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Cover: “Salsburg” by Susie Wilcox

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We would go in sunlight
dripping from the blue mosaics
of the pool's reflections upward
diffusion of light through collages
of stones, leaves, flowers submerged
and the running water catching
the light under overhanging
moss-ledges.
Our toes crinkled in the parrot blue wet
of that antique pool
and green excelsior lawn that smelled
so good in your hair.
There was a circle of hedgerows
over the hyacinths
(and who knows how many saw
when you kissed me that very first time)
sun humming in my ears
and I breathing
the whole rose-arbor down on top of me;
anything for love
it was, in those days.

Nina George
Sue Proctor

We

Our eyes tie silk threads
of forest greens and browns,
weaving an oriental rug.
And from the dyed strands which uncoil our minds,
grow trees
whose branches reach for the sky,
brANCHES that hold rusty winged birds of beige
that flutter in the tangled web
of our loom.
May be for awhile
it will lie
in a corner
forgotten,
over dried grey planks of birch
inside a musty log cabin
which grows dark from cobwebbed windows,
while we weavers find
new threads to shed and pick and beat,
reds that will keep a rose eye burning
and blues that turn to sky.
No.
Pick the old rug up woman.
Take it outside and shake it.
Yes you heard me — shake it!
Beat it against an old worn post
and when the dust flies free,
place your palms under the middle section
and thrust it over your head.
Let the sun's rays pour on it,
pots of melted butter.
And when the threads drink no more,
the trees shall Spring to life
and from their branches
the birds
will fly.

Martin Thomas Alexander
Still Life With Nude

I am Matisse's woman.
On the walls of his canvas
I lie,
touching threads
of trees and fruit.
Through the painted glass of his window
I see
his world outside.
In his mind's eye
he searches for my outline.
I am caught between the edges
of his strokes,
held only by the frame
of his sight.

Olivia Brown
Awaiting the Ark

Cardboard sky. The glistening street
Wet with fall’s desires. Quick air
From Olympus that parts the drops,
Descending, to meet as rivulets that
Slip beneath concrete: from nowhere to
Nowhere. Huddled, corrupt cars in the sheltered
Dark. Boy and girl, we two,
Slap the sidewalk: a sentence
Punctuated by puddles. The street
Lights (fluorescent glare of man’s
Interruption) hurt the night’s eyes,
Blinking and tearing. The trees
Whose careless poses belie their intense
Sucking of the clouds’ blood, desperate
To clutch with twig and root
The city, lulled by soft singing, beyond the
Hillcrest. Assured we are, who look up
From inside this child’s drama-box
To catch windwet odors that clear
Stuffy attics. The gods cry
For us and we must bow our heads.
The mist, or shall I say,
Spider toes tickle our faces —
Why rain, for God’s sake —
I think as we wait for the ark.

Durant D. Schwimmer

Ellen Burchenal
They wheeled her on a stretcher to a tiled room where the trochar glittered on its tray. Its reflection wavered on the ceiling; meanwhile his fingers probed her belly, ticking off her guts. “Now you will feel some pressure,” he said.

“I used to like you,” she replied, her voice shaking out of control. He laughed and the trochar bit, surprising panic in her. “You’re pushing me through the bed,” she managed to say before the instrument backed smoothly out again, its long silver throat choked with liver.

“Now,” he said, sounding pleased, “we can have a look at this tissue, see what’s going on in there.”

“In there,” she repeated, peering down as he covered the puncture with gauze. “I never believed there was anything in there.”

He smiled. “I know what you mean.” Applying the adhesive bandage he fumbled a little; she felt a sudden affection for him. He liked him for this mild embarrassment he showed after acts of doctoring, as if he had been caught eating fire or trying to walk on water.

The worst is over now, she thought, and relief made her reckless. “When you get the results of this, I can go home, isn’t that right?”

“Well,” he said, and his voice was suddenly as smooth, as slick, as glass, “we’d better find out what the results are, first.”

They train them to keep their faces still like that, she thought. “So when will I know?” she asked, chastened. Something happening inside me, she thought. Collisions in the blood.

“In a day or two,” he said, avoiding her gaze. “I’ll let you know as soon as I hear. Bed rest until tomorrow.” He went out carrying the jar in which a bloom of tissue floated like a field-trip specimen.

And I, thought Edwina, am the pond he fished it out of. Her stomach gurgled swampily; her hands lay mottled and yellow as salamanders on the white sheet.

