

## Book Marks

By Rebecca McClanahan. First published in *The Southern Review*; reprinted in *Best American Essays 2001* and *Best American Essays Fourth College Edition*.

I am worried about the woman. I am afraid she might hurt herself, perhaps has already hurt herself—there’s no way to know which of the return dates stamped on the book of poetry was hers. The book, Denise Levertov’s Evening Train, belongs to the New York Public Library. I checked it out yesterday and can keep it for three weeks.

There’s no way to know for certain that the phantom library patron is a woman, but all signs point in that direction. On one page is a red smear that looks like lipstick, and between two other pages, lying like a bookmark, is a long graying hair. The underlinings are in pencil—pale, tentative marks that I study reverently, the way an archaeologist traces a fossil’s delicate imprint. It’s a weird obsession, I know, studying other readers’ leavings and guessing the lives lived beneath. But I’ve always been a hungry reader, what one of my friends calls a “selfish reader.” Is there any other kind, I asked my friend. Don’t we all read to answer our own needs, to complete the lives we’ve begun, to point us toward some light?

Some of the underlinings in Evening Train have been partially erased (eraser crumbs have gathered in the center seams), as if the woman has reconsidered her responses. The markings do not strike me as those of a defiant woman but rather of one who has not only taken her blows but feels she might deserve them. She has underlined “serviceable heart” in one poem; in another, “Greyhaired, I have not grown wiser.” If she

exists, I would like to sit down with her. We have a lot in common. We chose the same book, we both wear red lipstick, and though I am not as honest as the woman (the gray in my hair is hidden beneath an auburn rinse) I am probably her age or thereabouts.

And judging from what she has left on the pages of Levertov's poems, it appears that our hearts have worn down in the same places. This is the part that worries me. Though my heart has mended, for the time being at least, hers seems to be in the very act of breaking. The farther I read, the clearer it becomes what she is considering. I want to reach through the pages and lead her out through another door.

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My interest in reading between the lines began when I was an evening student at a college in California, still living with my parents but working days to help pay my expenses. It was a lonely time. Untethered from the rituals of high school, I'd been set adrift, floating between adolescence and Real Life, a place I'd heard about which both terrified and seduced me. As an toddler, I'd been a mama's baby, one of those milkily content clingers who must be pulled, bodily, away from the nipple; eighteen years later I was still reluctant to leave my mother's side.

My only strike at independence was the paycheck I earned typing invoices at a printing shop. I could afford only used textbooks and the more *used* the book, the cheaper it was. At first I was put off by previous owners' underlinings, marginal comments, sophomoric doodlings and obscenities. Worse still were the unintentional markings—the coffee stains, dried pizza sauce, cigarette burns. After a while, though, I began to welcome the marks. Since I didn't have college friends—I worked all day, then went straight home after classes were over—I appreciated the company the used books offered.

I imagined the boy who had splattered pizza sauce across the map of South America. Was he lonely too? Had he eaten the pizza alone, in his tiny dorm room, while memorizing Bolivia's chief exports? What about the girl who had misspelled *orgasm* (using two *s*'s) in the margins of John Donne's "The Canonization"? Had she ever said the word aloud? Was she a virgin like me?

After a few weeks, a marked up textbook began to seem like a portable roommate, someone who could debate the meaning of a Shakespeare quotation or quiz me with questions I hadn't known to ask. Not since I was a child sharing a room with Great Aunt Bessie had I had a reading partner. Bessie and I would sit up late in our double bed reading aloud to each other. We'd take turns, each reading a chapter, and right before Bessie removed her dentures and switched off the light (she was a disciplined reader, always stopping at the end of a chapter), right before she slipped her embroidered handkerchief into the book to mark our place, we would make predictions about how the story would turn. Because of Aunt Bessie, I never saw books as dead, finished texts. They were living, breathing entities, unexplored territories into which we would venture the next night, and the next.

Years later, I was amazed to enter my first college classes and see bored students slumped around me, their limp hands spread across Norton anthologies. This stymied me, that people could read a poem by Shelley or Keats or Plath and not want to live inside it. Looking back on my literature texts, I can trace the journey of those years. In the margins of Wordsworth's sonnets, beside the lines "The world is too much with us; late and soon,/Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers," I can chart my decision to quit my day job and pursue my studies full-time, even if it meant borrowing from the savings

account I'd been feeding each payday. "I am done with this," I wrote in blue ink, meaning the commerce of getting and spending, the laying waste of the powers I'd yet to discover.

