

# Gulf Coast

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE & FINE ARTS

\$7.00



AVARICE, WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

# Gulf Coast

VOLUME V, NUMBER TWO  
SPRING/SUMMER 1993

*Managing Editors*

Mark O'Connor  
Randall Watson

*Fiction Editors*

A. Quinlan  
Amy Storrow

*Poetry Editor*

Lance Larsen

*Art Editor*

A. Quinlan

*Book Design*

Jim Tiebout

*Gulf Coast* is funded largely by Inprint Inc., along with the donations of our subscribers. We also could not have completed the issue without the additional care and generosity of Thom Andriola of *New Gallery*, Lynn Cazabon, Terrell Dixon, Howard Hilliard of FotoFest, Victoria Jones, Karl Kilian of Brazos Bookstore, Polly Koch, Robert Phillips, Adam Zagajewski, the University of Houston English Department, and all of our contributors.

We thank our patrons (\$100):  
Joan Alexander, Marion Barthelme,  
Michael & Cynthia Fowler, Joyce James,  
Mr. & Mrs. Kenneth L. Lay,  
Alexander Schilt,  
and our sponsors (\$50):  
Robin Brooks, Joan K. Bruchas,  
Mr. H. Philip Cowdin,  
Trudy Guinee, Stephanie Larsen,  
Mike Lieberman, Hinda Simon, and  
Rufus & Katherine Wallingford.

The purpose of *Gulf Coast* is to provide an open venue for works and ideas of local and national artists and writers. The opinions expressed here are not necessarily the opinions of the editors of *Gulf Coast*.

*Gulf Coast* is published semi-annually.  
Manuscripts should be sent to the editors at this address:  
Creative Writing Program  
Department of English,  
University of Houston  
4800 Calhoun Rd.  
Houston, TX 77204-3012.

A two-year subscription is \$22.00.  
Back issues are \$5.00.  
Barthelme Memorial issues are \$12.00.  
*Gulf Coast* is distributed in North America by  
B. DeBoer, Inc., Nutley, NJ  
Fine Print, Austin, TX

ISSN 0896-2251

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### INTERVIEW

Amy Hempel with Mary Robison	40	<i>A Conversation</i>
---------------------------------	----	-----------------------

### POETRY

Walter Pavlich	16	<i>Sadness</i>
Jon Davis	24	<i>Marriage</i>
E.G. Burrows	29	<i>Elsinore</i>
Susan Wood	36	<i>Harmonica</i>
	38	<i>Luck</i>
	39	<i>Astral Bodies</i>
Brendan Galvin	49	<i>Half Moon Fort (Barbados)</i>
	50	<i>Above It All</i>
Bruce Taylor	64	<i>Counting</i>
Lisa Beskin	69	<i>Loneliness in Summer</i>
Chris Semansky	72	<i>André Breton Works the Crisis Prevention Hot Line</i>
Allison Smythe	73	<i>Finite Habitation</i>
Leslie Norris	81	<i>Ithaca</i>
	82	<i>In The City</i>
Kevin Pilkington	98	<i>View From the Porch</i>
David Ignatow	109	<i>Sandia Mountain Range, New Mexico</i>
Heather Sellers	110	<i>Grind</i>
Alethea Gail Segal	124	<i>Creation Story</i>

### FICTION

William Cobb	7	<i>Three Feet of Water</i>
Lucia Nevai	32	<i>The Good Luck Cake</i>
Alvaro Cardona-Hine	52	<i>Portrait At Teatime</i>
Richard Howard	61	<i>Fag Ends (excerpt)</i>

George Williams	78	<i>The Road To Damascus</i>
Elizabeth Starr	84	<i>His Wife's Indians</i>
Andrew Markham	104	<i>Maws</i>
Lance Olsen	111	<i>Live Sex: Microwaves: London</i>

---

ESSAY

Edwin Gallaher	17	<i>One Room, Many Voices</i>
Dana Gioia	58	<i>Hearing From Poetry's Audience</i>
Ann Beattie	65	<i>Signs In The Balance</i>
Lorenzo Thomas and Heather Korb	87	<i>"Not Enough Sense To Ask For Money": Learning The Blues In Houston, Texas</i>
Julio Cortázar	117	<i>Strictly Nonprofessional</i>

---

ART

Michael Charles	18	<i>Revelation</i>
Ron Smith	19	<i>Untitled</i>
Ike E. Morgan	22	<i>George Washington Series</i>
David McGee	23	<i>Welcome to the Tropics</i>
Bert Samples	26	<i>Her Daughters Mournfully Injesture Dance in the Elysian Tradition</i>
Annette Lawrence	27	<i>Drawing Blood</i>
	28	<i>One Love</i>
James Bettison	30	<i>Prologue to Love (Gurl Dog)</i>
	31	<i>Blind Date</i>
Lincoln Perry	66	<i>Cbina Story</i>
	67	<i>Balance</i>
	67	<i>Götterdämmerung</i>

---

David Levinthal	70	<i>Untitled</i>
	71	<i>Untitled</i>
	74	<i>Untitled</i>
Charlie Sartwelle	75	<i>The Black Madonna</i>
	76	<i>Our Lady Of The Bayou: Sleeping Beauty</i>
	77	<i>Our Lady Of The Bayou: Black Madonna</i>
Mark O'Connor and Randall Watson	100	<i>Collaborative Art Project: Original Works</i>
List of Participating Artists	101	
Amy Blakemore	102	<i>Boy and Ball</i>
Guest Artist	103	<i>Boy and Ball (Altered Print)</i>

COVER ART: William S. Burroughs

Front: *Avarice*, 6-color woodblock, screenprint, 45" x 31",

Back: *Sloth and Avarice* (Text)

*Avarice* is one of seven multicolor shotgun woodblock, screenprint images with seven screenprint texts from the series *The Seven Deadly Sins*. The images are composed of woodblocks shot by the artist with a 12 gauge shotgun in February of 1991 and paintings on Mylar made by the artist in March and June of 1991. The text was written by the artist from February to July of 1991. Special thanks to James McCrary of William Burroughs Communications for his generous assistance, and to Lococo-Mulder Inc., Fine Art Publishers, for the loan of the transparencies used for reproduction.



---

**WILLIAM COBB**

## Three Feet of Water

ISABELLE WAS PACKING WHEN AUNT ROBERTA CALLED and said that if they didn't mind, she was going to join them at the beach house for the weekend. "I'll stay out of your way though. You won't even know I'm there."

Isabelle felt as if she had been sucked out the door of a 747. She fell through clouds, saw snow geese fly past, watched her luggage swirl around her in the sky. "Of course we won't mind," she said. She was so dizzy she had to sit down, holding the phone with both hands. "You'll love Zack," she said. It turned out Roberta's Audi was in the shop so she needed a ride, too. "Maybe I should just rent a car. That's what I should do."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Isabelle. "We'll pick you up at six."

So okay, I can handle this. I can cope, thought Isabelle. She drove. Roberta sat in the front seat, smoking menthols and brushing out her hair, which was the color of motor oil. She cracked the window to let the smoke out and the air rushing in made a heavy, buffeting sound. "Is that too much wind for you, Zack?"

"Not at all. It feels good," he said loudly, from the back seat.

Roberta cleaned the matted hair out of her brush and let that slip out the open window too. She read travel brochures to them. "Tell me where I should go, Zack. Ixtapa? Corfu?" She twisted around and held out the brochures to Zack, holding them fan-shaped, like a poker hand. "Pick one, any one. Give my life some direction."

Zack looked into Isabelle's aunt's blue eyes. With her eyeliner and powder blue eyeshadow, she looked like a night club singer. "I think you should look for adventure in your own backyard," said Zack.

Roberta frowned, and propped her chin up on the back of her seat. "You're no help."

"London, then. Or Paris. Somewhere nicely cliché."

"Izzy's never been to Europe," said Roberta. "Have you, Izzy?"

"Not yet," said Isabelle. She kept her eyes on the road. "I've always wanted to, but I've never had the chance."

"That's sad," said Roberta. She made a pouty face, pooching her lips out at Zack. "I think Louise was always a little too protective of her. Too mother hen-ish."

"I'll take you to Europe," said Zack, looking at Isabelle in the rearview mirror.

"All three of us should go," said Roberta, brightly. "I can be your chaperone. But no funny stuff. Or I'll tell my big sister."

Isabelle sighed and punched a tape into the cassette deck, keeping her eyes on the road. "Is it going to be like this for the rest of the weekend?"

Roberta stared at her. "Is what going to be like what?"

"You know."

"No, I don't. I think we're going to have a wonderful time."

The inside of the car was quiet for a moment, except for the roar of the wind coming in through the cracked window. Roberta had quit brushing her blue-black hair, and now she was letting it hang out the window, trailing behind the car like thick black exhaust.

Roberta was Isabelle's mother's little sister. She was forty-three, but looked thirty-five, and had been married four times. Her first husband, Bill, was a washout. "I hung him out to dry," she used to say. Her second husband, Mitch, made a killing in real estate for a time in Texas, and with that money bought the beach house, a Hobie Cat, and a metallic green ski boat with twin black Mercury outboards that went forty-five miles an hour. At the helm, he looked like Jack Lord in "Hawaii Five-O," with his dark tan, strong jaw, and thick black hair on his chest and back. Isabelle remembered when he used to parade around the beach house in his bikini bathing suits, calling Dallas and Houston on business deals, his hairy chest smelling of coconut oil.

One afternoon Roberta was pulling him with the ski boat and he was slalom-ing, cutting back and forth across the white crests of the boat's wake, the wind pinning Roberta's hair away from her face as she steered to avoid the fishing piers in Tornado Bay, Mitch leaning back and shooting rooster tails and wings of spray into the air. He made her stop so he could put on his trick skis, then, as she gave the engine full throttle, they passed a floating wooden ramp used for ski jumping. Mitch had never jumped. He swung over to the ski jump and launched himself into the air, his legs spread in an awkward V shape, the skis splayed out like giant paddles, and he hit the water in an ugly tumble, legs and skis tangling until Roberta killed the engine.

He had not been wearing a life vest, because, of course, they were for wimps. Roberta circled back to where he had been, waves slapping against the hull, the ski rope cutting a line through the water behind the boat. His skis floated on the surface. She fished them out, and shouted across the rippled gray water. "Mitch, this isn't funny!" she yelled, thinking he was hiding somewhere beneath the waves. She called his name until her voice was hoarse, until finally, she lit a cigarette and just sat there, in the cushioned seat over the ice chest, as the ski boat drifted. A pair of gulls glided above her. Sunlight glistened on the swells. Roberta flicked her cigarette butt and watched it float. After a while, staring at the water, she realized she had no idea where Mitch had fallen, so she returned to the marina and called the police. Three days later his body washed up on Pineapple Beach, his blue limbs tangled in seaweed and jellyfish, several of his fingers bitten off, his eyeballs plucked out by the sea.

Her third husband was a lawyer she met while working out the details of Mitch's estate. They divorced in two years, three months. The fourth husband was one of her third husband's friends (seven months, two weeks). "Love is just a mat-

ter of timing," Roberta told Isabelle, after the last divorce. "And remember, precious. Now is as good a time as any."

The beach house was stuffy and mildewey when they arrived. Isabelle and Zack offered to clean things up a bit. She was dusting and he was vacuuming the living room when Roberta decided they needed a bag of ice for daiquiris. She asked if Zack would drive her to the store. "I bet you're a stock car driver or something, aren't you, Zack."

"I'm a carpenter," said Zack, still holding the vacuum cleaner.

"Carpenter. Stock car driver. What's the difference?"

"It's okay, Zack. I'll finish up here."

Isabelle vacuumed the living room and mopped the kitchen. As she cleaned the cobwebs off the ceiling of the screened porch, she tried to decide if she was in love with Zack or what. She had met him on a flight from Dallas to Portland. He struck up a conversation with her, and explained what he was going to do in Oregon. They had been in the air for over fifteen minutes by this time, when Isabelle interrupted him and said, "But this flight is going to Portland, Maine."

He looked at her for a moment. "You're kidding, right?" He got out his crumpled ticket and smoothed it with his fingers, spreading it atop the tray that folded down from the back of the seat in front of him. She was right. He smiled stolidly and said, "There must have been some mix-up with the travel agent." Isabelle laughed so hard she had to cover her face with her hands. Zack grinned, shaking his head. "You think maybe I should have checked the ticket, right?"

That was two years ago. They had been seeing each other off and on ever since then, but had never slept together. At first Isabelle had been dating a pharmacist and then Zack was involved with some person named Tiffany whom Isabelle never met but knew she wouldn't like. Only recently both of them had become free. Now Isabelle could tell something was going on, because Zack had begun to drag his feet when he left her door at night and often seemed to be staring at her for no reason. She didn't know what to think of this. She knew love should be like a sledge hammer or an anvil that falls from the sky, something that suddenly hits you and knocks you out, but that was just one kind of love, wasn't it? Wasn't there another kind that develops like a slow pneumonia or the latest flu—the Asian, the Hong Kong love—where you meet someone and they breathe on you at a party or something and gradually you start sneezing and coughing, your eyes watering suddenly, people saying Bless You and Gesundheit; then comes that delicious aching feeling when you know this is for real; this is really sickness, with all that entails—the bowls of tomato soup on TV trays, the Days of Our Lives, the saltines—and the next thing you know you're bathed in sweat, tossing and turning in a bedroom with the blinds pulled dark, moaning. Wasn't this how greater loves develop, gradually, over years, an accumulation of café lunches, matinees, telephone calls?

She was standing on a chair, holding a broom upside down, cleaning the cobwebs off the ceiling. They looked like gray thread matted onto the yellow straw of the broom, giving off a wet dusty smell, like old rain you find in a box. A dark spider scabbled out from one corner, heading down the wall, until Isabelle smashed

it with the raspy torus of the broom, fearing black widows. Through the open door behind her, that led into the main part of the beach house, she heard someone knocking on the front door. Isabelle realized that love seemed like a good idea, and she wanted it—really, she did—but she felt as if she had no clue how to begin. She went to get the door.

It was a tall man with gray hair and a cinnamon brown tan, who asked if Roberta was home. He was dressed in a tennis outfit, with sunglasses hanging from a loop around his neck. "Who are you? I've never seen you around here before."

"Roberta is my aunt."

"You look like her little sister. Well anyway. I'm Tim. Can I make myself a drink?"

"Help yourself, Tim."

He knew where the bar was. He twisted a blue plastic tray for some cubes, filled up a glass with two fingers of bourbon. I know I shouldn't be doing this, he thought. This is not something I should be doing. But what the hell. It's a free country. "She called and told me she was coming. But she didn't mention you."

Isabelle squirmed up on a bar stool. "Should she have?"

"No. I'm not surprised, come to think of it. Why wouldn't Roberta mention her gorgeous young niece was coming with her? Go figure."

He was on his second bourbon when Roberta opened the door for Zack, who was carrying two brown paper bags of groceries. "Sorry we were gone so long," said Zack. "It's all Roberta's fault."

"Want to go for a swim?" asked Isabelle.

Zack said he just needed time to change. Roberta hugged Tim and they kissed. "Maybe I'll join you later," she told Isabelle.

"Hey Bobbie, you didn't tell me you had a gorgeous niece. I think I'm going to marry her."

"Don't listen to him," said Roberta, kissing the back of Tim's neck. "He's girl crazy."

"I'm dead serious," he said, and winked at Isabelle.

When Isabelle and Zack were out of sight down the hallway, Zack grabbed her by the belt loop and whispered, "Who's the geezer?"

Isabelle shook her head. "The beach boyfriend, I guess. But doesn't he look exactly like Richard Crenna?"

It was late afternoon on the beach. A flock of curlews culled the shoreline for the small yellow clams that lived in the wet sand at the end of the waves. Isabelle lay on a straw beach mat, on her side, her head propped up by her left hand, watching the curlews. Zack sat on his mat next to her, scraping beach tar off his feet with a piece of driftwood.

"Where does all this gunk come from? You think this is from an oil spill or something?"

"Who knows." Isabelle pulled her straight, dark brown hair off the back of her neck to keep from getting a funny tan, and absentmindedly held it up to her nose and inhaled, filling her lungs with its shampoo smell of vanilla and lilacs.

"Aren't they goofy," said Zack.

"What?"

"The birds."

"Curlews, sweetheart." Isabelle rolled over onto her stomach. Her skin was white in the sunlight, although the small of her back was carpeted with tiny hairs. "My mom always thought there was something hopeful and sweet about them. She figured any world that tolerated a bird with such a ridiculous beak couldn't be all bad."

Isabelle was twenty-seven years old and still lived at home with her mother, who had divorced Isabelle's father fifteen years before and never remarried. Isabelle secretly believed that her mother envied Roberta's frequent affairs, and that she lived vicariously by talking to her sister often on the phone. And Izzy sometimes wondered if she had too much of her mother's blood. She'd been a history major in college and was thinking about going back to graduate school, but she just couldn't muster the enthusiasm for being a student again. She dreaded the thought of the classrooms full of dweebs, professors with blackboard chalk on the back of their jackets, research papers on the Dreyfus affair or Catherine de' Medici. She spent most of her time reading, going to restaurants with Zack or other friends, and watching movies on her mom's VCR. She lived on the second floor, had her own balcony and stairwell, and a swimming pool with snorkle, mask, and fins. What else could she ask for?

"Did you know that I've had these sneakers since 1983?" said Zack. He picked up his leather Nikes and tapped them upside down, trying to get the sand out. "They're my buddies. My pals."

"You're a fascinating man, Zack McCloskey. One might even say brilliant."

Zack thought for a moment, then nodded. "This is true." He continued to stare at her, because of her eyes. Her irises were amber, and because she had taken off her sunglasses, her pupils had shrunk to tiny black dots in the center, showing the crystalline radii inside, like topaz.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" asked Isabelle.

"Nothing," he said. He stretched his legs out and wiggled his toes, leaned back on his arms, and looked in the direction of the beach house. "Mayday mayday," he said, in a low voice. "Aunt and mid-life crisis at ten o'clock."

Isabelle tied her bikini strings, sat up, and put her sunglasses on. Roberta and Tim were coming toward them, carrying towels, Tim carefully holding a drink. They walked up without saying anything, until their shadows stretched over Isabelle and Zack.

"We just came down here to watch you two make love," said Tim.

Roberta slapped his shoulder with the back of her hand, and shook her head. "His idea of humor." She spread out her towel and took off her robe. She wore a black one piece; her body was muscular and slim. Zack shaded his eyes from the sun, holding his calloused hand above him, and watched Roberta. I bet she's a volcano in the sack, he thought. And I gotta lotta lava love locked up inside me.

Roberta pushed her long black hair off her shoulders and said, "I love the ocean. It reminds me of Marlon Brando in 'Mutiny on the Bounty.'"

"I'm going for a swim," said Isabelle. She stood up and pinched her bathing suit bottom, pulling it into place.

"Watch out for sting rays," said Tim. "Step on one of those babies and they jab their tail right into you." He took a sip of his drink. "Then you ride twenty miles screaming to the hospital with that barb in your leg."

Isabelle took off her sunglasses and tucked them into her towel. "I'll keep my eyes peeled," she said, then walked towards the water.

"And don't forget," said Roberta. "Most shark attacks occur in three feet of water."

But instead of going into the water Isabelle walked down the beach. The sun was low in the sky behind her, its light faintly orange on the whitecaps of the waves. She watched seagulls catching wind and hovering in it, watched them as they glided to the sand, with their beady black eyes and their spread webbed feet. She walked in the shallows, where flecks of floating sea foam cast shadows on the brown sand beneath. After about a mile she came upon a sea turtle stranded at the end of the waves. It was motionless, and its eyes were closed. The shell had a heavy ridge down the center, and a fluid pattern of hexagrams flowed out to the sides. She sat and watched it for several minutes, until Zack came up behind her. She waved to him to kneel down, not to scare it, and put one finger on her lips. "Shhhhhh," she whispered. "It's sleeping."

They sat quietly, and Isabelle softly told Zack that sea turtles lived incredibly long lives, over two hundred years maybe, and this one had probably swum thousands of miles to get there, and was probably bushed. Didn't it look like a dinosaur or something?

"I think he's dead," said Zack. "He's not moving."

"He's not dead. He's just sleeping, isn't he?"

"I don't know. Seems pretty comatose to me." Zack reached over and touched the shell with one finger. When it didn't respond he moved closer and pushed the turtle, rocking it. "Wake up, Mr. Turtle. Time to go to work."

They both sat there for a moment on their haunches, looking at the dead turtle. "I wonder if we could perform mouth to mouth resuscitation on it," said Zack. "I heard of someone doing it to an iguana once."

"This is terrible," said Isabelle. "Doesn't he just look like he's asleep? Couldn't he just be taking a nap?"

"I don't think so."

Isabelle didn't speak when they walked down the beach. Zack put his arm around her and kissed her temple, shook her a little bit to try to get her to look at him, but she wouldn't take her eyes off the sand. She concentrated on following their line of footprints, paralleling the crisscross tread of a jeep that had driven by after them. Roberta and Tim were gone. The flock of curlews was still near the spot of beach where their towels lay, picking at the shoreline, while seagulls floated smoothly on the currents of hazy air above the salt grass, which grew like thinning hair upon the dunes.

They ate at Captain Billy's, the same dockside seafood restaurant that Isabelle had been going to since she was fourteen, when her Aunt Roberta had first bought the beach house. Its sign was a huge facade of a sailing ship, with the name Captain

Billy's written across the bow, with clumsily painted blue and white waves splashing up at the waterline, and dolphins jumping out of the curly plywood sea.

The wind had come up during the evening. Isabelle and Zack sat on the back deck area, where colorful, triangular flags upon the railing popped in the stiff breeze. The sailboat docks of Mustang Island were behind them, and the light along the docks and on buoys glittered and wiggled in wavy lines across the water. A huge butterscotch moon hung low on the horizon. Ropey brown nets with green glass balls were stretched across the back wall of the restaurant, and seashell wind-chimes clonked heavily in the wind. Isabelle made Zack promise not to order shrimp, because the nets killed the turtle. He couldn't use Heinz ketchup either, because Heinz owned Starkist, and Starkist was one of the main killers of all the dolphins caught in the tuna nets of the Pacific.

Zack looked lost for a moment, staring at the laminated menu spread before him. "Jeez," he said. "I hope the french fry and cole slaw companies didn't do anything wrong."

"This is serious, Zack. I think you need to become more environmentally aware."

While they were eating a sleek white cabin cruiser pulled up to the dock, with Roberta at the helm, and after Tim tied it off, they walked up to Isabelle and Zack's table. "Mind if we join you?" asked Roberta. "We're being horrible bores but we can't help it. You know how I love their snapper, Izzy."

"I think they're mad at us," said Tim.

Isabelle said that was all wrong. They weren't mad, and yes, of course they could join them for dinner. "Only you can't order shrimp or use ketchup."

"Great," said Tim. "Is that so we can look crustaceans in the eye without feeling guilty?"

"I wouldn't use ketchup anyway," said Roberta. She lit a menthol cigarette and blew an icy blue cloud of it into the air. "It's low class."

"I think we need a drink," said Tim. "To loosen up our bones. Hear this?" He flapped his hand above the table, wagging it back and forth from the wrist. "Hear that rattle?"

"Like a duck chewing dominoes," said Zack.

"That's the spirit. A couple more drinks and maybe you'll come up with something original."

"Timothy. Precious. Would you try to be sweet, for once?"

Tim was wearing a pink polo shirt and khaki shorts. His tanned jaw and chin looked clean shaven and braced with aftershave, but the rest of his face sagged, his lower eyelids drooping to reveal a rim of red skin and inflamed capillaries in his eyes. The grooves around his mouth and nose were as deep as battle scars. He looked around in an exaggerated manner at the other tables on the deck and said, "Where's our waiter? Where's our food? I'm starving."

"We haven't ordered yet," said Roberta. "Would you cool it?"

He stared at her for a moment, breathing heavily. A dense purple fog filled the air in front of his face. He tried to think his way through it. Whistlestop Whistlestop. I knew a man Bojangles and he'd dance for you. For drinks and beers. Lord hold on here the deck is spinning spinning. Turn the music up I know that

song. Silver hair and baggy pants and something something. His dog up and died. Up and died. Tim burped loudly. He rubbed his eyes with his thick, squarish fingers. His face turned a deep red. "I don't feel so hot," he said.

