

---

## In the Shape of a Goddess

**Sarah Dickerson**

---

It's nine A.M. I haven't had a drink in seven months, and it's been five since I walked into Hugh's house. I knock this time, lightly on the front door, and then walk in. His home looks like an abandoned art studio or wood-working shop, and it's hot inside, overheated; the thermostat must be broken. There is hardly room to maneuver through the machinery and lumber that fills the space. The past year's mail is piled up on the band saw, and several months of dirty dishes sit on the table in the corner. Sawdust covers the hardwood floors, mixed with pistachio nut shells, cat shit, and broken bits of pottery. Beneath the floor, I can hear Ramses in the basement, barking and whining to be set free, while two or three generations of cats surround my feet and meow to be fed.

Two years ago, Hugh had decided to leave this house and move back to his farm. He took me there many times. A lonely place—acres of beautiful flowering fields where once horses grazed now filled with the hum of insects and the soft erratic flight of butterflies. Inside the old ramshackle farmhouse, dust had settled on the kitchen countertops, the near-empty bookshelves, the plywood floor. A cold, black wood-burning stove stood dormant in the middle of the one large open room, its chimney reaching up through the roof where the insulation hung down in big loops. The children's rooms were up in the loft. Dolls and books and toys were left behind. We would take Ramses to the farm with us. It was his chance to run like mad through the fields.

Hugh had wanted to go back. He'd had enough of this backward college town where nobody understood him, so he gathered all the beautiful antique furniture inherited from his aunt, packed up a U-haul, and moved it to the farm. "I just want to be alone," he said. He took everything except his brass bed and his four-cup coffee maker.

But after moving the furniture out, he never bothered to leave himself. Instead, he moved his sculptures in. They told him at the art studio on

campus to get his stuff and clear out; they needed the space for new students. So he took all his artwork, the tall architectural structures, and lined the bare, dirty walls of his house like an art gallery, some pieces made of stone, some of brick; others were made of charred wood—pieces he named before setting on fire, then snuffed out half burnt, halting the sacrifice.

In the middle of the living room, he put the goddess.

She was my favorite. Cast in bronze, she was perfect, a female form with small upturned breasts and full arching hips standing between two slabs of limestone. She leaned slightly on one leg and her arms rested gracefully by her sides. Though her palms faced her body just below the hips, she held them slightly outward, as though to entreat, or comfort. Her bald head was tipped back and tilted to one side, a soft but insistent expression on her face, half pleading, half commanding. She was beautiful.

But now the goddess is gone, raffled off in Detroit to help pay taxes on the farm. The other pieces are still here, hidden behind the large machinery, a place to dry dishtowels, hang up his coat, a place for Ramses to pee for lack of a tree.

I step carefully over a pile of dog shit and I see Hugh's potter's wheel lying idle in what was once the dining room. The cats follow. Unfired cups and bowls of various sizes are stacked on shelves above the wheel and the top of the kiln, dozens of empty whisky flasks among them. He used to spend hours drinking and throwing pots that were never fired while Ramses barked and ran circles around the post he was tied to outside, sometimes well into the night. Every now and then I'd stop in to see Hugh engrossed in pot throwing, one after the other, a firm hold on the spinning clay, and I'd go out and lead Ramses around the post in the other direction to unwind him.

I peek into the kitchen and I see there's no coffee made. He is still sleeping. The faucet lets water plop steadily into a sink already filled with greasy dishwater, and it overflows into the basin beside it. The cupboard doors all hang open—not a single clean glass or plate. Every dish and pot and pan sits unwashed, on the countertops and on the floor, green mold growing on some of them, onion and potato peels scattered around them. I used to come every couple of weeks and do his dishes for him while he cooked for me, taking my hands out of soapy water to drink a beer and watch him slice mushrooms. He knew they were my favorite. I loved to watch him cook. His hands were as sure and steady in the kitchen as they must have been when he molded the goddess. As it grew dark outside, Hugh would untie Ramses and let him in.

