

**OxMag**



**SQUARE: Fall 2014**

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**Resurrection, TX**

I'm waiting, watching from the other side of the glass. My face is a reverse Rorschach in the glass. The TVs list new names for old cities. The new names honestly define. Flights are delayed to Pompous, NY, and Vanity, FL. Travel to Resistance, MT, and Offended, CA is on time. Old Money, VA has been cancelled. Everybody at my gate is already dead—shot in the head and left flung-out limp in their narrow metal and black vinyl seats. Hundreds of them in uniformed, parallel rows. Some in business suits, some in cowboy boots, some in sweat or yoga pants. Children of the sweatpants giggle at the dead, throw Cheetos at their baby-bird mouths and toys against the tall windows. Zombies, with heads bowed coolly, float past in opposite directions on the conveyor belts.

I call the town I grew-up in home, though I've lived away longer than I'd lived there. Memories of the place like Cliff's notes to the classics. I've been successful at acquiring things, and losing them—this latest failure the most influential. My wife and daughter aren't travelling back with me. Who knows if I'll see them before something serious happens. It's my fault we're all ruined.

A sexy robot voice comes overhead speaking to someone or speaking to us all. I think I'm in love with my waitress—wondering, again, if she can get me anything—but it's probably just the expectation of loneliness. She leans forward against my table, lengthening the line between her breasts. She is alive in the way Sarah Corbin was alive. Sarah was my first tongue kiss, at fourteen, in the tunnels under the old gym. The current threat advisory is orange. I tell her I'm well.

“Okay, then,” she says, and plays a little piano on the table. “Let me know.”

I touch the thin skin of her wrist, tell her I'd be better if she'd only sit a minute. Visit a minute. Her pulse quickens beneath my fingers. She smiles, touches my hand touching her, and leaves.

The door to the bright tunnel opens and a hoard of droopy faces from Segregation, MO, stumble out. My waitress returns, sits across from me, and introduces herself. It doesn't register. She is not Sarah Corbin, though her voice is now familiar. She's the voice of my daughter.

“You leaving me, daddy?” she says.

I call her sweetheart.

“But it's my birthday,” she says.

I tell her I know.

“It's okay,” she says, and touches my arm. Her hand is dry and warm.

“You need to go.”

Her eyes say she truly understands. My eyes apologize.  
The conveyor belts are empty, but they tread on. At my gate, a young man with a green Mohawk mumbles something over the intercom and the dead wake. And awake they are angry. They scowl and poke at touchscreens, and kick around briefcases, strollers, and book bags. They stand and stretch. Their joints have trouble unlocking.

**Always Checking? Finding? Lost?***Program poem #5*

```
CLS
COLOR 1
LOCATE 12, 23
    PRINT "SEARCH ME?  a Silicon Haiku"
LOCATE 25
PRINT "press any key to see how it happened"    ENTER = Quit"
SLEEP
CLS
DO
    FOR colors% = 16 TO 30

        COLOR colors%
        x% = INT(RND * 80) + 1
        y% = INT(RND * 24) + 1

        LOCATE y%, x%

        PRINT "idea"
        SLEEP 1
        CLS

    NEXT colors%
LOOP UNTIL INKEY$ = CHR$(13)
LOCATE 7
PRINT "File these ideas away in a safe place"
PRINT "you will want to use them at times "
PRINT "when you are lost in the rut"
PRINT "rolling along to nowhere in particular"
PRINT "wishing for a fresh twinkling thought"
PRINT "to start a creative fire"
PRINT "at that moment they'll all be right"
PRINT "here where you left them."
```

**SYSTEM**

## **A Great Carnivore Addresses Humanity On Learning That They Will Cause The Extinction Of His Species**

*At the podium speaking to the humans:*

Notice my large mouth and huge, fine teeth? You will be crushed this way (he magnificently demonstrates devouring prey complete with awesome sound effects). I am equipped with a mass of instincts at the ready to quickly eradicate you who are simply a meal for me, what you might call “supper.” I have never seen a Disney flick done on me though I’m told I am photogenic when a babe, and beloved by my public as this “Disney” being sees me as just cute and fuzzy and adorable, which I see as fine since my main goal is to consume you so that I may partake of your excellent quality protein (of course I need to ingest a lot of it every day) much of your meat’s perfection is because of your kind’s compulsion to eat the best quality protein yourselves as you pick amongst the tens of thousands of your butchered animals for only the most delectable little tidbits and sections while you grind the rest of all these creatures into bits for the less fortunate (I digress). The cute, fuzzy image you have assigned to me is wonderfully helpful to my main goal as it makes you an easy target for me and maybe for my descendants at some time in the future should your kind not have liquidated my species when that gray future may arrive.

*Later while resting and reflecting alone:*

That has just been me trying to frighten them into going away. But though my travels are few in their world it feels deep inside me that they will never go away or go back to wherever they have come from. It is I who am afraid in my deepest sleep in my safest places, whether darkest caves of ice or stone or thick forest or jungle or in my highest mountain retreats or tallest trees where no vital being has ever had the power to conquer me or my kind for a million years□not until this pitiable time.

**Surfaces**

who knows me  
as I  
the old photo taken when the tide was out  
    low sun  
        me on clam rocks  
            childish  
click  
a capture of reflected sky on flat water  
  
wanting a blue-yellow lightning bolt  
    framed by wet stone sides  
    an image of surfaces  
I found a melded surprise  
    water yielding in a trick of half-tones  
not solid at all  
    the sky resting atop  
        the starfish and sand below  
blended  
    what I thought concealed  
revealed  
  
I recall that clear day  
when  
    after camera click  
        I turned  
            to leave  
    and there a child cried, look, a starfish,  
and he saw nothing of me.

**Elemental*****Earth***

The only light I can see is the small yellow circle created by the flashlight I am holding in my teeth. The only things illuminated in its beam are the shoes of the person in front of me. The dark beyond the circle feels like an ominous presence and I try to ignore it. I am slithering through an underground tunnel on my belly, along with three other serpentine companions. I keep my arms extended out in front of me because the tunnel is so narrow that if I'm not careful my arms will become pinned to the sides of my body and I'll be wedged in. Claustrophobia threatens to suffocate me even though right now there is plenty of air and I try not to think about how far under the ground we are.

