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HOW WE SAY GOOD-BYE

Joan Connor

The double bind of time. We live in time. We love outside of time. The treble bind of time. Time is a grinning gap-toothed juggler with three pins. Sometimes two tenses are in the air, sometimes one, sometimes three. Past and present. Future, past. Sometimes, one slips, lands. We wait, dizzy for the other pin to drop.

When you and I first meet, you are perhaps more interested than I. Mid-sentence in class, I raise my eyes and catch you staring too intently, too thoughtfully at me as I make my observation, which even I know really isn't that sharp. You chew your pencil deliberately. You avert your eyes and pretend to stare down the creative hemisphere of your brain. I find the gestures theatrical and think, *Who is this clown?* But still there is something, something in the blue sizzle of your eyes when I catch you staring. Someone inside, someone lost, someone asking to be freed from his too-blue eyes. Maybe I cannot bear the pain. Maybe I cannot bear the tenderness. Whatever my response is, I elect to dismiss it, to dismiss you.

My friend Lisa tells me that you have a crush on me.

"Don't be silly. That type never goes for me."

"What type?" she asks, her eyebrows arched.

"The glamour boy, the trust fund baby. The tan and handsome jock."

She smiles smugly. "He's playing." She nods toward the tennis courts. "And I guarantee that when you walk by, he'll miss the ball."

You miss the ball. Lisa and I are snickering about it when you land suddenly beside us on the grass. We take a beat to recover conversationally. Your shorts bloom green like the grass. You cross and uncross your perfect legs. You are grinning expectantly as you lounge shirtless next to me. Yes, you are beautiful, but you look as if you are waiting to be unwrapped. *Who* is this joker? I

wonder. I roll my eyes at Lisa. "It's time for the lecture." And we rise and walk away. I didn't know yet that the joker was wild.

In class, your offerings sound ponderous, as if you had planned what to say in advance. You struggle for the vocabulary, pausing long between words in your literary observations. You always sit across from me; I always ignore your eyes.

When you sit next to me at lunch, I fire direct questions at you to keep your interest at arm's length. Your responses are evasive. Only later will I enter the past that I saw burning in your eyes; only later will I see the jungle there, the eyes of the men who died as you stared into them, the miserable marriage that should have been put out of its misery years earlier, the misbegotten loves and lusts, the temporary homes, the lost friends. Only later will I hear what is, finally, a life, your life, a life like so many others, ordinary for all its stupidities, joys, deficiencies, bumbles. Only later will I start unraveling the skein that is the knot that your life has snarled into. But then, then, I only thought you insincere, evasive. Later, I would recognize it as elusive, find the elusiveness intriguing, then exasperating. But not when we first met, not then, not yet.

At school, I watched you with women, so many women, all too fond. So he is one of those, I thought, who must have them all, must be loved by them all. I watched them, blonde, gray, brunette, young girls and women aged beyond their state of grace, batting around you like gnats around a porch light burning late into Saturday night. I knew from conversation that you had one at home as well.

"Do you love her?" I asked.

"Love?" You shrugged. You smirked. It was a man's way of leaving the door ajar. I didn't choose to enter.

But others did. So many moth-like women flitting. You seemed aware of your effect, knew how you attracted. A porch light with consciousness, a porch light with will, luring all the luna moths. A faint whiff of singed wings clung to you. But I misidentified the odor that I'd recognize later: Citronella.

Later you would confide that, when you saw me walk

across the lawn on the first day, you thought of Daisy Buchanan. I didn't realize then the proleptic implication of your allusion to that careless life. But I saw Gatsby's aspirations in your easy elegance, your polished grace. Later you told me that I stood apart, an Ice Princess, but I was the big thaw. I couldn't know then that you wanted ice, ice chips in my hands, the gravelly pellets of dense cold, an Arctic heart.

But I was icy when we first met, frosty, because I was in love. I could afford for you to be meaningless. Your meaninglessness to me attracted you. You wanted to inscribe your meaning, define yourself for me in some way that might pertain. To be entered in the lexicon of my life—that attracted you. What then attracted me? Something did. Haltingly, I circled you. I stepped, stalked, backed off and balked. But those eyes, the sorrow in those eyes, the thwarted tenderness, the longing. There was a story in those eyes I had to read.

Then I read your story, a disjunctive narrative from the fragments of which a tiger rose, a patient careful tiger. And before I knew that I was creeping into the verdant undergrowth, I fell in love with your story, with the cat in you although I would not know it for a while. When I met your eyes, I only knew that I was hacking my way into the foliage deep, too deep. I instinctively sniffed trouble, and I followed its scent in until, one night, wine-lusty, I said to Lisa, "I am just going over there. I'm just going to go over there and crawl into bed with that man."

"It's a bad idea," she said.

It was, in fact, a perfect idea, but one only glimpsed in time passing, in the rearview mirror, like a white dog narrowly missed at a speed too fast to brake. I slept in my single bed.

