

*Ned Balbo*

### **Walt Whitman's Finches: of discretion and disclosure in autobiography and adoption**

**I**t might have been close to Christmas, carols piped in overhead, or any late fall afternoon, the indoor mall a strange new world, when I first stood before Walt Whitman's finches. The aviary was enormous, a huge caged space of flashing wings, reaching well above the heads of even the tallest passers-by; I'd stare up, fascinated, past the birds to the space beyond, where a lost balloon faltered at the ceiling. The aviary was an Attraction, designed to draw a crowd—to offer respite from mere commerce, to beautify, or to inspire—while mothers and housewives window-shopped before their husbands got home from work: nature idealized, safely domesticated.

In those days, department stores sold pets, even Macy's and A&S before whose doors the birds were stationed, some of them the very species available inside. But the Walt Whitman Mall was more than a place to buy and sell. Dedicated in 1962 at a cost of twenty million dollars, it occupied what had been a sixty-eight acre tract of land bulldozed and built up into nearly a million square feet of retail space and a parking lot for over five thousand cars. If America's indoor malls are the great halls of consumer culture where we wander, tranquilized, as they efface all sense of time, still they offer the commodities by which we define ourselves: the identities we purchase, props for a future we envision.

The cage before A&S was gently sloped, with gilded bars—a giant, buxom hourglass—and its less imposing bookend stood before Macy's, a mile down. Overhead, birds whisked and fluttered: Cut-Throat Finches with red necks, Zebra Finches of various hues, Orange-Cheeked Waxbills, Tricolored Nuns, Parson and Lavender Finches—even a Pintail Whydah, exotic on its branch, shaking a tail three times as long as the bird itself. Nearby, outside the cage, in one of several Japanese gardens, a fountain bubbled endlessly, coins visible underwater, while across the promenade, keeping her son always in sight, my mother Betty tried on pairs of shoes. I glanced back at the cage: were these

Walt Whitman's birds?—grabbing the bars with claws and sliding, spiraling upward in a chase, or murmuring collectively, their endless white noise broken at times by a strident note or string of cheeps.

Who, I wondered, was Walt Whitman?

That Walt Whitman was a poet—probably America's greatest, born, improbably, on Long Island—I wouldn't know for years, and for years more would be a fact to which I felt, at best, indifferent. Even as a teenager, I wouldn't have thought to visit, not a five-minute drive from the mall, the house preserved by New York State and the Whitman Birthplace Association: a shingled, two-story structure sinking on its stone foundation, wide spaces between its wooden floorboards—the labor of Whitman's brooding, alcoholic father. When I finally saw the house, my father Carmine at my side cheerful on an expedition I'd invented for the day, what struck me most was how dirty it was, the cramped rooms roped off, filmed with dust, stray brochures discolored or crumpled, strewn or piled in disarray. And at least on that one summer day in 1983, no copy of *Leaves of Grass* was anywhere displayed.

The idea of a life in poetry or prose is, by definition, problematic. Life, for most of us, happens *outside* of writing, in the so-called “real world” where others press in upon us with their sum of love and grief, their demands and generousities, where events command attention and transform us. But, for writers, life and art are fused in ways that are revealing, even essential, yet seldom chosen. We need only think of Whitman, gregarious yet isolated, a teacher in hometown West Hills or a journalist in Brooklyn, already long at odds with impulse and ambition. Still, tirelessly self-promoting, Whitman lived in the real world, seeking an audience for his verse by any means available. To this end, he actually reviewed *Leaves of Grass* himself under cover of anonymity, praising, too, an early version of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”: “Like the ‘Leaves of Grass,’ the purport of this wild and plaintive song, well-enveloped, and eluding definition, is positive and unquestionable, like the effect of music.” The document, in that distinctive script shared by author and reviewer, appeared in the New York Public Library's centennial exhibition, only one page among hundreds in a literary reliquary of astonishing range: *The Hand of the Poet: Original Manuscripts by 100 Masters*. Today, across Long Island, Whitman's name remains alive, uttered eventually by anyone raised in its suburban sprawl, yet, like my mother Betty who brought me at five to see the

birds, few know who Whitman was—“chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter, / Taking all hints to use them...”—and fewer still would read, or understand, his words.

