Gulf Coast

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0 74470 87467 6

VOLUME XI, NUMBER 1
WINTER 1999

$7.00

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Volume XI, Number One
Winter 1999

Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts
is funded largely by Inprint, Inc.,
National Endowment for the Arts,
the City of Houston and the Texas Commission for the Arts through
the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County,
and the University of Houston English Department.

Our thanks to the following people and organizations for their support and assistance: Faith Venverloh and the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston; Lynn Dale and the Department of English at the University of Houston; Glenys Wolff; Rich Levy and Marilyn Jones of Inprint, Inc.; Charlotte Hall Banham; Elizabeth H. Carrell; Cynthia Fowler; Stephanie and Edgar Larsen; Angela and Howard Moench; Brazos Bookstore

Gulf Coast is published twice yearly:
Winter (December) and Summer (June) issues.
Queries and manuscripts should be sent to *Gulf Coast*, Department of English, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-3012.
Please specify fiction, poetry, or nonfiction on the outside of your envelope.
All queries and submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope if they are to be returned. Response time is two to six months.

Gulf Coast does not read unsolicited work between June 1 and Aug 15.

A two-year subscription is $22.00. A one-year subscription is $12.00. Back issues are $5.00. Barthelme Memorial issue is $12.00. *Gulf Coast* is listed in the American Humanities Index. The magazine is distributed in North America by Ingram Periodicals Inc., 20447 E. Business Pkwy, Walnut CA , 615/793-5522 and by B. DeBoer, Inc., Nutley, NJ, 201/667-9300.

ISSN: 0896-2251
ISBN: 0-9628811-5-5

FICTION

POETRY

NONFICTION

ART

Cover art by
Al Souza
American Friend
1997
Puzzle Parts and Glue on Wood, 72" X 84"
Courtesy the Artist and Moody Gallery, Houston, Texas

CORRECTION: Julia Fish's "Transom" featured in the Summer 1998 issue was mistakenly inverted in the production process. Gulf Coast *apologizes for the error.*

The Fabula Rasa

Now that I do everything with two hands,
I can't do two things at once. I can't, thanks
to this Buddhist means of keeping
both sides of the brain attached

to all I do. Mindfulness is the art
of honing in on, almost archiving,
the particulars on loan.
"Every object rightly seen unlocks
a new faculty of the Soul." Just so.

Take one of the ladybugs
hitting the screen, take five
of that piano rolling up and down the roof
all night that morning
showed to be an icy branch. The image sticks:
that story that rock

star told years ago: a violent drunk, he'd unraveled,
and his friends, practiced in damage
and beast management, tied him with recording tape
to the bed face down to keep
his airway clear.

In point of fact, he was swaddled more than tied,
in a husk of outtakes, a rind made of miles of
his abrasive wasted voice, the night's sessions –
Slipping & Sliding, Rip It Up – his fetters.

Tape is so skinny you wouldn't think
it could be strong. But he was like that too.
He was one of the more, today we'd say "commodified"
people alive. A star. He basically shed light.

He was a packing problem, a more or less
lavish form of dying who couldn't break
the shiny confines of his song.

Listen, this merchandise is weeping.
Exchange it, it
has a crack, a tear –

He came to
unable to figure why he couldn't move.
They cut him out as from an auto wreck
and though he couldn't remember, he did remember
on some limbic level, being humiliated, betrayed.
His cool veneer nerved into a pill or nap,

a dingy look of being
used. Grainy, stripped of brightness
and ovation. My god, it's
covered with goo.

In those days, engineers used razor blades
to edit tape. It flew all over
the studio. I remember the scent,
an electronic fragrance of transformers unknown
until this century. I picked a snippet later
from the lining of my coat
and did a young thing with it.

In homage to a nonpast tense, I kept it.
Later, in a different life, a friend spliced
the antique bit between two lengths
and ran it through a soundhead. How something

that resembles shredded monuments
can remember breath's beyond me!
How does it cling
to dimly threadbare lengths? How does it
get a grip? The tape held

an offbeat rattle, a static
choke more than a note, the phlegm of
ancient intimacies unspeakable, the emulsion
worn away or wiped, I guess, by time, its memory "lossy"

in the latest slang. I had my taste of strange.
The gist is now
I'm into thinking
with both sides of my brain.

Try masking, two-faced, barricade, self-stick –

Skin is a transitional surface. It freezes beautifully.
He told me, now I've told. The scale changes,
it is tamer, without flesh or claws.
Are you with me? A good listener helps
everything, even bitterness, sing.

buy frosty and conductive –

Fair creature of
an hour, you can hardly have too much.

RUBÉN DEGOLLADO

Wear Some Skin

You will wear some skin. Button the nipples; seal in the blood. The eyes through which you see are your own, but the costume has been made for you. This is what you have agreed to wear.

So, put it on.

Can you breathe? Pull the nosepiece in tighter. Then, the hood of your brow will not hide your eyes. There.

Now you can see.

You will do some things. You will not use the letter that comes after H. Nor will you be referred to in the third person narrative point-of-view. But you are still there inside, aren't you? Blink your eyes.

There.

It means so much more if it is you, not some narrative voice you are "listening" to and not someone you are watching from the limited, objective, or subjective omniscient. Now that the psychic distance has been shortened, you will care what happens. You are wearing the skin, but you are still yourself. No Lorrie Moore, Jay McInerney, Obi Wan Kenobi mind-tricks will be played. You will not be made to think or repeat anything you did not intend. You will only be made to act, because motion is necessary. Let you begin.

You are on a quest. You are searching for your grail, your personal piece of the truth. Somewhere, having completed the rising action and having reached the climax, point B on Freitag's Triangle, you will find the grail. Unlike most other grails you have been asked to look for, this one actually has something to do with Jesus. The blood in *this* grail that is more like a loaf of bread than a cup of wine is *manteca*, or lard. It was used by the woman that made this *gordita*, a thick Mexican tortilla made with cornmeal and lard.

You are probably thinking, now you are not being made to think this, about the differences between blood and lard. No, you should not *think*. You should *juxtapose* the Blood of the Son of the Living God with animal fat sold in one-gallon buckets at El Globo Supermarket over there on South Tenth next to Blockbuster's. *Tú sabes*.

Forget that.

Instead, you will have something like an epiphany. Something someone says or does will reveal some truth to you. What you will experience will be more modern, more in keeping with what is publishable. Because this is the way it is. Experience, like violence in the modern [REPETITIVE WORD] world, is forced on you. You may not want it, but it will be there. In literature, truth is something that no one consciously searches for anymore. So, try to forget the grail.

You will be like Joyce's Gabriel Conroy and/or O'Connor's "the grandmother." Or, if you are tired of textbook anthology examples, read Hester Kaplan's "Would You Know It Wasn't Love," Melanie Rae Thon's "Xmas, Jamaica Plain," or Stuart Dybeck's "We Didn't." All can be found in *major* [emphasis yours] award anthologies, which short fiction writers read to learn how to be published by the only literary magazines that seem to matter.

Back to the *gordita*. Flannery O'Connor would tell you it should first be substance and not a symbol of man's preference for evidence of divinity over faith [TOO WORDY]. Words like *gordita* and *manteca* will be used to describe it, because they are ethnic/multicultural, Chicano, Latino and so necessary to the tone. They must be *italicized* because bilingual authors are taught to do this, and furthermore, these writers want you to know these foreign words require your undivided attention and pronunciation. The Spanish words will help you *lean* [italics unnecessary] into this Mexican setting as you have entered the indigenous skin. Please, appreciate the connotative imagery without using a mirror, or your thoughts, or even description.