On the Fourth of July at the dance, in coy, girlish gear, I asked you to dance. You grinned. You could grin small like a cat. Bemused. You looked bemused. But then I realized that I'd bumbled into spritzed territory—an outstanding involvement, an unresolved involvement. I watched your whispered shouting match play out on the dance floor. The two of you knew all the moves.

I returned to my dorm and slept fitfully in the steamy night, feeling out of myself as if I'd slipped into something less comfortable, a steamy caricature of a Tennessee Williams heroine. Randy cat on a hot tin bed, scratchy in my skin. Sometime near dawn, I fell asleep.

You invited me to the beach. I noted how you loved your body, how you arched catlike in yourself toward the sun. I noted your snoozy sexiness. I should have realized then; cats only belong to themselves. But I recall wanting just to stroke you, perverse, imperturbable cat. Longing for coolness, longing to lose myself in water, I swam alone, swam hard, swam harder than I normally would because I wanted to out-swim those blue, blue eyes. Or did I want to swim into them? Drowning is always difficult.

At school I kept my skin intact; I stayed inside of it. But on one of the bad days, I cried. I cried in front of you, my outside life encroaching with legal papers, feral lawyers, the electronic hum of phone call crises, my son pleading, "Come home now," a knot of telephone wire which I could not untangle long distance.

My wet, streaky face humiliated me; I could not raise my eyes, but, when I did, when I saw the answering pain in your eyes, pain parting like lips, parting like thighs with all the trust implicit in the cleaving, for the first time, I thought, *Here* was a man. Then, untimely then, one of the pretty moths flapped in, and you flew off. But still, it was enough. I had read the spectrum of your stare. Beyond the blue to you.

The first time we said good-bye, you wrote your name in my address book. An act of faith in itself: I grant you access. But you seemed surprised when I wrote you. You wrote back. You began calling, too, often. Your lovely hand-painted cards arrived like grace notes, unanticipated, thrilling for the octaves that they scaled. Then books. Always, you sent books. I read them all.

But the calls were the best gifts. They were like surprise bags at childhood church fairs, gifts that could never disappoint because they were all so unexpected. They could be very wrong,

like rubber gloves or deodorant, a planting calendar or a cigar snipper for a four-year old, but they were always surprises, always challenges for the imagination to find uses for them, places for them.

After school ended, we decided on the phone to meet once. Briefly. In August when I had to leave my son with his father for the first time, you drove me. The tenderness, your willingness stunned me. When I said good-bye to my son, I didn't cry because you were there. When I said good-bye to you, you tried to hug me. Terrified that you would try to kiss me, I ducked. I stared at your boots. Too soon. Confused. Not this. Not now. I was in love; wasn't I? In love with someone else.

You were not, you candidly told me under direct fire. But you lived with a woman. The loveless condo sounded sad to me, but I was newly displaced myself. When love ends, couples often persevere out of sheer perverseness. I passed no judgment. I was only grateful that, on one of the most difficult days of my life, I had not been alone. Later, I would revise that—on one of the most difficult days of my life, I was grateful that I had been with you.

A day of parting. Parting from my son whom I knew viscerally, every waking and sleeping moment from his fine fly-away hair to his untrimmed toe nails. The scent of his pajamas on the day after laundry day, the dampness of his pillow. Loss. I could not tolerate the loss. But you were there. You were tall and steady. Your shirt starched summer crisp and awning striped. You anchored me.

As I recall, we had coffee. Then you left to meet a former lover, she of the dance floor shouting match. When you hugged me good-bye, I stared at your boots and thought, I wish I had a boyfriend who wore boots like those. I didn't know yet that it wasn't really the boots.

You became someone. You became the phone calls, the letters. You became the person I confided in about my troubled love affair. The phone relieved us of our bodies. The phone granted us the anonymity of the confessional, in the secretiveness

of which I could reveal all of my secrets, all of my sins, even the private ones, the ones I could not even tell my lover because they were about him. Some I had not even told myself because they were about me. You listened to them all. Sad as they were, we laughed.

And you talked, too, pursuing the spark of your thought out to the vanishing point, pursuing it until I could no longer follow. I just listened, loving your intelligence. We talked books, madness, children, sex, love. What we did not talk about would be a shorter list than what we did. You told me tougher stories than I had ever wanted to hear, but, hearing them, I knew them as my own, the stories I had waited all of my life to hear.

You needed to talk. I needed to talk. We both listened with a greed born of solitariness. In the silence between us, the silence stretching telephone wire over three states, I realized that I had been meeting you for my entire life, that something was shifting into place, a slow turning. I knew that, for the first time, I was confronting something that I did not truly understand, someone whom I did not truly understand. For the first time, I comprehended mystery; its allure is its very unknowability, despite what is known. You cannot poke it, prod its facts into line, force understanding. You can only know a mystery by letting it remain unknown.

The facts: despite your French surname, you are Boston Irish.

