



A House in Summer

Maxine Chernoff

Argotist Ebooks

Cover image by Carolyn Guinzio

Copyright © Maxine Chernoff 2011
All rights reserved
Argotist Ebooks

For you

A House in Summer

A House in Summer

“Virginia Woolf wrote this paragraph.” –Erich Auerbach

In which a woman wonders when her son will grow taller, when the weather will clear and her husband stop throwing his negative shadow on clocks and lamps and objects as they are. Will it grow lighter despite his darkness, her eyes dry, though they are mostly dry, despite the feeling of tears welling up as she wishes for the boy to have more light.

Will the room, nature’s repository of conical shells and tidy driftwood and small and radiant glass beads smoothed for centuries by water’s vague intentions, have something to say about the figures that come and go, the careless boy, unhappy man and woman whose demeanor makes the room glow with the distinct light of sickrooms, though no one yet is ill—but there is the care and caution one associates with grief.

When shutters break loose and the wind does its work and the people who’ve shined with the moment’s surprises and disappointments and failures to love quite well enough have left the room, will the wind acknowledge their vivid passing on sofas and loveseats where sand is engrained in scalloped patterns of fabric woven to resemble teardrop-shaped leaves? Will photos teeter on walls in their dampened frames or simply be stacked in boxes for relatives to take to a coach house overlooking a stand of elms on a narrow hill that deflects the wind, where someday a woman opens the box in front of her grandson who asks without much concern, to pass the day, who were these people, did you know them?

And the woman, because she is sentimental but cautious with her emotions, will say without conviction, I hear they were a family who summered at the beach, who lost their mother, who thought many things and then forgot them, who loved as well as they might, as I love you, she will tell her grandson, though not in words. She will think these words as he looks at her without knowing why her answer takes so long and when it does come seems to acknowledge some deep sorrow of inheritance neither can understand.

If this is in a book as most things turn out to be, the woman will have read it twice: once when she was young herself, a reader whose eyes grew teary for Mrs. Ramsey and all the love in the world that gathers in unmapped corners where someone comes to stand for no good reason, and then again when she is older and knows the pleasure of overhearing in her own voice things she might have said to calm herself and soothe a boy.

Rune

"I am not what you supposed but far different." –Walt Whitman

Not timber or bronze or iridium, not the old habits of species at a waterhole or the short
irregular breaths of the last whispered guest
Not the grievance that gives way to truth or the truth of a three-headed beast in your atlas
of imaginary travels
Not the speaker with the plans but the quiet boy learning the rope trick in the hallway
outside the room
Not the intelligence noted for its acute air of judiciousness but the wasp's sharp sting as it
strikes a shapely passing ankle
Not the coiled answer waiting for its question unlike what is asked or required on a
Sunday
Not the leaves in May shining ferocious in the garden where your grandson has left an
onion resting on a stone
Not the fierce attention of the man on the traffic island holding a sign that says something
smeared by the rain
Not the notice given by an eye to another in its hope of dependence on kindness or its
hope of notice in a room full of candles
Not the bored glance of a mother whose child has climbed higher than last time but is
busy with hurt and resentment
Not the author whose page is so busy with sound that he forgets each word's landscape is
a story with beginning and end
Not your hand or my hand or the things that we touch in a day which includes so many
forms of heaviness, so much light
Not the tinge of memory in a place where someone else stood unaware of your life
or its constant necessity to record its existence in each room's sharp corner
Not formal analysis or credo or code or the heard cries of pelicans over the water of the
bay's dark shadow under the bridge
Not earth's solitude early in the day when most everyone is sleeping and you are alone in
a kitchen where he or she once daily stood
Not the pouring of water or the boiling of kettles or the singing of neon as it advertises
books or massages or bereavement services
Not Augustine of Hippo or Herodotus or Longinus or Mrs. Miller or Captain Courageous
Not the oldest book or rarest coin or smallest bird known to sip water from a clover
Not your face in a mirror or a window nor your voice as heard on a recording among the
others nor your method of material witness to things as they open like a novel's first
sentence
You are not in the room or the story or the thought you are not in the absence spoken as a
charm against itself

The Staggering Man

A staggering man is carrying a salad across the street.

This is not the first line of a word problem about velocity or distance.

