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POEMMEMOIRSTORY

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FROM THE editor-in-chief

Dear Reader,

I thought I would begin this issue with some advice from Harper Lee, who once said: "Well, the first advice I would give is this: hope for the best and expect nothing. Then you won't be disappointed." Her words resonate today for every writer submitting work, although honestly it's easier said than done, don't you think? Who doesn't, after all, hope that each time they sit down to write a story or a poem or a memoir that one day it will find a loving home and readers? As a writer, I have despaired over the seas of "no thank yous" that lap upon the shore with each submission, and as an editor, it's often very difficult to say no to the good work that pours in during each reading period.

But what is the alternative? Not to write? Not to submit? To give up hope? Flannery O'Connor wrote: "People without hope not only don't write novels, but what is more to the point, they don't read them." As writers we have to find those slivers and slabs of hope, but even more than hoping, we have to devote the hours and time in the chair, letting our imaginations run wild on the page and giving our hearts and minds to the work at hand. We also write for those who have not given up hope because they are our readers.

And so on that note, I am very grateful that Margaret Wrinkle did not give up hope when writing her novel, *WASH*, which took her over two decades to complete. Working as a filmmaker, artist, and teacher with roots deep in Birmingham and the world, Wrinkle always returned to the story that haunted her as the rumored ancestor of slave breeders. Haunted by her characters, she found a way to atone through fiction to her give her characters a life on the page. Bethany Mitchell's interview with Wrinkle delves deeply into her process, and as writers and readers, we can all learn from her struggles and courage during her journey to create *WASH*.

PoemMemoirStory is also overjoyed to have the poems of Dell Lemmon, Stephanie Kaplan Cohen, Tina Mozelle Braziel and so many others. This is an issue packed with poems from all ages and experiences in the landscape of verse. From Dell's grandmother's postcards to Cohen's

Esther floundered. "You're shivering. He's shivering. I'll get a blanket," she said, and through the slits of his fast-swelling eyes, he filled his mind with her.

"No. It's okay. I'm all right now," he said. "It's very good."

* According to the *Jewish Virtual Library*, by 1939, Nazi SS officers had kidnapped hundreds of thousands of children in occupied countries into the *Lebensborn Program.* Many were stolen from their parents' arms because they matched the Nazis' Aryan criteria. Thousands were transferred to the *Lebensborn* (Fountain of Life) centers in order to be "Germanized" and forced to reject and forget their birth parents. Those who refused the re-education were beaten and transferred to concentration camps to be exterminated.

American Gothic

Tomorrow morning Virginia will undergo her first elective procedure, but today she will visit the Vietnam War Memorial for the first time.

It seems impossible that she, Virginia Wellington, the lifelong Iowan and olive-drab housewife, just barely forty-three (a tired and tight forty-three at that, her on-line picture mistaken by Dr. Snowe for forty-six or -seven) should board a plane yesterday from the wasted Iowa fields to step outside today into the electric shock of a big-city morning. And then to walk into a Dupont Circle café to buy a coffee and a bagel before making her way to the Mall—impossible, impossible. Impossible to her, at least.

For Virginia has never been anywhere but Iowa, and while she loves how the fields fill first with snow, then shoots, then stalks, then cobs, while she's bought her share of sensible shoes at the Des Moines mall and watched many a happy-ending movie at the Main Street Theatre, and while she's even car-tripped across I-80 to hear Sharon Olds read poems of bodies and birth at Prairie Lights, until yesterday afternoon, Virginia had never been in an airplane, had never seen the stretch of Iowa's quilt spread below her, the fields stitched with frost. And when the attendant brought her kitchenette miracles of warm cookies and hot coffee, patting the headrest as she passed like soothing the back of a small child, Virginia had thought of Harlan—her husband, dead now two weeks—and how he'd always said he'd fly again when hell froze over. A pilot in Vietnam, Harlan never said one word about the war except this line about hell and flying. Even so, Virginia knew pilot was a polite word for bomber.