Now.

The woman that made the *gordita* is empty inside the skin, and if you looked at the side of her you would see nothing. Thus far, she is one-dimensional, and there is nothing inside of her because there is simply not yet enough information to stuff her with [AWKWARD]. Her only significance so far lies in the fact [OMIT NEEDLESS WORDS; SEE *STRUNK AND WHITE*, RULE #17, PS. 23-24] she acted – grilled the *gordita* that may or may not change everything. Before you wore the skin, she made the corn cake in her kitchen.

She made it for her husband who eats them for lunch, nearly put it into a sandwich bag and almost did not see the burns the *comál* had made. She is rapidly filling her skin now, becoming round at the laterals, and you are not able to enter her mostly hollow skin. When you see her, you will understand how round she is, and how there is no room for you. You will not be able to enter her intelligence, know what she thought as she looked down at the *gordita* and saw the image that confirmed what she had always believed. You will only see her act, glean all of her characterization this way. Note Ernest Hemingway and/or Cormac McCarthy for examples. Or, if you are tired of reading, drive to your nearest video store and rent *Slingblade*, directed by Billy Bob Thornton, Southern Gothic Revivalist. Unh-huh.

Of course, to note these examples, you would have to remove your skin, and this is something you should not do until you finish your story. Otherwise, you would violate Edgar Allen Poe's criterion that one must complete a story in one sitting. If you walk away now, you risk disrupting Poe's "unity of effect" or waking up from what John Gardner called the "fictional dream."

. . . . burns the *comál* had made. Looking down at the *gordita*, [AVOID INTRODUCTORY INFINTE-VERB PHRASES] she picked it up gingerly. At this point, your eyes are glossing over the italics and they have lost their importance so they will no longer be used. These poor, hunched laborero Spanish words will get to stand up straight just like their English

counterparts. They deserve that. Now, note the ambiguity of the word "gordita," which is either a Mexican cornmeal patty made with lard and very fattening, or, a short, Mexican woman that is very fat. Also note the ambiguity of "gingerly," which means gently and like bread herself, thus linking the gordita to the woman. Like poetry, good short fiction uses compression, packing so much meaning into as few words as possible.

In the burns was a face and the woman calmly said, "Dios mío." My God, she said without wonder, as she looked at the miniature version of the Shroud of Turin except on a sort of tortilla.

This is where you in your new skin come in. You have heard of this potential miracle from the Five Alive news at ten o'clock, which is running a weekly story on different aspects of religious phenomena: weeping Marys, bleeding icons, Holy Children like El Niño Fidencio, Santo Niño de Atocha and Holy Tortillas.

Now, a sign that the end is near, that Mary and Jesus are unhappy with humans, has reached the Río Grande Valley in Hidalgo, Texas, where your borrowed grandmother lives just two blocks away. You will go there and see for yourself. Maybe, you are searching for your piece of the truth. However, as it has been established, this is outmoded, antiquated as a literary theme. The search for truth is no longer important. Perhaps, you will go for yourself because you want to explore your Mexicanness in this skin, but this is another worn-out theme. Or, you go because you took a picture of and painted the appearance of La Virgen on the live oak tree in Brownsville, Texas, (*Bark Virgin*, 1998. Acrylic on Masonite. 68 x 80 inches.) and this is the next work in your *Border Relics* series. The reason for your interest is irrelevant.

In your new skin, at your new grandma's, she asks if you are hungry. Would you like some tamales? Wonder Roast chicken? Pan dulce? Sausage and cheese from Christmas? Something to drink? Quieres Coca? Café? Water?

You say nothing, and your grandmother takes this as a refusal, even looks a little hurt because of it, not knowing that you cannot respond. Your grandmother explains that the woman has opened her home to the public, and it has become sort of a shrine, but without the archbishop's or the Vatican's approval. If this story were written by Julia Alvarez, it may have been a commentary on the "radical Catholicism" she identifies herself with [AVOID PREPOSITION AT THE ENDS OF SENTENCES]. She may have even made it an indictment of conservative Catholic theology. But, you must not presume; you must not let politics or theology infect your story. *Tell* the story. *Show* the details.

But, it is still a holy place. So they say. Your grandmother, who makes great chicken and rice, who has a shelf that is about to fall with the weight of all of the portraits of her family, is also a hellfire-and-brimstone-pass-the-collection-plate Baptist. She says it is just a tortilla and the Católicos are always worshipping things they can grab, and trying to burn their houses down with all the candles. And she will talk some more about how wrong the Church is, how El Papa is the False Prophet and how they are – but you should not listen, because it is not important to your story. She will tell you where the house is, telling you not to turn your back on the dog in

the front yard, even though he looks like he won't bite.

"Because he will. Porque ese perro, he looks at you real sad, like nobody loves him. Y he don't bark. He just bites you in the nalgas if – " But you should move on and ignore the rest if you recognize this is foreshadowing. She tells you it is two blocks down next to the water tower, enclosed by a chain link, barbed wire fence. There is no symbolism in the previous sentence.

The old wooden house. Cracked paint. No grass, and nothing but dry ground. Concrete walkway. Please observe the conveyance of meaning through form. So poor, so inconsequential, the house does not deserve a complete sentence.

You walk up to the screen door, facing the dog whose ears are begging to be scratched, and knock. A woman answers. She has these slick, massive arms like tanned Vienna sausages, her sweat so greasy you could possibly think she uses her own fat from her own pores to make the gorditas. Complicate the symbolism. If the lard, which has been paralleled with the Blood, flows from her, then who has created who? [WHOM?] And look at those arms! It looks like *some*thing inside of her is fighting to burst free from her brown skin, her lavender muumuu. Thematically, this skin that barely contains her will be ambiguously important later [TOO MANY MODIFIERS].

"Come in. Come in." For tone, she could say, "Pásale. Pásale," which you may not understand if you do not understand in your new skin, because it is only skin after all.

So, it will be done this way.

Pásale, pásale, the woman said, without quotation marks, trying to sound experimental and multicultural.

You walked past her and nodded, Thank you, for inviting you in.

Note the clumsy translation through context clues. This is something bilingual authors must do to be understood while remaining true to their cultural vision. They must also balance this vision with the desire to be chosen by editors who do not understand the language.

Also notice the tense shift from present to past. The former, as mastered by Raymond Carver, gives fiction the graininess of a documentary or slasher film. The latter is preferred by more conventional writers writing more traditional stories. By not distinguishing important details from unimportant ones, writers like Carver force the reader into the creation of meaning. With beginning writers, tense-shifting is often a problem. With masters of the short form, it is accepted if it is done well and intentionally.

There was a small line in front of the relic. Old women and men, heads bowed in supplication, with offerings and milagros in their hands, shuffled forward to get their look at the gordita. And as they walked away, you searched their faces and found what could be ecstasy on some, pale dissatisfaction on others, sweat on all. Is it hot in here, or is it just you?