Lapsed Catholic.

Former Marine. Former distinguished Marine. Two tours in Viet Nam.

Once married, once divorced. One son.

You ski. You run. You are an adrenaline junkie; its drug stands between you and the gathering madness of the past.

You write a streamlined, elegant prose.

You have a telepathic buzz that wires itself into my dreams, my thought patterns.

The cat in you was happiest in the East.

You drove a taxi for a while, lived on an island off the

coast of Maine, taught paraplegics how to ski, oriented children to the nighttime sky, led Outward Bound expeditions, drank cases of Absolut to still the demons, only to find them whirling back up, more vengeful, tasting blood.

You no longer drink.

You pop valium.

You sometimes sneak up on a quiet madness.

But while this is the text of you, it is not you. You are something other, something more than the sum of your parts, more than your sun-furrowed face, more than your chevron brows, your goofy mouth, your painful eyes, your past.

Sometimes I think that you were most yourself on the day before you boarded the bus for boot camp. But I am only guessing, guessing that you left your soul at the bus stop on the curb like a forgotten duffel. The good news: the soul never stays behind. If you have one, it always follows you. There is an eternal lost-and-found for essences. Yours still illuminates your eyes.

The phone call facts—I loved them. But I loved you in your letters, too—your wryness as you described family holidays, all the drunken uncles, your logily sexy mother, drill sergeant dad, the intelligence as you sketched your military past, the desperation, almost girlish, as you tried to convey your understanding of me, of us, the effort to write it right, to express the ineffable.

Sometimes you called me from the bath, your voice splashing in a languorous sexiness. I was seduced, and seduction induced panic. My friend, I cannot lose my friend. My resistance made you laugh; “We’re okay,” you reassured me. Perhaps you were wrong.

Why do male-female attachments always move toward a breaking point?

“I’m half in love with you already,” you said.

“Which half?” I asked.

You laughed; you were a man, I knew, who needed to laugh.

We made many tentative plans to meet, but you always

cancelled. I thought that I knew why. You'd seen the trouble in my eyes, too. For a year, we managed to stay apart with our lovers between us. On the phone, we perfected ways of saying good-bye:

"Ciao."

"Later, gator."

"Call you next week."

"Well, that really burned a hole in my bill."

"Good-bye."

On the phone, the conversation must always end, one must always say good-bye. On the phone, time is money. But still we purchased a strange intimacy on the phone. We started dreaming each other's dreams. We completed each other's sentences, thoughts, images, characters, stories. You always called me on the mornings when my boyfriend left; you knew I'd be upset about love gone awry.

I started waking to find you in my thoughts. What *is* this? I wondered. Who *is* this man? I had no answer; you were only yourself. The closeness terrified me. You were only a voice, a voice that had begun to haunt my heart.

When we weren't sparking and arcing, you told me stories. The stories you told: a decision not to marry the woman you lived with, a man jiggling on a high-tension wire against an orange sun, a home that sounded like a flat without emotional furniture, a prophet in the LA airport, the camaraderie of men who find true love in the threat of imminent death, your love for your son. "The last love I will ever feel," you said. Dolt, I thought, you're already in love again. You were not just slow of emotional study; you were glacial. I am as patient as murrain when the weight is worth bearing. Time and glaciers advance at the same pace. But I didn't know yet that your specialty was retreating.

After a year of conversation, I was nervous about seeing you at school. I have always been bad at hellos, because they always end in good-byes. During the year, we had come to know each other as voices, had come to know each other from the inside out, so that sight seemed unimaginable. But when I saw

you, I was home. I saw a family I had always known: my brother, my husband, myself, my father, my son, my perhaps lover, my sister. Recognition ended in a hug.

During school, you walked around dazed, with a dopey gleam like you'd swallowed the sun or had been fly-swatted by Glinda the good witch. Friends, observing your Gee-whiz bafflement, said, "He is in love with you."

"I know," I said. "He doesn't."

It was okay. It was enough to be proximate, enough to see you looking gangly in the sun as you played self-conscious tennis with one of the flirty interchangeable blondes, enough to see you dark and sun-sotted, sucking down iced teas, enough to see your face, surprised and hopeful about all that you did not know that you were feeling. Again, it was okay. I knew. When I looked at you, my stomach flipped. And when we finally kissed, all the flirtiness dispersed, and, blind-folded, I fell straight into the dark center of you. Not this, I thought. Oh, so it's this. I wanted to stay there. I was home.

On the day that my boyfriend was due to arrive, you told me that you loved me. I returned the dangerous words. We would wait a year to learn what they implied: nothing. We both have a disastrous sense of timing.

No matter when it happens, pain is always present tense, love is always past.

The boyfriend came. My heart writhed with an animated nightmare forest, Snow White's Disney woods. Hostile trees everywhere grabbed at me, shaking me into the deepening awareness that I had lost my way. When the boyfriend left, I felt only relief. I did not understand yet that we had already ended. A slow turning, a turning away, a turning toward.