And in the underlined sections of Hopkins's poems, I can trace the ecstasy of my first spiritual awakening ("I caught this morning morning's minion") made all the more ecstatic since, because I was unable to understand Hopkins's syntax with my *mind*, I was forced to take it in through my body. This was a new music for me. My heart was no longer metaphorical. It beat rapidly in my chest, my temples, in my pale, veined wrists. Suddenly, within Hopkins's lines, I was breaking in new places: "here/ Buckle! And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion/ Times told lovelier, more dangerous." Could it be that Rilke's injunction "You must change your life" was aimed at me? I scrawled in the margin, in bright blue indelible ink, THIS MEANS YOU!

Had I chosen to resell these books to the campus bookstore (I didn't; they had become part of me) their new owners might one day have read my marginal scribbblings, and wondered at the person who had left such a trail. "She needs to get more sun," they might have thought. Maybe they would have worried about me the way I now worry about the gray haired woman. They might even have responded, as I sometimes do, with an answering note in the margins. It might have gone on and on like that, a serial installment of marginalia, each new reader adding his own twist to Hopkins or Wordsworth--or to me, the phantom whose pages they were turning.

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Looking back on my nineteenth year, I am amazed at how easily I closed the books I'd been living inside. What replaced them were the poems the young man handed

me across a restaurant table. “Pretty Brown-Haired Girl” was the title of one; “Monday Rain” another. Some were written in German, and I used my secondhand Cassell’s dictionary to translate them. Even in German, the poems were not good—I remember thinking this even then—but they were the first love poems anyone had ever written for me. I ran my fingers across the words. I folded the papers, put them into my pocket, and later that night, unfolded them on my bedside table. Already the poems were in my head, every ragged line break and rhyme.

At twenty-one he had one of those faces that had probably always looked old. His hair was retreating prematurely, exposing a forehead with furrows already deeply plowed. But his eyes were bright blue, center-of-a-flame blue, simultaneously cool and hot. He wore faded jeans and a rugged woolen jacket and drove a motorcycle; his mouth tasted of cigarettes. Plus he could quote Wordsworth, which weakened me even more. He was independently brilliant, a part time student with an undeclared major, taking classes in subjects like German and astronomy and horticulture—nothing that fit together to form anything like a formal degree. “Come into the light of things,” he teased. “Let nature be your teacher.”

Nature taught me so much over the next year that it was all I could do to force myself to attend classes. He’d moved into his own apartment, and his marks were all over me—his mouth on my forehead, his tongue on my neck, my belly, the smell of his cigarettes in my hair. All else fell away. When an occasional misgiving surfaced I pushed it down. I had reason to doubt that I was his only brown-haired girl. But I hushed the voice of reason, even when it spoke directly into my ear.

My parents disapproved of him, and though Aunt Bessie no longer lived with our family, I was certain she would have disapproved too. I knew Carolyn disapproved. She'd told me so, in the same blatantly forthright tone she'd always used on me. Carolyn was my mother's best friend, and had served as a kind of alternate mother for me for as long as I could remember. She was a librarian who believed that books could change our lives, could save us from ourselves. Over the years she gave me many books, never apologizing that some of them were used. "Words don't go bad like cheese," she'd say. "Read everything you can get your hands on. Live inside the books." On the subject of my newfound love, she was just as adamant. Carolyn had married an older, stable, kind man who adored her yet allowed her the space her inquiring mind demanded. "I'm afraid you're going to lose yourself," she told me. "Besides," she added, almost as an afterthought. "I don't trust him."

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One night after we'd made love, he lit a cigarette and leaned back onto the pillows. "I'm in trouble," he said. "There's this girl." Smoke floated around his eyes; he blinked, fanned the air. His eyes were turning red from the smoke. "*Was* this girl. It's over, but she's been calling. She says she's pregnant." Something hot flashed through my head, then it was gone. All I could think was *He will marry her and I will lose him..*

"There's this place in Mexico City," he continued. "It's nine hundred dollars for everything, to fly her there and back. I have two hundred."

I had seen the word *abortion* in biology textbooks, but I had never uttered it. In 1969, even at the crest of the free-love movement, it was not a legal option. I had fourteen hundred dollars in my savings account, all that was left of nearly two years of

typing invoices at the print shop. Each Friday I had taken the little vinyl savings book to the bank window where the cashier recorded the thirty dollar deposit, half of my paycheck.

"I'll get the rest," I said, surprising even myself.

"I can't ask you to do that."

My next line was from a movie. Something out of the `forties. I should have been wearing a hat with a feather. We should have been in a French cafe: "You're not asking. I'm offering."

"I'll make it up to you," he said.

