot had broken. Water gushed onto her porch around three A.M. She had lain there wondering what the pounding could possibly be when it had stopped, suddenly, and she had fallen back to sleep.

The next night it happened again. Even though she got up and turned on the porch light, she could see nothing of the source of the water.

Snow fell softly

Snow fell softly on the dark curly road. She stood in the doorway, pressed between the room's warm glow and the street's empty whiteness. Flanked by sleep, by the still-silent night, she slipped between the stars and sheer hard glass like the first person on earth.

(Slip-skating a delicate swoop down the road's center.)

Silence warmed. Powdery snow splayed across the world (air-brushing the world) as if to obliterate the previous canvas.

She grabbed the sky and shook it.

Smudges of cinders. One with a little boot.



It was New Year's Day. She could stay in her room and listen to the lovely drops endlessly falling.

She gazed at the walls. Her room was a veritable fabric museum. Stray pieces from who knows where hung from every available precipice. Spareness, as an aesthetic, leaves out the human being she had discovered.

There it was. A yellow post-it. Sticking out from the side of her book like a tongue.

Probably it was not at all the point that Kawabata was making, but she couldn't help noticing the consistency with which his hero misinterpreted seemingly transparent comments of his heroine.

Her remark about the snow on Mount Fuji's summit, for example. Snowy white, it melded with the clouds, both contrasting with an overcast sky. Multiple times he extrapolated on the implications of her intentions toward him, based on her reportage of the previous day's news article, whereas she had made clear – “You didn't? You must not get the paper we get.” – that she took for granted that he had read the same thing.



She had awakened before dawn, a pitch black Saturday.

The characters in her book (old lovers who had not seen each other for years) were spending a night at an inn. The room they had been assigned had a grove in its garden. One entire wall was shaded by leaves.

Neither of them knew the names of the trees but gazing at the expansive trunks jutting up against their verandah had helped them relax.

She imagined the two of them sprawled out in their kimonos, enjoying the eucalyptus or possibly

redwoods. She pictured redwoods. Gnarly limbs with soft reddish bark.

The day, finally, a rainy winter one, had turned quietly back to darkness.



“This year seemed quieter,” she thought, referring to the holidays, but even as she thought it, she sensed she may have felt similarly last year.

Still, they were over and she was glad. To gaze at the hill or shut her eyes and just enjoy the afternoon sun . . . which suddenly spread, lifted its face and blazed brightly.

She sat very still. It had rained all week. She coveted her brief outdoor moment.

Like butter, the softness extremely pleasurable. A Monarch, huge and alone, was flopping around a tree.

A phone rang. Not hers.

Earlier she had again been feeling critical of Kawabata’s obsession with inns and lovers (his ubiquitous intriguing woman) when it dawned on her how “in his stride” he seemed. Could it be that writers had one or two subjects within the scope of which they worked out their artistic task?

Stealthily, like a cat

Stealthily, like a cat. Morning fog wove in and out of her vision.

“Am I sane?” One minute she could easily see ahead of her. The next, cars wobbled across her lane.

It reminded her of the way she massaged her thoughts (a habit she’d become aware of recently). One would arise. She’d kneaded it, modeled it, remodeled it – not obsessively but gently – till it released some subtle information.

She had been reading about postures that explored the gamut of one’s body-architecture. Each person may inhabit all forms and shapes but typically selects only a few. New poses encourage new self alignment (physically, like thought-massaging did mentally, she’d concluded).

She had been doing yoga, folding forward, enjoying the clean scent exuding from her tights. Indeed, she remembered the precise moment.



“Peacocks,” he’d said, “both kill and eat poisonous snakes.” He’d smiled enigmatically. “So the posture in their name is about digestion.”

As soon as he’d said that she recalled her dream.

The shop of her favorite clothing designer was having a sale. She had been excited to attend but when she got there felt embarrassed by the scarcity of items. There were several rooms with wooden floors and many tables set up, but most of them were bare. The feeling was not that they had already sold a lot. Rather that they had very little to sell.

In the dream, she'd connected this sense of barrenness with the terrorists' attack on Manhattan's Trade Center. She thought she had heard that the designer's entire fall line (which originated in New York) had had to be cancelled. Since none of the proprietors seemed concerned, she felt reluctant to draw it to their attention.

She'd wandered into the back where she found a beautiful gold silk blouse. Draped on a table over a similar one in silver, both looked lovely against the dark mahogany. She had been holding the gold one up to her chest, checking the mirror to see if it would suit her, when the salesperson she knew best said, "Don't buy that." She hadn't explained why.

She felt crushed but lacked the courage to argue with this person.

Her alarm had rung just as she "got" that she "got" to buy nothing. Nevertheless, the dream left a deep sense of satisfaction. "What a pleasurable dream," she'd

thought as she washed and dressed. But she'd forgotten about it till the teacher mentioned peacocks.

Later, in class, he'd asked for blankets. Everyone else already had one. As she'd made her way over to the shelf, she realized that earlier in her dream, she had also walked over to shelves fondling stacks (literally roll upon roll) of very dark, velvety-looking blankets. Since her dream shelves had been on the opposite side of the room, when she'd approached these real shelves, it seemed as if she were going the wrong way.

Suddenly the teacher had used the word "snot."

Before he'd said this she had been in a daze.



Sparrows in the rain. Their lively voices conjuring a sward, swings, children swinging (beside a row of flowers).

Opening her eyes, a dreary hill stared her down.

An image that stayed with her, strangely (because she had neither used it nor enjoyed it), was the yard of the house in which she had grown up – a patch of grass, a tree, flowers along the back. She'd rarely swung on the swings. While she'd carved her initials in the tree, she

much preferred climbing, playing, keeping close tabs on the amazing one across the street.

Knitting on the porch in the early morning light or on long summer afternoons beneath the slow ceiling fan. She had enjoyed that. (That porch overlooked leggy, shallow-colored zinnias.)

Above it was another whose cot she'd used on unbearably hot nights. Were it not for its screen, she could have pet the tree. It smelled heavenly and through its limbs she'd watched the sky, stars, moon, drifting clouds.

She had been driving in a car, slowing heading toward an intersection. A large white limousine in front of her had already stopped. It was a little to her left so that she could easily see its driver and the fact that it was empty except for piles of bed-rolls and sleeping bags in the back.

Mesmerized by the woman, she'd followed her into a side street. The woman pulled onto a rack (like the kind one sees at an automotive repair shop). She was still positioned to this woman's right thus blocked from turning left, the way she needed to turn and the only way the street (which had dead-ended) allowed one to turn. As it dawned on her that she was trapped, helpless to take care of an impending emergency, she woke up.

Once when she'd come home from school she'd found her mother lying on the couch, reading and eating brownies.

That was one thing. Another was baking cookies, liking the dough even more than the cookies, though they smelled yummy.

“Is there anything else? Think hard.”

“Do you remember turtles?”

“O my God! I adored, absolutely loved them.”

The dickey her mother recently sent her randomly came to mind. As a child she had worn dickeys with dyed-to-match sweaters. Mostly they were white with a textured finish, sometimes embroidered. A bottomless flap of approximately the same size slipped beneath the sweater's neck.

She recalled liking them but feeling sloppy when she actually had one on. The under part tended to sneak out and swing around so that its front ended up on the side or at least crooked. This new dickey was more like a sleeveless blouse with a cropped waist and no side-seams.

But what stood out in her mind (the thought that she kept massaging) had been what was revealed to her

about her mother's vision of her neck looking so much "nicer" covered. Indeed, her mother had referred to her "long slender neck" in the negative (as if it were a fault) whereas she had always been proud of her neck.

If anything, the dickey was a nuisance, hiding her neck and itching a little.

Daylight vanished

Daylight vanished in a swirl of brumous clouds.
Through her stained-glass window she had watched
them cruise, screening the stars, like brooding ghosts.

The smack of sheet on an upstairs banister whipped
then twirled into an argument with itself.

Marsh grass dozed in the heavy air. Exhaustion from
the day drained with the light and she fell asleep.

So soundly. Into the pit of silence.

Gulls. Their raucous laugh unheard, though high,
through the brackish air. She slept and dreamed of
seabirds, rising, falling, mingling in shards of crashing
sky-hewn waves. A tooled container, half-sunken near a
sandbar, bobbed its oily spillage.

The sky scudded past. Spasms of chimes in a powdery
wind. A sour smell, a soft mysterious rattling,
awakened her.

*Before her child wakes, a mother mentally makes the
shift. When his shadow sleeps, hers pauses. The stirring
of his shadow presses against her stillpoints (like a soft
admonishing hand). Space opens in her skull between
two waves where she prepares to cradle her son's
awakeness.*



The mist alive, so fresh on the green lawn. First light as it spread across the patio.

Not her patio. “Who sits on these redwood chairs,” she wondered. (The table in between with its pot of bulbs and pleasant view.)

Mountains humped the sky, a little like cows all brown and white and loafing. Moo. Moo. Leisurely absorbing new sun.

A deer and then its children – one, two graceful bones out on the glade.

The smallest sucked a leaf. (The wandering mother in a moment of reprieve as her offspring fed.)

Chewing, nodding, trying a drier bunch, a harder-to-reach, greener bunch. (*Deer nibble strawberries toward the echo of day-laborers.*)

A memory arose of her mother’s childlike body, sweet, like a roasted potato.



Birds madly roosting. Their clamor. In its abrupt absence, her mother’s lazy voice saying, “I don’t know” in answer to a question about her husband’s illness.

Her mother, usually an alert, extremely clever woman, over matters that concerned the health of the person about whom she says “When he goes, I go” suddenly went dumb.

“I don’t know,” she drawled at any query more complicated than the time and place of his surgery. She was not even sure what organ was being operated on.

The peculiar quality of her “I don’t know,” a sleepy yawn, more appropriate to a premature “What would you like for breakfast?” – the tone conveying, “It’s too early to tell” superimposed on “Don’t rush me. Come back later.”

“Her daze is probably an inability to cope,” she scolded herself. “She can’t face what might happen, so she doesn’t.”

But her mother’s unconsciousness bothered her. She had been too damaged by it to remain impartial.



Cheep. Cheep. She woke to the smell of spring.

A surge of joy – just before the (green and foreign) longing for her mother.

Who’d been fond of telling stories. Recently she’d told one of a child who’d fed squirrels. Only to be bitten.

The little girl had had to drag herself home, squirrel hanging from her bloody and dismembered fingers.

“I know someone who sews twelve hours a day,” her mother had added. “She sews on paper then photographs the paper. She’d sew on wood if she could.”



It was upon comparing the portrait she had made as a tribute to her recently dead mother with Nakamura Tsune’s *Portrait of His Aged Mother* that her insight slowly began to emerge. Whereas her portrait, sketched from an early photograph of her mother, made her mother seem younger and even more beautiful than she actually had been at the time the photograph had been taken, Tsune’s, completed while his mother was still alive, had been done in a simple style with dark, cold coloring. His stooped, emaciated woman, seated in profile against a half-wainscoted wall, prayer beads dangling from her wrinkled fingers, probably reflected Tsune’s feelings toward his own approaching death. Her painting, on the other hand, done while grieving the loss of her mother, her lover, and their miscarried baby, seemed shallow and self-indulgent by comparison.

Which was odd. How could one explain the fact that she, with her triple sorrow, had painted a sort of sweet,

pretty likeness void of any sense of pain, while Tsune, whose mother yet lived, had conveyed his suffering starkly and profoundly? It must be that both of them, choosing as their ostensible subject the aging and death of their mothers, had actually been painting self-portraits. Even as she thought this, the memory of her frequent glances in the mirror to check the contours of her face as she had painted, rose vividly before her. At the time she had rationalized this tactic by reminding herself of the strong resemblance she bore to her mother.

Her musings brought up the question of the degree to which one's love for others is in reality a form of self-love. In her situation, for example, all three persons mourned were fully alive within her. Her experience of them therefore had to be affected by her ever-changing experience of herself. Somehow the part she played, perpetually infusing them with life, had never occurred to her.

The two pieces of this that were most disturbing (and suggested that her behavior had been driven to a much larger degree than she cared to admit by a form of narcissism) were first her portrayal of her dead mother as young and beautiful, insisting on this, in fact leaving any trace of death out of the painting altogether, and second the conviction to which she had been quite

wedded of having lugged another around in her heart for a quarter of a century, when more accurately the weight she had borne had been a split-off part of her own psyche. Reflecting on the former (and taking a lesson from Tsune), she couldn't help but feel that her sole purpose in having created that portraiture was to perpetuate her mother's function as mirror to the beauty and youth she herself had been terrified of losing. Her mother was dead. If the painting had been about her mother, it would have had to include something on this subject.

But wait. Within the striking image she had drawn of her young, beautiful mother, an ardent brunette, spunky, feisty – within the glamour and sweet smells, exotic and exciting, had there not lurked a whirlwind of life force expending itself to keep itself alive? One could argue, given her own circumstance of extreme vigor at the time of her mother's death, that this had been the side of death with which she was most familiar – the only side in fact that she could have painted with authenticity. Just as a giant red balloon contains within its sheath of air a shriveled knot of rubber that one instinctively tosses (and that this is evident to the eyes of an observer if she will only see it) – metaphorically speaking, this explained what was happening to her now. She was beginning to see it.

The case of her lover (or “ex-lover” – it was difficult to call him that since her inner world belied it) was more complex. A part of her perfectly understood that he lived with his wife and three children in a travel-to-able city. But did he infuse her as she infused him with abundant, exuberant life? Did she owe the very transformation she was presently undergoing to the power of his imagination? She wondered.

As in a dream whose various figures represent various aspects of the dreamer, so in this “relationship” it must be that its various aspects, fashioned though they were on external originals, had nevertheless, over the course of years, quietly melded into the character of their maker. Lovers though they may have been in the past, their hearts had flowed along separate streams of time. The qualities she once admired in him were her qualities now – the “him” she thought of herself as loving, a mental “balloon” inflated with devotion that would as surely shrivel the second she withdrew it.

The air was cold

The air was cold and the sun, crystal clear on the sparkling grass. She stepped out on the porch. The cold was steady, reliable. A strong thing.

A rushing sound (not rain) wandered through the trees. It ran along the ground, in the shrubs and tilted grass. It rustled and rattled just above the earth.

It grew cooler. The hill itself looked drier, harder. A bleak wind lashed overhead.

Then the sun fell. Color and smell faded from the hill. The meadow lay wasted. The weather, a negation of weather.



February to her seemed crammed with undigested leftovers.

Even for the birds. They bumped heads. “Birds usually ship-shape into a perfect V,” she thought.

“They seem rushed,” she said to the tinted glass. She’d been gazing out at the bushes.

Bunched snow in winter sat (softly) composed. Did not buckle but melted under fair skies.

Spring was palpable, even from her window. Like a jittery child is calmed by satin (holding a piece in its little sleeping fist), so the winter sky with its softer, sweeter middle.

Oakland sat softly. Acres of cement with bits of green and a dowdy cloud-covering. “At least the blackbirds abscond the clot” she found herself thinking, pitying the snaking traffic.

Restless wings, wild, without form, vomiting themselves out of existence.

A bevy of birds, flapping – frantically was it – or did it merely seem so to her whom their sheer numbers had taken by surprise? “Are they larks?” She knew she didn’t care. (Such an annoying habit.)

Watching them careen about the sky, so black and hollow. (The growling in their throats and stomachs.)

A friend had given her an article on ducks. Observing ducks swim in bitterly cold water, a reader had asked why their exposed legs – why didn’t their blood solidify?

“Small birds enter a nightly torpor,” the ornithologist began. “Some (like goldfinches and redpolls) grow extra feathers and fluff them out. Some shiver. Some shiver almost continuously to generate enough body heat.”

As for the legs of ducks, their surface veins constrict shunting blood toward their warm central arteries.

She found herself engrossed. Fascinated. She had no idea that she was even interested.



Rain again. It had rained every day for weeks and people were starting to complain.

“I know they’re here,” she muttered as she scoured the floor under her winter coats. It was hard to see what was back there.

Naked, chilly, in the far reaches of her crowded closet (her guttural, exasperated grunt).

She had been straightening her room and its little porch. When she’d gotten to her failing-to-thrive nasturtiums (a small tree was waiting in the sidelines), instead of lugging the soggy, mud-filled pot down the hallway and several flights of stairs, she had picked it up and thrown it over the railing.

She remembered hearing it land. Deliberately not looking. More evident was the pristine state of her porch, suddenly emptied of the obstacle to her new tree.



“Aren’t they late?” she muttered to herself. A pair of doves waddled about. The lilies were sodden after last night’s storm and no birds sang.

She cracked her egg-top as she watched some leaflets flutter to the ground. An hour ago she had decided to sleep one more hour.

When she had enough, something softened inside. She felt alert but – she’d almost said slow – but more accurately it was grounded or simply calm.

After all

“After all, Saint John’s was originally a German house,” said Brother Leonard who had decorated one of the many Christmas trees in the Benedictine Abbey entirely with cookies. He began in October and had baked nearly 1200 cookies.

Another monk had photographed the nine-foot blue spruce taken from the Abbey’s woods. Its branches were covered with animals, swirls, and leaves.

The tree, beside a very small fireplace, seemed cluttered and poorly planned.



The tawny hill. Such was its flank, the creek mostly dried grass.

“Creeks are important,” she’d thought, remembering the morning she’d laid on the barn’s lean-to. Red maple fingers had been like a priest’s, the chattering water, prayer.

But this creek lacked excitement. (Not much water, no personality.)

Swing, jungle-gym, sandbox, slide, jerry-rigged on a patch of grass. A man played ball with his little boy. Probably for the boy it was nice to be with his daddy, but looking on, her heart felt flat.

Portions of the bay likewise weighed in less than inspiring. Mirroring a deadness in her no doubt.

Sometimes just moving was too much. It seemed impossible to get up from a chair, for example, to get in bed or leave for anywhere.

Even talking. Increasingly she wanted not to. (The awareness of words, wasted, violated or used nervously.)

A train whizzed by. A stroke of sunlit sky, floundering, anchorless, seemed out of place in the placid winter.



It is possible that a full understanding of what had happened in those few hours on the train to the hot spring would diminish its meaning. And that would be a shame. For Shimamura's idle life lacked meaning (reading along she knew he knew it – it was some small shred of meaning in search of which he'd made his solitary trips). It had occurred so unexpectedly, in transit, time usually hazed away. Hindsight, however, and distance had set the incident in bold relief.

His first trip to the snow country had been in the summer. As he'd left Tokyo, he remembered, his wife had cautioned him that it was egg-laying season for moths. Indeed there were moths – large corn-colored ones

under the eaves clinging to a decorative lantern. In his dressing-room also a queer-looking moth lay motionless, seemingly glued to the screen. Against the crimson glow of the mountain ranges, its gossamer wings fluttered in the wind. Transfixed, Shimamura had rubbed his hand vigorously over the inside of the screen. When the moth hadn't moved, he'd struck the screen with his fist. Sure enough it loosened and, like a leaf, wafted to the ground.

On his return (it had been December) he was startled to see the station master's face stuffed inside a muffler, the flaps of his cap turned down over his ears. As soon as the train pulled up at the signal stop, a girl, who had been sitting on the other side of the car, opened the window in Shimamura's section and called to him loudly. Shimamura found himself unavoidably involved in their conversation, as if some critical piece of drama whose every nuance pertained to him was being acted out for his benefit.

Perhaps it was in part the contrast between her beauty and the desolation of the border range that so entranced him. This region of Japan, which he had chosen both for its remoteness and its hot springs (whose geisha, he reasoned, would protect him from excessive loneliness), was reputed to be the snowiest in the world. Throughout the winter, cold winds from

Siberia picked up moisture over the Japan Sea and dropped it as snow when they struck the central mountain range. Frozen blankets spread endlessly over the bleak horizon. With little to relieve the monotony, one's life, hibernal, seemingly divorced from time, might easily sink into an undifferentiated darkness.

What registered with Shimamura after the girl drew herself back from the window was not so much the brightness of her voice (its high resonance) as the pathos conveyed by it. Her concern apparently was for her brother who, though hardly more than a boy, was living and working in this town. The station master seemed to know them both. Possibly because of the cold, he was trying to cut the conversation short, while the girl, sounding urgent, pressed for details of her brother's welfare. Shimamura couldn't tell if she was hurt by the station master's curtness or simply, in her own excitement, hadn't noticed it. In either case she had struck him as sad.

Was it sadness then that attracted him – (indeed, attracted her, for she was bound up with his story). When she was seated, his view of her, depending as it did on a combination of the shifting light (both inside and outside the train) and the image of her cast by the partially steamed window-glass, was illusive. From her place, across the aisle and one section removed, she

would have had no way of guessing that she was being observed. Even had she happened to glance his way, she could not have seen her own reflection and would have no reason to question the behavior of a man who appeared to be staring out the window at the countryside.

Since she was diagonally opposite to him, Shimamura knew he could just as easily have looked at her directly. A certain quality in her beauty – starkly cool, fierce, unreal – warned him against this. As if her purpose, karmic and foreboding, was to mirror something in himself that he preferred not to see.

Truly odd was his awareness, on the one hand, of the suffering implied by her close connection with her traveling companion, an invalid, someone to whom she seemed mysteriously bound, and on the other, of the fact that his reaction to the two of them was as it would have been to a dreamlike pantomime (the distortion of them produced by the window's glare lent them an otherworldly quality) rather than as one would expect it to be toward human beings in pain. Her overearnestness – both with the sick man (her constant ministrations – rearranging his scarf and the bottom of his overcoat that slipped open again and again so that even he, Shimamura, grew impatient) as well as earlier with the station master – aroused in his imagination a

ritualized figure from an old romantic tale where powerful feelings were metaphoric rather than an ordinary woman in the throes of anguish. He found it deeply disturbing that this inability (for he had come to consider it a kind of inability, having observed like failures in feeling in himself on numerous previous occasions) was being held up for him to watch.

Shimamura continued to peer out the glass. Streaks of red flushed the evening sky casting an eerie shadow over the terrain. Equally eerie and superimposed on his window-view of the reddish landscape were the incandescent figures of the girl and the invalid. The silhouettes, though not motionless, held their position in the frame created by the window, while the landscape, a kind of unmitigated emotion, droned steadily past them. When he relaxed his gaze, it seemed as if the mountains had been cut off by the outline of the reflected forms (progressing around them), but when he made a conscious effort to look, peering into their filmlike shapes, he could see that the vista was actually whizzing through them. It almost stopped his breath, this furtive glimpse of what might be their inner emotional reality. When a light somewhere out in the mountains coruscated in the center of the girl's face, then moved across her face shooting a single ray through the pupil of her eye, for that moment her eye became a weirdly glowing phosphorescent jewel

on a sea of scarlet. Shimamura, mesmerized by the inexpressible beauty of it, came to forget that he was confronting a mirror. The girl's face and the dim mountains melted together into a symbolic world (his own interior world?) of opaque coldness.

After a week

After a week of winter days, summer was back. Mist dribbled through the leaves, cooling down the shrubbery and scraggly bushes lining the roadside. Black plastic bags (bulging stomachs fastened at the neck) dotted the curb. Every few paces was a bumptious bag – “that could be a baby tree” she thought – but that she knew was trash. Fourth-of-July confetti.

Was it a tribute to the cold that it took the city a fortnight to clean up the mess left by the celebrations? Certainly the weather had been dismal since that last auspicious day and serene night. Her street had been cluttered with shredded paper.

Earlier she had noticed a covey of orange-vested men clucking around the narrow strip where most of the refuse had collected. Huddled together in the sun, they neither worked nor rested. Yet their aimless movements carried a charge.

Thus the tidy bundles surprised her, their perkiness, like haystacks (all teepeed up), strangely fulfilling. Between each bag, grass in the nubile light.



