

DeWitt Henry

IMPROVISATIONAL

*The hall was clogged with bodies; none of them hers,
but who could be sure?*

—Leonard Michaels

The hall was clogged with bodies; none of them hers, but who could be sure? This had all been a terrible mistake and none of it her doing. Higher powers were at fault, and surely higher powers had no business asking her to solve the problem.

She had been at that Internal Revenue Service desk, in the lobby of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Building, Boston, Massachusetts, early in the afternoon of April 14, dutifully attempting, as a good citizen, good mother, good single parent, good employee, and loyal, practicing Catholic that she was and always had been, to have her long form 1040 completed with the help of the IRS itself. W-2 forms, receipts, medical bills, bank statements and cancelled checks, everything was readied and neatly organized in an accordion file within her capacious straw purse. They had x-rayed the purse as she stepped through the metal detector, just inside the lobby doors. She had had to take four different busses to get here, all the way from West Somerville. She had waited in a line that had had to shuffle and stand for five, ten, thirty minutes, while some baggy pants young so and so, an overbearing, indignant young man, white, but unable to speak English, fought with the clerk behind the desk. Similar lines snaked towards other clerks, other desks. She was forty-two years old and in good health. She worked two different jobs, meter maid for the City of Somerville from 7 A.M. to 3 P.M. every day but Sunday; then from 6 P.M. to midnight every night except Wednesdays, she folded laundry and oversaw the Davis Square Laundromat. Oh, there was more, much more to her living. Lives depended on her. And as she waited, she was lost in thought of these lives: five year old Jamie, with his bad cough; his eight year old sister, Wanda Jane, whose birthday was this weekend. Thinking of the rent. Thinking of her own father bedridden in the home. Standing there feet aching and more and more uncomfortable with her soul's and body's suspension, when the bomb—

it was a bomb—bloomed everywhere. When she felt massive force crushing her at once, all over, lifting and rending and then like being pulled inside out, like a rubber glove stripped off the hand, the dry part, pale, inverse, she was herself, substantial, essential and certain, and not in line at all, but hovering, like smoke, but concentrated, like a nebula in space. And judgment surrounded her. Not condemning judgment. Not praising or loving or welcoming. But indignant and self-perplexed judgment. What is she doing here? No words, but the question. The knowing. Not her. This is not her death. This is absent-minded omniscience. This is impossible. And then again the inside-out, implosion. And the hall was clogged with bodies; none of them hers, but who could be sure?

Bodies sundered, shredded, torn. Shreds without bodies. Wetness, stink, and smear. The shower of sprinklers, pouring. Bone. Debris of glass. Caster from a chair. Paper, plastic. Landfill detritus, rubble and dust and guttering fires. And starting in heaps, heaps like those filling trenches in concentration camps, yet worse, heaps of dismemberment: would be some part intact and recognizable. Two shoes, red pumps, neatly side by side, as if the feet left to climb into bed. The gory hand. The torso, male, shirt torn. A search, desperate, obliged like a punishment, through lifelessness ripped past shape or meaning. And if she'd vaporized? If in that instant, her solid flesh had melted and dissolved? Or if this unfamiliar leg, round, raw and marbled as a mutton, but perhaps, were hers? Would she recognize her parts and how? How to identify your own disfigurement? Where the scar? Where the bit of clothing?

And if she did, as she felt bidden and all her passion craved; if she found this part, forearm or hand, or skull pan like a melon rind, or that; and if she searched and searched, and gathered all. Or if there, under X, Y, Z, intact she lay, whole, unmarked, as if in sleep. A sleep deserved. A sleep denied by all her love and effort to bless life, to give, to serve, praise the Lord and make him holy. If there. Her. What then?

Was she to rise? Eyelids flutter. Pain flood in. Her gasp for breath, her cry. Was she to complete some answer like a harmony? The one whole flesh, reviving. Among so many bodies and so many parts. Like judgment day. All the broken and diseased, the aged, the maimed. The poor, the rich, the takers and deceivers. The righteous. The millions from the trenches.

“Your life’s a miracle!” the fireman said, g’s of amazement, like a rocket’s thrust, stretching his beefy face.

Like that. As if. Her refund due.