

**Young in Fall**  
Megan Miller



Young in Fall I said: the birds  
are at their highest thoughts  
of leaving

Middle life said nothing—  
grounded  
to a livelihood

Old age—a high gabbling gathering  
before goodbye  
of all we know

-Lorine Niedecker

1.

I wrote to Mabel in typing class: Are you more like Abe Lincoln or Andrew Carnegie? What's your favorite key to success? Be a pal and throw your pencil at my eye, when you have a minute. I need sensation of any kind. Speaking of which, Brad ignored me completely on the way to school. I was planning to ask how many ducks he shot Saturday, you know that's all they care about, but instead had to listen to Astrid—how she can't wait for spring even though it's barely started snowing, thinks winter shoes are bad for toenail fungus, etc. etc. I'm so bored I could cry. I'm done with the lessons.

Mabel wrote back: I'm sick of these small-town boys. First Nicky, now this. Tell Astrid that Fred from St. Cloud is taking you to the movies. We went out last summer, he's the one with the nose. He's in town again taking care of his aunt. Just tell Astrid it's a date, loud as you can. That should do the trick.

In January we sent away for a pattern we saw in a magazine. It was a sweater with short sleeves and a slight puff in the shoulder, designed for fine-gauge yarn. Mabel made it in robin's egg blue and I made it in light moss, and we wore them all spring and summer, when everyone was staying out late, trying to have the best time they could before taking off.

I wrote her in October: Nothing new in Henriette. Swan Olson accused all the kids of opening his pasture gate. Butter prices have gone so low my father wants to sell the creamery. I've been on three dates with a fellow named Joel. He's chubby but he has his own car.

She sent back a postcard: I can't wait to meet him at Christmas. When I write next I'll tell you about the latest young doctor to make my acquaintance. My uncle brings a new one home for dinner every week, and I entertain them with stories of worldly adventure.



I wrote back: It's not like I'm going to marry him. He's Norwegian. Their lutfisk smells worse than ours, don't you think? I've started working at the post office three days a week. My mother wants me to go to school in Minneapolis to become a secretary but we haven't really got the money. I'm getting restless, Mabel, and the ladies are hounding me to make something for the fundraiser.

She wrote back: My dear Miss Gustafson, you really need to stop being so picky. Norwegians will be the least of your troubles if you ever move to Minneapolis. But I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to meet your fiancé this December even if you were ready to accept your fate. Aunt Evie and Uncle Arthur invited me to London—picture me at my giddiest. I feel like the world's getting bigger every day. That's what people in Pine City and Henriette don't understand. Someday we'll live in mansions, with beautiful paintings on every wall, and when we get tired of them we'll trade.

Wish you were here.

2.

I was twenty-nine when I met Bert. By the time my father sold the creamery I'd been living in a boarding house in Minneapolis for six years. He was ready to retire anyway. He and my mother wanted to move across the country. I moved with them, as did my cousin Nora, who was eight years younger than me and tired of the snow. My parents found a house in Seattle and Nora and I both got jobs in the office of a freight company downtown. It was 1943.

A few months after we moved we borrowed a friend's car so Nora could teach me how to drive. We were out in the country somewhere, it was a Saturday, and we stopped for gas at this little place. The fellow who came out looked about my age. He had a big wave of black hair. He was wearing a wool shirt tucked in, brown and blue plaid, and his sleeves rolled up. He came over to my window and said hello, and as he was pumping the gas he started chatting with us: he'd never seen us around before, and so on. The whole time he was looking right at me. After we paid he asked if he could take us to lunch. We'd packed a picnic but we pretended like we hadn't, and said sure.

Bert and I sat at a booth and Nora sat at the counter. Later I learned she just got coffee and waited to eat her lunch on the drive home.

Bert didn't say anything at first. He may have asked me what I wanted to order, but mostly it was silence, and I started to regret saying yes to lunch. Maybe he looked nice in a wool shirt but what did it matter if he couldn't talk? The waitress brought our sandwiches.

I said, well, what should we talk about?

And he answered, I've never met a girl as pretty as you.

I said, that's nice. Why don't you tell me about yourself?

He said, well, I'm from close by, between Woodinville and Bothell. I've got two brothers, one older, one younger. We had another who died when he was seven, from a kid disease. Mumps, maybe. He was older than me. I've been working at the service station about five years.

He took a bite of his sandwich, looked at me, and said, do you think it speaks badly of a person's character if they were married once already?

I said I think it depends on the circumstances.