Roberta stood up and took her purse off the back of her chair. "Tim, I think you need to go home."

"Thatsa good idea," he mumbled, and tried to stand up, but staggered, brushing his hand across his face as if he'd walked into a cobweb, then he lurched, one meaty arm jolting the woman sitting behind him, and grabbing the tablecloth, he fell backwards, overturning the drinks and knocking plates and silverware onto the wooden floor, scattering a wicker basket of plastic-wrapped Melba Toast crackers across his chest. Someone cursed for a moment, then everyone whispered as Zack and Roberta got out of their seats, and Isabelle watched, stunned, as a spilled glass of iced tea dripped onto her white dress.

"Tim? Are you okay?" asked Roberta. He started retching weakly. His legs were tangled in the chair. A waitress came up and struggled to move the table back and free him from it, but the people at the table next to them were staring and slow to scoot back. A busboy squatted beside Tim and Roberta and said, "Hey man, what's going on?"

A few of the other diners stood to get a better view of Tim's body, but no one got up to help. Roberta told the busboy to call 911 and held her hand against Tim's forehead. "I think he just had too much to drink," said Zack. Isabelle noticed the glass windows of the inner dining room were full of staring faces, their lips moving without sound. For a moment all she could hear was the sickening sound of Tim's retching. As they waited for the ambulance, the waiters brought out food to the other tables. "How are we supposed to eat?" someone asked. After a moment, they heard the sound of a siren wailing. A vein bulged down the middle of Tim's livid forehead as he breathed roughly, his chest heaving. "I think you better go on the wagon, buster," said Roberta. The ambulance people arrived and loaded him onto a stretcher, having to move the tables aside to make space. As he was being carried away Tim said, "Where's Isabelle? Isabelle, are you there? I want to marry Isabelle." Some of the other diners laughed and clapped.

Isabelle, Zack, and Roberta drove home to the beach house. Roberta apologized the whole way, insisting that nothing had ever happened to her like that before, that it had been possibly the most humiliating episode in her life. She knew they must think she's a terrible person to associate with drunkards and dissolutes like that Tim person.

"It's not your fault," said Zack. "You didn't make him drink. We're all responsible for our own actions here."

"Exactly," said Isabelle.

They turned on the ten o'clock news in time for the weather and sports. Roberta called the hospital and was told that Tim was already asleep, and tomorrow morning they were going to run some tests on him. Isabelle sank back into the soft cushions of the living room couch. "What a catastrophe," she said. "I hope he doesn't die or anything. He looked awful."

"We'll visit him in the morning," said Roberta. She opened the refrigerator door and brushed against Zack as she looked in. The beautiful thing about men is they all want the same thing, she thought. At least the ones that are worth their salt. If salt is the right word. Maybe not. Maybe sweat. Izzy has no idea who she's

playing with. This ape will scream and throw his bowl at the bars by the time I'm finished with him. Sorry Charlie. Starkist want tuna that taste good, not tuna with good taste. Roberta pushed her hair out of her face, making it stand stiffly away from her forehead and temples, and yawned. "I know this doesn't sound appropriate, but I need a drink after that."

"Me too," said Zack.

Isabelle closed her eyes and sighed. "I feel like I've been hit by a truck." Her skin was deliciously warm from sunburn, and still smelled of Noxzema. By the time the late show started she was asleep.

Roberta and Zack finished a bottle of Stolichnaya they found in the freezer and started in on the Cutty Sark. They leaned close to each other when talking, to keep from waking Isabelle. Zack chipped at the bag of ice with a butter knife and Roberta said, "Shhhh, softly," putting her hand on his waist. "Let's go outside to look at the moon," she whispered.

They held hands as they left the house and passed through the deep sand to the sea. The wind blew in off the waves. Zack stood behind Roberta and cupped her breasts. Her hair, whipped by the wind, wrapped his head in a black cocoon.

Later, Isabelle woke and sat up on the couch. She pushed her hair out of her face and blinked, trying to remember everything. The TV screen hissed. The lights were still on in the kitchen, but someone had turned off the lamps in the living room and had put a blanket around her. The hallway to the bedrooms was dark. She stood up and walked dreamily—barefoot, in her strapless white calf-length dress—to the sliding glass doors, which were closed, with a swatch of batik curtain caught in the crack.

She slid the door open and stepped onto the wooden deck. The wind had died and she could hear the waves. She left the deck and walked through the deep cool sand to the beach, thinking about Zack, what she felt for him. She knew this: she knew that sometimes she couldn't help but smile when he was around; she knew she told her old friends, who lived in other cities, all about him, and insisted they had to meet him; she knew the sudden feeling of recognizing his voice on the answering machine, the way he would start talking without saying Hi or who he was, and how she would rewind the tape and listen to his message a second time, just to hear his sound again. If this wasn't love, what did the word mean?

The moon was high, full and white in the sky, its light shining on the waves. Suddenly Isabelle noticed, in the damp sand near the wave's end, scrape marks on the beach, as if they had been dug by some heavy creature scabbling in the sand. She realized it must have been a sea turtle, a beautiful sea turtle dragging its heavy armored body up the beach to lay its eggs, and she stood there, smiling, digging her toes into the cold wet sand, wanting to find Zack, wake him and tell him, Look. I tried to tell you earlier but I couldn't say it, couldn't find the words. But look at this, look all around you. The world is really a beautiful, beautiful place.

WALTER PAVLICH

Sadness

I ONCE ASKED A BOY at a farm school in Oregon to tell me a lie. I could see perplexity, and rain in his face. Then he answered

*"I am not retarded."*

About his same age I remember pausing on the sidewalk, several blocks from home, with this determination:

*"I am both retarded and adopted."*

This was years before the romantic sadness of adolescence. I figured my family was just being nice to me, letting me eat with them, pretending their boy and girl were my brother and sister.

Evidence mounted:

The father had me hang from a pull-up bar in the basement. His boy was so much taller.

I was the only one who needed glasses. The mother wept in the waiting room, in the elevator, and once again on the bus ride home.

My eyeteeth flared into innocent fangs. They had me press them with forefinger and thumb during trips to the beach, while reading, at the minor league ball park.

Eventually I adopted *them*.

Their sadness could be mine.

---

**EDWIN GALLAHER**

## One Room, Many Voices

IN HIS 1989 BOOK *Beyond the Boundaries: African Literature and Literary Theory*, Mineke Schipper stresses what he calls a polysystemic approach. He argues that conventional history has not recorded or realized the influence of adventitious, outsider elements upon its "canon." Nor has conventional history established with any veracity the ongoing dialogue between these opposed constituencies as they shape human culture. "Fresh Visions/New Voices: Emerging African-American Artists in Texas" (September 13-November 29, 1992, at the Glassell School of Art in Houston) not only celebrates the influence of canonical elements on "outsider" contemporary art, but also makes apparent the ongoing dialogue between the canon and other non-canonical elements, and acknowledges, without the usual special pleading, the myriad voices and visions available in the realm.

A quartet of pieces by Annette Lawrence, for instance, exemplifies the difficulty of positing a value system without adding another voice, no matter how private or arcane, to the chorus. Entitled *Drawing Blood*, these four pieces are merely totemic representations of a convoluted exercise involving menses, the cycles of the moon, and numerology. As a piece of visual art it isn't much to look at (fine vortices of graphite and blood on brown paper); what is stressed is the entire intellectual construct *behind* the piece and the symbolic use of a woman's blood: this emphasis on process gives the artistic results a secondary, or even a tertiary importance. The lengths to which this work goes to construct an ontology—the ontology of a woman, specifically an African-American woman—is crucial and heartbreaking. The oddness of its method and the specificity of its materials are metaphors for the cultural repression of women's sexuality. The piece draws from a late 1960's conceptualist aesthetic, a post-Cagean but pre-Soho presentation of the work of art as being nothing but idea, pure and simple, articulated with little concern for visceral or bodily pleasures. Other pieces in the show—such as Collette Veasey's *Isis* and *Shades of Oneness*—seem also to lean upon this aesthetic without acknowledgement (although in the case of Veasey's work, not nearly as successfully). This resurrection of a pared-down aesthetic, which I have seen in other recent art exhibitions, is only a natural response to the last twelve years or so of neo-expressionistic work.

In the brilliantly unresolved symbolism of Ron Smith's paintings, we can see how the self's heritage and integrity can be compromised by the onslaught and distortion of nomenclature and even self-definition. Using bird and bird-mask imagery, Smith presents—as many of the works in this exhibition do—the actual



Michael Charles, *Revelation*  
acrylic and graphite on paper, 37" x 28"  
courtesy of Barnes/Blackman Galleries, Houston, TX



Ron Smith, *Untitled*  
acrylic on canvas, 38" x 36"

establishment of the self amidst the conflicting voices our society now inflicts on all of us with regularity. But instead of positing this struggle abstractly, or perhaps becoming yet another outraged voice hurled into the void, the war is waged right on the canvas. Using an enigmatic imagery and a sense of composition that looks as if the picture plane were seen through a prism, Smith paints the cataclysm and martyrdom of an outsider's soul with polished refinement; his subject, the self, is lost in paint. The loopy iconography and ornamentation of James Bettison's work (where fishes and hearts are mixed with cartoon shapes straight out of Saturday morning television), and the intoxicating paranoia of conflicting cosmologies that reach from beneath the white-washed surfaces of David McGee's paintings, also suggest how ultimately post-modern and cross-cultural concerns almost collapse beneath the weight of their own self-regard.

The work of Bert Samples is a bit more aesthetically pleasing and certainly more semantically satisfying. As presented here, Samples makes excellent use of the multiple iconographies available to the modern artist. Utilizing a sprightly, blues-influenced figuration done in a muted palette of ochres, off-whites, and melancholy bronzes, Samples often juxtaposes an archetypal African mythology with a "Western" materialist iconography. Unlike most juxtapositions, however, the results are not startling: Samples establishes an equivocal dialogue between the two modes of symbolic representation that seems inevitable. What is also refreshing is Samples' anachronistic concession to the ornamental. Long scoffed at by high-minded art critics, the ornamental gestures here are a reminder of the place of ornamentation as the cornerstone of the artistic impulse.

Many of the other artists included in "Fresh Visions/New Voices" are equally adept in manipulating multiple symbolic schema, and the art at times is only too ready to exploit the conflicting culture-codes confronting African-American artists living in a predominately white patriarchal culture. Tierney Malone's *Cream of the Crop*, an elegy with milk cartons, crosses, and bullet shells, is a moving spiritual vision of the wrath of empire, colonialism, and Western missionary history. His *Little Secrets*, however, seems trite by comparison. A stack of famous books by African-Americans restrained by ropes and piled seven feet high on the gallery floor, *Little Secrets* is one of those broad, portentous gestures whose didacticism is a reminder of how absolutely tyrannical any point of view can be. In other words, the art, like much political art, manifests the very situation it protests. Similarly, regardless of how magical and gosh-darn truthful Michael Charles' paintings of cartoonish, black homunculi overwhelmed by Ionian columns may be, the repetition of the motif over several paintings dulls rather than heightens the cumulative effect. And the disjointed, arbitrarily arranged sculpture of Steve Jones expresses a justified outrage but, unlike many of the more successful pieces in the exhibition, is unable to propose a solution.

The important works in this show do just that. They propose a solution by accommodating the possibility of many solutions. At its best, "Fresh Visions/New Voices" entices the viewer to accept multiple aspects of the American symbolic landscape, while acknowledging an African heritage that is distinctly a part of American culture. Like Ike E. Morgan's multiple renderings of George Washington, each pass at a subject elucidates yet conceals a little bit of the subject's essence. And each elucidation seems to point to a distinctly African-American view of American culture as it reveals the depths and passions of African

art: mutated, perfected in exile. Morgan's *George Washington Series*, for instance, not only says something strange and wonderful about our country's use of myth and that myth's inaccessibility to the African-American, but it also relays the humor and pathos of African-bred festival arts from Harlem to Haiti, and is straightforward in the tradition of African art at the turn of the century, where a new iconography of the encroaching white world is appropriated without pause or condensation into the established modes of folk representation.

If I have a complaint with "Fresh Visions/New Voices," it is in the dichotomous intellectual framework foisted upon the exhibition by its co-curators Joseph Havel and Rick Lowe. Also, despite its title, "Fresh Visions/New Voices" presents many artists (mostly male) who have been around the Texas art scene for a long time. One can imagine almost the same show with the same artists being done five years ago with the same sense of urgency.

Nevertheless, the exhibition is a success. Each artist in "Fresh Visions/New Voices" seems content to have his or her pieces show multiple intents, contrapuntal realities, in the guise of a whole. But upon closer examination, the work is so charged with conflicting lattices of sign/signifier pairings, with conventions of typical artistic referent and meaning placed in abject juxtaposition, that the entire classical notion of "wholeness" is found more often than not to be inadequate. What is promoted here, in a very small but extremely tidy way, is an aesthetic that could and rightly should embrace multivocal concerns, concerns that express with exuberance the contradictions which define America, how our heritage and identity (once a given) have fallen away, dissipated in a hail of disjointed conventional symbolisms that no longer work. Perhaps within the confines of this exhibition, we find—torn from all its attendant regalia—the narrow space where the soul now resides.



Ike E. Morgan, *George Washington Series*  
pastel on paper, 35" x 24", collection of Jim Pirtle



David McGee, *Welcome to the Tropics*  
enamel on tarp, 6' x 8'

JON DAVIS

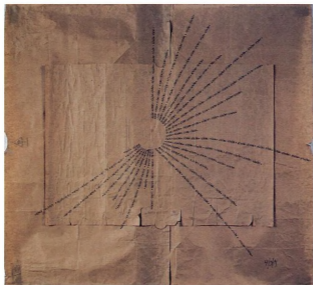
## Marriage

IN CHAGALL'S "BIRTHDAY," the man floating nearly off the canvas twists his neck impossibly to complete the shape suggested by the woman's face. She holds a bouquet lightly in her hand. The rest of the scene is domestic: A butter knife, two plates, a coin purse; behind them, a bed, tapestries, perhaps a mirror. But she is leaving the room. That is the first secret of the painting. Though she appears to walk on the red floor, she is already tilted impossibly forward. He snakes above her like smoke or mist drawn along by the gravity of her leaving. She drifts toward the window, toward the angular repetitions of the dawn that is just beginning outside. Or maybe it's a well-lit night. This is 1923, and lights are coming on all around the world. But that's not the point. His eyes are closed, his arms, hidden, useless. She's pushing off lightly with the toe of her right foot. He has closed his eyes to kiss her. Her eyes are wide, her gaze drawn to the lights dazzling the gray sky. She has already relinquished the flowers. The painting is called "Birthday," and they are drifting like balloons toward the future. In a moment he will bump the window sash, crumple to the floor and awake. She will slip through the crack and be gone. And that is the other secret of the painting

and why Chagall stopped them with his art.  
He will never fall now. She will never  
drift off. The painting concerns marriage.  
That is why, love, I woke early  
and wrote this while you slept.



Bert Samples, *Her Daughters Mournfully Injesture Dance in the Elysian Tradition*, gouache on paper, 25" x 30"



Annette Lawrence, *Drawing Blood*  
graphite and blood on paper



Annette Lawrence, *One Love*  
Photograph (original in color)

---

E.G. BURROWS

## Elsinore

A SMALL THING, that piggyback,  
years when there was laughter  
in court and Yorick,  
the better father, horsed him,  
squealing, the real play  
within a play like Otto  
waltzing around the greenhouse.

The whirl is what we miss,  
the dizziness, the prick of heels.  
Surely, I carried you, my sons,  
though the rooms were small  
and there were no flagstones  
nor battle flags on the walls.

Did you learn falling then,  
how to slip from a father's  
shoulders, first gratefully,  
later to mourn?  
Tossed on a mound, the skull  
says nothing, but a fool's up,  
the next child in line  
riding until the kingdom falls.



James Bettison, *Prologue to Love (Gurl Dog)*  
mixed media on wood, 63" x 88"  
collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX



James Bettison, *Blind Date*  
courtesy of New Art Gallery, Houston, TX

LUCIA NEVAI

## The Good Luck Cake

THE DRIVER OF THE PROPANE GAS TRUCK let Ardor off at the north end of the town of Plaquemine, Louisiana. He limped toward the Mississippi with his cane, dragging the left leg. His strawberry-gray hair was combed back from his forehead in oily ridges that held the imprint of the comb. His face looked combed too. The skin lay in folds on his forehead and under the eyes; the folds fanned out like parentheses around the corners of his mouth. He was old, but not wise.

The truck had bad shocks. He'd ridden straight through from the Veterans Home in Houma. The concussion of the ride still echoed in his leg bones. All his energy went into the leg. It had been shattered in World War II. The Army doctors had pieced it together with metal plates, pins, pegs—whatever they had handy. Every day since then, the hardware hurt. He was nothing but a limp.

Ardor stopped in front of his sister's cottage. When she first married, he'd visited her here. Her cottage backed right up to the Mississippi River then. Now, there was a wall of grass, the levee, blocking the river from view. And the tree was gone. The cypress in the side yard. All that was left of it was a stump five feet in diameter. Ardor hated it when they left a tree like that. Better to go to the extra trouble of bulldozing the whole root-ball out of the ground. Better to forget the tree and the shade it made and start over.

A girl walked up as if she were expecting him. "This is my square dance skirt," she announced. She twirled around a few times. The skirt spun straight out, revealing plump legs in modish, patterned tights. Her long blue-black hair spun out like the skirt. She stopped twirling. Her face was shaped like a valentine; her skin was English bone-white. Her eyes were a cool wolf blue. She folded her arms across her chest, hiding promising tweaks of breasts. "You are Ellie's brother from Houma, aren't you, sir," she said with respect. The familiarity Ardor could have predicted; the respect caught him off guard.

"I am," he said. "And you are?"

"Freda Perret. I added on to Ellie's letters."

Ardor wondered what Freda Perret had been writing to him. The last few years, he'd been throwing away his sister's letters without reading them. They were all the same and they made him feel bad. They began with a list of which flowering trees were in bloom, continued with joyous descriptions of miracles of abstinence occurring in the parish, and concluded with love and forgiveness for his withdrawal, silence and bitterness. Women could sit in their kitchens and believe

anything they wanted. What they believed didn't apply. "How do you do," he said, leaning on his good leg and shaking her hand.

"Just fine, thank you." Freda was giving him a significant look. Some reaction on his part was required.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked.

"I expect you *forgot*, sir," Freda said. Her manner was nurse-like, testing his faculties.

"Forgot what?"

Freda was pleased. Her features grew luminous with sympathy, which had the effect of making her seem to move closer. "It's the amnesia, isn't it," she said, her voice lowered confidentially—the sacred word was safe with her. What romantic war tales had Ardor's sister told this little neighbor girl?

"What'd I forget?"

Freda took his hand in both of hers. She coached him. "Ellie's daughter, Dolly, your niece, found a nice, clean Catholic nursing home for Ellie in Baton Rouge last year. On account of the two falls she had."

"Oh, no." His voice was a croak far back in his throat. He'd bummed the ride with the gas man today to ask for four hundred dollars. He'd lost it over the past few months playing cards. He couldn't go back to Houma without it. He'd be assaulted by the psycho in the wheelchair with the eight-inch Bowie Knife. *Why don't you just roll over and die*, he asked himself. He'd been asking himself this for forty years, ever since he got shot in the leg on the hill in France. The answer that came was always the same, *because I just don't feel like it yet*.

Ardor stared at the white, square cottage. It shimmered in the heat, threatening to disappear altogether. He needed a small miracle, the kind his sister was constantly reporting as the direct result of the prayers of the people around here.

"Ellie prayed you'd visit," Freda said. "I told her you would. I told her if she prayed that hard, you would. She had nothing but faith in you. She defended you constantly to your other sister."

"My other sister." Ardor had forgotten about her. He wondered if she could be squeezed for the four hundred. "Where is she living now?"

"On Bayou Teche."

Still on Bayou Teche—she couldn't be squeezed. "Who lives here now?" Ardor asked. Somebody owed him something for his trouble.

"A boy named Kenwood," Freda said. "And his younger brother, Robert, who's my age. Robert knows all about you."

Ardor bent over to rest on the cane. "You're looking peaked, sir. Would you like a cold drink?"

"I suppose."

He followed her across the road to her house. She skipped ahead, then ran back to walk with him at his agonizingly slow pace. "My mother is up the street, decorating the church. There's a farewell party this evening for a boy named Mark. He's in the Army. He's going to the Middle East. My mother spent three and half hours making the frosting."

The kitchen in her house was dark and cool. "Sit anywhere," she said. He picked a chair with its back to the wall, and straightened out his bad leg to give the knee a rest.

Freda poured him a glass of iced tea. She stood close to him, her knees touching his good knee, watching him drink. He drank with disappointment—tea was tea. His eyes swept the cabinets over the refrigerator and the range—good places for liquor to be kept.

As if she could read his mind, she said, "How are you doing with *it all*, sir?" *It all* was how Ellie used to refer to his drinking problem.

"Not well," he admitted.

"Don't you worry about it," she said. Her voice caught him up like a safety net, a sudden overall touch. She was so close and her eyes were so blue. He felt a pang: if only he had a girl to talk to now and then.

He smiled. "You're kind," he said.

"I have a weight problem," she confided. She moved to his side, resting a hand on his shoulder. "My boyfriend told me if I don't go to Weight Watchers, he's going to stop being my boyfriend and start being my cousin's boyfriend. Isn't that mean? He's in a wheelchair. He's got a muscular disease. I would never expect a person in a wheelchair to be mean, would you?"

"The meanest ones are the ones in chairs," Ardor said. "I've never seen anything like it."

"We had an intruder," she said. "Two weeks ago Tuesday. Looking in the bathroom window at my mother while she took a bath. She called Robert's father—." In deference to Ardor's possible amnesia, she explained again. "Robert is the boy that lives in Ellie's house now—and Robert's father came over here with a shotgun. The man ran down the levee. That kind of thing has never before happened in Plaquemine. Now, my mother locks the door at night and instead of leaving her grocery money on the table here, she hides it in that vase."

Ardor woke up. It was a blue-green vase, very classical and female in shape. It sat on the counter next to the wall phone. He could feel the presence of bills inside, soft, woven, genuine U.S. Treasury notes. How many, he wondered. It started with that, simply curiosity.

"Would you like to see the cake?" she asked.

"What cake?"

"The cake my mother made for Mark, the boy who's going to the Middle East." On the table was a rectangular cake pan covered with aluminum foil. Freda pried up the edges of the foil with care. "You should have seen the vomity colors she threw out before she came up with these. She borrowed a pair of shorts from Robert to copy the pattern."

She lifted off the foil.

Ardor leaned forward to look. The cake was a terrible mistake. It was frosted to look like camouflage: awful amoeba-like shapes in three awful shades of olive drab. Even worse, the words "Good Luck" were written in white frosting on top of the awful green.

Ardor grimaced and twisted away. "Goddamn bastards," he said. "I wouldn't show the boy that."

Freda's features grew crisp, her voice crisper. "It took her nearly a day to make it. Three and a half hours on the frosting alone. She threw out one whole batch and started over to get it right." She replaced the foil cover indignantly.

Ardor growled. They could sit in their kitchens and believe anything they wanted. He had to urinate. "Where's the lavatory?" he grumbled.

With her entire arm, she pointed disdainfully to the bathroom door off the kitchen. Ardor organized himself to stand up, crooking the bad leg at the knee, pushing himself away from the wall to get up the momentum to rise. Someone knocked at the screen door, a little black boy. Freda ran outside. "Robert," she said, "guess who's here? Mr. Ardor Landy. He came to visit Ellie. He has *amnesia*."

Ardor used the toilet, washed his face and hands, brushed his teeth with someone's blue toothbrush, combed his oily hair with someone's black comb. He lit a cigarette and smoked it, leaning against the window frame, looking out at the still, stagnant water of the bayou.