I am in the birth canal in Nutty Putty Cave. Nutty Putty is a hydrothermal cave in the desert, west of Utah Lake—although if you don't know what you're looking for it just looks like a hole in the ground. Because I didn't know what I was looking for, and I have no sense of direction, one of the guys in our group is acting as a guide. Which means that he was smart enough to bring a headlamp and he knows the way out. The birth canal is a one hundred foot long tunnel that feels like an initiation rite for admittance into hell. When I saw the entrance I should have followed my instincts and bolted, but I felt an adolescent desire not to be the weakest link and I followed the leader. The same leader who is now slithering along in front of me, flipping gravel into my face with his shoes.

Midway through the tunnel, the last person in our belly-crawling procession calls out that he needs to get out. I can hear the panic in his voice and my own panic threatens to rise in sympathy. The guide tells us there's no way out until we reach a turn-around point a little further down the tunnel. In order to turn around, we have to pass by the turn-around point so that the last person in line can turn around first. I don't like how that sounds. Backing up and trying to turn around seems impossible here and it's getting increasingly difficult to think rationally.

Passing the turn-around point violates every single survival instinct in my body and as I inch past, I have to mentally force myself to keep going. The tense, rapid breathing behind me gives my fear new power and I can feel it swirling around me in the dark. I make myself take slow, deep breaths until it's finally my turn to back up. The turn-around is little more than an indentation in the tunnel but it's big enough to allow me to back into it, crumple up my body, and then reverse direction—kind of like a three point

turn in a crowded parking lot. We get everyone turned around and start back the way we came, hoping that no one has entered the tunnel behind us. Not reaching the end of the tunnel feels a little like surrender but I remind myself there's nothing to see at the end—only another rocky cavern that isn't big enough to stand up in. And at this point, all I want is to get above ground. When I reach the exit to the tunnel I feel relief to the point of dizziness. I don't remember my actual physical birth but if it was anything like this one, it's a mercy to have lost the memory.

People joke about wanting to kiss the ground when they've had some sort of harrowing experience in a car or an airplane, but in this case it is the ground I view as the oppressor. Instead, I want to kiss the cold night air and just breathe.

### ***Air***

I am not a masochist. Or an adrenaline junkie. Or having an early-onset midlife crisis (though the thought has crossed my mind). I remind myself of these things as I am sitting on the floor of a Cessna 182, feeling the vibration of the engine through the cold metal underneath me. I am fighting nausea, partly from the motion of the plane, partly from the mind-numbing terror of what I am about to do. My hands feel shockingly cold.

I started the day in ground school with my jumpmaster. He spent several hours discussing every possible variation of every possible catastrophe that might happen during a static line jump and tried to prepare me for the ones I might be able to control. Ground school concluded with my signing a multitude of papers absolving the flight school of liability if any or all of them should happen. If I survive the jump but land in a gopher hole and twist my ankle, it is not their fault; if I veer off course and descend into the sagebrush and a snake bites me, they are not responsible. So far the only mishap has been that I flipped myself in the face with the elastic chin strap on my helmet and it made a small cut on my chin. I'm pretty sure I signed away my right to seek monetary compensation for my injury.

The plane reaches 9,000 feet and the pilot signals that we're at altitude. The jumpmaster reaches past me to open the door. Then he points at me and points outside. Apparently I'm supposed to go first since I am sitting closest to the door. I kneel on the threshold and feel the wind whipping my face. My palms are sweaty. It crosses my mind that Thoreau is to blame for this. Along with my high school English teacher. They both cautioned me about living a life of 'quiet desperation,' and I'm sure it's their fault that I've traded the quiet

kind for the screaming kind.

I reach out and grab hold of the strut—the diagonal metal strip that connects the wing to the fuselage. I make my way, hand over hand, until I am halfway to the end of the wing and my legs are flying out behind me. I feel shaky and surreal but I manage to hold on to the strut and I turn my head to watch for instructions. My jumpmaster gives me a thumbs-up sign which means I am supposed to let go. I release my grip on the metal strut and like an obedient ground school graduate I remember to arch my body so I won't go somersaulting through the air. I feel my body falling away from the plane and I start to count—one one thousand, two one thousand. By the time I get to four I am starting to panic, even though I'm really not supposed to panic until it's been more than five seconds. Just as I say five, I feel a jerking sensation and my legs swing under me. My parachute is open.

When I feel brave enough to look up, I notice that my lines are twisted—one of the possible complications they taught us about at ground school. I won't be able to steer the parachute until I get them straight. I kick my legs and rotate my body in a circle until the lines uncross and I can free my steering handles. And then I experience the most profound silence of my life. I am alone with the sky and it's exhilarating. I breathe in the cold air and float along, feeling like the embodiment of a cloud.

Minutes later I hear a voice in my head. I'm wearing an earpiece that transmits from the jump station—I can hear them but they can't hear me. To check if I'm receiving, the voice in my ear tells me to pull hard on my right handle and then on my left. Pulling on my handles causes my parachute to turn in wide arcs and the instructor on the ground can see that I hear him. As I float nearer to the ground, a slice of terror returns and I realize I have to land at some point. The trick is to flare at the right time, and my instructor's voice will tell me when. The seconds tick by and I feel like I'm accelerating as the ground rushes up at me. I hear the voice and pull hard on my handles. I've flared a little too high which means I build up speed again before I hit the ground and my landing turns into a tumble. Luckily it's a harmless tumble but the massive amounts of adrenaline still make it hard to stand up. My parachute catches the wind and starts to drag me away and I have to gather it in quickly. My body is shaking and my teeth are chattering but I finally manage to stop the chute. I feel amazing. I feel miraculous and exultant, like I can fly. The rush is so intense it almost burns.

***Fire***

“Have you ever breathed fire?”

My friend Mandy asks me this question as we sit on my front porch in the dark. I love Mandy dearly but she is a notorious risk taker and the self-preservation part of my brain hesitates for a second. Eventually I decide the prospect is way too enticing to ignore, and I smile. She interprets my smile as permission and she goes into the house to gather supplies. Her supplies strike me as unlikely—a large spoon, a bowl, matches, and a bag of powdered sugar.

