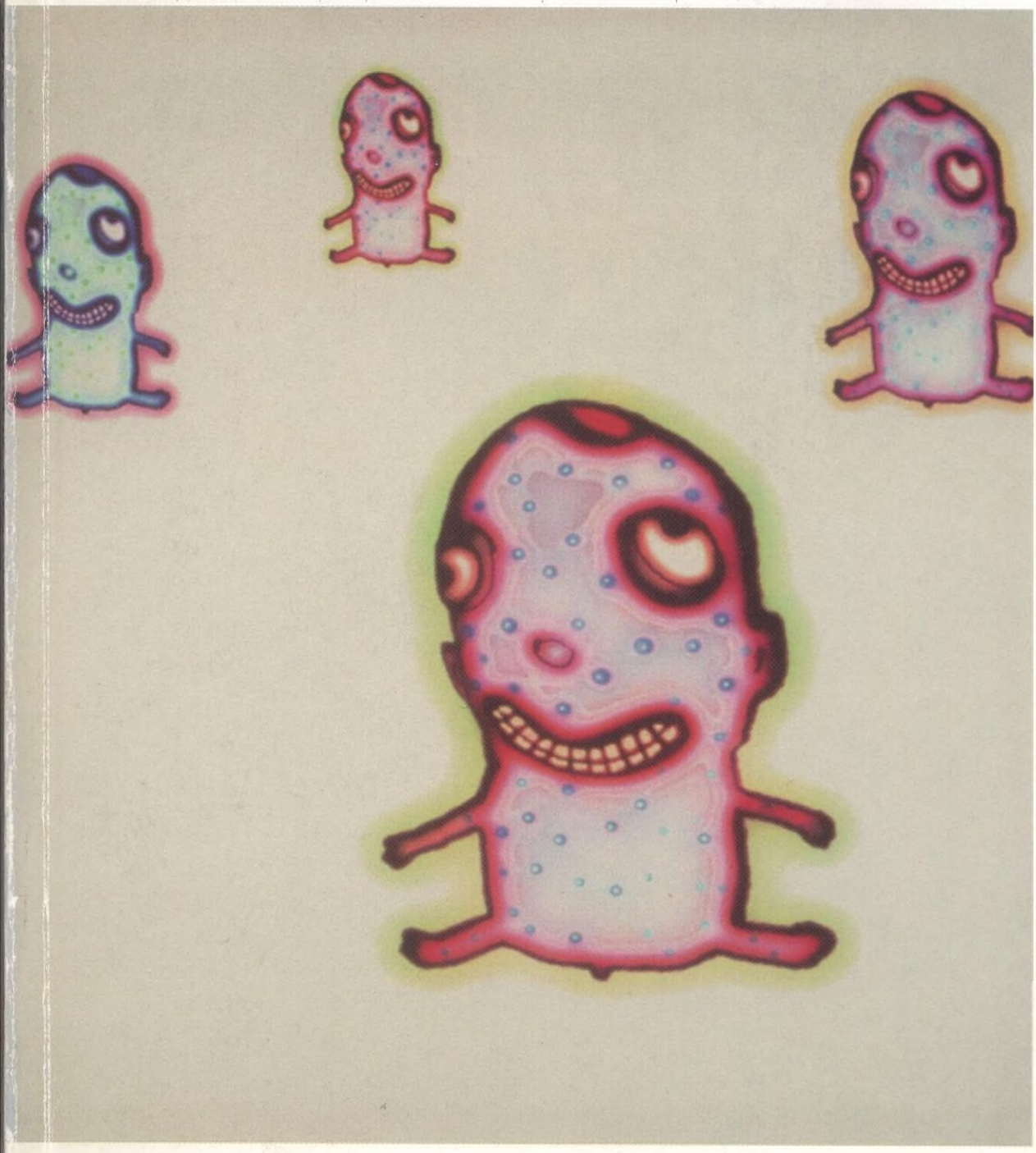
Gulf Coast



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POETRY

NONFICTION

SCREENPLAY

FICTION

ART

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electronic media

Appointment

As the eye refuses a landscape at its point
of horizon, resting where the curve of earth
is solid, so the promise *I will stop if you will*
also stop forms. Snuffing out the last smoky
minute in a Café, paring it down to a single
parting word, everything saying no, no—
heat's red sky, the waitress and her dizzy
tray of coffees. A swirl of scent and the betrayal
of taste it belongs to, like the old city where we
sat months ago and watched the boy's swinging gold
plate of coffee, cardamom, licorice and sugar—
every breath of the moment became us. The boy
plunging mint into a pitcher of tea and the old
women in white coats hurrying to pray when the call
deepened the air like a shifting wind.

Even then the story had an ending,
the trees had lined up for the water's reflection
and that embrace became sacrament. Leaning
against the city's ancient wall, I held up a hand,
felt the ceiling and mistook it for the next tier,
the lush continuance. Tick Tick. Dark lipstick
rims a glass in the Café where I ask the walls to come
closer, to listen, something is breaking off like fruit from
a tree and being held out as if the loss could be consumed
and then admired. The painting on the wall, a dancer
about to leap out of her frame but for the sake
of larger beauty—larger as in appointment,
as in leaving the Café because the night is hot enough
to trap words in the throat, and we move, like water moves,
along a torrent because the earth has opened and we have to follow.

Burning

I. The Cigarette Factory

Was it air stuck behind stiff windows
or the way tobacco stained their skin the color
of earth that made women come out singing and smoking
after work, after the long tables and cords of leaves
drugged the afternoon heat with a thick brown moisture,
and after they took off their shirts to that damp
and worked straight through the heat.

Men waiting for the songs to begin, imagining
the trapped smell of their skin, the sheen of brown
on their shirts. Imagining how to unlock the songs,
the choreography of fingers, the harmony of lights
extinguished and relit.

Mouth, fire, fingers. One never touching the other,
but knowing every turn in the passage, every degree
of burn. So the skill is not in deserving to enter,
but in finding the way in and knowing how to behave
once there—a hidden fire, a delicate passage and a single
thread locked in unseen dependency and then disappearing.

Smoke and notes rising together like the breath
of a tyranny finding its object. Quick embraces
staining the fingers and the sheets, hung to dry
in the sun, that filter of gravity and air.

II. Carmen

In the opera, women leave the factory singing
and smoking. Then she steps forward, hitting
the aria—and the note, the next tier in the story,
expected by a part of the body you never imagined,
is the bridge. Its path from mouth to ear is not

about beauty—the perfect C, the anticipated tonal leap—
but skill. Finding the listening and reaching into it.

And if the woman in the third row is bored,
if she saw a better *Carmen* last year in Vienna,
if she crosses her legs, opens the program
and that noise breaks her silence, what breaks
with it?

The libretto slipping into the arms of
the music, the orchestra bearing down
on the singer, the hidden fire tracing
itself in the argument—the need to spring
an essence from the music (it's not
the color of their skin, but the residue,
it's not the boredom, it's the rope of pearls
around her neck). A second hearing, same as
the first but a deeper draw, the thread going
further into unknown flesh and then becoming it.

Asking the bow to join the strings, coaxing
the breath from its passage and into speech.
Again. The word takes the tongue. *Again.* Waiting
for the songs to begin. *Again.* How long can she hold
the note? The aria fading. A slow burn extinguished,
a silent white death where softly, in the background,
another just the same begins to sing.

Hospital

Are you alright today?
The doctor, leaning in and speaking to
the body muted on its palette. His tenderness,
like flowers wrapped in paper, lemonade singeing
the ice with citrus, is unspeakably perfect.

At home, the wife can't sleep, the air
like fever, fierce and hungry. The sky pink
with a humid reflection. Her husband is being wheeled
immobile down the white corridors, life trapped
in him like fire in a mountain, the mountain cool
and dumb. She wonders how to reach him,
how to meet his eyes at the angle signaling
I love you or should it be (how much does he
remember?) *We love each other?*

Her bed marked with turns, half entries into sleep.
She could be wearing a white dress and moving
along a corridor like the merciful. She could feel
it was never enough, even the flowers and the pitchers
of water and the bedpans, even kissing the dry body
could feel like nothing. The still form under its white
field of cotton has no language to answer, its silence
is urgent, cutting, desperate.

Clouds moving like ghosts and the heat will break
into many smaller heats. *Are you Are you*
Wheeling down the corridor, to be bathed,
like an object that will not feel the water
but know it. The doctor is off-duty, at home
in an air-conditioned room drinking something cool
in a tall glass and letting it glide down his throat
like words that could not be spoken. Clink.
It's not about goodness, he is at ease with grief,
loves the bodies that cannot strike him,
loves the silence. The wife at home is so brave,

she is scared to turn off the light and she turns it off.
And where she was not enough comes back like a burning
in the darkness. *Why didn't you hold on harder?*
Why didn't you break his fall?

There is no relief—it is only June, she has only
been in bed for an hour. The body that cannot move or speak—
is it something else now? The doctor lies down,
a silent conscience, as in the cut stem hitting
the bottom of the vase with a light gesture
before water comes. Something like a reminder.
A question reaching in and echoing in the fluid
silent tunnels, touching but not moving the answer.

The Tourists

In the foreign restaurant, a band plays
into the evening, their belled sleeves
touching—almost touching—the music.
The castanets—water burning up with sunlight.
The guitar—a bright skirt flared to summer,
to red chickens and the loaf of bread.
Are the musicians playing for the women
or are the women dancing so the music will play?

As if something were spinning so fast
only colors come clear. A woman at the bar
purses her mouth for a sip, something fragile
inside—Oh yes. Her hand tapping the bar
which is to say *He's late so shouldn't I be drunk?*

The dancers have their own music like pages
turning, the smell of gin, further than discordant.
Water flowing correctly under its bridge, its old
stone cup of embrace. The dancers have entered
the evening, entered the darkness. The old men speaking
like patriots, a marble table ringed with sugar.

The band has stopped and sound is paintings
gorged against a wall. The people have never
felt so at home. Quiet in a foreign room.
The evening passed like a film, like fingers
through water. Doors open—a woman,
where night becomes her. A light coat like scent.
Cats curl up on cool stone and rename a Boulevard.

The musicians go home, something pulsing
in them, sound, a million revolutions.
The steady rhythm wanting to be heard.
Wanting a mouth for its voice,
which is the sound of breaking,
the day's first memory—more colors
than events, lingering like a thirst
from the night before, and shaped
by something in sleep.

Dream Places

CONNIE SITS IN HER EL PASO APARTMENT, sucking on a pomegranate seed, her lips stained a garish purple. She hears a voice calling her name, but the heat makes it difficult to gather enough volume to call back. She goes out on the balcony where Rosa waits four doors down. "Consuelo, come to dinner." Rosa's melodious voice rises at the end of each sentence, as if she were perpetually asking questions so as not to be disappointed by answers she may receive.

Connie lifts a jug of tea which sits on her porch. The tea is dark, strong, brewed by the sun which still slams against her arms though it is dusk. Connie shields her eyes with her hand and looks into the expanse of clear sky. The sun seems to gather power as it sets, storing it and coming back twice as strong as the day before, like the tea she brews daily. She scratches at peeling skin on her shoulder. She has lived in El Paso for eleven years, but her skin has resisted the transplant, its stubborn pink-white a reminder she was not born here.

Rosa still leans over the balcony, her stubby legs cut in half by stretchy pink shorts, a kerchief tied in her hair. Her face glistens with sweat that is replaced as soon as the dry air claims it. "Oh, Consuelo," she calls, "I can't stand this. Even my *chi chis* sweat." She lifts her heavy breasts so Connie can see the dark moons underneath.

"I know, Rosalita." Connie has no words of comfort. She knows Rosa doesn't understand why she would willingly choose to come to this unforgiving terrain instead of staying in the Midwest. When she had shown Rosa photos of her childhood home, her backyard waist-high in snow, Rosa had clapped her hands to her cheeks. "Oh, Consuelo, look at the trees wearing white. And the sky! *Esta nevando.* You must have been very rich. What a dream place."

Connie can't convince her that cold doesn't equal wealth. "Look at L.A., Rosa," Connie teases her. "You can't get richer than that. And it doesn't snow there."

"No, no. That's only the movies. Everyone is an actor there. You're real," Rosa says, stroking Connie's arm. "And rich."

Connie is not rich. She teaches composition at a community college so students who speak perfect Spanish can function in an English-speaking world, a chance to transcend the poverty their own language seems to equal. But she goes on trips between summer sessions, sometimes to her

hometown or to Mazatlan or Taos. That's why Rosa believes she is rich. Because she has the money to board a plane and, hours later, land in places where grass grows naturally and rivers flow. Rosa thinks Connie is lucky, that she can leave this relentless heat whenever she wants to. But Connie has chosen to come here. This is her dream place where students eat *quesadillas,* not burgers, sleep in the library because ten people sleep in the same room, not because they partied all night. Whose mothers sell cheap leather belts in Juarez to pay for their children's educations instead of preparing for dinner parties by cutting radishes until they bloom. She is a teacher here, not a hall monitor, a teacher for first-generation college students who want to make their *padres* and *abuelos* proud.

Connie and Rosa sit down to pork tamales, green chile enchiladas, tumblers of iced tea. Rosa cooks at "Fernie's," and at the end of her shift, she takes home her share of leftovers, specials that didn't sell and would only dry out if she didn't take them. For the past ten years, Connie has spent three or four nights a week at Rosa's, eating off the same green, pink, and blue ceramic dishes, the same placemats printed with smiling burros. Connie glides her eyes over the setting; these are details she knows so well she rarely sees them. She thinks one day, after she has left here, she'll see the same shades of impossibly bright colors, and she will spiral to the place in her belly that stores seemingly trivial details and will want to be back in this exact place at this exact time with her closest friend.

"How's your mama, Rosa?" Connie chews a bit of chile, the familiar fire watering her eyes and clearing her vision so Rosa's kitchen appears brighter, all lines more defined.

"Oh, *mal, mal.* You know that sore on her arm? It still bleeds."

Rosa's mother, a frail, tiny woman, crosses the border from Juarez each morning to clean, cook, and iron clothes for a woman who moved to El Paso from Germany. Emilia works illegally, carrying a net bag so she looks like any shopper crossing the bridge, shoppers who chew mango ice, sort through poorly sewn clothes sold by the pound, lounge before dime store fans with shopkeepers. She has seven children at home; home is a plywood shack, on the other side of I-10, right across from the University of Texas–El Paso. The youngest three children are sweet and lovely but profoundly retarded. The other four vary in temperament and ambition; one sells silver jewelry at the *mercado,* two clean hospitals, churches, and offices, and Emilio, Emilia's namesake, the only boy, steals radios, stereos, and sells them to shopkeepers who sell them to tourists at negotiable prices. They all do what they can. Together, the family makes enough money to put up new walls every winter, sometimes having enough left over to paint the outside pale blue or pink, so a driver, on the American highway, would see an opal among the ruins.

Rosa is the only one who left Mexico, the only one legally a citizen of the U.S. She married Jesus when she was twenty. She was then working illegally at Fernie's; Jesus was a cook. Jesus, a strong man with a broad

Tiguan face, never smiled, hardly spoke, and ran off with Conchita, a waitress, to San Antonio as soon as Rosa delivered a still-born boy. She crossed the border back home, but it was agreed she had to live in the U.S.; she had the opportunity to make something of herself. With an advance from Fernie, she got an apartment. After paying rent and bus fare each month, she had enough left over to send half her paycheck home. "America, the beautiful," she said when she met Connie. Connie laughed, but Rosa's face remained solemn, as if she were worshipping.

Now Rosa places a plate of *sopapillas* on the table. Connie trickles honey into the doughy pocket of one as Rosa details her mama's oozing sore.

"Oh, mama, why doesn't she stay home? We can take care of her."

Because, Connie wants to say, because she wants to step inside the boundaries of her dream place each day, to plant her oversized shoes, given to her by her employer, on U.S. cement, to dust knickknacks of a blonde woman, to be on the same side of the Rio Grande as her daughter, the lucky U.S. citizen, even if it's only for ten hours daily. Even if her sore ran and her hair fell out and, startling awake in the middle of a dream, she struggled to hear, one by one, the breaths of seven children rising and falling around her. Connie wants to say this, but Rosa, her hair soft around her face, looks at her for some wisdom. "She's a stubborn one."

Rosa shakes her head and clicks her tongue, pride bright in her eyes. "She is, just like me." She sucks honey from her fingers and smiles.

Weeks later, Connie sits in her office after the last of her classes. She sucks on the Mexican chocolate, hints of cinnamon lacing the grainy texture, that her students have given her. She has said goodbye, knowing she won't see most of them again, that many will be needed to earn money for their families, that one semester in the university is sometimes enough. She sighs and thinks of her upcoming trip home, walking along Lake Michigan under cloudy skies, and she almost feels her body temperature drop. She opens her eyes again, and the sun yawns back at her, bored with its tyrannical power but too proud to give it up.

When she gets back to her apartment, Rosa is huddled outside her door, face streaked with tears and mucus.

"My God, Rosa, what happened?"

"Mama," Rosa answers.

EMILIA COMBS HER HAIR, twisting the thinning gray strands into a knot at her neck. It is not light outside yet; her children sleep, curled around each other like sleek brown puppies. She zips her best housedress, the one embroidered with bright pink roses, the only one left with no worn spots, no tears, that she saves to wear on Fridays, giving thanks that she and her children made it through another week safely, in good health, and that she made it through another week without Fernando, her husband, their father.

She wraps a *penecillo*, doughy and fresh, in a napkin, carefully placing

it in her net shopping bag. She will eat it at ten o'clock along with a cup of coffee swirled with cream. Miss Berndt leaves the coffee for her in a modern white coffee-maker that Emilia is afraid to smudge; it is so beautiful. Emilio, her son, her strong boy, raises his head as she tiptoes to the door. "Mama, wait, I'll walk with you," he offers, as he offers every morning. "No, *hijo, estas cansado.*" He lays his head down again, his breath falling back into rhythm with the others.

Already it is hot. Already children gather in the drying riverbed, feeling the night's cool squishing between their toes. Emilia slowly makes her way across the border, paying her nickel at the bridge, the heat weighing her down. Her eyes dance from side to side, her nerves singing. If someone, a child selling tiny boxes of Chiclets, or a *chola* leaning against a bus stop, tear tattooed on her cheek, says, "*Hola,*" Emilia's bones quiver within her tight skin. She doesn't want to get caught. "*No tengo nada que declarar,*" she says to the American man checking passports. She is terrified of him, this man who could send her back home, to a place where she could never find a job, not at her age. The man barely glances at her, at the shopping bag she holds in front of her as proof of her right to go across. She is shopping only; she is only shopping.

Like every morning, when she shuts Miss Berndt's door behind her and sucks in air-conditioned air, she closes her eyes and thanks God she made it. This is part of why she does this, why she dodges the border patrol trucks, hiding in storefronts until they pass. The thrill of doing something illegal, the thrill of working for this big woman with hair of gold who stumbles into the kitchen for her coffee when Emilia arrives.

"*Buenos dias,* Emilia," she says in her booming voice. "*Como esta su familia?*"

"*Bien, bien,* Senorita Miss." Emilia can't pronounce her last name, its harsh consonants.

"*Me alegro.*" Miss Berndt gulps her coffee, wrapping her thick white robe tighter around her. They have had the same dialogue every morning for years. Emilia is content with this. She is a little afraid of this woman, her heavy straight bangs, her small blue eyes that roam the kitchen, checking corners for dust when Emilia says *hasta manana* as she leaves at night. But Emilia would never leave a spot of the apartment untouched. As soon as the woman leaves, Emilia caresses it with rags, soapy water, the vacuum cleaner from top to bottom, as if she were cleaning caramel from her own children's faces.

Today Emilia feels tired. The scab on her arm itches and cracks. She carefully dries a dinner dish, a thick white plate rimmed in a blue the color of Miss Berndt's eyes. The dish is so bright, so cool in its whiteness; Emilia hugs it against her breast as the room begins to spin, and she falls into a space brown as sand, brown as the color of her skin and the skin of her children, a place where she feels at home.

ZURITH BERNDT SITS IN HER OFFICE, feeling the weight of the heat. On days like this, she wishes her life would have taken a different turn. She never regrets that she married Dieter, never that, but she wishes fate would have dealt her a different hand, handing a card that sent her husband to San Diego or some other base that was a little more exciting than El Paso. She has lived here for twenty years, fifteen of those without Dieter; he had a sudden heart attack. She had been working for a furniture store, and she continued doing so after his death.

There is a small German community here, two restaurants, and a deli where those in the military congregate. Zurith doesn't spend as much time in these places as she used to. The people seem so young, the girls tan, blonde, and confident with their hairy armpits; the men seem boys, smaller than the girls. She remembers Dieter being tall, larger than life. She dreamed of a place where another Dieter waited for her, wondering where his God-sent, his soul mate, wandered. A place like Kitzengen without the boisterous, drinking men, without the young girls.

Zurith comes home, carrying an especially heavy load of fabric swatches and wallpaper samples. She will have to fly to San Antonio tomorrow to pick up special orders for a young couple, the wife a fussy, spoiled girl from Puerto Vallarta who wants everything exactly like the house she grew up in. Zurith is cranky, tired of this wicked heat, and hopes Emilia didn't drink the whole pot of coffee; she is tired of making a fresh one when she gets home. Just once she'd like to pour a good, strong cup for herself right when she walks in the door. But she never tells Emilia to have coffee waiting, hoping her common sense will tell her.

She steps into the kitchen and sees Emilia curled on the floor, clasping one of her good dishes in her arms. Zurith panics. Emilia works here illegally. She imagines herself having to go back to Germany. She sweats in her cool silk blouse. She calls Toni, her partner, the one who had suggested Emilia to her.

"Toni, Emilia is dead in my kitchen."

Toni clicks her tongue, an annoying habit she has developed to express irritation. "Call her children to get her."

"They have no phone. What should I do?"

"I'll think of something." Toni, a bright, chic girl, is endlessly efficient, always poised. Zurith feels happy and privileged to know her.

While Zurith waits, she wants coffee. But Emilia lies in front of the pot. She would have to step over her ankles, swollen in their thick stockings. She can't bring herself to do it. So she sits in her living room, on her overstuffed white couch, fanning herself with a thick German fashion magazine, waiting.

Toni comes with Rudy, her stylish boyfriend. They are so pretty together, she with her bright red lipstick, he with his oiled curls. They stand over Emilia, chatting, plotting, and Zurith wishes they'd do whatever it is they've come to do. Emilia's face is turned toward the floor so Zurith can't

see it, but she focuses in on the bleeding, ugly sore on her arm, clashing against the white of the dish. She wishes she would have suggested a doctor or, better yet, taken her to the doctor herself.

"Don't worry, Miss Berndt, this is all forgotten." Rudy unfolds Emilia's arms to remove the dish, and Zurith holds her breath, afraid Emilia's bony limbs will crack. "This yours?" Rudy hands her the dish.

EMILIA HUDDLES AGAINST the bridge's fence, among the children selling Chiclets, the *cholas* waiting for their boyfriends to buy them cigarettes or a mango ice. Soon the sun's edges begin to melt into the sky, and the children go home to suppers of beans and rice. The *cholas* and their boyfriends go off deep into the streets lit by liquor store and *discoteca* signs. Emilia still huddles there in the morning when Emilio finds her, resting in her dream place.

And Emilio carries her, hardly weighing more than a cat, to Rosa's home. Connie runs over, summoned by Rosa's shriek, a sound she has imagined she would hear soon; she listened for it in her sleep. Connie holds her, searching for the Spanish words for "There, there," for "She's at peace now," but only whispering "*Mi casa es su casa,*" like a stupid, bumbling American, sticking her nose where she doesn't belong, searching for words that haven't yet been named.

J. MARK SMITH

A Climber's Son

Avalanche, veux tu m'emporter dans ta chute?

ON A MILD AUGUST AFTERNOON a snow slide fans from the north face of Edith Cavell. Thousands of feet below the hanging glaciers, limestone buttresses receive a shower of rock and ice. The scale resists comprehension. Across the valley a walker stands in the meadows, deceptively close to those cliffs. The slide's report follows, then a thundering roll.

I have been here three or four times. Today, with rain clouds squalling about the scalloped highland, an umbrella comes in handy. There is a fitness, a decorum, to the place. A moraine stretches rubble several miles down the valley, marking the extent of the last glacial overflow. The Little Ice Age, a global cold snap which began in the thirteenth century and lasted until about 1845, is known to local geologists as the Cavell advance. In the time since that advance, vegetation has resettled slowly. Dryas and dwarf willow make the first inroads. The till turns eventually to soil.

I grew up hundreds of miles east of here. Laid down among memories of early life are images of the Cavell talus slopes, of quartzite slabs covered with green and black map lichen. And of that moraine land, resistant but not wholly lost, reassuring, as if it encased hard truths. A summer day twenty-one years past, under similar skies, I walked with my young mother among the heathers and the boulders. From a small cream-colored box, she spread my father's ashes about the meadows.

A train of erratics which extends the length of the eastern foothills from central Alberta to northern Montana has been found to match the Gog formations of the Cavell area. House-sized boulders, mostly pink and white quartzite with thin green siltstone layers, are believed to have been deposited by a large rock slide onto the Athabasca glacier and then carried by moving rivers of ice to the edge of the prairie ice sheet.

I remember the confusion of a February evening in our Edmonton home, the notification by phone, a minister in the living room, unexpected visitors. I was six and with my three-year-old brother watched *The Beachcombers* on a black and white television, wondering about the fuss in the other room. Next morning I heard myself telling the first grade teacher what had happened, happened to me, the voice dying in my throat. Given time, a glacial moraine will turn to soil. I say it without complete conviction. The erratics of the plains have been traced to their source; ingenuity has run

its course. And those missing pieces remain upon the plains, far from home.

A day before returning to the Cavell meadows, I camped at a provincial park in the foothills near Hinton. That evening I walked in an aspen forest and came upon a crumbling, overgrown graveyard. High-stemmed larkspurs crowded the peeling wooden crosses there, and the dilapidated roofs which housed the native dead were of many sizes. Something held my attention otherwise than in the meadows. It was another mortal landscape, one of the many versions of significance. There had been a gray and beautiful truth in the dispersal of my father's ashes, in the alpine effacement of marker and monument. I was not sure I understood, though. What belief was expressed by my mother's act? Not a pantheism, any more than the burial houses in that foothill graveyard express the original animist religions of the continent.

Maybe it is best to say from the outset that the love of mountains—not the cultural epiphenomena associated with that love, but the love itself—tests faith. John Ruskin claimed as much, in his *Modern Painters* of 1848. To champion J.M.W. Turner's landscapes, Ruskin showed how European Christianity, from medieval times to the present, has been involved with alpine places. He spoke of two "partly contrary" impulses: one ("mountain gloom") that excites religious enthusiasm; and another ("mountain glory") that purifies religious faith. The first, enthusiastic faith, tends to be "impure," too much bound up with the imagination. Mountain gloom, he thought, "by exciting morbid conditions of the imagination," has been much responsible for the extreme forms of devotion.

Gloom and enthusiasm bound up in one emotion? The modern reader stumbles over a paradox left by shifting orders of meaning. But I recognize Ruskin's first impulse. I know this feeling, however it may elude explanation. Wordsworth said of one of his characters, "In the mountains did he *feel* his faith. . . ," and likewise for me the confirmation of Ruskin's thought arrives with the force of a truth discovered from the inside. Scattered in the meadows, my father's ashes were the seed of enthusiasm—a faith impure as that of Baudelaire crying nullity upon himself in the streets of Paris or Keats "half in love with easeful death." It is a desire for nothingness, for freedom from the falseness of a too common experience, whether in the midst of the rushing world or on a lonely traverse. The feeling is "impure" to the degree it isolates and deludes the enthusiast. David Roberts, perhaps the most articulate of twentieth-century mountaineers, has written of the same pain. "Everything having to do with climbing seems to stifle the soul's urge to communicate."

That afternoon at the Cavell meadows, I walked high on the talus slopes across from the Angel glacier. Coming down through heaped quartzite boulders, I noticed a flower I had never before seen. An unfamiliar flower (*Stellaria monantha*) in the place of my father's death. A rather more acerbic phrase from Wordsworth came to mind: "Like one who would peep

and botanize/ On his mother's grave. . . ." I had, nevertheless, a field guide in my backpack, and the field guide provided a name. I felt a different urge there, in the moving scree, and it had everything to do with communication.

Even a few years ago I could not have walked to the Cavell meadows on a summer day without bitterness. What an indignity to suffer—here, within view of the East Ridge, where my father and two other climbers were buried by an avalanche on a winter night in 1972. I could not allow tourists. My feelings slowly changed. Now I wonder what commonness there can be between myself and the tired man on the trail unraveling rain-gear for his boys, or the elderly couple packing wurst and rye bread up above tree line, or the teenage girls spraying great clouds of insect repellent in the rain. The child's experience in the meadows was mine. But one need not have seen the falling ash, or felt that tearing wind, to know something of it. Last summer I retraced this popular alpine trail, and what the place meant to the others was part of what it meant for me.

It is the difficult transformation of the impulse to alpine gloom, I think, that Ruskin named glory. The mountains, he wrote, "by fostering simplicity of life, and dignity of morals . . . have purified by action what they falsified by imagination." There are ways to bear witness against the frivolity and luxury of our lives without forsaking what is good in them. The crumbling burial houses I visited in that aspen grove bespoke the possibility of a simple life. And there are other instances of such possibility. The Stoney people of the central Albertan foothills have long carried it in the wisdom of their elders. *A man is not born to challenge a mountain.* He is born to do other things; his world is elsewhere.

Leslie Stephen (man of letters, author of a climbing book named *The Playground of Europe*, and father of Virginia Woolf) had to admit, in his own time, that he had known "some stupid and unpoetical mountaineers." In our time, that statement would need qualification. Stephen's contemporaries were stupid and unpoetical in the way that the Romans were stupid and unpoetical compared to the Greeks. Which is to say, set against *our* contemporaries, Stephen's were not very. Edward Whymper, another eminent Victorian, is a case in point. An accomplished writer and artist, as well as a legendary climber, he gained notoriety throughout Europe for the disastrous expedition he led on the Matterhorn in 1865.

Whymper fronted his autobiographical *Scrambles amongst the Alps* with an epigraph from the Roman historian Livy: "Toil and pleasure, in their natures opposite, are yet linked together in a kind of necessary connection." Whymper's commitment to some idea of classical manhood is, if unexacting, not unintelligent. "Toil he must who goes mountaineering, but out of the toil comes strength. . . ." By strength, Whymper did not mean just muscular energy, but "an awakening of all the faculties." From this strength arises pleasure, he wrote, as if completing a syllogism. Whymper wasn't an enthusiast. He did, though, from the bottom of his English heart, urge

prudence. "A momentary negligence," he wrote (alluding unmistakably to the four Matterhorn fatalities), "may destroy the happiness of a lifetime."

In the decades since alpinists became natural conquerors and adventurers, a reflective line stretching back to Petrarch has gone underground. That thirty-year-old climbed Mt. Ventoux in 1336 A.D. with a copy of Augustine's *Confessions* in his knapsack. After the climb, he imagined another ten years of life and the unremitting effort required to bring himself closer to the condition he needed to reach. "Not with certainty perhaps but with reasonable hope at least, would you not then be able to meet death in your fortieth year with equanimity, and cease to care for that remnant of life falling off into old age?"

Modern climbing luminaries give voice to rather less poetic visions of human freedom. A kind of dignity, for such climbers, resides in *choosing* to climb, like choosing to endorse a particular line of products. There are, of course, good practical reasons for the non-introspective character of many contemporary climbers. Fear is banished by action, as Chris Bonington says. This logic, I think, is connected to the untruth that it is "right" to die on the mountain—that it is the "right way to go." Unlike the enthusiast, the late twentieth-century climber comports himself as though death were nothing. The possibility of climbing being spiritualized does not arise. Bonington tries to explain why he has sought out frightening situations, but his account is disappointing. If you take him at his word, you might think climbing has something to do with building up self-confidence.

In the Alps early in his career, Bonington and several others, including a man with head injuries from falling rock, were stuck for the night (their third) high on the southwest pillar of a mountain called the Dru. Anxious hours gave way to dawn. Then, Bonington recalls, in "the moment I start[ed] to climb this [was] all forgotten and I [was] lost in the all-absorbing business of coaxing my body up the stretch of rock immediately in front." Terror was translated into action. Bonington, whatever else you may think of him, is a mountaineering hero, a man who reaps freedom by vigorous action. But simplicity and purity of attack consort with the most banal optimism. "My experience on the Pillar taught me that however bad conditions become, whatever goes wrong I could [sic] extricate myself." The climber mistakes himself.

To all appearances, most young sport climbers buy the stupidity of the brand-name T-shirts that boast "no fear." But distinctions between "recreational" sport climber and "serious" mountain climber, though initially telling, turn out to be little more than generational. The hosts of brightly equipped adrenaline adepts out on the routes of North America, from Joshua Tree to Lake Louise, do confirm the truth that certain aspects of the world cannot fail to accompany the climber up the rock. Her imagination is fed now by advertising lines rather than by Livy, but it is the same end of toil and pleasure she seeks.

The non-reflective character of the modern climber may in some

instances be more than a matter of callowness or ignorance. It may not be anti-spiritual in every case. After all, mountaineering has never been an entirely rational activity. The climber is passionately interested in moments when intellect and will are reduced to nothing. But the climber has needed reason, too, in order that his devotion should be more than a desire for nullity. In our time, however, the climber's professions of faith and his avowals of reason are weighted quite differently than they once were. It could be that doing something like climbing in avalanche-prone country becomes a way to embrace the spiritual (which here means the uncontrollable) while keeping to the realm of rational action.

