

EXCERPTS FROM *BEFORE US LIKE A  
LAND OF DREAMS*

Karin Anderson

From "Homing"

*In which our protagonist, a crabby aging mother and professor, drives from Salt Lake City to her father's birthplace—Safford, Arizona—to visit an infant's gravesite. Year: 2016.*

Grandma Anderson said one of the best things about living in Safford was seeing a gaggle of Mexican kids making their way down the street, pulling a red wagon stacked full of homemade tamales, a nickel apiece. She'd step out and wave them over. So, once I calmed down, once I pulled off the diagonal strip of twenty-first-century traffic signals, franchises, and cheap motel chains, I thought to find a little takeout Mexican place. A few streets down I drove into a time warp. A gracious yellow-brick post office rose up, a clear landmark as I passed it on my right going south. And there was Main Street, nearly abandoned but preserved.

At the west end, a dignified city hall. But for the contemporary cars, my grandparents could have strolled onto the spot where I stood, engrossed in conversation, and walked the length before they realized something wasn't right. Suddenly they would notice how still the street had become, how many storefronts were empty or painted opaque or stacked with inconceivable objects. No billing on the movie marquee. They might wonder at the low roar of heavy traffic a few blocks north.

---

1. *Before Us Like a Land of Dreams* by Karin Anderson. Release date: May 14, 2019, Torrey House Press. For more information, see <https://www.torreyhouse.org/before-us-like-a-land-of-dreams>.

But then they'd see the café was open just like it always was, with its shotgun floor plan and counter seats suspended over blue and white tiles. They might be surprised that it now served only Mexican food but they'd order tamales, just like I did, and probably have them wrapped to go, as I requested, and retreat to a safe spot in the outskirt hills to consider the strangeness.

As I did. I had already reserved a little camping cabin at the state park a few miles south of town. I was grateful for my own forethought and in defiance of my grandparents I bought a bottle of wine at the Circle K on my way out of town. I parked at Cabin 5, Roadrunner, opening the car door to a thicket of bird calls. Ducks, grebes, mourning doves, blackbirds. Other voices I could not name. It was too dark now to see the creatures but the shoreline of tiny Roper Lake was right there, screened by a tangle of willows and reeds. I unloaded my baggage. The cabin was cute. A playhouse. The front section had a double bed. Behind a half-partition, two pine bunkbeds.

I couldn't help it: four little children. Irrational maternal reach. I don't expect that every woman is made to be a mother, but I was. One true thing. Small bodies tumbled past me, arguing as they chose their beds, settling in to arrange and elaborate and fall together into their private and compelling world. I hadn't heard from a single one of the grown versions in all this driving away, and I was glad because it meant they were each engrossed in their orbits. And so their small sudden return took me down.

I slept, or passed out, but at some point I walked back out to the car to fetch the yet-warm tamales, hoping they would help conjure ancestors rather than descendants. I carried the sack to the picnic table on the porch under the rising moon, relieved to be invisible to the quiet visitors from all their places. But I could not make myself eat. I left the wine unopened. I gathered everything and carried it across the dark lot to the trash bin. I walked to the lapping shore and stood in the dark. I stepped in a few feet, past my knees. Night birds called true to one another.

The next morning I took a walk around the lake, grateful for the new-knit tibia and fibula although they hurt. Another story but it did make me recall Ignatius. I loaded the car. I intended to spend the morning walking through town taking notes, all writerly. I thought I'd cleared my head from yesterday's drive. I went north back to Safford, further than I recalled—about ten miles--and I reacted by swinging left toward town at the first intersection. I'd turned too soon, but the town wasn't huge and this looked like a perimeter, so I went forward.

A half-mile more and I was passing gravestones to my right, and then I saw the arched entry sign. Safford Union Cemetery. I yanked the wheel, squealing the tires. Crosses and Madonnas and glitter-foil buntings to my right and left told me I was not in the Mormon section. I pulled up to a tall community cross and veteran's memorial, queerly lavender. I parked and rolled the windows down. Birdsong struck like a chorale.

I stepped out and spun around to assess. The cemetery extended for several acres but it was easy to see I was in the old section. Tall cypress trees, filled-up plots. No grass in this desert bedding. Bouquets—some bright fabric or plastic, some real and wilted—and tinsel wreaths pulsed against the dull mineral background. Most of the plots had been walled into family rectangles. A weedy succulent provided random fist-sized blobs of green in the places nobody walked. Graves with Spanish names were colorful and highly attended. Saints and Madonnas, statues of Jesus. Buntings and streamers.

I surveyed the acreage to spot the uniform nonconformity, a section of headstones, flat and distinctively crossless, to locate my dead affiliates. I walked over to browse. Mormon epitaphs, line-carved images of hornblowing Moroni and spired temples. Still, there were many markers. Each family enclosure looked to be holding ten or twelve graves.

Diagonal from where I stood, just a few frames up, a barren plot. A small black headstone all alone. No flowers or bunting. No wall. Placed

to keep cars at bay, a three-foot spigot pipe rose just behind. I walked over. There it was.

LORRAINE  
 Daughter of  
 Clyde LeRoy and Constance Porter  
 ANDERSON  
 Oct. 27, 1940  
 Oct. 28, 1940

I couldn't think what to do about it.

My single emotion was anger at myself for making footprints on top of the baby. In a climate like this the disturbance could last a decade. I backed up, sat on the low wall of the next plot over, and worked myself up about the footprints. I tried to distract myself by analyzing the site. One six-pound infant in a box that was, intact, maybe twenty-five inches long, fifteen wide. The rest of the plot was pristine. But for my footprints it was clear no boots had trampled this spot for decades.

I believed I had committed an ugly trespass. I did not care to be a family representative. Most of my relatives would concur I'm the wrong person.

I took a few phone shots and sent them to my sisters. My pulse leaped in gratitude as they each answered.

I gazed up at big Mount Graham.

I've been clear with my children: cremate. Let fly the ashes. Do not enclose any remnant of me. No urn, no vials, no plaster or cement or dirt. Scatter. I don't believe in souls, and even if I did I don't see why they would hang around their own suffocated remains. I recalled the coroner's words to my grandmother: probably nothing to move. Dust. At this moment I hoped it was so, but then again I knew there had to be some forensic trace. Safford receives nine inches of rainfall per year. Perfect dry air, unsaturated ground. The southwest desert yields many artifacts, including well-preserved human remains, centuries old.

The first house I bought after my marriage collapsed like a sinkhole was a nondescript brick rambler with a glorious old-time yard. But the interior could have been a Museum of 1974, which can get to you if you didn't love 1974. The first month, the pipes under the kitchen sink ruptured. When the plumber came to tear it all out, the debris beneath the cabinets was archaeological. Mostly it was sawdust, with nails and cigarette butts stirred in. But laid out as if for admiration was a skeleton of a mouse, intact to the last vertebral tip of its tail, fitted like an intricate magical toy.

