

interject past tense phrasal verb

Wrong Season

for JCO

I wonder for maybe the tenth time this evening why that mama wren with the worm in her beak doesn't go ahead and eat it. Why she keeps dipping from the eaves to the shrubbery, cranking her head side to side, watching me paint my nails, ^(Dane) waiting for me to leave so she can feed her squawking chicks in the nest on the rafter above my swing. With all those trees across the highway and behind my double-wide, why did she have to pick this place for a nest? Late summer-- not even the right season for nesting. I'm not leaving, not till my nails dry. She can go on and eat the worm. I hold up my red nails and blow them, and the wren on the scrubby shrub kites up to the roof where it's raining with the sun shining.

Almost dry, not a smudge, and just in time; I showered about an hour ago, and [^] ~~already~~ I'm starting to sweat; I hear [^] ~~Rambo and Tweety~~ ^{my babies} in the kitchen, begging supper. Long as The Lion King is, it never lasts long enough. I hate it when the sun starts shining while it's raining, because then the day seems to start over. If the clearing sky would only stay cloudy, I could put the kids to bed earlier and call it nighttime without them catching me in a lie. Then Damon would call, then he might come over, then...

I try to imagine what it'll be like--what it might have been like before ^{Ronnie} my ex, and the babies, born two years apart. Just me and Damon alone in some room I can't picture outside of this double-wide I've lived in since I got out of high school and married Ronnie. Not at Mama's, two mobile homes up the highway, at the Cornerville city limits sign. Not with all ^{my Sody-Sody} ~~my sisters and brothers and uncles~~ dropping by after supper. ~~That sobers me thinking about them~~

(I pray God'll have mercy on her soul.)

I go through the flimsy front door and hear the wren fluttering to her nest, the baby birds fussing good now. Cooler inside, but not cool. I slide the thermostat lever on the living room wall from 75 to 70 degrees, knowing the air conditioner, steady humming and rattling, won't cool the double-wide to 70. Not in this heat. In the kitchen, dim even with the sunlight stealing through the windows, Rambo is rubbing his eyes and whining "Mama," and Tweety, so named for the cartoon bird she looks like, toddling behind him. Both stunned-looking as ~~Ronnie~~ ^{she} who holds the record for watching tv the most hours in a row.

"Juice," says two-year-old Tweety, and holds up her empty bottle with the blistered rubber nipple.

"No more juice till after supper," I say, and she tilts the bottle high and sticks the nipple into her mouth, sucking air.

"I'm hungry," says Rambo, tracking behind me to the sink ^{double stacked with} ~~full~~ of unwashed dishes and pots. "I'm hot!" I switch on the fluorescent light, banishing the ghosts of sun framed in the ^{twin} ~~double~~ windows.

"Well, you gone have to wait a minute," I say, and he asks why and I say because I say so--what we both say, seems like, a thousand times a day.

He plops to the juice-stippled tiles on his bony butt, bawling, and I have to step around him to get to the cabinet over the stove, where I plunder among the toppled cans of food for...what? Soup. Chicken Noodle-~~oos~~. Which I know he won't eat. Knocking over a jar of Gerber's carrots I know Tweety won't eat either. Well, I'm offering it. Like the doctor said--"Just offer it; if they're hungry they'll eat."

✓ When they don't eat, I salve my ^{conscience} conscience by thinking about the Easter egg hunt in my yard last year and one of the pale little girls from a trailer in the park behind mine, who ate all six of the smeary-dyed eggs she found, while Rambo and the other children cracked and mauled and mushed theirs. When they're hungry they'll eat.

✓ The portable phone rings on the food-spackled wall over the garbage can vomiting rotted Styrofoam chicken trays and ^{shit} dirty diapers. I hop over Rambo with his bawling baby-turned-boy face to get to the phone before Damon--it has to be Damon!--hangs up. I press it tight to my ear and mouth, walking and talking--it is Damon!--trying to voice-over Rambo's squealing and Tweety's singing. That damned Lion King song! I feel embarrassed about the background racket Damon has to be hearing, laugh loud to cover it, and he stops talking and I know I've laughed too shrill, maybe laughed at something serious. I have only an inkling of what boys like Damon consider class. Store-owner's son, two years at Valdosta State, but still a freshman, whose attention makes me feel above this double-wide and accidental motherhood.

Tweety latches to my right leg and licks my knee. I pat her on the head, that bird's crest sprig of hair, open a can of soup, dump it into a clean-looking bowl from the sink and pop it into the microwave. Suddenly mad at Rambo for bawling.