Ramses is an Ibezan hound, an Egyptian breed from the island of Ibeza. You can see his flattened profile, one front leg held up high, marching next to Egyptians in ancient hieroglyphs. He would bound like a deer over the threshold and proudly prance through the house over dirty dishes and bits of pottery, knocking over beer cans and bottles, sniffing the corners of each room in search of old dinner plates. My hands elbow-deep in greasy dish water, Ramses would come to me and whine, his ears pointing straight up. He'd stick his big Roman nose into my side, and working his way between me and the sink, he'd shove me back forcefully. I'd push him aside, but he was as big and as stubborn as a farm animal and wouldn't budge. Hugh would grab him by the collar and drag him, his feet refusing to move, his butt dragging along the kitchen floor, to his dish of dog food. He'd sniff it, then sit, and, letting out a pleading yelp, he'd look at Hugh and cock his head, ears up, expectantly. Hugh would stand there with his hands on his hips. There they would be, staring at each other, and Hugh would say, "Dumb dog."

Hugh used to take hours to prepare a meal for me, enough time for me to get the kitchen clean. As clean as it could get. Enough time for us to become giggling drunk before stuffing ourselves with fried mushrooms, baked chicken or steak, and tossed salad with vinaigrette dressing. He was the best cook. And the best lover. Later, we'd make our way clumsily to Hugh's big brass bed, which back then was in the sunroom behind the kitchen. We'd shed our clothes and toss them over the side of the bed the three feet to the floor. I'd climb on top of him, and he'd pull my hips up with his large, firm hands, pull me up and over his face, while I held tight to the rails.

In the morning the sun would stream in through the dusty windows, and I would listen to Hugh in the kitchen, the sound of each gentle movement so subtle: his placing the filter into the basket, measuring out ground coffee, pouring water into the coffee maker. His opening the bathroom door and then closing it, his urinating into the toilet. In a few moments, he would bring me a cup of coffee with cream and sugar, just how I liked it.

But now, it's too hot in here, stuffy, and the place smells like dog shit, rotting meat, stale whisky, cat piss, stiff dirty laundry. Ramses howls mournfully in the basement.

After the house was emptied, Hugh moved his bed upstairs into one of the bedrooms, using the sunroom for storage of boxes that didn't make it to the farm. I head up the stairs and call out, "hello?"

No answer. The narrow stairway has been stripped of carpeting, the cats had pissed all over it, and the stairs creak as I climb them. The stench of

urine is strong up here as I walk past the bathroom. I wonder if Hugh is missing the toilet, or if it's the cats. Looking in, I see the bathtub, its faucet also dripping, filled with rusty colored water. Two grocery bags filled with Old Milwaukee cans sit outside his bedroom door. I knock, and hear the brass bed clank.

I open the door and see Hugh, wearing a once white T-shirt and stained Fruit-of-the-Looms, struggling to sit up on the high edge of the bed. He seems to be looking for something on the floor—his trousers maybe, or a bottle. He's gained weight and is grossly puffed, his hairless thighs and calves a pale white and covered with purplish red bruises the size of oranges, no doubt from falling down or bumping into the machinery downstairs. He looks up at me. His once curly graying hair is matted down against his scalp, his face bloated a pale yellow and covered with red blotches, his once sparkling blue eyes are bloodshot red. I inhale nervously. He breathes unsteadily and reaches up to wipe last night's drunk off his face. I see his fingers rattle against his forehead and then he quickly puts his hands in his lap to still them. I sit down beside him on the bare mattress, the sheets having been shoved to the foot of the bed during fitful sleep, and I touch his face. I work on his sticky hair, trying to loosen the curls with my fingers, and he lets me.