Mandy pours a substantial pile of powdered sugar into the bowl and scoops up a spoonful. She instructs me to light the match exactly when she tells me to and hold it in front of her mouth. She also warns me not to stand directly in front of her unless I want to be engulfed in flames. I don't. She opens her mouth wide and dumps in the powdered sugar. She nods at me to light the match and I quickly hold it up near her face. She blows the powdered sugar into the flame and the powdered sugar ignites into a million fiery crystals. The shower of sparks is beautiful and transient—they flicker for an instant and then go dark. I decide it's the coolest thing I've ever seen and I can't wait to try it.

It didn't look dangerous when I watched Mandy, but I feel nervous anyway as I lift the spoonful of powdered sugar to my lips. As I am about to dump the sugar into my mouth, I accidentally inhale, and I suck powdered sugar down my throat. Apparently rather than worrying about setting something on fire, I should have worried about asphyxiation by powdered sugar. I cough for a while and we both laugh, and finally I am ready to try again. This time I don't inhale.

I blow out the powdered sugar as Mandy lights the match and once again I am amazed at our own personal firework display. I feel like a circus performer or a magician. It occurs to me to wonder how anyone ever thought of lighting powdered sugar on fire and I decide it's probably better not to know. Mandy wants another turn and I hold the match ready. This time just as the sugar ignites, the breeze shifts and blows some of the fire back toward Mandy's face. She yelps and runs for the kitchen. I follow her and watch anxiously as she sticks her face under the faucet and into the cold water.

“Are you okay?” I ask, looking for signs of burned flesh. She finally turns her face to me and I am infinitely relieved to see that she isn't hurt. She is, however, a little singed around the edges. Her eyebrows will recover in time but until they do they will be a reminder to both of us that we are still not old enough to play with fire. And in case we need another reminder of our

insanity, we are both swimming in powdered sugar.

### **Water**

I am not a water creature. This doesn't often interfere with my daily life but it's interfering now because I am married to a fish and he just saw a little shack offering snorkeling excursions off the coast of Mexico. The fish and his father, both avid water people, are seized with enthusiasm to snorkel around Los Arcos—natural arch formations just up the beach from our hotel in Puerto Vallarta. I have never attempted to snorkel. It sounds to me like something you do when you have too much sinus congestion and even if it didn't, I have no desire to see colorful fish and coral in their natural habitat. That's what aquariums are for. Besides that, I have seen both *Jaws* and *Piranha*, and I know the risks of associating too closely with angry fish. No thank you.

Hollywood is not actually to blame for my fear of the water. The real culprit is a misguided attempt by a stepfather to teach me to swim when I was three years old. He tossed me into the ocean and waited for my survival instincts to kick in. I only have flashes of the memory—scattered images of thrashing my legs and choking on saltwater and the terrible panic that comes with not being able to breathe. I didn't drown but I didn't ever makes friends with the water either, and some vestiges of that old fear still haunt me as an adult.

I decide not to mention my fear of the water during the snorkeling discussion. I don't want to be pushed or cajoled by any well-meaning efforts to encourage me to face my fears and I don't want to feel guilty if I decide not to do it. I've noticed that people sometimes become enthusiastic about 'helping' someone overcome what seems to be an irrational fear and I can't help wondering in a sadistic sort of way if these same people would be so cavalier about facing their own particular phobias. It's comparatively easy to tell someone to get back on the horse if you've never been afraid of horses.

The boat rental is inexpensive and includes a guide and snorkeling gear so I allow myself to be carried along by the collective exuberance. I decide that if snorkeling is too traumatic, I can always fake a leg cramp and hang out in the boat. When we get to the drop off point, I decide I'll at least attempt to be a good sport. I feign confidence I don't feel and I lower myself into the water. The guide has given us basic instructions and will remain close by in case we need him. I have flippers on and they compensate for my ungainly swim strokes. I finally put my face in the water and try to breathe through the tube. At first my chest feels tight and my breathing feels awkward but after a few minutes I

realize that I'm not dying and I start to look around. The sight of fish all around me should probably be a cool experience but it feels creepy. None of them seem to be bloodthirsty, so I feel brave enough to investigate the nearby rock formations. I expect colorful coral or something that will explain the allure of this expedition but the water around the rocks is dark and murky and somewhat sinister. And there are more fish.

I swim around for a while, trying to pretend I'm having a good time but actually I'm mentally calculating how much time is left until I can get back in the boat and still maintain my dignity. I lift my head up out of the water and at the same time I feel a sharp sting on my calf. Frantic, I look to see if something is biting me but I can't see anything. I run my hand over my calf but I don't feel any teeth attached to my flesh. I decide to swim for the boat. When I pull myself out of the water, I can see a blue streak on my leg. Red jagged lines radiate from the blue. The guide looks at my leg and tells me in broken English that he thinks it's a sting from a jellyfish tentacle. He tells me not to worry—he doesn't think it looks dangerous.

I sit and wait in the boat until the allotted snorkeling time has expired. By now, I'm feeling nauseated and a little dizzy. My husband and father-in-law get back in the boat, full of enthusiasm about all the fish. They are impressed by my sting--they think it's colorful and cool and it adds interest to their adventure. Neither one of them seems concerned about my impending doom—they assure me that jelly fish stings aren't lethal unless you're allergic. I suspect they have no idea if that's true or not but it's pointless to argue. I sulk a little but neither one of them notices.

We make it back to the shore. My leg hurts but the thought of trying to find a doctor in a foreign country is more stressful to me than my potential death by jellyfish so figure I must not really be dying. We head to our favorite local restaurant where the owner speaks fluent English and I feel immense relief at being able to abandon my inadequate Spanish. I show her my leg and she tells me that stings are usually painful but not fatal. My nausea and dizziness are normal and should pass in a few hours. In the meantime, she recommends the chicken soup.

A few years later, I play lifeguard by the side of my father-in-law's pool. I still have no love for the water but my children do so I watch them float around on little blow-up tubes. My 14-month-old toddler wanders around the yard, intrigued by the pool but not allowed in until his dad emerges from the house.

