

*This Earth
You'll Come
Back To*

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a novel by

BARBARA
ROETHER

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IN MEMORIAM

Edna Rose Haley Roether

1920-2007

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I

ARRIVAL

2008

Blanchardville, Ohio

COURSE you couldn't find it right away. It's not so easy, what with all the names and pathways, if you're not familiar with the layout to begin with. Not in the heat of July. Still, there was no need for you to carry on like that, walking around half crying and stumbling sorry for yourself 'cause you couldn't see it right away. You should have used the sense God gave you and asked your brother, could have drove you right in to the place. I don't know why you had him drop you off downtown, walking all the way out here by yourself in the blazing crown of the day. You must have come out by West Main Cross and there's not a bit of shade there now they took the maple trees out to build the parking lot for the church, took down Grandma's old house too. That about broke my heart. Must be more than two miles. Don't you have a hat? Why you always insist on making things hard for yourself I'll never know; but it's just like you to take a simple errand and turn it into a full-blown crusader pilgrimage.

Well there's not another soul around today just the old maples with their green overall, the grass and the flowerpots, next to the American flags. And you my daughter walking in a circle trying to find a landmark you recognize. Reading all the names; names of the people you went to school with, their grandparents, parents, uncles. Names you haven't thought of for thirty-odd years since you left here. All those names you used to hear in the daylight of desk rows deep in the rapture

of childhood; Weisling, Frankhauser, Riley, Lynch, Slawinski. Each name ringing out with a voice around it, ringing up days in which the names were spoken, and all those days stretching back until you feel the beginning of your life and the end too. It comes over you all the sudden. That your leaving here and living in California all these years, the stories you wrote or didn't write will never matter at all, because you know you can't get away from this, this earth you'll come back to right here. You feel its pull. It's not a bad feeling. Oh the earth is the same earth anywhere it lies, and that is a comfort to you I know. Everything we ever tried or said or dreamed, every finger, backbone, jaw, falling down here like leaves. As if the ground itself were made of our passing lives, compacting into the dark soil of time.

I know you feel the earth, child. You feel its spreading kindness. I remember you wanted me to buy you a copy of *Leaves of Grass*, "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." I liked Walt Whitman too, except my favorites were his poems about Lincoln, "Oh Captain my Captain our fearful trip is done." I never did buy it for you on account of he was homosexual. But that's way off our subject. Where were we?

Well at least by now you know you're in with the Catholics, you know you're close. You found the big old Healy stone that's Aunt Marybell's, you know my grandmother's sister. She was so vain she wanted to have a bigger stone than her own sister if you can imagine.

Now there's no need for you to carry on like that. Bleating around like a little lost lamb, making a fool of yourself, hiding behind the oak tree when old Mr. Heinke's wife pulls up the gravel drive in her red Buick. She's out of the car with the pot of petunias, those tacky purple petunias, leaves them and back in the air conditioning in three minutes, and has done with it, like you could have; instead of acting like a child and mooning around with some fool notion. Feeling sorry for yourself, and getting all upset because you can't find your

own mother's grave. Well, you can't find anything with your eyes blurred by tears. I'm right behind you but you keep going the wrong way round.

Oh I know when you came today you'd been thinking how you missed being with your mother your whole life and now it's too late. Seems like you've already decided that's the tragedy you're working up to tell. How we lived and died so far from each other. But I was there all along.

What are you around forty-seven now? All swept up in grief and regret about what you haven't managed to write or do. And now you've decided our distance was the reason. Maybe you could explain why you weren't here until the end of the funeral, not to keep harping on that. There's two sides to every story. Now I hear even your own son calls you Miss. I. Regret. Speaking of your son why didn't you bring him along last time you came to see me when I was alive? I asked you to bring him, but you acted like it didn't matter. Deaf ears. I wanted to see him. Every child begins the world all over again. That's why we have them you know.



Well what's any mother to any child? Sounds abstract but you have to shake it out to the doing and dealing with every day. Life is what you do every day, what your hands touch and feel. Remember in *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus goes into the underworld, meets up with poor Achilles, and Achilles tells him that any paltry shred of human living is more precious than eternal glory. I didn't even like that story when Sister made me read it in eighth grade, but now a' course I see his point.



