Two Kinds of Commandments
For Benjamin
Jennifer Russ

Late Afternoon on the Canal
Helen Phillips

Mrs. Sen Mrs. Sen
Bidisha Banerjee

Tea for Two
Lisa Gross

Saint’s Day
Caolan Madden

Request
Frances Brown

Swung on Strings
Danica Novgorodoff

Replacing the Docks
Marguerite Lise Clavel

print
Marie D’Errico

Departures
Danica Novgorodoff

photograph
Jane Yakowitz

photograph
Yoni Amiel

photograph
Yoni Amiel

The Fat Man
Shawn Cheng

photograph
Yoni Amiel

I-475/795 Perrysburg, Ohio
Eric Recktenwald

Billboards
Eric Recktenwald

Milford, CT
Linda Rosenbury

Retain in, or recall to, the memory; bear in mind, recollect.
In certain favourable moods, memories—what one has forgotten—come to the top. Now if this is so, is it not possible—I often wonder—that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them? I see it—the past—as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. There at the end of the avenue still, are the garden and the nursery. Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past. I shall turn up August 1890. I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start.

From *A Sketch of the Past*, by Virginia Woolf

The above quotation inspired the editors of this issue to ask three writers about their relationships to memory, in literature and in life. Each was invited to respond with an account of a particularly affecting memory, or with a comment on memory itself.

Helen Schulman ✶
Harriet Chessman ✾
Carolyn Kizer ✹

If you wish to count pages, you may consult the chart below.
The train starts. Again I'm brought to the float
Trip we took in Israel down the Jordan.
June. I hadn't weighed our history then;
You'd barely had your aliyah by rote.
Paddling up from back of me, you yelped
Your victory as your wet tire splashed by.
I had no choice, let you go; clear, blue sky
Above the river laughed. And nothing's helped:
Within a year you shot beyond my height,
Caught in a furious current all your own;
This week, I willed to stake a spot of shore,
But, like this passing landscape, it is flown.
If you rode with me, now, we'd share the sight:
Some bare trees, brazen, springtime held in store.
LATE AFTERNOON ON THE CANAL

The water
is as green as the eyes
of the cat
who sits in a stone window
watching
the occasional procession
of a slow
shining black boat
breaking the green water
and slightly disturbing
the tattered red pieces of geranium
which fall from the window
where one woman hangs
her dangerous laundry
above the water
and across the water
which has its own voice
a girl eats a cold plum
carefully above the boy whose head
dreams greenly in her lap
and in his dream
there is a cat who is also
a woman
and the cat sits in a stone window
knowing nothing about the white sky
and everything about
this bit of green canal
so slowly as the afternoon
grows cold
the dream grows greener
and the cat
or woman
stands as though
she has made daytime love
for a long time
and now wants only
a cold plum
so surveys the water
as though she is looking in a green mirror
and leaves.
IN PREETI’S GAME, she stood outside the door to her own room admiring Rishi Rai. She touched his glossy paper lips with her fingers and traced the creases that divided his perfect face into quadrants. She knew that Deepu was on the other side of the door, counting tens in English under his breath. She hoped that he would remember her instructions. When he got to seventy, she prepared to imitate a doorbell. But he barked: “One-two-three-READY!”

“No Deepu!” she said, her mouth urgent against the door. “Don’t say ready, just wait for me to say ding-dong.”

“But I’m crazy, I can’t follow instructions,” he said.

“Shut up! We’re starting over Ding-dong.” Preeti went ahead and opened the door.

“The nurse is here,” she announced as she sailed into the room. After she had locked the door behind her it took her a moment to locate Deepu crouched behind the lacy curtain, gnawing on one of her dolls. Small noises that did not jam into words came out of him. He had wrapped himself in Preeti’s ma’s sari. She advanced on him.

“Mrs. Sen, I am a nurse from Calcutta Hospital,” Preeti informed Deepu. “Your family has hired me to take care of you.” He glared at her behind his hair. He was so small, smaller than she was. Preeti grabbed his wrist. She had not realized his skin would be so rough. Deepu thrashed in her grasp, keening. He dislodged the doll from his mouth and started spitting on Preeti if she came close enough. His eyeballs lolled behind their fluttering lids. His right hand fiddled with the bunched-up sari. Preeti beamed, her earlier dismay forgotten. She had never seen a real crazy person, but she was sure that Deepu was doing a good job.

“I promise I’ll be nice to you, Mrs. Sen – if you listen to me.” Deepu dragged himself over to the bed, still emitting those little noises. “First, I’m going to give you a bath. A sponge bath.”

“No, no, no, no,” Deepu replied through clenched teeth. Preeti moved towards him slowly. She saw what she had to do now. He was stronger than she was, but she knew he would not resist. She snatched his arms and wound them around the bedpost. “Pretend I’ve tied them and you can’t move,” she whispered to him. He floundered, unwilling to hurt her, unwilling to remain in her hold.

Preeti ran into the bathroom connected to her room and dunked her towel in the bucket of lukewarm water. She put the dripping thing on the bed. “Mrs. Sen, I’m going to have to give you your bath now.” She tugged on the sari. It came undone, the silk gushing all at once into her hands. He was still, his arms crooked around the post. His chest was brown. She dabbed at it with the towel. She realized he was looking steadily at her.

“Deepu?” she said. “Mrs. Sen?”

He was just looking at her, and now she thought that maybe he really was crazy.

“Mrs. Sen, you look like you need an injection,” she said.

Deepu fell out of character: “Where do you think you’re going to get an injection?”

Preeti reached in her pocket and came up with one of the insulin syringes she had scavenged from her father’s nightstand. She stabbed it into the air. Deepu followed it with widened eyes. “Don’t worry, this won’t hurt,” she told him kindly.

“No, no, no!” he shouted, and rolled under the bed. Preeti followed, grim in her resolve. Under the bed were dark and dust and suitcases. “Mrs. Sen?” she called. She squirmed between the suitcases and touched flesh. “Mrs. Sen,” she said. Deepu was making a muffled noise, as though there were feathers stuffed in his mouth. “Come on out of there Mrs. Sen,” she coaxed. “I have something nice for you.”

“What?”
“Something nice. Come on.” She pulled him out and did not loosen her grip on his arm. Preeti's ma's sari was snarled with cobwebs. Deepu was not conscientious about sweeping under the bed.

“What do you have then?” he said. He liked the sound of it; he kept saying it.

“An injection!” Preeti crowed, bringing the syringe close to his arm.

He stopped gibbering. “Preetidi—” he began.

“Don’t worry,” she repeated. “Be quiet.” She held his skin taut and poked the needle into it. The two of them watched the blood prickle on his arm. Deepu gave her a secret, admiring look. He sat in silence. Preeti moved closer to him and stifled a desire to ruffle his hair.

“Wow, I guess I’ve knocked you out,” she said finally. Deepu shut his eyes with surprising docility and let his mouth go slack. “I must put you to bed.”

Preeti pushed Deepu into the bed. Deepu made subdued noises and drooled a little. Preeti could see the two of them reflected in the mirror opposite. She was pleased to see herself looking efficient and in control. From behind them, several of the Rishi Rais plastered to her walls stared at her. She wished she could be tender with him like this. She took out a handkerchief on which she had embroidered a small, pink flower in needlework class and wiped the corner of Deepu’s mouth. Slowly, he calmed. His bony brown shoulders poked gently into Preeti’s arms. She felt a slinky excitement uncoiling inside her belly and radiating down. “I’m going to oil your hair Mrs. Sen,” she said. “It will relax you and make you ready for sleep.” She reached over to the dressing table for the bottle of coconut oil and shifted Deepu’s head onto her lap.

It was the first time Preeti had oiled someone else’s hair. She moved her uncertain fingers through Deepu’s scalp, working in the hot, phlegmy oil. His hair came out and stuck to Preeti’s fingers. She liked it. She had just finished wiping her fingers off on the white pillow when she heard the door opening.

“PREETI!” Preeti’s ma rushed into the room. “What are you doing? Why do you have the door closed?” As she approached the bed, she started screeching in dismay. She dragged Deepu up by his hair and slapped him. “You filthy, wretched boy, why are you on Preeti’s bed?” He remained impassive. For a second, Preeti was terrified that he would explain everything. Deepu gave her a look. It said: Now I can do what I want to you. Preeti looked away.

“Preetidi wanted to oil my hair,” was all he said. For the first time, Preeti’s ma noticed the sheen on Preeti’s fingers and the strands of coarse hair on the sheets. It was Preeti whom her ma slapped now. “Do you know how filthy they are?” she hissed, as though Deepu weren’t there. “They are full of lice and vermin. Where have you picked up these dirty habits? If you want to go live in the slum with the rest of them, go!”

Preeti said nothing, although she had started crying. She watched her mother’s fingers appear in red on Deepu’s cheek. Maddeningly, he was still calm.

Her ma dismissed Deepu and left Preeti to herself. By way of a parting shot, she said: “You’re twelve years going on thirteen, about to be a teenager, but honestly, sometimes you behave like such a baby! You don’t want me to tell your cousin about this when she arrives, do you?”

Preeti shuddered as she locked herself in. She was far too angry to keep on crying without anyone there to see her. She really hoped her ma wasn’t serious about telling Kiran. She didn’t think she had done anything horrible anyway. It was just a game. She wondered if Kiran would like playing Mrs. Sen Mrs. Sen with her. It was hard to imagine anyone
other than Deepu being Mrs. Sen. Preeti put a tape of Rishi Rai’s superhit songs into the cassette player and burrowed deep into the bed. It was still sticky from Deepu. “I’m a lonely wandering lover,” Rishi Rai sang (of course she knew it wasn’t really him; he was lip-synching to a playback singer, but it didn’t matter). “I’m a sad traveling gypsy. I’m going to burglarize your heart and make my home there.” She sniffed her fingers. The good smell of Deepu’s scalp was still on them.