I am waiting for him to cross and we have locked eyes.

He is grimacing or smiling at me. I am smiling back.

This man has a disorder that makes his case singular. It has a name and prognosis.

He is one of a galaxy of staggering men whose provocation is unclear.

I have seen them stagger in other arenas, and I have ignored their staggering in moments of disregard.

The staggering man is finally across.

My pen is out of ink, and I am writing with a crayon I found inside the seat, turquoise I would say, but Indian blue its appellation, perhaps about the ocean.

I haven't written so many poems since my twentieth year when my professor said that he doubted a girl with my large intelligence but emotional restraint could write a single word.

It sounds as if he was unkind, but his was a kindness to me, a mirror to hold up to my shadows.

The staggering man has receded.

The afternoon is brilliant with invented weather and sky-framing clouds. Several pigeons are harassing a dove, which one of my students has told me is just a smaller, dumber pigeon.

How are you today, my dear? Are you being viewed by someone who locks eyes with you and loves you? Have you read my parable and noticed its small devices?

Will you judge me with a deeper love than I could offer the staggerers and plaintiffs earlier in my years and see how I see your eyes in their reasons?

Daphne

“So much worse for the wood that finds it is a violin.” –Rimbaud

You try to find the easy answer to the question of the ages, the one that recedes as all steady dreams in a house of wakefulness.

You uncover a hasty truth, a candid lie, an answer like no other shaped like a boat with bat wings and certitude. This is no fable, no nursery rhyme. It is the trees’ steady progress toward a cloud made of bones and abstract longing.

Nothing in its place, no place for facts rare as birth in a banyan tree during a flood—you saw the photo in the paper and imagined the woman who had climbed so heavily upward to preserve her story past harm.

Unlike Magritte’s clever pipe or the oddly postured woman in the Balthus painting flung across a piano, you are serious as summer’s crazy ripeness or winter’s inevitability—a weedy patch without sun near the fence ignores both seasons.

You are a realist, saint of small remarks, hero of paper white as bone. You gesture to the moon or make a leap of faith. You honor the wood of things, the breath of things, the underlining in the script that doesn’t know its own destination in the pageant of forgetting.

Forgotten, you say, to any object that offers its presence. Daphne grows so slowly you can’t notice—all these years it’s hidden behind other greening things. Hesitating nearby, you carve a space for apparition, a space for circumspection and regret. Without them you are nothing more than windows bracing for a storm.

*(Note: *Pursued by Apollo, Daphne is transformed into a laurel (Laurus nobilis): “a heavy numbness seized her limbs, thin bark closed over her breast, her hair turned into leaves, her arms into branches, her feet so swift a moment ago stuck fast in slow-growing roots, her face was lost in the canopy. Only her shining beauty was left.” Name of a rare, slowly maturing type of laurel plant.)*

Commentary

U R my service dog UR white graffiti in the white bathroom of the Snow King UR a man and a woman wearing leather at a funeral for a colonel in the Russian army UR one of us UR a gun in a church UR Allen Ginsberg so lonely that you write *Howl* and *Kaddish* because you have no one to love you UR listing UR sinking UR are a fly ball hit off the bat of someone in stripes Everyone wants to sleep with you UR in the army of a neutral nation a fake army that shoots fake bullets at birch

UR my mother in a crazy dress and an empty smile and stockings with seams UR my father in a car hitting the wall of a factory at 8 am on Thursday, October 17, 1974 LOL UR no one I know UR the last good wish I wished you (LOLLOLLOL) and then you were not there

UR the baby I had, three in all, the magic number that makes up the trinity of snack crackers the trinity of bones of saints the trinity of thesis synthesis trifecta I lost the race I lost the horse I watched the horse running so fast her hoof fell apart She was a great filly they said the horsemeat butcher was closed for summer Baudelaire's drainpipe was very beautiful The swan stole our baguette The park (according to the film we saw later) was full of prostitutes According to the film we saw later the initiation process must happen in Europe in World War Two and involve a slightly ugly and dim-witted boy who turns out to be funny and handsome and then dies Emily Dickinson's parking meter is set on out of time—truly, you don't believe me please do She became a heroin addict and kept a pygmy rat in her room at college She became a nurse and killed sleeping patients with morphine She became the smooth hair of a sad woman in my class who plagiarized poems and reports and thought I didn't know She became my doe-eyed student who disappeared but not in body She became my mother with her vampire lips in the photo before the war She became a priest on holiday with dandruff and a penchant for escargots She became a Byzantine icon artist a pubic sculptor a little girl with one braid cut off by my friend in first grade She became a porn star who opened a restaurant in Northridge CA She became the only postmodern painting in Slocum Nevada She became the postscript to me she became me LOLLOLLOL