Thirty years ago when he was here, the bayou was busy with river traffic, barges, trawlers, small fishing vessels. They came to Plaquemine from serious distances on inland waterways; all were heading for New Orleans. It was something to see, the way they lined up and waited for a turn in the deep, iron coffin of the lock. The rising water lifted them up. Boom, they were released into the high, wide brightness of the Mississippi. Ellie's husband had come to Plaquemine to operate the lock. That was the kind of job Ardor understood. There were big wheels, interlocking gears, great iron gates, loud whistles. There was a system, based on mechanics. No wonder they'd been a happy couple.

Now, the lock was closed. The levee blocked access to the Mississippi. The bayou ended, boom, like that, in a forty-foot-high wall of grass. It was the way things ended in nightmares, bridges emptied into steel cages, stairs rising into thin air. They should have done it differently, so you weren't left thinking about the way it used to be. It was the same problem as the tree.

Ardor leaned his forehead against the windowpane, then pulled back distastefully, remembering the intruder. This had to be the window. He flicked the butt into the toilet and left without flushing.

He had four hours to kill until the gas man came back through.

Freda was standing outside, her back to the screen door, talking to Robert. "Mr. Landy had a flashback when he saw the cake," she was saying.

Ardor limped up to the vase. He stuck in his hand. It was a good-sized wad. He pulled it out. Ones mostly, a wrinkled five, three twenties. He slipped the stash into his deep pocket. It wasn't enough to save him from the psycho, but he didn't care. They shouldn't be looking at things with rose-colored glasses, these women. He'd go into town and drink, use up the cash fast, before they found out and asked for it back. Let the psycho slit his throat tonight; let him bleed to death in his sleep. He might get a good night's rest. Besides, somebody ought to finish off what they started in France. It was the same problem as the tree.

**SUSAN WOOD****Harmonica**

MY MOTHER'S VOICE HUMS ACROSS THE WIRES, the music of remembrance, and she's back there now, West Texas, 1926, where twice a day my grandfather drives the flat, sweat-stained road, Del Rio to San Angelo, and back. "Old Spanish Trails Stage," he calls it, this jump-seat Buick built for seven and on the front two red flags heraldic in the desert wind. Today the housewives and ranch hands, the oil field workers he ferries back and forth fill it with the steady rhythm of their talk—the sick and the well, the gusher that just came in, the farm that's lost or gained. He hardly hears. He's somewhere else, his long arm tapping out a syncopated beat against the black car's dusty door, his big ears burning with those tunes. Midday, time to kill between his runs, he's taken up ballroom dancing, surprising the teacher how lightly his large frame dips and sways. Waltz, fox trot, Charleston, soon he'll master them all, she says. Evenings, he rolls up the living room rug and practices with his daughter. Propped on pillows, his wife watches from her screened-porch bed and laughs until she's wracked by coughs again, bright spot of blood like the imprint of a heart painted on the handkerchief she presses to her mouth. Last year he sold his trombone to pay the doctor bills. What he misses most is the way he swept it through the air, cutting a wide swath of song. "Imagine," my mother says, "as if the trombone hadn't been enough, the day he brought home the harmonica!" This is how he was, she's telling me, not the discordant man I knew, whose only melody became the jangle of coins his thrifty second wife had made him save, his only rhythm

the metronome of talk of all that's out of tune.  
And this is how he is, who pulls the harmonica  
from its leather case and cradles the polished wood  
against his lips and kisses out song after song,  
asking them to guess the names. They never can.  
Finally, his wife—she has four years  
to live—laughs and says he should  
announce his numbers before he plays them.  
Furious and red-eared, he locks himself inside  
the rolled-up windows of his hearse-like car.  
“Alright,” he says to the stifling air, “I’ll play  
alone!” Beside him on the horsehair seat, I tap  
my feet in time, while one by one the lights go out  
in his small house, and he plays on and on  
till morning, trying to make a kind of music of  
his pain, to hold the dying note of something beautiful.

SUSAN WOOD

## Luck

FUNNY, HOW THE WEEK YOU LEFT I opened  
the book, another British mystery  
meant to make me forget for a moment  
how much I'd lost, and read  
the first sentence: "The thirteenth of May  
is the unluckiest day of the year."  
Funny, I'd thought it luckiest that day  
I saw you in the bar, in black, your red hair  
lit like a sparkler. In the smoky light  
your eyes were leaves of every season:  
green-going-gold-going brown. Still,  
after all that's happened, even now  
I wouldn't take it back, my heart  
like a locked box on its red velvet  
pillow. Funny, I think of one  
on a faded *retablo* I saw once,  
the Sacred Heart rising up with its little  
angels' wings. Aren't all hearts sacred?  
You turned the key and let mine loose  
in the world! Now I'll put in that box  
some things you once gave me: a paper  
*Zozobra* the Indians burn to chase away  
gloom, and the one they call  
Keeper of Dreams, a carved bear  
on a silver chain, and love,  
though it only lasts if we're lucky.

---

SUSAN WOOD

Astral Bodies

HAPPY IN LOVE, we say  
we're "starry-eyed," although in pain  
we see them, too, and aren't they

beautiful somehow, a thousand stars  
shooting across the eyes'  
night sky? So love stuns us

with its explosion, the heart  
so full it's bursting, that painful  
pleasure. We wouldn't have it

any other way, although its fate  
must be to break in time,  
the way a star's long dead

before we see the light. Aren't  
all lovers "star-crossed"? The trick's  
not Fate's—it's just a Law of Nature.

Take you and me, for instance. Tonight  
we love to burn, our bodies making  
so much heat and light we're blinded

by them and can forget whatever burns  
burns up, and out. Presently  
we'll rise and raise

the shade, the harsh morning pressing  
its palms to our temples, the stars  
going out one by one.

## A Conversation With Amy Hempel

*Moderated by Mary Robison and sponsored by the University of Houston Creative Writing Program—November 10, 1992.*

Mary Robison: You all know that Amy Hempel has two very highly acclaimed short story collections, *Reasons to Live* and *At the Gates of the Animal Kingdom*, published by Knopf, and that she's in the *Norton Anthology*. She is the favorite of the family, I would say, the youngest child of the so-called minimalists, although I think both of us would like to—

Amy Hempel: —retire that term—

MR: if it ever had any utility at all. I think of you more as—this may be your term—a *precisionist*. It may be Ray Carver's term.

AH: I think it is Carver's.

MR: You keep a very sharp focus on what you choose to frame. One story in the second collection, "The Harvest," describes the precision. You put the process of writing through the seventeen directions the story could have gone, jumping up on all the reader's expectations, risking all authorial authority and deliberately sabotaging the reader's expectations and conventional responses. You always use a highly revealing delivery with the language, the kind of selections that you associate with a prose poet.

AH: That's the nicest thing you could say.

MR: No, it is very rare. Your writing is very deliberate, specific, and determined in its intention. There are odd and delightful inclusions and exclusions that I would like to ask you about.

There are two stories, "Daylight Come" and "The Rest of God," in which the "I" narrator is noticeably absent from more than half the story.

AH: Well, I have several questions that I'm always asking myself, literally from paragraph to paragraph, before I go from draft to draft. One of them is in terms of the "I" narrator, present or not so present. Is the "I" there to observe or to declare its own feelings? What I'm getting at is I try not to say, "I was so scared." I try to say instead, "I was the one who heard the crash." You see the difference? You can write a story in the first person without that "me me me" kind of feel to it. This is a frequent goal. Another of the questions I'm always asking is, "what do I have here that's already enough without bringing in all kinds of clutter and junk?" So if

you talk about a kind of precision, if you stay with less, if instead of cluttering up and moving a story out laterally, you stay with one or two things and move down deeper and deeper into complication and don't stray from those little nuggets that you start with, then you have precision. Probably the bottom line question for me always is: What's at stake, anything? How can I up the ante?

MR: You wrote in the story I mentioned, "Harvest," that "I leave out a lot." I think that's the right wording for the story, but actually I think you take out a lot. I think there's effort involved here.

AH: Yes.

MR: It's not that you forgot something.

AH: It's deliberate. It's not, "Ooh, I forgot!" It's very purposeful.

How many people here have ever written anything that came from real experience? Everybody except Mary! I do this a lot. I'm always interested in the point where if it's going to work on the page, it has to stop being your story and start being the story's story. Why can't you just write down the thing the way it happened and have it work as fiction? It rarely does.

MR: Why do you think it doesn't?

AH: I don't know. Partially I think it's automatic. We embellish. You have a close call and you tell your friend about it on the phone that day, and without even thinking about it, you're making it a closer call, somehow you're putting a little spin on it to deepen the irony. There's a line in "The Harvest" about how "I" exaggerate something about an accident because nothing's ever quite as bad as it could be, and it's also never quite as good as it could be, so part of it is just unconscious. You can't stop yourself from doing that.

MR: I think that is a sort of translation or a tone of voice. You meet these folks that say, "Oh, you're a writer. Oh, the things that have happened to me!" And it's true, extraordinary things have happened to them, but they don't have the tone for telling the story that you have.

*Q: Will you talk a little about the position of the dedication in "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried"? I've noticed that it changes.*

AH: *The Norton Anthology* took the story as it first appeared in *Triquarterly*, and I later changed some things before it went into the book. I put her whole name at the end. To put it first calls more attention than I wanted. It makes a claim for itself that I didn't want the reader to see going in. So it's better to have it, for me, at the end.

MR: I bet you continue to make those changes, including when you get up to read out loud. The margins have changes in them and then you make some more while you're standing up.

AH: The writers that I trust the most are the ones who stand up to give a reading and they're going [pantomimes making changes in a book.]

Q: *Who are your favorite writers? Especially those who aren't contemporary.*

AH: Not contemporary? I've said very often that Mary is really one of the writers who turned on the lights for me in terms of contemporary writers. I have a friend who's always accusing me of not reading anything published before 1985.

I have a very spotty non-linear academic experience. I didn't come up through a literature program and I've stalled at places in school. My reading has huge gaps in it. The people who got me excited about writing started with Grace Paley, Leonard Michaels, and Tillie Olsen. The second order would be Mary, Barry Hannah, and Ray Carver, for example.

MR: All of them are short story writers.

AH: You're a novelist.

MR: Well, yes.

AH: I'm talking about *Days*. At the time it was *Days*. It was *Airships*. It was *Will You Please be Quiet, Please*. Always stories.

Q: *Any poetry?*

AH: I read a lot of poetry. I've often said if I could write poetry that's what I'd be doing. This is as close as I can get. I like a kind of concision and precision in prose because I have a feel for what makes a good sentence. I don't understand the line. I don't understand how poets break their lines. I've studied this. I've read and read. I don't get it.

MR: You're being very modest. The story "In the Animal Shelter" is a toss. It's a two-thirds of a page story. Whether it's an exquisite short story or an exquisite prose poem I don't know. Maybe it's both. There is an obvious question—and I don't mean to imply that a writer graduates to novels, Mr. Carver did not choose that route and he's just one—do you have any intention to write a novel?

AH: Inclinations that way? Funny you should ask. I've spent the last two and a half years working on something on and off that doesn't seem like a story. To my horror, I thought, Oh God, this sounds like a novel. "Horror" because I don't want to write a novel. I don't think I'm suited for it for any number of reasons, but the thought that maybe it was a novel was so disturbing to me that I couldn't even say the word. A friend asked me what I had been working on. I was very coy. I said, "I'm working on a thing that starts with 'n'." And she, a writer, said, "nightmare?" But in the last month or so I've understood that it is going to be a story, a novella, something longer—but shorter than what a number of you in the room are able to do.

MR: In the old days you really couldn't publish a collection without promising a

novel. With *Reasons to Live*, you were in the wave of writers who made it possible for writers after you to publish only short stories. Houses were not terribly interested in collections. But Gordon's [Lish] Girls are kind of special.

AH: I've heard Grace Paley say that, after her first collection, her publisher wanted a novel from her. In a taped interview that I heard, she said, "I was in my obedient phase then," so she tried to give them a novel. It did not come about. It was not a happy experience. We are not exactly mourning the lost novels of Grace Paley. We have the exquisite stories. As long as there are a few publishers who will publish story collections and not worry about hauling in lots of money, then we're okay.

*Q: Grace Paley says that she stopped writing poetry because she wanted the world to talk to her instead of talking of the world. As a poet she said she wanted to make sense out of the world, which she couldn't do in poetry. So I want to push you a little further because you do achieve such compression in your prose. It becomes very much like poetry. Is there anything else keeping you from poetry besides not being able to break the line?*

MR: That's not true—that she doesn't know how to break a line. That was a joke.

AH: I don't know. As I said when Mary was introducing me, the highest compliment anyone can pay me is to say, "Oh, your work is poetic. You have this in common with poetry." That's the goal, in large part. But I don't know how much further I can go with that. A couple of times—only a couple of times—have I tried to write a poem that looked on the page like a poem. And both times I just wrote them out as paragraphs. They're both in stories in my first book.

One thing I thought was telling, though, was that the more successful of these two poems has been noticed in reviews of the book. Several reviewers chose to quote that entire segment. So there was a way in which they saw it as something special. That was very pleasing. But that's as close as I've gotten to the formal structure of a poem.

*Q: Most editors in America are probably pretty anonymous. Mr. Lish is not. Can you talk a bit about what it's like working with him? Does he have a role in shaping your books? How hands-on is he?*

AH: I started as his student at Columbia and then in a private workshop, so I was his student before I was his author. It was a very natural thing to continue to show him each piece, each story as I wrote it. I had a very happy experience. I know he's a very controversial fellow. My experience has been that his suggestions—and they were always only suggestions—made me sound funnier, smarter or better than I did. We've had only a few disagreements. There was a story he did not want me to include in *Reasons to Live*. I thought that he wasn't objecting to bad writing—it was just not his kind of story. So I pushed for inclusion. And it's included.

MR: You did get it in?

AH: Yes. It's the knitting story. Maybe it's a woman's thing.

*Q: Are there readers who do not necessarily equal him but whose suggestions you take?*

AH: Less often. The ideal situation is that you want to trust your own judgment, your own take on it. I certainly can't always do that.

*Q: A couple of days ago, you told me you didn't consider imagination but rather observation to be your strong suit. Can you talk a little more about that?*

AH: Imagination is always held out as *the* thing, and observation is no big deal. I was trained as a reporter, and I found that training carried over very well because you have to leave everything extraneous out and get immediately to the salient details that tell you about the situations and persons. I know that in any given situation I will see the right thing for me. I just don't make up much. Which is not to say that you should read these stories and think that you've read my autobiography by any means.

MR: That surprises me. I tend to have a prejudice that journalism students don't do well as fiction writers.

AH: I didn't stay with it.

MR: They give you the whole Christian name, the route number, and time of day—all in the first paragraph.

AH: There is that aspect of it. There's the journalistic stance where you go in assuming that no one is going to read past your first sentence, so you better really knock them over. That was useful in story writing.

MR: You were not in a writing program?

AH: No. I would like to have been. There were lots of other things going on, things that interrupted. I was majoring in journalism and pre-med.

MR: Really. You don't have a negative opinion of writing programs?

AH: Oh, no. I think one might have speeded things up for me because I didn't really start writing until I was in my thirties.

MR: That's not unusual.

AH: No?

MR: Not for serious writing.

*Q: A question for Mary: are you equally at home writing novels as you are stories, or do you prefer one over the other?*

MR: I think they're not different genres. It's not like the difference between poetry

and prose. It's like sprinting and long-distance. One you do to move faster, to try to get a lot more in, to try to peak quick. And the other you just take your time. You have to be just as mean with yourself, just as ruthless, in the cutting.

AH: But in your stories, you make these perfect moments that signify like crazy. Now in the novel—

MR: My novels are full of those!

[Laughter]

AH: I know. But I don't understand how, when you have an attraction for those moments, you just don't add up enough of them to make a novel. How do you keep track of how they come?

MR: No one's saying, "Time. The end." I do it out of my head. Obviously there's that sort of epiphanic moment that Richard Ford can do so well, and that you're not so bad at. [Laughter] I think we head for it a lot earlier in short stories. It's just a different feeling.

AH: Are you working on a novel now?

MR: No. I've found that when returning from writing novels, I am very rusty. The short story is a form.

AH: It's like going to Canyon Ranch. You need all the fat trimmed away.

I wanted to read a paragraph from an interview with a friend of mine named Diane Williams. She's published two collections of very, very short stories. I think her first book was 110 pages long and had 48 stories. I'm always encouraged when I hear about an unconventional way into writing.

This is Diane talking. She says, "I've always felt that I had no memory to speak of, no really good memory. So if I didn't have a very good memory, how on earth could I be an artist? I always thought that a writer needed a kind of encyclopedic mind. Now it's the fragmentary nature of my memory that I exploit. The fact that I remember an aspect of experience that I have no idea why I remember—somebody's shoelace rather than what they said, that I was there to listen to. And the fact that when I look back on any experience, it's so chaotic and so unintelligible that it frightens me as a person who has to perform in the real world. But as an artist, it's liberating, because I have less to work with. Artistry is manipulating elements. The fewer there are, the easier the process of composing them. So I'm lucky in that respect, to be sort of simple, to have a poor memory, to hold experience in a chaotic way, but I used to feel apologetic for that and worried."

Any time someone can turn a problem into a success, I'm happy.

*Q: Can you talk a little bit about "The Most Girl Part of You"? For me, that story stuck out for two reasons. One is because somebody sews things into his fingers. The other is that it's rare for you in your stories to write love or sex scenes.*

AH: Well, boy-girl love stories. They always come out sounding like boys and girls.

MR: What's fascinating about that story is that it shows a teen mentality, but it's all adult figuring. You use a teen narrator for your story.

*Q: It doesn't occur often?*

AH: No, it doesn't at all. Well, I'll tell you something. A lot of you were asking about working with Gordon Lish earlier. And this is an instance where I think maybe something he said to me, a bias he expressed, reined me in. I gave him a story before that which had a romantic thing happening between a young woman and a man, and he said, "Oh, why do you want to do boys and girls? You do other things so much better. Remember death?"

*Q: But they're not necessarily mutually exclusive.*

AH: No, they're not. Boys and girls dying!

When I finished *Reasons to Live*, I didn't write any fiction for about a year or more, and then I wrote that story. It's the only real coming-of-age type story I have. I have a friend in New York, who's writing what he calls his coming-of-middle-age novel, so maybe that's next. It's hard for me to write a romantic or love story, or a sex scene, and have it not be excruciatingly embarrassing. I've told this story a million times, but what I fear going in is that I would sound like my brother. When he was eleven or twelve, he tried to write a piece of erotica. It contained my single favorite line of any story I've ever read. The line was: "Then he unzipped her negligee." I thought I would sound like that.

*Q: What allowed you to get past that for that one story?*

AH: I felt moved to it by some things that had really happened. My little brother's best friend's mother had killed herself, and within months, the boy killed himself. And my little brother was twelve, thirteen, I guess. He had his first girlfriend, so it was that mix.

*Q: And there really isn't any sex in the story.*

AH: Oh, no. It stops at the threshold. Goethe or somebody like that said—somebody here will know—"the threshold is the place to pause." So that's where we pause.

*Q: Do you feel identified with a single one of your stories, maybe the "Al Jolson" story?*

AH: Yes, and that's the first story I ever wrote. Listen, I'd rather be known for one story than not known for anything.

*Q: That would be a very double-edged sword to have the first story you ever wrote be the one that's most tied to you.*

AH: Well, listen to this. I have a friend who had an extraordinary success with her first novel. This is Amy Tan. Right after the book came out, and the first rapturous reviews were coming in, she was signing books in northern California, and a woman came up to her and said, "You made a terrible mistake writing your best book first." That's a preposterous thing to say under any circumstances.

*Q: Aren't we talking about exposure? You get attached to those stories because those are the ones you always run into.*

MR: They're your hit records.

*Q: Is it usual for you to go a long period without writing?*

AH: I think it's very unusual. Mary has probably never gone a year without writing. Right?

MR: How long?

AH: Over a year. I wrote other things. I wrote essays or reviews. But not to write any fiction for a really long period of time?

MR: I'm pretty good at that, actually.

AH: I didn't have that picture of you. I read an interview with you, I think in *Story Quarterly*, in which you talked about working in the summer and not missing going to the beach because what could be more satisfying than writing if it was going well? I took this to mean that you could write through it all.

MR: No. What it means is that I'm a physically lazy person, invariably. I said it was a pleasure and a luxury to write fiction, but most of your time goes to other kinds of things so that you can earn a living. Fiction feels pretty wonderful when you're finally allowed to do it.

AH: And as we said a little while ago, it feels really wonderful to go back to stories after you've been working on a novel. That's a sort of rest. Not to write any fiction for big chunks of time makes me very uncomfortable.

*Q: And would you use Gordon's class as a way to get back into fiction after you'd become his author?*

AH: Oh, yes. I haven't gone in a while, but I certainly drop in on an evening. It's a kick in the pants. I think you need to be reminded that there's a great deal of passion in his teaching, and in the people in the group. It's a very exciting thing to be part of. I still use it every now and then.

MR: That intensity and enthusiasm—that's what's good about workshops. You don't often get an audience of twelve or so reading your work closely and saying something intelligent about it.

*Q: You just mentioned essays. Do you write personal essays?*

AH: While I've been here, I've actually completed my second one, so I've only written two.

*Q: Do essays assuage something in you that's different from fiction?*

AH: Well, I only wrote them—all two of them—because I was asked. One was for an anthology edited by David Rosenberg. The other was for a magazine. They're not things that would have occurred to me otherwise, and the scary thing is the personal stuff, and that you can't hide behind fiction. You get to a different point.

---

**BRENDAN GALVIN**

## Half Moon Fort (Barbados)

THAT YELLOW, pop-eyed crab  
gesticulating on the coral stairs  
this morning, signing You'll  
pay for this! on the air,  
had you all day trying  
to tune yourself to aquamarine  
as the lizards do, and trying  
to exchange your junco-colored outlook  
for bananaquit and Dr. Booby  
hummingbird, but still unease  
is dashing around the outskirts,  
a monkey crossing a road  
through cane fields,  
and these villages, Pie Corner,  
Josie's Hill, Contentment,  
remind you they're not drawn  
from the name book  
of that iron god who sold you  
a northern code and decamped.  
How long before you stop  
analogizing lifts of flying fish  
with snow skipping and flashing  
past your houselights?  
In tonight's perpetual down-time,  
scored by the tree frogs' whistling,  
the roosters' hundred garrotings  
and resurrections, with leisure  
for frost to build in dutiful  
marrow, you'll count the waves  
that beach like slamming car doors  
and collapsing fences, till leaf-head  
clouds offshore grow morning showers  
downward, sink their roots,  
and trees of rain slip off  
up the current toward St. Lucia.

**BRENDAN GALVIN****Above It All**

WE GO ONTO THE ROOF to clean the pollinated skylights, you first while I balance the ladder. Then you haul me up. No longer afraid a hand pointing from a cuff will appear in the sky like an exit sign and nudge me off, as I was that first acrophobic day on Sugarloaf, I'm not yet as sure as that shingler across the marsh, riding a roof-tree, each of his gold-dusted sneezes a bronkbuster's Yahoo! So don't go far. Below, on that tumble of Yule knots and ant riddle I wouldn't call "woodpile" since the North Atlantic inhaled the best of it, an orange, spontaneous combustion—"firebird," since even the double vowel in the oriole's name flares like a struck match, clear, wild, without hesitation when he whistles her on, cheers her ripping at reinforced mailing tape I patched the wind-shredded tarp with. Forget that his orange and black recalls the jacket a man wore to court once, to convince the judge more or less unconsciously that he didn't deserve visitation rights, and you'll see the point of their burning early and late to hang a pocket of straw in the air. What do they know, who say all birds are flamingoes? Not that new little towhee, tail in a poker-hand's quick spread and fold, as he skims too erect over the blueberries down there, just able to grab the next passing branch, heady with the moment, like a kid that first time on skates,

not even sure he can pull up before  
the ice stops. Stay close. Pyrite,  
panhandler's dream, this stuff was  
everywhere before we knew it. Windshields,  
railings. Our pine table seemed to release  
memories like radium, glowing to outgild  
whatever sang awhile in its branches.  
Tonight this stuff will spin  
in the porch light like galaxies of gnats.  
Our black cat will come home  
through the dark golden.

