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The Prize

Gwen Head

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Acid-cured, the pages flake, fall away,  
the color of bright Virginia.  

_Le Journal de Bord d’Alfred:_  
on page three, the family packs, in an uproar.  
Toward the end, Maman falls ill, Jeannine learns to smoke.  
But nothing explains the cover,  
which, after thirty-five years  
retains its mystery.  

Alfred, in short pants,  
lies propped on his elbows, scribbling.  
In his left hand, a tooth-stitched apple.  
Behind him, a giant, shiny cherry bomb.  
Behind it, a white rabbit with cocked, flop ears.  

The book’s owner, too, is a mystery.  
Ducking a curtsy  
on an improvised stage  
in the Ursulines’ courtyard,  
too shy to look at the principal  
with her elegant upswept hairdo,  
the six-year-old scholar, at that moment,  
thinks for the first time  
of suicide.  

Can you pity her now, reader?  
Or imagine how she envies  
you, too clever to be taken in  
by anything so foolish as a book?