This is an allusion/echo/theft of William Butler Yeats's "The Magi," in which he comments on the failure of Christianity. Hopefully, it will draw a parallel to the gordita, which like the crucified-Christ in Yeats's poem, not of the Gospels, will disappoint. It has also got something to do with John Donne's line from "Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness," in which he

writes that "Adam's sweat" covers his face though his soul embraces "the last Adam's blood."

Once again, sweat and blood.

These are motifs.

As you stand in line, you hear the whispered prayers, the petitions to the gordita to find a job for Ignacio who is willing to work and provide for his family. Here these muttered prayers could become more detailed. You could learn about these people: their hopes, dreams, and fears. It could be an homage to/rip-off of Sandra Cisneros and her story, "Little Miracles, Kept Promises." But you will not hear them because you would probably undermine them. It is unnecessary.

Instead, you look at what has been left on the sewing machine that is now an altar. A stuffed panda bear with the picture of a puffy-faced baby in its arms. Sick puffy, not cute puffy. An *empty* bottle of Oso Negro vodka and a promise note not to drink if Chano wins the lottery, and a promise to "slow it down" if Chano wins the Pick Three. There are also milagros, little gold-plated trinkets in the forms of arms and legs and hearts. They are next to portraits of the afflicted, the ones who are asking to have/thanking to have had these parts of their bodies healed. Then you see the promesa. It is a six-inch braid of black hair. The woman who cut if off of her head wrote, "Thank you for help me pass the math of the TASP so I can go to South Texas Comunity Colege." Syntax and spelling errors are intentional and probably unwarranted.

You step forward because you must complete your story. You may not be thinking of Aristotelian drama, or even believe in its dictates, but you probably know there is a Major Dramatic Question or Questions somewhere. You just have to find it or them.

This is the most crucial point of any story. That is, if you still adhere to the notion that narratives follow the pyramid form when most literary theorists will tell you the Point A to B to C formula is no longer valid.

For the sake of *this* narrative, you are now at Point B on Freitag's Triangle, or on the peak of Fichtean's curve. This is the time when your questions will be answered. Or they will not. If one is writing a didactic piece of "literature," which is so unpublishable, your climax and denouement will have been planned from the very beginning. In this sort of story, every action/reaction must lead to the expected end, Poe's Single Effect. Furthermore, you would be told what to believe. For example:

He walked up to the glass case. The tortilla was smaller than he had expected it. But the image was of a bearded man with long hair, like the pictures of Jesus he had seen as a child. He leaned forward, and as he got closer, the image became cracked and rough. It was like a painting. The further away, the more his eyes could make sense of it. Close up, it meant nothing.

Or:

He walked up to the glass case. The gordita was smaller than he had expected it. But the image was of a bearded man with long hair burned into the gordita, like the pictures of Jesus he had seen as a child. He leaned forward, and as he got closer, the image of Jesus surprised him. On the Savior's face was a human expression of sorrow and forgiveness, which he

could not explain, and which stayed with him long after he left the house.

But these are not for you.

As was mentioned, you will not be told to believe, or disbelieve. In postmodern fiction, where you find yourself now, characters act, and readers are left to make meaning (if there is any to be made) either through form or from action.

You walk up to the glass case and the gordita is just as you see it through your adopted skin. It is round and brown. In the middle is a shaggy, bearded man's face. You look at it for a second and walk away. Please, appreciate the attempt at minimalism.

As you walk past the line, you again see the faces of the people. They may be reverent, yet optimistic. You cannot explain it. Action is all that is necessary. To impose an opinion is to risk subjectivity.

Walking past the line, [AGAIN, AVOID INTRODUCTORY INFINITE-VERB PHRASES] you think you hear the gordita-maker old lady say, "No eres tu piel." You do not know if she is really speaking, or if you have experienced a central-intelligence switch, (which is usually a mistake in short fiction), and you have somehow entered her consciousness.

"Tú. ¿Viste la cara de Jesucristo?" She has expressed that you are not your skin, and has asked if you saw the face of Jesus Christ. She could be stating that you, as the reader, bring baggage and meaning to any narrative disguise you don, and therefore, any attempt to "become" your narrator is futile. She could also be implying that what makes you important is not your borrowed bag of flesh, but the eternal human soul within, that aforementioned "*some*thing" beneath her skin. She doesn't specify which meaning or which skin. As for the question, you cannot answer if you have seen Jesus or not. The only certainty you receive from the viejita is that her yellow, gold-capped smile tells you *she* has always seen His face in everything, and the gordita is not more of a miracle, a milagro than the dog's caca you may step in if you are not careful. Or she could be flirting with you. And those arms! They leave you with something completely unexpected.

You push the screen door open, and your skin probably itches like polyester in the heat. You stay on the concrete path to avoid the caca-slash-miracle that bakes on the cracked earth. You walk past the dog, and do nothing when he bites your bologna nalgas because you realize how constraining your skin is.

Or maybe not.

After all, these are mostly suggestions.

MARK DOTY

Hesperides Street

I bought a can of coffee
– *por el gusto Latino* –
roasted on Hesperides Street,

and saw as soon as I read the label
an unlikely intersection: earthly sidewalks
cracked and unrolling beside the trees

of paradise, golden sun-apples
hung above the pitted asphalt
of a wonky part of town.

Sheer daydreaming,
there in the aisle
of Fausto's Food Palace

until I realized the heaven-street
I dreamed was, only slightly transposed,
the avenue of our December rental.

Even the taxis are pink,
and the rain relaxed; it has forever to fall,
punctuated, occasionally, by roosters

(who think it's dawn because it's cloudy)
and the squawk of what?
Two ibis walk wet asphalt.

Exile's a form of loss
one chooses, or could choose:
a cottage in a neighborhood

where you're neither welcome
or not, simply not at home.
Delicious unfamiliarity: guayabera

falling in the yard,
the extended syllabics
of fabulous names: poisonwood,

poinciana, the far-fetched
gumbo-limbo. Sapodilla.
Strange dignity of the traveler's tree.

Sunday morning rush at the Cuban bakery,
hundred-pound flour sacks stacked
in the shop window perpetually diminishing

and replenished, white dust
also perpetually descending
like a blessing. Though we prefer

next door, the San Lazaro,
which serves the hottest *cafe con leche*
in big white cups of – regretfully –

styrofoam. Unlikely intersection:
on my way home from Fausto's,
walking, half-intent on the notion

of heaven, here is Kingdom Hall,
stuccoed that soft ubiquitous pink,
and here the laundromat-*cum*-video-

and-sandwich-shop where all day
men smoke and drink *buchos* on the benches
and configure in their talk the paradise

to which exile must always refer,
their Havana. Any kingdom's imagined,
must be, before it's inhabited, and heaven

must be dreamed as Cuba is:
is there a bakery there, or sunny interstices
among the palm-fronds, or anyone

like the diminutive cook at San Lazaro,
utterly silent under his halo of whitish hair
who brews our morning coffee,

ladling more of his marvelous sugar
than I want to see? Peculiar intersection:
hounds and pink scooters, a hog

meditating in the arena of her pen,
abandoned high heels on a creaky stoop,
herons and pelicans and big frigate birds

wheeling over a street crowded
and various and home to an ancient tree
– a live oak? – looming right beside

the Tree of Life Church of God,
and a likely candidate for the title:
roots upheaving the sidewalk,

a dozen fishline beards of Spanish moss
hung like ghost-laundry before
the plain green glass windows

of the church – which glow,
service nights, no images,
just contained fields of green

as if a great blur of leaves
itself were holy. Dear oxymoron,
Hesperides Street. Heaven to earth?

