

One Man's Hysteria—Real and Imagined—in the 20th Century · *David Louie*

WHEN THE FIRST bombs fall I will be ready. Not with a Geiger counter, fallout shelter, or net, but with poetry—metabolized, memorized, and ready to recite. Only poetry can save our species. Civil Defense will blow its sirens, clogging the airwaves with attack alerts, but when the bombs start to explode these will be nothing more than desultory noise in a world that will seem all sound and light.

They call them missiles now. Not simply missiles, but missiles with multiple nuclear warheads with mysterious names like MIRV, MX, ICBM, etc., but I prefer to think of them as bombs. *Bombs* sounds friendlier, more personal, homier to me. I am not pessimistic. I do not suspect the Communists of suicidal leanings. I think the Soviet Union is a fine idea; the Chinese are the most humane people on earth. But the generals at the Pentagon, the so-called experts, tell me otherwise. I can only read the papers and hope for the best. I am not paranoid, I am not pessimistic, but neither is my skin lead-lined. And so, due to the recent preponderance of doomsday forecasts, I have taken up the reading of poems. One can never be too cautious in these subatomic times.

It was Sunday morning, and as it had been my habit each weekend for the past few months, I read poems outloud to Laura from the anthology I kept hidden in a strongbox beneath our bed. —Shut up, sweet, Laura mumbled to the wall, let me sleep a little longer. We were lying back to back, and since I did not see her speak, I pretended I did not hear her as well. Propped on my elbow, I leafed through the tome and suggested to her: —Sleep at that reading you're dragging me to later. I always do. Just don't snore. I glanced at the head of each ragged column, page after page, waiting for a familiar title or name to catch my eye. —Okay, I said, who wrote this one? Given the early hour of the day, I started her off easy:

Awake sad heart, whom sorrow ever drowns;
Take up thine eyes, which feed on earth.

But she feigned sleep on Herbert, filling the silence in which I anticipated her usual snap response with thick raspy breaths, until the baby cried, and her eyes grudgingly peeled open.

Of course, she is not our child. With the world situation the way it is, babies, in good conscience, are out of the question for any thinking man. We live on Dill Street above a household of Wycks, an unexceptional family of three, soon to become four. In these dangerous times, burdened by talk of limited nuclear wars, they have managed to be complacent, indifferent, and morally irresponsible in the face of current events. Some may call them fearless and hopeful, but I for one call them foolish.

—Wyck, my wife says, peering over my shoulder. You can't use their real names in a story. She pauses a moment, hands on hips. —Stephen, listen to me, it's not ethical.

My wife has always wanted to watch while I write. But after only a page I know I have made a major mistake when I agreed to this. I think of calling off the deal when, as if on cue, the omnipresent cry of baby Melinda charges up the heat register into my study.

—But you know, my wife says, rolling her eyes to indicate direction, Wyck is perfect.

—Tiny wickedness terrorizes the innocents again! I say, as if I were reading a two-inch headline off the frontpage of the *Post*.

They possess modest hopes downstairs. Anemic hopes that would humble a saint. I can say with certainty that these mechanical tappings I am raining down on their heads are nothing but unintelligible noise to them, like a baby's incessant cry or jets booming overhead or the tornado siren that regularly sounds the first of every month, when, in fact, I am imbuing their lives with substance and permanence in print. I offer them salvation from their naive optimism for a future.

Upstairs we are a ménage of writers. My wife—actually she is not my wife, but for my purposes here I will dispense with the truth and designate Laura as *wife*. (Of all the terms a man may use to refer to his relationship to a particular woman, only *spouse* seems better, but *wife* has character. Thus, sacrificing accuracy for expediency, I have opted to be married for now.) My wife writes stories and poems, while I, far less versatile but nonetheless supportive and admiring of her dual talents, dabble exclusively in prose—mostly shorter pieces, but I do aspire toward a novel, a great Faulknerian saga that will blanch the critics' ink. One must wonder, though, will there be time enough for its writing? Will there be trees for paper? If I finish it, who will have eyes to read?