He said, yeah, that's a good way to think about it. I married a gal named Alice a few years ago. The circumstances should have been okay. Her father was my boss at the time. She started hanging around the shop, and we got to know each other a little, then when I started working at the service station she started hanging around there, coming by at lunch, you know? So we got married. That was February, I think. She was probably too young. She was eighteen and I was twenty-six. She had this plan to go visit some friends of hers in Ketchikan that summer, so she went up there in June and she was supposed to stay a few weeks—it's a long enough trip it wouldn't make sense to stay any shorter than that—but by August she was still there. I start wondering what she's doing. I've been up there when I was nineteen and twenty because I have an uncle in Ketchikan, so I know what it's like. I know there are a lot of young people around in the summers. Eventually, I say to her, well maybe you should come back down, and she says, no, I think I'll stay. And that was that. I was out tuna fishing off the coast that summer so I only got her letters when we came back in. The whole thing was a mess. Earlier that year I'd gone in on a boat with this guy who'd come by the station every so often, I got to know him that way, he was a few years younger than me. He told me he wanted a partner for this fishing boat he wanted to buy. And I thought he was a decent guy. That's one thing I'll say about my father is that he was decent doing business with people. If he said he could put up a barn for a certain price, by such and such a day, by god he did it, even if he had to drag you out by the ears to help him. He beat my ass to parchment every week but he never charged someone more than he said he would. My stepmother was nasty too. My mother died when I was real young, for all I know she was wonderful, but my stepmother never had a nice thing to say. They never liked me because I looked like my mother. Ever since I left home I decided not to waste my time with mean people. So I never expected this guy might be lying. Jeff is his name, Jeffrey Colburn. If you ever meet him, you'll know he's a liar. That's what I learned later on when I started talking to people, I come to find out he had a reputation as a kind of small-time swindler. Because after a season of fishing, even though we made some money, we were doing good enough, I decided I wanted to get out—everything was going on with Alice—so we get done fishing in September, and I tell Jeff I wanna sell my half of the boat, either sell it back to him or I'll find someone else who wants to buy it, and he looks me straight in the eyes and he says, what do you mean?—this boat's mine. I'll never forget that. We both knew I put up half the money, we both knew that, when we looked at each other, and he lied through his teeth. I tried to take him to court. He made it sound like I was the one trying to cheat him, like I was just working for him that whole time. I couldn't do anything. It just makes you sick what some people will do. It makes you wonder why they decide to be part of your life in the first place, you know, they go and mess everything up, and you would've been better off alone. But you can't let one guy make you so angry, I guess. I started working at the station again and I saved some money, then last year the guy who owned it decided to move to Spokane and sold it to me. It's in writing and everything. I want to sell it in a few years and go back to making cabinets.

After forty-five minutes Bert was still holding the one half of his sandwich up over his plate, with one bite out of it, and his arms resting on the edge of the table. I hadn't eaten any of mine because I didn't want to be rude.

A few weeks later I said in passing that I didn't like the smell of smoke on his breath. He didn't say a word, and I never smelled it again.

I was lucky to find someone who didn't go to war. He tried to sign up but when he took the physical they found some kind of problem with his balance. He started building our house before we were married. And then in 1947 we had Bobby, who was terribly bright. One time when Bobby was in kindergarten his teacher called me up, very concerned. She said all the pictures he drew of his house were black. She thought he must be depressed. I couldn't help but laugh. I told her that's the color of our house—my husband hasn't put up the siding yet, so we just have tar paper over the plywood. I don't think she knew what to say, she must have thought we lived in a shanty. Our house was fine. It took a few years to get Bert's shop going. I did the bookkeeping, and the rest of the time I occupied myself with Bobby. I knit him a lot of sweaters. He had a new favorite color every year, and his idea of what he wanted to be when he grew up changed every other week. He wanted to be everything he could think of.

3.

It's funny to feel your body getting tired. It's almost like falling asleep, stretched out over five or ten years, but more painful. Bert and I watch our program every day at one o'clock. He listens to basketball games on his walkman. We talk about surgery, and I write letters to the people I used to know.

I learned that Astrid married an engineer from Duluth. Frankie was the head cook at a prison for thirty-five years, and Lorraine Smith had eight children. William Duane moved back to Henriette with his wife and watched our old town go to pot, he said. Nick Perkins was killed in the Pacific. No one knew that until the fiftieth reunion—or someone must have known, but they didn't spread the word.

I couldn't make it to the reunion so I sent letters. I got a card back from Emil Henderson a year later, in 1984. Carol, he said, it was a real nice surprise to hear from you. I've lived most of my life in Alaska—married Bertha Chase of Henriette—two sons, one grandchild—WWII vet, of course, wounded—wife died in 1967—never remarried—came close once, but got cold feet—now I'm going blind, but an operation may help—border-line diabetes—weigh 250 pounds—I guess I'm just wearing out.

Emil used to follow me all over when we were kids, and I never had the heart to tell him to get lost.

I've been exchanging letters with Margaret for almost twenty years. She became the postmaster at Mora and that's where she met her husband. Her son Bill died this June. He was fifty two, a year younger than Bob. He'd been living with them off and on for a while, never really holding down a job, but she was just happy to know where he was. When we first started writing Margaret said she hadn't seen him since 1969. For a long time she thought she had nothing else to offer him. Eventually she got so worried that she couldn't ignore it any longer, and spent a year trying to track him down.