That means love the rot black
in the tree-trunk crack,
and the cornsnake – pink, what else –

fallen from soursop to sidewalk
in the ecstasy of swallowing a rat
so large it must dislocate its jaw

to admit the beloved thing. Love
the iridescent gas leaked
in a pavement puddle poxed

by easygoing rain, orange peel
and chicken bones, discarded coffee cups
sticky with milk and three sugars, delicious,

buzzed by wasps, a dozen stray cats
slipping in and out a hole in the pink bricks
at the foundation of Kingdom Hall.

Heaven is here, and horrifying.
Does that mean it isn't heaven?
Ask the snake in the swoon

of his delirium, ask the gasoline
doing the rain some glamorous damage,
or scud-clouds worrying the pier where

the homeless stack their bags
and blankets, and one black man reclines
on a sort of *recamier*, a reclaimed chaise

of a mattress, and lays out daily,
for no reason I can figure,
a row of graduated coconuts

– demonstration of bounty,
hard and green and gold?
Ask San Lazaro,

who blesses perpetually
decked in his permanent wounds,
patron of the poor, and sick,

and sweet strong coffee:
heaven on earth is a lot of trouble,
but warm, and available, free –

or the price of a winter rental.

ANTHONY DEATON AND CHRISTIAN NAGLE

An Interview with Mark Doty

GC: When you first entered into a writing life, which poets influenced you most?

MD: I think Garcia-Lorca was the first poet I read on my own, scraping together enough money to buy a copy of the *Selected Poems* from what would now be called an alternative bookstore called The Hungry Eye. This was about 1968 or so; I was fifteen. I loved the drenched, dreamy atmosphere of those poems – the *Gacelas* and *Casidas*, especially – and the way they seemed to say something more than the words themselves, as if they were signposts of an interior life. I discovered Charles Simic's poems, too, and loved them for the same reasons. They were thrilling. They seemed part of some secret, interior conversation which went on somewhere beneath or inside the visible life around me. I kept a notebook of images and daydreams. My own poems were pretty awful, needless to say, dreamy evocations of the inarticulate passions and longing of adolescence. Well, they weren't even that good!

My first teacher was the poet Richard Shelton; I met him in Tucson, when I was still in high school, and he was kind enough to meet with me now and then and look at the poems I was writing and give me suggestions about what to read. We used to meet at the Poetry Center at the University of Arizona, which was an old house on the edge of the University filled with books and broadsides and photographs of poets. I'd take the bus down Speedway and walk from the stop and suddenly all the heat and light of Tucson would disappear while we'd sit in this bungalow full of books and talk about poetry. I was in heaven. Dick was a neo-surrealist, and he encouraged me to read the fashionable poets of the day – Merwin, Bly, Kinnell, Strand – as well as the Spanish surrealists I'd already started to discover on my own. Mostly what I did was to write very, very much like Richard Shelton, but he was smart and compassionate enough to just offer me encouragement. And to point towards more people I could read. So my first favorites were Lorca, Neruda, Kenneth Patchen, and Charles Simic. Blake spoke to me, too, profoundly. I was a dutiful young surrealist for a number of years; when I think now about the poems I wrote in my teens and the first part of my twenties – I say think about them because I certainly don't read them – they seem one long panoply of images of things burning, exploding, transforming: swans, stones, guitars, gardenias, you name it, everything was on fire. An image of desire and of rage, I guess, though I couldn't see that then.

In the late seventies the aesthetic currents around me began to shift, and concomitantly I developed a huge sense of dissatisfaction with the

poems I was writing, which had been becoming increasingly refined and disconnected, rhetorical performances which didn't have much to do with what I felt or experienced. A long process ensued – grad school, much reading, casting about for other possibilities. Robert Pinsky's *The Situation of Poetry* was important to me, as it was for many people, I think; Pinsky's call for a poetry of broader inclusiveness, more of a range of feeling and mode of discourse was a crucial antidote to the poetry of the decade or so that preceded that book. By the early eighties, I was becoming very interested in poets of memory, and in the possibility of a lyrical narrative which might allow both for the representation of experience and for meditation upon that experience; I was interested in the poem which could examine the stuff of memory for what meaning it might yield. That led to Lowell, of course, and to Jarrell – and to the work of a number of influential and interesting contemporaries: Phil Levine, Larry Levis, David St. John, and later David Wojahn and Lynda Hull. All were, in their own particular fashions, practitioners of a narrative art which did far more than simply retell (or retail) stories from life; the stories were placed in service of meaning, were pressurized, as it were, to lend themselves toward a particular process of discovery.

GC: Which writers are most important to you now?

MD: The old, abiding influences sustain: Keats, Whitman, Rilke, Cavafy, Hart Crane. To some degree, my last three books are conversations with poets whose work has particularly mattered to me. *My Alexandria* is a response to Cavafy, to Rilke and to Lowell, in particular; *Atlantis* is most concerned with Bishop, and in *Sweet Machine* there is a goodly amount of talking to James Merrill going on. And, increasingly, a host of my contemporaries whose work pushes boundaries, establishing its own aesthetic parameters, redefining a conventional practice of meaning-making: Bidart, Sandra McPherson, Lucie Brock-Broido, Brenda Hillman, Alice Fulton.

GC: Does this shift in influence represent any specific changes in your own work?

MD: Shift in influence is, to me, a continual phenomena. I am not much of a believer in the idea of "finding one's voice" – I think whatever my voice is it's something cobbled together at the moment, out of the particular exigencies and demands of the now, out of what I'm interested in, and out of the stream of things I'm reading. I don't think we have to worry much about continuity – there are certainly abiding concerns, gestures, manners of speaking which seem to stay with me – and are much better off if we allow ourselves discontinuities, the pleasures and instructions of influence. When I think about the places I've been as a poet, I seem to me a rather mercurial fellow, really, and that I think is a large part of what makes me who I am: taking in, trying on, assuming the costume of this stylistic or that in order to get at what I need to say at the moment. And you can't, you know, wear THAT outfit again, after everyone's already seen you in it –

style's a continuous act of self-re-invention.

GC: What American poets are you reading now (living or dead) whom you feel have been neglected? What do they have to offer us?

MD: I'll start with a famous example, and then a couple less so. Hart Crane, for all the name-value he has, remains the least read of the modernists, and to this day is often regarded as a curiosity, an interesting failure, an immensely talented also-ran. I don't think so. His is a poetry of profound engagement, of attempting to name a set of conditions of heart and spirit for which he had little precedent. Of American poets in this century's first half, he is our great craftsman, and our passionate visionary; "Voyages," for instance, is to my mind the century's great love poem. And I think his sense of style as a kind of intricate, meaning-making surface is an enormously rich influence, or should be.

