Questions for Charles Wright

In Country Music, you quote T'u Lung: "being unable to find peace within myself, I made use of the external surroundings to calm my spirit, and being unable to find delight within my heart, I borrowed a landscape to please it." I am curious about how your poetry has "borrowed landscapes," particularly those of Italy and the American South. What compels you, in the words of Black Zodiac's "Disjecta Membrane," to "think of landscape incessantly"? Why these places in particular?
In the Guts of the Living
Dargie Anderson

The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living
—W.H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”

To Innisfree or somewhere, leave the fray —
set off for Kanchenjunga, broad and tall,
or the gaping peak of Itacolomé, whose gummy mouth jaws wordless at us all.
Remember how you felt them while you slept, mountains; how they shouldered into motion your words and every secret that you kept, how every ridge bulged bigger than the ocean?
You slept there at their feet; discovered, dreaming, that mineral ribbons ran along your bones, your heart grew hot from geologic steaming, and glaciers pressed out your senseless tones:
now clutch those peaks like comfort given free, and make them hurt you into poetry.
Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue; 
so your face bids me, though you say nothing.  
—Fool, King Lear, 1.iv.194-96

Huddled in a doorway, words were scarce. “Nothing like this rain,” and my reply; infirm exchange.  
Foul weather stirred old habits, makeshift patterns emerged like some unpracticed art this evening.  
An offhand grid arranged itself, as figures hit their marks beneath an awning, shaken by old love.  
As if the sudden storm were proof of love, at least of love that had been lost, and what to mark it with? Nothing but rain on skin, or shrunk leaves spun into figures by the wind. One desires proof, a token of exchange.  
A trinket. “Pathetic fallacy.” Plotted ends to evening strolls do not suffice. I’m schooled in my own patterns. 

And to heave these themes into one’s mouth – the pattern of tongue on teeth, that busy signal, clamor I love too closely. Even now, lips numbed by evening chill, there’s need for noise, come then gone. “Oh, nothing.” Zero multiplied, over and over: at least a constant exchanged in this transaction. No wayward x, that shadowy figure. 

Just an Orphic cry, perhaps, “an O without a figure.” A start, at least, and mandates traced within the pattern of his missteps, there for us, in dutiful exchange for our own rites and halting shows of love. The mouth, in speech or meeting, encircles nothing, a hollow: the black, wet, cold spaces of evening. 

And how to shape one’s mouth without evening out old scores, be they real ones or just figures? I have forgotten my reasons, methods, have nothing to speak of evidence. Moments ago, a pattern of rain on pavement, now self-obsurred. Is there love in these counting games? Can observance be exchanged for something less contained: a fair, equitable exchange? Cause cannot stand aloof from effect, not this evening, when talk of weather freezes talk of love. We’ve recorded our proof – the result is figured out, conforming to the asymptote’s pattern, whittled down until it’s barely nothing. 

There’s nothing left to exchange, and love’s not love if left unfigured, though this evening out is merely pattern.
A related question: you have likened the poem to a journey, one which has internal and external components that can be at odds with each other (the poet with the most mileage has not necessarily traveled the farthest). In the T’u Lung quotation, external surroundings seem to work as a substitute for inaccessible inner peace. How do you see the tension or correspondence between outward and inward travels enacted in your work? Do you turn to physical landscape because the inner terrain cannot be mapped, or because the outer reveals the inner?
On the hottest day of the year, Nancy Colin couldn’t squeeze herself into the refrigerator.

“You’re crazy, Nancy!” yelled her husband, Jonah, who was sitting in the kitchen sink with the cold water running on his bare feet.

“All I need is five minutes,” called Nancy with one leg propped on top of the vegetable drawer. “Five minutes, then I’m going to work.”

“Oh please, you aren’t going anywhere. It’s too hot.”

“Don’t talk, I’m trying to concentrate.” She unhooked the second shelf and threw it onto the floor. In the side yard, Max barked and jumped up on the chain link fence, his claws rattling against the metal.

“Shut up, Max!” they both yelled.

“You must kill the dog,” said Nancy, clearing her way through the Kraft singles and two gallon barrel of pickles.

“Yes, dear. Kill the dog.”

There was no way Nancy was getting in the fridge. She threw the metal shelf back in and slammed the door. “Fuck,” she announced, sweating more now for the effort. She looked at Jonah, who was throwing sink water at his bare chest. The counter was soaked. “Well,” she started. “Well, it’s just too hot.”

Jonah smiled at Nancy. He flicked a handful of water in her direction. A few drops touched her white cotton tank top, but mostly they fell on the bubbling beige linoleum floor. Nancy stuck her tongue out at Jonah. “Well, I’m not going to work.”

“Bad girl.”

“Very bad,” said Nancy as she crossed past the refrigerator to the phone mounted on the wall next to the sink. She picked up the receiver and dialed, motioning for Jonah to stay quiet. “Bob, it’s Nancy. Listen, I can’t come in today. Yeah, I know, I’m really sorry. It’s Max, he’s been throwing up all morning and I can’t leave him. No, probably just the flu. Yeah, I’ll be in tomorrow.” Nancy rolled her eyes at Jonah and tapped her toenails impatiently on the floor. “Oh, come on, Bob, it’s not gonna be busy— it’s too hot for food... Okay. Bye.” She hung up the phone and jumped onto the counter with Jonah. “So, what are we gonna do?”

“Bob let you off ’cause you said Max was sick?”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t I get this?”
You have cited both Saint Augustine and Gerard Manley Hopkins as inspirations, and a fascination with Christianity, its language of darkness and light, sin and redemption, seems to course through your poetry. At the same time, your interest in the very different sensibility suggested by Zen leads you in other directions. How do these aesthetics play off each other in your work? Are they, as you suggest in correspondence with Charles Simic, dichotomized — ways to talk about old and new, metaphor and image? Or do they resolve into the same thing?

“Because you don’t have a job, dear,” Nancy reminded him.
“Anyway, Bob thinks Max is our son.”
“You told him the dog was our son?”
“Yep.”
“I would never name my son Max,” said Jonah. He swung his wet feet out of the sink and hopped off the counter. He went over to the fridge, opened it, sat down on the floor and stuck his feet in. “Ahhh.”
“You’re crazy,” said Nancy. She took the stopper out of the sink and joined Jonah on the floor. “Are you hungry?” she said, looking at the jar of pickles, carton of milk and rows of soda and beer cans.
“It’s too hot for food,” he replied, and fell into her lap. Nancy ran her hands along her husband’s hair, light brown and dirty, clumping together on the top. He needed a shower. Jonah looked up at her with his big hazel eyes wide open, blinking like a lady. He puffed his lips out. “Sex?”
“It’s too hot for sex.”
“Never!” he yelled and pulled her face to his. His lips tasted cold, like lettuce. She kissed him anyway. The refrigerator was humming and Nancy began to feel sick from the smell of the ice maker — stale water freezing. Sex was out of the question, at least in the bedroom. It was barely an hour since they had been jolted out of restless sleep by Max throwing a minor fit in the yard. When she thought of the bedroom all she could think of was lying in bed that morning, sweating before she had even moved a muscle, with a cotton sheet coiled like a snake up the middle of her body, already soaking up the sugar water that seemed to coat and choke every pore on her body, and Jonah lying on his stomach, half his body falling off the bed, reaching for fresh air away from the static murmur of the ceiling fan. Heat can kill the libido, and Nancy’s was currently running on empty, only to be found occasionally on the very tips of her breasts. So she wore tank tops, no bra, just to keep things interesting. Sometimes the heat made her crazy.

Jonah was another story. He barely felt the heat. “It’s just air,” he’d say. But there’s so much of it, she always thought. He played her games happily, though, and helped plan strategies, like skipping work, like the fridge, like draping sheets between trees to make shade.

“We’re wasting energy,” she said, her lips cold and her back itching with sweat about to dry from the cool air of the open fridge.
“Yes, dear,” said Jonah, grinning.
“Come on,” she said, pulling them both up off the floor. “To the bedroom.” Maybe, she was thinking, maybe the cold will stay on my skin. But as soon as her toes snagged on the living room carpet and she saw the green velvet couch, dust rising into the giant ray of yellow sunlight that bleached the cushions and held the air motionless, she knew the bedroom was a bad idea.

“Nope, can’t do it,” she said, pulling them both backward into a cloud of velvet dust. Jonah spread his arms and legs wide, catching the slight breeze from the screen door. Outside, an old blue Ford pulled up just past the house.
“Cathy’s back,” said Jonah, even though he and Nancy were both staring out the same window. Cathy had moved in about four months ago, alone. When Nancy went over to say hello, Cathy told her that she was nineteen and going to nursing school at night up in Barstow. Nancy liked her immediately and told her she reminded her of her little sister, with all that crazy blonde hair. Jonah liked her too, but mostly because he was convinced that she was a spy. He had decided this one afternoon a few weeks after she arrived when he noticed two things: that she never wore shoes, and that she never rolled the windows of her car down.
“She must be practicing,” he explained to Nancy. “Training. Toughness training. If she can take the heat in her car she can certainly stay alive if she’s ever kidnapped and thrown in a trunk. She’s a smart girl. I bet she’s older than she says.” Nancy, of course, paid no attention to Jonah and attributed his obsession with the blonde girl next door to all his free time and his insistence that Ritalin was a government plot.

