COUNTRY WITHOUT A NAME

BY ANN BOGLE

With illustrations by Daniel Harris

Argotist Ebooks
Country Without a Name
The five stories in Solzhenitsyn Jukebox (Argotist 2010) move along a continuum of fiction to essay. The 24 pieces in Country Without a Name move from fiction/memoir (memfic), at times starkly factual, at other times hazily fictional, to prose poem.

A group reading of “Acceptance is to her a phenomenon” appears at Whale Sound; “Gerade rechts zum Volkszimmer” at Big City Lit; “1974, What I Wanted” at fwriction: review; “Inaccrochable” at Wigleaf; “Basal Distance” at Wordgathering and on MiPO-radio. “Red Squirrel,” “Jungle,” and “Trent Kesey” appear as “Three Short Fictions” in Minnetonka Review. Work is forthcoming in Thrice Fiction.

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When Kayla arranged to have her breasts reduced and divorce Lyle, it was because she was a Pagan and he was Born Again. That had always been true and became truer. He would not take Prozac and talked Jesus to her as if from a bucket. His Bible was as shopworn as a service manual.
I hit the pole on Whited Avenue a year to the day. The radio was driving. The seatbelt snapped my sternum. The acts the shelf life. Later, the kindred, octogenarian doctor prescribed Topiramate, approved to combat PTSD. My brother the pot smoker thinks the doctor is Big Pharma, but I think he is a swinging, bearded, whistling, singing shaman who studies chemical sequences. This one mimics coca stirred with stomach acid or chicken fried in grandma’s kitchen without the nasty side effects, without the downs, the IBMs and 666s, the big old Gregor Samsa, the taste of tire smoke, ash or tin, the cash solicitation, the guns and squad cars in the ward, the next-to-nothing boyfriend, all sickeningly handsome as he says it.
I wanted to earn A’s. And an A cup to protect my tall nipples from fondling at school. It was our first year to be graded. Until then, we had been scored on behavior—what if we were to be scored on behavior or graded today? Then we were transitioning from behavior to performance along academic lines, and once, my head still hurting from the kick it received on May 2, the day before my twelfth birthday, from a boy on the playground, probably Hans, but maybe someone else, maybe Jeff, not likely David, and not the twins, Joel and Tim, and not Charles, never could it have been Charles. Charles was the sort of young man in sixth grade who might grow up to defend a woman against the might of other men, so it was not he who kicked my temple, after the teachers had warned the boys not to kick us there. Surely, someone must have wondered what “temple” meant. There was another David, but for the sake of fiction, he goes by Donald in my books. Donald and I had a relationship history that could be traced to the McGovern-Nixon election in which McGovern won only one state, ours, and Nixon won the rest. In the show of hands, Laurie and I had voted for McGovern. The other 28 kids had voted for Nixon. I planned a childhood memoir called *Voting for McGovern* or *Waiting to Be Hippies*. I thought of us dressed for those three years in our elephant pants and mini-dresses, beads and chokers at our necks, long blond hair parted down the middle, recorders, easier to play than flute and clarinet, though we played those, too, and as we got to be better at those instruments, recorder became harder to play, easier to overblow, and the girls with soprano voices, one with long brown hair and pretty bangs, joined the Chamber Choir for which they had had to audition, and due to my extreme height—I was 5’2” by seventh grade—I could not or did not think I could sing the high notes the other girls could sing and no boy, no boy could hit those high notes ever again. Charles appeared in the hall in eighth grade sporting the first beard, and I acted maturely toward it, as if it did not faze me that he had grown a beard over the summer and his mother, Gretchen, and his father, Father, had allowed him to do it. If there had been arranged marriage in eighth grade, the grade it used to be and still sometimes is when children left school to work in the fields, I would have hoped that my parents would have arranged for me to marry Mike, who was tall and spread his protective arms around me on the sofa in our living room, despite his age, which must have been only thirteen, already a man like Charles, a man like my father, who must have been 49 at the time, and who got mad at Mike, thinking worse things than arms folded around his daughter because of bad Donald, Mike who could be described even at thirteen as blue collar because to earn a living is what he wanted to do, and Donald, a poor student who had voted for Nixon in the open election yet picked the only two girls who had voted for McGovern to take him to the equation that led to the baby carriage, could take her dream away from her, to get A’s—a bad girl, perhaps, one who wanted to score and score well, an anomaly, a trick in their otherwise orderly progression of nips of vodka to nymphomaniac, not a nympho, maybe a sea nymph or wood nymph, and not an oily-haired girl, a tall girl, at 5’2”, fast at algebra and sure at science and made for weddings after all.
Un Americano