I think of my father, a tenured biochemist, who apparently had left religion and superstition behind. He climbed in the Lake District of northern England, in the Alps, the Canadian Rockies, the Yukon ranges, the Andes. What was my father after? Was it some kind of spiritual or emotional experience that attracted him to climbing? Could that young English scientist have shared Baudelaire's taste for nothingness? Exposing oneself to avalanche conditions involves a kind of submission to fate on all fronts, a self-control both rational and irrational. It is true the technology has improved in the last twenty years. I know three or four people who have survived avalanches because they were wearing radio transmitters ("pieps"). It is still not a reasonable thing to do. Some kinds of fear cannot be banished in action.

Perhaps then it is a humanizing ritual that the more extreme varieties of climbing enact. Strength and expertise are honored, but an uncontrollable variable is added also, as if to alert reason or imagination to its limits, in the way that it has needed to be "purified" at other times. I once heard the story of a physicist in his thirties, dead now, whose longtime climbing partner in Colorado was carrying on an affair with his wife. The physicist knew of the infidelity; the climbing partner knew that he knew. Neither let on. It was a matter of some importance that failure of trust in marriage and friendship should not interfere with the climbing affiliation.

The anecdote fits observations made by David Roberts after his 1965 ascent of Mt. Huntingdon in the St. Elias range of Alaska. In *The Mountain of My Fear,* Roberts noted that commitment to an expedition was not primarily a personal loyalty, that the personnel of an expedition were interchangeable. "The mountains," he wrote, "in a sense, could mean more to me than these people could."

What was my father after? I repeat the question and walk the summer streets of the village where I began these thoughts, admiring the last light on the nearby ranges. Like any lover of the mountains, I wait for the alpenglow, for "that strange faint silence of possession by the sunshine." Ruskin saw a deep melancholy in it and no end of cause for sadness. What is given must be possessed, what is unassailable made one's own. One need not be a climber, or a climber's son, to know these things.

Notes: The epigraph is from Baudelaire's "Le Gout du Néant" in Les Fleurs du Mal. *John Ruskin writes of mountain gloom and mountain glory in* Modern Painters, *vol. 4 (Boston: Dana Estes & Co., 1873). The Stoney maxim is recorded in* The Stonies of Alberta *(Calgary: The Alberta Foundation, 1983). I allude to William Wordsworth's* Excursion *(I, 226) and also to "A Poet's Epitaph." Petrarch's "Ascent of Mt. Ventoux" is translated in* The Renaissance Philosophy of Man, *Cassirer, et al., ed. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1948). Edward Whymper describes the Matterhorn disaster in* Scrambles amongst the Alps *(Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1981). Chris Bonington's adventure on the Dru is recounted in* I Chose to Climb *(London: Victor Gollanca, 1969). I have learned about the geology of the Cavell area, and about mountain ecology, from Ben Gadd's indispensable* Handbook of the Canadian Rockies *(Jasper, AB: Corax Press, 1986).*

I Don't Know What to Do about the Faithful

As the opening opens, the sky opens wide,
the day breaks
shattering shiny things on their skin-faces.
Their eyes are watching television.

Down here, they walk around with pockets full of ions
in the transcendent village.
They tell me, I just saw your look-alike
hanging out in the back alley

Examining her watery reflection in a puddle.
They say, see what has happened.
They say, I saw it written on the sycamore tree.
Their breath-marks float in zero air.

Up there, as a spaceship beelines for a momentary window,
a girl's body near the bottom of a swimming pool
struggles up, and on the air, the dj breathes
as dj's do, silently, in cylinders of breath.

MOLLY TAMARKIN

Introduced to the Florida Keys

via Central America, the jungle runner, like the Old World
ruins lizard, survives in a woodland
habitat and needs a two-foot pool brimmed

with water—a body's length to soak
a turquoise underbelly and to streak
the stair-stepped jagged anterior bars like ink

or tears can waffle paper.
The female's belly, white as plaster,
might digest her newborns as well as spiders.

This far south
(or north to them) the stunted mangroves mouth
the flats, creating hammocks for the uncouth

poisonwood and gumbo limbo, where the nervous runner
claws urgently and scrapes the tangled roots: the desire
for soil for egg-laying, like its sister

coursing Pompeii, only here,
evolved or simply younger, five to six inches larger,
exotic in the woods made precious by the salty water.

Estrangement Song

Even unwashed the subcompact's red is emphatic
against the tired greens of token trees
swaying frankly, as if such naiveté
contradicted the carbon monoxide and noise.
Not that it doesn't. But the half-cleared field
can be said to become the very freeway
moving obliviously past it, and that too
is a simplification. But the need never goes,
it changes, and sometimes its shape
is satisfaction, itself a subtler need.
Far from here this might not be so,
there where there are no landscapes
defining us from this side of an imaginary line,
defying us from the other, from that place
so open the idea of openness is reductive. Still,
from the old nothing comes the new and eternal
emphasis, the you, the me, and of course
some relevant intermediary qua intermezzo,
uninterruptably quiet,
the color of your voice, the tone of your hair.

JOSHUA McKINNEY

Moment (without) Scars

—baited,
anterior to crisis,
the phantom rigorously
derived from memory.
Like the man who lost
his thumb in
a threshing machine,
borders of a new continent
on his sleeve.
Such instants cramp
under thought's inflection
stopping to stare into
space, a hyphen
still dogging the date of
its birth. Blossoms
infect the surface
and we return
to the man without a thumb,
the way he palms his wife's
breast, how his pen
spells disaster
in a sinister track
leading into wilderness
where the map's X
stands for everything,
and the jar, exhumed, is empty.
The rest is waiting.

The Wall

WE SAT IN TWO ROWS facing each other in this black van. We were twelve men, six on each side. The bearded guard covered our eyes with black scarves. Like a magician he pulled a scarf out of his pocket, wrapped it around someone's eyes, tied it tight at the back, pulled the next one out and then the next. I was the last person, the twelfth one. The guard, who was already tired of this tedious job, covered my eyes carelessly. I could see everything from under my eye-band; the scarf was slipping down on my nose.

There was no window in the back, but I could see the driver's window; he had rolled it down. It was September and the breeze was fragrant. Damascus roses bloom in this month, I thought. Around this time of the year schools open. I remembered how I always walked to school early in the morning and felt the same fragrant breeze on my face. Even then I was conscious of the Damascus roses.

I was happy that my eye-band was loose and I could see everything.

The van bumped up and down. It was a country road, no asphalt. I saw the olive trees passing by. It was not dawn yet. Everything was gray, not quite dark and not quite bright.

Some of us were dozing off. The tilted heads wobbled on thin necks. One of us hummed a forbidden song, a love song about a revolutionary who asks his lover to kiss him good-bye, because he is going to be executed: "Kiss me, kiss me for the last time . . . God may protect you! . . . I'm going toward my fate . . . ."

We couldn't talk. I'm sure we would have, if there had been a wall between the bearded guards and us, but there wasn't. We couldn't look at each other either and talk with our eyes; our eyes were covered. Mine was not; my scarf was loose and now on my nose.

It's not that we had no idea where they were taking us. If we could talk, we would share our guesses. The strong possibility was: transferring us to a different prison, the one which was outside the city, the worst one, the one with modern torture equipment. The second possibility was: taking us somewhere for work, to make a new prison maybe. The third was: to take us somewhere in the desert, hand us machine guns and force us to fire at the other political prisoners—those who were sentenced to death.

I was sure that the others were considering the same scenarios behind their black blindfolds or in the dark abyss of their dreams. There was no

other possibility. Why would they drag us out of our cell before dawn, cover our eyes and take us to nowhere? None of us had been tried yet; all of us were in a temporary situation—the stage after the tortures and before the trial. My intestines, which were bleeding as the result of a certain method of anal torture, had only recently become better. They couldn't possibly execute us; that was out of the question.

The olive trees were passing by. When I was a little boy, every summer we went to this resort area at the seaside. My father had an old VW bug. My sister and I sat in the little hollow space under the rear window. We sat facing the window and watched the road. All the way I looked at the olive trees on the two sides of the road, passing by. They were white, light green, gray, green-gray and white again, strange colors for trees. My father hummed the old forbidden song all the way: "Kiss me, kiss me for the last time . . . God may protect you! I'm going toward my fate . . . ." My mother peeled off the tender skin of a slim green cucumber, cut it vertically into four long pieces, poured a lot of salt on them and gave each of us one piece to eat. She peeled another cucumber and then another, till our little car smelled fresh with the grassy scent of young, tender cucumbers. Sometimes my father had a bad headache and Mother laid the cool green skins of cucumber on his forehead. He looked like an Indian Chief in the western movies and we laughed at him. The cucumber skins stick to the forehead and absorb the pain, my mother believed. When Father felt better he hummed his old love song which he remembered from when he was a rebel.

I loved the part where he raised his voice dramatically, became sentimental, and told his lover that he was lost in the middle of an unknown sea: "In the midst of the storm, I'm wandering with the boatmen . . . . We have sacrificed our lives, that's why we can't keep our promises . . . ."

The van bumped up and down. The sky was still dark; dawn was not to come. One of us was snoring and that made me remember my dream. Last night I dreamed the strangest dream of all my past three years in prison. I dreamed about this woman that I knew once, one of our friends, the woman whose whereabouts I do not know and probably I'll never know. She was my friend's wife. She fell in love with someone else and they got divorced. But the lover left her after a few months. She was lonely and was living in a dark apartment facing a wall. When she looked out her window, there was this wall there, right in front of her. A bricklayer was busy working on the wall all the time, twenty-four hours, non-stop, laying bricks, bricks on top of bricks. The wall grew taller and taller every day. It got to a level where she couldn't see the sky anymore.

After the lover left, I used to go and visit her. She was quiet most of the time, depressed maybe, because of what had happened to her, and the wall. I did all the talking. I wanted to keep her politically updated. Those were the crucial days: a revolution, a war, and several coups and assassinations, one after another. I considered it my revolutionary duty to visit her and not let her become politically passive. Was I attracted to her? In a strange way

maybe, not quite sexual. She was a mystery to me, completely closed, living in a world unknown and inaccessible. I wanted to open her up, unfold her maybe, but I didn't know how. I'd get so easily obsessed with my own verbal ability that instead of making her talk I'd do all the talking myself. I'd start the conversation, then talk so much that my own words drowned me in a whirlpool of ever-turning, never-ending monologue. Most of the time I found myself spinning in this whirlpool, talking forever, while she just sat there motionless, listening to me, not even blinking. This passivity encouraged me even more and I plunged myself deeper into myself, believing that I was impressing her by my eloquence.

So night after night I visited her and talked. I didn't learn anything about her. She stayed closed in her many folds to the end. One evening I stayed late. I finished talking about politics and started a new subject: men and women. Then I led the subject to sex and little by little to more private matters. I even asked her some personal questions like whether she'd ever had good sex with her husband or the man she loved, which she didn't answer. Then I talked about my own sexual life, my ex-wife, our unhappy marriage, and so on. At two o'clock in the morning I asked her if she wanted to sleep with me. She said no. I insisted; she seemed quite detached and cold, absent in a way. But for some reason (maybe extreme depression), she was completely passive. She could have asked me to leave, which I'd immediately have done, but she didn't. So I kept insisting.

By three in the morning she was extremely tired. I'll never forget her eyes. They were red, like someone who has cried for hours. She sat on her bed, leaning back against the wall, at times even dozing off. I talked constantly, but she was withdrawn, going somewhere far away from me. In the short intervals when I stopped talking, we heard the bricklayer, laying bricks on top of bricks. He used his trowel to spread the mortar, flatten it and lay another brick. It was dark. We couldn't see the wall, but we could feel it.

At four, I persuaded her to sleep with me. She was exhausted. I had exhausted her. She gave up resisting only because she was tired and wanted to get rid of me and get some sleep. She said, "OK." No, she put it this way, she said, "You can have me, come; then go and leave me alone."

I don't know what had gotten into me that night. I wasn't in love with her. I didn't want sex either. I just wanted to break the ice, go inside her, unfold her, understand her maybe. I made love to her; no, not that. Whatever it was, it was bad. She was frozen under me, mummified. The moment I entered her, I froze too. When I buttoned up my pants, I felt awkward, ugly. The last thing she told me before I left, the last thing she told me ever, was, "Turn the lights out!"

It was dawn when I left her apartment. The wall was so tall I couldn't see the top. The bricklayer was up there in the sky. Walking in the gray alley, I pictured her lying in bed, palm of right hand under her cheek, facing the wall, witnessing how it was growing tall, blocking the bright morning

sun, reflecting only a dim grayish light.

I saw her later, several times. In the meetings and mass demonstrations. She acted like nothing had ever happened between us. She never came close to me, but didn't hide herself either. I was there, one among many, a friend, not a close one though, an acquaintance to whom you never talk, but you may work with or share ideas. Several times I was going to tell her that I needed to talk to her, but I never did. What did I want to tell her? Did I want to apologize? Did I want to make sure that I hadn't hurt her feelings? Or maybe I just wanted to ask one question, "What happened to that wall? Is he still laying the bricks?"

But I never talked to her again, and it happened that the bearded guards attacked all of our organizations and houses. Most of us got arrested, some escaped from the country, and a few committed suicide.

I don't know her whereabouts. Did she get arrested or manage to escape? She couldn't have possibly stayed in that apartment; although the wall was tall, the bearded guards could still find her.

So last night I dreamed this strange dream. There we were, both of us, standing in front of her window, looking at the wall. The bricklayer was up there laying the bricks.

I said, "I've come here to . . . ."

She said, "Sh . . . sh . . . don't talk, just listen."

I listened. It was the sound of the bricklayer's tool, flattening the mortar and then dumping a brick on the mud. It was a constant monotonous sound.

I said, "How tall is it going to get?"

She said, "Who knows?"

I said, "How do you feel now?"

She said, "Calm, I'm calm."

Now the bricklayer fell down. It took him quite a while to get to the ground. His scalp opened wide like a ripe red watermelon and his brain smoothly slipped out. I screamed, clawed my face and cried; I yelled and howled like a baby. Like an orphan I shed tears, like somebody lost. It was as though I had no hope in this world whatsoever. She looked at me, calm; she didn't even blink. Now she kept looking at the wall again. I thought to myself, she has never forgiven me. She will never forgive me and can never be kind to me. At that moment in my dream the only thing which could save me from that intolerable misery, that feeling of total ruin, was her tender affection. But she didn't give it to me. I stood there crying like a baby and she, a woman, a potential mother, watched the wall as though nothing had happened.

When I woke up, two bearded guards were standing at the iron gate of the cell. The little eye-window on the ceiling was black. The night was still deep. The guards told us to leave our things in the cell and get out. It was a long way to dawn when we got in the van.

THE OLIVE TREES WERE WHITE, light green, gray, green-gray and white, tender twigs bending with the gentle breeze. One of us snored. I knew who he was. He was always sleeping. In the past three years he had gradually reached a stage that nothing was important for him anymore. Transferring to a worse jail? So be it. Building a prison with our own hands? So be it. Being executed? So be it. He was not himself anymore. Long ago in the torture chambers when they took his soul out of him, they took all the pain out at the same time. He no longer felt the pain, so they stopped bothering him. Now, not knowing where we were going and not caring either, in the dark vacuum of his meaningless dreams, he was snoring.

The van bumped up and down. Now I could see the desert; it was the end of the road; the van stopped. So this is the case, I thought, we are going to kill our own friends. My heart started to climb in my throat and reach my mouth. Am I able to do it? How? How can I fire at my own comrades? At anyone? Friend or no friend? Am I able to fire at all? What about the others? Can they do this? What if we resist? They will kill us on the spot. Who cares, huh? Do the authorities care? The bearded guards can tell them that we rioted and they had to kill us. Meanwhile the guards came into the van and removed our eye-bands. We looked around, at the desert, at each other. One of us suddenly shouted, "Comrades, they are going to execute us!"

A bearded guard hit him on the mouth with the back of his hand. His big gold ring with the picture of the Great Leader carved on it tore our friend's lips; blood gushed out. Then they pushed us out of the van. The same friend with his mouth full of blood shouted again, "They are going to kill us before our trial, Comrades! This is against the law!"

This is impossible, I thought; it's out of the question. I looked around. There was no other van, no other prisoners, no one but us, the guards and the endless desert all around—bluish-gray, breathing silently in the last minutes of the night.

They prodded and hit us with the butts of their machine guns. Where are they taking us? I thought. What's the difference? Why don't they kill us right here? Then I felt my knees buckle under me and I almost collapsed. I'd never have collapsed if I hadn't seen the wall. There it was, in the middle of the desert, the tall brick wall, reaching the sky. It wasn't just a wall, any wall, it was the wall of my nightmares, the wall behind the woman's window, the wall that the bricklayer was building, the wall that he fell off of, the wall that made me cry in the last dream of my life.

They dragged us to the wall and made us stand there facing it; they stepped back. We stood face to the wall, our noses almost touching it. I smelled the fresh mortar and heard the monotonous sound of the trowel smothering the mud. The sound was coming from the very top of the wall, from the sky, saying something like, swoosh . . . swoosh . . . swoosh . . . . It was as if we stood there forever.

I felt the fragrant breeze of September. I heard my father humming, "In

the midst of the storm . . . wandering with the boatmen . . . ." I saw the green-gray leaves of the olive trees waving with the breeze. I felt the cool soothing touch of the cucumber skins on my forehead. I touched the tall, dark, shadowy body of the woman I hurt, the only woman I ever hurt in my life. Then I heard the clicks. One of us whispered, "O God, have mercy on us!" Someone else muttered, "Mother!" The comrade with the bloody mouth shouted, "Long live the Revolution!" And they fired.

We sat in two rows again, on the way back, six men on each side. They covered our eyes with the same black scarves. I was the first one. The bearded guard tied the scarf so tight that it hurt my head. I couldn't see anything. Total blackness. But I knew that some of us had fainted at the wall and been dragged into the van. A couple of us were wet with pee and vomit. Nobody hummed anymore. Nobody dozed off, even the friend who slept all the time. I couldn't see the olive trees; I didn't want to see them even if I could. I didn't want to see anything. The only thing I wanted was the cell. I wanted to go back to the cell and stay there forever. I thought, it's good that we are going back to our cell. I felt a warmth and security I hadn't felt for years. I thought, after a while we will recover from this false execution and I'll ask my friends if they also noticed the wall in the desert. If the wall was really there.

The van bumped up and down, taking us to our cell. I heard the sun slowly coming out from behind the remote edge of the desert, lighting the world. I felt its fragrant honey taste in my mouth, the taste of life. But I could not see the dawn; the black scarf separated me from the sun.

Neighborhood

Says the child, volcanos are mountains overwhelmed
by what's inside, coming apart, like the precise blue

of a dress, absolutely certain of its own color,
its own absorption and rejection of light. Such

women as here transform *space* into something more
than sadness, something airy and sweet as the day

sinking. Dark, and children still in the street,
ignored by parents far too young for them, dirty

as yards too close together. One man grabs a child
off the porch by the hair, stuffs her in the car

like groceries. But what frightens me are nights
going on like disease, air thick as intoxication

and the moon erupting through a wall of clouds.
Soon the rain might come, heavy and without warning.

MONICA WEINHEIMER

Other People

I'M ON MY FIFTH CHICKEN. It's really the ninth, if you count the ones I did with Mapy helping me. I still only do the butchering part, because to actually kill the chicken you have to be strong enough to hold the wings and the legs still with one hand. Otherwise the chicken might move at the wrong moment, like when my brother missed the rooster's neck and chopped off only its comb. It's best if the chicken dies quickly and painlessly, so only my dad can kill them. The cutting board rattles against the sink as I pull the skin off. Most people pluck their chickens, but my dad says this is not as good as skinning them. He says that most people eat store-bought chicken anyway, which is chock-full of chemicals and hormones, and not even cleaned properly.

"Come here and watch," he says. "See how I'm cleaning this with the water? You have to really get in there or little pieces will be stuck. Most people don't realize it, but the chickens you buy at the store still have lung stuck between the ribs, and intestines, and who knows what else. Yeah. It's really gross what people are eating."

I wrinkle my nose, even though he says that every time we do a chicken. He says he just wants us to know the right way to do things. He's standing by the refrigerator, wiping his hands on a towel and getting out a beer. Last night when he was standing in that spot my mom came up to hug him. I stamped my foot and squinted my eyes, and they finally stopped. It makes me nervous when they do that. They almost never hug; when they do it seems strange.

My chicken looks like a headless fat lady, glistening in its pink nakedness. I make it sit up on the counter and dance around. Mapy tells me to stop playing with it, but I see him smiling. He stops when I say it looks like Oma. That's his mother, but she probably weighs as much as our cow. She came to visit us once, and my brother and I accidentally went in the bathroom before she was done with her shower. She was standing there naked in a huge cloud of steam. She looked like a steamed whale, and we stood in the doorway, unable to move until she waved her arms at us and yelled, "Go on, scat! Out!" Aside from that she was really nice to us, but we never see her so I don't remember much else about her. Mapy hasn't called her in two years. Maybe it's because she's really religious. He can't stand religious people because they're so intolerant. Last summer, two men with smooth hair and shiny black shoes came to our door. I ran to see because

strangers never come to our door except to ask directions to the Beagle Club, which is only a little ways past our house, but people from town drive as far as our house and think they're lost. Their hands were full of papers and magazines, but Mapy said, "I don't buy into any of that shit. It's all a bunch of bull." The younger one coughed and looked at me, but I pressed my lips against the doorknob and said nothing. The other man was saying something about my education and my soul, but my dad cut him off: "Yeah, she's going to hell. Now get off my land," and the door slammed shut.

I slice into the soft part below the back, to open a place to get the innards out. Mapy lets me use his good knife this time, the one that comes out of a leather sheath. He sharpens his own knives, which he says most people don't do right. They hold the knife at the wrong angle and end up dulling the blade. He says they probably have poor quality knives anyway, like the ones they sell on TV, a whole set plus an extra one for $19.95. We don't watch TV, at least not like other people. Our neighbors let their son Alan watch *The Dukes of Hazzard*, which rots his brain. I wonder what your brain looks like when it rots. Probably like these guts.

My friend Elise watches TV, too. She came over the last time we butchered chickens, outside by the apple tree. When my mother ripped the skin off, it made a sound like a stuck zipper finally being unzipped, and Elise fell to the ground with a heavy thud. As she fell, her eyes rolled back and her head missed the apple tree by only two inches. I was disappointed in her. Even though her family eats store-bought chicken and lives in town like other people, she knows about horses, and I thought she would like to see the real way to clean a chicken.

He's wearing a blue work shirt, rolled up to the elbows. He has two exactly alike, so he can wear one while the sweat dries on the other one. Even though it's hot in here, he has on jeans, which are darker blue like the sweaty places on his shirt, and his black army boots which take forever to lace up. He always wears this many clothes because, he says, that is the right way to dress if you're going to do any work. I know this, but I always wear bare feet anyway. I can run even on gravel barefoot. Elise says I have leather feet, but I think she's secretly jealous. Jealous because her feet are tender from walking on carpet, and she doesn't have a horse pasture, and her mom's just a housewife. But I never say this out loud to her because I understand that not everyone can have such a good family as ours, which is almost perfect. My dad says the only thing wrong with our family is that we start too many projects and don't have time to finish them, but this is because we like to do things right the first time around, which takes time. That's why our house still isn't finished. There's a big hole where the greenhouse is supposed to be, and if you tried to go through the door, you would fall and die on the rock floor. When my parents aren't home, my brother and I play Bottomless Pit, where you have to creep across the windowsills without touching the windows. My brother pretends he's

going to make me fall by throwing BBs at me, but he (almost) always misses. I would say he is the one thing wrong with our family. He and my dad are always screaming at each other. One time he got the .22 and screamed that he would kill my dad, and then he ran out of the house. I don't know what they were fighting about. My mother wouldn't tell me, but she cried for a long time. She does that a lot; my dad says mothers are that way sometimes.

Right now she is cutting up the meat and putting the pieces in the wide silver-colored bowl we use for popcorn. I have finished cleaning all the lungs from between the ribs of my chicken, so I give the chicken to my mom. It gleams softly, and I suddenly imagine it scratching in the grass, the way it looked before it was naked in the popcorn bowl. My mother looks sad; perhaps she is seeing the same thing.

I take the bucket of slops far, far away and dump it in the back pasture where coyotes and buzzards will eat it. A few old feathers are all that's left from last time.

Mom is sitting in her office, not looking at her desk, but straight ahead, as if she could see right through the unpainted drywall to the living room on the other side. A deep sigh climbs from her belly and keeps going up until it seems to escape through the skylight. I stare at the faded Ellen Goodman newspaper columns stuck to the side of her filing cabinet and ask her what's wrong, without looking at her face. When she gets like this, her eyes look like the eyes of my stuffed horse, and I don't want to see them. She tells me not to worry, she's just tired. I go out to the kitchen where my father is sitting with his gin and tonic. For a few minutes the only sound is the ice clinking in his glass as he takes the last sip and fishes out the lime with his fingers. "Will you tuck me in?" I ask.

My dad gives me a back rub. His hands run callused over my whole back. They feel like warm, soft tree bark. He stays until all my muscles are relaxed and does my arm, too, when I ask him. My mother's footsteps are brisk and light on the floor above my head. I'm falling asleep, but I hear his boots, slow and heavy, climbing the stairs. The two mismatched rhythms continue for a while and then fall silent.

The Tourist

for Susan Dodd

1. DRY WRAPPERS

This photograph of you has no memory, no sense
Of how the contrasts of summer offer
Little weight against the slate sky, slate gray ground
Now near winter. I trade in such moments—
Each one discrete, no detail marred by chance;
I collect them; in the passion of the collector,
I never bring them to light, to be handled
By the crowd curious to know what lies beyond,
In the chaos of memory. There is only you
As seen; you look at the camera—I believe
You are looking at me. Still sometimes,
Through the current of picture postcards, snapshots,
Through the loud, jangling tournaments of thought,
The merest incident of your voice.

2. IN REDUCED PROPORTIONS

Was your daddy a thief who taught you how to steal;
Or a rich man who left you alone to feel
Your own way through the rooms of his house?
His face fading, look closely at his photograph.
Did he wear his clothes well? Off-hand, or ill-fitting?
Do your skirts swirl, colors jabber loudly?
His face has faded now; I have your voice—
Sounds I've come to love, believing they're you.
I believe that I know you beyond this
Tissue of sleep (even that far apart),
Your breath on my skin. You're not a picture
To approach, step back from, seeking
That distance from which to see best:
I can only protect myself.

3. PERIPHERAL FORMS

If this were a movie, you an actress,
Day after day, long hours in the lights,
I would hold you, your face close to mine,
Your lips parted, so seduced by how
Soon your image will at one moment flicker
Thinly across thousands of screens, to be
Taken up by eyes hungry to know you
And me rehearsing the before we should know,
Though there is no before for us. There is
No photograph, no memory then. Love becomes
The moment we refrain. Freed from memory,
Only in the present, only as imagined,
We are always able, over again, and again,
To repeat this scene with feeling.

4. THE PASSPORT

In shadows, it seems I see things not quite seen—
The night breaking into scraps around
A sentry's hands that hide a match flame
As I lean forward to accept the light.
I'd gone looking for a war to fight—
I wanted to lay my life on the line,
So that one moment might seem real,
So that you would mean that much to me
Here in these muddy trenches, longing to be
Home on leave, holding you instead of your photograph.
In truth, I haven't left my room in weeks—
A fool, I await an order that would impose
Meaning on memories the moment I stand
At your door, while you reach for words, for walls.

5. TO END AS A PHOTOGRAPH

There is only the view of the gardens
Reflected in my eye—not the roiling ocean
Scudding up on the beach; not the terrain
Seen by another, another time of day—
Only this nebula of sense and memory,
Only the view drawn from time and uncertainty.
I hold a photograph of you, hoping I'll see
What it serves as evidence of. . . .
Dance with me! The traffic on Broadway will halt
As the orchestra fills the streets with sound
Shattering the sea of concrete and glass.
Your arms around my neck, your body close
Against mine, swaying, sweaty, and dizzy,
It doesn't matter what we see.

The History of the World

first, unusual forms of rain:
Pliny says when Ascilius and Procius were consuls
it rained milk once, and blood once,
and many times it rained flesh

next: they vanish away, the white cities
among the western mountains lives a very strong thief

then: a secret devotion come August
and long disappearance of life comes after
and shade, and rusted gates, and broken sidewalks with writing
and a cistern; that's the best place of all
where the water can keep something bitter and good
or inside the disallowed and black old used up leathery word
with cotton or cane, a little money,
a truck and a roadside stand, tarpaper lonesome houses
and a few big ugly suncrazy flowers leaning over
as if to read the dirt

or maybe it's otherwise,
maybe it's this: she's on the old way back
got the story of the devil and his ugly dog
and the one where the snake learns to whistle
but trades away his most precious talent in exchange
ask that lady did you do it right, she says,
just like his brother did

she'd be just about visible by now, the yard be bare now
and goodbye to the sweet effect of some loss, we'd say
as a way to say hello and welcome back
and she'd start in right away with the story:
hasta ahora, hermano
brother, up to now, you know, I been pretty sad
but this is what I know now:
we are not boxes of something

or insects asleep on faded red magazines
there is a witch asleep inside your eye, each one,
and a city asleep inside her mouth;
inside that city, rainsoaked houses
of sailors and perfumed widows, streets that come back
on themselves, aimless barking of shivering dogs,
a light in a window here or there,
someone coming closer to the last thin moment of breath

there's a man in the baggage car recently dead in fact;
in his pocket, a seahorse and a papery bird; we move
in the deepest curving place, in the year of our shyness 1889
south of Bridget Falls, where
the solitary rider is lost and glad to be lost
and the dead man has carried the usual secret world; now
the images stream from his chest like butterflies in clouds
in Cham or Lhus or Mizraim. His trees
and his miniature armies in wild plantations
and his talk in wanderings of the fields. He spoke (by their wings
and fluttering) of the equivocal
production of all human things, of the two directions
of movement of the soul, of the seeds of rocket and mustard,
he spoke about the process and motion of the heart of the world

it's not so easy to become unbroken he said
remember there are people buried under every floor
but here there is one comfort: the witch often backs away
from slippery sheer walls of flesh;
she prefers the feeling of creeping into our heads, where it's dry
to be a kind of nothing there or a shadow-lesson maybe or a number

Sestina

So much depends on distance—
fresh off the boat in Dubrovnik, blinking, nowhere to stay,
and dragging my backpack, I trailed a grandmother
home. The floorboards in my room crazily warped, that night
I tumbled to the ground. At breakfast, they talked of the crash
I'd made. I can't remember the towns now, only the direction

I took, south, east, south, then suddenly north, each direction
a heartbeat closer. My dusty shoes, the distance
between me now and the Yugoslav children with blue backpacks crashing
to their bodies as they run—food enough to stay
alive two days only. The bombs and tanks invade the night,
the days, and even the day of the grandmothers

in one long line for bread. You'd think a grandmother
could make a sniper point in another direction.
They carry their baskets days and nights,
twice the normal distance
between markets and apartments, nations and papers, and the staid
faces refuse to register the bullets crashing

through windows, government buildings. Buses carry children and crash
the iron city gates that the grandmothers
had seen erected and then applauded. No one in this city wants to stay.
When I traveled, direction
didn't matter: I removed the distance,
simply, between each vanished church. I never travel at night.

Now I eat from china plates and sleep through the night.
I'd thought my plane home would crash,
that, after all my train rides, I couldn't travel the distance
home. Before I'd left, my grandmother
wouldn't look at me; she turned, delicately, to the direction
of my plane. She wanted me to stay.

But affection changes. When I wanted to stay
with the nuns, they had no room and sent me to the gathering night
with a crumpled map and written directions
to guide me past streets where now bombs crash.
I wanted distance erased then, I do now, a cool grandmother's
hand on my forehead tracing the distance

from my cheek to my chin, the distance between the fiery crashes
which blossom each night. Here snipers aim in the direction
of children, grandmothers. Who can afford *not* to stay?

Two Witches

live and work and will sell you spells
in a dry, hot town, four crosses to ward off evil

sunk at its corners. La Petaca, Mexico,
where no one honeymoons. You come either

to spend your life, or once, briefly, for the witches,
their black and white candles, their sugar cubes,

your cure. They tell you to have faith.
Sometimes you get so desperate you'll try anything,

so I've waited the yellow morning for one witch.
How many times has she heard this story? She calculates

based on your birthday, the planets, then reports
she can do nothing while there's drought.

I carry you with me wherever I go,
looking for the good dark earth, but

she shows me the door
where farmers wait with their chickens,

where girls braid lilies in their hair.
I always wanted to believe

in an order in the world, in the way things happened,
and even then, that a witch could turn it inside out.

I wanted to believe that each true thing would rise
and be chosen, that I could die of desire,

that simply by not wanting to hit the collie on the highway
cars could dodge it, and that I wouldn't want to watch

in my rear-view mirror. Why can't I leave
that dog rising halfway out of itself,

this witch's house on chicken feet,
the delicacy of your absence?

