

Nothing to Declare

A Guide to the Flash Sequence

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Founded in 1996 by Robert Alexander, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry. An imprint of White Pine Press since 2001, the Series publishes one to two books annually. It is our mission to publish the very best contemporary prose poetry and to carry the rich tradition of this hybrid form on into the 21st century.

Nin Andrews

Snow Magic

The Year Prayer Wasn't Enough

Gil

*Whatever you want, you just pray for it, my nanny, Lila May, used to say. But by the year I turned eleven, I knew. Prayer wasn't enough. That year everyone in my school turned mean, and my mama developed a conscience, as she put it, which meant she was always out. If she wasn't at a meeting for the citizens of Gordon County, or delivering cans of Dinty Moore Stew to the local soup kitchen, or going horseback riding with her Hunt Club friends, she was checking on old Mrs. Mellinger, our widow-neighbor who had a habit of getting lost in her own home. *Your mother, my daddy said, as he poured himself another whiskey, is always trying to save lost souls.**

Does she ever save them? I asked.

He didn't answer me. He just rattled the ice in his cocktail glass. I could tell by his sad eyes that he missed her as much as I did. My mama and daddy had stopped talking to each other that year, so even when she was home, our house went so quiet it felt like the inside of a funeral parlor before the mourners arrive. On the nights when we sat down to the supper table together, I felt a hush in the air and a chill. As if snow were falling inside each one of us, and no one would make it stop.

Confederate Gil

Sarah

In the town where I grew up, folks were still fighting the Civil War. They blamed the North for all their problems, including taxes, old age, the economy, the rising murder rate, even the tomato wilt and the raspberry blight. My friend, Gil Simmons, bragged that his great-grandpa was wounded in the Battle of Cedar Run. The Simmons lived on the outskirts of town in one of those old plantation

homes with white pillars and lace curtains on the windows and acres and acres of green fields with thoroughbreds grazing in them. Gil was an only child, and whenever I visited, he gave me a tour of the bathrooms. All nine of them, not counting the servants' bathrooms. Rumor had it that Mrs. Simmons, or Violet, as my father called her, planned to have an ample family, but Gil was the only child she carried to term. Gil, my daddy said, never looked fully here. He was so pale and thin, he was almost see-through. The town doctor, Dr. Repolt, said Gil was bitten by a spider when he was a bitty thing, and he barely survived. My daddy said Gil looked like he'd been dipped in Clorox. Rumor had it Mr. Simmons wasn't even his daddy. People joked that he was the son of a Confederate soldier, so he was part-ghost. On Halloween Gil's mama dressed him like a ghost in a gray suit with a Confederate flag in one hand, a trick-or-treat bag in the other. *Ghosts aren't gray*, I told him, *and they don't wear uniforms*.

Yes, they do, too, he said. *In the South, they do. Casper is a Yankee ghost.*

Any Place Else

Gil

My parents wouldn't let me visit my best friend Sarah Parker's house very often because she lived on the wrong side of town, and I missed her all the time since Sarah and I were what we called twin souls. Which meant we both liked crustless grilled cheese sandwiches cut in triangles (squares never did taste right), and our favorite other things were magic, the numbers 2 and 9, and snow. But we always argued about the color of 9. I said it was blue, but she was sure it was white. How could 9 be white? I'd still like to know. But Sarah said it was simple as a fact, just like pink is a 2. I had to take her word for it because she was the only person I could talk to about things like that. She was the only one who knew the color of numbers and music. How it was scary to feel too good or taste something too sweet like ice cream, which is why I never ate ice cream or Boston cream pies or caramels. I said I didn't care for them, thank you very much. So did Sarah. Back then we even shared lies. But the best part was when she stayed overnight when her folks were out of town, and I couldn't sleep. Neither

could she. We snuck into the kitchen and ate bowl after bowl of ice cream. The taste so cold, so sweet, so light.

