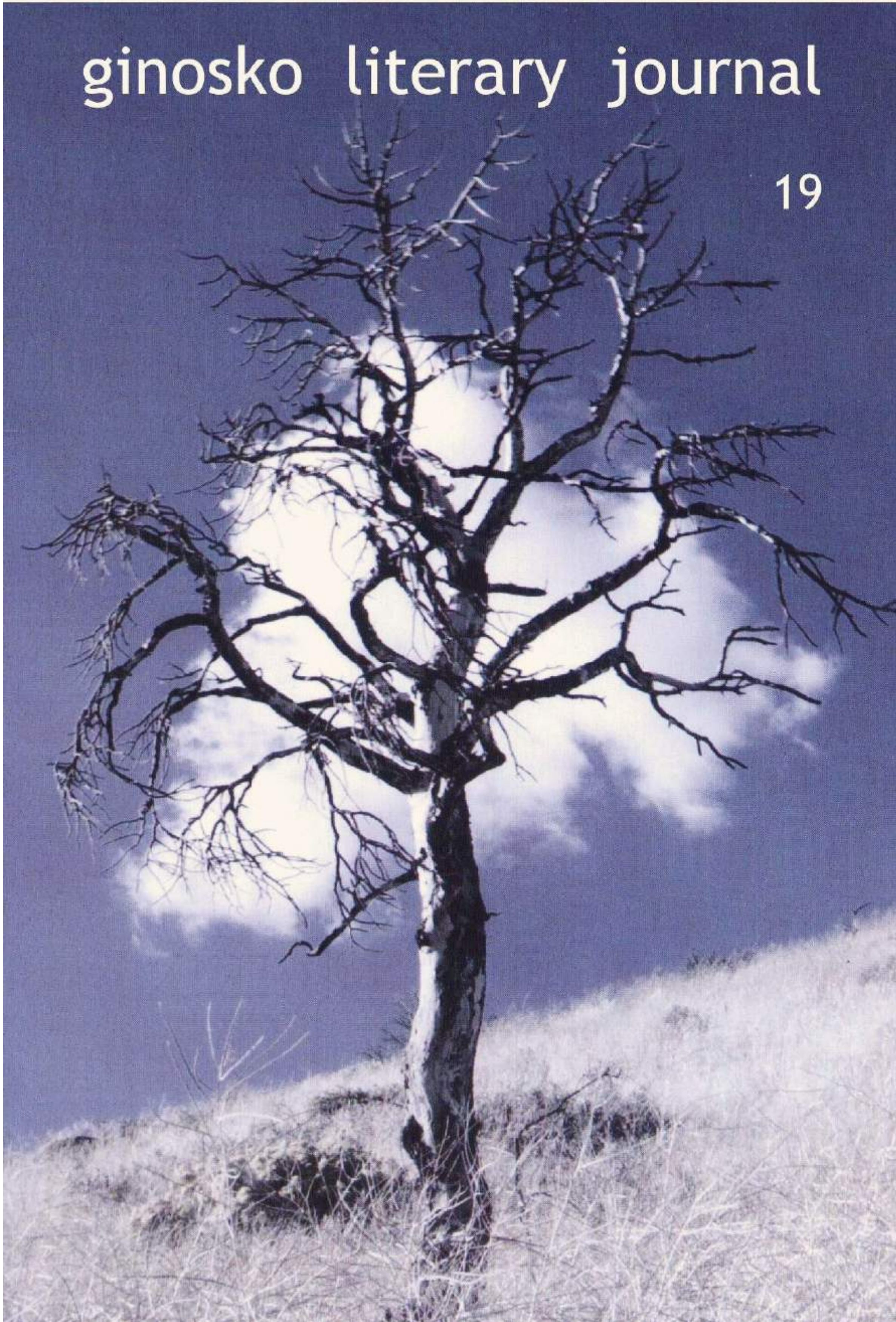
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Coming Up Roses

Allan Douglass Coleman

My first memory of television has me sitting among a crowd of adults who were crying and cheering as we watched the Army-McCarthy hearings in June of 1954.