You came and found me. You held me. I could have remained there for a year. For the first time, there seemed so much that I couldn't tell you:

How badly I wanted to hold your hand on the night that we got stoned and went and romped in the chain saw artist's menagerie of bears and moose, beavers and sharp-faced foxes.

How happy I was on the night when we went out for dinner with friends, and I watched you deliberating with yourself, understanding how hard it was for you to make decisions, and you finally, purposefully took my hand, knowing what it signified.

How shy I felt with you, naked in my body, you so beautiful in yours. The prettiest man whom I had ever seen. How young I felt, how awkward as if I'd known only thirteen years.

How I understood for the first time that you were neither insincere nor theatrical but indecisive. That to make decisions, you role-played yourself as if you were a split man, that this was the consequence of your history.

How I would like to take that history and cup it nest-like in my hands so that you would never again have to inhabit it without protection.

How I felt so raw in love with you that I could not talk about it when you insisted that we should. And you were right; we should have. Double bind of time.

How, instead, I bought a book for you, spending hours in the bookstore to find exactly the right book, so that it could say what I could not—that I loved you, that I felt like a wound that needed your salty touch, that I was so afraid, so afraid to be attempting this again, so uncertain the outcome, so unlikely the result, that I could not speak until I felt safe again and the only place that I felt safe was in your arms. And I could say none of this.

Love. Again.

I said, "There is a person here. There are two of us, here, we two." I warned you, "You cannot push things into shapes they do not want to assume." I asked you, "Are you certain? Do you really think you can cross over, give yourself up to it? You'll just go home, retrench," I said. "For a day or two, you'll try to shake me from your head. Gradually, I will diminish. You'll settle into your routine, return to the woman you live with. First, I am a memory, then a memory of a memory."

"No," you said, "you don't know everything."

But perhaps I did.

On the morning that we were to separate, we lay together on your college bed, neither speaking nor not speaking, neither caressing nor not caressing, just deferring the moment when we would say good-bye. For luck I wore my talisman earrings, a cluster of hearts and cupids. Retrospectively, they seem not to have served me well, but perhaps it would have been worse without them.

The room had a spartan whiteness to it, a purity, a simplicity, identical to the feeling with which I looked at you. The white light of love. You were squirmy, coy. You wanted to make love, you said.

Shy, I shook my head. "I have to go home," I said, "my son."

I kissed you. I packed my car. I found the fan that I had loaned you on the sidewalk beside my car. I didn't cry, but why, leaving, did I feel stretched to the snapping point, did I feel as if I'd left my hand or a foot behind on the pavement, did I feel that I needed to drive back, retrieve my foot, my hand, my missing self? Only later, unpacking, would I realize that I'd left half of my clothes behind. Only later would I confess to you on the phone that I'd gotten lost on the ride home. You admitted that you had, too. Only then would I realize why—because, apart, we were lost. Our destination, each other, we navigated unplanned side trips, trying to circle back, loop through time, trying to recover each other.

Again, briefly, I saw you as I drove my son North again for the annual parting. You wore a white sweater. Your eyes made mine sting. I wanted to hold your hand. I wanted you to take mine. I wanted you to explain what would happen next.

Instead I saw the condo where you live with her, acquired the blueprint which would permit me to imagine you together there: she, in her room; you, in yours; or you in the oversized Papa Bear chair; or you watching Sunday games on the oak encased TV. You sprawled on the Victorian settee, you asleep in your oak bed. I'd have no paucity of images with which to miss you.

I said, "I like your home."

"It's a house, not a home," you said.

"But it fits you."

"You fit it," you said.

Playfully I pushed you onto your mattress. "No," you said, "not now, not here. We don't have the time now. I want to go slow."

You always go slow.

You showed me photographs of your father, of your mother. I saw your face in them. You showed me a photograph of your son; again, I saw your face. You showed me a photograph of your lover. I wanted to ask, Why? But I did not. She was lying on the beach. She was beautiful. I imagined you beside her taking her photo. I imagined me on the other side of you, behind your turned shoulder.

We said good-bye in a parking lot. We did not kiss good-bye. Driving home, I missed my turn. All turns led to you, but still I drove myself South and home, following a map other than that of my heart.

We returned to phones, but the calls altered. We had more context now. At first, your calls were panicky. "What?" you demanded. "What are we going to do?"

But you were the one living with someone. "It's up to you," I said. "It's up to you."

"I'm tired of being team leader," you said.

But what could I do? Drive to your home, stage a scene? Reverse time so that we could be together again? It was up to you.

What you tell me on the phone after I get home: that you sleep in separate rooms. That in your anger at her, you smash the tennis ball at her during a game. That you tell her that she has more in common with her hairdresser than with you, that she is fat.

