

## Friedberg Travel Fellowship Report – Elizaveta Lavrova

### Introduction

Over the course of my semester in France, I made an effort to get to know this country beyond the city of Paris. I traveled to Aix-en-Provence, Montpellier, and Saint-Vincent-sur-Jard. These three towns differed from the places I initially intended to visit, since I selected them as opportunities came up during the semester to travel with my friends and to stay at my host family's vacation home. Recording my impressions in a journal and building on them to create several pieces of short fiction, I was able to fully engage with all the sights and experiences. I have assembled a short story collection that will allow me to look back on my thoughts and feelings while abroad in France for the rest of my life. I am extremely grateful for the support of the Friedberg Memorial Travel Fellowship, which made this project possible.

### Project: Aix-en-Provence

I traveled to Aix-en-Provence during the second weekend of October, while the weather was still warm. I arrived on market day, the streets filled with stands carrying everything from vegetables, to tapenade, to cheese, to flowers. Over the course of my stay, I visited Cezanne's studio, met with a friend for a late dinner, wrote in a café, and did a lot of wandering.

At the Atelier de Cezanne, which was preserved mostly as it was after his death, I learned that this native of Aix-en-Provence was primarily interested in capturing shape and color in his paintings. For him, the light in the Provence region was special.

During the rest of my time in Aix, I paid special attention to the color and was amazed by the remarkable vibrancy of the blues, the greens, and even the red of the terracotta roofs. I also saw the beautiful view of the Mont Sainte-Victoire that figures on so many of Cezanne's paintings.

It was interesting to see that there were two sides of Aix—the old centre-ville (with its old buildings, countless and remarkably varied fountains, and winding streets, this part of the city used to be circular, enclosed by walls), and the part of the town up near the Atelier—hilly, with white houses with red roofs, lots of vegetation.

The distinction between Sundays in America and Sundays in France was more acute in Aix than it was in Paris: many shops that had been open on Saturday were closed the following day; the restaurants I had planned on eating were not open, and in general the whole city was much quieter. I learned that when traveling to small cities in France in the off-season, it's essential to plan your activities ahead of time, and to consider the fact that Sundays are largely quiet days to be spent at home with the family. However, when I went to the park, I discovered more animation, as families relaxed on the grass, some people danced to music, and children and dogs played in the warm October sun.

In my short stories, I wanted to reflect the wandering that I did throughout the city, the colors and the beauty of the place, as well as the restlessness I felt during this first experience of traveling by myself. I wanted to convey also a moment that I will hold dear for a long time: just before I boarded the evening train back to Paris, I walked up the hill past Cezanne's Atelier. Children played in front of their building. The lights of the city glowed below. The sun was setting, bright orange, and there was an atmosphere of peace and quiet that surrounded me.



## Montpellier

On the last weekend of October, I traveled with a friend to Montpellier by train. The weather was perfect and warm, and palm trees lined the street from the train station to our hotel, which was broad and open. We stayed the first night in a hotel, and the second night with my friend's mother's acquaintances, who had a house out in the suburbs. The lady with whom we stayed was Chinese, and had married a French man and moved to Jacou, France in order to start a family with him. Both she and her husband were professors in the university. It was a real pleasure to converse with this family and to stay in their house, and it showed me that the people living in France have diverse back stories. It was also cool to see the woman's daughter and her best friend prepare to go trick-or-treating (as we were staying with them the night before Halloween).

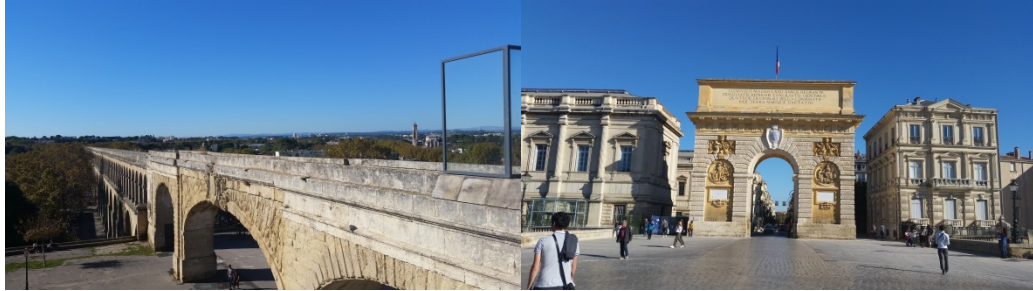
While in Montpellier, we visited key monuments and took a guided tour, which brought us to the Promenade du Peyrou, showed us the Chateau d'Eau and the aqueduct (which, despite looking like it belonged in the Roman empire, was actually built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century).