Together our aspirations tend toward the mundane. Our public goal, what we tell each other and our friends, is to own a food processor with

a French sobriquet. Privately, I am relieved we lack the financial means to justify such a purchase. As a man of the twentieth century whose eyes peer wearily into the twenty-first, I am well aware of the demands of social etiquette in the nuclear age. I know that the presence of such a contraption in our household, tantamount to the more romantic but less modern convention of exchanging wedding rings, would consummate our recent domesticity. The first tomatoes it purees will be comparable to our first kiss; as it kneads the tan dough for a loaf of Swedish rye, the temptation to equate this action with our initial lovemaking will inevitably arise and have to be honored. And, in keeping with modern day propriety, once the food processor has been acquired, a microwave oven is sure to follow.

During the past election, my wife and I voted, in good faith, for a full slate of eventual losers. And though this has been a source of considerable self-righteous chest-beating among our friends, we have approached these ignominious defeats with an air of composure, a spirit of cooperation, and only limited displays of public indignation. This is one of those rare occasions.

—Who wrote this? I asked, reading again from the anthology.

The world's population consists of only three principal types of people—the creators, the consumers (those who make the creators necessary), and the retainers (those able to digest and hold on to what they consume); here, specifically, I refer to the people with the talent to memorize and recite poetry. From the trio, the retainers are best suited for the apocalyptic possibilities of our unhappy age. Among the survivors—those not vaporized by the fireballs, those whose hearts and lungs withstand the shockwaves, those who avoid the 100 mph flying glass—only the retainers will have coherent speech, because they alone will still have something to say. The bombs will choke the formulation of thoughts; the words of non-retainers will be corrupted into baby Melinda-like subsyllabic utterances. But in this world of universal trauma and blindness, the retainers will come forward and speak in sibyllic rote—perhaps no more than disembodied sounds to them—the precious poems they had committed to memory with their ironic rhymes and beautiful iambs rising from the ashes, the world's lone true words.

These will be the purest progeny our pre-war civilization can transmit into this genetically corrupt landscape of the future. These will be our bravest children, our strongest. Needless to say, something must be passed on.

—Are you listening, Laura? I asked, nudging her gently in the back. I chose a poem I thought would tease her from her pseudo-sleep:

I saw eternity the other night
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,

—Vaughan, she said, Henry . . . underrated . . . seventeenth century . . . Now let me go back to sleep.

—You're supposed to give the next line.

—Stephen, I don't want to play your asinine game.

Sometimes Laura thinks I am a fool. I know she thinks I am morbid, but she fails to understand me. I prod her memory of poems, not to test her knowledge, I know she has her Phd, but out of a sense of duty. I see danger and therefore must take steps to guard against it; in this instance, poetry is the only practical approach to life.

—*I caught this morning morning's minion* . . . I read, trying to create some momentum for my endeavor.

—Hopkins, Hopkins, Hopkins! she said. Laura slapped her fleshy palm with its long sinuous lifeline to her forehead. She has a good heart really—even if she does fake a coronary in bed at times—but consistently refuses to look beyond the apparent. When the atom was split, I have told her again and again, *atom* became, semantically speaking, a centuries old lie. But I kept reading, hoping one day she would catch my motives.

I continued with Hopkins, one of Laura's favorites. At first she snored loudly, then she fell silent, and midway through the poem her legs rustled the bed linens, producing the sound of a large fish thrashing for its life in shallow water. She was warming to the task, and soon, draping her long legs over my waist, picked up where I had left off and began to recite:

Brute beauty and valor and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! (Yesyesyes! I said, go on, go on!) and the fire
that breaks from thee then (Say it!) a billion
Times told lovelier, (I love it!) more dangerous, O . . .

—Oh, my Laura!

— . . . *my chevelier!*

She rubbed her nose between my shoulder blades. Her secret signal. She wanted more. I happily acquiesced and quickened the pace.

—*I must complain, yet do enjoy my love . . .*

—Campion.

