

SIGNS OF WAKING
by MaryJo Mahoney

tenants' rites

In December of 2000, my apartment went on fire. I'm thirty-eight. Being so while still renting is a misdeed in Elmira, a town in upstate New York known for its high security prisons. My apartment sat cold, soaked and sooted. Faulty electrical cables emblazoned the basement of the house, built in 1906, broken into four apartments in the seventies. The basement held thirty years of the landlord's stuff: *JC Penney* stereos, two eight-tracks and speakers, three pedestal birdbaths decomposing to sand and rock, four smudged toilets, seven yellow and pink baskets, string lights, shedding silver garland, two faux Grecian columns, a lion-footed bathtub with a broken paw, torn green bags of fiberglass curtains, fallen stacks of bed sheets, eleven gallon-paint cans from *Sherman Williams*, rollers and trays, a scratched white leather baby shoe on top of seven damp bundles of *Life* magazine tied with nylon rope.

relational art

From 1983 to 1995, from New York City to Houston, I negotiated the pull of two identities. For twelve hours a day, four days a week, year after year I lifted sedated or depressed bodies from mattresses to chairs. I poked tubes with needles to infuse toxic therapy to men in their thirties and forties who weighed less than one hundred pounds. I swabbed an adolescent mother's labia with a numbing ointment in order to bridge the time span between her doses of morphine. For the first four of those years, I arrived home crying mercy for an exchange of selves. With terrifying stops and starts, I wrote through those years. I thought it saved me from some suffering, and I think it did.

sunday mornings

Growing up, my dad would be at the marbled black, formica table making Army hot cakes. My mom would clip grocery coupons from the *Daily News* with astonishing precision since she cut the weak paper with a pair of wide and loose scissors. All of the scissors in the house were loose. Most of the pencils had no tips. Obsolete phone books stacked the closets, but the plastic cover on the gold couch and the black iron railing were washed clean every other day with *No Frills* glass cleaner. The dust mop spanned the bedroom floors every morning at the witching hour: six on weekdays, seven on weekends. Each time the wood handle knocked a bed frame, it shook the bed. Most often I was the one still asleep there.

On Sundays, Tim and I would roll up in our blankets on the orange rag rug in the den to watch a television show about a brown clay dog that talked to a white clay boy about doing-right. The clay boy could be such an insufferable baby, *gee, Goliath, if only we didn't wander into this cave*, but we liked how devoted the clay dog stayed, like when Davey threw paint down a well. And if that was not enough, Goliath, the brown clay dog showed his white clay teeth, salivated blue clay tears and growled with a clay snarl like a real and worthy mongrel. We were absolutely hooked.

Meanwhile, our sister Flora and her steady, Steven, typically had been out into the morning on Saturday night, so we knew why a brown box commanded the landing by the front door. Any minute, Steven would drive up to our split-level house in his sprite, new-edition '73 MG. Flora would bolt out of her bedroom to the front door when the airy whirl vibrated the

garage door. With her flannel bathrobe swinging, her brown hair feral from impatience, she would march the box right out to his open car trunk to return it. Steven knew the routine. He would stand wordless in the driveway, smoking. Flora would begin to shout. He'd wait, dig in his pocket for gum, and nod once, not in agreement with her, but as a sign, a gesture in response to her words meaning *this conversation is useless*. He'd throw his cigarette in the street and wave one hand in loops as she barraged him just a little more. He'd walk the box right back into the house. Flora would follow. Her voice would get lower and slower as they walked up the concrete steps and would shut-off on the landing. She would never care that she was in her robe. My mother would say as if surprised, "hello, Steven!" and then she'd warble, embarrassed, "how about some tea?"

It is true Steven and Flora's ritual had become funny to us, a family joke. They made our father snigger one syllable through his nose. Since *chuf* was the closest he could do to sounding a laugh, we liked when Steven and Flora made it happen. And though as children Tim and I woke in wait for these fights, through her life, Flora never came to see how ridiculous they were. Her whole life, they grizzled in her blue eyes.

Each episode of *Davey and Goliath* wound down to a Methodist moral that we thought made the show too *out there*, crazy, a little rabid, and worse, kind of rude. It was not nearly as polite as the Jehovahs who pushed their god aluminum door by aluminum door while wearing blue suits. Our mother would stand at the door screen in an apron holding a wet spaghetti sauce spoon in one hand, catching the hot drips with the other. *Ah ha. Ah ha. Ah ha*, she would say. After three minutes of this, because Jehovahs spoke gently to her, she would force herself to say *I'm cooking now. Thank you, I'm cooking now*. Then she would push the wood door shut, rush up the stairs cupping the spoon, saying *shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot*, certain her sauce was burning.