---

**ALVARO CARDONA-HINE****Portrait At Teatime**

**M**R. FOOTERNAK DROPS IN AT TEATIME. He doesn't drink tea but prefers to sit a little distance away smoking his cigar and sharing with Mother and me this feeling (that tea brings) that the afternoon is the perfect time for the fellowship of small talk. Small talk masks, of course, depths we tacitly recognize in need of masking. Perhaps only for lack of training (philosophical) but also because we know small talk to be the perfect vehicle to arrive at any depth without becoming self-conscious about it.

It is small talk, after all, that slowly reveals each to the others. Each of us is so different that anything more direct and intentional would wreck the delicious harmonies of the hour. Mr. Footernak, as the now countless afternoons have revealed, is a Jewish gentleman of undisclosed means (he hasn't gotten to that yet), retired from the garment trade and living in Hollywood in a sort of limbo made possible by the overly kind weather, the palm trees, and the fact that his health still allows him to smoke. Compare him to Mother or me and you will see that what takes place so often around three in the afternoon at 6210 Fountain Avenue (five scant blocks from Hollywood and Vine) should be considered a kind of minor miracle. Mother, a woman of sixty (is it sixty? No. I am wrong. It's forty-nine! Amazing), pleasant, intelligent, imported (from Costa Rica), doing piece work at home for Miss Kelly (hence Footernak), the proprietor of a brassiere store on Hollywood Boulevard. Perhaps what is most attractive about my mother is her middle-class background, proper, cautious, educated and sensible. My grandmother taught her English and she has fulfilled her dream of bringing her family to California.

All right, now for me. A smallish, shy boy of seventeen out of work, out of school (a year at City College bouncing between a former choice of science and a growing but impossible-to-manage passion for composing music) and currently reading Jean Christophe at a fast clip.

It is 1943 and neither Mr. Footernak nor we know anything about Nazi atrocities against Jews. We comment on the progress of the war as unassuming bystanders and have no inkling that the new and final age of man is about to be ushered in in about two years when Hiroshima (a city we have never heard of) is turned into dust and ashes by the propositions of Albert Einstein. Jesus. No. We vegetate at the ecstatically ignorant level of the underbrush if this world is a jungle. Through no fault of our own since history is never shared or understood beforehand, obviously, or on a current basis. Only later, when it is too late and one, older then, also realizes that having understood some horrid little chunk doesn't mean one grasps current horrors.

But please excuse the digression. We three specimens of wartime naivete and existential bliss find pleasure in ourselves, in being little tarnished mirrors to each other at that hour when the human body is balanced between the gorgeous expenditure of morning energy and the descent into evening. A time for tea, or for a cigar, which I have begun to enjoy thanks to Mr. Footernak and the largesse of my mother who only balked initially, fearful that it would impede my growth (my growth being a thing both my parents devoutly and patiently wait for with unlimited apprehension) and which eventually comes in spite of the cigars.

Ah, what don't we talk about! We talk about everything and anything. Knowing it is nothing. So much so I can't recall a single conversation of ours . . . . But don't be disappointed. I am in the process of indicating that these conversations serve a different purpose than even we imagine. Conversation, small talk, always has, at all times and in all conditions. It is through small talk, accompanied by related, ubiquitous human gestures, that each of us learns something like the truth about the others.

About Mr. Footernak I have learned so much and in such subtle ways that I weep bitterly (a figure of speech) at the fact that language has absolutely no means to convey it. It makes telling you this very difficult. On the other hand, his ways, mannerisms and existence are as real to me at a neural level thanks to small talk as they are impossible to transcribe. Naturally, I shall make a stab at it, and I hope not to disappoint anyone, but I know what will be missing and what will be missing will be essential and miraculous just as the little I can describe will be essential and miraculous.

About my mother, having been her in the womb and hers as a babe and child, I can say ever so much more and so much less. To begin with, and aside from her ambition to see the family succeed economically, an ambition that of course consumes most of her waking hours, she is an immense memory bank triggered by pride and contentment. To be of the Hine Pintos from Costa Rica is tantamount to being right, to being tacitly chosen and in proper relation to the Godhead. Not in a pompous or exclusive manner, but through the contentment and the gestures, to go back to that. The body manifests its age and condition aided by a mind that understands its station. In life. In nature. In the order of things. Thus capacity. Mother's capacity stems tacitly from tacitly accepted forces, strengths, family status. The fact that America has reduced her to the level of a glorified garment worker doesn't even touch the elegance, the style, of this being who finds herself privileged to be in Los Angeles placing three meals on the table each day. A privilege and a joy. Hence the contentment, the clear pleasure to be talking with her son and Mr. Footernak about the kind of glue used in the manufacture of shoes or about Chicago's Gold Coast and the kind of winds that blow there.

Her son is there as an apprentice. He doesn't know what to do but an instinct tells him talking to adults will get him past his overwhelming (and undefined, unrecognized) nihilism, his like mystical desire to convey the odor of geraniums in music, the despair at having seen a particular bunch of weeds at the far end of a backyard once. His impatience with formal learning, a kind of unfortunate disability or perhaps simply the inability to see how harmonic rules relate to dream sound, has led to his abandoning his studies. He is at a standstill, in shock after encountering the stubborn shape of the world, and clinging to these two people in the afternoon (an hour of ease) and knowing that they might at any moment reveal the dis-

colored, the disguised, the magical key to things. Because they are centered in a way that he is not.

Mr. Footernak's way of walking, of entering the house, slowly, ceremoniously, is a key, or part of it. It is ever so much more applicable than a rule of harmony drawn from a Beethoven sonata and made to stand on its own in a bleak textbook. What, to be duplicated? Mr. Footernak walks the way he walks because he is dressed the way he is dressed, in a dark business suit, wearing a tie and sporting cuff links on his shirt sleeves. If somebody had ordered him to wear gym shorts and come visiting he would walk the same way but pain would be visible through it. Am I making myself clear?

He is short and portly and rather funny looking, like one of the more outlandish owls in a bird book. He can hold his humor as it is said some men hold their liquor. Good small talk bordering on gossip brings out a semi-smile on his face and Mother and I try our best to see that that facial expression stays put because it seems to hand back dividends, making us feel terrific. Perhaps because it isn't easy to put it there. Friendship, after all, consists of that, of trying to bring out the signs in a friend that prove one is providing real nourishment, essential nourishment. Mr. Footernak is our friend because, invariably, we make him feel good and because he makes us feel good. Our worlds are so different that we exist and dangle perennially on this rope bridge we have built between our very different shores. He'll bring a message from Miss Kelly and we immediately have a quarter of an hour of talk about how women have dressed through the ages. I listen. What do I know? I might join that conversation from a Marxist point of view since my mysticism (at seventeen) tells me it is time to change the world. Who knows, with equality we might choose to go naked. But anything I say is looked upon as mere improvisation by these two and treated accordingly. The tea is good and we usually have (Mother and I) some pastry from the Van de Kamps blue windmill store across from the Ranch Market on Vine Street.

When Mr. Footernak walks in he takes off his homburg, that landmark, and hands it to me. He knows I will reverentially place it on the mantelpiece out of reach of the cat. He also knows that I look forward to those few seconds it takes me to walk over to the mantelpiece to place his hat there. He knows how I regard that hat. This, again, is inexplicable, for none of us knows how immense a hat is, what it signifies, how it transforms, how it connects, how it echoes the crests of male birds perhaps. The feel of that hat in my hands is unique; it is made from a material (animal fur) with which I am unfamiliar but which my fingers recognize instantly as heraldic. Just as some crazy random chords discovered on the piano are heraldic. And blessed! Oh, why are some things blessed? I want to know, and each time I carry that homburg to the mantelpiece or from it I feel that I am on the verge of solving the mystery.

Like the mystery of very well-shined shoes, old shoes that would seem to want to reject such perfection. Mr. Footernak's shoes are entities that do not recognize dust or mud or even smears; like some countries that refuse to recognize others, it's as simple as that. He likes to cross his legs when he sits, so, naturally, the shoes, one at least, comes into more prominence. To be honored. That is what it is saying. Humble things are to be honored, raised from their position of humility and made to shine. If shoes shine, doesn't the soul? That's something very few people understand. In America most men go about with shoes that cry out for a little care.

They wear good clothes but the shoes go unserved. Anyway. The homburg arrives and all the hieratic writing inside, on the hat band. Writing I am dying to read but do not dare to for that would involve turning the hat over in a grossly conscious fashion, as if it were a common object subject to manipulation. It sits on the mantelpiece waiting for its master to decide when it is time to go, waiting for tea to be drunk and for three-fourths of a Churchill cigar to be smoked. Then it goes atop Mr. Footernak, indicating sobriety, propriety and, above all, respect for all men and all things. Oh yes, sorry if this disturbs. Only man's formal gestures can reflect profound respect. I don't any longer trust easy-going clothes or manners to reveal any great state of ease or grace.

Respect for women also. Mr. Footernak has the bearing of a widower (I am guessing this), of a man who has seen a marriage through. As a matter of fact, I believe he has alluded to children in far-off cities. This can be checked. An air of solitude is combined with a more diffident air of sadness. So, naturally, there must be the death of a dear being or of, at least, a close being. Mr. Footernak comes bearing his past just as I, opening the door to let him in, bear witness to eager emptiness. The past is Mr. Footernak. He has brought it to the present by an act of incredible patience that is the process of his personality. A past so strongly there and yet so reserved, so undisclosed. Why? I wonder, knowing little about sorrows.

My mother, being a lady, is precisely what Mr. Footernak needs to recall his wife. Seeing her he wishes life all over again. No matter how different his wife might have been, there is no doubt that here Mr. Footernak revisits femininity, the wonder of the sound of a woman's voice. He is exquisitely proper, of course, a friend of the family, an exile from perhaps some immemorial happiness who, here, in this home, discovers the comfort of an echo, the alacrity of time. Perhaps acceptance only.

I think acceptance plays a major role. The world is all rejection, the cliché of no one giving a damn. But here, in this pleasant small house with the hibiscus bush by the entrance, these strangers turn into friends. Perhaps only acquaintances, people to pass the time with. But who is fooled? Certainly not air, not air that by being in a room gets shared, willy-nilly. Taken into the lungs in turn by each person. And thus, how much more so the soul, that unrivalled oxygen, the soul that inhabits or is consciousness and extends variously beyond the body, liking to roam in friendship and in dreams. I spoke of mysticism. Bear with me. I just want to meet complexity with imagination, the baffling universe with the only faculty that won't reduce it to mathematics (although, on the other hand, one could say that math is the last refuge of the sentimental!).

Acceptance. A boy with his mouth full of toast talking about not wanting to make money, a frightening prospect for any mother, but taken in stride. Mr. Footernak is of the unspoken opinion that time will change that. By the way Mother takes a sip of her tea she acknowledges that he is right. They do not need to speak at this point. I am saying something nasty about occupations and they know how right it is for a boy of seventeen to be lost, that something might come of it.

The clock strikes a subordinate chime, for it is three-thirty, and Father, who has been mowing Mrs. Jorganson's lawn and who can't join us because he doesn't speak English, comes in and says hello. He and Mr. Footernak shake hands like diplomats, a delight. We hear him presently at his typewriter writing a letter to

some newspaper in Costa Rica subliminally conveying the wonder that in America one can (the everlasting intellectual) mow lawns at fifty-eight. Shades of Whitman.

My mother cleverly informs Mr. Footernak of her plans to ask for a raise. It is wartime, Miss Kelly has no other source of labor and it is against the law to pay the wages she is paying, not declaring them in the bargain. Something like that. Mr. Footernak understands that he is the fertile middle ground Mother is planting the seeds in. It makes him feel useful. Miss Kelly is a rather volcanic woman who periodically storms our house with supplies and orders. He knows her from way back, from before the Flood, and how perfect it is that Mother needs them and they need her. Best of all possible worlds although in my present phase (Messianic Marxism) I must view it with suspicion.

The raise comes. Not before federal agents for some reason have come and Mother has lied about her earnings, posing as Miss Kelly's business partner. A dangerous moment made more dangerous by my sister (three years younger than I) who, being present, starts to spill the beans to the agents thinking that Mother is stalling because of language difficulties. Saved by a call from Father in the kitchen, who is making rice and needs to know the time so he can time it twenty minutes. Mother looks at the clock on the mantelpiece (famous for being able to include homburgs), yells the time and, in the same breath, all in Spanish of course, tells my sister to get the hell out.

Another digression. Sorry. But it bears on this world of Mr. Footernak, of making a living in a strange land, of having no choice but to cheat, hurting no one. Mr. Footernak's influence on Miss Kelly is enormous. It isn't for nothing that he has the bearing of an elder statesman. We often wonder what he sees in us and accept his presence in our lives as a benediction. He dispenses a kind of everyday balm. What he might do in an emergency is calm you and call the perfect doctor, or save you with a bit of arcane knowledge, perhaps something from his pocket, it is that ineffable, and that certain.

His hands are minute, a watchmaker's hands. Well cared for, as should be obvious after talking about his shoes. No one with spotless shoes would permit the shadow of dirt under his fingernails. I observe that he converts the dirty habit of cigar smoking into an art. How? By husbanding the ash so that it collects ever so long on the tip of the cigar, a dangerous and forgotten skill (it is told of the great Clarence Darrow that he once mesmerized a jury during a difficult case by driving a wire through the length of his cigar before his opponent rose to summarize his case. Darrow proceeded to smoke his cigar in a quietly ostentatious manner. The cigar ash went on growing and getting longer until each one of the jurors sat spell-bound, watching, unable to follow the intricacies of the prosecution. Legend has it that Darrow won the case, to everyone's surprise) and by being truly decorous about the wet, chewable part. I swear, we never see him with a loose, dangling participle of tobacco. Then, also, the quality of what he smokes is so exquisite that even if Mother wasn't a Latin woman and the niece of a cigar-wielding worthy of old, she would welcome the aroma in our house as a salutary addition to our drab olfactory existence.

Invariably at four, after our clock has chimed the hour in the living room, Mr. Footernak double-checks the figure on his vest watch and announces that it is time to be going. I don't show my dismay, for that would embarrass him. Mother suggests he stay longer but everyone recognizes this as a formality. Father abandons

the typewriter to come to say goodbye and everyone accompanies him to the door. I bring him the homburg, which he takes from my hands with a smile, as if saying, "Someday you may wear one . . . in fact, I know you will," and he departs, walking, for he has no car, to the bus stop.

He'll be back in a few days, a week at most. In the meantime, Mother and I have our tea each afternoon in the shadow of our great guest, almost turning in his direction (where he usually sits) to verify something or wait for a reply. The tea tastes good, almost as good as when Mr. Footernak is there, but you can stir it all you want, it isn't the same. And yet, we drink our tea as if Mr. Footernak was there, we speak in a different way during that hour, with more formality, with care. In that way, he is almost there, practically there.

And I wonder, who else does he visit when he's not with us? Does he have a circle of friends that he can avail himself of or does he sit at home (what kind of home or apartment or room?) waiting for the time to be right to return? We don't know where he lives, what he does with his time, how he votes, where he eats or banks or shops. We know nothing and we know everything. That he is benign, amiable, clean, careful, diffident but warm, obscure but familiar, rare, useless, private, sorrowful (by inference), lost, forgotten, present by a concatenation of chance and inertia, middle-aged, effective in small matters, pusillanimous perhaps but quite possibly capable of heroic acts, undistinguished but correct, balding, faintly perfumed, possessing (as I think) an immortal soul, coming and going, obviously not at home when he dies, a man, a *mensch*, a statistic, a friend, a ghost, a memory, a mark, alas, like myself, a bird, a flight.

---

**DANA GIOIA**

---

## Hearing From Poetry's Audience

NO ONE EXPECTED THE HUGE RESPONSE THAT "Can Poetry Matter?" generated, especially not its author. I wrote the essay to address—as directly and candidly as possibly—the increasing cultural isolation of American poetry. Although I did not set out to provoke controversy, I knew my criticism of the institutions which dominate the poetry subculture would prove unpopular in some literary circles. Institutions—be they military, medical, corporate or cultural—do not welcome outside criticism. The editors of *The Atlantic Monthly* had warned me to expect angry letters from interested parties. When the hate mail arrived, typed on letterheads of various university writing programs, no one was surprised.

What did surprise both the *Atlantic* editors and me, however, was the enormous positive reaction the article created. As soon as "Can Poetry Matter?" was published, the responses began. Letters poured into the *Atlantic*, copies of which they shipped to me in thick bundles. Other mail came to me directly or through my publishers. Reporters phoned at the office for interviews. Newspaper and magazine articles appeared. Radio producers asked me to discuss the article on the air. Friends phoned with anecdotes about the article's impact. Strangers called to ask advice. And for months the mail continued. Eventually I received over 400 letters from *Atlantic* readers. They were overwhelmingly favorable. Many of them felt I had not gone far enough in criticizing the inbred nature of the poetry world.

I experienced my 15 minutes of fame with mixed emotions. I was flattered by the magnitude of response. I hoped my article would initiate fresh discussion about the problems facing American poetry. The newspaper clippings, which friends sent me, indicated that writers and readers across the country were heatedly debating the issues I had raised. Although some academic poets dismissed my analysis categorically, it was clear the rest of the literary community took the article seriously, even if they disagreed with particular points in my argument. What better response could an author want?

Yet, as each new bundle of responses arrived, I grew more depressed. The letters came in three familiar varieties—favorable, unfavorable, and incoherent—but, though they differed in tone and intent, together they formed an alarming map of American literary culture. Reading through them each night after work, I realized the poetry world was even more divided than I thought. Virtually all of the unfavorable mail came from Creative Writing professionals. Composed in the key of outraged virtue, these letters made three assertions: first, American poetry had never been healthier than today; second, poetry was thriving in the university; and,

third, except for poets themselves, few people in America had ever cared much for poetry.

I had expected the first two assertions. Examining the self-serving assumptions behind those comforting clichés had been the point of my article. The third assertion which appeared in dozens of letters, however, astonished me. Several letters mentioned Emily Dickinson as an example of the poet's position in America before university writing programs began. Her example is inspiring, but it hardly typifies poetry's historical position in American society. How had the assumption that poetry never mattered originated, especially among academics who should know some literary history? Had they never read about Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's international fame? "The Courtship of Miles Standish" sold 15,000 copies on its first day of publication. Did they not know how John Greenleaf Whittier had helped inspire the Abolitionist movement? His poems were not only memorized but set to music as hymns. He even had a town named after him. Had they never heard that James Whitcomb Riley was so popular that his birthday became a state holiday in Indiana? During Riley's final illness, President Wilson sent anxious inquiries about his condition. President Theodore Roosevelt not only reviewed E. A. Robinson's poetry, he also obtained him civil service sinecure in the Wall Street Customs House. Robinson's later books achieved the best-seller list. After publishing *Fatal Interview* in 1931, Edna St. Vincent Millay developed such a large audience that she was hired to deliver a series of poetry readings on commercial network radio. Carl Sandburg was asked to address a joint session of Congress. Robert Frost spoke at a Presidential inauguration. One could cite dozens of other examples. Only the amnesiac can claim that poetry was never popular in America. From the days of Bryant and Emerson, it played an important role in American intellectual life—until recently. Surely it was critical for contemporary poets to understand how its position had become marginal. To rationalize away poetry's current isolation by pretending it has always been ignored revealed a depressing brand of intellectual complacency.

Reading the many supportive letters and articles did not especially cheer me up, but they did teach me a great deal about the remaining nonacademic audience for poetry. Isolated and disenfranchised, poetry's common reader still exists. I heard from hundreds of these refugees—teachers, retirees, librarians, lawyers, housewives, business executives, ranchers, and reporters, all of whom care passionately for poetry. The emotion in their letters took me by surprise. They feel alienated from what they see as a self-enclosed poetry world, and they are angry at the university for sequestering poetry. I was also astonished to see how many readers—and journalists—still resent modernism (which they also associate with the university) for killing the traditional kinds of poetry they enjoy. Naively, I had thought the battle for modernism had been fought and finished fifty years ago. What affected me most was the tone of hopeless resignation in many letters. Americans had stopped reading poetry, they confided, and little could be done to remedy the situation. A particularly memorable letter came from a woman in Oregon. She wrote about how important the poems she knew by heart were to her daily sanity. She could not understand why her son cared so little for poetry. She knew he was typical of his generation and worried that something spiritually important was being lost in our society. I wrote her an inadequate reply and mused at how, in different

ways, hundreds of other letters echoed her concern. The image of these people sticks with me. They represent a large audience which is slowly dying from neglect. Some experts claim this audience no longer exists. Soon perhaps it won't.

I feel that one reason "Can Poetry Matter?" had such a strong impact was that I wrote the article not as a poet or a critic but as a reader of poetry. Jorge Luis Borges once confessed that he thought of himself first as a reader and only then as a poet or writer of fiction. A writer's loyalties must lie with literature, not merely his or her own ambitions. I conceived of "Can Poetry Matter?" as a non-partisan analysis of current poetry's dilemma. I tried as much as possible to suppress my personal poetic agenda and discuss my frustrations and aspirations as a reader of poetry and poetry criticism. Of course, my detractors will claim otherwise, and they may indeed notice biases to which I myself am blind. Dana Gioia the reader cohabits the same skull as Dana Gioia the writer. But I take it as a good sign that several poets with whom I am often grouped by critics became angry with me because they felt the piece did not put forth a particular agenda. Likewise one long-time friend denounced me to my face because the essay did not offer New Formalism as the cure to the ills of American poetry. A few weeks later a bitter enemy wrote me a long fan letter. Disinterested criticism, I discovered, makes strange bedfellows.

I learned one other thing from the reception of my article. When a piece of writing gains enough notoriety to gain controversy, the responses it generates often have little to do with the original text. The author has struck a nerve, usually by examining an issue that others have ignored or distorted. When all the repressed energy is suddenly released, it takes its own shape. For most respondents the text itself is merely a point of departure. Reading the various articles and editorials inspired by "Can Poetry Matter?", I was interested to see how often I was invoked to support an idea I disliked or to condemn a notion I endorsed. This can be either amusing or annoying. The important thing is to step aside and let the ideas pursue their own dialectic. The culture is now at work, and the author has become only one of the spectators.

---

---

**RICHARD HOWARD**

*from Fag Ends*

“NOT HERE, RODERICK. HE DIDN’T DIE HERE. and not like that.” I could hear reproof in my voice, the exasperation we reserve for our friends when they try to change us: I was scolding Roderick for turning my life, however parenthetically, into his kind of excitement, his condemnation. *Nicholas never goes anywhere, never sees anyone, God only knows what he does for sex*, that would be his line, doing something for sex, *so of course the old queen who tutors him in something would expire right there in his apartment! Just what Nicholas needs at his age, more lessons—still, if it gets his nose out of Proust . . .* Even from the way he repeated my words, punctuating “this afternoon” with a soft expectant gasp, I guessed what Roderick would be making of “like that”: *surely the poor old man . . .* What a preposterous formula for Frank, who was poor and who was old but nobody’s poor old man, not even his own. Some recipes have nothing to do with their ingredients. Though if Roderick patronized me, who could plumb the depths of condescension he would have to muddy in order to accommodate Frank?