At the foot of a cow-flopped pasture lay the pond of her childhood. Edwina crouched daily with net and jar on a rock by the water, predatory as the snapping turtle; meanwhile, eyed from below by cruising trout, darning-needles sw-oped and flashed their glassine wings. Edwina lifted her face, protected by scientific fact: they could not sew up your mouth. Shading her eyes she scanned the pond, then peered over the rock’s edge.
straight to the sandy bottom. A newt would be nice, or an eel, not too big.

A kind-hearted hunter, she usually released her catch after studying it through the glass walls of its prison, so if her prey did not die of fright it learned after all the snapper’s beak.

Willow leaves twirled yellow above the plush chocolate cat-tails. A milkweed silk snagged on the cracked pod, then sailed up. Under her gaze one leaf dropped its disguise, became a chrysalis hanging from the milkweed.

Edwina snapped the stalk. Clomping in galoshes she was too hurried to fasten, she carried it through the swamp, up through the orchard with its slush of rotting windfalls underfoot, finally to the house where she laid it on the cement porch while she got the jar ready. It needed a big jar, so there would be room for sticky orange wings to unfold next spring. Some gravel, a few leaves to make it natural. There.

She turned, clumsy in boots, and felt the liquid crunch beneath her heel. Smashed, her fault, no way to bring it back. She felt the turning earth’s whole weight press down on her as she stood weeping by her net and jar.

From deep in her dream she heard the shout, woke in the hospital. “Bedpan,” yelled old Mrs. Gerhardt, who winkled candies and wristwatches from every bedside table and so was tied down in a canvas shirt with straps knotted under her bed.

Edwina’s bandage itched. Inside me, she remembered, chilled. Stained curtains half-surrounded each bed. Across from Mrs. Gerhardt a painting mocked the drab wall where her gaze one leaf dropped its disguise, then gazed at the dioramas as if about to startle, testing her canvas jacket - straps. With professional skill the nurse hardened her face at loud Mrs. Gerhardt, who gave so much trouble.

Shut up, shut up, thought Edwina, whose head was beginning to ache. She had to sympathize with this nurse. Mrs. Gerhardt was so noisy, she made the room smell so bad.

“Me? No,” she seemed amazed by the question. “I’ve never been sick.”

“Or broken your ankle or had a baby or —”

“I said no, what do you want from me?”

“Oooh, young girls are croo-cifying me!” wailed Mrs. Gerhardt, testing her canvas jacket- straps. With professional skill the nurse hardened her face at loud Mrs. Gerhardt, who gave so much trouble.

Later, flowers arrived: a pinched arrangement of rosebuds and dyed carnations. At the sight of them Edwina’s spirits lifted foolishly; she ripped open the card.

It was signed by Howard but also by Helen; well, he had sent them, that was something. Or had it been her idea, something for poor Edwina, a dash to the florist between lunch and bridge club? A few of the carnations were browning slightly at the edges. It did look more like a wife’s kind of thing. Edwina closed her eyes.

As an ‘extra woman,’ Edwina was invited to a few dinner parties; at one of these few she had met Howard, who was there with his wife. Soon after, he came alone to the museum and found Edwina at her desk surrounded by 5000 butterflies, each labeled, numbered, and impaled. A young man had grown old collecting them. Now they lay still in the wafer-thin drawers of cherrywood cases. They weren’t corpses any more than the mummy in the Hall of Ancients was a corpse. It was so hard to believe any of them had ever lived.

“I had no idea butterflies were such a chore,” he said, clearly dismayed at her desk and the floor littered with 3 × 5 cards, at her grubby unglamorous absorption. “I thought you might show me a little of your museum, but I can see you’re too busy.”

“You’re right, I am much much too busy,” she said, putting down the Cecropia moth whose powdery wings she’d been examining, dusting her hands on the front of smock. How pleased he was, it had been her first clue to him, the way pleasure dawned over his face.

They walked through the museum. At Tyrannosaurus he stared unselfconsciously, then gazed at the dioramas as if about to fall through the glass and be frozen among the
posed caribou. Smiling perplexedly as if nearly recognizing someone, he paused before the great blue heron: it looked so like him, she thought, with its long legs and neck, its awkward beauty.

The final room was the Hall of American Indians. There the objects of a vanished daily life were collected. He looked at a braided hide rope, a chubby mortar-and-pestle, a cache of arrowheads. He stood silent a long time before an exhibit of cindery nuggets marked 'a quantity of charred Indian succo-tash.' "Someone's food," he said finally. "That was someone's food."


