

MURDERS AND ANNIVERSARIES

A candle is burning in my kitchen. It's an amulet and an offering as Lynn is far away, submitting herself to a doctor's examination — she's been quietly terrified for two weeks — got a suspicious test result, and must now get retested. I whisper *Shema yisrael* to my candle in the hope that the murmuring of some syllables in a language I can't speak might put me in good graces with God. It's a hard universe out there. Yesterday morning I witnessed a murder at my birdfeeder. An eighteen-inch Cooper's hawk (strangely beautiful in its predatory coldness) sank its claws into a gray mourning dove who was feeding on the ground. I grabbed a broom, ran outside in an attempt to scare the hawk with my noisy humanness, but I was too late. I stood there as the hawk flew away into the freezing sky with the dove in its claws, still alive....

It's late January, and these frosty mornings begin with the Overture to the Steam Radiators. Around six in the morning I hear the static-electricity sound of the quartz igniter in the basement, then the *thwop* of the flames igniting, and suddenly there's a long-haired conductor down there, tapping his baton against the exposed iron pipes that thread their way through the floors and walls of this house. The pipes bang and shake and pop like arthritic joints. The upper reaches of the pipes gradually become too hot to touch. Then the radiator steam vents begin hissing with a low extended whistle.

This February will mark 30 years that Lynn and I have been a couple. It feels unbelievable to me that it could be this long; we were in our thirties when we met: different dogs, different houses, different illnesses, different novels still to be published. And 30 years later, we remain a couple. Still resolutely unmarried (though people have mercifully stopped asking questions that start with: "So when are you two...") I think of Joni Mitchell's lyric to *My Old Man*: "We don't need no piece of paper from the city hall/Keeping us tied and true." That lyric makes us sound like romantic iconoclasts, starry-eyed in the face of conformity, but I think our lingering unmarried state mirrors some deep necessity in both of us for privacy, for solitude. It's not the solitude of loneliness so much as it's the necessity for reflection on some inner landscape (sometimes bleak, periodically beautiful) that defines us both. We've survived the deaths of our parents, friends — our respective address books now have half the names crossed out...yet there she stands in my driveway, in the black alpaca coat I bought her for Christmas. Thirty years later, she's still my girl.

The phone rings. It's Lynn's cell-phone. She's just left the doctor's office after two hours. "I'm OK," she says. "My tests are fine."

Back in my kitchen I look at my candle, now burned to the size of a thimble, and I say aloud, in the voice of my father: "Thanks God."

Outside my kitchen window, the Cooper's hawk has returned, sitting unmoving on a branch in a small tree two feet from the feeder. Waiting. And I know his killing is part of the inevitability of nature, but still I throw down my tea, grab the broom by the door, run

outside, and this time I charge directly towards him. He sails straight up and away — empty clawed. I last see him disappearing in the direction of JFK Hospital.

OK, it's not much. But I stand there with my broom and think: This one morning I saved a life, and another one I love remains healthy. On this gray day, that almost feels like enough.