On the tour we learned that Montpellier was founded in the middle ages, and began as an important trade town for spices and many other goods. Now, the town has a high proportion of students (almost one fourth of the population is student-aged), and has been renowned over the centuries for its Fac de Medicine. In fact, the Jardin des Plantes (the Botanical Garden) first appeared as a garden for medicinal herbs needed for the practice of medicine.

We also saw a Mikve (a Jewish ritual bath) during the tour, which was discovered only recently in the basement of an old building. It was fascinating to learn that a “point d’eau” would serve as the basis for a Mikve, around which a whole Jewish community could be built.

In writing about Montpellier, I questioned how best to incorporate a travel experience into a story. I asked myself whether it was more natural to leave the experiences intact, and present them as a travel narrative, as the viewpoint of an outsider, or to synthesize them into a narrative of my own creation. Rather than directly translate the experiences as a travel narrative, as I did with my time in Aix-en-Provence, I chose instead to select a few lasting impressions and interpolate them into the story as key elements and key places. I especially wanted to focus on the Botanical Garden, on the cats that lived in the garden (and likely belonged to the guardhouse) and on the tree in which my friend and I had found numerous folded pieces of paper containing peoples’ wishes. I also wanted to integrate the feeling of belonging, of numerous people crossing paths in a communal space, that I had felt while sitting by the Chateau d’Eau on the Promenade du Peyrou on our last evening in Montpellier.





### Saint-Vincent-sur-Jard

The last trip I made with the fellowship came a week after my trip to Montpellier. I took a train to join my host family at their maison de vacances at Saint-Vincent-sur-Jard, a tiny town in the province of Vendée.

I was able to spend more time together with my host family, and furthermore to meet some of their neighbors in Saint-Vincent, who were also spending their Toussaint vacation at the beach. Curiously, a good number of the houses in Saint-Vincent are owned by Parisians like my host family and their neighbors.

I furthermore learned about the Vendée Globe, a round-the-world solo yacht race that takes off from the town right next to Saint-Vincent-sur-Jard once every four years. They were just preparing for the launch of the race at the time that I was there; the boats would take off during an event that would draw a huge crowd a week later.

My host family took me to les Sables-d'Olonne, a neighboring town, which had a boardwalk and a long, wide beach. Rather than touristy, it felt local and intimate. We also saw a street the walls of which were decorated with seashell paintings, an initiative by a local woman who decorated the walls of the neighborhood over the years.



### Paris

To live in Paris was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I was incredibly lucky to have and that has left many lasting impressions. While in Paris, I wrote two short stories. One, entitled “The Horse,” came from my French Literature class, where the professor made a joke about how

he would not demonstrate what the word “piaffer” meant. The other, entitled “The Doorbell Rang,” presents a dystopian vision that came about as I was lamenting the high monthly cost of the Paris metro pass.

The Friedberg fellowship permitted me furthermore to take one trip out of Paris to the nearby town of Giverny. The voyage, an hour by train, brought us to the town of Vernon where we rented bikes and rode the seven kilometers to the quiet town of Giverny. Monet’s garden was just as enchanting in person as it was in his paintings.



### Conclusion

These travel experiences allowed me to reflect on what I was learning while abroad, and to reflect on my personal growth as a traveler, as a French speaker, and as a writer. I saw many different sides of France, from touristic attractions and historical sites to the intimate lives and stories of French family life. Such a diversity of experiences enriched my time in France and increased my understanding of its culture, and made my study abroad experience much more complete.

## Aix-en-Provence

### A Letter from the Past

The landline phone rang. This was a bad sign: nobody used the landline phone except for Christina's mother. Not even telemarketers – thanks to Paul's ongoing war efforts against commercial phone calls.

"Christina, darling," said her mother's voice. "Oh, this is such a shame. You know I was really looking forward to dinner tonight."

"I know, mom," said Christina, bracing the phone on her shoulder. She looked over at the counter: two grocery bags, unpacked but not yet put away—imported *parmigiano* to top Paul's pasta (he was particular), salt (how had they managed to run out?), skim milk for her mother's coffee, French Vanilla ice cream. The ice cream, at least, should be put away, decided Christina.

"Oh, no, you certainly do not know," insisted her mother, voice rising, threatening crisis.

"What on earth happened?"

"Just ask the *ogre* that you married."