What I know: that you smack the ball at her, because you are angry that she is not me, that you do not know that that is why you are angry; you only know that you are angry. That

you insult her because you hope that she will leave first, that she will make the decision so that you will not have to make it. But she stays.

Then you become angry at me, accuse me of self-centeredness, accuse me of indiscriminateness in love, accuse me of obsession, accuse me of sexual passivity. It may be true, in part or in total, but none of the accusations pertains. I am only trying to love you. I know that you are flailing, trying to ward off your love for me, trying to ward me off, because you are beginning to realize that you must make a decision, that finally it comes down to either/or, the breaking point of love, a binary decision. Then my phone calls become panicky.

In desperation, you suggest I go marry a lawyer. In desperation, you suggest that we have an affair. In time, this may prove to be all that we do have, and a measly one at that. But then my cheek stings as if I've been slapped. Your suggestion seems tawdry for us. I say, "I'm not a second-string pony."

During the upcoming weeks, I will learn that for the entire range of emotions that you feel, you have only one that you express, anger. I wait.

In September when you come to see me, I am a wreck, because now, every time I look at you, a question hangs between us: do you want to try or not? But you do not answer. I wait for an answer. I wait for you to decide. I wait for you to leave. I wait to say good-bye.

Before you say good-bye, we sit fireside and hear the coyotes wail, their voices clear as starlight. We ride the gondola to the top of Killington, and you name the mountains for me, the mountains shouldering back in space, in purple rank-and-file. Seeming eternal, almost eternal, but not eternal, I know.

As we descend, I want to tip your hand into mine, read our future in your palm. Do we have one? What do we do now, so that this moment connects to the next, so that soon we are not saying good-bye? Nothing.

This time when we say good-bye, when we hug, I cry. When you drive away, my shadow self is in the car with you.

That is how I know that you hesitate at the base of the hill, that you consider turning around. But I know you; I've dreamed you crossing deserts, stopping your car, looking westward over your shoulder to the past you are escaping. But you never turn around.

Over the phone, I make cases for myself. "We could be good," I say. "I would never leave you. We could care for each other."

"I'm with the wrong woman," you say.

"I know. What do you think I have been trying to tell you?"

"I am going to talk to her," you say. "I am going to talk to my son."

I note the verb tense. I wait. I can only wait. I will not play homewrecker. Not even for you. I will not, I cannot, press you to make a decision that you would regret. I cannot decide for you. I can only wait. With practice, I'm becoming good at it.

I go swimming alone. I do everything alone. Lying on the raft, I watch my earring, with the hearts and cupids, fall into the lake with a tiny splash. I watch it drift like a lure through the green water, down until my sight fails and imagination takes over, and I see it settle, settle into the lake bottom muck, disappear. I read the omen; love is lost. I dive into a murky despair.

This is how love passes—a broken spell. A snapped hex. With love, with spells, timing is everything. I know that our best time, our best chance is already somewhere behind us in the past. A slow turning. We have missed it. I silently say good-bye. I wish I could wrest the time, like Superman, spin the day back on itself. But I feel time slipping like a stretched rubber belt around my heart.

When you come to see me in October, I give you your Christmas present. "I can't see you again," I say. "My heart can't take it."

When you leave, you leave the gift behind. This time when we say good-bye, you say, "Get your life in order."

But I can only wait. I mail your gift: a small box figured with a coyote. Your saying: no regrets, coyote. A perfect motto

for a sprinter who outraces his own past, who inhabits an eternal present.

This time when you leave, you leave behind your gold signet ring somewhere in the dirt. We searched beside the tennis courts for hours, but we could not find it. We searched in the grass where we sat together in the sun. I sympathize with you and your ring, think of my hearts and cupids, sinking in the muck. I know what unplanned loss feels like.

This time when you say good-bye, you leave behind these images:

You, pink and glowing, skin scrubbed to boyishness, fresh from the shower.

The emptiness of your boots, agape at the foot of the bed. Inside that emptiness, I slumped and crumpled like an unwashed sock.

You, lying naked on the couch, pretty in your unselfconscious skin.

A glimpse of you posing before the mirror, after you have pulled on your green shirt. You toss your hair back and vogue. You like what you see. The vanity doesn't trouble me; I like what you see, too.

When you call this time, you say, "We do not get along."

You say that you are not good for me, that I should not love you.

But it's late for that now; isn't it? Slow turning.

When I ask about her, you say, "It's none of your freaking business."

We haven't censored each other before. I am only trying to come to terms with loving you.

"Do you love her?" I ask.

"Love," you scoff. "It's only a word. What is it? Show me one. Is it a frankfurter? Now I could show you a frankfurter."

I do not say what I am thinking, that you are smarter than that, that saying that is too easy. But I let it pass. I make a joke about your showing me a frankfurter, preferably with relish. I am a clause dependent on a word: love. I wait.

