

Elizabeth Swados

Judgment

I never said no,
never really said no.
Not to the men
even with their stubble
and their bellies.
Not to the women
with sour wine on their breath.
It was a time when I believed
the Gods were watching me
and “no” to a lover
was spit on a huge holy foot.
Now I say no all the time
except there’s no one there.
So my God theory
has never actually been tested
and I still live as if
the lever is in his hands.

Alison Lorber

All the Words You Sing

Red hair dye crushed through Nicoletta's fingers. In a bathroom mirror more shard than glass, her hair piled on her head, she saw her face burn under Clairol's asphyxiating chemicals. Her dark eyes narrowed either at the deception or the chemistry that created it. She'd already opened the window, but it only opened to another garden apartment, to another window she could almost reach if she were just a little taller. She was nineteen but could still hope. She leaned her face against the screen to catch any breath she could, while the dye scalded her brunette hair into a color only the rarest of women had been born with.

The plastic gloves on her hands wrinkled bloody while her watch ticked from the safety of the soap dish. Her sentence was counted in minutes, unlike Eddie's, counted in years. He had wrapped her fingers around a stolen onyx ring. "Not worth enough to sell," he told her in a voice that tempted girls to hear him sing rock 'n roll from back in the decade when Bill Haley and the Comets caused riots. So she was only one of many, whereas there was only one of him—bare arms, Les Paul Deluxe, and a passion that only the rarest of men would not try to hide. He was not much taller than she was, but there was no equality between them, not when he closed his eyes to her and opened his mouth.

The first night the house lights flashed on a woman with shining red hair to her waist and a diamond ring on her left hand, Eddie caught his breath in the midst of "Fever" to bend the microphone toward her. Her husband dropped his beer to snatch her back. It was then Nicoletta resolved to search out that precious color from the come-hither boxes that lined the beauty supply store.

For she had the fear of heartbreak perpetually with her, praying on her knees that time was not so fast, and the women who pursued him not so insistent. Even winter nights they would pose in little more than leather jackets and desire, calling his name over the din of his ferocious band, and when Nicoletta wasn't seething, she was wondering how it would feel to be that wanted. And every once in a while, she would suck in her breath to see the other woman, blushing with her husband's arm wrapped around her. Nicoletta knew, even if the husband didn't, that his wife only leaned on his arm so she wouldn't swoon when Eddie finally discovered her in his spotlight audience. She wears her husband's ring, Nicoletta repeated to herself; even now his arm claims her neck. But that had not yet stopped Eddie from seeking her, and she wondered if the thief in him desired a woman with a diamond more than a woman without.

Dye crawled down the side of her face from her looping pile of hair. She prayed to her eyes, to whomever controlled her from above, to give her the only thing she wanted—not a B.F.A., not a studio job in Manhattan, not even a bank account that would pay a salon to color her, but all of her elusive Eddie's desire.

Her mother had sent her father to her earlier that July, his jaw set but his eyes pretending to be reasonable. He angled his Ranger XLT in front of her building into a parking space where a K car would have seemed a doubtful fit. He was breathing hard but trying to hide it after he'd run up the two flights. Nicoletta was not ready for this visit. Too late to make ice cubes, she offered him water warm as the room. Traffic south on the Parkway was unpredictable, since cars seemed to spontaneously combust around the Newark exit, and rubberneckers always crept whenever

they saw fire leaping from an engine. So she still wore pajama shorts and a T-shirt from the college she told everyone she'd attended, just not for how long.

Her father touched her flame-colored hair. "You're trying to look Irish?"

She closed her eyes. There was no other way to hide.

He drank some water and set the glass on the floor. His arms had a girth that came from cutting wood and hammering it together most of his life. "Gina, Angie, Josie came by the house, looking for you." He counted her high school friends off on his fingers, as if they were too numerous for him to remember without assistance.

"You told them where I was?"

"Your mom did." He shook his head. "I would've lied."

Ash from a factory incinerator drifted in from the window. It floated down to the empty couch and the TV with only three channels on the dial, to settle on the bare floor. Her father would not have constructed a building like this.