Hide and Seek

Sarah

My friend Gil's favorite game was hide and seek. We would play it for hours in his huge house that always smelled of Pine-Sol and Old English furniture polish. His house was so big, I never could find him. I was always distracted by the china bowls of chocolates in every room. *Give me a hint*, I'd say, my mouth full of bonbons. Gil would promise to hide in a bathroom next time. But there were so many bathrooms, and some were the size of living rooms. Every one of them had a vanity with a peach-colored marble top and a wooden cabinet full of monogrammed towels. And some of the bathrooms were for the servants. *We don't go in those*, Gil said, his arms on his hips, giving me the stink eye. *But where are the servants?* I asked. I didn't see them. Or hear them. But one day Gil's mama rang a bell for them. And there they were, servants, like a tide rising up from the shadows. *Yes'm, Miz Violet. Yes'm.* Then the servants receded again, vanishing like smoke into the shadows and hallways and basement rooms.

Hair Spray and God's Minions

Gil

My father hated unusual things, and he especially hated my nanny, Lila May, because she was *too damned peculiar*. *Isn't it strange*, he said, *that a pretty lady like Lila May never married in the first place?* That was the first time I ever looked at her and decided she was pretty, even if she was old. Lila May was the only white woman that ever worked inside our house. Only Mama said she wasn't really white. She was what they called high yeller, but she looked white to me. And she must have been forty years old at least. Her face didn't have any wrinkles or spots, and her waist and ankles were so thin she would have looked girlish

if she didn't have a behind the size of two watermelons side by side. Daddy said she had been a beauty contestant once and had been the peach blossom or orange blossom or some kind of blossom queen. He never did ask what kind of blossom she was. He knew she'd say she was God's blossom, and he hated to hear her talk of God and miracles and virgin saints who got the stigmata, and how even their blood smelled like roses and attracted bees in the summertime. The bees always did like Lila May, but I think it was her hairspray that drew them. They'd hover around her, buzzing and buzzing, and she'd say they were all just God's minions. Then she'd glare at me as if to ask, *Who was I to say otherwise?*

Mr. Simmons

Sarah

Gil's daddy, Mr. Simmons, was almost never home when I played at Gil's house. When I asked what his daddy did and where he was, Gil said he was a historian, and that was why he was away. *History*, he explained, *is something you have to search for*. And you have to search not once, but many times. That's what the word, *research*, means. Searching over and over again. His daddy hadn't found it yet, but when he did, he'd be real famous. And everyone would agree at last that the South should have won the War. And the North was to blame. I imagined his daddy coming home with a Confederate soldier in hand who could tell us things we didn't already know. Gil said there were loads of Confederate ghosts around because many of the dead were never buried. He said he could hear them at night. And their ghost dogs, too. Howling for everything they lost. And everything they wanted back again.

Practicing Snow

Gil

The year everything went wrong in my life, Lila May taught me magic. She said all I had to do was sit for a spell. Close my eyes and bring one wish into focus. She said

everything else in my mind had to leave. And she meant everything. *It's best to start simple*, she said. *Start with something like the weather. Like a day of sunshine. Or rain.* So I started with snow, even if we did live in the South. I practiced snow at breakfast and at lunch and in the school cafeteria when I was eating my bologna sandwich and Wise Owl potato chips all by myself. I practiced snow after school when Sarah Parker didn't call because she wasn't my friend that day. Sometimes I could touch that snow and taste it. Sometimes I rolled imaginary snow balls and built imaginary snowmen. If I did it right, my toes turned blue, my breath foggy, and a chill ran up my arms and legs. Even my nose ran. Nights I pretended I was falling asleep in snow banks. I kept the windows open, even if the rain gusted in, even if the curtains looked like ghosts flying in the wind. I dreamt I was walking in deep snow, calling out, *Sarah, Sarah!* The snow was falling so thick, like it was answering me with giant white flakes. And I knew, I just knew it would snow soon. One day in early November, it did snow, the heavy flakes falling so fast they covered the ground in a thick, wet blanket. When I told Lila May that I made that snow, she just smiled. *Of course you did. But don't you tell another soul now. You hear me?*

