

Beginning Gently



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1

The dark red stone on
his finger was the only
blood he ever bled.

2

I was married once.
(You see, it is possible
to do too much dope.)

You did not smile or
look my way in passing. Still,
my heart is somehow
lighter, kinder, fairer now
than it ever was before.

Arms around you tight,
fingers laced against your ribs
(breathing, wet, and light)
we float above the down and
dew together in the night.

Then, we're surrounded
by the glow of butterflies,
fluttering and bright.

She was seven, and
while serving make-believe tea,
made unimportant
conversation about the
sun on the flowers and how

sweet the candies were
today. Someone else came up
by name. Oh, no, she
said, he's never been to tea
with me. I never invite

mean people to tea.
I nodded knowingly. No
mean people to tea.

Of course I never would have told another soul, but I was not a virgin when we married. He was, as it turned out. I was not. I had been with several other men, but they were only shallow, mean affairs where they had simply wanted my sweet body. He had wanted me, and I had wanted him as well. Father told me he would take good care of me, what with his degree and opportunities and his wanting me. It was truly love. Truly. And when he left me, after the children were almost all the way grown, and ran off with that "secretary", I was devastated.

Twenty three years of waiting on him (and waiting for him, and being there for him when he came home, and making a good home for him to come home to, and being the good wife, and doing the volunteer work at the church, and touching him, and letting him touch me) and one day I came home, and he was gone. He had simply wandered through the house (as if on lunch break doing some small errand) taking what he wanted and just leaving everything he didn't want behind: Me and the dog and the kids and the records of the musicals we had seen together back in New York City.

And he was gone. Of course, I waited for

him to come back. But he never came back.
And other breezes blew against his skin.
And other suns and moons shown down on him.
And someone else's lips kissed his, and when
he sighed, their thighs were wrapped about him
in the tenderness of any night. And,
oh to have sneaked into their bedroom, late
at night, under cover of the darkness,
and spied on them, poisoning the air with
my hatred and curdling the milk of
how they loved with all my rage. But it was
not my way. Silently, I waited for
him to come back to me. He stayed away.

And after the divorce I had to go
to work. Twenty three years of raising kids
and running the house and all of my volunteer
activities, and every application
that I made was greeted with the
same complaint: that I had no experience.
So I got a job as a clerk and
worked my way up through the ranks. But when you
start out working your way up through the ranks
in your fifties, there's no way to compete
with the pretty young girls or the shiny
young men who will manage you someday.
So I just worked and waited for the day
he might return. But he did not return.

And as the years unfolded, everyone
forgot, and they made up. And I learned from
the children how he was and where he lived
and how his wife, that other woman, was.

And I was left alone with photographs
of children who had loved me long before,
but, now, did not recall my heartache. I
was left with musicals that once had sung
our love, but now sang our mistakes. And I
was left with his virginity, from all
those years before, suddenly becoming
just a shallow, mean affair, where all he
ever wanted was my body. And my
sweet body faded, 'til it was gone away.

Once, when I was out walking in the woods, bending down below a bow of leaves to pass beneath, I bumped head-on into a butterfly passing through the other way. There was just a little flutter against my forehead, and then he had flown away. I didn't even have a chance to act startled and stand back up. But, I could feel a little bit of what it was like to have been born ugly and wet and hairy and subsisting by crawling around on the leaves, and then going to sleep one time and waking up all wide and light and colorful and jumping out into the sky.

We had had their undivided attention.
And at last, the shadows had broken
their quiet history to sigh for us.
(The shadows had kept quiet until then.)
Looking over to the side, I saw our
shadows dancing on the wall in time to
our touches and our cries. (Hairline secrets
coded in each shade of gray) they were there
beside us and harmonizing with our
motions, smiles, and sweet surprise. Later, as
we were lying on our sides (with beads of
sweat declining on our eyebrows, lips, tattoos),
I heard them sigh against the wall for us
and then decline into the pillows too.

