

## Before and after the moon landing

My father's father came over on a boat from Italy and worked in a brass factory. My grandmother came over on a different boat and did the housework. He smacked her around and neither of them smiled much.

Once while eating ravioli, my bangs fell desperately close to the bubbling aluminum tray. "He took a scissor and chopped them off," my mother said.

"Your mother stole my father from my mother who he then told to go get a divorce," said my half-sister.

"I went to live with a minister's family," says my mother.

It was in a distant secret city. That's where I was born, one month after they were married in another town nobody lived in. *It's Now or Never* was #2 on the pop charts.

Janice said something at recess, quietly though not silent enough so that the thorns splintered off and got tangled in my hair. My scalp began to itch and I scratched it obsessively, digging down to my eardrums where ladybugs were knitting a new story.

I was recruited by the neighbors. My parents recruited me back, then the neighbors recruited me back again. This went on for several weeks. One minute I was brushing the matted fur of a Saint Bernard, the next I was raking up empty chestnut burrs.

By November the sky had fallen and the grass had frozen, and I was released to the den. Barnabas Collins had stitched the curtains shut and pulled the nobs off the TV set; there was nothing to do but watch it and wait for spring.

Didn't they say there was hole in the sky over Australia burning us all up? Then sunscreen became as indispensable as toilet paper and the hole disappeared. People started wearing special sun-blocking clothes and now they walk around with rain umbrellas in the sun.

I had a blister on my arm the size of a peach; it was in Florida one Christmas before the moon landing. It popped at a Jolly Pirate as my sister went reaching for the ketchup.

We were a regular middle class family except that I wanted to play the drums and eat Cheerios for dinner. I didn't know I was White until my mother said, "Don't ever bring a black boy home."

"Everyone knows the story of me and Marilyn Monroe," my grandmother says. "We were the first to arrive at the butcher's on Ivy and Vine, eyeing the same sirloin and calf liver pie. Then the shop began filling up with hamburger people pushing us up against the glass case. We were so close I could smell her toothpaste.

The quake in '89 left us permanently uneasy, awake in the moonlight and frigid in August. Jesus had come in a bulldozer at night to reforest Eden and unforgive all our sins.

Cinzia moved to the Russian River and a one story bungalow in a meadow that would fill when it stormed. I stopped by once for coffee on my way to Tahoe. She was rolling up carpets and looking for her cat.

What are people thinking when they nail their garage sale signs to trees. At dawn, I'm extracting nails and staples, and shredding neon placards I then stuff in plastic bags and deposit on each of their doorsteps. I wear a Little Bo Peep costume and wrap-around sunglasses; nobody suspects me. By noon I've bought ten dollars' worth of bibs and bobs for two fifty.