GAVIN SCHULZ

Emily Mann: An Interview

Emily Mann has for nearly twenty years been an influential and innovative voice in American theatre. Since the mid seventies, when she became assistant director of the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, Ms. Mann has steadily worked to revitalize the theatre into, as one critic has noted, a source of "political awareness in America." Since that time she has served as director for numerous theatre companies around the nation, from The Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles to her current home at the McCarter Theatre Center for the Performing Arts in Princeton, New Jersey. Her vision of drama's role in America has afforded her several unique collaborative opportunities with other important artists: Ntozake Shange, with whom she worked upon the two-act opera Betsey Brown, *and Anna Deveare Smith, with whom she worked on the recent* Twilight: Los Angeles, *to single out two such opportunities.*

In addition to her passion for direction, Emily Mann is also an award-winning playwright. In her writings, as in many of her endeavors, Ms. Mann's artistic impulse has been toward what she terms the "theatre of testimony." Theatre of testimony makes conspicuous use of factual testimony, whether derived from interviews, outside sources, or transcriptions of court documents. These excerpts are then woven together by the author to create a dramatic work which fuses the author's personal vision with data from "real" life. In keeping with this factual emphasis, a multi-media format is frequently utilized; productions will incorporate television images, news footage, actual videotaped interviews, or musical excerpts.

Emily Mann's pioneering participation in theatre of testimony clearly places her on the cutting edge of the American theatre. Her journalistic background gives this artistic vision an added edge as she implicitly understands the mechanism underlying the more factual world of the news. In contemporary America, dominated as it is by the emergence of the "information highway," the theatre of testimony is becoming increasingly relevant to the way in which both America and the world perceives and interprets reality. The ephemeral boundary which exists between perception and interpretation is where Emily Mann has focused her artistic energies.

In the following interview, Ms. Mann discusses her own dramatic writings, emphasizing throughout the political focus which serves as a foundation for her work. The emphasis she places upon politics gives this brief look into the private workings of her imagination greater resonance; it provides a unique view into the political function of contemporary drama—and art. In the current political climate, in which governmental support of artistic ventures is increasingly finding itself

under attack, Emily Mann's insights into the "function of art" serve as an important theoretical touchstone regarding the role and support which America should give its artists and its art.

GS: In a previous interview, while discussing your play *Still Life,* you claimed that the actual story grabbed you and demanded to be told. Do you have any insight as to which aspects in a story stand out, commanding your attention?
EM: I don't know how and why I do what I do. That's more for the critics or the psychoanalysts to determine. Everything that I have written has had a similar power over me, though; that is why I expend years out of my life to tell a story. Sometimes I understand what it is that overtakes me and obsesses me; sometimes I don't. In *Annulla,* the impulse stemmed from my need to know as a young person how people, my people, could be exterminated in Europe—how people could be exterminated, period. Similarly, *Still Life* came from a very personal need to understand humanity's relationship to violence. I also felt that there were some people in my life that I had to answer to, people who had believed the war in Vietnam was an imperative. Finally, there is the question about how one survives through these horrors with one's humanity intact; how can one survive knowing what one knows about these horrors, about what human beings are capable of doing to each other?

But that is not enough. It does not really tell you why one needs to do certain things. The best person on this aspect of my work is David Savran; he conducted the interview included in *In Their Own Words* in which he discusses my "internalization of oppression." He studied and analyzed my work in a way that I don't.

GS: In a way that might be dangerous, perhaps?
EM: Perhaps, but I felt that he understood my work very well. All I can tell you, though, is that I become gripped by an idea or an emotion or a story which I feel must be told.

There may be another similarity between my plays, however. To me they are absolutely distinct, of course, but friends of mine have said, "You always write the same play." I think that is true of every writer—one is basically writing and rewriting the same issue over and over. There is something inside writers which continuously needs to churn around and then come out. Perhaps what links my plays together is that they are based upon personal or collective traumas which I feel need to be worked through. *Still Life* certainly has that basis. *Execution of Justice* and *Betsey Brown* do, as well. The Winnie Mandela piece. Most of my work has it.

GS: Isn't it dangerous to confront ourselves with the defense mechanisms that we have?

EM: I think it is dangerous, but essential. Oh, yes. I would hope that all of my plays are dangerous. Americans are in a constant state of denial. I think that is a truism for this society of ours. We believe what we want to believe about ourselves; we hear what we want to hear and see what we want to see. Unfortunately, we are also told how to feel, or how we should feel, about an issue or situation. Take the economy, for example. Just this "silly little event." In my opinion, America had been in a free-fall for some time before either Reagan or Bush finally admitted it. They wanted to call it a recession; they did not want to call it a depression. They wanted, through rhetoric, to explain away something very real. People were losing their homes, the unemployment was probably twice as high as their figures claimed, we were worse off than we were ten years before, yet they wanted to say that we were not. America wanted to believe that was true. The eighties were a study in denial. Even now, in terms of racism, say, people do not want to admit what is going on in this country. They probably never will until they fight.

GS: If people are so resistant, do you believe that plays can actually effect change?
EM: I think that if one is capable of learning new information, of feeling new feelings, asking new questions, or beginning new dialogues, then, yes, artists can stimulate an advance in thinking or, at the very least, in-depth thought on a question. They can make people, if they know for certain that an event like the Holocaust or Dan White's "Twinkie-Defense" actually happened, deal with another set of possibilities and questions which could affect how they will make future decisions.

As people get older and learn more, they grow, and one can either become healthier, kinder, or wiser, or one can shut down and become narrower, more bitter, and less capable of doing the right thing. For example, there was a movement afoot to deny that the Holocaust ever happened. If I can keep putting out facts demonstrating that it did happen, I might be able to help short-circuit the movement to deny it which, through that denial, attempts to foster even more anti-Semitic claims. If I can in any way help show the truth, then perhaps that can help short-circuit the enemy. Sometimes I feel that I am just stating the facts. Yet even through facts I am asking questions in an attempt to initiate both self-questioning within an individual and a dialogue within the group regarding perceived reality. I may not have the answers, unless I am trying to do something specific with the material, but dramatists who feel they have the answers are probably writing agitprop.

My intention is to force people into confronting themselves through the facts and the metaphors of my work; that has always been the basis of both dramatic and tragic writing. The Greek tragedies were about making the people look at themselves. Most of the early plays can be perceived as attempting to hold up the mirror before the audience. That is the basis of

dramatic writing, having people collectively sit together and watch a mirror being held up to them.

GS: You came to the theatre from journalism. What did you find within the dramatic forum which you could not find in the journalistic forum?
EM: The collective space. Newspaper articles are, hopefully, merely presenting facts before the public. But by putting out a provocative, thought-provoking story which depends upon and demands active audience engagement, by having the audience, as a group, simultaneously experience a strong story and a live dialogue between the stage and themselves, a more poignant and memorable experience is generated than one would get from reading a mere newspaper article. It is the difference between having an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experience and a purely intellectual one.

There was a style of theatre developed, called the Theatre of Testimony, which rang a bell with me. In *Execution of Justice* I allowed the witnesses in the courtroom to give their testimony. Then I brought in a group called the "uncalled witnesses," those people in the community who experienced Harvey Milk's murder, had a lot to say, but were not called to testify in court. Those witnesses included the dead. My intention was to generate a unifying link between the styles of testimony by making the audience the jury; they were actively processing the testimony and judging the case, actively responding to the storytelling.

GS: Considering the manner in which you weave the various testimonies and mediums together, do you think that you might be flirting with the very problem you are confronting: America's inundation with mind-numbing information?
EM: Not at all. What I am doing is taking two hours from people's lives and asking them to look deeply and thoughtfully at a certain play rather than presenting them with a barrage of information in ten-second sound bytes. I say, "Let us think deeply about this particular issue, this particular event, these particular people, and think deeply about it for a short while." The objective behind this format is for the audience, when they come out of the theatre, to have either new questions, new information, or a new or renewed sense of what they believe in regarding the events dramatized on stage. Plays give individuals the time and opportunity to meditate on a single issue. This is something which we so rarely do or find the time to do in our daily lives. Instead we are barraged by "Give me thirty minutes and I'll give you the world." I think I am actually trying to combat that.

GS: The way that the news is run, that barrage of information, could that perhaps mask our fears, or serve as a security blanket? If we accumulate enough facts to give us the illusion that we know what is going on, then we do not have to face a critical examination of ourselves.

EM: Right, absolutely. In fact, that barrage of factual data is a narcotic; it numbs the senses, paralyzes one's ability to act and to know anything deeply. Just as an example, let's take the old Iran-contra affair. We even knew then that the President, and the previous President, were deeply involved in wrongdoing and nothing has ever been done about it. It is indicative of the American difficulty in prioritizing what is important from all the noise that we hear. We are told incessantly about corruption and ineptitude; yet the same cynicism with which these acts are performed has infiltrated into the soul of the nation. There is a deep cynicism within everyone. Our top has consistently behaved in a corrupt manner and there is nothing we feel that we can do about it; ironically, the more we know, the less we do. It is a very dangerous state of affairs.

I feel this is where art must come in. Drama, as are all the arts, is important to the health of a good democracy; it is essential to it. The Greeks knew this. I think they were onto something extremely important. If what we are striving for is a government by the people, then it is imperative that those people who are voting, making decisions, or capable of influencing their representatives must take an active responsibility in knowing what is actually going on, what they believe in, and what they want done. However, if those people are not taking the time to think about what they believe in, then there is a flaw in the structure, in the very foundation, of the country; then it no longer is being run "by the people." So an informed electorate, an informed society, one fully engaged in the debate of ideas, is essential to a moral country.

Right now, the anti-intellectualism that is apparently inbred in America bodes very badly for the future. The politicians are realizing that they can manipulate Americans in two different ways: one is obviously through their pocketbooks, their own personal pocketbooks; the other is through stimulating a religious reflex. The abortion issue is an obvious example—an emotional and religious reflexive response is deliberately triggered. This is very shallow and potentially very dangerous. Of course, there are always those people who are essentially looking out for themselves. The basis of this country, however, was the protection of all the people, rich and poor, old and young, people capable of taking care of themselves and those who are not. The intention was to take care of all the people, which can only occur if one cares about more than oneself. This is impossible if people do not know each other; nor is it possible if we accept the cynical and corrupt nature of the electoral system as it stands at the present moment in time.

I want to put back on stage language, so that people can hear and therefore know the difference between the brilliant use of the English language and the mediocrity which is embodied by our current leaders. I feel we have to include sophisticated ideas, challenging ideas, and bring up onto the stage people who are different from us, people not ourselves. Perhaps I feel we must go beyond merely holding a mirror image of

ourselves up there on stage; it must depict all of humanity, so that people see even more clearly how they are connected to the rest of that humanity. If you are not black, you can still put yourself in the shoes of a black person. That is what I did or was striving to do in *Betsey Brown*. I wanted both black people and people who are not black to be able to say that, "Yes, that is me up there as well. I have felt those things; that is a part of me." That, I am convinced, is the other thing that drama is capable of: putting the members of the audience into the shoes of other people. They are taken to a place that they have never been, allowed to live lives they have never experienced, and be part of a culture they were never a part of in a body that is not theirs. That is the way to bring humanity together.

The Kiss

ORANGE LIGHT FALLS through the stained glass window up near the ceiling; the hallway and my coat are orange, the wet umbrella leaning against the door, the floor, the wallpaper with lilies and roses—everything orange. I am wet. I just walked in the door. I took off my brown rubber boots and put them on the shelf beneath my father's winter coat; now my feet trail the waxed hardwood floor carefully, on orange socks. The world is suspended, completely still, except for the dripping of water. Leftover rain leaks purple from the boots on the shelf, from the umbrella, from my braids, from the hem of my coat which swishes against my bare knees. A concert: drip, drip, drip. Reminds me of the sound of clocks ticking time away but this is a different time. An orange time. I am the only one who lives it.

In the corner stands a statue of a lady, bow and arrow strapped across her shoulder. The strap cuts down between her breasts which are clothed in bronze but so thinly they seem naked. She is Athena, my father says, the goddess of the hunt, and a deer grazes by her feet unafraid. I talk with her when I am here by myself. I talk with her now. She alone is with me in this orange time.

Athena, I say, where is my mother?

My Lady, she says, she has taken your baby brother and gone out to shop, to visit a friend as she does every day. But why are you here? she says. You went off to school just an hour ago with your lunch box. You came home early yesterday, too, and the day before. Three days home early. What happened?

It doesn't matter. I won't tell you, I say. I feel sick, I suppose. I have a stomachache.

Take off your coat, My Lady, and dry your hair or you will catch a flu.

Athena, where is my father?

He must be at the office.

But what if he is home? I came to see him. I want him to be home.

What we want is what is, My Lady. He must be home.

But I don't hear the ticking of his typewriter keys upstairs!

So he sleeps, he sleeps behind his typewriter. He is tired.

Yes, yes, I say, that must be it. He is tired and he is home. I won't wake him.

I take off my coat. I hang it on the same peg as my father's. I am free. I have to be more silent than the drops of rain that fall from the boots and my

coat hem and my braids but I can leap and dance in this orange world because it is only mine.

MY MOTHER SAYS she hid her head in my father's coat to not hear him sing my name when I was born. Cora, Cora. He sang it all day. She bought herself earplugs which poked yellow and rubbery from her ears, but she still could hear him. She hid in the kitchen where my father never came but then she began to bake casseroles and stir soups in order to not get bored; she became fat and old. I was twelve quite soon, thirteen, and my body was that of a woman only I did not know this. My mother informed me of it one day before I went to bed. I stood naked in my room and she came in without knocking. She held an oblong mirror she had unscrewed from her own wall up to my face.

Stop dancing, stop swinging your hips, she said. How can you be so thoughtless. This is what he perceives you to be, because you stole my looks: he thinks you are me, his wife. I lost myself when you came out of my womb and you found me, you picked me up, you put on my face. You stole from me. Now you owe me. You have to do as I say. I want you to wear pigtails and knee-high socks, penny loafers without a penny. I want you to stop bouncing. Be sedate, read books, wear a pair of glasses. If you don't, I'll kiss your face. My kiss will leave a black mark on your cheek in the shape of a heart; it will never wash off. No lover can stroke it away. No man will want to look at you if I choose to kiss you like that.

I watched my own face in her mirror. I had never seen myself as I did now. I had long, wavy hair and parted lips and my eyes seemed private and soft like flannel folded. I instantly understood why she was afraid. I understood both what power I had in our house and how dangerous it would be to use it. I was afraid of her. Her lips cut her white face like knives.

I will do as you say, Mother, I replied.

She threw me my bed sheet to hide myself in. Wait, she said. Let me see you first. It is as if I remember myself.

I stood motionless in the room because she asked.

I used to be like that, she said. I used to be young and go to parties. I wore white fingerless gloves my grandmother crocheted; I wouldn't dare touch anything for fear of making them dirty. I was asked to go sledding one winter by a boy with white hair named William Dingle. He picked me up and on his toboggan we skidded right down the steepest hill in the park. We landed in a snow pile on purpose; that's when I received my first kiss. His breath smelled after onions. His lips were stiff like two twigs but otherwise it made me happy. Then came your father. He took me dancing every night and snuck into my room afterward by climbing up a tree. I knew nothing, so that was that. You won't understand what I am saying and I am glad. What I am saying is: I've given up enough for you. I expect you to listen carefully: men don't have restraint. William Dingle didn't in spite of his twig-like lips and your father certainly didn't. He still doesn't;

that's why I lug around another baby. You better do as I say, young lady. I am watching you. I can hear the conversations you have with yourself at the dinner table, secret, within your own brain; you are up to no good. I am your mother. I must protect you.

I covered myself in the sheet and my mother left. I sat stunned on my bed, shaking.

Since then, I do what she says. The only times I dance and leap are when I am alone in the orange house, secretly. I cannot speak about it. I untie my braids and take off layers of clothes. I strain to see my reflection in the copper umbrella holder, the shiny glass in front of a picture of the sea, my mother's high-heeled, polished shoes. My reflection looks uncertain like a water plant. I always hope my father will be home, that he will come down the stairs and see me as I saw myself in the oblong mirror, as my mother sees me. But he never is, he never does. Wishes aren't the truth. Perhaps it is better they aren't for I might not know what I wish for.

I don't know my father. I dream of him under my cool sheet at night, and I see him at breakfast and dinner when he asks me questions about school politely, slicing his food with knife and fork into small bites shaped like squares. He hardly looks at my face; he passes me in the hall and brushes his hand through my hair as if he collects a sheet of paper he lost which isn't important—only to be organized, to fulfill an obligation. My mother locks my room at night. The father I know in my head and speak about with Athena waits for a chance to see me when she's left the house. The other father, the one with the black leather attaché case and gold-buckled belt, has forgotten my name.

I think I am a princess. I am not what I seem. I wander through the downstairs of the house in my school skirt and my blue ribbed sweater and knee-high socks, but I have taken off my glasses, I have undone my braids. I find one of my mother's voile nightgowns in her sewing basket and I put it on over my clothes. I close my eyes. I lie on the couch and I touch myself where it is forbidden. I begin to remember things.

In school three days ago Patrick Himsel asked me to touch tongues. This is a gross habit among boys and girls at my school. You stick out your tongue and let it be grazed by somebody else's which tastes thick and sweet and hot on yours and if you are dared you are not allowed to say no according to a unanimous but unspoken and secret rule. I was playing hopscotch with Pauline Kaars when he asked. I said yes. I stuck out my tongue. Patrick Himsel stuck out his and touched mine and it was thick and sweet and hot, but all of a sudden, unexpectedly, I didn't hate it, I liked it. I closed my eyes. Patrick Himsel said we could go into the bushes and I trembled because I remembered my mother saying men don't have restraint. Still, I laced my arm through the arm of Patrick Himsel, avoided Pauline's eyes, and let myself be guided into the hydrangeas where we had to watch out

for the small black bugs with claws that pinch you if you, even unknowingly, interfere with the path they naturally take in and out of the flowers. Here Patrick Himsel pulled me to him and stuffed his whole hot sweet tongue into my mouth so I couldn't breathe or say no and I let him, mostly to see what it would be like. I had never done this before. I had played doctor in my closet with Elina Bausk who had a pretty lilt in her voice when she said "breathe deeply" and held the plastic stethoscope to my chest. Now I was entered, not approached but entered, and it loosened a dark spool of thread in my brain because I couldn't say I liked it or disliked it, I couldn't say I was there to feel it at all. I saw a black bug in the middle of a hydrangea flower from the corner of my eye. I stuck my hand into its grasp and it pinched me. This reassured me I was real.

I lie on the couch and touch myself where it is forbidden. My hand folds across my chest like a paraplegic's and I am embarrassed. I have to sit up, I have to think good thoughts—I spent all my money on a wicker duck for my grandmother's birthday, I spent all my money on a wicker duck for my grandmother's birthday. That thought soothes me. I must be a good person. Then I pleasantly forget I have a body. I float around between the walls again like an orange mist and this way I am happy. I don't know how time spends itself, not even that it does.

I hear footsteps above my head. Thirsty, I have just gone into the kitchen, poured some faucet water into a porcelain cup with roses, lowered my lips to drink. I jolt. I now must turn myself into the Cora I am when someone else is near. He is here, he really is home, I think, I didn't make it up. This is the first, the only time this has happened. I want to take off my mother's nightgown, but I can't, I am frozen. I stand still and register for the first time that the drip, drip, dripping has stopped in the hall. Time dried up. How late it must be!

I walk into the orange hall and my father walks down the stairs. Our footsteps have one rhythm, but his is light, mine heavy with fear. I see my mother's face big as a moon in the chandelier and I want to run and cry, only I cannot. Some things are destined to happen and we cannot change them. Sometimes there is nothing to decide; the feet just walk obediently to their destination and we follow as the children of Hamelin followed the flute of the Pied Piper.

Here he is, here you are, Athena says. As you wished.

My father wears his suit but no tie and slippers. His hair is ruffled. It must be that he slept.

Cora, he says. He smiles. He doesn't think, why isn't she in school? as a mother would. Fathers don't think these things.

Why are you home? I question him instead.

He looks guilty. He smooths his hair with his hand. I didn't know you were here, he says. I didn't feel like being at the office.

I am, I say. I was sick. A stomachache, but I feel better now.

I see his eyes glance over my mother's nightgown as I speak, but he does not ask me why I wear it; he can only ask questions that are sure to have answers.

When will your mother be back? he asks.

I shrug.

He goes into the kitchen to make some coffee but won't let me out of his sight. Cora, Cora, he says.

We are alone together. I follow slowly; I don't dance but my heart leaps and I don't know what to say.

I love you, Father.

I love you, Cora. Love you, Sweet.

I am not surprised.

He holds my hand while he pours the coffee.

There is a stirring overhead. We both look up, I wide-eyed, my father nervous—even, for a moment, afraid.

It's nothing, he says. Probably the cat. I'll go see.

I say, no, stay with me. I never get to be with you alone.

All right, he says, one eye on the ceiling. He sits next to me on the couch with his coffee mug in one hand, and in the other he catches the hem of the voile robe which, because I wear it, is not as much my mother's as mine. I know what I can do in this moment. I hadn't known before, but my mother showed me when she held her oblong mirror up to my face.

You are pretty with your hair down, my father says and strokes the brown velvet waves that fall down on each side of my face. You are pretty without your glasses. You are beginning to grow. See? You have breasts and hips and you don't look at all twelve, or thirteen, whatever age you are. You remind me of your mother. Your mother looked like that on our wedding day. Don't stare at me, Cora. Your eyes say they want things a father shouldn't give.

I sit down on my father's lap and stroke his cheek with mine. I see tears welling in his eyes.

I shouldn't have, I never should have, he says. Life is too complicated. It seemed so right, but I know it wasn't. I came into your room at night when you were a child and kissed you all over your face. You were asleep. Your mother came in. She didn't understand, she screamed. Then you woke up, you screamed. I only wanted you to know what it is like to be loved tenderly. But you are a girl. I can be correct if I don't see you, if I close my eyes when you are near. What is confusing is, it can't be wrong. You so much are my wife. Her hair, her shape, her nostrils, see the way they flare as I speak! Time is turned back. I don't know whether I am young or old when I see you. When you are alone it is particularly terrible; I forget that the other one, the other wife, exists. I forget that I have gray hair and arthritic wrists and I want to do what I always did when you came this

close to who I am.

It is OK, Father, I say. I'll cup your sad heart in my hands, so it cannot spill. It was meant to be that we are together, I am her now. I feel guilty but I cannot help it. She says I stole her face but I only woke up one morning wearing it. I think she put it on me herself. I don't know why, but she must have and it is glued so tight I can wear glasses and braids but that face still won't come off. I will hold you now. I have waited for you, Father. I am not a child. I am not afraid.

You should be, he says.

We put our arms around each other and cling to each other and all of a sudden I realize we are afraid, we both are. I don't know what of. I want to be bitten by another bug to remind myself with pain of something that is too easy to forget.

What happens next is startling and I can hardly believe it. I think the cat comes down the stairs, pit pat, pit pat. When the cat is about to enter the living room where my father and I hold each other on the couch, it turns into a woman who looks like a cat with ruffled orange hair and sleepy eyes, dressed in my father's green bathrobe. I have never seen her here before and I wonder whether I imagine her.

My father jumps. He lets me tumble out of his arms; I fall to the floor like a feather, distinctly sensing that for him I no longer have weight.

Bertha, he says.

Bertha. She is real. She is not the cat. Athena looks at her disapprovingly from behind.

You will not tell your mother, will you? my father says to me. You will be silent?

I nod. A pebble settles in my throat so I can't speak.

I'll go, says Bertha. I enjoyed our meeting but I don't want to hurt anyone. I am not that kind of person. I don't want people to know what I did.

My father goes out into the hall and whispers with Bertha who disappears hurriedly back up the stairs.

I am sorry, my father says out loud, to me, to the walls with lilies and roses that hold memories of him and my mother.

He says, this happens in a lot of homes. I know what you think but it is not just my fault. Your mother doesn't take care of herself; she looks like she's sixty and she reminds me of my own mother. I don't want her to touch me. Life is more complicated than you think. You may be sure you will never do things that everyone knows are disgusting, but you'll find yourself doing them, not knowing why. It happens. You'll see.

I murmur I understand. I still lean against the couch, slouched on the white wool carpet. I realize I have landed on my glasses, which I don't need except to prove my innocence to my mother. They are cracked. A small shard of glass has cut my thigh and I cannot roll up my skirts now to check

whether I bleed. I must do that later, when I am alone.

Bertha comes back down in a red and black velvet suit. Her hair is up; she looks ready for work. I'll see you, Bernard, she says to my father and kisses his cheek lightly, leaving the red mark of her lips. She avoids looking at me. She slips out the door on her cat feet and it closes behind her like a mouth.

Get up, go do something, my father says. When you sit there like that, stunned, crazy, it looks like something is wrong. Your mother will be home soon. You'll scare her. You scare me.

My father tugs at my shoulders and I get up, obediently. I do what he says. He grabs hold of me briefly, absentmindedly, as if I am a thin sheet of paper he would like to dispose of if only he could. When he lets me go, I fall back down against the couch.

My father puts on a pair of boots, tucks his shirt into his pants.

I have to go to work, he says. I won't tell your mother you were here. It will be our secret.

THE HOUSE TURNS purple with dusk. My mother comes home. She carries my whining baby brother in one arm, a paper grocery bag in the other; her hair is up in pink foam curlers and covered by a pale nylon net. She finds me in the living room, wearing her see-through nightgown over my school clothes, the smell of my father's cologne hidden in the curls of my hair and my glasses cracked, a red bloodstain in back of the nightgown about where my knees are. Her eyes freeze. She puts down her burdens.

I see, she says. I see.

That is all she says.

I lie in bed. It is completely dark. I am wearing a thin nightgown which has slipped up around my thighs; the sheet brushes coolly against my skin. I don't remember dinner, I don't remember looking at my father or my father looking at me, though we sat across from each other at the table. I spilled milk on my sleeve. My mother heaped extra potatoes on my plate, and her lower lip, colorless, protruded like a shard of broken glass. My baby brother cried in his crib for two hours, would not drink when my mother offered him her breast.

I think of what Patrick Himsel did after stuffing his tongue down my throat. He tried to grab another part of me. I am not sure which because I didn't feel a difference between them. I did something I don't understand. Patrick Himsel didn't understand it. I blindly kicked my own shins with my penny loafers without a penny, kicked and kicked, but didn't feel anything. I kicked the air perhaps, or the hydrangea bush—for a pink snow drifted down onto both of our heads while we stood there waiting for my foot to stop. I heard the bell ring for classes but I did not go back into the school. I have cut classes since. I go back to the orange of our house without my

mother there and with only, except today, the thought of my father.

I was happy alone. I leaped. I danced. When I took off my stockings I noticed with slight curiosity that my left leg was bruised at the shin; because the bruise didn't hurt I didn't pay it any attention. Only when tired did I feel drawn to the couch, drawn to lying down, to closing my eyes. Then everything turned black: resting, my mind became a black spool of thread. I see the spool now, while I am almost asleep in this bed. It unwinds, unwinds, unwinds. The black thread leads me to things I cannot know, less vocal than secrets.

When I am asleep, I dream I feel a soft thing brushing by my cheek, soft, soft but cold, like a wind. I try but I can't open my eyes. I am too tired. A kind voice says, sleep, sleep, my child, but it isn't Athena who speaks and then my heart freezes.

I can't feel it. Everything seems as before. But I know I received my mother's kiss.

The Night before Texas

The girl, the boy.
They take lions as dreams.
They take lions as lions.

He knows.
He's heard the fawning.
He's dressed appropriately, for the period.
Dust inside his blood, cellular breakdown.
More electricity than he can imagine.

Pulmonary trouble, trouble at night.
She'd welcome a letter from far away.
She'd welcome a quiet, black trees in the waking.

The girl has toucans dangling from her ears.
The boy's laced into two dark shoes.
You'll see.

You'll Feel Better Afterward

The mad are mad past help
And it is them I wish to serve
And it is them I will serve
Bring them their mail
Interpret the letters
And the direct mail asking for money
And be berated for the wrong translation
Always the wrong one never anything right
Someone has to serve the mad or they will go lonely
Down into the grave
Lowered on pneumatic lifts
In aluminum caskets
Down go down alone
Because enough of us have not been serving them
Loneliness is bitter and makes sense
A powerful combo
A chemistry we can't change
As the mad may never be helped
But should be fed and served
With a few loyal people
(Who can hardly be said to have known them)
Standing around in the rain, yes,
Remembering the bad times
In the heat and humidity in the boneyard.

Engaged with Each Other, Wind and Flesh

Not in a restaurant of the rue Allard
Never or I take it back sometimes in an
Office deep in the mid-Atlantic states
Of the United States
Wet in every usage
Balmy as an assuagement
No rhythm
But a pace
The neck has bones that click
The neurologist says those are muscles
That were her bones
Those that were the click

What's charged plus or minus
Whose breeze, whose temperature
Where is that which has characteristics
Comment c'est, comment c'est.

The Four Ghosts

I've come back to you from a generation in which it was unusual for a
beautiful woman to have an employee.
The employee made a coup—arranged for her boss to have an interview
on TV
And the employee interviewed the boss. They practiced for weeks
So that the interviewer asked a question and danced away and the subject
did a long monologue
Mostly about her aesthetic, sometimes about her life, and some had the
impression
That the interviewer, overall I mean, *was not there*, even though after a
while she danced back to her chair
And listened, and asked another question. Others felt she was the true
subject and the boss
Was nothing as the rain and the bicycles in some French novels are only a
pretense for speech and do not exist.
But it was the beautiful boss who spoke, so my God, what can you be
thinking?!
I've come all this way to tell you the employee immodestly showed her
legs, not while dancing
When she twirled lightly, gently, hardly stirring her skirt, but when she sat.
Don't murder me again. The boss was not nice, which women admired, and
she lived a long healthy life, mentally and physically.

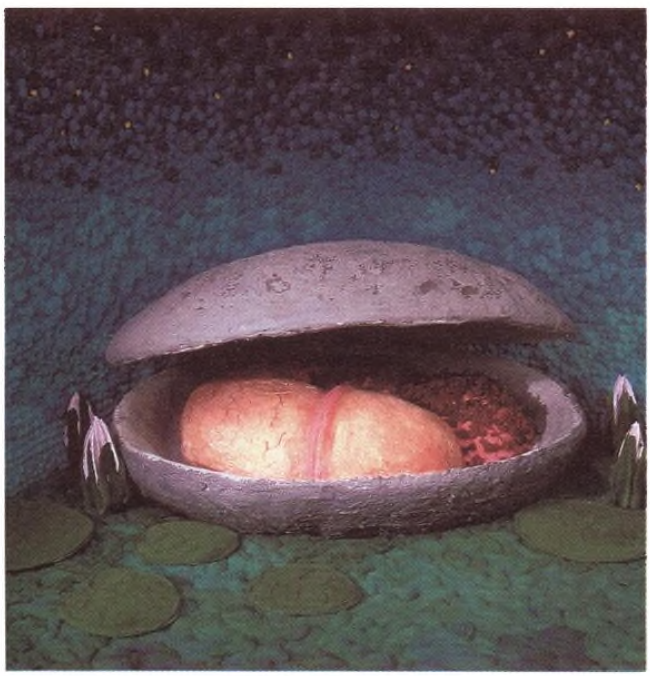
Late Watch

The end of the century overstimulates itself to such an extent that clouds wamble off at half-mast
only to reappear in white ties and tails to be the life of the party on the dizzy horizon past midnight.
And there are others in a tipsy mode despite the fact that nature is out back polishing the gangplank.
Even if we could get the home phone of someone with the reputation for navigation in such waters
we'd be destined to get a busy signal or voicemail or at the very best get put on hold forever.
Too bad we aren't on board with someone at the tiller who barks, *steady as she goes* and means it,
but by the time another day's sun slumps under the yardarm our situation continues its listing.
Maybe we should consider abandoning ship except that the majority of the lifeboats are snoring
even though the mainsail makes an infernal luffing and somewhere a halyard pulley whacks metal.
Maybe we should consider why the gulls that followed the boat from the beginning aren't circling.

