

Selection from

To Some Women I Have Known

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The Ghost Horse

We were going to get a horse. The horse would give us meaning.
Or a feeling we didn't have sitting in lecture halls during the day or
waiting on tables at night.

We would ride the horse from Illinois to Colorado and meet people
along the way who would also give us meaning.

Before we went to see the horse, my friend June bought a pair of
English riding boots in butter yellow. She found them at the local
Goodwill, four dollars.

The horse handler had a Guns N' Roses t-shirt and slapped at the
horse's chest. The horse went crazy. He pawed the ground and the
steam from his nostrils hung in the darkened stables.

As soon as June mounted, her boots slid from the stirrups. The
horse was gone like a ghost train, all light and muscle flying past.

And June was a horizontal dash on top of it—frightening and
comical—the stirrups bounced and flew beneath her, useless
apparatus to hook the rider.

There was a sift of snow on the stubbled wheat outside the corral.

I felt the moment pressing upon me, perhaps knew how I would
remember it: whitened girls on a whitened landscape with Ghost
Horse.

Freakin' sideshow hell horse, the horse handler shouted. The horse
breached the corral, jumped a low gate. The horse-hand ran and
tried to stop him. *Whoa! Whoa!* Several times the horse handler had
to ditch.

June hung on. The horse slowed himself.

Then for a moment June looked like god on a horse, straight in the
saddle. It was as we had imagined ourselves—we who did not
believe in god, but horses.

The horse handler grasped the reins. June dismounted, and we
walked away. There was a bus stop at the cul-de-sac, before the
fields and stables. Turning back I saw the horse handler standing
there with the reins of the colossal horse, a dejected giant, a Trojan
horse, the Appaloosa, a clown of a horse.

Everything huge and luminous and dying.

From Where I Stand on the Steps of the Romanesque Church

Weddings seem unreal to me, and so it seems that I am not here, but only that I remember I was here. I'm already remembering how I stand on the steps of the Romanesque church and look at the vines growing gracefully on the building across the street and how the Cadillacs turn into the parking lot—which seems an old thing—to have Cadillacs arcing along the shaded vine-wall of the church parking lot. What era was that? And I am already remembering how I will remember it. Providing it might be something worth remembering. That it might be something. Tony Lamont, an old friend of Aunt Ag's, is getting the wheelchair from the trunk of the Cadillac. He wears the painted-pony cowboy boots for Aunt Ag, who still flirts with the man she went skiing with in Aspen thirty years ago. My younger cousins, two girls sixteen and eighteen, who will never be sixteen and eighteen again, each go to help my grandmother and slowly settle her into the chair. The linen dress of my grandmother is now pressed into the chair and pulled out at the sides, like the wings of a moth caught in the daytime screen. My cousins close in around the woman in the wheelchair, each touching her shoulder lightly. My aunt has her moment to shimmer as the sun dapples the street and plays upon the ice-blue gown pooled briefly at her feet like water. The girls wear ruffled dresses that swish as they walk. They look both ways before crossing the street under the elms. I am already remembering the orange and yellow dresses flashing light in the open canopy. Aunt Ag, and Tony, the two girls, and the grandmother in the wheelchair come toward me where I stand on the steps of the Romanesque church.

The Drought Just Then

The days were so hot that my roommates June and Harry were reduced to drinking riesling. We wondered if soldiers in the Middle East were as hot, carrying their fifty pounds of gear. We kept the windows open around the clock and watered the sheets regularly. This was something June's mother had told us to do. She had grown up on a farm. The trains loomed close and dust came in. It added to the effect. The apartment was a desert; the damp mattress, an oasis we lay on. Our conversations were feverish. June and Harry talked of food and wine all summer. Their jobs as sommelier and head waitress had influenced the realm of ideas. Harry thought Côte du Rhône was best with salmon cooked with capers and zest of lemon. June set forth an elegant argument for Pouilly Fuissé—chilled, served with caviar spread on rounds of pumpernickel. She won me over just by saying *Pouilly Fuissé* ten times really fast when I asked her to. June told me of her small daring feminist move: she gives the first pour to the women at the table. I imagined women in black dresses, dark hair, leaning back to swish the Pinot Noirs, Côte du Rhône, Pouilly Fuissés. But the wine thing only fascinated me for so long. I was reading *Crime and Punishment* that summer of the drought, where on a perfectly fine day, by a perfectly fine man, a woman is murdered. I was convinced that a tragedy was playing itself out beyond the façade of human activity. Yes, I agreed with June and Harry: culinary taste *was* art. *Good art seduces and subverts*, Harry was fond of saying. June and Harry cooked a cool leek soup one night, and we all agreed that it seduced the hell out of us. We had to drink vodka straight up just to cut it. Then we sat on the floor. On June's old oriental rug we sipped Grey Goose, and dipped croissants into the silky green and agreed that nothing else mattered. We'd give our lives for this moment with leek soup. That was the third thing about great art—it became its own entity, set its own rules; stepping into it was like crossing the galaxies as dust. We were so taken by the taste of leeks and vodka that we nearly forgot about how many had died in the drought raging across the Midwest just then, and the war in the Middle East was a tincture. For once, it was not enormous work, as it usually was for us, to be not of something.