“Baby, remind me again why we moved here,” he said, his eyes closed.
“We thought it would be glamorous,” she said.
“Ah, yes,” he said slowly, feeling the warm air on his lips.
“Glamorous.”

For a while, neither of them said anything. Nancy’s mouth was still open, her head resting on Jonah’s arm. She loved the way he smelled, never like soap, never like cologne, just like skin. Like bare feet, like legs, like the thin patches of hair on his chest that caught the beginnings of sweat on his skin and held them there. Next door they could hear Cathy banging around in the kitchen,
slamming the oven shut, prying it open, dropping pots and hanging them back up. Max was barking again. "You must kill the dog," mumbled Nancy as she drifted into sleep. "It's been a rough day."

When she woke up, she was alone on the couch. Her body felt heavy, like it was soaked with lead. She leaned her head back and saw Jonah sitting, naked, at the window.

"Are you spying on Cathy again?" she called, noticing the binoculars.

"Of course. Did you sleep well?" he asked, twisting his skinny waist away from the window.

"I was blind again."

"Did you die?"

"I don't remember. Leave that poor girl alone, would you?"

"She's baking," he said, getting up from his perch by the window. "Do you want something to eat?"

"Yeah. Something good," she said, groggy, watching as Jonah wiggled his bony ass past her to the kitchen.

"In case you're wondering why I'm naked — " Jonah called from the kitchen.

"I think I'd rather not know," interrupted Nap himself into an upright position. The room seemed even hotter now, stifling. She remembered the afternoon Jonah spent braiding the shag carpet. When she came home from work, he picked her up and carried her across their new "field of grain" to the bedroom.

Nancy got up off the couch and went to the window to look into Cathy's kitchen. Max's little yard was all that separated the two houses and Max's yard was fairly pitiful, mostly dirt and weeds growing around urine-soaked earth. Cathy wasn't in the kitchen anymore; instead, Nancy saw her walk out the front door and make her way to their concrete walkway.

"Jonah! Stay in the kitchen! Cathy's coming over!"

"Shit!" he yelled. "She's probably got one of those spy cameras on her! She knows I'm naked! She heard you tell me to kill the dog!" Jonah was jumping up and down, running down the little hall.

"Get in the bedroom!" yelled Nancy. "Stay there and shut up!"

The bedroom door slammed just as Cathy climbed the two little steps to the porch and tapped on the screen door. "It's so hot," she said, waving her hand in front of her face as the cloud of dust rose from the green cushions. "Why aren't you at work?"

"Too hot. Just can't do it."

"Yeah," said Cathy. "I know what you mean." Cathy had beautiful features. Her skin was pale white, smooth like warm milk, and her eyes were brown, but they sparkled like two tiny stars, alive and strange. Her bare feet were spotted with blood-red toenail polish and she had these strange, witch-like, long, pointy fingernails painted with silver glitter. The nails were what Nancy always noticed about Cathy. They moved as she spoke, gently grazing her skin or scratching along the velvet of the couch. She clicked them together, end to end, in a rhythm, almost like a beat she had to keep. Almost like she was sounding out the world around her, tapping with the twigs as they scratched against the house, tapping with the dripping faucet, tapping to make music of the silence when the air was too hot and thick to hear through.

"Where's Jonah?"

"Oh, I've banished him to the bedroom," said Nancy, rolling her eyes and pushing out her cheeks like she had a secret running around inside her head. "Drinking so early?" she asked, nodding at the wine Cathy had laid down on the carpet.

"I thought we might share," she said. "Are you busy? Can we go for a drive?"

"Yeah, sure," shrugged Nancy. "We'll take my car so Max can ride along." Cathy jumped up and ran to the bedroom to find a skirt and some sandals. Jonah was lying on the bed, still naked, with his hands reaching up toward the ceiling. "I'm not even gonna ask, thought Nancy as she dug through the bureau. She pulled on a cotton skirt with some plastic flip-flops and grabbed the car keys off the bedside table. "I'll be back in a few hours," she said. "Try not to exhaust yourself." No sign of movement from the naked man sprawled on the bed. She jumped up on the bed and stood peering over him. His eyes were fixed on some indeterminate spot on the ceiling. She looked up, trying to see what he saw, but the rough white plaster seemed quite ordinary. "I'm sure there's something quite fascinating up there, dearest, but if you would focus your ears for just one moment I wish to inform you that I am leaving the premises with our lovely neighbor. I will be drunk upon my return, so please plan accordingly."

Cathy was waiting in Nancy's dingy red Datsun with her bare feet on the dashboard. Nancy opened Max's little gate and ran alongside him to the car. "Get in," she hollered and pushed him up into the backseat. "Where to?" she yelled over the wind as they
A related question: to what religion, or set of spiritual beliefs, do you subscribe? Spirituality is such an important part of your work — what role does it play in your life?

Sped off into the dirt on the road behind their houses. Cathy may not roll down the windows, but Nancy did. She drove with one foot sticking out and resting on the sideview mirror and her left hand tapping to nothing on the hood. Nancy’s toenails weren’t painted – her toes were calloused and awkward, crooked from the bones jutting out under the skin. Cathy didn’t answer, she just uncorked the bottle of shitty red wine and poured it into the mug. She handed the mug to Nancy and kept the bottle for herself.

“Does the dog drink?” asked Cathy.

“Only on St. Patrick’s Day. He gets the green beer. Don’t you Max?” Max had his head out the passenger window, lapping up the dust, his gums flapping like a parachute in the wind. They drove for a while in silence. Cathy closed her eyes.

“It’s like living in a blow dryer,” Cathy said after they crossed the train tracks headed east toward the county jail.

“I’ll never get used to it,” said Nancy, shaking her head.

“Pull over here,” said Cathy, pointing to a little road leading back into one of the old caverns they used as bomb shelters in the fifties. Nancy slowed the car down and stopped in the thin, spotty shade of a couple of Joshua trees. She turned off the ignition and rotated toward Cathy. Around her neck, Cathy wore a string of beads, cheap glass and clay colored beads you’d find in a plastic bag at a fabric store. The necklace was long and fell down between her small breasts. Nancy felt old. She wanted to touch her.

“Nancy, do you know that your husband wants to fuck me?”

For a minute Nancy said nothing. And then she laughed. Loud. She threw her head back and held her mouth open, her shoulders shaking limply. Cathy wasn’t smiling. Wisps of her dirty blonde curls blew against her face, sticking to her lips and she reached up to pull them away. Nancy felt Cathy’s eyes burning into her face and looked down at her hands lying heavy, itching with sweat, in her lap. The car felt strange, almost weightless, like the heat might just pick it up and hold it, hovering over the sand. For a few moments, Nancy wasn’t sure if Cathy was even in the car with her. She didn’t seem to be breathing, and her eyes were open wide, waiting. Waiting for something Nancy didn’t even know if she had. Nancy looked at Cathy, looked at her skin, looked at her chest, looked at her pretty, callused little feet sweating stains onto the black vinyl dashboard. She thought about the
first time Jonah kissed her. She was fifteen and he was sixteen. He had a green Volkswagen Bug. He was giving her a ride home. When they pulled up to her apartment, he jabbed her in the ribs with his index finger. “What?!” she said, nervous. He didn’t answer, he just smiled, ear to ear. She could see every tooth in his mouth. He leaned in close to her and kissed her, still smiling. She barely felt his lips, just the smooth, hard surface of his teeth.

“Yeah,” she answered slowly. “Yeah, I suppose he does.”

“I didn’t. Fuck him, I mean. I’m not like that.” Max was turning around and around in the back seat. Cathy reached back and patted him on the back.

“No. No I suppose you’re not,” said Nancy. “Let him out.” She motioned for Cathy to open her door and let the dog run around in the sand.

“I didn’t know how to tell you. He’s been over three times, in the afternoon. He took off his clothes. Like he was naked. I didn’t know what to do.”

“I’m sorry he bothered you.”

“Yeah, well. I just though you should know what he’s doing.”

Nancy’s heart was beating fast, hurting her chest, hurting her stomach, hurting her mouth. She was sweating but her brown skin, thick and smooth from the sun, was covered in goosebumps. Her head felt funny, warm and slow and strange from warm wine on an empty, morning stomach. Max was barking at something burrowing into the cool, soft sand in the shaded base of one of the Joshua trees. He kept pecking at it, jumping up and down and dancing like a crazy Indian around the little hole.

“Yeah,” said Nancy, still looking at Cathy’s skin. “Yeah, I should know.” Poor girl, thought Nancy, Jonah’s quite a sight when he’s naked. She pictured Jonah lying naked on the bed. He probably still had his arms up in the air.