Virginia sipped her coffee and traced her finger on the plane's plexglass along the rivers patterned like branching veins. She said "spider-belly head" and "web of veins" out loud, words from an Olds' poem about a dead child, killed in a foreign war. "Her mother's face," Virginia whispered, "beaten and beaten into the shape of a plant," the double *b*'s and *t*'s as thrilling to her as the horror of the image.

Now, though, Virginia walks toward a DC café with soft bread stacked

against a plate-glass window. Breathing the raw air, her face seems to freeze, a water-tightness of skin and pores. Her crows' feet, her smile lines, even the deep V between her eyes harden into granite, into the smooth black marble of the Memorial she's read about in her visitor's guide. Like a scene in a foreign film, Virginia imagines the *mmm* of a cello and a close-up of a beautiful face, an older woman's face, one that fits the mood of winter, still and suspended in the camera's eye, while all around her car wheels crack the gutter's ice, awnings snap, and people hunch into their scarves. Virginia wants the flannelled woman up ahead, a Pomeranian at her heel, to step out of her way, to applaud as she passes. Tomorrow I'll take up space, Virginia thinks, and it makes her feel like someone else—all makeup and smart casual, someone with a square to her shoulders, a rise to her breasts. The posture of a surgically modified woman.

But Virginia isn't an aging beauty—she's not even an old looker, that perfect rose with curling brown edges. Her face is plain, at best, American Gothic in drugstore-brown bangs. In their on-line consultations, Dr. Snowe has promised that he can change all that. His practice is called Cosmetic Magic.

*

Early July, 1916, and Dr. Harold Gillies sweats as he cuts another skin flap from a soldier's thigh to rebuild a nose. Yesterday, despite the godforsaken heat, Harold had managed to remake two eyelids, part of a cheek, and a passable bottom lip—but the broken boys just keep coming and coming, a rotten stream of suffocation, gangrene, and hemorrhage, boys trying to tell nurses to "Kill me—kill me," their jaws or faces shot away by German snipers.

This particular case, though, is fiddly: beneath the soldier's eyes is nothing but a raw hole. When the boy was admitted, his uniform had been pinned with a label bought by Harold himself, one reading "faciomaxillary injury—Cambridge Hospital, Aldershot." Medics working battlefields in Belgium and France had been instructed to affix these tags on any British boy with a devastating wound above the neck. Such cases were sent directly to Harold.

When he had first specified those two words, "faciomaxillary injury," they had been more sound than sense, with their soft consonants and

odd rhythm, like a phrase from one of those modern poems in *The Egoist* Harold loved: "Deft Gillies' art, his catlike ease, his hawklike pose, / his genius for fixing faciomaxillary injuries." But now, surveying the actual damage before him, this dark cavity of a face, like a goose waiting to be stuffed—the comparison to poetry seems badly chosen. As this young boy's head had slowly surfaced over the trench line at Somme, a sniper had shot off his nose and most of his mouth. Without an upper palate, the soldier couldn't even say the consonants of his own name before Harold's assistant administered the ether.

Now a nurse wipes Harold's brow, his chin dripping, heavy as rain. The doctor is young, although not as young as the soldier, but he will age well. In five years, he will help found the American Association of Plastic Surgeons, and eventually the Queen will knight him for work that, even now, earns him the nickname Miracle Man. For Harold is doing something no one else ever has: he's remaking jaws, lips, eyelids, and noses, excising tissue and bone from other parts of the body, applying them like bits of clay, thumbed into place.

Sometimes Harold thinks of himself in this way, as a Medieval potter over a wheel, repairing a cracked bowl. For even if this soldier manages to avoid sepsis or internal bleeding—even if the boy doesn't have to wear a crude mask to buy his milk—Harold knows how he will look. His face will remain a broken pot, roughly mended. No miracle.

*

Stepping into the bakery's warm light, Virginia's face loosens. The brown loaves light a lamp of happiness in her chest, their salt and sugar, as Jane Hirshfield would say, runs through her body like current through copper wire. Virginia might be common as bread now, might not be noticed by the whip-thin girl behind the counter, but soon—soon.

