also by marianne wiggins

Novels

Babe

Went South

Separate Checks

John Dollar

Eveless Eden

Almost Heaven

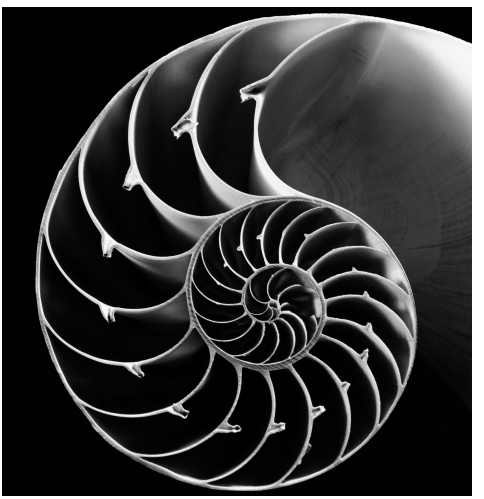
Short Stories

Herself in Love

Bet They'll Miss Us When We're Gone

marianne wiggins

evidence of things unseen



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Severin and Melville

those two necessary salts

evidence of things unseen

The Material that destroyed Nagasaki was plutonium-239.

Plutonium was the first man-made element produced in a quantity large enough to see. It was created in 1940 at the University of California at Berkeley. The idea of it had for many years been indicated by the periodic table of the elements, where a row of blanks paralleling the rare earths suggested the theoretical possibility of elements whose family characteristics—like the characteristics of thorium, protactinium, and uranium—would be similar to those of actinium. It was possible that unknown elements (with ninety-three protons, ninety-four protons, and so on) had long ago existed in our solar system but had vanished . . .

John McPhee, *The Curve of Binding Energy*

white sands

Somewhere in the heart of North America there is a desert where the heat of several suns has fused the particles of sand into a single sheet of glass so dazzling it sends a constant signal to the moon. On a map, this unmarked space looks like a printer's error, an empty region on a page the cartographer forgot. One way or another each of us is drawn to this forbidden place. Like a magnet, this glass desert calls our irons the way the whale's heart used to beckon a harpoon. In our dreams or in our fears we imagine what it must be like to walk upon this surface. We imagine we could balance there, like an angel lighting down on ice, glissade, perhaps, without cracking its thin shell with the weight of our existence. This desert's name is Trinity. One day the sun rose twice there in a single mourning and Man saw his face reflected on the underside of Heaven. When the first atomic bomb exploded over earth that morning, the entire sky broadcast the news. Creation of the universe, that day, was reenacted. This time, God was not the only audience. If birth is fission, then the love we make is fusion; and to make an End is nothing more than to realize a Beginning. Because the end is where we start. Somewhere in the heart of North America there is a desert made of glass. Reflected in that glass there are two lovers, twinned for all eternity, the shape of all their days preserved like history's signature in stone. Their love preserved, like wings, in amber.

> . . . when seamen fall overboard, they are sometimes found, months afterwards, perpendicularly frozen into the hearts of fields of ice, as a fly is found glued in amber.
>
> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick,* "The Blanket"

radiance

On the night that they found Lightfoot, the stars were falling down.

All along the pirate coast the lighthouse keepers cast their practiced eyes into the night, raking dark infinity with expectant scrutiny the way the lighthouse beams combed cones of light over the tillered sea.

Over the Outer Banks, from the eastern constellation Perseus, shooting stars like packet seeds spilled across the sky, tracing transits of escape above the fourteen lighthouses from Kitty Hawk and Bodie Light to Hatteras and Lookout.

It was the yearly August meteor shower and Fos had driven out from Tennessee across the Smokies to the brink of the Atlantic for the celestial show as he'd done each August for the last fifteen years ever since he'd shipped home from France in '19, once the War was over. He and fifteen other sons from Dare County had been among the first recruits to go across the North Atlantic in '18 for valor, decency, and hell like they'd never known. Not one among them who survived was proud of it in any way that didn't cast a shadow back across his pride. Fos himself, by accident, had been a sparker in the field, an incendiary artist, and he'd been brilliant at it. He'd always had an interest in what made things light up, made things radiate, but he never knew he had a latent genius like a fuse, a

flare for fireworks, until they handed him a uniform and stood him up in front of a regimental officer and asked him what, if anything, he was good at doing. I'm good at making things light up, Fos said. Looking at the open file on the camp table between them, Fos watched the R.O.'s pen stall where Fos's name was written on the page. You mean explosives? the R.O. said.

—um no sir.

The pen still stalled.

—chemicals? the R.O. pressed.

—*radiance,* Fos explained.

They put him in Artillery and shipped him over with the rest of the First Army and on the fifth day in their training camp in France two British officers with more brass than a church organ between them interrupted gun assembly in his barracks. Who's the chap here who's the chemist? the one with more brass asked. When no one volunteered, the one with less brass held his clipboard up and read out, Private First Class Foster? Fos felt the heat rise to his cheeks and took a weak step forward.

—that would be me, sir.

Come with us.