After the show, Tim and I studied Flora's box: a faux fur cape with leather gloves, three valentine heart-boxes jammed with penned loose-leaf folded into tight squares, nine statuettes of endangered lions and panthers, a canister of *Turtlewax Car Wash*, two pump bottles of *Armor All Multipurpose Car Cleaner*, a brown-checked bellbottom jumpsuit, seven Italian gold chains, three lucky-horn charms, and a pliable lumberjack doll from *Arby's* named Ugly Ted because it really looked like our Dad. Nearly each weekend, the contents of the box shifted. We wondered how she decided which gifts to keep, a sign these fights were not gravely serious.

crawling out of myself in the morning

I trailed the draped stethoscope off from around my neck and shoulders. I slid the ponytail elastic out of my hair. I stepped out of my blood and *Betadine*-stained scrub pants to take a shower with industrial soap chased by a second wash and rinse with a papaya-scented shampoo. I let my hair dry long and wavy. I slid into torn *Levi's*, from college, and a cotton tee shirt. I flicked the keys and nestled in. I wrote until I began to lose my words, until I was too tired to reorder them. Early on, I pretended to be Louisa May Alcott, Florence Nightingale or Elizabeth Kubler Ross as I tapped out reflections on a *Smith Corona* word processor, saved on diskettes that are now obsolete.

I was afraid of my voice, and I thought I should write like the mothers.

messing with texas

Houston was a city of wet, summer dog days ten months out of the year. College boys brought their guitars and sat in dusty patios of restaurants fingering A chords under dragging fronds of palm trees. They sang about sitting around under them. The heat draped like velvet while boys sang and scratched the ribs of steel strings.

I still like this.

where the good die young

On Long Island, we sat around and sang about sitting in cars with the radio on. Oak trees and white-bark birch trees stood lanky and hale as boys playing hoops in a parking lot. At midnight, tipsy on *Sangria*, girls preened in passenger seats as their boyfriends drove through the *Milk Barn* to buy weed. On Saturday nights, most cars migrated south to the fishing docks, to watch for submarines. With the engines off and radios on battery power, rock music christened us, named us, allowed us our reveries.

We had a lax police department unless you could not blend.

hippocratic oath

... I will use ~~treatment~~ story to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but I will never use it to injure or wrong them.

are you going to a halloween party?

Through high school, I drove a red *Chevy Nova*, heater broken for six years, with a sharp rusted hole in the passenger's floor. The winter of junior year, Lisa and I would wend through black ice to the *Salty Dog* to woo two musicians who looked enough like Roger Daltry and Elvis Costello to make us wear bikini underwear. When I picked up Lisa in the red beater, we'd check each other's look in the mirror on her bedroom door: necklines cut off of tee shirts, red bandanas tied around one wrist, enough brown eyeliner and ivory undercover that her mother called us barn owls, our hair flipped, spritzed and sprayed three times to keep it standing.

At the *Salty Dog*, three plastic cups each from our rum and cokes were upside on the horseshoe bar by the time Lisa and I switched to *Absolut* and pineapple. We smoked Lisa's *Marlboros* and blew rings and poked the rings with the tips of our cigarettes. We vanished to the bathroom between sets, beach sand crunching under our cowboy boots. We fled back to our spots at the bar, pushed and apologized our way to our wood stools. The bathroom trips reassured us that we had dressed wisely.

While we were gone, Roger Daltry had a spat with his slinky girlfriend who was now afire. As she stormed away, he pushed his way to the bar eyeing Lisa. I had guessed this would be a good night back at her house when Lisa decided to wear the silver ring with three beaded chains that clasped to a bangle bracelet.

I went for a stroll since we were between sets. Strobe lights struck the mirrors. Blue light fell through the windows onto the dance floor. Sturdy, white boys danced. Their gold chains hopped. Skinny white girls in shiny pants stepped out star points with their pumps. There was something ugly about the suburbs that I found interesting. I leaned my forearms on the banister of the loft staircase. I adjusted the bandana on my left wrist and the black rubber bracelets on the other one and watched the dancers. Just when what was ugly about the suburbs was becoming a little bit interesting, Elvis Costello was descending the stairs. I signaled *here he comes* to Lisa who was sunning herself at the bar with Daltry. She was smiling and smoothing her long chestnut perm behind excellent chain earrings she bought at the flea market that hung like meteor showers. Elvis approached me by the banister. We met toe to toe on the wide, dark landing. A full head taller than him with hairspray and boots, I grew shy by the blink, and he blushed.