I am writing this knowing that it is first excessive and second unimportant I am writing this knowing that you may not approve of my sudden burst of prose at the end of a book of poems LOLLOLLOL which I used to think meant lots of love

Lots of love and BTW it means more, it means less, it means when you fly, I will try to join you in the vee-shaped clouds over the opera version of "Three Sisters" He says he saw a boring play with people talking I didn't understand it was "Three Sisters" who never leave and never stop talking until much later Trashy novels are the only ones that work It will not save you to write poems that save you I saw the girl to whom I once gave a B+ for not listening to me She deserved a better grade for not listening because she didn't listen so very well She was whole-hearted in her non-listening She broke the mold of non-listeners

If you were a cantaloupe, what would I be? If you were a mollusk, where would I sleep? If you were a tank, would I ride in your dark and steamy chamber?

Kings summon us and we come We are supplicants all in search of something to worship in a peculiar and profane way The Duke of Bavaria was an asshole he was worse than George Bush II

maybe and maybe not LOLLOLLOL The king of Belgium thought his private factory was the Congo their trees his baubles You may lose life and limb if your mother has you in the wrong bed you may lose more if your mother has you with the wrong man we all lose everything eventually but the stories have different weight over time some are told and some are not some are redacted and blurred by water or tears or another liquid Where can I buy some fire? Where is the fire store in this mall? We do not know how to properly use things but use is of no use and value of no value My grandson eats worms and swears to their goodness It is protein I say we all need it daily My love is a white birch my love is a flower

Can you say the fucking name of the flower I tell her don't say those flowers with the white petals and the yellow center, say daisy, damn it, I tell her and she says that is elitist as is the word *imagery* Okay, let's call it vapor or if that is too abstract let's call it sidewalk Is sidewalk elitist? Is garbage elitist, or do you prefer the word *refuse*, which is easily misread Multiple readings, are they allowed here? Do I get to keep my marbles, my beautiful tiger's eye and turquoise the color of our planet? What must I surrender to get out of here? Do you need it all or just most? I will give you most without you asking I will give you all if I can LOLLOLLOL I have nothing and still have my integrity she said my justice he said my last word

It rained frogs in the movie. It rained cheddar cheese. It rained a big moon with a hole bitten through. How can you count it or sum it, the teacher once asked Say ask for a question not said Why were all teachers so sad in that building? Was it a sad building? Who drank the most, Mr. Larson or Miss Weatherbee, I swear that was her name She ran the Daniel Burnham speech contest which I lost when the bell rang and I forgot the rest of my speech like magic We were mean We were children We did not know

What is the sum of three gentlemen in a gondola? What is the sum of our natural inclinations toward deification of otherness? What is the sum of our woes? LOLLOLLOL

Construction

‘Then the air was fully of wings, the doves came down out of the sunny blue like angels in a painting.’
—Wallace Stegner

You try to build it with scarves and wigs, the hair of women from shrines in India cut for purity and sold for profit. You cut your nails, make sure you are clean enough, you take the scrupulous bath so you are ready for the Lourdes of chemicals, alcohol, tubes. This is the oblation, the vow not to outlast but to serve, to compensate as best you can for its eventual failure.

Bargains are different—you play tricks, crossing the road coolly in front of the barreling truck—let him dare rob you with an unplanned end. Punch lines abound—how she was hit by a garbage truck, a potato truck, at the side of a friend helping her shop that day—they were sharing an eggroll. You laugh outrageously but not with outrage when the impossibly beautiful movie does not end as it should but just accrues endings. No editor, no discipline—allegory of your life—everyone’s too, this is general—so many scenes unlit, words mumbled on tape, false starts, abrupt curtailments.