Cathy crossed her arms over her chest, like she was hiding herself. She leaned in a little toward Nancy. “I don’t like it, okay? I don’t like it.”

Nancy’s head was almost empty. No sentences, no sorrows, just a lot of swaying back and forth. Nothing in her head sounded right, nothing sounded like what Cathy seemed to be asking for. “I apologize for my husband’s behavior, Cathy. It won’t happen again.”

On the way home they didn’t speak much. Max amused himself by gnawing on the back seatbelt.

“Did you ever dream you were going blind?” asked Nancy, not really expecting an answer.

Nancy let Max enter the house before she did. He ran like a rabbit through all the rooms, like he was looking for something.
The surface at first was hard: rain rolled off of it, and sunlight made it glare.
Rust would come to complicate its shine, but not before the sheet of paper, half-filled with words, projected at an angle from the great snap jaw, slowly caved into itself, shrank to lace, and disappeared.

Even the rust yielded to a softer texture. A million filaments affixed themselves to the dull brown scratch, generating a fuzz that condensed as time passed. Hesitant stems explored the device: tendrils grew and ramified to make at last a network, a living textile. Bit by bit, the keyboard fell apart; the keys fell in the grass.

Late in the spring, after floating for hours in breezy ellipses, a seed descended into the broken machine, entering a mesh of cursive fibers. Weeks later, out of a zigzag where the hull had long ago burst, an aster emerged. The petals were as faultlessly shaped as the hull had altered its first self.

**Old Typewriter in a Field**
Jennie Chu
In one of your essays in *Quarter Notes*, you describe Pound and Crane as great failures, “fallen angels in the American twentieth-century poetic firmament.” Should poets pursue grand poetic ambition, even at the risk of crashing and burning? Is it better to be a “little master” or a “big failure”? How modest or sweeping are your own artistic aims?
Christian Kemons
Beds, silver-gelatin print, 4.25" x 6.5"
CHAPTER II

Janet Corbin, reclusive author of 12 mysterious thrillers, was, in fact, a literary equation; a team, maybe, though the word carried an inelegance that appealed only to certain publishing executives. A triumvirate, certainly: Sanford Herschovitz, Franklin Dickson, and Carolyn Kearne.

This must be what Nancy Drew looks like, Sanford had thought the first time he'd seen Carolyn. Even now, as she read his draft of Chapter II, he imagined her digging up the Clue in the Velvet Mask or unravelling the Mystery of the Ski Jump. Her entire countenance sort of resembled a ski jump, now that he thought of it. Her eyes, lips, nose, chin, and breasts all sloped upwards. “I have some problems with the end of this section,” she told him; even her voice slid a few notes higher as she spoke.

Grayson Tablet steps out from behind the carnage and plucks a Grange from a bloodstained packet on the ground. Menthol. Dammit. He digs around in his breast pocket for his lucky lighter, but it's not there. He counts the bodies, face up like spilled playing cards after a game of high-stakes poker. Twenty altogether, enough for all four royal flushes. Risley's one of them, the Jack of Hearts, tucked under Fats, the King with the Sword in his Head. Fats would have had a light. And what was Fats's wife going to say?

"Bastards," Grayson says. "As soon as I get a drink, I'm going to find the terrorists who did this and pay them back with 10% interest."

"Grayson doesn't do math," she said, "and even if he did, he wouldn't say 'with 10% interest.' It's too wordy. And don't say 'breast pocket.' We don't want people to think he has breasts."

Sanford made the changes reluctantly, committing the originals to memory: interest, breasts, interest, breasts. For some time, he'd been funneling his balled-up trimmings into one artful volume, the fabulous Unbook, whose hero did math, whose author was one man, and whose readers were perfectly comfortable with male breasts.

Grayson opens the tab on his Koola Kola and takes a long drink. He knows only this: he has to find the secret weapon Dargor's henchmen used to massacre Theta Force. It made its users invisible, and shredded its victims like a space-age shuriken. Intelligence was calling it "Invisoshreddor."

"That weapon sounds like something I ordered from the home-shopping club last night," Carolyn said.

"Maybe that's where Dargor got it," said Sanford. He typed: Dargor got it on the Home Shopping Club. He looked up at her, and deleted it, all the while murmuring mnemonically, "home shopping club home shopping club home shopping..."

CHAPTER V

Franklin also looked like Nancy Drew. He stood only slightly taller than Carolyn and had a girlish voice, eyes like a pixie, and luscious red lips. He'd distinguished himself to Carolyn by brushing his teeth so often that his gums had receded and to Sanford by filling out crossword puzzles horizontally, top to bottom, with a pen. As part of what had become a post-divorce mini-series of ineffectual mischief, he'd recently begun composing entirely new puzzles in the space provided. Chapter V was his.

Dargor's palace stinks with the odor of evil. Grayson recognizes it immediately and grimaces. This place will have to be demolished—it smells...
like my ex-wife, he thinks. Which ex-wife? By now, they’d merged into one — one superhuman bitch.

Intelligence has it that Dargor was stockpiling virgins along with missiles. Every night, the bastard drinks and screws one of them, soaking the sheets with blood and pumping her full of whatever diseases he’s hosting. Afterwards, he leaves her to clean everything herself, with generic detergent. Worse, if a spot of blood remains in the morning, he makes the girl lick it up. Grayson has made it a personal mission to rescue the virgins, and perhaps find himself a new wife or two.

Suddenly two guards materialize in front of him. One leaps to kick him and the other throws a devastating left at his cheek. Grayson steps back nonchalantly and his foes collide. Three more sentries appear. They’re beating him. His face is bloody. But love of victory exposes mines everywhere, the entire nest, Dargorian explosives, ready.

Sanford sipped some Koola Kola and read the last sentence a few times. One of Franklin’s games: the first-letter code, with its awkward constructions. Poor Grayson had suffered almost to death the enemies those letters presented. “Do you expect anyone to notice this?” Sanford asked.

“Of course not, that’s the point. It’s voyeuristic. I can see the story naked, and no one else can.”

Franklin was the sort of writer who always rearranged the letters and never the words, thought Sanford. “But the letters don’t reveal any hidden meaning. We’ve discussed this. They’re just sounds.” Sanford said.

“That’s a mistake,” Franklin replied. “Letters are more than instructions for pronunciation. They’re what words look like. In this picture,” he pointed to the encoded sentence, “we see Grayson being attacked, piled right on top of a...representation of my sexuality. Don’t overlook hieroglyphs. There’s nothing outside them.”

“As far as I’m concerned, this is masturbation,” Sanford said, as if that settled the matter, a supposition which was, apparently, enough to settle the matter for the moment.

CHAPTER VI
Carolyn blithely announced that Grayson Tabler would no longer be drinking Koola Kola. “The publisher signed a deal with Duper Cola, so from now on, that’s what he drinks. I happen to prefer Duper anyway.” It wasn’t much of a betrayal of literary truth; Grayson had only drunk Koola because of a previous deal between the publisher and its manufacturer. For Sanford, who had made Koola his favorite beverage, who had submitted ideas for slogans to the company in a failed attempt at a second income, who had even named his male cat Koola, it was just more material for the ever-growing Unbook. What did surprise him, though, was Carolyn’s preference — and, perhaps, that Carolyn’s preference should matter to him.

Brands, he suspected, weren’t names so much as little stories. The Koola story was Grayson’s, it was his. Rebellion, subversion, naked indulgence. With twice the carbonation of regular colas, it meant louder belches and tangier taste. Koola was the story of a young, well-dressed trickster, named Dusty, maybe, or Lance. Lance on the run from the law, with girlfriends pregnant in three states, stops only to drink a Koola now and then. And despite the attrition of a diet of high fructose corn syrup and/or sucrose, caramel color, phosphoric acid, and natural flavors, Dusty maintained a manly physique. His pecs glistened with carbonated sweat, and his abs lined up like stacked Koola cans.

Duper, by contrast, was the story of cold hegemony, the trademark of glacial tedium. It was supermarket zest, housewife pep, old guy groove. It was a story about Dudley, or Wayne, who slept with an inflatable sheep called the Love Ewe more than his wife. The realization that Carolyn didn’t want to be in his cola-narrative, had in fact never enjoyed being a part of it, disturbed Sanford profoundly. Had his participation in it surreptitiously changed the Koola story?

Grayson stores the missile code along with every missile code he has ever had to remember. Committing another long list meant exertion: 12037647228677647223. But writing the numbers down constitutes a higher risk than even he is willing to take. Fats had written them down. And now Fats was dead. In those numbers, he reflects, lies the destruction of the world hundreds of times over. For that moment only, he wishes he has children.
Hadn't Sanford also been aware of the irony that the world, whose wholeness and completeness might be set equal to 1, held within it the power to destroy 100 worlds, each with the power to destroy 100 more worlds? That a world's explosive capacity always overflowed itself to infinity bestowed a kind of self-transcendence on every atom, a power each one had over every other one. Maybe Franklin was right. Maybe a single letter could exercise some sort of power over others, could participate in an infinite number of words at once, at the same time subordinate to every other letter.