"Isn't it hard for you," he asked, staring at her bare feet. "To see him only twice a month?" She nodded but he didn't need to see her answer.

"So how could you do this for the rest of his life?"

"It won't be forever," she reassured him. "He'll be out in twenty-three months."

Her father rubbed his eyes with his fingers, as if trying to push them back in. "Nicky," he sighed, nearly kicking the water glass with his boot. "Do you think he won't ever go back inside?"

She stared at her father. "No."

"I don't want him to steal for you." He pulled out a folded piece of paper from the pocket of his shirt. "Yours," he said, unchaining himself from the wall to hand it to her.

Nicoletta unfolded a check for five hundred dollars, a contractor's decisive bid.

Her father raked his hand through his hair. "You can add another zero to that if you leave one zero in prison."

She crumpled the check in her fist. "What if someone had asked Mom to leave you if you were in trouble?"

"Trouble like losing a job?" He paused to let her lips burn. "Or trouble like robbing jewelry stores up and down New Jersey?"

"Some of them got their gold back." She clapped her hand over her mouth.

Her father stared at the most beautiful of his daughters as if she were in need of an exorcism. In the Church of the Madonna, her mother had rocked her linen-swathed body quiet at her baptism before handing her to his mother, who listened to WQXR every opera Saturday, always singing the doomed heroine's part during the glorious Italian performances. Now in an apartment more fit for his day laborers, her son's breath smothered as he faced a girl half his size with twice his determination. "Keep it."

Nicoletta would have reached for him, not to thank him, for he almost made her doubt what she knew she wanted, but to let him know she also could not control what she wanted to most. He reached for her first, as if he would carry her down both flights of stairs and backwards through time if it would break the spell. He had to leave with his arms empty. But his kiss remained on her cheek, the only place where Eddie had never kissed her.

Between those too brief, too early prison visits, where she was condemned only to look at what she could not have, there was sharpening pencils at work, ignoring ringing phone calls from prying friends, stifling in her apartment. In that church of stone and stained glass, God had blessed her with mercy and her grandmother with magic, and it was in her imagination she

resided, aided by memory. It was real enough that she had to close her eyes whenever she thought of Eddie's mouth on hers, and let the chills seep through her skin, so that she shimmered Dairy Queen cool inside. She had won what all the girls wanted, but only for an icicle bright December, measured in the duration of a few thousand dollars' worth of bail. It was his freedom to spend, and he would drive her shivering to a rime-glazed beach in a T-bird with a cold heater. But after hours kissing, the leather interior sweltered against their bare skin. She had unrolled the window to let the snowflakes dust her glowing face. He tasted her again. "Like icing."

(All the Words You Sing continues in J Journal, Vol. 3, No. 2, fall 2010)

Paul Many

Harsh Petition

From above, it's mainly brown,
with the crooked white of a road
drawn like a part through coarse hair
on Sunday, scattered with silos,
gray rooftops, a water tower, a steeple.

Once on foot you can easily step off
its crumbling edges. Fields fly
in all directions; a local street
takes you through the whole county
before dying in a trainyard.

On a chill winter morning
walking a cleared field you see
only wheeling hawks, a groundhog,
sparrows skipping ridge to furrow
unmindful of the arrowheads,
rifle balls, uniform buttons buried below.

For in this place history is geography
sealed in the atlas of townspeople's
passions, pages lying against each other
like illicit lovers; latitude and longitude
describing their secret rendezvous.

Some have called for commination;
a harsh petition, since their only sin was
defying the limits of time and place,
obeying the dictates of their hearts—
the office of all our hearts after all.

But forget them for now. Most have.
Here's the churchyard flooded and frozen,
children skating on new ice, oblivious
and alive, inventing their own histories
as they laugh and dodge among the stones.

Gene Grabiner

Fingered

When the slim disease
came to Sing-Sing,
the hacks would shove in dinner
on metal trays
with brooms like a
quarantine shuffleboard.