I hold the phone away and say, "Time out, Rambo! Go to your room right now!" Let Damon know I don't like Rambo either. Let Damon see the solid ^{same} side of me, my solid ^{same} mothering. And then he can say how smart I am, how up-to-date I am, that my being a mother is okay by him. I have merit, the kind of woman the tv talk shows and mags boast is acceptable now. In the nineties it's sophisticated and sexy to be a strong mother and career woman. But my new job at the Delta (in Cornerville) doesn't seem like the kind of career they mean.

Rambo scoots on the floor and springs to his feet, then shambles around the corner by the garbage can, his bellowing squeezed now, his hurt-feelings cry. Down the hall with the seat of his baggy white jockey shorts accusing me of not mopping the kitchen.

Tweety, bowlegged in a clumped wet Pamper, ^{patters} ~~leddies~~ after him. "Bubba crying? Bubba crying?" Everything a question, a habit she picked up from Damon maybe. To please me maybe.

I toggle the timer on the microwave and step away, leaning against the stove with its level surface of inset eyes that seems smart and modern to me but probably doesn't to Damon. And I don't know what is sophisticated, what his mama ^{is} ~~Mrs. Hoot Walters's~~ stove would ^{look} be like. Whether she ~~even~~ cooks ~~over~~.

"They'll go down in about an hour," I say to Damon. "Right after I feed them."

"I don't know how you ^{put up with} stand it?" says Damon. "All that racket?"

"You know how children are."

"I don't want to know? Too much fuss and ^{brother?} trouble?"

While Damon tells me about his nuisance nieces and nephews, I
✓ listen to Rambo shouting at Tweety, hear her padding back ^{up} the
hall, Rambo behind her. A Power Ranger doll flies over Tweety's head
and lands under the kitchen table, as she wings around the corner,
home-free, laughing with her straight eyebrows ^{hiked} raised when she spots
me, then crying as she crashes into the garbage can, tips it over and
sprawls into the waste of bread crusts and jagged cans and mysterious
Coke bottles that look empty but dump enough syrupy gook to stain
✓ brown the entire white floor.

Bracing the phone to my ear with my shoulder, I help her up and
press her face to my left thigh, tears and baby-spit and sweat
trickling ^{down my chest} from my eyes. She shudders, sucks her thumb. Rambo's scared
white face peeps around the corner, and I trip through the trash and
yank his stick arm, shaking him and walking him half-way down the
hall. He cries--his hurt-body cry--and lunges toward his bedroom at
the other end. Slams the door. The microwave beeps. I limp back to
✓ the kitchen with Tweety ^{dragged} grown to my leg. I open the microwave door,
hot-handling the bowl of parched Chicken Noodle-ooos to the counter by
the refrigerator. Damon is listening to a Michael Jackson CD,
crooning into the phone. I don't like Michael Jackson. I don't like
him--child molester--or his music. I act like I do.

Suddenly, "Old man says if I want to stay in college," Damon
says, "I gotta toe the line?"

He waits for me to speak.

"What's that mean, toe the line?" I know. I just say that to be saying something I don't have to think about.

✓ "Hell, I don't know. Get my grades up, I guess?" ¹⁾ *You know?*

"Yeah," then to Rambo, slinking into the kitchen like a hungry puppy and scaling up the skittering high chair. "Rambo! No! Wait!"

I open the freezer compartment of the side-by-side refrigerator with moldy breath and take a half-circle of ice from the bin. Hold it to my hot throat, then plop it into the soup, spattering my ^{hard-earned.} white tee-shirt.

✓ ~~Rambo's howling again, stalking off around the corner again~~

"I don't see how you stand it?" says Damon. "I'd go crazy?"

"I am."

"Why don't you call up Ronnie and make him take them awhile?"

"Weekends. He gets them on the weekends." Meaning just me and you then.

"Two da-ays? That ain't fair?"

"He's got that little trailer, you know." Saying that about

✓ Ronnie's trailer makes ^{him} ~~us~~ seem poor--poor white trash--all of us poor, and sets up a comparison to the Walters's family in their fine brick house, south of ^{Pa' Dunk} (the Cornerville crossing. "Besides, he has to work night shift at Occidental," I add. "Sleeps all day."

✓ "Well," says Damon--doing something that lifts his ^{breathy} voice from the phone--"you work too, don't you?"

He's really into phone sex, and I wonder. Staring out the double window over the sink, I see it's getting dark, finally. I change the subject. "You coming over tonight?" I say.

"Might."