Kiran was coming. At least Preeti had that. She planned to stick closely to Kiran during each of the four days that her cousin would spend in Calcutta. To prepare for her arrival, Preeti resolved to reread every word she had written about Kiran. Whenever Preeti and her classmates had to write about the person they admired most in the world her friends picked Indira Gandhi, or Michael Jackson, but for Preeti, Kiran was the only subject. “Kiran is my cousin-sister. She is seventeen years old. She is very beautiful. She lives in the USA. It is very cold there, so Kiran wears many sweaters. Her favorite color is red. In her school, there are no uniforms. Kiran loves her school. She always comes first in her class. She is kind and funny and she loves me very much,” Preeti had written in her most recent composition. “I admire her because she is so nice and also studious. One day, I hope to be exactly like her.” Then she had drawn a picture of Kiran with the fluorescent markers Kiran’s mother had sent her from America. She had originally marked two semi-circular lines on Kiran’s chest. And then she had wondered again about Kiran, what she looked like and how she acted. She imagined she must look like Preeti, but if Preeti were beautiful. When she looked again at the drawing of Kiran, she was abashed. She colored in her chest with a black marker. Preeti’s ma had sent a copy to her sister, but Kiran had never responded. Probably she hadn’t gotten the letter, or maybe she didn’t like to wear black sweaters.

**IN PREETI’S FAVORITE HINDI MOVIES,** the children always knew the right way to act. They were optimistic even when their parents were kidnapped or got cancer; when they cried, their tears looked fake. Radhika, Preeti’s best friend, had told her how they put glycerine in their eyes when they needed to cry. Nothing too terrible could happen to them, because they were only acting anyway. When Preeti was younger, people were always asking her whom she loved more, her father or her mother. That’s when she had taken to answering cutely: “Kiran!” She thought it sounded like something a clever kid in a movie would say. And besides, she knew it would make everyone laugh, even her parents.

Preeti’s ma always referred to Preeti’s baba as ‘are you listening?’ because it was improper for her to say his name aloud. Preeti’s baba called her ma by her name, Urmila. Preeti thought that maybe her ma didn’t like to be called by her name, and that’s why she and Preeti’s baba fought so much. Preeti’s baba spent very little time in the house. Preeti thought sometimes that if he died, she wouldn’t need the glycerine.

Preeti was fine at school. Her ma and baba always told her to study harder so that she could be like Kiran. Her teachers liked her, but they told her ma that she talked too much and sometimes filled the other girls’ heads with nonsense. Still, Preeti definitely wasn’t one of the weak girls. She was friendly with the girls from the best families and aloof to the rest. She hated boys (except Rishi Rai who didn’t count because he was famous) and was glad she didn’t have to go to school with them. Deepu and her baba were the only boys she knew. But Deepu was a servant and her baba was her baba, so neither of them really counted, either. She wasn’t even sure if she liked Deepu. She had not known him long. His baba, Preeti’s aunt’s cook, had brought him from the village just a few weeks ago.
In the silver diary with a real lock that Radhika had given her, Preeti wrote that she would never get married, not even to Rishi Rai. She wrote that her official best friends were Radhika and Prerna, because they were from the best families. She wrote that her favorite color was silver because it was the color of the stars and that her current goal was to get selected to dance to a Rishi Rai song for her teachers during the Teacher's Day Celebration. She would have liked to have been Miss Universe, like Ayeshwaria Roy, but she knew enough not to write that down. Instead, she wrote that she wanted to be a doctor, like her baba, or a computer scientist, like Bill Gates. She wrote that she couldn’t wait for Kiran, her favorite person in the world, to come, so that they could finally meet.

IN PREETI’S DREAM, Rishi Rai holds Kiran in his arms in front of the Taj Mahal and raises her high above his head; she smiles and arches like an Olympic figure skater. He is lithe in a turban and embroidered silk robes. Kiran sparkles in a sequined bikini-top and billowing pants. Preeti is unsurprised to see that Kiran looks just like her, but thinner and older. The sun spins into her hair. Rishi Rai sings: “My crazy heart is exploding. You intoxicate my veins.” Kiran opens her mouth to respond and the Taj Mahal melts into green fields overrun by sunflowers higher than their heads. Now they are both gyrating in tight blue jeans dodging the sunflowers and rolling down endless slopes buoyant with grass. “Drink from my well and you will always be thirsty,” Kiran sings. Rishi Rai moves close to her face and the hills whirl into waterfalls. Now they are both dressed in black. It is raining. Kiran’s sari clings to her body. Pointy nipples stick out of her blouse and brush against Rishi Rai. He smiles vaguely and sings, “I am the King of Thieves and I will steal my way into your heart.” With some horror, Preeti realizes that his lips are not moving in time to the words. “I am the Queen of the Police and I will handcuff your heart,” Kiran responds. With each word, her lips and body movements grow more out of sync with the music. And the music itself slows down more and more, so that each note is extended, each syllable excruciatingly drawn out. Kiran and Rishi Rai begin to look a little crazy, bobbing up and down to an imagined tempo and mouthing words that sound menacing and faraway, as though they are being transmitted from the stars.

KIRAN CAME. She was very thin, thinner than Preeti. She had very clear skin and unbecomingly short hair. She wore strange clothes. Still, Preeti thought, she looked a lot like Rani Zinta, one of Rishi Rai’s favorite female co-stars. She had a tight schedule: visits to relatives, to historical places, to non-governmental organizations all across India in three weeks. Preeti knew that Kiran’s ma had specified that she was to keep a daily journal and take lots of pictures, so that she could write an essay about her trip when she returned.

When Kiran walked in the door, Preeti hung back. But Kiran swooped upon her and gave her a big hug. She spoke a Bengali that emerged painfully from her mouth, as though each sentence pricked her tongue. The same smell of foreignness that clung to the presents that Kiran’s ma sent Preeti’s family twice a year had wrapped itself around Kiran, too. In her suitcase she had fancy chocolates, a box of crayons, and a dress that was too small for Preeti. She also had a variety of pens, colognes, lipsticks, post-it notes, and soaps for their relatives. Kiran started pulling them out right after Preeti’s parents showed her to the guestroom.

“You shouldn’t have brought all these chocolates, Kiran!” Preeti’s ma exclaimed. “We get all these things in India now.”

“Don’t worry Auntie,” Kiran said. “My mother insisted that I pack them. She likes to make you happy.”
Preeti’s ma tittered. “I guess your mother still thinks India is a poor wretched country full of inconveniences.”

“Isn’t it?” Kiran said.

“If she came back more frequently, she would know that it is not.”

“Of course I don’t know much about it Auntie,” Kiran said.

“That’s just how the Americans insist on seeing it,” Preeti’s ma said in English.

“Leave the girl alone, she just walked in the door,” Preeti’s baba said, also in English. He was lounging on the divan in a pair of briefs. As always, he was slightly drunk and very hairy everywhere except on his head.

Preeti knew that Kiran had funny ideas. She had heard her parents discussing Kiran’s visit. Her baba had been tolerant, permissive even. “I’ll be glad to see my smart little niece,” he had said. Preeti’s ma had said: “She’s a vegetarian, of all things! Can you imagine? I’m going to have to cook a separate meal for her every single day. They become crazy and corrupt if they grow up in the States. You don’t know how their minds work. She shops in second-hand stores and drives her own car. My sister told me that she’s more likely to get into a good college if she can write an essay about being Indian. Fine time to send her child to ‘learn about India.’ Whoever heard of such a ridiculous thing? With the money for a car we could pay for Preeti’s entire education!”

That conversation had ended with Preeti’s ma screaming about money. Preeti wasn’t sure what her baba said because he was harder to hear through the walls. But today Preeti’s ma was making an effort. Although her thin-to-begin-with lips disappeared behind folds of disapproving flesh and her under-chin puffed out, she turned to Kiran and said, “You shouldn’t have brought all these chocolates because Preeti’s going to eat them and get even fatter. Preeti, look what a nice figure your cousin has! You could look like that if you ate less.”


“Well, you should make sure to spend some time with her so that your good qualities rub off on her,” Preeti’s ma said. “I don’t know where her mind is, half the time. She spends all her free time watching Hindi movies. She’s obsessed with them. I wish she studied more, like you.”

“Auntie, I don’t study all the time.”

“Well, it’s clear you don’t study anything about India,” Preeti’s ma said, unable to hold back.

“Urmila!” Preeti’s baba said, standing up. “Kiran dear, don’t mind your auntie, she’s a bit of a nationalist. She gets prickly when she has to speak in English for too long. Learn some Bengali and she’ll be bleeding butter like a proper Indian auntie in no time!” He winked at Kiran and picked up his wallet from the table. He thrust a wad of cash at her. Preeti’s ma clenched her sari around her ample frame and huffed out of the room. “Here, have fun in Calcutta,” Preeti’s baba said. “I’m afraid I’m going to be away for most of the time you’re here. Business you know. But enjoy, enjoy. Preeti will show you around. Right Preeti?”

“Sure,” Preeti said, hoping only that her baba would leave immediately. Kiran started protesting, so Preeti’s baba just placed the money on the table, patted Kiran on the back, and left. Kiran fell back on the bed, heedless of the trinkets heaped upon it.

“Don’t mind them,” Preeti said. “They’re always like that.”

“It’s okay, don’t worry. They’re very nice. I’m glad to be here.” Kiran shifted.

“So, do you like Rishi Rai?” Preeti inquired tentatively, unsure what to do with Kiran now that she actually had her.

“No,” Kiran said. Then, watching Preeti’s face, she said, “I mean – I don’t know too much about him other than that everyone in India loves him.”

“Have you ever seen any of his movies?”

“No.”

Preeti stared at her cousin in surprise. “Not even Daulet ke Jung?”

Kiran laughed. “No, not even that.”

“Do you want to?”

“I don’t know. Maybe sometime. Sure. Listen, I’m really jetlagged. Let’s talk tomorrow, okay?” Without waiting for Preeti to leave, Kiran took off her pants. She had on silver, sparkly underwear. Preeti had never seen panties like that. She looked away quickly.