They led Fos past rows of wooden barracks to the quartermaster's depot into the munition stores. Next to a stepped-temple of stacked diesel drums there was a brick hut with a flat roof, buttressed by sandbags. Inside there were four men in blue smocks and gauze surgical masks in a makeshift laboratory. An astringent tinge of sulfur in the air was the first thing that Fos noticed. Speak any French? the British officer asked before he left him there.

—no sir.

—learn to.

—yes sir.

Four pairs of dark wide eyes stared at Fos above the surgical masks. Then one of the men, the short one in the foreground, spoke. A patch of moisture appeared on his mask from where the words emanated and Fos stared at it, uncomprehending, as if a translation would materialize there as well. The tallest of the four untied his own mask and, with a heavy ac-

cent, said, He wants to know are you the candlemaker Uncle Sam has sent?

—*candlemaker?*

Fos stared at the material around them. There were shelves of chemicals in jars, sieves and grinders, meshes, funnels, fuses of all sorts, crates of French F1 pineapple grenade casings. As best as Fos could reckon from the things that he could recognize, the men in the blue smocks were making firecrackers. The short man gave an impatient shrug and seemed to ask the same question again, only this time with more force so his mask made little jumps, in and out, like a pumping artery. Fos nodded, mutely, and then there were *oo*s and *ah*s all around and then the short one asked him something else in a nicer way with what appeared to be a little curtsy. He wants to know where in the United States we come from? the tall man translated for Fos.

Oh, Fos answered. North Carolina.

They stared at him.

Kitty Hawk, he said.

—*kiti—?* the short one repeated.

Kitty *Hawk,* Fos emphasized. He flapped his arms. *The Wright brothers,* he said.

There was a burst of recognition as all of them flapped their arms and chimed Or-*vee!* Wil-*bear!* That established, everyone turned back to what he had been doing and left Fos in the care of the tallest one among them, the one who spoke the English, a French-Canadian, as it turned out, who handed Fos a mask and smock and began to show him around the little laboratory.

You wouldn't think it, Fos would later tell his son Lightfoot, *but the worst of problems over there was Light, pure and simple.* Daylight. 'Cause there wasn't hardly ever any of it. Almost none. You would have thought the vermin and the brute of noise would have been the worst, but men go crazy without daylight. In the smoke and in the dark. Men go crazy when they have to run out into somethin that might kill them that they can't see right in front of 'em.

So Fos's first job in the Great War was to learn from four Frenchmen,

who'd had three years' more experience, how to light the trenches, how to light the field. So that the boys could see what they were shooting at. See death coming, when it came.

Sodium nitrate, Lead tetraoxide, Potassium chlorate, the Canadian recited to Fos from the labels on the bottles on the shelves. Oxidizers, he explained. Hot. *Vurry* hot, he emphasized. Then he pointed to another group of chemicals and read, *Charcoal, Lampblack, Titanium* and told Fos, Make the *boum.* You understand? Fos nodded. All the labels, except the ones for casings and the fuses, were printed in English—all the warnings were, too—and Fos comprehended that all these chemicals must have been delivered from the States, or from England. Somewhere where the native lingo produced disclaimers written in English that warned FLAMMABLE SOLID. SPONTANEOUSLY COMBUSTIBLE. DANGEROUS WHEN WET. The Canadian took down a jar and shook out a salting of powder on a glass slide and said, *Paris green.* Is copper. Makes the fire burn in blue. Blue flare.

Behind them, one of the Frenchmen nodded over his work and translated, *La flambée.*

—*la fusée,* another said.

—*la flamme vacillante,* and Fos was reminded of a drawing he'd once seen of medieval monks at their tables, brushing color onto pages of gospels, while chanting.

Barium chloride, the Canadian told him. For the green flame. *Barium sulphate.* All the bariums, green. *Sulfur*—yellow. For white, pure white flare—the magnesiums. *Vurry explosif!*

—*foum!* one of the Frenchmen mimed.

—ker-*plouie!* another one joked.

But Fos was transfixed by something else. He wasn't a chemist. He wasn't transported by processes that needed to burn oxygen. He wasn't interested in energy that *burned.* One of the Frenchmen at a small desk at the back of the lab had a glass vial and a paintbrush in his hands and he was painting a sign on a sheet of metal with a liquid that appeared to be water.

But in the dark, Fos knew, that liquid would *glow.*

—rah-*dyoom,* the Canadian said.

I *know,* uttered Fos.

He was impressed.

A gram of radium these days, he reckoned, must cost a fortune. Tens of thousands of dollars.

—*caviar,* Fos said, searching his English for some way to express to the Frenchman that he knew the stuff's value.

Above his mask, the Frenchman's eyebrows went up and he pulled his fingertips together and gestured at his mouth and said, *Mais il faut qu'on ne le mange pas!*

—he says Don't eat it, the Canadian said.