She didn't know what she felt reading about Yuji Nakamura whose bum knee kicked in as he ran the second

and longest leg of the 130-mile Hakone *Ekiden* relay. He'd hobbled and grimaced till his coach finally said, "You're out!"

His teammates, wearing yellow sashes of dishonor, simply ran their paces to the end.

Fifteen 10-member, all-male squads from Japanese universities compete in the grueling New Year's Day race, the article explained. Water is permitted once each relay leg, roughly at 10 kilometers (the halfway point). Millions line the asphalt route from downtown Tokyo to the resort town of Hakone. Millions more watch from their homes.

While there are no superheroes in the *ekiden* (a super-human performance by one runner will not guarantee a win), anyone who lets the team down shoulders an overwhelming responsibility. A runner who gets sick, injured or for any reason fails to complete his "leg," often finds that the race haunts him forever, ruining his career, even his life.

Historical failures are dredged up annually on television and magazines.

Nakamura, the reporter noted, had considered suicide. "I was so sad, had so many regrets and was in shock because I'd done something from which I could never redeem myself."

While *ekidens* are now run all over the world (with races tailored for high schoolers, girls, professional squads and so forth), the Hakone *Ekiden*, journalists say, borders on the sadistic. One leg is up a paralyzing hill. The next, coming down, is brutal on the knees. Runners battle snow, ice, heavy wind, freezing rain and don't give up, for there are no substitutions once the race starts. They will kill themselves delivering the *tasuki* even one second faster. If any runner falls more than 10 minutes behind the leader, the entire team forfeits. A disqualified team automatically forfeits its berth in the following year's race.

"I must not stop – even if I die," is the feeling of most runners.

Doryoku (effort) – an end in itself – is said to be the ultimate motivation. The philosophy stresses endless training, dedication, team-spirit, obedience and self-sacrifice. Instead of letting athletes quit when they tire, coaches turn up the heat, continuing to drill to the point of exhaustion.

"*Gambare!*" (fight harder) fans scream cheering runners on. Which ratchets up the pressure. When marathoner Kokichi Tsuburaya won a bronze medal, he apologized for letting his country down.



She gazed out the window. If the truth were told, though the report of the Master's retirement game had been serialized in an exhaustive sixty-four installments, she was only now, through more heuristic means, beginning to grasp the momentous nature of this occasion. No one could have been more respectful, more knowledgeable, more observant nor sparing of himself in his reportage than Uragami whose newspaper, the *Tokyo Nichinichi Shimbun*, had sponsored the match and whose devotion to Honnimbo Shusai had been entire. Yet, having read what he had to say (admittedly years later), she felt that the account, focused primarily on externals, served rather to elegize (lament) than to parse (examine closely) the illusive events for posterity.

For example she learned that the match itself, lasting fourteen sessions, began in Tokyo on June 26, 1938 and ended, not quite six months later, on December 4, in Ito. The Master had died on January 18, 1940. Most certainly the ordeal had taken his life.

But such facts told her little. Their very paucity aroused a strange interest in minutiae (like the very long hair Uragami had noticed in the Master's left eyebrow), as if something ultimate in one's understanding hinged on getting these details correct. Mr. Uragami himself had

said that his noticing the hair and writing about it had been a trifling matter. The important point was that he had noticed it at a difficult moment – that it had come as a sort of rescue. But such thinking was apocryphal and now that she realized it, her inclination was to extrapolate – to posit that hidden within this single feature of the Master’s visage (a sort of metaphysical heirloom/philosopher’s stone?) had been an elixir with transmutative properties compensatory to her own age’s precise shortcomings.

Buried in Uragami’s treatment of a day’s session at Hakone was the following brief paragraph:

Today I discovered for the first time a white hair about an inch long in the Master’s eyebrow. Standing out from the swollen-eyed, heavy veined face, it too somehow came as a savior.

Several days after this article had appeared (and two days before he had died) the Master and his wife had made a trip to Atami to get the Master a shave. Phoning a reliable barber, the Master had told him that he had one very long hair in his left eyebrow, that it was a hair of good luck, a sign of long life and that he, the barber, was not to touch it. Of course the barber agreed. Amazingly the Master had not himself previously noticed the hair. He had only recently read about it in Uragami’s newspaper article. While his wife related this story,

the Master remained silent but, Uragami told us, a flicker had crossed his face “as if it had caught the shadow of a passing bird.”

Uragami has reflected that more than a decade has passed since the Master’s death and no method has been devised for determining the succession to the title “Master of Go.” Instead rationalism, with its tedious rules, meticulous point system, and emphasis on winning has wrung the concepts of dignity and afflatus out of the process. “Victory” has become a commercial asset for a competitive person (read disciple of Go). The life of a player today, far from lustrative, is consumed by contests, annual title matches, and recitals of strength in flashy championship tournaments.

In all three matches played in the last decade of his life, the Master had fallen ill midway through. After the first he was bedridden. After the third he died. Each game took inordinately long. It was as if in these final play-offs an epoch (a complete system of values and aesthetics) virtually embodied in the Master, came grinding to a halt. The last, nimbus of an eon, should in its own right have been a masterpiece, but as Uragami said, “By this time the Master could not stand outside the rules of equality.”

Witness the contrast between the Master and his opponent, Uragami continued. Once the former, quiet and

nerveless, sank into a game, he did not leave. Otake, on the other hand, frequently excused himself, presumably as a consequence of his habit of drinking copious pots of tea. (Otake's difficulty however had not stopped at enuresis. Often he had left his overskirt behind him in the hallway and his obi as well.) His way of sitting down and getting up were as if readying himself for battle. Typically a long deliberation would be capped in the final minute by a hundred or a hundred fifty plays of surging violence – quite unlike the Master's steadfast immobility suggestive of one who had lost all consciousness of his own identity.

One indeed got the impression that when the Master was seated at the Go board he had the power to quiet his surroundings. This power, the result of long training and discipline, “alchemically” affected the Master's physical body and was especially noticeable (Uragami reported with some authority since he had taken the last photographs) in his dead body where his large longish face with its bold features, his strong jaw and his disproportionately long trunk had seemed exaggerated. Even more pronounced, she thought, was the eerie sense one had of his torso disappearing from the waist down. His legs and hips, insubstantial to the extreme, seemed inadequate even for his weight (which she knew to be about sixty-five) – a child's

weight. His knees (in *seiza* it was obvious) appeared transparently thin.

The Master's physique confirmed what those knowledgeable about the spirit of Go have long suspected i.e. that the intense concentration required would chisel away at a player's manifest being (it was almost as if concentration itself replaced a player's body). One would imagine that when in recess the Master would prefer diversions of an altogether different nature, but Uragami explicitly noted that the Master had literally been addicted to games – mahjongg, billiards, chess – which he passionately played day and night, even in the interval between a professional session and dinner.

Uragami's description of a glimpse he had one day of the Master walking the hundred or so yards across the garden from the outbuilding of the Naraya Inn to his apartment in the main building bore this out on the one hand, and ironically (that it should come from a mere glimpse) gave her more of an insight than she got anywhere else in the report of the true magnitude of what was before her. Just beyond the gate of the outbuilding was a short slope and the Master, palms lightly clasped behind him, bent forward as he climbed it. His body, held perfectly straight from the hips, made his spindly legs seem all the more accessory. "The retreating figure of the Master against the background sound of flowing

water carried along with it the retreating fragrance of Go as a graceful and elegant path,” Uragami eulogized. From photographs of the dead body, in which there appears to be only a head, a doll’s head, almost gruesome (as if severed), the Master’s martyrdom (she named it from her present vantage point) – the sacrifice of an invincible life for the sake of an art that was no longer relevant – seemed all but conclusive.

BOOK TWO

Sweet soft night

Sweet soft night descended with the roses. Moist air, rose-blossomed and thorny. Soft thorns. Yes. Very soft thorns. She pulled the peach-colored flower closer, thumbing the thorns, letting them jab her calluses. The vine concealed crossed stems of buds that released their fragrances one at a time.



“No! No! I’ve never in my life bounced a check.” Her mother’s voice, aggrieved, suddenly clear as a bell.

She had expected her mother, informed by her bank, to have brought up the subject herself.

“I have it right here. It says ‘payment stopped’ in bold red letters,” she said as she realized her mistake. She could feel her mother’s mind stretching to recall.

“I can’t remember, honey. I know I stopped payment on something.”



The sumptuousness of a day on the verge of rain. Its luminescence (bundles of light-filled randomness).

Trillions chirped. Their swarm. And the acres and acres of wildflowers across incipient-summer land.

She dreamed of them. Their colors moist. Their aura, lotus-purple.

The cry of a hawk awoke the child. It too screamed but its voice (bellowing across the canyon’s wood) was from a distant century.

The hollow hill, the hollow skull without a candle reddening its eyes.



Squawk squawk squawk. She looked up. The jay’s loud voice filled a flower-ridden tree. The sky, bubbling with clouds, made its own daisy-filled, just-about-summer, meadow.

Sun beamed through the window carrying the silvery smell of tree (a very slight breeze plus the lugubrious weight of heat). You could see the heat, its little parcels of debris not quite melding.

“The practice of yoga requires effort (which means staying with being) and detachment (which means colorlessness – non-projection – impartiality). It requires a switch that cannot be thought into play,” iterated her teacher.

The yogi’s body (twisting and folding over itself).

It startled her – this dumpy, late middle-aged woman disappearing utterly.



Once she’d seen a documentary of (was it) Margot Fonteyn? The ballerina had married late and when her husband became ill, she’d retired.

“That’s what I want,” she’d thought, as she’d watched her, in her blue sweater, bend from the waist to offer her husband a drink.



The night’s cool breeze. Alone, from her porch, the green evening pulsed with fragrant flowers.

Nagai Kafu had idealized prostitutes and set the scene, no doubt as a statement of mutability, of a story which still haunted her on the Ginza in “second” Tokyo (which succeeded “first” Tokyo destroyed in the Great Earthquake of 1923 and which, in its own turn, disap-

peared in the American incendiary raids of 1945). Perhaps he'd envied their cavalier style, their freedom to eschew the social constraints that he, raised in a respectable family, had to suffer. He was certainly aware that their feckless ways were also precarious. Take a waitress, for example. Her livelihood might easily have depended on the generosity (read loneliness or sexual neediness) of strangers – customers who dropped into one's restaurant – or, after hours, passers-by on the street who'd respond in kind to a seductive "Hey lover-boy, how 'bout a cup of tea?" And of course, as he pointed out, among themselves these people made their own fine distinctions. The combs in one's hair, the "flying" pattern on one's kimono, the twill of one's haori, the embroidery on a sash, if the slightest bit frowsy, mockingly declared one as incult. Or even those between waitress-prostitute, geisha-prostitute and out-and-out prostitute. This nomenclature clearly signaled a level of expertise in the work of giving pleasure that closely affected the bearer and toward which she must bow. The bottom line was one's ability to arouse a fantasy, the suggestion that anything might be possible, that "with me one might enter the highest realms of the unknown" which allure, by the way, was the same as that of houses of God. From this standpoint Kafu's attraction to his subject made sense. In fact, now that she reflected, she thought her own fascination with this

particular story had to do with the loyal nature of the bond between its hero and heroine held firm despite their obvious character flaws and wild vicissitudes in the back alleys of their external lives.

One of the most notable features of this world, at least for her what stood out and stayed with her, was the constancy of its ephemerality. While nothing lasted, nothing significant appeared to change, even over the course of generations. The story began in typical desuetude – the couple, dishabilled from having just awakened, were calculating what with the New Year approaching and her in her late thirties/early forties, how much longer could they go on living off her earnings? Granted she was still lovely and looked much younger than she actually was, but . . . didn't they need to begin . . . at which moment she was called to the phone. Her immediate presence was required at an assignation house. They, of course, were used to this. She wanted to be called as much as possible. Frequently there wasn't time even for a bowl of rice. She'd dressed and flew off leaving Jukichi to eat his soft-boiled egg and warmed leftover milk alone. He tidied up and ran whatever errands. O-Chiyo would be back tonight or tomorrow some time, possibly tomorrow night in which case she'd call or have someone call. Other men would resent this eclipsed existence, but the decisive turn toward intimacy in their relationship had

happened on the occasion of his letting her know, that he “got” the nature of her work (which was not in a bar as she had told him) and that it was okay. So long as she was straight with him, whatever she did was fine. The relief for both of them at this extraordinary conversation – most of it conveyed through gesture and facial expression – left its indelible mark. They became inseparable from that moment.

The specifics shifted. The woman’s house from where originated most of O-Chiyo’s work was raided and they had to evacuate the neighborhood immediately on threat of arrest. Shortly thereafter O-Chiyo, in a crowded street with a new customer, got separated from him and when she ran to catch up, joining hands again, she found herself holding the hand of the wrong person. This man however, a genial philandering ex-official who had lived down a bribery scandal, whisked her into a cab and in the end set her up in a house of her own choosing as his concubine. Jukichi, being the one with free time, found the house and in addition an apartment several blocks away for himself so they could stay together except for the nights the man came around.

These little developments, beginning with his discovery of her working as a prostitute, only served to strengthen Jukichi’s connection to O-Chiyo. The idea

that other men found pleasure in her body somehow made her all the more appealing. Unlike O-Chiyo, Jukichi held a university degree. He had tried his hand at writing, but his enthusiasm at every employment opportunity trailed off shortly after he was hired. Should he be ashamed of allowing a woman to support him (of battenning at her expense) or just resign himself that this was how he was? After all, within its own definitions their way of life was honest. O-Chiyo seemed happy. They were neither hypocritical nor materialistic which was saying a lot in their land of lies.

The sweet smell came again in the night

The sweet smell came again in the night. She listened for the rain, softly falling on the silky hill. No birds. No cats. Just silence and rain.



“Child’s Pose,” he’d said, as if it were a pose for children. “What I like about it . . .” his voice trailed off. “You feel massaged,” he’d finally gushed. “Lotus posture is too advanced.”

She could hear the soft twilight twitter of the hill’s young birds. A dove cooed in the distance – coo coo coo – in threes. (Its rhythm and predictability melted through her body.)

For years she had pooh-pooed massage as if it were simply an indulgence dressed in “healing” attire. But when she’d healed through its soothing effect – washing one’s face, brushing one’s hair or even teeth are forms of massage, she’d realized.

Sweet and cool the puffs of rain had startled her out of a sleep. It had taken her awhile to understand – that she had gone to bed and since then, only several hours later, the whole world had changed. Her chimes were pulsing and a soft fresh breeze ambled around her sheets and hovered over her pillow.

So that when she awakened in the morning and it was raining, she remembered that this rain had started during the night, that its slow, penetrating drizzle would probably last all day. Which made her heart jump.



“Mt. Diablo beams,” she thought, feeling like a fish in a lighted aquarium. A bank of clouds perched tidily. Mountain, sun, a few trees and low-lying hills made for a beautiful backdrop.

Dawn, like a bowl capped the striated rock.

“The violinist played jigs,” her mother, a bit out of breath from dashing to the phone, gasped in an effort to sound cheerful. Her throat hurt. (She could tell.)

Sweet morning air drifted through the window along with chirps in clear clumps of six.

“Who’s that bird?” she found herself thinking.

“He talked for two and a half hours and then at the end he volunteered to play. We all expected something classical.”

“What is your connection to Brandeis, mother?” (She wondered what had impelled . . . her mother had never “belonged” to anything in her life!)

“Oh you know Brandeis. The university, honey.”



White sky. Branches bled against a bone horizon.
“For they too are bone.”

Listening for birds, their twitter in the darkness.
Making it more dark. (Their unseen privilege.)

Her grandfather had fed them. The stump of his
personality, without apology, its brittle rub, its
unforgiving stride.

The crippled boy across the street. (His stare came
to mind.)



*Creamy sand and ocean-blue water pressed against the
sky. So that it too seemed vigorous, its blue, weighty.
Pulsing and sharp.*

*Hot noon air, singed and crackled alive over the sea-
edge. Dusty afternoon turned to limpid night. The mote
of the firefly's silky, neon, beep-beam-beep.*

*The limb of a palm elbowing restful gray. “Hey you!”
(A young thing with young gestures.)*

*Peeling, cackling nuts and bark. Fronds on top fan the
liquid earth. Lamp posts strutting noble and tall like a
black tap dancer.*

“Come one, come all,” an announcer shrieks in his ocean voice, megaphoned astride the savannah. (She wears a beanie.)



Waiting for fish. The patio’s soft lights reflecting the pool’s blue shadows. The band, the soft soft shuffle beneath caged birds.

The woman’s legs beneath her yellow sunsuit. Pumps, pocketbook, patent-leather gleaming.

Out of silence, surf. “I am alive,” you say. “The art of swimming is immobile, pristine and very fashionable.”



The color of feathers (a pheasant’s or robin’s) – vibrations of spray piled on to ease.

Breath is protection, sweeping out the gross nature (a person’s inspiration, another form of breathing). Play is breathing.



Sweet-potato fields near the poor folks homes, seething in the blue blue day. Pigeons coo from fringy gussets of former forest.

A herd of deer, coppery and dark through morning shadow. Their swivel into nubile space, queer and graceful (as if it were not a herd but a flower family waving on the hillside).

Dark-eyed people traveling narrow footpaths.



A warm light beckoned her. (Someone had turned it on but left no shadow.)

She gazed at the grass, its green breath cheerful. From its roots she heard the sea, back and forth, matted and pressed (*slurped and swallowed Christlike slenderness*).

Was it loss of control of her body that she found so embarrassing? She didn't think it was simply age. Secretly she was proud of her age though it made no sense. Perhaps it wasn't merely her age but the way she was inhabiting her age that pleased her.



"It's not true," she said, clearing her throat. She cleared her throat a lot. Her frail voice was like a thin thread.

She glanced out the window. As her mother spoke, the bells of coolness churled.

Her mother's voice receded with the oncoming night. Spring branches, budding with baby leaves bowed to the sun as it dropped behind the hill.

"I don't know," her mother resumed. She'd suddenly sounded disgusted with herself. "I get into bed to read and I'm out like a light. But a few hours later, I'm up again. At 5:00 I'm up for good."

"I've always been this way, honey."

"I'm not saying I go around tired," she suddenly added. "But when I get a full eight hours of sleep, I can't explain . . ." Her pause contained a lifetime of frustration grappling with this issue.

She thought of her mother's sad depleted body.

"Do you remember when I worked at the Chart and Information Center?" As she asked, odd-shaped pods on floating branches came into focus.

A few birds, their nighttime serenade beneath a starless sky.

Kiyooka Susumu's Wife

A Woman Educated Beyond the Needs of Her Society

Had Kimie been a different sort of woman she would have turned green when her cohorts shoved under her nose the caption, “Home Life of a Celebrity. The writer Kiyooka Susumu’s wife, Tsuruko” alongside a photograph of a truly stunning woman seated on her veranda. But Kimie, Kiyooka’s mistress of several years, was unimpressed. Even when goaded, “You’re quite jealous, aren’t you?” by her fellow waitresses, Kimie, surprised by them, scuttled, “It’s just as it should be. A wife is a wife. I don’t have to worry about her.”

For Kimie, who took her pleasure as it came, these words were true enough. As fashionable and rich as Kiyooka now was, thanks to the skyrocketing success of his pulp fiction, for Kimie, who chose to remain in her threadbare room seeming to prefer the filthy alley that it fronted and its dinginess to the effort it would take to move (she did nothing to improve its charm either – the place reeked of transience and shabbiness), Kiyooka’s sprint into fame hardly mattered. She continued to receive him dispassionately just as she received all the others.

Unbeknownst to Kimie, her casual words were rife with meaning. Tsuruko was Kiyooka’s wife in name only.

When they met she was twenty-three and already married to a graduate of military college. She and Kiyooka fell into a liaison at a hotel while her husband was studying abroad. Her husband's family, terrified of gossip, dissolved the marriage without consulting their son on the pretext of Tsuruku's frail health. Her own parents were dead. Her brother bestowed a small amount of money on her and promptly disowned her. (Kiyooka at the time was living with his father.) The moment Tsuruko's marriage was annulled, he moved in with her.

Though Kiyooka's father, Akira, a scholar and instructor of Chinese composition at the Imperial University, cringed at his son's open affair with a woman the world considered married, he wisely refrained from saying so. One day, at his wife's grave, however, he came upon a young woman also offering flowers. He gathered this must be Kiyooka's new "housemate," but he could not fathom the two behaviors – honoring the death anniversary of an unknown "mother-in-law" and shackling up with his unfilial son – abiding within one personality. The two began to talk and soon became deeply engrossed in conversation. By chance they met in a railway station. Over the course of time Tsuruko was given entrée to his secluded country retirement cottage.

It thus came to Tsuruko's attention that although Akira had a gardener and a woman to look after the household chores, he lacked for proper meals, clean clothing, and attentions to his person. Gingerly she began to care for him. She did everything in a discreet manner so as to offend neither Akira (he most certainly would have disclaimed any need had she openly asked) nor his older daughter to whom the duty more properly belonged. Just as unobtrusively Akira grasped the unhappy state of Tsuruko's second marriage. Believing his son to be a debauched scoundrel he wasn't surprised, but he was sorry to learn the truth just as he had determined to add Tsuruko's name to the Susumu family register.

Indeed the passion between Tsuruko and Kiyooka had barely lasted a year. Kiyooka's first act as "darling of the literary world," ostentatiously buying a lavish house for a movie star, was followed by ostentatiously surrounding himself with a covey of geisha. Eventually the movie star dumped him at which point he made the waitress Kimie his concubine. Tsuruko found herself not so much envious as deeply saddened to discover the true nature of her husband's character. Her own upbringing included tutoring in French and etiquette by Madame Joule and in classic literature and calligraphy by a Japanese scholar. Refinement proved her undoing. Marrying as she did initially into the prosaic household

of a professional soldier and, subsequently, to Kiyooka (turned impresario and speculator, swilling Western liquor with his cronies and placing nightly mahjongg wagers and horse-racing bets) her inbred *éclat* was a complete waste. She had in fact decided to leave, but unendurable as her circumstances were, an inexplicable inertia took over as she squandered one opportunity after another to speak with him. Every day she continued coldly to honor him, it became that much harder (because her loyalty seemed that much more pretentious) to change things. For his part, Kiyooka had never intended in the first place to make Tsuruko his legal wife. He wanted merely to enjoy occasional trysts with her. Her earnestness, however gradually derailed this plan and when he learned of the money from her brother, he found himself racing to her side. The quality of her person incrementally had had its effect which was to make him feel ashamed of his own immorality. In the end it soured his enjoyment of her. He felt cramped with the restraints on his vulgarity her presence imposed, and then unenduringly lonely. That's why he pursued the joys of the "floating world" so assiduously and would have done even more in this direction if the waitress Kimie showed more enthusiasm.



Hot new-moon morning. A shallow breeze aroused her chimes. Squirrels. Birds. She set her thoughts aside.

“Do you ever hear from him?” Her mother’s low voice, referring to her father, rose out of nowhere.

“No.”

“Months ago I asked JoAnne if she knew if he were still alive. She said she’d call him, but I guess she forgot.”

“She may not have remembered,” her mother repeated. It was obvious she was hurt. The incident hadn’t been important enough to make a point of, but still, she would have liked to know.

She recalled a time when her mother’s fury at her father had been so volatile that her “no” would have been a strategy to end the conversation. Now her “no” was simply “no.” She hadn’t anything else to say.



Coo. Coo. An old owl, early.

The day darkening amidst so many trees (their deep green shade) and a man amongst its branches “cleaning” one of them. Debris from the tree was falling on her porch where she stood, directly below the man and in line with the debris that looked like stardust.

It had been 9:00 A.M. when the pleasant dream ended. Every few hours it’d seemed like she’d moan (from the midst of her stupor), “Just a little more, please.”

The day had zoomed from February to May in about four hours. Naked branches glistened in the groin of the hill, slender, deer-colored – and clean.