—How's that?

—You heard right. Thomas Campion, with no *h*.

She was, as usual, right again. She was in top form. Assuming the role of quizmaster with great relish, I quickly found another poem, confident my work with this contestant would in the end benefit mankind.

—*These lines that now thou scorn'st, which should delight thee . . .*

—Stop! Laura said, massaging her eyelids, lost in thought, leafing through the tome in her head. —That's not even the beginning of a poem, you bastard.

—I never said it was. To my great displeasure, I thought I had finally stumped her.

—Quiet, she said. Her face twisted as if in pain. He's . . . a . . . sonneteer . . . Drayton . . . a major poet . . . Michael . . . among the minor poets. Then she recited the poem as I followed along in the book. She was flawless, letter perfect, pausing only at grammatical breaks.

—There's no threat, my wife says as she returns several pages of my manuscript to the tray beside my typewriter. —You're letting all that rhetoric coming out of Washington get to you. I can assure you, Stephen, no one in North America, Europe, Russia, or even Australia is ever going to die from or be blinded by a nuclear device.

—Your head's in Candyland; you're too idealistic.

—Just remember Hiroshima.

—I know about Hiroshima; uranium-235 bomb, equal to 12.5 kilotons of TNT, killed over . . .

—And don't forget Nagasaki.

—What are you driving at? I pick up the anthology on my desk and open to a poem I had planned to use later in the story. —Now, listen to this, even Shelley had the right idea way back in the eighteenth century.

—Nineteenth.

—Okay, nineteenth; you're always so damn smart about certain things, but listen to our friend Shelley: *The awful shadow of some unseen Power/ Floats though unseen among us . . .* I slam the book shut. —You see, it's real. The threat's been anticipated for ages. We live in an ugly world. You've got to face up to it.

—Stephen, I agree, even if you've taken P.B. out of context, but I don't think it's going to happen too close to where you're sitting now,

my wife says. —Radioactivity is brutally democratic, it doesn't care about race, but those who control the bombs aren't as egalitarian. I find it a curiosity that they never dropped any bombs on Germany, after all the trouble it caused, and then went ahead and unloaded on Japan. She clapped her hands together twice directly behind my head. —Boom! Not once, but Boom, boom! Once wasn't enough; they had to go back three days later for an encore. If any place is destined for a return to the Stone Age it'd be China, the Mideast, or a country like Libya. I think we're safe in Ossining. After all, doesn't Cheever live here?

—What about the South Bronx then? or Detroit?

—I'm sure our government allows the Russians to consider any area in the country where topsiders aren't worn a special non-military target. Their missiles are capable of pinpoint accuracy, you know. They can hit Harlem and still leave Bloomingdale's open for business.

—Well, even with Cheever and Bloomingdale's on your side, when they destroy the ozone layer, we'll all be blind no matter where we live. You don't have to be in the eye of the hurricane to feel its force.

In the middle of a tense and silent standoff, my wife wraps her arms around my neck, leaning her soft bosom against my head, a sudden peacemaking initiative. —Hir-o-shi-ma, she whispers, as Emmanuele Riva, the actress who played the forlorn actress in the Resnais film had done. —Hir-o-shi-ma, she repeats, reaching her hand down the front of my shirt.

—Na-ga-sak-i? I ask as our cheeks touch. I grab hold of her hand and position it at the tops of my pants. —Na-ga-sak-i?

Although I lack a retainer's mental apparatus, I have tried to memorize what I can. In the unpredictable future, you never know when you might be called upon to speak.

—*No more, my dear, no more these counsels try . . .* Laura recited. She was on a roll; she was on fire. Her tongue and memory clicked like a teletype machine. Unprompted, she was belting out one of her favorites. —*O give my passions leave to run their race . . .*

—Sidney, right? I asked.

Laura suddenly stopped. She hated when I interrupted her. She hated when, in my small way, I paraded the minuscule knowledge of poetry I had gathered from our years together. Memorization was her domain, her special talent. I pleaded with her to finish, but she turned her face to the wall, silent.