In their third set, Roger and Elvis sang *what I like about you* by the Romantics and nodded to Lisa and me in a wing of the dance floor. We reciprocated by pushing through the others, centering ourselves in a juncture of smooth light. Our belted hips swiveled, not to the pace of the rhythm guitar, but to the backbeat of the drums. We mouthed *you really know how to dance* to each other, to the floor, and finally to the band, feeling revelatory and embarrassed that

they would really like us, celebrate us for our resistance, and that if one did not have a girlfriend and if the other had been taller, they would have wanted to date us.

After the high note, we left. We race-walked to the *Chevy* recounting the narrative of our night. We donned our cold scarves and gloves that were hidden under the cracked bench seat. We cheered and wiped the frost from the inside of the windshield with our gloves. Lisa wrapped a scarf around her head. I screamed out the window at the apex of the *Robert Moses Bridge*. We laughed and shivered and smoked with the windows partly open, straight to the *Avenue Diner* where the *Camaros*, *Firebirds* and *Z 28 Special Editions* gathered. In our glory, in the diner, we drank diet soda and ate cheeseburger platters, half-sour pickles, the garnish radish and the iceberg lettuce beds. We had a glow about us.

doing for others

At twenty-two, I could catch first warning signs, prioritize and dispatch orders with conviction. I could rethread an arterial line, rotate dialysis bags, *snow* a crack addict before a round of medication, and listen with my stethoscope to the lungs of a patient with a chest tube. I thought I should write what others needed.

no enduring friendships

I did not grow relationships with many patients. When they landed in the hospital with serendipitous luck, people came with them. I watched a pageant of odd and heartbreaking partners and families, tangled intricately as the netting on the bouffant of an old lady. With cues from the patient, I chased away legions of dutiful friends who hovered too long or hung back on metal chairs hiking the hem of the privacy curtain. My closest relationships lasted the length of each hospitalization plus or minus a phone call.

When patients like Dree came in, always alone by *Yellow Cab*, I grew a particular tenderness for them. Awake at two a.m., Dree understood to ring for me to watch *The People's Court*. As often as I could, I sat in the bedside chair, hooked my white shoes in the railing of the electric bed, sipped a coffee, and watched Judge Wopner beat his gavel. Dree and I loved to see him talk all the accusing people down. Dree ate a vanilla ice cream cup by the nibble from the belly of a plastic spoon. She held firm to her cardinal rule: *no talking during the show*. Once though, the judge snapped at a tiny Dominican woman. He ordered her to stop sending payments on a *Grand Am* for her bad-seed boyfriend, who showed up to court in a cream sweater from *Wal-Mart*, wrinkled black pants and no belt. With that Dree waved her spoon in the air and said, *I absolutely agree with him*.

no ordinary woman

In 1967, at four, I had a strong disposition for justice. It only took several stellar cameos of Batgirl for the imprint to take hold. Not Ginger. Not Maryanne. Not Lucy. Not even Yvonne Craig, the actress who played Batgirl. Occasionally, Gidget. Once though, Batman tried to stop Batgirl from doing her thing by saying garbage like *this isn't exactly women's work*, and she ignored him. Then, in another episode, he said, *how do you know?* and she said snottily, *through the one thing you couldn't possibly have in your utility belt, Batman... a woman's intuition*. Although that one went over my head, I understood her tone. I laughed heartily and threw an arched look at Tim.

that's right, you're not from texas

I saw a green salamander hustle along the inside of a windowpane of *La Vaca Negra*, the most passionate little coffee shop in Houston. It felt so scared it turned green to blend with the

potted plants on the ledge. It moved its body like it was nervous. One side flexed in an arc while the other side extended. Its smooth skin crimped only when it flexed. I could see where ribs ended and the soft belly began. For a split second, the belly inflated. The little paunch stretched so thin it appeared to have a small light inside. Lizards have scales since they are reptiles, and salamanders have skin. They are amphibians. This particular Texas salamander that crawled on the window was not dangerous. Two rims of white cartilage lined its mouth. This cartilage cut leaf petals into digestible bits because the tongue muscle traveled as if on a pulley, a minuscule electric train on a track that hauled plant bits into its slack throat. I happen to know that in the case of flies and gnats, the tongue surrounds them, caddies them in a cavity like embryos along a conveyor. Unlike the common salamander on the glass, I also happen to know a minor percentage of salamanders grow without undergoing metamorphosis. Not through the belly, but through the neck, their gills fill up, a brief bubble pumps up beneath the chin and falls surprisingly fast, one breath cycle as fleeting as the blanch of a camera flash.

listening

I liked to sit watch, Indian style in the highboy, a bionic miracle if ever there was one, an adjustable vinyl chair with arms and foot paddles that even kept patients with the dwindles honest and upright. Nightshift at *University Hospital* in 1990, I sat under the dimmed florescent lights of the fifteen south hallway where I could see the doorways of my four rooms. I could hear motion coming from the darkness. From the highboy, I could hear a body stir in a steel bed. I could hear a yielding cough and a labored breath. I could hear the chirping of a monitor. I could hear and see a broadcast station sign off the air. White noise and iridescent blue light rolled into the hallway.