A rickety bus (splayed with sunflower seeds) had twin rows of soft, red leathered, two-person-sized seats. One row was bedlike with no central divide. At each window edge perched another leather-covered panel. Passengers could lie down and use the panel as a pillow.

She and her companion had chosen the opposite side however. She had some papers that she'd wanted to give to someone to work on and was in turmoil about whether to spend time organizing them in a way the other person would be able easily to understand or just let "them" figure it out.

“What a battle!” she'd thought when the alarm finally rang.



“It's Tuesday,” she realized, glancing at the murky sky. “They said it was going to rain.”

She studied the sky. Black as coal with puffy gray trailing wispily.

“Why is that man blinding me with his high beams,” she stewed, wedged behind a truck. It was well after seven.

Droplets glazed her windshield. Ever-so-tiny, they scattered themselves about.

The previous day she had been forced to drive through narrow (and slippery) switchbacks. She'd crept along. Actually the trees lightened the rain, which on the freeway had seemed deadly. But what had taken her aback was a bicyclist pumping up the steep (and extremely muddy) road full of pot-holes, branches, leaves, rocks.

The cyclist's clothing covered his body and was shiny like a wet suit. "It's not a wet suit," she'd thought. "It's not even waterproof. At best it's water repellent. (Which does nothing.)"



The storm was unseasonal. Even the birds, it seemed, didn't know what to do.

An old cypress shivered. Stuck out in the smoky sky, forlorn, stoic, an injunction to a complainer.

Traffic inched around a duckless pond. A plumber's truck, with odd (for a plumber) boulangerie-style print, blocked her view of the long stretch between exits.

She watched her impatience rise.

Recently she'd been in a long line of cars snaking toward the tunnel. Could it have been the heat that

shoved her to the shoulder, straight into the highway patrol's snare?

"It's a form of agoraphobia," she'd told herself, trying to normalize it. But it hadn't worked. Other people simply didn't get this upset.



New-moon heat subdued the birds. (Their soft cheeps in the fruit trees.)

"Tonight between 5:00 and 7:00." The woman, in a neon shirt, sounded sure.

"On new-moon days, it's best to practice slowly," the teacher'd interjected. "Or not at all. On full moons too. Energy is flying about." (She pictured a blind person swiping the air.)

The light on the hill had shone burnt orange. An old past burnt-orange fragment of time.



"Sloppy sun," she'd thought till she'd remembered the eclipse. It felt like its muscles had tired.

"Perhaps it's her voice that's tired," she'd corrected herself as she listened to her mother's dream.

“That evening on t.v. (I don’t even know why I watch this program) but (did you see it, honey?) an old woman stuffed a hot dog down her neighbor’s throat.” Clearly she had been riled.

“Afterwards I dreamed that a big bird had swallowed two other birds, one slightly smaller and one very small. When I opened the big bird’s mouth, the small bird flew away, but the larger one . . . I couldn’t pry it out.”

She’d glanced at the darkening sky. Her mother’s voice trailed off just as the solar eclipse had become a force in the room.



Smokey air. Brittle grass. “A stale morning,” she’d thought, gazing at the cobwebbed air. Everything felt congested.

Loud thin chirps pierced through the bushes, fading chirps announcing the morning’s end.

Her heart tingled at a glimpse of her little plant. Strange. When she saw the same plant on the street, in a random yard, say, or a church, invariably it looked cheap. Even larger ones with brightly-colored petals left her dejected.

It was as if *this* were the true flower, hers merely a property of her mind. To see her treasure so naked (exposed) was off-putting.



The birds' electrical cheep in the chill morning air. One buzzed. One sweetly chirped. Another coo coo coo'd.

She shut her eyes. Tweet-tweet-tweet-tweet-tweet. She could sense the trees' roots' pleasure (like toes) spreading through the cool rich mud.



"Honey," she'd said. "It came all the way around to the window and just stood there." She was referring to a hummingbird whose feeder she'd forgotten to refill.

While she'd heard that hummingbirds were like soldiers when it came to their nectar sites, she'd never heard of a bird "going to get" someone and staring them into submission.

"They're mean!" her mother continued. "They'll attack!" She'd read about one attacking a little boy.

"Some birds," she'd said, referencing a second feeder, "will take one seed, fly off to a corner of the yard, eat it and maybe come back for another." As her mother

spoke she'd had the image of a well-mannered child in her Mary-Janes accepting only one chocolate marshmallow bunny. "But sparrows slop them all over the ground. Their refuse attracts rats."

"Without the birds, the yard is lifeless, so I keep putting out seeds," she'd continued slowly. She sounded discouraged.

The yard in question sloped gently upwards toward a thick grove of bamboo. Some azaleas and rhododendrons had recently been taken out. "They just got too big for the hill," her mother explained.

"After they flower, you can cut them back. But if you miss this window, you risk cutting off the next season's buds." It was evident what had happened.

She shut her eyes. It pleased her that her mother had developed such a close relationship with the life her property hosted. She pictured her father putzing about. "He won't let anyone else touch it," her mother said with pride.

She tried to recall the back of their large, colonial-style dwelling. A swimming pool with iridescent flies was all that came to mind.

She imagined her mother alone, probably in her housecoat, watching the birds early in the morning. Suddenly

she remembered another part of the conversation. It seemed that a pair of parent swallows were teaching their fledgling to fly. Standing at opposite ends of the pool, they'd take turns accompanying it across.

"They're adorable," her mother had exuded, though her voice had sounded sad.



Once as a child she'd been home alone and wanted something from her mother's room. She'd opened her bureau drawers. One had sweaters. Beading covered the entire front of an aqua-colored cardigan, soft, weighty with sequins, pearls and teeny silver balls.

One had swimsuits. Kneeling by the drawer she'd splayed them on the carpet. Who was this person who wore Hawaiian-flowered outfits, belly exposed, featuring thighs? Not a swimmer. Not a mother.

Her mother had worn high heels, but her feet, strangely, had looked old in them.



"I don't know," she said. "What was I talking about?"

She had mentioned a friend who had recently visited. Now she couldn't remember what she had intended to say. "Oh well. It wasn't important." At another time she would have said, "Oh well. It'll come back to me."



“And I’ve just talked the whole time,” she said as the conversation drew to a close. “I wanted to know about you. Find out how you are doing.”

She said the same thing at the end of every conversation.

“I’m going to be eighty,” she’d continued, almost in a whisper.

“I’m going to be sixty.” (It had just come out.)

While she privately had scorned her mother for underpreparing for her death, (“Anyone deserves better,” she’d said to herself, picturing the enhanced quality that her mother’s final years would assume if consciously engaged in), with oversights like the above, she couldn’t help but wonder how much of her scorn was merely a projection of her own avoidance of the subject.

“How does it feel to be almost eighty?” Had she not asked because she didn’t want to know? Imagine leaving her mother alone, stranded with feelings that so obviously frightened her!

Usually it was her mother that swished the subject away.

“I wish I could knit,” she’d drawled, as if, magically, her daughter might make it so. “My friends say ‘why don’t you just try,’ but my surgeon said ‘your knitting days are over!’”

“Your knitting days are over!” she’d repeated, mimicking his sternness, experiencing again the torture of the verdict. (Her mother’s old, olive-colored skin crinkled along the extremities.)

Her mother’s knitting had always been looser than hers.

“Look at that face”

“Look at that face.” The woman was staring at a Matisse. The portrait was of a youngish woman with large sad eyes.

To her, the model’s expression – chin narrow, forehead broad – was not as striking as her friend’s command.

As they stepped into an adjoining (more contemporary) room, they’d agreed that – well – (she was still thinking, not about the face, but about the negative space behind the words calling it to her attention).



What in her face had so moved her grandmother, she wondered. She couldn’t have been more than a toddler.

So that it must have been something inbred. Probably a feature she still had. Or perhaps one her grandmother had had or had wished she’d had.

Her face, she felt, had never let her down. Her cheeks were trim, not lazy, though there had been a period when they’d seemed bland, expressionless, shy.

Her body, likewise, had taken on a square, sort of non-descript, blah-ness.

It occurred to her that the quality in her face admired by her grandmother might be different from the one she herself appreciated.

Perhaps Matisse had painted the longing he'd hoped a woman might feel for him? Having no idea of whether she'd actually felt that.



“It was just hard to read, that’s all.” Her mother paused. “Because I knew how much he loved you.”

Her mother referred to a section about her grandfather in a long autobiographical poem that she had written some years earlier. Several less than positive references to her mother had prevented her from calling this work to her attention.

“Where did you find it?” she had asked, instead of responding to her mother’s concern about her grandfather.

“Barnes & Noble.” Then she’d launched into a defense of her father.

As her mother’s story progressed, she had found her attention drifting further and further away.

“He wasn’t mean, honey. He never refused to give me what I wanted.”

“But he made you cry. I’d come home from school and you’d be weeping on the phone. I couldn’t forgive him for making you cry.”



Her thoughts drifted to Yukiko and she took out her pen:

Gentle, quiet, graceful though Yukiko was, she was (they would never say so) an embarrassment to her sisters. The fact that she had passed the marriageable age (she reached thirty without a husband) was like a thorn in the family side reminding them of the gradual decline in status of the Makioka name and the concomitant need for adjustment in their attitude. It used to be, as members of an old and established household, that the willful rejection of an even slightly deficient suitor was in keeping with their reputation and prosperity. But extravagance (their father had been an ostentatious spender) and mismanagement were having their effect. Tatsuo, the eldest sister Tsuruko’s husband, who became the head of the family after their father died, discovered the deceased man’s business to be heavily in debt. It was Tatsuo ultimately, against “loud” protests from his sisters-in-law, who took the decisive step to sell the shop. Worried about his responsibility as family heir, he chose what for him would be the safer, more familiar course – to stay in banking. Oddly, it was also Tatsuo, austere, retired, almost

timid, who took up the cause (apropos Makioka's new lowered standards) of finding Yukiko a husband.

One of the executives in Tatsuo's bank acted as the go-between. The candidate was heir to a wealthy family, himself an executive of a bank in a provincial city.

Though Tatsuo knew Yukiko was loathe to leave Kobe, her wishes on this score were too irrelevant to be taken seriously. (In his opinion the provinces suited her shy, non-urbane ways.) Since the two banks corresponded, Tatsuo was privy to all the information he needed concerning the man's character, finances, and social position, which was, if anything, a little too high for the current standing of the Makiokas.

Yukiko however was not predisposed to approve of the choice by the very brother-in-law who, in selling the family's business, had behaved in a way that violated (she was certain) her dead father's wishes. What's more, she found the man countrified. Yukiko didn't need her degree from a ladies' seminary to spot his lack of breeding. She would be quite unable to respect him. Rather than saying so directly (one of her main shortcomings was seldom to say enough to make herself well understood), she hemmed and hawed, giving vague answers that could be taken to mean anything. Tatsuo, conveniently, took her reticence to mean that she was not hostile to the proposal. So that when, in the end,

she said a flat “No – the fellow lacks an intelligent face,” Tatsuo was stunned. He privately suspected her of deliberately trying to embarrass him (a grave misreading of Yukiko’s nature).

Yukiko was happiest when allowed to live out her life in the household of her second oldest sister Sachiko. Their Kobe home was modern and casual and Etsuko, her niece, thrived on the exclusive ministrings of her cultured aunt. In some ways Yukiko was closer to Etsuko and a better “mother” to her than Sachiko (which fact Sachiko recognized and was grateful for – felt relieved by). Forever useful here, Yukiko dreaded being called to the Main House in Osaka when her brother-in-law and Tsuruko periodically got it in their heads that she more properly belonged there. She also dreaded the increasingly infrequent *miai* arranged on her behalf by an assortment of matchmakers. She said nothing of course. Silently she participated in one after another. They seemed frequent because of her mortification at being paraded before the unappreciative – her delicate, slender, old-world beauty was not what they wanted (placing her in the demeaning position of entertaining rejection by her cultural inferiors) as well as the fact that they jeopardized her present living arrangement which privately she found most satisfactory . . . she remained relatively unnoticed. To her credit, Sachiko, determined to find a man who

preferred, nay who would downright insist on a woman of Yukiko's caliber, ardently defended her. But as time went on, a promising candidate ("bird-in-hand") weakened even Sachiko's integrity.

Ironically it was Sachiko's lively presence, her more accessible beauty, that dwarfed Yukiko's more subdued one. Indeed the younger sister appeared, beside the ever-bright older, a bit moody. Recently a faint spot, a mere shadow that came and went in cycles was showing itself over Yukiko's left eye. Sachiko and Teinosuke were worried that it would negatively affect the opinion of a new prospect that had been found through the good offices of Itani, their hairdresser. (Sachiko, knowing Itani's fondness for arranging marriages, had left Yukiko's photograph with her.) Itani, it turned out, had sent the picture to a man she heard about but didn't hear back from for so long, she nearly forgot him. Then she learned he was busy investigating Yukiko's background. Itani meanwhile had gleaned the following about the man: 1) He is an office worker at M.B. Chemical Industries, a French company. 2) He lives with his mother in a small house that he purchased some time ago by installment. 3) Though he is over forty, he looks younger. 4) He has never been married. (This was the biggest plus. The Makiokas had more or less given up hope of finding a previously unmarried man. Also that he might know a little French was of

interest.) 5) His photograph reveals a plain enough person, a middling office worker – one can tell at a glance. 6) His income accordingly is moderate – what one might expect.

Segoshi actually managed to spend a few moments alone with Yukiko at the hasty *miai* that was conducted. When he later requested a second interview (just with her), she didn't refuse, which was uncharacteristic of her, nor had she objected to an x-ray and skin examination when at one point the question of the strange mark over her eye became the focus of attention. Though she revealed by not the slightest quiver her true feelings on the matter, her docility – might this in itself be an indication that even Yukiko was concerned about spinsterhood? How seriously did she take the old adage “bad luck chases women born in the year of the ram”? Segoshi's investigations were now complete and he was anxious to move forward, but the Main House in Osaka, for some reason, dallied. Itani was relentless and Sachiko in turn grew impatient with the Main House. She watched herself become more and more hopeful that this time the negotiations would succeed. With a little distance and greater objectivity however she realized that their very desire for a match (out of all proportion to what they could reasonably expect) had the perverse effect of dazzling them, heightening their excitement (possibly even their greed). Was a contract

with this man really suitable? The check and balance system provided by the two houses, much as she resisted it – the slowness especially – had its advantages.

Finally a call came from Tsuruko. “It’s a good thing we took our time,” she began. “It seems that the mother, whom we were told had palsy, is in fact mentally ill. She doesn’t even recognize her own son.” Sachiko understood. A strain of insanity in Segoshi’s blood posed an insurmountable difficulty. He would have to be refused. “There is nothing to be done, Yukiko,” Sachiko consoled, her, gently enough.



The woman’s ribs. That afternoon she had placed her hand on several. She had expected to feel bone but instead, there was a hodge-podge of bumpy flesh.

“Feel mine,” her massage therapist had said. (She’d wanted her to understand how to breathe diaphragmatically.) “Place your hands on my rib cage and feel my inhale,” she’d said as she’d picked up hands that had just felt her own dismally weak one. She’d expected sharp poky spindles encircling air.

Coo. Coo. Coo.

Coo. Coo. Coo. Ancient bird on a long slow evening.
Your whisper is my mother.

“He stopped smoking cigars after a lifetime of smoking cigars. Don’t you remember, honey. Your grandmother was so mad.”

“At what?”

“At his dying. For leaving her alone. She lived twelve more years. I’m surprised you don’t remember.”

“When he died, she must have been bereft.” Her mother’s voice dropped.



“My doctor,” she began. “What was I saying? Oh yes. My doctor says that my walking and my aspirin are what keep me alive.” She was silent for awhile.

“Except I’ve had to cut way back on my walking. After about twelve minutes, my arms and hands hurt.”

Suddenly she came alive. “Your grandmother walked. She walked everyday. It kept her spirits up.”

She recalled her grandmother’s intentional and vigorous stride.

“One day she was walking in the loop. She was just beyond the city gates when a black man knocked her down, grabbed her purse and ran away. She didn’t have much money in her purse. But she hurt her hip. After that she was never the same.”



The sweet singing of birds and then the steady peal of an old church bell abruptly with the dawn. She lay there listening.

This had been the second time birds – their pre-dawn clamor – had pleasantly extended her day. Actually, when she thought about it, she wondered why this hadn’t happened every morning – the birds’ ruckus being just as loud and just as early.

The church bell also sounded regularly. Its slow, scratchy, Cotswolds-pounding swell.



“It blooms all year,” the salesperson said. “Depending on how you feed it, you can get blue, purple, rose or even eggnog-colored blossoms.”

While she appreciated the information, she wondered why the woman had assumed that she would tire of its pleasant pink.

As a child she'd had a hydrangea tree. She'd called its flaky flowers snowballs. In the winter they'd all die at once shielding the ground in a blue-white cover.

"It's odd," she thought. "The salesperson has been touting its inherent 'evergreen' nature, whereas my heart recalls its spectacular demise."

The hydrangea had replaced a small Japanese Maple she had purchased the previous fall. The merchant had told her that though its branches would be barren over winter, if she simply waited, it would blossom in the spring. Meanwhile she needn't even water it.

Indeed, she had waited and indeed it had just begun to sprout lovely purple leaves (its limbs were singing) when suddenly they'd gone limp. "They look like a sick old woman," she'd thought. Her next thought had been aphids.

Of course she didn't know for sure. What she did know, however, was that this emaciated stack of sticks was now depressing.

The hydrangea had made her happier than a "solution" to her problem warranted. Just picturing it made her tingle inside. A common plant. It was nothing special. Even the saleswoman, embarrassed at its plebian color, had recommended fiddling with its diet.



Coo coo coo. Down the chimney echoed a dreary day.
She wasn't the only person pre-dawn birds were
startling out of their sleep.

The image of someone that she expected to see in the
afternoon bubbled through her mind. She knew that he
liked to be welcomed warmly, greeted at the door with a
big smile. She pictured herself opening the door early
so that he would see her when he rounded the corner
from the elevator. "Hi!" she'd yell, leading him in, fol-
lowing him as he shuffled over to the sofa.

Even if she didn't feel particularly exuberant on a given
day, the desire to please him in a small, entirely-within-
her-means way, she'd realized, would control her
behavior.

Randomly she pictured his grandchildren. "Be sure to
give grandpa a big hug, tell him how much you love him
and how happy you are to see him, okay?" was her
fantasy of their mother's forthcoming-visit protocol.

Would his grandchildren make fun of him? Mimic him
in their play? "Hi, grandpa!" And burst out laughing
so hard they wouldn't (doubled-over) get to the well-
known end?

Suddenly she felt sorry for him. Or was it herself, fixated on a “foible” that most people would find endearing?

She wondered which of her own foibles imaginary grandchildren might choose to pantomime. It was a brutal mirror, certainly, boiling oneself down to a laughable caricature.

Thinking about it she recalled the Ishiguro tale that several years earlier she had chronicled:

The paintings of Masuji Ono, now retired, had commanded considerable attention in the days before the second world war. He recalled the celebrations, the hoopla surrounding his receiving the Shigeta Foundation Award, for example, put on by his pupils at the old Migi-Hidari (since the war it had disappeared along with all the other bars of their district's pleasure quarter) and how oddly, despite the congratulations and speech after speech in tribute to his achievement, the expected feeling of triumph and deep fulfillment which the award should have brought, had been missing. When the feeling finally came, it had come unexpectedly, in an afternoon of solitude.

Several days after the public festivities, he had suddenly been inspired to visit his former teacher Mori-san and had boarded a train to Wakaba, a province he had by

this time avoided for sixteen years, though he hadn't been able to avoid news of Mori-san and was aware of the steady decline in his reputation. Lately in fact he had noticed that Mori-san was exhibiting in unprestigious halls and he had even heard a rumor that Mori-san, fulfilling his own dire parting prediction for him – Ono, had begun illustrating popular magazines. No doubt Mori-san, on his side, had heard about the Shigeta Foundation Award. As he had made his way out to the villa – a path once trodden over and over, various possible conversations between the two of them had drifted through his mind. Strolling up the mountain he'd stopped to admire the view and relaxed for a bit in the wild grass. At that moment he was overcome by the deep sense of satisfaction that had until now escaped him. It was a profound feeling of happiness stemming from the certainty that his efforts had not been made in vain. The risks he had taken, the extreme sacrifices, had proven worthwhile. He had achieved something of real value and distinction.

Thus it came as quite a surprise, when negotiations were getting underway for his younger daughter's miai, to hear from her older sister (whose opinions he sensed mimicked those of her husband – Suichi's experience in the war had left him bitter, resentful and vociferous in his condemnation of previous supporters of the Imperialist movement), that "precautionary steps" were in

order to make certain that the outcome with the Saitos didn't repeat last year's failure with the Miyakes, a family of far less influence. The very fact that it was out of character for Setsuko to make any sort of incriminating remark pertaining to her father made what, upon reflection, were quite pointed ones, all the more troublesome. The sidelong glances, the knowing looks exchanged between the two sisters – his sense that the whole atmosphere between them changed when he walked in the room – had contributed to his impression that they were concerned.

Understandably, since the way the Miyakes switched positions, so abruptly and at a point when to all appearances the negotiations were going smoothly (implying a specific reason, some obstacle they deemed insurmountable but giving not the slightest clue as to what that might be) the whole family had been on edge. Noriko was at an age where remaining single would soon be an embarrassment. Difficult as it was for him to envision his career in any other light than immensely favorable, he had to admit that times had changed. The war effort, in the name of which he had abandoned his up-until-then distinctive style (Mori-san's style) had wrought so much destruction, created so much devastation and pain in the lives of so many (he himself lost his wife and son) that the innocence (good intentions) of those who had supported it, could no longer be taken for

granted, especially by young people. He had heard Suichi's scathing commentary. His own tyroesque pupil recently requested (granted he had been polite and made his discomfort obvious; nonetheless he was forced by financial realities – he seemed almost desperate – to overcome his reluctance) a letter from him confirming their disagreement over making posters for a particular war project. The pupil's hireability hinged upon his verifying a trumped-up –once-upon-a-time dissociation! That exquisite loyalty to one's conscience could lead to actions which future generations deemed shameful – he felt the blow at the core of his being. Nothing could be assumed.

Take Ichiro. How unnerved the boy became at the mere hint by his grandfather that pretending to be Lord Yoshitune might be more interesting than playing Lone Ranger or Popeye (granted Ichiro's renditions of the latter – including bilge, meant-to-be English – were highly amusing). But why a cowboy? A samurai warrior or ninja – ninja of the wind for example – he couldn't help but feel would be far more salutary (instructive) for a child of seven.

What continued to weigh on his mind were his teacher's words that night in the storeroom just prior to the eruption in their relationship. Having tired of the entertainment provided by a valued pleasure-quarter friend of

Mori-san's, he had sought refuge in the quiet storeroom. He had been sitting in relative darkness when Mori-san himself appeared and seemed bent on conversation. He wouldn't have said anything had Mori-san not pressed, but Mori-san had pressed, and eventually he had admitted to being puzzled by the fact that they, as a school, devoted so much of their time enjoying the company of, studying and painting pleasure-quarter characters. Whereupon came Mori-san's fervent, "The finest, most fragile beauty an artist can hope to capture drifts within those pleasure houses after dark." Mori-san, as close to pontificating as he ever came, elaborated on the difficulty of capturing their transitory, illusory qualities. He himself, up to that point, was convinced that an artist's primary concern must be to capture beauty wherever he finds it. Indeed it was his belief that had made Mori-san and himself so compatible. But lately he questioned, in the face of the changing times — adults impoverished, children orphaned, cultural values disintegrating in the wake of blatant and crude financial ones — whether painting courtesans was enough. Eventually he'd decided it wasn't. As a consequence he was ousted, expelled as a traitor (having been his teacher's star protégé). With one sweep he'd lost his community, his mentor and even any assurance that he would be able to continue painting.