You are making a collection of homely wisdom offered like cakes at the banquet. You are a snob about offerings—so much is trivial, small as an ant crawling with a large leaf bent leftward. The braveness, the unfairness, all the ways in Tibet and Peru and with eagles or crows they topple the body to provide something more substantial than your own grief for yourself, you, the best friend you’ve ever had, the one who knows your lies and quibbles and times you really didn’t mean it, you who had even outwitted yourself. How you’d delayed because there was something more tinged with promise, more warped by danger that drew you off course. You who threw away charts and itineraries and maps. You who said no and no thank you at best.

You have no menu. You have *this* with the cube for the day, the rectangle for the week, the larger square of the month that marks a time for flags, a day for fathers, a festival in a South Asian atoll, a calendar whose photo of mountains that seem celestial are merely granite and water condensed into snow. You have minutes of still being yourself, if shadow is you, if your hand holds a lime-green glass and takes a long sip you feel deep in your throat.

It’s finally not about you but what others will say, what they whisper about the self that you weren’t, all the same, really. You were quiet or self-composed, cheerful or foolishly so, alert till the end or unfeeling as ice. You are elsewhere, doubled, halved and zeroed. Maybe, you can report by letter or note or an oddly voiced message that you are with yourself elsewhere or nowhere, you have what you need. Not pinned to a board in a small room without windows or sewn on a jacket, not on a booklet with dates and a line and a face with your own flaming eyes and longish chin—no harm meant in the modesty of missing, in the simply lucid sense of being here but also unseen.

Gesture

“*the fabric I ate/ and ate.*” –Lisa Fishman

You are the one who lived beyond this and that, whose face was a recompense like a photo showing unknown people in a better time when snow covered most of the view they were trying to obscure, and smoke the rest, the beautiful variety of white smoke (maybe steam) with its waving tangents ascending to the cobalt dome of the sky.

You made televisions mad with war go blank or showed music that covered the news of more deaths here and certain lack of life there, you were with the white piano on fire and the candles blazing on the piano on fire, and on the lawn there were birds of various black hues with beaks cracking tiny yellow seeds, also there to distract you from the war.

You are the crack in the ceiling she noticed when he was not there, not in bed this night or that night, nor present in the morning. The curtains’ breeze was static and the trees buzzed with peculiar light as she traced the sheets and shadows on walls and asked time to assist the process of slow forgetting which is similar to remembering but in muted, kneeling tones.

You are the record player for *my funny valentine* in this version and that version and some versions yet to be made by DJs who will break the song in half or quarters or sixteenths or forty-eighths and place parts of it elsewhere like leaves dried in books about the Moors and sing something else that reminds you of summer in Dallas or Prague or Vermont.

You are the locus of happiness locus of sorrow you are the water where dolphins nurse their young and the water that makes boats list in Williams’ poem *The Yachts* which is not nearly his best with its driving rhythms and forced endings and endless triumphs—he is better on small projects as you are in making happiness a temporary patch in regard for the moment and nothing to follow.

You are the formlessness of form as it breaks from its song or shape or recent invention in independence from what surrounds it, the figure that goes from one shadow to the next without disputing its small place in the painting where men come and go and sell things packed on camels in a desert that reaches beyond the castle at the end of the Silk Road and the three subsequent left turns to the ancient widow’s house.

You are the eventual practice of learning to wait by a pond as light changes from morning to day to generation to others at the same pond on a Saturday late in summer when she takes his hand and he breathes in deeply and tells her to come away from here, the edges are dangerous and far too filled with memory.

You are you turning back on yourself like a dress unsewn and unraveled and no longer quite cloth—more like paper—in a narrow closet where people leave things when they move and light slants as is its tradition in rooms that get lost in a story of leaves and seasons and long endings in patience-filled sunlight.

Evidence

“To philosophize is to learn how to die.” –Montaigne

Of houses, empty or noticed, to rooms whose lamps have left their light behind, ancient after time has landed in the breach of its excess, dropped there as if a package fell from the arms of a woman.

Of glasses once filled whose essence is left in a stain that looks clear in most light but carries a tinge of its erasure when she notices it late in the night after he is asleep.

Of windows, whose eyes are shut to the diversions of their intended gazers, birds passing on their sheer migrations over oceans filled with brine.

