

The Prize · Gwen Head

Acid-cured, the pages flake, fall away,
the color of bright Virginia.
Le Journal de Bord d'Alfred:
on page three, the family packs, in an uproar.
Toward the end, Maman falls ill, Jeannine learns to smoke.
But nothing explains the cover,
which, after thirty-five years
retains its mystery.

Alfred, in short pants,
lies propped on his elbows, scribbling.
In his left hand, a tooth-stitched apple.
Behind him, a giant, shiny cherry bomb.
Behind it, a white rabbit with cocked, flop ears.

The book's owner, too, is a mystery.
Ducking a curtsy
on an improvised stage
in the Ursulines' courtyard,
too shy to look at the principal
with her elegant upswept hairdo,
the six-year-old scholar, at that moment,
thinks for the first time
of suicide.

Can you pity her now, reader?
Or imagine how she envies
you, too clever to be taken in
by anything so foolish as a book?