I should have been repulsed but I had to keep myself from caressing it, and now among all of that unsettled recollection I was picturing the exquisite bones of a human infant prone and pristine under my boot prints, the skin of her strange webbed fingers fallen away, the haunting caul that covered her face and neck dissolved, the deep structure of mystery revealed yet unresolved.

I sat longer and recalled a cold morning when I was fourteen and our parents were away on a weeklong trip. My brother and I walked in the morning chill, down that back line to Grandma's barn to feed the animals Dad was sheltering there until he returned. We knew the ewes were pregnant but they weren't yet due. Even before we cleared Grandma's stile we could see something was wrong. The horses stood away at the far end of the pasture. The sheep huddled against the barn, one a bloody mess.

We drew closer. A dead lamb lay in the open field, enclosed in its now-frozen sac. Another, a twin that may have taken a few steps before freezing, lay a few feet beyond.

A breath or two, a falter, all done.

This kind of thinking is why the many descendants of the parents marked on this baby's headstone would nominate anyone but me to trip to such a solemn site and eulogize. I tried to quit it. I worked to clear my mind and keep the space pure. I stood up to atone for the footprints. I knelt on my right knee and held the screwed-and-bolted left one out

at an awkward angle. I smoothed the footprints with my palm, revealing soft fine dirt beneath the gravel. I made a circle. I eased up on the strength of my good knee and walked the larger plot to gather stones the size of peach pits.

The desert looks colorless until you pick it up: juniper green, terra cotta, cherts in black and blue, mustard yellow. I carried them back to the circle, careful about new footprints, and lined them into a spiral—“Spiral Jetty,” my youngest would have called it, if she were here and still small; I recalled a good day with her, years ago, at the north shore of the Great Salt Lake. Now I stepped sideways to encircle the mini-jetty in footprint rays, hoping that at some point those nine annual inches of rain would neutralize them, and camouflage the stones. All of this business cleared my mind. I forgot myself and time dropped when I stood up. The air congealed above the little piece of ground that I knew for a fact my own people had stood upon, late October 1940.

I step in.

People mill about, printing this dirt with hundreds of tracks. The Mormon ward has come out, and the Catholic family that makes tamales as well. I am grateful for the crowd—not for my grandparents’ sake, as they’re in no social mood, but for my own. The bodies allow me to acclimate.

Women huddle in little knots, all wearing hats, many holding babies. I wear jeans and boots, and because a Safford October feels a lot like a Safford February, a sleeveless cowboy shirt. My hair is straight and a little dirty. I make an effort to pull it into a civilized ponytail.

Children run about, shouting and tagging. Some settle a moment when rebuked but then light out again. Some are smart enough to stay out of reach. Men stand gazing outward, holding this hard domestic moment at arm’s length.

Everyone here is emerging from a Depression. I compose a list of wonders and terrors these people have not yet seen. How much they do not know. I feel a superior tingle of prescience like air before lightning, but when it strikes up there on the high peaks, purpling the sunlight, I comprehend it's the flicker of my own unreadable future. Theirs has come and gone. I can see that, too, a black roiling mist fitting the harsh ridges.

I do not have a guide and now I realize why I should.

The people I hope to address are behind me but I am not prepared to turn.

I walk erratic to the north edge of October 1940. On the cinder road my boots sound like coins in a shaken box. The cemetery rests on a swell above the city. It's easy to trace every spot the channeled water touches below: neat family gardens, cypress rows, bright floral patches. Little houses beam up in stucco blue and green, butter yellow, tangerine.

I strain my vision northward over valley and range. I miss my children so sharply my chest feels scraped out. At this moment they feel more lost to me than the spectral noisemakers frolicking among the headstones.

They are not here. I am not anywhere.

Time cracks, bottomless and black and I drop down. Warm snow, powdered and deep. Salt water scouring my fine mouse bones.

I reach for the story. I turn to face the milling mourners. The extras are collecting their children and clearing out. I walk in a deliberate, counting pace, breathing to it, willing the last of them to drive off in their movie cars. The remainers are clearer now, figures I can sharpen the same way I focus a camera lens. Clyde and Connie stand together at the fresh-dug hole. It's larger than it needs to be to hold the tiny box, because first it had to contain a man with a shovel.

I halt to adjust the image, dialing back my grandmother's age. Her hair darkens. It's longer and pulled back in a careless roll. She came with a hat but it's on the ground. She moves more quickly than I remember.

Her shoulders are strong and well-defined but I recall she has recently delivered an infant, so her patterned dress smocks over a muddled waistline. Stockings black, sturdy shoes. I feel a surge of plain love at the distinctive way she nods her head, and how she stands, feet too far apart. She's the same height as her husband, maybe taller.

I am not ready to converse so I size up the man beside her. I know he is bald under his sharp felt hat, has been since his early twenties. He's built small and tight. I see his masculine deftness now, because my younger son is framed in likeness. My son permits me to invent a man I never knew. Deep-voiced, soft-spoken. Moves like lake water. He's made of dense bone and lean muscle, stands in relaxed attention even here at the burial of his baby daughter.

He's a compelling man, even with that fury -- maybe, at this point of my life, because of it. Still I cannot bring myself to speak. I see my father, Tommy, and his brother Chris over there among the trees, tired of this solemn not-Sunday afternoon. Tommy is five since July. Chris is three, towheaded. He looks like a storybook angel but I know he's no such thing. Where's Lynne? She's a toddler, barely a year older than this baby about to be buried. I place her in her father's arms to test him. She squirms backward and down, the way small walkers do when they want to explore. He sets her down, but gently. She steps and tumbles, cries, then discovers the dirt and colored stones.

I walk nearer, looking for a six-year-old. I know I can talk to her. This one will play life hard and she'll be tough enough to enjoy it. Right now she's a skinny line experimenting with elegance. She's missing front teeth. She gives me a precocious side-eye.

I say, "Hello, Mary."

She scowls, intrigued.

"You aren't supposed to be here," she says.

I spent a warm evening at Mary's place a few years ago. Good wine and strong conversation. Sometimes I think Mary is crazy. Sometimes I don't. Her daughters probably felt the same about my father. I haven't



seen Mary in a long time; she tends to approach and retreat. Maybe this time, right here, will be the last.

“How do you know I don’t belong?”

“You’re wearing the wrong clothes.”

I put my finger to my lips. “Don’t tell anyone. No one else will notice.”