Soft rains fell on the mountains through the night
and, freezing, bound to everything in sight.
The grasses on the hills have fallen from
the weight. The trees all sag and cannot sway
with breezes. Valleys in the distance each
have trapped a cloud and made an island out
of every ridge and peak. My truck is washed
with crystal on the drive. And bundled up
against the cold I stand out on the porch
(my cat repeating rubs against my ankle
with his shoulders) listening to each
bird call and each tree sigh and whispered purrs.

The heat inside the house melts ice upon
the roof in beats of drip-drip, drip-drip, drip.

And here I am again. Awake in the early morning. And the rest of the world is asleep. And I am thinking of you. In your sleep, which is still with you I believe, I will ask my guardian angel to ask God to ask your guardian angel to look in on you, for me, and smile. He will not be able to lay as we in our sleeps, or to hold your hand for me, but he will be able to reach inside of you, as you sleep, and help you awaken complete, as I never could, and keep you at peace until the next time we meet. (You, at peace until the next time we meet.)

Part 1.

Brad told me about screwing Betty a couple of times under the dining room table when the rest of us were upstairs asleep. He told it not to say how great it was or sinful it was or sexy it was, but to prove how much he loved her and how heartbroken he was after she was killed, in a drug deal with the Feds, in some graveyard, when she and Bobby tried to shoot their way out of the bust rather than go to jail again. The images of her, first, with him on her back on the floor as both of them urged each other on while being quiet enough to not waken

the rest of us upstairs, and, second, with Bobby, of her dead in that old graveyard, with blood all over the place and bullet holes through the windows and sides of the van, did not prove his love to me. No. Instead of proof of his love for her, I took it as proof that I would never understand these straight men no matter how much I learned of them. I mean, if you really love her, why have her on the cold tile floor under the table a couple of times and then let her go on drug dealing with Bobby? "Really," I wondered, "why not help things change?" I never asked him it though. I just wondered.

Part 2.

And it reminded me of the time that Johnny Ray Haycock told me about taking that young black girl on the counter of the grocery-store-gas-station he used to have out near Heidenheimer, when he was a young man, before he moved to Houston to make the fortune that he never made. Lord, he was proud of that black girl. I mean, he told me about it proud: Eyes afire; Back straight up; Still, in his mind, being all over the inside of that poor girl on the top of the counter right beside the cash register and with all of the store lights on and only the front door locked, as

a concession to her fear that her pappy might come looking for her 'cause she was there to buy his beer. And Johnny Ray was taking payment out in trade 'cause he had always wanted her, and tonight he had told her that her pappy hadn't paid his bill up yet, but she could have the beer if she wanted the best love making of her life right there on the grocery store counter. And she did. And he did. And he was still bright eyed and tall over it years later, whenever he told of it. Or when he even thought of it, alone or with friends.

But it was not about loving her. No.

And if she'd turned up dead in a drug deal, Johnny Ray never woulda brought up the

countertop night as proof of his loving her. He woulda said, "Damn, I hate to hear that. I was hoping to have her one more time someday." "Shit," he woulda said, after a longish pause. And then, his eyes bright, he woulda thought about every move she made that night. And how he played her like a fiddle at a barn dance out in the county late into the night with all of the store lights on. And how he kissed her on the cheek. For Johnny Ray, it didn't matter 'bout loving 'em. It was lovin' havin' 'em.

Part 3.

A few years ago, I fell in love with a young man named Dana. He was a sweet and pretty man. And I think he might have loved me too. And we had great tender sex. And we had great dirty sex. And we had great times listening to the radio and talking and going to the movies and eating dinner. And I had written him a great many poems, perhaps more poetry than for any other man I've known. For, although there have certainly been men for whom I wrote no poetry, there were only one or two for whom I wrote so many pieces of poetry.

But, it didn't work out. And we agreed that we loved each other, and, sex or no sex, we would try to stay acquainted.