To this day, I can't recall if he ever repaid me. Within a year we were married, and what was left of my savings was pooled into a joint account. There was little money and much to buy—a dinette table, a T.V. stand, a couch. One night he suddenly sat straight up on that couch. "I'll bet she was lying all along," he said, as though continuing a conversation he'd started just seconds before. "Maybe she just wanted a trip to Mexico. She probably spent the whole time on the beach." I wanted to believe him. I hoped the girl *had* spent the weekend on the sand. I hoped she'd gotten a tan. But I knew the girl hadn't lied. I knew because of what had been set into motion since I'd handed over the money. The shadow of our marriage had made its preliminary approach in the parking lot of that bank, had lengthened and darkened with each month, and has never completely lifted.

The girl's name was Barbara. She had blue eyes and long brown hair, and she lived in Garden Grove with her parents. She had a lisp. That's all he ever told me. The rest has been written in daylight imaginings and in dreams: Barbara and I are sitting

beneath a beach umbrella reading books and sipping tall cool drinks. The ocean is crashing in the distance and the child crawling the space between our knees is a girl. She is a Harlequin, seamed down the center. Not one eyelash, one fingernail, one cell of the child is his. She is the two best halves of Barbara and me, sewn with perfectly spaced stitches: this is the story I write.

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Studying the markings in Evening Train, I surmise that the gray haired woman is unashamed to admit her ignorance. She has drawn boxes around difficult words—*epiphanies, antiphonal, tessellations, serrations*—and placed large question marks above each box. Maybe she’s merely an eager learner, the kind who sets small tasks for herself; she will go directly to the dictionary and find these words. Or maybe someone—her husband, her lover, whoever broke her serviceable heart—also criticized her vocabulary. It was too small or too large. She asked too many questions.

In the poem about the breaking heart, she has underlined “in surface fissures” and “a web/of hairline fractures.” She probably didn’t even notice the fissures at first. Maybe, she guessed, this webbing is the necessary landscape of every marriage, each act of love. Pages later, she has circled the entire poem “The Batterers,” about a man who, after beating a woman, dresses her wounds and, in the act, begins to love her again. I tell myself *I* wouldn’t have stayed in that kind of situation. As it is, I’ll never know; he never hit me. One night, desperate for attention, I begged him to. (How do we live with the knowledge of our past selves?) He’d come home late, at two or three o’clock, with no explanation. Earlier in the evening, returning from one of my night classes and looking for clues to his absence, I’d found a woman’s jacket behind a chair. It smelled foreign yet



familiar—a woman’s musky perfume mingled with the memory of his cigarettes. He had not touched me in weeks.

When his fist finally flew, it landed on the door of the filing cabinet where I kept my class papers and poetry drafts. This act should not have surprised me. For months he’d been angry that I’d returned to school. “What are you trying to prove?” he’d say. “Where do you think this is going to get you? Just listen to yourself, can’t you just hear yourself?” Though I still worked part time at the print shop, he spent whole days on the assembly line, drilling holes into bowling balls. Anything to make ends meet. He was hoping, beyond logic, that he would be saved from Vietnam. He was terrified; his draft number was a low one.

The force of the blow was audible: a thud, a crack. Loose papers flew from the top of the cabinet. He cried out, then brought the fist to his mouth. Surely the fist was broken, I thought. I rushed toward him, but he held up his other hand as if to block me. Time slowed. White paper fluttered around me like birds. I stared at his hand, and something went out of me, I could feel it, a sucking force, tidal, pulling myself out of myself. Then the moment was over. He turned and walked away, his wounded fist still pressed to his mouth, his blue eyes filling. I knelt on the floor and began to gather the papers together. My eyes were dry, my vision clear. This is what hurt the most: the clarity of the moment, its sharp focus. Each black word, on each scattered page, distinct and singular.

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Two years ago, when Carolyn was sure she was dying, she wrote to me from her home in Virginia, asking me to come as soon as possible. “You can have whatever you want,” she said. “The only thing I ask is that you don’t cry. Just pretend it’s a book sale.” We spent two afternoons going through the books. Too weak to stand, Carolyn sat on a little stool, pointing and nodding. Shelf by shelf, her life’s story unfolded. She said she was glad she’d lived long enough to see a grandchild safely into the world. She was glad I had found a husband who was good to me this time.

Now, as I study the phantom woman’s markings, I fear more and more what the woman is considering. In the poem “Dream Instruction” she has underlined, twice, “gradual stillness” but appears to have missed entirely the “blessing” in the lines that follow. The marks in “Contraband” are even more alarming. I want to take the woman by the hand and remind her of the poem’s symbolic level, a level that’s nearly impossible to see when you are in pain. Contraband, I would tell her, is a symbol for the tree of knowledge, the tree of reason, and the fruit is the words we stuff into our mouths, and yes, that fruit might indeed be “toxic in large quantities” but those lines are not a prescription for suicide. There are other ways to live with knowledge.