She’s pleased to keep a secret. I point toward Tommy banging along the fence line. “Is that your brother?”

“Yes. Both. Stupid boys.” She’ll be surprised by how long she outlives her almost-twin. “Who are you?”

Another secret. “I’m a time traveler.”

“You are not.”

“Okay. I came down from Utah. I’m here to see your mother. She’s very sad today.”

“I know. The baby died.” Mary is sympathetic but preoccupied with her own fierce thoughts. I want to prophesy while I have the advantage but I’m not here to dispense revelation.

I make a plan. One question per character. “Mary. What do you love?”

She thinks this over. “Nothing. I hate everything.”

I veer from the plan. “Okay then. Who do you love?”

“I hate everyone.”

That makes me laugh. “No you don’t. You’ll see.”

“No, *you’ll see*,” she says and fades off as I walk toward her parents. Clyde sees me coming, nods as if he knows me but then double-takes.

I’m committed now. “I’m sorry for your loss, Brother Anderson.”

He tilts his head. “Do I know you?”

“Parts of me.”

“Where do you come from? You’re made like my mother and sister.”

“That’s no revelation. My father told me that.”

He is sifting evidence. This is the sort of day he might expect a visitation but I’m not the kind he’s been watching for.

“Let me shake your hand,” he says.

I know what he's up to. He intends to discern whether I am a good or a bad angel. I'm not certain I'm corporeal so I keep my hands to my sides. This means that I am a good messenger made of spirit; I will not offer a hand to deceive him. He waits me out. I slide my hands into my back pockets.

He appears to be satisfied, and he asks, "Do you know what happens to us?"

I know he will make his wife pregnant five more times. I know he'll soon move his family north to Salt Lake City. I know his definition of paternal discipline will escalate into what the law in my time would frankly call abuse. I know he'll buy a dairy farm in Alpine to try working his oldest son into compliance.

I know he'll die in a fiery explosion thirty thousand feet above the Mediterranean Sea, leaving one son at least to assemble himself in a house of broken mirrors.

He will have sixty grandchildren. He will not live to know a single one of us.

"Only a little," I say.

"What have you come to tell me?"

I haven't come to tell him anything. But here he is. Here he always is.

*I've come to tell you to fuck off, you disgusting fuck.*

*I've come to tell you a whole family has filled in your absence with wishes, with justifications and incriminations, emulations, with a better ending to your story.*

*I've come to diminish you so I can get on with more relevant outrages.*

*I've come to tell you I understand it's plain infuriating to be alive and the gorgeous parts are only exacerbations.*

I don't have it in me. These people are dead. He got what he had coming and probably more. Blown into black sky, lost in strange waters. Sent home rotting in a sealed box.

And so I fade.

“I came all this way, but the more I think about it, the less I have to tell you. The actual road is not like a line on the map. I just drove over that Coronado Trail. You’ve got to know what I mean.”

He has my father’s laugh. I like him. I fear him in all of us.

My grandfather and I glance together toward the little boys throwing rocks at a post. Excellent aim. I pick up a smooth red stone and throw it clean in Tommy’s direction.

Clyde says, “Oh. I see.”

“Yes, but this is all you’ll ever see of me. And I have a question for you.”

He doesn’t want to hear it but he attends.

“Are you better for them dead than you were alive?”

“How long do I have?”

“About a decade.”

He is truly stunned. He takes stock of his little children. He reaches a hand toward his wife. He tilts his head, and straightens it to look me in the eye. I hold my bluff. I’ve played him with his own formula and so he squares himself to answer.

“You know, my father never relented at all. I’ve loved my own children better far than I received. I might have left him behind. I might have become better.”

“Do you think you would have?”

“How can I know? I believe there’s something of my mother in me.”

He looks to the mountain. “A story of a man is not the man himself. My children will not wish me dead, no matter how much they wish me to be a better father.”

I don’t know. What children do not sometimes wish their parents dead?

Now he looks toward the sky, and then across the acres of the deceased.

I step a pattern of rays with my twenty-first-century boots. “How much is unforgivable? I saw you—the ghost of you—in my father’s worst moments. I don’t know how to forgive him. I don’t know that I should.”

He glints at me strangely, lifting his hand as if to touch mine. I don't know whether it's tenderness or an attempt to confirm his suspicion that somehow I am cheating the messenger formula. This man is not stupid. I jerk my hand away.

"How long are we responsible?" he asks. "When do we leave them to answer for their own good and evil?"

He flexes his jaw the way my father used to. He gestures downward, as if sweeping something behind him. "I've got to round up those boys. Please excuse me now."

My grandmother stands.

"We'd best go," she says. "They'll be coming in to close it up."

She knows the men with the shovels await.

I make them vanish another moment, and she relaxes. She meets my eyes.

"I'm sorry. I don't recall whether we've been introduced."

"Not yet and forever ago."

I conjure a bench and she consents to sit.

"I'm sorry about the baby."

"Well, I don't know what to say about that."

"Why aren't your parents here? Where's your family?"

"It's a long way. We had to take care of this. Some of them are driving down next week."

She thinks. She comes to a certain clarity and reaches to touch my knee. "How did *you* get here so soon?"

"Down the Devil's Highway. Don't ask to shake my hand."

She laughs at my joke, very gratifying, and she bobs her head as if to clear her mind. Neither of us can quite make out what time this is.

"How do things go with your husband?" she asks. "I only get to see the first part."

"Not so well. But the kids—wish you could know them. They'd worry you though. And I'll still do everything I'm gonna do."

She looks toward hers. Mary sashays in our direction. Clyde is bringing in the boys but allows them to meander. Baby Lynne is tasting rocks. The tiny coffin hovers over the abyss.

“Why aren’t you acquainted with my husband?”

“He’s only a story.”

“No. Absolutely he is not.”

“I watched you all those years, alone. I loved your house. You had people and solitude both. I must have come to believe that this is the way mothers go. A house empty and full at once. Books. A garden and trees, hours to be in them. But now I’m afraid.”

“You ought to be. Did you imagine this would be easier than the seasons before it?”

She lifts her hand at the wrist, pointing a sideways finger into arid blue. “You spend your life trying to keep everything gathered. But when you succeed it’s all about scatter. Children grow up and get on. As they must.”

She gestures toward the grave. “You can’t hold what must go.”

She bumps her shoulder against mine. “And you can’t let go what you must hold. This is a sin. The kind you still believe in.”

We face west, tracing out the green and gray mountain, falling to silhouette. I wish to sit a little longer.

“Mount Graham looks a lot like Lone Peak. In Alpine. I mean in its general mood and conformation.”

“We thought so, too.”

The husband and children were very near.

“Grandma. Should I go home?”