Or, take Georg Trakl, born in Salzburg, Austria, in 1887, dead in November 1914, educated, as far as I know, without awareness of Whitman’s work, his own art’s genesis deriving from the accidents of birth. In *Georg Trakl: A Profile*, editor and critic Frank Graziano writes, “One can imagine Trakl’s brief, intoxicated life as one that mortifies its flesh only to patch it with poems that bear an uncanny resemblance to scars.” Here is one of those scars, a sonnet imperfectly translated: “Dream of Evil” (in German “Traum des Bösen”).

A gong’s brown-golden tones fade, as a lover  
wakes up in the flicker of dark rooms,  
his cheek close to the window’s fading flames.  
Sail, mast, and rope flash on the river.

A monk, a pregnant woman in the crush  
of people—strummed guitars, red blouses shimmer.  
Chestnuts shrivel in the hot, gold glare;  
The sad pretension of the church looms harsh

and black. From pale masks, a spirit of evil  
stares. A public square, now gray and dark, grows  
dreadful. On dim islands, whispers rise—

Tonight, the lepers read conflicting signals  
in the flight of birds. Maybe each limb decays.  
In the park, a brother and sister’s trembling eyes.

Even in my translation, the poem remains uncanny: “Ein Liebender,” or lover, wakes in “schwarzen Zimmern,” black rooms whose windows reflect fire while, along the docks outside, a monk and pregnant woman pass amid the crowd. A church looms, chestnuts roast, the day wanes, and the spirit of evil—“der Geist des Bösen”—stares out from pale faces that look like masks. Voices rise from nearby islands, lepers are baffled by omens read in bird-flight, while anxious siblings meet each other’s gaze: “In the park, a brother and sister’s trembling eyes,” or, in Trakl’s own words, “Im Park erblicken zitternd sich Geschwister.”

The fourteen lines of Trakl's sonnet hold the whole unsettling journey from dockside room to fallen world, or worse, while the last line offers a clue to what triggers the darkening mood. But what wound underlies this dream of evil?

We don't need to know every detail of the writer's life to catch the mood of Trakl's poem; still, biography is revealing. Georg Trakl was the son of an indifferent hardware magnate and a mother with a weakness for opium and antiques. Despite their affluence, neither parent showed much interest in their children (six altogether) though, from the available evidence, Georg and the younger Grete showed great interest in each other. Too much, in fact: they were almost surely lovers, and if the guilt and damaged psyche their actions brought weren't enough, Trakl, too, became an addict, later a pharmacist by necessity, and, eventually, a suicide broken by the Great War's horror. (For him, no "Drum Taps" would bring order out of grief.) With this context, Trakl's "Dream of Evil" becomes far more accessible, as the poem alone is not—though no poet would say that poems *require* biography's support. Still, I can think of few poems besides those of Trakl (or, maybe, Weldon Kees) that so fully evoke the dark mood in all its complex shadings *without* resorting to confession—that is, the overt disclosure of biography. In "Dream of Evil," the feelings are already *there*—in the lines, the unsettling images, the sonnet's controlled form—*without* mention of the facts of Trakl's life.

I, too, have a sister in my life, and our relationship is difficult, in part because we were raised in separate households. Indeed, throughout my childhood, *family* meant only three people: my parents, Carmine and Betty, and myself. It was rare that we three ever went out visiting, and never did my parents leave for the evening as a couple; but weeknight dinners that began at the jangling of my father's keys, or summer nights spent on the stoop while my parents smoked and talked, gave us the hours together no one else would know. With nights "on call" for plumbing emergencies, Carmine worked a six-day week, while Betty sought in neighbors' greetings real or imagined slights; these factors left my parents, if not entirely friendless, then largely dependent on their siblings for what social life they had.

I was surprised, then, when one night we all went on a drive to Brentwood, the nearby suburb that would soon become our home. Founded as "Modern Times" in its nineteenth-century heyday, a utopian community based on the practice of free love, the Brentwood

of 1967 held few traces of its past, aside from the white Victorian mansion of the Ross Nursing Home, soon to be razed by fire, the octagonal house on Brentwood Road (a *Modern Times* construction fad), and the magnificent oaks and pines that then still shaded Suffolk Avenue. The Brentwood of the 1960s was working class suburbia, mostly split-levels or ranches of families Catholic, Jewish, Italian, German, Black, or Puerto Rican, a “village” by legal definition within the larger Islip “township,” all part of the same ongoing sprawl that blurs all borders and distinctions. Together that night, we drove from Smithtown, past the Knight’s Inn at the crossroads, down a dark Route 111, past the stables and silent horses (replaced by state and county offices), then the Wagon Wheel Inn’s orange-and-green neon ring—a dive bar that, for years, would stand in ruins at the roadside, today encased within the shell of some corporate franchise.