"Excuse me," Virginia says, tapping the counter with the beat of a tiny heart. "What are those? The twisted rolls?" Yes, the evils of white bread, Virginia has heard, but she's sure these rolls will fill her with warmth.

The girl is a bird, eyes too big for her face. A crow or a raven, the kind of bird Virginia spent her childhood chasing out of the sweet corn. "Challah rolls," the girl says. "Egg bread."

"I'll take one. And a coffee, please. Small." In another month or two, Virginia thinks, my smile would yellow a flush up this bird-girl's spine.

"Four-fifty-eight," the bird-girl says, fingering the bills, counting them as if it takes all her focus.

Curling the coffee against her chest, Virginia steps back outside, the cold sharp as a scalpel. A wind against her face, Virginia waits to cross the Circle. She decides to walk. She's from Iowa; she knows cold. How to wave down a taxi, anyway—big, like a kid's greeting? Or with a single hand, turned sideways like a queen's? On all sides, people stand solid and sure, someplace to go, someplace they've already been. Virginia tries to stand square in her good shoes (not even on sale), thinking that the challah bread tastes a little too much like bread.

With a good clip, she crosses the street (she knows how to walk well), past small shops that pulse a complicated rhythm with their *m*'s, *p*'s and *b*'s. Brooks Brothers, Macy's Metro, Pizza Paradiso: every name is a poem. Stanton is just a one-horse town at the bottom of Iowa, no beat, no buzz. In Stanton, Virginia's walk is dull—the thud of a bass drum.

Despite the cold, the morning is bright for looking, the sky a single shade of blue. Winter blue, Virginia thinks. The blue of illness, of veins in a hand or up a neck. She hasn't told anyone about the four-week surgery package, airfare and hotel expenses all included. For two years before his death, Virginia skimmed the cream from Harlan's disability checks for some adventure or other (back then she wasn't sure exactly what), and now her neighbors think she's treating herself to a much-needed vacation, a chance to see the nation's Capitol.

*

November, 1936, surgeon Max Thorek takes a photograph of a naked Negress in a small, second-story room above Ellington's Cotton Club. Whenever he can, Thorek visits Harlem, where he believes, like Langston before him, that he can fling his arms wide in the face of the sun. Dance! Whirl! Whirl! Thorek comes to Harlem to whirl with any black woman who will have him—loud-laughing, big-breathing women he prefers to the pale, corn-colored ones of his native Midwest. Once developed, this photograph of his Negress will look like a pencil sketch, the woman's shadow seeming to smoke the long cigarette pinched between her fingers. Decades from now, Thorek's "Harlemesque" will sell at Christie's for $10,000.

Colleagues call Max "complicated." He speaks Russian and French,

Hungarian and a little Polish; he plays the violin, writes books, dabbles in poetry, collects art. Last year he founded the International College of Surgeons. "I have sighed deep," he likes to say, "but I have laughed free." And yet, even though Max will go back to Chicago—to his surgery and his pictorialist books and of course to his photographs—in the coming years, he will return again and again to the perfection of the Negress's nose and neck, her arched back and double profile, her breasts turned and smiling at him with their own, odd mouths.

During the war, Max had made a name for himself working on American soldiers whose faces were burst open by artillery shells. He had called his medicine wizardry. Itchy days, those—days when he'd cut sleep, hands prickling to wire the shards of a soldier's jaw or make vulcanized rubber splints for another, toothless. Such short twenty-four hour days! How could he do all he wanted in the operating room? In the study? The darkroom? The bedroom? To others, Max calls himself Dr. Thorek, but ever since the war, in his own mind he is The Wizard.