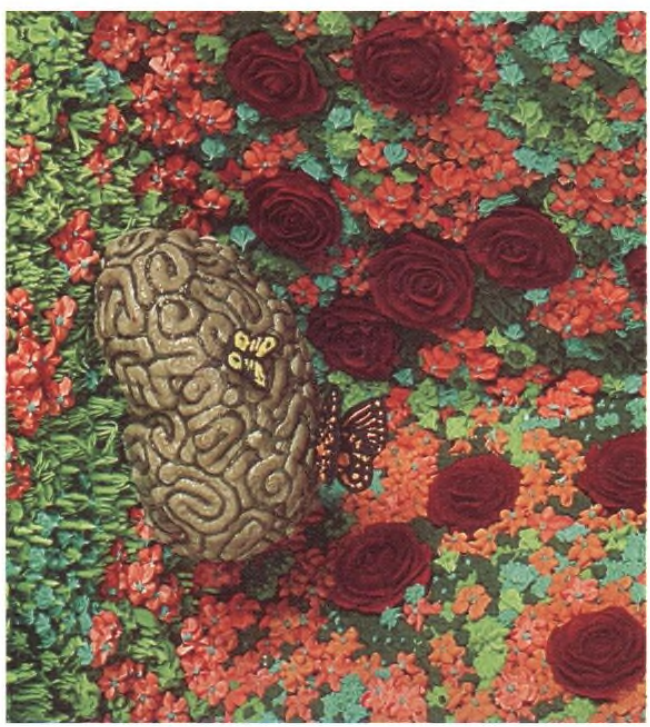
Petit Mal

If I had it to do over again I would pay more attention
to the words on either side of the one I'm looking up
could stand as a resourceful remark to placate a mirror
dominating the bathroom in the basement of the library.
What is being said about you when you are not there
does not amount to much and the people will go home
with nothing more moribund than fly-fishing in mind
is a good way to put the party you missed in perspective.
Even down in machine city something sticks in the craw.
The sandwich carousel's resolve remains unflappable,
but the only sandwich left in the machine is tuna on white,
meaning you might have to settle for the gooey cashew bar.
If I were a tour guide I'd take 'em down a hall of definitions
and rudely abandon them at the fourth or fifth meaning

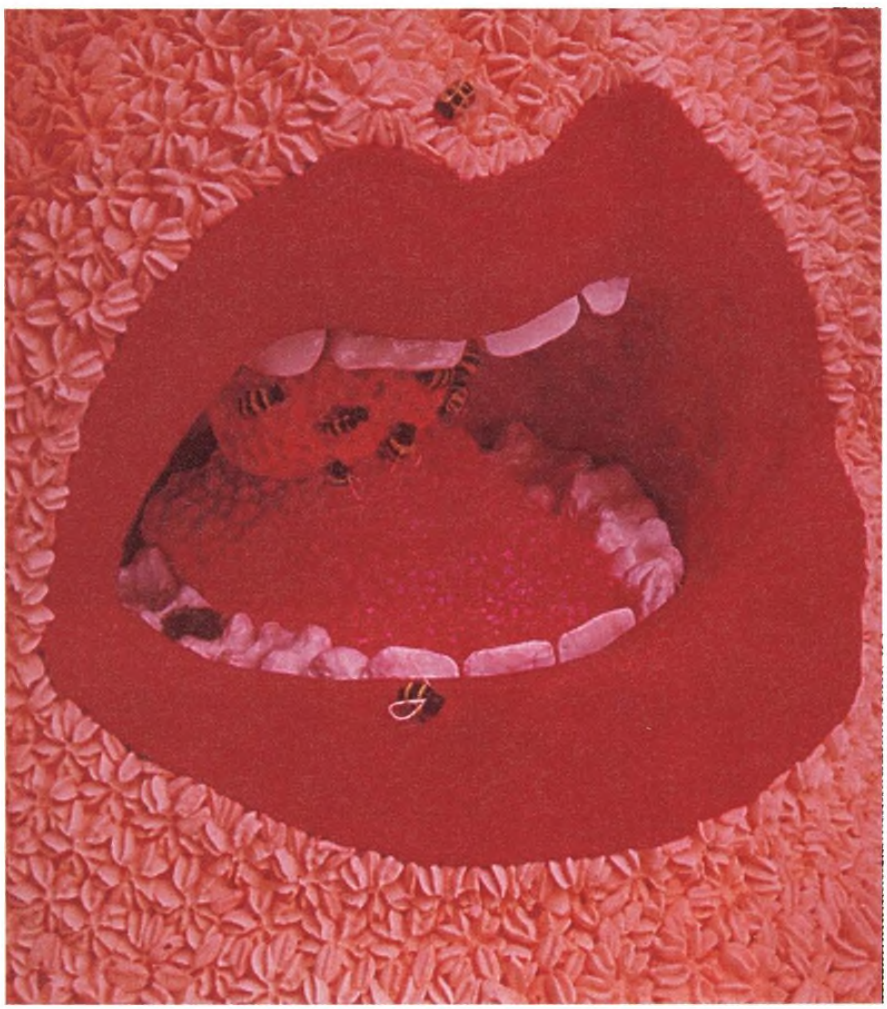
because sometimes such research is like bad couch therapy
though you don't really mean it and this petit mal will pass.
Someone should do something. So many cracked spines
in the stacks waiting in line to be re-read in the diffident light.
So many fascicles, folios and unread maps in morgue status
it occurs to you in a leather chair in the periodical room.
You know what it is? The most banal of gestures matter to us.
The man who demagnetizes every book that leaves the library,
the whirlpools from the polishing buffers of the night detail,
the lady who spools and files microfiche tapes in metal drawers.
The other side of the story now is there are only footnotes
rising quietly to the top of the page like the buildup of snow
you regard from a carrel window as it reduces definition
from the hoods of cars and spoked bike wheels at frozen meters.



Sweet Dreams, 1994, cake frosting/C print, 36″ x 36″



Thinking of You, 1994, cake frosting/C print, 36″ x 36″



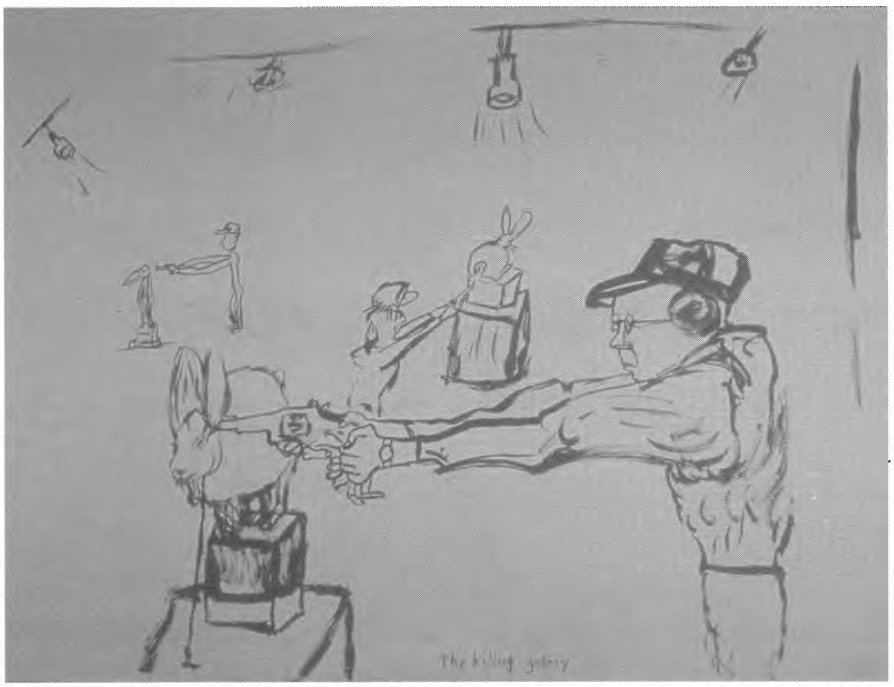
Trouble Sleeping, 1994,
cake frosting/C print, 36″ x 36″

Too Late, 1994,
cake frosting/C print, 36″ x 36″

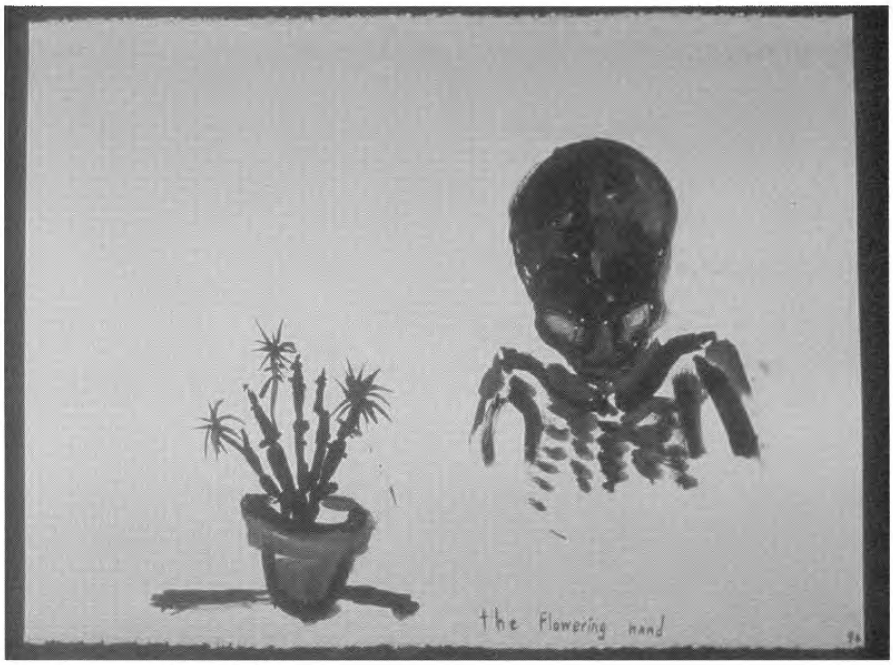
Love Shot, 1994,
cake frosting/
C print,
36″ x 36″

EYE!, 1994,
cake frosting/
C print,
36″ x 36″

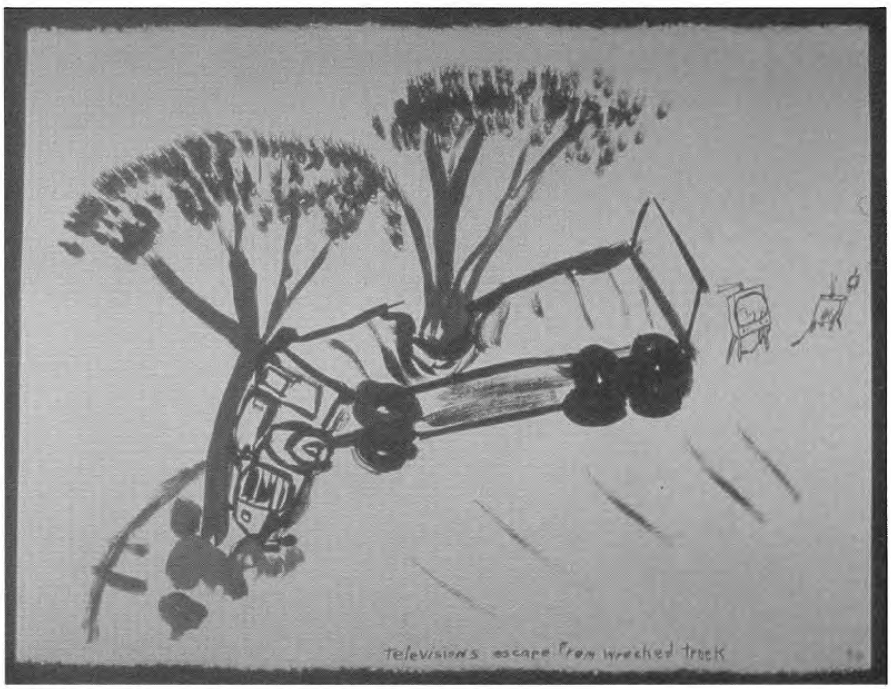
Zombie Cowpoke with Bell, 1994,
ink wash, gouache on rag, 22" x 30"



The Killing Gallery, 1994,
ink wash, gouache on rag, 22" x 30"

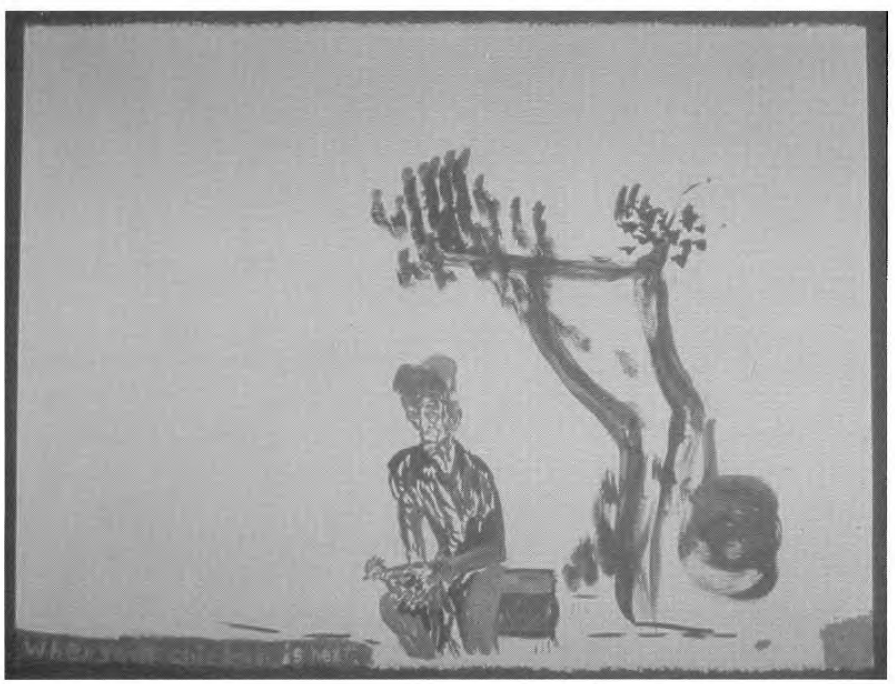


The Flowering Hand, 1994,
ink wash, gouache on rag, 22″ x 30″



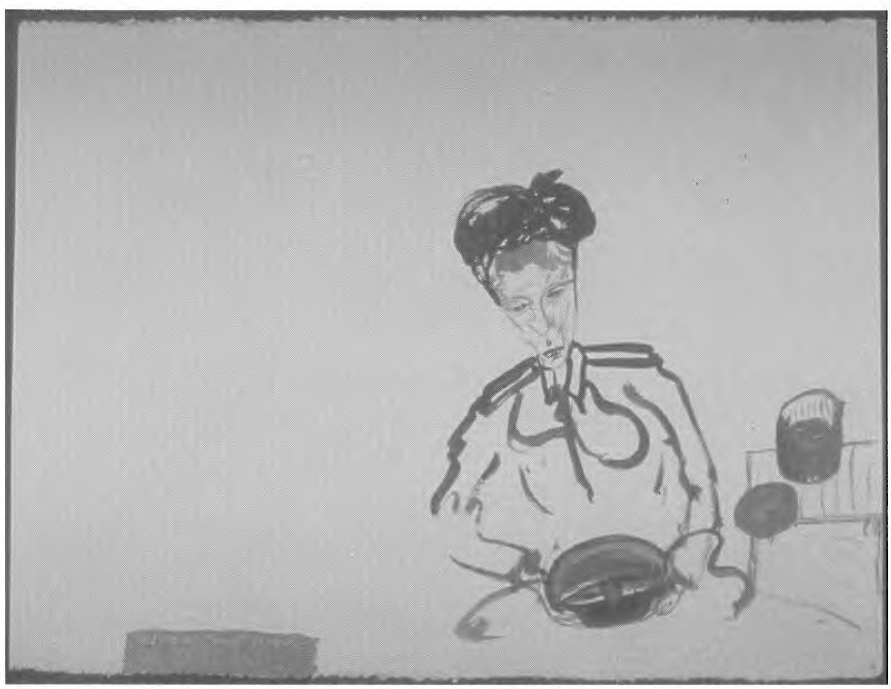
Televisions Escape from a Wrecked Truck, 1994,
ink wash, gouache on rag, 22″ x 30″

She Was a Poet, He Was an Expert in Square Knots, 1994,
ink wash, gouache on rag, 22″ x 30″



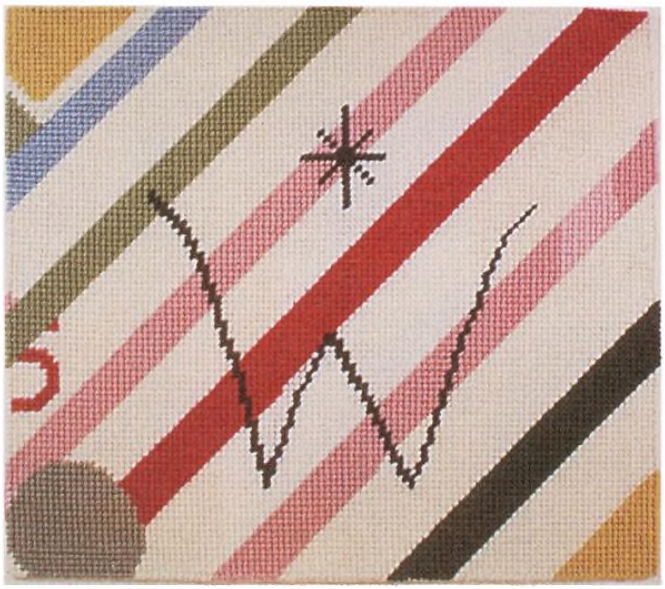
When Your Chicken Is Next, 1994,
ink wash, gouache on rag, 22″ x 30″

Trying To Start a Fire in a Smell on the Hands, 1994,
ink wash, gouache on rag, 22" x 30"

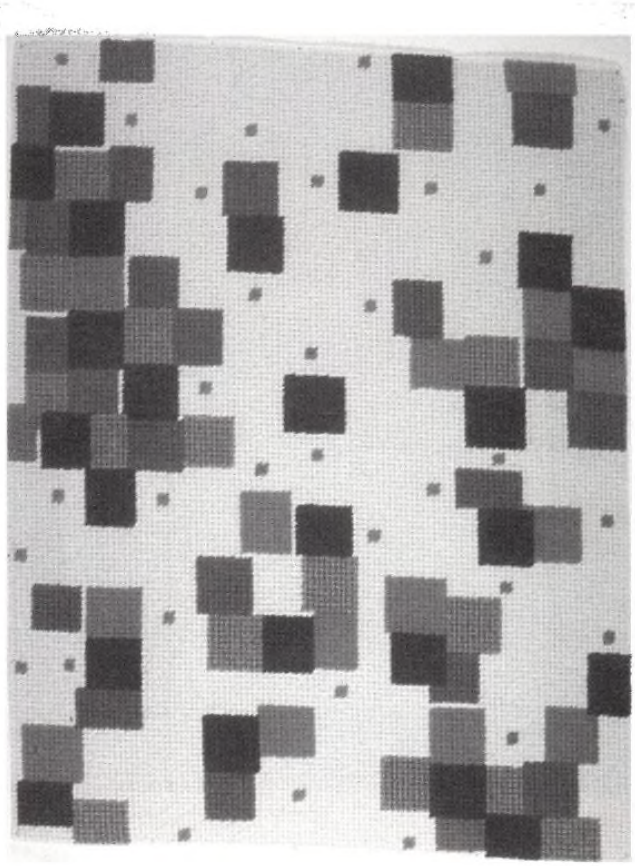


The Old Revolutionist Unpacks Her Party Hat, 1994,
ink wash, gouache on rag, 22" x 30"

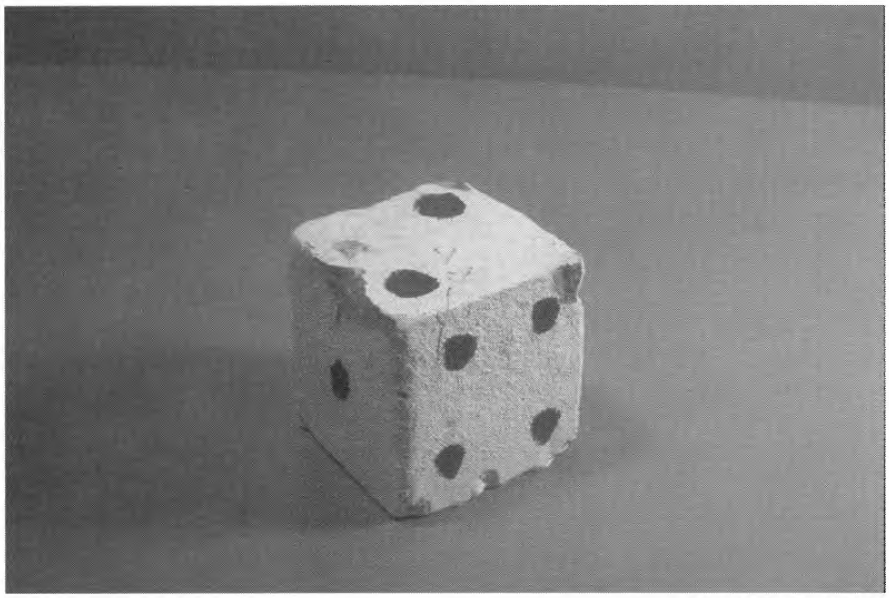
Candy Tower Cover, 1995,
crocheted yarn, 48″ x 16″ x 17″



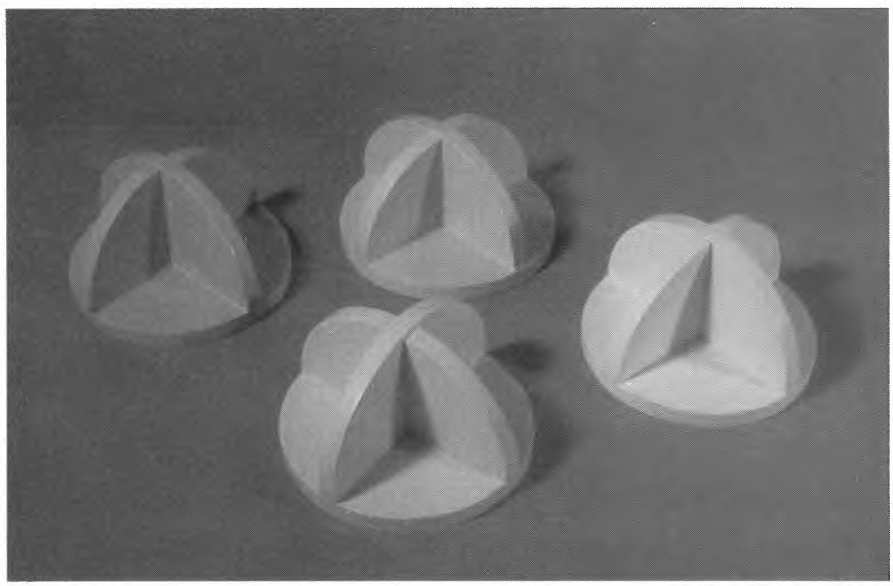
*W**, 1993,
wool needlepoint,
7" x 9"



Squares, 1994,
wool needlepoint,
14" x 11"



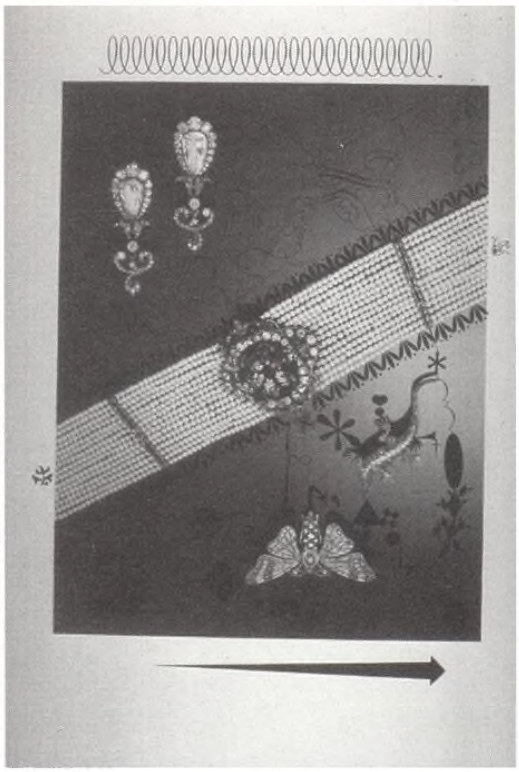
Eroded Die, 1994,
concrete enamel, 4″ x 4″ x 4″



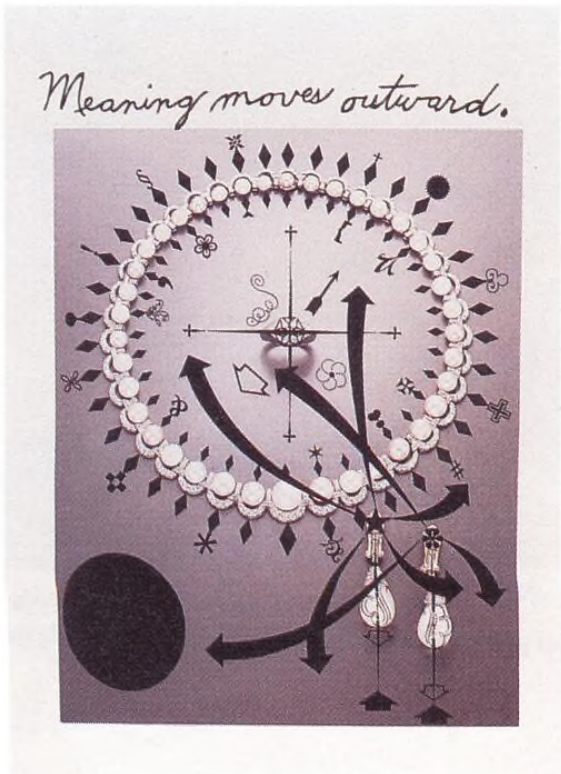
4 Jelly Objects, 1993,
plywood and enamel, 4″ x 5″ x 5″

Jardin, To Robert Campbell in memorium, 1993,
hand-colored mixed media, 13 3/4" x 18"

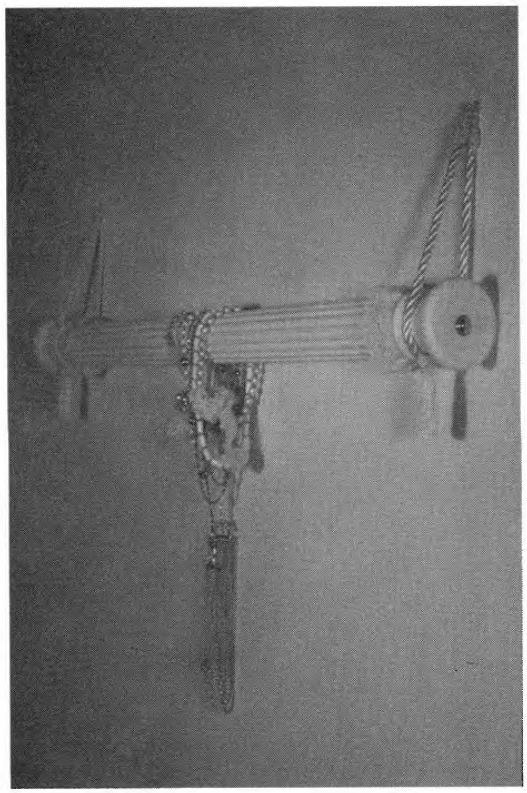
The direction of the gaze, 1994,
ink and presstype on found offset photo, 10 1/2″ x 7″



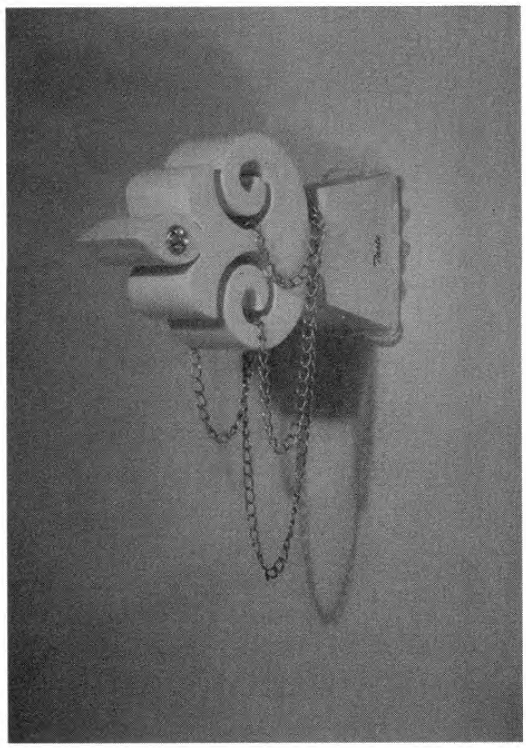
-->, 1994,
presstype on
found offset photo,
10" x 7 1/4"



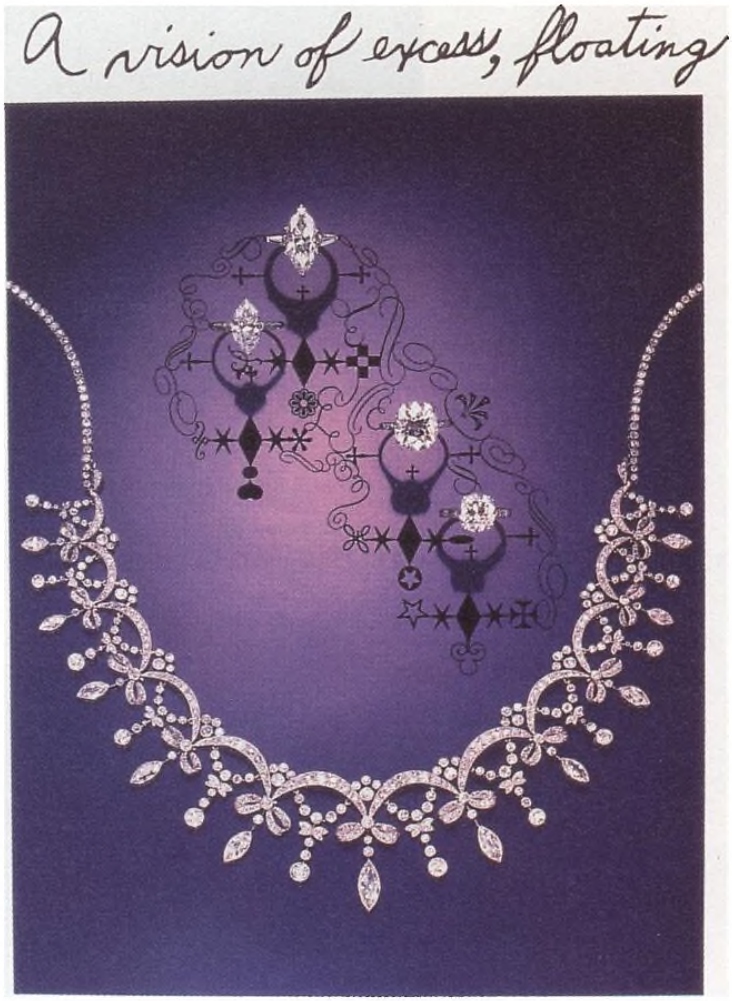
Meaning moves outward, 1994,
ink and presstype
on found offset
photo,
10 1/2" x 7"



Untitled 1, 1993, painted wood, jewelry, lace, and swags, 30″ x 40″ x 4″



Lick/Taste, 1993, presstype on painted wood, jewelry, and lace, 12″ x 3″ x 11″



A vision of excess, 1994,
ink and presstype on found offset photo, 10 1/2" x 7"

The Nurses' Station

HENRY WEARS his bloody blue running shoes everywhere. They go from the OR to home, out to the supermarket, around the gym. The blood doesn't look like blood. It could pass for paint, except he wears a green scrub top, too, or his white housestaff pants. Waking up early on an off-call morning, he reaches for his scrub top, tucks it into white shorts, and then pulls on the running shoes without socks. He goes out to buy donuts. I tell him that *I* wouldn't want to buy donuts standing next to someone with blood all over his shoes. Henry doesn't care. He leaves the plush, new Nikes I bought him sitting in the box. Even when we go over to his mother's for dinner.

Lounging in his mother's garden on a hot summer's day, I see the bloody shoes behind a low bush. Henry's on hands and knees, crawling through the cool, moist shade, searching for snails. The snails mostly live in the Lilies-of-the-Nile, flowing gracefully over the long, sharp leaves like pus released by a blade. Henry parts the leaves with the tip of his spade, and scoops the snails into a large tin pail. It fills with resonant thunks.

After a while, I go over to look. From over his shoulder, I can see them in the pail, fat bodies exposed, fully stretched to flee: They glide over one another rapidly, interweaving, lacing the pail in silvery slime.

What'll you do with them, I ask, and in answer he cracks one smartly with his spade, flips it onto the ground. Writhing, it coats itself with dirt, like a self-breading zucchini.

Henry wants to deliver babies, but he loves gyn surgery, too. He's talented with his hands. I know from our days as teammates in anatomy lab where we met. He was earnest and delicate with the knife, the ideal person to work with. Sometimes, during lunch break, he would stay behind, plugging along, and when the rest of the team returned, all the right muscles would be neatly dissected away on replaceable flaps, the major nerves and vessels would be clean and exposed, and he might even have gone a little farther, tunneling through the flesh along an artery until it connected with the assignment from the previous day, or painstakingly picking out an absurdly difficult and insignificant structure just because it happened to have a silly name like "the hydatids of Morgagni."

One day when the power generator for the labs failed, we were left in the windowless room in complete darkness. The janitor brought up some candles. We tried to continue working, but soon the instructors and most of

the students left.

Henry and I took all the leftover candles, and placed them on bookstands and chairs in a bright ring around our cadaver. Even with the extra candles, it was hard to concentrate. I put down my dissecting needle, and stepped back to rest.

In the silence and half-darkness, the room was much more pleasant. The long flames seemed to burn off the preserved-flesh fumes that usually anesthetized the nose and irritated the eyes. Outside the circle of candles, the rows of white-sheeted cadavers receded into the shadows.

By now, we had done just about everything there was to do to our "Mary." We had hooked her skin with tools and fingers, and pulled back finely textured dermis from the cottony mesh beneath. We had cut through the mantle of dark yellow fat, and ripped it off in thick oily sheets. The instructors had come by to trace the structures in the exposed tissues. As the body hardened, it had been as if a very complex map was fading. We had torn from the gutters of her spine, long cords of muscle thick as our fists, stripped her legs and buttocks down to her bones, and split her joints, which had leaked like coconuts. In the cavity of her abdomen, our gloved fingers had met exploring the angles of her liver and spleen. Sailors, we had hauled the ropes of her bowels. We'd halved her organs with a carving knife and found staghorn calculi, sessile polyps, and a kidney worn hollow by urine. Her breast, which we'd pried from the surrounding tissues, had contained a dull pearl, a scirrous carcinoma that had gritted against the scalpel blade. Most of her now rested in buckets beneath the table. Upon the table lay a bony frame. Only the hands, one of which Henry was working on now, and the head, covered by a white knit bag, remained.