We had met along a river under a decrepit tree surrounded by ducks. We were both strangers in town. I had come in from the south and she from the west. I was navigating my bicycle with its twin flat tires to the garage when I passed Laura and recognized the book, with its enormous girth and gold printing across its spine, splayed open, face down, on her lap. With her eyes closed, her lips squirmed, as if she were saying the rosary or kissing an imaginary love. When I heard it was a Keatsian ode being whispered from those lips, I snuck up behind her and chipped in the last line, as a way of introduction. But she turned on me and scowled, a total stranger, just as she was doing now. She refused to speak. And when I tried to follow her, she pressed the tome to her breast and outran me, encumbered as I was by the dilapidated bike.

I leafed through the anthology for someone else's words which would shake my stubborn Laura from her dark mood. I hit upon what seemed absolutely perfect for the situation: *The grave's a fine and private place, but none, I think, do there embrace.*

—How trite, she said. —What tripe!

—What are you saying? This is a classic.

—Stephen, *I think the dead are tender. Shall we kiss?* I can agree with Roethke only up to a certain point, she said. —But the invitation is his sentiment alone. I've only repeated it here to preserve the integrity of the line. Laura turned, again preferring the wall to me.

If I did not act fast, I would lose her to the bathroom and her morning routine. In such emergency situations, I have learned to resort to my secret weapon—*Prufrock*. Laura was a sucker for Eliot. I quickly found it and began to read. She refused to respond right away, aware of the manipulation at hand, but I knew I was getting to her, and in no time would erode her resistance. When we first made love a Book-of-the-Month-Club record of Eliot reading played in the room. She claimed she had notched multiple orgasms that night, and that these were the very first of their kind she had ever experienced. Soon, Laura was reciting in a low voice, like purling water, as I read aloud. Her words, Eliot's words, fell hot and sticky against the nape of my neck.

—Stephen, my wife says, this is nonsense. I don't even *like* Eliot. And what's more, she adds, pushing a rigid finger into my back, I don't want my name associated with any sex, especially multiple orgasms.

—Why are you so touchy? What've I done wrong now?

—You know damn well the first time we went to bed you couldn't even raise it to half-mast.

I have often wondered when she would dredge up this bit of the past.

—And it wasn't Eliot on the turntable, she says, but Dylan.

—So you see, it's pure fiction.

—Call it anything you like, but don't call me your wife when I'm not, and keep your orgasms to yourself. I mean it, do what I say or you can't use Laura any more.

I fail to understand her objections. After all, her name, in truth, is not *Laura*.

Laura and I kissed. I thought I felt Eliot percolate beneath her scalp. I pulled her on top of me. Her body was pliable, but her tongue did not feel committed to love. I sweated, ripe for langorous rowing, ready for the wet friction of floating downstream. But she remained dry and rigid, an abandoned canoe.

I asked her what was on her mind, and she muttered something about mermaids singing, and so I understood and forgave the fact her breast had gone cold in my hand, the fact her knees remained locked despite my loving caresses. It was Eliot and poetry that denied me my pleasure. And for them, the cause, I would gladly sacrifice the satisfaction of my baser needs. Unwittingly then, she had played into my hands.

We kissed, or I kissed her, and I shut my eyes. I imagined the ocean at night or a vast river flowing under a bridge, deep and boundless. We kissed, and I squeezed my eyelids tighter, sealing in the darkness of the ocean floor. We kissed, our tongues struggled like eels, while fish swam in my head. Often, I made love to Laura this way.

