

The Black Fugatos

Eve Shelmutt

The last leaf that is going to fall
has fallen.

—Wallace Stevens

Oh Pauline, desire reeling her in. She says to the two girls, "I'm going to Asheville, overnight," thinking, Maybe a *bit* longer. Any snatched time barely enough, her body only partially the silver of scales flipping through water, mouth fly-hooked and airless, and, once-caught, caught. So her teeth itch, too, and her toes splay as if in hot dust, and she puts one hand on the dry hollow between her ribs.

"Sure thing," James would say, sliding over—booth, bed, car or wherever she found him, even on a used car lot selling spinners to uplift the public eye, one of his arms raised while he demonstrated the spinner's sparkling effect in wind. Under that armload of reflected light, she could slip.

"So!" she says brightly, knowing the hue of her voice is wrong when desire is lavender, mauve. Pauline trusts her daughters know not a thing.

"To see Poppa?" asks Josie, her name for him making him ordinary, a man in overalls or a baseball cap turned backwards. Josie's right hand, fingers laced around a silver spoon, stops over her oatmeal bowl. Claire kicks her under the table. What *else* would she go for?

"Bring me something?"—Josie twirling one braid now, looking at Pauline with those eyes so open and clear they would if she were older stop a streetful—cars, donkeys, stormtroopers.

"I wouldn't *have* anything," says Claire, to which Pauline nods, patience of someone already halfway to where she is going, reaching out distracted to pat Claire's hand snapping back into its fist. "Well we know *that*, Honey."

"Any-hooooo," says Pauline after a pause, "that's where I'm going. You two'll go to Miss Keane's."

"Oh God," says Claire.

"And you can practice piano there."

"See?" says Josie, looking at Claire or, now, at the back of her head and to the sound she knows is coming, the screen door slamming.

Now they'll have to get Claire from the back yard, car running, its back door hanging open, Pauline tapping on the horn, and Josie saying, "Make her come." Then Pauline will have to wrestle, stuff her in the back seat, Pauline's pink blouse sticking to her back in the heat, then Pauline slamming her own door. "Whew!" Pauline will say, as if she's pushed something as indifferent as a wagon up a hill. It will be just *un-godly*—Pauline's word as the trees' pollen floats up behind them, but the word coming out softly as if to herself.

And what will Mrs. Brown think of the scene, her fingers snaking at the shade?

Who cares? "A bracelet with a charm on it?" asks Josie. "Like a, like a tiny bicycle?"

So Pauline nods: *Maybe*, not looking at Josie but over her head because Pauline envisions that he's got her thrown on top of him this time, making her wait, barely wait, with his knowledge of the increments her body takes around him. The tufts of the chenille bedspread make stars on her knees while she laps against him. My God, my God, who *is* he? What species?

Claire knows all this: Pauline asks, Why, otherwise, would she slam the door? Or, if she doesn't, does Claire imagine the sensation of an ocean when a wave hits the torso? When that's not right, oh no, though suddenly the taste of salt films Pauline's tongue.

If we were *dumber*, Pauline thinks, how easy. . . .

"*This time*," Pauline tells Josie, "you'll *walk* to Miss Keane's, together. But not before 6:00 this evening. I'm not paying for her before dark."

And Josie thinks, Oh! This novelty, knowing immediately that she will roller skate, leaving Claire to pant behind her, Claire's gold head a wedge when she whirls on the skates once or twice.

How far to Miss Keane's! Past the patch of violets first, then past the Negro girl's house with her twins, then the house of the two old ladies where they must never go, and never know why not—one of Pauline's secrets. And way past the Baptist church where Claire uses the piano. On and on it stretches, defined both by sidewalk *and* all the houses of Belton, Josie suddenly imagining herself lifted up—presentiment, is it?—as if to see the span from above, skates dangling heavy as her arms flap.

Years from now Josie will straddle a man she loves, older than herself, locked in himself, because of time, she will think. He had lived as a child on an Ohio farm with his father, then in town with his grandmother. Looking down on him, she will, if only for seconds, remember how Belton looked in her mind's eye from above on that day she sat with Pauline, think she knows just where sat his

grandmother's house, the one with the porch reaching around both sides, how he was half-grown then, waiting on a hall bench.