She was unresentful; it was what she needed him for, to take the sneaky weed of disease and make it a garden variety. She lay back in bed and let them cultivate her like a carrot, which was what she would look like, she thought, if she got any yellower.

The next morning they let her out of bed. In the bathroom mirror the whites of her eyes were blood-flecked yellow, like fertilized egg-yolks. She put on lipstick although it clashed with her saffron skin, suspecting intentions were more important now than color scheme.

In the other room the nurses laughed and chattered, rolling Mrs. Gerhardt back and forth, forcing fresh sheets and soaker pads between her and the mattress. It's true, said one. Help, ouch, police, howled Mrs. Gerhardt as they wrestled her out of the nightgown that flapped around her shanks like a rain-soaked flag. Well I don't know, said the other. Murder, murder, shrieked Mrs. Gerhardt. It's true though — oy oy oy! — intelligent people suffer more than less intelligent ones. I was taught that by very intelligent nuns.

"There sure must be a lot of intelligent people in this hospital," Edwina said nastily as she passed them; they were busy propping Mrs. Gerhardt up in bed like an antique doll and didn't hear Edwina, or pretended not to.

In the solarium she saw that her instinct about lipstick was right. Tricked out in best robes and unscuffed slippers, a dozen patients sipped coffee and greeted one another with hope and caution, like passengers on a singles cruise. Although nothing, thought Edwina, touching her own hair nervously, could disguise that woman's baldness, not even the ruffled mobcap she wore. Nor was there any way to avoid noticing the plastic tube that disappeared into that elderly gentleman's dressing gown. Not me, Edwina thought, I don't belong here. "Good morning,"

said the old gentleman, the courtliness of his bow contrasting oddly with his paraphernalia.

Before she could stop herself she was bowing idiotically in return. "Good morning." Lord, what did people look at here besides each other? With relief she spied an aquarium off in the corner. "Guess I'll just have a look at the fish," she said, backing away. The old man kept nodding. She had backed off several feet before she realized it was a tremor that kept his head bobbing so, his whole body quivering like a pole in a high wind.

Gliding up the aquarium wall, a snail kissed his dinner from the glass. Behind him a school of neon danced, invisibly connected like the pendants of a mobile. With trailing whiskers a catfish vacuumed the tank's orange gravel floor.

Edwina liked the aquarium. She felt grateful to whoever had thought of buying it, and had not stopped at thinking. She liked the fish, and if they enjoyed swimming over orange gravel and breathing bubbles of oxygen burped by a mechanical frog, she wouldn't criticize. They certainly seemed to enjoy the plastic trees and ferns, gliding among them with the weightless otherworldly grace of astronauts.

Suddenly her eye was caught by a different kind of movement, a silvery jabbing among the plastic branches. Looking closer she saw a swordtail floating upside down as if resting, its tail eaten down to a red stump. Another swordtail was nipping at its ragged gill, which it waved languidly, as if fanning itself in an exhaustion of heat.

The pains came without warning. Inside me, she remembered again, sweat prickling her scalp. Her tears left itching trails. A needle stung, the room turned. "Get some rest," someone advised, turning and turning and gone.

She woke, cheated. He had drugged her and sneaked away. But then, she had begged to be drugged, had threatened and pleaded and wept. That was me, she realized, those things came out of my mouth.

When dinner arrived Edwina had to close her eyes, but food made Mrs. Gerhardt happy and sane. "I always look on that painting," she remarked, chewing a dry chop with energy.

In the painting the man still pushed his bicycle. Below in the shade, blue water lapped the stones.

"It's cool under there," Mrs. Gerhardt confided. "The birds fly up. They have nests where the old stones have fallen. I hear them chirping, and their wings." She overpowered a dinner roll with her strong yellow teeth.
“It’s funny how I know,” she went on conversationally. “They never let me sit in a shady place. I had weak lungs. All winter my mother wrapped me in hot rags while she went out to take care of the chickens and cow. When the doctor came, he could make me laugh.”

Her pouchy face alight with the pleasures of food and talk, she went on as if entertaining a whole dinner-table. “My mother,” she said, scraping her pudding-dish, “she was from the real old time. Once my father sent her down cellar to get wine from the barrel. ‘Take the cork out,’ he said, ‘put in this tube, and suck on it. When it runs, fill the jug.’ So she went, but she didn’t come back. And when we all went to see, we found her sitting on the cellar floor with the tube in her mouth, swallowing and swallowing. The jug was full, but she didn’t know how to make the tube to stop running! We laughed and laughed. I can still see her, her cheeks so round and red like roses!” She stopped. “Well,” she said. Her listeners had all gone. “Well, that was in the old times.”