Of gardens where he sat or she sat amid the trickery of a season and its aftermath, patchy on the lawn and patchy in the sky, gray and listless for a time before respecting the progress of feeling as it overtakes the geography of plants.

Of reasons which fill a space but not adequately, which stretch like deserts between needs vocalized or calmed, written or whispered, answered or forgotten by the time an answer is prepared.

Of books filled with language that is never proper to the moment but serves as a repository of the possible though the possible is not enough, as a tent is never enough in a storm.

Of eyes that fill with knowing or restless asking or a glance that means retreat or surrender or that a village lies in waste, a life is lost, small as a child's attempt to capture a mote of dust above his bed in moonlight from a gibbous moon

Of melodies whose notes contain the promise of an answer, as if music is an answer or patience a virtue or love an antidote.

.

Anosognosia

“God knows where I am.” –Linda Bishop

Give up your princely crown: you never had it, your kingdom, your horses made of fire and tears. Give up your plans to sail the ocean in a vessel made of clouds and glue.

You are not you, not yourself, not the one whose whispers were heard by the teacher even when your lips were closed and your shiny boots on the ground. You are not the one heralded at the refuse dump by the seagulls whose cries were also the cries of a little girl dropped in a well.

You are not the handsome stranger who is awaited in the house where thirty-nine apples are rotting near the sink drain and the woman lies on the floor almost dialing a number in Connecticut of a relative whose hands were too large and too close.

Give up your jewels, the glass brooch in the shape of Siam, where you once ruled a gaggle of women who praised you in eight languages and shared your shadow with no one. Give up your heraldry and your whispered treasons by the site of the buildings that once stood as an outline even on coins.

You are not the child in the closet pretending to be the ghost of Julius Caesar. You are the lady on the bus in rags asking for pennies because she is building a ladder taller than a northern pine that will reach beyond her most feared cloudburst.

You are not the comfort of a room where she rocked and held her child before she heard it tell her that treason was in the air, that the room was filled with dirt, that a certain chief of state had it in for her unless she enunciated correctly and plainly on a certain Friday before Flag Day the names of all the ghosts and saints beginning with K.

Give up your plan to beat the dead at their game of cards, your plan to conquer Las Vegas with your lamè gown and tulle, your plan to grace the state dinner for the King of Nubia with your crown of gold thorns and thistles from your neighbor's yard.

You are not someone with a plan, you are a woman made of bone and lace, a woman made of iron and nakedness, a woman made of words and excuses for them, you are under their care, you are subject to a plan that will enable you to be among them, to gather stars if you wish but keep them secret.

(patients in denial of their own disorders and thus refusing treatment for them as in the case of schizophrenia.)

Singular

“Death’s outlet song of life...” –Whitman

“Every man should be so much an artist that he could report in conversation what had befallen him.” –Emerson

High-mindedness is a construct of mind and its metals, its iron and zinc, its blue mercury.

It is a waste to consider how we relate to the human condition—we are the human condition in cotton and lace and charms that fit in thimbles. We are broken and fixed. We are mended and torn. We are the underlining of the soft belly of kangaroos crossed with examination books. We tell jokes that aren’t funny and laugh with our eyes closed.

When we open them, someone has died and another been born.

We praise Jove. We praise Allah. We praise the mark-downs at the Nordstrom Rack where a handsome young woman was weeping into her hands. We praise the immaterial essence of clouds that resemble your uncle on Wednesday. We praise the material grace of your hand on my collarbone, soft in its landing there.

We are unkind to our neighbors. We cheat on our friends. We are witnesses to the first bee in the jasmine we planted at noon. We are witnesses to the harms of a life and its slow repetitions that lead to new beauty. We travel to see peasants enact old rituals that we would find foolish in our own doorways. We are peasants as well under our skirts and children and finally fools. Who knows the height of a well-built arch or the dimensions for travel to Mars? They say if you fly there, you cannot return. There are those who will fly there. I heard them on a show discuss how they’ll grieve for irises and children and the small fond expressions of those that they love.

We all leave cathedrals and ashes and bony candles burnt to their wicks. We all leave nothing we wanted and everything we did and that of an in-between state of a small conversation involving the beauty of spires.

We are not jugglers. Planes fall and leaves too and nothing that crashes or lands without sound gets repaired. Our ankles have sight of the horizon of small endings. We look forward to more as we leave more behind.