A table model whose brand I don't recall, with a big black & white screen in a dark wood enclosure, that TV sat atop a high chest of drawers in my parents' bedroom, actually a large space off the living room in our expansive railroad flat on the north side of 14th St. in Manhattan, west of Eighth Avenue, just outside Greenwich Village -- the southern edge of Chelsea, half a block from the meat-packing district. Undoubtedly purchased secondhand (Duke and Frankie could rarely afford anything new in those days), it was nonetheless one of the few TV sets owned by anyone in their crowd, whose leftie persuasions typically included disdain for this low-brow medium. Its large screen, plus its elevated placement, enabled viewing from a distance, so a dozen or more of their friends had pulled up chairs or found space to sit on their double bed that afternoon.

Broadcast live from Washington, DC, televised gavel to gavel for three months, the hearings riveted this audience, whose individual members came and went over those weeks according to the demands of their professional and personal lives. I knew all of them, at least in passing, mostly members of the poker crowd that gathered several evenings each week around our big dining table or participants in the writers' workshops that my father ran for the Communist Party, or both. Sometimes my parents would be at work in the front room of the apartment, which they used as an office, sometimes not there at all. Many a weekday my younger brother Ennis and I would come home from grade school -- P.S. 41, just a ten-minute walk away down Greenwich Avenue -- to find some new configuration of vaguely familiar faces with their eyes glued to the screen. People brought sandwiches, macaroni salad, and pound cake. The coffee percolator worked overtime.

At the age of ten and a half I didn't have any clear understanding of what these hearings signified, needless to say. I took their importance for granted from the weight that my parents and their circle gave to them. So when, on the grainy screen below the rabbit ears, this elfin old guy said to the ugly man with the ugly voice and the five-o'clock shadow, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?" and the gallery in the hearing room burst into applause as the camera panned across it, and our home rang with the sounds of weeping and huzzahs, I understood only that this nasty bastard had finally got his comeuppance, so I yelled and clapped gleefully along with them.

I may have been only half past ten, with a limited grasp of politics, but I knew something about nasty bastards. One of them, Leon Manx, sat near me in that small crowd that day. I didn't realize it at the time, only gathered it later and had it confirmed by Duke not long before his passing, but Leon served the CPUSA as, among other

things, my parents' handler. He was almost certainly a genius; he spoke fifteen languages fluently, wrote effectively in another dozen, read yet more (including Sanskrit), had doctorates in several sciences. He and his wife Nena had accompanied us to France and then to England when my parents went into exile in 1951 to dodge the House Un-American Activities Committee, had returned when the British refused to renew all of our visas, lived a few blocks away from us, nominally worked freelance for my parents as the main translator in their publishing business.

I had no way to put those pieces together, but I already knew Leon as a bully, and a threat. Prematurely balding, of medium height, he had a barrel chest and bulging muscles -- a physique inherited from his ironworker father who (Duke confided in me some years later) used to punish Leon and his brother Hank by drunkenly holding them by one ankle, upside down, outside the window of their fifth-floor walk-up tenement apartment, vowing to drop them if they didn't shut up.

Leon liked to pass the abuse along, by intimidating women and dominating men. Women he scared by radiating the potential for some berserk eruptive capacity -- nothing I can imagine anyone finding virile and thus sexually provocative, just a continuous seething. For men he added verbal aggression and active physical provocation, not only unconsciously puffing out his chest but crushing any male hand proferred in greeting or departure, forcing the victim to acknowledge the painfulness of his grip and plead to be released from it. He practiced this on all members of his own gender, regardless of age, so I came to dread their occasional visits, after which my right hand would ache for a day. My father, who knew of this because I spoke to him about it, and because Leon did the same to him, never did anything to stop him.