"You don't have to get up," I say. I move my hand down to touch his cheek. Taking a sudden shaking breath he lays his head back on the single pillow and I cover him with the quilt, the one his mother made for him. It reeks of piss. With his eyes closed he reaches for me and pulls me into his arms, as if I had never left him, as though I had never been missing, and I let him. I lay my head down against his chest; his T-shirt smells like booze. He strokes my hair as I listen to his racing heart occasionally skip beats. I used to carry Klonopin in my purse. I'd give him a pill every now and then to help him with his morning jitters, or sometimes he'd pop one with me in the evening; it made for a smoother drunk. I don't have them anymore—doctor said I had to quit those too.

He wraps his arms around me and rubs my back, and I try to position myself so I can't get wind of his stale whisky breath. He pulls the shirt out from the waist of my pants and I let him lift it over my head and off me. We kiss. It's not my fault this has happened to him, I tell myself. I didn't do this to him. His mouth is sticky, dry. It tastes like rot, but I ignore it. I take off the rest of my clothing and his, and pushing the smelly quilt to the floor we make love on the bare mattress, the brass bed squeaking, the rails clanging against the wall.

I had started drinking after David moved out. I had to kill the hours before and after dinner, the hardest part of the day. Two beers in the evening, that's all, to get me through the hours that they should have been there. The girls and I didn't last long in our little townhouse across the complex. I could see where they lived, and I couldn't stand to watch them—my stepson, Thomas, after school, and David after work—walk into a front door that wasn't ours anymore. After four months, I broke down on the telephone. Please, I cried to my father, I want to come home. Please take me back to my hometown.

That's when I met Hugh. He was a friend of my parents, the recent artist-in-residence turned graduate student in the art department where my father taught. He came with my folks in a big white truck to help me pack up and move.

There was something about him—his handshake perhaps. He was tall, somewhat shy, with curly graying hair tied back in a short pony tail. There was something about his hands, or maybe his soft masculine appearance. Maybe it was because he was the first man I saw after David left. From the moment I shook his hand, I knew I needed him and he needed me. I could tell. "He's divorced too," my mother had told me. There is a powerful, magical connection between alcoholics, particularly divorced alcoholics, even before you know you are one. We attract like magnets, and start circling, like stupid planets with a gravitational pull gone nuts.

It just happens. You just know.

All it took was a phone call to set things in motion. After settling in to my old hometown, into our new two-bedroom apartment, I called him and invited him out for a drink. I felt mischievous and daring after my separation from David. I didn't care about possible rejection; I'd already been rejected. I didn't care about anything, least of all myself. The moon could've dropped from the sky and squashed me flat, for all I cared. I figured I might as well have fun. I also knew he wouldn't turn me down.

And he didn't.

I met him downtown at what was later to become our hangout—The Bird—a place where college students gather to drink beer and play pool. I learned a lot that evening. He said he was married for 25 years and had seven children, all of them home-schooled on the farm that he and his wife had retreated to once the Sixties were over. When I met him, his marriage was finished, and so was his idyllic family life on the farm. Half his children had grown, and the other half shuffled between his house and hers.

I also learned that he liked to drink, liked to dance, and was addicted to pool. We didn't talk long before he ushered me to the pool table and dropped in quarters. We listened to songs on the jukebox as we took turns shooting. If a song he liked began to play, he'd stop mid-shot, say "Ah!" then take my cue stick and his and lean them against the wall. "Dance with me!" he'd announce and grab me, swinging me around the pool table. It'd been years since I danced.

I decided I liked him because he was an artist, a sculptor. I like art, but I like the erotic talk surrounding it more. Not the incoherent stuff, not the babble about shape and form and color and depth, but the talk of gods and goddesses and women and sex and mothers with infants. It made me feel powerful. Someone once said that men have to make art because they're terrified and awed and in love with women. It helps them get a grip on things, particularly women, the more mysterious sex. It offers the illusion of control—gives them the balls to approach—the courage to get it up. I like that idea. It's a turn-on. I'm not sure why women make art. Probably to get the hell away from these guys.

At the very least, art gave Hugh and me something to talk about. The breakup of our marriages gave us something to cry about. And we danced and we drank and played pool for years, until Hugh called the bartender a bitch one night and got thrown out of the bar for good.