CHAPTER IX
Grayson vaporizes them, humidifying the room with droplets of henchmen that condense in red on the wallpaper. The stench drives him out into the main corridor, where, between two panels, he makes out the painful moans of a delicate voice.

"Powder becomes soup with the addition of water," Franklin said over lunch. "But supposing one swallowed the powder first, and then two cups of water. Would one, then, have eaten soup?"

Sanford didn't answer because, first of all, he was sipping soup himself, and second because he wanted to hear Carolyn first. "Immaculate conception," she said. "What was once water and powder becomes soup in your stomach." Sanford imagined her pregnant with soup. But by whom? He imagined her with Grayson:

Grayson embraces her and with one hand unzips her gown. The other massages her thigh. "Grayson Tablet, you're not circumcised," she says.

CHAPTER XIII
Franklin made them brisket for dinner at his house. He'd cut it lean for Carolyn, and koshered it for Sanford, who had by no means implied that he kept kosher, but was nevertheless thankful. "I'm considering becoming kosher," Franklin said.

Sanford smiled. "It's slightly outdated, Franklin, combining meat with salt. Why not take it a step further and use tarragon or rosemary?"

"Warm salt is good for my gums. The dentist says I should have it every day—my oral problems are a conduit for my spiritual revival."

"What revival? You were never Jewish! Dickinson is some kind of WASP name."

"Don't listen to him, Franklin," said Carolyn. "I think it's a fabulous idea."

"And I think from now on, Grayson should be Jewish," Franklin said.

Sanford doubted the publisher would allow it. A minor character, perhaps, a villain, certainly. Even Hitler was part Jewish. As he was saying so in the nicest way possible, Carolyn walked upstairs to the bathroom.
You have been showered with accolades like the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, especially in recent years. How has this attention and acclaim enhanced or disrupted your work?

“Sandy, I’m worried,” Franklin said. “Sally took almost everything. And I may lose my kids now. After she left me, I ordered her a bunch of magazine subscriptions: Dirty Housewife and Bitch. Clever, huh? She’s using that against me now. She wants them to live with her — I mean, she’s the one getting the magazines. There’s a prenuptial agreement; nothing I can do.”

“Things will work out,” said Sanford, though he doubted it. He understood the crossword puzzles then. Franklin had inked in the letters wrong and committed himself to losing the game, but was somehow compelled to finish it anyway. His whole life had become the Unbook.

Grayson is too late to save them. The Dargorians have already been there. No chance for a fight. The only challenge that remains is to rearrange the body parts so everyone will be buried with his proper limbs.

The enormousness of the kosher brisket’s significance, whatever it was, disclosed itself to Sanford. He patted Franklin on the back, thinking he should have embraced him.

Carolyn hopped down the stairs. “Your children are beautiful,” she said. “What are their names?”

“They’re beautiful,” she said.

Franklin didn’t look, but Sanford could see she actually believed it. It was then, he later remembered (though the feeling had probably crept up on him much more slowly), that she made sense to him. She was water then powder then soup. She demanded dominance and submission. She demanded love.

The chain reaction of world-destructions began. He wanted to cook for her. He wanted to eat her food. He wanted to fatten her up, make her pregnant but leave her a virgin, give her all his possessions, meet her family, be her brother’s brother-in-law, kiss her cheek, write her biography, even share her epitaph — a thought whose ominousness did not immediately strike him.

CHAPTER XVI

But how could he tell her? Sonnets spread out before him like so many crossword puzzles: Franklin was filling in the letters wrong. But maybe Franklin would tell her for him. Except the divorce might make it uncomfortable. For all Sanford knew, Franklin wanted Carolyn too.

To his surprise, he found himself spending the night cramming the first-letter code into the plot:

Grayson cringes, and raging obsessively, languid yet not ignoble, laments uncaring, vicious, ugly Fortune.

Besides being relatively easy to integrate grammatically, G. Carolyn, I luv u seemed oddly appropriate. The words defaced the story like graffiti, juvenile and self-satisfied. He was ashamed of himself as soon as he gave it to her to proof.

“I don’t understand this sentence,” she said. “Why ‘languid yet not ignoble?’” She flipped the tape on her tape recorder.

She had understood the code, he knew. It was as conspicuous as the new Duper Cola ads. This was her cryptic reply. He turned it over in his head. I don’t understand this sentence. IDUTS. Id ut s. Id ut s. Id u ts. Id you, tsk. He was moving too fast for her. No — I du ts. I do too. She loved him back. Which was it? The first antinomy of his new romance. He sighed, nostalgic for the present, experiencing it as if through memory.

CHAPTER XVII

Franklin poured ketchup on everything. Soup, bread, chicken, cottage cheese — even salad. “Ketchup is nothing but tomatoes, salt, and vinegar. But somehow when it sits on food, it exerts a sort of culinary power over it. It koshers it, almost. I learned it from Sophie, if you can believe it, Sandy. She squirts it on cereal, even. I’ve become more and more childish in my taste. It worries me, frankly.”

“And Philo?”

“He misses his mother, I think. He won’t speak to me. It’s ‘Hello, Philo,’ and, ‘Shut up.’ He sits around putting jigsaw puzzles together all day. The boy’s name means love for God’s sake. He has two houses, two parents, two names. Split right down the
middle. Most people are, I think. Love sort of connects us if we’re lucky — or at least provides us some continuity. Now Sophie and I use ketchup instead." He giggled.

She’s gorgeous, with little pixie eyes and sensual red lips. "I was working for a top-secret government agency trying to locate Invisoshreddor," she says. "We weren’t having much luck until I noticed that Dargor’s attacks always came right after dinner, around 7 pm. Maybe, I thought, it can’t make you invisible unless you’ve eaten something, probably meat, I figured, since the attacks were around dinner time. Maybe Dargor had been planning other attacks, and those had failed. Finally, our orders came to change position at 2 pm. I was right: the Dargorians were visible when they attacked, but it didn’t help us much, since there were so many of them. They took me prisoner." Tears stream down her face like drops of pain. "My name’s Nancy," she said.

"Franklin," said Sanford. "It’s Nancy Drew. You didn’t even disguise her."

"I suppose it is, Sandy. I can’t help it, really. I love Nancy Drew. She’s the perfect girl. Smart, pretty, petite. Sally was so tall and big, she was so... middle aged. Nancy’s so... un-ex-able. I love her."

None of this really surprised Sanford, because he’d loved Nancy Drew in almost the same way. As a boy, he’d torn the jackets off her books so no one would know the truth about him, and stayed up all night reading them — even as a teenager. Moreso as a teenager, in fact. Her lithe little body and can-do grit defied libidinal categorization: she was a girl one loved the way one loved boys. And here was Franklin, who now looked like Nancy Drew more than ever, who ought to have been as revered as much as he revered her. "I suppose I love Nancy too, Franklin," he said and blushed, thinking for a moment he’d said you instead of Nancy.

"Sandy — there’s something I should tell you."

His thoughts twisting back towards Carolyn, he said, "Later, Franklin, later."

"The worst part is, I never have time to cook," Franklin said. "My kids haven’t eaten anything hot in two weeks."

"Why don’t you come to my apartment for dinner on Friday? I’ll cook. Bring your kids," said Sanford.

"I don’t know, Sandy. Sally doesn’t like them to stay out too late."

"Carolyn will come too," said Sanford, although he’d not yet asked her. "She really likes Philo and Sophie. I’ll put out the doilies."

"I suppose if Janet Corbin’s going to be there, I’ve got to be there." The perfect pretense to have Carolyn for dinner. She’d have to come, and it was Franklin’s idea.

"What were you going to tell me before?"

"What do you mean?"

"What was that thing you were going to say?"

"Oh, that." He combed back his hair and looked at the ceiling. "Did you know I’m not circumcised?"

"No, I didn’t." It was more difficult than he would have liked not to think about Franklin’s penis swaddled in foreskin like a newborn baby’s. He’d never been completely naked, then, like a present never unwrapped or a book never opened. He’d never been named.

"But there’s something I want to know," Franklin said. "What do they do with the — skin — after they cut it off?"

They put it in the Unbook, he thought. "The father buries it in the front yard. I never really had a bris, though. A doctor did it to me. So mine isn’t buried." He imagined it in purgatory, the sacred incision without the necessary sanctification. Franklin’s was another matter altogether, and even years afterward, the accursed penis sometimes flashed through his head.

**CHAPTERS XIX AND XX**

Franklin’s Grayson was becoming less and less appealing, Sanford noticed. Dead henchmen all over the floor. "That’ll show you, bitches," Grayson laughs. He’s close enough to smell Invisoshreddor. If only I could see it, he thinks. If only Nancy could see me!

He’d managed to impress Carolyn, though. "This is beautiful," she said. "Here he is, at the height of his power, making
Cathy Braasch
*Building the Maze*, collograph, 9.5" x 18"
misogynist remarks about the men he just killed, and all he wants is a woman to be impressed by him. It's tragic – a real step in his development."

“He's already over-developed,” Sanford said. “Twelve books worth of developing. I found the scene somewhat sentimental.”