“The day death comes for you, your life will seem briefer than this one in the box. No need to hurry it.”

She stood in her time, urgent to greet the approaching man.

I lingered to catch a glimpse of Tommy, who gave me frank little-boy appraisal. A quick grin. He put his hand in his father’s and waved me off.

Clyde: “Can you be so casually lost to them?”

Constance: "Go home."

I stood, sifting, and she said, "You can recite these words as well as I can. I will read them to you some time: 'There is a concatenation of events in this best of all possible worlds.'"

I read them again years later in a college French class. Concatenation.

*Cela est bien dit, mais il faut cultiver notre jardin.*

Something sat hard in my gut.

Mourning doves provided a two-note flute song as I walked back to my car. I kept driving south. I lost my bearings entirely. I could see Mexico, right there to my left, and I bounced along the ludicrous boundary wishing I could punch through to Patagonia.

At some point in the muddle I must have reached a turning point. A reluctant return.



### From "Devil's Gate"

*Crabby mother/professor listens to characters speak from within a fragmented ancestral story. The younger brother of a family of older sisters has shocked his Mormon family by planning to marry a fortuneteller. Settings: Safford, Arizona and Ashton, Idaho, early 1940s; Orem, Utah, early 1970s; Smithfield, Utah, late 1800s.*

Connie Porter Anderson: First lines of Erma's letter were, "Well, that wasn't the end of it after all. Steve's gotten that Ruth Loveday pregnant. We're going to have a new sister-in-law, and by golly, she's a keeper. She grew up on the train tracks. No family to speak of, although Steve says her daddy's coming in from the far edge of the known world sometime to bless the happy couple. And here's the best part: the girl's a fortuneteller. We have a Gypsy in the family!"

I didn't know what to make of that. I knew she wasn't a real Gypsy but everything that word brought to mind was disturbing to me—more

so than I could account for. That night I told Clyde that Steve was getting married. I even told him the girl was pregnant and that she was one of those Pocatello types, but I didn't show him Erma's letter or mention the voodoo. I'm not sure why it was so hard to say it. Clyde would have made a joke and put it out of his mind. Even so I didn't want the words to come out of my mouth.

I feared if I said, "She reads palms for extra cash," or, "Steve says Ruth can read your life in a deck of cards," I'd make something come true that I was not prepared to contend with. I didn't believe in any of that Maid of Mystery tripe. And yet again, I knew there were supernatural presences, both good and evil, all around us. I knew that servants of Satan watch for any opportunity to enter our minds and convince us that their logic is our own. The devil's helpers are eager to answer when we call. Using the wrong authority to address spirits in the world beyond, even if they might seem benign, is asking for trouble. Steve of all people didn't need any of that. Furthermore, it was his responsibility as husband to control the spiritual communications within his household. The Melchizedek Priesthood is a man's sacred inheritance to be used as a blessing to his wife and children. To invert that sacred family order could bring down disaster.

I lay uneasy all night fearing that even Erma's letter had attracted the attentions of evil spirits. In the morning I carried it out to the bin and burned it.

Ruth Loveday Porter: In September I carefully folded and packed the dress my girlfriends and I had chosen for the grand occasion. It wasn't white of course. It wasn't even a wedding gown but it was pretty and demure. I looked respectable in it. Sky blue with a neat collar. Buttoned down the front but draping above the waist so I could wear it without calling attention to my widening girth.

I got some sleep after work but set my alarm clock for midnight. Steve waited outside. He took the valise from my hand and we walked on up to the depot, rode quiet, and left the sleeping tourists in the cars as we stepped onto the Ashton platform in dead dark. The train pulled away. Crickets chirped unnaturally loud. The grain and spud elevators stood like disapproving titans above us. There was not a human being in sight. Even the office was locked. A single-bulb lamp on a post emitted the only light but starlight.

We stood. The weather was turning and the slight wind made me shiver. Steve stood behind me to press his warmth against my back, bringing his hands around to shield the incomprehensible thing inside me.

“Don’t worry, Ruth. It’s all going to be grand. You and me and little Bambino. We’ll take on the world. You’ll see.”

The sound of a lone vehicle on the highway filled in for conversation.

“Hope that’s them,” I said. We left the suitcases and walked out a way to see around the silos. We watched the headlights approach for a mile. The vehicle slowed at the Main Street turn, signaling right and the beams came around.

“It’s not the Buick,” Steve said, and in a minute we could make it out as a pickup truck. Suddenly we were all illuminated, stars of our own show. The horn made a little toot and a woman’s hand waved from the shotgun side.

“It’s Gene and Erma,” Steve said, but he was wrong. The truck stopped and Erma spilled out from the driver’s seat. Another woman hopped down from the other door.

“Steve!” they both cried and Steve said, “Oh! It’s Erma and Gladys! What in the world are you two doing up this time of night?”

“What do you think?” said Gladys. “We’re coming for the prodigal brother, and—” she took a gander at me, “—and the prodigal’s fiancée! Hello, Ruth. I’m Gladys.”

“Pleased to meet you.”



Gladys was the prettiest of them all. Long curly hair. Wide shoulders and a slender waist. Her eyes were animated even in this darkness.

“I’ll bet you’re very tired,” Erma said. “Pile in. Let’s get you to a nice warm bed.”

“Who sits on Steve’s lap? Me, or Ruth?”

“You can ride in the back, big boy,” Erma said. “In you go, Ruth. You can sit between Gladys and me. We won’t bite.”

“Didn’t you bring any luggage?”

“On the platform.”

“Here we go.”

Steve leaped out to grab the valises as Erma pulled up to the depot. He tossed them in among the bales of straw, settled himself against the cab, and rapped on the window. Erma eased into gear and let out the clutch. I expected her to blaze out of the lot in the same fashion as her father, but she was decisive and deliberate.

“I’ve never rode in a car with a woman driver,” I said.

“Didn’t anyone ever teach you to drive?”

“We never had a car.”

Steve’s sisters considered this.

“It’s probably a necessity of farming,” Gladys offered. “Girls learn to drive tractors just like the boys around here. And somebody’s got to run errands into town, isn’t that right? Most of our mothers don’t drive but girls our age do. Mostly.”

“Connie’s never quite gotten the knack of it,” Erma said, and they both giggled.

Erma slowed to turn toward Ora and the Porter farm. The blinker sounded urgent in this early dark hour. “Ruth,” she said. “Do you mind—I mean, for our parents’ sake, we’ve arranged to have you stay at Gene’s folks’ place. They’re awfully nice people. It’s a lovely room, upstairs and quiet. You can sleep late if you like and get all refreshed and ready for the festivities.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “I don’t want to trouble anyone. Not your parents or nobody else.”