—*don't worry!* said Fos. He knew about radium, about radium's effects on humans. Ever since he'd first seen the light that nature can make without burning air, seen his first vision of bioluminescent plankton in the waters off the Outer Banks, Fos had been fascinated by the kinds of lights nature can produce, the ones not always visible to man, the range of lights radiating just off the edge of human vision at the boundaries of the human spectrum. Infrareds and ultraviolets. Colors only birds can see, in their mating rituals, in the feathers of prospective mates. Or colors only underwater animals can see in the ocean's depth beneath the reach of solar light. x-rays, for example. x-rays fascinated Fos. First time he saw an x-ray image in a magazine when he was still a boy, it captured his attention, totally. He stared at it the way a person stares into an icon during prayer. It was an x-ray of a human leg. You could tell it was a left leg from the way the foot bones were arranged. There was something ghostly in them, Fos thought—in the bones. There was something spectral in the picture. As if the image, in and of itself, possessed a soul. Or captured one. He tore it out and carried it inside his billfold, kept it hidden in his pocket for luck, for prayer, for the same reason someone else would keep a rabbit's foot. Subsequently, he made a point of reading everything he could about the subject—how x-rays are made, how they'd been discovered, who invented the photographic process of fixing them to film. When he was only twelve he wrote off to one Dr. George Johnson of Boston, President of the American Roentgen Ray Society, to inquire how he could become a member of their august scientific circle. Roentgen, for whom the Society had been named, had "discovered" rays emanating from a cathode-ray tube in 1895,

five years after Fos was born. One year after that the Frenchman Becquerel noticed energetic radiation emanating from a uranium salt when they'd fogged a photographic plate that he'd placed next to it by accident. Two years later Pierre and Marie Curie discovered radium—a new element—in uranium ore. The radium, itself, owned the capacity to *glow.* Soon after the Curies' discovery, Becquerel went to visit them at their Paris laboratory and asked if he could take a sample of their new element home with him for experiment. They gave him a phial of liquid radium which Becquerel placed in his waistcoat pocket next to his pocket watch. By the time he undressed that night, six hours later, the radium had burned an outline of the phial onto the surface of his skin through three layers of clothing and had irradiated the numbers on his pocket watch so he could read them in the dark. In other words: they glowed.

Soon before he joined up to go to War, Fos had read that a watch factory in Salem, North Carolina, had closed down because a dozen factory workers, watchface painters, had developed a mysterious bone disease, necrosis of the jawbone, and subsequently died. What the article in the local paper hadn't said was why only the painters at the watch factory had fallen ill. But Fos had guessed the reason. Working on a field that small, painting lines the livelong day on a circle half the size of a silver dollar, the watch painters had a built-in opportunity to attract hazard to their bones, especially if the paint contained pure radium. No doubt for precision and to perfect their points, every quarter hour—maybe even every minute-on-the-minute—the painters must have licked their brushes. So Fos understood the culinary subtleties the Frenchman had referred to when he said, Don't eat it. Fos was never one for insubordination but the truth was until he saw the radium he'd been thinking he should come clean to the Canadian and tell him to tell the Frenchmen that there'd been a regimental error and they'd recruited the wrong guy. It would have been a stupid thing to do, Fos knew. Even in so short a time as he'd been in France he'd heard the horror stories about what they could expect once they moved into the frontline trenches. At least if he played along here with the Frenchies he might reasonably expect to stay *behind* the front. When he thought about it he knew he was better off making flares and staying un-

der cover than strapping his gas mask on, arming His Trusty with its bayonet and hurling his entirety against sure desolation, land mines, and the unknown of that hell between the trenches they called No mans land. Still, until he saw the radium Fos wasn't keen on simply playing out his Army time setting loose a load of chemistry into French heaven. But when he saw the radium he knew at once there was before him something he had dreamed of: Chance of a lifetime. It wasn't the last time nature's active miracles would offer Fos A Chance, but they weren't always as self-evident as that one was. That one was a beaut—the first step in a chain reaction of events that soon had Fos sharing a cramped space dubbed the Boom Bunker in the trenches on the American Line southwest of Verdun outside the town of St. Mihiel with an intense fella from Tennessee they called "Flash" Handy who would ultimately change Fos's life. Flash was the regimental photographer and he and Fos were the only boys—other than the mustard gas and chlorine boys in the Chem Corps—who were supplied with active chemicals on the front line. Fos had all the oxidizers, neons, burn reducers, phosphorescents, and fluorescents he needed to create a Light at the end of every tunnel for the doughboys in their darkest hours: Flash had the acid baths, developers, gum-bichromates and platinum and silver powders for his photographs. If the Jerries had ever landed a live one on them Flash and Fos had enough volatility in store to take the whole American Expeditionary Force one way to the moon. Fos, himself, took a nasty dose of mustard gas on the September morning the First Army made their raid on St. Mihiel, and after that his eyes watered continuously. He couldn't see without his specs in daylight, but his night vision stayed the same as it had always been—and it had always been near superhuman. It was legendary, all the things that Fos could see that others couldn't in the dark. Which meant that not only was he indispensible on night maneuvers in the field but he was also an enlightened wizard in the darkroom—a fact which Flash was quick to grasp. Fos could make a photographic print with such resulting subtle nuance and precision it seemed the image that emerged onto the photographic paper had been bled from Fos's hands. When the armistice was called on November 11, Flash's unit was dispatched to Rouen for the Occupation, while Fos's went to Metz, and the

