

Renee Lynn Hansen

## THE DROUGHT JUST THEN

The days were so hot that my roommates June and Harry were reduced to drinking Riesling. We wondered if soldiers in the Middle East were as hot, carrying all their 50 pounds of artillery. We kept the windows open round the clock and watered the sheets regularly. This was something June's mother had told us to do. She had grown up on a farm. The CTA trains loomed close, and the dust came in. It added to the effect. The apartment was rather like a desert; the damp mattress, an oasis we lay on. Our conversations were feverish. June and Harry talked of food and wine all summer. Their jobs as sommelier and head waitress had influenced the realm of ideas. Harry thought Cote du Rhones were best with salmon, cooked with capers and zest of lemon. June set forth an elegant argument for Pouilly Fuisse — chilled, served with caviar spread on rounds of pumpernickel — she won me over just by saying Pouilly Fuisse ten times real fast when I asked her to. June told me of her small daring feminist move: she gives the first pour to the women at the table. I imagined women in black dresses, dark hair, leaning back to swish and savor the Pinot Noirs Cote du Rhones Pouilly Fuisses. But the wine thing only fascinated me for so long. I was reading *Crime and Punishment* that summer of the drought, where on a perfectly fine day, by a perfectly fine man, a woman is murdered. I was convinced that a tragedy was playing itself out beyond the façade of human activity. Yes, I agreed with June and Harry, culinary taste *was* art. "Good art seduces and subverts," Harry was fond of saying. June and Harry cooked a cool leek soup one night and we all agreed that it seduced the hell out of us. We had to drink vodka straight up just to cut it. Then we sat on the floor. On June's old Oriental rug, we sipped vodka and dipped croissants into the silky green and agreed that nothing else mattered. We'd give our lives for this moment with leek soup. That was the third thing about great art — it became its own entity, set its own rules; stepping into it was like crossing the galaxies as dust. We were so taken by the taste of leeks and vodka that we nearly forgot about how many had died in the drought raging across the Midwest just then, and the war in the Middle East was a tincture — It was not enormous work, as it usually was for us, to be not of something.