When my mother was dying, she asked, “Will I live?” I remember the silence as she turned from our silence to make herself ready, the quiet of an afternoon in a room where light and sound were present but respectful. I remember the quiet later that day as we stood alone with her. Absent at last, she withdrew with a tact saved for endings.

Please save me from all that I know must follow. Please give me a book or a song or a look that means less.

Question

“a dream hesitates, it doesn’t ask” –Fanny Howe

You ask and it’s given
Hands’ rotation in the light of planets saints who died thinking of ten states of bliss

You ask and it’s given
the cobalt message bottle blue as a particular those who wandered green and bitter in the cobbled
desert (*the Bedouins all have cell phones, my son explains, their sons listen to Michael Jackson*)
we do not want things to change but they do

You ask and it’s given
the perfect text words of bird throat and hummingbird tongue
words of oblivion in shafts of ancient light

You ask and it’s given
lady on the stairs whose hat blew off being young we gave chase
would Godard have liked our mad dash (we were always in films without asking)

You ask and it’s given
the irresistible sky over us separately and together we hear of bombs in (our world)
the one that cracks so easily that allows in
the bitter with the sweet

You ask and it’s given
the calm the substance the atmosphere the storm the death the waking the asking
you ask

Offerings

“A cluster of belfries encants the human idea.” –Rimbaud

The heart-shaped meteorite is not message or omen, talisman or cure,

locket of the world's intention, correlation of tangent and bone:

The church in Bruges where the blood of Christ thickened in a vial is chained to a priest.

Death on vacation, a humid Sunday when he says something trifling,

then looks at her for the last time. Who notices that a train leaves unless it is bound for grief?

The man who said he'd been blinded but now could see had kept the knowledge of failing to himself.

His blue eyes told of the miracle, which meant he would keep reading Yeats to students who Twitter and text during his lecture, who read box scores and Google their names.

Heart from the sky, blood in the vial, fragments of what's said

on a train to Bruges become story by connecting the dots:

Words flee, wanting a home in another context. Let's build

a reliquary where, under indigo velvet and gilded lining, they can escape prying eyes.

Heard

“Error, errancy, and bewilderment are the main forces that signal a story” –Fanny Howe

You are a rough draft

Lost in a dream of salt flats of words on paper

You are melting in fog

You are lifting off the page like a flock of swallows

You are the grass tangled in life without permission

Green as a pledge or a warning

You are the evidence of snow evidence of daylight before you remembered its name

You are a measure of progress which of course has ended, which happened before you

You know what to call it—you call it something else

Maybe *limit* or *reservoir* you are spilling into your own accord

With seasons with particulars with eventualities that mean nothing

You know that to reproduce a figure you must learn to see its contraction

You must steadily approach a shadow without altering its borders

You must cut a shape from a shape inside of nothing

You must practice forgetting until it is science

You are an ornament of nature a gesture of surrender

To words you once recognized as your own

Parade

“The laughter of those missing/makes it clear...” –Bei Dao

Is it the beginning or end of the story when the road turns southward into nothing and a coyote is seen on a hillside above the tract houses and the fund-raising march approaches the house where she died last night quite late after a short illness?

She is no longer there, cushioned in moonlight, no longer a prime number, proof of her son’s voice when he called for comfort the day he discovered his heart could break.

Not present for endless war and sorrow, which she will happily miss, not in the audience but in a solitary role she would mock were she asked. Who asks? Who speaks of her in the garden of the neighbor she barely knew who has become responsible for mortality as it relates to their cul-de-sac?

The neighbor’s husband knows it uplifts her to care about strangers, contains her as the uncontrollable leaks from the television into their ears. He remembers *The Enormous Radio*, from which Cheever’s protagonist hears all the tawdriness of strangers. He has learned to console her anonymous grief far better than her inventory of harms mostly related to him.

The fund-raisers wear pink. A hideous parade outside his window. The new widower hears a megaphone tell the group of women and a few sad men, that every step helps the living remember.

Her death is excluded, her death like scrimshaw, rare carving in ivory, souvenir of vanished time that won’t hold value. Is the daytime moon in a phase he’s never noticed, white and jagged as a paper cut?