But had he ever seen Frank? Wasn’t it all part of the myth of poor middle-aged Nicholas—the superannuated tutor, the endless translating of the already translated tomes, the pitiable withdrawal from life? Life was what Roderick had, of course, and Nicholas had lessons. Yes, it was during one of the lessons that they had met, overlapping here at the top of the stairs, the first time Roderick had produced “his” Robin to be admired, to be coveted, the new acquisition, the latest likelihood—Roderick was always brimming with probability, it was what made him judge Frank so promptly, judge me (though wasn’t there a plea beyond judgment in his need for me to inspect the present prize, to praise the New Boy against all past manifestations of Roderick’s cupidity?). It was precisely because I never went out that Roderick must have brought Robin in: last September, I know the day, it had been the business about ides and Frank had explained the Roman calendar, nones and calends, so it was three months ago that they had appeared at my door, uninvited, unannounced, grinning with apologies I cut short a little too sharply—why else was Roderick so hesitant now about paying his visit, telling his latest story?—and we had all stared, Roderick glistening with the pride of possession, his boy curious and no doubt prepared for just such an oddity, I impatient for the incongruous assemblage to be dissolved, but Frank undeterred from his gobbling ceremony, tucking my weekly check into his union-suit pocket with a coquettish smile at the “new” young man, then working his way into the inveterate cardigan, the muffler, the filthy raincoat and the rubbers, all for the mildest September afternoon, then the interminable two-step descent, calling reminders up the stairwell:

the next assignment, the hour of the next lesson—enough for Roderick to conceive, three months later: *the poor old man knocking over a dictionary as he lurched to his feet, losing an avalanche of papers onto the floor, murmuring as he collapsed into Nicholas's arms, "I am dying, Sodom, dying . . ."* Nothing of the sort had happened, of course, there had been no occurrence to mark the sense of an ending but the smell. And the sweat—even the backs of Frank's hands were shiny, the great liver spots gleaming as he stuffed the Latin grammar into his briefcase, the union suit yellower than ever and reeking worse. We had stopped the lesson without referring to such evidence, but I knew something was wrong, more serious than the usual "spell." And if it was always a serious matter, for Frank, getting up my stairs, I almost had to carry him down, remonstrating in the polluted snow until he would accept cab fare to Brooklyn, waiting on the stoop until I saw his taxi jouncing along the ruts of Ninth Street—else the dollar bills would have joined the check, and my conscience bequeathed me the image of Frank unprotestingly edging down into the BMT—"You know, dear, whatever happens in the subway, at least there's always someone to take care of me," and indeed *someone* had telephoned, just before Roderick: my name was on Frank's calendar.

"So there's no reason *not* to come over now, Roderick. You're the one who's upset. You said something happened . . . Whatever happened to Frank has nothing to do with it. And I told you, it doesn't upset me—it was inevitable. So come over now—I'll see you in a few minutes." Not upset, not even saddened? How easy to see the inevitability of someone else's dying . . . and the arbitrariness of my own. Just startled—only the inevitable can startle us—that it was over now. Frank was so marginal, in his sixties, to the life he kept preparing himself for, and his preparations had been so thorough! How could Roderick help seeing me as an industrious if belated apprentice to Frank's futility? and was there that much to choose between teaching dead languages and translating dead authors? Of course for me there was a difference. The choice was clear. Proust was life itself, and Proust in English—my English, not some lame Englishman's—was my life. For Frank the languages, living and dead, were an occasion, even an excuse. Wasn't that what put him on the side of life, after all—"all" included the closeted pedantry of the Talmudic invert—and if Frank was on the side of life, whose side was I on, as I suspected Roderick had instructed young Robin long since. All those languages, even Chinese, and the so-called dead one I was learning from him, without Frank's ever leaving the five boroughs, without his ever reading a book! It was encounters Frank had readied himself for, conversations with dark strangers who would be warmed into response by the unexpected eloquence of this motherly old interlocutor. And hadn't he been a motherly middle-aged interlocutor too? The more exotic the foreign visitor, the more likely that Frank would be called in to cope: with the Peruvian *coloratura*, for instance, whose manager claimed she was the last Inca princess, the lost voice of the Andes—something which entitled her to speak Quechua exclusively. "She can't sing at all, dear, but she can hit any note above the staff. And she can't speak much Quechua either—I think she comes from Park Slope." In his Henry Higgins avatar, Frank went along with the fraud for the fringe benefits, in this case two dour little gold-skinned drummers who could speak only Quechua and whom he took home with him after each performance . . . And what about the Polish Mime Troupe, six white-faced giants who boarded Frank in their smelly dressing-room between silent agonies on the City Center stage?

Balinese or Bolshoi, any attraction, if it was outlandish enough, summoned Frank as its interpreter, an eager polyglot for whom Dhimitiki was a way of meeting Cavafy's subjects, never of reading Cavafy or even—it was why he was tutoring me—Catullus, whom he ignored. As the lessons continued, I sometimes thought Frank was Cavafy, a kind of Jewish Cavafy, garrulous and unrelenting, with all the terrible energies of repression lubricating his giggles as he drilled me in the old conjugations—a Cavafy without culture, just language and lust. Gone now, *inevitably*, as I had said, another Last Leaf who perfectly exemplified Marcel's ultimate discovery that it is out of adolescents who last long enough that life makes its old men. Perishing alone—but how else would we all perish, was there a comfort to be taken from the family deathbed?—in his Men's Residence Hotel on the last day of 1972, not only inevitable but *designed*. And now the troublesome business of finding another Latin teacher at once, if all our work wasn't to be wasted: the one appropriate tribute.

**BRUCE TAYLOR**

Counting

ONE IS A SLUR OF BIRDS.  
One is each bird, each wing.  
One is also each leaf the birds scatter  
as they swarm from one tree to another.  
Who can say where one stops?  
One could be an epic winter.

---

ANN BEATTIE

## Signs In The Balance

TODAY, SITTING IN MY KITCHEN, I HELD UP A TRANSPARENCY of a painting my husband did a few years ago, "Balance." I remembered the painting distinctly when I looked at it again. At the same time, the ending of Yeats' poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" came to mind. Though I'm sure Lincoln wasn't thinking about that poem when he painted the painting, quoting from it still seems appropriate: "I balanced all, brought all to mind, / The years to come seemed waste of breath, / A waste of breath the years behind / In balance with this life, this death."

*In balance with this life, this death* was a line that shocked me the first time I read it; linking life and death with a humble comma so definitely a stroke of genius. It's also not much different from what I see Lincoln doing in some of his paintings, "Balance" included. But let me first say, in deference to Lincoln, that he thinks I am pleased to take a bleak view of things. No different than anyone else, I project—onto people, onto paintings (maybe particularly onto paintings of people)—looking for what I need to find, finding those things anyone who knows me well could guarantee I'd locate: people not communicating; private moments in public places; landscapes changed by individuals and vice versa; shadows more metaphoric than realistic.

My immediate reaction to "Balance": The painting has been painted one block away from our house in Virginia. There's a nifty quote (as painters call it) of an earlier painting Lincoln did in TriBeCa, in which a figure carries a similar beam. I also notice the deliberate reference to Picasso's trees. But those signs . . . those signs: absolutely unharmonious, intrusive, as strange as the effect of looking at a beautiful woman and being shown, simultaneously, an x-ray of her chest. Okay: for the doctors, the woman is that x-ray, but for the rest of us, that transparency would make it more difficult to perpetuate our little fictions. About immortality, say.

"Balance" is neither landscape nor portrait, but a narrative in which the world comments, inevitably, on the peoples' psychological states, and on the dynamic between them, while the figures, by their dress, demeanor, and, in some cases, by having been simplified into symbols of their human selves, change the emotional tenor of the piece. Let me remark, briefly, on a few of the figures: the man's stomach is recognizable, his paunch indicating a bit of overindulgence—human frailty; the woman in black, dressed for the cocktail party that is not, is strangely asexual



Lincoln Perry, *China Story*, 1990  
oil on canvas, 60" x 60 1/4"  
courtesy of Tatistcheff and Co., NY, NY



Lincoln Perry, *Götterdämmerung*, 1992  
oil on canvas, 38" x 52", courtesy of Contemporary Realist Gallery  
collection of Janice and James Chingas



Lincoln Perry, *Balance*, 1989  
oil on canvas, 84" x 116"  
courtesy of Talistcheff and Co. NY, NY

and plain in spite of her low-cut dress (so much for institutionalized sexuality). Meanwhile, a form person—person as simplified form—stands just where painters are not supposed to position their subjects, smack behind the middle of a sign (yes; just the slightest bit off-center, but this isn't where you'd usually choose to position someone in a painting, is it?). Then there's someone reaching out of a manhole (That's sexual, Dr. Freud), and the manhole also finds a nice positive to its negative in the oddly spherical bushes. The man in the black cap carries a phallic symbol, a metaphor for the sexual act; he has been stilled, though, turned into a tableau, acknowledging either the presence of the painter or—uh-oh—us. The man in the yellow cap in the foreground is—at least in this context—a wonderful physical specimen, and we notice that he's actually delved into something, put his hand right into that orange bucket.

But back to the signs: the orange sign symbolizes men at work. The yellow sign tells us children are at play. Really? There are no children to be seen. There isn't even a candy wrapper in the gutter, or a cat wandering across a lawn. This place doesn't seem like the real world. And no one seems to be relating to his or her surroundings. There's no interconnection. The people on the porch might as well be isolated behind glass. Obviously, they are not relating to each other, either. But they're up there, as if on stage. Notice, too, that where an apparent lack of anything in common doesn't divide them enough, the physical world of the painting does: white posts make them into figures in a painting, deliberately framing them with imperfect placement; the soft-swirl tree, like an ice-cream cone you might be given in hell, protrudes in front of them, also, acting as another divider. Finally, the signs, meant to be extreme simplifications in a universal language, seem, in their depiction of arrested motion, no more absurd than the people, enclosed in their private realities, who might as well be cardboard cut-outs. Their inner thoughts are unknowable, from the painter's perspective—unknowable, but not un-seeable.

But our own thoughts, when we've had conjured up the social versus the workaday world, class differences, a distorted physical environment? When we've also had to adjust to the presence of disconcertingly undetailed figures who, depending on the way you want to interpret, could be either evolving or devolving people? *Caution*, the signs are telling us: something's strange—a notion reinforced by the surreal bushes. Take my word for it: such trees do not grow in Charlottesville. Though as imaginative transformations, as informing interpretations, they certainly do.

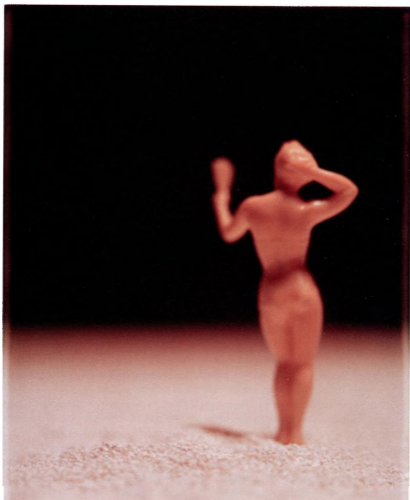
"Balance" is at once cold-eyed and an example of subjective interpretation. If the two scenes, the two distinct, differently populated worlds of the painting, could be said to truly balance each other, I suspect we would be likely to have a moment not of harmony, but of atonal music. (Formally, the painting is itself well balanced, of course). Except for a micro-second on a see-saw, who really has things balanced in life, children included? It seems to me our lives are better expressed by the audacious Yeatsian comma, dividing at the same time it links. Lincoln's painting is the pictorial equivalent of that comma.

---

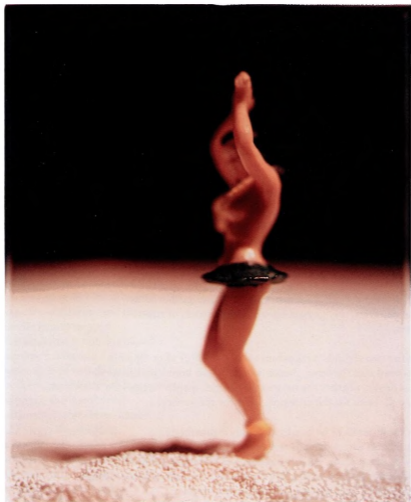
LISA BESKIN

## Loneliness in Summer

IT'S WHEN YOU LIE FLAT on your bed  
like the gunned-down Dillinger,  
riddled by heat. It's when  
you don't even want to touch yourself,  
can't imagine making pleasure from nothing.  
You'd rather lie with open palms  
letting the sweat pool between your breasts,  
gazing at your body  
the way a sad man in the suburbs  
gazes from a window at his fenced-in yard  
and thinks, "Can this be everything?"



David Levinthal, *Untitled*  
from the series "American Beauties"



David Laundy, *Untitled*  
from the series "American Beauties"

CHRIS SEMANSKY

André Breton Works  
the Crisis Prevention Hot Line

FIRST THING HE DOES IS KICK THE OTHER WORKERS OUT. Then he records a toilet flushing, plays it back for each call.

"What a life . . ." he sighs, dreaming of lunch: a roast chicken plump in the throat of a bicycle.

"Art stinks!" he yells at the fluorescent light quivering above him. "All writing is garbage! I left my renegade pasty waltzing across watercress kneecaps, and just look what the flagship brought in: a beaker of gunpowder, smoking roses!"

All at once the toilet starts to ring and water gushes from the receivers, tiny geysers lip-syncing the souls of tinier lives.

In the two seconds it takes him to shout "Allo!" after dipping his head into the bowl, Breton wonders how bubbles translate at this depth, whether the oxygen that carries speech carries love as well. Love for the drowned. Love for the surface.

What difference? he thinks, suddenly remembering a childhood where tin cans and strings stretch across sun-fed lawns, the metallic echo of small voices settle like pollen deep inside the ear of tongues, and the promised clouds of heaven hang limp, anvils over the head of every silly breath.

---

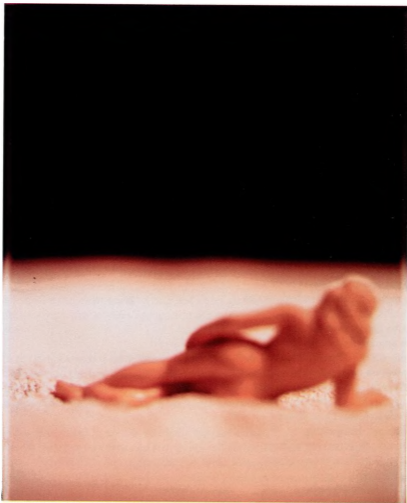
ALLISON SMYTHE

## Finite Habitation

ALL I EVER WANTED WAS JUST

GOD

something huge  
and unmeasurable—  
not this crumb  
of crusty bread,  
this stacked, whited  
linen, engraved altar, grave,  
ungraving, not the here  
most equal of shoulders,  
pewed, pressed together, crowded  
with scents and rising in unison,  
the arched beams stretched over us  
like ribs, sheltering and caging,  
candle flames stepped  
like fingernails, not this paned  
window's refracted light, this  
procession of vowels hovering  
in the rebreathed air, this repetition  
of pages, this numbering  
of Sundays, this clean sleeve  
of liturgy, this washing  
of hands, this creaking of knees  
and shoe leather, this common  
sense of surfaces, this  
two thousand year old  
eclipse, this amen,  
not this, not  
this cup.



David Levinthal, *Untitled*  
from the series "American Beauties"



Charlie Sartwelle, *The Black Madonna*, 1991  
acrylic on handmade quilt  
courtesy of Mother Dog Museum



Charlie Sartwelle, *Our Lady of the Bayou: Sleeping Beauty*, 1992  
mixed media



Charlie Sartwelle, *Our Lady of the Bayou: Black Madonna*, 1992  
mixed media

---

**GEORGE WILLIAMS**

## The Road From Damascus

**“YOU ARE CARVING A ROASTING CHICKEN.** The knife will not—I repeat—not of its own free will stab your lovely wife clean through the back. The chicken is food: it is not a dead bird, a derelict descendant of vanished dinosaurs spilling ammoniac rot and kidney slick onto the carving platter your in-laws from St. Petersburg mailed you two weeks before your wife five years ago was delivered prematurely of a stillborn girl while you were in a topless bar in Fort Lauderdale drunk out of your mind with colleagues.

“You *will* not at your boss’s annual summer evening Hawaiian pool party walk up to your associate’s wife and pluck the nursing newborn from her disbelieving arms and dash it on the mossy stones of the Japanese rock garden. Nor will you siphon a gallon of gasoline from your car and dousing her dress set her on fire with a luau lantern, payback for making your wife a social pariah by cutting off invitations to dinner parties and ladies’ pro-am golf tournament fund-raisers and Woman’s Club charity functions because after losing her first child she took an overdose of Placydl and drove her Riviera into a ditch and spent a month recovering in a *wellness center* on company insurance. Nor *will* you contemplate putting a 12-gauge to the back of her head for suggesting your wife is a dysfunctional toxic-parented para-alcoholic co-dependent enabler when after two drinks she has been known to screw anything longer than it is wide and come Sunday still shake her comely butt up to the communion rail at St. Sebastian’s for the *body* and *blood* of a God you no longer are afraid to admit you find incredible, the son of the Supreme Being allowing himself to be nailed to planks by half-wit centurions and then possessed of the wherewithal to query his father as to *why* he’s been forsaken.

“You will not, out of nowhere, when you are selling a life insurance policy to a black executive, shout, “**AVAUNT! DOUBLE INDEMNITY OR CHITLINS!**”

“You will not walk up to the blond in the secretarial pool and slip the erection you are hiding behind your briefcase between her plum lips, which will, willing, swallow the briny *seed* you have been saving for her since the Christmas party where drunk you passed her in the hall and touched the *nipples* rising through her silk blouse as gingerly as you would a newborn baby’s head.

“The fighter pilot in the Phantom jet screaming 70 kilometers to the west over the Gulf of Mexico has not just accidentally fired a heat-seeking missile from its razor wing, which in less than forty seconds will blow the Airbus in which you are riding, a perspiring passenger with drink in hand, clear out of the summer sky, and rain you down on the grey waters of the Gulf in an aluminum-confetti cloudburst of viscera.

"You will not *die*. If you rub your face, your skin will not come off. You are *not* going mad. You are not hearing *voices*. It is only the after effects of a poison your system is attempting to purge from said system. Your brain does not feel like a pork rind. You are not an eating breathing defecating worm created to no end and destined to become a maggot-eaten passel of gristly splintered bones turned over in the soil by road crew a hundred years hence. You do not feel like a pelt on the interstate that used to be a dog. You do not have a *skeleton*. You are not an *animal*. Your heart will not stop *right now*.

"You will not wake one morning to discover a cache of firepower in the trunk of your Omega, nor will voices direct you into the crowds of shoppers at the mall, where calm as pond water you will simultaneously open fire with a flamethrower and heavy machine gun, riddling and torching *customers* before you wedge a hand grenade into your mouth and pull the pin for the sales clerk of Radio Shack, who is videotaping the mayhem from behind the safety of a pyramid of Snoopy phones so he can sell the cassette to CNN for 50,000 dollars and take his live-in girlfriend on a skiing vacation in the Alps, where he will recount the story to local reporters and curious tourists over snifters of brandy, boring his companion into having a *menàge à trois* with a German mime and his hermaphrodite lover.

"If you swing your arm in the gym while lifting a weight, the barbell will not fly out of your hand and strike dead an aerobics instructor shouting into a megaphone.

"Your foot does not have a mind of its own. It will not of its own free will lift itself from the brake pedal and stomp the accelerator, thereby running down where they walk two pedestrians crossing at the light.

"Beneath the skin on your face when you look into the mirror is not a *skull*.

"You will never spend another nickel in a strip-bar, nor waste like you did last month 900 dollars on a stunning prostitute, who deliciously feigned and writhed beneath you while you rose to a two-condom climax not even a dozen 50 dollar street walkers allowed you to forget.

"You *will* not have but three drinks before dinner; you *will* not have but two drinks before dinner; you will only have *a* drink before dinner; you will have only ONE drink to steady your nerves; you will not drink a quart of scotch in a 24-hour period; you will not drink ever again; you will drink *only* every third day; you *will* drink today until you pass out; next week you will *go* to AA; you will get *drunk* tonight since you are going to AA next *week*.

"You will not while spending a Marine Reserve weekend at Quantico hi-jack a prototype tank with laser weapons and a 70 millimeter cannon and drive it into the northern Virginia Sunday dawn, blasting split-level houses sky-high and igniting the gastanks of cars with laser light, nor will you mow down with the co-axial machine gun confused *residents* who flee their houses in robes and boxer shorts, or perched out of the hatch roll over the slaughter on the lawns and through flak-blasted gardens and the machine-gunned dog houses and burning picture windows wave an insurance voucher in the air and shout through a bullhorn, "ATTENTION: YOUR HOMEOWNER'S POLICY HAS EXPIRED. HAVE A NICE DAY.

"On a Saturday afternoon in August your self-propelled lawnmower will not of its own will run you down and cut off your legs at the knees, leaving you an amputee in the hot grass, where your neighbor's dog will drink your intestinal bile and toss your jawbone up and down the yard.

"You love your native America. It is not a rabid behemoth of greed idiotized by advertising and stupefied by cathode rays and narcotized by Twinkies. America is not a land-fill. The interstates are not strip-mines. The federal government is not run by technocratic zombies and National Security Councillors on mood elevators. Hidden in the amber waves of grain are not gargantuan warheads poised for global annihilation. You are not responsible for a hole in the ozone because for 24 years you have sprayed Right Guard on your nervous underarms, nor has your car farted hydrocarbons into the atmosphere that rain down acid on the earth like whirlwinds of ammonia in the atmosphere of Jupiter.

"Big Macs are not made of beef steer fed concrete and steroids before auction, nor do the french fries soaked with ketchup resemble the delighted parasites that will one day dine on your fatted carcass.

"Nor will you weep driving in the car over the sadness of life, nor step any closer to the lip of the abyss because your sister and a friend climbed aboard a jet and flew away into the deep blue of a cloudless sky, never to be heard from or seen again.

"Neither is the child in your wife's womb the anti-Christ. It does not look like a frog, nor does it have more than one head. Its limbs, though bowed, are not amphibian. It does not have red eyes, nor fangs, nor claws, nor a tail like a whip-saw. It does not have cloven feet. It is normal. You are normal. Your wife will not die in childbirth. The baby will not be born dead. You will not jump off a building, or a bridge.

"Nor will a rendition of Amazing Grace over the country station crack you asunder and fill you with the terrifying fire of the Holy Spirit. Also, there is no such place as HELL, where souls are tormented in an eternity of flame for the paltry vanities which sustain your very existence; the vanity of insurance; the vanity of love; the vanity of comfort, peace, friendship, etc.; the vanity of having a family, earning a living, buying a house, and so on; all these illusions and spurious hopes masking a bedrock selfishness which God in his thunder is readying to avenge right *now*, for the summer thunderhead swept in off the Gulf, it says, and you can hear it say, "BLOWOUT SALE ENDS SATURDAY. PREPARE TO DIE."

---

LESLIE NORRIS

Ithaca

JOURNEYING IN ITHACA  
in his old age,  
he climbs to the town of Stavros.

He walks among olive trees  
in the dusty gardens.

Early mist covers the sea.

Odysseus is home,  
atop his column.

Stone head of Odysseus,  
dry moss in his eye,  
stares over two concrete houses  
and a wrecked Honda.

He records with his Leica  
the face of the demigod,  
thinks of the men,  
wherever their fortune,  
who turn their faces  
to the fires of home.

White sunlight lifts the mist.  
The sea begins to juggle  
its silver platters.

In that blinding dazzle  
he sees with clarity  
Ithaca vanishing.

LESLIE NORRIS

## In The City

IN THE CITY he has forgotten how to be alone.  
He is often astonished by the silence of libraries,  
in the tall buildings he admires and visits, he  
whistles sometimes, from nervousness.  
He stands before paintings, studying eloquence.  
Not wanting simplicity, he imagines life  
as sauntering from room to room, not aware  
that he runs everywhere, across  
Royal Crescent where he pats the black labrador,  
up Lansdowne Hill to the Racecourse,  
among fashionable shoppers  
in Gay Street and Milsom Street.  
On Sundays he reads *The Observer*  
in the Botanical Gardens where sat  
the sailor's ghost. (In his own house  
a dead admiral walks at evening,  
meticulous and gentlemanly,  
decants his shadowy claret.)

They walk in October evenings  
when surprising cold  
suddenly drops the beech leaves  
and mist fills the bowl of hills.  
Their hidden feet  
are muffled to brushing echoes.  
He does not think to say out loud  
that she is as new bread to him,  
as air and daylight, his certainty and life.  
Her face is the one he looks for  
in all the brilliant streets.  
Hand in hand they walk home  
through autumn mists.

In darkness beyond night  
he runs downhill to the Post Office.

Flattening rain has emptied the world.  
Nothing is alive.

From the roof of the City Building  
a little screech owl screams  
and screams again,  
helpless in daunting storm,  
small and desperate in the downpour.