He walks over to the edge of the pool and throws a ball to his brother. He is on the other side of the pool from where I am, and I tell him to step back from the edge. Instead, he steps into the pool. He sinks quickly and I hesitate for a second in stunned panic, and then I jump in after him. My clothes make it difficult to swim but I reach him in a few seconds and pull him out of the water. I'm in the deep end and I struggle to drag him with me as I swim to the side of the pool. When I reach the side, my mother-in-law is there and she pulls him out. He's coughing and sputtering, but he's breathing. I pull him close to me and cling to him, grateful that he's okay, relieved that he has enough breath to cry with. Someone wraps a towel around us. I'm shaking and cold and I realize that I've never been so afraid in my life. And my fear has nothing to do with the water.

### ***Balance***

Parenting is fraught with peril. This is not the first thought I have when I pull into the driveway and see my four year old son alone on the roof, but it occurs to me later—sometime after I help my daughter figure out how to manipulate her crutches so she can get from the car to the house with a broken ankle. Assuming that not even my husband is crazy enough to let a four year old on the roof by himself, I walk around to the back of the house to look for the co-conspirators. I find my husband and my eight year old son cleaning out the rain gutter. In a somewhat elevated voice, I ask what in the world he is thinking and remind him that a person should be expected to make just so many trips to the emergency room in one day. He responds with a flippant, "He's being careful."

Herein lies part of the peril -- striking a balance between two vastly different individuals who have somewhat incompatible parenting styles. One style aims to deliver each child safely into adulthood and one professes that children are nearly indestructible and should be allowed to climb things, drive things, and light things on fire.

I try to find a balance between the two. Last summer we took a family trip to Arches National Park. It's a family favorite but I always know in advance that I'm going to have to close my eyes and go to my happy place when my kids follow their dad to the brink of a precipice or the top of a cliff. I tell myself that it's good for them to experience difficulty, to face their fears, to scrape their knees once in a while. I am mindful of the suffocating type of hovercraft parent that I don't want to be and I resist. Still, she sits on my shoulder and whispers, "If they crack their heads open it will be all your fault."

While I watched one such climbing escapade, a French tourist came up to me and growled, “I hope you have enough children!”

Not sure I heard him right, I said, “I’m sorry?”

He pointed at my kids and repeated, “I hope you have enough children! Because those ones are going to die!” Clearly disgusted at what he believed to be my permissive parenting, he shook his head at me and stalked off. A couple of bystanders rolled their eyes at him as he walked away. The rock my children were climbing was difficult but not death-defying, and no one was hanging on by their fingertips over a bottomless ravine. Still, whether he knew it or not, he had hit me where I was most vulnerable. I wondered if he was right—was I a terrible parent, allowing my kids to face mortal peril in the name of recreation? Was I failing at the most important responsibility of my life? Or was I allowing them to experience a difficult climb and make a memory with their dad? Where is the line between risk and negligence?

I believe in facing fear. I’ve practically made that a philosophy of life and it’s why I do things like skydiving or bungee jumping or slithering through caves. At odds with this belief is the deep, primal instinct to protect my children from harm. In the battle for balance it has occurred to me that maybe protecting them too much is a danger in itself. Maybe there’s a different kind of harm that comes from living too long in a comfort zone, being afraid to experience life.

Sometimes the answer is easy—like when my son wants to douse his hands in hand sanitizer and light himself on fire. Or when my eight year old wants to buy a machete. If all of my decisions were that easy I’d be the perfect parent. Which is, after all, what I really want. This is why, when I’m creating photo albums, I tell my children that I’m not just pasting photos—I’m collecting evidence. Years from now I can point to all those smiley vacation pictures and prove to them that they had a happy childhood.

At the end of the day, or the climb, or the visit to the emergency room, I am left with the realization that parenting is the ultimate trial by fire and no matter how many times I face this fear, it never goes away.

Recently my son told me that he wants to jump off the Stratosphere in Las Vegas on his next birthday. He’s not suicidal—he’s talking about the SkyJump ride where they strap you into a harness and let you freefall for 855 feet. I paused and did the inevitable internal parenting battle. Then I said, “Okay, cool. We’ll do it together.”

**Ghosts and Birds**

I own a one-room schoolhouse  
so each year I return to the Upper Peninsula  
to see if it's still standing

Every year it is

It ages as slowly as my mother-in-law  
did at the end  
one or two months for every year  
She and the school—  
two old characters  
dedicated  
at a cellular level  
to self-preservation

Every summer  
the first time I mount the stone stairs  
and fiddle with the door key  
I hear the chatter of ghost children  
but once I'm in  
they go silent  
fly away

Then all I hear is the rustle of corn  
the cries of sand hill cranes  
and in the ditches  
red-winged blackbirds  
my favorite  
since childhood

**Old Crush**

I come back home every summer  
I sold my house a long time ago  
but still have the one-room schoolhouse  
I get my water from a hand pump  
my light from oil lamps  
my toilet's a pit  
but I feel comfortable there  
though I never did too well in it  
when it was a K-8 school

I drive into town  
to the grocery  
There's that girl I had the big crush on  
She always seems to be working  
never a day off

She's put on weight  
in middle-age  
and the lines of her face have softened

Her head makes me think of a soccer ball  
the features less cruel than  
simply truculent  
She would have made a hard wife  
but it seems like she never married

On her side  
she doesn't seem to remember me at all

**Riders**

Her eyelids are as thick as organic potato chips  
and I fall in love with her instantly  
I want to lean over and lick her eyes  
taste the salt  
but I don't even know her  
we're just passengers on the same bus  
she took the last seat  
the one next to me

I pretend to fall asleep  
I even make snore noises  
my head on her shoulder

## Changes

We spent the day in stasis, watching the lives of others. We gathered statuses on Facebook as if they were Easter eggs, hidden for us in a lush green lawn. The statuses went something like this: one person had a baby and was not sleeping well; another person was taking pictures out of a dirty bus window in Cincinnati, describing the uniformly grey chain link fences and broken concrete as sad; someone else hated South Dakota for reasons unknown. Maybe it was the cold.

At noon, we put our lap tops aside and contemplated the morning. We were inordinately happy. It was an exquisite way to spend time: getting married, getting divorced, having anniversaries or children, going to funerals and to small islands off the coast of Georgia, complaining about politics, or the weather, or everyone from Boston. We started to see ourselves in every picture, arms around the people we'd known. We had cameras around our necks and water bottles at our sides, and we wore hats with the names of the places we'd been.