But, do *I* dare make love? Despite my sophistication as a writer, a liberal, and a subscriber to the tenets of Masters and Johnson, I want sex only during periods of heightened world tension. I am embarrassed to admit it, but I have no more control over my sexual urges than an animal has over its estrus cycle. Ever since the time I first could conceive of nuclear warheads, missile silos, vulvas, and phalluses in the same thought, lovemaking has seemed futile and vain, its attractiveness tainted by the mushroom cloud that burgeons in my mind any time the caressing begins. How can a man find comfort, let alone the ability to be sufficiently aroused, when the principal plan for deterrence is called Mutually Assured Destruction? Sexual intercourse under such a promise offers no real hope or prospect for pleasure. But when a new trouble spot flares up in the world, I am more than eager for loving. I was ripe during the Angolan and Afghanistanian incursions; I wearied my wife during

the Salvadorean revolution; I could have taken on all the concubines in Ancient China (and Mao's five wives too) during the 444 days of the Hostage Crisis. Whenever Washington poses another ultimatum to Moscow or Israeli jets set their sights on some new Arab target, I am as frisky as a cat howling in heat. I attain critical mass.

As strange as my condition may seem, my feelings, in the end, are purely instinctual. While the world teeters again and again, inches from Armageddon, I want nothing more than to propagate my species. I want a child, like any other rational being, to carry my name into the future, its bleakness notwithstanding. But a child, I know, will be ineffectual against the heat, light, and fallout. How will such a child grow? What gnarled shapes and odd combinations will its genes assume? As my wife and I make love I have tried to propose she write and commit to memory an antebellum elegy for me—a poem in which my name appears at least once, not necessarily spelled out on the same line, but perhaps buried the way Shakespeare is in the 46th Psalm.

—Stephen, my wife says, I want out of this story. She tosses the manuscript pages onto my desk. —You have me in bed on the brink of some lascivious act, and here you make this absurd confession about your own sexuality. My God, Stephen, if you're not embarrassed by all this, then think of me. Christ, I have to live with you even if this isn't true.

—But it's true, I say to the typewriter. —It's the sorry truth.

—What is?

—It's too risky to bring a child into this world.

—Don't I have a voice in this matter?

—It wouldn't be fair.

—For who? she asks. —For yourself?

—The kid. I turn around in my seat and take my wife by her broad hip bones. —Why don't you write me that poem?

—Stephen, what's wrong with you? We're safe here. She wanted to say more but stopped and exhaled a long breath as if her lungs held all the frustrations of the world. —I want out of this story. Go back and cross me out. People will think it's autobiography.

—I'm not an autobiographical writer.

—Christ, there's no talking to you. Just leave me off those pages. She exits and crosses the hall to her study. —Give me a break, will you? she says. —And some privacy. The door slams shut behind her.

I have great faith in my wife. She will persevere through the coming madness and years of radiation.

I know that if she were a mother she would hide the face of our child in her lap until the firestorms abated. If she were a doctor she would tear her skirt into strips and dip them in the last cool waters and soothe my fresh blind eyes. But she is a poet, and I want to ask her—when the screaming ebbs (or when we hear no more), when those of us huddled together in disbelief can no longer vomit, sleep, speak, or cry—to recite the poem, my poem, all poems. For as light will darken our eyes, so will our thoughts turn to shadows.

My wife's temper reminds me of steel—in my hands, both are unbendable. I knock on her door, armed with a surprise, but she continues to type away at her little portable which makes the sounds of cats lapping milk from an aluminum pan.

I let myself in. She stares straight ahead at the sheet of paper curled in the roller. I rest my hands on her shoulders. This is accomplished without incident. She turns the roller backward until the paper disappears into the machine.

—Why so tense?

—You know I don't like it when you read over my shoulder.

—Honey, I say, stroking her fine hair. —I've made you a mother. I guess I must have accidentally pulled her hair when I said this. Her head had lurched forward, and she emitted a groan of pain.

—I made you a mother, I repeat, saying it as if for the first time.

—I don't want to be your wife if we're not married. And I don't want to be a mother, real or imagined, under the same terms either.

—I thought you'd be pleased with this development.

—Go away, Stephen. I want to finish typing this poem before we go.

—Where?

—To see Carla read again.

—We saw her yesterday, isn't she finished? Or is she reading the whole thing herself?

Carla is Nancy's friend, who is participating in a marathon reading of *Finnegans Wake* at the bookstore downtown.