For instance, you can gather up what remains of yourself and set off on a journey much like the journey of faith Levertov writes of. Or, if that proves too difficult, if you’re too weak to manage such a journey, you can send your self off on its own, wave goodbye, step back into childhood’s shoes and refuse to go one step further. You can cut off your hair, take the pills the doctors prescribe and beg for more, then lose yourself daily in a gauzy sleep, surrounded by the books that have become your only food. His deferment dream did not materialize, so you have followed him to a military base where you know

no one. Vietnam is still a possibility. Your heart is divided: you dread the orders yet pray for them. If they come, you will be able to retreat honorably to your parents' home. In the meantime, you have the pills and the books and the bed grown huge by his nightly absence--he is sleeping elsewhere now with someone else, and he no longer even tries to hide it.

If you're lucky, one night your hand will find the phone, and if you are doubly lucky and have a mother like mine, she will arrive early the next day, having driven hundreds of miles alone in a car large enough to hold several children. Though she is a quiet woman who rarely interferes, in this case she will make an exception. She will locate your husband, demand that he come home, now, and when he does (this is where the details get fuzzy, you have sent yourself off somewhere) together they will lift you into the back seat of the big car and rush you to the emergency room of the nearest hospital where the attending physician will immediately direct them to the psychiatric wing.

I would remember none of this part, which is a blessing. Had I remembered the details, I might have felt compelled to tell the story too soon to anyone who would listen: strangers on buses, prospective employers, longtime friends of the family, men I met in bars or churches (for months I would search both places, equally, for comfort). "There's no need to tell," my mother would repeat, over and over, long after I was out of danger. Though I've finally decided, after nearly thirty years, to tell, I still hear my mother's words in my head. "You don't need any more hurt. It's no one's business but yours."

This is my mother's way. Though she freely gives to anyone in need, there is a part of herself, the heart's most enclosed, tender core, that she guards like a secret. In this

way, and in others, I would like to be more like her. Less needy, more protective of fears and desires. Less prone to look back, more single minded in forward resolve. Though I had rehearsed his leaving for months, when he finally left, for good this time (isn't it strange how we use *good* to mean *final*?), I was terrified to imagine my future. "What should I do," I begged my mother. "What would you do?" I don't know what I expected her to say. My mother has never been one to give advice. Experience, in her view, is not transferable. It is not an inheritance you pass on to your children, no matter how much you wish you could.

If her words held no answer, I decided, then I would read her life. She had left her parents and the family farm to follow her husband from one military base to the next; waited out his long absences; buried one child and raised six others; watched as loved ones suffered divorces, financial ruin, alcoholism, depression, life-threatening illnesses and accidents; nursed them through their last years. "Take me with you," I begged, meaning back home, to *her* home, to the nest that she and my father had made.

My mother remembers this as one of the painful moments of her life. "I wanted more than anything to say yes," she recalls. "But I knew if I did, you'd never find your way. It was time you found your own way." So my mother took my face in her hands and said No. No, I could not follow her, I could not come back home. Then she helped me pack my suitcase and, so that I would not be alone, so that I would be safe if worse once again came to worse, she made a plane reservation to my brother's town in South Carolina. Half a world away, or so it seemed to me.

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The narrator of Levertov's Evening Train sets off on a journey too, and though I suspect that the luggage and racks of the book's title poem are intended to be metaphorical, I cannot help but feel that the phantom woman's journey, like mine, required a real ticket on a real train or plane, and that by the time she had arrived at the poem called "Arrived," she had already sat alone in a room with "Chairs./ sofa, table, a cup--" and begun the inventory of her life. Was the phantom woman, like the poem's narrator, unable to call forth the face of the one she had left, who had left her? Why else mark these lines: "the shape/of his head,or/color of his eyes appear/at moments, but I can't/assemble feature with feature"?

In my pain, I prayed for such moments of forgetfulness. How pleasant it would be not to recall his hands, his tanned furrowed forehead, the flame-cool blue of his eyes. My only release was to stuff my brain with cotton. That's how it felt when I took the pills. Though they no longer had the power to put me to sleep, they lifted me to a place of soundlessness and ether. I thought of T. S. Eliot's hollow men, their heads filled with straw. The image of scarecrows was comforting, as were thoughts of helium balloons, slow floating dirigibles, and anything submerged in water. I was an aquarium, enclosed within myself. Amniotic silence surrounded me hour after hour, then suddenly--What's that noise, I'd think, startled, amazed to discover it was my own breath in my lungs, my heart thumping, the blood thrumming in my own ears.