Henry appeared to be stooping closer and closer to the hand, so I picked up a candle, and leaning against the cadaver's hip, held it close to the field. He had opened the surface, and now was poking his dissecting needle through the carpal tunnel into the palm, freeing up the papery sheath. He sliced through with his scalpel, then began to pull at the tendons with a forceps. Each tendon seemed to jerk the entire hand. I shifted, and a drop of clear wax fell from my candle onto Henry's glove. He put the forceps down, and pushed up his glasses with his arm.

He turned to me. "Do you want to see the face?" he asked softly.

I wondered if we could get in trouble, since it was a full two weeks before the assignment, but I agreed.

Eagerly, he pulled me towards the head. Then he released my arm, and stood very still, pressing his hands together as if to squeeze all the tremors from them. He undid the bag, and I felt a slight thrill as he pulled it slowly off the face and head. He dropped it onto her ribcage, and I stepped up next to him.

Her head had been shaved, and the scalp was covered with short white bristles. Her face was baggy and flattened like the flesh of a dried-apple doll, and the candlelight gave it a warm orange tint.

I was surprised to discover that she'd had an expression on her face, all this time, under the bag. She was an old woman—they'd told us seventy-seven—and wore what I thought of as an old woman's expression, as if she might have been our grandmother, patient and approving. She probably *had* been someone's grandmother, but it felt as if she belonged to us. We stood together, gazing at the face, and Henry reached over and took my hand. Through the wet rubber of our gloves I could feel the heat. Then he let go, and we picked up the bag, and pulled it over her head as quickly as we could. We squirted her all over with formaldehyde, and covered her with her sheet. Then we blew out the candles and went to the library.

Henry is a natural for surgery, and, now that we are interns, I often hear how the attendings take an uncanny liking to him, even in this time of rampant litigiousness passing him the knife and saying, "You lead, Dr. Bradley," with a fatherly wink. I have reason to congratulate him almost every night. That is, on the nights when I see him. Our call schedules are out of sync for at least two more months. I'm on every three days to his four, but his hours are longer.

So, nights at home, I'm often alone, which isn't a great loss, since I usually go right to bed exhausted, wake up briefly to eat dinner, and then go back to sleep. When Henry and I are in bed together, I keep the light on so that I can stay awake awhile to chat. He tells me OR stories until the profile of his face develops a bright fuzzy border against the light from the bed-lamp, and his words sound telegraphic and strange. "Crankcase oil . . .," he says. "More bleeders per square inch . . ." and "bad flesh with a new tool . . ."

In medical school, we used to study together every night, sometimes until dawn. Practicing our physicals, we were handy for each other. On Henry, I could verify landmarks, reactions, sounds—some normal, and some abnormal.

Henry has large, enthusiastic pupils, and, through the ophthalmoscope, the round circle of retina glistens, the vessels plump and undistorted as they dive into the optic cup. His abdomen is soft and dimpled. The muscles are indistinct but the bowel sounds are vigorous. I've never been able to locate his knee jerks, as his legs are too tense to truly dangle. I have found pulses, briskly beating, all in their places, from the one on the hairy dorsum of his foot to the one beneath his cheek where a moustache might end. On his back are scattered cherry angiomata, pinhead lesions colored a brakelight red. They do not blanch when compressed by a clear glass slide. Most disturbing to us, until we decoded its insignificance, was a circumscribed murmur in the hollow beneath his left clavicle. It sounds as if a stiff broom were sweeping a dusty floor close beneath the stethoscope's disc.

It was fun being an "item." Most of our classmates couldn't stand one another. They would pair up briefly, but a natural antipathy would push

them apart again. At the graduation exercises, our classmates interacted like a box of magnets, with the force fields repulsing. But Henry and I stuck together. People used to tease us that Henry was the brawn and I was the brains, since he was going into the most concrete field, and I into the most intellectual, but we knew it wasn't true. Henry surpassed me in surgery, ob-gyn, and medicine. He was *Alpha Omega Alpha* all the way, and, though we studied together, I was a B+ sort of student. But we played along with the stereotypes, and Henry affectionately called me FLEA, which stands for "Fucking Little Esoteric Asshole," and is what everyone but we internal medicine people call internal medicine people.

I admit to liking the detective work of medicine much better than what I actually do most of the time. I have a busy service, and most of the patients, all seventy-odd years or older, have had their problems since before I was born. We admit them, and they get better with a few added milligrams of the medications they've been taking at home. Sometimes they get better without the added milligrams. The ones that don't get better stay the same or get worse. The ones that get worse, die, stay worse, or get better. There aren't really that many possibilities.

The resident who oversees me is a third-year, and he really knows his stuff. While I'm struggling, trying to fold the five-foot EKG strip, he's leafing through the chart and spearing lab values with his pen. When too many of the patients are just coasting along, blandly waiting to go home, he tries to spice things up by asking me impossible questions out of the blue, questions that make my heart pound and my palms sweat. I hate not knowing something.

As time goes on, his questions get tougher and tougher. He's thought of screwy little twists, blinds, and baffles. I've begun to have nightmares about the times he'll turn to me with a calm, cruel face and say, "Tell me, Dr. Bart, can you see B12 deficiency with a normal B12 level?" or, in a whimsical mood, "I am a muscle. I am my own antagonist. Who am I?"

But on frenetic on-call nights, I couldn't survive without him. And *he* runs the codes. He makes sure that all the drugs and shocks go in in the proper sequence, usually so that we can be secure that a patient, myocardium spent, is really dead.

I spend most of my time in the nurses' station writing in charts. The trick is to have a thick pen. Then you can write longer without getting debilitating cramps. Sitting at the conference table with all the ashtrays pushed aside, I put my pen down periodically and rub my hand. The surgeons have a very different sort of day. A surgical write-up only takes about half of a page. Henry spends his afternoons roaming around the hospital shoving tubes into people's chests, or lounging in the cafeteria. In the mornings, he does laps, hysts, and D&Cs. During a routine lap, you might find anything, a dozen black crabs clinging to the woman's organs, a tiny embryo bursting from a tube, or, tucked into an ovary like walnut meat in a shell, a dermoid cyst comprising bones, hair, and teeth.

As a student, though, I decided that the fascination of surgery didn't outweigh the horror. Henry and I were hanging out one day looking for hands-on action when an old man came into the ER with a dissecting abdominal aortic aneurysm. You could see it on the lateral film, a thin phosphorescent outline filled with darkness. We trailed the team into the OR. None of us had finished scrubbing when the old man arrested and we all threw down our brushes, ran into the operating room, and jumped into our gowns and gloves. The surgeon opened up the belly after just a swipe of antiseptic. The junior resident was crawling around us doing cutdowns on veins so that they could pour in more blood, which you could see pour out again through the aorta every time Henry, who was pumping, pumped. I was pinned between the patient and the surgeon's big belly, and was pulling as hard as I could against a large scooped retractor. The surgeon and the senior resident were trying to sew a big, stiff graft onto the aorta. Whenever more of the tissue gave way, they cursed and swore. My right arm was going numb from the pressure of the surgeon's belly, and my left breast was squashed against the metal operating table, but, when I tried to switch hands, the surgeon swore at me to pull harder. When it was over, they let us sew up the corpse. For Henry this was the sort of boon that made our being there worthwhile. He set to work still exhilarated from battle. Feeling beaten and literally bruised, it was all I could do to assist with one hand while cupping my sore breast with the other.

Henry was a good sewer by then. He used to practice on the bedsheets with four-O silk and a clamp he'd stolen from the hospital. While he sewed, I would let my books stand open, and we'd talk about medicine, medical people, or medical ethics, but mostly about medical people. We always agreed on who was nice, a good guy, not a bad guy, or an asshole.

At the end of our core rotations, we celebrated privately together. I was certain about medicine, and Henry was just finishing ob-gyn and had decided that it was for him. We were both happy as we envisioned our futures. Henry told me enthusiastically about the vaginal hysterectomy he had seen that morning. We were in his dorm room with only the desk lamp on, and it was warm in his room, but chilly out.

Henry remembered that, when he was little, he used to think that women were made pregnant through their navels. Their husbands would reach in with a finger and bring out the uterus, the way that you might right an inverted glove. Then they would implant a child and push the uterus in again. That made me giggle. Then I told Henry that, when *I* was little, I used to want to get sick, go to the hospital, and have an operation. It had seemed as if it might be a lot of fun to have a bunch of doctors poking and slicing at my stomach when I couldn't feel anything, and to look up and see a big light with darkness all around, and their concerned white-masked faces. Then Henry told me about how he used to think that little girls wanted to be drowned. During swim class, he used to fantasize about grabbing one, and holding her underwater until all the bubbles came up

and she stopped twitching. That scared me a little, and I grew quiet and stared into my beer. We were sitting on the floor with our backs against the bed. Henry grew quiet, too, and began to twist the beer bottle in his hands. After a while he put the bottle down. "I've never told anyone that before," he said.

I looked at him and then at his hands lying passive in his lap. I felt that I'd been given a riddle to solve. I didn't want to answer incorrectly.

Gently, I took his hand. "Thank you, Henry," I said.

In the past month or so, I've seen Henry less and less at home, and only now and then at the hospital. One night when we were both on call, we met at dinnertime in the cafeteria. We shared a bean salad. Another time when I asked for a surgery consult to place a line, they sent Henry. He did a nice job. No fumbling.

My service is beginning to run much more smoothly. There are a million ways of saving tiny increments of time. For example, if a patient has a question I tell him to ask his nurse or private doctor, and I've found a foolproof way to fold EKG strips, three economical moves. I'm much less dependent on my resident. Moreover, he no longer quizzes me on rounds, though I'm not sure exactly how this came about. The whole routine was escalating madly when, one morning, he asked me two stunners in a row. I answered them both. Then he asked me why the "Journal of the American Medical Association" was a misnomer. I was a little annoyed at the pointlessness of it, but I got that one, too. At that, his face grew stony, and he turned to me and, practically spitting over each word, said, "Tell me, Dr. Bart, what's so 'internal' about internal medicine." We stared at each other for a long moment before it dawned on me how ridiculous he was. I smiled and he dropped his eyes. Then we moved on. Since then, I've completely lost the habit of calling out his name in my sleep, something that had jarred Henry awake on many an occasion.

One day around noon, as I am on my way to the cafeteria, the code bells sound. It's always a struggle to get myself to run at top speed, first of all, because my clogs make such an incredible clatter on the hard floors, and, second, because I hate being the first doctor to get there.

On the ward, I find the nurses milling around a room that I'd thought to be unoccupied. I push my way in, and the first thing that I notice is that I've arrived before my resident. The nurses have already started two IVs and slapped on some EKG leads. One nurse, both knees on the bed, is pumping on the chest, while another stands at the head squeezing air in and out of the lungs with a rubber bag. The anesthesia resident arrives and, as the head is positioned to intubate, I realize that the naked young woman on the bed is herself one of the nurses. I'm handed the defibrillator paddles, and am about to move towards the bed, when another nurse grabs my arm and points to the EKG machine, which shows a flatline. We change protocols. In the course of things, the head nurse, a huge, raspy-voiced

woman, tells me that they found Millie on the floor ten minutes after she disappeared carrying some charts.

I wish my resident would show up, but the code seems to be going smoothly. The nurses have all the protocols memorized, and often have the drugs drawn up into syringes and ready before I even ask for them. When they get worried, they jog my memory. "How about some more epi, Doc?" they ask.

Millie's body is trim and petite. Her skin is lightly tanned without tan lines and seems completely unblemished. I'm trying to figure out what happened, but everything I think of seems absurd in such a young, healthy-looking woman. I feel myself sweating. It occurs to me she may have ruptured a congenital aneurysm somewhere, so, right away, I ask for blood, the surgeons, an operating room. We open her IVs wide so that the fluids spurt in, and we continue working the heart. My resident arrives and adds that we should make sure that gyn gets up here. Then he shoves me aside and takes over.

A moist heat rises, covering my face, my entire upper body. What he'd thought of immediately was a ruptured ectopic pregnancy. Hating myself, I move over to the woman's crotch, and concentrate on sticking her femoral artery for blood. After a minute, the surgeons arrive, a tall pale one, a stocky one with a tattoo, and Henry. They confer briefly, and the tall, pale one claps his hand on Henry's shoulder. The short, stocky surgeon has already buried a catheter in the woman's abdomen. A spurt of blood escapes marking his green scrubs with a black slash. He lets out a whoop, and pulls the catheter out again.

Henry goes to work, gloving up, and then, elbowing a nurse aside, opens the chest with a huge incision that seems to take off the whole left breast. Quickly, he and the tall surgeon apply some hardware that spreads the ribs. The stocky one sticks his right hand into the chest cavity and begins to knead the heart against the sternum. "Let's roll 'em," he says. Four nurses move to the corners of the bed, and, as they wheel it out, one of them starts to cry.

The tall, pale surgeon turns to us. Why wasn't he called sooner? he wants to know. His voice is loud and sarcastic. What did we think we were dealing with, a rare parasite? Some old gomer with a bad heart? He wheels and goes striding down the hall after the bed. Henry, intent on the chase, scoots after him.

My resident looks furious. "Surgeons," he hisses. "We followed the protocol. If it weren't for us they'd all be pathologists." He is responding to the insult, but I do not know what he thinks of me.

The nurses aren't looking at us. I feel like they're waiting for me to leave so that they can discuss what happened.

I go back to the nurses' station to collect my clipboard. I wonder if knowing would have made a difference. Not just knowing, but not to have faltered, confused, valuable seconds lost. I wonder if anyone noticed that

the call for gyn had come from my resident, not me.

Later, I page Henry. Millie has made it out of the OR, but her pressure is dropping. I tell him what happened. "You *did* know," he reminds me. "We studied it for the Boards."

I am feeling even worse. That night, "most common cause of sudden death in a woman of child-bearing years" runs through my head like some insistent and disembodied public service announcement. Whenever I finally start to drift, facts and figures start to pop up in my brain, some really trivial, like the side effects caused by drugs taken off of the market because of the side effects that they caused. When I was a student, my dreams at night about what I had crammed before sleeping would be at times so cosmically boring that I would jump awake, as if from a nightmare, and start reading again. Now, once again, I find myself helplessly reviewing ob-gyn. I see tissue slide after tissue slide, looking like so many photos of rolled oats.

This criminal flatness that is my mind overwhelms me. I'm frustrated that so much of what I know is fallow and dead, with the most important questions still a puzzle beyond my comprehension. And I think that, if I could find something in me that was truly alive, I would be of much more use to myself, at least, if too late for the unfortunate young woman who would die tonight of shock.

Unable to sleep, I decide to drop in on "Liver Rounds," the weekly drug company-sponsored party. Tonight's is designated hospital-wide. Henry is on call so, hopefully, he'll be there taking advantage of a free dinner.

I realize that I haven't a single piece of clean clothing to wear, but all of Henry's shirts are still clean, so I select one of his. It's a little long in the arms, but otherwise it fits. My skirt from today isn't too rumpled so I pull it on and, at two minutes to ten, speed over to the hospital.

Henry is there when I arrive, and engrossed in conversation. He doesn't see me come in. The lounge is packed with people, more crowded than I've ever seen it, and seventies music is blaring with the bass turned way up.

I wend my way over to the food table where some medical interns are standing.

"Hi," says one, named Megan. She's a very tall woman with a deep voice wearing housestaff pants and a plaid shirt. She's on call tonight. "The meatballs are great," she adds.

"I'm starving," I say, and spoon some meatballs onto a paper plate. As I eat them, I look around the room.

The party is supposedly for all the people whom I see every day, all the time, and, yet, I feel nothing familiar about the situation. I wonder if it's the incandescent lighting, the music, or the fact that the people in scrubs or white stick out, rather than the reverse. After a moment though, I realize

that what strikes me as really strange is the fact that the room seems full of women. They outnumber the men, four to one.

This doesn't make any sense to me. Our year, after all, was the first in the history of the hospital to break forty percent women. But then, as I begin to recognize some faces, it dawns on me that I had forgotten about the nurses.

The nurses are everywhere, on the dance floor, entering the door, perched on armrests, and stacked in lines against the walls of the room. There are two or three in every cluster of men. They are drinking wine, some are smoking, some are laughing loudly with their heads thrown back. Some are tanned as if they'd just been on vacation, or had gone to the beach, or wind-surfing, or kayaking over the weekend. I put down my plate. The nurses are bobbing on the dance floor. They've mascara'd their lashes, and put on lipstick and clingy, new-looking clothes in bright, appealing colors. Out in the center of the floor, I spy my resident whirling awkwardly with his tie over his shoulder.

"How's the service?" asks Megan.

I see Henry turn and head towards the door, still in conversation with one of the nurses. "Not bad," I say.

Megan's gaze follows mine. She flushes, slightly. "You're pretty tolerant," she says.

"What?" I ask her. She shakes her head, and seems ready to change the subject.

I stare at the door, which Henry, gallantly, is closing behind them.

For a moment, I have the urge to run after him, but think better of it. I wonder if I heard her correctly.

We talk about a patient of mine that she is covering, a young mother with endstage breast cancer. The attending had "followed" the lump for months before deciding to do a biopsy.

"Sad," says Megan, "and stupid." Again, she looks embarrassed.

Suddenly, it occurs to me that I may not have written the order for the patient's 9PM chemo. I wrack my brains but continue to draw a blank. "It's all right," I tell Megan, finally, "let me go check."

It is perfectly silent in the main building, save for the hum of air vents and fluorescent lighting. When I press the button, the elevator doors open abruptly.

Up on the ward, the hall lights have been turned off. Small lamps beneath the chrome handrails illumine the floor tiles in wide half-circles.

When I am on call, patients in distress seem to drift in little islands of light. I move from island to island. Some patients are sweet when awakened, some seem ready to punch. My breast cancer patient needs bloods drawn every night. When I go to her, she always has her mastectomy scar exposed. In the smooth, flat skin above the well-healed incision, there is a cluster of bumps, as if fingers were pushing at the skin from within. She worries the bumps nervously with her hand, like a woman

telling her rosary.

As I approach the nurses' station, the image of Millie alive and on duty, perhaps complaining about not being able to go to the party, flashes into my mind. Then a patient, over the intercom, asks to be let off the pan. The ward grows quiet again. In the distance, I hear the chirping of heart monitors.

I blink in the light of the nurses' station, and pull the patient's chart from the rack.

The head nurse comes out of the conference room. "Why hello, Dr. Bart," she says. "Are *you* on call tonight?"

I flash her a small, self-pitying smile. "*Oh no,*" I say. "Don't go calling *me* for anything."

"Read you loud and clear," she says, and then adds lightly, "Just can't get enough, huh?"

I look up, but she has already half-turned away, and her eyes behind her glasses are invisible. In the lenses, the lights from the nurses' station are reflected in floating, amber orbs.

Destiny Turns on the Radio

On paper the world is a place of limitless possibilities. Dinosaurs can walk the Earth, little boys can fly, and a simpleton like Forrest Gump can hobnob with presidents. But when a screenplay is taken off the page and put onto the screen, reality becomes something of a bother, especially if you're making a low-budget independent film. It seems there's never enough money or daylight to get all of the screenwriters' ideas into the actual film. If you're lucky, they get the important stuff.

It took eight long years for "Destiny Turns on the Radio" to make that perilous journey from the page to the screen, and money and daylight were constantly in short supply. But somehow we managed to get the important stuff. Or most of it, anyway. The original script found Julian Goddard waking up in an ancient Indian ruin on the edge of the Painted Desert. But since we couldn't afford to transport the cast, crew, and equipment to Arizona, we had to shoot the scene at the Vasquez Rocks on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The ancient Indian ruin became a rocky outcropping.

Everybody loved the idea of vultures pecking over the remains of a flattened jackrabbit as Johnny Destiny approaches, but the birds we hired were lousy actors. Their lackluster performances ended up on the cutting room floor. And then, of course, there was the opening image of an unseen hand spinning a roulette ball into play. We employed this image liberally in the script, thinking it would make a cool transition between scenes. Fortunately, it never made it into the film, not because it was difficult or expensive to shoot, but because it was a cliché. No amount of money or daylight could have changed that.

FADE IN: A ROULETTE WHEEL

An unseen hand sends a ball spinning into play. Just before it clatters to a stop . . .

DISSOLVE TO: EXT. THE NEVADA DESERT—DAWN

CLOSE-UP—A COYOTE'S EYE

The Trickster sits atop an outcropping of rock looking down on a man, roughly thirty, sprawled out unconscious in an ancient Indian ruin. An empty tequila bottle lies by his side. An arch in a beat-up stone wall frames

a desert highway stretching into the distance. A car comes into view.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY — DAWN

The car, a Plymouth Road Runner coupe, is traveling fast. Down the road, two large vultures fight and peck over the remains of a flattened jackrabbit. Honks of the car horn disturb the early morning quiet. The vultures lurch into the air just as the car passes over the carcass, the horn still blaring.

EXT. INDIAN RUIN — DAWN

JULIAN jerks awake and rises to his feet, which seem less than willing to support him. He braces himself in the archway, squints into the rising sun, and spots the approaching car. He wheels around, grabs the tequila bottle by the neck, and smashes it against the stone wall, creating a jagged weapon.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY — DAWN

Julian staggers down from the ruin and plants himself in the path of the oncoming car. He tightens his grip on the bottle, eyes glinting with determination. The Road Runner bears down, drifting toward him on a wave of heat shimmering off the road. Julian's eyes narrow as the car comes into focus. A single word escapes his parched lips.

JULIAN: Thoreau . . . ?

Suddenly the wheels lock up, tires screeching. Julian doesn't budge. The car skids to a halt inches from his shins. Total silence. A cloud of dust settles to reveal JOHNNY DESTINY behind the wheel. He's a tough guy with a faraway gaze. One thing's for sure. You don't want to fuck with him.

Julian's fingers go slack. The bottle drops to the ground. His eyes roll back in their sockets and he keels over with a thud. Destiny climbs from the car and kneels beside the fallen man. He lifts Julian's head up and pours water from a jug over his dusty face, just enough to revive him. Trembling, Julian brings the jug to his lips and drinks greedily.

DESTINY: Need a lift?

JULIAN (croaking): I'm going to Vegas.

DESTINY: Where else, right?

Destiny helps Julian to his feet and guides him around to the passenger side.

JULIAN: What are you, a gambler?

DESTINY: Who isn't? The name's Destiny. Johnny Destiny.

JULIAN: Well, I appreciate the ride.

DESTINY: Hey, Johnny Destiny knows what it's like to be down on your luck.

He deposits Julian in the passenger seat and shuts the door. Julian eyes him warily as he walks around the car and climbs behind the wheel.

JULIAN: Nice car. '68 Road Runner, right?

DESTINY: This baby's a '69. A four-forty, six-barrel, four-speed trans, air grabber hood with a coyote duster.

JULIAN: Sweet lines. A friend of mine had one just like this. Only his was a '68. Same color, too. He used to call it "monkey-bottom blue."

DESTINY: Nothing beats Detroit iron.

Destiny hits the horn—"beep-beep!" Julian cracks a smile. Destiny turns on the radio, releasing an acid jazz riff. He throws the car into gear and they pull away in a cloud of dust.

EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS ROAD—DAY

The Road Runner passes a sign: LAS VEGAS 59 MILES.

* * *

INT. ROAD RUNNER (MOVING) — DAY

Destiny drives down a twisting ribbon of road out of the mountains.

DESTINY: Vegas. What a town, huh? Anything can happen there. You know how it is. I don't have to tell you. It's an explosive situation, that's what it is. You've got men looking for women and women looking for men, and they're all looking for money. Quick money. The town is a goddamn tinderbox.

No response from Julian. Destiny glances his way.

CLOSE-UP—A JAILHOUSE TATTOO on Julian's upper arm. It's a broken heart with the name "Lucille."

DESTINY: Lucille. She why you're going to Vegas? [No response.] Hey, you don't have to tell me. I know how it is. I've seen that look before. She's beautiful, huh?

Julian gazes into the distance, dreamy, hard-bitten.

THE ROULETTE WHEEL

Once again, the unseen hand sends the ball spinning. Just before it clatters to a stop . . .

INT. LUCILLE'S HOUSE—BEDROOM—DAY

She's beautiful, all right. This is LUCILLE and she's lying in bed—with another man. His name is TUERTO. He's a ritzy cat, the kind of guy who looks right at home between silk sheets. He snores softly like a man without a care in the world. The problem is that Lucille doesn't look happy. Her eyes are open, staring at the ceiling. Quietly, she slips out of bed.

INT. LUCILLE'S KITCHEN — LATER

Wrapped in a robe, Lucille nervously smokes a cigarette and stares at a test tube from a home pregnancy test kit. The sound of Tuerto's singing drifts in from the bathroom. It's a mangled version of Elvis Presley's "Viva Las Vegas."

TUERTO (singing off): There's blackjack and poker and the roulette wheel, a fortune won and lost on every deal . . .

The liquid in the test tube turns blue. Lucille compares it to the color chart from the kit. Positive. Her worst fear confirmed. She takes a long drag on her cigarette, realizes what she's doing, and quickly snubs it out. The phone rings. She snatches up the receiver.

LUCILLE (into the phone): Hello . . . Hey Ralph . . . Yeah, I can talk. Ten o'clock rehearsal? What do we need a rehearsal for?

INT. THE BATHROOM

Tuerto opens a drawer, revealing a pearl-handled revolver. He grabs a pair of ruby cuff links and snaps them into his shirt sleeves.

TUERTO (singing): All you need's a strong heart and a nerve of steel, so viva Las Vegas! Viva Las Vegas!

He "shoots" himself in the mirror and flashes a grin.

INT. THE KITCHEN

Lucille sweeps the pregnancy test paraphernalia into the trash.

LUCILLE (hushed, harassed): Okay, okay. I'll be there . . . I'm not tense,

you're tense . . . Listen, I'll do the singing. You just make sure this guy shows . . . Tuerto's coming. I gotta go.

Lucille hangs up the phone just as Tuerto enters, straightening a killer silk tie. He sings right to Lucille's face. She smiles patiently.

TUERTO (belting it out): VIVA! VIVA! LAS VEGAS!

Tuerto kisses Lucille with a slurp. She grimaces.

TUERTO: So long, doll face!

Tuerto soft-shoes out the door. Lucille reaches for a cigarette, remembers her condition, and tosses the pack in the garbage.

EXT. MARILYN MOTEL — DAY

The Road Runner pulls into the gravel drive. This is an old, industrial section on the edge of town. Smokestacks jut into the sky. A web of power lines crackles with electricity. Puzzled, Julian studies a postcard.

CLOSE-UP—PICTURE POSTCARD, a picture of the Marilyn Motel, a nice-looking joint in Technicolor.

TILT UP TO REVEAL the motel itself. The years have been unkind to this place. A battered sign of Marilyn Monroe beckons to motorists. You know the shot. From *The Seven Year Itch.* A gust of wind from the subway lifts up her skirt, only this one is in neon and it flashes up and down.

DESTINY: They sure don't make 'em like this anymore.

Suddenly the Road Runner's radio goes berserk with some sort of intense electrical interference. Destiny turns off the radio. Julian pockets the postcard and gets out of the car.

JULIAN: Thanks for the ride, mister.

As Julian turns, he is nearly sideswiped by a late-model Continental moving fast out of the court. KATRINA, a good-looking dame under all the makeup, runs from one of the rooms screaming after the speeding car.

KATRINA: Come back here, you lousy bastard! If I only had a gun! One shot! One shot, that's all I need!

The four-inch heel of Katrina's shoe gives out, and she takes a spill in the gravel. Julian and Destiny run to her. As they help her to her feet:

KATRINA (indignant): Don't touch me! I can do it myself! Dirty shyster!

Gold chains dripping off his neck and he leaves me a lousy twenty bucks!

Katrina fixes her dress, a tight-fitting number with a bright floral design. Destiny picks up her broken shoe and hands it to her. Their eyes meet. Recognition washes over Katrina.

KATRINA (breathless): Johnny! Is it you? Is it really you?

DESTINY: That's right, baby. In the flesh.

Katrina's eyes suddenly glint with rage, and she slaps him a good one across the chops. Destiny flexes his jaw. Katrina spouts tears and falls into his arms. Destiny soothes her.

KATRINA: I'm sorry, Johnny. I couldn't help myself.

Destiny shrugs at Julian.

DESTINY: It's a long story.

KATRINA: You're a sight for sore eyes, Johnny. I've been rolling snake eyes ever since you left. Bad luck, that's all it was.

DESTINY: Luck changes, baby. It always does.

Destiny leads Katrina back to his car, turns to tip his hat to Julian.

DESTINY: See you around.

JULIAN: Doubt it.

DESTINY: You never know. It's a town of limitless possibilities.

The Road Runner pulls away.

EXT. MARILYN MOTEL COURT — DAY

Faded pink stucco, cracked. A monument to the decline of the post-nuclear west. NO VACANCY flashes between Marilyn's legs, but the place appears deserted. Julian pauses in front of Room 21. He reaches hesitantly for the doorknob. Just then the raw cough of a troubled engine comes from around back. Julian's eyes fall on an arrow-shaped sign that reads POOL.

EXT. MARILYN MOTEL—POOL AREA—DAY

Julian steps from around the building and walks past an empty pool, its cracked yellow bottom baking in the sun. You can imagine that this odd-shaped pool was once the centerpiece of a tropical paradise, but that was a

long time ago. Julian spots a rusted Checker Marathon sitting between the pool and the office. The words MARILYN MOTEL on the side door are barely visible under a thick layer of desert dust. Julian's shadow falls on HARRY THOREAU who is tinkering under the hood. He's about the same age as Julian. He wears boots and old work clothes and has the wild-eyed intensity of a man who has wrestled demons.

JULIAN: Howdy, Thoreau.

Thoreau looks up, plays it cool.

THOREAU: Julian.

JULIAN: Three years late, but I made it.

THOREAU: Better late than never.

Thoreau wipes his hands and slams down the hood.

THOREAU: Heard about you on the radio this morning. Them news fellas were comparing you to Harry Houdini. I kinda figured you'd be headed this way.

JULIAN: You're probably not the only one.

Julian follows Thoreau over to the office porch.

THOREAU: So, what do you think of the place? It's all mine now.

JULIAN: You didn't buy it, did you?

THOREAU: Let's just say I acquired it.

JULIAN: Well, it looks like shit.

THOREAU: The universe is expanding, Julian. It's beyond one man's power to stem the tide of chaos.

JULIAN: You could make an attempt. At least put some water in the pool.

THOREAU: That ain't no pool. That there is the devil's watering hole.

Thoreau steps onto the porch and grabs two frosty beers from a cooler next to a lounge chair, facing the pool. Within reach is an odd assortment of jury-rigged RADIO EQUIPMENT. Shortwave, longwave, and every wave in between connected by coaxial cables to a rotating satellite dish on the roof. Looks like Thoreau spends much of his time at this poolside Mission Control. The two men clink beers and chug.

THOREAU: You seen Lucille yet?

JULIAN: No, I came straight here.

THOREAU: So what's the shot?

JULIAN: I want my share of the money, Thoreau.

THOREAU: And then what?

JULIAN: Then I get Lucille.

THOREAU: Uh-huh . . .

JULIAN: And I figured after that, head for the border and keep on going.

THOREAU: Sounds like a hell of a plan.

JULIAN: Glad you like it.

THOREAU: Couple of problems, though.

JULIAN: Like what?

THOREAU: First off, there's Lucille. She hasn't exactly waited for you.

JULIAN: She didn't leave town?

THOREAU: No, she's here. But she's Tuerto's girl now.

JULIAN: Tuerto?!

THOREAU: He's a big shot now. Runs the Stardust.

An ugly image takes shape in Julian's mind. His face twitches spasmodically, and he explodes like a wild beast, hurling his bottle against the wall.

JULIAN: Tuerto?! This is truly offensive! I may throw up right here!

Thoreau hands him a fresh bottle of beer. Julian pulls himself together with a long swig.

JULIAN (glowering): You said there were a couple of problems.

THOREAU: Well, Julian, it's about the money.

Julian grabs Thoreau by the collar, pulls him close.

JULIAN: Thoreau, I spent three long years in prison dreaming about that money. Whatever you do, don't tell me it's gone.

THOREAU: It's gone.

A tense pause.

JULIAN: What do you mean "gone"?

THOREAU: I mean "gone." As in "away."

Julian lifts up a fist and brings it crashing down on Thoreau's face. Thoreau staggers backwards, shakes it off.

THOREAU: Don't you want to know what happened?

JULIAN: No, I want to hit you again.

Julian bashes him again. Thoreau tumbles backwards over the lawn chair, sprawls in the dirt.

THOREAU: I didn't squander the money, and I didn't lose it. It was robbed.

Julian straddles Thoreau and grabs him by the collar in preparation for beating his brains out. Thoreau recovers his senses.

THOREAU: It wasn't my fault. You went back for Lucille, that's what screwed things up.

Julian pulls his fist back, but before he can let fly, Thoreau sinks the tip of his boot deep into Julian's privates and somersaults out of the way. Julian is rendered completely useless. Thoreau dusts himself off, grabs two fresh beers from the cooler. He sets one next to Julian, who remains on the ground in an anguished fetal position.