What I do while I wait: one sunny afternoon, I actually dance myself into a frenzy, believing that I can call you, summon you, believing that, at any moment, your green car will pull up. You will unfold from the seat. I will run to you, and I will know that, at last, you have decided. But I only dance myself into, first, a frenzy, then, a fatigue. You do not come.

I stare at the phone.

When I come home, I pray that the blinking red light signals a call from you.

Sometimes I cry.

When I answer the phone, I hope for your voice.

I write you letters, too many letters.

I send you Miles's tape, *Bitches' Brew*.

When I see an envelope with your handwriting on it, my heart skips.

When you call, I no longer tell you about my dates, because it upsets you although you do not know why.

When we talk, I hope for what you do not say.

Finally I can bear waiting no more. "Tell me to bugger off," I say. "Tell me to scram, beat it. There's more mercy in it. The coup de grace."

"The coup d'etat?" you ask me.

Coup de grace, coup d'etat – it's all upsetting.

"What do you want?" you yell. "Do you want me to move out? Do you want to move in together?"

Yes, I say to myself, you stupid lug, of course that is what I want. Yes, yes, yes, but I cannot say this to you, because *you* must want it.

"What do you want?" you repeat.

"You." Truth has a knack for stilling time.

"That's pretty clear," you say. "I'll talk to her. I'll prepare my son."

Over the phone, we push and pull. At night when I *can* sleep, I dream of you. When I wake, I wake to you. Am I not pretty enough, not smart enough? I wonder. Am I finally just not worth the risk?

"Self-pity does not become you," you remark on the phone.

And so I wait. Sometimes now we say good-bye by hanging up on each other.

You accuse: your love life's been a revolving door. You wear people out.

The first assertion is true of us both. As for the second—no, no one has ever left me. I have never worn anyone out. But I am wearing myself out with waiting.

"I move slowly," you say. But you do not move at all.

"Something must give," I say. "I can't keep doing this, doing nothing, missing you." But nothing changes. I have misgivings, doubts. Perhaps, I think, you are insincere after all. Perhaps you are unreliable. Perhaps I am just part of the show at school. A gumball machine prize? A bodyshield. A trophy.

"Would you lie to me?" I ask.

"No," you assure me, "no."

Friends begin to warn me, "He's an operator. A manipulator."

What can I do but look into my memory of your eyes, your blue heart and wait? I love you now. I can't turn back. School will be different, I tell myself. I look forward to school. I wait.

School is different. On Christmas Eve before we meet at school, I spot an estate signet ring through a plate glass window, and I know that it is yours. I have it engraved to match the one you lost. The curves in the monogram twine around my heart. The gold glints. I see myself smiling in its polished surface. To the extent that I have a Christmas this year, it is in the pleasure of this gift to you. When I get to school, I hang it in a bag on your door knob, but you do not unwrap it until the last day.

"I can't accept this," you say. "It is too much."

"You have to. It's monogrammed."

Between the first day and the last, we are together. You speak as if you have decided. You speak of moving vans. You cite dates. We will be together, I think. Your voice serious, you ask me, "What would you do if I were recommissioned?"

"I couldn't bear it," I answer. The thought of you hurt or in danger wells in my eyes.

"It's not likely," you reassure me.

Now when you hold my hand, it feels like trust.

I amass more images of you:

Your face turned toward the sun when we went skiing, your face so happy, my heart elated, and I felt as if I wore your face like a mask.

You on the same day, skiing into the weeds and knocking yourself flat on your back. Grinning, you stared at the sky until I intervened between, smiling down at you.

You in the men's store picking out a tie with endearing finickiness.

Your worried face scouting for me in a crowded auditorium, relaxing as you spotted me. Yes, here. I am here. For you, I am here.

You returning from a day on the mountain, your face simplified by air and sun and speed, your forehead eased back into your boy face.

You, playful after an afternoon in bed, standing behind me, wrapping your arms across my stomach, rocking me. Now that's the boy I like, I thought. That boy.

You across from me at dinner, finding my hand. A pink brocade room, a fire behind the hearth, a flute concerto measuring a perfect meal.

You dancing, stomping your boots, squatting, bucking. When you move, you always smile.

You at my reading, looking down into my face. "Was I okay?" I asked. You smiled. "You were great."

You, leaving, taking all of my heart, all of my best self with you. You leaving. Love is a retreating back.

Why must we always say good-bye? Why can't there be more images, a string of them? Why am I always left with memories that I try to hold like water in my hands?

How we say good-bye: I say, "I'm not good at this."

You say, "I know."

We stand beside our cars. My eyes are dry. My hug is trusting. "Will you come see me on my birthday?"

"Yes," you say.

My birthday comes, but you do not.

You drive off at sixty miles per hour into blinding white-outs. You do not call for several days.

When you do call, I miss you so much that my breath catches.

"What," you ask me, "what?"

"What do you think? For eleven days, we spent every waking and most sleeping minutes together. Then nothing. I feel untethered, lost."

"What do you want?" you ask.

By the question, I know that you are already in another time, a parallel place.