Neither one of them answered until we pulled up to the house. As the truck came to a stop Gladys said, “It’s all going to be all right, you know. We just have to get through tomorrow. Or today—whatever it is this time of night.”

I glanced toward the darkened house. The porch light shone harsh in the velvet air. Steve jumped out. He came around to Gladys’s door and opened it.

“Where’s everyone sleeping?”

“I’m sleeping here,” said Gladys. “And you are, too.”

“Glade come with you?”

“No, he’s haying.”

Steve looked dubious about that but he said, “Can Ruth sleep with you, then?”

“She’s coming with me,” Erma said. “Gene’s folks have a nice room all ready.”

Steve flexed his jaw. He looked about to argue or go in and confront his parents, but instead he said, “Well, that sure is nice of everyone to have it all arranged like that. Ruth, I’ll come find you in the morning.”

“No you won’t,” Erma said. “I’ll take care of her. Groom can’t see the bride until the wedding. It’s bad luck.”

“Oh, for hell’s sake, Erma. Ruth and I have seen pretty much every inch of each other before the wedding. Everybody knows this is a shotgun affair. Now all of a sudden you’re a bunch of busybodies.”

I know I blushed, but it was dark. Gladys and Erma made a little disapproving gasp together. I didn’t have the least idea what to say so I kept quiet, but Erma said, “Steven, Ruth is about to become your wife. She’s going to be the mother of your children. Show some respect for her wedding day.”

Steve made an odd sound at the back of his throat.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. Good night, Ruth. I love you, honey. I’ll see you tomorrow at the courthouse. You’ll be the prettiest girl in town.”

He turned and walked under the leafy silhouette of the gateway trelis. Gladys followed him into the house and the door closed. Although we strained to emanate camaraderie, Erma drove back to the Hess place in silence. She walked me into the house and settled me in the room. It was clean and quiet. I locked the door and sank in under the quilts but it took a long time to fall asleep.

I awoke to a light knocking and the sisters’ voices, saying my name.

I opened the door and they came in like water.

“What time is it?”

“Nearly noon.”

They stood back to assess. I imagine I didn’t look too attractive.

“Let’s get you dolled up,” one of them said and they went to work.

I knew that a family lived here but either they were very quiet or they had gone out. The house seemed empty but for small clanks and quiet steps wherever the kitchen was. Erma escorted me to the bath, drew warm water, handed me clean towels. I would have enjoyed the luxury but everything was awkward. My skin tingled with anxiety. I felt like a rank intruder.

I came out of the water and made a long consideration of my stomach, swelling but not so much as to transform me. I had been grateful to feel no real sickness, which had probably helped me forget for hours at a time that I was pregnant. Now I thought about the tiny human inside of me. I pictured a white larva, a featureless wasp, which is silly to me now so many years beyond. Ronnie was bright and sensitive, no sting in him at all.

I raised both my palms to eye level. The children lines suggested many offspring. Six or maybe seven. I could hardly picture that. But only two were distinct. Flames shot through my line of sight. Behind them a

dark wall. Beyond that—something else. I forced a wave of hard refusal backward through my skull. *Best not to try to read your own destiny*, the woman in Bill had told me, conveyed through the closeness of our minds. *Your gift is for others*.

Not that they'll appreciate it, I came to understand. Everyone wants a telling. But nobody hardly ever is willing to accept what's told. We spend our lives arguing with our own tales. Doesn't matter if we're reading them forward or back.

Stella Jeppson Porter: Now I recognize the little girl. I believe it's Gladys. She looks strange to me but it's hot in this car and my mind is unsettled. How could I not recognize my own daughter?

"Your hair's gone straight in this heat."

She looks at me, quizzical.

"I almost didn't recognize you," I prompt and she says, peevish, "It's all right."

"Your father couldn't bring himself to come. He'll compose himself for the get-together."

The child bites her lip.

"Fred has to consider his standing in the bishopric. How can he counsel other people about their children when his own are disobedient?"

Gladys here seems too young for this kind of talk. I nudge the parts toward congruence.

"Are you ready to go in?"

I had intended to see my last child sealed in the temple to a faithful wife. But here he is with that Gypsy. "I don't understand. I had a dream. It wasn't supposed to turn out this way."

The dream returns when I call it to mind, bright and identical. I have come home to Cache Valley to see my mother. I stand at the fold where the valley floor bends abruptly into mountainside. I can't tell whether it's winter or summer. The landscape is blue and white like

December yet the grain rises up from the snow, a warm butter hue. I admire a herd of elk, regal and enclosed in their animal perceptions. A Shoshone encampment curls thin smoke in the distance but they neither frighten nor take notice of me.

I am home to my mother, and I am child again yet wife and mother and because I am a child, my father may be here. Immediately it is so. He's been here all along, just above me on the slope, looking in the same direction and directing my thoughts. He is tall and bearded just as I recall him. He has been guiding me and he says, "Look!"

I don't need to turn my head to see where he points. My sight follows his south through peak and pass toward Devil's Gate. The route is obscured but I know it well. I follow my father's spiritual sight. Together we watch a young man stride the mountain pathway. Swift and sure he comes our way, gaining distance like a traveling angel. He revels in the gliding motion of this journey.

At the high mouth of our valley he stops, sensing my beloved papa and me dead and living, vital and decaying, here and already gone. The young man smiles, luminous, and hails us with a call and waving arm.

My father cries out, "Forty-one. Too soon! I was only forty-one!"

Instantly the young man is with us, transported across the valley at celestial speed.

I explain. "It was appendicitis. No one understood until it was too late. The doctor went home to sleep. This man is my father."

My father says, "This man is your son."

"But I already have a son."

"Surely that's not all."

I awaken. I awaken my husband. Fred sits up abrupt and very surprised.

He answers, believing.

He comes.

Steven Porter: We stood in the foyer. Just Ruth and me. Ruth in her blue dress. My sisters had done her hair up pretty but it made her unlike herself. Besides, she looked tired and a little haggard which made me feel guilty for putting a child in her. Women live completely different lives from men. Coupling brings us together and then holds us forever apart.

Old Mrs. Hertig tap-tap-tapped on her typewriter, pretending that the room wasn't a pressure chamber. The telephone rang. Mrs. Hertig picked it up, chipper. "City hall."

The voice on the other end said something to make the old lady glance in our direction, then quickly take up a pencil, feigning insignificance.

"Well, alrighty...of course. I understand. I'll tell Judge Harrigfeld. No, he's got nothing to press him. He'll be here... Okay, we'll be watching for you." She carefully put down the earpiece. Mrs. Hertig composed herself, enjoyed a smug moment, and then spoke to us.