~~them~~
~~the babies~~

✓ "I'm gone have ~~them~~ down in about thirty minutes." I unlatch
✓ Tweety's sticky arms from my leg, where she's dozing and sucking her
thumb, and carry the bowl of watery soup to the high chair and set it
on the tray. Then I pick Rambo up and thread him between the tray
and the seat. His scraped knees jam against the tray. He screams.
I slap his leg, keep talking to Damon. Sprint down the hall with my
hand over the phone to keep Damon from hearing Rambo. I hate Rambo
and Ronnie and Tweety trailing behind me into my hot, dim, mildewed
bedroom, floored with clothes. ~~A slice of roach-nibbled bread on the~~
night stand Ronnie and I bought for antique, which I doubt.
Everything else is this plastic house is plastic. Even Tweety, now
curving into the curve of my hip on the romped bed, looks plastic.
Like a replica of Tweety Bird. "Well," I say to Damon, "are you
coming over or not?"

*Sometimes Oldfashioned, and that's what I can't stop when it comes to (the babies).
Rambo (the babies) and it's my*

"I gotta run by the Delta first?" says Damon, as if he's stretching, coolly coming to life again. "Take back these movies I got over the weekend?"

"I'll be here," I say and punch the off button on the phone after he has hung up. Never first.

had
By ten o'clock I figure he's not coming. I've already got the kids down, had it out with Ronnie on the phone before he left for work. I am not giving up my job at the Delta; Miss Houston might be the nastiest woman in Swanoochee County, but she's a cheap sitter, has never killed a kid yet.

not there be the woman from MJ

on red delete
Sitting on the blue-mauvey sofa, I watch tv--^{*self*} a news brief about
~~some crazy woman deliberately driving her car into a lake and~~
~~drowning her own children--~~ still half-waiting for Damon in my new
khaki shorts and white tee with the tomato-sauce stain like blood
leaking from my right nipple. The air conditioner is still humming
✓ and rattling, but shows promise of reaching the 70-degree mark before
maybe midnight. Or before it quits. A blonde women on "Melrose
Place" has a shagged, heavy-banged hairdo I like, but I'm afraid if I
cut my frizzed brown hair Damon won't like me anymore. Not that he's
ever mentioned my hair, but I'm afraid to change anything that might
be what attracted him. I feel warm, knowing Damon the Hunk likes
whatever he likes about me.

✓ I get up, shoving aside Tweety's ^{*lavender*} plastic doll stroller, and part
the curtains on a window over the front porch, scanning the highway
✓ for ~~automobile~~ lights. Spread-eyed lights of Damon's slooped
Corvette, specifically. A truck passes, a car, heading east toward
 Fargo. I open the door and lean out into the damp pine air, checking
for lights at Mama's trailer, though I know she won't be done at the
Delta till after eleven. I'll call her then, see if she's seen
Damon, who she doesn't have a bit of use for, as she says. Always
harping about me working--"You neglecting your babies for a job that
✓ pays ~~just~~ about enough for new earbobs and makeup"--when she's the
one who hired me.

I sit again, watching tv, trying not to watch the gold octagonal
clock on the wall between twin gold sconces. A matched set from Home
Interiors. Over-priced junk supposed to make you feel creative by
mixing and matching fake flowers and pictures of fake flowers. Color
schemes depending on "what's in" in decorating for a specific

period. I can't afford to buy the latest. I'll be seeing mauve and blue as I draw my last breath.

When I hear Rambo whining, I think at first it's in my head, I've heard it so much. Then his whining turns to crying, and I sit here hoping he's crying in his dream. Or if he's awake and crying and I don't go into his room and let him know I know he's crying, he'll give up and quit. After a few more minutes, ^{when} his crying links to crying, I know he's on a roll.

I go down the hall and stand close to the wall at his bedroom door, ^{saying} looking down at my ^{what's so damn ANNOYED} sneaky ^{feet} legs that could be what Damon likes best about me, and listen. Rambo cries louder, the sound sitting up now. I have to go in before he wakes up Tweety in the crib at the foot of his bed.

He's sitting up, tugging at his left ear; when he sees me he starts wiggling from ^{under} the sheet and drags it from the bed to the door.

"What's going on, Buddy?" I say, walking him in his dirty jockey shorts toward the living room. Sometimes tv puts him back to sleep.

"Ear hurts," he says.

^{oh} "Go lay down on the couch," I say, "and I'll warm up some ear oil and get you some Tylenol."

He stumbles ahead of me, crying, while I stop off at the bathroom, turn on the light and stare at my face in the mirror of the

medicine cabinet: ^{fringed} long brown hair tugged into a bushy ponytail, ^{made rounder by wire frame} with frizzed tendrils framing my round face, ^{the in-they intellectual} by lying eyes--could be green, could be brown.