“That just shows you have no appreciation for love,” she said.

She'd swallowed his powder without any water. He'd embossed her name on his writing, he'd agreed with everything she'd said until this particular episode, he'd even tried to get Grayson to tell her, though he hadn't been much help. Laconic and acerbic, the hero spoke only in that male code which women's magazines had dedicated themselves to understanding. Franklin seemed to be able to get something out of the character, but it came at the expense of both their integrities.

The only other possibility that came to Sanford was Janet Corbin. Not only was she talkative, passionate, and girlish, but she'd actually been published in those very women's magazines. She could help Carolyn decode Grayson, and through him, Sanford. And since Janet was part-Carolyn, it would almost be natural, like she was telling herself he loved her.

Janet proved more difficult to control than he'd intended for precisely that reason. What could she say? "I, Janet Corbin, love myself?" Though not without an intrigue of its own, it was too strange and subtle. He settled on this: Grayson spoke to her softly, with the tone that many men take when they love someone too boundlessly to summon the words to say it.

Unfortunately for him, Franklin proofed the page. “This is nice, Sandy,” he said, “but a little unusual. The narrative voice never sounds like this. A little too romantic. I wouldn't have expected it from you, Sandy.”

“Everyone thinks I'm some sort of monolith. It's just not true. I drink Koola Kola, don't I?" Franklin laughed. “This isn't personal. I'm just talking about the writing here, in Chapter XX.”

“Can I take a look at it?” Carolyn asked.

“No, it's fine. I'll just delete that,” Sanford said, and he did. It wouldn't even go in the Unbook. "Carolyn, would you come for
dinner on Friday? I'm cooking. Franklin is coming with Sophie and Philo."

"If Franklin's coming—and you're cooking—I definitely will," she said, opening her tape recorder and flipping the tape.

"But," said Sanford, "don't bring the tape recorder, okay?"

Sanford made brisket. He cut it lean, and koshered it all Thursday night. He wasn't quite sure why, but he convinced himself that the meat would need to be clean before it could accept any of the marinade. It had been decades since he'd koshered meat last, and he'd forgotten how much it dried out. Soon he got worried that Carolyn wouldn't be impressed by this sandy clay brisket. Sophie and Philo might refuse to eat it, and make a scene. They'd want cereal instead. With ketchup.

He didn't have any tenderizer. The only remotely wet substance he found in his refrigerator was a two-liter bottle of Koola, almost flat after two months, next to some soup mix (what was that doing in the refrigerator?) and a bottle of ketchup. He did what he could. In a basting dish, he combined:

2 packets, onion soup powder
1 cup, water
8 oz., tomato ketchup
3 cans, Koola Kola

and baptized the brisket in its marinade. Several hours later, its juiciness satisfied him. He cooked it for an hour and a half. Franklin arrived first, with Sophie. "Philo couldn't make it," she said. "He's with Mom."

"Hi, Sophie. Do you remember me?"

"Yeah. You're—" Franklin whispered something to her. "Mr Brisket," she said.

Sanford grinned. "I'm Mr Brisket," he said.

"It's nice to see you again, Mr Brisket," said Sophie.

Sanford would have kissed Franklin had Sophie not been there. This middle-aged Nancy Drew, this metaphysical mendicant, this crossword puzzler, had given him the perfect Unbook code name: Mr Brisket. It was not so much a description as an ontological aspiration, the possibility of some final authenticity, some ultimate originality: to become whole, to become real, to become Mr Brisket.

Carolyn let herself in. She didn't seem to have the tape-player.

"Hi, Carolyn. Welcome. Sorry I don't have any hors d'oeuvres, but it took longer than I thought to kosher the brisket."

"It's fine. Hi, Sophie. It's so nice to see you. You look beautiful. Hi, Franklin."

She hadn't even said hello to him. Franklin smiled and gently shook her hand. They sat down and began talking softly. Sophie busied herself aggravating Koola the Kat.

"Let's eat," Sanford said, afraid he was losing control of the evening already. "Does anyone want something to drink? Wine? Harder? Softer?"

"Do you have any Duper?" Carolyn asked.

"Koola okay?" Sanford asked.

"I'd like some," Franklin said.

"I'll just have water," said Carolyn.

"On second thought," Franklin said, "I'll just have water too." Sanford poured. "Brisket time," he said.

He set it down in the middle of the table, and dished out a few pieces to everyone. Sophie started eating right away. "Good," she said. Both Carolyn and Franklin seemed preoccupied.

"So, Franklin, eat!" said Sanford.

"Yeah, Dad. Eat!"

"Nice job, Sandy—Mr Brisket. It's great."

Carolyn chewed deliberately to explain her silence. She held up a finger, swallowed, and said, "I've never tasted anything like it."

Sophie asked if there was any ketchup. "I like to put ketchup on things," she said.

"Sophie, there's already ketchup in it," said Sanford.

"You marinated it in ketchup?" Franklin asked.

Sanford looked at Carolyn as if she had asked it: "Ketchup, powdered soup, water, and—Koola Kola."

"It's—" Carolyn said. "It tastes like brown. Like you combined every possible flavor into one pure taste."

She was right, she understood: the brisket proclaimed unity. Meat, powder, ketchup, Koola: body, mind, heart, and soul. It was his last, most complete love-offering, and she'd understood. He'd handed her the world in a basting dish, and she'd accepted. The chain reaction was beginning.

Now he would finish it. “Carolyn,” he said, “I love you.”

She shivered and smiled uneasily. Franklin dropped his fork. Sophie kicked Koola from under the table.

She smiled. “Thanks,” she said, hardly fazed.

He’d miscalculated. She’d been expecting this. The graffiti, the purple prose. She’d received their encoded transmissions, and conveniently ignored them. He blushed redder than ketchup. He looked to Franklin for help. “I love you too, Carolyn, and you, Sandy.” Franklin said. “We all love each other. That’s why it’s so good we’re working together.” He’d done it. He saved them and perhaps Grayson too, all perhaps inadvertently.

Carolyn smiled again, as if relieved. “Sandy,” she said. She never called him Sandy, or for that matter, Sanford. She was the sort of person who didn’t use the vocative, though it hadn’t occurred to him until then. “Sandy, Franklin and I have decided to move in together.”

Sanford bit his tongue and scowled. She said it as if moving in together didn’t mean have sex, as if it were just some sort of housing compromise. Franklin grimaced sympathetically. “Don’t worry, Sandy. We’ll keep writing together. Janet Corbin won’t die. Carolyn and I just need each other. Sophie needs her. Philo talks to her.”

“I don’t think we can do that,” Sanford said. He looked at the brisket, peacefully bathing in Kola. “I think I’m going to become a butcher.” He hadn’t thought of it until he said it, but it seemed right. It seemed like an ending. Butchers and writers both cut up their worlds and sank the remains into secret recipes. The only difference was butchers never cut away anything worthwhile. There were no regrets, no Unbooks. Writers complicated the world by cutting it up – butchers simplified it.

Sanford became a butcher, and broke off what he supposed had been his love affair with Janet Corbin. He’d loved her all along, not Carolyn – not only Carolyn. He desired the two other people who comprised Janet as he’d loved one person, as he’d loved the part of himself that was her, too. She was perfect – free, romantic, sentimental, and eternal in her fictional world. She was unattainable and at the same time somehow already attained. She was the sum of the three of them, no, she was spelled by the three of them, each letter transcending itself the moment it entered her. He’d created the Unbook for Janet, he guessed, in the hopes that in keeping her whole, he might make her real. And now, Janet wouldn’t even finish her last book. At least, not the Janet Corbin they’d been.

He did finish the Unbook, finally. Carolyn had rushed by the new butcher shop, and he’d found himself going after her, shouting. She didn’t stop. “Carolyn! Carolyn.” She turned around faster than he’d expected, and smiled.

“Hi, Sanford,” she said. She looked much older than before. “Hi,” he said. “You look good.”

She stroked his arm. “You too,” she said. He stared at the ground for a while. He could still feel her touch. “Is there something you wanted to say?” she said. She turned on the dictaphone.

“I didn’t realize I was being interviewed,” he said.

“You’re always being interviewed,” she said.

“Well... all right. I have a question. About the dictaphone,” he said.

“You do?” she said. Her smile wavered a little.

“Okay. What do you do with all those cassette tapes? I mean, do you have some kind of room in your house all filled with them?”

“That’s why you stopped me?” she said. “To ask that stupid question?” She’d never said stupid the whole time he’d known her.

“Yeah. That’s why,” he said.

She laughed. “It’s always been the same tape,” she said, and went on her way.
Cornstalk Stubble Under Snow
Oana Marian

So in my paintings there is a quiet, personal tie-up, an echo of the past.
—Andrew Wyeth

How often as a child I wished to see
Some heavy snow. For if a field of corn,
Or what remained of it, appeared to be
Just patched with white, mid-winter’s blanket torn,
Its threadbare homeliness unsettled me.