"The *ogre's* name is Paul, mom," said Christina, but her mother had already hung up.

The marriage had been three years of fragile peace, three years that had seemed like three centuries, three years stretched taut and tense and terrible. The relationship between Paul and her mother was Christina's daily Labor: every encounter had to be micromanaged, every comment neutralized, each mounting argument diffused (which took no less expertise than diffusing a bomb). Her mother and Paul were not easy people.

The marriage was a delicate thing, like a globe made of glass—each time the wind blew, Christina worried it would topple over and shatter. Still, it was a precious thing. It was translucent, and here and there shone through moments of unfathomable happiness.

"Paul?" called Christina, forgetting the ice cream that was beginning to melt on the counter.

"Paul? Where did you disappear to?"

Their honeymoon to Mexico, they took the bus in the wrong direction and although they barely got back to the hotel thanks to Paul's broken high school Spanish and Christina's visual memory, for a moment they had felt like they had shed their roles as tourists and embraced that of adventurers. Two years ago, they had gone shopping for a car and ended up in one of those pop-up Halloween stores instead, Christina trying on silly, ridiculous, terrifying masks, Paul buying fake blood—"What for?"—"I have a feeling that one day it will come in handy." Last December, when Paul's brother Neil visited, they had put on jazz on the Bose speakers while Paul had cooked chili, his sleeves rolled endearingly all the way past his elbows.

She found him on the deck smoking. "What the hell is this," she said.

"Listen, I only smoke when I am nervous." His words were preceded by a big cloud of opaque smoke, which tumbled out of his mouth and proceeded to dissipate into the evening air.

"Put it out!" Christina demanded.

"Fine, fine," said Paul. He plunged the cigarette butt regretfully into the soil of Christina's ficus plant.

"Pardon my French," she said, "but what the *fuck* happened?"

"Look, you know we don't get along, me and Laura." He was looking fixedly into the distance. It was true that the view was impressive. It was one of the reasons they had chosen the house. The summer was beginning to turn the corner into fall. The sky was pale and pastel, like the inside of a shell;

the light was soft like a cashmere turtleneck; the mountains rose up above the horizon. They were still mostly green, touched in a few places by spots of yellow and ochre.

"When I left, everything was fine," said Christina. Paul nodded. "I expressly *told* you not to provoke her."

"Yeah," Paul said.

"I was only gone half an hour."

"Guess so." He had taken out another cigarette, but, too timid to light it in front of Christina, he was fiddling it, twisting it between his fingers.

"And when I came back," Christina continued, "ready to eat the dinner that I had been working on *all afternoon*, with the two people that are the *most important* to me, my mother was *gone*, and here you were *smoking* on the deck."

"Yeah."

"Paul!" she said. He jumped.

"What?"

"What did you say to her?"

"I want you to remember one thing," said Paul, studying the white roll of paper and tobacco in his hand. He paused, seeming to consider what he was about to say; then, deciding himself, he delivered the following sentence: "It's not my fault your mother is a bitch."

Christina felt an ugly lump ascending in her throat.

"What did you say?"

"She made a comment. About the way I decorated *my* living room. Jesus, Christina, you know the way she is. But this is *my* house. She had no business. And anyway I didn't say anything to make her storm out. She overreacted. I only told her exactly what I think of her rotten old place, all cluttered up and shuttered up and dusty as hell." He took a breath. "I told her it looks like a special kind of dump, where they only accept the shittiest shit refused by all the other garbage enterprises."

"Jesus, Paul," said Christina, the lump breaking through to the surface.

"She deserved it," said Paul.

Christina could physically feel her precious peace shattering. The tiny glass shards settled on her skin. And for what? A dispute about décor? It was so childish.

"I *asked* you," she said.

"Look," Paul began.

"No," said Christina. She left him there, stupidly balancing the unlit cigarette between his fingers.

She made her way to their bedroom and collapsed on the bed. The sun had finished setting and now a pervasive blue color hung suspended in the air. Christina tried to gather herself, like one gathers a bowl of Cheerios after it has toppled from the counter, after the Cheerios have scattered all over the kitchen, rolled under the refrigerator and the breakfast table, and gathered all kinds of dirt.

There were all her happy memories, shining like pebbles polished by the ocean. There was her childhood, sunny; her grandmother reading her palm and telling her that indeed everything in her life would turn out fine and just *look* at that love line, her grandfather telling her she was special, her tenth grade English teacher Ms. Hays telling her she had a great talent (for what?—this was never specified), her college roommate Ginny who got married at the age of twenty-two swearing to her that love was real, love was hard, but love was worth it.