“Do you want me to brush your hair for you?” Preeti asked quickly so that her cousin wouldn’t sense her embarrassment.
“Okay, if you want to.” Kiran handed her a brush and sat down on the bed, pushing aside soaps and shampoos. She was still in her underwear. Preeti crouched behind her and ran the brush tentatively through Kiran’s hair. “You have the prettiest hair! I always imagined it would be longer though.”

“Why were you trying to imagine my hair?” Kiran asked.

“Because,” Preeti said brightly, “you’re my favorite person to think about. I imagined everything about you a million times before you came.”

“That’s really nice of you to say Preeti. Thank you.” Kiran was slipping off her shirt. She didn’t seem to notice that Preeti was looking straight at her.

“I just love you best of everyone in the family,” Preeti whispered. “Even more than Ma and Baba. I remember when you came here the last time—”

“But you were just a baby!” Kiran interjected.

“I know. But I remember. You used to pick me up and whirl around until we were both so dizzy and then you’d fall down on the bed. But carefully, so I wouldn’t get hurt.”

“Yeah, that was fun,” Kiran said.

“Do you want to try now?” Preeti said.

“Now?” Kiran looked startled. “Okay, we can try.” She stood up and faced Preeti. Her bare arms slipped around Preeti’s waist. Preeti touched her cousin’s back, completely aware of how lumpy her fingers were against that smooth flesh. Kiran giggled and tried to lift her up without much success. Still holding her cousin, Preeti started moving. They spun in awkward circles.

Deepu came in without knocking. Preeti’s ma had ordered him to turn down Kiran’s bed.

“Get out!” Preeti said, but Kiran was already pulling a robe around herself.

“Who are you?” she asked Deepu in Bengali.

“He’s the servant,” Preeti said.

“The servant? How old is he?”

“I don’t know. He looks little but he’s older than me.”

“I am sixteen,” said Deepu in garbled English.

“He speaks English!” Kiran marveled.

“Only a little. I tried to teach him English, and also how to read and write, but he refused to learn. Anyway, just let him fluff your bed and then he’ll leave.” Preeti didn’t think Kiran ought to spend all this time asking after Deepu. After all, he was just Deepu. He moved over to the bed and started beating the mattress with a broom made of long fat twigs.

Kiran put her hands on Preeti’s shoulders and steered her towards the door. “Goodnight Preeti. Thanks a lot. Listen, I really am tired, okay? We’ll have lots of chances to get to know each other.” She turned to Deepu and said in her painful Bengali: “Oh, and you don’t need to make my bed. I can make my own bed. Goodnight for now.”

Preeti knew Kiran wanted her to leave, but she wanted to stay with her cousin forever. Trying to stall, she said, “I don’t feel good either.”

“What’s wrong?” Kiran asked.

She looked towards Deepu and decided to ignore him. He only pretended to understand English anyway. “I’m having my period.”

“Oh! I’m sorry, that sucks. Do you have cramps?”

“It’s my first time.”

“Really?” Kiran seemed genuinely interested. “Well, do you have any questions or anything? I mean, I don’t mean to sound like one of those godawful pamphlets they hand out in school – but I could probably tell you whatever you’re wanting to know.”

Preeti watched Deepu carefully turn down the bedspread and was deeply embarrassed. “I know about it. All my friends have it. But I hate it. You don’t have it though, do you?” She couldn’t imagine Kiran stinking of blood for days at a time.

Kiran came up and put her arm around Preeti. Her skin looked even more beautiful up close.

“Oh no sweetie. I get it too, same as you. I don’t know what kind of things they’ve been telling you,” she said. Then she started laughing. “I remember when I first got my period – I had had tandoori chicken the night before. And in America, you can get a tandoori mix that comes in a
box—and it’s red. So when I looked in the toilet bowl, I thought it was tandoori mix coming out of me. I was so horrified! I wouldn’t believe my mom when she said it was blood.”

Preeti ignored this disclosure and thought instead about how warm her cousin was, how perfectly lovely and nice. All that concern was for her, Preeti, alone.

“It’s good I’m around. You can ask me anything. I’m like your sister you know,” Kiran was saying.

“Okay,” Preeti said. But she was mortified. She didn’t want to actually talk about such nasty things. Still, Kiran had said: I’m like your sister.

PREETI SUNK OUT RELUCTANTLY. Deepu joined her. “Play parcheesi with me,” she told him because she didn’t want to sit alone in her room. “I bet it’s cooler in the air-conditioner room than in the servants’ quarters.”

“It’s like a refrigerator in here!” he exclaimed as he rolled the dice. Preeti’s ma normally didn’t allow servants to linger in the air-conditioned room because she didn’t want their stench to recirculate. Deepu didn’t smell though. He groomed himself many times a day, and knew the moves to all of Rishi Rai’s dance routines. He was the only person Preeti had ever met who loved Rishi Rai as much as she did. He was shorter than she was, and she never missed an opportunity to gloat over it. His teeth jutted out yellow and askew.

Deepu was fun to play parcheesi with because he was so melodramatic. At critical points in the game, he would roll the dice inside his cupped hands for ages, exhorting various gods and goddesses to help him. “Oh please please please elephant-headed Ganesh with your magnificent snort grant me a six!” he would say.

He was good too. He was about to beat her when Preeti jerked the board. The game-pieces flew off. “You can’t win,” she said simply. “We have to keep playing until I win.”

Anger darkened his face. He sat there, waiting.

“Don’t get mad, I’m sick of playing this stupid game anyway,” she said. “I’ll give you an English lesson. You know you’ve got to brush up your English if you’re ever going to impress Kiran.”

“Okay,” he said, surprising her. He sat there and she recited the English alphabet over and over. In class she had learned the word illiteracy. Deepu had illiteracy, just like most people in India.

“A for apple, B for boy,” she enunciated.

“A for applebee bee boy,” he repeated. Preeti knew he didn’t care, that the sounds were meaningless to him.

Preeti knew that she wasn’t a spoiled child, though her ma was always claiming she was. She just liked testing Deepu. He sat at her feet, running the words together as though they were a mantra.

PREETI WAS IN HER BATHROOM. She had waited a long time for the geyser to heat the water. She was eager to scrub the bloodstains off the insides of her thighs. She had already washed the panties herself, her ma had forbidden her to give them to Deepu along with the rest of her clothing. Preeti loved taking hot showers. The steam in the bathroom let her believe she was inside the fogged-up screen that distinguished dream-sequences in Hindi movies. As she moved under the water, she realized that she had mistaken the splendid head of a cobra for the shower head. The cobra was her consort, for she was the snake-princess, whom Rishi Rai, the snake charmer, loved. She coiled and uncoiled her body, hissing along with the water. The window was all fogged-up, but she could make out a figure standing on the ledge outside it. Was it maybe Rishi Rai? She moved closer and saw that it was only Deepu. She expected him to move away, but he stayed where he was, looking at her through the striated glass.

She knew that he shouldn’t be there, that if she told her ma, Deepu would pay. She smiled, though not in his direction, and moved back under the shower. She frothed the shampoo all over her body until she had a second sudsy skin. The snake-princess danced for the snake charmer, whom her people hate. He was dim behind the glass.

DEEPU DIDN’T NEED to learn English to impress Kiran. She seemed more taken by him than by anyone else in the family. Preeti’s best friends Radhika and Prerna came over in the morning. They had come to inspect Kiran, each with an ayah in tow. She gave them fancy American chocolates, but shocked them by offering the box to Deepu and the ayahs too. She played Monopoly with them for a while, but seemed to prefer asking Deepu question after question; because Preeti spoke good English, she was forced to translate. Radhika and Prerna and the ayahs were inflamed.

“She’s not wearing a bra!” Prerna whispered to Radhika, referring to Kiran. Preeti pretended she hadn’t heard.

“I prefer Swiss dark chocolates to American, don’t you?” Radhika said to Prerna, not bothering to whisper.

Kiran ignored them until she heard Radhika complaining about her period.

“See Preeti, your friends have the same problems as you do. Has Preeti told you guys that she’s having her period for the first time?”
Prerna laughed. It was not a nice laugh. "Preeti's had her period for over a year now! She was the first of us to get it. She hates it so much she pretends each time is the first time. She just sits in the bathroom for three days straight, doesn't come to school or anything. She's crazy!"

"That's not true!" Preeti said, but she could tell Kiran believed Prerna quietly, without saying anything. This couldn't be happening. Radhika and Prerna were baring their teeth at her from behind their fat braids. They didn't understand. Each time the stinking blood stained her thighs, Preeti was horrified, just as if she had never seen it before. Kiran had to understand. She had to.

"Ask Deepu what he did in his village before he came here," Kiran finally said.

"Nothing, he did nothing. He sat around and was lazy." Preeti said. Even as she wished she could gouge out Prerna's eyes, she knew that she wasn't going to. Deepu was the only person she could touch with impunity.

"Ask him!"

Deepu looked up from the vegetables he was chopping. Even though he was not supposed to understand what Kiran was asking, he said, "I used to go out in a fishing boat with all the men. The water was pretty but it always got real cold by the time we brought the boat back in. We rowed a long way into the sea and cast a huge net. Before I was old enough to go in the boat, I stayed on shore and dragged in the net when the boats came back. It took twenty or thirty of us to pull in that thing. But there were always so many fishes in it. Sometimes octopus. Sometimes huge jellyfish." Preeti translated.

"Ask why he left," Kiran said. Radhika and Prerna were whispering away, disappointed by Kiran's reaction.

"I left because of the cyclone," Deepu said. Preeti had never heard any of these details. "I didn't have any food. It rained for two weeks without stopping. Our house was uprooted in the wind. Even the houses with tin roofs blew away. Trees fell into roads and blocked them. No one could get away. The sea rose above the beaches and into the resort hotels. The tourists stopped coming. I was hiding in one of the hotels. My baba found me and brought me here, to work."