Aversions

“Pray Heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed.” –Virginia Woolf

An aversion to Viennese music, the type she heard in her youth at the great amusement park by the dying green river, where all the swallows nested nearly on top of one another under a bridge and scared her with their dense blackness. Why it was the pipes of the organ that frightened her more she was unsure; perhaps the brash and hollow sound of the low notes felt oddly like wind in a desert though she had never been to a desert—or cold touching her skin at night as she changed positions in her child’s narrow bed.

He was terrified of bees in any form, forms of honey, the names would throw him into a panic; clover honey, Tupelo honey, pine, whipped or combed. Who whipped or combed it, he wondered. And the bees’ regurgitation of the nectar, the stickiness of the product, as if one could get oneself entangled finger by finger in its goldenness. As to seeing the bee itself, he would wait until dark to take walks to a bench under the elders where he’d read books on Vikings and space aliens, who had nothing to say about honey.

Her fear of cloth made it very hard for her to concentrate at the shirt factory. The bright fibers gleamed, the stripes a sin in themselves of color and pattern and roads she had forgotten to take when she’d left him. One would have brought her to a different city where she could have worked as a maid, perhaps, but then there’d be laundry and sheets; or maybe as a baker, but the flour would get sifted and poured and rolled into a perfect rectangle of significance, nearly substantial as cloth. Anything but the hum of the sewing machine on her table and the one next to hers, where the girl with the extra finger sewed even more slowly than she and whistled as he did, a melodic low tone like the kettle beginning to boil the morning she had left him for good.

His first memory of his mother’s arms couldn’t have been at as early an age as he imagined. Most sources say one’s true memories don’t exist before kindergarten. But he knew he had seen her look away when she gave him the bottle, her sunlit blue eyes blank as water. She wanted to be elsewhere, he realized, and thought for her of places that would have easily outdone the holding of this small bag of bones—what a skinny, unattractive baby, people had said, thus the supplemental bottles of a mixture of pure cream and goat’s milk. He dreamed they sailed off together in a little white boat on a vast calm sheet of blue sky, he and his mother floating out of reach of the doctors and nurses and allusions of his failure to thrive that had made her so sad and unconfident.

Together they hated any type of berry. Summer was worst when the stores filled with the patriotic colors of the fruit, their reds and blues, their small variation from Sweden, the lingonberries of Ingmar Bergmann, the gooseberries of Chekhov, orbs and dents and pure circularity. Neither was allergic—they concluded that the first time they met at a picnic where they sat like leftovers next to a plate of creamed corn. On Thanksgiving they made the usual feast, but they were so in love they barely ate—the turkey they had roasted for so long sat on the table looking as it had been buffed to brightness. While in bed in a blissful tangle of ankles and thighs and arms, what they thought most about was their

delight in having excluded cranberries from their plates. By spring it was over. The stirring they'd felt that summer in the berry aisle amid the lushness flown in from three countries on two continents was now a steely indifference, an aversion to one another, as if even a touch might elicit a cry of pain or a reverse of joy so sharp it would cut them. One night she almost ate a strawberry to declare independence from him but refrained at the last second.

Under the Music

Under the music, a baby cries in the audience. A police siren meets a thunderclap meets quantum theory.

Under the music you are falling into a sleep so calm that your face becomes architecture, your head and arms a latitude. Knees bend, and you breathe an intelligence heard in the room's soft air.

It is May here, the third month of spring. Already flowers die and new ones approach life, prodigious in their powers. Tendrils reach from under fences.

We build fences and sandbag rivers. We launch drones that fly crookedly toward their targets, launched by boys one might have taught beadwork at scout camp.

You stand there, lovely in your harmlessness, gazing at a neighbor's fence, where a Stellar jay rips at a tissue. New jasmine twines over older vines. Nothing can stop it, not even your concern for its reaching.

Maxine Chernoff has written twelve volumes of poetry including *Without* (Shearsman, 2012) and *The Turning* (Apogee, 2009) and three chapbooks, most recently *To Be Read in the Dark* (Omnidawn, 2011). With Paul Hoover she translated *The Selected Poems of Friedrich Hoelderlin* (Omnidawn), which won the 2009 PEN USA Translation Award. She is co-editor of *New American Writing* and Chair of Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.