I stare myself down in a triptych mirror: the other woman.

What I do not answer: I want you to get your ass in your car and get over here.

I want to make love to you for hours under a comforter on some dreary November day.

I want to lie next to you in bed and watch you read the Clancy techno-thrillers that you stash under the box spring in embarrassment.

I want to watch you shower, watch you shave.

I want to know that you are home when I am not.

I want to cook cioppino for you.

I want to watch you watch the football games.

I want to rub your feet when you are tired.

When you are sad, I want to cheer you or, if cheer is not possible, to hold you, at least to hold you.

But I can say none of this, because you must realize that you want it, too.

"Do you love me?" I ask.

"I think so."

"Do you miss me when I'm not there?" (Yes.) "Do I know

you better than anyone?" (Yes.) "Do you spend two hundred dollars a month on calls to anyone else?" (No.) "When you are troubled, whom do you think to call?" (You.)

"Do you love me?" I ask again.

"Hell, I don't know. I wouldn't know love if it jumped up and bit me on the ass."

"Consider yourself bit." I hang up.

A week later, independently you offer that you love me. I'm not surprised, but I am tired. The dance of advance-retreat is wearing out the carpet of my heart.

On my birthday, I receive three lovely gifts from you: pens, filigree earrings, a mirror in the shape of the sun. My three prism sides. You love me, I think. Perhaps. For a week, I wear the earrings every day. It takes me a week to realize that I'd have preferred something else—you, just you. You here.

But I am alone on my birthday. And I am alone on Valentine's Day. Advancing through the cycling calendar of holidays alone. You send me a Valentine that says, "This feels like too much and too little." You are right on the second count. Too little.

"You are writing me too much," you say, "too often, too critically, too contradictorily."

"I am coping," I explain. "I am trying to understand. I offer this, I offer that. You don't respond. It is like trying to love a vacuum."

"What do you want?" you ask.

Jesus Christ, I think, no one can be this obtuse. A mutuality of love and trust and tenderness. You, I want you, you and your love. I cannot bear missing you. And reassurance, I want reassurance. I am hopelessly in love with you. I am alone, lost somewhere inside of all of this, and I can't find my way out.

But I don't say that; I say, "I want you to do something. Do something. Do anything."

Time makes the decisions that we cannot or will not.

"Yes," you say. "Okay. The ball is in my court. This isn't serving anyone well."

“Act. Just act. No more talk. Figure out what you want and do something.”

I feel caught in the double bind of time, the double bind of love. I know that I shouldn’t call you, but I call you. I know that I should wait, but I can’t wait.

When I call you, you say, “What’s the glorious wisdom this week? What’s the big solution to my problems—a hot bath, the love of a good woman? Love makes the world go round, eh?”

You make love sound like a one-trick pony, me sound like a fool. Over and over I bring you this gift, and you ignore it, or you dash it to the ground, dance cowboy on it, stomp it into dust. But still I come riding back on my one-trick pony.

An OLD joke: how do you keep an asshole waiting?

I don’t know. How?

No answer.

You say you will talk to her. You say you will come. You do not talk to her. You do not come. The circumstances are unchanged from the moment I first set eyes on you and saw trouble. What will it take for me to realize, for *me* to act? God wearing a sandwich board, parading back and forth before my house: THE END IS NOT COMING. IT IS NOW. But I stand in the center of the double bind of love and time. I can only elect to be miserable without you or to be miserable without you by my election. Which one is ultimately worse?

You say, “Look, your attention is making me think you are hysterical; that is why I don’t come to see you.”

“I am hysterical,” I say, “because you don’t come.”

The double bind of love.

At night when I cannot sleep, I rock myself into your skin. Waking in the morning to a room of winter light, I smooth my sheets and create you there. I lie on you. Your skin is soft, your body hard. All day, I talk to you in my head. When I laugh, I laugh with you. When I note something beautiful, I store it for you. But you are not there.

One snowy night at school when we made love and you

could not stay hard, I asked you, "Is it me?"

You shook your head.

I thought I understood. "The juggler has two pins in the air. Sooner or later, one must land."

"Yes," you said, "that's it."

Joke: how do you keep an asshole waiting?

I think of your beautiful ring on your beautiful finger. I am the circlet of gold, the charmed circle you wear. Wherever you go, I go with you. Your monogram blazes in my heart.

"What do you expect of me?" you ask. "Are you saying that I can't see you as long as I stay with her?"

"Well, yeah, Slick. That's exactly what I am saying. Sometimes I think you are crazy. What else do you propose—that you divide into two and sustain two simultaneous lives and loves with disparate women in disparate places with disparate lives? Do you time-travel, love? For you, making a decision is an out-of-body experience."

And for me, at forty, when it comes to love, I'm from the Show-Me State.

So show me.

How do you keep an asshole waiting?