"He left because of the cyclone," Preeti said. She knew Kiran was going to press her for details. She felt sick. "You know, I think he's just making it all up. Everything he's saying sounds like the plot of a Rishi Rai movie."

"Yeah," Radhika added. "I went to Orissa, where he's from, for summer vacation. They said the hotels were fine and all the water had gone down. And look, my ma got me this beaded necklace for only 25 rupees from a woman who was originally asking for 600! Can you believe it? They're all thieves and liars down there. Just like Deepu."

Kiran fingered the shimmering blue strands. "This necklace is gorgeous. In America it would cost at least 25 dollars. The woman who made it probably sold it for 25 rupees because she was so desperate. I've heard about that cyclone. It was all over the news. It was the worst cyclone in India this century. And the people who were affected barely got any aid at all. While people like you..." she gestured towards Radhika, "I've read all about it."

"Yes, it's very sad, isn't it," Preeti said quickly, knowing she sounded like her ma, hating it, hating Radhika, hating Prerna.

"Sad?" said Kiran. "I thought things were always like that here. You girls sure don't seem too sad about it."

"I guess so." Preeti paused. Radhika and her ayah walked out without saying goodbye. Prerna followed. Preeti looked after them but did not move. She could find nothing to say to Kiran. Finally: "Sure you don't want to watch that Rishi Rai film or maybe play Mrs. Sen Mrs. Sen?" she asked.

Tactful for once, Deepu left the room. Preeti felt a grudging respect for him.
“Why didn’t you tell me you’ve been having your period for a year?” Kiran said, refusing diversion. “Why were you lying to your favorite person?”

“I wasn’t! Prema was lying! This is my first time. Right now.”

“I thought she was your best friend,” Kiran said. “Why would your best friend lie to your favorite person?”

Instead of answering, Preeti shoved a movie, in which Rishi Rai was a poor fisher boy, into the VCR. Soon, she lost herself in the complexities of his love for a wealthy girl. Kiran stayed in the room, her eyes blank. Preeti could tell she wasn’t paying any attention to the events unfolding on screen.

Deepu came back and hovered in the doorway. “Miss, will you teach me English?” he asked Kiran with an engaging smile. “I already know afterappel heeferboy ceefercat deeferdoy.”

Kiran smiled back. “Dog, not doy,” she said, patting the chair next to her. Preeti opened her mouth to tell her that servants weren’t allowed on the furniture. Instead, she slunk out of the room. They didn’t notice. Kiran was barking like a dog and Deepu was laughing.

THAT AFTERNOON, Kiran wanted to go for a walk. She said she preferred walking around the neighborhood to visiting important historical sites. The only place she was looking forward to visiting was Mother Teresa’s Home for Children. Preeti had already decided that she didn’t want to spend any more time with Kiran, but her baba had already left town, and her ma’s thyroid was acting up, so it was up to her to escort her cousin. They walked out through the garden door, trampling over Preeti’s ma’s wilted sunflowers. Preeti was lucky enough to live in one of the few remaining mansions on the road. Almost all the other old houses had been razed to make room for taller, skinnier apartment buildings.

Preeti did not know too much about her neighborhood because she was never allowed to go outside by herself. Usually her chauffeur drove her wherever she wanted to go. She recognized the barber squatting by the roadside, his razor poised for his next customer. “You should have brought your camera,” she told her cousin. “Don’t you want to show your friends in America what Calcutta is like? Didn’t your ma say to record all of your experiences?”

“It’s too much,” Kiran said, shrugging. “Too much color, too much sound, too much dust, too many people. I can’t take pictures here. Or tell anyone what it’s like. My ma thinks I’m going to write an essay about coming to India and that it’s going to get me into a good college.” Preeti became aware that people were looking at them as they walked; mostly they were all looking at Kiran. “I guess I just got here. I’m taking everything in, but I can’t arrange it in my head,” Kiran continued.

Preeti was uncertain what to say. “I guess you don’t have wicked people in America. Or illiteracy. That’s why there’s no poor people. Here, it’s very common.”

Kiran opened her mouth to respond. For the first time she seemed engaged in the conversation.

“Hey gorgeous,” Preeti heard someone yell. She looked up and realized that three boys scrunched onto the skinny seat of a motor-scooter were circling them. One of Kiran’s fingers was winding itself tightly into Preeti’s belt-loop. “Are you for sale baby?” She heard one of them say. She realized that the boys were talking to Kiran. Preeti knew that there was a bad thing that could happen now. She had seen it in movies. She saw the boys intensifying their insults; she saw herself and Kiran trying to run. She could feel the gathering crowd practically breathing down their necks. She saw one of the boys grabbing the end of Kiran’s sari and pulling on it, Kiran shrieking. All that carefully pleated silk coming loose and splashing all over, her sari unfurled and her breasts and belly bared. Any moment now, Rishi Rai would show up, smiling his crooked smile. Except, Preeti told herself in order to halt her speeding brain, Kiran isn’t wearing a sari. She was wearing a short skirt and a tank top.
"You're dressed like a whore, aren't you going to act like one?" Another boy said. His friend revved up the engine. They had sparse mustaches and huge rings of sweat under their armpits.

"Don't talk like that to the lady," the third boy said. He combed his well-oiled hair with his fingers. "Anyone can see that she's a classy one." He leaned back against his scooter and starting singing the Rishi Rai hit, "I'm going to burglarize your heart."

"Bastards," Kiran yelled, as she walked away from them, practically dragging Preeti by her belt-loop. The boys laughed and jeered. The singer continued his song and his friends joined in on the chorus. They revved up the engine a couple more times, but did not follow.

"Where do they learn to do this shit?" Kiran demanded loudly as they headed home. "The reason I asked you to come with me is cause I thought people wouldn't bug me if you were around. I tried sneaking out last night and the same thing happened. What is wrong with men in this part of the world?"

"It was like a movie, wasn't it?" Preeti said, her excitement mounting now that the danger had passed. "There are always scenes like that in Hindi movies." Then her face fell. "Except that the hero always shows up to rescue the girl."

"Always?"

"Of course. Unless she's a bad girl."

"Oh, I see," Kiran said. "Maybe I'll bring Deepu with me when I go for a walk again. I'm sure he's good at acting tough."

Preeti scowled and wished desperately that she could have been Rishi Rai for her cousin. She would have slouched up to the biggest boy and punched him out. Then she would have broken another boy's leg and slammed them all into fruit stalls without breaking a sweat. She and Kiran would be borne away in a stream of cascading fruit. Then she would sing the song about burglarizing Kiran's heart and the two of them would shiver and wear turtlenecks and make snow-angels in the Himalayas. Apples would blossom in Kiran's cheeks. Preeti would suddenly produce a flask of hot cocoa and Kiran would sip it and scrunch up her face into a big grateful smile.

PREETI HAD SCHOOL the next day, Monday, July 1. She was miserable: Radhika and Prerna were not speaking to her. Her friends were following their example. Preeti spent her lunch period in the bathroom, spinning. She whirled and whirled until she collapsed on the floor, the tile cold against her cheeks, her uniform disheveled. Then she got up and started again. Rishi Rai was spinning next to her, and so was Kiran, and so was Deepu. They were all laughing, out of breath.

Because Preeti was in the bathroom, she missed the moment when everyone found out about Rishi Rai from the doorman, the first person in the school to know. When she stumbled out of the bathroom, still dizzy, all the girls were chattering wildly and sweeping their belongings into their backpacks. The orderly lines into which they assembled after lunch
seemed to have been utterly forsaken. She couldn’t spot any teachers except for Mrs. Briganza, who was standing around looking pale.

“What’s going on?” She asked Prerna. “I’ve been in the bathroom. Did I miss something?”

Prerna instantly forgot her power-play of recent days, too excited at getting the chance to fill in someone who really didn’t know.

“I can’t believe you don’t know. Rishi Rai’s been kidnapped! By bandits! In the South!” she squealed. “They’re holding him for ransom in the jungle until the government lets some of the bandit people they have in prison go free. And they want money, lots of money.”

“And school’s been cancelled for the rest of the day – maybe even tomorrow too! There might a General Strike – or bombs!” another girl, Sharmila, chimed in. In the corner behind her, a girl who was prone to fainting was doing her best to induce a spell. She wavered on the floor.

Preeti half disbelieved it all. She hadn’t heard any news report; maybe the girls were ganging up on her in order to make her more miserable. However, the chaos all around her had something sharp and in-focus to it. Amazed at how fast her school’s strict rules had been discarded, she walked out of the main gates and into the sweltering day, something she normally could not have done.

She didn’t see her car or chauffeur outside, so she decided she was going to walk home, also a feat she had never undertaken unaccompanied. The sun’s extreme heat upon the asphalt ate through her thin sandals and scorched her feet. The horns seemed to blare even louder than usual, but she knew that she was in no danger because the cars were jumbled together so densely they could never move suddenly enough to injure her. The traffic-policemen were even more flustered than usual. They stood inside the snarls of traffic banging their batons on the doors of nearby cars. Strains of Rishi Rai’s superhit songs streamed from most of the cars and mixed together in the thick, fume-filled air with the orchestra of honks and the political discourse of chauffeurs who were yelling out of their windows. Preeti squeezed between cars and tried not to breathe the black smoke. She sidestepped two men who were punching each other out. She still couldn’t think about the horrible thing Prerna had said. She started running, the sun under her heels hot at every step; she was mindful only of getting herself home, hoping that once she got there, everything would be normal again.

As soon as she walked in through the open front door, she could see there was no chance of that. At least fifteen or twenty of the neighbors and their servants, those who lacked access to a television, were crowded into the living room. They were silent and sweaty, intent upon the screen. Her ma, she who was always chiding Preeti for her unhealthy obsession with Hindi films, was sobbing into her sari and wiping her snot on its hem while she clamored for Preeti’s baba. No one acted surprised that Preeti was home, or that she was by herself. Deepu was crouched in front of the television instead of finishing his afternoon chores – and Preeti’s ma didn’t seem to care. Even Kiran looked like she was interested in Rishi Rai now. The television was turned up very loud. Experts were offering live commentary. One of the newscasters burst into tears in the middle of reading her report. Preeti picked her way towards her family. Her ma reached for her and pulled her down onto the sofa. They watched the screen.