"Steve, honey, that was Erma. She says they're on their way. Leaving the house in just a few minutes. Seems there's been a delay."

I took Ruth's hand and led her to the foyer bench. I knew the old biddy was pleased. I knew that everyone in the whole town was picturing, one angle or another, Steven Porter and some Pocatello chippy out in the long summer grass, sowing wild seed. Taking what solely belongs to the grim-lipped Puritans in their restricted rooms.

We listened to the ticking regulator on the wall. Mrs. Hertig went tap, tap, tap. Tap.

We heard tires on gravel. I left Ruth on the bench and stepped out to see Erma and Gladys. In Eugene's truck. They got out lipless and picked their way toward me in their fancy shoes. Neither acknowledged me until they were up the steps. Gladys pushed stray hair back into her hat. Erma dropped her bottom lip and glared at me as if to quell my question before I could ask it, and then she answered it anyway.

"Daddy and Mother aren't coming."

Several cars went by before I said, "What's that again?"

"Steve, let's just get this done and make the best of it."

“My own parents won’t come to my wedding?”

“Steve, please. You know it’s too much for them.”

“What’s this about respect for my wife on her wedding day?”

Gladys said, “Well, that’s why we’re here. I know it’s dismal but we came, didn’t we?”

We all stood wooden, restraining our sharp Porter tongues. I held my breath while I walked out to the asphalt shoulder. I stared out toward the Tetons, struggling to control my mind. I forced back the burning edges. I knew Ruth was sitting pale and still on the foyer bench. My sisters hovered on the porch. Eventually Erma pushed herself in through the doorway to greet her impending sister-in-law.

I walked back toward the building. My head was filled with helium. Gladys said, “Oh. My goodness! Look!”

The Buick, coming our way. Everyone on Main Street turned to watch its grinding progress, painfully slow, over-powered in second gear.

If we all wanted to avoid a public spectacle, this was no dice.

“Is that Mother?”

“Mmm-hmm, I believe so.”

Our mother cranked the wheel to her left, crossing the lane and mostly navigating the driveway. The front wheel caught the curb but she sustained speed enough to clear it, crushing a lovely patch of city hall marigolds. The Roadmaster kept right on coming at us and then killed all of a sudden, rocking on its chassis. Mother wasn’t exactly in a parking stall, but she was definitely in the lot.

We stood dumbfounded.

Erma pushed open the door. Ruth and Mrs. Hertig peered over her shoulders. Citizens leered from the sidewalks and storefronts. None of us said a word as Mother, still inside the car, adjusted her hat and gloves. She checked her hair in the rearview mirror and shot the city hall an apprehensive glare.

“Go, Steve,” Erma said, and I snapped out of the community trance. I loped down to open the door, bent downward and craned my neck to face her as I offered my arm.

“Mother! What in the world are you doing?”

She took my arm and stepped out, doggedly sedate.

“What do you think? I’m attending my son’s wedding.”

I walked her up the stairs, meeting my sisters’ rounded eyes with my own and then Ruth’s tight-jawed wonderment. Mrs. Hertig exclaimed over Mother, and now all of us as if we were showing up for a jovial church dinner. She hurried down the hallway to find old Harrigfeld. He came out in his white shirt and tie, pushing his arms through his suit coat, caressing it downward with his palms as if it were going to lengthen.

“Fred on his way?” the JP asked, and when nobody answered he swallowed a couple of times, throat protruding. “Well, alrighty then, should we get this affair ironed out?”

Harrigfeld took stock of my mother and sisters, then turned to examine me as if I were a used car. I’m sure we were both recalling an earlier appearance I’d made back when I was fifteen, a swimming-while-truant incident. I may have been inebriated. Possibly buck naked. Back then I mean. But Harrigfeld judged me now as salvageable I suppose, because he said, “Steve? You ready? How about you introduce me to the little lady, here?”

Ruth blushed. She held her hand out, limp. I said, “This is Miss Ruth Loveday, my fiancée. About to be my wife.”

Harrigfeld gave her a quick distasteful appraisal.

“Who’s doing the witnessing today?”

Gladys stepped forward. “I am.”

Mrs. Hertig said, “Well, we need two witnesses as per the law of the State of Idaho.”

I looked toward Erma but it was my mother who said, “And so am I.”



The man made short work of us and we were married. Gladys signed her name all pretty on the certificate. Mother's hand shook as she took the pen, but she wrote out her whole name in old-time Spencerian hand: Stella Marie Jeppson Porter. She gained resolve as she went, finishing with a flourish and a haughty frown for Harrigfeld. Once he'd finished the dirty work the man got jovial and confidential, sending us out the door with, "You understand of course, real marriage is only in the eyes of the Lord under heavenly authority. Not these mere legal pretensions. I look forward to seeing the two of you in the temple in a year or so. Miss Ruth, I'll be the first to congratulate you."

"Mrs.," said my wife. "Mrs. Steven J. Porter, if you please."

I took her hand. Erma seated herself in the truck and Gladys put herself behind the wheel of the Buick. I set Mother in on the other side. Ruth and I stepped into our borrowed coupe and we all drove home in caravan.

My noble father, probably exhausted by sole care of Mae for the last two hours, opened the front door for her the minute we pulled in. She tumbled out with her usual sideways gait. "Stevie Weevie! Steeevie!"

But she stopped at the trellis when she saw Ruth. Mae threw her arms high, waving them like seaweed. "Here comes the bride! Here comes the bride! The bride is here! Did you get married Stevie? Is Ruth your wife now?"

"Yes, of course she is! Say hello to your new sister-in-law," I suggested extra loud so my father would hear. I looked toward the house. The doorway was open but empty. My father had fled to the barn.

~

### From "Tooele Valley Threnody"

*Untangling a knot in the family record for my mother, I realized that twin sisters had married brothers in a poignant sequence of tragedy and salvage. It went like this: Millicent Lindenberger married Silas Sprague in Olive Green, Ohio, 1818. She died within six months. Her twin sister, Barbara, married Silas a few years later; he was killed by lightning on the day their first child was born. The younger Sprague brother, Festus, married Barbara when his brother's child—a daughter, Rosamond—was about four years old. Festus and Barbara had several more children, joined the Mormon faith, but did not migrate west until both were well into their fifties.*

Millicent: When I try to rise it is from beneath, or behind, the frigid hold of fever. Secret ice rising from the black swamp draining. The steaming summer green.

Even so I am filtered through the waning bones of Barbara Ann, who was my own body and not. Our distanced deaths finally only one, as was our birth. In Barbara my image extending, flesh, womb, muscle, bone, our long brown hair graying on her aging head, her long years depleting our youthful height.