Among more recent examples, there are two other gay men whose work has been of great use to me, poets who deserve a much wider audience. James L. White, who died in the early eighties, published just one full-length book, *The Salt Ecstasies*. Wonderfully passionate, haunting poems, and a good part of their accomplishment is the wedding of the rhetoric of the deep image poem with a frank and fresh openness about sexuality. It has been enormously difficult for gay poets to write about sexuality without slipping into either a rhetoric of liberation, a boring focus on the physical act itself, or a coy vocabulary of figurative speech. White's poems are burning, fierce evocations of a gay man's life with its attendant energies, shame and glory. Herbert Morris, who is still very much alive, has published three major books, all with Harper & Row, and all are out of print. He is a master practitioner of the meditative narrative, an archeologist and magician of memory, and he writes the best contemporary blank verse of anyone I know. It is difficult to figure why he's under-read; in part because he doesn't travel and give readings, in part because the poems are demanding, I guess. His chief stylistic influence is probably Henry James; like his mentor, he is an architect of vast, intricately qualified, orchestral sentences.

GC: Do you feel contemporary poets need, continually, to reclaim those poets who are on the verge of being forgotten? To maintain a watchful eye on the past?

MD: Absolutely – who else will do so? Perhaps particularly because the uses to which literary critics put poetry, in service of idea or theory, is often not the uses which poets make of the tradition. We cannot leave its conservation to canon makers and specialists in the construction of literary history; it's up to us to treasure – and to promote – that human store which speaks to us across time.

GC: There is an almost elegiac quality to this.

MD: Yes and no. Yes in that working to keep poets we love from slipping

into invisibility is an act of commemoration, a reminding of readers about who's traveled among us. No in that the life of the work is itself continuing; I don't need to make James L. White's poems live again, I just need to put them into your hands and say, "Look at this."

GC: We would like for you to speak about the elegiac quality of your own work. But first, do you see the psychological and/or social function of the elegy today as being significantly changed from, say, the age of Milton, or Hardy?

MD: The elegy has always been a dual form, of commemoration and consolation. The commemoration part has to do with inscribing the particular characteristics of who or what has been lost, attempting to make some kind of stay against time. The consolation part is, of course, that crucial act of meaning-making which attempts to suggest a way in which loss might be bearable.

I think of "Lycidas" as the model for the English elegy, and it's interesting to note how little of the character of the drowned young man is therein portrayed. Milton doesn't need to worry much about recuperating this loss, as the poet is convinced of his strategy of consolation, which is a shared Christian metaphysic. He can say, very confidently, "Lycidas is not dead" because he's certain of the resurrection. I don't think a twentieth century poet can say that Lycidas is not dead; our historical circumstances will not permit it. The realities of this century conspire to erode our sense of a God who takes a personal interest in us, and even if you believe that life goes on after death, such a belief is personal, the outcome of a private vision, and not the kind of shared community of faith which Milton could count on. Since death is both real and inscrutable to us, the modern or contemporary elegy has to do more work of conservation, as it were, to underscore the particularity of the one who's disappeared. And, while it cannot abandon the attempt at meaning-making, the fact is that any confident argument against the fact of death will not convince us. We know better. So the elegy has become a set of failed negotiations with the fact of mortality – failed, of course, because mortality wins, but the poems might be no less noble for that.

GC: Ruined architectural spaces, or those on the verge of ruin, appear throughout your work. I'm thinking of poems like "Demolition," "The Pink Palace," and references to your dilapidated former residences in *Heaven's Coast*. These spaces are very much a part of a larger elegiac pattern in your work and seem to expand the boundaries of what is possible in elegy.

MD: Thank you! I love broken things, things scarred by use, I guess in part because they demonstrate the evidence of time. A lot of my growing up went on in western and southern suburban places – Arizona, Florida, Southern California –and I was very aware of the newness of the world I lived in, of an historical soil that seemed about a quarter of an inch deep, at least for displaced white people like my family. I loved, as a kid, books of

mythology, and stories of archaeology and discovery. A particular lifelong attraction began there, perhaps.

And of course those ruins have accumulated different metaphoric resonances along the way. The first is simply the way that as any of us move on through time, the past becomes a ruin, an incomplete interior architecture made of all that we've lost. For me, this process has been ferociously accelerated by the epidemic. There's a brownstone apartment building on Beacon Street in Boston where I used to live in the early eighties – when it was already a bit of a ruin!– and now it's a ruin in another way, in that of all the men who lived there then, as far as I know I'm the only one still alive. That is not a feeling one expects to have at 45, not in peacetime. When I walk on my street in Provincetown, I'm aware of who my neighbors are, but also of the dead who occupied these same houses over the last eight years: a town of ghosts, an archaeology under the surface. And finally, of course, we are somewhere late in the life of an empire, of many empires, and the world is shifting and reconstituting itself, and much is in ruins around us.

GC: In the preface to Paul Monette's *Love Alone*, he states "But I would rather have this volume filed under AIDS than under Poetry. . . ." Could you make such a claim for your own poems?

MD: No. I want very much to speak to people whose experience overlaps with mine specifically, but I also want to insist that everyone's experience overlaps with mine – not losses to AIDS, necessarily, but the fact that to be human is to be in the position of losing what you love; that is love's contract. I want to write poems which address the conditions in which men like myself live, but I have no desire to stop there. Paul was speaking as an activist, in response to a crisis. He once wrote to me, after I'd reviewed his poems and found the angry ones wanting, and said "You're probably right; these angry poems won't last the night." He didn't particularly care if they did; that wasn't the point. For me, it is very much the point; I would like to build poems of a certain sturdiness, capable of speaking to a range of readers.

GC: Your earlier work shows the significant influence of Lowell, Merrill, and Bishop, among others. Your most recent book, while less determined in this way, retains a formal conscience. The "new formalists" of the last decade failed to impress most critics. Do you think there is growing disinterest in formal rigor these days, especially among newer, younger American poets? Would you talk in particular about this movement's influence on your own poetry?

MD: I've been feeling heartened by young poets' attitude toward form lately; it seems to me that there is more of a perception out there that ALL poems are formal things, and that there is no necessary value in fulfilling the requirements of, say, the pantoum. What's interesting is finding the structural principles which will allow an impulse to come to its full fruition. The result might indeed BE a pantoum, or it might be one of a thousand

other things we do and don't have names for; it might be an instance of that wonderful term of Alice Fulton's, "fractal verse." I suspect that new formalism, like language poetry, is ultimately best seen as a corrective influence, an uprising which may not in itself lead to a lot of great poetry, but which goads poetic practice out of sleepy complacency.

I said earlier that my last book is a conversation with James Merrill, and while it's true that he is a presiding presence there –the book's Prospero – there are lots of other sprites and faeries on the stage as well. I'm increasingly interested in the incoherent, in those intractable perceptions or facts which pull resolved forms out of shape. Much of the art I respond to makes a shape, invents a structure, then breaks that structure apart or allows it to dissolve. This is a way of avoiding a kind of false sense of resolution and completeness, the sort of form which probably felt truer to experience in the past and now seems somehow incommensurate with the life of our day. It connects to what I was saying about elegies. We are unlikely to believe the elegy which offers us a seamless gesture of consolation, which doesn't question itself. In a similar way, I feel more and more inclined towards poems which are formally self-conscious, which call into question their own principles and structures, which make their formality a part, as it were, of their subject.

GC: You're a poet who works principally in couplets, quatrains, and especially tercets. Almost all of the poems in *Atlantis* are in tercets. Would you talk a little about how, for you, a poem finds its stanzas?