He had blotches on his face,
or his teeth rotted or maybe
he was queer, with a strange cancer—
worked in the kitchen. So when other cons
burned his cell,
he got administrative segregation,
was sent to the hospital—
out of the narrow alleys
of their lives.

One time, this lifer met with the counselor,
filled out a form,
handed back the pen.
She just sat there,
pen untouched on the table.

When the slim disease
came to Clinton, hacks in the yard
were all from Mars. Goggles, gas masks;
what was coming?

In that beginning,
AIDS fingered eight-thousand when it came inside.

Charles Lowe

Your Flower Boy

Every day you take a bike ride to interview a manager and maybe a worker or two. You are given freedom with a few conditions. Your article should include something positive on the factory boss and must of course answer the 5 W's: who, what, when, where and why of the state-run enterprise. The other limit is that the article should all in all be no more than the size of a thumb.

Most of the factories you visit are on the city outskirts, so for the two or three hours on the way to your appointment, you get in the habit of conversing with a reader who understands what it means to live on a bicycle and not at home with a settled family. You start to make rare connections: for instance, between the bicyclists crowded together on Pu-Yin Avenue and the snapshots thrown together in a photo album. But when it rains, you aren't sure what hit you. The rain clutters up your eyes, and you don't even bother wiping away the droplets. A skilled driver does not need to wipe away the raindrops. The key is to protect your pleated skirt and pressed white blouse so that when a manager meets you, you appear important enough to drive to the factory in a private vehicle.

The manager smiles at you. Managers sense whether you are important by the way you carry yourself. Can you bike an hour and a half in a storm, over trolley car tracks that threaten to swallow up your thin tires before you hop off at the factory's front gate, lock the bicycle in front of the guardhouse and enter through the glass doors, depositing the raincoat while appearing as if you have not exercised, as if your legs are not stiffening while you study an assistant who is straining the tea twice in front of you to let you know that your story is meaningful?

If you can pull that stunt off, you are happy. You are better than happy. You can open all doors. You are one of them. Best to be one of them—better than having money, better than having friends. And if you are one of them, the manager reaches out his hand and returns your smile with the same courteous smile.

Then you know that you've made it. Every door opens. Every manager gives you the ingredients for a good story, confident that you can parse out the appropriate dish. Of course, that talent is not unusual. You are a reporter two years out of college but are already well versed in what they want. Their needs are simple. They want you to note that productivity is rising at a miraculous rate, that the managers are understanding and humane. The workplace is safe. The workers are contented.

So you tell each manager what he wants to hear. The managers in these places are men, and you find that it is best to tell men what they want to hear. So you tell this manager that you are astounded at the conditions of the factory and even more amazed at his industrious character. You are indeed most happy to have the opportunity to pedal three hours through a rain clattering up your eyes in order to see such a stunning factory. And you know that the manager is contented with the introduction and might even make the effort to call your editor to put in a good report.

Then you take out a plastic envelope and from that envelope remove your Japanese Instamatic and shoot several photos of the manager—smiling, holding the hand of a worker though this worker's hands have a soft untouched feel and might not be the hands of a worker. Then you offhandedly jot down a provisional headline, pending approval by the editor and the

police censor: *Teamwork at the No. 2 Elevator Factory*. Then you get the payback, the one that you are most certain of.

The manager takes you out to a fancy lunch at a nearby restaurant. This is your favorite part, going out to a nearby restaurant with a senior manager who is given free access to an unlimited expense account.

You are lucky that day. They have your favorite, river bass, a bluish fish sliced open from the gills, bones so thin as to vanish in your throat. The manager does not talk. His lead supervisor does not talk. They have all anticipated your story so that it is almost not necessary to write the byline; now comes the serious part, the trays full of steaming dumplings with translucent skin and tightly wound lips, string beans green with seeds and bluish green bok choy circling the edges of a plate, followed by a watermelon sliced finely, seeds big enough to gag your throat.