So, how do you measure love? What evidence can be offered of its existence? Is it what is remembered or what is forgotten between those who love each other? Is its measure what is swallowed back, or what is spoken?



Now that you've found my marker you can't see how you'd missed it in the first place. It isn't even a shock, just like death really isn't such a shock. Gave you a moment of comfort, finding my name carved out clear in the standing stone of daylight. There is proof of her being, you thought, for all the world to see. You let your breath out relieved but no more than one breath when oh, so crestfallen an expression I never did see as you looked down. I guess it took you by surprise there not being any grass grown over the plot yet. The earth here brown and bare; green to each side but the square right over me just brown and plain.

But how could that be you're thinking, after six months, after the snow of that frigid day in January, by now by July there should be some grass.

Oh at first you're angry enough to raise the dead or those of them that haven't yet been raised. Why can't your mother have some grass, some deep rich green grass to cover the place like everyone else, why should her place lie brown and uncovered? Scarred with the brown of poverty. Can this woman never have anything abundant? Is grass extra in the price of dying? Why did she have to live and die now too in the ever glowing glare of not enough. Even that isn't the whole story is it? You see your own shame in that brown square, see what you were too careless to attend to. You wonder how the earth could know of your omission. Withholding its blessing because you had been so late for your own mother's funeral? Too far away to make it back until the last minute.

Course in the larger scheme of things a lack of grass here isn't much to speak of. The plot just hasn't fully settled in yet. And oh they're cheap out here. You have to ask them special to put new sod on and it costs. George came by once on the tractor with grass seed but then the floods came right after him, washed it away. On the other hand now, notice your father's place next to mine, all nice green and perfectly mowed. Some things never change.



I can tell this story if you want me to, dear daughter, but maybe not all in a row. That never was how my mind worked, but inasmuch as one thing leads to another, well, it should suffice. You'll have to listen and let me tell it in my own way, which means not just after you were born or not just about you, though you have been the easiest to love, most of the time. I think we had similar temperaments, so we understood each other, though not all mothers and children do. It's not a given, though you'd think so wouldn't you? Some children take after their fathers, as several of mine certainly did and I don't have to belabor that point.

People always asked me why did you have ten children, and did your husband drink because of that, or did I have them in spite of that, well who's to say? Their number and his drinking relate as much as one thing to anything else if you want it to.



This is the first chance I've had to even think about it so much. Someone was always getting born or getting sick, I don't mean just my own children and my grandchildren, but theirs too and uncles, aunts, my brother with that brain tumor. Of course those fools out at Valley Hospital, I call it Death Valley, couldn't diagnose it for two years, you'd think they would know more than they do, well he suffered so, and for what?

But now we're free to talk. Are you still nursing the notion that a lot of what goes wrong for you comes down to the fact of you growing up so poor? Those are your words now, I never thought like that, poor or not poor. Call it what you like, I did the best I could. That wasn't enough for some of my children and it's awful when your own turn on you. Grow up to be whoever they are and then get mad because you didn't do things the way they would have. I don't mean you, you're not so spiteful by nature. But I know your sister Kate is out

there bad-mouthing me from her spotless house that I wasn't organized enough. I should have done more. It's not logical. Course logic never stopped anybody in this family. Sometimes I want to say to hell with the lot of 'em. We can always think of a reason this or that happened but just because we think it don't make it so.

You want me to tell you how I raised ten children without any money, but didn't give in to despair. Why I didn't give in? Well, what's there to give in to when you think about it, where you gonna go on God's earth? I guess you can tell me that, since going seemed to be your approach. You want me to tell how my husband never did drink himself to death but not for lack of trying? He died in the middle of the living room sure, but that's no great accomplishment, everybody dies.

Then of course if ten children is too many which one wouldn't I have had? As you're the ninth I'd watch yourself there. I know you've had abortions; don't think that never occurred to me. I asked you several times why you only had one child, and you didn't answer. You don't want me to talk about that but I certainly will. The church tells us it's a sin, but now you see it's a sin against the body, you felt the pain of that sin. And you grieved for those who never came, those you talked yourself out of saying you didn't have enough of something, didn't have enough time or space or help. Took the idea of there not being enough into your own body, didn't you. Still, you ought to forgive yourself. Life does come and go, women know that.