Ann and User Name are going to a coffee shop in a northern city. The weather is predicted to be 25 degrees. The cafe has exposed log walls. User Name’s apartment is in the warehouse district. The coffee shop is near the creek. Ann will wear black boots, black jeans, and a gray cashmere sweater dress. She will not look “great.” She will look even. Her hair will be in a knot from not brushing it after washing it. User Name will greet her by telling her she’s right, she is tall, and Ann will think of their middle-aged grief, though she feels twelve and thirty-nine. He will be tall. She’ll say, “You’re tall yourself! I so like tall!” And they’ll dive for a table by the window when the elderly lawnmower repairman begins to clear it and leave. Americano, Ann will say, large, wondering if you pay in sex for that or if it goes on a tab or ledger adding up to gestures that add up to sex or money that adds up to the same thing as sex. He’s tall. He’s appetitive. He orders a Danish. He orders a latte. His eyes are wide then narrow and brown. Hers are gray then they look away, toward the back door where a delivery driver has walked in, carrying a tray. Nothing is going to happen today. User Name has a missing toe, but she will not know that until the third date. On the first date, she will not know. The missing toe will mean, eventually, giving succor, not for the loss of it, a blade fell on it when he was eight, but for his hated father, his father who stayed up late and messed around in the kitchen making apple sauce and cherry wine.
I dreamt that my old friend, Trevor Lea Rogers, was crossing the grassy mall in a city like Madison, but not Madison, perhaps Washington, D.C. He looked so much the same with his medium-length long hair and beard dyed black. He was wearing a ball cap. As we used to say, he looked like Brad Pitt. He saw me and caught up to me; we were happy that we had spotted each other. In real life, we haven’t seen each other in nine going on fourteen years. We went to a nearby garden to sit. The garden was outside an arts administration building. The building had a narrow, yet monumental façade and heavy, forbidding front doors. We sat outside, experiencing a mutual happiness, without knowing exactly what it was they did inside the arts administration building. Then Trevor took a scissors from his pack and went over to the bank of white petunias that edged the sidewalk. He cut all the petunias up until they looked shredded like bills. He told me he had renamed himself, that his new name would be: Kesey, Trent Kesey. Just then, an arts administrator poked her head out of the big front doors. She started to call Trevor inside. She was smiling at him, but she frowned at me. She said she was thinking of having him arrested. The shredded white petunias were on the lawn. Spell it while you can, I was thinking soundly; the petunias will be wasted otherwise. Just then the arts administrator decided not to press charges against Trevor and let him go. Trevor decided against spelling his new name, but I pictured it: Trent Kesey written out in white flowers.

Then Trevor bought a dress for his wife, Julie, for her birthday. He bought it from a street vendor and was trying to devise a way to wrap it, by folding it carefully on colored tissue paper. He said he hadn’t been to see her in a week.
I realize that to say, “I do not believe in God” is footsteps away from “I do not rely on God” and “God left me.”
I changed my mind about what had taken place: I had failed improperly, not, as I at first believed, won every heart. The hearts were in the field. The hearts, our hearts, our two tall hearts, our too-tall friendship, too tall for men, our hearts in our eyes, at a level, to the side, our hating to do this: to win, we lose.

The Queen of Spades had not won every heart, but it was not in her heart to realize it, and now: what difference did it make? She had reported her gain.

Did her face require so much studious fascination? I had looked at the side of her face more ways than one—the sort of face she wore but also the face her parents had given her, ancient bone structure, judge’s eyes.

*I was not “best.” I was “better” and “sincerely.”*

She bore herself like a “widow.” Men edged up to her kinetic circle, wanting to touch him: her father, to meet him, to know him, to test for his riches, but they’d already had her, and he, not hearing all this ridiculousness, *girl-to-woman, woman-to-man, serenely born,* knew her as a girl!

Neither of us thought of real winning. We set about brilliant losing, dark angel forms of luck and greed, the desire, the craving, *the need to lose so strenuous that one wins*; we tied at thirteen. She was 26 when she faked her victory. I was 29 when I lost mine.
We do this: We go out for coffee in Wayzata. We go to the Caribou that is next to the bookstore. Harry, an early retiree and investment strategist and good man, world traveler, stops at our table to ask if we have seen it: the Porsche Carerra parked just around the corner. He estimates it costs $350,000 and that there are fewer than ten of them in the country, six more likely. We haven’t seen it, but Lena, my friend, says, “That’s how much my house costs: $350,000.”

Later, we’re eating hamburgers at the Wayzata Legion—they are very juicy and cost $6 for the basket—and Lucia walks in with Karen. Karen is carrying a gigantic gold Chanel purse. Both are in pants sets and heels. They have been to Gianni’s, the best steak house, and are coming in to the Legion, the only place that allows smoking inside. Lucia is loud and friendly and affectionate. She runs her arms around the Duke and squeezes herself in between his legs. He is bald and yellowing and spotted, at least 70, and she is 65, but she looks ageless, like Sophia Loren. Karen ties us up with talk. She tells us her father is a three-time veteran, and people at the Legion are always good to her even though she wears Chanel and Cartier diamonds. We look at her finger. It’s big, a wide band up to the first joint. She wears a diamond cross that covers her breastbone. I can’t figure out why she is wearing a leopard print chemise. She is very married, as she tells us in plain detail. She says that she and Lucia are going to a private dinner with Bush in Wayzata for $5,000 per person. Lena says she would only pay $5,000 to eat with Elvis, and only if she got to sit right next to him.

Karen walks away and Lena says that she has Cartier, too, and Chanel, but she doesn’t talk about it with strangers at the friggin’ Legion, for crissake. Of course, I say. Lucia is German, and we had a conversation auf Deutsch at the coffee shop on another day. She said my German was commendable, but she knew right off she didn’t like me. That was the week before she went to the Cheney luncheon in Excelsior.

Lena and I grew up together and vote for Democrats. We’ve talked about politics, which is a little surprising considering that so few people do. The men in her family are Republicans and the women are Democrats, going back to FDR. Their women and men disagree about the war. In my family, we vote for Democrats, without ever being sure whether they represent our views. My mother is more like a moderate peacetime Republican, my brother a Christian member of a leftist party not invented yet.