two of them were forced to go their separate ways. But when Fos returned to Kitty Hawk in the late winter of '19, Flash offered him a partnership in his studio in Knoxville, Tennessee. Fos packed his x-ray books and tide charts into his Army footlocker and drove his old Ford truck away from the Atlantic Coast on the hottest August morning of that year on record. For as long as anyone could remember, Fos's people had been lightermen in and around the shoals and hoaxing sands of the Outer Banks—conveyancers of cargo in scoop-hulled longboats called *lighters* in those waters—until the family tree had pruned down to a single shoot, *Fos,* like a pot-bound exotic in an orangerie too strenuously pollarded. Tidal salts ran in his blood. As he drove away that blistering morning and the land fell off behind him in the first swell of its Continental self, Fos felt a tightness in his chest and his eyes began to water. Well his eyes were always watering, fogging up his glasses. Blister gas, the boys had called the mustard, because that's what it did. You couldn't see it coming and it didn't hit you right away but several hours after it got to you it blistered every living tissue it had touched—in Fos's case, his corneas and tear ducts. The specs—rimless so he didn't have to view the world through picture frames—gave his face a bookish absent-minded look, and the fact that he was teary most the time endeared him to old folks and certain kinds of women. But the truth was, for that first year after he was demobilized, that first year in Tennessee, Fos eschewed the company of the gentler sex and stayed almost entirely to himself, either in the darkroom or in his rented place above a bakery, studying about light and working on his theories how to capture it. Fos had several theories that first year. One thing that the War had taught him—and that working under Flash's tutelage added to—was how to make a framework for experiment. His experience in the Army had given him a confidence in his ability to adapt and improvise, to think sideways. Fos had no formal education beyond what was handed out to every child by the State of North Carolina in its local schools, but what being in the War and being in the Army had shown him was that people by and large tend naturally toward light, toward its source, as sunflowers do in a field. People lean, either in their dreams or in their actions, toward that place where they suspect their inner lights are coming from. Whether they call it

God or conscience or the manual of Army protocol, people sublime toward where their inner fire burns, and given enough fuel for thought and a level playing field to dream on, anyone can leave a fingerprint on the blank of history. That's what Fos believed. Adapt and improvise—he'd read his Darwin, he was a fan of H. G. Wells, and he spent most his time that first year after the Armistice inventing ways of showing people properties of *light,* how things that they believed were hidden in the natural world could be revealed in unexpected ways. Some of the methods he devised were easy science and mere theater—but he got a kick from holding people spellbound. He rigged his truck with tricks he'd picked up, making showy things like Roman candles, fireworks, and pinwheels, and drove from town to town through the muddy rural landscape of the Smoky Mountains outside Knoxville on his days off, like a one-man circus, picking up a free meal now and then, sometimes even pulling in a dime or two. That first year he worked straight through the summer, running the business single-handed when Flash took off to New York City and Niagara Falls with a grass widow from Chattanooga he was hoping not to have to marry. By the end of Fos's second summer in Tennessee he had earned two weeks' vacation and he knew where he wanted most to spend it. Back on the shining shore where he'd experienced his first miracle of light. Back home on the Banks.

Fos's theory—the one he hoped to be able to develop into a serious research paper, maybe even get it published in a scientific journal—was that creatures who produce their own light don't emit light randomly. Random light emission in, say, a creature like a firefly wouldn't make a particle of sense in Fos's view. He had studied them, the fireflies, keeping them in jars and letting them fly around his rented room. He kept charts and tables of their rates of radiance. He noted their responses to various controlled conditions. He ended up with inconclusive data and gallons of dead bugs but the evidence suggested *moonshine* was a factor. Fluctuations in celestial lumens. When the moon was waxing, full, or gibbous, the fireflies emitted light more frequently and for longer periods than when the sky was cloudy or the moon was new, and Fos's theory was that these two facts must constitute a cause-and-effect relationship. If they did, then the same cause-and-effect might exist between celestial lights and other bio-

luminescences, between starlight and other light-emitting creatures, between moonlight and the radiance that emanates from breaking surf. Back home on the Banks was the place to test this theory with photographs and observations, Fos believed—and the Perseid meteor shower, peaking as it did, like clockwork, every summer near August 12, was the perfect time. Fos's Farmer's Almanac of 1921 told him that the moon would be waxing through those first two weeks of August, getting full on Thursday morning the 18th—nocturnal celestial conditions which couldn't be more beneficial for conducting his experiments. Not only would there be more lights in the sky as the earth clocked through the arc of cosmic dust in the constellation Perseus, but Sister Moon, our best and closest nightlight, would be unveiling more of her pale face, increasing her surface of reflection, every evening on the very nights the stars in Perseus would be showering down. On the darkest night in August, the night of the new moon, Fos packed his tent and camp bed, Army mess kit, tripod, and his box and pinhole cameras, canisters of water, and some tins of food into the back of the Ford truck, checked and rechecked his equipment, and sipped coffee while he watched the sky and timed the dawn against the Almanac to verify its accuracy. Sure enough the sun rose as predicted from the east on the dot at 5:44 over Knoxville, longitude west 83.9', lat. N. 36 and zero. Fos went back up to his rented room, shaved and packed his razor, and put on a clean shirt, smoothed the thin white bedspread one last time on his bachelor's bed, closed the door behind him and went downstairs to the aroma of baked bread coming from the bakery. Flash was waiting for him by the truck, in a shirt without a collar, cup of coffee in one hand, freshly baked Knoxville cruller in the other. The morning sky had clouded over. Hey, Flash said. Hey, Fos acknowledged. It was their standard greeting. Came to see you off, Flash said. Uncharacteristically for the fashion of the time, neither of them wore a hat. Flash because he claimed it made it easier to kiss a woman, and Fos because he didn't like to shade his eyes.