I liked to think about my patients: what their lives felt like, seemed closest to, reminded me of, reminded them of, who I was to them if I was anyone. Years of nursing have watered down my academic worries, beyond the formality of exploitation and subjectivity, a highbrow concern about thinking that is a privilege of the well. However, of my patients, I fear time will goad my shame since our reciprocity is a writing act *for me*.

To write about life as a nurse, inevitably, I am writing about my experiences with people who have since bought the farm -- a winning euphemism for its gallows humor in the company of nurses. As a writer, I am mindful of a caveat that screams *disrespect!* as such memories chase me. Their constitutions, like dreams, can be cunning and slippery. I sneer and grin and well up from the strange and shared life stories that come back, even midday. Yet, an inch beneath each memory lays my shame.

One could write a ballad in the gray area between appropriate and inappropriate intimacy of this work. Nursing is incredibly intimate *at least*. Physical rescue startled then awakened then spent me. Bath and meal chores never thrilled me. Watching over anyone, cute, pitiful, sick, endangered or young, came easily to me. I still hover by nature. To stay useful through chronic illness and prolonged togetherness was a bruiser, one that frustrated both patients and nurses. A nurse could unknowingly and easily project her issues on a chronic patient and sometimes both acted out. When this happened, we left our rooms for a minute to cajole each other and have a laugh at the nurses' station. We re-enacted the respective domestic dramas for each other because no one ever really got hurt by them. We all had our moments. My drama sounded like: *fine with me, sit on that bedpan until dinner, or no, you did not swallow the blue pill - open your mouth*.

A nurse could fall away in a wink, and sometimes it was a sign of losing heart. This happened from the wear of constant, brutal illness. Gabby, my friend, a supervisor who had three messy kids under ten, lost heart several times a week. For her, this sounded like, *on three, lift for the gurney. I cannot forget to pick up milk today*. But an extreme case of losing heart that needed an intervention sounded like this: one Sunday, working a half shift because we were short, Gabby said with exasperation, *and the coma man finally dies when I have a dead dog waiting in my car*. Unanimously, we took her charts away and sent her on her way with a dollar

sixty in her lab coat pocket to transport the rigid beagle to the Galveston pet crematorium and then, on a solemn promise, to *Dunkin' Donuts*, alone, before her return to motherland.
I punched her timecard at the end of my shift.

a real live court story

Once the apartment fire was quenched, the fire inspector took the landlord aside, and they whispered. Ten months later, even the polyester lady behind the bullet resistant glass at the court office stymied when she realized a tenant was taking Dr. Cosi, the beloved dentist and landlord, to small claims court. The lady pulled her arms in against her low breasts. She tapped a file folder with the crimson tips of her fingers. The chained pen shook on the melamine counter as she pushed the forms through the envelope slot. I stood immovable in my blue interview suit and swallowed more than usual. On my day in Elmira city-court, the judge pumped Cosi about the progress of the community swimming pool and the Sons of Italy fundraiser.

a simulation

A plane passes overhead. It moans through the sky. A banner waves from the plane, an advertisement for a waterside bar. A man sits in a webbed beach chair smoking a cigarette. His little daughter with long black ringlets kicks the sand at his feet, sees that he is busy watching the plane and smoking, spins around, tiptoes quickly around his chair. She joins her mother on the green plaid blanket. The mother is lying on her back with her knees bent, sunbathing. The little girl plops down next to her mother, pulls a plum beach towel across her shoulders and over her face, mimicking her mother.

she knew

In 1992, Lisa wore a torn *Van Halen* jersey to her surprise, wedding shower at the Corner House restaurant. The lower hemline curled at the hip, so if she raised her arms to smoke a *Marlboro*, her olive belly flanks showed divinely. She bobbed her spiral perm at Aunt Ursula's haughty cheekbones. She chortled *no shit* to the table of gussied-up girlfriends from the office. Their fashion ranged a decade of suburban disco: backless sweaters, feathery jackets, hot pink leather, metallic blouses, and nylon peg pants. Through the afternoon, the more champagne and wine they drank, the more theatrical they became.

Lisa was getting out of Long Island.