THOREAU: Can you hear me, Julian? . . . For the sake of this conversation, I'm going to assume you can hear me. You left me waiting here in this Godforsaken place with all that damn money. I was a sitting duck, Julian!

JULIAN (hissing): I figured you could take care of yourself. You had a gun, you had a car, you had your wits about you when I left.

THOREAU: You are seriously underestimating the power of the forces that were aligned against us, Julian.

JULIAN: What the hell are you talking about?

THOREAU: I'm talking about the inescapable forces of fate. I'm talking

about fire and water.

JULIAN: You ain't gone and got God on me, have you?

THOREAU: I ain't putting no names on him, but he was here, and he stole our money.

JULIAN: He? Tell me there was more than one.

THOREAU: One was enough.

Thoreau turns and squints at the pool.

DISSOLVE TO: EXT. MARILYN MOTEL—POOL AREA
(FLASHBACK)— NIGHT

The pool is filled with water. A blue Road Runner idles behind Room 21. Thoreau sits at the wheel fiddling with a Zippo lighter. The motel's Checker is parked by the office.

THOREAU (V.O.): If you recall, we had an appointment at the Silverado Bank. But, of course, you and Lucille had to choose this particular moment to have a relationship talk . . .

He rolls his eyes and glances at his watch as shouts and curses drift from Room 21. The argument is punctuated by breaking glass and smashing furniture.

LUCILLE (off): Get out, you bastard! Get out! I don't want to see you anymore!

JULIAN (off): Ow! . . . Shit! . . . Would you just shut up! . . . Cut it out! . . . You gotta trust me!

INT. ROOM 21—NIGHT

It's a disaster, clothes and broken glass everywhere. Lucille collapses on a screwed-up bed and begins to sob. Julian stands up from behind an overturned chair, kicks aside a mangled copy of Gideon's Bible, and moves to comfort her.

JULIAN: Alright, baby, what's the problem?

LUCILLE: It's this town, Julian. I hate Vegas! I can't bear it anymore. You said we were gonna leave tonight.

JULIAN (climbing on the bed): We need some traveling money, don't we? After tonight, we'll be on top of the world.

LUCILLE: And then what?

Julian gathers her in his arms, looks down at her.

JULIAN: Then we'll leave Las Vegas.

LUCILLE: With the cops chasing us?

JULIAN: There ain't gonna be no cops. Thoreau's got it figured out. It's gonna go like clockwork.

LUCILLE: But what if something goes wrong?

JULIAN: Nothing's gonna go wrong.

LUCILLE (rolling over so she's on top): Julian, let's leave now. Forget the bank. We don't need the money. Let's just get out of here before it's too late.

Lucille touches his face, stares into his eyes. The car horn blares from outside.

JULIAN: Don't worry, darling. Just wait here. I'll be back before you know it.

Lucille knows she's not gonna win this argument.

LUCILLE: You have this power over me. It's ripping me in half. Part of me wants to stay, and the rest of me wants to clear out right now.

JULIAN (rolling over so he's on top): Which parts want to stay?

She kisses him. Outside the car horn blares again, and Julian pulls away.

JULIAN: I gotta go, baby. We're on a tight schedule.

With a wink, he's gone. Lucille moves to the window and watches as Julian jumps into the Road Runner and the men drive off into the growing darkness. She grabs the first thing she can find and heaves it at the mirror across the room—SMASH!

MAUREEN MURRAY

Crows

IN THE EARLY EVENING, only the crows gathered, and just quickly, to plan. They bitterly paced the longer branches, then black over black lifted from the tree with a startle. Their conversation would continue elsewhere; my conversation was here.

I looked away from the sharpness of those black wings—angry little flags snapping in the wide winter sky—and turned three pots of Christmas cactus in their dishes on the deep window sill in my bedroom. It was December first; there were things to do.

So far, I had spent the afternoon putting away things, although my task for the day had been to decorate. We have a "smart labeler" hooked up to the computer, and I labeled and packed boxes of clothes, regularly tripping on my bathrobe as I carried the light but awkward boxes up to the attic. I searched my bedroom for old perfume bottles (Daniel and I have been together for four years, so I have more than a few), and I tossed them in with my summer sweaters and linen outfits.

A black dress on a wooden hanger hooked onto the front of the armoire had been reminding me all day that we were going to Daniel's holiday party the next night, even though it was the first anniversary of my mother's death, and I had planned to spend the earlier part of the day comforting my sister.

I decided to wait out his return by choosing my jewelry and shoes for the party. If you're a doctor's wife and don't look like you're enjoying it, you sense some irritation from the employees.

I lit incense from the Asian Art gallery. The house was always so still at this hour while I waited for him: the heat had begun to tingle in the radiators and I had a glass of honey-colored chardonnay with me, but the incense helped to tighten the room around me. The windows were blackening (I haven't gotten to window treatments for the bedroom yet), and I couldn't see the tree anymore that the crows had temporarily settled in. My husband said that the tree would come down in the spring, that the roots and the branches were too close.

In the fall, I had liked to pass by the windows as I waited for him, and I would watch him in the driveway as he gathered his things from the car. Tonight, I was in the only lit room and if he looked up and if I were close enough to the window, maybe he would see me. I preferred it the other way—I liked to watch him move without me.

I put on a pair of sheer black stockings under my bathrobe and tried first the shoes that reminded him of Catwoman, then a pair that had more of a twenties look. I sat on the bed across from the full length mirror, crossed my legs, and nodded with a serious expression. I prettily played with the ends of my hair. After so much nodding, the real drama of the conversation comes when I break out into my incredulous smile—incredulous that someone that interesting could be that witty, too.

When I heard his car pull in, I had two quick gulps of wine and headed for the bathroom. I would light a candle and slip into the bathtub; his footsteps would sound through the rooms, and he would switch on lights, maybe start a fire.

I applied some pale pink lipstick, fingered my hair back into a leather barrette, and decided yet again not to change out of my bathrobe. Jude was my sister—she wouldn't care what I was wearing. I searched the tiny drawers of my jewelry box for Mexican earrings. So much caffeine had made my hands a little shaky, and I could hear Daniel humming to a much slower tune.

"Do you want some more coffee?" I called into the bathroom with my small morning voice. I brought breakfast up to us every morning on a heavy pine tray—a whole pot of coffee, two upside down mugs, and a tall glass of orange juice to share.

I did not grow up with this kind of luxury. I grew up poor but refined. My mother had been a novice in a convent as a very young woman—she taught us how to glide our spoons away from us when sipping soup, how to pass what you wanted before taking it, how to feel what others must be feeling. She quietly associated herself with others' pain and humiliation whereas I was more Old Testament. I had always sensed something coming against us.

Daniel poked his head out of the bathroom.

"Won't your sister be here any minute?" he asked, looking nonchalantly past me over to the pile of recently discarded clothes on our bed.

I nodded yes and offered more coffee.

"Are you feeling a little sick?" he said.

I nodded yes again, even though I was of the opinion that no one was ever *a little sick.* Someone was either fairly ill or pretty much a faker. But I kept these thoughts to myself, not wanting to insult his profession.

As usual, though, his concern drew me toward him as if I were a somnambulist, and when I stood dead in front of him, he touched the back of his hand to my cheek and leaned forward to kiss my forehead.

"Do I have a temperature?"

"You always have a temperature," he said gently. "And you might even have a slight fever."

Sometimes, when confronted with such gentleness, I could confuse

words, even though I am well-educated.

"I wish today weren't today," I said.

"I know, but Jude will help."

He pressed me to him, and my body felt like a rickety wooden frame against his strength. Maybe I did look pretty to him. I reminded myself of the smallness of my body, but then I considered the condition of my skin, the coldness in my hands and in my feet.

I stood at a dining room window, watching the crows stitch rough circles into the frosted grass. One arched his neck back and called to the others, as if taunting them to leave.

Jude used the knocker on the front door instead of the bell. Three loud knocks and a bark. I hadn't remembered to remind her not to bring her dog.

"Hello," I said, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Why did you bring Bob?"

"Bob hates being home alone. I didn't know how long I'd want to be here."

She unwound her long turquoise scarf and shook her arm out of a cheaply made leather jacket, all the while pulling back on Bob's leash. The dog's toes scraped on the tiled hallway floor. He was scrambling to get somewhere. I rubbed his head kindly.

"We'll tie you up outside," I said, in a voice I usually reserve for children.

"Let's forget about Bob for one minute. Why aren't you dressed?"

"I don't feel that great and this is comfortable. Besides I showered last night, and we won't exactly be celebrating—"

"I'm not doing this," Jude said. "I'm not spending today with you in a bathrobe. For Christ's sake, I came all this way. Maybe we should head home, Bob."

Jude fumbled in her jacket pocket for cigarettes and soon would only be addressing Bob as a further means of protest.

I headed for the kitchen knowing that she would follow. I told her I had made coffee and oatmeal scones.

"I mean it about the get-up," she said behind me. "I came all this way."

"All what way? It takes forty-five minutes to get here, and you can never manage it. Where did you get those cowboy boots?"

Jude just shook her head. She always arrived looking as if she were making a quick food and bathroom stop on a long road trip. She had been carrying herself like a forty-year-old divorcée ever since she was sixteen, and she never actually traveled. When we lived closer together it was worse. One time she ran into my apartment on her way to a wedding to pick up a slip, and she ended up leaving with my best underwear. She was always just in enough trouble that you could only help her yourself.

She lifted a scone off the cookie sheet on the stove and blew on it. She looked up at me and smiled.

"These look good," she said.

In her mind I was already no longer annoyed with her. She tore off a piece of the steaming scone and offered it to Bob—apparently we had all made up.

I agreed to drink coffee sitting on the steps of the deck because Jude would not leave Bob tied up by himself outside. I doubled a plaid pink and blue wool blanket and laid it across our laps. It was only forty degrees. We wore Himalayan knit hats with bright braided strings that I found in the back of the hall closet. Often when Jude visits, I have to dig far into the corners of my house to accommodate her. I have to gather winter clothes to wear while *sitting* outside in freezing weather or pirate through the cabinets for the ingredients for a Bloody Mary for her hung-over friend who agreed to take the ride with her. Then you find yourself sipping a shitty Bloody Mary over down-and-out conversation or you're trying to throw a ball to Bob without standing up or spilling your coffee.

I handed Jude mittens and she nodded, but placed them on the step behind us.

"It's weird without Mom," she said. She was staring straight ahead—we were pretty high up on the stairs—and all we could see were tangles of thin trees with skewed patches of light pasted on them. Beyond the trees, just a short distance really, was conservation land, a long stretch of pumpkin patch to the Sudbury River, but we couldn't see any of it.

"I know," I said dumbly. Daniel did not expect me to know him so well—for which I was grateful—and I was never around other people since I quit work. I was out of practice with open-ended statements. But then suddenly I had a memory to offer; except for the past year, I've always been a girl with memories.

"I remember my first day of school," I said. "I didn't want Mom to go home; I wouldn't let go of her hand or look up. The teacher led us over to a table with magnets. I had never seen them before. I was so fascinated by them that Mom slipped out. I couldn't believe there was such a system to things—that if a magnet were near a little metal ball, the ball had to go to it; that two magnets turned in a certain way wouldn't touch each other no matter what."

"That's interesting," Jude said, practically interrupting. "I have news. News that would make Mom happy."

She patted the side of her leg, and Bob trotted up the stairs and sat next to her. He dropped a grimy rubber ball at our feet. It slowly rolled and then bounced down the steps, and he followed it.

"What is it? Tell me." I wasn't one for news. Whenever our mother had to tell us something, it was usually that my father had started drinking again. Once it was really that our dog had died, and I was relieved.

"All right then, I'm pregnant," she said and clapped her hands once. "Didn't you notice? I haven't smoked since I've been here; I just carry them

around with me. I thought you might have guessed on your own."

"I would have never guessed. I could have never guessed that today," I said. "Let's go in. You shouldn't be out here."

Our family had always been like a dark house. Since my mother died, it was as if the night were darkening and wrapping around it. A baby would light the house, and I wondered where I could go.

It's fifteen minutes before we leave for the office party. Sitting at the vanity in my bedroom, I carefully shake out from a blue velvet pouch beautiful diamond earrings given to me by my husband on our first anniversary. The candle lit next to me makes small shadows dance across my neck. I know that I'll be asked again, soon, to have a child and that I will negotiate one more year without one. But for tonight, I wear a little black dress, and it is flattering. I hear his electric shaver; soon he will sing.

I put on my green wool coat and slip on black boots and head outside. The path through the trees is easy to manage, even though there has been a dusting of snow. It is 4:30 and the light is silver. I see dark green pine trees, black boughs, frantic dried copper leaves, and a thin carpet of snow over the field. Far ahead of me are the crows. I begin to run lightly. I am the same colors of what is around me—my open green coat flaps against my tight black dress, the copper is the color of my hair.

Exhaustion can create a feeling of readiness in you, although I think it is a readiness for murder, and I'm not sure what will go. But for now the crows surround me. They're at my feet; they run alongside me.

From Darkness into Light

The first quiet breath you've given in days,
quiet as sympathy, assurance, sigh.
A nurse pulls the translucent tubes awry
and two small jets feign life above your face,
exhale the unspecific air like grace,
like any of us. Your lips mask a slight
listening, open-mouthed, to a child, sight
lost in a stare at TV turned low, late,

like dozing off—the death-free simile.
I take it now, unashamed, to hands posed,
pretending prayer on the sheet, to the sheet,
simple bedcloth, to the brow mere repose
I trace lineless, white. I take it as sleep,
unafraid, and touch your still eyelids closed.

in memory of Karoline

The Second Coming of Judas at Connor's Gas and Diesel

You can't start things over, yet you've returned,
bad penny, hunched above the chrome counter,
a brow pinched with weather reports, thumbed crusts of pie.

The Rock-Ola hymns, "Wax wings before the sun."
As always, there's no flying, just one leap
for self-preservation. You will down coffee

with the worst of us; knives kiss salty bread.
Soon, down a rural route behind the barnyards,
you'll piss your name in steaming cursive on the snow,
recalling Jesus, good times. You should go. *Now.*

Leave coins for this betrayal of waitresses—
be a brother, a son. Highways brought you here.
Soon they'll be too fierce for travel with crucial lords
that drive you toward the tried, the untrue.

Problems with the House

When I wake up this morning
the horse is in my room.
The horse
usually sleeps in the den,
but this morning something is wrong.
He snorts, shakes his head
as if trying to talk,
knocks a hole in the ceiling.

When I try to lead him out, he
can't fit through the opening
and he panics.
He follows me downstairs
with the jamb stuck on him like a yoke,
and then must stoop and strain
at every door.

When we get to the kitchen,
I have coffee and a cigarette;
he tries to calm down.
I can see that he is, for a horse,
a rather impressive figure. His neck
could have been carved of finest ebony.
Veined his flanks like watered silk.
His head is incomparable: pure presence.

In the end, he walks the floor.
He sees his reflection
in the refrigerator
and his eyes open wide.
I hate to see him like this,
but there is nothing to be done.

He goes out the back door
and I watch him trample the beds.
He doesn't even feel
the fence collapsing under him.
He runs away through the backyards.
Dogs bark in the early light.

Monday for Sneaking

SHE DIDN'T MIND THE LEPROSY. Harold was still a handsome man. Amanda wished that he'd contracted the disease abroad. It might have been romantic. She could have explained that he'd been stricken with a tropical fever. Unfortunately, the origins of his disease remained a mystery. As it was, neighbors wouldn't set foot on their lawn and were careful to keep the feet of their dogs and children off the lawn as well. It was 1943 and by law Harold should have been taken to Elwood Sanitarium. But he was from an old New Orleans family, and Amanda had a great deal of money. The law was bent. Harold was sequestered in his own house, in the dining room because it opened into the downstairs bathroom. He'd spent four months there already.

Harold went to the hospital for his initial diagnosis and stayed for a week while the dining room was readied for him. Amanda hired three carpenters to fix the room. They built a laundry chute to the basement and installed a bathtub in the lavatory. They stripped the wallpaper, painted the walls white, and removed the chandelier. Amanda wrapped it in tissue and had it stored in the attic, along with the Turkish rug, the dining room table, and chairs.

They carried in a bed, a divan, and Harold's black leather armchair from his study. They built a makeshift desk, and Amanda arranged his papers and utensils in the same way she'd found them. She made his bed with thick white cotton sheets. Then she'd left and the house was fumigated with a sweet-smelling pesticide. Amanda stayed in the hospital inn for three days. They returned to the house in an ambulance. Harold rode alone in back.

The physician visited once a week to check on Harold, and Amanda called the hospital every Monday to report on Harold's condition over the weekend. She was tested twice a month for the bacillus in her bloodstream and listed as a nurse's aide.

Amanda didn't appreciate the notice in the *Times-Picayune* that announced her husband's confinement, nor did she take kindly to the large yellow sign posted on the front door, prohibiting anyone from entering without written permission from the health department. Amanda and Harold found themselves cut off from their community: the opera lunches, country club dances, local elections, and Garden District parties. Harold had finished his last law cases and didn't like to call the office any longer.

His colleagues were pitying and short on the phone.

With Harold's confinement, Amanda's closer friends asked that she not visit for fear of contamination. She called them once a week to tell them that Harold was doing well and writing a book. She reassured them it wasn't possible to be social at a time like this. Amanda was warm and gracious on the phone. Her calls were brief.

She fixed their meals in the kitchen, talking to him from behind the countertop. Harold sat in his black leather chair with a newspaper. He changed clothes after breakfast, pulling the dressing screen around him, and dropped his soiled underclothes down the laundry chute. When she returned from her afternoon errand, she fixed their lunch. She pushed the tray towards him, and he took his lunch, taking care not to touch the tray. They developed a routine that never varied, and in between Amanda's errands and cleaning routines, meals and sleeping apart, they reminisced about the trips they'd taken together since their honeymoon. Harold took copious notes in blue India ink.

The chute dropped his soiled clothes and bedding straight into the industrial washing machine. She wore rubber gloves and washed herself long and hard three times, once after she'd loaded the clothes and soaked them with bleach, then again after she'd put them in the enormous gas dryer, and then a third time after folding his clothes for him and placing them gently at his doorway. He pulled them in on a clean towel. They hadn't been able to find a housekeeper or even a maid to help with the running of the household. Amanda's hands had become slightly rough and chapped. She splayed them on the counter, her heavy rings falling to the side.

"I've got my mother's hands already," she announced to Harold.

"You've got lovely hands," he said and smiled.

Amanda rubbed lotion into them. "Are you hungry this morning?" she asked.

He nodded and she fixed his eggs quickly. She pushed his breakfast towards him on the tray. Two eggs, sunny side up, no meat, coffee with scant cream, toast with jelly, and a medicine cup with his Dapsone for the leprosy and a morphine derivative for his pain. He ate one egg and half a piece of toast. She scalded his dishes and went upstairs to dress.

"Do you remember," she asked, "when we watched the inauguration and I found that earring?" She stood in the kitchen with her black purse over her forearm clipping two mabé pearls to her lobes. Her hair was pulled back into a chignon. Harold could smell her perfume. She was small boned and fair skinned. Her dress was a soft wool crepe, blue with a black velvet collar. "Do you remember that?"

He lowered his paper. "Of course. You nearly broke your hand under somebody's boot as I recall." The leprosy affected his larynx. His voice was more hoarse than usual that morning. Amanda held her hands out before her, palms uplifted to him, and winked at him. He blew her a kiss. "You

might bring me a can of those baby corn," he added. She nodded; it was on her list, but every Monday he mentioned it, almost as an afterthought.

She kissed the air between them and left the house. In three hours, she would return with two bags of groceries and a new pile of books from the lending branch. She read to him after supper. Harold had time to smoke three cigarettes while she was gone. He would blow the smoke carefully out the window, leaving the windows open until just after 2:00 p.m., which gave the house exactly thirty minutes to lose the chill from outside. He rationed his cigarettes, having bought cartons from a hospital orderly, and smoked on Mondays only.

Harold moved to the divan and painfully drew his feet under him. He'd lost some feeling in his right ankle and foot, and loss of sensation had turned out to be surprisingly painful. He opened the window and lit the first cigarette, inhaling deeply. It was winter time and the side yard was nothing but a mess of brown grass. Harold finished his cigarette and pulled the afghan around him.

He lit the second cigarette. His head was spinning just slightly. He wasn't used to smoking anymore, and the amount of pleasure his Monday cigarettes gave him was dwindling. This seemed a great unkindness to Harold. He thought if he'd taken such trouble to have a few cigarettes once a week during his confinement, the very least that ought to have been returned to him was a relaxing smoke. He dropped the second cigarette, half smoked, in the toilet and lay down on the divan. His head reeled a little more heavily, and he swallowed a few times against the sourness along the sides of his mouth.

He pushed the window down quickly and stumbled to his bed, kicking his numbed foot into the metal leg of the bed in doing so. He sat on the bed and dropped the slipper to the carpet. The side of his foot was bleeding hard. It didn't hurt, but he was alarmed at the speed of the blood running across the bottom of his foot. It was this sort of thing that would send him to Elwood.

His fingers beginning to ache again, Harold carefully opened up the cut along his foot. It wasn't so deep, he decided. He took a clean undershirt from the little dresser next to the divan then rested his foot alongside the sink. He washed his bleeding foot with the germicidal scrub Amanda had brought home from the hospital and wrapped the undershirt around his foot. He walked back to his bed and watched the blood squeeze through the white shirt in carnation blooms. He rested his foot on the headboard, pulled his robe around him, and settled against the pillows. His gut gripped together inside him and he closed his eyes, moistening his lips.

Amanda's hand had been badly bruised during the inauguration parade. She was standing pressed against him when she spotted the earring. She'd thought it might be a diamond. Somebody had stepped on her fingers when she reached for it, and she brought her hand with the earring up to her chest. He'd taken her other hand, and they made their

way back through the ticker tape to their hotel. She bathed her fingers in water from a pitcher, and they lay on the bed together, their suit jackets pressed around hangers on a curtain rod. She'd stood up again to hang her skirt over the chair back, and he'd put his pants carefully over the footboard. They arranged themselves in bed again, with just a small space between them. She fell asleep first, and he'd rolled towards her, his body flush with her side. Her mouth opened slightly, and he traced her lips with his fingers until she frowned in her light sleep and turned her back towards him. He'd left his arm around her and tried to sleep in the strange city.

Harold sat up to look at his foot again. The shirt was more red than white, and he lay back down. His fingers ached, and he placed his hands carefully on his chest. He'd nearly finished imagining the first few chapters of his memoirs. He'd organized an outline of the chapters, beginning with the honeymoon in Niagara Falls. The subsequent chapters were titled: The Inauguration, Prewar European Holidays, The Great West, and so on. He'd thought a great deal about his travels through the South but couldn't recall where he'd put his diaries from Texas. Amanda had spent two hours looking for the diaries several months ago and each time returned to the dining room arch with a rueful smile.

"I couldn't find them, darling. I'm sorry."

"Did you look in the bottom of the bureau?"

"Of course, just as you asked."

"Perhaps in the attic?"

Amanda looked doubtful. "We haven't gone up there in years," she said.

"I think they must be in the attic; would you look?"

"You know I don't like the attic."

"I know," Harold admitted. "But it's so important to me. If I could just step foot out of the room." He took a step towards the arch between them.

"Of course, I'll look," Amanda said, stepping backwards. "I'll be right back." She turned and went to the second floor. Harold heard the stairs to the attic pulled down and unfolded, and her steps. She'd called down to him after a quarter hour, "I don't see them, dear."

"No?"

"I've looked everywhere. I'm filthy," she'd said. "Let me shower and I'll be right down."

Harold looked at his watch. The house was quiet. When he stood up, blood leaked out of the shirt into the wood floor. It would stain. He unwrapped his foot in the bathroom and was pleased by the thick line of blood congealing over the cut. He left the shirt in the sink and wrapped gauze loosely around his foot. He sat on the divan, fastened the bandage with sticky tape, and lifted the window carefully. He enjoyed his third cigarette. It was always like that. He'd smoke only half of the second cigarette, and then the third was a real pleasure.

Amanda would be back in an hour. Normally he'd rather have an hour

and a half, but what with cutting his foot open, he'd lost time. He'd give himself two hours next Monday. It couldn't be helped today. Harold tucked his feet into his slippers and walked quickly through the kitchen to the stairs. He stopped at their bedroom door at the head of the stairs and looked in on the rumpled bed. Her robe and nightgown lay draped over the edge of the bed. Harold took a step into the bedroom but quickly stepped back. He pulled the attic stairs down and climbed them carefully, placing his fingers in front of him so that he would not cut himself again by accident.

"You've got to be very careful," the doctor explained to him. "You lose sensation, and then before you know it you've cut yourself down to the bone." He might not feel a nail or a bit of glass until he'd cut through a tendon. His hands weren't numb, but the sensation in a few fingers was beginning to wane, and he found typing difficult. He'd bruised his fingers badly at one point hitting the keys on the manual typewriter.

The attic was dim and cold. There was a light bulb above him, but the chain was missing. He turned the bulb, and it flickered on. He was surrounded by boxes, a number of trunks, the dining room table and chairs, old newspapers, piles of books, and Amanda's sewing mannequin. A wall of dresses hung from a dowel. Harold stepped carefully over the books, his old law books, and turned from there to one of the many trunks. Most of them he'd gone through.

He pulled back the lid, mindful of his fingers, and lifted up the screen. He reached into Amanda's grandmother's dry-rotted clothes, rifled through parcels of letters with stiff ribbons wrapped around the envelopes, and held up a silver hairbrush with hair falling out of it in broken strands. The trunk smelled of lavender and camphor. He dropped the brush into the letters and let the lid fall.

Harold turned to face the sewing mannequin. There was a hat on its neck. Harold pushed the hat to a jauntier angle and let his hands fall around the tiny waist. He pulled the mannequin towards the dresses along the wall and ran his fingers along the sleeves up and down the length of the dowel. Harold held a dress out and away from him. He couldn't remember Amanda wearing it. He picked up the next one. It wasn't familiar either. There was a particular dress he had in mind.

He looked through the dresses until he found a yellowed shift with long buttoned sleeves and a full skirt. He slipped it off the hanger and held it up against the mannequin's chest. There was a crushed bow along the neckline. Amanda had worn the once cream-colored dress on their honeymoon. He slipped the dress over the mannequin's neck. He'd finished with his second year in Tulane's law school, and they were married that summer so that he could take a honeymoon and begin his summer term with his father's company.

They'd planned to have children after he finished law school, but she'd become pregnant that summer only to lose the baby and the next two babies

after that. The doctor explained that unfortunately she was not able to carry a baby to term. He assured her she was quite fertile. They'd left the office slightly dazed and took a taxicab home.

"I'd always thought I'd have children," Amanda had said in the kitchen. She would not look at him.

"You can't help it," he'd said, after an awkward silence.

"No. I can't help it," she replied and poured iced tea into tall glasses.

"We'll keep each other company," he offered, and she looked at him then, with her head turned slightly away.

"I didn't want children for company."

Harold subsided into silence again. He'd thanked her generously for the iced tea. Amanda took her lunch to their bedroom and rested for the afternoon. Harold ate at the kitchen table and left for the office. Later they bought two beagle puppies and named them Charles and Lucy. When Harold was in the hospital, the doctor insisted the beagles be put to sleep. They were inside dogs and might have carried the disease throughout the house. Nobody had wanted to take them.

Harold started at the sound of the taxi outside. He hadn't time to climb down the stairs. He fastened the back of the dress hurriedly. The sleeves hung limp, and he folded them together along the waistline of the dress. They fell apart. He held them to one side, his hands resting on the mannequin's hip. Amanda came in through the front door. She walked to the kitchen with her two bags and set them on the counter.

"Harold?" He wasn't in the dining room. Amanda took the cans of tuna and put them in the icebox. She tucked the loaf of bread in the bread box and walked to the doorway of the dining room. The bed was disheveled, and there was a great deal of blood around the pillows. Amanda took a step forward. The bloody white undershirt lay gleaming in the sink (she saw only small corner of it), and the edge of the sink was bloody as well. She put the eggs hastily in the icebox and ran through the kitchen. "Harold?" she called again.

Harold crouched in the attic, his head bent into the stiff and yellowed dress. He listened to her footsteps as she moved through the house. Amanda called up to him from the attic stairs. Her voice was steady. She climbed the stairs carefully. He thought he would shriek but bit the dress and his fingers in the dress until he was sure of his dead throat, and she was at the top of the stairs looking into the attic. She turned to Harold crouching there, and her breath came in hard.

" Harold? What happened? All that blood?"

"It's nothing. I've cut my foot. That's all."

He let the sleeves drop from the mannequin's hip. Amanda frowned.

"What have you done with my dress?"

"I wanted you to try it on."

"It's too old. I can't wear it anymore."

"I only wanted you to try it on."

"I can't now. You're touching it."

"I'll hang it back up in a minute."

"I don't want to wear it. Leave it alone."

"All right." Harold ran his fingers along the back of the dress.

"I'm going to shower," Amanda said quietly and backed slowly down. "Did you touch anything in our room?" she asked, stopping on the stairs to look at him. He shook his head and held her dress away from him. She noticed the lesion on the side of his temple. It was oozing slightly. She drew her hands back from the stair rail.

"Go back to the dining room, Harold," she said softly. "I'll have a shower and fix your baby corn." Amanda turned and went to her room. She locked the door and, stripping her clothes off, turned on the water as hot as she could stand it and scrubbed herself with germicidal soap until her skin was pink and smooth and stung from the surgical scrub sponge. Amanda heard the door handle turn partway and then it was released slowly. She held her breath with her head out of the water. She heard a low wailing in the hallway and then he stopped. She rinsed herself and turned the water off. She dressed slowly and pulled her shoes on carefully. She looked around the room. Everything was as she'd left it. She went to the kitchen.

"I cut my foot on the bed frame," Harold explained from behind his changing screen. "I'm afraid I ruined a perfectly good undershirt." He combed his hair and changed his clothes. He let the shirt and his pajamas fall down the chute into the basement. "Be careful with the wash. There's an awful amount of blood on the shirt."

"Shall I call the doctor?"

"Let's don't bother him; he'll be here Friday."

"You don't want an infection," she said.

"All right then. Let's ask him to have a look sooner than Friday."

"All right," she said and nodded.

"Did you have a good afternoon?" he asked from the armchair.

"I couldn't find needles," she answered from behind the counter.

"Are you sewing something?"

"I thought I'd fix your robe. The pocket's ripped."

"Should you hold my clothes that long?"

"If they're clean."

"Ask the doctor, would you?" he said.

"I'll call him after lunch. Would you like mayonnaise?" Amanda asked.

"Yes. A pinch of salt and pepper in the mayonnaise, please."

Amanda fixed his tray with the baby corn in a circle and black olives around the dollop of mayonnaise. She slid the tray across the floor then washed her hands with the germicide soap and sat down to eat the egg sandwich she'd fixed for herself. Harold speared the corn with his fork and dipped it carefully into the mayonnaise before bringing it to his lips. Three of his fingers around the fork were purple where he'd bitten them.

DANIEL STERN

Frank Kermode as Public Intellectual

For the spring semester of 1995 Sir Frank Kermode was in residence at the University of Houston as the Houstoun Professor of Humanities.

In recognition of this distinguished figure's visit to Houston, the University organized a conference, A World That Is Not Our Own: Concords and Discords in Contemporary Criticism, a Festschrift in honor of Sir Frank Kermode's 75th Birthday. The conference was held at the University Hilton on March 5 and 6 and featured guest speakers David Bromwich of Yale University, Margaret Ann Doody of Vanderbilt University, John Hollander of Yale University, Edward Mendelson of Columbia University, David Mikics of the University of Houston, and Richard Poirier of Rutgers University.

*What follows is a version of the remarks delivered by Daniel Stern, Cullen Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Houston, under the rubric of "Frank Kermode as Public Intellectual."**

WHAT I HAVE TO OFFER is an appreciation. One fiction writer's small song of gratitudes for the work of another writer whose books have been precious to him. A thank-you note to a writer who simultaneously questions, believes in, and loves literature. One who has always affirmed the value of thinking about its value, otherwise known as criticism.

I am only going to try and present my Frank Kermode. I am not going to try to translate or interpret. The original will suffice. I'm reminded of the time James Thurber went to France and was met by some admirers who told him that his work was really at its best in the French translation. Whereupon he quickly but mournfully said, "It does tend to lose something in the original." That is not the case here. Kermode speaks well for himself.

He is a man who, I believe, would find life intolerable without the sustaining and healing presence of poetry, fiction, and music—not necessarily in that order. I think, in our present climate of theory and politics with many people struggling not so much to deal with literature and art as to attempt to replace it, this is not an insignificant point.

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*Author's note: I apologize to the reader for the excessive use of quotations from Frank Kermode's work. The intent is a broad, affectionate look at a large body of important critical work and the man who produced it, rather than a scholarly paper.

A small aside here—an anecdote of the time I first met Frank Kermode. There was at Wesleyan University, in the late sixties and early seventies, a gathering of distinguished writers and thinkers at the University's Center for Humanities. It was quite something to be able to stop at the water cooler and find one's self engaged in a conversation about Othello with Frank Kermode, or chatting about whether the possibility of a self still exists with Hayden White, or kicking around questions of representation with Harold Rosenberg. Heady stuff for a man who was on a month's leave from McCann-Erickson Advertising. It is no false modesty to say that I was enjoying every moment, at the same time realizing that I was in on a pass.