For a woman, Max believes, years are a kind of explosion. He likes this metaphor, even uses it at an American Association of Plastic Surgeon's conference, saying, "A woman is ravaged by the shrapnel of time." And why not—why not freeze the curves of youth, Max thinks, setting his camera down on an end table with a patched leg. It's true that poor Passot's first papers on facelifting were universally disparaged; he was dubbed a charlatan for accepting vanity as an indication for surgery. And then there were the difficulties, of course, of course—skin-flap necrosis, damage to the facial nerves, sloped smiles like the hang of meat in a butcher's window. But the successes—the successes! *La grande operation* and suddenly turnip women were pomegranate gorgeous. Nothing risked, nothing gained.

The Wizard offers his Harlemesque a drink. She says, "Yes," but doesn't smile.

Why not fix a woman, Max wonders, looking intently at the unsmiling beauty before him—fix her like a photograph?

*

Virginia's husband hadn't managed his health. Stanton's single mail carrier with his small, silver van, Harlan hardly ever walked to the mailboxes, not even in the sun much less in the sleet or snow, and his favorite

dinner remained corn-fed steak. Two years ago, his fifty-odd years of meatloaf and sedentary mail delivery caused a stroke, Harlan falling down one morning right next to the bed, still as stone. In her rush to get to him, hearing the thud while standing at the sink, watching the blue-black morning through the window, the fire gleaming under the kettle like night's one blue eye, Virginia had caught her big toenail on the steps. She hadn't even felt it until she'd noticed it at the hospital, much of her nail already black, poking above the top of a sandal she'd slapped on despite the cold.

As the doctors and nurses and EMTs ignored her, Virginia sat in the waiting room with her winter coat and summer sandals and examined her toenail, now pitch-painted, no longer a clear window to pink skin. It looked like a beetle. Unlike a painted nail, this toe wouldn't complement her fashion, she thought. It wasn't a frosted purple to match the shimmer of a short skirt (she didn't own) or to peek out of a pair of sleek sandals (she'd never buy). The black toenail belied her low cholesterol and sharp eyesight, the round health of her egg-beating forearms.

Death, Virginia has always feared, is blindness—having her eyes put out. A common nightmare, she will see the paperclip or the needle inching toward her eye and then awake, a hiss through her teeth like the *w* of wish, a hand to her face. Her black toenail guaranteed her death. It won't kill me, she thought, but something will. Something will make me fall cold and dead, my lips still and pale as Whitman's Captain.

Finally allowed to see Harlan, sleeping in the hospital bed, Virginia thought he looked stuffed. When the doctor told her Harlan would have to give up his mail delivery, go on disability, he didn't even look at Virginia. "He'll have physical therapy each week," the doctor said, checking his watch. "But the left side of his body won't ever come back to full range of motion. He'll have to walk with a cane. Or a walker."

A match more than a marriage, no children (she hadn't been able to), four decades of scrubbing, rubbing, washing, dusting, mending, stirring, baking, and folding, and now a husband on permanent disability: Virginia's coming days piled themselves thick and white like fat off a cutting board.

The very next week she got herself a secret bank account, three-hundred dollars a month that Harlan never noticed. At first she wasn't sure what the money was for—maybe just the means to waste the sun on some beach, ordering a drink with tropical in its name. But every time

she paid the bills and held back another $300, Virginia remembered that toe, how her body would eventually flake away like charred paper. That black toenail was not an aberration, something that would heal. She would go to it, she knew.

*

On December 5, 1945, at a speech given before the annual Southern Surgical Association conference, Dr. John Staige Davis describes the importance of sustaining the plastic surgery centers he and others established during World War II. "As there are a large number of men, wounded or injured, in World War II, who require plastic surgery," John begins, "it may be timely to look into what is being done for these patients." He notes that there isn't an open seat in the ballroom, wide as a cave. Eyeglasses glint from every corner.

The year before, John had treated a fighter pilot with a face burnt black as a dropped match. The soldier's B-17 had caught fire above Cassino, his head hitting the control panels, cracking the bones under both eyes, popping teeth. Utilizing the brand-new skin bank at Bethesda, John had performed extensive skin grafts, but the results were poor. While the pilot's face was no longer charred, he still looked like a quilt, hand-stitched. Seeing himself in the mirror for the first time, the pilot had said, "Doc—there's no way I'm going home like this."