I couldn’t know that night that I was about to meet my sister, though I wouldn’t know her as such for six more years. Indeed, I wouldn’t find out till then I wasn’t a Balbo at all but a child, through various subterfuges, never even adopted, a legal loose end that still dangles to this day. That night, my father Carmine turned onto Prospect Avenue in a neighborhood where all the streets had been named for streets in Brooklyn, to ensure that, in my childhood, I would get to meet my sister. In mere months, we’d move to Brentwood so Kim and I could become friends and so the women raising us could find some comfort in each other.

A sibling is a version of the self, the same dice on a different roll, another set of possibilities. For Kim and me, that feeling runs deeper, the consequence of choice and chance that kept us strangers for seven years and which would keep us apart in other ways long after. Kim was raised as the daughter of Elfie and John Madsen, our German-born paternal grandmother and her second husband; I was raised by Carmine and Betty, our maternal half-aunt and her husband. Growing up, Kim believed our father Don was her half-brother; I knew him as an uncle through marriage. For Kim, our mother Elaine was merely her brother’s wife; for me, an aunt, Betty’s half-sister. And so on, lines of descent and origin later to be revised when Don and Elaine forced out the truth: that they’d conceived then given us up, a choice forced on them, they believed, by fate, limited finances, and family. Anyone who wants to write wonders at some point whether to recount the raw material of a life: is my biography interesting? Would anyone care to read it? But through my teens

and twenties, I faced the opposite problem: a family story so baroque no one could even follow it.

In Yeats's "The Stolen Child," the faeries' summons is a song: "*Come away, O human child! / To the waters and the wild / With a faery, hand in hand, / For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.*" The myth of the changeling holds considerable power: for the human child, the true son or daughter, the faeries substitute their own, a being magical yet troublesome, not of human origin: in short, unnatural. The true child vanishes into "the waters and the wild," spared human sorrow but also human joy. The adopted child, however, embodies *both* human child and changeling: cut off from his origin, he strives to adopt a human face, parents struggling to overlook the signs of his inheritance, to turn away neighbors' suspicions and to quiet rude remarks; but he is also the human child lured from his family's grasp to find himself brought to a wilderness by strangers.

Too soon, our friendship with the Madsens trailed off in petty conflict, though prior to Betty's death in my first semester of college, the bond enjoyed a brief revival. (Both Elfie and John were dead not two years later; all three were cancer victims and Elfie, tragically, was mauled by a stray dog during her illness.) Whatever their good will, the Madsens were heavy drinkers, a frailty Betty feared might corrupt her son and husband; but with the acquaintance broken, she found herself lonely, again, my father at work all day, the neighborhood not one she'd have selected otherwise: peacocks screaming every morning out of a neighbor's makeshift barnyard, elsewhere a pigeon coop that trilled and cooed till noon, my father's "jalopy," as he called it, stolen and ditched in the woods one night, the BB shots whose target was our picture window.

Born "out of wedlock," a catch phrase then, didn't apply to us; Kim and I were given away because Elaine was not yet divorced. She feared losing custody of Lance, whom she'd conceived with her first husband—the times were unforgiving of a wife's adultery—and at her mother and sister's urging made the arrangements she'd regret. Kim and I weren't twins (though we sometimes felt we were) but separated by over a year, which means both that Elaine's divorce was a painful, drawn-out proposition and that she and Don repeated the same mistake. Later, when they married, Don and Elaine would want to see us for visits of uncertain purpose or duration. That we'd become our new identities—the Madsens' daughter, the Balbos' son—was an outcome

they'd not foreseen, and so, they lived a paradox, withholding consent for our adoption, swallowing rage at those who raised us, while zealously hiding our existence from everyone they knew—in effect, erasing us—having convinced themselves they'd acted for our good.

In this way, Betty lost the friendship of her only living sister through the very son who should have brought them close.