But in I was, willy-nilly, and there I first met Frank Kermode. Strangely, that time, the end of the sixties, seems in some ways a reverse echo of our own. Example: I gave a talk and the next morning there was a colloquium. Colleagues, visiting scholars, and graduate students all discussed the themes of the previous evening. One young Marxist scholar spoke up and, as they say, quickly cut to the chase. "Look," he said. "This whole idea of reading is, itself, a solitary and bourgeois idea. Someone is paid to write a book, which he does alone in a room; when it is published, someone else pays money for it, buys it as a commodity, then retreats with his or her purchase, alone again, to a room in which he or she consumes it in solitude." What, he asked, could that essentially commercial and solitary experience do to alleviate the life and condition of an ordinary human being? How could it bring a needed sense of hope and community?

I remind us of that quite extreme position (even for the sixties) because shortly thereafter I came upon the best possible reply to the young professor: I bought a book and after having paid money for it, took it home and, alone in a room, read for the first time. It was *The Sense of an Ending*. A book which spoke to the concerns of that time and also beyond them to universal concerns. "It is not expected, " it famously begins, "of critics as it is of poets that they should help us make sense of our lives; they are bound only to attempt the lesser feat of making sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives." That phrase, the lesser feat, shows us how far we've come. There are so many now who believe that critical theory is by no means a lesser feat than writing poetry or fiction—and who would even banish the whole notion of lesser or greater feats from our consciousness entirely.

Kermode then speaks of our being at "a moment in history when it may be harder than ever to accept the precedents of sense-making—to believe that any earlier way of satisfying one's need to know the shape of life in relation to the perspectives of time will suffice." And he speaks of Yeats' golden bird who sang of what was past and passing and to come, and so interested a drowsy emperor . . . reminding us that "the physician Alkmeon observed, with Aristotle's approval, that men die because they cannot join the beginning and the end. What they, the dying men, *can* do is

to imagine a significance for themselves in these unremembered but imaginable events. One of the ways in which they do this is to make fictions: objects in which everything that is exists in concord with everything else, implying that this arrangement mirrors the dispositions of a creator, actual or possible . . . ."

Such models of the world, he says, make tolerable one's moment between beginning and end, or at any rate keep us drowsy emperors awake. He tells us, a little way on, that "men, like poets, rush into the middest, in medias res when they are born; they also die in medias res, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End is a figure for their own deaths. (So, perhaps, are all ends in fiction . . . .)"

I remember to this day how moved I was at that first reading. The act of creating literary fictions had been seen in its largest, most generous sense. And it is just that relating of critical and interpretive strategies to the common human condition that is one of the hallmarks of Frank Kermode as a public intellectual. A kind of hermeneutics with a human face.

This was the song Kermode sang about a half hour before the shock troops of the French arrived in England and America, with the news that Structuralism was here and the author, all authors, were disposable. But his interest in the nature of imaginative space, in fictions, in what happens between the tick and tock of narrative time, did not wane.

The Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard titled "The Genesis of Secrecy" brought another gift from Kermode to the novelist. Here he addresses, through the writing and rewriting of the Gospels, the questions about narrative which continue to engage him: what kind of things are stories, and how are they made? He tells us that The Evangelist, for whom the truth of a story is that it interprets and fulfills an earlier Old Testament prophecy, is doing something not so different from what the novelist does—since the later pages of a novel are almost always an interpretation of its own earlier pages. This is not only cheering to the working writer, it is useful intelligence.

Kermode has been a great mediator, having a deeply nontotalitarian soul. In a review in *The London Review of Books*, P.N. Furbank remarked: "It can be fairly said that no one has done more than Kermode, or even as much as him, to hold the literary community together. He has confronted several bloody revolutions in literary studies without losing his nerve or, except very occasionally, his temper. He has shown that one can take on everything in the way of serious novelty and yet keep one's own independent course, Or, as he likes to say, to follow one's nose. He writes for the dry-as-dust scholar, for the advanced literary theorist, and for the casual reader of book reviews, for everyone who cares about literature. And he performs all this with neither trendiness nor with pretended indifference to fashion." Thus P.N. Furbank on Kermode. For myself, I add, he is a kind of functioning compass for many of us, who sometimes lose our way in the

jungle of literary ideas.

From questions of time, narrative, plots, and endings, quotidian and fictional, he has moved to the question of what makes poems, novels, plays, worth preserving. The title of one of his books, *Continuities,* tells a great deal about his natural method. He is a great connector, a continuer.

Although, on meeting Frank Kermode, at first glance you might not think that you have met a rabbi, his quest has led him into midrashic interpretation so deeply that he actually studied Hebrew to help that process. One remembers another public intellectual, Edmund Wilson, learning Russian and Hebrew late in life to pursue Pushkin and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

In the T. S. Eliot lectures titled "The Classic," Kermode brings the midrashic ideal of continuous interpretation to bear on what used to be called, when I was young, the "great books." The questions he dealt with in 1975 have now become burning issues to any of us who teach or, indeed, have children of our own. How may we reach back across the centuries to read, with any sense of value, Virgil, Dante, Milton, Charlotte Brontë, Hawthorne? (Of course, of late the question has also become, in some quarters, should we reach back to them at all.)

Classics were, of course, once thought to be beyond time, as the angels or the Imperium were beyond time. Today, in the words of another public intellectual, Lionel Trilling, we expect the classics to "read us." Trilling was referring to the great modernist classics, but I take the liberty of extending the notion. And I take him to mean that they challenge us as to what we believe and how we live.

Kermode tells us it can be argued that to require the classic to speak to us directly in our time, rather than to demand of ourselves the effort to speak to the classic in its time, is what T.S. Eliot calls "overestimation of the importance of our own time." Against this Kermode marshals an older tradition, a tradition in which, over and over again in time, old books which people still read are accommodated to readers whose language and culture are different.

Alongside the conventional view of preserving what is timeless in the classic, he says, "I claim to be reading a text that might well signify differently to different generations, and different persons within those generations. I understand that this view may well be an encouragement to foolishness, a stick that might be used, quite illicitly, to beat history and to sever our communications with the dead." (Prophetic words.) "But it happens," he says, "that I set a high value on these, and wish to preserve them. I think there is a substance that prevails, however powerful the agents of change; that King Lear, underlying a thousand dispositions, subsists in change, prevails *by being patient of interpretation."*

That phrase, patient of interpretation, is a key to the essential humanism of Kermode's way of seeing. (One of his finest essays is called "The Patience of Shakespeare.") It is this idea that leads him to suggest that

an interpretation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as an exposure of nineteenth-century Western imperialism in Africa is perfectly fine—as long as it does not insist on being the final interpretation—suggesting that a work so rich and complex will wait for the next fresh look of understanding, and will do so perhaps forever.

Kermode offers us a profoundly open way of looking at the classics—later to be central to the emerging brouhaha over "the canon." He states: "The classic work we contemplate is now beyond time in a more human sense. It is *here,* frankly vernacular, and inhabiting *our* world where alone, we might say with Wordsworth, we find our happiness . . . or not at all. This work we contemplate stands there, in all its native plurality, liberated not extinguished by death . . . unaffected by time yet with an essence available to us in the aspect of time. So the old image of the imperial classic, beyond time, beyond vernacular corruption and change, had perhaps after all a measure of authenticity; all we need do is bring it down to earth."

In other words, as the rabbis would have it, a patient interpretation will give us everything: timeless essences as well as a literature of our own moment. And the political choices offered by what Harold Bloom calls "the school of resentment" may be essentially false choices.

Now, Kermode has come down often squarely on the side of what used to be called the common reader, as well as the idea of the man of letters, the all-round bookman (in fact, he is a great defender of that poor relative the book review)—all opposed to the more elevated ideal of the priestly academic shaman. This is part of his persona as a public intellectual that endears him to us novelists and poets. But it is not to imply that he has stayed out of the fray all these past decades. At University College in London from 1967 to 1976 he led a famous seminar dealing with Structuralism, later Deconstruction, and related imported theories, preserving, we are told, "a tone of good humor in the midst of the most serious, even fierce exchanges." He has dealt seriously with Saussure, Derrida, de Man, Lyotard, Blanchot, Eagleton, Kristeva, Lacan—and other such crystal-clear pushovers.

I mention this because we are living, to some degree, in a new world of discourse, a world in which all old assumptions are frequently discarded, in which the very notion of the value of literature, of the value of the past, the value even of Olympians such as Shakespeare, indeed, the very notion of the value of value, is being seriously eroded.

I mention this here because, in 1988 and 1989, the man who has been described here as a meliorist, a peacemaker, took off the gloves. In the last two chapters of his book *History and Value* and in the long prologue to *An Appetite for Poetry,* he deals directly with what he sees as the consequences of the New Historicism and various varieties of primary political theory working their ways in the life of criticism and of the universities.

His reply is stated eloquently in the last chapters of *History and Value.* He has said in many different ways that the difference between a frozen,

imperial, and oppressive canon and the canon we actually have is "commentary . . . commentary that proceeds to grant freshness and modernity—relevance, if you will—in generation after generation."

"Absolute justice and perfection of conscience are unlikely to be more available under any new dispensation than they are now. . . . Nevertheless, we shall rewrite the past to suit our modern wishes, as the past has always been rewritten." The question he asks is "do we want to break the only strong link we have with the past—our ability to identify with the interests of our predecessors, to qualify their judgments without necessarily overthrowing them, to converse with them in a transhistorical dimension.

"Though inevitably tainted with privilege and injustice, that still seems a valuable inheritance. Some workable notion of canon, some examined idea of history, though like most human arrangements they may be presented as unjust and self-serving . . . are necessary to any concept of past value . . . necessary even to the rehabilitation of the unfairly neglected."

And he asks that we "so construct history that the valued object stands out from the unvalued and belongs to a totality of literature rather than to an archive of hopelessly diverse documents. Perhaps the best image for the way we endow with value this and not that memory is Proust's novel; out of the indeterminate, disjunct facts of history, a core of canonical memory; out of history, value."

Clearly, it is with models of fiction and poetry that Kermode is most comfortable, so I will end with two extracts from Wallace Stevens, a poet dear to Kermode's heart and necessary to much of his enterprise. Early on he reminds us that

> From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
> That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
> And hard it is, in spite of blazoned days . . .

But, finally, one has the sense of Kermode's ultimate allegiances when reading lines he quotes which are meant to speak to all of us:

> Children of poverty and malheur,
> The gaiety of language is our Seigneur.

Killing Frost

Self-righteous with stories of the sow that ate her young in a sty
plastered with dung, my father said pigs were
intelligent—that when she was eating, she knew. I could see they
were vicious right until a sharp blow on the back
of the head with an axe. Their slaughter was never the dull routine

of cattle who die without making sounds. Like blackberry thorns,
hog squeals were hard to pull out, unlike a knife
plunged to jugular at Aunt Hazel's command, Stick 'im right
in th' goozle'ere. Sanctimonious is how I'd describe
us as a stake sharpened at both ends was put between the tendons

and front feet to hold the carcass. We hoisted the hog full length
into a barrel of boiling water to get bristles out.
The head was twisted off and brains were scooped out to fry
with eggs for breakfast. Finally, there was real
satisfaction, a climax: one long cut down the belly spilled the red,

shining like ebony. Warmed by exhaust from a Ford tractor, we'd
trade techniques: hogs should be killed late November
on the full moon or just about. While the moon waned, meat would
shrink with too much lard and in new moon, there
wouldn't be enough grease. A slice in a pan would puff up and spit

right in your eye just like an adder. Hogs we didn't kill were taken
on Saturday to Elizabethtown but only when the moon
was growing so the meat would hold water and weigh more. Eating
held significance, a reputation was made on curing
ham. Doc Hall Pyrtle used five pounds of salt for a two hundred

pound hog. My father liked eight pounds per hundred mixed
with black and red pepper and at least a quart
of molasses. Neighbors buried hams in bushels of corn or hickory
ash but ours were wrapped in layers of gauze
with red stain seeping through like a shroud. Swinging on hooks,

shoulders hung aloft until the peach trees bloomed. Then hams
were put flat side down on bare ground. Cured
for two years, the unveiling was a ritual until we reached the hard
brown fat that was far too tempting to use as an altar
for kneeling. Thirty years later, I read New Haven, Connecticut,

on The Register each morning instead of Cecelia, Kentucky. Too
many relatives have passed since I moved
up North to marry. I should label myself Yankee, buy a plot
in Beaverdale across from my office. My father's
scythes and mauls have been picked over; the tool shed, part plank

and part log chinking, has already begun to sink. Still, I think about
our hogs as I wheel down the the aisles of Ferraro's Grocery
on my quest for the Christmas ham. Stacked pigs' ears, sealed
in plastic bags and ten cents per pound cheaper
if bought in bulk or feet split down the middle and crossed like

hands of the dead don't tempt me. Pork tails at $.49 a pound are too
much of a bargain to pass up. No salted crust, shrink
wrap keeps swarms of flies, mounted like polished emeralds, off
the rind. Connecticut law requires all unwrapped meat to
be hung behind walls. Doors are pushed open when I ring a buzzer

but then they swing shut. Is the butcher I invent testing a blade?
Cutting is done in a hidden room and I picture walls
inflating into red balloons. Leaning to hear slaughter pen bawling,
laughter filters through. I parrot words about women
who can live years without meat. Pulling me off my pedestal,

Aunt Hazel urges, Buy what oozes under the plastic. There must
be blood somewhere. Look in corners, on counters where
it might have thickened. I want a shudder that goes all the way
down my neck but orange prices plaster windows,
block my view, quench the vision of the hog, wild then stilled.

A Season For Storms

THERE WAS THIS TIME in my life when it seemed all I could do was put one foot in front of the other and keep slogging along like that all day until it was time to go to bed. As I remember, the sleeping was the best part by far. Long hours of almost drugged sleep in which I lived in another man's body and awoke confused and ashamed in my own. That's what woman troubles can do for you. Worse sometimes than being broke or sick. I know about all those things, too, but woman troubles I think are worse.

When my father's family moved out to Illinois from the East, they stored all their worldly goods in an old warehouse while they were finding a house to rent. There was broom corn stored in another part of the warehouse, and somebody torched it, trying to drive up the price of broom corn. So my grandparents lost everything, the beds and chairs and tables that would have been hard enough for them to replace out of their meager savings, but also the irreplaceable things like the photographs and momentos. I think I know how that must have felt because that's what my Lydia had done to me. She had torched me like that guy did the warehouse.

My restlessness was so overpowering, I was never comfortable in one place. I kept wanting to be anywhere but where I was, the next room, down the street, or miles away. When people tried to talk to me, unconsciously I would keep edging away from them, just moving anywhere. So, I quit my job and packed up my stuff and started driving. I can't say that really took me away from my grief, but at least I had the sense it was at my back. As long as I didn't stop for long, it couldn't really catch me.

I was moving then aimlessly through northern California and Oregon and Washington. It was at the end of one of those days that I pulled the pickup off the road into a tiny little town up in the timber country. They had bulldozed a shelf back into the pines, and a dozen or more scattered buildings had grown up there like wild mushrooms. Some clapboard houses, but mostly cabins and shacks and Quonset huts. One bore a neon sign in the shape of a cocktail glass, and it was that I had noticed first from the highway.

Before I could reach the porch of this tavern, a rain came up out of nowhere. It picked up at a furious rate and was soon rattling in the tin downspout of the tavern and pounding on the brick-colored clay of the parking lot. So I came through the door, wheezing and stamping and shaking the water from my jacket and hair. The bartender looked up

curiously from his efforts at moving some bottles from cardboard boxes to his shelves. "Got caught, did you?" he said, with a big smile. "That's the season for you. When you least suspect, down she comes. Come on in, my friend. It's warm by the bar. I got a space heater here."

I moved into what was really a large room that seemed much tighter because the wooden walls were as dark as if they had been scorched. And it seemed every inch of space was covered with posters and photos and magazine clippings. Down one side was a pool table with scoring beads hung above the worn felt and cue sticks neatly stored on the wall. A dozen tables crowded the other side where a silent jukebox hunched in the corner. In the shadows, a grizzled Labrador labored to his feet and ambled across the floor, his heavy body swaying from side to side. He disappeared through a curtain into a back room.

I took a place at the end of the bar near the red-hot elements of the heater. "Bar whiskey, please," I said, "with a short beer chaser." The rain had, if anything, intensified my thirst. The bartender quickly poured my drinks. As he pushed the glasses across the bar to me, he followed them with his large and calloused hand. "Andy," he said. "Nice to have some company. What's your name?"

"Vern," I said, not knowing until that very second that I would be lying to this stranger. I did that sometimes in those days. I would be among new people and suddenly find I no longer wanted to be myself. Vern was a name I began using when Miller and Hawk Ryan and I started running the town girls when we were fifteen and thought it furtive and cool to have aliases. So, all my life I was Vern when I wanted to lie. And when he asked where I was from, I said Monterey, too, though really I was from Salinas. There was no mystery in this. All those things that had to do with Lydia that I could disavow helped push me away from her. So, let the lying begin, I thought.

"You be spending the night?" Andy asked me.

"If there's a greasy spoon around here. And a cheap motel."

"Well, we can fill that bill," he sighed. "The greasiest and the cheapest."

"Then I guess I can relax," I said, loosening my jacket and sprawling out on the stool. So Andy and I talked, he content, I guess, to have the company, and I happily distracted by the creativity of my tales. It was as if I were meeting this Vern myself for the first time, fascinated with what he would say next. He was an interesting fellow. It turned out he had once been in combat, and some years ago he had been rich for a while as a wildcatter. But lately he was mostly a drifter.

So contentedly engrossed was I in the conversation and increasingly mellowed by the whiskey, I scarcely noticed that the door had opened and the woman had come in. But there she was suddenly, right there at my side, asking Andy who his new friend was. As Andy introduced us, I turned, distracted from my running narrative of lies, and really saw her for the first

time. She was shaking off and folding an umbrella, but some of the rain had caught and was gleaming in her hair, and a drop or two glistened on her pale forehead. Because she was a friend of Andy's, who in a short time had become one of Vern's dearest friends, I was sure happy to meet her. But I saw no beauty in her pale, hard features and felt no stirring for her. Her name I never did catch when Andy introduced us, and so I never really knew.

She was a strange one. I guessed at first she was drunk or stoned. But then, I wasn't sure. She looked so directly at me through her dark eyes that I wondered if I knew her and had forgotten where or when. But she gazed in the same intense, familiar way at Andy, too, and about the room, as though it were all new to her and incredibly interesting. I began to wonder if she was crazy.

From her face, I thought she was too old for me, although I sensed what I was seeing was so much experience that it made me feel like a little boy. I thought if I had to guess her age, try as I might, I would probably guess too high. Her smile was tight-lipped, which I always assume means there's a problem with the teeth. But that thin smile had a guarded and mysterious quality. There also was a certain girlishness in the movement of her body that I was sure must still be attractive to some men.

I can't really account for the next few hours. I had been going about the business of getting drunk before she came in, and it was hard to pull back from that plan. I seemed to slide back and forth into a pleasant blackness, a vacuum of time. But I would pull up into the light occasionally and could see that she was sitting beside me at the bar, looking closely at me and smiling. It slowly dawned on me that we had been in some kind of conversation for awhile, and I wondered with a start who I had been in that talk, me or Vern? And where did I come from, Monterey or Salinas? The second thing, and this was strangest of all, this woman seemed to be interested in me. Since Lydia, I was convinced that I gave off an aura of defeat that isolated me from the world, most especially from women.

Looking back, when I recall that night, I can see with great clarity her face and her movements. And I remember well her bold familiarity. But I don't remember at all the things she said. I mean, other than what was necessary to go from one place to another. But in between all of that, anything that she might have told me about who she was or what she did or believed in, I simply can't reconstruct. All I remember is how she kept saying, "No, tell me about you."

I failed to reorder for awhile, suddenly wanting to be sober. She helped by ordering me first some coffee and then such a quantity of pretzels and chips that I soon lost what appetite I had. The fuzziness began to part, and I struggled back among the living to see what was happening there. My recovery I could see reflected in her face. She seemed pleased that I was coming around. And sensing her approval, I took another look at her and reassessed her looks in light of these feelings she was displaying for me. I

admit I found much more there than I had seen before. "So, you like me?" she asked, laughing a little, still without showing her teeth. "Do you have someplace to stay tonight?"

"No, I was going to go to the motel."

"You can stay with me," she said casually. "But we'd better go now. I'm getting tired. Why don't you pay Andy?"

Tired, I thought. How could it be time for bed? I looked around the tavern and was surprised to see it had filled up with regulars. Somehow, the afternoon had become evening. Andy smiled weakly at me as I paid him. I sensed his disapproval that this woman and I had developed something for each other. I didn't care, I thought. Andy's jealousies were his problem. For the first time in a long time, I felt good about the way things were going.

Then we were in the rain and a cold wind that snapped me quite awake. Our feet splashed in the puddles in the parking lot. We tried unsuccessfully to keep her umbrella over our heads in the wind, and we stumbled in the dark. The woman laughed at it all. A hard laugh that I felt I had heard all my life.

It was good that I had sobered up, because in the rain and darkness, finding my footing on the rickety steps to her front porch took everything I could muster. But we managed somehow and entered a door she had left unlocked. She turned on the light to reveal a room of shabby furniture nearly covered with magazines that spilled carelessly over the chairs and floor. The air seemed trapped and rancid with mildew and cooking odors. A small television blinked on noiselessly in the corner, like a night light left burning. She took hold of my hand and led me into the bedroom.

The bed was scarcely made, a spread pulled up over the topology of tangled covers. Sleeping there were three cats, whose yellow eyes blinked open to watch us approach. And lying with them was a man. Fifty years old, I'd say, if he was a day. I couldn't have been more surprised—that he was there at all and that he was so much older than her. His drawn, sleeping face wore a two-day white stubble, and his clothes were soiled and wrinkled. "Get up, all of you," the woman said sharply. "I got company."

And so they did, the cats sliding away as water on glass, from the bed to the floor and gone. The cat man looked up with red eyes at us, his face offering no recognition. He stood up, shook his head to clear it of sleep, and shuffled through the doorway. I heard his phlegmy cough echoing through the little house. The woman sighed, closed the door, and locked it with a bolt. And then she came close to me and kissed me. I don't think I have ever known, in such a small and unexpected way, such total happiness. I found myself choking back tears.

She took off her things then, as immodestly as if she were alone, and cast them in different directions where other clothes were sprawled in disarray. As she did, she gestured to me to take off my clothes, too, and I eagerly obeyed. But these I tucked in a small pile beside a chair.

Her breasts were as white and soft as her face was hard, and her smooth limbs reflected like polished marble the light from the bedside lamp. In fact, her slight body was so unexpectedly lovely I had to gasp. No baby's mouth had ever touched those dark nipples, I would swear on that. She moved gracefully as she smoothed out the bedclothes and tucked in the sheets. Then she led me softly into the nest she had prepared. Made speechless by my good fortune, I settled down with her into a bed made warm by the cats. And the cat man.

Afterwards, I slept like an angel. Not drugged at all with sorrow as I had often known back then. I awakened once or twice in the night and sensed the woman's presence near me, a most comforting and reassuring feeling. In my quite vivid dreams, I was a child again, back in Illinois, with my parents both alive. I came in from play and found myself once more at the table in my mother's kitchen. Mom, Dad, Larry, everyone was there. And there was not a single moment in these dreams for my Lydia. As though she had never existed.

When I awakened in the morning, incredibly refreshed, I smiled to myself in gratitude for the woman beside me, and I reached for her and moved close to the heat coming off her body.

She stirred with a grunt and turned her face to me, a face the morning light through the small panes of the window chose to treat most ruthlessly. I quickly reminded myself that this face was not what she was about. What I needed was to see again the dance of her remarkable body. To be once again the man I had been the night before. But the woman wanted nothing of my dreams and my gratitude. With a quiet oath, she turned fully from me and sought the outside edge of the bed, nearest the wall, where she could meet again with sleep.

I had no trouble finding my clothes, still bundled tightly by the chair. I dressed, shivering. A glance through the window showed that the storm had cleared. The surfaces of the puddles in the yard were unbroken with raindrops. I unfastened the bolt and slipped furtively through the door, not sure what I would do. Then a voice spoke, as unexpected as if Lydia had suddenly called my name. "Want some coffee?" it said, and I turned my head and there was the cat man. Why would I not expect him there, I thought. I realized I had quite forgotten that he existed, amazing as that seems.

He stood in the doorway of the tiny kitchen, holding a cheap aluminum coffee pot, looking even more rumpled than the night before. One of the cats swirled about his legs, rubbing up against him. My new confidence made me terribly bold. I knew that I wasn't afraid of him at all. Yes, I would have some coffee, I thought. I moved past him into the kitchen. There was a small table by a window, covered with oilcloth. Another cat was sitting on its haunches squarely in the middle of the table by the sugar bowl and the salt and pepper shakers. I sat down and glowered at it until it moved sullenly away. The cat man put my cup before me, followed by a

small carton of milk. He said nothing while I sipped my coffee, but I could smell his foul breath even at a distance, and I could feel his eyes upon me.

"What brought you here?" he finally asked, dully.

I wrapped my hands around my cup to capture its warmth in the chilly room and thought for a moment, not sure what I wanted to tell him. "Just traveling," I said.

"And so you met Andy," he led on, "and so you met her."

"That's right," I said. "Just like you say."

A long period went by in which neither of us said anything. I finished my coffee and set it down, with no offer from him to refill it. I wanted another, had to have another, and I resolved to go to the greasy spoon Andy had told me about and have a dozen cups if I wanted. This cat man wouldn't be deciding how many cups I could have.

Then, in a voice so strange and calm, without threat, it made the hair stand up on my arms, he said, "It's time for you to go."

I looked at him and he didn't turn away. His red eyes were set on mine.

"All right," I said as slowly as I could, determined not to show the slightest fear. "It's your house. So I'll go." I didn't truly know that it was his house. But suddenly I had this twinge of uncertainty, like before I had met the woman. First, the way she had turned away from me that morning. Now the cat man, docile as he had been in the face of her commands, was starting to crowd me. It was almost as though it had been me lying on the couch through the night, listening to her moans of pleasure coming from the bedroom.

I started to rise, but his hand fell on my arm. "I don't know what you think," he said. "And I don't care. People like you have your lives. And I have mine."

I looked at him, not flinching from his steady, almost crazy stare, determined not to tear myself away too quickly. But, in a well-measured moment, I rose, thanked him for the coffee, and left him sitting at the table. The cat, apparently relieved that I was leaving, quickly jumped up by the sugar bowl again. Very quietly, I eased open the bedroom door and saw that she still slept in the heap of covers near the wall. In my jacket, I found a piece of paper and a pencil, and I wrote a note. I wished her a good morning and told her I would be having some coffee at the diner Andy had told me about and that she could join me there.

I left without speaking again to the cat man and, turning on the squeaking front porch steps, looked back at the clapboard house where I had spent the night. Like the woman's face, it hardly bloomed in the morning light. In truth, there was almost a human quality in the way it stood there in the mud, slumped and defeated. I walked back down the lane through the little town, stopping momentarily at the dark hulk of Andy's tavern, where the neon cocktail sign was stilled and the window shades were drawn. Andy's big Labrador was lying on the porch, his head

resting heavily on his paws and his eyes following me as I passed.

The little diner by the highway made things much better. The coffee was nice and strong, and the waitress there was so bubbly friendly, she was the perfect antidote for what I had just been through. She brought me country sausage and eggs and toast made from homemade bread. She leaned over the counter while I ate and told me all about her life. She also asked me about mine, and I found myself largely telling the truth. Then, the cadre of regulars began to trickle in, shopkeepers and truck drivers and loggers. There was a lot to talk about, the storm and how it seemed to have cleared off and where people were from and where they were going.

I'm normally not a very gregarious person, especially when I'm sober. But I found myself quite chatty and open that morning. I spoke to just about anyone who wanted to give me the time of day. How many cups of coffee I drank I cannot imagine. Except that I was fairly trembling with a caffeine rush. Then, I began to notice that some of the people were ordering hamburgers or the Special, which was meat loaf and mashed potatoes. I realized then that it was nearly noon. I never really expected her to show up, I thought. I'm not a complete fool.

But, I should say, a most remarkable thing occurred that week. At least for me. I finally had a day that was better than the one before. And then another to boot. As I drove down the highway between Klamath Falls and Redding one afternoon, I felt the stirrings of something like a kind of joy deep down inside me, as unexpected and scary as if it had been the first twinge of pain from a malignant tumor. I had to stop along the shoulder of the highway for awhile to contemplate it. Shortly after that, Vern and I had a falling out. It was inevitable, I suppose. But one day he just slipped out of the cab of the truck and I never saw him again. I have no idea where he is now. For all I know, he might have wandered back to that little town in the logging country. Maybe he just had to have some kind of showdown with the cat man. That's Vern's problem now, I figure. It's sure not mine.

The Unexpected Aviary

All I was certain of at the beginning
was there was one about eiders.
Only now I find the preponderance of birds
presuming their places on every
other page. And the frames of windows.
And I want to say these discoveries
are good for something, evidence
there are within us unrealized images
binding our selves, performing
the work of quiet ringmasters.
Then I remembered the birds I forgot—
the hummingbird suspended at my ear,
the wind-wracked pelican,
the stone kingfisher. That nightingale finally
singing its heart outside my window
in 1987. It was dark as a crow's feather
in that room where I thought I was dreaming,
where I woke most nights in the snare
of those vultures, the nightmares.
There even the most dignified birds
were on their way to some terrible death,
while earthbound I railed and tried
but could not save them. And if it wasn't
the heron or the hawk, it was a fox
outside a window. Or the elk I escort
through rush-hour traffic in an epic
dream to safety. But it wasn't safe,
was it? I knew reaching the threshold
of the woods, it was only a park.
But oh that stretch, that short
breathtaking run and scent
through what seemed spacious.
I can tell you it's only stale if it is
on the page. How geese descended
Christmas day on a field inside locked gates
encircling the mental hospital. How before

comprehending migration, we guessed
they hid through winter in the silt
of lake bottoms. My friend says
any working theory is good enough
for a running start. Perhaps it *was*
the parakeet, pigeons, no, the penguins
in the zoo of childhood. I knew the birds
outside those windows were all we had
pointing to angels. And I was going to know it.

January 15th

It wasn't you. It wasn't—
until I entered the date
at the top of the page,
what I always do
to fasten myself first
to the world with the pen.
It wasn't until I said
the lip-seamed *M* at the start
heading to the inevitable
double *L*'s at the end,
Michelle, the word *shell*
for the first time sounding
itself inside there.
It wasn't the shell dropping
when I pictured it
again, something someone
might have caught
looking out a window
at nightfall turning
in the center of January.
It wasn't your long
unbroken fall
from the fourteenth story
yanking twenty years
later at the rip cord
of my life. It wasn't you
pitched by what we call *choice*
out a window, the only
close call being
how it hadn't been me.
It wasn't you leaving
me shattered and determined
never to shatter. And it was.

A Poem about Breasts

Your gait is indeed royal:
frightening infallibility of breasts.—
Miroslav Holub

1
Planetary ballistics dictate that any body
arriving from a great distance
and acted upon by the gravitational
force of a single object—a star,
for instance—will return, however altered
its trajectory, to a great distance.
In order to capture such a body, the attraction
of two heavenly objects is required.

2
If men were moths, how might we revolve
between the image of two flames?

3
Love's flame, they say, burns hottest in the eyes.

4
The old prospectors scrabbling months on end
through western mountains, solitary,
kept company only in their dreams,
translated the objects of those dreams
into stone and earth and air.
Thus, along Lake Tahoe's western shore,
two symmetrical peaks bearing on any road map
the name "Betty's Knobs" raise in proud basalt
the slope and signature of Betty's praise.

5
The evolutionary development of sight
has led the eyes to focus
primarily on single points.

6
In most versions of the story, it was Helen's
face which launched the thousand ships.

Peden Street

Why does it have to be December, Adam?
Why does it have to be dark? Snow falling
on the shopkeeper's stone head.
If one walks to where the branches of the land-
scaped tree were, and sways there,
as if in middle air, why must it be by the neck?
Why the dull ice rink again, Delmore? Why the goddamned
gray? And the dead boy in the park,
his eyes in the carven sockets, Pieter, are where?

Walking east to meet her walking westward
to meet me a few blocks, between mimosas and the anuses
of River Oaks restaurants, I saw her,
dressed in black again, the street light into her,
the moonlight limited to the sky, the crickets left unchecked.

As she approached I was as blind as the tree roach
on the dumpster across the street, flailing a feeler,
not knowing I exist at the only place
I could be; waiting to evolve, I guess,
setting my delicate legs on this hueless love,
lifting up my head in the darkness and sensing
the centuries revolve and mutate around me.

DAVID KING

Then versus Now: Life with HIV

IN THE FALL OF 1986 I found myself sitting in a consultation room in the basement of a city health clinic. I had lived in Boston for about five years and had been to this clinic a few times for a cold, or the flu, but this visit was different. This time I was facing a nurse who was about to reveal to me the results of my HIV test.

As I sat under the fluorescent lights in that tiny room, I can remember feeling that I knew what the result of the test was going to be. Yet in no way was I prepared for the words that were to come out of the nurse's mouth. In no way could I have predicted how those words would change my life. Then, like a car accident from which the survivor demarcates time by referring to events as having happened before or after the accident, the words were spoken; my sentence had been read. A wall was built between the life that I had lived up until then and the life that I would lead from then on. Things would be totally different. I had been exposed to HIV.