Snow

Sarah

One snowy day in fifth grade, my friend Gil Simmons bet me five bucks we'd get over a foot of snow. He bet we wouldn't have school the next day. Or the day after that. I bet him we would too have school. But the next day there was so much snow the roof on our tool shed caved in. Two trees toppled over on the power line. I didn't want to get out of bed because we didn't have any heat or electricity, and the house was cold as an ice cube. Mama had to cook over the wood stove, and my daddy couldn't get out of the driveway. Mrs. Mellinger, Gil's crazy old neighbor—we learned later that day—had died in a car wreck. Her tan Ford Falcon slid over to the wrong side of the road, right into oncoming traffic. Two teenagers were in intensive care over at the Martha Jefferson Hospital. My mother said Mrs. Mellinger was drunk and British, and she always did drive on the wrong side of the road, but I blamed Gil. Especially

when he phoned all happy, and asked me to pay up. I couldn't believe he would do a thing like that. Neither did my mama. She said she didn't want me playing with Gil Simmons. She said that all the time, but that day I nodded, *Yes ma'am. Gil Simmons isn't even my friend no more.*

Magic

Gil

One day I told Lila May that Sarah Parker was the girl I loved. The next day Sarah Parker gave Timmy Preston, my archenemy, a sweet tart the size of a baseball at recess, so I didn't love her anymore. I told Lila May I didn't care one lick if I ever laid eyes on Sarah Parker again. *Not one lick*, she nodded. *Not one lick*. And when she said it, I knew it was true.

Carol Guess

Revival of Rosemaling

The Ruined Garden

Everyone lost someone in the avalanche that year. Nights, we held dances in the ruined garden. Wolves wove the trail but stopped short of the fireline. The mountain refused to name what it knew. When a dog, child, or mitten went missing we wore miner's headlamps, bright sieves for thick dark. Everyone waltzed, but not everyone tangoed. Hard-packed snow tumbled, gathering speed, eating ice farmers, sentries, and skis. We shouted questions, but our questions stirred rocks. We had to learn not to talk—to move mutely, we of the valley—and to bury the bodies when spring thawed ice walls. Our dead came down perfect, red in their cheeks, palms flexed as if resisting the pyre.

Marietta

No one knew about the cabin. People thought I lived in town in a wooden house with a bright red door. No one had ever seen the house because the house wasn't real. I lived in a cabin on the outskirts of town. I had to haul my garbage to the dump. When someone got hurt, the ambulance came from somewhere else. No one could see the cabin from the road, although I could see the road and the bay. No one could see what I was doing or who I was with. All winter, snow kept the shape of snow, sirens muffled, Amtrak derailed. Llamas stumbled into the field and slept standing up, manes brittle with frost. Once a hawk flew into the window. Once you dressed me up as a boy. Once you came home in a stranger's coat and shook strange snow onto the concrete floor.

Crown Hill

Stairs spiraled up to an attic filled with salt. We slept thin as tripwire, taut among pillows. One night strangers stared down through the skylight. Glass divided stage from audience. What we wanted was applause. We showed them everything, and when it rained they never went home again. Our hands signed the story of what it meant to be warm.

Field

We fled the city at night. I was distracted by your body. My suitcase chipped at the bone in my thigh. Thieves stole doorways and sold them to trees, scrubby oaks that grew up on the street. Beyond the factory we slept in a field littered with swan's-down, beer husks, and bees. We fed a fire to blister coyotes. We strung death along on thinness alone.

Museum

The house that lived beside us is gone, replaced by concrete for a three-car garage. At the estate sale, dealers priced Norwegian dolls. We saved a squirrel from a tangle of chard. Maybe charm got confused with harm by someone like me or maybe by me. We chipped ice from bootprints to brew into tea. What did we know of strangeness? What might've saved us lived somewhere else. We hung aces from trees axed for newfangled holidays. We knit shadows from snow, leading wolves to false prey.

Jim Harrison

Hospital

I was chest-high in the wheat field with wind blowing in shimmering circles. A girl on horseback came by on a trail and the horse smelled sweet with the wheat. How blessed horses smell in this bitter world.

I could see the hospital in the distance and imagined the surgeons in the basement sharpening their knives. Tomorrow they will cut me from neck bone to tailbone to correct mysterious imperfections that keep me from walking. I want to walk like other kids in the fields with my noble dog.

After surgery I didn't get well and they sent me to Mayo in Minnesota, an immense Pentagon of health machinery. In an ambulance-plane I ate a bad sandwich in keeping with the tradition of bad food that would last until my secretary brought take-out from a nearby restaurant.