Hid in the lee of a door  
he looks toward the bird.  
He too is helpless.  
He is blind with rain,  
not an inch of his skin is dry.  
In the lash and whip of downpour,  
bent double, he climbs the hill,  
the hoarse voice of water, the gutters flooded.

It is not the rain  
makes him shiver.

**ELIZABETH STARR****His Wife's Indians**

HE COULD FEEL HER SHIFTING POSITIONS ACROSS THE SEAT, tucking and untucking her feet beneath her. The lamps on the sides of the highway were starting to fade on, even though the sky was still light enough to see by. He continued to count the exits and in between eyed the piles of Kleenex on the floor beside her feet. Though the light seemed to dim inside the car before anywhere else, he could still make out the separate colors. She'd bought a sample pack, and it was almost empty. She held a blue one crumpled between her fingers. She was saving it, he knew, because he had announced at the state line that they weren't stopping until they reached the hotel. She sniffled. She had been this way since they entered Alabama.

At the overpasses she would click her fingernail against the glass.

"There. No, that's not one." She turned to him and wiped her eyes. "They look like them, don't they? Indian mounds?"

There were Indian mounds in Alabama. Numbers of them. He had never seen so many and every time they passed one she would say so.

"There's one, Rod." And it would pass. "There was one. It had a sign." She would look at him remorsefully because he hadn't stopped. Because he hadn't slowed down enough for her to read the sign. He tried to keep his eyes on the straight lines, to pull himself back into the gray curves of the road and the feel of the car beneath him. Soon he would need the headlights, but not yet.

He had counted the exits on the way in, and Alabama had a few hundred left to go. She didn't seem to notice or care when he started counting them aloud. She continued to stare into every conspicuous hill or pile or rise in the earth.

"Another. That's another." She would turn. "That was another." And she would watch his face until she mistook something for a nod before she turned to the window again.

"Ten thousand."

"I wish we were Indians. I mean I wish we had been Indians."

He was sorry he had asked at the funeral what the mounds had been. He was sorry her cousin had told them.

"What for, Kate. Why do you wish we had been Indians?" A car appeared over the edge of the next hill with its headlights on. He rubbed his fingers together, debating. He asked so she could begin the talking again, so she would stop taking her shoes on and off and pulling her dress down tighter around her knees. So she would, for a minute, stop looking out the window. He flipped the lights.

"For cousin Agnes. She would hate it if she were alive, Rod."

"Hate what?"

"Being in a casket." She pulled her dress. "If we were Indians, we could just have a family mound, with all of us lying right next to each other. . . ."

He let the next exit pass without saying anything.

It had all started, he noticed, when he backed over the cat. She insisted they go to the funeral in Mississippi, to mourn for the postcards they would no longer receive at Christmas from Aunt Agnes. She cried over the college children they had seen grown up in school pictures: children she did not remember the names of.

Now she cried over the Indian mounds. She knew nothing about Indians. But because his wife began to cry again in her black dress, the dress she had put on to bury the cat, he lost count of the exits and pulled into the next set of mounds.

"Choctaw. They were Choctaw Indians. See the sign?"

She read it aloud to him. They had been one of the Five Civilized Tribes, twenty thousand of them had lived, probably, before their first European contact.

She climbed one of the mounds and knelt and felt it with her hands while he waited by the car. She looked strange under the beams of the headlights. She looked a little cold.

"Do you want my jacket?" he said. She stumbled toward him, triumphantly, a piece of paper in her hand.

"I found a flier." She handed it to him and edged back up to the top, then lay down and stared away from the headlights. "You read it to me, Rod."

Perhaps it was because her parents hadn't died yet. Perhaps because she hadn't ever lost a dog. These were possible reasons for her behavior. He took a breath in through his mouth to let the cool settle at the back of his throat. The air was sharp against his eyes, as if he had been asleep. Driving was a little like sleeping, once all the rhythms kicked in. He looked up at his wife. They were both growing older. He knew that that could do it too. And she should have, after all, had a dog. His had died at fifteen years, and he had cried then.

"They wrapped the bodies in skins and bark and things," he said. "They'd put food and possessions with them, for . . . I can't make it out." He paused. "They'd kill their dog, and put it with them."

"Don't summarize." She hadn't moved but she was watching him; either that or staring into the headlights, her arm raised to protect her eyes.

" . . . it was cleaned, placed in a bark coffin and taken to the bone house. When the bone house was full, the bones were taken out and buried, and mounds built over them."

She didn't say anything, and he wondered what she was thinking, if she could see herself like he saw her: peaceful and dead, all tangled up in Indian bones.

Maybe she had just fallen asleep. It would be the first time she had slept so peacefully in weeks.

He stood, uncertain what a man was to do when his wife was asleep in a graveyard.

"Isn't it beautiful here?" She smiled.

She didn't seem to see it as a graveyard. Perhaps she couldn't see herself as he saw her and wasn't thinking of bones at all. He tried to picture his wife, instead, in the midst of a tribe of almost transparent Indians, lying with them, quietly, side by side.

He couldn't really picture it, but somehow, he felt he was seeing what she was

seeing. He thought of her beside him in the passenger seat, watching through the windows while he watched the road. He wanted very much to go over to her then; to stand very quietly by her side until she was ready to go.

## “Not Enough Sense To Ask For Money”: Learning The Blues In Houston, Texas

**F**UNNY THING ABOUT IT, THE BLUES. Here is a brilliant and ebullient art form, full of a wise and playful cynicism, that somehow has existed in the minds of many people in the form of stereotypes that do not at all represent what the music is about. In a sense, it's almost fitting. Stereotypes and clichés are also part of the poetry of the Blues, the very tools that the Blues singer uses to pry open the minds of listeners after the soaring guitar has opened their ears.

Among the stereotypes that seem to have half-lives that rival plutonium is the rurality of the Blues. Another is the romantic image of the Bluesman as an isolated, lonely wanderer. Each, of course, has some historical truth. Developing around the turn of the century, the Blues did first appear in the small settlements, plantations, and lumber camps of the South; and the singers of that day did tend to be men who wanted a way out of the drudgery and near-slavery circumstances of that rural economy in places such as Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas.

But if one takes a longer view in both directions, the Blues can be seen to reach back to the survival of an African style of musical commentary on everyday life and forward, ever forward, in the sense that such wise and signifying comment continues to be valid and needed in whatever social circumstances the people find themselves. In the years just after World War II, Houston was the center for an extraordinary group of talented Bluesmen.

Oldtimers remember that Blues lived next door in Houston's Black Third and Fifth Ward neighborhoods. Shady's Lounge, Club Ebony, and Club Matinee, among others, featured stars such as Amos Milburn whose "One Scotch, One Bourbon, One Beer" was a national hit, as well as younger performers like Albert Collins who were beginning to make a name for themselves. Other Houston Bluesmen included the dynamic Big Walter Price and the poetic Weldon "Juke Boy" Bonner. There were also Clarence "Candy" Green, Perry Cain (later a popular deejay on KCOH radio), drummers Ben Turner and Ivory Semien, and Peppermint Harris. Hop Wilson and D. C. Bender kept an older Blues style current with their own personal innovations. The major figure on the scene, of course, was Sam Lightnin' Hopkins and Houston also was the headquarters of Don Robey's Peacock Records, a major entity in the Gospel, and Rhythm and Blues scene.

Robey founded the record company in 1949 to help build the career of Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, who was headliner at Robey's Fifth Ward supper-

club the Bronze Peacock. If there was anyone in Houston at the time who could challenge Lightnin' Hopkins's preeminence, it was Gatemouth. Where Hopkins was comfortable as a solo guitarist and singer in the classic country Blues mode, using that expected style as the base for all sorts of surprising and clever improvisations (both words and music), Gatemouth could simply explode all expectations.

A decade ago, in a small club in Nederland, Texas—not far from Orange, the town where he grew up—Sally Edge and I sat in delighted anticipation waiting for the start of Gatemouth Brown's show. While known as a master of all the country and urban Blues styles, Brown kicked off this show with a characteristic surprise. His 4-piece horn section launched brightly into Duke Ellington's "Take The A-Train" as Gatemouth, resplendent in rodeo cowboy dress-up garb, strolled on-stage playing guitar riffs aimed at the same spot in the stratosphere that Ellington's trumpet star Cat Anderson called home.

**GATEMOUTH BROWN:** I have a certain beat that I had the drummer to do. You accent one on your bass drum and that gives me what I call a Texas drive. And the swing part is from the Country side. That's where I can mix Texas Blues and Country together and come up with American and world music. Texas drive and swing.

When I was about twenty-two, I had an 18-piece orchestra travel all over the United States. Been misprinted a lot. Said I was traveling in the south, but that's incorrect. I traveled all over the United States.

\*\*\*

Guitarist Joe Hughes was born in Houston in 1938. While his mother thought "Blues music was bad," his stepfather was a staunch Lightnin' Hopkins fan. For Hughes, the Blues singer is "delivering a message, just like a preacher is delivering a message." And, he told writer Alan Govenar, the Bluesman "has made an art form out of it."

**JOE HUGHES:** When I started out, I was listening to Gates cause I've always idolized Gate Brown. He plays with fire. He plays with spirit. He's an entertainer, you know, he's not just a guitar player.

**GATEMOUTH BROWN:** Thank you for the compliment. You're not saying that because I'm sitting here, are you? Now what are you going to say when I leave this room?

**HUGHES:** I'm going to say the same thing.

**BROWN:** Okay, go ahead. Carry on.

**HUGHES:** I was fortunate enough to get a chance to meet him and to know him and to love him and he is just a beautiful person. Like I say, he is a well rounded entertainer. But when I first met him . . . I can't remember when I first met Gates because I've seen him so many times, so many times. I've seen him at the old Rodeo Cafe, I've seen him at Shady's Playhouse. I've seen him downtown where I was playing. He come in and told me my guitar didn't play worth a damn. But he was telling the truth.

When did I meet Gatemouth? I don't know. It's like he has always been there because I knew him before I knew him, you know.



Clarence 'Gatemouth' Brown

Milt Larkin Collection,  
Courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center,  
Houston Public Library

\* \* \*

Heather Korb's film *Third Ward Blues* focuses on Joe Hughes, who still makes Houston his home, and draws a wider circle to include Albert Collins, Gatemouth Brown, Johnny Clyde Copeland, and other musicians. It is clear that these men are artists who have inherited and extended an African American tradition. Comedian David Alan Grier developed an outrageous character for the television series *In Living Color*—a parody of the stereotypical Bluesman that, nevertheless, emphasizes the real fact that the aesthetic principle of Blues music is testifying to the truth of what life really is all about. Listening to the musicians talk in Korb's film underscores this point also. Wanna hear it? Here it go.

\* \* \*

ALBERT COLLINS: Lowell Fulson. I met Lowell, the first time I met Lowell was at that ballroom down on Elgin and Dowling. The El Dorado Ballroom. That's the first time I seen him and Ray Charles. But Lowell had mostly the big-time musicians that used to play with him. Lloyd Glen and all them people. When he cut out that guitar shuffle, that's when I really got into Lowell. I was trying to play "Okey Dokey Stomp" and all them things in them days, and Gatemouth Brown stuff, you know. And I'm trying to play a little Albert Collins too. You know, trying to get my own thing happening . . . to project my own music.

People here in Texas used to laugh at me and say, "Man, why don't you put that starvation box down and go get you a job?" I say, I got a job. You know I always had a job. The first time I met this kid here, I always had a job. I kept a job. You know I'm so blessed and God blessed me so much because you know what? I never went hungry. My people took care of me. I never had to run away from home. I never been on drugs in my life and I feel real good.

\* \* \*

What Heather Korb has accomplished, in fact, is a fresh approach to a history that all too frequently gets lost in America. Race remains a factor in this country and has the strange power of making people and processes invisible; that is, if what is under discussion has anything to do with African-Americans. Korb's *Third Ward Blues* offers an intimate and entertaining visit with men who are both artists and friends, who know and enjoy their role in the community they live in at the same time that they understand (even if many of their neighbors may be unaware of their status) what it means to be an internationally-acclaimed artist.

\* \* \*

JOE HUGHES: You know the first guitar I had? Johnny Guitar Watson was staying right around the corner there and he had a guitar then, an electric guitar, but he



Joe Hughes, 1954

wasn't playing either then. He had moved to California. That's the first guitar I actually played on the bandstand until he came to repossess it.

JOHNNY CLYDE COPELAND: I think I got you your first real guitar . . . . You know, the guitar we saw at Congress Street or somewhere; we used to go up there and look at it everyday and we used to bet who was going to get the guitar first. And when I got a chance to get the guitar, I give it to you.

HUGHES: I'm sitting on the step of 3125 Tuam. This is the house I was staying in when I first started playing guitar. We used to play on this porch right here, me and Johnny Copeland, Herbie Henderson, and James Johnson all started out from The Dukes of Rhythm. This is my homestead. I was fifteen, fifteen and a half years old when I started playing bandstand.

This is also where I was staying when my mother passed, but we'd been playing about six to eight months when she passed. Kinda hate it because she didn't really get a chance to see us perform like I woulda wanted her to. But this is where it began and I met Johnny, like you say, through my brother. And he's become the best friend in the world I have today.

\*\*\*

The Blues is an important art form in a number of different ways. As William Barlow noted in *"Looking Up At Down": The Emergence of Blues Culture* (1989), "Blues songs documented the temper of the times and thus preserved the historical legacy of a people still confined to the lowest echelon of the social order." At the same time, Blues is also a unique symbiosis of lyric poetry and improvised music that has—over the past seventy years—provided the model and foundation for American popular musical forms ranging from the Broadway musical stage to rock 'n' roll.

\*\*\*

HEATHER KORB: So you were playing honky tonks when you were sixteen.

JOE HUGHES: Yeah. I always looked older than I was. And my brother and my best friend, they drank beer. I didn't drink beer. But I could go into these clubs and buy them beer, you know. We played at the Green Lily. I think we got about \$3.75 a piece—there was three of us—and all the beer you could drink. And I didn't drink. So when they give me beer, I just give it to my brother or some of their friends, you know.

Actually, I started recording after Johnny Copeland did. He met a guy named Charlie Booth which did his biggest record to date, really, as far as a hit. Which was a song called "Down On Bended Knees." But by me being associated with Johnny, as close as we were, it brought me into the picture. But my first recording that I did actually on record was for a guy named Henry Hayes on Kangaroo label called "I Can't Go On This Way" and "Ants In My Pants." But it didn't do that well. Cause I was really trying to do crossover music, you know. And so I didn't really just play deep down Blues, I did whatever I thought would sell white. But to no avail, though.

But I found out that a lot of my stuff ended up overseas, which is really when I really got my break, when I started going to Europe. Which is . . . this is all years



Albert Collins  
Photograph by Benny Joseph

later. But the best thing I had going for me then was that I was fortunate enough that I didn't have to go to somebody to get into their band. I had created my own. And, lucky enough, we did play all the latest stuff at that time so we had no problem getting work. It was just that we didn't have enough sense to ask for no money.

\*\*\*

Another long-ago discredited, yet persistent, misperception suggests that artists are generally inarticulate beyond the limits of their artistic discipline. The fact is that many artists, visual artists and musicians especially, feel that talking about their work may have the undesirable consequence of directing attention away from the aesthetic experience they've worked so hard to present. The Blues poet, of course, characteristically toys with the stereotype of tongue-tied wisdom.

*Third Ward Blues* goes a long way toward debunking these Blues stereotypes. Korb's sensitive and probing portrait of Houston Blues artists gives the viewer a sense of their camaraderie and their connection to the community they grew up in. The interviews certainly dispel any notion that these men are inarticulate except when singing.

Mention the Blues and many people think of smoke-filled honky tonks. And there are still a bunch of them in Houston's Black neighborhoods. But the Blues can also be found in Sum Arts' annual Juneteenth Blues Festival at Hermann Park's Miller Outdoor Theatre or at megaconcerts sponsored by cigarette companies in huge no smoking by city ordinance sports arenas. The young men who learned to play the Blues in Houston in the years just after World War II are now stars with international reputations. In fact, most of their livelihood comes from overseas tours. But their connection to Houston is still strong.

\*\*\*

JOHNNY CLYDE COPELAND: Take my music out of Texas? Well you know, during the time of the Disco era club owners all decided they would use record players instead of the bands. That made the work kinda slight. We was working one or two nights every week. At the time when I left here the Blues had fell to its slowest times and there wasn't much work in the city. Me being the person that worked locally 15 or 20 years making my living . . . and at this point I just couldn't make a living, you know. I couldn't make two days a week.

And I had an offer from a very good friend, a guy named Robert Turner who was living in New York at the time, and he wanted me to come up there and try to do something. And when I got to New York I realized what a bad state our situation down here was in. I picked up Sheldon Harris's book *The Blues Who's Who* and there wasn't nothing wrote about nobody out of my area like Joe Hughes, myself, Widemouth Brown, or a lot of those guys. Well, Gatemouth Brown was in it, but he wasn't registered as Texas Blues—just Blues. T-Bone Walker was in it, but it was just Blues. Leadbelly . . . it was just Blues. Blind Lemon Jefferson. But just Blues. I thought, well, like these guys have a background, too! They come from a place, you know? Which is Texas and I think somebody should let the people know that.

When they took Lightnin' Hopkins into the European situation in the Fifties



Johnny "Clyde" Copeland, 1988

Photograph by Gary Supone

they didn't distinguish him from Howlin' Wolf or Muddy Waters. They just put them all on a plane and brought them over together. They didn't say, well Lightnin' is from Texas and Howlin' Wolf is from Lake Jackson, Mississippi. They didn't do that, right?

They just say, "Hey, this is the Blues." We had a problem where we were unknown down here and I took it on my own to try and make sure that somebody knows that some of the stuff we did was known through family—not just individuals—but "family music."

You know when I first came back from New York you know I told Joe Hughes, I say, "Joe Hughes . . ." I found him and I told him, "You know, I ain't saw nobody in New York who can play guitar better than you."

JOE HUGHES: Do you remember when we was in Galveston? Our first uniforms? And we would always dress alike—socks, underwear, shoes. That's how close we were. We did everything together, we went everywhere together, we was always together. We'd get off a job and come down to Marie's and stay up all night.

COPELAND: We were our own little family.

\*\*\*

Funny thing about it, the Blues. There's always a "new" musical style being hyped by the many-headed clarions of the American culture industry. Often enough, when examined, these novelties turn out to be adaptations of the Blues. And, in any case, the real Blues is always already still around. It is real and it is an art that is difficult to learn and, in fact, never learned unless the artist applies not only art, but also heart. And soul.

\*\*\*

ALBERT COLLINS: Well, is Texas Blues different? Cause a lot of people ask me. Texas Blues, Chicago Blues. We never had so many harp players coming out of Texas, or slide guitar players. That's the difference. Cause I was raised up with big band sounds. I used to listen to Jimmie Lunceford, Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey. That was my kind of thing . . . what I grew up with. I always wanted a big band including Henry Hayes, music teacher.

I played with Little Richard. This is where I first met Jimi Hendrix at, right on Dowling and Elgin. I started out trying to play piano first, and I wanted to be an organ player like Jimmy McGriff and Jimmy Smith. I bought me an organ. It got stole from me.

Joe, you don't remember? I had that '57 Ford convertible. But, hell, you were a little bitty boy. You know, I watched this young man, Joe Hughes, grow. This man here is a very good entertainer, and I'm not saying it because he here, I'd say it even if he wasn't here. He can play any kind of music you want to hear—country, Blues, jazz, he can play it all. But I didn't read music. I had a beginner's book and I took the beginner's book and I threw it away and I started playing by ear. That's the only way I play, by ear. The only music that I read is drum music. That's the reason I'm hard on a drummer. I want to read drum music for a beat because I had a problem with my timing when I first started playing music.

JOE HUGHES: I learned to play out of a 25-cent guitar book that belonged to Jewell Brown's brother. Ted Brown. I can't read either. I play by ear.

COLLINS: I thought you could read!

HUGHES: No, man, I can't read nothing but the funny papers.

\*\*\*

All quotations from musicians are transcribed from Heather Korb's film, *Third Ward Blues*, Copyright © 1993 by Heather Korb; all rights reserved.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Brown, Gatemouth. *Original Peacock Recordings*. Rounder 2039.

*Real Life*. Rounder 2054.

*Alright Again*. Rounder 2028.

*No Looking Back*. Alligator 4804.

*One More Mile*. Rounder 2034.

*Pressure Cooker*. Alligator 4745.

Collins, Albert. *Ice Pickin'*. Alligator 4713.

*Frostbite*. Alligator 4719.

*Truckin' With Albert Collins*. MCA 10423.

*Don't Lose Your Cool*. Alligator 4730.

*Frozen Alive*. Alligator 4725.

Collins, Albert with Johnny Copeland and Robert Cray. *Showdown*. Alligator 4743.

Copeland, Johnny. *Ain't Nothing But A Party*. Rounder .

*Copeland Special*. Rounder 2025.

Hughes, Joe. *Texas Guitar Master*. Double Trouble TX3012.

*If You Want To See The Blues*. Black Top 1050.



Eldorado Ballroom

Milt Larkin Collection, Courtesy of the Houston  
Metropolitan Research Center,  
Houston Public Library

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barlow, William. *"Looking Up At Down": The Emergence of Blues Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.

Govenar, Alan. *Meeting The Blues*. Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1988.

Govenar, Alan and Benny Joseph. *The Early Years of Rhythm and Blues*. Houston: Rice University Press, 1990.

KEVIN PILKINGTON

## View From the Porch

WE LIKE SITTING ON  
our porch where we  
can watch the East River.  
A tug tows clouds uptown  
to cover sun and keep  
the rest of the day cool  
though nothing helps the heat  
our cats are in.

We are at a height  
where we worry about  
the factory on Roosevelt Island  
that smokes three stacks  
a day and how this river,  
filled to its waves with a color  
too vague to know, will  
never lose the taste of ghetto  
and slum from its mouth.

From here those streets to the south  
are too thin for anyone,  
but if you walk them, you'll age quickly,  
sleep in their alleys and dream  
wine. Your only hope of staying  
young could be a traffic light  
every time it stains your face green.

That dark smudge is where  
I once lived. Cabs were too yellow  
to stop there on cold nights;  
if I had the money, I'd head  
for the clubs on the west side  
that open every night at eight  
and close around jazz. Then  
for a buck I'd ride the subway

to nowhere, letting it rattle  
me warm.

It's taken a while but every  
time this woman holds my hand  
I know I've finally made it.  
Now I can lean over this railing  
grab cars that look toy and stuff  
my pockets with rush hour,  
know that each day begins  
with her mouth that touches me  
the way dawn never could,  
sleep every night curled next  
to her side and after we love,  
watch as she lights the room with her thigh.

## Collaborative Art Project: Original Works

THE IDEA FOR THIS PROJECT originated one afternoon in a Montrose coffee-bar, where we were thinking about how we could include an original work of art in each issue of *Gulf Coast*. We printed the same photograph on two opposing pages and then asked local artists to alter the photo (p. 103), in any way they chose, with these stipulations—that the issue would still close, and none of the pages would stick together or be damaged. We invited over sixty visual artists and three musicians to gather on a Sunday in February and reinterpret a photograph by Amy Blakemore, altering her print through a variety of mediums. We mailed each participant a photocopy of the image three weeks in advance of the gathering, where we promised to serve them paella and beer when they were done. Each artist worked on fifteen copies of *Gulf Coast*. Some artists created fifteen variations on the work; others emphasized one; the rest fell somewhere in between.