Look at the starlings today how they flock and turn, fold together, shake out. European starlings they are, not native either you know, some fool man interested in Shakespeare thought they ought to bring over all the birds he mentioned in his plays, took a terrible toll on the farms around here, I don't know why people can't leave well enough alone. Still they're pretty to watch.

Well I have no problem now finding the hours that have gone some time ago, but knowing about more recent events is harder to sort out. Like trying to find your place in a book when you've lost your page, you flip through but it seems the whole order of events has shifted, and maybe you've never read any of it after all. Course I can see fine what's right around here.



This is a pretty place, as places go. You can hear the boys playing softball in the field over at Lawson Park there in summer the crack of the bat and a rise of cheers through the locust chorus. In winter the kids come and sled there on the hill. It's not much of a hill, but for this part of Ohio it's noteworthy, plenty big for the little ones. Snow muffles the voices though. I miss the sound of the little children.

That hill used to be the bank of a horseshoe bend in the river, which is why they made it a park, since it's prone to flooding and shifting. Wasn't good for anything else. Flooding continues to be an issue here, as I'll explain later. Well what would you expect of a place that used to be the Great Black Swamp? You always laughed when I mentioned it but it's true, look at any old map of northwest Ohio. This was the edge of the glacier that created Lake Erie. Course plants grow where there's water, fall and decay you get a good number of layers like that creates deposits of natural gas. This was a gas boom town in 1886 is why my Grandpa Tindal, my Mother's father, came over from Belgium as a glass blower. I know I've told you all this before but maybe you'll listen now. See how it's all related, now that I'm here in the ground along with the rest of it. As a matter of fact one of the major gas wells was just nearby the cemetery here, out where I-75 goes north to Toledo.

They came like moths to the light all those workmen; so many new factories opened all at once. Well the town supplied gas free to any industry that would move here, so the glass works came, brick yards, rolling mills. They thought the

gas would never run out, and workingmen came from all over. So the Healys came to serve those men, thirsty with tending furnaces all day, and thirsty in other ways too. Everyone was coming here, no one was leaving. Like you always were.



I'm not sure when was the first time you left, though the second or third are still vivid. I don't count your being born though that's one kind of leaving. Leaving the inside of the body for the outside, it's not so far. When children are born we say they have arrived, and that's true to a degree, but arriving isn't the same as getting born which takes a little longer. Children come to life by days, they have to learn to live inside of time. And here I am now learning to live outside of it.

Today you're wandering around here crying and lost same as the day you were born. Truth is every single baby born comes to this world on the verge of hopelessness. Comes out of warm comfort to this world, heartbroken and lost, desperate to find someone, just like you are now. I've seen it with each of my ten children, always the same look in the eyes, a look asking one question. Can you help me? And each time I said I'll try.

Oh Lord, a baby's first look is full of a tender pleading. It's a question from a far place in the face of a tired traveler. Will you help me? it says, but more fierce than that, you better help me. Help me! That's what every baby mouth asks, when they get here. They come asking, like hobos off the train used to come begging at Grandma's back door when she lived near the tracks on Griffin Avenue. Grubby and hungry they come, just showing up and knocking. They don't have to say anything and she doesn't have to ask, need in a person is obvious.

I remember the day you were born. It was a bitter cold morning when I went in. Ice on the streets. Dr. Best was the attending physician, but I certainly didn't think he was the best at the time, because right after the delivery room, when they wheeled me back into my room, I couldn't feel a thing in my legs, they were totally numb.

I lay there trying but I couldn't move them, had no sensation whatsoever. Well, I thought, Rose, you have really done it now, this ninth child was just one too many and now your legs are paralyzed. Said you would help that baby but you won't be able to now, not her or any of the others, who's gonna chase after them? I about lost my nerve for the whole shebang right then. Started to shake with the fear of it, or with the blood I'd lost, either way exhaustion took over.

I slept, and when I woke up I felt something in my toes. I kicked off the blankets just to see if my legs worked and they were fine. I was laughing with relief really when the nurse came by and scolded me but I didn't care. Course it seems funny now. It was just the stirrups or something had given me a pinched nerve. I was fine by the afternoon.



They brought you in. I recall each child clearly, it's not a memory that dims.