And we occasionally had dinner. I published some of the poetry in one of my books. And two or three years later, we were having some dinner and it came up how nice it was for each of us to still have our friendship. And I said that I had been afraid, back when I said it was over and that, "I knew that sex was pretty important to you, and I didn't know if you could do a friendship without any sex." "Well, it is important," he shyly replied, looking down to the side as he spoke. "And you're right. I never have bothered to know a man before without there being sex involved in the friendship. But you were different. I mean, I miss the sex with you, and I've thought many times about telling you to go grow up and try it again or go away. But you were the only one who wrote me poetry." Suddenly, Dana and I understood each other better than we ever had before. It had never crossed my mind before: Even with all the seeds of all other men down deep inside of him, no one else had ever given poetry to him. "No wonder we still smile at each other," I thought. And Dana looked up into my eyes. And his eyes were bright, and his back was straight. And I am sure that mine were too. And I knew right then and there that if he died someday I'd think, "Damn. I was still wanting to give him another poem someday." And then I'd think about, kissing him on the cheek, lightly, good night.

There is an error in translation in one of the famous quotes from the Bible: "And God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," etc.

I am sure that the original Greek was, "And God so loved the world that He hung the air with angels who would sing to those who listened, scattered the earth (every day) with such millions of miracles that we might have trouble seeing them as such, and gave (every night) You, to touch and kiss and hold against the darkness, loneliness, and terror of my darkest dreams." You are the great gift. And I am the recipient.

This growing old is very strange.
I have less energy, and I do not think as quickly
or as clearly. My balance is going away,
and I walk like a little child again: more slowly
and more carefully, sometimes with my hands out
to catch hold of whatever is around if I might
falter. My bowels are less efficient and
I do not love the dietary sweets the way I once did.
Your touch is still the high point in my contact with
the world. It still makes me smile. And it still gives my
heart a little more of a flutter. But my smile is less
ecstatic and more meditative. And the flutter in my
heart is less like the pounding hooves on the plain
beyond the pasture, and more like the wings of
angels come to greet me on my journey.

Beginning gently, an hour before dawn, the patter on the roof seemed more like snow than rain. It was raining in the desert.

By daylight, the car was washed clean as if it had never seen a dusty road there.

The ground was darker from the wet, but there were no rivulets – water being soaked in as fast as it could fall. Through the mist, the gray clouds hung to the earth in every direction. Time to sleep in. Not sleeping: Touching to the patter. Sighing with the wind, the creaking walls, the little trees, and - I remember: Even when it rains in the desert, I want nothing more than you.

For Cynthia Bell

A grey fox ran across the road in the morning twilight as a hawk warmed itself in the sun, standing on a tall fence post. Mule Deer grazed casually in the fields, and, at a curve in the road, a flock of twenty turkeys wandered back and forth, not deciding which side of the road to be on, only to break and fly away to the wood. I lay an old silver Peso on Nina Hannold's grave in memory of you. I had often wondered why I . . . I was carrying it these past few years. Now, like an Indian talisman, it keeps a piece of you in the wilderness no matter where they've laid your body down.

I had to waken Michael and say that something was terribly wrong, and he needed to take me to the hospital. Slowly, we learned that the back of my eye had torn, and I was going blind. They said that I was going to have surgery right then. So, as we walked down the corridor, I asked Mike if we had ever made any promises about sickness and health. “No,” he said, “that’s against the law for us. We could go to prison.” And we both laughed, as he held my arm to keep me from falling. Right up to the brink, and then over in . . .

into the chasm, I am a lucky man.

I believe that I must be the first one out on the trail this morning. The sun is up high enough for others to be out, and it is warm enough, though cool and still and clear. But I walk into spider webs hanging from the trees. And the grasses in each clearing are wet with dew – and there are no footprints through them. (I'm sure the spiders are surprised that I escape their bonds, though they may understand that I am too big to eat anyway. My boots and trousers are wet with dew drops way up to my knees.)

Except for a cardinal hopping about in a cedar tree, I have been alone.

It has been a dry period for me. But, this morning, even though there is no breeze, again I feel the spirit blowing through me. I will walk on further. I will carry my camera with me and try to take pictures of my peace. When I sit on a rock, I will pull out my journal and make some notes: I want to remember how grateful I am for the dry creek-bed, for the small yellow flowers and the gravel underfoot, and for the unseen beings hiding behind the leaves of the trees; and

how sorry I am that you are not here; and how I look forward to touching you.

After I
had kissed you good night (and said,
"Sleep tight") all the stars
were glowing up above us
in the sky.

And the top step
of the stairway still
creaked as I passed by.