Finally, I say, "Enough. You figure it out. You decide. When you do, let me know what you want, and we'll see what we can do. Until then, we need to leave each other alone. You need to act, to do."

"You will miss me," you say.

"I already do."

"No, you will."

"I do now."

You say, "Good-bye."

Good-bye. That is the simplest way to do it.

But my hands cup my heart, steaming with dry ice. My hot and cold running modernized heart.

I wish I could write this story in reverse, work backwards into the text and say, "Here, here is where you might have made a decision. When I asked you to dance, you said, 'Yes,' and we

spun into immediate 4/4 time. Here, here, the night we had dinner together, here is what I might have said, no demurrals, no deferrals: I love you *now*. Here, that night, we should have simply held each other. That bitter comment, I kept that to myself."

In the story, I can move us around, prod us onto our stage floor chalk-marks, put words in our mouths, develop for us an incremental plot with a happy ending that is our beginning. But we live outside of the story, in time, waiting for the pins to land. You hold the future pin. The present whirls, end-over-end, high through the air.

I wish I could write time in reverse, recover the day that we are separating and you are listening to Cat Stevens in your car. When you reach the Portsmouth bridge, you say, "No." You bump a traffic cone. Horns blaring at you, you flip the bird at the drivers and grin. You pull a U-ie. You lay rubber. You turn around, following the map of your heart.

In Woodstock, Vermont, I brake my car because my hands are trembling on the wheel. "No," I say, not this time. "No, not *him*. I will not lose him." I turn my car around and follow the map of my heart. Somewhere on Route Four, we intersect, we recognize each other's cars as we whirr by, skid and screech to a halt. Oblivious to traffic, we meet on the dotted line. "Okay, okay," we console each other, "end of the line. We're here. Now. Okay." And I hold your face in my hands, your eyes in my eyes. Okay, that is all I wanted.

But that only happens in stories. Time works against such odds, such conclusions.

I toss the future pin in the air, juggle possibility. I see how we say good-bye:

We meet again. We say good-bye, perhaps kissing this time. Perhaps I cry. We stand by our cars. A car door slams. There will be a flurry of phone calls, a flurry of unanswered letters. We will say, "I love you, but." Or "I love you, and." The calls will become more desultory. For the first few years after we graduate, I will still, perhaps, remember your birthday, transferring the date annually from calendar to calendar. I will send you prettily

wrapped packages with Indonesian fishing cats inside, or wired electric-lavender cats, painted with orange dots, regretless coyotes. Then I'll forget to transfer the date. I'll remember that your birthday is in August. I'll send you cards, missing the date by a day or two, cards with lions on them playing flutes, or tigers wearing crowns and smiling. In one of my recent moves, I'll discover that I've lost the cards you sent me years ago, the cards that I read and re-read, so that I still should have some of the quirky lines memorized, but when I try to remember them, I'll be surprised to discover that I cannot. For a while, I'll still have sleepless nights when your blue eyes poke holes into my dreams, and I'll startle, thinking that you are above me in my bed, staring at my face. But my hand will clutch, reach, find someone next to me, someone who is not you, sleeping quietly. We will still call each other, but the intervals between will grow longer, and, although more time has elapsed, we will find that we have less to say. One day, by accident, I'll discover your name in my address book, written in your hand the summer we met, and I'll cry for a different future that's already past. Regrets, coyote, regrets. But I will not cry for very long, not as long as I once might have. For a while, I'll send Christmas cards to that address. The notes will be cheery, newsy, false. One day, the envelope will come back with a stamp: not at this address, and I'll cross your name out of my address book. But never out of my heart. The heart keeps its own time.

One day, we will meet, barely recognize each other for how the intervening years have dressed us. We'll be awkward, surprised, standing outside of a coffee shop in Harvard Square, both thinking we should suggest coffee, both looking at the dog-eared steamy window of the coffee shop rather than at each other's eyes, both deciding against the suggestion. We deferred so much for so long that deferral became its own conclusion. We cannot reclaim the past. We will express awkward surprise at the coincidence, bid each other a clumsy good-bye. Unable to bear your retreating back, I'll keep my eyes on the sidewalk ahead and listen to your boot heels recede. We'll both return to our spouses

with anecdotes, “You won’t believe who I ran into.” Anecdotal to each other, we’ll still wonder on the queasy edge of sleep—What happened exactly? What went wrong? When? But we’ll drop into the dreamless sleep of the past, and we will wake up to the diurnal clatter of our separate lives, shake each other off like half-remembered dreams, shower, resume our habits.

I watch the forward arc of the pin twirling through time. I watch the juggler grin and lose myself through the gap of his white-hot teeth. I want to knock the juggler over, grab time like two erasers, clap the present against the past, choke on a chalk-dust cloud that erases all time. I want to draw my own future in a chalk-picture on a square of the sidewalk and forbid all rain to smear it, blear it, wash it away. But these are only words, a figurative language that can conduce to no literal world, can confine no time.

How we say good-bye: like this.