MD: I do love those little three-line parcels beyond reason, I admit it. The tercet is a stanzaic pattern which yokes poise (since it has a feeling of shapeliness, of deliberate placement on the page) with a forward momentum. That forward-moving quality is in part the result of the odd number of lines. My late partner Wally was a window designer by trade, and he would never put two or four of anything in a window display – always three shoes, or five hats. The odd number keeps the eye engaged. The eye wants to complete a tercet, it doesn't seem quite at rest. Thus it's perfect for Dante's purposes, tumbling us forward, allowing no resting place within the canto, while also threading the stanzas of his poem together through the recurrent sounds of the rhymes.

Early on in the composing process, I like to separate lines out into a stanzaic pattern – a choice half-arbitrary, half governed by impulse – in order to isolate the parts of the poem; I can't see the parts unless there's enough white space around them. Further along, it becomes clear that a particular pattern does or doesn't serve the movement of sentences, the direction of argument. If I don't have a strong feel for what it should be, I'll try lots of different arrangements on the page to see what I might learn from them.

GC: How does an entire collection come to be governed by one stanza form? Did the tercet bespeak, in some architectural sense, the argument of *Atlantis*, or does its dominance in the collection reveal a more expansive formal concern of yours at the time, a concern in which the life of *Atlantis*

became submerged?

MD: The process of making a book, and perhaps especially of beginning one, seems a search for a manner of speaking – with all that entails: the characteristic gestures of syntax, lineation, stanza-making, the lines of argument, the patterns of thinking which comprise an approach to a particular content, a period in one's life, a group of related poems. That's partly a matter of will, largely a matter of where the imagination moves next. Both *My Alexandria* and *Atlantis* are confrontations with a looming, unthinkable loss. In the former book, that loss was at a greater distance; the poems anticipate it but try to deflect it philosophically, to think through means of negotiation. I seemed to have the time and leisure to do that. The poems in *Atlantis* were written in Provincetown between 1990 and 1994; they run parallel with Wally's intensifying illness, and the last poem in the book was, in fact, the last poem I wrote before his death.

I was aware that I was up against the unsayable, that in some ways I could say so much less than I could in the previous book, because now these plain facts were so pressing. The last poem in *My Alexandria*, for instance, attempts to imagine death in a way that the poems in *Atlantis* do not dare to; they are up against limit, against the wall, as it were. They scramble for bits of metaphor, bits of narration, whatever can be held as the unwritable proceeds to occur. I think that is one of the reasons they become shorter, most of them, both in terms of line length and stanzaic pattern; I guess this wasn't exactly conscious, but it seems to me in retrospect that I was seeking a form which acknowledged limit. And which kept moving, unspooling despite the enormous pressure to just fall into silence. It was strange, our move to the Cape, in that during the most difficult years of my life I found myself in the most beautiful place I'd ever lived in. There's a quality in the book of turning to landscape – to that light and fluidity – for instruction: how do I live through or with this? I suppose part of the answer is a formal shapeliness which in itself tries to sustain, to the extent that it can. Perhaps the tercet was necessary in that I felt that if I came to any resting place, I wouldn't go on; the poems needed to keep moving, trying to talk around what they couldn't say, or they would lapse into a void, into stasis.

GC: We have seen from you, in recent years, an increasing confidence in the shorter line. Whereas My *Alexandria* works mostly with a loosened iambic pentameter (4-6 feet/line), *Sweet Machine* shows you exploring more lines of 1-3 feet. I'm reminded of how the mid-career Yeats wrote thin, rhythmic poems (e.g. "Friends," "A Coat,") in *Responsibilities*, trimeter which, it is easy to see, was once loosened iambic hexameter. Similarly, the poem "Favrile" which launches *Sweet Machine* is made of tercets which can, themselves, be reconstituted into iambic/anapestic hexameter:

> Glassmakers, at century's end, composed metallic lusters
> in reference to natural sheens (dragonfly and beetle wings,
> marbled light on kerosene) and invented names
> as cooly lustrous as their products' scarab gleam:
> Quetzal, Aurene, Favrile. Suggesting, respectively,

> the glaze of feathers, that sun-shot fog of which haloes are composed, and – what? What to make of Favrile?. . .

Was this intentional or intuitive on your part? Or both? Are you, like Yeats, writing first in a longer line which you then manipulate in the interests of aesthetics and pacing?

MD: Intention and intuition seem to live awfully close together, thank goodness! The music of sentences in my head is certainly an extended music; I love the periodic sentence, with its inclusivity and suspension of time, and I'm drawn to a kind of musicality which occurs when phrase hooks to phrase, and a rich procession of qualifiers complicates both sense and sound. But increasingly I found my poems simply resisting being placed on the page with a long line to complement the long sentence. It was the pull between which felt energetic, the parceling out of the extended syntactical unit over shorter bits of time, individual lines which could emphasize the physicality and sonic interest of the parts.

Sweet Machine has at its core a pair of arguments, loosely but definitely related. The first revolves around desire, which is both the force that brings us back to life after loss (as in "Visitation") and an inescapable, self-perpetuating trap (as in the title poem.) The second conflict revolves around making, the sheer pleasure of the made thing, which is celebrated in poems like "Favrile" and, on a more homespun level, "Dickeyville Grotto," which concerns a Wisconsin priest who builds a temple from junk. There is a dark side to making as well; the citizen of "Metro North" lives in a world poisoned by manufacturing from which he benefits only through the use of its refuse; the friend in "Murano" destroys herself by transforming herself into a work of art. The built world pushes the swans in "White Pouring" toward extinction. The book doesn't attempt to resolve these arguments, but to dwell in them, and I hope that these tensions are reflected in the book's formal designs, which are themselves "favrile" things – that is, extravagantly made – and are also devolving, coming unglued at some of their seams to allow for tensions and divergences of thought.

GC: Wallace Stevens wrote "There is in reality an aspect of individuality at which every form of rational explanation stops short." Poetry, it would seem, is one way to represent this elusive and individual aspect of reality. Do you think your interest in non-fiction prose has been an attempt to get at this same reality through a differently configured individuality, a non-poet self, as it were?

MD: I think the self is too slippery and complicated a phenomenon to be known in any singular way. Likewise, it can't be "said" singularly; when we speak in another mode we make new discoveries about what we have to say. Certainly turning towards prose had to do with a need to approach reality in another way. *Heaven's Coast* began about six weeks after Wally's death, in a time when I couldn't even read yet, having no singular concentration. I remembered an invitation I'd received to contribute an essay to a book called *Wrestling with the Angel: Gay Men Write About Faith*

and Religion, and I found myself thinking that if I COULD write that essay, here's where I'd begin. I thought of a sentence, and then another, and then felt, well, if you're thinking this way, you might as well try. The marvel, for me, was discovering that behind each sentence lay another, a kind of continuous thread of attention, at a moment when I felt almost no continuity in my life.

So I wrote that essay, then another, and a third; then I realized these weren't essays but something more like chapters, elements in a kind of chronicle of grief. I could only do this in prose because I somehow felt freed of the pressure to say EVERYTHING in a singular, compressed form. Even a long poem, of course, is enormously compressed, selected, reduced to essence. Writing prose gave me the feeling of operating in a wider arena: room to meditate, investigate, pose questions, spin out a related story. To digress and see where the digression might lead. Not that you can't do these things in verse, of course, but prose allows the wider canvas. And I felt like a new person, in many ways; the form of my life as I knew it had broken, and the new life seemed to require a new form.

GC: Could you tell us a little bit about the new memoir you've just finished?