Even from here, I can remember looking into your milky blue eyes for the first time. The hospital walls fade away and there's just a clearing. Pang of shyness I felt (came with each child) noticing you were a stranger I had never met before. At the same instant some voice in the distance that's familiar, a conversation we've had before, like you knew me somehow, some previous agreement you've come to collect on. Your look is troubled, because you know getting born is a bad gamble, it might not work at all, but you have no recourse now, no way to return to where you came from. You're caught in a tiny net of bones all smeared with oil and blood, a body that is of no use to you, there's no strength in it. You have no resources whatsoever. I see the humiliation you feel, can feel you saying "Look at me, look at what has happened to me, I who am a human being, to be reduced to this, alone here, a stranger, helpless, exhausted." There's a sidelong glancing question in your look, you're not sure I'll keep my part of it but I feel a power I don't want to offend, so I say yes.

Yes I will. Tie your life to mine.

Was something familiar I saw in your eyes, looking down that deep distance, like something in back of a dream. Part of me is still there looking. Part of a mother remembers and never forgets that. Because in that first gaze I saw you. Saw who you were in a way I have been losing track of ever since. Just those few seconds are all the time I had to see who you were in the essential before you became my child. All a mother has, three or four seconds to get to look at their child as she came originally from wherever she did. Before I said yes, I would help you. Before who you were was mine, my daughter, to be circumscribed by where or what I am or was, what I could or couldn't do.

1960-63

Blanchardville

Warming up outside finally, hope it holds. You just can't tell. Plenty of times we've shivered outside in a new Easter dress. But it's early spring and no reason to be unhappy today, little Stephanie lying on the couch and the hyacinths poking out of the ground by the porch steps.

"Why don't you take a nap sweetheart? Listen I'll tell you some rhymes. *I've never seen a purple cow I never hope to see one, but I can tell you anyhow I'd rather see than be one.*"

"Is it bad to be a purple cow?"

"Well a course. It's strange, it's not right for a cow to be purple."

"But what if it is, will somebody kill it?"

"You go to sleep. It's just a little rhyme. Here's a different one. *With rings on your fingers and bells on your toes and elephants to ride on wherever she goes.*"

"Is that about me. Am I the 'she'?"

"Why sure, it could be."

"I'll ride an elephant?"

"You never know."

“How can you put bells on your toes. How do they stay?”

“I don’t think it means on the toes, I think gypsies used to have some chains and jewelry they decorated their feet with, and there might be some bells attached. It’s just a story for fun. Take a nap now.”

She’s asleep. Good.

It isn’t raining rain you know its raining violets... Wish I didn’t have to use this downstairs room as our bedroom; on display for all to see. The front door, opens right off the living room, no door to close, no privacy. But what are you gonna do? It’s a roof over our heads. Keep this bed made and the clothes picked up. Floral bedspread maybe isn’t the best choice here if I had a solid color that might seem less bedroomish. I dislike these modern polyester fabrics on everything anyway. Mother used to have such beautiful linen bedspreads for summer, embroidered them with daisies, used to stand and iron the linens, Uncle Charlie would move the beds out to the long summer porch, could hear the crickets all night, birds singing in the morning. Oughta get a basket for her to put those blocks in before I step on them again. Damn edges are sharp.

It isn’t raining rain you know it’s raining violets... . Oh she’s waking up.

Out of the darkness of the inner bedroom, and into the living room I’m walking toward you as you wake from sleeping on the couch little one, there you looked startled.

“Hey babe, waking up?”

“Uh huh.”

I’m walking out of the shadows; you watch me moving toward you into the light.

“Momma?”

“Dear heart.”

“What was my name?”

I stop. You watch my brows knit together, grimace. Maybe fever I think. Waking up with it. “What do you mean, your name? You know your name is Stephanie.”

“I know, I know that,” you say, frustration in your voice.

“I don’t mean now, I mean my real name, before. Before I was here.”

Oh I felt a terrible chill like someone sneaking up behind me. I looked around the room, I didn’t know what. I stopped, had to think. I could feel you touching another place but it was not a place I knew. I was spooked, tried to answer.

“Your name is Stephanie, I named you when you were born out of my stomach. God created you and you’ve been with us these three years. You came from heaven.”

“I know I mean before...I.”

“Feel sick?”

“No.”

“Let’s have some lunch, how bout some chicken noodle soup.”