Thunder.

Scattered raindrops on
the rooftop. Walls that shudder
in the wind. You and
I, beside each other,
underneath the covers, in the
morning.

There is a small breeze coming
in from the meadow. It faintly
caresses the curve of your
smile. The birds in the distance sing
songs of the meadows and trees
we can't see. We sit on the back
porch and quietly weave our
beliefs: I know that you love me.
The breeze holds our shy hands
and silently kisses our smiles.

20

Tattoo

Another way of
paying someone to touch you
just beneath the skin.

Was there anything
better (in all of space and
time) than the curve of
your behind? On cold, dark nights
it still smolders in my mind.

All you were wearing
was bare skin, baggy old shorts,
and my smiling eyes.

Suddenly, my heart
was beating life instead of
only lonely blood.

All of the noises
of the city were lost in
tender little sighs.

Bare skin. Baggy shorts.
Smiling eyes. All of our sighs.
Blood, becoming life.

Marie asked that we
not put cut flowers on her
grave, but, rather, that
we let the wild weeds bloom and
then let them all go to seed.

The yard was wet with morning dew.

My feet were wet from walking in
the grasses on a morning stroll with you.

The mountain laurel bloomed
in common song with a Mockingbird up on a wire
and some Ravens in the distance in the trees.

And morning rose above the eastern hill
into full view
with you.

When Jeremy and I first met,
he was trying to get into my pants,
and he asked me what I liked to do in bed.
Being a bit caught off guard, I said,
"I like to watch pretty young men like you
lying underneath me
covered with our sweat
and filled with smiling. And you?"

You should have seen his smile.
You should have seen his curling hair
around his face and close clinched eyes.
You should have seen his twist and
felt his writhe. Unfortunately,
what I should have said was just, "I'd
like to get acquainted."

Heads on our pillows,
late at night,
light (still on in the
hallway or maybe the
next room)
reflecting in your eyes.

Eyes open.
Hypnotized.
Blurring into sleep.

I am still inside of you:
As if I were the light in
your soft eyes. No. No.
No. You are still
the light inside of mine.

Harlow danced with Jenkins on the dance floor after all the other men and women had gone home to go to sleep. Wee hours of the morning turned to sunlight, and, in the morning dawn, the limousines and chauffeurs turned to working men and women on their way to do the business of the day.

Champagne for breakfast tied them to each other, and together they returned to her house on the hill that looked across the valley to the sea. Surrounded by the statues of Greek gods and goddesses, they strolled the garden on the rise above the tennis courts and pool, alone above the city.

Beneath the full moon
we were reduced to shades of
gray, black and silver.

Between our touches,
years unfolded quietly.
Spring. Then Fall. Winter.

Tattooed upon his
arm, two skeletons, in boots
and weathered hats, danced.

Albeit without
all of the lust, my skin still
remembers your touch.

Oh to have the touch
of lust return to me as
when we were in love.

It was a morning in January.
I had slept late. Then, when I arose, the yard was full of sunshine on frosted grass, and the Robins were singing songs about the food that they had found and what a day it was. Here in the South, the appearance of Robins does not attend Spring. Rather, they are only proof that it is still just Winter. As the Spring arrives, they will fly away towards other summer homes back north. I turned from the window view to comb my hair and dress against the cold. Then, when I opened the door, the Robins, still afraid of what mankind might do, all flew away.

Now,

weeks later, I awaken to hear the song of Mockingbirds. Two of them pursue each other out upon the still bare Elm and China Berry trees (from branch to bough to leave). The plum trees bloom behind them as they sing. This morning it is blue skies, pearl blue clouds, and reaching from inside of you the deepest touch in all mankind caressing part of me. It must at last be Spring. I will awaken with a wash of loving you and sing along with those small Mockingbirds the songs we mortals always sing to Spring. It is the sweetest music known to man. Or God. Or any other thing.

I'm calling now to say goodbye. And I've gotten your answering machine. I bet you are outside, working in the yard surrounded by the sunshine and the singing of all of nature's craft, and, as always, you are being caressed again by the passing winds. Your hair dances in those winds. The sweat washes down the tracks of dirt on your skin. I am at home calling you on the phone, but I get only the message that you can't take my call right now. I can hear your heart beating in the distance.