Dinner

At our women’s dinner, no one takes pictures. All seven women are dressed up and look beautiful for our age. Our ages vary from 41 to 66, adjusting for the possibility that one of us is altering her statistics. We grew up together, most of us. Our goal is to eat a terrific meal in a restaurant and to light up cigarettes afterward. Soon, we won’t be able to do that, and already, we have had to drive to the neighboring county to do that. Our hostess, Lena, visits Florida to see her snowbird parents and believes the smoking ban is our Prohibition. She has been watching old Bogart
movies and realizing the end of an era. I wear my Mizrahi evening dress that I got at Target for $6.

The truth is, we hardly ever understand what is going on. If you consider that it is legal to boot-lock my car in a Minneapolis parking lot for $119.75 but not to smoke in a restaurant, are we not in our rights to ask what rights are, what ours are and what they were?

I order, of all things, beef liver. What a strange decision, to eat liver at a restaurant. All the women ask to taste it, as if it were an exotic appetizer. I give them all bites. For liver, it tastes very good, but for food, it tastes like liver. The thought of it, while I eat it, causes a ruckus in my esophagus, and twice I go to the women’s room to burp violently near the sink. I eat it in the hope that it will help my liver, which is holding up well after years of taking medications and a past of too much drinking. So, we are all healthy but suffering financially, not equally so, and the tendency to suffer financially has been caused by humbling ourselves to particular men. We take a quiz in moral values, phrased as a party game. After the story-quiz, it comes clear that I place my values in the following order: Security (the old male friend), Love (the girl), Sex (the lover), Morals (the girl’s female friend), Money (the old man). Within the group there is every possible combination. I’m keeping this vague because it is more important to get out and enjoy company and a meal once in a while than it is to report it in a detailed format. You see how it makes for paler writing. I do.
Sometimes I think we are in it all together, responsible to each other and for what happens to one another. We can prevent suicides. Other times I think this thinking is jaded, that having strange longings for world peace is unjustified. Happier and more optimistic people than I feel we are not in it for peace, not responsible for war or suicide. One million people die every year at their own hand, the hand that swallows the pills or plies a knife or loops a noose or turns on the gas. It amounts to more deaths than homicide and war combined. For every person who dies alone that way, another twenty try. An attempt that leads to death is called “completed.” I think it affects rent. The dead guy is not the bad guy, the only bad guy in a serene film about beauty, the living not the good guys on a team that wins at war. He is in his own category. He carries a name or label. He has a “profile” under law. In China it’s women. Some people are against fear. I am more against hate than against love. Someone will try to tell you that love is a sickness. Someone is always diagnosing.

I walked and then I ran. I was in the woods on a paved path and couldn’t tell how long a block was: I just ran from tree to tree, blue racing line to blue racing line, thinking of kilometers.
She upbraided me for not counting on him more. I told her that my favorite in the Birthday Book was August 26th, Day of the Supportive Partner. I told her I had promised him I wouldn’t go mushy in emails. I said he was cold. I said I like cold. She said, “You’re cold.”
Hysteria

Does a nameless horse make you more nervous or less nervous than a named horse?
—Padgett Powell

The fathers hit their daughters who grew up to fear women, fear or avoid them, distrust or blame them, wanting to shock or maim them, the hitting fathers masterminds against lesbians.

One father in thirty-seven—or one in three—depending on the reckoner—is thought to have fornicated with his teenage daughter. I have learned to ask whether “fornication” is what is meant or whether that’s a false rumination, wishful insistence on what is dire.

I once sat in therapy sessions with a kind male psychologist who took notes after our visits. Twenty years later, I reread the notes. Whereas I had told him that I had had my clothes torn from me on numerous occasions by boys—what I now call gang stripping—he wrote that it bothered me that a boy had “fondled” me. My sacred boxes contained this misinformation. I called Dr. Hall and asked him to revise his records, but they were shredded by then.

Brad Errett sucked my nipples until I screamed, “Suck them!” Keith Lammi kissed me in the raspberry bushes at band camp near Moosehead. We met there daily when he wasn’t playing trumpet and I wasn’t playing clarinet. Marco Popp and Robert Raithel kissed me in Germany. Marco Popp pinned me to the sofa in the disco after he’d watched Robert Raithel whisper in my ear. Marco’s pinning me hadn’t upset me so I name them.

What bothered me was the violence of American boys—a Roman conquering by one of them when I was fifteen and he was sixteen—a childhood friend. Son of my father’s friend, paddled by my mother’s friend—neighbors like the Rubbles and the Flintstones—dead. He died of a heart attack at almost 41, days after 9/11. Someone superstitious might say that I’m his widow. Boys had learned that football is gay.

Mark Jacobson died of a heart attack days before 9/11. Mark Jacobson didn’t ransack “the girls,” meaning a girl, but a tree limb knocked him to the ground as he rode bareback through the park trying to tame the wandering Appaloosa.
I noticed that on nicotine patch I dreamt of celebrities and sex. These were men who knew me in the dreams but not in life. All of them were extremely famous, except Dan Fogerty, who used to be more famous and who kissed me like a teenager. Redford came in a limo. With Dylan the embrace was of friendship for my real friend, Jack. A team of reggae journalists played and an unknown man came for me after work in a kilt.

