CONNECT

I never knew what love was until I watched him
play connect the dots on the huge map that hung
above his bed, pins in red, green, blue, orange
tracing her path through Dublin, Nice, Florence,
Trieste. I would follow the trail of sound, Elvis
Costello or the Violent Femmes, and see him
traveling, pins pressed hard into cork, imprint of her
lips on his own and I would have to knock hard
to be heard above his thoughts. Before he turned
he would feign concentration on an imaginary
guitar, tuning and strumming for my benefit,
the motion of the music replacing the stillness
of his figure imposed on the map.

He would offer me a drink from the old yellow newspaper
box liquor cabinet, always gin, Tanqueray in its green
bottle taken from its place next to the Glen Fiddich. And then
he would begin to talk about her, never admitting that he
missed her, but telling me instead how she had danced at
the Höfbrauhaus, floated through Venice, sent him a postcard
of Renoir's *Le Moulin de la Gâlette*. Sometimes we would discuss
what we wanted to see in Europe, but most of the time I just
listened to him not missing her.

Across the calender that hung next to the map he marked off the days until the next phone call, always Thursday, always eight o'clock, Mountain Standard Time, though he always knew her time too. After he would retreat to his weekly glass of Glen Fiddich, reading over her letters again, never missing her, of course, just connecting a couple of more dots with a press of his finger.

CHICAGO, 1989

I remember that bar on Madison where we stopped to buy cigarettes on our way downtown. Every head turned to look when Dave and I walked in the door, five old men squinting at us over half empty glasses of draft. We pulled up to the bar and ordered a couple of Old Styles, acting like we knew. I went to the cigarette machine and bought a pack of Chesterfields, the ones with no filter, and one of the old men said, *You don't actually smoke those damn things, do you?*

I sat down beside him and we began to talk. John told me he was seventy-two and had worked on the Burlington and Northern all his life and didn't have any family. His skin was brown and cracked and his plaid shirt was badly worn at the collar. Like Al, the man who sat by Dave, John lived above the bar, on a small pension from the railroad. I looked at his worn hands and the creases in his face and asked if he regretted anything. John laughed and didn't answer directly, just took a long pull on his cigarette. Then he told me about a wife and the kids they never had. He told me about the other railroad men and the smell of the engines and the way the stars and moon shone on an Illinois winter night. But now, he said, his railroad days were gone, like her. His eyes looked past me as he finished the story and as he awoke from his memories, he recovered his hoarse laugh. I recovered my own smile and asked him the name of the bar, but he didn't know. No one knew, not even the bartender. It was just the bar and why did it need a damn name anyway?

We asked the bartender why there were upside-down shot glasses in front of our stools and he told us that John and Al had bought us a drink. We both knew they didn't have much money, but there were the two shot glasses, overturned and glittering in the pale light of the bar. We took a shot of rye and I drank to Al and John and to what I was learning I didn't know.

READING THE SIGNS

It was raining the day I asked my father
about that old catcher's mitt we had never
spoken about before — never in all those years
of Dave Van Horne and Duke Snider
and the Expos on CBC from the old Jarry Park,
never in the few times we played catch when
I was a kid, never in all those conversations
about the Blue Jays when there was nothing
else to say. We never talked about it, but I had
seen him handle that glove, his fingers caressing
the dark leather, his right hand beating a pocket
too small to cover the ball's bright red stitches.
Let's go to the basement and find it, he said.
I followed in silence, down the stairs, through
our past, my father's step sure and deliberate.
As he switched on the light, I could see the sheen
of the leather on the shelf where I knew it would be.
My Dad gave me this glove in 1923 — I was eight
years old — I want you to have it. He handed me
the glove and smiled as I put it on and slammed
my fist into its pocket.

ON CHILDREN

Babies have a way of sneaking up
on you when you least expect it —
first one friend, then another, one,
two, even three babies each. Baby
showers, christenings, one more Winnie
the Pooh toy to buy and then the inevitable
question: *So, when are the two of you having*

a small one of your own? And I don't know what
to say to this endless query. *Never* ? That seems
so harsh and final. *Someday* ? That seems so false.
I don't know ? Maybe true, but it won't be enough
for them. Sometimes I try to catch Heidi's eye, to see
if she's heard, sometimes I take a drink of the coffee
or wine I've been handed. Usually I make a joke,
deflecting the conversation back to them and
their children, crawling along the carpet, crying,
laughing, eating, waiting to be born.