It's alright. There's no need to call me back. I'm only calling now to say goodbye.

It began to rain as I was driving home. First a light mist. Then some sprinkles. Finally, a full blown constant shower. The road changed from pale slate gray beneath my lights to glistening with all the light and motion that surrounded it, as all of us, out late, proceeded where we might be going. And the sound of the raindrops breaking on my windshield, and the slap of wipers, danced inside my heart with all our pleasures.

Then, stopping in my back door, I turned and glanced out at the blessings given soil and trees and skin. All of the world was just like us that night: Wet, tired, happy and at peace.

You were just sitting in a chair, looking at the floor (or nothing) blankly, perfectly still. And I went over and sat down on your knees facing you and gave you a hug and kissed you on the side of your neck, lightly. (So, so, gently.) And you cocked your head to the side and raised your shoulder giggling and squeezing my cheeks between the side of your head and the top of your shoulder. And I nibbled there where I had just been kissing and you giggled more and pulled away from me back into your chair smiling. And we sat there eye to eye a moment, glad to be in each other's company.

It's the last week of February. As usual for us this time of year, it's been going back and forth between pretty nice and pretty cold again. For the last few weeks I've been seeing hoof prints from deer in my yard, every now and then – like the morning after a rain. Not a lot of them: One here in the soft soil; There another one. Just enough to let me know that the deer are still about.

The herd has been growing for the past ten years. When I first moved here, most of the land around me was still in farming use, and the deer had to compete with the cattle for food and then survive the annual hunters too. But then, about 15 years ago, the area began to change from farming to residential tracts, and slowly the hunting stopped and the deer herd began to grow again with plenty of food.

Each year I see more of them, standing at the side of the road as I drive home at night, or laying in the gutter having been run over by some passing car or truck. Still, more of them. Sometimes in ones or threes, usually in twos, they stand very still and gaze away into the night wondering if it's safe or if they need to take to flight. Sometimes they return to eating grasses

before I have gone by. Sometimes I have to blow the horn to get them to run off the road into the dark.

Last night was a full moon. And there is always better luck at getting a look at the deer on nights when there is a full moon. Driving home, there were none. Not that I was disappointed or expecting them. There just weren't any out at that time.

But in the middle of the night, I awoke and looked outside, and there were four of them in the backyard outside of my bedroom window. I gazed on them a while and then went back to sleep: Sweet dreams.

I don't know if you know anything about Texas scrub-brush white tailed deer. They're wild animals. They have fleas. They have ticks. They drop their droppings anywhere they wish. Even if it's in your backyard. They are not at all like pet dogs or cats. They do not care to know you. Although they might just eat the food you leave out for them if they find it.

That's how a lot of people who hunt deer hunt them: They set out food for months to train the deer to expect food there, and then in hunting season they go back there and shoot them.

The deer may learn that food is regularly being put out for them, but, unlike our own pets, they will not be grateful. They will not be domesticated. And when they smell or hear the slightest inappropriate thing, they will flash their tails and snort or whistle alarm and bound off into the night with all of their might.

Once, several years ago, in a different house in another part of the state, I had a deer come into my yard several nights in a row, in the late Spring, to eat peaches from a tree in my backyard, back outside of my bedroom window. I didn't want him to eat the peaches. I intended to eat them myself when they were ready.

The first night I saw him, I yelled at him, and he jumped sideways over the barbed wire fence in one motion and was gone. And I went back to bed, my peaches safe. The next night I saw him, I yelled at him and he looked over at me with a clear understanding that I was not very dangerous if all I was going to do was yell at him. He continued to nibble at the peaches.

I dug around in my dresser and found an old target pistol that I have had since I was a child and loaded it up and went outside and fired it into the trunk of a nearby tree.

At the sound of the gunshot the deer jumped over the barbed wire fence in one motion and was gone again. And I went back to bed, my peaches safe again. The next night, I saw him again and yelled at him again and loaded the target pistol and went outside and fired it into the trunk of the nearby tree again. And he looked at me, very quietly in the night, eyes wide and brown even in the darkness, waiting to see what I would do next. I realized that in the two previous nights, he had learned that I would yell at him and make terrific noises, but that was about it.