Each night I sang along with a bedsore cantata from the endless halls, the thousand electronic gizmos beeping, and also people entering my room for "tests." I was endlessly sacrificed at the medical gizmo altar. There was no red wine and no cigarettes—only the sick who tore at the heart.

A beautiful girl Payton couldn't walk. I'd shudder whenever I passed her room.

On very long sleepless nights I'd gaze at the well-lit statue of Saint Francis across the courtyard. I'm not Catholic but he bore me up with birds on his shoulders. One night the planet Venus dropped unwelcome on his neck. Francis with Venus is not right. I don't think he knew a woman. I saw the same thing in Narbonne, France, one night with a million blackbirds flocking above the canal for the trip south across the Mediterranean. Venus was blurred on the peak of the cathedral.

My spine aches from top to bottom. Also my shingles burn, a special punishment. Francis heard my crying over Payton. He doesn't care about her beauty I suppose. There were no beauty contests among his birds.

I heard Mozart's last trio late last night, a spine-tickler, like the night I heard Thelonius Monk in Grand Central. There are so many emotions on earth, especially trapped here where moment by moment I surge with emotions. I'm told this place is admired throughout the world, though my brain waves tell me different. The nurses were kind and friendly while the doctors tended toward smug and arrogant. Hundreds of doctors looking for something wrong are suspicious.

The old bugaboo of depression slid in. I wanted to sleep on the floor but was frozen in an electric bed. I began to have delusions and at one point I was in Paris at my favorite food store buying cheeses with my grandson. Another night I was wailing and the attendant shook me awake. "I'm dying," I said. "No you're not, you're just wailing." I ate an apple and went back to staring at Saint Francis and his birds. Without birds I'm dead. They are my drug that lifts me up to flight. Thousands of kinds of birds I've studied, even in the rain when they seem more blessed on the branches.

What is wailing? A death-drawn crooning. It hurts to hear noises from the pediatric ward—the innocent crying out. I am thoroughly guilty in a long life.

I wanted to be a cello. I hear cellos when I'm trout fishing. The green banks with wild roses capture the cellos and thousands of birds, many sweet-sounding warblers and colorful western tanagers. Will I fish again with this badly ruptured spine? The scar looks like the bite of an ancient creature.

There is a place in us to weep for others. I found it at night with daytime eyes, whirling the memories so fresh you could smell the pain within is dark and raw. This great sprawl of sick people craving the outside, to walk in a forest beside a lake, the air full of birds in the greenery. Saint Francis dozing against a tree, a yellow warbler perched on his shoulder. There is no way out of this prison we have built so clumsily. Hellish in its ugliness, most of

us want to stay. I can't die when I want to go back to Narbonne and my secret room where I write so much. They cut me open in a long strip and luckily sewed me back up. In hospitals we are mostly artful sewage systems.

I need my secret place in the Upper Peninsula near Lake Superior, my dark thicket covered by winter. It is night in there but I can watch passing animals, a deer, bear, even possums which I love for their humility. The thicket is flooded with birds, a few inches from my good eye. Francis would love this thicket. Maybe I'll take him there someday. And best of all a stump in a gully that I can crawl into and sit up. My place of grace on earth, my only church. The gods live there.

How to get out of this hospital? I planned three departures but a doctor won't sign my release. I am desperate for home and my lovely wife. They want to keep me here though departure is supposedly voluntary. Finally a friend in California sent a jet and saved me. We loaded up my daughter, my secretary and her daughter and were soaring back to Montana.

A green glade of soft marsh grass near a pool in a creek. There are a dozen white birches and I curl in the grass. The last day I saw a drop of blood on a tile. Be careful, our blood falls easily.

Holly Iglesias

Nothing to Declare

Near the end, there were gold purses and cinch belts and giant sunglasses, men in guayaberas, women with two-carat studs, platinum shrimp forks and rock-crystal ashtrays. I had children then and was free of disease. An undocumented woman ironed in the garage all day long, the same shirts over and over, and a man shocked the pool every other week. They will tell you I left of my own accord, but observe what happens when I smell Paco Rabanne Pour Homme.