Of Elizabeth Bishop, poet and critic Dana Gioia writes, “For some of us coming to maturity in the late sixties or seventies, Bishop’s personal example deeply influenced our sense of what it meant to be a serious poet. This assertion may seem odd to those who remember how little was known about her life at that point, but her determined privacy was an essential part of her attraction.” By now the facts of Bishop’s life are better known, thanks, in part, to an interview conducted by Elizabeth Spires. There, Bishop described her child-self as “fearfully observant... You notice all kinds of things, but there’s no way of putting them all together.” At only eight months, the poet had lost her father, and she told Spires, “My mother went crazy when I was four or five years old.” Thereafter, various relatives cared for Bishop—“they all felt so sorry...that they tried to do their very best”—until she was old enough for boarding school. In the Winter 1992 *Georgia Review*, we learned more of these years’ effects from three never-before-seen poems, enriched by Thomas Travisano’s commentary; one of these, “A Drunkard,” describes “a terrifying historical incident, the Great Salem Fire, from the perspective of a three-year-old child. The fire took place on 25 June 1914...[and] devastated 252 acres, destroyed 1,800 buildings, and rendered 15,000 people homeless.... More significantly, it alludes frankly to Bishop’s lifelong problem with alcohol—an admission made nowhere in her published work—and explores feelings of guilt and anger toward her mother more directly than anything she published.” The poem begins with Bishop’s characteristic detachment:

When I was three, I watched the Salem fire.  
It burned all night (or then I thought it did)  
and I stood in my crib & watched it burn.  
The sky was bright red; everything was red  
out on the lawn, my mother’s white dress looked  
rose-red; my white enameled crib was red  
and my hands holding to its rods—  
the brass knobs holding specks of fire—

Here we find, as in Trakl's "Dream," another fire glimpsed from a room, as Bishop beholds a world plunged into conflagration; yet Bishop's poem, unlike Trakl's, is the product of an ordered mind:

I felt not fear but amazement, maybe  
my infancy's chief emotion.  
People were playing hoses on the roofs  
of the summer cottages on Marblehead Neck;  
the red sky was filled with flying motes,  
cinders and coals, and bigger things, burnt black.

The next day, "clouds of smoke" still visible, the beach is filled with "strange objects [that] seemed to have blown across the water: / lifted by that terrible heat, through the red sky?"; but when Bishop lifts up "a woman's long black cotton / stocking," her mother reprimands her, "*Put that down!*" We all recognize this moment: the shame of having broken some taboo never explained, the child's flush of rage at her own lack of understanding and for the surprise attack of a parent's sudden scolding. Still, we as readers (and Bishop as writer) see the mother's point of view: her daughter may have just picked up the stocking of a corpse. It is an image charged with terror: the mother's sight of her own child touching what's touched the dead (so intimately, as well), the daughter handling death itself, innocent of this small act's gravity. The moment the poem selects is poignant: two years later, Bishop's mother would suffer a final breakdown to begin what would become lifelong institutionalization. This painful memory, then, is one of only a precious few, culled from an age when memory itself is fragmented, imperfect.

Bishop's poem resolves with self-revelation and retreat:

But since that night, that day, that reprimand  
I have suffered from abnormal thirst—  
I swear it's true—and by the age  
of twenty or twenty-one I had begun  
to drink, & drink—I can't get enough  
and, as you must have noticed,  
I'm half-drunk now...

And all I'm telling you may be a lie...

If so, what kind of lie? The lie inherent in our attempts to reconstruct the past? The imperfections and gaps of memory, the vagaries of interpretation? And if drunkards aren't, after all, always reliable, so, too, are they known for voicing truths others suppress.

I was fortunate to hear, in the last months of her life, Elizabeth Bishop at Vassar College, her alma mater (and my own thanks to a scholarship's support). She sat in Cushing Hall, habitually smoking, reading and speaking gently before faculty and students. Who can imagine her reading "A Drunkard"? Yet, she was compelled to write it: what we must write, and what we must publish, are matters to consider separately. Anything we write, to some degree, reveals our lives, consciously or not, by inclusion or evasion. A critic decades later may seek to redress the writer's error: today, we value any insight into Elizabeth Bishop's work, and a poem as good as "A Drunkard" surely calls for our attention. In our media- and publicity-driven culture, Bishop's stance seems quaint. Today, we withhold secrets only long enough to expose them; no public figure dares presume the right to a private life, and we have to assume our own secrets will one day face exposure, so much so that we announce them before our adversaries can: the better to guide disclosure, the better to control the "spin."