—She read the opening pages yesterday and is scheduled to do the last few pages today.

There is no point to our discussion; our attendance at the reading is inevitable, so I return to the subject of our child:

—His name is Todd.

—Who?

—Your son.

My wife brusquely snatches the paper out of the typewriter and shoves it into the nearest desk drawer and stands and stomps into the bathroom.

—His name is Todd, I say, following at her heels. —The two *ds*, I think, will give him character.

—Retodd, she says as she outlines her eyes with pencil. —That's what you are.

—Don't be so cruel to your own son.

—He's your baby.

—But you said you wanted a kid.

—Christ, Stephen. She pulls her lips tight and applies a colorless gloss over the exasperated smile.

Two months ago we had visited a pet shop. Because of a stipulation in our lease forbidding dogs or cats, we searched for a cold-blooded pet.

—Sperm, my wife had said, pointing to the tiny fry darting to and fro among the translucent plants in the aquarium. We watched as a male tried to couple with a swollen female nearly twice his size.

—Want some? she asked.

—Guppies or sperm?

—Babies.

—Let's see how we make out with fish first.

We linked arms, found the proprietor, and chose a pair of guppies. On the drive home one of us had inadvertently rested the fish in their bag of water on the narrow shelf space between the dashboard and windshield. The defroster blew out air the entire ten miles home. Upon arrival the fish were floating belly-up in the tepid water.

Note: Revise from beginning. The two in bed do not make love, not even off the page. They kiss, with Nancy stretched out beneath the narrator. He believes she is reciting Prufrock in her head as he tries to interest her in some sex play. There is the possibility she is singing Dylan instead. Ultimately, they have no time for love. They have a child now to tend.

We walked the eight blocks or so to the bookstore. It was just minutes after noon. Todd held our hands, doubling his steps to keep pace with us. We were on our way to see Nancy's girlfriend, Carla, an English teacher at the local high school, read the opening pages of *Finnegans Wake*.

—I'm glad Carla got involved in this reading, Nancy said.

—It's a better thing than some of those jerks she's gotten involved with in the past, I said as we passed a lawnsale.

Todd tugged on Nancy's arm and said, —Carla's the crying lady, right?

We stopped to browse at the second lawnsale we came to. Books and records and all sorts of appliances weighed down several tables. Boxes with men's shirts and shoes and ties dotted the yard. A food processor, almost new, with a French sobriquet gleamed in the sunlight and all but shouted to me.

I asked the woman in charge what she wanted for the machine. It was a very reasonable price she quoted to Nancy, even though I had done the inquiring and tried to maintain eye contact with her. She was young, plain-looking, and, I noticed, not wearing a bra. And perhaps it was because of this bralessness, the chance that she had noticed that I had noticed it, that made her uneasy with me.

—I used it when his parents came to visit him, she said to Nancy. —Everything had to be a puree. But now we're separated. I don't have any more use for it. Her voice grew tentative and sandy as she spoke.

—I'll take Todd for a walk, I said, feeling as though I was somehow the pebble of her discomfort.

We found a cooler around the side of the house that sold bottled soda for a quarter. Todd selected a grape, and I handed him some coins to drop into the collection jar.

—I've asked you not to feed him any junk, Nancy said from where she stood with the woman.

—If he has to sit through an hour of *Finnegans Wake*, he deserves whatever remuneration he wants.

Todd and I browsed at the books, passing the bottle between us.

—Is that lady Carla too? he asked.

—She's not crying is she?

—Yup.

I turned around as Nancy untied the red bandanna wrapped over the woman's hair. She talked at the ground, and Nancy shook her head sympathetically. Unfurling the red cloth, Nancy held it to the other's nose.

—A lot of books, huh Stephen? Todd ran his little fingers across the row of spent spines.

—I'd say there're over a thousand million words on this table, I said,

picking up a book called *Ahead of Their Time: Selections from Berryman to Sexton*.

—What would you do with a thousand million words? I asked.