MD: It's called *Firebird* and will be out from HarperCollins next year. It is a very different book than *Heaven's Coast*, which was more meditative, nonlinear, and drew at least part of its form from the journal (though it also has elements of nature writing, literary criticism, and spiritual autobiography, but that's another story). The new book is an autobiography from six to sixteen, with a particular eye towards matters of aesthetic education: how do we learn to identify what we find beautiful, and what are the uses to which beauty is put? It's a sissy boy's story, and thus an exile's tale, and a chronicle of a gradual process of coming to belong somewhere, to the world of art.

This book behaves more like a novel – a continuous narrative which traffics less in reflection and discursive writing and more in scene and in character. I felt it was a book that couldn't exist as verse, largely because its project is to place the self in context, to think about my own peculiar family and about American life in the fifties and sixties. If I tried to write poems about this stuff, at least at this point, I fear that I'd spotlight the lyric "I" in a way that would be at cross-purposes with my deeper intention. Prose, here, allows the broad tapestry, the universe of detail which allows the book to be not so much about me as a whole constellation of experiences and ideas – personal and collective – about art, sexuality, identity, gender, and the survival of the inner life.

GC: As a poet who remembers a time when we didn't have MFA and Ph.D. programs in creative writing as they exist today, would you comment on their value to a young poet? Does the community help or hinder, improve or confuse, breed healthy competition or lassitude?

MD: I'm not THAT old! MFA programs were around when I started out,

though certainly there weren't so many of them, and there wasn't the feeling of such a large, institutionalized system of instruction in creative writing. I am a great believer in the use of graduate programs, and I'm weary of hearing them bashed; it's too easy to suggest that they produce too much similarity, or that they create a hothouse atmosphere. What seems to me crucial is that they provide communities, a structure in which one can find like-minded souls. That is not easy in a country this big, this turned away from literature, this disinterested in feeling. And it is no small thing to be able to join a group of people who share your concerns for a few years' time.

In my own experience in grad school, I found my teachers, who were goodhearted and hardworking souls, primarily useful in terms of pointing me towards what I hadn't read yet. I can't recollect many useful bits of criticism or advice. The good stuff came from my peers, from our arguments and shared intentions, our talks and letters and dissections of each other's work. That stayed with me. I suspect that has always been the case, and that one of the best things graduate programs give students is just that: each other.

Ph.D. programs are newer, of course, and their recent proliferation is controversial. It is odd, for those of us with MFAs, to watch the doctorate become the degree of choice, which is in part of course a response to the number of institutions granting the MFA, a kind of inflation of credentials. I've taught in two doctoral programs now and find my reservations have eroded; who wouldn't want to spend five years in good company, growing one's work, deepening one's reading? Of course the reality is that doctoral students work like crazy, too, as teachers and scholars. I don't know that anyone has the balance of creative work and literary study quite right yet; it's not an easy thing to structure. But this is a recent hybrid, and it's going to take us all awhile to get it right. I hope that the next few years will see increasing experimentation and tinkering with the nature of doctoral study in writing. It's here to stay; time to get good at it.

PAUL LISICKY

The Pygmalion Salon

> Tonight you simply can't afford to be a-
> n eyesore. But no one will ever see a
>
> dog in *mascara* this time of year.
> Ash Wednesday'll come but Carnival is here.
> What sambas can you dance? What will you wear?
> Elizabeth Bishop, "Pink Dog"

My father's robe is made from a lustrous black wool with magenta piping along the hem, pockets, and sleeves. Its belt assures a jaunty fit around the waist. Though a little shopworn, it's still in decent shape. I never in my life expected to get much use out of it, but believe it or not, I'm wearing it as I write this, almost enjoying the scratch of its seams against my bare shoulders on this frosty May morning in Utah.

But I wasn't so sanguine about receiving it. Six months ago, visiting me in Key West, my mother gives me my Christmas presents seconds before her departure. Two bright pink boxes from Burdines hold two black shirts, always something I can use. But this third box . . .what's inside? It smells faintly of naphthalene, Right Guard, of being packed away somewhere. Something aches above my heart. I don't know if I can stand it. I can't help but picture my father wearing it in the basement of the Cherry Hill house, which they've finally sold after six long years. He's standing beneath the bare bulb, paging through an engineering magazine, one of the thousands he's been saving – and promising to get rid of – since 1959.

"You don't like it," says my mom dryly.

I look at her. There's not a trace of irony in her expression. "Oh, no, no – I'm just – "

"We have to go, dear. The boat parade's at six." She kisses me faintly on the lips, walks past the mango trees, and drives off to Fort Lauderdale with a merry toot of the horn.

I spend the rest of the day riding my rented bike down the woeful, palm-shrouded streets of Key West. (What is it about tropical gloom?) It's hard not to cast the gift in some dire light. Is my father dying? Only three weeks ago I've visited them for Thanksgiving to discover he's developed a swelling, the size of a teastrainer, on his tricep just above his elbow. Though it's since receded, baffling his doctor, it's reminded all of us of the nascent terrors of the body, of how fragile we are. Or is this about something no less dire, but protracted? Are they losing it? Thanks to good

genes, my parents look quite young for their age, but they're in their seventies now, struggling with cataracts, arthritis, and high blood pressure. Just last night my father forgot that I'd been teaching every summer for the past three years. I was annoyed, if only for a second (So this is how much my work matters to you. . .), followed by a quiet, expansive melancholy.

I stand at the beach, watching the winds whipping up the milky green. A squadron of pelicans mimics the fighter planes over the Florida Straits. Maybe I'm supposed to feel honored, grateful that they think I'm worthy enough to inherit my father's mantle. Yet I can't stop wondering if the situation were reversed: how would he like it if I boxed my worn Levis and gave them to him for Christmas? Would he feel so honored? Or would he only think I was cheap? Actually, it's quite amusing to think that we'd be able to trade clothing at all, given that I'm six foot two to his five foot seven, a five-length sleeve to his three. The robe is a size Large. He used to wear it with the sleeves rolled up. Not once, but twice.

Could it be that he's hasn't any use for wool now that they've moved full time to Fort Lauderdale? Salt Lake is a bit nippier than South Florida.

Perhaps I'm just thinking too much.

When I come back to the house, I walk into the master bedroom to find the black robe lying on the bed as if my father had just stepped out of it. A shroud of sorts. I'm so startled that I lurch out of the room and shut the door behind me. Our dogs, Arden and Beau, look puzzled. They bark and they shimmy, demanding that I take them to the White Street Pier.

It's not till we're walking past the house with the pot bellied pig out back that I realize what the gift was about: B. Altman. Sewn into the collar is a strip printed with a witty elegant script circa 1968: B. Altman. Of course.

* * *

My brothers and I never called it Altmans. It seemed as crude as calling draperies "drapes" or Provincetown "P-town." It was always B. Altman, actually B. Altman and Company, and the store carried a special distinction in our family, not because we loved the clothes so much (who in South Jersey wore tartans and tattersalls?), but because its single Philadelphia location seemed to embody a faded elegance, a worndown optimism, qualities which made sense to us. Though impeccably neat, the store hadn't been updated since 1962. It stood alone, unmalled, a white brick building surrounded by circular planters, gracing a lush green knoll in Devon. Already on the way out. Even the logo seemed charmingly passé by the time we made our monthly pilgrimages to it, and it was no surprise to us that the whole chain – including its Fifth Avenue flagship – closed in the early 1990's.