Weather comin, Flash prognosticated.

Fos nodded. Yep.

Rain, Flash emphasized. An' don't we know too well what *that'll* mean.

Fos pressed his lips together.

Mud, Flash said.

Fos wiped a teardrop from his eye.

Mud without the poetry, Flash observed. It was a reference to their war experience. Fos had once come into their bunker from an open gun emplacement wearing mud up to his shoulders and said, *Every other man you meet here thinks he is a poet* and Flash had answered, Poetry and mud. That's what Thomas Jefferson swore all men are made of. One half poetry. Other half of mud.

Maybe I'll outrun it, Fos now told him.

Flash contained a laugh. Fos was a legendary hazard on the road. He looked around too much.

It starts comin down, Flash said, you won't make it past those mountains.

Fos nodded. Roads in Tennessee were ruts cut against sharecropper earth. Notorious for soil that wouldn't root. Notorious for mud.

I'll be all right once I get to North Carolina.

If you get to North Carolina.

They were standing by the truck that way men do when they like each other, standing about a foot apart, shoulders back and chests thrown out so their hidden hearts could pound at one another.

Well you take care and don't hurry back on my account, Flash said.

Fos opened the door and hauled himself into the driver's seat.

You wait a day the rain will end, Flash told him.

Can't wait, Fos said.

Flash stepped back and cast his eyes along the bodywork.

Well you know I think you're a fool, Foster, for what you are about to do.

I'm always a fool for what I do, Fos said.

Flash raised his eyebrows and inclined his head toward what Fos had painted on the truck and chuckled, Ain't *that* the truth.

So long, Fos said.

Flash raised his chin. Drive careful now, he called. An' don't come back without a woman!

Fos shook his head. Flash spent as much time thinking about women as Fos did thinking about light. In his entire life Fos had probably never thought about a woman half as much as Flash thought about a different one each day. He backed the truck into the street and headed out of Knoxville, east, toward the Great Smokies, the Appalachian Trail, the state border and Ashville. He hoped to camp somewhere between Ashville and Winston-Salem that first night but the sky started to come down on him in sheets right after Gatlinburg and made the narrow Newfound Gap Road into a chuting river. And even over mountains men insist on building roads as if they'd never heard the rumor *Water runs downhill* so Fos was stalled for most the afternoon leeward of Mount Collins waiting for the clouds to shred. Around three a bald sun made a stab at holding the spotlight through a thickening sky and Fos gained some miles but by five the thunder train was on the roll again in the nearing distance. Just before six o'clock coming down the Gap beside the Oconaluftee River near the Blue Ridge north of Cherokee Fos's headlamps highlighted a beached Model-T stuck like a hog in mud, angled something awful, like tipsy freight balanced on a catapult. Bent against its glistening frame and seeming to be strapped to it like prayer to fate were two rain-drenched figures, pushing with all the visible effect of gravity on hills of granite.

Fos pulled the truck in front of them and got out to help.

The wind was something terrible.

I got some rope with me in the truck—he shouted.

The man that he was yelling at had his face turned from him, from the wind, but Fos assessed he was of ample size, broad-shouldered, massive muscled, and with hands like hams.

I think—if we can rock her—we can rock her front wheels loose, the big man shouted—*if you go round t'other side an' push together with my wife—*

Fos took his glasses off and folded them inside his pocket and went around the tilted Ford and took up a position on the right side of the chassis on an axis to the stronger man, behind the narrow figure of a woman with black hair dripping down the pale dress clinging to her spine and bony hips. She didn't turn around to look at him at all as Fos steadied his balance and shouldered to the job. On a signal from the other man, they all

three threw their bodies into it and the car rocked forward. Once more they gave a heave and Fos's head and shoulders carried forward in exertion to within an inch of the woman's back and he could smell her. Blinking in the rain he saw her bones smooth as horn beneath the fabric of her dress where it clung flat as oil on water to her form, he saw the flat spades of her scapulae and her ropy spine rising from the meagre compass of her unspanned hips toward the frail width of her slender shoulders. Beneath her hair she had the longest whitest neck that he had ever seen. He could have cracked her like a chicken bone. Not once did she turn her face toward him, even after all their effort righted the car back onto the rutted road. Fos let the Model-T precede him down the treacherous pass and as the Ford turned off the gutted route at the road for Cherokee the last image he retained of her was her pale profile against the darkness in his lamp lights, her elegant neck arching like a fisher's rod hooked by an insatiable hunger into its ultimate submission.