Lisa opened thirty-seven silver-foiled boxes. She showed glee for each and every *Lenox* knickknack, three king comforter bed-in-a-bag ensembles, and the *farberware* super collection. She waved savings bonds for cheeky sums in the air and held out a crocheted table runner from old Mrs. Saviano like a strip of paper dolls. When Lisa was small, Granny Saviano would peek from her scalloped storm door to watch the school bus. Lisa bubbled over two chocolate penises on sticks, a red satin garter, and later in the white marble bathroom, two dime bags of Jamaican weed. She welcomed a vacuum, a *Bob Mackay* peignoir, and eleven towels, four of which were rosetted, from Ursula. She hailed to the glory of his and her terry slippers. Lisa's mother kept saying *is that what you're wearing*, but trouble always made Lisa grin. So, when Toni the gym-girl married to the guy-taking-steroids yelled from her table, *your perm's growing out, congratulations*, that is just what Lisa did.

The ugly gift quacked.

Bought on a manic whim, Aunt Ronnie's 450 SL convertible *Mercedes* shined midnight blue parked illegally in the valet circle. My white *Volkswagen* hatchback rested like a pigeon in the side lot of *Oldsmobiles* and *Cadillacs*. My black silk dress, cut on the bias, promised to lengthen me in the saffron of the baroque table lamps. I hoped to sport the sleek skin of a dolphin down to my leather heels. Sitting next to Lisa in her beribboned chair, the wall vent rumbled. The black fringe on her boots doddered in a runnel of air.

Her lined lips could have donned an album jacket.

flora's wake, February 1998

narrated by Corrine, flora and steven's oldest daughter

After Harry flew in from Houston, he flooded Grandma's den while doing laundry. We tried to keep Grandma upstairs while Harry got down on his hands and knees and blotted the pink carpet. He worked through fifteen towels, each heavy as a cat, and no one helped him. Aunt Mary just stood there staring at him with her hands on her hips, her mouth open, sliding her jaw left and right. The birdclock whistled two species that's how long she stared at him. She had been with Harry for five years, but this was not why she stood there so long. Everyone's sense of time was out of whack. Finally, Aunt Mary swung her hands and shook her head, gasping and gasping, until she muttered a complaint in defeat. *Thirty-five!*, was all she said.

Sitting in the blue velvet recliners, my sister Allora and I beheld them. We knew our family would not get through this day smoothly. Aunt Mary and Harry were funny to us. We knew *thirty-five* was short for *at this age you're arriving for a funeral with dirty laundry?*

Watching Aunt Mary was like watching *The Archies*, when Veronica would lace into Reggie. Though at heart Aunt Mary was mostly a Betty. Harry sort of knew this, but no sooner did Grandma peer downstairs through the black iron railing than disappear. Upstairs, her voice scraped at Papa. The words I heard were *wah wah wah doing this!* He spoke back to her like the devil, in a whisper, *Lorraine, it's only a goddamn carpet!*

Papa really, really liked the Texan. We all did. But when we heard grandma's quarrel coming on, my aunt patched things up with Harry in a flash. The four of us took off without destination in Papa's ocean blue *Tercel*. The flattened seat cushions and shot shocks seemed to bring the four of us menacingly close to the road. We toured slow and low, up and down the shallow hills of Vanderbilt Parkway. Papa must have weighed *well* over two hundred pounds. Here, I figured, Papa had lied about two considerable things. One was not much of a secret: we all knew he never did do car maintenance. And two: he must have been sensitive about his weight, seeing how he never complained that his driver's seat collapsed.

A few days later, I voiced my concerns to him. *Pa, you look thinner*, I said just to see what he would say.

And he said flatly, *yeah*.

In the car, I could see Aunt Mary's chapped face and Allora's paleness. Harry dragged us around in the four-speed that like us had no pep. No one wanted to be seen, not because of the car but because we lived in the stun of despondency that would not allow us to move with ease. So, Harry turned the steering wheel with a great arc of his arm, and we toddled into the parking lot of the Commackmultiplex cinemas.

Aunt Mary peaked around her bucket seat at us. She said, *I was younger than you, Allora, when your mom took me to see an R-rated movie called Billy Jack. You know it?* Aunt Mary's eyes were dead, fatigued from tears. She couldn't help herself. Even strip mall stores like *The Wiz* reminded her of my mother. Harry slid the car into a remote space among ninety vacant spaces. That was Harry, abiding by the law always. Once, he wouldn't let Aunt Mary drive a rental car because her name was not on the list of designated drivers. We idled in the empty parking lot, aligned within the yellow lines. Harry sat still for ten seconds. Then he rolled around in his low seat to face us, winked at Allora and me, turned to Aunt Mary and said, *baby, I think it's playing*.