KIRAN FOUND PREETI in her room. She was sitting by the window, twisting a square of paper into a lotus. She had not eaten since she’d found out. After all, India had won freedom partly because of Gandhiji’s fast. It was hard not to think when the sounds of the riots outside constantly filled her room. School had been cancelled. Men from the
Party patrolled their block in crowded vans. Their hoarse rhetoric fell out of sputtering loudspeakers. The television channels played only Rishi Rai movies. The newscasters emphasized his great philanthropy (he gave generously to an organization that bought cricket equipment for boys who lived on the streets), his tolerant, diversity-loving spirit (exemplified by two Muslim ex-girlfriends, a Japanese ex-fiancée, a Zoroastrian ex-wife, and a tearful Hindu woman, his current wife); the desperation faced by his family (many of whom had been popular actors in their day and were still beloved by those old enough to remember them); and the torture he was almost certainly enduring now. Men argued in the streets about whether the government should give amnesty to the bandits, who were all wanted for murder as well as for smuggling ivory. Western diplomats appeared on television with tiny smirks almost hidden behind their beards. They exhorted the government not to give in.

"Hey Preeti, do you want to play that game you’re always talking about?" Kiran said. Her shoulders were muscular and bare. "Deepu was telling me about how to play it."

PREETI STOOD outside the door to her own room, admiring Rishi Rai. His doctor’s coat was open down to the third button and his chest-hairs were tangled wild. Even on the poster, his energy was unmistakable. He wore a gold chain that said: Cool. This poster was from his acclaimed debut, Pagal Mein Pagal Tum, in which he played an escaped convict posing as a doctor in a mental institution. He fell in love with, and consequently healed, his most beautiful patient. Preeti uttered a quick prayer for his safety. "Ding-dong!" she said, and walked in.

Kiran was sitting on the bed. She was stiff, expressionless. Deepu crouched behind the lace curtains, gnawing on a doll’s head.

"I’m the nurse from Calcutta Hospital," Preeti announced.

Kiran just sat there. Deepu wasn’t helping either.

"I have been sent to make you better," Preeti said, feeling how artificial her words were. She couldn’t force this.

"You have to pretend to be crazy," she told Kiran.

"I am." Kiran said. "I’m just sitting here thinking about India. All the people I know who are bona-fide certifiable get themselves all depressed this way. They just sit and stare at the walls and think about things they can’t do anything about."

"Oh," Preeti said, because she had no idea what Kiran was talking about. "I have to give you a sponge bath."

"Okay," Kiran said and lay back on the bed without struggling.

Preeti glanced over at Deepu. "You can’t stay," she said.

Kiran said, "Sure he can." Deepu stayed.

Preeti looked for a towel but found only toilet paper in the bathroom. She came back and tugged up her cousin’s dress. She moved the toilet paper in moist circles across Kiran’s belly, moved upwards. "Hey, this feels kind of good, Preeti," Kiran said. Preeti looked up and realized that Deepu had also acquired some toilet paper for himself and was rubbing it across Kiran’s thighs. She tried to ignore him and found herself rubbing the paper into her cousin’s flesh so hard that it started to disintegrate. She longed for her ma to come into the room and find them this way. But her ma’s thyroid hurt and she was resting again.

Preeti said finally, "You can’t. Deepu, you can’t. Get out. You’re a servant. You’re filthy. You can’t touch her."

She reached across and pinched him as hard as she could.

Kiran jerked upright and landed a slap right across Preeti’s face. "I can’t believe you!" she said.

"Shut up," Preeti said. "Shut up shut up shut up." She lunged towards her cousin and shoved her back on the bed and pressed the pillow down on her face.

Kiran struggled. She was stronger. And she had Deepu on her side. Feathers busted out of the pillow and stuck to them. "You’re messed up in the head," Kiran said softly after she had wrested Preeti off of her. "Your head’s full of evil." Kiran’s face was blotchy and red and specked with down. Deepu’s face was calm and smooth.
IN PREETI’S DREAM, Rishi Rai is in the jungle, tied to a tree. Preeti is high above his head, her legs wrapped around a coconut tree. It is cool and green here. The calls of birds and insects are very loud. Swarthy men surround Rishi Rai. They have just made a sacrifice to the goddess of bandits and their arms and torsos are sticky with blood. Kiran is among them and she is their leader. Her hair is long and adorned with crimson hibiscus. She pulls off her belt. She raises it in the air and cracks it across Rishi Rai’s chest. Her loud laugh takes its place among the various sounds of the jungle. Rishi Rai moans, dirt and tears and snot and blood mixing together on his person. The bandits are all holding machine guns. Preeti wants to call out to him but she can't. All the machine guns fire at once. “Rishi!” Preeti screams into the avalanche of sound. She slithers down the tree and runs towards him, but the jungle and the bandits and Kiran are all spinning, spinning away.

KIRAN LEFT for her uncle’s house in Delhi the next day. She kept trying to find Deepu, but he wasn’t around. “Goodbye,” she said to Preeti, her face strained. Preeti was suddenly glad that Kiran wasn’t trying to apologize because then she would have had to apologize too, and she knew that neither of them would have meant it. “Goodbye Kiran,” she said, wondering whom she would write her English compositions about now.

Her ma went with Kiran to the airport, so Preeti was alone in the house. She switched on the television. The first thing she noticed was that the newscaster was wearing white, the color of mourning. She was repeating in a robotic tone: “Rishi Rai was shot and killed by his captors early this morning. Dead body discovered by local police at 2 PM. Again: Rishi Rai was shot and killed by his captors early this morning. The Prime Minister has not yet made a statement.”

Preeti had already caught a glimpse of his corpse, all decked out with white gladioli and surrounded by mourners before she hurriedly switched off the television. She was crying, naturally, but her tears felt silly, as though made of glycerine. She was having trouble breathing or thinking. She knew she had to find Deepu. She wandered around the house looking for him. She found only an envelope in the guestroom where Kiran had been. It was marked ‘Deepu’ and was thick with bank notes. Preeti stuffed it in her pocket without giving it much thought and tried ringing the bell that went off in the servants’ quarters. When he didn’t answer, she grabbed her needlework kit and marched towards the quarters at the other end of the garden. It was a big garden. In the section nearest the house there were long rows of marigolds and sunflowers and even some roses in the wintertime. Trellises of bougainvilleas crept charmingly up to the balcony. But at the other end, the garden grew progressively unkempt. The shack where Deepu, Jaggu, their chauffeur, his wife and son, and their washer-woman lived was obscured by brambles. Although Preeti’s baba had made sure there was electricity in each of the three rooms, there was only one light-bulb that they moved from socket to socket as needed.

Preeti rarely came here, and when she did, she preferred to yell from outside. “Deepu,” she called. “Deepu!”

He finally came out. Noticeably more shriveled and less well-groomed than usual, he was barely even polite. “What do you want?”

“Have you heard?” She asked.

“Heard what?”

Preeti was very glad he didn’t know yet. “Never mind. I want you to play a new game with me,” she said. “It’s called Rishi Rai Rishi Rai.”

“Go home Preeti.”

“Don’t be rude to me!” she said.

“Don’t be rude to me!” he mocked.

“Shut up,” she said, her lips trembling. “Shut up or I’ll tell my ma-”

“What’ll you tell her, let’s hear?”
"I'll tell her you look at me through the window when I'm in the bathroom!" she said. He scuffed at the ground with his cracked feet.
"I'm not joking either. I really will tell her," Preeti said, trying to convince herself. It was hard now to remember that she and he had been friends.
"What do you want me to do?"

PREETI TIED RISHI RAJ to the tree behind the Servants' Quarters with scraps of cloth from her needlework kit. She tied his hands tight, even though she could see for herself the blood that was already trapped inside his palms, unable to move up his arms. His shirt was off and the gnarled bark dug into his flesh. She rubbed circles of dirt onto his chest and smiled. Slowly, smoothly, she slid the belt off of her waist and raised it high into the air. She brought it down upon Rishi Rai's chest without much of an impact. Again. Better this time. Again. Again. Again.

"Mrs. Sen," he was saying. "Mrs. Sen, Mrs. Sen, Mrs. Sen. Please stop. Mrs. Sen. Please stop, please stop, Mrs. Sen please stop." He said it like a mantra, like it was a Sanskrit prayer or the English alphabet.

HE WAS NOT crying out anymore. Deepu was not moaning as Rishi Rai moaned. He stood there, tied to the tree, merely looking. His eyes swelled with liquid. They were not focused but his face was pointed in Preeti's direction.

She moved towards him now, the belt forgotten, and untied his hands. "Deepu," she said. "Deepu."

He did not speak but laboriously examined his stiff hands, attempted to flex his fingers.

"Deepu," she said. "I am sorry."

She wished that he would at least smile at her, but he didn't.