And yet, this trend offers an advantage. What passed for privacy years ago, with its command to mute our voices, was often used to silence us, to sustain the power of the strong: to silence women, suppress our children, or our neighbors. We were told to turn away, to shut out what we witnessed: the consequences of segregation, the dangers of the workplace, corruption of the environment, the violence in our own homes. In Whitman's time, the *New York Herald*, one of Manhattan's "penny papers," drew criticism for its then-novel sensationalist approach—its stories of crime, disaster, violence, vice, and murder. Yet in the 1840s, Whitman himself worked at the *Aurora*, one of dozens of penny papers competing with the *Herald*. If, as Andrew Ciofalo writes, a number of Whitman's poems originated in his prose, then generosity of spirit may not be incompatible with knowledge of human nature's darker facets. Indeed, by the 1860s, having witnessed suffering that no one could sensationalize—the Civil War's vast casualties—Whitman wrote of his long months tending to dying and wounded men:

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,  
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter  
and blood;

Back on his pillow the soldier bends, with curv'd neck,  
and side-falling head;  
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look  
on the bloody stump,  
And has not yet look'd on it.

With the rise of modern journalism and the devastation of civil war, worlds previously hidden, on which so many had turned their backs, rose suddenly to light, forcing us to look upon them. But if the power to expose no longer holds surprise or impact, jaded as we've become by all we've seen or read, so much the better, after all. As mere shock loses its force, the content and form of what we offer regain primary importance. The impulse, emotional or aesthetic, that compels us to disclose must offer writers and readers something worthy of the telling.

Yet for those touched by adoption, disclosure is countered by a powerful opposing urge toward silence. For Betty, as for so many adoptive parents, concealing her child's origin served a higher purpose: that of fierce devotion, its proofs offered anew each day, more compelling than some account of how I came into her home. Betty and Carmine never thought to question adoption's secrecy—few back then could envision alternatives, and an illegitimate birth still held its lingering stigma—but, most of all, for adoptive parents, disclosure offered no advantage: telling the truth might cast in doubt their authenticity as parents and so remained a step avoided or delayed. In a culture that reflexively seeks likeness in its children, strangers offering casual verdicts on whom we do or don't resemble, to live as adoptive parents is to struggle every day with yet another tactless inquiry or ill-conceived assertion, one more reminder of the bond that they experience so intensely, yet find subject to skepticism or contempt. No wonder Betty and Elfie tried to form a friendship: together, free to relax their guard, they could forget, for a few hours, the fear of what some chance remark might inadvertently reveal, as well as the daily, draining effort of regulating what they said.

For biological parents, the issues are less clear. Until recently, those who gave up children enjoyed the protection of sealed records, the absolute dead end of any adopted person's quest; yet birth parents faced that same wall, forbidden to seek out those they lost, a stricture that reinforced the gravity of their choice. The grief of parents who give up a child cannot be overstated, especially that of single women

with few options or support. But in the absence of formal adoption, as in the case of Kim and me, how does the equation change? Can birth parents who stay together shift identities at will, pretending for years to be uncle and aunt, older brother and sister-in-law, biding their time till they see an opening to take off the masks they wear, only to put them on again at their convenience?

Former Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress, Maryland Poet Laureate, short story writer, literary journalist, and celebrated woman of letters Josephine Jacobsen has asked the crucial questions of autobiography and art: “What do I remember, and what is worth remembering? It is important to know the difference. Too often what persists most sharply is something small and intense, while large changes stay merely as cumbersome facts.” Jacobsen reminds us also, in recounting the facts of her life, “It may seem odd that, in looking back, I have spent so much time on the first twenty-five years of my life; but I realized some time ago that it was these formative years which set in motion everything else: who I was, where I came from, what I wanted. The rest is the development of that seed.” Already fatherless at five—a stroke had paralyzed Joseph Boylan a full two years before he died—Jacobsen underwent unsettled years of travel with her mother, like Bishop “fearfully observant” wherever she stayed. How much, then, of Jacobsen’s work attempts to comprehend those events that bring order or disorder to our lives? How many of her stories, ending so often with a death, reflect this early intimacy with grief?

