

The First Thing and the Last

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a novel by

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ISBN: 978-1-935514-69-5

Library of Congress Number: 2009939985

Cover art: “Clouds Over Death Valley,” pastel by Karen Jones.

Cover design by Susan Bright.

Acknowledgements

Recognition and thanks go to the following:

“With the Dog at Sunrise” by Jane Kenyon, in *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems* (St. Paul: Graywolf, 1996); excerpt from “Lullaby” by Cris Williamson and Shaina Noll; “The Thanksgiving Grace,” a widely used song based on a poem attributed to Alice Corbin Hendersen, source unknown; the untitled poem that begins, “Do not stand at my grave and weep,” by Joyce Kilmer in *Earth Prayers*, Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (eds.), (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

For Nora, always

Also by Allan G. Johnson

The Forest and the Trees

The Gender Knot

Privilege, Power, and Difference

*Searching for God is the first thing and the last,
but in between such trouble, and such pain.*

Jane Kenyon
“With the Dog at Sunrise”

One

1

For an instant, Katherine forgets what is happening and feels as if she is flying. Like an object hurled into the air and weightless at the apogee of flight, she is aloft, unbound in the vast and timeless space between one heartbeat and another, before the gravity of being draws her back to who and where she is and what is what.

She has felt this way before, when she was younger, before Ethan was born, and she sometimes dreamt of flying in the yard outside her old elementary school. In the dream she is eight years old, her auburn hair shoulder length around the small rounded features of her face. She stands among the other children at recess, with them but apart. She is wearing a dusty rose nightgown with long billowing sleeves and embroidered with blue cornflowers, but no one seems to notice. And then she extends her arms to raise herself up on her toes, leaning her body forward as if to catch a lifting breeze, and leaves the earth to float and soar and dip above jungle gym and carrousel and earthbound children oblivious to the miracle above their busy, noisy play. She is never afraid and never falls. She lands when she chooses and where.

Then there were blanket tosses at summer camp, lying on her back and looking up at the sky as she ascends, laughing, never doubting being caught on the way down. Unlike her brother, Jack, who assumes that falling without the expectation of being caught is the natural order of things. As a boy, he would stand at the end of the diving board at the town pool, toes barely to the edge, a finger laid along his lips, and look down as if trying to figure the distance or calculate the odds. Then he stepped off, tentative, still clinging to the possibility of changing his mind, arms tucked close to his body, eyes shut, knees bent to absorb the blow.

But Katherine was acquainted with the end of the diving board only in passing as she flung herself into the air, each arm and leg seeming to have a direction and purpose of its own, eyes open as she hit the water, which she trusted like her father's arms when he threw her into

the air, face upturned in a smile, her looking down at his big hands awaiting her return.

Once again she is thrown into the air, but this time it is not a dream and no one waits to catch her, which she realizes as her ears fill again with David's enraged grunt of exertion from throwing her across the kitchen, and she sees the wall by the sink just as her shoulder and the side of her head slam into it, breaking the glass on the Monet water lilies print they bought together at the Harvard Coop one rainy afternoon. Something pops in her neck and blood begins to run down the side of her face before she hits the floor. Even then he is upon her, kicking her as she tries to curl herself into a smaller and smaller target.

"You fuck," he says, sweat running down his face, "who the fuck do you think you are?" And she has no idea except that it has something to do with dinner, her whole life suddenly reduced to a narrow focus on the hope that he'll wear out or get distracted and move on to something else. And that his voice and the blows landing on the familiar terrain of her body won't be enough to wake Ethan.

The last thing anyone who knew Katherine growing up would have predicted would have been that she would find herself thrown through the air across her kitchen by her husband, the object of a rage that could only be called murderous. In fact, it would have been so far from their imagining that it wouldn't have been the last thing, but no thing at all, not even occurring to them to rank below the rest.

Constance DeSilva, her fifth grade teacher, would have raised her short body to its full height, stuck out her chin, and declared that Katherine Stuart would never marry such a man as would do a thing like that to her. And if even if she did, she wouldn't tolerate it long enough for it to come to this.