Perhaps it’s due to Wellbutrin—who knows?—that I dream now of celebrities I have met and who might argue against it, their fame, as a false claim, one that means (since no one besides poets and students, colleagues and friends knows them) a familiarity related to but unlike widespread fame.

I walked into a party. Men I’d heard of and more than “heard of” were there, whose veiled, intimate thoughts revealed in pages of risky avant-garde literature I had read. I was wearing new shoes that were a half size too small. My feet had grown from pounding the pavement looking for someone. The homelessness had broken open in me without interrupting shelteredness.

I had slept alone with a dry head in a soft bed. It was as if I had always slept that way. I might have resorted to holding a stuffed animal. There was a reason for this celibacy but it was not religion or disease. It was society. I had exceeded a limit placed on all of us—how many hands we are to hold before picking the hand we most wish to hold for life. I had thought it was a numeral but it was a resonance, one that happens early then recurs.

I hit upon it with a musician, a famous man married for decades, a soul already spoken for, enough. I was poor (despite my shelter) and I had learned that “poor” is different from “broke” which didn’t apply to all poor people. “Broke” described the nouveau poor. And “clarity” I suggested we use when “enough” had been reached.

I dreamt in three dreams that we were at a poetry reading and at two A.A. meetings. In the second dream of the meetings the married musician suggested that I read seafaring novels to help the alcoholic I had next met. The alcoholic had rejected A.A. as brainwashing. Enough, enough, enough, but it wasn’t yet enough: clarity in action.

In the earlier dream about the meetings—the rooms change—I am bottomless under the table and must cross the room to find pants. My fat shows, fat that wasn’t there when he met me, vantage he would not have seen.

In the dream of the poet there is a wide sweeping lawn, and we flirt, but it is or is not the same thing, and we have no words for it: “legislation,” “negotiation,” “foundation.” I collide with him on a hill and knock him over. I recircle the hill to see him but by then he is busy.
Earlier, not ten years of it, I had walked into Keillor’s bookstore and the word “clarity” was written across a banner under the ceiling. Enough, I was thinking, but the furtive position of one seeking clarity or enough, quietly or alone, was barely enough when I couldn’t see those brown eyes or pass a guess.
NOTES: I spent one summer at my mother’s house with a toad, an American toad, a female American toad, a *Bufo Americanus*, who visited each night at ten and left in the morning at six for twelve weeks; then she did not appear at her perch by the glass door for two weeks, a summer vacation.

“If you continue to come here,” I said to the toad, “I’ll have to buy a terrarium.” At the word “terrarium” she crawled off into the night.

My life was quiet then, and that was my entertainment. I studied toads on the Internet. The male toads have distinct voices. They call in mating. The females have little red gullets. Toads hibernate under the permafrost. No source seemed to know how long they live.

I reluctantly named her Tilly Artaud. She was free, not a pet. I could only train my cat, Francis, not to eat her if he knew she were a pet. Before the summer was over, I saw him pat her gently on the head.

Tilly appears in a paragraph in my short story “Dumb Luck.” I used it, but it’s a longer story than that. Do I write it long form, as a creative nonfic? As a children’s story?

I started on a children’s story about frogs and turtles that turned lewd. The turtles were the landlords. The wife turtle drove a red Corvair. Her husband fetched six-packs of pop and beer from the country store for the frogs who were guests. He strapped the six-packs to his shell with a bungee cord. He went on foot, crossing the highway at a walking bridge. One day a car hit him, and the frogs didn’t care that he was limping. The frogs were a very famous rock band staying at the lodge. Continue?

After not going out for weeks, I went to a bar and met an electrical engineer, a motorcyclist who raced in the Black Hills, a Renaissance man in a relationship with a young married woman, and I told him about the toad.
Another writer was not always another writer. Before that she was a young woman writer and before that a girl who wrote, before that a child and before that an infant, before that an egg in the scenic camaraderie of heaven, in a film about two pants, parents enjoining her to take up.

She has lived with her and inside her. Has she seen it? She has not seen it, but she has roamed its hall until airborne, a cord dripping. Who cut it? Saw. He saw it, the boy, from the foot of his mother’s deathbed, her covers flung off—dark furry snail suddenly visible—signal of what’s next, his dying at the beginning or her end.

Another writer writes a serious paw, a mistake of cat, a dripping maw, a dune of replacement. “Sex is a renewable resource,” she says. “If I have slept with all of North America, then you have slept with all of North America and Iceland besides. Wake up, lizard!” but he has slid off the bed.

She’d rather write his penis than her pussy. She’s seen that.

Her clit is off limits to all except a stranger. He sends her a chestnut-sized, hand-painted black and pink-petaled vibrator with twelve speeds and two gyrations. When it runs out of energy, she plugs in the long one, long like a rolling pin.

“It was the size of my forearm,” she said when he asked her about the largest man. “I squatted over it. The head was inside me, and I covered only the top of it like a helmet. He didn’t thrust.”

She is long and curved up near a bell; only the carillonneur has knocked it.

She goes to the garden in August with her camera. She pictures it for the wild rhinoceros, a serious writer, living in Reading. She has never met him. He sends her fifty photos of his pumped-up self, even one of his erection during a handstand. She says, “I’m not big enough for you, not wide.” He texts her from a restaurant in Philly where he is eating mussels: when r u cum-ing?