Once again the picture had shifted subtly. Now that Noriko was married and pregnant with Taro Saito's baby, both sisters had expressed astonishment that their father had taken the "precautionary steps" that he had. Setsuko's heartfelt, "Father painted some splendid pictures, and was no doubt the most influential amongst other such painters. But father's work had hardly to do with these larger matters of which we are speaking. Father was simply a painter. He must stop believing he has done some great wrong." And even Ichiro's touching, "Oji's not to worry." When he had not succeeded as he ardently promised to extract permission from the boy's mother for Ichiro to drink a prized drop of sake at the family dinner that night (which clearly had echoed a tone that child heard his parents using) surprised him in the extreme. Lately Setsuko had out and out denied having ever uttered the words "precautionary steps"!

If he were to take their present stance literally, the implication was quite obviously that what he thought he heard from them before the miai was nothing more than a projection of his own unacknowledged (and quite unconscious) guilt and shame. It was difficult to believe he had distorted things so radically. All those visits he had forced himself to make to ascertain that nothing detrimental to Noriko stemming from his career as an artist (no unaddressed solecisms) would emerge when

the Saitos investigated his family – if what his daughters were now saying was true, such “precautions” had been out of place. But he had been so certain. His early painting style earning him Mori-san’s tutelage, his patriotic turn making his work legion, his sense more recently of needing to back-pedal – each move had seemed abundantly clear.



Blood red leaves amongst the eucalyptus. Chimes swaggered in a breeze. A luminous night (at the beginning of her life).

“The longest day of the year,” she’d thought poised to hear the birds. At 7:00 o’clock, dusk was porous with light.

Her chimes sputtered. Still no birds. An engine in the distance revved, then re-revved. The low hum of cars, the bay, bay dogs, a boom box (its sepulchered thump) pulled her from her reverie.

BOOK THREE

Who is Kai?

“Who is Kai?” His questions. Gary Snyder’s answers.

Insistent chirps fizzling to a thread. The cool hill
broods birds warbling before light. Is it the heat in light
they want to avoid?

It brought back her summers in the blackened coastal
mountains (the heavy feelings she’d had, remnants of
which still cropped up).

So Gary says granola and she thinks, “milk, but up
there there is no milk . . . does he eat it dry . . . does
he just take fistfuls with his pilfered instant coffee?”
(She forgot about instant milk – that it existed.)



So why am I thinking about food when Gary is climbing
to Horseshoe Lake? Why am I wondering how he can

stand cooking in the rain (raincoat-hood over head)
feeling clammy, miserable, stuck.

It is reversible but if you're that conscious . . .

“Bones. Please move. Do your thing, okay. Just cooperate (for once).”

Think'n: “Why does everybody else look like they're hav'n a good time?”

Dirty hands hook tangled hair over itchy ears, again.
Nose drips. No hands to reach into inaccessible pocket
(under raincoat under bulging belt). Sooty smoke but
how much heat, really.



So birds. Mud, rain, dirty feathers or not (though they
have to preen – if their feathers get matted, it's bad
news). Not only that. They need their feathers light,
wispy, fluffed to the maximum. Preen all day. Every
minute you're not eating (or gathering food).

So you could say, “Well, think of delectable meal in
rain-fresh air. Think of sun, wind, sky. Think of trees,
blowing branches, flowers.”

Anyway, birds seem to do fine in the serial outdoors.



“I’m a kinesthetic learner,” the person had said. “I need to write it down and WHILE I’M WRITING . . .”

I think to myself: “I just write to get something READ-ABLE. THEN I learn.”

But it’s annoying. If the teacher says, “Wrap your right hand around your left ankle and thread your elbow through your arm . . .” I hear the word hand, but I can’t picture, right off, what that is. I can’t wait to READ it.

It’s particularly annoying in that I’m not a visual person. I need to read but I’m not visual. Reading = slowed time.

I learn through my heart, via some brain/eye combination.



The wooden hill dripped with mist. “Will it ever lift,” she’d thought watching a Japanese man dash to the pool with his five kids. All wore parkas in American-candy flavors.

His face, lifting one of them, up, over the fence, so the child could open an unexpectedly-locked gate from the inside. But he couldn’t. Something was the matter. The father’s confusion. The patience of the other four. Eventually they left.

Had they been thinking about going swimming?
It seemed unlikely. Perhaps the pool was a shortcut
to some other part of their condominium's property.
She admired the man's energy which seemed easy,
fun-loving.



Their (the daffodils') surprise white at the evening's
climax. The white of blue. The white of sky-blue water.

So the teacher says, "Get a slant board, a mat, a chair, a
blanket – the slant boards are outside . . ." and I look at
the clock and think, "Ten to eleven. Twenty-five more
minutes."

Because I have that sluggish feeling. I don't want to get
the board. I don't want to think about placing the mat
over its slim end.

I look around. Everyone is hopping to it. "Oh boy," one
woman says to her helper/buddy. "I can go home and
really have fun with this!"

I'm think'n, "I'm not even interested."

And yet I am interested. Even more interested than the
excited woman. I care with all my being. I could cry I
care so much.

The white flowers startle and I'm interested. But not with my whole being.



A man who goes on bird walks. He wants to know the name of . . . The leader just wants to say her spiel and get on with things, other people, lunch. The man, on a scale of one to ten, is how interested in the answers to his questions?

(But he doesn't know it. He thinks he's interested. He thinks of himself as a curious person and likes that about himself.)

He also likes the words that come with the leader's explanations.



Tweet tweet. Tweet tweet tweet tweet tweet. Tweet tweet. Tweet tweet tweet tweet tweet. Tweet tweet. Tweet tweet tweet tweet tweet.

Now *this* conversation is interesting. I think everyone will agree (if you're being honest with yourself). It's completely fascinating. The only reason you'd stop listening is if it stopped or if you were pulled away.



The woman upstairs shrieks into her portable phone. She wanders on and off her porch screeching Punjabi at the top of her lungs. Probably she thinks, “No one speaks Punjabi. I can yell as loud as I want.” I’m think’n, “Who in their right mind would listen to anything said to them in such a tone of voice.”

More compassionately: “She probably senses that people don’t respect her so she screams, figuring decibel commands (if nothing else). But it doesn’t elicit, and on some level she’s aware of this.”

I hear her pace the floor. Other people are there, but hers is the only audible . . . I hear young footsteps. I’m figur’n she’s what – maybe fifty?

The yellow sky and its descendants

The yellow sky and its descendants. And mine.
Mine too.

“I don’t remember,” she said. “I don’t remember the name of the book or the writer. I like being a member though. Mainly we talk. Have a bite. I’d read anyway.”

Her mother had always liked to read, but increasingly over the years, she’d read for larger and larger chunks of the day.

“I’m boring. I know that,” she’d interjected suddenly. “Everyone I know keeps very busy.”



“Termites,” she’d said. “Her house has termites, so she cancelled her trip to Alaska. Termites are very expensive.” She’d said it in a tone that implied that few people would be able to afford the luxury.

“But JoAnne can afford it, can’t she, mother?”

“Termites are expensive,” her mother repeated.



“Would you like me to leave you a card that says what I do,” the young woman had asked. It was a gesture of kindness. She knew her mother admired her and talked

about her to others. She also knew that when people asked what she did, her mother could never quite remember.

“I took her card but now I can’t remember what I did with it,” her mother had said. She had just asked about Camille’s line of work. “It has something to do with acting,” she’d answered. “She lives in L.A.”

She herself had never known Camille, but appreciated her consideration and sweetness to her mother.

“She teaches acting maybe. I think she teaches acting to disabled children. She’s very good at it.”

She wondered how her mother knew.



The morning emerged, sweet solemn unusual. Its tug. “Join me. Join me. Enter me here.”

No birds cawed. No mowers in the distance. “Sharpen your breathing!” The teacher’s words through the heightening light.

She had been looking forward to coming. Now, though she was here, a part of her was still looking forward to coming.

Sun and cold crossed the room at the same moment.



Jabbering. The Indian man sawed and the shavings slid through his porch planks onto her porch planks. “The Dow Jones . . .” his radio blared. She had rejected the idea of calling up to him – “Please turn down your radio and cover your floor” – thinking that he probably didn’t speak English. “Hey! The reporter’s speaking English. He’s fucking making an English racket.”

Still, something in her refrained.

Later, sweeping up the still-thick debris, she’d wondered. She didn’t feel anger. Normally she would have been enraged.



A deep voice answered the phone. A workman’s voice, foreign and uneducated. “If you need to reach Valentino . . .” a machine began. Then someone picked up the line.

The woman had told her to call her at her home number.

Something about his voice said that she wasn’t supposed to hear it. She wasn’t supposed to know about that part of the woman’s life.



Wind whorled the day's dusk. (Its dark clotted sound.)
A pence. A sixpence. A penny for your thoughts.

One was gum. The man's memory. The seats, their
undersides, a field of pink bumps.

“What else?”

“There used to be a man . . . he'd walk, carrying a radio.
If he stopped he'd die (I told myself he'd tell himself).”

“Was he friendly?”

“I began to feel friendly. One day I approached him. He
growled, literally snarled something unintelligible.”

“Maybe he felt that talking would require stopping.”



The woman snapped. Her gray wool sweater, rose short
shorts, and her sense. Her endless line of reason.

“What was her reason?”

“Rhythm. Rhythm was her reason. Every so often she
simply needed to. That's all.”

“Explode?”

“Arrange a certain kind of attention to envelope her,
swathe her, molest her again. She'd get punchy.”

“Punchy?”

“Her rightness commanded a focused block of time.”



Fat and rosy. Her hydrangeas busted out. Facing the hill, they laughed, blushed, shed a few pale petals.

“He fell,” she’d said. “He climbed up to fill the bird feeder and slipped. He’s okay now. He says hi.” She paused to catch her breath.

“So as not to be outdone, I tripped on some wire leaving a store. I fell flat on my face. The owner had the wire covered but, you know, little notches stuck out.”

She hardly knew what to say.

“As soon as I got home I iced it and this morning it was fine!”

“That’s amazing mother!” She’d gathered her courage. “Is your face okay?”

“I didn’t hit my face. I put out my hand. It was my knee that got the brunt of it.”



“It’s very dry here,” she’d answered. “All the lawns are parched and there are no flowers.” Her mother’s voice cracked. “We’d be lost without our sprinklers.”

“Are you rationed?” She’d thought of California. In times of drought, people were embarrassed to water their lawns.

“They said it wasn’t necessary. It’s depressing to see the grass turn brown.”

She knew the feeling. Still, the image of her mother’s kelly green yard, sprinklers going in the midst of a water shortage . . .

Horsetail clouds

Horsetail clouds whip from the south. Their sound on contiguous water.

Enjoying the early sun, the beginnings of heat in the still-cool day. No birds. A dog bounds up a hill, hauling his master.

The hill is steep. The dog seems fine, but the man? From the way he stoops, it seems he is in pain.

Mainly she wondered if he excused himself, as she did, from little things (the “correct” parts of something). Her teacher, for example, had given her a *mudra*, a sequence of movements that cumulatively built up heat. At several points in the sequence one’s arms were raised. First you swallowed, then slowly lowered your arms as you expelled the breath.

“Swallowing forces the energy down,” her teacher had explained. Which made sense. Yet each time she got to the place where her arms were raised and she needed to swallow, she’d either forget or excuse herself.



“The daffodils look stupid,” she thought gazing at the crabby hill. “Dressed for a summer day . . .

“Poor things,” she’d added, leaning over the rail, getting a feel for the squeamish grass and trees. “It’s downright freezing out here.”

Brisk chimes and the echo of wind. The choppy bay shoved unready air, which stumbled over itself.



Most of his life he’d been a runner, he said. At sixty-five, he still worked out each day in his home gym, but what really attracted him was yoga.

“I go to a class and it’s all women. I don’t feel comfortable,” he complained. She pictured him in a typical studio surrounded by thirty-something, fairly limber women. Of course he’d feel uncomfortable.

First Shiva. Then men men men. Initially women hadn’t even been allowed.

“Still,” she thought, “the superstars are mostly male.”

The realization had startled her. Her classes were filled with females yet her teacher and her teacher’s teacher . . .

She wanted to think that women brought a certain delicacy to the practice, a sensitivity that men lacked. But when she thought about it, the few truly powerful women teachers were not that way. (She did know

several exquisitely sensitive women teachers but they were not on the superstar track.)

“Superstardom hardly precludes authenticity,” she mused to herself. Yet she’d noticed a pushiness (or drive). Maybe drive was a better word.

“It’s different from aggression. Aggression is violent whereas drive is an inborn quality that simply expresses itself in the integrity of an individual presence.”

Violence is added-on. (She was getting it.) Naturally it would be featured in a culture that exalts adornment.



The dubious hill. The silent banner of the hill. Okay. Think about silence.

“That moment in the morning when I leave my room. No one is home. No one is around the building.”

“How do you feel?”

“I notice the quiet immediately. My bones relax. It’s a different kind of quiet from other times during the day.”

“What’s different?”

“It’s like steam. It’s as if the quiet can’t contain itself so it lets off something. A hum. It’s very peaceful.”

“What else?”

“God is present. I tiptoe about being very careful, very respectful.”

“How can you tell?”

“The air vibrates. ‘*Om Shanti*,’ it says. Even if a mower or gardener passes with a leaf blower or trimmer, let’s say, God’s silence isn’t affected.”

“I’ve heard that at death, as the senses depart, one will still hear one’s loved ones, the sound of their thoughts, for example.”



“Don’t just breathe. Feel the prana in the air and breathe in that,” the teacher had said. The air smelled like urine.

The day was warm and it felt pleasant to be in class. Inhale. He had also said that balance was not just not falling over.

“Balance is the stability of lightness,” he’d explained. “It can be scary. Sometimes, just when people find their point, they fall over.” She had had that experience.

“Lightness is the normal human condition,” he’d said.



“Your back is straighter again this month,” her massage therapist remarked. “The curve is less severe and the hump has flattened. It’s almost unnoticeable.”

“Long-term scoliosis is intractable,” everyone said. Spine-wise, she might straighten the energy, but the bones themselves would never change.

It made sense but she wasn’t convinced.

“YES!” her body screamed when she’d accidentally land in some stretch for which (it felt this way) she had waited all her life. She’d hang out for awhile, pulling inside. She was sure her bones were scrambling into alignment.

(Listening to them tripping all over themselves, dashing toward their correct place.) A parent bird hears her unborn chick turn in its egg no more clearly than she the vertebrae of her lower left back.



“Your bunions aren’t just bunions,” the rolfer pronounced emphatically. “They’re part of your scoliosis.”

“As are your poor digestion, shallow breath, weird (shifty) energy.”

“Oh my God!” (It made sense but she had never thought about it.)

The curvature had been noticed by a seamstress who’d altered her childhood skirts. One side had been a full two inches shorter than the other.

“Did no one suggest surgery?”

Maybe they had. She couldn’t remember.

Barely audible birds

Barely audible birds. And sun. Like a wall.

She’d rounded a bend, a narrow forest road. Sun-soaked branches patterned its tar. Rose-black, amber-black, cerulean-black. (The sudden hopscotch of yellow-white.)

Was it the curve, its swaggering “s,” a piece of time, roused, helpless in her body?

“Probably it was a feeling stored in your body, not a time, wouldn’t you say?”

“Rounding the bend, desperate and clutchy. Whereas at that moment I had just finished a yoga class.”

“Describe the sense.”

“‘Just get me home. Please!’ I was crazed.”

“Or opened like a vessel so that when tilted, an old condiment (anxiety) had suddenly slipped out.”



“My drawing teacher,” she’d begun. Veins of white threaded her pony tail. From her graying skin, the ricocheting sun.

The woman’s age. Her smile. Once the class had sung her “Happy Birthday.” She’d turned around, faced everyone squarely.

“Not everyone would be able to receive such a gift with so much composure – is that what you’re saying?”

“There was no ‘Aw no’ or ‘Please, you shouldn’t.’ ”



“The jaw and the genitals,” the teacher began.

“They’re energetically connected. Someone tight in the jaw . . .”

“TMJ + wild sexual fantasies?”

“I ask my beginners to do Lion’s Pose,” he’d continued.

“I say, ‘Don’t be shy. Give it your all.’ They spread their tongue on their lower teeth . . . It’s a cultural thing.”

He’d paused.

“The whole region of the head should be, like a balloon, inflatable.

“The tongue, for example, is a muscle. When you stretch it, it becomes longer (easy to rest its tip on the soft palate).” He had previously explained just how far back the soft palate actually was.



“Hello.” Her voice croaked. Dredged up from . . .

(“I no longer feel nostalgic,” the thin man had said, staring into space. His words from some abyss.)

“You’re early. Usually you call at ten after. I wasn’t . . .” her words evaporated. “How are you dear?”

“How are you? How’s the weather?”

“It’s beautiful. So cool. Right now there’s a breeze.” She’d paused. “Last week it was roasting. If you so much as opened the door . . .” She’d paused again.

“Oh I know something that’s new. I volunteered at the library. I’m going to work at a neighborhood branch four hours a week.”

“That’s great, mother! What inspired you to do that?”

“You know, honey, every time I go to the big library, the people there are so sullen. I look around. No one

seems happy. But at the small library where I sometimes go, they are friendly and eager to help. I thought to myself, ‘I’m going to volunteer. It’s a great place to be.’ ”

It seemed appropriate, somehow, that at the end of her life, her mother would work at a library.



“The older I get, the less there is.” The thin man crossed his legs, gazed at the darkening sky. “I kick through feelings. And, like I said, I’m no longer nostalgic.”

She understood. She had sometimes felt ashamed of her, of late, absence of nostalgia. When she’d finished something, it was finished. What pertained to it felt like a fetter.



“She’s lost her youth,” the woman began. “She’s aged. She’s a doctor. She’s full into being a doctor.”

It was said without a slur, but there was a slur.

“She says she’s happy. That her marriage is happy. But she also says, ‘Well, I’m the breadwinner so . . .’ ” her voice trailed off.



“One Saturday morning – very early – a guy waved me over.” (The thin man was talking.) “I was running. He was on the other side of the road. ‘Hey,’ he’d said. ‘I just got out of prison. Been in prison twelve years.’ He had scars, a tattoo. A huge man.”

He’d recrossed his legs. “His body needs to move,” she thought.

“‘I got nowhere to go. No food.’ There was something wild about him.”

He hesitated. “The guy almost cried. (I slipped him a twenty.) I could see he hadn’t quite expected it. Things like that. I’d miss that.” (He had been talking about maybe moving.)



Evening ascends. Bronze light on the hilltop. Screech screech screech plus the wheeze of early crickets.

“It’s too hot,” she’d said. “I get depressed when I can’t be in the sun for at least a little while.”

Her mother’s skin had darkened. Olive-complected, she had, in the sun, simply turned olive-er. In her youth a white summer dress had been almost like a pearl.

She recalled the pale shades.



“So her gifts were too shiny?”

“Always. A ray off.”

“Do you understand the sun? Are you a sun person?”

“No. I like the sun hidden. I bask in its aftermath.”

Tweet tweet

Tweet tweet. Tweet tweet. (Despite the black eerie night.) Smokey clouds rumbled around the sky.

“Sweltering,” the woman reported, feet immersed in bubbly soapy water. “Sweat simply dripped off me.”

The woman’s voice, like a radio, drifted from the other room.

“Of course it was beautiful,” her odd monotone continued. “We hiked. The wine country was fun but,” she’d stopped, “there was no air conditioning!”

“Even in stores!” The manicurist seemed astounded.

“Well, the hotel lobby was coolish. I’m sure in Milan (pronounced Mee lan, rhyming with can) it’s different. There weren’t department stores or anything like that.” She’d paused. “It’s not something I’d repeat. I mean it was an experience. I’m glad I went.” Her voice trailed off.



“Allow the ball of light in the *agna* chakra first to glow then gradually to descend purifying each body part. Roll it slowly around your throat, your heart, your lungs, your sacrum. Take your time. Get every spot.”

Sun peeled through the blinds. It was Sunday. She had slept thirteen hours.

Her teacher's words, sucking them with her body, lozenge-like.



Indian neighbors! The fact sat warmly. She had never lived in close proximity to an Indian family.

For years she had lived amongst the Japanese (their sloppy-but-not-exactly-slovenly, at-home, ways). So used was she to the elegance (seen-ness) of their exterior, their quotidian noisiness had come as a surprise.

But perhaps she was being too harsh.



Mushy hill. The day, without sun, sagged.

She'd dreamed she'd been in a hall, *Othello*-like, tiled and mirrored in green Egyptian splendor. Queenly beings roamed about, lavishly limbed and dressed. Her aunt was announced. She was dark black with choppy hair. Though richly attired, her posture was obsequious.

"Your mother is dead." (The pronouncement from the court.) At first immobile, she had doubled over and

sobbed. It felt like an earthquake, an impossible disaster, yet she alone need experience the blow.

The shock had awakened her. Strange. Its residue was not horrific so much as exotic, foreign, inaccessible.



“I don’t like to ingest things,” her mother had recently said rejecting acetyl l-carnitine as a memory stimulant. Her esophagus randomly burned. While she sympathized with her mother’s hesitancy, besides ginkgo biloba, not much was available to supplement one’s mental faculties, which were causing her endless frustration.

Also, her phrase, “I don’t like to ingest things,” seemed, somehow, out of character.

“Do you feel alone in the world,” she had asked a woman whose mother had recently died. “No. I just miss talking to her,” the person had answered.

“I would sob at her death yet I don’t particularly want her to talk to her,” she’d thought. “That she’s there, that I know that she’s there, supported and content. But that would be true in death also.”

(An Iago-like character danced around her extremities.)

She tried to imagine what it would feel like to miss her living mother.

A mother she knew was taking her son on a trip to help him pass the days while his father was away. She pictured the little boy missing his father terribly. But the picture was just a picture.



In her dream there had been a quilted jacket. The memory of its soft cotton breast.

A building had swished back from the street, an endless row of odd-shaped apartments. “This one is available,” the Indian owner had said pointing to any number of cavernous openings.

He owned a similar building across the street. She tried to keep her attention on her purpose of renting a room but it kept shifting to the bolts of tie-dyed, quilted fabric he had stacked in floor-to-ceiling shelves.

Vividly recalling her jacket. Imagining its sleeves. Rubbing her arms to re-feel their softness.



“Pull the *chi* from your feet through the knees to the *kanda*,” the teacher began. So poetic were his instructions that she had trouble imbibing their meaning.

Lavishing their resonance, clinging to the sounds.
Sometimes she'd fall behind.

So it was a risk. She did want to hear. But the sounds
were . . . irresistible actually.

“Now withdraw your senses.” he continued. “Allow the
front of your spine to act as a magnet. Affix each sense
solidly, then focus your attention at the third eye.”

A warm feeling spread like butter over her chest and
arms.



Daisies! A bright yellow bunch in a gold-foil pot. “A lit-
tle summer color for you, my darling,” ran the yellow-
paper note. Tiny green buds, leafy green fingers, plus
the still-green centers of the more mature blooms.
Usually daisies were white. The shock of their laughter.



Thin, spry, willowy. The woman's long black braid
scrolled down her spine, signing her Buddha t-shirt like
a seabird's wing signs waves. Beads at her throat. Rings
on her toes. One toe had two.

“Take your time,” she whispered. It came as a surprise.
Such a simple instruction yet her body responded,
instantly.

“Take your time,” only this time louder. She’d sensed the effect and wanted to prolong it.

“What a wonderful teacher,” she’d thought as she managed to stay balanced in the awkward position. Previously the woman had adjusted her arms slightly. “I wonder how she knows that half an inch would make such a difference?”

Simple and tight, her braid rested on her back.