You’ve had your whole life, Edwina protested silently. You should be glad. Silence. Maybe the old woman was asleep.

Then, “I could tell what more I want. I want it all over again.”

She lay back and listened to him tell how it was with her, and how they would proceed. She had chosen him well after all, she thought. He was prepared on her behalf for anything. He talked on, his face kind but legible. Edwina felt the dark wing brush her cheek.

When he had gone, she went to the window. Swaying, she placed her hands flat on the gritty sill and looked out. Dusk rose like a tide in the street, around buildings stolid as dockpilings with night rising up their sides. A school of bicycles darted around a car; it hesitated a moment longer before moving into the path of a truck.

The car rolled lazily up on its side, then flipped over, rocking slightly like a turned turtle. A small figure struggled from the wreck, took a step, and fell. From far away, Edwina thought, all accidents must look like that: deliberate, slow.
Struggle

I cannot feel the words,
my body tongue-tied
organs mute
hands stammering before
your flesh;
walking as though my bird-legs in buckets
awkwardly clammering up the path,
the moon silent like a blind eye
or an apple in my womb;
the rhyme is out of tune,
the riddle cracked, a
thing unstrung between the corners
of the heart.

Nina George
Walking With You

The street you walked down
was running away from itself,
clicking methodically at your heels.
As you passed, doors locked
one by one, windows closed.
Cold petals on the daffodil
you gave me avoided each other.
Night had forgotten morning but
I cannot erase the picture
you have of me: a dryness
heaped in piles of parched leaves,
broken branches, crushed stone.
As you looked at me,
your eyes opened my jacket and
walked in. You asked:
— Veux-tu me parler?
But I don't speak Chinese or German
while you did not understand:
I had nothing on beneath my clothes.
I took your hand but
the street kept dividing
and we walked in opposite directions.
(He misunderstood my response.
Because he heard nothing
he thought he was
alone.)
When I reached the corner
I looked back but was not in time.
You had already gone
and did not see the moist tree of daffodils,
yellow buds unfolding,
poking through cracked pavement,
trying to remember morning.

Jane Kelleher
Nantucket's Neighborhood of Feelings

I  Ferry
The first view is
three steeples
two needling that clearest sky
one gold dome nudging aside the blue above the hill —
so still
The boat intrudes on that sunlit mirage
throwing slow waves upon the beach.
Then a guttural screech
flying up on the wings
of the greywhite scavenger
breaks the sky open
into a thousand tiny rushes of wind.

II  From the Cottage Porch
In eddies of wind
the church bell rings low:
one two louder three
then whips its sound
away like a startled kite.
Two lines of white wash
frenzedly flap
as high as the ropes allow
while shadows dance on them in silence.
I can hear only the leaves rustle
and an occasional whistle.

III
Not sunset:
only one thin rim
of rusting reds and tinted greys
lingers under the weight of clouds and night.

Leslie Brayton
A Woman in Search of Spring Dandelion Greens

I knew her
dark against a field of sun-blind green:
feet set apart in solid stance,
broad shoulders and a matron's bosom
filling her dress
which drooped to mid-calf.
She bent to the grass
(an endless field of light)
plucking weeds she gathered in one fist.
They too were dark against the green,
and everywhere
warm air breathed of leaves.

Sukie Curtis
Upon Entering a Pine Grove in Newagen, Maine

I tiptoe
as if in an empty room
where a sleeper turns
restlessly.
The only sound is my breathing.
Here, in the damp dark
no birds shrill. no badger snorts
hunggrily. not even the grey squirrel
chatters nervously.
Here, the green mosses sleep
on sodden stumps, burly monks
who pray all night.
All day they guard
the black earth beetles,
blind miners speelunking home.
Here, the rocks lie flat
on their backs. their rough faces up
And still. A million years still.
Their gray cheeks sprout
in white lichen beards
all over.
Here, the thin sunlight hangs
in brown-threaded skeins
from a thatched roof.
Below, mushrooms, small astronauts
shove their white noses
into the mooning dark.