We drank margaritas at La Señorita's on our first *real* date. He wore his hair down, long and curly, and his eyes, I noticed, were a deep dark blue. We talked. He told me he'd wanted to be a priest and spent seven years in the seminary. When he was 21, he fell in love with a young married woman in his church. Their affair was nothing more than kissing. "We were both very Catholic, after all," he said. The young woman ultimately stayed with her husband, and Hugh left the seminary to study art. Later, he met and married a young Canadian woman. They bought 60 acres in the middle of Michigan, built a house and a barn, and dedicated themselves to a life of arts and crafts—weaving, jewelry-making, pottery, and sculpture. They raised their own sheep; they spun their own yarn; they made their own blankets and clothing. It was the ideal life, he said. But, immediately after he accepted an artist-in-residence position at the university in town, things fell apart.

"We moved from the farm into town, and it just wasn't working," he said. "So, we agreed to separate, and we agreed it would be temporary—we needed space from each other." He paused. "Then she met another guy. And I got divorce papers in the mail." He shrugged and looked down at his drink, then quietly shook his head. "She married him last month."

We continued for hours, sharing sorry stories of marriages gone bad. I told him how my husband left in the midst of his nervous breakdown, taking my stepson and leaving me with our two baby girls, how awful it was, how I couldn't eat or sleep. After stuffing ourselves with chicken enchiladas and Spanish rice, and slugging down three salty margaritas each, we drove downtown to see *Pulp Fiction*. Before the film began, Hugh reached over, smiling, and rubbed my right shoulder.

Nice. And he continued, not just rubbing, but kneading my shoulder and upper arm, all the way down to my elbow with his large, firm hand. It was as though he were molding me, attempting to change my shape.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to see how you're put together. For the goddess."

"Goddess?"

"Always doing research," he explained. "It's for a show in Detroit."

I wanted to see this goddess.

We arranged to meet at the art studio the next day. I took my two-year-old with me, Emily, holding her high on my hip as I walked into the studio.

"There you are!" said Hugh when he saw us. He gave my daughter an approving smile and ushered us into his studio space.

The first thing I saw, taking up the majority of the room, were two enormous square legs of white marble, a single structure about eight feet tall, holding up a kind of twisted and flattened calligraphic form, as though he had taken the marble and bent it like iron. It was a commissioned piece, a monument to be installed in a Catholic cemetery in Detroit for children with cystic fibrosis, a thirty-thousand-dollar job. Sadly, it was money already spent, used as a down payment for a house that he and his wife had purchased together before she left him. She got the house and he got the piece, unfinished in the middle of the art studio. Apparently he was past deadline, and his priest-friend who got him the job was pissed. Hugh's other pieces were there too, the architectural structures, the burnt altars, all ready to be moved to the campus gallery for his M.F.A. show.

Then I saw her. She was covered in plastic and wrapped in damp brown paper towels, standing on a pedestal of some kind. When Hugh unveiled her she was nearly perfect, a female figure about a foot and half tall. She was made of red clay, still moist. Her face appeared to be finished; she was already pleading, already entreating, as though she had pushed her face out from within the red clay to beseech her creator. Her back and shoulders were still in progress, thin strips of red clay draped on her arms and across her back like muscle tissue, like you might see in a human anatomy book—no skin yet.

“So that’s why you were feeling my shoulder.”

He was looking at her, his eyes scanning the length of her body. His arms were folded in front of him, and he leaned softly on one leg, like her. “Always doing research,” he repeated, this time in a whisper, more to himself than to me. I shifted Emily to the other side, adjusting her on my hip.

After a tour of the studio, I gave him a ride home, Emily in back in her baby seat. When I pulled up to his house, he kissed me quickly, and before he stepped out of the car, I asked him: would he like to come over tonight? No, he couldn’t. He had too much to do. He’d give me a call, he said.

So I went home, put Emily down for a nap, and threw a stool in the kitchen, puncturing the drywall. I didn’t like being cast aside that way. I didn’t like being alone.