"Kiran left today," she said. "I found this in her room. It had your name on it." Preeti pushed the wad of cash into Deepu's hand. He took it without comment. She stared after him as he moved through the brambles towards his quarters.
In certain favourable moods, memories — what one has forgotten — come to the top. Now if this is so, is it not possible — I often wonder — that things were

WHEN I WAS A KID, I flirted, not-so-briefly, with the idea of becoming a dancer, and I have always prided myself on the maturity and wisdom of my decision to embrace the life of the brain over the life of the body, knowing even then that the body begins its rapid and cruel betrayal so early that the bulk of life, my life, would have been spent on the memories of what I once could do, rather than what I was capable of doing now, and that this cruel nostalgia could rule my days as early as when I turned twenty-five. But a writer is young until a writer is forty. A writer accrues wisdom and strength and technique as the years pass; a writer builds up muscle as a writer ages. I did not count on an increasing cerebral inflexibility, that it would be harder and harder to touch my intellectual toes. But these days I’m in a panic. My memory is failing me. It’s more than the name-thing, that began when I turned thirty, when I started juggling shame and mnemonic devices whenever I had to introduce people at cocktail parties — I’d have to run through the entire alphabet in my head, while continuing the conversational patter, as I searched for a trigger (A is for Adam, B is for Bill) just so I could properly address both friends and acquaintances — the mental equivalent of spinning plates while standing on one leg. Ten years later, it’s worse. My husband will recount some lovely dinner in some lovely foreign country and I will insist he shared that moment with his other wife — although as far as I know, I’m his one-and-only. Sure I miss dates, and I forget to pay bills, but one could just chalk up all that forgetfulness to avoidance of the oppressive mundanity that constitutes so much of my daily life. But the horror, for me at least, isn’t so much the rubbery blank stretches of thought that wrap around and around until they obliterate any other bright, attractive floating island of inspiration — nothing stops the wheels from turning like trying to remember something! One becomes so obsessed with retrieving the forgotten piece of the puzzle, a name of someone at a party, the contents of a novel I surely read and once delighted in arguing about, that an intellectual paralysis sets in — still it isn’t this constant struggle to remember an actual experience that most plagues me, but my ever-growing deficiency of language, the words I cannot sum up, the meaning behind words that I know — the images and for-instances that don’t come readily to my tongue or my pen — that has become the constant, background hum of torture of my day-to-day life, in my professional existence yes, but worse, in the privacy of my own straining and contorting mind.

When did it start? I can’t remember. At thirty with the name-thing? When estrogen levels began to decline? In childbirth, which left me softheaded and scattered, and well, less clever in the classroom, at parties, on-the-stand of my emotional life? Is the problem physiological or psychological? As my physician gently told me, when I wondered out loud in his offices, if I had the early signs of dementia: “You’ve got a lot to worry about,” he said, rather unscientifically I thought. “There’s a limited amount of space for all the stuff in your head.” Well I do have a lot to worry about: two young children, two aging
parents, a lovely husband, a demanding career as a teacher and novelist, all that domestic garbage: those bills, and the shopping, and the cleaning, and the kids' clothes and play dates and doctors' appointments and school and camp and where will they go to college and who will pay for it, and how can it be we live in a country where the guy who lost is the guy who won (the presidency I mean) and will my husband and I ever have a vacation alone again? It is cluttered up there, no doubt about it, but also, truth be told, I don't have the recall I once possessed. I mean, let me brag here, I had the best memory, it was so good that when I was in college studying and I needed to look up a reference, I not only could remember the exact page the data was on, but also the exact line. I used to remember everything.

My father had a superior memory. When he was in medical school he was first in the country in anatomy. He could remember every bone, every muscle, and later, when he was my father, he could remember every one of my numerous transgressions, the good-for-nothing boyfriend that actually turned out to be good for nothing, the nights that I stayed out too late and used our home as a flophouse, the one time in the heat of an argument when I made the dreadful mistake of saying fuck you to my father. I said fuck you to my father! God. I still feel ashamed of that.

Last year, in a catastrophic fall, my father suffered permanent and irreversible brain damage. But even before the fall, my father had already shown the signs of senile dementia. So what does that mean? It means he barely remembers most of his life, or mine for that matter, it means he can no longer tell the stories of his childhood or reference his long career as a doctor, or his marriage to my mother and some days when I call, he doesn't even remember that he's talked to me, or what he's done that morning. So much of his mind is blank and clean and empty. My politics are way left of center, I'm a red diaper baby who grew up to be what is often termed a bleeding heart, but perhaps you'll understand why at night now, I dream the same dream over and over again. I dream that I hug and comfort Nancy Reagan.

I had coffee with a friend whose father-in-law suffers from Kreutz-Jakob, or mad cow disease, as it is popularly known. This means that her father-in-law's brain looks like Swiss cheese – it's holey. She was talking about the agonies of loving a person whose memory has faded. "Who are you, if you don't have a memory?" she said. It is a line that stuck with me. After all, almost all the difference between being an adult and being a child is the accumulation of experience filtered through recollection. It is this equation that equals wisdom, no? Without it, all we are is children, just taller, fatter, uglier, more wrinkled kids. Memory is what made my father such a good physi-
cian. Memory is what made him such a wonderful father. Memory is what made him a man. But still my friend's notion troubled me. So I'll give you this: After my father fell, after he had two surgeries for the massive cerebral hemorrhages on both sides of his brain, initially he could not remember a thing. He did not know that he was a doctor, he didn't recognize the hospital where he was now a patient and had been a physician for forty years, and he did not remember Monica Lewinsky. But he remembered me. Every day during the few short periods where he attained consciousness, I would tell him over and over again where he was and why he was there. "You fell, Daddy. You hit your head. You had two bouts of neurosurgery. You had a seizure." I told him the same story over and over again, but for him it was always fresh, always new. Remember that movie Groundhog Day? My father's story got old for me, I had to drum up all the actorly reserves I once cultivated to tell it to him with the gravity and sensitivity it and he deserved. But for him, every time I told him that story, his story, it was as devastating as it had been for me when I first got the phone call that he had fallen. Not having a memory in this instance, like in so many instances, served and diserved him. Who would want to remember the hideous recent past?

One morning, when he was lying in his hospital bed, when we did not know if he would live or die, or what kind of life lay before him if he made it, my father's eyes fluttered open, just as my mother, his wife, was crying at his bedside. He did not know where he was or why, I'm not even sure he knew his own name at the time, but still he said to her: "What can I do to help you feel better?"

What remained without memory was personality, was personhood. My father, down to his bones, is a man of compassion, of empathy. He is kind. Memory is the only tool we have to make sense of the world. Without it we wander lost and alone and afraid, sure. We all know this. And yet at the same time each of us possesses an essence, some primal, pithy, inarguably specific core that makes us who we are.

This thought comforts me each morning when I cannot find my keys, my hat, my gloves.
I picture my happiest memories as islands, bright and small, floating in air, blueness. So—I am about five, and I'm standing on our neighbors' lawn with my sister and my grandmother Dorothy, and I'm looking at her shoes and the hem of her skirt and the grass, filled with clover. She's just discovered a four-leaf clover, and somehow this discovery makes the day simply hold still. The day becomes this island, cut out of time, filled only with the green clover in grass, her shoes, her presence. Ah. Her presence. And when I come to this aspect of the memory, I bump into something I have always felt: a memory comes to us immersed in feeling, yet it's this feeling that remains stubbornly difficult to translate into words. I might wish to hand you the memory whole, toss the little island to you like a ball, so that you would be me in that bright moment on a humid, warm Ohio afternoon in July, when your grandmother has just come to visit from Peoria, Illinois, and you have a sense of bliss simply from her presence, made more astonishing by this fact of her delight in discovering something you have never, in all your five years, heard of: a four-leaf clover.

This wish to give someone a picture, felt in this way, is a human wish. It's especially a writer's wish. And, of course, it can't be done. How can you know what my grandmother Dorothy meant to me? I could try to tell you, although I'm not sure of my own knowledge. She was a teacher; she had an air of calmness and kindness quite unusual, I felt then; she looked thin and wore glasses, but when she smiled, you could see something almost pretty in her. I could tell you other stories about her. I could try to figure her out. Yet the stubborn fact remains: you could not know her as I knew her. This is why I love writing fiction so much. As a fiction-writer, I'm not bothered by the impossibility of giving you one of my floating islands. I can create a whole new island, and you can come onto it with me, discover its terrain, eat its fruit. We're on it together from the start.

The astonishing thing is that, once I've chosen to create a fictional world, my grandmother can show up in it. Well, she may not be my grandmother precisely; in fact, she will have a new name and a new habitation and a new life history, and because of all this newness, I will be glad of her appearance in my story. I won't be kicking myself because I can't possibly render the actual woman fully, just as I can't possibly tell you how it felt to discover the miracle of the clover. And yet I'll feel happy in the writing because somehow, miraculously, I have the chance to be in the presence of my grandmother again. Of course, I have other kinds of memories too. My grandmother became thinner and older. She misplaced her own memory, often, so that she'd look at you with bafflement, trying to sort out just who you might be. In the “assisted living” facility, a place where her life became reduced to a bed and a small table with drawers, half a closet, she would look frightened; where the hell am I? she might have been wondering, and why in God's name am I here? I saw then, with terrible clarity, how it must be to be cut off from your history. She might have felt like an island, unnamed, undiscovered, unvisited, or visited only by people she could not for the life of her recognize. I am frightened of many things, but one of my most constant fears is such loss of memory. Maybe I write fiction in order to discover a place to hold my life, in a form indirect yet satisfying, and safe (I can hope) from illness and death. I suppose most writers wish to defy loss. As Bishop's poem says with such irony, “The art of losing isn't hard to master.” I don't know how hard such an art is to master, but I do know how writing marks the effort to hold on to what otherwise would be wholly at sea.
FOR SOME REASON, it is very important to remain true to my memories when I write poems. I can invent as well as the next poet (and I've noticed that my wholly invented poem is usually taken as autobiographical), but when I am writing about the past I don't invent, and I am particularly careful not to invent what was said, by me or others. Although my memory is spotty in most cases, my memory for dialogue is extremely accurate, going back in some instances to my early childhood. When, for example, in my poem, “Twelve O’Clock” I quote my mother saying, “Listen darling, and remember always / It’s Dr. Einstein broadcasting from Switzerland”, it is precisely what she said. I was four. Obviously, one reason I remember it so clearly is that the lines are in perfect iambic pentameter. In my poem, “Gerda”, I quote my father explaining that he had not kept on Gerda, my nurse (my mother was jealous of her): “I always let your mother decide these matters.” He said this when I was in my thirties. And it’s iambic pentameter again, as well as a nurturing of my resentment, which was how we get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be...
able to live our lives through from the start.

HELEN SCHULMAN is the author of the novels The Revisionist and Out of Time, and a collection of stories, Not a Free Show. She is also co-editor of an anthology of essays, Wanting a Child. She has taught in the Graduate Writing Division of Columbia University and at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference.