He sees her smile, maybe knows the power of memory which makes the two of them seem to meet, that lie of the ferreting mind while their bodies rock. So he smiles, thinking: Close enough, this'll do, while Josie's halt in memory and this simultaneous smile insures that he lodges always somewhere in her, love taking root.

"Bye, bye, bye," calls Josie, running to the edge of their half of the yard, not one step over into the street, toes hanging off the curbing and curled over it as Pauline's Nash turns the corner. And in the silence the Negro woman begins to sweep her yard, the two oaks rustle.

Pauline, set free, begins to hum to herself, which also she does when he's done what he wants and the hollow of her ribs seems full. Otherwise, why drive so far?

In the house Josie hears the clock tick: here/then, now/then, once/twice, again/again. The bushes scrape the screens; Mrs. Brown's phone rings. Josie sits on the couch. Later she sits with her skates on, their weight pulling her feet down. Momma's clock, she thinks. It was once *her* mother's, and someone else's before that. They have all these things which belong to people who died. The violin under the sofa, the box of music Pauline might play again one day, the Blue Willow china, some chipped, are theirs now because Pauline takes care of it all each time they move. She asks herself, Where is Asheville?

Then she skates through the dining room where Pauline's twin bed almost touches Claire's chair, and into the kitchen. She makes a bologna sandwich, not looking out the kitchen window when she puts the knife in the sink.

Once Claire had a birthday party in the dining room, Pauline taking up her bed and leaving it propped against the back porch rail. Only last December, and the sheet became stiff while the three girls sat with Claire around the table. Claire: the stranger. Then Pauline put everything back as it had been.

Josie closes her eyes, yells, "You better come in, you better"—*Pauline's* voice, but two pouches like time caught in two sacks of breath puff out Josie's cheeks.

So they get to Miss Keane's at 1:00, Claire having trailed behind saying too loudly such things as, "Here I am, a forward having to jump all the time and she won't get me a bra," and, "If he comes back, I'll kill him," (He's coming back, Josie says to herself) and, "*You* had to stand in the street yelling 'Police, fire, help, murder,' you idiot," which makes Josie shiver, redden, skate faster.

Pauline, then, when he was visiting: huffing in the dark: "Faster, faster, faster" while the wall shook, and she screamed out once, so high; Josie lifting the bedroom screen, tumbling out, tearing her nightgown to get help. Then Pauline coming out onto the stoop, stooping as if calling a cat—"Come here, Honey, come here," the blue satin housecoat parted at her knees, Josie saying, "What, what?"

When Claire, all along, knew what.

Josie, skating, remembers that once he brought a bag of toys. On the back porch in a dishpan the Dipsy Deep-Sea Diver bobbed up and down in water.

"And now this," Claire calls.

"Hi, Lucy," says Claire when Miss Keane opens the door in her navy blue dress-collar white, apron white. Miss Keane looks down at the watch pinned to her dress. Claire goes to the sun room, bangs open the piano lid, and begins to play "The Moonlight Sonata."

"*Miss Keane*," says Miss Keane to Josie while she rolls her eyes toward Claire's curved back and Josie hangs her head, this way of saying *Sorry*—Pauline would approve.

"And we're early," says Josie, "because. . ."

But there *was* no reason unless Miss Keane had been, only once!, in a smaller house with Pauline, hearing how she walks as if tramping through mud uphill, arms swinging, swish, as if a baby were strapped to her back. Even walking down a street her arms swung out and hit you. She could lift anything. And her height, and the chin jutting out. But no fat, when there was so much to do, even resting, the sigh coming out as if resting were a job. "Let me rest, Honey," until anyone could feel her work at it. Mouth going slack, blue eyes shutting—too blue!—and the voice shut off like a faucet.

Only when she rested, feet up on the sofa, could you see, years later when the black of her hair had seeped to the ends, that she was losing the white hair. So thin you could blow through it.

And now, when her hair was still black she never rested with her head down, feet up. She put her head against the back of the sofa and stuck her feet straight out, suspended. Big feet, with bunions, and narrow but for the jut-out the bunions made. Toe nails painted red.