Katherine's memories of that time are vivid and fine. At recess she often hung upside down from the jungle gym bar, her dress clutched between her knees to keep it from falling over her head. There had been some controversy about that — the wearing of dresses to school — and a running battle with the principal, Miss Burdock. Katherine

insisted on wearing jeans because dresses were too easily torn and soiled in the dusty yard where the children played. Dresses made no sense, she said, her faced pinched around the futility of trying to convince an adult who was clearly set against her.

Miss Burdock listened patiently, head bowed, heels together, hands folded just above her waist, and when she thought she had heard enough, looked past the long line of her broad and ample bosom to the child below.

“Jeans,” she said, “are inappropriate,” as if the authority inherent in such a lengthy word was more than a match for any child’s argument. But still it made no sense, and Katherine believed everything was bound to make sense. Miss Burdock, however, was unmoved and said Katherine could not come to school in jeans and would be sent home if she did, and if she did not come to school, her education and therefore her life would surely be a ruin.

There was a long silence as Katherine stared down at her feet and felt the pulsing of her heart in her ears. Children ran in the hall outside until a sharp voice slowed them to a walk. The clock on the wall clicked as it reached 3:00 and the bell sounded and she looked at Miss Burdock just once and then turned and strode out into the hall, borne along by the tide of children seeking the freedom of the outside air.

No. No one would have guessed, including neighbors who watched her play cowboys with the boys next door, resplendent in the Dale Evans outfit she received one Christmas after a year of relentless begging. It had a chocolate brown western shirt with scalloped decoration running across the chest and fringe that hung down at the forearms and a matching skirt. And it came with not one toy gun, but two, and not like the ones the other children had that took rolls of caps and spat out streams of paper that had to be torn off. Hers had small cartridges that looked like real bullets and came apart to insert a single round cap between the casing and the slug. She had a poster of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans on the wall in her room and she practiced her draw before the long mirror that hung behind the bathroom door. Her mother shook her head and sighed whenever she saw Katherine run out the door, armed to the teeth and slapping her thigh to mimic

the rhythmic clip and clop of the horse that galloped beneath her. She despaired over her daughter's future which she knew would hang on her ability to make herself attractive to men, but there was something in Katherine that she found irresistible and so she became practiced at knowing when to give in and when to gently steer her on a more promising path to womanhood.

In seventh grade, Katherine discovered literature on a rainy day at the public library. She had read *Little Women* but knew nothing of the Brontë sisters or Jane Austen. She devoured them, and began to wonder if a woman's fate always hinged on the anguish of a man's tormented soul. It seemed that way from what she could tell. Never did the authors portray a man waiting, his life on hold, for the outcome of some woman's dark, heroic struggle for herself. Always it was she who waited, patiently and not without some danger lurking nearby.

In high school it was Edith Wharton whenever she could find the time between assignments to read Hardy, Dickens, and Hawthorne. When her grandmother cleaned out her attic, she gave Katherine a small carton of books that included the poems of Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, and e.e. cummings, and inspired by images of slanting light on winter afternoons, little lame balloon men, and woods silently filling up with snow, she began to write poems of her own. She wrote them in a small journal she found among the books in her grandmother's box, and for years kept them to herself.

Her grandmother would not only have been shocked by Katherine's fate, but incredulous and furious. In Katherine's memory she was the tallest in any company of women and her face had all the sharpness of feature that Katherine's lacked. She was strong enough to lift Katherine into her arms with ease even as they both grew older and other adults declared Katherine too old for such things. When Katherine visited her on hot summer afternoons, she often found her in the back yard, bent forward as she labored behind her push lawnmower, the whining pitch of the blades rising and falling as she quickened and slowed her pace. She would stop when she saw Katherine and smile beneath the sleeve of her blouse drawn across her brow.

They would go into the cool kitchen where there was always lemonade in the refrigerator and sit in the dining room and talk about what Katherine was reading and what was happening in school and whether that Robertson boy still followed her home and slipped little notes of affection through the mail slot in the door, folded so many times she barely knew what they were.

It was remarkable to Katherine how unlike her mother and grandmother seemed to be — her grandmother so bold and full of life, a reader and a thinker who thought the meaning of life a question worth pursuing, and her mother so carefully modulated, so disinterested in books and ideas, so concerned with the opinions others held of her. When her grandmother heard that Katherine had been forbidden to wear jeans to school, she volunteered to set Miss Burdock straight on the matter, but then thought better of it, fearing it might only make things worse. Her mother, on the other hand, although she had finally stopped ordering Katherine back upstairs each morning to change into a dress, seemed to greet the news of Miss Burdock's ultimatum with relief and pursed her lips and looked away in a gesture of 'I told you so.'