HARRIET CHESSMAN has published a work of literary criticism, The Public is Invited to Dance, about the work of Gertrude Stein, and a novel, Ohio Angels. Her second novel, Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper, is due in December of 2001. She teaches at Yale University and the Bread Loaf School of English.

CAROLYN KIZER is the author of eight books of poetry, most recently Cool Calm & Collected. She has received an American Academy of Arts and Letters award, the Frost Medal, the John Masefield Memorial Award, and the Theodore Roethke Memorial Poetry Award. She is a former Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets.
Do you long for Oolong like I long for Oolong?

Darling, I have orchids on my fingertips tulips on my windowshades and a green spring gathering beneath my window.

Are you gone on Ceylon like I’m gone on Ceylon?

Pouring tea and sugar long separate ribbons rosy knees steam and kisses.
Fortunes found on the bottom.
SAINT’S DAY

All of the aunts used to take my hands between theirs and say, nodding, I know there’s hope for you, at least — whose rosaries sparkled around my neck, and snaked my wrist, and glittered in pale coils deep inside my jewelry box. I dipped my fingers in the wells of holy water, watched the wounds drip with a real fascination — and when, one summer, we had Mass in someone’s yard and I approached the rim of the cup and saw the moon lost in that still, dark water, I took breath as solemnly as communion, and the grove moved carefully around us, the prim hedges grown as long and undulant as oak trees, every berry the deep-dyed juniper berry. I found the date out in some tourist’s book printed on cheap paper in one of those Dublin shops that teaches you your heritage. A virgin, martyred, late sixth century. I saw her long plait, her white shoulder, and the hot hand of some pagan king, and her flight through the snow, ragged and barefoot, the cliffs high and sharp and full of wind, the pale blossoms shivering, as delicate as wafers. The moon sank in the sky and smashed itself to pieces on the waves, the mass of voices, close and hollow, chiming her resistance — at the cliffs at last, that damp place, the wind wild at my hair and in my dress, I took her for my own, laid her by the side of the ecstatic pictures, the coiled beads, the confusion of berries and sacraments. I observe her as carelessly as I observe Easter — the glamour of rebirth, the helpless allure of beatific death. The aunts approve, send shamrock cuttings trapped in glass. The druids shake their woolly heads, but maybe she enjoys it, having gone, for all her fervor, to her death for the sake of a beautiful story.
REQUEST

At some point, think three mornings after the roses-night.
Or remember the sweater and this:
Sleep-murmurs. Think toothpaste.
I thought: the window is open in snowtime.
You said: you twist your hair when distracted.

At some point, think the blur of Tuesdays Wednesdays
Thursdays beyond decipher. The giggle. The sweater.
The ridiculous open window, but you quiver in sleep.
Even the sweater, repeatedly. Toothpaste.
You said: can you keep your hands off your hair?

Timing is everything I hear, still: I pardoned your punctuality,
arctic nights, unfunny chides
for the sweater gladly. Think the innumerable hellos.
You said: you’re so good to me.
You said: you weren’t waiting long?
I thought: must you quiver so perfect?

You contend: the roses-night had no-roses-Novembers surrounding it.
I say: you were a blissful routine.
At some point, think sleep-murmurs.
LIRA STANDS by the window where a fly is caught between two panes of glass and is tapping out time, keeping rhythm by flinging its body again and again against the encasement. The light is bad and the outside sky delicate; everything appears in the flat tones of a fogged photograph. She stands in a room blurred with black polyester dresses and uneasy hands that don’t know whether to touch and console or cling to their own shirt cuffs and skirt seams.

State of grace she hears someone say with labored emphasis on grace, and it is her mother, still weeping onto the young priest’s sleeve. The priest looks around the room nervously and, with his hand, wipes the sweat that glitters on his sun-burnt forehead. Yes, I know, Jane, he says, looking away, Yes that’s right Jane. Lira wonders why her mother is suddenly so concerned with state of grace, atonement for sins, heaven and hell, since they left the Church almost twelve years ago. The priest is not listening. Lira walks the perimeter of the room, watching the crease in space where the floor meets the wall, not watching the faces of the darkly dressed figures who pass back and forth murmuring what sound like lullabies, touching or not touching with pale, plastic hands. She stops at the flowers, their petals white and already scattered like confetti on New Year’s but it is July and there is Uncle Hass laid down in a box, all polished and silver like a spoon in the silverware drawer.

She thinks of the only memory she’s kept of him as if he belongs now only in one place. She thinks of him by the Maury River, where the sweet Virginia wineberry and the poison ivy give way to rocks and the water spits green droplets, mud-colored after rain, at their feet. Uncle Hass used to take her to the river and she looked forward to these times, imagining a certain closeness between them in those hours of silence, two unlike people drawn together by the knotted twine of river. He would sit open-kneed and motionless on a rock, anticipating the destruction of flight, imagining himself playing the sun in a game of icarus.

Sharp Shinned Hawk, Cooper’s Hawk, Red Shouldered Hawk, Red Tailed Hawk and Rough Legged Hawk — the last he’d never seen in Rockbridge County. Those come down from the Arctic in the winter, he told her, but someone seen one in December 1948 at the Ruff Alphin farm. He laid his gun across his spread lap and watched the trees.

The birds ascended from the forest, skimming the treetops, diving in violent spirals and looping back upwards before hitting the earth, as if swung on strings. They fell and rose
with outstretched wings, never flapping, riding the air, loving the air. Hass sat on the rocks, counted the birds, called them by name, and chose one. Lira remembers her shudder when finally he adjusted the brim of his hat and stood; she remembers the explosion of the gun severing the air between them and the body of sky-stained feathers that jerked mid-air away from the pulsing sun, pinned ninety degrees off the edge of the earth. The hawk paused and folded, recalling gravity.

Now, watching her mother who seems to be sinking as mourners pass around her and around the faded room, she is reminded of the hawk, dropped from the sky no longer a bird—must come down declared the laws of science, must come down urged the treetops clawing at air, Gotchya snarled Hass. And the river opened up and caught it. The feathers spun like a pinwheel and for a moment a ribbon of deep red clouded into the curl of water. How would her mother remember Hass, Lira wondered. Would she remember the furniture broken on Friday nights, repaired on Sundays? The venison and beer he brought over for holiday dinners? The lawsuit over grandpa’s land? The family barbecues?

No, Lira thinks. My mother is sinking. Dropped in a river and her feathers spinning patterns, her words all mixed up underwater.

Hawks die like broken toys. Lira crushes white petals under her shoe. Hass dies like a derisive prankster. Jane dies like she thinks it’s her turn.

LIRA HAD ONLY COME HOME because she’d never been to a family member’s funeral and she was persuaded that the aftermath of the event of dying held a great deal of importance in the rituals of the living. She told herself that she had not come home because Jane had begged her. Her brother Summer would not be there, especially if their mother had asked him to. Lira remembered how, when Summer was in sixth grade, he came home after school one day, ill and tomato-faced. It was December and he tracked wet snow from the front door to the kitchen where he immediately vomited onto the creamy linoleum floor. What is it, their mother asked holding the trash can to his chin. Took aspirin on an empty stomach, he said, wet eyed. Yes, said Jane, but that’s beer on my floor.

And so on with Summer until he was eighteen and packed a bag to leave, meaning to join the army. Who knows if he ever made it.

At night Lira would walk away from the house. Down one slope and up the next, she walked until she stood level with the house again, half a mile of darkness stretched thin before it. The poems Jane read when Lira was too young for school rolling back and forth in her head with the rhythm of footsteps, climbing. Conrad he took the oxen, but he left Kentucky Belle; How much we thought of Kentuck, I couldn’t begin to tell—climbing. Came from the Bluegrass country; my father gave her to me—when I rode north with Conrad, away from Tennessee.

She stood and looked at the house on the hill, seeing it as a stranger would see it from a distance, and it looked like a tiny boat carried on the crest of a wave in the middle of the ocean, in the middle of the night, a fisherman’s lantern bobbing on a dark sea. She looked at the yellow square of light that was the window to her room and she wondered, as a stranger would wonder, who lived there. Who.

WHEN LIRA was born Jane was staring at a water stain in the white hospital ceiling. When a nurse said, m’am you got you a girl m’am, Jane closed her eyes and imagined she saw a stain shaped baby. When Lira was two Jane fixed up her baby curls in plastic barrettes and wondered if the kid, silent and blankfaced, would be retarded. When Lira turned five Jane
threw a birthday party where the napkins were printed with tropical birds. A yellow lion-shaped cake burned black in the oven. At ten years old Lira was grounded for a month and at eleven for four months. She can’t remember why.

LIRA WAS THIRTEEN when Summer was gone and Jane took to spending her nights in the kitchen rather than in bed.

Where did you go last night? her mother asked when the jars and bottles in the door of the refrigerator stopped rattling.

Nowhere, Lira said, speaking into the open fridge. Three kinds of beer and a block of white cheese, mustards, relishes, maraschino cherries.

You weren’t in your room, Jane said. You weren’t in the house. Lira didn’t answer. She took the cherries.

I heard a car, Jane declared as if she were saying, the earth is curved and that explains everything.

My friends don’t drive. She turned to her mother. I didn’t go anywhere. A shadow slid across Jane’s face as the fridge door shut and the light bulb inside clicked off.

As long as you live under my roof, eatin my food— Jane began, her body rigid like a wooden body behind the kitchen table, a statue in the half-dark, her words strung up in the air.

I wouldn’t exactly call it food, Lira said, red syrup dripping down the side of the cherry jar. Sweet syrup. Sweet mother.

Never— Jane shrieked, pounding the table with a wooden fist. A can rolled to the floor and bounced.

Never what.

Get out. Just go.

Lira stared at her mother. The house was silent, all the words fallen out of the air. All the sound settled to the floor, bounced like aluminum. Jane had eyes like little bird eyes, small and gray and invisible in the dark. She looked back at Lira and was not looking at anything. Jane’s eyes were like little water stains where the wet had dripped too long on her wooden face.