That is how Harry from Texas roped the three of us into a movie the day of my mother's wake. None of us remember what movie we saw, but my home was crowded with fruit baskets and stacks of unopened mail, trays of chicken cutlets and chicken parmesan and baked chicken and rice brought to the house. We didn't want to see Mom's cleaned sick-clothes, her sweat pants and ankle socks, on the coffee table. We didn't want to go home to the orange bottles with white screw tops on the kitchen counter, or the brown glass bottles mixed up with her makeup on the glass tray of her dresser. We didn't want to go home to Dad on the portable phone pacing from the living room to the kitchen to the hallway crying, *Thursday morning* and after a pause *she*

went when I was in the elevator to twenty-six letters worth of people in the flowered, spiral phone book.

Harry helped us feel invisible for two hours.

code blue, 1990

I could no longer kneel on the backboard wedged between a body and a mattress and sustain an iambic rhythm for a stopped heart with the heels of both of my hands when every member of the code team knew that if we saved the patient with this round of life support, it would be only a matter of hours or days before the final arrest. Most often it became a guessing game: which performance of human pounding against another devastated body would really be the last?

As a nurse, I was losing heart.

no matter where you are...

Even Texas salamanders have defense mechanisms that help them hide from predators. In the summer, they turn brown, so they can hide in city dust. In the fall, they turn green, so they can play in monkey grass. When my pale salamander reminded me of the picture of a human embryo I saw in high school physiology class twenty-one years earlier, I climbed on my chair in *La Vaca Negra*. Right there in the restaurant, I took her off the glass, brought her outside and set her against the stalks of an Aster plant, thick in a bed of indigenous flora that bordered the outdoor patio. She traipsed along my palm, extended one thin limb at a time and drew her silky body into the leaves. A pulley righted my spine. I stood. My stomach filled with sharp white light.

On the patio of palm trees and plants, many feet of wrought iron chairs scraped on the slate groundwork. I looked out from within. Two thick hands held a large white cup. A heavy woman wearing the stickpin of a mum on her sweater closed her eyes, frowned her full lips, and lowered her body festively. She drank coffee in deference to the ceramic cup that seemed to anchor the width of her body. Her friend, a bluish woman with dizzy gray hair that rose in brief hints of wind, sat diminished beneath the weight of a blue rain jacket. The blue woman turned a white napkin in her lap. Unaware, it fanned open incrementally.

honesty

What else is more antithetical than a nurse learning sustenance? For instance, three minutes after injecting an iv port with morphine, Marie, a hollow cancer patient plays a round of *Rummy* with her husband. Meanwhile, Hugh, a yellow-eyed man bleeds in his mouth from the acid in apple juice. In the midst of that, Jerry, a grandfather with paraplegia yells *for the love of Jesus* clear across the south wing of the fifteenth floor because he cannot hoist well with the bed trapeze.

Career nurses learn a resolve, but I could not. At first, I stood chagrined before a mirror minding a self callused by having witnessed heaps of anguish. Abashed, acned, perpetually cautious and tired, I scurried to the staccato of a mercurial family and the refuge of a telephone. I could not feel my vitality, my wellness, because I carried all of my Marie and Hugh and Jerrys with me. I jogged when I could, but the gains never neared. I jogged to get rid of my grief: nine minute miles most days, at my peak, before I wrecked my knees in size seven *Nike* sneakers in 1991 the effect of having *needed* smaller feet than I had, all the while shucking bees off me.

my father's wake

He died suddenly, weeks after Flora. When I reached in his coffin to touch him, to give him a pat on the arm that said simultaneously *what the hell was all that about* and *goodbye*, my fingers sank too far into his *Sears* jacket sleeve. I pressed with a little more intention. My fingers hit a slim piece of wood. His

upper arm was gone. I straightened. I stood back, realizing that his hand and wrist were merely propped in his sleeve. He had donated a cut of long bone, skin and corneas. As a family we were constantly overlapping what our lives were with what our lives really should be. And so, my father's life and my father's death, had become, absolutely, a donation to strangers.

I realized, touching the wood that should have been his arm that we even succeeded in thwarting our goodbyes with our aspirations. Like all legacies, we had no knowledge of the real implications of any of our wishes. When our lives happened differently than we thought they would happen, we were so wedded to our ideals that we found someone to blame for our failure.

Since my father was always much kinder to strangers than he was to his wife and children, why not blame him for being wooden?

when a brown bat is only a brown bat

Last Saturday, a banner frost-belt summer night, restless, after midnight, I rolled from side to side pulling the comforter between my knees. I heard a *thing* hit something else, incidentally, the way Harry and I had done, when we were still together, walking elbow to elbow down Westheimer Avenue, window-shopping in Houston. I thought of the illustrious she-robber from those years who tiptoed away from my apartment house, the one that had been a rectory, having had just pirated a red pepper wreath from the interior door.