In the afternoon, we scrolled through photos and feeds on our phones. We read lists punctuated by pictures of cute puppies. Kanye West had late lunch at a sushi place and really enjoyed the food. We learned the top twenty reasons that our generation was destined to fail. We began to see, like the desert fathers, a new vision for the world. Life no longer needed to be lived. Only fools spent their time doing things: taking pictures, going to malls, meeting friends for coffee. The real geniuses of our time were observers—people capable of constructing meaning from the fragments of ourselves that we scatter across screens.

We made a pact that day to change the world by changing ourselves. We'd redouble our efforts to aggregate: pictures of pets being embraced by owners, pictures of meals at Italian restaurants with vivid green beans and Chicken Cacciatore. We'd read every update from people we wished we looked like, every article recommendation from people we wished we still loved. We'd take a week, a month, or a year, gathering experiences—playing in the season's first snow or traveling through European hamlets with toddlers. Everything else would have to be discarded for the project to work.

In our new lives, we'd do our laundry at home, spend time in Paris and Rome, never leave the towns we grew up in and have four children with our high school loves. We'd change jobs four times and retire at the same desk we started at thirty years before. We'd get old, get fat, get Buddhism, take up yoga or take up with younger women. Finally, when our bodies were filled to bursting, we'd move to a mountain, some place distant and cold. There, we'd

sit in a cave, just breathing, imagining all the things we could have done, the people we might have been.

**I Don't Want a New Car**

and when i die, i want the world to say,  
*she died today*, and nothing more. i want  
green grass in the meantime and hips that sway  
like fields of grain. dahlias and clairvoyance

and days of whiskey and rain. give me blue  
clouds and crystal nights and the taste of 5  
a.m. like an orange peel. i want tu fu  
and white poplar trees and johnny cash live,

the swell of the sea and the soft sadness  
of september—like too much chardonnay—  
in a paper cup. i want good poems, messy  
windswept hair, red high heels, and a few great

days that eventually fade into night.  
i'll climb in bed and you'll turn out the light.

**Magdalene**

roll the stone away.      pour down your tears,  
magdalene, and wash the stranger's feet.  
dry them with the shimmering  
lengths of your hair—your hands the flame,  
your blood the midnight oil. give your body  
only in earnest work but give it, magdalene.

don't fear the weariness that clings  
like wind to your summer bones—weeping  
willow, sway.

dance, magdalene—beautiful  
as air, strong as the sky.

be a servant, magdalene, but not without  
choosing. supplicate to love because love  
is the great hosanna. redemption, magdalene,  
the truth and the light are in your tears,  
you are everything on your knees. alpha.  
omega. magdalene. meek magdalene,  
here, the earth.

**Spring**

there's dirt under my fingernails.  
pale blue flowers, the scream of geraniums  
and praying palms—a kind of witness—

in the windblown garden. it's spring again,  
the second since you left—swung wildly  
into the distance—heralding the yellow-eyed

demon of regret with your chime  
of passing. in the garden, on the blurred  
highways, and in our dream-torn beds,

we, your survivors, are surviving—fighting  
the dark bleed of things unsaid and sins  
unforgiven. we plant nasturtiums in the dirt,

bear children, and write silent poems  
while the sun sets. but we are merely  
a harvest of our scars, strange portraits

of a gone-by time, echoes of the sun.  
it's spring again, prisoner—potted pansies,  
pale rose, and your candle relit

in memoriam.

**Anthem**

Hear this anthem, which begins,  
as the habitual audience settles,  
with my inability to conjure the mud-people  
and their broken-mirror words,  
with my reluctance to draw succor from that yesterday smallness,  
especially when, with one softening breath,  
my eyes are nearly liberated from once-thick flesh,  
and my palms push into the rushing water of our kitchen sink,  
and my ears lift with the passing bus:

You have cracked me like a coconut,  
and the milk runneth over,  
and yes, I know, that's a little grand for a guy  
scrubbing cheddar out of a cast iron pot,  
but what can I do?  
I am twice my size, even with one knee on the ground.

And now that I've stopped moving,  
how can I tell what will come before me, and to what end?  
Like that moment we couldn't stop laughing when  
the truck pulled in front of us and we almost died.  
Death wasn't funny,  
but who I'd always thought would die sure was.

And you were laughing, too, to watch me spill,  
all that milk and grace, and my flag,  
effortlessly, in the wind.

**On That From Which I Cannot Escape**

we would be  
on our darker

day, we would  
die as the

day, darker,  
would be;

what would we,  
so nearly alike,

do, if the  
day were, being

what it  
is, nearer;

we have, in so many  
contests, wandered

**On the Taking of Lives**

there it is.  
if you must,

please do so  
without it.

as all of  
this is yours;

so there it is,  
then, you must

do as you  
please. without

all of this;  
is its

enemy any  
less inexplicable?

### **Psychiatric Ward**

Walking with that terror at my heels  
I was looking for a smile from someone alive,

from someone far away,  
from ticking clocks in the houses of the dead,

sinking into tar filled sidewalks trying to forget  
the slap on the face, the bed wetting, my mother thudding  
down basement stairs like a large whirligig, in the hospital  
their faces unmerciful, in the car wanting  
to open the door and gently roll along the highway  
like a deflated basketball.

I believed it all looking ahead at unemployed days,

at endless re-awakenings,  
at rock sculpture come alive,  
at an endless crib of dreams.

**Knotted**

A stack of damp newspapers lay in the driveway when Tom and I returned from a weekend in Boston. I gathered them up as Tom opened the door. Then I saw the headline, in ominously large font, on page one.

*Local Woman Found Hanging in Attic*

I couldn't read beyond the first three words. My tongue was a dry wad. Tom squinted at my face and grabbed the paper from me. He began reading.

*Elizabeth Marshall Lewis was discovered hanging in the attic of her home at 39 Woodside Drive.*

His words broke off like a jammed electronic recorder. He handed the paper to me, and together we silently read and reread the article.

*She was found by her husband, Douglas J. Lewis, when he returned home at approximately 7:30 p.m. last evening.*

"Suicide?" I looked over at Tom, but he'd slumped into a chair at the kitchen table. His head was cradled in his arms.