So John had hired the prettiest nurses he could find and started the first plastic surgery rehabilitation center in Baltimore. He formed a Guinea Pig Club among the patients, the pilot its first president, who even came up with a drinking game called "Scars." Eventually, John's pilot had four skin grafts. After the fourth, the soldier had asked John for a face-lift.

"I got enough of somebody else's loose skin for an elephant. You're a genius, Doc—come on, give me that windswept look," he'd said with a laugh as hard as a slap. "Skin me like a fish; you know I can take it. Otherwise I'm never going to find a wife."

John had said no, then yes. He himself had a wife, three kids. And the pilot's plea made him think of an odd little poem from when he was a child: "He often expressed / A curious wish / To be interchangeably / Man and fish." After the fifth surgery, however, the pilot's sutures had become infected; he'd developed septicemia and died a week later. John

had named a new wing of his rehabilitation center for the pilot, paying for his family to come down for the dedication.

"The object of military plastic surgery is primarily the restoration of function and comfort," John continues, his voice steady as a pendulum, "and incidentally with the improvement of appearance." The other surgeons nod, take notes, for John is the first American surgeon to devote his entire practice to the plastic arts, and after 78 articles as well as the flagship textbook on this new medical specialty, he is now the Chairman of the American Board of Plastic Surgery.

John shows his before-and-after slides of the burnt pilot, and as he does every time, he thinks that the picture after the fourth skin graft shows a normal, if well-worn, face—a face, John is sure, some nice girl would have loved.

*

Harlan had died well. For those two years after the stroke, Virginia had brought him the garden tomatoes he loved, read him whatever words she could find (newspaper, novel), tried to make her voice a waterfall of words, easy and constant. In the evenings, she thought about her bank account and where she might go—or if she'd go. Then one evening when she was replacing Harlan's pillow with a clean one, thinking of the poet's pillow with its curve of horseshoe luck, he had put his thumb and finger around her wrist. Harlan had simply closed his eyes, and that was that.

By then she'd saved $8,000; it was time. And so Virginia did her homework (forty-three meant patience and a library card), spent two full weeks surfing the web from the library's computers and considering it all: walking the Great Wall, hiking Pike's Peak, snapping photos of Mayan ruins, drinking wine at Italian cafés. What Virginia finally settled on was Dr. Albert Snowe in Washington DC, who offered a face lift, nose job, cheek implants, and lip injections along with a plane ticket, a four-star Dupont Circle hotel, and four weeks of follow-up care—all for a single, flat fee of $8,000.

When Virginia first clicked on the Cosmetic Magic site, she'd examined the before photographs of middle-aged women, the ones with the air of discarded wrappers, and she'd thought of a poem she'd read in high school. Back then Virginia had been an onion, round and white—a girl to go with anything.

"Beauty's truth. Truth beauty," she'd said out loud, the guy at the Sci-Fi wall glancing around.

Human poetry, she remembered her high-school English teacher saying, tapping the book with his rhythmic seriousness. What would human poetry look like? Certainly not Virginia, sandpaper rough and red in the cheeks.

Human poetry was Snowe's website. Expansion and rejuvenation, firmness and smoothness, youth and glow, the slim and the stylish. For aging Hollywood stars in their forties and fifties, everyone knew it was chemical peels, Botox, brow lift, lipo, nose job, tummy tuck, and fat transfers. Virginia knew the lingo. She'd read her share of magazines, watched a little reality TV. A bit silly, she knew, but she loved the tempo and the rhythm of plastic promise: "Foto Facials," "Stars' Secret Weapon," "Quick-Fix Lasix," "Scalpel Slaves."

Virginia had never really hungered to see lions in Africa or glaciers in Alaska. Her entire life, she'd been a lamppost or a telephone wire—visible but unseen. When Harlan had asked her to marry him, he'd said, "You'll do. You'll do just fine," with a wink and a laugh. Now Virginia wondered what it would be like to be a jaguar rather than a lamppost—the atoms slitting a wake in front of you, sewing it up behind.