Mark O'Connor  
Randall Watson

---

## PARTICIPATING ARTISTS:

Wanda Alexander	Dan Johnson	Don Redman
Dan Allison	Winfred Johnson	Cristi Rinklin
David Aylsworth	Paul Kittelson	Tony Romano
Michael Barry	Sharon Kopriva	Kerry Rowitzer
Amy Blakemore	Jacqui Larsen	Dean Ruck
Fernande Bondarenko	Jack Livingston	Robert Ruello
Carol Burton	Ken Luce	Janet Ruffin
Penny Cerling	Giles Lyon	Charlie Sartwelle
Wade Chandler	Cynthia Macdonald	Debbie Schlieffer
Sheila Cloudt	Heidi MacDonald	Kelli Scott Kelley
Alex Coward	Malcolm MacDonald	Beth Secor
Christy Cox-Silbernagel	Andy Mann	Kathryn Sherman
Maja Dimitrijevič	Jack Massing	Jenny Silitch
Jeff Elrod	Robert McCauley	Toni Silva
Carter Ernst	Georgia McInnis	Gail Siptak
Kirk Farris	Maria Merrill	Allison Smythe
Andy Feehan	Peter Merwin	William Steen
Michael Fischer	Lynn Nguyen	Amy Storrow
Lisa Fisher	Mary Ann Papanek-Miller	Jim Tiebout
Michael Galbreth	Renée Pernoud	Nestor Topchy
Mary Hayslip	Jim Pirtle	Moses Valerio
Howard Hilliard	Carla Poindexter	Marco Villegas
George Hixson	Basilios Poulos	Randall Watson
David Jezek	A. Quinlan	Rob Ziebell



*Boy and Ball*, Amy Blakemore  
Gelatin Silver Photograph

*J. Larson*



## ANDREW MARKHAM

### Maws

**O**UTSIDE THE WAITER'S ROWHOUSE, THE CHINESE WOMAN sneezes in the morning. He is a career waiter, and it is 1923 almost everywhere in the world.

The hotel will be opening this week. It is the finest one that the city has ever seen, ever *will see*, if the owners, two robust and mustachioed twin brothers by the name of Fain, are to be taken at their word, and he, the career waiter, who is bicycling to work now, can see no reason not to.

This is good work, the career waiter thinks. These are giddy times.

Sometimes, the Chinese woman will sing. Usually this is at night, and her voice is good, there is a yearning to be heard, even though she does all those eerie and unearthly tricks with it that he supposes her homeland songs call for.

This morning, over a Sunday steak and egg breakfast he has cooked, he reads a feature in the newspaper about some Indians, natives somewhere in Central America; there is a photo, shows them looking at a block of ice as high as a Christmas tree and bookcase-wide. They are standing around it, and their faces read faithful to the caption: *from where has this great cold stone gem come?* His imagination keeps coming back to this all day, like a tune he can't help but sing, and suddenly he feels himself wanting to find something like that, something that he could see for the first time, and be stunned, breathtaken.

He was hired on six months ago to the hotel's restaurant, when the hotel still was only a promise. One of the Brothers Fain, he can't recall which, said, as he looked up at the not-quite-finished-building, "The South shall rise again, boy!" And then, he shook the career waiter by the shoulders (he could feel this rattling all the way to his teeth), and gave him the job, at a starting salary that almost embarrasses the career waiter when he thinks of it. When the tips start coming, it will be downright *vulgar*.

The hotel has opened, and is the toast and talk of the town. On Fridays and Saturday nights, the lobby and overhead balcony are converted into a two-level ballroom. It is one of the best features of the hotel, yet another bragging point, yet another beauty mark for the Brothers Fain: an indoor balcony which a bravura

piece of engineering has enabled to cantilever far, far, and farther, out into the air. Gravity mastered.

People can dance on both levels, men can look below to see down the women's dresses; and while the women have no like advantage, they seem to enjoy looking down as much as the men. There is something about seeing the kaleidoscope patterns of people coming and going, most of them so beautiful, and swirling around the floor that looks like dark water, like they are dancing on dark water.

Once a month, for a good while now, the career waiter has been sending money to his younger sister, a languages teacher at a women's college in Virginia; she's been putting this towards some property in the mountains, a cabin, a few hundred acres which they have agreed to share evenly, though her contribution has been minimal. He feels good doing this, noble, although some days a less-fair and selfish voice will tell him he is just a soft touch and sucker. But now it is nearly paid for, and in both their names. Sometimes he thinks neither one of them will marry, and the idea of them growing old together seems unnatural and colorless to him.

Six months from now, this will happen: the marvelous balcony at the great hotel will collapse, spill down onto the lobby below, and it will happen so quickly that some couples will still be waltzing in midair, waitresses will still be refreshing drinks. It will be the career waiter's day off, but the Brothers Fain, who do not take days off, will stand by, mouths like O's of horror, and they will be ruined, will see more than a few customers killed before them, more crippled still.

But none of this has happened yet. And as to the once-more rising of the south, the jury will remain out.

When he was still in college, he had bouts of panic, and what they used to call melancholia, the career waiter did. One time, he took a good look at one of the magazines so popular at the time, the ones that described alien cultures, the ones that so rawly depicted the ways of the animal kingdom—snakes swallowing rabbits whole, blood in a lather on the lion's maw—and he just froze in yellow terror. His wonderment at why he would have this reaction made him attempt to enter into the young field of psychology for a time, the faith taken in science being what it once was.

But he found that this descent, even deeper into his own worries, fears, did him no good, actually made him sick for a time. He left college, wandered into waitering, and has found it in many ways satisfying.

There are only two things that have kept this first week of the open hotel from being perfect for him. One is the Chinese woman.

He is a patient, patient man—you have to be in order to do the job he does well—and he has also gotten fairly capable of tuning out those things that might initially bother him. But the sounds that come out of her seem to cut through both of these virtues, and burrow themselves into what feels like his spine.

She clearly is exaggerating her sneezes; and, as his sister would say, it is like the end of the world, to hear her clear the phlegm from her lungs. She wants people to know that she is outside, sick; that there but for the grace of God go they.

He has been asked to perform the master of ceremonies duties at the hotel this Friday, when there will be a dance contest. The Brothers Fain seem to have all the confidence in the world in him, and have let him know that they're considering him for the job of restaurant manager. He guesses he is content to let his career keep moving in this direction, although he hasn't done any such work in the past. The Brothers Fain say that though he is still a young man, he gives off a certain air of self-control. A good-looking boy, they say, and he can think on his feet. All virtues that will take him far in the service trade. They say these things as if he weren't in the room, and he finds himself wanting to speak up, to say, Wait, I'm here, you know.

Sitting on his night table is a letter he began to his sister. Dear Jo, it begins, how do you say Hello in Chinese? He puts it in the drawer.

He takes out a better insurance policy on his rowhouse. He is surprised to find that his parents' names are still on the policy, and then ashamed that he has not thought about them in so long. They have been dead ten years, already old when they had him and his sister, already gone through several lives—teachers, missionaries, then a good living in overseas trade—and have left behind enough of what they'd accomplished to sustain him and his sister well, materially, spiritually. What he remembers most clearly is that they died within six months of each other. He recalls thinking with some guilt at the time that it was magical, that his father—that *anybody*—would die simply because his heart was broken, his life's love taken away. He remembers feeling envy for the part of his mother only his father had shared, this in addition to his own sorrow.

It is a *marvel* to the career waiter that the police have not taken the Chinese woman away. It's a perfectly respectable neighborhood, with him—the lone bachelor—being the only slightly shady resident. Doesn't she frighten the children, wearing her oily-looking sweater and dungarees in the heart of the summer, her long black witch's hair? Those songs of hers? But that is a problem, a puzzle he hasn't yet worked out—once you get past the noises, the rags on her back, and look closely, she is still a young woman. Her eyes are not dull but wild, and a single bath would likely unearth a beauty of sorts.

In daydreams he imagines she could even be some sort of empress, heiress to the Oriental throne—that there has been a terrible mistake made, leaving her destitute and alone. He can imagine the story as an opera.

She must have been one of the whores the railroad would sometimes supply to the Chinese workers, or the daughter of one such whore. That is what the career waiter knows is likely to be true. And so maybe the neighborhood pities her. *He* does, when the sounds she makes do not invade his head.

Throughout the dance contest which he has been asked to host, he has more to drink than he usually does—he rarely touches the stuff, really, the law being the law after all—but on this occasion it does loosen him up, enables him to make a few jokes during the course of the evening, all of which go over well with the crowd.

They go over especially well with one blonde. He notices that though she

started the evening with one spit curl that seemed to join at her eyebrow, her dancing and revelry and sweat have turned one side of her face into a series of commas and quote marks and curlicues. There is no man in the ballroom who has not tried to brush his crotch against her on the dance floor—high society has more than its share of *frotteurs*, he has noticed—and he has identified with this urge himself.

While on the toilet, of all places, it occurs to him that there have not been any Chinese working the rails since he was a boy, very young. They have all long since gone west, east, anywhere but further south. This once more casts a shadow on the origins of the Chinese woman.

In the basement of the rowhouse, there is a workshop his father constructed for the pursuit of his lifelong hobby, watchmaking. There are possibly hundreds of watches, the works for a hundred more down there, along with precise and elegant tools and worklights. The career waiter goes down there from time to time, tries his hand at working on the watches, what he can remember of his father's tutelage.

Two weeks later, he is hosting another dance contest. And there is the same spit-curl blonde. She does not make him work at all hard. He can't even remember what he said to her as he walked over after the contest was through, only noticed from her accent that she was from up north. And now they have arrived back at his rowhouse, where he finds that he also can't remember her name.

Like liquor, he doesn't often indulge in this way, feels it is slightly wrong, and there are his neighbors to consider, but it has been a heady week, and he believes that a single fling would even do him a little good. He has been feeling something more than the desire that comes to everybody in the summer months, more of a longing, a need to be surprised, like an Indian seeing ice.

He is getting fewer and fewer opportunities at the hotel to meet the guests, who were always the ones to stir his imagination the most—why would that lovely young thing be with such an ancient old troll as this? Or why does the bachelor lawyer always eat alone? No time for friendship, or no interest? Now, he just gives direction, encouragement, the odd bit of chewing-out, to those who deal directly with the guests, and has meetings with the Brothers Fain. They seem to him overfond of the idea of *meeting*, and use them as a pretext to go on and on about progress; he has tried to join in on this running conversation, but it is no use trying to get an edgewise word between these two. He doesn't know what he would say anyway. He liked bringing small and simple bits of pleasure to people, or just being a kind of fly on the wall, and now, he's a little bit at sea, unsure of what his job actually is, and he feels a new melancholy coming on.

After a month goes by, he gets a letter from his sister. Dear Joseph, it says, I am more than a little worried about you, your flights of fancy.

He sighs as he reads on.

His sister thinks it is very sweet, him wanting to help people, but he should not let his flights of fancy—there, that is the second time she has used that phrase—carry him away.

He had no clue that this was an outstanding trait in his character, but he imagines it must be if she says so.

His sister ends the letter with a few phrases of Chinese she has copied down from a textbook. She herself can't speak the language at all. He practices pronouncing these phrases smoothly, but when at last he attempts to use them, the Chinese woman hisses at him like an animal, like something cornered. He notices that her teeth are in excellent condition. They are perfect.

Maybe, he thinks, I've offended her by addressing her too directly. But it is too late, she has run off, gone south before his very eyes.

One thing the Brothers Fain disapprove of, and often tease him about, is the fact that he still rides a bicycle, this although he sees people everywhere riding them, the same as himself. Don't you know it's the 20th century, boy?, they say, laughing in great explosions of air and wheeze.

The overhead fan in his bedroom has not worked in some time, not since the hotel opened—actually, that is the other thing besides the Chinese woman that made that very first week imperfect—but there in the dim still light it doesn't much trouble him—he lies on the bed, himself still clothed, watches Emily (he has since learned her name) take off her shining dress to reveal her shining flesh.

*Marvelous*, is the word he thinks of, the same word every time she does this for him.

She is able to make her body writhe even standing up, to seem as if she is aching for carnal pleasure, touching her own skin lightly with her fingertips, pink lips parted as if she is shocked at her own arousal, ready at any moment to unfold into ecstasy. To *come*, the word she likes using so well. It is a performance, and it works every time—he sees that that is her satisfaction, the bedroom her arena. He has been pleasantly surprised to feel a certain measure of respect for this, for her.

As they make love, outside the Chinese woman sings, sneezes, and spits.

What is that? Emily asks, in languid, amused tones.

The Chinese princess of the neighborhood, he says, and loses himself in her saying, Hello, hello, hello.

---

DAVID IGNATOW

## Sandia Mountain Range, New Mexico

ON THE COARSE BROWN HIDE of the mountain  
over its rolling tongue of the road  
we drive to the mouth of this carcass  
piled above us, in its shadow.  
Far into the vertebraed distance  
the stubbled skin lies in plains.  
Where we see water, it is an open eye  
dead to the sun, and when we look up  
the sun is its crawling maggot.

Only that a foot leans upon a pedal  
sees us out of the cemetery of this body,  
dead from before the time we were swamp.  
Rubber, oil and steel die beneath us  
for our deliverance, and where trees dress  
the impoverished sky, our eyes open again  
within our burying selves.

HEATHER SELLERS

Grind

AT NIGHT THE TEETH PARADE, hard larvae.  
In my dreams I bleed and gums gleam.  
My teeth peel in transparent layers like toenails  
and slip into my lungs.

The nightmares are dry and deep.  
My hands fill with what I say and crush what I mean.  
I wake gnawing a dog's leg with my fur gums.  
In sheets of prayer, I sleep  
undone.

---

## LANCE OLSEN

### Live Sex: Microwaves: London

ALLISON WAS A FACT-CHECKER FOR A HORSE MAGAZINE on the twenty-first floor of a slender building covered with cobalt-colored mirrors in Boise, Idaho. During her two-week vacation in London, she wanted to know only one thing: what went on behind all those narrow doorways in Soho marked LIVE BED SHOWS and EXOTIC DANCERS.

#### HOPE IN LONDON (1)

Murray, her husband, was a high school teacher. He had been a high school teacher for seven years and he had the distinct impression he was going crazy.

"I have to get out of here," he told Allison one April evening at the dinner table. "My students are driving me mad. The administration is driving me mad. The other teachers are driving me mad. I need to get away. I need new experiences. I can't sleep at night."

Allison loved Murray.

She loved his ironic sense of humor, his levelheadedness, his sense of tidiness, and the red mole that grew two inches below his left breast. So on June 28th, the day after classes concluded, they boarded a 747. Allison plugged in her headphones, Murray swallowed three Quiet Worlds, and they flew to England.

At Gatwick he bought a Nicholson guidebook and street map and he planned their itinerary as they rode in a fat black cab toward their hotel room on Tottenham Court Road near the tube station.

That afternoon Allison fell asleep on a bench among harps and lyres in the Babylonian Room at the British Museum, cradling her rented tape-recorder in her lap and dreaming of excited phosphors, a million tiny dolphins shimmering on her computer screen back in Boise.

#### SANITY: MICROWAVES (1)

Umbrellas unfolded above them like large black mushrooms. Murray and Allison padded down Charing Cross Road in a cool light drizzle.

They stopped to browse warm book shops. At Foyle's, Murray bought a Penguin paperback filled with the history of London from pre-Roman times to the present.

They cut through New Coventry Street, bought half-price tickets to *Cats* in Leicester Square, and came out in the midst of Piccadilly Circus.

Allison had never seen so much energy, most of it sexual, in her life.

She just stood there, mushroom umbrella drooping, and took in the neon signs

flashing above her. Red double-decker buses, cars and motorscooters whirled in a dense noisy circle. Young men and women dressed in black leather and silver studs, hair orange and pink, played guitars at the feet of the glistening dark green statue of Eros.

She stared at businessmen in smart suits and cropped hair hurrying along sidewalks, blacks with tribal scars and braided locks hustling on street corners, tourists plunging into Tower Records, Wimpy's, the Underground. She sniffed the bitter smells of diesel exhaust, the greasy smells of frying meat, the lightly sweet smells of urine, pastries, and cigarette smoke.

She loved it more than she had ever loved any other experience in her life.

#### LIVE SEX IN A SYNTHETIC LANDSCAPE (1)

But Murray misread his map. Rather than heading up Regent Street, where a number of interesting and significant stores and cafés were housed, he led them up Sherwood Street, made a right turn instead of a left, and stepped out of an alley into the heart of Soho. Fruit and vegetable carts lined cramped side streets curving at illogical angles. Rotten apple rinds and lettuce stuck to the slick dark pavement. A wino with anal-pink eyes and blackened hands scrunched near the stage door of a theater. A middle-aged woman in jeans and T-shirt stood hugging a small blue pillow near a storefront advertising Iranian cuisine. Businessmen still hurried along sidewalks, but there were fewer of them, and, instead of heading for their offices, they were quickly ducking through narrow beaded doorways above which appeared the signs which fascinated Allison. Many signs were neon. Some were simply painted in black letters on white brick. Most were accompanied with a price: £1, £3, or £5. Beautiful women with black fingernails stood in some doorways, squat men with white silk shirts unbuttoned almost down to the navel in others. It was impossible to see beyond them, although Allison did what she could without appearing too conspicuous.

#### SMILE: NIKON

Murray turned the map every which way.

Allison daydreamed about large white beds in intense ovals of light, teenage women kissing tongue to tongue, and young muscular men reaching tenderly between each other's legs.

When she closed her eyes and opened them again, she saw the Queens Theatre, a prim man in a derby, and a McDonald's. Murray and she were back on Shaftesbury Avenue. A punk couple posed near a double-decker bus while a happy Japanese man wearing a flowered shirt snapped a photograph with his Nikon, having just paid each of them what looked like a ten-pound note. Allison's heart sank.

"Hey," she said to Murray, "that was fun. Let's go back."

"Yeah, right," he said, hailing a cab.

"I'm serious."

"We have thirteen minutes before the changing of the guard," he said.

Allison remembered a photograph she had once seen in a magazine of dazzling silver-white solar panels running in mile-long rows over a thousand acres in Arizona.

## HOPE IN LONDON (2)

"I'm not going crazy anymore," Murray announced several days later, looking up from reading about how Henry VIII used to hunt wild boar and bulls in the very place they now sat.

They were picnicking near the Serpentine Bridge in Hyde Park. The rain had stopped and the sky was blue and the early July sunshine scintillated on their faces.

"I have regained equilibrium," he said, taking a bite out of his chicken salad sandwich. "I can face them again. The madmen. The lunatics. My colleagues."

"I want to see a live bed show," Allison said.

"What?" Murray said, mouth full.

Allison repeated herself. Then she explained that she wanted to do something really new once in her life. She wanted to take a chance.

When she was finished, Murray hugged her and laughed.

"Going to England is doing something you've never done before," he said. "Seeing the National Portrait Gallery and the British Museum and the Tate is doing something you've never done before. And anyway," he added, "you're not missing anything."

"How will I know I'm not missing anything unless I've seen what I'm not missing?"

"Take my word for it."

"Why should I take your word for it?"

"Because I grew up in New Jersey."

"I want to see a live bed show."

"There is so much disorganization in the world," Murray said, sighing and taking another bite.

## DESIRE: YOU: LIES

The idea came to her like a revelation, like an explosion of sunlight off those solar panels in Arizona: that evening as they sat in their hotel room on Tottenham Court Road planning the next day's itinerary, Allison cleared her throat casually and said she wanted to visit Harrods.

"I wanted to pick up a few things for Jeff and Linda and Patricia and David," she said.

Murray, who hated to shop, stared at his Nicholson guidebook and street map.

"I guess we should," he said despondently.

"Tell you what," she said, as though a plan had just zipped into her brain.

"How about you head over to the Science Museum, and I'll head over to Harrods, and we can meet at Covent Garden for lunch."

Hope rippled through Murray's features.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah. That'd be great. Then we can walk down to the Thames for a boat ride."

"Great," Allison said. "Great."

And she meant it.

## LIVE SEX IN A SYNTHETIC LANDSCAPE (2)

She dreamed of Arizona that night, sunflashes among dry beige hills and cartoon cacti, and woke refreshed and eager. Murray and she took the Northern Line south to Leicester Square, the Piccadilly Line west to Knightsbridge Station, then

walked down Brompton Road to Harrods. It was a warm azure spring day. They held hands. In front of the department store, they kissed. Murray continued on his way down Brompton Road towards the Science Museum while Allison entered the huge copper and glass revolving doors. She stood in the foyer and counted to two hundred and sixty-five. Then she walked out of the huge copper and glass revolving doors and, at Knightsbridge Station, took the Piccadilly Line east to Piccadilly Circus.

She surfaced in front of Tower Records, crossed Sherwood Street, and plunged into Soho. The magic smells came to her again, and the back of her neck tingled. She wound through shrinking lanes, stopped at a shop run by a German without a left ear, and bought a strawberry tart which tasted too sweet. She thought she remembered where the sign was that most interested her, but when she turned the corner she was convinced was the correct corner she couldn't find it. In fact, things gradually began to look less familiar rather than more, and when she later tried to backtrack she realized she was lost. She passed two men in T-shirts and jeans digging up the street. Great shards of asphalt lay around them. When she walked by, she heard one say, "I'd sorely like a piece of tha for loonch now, wudna?"

Just when she decided it would probably be a good idea to ask someone for directions back to Piccadilly and forget the whole thing, she stepped out of an alley and saw a handsome man in a black suit walk past a beautiful teenager in a short red leather skirt and disappear behind a wall of colorful beads. The neon sign above the doorway was the color of maraschino cherries. It said LIVE BED SHOW £3. Allison checked her watch. It was already 11:32. She had to hurry.

#### OUT OF THE COUNTRY, MURRAY SAID

The staircase was so narrow that if two people met one would have to back up to let the other pass. Allison descended carefully, her vision coming back to her as though many gray veils were being lifted from her eyes. At the bottom was a small bland alcove with a peeling tiled floor and a polished black door. Allison opened it and stepped into a lush tropical rain forest, dark green leaves the size of bicycle tires, thick ivy hanging from the trees, the precise strains of the Brandenburg Concertos drifting through her consciousness.

She opened her eyes very wide and then closed them. An artificial blue-white light bathed the gravel path beneath her feet. Couples sat at the bamboo tables in cozy groves partially hidden beneath luxurious foliage. The handsome man she had seen enter was with an attractive blonde in her early twenties. The blonde, it slowly occurred to Allison, wasn't wearing any clothes. Her body was completely tattooed with emerald and blue dragons. In the palm of her right hand, which she now raised before the handsome man in the derby to make a point, was an eye. The eye was not part of the tattoo. It looked past the man, blinked and surveyed Allison calmly.

Allison opened her mouth to scream. But almost immediately she closed it again when another beautiful naked woman, this one without tattoos, came into view. She had long full red hair and pale freckled skin. She was moving, yet her feet weren't touching the ground. She was gliding by means of two delicate bat wings, white flesh and cartilage, extending from her shoulders. In her hands she carried golden cups filled with turquoise liquid, one for the handsome man, one for

the tattooed woman. She gently set these down and floated back the way she had come, her fleshy tail trailing along the ground behind her.

Allison followed her through wood ferns and curly grass, daffodils and foxtails, acacias and linden trees. She passed a small pond covered with lily pads on which perched tiny pea-green frogs with large silver eyes. She climbed among lava rocks through which burst jasmine, honeysuckle, and plants she had never seen before with short stubby avocado stems and swollen wet flowers shaped like the plum-colored folded lips of a vagina.

A nude teenage hermaphrodite sat among these, its left middle finger inserted into the mouth of a glistening flower while it stroked itself with its right hand. Its eyes were closed in pleasure. Around it head circled tiny transparent fish with blue-black wings. Allison could see their scarlet hearts pumping. Orange bubbles swelled from their gills and rose around their heads. They became copper snakes, apple-green geckos, transparent fish again. Allison knew the hermaphrodite was dreaming them.

In a clearing, she discovered another businessman sitting in the lotus position under a banyan tree. He was speaking to a naked tanned boy with white hair and four arms who sat across from him, also in the lotus position. Around them grew Venus fly traps and ferns sprinkled with diamonds. With the fingers on his third hand the boy played with what appeared to be a ruby hose.

"The black box," the businessman was explaining, "is the limit of our knowledge."

The boy squeezed the hose.

"Airships," he said, "the valley between each finger."

"The black box represents the small secret moments, a sense of peace, a sense of wonder," the businessman said.

The hose was an umbilical cord connecting the man and boy. It pulsed softly like the tentacles of an anemone. The boy squeezed it again. Rich blood surged.

"The dream works like this," he said. "You hold a cat on its back in your arms. Its head wobbles and falls off. You stoop, pick up the head, try to attach it. But it falls off again. This is a process."