Only Claire kept her nails short. Even years later, when Claire grew fat, she kept her nails short and spotless. She used a white pencil into middle age. Claire: growing fat as if to let no time in, of music or the men to come with time.

"Well nevermind," says Miss Keane. "What you can't help, you can't help."

"We could *help* it," yells Claire over her music, "we just *didn't* help it."

"So be it."

And Josie follows her into the kitchen, the long room with wood cabinets holding light filtered by the trees growing against the panes. On open shelves along a wall sat gallon jars of white paste the children used on weekdays when Miss Keane ran her kindergarten. The room smells of paste.

"I was having my tea," says Miss Keane, nodding toward a cup on the low table, "and I was to take my nap. I expect you'll want tea," a statement, making Josie nod.

"But *she* won't have any, thank you." She spreads her hands in her lap where a napkin would be. "And I can draw or read. But I forgot my books. While you sleep, I mean."

"Nap," says Miss Keane. She nods her head toward the sun room. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, she *never*. . . ."

"No, I expect not." She hands Josie a cup so thin it could break if you touched your teeth to the rim. Ridiculous!, Pauline says in her ear, wherever Pauline is now. Where there isn't a cat—Josie watching Miss Keane's cat roll on her back on the windowsill. "Look!"

"You know *her*. How many times have you been here?" Then: "Does she ever stop?"

"Her?" Josie looks around the doorway, Claire the same, almost like a cat, her back curved over, yellowed by her long hair, and her curved fingers held out. "No, we don't *think* so, me and Momma. We think. . . ."

And what did they think, Pauline only watching Claire walk away each morning to the church, Claire carrying her red satchel hanging from one hand by the frayed strap. Pauline would look up from her book and watch until Claire turned the corner. But that was in summer. During the months of school, they saw her at dark.

"She's good," says Josie. "Miss Conklin told Momma she's good."

"Good?" Miss Keane stirs her tea around and around. "Good? Well, *good*, yes. But. . . ."

Josie waits, to be polite, then tells her about the bracelet she'll get. She watches the cat sleep on the sill, and almost falls asleep with her chin in one hand while Claire plays.

This music: she never gets to hear it unless Pauline takes out the violin, saying, "Let's see, let's see." And too soon: her eyes narrow, when the blue turns gray. She puts up the violin. Time bunched in her fingers where the tremolo should be.

Should I, Josie will ask him in the future, having slid off to lie beside him, take *up* the violin?, voice wistful of its own accord, so it almost whispers, neither of them knowing why. He will look into her eyes. Anyone, then, could have sensed his effort, a grace come so far to surface.

"Could *I* sleep," asks Miss Keane. She answers herself by taking Josie's hand and leading her out to the garden, telling her with patience the names of the herbs and what they heal. "Anything," says Miss Keane. "You were drinking herb tea and you didn't know it. But it's important. More people should study it. We *allow* herbs, the Christian Scientists."

She has Josie taste the mint. Josie keeps her hand in the pockets of her dress, which are as deep as her arms reach, and she holds them straight so that when she opens her mouth it's as if only her mouth were capable of moving, like a person on a sick bed or a beach, heated until he can't move.

"She has no discipline," says Miss Keane, stopping on the flagstone path. "You can hear it. Not the notes. Oh, no, they're perfect. We know about things like this since we're trained to it. But inside her. The rest notes don't rest. That's the only way to put it." And she laughs. "Well enough of that." She touches the top of Josie's head, Josie thinking: Pauline wouldn't like that, her hand on my head. Miss Keane presses down. "She won't make it, you know. But there's more to life than one thing, isn't there?" And her hand lifts.

Lucy Keane's hair was white, full, braided, with the braids coiled into a bun. She wore black shoes with laces; ankles thin, almost blue.

After they eat, Claire taking a place at the end of the table opposite Miss Keane, Claire looks up at the clock hung above the windows and she says, "Now, precisely, is when we were *supposed* to come over."

"Ah so," says Miss Keane, also turning to look at the clock.

"And this way, you'll get more money," says Claire, making Josie say, "Claire!" because they could talk about money *in* the house, and never outside it—how Pauline was raising her girls.