I came into the living room. I flattened my palm against your forehead to check for a fever, but it was cool.

“But what was my name...” you sit up, searching my face where you see the worry then lie back down and turn your face away toward the back of the couch. The paisley fabric there and the start of something uncertain. My displeasure was new to you, and you were frustrated too, thinking I should know. How could your mother not know such a simple thing as what your name had been originally?

You felt the edges of the world fold up around you, like a wild pony corralled for the first time. Well, you can’t be in two worlds at once, or at least that’s what I thought at the time. Felt like I needed to hold you here, keep the borders intact, like a rancher mends a fence to keep in his stock, to say here now stay. You only have the name I gave you. Cows are not purple.

First question you had ever asked me that I couldn’t answer. Still can’t. Eight children before you and not a one of them ever asked me that. Three years old you were and already thinking about someplace else. Was that the first time

we parted? You felt alone with your question even then, didn't you. I know that disappointed you.

Though I know more now. How the borders around us are arranged like rippling water.



You were always coming from somewhere else. Used to write your address in my book with a pencil it changed so often. You told me a story once, I wonder if you recall it. You were with the Buddhists, in your Buddhist period I say, like Picasso's Blue Period. Ha. You were staying in a little wooden house on a hillside in Darjeeling, India. For a week, every day was just draped in fog and mist, soaked in tight. In the floaty gray dawn you would climb the slick switchback curves up the path, following the sound of the chanting monks in the monastery up above. One day, sitting in that monastery your eyes had been closed ten or fifteen minutes, when something changed in the room and you opened them. The fog had lifted, and there, through the windows in front of you were the snowy diamond peaks of the high Himalayas, stretched out blazing like cut glass crystal against the deep blue sky. Gave you vertigo to look it, was just so beautiful and "to think" you said, "that all that beauty had been there all along and you just couldn't see it." I think of that now because I can see so much more from here too, as if the fog of life has lifted and I can see to some other horizon, but as far as I can tell I think it's life too. Just more life. Far as the eye can see.



Like I started to say earlier you can trace a lot back to geography. In 1886 there were 6,000 people here in Blanchardville, by 1887, 30,000. All on account of the earth you see. Limestone, Trenton limestone, any geologist will tell you runs in a belt through here north to southwest, it's about a hundred feet deep and the gas flows through it in underground rivers. Wells were all over this side of town. You could hear the gas gushing out, some said it sounded like Niagara Falls,

all that gas blowing like a huge breath out of the mouth of the earth. Could see it too. Even when you cap a well there's exhaust and they would put a flame to it. Grandpa told me there wasn't a dark night in this town for ten years when the Cargill Well was blowing. You could see it from miles around, the tower and its constant red flame against the sky. This part of town people walked around all night like it was daylight. Grandma hung the laundry out at midnight, while the boys played football in the streets. Was like God had lit a special lantern just especially for the people of this town, that they should always have light. And they did. Fiat Lux.

Advertisements in 1890 said "Whoever missed the chance of enriching themselves by investing in the great cities of Chicago, and St. Paul has another chance with Blanchardville," which was sure to become "the greatest manufacturing center of a mighty republic." Course our hopes were a little higher than turned out to be the case, family and town either one. I always hoped you'd write a book before I died, as you were always threatening, but you never did. Well if wishes were horses beggars would ride. But why don't you, plenty of people do.



Still only about 30,000 people here give or take; and damned Republicans most of 'em, but the residents here do feel they're special. If you drive in from Columbus-way onto South Main looks like you really are somewhere, with all those grand old Victorian mansions lining the streets; towers and turrets carved out of the gas boom riches. Some of those mansions still have the old window glass, with the ripples you know, that your great grandfather blew. Of course there was oil ran under the gas and when one ran out they took the oil is why Hercules Oil made its headquarters here. Still our largest employer and the biggest building on Main Street, what is it five stories high? A pile of yellow brick. Doesn't look big to you I know, world traveler.

You must have walked right past my grandpa's old brick building downtown today, you know where it is there at West Main Cross.

Well they sandblasted the old stone façade last year and now you can read the Healy name again, but you have to cross the street and stand in front of the courthouse to see it, way at the top. I thought that last flood was gonna take out the whole block.