Something happened when he was in the army. He was in Pakistan, in the army intelligence. He was good with languages, apparently. Margaret said while he was over there he had this house-boy, a young man who was his servant, because that was the custom, and they became friends. Then one time he had a few days off and he decided

to go with him to visit his family. He wanted to see the country and get to know people a little more. But it turned out the family moved around a lot. They were nomads. He must have misunderstood their plan because he found himself out in the middle of the desert unarmed, gone longer than he should have been, with no way to get back. This was the part Margaret didn't hear about until later. They were going along in this caravan and suddenly they came upon two men with light skin and machine guns, speaking Russian. He said it felt like his throat closed up right then. He knew they'd kill him.

Margaret said he wouldn't tell her how he killed them, but he did. He killed both of them. When she tried to picture it all she could picture was something out of a movie. He started taking karate lessons when he was thirteen because he was skinny and he hated getting picked on, and he had a black belt by the time he went over there. When Margaret found out what had happened she felt so lucky he was alive. It was a miracle to discover she could be so grateful. He didn't see it that way. She told me she cried every day. Every day she told him it wasn't his fault, he was serving his country, he did what anyone would do, he didn't have a choice, and isn't this better than dying young in a strange place? He just replied, calmly, you don't know what you're talking about.

They think he died of a heart attack. Margaret found him lying on top of his bed.

This past August I finally wrote to Lucille Thompson, to see if she could track down Ward Jones, Mabel's younger brother, because no one had heard from Mabel.

Lucille wrote back: Dear Carol, I was so glad to receive your letter because it gave me something to do. Ward Jones, Ward Jones—the name sounded familiar right away. I walked across the street to see if Ida remembered him, and she said no, but I should try Katherine. I tried Katherine and she didn't know. I asked everyone I could think of—I won't bother naming them here—but no one could place him. Then last Sunday before church I turned to my brother Hank in the pew behind me. He said, yeah, I knew Ward Jones. He was the class of '37. Hank said the story went that Ward and Mabel's father was odd, different or something, so he had himself put on a farm out by Pokegama Lake. It wasn't a huge place, just enough cattle to make a living. Their uncle was a doctor at the Mayo Clinic. He'd drive up to Pine City every so often and he always stopped for gas at the co-op—Hank remembered that because he ran the co-op for several years. Ward got shot in the foot one year when they were out deer hunting and they took him down to Rochester. Hank said Dorothy Pederson should have his address because she organizes their class reunions, so I called her the next day, which was yesterday. You can write to him at 4826 Red Bluff Drive, Rockford, Illinois, 61107. Good luck.

I'm terribly sorry to hear about your health problems, Carol. I've had my share of problems too, as you might imagine. My husband passed away July 30, 1995, and six months later I was hit by a car. I was trying to cross the street from the bank to the pharmacy and this woman pulled out of the parking lot and didn't see me. She broke my arm and mangled my back. I went to doctors all over the place for several years. Eventually I got so fed up that I went down to Florida, my daughter and son-in-law were there at the time. We were going out in a canoe but there weren't enough seats so I was supposed to sit on the bottom. As soon as I sat down I screamed bloody murder—my eyes about popped out of my head, I'd never felt so much pain in my life. I made them take me back to shore and when we got there I couldn't even stand up. By the time they

got me out of the canoe I was soaking wet. They helped me up the lawn and went back to their boat ride, and I sat down in a chair to rest. After a while I started to feel a little better, but then before too long I looked down and saw there was an army of wood ticks coming at me, tons of them, marching right up the hill. It's tick country down there. I thought, ticks are the last thing I need. So I starting picking them off as fast as I could until my feet were so sore that I kicked off all my clothes. Then I went inside and swallowed half a bottle of Tylenol—that was all that was left. Later we went out for dinner and we stopped by the Wal-Mart on the way, the big one, and while my daughter was paying the bill I got another bottle of Tylenol, swallowed that, I may have passed out or something, I don't know. Then I woke up the next morning and my back has been fine ever since. That was 1998. Well, Carol, I think I'd better take a nap. I hope you can make sense of all this.

In high school Mabel said her father got a job as a traveling salesman.

I wrote to Ward half-expecting my letter to be sent back unopened. I got a reply the first week of September.

Dear Carol, it said, I've received your letter asking about my dear sister Mabel. I regret to inform you that she passed away in March of 1990. She got lung cancer in 1988. She handled it pretty well, then died in her sleep one night. I wish I had better news. You sound like a loyal friend, and I'm certain Sis was fond of you. Please excuse my awful handwriting. It's the result of being 82 years old and having arthritic hands. Mabel was 76 when she left us. Her family loved her. Thank you for asking about her. Sincerely, Ward E. Jones.