in the boxcar strangely set down in an empty lot some distance from Spy Oak (where a Revolutionary traitor was hanged—served him right for siding with redcoats); the lucky boxcar children dangle their stick-legs from their train-house maw and wave; how I envy them! I envy the orphans of the Gould Foundation, who have their own private swings and seesaws. Sometimes I imagine I am an orphan, and my father is an impostor pretending to be my father.

My father writes in his prescription book: #59330 Dr. O'Flaherty Pow. 60/ #59331 Dr. Mulligan Gtt .65/ #59332 Dr. Thron Tab .90. Ninety cents! A terrifically expensive medicine; someone is really sick. When I deliver a prescription around the corner or down the block, I am offered a nickel tip. I always refuse, out of conscience; I am, after all, the Park View Pharmacy's own daughter, and it wouldn't be seemly. My father grinds and mixes powders, weighs them out in tiny snowy heaps on an apothecary scale, folds them into delicate translucent papers or meticulously drops them into gelatin capsules.

In the big front window of the Park View Pharmacy there is a startling display—goldfish bowls, balanced one on the other in amazing pyramids. A German lady enters, one of my father's cronies—his cronies are both women and men. My quiet father's eyes are water-color blue, he wears his small skeptical quiet smile and receives the neighborhood's life-secrets. My father is discreet and inscrutable. The German lady pokes a punchboard with a pin, pushes up a bit of rolled paper, and cries out—she has just won a goldfish bowl, with two swimming goldfish in it! Mr. Jaffe, the salesman from McKesson & Robbins, arrives, trailing two mists: winter steaminess and the animal fog of his cigar, which melts into the coffee smell, the tarpaper smell, the eerie honeyed tangled drugstore smell. Mr. Jaffe and my mother and father are intimates by now, but because it is the 1930s, so long ago, and the old manners still survive, they address one another gravely as Mr. Jaffe, Mrs. Ozick, Mr. Ozick. My mother calls my father Mr. O, even at home, as in a Victorian novel. In the street

*A Mr. Matthew Bruccoli, another Bronx drugstore child, has written to say that he remembers with certainty that Mr. Jaffe did not smoke. In my memory the cigar is somehow there, so I leave it.

my father tips his hat to ladies. In the winter his hat is a regular fedora; in the summer it is a straw boater with a black ribbon and a jolt of blue feather.

What am I doing at this round glass table, both listening and not listening to my mother and father tell Mr. Jaffe about their struggle with "Tessie," the lion-eyed landlady who has just raised, threefold, in the middle of that Depression I have never heard of, the Park View Pharmacy's devouring rent? My mother, not yet forty, wears bandages on her ankles, covering oozing varicose veins; back and forth she strides, dashes, runs, climbing cellar stairs or ladders; she unpacks cartons, she toils behind drug counters and fountain counters. Like my father, she is on her feet until one in the morning, the Park View's closing hour. My mother and father are in trouble, and I don't know it. I am too happy. I feel the secret center of eternity, nothing will ever alter, no one will ever die. Through the window, past the lit goldfish, the gray oval sky deepens over our neighborhood wood, where all the dirt paths lead down to seagull-specked water. I am familiar with every frog-haunted monument: Pelham Bay Park is thronged with WPA art—statuary, fountains, immense rococo staircases cascading down a hillside, Bacchus-faced stelae—stone Roman glories afterward mysteriously razed by an avenging Robert Moses. One year—how distant it seems now, as if even the climate is past returning—the bay froze so hard that whole families, mine among them, crossed back and forth to City Island, strangers saluting and calling out in the ecstasy of the bright trudge over such a sudden wilderness of ice.

In the Park View Pharmacy, in the winter dusk, the heart in my body is revolving like the goldfish fleet-finned in their clear bowls. The librarians are still warming up over their coffee. They do not recognize me, though only half an hour ago I was scrabbling in the mud around the two heavy boxes from the Traveling Library—oafish crates tossed with a thump to the ground. One box contains magazines—Boy's Life, The American Girl, Popular Mechanix. But the other, the other! The other transforms me. It is tumbled with storybooks, with clandestine intimations and transfigurations. In school I am a luckless goosegirl, friendless and forlorn. In P.S. 71 I carry, weighty as a cloak, the ineradicable knowledge of my scandal—I am
cross-eyed, dumb, an imbecile at arithmetic; in P.S. 71 I am publicly shamed in Assembly because I am caught not singing Christmas carols; in P.S. 71 I am repeatedly accused of deicide. But in the Park View Pharmacy, in the winter dusk, branches blackening in the park across the road, I am driving in rapture through the Violet Fairy Book and the Yellow Fairy Book, insubstantial chariots snatched from the box in the mud. I have never been inside the Traveling Library; only grownups are allowed. The boxes are for the children. No more than two books may be borrowed, so I have picked the fattest ones, to last. All the same, the Violet and the Yellow are dreaming, dreaming. Mr. Jaffe is murmuring advice. He tells a joke about Wrong-Way Corrigan. The librarians are buttoning up their coats. A princess, captive of an ogre, receives a letter from her swain and hides it in her bosom. I can visualize her bosom exactly—she clutches it against her chest. It is a tall and shapely vase, with a hand-painted flower on it, like the vase on the secondhand piano at home.