"Why?" I asked. "She had it all—Doug, Becky, Skip. Friends. Even money." I read the article three more times and still knew nothing.

I bought the ingredients at Stop & Shop and returned home to attack a counter of sirloin cubes, paprika, and sour cream. I'd taken this same recipe to Elizabeth and Doug for dinner when we visited them at their Cape Cod cottage last August. Doug had devoured it.

Then I forced myself to take the flowered casserole dish over to the big, white colonial on Woodside Drive. I'd been to the house many times over the years. Elizabeth had been like my sister, my best friend. We had kids the same age, read the same books, shopped for clothes together, and partied with our husbands. How could Elizabeth be gone? And why?

The casserole collection is a rite of death in Ridgebrook. You read an obit and whip up your special recipe of lasagna or beef stew. I wasn't sure if any of the grieving relatives ever ate a bite. Doug wouldn't want a parade of housewives bearing buckets of stew, but there was nothing else I could do.

Skip opened the door. He looked taller, but he'd lost his collegiate self-confidence.

"Hey, Mrs..." He finally looked at me. "Thanks for...whatever..."

I stepped into the house and set the casserole on the hall table. Before he could disappear, I reached over and kissed him. He jerked his face away. I felt his two days' growth of beard.

"Is your dad here, Skip?"

“He’s at the...the...funeral place.”

“And Becky? Is your sister around?” I picked up the casserole. “I’ll take this to the kitchen.”

I shoved past Skip through the hall filled with dozens of unwrapped floral arrangements and found Becky in the kitchen, slicing a ham.

“What should I do with this food, Aunt Sally? We don’t want anything.”

She wore faded jeans and a gray T-shirt. Her long, mouse-colored ponytail swung over the ham as she hacked at it.

“How’s your dad, Becky?”

“How do you think he is, Aunt Sally? Mom *hanged* herself.” She turned away so I couldn’t see her tears. She stuffed scraps of food into the sink and clicked on the disposal. The harsh grinding vibrated through the kitchen.

She stared out the window at the garden of golden forsythia bushes.

I left the kitchen by the back door and escaped to my car, parked next to the boxwood hedge, edges trimmed to perfect squares.

I checked my shopping list to find an ordinary chore. At the hardware store I found Judd, who knew everything that went on in town.

“What do you have in casserole dishes?” I asked.

“Good to see a familiar face.” His voice was soft, confiding. “Crazy things going on.”

When I didn’t reply, he said, “Guess you heard the news about Mrs. Lewis.”

“Yes, Judd. Sad.”

“You were a friend, weren’t you, Mrs. Jackson?” Judd’s brown eyes were fixed on me. “I don’t know who to tell.”

I took a deep breath of musty hardware smells. “Oh?”

Judd balled up his gnarled hands. “I sold her rope. You know, rope she must have used to...” Judd looked down at his scuffed boating shoes. “Last Monday, maybe Tuesday, she comes in here, looking just like always, and tells me she needs some rope.”

“Did you ask?” My palms felt hot and sticky. “What she was going to do with it?”

Judd’s eyes had a distant look. “She was real particular about the feel of the ropes. Didn’t like the manila. She said it was scratchy. The nylon wasn’t right. It was too slick.”

“What’d she buy?” I glanced over at the wheels of ropes, like snakes coiling round each other. I didn’t want the answers. But I couldn’t stop the questions.

“She kept fingering the cotton rope.” Joe grabbed my hand. “But it’s

worse. She wanted me to teach her knots. She knew I'm a sailor and asked me about knots that slide up and down but won't come untied."

He looked at me, expecting a comment, but I had no words.

Judd reached for a cigarette and lit up, against his own rules for the store. "I had a few laughs as she tried to learn the slipknot. I promised her it was a very tight knot. Definitely wouldn't come undone." Judd pinched his lips tight together. "Then she paid for the rope, thanked me very much, and left," Judd said.

Judd's bushy eyebrows pulled into a single mass, and frowning wrinkles stretched across his forehead. Without thinking, I leaned forward and hugged him hard.

I wandered around Ridgebrook remembering my tennis pal, who could go three sets with the A-team players, and an hour later she'd have showered and changed into a trim linen suit, ready to run the PTA meeting. Dimples in her cheeks, she'd smile her way through encounters with Mayor Bronkhurst as he tried to cut teacher salaries and have the guts to go one-to-one with Frank Gambelli, who insisted every fall that one of his four sons be put on first-string football.

Tom was standing at the open kitchen door when I drove up.

"Doug just phoned. Wants to know if Elizabeth's dad can stay with us when he comes to the funeral." He put his arms around me. "I said okay."

Tom probably didn't like the idea much more than I did, but we had to do it. "Of course he can stay here. How about Elizabeth's mother? She always seems to be sick, in some hospital or other, but I guess she'll be coming. Have we met them? At Elizabeth and Doug's Christmas party?"

"Not that I remember. Only the father's coming," Tom said. "He arrives for the service Wednesday. He'll be with us for dinner and the night."

"I'm surprised he's not staying with Doug. Their house has a beautiful guest room." I thought a moment. "But I'm not so sure he got along with Elizabeth's parents."

"Probably an in-law kind of thing," Tom said.

"But still... Elizabeth's parents don't live far away."

"You know Doug. He likes his life running on his own terms. Change a tee time for a golf game or include the wrong person in a foursome and he'll go ballistic. Just the way he is. But we've always gotten along great as long as I don't make waves."

"What'd Doug say? Did Elizabeth leave a note?" I asked.

"He's a mess. He didn't say and I sure didn't ask."

“Then tell me,” I persisted, “what *did* happen with Elizabeth?”

Tom held my face in his hands. “Damned if I know. She was your best friend. What do you think?”

“Remember I called Elizabeth about ten days ago and asked her to be my partner in the tennis tournament up at the Cape in August?”

“She was busy or had another partner or something,” Tom said.

“That’s not quite what she said. First there was this long silence. Finally I said, ‘I’m not the player you are, Elizabeth. I’ll understand if you want another partner.’ Then she said she loved playing with me but didn’t think she’d be at their house at the Cape in the summer.”

“Strange,” Doug said. “As if she’d already planned...to do...”