Leon's barely controlled violence took psychological forms too, a variety of domineering patterns. Here's a story that Duke told again and again (as he did with all his stories):

After we sailed to France, on the run from the witch-hunters, we ended up on the Côte d'Azur, a sleepy little town called Golfe-Juan. My parents rented a white elephant of a hillside villa for a song, and, until they found a rental of their own, Leon and Nena stayed with us for a month. Breakfast every morning consisted of croissants, *pain au chocolat*, fruit, coffee for the adults, café au lait for me, hot chocolate for my brother Ennis.

When you slice a *pain au chocolat* in two, so as to toast it and get the chocolate melted and tasty, the chocolate almost inevitably ends up on one half or the other, not evenly divided. Leon made a point of getting to the breakfast table before any of the rest of us, and the chocolate sides of those pastries were always all gone. Always. All. Even after I complained and my mother reprimanded him for that.

My father never showed the slightest interest in spending time with infants. Children only began to interest Duke when they could serve as captive audiences for his narratives of his life, or as proto-contestants to whom he could teach competitive games, at which he was by definition superior. Or when he could read out loud to

them, though books of their own choosing usually bored him, so he generally picked the titles. (I first encountered *Moby-Dick* that way, including the chapter on the whiteness of the whale, when I was nine.)

The only ways I knew of to get Duke to spend time with me, then, were games, his stories, or getting read to. One evening in Golfe-Juan he and I were playing casino, a simple card game. I didn't much like games, then or since, but at age seven I could understand the rules of casino and sometimes won a hand. Duke wouldn't generally throw a game, but with something as elementary as casino he didn't press too hard, so I had a slim but fighting chance, one on one.

Suddenly Leon came into the room -- either they were still living with us or had arrived for dinner -- and sat down at the table. After watching my father and me for a minute he huffed "What are you doing? That's the wrong move!" and began helping my father to play more aggressively against me. After a few minutes and a few lost hands, with two adults arrayed against me, I burst into tears, threw down my cards, and ran out.

"Poor Arlen!" Duke would always say in retelling this incident. "That was so sad. Leon was so mean." I heard that tale dozens of times over the course of my life. (I have no personal recollection of that moment, which I surely wiped from my memory as soon as I could.) Not till Duke was in his eighties, recounting this yet again, did I awaken to the realization that Leon was peripheral to the plight of "poor Arlen," who lived with a father unable or unwilling to defend him against bullying even in the supposed safety of his own home.

Fortunately, we didn't see Leon and Nena often once we returned to the States. Now and then Leon would show up at our 14th Street apartment during business hours, to confer with one or both of my parents, in which event I either stayed in my room or went out to play, waving goodbye from a safe distance as I left. Neither Leon or Nena played poker or wrote poetry or fiction, nor were they particularly social, so they didn't take part in my parents' scheduled recreations or occasional parties. From time to time they came over for dinner.

I recall Leon vividly from that period, Nena much less so. She was small, perhaps half his bulk, and spoke little. Usually I excused myself after the meal, so I don't know how those evenings evolved, but when I had occasion to pass through the living room en route to the kitchen she and my mother were mostly silent, the talk conducted by the two men, each of them monologists by nature. I do remember that Nena always wore skirts and blouses with full-length sleeves, a trademark silk scarf around her neck, a swept-forward hairstyle that covered half her face, and an unusual amount of pancake makeup for a woman her age in that era in those lefty-boho circles.

Around 1957 my parents' little bootstrap publishing business had succeeded to the

point where it had solidified and grown. Their company went public on the New York Stock Exchange. For the first time in either of their lives they had some money, and bought a brownstone on West 70th Street, where we lived on the first two floors (plus the basement), with rental units above. They sprang for a living-room ensemble -- a brand-new couch, coffee table, and rug, all Danish modern, plus a stereo console in teak to match -- all store-bought, as we used to say, not second-hand or found cheap at auction. That's the point where Ennis became aware of Duke and Frankie's financial situation. I've often told him that we grew up in two different families, me with two churchmouse-poor old lefties always looking over their shoulders for the thought police, him with two solid-citizen successful entrepreneurs running a publicly traded corporation.