That night he camped under a squally sky in a windswept field ten miles on the Tennessee side of Ashville and harried the odds over in his mind of how many nights he'd have to sacrifice to weather if the rain kept up. Or worse, if there was cloud cover over the Banks during the meteor shower. The rain had bogged his progress and dampened his initial hopes. He was restless and preoccupied and nothing that he touched felt dry. He lit a candle and watched the shadows on the tent and listened to the rain against the canvas. He ate a cold meal of hash and beans directly from their tins, then he lay down on the camp bed under a thin blanket that smelled of damp and thought about the stars behind the clouds. He thought about the woman's neck. It was true, what Flash had said about the mud, Fos thought. About the poetry. Not since his time in France had Fos seen so much mud as he had today. Nor known so many grown men who relied on rhymes and starry wishing for their entertainment. For their salvation. For their souls. Worst night he ever lived through over there had been a night like this one. Rain and thunder running through the trenches sideways. Fos was holed up flat against a mud retaining wall inside a dugout no wider than his shoulders with a boy from Massachusetts next to him while they took a beating overhead. The noise was stupefying but between the rounds

there came a hollow silence which was worse because you knew the Jerries were reloading those big guns. Watcha got there? Fos asked the boy during the brief lull. The boy had a book inside his jacket between two buttons on his chest just above his heart as if it might protect him from a piece of shrapnel.

Poetry, the boy said.

They took another round and then the boy said, Emily Dickinson.

Fos remembered now that he'd never heard the name before. Even now he knew he probably would have forgotten what the boy was reading if what had happened to him next had never happened.

He remembered that they took a pounding for a while and then when he got the chance the boy had shouted, *I dreamed last night I was making love to her!*

Fos had kept his silence in the dark, hoping that would end it.

In the dream I could see how white she was! the boy had shouted. *I could feel her bones—!*

Fos remembered that he'd wondered how a boy that young knew what making love was.

He remembered thinking maybe he should ask the boy what making love was like before they both got shot. But then the boy reached over in the dark and grabbed Fos by the shoulder and shouted, *She was so thin and white! It was like flying on a swan with my arms around its neck—!*

Fos turned his head to the darker side of the tent to keep from thinking about what had happened after that. He lifted his arm and made a shadow in the candlelight on the tent canvas. He made his hand into a shadow of a duck. He made his arm into a snake. He made a swan. He arched his hand and moved the swan across the side of the tent, like it was flying.

The boy had died six inches away from him, his hand still holding onto Fos's shoulder.

And Fos had never read any poetry by whats-her-name. Emily Dickinson.

He slipped his glasses off and blew the candle out and let the rain set up its rhythm in his thoughts.

Like flying with your arms around the white neck of a swan, he contemplated.

He rolled over in the dark.

Well, he thought, if that's what all the fuss is all about then I'm not missing much.

Still.

A radiance inside him told him he was wrong.

. . . like showers of silver chips, the foam-flakes flew over her bulwarks; then all this desolate vacuity of life went away . . .

HERMAN MELVILLE, *Moby-Dick,* "The Spirit-Spout"

the glory hole

At noon on Saturday, August 6, 1921, Ray Foster smelled the ocean for the first time in two years.

The air that carried unseen evidence of the Atlantic insinuated itself so completely through his senses Fos could taste the Gulf Stream and his eyes began to weep seawater. He was late—mud and rain had held him up, he'd been three days behind the wheel and he was itchy with frustration. He was not a man who took to slowpoke travel. He liked to set a *pace.* So when he had to decelerate to a dogtrot, stuck for nearly half an hour on the tail of a mule-drawn buckboard on a go-nowhere dirt track he hadn't meant to be on in the first place somewhere west of Manteo on Roanoke Island looking for a shortcut to the causeway to Nags Head, Fos started to get irritable. Fact was, he was lost. Low on fuel, and with that stubborn pride men have when they're absolutely sure they know the territory better than they really do, he hadn't stopped to ask directions to a filling station in Manteo and now he was stalled behind a throwback to the nineteenth century on a dusty trail between the cotton and potato fields leading Lord knew where while what he wanted was to find a pump and set up camp before the sun sank in a blaze of burnished color into Roanoke Sound where he still might have a chance to finally see what he'd driven all this way to

see, his haunting noctilucent destination. He hit his hooter but the driver of the mule cart acted deaf to Fos's fussing and slowed the mule cart down. He was hauling sand. Fos knew *sandbags* when he saw them, from the trenches, and this fella was hauling half a ton of them. Who in God's creation would haul sand out to the ocean? Fos tried to figure. Unless he was hauling it back *from,* which meant Fos was driving in the wrong direction. Panicking, he poked his head out the window into the dust kicked up by the mule and looked up at the sun and took his bearings and satisfied himself that he was heading *east,* the right way. When he tucked his head back in and looked at the road again he saw a narrow chance to go around the cart and gunned the truck for all that Mr. Ford's quartet of cylinders was worth and left a gritty cloud of carbon in the heavy August air for the driver and his mule to chew on. Fos's mood lightened and he smiled to himself and one mile down that same dirt road with the first seagulls swooning overhead and the Sound so close he could hear it lapping, the truck lurched abruptly, sputtered, coughed, and drifted to a halt beside a sand track running from the road between the dunes past an unpainted wooden house to a tumbledown barn with a black smokestack on its tarpaper roof, out of which a column of brown smoke was rising into the yellow sky. Fos tried to start her up, tried again, then got out, mopped his forehead with his handkerchief and eyed the house and barn. *Moonshiners,* he reckoned. Who else would be stoking up a fire on a baking summer afternoon? Just the way his luck was running he could get his head blown off by some suspicious local spirit leveler on top of everything else that had gone wrong for him this trip. But then he saw a gas pump by the barn. He got his fuel can from the truck and started down the sandy path in the direction of the house. Nothing moved except a slight breeze through the sea oats on the dunes. When he paused before the house he thought it looked deserted. Then a dog appeared out of the barn and growled. It ran back in again, then out, then in, then set its head down low between its forelegs with a bead on Fos and started barking. It was one of those coondoggie kind of canines that you see down South, all whelped from the same bitch on day one of Creation, all identical and dumb and mangy, their entire breed a single color, their entire corps the color of their teeth. Fos inched forward and the dog retreated and stopped barking as Fos stepped across