Night roamers abounded in Houston. There was nothing too extraordinary about a stoned, four a.m. shuffler in the city who had approached a door wreath, asking herself, *are those chilies plastic or real?* On this Saturday, though, the occasion of fractured sleep led me to entreat to thoughts of safe probabilities, to Henry, to the easy misdemeanors of drunk roamers and mischievous neighbors. But I was alone, I knew, beneath the imagining, when a thing rubbed against something again. Glass, metal, or wood? I considered each of them.

Again!, someone inside me said. I can be the duchess of scaring myself.

I quipped to my alter ego, my duchess, *you could not be more draining*, from under the covers because Dan had said a version of this the night before. Dan and Wendy, intensely married and well-read friends, quite recently declared all maturity to mean complacency. Of late, it seemed to them, their fracas demonstrated passion and thus must be compelling over *Bombay Sapphire* cocktails with friends.

I knew I was very tired.

I would check the front door for night roamers, if only to chastise the duchess, ease her suspicious mind. I rolled to the side of the double bed and looked around. All was well. Street light peeled through the window sheers. The doe-eyed virgin in the Chagall print still shied her eyes just beyond her bouquet of eucalyptus stems and pansies. She held her eyes in accidental notice of the room beyond them. I looked for Dilly. Thirty pounds of canine were atwist, black and belly-up, on the tangerine throw rug. Lately, when Dilly slept, she twitched to thoughts of Mrs. Spade's Maine Coon cat. And there Dilly was, asleep, and up to something in her dreams that entailed the neighbors.

Something came forth in the darkness again.

I tugged the comforter from my head, and the light bleached. A brown bat swooped low, avoiding the blades of the ceiling fan. It swooned fast, precarious, with its wings bent. I flipped the comforter back over my head. *Holy fuck, duchess.* I sneaked another look holding the comforter as a hood.

Rabid!, the duchess snapped.

The brown bat hung there below the blades, tilting like a military fighter plane. He backed into the far white corner, wings creased and hard. He perched only on air from the fan. He sprang from the corner, taking flight. He was marauding and tipsy. He dipped below the fan blade, ducking them with incredible acumen.

I disappeared beneath my pillow.

My thoughts became like *The Avenger* car, the one sponsored by *Sprint* that drove breakneck on the dirt oval track at Watkins Glen. On Friday, the *WBGN News* crew had rigged a camera on the hood of a racecar. Chris Burton, a brand new father, showed the news crew what the car could do. I had been sitting on my leather couch, and I too jimmied and kicked up dust at

one hundred and twenty four miles per hour for thirty seconds with thoughts of how *Sprint* had begun to push for public interest in speed since it had been trafficking a line of fiberoptic communication cables made from glass.

I rose, abominably, draped in linen. I swang and swang one arm in the air. Bats do smell like ammonia. It gravitated to the center of the room each time I hit it with my blanket to infinity. In the end, the brown bat hit the door jam and bounced with might into the hallway. Hurrying, I shouldered the door until the doorknob clicked. *Tic*. Leaning there, the bedroom began to smart from the streetlights again. I poked a blue sponge *Vellux* blanket in the gap between the foot of the door and the floor.

I could not sleep. Restless, I rolled from side to side. I pulled the comforter between my knees. Why is the foil envelope of soup base in *Maruchan Ramen Noodle* labeled *Oriental Flavor* instead of cooked beef powder? Why did Dan, whose mother is a blonde drunk, say to Wendy, a brunette, *I would pour this blue martini on you, but I would not want to waste it?* How much faster is the aerodynamic *Sprint Avenger* without the camera?

lucid truths

Because I had seen so many deaths, over time, I started to see moods and contexts separating them from each other.

Sometimes, death was slow and disfiguring:

a mother sits vigil holding her adult son's forearm that has swollen four times its normal size from a yellow body oil that builds beneath his skin. Her hand reaches deep into the weight and pressure of the lymph fluid. She holds without reservation her son who is trapped inside the hideousness. She holds the son who resides in her memory.

Other times, death was hidden in what could not be seen:

a male in his late 30's, still handsome, his hair curling into black loops that shimmer under the lights, is held by his ankles by his lover in an attempt to hold him among the living. He still has taut, distinctive muscles in his calves, archetypal runner's legs. His lover holds his body as evidence.