Little by little, these solid thoughts allowed Christina to restore the rate of her breathing.

She thought about Ginny some more, the pictures of Ginny's two little children that surfaced occasionally on her Facebook wall, each of them smiling Ginny's smile and wearing the same large, protruding ears. She thought about Ginny's husband Matthew and his neck, long like a giraffe's.

Inevitably, she thought also about Adam. Inevitably because in college it had always been the four of them: Ginny, Matthew, Adam, and Christina.

The summer after they graduated, when Christina had begun her first job as part of an accounting firm, Adam had suddenly taken off with one of his buddies to go backpacking across Europe. “My last fling,” he told Christina over the phone, “Before I become an upright citizen and go to law school.” For two months, she got regular letters from Adam. Then the letters stopped; Adam came back from Europe, and practically disappeared from her life.

In the middle drawer of the dresser, underneath old bills and tax papers and a folder full of receipts, underneath an old copy of the Bible and two glossy black photo albums, lay one of Christina’s most treasured belongings: a thick, unmarked envelope, inconspicuous among all the other paperwork. She emptied the drawer looking for it, knowing it was there but fearing momentarily that it had gone missing. Finally, it was found.

At first she had only meant to hold it, to feel its weight, but her fingers slid the envelope open instinctively. She had not looked inside the envelope since the day she had married Paul.

(That Paul, he was probably smoking that cigarette he had been holding, frowning in his typical way at the descending darkness.)

The letters from Adam arrived every two or three days—every time he and his friend John changed location, there was another envelope addressed in his lopsided hand, no return address and a foreign stamp clinging to the corner. Christina had wondered how long the letters took to travel to her little house from whatever exotic places they were posted. Adam never wrote down the date, but once he had mentioned the summer solstice and from this Christina had calculated that it took somewhere around two weeks for Adam’s words to be delivered to her door.

It bothered her that she was reading about his life two weeks after it was happening.

While she was waiting to receive his letters, Adam had already moved two weeks into the future—it was as though she was looking at his life from behind a distorted window, his actions distant and muted and cloudy. For all she knew, the Adam of the past, the Adam of the letters no longer existed. He was but a shadow. The real Adam was always two weeks ahead.

Several letters in, Adam had purchased a box of colored pencils. He hadn’t drawn since high school, he had explained, but everything he was seeing had awakened in him an unexpected hunger for the act of creation. His hands were restless, his heart aflame with the villages and cities of Spain and southern France.

The first drawing he sent her was a sketch of a Spanish cathedral on the back of a flyer for a piano concert. “Hope you don’t mind that I’m sending you this little sketch,” he had written. “It’s rough, I am a little rusty – my eyes see one thing, and try as I might to reproduce it, my hand sees another. I can’t pretend to capture the color, the light, as it is here. For instance, where you see yellow on the cathedral wall, imagine it golden, with the sandy color of the wall shining through, transformed by the evening sun; but imagine, also, that the wall is uneven and that in the cracks and crevices and indentations there is a soft, lavender shadow....Still, this is the only way that I can show you what I am seeing, the only way I can share it with you.

“And besides, if I carried around all the sketches I’m planning on making, well by the end of this trip my backpack would weigh seventeen tons....”

Christina had tacked the picture of the cathedral up on the wall above her bed.

From then on, the letters each came with a picture. Christina privately disagreed with Adam about the color; to her it seemed enchanting, seductive. The places that Adam visited breathed on her wall. Sometimes, overtaken by a sudden moment of melancholy, she would stare at this wall of masterpieces, this wall of secret treasures, and wonder what Adam from two weeks in the future was doing at that moment.



The longest letter had arrived in her mailbox nearing the end of August. Christina had had a long day of work, and besides, somebody had stepped on her foot in the subway and when she removed her stocking, she found it bruised and a little bit swollen. She had set the kettle on the stove to boil, and looked through her mail. There was a bill, an offer for a magazine subscription, and—precious thing—the envelope from Adam.

The envelope was thick, reassuringly heavy. Pouring herself a cup of tea, Christina dug a manicured nail into the envelope. The paper gave easily and the contents spilled out onto the kitchen table. The letter itself was long; Christina counted three sheets of paper, over which wandered Adam's lopsided writing. Tucked behind the letter, Christina discovered the drawings—not one, or two, as was usual, but a dozen.

"My dear, my wonderful, my darling Christina," Adam had written. Christina felt the blood rushing into her cheeks.