The brownstone had a little garden out back on the ground floor, mostly flagstones with a few strips of earth along the fences for plantings. Surrounded as it was by other similar buildings, all five stories tall or more, it got no more than an hour's sunlight a day, around high noon. From sunrise on, the rest was shadow, until darkness fell. Still, it was an outdoor space about twenty feet wide by thirty deep, which few New Yorkers have. My parents bought a wooden garden table with accompanying benches, left the rest as they found it, and in the summer we'd eat lunch and even dinner out there. In warm weather their parties (and, eventually, mine) would spill out of the living room into that space.

By 1959 we'd settled into our new life as landed gentry. Tickets to Broadway shows had become one of Duke and Frankie's indulgences. Whenever we saw a show that Duke liked, he'd buy the original-cast album. That was the year the musical *Gypsy* premiered, so of course that LP often spun on the turntable in the evenings and on weekends. Duke fancied himself as a singer (Frankie was tone-deaf, or claimed to be); he'd taken voice lessons in his teens, so he'd sing along -- especially the theme song, "Everything's Coming Up Roses."

When the business took off, before the IPO, they'd moved all their professional activities to an office on West 17th Street, so Leon never showed up at the house thereafter during business hours. He'd become marginal to Duke and Frankie's business -- they worked with dozens of translators at that time -- and whatever power he'd held over them as their handler had somehow waned. (By then I knew a lot more about my parents' political past, knew also that Leon was much higher up the Party ladder than they had ever been, was thus more at risk than they, with the Cold War still raging.)

Still, at least on a personal level, he had them cowed. He and Nena came over for dinner every few months, and my last memory of Leon grinning viciously as he crushed my hand and stared into my eyes to relish my pain has us standing in the foyer of that apartment, my parents watching this torment wordlessly. I would have been close to sixteen, but nowhere near his match, the classic 97-pound weakling of the Charles Atlas ads.

One morning a few months later, spring of my junior year, I was explaining to my mother that I had to go to some fictitious high-school function that night, when I knew they'd planned another dinner with Leon and Nena. Frankie cut me short, announcing that they'd cancelled the dinner; Nena wasn't feeling well, not the first time that had happened. A week later I came in to find my parents and Nena huddled in the living room. Nena turned her face away. Duke jerked his head quickly, and I beat it.

The semester ended. Ennis and I left for the summer place our folks had purchased on Martha's Vineyard. Duke and Frankie came up for weekends, sometimes whole weeks. We hitched rides and went to the beach while they were gone, played golf and did some deep-sea fishing when they showed up. Somewhere along the line Frankie mentioned that she'd started redoing the garden, fixing up their bathroom (Ennis and I had our own), and redecorating the living room.

Sure enough, when we got home she'd changed things around considerably. Their second-floor bathroom had all-new fixtures and tiles, while the staircase leading up to it and the ground-floor living room sported new coats of paint. In the garden, a high cinderblock wall had replaced the much lower, decrepit wooden back fence that had come with the place. "They had to dig a deep trench to pour the footing for that," Frankie said. Though still straggly, newly planted climbing roses had begun to spread along guidewires attached to bolts in the cinderblock. "Eventually those will cover the whole wall," our mother told us. "It'll look beautiful."

She'd set privet hedges along the side walls, where previously only some English ivy had grown. "These are all heavy feeders," she informed us. "We'll need to fertilize and water on a regular basis. That'll be one of your chores, Arlen. We're going to increase your allowance." Needless to say, I was pleased.

A few weeks later, I came out of my room for dinner to find Nena and Duke at the garden table, with Frankie passing the meal out to Ennis through the small kitchen window that opened onto our little backyard refuge. Looking around quickly, I saw no Leon. Duke caught my eye, put his finger to his lips, and led me back into the living room. Before I could ask, he said, sotto voce, "Leon has gone underground. It wasn't safe for him to stay around. He had to leave. You understand?"

