

# Exhibit

*by* Elizabeth Hegwood

Late in the morning, standing in line, clutching a bag of Meow Mix, I listen to the woman waiting behind me. She's having a cell phone conversation about the *Treasures of Ancient Egypt* exhibit. It's in New Orleans, she says, and the kids liked the mummy. I slide my check card, drive the quiet ten blocks home, feed the cat, pull on lower heels, and get back in the car.

It's a clear, easy drive to the city, but I'm consciously trying to breathe slowly. My heart is beating a little because earlier this morning I read that a car was recently gunned down on this same interstate, the kind of unfathomable drive-by you see in Bruce Willis movies. Christmas morning, this happened, a man killed on his way to see his family. I'm not exactly worried about my own safety, but I'm unable to stop wondering about the man's life, the details I've created: his mother, his nephew, the swerving car, a can of cashews in the front seat, a gift-wrapped tin of cookies in the back. The CD starts over and I imagine looking up to see, for the first and only time in my life, a bullet being fired, the spray of glass just before a mangled wreck of metal, my own sedan whizzing past the scene, fifty feet away before I realize what's in the rearview mirror. I remember the headline I read, half of the front page. I think about the people who, a few days ago, received the real call.

At the museum, I buy my ticket and pin a plastic feather to my collar, which, according to the card it comes on, symbolizes *Maat*, the Egyptian goddess of truth, justice, and morals. Inside, still thinking of the broken family, I walk through the exhibit twice, the first time lifting the audio guide to my ear, letting the smooth voice tell me where to step and what to note. The second time, I return the guide and stay at each display much longer. They've called the collection *The Quest for Immortality*, but it's the poignant humanity of the art that makes me want to take the outstretched hand of a goddess's statue, or stroke the burial masks, luminous as faces, the corners of the mouths barely upturned, eyes almost serene. I could

climb onto the enormous figures, flatten myself against their backs and strain my ears, let them tell me who they loved and what they believed in, or how, at the end of a life, even after a tragedy, they were able to weight their hearts against a feather and keep the scale from crashing. As my eyes trace the hieroglyphics, I want to hug the columns, press my face against the carved rock, which must be warm from baking for thousands of years in the sun.