"My dear, my wonderful, my darling Adam," she whispered.

This edition of your biweekly subscription to the Adam Engleman Tribune is (as you may have noted) longer than usual. This is not only a testament of my fondness for you, which is very great, nor merely a testament to my great love for the country of France, nor a simple gift to show my gratitude for your loyalty as my primary subscriber—while these are all true, the real reason for my verbosity is much simpler: John Leland has fallen in love and he has forgotten all about me. I have been abandoned. I have been wandering about this town for three days now and John has condescended to join me for but little of that time. By consequence, I have had a lot more time to think of you, and a lot more time to write.

Let me start, as I always do, by situating you in my journey in the geographical sense. We have been steadily making our way west along the south of France, as you know, and on Sunday we left Avignon and arrived in Aix-en-Provence. This is a small city, a very old one, and very beautiful. The sun is warm here, and the colors and the light truly are magnificent, just as I have been told.

More on that later. First and foremost indulge me, allow me to complain a little about John.

We took the last bus here from Avignon. We were some of the last to get on and there weren't any adjoining seats remaining—I sat down in the front next to an old guy with a slightly uneven mustache. His breath smelled terrible and he didn't speak any English. As you know I only know a dozen words in French, two of which are not decent, and so I didn't catch a word of what he was saying. I think maybe he was relating his opinion about American politics, but I cannot really be sure. He did, however, share a pack of pistachios with me and so I was content.

John, on the other hand, found a seat all the way in the back of the bus. Later he told me he had passed up several empty seats on purpose: he had seen an opening next to, in his own words, "the Most Beautiful Girl in the Universe." In my opinion that title should belong to you.

(I'll be honest—I am jealous of John's ability to speak French. I'm more jealous of his ability to meet beautiful women everywhere he goes.)

So anyway, there he was, in the back of the bus, next to a goddess called Marguerite, who spoke French, English, and Italian, and had the same taste in poetry as John, and offered to show him around town.

Which brings us back to today: John has been with Marguerite for the past three days and refuses to leave Aix. Due to his outright neglect I am feeling lonely and cannot properly enjoy this city. What does she see in him anyway? What can he offer them, besides and intimate knowledge of Roman history and an assortment of bad jokes? What is his secret? (Can you tell I am bitter?)

To fill my time I have been drawing more than ever. Enclosed you will find a pictographic history of my past seventy-two hours. Aix is full of details that at first I overlooked but now am taking pleasure in discovering and recording. It is the kind of city where if you don't look up, you might miss it all.

For example, the fountains. Never have you seen so many fountains! You can be walking along a perfectly unremarkable street and suddenly you will come across a fountain, nonchalantly looking magnificent in the middle of the road. This one, like others, is special; it is not like any other fountain in the city. This one is covered in moss; that one is a monolith adorned by an angel; that one is plain; that one features at the center a classical-looking statue. Everywhere water is flowing. It's kind of enchanting.

Do you remember the time we went down to the river in the middle of October? Ginny and Matthew went to collect firewood and we waded ankle deep into the water. It was cold. The leaves swirled on the surface of the water, the reflection of the sky rippled, you smiled at me, and after a while my feet went numb—but it was an incredible feeling—I can't describe it any other way than to say that I felt alive. I think of that time each time I come across a fountain. Thinking of you gives me comfort in a foreign place.

I had a dream last night. An incredible, long dream, full of color. I only remember it in bits and pieces. If you insist, I'll tell you about it.

Sometimes you know where a dream comes from and sometimes you don't, and it is in the second case that you begin to worry about divine inspiration. For example the night after we all watched *The Matrix*—do you remember that night—I dreamt I was a hero saving somebody or something from disaster; I no longer remember who or what. There had been a lot of running and fighting. I felt important. You get the idea.

I think that probably the dream I had last night was more on the side of divine inspiration.

First—although to be honest I'm not really sure what came first—I dreamt that our cat, the one that wandered off Junior year, came back home. Except he had turned all white, as though whatever he had seen had impacted him thoroughly enough to change the color of his coat. I fed him and he ate and then he turned into me or maybe I turned into him—either way I was now the cat.

I wandered narrow cobblestone streets, looking for something that has since slipped my mind. Every street turned into a dead end. I think I became human once more. There was a market. I tried to buy apples but I kept being handed tomatoes instead. A man with an eyepatch and a bouquet of flowers sold me one of his roses. I went to pay him but in my pocket there was nothing but seashells. The man seemed perfectly content with this currency. Suddenly I was back on campus and you were there too. I gave you the rose, and I won't tell you exactly what we did after...