When she’d had braids, they’d shed their hairs. Little spiky ends would fly all over. In the front, instead of lying flat, cowlicks had poked every which way. She’d felt disheveled. A mess.

“Mess” still served as her default self-curse.

Black dawn

Black dawn. The sky growled. An old man with his puppies hovered in the approaching rain.

Drops, first thin, just a misty film across her windshield. Could it simply be an especially wet morning?

More drops. She'd turned on the wipers. Sure enough, after each swipe of the rubber blade . . .

She was headed towards the mountains.

Later, heading back, thick fog curtailed her vision. Rounding a bend in a blanket of whiteness.

A cyclist wearing red swerved in small "s" patterns as he huffed and puffed over a crest. The rain had slowed but the trees spewed their heavy drops. Thud. Thud. "Makes it hard to keep his balance," she'd thought, worrying for him.



The yogi wore black. Her sweater, tights, socks absorbed the morning sun that spilled in through the sliding screen.

"He selects his stones carefully," she said. "I looked on the web. Called other jewelers. All of them are expensive."

She'd remembered that the last Vedic astrologer who'd read her chart also was a jeweler.

The ups and downs of her mistrust.



Gregorian bells. Their rustling as the day dropped behind the deer-strewn hill. “It could be a carpet. It could be woven in Victorian wool,” she'd thought gazing over the pine and tall mustard-colored grass.

“Will you teach me *pranayama*,” the woman asked softly.

She had just pushed this person to prepare herself for a task for which she was capable but hadn't felt capable. Now . . .

And yet it felt right. To grow into the position. To become the person that could.

“Visualize a small blue flame at the base of your spine. At the crown (and hovering just above it) is a glowing fire. Allow the fire to suck up the flame (as a person would a straw). Then let it melt away, leaving a residue of silver thread.”

While the teacher's instruction was vibrant, opening to it, allowing it to seep, gradually, into her bones . . .



“What I like about a person is her ability . . . like to be in a room. I think I want to write about being in an empty room.”

She’d pictured him at his wooden desk, writing with a pen. Alone with words.

“The older I get the less I want to go out,” he’d said, warming to his subject. “My friends are just who they are, I guess. We don’t have to ‘do’ anything.”

“Hang out. There’s an art to hanging out, I guess.”

An old black jacket draped at his sides. He’d just been running. An orange baseball cap clung to his still-damp head.

“I used to drink. When I stopped I started running. Now I can no longer find the point.”



“She eats and eats. It’s out of control,” the mother said. “There’s no end to her consumption.”

The girl had just been jilted.

“I buy food. It’s gone. A whole pizza, gone!” She’d paused. “Ice cream. Quarts. I can’t buy anything.”

“She’s trying to stay alive.” (She was trying to help the mother.)

“What about respect? She thinks of no one but herself. Should I tolerate this?” (Her voice lowered.) “Her only relationship is with food. That’s all she cares about.”

“The psyche needs to conserve its energy.” She’d said this. Inside, however, she’d worried terribly.



“2607. That’s the building all right,” she’d said to herself. No door, no windows. “Lots of people have to get in somehow.”

Stairs on the left led nowhere. On the right, however, a path ended at a phone. She tiptoed around the garbage.

Just as she’d arrived, two sari-clad women stepped through a gate.

The decrepitude, the filth, the disarray. Clearly the building’s owner was letting it fall apart. It felt uncomfortable to be here, even briefly.

It crossed her mind that the astrologer himself could be the owner.



Her sleeves, their slight flare at the wrists and sheer crinkly fabric accentuating her thin exotic body. “Until I was eighteen I lived in Communist China,” she’d said.

“Was your family Communist?”

“No. I was raised a Christian. Only my parents’ understanding of Christianity was slim.”

She tried to imagine harboring a Christian thought in what she knew about Mao’s regime. “Oh I just told myself it’s brainwashing,” she’d commented. “I was never affected.”

The year without butterflies

The year without butterflies. Hearing a woodpecker in the night, she'd remembered the missing Monarchs.

Astride the hill, beneath one dead overhanging branch.

A pine grows. Its fluffy needles brush the sunny afternoon. An Indian woman rushes down the street clutching her sari. Its indigo/sky-blue firing the bus stop while a skinny woman reads.

Still there's a breeze. An island for dogs and wet cool air. Both drag sand from places.

The god's dead skin melting in the mountain sun. Yellow sapphires had sprouted she'd read. Yet the scarcity of butterflies, yellow skin aside.

Tigers too. *Their* yellow skin. Her yellow skin. Everyone's untempered concern.



She had overslept (though it seemed more like the sun was slow and she'd kept dozing, waiting). By the time she'd risen, the birds were quiet.

White sky, nests, and the carcasses of trees. Their silhouettes in the silent morning.

She could feel them in the trees, the bush, the outskirts of the hill. “Probably because their hearts beat so fast,” she’d told herself repeatedly.

The vibration of their hum. “Little voice galaxies.”
Coming from them it felt more hers.

“A cockle shell is always special. One feels blessed, picking it up, listening, actually hearing the pulsing sea.”

“I’m struck with how a general sound, like a caw or sigh (from the ocean, say) seems more personal (meaningful to me) than a more specific one maybe even addressed to me.”

“Vagueness = space. I relate to that. (Locate myself within it.)”



“Hari Krishna. Hari Om.” It was far away in the city but the sound of their chant, cymbals, drums. Even as she woke, long before the parade.

Crickets, seething heat and their song. (Though she’d read that the air, its essence, is purest at 4:00 A.M.)

The energy of the feast (their love of god so fresh).

“A Hari Krishna person once proselytized me at an airport. I gave him money I didn’t have. I wish that hadn’t happened.”



Heat bristled. Leftovers from the high noon sun shattered in early shadows. Childrens’ cries, their broken wails like wolves on an August night.

“Help!” The shriek and pace childish. “No no!” Yelps. (Someone’s getting dunked.)

“It’s almost dark. Strange that they’re swimming so late.”

A monotoned male drones through the woodwork. His canned, carefully-trained, din.

“Did you see the woman’s face?” (She meant her new Indian neighbor.)

“I called upstairs. There was no answer.”



An empty room. His. Aloneness at its peak.

His ability. Flying in no alone moment but in its spacious quality, gently, delicately, being him.

Someone comes over. An awkward beingness having now to come to terms.

Knees knock. White stripes and cap. Their shabby clinging to what was.



“The other man puffs himself up. Trying to be seen. Please. He says.”

“How can you tell?”

“I fall asleep. My eyes become sooooo heavy. His alert head only notices what’s inside it.”

“So when he says, ‘I feel your respect,’ he’s talking about himself – what he feels visualizing himself visualizing him.”



Alone. On the hill. A single white daffodil. “It looks like a blown-away piece of laundry,” she thought, gazing at the cold, brown grass.

“There used to be a row of them, all perky and sweet.”

In her book a girl (perky and sweet) had been raped at dawn while walking to a festival. She and a friend were skipping down the road, all elated in their bracelets, henna, song. Probably they were filled with things to tell each other.

Later she'd hung herself. The thugs had mistaken her for the real woman they'd been hired to attack.

The whole thing had been instigated by a man who wanted power. He'd racked his brains. Finally he'd rekindled an old point of contention. Feelings ran so deep and so broad on this well-cultivated issue, that the needle seemed unlikely ever to land in his precise corner.

“I just keep thinking about the giggling little girls.”



A young girl's body, bloated with food.

“Got'cha!”

“Her war. Her everyday ‘2 fruits, 2 vegetables’ versus ‘fuck it’ – which – neither makes her happy.”

“She tries to distract herself. Assure herself it's not important.”

“Or that it's extremely important. The only thing of importance!”



“She became so tired. I gave her the briefest instruction. We sat for about five minutes. She was wiped out!”

“I get tired. But I hadn’t allowed myself to feel the exhaustion until I saw her do it. I tried to break it down. Only give her the bare essentials.”

“You underestimate preparedness. Energetically the body has to be made ready.”



“Ganesh. God of wisdom. Remover of obstacles. Elephants are the wisest of all beasts.” The teacher’s sharp thin body. Her perfect Sanskrit “r.” The coral echo in her Om as she led the chant.

“I was beat. The heat, ants, deluge of facts. I was just lying there half asleep, but dying to know about Ganesh.”

“I bet you thought White Tara or Green Tara would be your deity.”

“It was strange. When I got home from the Vedic astrologer, I saw three different images of Ganesh in my room.”

“Was it the animal part that had put you off?”

“I’m aware of shunning explicit animal energy, though I like fish (their silent light).”

“The energy of Ganesh resembles that of Sanskrit, its four stages of arising.”



“A tone and can I be there for its various impregnations?
Can I ride it like a wave the sea-floor’s mountainous
range? Eon after eon and maybe a tip will emerge.
If so, we get all excited.”

“Birds know way beforehand.”

“Seabirds hunt the bottomlands. Their peaks and
valleys. They read them, smell them, sniff them,
sway to them.”

“A cliff’s demise. Miles below the surface. Is its moan
the cockle’s? The longing could have been.”

Redwind daylong daylong

“I don’t like people touching me,” commented the yogi in response to her complaints about a workshop that’d been organized around participants assisting each other in poses. While she grasped the rationale, the class had seemed an endless series of technicalities, switching places, talking.

“It’s nice inwardly to feel out the nuances of one’s own correct alignment,” she’d added, encouraged. The more she thought about it, the more cheated she’d felt.

“I don’t want strangers touching me,” the yogi repeated, brushing herself off, as if someone just had.



“Rubato. Do you know what that means?” The teacher was emphatic. No one replied.

“It means rubbery. If you’re playing music and the score says ‘rubato,’ you mentally keep the rhythm but you stretch it in an expressive way. *Pranayama* is the same. You stay with your breath, but not stiffly. Not like a log.”

“The body is filled with rhythms,” he’d added. A healthy person’s hums. Notice in yourself.”

She had actually. But she'd related it to sensitivity. Her mother, for example, vibrated at a very high speed. "She's tuned like a viola," she'd mused many times, somewhat in awe of her.



"My bones are the vestibules of touch, or used to be" she thought to herself. If a masseuse, let's say, had failed to apply enough pressure . . . "Err on the intense side. I'll tell you if it's too much," she, once upon a time, would have rushed to instruct.

She touched words. Not the word, but the word's aura (the astral word). Massage, she thought, should be the same.

"Massage isn't massage," she mused. "It's a transference of consciousness. Everything depends on (1) the masseuse's understanding and (2) the depth and harmony of the connection."

The odd part was that she was just figuring this out.



"Agapanthus," the woman had said handing her two long-stemmed ones. "Their root-balls are gritty, but their blossoms . . ." She knew. Patches of them grew wild along the edges of her hill.

She'd put the two in a vase. Their fragility and cosmic sweetness.



Wind roared. Chimes banged. A lingering racket at the day's end.

A baby eucalyptus slinked through the iron bars.

"I'm scared," said the thin man. He'd been sick, and before that, awake for three days visiting a friend.

"I'm scared," he repeated.

His emaciated frame, shiny skull, book bag, glasses.



"Wine! They're wine-colored this year!" Her hoyá had sprouted its tiny waxy blossoms.

She'd glanced at her hydrangea recalling the salesperson's advice. "Different foods create different colors."

She hadn't fed it. Its blossoms were a stunning violet-pink.

She had randomly used the word "memoir." But "late bloomer." For him, that's what it was about.



“Crystal meth,” the man had said. “The whole northern part of the state is being affected. Jackson. Sonora.” She knew someone in Sonora who met the description to a “t.”

“They crinkle their mouths.” (He imitated the look.)
“They lick their lips and chomp their jaws. Constantly. Also they age. No matter how young, they start looking haggard.”



“Viyasa said that *pranayama* is the greatest of all *tapas* (purifying acts),” the teacher explained having gathered the class in a small circle around him. “How does this work? We have less *avidya*.”

“Ignorance of our true self leaves an imprint on the body/mind. We experience it as a contraction (me). *Pranayama* creates a psychic relaxation. It moves the chi. Loosens *avidya* up.”

Yet she’d veer off – “Oh I don’t need to do that” or
“I’ll just skip that part.”

BOOK FOUR

Green hydrangeas

Green hydrangeas! For several weeks now she had noticed the chartreuse cast to her potted flowers. “Soon they’ll turn pink like the first blossoms,” she’d thought, though she rather enjoyed their sweet, pale, celery-like color.

The chill had slowly drained from the day. “September is the hottest month,” she schooled herself, getting ready.

She looked more closely at her hydrangeas. Certainly they were no longer sprouts. “They really are green,” she’d exclaimed with irrational satisfaction.

Pig! Her heart jumped. The little squiggly letters leapt out with intrigue. Not the dry, meaningless forms on a page that meant nothing to her except a task she

couldn't master. Here was a lovely pig and "pig," the word, resonated, and the sound had letters that she could learn both to say and write.

Indeed, learning (anything) was so hard, that it was hard to learn that it was hard to learn.

There was a mouse too. And a foot. Her chest exploded.

Dusk and its sounds. Her neighbor's television blared. Lights popped on from distant windows.

The ease of being. Without talk. Without the sound of ease.

"Sri K. Pattabhi Jois says, . . . *it is not good to talk too much. By talking too much, the power inherent in the tongue decreases and the power of speech is destroyed.* (Though I'm not sure I understand what he means by 'power inherent in the tongue.')

"Like stones, sounds contain the residue of those to whom they'd belonged."

"The sound of rain. Or a mantra. Listening to the sound of the Sanskrit alphabet sung by one's teacher in a jingle."

"Clouds and paths. Their sound to a walker. Crickets and children on a summer night."

“The plop of a pea to the ear of a mother whose son is far away.”

Her thoughts turned to Krishna, how he'd taught that one comes to yoga in her life only by having practiced it in a previous life. “She is pulled toward it against her will, like a magnet,” he'd said in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

“I think of a vase. Its space. The line that shapes it.”

“A bird's chirp. What's more shapely?”

“The sun's square shadow on a browning slope.”

“It's the building,” she'd thought. “Lines compiling lines. The streak of a bird across their trajectory.”

“Were there birds before this?”

“Birds exist in real time. (Before the bird comes time for the bird.)”

“Bird's eggs. An albatross chick takes a very long time. It makes one hole, then another.”

“Its parents meanwhile ‘talk’ to the egg. First through the shell, then through the holes in the shell.”

“But they stay out of it. They are there, but they do nothing.”

“The real time of their voice, through the shell, pulls the chick, against its will, like a magnet.”

Quiet. The suddenly-silent night with its churning train

Quiet. The suddenly-silent night with its churning train.

Mustard grass blazed on the hill. (The occasional caw and somersaulting leaves.)

“Could they be squirrels?” (She peered at the cluster.) For a moment it seemed so. But then, from their scurry, their bobbing twitchy necks, it was clear they were sparrows.

She’d looked out at the trees, tall, spare, gracefully arched toward the sky. They reminded her of a painting.

The “painting” had been a silk-screen. She’d seen it at a friend’s. No green. No sky. Just the inner world of slender wood.

“This this this. It all goes,” she’d periodically said to herself, ripping through her belongings.

With “for sure” piles, “maybe” piles, plus a strictly-enforced lag time, she’d rarely err.

She had erred, however. The silk-screen was one. There had also been a jacket that someone had made for her out of lush Indonesian fabric.

Shabby dawn. From a door left open during the night, cold morning air crept stealthily across the room.

She stood in the squalor near a skinny cat whose muddy nose was shriveling.

Noses musn't shrivel, said the yogi. (She was reading.) The five elements – earth, water, fire, air and space – are found in localized spots on the nostrils' inner linings. A person can, by channeling her breath, affect the quality of her consciousness.

“The little rounded bumps on your noses' sides should be soft and passive,” the yogi continued. With your fingertips, gently stroke them downwards. Then release as you inhale.”

“Could this be true also for cats?”

“You have a fine hand,” the astrologer had said, tilting it toward the light. “You're intelligent, yet practical. You will live a long life. Only your health and your relationship will be a problem.” He'd released it, seeming satisfied that she'd be pleased. But she had not been prepared to hear about her dismal health nor her relationship.

“Yet the point is to know so that one can make better choices,” she’d reminded herself as she slowly walked to her car. “It’s not a verdict. It’s a warning.” Her whole purpose for the visit, in fact, had been to collect a sapphire that, after it was set, could be cleansed and blessed to ward off these very influences.

“A stone is sullied,” the astrologer had explained. “Just as a baby is born with mucus and blood and needs to be bathed and dressed for this world, a stone needs to be washed from the effects of its former life. A *pooja* ‘wipes the slate clean’ so to speak.”

“For these ten days I fast and do my spiritual practices. But I will try anyway to do the *pooja*,” he’d generously offered.

The yellow stone, pale and huge, sat between the jeweler’s fingers.

“It’s almost too big,” she’d thought. “I’ll never be comfortable with something so garish.”

The astrologer had said she could get a pendant instead of a ring, but (as the jeweler pointed out) a pendant wouldn’t always touch her body. (Which had made her wonder why the astrologer had said it would be okay.)

Night traverses night

Night traverses night. A few city lights had crept through the pane. A suckling. Some staves of bamboo. How much time have you got?

The time of black. Its depth and how much a person charges.

“Is time free?”

“The person who thinks so.”

“Settlements founded on this basis.”

A woman talks and then makes sure to unsay everything. Another talks. She feels bad about it later. Another uses the radio instead of her own voice.

“What does adamantite mean?” one asks.

“Diamond-like. Hard to cut. Hard to take away from itself.”

The aluminum gleam of an early morning sky. Against the dun-colored earth. Its pungent odor.

“No. I can’t talk now. I am very busy with my prayers,” the astrologer had said. She’d called to find out if she

could bring her stone (now that it was set) for a *pooja* during his week of fasting.

“You can’t come. You come the next week. I do early Thursday morning.”

Probably he had been irritated by his wife’s demand that he take the phone. Still, once he had taken it, and especially were he immersed in prayer, his tone, it would seem, would reflect prayer. Instead it was grouchy, annoyed, perturbed. She’d heard the background voices of his wife and daughter like chickens in a crowded barnyard.

“He *asked* me to call,” she muttered to herself. “He said he might have time. I mean I wish he’d just said, ‘Forgive me. I’m praying. It would be inconvenient to have an interruption just now.’”

“*Prosad. Prosad.*” The Indian woman had passed her a gift. “What an honor to receive this blessed food,” she’d thought as she cupped the sweetened balls.

She’d felt relieved to have delivered the jewel.

“Don’t worry,” the Indian jeweler had told her. “See this watch.” He’d pulled up his cuff. “A thief would take this before they’d bother with your stone.

She'd glanced at its tiny box. It said "22 carats."

"Is 22 the highest amount of carats," she'd asked, uncertain of how to respond.

"24 is the highest, but it's too soft for your purposes."

He'd paused. "We need to secure it on your arm once the *pooja*'s done, so please come back." He had been through the long decision-making process of how she, who disliked rings and pendants, could wear such an ostentatious gem.

Slow light melting slow cold. Recalling drab cold days.
The ones that followed sparkling sunny days.

Puffy dolphin-shaped clouds sailed above the town.

"Only autumn," she felt, "could have an 'Indian summer.'"

Which depended on the brevity and elegance of brief
elixir dawns.

Dark bells. Musty grass harped at the sky. "It's winter, man." (That's what the sky said.)

“It certainly smells like winter,” she’d thought, glancing at the swarthy air. Jays squawked. “Why are they so crabby?”

The jeweler from India – he was not crabby. Twice he had generously offered to help. Strange. He’d said what he’d had to say and then just stood there, which had a tender feeling.

“Don’t leave your purse,” he’d advised when she’d walked to another part of the store where a mirror stood. “I had my wallet stolen that way. And from my own shop!”

She’d appreciated the reminder. Once her purse was stolen from a shopping cart at the supermarket. “It hurts,” she had instructed herself again and again, but apparently not enough.

Daybreak

Daybreak. And the noises of daybreak.

“How are you, dear?” Her mother’s voice, sodden and foreign. “We were talking to the neighbors across the street. I forgot you were going to call.”

“How are they doing?” She knew she was fond of them.

“They’re moving to Colorado. To be with their children. And their grandchildren when they arrive.”
(This last was barely audible.)

“Our neighbors to the left are also moving. I’m just waiting for the ones on the right . . .”

“Are you close?”

“We talk. Like now. Standing on the street. They’re very nice people.”

Her mother’s delivery had dropped. She could imagine that poof, three neighbors gone . . . , but each time she’d primed herself to hear her disappointment, she’d hedged.

“The road was a shimmering blue-black stripe scored in the red soil.” She’d read the sentence how many times? Its author, David Davidar (once a journalist) lived in New Delhi the jacket-cover said.

“I mean like everything’s the same.” (The thin man had been talking.) “This guy I knew, he’d gone home one day, poured kerosene over himself and struck a match. Nice guy too. Really nice. But you know, what’s the difference between that and ‘Hey, what’cha hav’in for breakfast?’ ”

She knew what he meant.

“I mean people do what they do. We can make it mean this or that but in the end it doesn’t change anything.”

“Ah. Ah. Ah.” Her hand formed the vowel. Again and again. Each time she’d whisper it.

Its lines, curves, patterns on the sheet. And in her body. Etching them into her body.

“Connective tissue, infused in every cell, is slow to stretch,” her book had said. “But if you soften the surrounding muscle, it helps.” Sanskrit was the same. If she’d turn off her mind, her body would absorb it. If she grasped, her pores locked. She could feel them clamp shut.

“Use your breath, not your muscles,” the teacher had scolded. People were fading in the long hold. When, after about three minutes he’d added, “Get

comfortable. We'll be here awhile," someone had laughed out loud, as if she couldn't even imagine the idea.

Letting her breath do "horse." Through the window an old Japanese woman rounded a bend. She looked strained.

"*Asanas* have a built-in nobility," she murmured to herself as she watched the woman suffer. Her walk was right (she'd mastered the stride) yet it generated (she hated to say it) stupidity.

It had to do with body integrity.

"Ninety percent of yoga is creating the right context for yoga," her teacher mentally droned as she drove home from the long, slow class. Traffic too was slow.

"Unlike the squirrel who bounds up the pine," went her uncanny connection. The tree was young. Its bark undeveloped. "It couldn't be grip. But it couldn't be muscles either," she'd continued, trying to imagine what in the squirrel let it scramble, circus-like, straight up the trunk's belly.

Then again she'd seen it on its haunches, nibbling at a nut, a little spastic (very busy). Its constant glances. Its fluffy tail flicking.

“Squirrels are in a hurry,” she’d thought, picturing one traversing her fence’s spikes. While its skill was yogic, its nervousness bothered her.

Their relentless purr. These beasts from the bush. So much song pressing on, pressing on.

She awoke to their trill, a miasma of calls. It was 4:50.

A cricketless sky, striated cobalt, had gradually exposed itself. Driving east she’d caught phantoms harkening, braying across the scarlet grass.

“Were they trees?”

“No. They were shapes. Blobs. Eerie, black, ghosts.”

“I’ve had too many Alaskan hamburgers,” said the yogi back from a sunny summer. His *nauli* lacked its usual sharp clicks. “When it gets easy, you’ll want to do one side, then the other, then a swirl, then reverse directions.” He’d started to demonstrate. That’s when he’d stopped. “Up there the air is cold. Working outside makes you hungry.”

“Denise was ravenous. I’ve never seen her eat so much,” he’d continued thoughtfully.

She'd tried to picture poised Denise scarfing down a plate of food. Heretofore he had used the word "feed" for "eat." Imagining Denise "feeding" . . .

Autumn noon. A frail caw, a cat, crickets (barely audible over the hum of distant cars). An owl mood. Shrieks of kids from the next-door pool. Since her room squared the hill, their noise muffled rounding her building's corner.

Sea oats

“Sea oats. So that’s what they’re called!” She looked at the brown feathery flags waving over the beach. Its sand was moist and the white rippling surf sparkled so she could almost smell it.