One Night a Girl Appeared to Me

One night, shortly after we moved to the city, a girl appeared to me.

I was bored, sitting out on our steps watching the sun set beyond the white brick hospital helicopter pad at the end of the block. Sometimes, depending on the wind, I could sense the vibration, the individual *whomp-whoosh* of blades slashing, bringing in children. Before landing, arms would appear from the copter's carriage signaling to those on the heli-pad, the skids would scrape, and then the nurses and doctors dressed in white would rush in.

This night brought no copter yet. It remained quiet. Only the sound of crickets and traffic from the boulevard and the hydrant dripping at the curb.

It was a warm spring.

She came walking straight out of the dusky end of that block, this girl blocking the sun setting beyond the heli-pad. Round and buxom, she moved on course.

When she was near, I recognized her as the largest girl in my class. *I know you*, she said, leaning against my balustrade.

It was true. She knew me.

She was twelve, and I was twelve. She was the largest girl in the seventh grade. And I was the second largest.

A corner of the hospital now squared away the sun and edged her face in violet. We were fully formed women facing each other. *You should come over*, she said.

She lived in an old Victorian, like all others in our neighborhood except it was painted a tangerine pink. The sun sat angled to the beaten peak of roof.

Dusk dispelled the edges and atomized the hot tar. I may have noticed this. In the hall she paused to show me her doll keychain, a naked, finger-sized baby with white-blond hair. I may have noticed the quiet before the crickets began.

A plaid couch lined one wall. A TV sat across from it. If someone

else were there, if anyone else had tried to record it for some reason, to take a picture, we would be two girls sitting on a musty pink carpet. One shaking out a pack of cards from a box, the top of the box flipped open.

I noticed the deck landed as a cube in her hand.

We have choir together, she said. *I know*, I said. *My brother is moving to California with his girlfriend. Maybe it will work for them, who knows*, she said.

We said it, or I said it—we should both run away to California and join her brother there. We would live on top of the garage or something.

Like others she had heard of who hung out in flats above garages.

The sun left the earth and yellow-green light turned rose then white-blue, then darkness, and we used the TV for light as we continued to play cards.

Her mother walked in—red hair and a breeze. She set grocery bags on the counter, turned the light on in the kitchen and ashed her cigarette in the sink. I was introduced as the new friend. *Friend, we're having minute steaks tonight*. Her voice was lilting and windy, a hint of gravel. I loved mothers such as this—or thought I did.

She chain-smoked at the stove where she unpeeled steaks from the wax paper and talked of bad managers at the drugstore where she worked. She paused at some point and said, *Her Daddy died in the mines*, you know. She pointed to her daughter, then to me, as if I should remember this.

Her daughter was showing me how to play Rummy Five Hundred—leaning forward to arrange cards in my hand. *Wheel of Fortune* had come on TV.

Though my father was still alive, my grandmother had recently died. I arrived in time to watch her die. Unreal, this dying. The nurse said, *Go in, she is dying*. There was a guitar in a green velvet case leaning against the wall that I was supposed to play for her. But I could not create that moment. Instead I stood and watched her breathe and die.

We shuffled the deck in front of Pat Sajak, and the audience called out *Wheel . . . Of . . . Fortune*. Commercials came, and the mother's voice husked and windy from the kitchen, *The damned manager at work is flirting with me, again. Came by today to look at my boobs! At some point you get too old, you know, to be a fool. You remember that, girls.*

And I remembered also the advice of my own mother who told me to fork my steak with tines curved down, so fork and hand look of a piece.

There were a few geese honking. A cerulean city night: I imagined it transpiring outside the long, double-hung windows. And further, the cottonwoods, and rivers cutting themselves into the Midwest, leaving scars between hills, traceable from the air. Beyond, the mines of Virginia, men walking the tunnels below where my new friend's Daddy died.

I stared at Vanna, her brilliant blond hair, her dress shimmering, and from the cracked window, the womp-whoosh of the blades. Incoming. The white jackets, I knew, were now appearing on the hospital roof.

The mother sat at the chrome kitchen table. Her carotene hair matched the stripes on her uniform. The yellow light on the last pink of minute steak.

The category was household utensils. Contestants stared straight ahead guessing wrong answers. Vanna's dress spumed around her— her hands shaped around the glowing letter. She turned the last N. *Fork, and knife and spoon* one contestant screamed. The audience clapped. The camera panned away. Vanna's ghost dress imprinted upon me.

The girl took my hand. *Come on*, she said. *We'll play cards upstairs*. I let her hand lead. My face, like hers, whitened in the bare brightness of TV.