Some of those last little downtown businesses just north of the bridge were wiped out, including you'll remember Fowler's Diner that Scott Fowler ran, third generation of Fowlers to have that restaurant. Served the best fresh bass from Lake Erie. Well during that flood your crazy sister Becky in Oregon heard the news, oh it was in the *New York Times* and everything, so she called up your sister Linda here in town.

Becky said, "Linda I heard about the flood and I'm worried about Mom."

"Well what about her Becky?"

"Is she gonna be OK?"

"Well she's gonna be as OK as she's ever gonna be," Linda says.

Becky I guess was worried the flood was going to sweep away the graves.

She always was a little hysterical, remember I had to lock her in the cellar sometimes I don't like to admit it but I did. And truth to tell it didn't hurt her a bit. Well, so I wasn't swept away, and so what if I had been. Not like I was gonna drown. At any rate there was nothing Linda could have done, was there?

They say the river here runs east and west, but I say it doesn't really run at all, it just sort of sits there, looking for trouble. It's too flat around here to have a good river. I haven't been out North Main to Pine Street where you all grew up in a long time. Seems like everything's over here now. Closer to church.

Anyway I'm glad you got away. Seventeen when you left for San Francisco, 1977. Saved your money from waitressing at that Mexican restaurant on Main. After all that had happened I went along with it. Seemed a better idea than you putting yourself in so much danger again, I thought, since your older sister was there. Wasn't like I had that much choice in the matter but I wasn't happy is why I didn't go with you and Dad up to Toledo that morning. You wore that big denim cowboy hat your friend Stacy had given you. I said "I don't know why you want to draw attention to yourself like that," because I had to say something to cover the bitter loss I felt.

Remember just a few summers ago you were visiting and we were doing the dishes together by the kitchen window that looks out onto the neighbor's blacktop driveway, when I dried that plate and put it in the cupboard overhead as Mrs. Walsh pulled her car in from work, and I meant the whole of life here when I said "I'm glad you got away." But maybe now you're not.

1965

Pine Street. Blanchardville

You've seen they tore down the old grey-shingled house on Pine where you all grew up. Tore it down some years ago, to make a parking lot for the school. It was an ugly house to begin with, and a course we didn't live there anymore.

The big maple out front is still there if you want to go look at it, its trunk dividing into those two outstretched arms. The tree has survived as living things often do, longer than the works of man. Tree standing there rooted to where it always was.

Along with the house they tore down the peony bushes that used to bend over in the rain, so heavy were the white petals on those blossoms, I can smell them yet, a wet white perfume; and on the other side of the garage also torn down was the spindly ash tree where you had a tree house, over a forsythia

bush with its early yellow fingers of flowers and other things that grew there as my children did.

No one now seems to remember how much of the town was full of overgrown gardens with currant bushes and barefoot kids out running around playing baseball and jump-rope and basketball and bicycles, and creating carnivals in the backyard out of piano boxes and cardboard, without all the adult interference that they get now. Now none of the kids even walk out the door. No one walks anywhere, all we have are ugly black-top parking lots and fat kids, I don't call that progress.

I think of that maple tree now and those games of hide and seek that would begin and end at that tree. Summer evenings, you'd start after dinner and go to nine ten o'clock, the whole neighborhood would get involved, some of us parents would sit next door on Cramer's red brick porch with the roof over it, a Midwestern porch, nice and cool in the summer. Be the two Cramer boys and the Weaver girls from across the street and of course the trashy Stone kids from down the street, Decklers from behind us if their crazy Portuguese mother wasn't screaming at them, you younger ones, at least a dozen kids give or take.

"You playing or not."

"I'll play but I'm not counting, I did it last time."

"Did not, Kevin counted last night."

"Across the street is out of bounds."

"Joseph if you're gonna go inside in the middle of the game then don't start playing."

"Oh he's little leave him alone."

"He's a spoiled brat."

"Look I got firefly rings on every finger."

"That's gross, you're gonna kill them all."

"I like to pull their guts out, see how they keep glowing, and sticky too. Here eat one."

"Get away from me."

"Come on let's play."

“Carrie you have to count, and your head has to be touching the tree, and eyes closed.”