Sea oats are everywhere protecting the fragile shoreline from the forces of nature, said the postcard’s inscription. Her mother’s note had remarked on how she’d particularly loved looking out at the beach and watching the sea oats sway. “The weather is gorgeous,” she’d added (verified by the card’s amazing sun) but when they had spoken, after her return, it turned out she had been sick.

“What was the matter, mother?”

“Oh I don’t know. It’s my esophagus thing. The doctor says everything’s fine, but as soon as I eat, it hurts.”

“Were you sick for the whole trip?”

“I couldn’t walk on the beach. You know how much I love to walk on the beach.”

She’d stopped. “Daddy walked.” She’d said this in a tone that implied that since he had, a part of her was satisfied.

“I’m read’n this book,” the thin man said, holding the rubberbanded paperback in his lap a little more tightly. “Four kids from a family of ten – killed, randomly! It’s written by one of the surviving brothers who’d moved away but then moved back.”

She had commented once that when she drives through especially downtrodden neighborhoods, she’s aware that what the people on any one block do have is knowledge of everyone on the block.

“So ya’ know. Sure you might know everyone on your block or couple of blocks. But they’re just people. They could still steal or kill your child.”

She knew he was right.

“You know these people all your life, but so what? You know what I mean?”

Drops of rain awakened her. She looked at the clock. Only 1:30. “I have the whole night to enjoy the lovely sound,” she’d thought, snuggling deeper inside her covers.

“I have GERD. Gastroesophageal reflux disease. They abbreviate it ’cause it’s such a long name.” Her mother sounded tired.

“What is it exactly?”

“When you eat you get a burning sensation in your chest. It feels like everything you swallow comes back up.”

“Can you get anything down?”

“Well, soup. If there’s nothing in it to irritate my throat.” Her voice trailed off.

“Oh I know something,” her mother continued, her tone implying “Here is a ray of hope!” “I bought this gadget. It looks like . . .” she’d stumbled for a moment searching for the right word.

“A remote control,” she’d finally resumed. “You color-code in things that you tend to lose.”

She pictured her mother trying to retrace her steps, forgetting what she’d done two minutes earlier, adding that to the frustration of losing her keys.

“It’s perfect for people like me.”

She’d paused. “When it beeps, I can’t always hear it.”

“Would *you* like one, honey?” This, after a long silence.

“I don’t actually misplace things often enough to warrant it, mother.” She’d hoped saying so wouldn’t make her mother feel bad. “Maybe there’s a way to turn it up,” she’d added (her edge of despair).

“What concerns me, mother (I gather from what you say) is that you think you’re only interesting when you have something new to report. I’m interested in whatever you do. When you say you had soup for dinner, I find that interesting.”

“I don’t. What’s interesting about that?”

“Well, it’s what you do. Your life is interesting. You don’t have to do anything special.”

“I think going skating or going to see friends is more exciting.”

“Why?”

“Oh I don’t know. There’s just more to talk about, I guess.”

“I go to my doctor tomorrow,” she’d said when the subject of her esophagus reopened. He’d given her a shot. She knew (she’d said) it wouldn’t help, but “since she was there . . .”

Her heart bled for her mother.

“I’m belching all the time.” She’d paused. “He won’t help. Even when he gives me something, it doesn’t last.”

“So he was drunk and he said, ‘I don’t want to be friends with anyone I can’t beat up.’ Keep in mind that this is a big guy. He was at his wits end.”

The thin man was talking. He had on a bright blue shirt.

“Aren’t you cold,” she had asked when he’d walked in. “It’s winter. It’s dark. Don’t you want a jacket?”

“Naaaah. I’m used to it. My apartment isn’t heated. Compared to Atlanta, California never gets really cold.”

“In Atlanta,” he’d continued, “it drops to 33. Then it rains. Noth’n out here ever gets that uncomfortable.”

She knew what he meant.

Sweet rain. The first of the season. The sky was black. The hill silent.

“I wish you were coming home for my birthday.” The low voice of her mother rose up in her mind.

“You know how I feel, mother. I’d just spoil the party.” (She herself wished she weren’t the person who detested gatherings.)

“I know, but I still wish you would come.” Another time she would have pushed it.

“Tell me more about your life.” (It felt like she had already forgotten her disappointment.)

“I’m a monk, mother. I don’t have a personal life.”

“I know, but I’m still interested.”

The rocking sun

The rocking sun. Back and forth across the thin man's face. Dusk. Falling falling fallen.

He'd gazed out at the sky. His tall silver building loomed above the criss-crossed roads.

"I hate lights," the thin man said. "People come over and I'm sitting in the dark. I like it like that."

As he spoke, lights from the city slowly grazed the room.

Three birds chirped.

Shiny scalp, elbows, the baggy clothes of a very thin being.

"So I can't make plans. I have no idea what I want. I'm flat," he'd said after a pause. "Something comes along and I can feel if I want it. But if it doesn't come along . . . I can't imagine beyond what is right in front of me."

The gelid sky

The gelid sky with its few poky clouds. No pink. A flat pale tan.

She skirted the traffic.

Remembering dawn. Its dimples over the hill. A rat had scurried across her porch in its first amber glow.

Her hoyá's blossoms reamed the porch, scattered in wind-blown rat piles.

Dogs and sand slugged the path eastward. Squirrels and a doe (leg torn, eyes bewildered) roamed the heavy bay.

Several weeks earlier she had seen it with its mother, chewing leaves, sloshing through mud. Spelled by a particularly luscious bush, the deer had eased out of sight.

A Monarch darted across its path. Usually millions of Monarchs feasted on the trees. "Where have all the others gone," she'd wondered.

"How are you, dear?" Her mother's voice, hollow, scratchy.

"You sound tired, mother. Did the phone wake you?"

“No. I was up.” She’d paused. “I usually don’t take naps.” (It seemed she had run out of things to say.)

“I wish my grandchildren were here. Do you remember, honey, how you used to go to Grandma’s?”

“So what’s new, sweetheart?” Her mother’s voice seemed breathless, a little dazed.

“Nothing much. How ‘bout you? Did you have a nice supper?”

“I wasn’t really hungry. When I’m not hungry . . .” she’d paused as if she had just remembered something.

“I had soup. The soup was good. I like soup . . .” Her words trailed off.

“How are your hands, mother?” It had been a pity, the one day she’d worked at the library.

“They’re the same. I see the doctor next week.”

Suddenly she came into focus. “Your aunt Lilian’s fingers are all curled up. Her hands are like a ball.”

Sobered by trees. (The leaning cypress.)

She'd stood at the rail and watched a squirrel on the roadway, standing! It had been a rare moment, seeing it upright and so still. Possibly it expected cones. A fluffy pine sloped in the wind and frequently shed its handsome fruit near where the squirrel had positioned itself.

Earlier, she'd caught the moon rocking. Usually, at so incipient a stage, its fingernail arc would tilt sideways. Since the full outline of its silhouette had been visible in the blackness, she had seen it resting in its sliver-saucer, straight up, like the funny squirrel.

Strange that she'd expect it to be crooked.

Astrologers tell Chinese kings

“Astrologers tell Chinese kings,” he’d said, “and rich people” he’d added after a pause, “that sixty (the age of sixty) is the beginning of adulthood.” He’d stopped to make sure she’d understood. “It means not responsible to anyone else. Just being who you are.”

She’d pictured a sixty-ish Chinese woman padding around in cotton shoes.

The man, an acupuncturist, had a Chinese wife. Who had a Chinese daughter. (Her utter lack of curiosity.)

“Pssstt . . .” said the sign on the back of the truck. Which she had found very curious.

Happy Birthday, my darling

“Happy Birthday, my darling. I thank God for the gift of your life. With all my love.” 27.xi.02

The words were on a card from the J. Paul Getty Museum. *A delicate botanical specimen is captured here in one of history’s earliest photograms, also known as a photogenic drawing. It was so named by William Henry Fox Talbot, a scientist, mathematician, and author who is credited with being one of the inventors of photography.* Such ran the inscription. The photogenic drawing negative, *Erica mutabilis*, March 1839 was a William Henry Fox Talbot (English, 1800–1877) reproduction. She’d found its silvered mulberry veneer stunning.

The card and the words of the card. She hadn’t realized that she was so loved.

“You’re going to live to be a hundred!” the astrologer had screamed. When she’d gone to retrieve her gem, after its *pooja*, he was away. But his wife was home. She’d immediately dialed a number and handed her the phone. That’s when she’d heard the emphatic report.

“I don’t care so much about a hundred,” she’d replied. In truth, when he’d intimated this before, she’d found herself annoyed. “I just need to accomplish what I want to accomplish.”

“That’s what it means,” he’d instantly rejoined. If you live a long life, you’ll have time to do what you need.

She could see the logic but the language irked her.

A previous Vedic astrologer also had concluded an extremely auspicious chart by saying that she would be financially prosperous. “House and car,” he had said. She knew that this was simply an Indian’s way of exemplifying wealth, but for her, it diminished the full measure with which she could enjoy her good fortune.

“The Dalai Lama rides an exercise bike!” (So said her new maroon and ochre book.) She was amazed. And relieved.

Because she’d worried about him.

She recalled the afternoon during recess from his class. He’d personally presented a *kata* to a group of American women participants. Just as she was thinking how silly they all looked performing their Tibetan dance, he’d walked up and wrapped a white silk scarf around each of their necks and bowed.

Just before he was born, his mother had dreamed of snow lions (two green ones escorting a bright blue dragon). “Green is my favorite color,” stated the new book of His Holiness, beaming through his glasses.

A portion of her previous night's dream flashed through her mind. She had been chatting with two other women when she spied her partner on the other side of the courtyard, sitting in the sun reading. Suddenly she missed him very much. As she walked over to join him, she noticed that he, on seeing her approach, put a post-it note at his place in his book. "he's glad I'm coming," she'd thought, touched at his eagerness.

The image of him sitting alone in the sun reading had stayed with her the whole day. In the dream, the sun's rays acted as a halo. It was as if he were sanctified by the sun and that their coming together in this private (yet public) way was also sanctified.

Drip drip drip. First sound. First light. Usually pink, today a narrow band of yellow had crept across her carpet.

Her Buddha glowed. "He's black!" she realized. How had it taken her so long to notice?

"Where's this from?" she'd demanded the moment she'd spied it toppled on its side.

"Tibet," the stall-person replied. She had been shocked that he even knew the word.

Which made her believe him. (Obviously it was what he had been told.) “How much?” she’d asked.

(Pause.) “One twenty-five.” (It was a particularly beautiful rendering.)

So now she had three. The first had been a gift, a silk-screened scene from Buddha’s life. Amidst a covey of disciples, long-eared Buddha stood, one hand opened, the other raised.

She’d draped it over a monitor where her gaze plummeted into the oval of Buddha’s lightly-touching forefinger and thumb.

On top of the monitor sat a small bronze Shakyamuni whose detailing and expression she’d found gentle, sweet, inward.

Beside this she’d placed a flower. And behind that, the wooden Buddha from the flea market.

Fat sun

Fat sun. Prune sky. “It looks like it’s going to be a nice day,” she’d said to herself hearing (and wincing at hearing) her new upstairs neighbors clanking around.

Two small birds twittered in the bush.

“They are lovely people,” the real estate man had retorted when she’d mentioned their noisiness. “They dote on their apartment. They’re a delightful couple.”

When she’d referred to their Indian language, he’d corrected her. Strange. The fact that they were Russian put an entirely different spin on the situation.

Wind browned the dangling branch, wedding its limbs to the air.

“Where’s that tweed jacket,” she’d thought. She’d remembered its drape, the way it would swing around her body, then swish, bulkily, back into place. “I probably dumped it.” She dreaded looking in her closet.

For awhile she’d had the rule of giving away the equivalent of any new addition so that the total size of her wardrobe remained the same. “I have a small closet. I’ll just stay within the means of my closet,” she’d thought.

Eventually it got too costly.

“I want a wardrobe with depth,” she’d reasoned, though suspected it was more like greed (the inability to resist buying something that she liked). But she found that she’d forget she had certain things and failed to love them.

So she’d give them away and it made sense. In a later moment, however, it might not make sense.

“Do you remember when you used to be enraged when someone commented on your clothes?”

“I felt violated. As if a third party was intruding on an intimate colloquy. No matter who it was, I assumed they ‘didn’t understand’ and therefore had no right to comment.”

“Pretty severe.”

“I felt that people’s remarks were random. That they were ‘making conversation’ at my expense. (This was a serious subject for me.)”

The sun had dropped behind the hill. “It’s only 4:30!” she’d muttered glancing at the darkening sky.

The day, shrouded in mist, had shrunk to a few sooty drops. “I mustn’t forget to have new wipers installed,”

she'd thought noticing the grime plastered over her windshield. Her mechanic had suggested a pair a year.

Every year she'd say to herself, "What! Already!"

She'd had the same internal dialogue about her shower filter.

Having read that the city's chlorine was unhealthy, she had dutifully purchased one. "It's meant to serve an entire family. I'm just one person," ran her rationalization the following fall for skipping the manufacturer's recommended annual replacement.

Now, as its third anniversary approached, she'd heard herself squirm. "Isn't it supposed to beep when the filter is beginning to wear out?"

Caw. Caw. Caw.

Caw. Caw. Caw. Scathing crows reminding her of cats.

And her dream set in an early morning. She had been vacuuming a field filled with mud and thick weeds. Each time she'd move to another of its "districts," huge Alice-in-Wonderland cats stared her down with benign whiskered faces. Some had stripes. Some were pale yellow. But they'd seemed eerie and they'd frightened her with their secret intelligence.

The night had been hot. Her neighbor's t.v. blared. Noise, sweat and seething crickets had kept her awake.

"Do they hum more in the heat?" She had been asking herself this question as she'd finally dropped off. It did seem that their comforting purr had more oomph on hotter nights, but that could be her imagination – that they were "complaining" for her. The truth was she didn't even know for sure that crickets objected to heat. "For all I know they love the scorching weather!" she'd inwardly mused. "After all. Summer is their season." Just then she remembered that on her calendar she'd marked the previous day as one with a full moon.

Another facet of her dream – that the handle of her vacuum had been wet and despite the shivers in its

electrical currents, she had been too lazy to put it down, get a towel and dry it off. Instead, she'd just plowed on, praying that "somehow" it would be okay. The socket to which it was plugged was loose. She hadn't dared touch it. The whole seemed risky in the extreme, but she'd brushed the danger aside as if she could think it away.

Funny. In her dream she was doing something that was not lazy, yet she was doing it lazily, to the point of endangering her life. "It would have been wiser to simply not do it or wait till a time when I could be more present," she'd mused.

Crickets and no moon. Gray-green clouds empty of debris. Dusk settled over the valley.

"The idea that her kittens might be sacrificed by her mother – that in the hierarchy of values held by her mother the lives of kittens were certainly of less importance than, for example, Frank-san's slightest whim – must have been alive to the girl before the animals were even born." Such were her thoughts as she re-read the story¹ by a casual friend of the child's mother:

1. Inspired by *A Pale View of Hills* by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Indeed, now that I remember the first conversation I had with her, that strange afternoon inside the shabby cottage, Mariko huddling over the pregnant cat curled up on the tatami and commenting, quite out of the blue, "She's going to have kittens. Do you want a kitten?", what strikes me most is how the child, ignoring my "Oh really? How nice . . . I'm sure they'll all find nice homes," became surprisingly insistent, almost demanding. How could I have failed to notice the anguish and despair arising from her helplessness in the face of (in her mind) certain disaster. By screaming at her mother that most unchildlike, "Why do you always go away with Frank-san? Frank-san pisses like a pig. He's a pig in a sewer . . ." she made her analysis of the situation abundantly clear. If Sachiko's own life was held in abeyance, it would be foolish to expect (and this is what did not escape Mariko's perspicacity) her own or those of her kittens to be more highly regarded.

There were many occasions where Mariko's pre-occupation (one could almost say obsession) with her kittens, for now there were three, Atsu, Mee-Chan and Suji-Chan, was in evidence, but by far the most poignant of these was the day of our outing. The outing had been planned to celebrate the imminent departure of Mariko and Sachiko for the home of Sachiko's uncle. Frank-san for the moment was out of the picture. Sachiko, while

procrastinating, giving her uncle a moving date and then doing nothing to prepare so that weeks after the established time she still had not packed a single item, held firm to her intention. She and Mariko would live in her uncle's spacious house and Mariko would have tutors and private schooling. After all, wasn't Mariko's education what she must concern herself with above all else? The outing was designed to be one last day together at our ease. The lift up the mountainside had indeed proven spectacular, the picnic on top and the vistas on our little hikes exceedingly pleasant. Toward evening, after a department-store supper, we strolled through sidestreets in little hurry to reach the final tram depot. On one such sidestreet we chanced upon a kujibiki stand. Mariko instantly asked to play and noticing Sachiko's reservation, I handed her a coin. Since Mariko appeared to be a child, the stand-keeper instructed her to close her eyes while drawing her ticket and visualize the big furry bear. Mariko: "I don't want the bear. I want the basket" pointing to the back of the stall. The man shrugged. "All right, princess, close your eyes tight and imagine your basket. Ready?" The first time Mariko's ticket won a flower pot. The second time she (now it comes back to me clearly) won a pencil. We were about to leave when Mariko pressed to try yet a third time. She seemed so desperate, so single-minded, her emotional intensity so unsuited to the "we-all-know-

no-one-ever-wins-anything-serious” attitude with which most passers-by play. Mariko, just then, was not a mere passer-by but for whatever reason, both her mother and myself refused to see that.

As luck would have it, on her third try Mariko won, not the basket but what the stall-keeper described as a “major prize.” This turned out to be a large wooden box. Made of smooth, unvarnished pine it was light, like an orange crate, and had two sliding panels of wire gauze. Mariko, thoughtful, inquired, “Couldn’t we carry the kittens in here when we go to Uncle’s? We could put down a rug. I’m sure they’ll be quite comfortable.” Sachiko wasn’t so sure but on reflection could picture it working as Mariko described. Several days later, however, Frank-san’s car was back and their plans had changed.

They weren’t going to go to America immediately. Frank-san would put Sachiko and Mariko up in Kobe while he went to America to send for them after he found work. They were leaving tomorrow. Sachiko was quite agitated, throwing essentials into valises, boxes, what-have-you. She kept repeating that she couldn’t take everything. Some things would have to be left behind. She hoped I could use some of the things as they, many of them, were quite valuable. Mariko sat in the corner of the tatami playing with her kittens, expressionless.

“Have you decided yet?” she asked abruptly. “We’ll talk about that later,” her mother began when Mariko broke in, “But you said I could keep them” and began to intone to me, “She said I could keep them. She promised I could keep them.” Sachiko turned toward her daughter, spotted the orange crate and yanked a kitten from the tatami, tossing it inside. Mariko was still hugging one of the tiny black kittens to her chest. She said nothing as her mother shut the other two inside the crate. Then she held the kitten out to me. “This is Atsu. Do you want to see him?” Mariko grabbed it away from her yelling, “It is just an animal. Like a rat or a snake. It’s just an animal.” She dropped the creature into the crate and left the cottage.

Mariko, still blank-faced, shadowed her. Sachiko headed for the river. First she took one kitten in her hands and tried to drown it by holding it under the water. When after a few minutes it wouldn’t die, she put it back into the box and edged the entire crate into the river. To prevent it floating, she leaned forward and momentarily held it down. Mariko watched, transfixed, from the top of a slope behind her mother. As the box began to bob its way down stream, it caught in some reeds, was freed by a current and continued its journey. Mariko ran along the bank, stopping to watch the box till only a small corner was visible above the surface.

Sachiko, who by now was aware of her daughter's presence, called to her before turning back to the cottage but her voice was the perfunctory voice of a weary mother doing what is expected of her. She shrugged her shoulders and walked back with the exasperated step of one who has experienced an unwanted delay. I turned in search of Mariko. Toward dusk I found her crouched on a bridge staring into the water.

Sticks. Little poles.

“Sticks. Little poles. They couldn’t have been more than this round,” the woman had said making her thumb and index finger into a ring. “At least this is how they were when he lived with us.”

She’d looked down. It was easy to picture.

“He’d stand in front of the refrigerator. He’d be there for the longest time. Finally he’d take a carrot.”

She imagined the thin man, scantily dressed, poised in front of the fridge. He’d probably felt comforted by the purring lights and intriguingly colorful jars.

“Later he started crying. I’d hear low sobs coming from his room.”

“We put him to sleep,” the dark woman said switching the lotus-like cross of her legs. Long gray braids limply straddled their creases. “His little white body was so thin. Just a stack of bones.”

Tears dripped down her face.

“About a month ago he’d stopped eating. We got him some baby food, which (for awhile) he’d take. Then he’d refused even water.”

She pictured the pitiful cat needing to die but not being able to.

“We took him to the vet. Buried him. But I worried that his brain might still have been working.”

The sun’s last rays shedding its pink behind a tree.

“What tree? Not a hide-and-seek tree. No one would play hide-and-seek behind that tree.”

“It’s skinny. But if you were desperate. If you knew the person was coming and you had to hide fast . . . “

“You could will yourself out of sight. I’m not sure how much a beanpole tree would help.”

The thin man stretched his legs. He knew all about invisibility.

Inside he was empty. Words, anybody’s, effervesced. Disappeared.

He disappeared. (He’d stopped going to school.) He’d drive around. No one paid attention.

So now, when he tries to learn, he has to focus really hard.

“Do you think that’s why . . . well, I mean, the less he has, the less he needs to worry about.”

“He’s good with the negatives. Knows what people don’t say.”

Three birds

Three birds. Their flutter in the cold sky though they said nothing. No tweets. Nothing.

Two hummingbirds, one, and then right away the other, from place to place, very deliberate.

“Is it their speed that makes it seem as if they know exactly where they’re going? Or maybe they do and what was once there, isn’t.” (The “Simon Says” quality of their partnership.)

“We’d planned a reunion for the sisters.” Her mother’s voice rose up. “But at the last minute Jane got sick. This time too, she said she couldn’t come. So we called it off. But, you know, honey, she’s never really gotten along with Helen.”

She’d paused. Her silence had no judgment. At an earlier time, the silence would have been pregnant with judgment.

“She no longer talks to Rose. Until about a year ago they were inseparable. I’m sure it was something Jane did that caused the rupture.”

It may well have been, she’d thought to herself. Still, that quality in her mother – to predictably side with the

non-family person – had, at least for herself, been an ongoing source of pain.

Her mind fell to a story she'd read – was it a brother of the Buddha, who (being jealous) decided to foil him? He'd set free a rampaging elephant. The elephant bounded off but when it saw the compassion on Buddha's face, it stopped short and prostrated instead. A drawing of the scene had depicted just the elephant's trunk groveling on the ground amongst a crowd of devotees. "Funny how much information is contained within that trunk," she'd thought examining the drawing closely.

Most of the followers carried offerings. Flowers, bowls, flowing robes, *chortens* – all joy-filled except the poor humiliated elephant.

Horse pose

Horse pose. “I mean I know I don’t have the strength to full on do the pose, so I feel like an imposter.”

“Imposter!”

“The pose requires power, grace, dignity. Instead of embodying it, deeply breathing into it, my mind falls apart. It says, ‘Spppooouush. Think about rivers. Think about flowers.’”

Cool air clinging to the hill. “It wants to be hot,” she’d thought, gazing at the whimpering grass.

“Go lower.” Her teacher’s voice, suddenly, apropos of nothing. “Everyone but Angie, go lower,” he had said. Everyone looked out of the corner of her eye at Angie, who indeed, was very low. Too low. “Angie, come up. There. Stay there.”

“Strength in the legs builds prana,” her teacher said as the horse-pose clock ticked. “Notice your inhale. Power in the thighs deepens and purifies *puraka*, the incoming breath.”