Her father stayed out of it, hiding behind the morning paper, until she lost the Battle of Burdock as he would later call it, and retreated in tears to her room, and he followed her there and stood in the doorway, hands thrust into the pockets of his baggy corduroys, and watched her lying on the bed and crying into the pillow.

"It's not fair," she said in a muffled, stricken voice. "It doesn't make any sense."

He sat down beside her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Maybe not," he said. "But you have to play by the rules. It's the only way to get along."

"Even when they're dumb."

"Well," he said, "sometimes, yes. Miss Burdock is in charge and she gets to make the rules. That's just the way it is." He rubbed her back and she looked up into his round face and the fine hair already thinning on top of his head. "Besides," he said, leaning forward as

if confiding a secret, “you look so pretty in a dress, and you’re such a pretty girl.”

“I don’t care,” she said, turning her face back into the pillow.

“You will.”

The blows from David’s hands and feet come slow but unrelenting, blending to a continuing flow of pain that Katherine thinks she cannot stand, until she leaves her body for asylum in a small space just outside her mind where the pain feels once removed and she can bear the terror of knowing that in this moment he can do whatever he wants.

He grabs a fistful of hair and slams her head into the wall. Then he walks to the kitchen table and sits down, exhausted from the effort. He reaches behind him and takes a dishtowel hanging from a drawer pull and throws it at her, then rests his elbows on the table and lays his eyes against the fleshy heels of his hands. “Why do you make me do this?” he says, his voice slurred from rounds of drinks before coming home. “You make me crazy.”

Katherine’s body bloomed later than most. In seventh grade, all around her girls sprouted breasts and carried tampons to school while she remained flat and unstirred. She wrote about it in her diary, this wanting to feel stirred up inside. And then it came to her one night when she couldn’t sleep and wound up in the bathroom, sitting in the dark on the toilet, waiting for the mystery to stop flowing from between her legs, her head resting on her hands that pressed into her eyes to make the black nothingness come alive with sparks that shimmered blue and red and silver. And then she wondered, and slowly lifted her head and passed a hand gently between her thighs and touched an outstretched finger to the soft lips and brought forth a tiny drop, dark red, almost black in the night, and she raised it to her face and turned her finger from side to side as she examined it, and then with a small murmur of surprise slipped it into her mouth and tasted of the mystery she had become.

It wasn't until her junior year at the University of Vermont that she allowed anyone to know of her poetry. She didn't see it coming, this sudden desire to make her secret known to another, and would never have guessed the recipient would be Leonard Phippen, an aging professor of creative writing. His eyes squinted almost shut when he smiled, which was a lot, and his hair reminded her of her father's, except that what remained of it didn't lie neatly across his scalp, but instead strained and arced upward in all directions in a pattern that reminded her of solar flares. From time to time, especially when he was reading aloud during class, he would run his hand through his hair as if to bring some order to it, but the effect was always to rearrange the chaos in a new form.

When she submitted her first poem to him, he wrote across the top in a pencilled scrawl, "Uncommonly good. I hope you'll do some more." And after she submitted the second, he asked to speak with her after class. He didn't smile, and at first she wondered if she'd done something wrong, until he beckoned her to sit down and leaned back in his chair as he fingered the page that contained the poem.

"Every once in awhile," he said, "a student writes something I would like to have written myself." He looked up at her and made a little smile. "This is one of those times."

She blushed and looked down and then up and by the look on his face, knew that what he said was exactly what he meant.

"There's more, isn't there?" he said.

And before she realized what she was doing, she nodded and said there was.

"May I see some of it?"

She only let him see the ones she liked the best, and when he read them he told her she could give him poems at any time, whether she was enrolled in one of his courses or not, and that he would read them and tell her what he thought and help her make them better if she liked.

"You have a certain turn of soul," he said after reading the first batch. She asked him what he meant and he sat without saying anything

for a long time before he shrugged and said he didn't know how to put it into words, which was a rare condition for him. "Just keep writing," he said. "Keep writing."

And she did, and then she met David Weston and fell in love for the first time.