Leaving the library, a printout of Dr. Snowe's homepage under her vegetable arm, Virginia made up her mind. She felt as good as she'd ever felt, better in fact, big in her skin, a surge of pure love for the summer marigolds, the gritty kid lurking by the bicycle rack, the rusty Plymouth parked by the door, a poodle panting out the back window. She was ready to embrace the world, to move in it and through it—but she'd need beauty if the world was going to embrace her back. She must lure its love, and not rush headlong and naked, mad for the marigolds and the poodle and even the gritty kid. For such magic, she must wait.

She'd start with Dr. Snowe's basic package—a nip, a tuck, a slim stalk of a nose, flared at the bottom like a pinned butterfly. Then, eventually, who knows, a chemical peel, maybe lipo and a tummy tuck, perhaps even implants, why not, a set of silver stars. Just how far might she go, Virginia doesn't yet know.

*

In April, 2003, a new intern, Dr. Ahmed Fadhli, treats eleven civilians

in one month at the Al-Babtain Center for Plastic Surgery in Baghdad. Called "collateral damage" in the American press, the patients include a six-year-old girl with a blast injury to her torso, a thirteen-year-old boy whose upper limbs were severed by a rocket-propelled grenade, and a forty-year-old male who lost much of his face to a stray bullet, including the partial loss of zygoma and maxilla as well as a fracture of his nasal bones—meaning his face had been emptied like a blueberry squashed between two fingers.

Ahmed and another senior surgeon, Dr. Ibrahim Ghoneim, work round the clock in four surgical theaters. The burns are the worst injuries Ahmed has ever seen—deep dermal, with exposed pink muscle like on the plastic models he used in medical school, but here the edges aren't clean at all, the soft tissue nothing like synthetic skin. Here the wounds are wet and red like ragged, open mouths all over the body.

Over the course of twenty-seven surgeries, Ahmed tries procedures he's only ever read about: skin grafting, bone grafting, local flaps, free flap reconstruction. The teenage Iraqi boy is the most difficult, with amputation of both of his arms and 35% of his trunk, flank, and shoulders burned black as earth. It took three days for his brother to bear the boy through the war zone to the Center, and by the time he was admitted, he had anemia, shock, sepsis and severely infected third-degree burns. Ahmed operates, performing his very first escharectomy and an homograft skin cover (refrigerated skin as a temporary dressing), his fingers shooting sparks as they cut and sew. Dr. Ghoneim says, "Ahmed, your sutures are superb," and a week later, he performs yet another surgery, this time replacing the homograft with autograft skin sliced from the boy's back and posterior thighs, cut in tidy rectangles like the dough Ahmed used to carve out for his Turkish grandmother's sigara börek—his favorite treat. The nurses apply cream to improve scars, and Ahmed puts in an order for limb prostheses. The boy will survive.

"You have performed magic," says Dr. Ghoneim. "You have given that boy a second life."

Ahmed shuts himself in a supply closet to cry his joy.

Ahmed thinks nothing of the boy's future—how he will eat or shit or turn doorknobs with hooks for hands. When lucid, the boy says "Fuck you," thrashes on his cot, refuses food. Without arms, he looks like a python, wriggling on its back. Ahmed assumes that, upon release, the boy will be recommended for some form of psychiatry to treat

post-traumatic stress disorder, will figure out his life. He's a miracle, after all. In the words of Ahmed's favorite American rap artist, he has burned this boy a goddamn miracle. One, two, three, four and five—the boy's blood had run cold, but now he's comin' alive.