the shadow line into what he expected would be the cool murk of the country barn.

The heat that hit him was a barrier, just like a heavy curtain, fogging up his specs.

All along the walls and from the rafters Fos could make out floating orbs of color like the colors of cathedral windowpanes he'd seen in France. He took his glasses off and wiped them. Then he peered through them again. Sure enough, there was glass reflecting all around him—green glass, mauve and strident yellow, a red as soft as hearts of beachplum blossoms. Blue that was the pure expression of high heaven. In the center of this color wheel there was a large man in a grimy singlet and a leather apron with his back to Fos, intent upon the substance in the fiery maw of the long came that he was turning, burning bright and molten in that part of the furnace called the glory hole.

—'scuse me, Fos interrupted.

The glassblower turned his head away from the bright furnace and scowled at Fos beneath his dark eyebrows over his massive shoulder.

—my truck, Fos said and gestured toward the door.

Be a minute, the glassblower said, and Fos watched him as he gave the came a deft rotation through the flames then lifted the long pipe into the air and blew through it. The glowing knob on the came's end shivered into life and began to breathe, ballooning. When it had achieved a certain volume the glassblower pried it from the pipe and plunged it in a tub of water, where it seized. Then, unmindful of his audience, he began the process, yet again.

Fos was mesmerized. He'd never seen a glassblower at work and he very quickly forgot his rush to get to the Atlantic before the sun set. He put the gas can down and approached the furnace.

Your colors are—they're really somethin, he remarked.

The glassblower looked him over. You know color, do you?

Well, some. That blue, for instance. Fos pointed to a flagon on the rafter overhead from which a warm azure aurora arose.

The glassblower flashed a look at Fos.

I used t' make a firework that color outta copper powder, Fos told him. Paris green, he said.

The glassblower annealed a knob of jelly on the came's end, in readiness to fire it, and smiled at Fos. That there one's a ten-year-old. Caint come by Paris green that pure no more these days. Caint come by it a'tall, not since the War.

Fos wrinkled his brow and ventured a step forward. You mean t' say you've run out of Paris green?

I an' evr'y tother glassman between here an' Flor'da.

I have some in my truck.

Say *what—?*

In my truck. He pointed toward the door. See I run outta gas an'—you're welcome to it. You'll make more of it than I ever could.

Son, if you ain't some divil you're an angel dropped to earth an' I'll be damned. Where'd you come by Paris green?

In the War. In France. I was a—

Stand back, boy, an' let me finish this here rod an' then we'll talk. I don't want you gettin scalded.

Fos stepped back and the glassblower repeated the process only this time the molten globe on the came's end was as big as a prize plum, and when it was heated to a point where it was throbbing to be blown, the glassblower swung the came from the hot fire of the furnace into the air in front of Fos and blew. As Fos watched through his watery field of vision an apparition on the came's end inflated like the bloater of a frog's neck and grew into a shining pearl, then an enlarging bubble, a shimmering orb around an expansive heart of nothing but pure air. Then, in front of Fos's eyes, the miracle occurred.

Inside the quivering bubble on the end of the blowpipe there appeared a pale shape like a ghost inside a mirror, a visible and visiting spook inside a crystal ball.

Fos leaned toward it in the heat and smudged his specs with perspiration.

Inside the sphere, like life held in solution in a specimen jar, there appeared a tiny woman with a halo, in a dress the color of pearl, staring at him from inside the bubble, upside down.

Fos tilted his head to set her upright in his vision when, from behind him, there came a voice that asked, That your truck in front out in th' road?

Fos turned and saw an illusion of light in the shape of a woman framed by the barn door.

He looked back at her upside-down image reflected in the glass bubble, then back at her, then took his specs off, cleaned them in a hurry and fumbled them back on.

Keepin out the sandman, Fos thought she said.

—the sandman? he repeated.

Sandman here? the glassblower raised, taking the pipe from out his mouth.

Yeah, Pa, he just got here, she answered. He coulda gone around it, she explained to Fos, but he mighta gotten stuck. So I went ahead an' moved it.

"Moved" it?

Caint go without my sandman, the glassblower confirmed. Not for long.

I only moved it so the sandman—

You moved my truck?

She nodded.

But it's outta gas, Fos said.

It ain't.

It is. It wouldn't start.

Well mebbe but I started it.

She starts things, the glassblower said. Speshly she starts automobiles. He put his mouth back to the pipe. Donja? he said, then he blew.

Your magneto wires were all damp, she said to Fos. So I wiped 'em.