Sweet syrup. Lira tasted sugar, smelled aluminum. Sweet jesus.

Fine she said and left the room.

LIRA WAS SIXTEEN when she began her leavings, twenty-two times she left home before two years had passed, each time she came back after days or weeks or months due to weather or boredom or hunger or spite. On her eighteenth birthday she met Max Ruby Salem at a Dairy Queen on route 11, and he ran his eyes down and too far up her legs and promised her they could be in New York City by June. The Dairy Queen door blew open and shut with a gust of air conditioned air as sullen teenagers came in. She looked at Salem and his eyes said I could love you and I’m lying at once as he watched her and she considered.

Of course they never made it past Louisville which was 430 miles in the wrong direction. They came in from the east in a 1982 Chevy pickup, got lost and crossed the Ohio River twice before calling Salem’s cousin from a payphone downtown. The cousin, Anny, lived in a shotgun house on Payne Street with three dark sons and a new boyfriend. When the Chevy broke down a week later they rode the TARC bus back and forth across the city, and the summer was hot and splendid and prosaic and entirely detached from the place they remembered as Virginia, as if Virginia was not a place they had come from but a story they had heard. They stayed in Louisville for a year, and Lira worked at the Krispy...
Kreme selling donuts until donuts made her sick and Salem made her sick saying the same things so many times that she could predict his words. At first she thought it was a sign that they were meant to be together, but later she decided it was only because she had heard everything he had to say.

In May she left for Chicago with a University of Louisville student named Joachim who had irascible black eyes and told romantic stories in English and in Spanish which she didn’t understand. A month later he went back south with an older woman, leaving Lira alone in the city, but she loved and was terrified by Chicago and she neither loved nor was afraid of anyone so it didn’t matter.

THE PHONE WAS RINGING when Lira came in. Inclined not to answer it she stepped into the concrete block room where the air held columns of dust and light, slanting between the window and the cracked floor and supporting nothing. Light is a wave, she thought, and also a particle. The dust turned in the air like spools unraveling, slowly. The phone was still ringing.

Will somebody git that? a voice called from the back room. Mid-ring, she picked up the phone.

Hello. She pushed open the window with her shoulder and the afternoon Chicago heat pressed against the stale insides of the room. The phone crackled and picked up a few words of someone else’s conversation — you wouldn’t want it a man’s voice said in a rush. How would you know what I... a woman’s voice answered and faded.

Lira, the caller on the other end said, maybe for the second or third time. The voice was strange and her name sounded strange spoken that way and she knew it was her mother.

Lira. I think... I think you best come home.

For all the times she’d told Lira to leave, it was the first time Jane had ever asked her to come back.

How did you get my number? Lira asked, watching the dust spin tiny cyclones in the spine of slanted light.

Light is a wave, and a particle, and something else too. Something like memory.

How’d you know where I am? she said.

Lira I’m askin you come home. Your uncle Hass got himself busted straight through his head and your brother gone someplace and this house all a mess jesus I just thought you could come home for his sake anyway since you never did say goodbye...

Only twenty three times I said goodbye. Light, she thought, light.

Jane was not listening.

Lira you think you could make it here by Sunday?

THE MOON WAS A CASHEW or a claw as the Greyhound bus roared out of another nondescript town somewhere between the midwest and the southeast. Lira felt wonderfully anonymous cloaked by the darkness and the heavy breathing of a heavy woman beside her. The highway passed a Waffle House and a power plant blinking like an alien colony and it passed a lake smooth and all of one color where the eyelash moon reflected off the surface like a single footprint. Lira thought of her mother saying Aw jesus Lira I’m askin you come home and Lira wondered if Jesus left footprints when he walked on water.

Do you feel pain out of habit after so many goodbyes? she thought.

By the time she reached Virginia it was night again and the moon which the fat lady called waxing was gone, and the fat lady was gone, a heroin-eyed girl in her place. The lights of cars ahead floated half a mile up in the sky, disappearing deeper into the cloud on which they traveled. All the mountains dissolved into the air by rain and indigo.

How many times do you have to leave before you stay gone? she wondered. How many times do you come back before you can’t leave anymore?
In Buena Vista she stood at the bus stop as the sky was already beginning to fade, pearl colored in morning mist. In Lexington a warbler and a vireo cried the sun up and Lira watched it roll over the crown of hills: Ragged Mountain, Whiterock Mountain, Big House Mountain, Little House Mountain, Hogback Mountain, Jump Mountain. At 7:45 route 11 joined route 39. Midmorning she was home, standing on the front porch not knocking, her back facing the door and the paisley blue curtains. Her eyes were two-days sleepless, watching the fields as three deer bobbed across the horizon, rising and falling into the grass like silver glinting needles hemming the land to sky.

JANE SITS behind the kitchen table where she always sat, a row of peeled green apples naked-looking before her.

Fried apples, she says blankly, the knife motionless in her right hand.

I think I’ll change, Lira says, unzipping the borrowed funeral dress. The air is hot and hushed in a proper mourning gloom.

Have you ever seen somebody die, Jane asks flatly as if it’s not a question at all, but an offhand remark.

Mom, don’t, Lira pleads. You need me to cut the apples?

Well he was already dead anyway, she says. All done, drinkin all gone to his head like I said it would. Her hand is like a white glove, limp and folded over the handle of the knife. I just walk in and there it’s done, not any time for protesting nor askin what anybody thinks.

Mom, don’t.

Someone could’ve told me – his dog could’ve done other than waggin his tail while I just walk right in to find my own brother...

Only her mouth moves, her eyes still like two glass doll eyes.

And it’s a wonder we ever let you go around with him for shootin birds and shootin god knows—

Mom, don’t.

That dog could’ve told me, barked or some other than waggin his tail like that. There’s just no gettin into heaven—

Don’t— Jane looks up and Lira is standing almost naked holding her dress, looking not angry and not sad but confused, like she doesn’t know whether to run out of the room or to say something splendidly appropriate.

They stare at each other, startled glass doll eyes to glass doll eyes, and Jane says, suddenly soft, you might stay.

Lira looks away. She looks at the fist-sized hole in the wall next to the door and can’t remember if it was Summer’s or Hass’s or her own, she looks at the crushed cardboard boxes printed with cheap beer brand names, she thinks of how many times she wished her mother would say you might stay but instead said worthless or bitch.

Jane’s speaking runs into silence like a train turned accordion against a wall. In this empty again air Lira thinks of the hawk and its tail feathers pointing at the mouth of sky that the falling body leaves vacant. Some birds migrate north for the summer, she thinks. Some birds mate for life, she remembers, standing still naked in the kitchen and still as if caught in the act of indecision. Geese, albatross, loons. And hawks.

And what is home – a geographic pinpoint, a nest of twigs and twine, a mate for life? a mother?

HER SHADOW is cast shapeless below the moon. This is not like night she thinks, but like the stillness of death, the clarity with which all color is drawn from the world and everything is illuminated by a pallid light from no source. The moon is now like a nickel dropped in a pool without a surface, not falling and not floating but caught, trembling as the current spreads slowly over it and sticking seamlessly to the ceiling of the universe. Lira walks away from the house to where the sound of the crickets is equal in weight to the sound of the highway ten miles off. Then she turns and walks backwards, thinking, walking backwards is like leaving and staying all at once. Walking from and watching the place, the leaving. Fireflies fall like stars into the fields. And how many times, she thinks.
REPLACING THE DOCKS

At the dock's edge a worker kneels, head down
slamming nails into bright, splinterless boards.
One shot each, a quick rhythm for my eyes.

I wanted to know about beginnings –
that's why I came back here without you,
scraps of weakened sun where the sand
used to scorch, and old words paled like the light.
I can't stop thinking your thoughts
though they are quieter now and lulled
by waves that curve and press the pilings.

Time has closed itself up again – my hands fumble.
They hauled the raft we made onto shore
in August, left it leaning against this bench.
There's no use now in all the nails I hammered,
crooked, out of line. Yours went in straight
every time, no bent heads or aching wrists,
no bruises on your knees. We used old wood
for the raft, it was a small part of everything,
took only a few days to build.

It was hotter then; your boombox
scratched out Chopin's concerto number two
till the batteries died from rewinding,
till I could hum each piano note as we worked.
Too soft and sad for summer, you said.
Now that I can hear it falling under
the leaves, I guess you're right.

The man on the dock is quiet for a minute,
hammer perched on his leg as he sifts
through sheets of sandpaper to find the right grit.
I study my hands held palm-together,
trying to think of a better word than "interlocked."
He's buoyed, cross-legged, by water and wood,
He bows his head and copies my gesture –
he stares at his fingers clasped,
not even flinching when the hammer drops.
THE EDITORS WOULD LIKE TO THANK:
The staff of The Yale Literary Magazine;
Harriet Chessman, Carolyn Kizer, and Helen Schulman;
J. D. McClatchy and Susan Bianconi at The Yale Review for their continuing support;
The Bergen Judges;
Audrey Healy and the English Department;
The Davenport Sudler Fund;
The Yale College Dean's Office;
Masters Mary Miller, Gary Haller, and Steven Smith and the Ettelson Fund;
Everyone who has offered their support, guidance, and enthusiasm.

THE DESIGNER WOULD LIKE TO THANK:
Joe Maynard, John Robinson, William J. Mack Company, GIST,
Dr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Prestel, and Rob Giampietro.
THE JUDGES for the Francis Bergen Memorial Prizes for Poetry and Fiction, Spring 2001 were J. D. McClatchy and Amy Bloom.

J. D. McClatchy has been editor of The Yale Review since 1991. He is the author of four books of poetry, most recently, Ten Commandments. He has also published two collections of essays. In 1996 he was named a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Amy Bloom is the author of two collections of stories, A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You and Come to Me and a novel, Love Invents Us. She currently teaches writing at Yale University and is a practicing psychotherapist.