"It's all right," says Miss Keane. "Go put on your nightgowns, both of you."

"They're wet," says Claire. "She was in such a hurry to go make love they're wet, in the basket in the back of the car," Claire looking straight over the plates to Miss Keane.

"You hush up," says Josie, because now, she thought, I know.

And Miss Keane slaps both hands on the table, pushing herself back. "Enough!"

So they leave Claire playing the piano and drive to get the nightgowns, not the *wet* ones, says Josie to herself, touching her chest where what she knows now settles. And Josie soon telling Miss Keane that she's parking *her* car in the spot where *he* washes his car when he comes, "sometimes a Cadillac, with the lady on the hood made out of silver, sometimes some other car, like a Packard or a DeSoto." For a brief time, as they get out, Josie imagines herself as Pauline. Shutting the car door, she says, "With him, you just can't tell."

"Indeed," says Miss Keane.

And, inside the house, Miss Keane stands still at the doorway. She walks to the center of the living room. Josie hears her sniff. "Just as I imagined," says Miss Keane.

"Imagined what?"

"And she sleeps in here?" asks Miss Keane, standing now in the dining room. Josie goes to stand with her back against the dresser where the strap of Pauline's pink bra dangles. She looks up at Miss Keane.

Miss Keane slaps her hands together. "Go find them, right now."

At the door as they are about to leave, with their nightgowns bunched in her hands, Josie says, "We should leave a note."

"Whatever for?"

Josie listens to the clock, to Miss Keane's feet shifting on her black shoes in the doorway, a dog barking far away.

"It won't last," says Miss Keane. "You can smell it. Well, how could it?"

Near sleep, alone in the room because Claire made a pallet on the sun room floor, Josie says to herself that *someone* would have read the note.

How could Josie leave him, when he was old enough for wisdom and could tell her why? "I don't know," he will say, sitting up stiffly in all his nakedness and holding her hands in his. "You tell my why. If you can *tell* me. . . ."

But every word Josie thinks of won't do, will never do. So, like that, it was done with.

In her garden, while Claire played the piano and they wait for Pauline, Miss Keane sits Josie on the stone bench and tells her, "I watch, you know. We're trained to it, as I mentioned. So let me tell you: you'll need to hold on when it falls apart. *They* won't. Your family, so to speak, I'm talking about now."

Josie nods, Miss Keane takes Josie's face in her hands to still it. "You get yourself very, *very* quiet. None of this pounding away, you understand. It's—this quiet—like standing back, something like deacons do in church before they pass the collection plate, you remember? So don't *you* cry and carry on when the time comes. And I'll give you some mint to take to your mother, how's that?"

And now, Love (equi-distant), Watcher, Tarrier at Old Houses, By-Ways, the Body's Iridescent What-Nots, here is how it happens:

Pauline drives up and toots her horn—won't come in!—so that Josie runs out and sees her puffed face, eyes almost glued shut, and her voice one second before whimpering. Takes the envelope Pauline gives her, with just enough money and not one cent over, so it's short by hours, and runs it back to Miss Keane, Claire saying she'll *walk*.

And Pauline in the car thinking: Surprise lying like shells everywhere or stubs of roots cropping up as you walk along. Which is only the beginning of suffering, the heart getting itself in gear for the real, non-indifferent push up a hill.

Pauline, afterwards, moves them herself to a whole, not by God a half, house, which she kept so clean everything had a place: Pauline's feet at one end of the sofa, head at the other, everything in between forgotten, like bread on a grocery list. Oh it was orderly! The name *James* never once passed her mouth, not then, in the new house.

But that was later, Josie now peering over the back seat, asking, "What, what?" Thinking, Is this *it*? Miss Keane's hand burning her head.

And, standing like a deacon behind a pew, Josie misses it all but for what her ears pick up: lovely months of wailing (Pauline) and fury (Claire) and his name dropping like a coin in any plate. *James long gone with his trousers on*. A round, only Josie's part missing because she would not loosen up.

They hate her. How *do* you close something down? *They* knew.

Loss, which taught her, late, to love chaos above all: When Claire was thin with music, when Pauline swung herself all over, when he asked, "You tell me why," when anything might have happened in the last green time.□