In the photo an elegant nail partitions the leaves: a flower, she’s heard that, or an ear of prime rib. She posts the photo to her weblog under the heading “Sex and Taxes” and leaves it for fowl to peck at for a week.

“I don’t want you to get a Brazilian,” he tells her, only he calls it a Bolivian. She has to get a Brazilian, every few weeks for a year. “I like you with hair there,” he says, “I like women with hair there,” but his position is a losing climb. “Suit yourself,” he says, “but it’s for men who fantasize girls.” “It’s cleaner,” she says, thinking of the artist in St. Paul who wouldn’t let hair near his mouth. She has told him about the camera but not about the rhinoceros who texts her in Reading: gitting any? like a common pornographer or a crowd.
Blood everywhere, and this time she hasn't prepared for him or shaved. Fifteen pillow shams at the Palmer House devastated, a serious poet from Philadelphia, not the writer from Reading after all.

The third first he: Had he seen it? The ring. He couldn't move forward to be inside it with her: It was a deadlock in several positions. He went down to look at her, to shell gaze. There was a wedding band. “You said you weren't a virgin when I met you,” he said. “I'm not,” she said. And he turned it
Scandinavians settled in Minnesota because it resembled Scandinavia. This morning I vomited salad I ate last night at an Irish pub. The salad was called “chop chop.” I paid $19 for the food and two beers. I met the owner whom we help to become rich with our simple appetites. We were rich farmers from Scotland and Sweden. He is Irish but unlike other Irish-American people I know, he is from Ireland. He is red-headed, swarthy and muscular. He imported the mahogany bar from Ireland. I wish my simple appetites might feed two in our decision instead of helping him if he’s a tax-evader like so many of the restaurateurs. Asian restaurants serve vegetables with love. Overnight, I felt drunk, as if headed for hangover, but I hadn’t drunk enough to cause it. What caused it? Superstitions dialed in sleep. Today I was thick with religious devotion. I had thought about delicious corned beef and cabbage not to be served at that public house on St. Patrick’s Day. I wanted the Irish of Binghamton, the fire department, and the Irish of literature to comfort me. To avoid this drunkenness not caused by drinking. I was so balanced before it was revealed. Ladylike reserves be restored to me.
Unapproachable. I imagine an L. Frank Baum novel with a hairy lesbian marching band in parade. The womyn visit the barbershop and keep their hair short like men then let the hair on their legs and armpits grow like European women. The womyn are hippies in their way.

I have to look back at it: men in Madison guaranteeing the free speech of a preacher on the library mall. The preacher stands during lunch hour on a concrete platform and shouts at the group, perhaps hoping to save them, “F-o-r-n-i-c-a-t-i-o-n!” The beards face him braced at attention, forking the word in the cold.

I walk by watching them, not stopping, thinking, “What fornication?”

Later, ten years later, in Texas, I visit G.’s apartment. She orders the men to piss off the balcony but lets the women through the bedroom to the bathroom to pee. Pages of my thesis are strewn throughout the rooms and cover the floor. We sit on them and on old CDs. The visitors grow upset, to the point of hysteria, if one of their lovers sleeps with another of their lovers or husband or wife. “F-o-r-n-i-c-a-t-i-o-n!” I shout from the bathroom. The men hear it and send in J., the little drug dealer girl, to see.

... When the man comes in the house with his girlfriend, he is hoisting a 12-pack of Bud, and she is holding her eye where he has flicked it with his baseball cap while driving. M. and I have been arguing about the future. At first we are glad to be interrupted. I immediately think of the two of them driving 25 miles out of Houston to get to us in Sugarland, but when I see that the girlfriend is injured, I get on my horse.

The man is wiry and jumpy. There is a tattoo of Charles Manson on his upper arm. He looks like a man on a pogo stick. He will not stop jumping. “I’m going to smash all the windows of her car,” he claims. “Stop him,” I say to M., but M. does nothing except try to make peace with concentration. “You’re not allowed to hurt her or her car,” I say to the man, whose name I have heard once and forgotten. The man veers close to my face, “Who’re you? Bella Abzug?! Gloria Steinem?!”

The girlfriend smiles then goes to lie down on the daybed in the dining room. The man runs through the kitchen and out the back door. When he comes back, he says, “I smashed the windows of her car.” M. goes out to the driveway and returns. “He did it,” he says. “Call the police,” I say, and M. says, “We can’t have the police here. The neighbors will complain about rehearsals.”

Then the man jumps near my face. “I’m going to tell you a story, Bella, Gloria. When I was thirteen my father beat my mother every day, and I threw myself into the fight and tried to stop him. I couldn’t stop him. He was bigger than I was. You have TLE. I have TLE. You have bipolar. I have bipolar. But mainly I shoot heroin.

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Would you like to shoot heroin?"

“No,” I say and look at M. “She doesn’t do that,” M. explains. Then M. leaves the house by the front door, and I pretend he will be right back, that he will not abandon me to a fiend. The girlfriend has not gotten up from the daybed to look at her car. She lies turned to one side holding her eye and shyly laughing.

I go to the master bedroom. I close the door. I leave it unlocked for M. The man comes running through the door, jumping and making noise. “I’m going to eat you,” he says. Then he leaves and I lock it. I get in bed. I can hear him fucking her in the dining room. I hear her songbird sigh. I can try to get under my head. I pull the pillows over my ears and the covers under my chin. I pray, What solidifies them. What unites them: Blessed are these the workers of the world.
Now the house is empty of romance except for a potted flowering plant from my mother for Valentine's Day. No man has set foot in my museum since I moved here. One man has set foot. The owner's brother to see about the gasket under the toilet. The Comcast installers, twice. The man and his son who sold me the corner desk and cupboards. The cupboards have a name that I'll think of before I'm done. I'm showing you that I'm not always right.