—I'd throw them all over the place, Todd said. —I'd throw them at Carla and Nancy and at you. He acted out his plan, his tiny arm was contorted behind his head, and then thrust it forward in a strange and sudden burst of violence.

—Stop it, I said. —That's enough. It was not the volume but the intonation of my voice that seemed to frighten the boy. Our hands collided, his stubby fingers bending back against the heel of my palm. We had never touched this way before.

Todd and I walked to the rear of the house where we discovered a screened-in porch with its door wide open. There was a table inside surrounded by wicker chairs. A goldfish bowl and its lone occupant rested on the tabletop. As Todd watched the fish, I leafed through the poetry book I had found. I read some lines outloud and asked Todd to try to remember them. I read him the same lines again, and then he said them back to me perfectly. A natural retainer. I felt hopeful and proud. I lifted the boy onto a chair, gave him the grape soda, and told him to watch the fish while I paid for the book. As I backed away from the porch, I focused on Todd's black hair gleaming in the sun. I tried to peer through that blackness to the tight convolutions underneath, and read the confession on his mind: *Stephen, I'm scared of the world*. But he was too young for such fear; someday I would have to warn him of his fate, etch the fear of radiation into his thoughts, and teach him the need for him to try to memorize poems too.

I purchased the book with a five dollar bill. The woman handed Nancy my change.

—Look, Stephen! Todd called from the porch as I turned the corner of the house.

The goldfish bowl had been transformed into a transparent purple globe. The goldfish, barely visible in the sweet, bubbly solution, hovered at the surface of the water, unable to swim.

—Can you fix it?

I dipped my hand into the water and scooped out the fish. It offered no resistance. —Hold him, I said, make a bowl with your hands. Todd accepted the fish, stared at it, and brought it to his nose. After I poured the purple liquid from the bowl, I refilled it from a spigot near the garage. —There, I said, put him back into his house. Gently does it.

As we left the lawnsale, continuing to the bookstore, Todd clutched Nancy's skirt. She was silent and angry with me. I had said the food processor would be too cumbersome to carry with us to the reading. But I had also suggested we stop by and inspect it again on our trip home. Unfortunately, Nancy interpreted my words as a flat rejection, not only of the machine but of our domesticity in general. I hooked my arm around her waist, and Nancy bolted, agitating the hem of her skirt into a flurry of wavelets that seemed to carry her away from Todd and me. —Nancy, I said, can be Carla too sometimes.

At the bookstore we found Carla leaning against the biography shelf in conversation with Ian K—, a clerk at the shop, novelist, and organizer of the reading. He was stuffing his pipe, paying meticulous attention to the tobacco, indifferent it seemed to Carla's presence. She wore a slip-like black dress with thin shoulder straps. Light blue ceramic beads circled her neck. She was as lovely as I had ever seen her, even if her elegance was misplaced in the bookstore. As we entered, Nancy said K—'s beard was an affectation. She did not like him. She feared for Carla who had one desperate weakness—she routinely fell in love with unhappy men, helping them to feel better while becoming more miserable herself. Carla latched onto the divorced ones, the married ones, the ones who called her cunt and might beat her unconscious one day if she did not have Nancy to intervene and urge her to move on again. For Nancy, K—'s beard was a manifestation of unhappiness.

I tend to be on my worst behavior at readings. I refused to sit with Nancy in the chairs Carla had reserved for us in the front row. Todd and I wandered to the back of the store and found an isolated nook in the fiction section. I rested my head against the corner where two shelves joined—Robbe-Grillet at one ear, Sand in the other. I pulled my knees to my chest and closed my eyes. When I opened them I saw Todd squatting several feet away with an oversize, bottom shelf art book open across his lap. He flipped through its pages, rubbing his sugary hands greedily over the colorplates while Carla read in the near distance. My indolent eyes kept drooping shut, but I struggled with them, trying to maintain a focused picture of my son. The best I could manage was a series of fragmented images. And if my imagination had been operating then as it is now, I would have said I fancied seeing him growing bigger and older with each blink of my eyes.