Fos looked at her hands.

Lord knows where he got the courage but he said, Show me.

She shrugged and started from the barn and Fos, transfixed and speechless, floated off the ground and followed her.

Out in the sun they stopped to look at one another. She was really something, Fos saw. Compact, for a woman, and on the short side, but—in his eyes, at least—she *shimmered.* Skin so pale it seemed made in part of air, eyes the size of pigeons' eggs, light green shot through with gold and pink and indigo and lustered like the nacre on the inside of a mussel shell. Her hair was like, well it was like lemonade, Fos decided, and you could hardly make her eyebrows out at all.

On her part, she was noting he was tidy.

She liked his hands, the length of his fingers. They had a yellow stain on them, she noticed, but he kept his nails clean. He seemed a man who wore personal fussiness with ease, someone who knew how to take care of linen. But there was something strange and otherworldly about his eyes. For one thing, they were set wide apart under a flat anvil brow that lent him, straight on, the blunt uncomprehending look of a sheep lost in the woods. And for another thing, he seemed uncommonly tearful.

But in the way that it's said a penguin resembles a dolphin when they both swim under water, then what she and Fos might have been noticing about the other was the pattern of that wake pulsing between them, those measured unseen waves generated from the synchronized beating of their hearts.

Neither one was any beauty, and they knew it. For the times, and at their ages, they were both far enough along in years to think they'd missed the boat for lifelong mating. Fos was thirty-one, or would be in September. She was five years younger.

Whatsa matter with your eyes? she asked him, standing in the sandy yard outside the barn. He could hear what sounded like a donkey braying somewhere near. You got somethin in 'em?

No. Yes. I mean—

He took a breath and tried to straighten out his thoughts.

The way she looked was having an effect on him.

He wanted to ask her what her name was but he couldn't string the words together that would do it, so instead he said, My eyes got burned. I mean, they got somethin in 'em. In the War. That's what's wrong with 'em. Me an' the men I was with got gassed by the Germans.

What kinda? she said. Mustard or chlorine?

She seemed to speak strung out—in ellipses, Fos noticed—like she was hanging out the wash. He could see the spaces in between her words.

Mustard, he explained.

How long ago was that? she asked.

Three years.

Well that ain't normal, is it? You should be over it by now. You shoulda cried it out.

Fos stared at the footprints she'd left in the sand. The thing is, he said. The way I look at it. I'm lucky I'm alive. There were lots less lucky.

I guess you saw it all, she said.

He looked straight at her.

There's some things I haven't seen yet, he answered, and he blushed.

She appreciated that. The blushing.

He was so immobilized by her he hadn't noticed what was going on around them until he heard the braying noise again and he saw the same mule cart that had slowed him earlier pulled up in the shade beside the barn. The half of the mule that was the donkey half was winning out over the half that was its native horse sense and the mule was braying its fool head off, sending up a hellish noise, laughing like the devil with its lips curled back and its rancid teeth exposed.

Fos laughed with it.

Oh the *sandman,* he acknowledged.

Pa's somethin crazy about sand, she said. She put her hands over her ears and moved down the sand track, away from the noise, toward the road and his truck. You can't make your glass without it, she remarked.

Well, these parts, there's plenty of it, Fos observed.

That's what I say to Pa but still he swears it's purer over in County Tyrell than here in County Dare. So he has it delivered. Just goes to prove, I guess. People always think the grass is greener.

She gestured toward the truck.

Where you been you picked up so much red mud?

Tennessee.

That'll do it, she said. Don't get mud that color out here. Pa and I got relations over there. In Tennessee. On Clinch River. My momma's side. But, still. Cousins.

Oh Clinch River, sure, Fos said. That's close to where I'm livin now. In Knoxville.

What's that you got written there? Under the mud.

That's my advertisement.

Fos stopped and dug into his back pocket and brought out his billfold and handed her a card.

What's this? she said.

Read it.

He watched her read. Fos noticed that she didn't need to move her lips to read it, either.

That's me, he said proudly.

He pointed to a line of printing on the card.

Ray, he pretended to be reading. Ray Foster. Well people call me Fos.

Ray, she repeated, drawling what there was to draw all out.

Raaaaaaay. I like it. It has a way about it. Like ray a' hope. Ray a' sunshine.

Fos was blushing.

Well, he said.

—*ray*dio.

What I hear most, you know, from waitresses an' such, is ex. Waitresses, especially, they hear my name they want to talk about their *exes,* you know. Their *ex*-Rays.

She blinked.

Oh, she said. I get it. See that wouldn't work for me.

What.

X-Opal.

Fos stared at her.

But it works for you. *X*-Ray. That's kinda cute.

Did you say your name is Opal?

Yeah. Why areya lookin at me that way?

'Cause you're like one.

Like an Opal?

Like the, you know, the precious stone.

That's what Pa thought when I was born. Coz I was sorta blue. For a while they thought I was albino. You know. Because of my white hair.

It's nice, I like it. Your hair. You get to see what you'll look like when you're old.

She studied his card again.

What's this mean—? Phen-o-men— . . . ?

Phenomenologist, Fos said.

Ray Foster, she read. Phee-no-men-ologist.

Yep.

Is that what it says on the truck, too?