I nodded. I did understand, or thought I did. People on the left went underground sometimes, I knew that, they hid, they went on the run or into exile, people hunted for them, Trotsky, Mao, Arthur Miller, it got dangerous, and Leon had been in the thick of it, my parents more like useful idiots, smaller game. "You can't mention this to anyone," Duke continued, his finger again to his lips. I nodded. "Even among ourselves, even with Nena. It's too painful for her to talk about it." "Okay," I agreed. "I get it."

I figured the dinner would be strained, what with Leon on the lam somewhere, fleeing right-wing hounds, and Nena and my parents worried sick for him, but in fact it went fine. The women conducted most of the conversation, in a cheerful mood, Duke remaining uncharacteristically quiet. Nena looked good, better than I remembered ever seeing her. She'd changed her hair style, off the face, so you could see her bone

structure and her hazel eyes, which shone. Aside from a light shade of lipstick, she wore no noticeable makeup. Perhaps because of the heat of Indian summer she'd donned a sleeveless blouse without accessorizing it with a scarf, first time I'd seen that. It seemed a weight had been lifted from her shoulders, which I chalked up to the fact that it must have been a relief to have Leon with all his intensity gone for awhile, her concern for his well-being notwithstanding.

I found the company so enjoyable that I stayed with them after dinner. When Nena left that evening she hugged each of us, myself included -- another first. "Don't worry," Frankie told her. "It'll all be okay." "Yeah," Duke added. "Everything's coming up roses." Nena laughed at that, but I thought I saw tears in her eyes. "Coming up roses," she echoed, before stepping out into the hall.

That got to be a catchphrase with them -- not surprising, since you couldn't get away from the song that year. We saw Nena often from then on, at our house in Manhattan and even as a summer visitor at the place on the Vineyard. Whenever the weather permitted they'd sit outside in the cool of the evening. "How are things?" someone would ask, and another of them, Heineken or gin and tonic or wineglass in hand, would answer, "Coming up roses." I even took to saying it myself, seeing as how I'd become the de facto gardener for our back forty, and that tickled them especially, though I couldn't say why. As for Leon, at least in my presence, none of them ever mentioned him again, save for some of my father's stories about the past, which he never told when Nena was visiting. I figured he'd found some safe house or bolt hole in the States, or had slipped across the border into Canada or Mexico, and the less said the better before things cooled down and he made his return.

I left home for graduate school shortly before I turned 21. Duke and Frankie finally divorced while I was on the west coast, to the great relief of Ennis and myself. She got the house as part of the settlement and kept it, much longer than she should have (too much space and work for her), and she tended to that garden in my absence. Eventually she sold the brownstone, with that wall of roses one of its attractions, I was sure. But new buyers sometimes like to start from scratch, so I had no idea if it had survived.

In the mid-'90s I took a girlfriend on a tour of the exteriors of the places I'd lived in Manhattan. They were all still standing then, remarkable for a city that's always in flux. The house on 70th Street was the one furthest north, the last for us to view. When we got there, I saw that they'd remodeled the front, moving the steps, running the entranceway through what had been my bedroom, and turning the former hallway into private space for the owner's unit.

I was explaining all this to my gal pal when the front door opened and out stepped a man in a jogging outfit. He looked suspiciously at these strangers studying his building. "I used to live here," I called. "You just stepped out of what was my bedroom." His face lit up. "You must be one of the Corman boys," he said. "I bought the building

from your mother Frankie. Would you like to come inside and take a look?"

Delighted by the offer, we followed him in. It was strange, the mind accommodating a space so clearly defined in memory to the physical actuality of it. I've had that experience a few times before, watching two perceptual overlays meld into one, not without a struggle. It's visually disorienting, even a bit vertiginous, until they merge, as they finally did.

The new owners hadn't changed the place much on the ground floor, but they'd completely finished the previously raw basement, and had revised the second floor, keeping the back half for themselves, converting the front half, which had been Ennis's room, into a separate studio apartment. A shock, yet also a treat, to step back into a space where your life once centered after an absence of forty years.