* * *

No words precede the reef, none follow. Only sea fans, brain corral, a bank of clouds miles above the surface. The glint of sun, of barracuda and baitfish in flight. The Gulf Stream sweeps by, squeezing between Florida and Cuba, the true Cuba, the solid one, not the wet seduction of dreams. Ahead, the drop, the sea floor sinking, the mask pressing its mark into skin.

* * *

Another afternoon downpour and nothing to do but wait. It will pass, as it passes in Caracas, Havana, San Juan, in all the damp summer places of the hemisphere. Half water, half sugar, Cubans stay inside, they say, so they don't melt. In the battle between Amnesia and Nostalgia, Nostalgia always wins, memories of home solid as sugar or gunmetal, Amnesia a mere vapor wafting through the transom unannounced.

* * *

Bomb, echoic, derives from the Greek for a deep, hollow sound, for when a man eyes the armhole of a sleeveless cot-

ton blouse, gauging what is visible against the sweet ache of all that is potential, assessing with the same easy pleasure his finger takes when circling the headlight of a Lamborghini, and when the tanned arm, the pale breast but inches from the armhole is that of his daughter, thirteen, something detonates, thundering within the body's chambers, seismic at first, then settling into a rumble, its half-life beyond measure.

* * *

You depend so on the machete to keep the strangler figs at bay. Forgive me—the plums gone, my letters in the icebox now—I can't sleep, the machete under the bed so cold.

* * *

The spoons of people dead before your birth, sterling like this one, the bowl demure, somewhere between demitasse and teaspoon, my great aunt's initials at the bottom, one flourish more ornate than the next. The patina soft, like that of the cream and sugar set my mother bought during the war, which you have, or I suppose you do. I gave it to you when you married, when it looked as though we had made it, as though the knives and lies were behind us. Before the new regime and the hiding of gifts.

* * *

Cloudbank flecked peach, ochre, orchid, day dancing with night, the old world with the new. Strains of a distant bolero, the seduction more breeze than gust, a hat with a veil, say, or a lipstick called New Bruise. Body, ocean, melody, all of it fades to a shade neither gray nor blue.

Pamela Painter

Art Tells Us . . .

What I See

Those sinewy lines are real. I'm standing on the edge of a friend's blue tile swimming pool, and just this instant I realize that those lines I saw and was amused by in a David Hockney painting are the real thing. I turn to call to my wife but she is deep in conversation with Max, who is generously mixing her one of his slushy margaritas. His wife is sunbathing, against all reason, her eyes closed. I turn back to those yellow wavy lines in my friend's pool. I'm seeing them for the first time. Hockney has made me see something I discounted in his painting as an artist's license to paint anything. Even silly lines. These lines must be ridges reflecting the Cape summer sun—lines most apparent in Hockney's painting *Peter Getting out of Nick's Pool*. Sinewy lines made up of thin reeds of red and orange, and before this moment totally unbelievable.

At the MFA exhibit, I marveled at the nerve of Hockney to paint those lines, when his rendering of Peter's naked back as he perhaps contemplates getting out of the pool is so marvelously real. His hands flat on the hot concrete surrounding the pool. His wide shoulders hunched around his neck, his head turned to the right, his mouth hidden by his raised right shoulder. Strong shoulders taper to a waist, then the slight flare of hips made for holding on to when what I thought of as imaginary lines approach his bare buttocks. His cleft is a rich sienna or raw umber slash with one wavery, solid watery line in particular moving through his slightly parted legs—a line that surely ends somewhere. Peter is looking off to the right—he doesn't seem to be getting out of the pool. Perhaps he is looking for Nick. Perhaps he is waiting for an invitation. Perhaps the tension in his arms is the real invitation.

Hockney has made me see. I look around my friend's pool to see what else I see. I see hummingbirds with invisible wings, crimson trumpet vines eclipsing whatever structure lies beneath its canopy, becoming the more solid

of the two. I see my wife deep in conversation with my best friend, Max—her gaze locked on his, their drinks held in silent salutation, an invisible filament between them as tangible, as breakable now, as glass.