Nancy Nies
These hills had jostled each other
shoulder to shoulder
until they rested here so deeply
their breathing is almost heard
moving in the mist of cattle
chewing in their dusking field;
moving the soulless, sad creatures
to be silent and listen
and breathe deep and listen again.
I had wanted to walk by the trees
whose muscled limbs reached
down to the river.
I had wanted to wrap the still,
rising mist around me like a shawl.
I had wanted to touch the sorrow of the cattle
and hold it like a child
as the summer slipped finally away
with long hair trailing
and one hand waving and back.
Still, nothing holds a final key. "Listen!"
the click you heard was an old cricket,
a branch sprung loose under the weight of an owl.
And the mist, only the rags of time.

Elizabeth Tyson
Hail to Those Sailors Seen

Hail to those sailors seen swabbing and swearing
Hail to the mizzen, the mast and the rigging;
Send to our captain the message that is waiting
Pull from the shore in a flurry of wind.

The storm came like blacking, like bitching, like brew
Full of our skin, the wind and water came through and
Swept the deck cleaner of those not on tightly
Lashed like the coils of a snake stretched and striking.

Mountains were moving, erupting and boiled.
I took to the line, to the mast when we rolled;
I took to the foam, like some shade of grey
Rotting already on the blunt pitch-of-day

In some watery hole, salty hole of the sea,
Some frozen confusion, all confused in the sea:
Night like its blackest, life like its thinnest
Washed of one man, it aborted unfinished,

An island, a prayer, this island like rock
That covers the ocean far under and over,
Floating like wreckage, drifting like sand
In the squeeze of the hour, through that thinness, that glass ...

Here are the heavens, broke-open like treasure.
On sand are my sandals, the hair dry on my chin,
While all the world over and over again
This place, is my place, this morning, my friend.

William Epes
The land seems endless. Soil lies fallow from one side of the horizon to another. With each rainfall, ground becomes thicker and darker. Ishmael watches sun-rise casting an orange glimmer over fields. Tomorrow, father begins to plant. They will work together.

Winter has been cold and wet. Through January and February, snow fell and froze into ice. Mother was sick. Ishmael stayed home, nursing her — while father went to Chicago for new equipment.

During March, a warm wind came up river. When she felt better, father walked her into town. They saw white snow melting into black soil. Water seeped, making the ground softer — almost muddy.

She bought a new dress. He looked on, giving his approval. On the way back to the farm, they tried going through the woods, but snow still covered the path.

He stoops, gathering a handful of dirt. His parents may still sleep. Ishmael forms a ball and throws it against their bedroom wall. A slight thump. He does it again.

Inside the barn, cows begin to stir. They are hungry.

A window opens. His father's voice calls out. Ishmael asks if anything special should be done. Father appears. Leaning on the sill, he throws a towel to his son. Ishmael must work on the tractor, cleaning and greasing the parts. They laugh at each other. Father will go back to bed; it's his last chance to sleep late. The window closes.

An open bag of feed leans against the gate. With one hand, Ishmael hoists it over his shoulder. He enters the barn. Cows moo. After hanging the towel on a hitch, he pours feed into each trough. There is enough for all. They eat and he looks on.

Mother never made him breakfast until his chores were done. That was part of the rule everybody agreed to. Since his 14th birthday, father expected him to work. Though it had something to do with making a man out of a son, Ishmael understood that his father was getting older and could not do all the work by himself. If Ishmael had breakfast before going out, then he would feel too heavy and weighted down. Working on a full stomach nauseated him. So, mother slept longer; father worked less; and Ishmael prepared the farm for each new day.

He does not wait for all four cows to finish. The two Jerseys eat faster and are milked first. Bulging in his hands, their tits are big and always warm. Milk sprays into the bucket.

White droplets wet his fingers.

He moves to the young heifer. She has not given birth yet. There is very little. Ishmael remembers when father brought her home from a broke farmer in Pekin. The man sold everything he had.

Ishmael checks the holstein. While growing up, he rode on her back. For his tenth birthday, mother made a bell, using tin cup and nail. That morning, they hooked it on a belt and gave her a collar. He hears it as she moves. Her milk comes slowly. Well over half full, the bucket is placed on ice. He gets his towel. Tools are found. Tractor work begins.

His hands grip firmly. Steel shines through grease, cutting into skin. Blood. A thin red stream moves across his wrist. It does not hurt. He takes a clean part of the towel and wipes it off.

In the woods with father, Ishmael had never gone hunting before. He carried arrows. Father always held the bow in his right hand. They went off the path. Ishmael tripped. Pain ran through his body. Two tips were in his shoulder. Father tore Ishmael's shirt. He watched his own blood drip onto the ground.