But since a year or two ago, I’ve found
An eerie comfort in these fields. The sky
Behind Magnolia Hill, the furrowed ground,
Seem like a deep, long-drawn-out winter’s sigh,
Cut by a single kestrel’s call. The sound

Grows faint, the echoes rarefy. And there
The snow spreads sparsely like some rough-grained chalk,
Exposing yellowed devilgrass, to bare
The tops of rudely stubbled corn; a stalk
Or two throws pointed shadows from the glare

Refracted by the silos’ cold-sheened caps.
So Wyeth crossed the Kuerner farm this way.
The ease of weathered beauty, or perhaps
A quiet danger seems to mark a day
Like this, a memory coming out of lapse.
Cathy brought her daughter to my home one afternoon, even though she said she never would, and when they arrived Olivia stared at me and asked if I knew anyone whose name began with an "R." She waited for me to answer and then said, "Old man, you're taking too long." I finally told her that once, not very long ago, I did know someone. Cathy looked apologetic. Olivia got excited. "Maybe you know the same one as me! My friend's name is Ruby and she's in the fourth grade." Cathy rubbed her daughter's back, placed her fingers on her neck and stretched them all the way down; her back was that small.

"Why would you have a friend in fourth grade, Olivia?" she asked. "That's so old."

"I have lots of friends like Ruby." Olivia lifted her chin high, and poked one hip out. "What do you have to eat here old man?" I wondered how old she thought I was. She ran in search of the kitchen and I saw her shorts were torn in the back.

Cathy grabbed my arm. She smelled good, as if she had come straight from a shower on the other side of my front door.

"I'm sorry Caleb. Sick baby-sitter, no school today. I'll make her quit the 'old man' stuff. She'll stay out of your way, I promise."

"I think she's beautiful," I said and kissed Cathy hard for a long time, because I was happy that this woman could have made such a pretty thing.

"Where's Rose?" she asked when we were done.

"I don't know." I wished she wouldn't always ask. I never knew. Then, as usual, Cathy put on rubber gloves in case she found an accident, and left me, in search of my wife.

Olivia did not stay out of my way, as Cathy had promised. We sat together in the kitchen where she made a game of requesting food from me but then rejecting whatever I offered. Over and over she stuck out her tongue and moaned "No, I said something good, not gross, good. Can't you get it right, Caleb?" (I told her my name early on so that she would stop the "old man" stuff. I couldn't have taken it.) As I sat with her daughter, Cathy would fly through the kitchen and peck Olivia's cheek, squeeze my

9 In *Quarter Notes* you pay homage to Donald Justice, who took seriously his roles both as writer and teacher. How much is teaching a part of what you'd consider to be your vocation or calling?
shoulder. "I hope she's not bothering you," she said each time, and then, "Olivia, please try to be good for Caleb." Then she would be gone again, her silver hoop earrings glaring back at us as she turned and fled to Rose.

"What's wrong with that woman?" Olivia asked soon. She was spinning an empty salad spinner around and around. It made such a vacant noise that I knew I could never pretend it was full.

"Hello? Caleb?" Olivia snapped her fingers in front of my eyes. "I asked you a question about that woman."

"You mean Rose?" I asked, even though I knew who she meant.

"That crazy woman. My mom says she's not really crazy though, just old. But I don't believe it. You're really old and you don't seem crazy. Not like that." I thought of Cathy gripping her daughter's face, and lying about who I was to her. Then I thought of Cathy naked.

"She's not crazy," I finally said. Olivia kept spinning, her arm going around and around like a whirligig in a wind storm. "She's sick."

"What's the difference?" Olivia stopped and panted, opened the lid of the spinner. "There," she said, "it's finally done. Now we can have our afternoon tea party."

"It's done, Caleb," and I wondered what we would be eating, what she would choose to make out of anything in the world.

Later that afternoon, Olivia taught me how to make paper airplanes. She taught me how to fold the paper so that the plane would fly for a long time before it landed and how to be happy not knowing when or where it would come down. "You just have to close your eyes and then see where it goes, like a surprise." After a few unsatisfactory flights, Olivia decided it was time to get serious. She crouched on the kitchen tile and held the little plane with two hands. She counted slowly to ten and then thrust herself upwards, launching the plane ceiling-ward.

"Look at it, Caleb." Her plane flew from one edge of the room to the other, drifting from Rose's wall of pots to her breakfast chair, and back again. We watched each other watch it. Then Olivia caught it out of the air, and then tore its wings off.

"I'm sorry I broke it, Caleb," she said sincerely, but without explanation. She added that it must be especially hard for me to watch things fall apart because it could remind me of how old I am. She frowned and said, "I know all about death. I know that it comes when you don't know it's coming. Do you know about my dad?"

"Yes," I said, sitting down and giving us each a cookie, the only thing we both liked. "Your mother has told me what a good man he was."

"He was," she said, splitting her Oreo in two and licking the filling, "he was actually a hero. Did you know that? My dad, he was a hero. My mom said he got an honor of medal." She smiled. "You know what those are, right?" I nodded. "They're really good to get."

I made a new plane the way I had been taught and then stood up and flew it around the kitchen. We watched it glide in circles around the cabinets, past the pots and pans hanging in rows, around and around until it wore itself out.

"How old are you exactly?" Olivia asked.

"I'm seventy," I said, quiet in deference to my age, my greatest accomplishment.

"That's nothing. I know someone who's ninety-nine."

"Do you?" I asked, "who's that?"

"It's my mom's mom's mom. She's ninety-nine. Can you believe that? She's ninety-three years older than me exactly. We have the same birthday. Valentine's Day because so many people love us."

"I'm so glad," I said, even though I felt tired all of a sudden, and a little sad. Olivia stared at me for a long time, chocolate creeping from the corners of her mouth.

"My mom loves that crazy woman I think." This shocked me, and later, when Olivia fell asleep on the couch I asked Cathy if she loved me too, just to make sure.
I was a mess when Cathy first came to me. My son, who is older than she is, hired her to come in every day and take Rose off my hands, Rose who was not really Rose anymore as far as I was concerned. The first thing she said when I met her was that I had a lovely home. I looked around and disagreed; there were candy wrappers on the living room carpet and the piano bench was covered with stacks of sheet music. Each room in my house was filled with things that should have been thrown away a long time ago. I tried to see this woman’s eyes and judge whether she was being serious, or just polite, but I couldn’t because she was looking down. Her head was tilted all the way down like she was praying.

“Mr Williams,” she whispered, “I think your home could be very lovely.” Her dark hair was short like a man’s and she wore long earrings in the shapes of fish. I imagined those fish stifled by air, suddenly not anywhere near home. Then I realized that was a little bit like me, like me and Rose.

And while Cathy followed Rose around that first day I stayed in the house, even though Tom, my son, wanted me to leave right away, to take a break. He made me promise to call Harrison, a fellow I used to golf with, but I didn’t. I remember sitting in the basement, part of me wishing to be back north where we used to live, and part of me wishing for Rose’s special-recipe banana bread to be warm from the oven for one more breakfast. I remember that all of me wished for Rose back. I put on Pachelbel’s Canon and cried for the first time in a while because I had always been a simple man with few needs and this music had made me happy for as long as I could recall but not anymore. Then I stood up and practiced my golf swing in the shadows, hitting absent balls as far as I could, so far that they would fly for miles. When I was finished I went upstairs into the light and saw Cathy again; she was combing Rose’s hair and Rose was letting her.

“Your name’s Cathy, right?” I asked and she saw that I had been crying. Rose did not look at me, but down at her hands.

“My name is Cathy,” she said, and then she asked if it was okay to call me Caleb, and when I nodded she told me my wife must have been the most gorgeous person, and she meant inside.

“Thank you,” I remember saying, as if I had had something to do with it. Then, while Cathy combed Rose’s hair, while knots

Jeffrey Byrne
229, Midnight, 1998, silver-gelatin print, 8.625" x 10.5"
untangled and day ended, she let me play her my favorite music, a little Gilbert and Sullivan, and some of Mozart’s horn concertos, and God bless her, she laughed at my jokes.

On July fourth Olivia was so tan that, as we waited for the fireworks over the boardwalk together, I feared I might lose her to the darkness, to the shadows spreading over more and more of the promenade. I wondered what I would tell Cathy if I lost her, and decided it was not an option. So, I kept Olivia near me; I even took her hand for a while against her will.

While we waited for it to get dark enough, Olivia made me sit on the ground, twilit legs towering around us.

"It’s just nothing," she kept saying with an impish smile of the card game called ‘Nothing’ that she was teaching me. "It shouldn’t take you long to learn because it’s nothing!" She really got a kick out of that but when I joked that I had lost nothing in losing she frowned, and grumbled. "That’s not true – you still lost the game to me. I still won." I nodded and brushed an eyelash from her cheek.

"Gimme that," she whispered fiercely. I obeyed and put it in her palm. She transferred it to her finger and stuck it out, bringing it to her lips. She blew on it once, and then again, harder.

"Damn it," she said, "Damn it. More than two blows and it doesn’t count anymore." She looked as if she might cry.