A View: *Office at Night*

They don't seem to be working, though up to a few minutes ago she was filing papers in a tall filing cabinet. Beside the cabinet, her boss sits reading a page at his desk, holding it beneath a green banker's light. Her plump right arm bends to encompass a generous bosom, and her right hand rests on the edge of the open drawer. Seconds ago she turned toward the man at the desk. Her face is vulnerable, intent. She is waiting. Partly hidden by the desk, a piece of paper lies on the floor between her and the man at the desk. We are led to believe that Edward Hopper is in a train, passing by on the El. The most voluptuous curve in all of Hopper's paintings, almost to a surreal degree, belongs to this secretary in the night-blue dress in *Office at Night*, an oil on canvas, 1940. What word, in 1940, would have been used to describe those two rounded globes beneath the stretch of the blue dress's skirt?

If it weren't for that piece of paper on the floor, we might believe the curator's prim description of this painting: "The secretary's exaggerated sexualized persona contrasts with the buttoned-up indifference of her boss; the frisson of their intimate overtime is undermined by a sense that the scene's erotic expectations are not likely to be met."

Wrong! The man is not indifferent. He is intent on the paper he is reading—but too intent, and he is not sitting head-on at his desk. He is turned—slightly—toward the secretary, his left elbow firmly on the desk, and his right elbow nearer her is uncomfortably balanced on the desk's edge. His mouth is slightly open as if to speak. His left ear is red. It is. It is red.

And what of their day. Her desk faces his in this small cramped office. They have no privacy because the wall to the hallway beyond does not reach the ceiling. He must have looked up from his papers, glanced up from his desk to say to her as she faced him behind her black typewriter, that tonight they must stay late. Did the secretary call her mother, or the two roommates she met while attending

Katherine Gibbs, to say her boss asked her to stay late? By this time, on other evenings, she would have finished dinner, perhaps been mending her stockings, or watching the newsreel preceding the cinema's double feature.

Tonight she is working late. Yes, her dress has a chaste white collar, but the deep V of the neckline will surely fall open when she stoops to retrieve the paper that was dropped. She is looking at the paper. Was it she who dropped it? Though another object lies solidly on the chair behind her? Or did her boss drop the paper—and she is acknowledging this before she follows through on stooping over, perhaps bending at the knees over her spiffy black pumps, to retrieve the page. It resembles the papers on his desk. But note that another paper, curved slightly, its edge rising, has been nudged toward the desk's edge. The topmost paper shows a refusal to lie flat in the slight breeze from the window. This evening breeze is blowing the blind into the office, has curved the pull-cord with its sweet, soft ring. Other papers, but not all, are held in place by the 1940's black telephone, so heavy that in a B movie it could do service as the murder weapon.

Perhaps this story began at an earlier time. It might already be a situation, a situation that just this morning made the young woman choose to wear this particular blue dress. A dress equal to a request to stay late in the office at night. Somehow we are all in the middle of their drama. It isn't over yet. We are mesmerized by the piece of paper on the floor. She will bend before him. Someone will turn off the lights. Certainly they will leave before midnight. Perhaps it won't turn out well; maybe nothing good can come of this. But for now the blue dress cannot be ignored. Hopper's brush painting her, painting her dress blue, made sure of that.

Artist as Guest in the Hamptons

First of all, his wife informed him, we can't possibly have the Horstels to dinner with the Jimm Smythhs because the long dining room wall—the only space large enough for the 6' by 15' paintings they each gave us—is occupied, so to speak. Hanging there is that sixty-pound oil and gouache titled *Whale and Water* that Xu Xui announced was her “house-gift” in the thank you note she sent express mail a month after her three-week stay. Remember, since she used

real glass, 'Whale and Water' was too heavy when we tried to lug it down to the basement.

He remembered all too well. Besides, he was still feeling the after-effects of last fall's hernia from carrying the Lindstrom bronze porpoise from the potting shed to the patio when Sven Lindsrom mentioned he was coming to visit them in the Hamptons to reinvigorate his artistic vision. And no doubt acquire another muse, his wife said. So in addition to having the Horstels and Smythhs separately to dinner we'll have to wait till our roaming son Charlie is home from his RISDI internship to unseat the Xu Xui and haul either the Horstel or Smythh up from the basement, depending on the guest list, to the "place of honor" in the dining room. There the artist was always circumspectly seated across from his or her work, which occasionally had a stultifying effect on conversation, but could also lead to some interesting anecdotes, like the story Tioni used to tell about his painted wooden leg's adventures in Italy before he died. Lord knows where in the garage Tioni's *Afternoon of the Fun* is buried.