It was Abe Lincoln's 200th birthday, so that is how I'll remember it—the day, the time. The years I lived in Binghamton, I visited Irish bars in the evening, and I had many Irish friends, not from Ireland, but Americans whose ancestors were from Ireland. And one of them told me he could move to Ireland merely by proving his heritage, but he stayed in Binghamton after all; he bought a house with a turret where his son plays drums. Later I wrote five short stories about him and about our plan to move to Canada, something we never did nor visited, even though we threatened it when Irish bars were closing, and we pretended to be bored by cloudy Binghamton. He had his birthday February 12, and I'd talked to him earlier that day. He was worried about the bathroom renovation, and he asked me to give him some paint—cobalt blue with copper in it—but I laughed it off, as if, fat chance I'd send him paint. He was not enjoying his birthday in the least, which distressed me. Perhaps I'll send him a gift certificate for paint.

He and our Greek-American friend, Tomas, sat in the first row and smoked in the original Jerry Rothenberg course. I sat in the back row with Deb; she and I smoked when Tomas and Michael were done smoking and before Jerry smoked again. Other people smoked besides. We retained everything we learned. We learned more than usual for a seminar. My presentation was on Dada in Zürich, and while I talked, Michael drew my lips in his sketchpad, and this drawing became a monument to friendship that started then.

When I met the other Michael in Texas, I dubbed him Michael to remind me of my friend, but other people called him Mikey, and I might have realized early but didn't or wouldn't that I was not replicating my happy days but was creating a bomb that would last a lifetime and that would turn out to be no one's fault, just something—a timeframe—that happened and that contained its own happinesses.

I wanted to say a few times that you are Irish, but you had said that already, so I thought it might not add much to the conversation to repeat it. It might add too much. I might put myself in the position of iterating stories of Irish men. My friend, Maureen, writes about Irish women writers and other Irish people. I went to one of her talks in New York about the son of a businessman from Brooklyn named James Johnson Sweeney who became curator of MoMA.

The rest I told you, that I began to write male characters in fiction for the first time—I began to impersonate men movie stars in the mirror—I crossed over. I thought I would refuse to finish my novel about Texas and leave it as a short story,
really leave it that way, without writing it in the first person, male point of view, but in the third person semi-omniscient point of view. A novel that spans thirty pages after all the cuts have been made, story with a complex chronological design that introduces a novel that doesn’t exist. The woman in the short story is less interesting than the man. The reader might care very little about her because she is emotionally frozen, immobilized in her apartment by her inability to make a decision about wrongdoing about which she knows almost nothing. The other people in her world are much more active and engaged. She is a poet who writes three poems and contracts to write little or nothing. Someone being funny might think it’s a novella about writer’s block rather than about a rock band named ISM-GISM.

Marie Ponsot told us in her talk about the writer’s duty that “sex” had been referred to in her mother’s past as “rendering the debt.” What we call love or banging. I like your Pendleton sweater. I enjoyed your stories. There was such an opportunity to see each other in the evenings. If only I hadn’t sworn off shaving—it was awkward sticking to it all weekend—I saw myself as beyond shaving when I swore it off. Let’s cut this up and send it. You might think that’s the end, but no.

There was a man, a Harley Davidson salesman I met in A.A., with whom I ate at Perkins many, many nights. I told him he seemed Irish to me, though his last name was German. The next time I saw him, he told me he’d asked his mother who said he was three-quarters Irish and one-quarter German. Why would there have been no mention in his family of Irish blood until then? My aesthetician, Kathy, went on a disappointing date with him—the motorcycle salesman we’d picked out for her. He sells cars now that the bottom has fallen out. It was the car salesman she found so one-note; then he got pissed off that she’d told him that on the phone. That is how I came to avoid going in for salon treatments—waxes, haircuts, color touch-ups, facials, manicures, pedicures—something I was given to before that.
I guess let’s just talk about it: hope. I guess let’s just think about it: money. I guess let’s just cut up for an hour or two: nine laughs. Let’s agonize about church issues.

I was so steadfastly there, not charging, not nagging, not expecting, not asking, never needing to beg (paid by work), charitably giving out thoughts and words and listening to one at a time for two decades. Now I’m old. Men are just starting out on the path of the parasite, the manly collection plate, to increase them, to buy them, to get one, to buy one and take one home, a divorce nuptial, their gaining a girl (again) or this time a hen with a little purse on a little strap or an industrial doctor’s bag or a clicky set of equals, King Care.

Ah so, I look better than I aged. I’m not a cheap date, as I once made proud of being. I need steak or a doctor’s drug to keep my weight from shredding. The Jews eat cattle but not pig; the Catholics eat a bone slice of Him. I try to talk with Him, but he’s crowded by insiders. I was a loser. I mention it. I mention liking meals at chain diners as much as meals at good Italian restaurants. The sign of the prostitute is her diamond engagement ring. Gays’ “marriage is love” intrigues Greek men upstairs.

I loved without marriage and the men loved without divorce and we loved a 24-year-old eating and how gracious she shone over a tame bottle of beer. Yours is yours, mine is mine.