Ahmed is taken with his new ability to raise the dead. By 2007, he is the first surgeon to open his own plastic surgery practice in Iraq, where he calls himself The Shaman and offers to turn Iraqi women into the thin, tall, small-nosed, round-eyed American models that sell Coke and Levis on billboards across Baghdad. Ahmed becomes adept in boob, nose, and eye jobs. He can work a liposuction cannula like a wand. For the richie-rich, he performs house calls for Botox parties with up to ten of the client's closest friends. For radish-shaped calves, he severs nerves behind the knees, atrophying legs into super-slim stalks. For shortness, he saws through shin bones and inserts metal braces to stretch shins two or three inches taller. For aging vaginas, he plumps labia with silicone, and for wannabe virgins, he reforms hymens. At night, Ahmed surfs the Surgeon & Safari website, wonders if he could offer his own vacation package to wealthy Westerners, "The Best Boobs and Booty in Baghdad."

Although most of his procedures go well, sawing women in half leaves its marks. Sometimes a patient's body attacks a breast implant as a foreign object, encasing it in tissue that Ahmed must chisel out from the chest wall. Facelifts create long scars, the incisions can get infected or an earlobe might slide downwards. Once Ahmed sheared too much skin, like a close-cropped piecrust, and the patient wound up with a tight, alien face. Permanent scars, burst implants, severe reactions to injectables, blood-clot deaths—these things happen. But when he's over an open body, Ahmed's hands hum, the operating table trembles, the air vibrates. It's not walking on water or splitting the moon, but it's the closest thing he's found to touching God.

*

Walking stiff and straight from Dupont Circle to the Mall, Virginia tries to think of the right words to explain her transformation—for she has no idea how she'll explain it to the residents of Stanton when she arrives back home a month from now. She imagines their eyes dilating and hopes their faces will open like fields.

As a child growing up on a farm, Virginia would often sit in a hay

field while her parents worked the ground or the animals, looking through her small fingers to the horizon, shaping meadows with her hand, pinching clouds. She'd pretend to mold the small copse of trees around the pond or consider what it would feel like to cup the barn in her palm. She loved how the world made and shaped itself, especially in the spring—the cherry trees creating little globes, the pear trees little hourglasses. Virginia watched the cows give birth, a whole, miniature cow pulled through a black hole to nowhere, like a magician's trick.

Not having her own children, Virginia never knew what it was like for her body to shape something from nothing. She wondered how it felt to flower, to grow heavy with leaves and fruit—so heavy the boughs can't even move in the wind. And then the coming of the new, that throb and utter exhaustion, only to fold back in, to return to what you once were. It amazes her, still, the thought of such transformation, from seeds to shoots.

"The opposite of all this," she says, the pale buildings like grayish snow. All these memorials she read about back at the hotel: the Lincoln, the Washington—the Korean, World War II, and Vietnam War. The center of the nation's city is one, long graveyard. Marble columns, smooth domes, a giant white obelisk thrusting itself into the sky—nothing more than sculptured bone. Skulls and kneecaps arranged carefully in the ground.

"Colossal wrecks," Virginia says to no one.

All this solid heaviness, Virginia thinks, the soldier's names in regular rows, Peters and Toms and Davids carved in mica so that they sparkle like the heart of light. Such sparkle—and all of it a lie. The illusion that dust and dirt, fissures and cracks are but a passing nuisance. Forty-three years of housekeeping, and Virginia knows that dust is elemental. In a magazine she'd read to Harlan while he died, Virginia learned that people eat two pounds of dust a year, just breathing.

Tiffany Tavern, Decadent Delights, Marvelous Market—now she's close; she checks her map. Two more blocks.

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," she says, fitting each syllable to the click of her heels, and finally she's there, the Memorial, like a farmer's dark furrow through a field. Harlan's name won't be here, of course, but he would have known some of these men, heard about their girlfriends back home, the jobs they had waiting. He might have sat with them while they died, with their lost limbs, lost eyes—might have

watched the pattern of leaf and light from a banana tree move across their faces.

Walking down the ramp, the soldier's names at her heels, then her shins, then her stomach, and finally level with her face, Virginia says, "I wish you could see me, Harlan. You wouldn't recognize me," pressing her palm flat on the stone. She feels ready. Yes, Virginia is ready for the woman she will become tomorrow morning when Dr. Snowe says "count backwards from twenty" and makes the first cut.