Meanwhile, his wife said, about tomorrow's dinner party: the small, lush Klayton watercolor—let's see, that was his house gift four years ago—should probably be moved from the guest bathroom to the entrance way, though it does match the new marble tiles perfectly, and goodness, we can't forget to bring his wife's multicolored, jelly-bean platter down from the attic, though we still aren't sure Janine didn't mean it as a joke. And we must call the art restorer to see if he's replaced the matting on the Binner, since they're good friends of the Horstels, and we must also ask if he was able to disinfect the canvas so there is no hint of Nero's recurring bladder problem; it proved so ruinous to the Mendoza triptych that we can only dine out with them, and of course pick up the check, year after year after year.

And by the way, his wife said, the Hampton Art Museum called to remind us that we still haven't retrieved the Missy Massey painting that we'd donated to their auction last year. We told her we were donating it, so heaven forbid she asks what it went for. The director suggested that requiring the opening bid begin at \$200 might have been a bit high. Surely, her husband said wistfully, someone might be at this year's art auction who really loves Peoria, as in *I 'heart' Peoria*, since the Finleys have stopped speaking to us ever since Finn found his *I*

'heart' Frogs behind the ficus in the library. Or was it in the closet?

What is this anyway, his wife said, why can't our artist friends arrive with two exquisite ripe cheeses? Or, he said, a vintage Bordeaux or a good bottle of champagne—house gifts, they agreed, that would disappear at evening's end into the Hamptons' own starry night.

Gary Young

I Want to Sing

Tseng Tzu said, "I have heard the Master say that on no occasion does a man realize himself to the full, though, when pressed, he said that mourning for one's parents may be an exception."

—*The Analects*, Book XIX, no. 17

My mother was a beautiful woman. She had been a beautiful child. She danced for the soldiers, then, and sang for them, and everyone clapped and cheered. When her period came, she thought she was dying. Her face broke out, and her mother screamed, how could you do this? How will we live? Who will love you now? Years later, my mother turned to me. I was twelve. We'd stopped to rest in a little town. She put her hands on my cheeks. Let me get that, she said, and she dug her nails into me, picking until I bled. That's how it starts, she said, and it wasn't the shock or the pain, it was the look on her face that made me want to cry.

* * *

I was home from the hospital and not expected to survive. My mother had come to visit before I died. She needed my attention; she was still weak. She had tried to take her life again. I have trouble breathing, she said, and tapped a gold coin hanging from a choker at her throat. It's to hide the scar, she said. But the coin was too small. I gave her my hand to sit; I gave her my arm to rise. When friends arrived for dinner, she danced for an hour, beautifully. Everyone agreed she had a talent.

* * *

Tell me a story, she says, one I haven't heard. So I tell her, it was autumn. Mother took us to see George. I'd made him lunch, but he couldn't eat; he was dying then of cancer. No, she says, a happy one. I tell her, you were three. There was

a party in the old house. They dressed you like a flapper, and everybody danced. It's strange, she says, I can't remember, and you can't forget. I stole money to buy you food, I tell her. I know, she says, you told me before. I hid the food under my bed, but I couldn't bring myself to eat it.

* * *

I waited for my mother in the greenhouse. It was warm, and I could feel the presence of the air. I practiced words in my breath on the windows. I thought I was alone, but an older boy in the corner called my name. I asked, how do you know me? And he said, I'm your brother. He said our parents had sent him away, but he knew me, and watched me every day. That night my mother said, someone is playing a joke on you, but I knew she was lying. I believed him, I still believe him, an orphan, a boy I could never be.

* * *

The burning house turned our night clothes yellow. Standing at the curb, my brother batted ashes with his hand. We had a puppy, and my mother shouted, where's the dog, and then, my God, where's Cathy? I remember the sound of breaking glass, and walls too hot to touch. I remember pulling my sister from her bed, and leading her out into the world again. I didn't wonder, then, how I'd found her, or how my mother could have turned so easily to send me back into the smoke and flames. It was my house; I knew where I was. I could find my way even in the dark.