I've always had a good idea of when and by whom I was infected. I'm not sure, though, if it was Paul, who I met in Singapore, or his ex-lover Tone, who I stayed with in Sydney, or both. I guess it really doesn't matter.

For a year after I graduated from college, I lived in London with a lover I had met in Boston. We were both enjoying living abroad and working at various jobs. I tended bar at a huge gay disco, but unlike bartenders in the U.S., I didn't make a lot of money because tipping is not customary in England and my wage was only about $3 per hour. I did, though, as all the bartenders did, steal money. In fact, I stole enough money to buy an around-the-world airline ticket and return to the U.S. "the long way" after my lover and I decided to end our relationship and leave London.

In Singapore, I met Paul at the airport. He was a few years older than me and traveling from Australia towards Europe. It was interesting and wonderful to be with someone a little older and more experienced. We spent a few days together, and when I left, he gave me a present to bring to his ex-lover, Tone, who was still living in Sydney. Tone was also a little older, and even though he had a new lover, he asked me to share his bed on a couple of different nights. After I left Sydney, I was very ill for several days with flu-like symptoms, which I would years later learn was a telltale sign that my body had been infected with HIV.

Neither Paul nor Tone nor any of the other men I was sexual with on my trip mentioned AIDS. Maybe it was still so early in the epidemic that people didn't know a lot about it or felt they could still deny its existence. Whatever the reason, I don't blame anyone for my being infected, nor do I blame myself. Becoming infected was just something that happened, as it has to thousands of others, and I was just going to have to deal with it.

One night, my lover Brian, who I had been with for several months, asked me about the appointment reminder card that he had seen on my desk weeks before. He had surmised from the card that I had gotten tested and now, because I hadn't mentioned anything about it, asked me to tell him about my results. I didn't know what to say to him. In fact, I don't think I said anything; I just started crying while he held me.

In the first years following my diagnosis, I experienced intense anxiety. Sometimes I felt nauseous and tired. I was paranoid about the slightest ache which might be a symptom of a larger illness which would carry me swiftly to my death. Halfway through the first decade of the epidemic, there were still lots of stories throughout the media that described AIDS as a disease that, in some cases, killed its "victims" in a matter of weeks.

During this time I always had trouble breathing. I felt like I just couldn't fill my lungs all the way up. I felt like I was suffocating or drowning. Part of me was waiting for the guillotine of AIDS to drop on me. Almost every thought was shadowed by my impending death. I was waiting for my sentence to be carried out, as it was on other gay men I read and heard about.

I was twenty-four years old when I was diagnosed, and maybe because I was so young, or maybe because I was so quiet about my infection, it was years before I knew anyone else who was HIV positive. It seemed like everyone who was infected with HIV at that time was at least ten years older than I. None of my friends were positive, and the only people I assumed were also positive were those men at the doctor's office I went to that specialized in AIDS and HIV. I had heard about support groups, but I didn't feel like they would be good for me.

It took me a long time to "come out of the closet" about being HIV positive. At first I only told a few close friends. A few years later I wrote a letter to my parents, three brothers, two sisters, and their various spouses. It seemed easier to tell them all at once in a letter than to tell each of them individually, as I had done when I told them I was gay. A letter seemed a lot less stressful and a good way to avoid a lot of crying. I wanted them all to know about my being HIV positive so that if I got sick it wouldn't be a shock to them and they would already be prepared to some extent. I also wanted their support.

Throughout the years of my infection, I have stayed healthy. I have experienced some damage to my immune system, but I haven't had any of the infections associated with AIDS. I am not currently on any medications,

although I did take AZT for three years. I wasn't sure if the drug was helping me or not, and I stopped taking it when studies came out questioning its effectiveness. Instead, I have looked towards Chinese medicine to keep my body healthy and get acupuncture every week. I also get a massage once a month, which helps me relax. I also find being touched by someone very healing.

Over the last ten years I've read a lot about psychoneuroimmunology, or the study of the mind/body connection and its role in staying healthy. I started reading this literature because traditional Western medicine wasn't coming up with ways to deal with HIV infection, and I, like many others, was looking elsewhere for treatment and hope. I found this more holistic approach to health to be more accurate than just a Western medical approach.

I definitely don't have the same amount of energy I used to, and that scares me. When I'm feeling tired, I wonder if it is because I've worked a long day, because I'm no longer in my twenties, or because of HIV. The lines are blurred and it is difficult to see whether or not HIV is affecting me. Open questions like this make me uncomfortable and leave room for worry. Sometimes I can't decide if I'm sick or if I'm healthy. This is the strange duality of HIV. On the one hand, HIV is such a big part of my life, and on the other, it is not. I may be infected with HIV, but I'm probably not experiencing any symptoms, so how do I classify myself? How do others classify me? It bugs me when people ask, "So, how are you feeling?" as if they are expecting that I'm not feeling well.

Over the years I have learned to be very open about my HIV status. In San Francisco, where I now live, it seems easy to be "out" about it because so many people are positive and so many more have been personally affected by the epidemic. Sometimes I worry about being rejected by a potential boyfriend, but that has yet to happen. When I go out on a date with someone, I try to bring up my status casually and not make such a big deal out of it, knowing from experience that if I'm calm about it they will be also. I'm sure to tell people on the first or second date because the longer I withhold the information, the harder it seems to share.

Before my diagnosis, I worked as a computer programmer. I didn't really enjoy my job but never thought about stepping out of the mold of what was expected of me. I planned on working for a few years and, when I had saved up enough money, to then begin living the way I wanted. I figured I would travel and spend lots of time taking photographs and making art. With an HIV diagnosis, though, the period of time between now and "later on in life" suddenly disappeared. I realized that there was no longer any time to waste doing things that I didn't want to do.

My diagnosis prompted me to follow my heart into an art school for a year and then to move from Boston to San Francisco to get a master's degree in cultural anthropology. Looking back now, ten years after my

diagnosis, I realize how completely my life has changed.

Being HIV positive, and the attendant constant confrontation with mortality, has changed, for example, how I perceive life and longevity. These new perceptions have deepened and made more precious my interactions and relationships with family, friends, and lovers. Having HIV inside my body has also transformed how I think about health and my physical vulnerability. There was a time when I thought doctors were gods who could fix anything that was wrong. Now I realize how limited and fallible Western medicine can be. Since my diagnosis, I am much more sensitive to how my body is feeling and how exercise, stress, sleep, and different foods affect me.

Because of HIV, I'm more inclined to stay home if I'm not feeling well. I have been learning not to push myself and instead to rest when I feel I need it. Luckily I have a job that is pretty casual and low pressure, but I'm nervous about having to hold down a full-time job after I finish school that wouldn't allow some flexibility when I'm not feeling well.

I have a strong desire to connect with people in meaningful ways. I not only desire it, I crave it, and find that I'm anxious when it doesn't happen. I have very little patience for "bullshit," which I define as the unimportant and petty stuff some people put so much emphasis on. People who get worked up over a broken glass or a dent in their car get on my nerves. I feel like yelling at them, "That's nothing, you could be dying right now!" I enjoy people who can talk about what's really going on with them. I guess sometimes I feel like I just don't have time to work through the layers of protection people have.

These days I find myself living life with a sense of urgency. I feel like I need to take it all in and do as much as I can, while I still can. I want to learn to speak Spanish, how to play the guitar, and all about the world's cultures, while I do lots of traveling, photography, writing, and dancing. Sometimes I feel like I'm playing a game of "Beat the Clock" in which I'm a contestant carrying an egg on a spoon across a floor littered with marbles. Sometimes I'm terrified and often paranoid that if I don't get enough sleep, if I'm too stressed out, or if I don't take enough vitamins, my body will cross the line between being healthy and being sick. That I'll drop the egg and there will be no putting it back together in the same way again.

Living with HIV, I waver back and forth between happiness and hope, depression and crisis. My mind is mainly filled with positive thoughts, but it is also susceptible to negative thoughts. It is very important to me to keep a positive outlook as I am sure this directly translates into health. It is also very important to watch my language when talking about HIV. I'm always careful to say "if I get sick," not "when I get sick," to leave the possibility open. I used to celebrate every year of my diagnosis, feeling that I had beat HIV for another year, but now, in 1995 on the tenth anniversary of my infection, I sometimes wonder if I'm just getting closer to the time when the disease overcomes me.

Actually, it's not death that I am afraid of; it's getting sick. I fear losing my abilities, my independence, my physical beauty. I fear the slow deterioration of the body that accompanies the progression of the disease. I also worry about who will take care of me and whether I will be able to support myself financially. I do have a group of friends who I'm sure I can count on. If I get sick, I know one of my biggest lessons will be learning to be comfortable with depending on others.

Being HIV positive has been, at times, an enlightening as well as a terrifying experience. HIV is like a "wild card," and I'm not sure if or when it will be played. Around me, while some HIV positive friends and acquaintances stay healthy with me, others waste away and die. It makes me wonder if I will be forced to take my turn. Each time I read that someone has AIDS, or someone has died, I can't help but feel that a ratchet just clicked one notch closer to me. I read about celebrities who are HIV positive or have died from AIDS. Then I hear about those not so famous, just friends and acquaintances who are also dealing with HIV. "Did you hear so-and-so is in the hospital" or "so-and-so died?" I wonder if HIV is spiraling closer to me.

A couple of years ago I awoke crying from a dream. The tears were happy tears. I was on a road trip with a group of friends and had stopped for gas at a roadside station. While one of my friends was filling the tank, the rest of us went into a little store to look around. I can remember reaching for a pack of gum and noticing a newspaper which had a headline stating that a cure for AIDS had been found. The news totally took me by surprise. I was shocked because I had no idea they were so close to finding a cure. I couldn't believe the good news. It was all over! There would be no more suffering or death!

Sometimes I think about this dream and wonder what life will be like for me and others after HIV, after a cure for AIDS is found. HIV is such a major part of my life, I wonder if I will be a little lost without it. I wonder, what will I have learned? Will I still be here?

Last year a good friend of mine, James, died of AIDS. I felt the loss deeply because we had a lot in common and were able to share our feelings about being infected with HIV. We were each other's support group. James had experienced many of the opportunistic illnesses associated with AIDS and used to encourage me when I was feeling scared about being HIV positive. He used to say, "Even if you followed the same course of illness that I have from my first opportunistic infection, you would still have five years to live." Somehow this was comforting.

The last time I talked to James was two weeks before he died. We spoke on the phone, as we now lived on opposite coasts, he, in Boston, while I am in San Francisco. It was the most frank and strange conversation I probably ever have had and one that I would have never imagined. We

talked about fear and what happens to us when we die. He told me what it was like to be lying in bed knowing that he was going to be dead in a few days. He was frightened, and my tear-muffled words did not console him very much.

After a while, he grew tired and there didn't seem to be anything left to say. I told him how much I loved him and how much I appreciated him. Then we said good-bye and hung up.

It wasn't as if I was saying, "Good-bye, I'll talk to you next week." I was saying, "Good-bye, I won't see or talk to you anymore because it is now time for you to die."

I almost died recently, but not due to my being HIV positive; I almost drowned. In the few moments when I wasn't sure if I was going to make it back to shore or not, I felt closer to death than I ever have, including from being HIV positive, and I was terrified.

I was on a bus tour with thirty other people to Baja, and a small group of us went swimming in the Pacific Ocean. The beach was tropical, very wild and virtually desolate except for our group. The water was colder than I expected but refreshing. I took the first opportunity to ride one of the huge waves in. The ride I got was great and I was excited to catch another one, so I swam further out to where three others looked like they were treading water and enjoying themselves.

When I got out there, though, I realized they were having trouble swimming back in and that the woman was exhausted and close to drowning. The two men she was with each had one of her arms and were trying to keep her afloat and heading in towards shore. The waves lifted us up a few feet, dropping us back each time, and at the top of one of the waves I looked up and saw how far out we were from the shore. I could feel the receding tide dragging us farther out.

I took the place of one of the guys, giving him a chance to rest. But after helping her for a minute or two, it became obvious to me that I was having trouble keeping myself afloat, physically as well as mentally, let alone trying to help someone else. I remember thinking that if I continued to try and help her, I was just going to tire myself out and I would be the one to end up at the bottom of the ocean, so I handed the woman back to the guy who was resting.

I immediately turned onto my back to float and tried to breathe through the fatigue and panic that had come over me. I was overwhelmed by the danger of the situation and was shocked by how quickly I had lost my strength. I hadn't swum regularly in years and had tired easily. The water underneath me seemed massive and powerful, and my efforts to paddle seemed to get me nowhere. Each time I looked towards the shore, it seemed no closer. I wavered between panic and somewhere shy of confidence.

On my back, feeling all that water and no ground beneath me, I was

angry that I might die this way, on the first day of my vacation. I was mad I didn't have the chance to prepare for death as I had been expecting to do. For about the last ten years I have assumed that I would have a slow death from my HIV infection and that I would have ample time to prepare, say good-bye to people, and make arrangements for all my things. I hadn't thought that I might actually die of something other than HIV.

I also thought briefly of James, Tone, Larry, Don, Uncle Jim, and Grandma and Grandpa. The thought of these friends and family members who have died came down in a soft light from the sky into my half-submerged eyes. I felt them above me, waiting, and knew if I died right then, everything would be all right. But as quickly as the image came, it disappeared, and I was back in the water, struggling. I think in that couple of seconds I decided I wanted to live and that I just couldn't die this way. I hadn't fought HIV for the last ten years to die so quickly and meaninglessly in a few seconds from drowning!

Floating allowed me to rest, and now that I had calmed down a little I was able to concentrate on swimming. After a while, my foot touched the bottom and I wedged my toe between some rocks. I was desperate to hold my place against the river of water flowing out from the beach. When the flow slowed, I swam some more and then jammed my toe into another space in the rocks, which seemed like the same space as before. I was shredding my toenail, but I think I would have shredded my whole leg to not be dragged back out again over my head.

When I finally got to shore, I was exhausted and wanted to burst into tears. Instead I fell onto the sand heaving up the water I had swallowed. A couple of people from the beach went into the water to meet the others as they were getting a little closer to shore. It seemed like a very long time before they finally were pulled onto the beach.

Looking back on the incident, I realized I lost a little innocence that day. Even though I'd felt like I had been facing mortality for the many years I have been HIV positive, I realized that I really hadn't been. Or at least not to the depth that I will when I face death in the last moments of my life. I saw that life, as well as death, is in some ways a decision, and with some strength on my side I was able to choose to stay alive. I couldn't tell you why. There wasn't anything in particular that I wanted to stay alive for. I just knew that I couldn't die yet. It was just something so very basic that it is unexplainable.

The Merle

and then it was my turn to look after
the dog. A blue merle on the barn floor,
one of those cattle herding dogs
from another ranch, come to our farm
to die. *We don't want you; this is not*
heaven, I told the dog. *Go back home.*
She slowly rolled sideways to show her pink
belly, a bright underside slit up
the center, ravaged by maggots. Pearls,
the gaudy kind, adorning the living.

Tonight the Moon

is a sliver of light on a plate—
I swear I can see the whole
plate, the dark side,
the vanished harvest.
Without sadness, I'm thinking this
is how we carry sadness—
not some millstone
shaped like the heart, not a bruise
the size of a continent, but
a residue, a heat
from others' hearts riding the air,
all the breath around us
mixed with diesel, pollen, charcoal,
haze—something makes us sneeze
all year round. Gravity
bows and shrinks us
as we age—for a while we
don't notice—but it feels good
to slip outside and let the moon
pluck at some bass note
even if we're taking out the garbage
for the thousandth time.
The sky never changes
and never ends, and this
is unthinkable. Still we try—
our feet grow light
on heavy ground, our eyes
travel up and up, and the hairs
rise on our arms until our skin is an ear
cocked towards every cricket,
every restless leaf, footsteps
along a fenceline miles away—
then we step outside
our lives, even as we step into
our bodies, all four corners,
and ride them home.

Feathers

His hands, fair-skinned and well-
fed, move among touchtone buttons
and expensive pens. They send his voice
every day like an arrow into the world of
high finance and favors,
bull's-eye, nine to five.
This morning they find the fit of
shell to gunbarrel without a false move
while his eyes travel
skyward, pinning flushed game.

This is the new part: he stoops to pluck
a few feathers from the downed
pheasant, then nests them
in his hunting bag like game itself—
the elegant tail spears
and almond down etched with fine ovals,
etched in the sure strokes
of a calligrapher sitting by
traveling water, surrounded by birds
who pause to dip their bills
and then lift away in a
single sheet, smooth wing singing on air.

The Governor sees him kneeling, hands
full of feathers, and is too amazed
even to guffaw. But the eyes say
George, what the hell are you doing?
He looks up, thinking to say,
They're for a friend who asked for them,
but the Governor's camouflage cap
has sprouted branches full of fearless
singing birds. And his own eyes
have alighted on a mountaintop softened
by mist, farther east than he has ever been.
A stream lulls itself over the patient stones

as he dips a feather again and again into
rare black ink. He answers, *The slow*
poem I didn't know I was writing
is warming me up. I want to
hold my hands here a while longer.

BARBARA PECK

The Thief

YOU MAY NOT BELIEVE THIS, but the week Tommy Bolt turned twelve he found a monkey in the forest. This was not the monkey that Mary Piola, J.P.'s wife, often searched for when she was drunk. This monkey was about a foot high sitting down, brown all over, tan hands and feet, and had the wrinkled face and bright eyes of a happy old man full of harmless tricks. Beneath its neat fur its skin was sky blue.

Tommy Bolt came down off Poacher's Hill carrying his air rifle with the monkey sitting calmly on his shoulder. They crossed the log over Shrimp Creek—which was full of crawdads, not shrimp—the monkey clutching both perfect tiny hands in Tommy's blond hair, came through the big pasture, and entered the town from the east. Crazy Joey Marks, who wasn't exceptionally crazy, was the first to see them. He ran away screaming Tommy Bolt was being killed by a bear.

It was common knowledge that of all the people in Greenfield, Tommy had the best way with animals, although he was a country boy and wasn't sentimental. He had the ancient gift of attraction with one significant difference. His magnetism, universal and inexplicable, wasn't coupled as it is in others with an equal portion of stupidity. Tommy was smart and could apparently master anything, and everybody, men, women, girls, boys, loved him truly, without jealousy.

All those along Ferry Street who understood Crazy Joey ran out carrying mops, brooms, dolls, bats, and other weapons. Mr. Sayre, the lawyer, ran holding his aluminum putter over his head.

Tommy strolled into the gathering casually, saying hi to each by name. The monkey ignored everything, preening Tommy's thick blond hair with the immaculate intensity of someone who has lost a memento beyond price.

Although the cluster was immediate and amazed, it was somehow not incredible that Tommy Bolt should walk into town with a monkey on his shoulder. The adults, already familiar with monkeys, didn't push too close. They shook their heads and smiled, struck dumb with the words, "That Tommy, that Tommy."

The children crowded. "Is it real? Can I touch it? Does it bite?"

"Now, don't go scaring him," Tommy said. "Let him get introduced." Tommy and the monkey turned onto New York Avenue in the direction home. Mrs. Bedell and her daughter came out of their bakery shop and put their floured hands on their fat hips.

The children ran along in front, besides, behind, and the adults stopped in place, strangely satisfied. Johnny Gore and Whip Rhinehart, classmates of Tommy's and the town's apprentice moral police, dragged Crazy Joey into the alley behind the Half Moon Bar, both of them repeating, "Ya dumbshit, ya fuckin mo-ron," over and over while they beat into Joey that week's second helping of common sense.

Tommy went up the side steps to the veranda that ran all the way around the three-story Bolt house. He stopped and undid the five quail hanging from his belt. His mother's shadow form appeared behind the screen door. Her voice floated out on its deep accent, "And where did you come by this, Thomas?"

The children shouted helpfully, "It's a monkey! A monkey! Monkey!"

"Out of the landmark oak," Tommy said, "on the hill. I could tell it wasn't no cat—"

"Thomas. "

"A cat before I even . . . got up close and I just sat down until he come down and he did, all right. He did." Tommy was as amazed at his gift as anybody.

"He's lovely. I wonder who he belongs to?"

"Until we find out, himself, I just guess," Tommy said.

"Who!" The children screamed and danced. "Nah! Finders keepers!"

Mrs. Bolt came out and everyone went quiet. The monkey watched her. She slowly put out her open palm. The monkey reached up and held her finger. She smiled. "I'll get some crackers and water," she said. "And an apple." She took the offered birds and went in.

"I'll clean those later, mom. I have to dry the skins. All right, everybody," Tommy said, "meet Mr. Winkle."

"Yaaaayyyy!" The shout echoed over the town, loud as when Greenfield beat Springfield two to one.

For a while, there in the last lovely hour of morning, the children came to stay on the Bolt porch.

The monkey clambered on Tommy's chair and pranced along the back, arms out for balance. He made faces, scratched, and jumped on Tommy's head, pretending to pull the hair out by fistfuls. Using Tommy as a rope, he let himself down hand over hand and swaggered to the bucket of water. He sniffed, drank, then proceeded to wash his hands as if he had a bar of soap.

At every familiar movement the children shrieked and clapped. "It's got fingerprints!" Karen Anderson shouted.

Cupping water in his hands, the monkey closed his eyes and splashed his face, rubbing vigorously. Without warning he dove in the bucket and, clutching himself into a ball, spun over and over. Several of the children grabbed to save him.

"Leave him be," Tommy said in the shouting.

As the children grabbed at him, the monkey leapt amazingly from the water into the rose trellis, howling when he got bit by the thorns.

"See," Tommy said, "we scared him and now he's hurt." Tommy stood up and took hold of the wet monkey. The monkey clamped his teeth on Tommy's finger and wouldn't let go. Tommy's face never changed. He made no sound. He held the back of the monkey's neck firmly, twisting his finger the way he would with a crawdad, or a crab. "He's tired," he said. "Mom? Please could you bring me that string?"

Tommy calmed the monkey and made a leash of kite string. He tied the loose end low on the chair. He forced the monkey to sit on the porch, stroked him. The monkey sat quietly and looked up at Tommy with clear eyes.

"Now, we'll leave him alone. Let him rest until he knows he's safe and welcome," Tommy said. All the children went down the steps, walking backwards out of the Bolt yard. Tommy waved and went in.

Little Mike Vincent, the new boy, escaped lunch earliest and, running all the way to the Bolt's yard, stood outside the picket fence. He held something tight in his hand.

The monkey sat quietly by the empty chair, his tiny legs drawn up, his hands resting on his knees. "Mr. Winkle, Mr. Winkle," Mike whispered. "I've got something for you."

WHEN MIKE CAME TO TOWN two weeks ago, Tommy Bolt was the first to speak to him. Tommy was four years older, far across one of childhood's unbridgeable chasms. Walking by the yard where the little boy stood by a tree, Tommy shouted for him to come along and see the black squirrel.

In the woods he showed Mike how to shoot a slingshot. When the bottle exploded after a thousand tries, Tommy slapped Mike on the back and yelled, "All right! What a shot!" And he said Mike could keep that slingshot.

Mike opened the gate and went in, climbed the stairs quietly. When he touched Mr. Winkle, the monkey was hard and cold. The string was twisted in and out of the chair over the arm and down. Bowtight. Mike looked in the monkey's lightless face. He stood and knocked on the door. Mrs. Bolt answered and Mike said, "He's dead."

She came out. Saying nothing, she put her arm around Mike's shoulders and they stood without speaking for a while. "You poor, poor little thing," she said, smoothing the hair off Mike's forehead. "Thank you, Michael Edward. I'm so sorry. It was very brave of you to tell me. Other boys might have run away."

Mike held up his fist. Opened it.

"He would have loved it, Michael. We'll put it with him."

Mike looked down, kicking rocks all the way home.

That night he lay in bed crying uncontrollably after his father shut the door and cut off the light. His father was an engineer, practical and proud of it. In the next room he was explaining.

"Of course, I did. I told him that was ridiculous. One of these idiots

strangles something, it's not his fault."

His mother said something.

"I'll tell you, these hicks are something else, aren't they?"

His mother said something.

"You know every bit as well as I do, nobody finds a monkey in a tree. What do you think this is, a jungle?"

She said a single word.

"Oh hell, the kid stole it and you know it. All these hicks think alike."

"You don't know that," she said clearly.

"I don't? Well, I know when the owner shows up there'll be hell to pay. You think a monkey's cheap? How're these hicks going to sweet talk out of that? What's the matter? Don't have an answer?"

And Mike, exhausted with tears, caught in the warm grasp of the blanket, said, "Give it back," as he slid into sleep.

Sorrento Valley

On a hillside somewhere in Sorrento Valley,
My aunts and uncles sat in canvas chairs
In the blazing sun, facing a small ash tree.

There was no wind. In the distance I could see
Some modern buildings, hovering in the air
Above the wooded hillsides of Sorrento Valley.

I followed the progress of a large bumblebee
As the minister stood, offering a prayer,
Next to the young white California ash tree.

Somewhere a singer went right on repeating
When I Grow Too Old to Dream. Yet to dream *where,*
I wondered—on a hillside in Sorrento Valley,

Halfway between the mountains and the sea?
To be invisible at last, and released from care,
Beneath a stone next to a white tree?

—As though each of us were alone, and free,
And the common ground we ultimately shared
Were on a hillside somewhere in Sorrento Valley,
In the shade of a small ash tree.

Threnody for Two Voices

—This is my complaint: that
Humiliation in the snow. I've carried it
This far, made hate so much a part of me
The past seems riddled with despair, and my life hurts,
And the words that find me curl up at the edges.
You keep asking me where, and yet I see it everywhere,
I see it here at home: in the arguments after dinner
And the tense confinement of the living room; the sudden
Ringing of the telephone; the anger that wells up in me each morning.
I feel it in my bones. This secret life
Whose language is the melancholy sound the heart makes
Beating against its cage—why can't you feel the
Emptiness I see reflected in your face, why can't you
Sense this overwhelming thing I have no name for?
The present is a dull, persistent ache, the future an impersonal expanse
In which I'm tentative and old, and my life has come to nothing.
I want to keep the emptiness away, to realize the
Sense of what it's like to be alive—instead of just existing
In a frozen atmosphere of rage, where the thoughts go
Swirling through my mind like snowflakes.

—Yes. And yet some days seemed different.
I remember the enchantment and the peaceful light
That used to settle on the yard on summer evenings.
Couldn't some of that return? My world feels broken,
And the world that you describe is one that I can't see,
In which there isn't any happiness, and where the sky became
Opaque and lost its tenderness, and what had seemed like
Poetry became two separate monologues, imprisoning each of us in a name.
Why can't the truth be like a dream from which two people can wake up
and kiss?
Why can't our separate lives share *this* illusion:
Rounded by contentment and well-being, infinite and free
And yet at peace within the boundaries of our life
Together, in a language that contains us like a shell?
I don't know—perhaps there isn't any peace

And everything I say is futile. Maybe we're alone
And what you say is merely confirmation, further proof
That all that lies between the poles of solitude and death
Is the rhetoric of loss, of feeling cheated by a world
That whispered quietly of love and left us with this incoherent
Thing that love has brought us to despise.

—The truth is smaller. What you mean by love
Isn't anything I recognize. You mean a style of contemplation,
Or a monument encapsulating everything you cling to
Like a first certainty—things which to me are merely
Emblems of obscurity and death: the hurt bewilderment;
Your maddening inability to see; the breathless concentration
And these rambling explanations filled with a grandiose
Self-pity and a sadness on the scale of the universe.
What's missing is the dailiness, the commonplace
Engagements that could make this formal universe a home.
I had the thought that what was called a "normal" life
Was really a form of cruelty, and that the people who could stand it lived
in hell.
One time I even thought you might agree with me,
And come to me in my head, and start to understand me.
It doesn't matter now. What matters are these syllables
That shape the endless argument in which we live.
Is this the peace you bring me? I hover between two minds
As in an endless space, I feel my body drift through
All-consuming layers of anxiety, still harboring a wish
That you might cling to me, and then let me go.

—I know that I can bring you nothing but my own
Uneasy mix of insight and illusion, and a voice that
Beckons like a distant singing in the trees, and no delight.
I think that what might free you is the effortless
Forbearance which I haven't the capacity to give. To
Rest in peace, inspired by the simple breath of happiness;
To remain indifferent to the frame of one's existence—
These aren't compelling ways to live. Life has to hold the consciousness
of death,

Or it isn't life, but something featureless. This
Thing you call your soul is just the music of a solitary quest
Inexorably approaching, through layers of frustrated magic,
The dead core. It sings more clearly in the air, more
Urgently in the darkness, floating through the bare trees,
Coursing with the thrill of anger through the veins . . .
My song is simpler: disappointment, and the pain of isolation,
And the hope that something in its underlying tenderness
Might still appease you, might approach you in a calm and
Restless voice that sings more sweetly as the summer wanes;
And still more silently in autumn, as the grave opens
And the earth makes ready to receive its guest.

—And sets me free. For did you think that all the
Force of my conviction, all the strength of my prolonged dissatisfaction,
Might amount to nothing? That what started as a way of
Fighting back the emptiness I felt encroaching on my heart
Might be simply in vain? I can't go back to that romantic
Wilderness again, in which my passions felt like questions
And my dreams were private motions in a universe of one.
This impasse may be lasting. It may ultimately heal.
What matters is that something in my soul began to breathe
As I began to see your words as merely part of my experience,
And to feel that almost none of what they said to me was true.
What freedom means to me is not depending on the world,
Or on you, or on some fantasy to tell me how to live. It's
Not enough to mirror my despair, and give it back to me.
I want to see myself as what I am, and look at you the way you are.
Is that a form of hatred? Or an intricate form of care
That lets another person be? Or a form of self-deception
Leaving both of us alone, and with our disparate lives
Uneasily together at the end, within a blank and
Intimate expanse? Maybe now you see.

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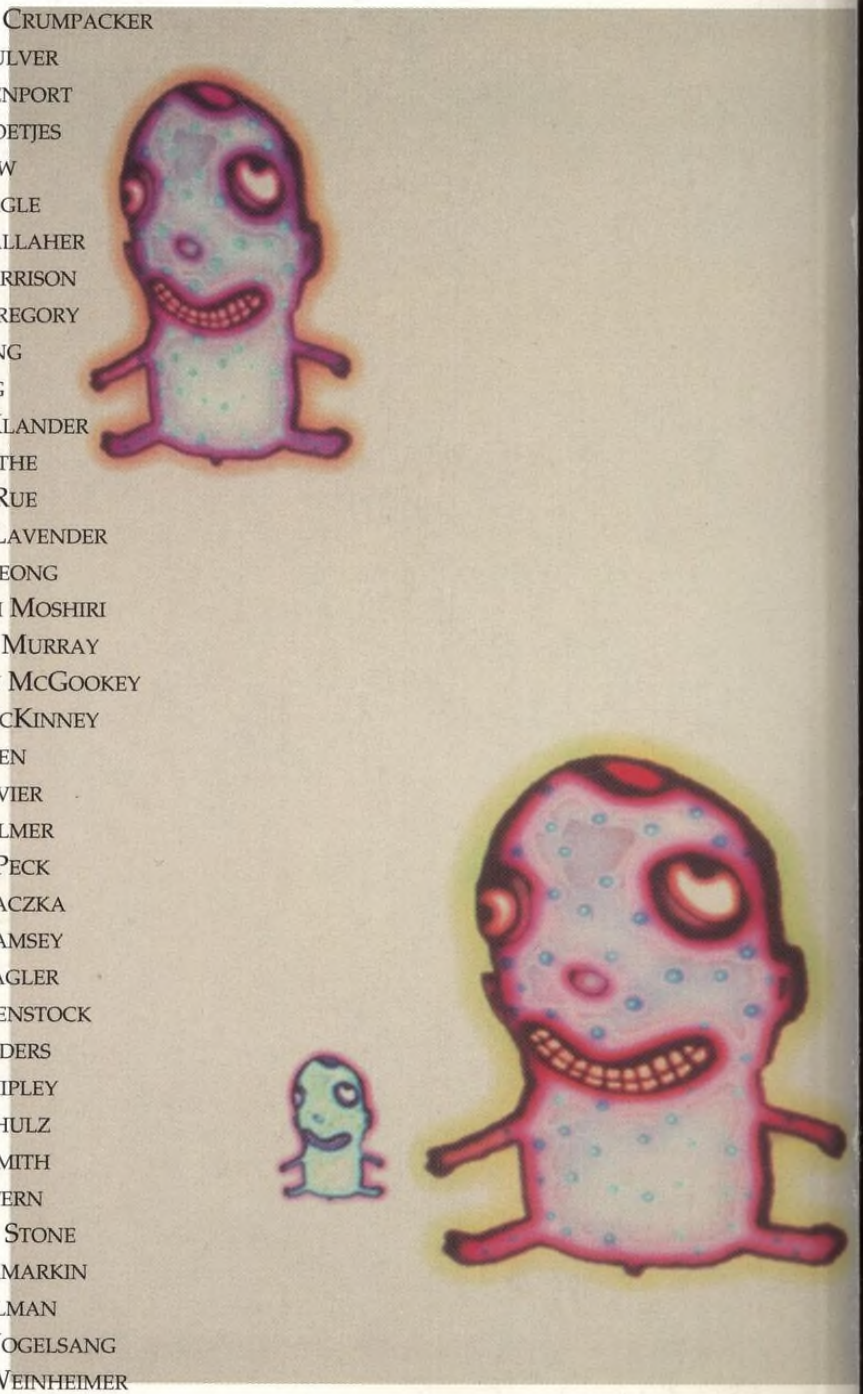

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