A shroud of dark. Ducks quacked. Seabirds whined. A low horn in the fog.

“Was it plentiful?”

“Her laptop was jewel-like the woman had said. Not plentiful in that sense.”

She’d thought of the fat Korean comic upon whom instruction in being “Asian” had been foisted. The woman had felt so ashamed.

A teenager wrote saying *she* was ashamed of her representing herself as Korean as if, being a comedian implied a stand-in role-model.

It reminded her of the thin man. His mother had never recovered from the fact of him. She couldn’t stand that he was him.

“That he ‘was’ took away from the possibility of her becoming?”

“She couldn’t be her, schlepping around a kid.”

Dark days. Their similar ending. The way they seemed to slow down, drift off.

While light days rekindle themselves, dark days drop off flat. They keel over. Bamm.

One can smell it coming.

A flat sun broke through the wine-colored clouds. “Go lower,” he’d said. “Stay with your breath. Don’t let yourself get distracted.”

His words came just as she had been about to lift her gaze. The air reeked forest.

“Your perineum should broaden. Energetically, however, it lifts. If you allow your arches to activate your feet, and from there, your legs and abdominal muscles, your thighs won’t grip and the opposing actions in the *muladara* chakra will happen automatically.” It was a mouthful.

“ROAD CLOSED” “Oh my god,” she’d thought. “There go my precious fifteen minutes.” She’d whipped the car into a U and inched back in the opposite direction, forcing herself to relax.

She had had to snake down a one-lane thoroughfare for several miles to reach this sign. “Why couldn’t they have announced it at the turn-off,” she irrationally thought. While the route over the hill was popular, proportionately, very few people used it. “That’s the problem with insider secrets,” she’d rethought (it felt) more correctly.

She was still scolding herself for having snapped-judged one of her classmates.

Not a May sky

Not a May sky. Behind the clouds a tortured sun.

Bells, whisked by wind, aroused suddenly in a heat break. The city sighed. “What a relief!”

For days now a brittle sun had poured down the air shafts. Midnight felt like noon. Sirens. Fires. Even the stars seemed out of whack.

“Some people thrive in heat,” she’d reminded herself. She’d had a friend whose body – the closer to the equator, the more alive.

Curled over his guitar his gentle swipe of the strings.

Dark but not cold. The evening had jumped into place early.

The silly ghost, splayed across her manager’s office window, had brought to her attention the fact that she was more isolated than she’d thought.

“I was reading a book by a man who roams the astral world,” began the teacher in reference to herbs as inducers of elevated states of mind. “He said, *Whenever I’m out [in the astral plane] I run into cats.*”

“Cats’ eyes have two lids,” he’d continued. “When both are shut it’s ‘see ya’ later.’ ” He’d obviously been a fond observer of his own two cats.

“I’ve seen them twitch. It can get pretty weird.”

She’d wondered why she’d never liked cats. Just thinking about them gave her the willies. One would guess that it’d be the opposite, since cats were calm, intuitive, highly evolved beings.

“It’s their claws,” she’d reasoned, but secretly had no idea. It made no sense.

Traffic snaked around construction. Stick figures raved. Baseball hats, polo shirts, knickers, bats – beside the wavelets.

She’d looked, tired and wanting the sea-breeze in their shirts to be in hers that night.

An old woman in a hat (or visor) came to mind. Mao jacket, farmer pants. (Her slow slow hobble.)

She played flute with friends, she’d said, but alone she played viola.

“Do you enjoy it?” she’d asked. (Because the woman had seemed stunted.)

“Oh I don’t know,” she drawled.

“Fat and sleek!” she’d muttered, rounding a bend, facing a huge moon in the still-dark dawn.

“How do we adjust our practice?” a person asked. (Because it couldn’t be ignored.)

The teacher had hedged. “The goal is to develop a sense of cool, yin, receptivity. For a beginner that might mean restorative poses.”

He’d paused. “An advanced student might do difficult poses slowly. A *vata* must be still. Do you understand?”

The finally-rising sun cast one lank ray across the spotless carpet.

“Luxurious” was the word that had come to mind. The yogi’s body was not thin. Lithe and supple, powerful and soft. “A gorgeous body,” she’d thought as she watched her on her stool, one by one replacing the wooden blocks she’d removed the day before in an explosion of cleaning.

She’d noticed that in class, each time a new instruction was given, she’d be in the pose before the words were out of the teacher’s mouth. Meanwhile she herself, like a lump, would be struggling with some logistic like buckling a strap or folding a blanket in threes, just so.

The mule-ish quality was familiar. (At her monastery, as the first bell clanged, she'd watched a fellow student, fully robed, flying toward the meditation hall.)

The idea would never have occurred to her.

A chalky sky behind the elms. A cricket wheezed.
The sun, a skin, sheathed the horizon.

Birds twittered across the vale. Their echo. Hawks.

"You'll be a nicer person," the teacher had said.
"Remember that. You'll be a nicer person."

He had invented a way of parsing *mayurasana* so that shorter portions were interspersed with another, easier, activity. "This way you do more," he'd explained. Practice it for the week."

"Nicer person." His words rang in her head. "It's true. We all do want that!" she'd mused.

Once a classmate had greeted her outside, in the dark, in the cold. "Hi Gail!"

Later, much later, she'd said to herself, "I bet if I greet people pleasantly, calling them by name, it will make them feel good."

An elegant sun

An elegant sun, its crispy back braced against the sky.
“Yes,” she’d thought, “winter is around the corner.”

Earlier, smelling dawn, sucking it (in rich full breaths), she’d almost lost her balance. “Empty your mind,” the teacher had said just as (so enticing was the fragrance – like hay or milk fresh from the udder) she was about to do it again.

For one split second her life had flashed before her.

“Little horse. Little secretions. Hope.” (The words popped through her dream.)

“Raise your hands, bow your heads.” The teacher was preparing to end a vigorous class on backbends.

“Inhale,” he’d said before a common instruction.

The slow low sound, in and out. So old. So familiar.
More familiar than her skin.

“The moon will be full Saturday,” he had earlier announced. “Of course the moon’s light is really a reflection of the sun’s. That’s why we do rest poses . . . and long holds,” he’d added, almost as an afterthought.

The glare from its mostly-full face had awakened her during the night. Sopping body. Moody mind. Simplest decisions impossible.

An innocent day rising up up up. Peak after peak loomed in the distance frothing with clouds.

“*Paschimotanasana*. Ten minutes. Take a blanket if you need to.”

“There must be a *marma* point in the center of the forehead,” she’d thought as a surge of bliss rushed through her body.

Stubby cypress. Dune flowers, bob tails. One sailboat slinking by the skyline.

“Shaped mist,” she’d muttered as she watched the rocks and spiky treetops fringe the cobwebbed bridge.

Two baby pines slumped beneath their mother naked on the east side.

Salty air, slime and piles of mud near a crooked barrier.

That morning her teacher had spread out a map of the body’s musculature. “When you support a person in a pose, your hand needs to be specific,” he’d begun.

“The placement – the direction of your fingers – gives an energetic signal, which you use to encourage the person (even the person’s skin) to move in the right way. If your hands are on muscle, you may create pain. Tendons are better. See the white spots? You want to be there.”

Later, his words “red meat, white meat” tumbled through her mind.

“Bye Susan! Susan’s off to England.” The class had turned around to see Susan waving, leaving a little early.

“Rain gear!” she’d exclaimed, inwardly describing the puffy black microfibre pants and oversized t-shirt Susan had on for her international flight. It made sense, but she wouldn’t have had the nerve.

Odd that she would feel impelled to dress more formally on a flight whose majority of time would be spent sleeping.

“Or writing. But clothes get in the way of writing.”

Snow

“Snow!” she’d thought as the snow-covered city emerged from its bank of bloody clouds. Indeed, the seven hills, the uptown highrises, even the bay resembled frosted glass.

“Were it anywhere else it would be snow,” she’d said to herself. (She hadn’t realized that fog could be alabaster.)

It had hailed earlier. After the rain. And sun for a split second.

“What a day!” people were saying.

When she’d driven toward the bay about 4:00 P.M., the light had been splendid. She’d looked up. Lo! Clouds like postcard heaven.

Billowy, over-the-rainbow white.

Black air (valley-bottom damp) peered in her window. “Like plaster,” she’d thought staring it down. Darkness was a fixture. Even the birds were tired of fighting it.

A hummingbird that had formerly fed on her azaleas, tread the air that had held them. “In their memory,” she’d thought, amazed at their brains’ retention. She supposed it was a matter of survival, returning to

previous nourishing sites. Yet their intelligence seemed somehow pitiful.

“Think though. If they could talk themselves out of it. If they rationalized, ‘Hey! That old plant is not too likely to still be alive . . .’”

“So a bird learns by getting thrown into the fray and dealing.”

“I’m not a bird.”

“You learn by . . .”

“Absorbing. Also by a line of sense. Like energy. Energy’s a language I speak fluently.”

“An *asana* is a lecture. The hieroglyphics of a pose startle one’s cells to life.”

“The way a posture genuflects – like a stiff sun stunned into exuberance.”

Marjoram light. “So full of winter,” she’d thought. Traffic was flowing.

“We’ll do a new moon practice today,” her teacher had said. “Deep, slow. If you injure yourself on a new moon day, it can take a long time to heal.”

Pale hills steeped in the background, magenta clouds scurrying along their tips. “As if they’re peak-hopping,” she’d thought, remembering the practice of well-jumping that Indian children relished.

“Tweet tweet tweet.” Her eyes were closed and the sun, by now, was high in the sky. “Even their tweets are restrained,” she’d muttered. “Not their usual blares.”

“So a full moon carries crazy energy. A new moon, energy not yet formed.” She was trying to visualize the difference.

“Crazy = splattered all over the place. No roots. Wild. Not-yet-formed – it’s not flailing, as in untamed. It’s seeking, as in curious.”

The more she thought about it, the more dissimilar they’d seemed. “How could I ever have confused them?”

A melon sun splayed across her back, cradling her spine. It rolled in waves. On an inhale it practically spasmed.

(Catching a glimpse of the spidery veins in her fore-arms and thighs.) “The ones in my arms are like a tree,” she’d thought. “Because they’re so thin, the blood vessels poke out.”

And the ones in her thighs? Tiny blue lines squiggled in erratic directions. Up and down, out of control.

The sun shone in unexpected corners, at unexpected times, in unexpected intensities. At the end of her practice it was chestnut.

BOOK FIVE

Plop . . . plop . . . plop.

Plop . . . plop . . . plop. Slow drips from the rusted rail.

A dowdy day. Between rains. (Waiting.)

The window was cold. Splinters of air (like shards she'd thought) grazed her chest as she stood up close. A squirrel raced by, chewing on water. "There's nothing else around," she muttered to herself, pitying the animal.

Dawn. Finally. (She had awakened early.) The voices of neighbors above.



The shabby day, beneath her lids, slowly, slowly, sparkling. She'd wanted to open them, but had resisted. "I'll just enjoy the glow," she'd told herself, rationing the time.

Though she couldn't tell (and it'd been cloudy when she'd closed them) it felt (from the inside) that the day (reddening) fast-forwarded toward noon. High noon. Summer noon. Soft noon.

Angling toward a peak.

"The sun rises in your ears," someone had suggested.

"The moon in your nostrils." (The woman who sweats when she breathes through the right one.)

"Oh god, Harvey." (The person who said that miles away.)



Late morning light trailed her forward bend. (Its heat caressed her spine.)

A buoyant fold, elbows hanging loosely. Scooting her right hand around her left wrist, gripping the wrist, allowing the shock of its skinniness to pass, she began to breathe. (The spasms of widening.) "I'm growing fat!" she'd thought, relishing the sense of spreading. Hadn't she been harping on having more "room" in her old age.



Tap tap tap. The thin man in his coat.

“So now I have this rash. It’s not ‘vd’. But like here it is. What was I thinking?”

His slouch made him look grumpy.

“So it’s like, when I read, I hear books. Tones, sounds. It’s all conversation.”

She too had trouble picturing things.

“I lie in bed the whole day hear’n voices, feelings. But if they describe the setting – ‘The drug store on the corner near an old elm’ – like that – I lose interest.”

“It shows in your skin.”



“It’s trying,” she’d thought glancing at the sky. The murky white of the previous day was starting to have some pep.

Her still-green hydrangeas reminded her of “brightly colored ones in harmony with the trees.” (Her book had spoken of them.) Hers used to be bright. Though their green was not anemic – its lime had verve – they melded neither with the trees nor the other seasonal blossoms.

“They’re weird!” she’d thought (though she hated saying it). She couldn’t figure out what was wrong.

In the front of her book's house was a stand of peach-colored cosmos. A low green breeze blew from the mountains down toward the east, the author had said.

"How can a breeze be green?" she'd mused.



Fog shielded night. "From its own blackness," she thought, scanning the tiny lights strung across the lot. A tent was already there.

Beams crammed the sky, though, due to rain, the race had been called off.

Branches, buckets, tags. A zillion tables fed the cold air. Jockeying trees. What feels sleazy?



Puddles and spray, her dashboard a trough of mud.
(The warmth of the under-air.)

"She wanted them to accept her."

"Shuffling as a plea."

"They're bored too. Hey."



A night of fiction. (How many centuries making it true?)

“First (an adjustment) is ‘Hey. Whose life is it?’ ”

“The letdown precedes the fact. Yes. It’s me.”

“No spins.”



“Hey! Could you get a mop?” He’d said it politely to the guy who’d spilled the water.

“I hope you fall on your ass,” replied the guy.

“What did he do?”

“He went out to the shed, got a mop, mopped up the water. But he was furious.”

“It raises uncomfortable feelings.”



“It looks like it’s from a village,” the man said, examining the *thangka*. “See how it’s asymmetrical, lopsided, a little naïve. It’s very charming but not from a major center of art.”

She knew what he meant.

“It’s not realized. It lacks a full investment.”

“It has a subject rather than being it.”



Dazzling sun stripping the water. How late is it?

“Are the monks out yet?”

“No.”

“Who is that shivering near the stones?”

“What makes you ask?”

“Her light, its glimmer in the redwoods. (Its sheen down there blowing.) I thought I knew who it was. For a fleeting moment. Like a ghost or an aura of someone I’d known intimately.”



Fog droned its blaring white hat.

“The city wore mufflers. Turned its attention elsewhere.”

“Whiteness before blackness. Nights darker. Days colder.”

“Squandering. The pennies of motion. It’s her voice she says. It dips.”

“Be nice to me, honey.” She says that in the dipping tone of winter.

In an owl's brain

In an owl's brain there is a region, the article had begun, whose specialized cells (using the coordinates of every sound) construct a map of auditory space. The barn owl's is the most elaborate. Its screech presages death.

If you hear its rasp . . . someone who knew him had . . . its shrill hiss had continued well out of earshot . . .

Huge wings lowering into cottonwood.

Funeral services were held for Kobun Chino and Maya Otagawa on July 30 in Engelberg, Switzerland, at the home of his senior dharma heir, Vanja Palmers. He is survived by his wife, Katrin, and their son and daughter, Alyosha and Tatsuko, as well as two adult children, Taido and Yoshiko.



Black sky. Soft bands of pink had crept from behind the trees. She wondered if the sick man would be out for his gulps of air.

But no. No one was out. "Maybe the fumes . . ." The paint's toxicity had infiltrated her path also.

Probably she was just irritated. Ever since she'd read Kobun Chino's obituary. It had skirted Harriet! (She

recalled the snappy energy between Harriet and old Mel, though he'd said they were just friends.)

“A tryst at the baths – out pop five children! Two from Harriet. She wondered how, as a simple priest, he could support so many people. “Maybe it’s cheaper to live in Switzerland,” she’d mused, though she doubted it.



“Elegant. You are always so elegant.” Her mother’s words came to mind. She had said this immediately after saying that she hadn’t liked the photograph she’d sent her for her birthday. “It’s so severe. You’re not that way, honey.” But she was. She was severe and elegant, a look her mother might appreciate, say, in Audrey Hepburn.

“Everything was fine except you weren’t here.”



Night plummeted. It fell so fast. “What happened to the day,” she’d muttered, looking out on its dregs.

If she hadn’t been a geisha, she’d have been a Buddhist nun. Or policewoman said the character in her book.

“From the inside . . . the word was extrospected . . .” which she’d guessed meant inspecting one’s inter-

psychic world, closely, diligently, as one ordinarily would one's intrapsychic one.

The same energy gazing the other way.



After-rain hush. As if the heavens, having spit out everything, had nothing more to say. "The hill does look a little sheepish," she'd thought, staring at its sopping boughs.

In her book there were crows and new green leaves on the garden's maple.

Unlike ballet, traditional Japanese dance focuses on the ground rather than the sky. Though slow, it requires highly-trained muscles. Each piece is composed of a number of fixed patterns (kata) that are later strung together.

"I wonder if the *kata* of these dances and the *kata* that Tibetans use for offerings are the same?"

"Tibetan *kata* = scarf (light, fluffy, airy)," her thoughts continued. "The recipient puts it around his neck . . . like a garland!"

We went into the altar room to say our morning prayers. Afterwards, she tucked up my long sleeves with a cord so I could work and stuck the feather

duster in the back of my obi. Then she took me to the lavatory and taught me the proper way to clean a toilet.

“That’s how a monk is trained! she gasped. “Precisely. And in the same order!”



“That’s my seat,” screamed the child at the older girl (who was accustomed to this spot). “Yes, child, that’s right. Take your seat.” (But she’d wondered how . . . she was so small . . .)

Older girl pouts (eats without saying grace). “It’s rude to eat before the Madame. You have terrible manners,” mocked the babe. Madame to the older girl: “Listen to what she says. She has a lot to teach you.”

She’d thought of the Avatar Yogananda scolding, instructing, stridently correcting his elementary-school classmates.

The rapacious conviction of the Mother (Madame) who “recognized” the toddler (allowed her her blanket of turquoise with white tulips).



She fell into a doze. There was another character with whom she’d identified.

The reason for Ogata-san's unusually long stay that summer had become clear the moment Shigeo Matsuda, looking thinner and more youthful than she had remembered him, slid open the entrance gate to his pleasant-looking house and squinted to avoid the glare of the noonday sun. Dressed in his shirtsleeves, he'd carried a small briefcase which he opened momentarily, rebuckled it and crossed over to her side of the road. Shigata-san, she now realized, had waited a long time to finally bring the matter to a head.

She remembered how casually he'd first brought the subject up. His circuitous approach (requiring a tremendous amount of forethought) should have indicated that the situation, demeaning to his sense of honor, was one he had hoped Jiro would handle. Obliquely inquiring about Jiro's school reunion (which understandably he'd figured Shigeo Matsuda might attend) and leading from that to some offhand mention of Shigeo Matsuda himself – whether Jiro ever runs into him – do they still get together from time to time – to his belittling observation about the confidence of today's young people, “Like myself I suppose at that age, they are exceedingly sure of their opinions,” he'd eventually gotten around to the article in the teacher's periodical he'd run across. “I'd never heard of it” he'd added, referring to the periodical. “It wasn't in existence in my time. To read it you'd think all the

teachers in Japan are Communists.” Gauging the entrenchment of Jiro’s passivity from his flaccid agreement, “Yes Communism does seem to be on the rise,” Ogata-san had at length stated what had been on his mind from the start, namely, Shigeo Matsuda’s scathing attack of him, Ogata-san, in this article.

Perhaps as a way of deflating his anger at Jiro’s evasive, “Are you sure it’s the same Shigeo Matsuda?” Ogata-san, whose face had suddenly taken on a nostalgic cast, recalled how the Matsuda boy used to come to their home to play and how terribly Jiro’s mother would spoil him. Then he’d remarked that he himself had introduced Shigeo Matsuda to the headmaster of Kuriyama High School (implying a further dimension to his shame in light of a personal obligation). To all this Jiro had only to answer, “It’s very regrettable, Father. You must excuse me or I’ll be late.”

She believed it had been the next morning that Ogata-san emerged from his room dressed in jacket and tie and announced his plan to visit Dr. Endo, the other teacher attacked in the Matsuda article. She remembered the morning well. He had complimented her on her cooking with a warning that he might ask her to teach him both to cook and to play the violin, from which fantasies she’d understood his profound engagement with teaching – that it had been his way of life,

certainly his primary way of relating to other people – and just why his integrity being questioned by an “upstart” like Matsuda was so humiliating and ultimately intolerable. Then, he’d directly asked if she knew Shigeo Matsuda and about her assessment of the closeness these days of his friendship with Jiro. To her answers, which couldn’t have been helpful (she’d only met Shigeo a few times and Jiro and he were not close) Ogata-san replied, (did I imagine the twinge of disappointment that these words hadn’t originated with Jiro?) “I’m going to suggest to Jiro that he write to his friend. Shigeo should apologize. Or else I’ll have to insist Jiro disassociate himself from that young man.”

About this time Ogata-san and Jiro had begun a game of chess that lasted the entire duration of Ogata-san’s visit. In fact, on looking back, there was no doubt in her mind that Ogata-san’s decision to take matters into his own hands (and from there, his business being finished, to end his visit with them) had been determined by the outcome of this very game.

Ogata-san apparently had been sedulous in his efforts to teach his son to play chess. In particular he had used chess as a way of instilling in young Jiro highly valued traits and of correcting certain unwelcomed ones that he’d noticed early on in his son’s character. A significant part of the lesson pertained to approach –

e.g., everything hinges on a coherent method – when the enemy crushes one scheme, a good chess player immediately comes up with another – a game is sealed not when a king is cornered but when a player gives up having an overall plan – one should never play a single move at a time; one should think ahead, three moves at the very least – and so forth. Ogata-san had said he could tell that although Jiro began his game with a strategy, the moment he, Ogata-san, broke it down, Jiro gave up and began playing one move at a time. When Jiro replied, “There seems little point in carrying on then,” Ogata-san had accused him of defeatism, whereupon Jiro, exasperated, had said that he failed (which ultimately of course implicated Ogata-san as having failed as an instructor) to see what defeatism has to do with it. “It’s only a game.”

Ogata-san’s subsequent behavior – so typical – he was a teacher through and through, though she realized in retrospect that he was as slow a learner (they had been playing for several months) when it came to the nature of his son’s personality as his son was in matters most prized by Ogata-san. He’d explained to Jiro that although he had him cornered, there were three separate means by which he, Jiro, could escape, one of them being very simple. By sulking and saying he wanted to quit, Jiro was behaving the same way he’d behaved when he was nine. Ogata-san, agreeing to end the

game, but wanting anyway to show Jiro his three potential moves, pushed Jiro to the point of explosion. Flinging down his newspaper Jiro had gotten up as if to knock the chess-board to the floor, but had clumsily stumbled on a teapot steeping next to him, spilling its contents onto the tatami. When it registered that all he had accomplished was to make a mess, he'd snatched his newspaper and left the room without a word.

It was the very next morning that Ogata-san started talking about "getting back." Just as he had given Jiro every opportunity to win the chess game, he had likewise given Jiro every opportunity to address Shigeo Matsuda. What Ogata-san had really learned from Jiro's behavior the previous night (which was probably why he'd appeared so thoughtful, sitting so long gazing at Jiro's puddle) was that Jiro's standard answer – "I know it's important Father and I'll do it as soon as I have time" – was his son's own strategy of avoidance. He, Ogata-san, needed to acknowledge that this was Jiro's game-plan. Jiro's refusal to see (and to act upon the fact) that, given his father's history and pride, there was no way a slur on his honor could be anything other than unbearable (requiring prompt and firm attention from his adult son) was a retaliation in itself. Clearly during the night Ogata-san had accepted this. Therefore his decision to take the matter into his own hands.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Raspy drops on the innards of a squirrel, tire-marks faded. Trees like green clowns through the gush west.

Swirling lights, red, white. Puffs of white thrust through rain pounding on the asphalt.