At home, mother cleansed the wound. She said there would be no infection. He tried sleeping, but it hurt too much. Awake all night, Ishmael talked to himself. He spoke of places he had never seen. Morning came. Shadows entered through the window. Father did all the work — and mother made him breakfast. After eating, Ishmael slept until the next day.

Dull red scabs form. He fits one metal part into another. Valves are oiled and sparkplugs checked. Father should be waking up. They should ride around and test it again. A long time ago, Ishmael wondered how long he would stay. Tomorrow starts his fifth season.

* * * * *

Under a darkening sky, mother sits on a stump. Her eyes scan the horizon. All is flat. When they came here, there were no canals, and woods still surrounded them.
In the four corners of the fields, trees blocked out sunlight. She would take her child to the shade and rest. The ground was wet and cool. It felt so soft as she lay there, listening to wind whistle.

While Ishmael went to learn reading and writing, she worked — digging water ditches. Her shoulders were strong and back wide. Hair fell over her face. Afterwards, she took a nap with father. Coming home, Ishmael would never disturb them. He changed his clothes and went to play by the river.

Mother stands up. Her legs are stiff. She walks to the front of the house. It will be another hour before eating; they have to check the seed after walking the land.

In 1858, an Indian fighter from Wabash county settled near here. He fought Blackhawks and Iroquois until a trader cut off his hand. They say he stole guns and furs. To keep his house, he took the daughter of a merchant. She bore him two sons — who eventually used their inheritance to invest in a railroad from Springfield to Chicago. The eldest was mother’s grandfather.

A burnt red streaks the sky; sun sets. Wind blows through trees.

He knew politicians and crooks and whores and boozers. Though he said he loved his wife, there was only one child — a red haired daughter. He sent her to schools and on long trips with his wife. Anything was done to keep steady women out of his life.

His daughter returned to Illinois. Rich men courted her, but she preferred to live near her father. The pregnancy was an accident; she knew he would never admit it. He came to see the new child once in winter. From her window, she watched him walk along the white streets. Whenever others asked about her husband, she said there was none.

As a child, Ismael’s mother did not cry. It was all explained to her. She played along Chicago’s beaches and in the stables. On her fifteenth birthday, she ran away.

Two years later, she gave birth in Cincinnati. A rich man kept her. When his wife refused divorce, he brought mother and the boy to the estate.

She lived in the carriage house beyond the servants quarters. At night, he took dinner to her. His wife refused to let her in the house. The workers saw their boss walk over at dusk and leave at dawn. They knew, but never saw her.

While working, father found Ishmael crawling in the fields. He carried the child to her quarters. He promised not to tell.

She asked if he could help. Father agreed to look after her son during the night.

One afternoon, the boss demanded that Ishmael become his heir. Despite the price, mother refused to leave her son. He yelled and slapped her. She wrestled free. A gun was drawn. A bottle thrown. He shot the chandelier. She protected her son.

Father heard the second shot. When he arrived, Ishmael cried in her arms. The boss lay face down; blood pouring from the head. They took the money in his pockets.

A family eats dinner in Illinois. Soup, meat, and corn served around the large wooden table. All day, men have worked; the woman rode into town, bringing back tools needed for a long season. Water moves slowly through ditches. Moon shines in a cloudless sky. Night enters living cycles.

When finished, each person takes care of their own dishes. Mother never cleaned. Ever since Ishmael worked, it was everyone for themselves. The first done starts coffee and finds dessert. She usually bakes a fruit pie.

Each berry in Ishmael’s mouth slides. She finished baking before going into town. The pie sat all afternoon. Father eats only one piece. Ishmael starts his third. Mother’s cooking goes all the way down, constantly telling him to stay.

He had run away before, but this time was different. His parents knew about the girl. They saw them together many times. He met her at the church. She stood, leaning against the back wall. Two days later — near the Mississippi, Ishmael turned back.

He watches them, listening to their conversation about town. She speaks of people dying or dead; while father nods politely, occasionally commenting. They were not friendly with most, yet some townspeople visited regularly. Ishmael rarely received the chance to meet any of them. At most, he said Hello and took their coats. Then, father or mother asked him to leave. It made no difference, for he wanted to be alone. After his third piece, Ishmael cleans the plate and walks to his room.

He lies on the bed. There is nothing to do but wait for tomorrow. One more night, one more season. Without understanding their words, he can hear the voices from below.

Mother and father told Ishmael the whole story when he returned from the Mississippi. It took fifteen years of his life. When he asked why they were silent so long, she cried. Father said it did not matter who or where because he was their child.
They raised him and made a place. Home should always remain with them. Ishmael had no more questions.