I timed my own drinking carefully, rarely losing control. I didn’t see myself as a real alcoholic. I had it figured out: when I couldn’t hold off till noon anymore, I came up with a strategy that worked. None until 11 A.M., if I could help it, and then only three. I’d started taking a writing class—I had nothing better to do, and no idea, at the time, that writing would help save my life.

I also figured out, by trial and error, that I couldn’t do it beyond the first three beers—I couldn’t write. My mind would go watery and my fingers missed the keys. So at one o’clock, I’d take a nap, and at three o’clock, I’d get the girls. Then I’d stop at the party store, the one between Hugh’s house and mine. Candy bars and soda for the girls and a six-pack for me, unless I went back to Hugh’s, and then I’d buy a twelve-pack. I refused to buy his whisky, but if he had some vodka, I’d have a vodka and tonic with lime. Sometimes he cooked for us—the girls would play with the kittens or Ramses, or be given a wad of wet clay to shape. Otherwise, we’d go home, and the six-pack would last till we all went to bed.

Right from the beginning, I needed him to be with me, to drink with me. Without him, I began to feel hazy and incomplete, like I was disappearing or drifting away into space. I hated that feeling. It scared the day-lights out of me. Hugh, on the other hand, often seemed indifferent, or needed room to breath once in a while, or room to drink alone and brood. I didn’t like to drink alone. When he pushed me off, I panicked, and the more I panicked, the more I drank. And the more I panicked and drank, the harder he pushed and drank, until we’d both be sent reeling, spinning wildly out of control—me throwing objects, like car keys at Hugh’s face, or Kleenex boxes across the room. Hugh would throw pots on the wheel.

“I just want to be alone!” he would yell.

“I just want you to want to be with me!” I would scream.

“Well, I don’t always!”

And I’d go home and throw things there: a coffee mug, a book, whatever was handy, and drink myself to sleep. And I’d go back on free weekends when the girls were at David’s, or back in the morning after I dropped them at school. We’d cling to each other then, making love for long hours. He’d lay his head between my breasts afterward, still and quiet like a boy.

Sometimes Hugh and I would wake in the morning in the big brass bed, our mouths sticky, our hands jittery. We shouldn’t drink so much, we would say. I need to stay away from the whisky, he would say. We should at least hold off until next weekend.

Sometimes Ramses would be there too, sitting up next to the bed staring at Hugh, his head cocked, looking guilty. He’d stand on all fours for a moment, sniff the floor, and take a quick prancing step backward, then forward. He’d sit up again, cock his head, and stare at Hugh. A massive pile of dog shit would be sitting on the living room floor.

“Ramses!” I’d hear Hugh yell from the living room after he staggered out of bed. Ramses would jump up, pivot around in nervous circles, and start to whine. Hugh kept a shovel next to the kiln, and before the morning’s coffee he cleaned his home like a barn stall, dumping shovels full of shit into the toilet and gagging, while Ramses, head down, would look up in shame with sad brown eyes. After he’d dump the last pile, he’d grab Ramses by the collar and drag him sitting on his butt, his hind legs kicking underneath him. Hugh would struggle to open the back door, and when he did, Ramses would yank himself free, back up, take a few high prancing steps, and dart around Hugh. Leaping through the torn screen of the door, he would run like a gazelle at full gallop until he disappeared down the street, out of sight.

“Damn dog,” Hugh would say.

One day, I suggested we take Ramses for a walk. “I think he needs to get out of the house for a while,” I told him. We drove to a nearby park with Ramses in the back seat of my car, refusing to sit and sticking his big head over the seat, nudging me as I tried to drive. “Sit, Ramses!” said Hugh, and Ramses turned circles on the back seat, bumping Hugh in the head until he settled down, his long body sprawled along the entire back seat.