A story drawn from “these formative years” by her own admission, Jacobsen’s “Atlantic City” depicts people—indeed, a world—in the act of disappearing. World War I is breaking out, the Great War that broke Trakl, while a child and her mother stay at an Atlantic City hotel; there, its manager, Mr. Zubach, kindly friend to child and mother, is summarily dismissed because he’s German. As a child who lost her father, a fact at which the story hints only through his absence, Jacobsen feels the tug of grief, connecting a vanished cousin missing at sea in the midst of war with Zubach’s exit from their lives and, indeed, the passing of an era: “The last, the final war was out there, on the black water. That was the Atlantic Ocean. Huge and black it came over my mind like the tower of a wave, pulling into itself the patient chair-pushers, my smiling Japanese scorers, Mr. Zubach, my Atlantic City.” And so, too, had the black Atlantic

drowned the world that Whitman knew—West Hills’ farms and schoolyards, blacksmith shops and Indian trails, to raise, in those years that followed another, second “final war,” both the mall I still remember and the one that stands there now.

In today’s Walt Whitman Mall, the aviaries are long gone, as are the commissioned mobiles that once hung over the crowds and cages, designed by sculptor Bogdon Grom with inspiration from *Leaves of Grass*, elegant abstractions lost on most who passed below. There, *Walt Whitman* is a brand name as opposed to body of work, less person than pleasing sound, an alliterative convenience for invoking civic pride, a catch phrase used to advertise a market. But that was not always the case. According to the *New York Times* of May 29, 1905, to the dismay of the local women’s Colonial Society, Frank J. Rogers, then-occupant of Whitman’s birthplace, forbade a tablet honoring him on either the building or the grounds: “‘You can’t advertise any poet by using my house,’ he said,” articulating the insight, however accidentally, that consumerism and poetry cannot easily coexist.

But lives evolve, the world transforms, and even a climate-controlled market, its ceiling space cathedral-high, seems poetic when reshaped by memory. We value the vanished world, whether composed of empty landscape, or dug up and paved over; always, that which is past takes on intrinsic value. Louise Glück’s “Meridian” captures just such a transient moment—“Long Island Sound’s / Asleep: no wind / Rustles down the inlet / In the sagging light / As, stalled at / Vanishing, two Sunday sailboats / Wait it out”—while Marvin Bell’s “The Home Front” evokes the South Shore’s Center Moriches in the shadow of World War II: “German submarines were an idea we watched / off the south shore of Long Island...I spent afternoons at the Bay / watching for unidentified airplanes....” More recently, Kathy Fagan’s “A Summer Song Cycle” recounts a Fourth of July picnic during the 1960s: “We children squad up to eat with our families, spitting melon seeds, knifing clams, / Holding their grainy meat on our tongues / While flames lick blue through the blackening grill and copters circle, looking for fireworks: / For the first one blowing itself over Hempstead.”

For the child who was Walt Whitman, in Justin Kaplan’s reconstruction, “The sun rose in the morning, his father set out for work....In the evening herds of mongrel cattle and rat-tailed sheep

were driven homeward from their grazing on the Hempstead plains....In the quiet after storms he heard the roar of the Atlantic surf. Half a mile from the house, from the top of Jayne's Hill, the highest point on the island, he could look out over Great South Bay, Jones' Beach, and the ocean beyond—to the north he saw Long Island Sound and the Connecticut shore." What would he see now? Today, Jayne's Hill belongs to West Hills County Park, which includes most of the family holdings, and the highway closest to Whitman's birthplace is the infamous Route 110, known for its noise, diners, traffic, repair shops, chain stores, corporate offices. And, of course, the mall whose decal—emblazoned on every entrance, vivid green against the glass—is a triple-leafed, cartoonish blade of grass.

In *Walt Whitman: A Life*, Kaplan quotes Louisa Whitman writing of her son, "He was a very good, but very strange boy," while Whitman himself would recollect, "The time of my boyhood was a very restless and unhappy one; I did not know what to do." Later in life, Whitman would seek in both parents the seed of himself, altering his personal myth as time and circumstance required: "All through young and middle age, I thought my heredity stamp was mainly decidedly from my mother's side; but as I grow older, and latent traits come out, I see my father's also." But to what parents or predecessors should an adopted child look? To his flawed adoptive mother, reluctant to leave her son unwatched for fear her own sister might come to claim him in her absence? To his flawed adoptive father, dead now almost two years, even-tempered until pushed, more often playful, eager to please? To whom should brother and sister look? To those incomprehensible people who'd never fully call us theirs yet never quite give up their claim, their young lives ruled by love and rage, their middle age and golden years consoled by sons born to replace us, by the prosperity they valued more than blood?