What did they want the favored ones for? Good mothers. What did the favored ones pay? I was thinking that the feminists pounding the city pavement had increased rent with every footstep, not that I was not one, but we had not earned our money at it or put our money together: “Women” was too broad a category. The favored were coming to buy our men from us, without our sad work we put into it, without the love we showered on them, without the lost decisions we left up to them, as we were practicing, always practicing.
Bitter Tide

I guess let's just talk about it: hope. I guess let's just think about it: money. I guess let's just cut up for an hour or two: nine laughs. Let's agonize about church issues. Let's counter violence with appetites. Let's charitably caretake Wagonmaster's appetite for violence. You spotted him twelve years later, over the phone. You declared you knew all about him, that I had a thing for bad guys, for the violent types. I chided you for not letting me in on your man knowledge, which you didn't. The girls/babes/chicks/shebas were violent themselves or countered none. One had been choked, and I acted like I didn't care. She had not cared when mine had pelted me with the words I had heard come from her, the c word, for one, which I now use for our down theres. My down there (pointing), a genuflection was it before. Now (thanks, gratefully, to Daphne Merken's recent writings about sex) I realize my life as a sexual beggar or beggar who is sexual has only just started. Men want to be paid, and since I didn't charge until now, they are my competition for getting paid; for me it's too late; for them it's just beginning ... the later-in-life male whores, the second act.

I was so steadfastly there, not charging, not nagging, not expecting, not asking, never needing to beg (paid by work), charitably giving out thoughts and words and listening to one at a time for two decades. Now I'm old. Men are just starting out on the path of the prostitute, the manly collection plate, to increase them, to buy them, to get one, to buy one and take one home, a divorce nuptial, their gaining a girl (again) or this time a hen with a little purse on a little strap or an industrial doctor's bag or a clicky set of equals [squeels on her heels, vooz, twos, strues blue true coos, bazooms, shrooms, runes and stoons, stoon dones, les drones, phony, cronies, bone monies, Shoney (a euthanasia), vroge heir], King Care.

Ah so, so I look better than I aged. I'm not a cheap date, as I had once made proud of being. I need steak or a doctor's drug to keep my weight from shredding. The Jews eat cattle but not pig; the Catholics eat a bone slice of Him. I try to talk with Him, but he's crowded by insiders. I was a loser. I mention it. I mention liking meals at chain diners as much as meals at good Italian restaurants. They were putting gas in a car when they fed me: men. Next they will be paid by jerking a guy/by rubbing a guy like a boss they haven't met, their new gal's ex-husband, that is hers by law, but no one views laws that way. The sign of the prostitute her diamond engagement ring. Gays' "marriage is love" intrigues the big guy upstairs. The gays all have good jobs.

I loved without marriage and the men loved without divorce and we loved a 24-year-old eating and how gracious she shone over a tame bottle of beer, even smoking like Uma in the dance number, a bad girl, a girl to get you in trouble with her bad ass black manager of a dad's dad. So I'm broke, on public assistance, diagnosed, barely shouldering, barking and call on you cheated. Yours is yours, mine is mine until death makes its frenzied curtain call over my live womb, then my live breast, then my live neck, and live green eyes, and live midsection and live tail. Eighteen thousand was the most I ever earned in a year.
What did they want the fat ones for? Good mothers. For what did the fat ones pay at the office? I was thinking that the feminists pounding the city pavement had increased rent with every footstep, not that I was not one, but we had not earned our money at it or put our money together: “women” was too broad for our category. The fat women were coming to buy our men from us, without our sad work we put into it, without the love we showered on them, without the lost decisions we left up to them, practicing, always practicing for a bigger better day.
This is a never-ending day with sunshine crowning an eventual eclipse or a virtual exposure of no news from China from Beirut from Jerusalem where is Jericho? is Jericho in the news where is Tabriz? The sell out came in her not asking if I wanted to live she always thought no one really wanted to live or had their reasons for living she had liked dying just fine and wanted to see more of it had gotten to like watching it and forgetting there was functionality in plain living not imaginable in her graceless world of bloody corpses and smashed bones raked off by a yard junta as not edible flying girl flying sea flying pictures flying orgasm flying automobiles flying sandwich and chips flying rich folk flying poem the only thing not flying were her orderly friends with their small to large hang ups and their physical difficulties one had a wired jaw one a hard time getting pregnant one a head that turned to autism if he was tired he would bash or bang it and one with a document of some estimable value that needed a script doctor before she got the doctor-doctor not to notice her independence or to pay nice compliments he was no more than a ruddy cube she was not near her friends anymore they were spirited away on their flying rug or curled with a gun or watching TV not pulsing to operate what they had quit wanting careers or fame they were happy to watch reruns of Seinfeld and Melrose Place she was not their friend anymore though she had liked all of them they were running not flying they were selling but not collecting they were free but unhappy she was happy but unfree and the blood of the seal went to bone meal for the richest of the riches who lived in the townhouse of the flying squirrel not the flying girl of all seas …
We sneaked blood-red tomatoes from the new kitchen. The new kitchen had oak cupboards, the top ones lit behind glass, showing carved flute vases—green and robin's egg blue and delicate pink—porcelain chickens, beaks pointed toward each other, two chickens discussing, one cock and one hen, the long ice masher, the silver plate, the Japanese clay plate, the wooden dish. There was a woodcarver in the family; one of the grandfathers taught shop and built furniture. The granddaughters quarreled over who would inherit it: the gentle cut-copper lamp, the small table, varnished and erect, with its legs at a flared stance to seem curved but not, straight. We were to eat just meat and to become discombobulated over vegetables and bread and not to indulge in sex with strange men—men were all strange once you got used to their distance—were Lincoln logs, poles, boulders and scrub trees. Sex was for gitting kin—the new rules same as the old rules. Girls were for sex. Leave girls out of it: Let Latin grow in them. Teach girls joy and “no touching” and “three men max.” Slather them with mother’s caresses and dog’s big-face kisses and paws.
Acceptance is to her a phenomenon