“Five ten fifteen twenty twenty-five thirty thirty-five forty forty-five fifty fifty-five sixty sixty-five seventy seventy-five eighty eighty-five ninety ninety-five a’hundred, apples-peaches-pumpkin-pie who’s not ready holler I.”

Course one of the younger children would always holler I.

“Hurry up then, five ten fifteen twenty that’s all you get.”

And off you’d all go into the spaces behind and between the houses, behind the juniper hedges, or into a car parked at the curb or behind the barrel where we burned the trash, behind the tool shed door, between the houses and the pine trees, and under the grape arbor in old man Turner’s yard. The game, you know, is to come out as the seeker is off looking for someone else and run to the tree before they see you. But you never seemed to understand that, and you stayed hidden, listening from under the tendrils in the grape arbor to the crickets thrumming, to your own heart pounding, watching fireflies and the stars overhead, breathing in the smell of rotten fruit, listening to the voices of your friends and their running footsteps in the dark, waiting there in the hidden place wanting to be found or wanting to never be found but to live there by yourself in some other life than the one you had.

“You didn’t find Stephanie?”

“Don’t even look for her, she always hides somewhere you’ll never find her.”

“Ollie, Ollie in free, Ollie Ollie in free,” one of the kids would shout and you’d have to come out. But otherwise no one ever found you. Not the places you hid.



You’ve been in Ohio longer this summer than you have been since you were seventeen. Wouldn’t you know it, now that I’m gone you have cause to come. It was ever thus. I’m glad you’re getting another degree, somewhere up there by Cleveland where we used to live.

You didn't expect that being on your home soil, breathing in the humid Ohio air would make you feel better but it has hasn't it? Just the feel of the air has been healing to you, not that dry or harsh salt-sea air you have on the coast; we have softer air here, and it's the air you're made of. That moist smell of the earth coming out of the cattails along the road, the powdery smell of red sumac, deep set white wooden houses. Houses that seem to sag under the weight of green shadows, and of course the storm's thunder and lightning, you been watching the storms out your window at night, but don't go out in that, I don't know if you remember what lightning can do. Just the sound of a lawnmower in the late afternoon, perfume of the cut green grass mixed with a little gasoline it's all a comfort. Even the feel of your feet walking on the worn blocks of a limestone sidewalk, the texture of the Ohio earth. Those sidewalks you used to walk on to school and everywhere.



Must have been your twelfth birthday, you were walking. You'd be surprised how easy it is to get from one place to another now in memory. I no more start thinking of it than it all appears. Maybe memory lives inside our lives like water lives in a stream, as if water could weave together every scene. Now I'm not making any poetic claims, but maybe memory lives its own life. One day I was home and you were at school.

January 1972
Blanchardville

What time is it anyway? Better get up. Where did I put those slippers, damn, I wish I could find them. This linoleum floor is cold, how cold is it out there I wonder. I'll turn the TV on. get the weather report while the water boils. Oh doesn't look like it snowed more, some sun coming out now. 30° not so bad. Stephanie's birthday. Oh it was bitter cold the morning I had

her. Wasn't such a good year, but things got a little better after she came. Rusty started working again. Count your blessings. Oh hell I'm almost out of instant coffee. Guess I better try to get over to Food Town. Can't remember what Stephanie did say, had Girl Scouts or Campfire, whatever it is she's in. I think she's coming home late after some thing at school. Well I'll make supper early, so we can eat before I have to go to work. Noodles sound good, she likes those. I'll see what meat is on sale. Oh there's the 12 o'clock news. So Tricky Dick is going to China. That'll do us all a lot of good. Damn heathens all of 'em. Poor Oolan, Mother said. I heard Pearl Buck once at a Chautauqua up on the lake there near Erie. Oh that was a sad story poor Oolan, her husband stealing the pearls from off her neck. Terrible. Dear Sister Ursula. Always had us sending pennies to China. Better carry that laundry to the basement. Then I'll clean up, take a mop to that dining room floor like I've been saying I would, not that any of 'em would ever turn a hand to help. I bet I can find an angel food cake over there. Stephanie likes that. I better get a move on.

You were walking along thinking.