I considered my options.

Then I went back inside to bed. And he continued to finish off my peaches.

Or perhaps they were his all along.

Since then, I have understood that the deer owned my yard whenever they wanted to, because I knew that I would not stop them. Instead, I would look upon them and consider how peaceful they were, how quiet they were, how graceful they were. How noble they were.

All the while understanding how wild they were.

And then, this morning, when I awoke for the day, still before dawn, but with the

color of the moonlight from the western sky giving way slightly to the light from the sunrise in the east (Shadows meeting somewhere in the silver gray and becoming none) I looked outside my window and there were seven deer standing in the field at my backyard watching the change from night to day: One eating; One with his tail raised, but no alarm; One in perfect sideways profile, strong and healthy and alert, motionless; Four adults and three yearlings, I would guess; No racks of antlers, but it's not their season right now, so I couldn't say if there were any bucks in the bunch.

Seven of them. More than twice the largest herd I've ever seen around here before. And all in my backyard. Well, just past the barbed wire fence that separates the part that I mow from the part that just grows weeds and wildflowers, anyway.

It was very still. The birds had not yet begun to sing their morning songs. The neighbor's chickens in the distance had not yet begun to make their morning sounds. The light was all still silver gray but adding in some blue way off in the eastern sky. And the deer were so sweet and so graceful and so quiet.

I stared at them a while, through the window at my back door. And then I went and got something to drink. And, when I got back to the window, they had moved farther out into

the field while I wasn't looking. And I stared at them some more. And then I went to brush my teeth, and when I got back to the window, they had moved farther out into the field again while I wasn't looking. And then I looked at something else for a moment. And when I looked back up, they were gone. And I thought for a moment about how wild they are. Even while eating in my backyard.

My father always
used to say, "There is no money
in poetry."
And I would always say,
"I know."

(But God is good to me,
and I am at peace,
although still a little wild.)

After mowing the yard this morning, I sat on the back porch a few moments and watched the birds fly in. Dozens of them, Jays and big, black Grackles, swept in, after I had finished, to pick on the scattered bugs that now had so little grass to hide in. Calling out, they sounded angry with one another: "Interloper," "Thief," "That's mine."

And, every now and then, one of the Jays would also scream at me, as if I were some sort of threat to him. I wasn't though. No. I was just the old man who had mowed his lawn and then sat down on the back porch, a few moments, to watch the birds fly in.

The moon is only
a single silver curve of
light above the eastern hills.
The air is clear and cold.
Soon it will be sunrise in

the early Spring. I
am standing in the backyard
listening to the
deer in the field beyond the
fence and to the few soft songs

of crickets in the
early morning stillness. Dew
marks the paths that no
one has walked on yet today.
I will be along them soon.

Why do I dream of
you when you are already
here with me all night?

Why do I reach for
you when you are already
laying beside me?

Why do I lace my
fingers into yours when you
are holding my hand?

Because of the way
you will inadvertently
kiss me in your sleep.

And because of the
expression that you have, when
we are both smiling.

And because of the
way you guide your fingers, all
over my body.

I couldn't figure out why my dress shoes had mud on them. I don't have a lot of need to wear them and it had been months, I was sure, since I had last put them on. But I couldn't figure out why they had mud all over them. And as I cleaned them I questioned my memories of the summer trying to recall what it was about.

No idea. And I went out about my evening with my friends and had a lovely time. Then just before midnight, sitting on the side of my bed, bent over to untie them and take my shoes back off and go to bed, I remembered. The last time

I wore these shoes was to Dianna's funeral. It too had been a gathering of friends. It too had been a bit of a celebration. And it too had been on newly turned ground, damp from the morning dew, that stuck to my shoes. Then I came home and went on about my life.

Thank you for holding my hand as we sleep,

and

thank you for waking me up with a kiss.

Sometimes I am
like a moth beating itself to death
against a light bulb.

A spider tossed out a web strand
to catch the falling moth
in death.