When this happened, when I was brought back to myself, I'd think *No, please not that*. I had forgotten for a while that I was alive, that there were fingers at the ends of my arms, fingers that could burn themselves on the gas stove, the iron, the teakettle's steam. The world was too much with me. Why bother? (*This is the way the world ends. . .*) I fell

back into bed, finding comfort in Eliot, and later in Job. The New Testament was stuffed too full of promise and light, but Old Testament sufferings were redemptive, though not in the traditional sense of the word. I was long past questioning why a loving God would destroy Job's house and cattle, afflict him with boils all over his body, and kill his children. The worst is yet to come, I thought—and almost said, aloud, to Job. Happiness is what you should be fearing. If God answers, out of the whirlwind and the chaos of destruction, beware of what will be given: healing, forgiveness, six thousand camels, a thousand she asses, seven sons and three daughters, each fairer than the next, your life overflowing, another high place from which to fall.

I didn't want to live but I couldn't imagine dying. How to gather the energy? I owned no gun. I had no courage for knives. Pills seemed an easy way out; I tried, but my stomach refused to accept them. Over the next weeks, I started taking long drives on country roads, staring at the yellow line and thinking how easy it would be to pull the wheel to the left, into the oncoming truck, which was heavy enough, I was sure, to bear the impact without killing its driver. (I didn't want to kill anyone, not even myself. I just wanted not to live. There's a difference.) Or better yet, pull the wheel to the right, into that stand of pine trees.

What terrified me was not the thought of the mangled metal, the row of wounded trunks, or even of the sheet pulled over me—a gesture that seemed almost a kindness, something a loved one would do. What terrified me that late summer day was the sudden greenness of the trees, the way their beauty insinuated itself into my vision—peripherally at first, vaguely, and without my consent. I blinked to stop what felt like tears, which I hadn't tasted for so long I'd forgotten that they were made of salt, that they were

something my body was producing on its own, long after I thought I had shut down.

Okay, I said to the steering wheel, the padded dashboard, the pines. If I can think of five reasons not to die, I won't.

When I got back to my room, I pulled from the pages of Eliot a blank prescription refill form I'd been using as a bookmark. I found a pencil in the nightstand, one without an eraser, I recall. I remember thinking that I couldn't go back on what I'd written, couldn't retrace my steps if I made a mistake. I turned the form over and numbered the blank side—1,2,3,4,5—with a black period after each one, as if preparing to take a spelling test. It was the first time I'd put pencil to paper since I'd left California. I thought for a while, then wrote beside number one, "My parents," immediately wishing I'd have split them into "Mother" and "Dad" so that I could have filled two lines. Then to my surprise the next four blanks filled quickly and my hand was adding numbers and more numbers to accommodate the names of my siblings, my nieces and nephews, the handful of friends I still claimed and even the ones who were gone. I filled the back of the prescription form and probably could have filled another but I didn't want to try, I couldn't bear any more just yet—the stab of joy, the possibility.

As the months passed, the world slowly continued to make itself known, appearing in small merciful gestures, as if not wishing to startle: voices, a pair of hands, golden leaf shadow, a suggestion of sky. Then one morning, for no reason that I can recall, the world lifted her veil and showed her whole self. She looked strangely familiar—yes, I thought, it's all coming back. Put on shoes, brush teeth, smile into the mirror, pour orange juice into a glass. *This is the way the world begins. This is the way the world begins. This is the way.*

I smooth the center seam of Evening Train and run my hands over the marked-up lines. Poems can be dangerous places in which to venture, alone, and I'm not sure the woman is ready for "After *Mindwalk*." She has underlined "panic's black cloth falling/over our faces, over our breath." Please don't, I want to say. Don't do it, don't drink it, don't eat that apple. I want to tell her about the pine trees, the list, Mother and Bessie and Carolyn and Wordsworth and Hopkins and Job. Look, I'd say, pointing to the footnote. See, "Mindwalk" was a film by Bernt Capra, it's not a real place, don't worry. It's about Pascal and the Void. It doesn't have to be about you. But it is, of course. That's why she is not only reading the book but writing one of her own as well, with each scratch of the pencil. The printed words are Levertov's, but the other poem is the woman's—written in the margins, in the small boxes that cage the words she cannot pronounce, in the crumbled erasures, in the question marks floating above the lines. *Wait up*, I want to say--a crazy thought, but I can't help myself. *Wait up, I want to tell you something.*