I am incognito. No one knows who I truly am. The teachers in P.S. 71 don’t know. Rabbi Meskin, my ebeder teacher, doesn’t know. Tessie the lion-eyed landlady doesn’t know. Even Hymie the fountain clerk can’t know—though he understands other things better than anyone: how to tighten roller skates with a skatekey, for instance, and how to ride a horse. On Friday afternoons, when the new issue is out, Hymie and my brother fight hard over who gets to see Life magazine first. My brother is older than I am, and doesn’t like me; he builds radios in his bedroom, he is already W2LOM, and operates his transmitter (da-di-da-dit, da-da-di-da) so penetratively on Sunday mornings that Mrs. Eva Brady, across the way, complains. Mrs. Eva Brady has a subscription to The Writer; I fill a closet with her old copies. How to Find a Plot. Narrative and Character, the Writer’s Tools. Because my brother has his ham license, I say, “I have a license too.” “What kind of license?” my brother asks, falling into the trap. “Poetic license,” I reply; my brother hates me, but anyhow his birthday presents are transporting: one year Alice in Wonderland, Pinocchio the next, then Tom Sawyer. I go after Mark Twain, and find Joan of Arc and my first satire, Christian Science. My mother surprises me with Pollyanna, the admiration of her Lower East Side childhood, along with The Lady of the Lake. Mrs. Eva Brady’s daughter Jeannie has outgrown her Nancy Drews and Judy Boltons, so on rainy afternoons I cross the street and borrow them, trying not to march away with too many—the child of immigrants, I worry that the Bradys, true and virtuous Americans, will judge me greedy or careless. I wrap the Nancy Drews in paper covers to protect them. Old Mrs. Brady, Jeannie’s grandmother, invites me back for more. I am so timid I can hardly speak a word, but I love her dark parlor; I love its black bookcases. Old Mrs. Brady sees me off, embracing books under an umbrella; perhaps she divines who I truly am. My brother doesn’t care. My father doesn’t notice. I think my mother knows. My mother reads the Saturday Evening Post and the Woman’s Home Companion; sometimes the Ladies’ Home Journal, but never Good Housekeeping. I read all my mother’s magazines. My father reads Drug Topics and Der Tog, the Yiddish daily. In Louie Davidowitz’s house (waiting our turn for the rabbi’s lesson, he teaches me chess in ebeder) there is a piece of furniture I am in awe of: a shining circular table that is also a revolving bookshelf holding a complete set of Charles Dickens. I borrow Oliver Twist. My cousins turn up with Gulliver’s Travels, Just So Stories, Don Quixote, Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales, uncannily different from the usual kind. Blindfolded, I reach into a Thanksgiving grabbag and pull out Mrs. Leicester’s School, Mary Lamb’s desolate stories of rejected children. Books spill out of rumor, exchange, miracle. In the Park View Pharmacy’s lending library I discover, among the nurse romances, a browning, brittle miracle: Jane Eyre. Uncle Morris comes to visit (bis drugstore is on the other side of the Bronx) and leaves behind, just like that, a three-volume Shakespeare. Peggy and Betty Provan, Scottish sisters around the corner, lend me their Swiss Family Robinson. Norma Foti, a whole year older, transmits a rumor about Louisa May Alcott; afterward I read Little Women a thousand times. Ten thousand! I am no longer incognito, not even to myself. I am Jo in her “vortex”; not Jo exactly, but some Jo-of-the-future. I am under an enchantment: who I truly am must be deferred, waited for and waited for. My father, silently filling capsules, is grieving over his mother in Moscow. I write letters in Yiddish to my Moscow grand-
mother, whom I will never know. I will never know my Russian
aunts, uncles, cousins. In Moscow there is suffering, deprivation,
poverty. My mother, threadbare, goes without a new winter coat so
that packages can be sent to Moscow. Her fiery justice-eyes are
semaphores I cannot decipher.

Some day, when I am free of P.S. 71, I will write stories; mean­
while, in winter dusk, in the Park View, in the secret bliss of the
Violet Fairy Book, I both see and do not see how these grains of life
will stay forever, papa and mama will live forever, Hymie will
always turn my skatekey.

Hymie, after Italy, after the Battle of the Bulge, comes back from
the war with a present: From Here to Eternity. Then he dies, young.
Mama reads Pride and Prejudice and every single word of Willa
Cather. Papa reads, in Yiddish, all of Sholem Aleichem and Peretz.
He reads Malamud's The Assistant when I ask him to.