I was the prettier one. Folks remarked how perfectly we were twinned, but in truth and to our separate grief, the men who courted us began with her. Stronger features, or a stronger soul behind them. I was bashful. She attracted them first, but then the young bachelors turned to me, soothing their impetuous inclinations. Something about my sister—her frank replies, her gaze forthright like a man's—made even Silas fearful, and so the shift, a turn of eye and heart to softer me.

I married Silas Sprague on the Ohio frontier in the same season we arrived to join his family, who were also ours. I was almost eighteen and he twenty-four. Barbara stood as maid, never allowing an emotion.

I would speak something for Silas but as wife and husband we were too brief. I was in a state of becoming, too new to know myself. In Ohio country in 1818, a young woman might die by bear or cougar or wild hog. She could be taken by miscarriage, heavy weather, even Indian

attack, although by now this was old fear more than likelihood. Vapors rose up from the ancient swamps as the men dug drainage. Cold fever stalked the settlements, and although Olive Green was set high and known for healthy air, still the malady could find its way. It courted those of courting age, stalked young parents in their prime, left the little ones and old folks bereft. It seized us in summertime, set us to melancholy and emanations of horror. Cold fever blued the skin, seeped inward to the vitals, freezing us in the midsummer heat.

Barbara: I mourned the loss of my sister twice and in quick succession, the second time so awful that recalling the wedding became a source of comfort. Silas vanished into the uncleared groves and worked himself to insensibility. Our mother descended into a long twilight of half-remembrance, a middle place between living and living dissolution. In Mama's mind, Millicent had never disappeared because the copy stood before her daily. She called me Barbara Ann, or "Melisaint," or even the names of her four sisters, dead one by one in Providence, each by fifteen. To my mother until she died, I was the bodily sign of never-occurred. Never-twisted, never-frail, never-grimaced, never phantasmic.

Silas swore he was marrying me, not some resurrected sister, on our wedding day. Our families had been commingling for so many generations it was inevitable. The family temperaments were compatible, a web of support and relation. Yet I had been taken for so many others, and I had recalled so often that Silas had chosen my sister first, that I made my vow in a disposition something like resigned, something like hopeful. Silas looked older than he was but it became him, and my mother murmured, "Praise the Father hallelujah." Christopher slapped him heartily on the back, and my sweet cousin Festus, now brother-in-law, kissed my cheek in congratulation. My sister Mary and her fat husband Pompey Mason, notorious for never confessing Christ, hosted the celebration and by the late night it truly was an occasion of joy and restoration.

By May I was heavy and due to deliver. Rhoda and my sisters sat with me while Mama rocked in her own personal night, although it was broad day. Silas seemed nearly joyful, although restrained, and late afternoon he went out for the midwife. He took his gun for the sake of habit, slinging the long barrel over his shoulder. I heard his black horse pivot in the hard dirt and sensed the first low rolling of thunder. Mary stood at the door and told us the storm was a good way off. We waited, and night fell, and we waited yet, but the storm and the baby did not. Mama came to good enough sense when Rhoda took her by the arm and showed her the crowning, told her to warm linens. I called for Silas and my daughter came, but not the midwife, and never again my husband.

Festus: She was beautiful, the one I loved, strong and ready for the long life ahead. The little girl was bright and fierce. When I found the courage to ask Barbara to marry me she said, "Festus, we've been easy between the two of us since we were children. I imagine we can make a good life together."

The wife I had always longed for. At the cost of my brother, her husband.

Rosamond: I called him Pa, never queried after the other, but for one day. When I was twelve years old, I asked, "Can't you tell me something to make him true to me?"

And Festus said, "Come on then."

He reached to the hook, took a straw hat, put it on my head. "He was plenty real. This was his. Now it's yours. Let's walk."

We set out beyond the road into the forest, dark and dappled and down a path he said was once open and bright as it led to the old midwife's place. In my later life I might forget for months about that day with my almost father—my father's brother—walking the overgrown path under the summer-straw hat of Silas Sprague. But then, even until

my old age, the scene would come back very sudden, as if I were a thin girl again returned to a vanished world. We walked up a small rise to an open spot, just big enough to be a meadow. Festus strode to the center. Turned around and watched me come to him. "There you are, walking his same road. He never reached the midwife, so we know he was coming this direction."

I approached, stood with him where my father was struck. I said, "I keep trying to make some meaning of it."

"We all do. None of us can stop ourselves. When we found him the ground surrounding him was written on, like an Indian picture. The very same marks down his back and leg. Folks call them lightning flowers. It's the natural work of electricity but even so I'm overcome by a sense of significance. Like signs in a language I can't read. How could it mean nothing at all, to be electrified the very day his first child coming?"

We stood in the meadow, the light perfectly transparent. Air blue and yellow together. That sweet true note of the redwings. Pound of a peckerwood. If Festus hadn't stood there and told me, the meadow would never have revealed a thing, no matter how long I stood, no matter how many times I walked along my father's path. The meadow lay shining, as if everything could only ever mean itself. Nothing else.

Festus said, "His horse was still standing there. Looked the same, but turned out he was addled. Couldn't recall how to chew grass or drink water. Didn't run, but didn't know us, either. Couple days later we understood and put him down."

Silas: Never learned whether son or daughter, quick or still. As I rode I spoke to myself, a hard talking-to. Shouted out loud that I had to come back to the human race. I was young, not old. I was about to be a father; I truly hoped a gentler one than mine, a stalwart man and unyielding. I shouted out to myself over the thickening atmosphere, the pounding

hooves, “This is your child coming! Your wife in throes you caused! Rise up and return to life and season!”

An answering strike. And now, the emphatic dark.

...

Barbara: Somehow the Mormons caught him on the right day. I was on my knees, not praying but pulling weeds from the kitchen garden, when I saw them approach. I smiled to myself, knowing Festus would tip his hat and turn his back, but something the older man said caught his attention and my husband started as if he'd been struck from above. He leaned in listening. He gestured with his right hand toward the sky, bringing it down, pointing there, there, and there at the ground around his feet, redrawing the jagged lines. I had never seen nor heard him tell that story but I knew exactly what he was portraying, line by line. I shuddered and went in with my dirty hands.

Of course I had not seen Silas fallen in the meadow. The hard truth of that view belongs to his brother, who went to retrieve the body as I nursed my baby daughter in her conception bed. That night my own image of Silas was seared immutable upon my mind: timeless, transfigured by a blinding bolt to gleaming glass. Vertical and naked: smooth hard suspension over the wreckage of mortal flesh. In my diminishing dreams, even now, I reach to caress.