Just as you tossed out your web
to me, in life.
And I held on to it,
for all the nearness
and dearness
I could get.

Let me tell you, I
love the way our skin touches.
I love the way our
hearts touch. I love the way our
minds touch, lips touch, eyes touch. And

the way our eyes
caress each others bodies from
way across the room,
quietly, tenderly, and
gently, opening our arms.

(when Spring slipped into summer, as we lay in soft, scented, fading skin).

It is difficult to write poetry about my boyfriend anymore. There is no yearning that is not met. There is no wonder that is not held in awe. There is no mystery that is not explored. And there is no skin between us that is not touched somehow. We talk, laugh, eat dinner, visit with friends and go our separate ways. We sleep back to back or in each others arms or, sometimes, one or another on the couch for some reason. But it is difficult to work up the energy for poetry about him. I am grateful to have him in my life, and there is not much more to say. I love him beyond words.

After Sasha died, the other cats in the neighborhood, who had always visited her in her life, came by to visit her but could not find her anymore. They would sniff under the bushes and smell around the back door on the porch. All of them would wander slowly off - some out toward the garage, some away towards homes. Benny, the big tomcat, clawed at the door begging for her to come back out. He slept all day on the welcome mat. He scrunched himself up sideways on the window ledge and stared inside the house. I never could find any way to tell him. I scratched him behind the ears and on the top of his head, but I couldn't find the words he'd understand. Finally he looked up at me and meowed very slowly. "Yes," I said, "I miss her too."

All of them stood around saying things like, "He never knew what hit him." And, "He never saw it coming." And, "There was nothing he could do." Well, let me tell you buddy, everything went into real slow motion, and I saw it coming. And I knew exactly what it was that was going to hit me to. But there was nothing I could do.

I wasn't really
looking, but just out of the
corner of my eye,
I saw you smile. Both of us
thinking about the touches.

44

I still leave room on
your side of the bed, thinking
you will be right back.

Just one little lightning bug between us.

I took the old road to the river:
Bumpy, rutted, almost washed out at a
couple of dry-wash creek-beds. It was
enough to make me wonder how they ever
got about before there were paved roads and
bridges everywhere. Then I remembered
they did not have our modern cars back then.
They had horseback and mule drawn wagons. The
early white men scratched a dirt road on top
of the Indian trails. And they left the
ruins of a few fences and cabins along
the way. We modern men have built a
new paved highway across the ridge in the
next canyon. But I did not wish to go that
way today. I wanted to pass slowly by
the long ruined homes and fields, listening to
the symphony of their loves and their times
and the children running naked to the water.

We went camping on a holiday. I
awoke in the cold, early, morning, dark,
in our tent, to learn that, still, the curve of
your spine against my abdomen and chest
(your fingers holding mine) meant everything.

When I was in the first grade, 6 or 7 years old, my family went camping at a state park somewhere. I don't remember where, but it had a lake with a swimming pool, and a volleyball court, and horse-shoes, and slides and swings and all the other stuff. And I met a boy named Forrest in the park. He said he was from Belgium. I'd never heard of Belgium before. But my Grandpa told me it was far away in Europe, and they must be pretty rich to travel in America even if it was camping. Forrest and I played together and shot at each other with our water pistols.

They were leaving before we did. And I had an argument with my mother and I was in our tent, angry and crying, as they drove away: Him at the window in the back seat – nose to the glass – waving his hand from side to side. I don't remember what I was crying about, but I didn't even wave back. I sat with my hands over my mouth and nose and watched him drive away. I know that when you die, all of your family and friends will come to meet you at the gates of heaven. So, my grandfather will be there. And my parents. And my wife. Will Forrest be there too?

I don't know how much money they had, but they had a lot of money.

I mean they lived on five acres, downtown, in a house designed by a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. Their living room was the world's most elegant and simple cavern, made of rock and long, horizontal lines of wood and glass. And it was two and a half stories tall with one wall all windows looking out into the woods and the creek that went past.

And they were nice enough people: Eunice, Mary Alice, their sister Emily. But they were always dressed up and made up and wanting me to perform and discuss the meaning of my poetry.

