

...Leroy knows that he is leaving out a lot. He is leaving out the insides of history. History was always just names and dates to him. It occurs to him that building a house of logs is similarly empty—too simple. And the real inner workings of a marriage, like most of history, have escaped him. Now he sees that building a log house is the dumbest idea he could have had. It was clumsy of him to think Norma Jean would want a log house. It was a crazy idea. He'll have to think of something else, quickly. He will wad the blueprints onto tight balls and fling them into the lake. Then he'll get moving again. He opens his eyes. Norma Jean has moved away and is walking through the cemetery, following a serpentine brick path.

Leroy gets up to follow his wife, but his good leg is asleep and his bad leg still hurts him. Norma Jean is far away, walking rapidly toward the bluff by the river, and he tries to hobble toward her. Some children run past him, screaming noisily. Norma Jean has reached the bluff, and she is looking out over the Tennessee River. Now she turns toward Leroy and waves her arms. Is she beckoning to him? She seems to be doing an exercise for her chest muscles. The sky is unusually pale—the color of the dust ruffle Mabel made for their bed.

from "Shiloh" by Bobbie Ann Mason

When I reached our front lawn, I stood out in the dark and looked in through the kitchen window. My mother and stepfather were sitting at the kitchen counter; I couldn't be sure if they were speaking to each other, but then I saw my mother raise her arm in one of her can-you-believe-this gestures. I didn't want to go inside. I wanted to feel cold, so cold that the cold itself became permanently interesting. I took off my overcoat and my gloves. Tilting my head back, I felt some snow fall onto my face. I thought of the word "exposure" and how once or twice a year deer hunters in the Upper Peninsula die of it, and I bent down and stuck my hand into the snow and frozen grass and held it there. The cold rose from my hand to my elbow, and when I had counted to forty and couldn't stand another second of it, I picked up my coat and gloves and walked into the bright heat of the front hallway.

from "Snow" by Charles Baxter

I walked over to a car, a Pontiac with Ohio tags, one of the ones with bundles of suitcases strapped to the top and a lot more in the trunk, by the way it was riding. I looked inside the driver's window. There were maps and paperback books and sunglasses and the little plastic holders for cans that hang on the window wells. And in the back there were kids' toys and some pillows and a cat box with a cat sitting in it staring up at me like I was the face of the moon. It all looked familiar to me, the very same things I would have in my car if I had a car. Nothing seemed surprising, nothing different. Though I had a funny sensation at that moment and turned and looked up at the windows along the back of the motel. All were dark except two. Mine and another one. And I wondered, because it seemed funny, what would you think a man was doing if you saw him in the middle of the night looking in the windows of cars in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn? Would you think he was trying to get his head cleared? Would you think he was trying to get ready for a day when trouble would come down on him? Would you think his girlfriend was leaving him? Would you think he had a daughter? Would you think he was anybody like you?

from "Rock Springs" by Richard Ford

A month after the divorce, he got married again. The bride, who was a young widow with a four-year-old boy, works in the same institute with him. She's a decent woman, loves her new husband, and takes good care of him and their home. We often see the newlyweds walking hand in hand in the evening. Never has Chigan looked so happy and healthy. His stomach has begun growing into a pot belly like a general's.

More amazing is that Dandan adores her stepbrother. She tells others she has always wanted a younger brother and now she finally has one. The boy is attached to her, too; together they read picture-storybooks and recite nursery rhymes every day after school. Asked whether her stepmother is kind to her, Dandan will say, "My dad found me a good mommy." Sometime she plays hopscotch with other children in front of the apartment building. A pair of huge butterflies, made of yellow ribbons, dangles at the end of her braids as she capers around. Smiles widen her gazelle eyes.

from "The Woman from New York" by Ha Jin