Why does she engage if it teaches literature agrees that living is an husband. What you were given as experience—accident this is as you write about it. You were given blame for action as experience by cause and effect now. If you take apart blame and even forgiveness is too rigid. She thinks of that purpose as to give men sexual destiny. She believes action result of grave faults in a person’s life is not her phenomenon. Go on living each trouble born is accepting human being teaching gratification literature. She is a feminist invented at A.A. Fate is activities selected. She embodied no acceptance without A.A. She has invited to live the many of them her own, that in other such as—specifically, her husband—caused by the person in it. She thinks to in his environment if she were not to be pleasuring she would not be she. Or s/he your.

Rationing a portion of her brown bear sympathy for the rapist whose victim laid a trap and counterclockwise he relents at her. Police would shoot him. Victims! scales nethering—left the car or tent again. Sit inside it. She, professor, seeds joy at animal virtuosity. He wins her (almost) and never tardily.

[Sad linguistic terms for it.]

What you were caused by the person in it and effect. She in other activities such as teaching believes each she thinks going on living forgiveness is to live A.A. She has give men—she is a feminist. Not to be she is embodied. She thinks of her grave faults invented at A.A. She believes no teaches literature given as an experience—this is as you believes action in a person’s life is human being is to blame for action in rigid. Acceptance is a phenomenon accepting that she was born specifically, her now husband—sexual her husband she would not be in of them her own. Why does she if it agrees that living is an accident by cause environment. If you take apart she her destiny. She believes fate is and even about it. You were given as without literature purpose that is to is the result of if she were.

Sympathy for the rapist left the house again with brown bear’s nature what animal virtuosity. Wins (almost) and never tardily relents at her. Brown bear rationing a portion of her. Victims! scales nethering—sit inside it. She, professor goes joy at whose victim laid a trap for him climbing on her professor and counterclockwise. Police would shoot him.
if it didn't have periods and commas it'd be a poem about apostrophes and question marks about scenery do you have scenery a winter ride to the lebanese psychiatrist the reason to go to the psychiatrist is so men and women won't have to but tell them about it later so they can benefit from it i said my anxiety on tuesdays is revolting it used to be workshop day i used to like LIKE workshop day but ten years without workshop comma tuesdays eat me what is causing your reaction he asked war i said he said are you like the rest of us and you disagree with war yes i said i disagree with war and he said only one man agrees with war but he won't go to the war then he told me try meditation and i said it's not enough you must have a teacher for meditation on tuesdays an elevator is going up and down inside my body's frame not quote unquote mental an elevator is going up and down inside my body's frame not italics mental italics basal dash basal than mental double dash basal distress better than quote unquote mental illness in reject that label we experience it for them or driving in a winter glass to the doctor at eight early tend the gist you are seeking and save them red tape paperwork and general satisfaction of given treatment call it basal distance or basal distance question mark might it be long before mental illness basal distance fills it next question mark
His thoughts went astray when she wanted to. She wanted to surmount his parameters. It was a figment of her imagination, not his. His imagination was at the driving range. Methods of obligation glided by. He wept to see her misunderstand his duties. The hurry up call for midnight was always late. “Chime in!” she hollered from her side of the bedroom. Her bedroom was in the kitchen as they agreed. He watched her prop her leg on a stool to examine her toilette. His mood swings were difficult despite lavish elbow room. She put copies of Lydia Davis’ _Collected Stories_ in every room of the apartment. Petunia notwithstanding. He was in the habit. He gave her his driving range and she gave it back. She didn’t know what a bogey was. Arms akimbo he smiled and licked the China cat by the window. The cat had no name, not like Lydia. Therefore, the boomerang ideal made sense for a change. She asked him to cower in the living room. Although he was a Luddite, he persevered. She placed a cushion near the loveseat to give him the position. But then stargazing became lackluster like lukewarm soup. “That would be a good name for a male porn star,” he said, “Luke Warm.” His name was Lucas, and he was shy and obedient. Her name was Hattie, a gendarme’s muse.

Filibustering was fun but insincere so they went north. She set a mile marker outside the cottage. That made him think of sex and think three times. Hang the chandelier in the kitchen, she counseled.

Altruism was not a noun but a verb, and they kissed. She bit his lower lip and he tapped her jaw. The origami in his head was approaching maniacal, but he remained subdued and willing. She fingered the laces of his plaid flannel knickers. Her on-again, off-again approach was threatening, but after further analysis, he complied. It was like licking butter on an ear of maize. Suddenly the phone rang; it was his ex-lawyer calling from Lithuania. “Get me a bucket,” Lucas said to Hattie. The focus was not a metaphor; it was dyspepsia. “He’s jelly,” Hattie offered him the phone.