✓ When I get back to the living room with the ear oil, ^{Rambo} he is stamping, thin and white, in the scatter of toys, stooping and squalling and hugging his stomach.

"Come on," I say, "lay down right here." I sit on the blue sofa with its stained mauve flowers and pat the cushion next to me for him to come.

✓ A knock on the front door makes my ^{heart knock} chest squeeze. I walk past Rambo, lost in his pain--ear or stomach?--and open the door. Damon is standing on the porch with one hand propped on the pushed-in metal siding. When he lets go it ^{phlopes} ~~peeps~~ ^{PHOOPS} out. He flashes his ^{level white} ~~even white~~ teeth and steps inside: tall and tan in a mint polo with a Ralph Lauren logo, skin Levis and Nikes white as his teeth.

"Hey, fella," he says to Rambo, "thought you'd be in bed by now?" He reaches out to knuckle Rambo's spiked hair.

Rambo ducks and dashes to the sofa and presses his face into a cushion--^{white} ~~white~~ ^{skinny legs} and knobby spine ^{blue-ripped} ~~and~~ those dirty shorts ^{gaping} around the leg holes.

"He's got the ear ache," I say to Damon.

"Don't we all?" says Damon and covers his smallish ears.

✓ "I was just about to put some ear oil in it," I say, "then ^{back} ~~back~~ him ^{in again} ~~back to bed.~~"

I go over to the sofa and sit next to Rambo's burry brown head and twist it so that his left ear is up. He wriggles free, screams tearing with him across the living room and down the hall. I follow ^{him} sure he'll wake up Tweety this time. He scrambles into the chute between his bed and the wall and sits clutching his ^{scabby} ~~scabby~~ knees. Tweety is standing in her crib, watching with those huge blue

eyes and that standing spring ^{set} hair that earned her the name. I think that the nick-name "Rambo" didn't take, that Ronnie was stupid for thinking it would take--"Gonna make a tough man, you'll see." I don't want to say that name again; I don't want Damon to think I'm stupid too.

"Get up, Raymond," I say, coming around the bed with the ear oil for the kid who looks like a Raymond for real.

"I want my daddy," he shrieks and scooches to face the paneled maple headboard with his scrawny legs folded.

"Well," I say, "that's too bad." I wonder ^{hope} if Damon is listening; ~~I wonder what he's thinking.~~ "Your daddy's gone to work, so you might as well get up here on the bed and let me doctor your ear."

✓ I crawl across the bed and snatch ^{at night} his left arm. He yanks free and crooks it over his crying face. Not even cute now that he's four. I drop the open blue bottle of ear oil and it rolls under the bed.

"Alright, ^{dammit!!} I say, "I've had it with you!" I slap at his arm, miss and hit him on the head. Too hard. My handprint shines red on his silvery scalp. He scoots to his back on the ^{plastic parquet} floor, kicking and screaming. Tweety cries. ^{Dropped to the mattress and started} Still standing in her diaper holding to ^{throw the bars} the crib rail.

*What just -- I'd start hitting
sometimes I'd start hitting
and could stop hitting
that was when it was
most dangerous for
my babies*

✓ I crawl across the bed to leave and see Damon leaning in the doorway with his long tanned hands loose alongside. "I'll ^{hang} just come back another time," he says low.

✓ I follow him to the living room, where the ^{duets} ~~ambly~~ crying filters through the flimsy fake-wood walls. "If you'll wait a few minutes," I say, "they'll both be asleep."

"I got a test tomorrow, you know?" He stops at the open front door, turns and ^{stares} eyes me with those stretched ^{brown} liquid eyes. "But I'll see you around, okay?"

"Okay," I say and watch him swagger across the porch, ^{across the yard} watch his moon-struck body merge with the slooped body of the Corvette. Sure and aloof and free.

I ^{stares} don't plan it, I don't think about it, I just do what I do next because I can't think of another thing in the world to do. I do ^{did} it to stop the crying. I do ^{did} it to live.

I wait the next morning ^(space) till I figure Mama's up, then call her to say Rambo's got the ear ache, I won't be going to work, I have to take him to the doctor. I doll Tweety up in her blue gingham sunsuit to match her eyes. "Mama crying?" she says, "Bubba crying?" I carry her to the hall and stand her by the living room door. ~~Stay there,~~ baby, I say, ^{stand} and don't get dirty."