When the banquet is served up, you do not return right away to the offices of the *Tianjin Daily*. A few hours ride is not good for the digestion. Even in a downpour, you assemble your gear and tour the factory grounds, pretending to take useful pictures, none of which will make the newspaper, so you show your not-so-serious side, taking a photo of a bluish-green liquid, a photo that reminds you of water from a pressed vegetable. That vegetable excess leaks into a stream. Then you stop in front of a woman without a mask holding a blow torch that randomly sends off sparks that threaten to blind her or you, and because your photos will never see the light of day, you tell yourself that you have shot these photos for your husband who believes that you are an artist.

Of course, that is a joke. You will spread your photos on the kitchen table after dinner. But your husband will ignore the photos, and you will be left alone to smile at the shadow bouncing off the worker's blurred feet, which makes his toes appear awkward next to a jagged nail. Your husband will give the photos a brief scan before he plunges into an uninterrupted sleep.

You study him—your husband has thin arms that dissolve beneath the blankets. You remove one of those blankets. The apartment holds onto the humidity, and you think this fellow sweating must be your husband, and your real job is not to be a reporter. That is for show. Your real job is to take care of him, this stranger who sweats too much.

(*Your Flower Boy* continues in *J Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, fall 2010)

Larry “Ace” Boggess

Drug History

I didn't used to smoke & then I did &
then I went to prison where smoking was outlawed &
cigarettes were everywhere.

I drank a bit & there & mostly there &
mostly vodka which is like drinking water
without all the impurities &
with more hope—also hopelessness.

I always loved coffee—my gateway—
started at age 6 & started a pot at 6 a.m.
to give me a start come every sunrise since.

But it's the pills you want to know about—
the three *-dones* (*oxyco-*, *hydroco-*, *metha-*) &
the *-phines*, the *-phones*, the fiending—
but it's not the pills you want to know about;

it's the knives. The knives came after,
conjuring all the pretty wounds, blood lines
like a soldier's lead-shot canvas.

I'll tell you in confidence—
can you spare a *Marlboro* & a hot shot
of good old joe?—see, here's the why of it:

it's about wanting,
it's about silence, as if any-
one could hold that like a knife.

Sandra Hunter

In-Breath

Up on her toes between the white gauzy curtains, Gul, skinny body arched like a bird feather, arms stretched up-up-up, breathes in earth-smell from yesterday's storm, another one coming in, bruisey blue and purple clouds sinking over the city. Almost lunch time. This afternoon, best friend and just-like-brother Hari Prinsloo, seventeen and nearly four years older than Gul but the same height, big-teeth-and-all, is going to win the Underbone 115cc event at the Petronas Asia Bike Championships. First time ever in Chennai, *bhai*. But how will he do it if the stupid rain ruins everything?

Spins around and catches a flash of her untidy cloud of hair in the mirror. Better get dressed. Ma busy in the kitchen will shout upstairs for help any minute now. Saturday is Papa's sleeping-in morning but even he'll be getting ready, putting on extra-nice kurta for the fiancé visit.

Steps out of her room, head tilted for anything the house might say. Silence. Trails a hand along the old bumpy wallpaper along the corridor to Papa's meditation room. Even before she's there, she feels it. Papa has left his body again in that melting way that makes the whole upstairs slump and slide with him into its own meditation.

Papa lies on the pink, brushed cotton sheets on-sale-from-Amy's. But his quick and calm self—the one that can still pick her up and twirl her around, that eats chili peanuts with her on the back steps—has gone somewhere else.

Chest lifts slowly, pause, slow release. One and a bit per minute. It will become less until a single breath might last an hour. Papa is a sainted Guru-ji, like his father and grandfather before him, giving blessings-and-all to the faded-cotton-people who wait silently on the verandah to scurry in to touch his feet and scuttle away, who leave gifts of fruit, bundles of cloth and sometimes exciting fat rolls of cash on the back doorstep. Papa has always been here-one-minute-gone-the-next to Commune with the Universe. Sometimes he comes back happy as a lamb and ready for kesar ice-cream, sometimes he just seems *so* tired. "This cosmos business, beautiful and divine essence and all, Gul-Gul, but it's not for the faint of heart."