“What doesn’t count?” I asked.

“My wish,” she said, lowering her head. Then she took my hand to trace the lines on my palm with soft fingers, as if she could see everywhere I’d ever been with a thumbnail. Before long she left me to go to the railing and look over it for a while, beyond it, and even though I liked her near me, I didn’t interfere, I wondered what she had wished for, what was so important to her just to hope for. I let her stand there, suddenly not sure what I would wish for right then, as we waited for twilight to end and night to begin.
My son calls every now and then, maybe once a week, to check in. He does not know about Cathy or Olivia. I try to pick up the phone when he calls at night so that he won't be surprised, but once Olivia answers it before me, because I am an old man.

"Who was that little girl?" he asked, shocked, when I finally got on. It was an August Miami night and my face stuck to the receiver, held fast by the sweet threads of Olivia's sweat.

"She was telling me about the phases of the moon," Tom said, "but she had no idea what she was talking about." Tom is not the most forgiving person, even to children.

"She's Cathy's daughter." I said.

"Mom's nurse?" Tom asked.

"What did she say about the moon?" I asked.

"What's the nurse's daughter doing at your house at 7:30?"

"Tonight you can see the moon already," I said, "even though it's still light out."

"Mystifying, I'm sure," said Tom, "but who is this Olivia?"

I did not want to tell him. He was my son, but there are some things a father can keep from a son if he feels he has to, and this was not the first. Rose and I have kept secrets. For instance, Tom never knew his mother had a child before him—a girl who died three days after she was born. For three days three years before him, I had a daughter. And strangely, when he asked who Olivia was, I thought first of that baby and the way Rose held her to her chest in the hospital bed even after she was gone. I sighed a little into the phone, not meaning to, because I saw this scene so clearly that I couldn't believe forty years had passed since that sadness, that other sadnesses had come and gone since then, that I was older now than I ever imagined I could be, and that Rose was not Rose anymore. So I said, "Have a good night, Tom," and hung up because I knew he had heard the sound I made and would ask about it until I told him something, and although I knew he could take it now, I also knew I couldn't have. I have lived too long to have illusions of my own strength.
“Who was that?” Cathy asked, worried, this dear woman who also knew nothing of that daughter I had, and never would, because Rose wouldn’t tell, and neither would I.

At night, before Cathy started staying over, when Rose and I lay next to each other, I would whisper to her when she was finally asleep that she was my secret-keeper, and that she was very good at it. I would say it over and over. And when she turned in her sleep, when her lips moved into a smile as if she were the old Rose, I would think she was happy to be praised, that was the sense I got, and so I would keep whispering: Rose, Rose, these are our secrets you are keeping, Rose, you are my secret-keeper.

When Cathy told me the truth about Olivia’s father, Rose was in the other room watching slides of our trips around the world.

“He was a man like you,” Cathy said and I could hear the click click of the projector between her words, continents traversed in moments. “He was very much like you.”

“How?” I asked and held my hand tight to her cheek, loving the rough and smooth that combined when I touched her. And then my hand was wet.

“He was my first patient’s husband, Caleb, and I loved him, and then he died.”

I wondered which country Rose was visiting right then, and which hemisphere, whether she was on safari or hiking a tall mountain. I decided she was relaxing somewhere, probably on the beaches where she and Tom counted as high as a thousand until the sand got cool enough to walk on.

“I hadn’t been in love before,” Cathy said, “I didn’t know what it felt like and then he left me my daughter to love.”

“And Olivia never knew him,” I said, trying to picture her, to see what she could have gotten from an old man, whether there were any traces of someone my age in her.

“No,” Cathy eyed me, “not yet. She wasn’t one before he died.”

“I’m sorry,” I said and really was. And it wasn’t because Cathy loved me for strange reasons, or didn’t really love me at all, but because Rose was half way around the world, and here was Cathy, before me, who had never been anywhere. I wondered where Olivia’s father had been in his life, if he had traveled distances and crossed oceans, and whether he felt he could travel some more with a new wife and child. Cathy had never seen these places, and that was why I was really sorry, because I knew I couldn’t take her to places I had already been.

In September, when I turn seventy-one, Cathy sends Olivia to a new school, a better one, near me. They are both living with me all the time now, and we eat meals together around my small kitchen table. Cathy makes meatloaf and pastas with spicy sauces and Mexican enchiladas with five different cheeses. She likes for us to eat well.

Rose doesn’t sit with us at meals. She grazes all day, my sad sheep, and during our meals we can hear her pacing upstairs, just above us, or searching in the living-room for what has always been there and still is. Yesterday she asked where the coffee table had gotten to, and why it always disappears. Olivia almost choked; juice dripped from her mouth. When she was under control, she stood and confronted Rose.

“You’re crazy,” she said to her, “you’re really wacko.” Then she took Rose’s hand and led her to the table, stood with her before it, like a tour guide. “See,” she said, “there it is with all the pictures of your family.”

“Tom,” Rose said, pointing at a picture of me. “There’s Tom.”

Olivia eyed her, like a frustrated teacher. “No, that’s Caleb.”

And Rose said, “Caleb? It can’t be, he’s dead, been dead for some time.” Olivia began to shriek.

“Then who’s that?” she yelled, dragging Rose back to me. Rose almost laughed.

“That’s my husband, silly silly girl.” And she turned to continue her search, muttering “wacko” beneath her breath, just as Olivia had said it, fresh and young and crisp.

Today Cathy tells me she wants to marry me. When she says it, I notice the rain that began softly not long ago has gotten louder, and harder. She also says she wants to take care of Rose until Rose dies. Then she asks why I am so quiet, and it is because I am thinking of Olivia at school learning to multiply and divide, Olivia memorizing foreign maps, and how to say please and thank you.
in other languages. I picture her at a tiny desk, her knees tucked beneath her, face pinched in concentration, like my son Tom’s when he wanted to hit the golf ball as far as he could, farther than me. She is adding numbers in her head, or maybe writing something down, or counting on her fingers. Whatever she is doing, I know, as sure as the rain falls, that soon, soon, she will learn that something is wrong here.

“When Olivia was about three, or maybe four, we went sightseeing in New York City.” Cathy looks at me. She needs me to listen to her. Suddenly all I want is to go play golf with Harrison, to listen to some music, to be alone for the rest of my life.

“We took the subway train to the stop near the Empire State Building so that we could go all the way to the top and there was an elevator that you had to take up to the street.” I picture Cathy far beneath the ground, searching, lifting her arms high above her head to find a space to climb through. She searches and searches and when she finally finds one she crawls up into the light with her tiny daughter and my Rose crawls head-first into the hole she came from. It closes behind her as if everything were water.

Cathy wonders what I am thinking. She has one hand on her hip as Olivia so often does, and leans against the sink.

“We crammed into the elevator last. I mean, we were so close to the people around us it was like a cattle car. And then from below I heard this little meowing, this tiny mewing from far beneath me. And everyone in that jam-packed space heard it too. And then it spoke and said ‘Mom, Mom, I am a little cat. I am a squish-squashed cat. I am a sad little cat.’ Olivia was telling strangers that she was sad, and I didn’t know what to do. People thought it was cute, they giggled. But not me—I cried. I picked up my cat and swore to her that she wouldn’t be sad anymore. And we didn’t go to the Empire State Building. We took the elevator back down to the train and went home. We flew home and in a few days I wished I had seen the top of that building, and the whole goddamn city. I have always regretted it. I've put her before me too much, and Caleb, I am the sad cat. Don’t you see? Don’t you see?”

But I don’t see, and Cathy becomes even farther away than she was before. The only thing I can think to do is kiss her because that is what I’ve gotten used to, but now doesn’t seem the right time.
This city knows the changeability
Of things we save: the water seeps into
The rotten siding, or warps the floorboards,

While mildew blasts the parlor furniture,
Upholstery and all, and turns once-crisp
Mementos (note cards, old photos, love letters)

To ugly matter, early. In old floods
Anonymous corpses (too poor to be
Entombed above the ground) came floating forth

Along the pitted streets, turned broad canals,
And headed for the swollen river, which full
And thick and brimming over now, spat out

Its refuse, trees or bodies, no matter,
On the levee bank. A crowd formed to watch.
And when the floods receded everyone

Returned to low ground, reclaimed their snake-filled
Parlors, re-shuttered all the windows and
Re-whitewashed mud-stained tombs; renewed the quest

For small things, which never last the next flood,
But which complete a household. All these things
They all did thus, as if by these same acts

And objects – self-doomed monuments against
The sea-change – they might, despite the heavens’
Best efforts, make something here yet matter.
12 What "reading list" would you assign to an aspiring writer?
As the Water Left It
Mark Neuman

This morning, I took the blueprints out of the fireproof safe and unfolded them on the floor. Here with my translated home in the original, I could find the spot where I was standing, a wall gone before I moved in, the corner where I put the bed last week. Houses follow maps this way.