From the forest, sounds release themselves. Near the swamps then through the trees, gas whines into darkness.

Turning onto his back, Ishmael tries sleeping. His breathing regulates itself. Legs relax. Hands and arms are limp. A breeze, coming through the window, blows out the candlelight.

The past of mother surfaces inside each breath. Though he often wonders about the man she killed, Ishmael does not accept him as father. Mother had to run away. She had to kill. Whenever he touches her hands, he wonders which finger pulled the trigger.

During the night, images flicker in the light behind his eyes. He sees mother running away — sweating and breathing heavy. No one chases but she moves faster, ripping her clothes. Iron and steel coating over the knuckles. She pulled with the middle — he knew from the taste. She drew him to her breast.

On the first night away with the girl, she told Ishmael about her husband. Until then, he had no idea. He only wanted to leave home. When he left her on the second night, he gave her his money.

He often thinks about staying out all night. Many times, he went behind the church — where women wait for men. They are not too expensive. Some get pregnant and disappear; others have been stuck for years.

Lying in bed, he remembers faces and surroundings. Names return in small whispers. Often, Ishmael called on a friend in town. Together, they took women into woods. Ground was always wet, but soft. Flesh moved warmly. The touch tickles his hand. One finger after another press into his legs. Linen sheets rustle as his position shifts.

In town, a church bell, strikes the hour.

He hears nothing. The bed creaks.

He sleeps.


Slowly, mother and father make love. Cool morning air enters their window. Bodies slide against and through — as if nothing will stop them. Together wanting forever, they feel the same from years gone until years coming. Air surrounds them. One hand clutches the other. Arms embrace shoulders. The first night after the killing she cried: the smell of grease was still on her hand.

The motion continues. Right leg rubs into left; wetness runs. Muscles tighten — firm skin tingling.

Father kisses each finger. Iron and steel coating over the knuckles. She pulled with the middle — he knew from the taste. She drew him to her breast.

Outside, Ishmael prepares the tractor. He starts the motor, letting it run while the cows are fed. The noise blocks out morning sounds. Cows moo.

Father lies next to mother. He hears the motor. Work must begin. The season has arrived. His son waits. Father rolls onto his side, swinging his legs off the bed. Feet touch floor; he stands.

Ishmael returns to the tractor. He fills the cannisters with seed; then, the gas is emptied into the tank. He climbs to the seat. Settling himself at the wheel, he finds the right distance for the pedals. Neutral is shifted into first. The machine jerks forward; big tires press deep into land. Ishmael drives in large circles before father comes out. Then, the motor stops. Ishmael steps down and walks over to father. They talk about where to start.

A full sun shines. Near the horizon, yellow tinged branches cut into sky.

On the original plot, father planted north to south. After the acquisition of new land, he bought the tractor. The forest was cleared east to west.

Shielding his eyes, Ishmael points to the eastern corner. The land needs more water. A new ditch must come through the trees. Father turns towards the northwest, scanning the field's edge. He asks Ishmael if it can be done within two days.

Land has been crossed then plowed and planted for years. Soil lives and dies in the shades of its own darkness. A wind stirs, bringing breath into the dirt.

They decide to dig together. While Ishmael seeds, father shall plot the route from corner to creek. Mounting the tractor, Ishmael takes off his shirt. Sunlight covers his chest. The machine rolls into the field.

Walking to the corner, father watches his son. All has been done. They have given the child everything possible. Ishmael did well; he helped his parents. He wronged them only a few times. Father knows that Ishmael will leave soon. The land can be sold — or workers hired. People and places change again. The years spent here seep into the soil, spreading thin like rainwater. Blood stains are diluted with each season. Events fade into planting rows and rows of crops.

Mother returns from town. She arranged for a shipment of meat. The men are hungry every night. Sitting on her stump, she looks at her son. He can never understand what his birth meant. That pain will never be his — only the burden of taking it from her and giving it to another. Mother sees how Ishmael will leave: at night, realizing that there shall never be anymore sleep in his life. Each morning brings the threat of an empty bed.

Wind brushes against her skin, blowing away droplets of sweat. She straightens her back. Slowly, seasons enter and leave and enter. Ishmael drives along the path marked by father. Mother focuses on his back — white amidst the light. Muscles in her shoulder tighten. Years of digging ditches and posting fences flex with every breath. Her arms feel the weight of using hammer and shovel against the earth. Greased metal shines through green, while black soil is torn under shadows.