That's all I really was to them – another visiting poet, there for the holiday season. I was one of the Christmas decorations around the house: colorful and festive and temporary. I was supposed to be interesting and intelligent and lyrical. I was supposed to do drugs with them and have sex with them and look interesting anytime I was in the room. (Which was to be on-call.)

I could do anything as long as it fit those needs.

And they gave me nice things. One day I

commented on a lovely piece of petrified Mammoth tusk, marked on its underside, with a very fine hand, as being from the such-and-such age. Emily said if I liked it, I could have it.

I could gaze at the flames in the fireplace. I could dine on any leftovers. I could even do drugs and have sex with their brothers and husbands.

I always supposed they had learned that was ordinary poet behavior from Ginsberg. He always said that the boys were almost as important as poetry. "Poetry first. Boys' bottoms second." (Boys meaning pretty young men, not really little boys. They don't know anything about sex, who wants 'em?) But boys' bottoms were second not first.

That was always confusing for me. You hand me unlimited quantities of sex and drugs, male or female, uppers or downers or insiders or outers, and my poetry seems to wither on each line.

Sonnets went unwritten. Episodes of music went unsung. Clusters of rhymes were lost down deep within these strangers with money.

Maybe that was all they ever wanted. Shared protein. Shared hallucinations. Shared delusions of grandeur and paranoia.

Shared discussions of sonnets that would never be.

I was a nice holiday guest. We had lots of fun. One day, I was going to have to pick up my Inscribed Petrified Mammoth Tusk, my frayed or unwritten lyrics, my used-up ass, and walk on out of there.

I told them I was going out for cigarettes, asked if they needed me to pick up anything for them, and walked on out of Frank Lloyd Wright's student's front door (and their weird trips) and back into my own journey.

I didn't even say goodbye to Ginsberg – God Love Him: He had other behinds on his mind.

After he had died, I was offered any remembrance of him I might wish. At his executor's suggestion, I accepted two small photographs, some old yellowed newspaper clippings, and a few old correspondences (including an odd St. Valentine's Day card that he had saved). I was offered more if I wished, and said that I might call back for more. As days passed, I found myself wanting an old quilt that his grandmother had made or a simple colored comforter. "Bedclothes?" I wondered, "Why would I want bedclothes?" Surely it would be to have something that had kept him from the chill. In the end, however, I chose to let those, too, fade off into the ether.

The summer I turned 10, we lived in an old, two story, log house with a wide front porch that overlooked a small lake in the pine forests of central New Jersey. I spent the whole summer on that lake: Swimming, Canoeing, Riding bicycles on the roads and paths that surrounded it, Playing with friends, and (out on that big front porch) Listening to music by that new rock and roll legend Elvis Presley. I still had bright red hair and freckles from head to hand and foot. And, because it was summer, I hardly took off my blue swimming suit except to sleep or, on Sunday, go to church.

And sometimes I wore it to sleep as well.

I remember one afternoon playing Elvis' new single, "Don't be Cruel" over and over on a small phonograph I had carried out onto the porch, and dancing there all alone (red hair, freckles, blue bathing suit, lake in the Pines) endlessly to the blues.

Okay. My youth was perfect after all.

I went for a walk in the nearby woods this morning. I had not been there in months. (I had not felt well. Then I was away on holiday. Then it was just too hot and cruel outside.) Today there was a cool morning breeze, and the sky was a solid light gray. The leaves were beginning to fall, and the flowers in bloom were clearly in the last fling of summer: Tomorrow they'll be gone. It was a lovely walk in the trees, with only a light jacket needed to stave off the chill. It was just such a day I first took off my clothes with another. In a wood far away. Taller trees, then,

and no blossoms at all, as I recall.

Because we had taken off our jackets, we had to stay very close to stay warm.

The convertible's top was down.
The sun was high in the clear blue sky.
Billy Ray was at the wheel with
three of his girlfriends beside him
across the wide front seat.

Seven or eight of the kids
– all under ten –
were piled into the backseat
crawling all over each other.

Everyone was smiling and happy
as they pulled out of the driveway
on their way to the beach for the day.

There is nothing in the world like
a day in the sun at the beach.

Everything!
would never be the same again.