Today, my sister is married and still living on Long Island, with two sons of her own who have never met their grandparents—not those who raised their mother, nor those who gave her away—though they knew my father Carmine during his last few years, stopping at his apartment across from Brentwood's St. Anne's Church, spreading their toys out on the floor or banging out noise on the piano, wandering outside to the grounds while Kim and I watched from the sidewalk, till Carmine hailed and joined us with his folding chair. Kim, on the whole, is well; a skin cancer survivor, she's self-conscious about the scar that

runs jaggedly up one arm, the result of surgery to address the risk of undetected disease. Even before her gentle Teamster husband lost his job (a longtime boyfriend of whom Elaine had vehemently disapproved), Kim worked part-time at a factory to help pay off the mortgage, a full-time mother most of the time, resolved to spend time with her kids, a blue-collar wife who faces parenthood with full determination.

For their part, Don and Elaine live not a half hour's drive away in exclusive St. James part of the year, and in St. Croix when winter threatens. Their two acknowledged sons, born as the sixties waned, graduated from Long Island's La Salle Military Academy, a boarding school that since their time has given up its mission, thrown open its doors to women, and gingerly stepped into the future, having supplied for Don and Elaine, after their years of trial and error, a form of child abandonment entirely respectable. Neither speaks with Kim nor offers support of any kind, having failed through the years to mend the griefs that joined their lives, or to refrain from criticizing a daughter raised as someone else, who too clearly shows the scars of all the losses she has suffered, whose friendship called for understanding that they'd failed to extend. For Don and Elaine, discretion—what they'd call *privacy*—was a way to escape the scandal that their fears exaggerated, a way to evade financial support for their own daughter and son during the years a growing business brought them unexpected wealth. For them, disclosure was a tactic meant to reassert their claim once Kim and I had reached our teens and the prospect of raising us had passed.

Sometimes I think of our high school days, the bus-frame rattling on bad roads, Kim and I in separate seats, at times glancing at each other: both burdened by our secret, we'd get off at different stops, our paths taking us different ways, to separate houses, separate lives, the flap-door squealing as it clattered, the school bus rumbling into dusk, bright afternoon, or falling snow.

To whom, back then, should we have looked?

Now only I survive to recall the family that was mine, the first parents I knew before the truth dispelled all trust; not to disclose what I remember is to let it disappear, like those long drives to the mall in a '57 Buick—Betty's pride, mint-green and white, in mint condition over a decade—where we'd glide past empty fields, a barn carved halfway into a hill, down Jericho Turnpike with its farm stands

of cucumbers and tomatos, past the greenhouse where we'd found the raspberry bushes for our garden, Flying A and Esso stations, Sinclair's big green dinosaur—these, too, I remember, logos diminishing behind us, a restaurant's tower and looming windmill telling us that we were near, other landmarks still to come, Walt Whitman's finches just ahead.

Years from then, we'd have our own finches, crowded into a cage, their aggression concentrated into a cramped, uncertain space, one Lavender Finch so cruelly dominant Betty felt compelled to drown it—"out of mercy to the others," she quite reasonably explained, filling a sandwich bag with water, born of an era in which neighbors raised and slaughtered their own game, her better judgement compromised by long hours of isolation, writing letters to Polish cousins or mission priests she'd never meet.

But I try not to think of that. Instead, I recall how I'd looked forward to the sight of Whitman's finches, especially the smallest who'd slip through the bars somehow and fly up wildly toward the ceiling only to fall again and end up clinging hopelessly to the cage. I'd glimpse, on the ride home, through darkness broken by cars and neon, the splendid Huntington Townhouse set far away uphill, spotlights on its stone façade, its chandeliers and central stairway, visible through glass, cascading in light and movement: a wedding reception or senior prom, some purpose past my understanding. Soon, we'd near the Thunderbird Diner and its electric vertical sign, mock totem pole with Old West lettering. What else hovered in the darkness?

Next to me, my mother drove, lipstick carefully applied, earrings audible when shaken, both hands steady on the wheel. What would we have talked about? I only remember what I saw: out across the hood, taillights glimmering ahead, the road a river that ran below us, seemingly endless, toward the east. *Press close, magnetic nourishing night!* Whatever else I might have known but pushed beyond all conscious thought, what more suspected or overheard but not yet fully understood, I knew that Betty was my mother as I knew, too, that we'd reach home, soon to join my father at dinner or to wait till he joined us.

And miles behind us, through the dark, Whitman's finches trilled and whistled—illusory, an error born of small misunderstandings—tumbling from the bars, singing in their cage.

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