Festus came in the door with the Mormons speaking of signs and translations, the whole American continent the burgeoning Celestial Kingdom, the ground shining up like crystal, one great Urim and Thummim. Festus was a good man but in his manner timid. Silas the better lover, Festus likely the kinder father. Festus intelligent and esteemed but inconfident in his personal wisdom. But on this day he stood with his brother's stature and a burning conviction. Our last child rolled inside me eager to arrive. And everything changed for us.

Rosamond: I was seventeen and strong-willed and I wanted nothing to do with the grand immersion. I had appointed myself defender of the old order, speaker for the lost. I fancied that somehow I was not only the child of the electric man but also the daughter of my mother's twin sister, dramatically young and obscured in the emerald secrets of the old wilderness. I sat on the bank of Sugar Creek to watch the usurpers go under the water and rise up Mormon, filled with the Holy Ghost and ready to hold forth in prophecy. I may have wished in some deep portion of my mind that the Latter-Day Spirit would release the tongues of my wet people, that my parents could speak some fiery truth in the voices of the dead who haunted them, but the one revelation of the day was my mother's condition; when she came up, the water showed her contours.

I watched my sisters Lucinda and Eveline lifted from the symbolic grave, silly and shrieking although Lucinda acquired an air of almighty importance soon enough. Little Fess went down and came up calm and decided, harbinger of the man he intended to be. Edwin hated the water after nearly drowning as a tyke, but he would not be outdone by William. They went under together and came up gasping the same way they were born, in quick succession. The littlest girls, Emily and Dorcas, played near me on the bank in the Indian summer light until our mother was dry and put together. I maintained a stone countenance but I soon realized I was in no temper to align myself with the townfolk, either.

People in Olive Green were stunned and censorious. Any time we came nigh, familiar faces smoothed themselves to taut inscrutability. Neighbors and old friends and even family patronized my mother as if she had lost her wits. Aunt Mary and Uncle Pompey affected an ironic little air of toleration and townsmen stopped conversing when Festus approached. They would greet him and feign camaraderie but yield no personal or communal confidence. One local wit behind me at the mercantile said, "Your ma's plenty enough for one man to handle, ain't she? What's got into that Festus Sprague? That old man got the stamina to be Mormon?" and everyone laughed but Willard Green, recently come

down from Chenango and just then stepped in from the street. Willard so big he looked like a brown bear had ambled in, and he said to me, “Lady, you need me to knock the stamina clean out of this jackass?”

...

Festus: So many have told embellished tales of their journey from the soft green of the East to the hard blue West. Immigrants to Utah clung to tales of hardship to make themselves heroes and visionaries. Believed they were owed something for it. All I have to say is, America is a broad continent and we were grateful to witness a long stretch before the railroad changed it forever. Barbara and I were fifty-seven and fifty-six, too old for such adventure but the trail was established. Our children were grown and strong and made it mostly easy for us. Barbara seemed relieved to depart, uncannily young and light in her legs and shoulders. She was joyful to find Rosamond and Willard and their tall boys in Iowa, loaded to accompany us. Barbara loved the nights under the stars and did not fear the sound of wolves in the darkness. She became a woman I had not known nor ever imagined in such a way. After the plains and then the Rockies I believed that the very sensation of Ohio, humid and mulched and rolling in the hue of trees, had been beaten clean out of me. But we do not step so easy from the landscapes of memory. After the first season of adjusting, I dreamed each night in Olive Green, then woke each day to the blinding blanch of the Great Salt Lake.

Barbara: Young Fess rode his horse to Red Butte the evening of our last encampment. I could hardly take the vision in, my beloved son, easy stance in the arid sunset. A white penumbra shone about his head and shoulders from the unearthly back-glow of the inland sea, which did not resemble water so much as a sheet of immense and burning glass.



Festus: He looked like the angel I had been seeking all my life. He came up the trail light in the saddle, a natural cowboy. This was no Sprague my Providence grandfathers would discern. His smile brightened the shade under his wide hat brim. My son, the image of my brother in the new dispensation, dismounted and reached first for my hand in a manly shake, and then a strong pull to embrace me.

We sat long around the campfire, every one of us together there in the desert twilight: each of our children, grown, and our grandchildren growing, alive and vivid, laughing and swapping stories and still more coming. The city below lay visible in entirety like an unfurled map.

We settled in to sleep, one more night in transit under the Big Bear and the Pleiades and Milky Way.

My old mind returned, and I murmured, "Why isn't it Silas here?"

Barbara rolled, a bit laborious, and turned her face toward mine.

"Festus, don't you ever ask me that question again. Don't ask God that question again. Don't ask the prophet, don't ask the scriptures, don't even ask the devil. Here we are surrounded by our children. Rosamond's as much yours as she is your brother's. More. He never spent an hour with her.

"Everyone that matters is here surrounding us. I don't care what anybody says about the coming order. I've seen nothing of it. All I've seen is vanishment. This is you here, not your brother. This is my self, not my sister. If Silas and Millicent wanted this, they should not have gone and got themselves dead. We are Festus and Barbara, warm and breathing right now under this celestial night, shored up by all the significance we have a right to ask for."

Barbara: Next morning we awoke and descended with the rising sun behind us. The long shadow of the mountains pulled off the flat valley bed like a lavender coverlet.

Young Fess had a little cabin nearly built for us in the Tooele Valley, forty miles farther west in a new settlement with an unsettled name, but the year was troubled by the federal march and Indian anger and so the whole town, once Twenty Wells, then Willow Creek, now trying out its new name Grantsville, was evacuated. We waited several weeks in temporary quarters in Salt Lake with Fess and his wife Lydia before traveling a short day west. On that day we followed the arc of the salt-aproned waterline and then took a sharp turn southward to our new home. For a while it was small and rustic living, more like bivouac than habitation, but I confess I was almost regretful that the conditions improved. Something cleansing in my mind about making do.

The more I acclimated, however, the more I found myself trying to convey this strange yet strangely familiar landscape to my dead sister, buried deep in the fertile soil of Olive Green. I worked continuous words in my mind, straining to describe to her the granite fortress of Deseret Peak, its upper walls so sheer the snow could not cling. I had long told Festus to stop dwelling over the dead, but in this distant place Millicent became less and yet more a part of me. Speaking to her was a way of talking myself into clearer states of mind. I tried to explain how the west mountains contoured the bottom edge of sky at sunset, high evergreen forests packed in angular canyons and lining the northward slopes. I described the sheer blue barrier that rose between us and the Salt Lake Valley, cutting into the shifting pools of uncertain shoreline. There was no means to depict, to an unmade girl lost in the deciduous hues of old Ohio, the glittering sheets of shoreline salt, the unrippled mirror of the famous brine lake evaporating in the desert sun, the barren geometry of islands inverted in the depthless mercury.