No one's going to remember my birthday, not that it matters now it's already 4:30 they didn't even know it was my birthday in the Girl Scout meeting, the center is just behind downtown at least it's a little closer to home, I can go straight down West Cory, I want to get a camping badge it will be getting dark soon have to walk fast to get home before dark. It's hard to walk over the black patches of ice on the sidewalk, can't go around it cause the snow is piled up so high on the sides, but not here on the green arching metal bridge the frozen river below looks solid but you can't walk on it or you might fall through like the relative in Michigan did in a lake behind his house he was only seven, only a little boy that never even got to be twelve. On the other side of the bridge solid land, the machine shop door is open the men still welding how the sparks run out in front of them like a fountain of

fire what do they make in there. Don't even think about your birthday, there won't be anything at home so just get used to that. Even if anybody remembers, they don't have any money to buy presents or cake or anything, you're not a baby, you've had a lot of birthdays it's not like you're a little kid. Earlier just after school, the sun was out, the icicles hanging over the front porches were dripping and water ran across the street, but now the melting has stopped it's getting colder. So quiet now except when a car comes by a peeling sound, no one else is out all the other kids walked home an hour ago, only these same old everyday houses on both sides of the street with their rectangle window eyes shut and dark their pointed heads settling into stillness, snow shovels leaning next to the door and the frozen tricycles on the grey porches.

What story is this like maybe the Dickens story *Little Dorit*. I'm very tragic, a poor little waif, threadbare like my coat; or I could be in a Fitzgerald story a careless adventurer, a very sophisticated traveling woman, a woman who is walking to a hotel in Moscow. Dickens seems more realistic. Still hurry up home because maybe someone remembered. Make your feet go slower because they haven't. The sky is pink and purple in the west you can feel darkness coming. It doesn't matter whether there is anything or not. Why do tears keep getting in your eyes then? If anyone sees me I'll say it was the cold. Maybe if I were a better person. This morning mother wasn't awake when I left for school, since she works at the newspaper she gets off at two in the morning so she tries to sleep. The oven in the stove doesn't even work so even if she had remembered she couldn't bake a cake. Sister Linda or Annie might remember and bake a chocolate cake and come over. Maybe they would try to surprise me. I can picture them. But probably not. Besides it doesn't matter. It's just sinful and selfish to just think about your own birthday. Why did you have to have a birthday and get your hopes all up anyway, that's the worst part. It's stupid that there are tears in your

eyes again if they came all the way down would they freeze.

A lot of people are in Vietnam dying and you're just worried about your stupid little birthday. Of course it's irrelevant, birthdays are stupid anyway you've had already twelve of them; you're not a baby. Would it be chocolate? If there were a present what would it be? Mother has enough to do just to get dinner cooked before she leaves for work at six anyway, sometimes she can't even finish it, so how could she do more. Here's the corner of Defiance already and the stop light at Main Street. It's only two more blocks, one down one over to Pine then you'll know. Legs are frozen cold on the thigh where my coat doesn't cover, these books are heavy. I don't really want to get home, it doesn't matter what happens, my birthday is almost over anyway.

You opened the door and the warmth took you in, the living room had been cleaned and vacuumed. You could smell chicken cooking and hear me singing in the kitchen.

I heard you come in, "Hi, Honey, I'm in the kitchen"

I was just finishing up the dishes. You didn't answer, so I came down the hallway my hands still wet with dishwater, I wiped them on my apron, before I reached out for you.

"Hi Sweetheart, Happy Birthday, baby girl" and I wrapped you in my arms and, kissed your cold stiff cheek, but noticed a salty trace there. Your face turned slightly away.

"Now what's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing."

But I heard the lump in your throat. Girls at that age are emotional I thought. Nothing wrong with that. Let 'em be.

Well you saw the cake on the table; an angel food cake from the store, whipped cream and pineapple to go along with it. There was a card, candy. You didn't say anything. Maybe couldn't I see now.

"Well sweetheart I didn't have a chance to get a present, maybe later this week. I'm making chicken and noodles; I know that's your favorite."



That was a day you have always remembered, when you dared to be tender which is not often; that day you realized that what you or anybody wanted when they were out walking in the cold alone was just for someone to be waiting.

Someone holding you in mind, though you couldn't see them; holding you in the net of their mind and pulling you nearer. Wasn't gifts or cake or any of that mattered, except your mother's arms coming out of the steamy kitchen and wrapping around you where you wouldn't have to be single or apart or anyone else.

All along I've been waiting for you to come home.