Ramses enjoyed his walk by the river, prancing happily, stepping high, pulling Hugh along on his leash. A woman stopped and remarked, “What an unusual dog—what is he?” and Hugh proudly related the entire history of the Ibezan hound, rambling on, while Ramses, afraid of most people, stood

shuddering, cowering nervously, wrapping his leash around Hugh as he spoke.

“Uh-huh,” said the woman. “Interesting.”

We decided to stop at a picnic table and finish the Old Milwaukee from the night before.

“I should really walk him more often,” said Hugh. “This is nice.” He tied Ramses to the table, and we drank our beer and talked. When it was time to go, we headed back to the car.

“You know,” Hugh said. “I should walk him every day, maybe he wouldn’t take off so often.”

“The exercise would do him some good,” I replied. When we reached the car we both turned around. “Oh!” we exclaimed simultaneously. We retraced our steps back to the picnic table. Poor Ramses sat there, still tied, cowering by the table.

I could never get Hugh to come and stay with me. It was as though he were tied to his house, trapped, unable to escape. I went to Hugh’s house on Fridays after taking the girls to David’s, and came home on Sundays when their dad brought them back. On Monday mornings, I’d take the girls to school, go back to Hugh’s, and climb in bed with him. If he was shaking bad enough, I gave him one of my pills, and after one of us said, “oh what the hell,” we’d jump in the car, run to the store, and buy some more beer. I knew Hugh was an alcoholic, but me? Certainly not a real alcoholic. I had it figured out.

If his mood was dark he told me to leave him alone. I’d leave in tears, and picking up my own beer, I’d go home and drink, screaming at him over the telephone for not loving me, for not wanting to be with me.

“Give me some space!” he’d yell back. “I just want a little space!”

I’d slam down the phone, and he’d get drunk. The next morning, I’d climb into his bed, and we’d start all over again.

I finally saw her finished. It was late afternoon on a beautiful spring day, and Hugh took me to the art studio to show her to me. She was outside on the sidewalk, waiting to be loaded onto a truck and taken to a show in Detroit. The goddess stood in the sunshine, cast in bronze and posed on a limestone base. Two rectangular posts rose up on either side of her, supporting a cross-member as a ceiling. She stood framed, solidly female—slim waist, flat belly, tiny breasts—even more perfect than her clay predecessor. Her palms were turned just slightly outward, her head tilted back and cocked to one side. I could imagine the fiery-red molten bronze that filled her plaster mold and

then hardened and froze, transforming her into the goddess she was now, into shades of light and dark golden metallic brown. Though passive, serene, her expression showed she was as demanding, as insistent as before, even more earnest now that she was solid bronze. Above her head hung a lead hammered relief mask of the Egyptian goddess Hathor. The sun shone on her and the limestone fortress she stood within, highlighting her features, illuminating her face, and casting a shadow on the sidewalk like Stonehenge.

“Wow,” I said. “She’s beautiful.”

“Well,” he paused for a moment, “she’s 90 percent you, y’know.”

“Me? She is not!”

“Yes, she is.” He stood with his arms folded, looking at me this time, smiling.

Me? A warm feeling flowed through me. I was stunned into silence. *Me!* We left to get some wine, to sit in his backyard and celebrate, relax. On the way to the store, I spoke, interrupting my own reverie: “So what’s the other 10 percent?”

An eight-thousand-dollar price tag was attached to her and off she went, only to return again after the show unsold. She stood in the middle of Hugh’s living room for the next several months. That’s when his money ran out. He’d been offered another commission to build an altar for a Catholic church at Georgetown University earlier that year, but that money was long gone and the project barely started.

I could no longer keep up with his drinking. He’d already been kicked out of *The Bird*, and often went through pints of vodka or whisky before I could make it over on our usual Friday nights. He’d be too drunk to cook, too drunk to talk beyond incoherent mumbling. Sometimes, he was too drunk to say “leave me alone,” so I’d drink my own beer and crawl in beside him, safe and warm in the big brass bed, hoping in the morning he’d be glad I was there.