In the dream it all seemed connected but now to tell you the truth I couldn't connect these fragments even if I wanted to. Whoever sent me this dream has too much faith in me. I am but a humble wandering artist, a tiny soul lost in the giant continent of Europe. Whatever divine inspiration was supposed to come from this vision is lost on me. The only thing I can tell you is that I woke up with such a strong feeling of longing....

The color here is truly superb. Did you know the painter Cezanne thought that Provence was unequaled in terms of light and of color? I walked up the hill behind the centre-ville and was amazed. The city changes its character up here. The streets are wider, there is more vegetation, the houses are white with red clay tiled roofs. The greens of the trees and bushes are unbelievable.

The studio of Cezanne used to be up here—and still is, preserved after his death, exactly as it was. Also up here is the point from which he painted the Monte Sainte-Victoire. I spent a good hour there, the result of which you will find among the drawings. Thank you for being my personal art curator, by the way.

It's been a long time since trees, houses, streets, have been enough to take my breath away. The sky was the bluest I had ever seen. The mountain in the distance called to me like an old friend. I hope I conveyed this feeling of infinite, unfathomable beauty—although I can't pretend to have done it justice.

This morning, out of boredom, I drew myself. You may not know this but I have grown a beard. A handsome beard. Any self-respecting pirate or lumberjack would be jealous. I messed up and got its form a little wrong in the drawing; it is not really so square.

You know, I have changed. You wouldn't recognize me now. This is why I'm sending the picture with the beard—I look quite different, don't I? I want you to know me, to see me as I am now. More than just the beard, I feel myself sliding into a different self. I'm not sure who I am, but the universe itself seems different. Wider, full of possibility. I want you to see these cobble stone streets, these sunsets, these old men on the bus who share their pistachios and their opinions, these children in the park and dogs running loose without leashes, these lonely men drinking beer on the park benches, staring into the distance determinedly. I want you to see it all reflected in me. And even though I can't say precisely how it has changed me, I know that I am now different.

I think you would find me stronger. More interesting. More poetic.

I drew you as well. It is from memory. It's lucky for me I spent so many evenings studying you, memorizing your details. Now I can try to resurrect you on this paper. This is the only drawing I will not be sending back to you. I am too proud of it; it is too dear to me.

Last night I was walking down the hill from where Cezanne used to paint the mountains. The sun was setting. The sun swallowed up the universe.

Do you ever look into the distance and begin to feel very, very small? When the city is beneath you and you know that it is full of light and color, people moving, talking, smoking, dreaming, laughing, playing cards, shouting—but none of it reaches you. Their sound is so small, or maybe in this moment you are deaf to it; in this moment you are wrapped in the silence, you are swallowed by the setting sun. The city glowing, distant and the lights nestled in the hills are so small, so lonely in this sunset that consumes all, that sets the world on fire. The wind tugs at you gently and that is all. It feels like the end of the world.

Your soul is tranquil.

In that moment, walking down the hill by myself I felt small. I felt infinite. I experienced profound heartbreak.

In that moment, I missed you.

My only comforting thought was this: is this not the same sky that is above you at this very moment?

Are we not all connected to one another?

Are we not all parts of the same whole?

Christina put down the letter and stared, unseeing, at her hands. She knew, she knew that the relationship with Adam had been one-sided. Whether entirely on her side (as she imagined the romantic scenery from his letters and sighed longingly), or entirely on his side (as he described his adventure and imagined her reading his words with fascination), it had not been real. Whatever it was, they had never actually communicated.

She knew this because when Adam came back, when she saw him, it was not the same—there was nothing in their meeting over lunch of the letters. Maybe her actual presence had gotten in the way of Adam's poetry. He *had* changed, she could see that. But something had changed in their friendship also, had become dull. They hadn't seen one another since.

Whatever it had been, it had not been real. Still, the letters had contained something beautiful, something precious. Something—Christina trembled at this word—something sacramental.

She was pulled from her reverie by Paul's footsteps on the stairway. Slowly, heavily, her fingers folded the letter, fingertips caressing the paper.

Paul poked his head through the doorway, saw the photo albums strewn on the bedspread, smiled.

“Our wedding pictures,” he said, picking up the smaller of the two albums. He flipped through the photographs.

“What a beautiful wedding,” he said.

“What a wonderful woman I married,” he said.

“I think that maybe,” he said, “I should apologize to your mother.”