#### MICROWAVES: LONDON

People moved around Allison on the sidewalk. An old shoeless man with a large mole over his left eye stared at her from across the street. Behind him, a shop window was filled with raw pink briskets of beef, segmented tubes of sausage, plucked ducks. Allison stood in front of a TV repair shop. She glanced down at her watch. It was 11:34.

For the next hour, she searched in vain for the neon sign and the teenager in the extremely short red leather skirt.

She arrived at Covent Garden one hour and thirty-five minutes late. Murray had already eaten. She shyly slipped into the chair across from him and, avoiding his eyes, examined her menu. When the waiter appeared, she primly ordered a house salad and a glass of white wine. Murray didn't say a word. He just looked at her.

SANITY: MICROWAVES (2)

Early the next morning they boarded a 747. Allison plugged in her headphones, Murray swallowed three Quiet Worlds, and they flew to America.

Murray prepped classes and Allison returned to the slender building covered with cobalt-colored mirrors in Boise, Idaho.

"I love all this mental health," Murray told her one August evening at the dinner table.

"Mental health?" Allison asked.

"Wholesomeness, equilibrium, lucidity," Murray clarified.

They settled into their routines, soon forgetting they had ever been in London. Murray taught his students with a serenity only those who have been through desperate hours can display. He spoke cheerfully with his colleagues. Allison checked facts as she had always done—but she silently maintained that something had changed and would never be the same again. She found herself noticing small things she had never noticed before: the tiny cusp of age at the right-hand corner of her mouth; the hint of crimson on the underside of a maple leaf; the sound of jazz far in the distance at the moment she fell asleep every night. This pleased her very much.

---

## JULIO CORTÁZAR

### Strictly Nonprofessional

*The work of Humanario has had a strange life. The book, done by Argentine photographers Sara Facio and Alicia D'Amico, with an introduction by Julio Cortázar, was one of the first modern photodocumentary essays published in Latin America (La Azotea Press, Editoriale Photographica des America Latina, Buenos Aires). These images of life in a state-run insane asylum were commissioned by an Argentine government official. The photography changed the way these asylums were administered, but the book itself was censored, removed from store windows the day after its appearance. The exhibition of the Humanario work was the first broad public exposure it had had in many years.*

Wendy Watris

I KNOW NOTHING OF THE MADNESS IN THE IMAGES OF THIS BOOK; I can only, full of hope, look to the new psychiatric schools of thought that refute a too-comfortable division between the sane and the insane, and maintain that many of the beings that populate hells like the one that is presented here could be on our side, if our side did not maintain with such persistent efficacy the many ghettos that protect the city of the normal man.

Obviously, we poets present ourselves always as against any ghetto, and anticipate, if only chronologically, the psychiatrists who are destroying so many wire fences and bonnets with bells; a swimmer between two waters, the poet knows little about such matters that, however, something in him knows and expresses. This is how I'd like to allude to ethereal and indefinable zones, to atmospheres apparently guaranteed by a pasteurized normality—from which, evoked by a broken rubber glove or a broom leaning on a wall, presences can begin to appear for which there are no other definitions than reverence, before or after the words with which insolence or fear try to define them, so as to better control.

The big paradox is to delve into madness without being mad, to be the onlooker at the edge of the aquarium where the octopus sleepily does and undoes his vague clouds of tobacco and nightmares. When some of those rare testimonials of this close and yet unreachable reality show up on our side, what is said and understood—a double process of mediaticization and deformation—is barely a distant gust, a door that cracks open to let through a ray of light, and perhaps a finger or a stare.

I think of *Below*, the terrible and admirable story by Leonora Carrington, this living nekia from which she returned as the character of one of her stories, with its hands decomposing like a slow rain of white rabbits; I think of *L'homme-jasmin* by Unica Zürn (both of them, wives of great luminaries of surrealism, going to the



limit of a delirious itinerary that prudently remains at the edge of their husbands' painting), Unica Zürn living a persecutory spiral that nothing nor nobody could stop, jumping from one fire to another, till the black blaze of suicide. I will not delve into the catalog of the likes of Hölderlin, or Gerard de Nerval, whose obscure logbooks managed to reach us from that indefinable frontier; if I allude to a famous bibliography, if I think of Nietzsche, of Swift, or our Jacobo Fijman, or I see dancing behind my eyelids the phosphorescent peacocks of Seraphine and the mandalas of Adolf Wölfl, I am looking for the crack in the door, barely touching those rumors that retract like spiders, preventing me from believing in the whole aquarium, in the octopus inside, and us, outside . . . because madness has symmetrically the same infinite number of levels that differentiate sanity; and the axis of this symmetry is that zone where contacts can still be made; farther out in madness or sanity, the layers are stratified, and while intelligence brutally refuses any reference to this other mental "manner," madness irrevocably closes itself to any mechanism of reason. If our intuition were infallible, perhaps the faces shown in this book would allow us to find out which of these beings exist in this axial zone—this contact zone—and which are out of reach; similarly, if our intuition were infallible, perhaps the photographs of heads of state, famous field-m Marshals, philosophers, bankers, politicians or industrialists would allow us to discover which of these beings also exist in this axial zone—this contact zone—and which are out of reach.

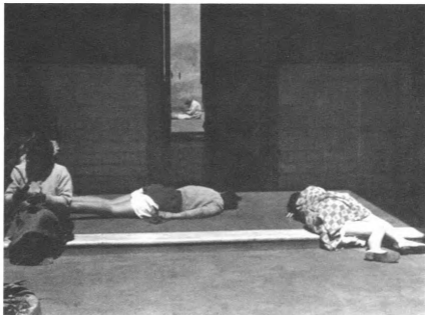
I have always felt that away from this contiguous zone between a certain madness and a certain reason, the madmen and the sane are symmetrically similar in their process of becoming more and more mad, and more and more sane. Finally, what victimizes certain madmen is what society finds unbearable in their external behavior; tics, manias, physical degradation, oral or motor disorders rapidly facilitate labeling, and prophylactic separation; this is logical, indeed beneficial to the madman—this is a society that applies the rules of its game with which nobody is authorized to play. But the other extreme of this symmetry, there where time after



time reason becomes more and more reasoning and reasonable, reason whose external conduct not only does not offend the city, but contributes to its enrichment and exaltation, one only has to look closely to discover at every step the other alienation, that which not only does not transgress the rules of the game but gives them statute, and applies them.

I suppose that Erasmus, among many others, has already talked about this, which is therefore not very original; but in our times, in which many of us are hopeful and preoccupied with future projects of man, it appears to me more necessary than ever to bring to attention these extreme levels in which intelligence and reason lock themselves up in their own saturation, and become much more dangerous than the madness of the asylum. It is not by chance that I am now thinking of Adolf Eichmann, so extraordinarily intelligent; and without falling into exaggeration, the manner chosen by the Chilean military junta to *make the country mentally healthy*—would you consider it sane?

The only good fortune that certain maniacal collectors, certain multimillionaires who pay for wars and genocides to multiply a fortune so large that it is useless to them, certain Pinochets and certain Francos, is that they do not slobber; this tiny little humid detail is the only reason for which they have not been locked up, and, what's more, been photographed by Sara and Alicia. I repeat that none of this is original; but perhaps it is because of this that I repeat it, because the city, society, have conditioned us to distinguish between madness and reason on the basis of the presence or absence of spectacular or depressing symptoms. It is profoundly symbolic that Albert Einstein, armed with his tousled hair and his knitted vest, often gave the impression of a madman lost in the streets and in his dreams; and it is well known that once the queen of Belgium invited him to her country house (they played scratchily sonatas for violin and piano and had a great time), Einstein got



lost and from the café of a little train station telephoned *the queen*, at which moment several patriots proceeded to subdue him by grabbing his vest, thinking that he was a madman who was ready to assassinate the sovereign. The city has its signs, and interprets them as it was taught, what the hell.

The astute among you will note that the essential difference between madness and reason does not reside so much in external manifestations, as much as in the fact the madman is a man who *is alone*, who has no relation with our control panel, just as we do not have any relation with his. This is so true that G.K. Chesterton could state, paradoxically, the madman is not a man who has lost reason, but a man who has lost everything but reason. And this reason, functioning away from what is common to us, knits its recurring spider webs inside of an unreachable private orbit. But even if all this is acceptable, I do not think that it invalidates my belief in a symmetry between the progressive levels of worsening of reason and madness; because, what is it this *everything* that the madman has lost? Exactly the same thing—but without the innocence that denounces the insane—that the illustrious professor has lost, concentrating all his life on etymology, nuclear physics, or the amorous life of Simón Bolívar. Already, the exceedingly forgotten Anatole France showed how what he called the “bookcase of the specialist” is a clever maneuver (sometimes unconscious, sometimes hypocritical or cowardly) to completely disengage oneself from the profound impulses of humanity fighting itself, to maintain a comfortable neutrality in the unending combat of Ormuz against Arimán. Lose everything but reason; of course, old Chesterton, except that this loss—involuntary in the madman (involuntary?) and prudent in the sane—is essentially the same. Humanity has an overwhelming percentage of individuals turning their backs to it, some locked up in asylums, and others reading reports in the congresses of the Royal Society or the Pen Club.



The poet, who does not accept language in its purely rational intent, sees many convergent and adjoining things in words such as reason and madness, and goes as far as to eliminate them to directly apprehend what is a madman and what is a sane man; as he is camped with resolve in the axial zone, his permeable vision shows him any project about a man to come as a dancing, fecund integration of components that come from the first levels of reason and non-reason, there where there is common ground, where Aristotelian logic does not reign supremely, but only constitutionally.

This is the impulse that makes technocrats and commissioners tremble with indignation, the impulse that moves many revolutionaries into action or theory, and for revolutionary, read not only those who fight for the revolution but also those who have inaugurated it in themselves and transmit it through words or sounds or pigment, without mentioning those in which all the components coexist, those that die assassinated in a Bolivian jungle, carrying till the end Pablo Neruda's *Canto General*.

To come back to the images of this tremendous book, in which each page is an island of total solitude, of irreparable incommunication, I think of a sentence that slipped into one of my books, years ago, in which the poet proposed, in his manner, an explanation of madness. It came from a long acquaintance with the dream world, this night country in which Leibnitz or Spinoza or Descartes watched so many times their most cherished scaffoldings collapse; it came from this incessant rebellion of the darkest forces set against the dialectic clarity of the wakeful state. It has always surprised me that the mechanism of a dream can completely obey the diurnal laws, only to be followed moments or nights later by another dream in which the most elementary meanings and relationships of reason were violated, mutilated, as if in a supreme farce. When one awoke from any one of these dreams, the sane dream and the mad dream, the feeling was the same: we had believed in both, we had fully accepted the continuity of normality or its unthinkable upset. Faced with the behavior of certain madmen, with the security and faith that summarizes all that they say or do, and their frequent ire against our lack of understanding, I tell myself that perhaps madness was born from an extrapolation of a



transgressive dream, a dream from which that man or that child would never wake up, a dream that had invaded and displaced the wakeful state, as does delirium, or hope, or love. There is nothing extraordinary in the displacement of ordinary categories, and this often happens to us in small doses, in language, where metaphors and figures of speech achieve their goals against the winds of reason, and even in the field of sentiment, where the unreasonable metamorphoses of the loved ones occur, or the erotic sacralization of certain zones that would be repugnant under any other circumstance.

When I wrote: *Madness is a dream that gets*, I did not imagine that several years later, a beautiful text by Luis María Ravagnan<sup>1</sup> would come to support, in a territory much more solid than mine, this glimpse that dazzled me for an instant. "Perhaps we could accept", it is stated in the conclusion, "that in his mental disturbance, the subject was installed in a persistent sleep state while fully awake, while the normal person is capable of fully returning to the wakeful state when he liberates himself from his nocturnal dramas. . . ." The eyes that are seen in this book could be eyes that see and will keep seeing a dream that has implanted itself as the final substitution of one reality for another; and just as this character from my book found out with bitterness that it was worthless to sleep near his beloved woman, head against head, striving to mix her dreams with his, when, upon waking up, kissing and loving, their respective tally of the night yielded two different and irreconcilable sagas, in the same way, our interrogation of the madmen, or their sometimes desperate signs requesting communication or help, crashes into a barbed wire entanglement through which can pass only incomprehensible words and gestures.

Almost all the subjects that from the pages of this book look at us without seeing us, appear to belong to this isolation, just like they looked for an instant at the camera that was not part of their dream. Strangely, a few days ago, I listened again

to the admirable record that Susana Rinaldi dedicated to the poetry of Homero Manzi; suddenly, in the text of *Definiciones para esperar mi muerte*<sup>2</sup>, these two verses stood out:

*...and to the desperate people that deliver the ultimate gesture  
facing the final and instantaneous landscape of dementia.*

I realized that Manzi was referring to this book, in which to deliver the gesture describes the very act of photography. Without any consciousness of this delivery, without interest for all that gnaws at us from within, at every page, the dream of each one of these beings continues on its cyclical course, crossing paths with other dreams, in every patio, in every bed, in every one of those things that for us have a name that *they* do not utter, that cast a bridge that *they* do not cross.

Julio Cortázar.

(translated by Edouard Philippe & Marta Sanchez de Philippe)

1 "Los Sueños y la Locura," in *La Nación* newspaper, Buenos Aires, October 14, 1973.

2 "Definitions to await my death by" (Translator's Note).

ALETHEA GAIL SEGAL

Creation Story

DIDN'T YOU KNOW? The world  
is just a stone tied to a string,  
the extra thread of a violin maker.  
Catapulted into the air  
through the archway of time  
we are one long toss in gravity's pull.  
The twine untangles itself as skywriting  
through the well of the universe,  
humming. For years,  
men who watched the blade  
in the center of town  
chart the sun's course  
predicted the world's end.  
But there's no end. Only the tug  
the man walking the dog at dusk  
thinks belongs to him, and then,  
the breakneck speed of revolution  
whirling us back in dervish turns  
into the maker's hand.

## CONTRIBUTORS

- ANN BEATTIE has written art essays and criticism in addition to her numerous novels and short story collections. Her most recent collection, *What Was Mine* (1991), is published by Random House. She lives in Charlottesville, Virginia and York, Maine.
- LISA BESKIN's work has appeared in *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Chiron Review*, and is forthcoming in *New York Quarterly*. She lives and works in Amherst, Massachusetts.
- JAMES BETTISON is a visual and performance artist living in Houston. His exhibitions include New Gallery, Houston, TX and Galerie d'eendt, Amsterdam.
- AMY BLAKEMORE received her MFA from the University of Texas, her B.S. and her B.A. from Drury College. She currently teaches at the Glassell School of Art in Houston.
- WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS, our cover artist, is the author of numerous books, including *Naked Lunch* and *Junky*. He also works in the performing arts, recently appearing in *Drugstore Cowboy*.
- E.G. BURROWS is the author of two books, *The House of August*, (Ithaca House, 1985) and *Handsigns for Rain*, (Wayland Press, 1989). Recent work has appeared in *Poetry*, *Zone 3*, and *Slant*, among others.
- ALVARO CARDONA-HINE has published eleven books of poetry, prose, and translation, including, most recently, *Miss O'Keefe* with the University of New Mexico Press in 1992.
- MICHAEL CHARLES is a recent graduate from the M.F.A. program at the University of Houston. He has shown at DiverseWorks and Lawndale Art Center.
- WILLIAM COBB is a graduate of the University of Texas and the University of Houston. He received a NEA grant in 1992, and has had short fiction published in *The New Yorker*, *The Mississippi Review*, and other magazines. His first novel, *The Fire Eaters*, will be published in the spring of 1994 by W.W. Norton.
- JULIO CORTÁZAR published poetry, essays, short story collections, and novels including such works as *Hopscotch* (1963), *The End of the Game* (1965), and *We Love Glenda So Much* (1980). He died in 1984.
- JON DAVIS, author of *Dangerous Amusements* (Ontario Review Press, 1987), recently completed a new collection of poems and prose poems entitled *The Ocher World*. Other poems from the manuscript are forthcoming in *Agni*, *The Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center's Anniversary Anthology*, and *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*. He is professor of Creative Writing at the Institute of American Indian Arts. He lives in Glorieta, New Mexico.
- EDWIN GALLAHER is the program administrator for Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Recent poetry is forthcoming in *The Paris Review*.
- BRENDAN GALVIN's recent collections are *Wampanoag Traveler* (1989) and *Saints In Their Ox-Hide Boat* (1990), both from LSU Press, *Great Blue: New and Selected Poems* (1990) from University of Illinois Press, and *Early Returns*, forthcoming in the Carnegie Mellon Contemporary Classics series.

DANA GIOIA has published two books of poetry, *Daily Horoscopes* (1986) and *The Gods of Winter* (1991), both by Greywolf Press. His most recent work is a collection of essays, *Can Poetry Matter?*, published in 1992.

AMY HEMPEL is the author of two collections of stories, *Reasons to Live* (1985), and *At the Gates of the Animal Kingdom* (1990). She lives in New York City.

RICHARD HOWARD is the author of nine books of poetry, and his next volume, *Like Most Revelations*, is forthcoming with Pantheon. He has translated over 150 works of French literature. He is currently working on *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, by Marcel Proust, to be titled *In Search of Lost Time*. *Fag Ends* is from a work in progress.

DAVID IGNATOW has published fifteen volumes of poetry, a prose collection, and *Talking Together: Selected Letters*, published by the University of Alabama Press. His prizes include the Bollingen Prize in 1973, the Shelley Memorial Prize, and most recently the Robert Frost Award from the Poetry Society of America and the Josephine Miles Prize from PEN Oakland.

HEATHER KORB is an independent film and video producer, currently living in the Houston area. She has worked with Shakespeare and Company in Paris, as well as with the Edinburgh Arts Festival. She is presently completing work on a documentary, *Third Ward Blues*.

ANNETTE LAWRENCE is a multi-media artist from Queens, New York, working in sculpture, photography and video. She has shown at Firehouse Gallery and Barnes-Blackman Galleries.

DAVID LEVINTHAL was born in California and resides in New York against his will. *The Wild West*, a collection of his photographs, is forthcoming from Smithsonian Publishing. His latest project involves German mythological figures depicting Wagner's ring cycle, and will be shown at the Vienna Opera House in May.

ANDREW MARKHAM received his M.A. from The Writing Seminars at The Johns Hopkins University. He recently published a story in *The Western Humanities Review*. He currently lives in Kitakyushu, Japan, where he works for the Japanese Foreign Ministry.

DAVID MCGEE has shown his paintings at Bob Mier Gallery, St. Louis, and Lynn Goode Gallery, Houston.

IKE E. MORGAN produced "60 George Washingtons" for Treebeard's Restaurant, Houston. He lives in Austin, Texas.

LUCIA NEVAI lives in New York City. She has published stories in *The New Yorker*, *The Iowa Review*, *Mademoiselle*, *Prairie Schooner*, and numerous other quarterlies. Her collection, *Star Game*, won the Iowa Short Fiction Award.

LESLIE NORRIS, a native of Wales, has published fiction and poetry in *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, *Sbenandoab*, and numerous other quarterlies. His poetry collections include *Walking the White Field: Poems 1967-80*, *Selected Poems* (1986), and *Sequences* (1988). He is a professor of English at Brigham Young University.

LANCE OLSEN is a professor of English at the University of Idaho. He publishes books on postmodern fiction when he's not writing it.

- 
- WALTER PAVLICH's latest collection, *Running Near The End Of The World*, won the Edwin Ford Piper Poetry Award from the University of Iowa Press. Other work can be found in *Atlantic*, *The Yale Review*, *APR*, *Poetry*, and several other magazines.
- LINCOLN PERRY's next show is at Tatistcheff & Co., New York, in April, 1993. He lives in Charlottesville, North Carolina and York, Maine.
- KEVIN PILKINGTON is the author of two chapbooks, *On This Quiet Hill*, and *Reading Stone*. He teaches creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College and The New School.
- MARY ROBISON is the author of several works of fiction including *Believe Them* (1988), *An Amateur's Guide to the Night* (1983), *Ob!* (1981), *Days* (1979), and *Subtraction* (1991). She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a CUE Award for Excellence in Teaching.
- BERT SAMPLES has shown his paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Blaffer Gallery, Dallas Museum of Art, and Foster Gallery at Louisiana State University. He is Chief Preparator at the Museum of Fine Arts.
- CHARLIE SARTWELLE founded Mother Dog Studios, an artists' space in Houston, six years ago. Four years later she began the Mother Dog Museum, which holds biannual shows of resident artists and others. Her "Our Lady of the Bayou" pieces are designed for the Buffalo Bayou Art Park.
- ALETHEA GAIL SEGAL is a graduate of the Warren Wilson College writing program. She is a freelance writer and offers occasional symposia on writing, Tarkovsky films, and astronomy. She has lived in TriBeCa since it was called the spice district and smelled like cinnamon at night.
- HEATHER SELLERS currently teaches Creative Writing at the University of Texas, San Antonio. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in various literary magazines. She is currently working on a novel.
- CHRIS SEMANSKY's poetry and reviews have appeared in *College English*, *the minnesota review*, *The Reaper*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *Beatniks from Outer Space*, among others. His first book, *Death, But At a Good Price*, received the Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize and was published by the Nicholas Roerich Museum and Story Line Press. He currently works as a male companion for an aging millionairess on the rich and rocky north shore of Long Island.
- RON SMITH resides in Houston. He has shown his paintings at Lubbock Fine Arts Center, Blaffer Gallery and Barnes/Blackman Galleries.
- ALLISON SMYTHE runs her own graphic design company in Houston, Texas.
- ELIZABETH STARR is the winner of the Sylvan N. Karchmer Fiction Contest for undergraduates at the University of Houston.
- BRUCE TAYLOR is a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. His poems have appeared in *The Nation*, and *New York Quarterly*. His forthcoming book of poetry, *This Day*, will be published by Juniper Press in the spring of 1993.

LORENZO THOMAS' books of poetry include *Chances Are Few* and *The Batbers*. His work is also widely anthologized. He has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards, including a fellowship from the NEA and the Lucille Medwick Prize. He has most recently been elected to the Texas Institute of Letters.

GEORGE WILLIAMS was the first recipient of the Michener Fellowship, given by the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program in honor of Donald Barthelme. He currently teaches at Houston Community College and works as a story consultant for Maysles Films.

SUSAN WOOD teaches Creative Writing at Rice University. Her second book, *Campo Santo* (LSU Press, 1991) received the Lamont Poetry Prize.

ANN BEATIE • LISA BESKIN • JAMES BETTISON • AMY BLAKEMORE • WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS • E.G. BURROWS  
ALVARO CARDONA-HINE • MICHAEL CHARLES • WILLIAM COBB • JULIO CORTÁZAR • JON DAVIS • EDWIN GALLAHER  
BRENDAN GALVIN • DANA GIOIA • AMY HEMPEL • RICHARD HOWARD • DAVID IGNATOW • HEATHER KORB • ANNETTE LAWRENCE  
DAVID LEVINTHAL • ANDREW MARKHAM • DAVID MCGEE • IKE E. MORGAN • LUCIA NEVAI • LESLIE NORRIS • LANCE OLSEN  
WALTER PAVLICH • LINCOLN PERRY • KEVIN PIRKINGTON • MARY ROBISON • BERT SAMPLES • CHARLIE SARTWELLE  
ALETHEA GAIL SEGAL • HEATHER SELLERS • CHRIS SEMANSKY • RON SMITH • ALLISON SMYTHE • ELIZABETH STARR  
BRUCE TAYLOR • LORENZO THOMAS • GEORGE WILLIAMS • SUSAN WOOD

Sloth says don't stick your neck out, go by the book, never go too far in any direction, stay in the mainstream, don't get *involved*, don't get mixed up in it. And Envy - you know the type, unfairly passed over for promotion . . . one such swine can disrupt a whole firm with his tale-bearing, lies and slander. No wonder he is passed over for promotion: he is so busy all the time with affairs and intrigues, he has no time left to do his job.

The old miser fingering his gold coins with idiot delight has given way to the deadly, disembodied Avarice of vast multinational conglomerates, with no more responsibility or consideration for the welfare of the planet than the computers that orient their maneuvers, programmed for maximum profit, humming and purring and sucking up rain forests and spewing out dividends. Avarice has ravaged the planet, cut down the rain forests, and polluted the seas and rivers.