—Stephen, Todd said, nudging me with the corner of a big book.
—Look at all the blood.

It was a reproduction of Gauguin's *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* that he had shoved before my nose.

—That's an angel, I said, pointing to the blond, alated figure. —Angels don't bleed; they've got holy water in their veins that keeps them light.

—Oh, he said indifferently. He sat on his heels and asked, —Where does all the blood come from? Todd brushed his hand over the broad areas of red that covered most of the page.

—Red isn't always blood, I said, just as black isn't always hair. I stared at Todd, his head bowed to the page, and then at the painting. The grass was red, so was the sky. The grass and sky were indeed bloody. Gauguin took liberties; he dared to presume. And I wonder, what color is Todd's blood? Does it have any? What is the blood between us?

—Stephen, black is your hair too, Todd said.

As red is blood, then black is death, *isn't it Todd, isn't it?*

After the reading, which lasted almost an hour, Todd and I waited outside for Nancy to finish her chat with Carla. Walking home, Nancy said she had mentioned to Carla that Todd had dubbed her the crying lady to which her friend had advised: —Teach that boy to respect women while it's not too late. —Bitch, I said, a safe distance from Carla, as Todd tightrope-walked the curb ahead of us.

I directed us down the street toward the lawnsale. When we arrived at the house with the food processor, Todd, right on cue (when I placed my hand on the machine and tapped its plexiglass top), blurted out the lines I had taught him: *There are no stars to-night/But those of memory.*

Nancy knelt on her skirt and gathered the boy in her arms. She asked him to repeat the lines. He did. —Crane, right? Todd shrugged his shoulders, holding his palm to the sky.

—You're telling him about war, aren't you? Nancy asked, her eyes first so tender when looking at the child's open hands, glaring when they reached up to me.

—No, just poetry.

—You shouldn't be putting such thoughts into a small boy's mind, she said, as if she had not heard me.

The woman of the house came outside, holding the same red bandanna to her nose. —The fish is dead, she said. Nancy took her into her arms.

Todd and I exchanged glances. The lesson I should have taught him

did not present itself. Was I supposed to admonish Todd for something he did not know? Who could assume the responsibility? There were worse things ahead for him to learn in time.

—Stephen, I'll be out in a minute, Nancy said as she led the woman back into her house. —Decide about the Cuisinart while I'm gone.

—Stephen, my wife says, we have to be at the bookstore in a half hour. She enters the study and reads what I have written up to this point.

—Well, do they buy the food processor?

—You know we didn't. I try to shield the page in the typewriter with my body.

—But do they buy it?

—I'm not sure. We can check it out again today. Standing, then turning, —What've you been working on? I ask to change the topic.

—I typed out *Prufrock*, she says. —I thought I should try to memorize it. She wraps her arms around my waist. —We've got less than a half hour to get downtown. We should hurry.

A half hour, thirty minutes. It takes Soviet-based missiles thirty minutes to reach our shores. There will be thirty minutes to replay the highlights of civilization; thirty minutes of panicky flag waving and hymn singing, and then an eternity of calm. In a half hour's time you can write your will (if you are hopeful), say a dozen prayers, rape and never be caught, or finish that scotch saved for special occasions. You can hoard canned beans and buckets of drinking water, gather guns and ammunition to protect against the hungry ones, the ones who never gave a thought to survival. You can loot your neighbor of the riches you always felt you deserved; you can live the idea of *carpe diem* more feverishly than the metaphysicals had ever intended. Or you can write your own poem, reread a good one. You can defy all logic—thirty minutes is ample time—and make a baby.

—Todd sounds like a nice boy, my wife says and then kisses my cheek. She leaves the study, returning immediately with my sportscoat.

—I guess there's no escaping Joyce, I say. I take out a scrap of paper to write myself a note so I will know where to pick up when we return from the reading.

—I'll meet you downstairs, she says.

—Good, just give me a minute.

I take my time and scribble:

*You are Stephen
You are Laura too
Bring back wicks?
Work in Luddites?
Don't forget Todd*