I found this in the encyclopedia on “Blueprints:” the drawing to be copied is done on translucent paper, then impressed on other paper (treated with a ferric salt and a potassium compound), and exposed to light. Except for where the lines are, Fe is reduced and forms with K an insoluble blue field. The negative is rinsed with water, to leave the lines in white.

Noah, who lived when iron was still new to us, also laid plans anticipating water. The Bible says he built in “Gopher wood.” The ark was inhabited some time then left to dry off slowly, as the earth dried. Did it stand tall, as the water left it, which held it up so long? It was in the blueprints that it would, and I can still map home in what the water clears. (But for this: the flood dissolves all things, except for some people, the pairs of animals, and the ark that leaves its charge here. Once lucid with grace, its wood now dries and bleaches in the sun. Brought back through floods to emptiness, flat against the sky and spared its solvation, this is the way the frame stands.)

So do the blueprints and the ark endure in the way that they were made? Today, I would like to read this somewhere: The elements cut hope from its original. You can see them as on the sky always, back of the blue field.
Journal and landscape — Discredited form, discredited subject matter —
I tried to resuscitate both, breath and blood,
making them whole again,

Through language, strict attention —
"Apologia Pro Vita Sua," Black Zodiac

Charles Wright's poetry combines "strict attention," close observation, and metrical precision with mystic meditation on issues of faith, materialism, landscape and form. His work has been widely lauded. Wright won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for 1997's Black Zodiac. He has also published Appalachia, National Book Award winner Country Music: Selected Early Poems (1983), Chickamunga (1995), The World of the Ten Thousand Things (1990), Zone Journals (1988), The Southern Cross (1981), China Trace (1977), and Bloodlines (1975), as well as two collections of essays, Halflife (1988) and Quarter Notes (1995). Wright has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Ingram Merrill Foundation, and The National Endowment for the Arts, as well as the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize (1996) and the Edgar Allen Poe Award (1976) from the Academy of American Poets, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award (1977), the Brandeis Creative Arts Citation for Poetry (1987), and the Ruth B. Lilly Poetry Prize (1993). Wright was born in Pickwick Dam, Tennessee in 1935 and attended Davidson College and the University of Iowa. He lives in Charlottesville, Virginia and teaches English at the University of Virginia.

Questions appear throughout the magazine. Interview conducted by Darby Saxbe.

Charles Wright Responds

1. I am composed out of what I see, apparently, and not out of what I think. What I think comes out of what I look at. I imprinted twice in my life — when I was young and grew up in the American south, southern Appalachia in particular, and when I had a second, more intellectual birth in Italy, in the late 1950s. One tends to return to what one knows best when one is trying to explain oneself. I find I am no exception to this. If one is having trouble generating ideas and emotions, or if one is genetically loathe to express them, one borrows what gives one an emotional or intellectual release to express such things. The T'ang poets tended to do this. I find that I tend to do so myself. Landscape is transmutable in art. Nature probably is not. "Landscape" is considered slightly "déclassé." I like that. I'd like to have been a painter, but I can't paint. I'd like to have been a musician, but I can't play. So I riff on the landscape. So I riff on the language. It calms my spirit.

2. Well, I do believe the outer reveals the inner, or can be transmuted, as I say, into the inner. All travels of any significance are inner, in any case. The heart is a picky eater. It doesn't need much to get along. But what it does need, it really needs, and will have. Landscape is front man for the other world. It's better to be in his pocket than out of it. The heart knows which hand to bite. It's the one that feeds it. The inner terrain cannot be mapped. In spite of what Bob Dylan said, there are no road maps to the soul. Let it remain that wild country we all have to cross. Good shoes downtown. No hands in pockets.
3 They resolve into the same thing in my mind, and it’s very difficult to explain how. Perhaps through the crystal of language. The sturm and drang of Christian imagery seems to get pacified and clarified by Zen’s low flame. My vocabulary is the vocabulary I grew up with. But its meaning is the way I have come to be read and it has come to be read. We all burn in the same fire. We all enter the same language. Look, your work is either smaller than you are or bigger than you are. If smaller, then you are a diminished thing. If bigger, you’ve become a pilgrim on the road to the Campostela of language. No great poet (not to say good poet) has ever had work smaller than he. Although most poets have. Good shoes downtown.

4 Very little in my day-to-day life, but an enormous amount in my thinking and writing. As for religion, unfortunately, I seem to subscribe to none, though I read a lot in the stacks. Especially in the Anglican section. One does try to be as Christian in one’s attitudes in life, however, as much as possible. As John Keats said, there is so little good in even the best of us. Have mercy.

5 My talent has been modest, I think, but my aims have been sweeping. If I could just reverse those, I think I might be onto something. Of course, it’s better to be a “little master.” Just look at Philip Larkin, W.H. Auden, William Carlos Williams, Dickinson, Hopkins, etc. Of course it’s better to be a “big failure.” Just look at Pound and Crane, the Williams of Paterson, Shelley, Zukofsky, etc. My teacher, Donald Justice, firmly believes in “little masters.” The first poet I ever read was Pound, who definitely tried otherwise. I don’t know. Wallace Stevens, the state bird of Connecticut, once famously said, “I do not know which to prefer, / The beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendoes, / I The blackbird whistling / Or just after.” When push comes to shove, I’m an innuendo guy myself. Little masters.

6 I had to write a lot of thank-you notes over the spring and summer. Otherwise, it’s a non-event. One hopes the attention will help critical appreciation along. One hopes one’s writing isn’t affected. So far so good with the latter. Inside the former it’s too dark to see — all one can hope for is that it might make the work larger and the head smaller, and not the other way around.

7 The chicken comes first, then the egg. Sound then sense. As Pound used to say about Yeats, I get a ‘chune’ in my head from time to time. My lines are all a variation on syllabic verse. Which is to say I count the syllables in every line I write. I let the stresses take care of themselves. 7 and 13 are my favorite syllable counts, next 9 and 15, then 5 and 17. Per line, I mean. I try to mix the lines up as much as possible so as to avoid slipping into a “pattern.” Like all of us in free verse, I write to the sound I like to hear. One goes by the seat of one’s ear. Taking into account, of course and vowel and consonant balances, runs and riffs of different melodic patterns, the attempt to get at quantitative values as much as possible in a non-quantitative system. I like the ghost of pentameter behind the lines, invisible but making noises. And though I say I let the stresses shift for themselves, one knows more or less what one is likely to find in a stress pattern if one knows the syllable count, doesn’t one? In free verse, you live and die by your ear. There are a lot of dead bodies around, so listen to the sound that it makes, and make a joyful noise.

8 Why write if beauty comes from silence? Because silence is terrifying, that’s why. Is poetry a way to use language to get beyond language? I’d like it to be, and I like to pretend that it is, and sometimes, momentarily, it is, but in the long run I’m afraid that the beyond is still the beyond.

9 I like to think it’s not much, that it is adjunct, that it is non-solvable in the waters of writing. I hate, for instance, to be addressed as “Professor.” However, I’m afraid it’s been an iron thread that has run through the entire tapestry of what I have done over the years. And I’m always thrilled when anyone says he or she has liked a class, and crushed when I think I’ve done poorly in any given class. Or semester.

10 Emphasis on formal precision. Hard to crack open someone’s chest in class and say, Your soul looks a little off today. They should listen hard to what I have to say — at least some of it will have some merit — and then go out, if they are any good, and do otherwise.

11 It’s hard to say. John has a bad leg. I’ve got a bad arm. It would depend on whether we were kicking or punching. Hard to say.

12 The Bible, Cathay (Pound), Residencia en la Tierra, I and II (Neruda), Selected Poems of W.H. Auden, Bells in Winter (Milosz), Collected Stories of Ernest Hemingway, Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, Spring and All and Pictures from Brueghel (Williams), The Confessions (St. Augustine), The Divine Comedy, Shakespeare’s sonnets, The Bridge (Crane), The Poetics of Space (Bachelard), Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson, Montale, Kafka, Herbert (G and Z), Lorca, Borges, etc., etc., etc. As Theodore Roethke once famously said, “You want to be a writer? There’s the library.”
Rind
Alexis Jones

When body seemed only bulk,
Navigable hulk or husk,
And souls to be extracted from eyes,
"Lathe me to a wound," I'd asked,
"For truth is bare and we might find
Blood brotherhood at last."

But it is the edges of things come alive with sun.
I'm asbestos hearted, my soul all in my skin.
Outside thing, stouter mobius strip,
Inflated to a round and not concluding.

There never was a point of view.
Consider, for every focus,
What body of vertigo. Consider the blind,
Hunched over handicrafts, piecing dorsal from ventral,
In rooms or on a plain.

Eyes are too tender – dumb berries,
Fairies in caves, they can't play
In the general games. Deity
Is dim and large, plotted on scrimmaging
Frictions. Leaflets a flap past memory of seed.

And it is use that makes the body
Itself. Thick or fine, tense or slack.
No paint job is tenacious:
The verve we love is held back for need.
We are most lost when we retreat.
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The winner of the Francis Bergen Memorial Prize for Fiction is "Glamorous" by Julia Dahl. Robert Stone judged the contest.

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