Eventually, his phone was disconnected, his water shut off; his ex-wife sued for full custody. His lawn grew to eight inches tall, until the city finally mowed it and sent him the bill. He gathered loose change to buy whisky, or waited for me to bring beer. I told him to relax, things would be all right, and I’d give him another pill. The faculty at the art studio told him to get the monument for the cemetery out of the building; if he weren’t going to bother finishing his M.F.A., or the commission, he had to clear out. So he forced himself to work on the marble piece, and each night that summer he’d lie down in a lawn chair in the backyard, drunk and exhausted, covered with

marble dust that he couldn't shower off, looking like death, like a drunken depressed ghost.

And the goddess stood watch in the living room.

He woke up one morning, the following spring, in the emergency room, a thick white bandage on his forehead and dark bruises on his face. The cops had found him, face down on a sidewalk on High Street. He had no idea what happened, whether he was mugged or had simply fallen down. One of the art faculty had a party. He remembered the bagpiper playing, and everyone dancing and drinking for hours, but that's all.

I dropped the girls off at school, and Hugh and I drank one last twelve-pack together before I drove him to the Pine River Recovery Center where he would stay for two weeks. The bruises and bandages convinced me, and I knew he needed to stop. This would be good for me too, I thought. I needed to knock it off too. It seemed like the right time, and the right thing to do.

I walked with him into a sterile lobby and a faint familiar odor hit me—an odd mix of Band-Aids and crayons. Suddenly I felt sad, as though I might never see Hugh again. We faced each other and I wished him luck. Then he turned away, pushed down the handle of a big white door, opened it, and disappeared. It swung back heavy and shut with loud clank. David had disappeared behind a similar white door that locked from both inside and out. I used to have to knock to get in. The first two times were suicide attempts that left my mouth cotton dry. The last was a complete breakdown. He didn't want to see me then. He told them not to let me in. That was the end.

Heading down the highway for home, away from Hugh, I began to feel the hard, steady pulling, like something holding me from behind, or something slowly, and surely, being yanked from inside me. I pushed buttons on the radio. Everything's going to be fine, I told myself. Get a grip. But the farther I drove, the more fuzzy and vague and edgy I felt. By the time I picked up the girls and arrived home, the hazy nervousness, that abstract sense of my being, left me feeling wiggly. I was coming unglued, and had to stop it.

So I drank.

I timed it carefully. I knew how to drink in the morning—I knew I could write up to the third beer and knew that beyond that, I was no good. On my fourth, I'd call Hugh on the patient phone line. Then I'd take a little nap before picking the girls up at school. Then I'd drink in the afternoon, then make dinner, then drink a few more in the evening. I could

function this way, if I spread it out enough. It didn't cure my loneliness, entirely, but it kept the panic in check. I promised myself I would stop when Hugh got out.

When he finally came home, he went straight to work on his Georgetown commission and started attending AA. He looked better, healthier. He was feeling great, he said; he was eating well, and sleeping fine. Thank God, I heard some figment of myself say to him. Thank God.

Shortly after he came home, the marble piece was installed in Detroit, and Hugh invited me to attend the unveiling ceremony. He gave a beautiful speech in front of a crowd of hundreds, and I watched and listened from another planet, dead sober and disconnected. Why was I still feeling this way? He kept me by his side, miles away, and I watched him as he shook hands and kissed cheeks. He showed me the town, the Detroit Art Institute, and the Center for Creative Studies where he once went to school. He took me to restaurants. He treated me like a queen. I didn't know who he was. I didn't know who I was.

We went to an art gallery café on our third evening out, where he introduced me to friends. Music played, and too many people talked and laughed. I wandered away to look at paintings, different sizes and colors. Too many paintings, too many colors, and the lights that hung from a rail on the ceiling were way too bright. I looked over at Hugh, far across the room, smiling and talking with his friends, his arms folded in front of him, and I knew, right then, though I couldn't formulate it clearly, that he didn't love me. He never had.

I walked over to him and yanked on his sleeve. "We need to get out of here." I said. Then I panicked. "Get me out of here!"