Papa and mama, in Staten Island, are under the ground. Some
other family sits transfixed in the sun parlor where I read Jane Eyre
and Little Women and, long afterward, Middlemarch. The Park View
Pharmacy is dismantled, turned into a Hallmark card shop. It doesn't
matter! I close my eyes, or else only stare, and everything is in its
place again, and everyone.

A writer is dreamed and transfigured into being by spells, wishes,
goldfish, silhouettes of trees, boxes of fairy tales dropped in the mud,
uncles' and cousins' books, tablets and capsules and powders, papa's
Moscow ache, his drugstore jacket with his special fountain pen in
the pocket, his beautiful Hebrew paragraphs, his Talmudist's ration­
alism, his Russian-Gymnasium Latin and German, mama's furnace­
heart, her masses of memoirs, her paintings of autumn walks down
to the sunny water, her braveries, her reveries, her old, old school
hurts.

A writer is buffeted into being by school hurts—Orwell, Forster,
Mann!—but after a while other ambushes begin: sorrows, deaths,
disappointments, subtle diseases, delays, guilts, the spite of the pri­
vate haters of the poetry side of life, the snubs of the glamorous,
the bitterness of those for whom resentment is a daily gruel, and so on
and so on; and then one day you find yourself leaning here, writing
at that selfsame round glass table salvaged from the Park View

Pharmacy—writing this, an impossibility, a summary of how you
came to be where you are now, and where, God knows, is that? Your
hair is whitening, you are a well of tears, what you meant to do
(beauty and justice) you have not done, papa and mama are under
the earth, you live in panic and dread, the future shrinks and darkens,
stories are only vapor, your inmost craving is for nothing but an old
scarred pen, and what, God knows, is that?
A Drugstore in Winter

This is about reading; a drugstore in winter; the gold leaf on the dome of the Boston State House; also loss, panic, and dread.

First, the gold leaf. (This part is a little like a turn-of-the-century pulp tale, though only a little. The ending is a surprise, but there is no plot.) Thirty years ago I burrowed in the Boston Public Library one whole afternoon, to find out—not out of curiosity—how the State House got its gold roof. The answer, like the answer to most Bostonian questions, was Paul Revere. So I put Paul Revere's gold dome into an "article," and took it (though I was just as scared by recklessness then as I am now) to the Boston Globe, on Washington Street. The Features Editor had a bare severe head, a closed parenthesis mouth, and silver Dickensian spectacles. He made me wait, standing, at the side of his desk while he read; there was no bone in me that did not rattle. Then he opened a drawer and handed me fifteen dollars. Ah, joy of Homer, joy of Milton! Grub Street bliss!

The very next Sunday, Paul Revere's gold dome saw print. Appetite for more led me to a top-floor chamber in Filene's department store: Window Dressing. But no one was in the least bit dressed—it was a dumbstruck nudist colony up there, a mob of naked frozen enigmatic manikins, tall enameled skinny ladies with bald breasts and skulls, and legs and wrists and necks that horribly unscrewed. Paul Revere's dome paled beside this gold mine! A sight—mute numb Walpurgisnacht—easily worth another fifteen dollars. I had a Master's degree (thesis topic: "Parable in the Later Novels of Henry James") and a job as an advertising copywriter (9 a.m. to 6 p.m. six days a week, forty dollars per week; if you were male and had no degree at all, sixty dollars). Filene's Sale Days—Crib Bolsters! Lulla-Buys! Jonnie-Mops! Maternity Skirts with Expanding Invisible Trick Waist! And a company show; gold watches to mark the retirement of elderly Irish salesladies; for me the chance to write song lyrics (to the tune of "On Top of Old Smoky") honoring our Store. But "Mute Numb Walpurgisnacht in Secret Downtown Chamber" never reached the Globe. Melancholy and meaning business, the Advertising Director forbade it. Grub Street was bad form, and I had to promise never again to sink to another article. Thus ended my life in journalism.

Next: reading, and certain drugstore winter dusks. These come together. It is an aeon before Filene's, years and years before the Later Novels of Henry James. I am scrunched on my knees at a round glass table near a plate glass door on which is inscribed, in gold leaf Paul Revere never put there, letters that must be read backward: [YAMJIAH qIIVaIJ] There is an evening smell of late coffee from the fountain, and all the librarians are lined up in a row on the tall stools, sipping and chattering. They have just stepped in from the cold of the Traveling Library, and so have I. The Traveling Library is a big green truck that stops, once every two weeks, on the corner of Continental Avenue, just a little way in from Westchester Avenue, not far from a house that keeps a pig. Other houses fly pigeons from their roofs, other yards have chickens, and down on Mayflower there is even a goat. This is Pelham Bay, the Bronx, in the middle of the Depression, all cattails and weeds, such a lovely place and tender hour! Even though my mother takes me on the subway far, far downtown to buy my winter coat in the frenzy of Klein's on Fourteenth Street, and even though I can recognize the heavy power of a quarter, I don't know it's the Depression. On the trolley on the way to Westchester Square I see the children who live