* * *

My mother cut her toenails and her cuticles every night until they bled. She'd take a little pick and peel away the skin; she'd cut the pale flesh away with shears. I couldn't stop her, and if I asked, are you finished, she always said, no. I sat on her bed and watched; my attention was all I had to give. It was all she ever wanted.

* * *

Terrified of another pregnancy, my mother asked the doctor to remove her uterus, and the doctor did. After the surgery,

our dog made a nest of torn rags in a corner of the house. When we stroked her belly, our hands came away wet with milk. The vet said, she isn't having puppies, she's just a high-strung breed. She began to have seizures. Her body convulsed, and her small eyes jerked in her head. I'd pry her jaws apart, feed her raw eggs and whiskey, and she'd relax. She'd lick my face in gratitude. My mother used to say, that dog is almost human; she really is like one of the family.

* * *

The light from her room was penetrating, otherworldly, blue. I didn't recognize the smell, but I remember thinking, the air is burning. I was afraid to go in. I could see her lying on the bed. Her skin was blistered; she'd fallen asleep under the tanning lamp. That winter, she did it again. They covered her face with a salve, and she seemed to be melting. While she was away, I lifted the lamp over my head, and let it fall. When she discovered the lamp was broken, she screamed, nothing's safe, I can't keep anything for myself.

* * *

My mother entertained the troops in Vietnam. When she came back, she handed me the photograph of a soldier, and said, he was killed sneaking into camp the night I sang. You may not believe this, she said, but I've never felt as safe as I did while I was there. The Vietnamese soldier in the photograph is hanging by his wrists. A curtain of blood fans out from his neck. His hands are swollen; he was still alive when they strung him up with wire. My mother said, those boys couldn't do enough for me; they treated me like a queen in Vietnam. I still have a picture of the one who gave her his life.

* * *

My mother wouldn't ride, but when the horses had been turned out to pasture, she'd pour salt on our cabin floor, and dance all night for the cowboys. One summer she missed a turn driving into town, and rolled her car into a ditch. She was so happy to be hurt, to be an event. In the hospital she introduced me to a girl who'd spent two days

pulling slivers of glass from her teased and bloody hair. My mother asked, did you miss me? But before I could answer, she turned to the girl and said, we have had such a time.

* * *

My mother had the flesh burned from her lips; she had the skin peeled from her face. She wanted to look young again. When the scabs fell away, and she couldn't bear the bright, new scars, she poisoned herself. I have so much to tell you, she said later. She said, I left my body. I knew I was dying, and I could see my body there. I floated away from it, down the hall, and through the door into the street. There were people everywhere, she said. It was beautiful. They wanted me to lead a parade. Mother, stop, I said, I was there.

* * *

My mother practiced yoga. She leaned forward from her waist, pulled her legs behind her neck, and said, my vagina's collapsed; the doctors say there's nothing they can do. In the mental ward she met a young man from Texas. He had small, hard muscles, and his face twitched when he showed me his tattoos. He and my mother talked about home, and madness, about the future and electric shock. They fell in love. When they were released, he terrorized my mother, broke into her house and beat her again and again. I should have had him arrested and put away, but she was so happy, so excited, that I didn't have the heart.

* * *

My mother loved violets. When she spent whole days in bed for days on end, I brought her violets, and put them in a cup on the nightstand by her head. I skipped lunch all week for the money to buy them, and the florist would nod and say, violets again. When I brought them home, my mother said, you precious thing. Then she'd look at the flowers and say, they're beautiful, but they never last.

* * *

My cousin had a dream last night about my mother. He said, I was sobbing, and she held me, and rocked me in her

arms as I cried. She turned and looked behind us, at a room full of people, and I asked, do they know you're here? And she said, no, no they don't. My cousin said, I'd never dreamed of her before, and I woke up happy; I was still crying, but I felt all right. Then he stopped, and I asked, how is she? And he said, great, great. She looked great.

* * *

I last saw my mother a week after her suicide, in a dream. She was so shy; she was only there a moment. I'd called her stupid. How could you be so stupid? Eight years later she's back. What do you want, I ask her, what do you really want? I want to sing, she says. And she sings.