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I don't know. I have no idea." I started to cry.

I started drinking again when we got home, and tried to hide it from Hugh, who I knew didn't love me anyway, not anymore. In fact, he never did. It became absolutely clear to me. I was infuriated.

"So what's going on with you and me now?" I asked him one Saturday afternoon.

"What. Nothing's changed."

"What do you mean nothing's changed? I don't know where I fit into your life anymore."

"Same place you always did."

"What are you talking about? You never have time for me anymore."

"Oh, that's crazy!"

“Oh, fuck you!”

“Look,” he replied calmly. “I don’t have time for this. I have to get going on this commission—today!”

No time for me. Of course not.

I got into my car and drove to the party store, the one between my place and his, and bought a twelve-pack of Budweiser. Instead of throwing stools against the wall, I went home and drank three cans of beer and took two pills. I had no idea what he was doing to me, or why, only that I was angry. I was so angry I didn’t know what to do with it. I drank three more beers and took two more pills. I needed to grab hold of something, something to ground the rage, to pull it back. One more beer, and one more pill. I had no intention of killing myself; I needed to squash the anger, or something. I needed to get rid of that wiggly feeling.

What I needed, was back. I needed back in his orbit. Or him back in mine.

I called him on the phone

“Hey, guess what,” I think I said. “I think I took too many pills.”

Worked like a charm.

He came quick, grabbed my case of Bud, and took me back to his house. He put me to bed to sleep off the pills.

Then he drank my beer.

I don’t remember much. I recall his taking me, in my car, back to his house. I remember telling him to make sure he got the beer from the refrigerator. I know I threw up on my shoes.

I woke up with wet pants in Hugh’s big brass bed, Hugh sitting on the edge of it looking down at me. I was dreaming; I was sure of it. Hugh was drinking from a can of Budweiser. *No*, I said. *You can’t drink that*. Was it out loud, or to myself? *It’s okay*, I thought I heard him say back to me. *It’s okay*.

There was no way to get back to that place, where we drank and laughed and danced circles around the pool table. That place, wherever it was, didn’t exist anymore. We spun out of control, crashed and burned in the big brass bed, shaken and full of shame. This place, I didn’t want to be, neither alone nor with Hugh. I needed out, before I killed him, or died myself. This place was hell, alcoholism’s black hole, and I didn’t like it. My own drinking, I realized, was dangerously out of control.

I went over to Hugh’s house a few more times, though they told me in AA I should stay away from him. Finally I did stop, partly because they told me to, and partly because I couldn’t stand to see him drunk, especially now

that I was sober. I'd often wondered, during that time, how he was doing. I worried that he might cut his arm off on the band saw, or set the place on fire while the kiln was going. If anything happened to him, it would be my fault. "You need to take care of yourself," they kept telling me at meetings. I had been going to AA for seven months, but I still felt responsible for Hugh's relapse. Five months had passed since the last time I walked into his house. The place was a mess.

After we made love, I lay down beside him and listened to his heart beat erratically inside his chest. "You have to stop," I whispered. His skin smelled like whiskey. "You can't keep doing this. It's going to kill you." I knew that now. He nodded and breathed in and out shakily, his eyes watering. I felt helpless.

"I have to go," I said and gathered my clothes together. I couldn't stay. I had things to do. I had to write.

I dressed, and then kissed him on the cheek before I walked out of his bedroom, closing the door behind me. I hoped he might go back to sleep, but more likely he'd look for his bottle from the night before. I hoped he might have heard what I said. But I knew he knew. I walked slowly down the creaky stairs and out the front door, and on my way out I saw the goddess—that is, the ghost of her former self.

I wondered why I didn't see her when I came in. Her plaster mold lay amongst piles of rubble on the front porch. There she was, her hollow impression in two halves, the front and back lying side by side. Perhaps he could make another. Perhaps he will. As I stepped off the front porch, I wondered, and as I walked toward my car, I could hear Ramses through the basement window, howling sadly. ■