I go to the bedroom for Rambo, who is knotted on the bed, crying in his new tennis shoes and brown shorts and matching striped shirt I bought ^{at Wal-mart} for him to start pre-kindergarten ~~in~~ next week. I don't talk to him, just scoop him up and cradle him in my arms down the hall and ~~see~~ Tweety ^{back out} in the kitchen, playing in the garbage can. Trash all ^{now} around her ^{feet} puffy bare feet. I don't talk to her, I don't say "Ank!"

I simply walk on through the living room to the front door and open it to the morning sun and tweeting of the wren's chicks, and carry Rambo out to the car, set him in the back seat and buckle him in, ^{trying} Then go inside again for Tweety, lifting her high in my arms to keep my cheek from touching hers, to keep from inhaling the sweet-stale

smell of her sprigged hair. I place her in the baby seat next to Rambo, double-check the hitch.

"Bubba crying?" she says, and I say, "Shh!" and shut the door because I don't want him to stop crying and make me stop crying and change my mind.

John But I ~~don't~~ plan it. Call it something else.

I start the car, brimming with crying, back out of the mowed weed yard onto 94, and drive east past Mama's trailer at the city limits sign, all the way through ^{town} Cornerville without having to stop at the sole traffic light at the crossing. Cars and trucks at the Delta on the corner and across the road at the courthouse, but none on the highway, none passing or meeting me as I head toward the Alapaha River bridge shimmering white in the morning slant of sun.

First time, I slow down when I get to the rutted ramp, east of the bridge, looking, checking, losing my nerve. Maybe because Tweety is singing The Lion King song, ~~now and then stopping to say~~, "Bubba crying? Mama crying?"

I drive on west along 94, ^{a couple of miles;} till I get ~~to the intersection of 136,~~ sure I'll keep driving ^{till I get} to the doctor in Valdosta, but make a quick u-turn on the cross of gravel ^{at the intersection of 136,}. A spin of green pines and gray highway and sun. I hear Rambo's head smack the window--he cries louder, a squeezing you-hurt-me cry, which is distinctly different from the earache cry I've been listening to all night. Makes it easier for me to go back to the bridge.

I'll do it this time. I sit high, crank down my window and consider plunging the car down the ^{west} bank, ^{then} west side of the bridge. If I go into Cornerville to turn around, somebody might notice. But

when I get to the start of the bridge, I see the west bank is too weedy to tell if it drops off or slopes. I drive on across the bridge, slow so I can look ^{down} at the river, at the sloping east bank of sand with a jeep-trail leading from the road ramp through thickets of bamboo and willow and tupelo to the tea-tinted shallows flowing over scalloped sand, and the sudden pitch of black water off the west bank where I've wisely decided not to ^{drive} plunge the car down. Somebody might be hurt.

I turn in at the cemetery, east of the bridge, on my left, with its bleached headstones and stark sand, back out and veer ~~left~~ toward the shoulder this side of the bridge. Dream-listening to the unreal rumbling of the car down the rutted ramp, west along the jeep-trail toward the calm-flowing water, ^{listening} to the crying and the Lion King Song in Tweety's tiny voice. Dream-seeing the concrete pylons on my right with the ^{initials} names of lovers painted the red of my nails. Dream-feeling the car's bucking in and out of gullies, wheels digging into the sand and slowing the car, then rushing toward the rushing river and hurling into the shallows with a great splash of water that slides ^{like honey} ~~down~~ down the windshield, slow as the car inching toward the dark dropoff, the black water.

Rambo's you-hurt-me cry turns to screaming. I don't look back. I don't look back even when Tweety screams too. I just sit there waiting for the car to inch farther out and under, wondering if the it will bog in the sand or float free, and when it does begin to float ^{get to} out and sink, I climb through the window and perch on the ledge, feet ^{cooling} ~~resting~~ in the ^{cooled} ~~water~~ on the seat, and stare north over

the ^{car} roof at the river funneling between rock banks and cry till the screaming in the car stops.

I don't look ^{at my babies} I swim with the current toward the mussel-shaped sand bar downriver, listening to the car gurgle its last, to the crickets and locusts buzzing. The silence of my own not-crying.

I ~~don't~~ do it, I ~~don't~~ plan to do it, I guess it's all right just to dream it up. I steer the car from the shoulder to the highway, cross the bridge, and head to the doctor in Valdosta.

They're safe again, ~~and I love to see~~ ^{till the next time}.

~~it also~~

~~I want my babies back, my precious babies, ^{your mama miss you} ~~babies, if you can hear me, your mama miss you~~ ^{my babies} ~~my way out there~~ ^{know} ~~to be back to their mama~~~~

Babies, if you can hear me, your
mama misses you.