It was summer; the door to the garden was open. "May we?" I asked. "Be my guest," he said, guiding us into it. They hadn't altered that at all, just replaced the furniture, added a high-end barbecue grill, and repainted the fences. The back wall was a riot of small, deep red roses, all the way up that cinderblock. "Frankie planted that, you know," I told him, "summer of '59. I tended it for years."

"Believe it or not," Sumner told us -- his name was George Sumner -- "that's what sold us on the place. My wife Lilian couldn't get it out of her mind. She said if those roses could flourish here, then we could. Frankie loved that response; I think she even reduced her asking price because of it, and she took our personal note in lieu of a mortgage. She gave Lilian very explicit directions on how to feed and water the rosebush to keep it healthy; we still have those, on the kitchen wall. She said she'd been waiting for someone who would take good care of those roses."

"Could I get a few cuttings?" I asked. "I'd love to have some for my own garden." He stepped inside and we followed. He pointed to a yellowed card pinned to a corkboard on the kitchen wall. I recognized Frankie's handwriting, then scanned the card, seeing fertilizer and bone meal brand names, feeding schedule, watering frequency in different weathers, instructions on how to wrap the base and mulch the ground for winter.

Suddenly I realized what those roses had meant to Frankie and Duke, but most of all to Nena. And again I had that unnerving sensation, two realities trying to exist in the same mental space, more dizzying because this involved perceptions not of spaces but of people -- who they are at their core, what they're capable of, how much of them you can fail to see, especially when you live with them every day. For a minute I couldn't breathe; my whole chest locked up, I thought I might faint.

Fortunately, I was up close to the corkboard, my face turned away from them, my hands gripping the countertop. I stayed there as if studying Frankie's notes, while Sumner rummaged in several drawers, finally fishing out a pair of pruning shears and a small paper bag. "Help yourself."

I did. "This means a lot to me," I told him. "Seeing the place and the roses so well cared for, Frankie's notes, these cuttings. Thank you, and thank Lilian for us. Frankie

will be glad to hear all this is in good hands." "How is Frankie?" Sumner asked as we took our leave. He didn't need to know about her slow slide into Alzheimer's, so I just told him she was fine; he said to send their best wishes, and we waved goodbye. I've never gone back, though Sumner gave me his number and said to call anytime.

Those cuttings rooted easily in some potting soil, then began to branch. One of them, now a full-grown bush, thrives in my back garden on Staten Island. The next time I saw Duke and Harriet, his second wife, I gave them another, telling Duke where it had come from. "Everything's still coming up roses," I said, looking him straight in the eye. "Coming up roses," he replied, nodding. "Good to know."

I flew out to see Frankie, at her place in Mendocino, some months later. Nena had spent time with her there shortly after she'd moved in; they'd stayed friends till Nena died of cancer, and Nena had stayed in touch with Duke too, though mostly by mail after the divorce. I'd brought another of the rooted cuttings with me on the plane.

Frankie moved slowly into the garden on the arm of her caregiver, who sat her down on a bench in the shade. I'd taken what I needed from her potting shed, a shovel, some compost, and a cup of bone meal. I told her about the cutting's source while planting it in a suitable spot, where she could see it every day, then watered it to set it.

Brushing the dirt off my hands, I sat down next to her, took up a manila envelope, and pulled from it prints of several pictures I'd made that afternoon with Sumner: one of the new front of the brownstone, one of the rosebush in full bloom, and another of her care instructions pinned to their kitchen wall. "Oh dear oh dear," she said, looking from one to another of the pictures, "Oh dear oh dear," which was pretty much all she said about anything at that stage, good, bad, or indifferent. When I asked her if she knew where I'd made those photos and what they represented, she said nothing. Then she turned her weathered old face to me.

"Everything's coming up roses," I told her. She returned my gaze and, after a long minute, replied, with a faint smile, "Coming up roses." I wanted to think she knew what she was saying, but by that point in her decline I couldn't be certain she even recognized me.