Ma gets mad with Papa's journeys. Gul and her older sister, Rishi, will wake up to Ma's loud whispering *Mr. S? Mr. S? Are you still here?* And then her signature groan *Not now*. Gul, bare feet silent on the wooden floor, follows Ma downstairs. Peeping from around the old grandfather clock unsteadily ticking as though it's on board a tipping ship, Gul watches Ma: *Guru-ji is in the heart of God. He will not be receiving today*. The faded-cotton visitors peer into the house, looking up at the ceiling as though Papa is hovering just above the orange and pink lamp. Maybe they're hoping for some last faint blessing, like waving goodbye to someone on the train.

Gul knows, for all the hushing and *you girls keep your voices down*, Papa can't be disturbed. He just doesn't hear anything. Sometimes heart hurts, isn't it, with missing him. She'd been small when she started sitting on the bare floor by the foot of the divan, waiting for him to come back. Little by little, slowly by slowly, she shifted onto the rug. No lightning bolt to punish her for seeking comfort for her aching bottom. Next step was *just* one finger to touch the holy feet, the holy stomach, the holy hand, even the holy beard. Nothing. No sudden opening of the

eyes or seizing of the naughty finger. Papa's spirit was really gone, maybe flying out somewhere across the galaxies like a big blue kite.

He looked like the dead saints, may-they-be-blessed, in pictures at school. So she started talking to him in small whispers. It became normal to slip into the meditation room and tell him about boring old History, the two-foot-long dead cobra in the gutter right outside the temple, the chai-wallah who gave her free sips of tea on the way home from school. And then the secrets: she'd eaten the last of the rose petal jam, stolen five rupees from the tea caddy where Ma kept house-keeping money, smuggled a cookie into temple and eaten it when she was meant to be praying.

It was *so* comforting to go to bed at night, knowing she'd told Papa everything. Almost like never having done anything wrong and much better than praying to a picture. So no need to tell Ma anything, isn't it?

Best of all, Papa never remembered any of it when he came back from pilgrimage. Just happy to see everyone. A little thin sometimes. Pilgrimage took days or even a whole week. And no food. Ma fasted on all the holidays and once made Rishi and Gul fast for a whole day. Rishi just went back to bed. Holy time, Ma said. Think about your sins and how to improve. But all Gul could think about was when-when-when she could finally eat dinner. Watching the clock creep jelly hands until she could only think of the horrible song, *chapati, dhal with aloo, raita and some pickle-oo*. And Papa could go for *days* without food, so he was very holy.

Ssh, ssh, slipping out of chappals, tip-toe in, step over the squeaky floor-board and the one with the loose nail. Sits down quietly on the small rug. Bends her head. "Papa, it's Gul." A deep, groaning sigh. Gul snaps upright. Is he angry? Is he speaking to her from his place of communion? Is something stuck in the holy windpipe? What if he were to choke? Would she be allowed to wake him? But Papa's breathing settles back, slower, slower, slower.

She leans over the divan and whispers, "Papa, did you forget Rishi's fiancé is coming today?" Twirls a loose thread hanging from the pink sheet. "I have to sit on a *stool*, Papa, just because I'm younger. And he goes on and on about how *backward* Indian women are and how American women are so this-and-that. I wish he'd just go and marry one of them. But then Rishi would be sad and I don't want that." Tugs the thread gently. "But, Papa, how could Rishi want to marry someone with such yellow eyes? Rishi says gold-green but *I* don't think so." Papa's face is calm, the eyelids peacefully closed, deep lines on either side of the nose and mouth, the long thin cheeks, the curling grey hairs in his eyebrows. What will happen if Papa doesn't come back? Heart beats loudly. Puts her hands over her heart to cover the noise.

"Don't stay away too long, will you?" Is it a sin to ask the Guru-ji to return? She wants to kiss his cheek, touch his hand, but that is forbidden. Is this Papa the same as the Guru-ji now far away? Jaideep is America-returned and *he's* different.

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