Mother’s shirt clings to her body. The breeze cools, but moisture comes out of every pore. She rubs one hand against the other. Skin stretches along each finger. Mother closes her eyes pushing callous into bones. Through ditches, water flows from river to fields. Ground softens. Seeds grow. Roots plant themselves. Men thirst for more. They tear themselves away from each cycle. The water spreads, diluting blood stains of years passed. A wind picks up loose dirt. Brown dust moves across the horizon.

Mother sighs as blood rushes within each fingertip.
I Don't Know Why

I don't know why I'm
lovely red gown on the bed
how nice to find shoes
to match
and feel the powder
skim across my back
a white waterfall

going out with you tonight
black sky
who forgot to turn on the stars?
dead damn evening
good thing I got this new lipstick
Paint A Perfect Smile
On Your Lips Cause
You Can Be Sexy Too!
you probably couldn't tell but
later tonight you'll know
not see not hear
feel sensuous it
excites me
some

have you read the latest on how to do it?
but don't tell me
you don't need no book
you're in love
bullshit.
that's what they all said
that's what I said
Bring me a red, red rose
to hold in my mouth
to put in my hair
to put in
tonight. a star came out
amazing
and I can make a wish

um. I wish. I wish.
I wish I knew
why the hell I'm going
out with you tonight.

Jamie Petillo
Sincere mornings don't care for me.
English mornings crawl.
When I scream she chuckles, a girl who has no face, nor has she eyes.
Talks in deletion;
saying ooohh ...
God if she understands (my signals keep changing)
Watch out,
my laugh always terrifies me.
Maybe it will help:
to run to the mountains, swim with the trees.
Please don't laugh with circular lips.
Feign your love to other than me.
Walk with modern dance happily without.

Stephen Elsaesser
S(he)

After loving, she rolls over, limp and bored as flat beer. He looks on. Helpless. Too numb with fear and wondering at this drugged bird loose in his bed. It isn't easy to love a fool, he said. The words come mirrored back, glass needles sewing questions on the air. All lines go slack. Dull-eyed, on the bed she lies a smile, manufacturing love like potato chips or coke, amused at the red-cheeked youngster, trapped by her joke.

Nancy Nies
City Women

In Paris, the women dye their hair the color of the season and pluck fashions right out of the boutique windows as often as they tweeze their eyebrows. They are so alike in trying to be different that the streets teem draped fake models and the only real things are the clothes hangers.

In Rome, the women emphasize the outlines of their bodies in the stitch-strained tightness of blue jeans, wearing high heels as thin as their ankles. They giggle around the caffes like hens, swinging millions of delicate chains like broken prisons around their skinny necks.

In London, the women are chunkier, “beef to the heels” as the saying goes; displaying the country’s weather in their cheeks, maps of tiny shattered blood vessels. Their hair is as messy as the backwards traffic, and their lips are full and lacquered to match their fingernails.

In New York, the women laugh a lot, exposing their gold fillings, as they take big loping steps downtown in their baggy slacks that hide the legs they wish were really as long as all those basketball players’. They are loose with their chewing gum and cigarettes, and often chat with pretzel vendors during their lunch breaks from the skyscrapers.

Katie Philson
The Day's Rise, Where the Night's Eggs Are 
(a slow, stepped dance)

1.
Rising like fish, 
we bake this bread, 
daily. 
Swum in coffee, 
our breakfast hides 
belowboard. 
A good morning 
moors us, leeward 
of the day. 
Rising and rising!

2.
Sunpools are fused 
and fade our shadows 
like shivers. 
The path crooks 
like a beechlimb laid 
against the bluff. 
The smell of the noonmeal 
swells toward the shorewater, 
redolent. 
Swelling and swelling.

3.
Work follows, back 
and back to the fields we are 
scything. 
Behind us have fallen 
those times we have cut 
quickly. 
Shadows grow heads and 
tails root bits 
of darkness. 
Rooting and rooting.

4.
Evening and plantdew - 
slow, we seep through 
the black. 
The tastes of the nightmeal 
roll through our minds 
like mouthfuls. 
The salmon-streams moon, 
sparkling and 
spawning. 
Spawning and spawning!

William Epes
Sisters

I pass
barefoot on the grass
and see them again
there, in their portrait way,
wearing their spring dresses
and sad lilac-blossom eyes.
The youngest, with her head
on the elder's knees,
lonely for some young man to kiss
and the days to grow long again,
while the soft girl's hand
touches her hair
and the waiting inside her body.

Nina George