I sat down at the kitchen table. The newspaper was still there. Tom and I hadn’t wanted to toss it away. Or touch it.

The service was in the big, stone church with the tallest steeple in town. All Saints was a sell-out, as Tom phrased it. Everybody was there because Elizabeth was so popular. Also, I guessed, because people hoped to get the scoop on the suicide.

The church was massed with too many stiff and formal flowers. Where were the happy, colorful blooms that I knew Elizabeth would have chosen? But maybe I hadn’t known Elizabeth at all.

The strange part about the service was that it wasn’t strange at all. Just your run-of-the-mill, ordinary Episcopalian service. The passage from Ecclesiastes, “For everything there is a season...a time to be born and a time to die...” How could the minister claim that Elizabeth’s time to die had come? She’d had everything to live for.

Then Doug stood at the dark, wooden podium. Even with his sunken eyes and a face that had aged ten years in less than a week, he was, as always, handsome with his carefully combed blond hair and the physique of the lacrosse captain he’d been at Yale.

“If someone you love is sad, do whatever it takes to banish that sadness. Elizabeth wasn’t always the happy person you thought you knew. Deep down, she felt darkness. There are ways I could have helped her. Should have helped her. I will never forgive myself that I didn’t try hard enough. I...loved her...so much.”

Before I could consider what he’d been trying to say, a Bach organ postlude boomed, and people crowded the aisles.

Becky, Skip, and Doug stood on the steps, handing us colorful packets of forget-me-not seeds.

I needed all possible comfort to get us through the evening with Dr. Deaver. Dr. Sam, as he asked us to call him, was a stooped, shriveled man, maybe late sixties, but looking as if eighty or more years of troubles weighed on him. He'd been a pediatrician for a couple of decades. As he related his years of doling out advice about the importance of parental love, his eyes lit up, and you knew why Elizabeth had adored this gentle, sweet father. She'd never said a lot about him, but offhand remarks had told me he'd been special in her life.

"Tell us about Elizabeth's childhood," I said.

"Lizzie was pudgy when she was little." Dr. Sam chuckled. "Her mother and I thought she'd never slim down."

"Hard to believe," Tom said. "She had the figure of a model."

"Took Doug to get her in shape. Literally," Dr. Sam said. "Everything changed after she met Doug at a Yale-Vassar mixer. She fell for him from the first minute. Lizzie called home to say she'd met a gorgeous guy with an amazing smile. She lost about twenty-five pounds that term. Doug began calling her Elizabeth. Said Lizzie was no name for his girlfriend. Course I kept on calling her Lizzie."

"So Elizabeth lost the pounds and walked down the aisle a raging beauty. I've seen the wedding photos," Tom said. "Happily ever after for..." Tom stopped himself.

"Do you think she ever minded? Turning into a new person, a slim Elizabeth?" I asked.

"Doug had a long talk with me before the wedding," Dr. Sam said. "He'd visited us in Newton Falls and met Lizzie's mother." Dr. Deaver was silent for a moment. Then he straightened up and his pale-blue eyes looked directly at me. "You know, my dear Jane's had her problems with depression. Doug claimed Lizzie got real upset being around her mom. Said Lizzie and he thought it'd be better if they didn't visit much. Doug was a wonderful husband to Lizzie. Couldn't have been nicer," said the doctor. "But I'm not sure it was right to keep Jane out of Lizzie's life. Doug could be kind of dogmatic, controlling... Maybe he didn't understand my Lizzie and her needs." He blinked back tears. "But of course he was a wonderful husband."

"Lizzie adored you, Dr. Sam," I said.

"Did you know she came up to visit us last month?" he asked. "Doug was off on some business trip. Lizzie said she was having what she called 'bits of sadness.'" Dr. Sam buried his face in his hands. "You know what that psychiatrist said? He told her she might be getting the illness Jane's been living with all these years. He gave her some pills he said would help. And Lizzie told me she was so glad to have the pills. She'd get herself happy for Doug and the children." He poked the napkin at his eyes. "And now my Lizzie's gone."

None of us said a word, thinking about the Elizabeth we'd known. What must she have thought when she heard the psychiatrist's pronouncement? Seeing herself turning into her mom?

After that we just worked our way through the ice cream and decaf.

Doug pulled up in his metallic-blue BMW, right on schedule, the next morning.

I hadn't talked to Doug during the past week except at the service and reception. I was one of over two hundred well-wishers, chanting the "we'll miss Elizabeth" refrain as we hugged Doug.

"Thanks for letting us get to know Dr. Sam," I said.

"I guess he told you what happened when Elizabeth went to visit them last month," Doug said. He turned away and kicked at the gravel in the driveway. "We figured some worthless shrink was trying to get her in his clutches. Undo the life we'd made for ourselves. We couldn't see he'd ever done much good. Her mom's still a psycho case. Elizabeth and I decided she shouldn't take those pills."

He turned back to me. "But I don't know anything anymore. Elizabeth was upset off and on. Just a day here or there. Not about anything special. But she was definitely down. I've got to admit it now. Wouldn't have last month. If we hadn't thrown away those pills, maybe I'd still have her." His mouth puckered.

Tom and Dr. Sam walked out of the house. Doug helped his father-in-law into the car, slammed the doors, gunned the engine, and specks of gravel flew against my legs and face as the car accelerated down the driveway.

I was about to reach for Tom's hand when he said, "Well, that's that."

I didn't answer and walked back into the house. Tom's brown leather briefcase was in the front hall.

"I'm sorry I've got this business trip to Chicago. Elizabeth's death has been tough on us, especially you."

"Can you put it off?"

"Life moves on, Sally."

I looked at Tom and noticed gray circles under his eyes. His blue striped tie hung loose. I reached up and slid the knot in his tie up and down. I tightened the knot so the tie hung straight and perfect.

Maybe it was just as well I'd be alone for a while. I was tired of having a stiff upper lip and smiling when there was no reason to smile.

Tom looked at me and said, "I hope you're not going to mope around all week about Elizabeth. Cruel, selfish woman!"

I took a step back, away from him and his words. "How can you say

that? She was my friend.”

“And Doug *is* our friend. She destroyed Doug and the kids. She *was* cruel and selfish to run away from her family, from life. I hated all that stuff at the funeral about sweet and loving Elizabeth.”