And other times, death was coarse and candid:

a woman in her late 20's wastes. She dies slowly. Her bones are so prominent that the hollows of her cheeks and shoulders and hips pool bath water as if she were devolving, turning into a terrain of ponds where a child could play unassumingly with a doll. I dry her body, thinking about her myth, as all minds must do, inevitably, with routine work like this.

the sick child

There is a painting by Edvard Munch entitled, *The Sick Child*. The child is Sofie, the painter's sister, ravaged by tuberculosis, *consumption*, frail, fatigued, sitting upright, daytime in a sickbed. She looks lightly upon the caregiver, dressed in black, whose head hangs over their joined hands. The child is more at peace than the woman at her side; the child comforts the caregiver; the caregiver appears struck. She is ashamed.

Nurses know this situation, but what does it mean?

Shame is always a veil. Beneath the veil many nurses feel inadequate. We fear we never quite give enough, or we feel adequate only when we're giving. We fret having missed the walk down the hallway with the widow. We never question the utility of holding a third iv bag in our teeth, nor the *sine qua non*, having might, as in the ability to bend deep at the knees and roll a morbidly obese, sedated patient on his side.

If nurses feel shameful about accepting any kindness, any sustenance, it is because we are the givers. We say *yes* and *no problem* and *how much?* This malignancy is a kind of martyring that takes on agency: a slow silence, a thick wordlessness that grows.

Until Flora died, I felt it.

ineffable grief

In Houston, my shrink told me that with Flora gone, my family would have a hard time finding a center again. Flora was the great communicator, the equalizing friend among us, the one we all adored. Without her, there is a hole that is our center, a negative space that draws all of us in. It is not healthy, but we cannot control it. We stand before each other and feel her truancy. I wonder whether we will ever replace the absence with some other matter, or someone, again. We cannot bear to consider this change, this moving on.

when patients shepherd us

How do we render what we've learned? Hospice patients taught me that acceptance is less about spiritual surrender than a self-consent to be. Only being, which is why a terminally ill patient can be charmed with clarity and energy. What else is this, if it is not music or poetry?

...there you are, flora

I turned to the Aster. Its long leaves split apart and pointed all around on the patio. I surveyed every stem. I traced the dry paths between each plant. I knelt on the stones and reached blindly in the beds even though I did not want to hurt her. I sat on the patio and held still. I watched a flat green deepen until it appeared black in the shadows of the lamps. A stillness expanded; it pulled from leaf to root. I could not find her. I kneeled before her and pleaded. She should have lingered pale and green in the Aster leaves. She could have found repose somewhere in the broken foundation, in a crack in the cement of the building. And then I was unnerved by the confidence of a memory, how an enigma will at any moment earn meaning. Impulsively, I knew she turned brown again and hustled off with all her natural will, within the limits of her efficient body, into what remained of the city.

the house my mother bought

I am settled in the house my mother helped me buy in upstate New York, built in 1865, but with refurbished wiring inspected by two electricians. I am relieved to have stopped my nomadic padding about that went hand in hand with renting. After the apartment fire, fourteen months ago, my mother spotted me cash for a *Bank of America* mortgage. Brown bats did abound in the attic in August, as did central air. I spent my first paid summer hunkered down, writing here.

February now, I have shoveled my driveway and brushed my *Honda* out from the footfall of three storms. A mild year. The perimeter bushes are still trimmed sticks but for burgundy berries with diameters like marine pearls. An excessive evergreen reaches its burly arms up and out to the phone wires, lurking the neighborhood. Over the past six months, I think that aged tree has gone full-blown crazy for me. In January, finally, Mrs. Spade's Maine Coon cat picked herself up and caddied off. She left to take her residence under the porch of the bank repossession next door, giving her back the solitude that I took away.

Behind my childhood house, four pine trees grew in a square. Tim and I fought about whether they arrived from seeds in the wind or blackbird droplets. Before the pines became the

beams of a tree house, they were gentle, wayward ponies. Tim and I saddled them with our blue thermal sweatshirts and rode them to Monticello, Cherry Hill, and Brooklyn, places that became our imaginary landscapes only because we knew them.

elmira, revisited

Still, there is a back road here, Church Street, that ripples down and along like an easy wavelet, a strand of hair shed by a schoolgirl when she draws her head restlessly through a sweater. Footfall of deer echo and stop with caprice. Paint on a white farmhouse drops off in flakes, the comeuppance of stiff winters and febrile summers. Thirty-six stout brown and white Milking Shorthorn cows corral against the ailing house. In this slow valley dotted by a wholly rusted *Century*, a green and yellow *John Deere* is sunk in the earth beyond the wheel shafts and seems diligent as a weed, resolute as a dandelion is.

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