

Jean L. Kreiling

On the Cusp

Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

for Ivy

It's not quite summer, but this boardwalk calls to those who need the seashore, their footfalls a song of slapping flip-flops close beside the thuds of sturdy sneakers. On the wide, pale golden beach some hardy souls have laid their blankets, where they huddle, unafraid when late spring winds turn wintry. But most stroll, and briskly, as if headed toward some goal, unspecified but critical. It might be Kohr's for frozen custard treats, despite the chill; or Thrasher's for the famous fries; or else the next white bench, where seagulls' cries and breakers' roars will underscore their rest; or maybe just the boardwalk's end, a test of stamina. My guess, though, is that most have come to this slice of Atlantic coast to stride toward summer. Their perambulation explores the season's cusp, their destination less physical than temporal, their aim to greet the summer's first breath and to claim that exhalation for their own. The sea that beckoned them now lends its energy to their more finite heartbeats, and will steer them toward a well-known and yet new frontier: the edge of summer. Reaching it, they may find seasons of their own: a time for play, a mind at ease, a freshness at the bone, a step beyond the cusp of all they've known.

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Vertigo

after the 1958 film directed by Alfred Hitchcock

He'd watched her fall — a ghastly end —
and knew that with her would descend
his own frail equanimity,
both sacrificed to gravity
and lies. He didn't comprehend

that his obsession might extend
a fraud committed by his friend;
he learned to doubt the tragedy
he'd watched. Her fall

was fatal, but he would pretend
that his affection could amend
the past. His friend's duplicity
provoked poor Scottie's fantasy —
but though he wished that facts could bend,
he'd watched her fall.

Mirror Nonet: Madeleine and Lilac

“And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine which on Sunday mornings . . . my aunt Léonie used to give me . . . [T]he smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment.”
—Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*

Let Proust marvel at his madeleine;
I have the fragrance of lilacs,
which returns me to the day
when I hid behind shrubs
to elude the tag,
and purple buds
dizzied me
with sweet
scent—
for though
I’ve outgrown
the scabby knees
and the frizzy braids,
one whiff of lilac still
makes me half-drunk with wonder,
the enchanted air twisting time
as exquisitely as Proust’s damp crumb.

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Unmailed Letters to Old Lovers

Dear A, I meant to write you long ago,
before my hot tears ended and I learned
I could forgive you. How was I to know
my rage would cool, considering I'd burned
with it for months? I'd thought of searing lines
of razor-sharp reproach, the kind that rips
into a man's self-worth and redefines
and magnifies his guilt. But clever quips
would have been lost on you, and would have gained
me nothing. Our affair now seems like just
another fling, and I have not retained
a trace of heat where you're concerned — no lust
of any kind, even for settling scores,
for I was never *Very truly yours*.

Dear B, We did it right. We had a good
eight months, or maybe nine — more fun than fights,
more trust than trouble, more things understood
than not, plus what the poet called “wild nights.”
We liked the same things: biking by the lake,
then lingering at the outdoor café,
reciting Robert Frost and William Blake,
researching pizza joints, spending a day
spellbound by Hitchcock while it snowed outside.
We parted sadly, neither of us bitter
but both sure it was over. Though I cried,
we skipped the grudges and regrets that litter
so many endings. Yes, it had to end,
but we did that right, too. I'm still *Your friend*.

Dear C, You were, at last, a mystery:
both tough and fragile, brainy and naïve,
a nomad who would settle down with me
but who, perhaps, I should have known would leave.
You'd lived all over—Africa, Japan,
Hawaii, Costa Rica—but somehow
you seemed contented here, just like a man
who'd found his home at last. And even now,
I still can see us by the fire: we sip
Merlot and chat, solve problems big and small,

consider travel plans. But your next trip would be for one; last I heard, Montreal was your next stop. It seemed we failed the test of time, though I did give it *All my best*.

Dear D, I wondered more than once if you had been “the one” — and if I’d been a fool to send you on your way. When I review our history, your flaws seem miniscule, your virtues more substantial. Did I choose unwisely? Maybe, though I can’t complain about my life since then, and when I muse about what might have been, I know my brain has donned rose-colored glasses. But to know that now you are inarguably out of reach, that you’ve gone somewhere I can’t go, has more than grieved me; it’s rekindled doubt. With your death, I see everything less clearly; I do know that I once loved you, *Sincerely*.