“She was depressed, Tom. Seriously depressed. I think she loved Doug and her kids so much that she didn’t want to live if she was going to turn into a sick woman like her mom.”

Tom put one hand under my chin and tilted my face so our eyes met. “I know her death was difficult for you. For both of us. But find something to do, Sally. Find some fun.”

“Fun...?” The word was alien and inappropriate, but I knew what Tom was trying to say.

I looked out the window at the shining spring morning. Maybe I’d plant the forget-me-not seeds from the funeral. Within a few weeks green leaves would poke up, and tiny blue flowers would appear. I wanted to dig in the dirt and plant flowers that would bloom all summer. “I’ll buy geraniums. How about the fire-engine-red geraniums you’ve always wanted? You never like the color I choose.”

“No way! Get the same pink ones you’ve bought for the last twenty-two years. Please, Sally. No changes or surprises in my life!”

“I’ll have tubs and tubs of pink geraniums for you when you get back.”

I felt tears oozing as I put my arms around him. “Hurry home, darling.” I hugged him hard and when I nestled my head against his chest, I felt the knot in his tie slip loose.

**I Should Never**

Have listened  
To The Beatles

The corpse was  
How can I say this?  
Beautiful

Especially  
The lip print  
On the right cheek  
Little tear of blood

The birthday parties have been cancelled  
All the water is now vapor  
Your blood has the texture  
Of laughter And your scream  
With its broken arm Never made the team

### **Photographs Best Shot on a Sunny Day**

6:00 A.M.

Troost Street.

Dollar store clotheslines are strung between gas pumps at a deserted filling station, the armature of somebody's weekend yard sale.

Sunrise reflects the plastic tubing to form a polished web.

12:00 P.M.

At noon on the playground, twenty-five seven and eight-year-olds are making their bodies into sundials.

They stand with arms outstretched at their sides, waiting for their teacher's next instruction.

6:00 P.M.

The bicyclist waiting at the red light shields her face with a hand.

The skyscraper jutting over Broadway carries men in hardhats perched atop slings carrying rods.

Iron beams slide into place, bellowing through the city.

12:00 A.M.

The white-haired gentleman in starched slacks and a button down comes puffing around the corner of the café patio, circles the parking lot, and continues to jog through the dark Starbucks drive-thru.

**Body Suit**

I wear my body now  
like a frumpy old suit  
I can't take off.

It drapes itself around me;  
hangs, worn and threadbare.

When it was issued,  
it had some nice lines.

Creases where  
they were supposed to be.

Now, it's so wrinkled,  
you'd think I slept in it.

**Postcard from California**

Some things you should know...

**Thing One:** When you are fresh off executing the most masterful courting job on the girl of your dreams, do not get caught woozy and drunk on Cabernet and Pinot Noir at three a.m. after everyone has gone to sleep for the evening with your jeans down around your ankles, hulking rear sweating on the toilet seat, head dangling in the adjacent sink. Do not allow the tender sister of said dream girl, unaware of your haphazard lock-job, to nudge open the bathroom door and shamble in stark naked as you let out a percussive fart and startled yelp at the same time. As the sister whirls and screams, do not notice the soft curve of her smooth waste or sloping buttocks as it disappears out the door in a spasmodic burst. This you will not find in any travel brochures or vacation guides. You are welcome.

**Thing Two:** While in Napa overlooking the most majestic scene of rolling hills and blooming vineyards, sipping blended wine out of a thin stemmed glass, do not tell a sarcastic joke about how you'd rather be back home in Lincoln because everything there is more impressive and savory. This will illicit a swell of laughter and flirtatious cooing from the girl in which you are falling in love and her younger sister, and this will only serve to give you unbridled hope that will later be vanquished by the rueful boot of fate. Do not picture the way the object of your affection might look down the road, sweet and smiling as she wakes beside you, cloaked in nothing but your oldest, coziest T-shirt and winking those impossibly blue eyes. Don't imagine the nicknames you will later give her as she sits in the morning sunlight of your apartment drinking coffee from one of your chipped mugs.

**Thing Three:** When the trip is over, do not think about how the entire spectacle seems like a metaphor for every relationship you've had and didn't have, about how the whole thing feels like a microcosm for the remaining stretch of life you have yet to undertake or overcome. Or do. Do it. Let the experience wash over you, curling like an ocean wave, appearing like the flaccid penis California resembles from north to south, from Eureka to the Salton Sea. Get comfortable; make it your replacement girlfriend. The taunting nature of the seasons and shifting tides always tending downward before too long... Greetings from sunny California... Don't let it weather your resolve, all stubborn and resilient, bubbling to the surface of your memory every seventeen months or so... driving in the car or while trying to fall asleep... *It's nothing, dear.* Don't clench or brace for blow. Do not fight it, and you have fucking won.

**Well**

*Wellaway* means *alas*.  
We fill with tears,

but still wish others  
a favorable outcome

because there's luck  
worse than a bucket's

crack, a broken cup,  
no harm in good

ale as it gushes  
from the tap.

**Wake**

Pain keeps us up.  
At two and four we

take our pill for back  
and head, respectively,

wonder why us, how  
long will this go on,

where do we rate them  
on a scale of one to ten,

your sharp pang,  
my dull ache.

**Stay**

Right where you are  
is how you'd better

be, under the sway  
of sound, one syllable

pounding the sand,  
call it a wave, wait

for one more. Don't  
get up, don't jot

down what it means.  
It means don't go.

**Quieting**

Some parts of our skin  
taste like iron, like the inside

of our lips. My wrists  
tingle during a lightning storm.

The friction of our limbs  
and sand in stiff cotton

sheets, the salt  
of seaweed on the pillow

that dampens my scream.  
You wrap my hair around

your fist. I whisper pickup lines  
out an open window at the surf,

place a cheek  
to your neck, feel

Adam's apple jump against  
my temple. I wonder

why you never say  
anything.

Later, I crawl  
through tidal pools

catching nacre shards  
in my underwear.

If I have a daughter,  
I'll name her

Pearl. I want to tell you this  
as you peel wet clothes

off me, but you push  
a piece of shell

past my teeth,  
press your mouth

hard to my mouth  
until I can't breathe.