Her (white) dream. Turrets and gray slats. A gymnasium of quiet people stroking their dog or lovingly-wrapped cat. Song after song, gently (kneeling) petting their dozing beast.

“Strange. They all know all the songs,” she’d thought observing through the door, each person lost in a deepening connection with her animal. The latter swooned. “As much as a dog can swoon,” she muttered, glued to the scene. (She’d stood there a long while.)

Manga² Solutions³

(1)

Bird drools over a map of Africa displayed in the showcase of a museum giftshop. The map is a page in a luxurious leather-bound atlas equal in value, Bird has calculated, to five months of teaching cram-school. Something at once virulent and doleful about the map-maker's depiction of the exotic continent stirs him in a way that the platitudes of his daily life in post-war Tokyo have not. The vision (Bird on African soil gazing at cerulean sky through dark-colored glasses or Bird stranded on Nigerian plateau facing certain death by enraged beast or Bird with tribes statuesque, scintillating in ivory and paint – NON-STOP JINGLY MOTION) has eaten into his composure so that it is startling to be addressed (by his mother-in-law for example) as someone who isn't this person. Simultaneously Bird purchases Michelin road maps series #182 and #185 complete with insignia (toadlike rubber man rolling tire down road), a practical gesture for actual use in Africa, while his wife sweats on a rubber mat giving birth to their son (the common theme being

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2. *Manga* meaning “cartoon” is often written in *hiragana* syllabic script. When written in Chinese script, *manga* is a compound of two characters: *man* meaning “involuntary, in spite of oneself” or “morally corrupt” and *ga* meaning “picture.”
 3. Inspired by the novel *A Personal Matter* by Kenzaburo Oë.

bringing forth life). For Bird's son equals Africa (or surpasses Africa) only Bird as yet doesn't realize it. What he does realize is that the spunky existence of this baby (saturated with hidden codes) is a knife to the cord of his, Bird's, youth. Skirting the edge of his ability, his anonymity, his reverse prowess, Bird is about to become known.

He is aging. Not like his paunchy friends whom the corporate world and marriage fatten, but more sinister and thorough, his aging sears his striving adolescent frame so that it languishes inside itself. He has shrunk opaquely. One looking closely sees the same birdlike posture, hunched, spritely, superimposed on a floating corpse. Bit by bit his second body yellows and dries.

When his son is born with "two heads" (a brain hernia causes the brain to protrude from a fault in the skull so that the head seems to be double), one can imagine Bird's terror for it is somewhat like catching an unexpected glimpse of himself in a carnival mirror.

(2)

Bird sees himself reflected in the plight of the unwieldy infant – created by his mind and his body. The doctor said "goods" ("Would you like to see the goods?") and he is entirely correct. This is Bird's product.

In a desperate move to save his neck (being saddled for the rest of his life with a monster baby is a form of strangulation) Bird tells the hospital not to operate. He will take the baby home. This is neither a plan nor a strategy. It is loss of impulse control (the illusion of freedom from responsibility and hence from the burden of being an individual). In actuality Bird has thought no further than to get away from the doctor in the face of whose authority he feels powerless.

As in taking one's pet to the SPCA, or one's senile mother to a "convalescent home," Bird's panic is a signal that it has registered, at least partially – the baby is now entirely his concern.

Sloughing off his obligation, slipping the creature to a "doctor" who would make sure it died of malnourishment or pneumonia or some trumped-up diagnosis that could survive an autopsy, is choosing to play a part, irrevocably.

And mistaking the nature of his fetters as existing outside himself. Bird's panic ironically is a sign of health – the first tiny indicator of the possibility for his survival that manages to poke its ugly head above the physical, emotional and psychological abuse with which he is accustomed to treat himself.

Somehow through the haze of alcohol, furin,⁴ pride, denial, dissociation, irresponsibility and general immaturity (viz. clinging to his silly adolescent nickname and accompanying fantasies) a spark of conscience obtrudes itself just enough to make it known to Bird that he is now, precisely, at a point of no return.

A comment on will power by virtue of which certainly Bird's baby is Bird's baby. Before he turned twenty Bird, we are told, knew no fear. Seven years and four months later he teeters on making a decision the consequences of which could make him fear's lifelong devotee. Bird catches a glimpse of his future self in the reflection of his "idiot son" in the nick of time.

As long as the welfare of his baby is in official hands (experts at a university hospital), the tenacity by which the situation grabs Bird creates its own kind of exclusivity. (The life of his conscience hangs by the thread of an infant's cap or pacifier.) So securely is Bird held by his own anguished retro image that (as if mystically blessed) he is excused from (when taken at face value) "larger" civil (national and international) concerns. Shackled though he is by bassinet etc., excruciatingly and mercilessly, by the same token he is, in ordinary

4. An illicit sexual relationship in which one or both partners are married to someone else.

spheres, more at liberty than usual, enjoying a margin of action circumspectly broader than the conventions and lies that heretofore ruled his life. Ultimately he may be out of control (prisoner of himself), but so out of sync is he with the world's destiny (the little drummer boy who offers his most prized possession to the baby Jesus) that its manacles no longer constrain him. The pulse of his baby replaces the pulse of humanity. As long as it beats inside Bird, he is free.



Pink sky, treetips – hi! good morning! But the God of Black said “No-o-o-o.”

(The sun's wan grin barely discernible through the blur.)

“Sit in *padmasana*. Cross your right leg under your left. Soften your eyes and be sure the channel through your right nostril is clear.” (The tick of the clock as dots of rain beat rhythmically against the door.)

She'd relished the space. Each person making her own inner adjustment. As if on call, her right nostril felt frisky.



Earlier she'd been aware of her proclivity to not move (more, being-as-a-swoon).

The pull of inertia compounded by gravity, its weight,
tug, unyielding bearing – down.

Like the slow unfurling of water – steady, forceful,
even-keeled.

“I find my ears yearning (searching) for the gentle
patter that usually comes first.”



Her eyes drifted to her flowers. “A bulbous lily-like
plant native to South Africa,” began the mushroom-
shaped tag. “Its bold (flamboyant) blossoms range from
red, salmon, snow white to pink.”

A new bud had pricked through a bluish sheath (both
phallic). Bushy grass and bits of bark – a hairy pubic
undergrowth.

“A row of them would make a perfect Hanukah meno-
rah,” she’d thought, though a silver Star of Bethlehem
shimmered beneath its flares.

One infant peeped candle-like skyward. Its would-be
flame had a lime-green center.

She was reminded of Albert Schweitzer, the photo at his
hospital desk. Tall locks, bushy brows, mangy goatee,
bow tie. Twinkly eyes and fur had draped over his
resting hand.

“It’s in the lion pose,” she’d smiled. “Almost – with a little more oomph and slightly higher hand.”

Somehow, now, on the cusp of a wild storm, the thought of that tropical climate.



She’d tucked her t-shirt under her bra and lowered her tights so that her students could see her navel. “It’s risky for me to demonstrate this *banda*. I’m fifty and I’ve had four children.”

It was the day after Christmas. About to pour. Three people were in class.

She listened to the wind rising with the sun. Ribbons of sateen, cobalt then iris then nero nero nero. “A Neanderthal winter,” she’d thought, watching the woman.

Behind the windless darkening day

Splish splash. “I can’t even see the bay,” she’d thought, shading her eyes from the stark shards of silver.

She’d moved to the exit lane. “Ouch! I could have hit that person!”

Cars banked. Flowers crushed. “What a day,” everyone was saying.



Rain hissed over a sheer sheet of water. (Sprawling dew inflating itself like a peacock.)

Yet the streets were quiet. A few drops meandered down her sideview mirror. (The gush of motion blasting its aftermath in the face of the bleary ones.)

A dog pranced along the walk. Proud as a bird. Its sleek hair.



Mud in the alley. Blinding white sky. Cold air seeped through a small crack in her window.

She’d remembered leggings.

Funny light in the slanting (pale) evening. Walking slowly sucking on a stick.

Or chewing a whole pack evenly. One a block. How many gummy candies?

Hard chewy. Soft chewy. It's true, her acupuncturist had said. Some foods are especially suited to some people.



“So I walk around the lake maybe twice everyday. I figure in ten years I've walked the lake 4000 times.” His black nylon jacket was zipped to his chin.

“What is it like before dawn?”

“The air smells sweet. I can breathe really deeply.”

“Are you scared?”

“Naaa. There's one part where drug dealers work. I just say hi. They're pretty friendly.”

“Around 2:00 I go again. The light is beautiful. Like the day peaks. In summer, of course, it's too hot.”



“Shouldn't they be flying south? March (not December) is when they're all over the place!” She was brushing a caterpillar from her porch's ledge. The skinny creature, pretzeled into an “s,” had stared, whittled its feelers and slowly proceeded along the blue railing.

She'd noticed another, then another. (Butterflies had been scarce for years.)

She had been concerned about their absence, but seeing caterpillars about to pupate . . . in the rain, in the fog . . .

Soft gray sun had spread across the greenery. Late afternoon light. "Almost the new moon," she'd thought, as if straining would scurry it along.

A nearby church.



A motley day. "Even the squirrels look cold," she'd thought gazing at a severed-but-clinging branch. Their unpretentious sopping.

"The lungs of the girl. The idea that her lungs could be cordoned off. Painted jet blue."

"Jet blue?"

"Isolated from the rest of her. As if she could treat them one way and meanwhile think of her dogs as valuable."

Kan⁵

You know for sure they were a Stranger's words because of your clear memory of the circumstances. Yet, you feel convinced that those same words had gushed forth straight from the deepest recesses of your soul. Assuming that words come to life only in the relationship of two human beings, there's no earthly reason why you should not insist that your own existence be the wellspring of the Stranger's words.

Him-me, me-him – the narrator seems to be posing a rhetorical question. 'Nothing quite as terrifying, soul-stirring, as being picked as a pinch runner!' either he or the other father remarks as they, awaiting their retarded sons, watch children different from ours on the ball field. 'That's it, even when nobody bothers to shout and cheer him on with Go Go,' the alternate slides right in. Postwar sandlot baseball, those golden years when who's who was delegated to black-market mitts ('nine mitts in our settlement'), scored their (yes, unilateral) hearts which plummeted to their stomachs in the rush of Go Go Go. Almost a pant (frenzied), almost a whisper, potbelly of preconsciousness, informing strains, isolate, divergent patches, (wiggly, primitive) shadows of shared pre-knowing. (About their retarded sons?)

5. *Kan* means “gap” such as the gap between two sliding screens. Through this thin space ninja, masters of stealth and disguise, glide in.

*So how do we sort out the him-me-me-him nerve?
It (the energy vibration) enters the body through the
medulla (oblongata). One can easily syphon it off,
messenger it to a body part, invigorate that part. Is
me-him-him-me like chocolate, vanilla, strawberry?
We recognize ourselves as chocolate, the fervent slip
of the forefinger deep inside the cookie-dough and then
YUM. It is forever.*

*'Dead Monkey.' Like tough love is it? They say that
during withdrawal, the drug addict hallucinates one
(a dead monkey) glued to the scruff of his neck. Which
must be terrifying. The disgusting pull, chain-gang hulk
fastened, fastening, fastener of my soul, my astral body.
And here we are. No cigarettes. No leeway, junkie. You
see how quickly things get confused?*



Cracking the fog. Its handsome caw. A crow or a jay
through the mist.

“Who was it that said he’d found a blank canvas so
stunning that immediately to work on it – for him, it
demanded *too much too quickly*? (So first he got it dirty.
Then he’d work in reverse.)”

“It wasn’t linear.”

“Painting is never linear,” he’d claimed. “Except when

one's asleep (and maybe even in one's dreams), one is constantly reflecting, contemplating, shifting, having flashes of clarity."

"What's there must give forth and there is no criterion except, 'yes, that is really what gave forth' and not an idea of what, for example, ought to have been given forth."



Creampuff clouds, a bed of them, beneath the raw blue sky. "I'm here!" screamed the sun.

"The ghost of rain, storming away. MAD."

"Clouds got their way."

"Does that mean, being pushy, that they deactivated the horizon? I mean that horizon had been waiting a long time."

"The horizon was orange both before and after, right?"



She'd thought of the girl who wanted her freedom but loved her dog who needed constant walking.

"The idea of a dog does not contain its volume within the dog's actual contour, whereas the actual dog somehow does."

“Worrying about the dog – the persistence of noetic pulse – its volume contains her actual contour.”



Blip blip – blip blip. Rhythmic, metallic. (Her memory of the man who’d put tin in his painting.) “The tin was so lively I had trouble getting it onto the surface,” he’d said. It had looked light, almost like it could blow away, whereas its history – it was filled with sand and had been rescued with an enormous crowbar.

(What it furnished as a shape, color, or volume.)

“For me, what’s interesting, is the attitude of the picture as its evolving,” he had said.

(“His idea of putting more into a painting than it could hold simply by folding a larger piece of canvas into a smaller one.”)

“A title is extra color,” he’d said.



The mute. The pleaded man. He was spent.

“Well, it’s costly. Neutral is expensive.”

“‘Am I alive or dead?’ It’s a samurai chant he intoned each morning at 4:00.”

“How does one know?”

“If you get MAD.”

“But you are a dead person.”



Blasting drops. Unrelenting water. Streets like lakes
(soon-to-be rivers).

“I just want warm clothing. I go to my closet with the
intention of dressing warm and out comes – what –
the flimsiest garment!”



“You’d have to be a fool to want to paint a picture,”
said the painter. “The most powerful instinct is to paint
a single form in its continuity.” (Which he admitted was
a face.)

“The true image only comes out when it exists on an
imaginary plane,” he’d said. “Rembrandt eliminated
plane. Van Dyck said, ‘I’m a painting,’ whereas Rem-
brandt – he’d said ‘I am not a painting, I am a real
man.’ (But he was not a real man either.)”

“Cage used noise. He’d begin with a city – ‘a structure
in which you could do anything’ – and continued with
what he called ‘far-reaching’ actions in such a way that

the activity within the structure – well, it just dissolved.”

“By not having something happen, the thing was carrying on. No-sound didn’t stop the flow.”

“It wasn’t a pause. People mistake this.”



“I want the things that happen to not erase the spirit that was already there without anything happening.”
(Cage drove the point home.)

While in *Variations 4* he’d refused to chat with members of the audience during the performance (“Don’t you see I’m busy?”), in *Variations 6*, chatting simply became part of the show.



Con la ayuda del Semáforo Solar:
¡¡¡HAGAMOS DEL SOL NUESTRO AMIGO!!!
Ministerio de Salud

In an Upside-Down World, Sunshine is Shunned ran the headline to an article on Punta Arenas, Chile. In the southernmost city on the planet, “solar stoplights” set at four levels of alert, warn people to limit their peak-of-the-day exposure to a maximum of 21 minutes.

“When the light is red, I don’t let my kids go out to play at all,” one mother had said.

A picture above the article showed a woman wearing a sheepskin vest over a long-sleeved sweater. Thick, dark glasses wrapped around her head.

In a second photo, a blonde little girl dressed in black velvet demonstrated to her schoolmates how to protect themselves. At first glance the child looked like she was in a play.

“We feel like we are rabbits in a laboratory experiment,” said one dad. “Nobody knows what is going to happen to us.”

Absurd indoor beaches by a Japanese painter – elaborate palms, coconuts, silver sand, white-tipped wavelets – flocked to mind.



Earlier she’d smeared the emergent mist, slowly, hesitantly, praying that rain, feeling staved off, wouldn’t obdurately fill the vacuum.

It had. It had begun to rain. Then it rained, vigorously, for about three minutes. Then it stopped, and hadn’t resumed, despite the reports, despite the fact that any fool . . .

The squirrel, in the rain, resting on its haunches (bobbing, arching, heaving, twitching). She'd always thought of a squirrel as sprightly whereas this one – each movement seemed to ream through its entire body.

“That’s funny,” she’d thought, maneuvering closer to the window. In her dream she’d had on a tightly-fitting kimono. Waddling across a street, she was making her way to a hairdresser whose expensive permanent – she’d wanted it but hadn’t counted on the price.



“A well-educated foot,” the teacher had said, caricaturing an armless person steering an automobile with his legs . . . and feet. “The body will learn anything.”

Before she slept she’d been studying the lessons of a yogi who had been murdered. His body was never found said his father in a postscript.

This flossing of the body – her sloth kicked in. Plus a part of her (a feisty, strong, non-slothful part.)



Sobbing storm. Awake in the thrashing swish, whoosh, whoop! Water – from the sky, road, trees – splashes, gushes, the world an explosion of harsh pellets.

The sober morning-after.

Drip drip drip. A slow dark day. (The feeling that darkness would never end.)

Strange. In summer she'd looked forward to rain.
And now, she still did enjoy the rain.

Sable clouds. Sable hill. Flashing lights peeled the haze.



The old man alone, startled.

He wanted her there, yet her words, she felt, were an interruption.

He would never have admitted it.

“Silence continues the thing. It's not a lapse. It's the same as if there had been something.”

He (the man) would probably agree, but only in theory.
He wouldn't agree, really.

“Without resistance you vanish either into meaning or clarity and who wants to vanish into either meaning or clarity?”

A gnarly El Niño

Ono (scriptwriter-to-be) and I are staring up at the pitch-black sky when suddenly the tarry clouds above us part and I see their searing thunderheads catch the glitter of the moonlight. (This is an Oë sentence.) “Oh God,” Ono says. “You know the Righteous Man has been killed don’t you?” (When it departs from the nightingale’s body the nightingale’s knowledge that the night has passed is destroyed.) Sayoko, perched on the seat next to her, (Karima kunoichi are women who, not part of the clan, are hired as maids, mistresses, fortune-tellers, prostitutes) voices exception to Ono’s blatant (PINK) grief (too much feeling, not enough cause). SHUT UP YOU LITTLE BITCH! SHUT YOUR TRAP!” Ono responds in the doldrums of sorrow. Still missing the point Sayoko retaliates, “Change your attitude or I’ll denounce you” – a naïve and (unconsciously fascist) stance typical of a very young person – though not a pea-brain. Nor is she (Sayoko) forthright about her personal desires – to be in the back seat holding the wounded Mori. (Her young activist eye attacks, in this case inappropriately, and labels self-serving motives.) “SHUT UP, BRAT! CAN’T YOU KEEP YOUR TRAP SHUT!” Ono, polish personified, is too maimed to manage juvenile energy just at the moment. The little tart, reckoning her losses, scrunches back in her seat, still

cursing but inaudibly. Ono launches into her story – the death of the Righteous Man – but the little tramp can't restrain herself. "SHUT UP! YOU LITTLE BITCH, STILL FLAPPING YOUR JAWS!" The Mediator nabs the ensuing interlude to assign Sayoko the TASK of being Mori's caretaker whereupon her secret desire transforms into a politically correct action which (because of her previous rigidity) she may lose face performing now. First she wants to but she doesn't dare. Then she HAS to but she doesn't dare (1) to refuse on the grounds of her causes or (2) to agree on the grounds of her feelings. The fact that she has cause and feeling positioned adversarially MARKS her as a featherweight. RULE NUMBER ONE for a skillful woman (ninja) is to have cause and feeling in sync.



A gnarly El Niño season has announced its arrival with a big wet slap across northern California. Brandishing a bright swath of red and white (a clear El Niño hallmark) the latest color-coded maps signal warmer-than-normal sea temperatures and higher-than-normal water levels.

The article had gone on to explain that aberrant conditions spanned an area twice the size of the United States, stretching across the Pacific from the international dateline to the coast of South America.

According to one meteorologist, a separate slug of warmish water (bearing its own distinct blob on the satellite maps) had popped up in the northern Pacific. This had fostered a westward drift in a ridge of high pressure above the Gulf of Alaska, allowing storms to sneak down through the Aleutians into southern British Columbia, Washington and Oregon.

Though forecasters had been careful not to call a storm an El Niño storm (even a storm in an El Niño winter), it was certain that El Niño (with its addled air masses pulling the mid-latitude tempest track southward) was energizing and pumping extra moisture into a tail of turbulence heading her way.

“And what about the fish!” she’d exclaimed, worried, saddened, disgusted with the newsmen.



Drip drop drip. Persistent blasts. And she, in the dark, listening.

(The agony, like Christ’s, repeated to a voiceless child.)

Slower, a little slower. But when she woke, it was pouring. (Only the hiss of wind.)

“Jets of water sound like wind,” she’d muttered, listening more closely. It was curious. The harder it

poured . . . there seemed to be a threshold, which,
once crossed, either clarified or made it more murky.

On her stomach, on her pillow, cool, puffy, relaxed.



Rain. Then blackness. Dawn, finally, a limp beam.

“Poor hill,” she mused, staring at the silent mud.

Wind felled trees. “Millions lost their lights!” one
headline shrieked. She’d prepared (set out candles,
flashlights, water) but it hadn’t happened.

“Didn’t they bury them after the last gale?” (A resident
was referring to the power lines.) Having continuously
lost their electricity – “We’ll remove them from the
elements” – the city’s authorities had effectively said
before planting them underground.

She shut her eyes. The sound of the hill, stark and
weary.



“Am enjoying your book of poetry so much, honey –
read it everyday for a little while – lovely, lovely!” It
was on a card with a snowman (Santa Claus hat) holding
a bunch of heart-shaped balloons. Two of the red ones
showed up as the “a’s” in “Happy Holidays!” when you
spread it open, typical of her mother’s exuberance.

Over the years they'd both persisted in sending the style that represented themselves, rather than what the other person might appreciate.

Blinding sun. But when she'd looked up – expecting (finally) clear sky – “The sky’s tongue is coated,” she’d thought, dizzy with the shock. “You’d think with all the rain . . . The sky seems to have indigestion.”

Her hydrangeas too had suffered. The storm had taken several stalks. While new growth was just beginning to be visible, the plant as a whole looked exhausted.

She worried that she hadn’t fed it enough. Or the right food. Yet now that she was apprised, it was winter. Probably she should wait until spring. She wished she knew more about plants, but her mind discarded whatever she was given even as the person painstakingly . . .



A giant sea turtle ambled out of the chilly waters of Tomales Bay to the amazement of several witnesses and sunned itself on a beach near Inverness, thousands of miles from its normal habitat in Mexico and Costa Rica. The adult turtle, weighing an estimated 75 pounds, emerged from the water directly in front of one of the Bay Area’s few sea turtle biologists, who happened to be at Shell Beach that day with his family.

The biologist had snapped about 25 pictures before the turtle shuffled back into the water and swam off as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

One of the photographs (with just the turtle's snout sunning in soft swirls of seawater) accompanied the article, which went on to say that the olive ridley, being way out of its element, had perhaps been a victim of El Niño. Previously barracuda and other tropical fish had been found in northern California waters during El Niño winters.

The whole thing was all the more bizarre in that even leatherbacks (who have occasionally been sighted in Monterey and around the Farallones) rarely come out of the water unless they are nesting the reporter had said.

“Cold water would slow a turtle's heart, which would allow it to survive while drifting with the current,” one expert fathomed. Another: “The animal may just be confused.”

Her gaze fell to the hill where two birds frolicked. Twirling, swirling, dashing from place to place. “They have so much energy!” she'd swooned.

The turtle had reminded her – how had the painter put it – “There are forms in some experiences in your life that hold excitement. Even if you can't do them very

well, there is something terrific about the tenacity of a form that won't allow you to do it."



Her new bud's tongue was sticking way out. "It could be a baby bird," she'd thought enraptured with its intense (upright) caw ("food mama, please more food").

One of the four older blossoms had shriveled. Its red was gray-red; its edges were white. Droopy frail pistils randomly suspended. Just there, disappearing.

The bud was growing. "It's slightly redder than the adults," she'd muttered, mesmerized by its velvety glow.

Their horn-like shapes reminded her of "taps."

redwind daylong daylong
was designed and set into type
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using ITC Bodoni Twelve.

This typeface was originally designed by Giambattista Bodoni,
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