Its Main Line address probably had more allure than we were willing to admit. Like just about everyone else in Cherry Hill, our burgeoning suburb carved out of apple orchards and sandpits, we were eager for what was hard to get. Not that we didn't have opportunities; there was the Cherry Hill Mall, of course, with Strawbridge and Clothier, The Blum Store, and enough tropical foliage to resemble Miami Beach's Lincoln Road. It was one of the first enclosed shopping centers in the country, and our community –

formerly the lackluster Delaware Township – was even renamed in its honor after busloads of tourists came to pay their respects from as far away as West Virginia. But it's like that old line: *who wants to belong to any group that would admit you as a member?*

(Which makes me think of my friend Janet Kulkowitz's mother and the way her eyes misted when she spoke of her longing to live on the Main Line. How much of this yearning was triggered by the fact that Jews weren't allowed to buy houses in Radnor until the 1960s?)

The charm of B. Altman, no doubt, shaped my youngest brother, Michael, who's been drawn to fading and unusual department stores for as long as I can remember. At 5, he opened his own personal branch of the chain in our summer house living room in which he sold my mother Scotch tape and Russell Stover chocolates. He's one of the few people I know who will actually buy his clothes solely on the basis of the store's label, no matter how inappropriate the piece. ("Get me a tie from Porteous," he says, when he hears I'm spending the weekend in Vermont.) He can recite lists of defunct chains with all the solemnity of the Kaddish: Iveys. Hutzlers. Bambergers. Sakowitz. S. Klein. Pomeroys. John Wanamaker. The names of the dead are endless. He deplores the conglomerates' programs to eliminate the regional, the quirky, the specialized. Lately, when he has time off (in between playing oboe for the Richmond Symphony and traveling to the regional pageants of the Miss America "scholarship program," another hobby), he travels across the country photographing individual stores which he believes are on the brink of closing. Ninety percent of the time his speculations are correct. Only a couple of years ago, he made a point of making the final purchase at Thalhimers in downtown Richmond on its final day of operation. He stood in line to buy a violet blouse, of all things, so he could hold the cherished title forevermore. ("There wasn't any men's stuff left.") The local newspaper even interviewed him upon his departure. "I loved this store," he said with feeling, shook the blouse in the air, then walked out to his car.

* * *

I'm less drawn to department stores these days than to a good buy. Though Michael thinks this deplorable (the reason behind the demise of so many smaller chains), he's decent enough not to call me on it. Today we're driving to Sawgrass Mills, the huge outlet mall west of Fort Lauderdale. It's one of my favorite things to do when I visit my parents, who live ten miles to the east. When the mood's right, it's even preferable to a couple of hours on the beach. And though I'm sort of appalled by the location of the place – it's located quite literally across the street from the Everglades – I'm breaking into a cold sweat as I spot it on the horizon. Its parking lot shimmers beneath bronzed cabbage palms and glary subtropical clouds.

We park outside Waccamaw Pottery, which we always do, just in case someone gets lost. The place is enormous, arranged in arcing semicircles, at least a mile from one end to the other. (How many times have we seen lost tourists, separated from their loved ones, on the verge of sobbing, after they've fallen under the spell of all those good buys?) But that doesn't stop

us. I'm walking faster. Somewhere in my head, from ten years ago, I hear the sad, sad laugh of Elaine Cimino, an old acquaintance from grad school. She's kidding me about my third new shirt in as many days, wondering aloud whether I'm shallow or not. I laugh; no apologies from this corner, though it's hard not to be hurt. When I outwardly appreciate a visiting writer's outfit, she snaps, "What's that have to do with anything? I expected more from you." I can still see Elaine, slumping at a conference table with a cup of Red Zinger, her sweatsuit the outward expression of her inward gloom. *Look around, dear,* I almost cry out in the mall. *Life's a banquet and most poor sons of bitches. . . .* Well, you know the line.

I know exactly what I want. It must be dark, shiny, something that bridges the elusive gap between night club and poetry reading. It takes all of twenty minutes. When I'm finished, I emerge with two pairs of shoes, a polo shirt the color of pool water, and gleaming windbreaker a la Prada. My grand total? 120 dollars.

Michael, on the other hand, has found within himself the supreme generosity to turn his attentions toward his friend Libby, who's asked him to buy something for her. The lime-green snakeskin vest (where are his politics?) he brings to the register is both hideous and fabulous at once, marked down to 75 dollars from $1750.

It's not that everything's so cheap here. A lot of it seems ridiculously pricey, even though some things are marked down to 75 percent off the original. But it's the possibility of the bargain that fans our ardor. Like most of the shoppers wandering through this mall, I'm not wealthy. Don't most of us in this boat know that, say, the purchase of a new jacket is for many people the first step toward inventing a new persona? I watch a teenage mother walking toward us in a flashy nylon red/black shirt. She's carrying a baby over her left hip. He twists and turns; he won't stop crying, screaming into her collarbone. Hard, hard life. No breaks, no comfortable apartment, no weeklong vacations to the Caribbean. Would we deny her the pleasure of stopping a homeboy dead in his tracks? *Hey, girl.*

Look around, Elaine. What would you deny us? These Cuban exiles, these working class African Americans, these gayboys getting by on their protease inhibitors – why stop anyone from being more *himself* by impersonating somebody else?

* * *

From Oscar Wilde: "The truth of masks."

* * *

How much of my current desire for the artificial is spawned by living in Salt Lake City?

In a recent poll, my adopted city rates lower than Birmingham, Alabama, on a ranking of the country's "well dressed" places. Walking past the big wedding-cake of the Tabernacle, I'm not sure I believe that, though I can't help feeling a little alarmed by the fact that everyone's fashion sense is at least five years behind the times. Even "hip" kids are still wearing oversized jeans halfway down their butts and tiny t-shirts emblazoned with

the logos of 70's TV shows (*The Partridge Family* and *Charlie's Angels* are particular favorites.) It's hard not to be snobbish about such things. Though it looked playful and ironic back in 1993, that look's come and gone everywhere else, and now it seems, well just. . . silly. *For God's sake, I'm old enough to be your father. If you were my kid, I wouldn't let you out of the house like that.*

Still, it's preferable to the missionary look. I'm sure there's something at stake for these kids who choose not to dress in button downs and khakis, something which I, an outsider to this culture, will never have access to. I'm sure it's nothing less than political. They're saying, *Listen, I don't want any part of your plan. I don't want to be married at 16, I don't want to go off to Kampala for two years.* . . . Etcetera.

While the other 90 percent of the people walk around in attire that asserts their allegiance to the pack. No right to stand out. Since you're part of the stream of things, since you can be endlessly, effortlessly duplicated, you can't possibly have the authority to make a difference. Or worse, to inflict injury. (No "excuse me" when you bump into someone; no qualms about cutting ahead of another on line at the airport.) Which can create some problems. All of this is undoubtedly overstated and maybe just plain unfair, but I'm reminded of a recent TV commercial for the Salt Lake City transit system promoting public transportation during bad weather. It features a cartoon snowflake (now what could be more individual?) claiming, "I'm special!" seconds before it's smashed joyfully by an oncoming bus.

So is there any wonder I like walking down the street in my shiny polo shirt with the Johnny collar? I watch some teenagers smoking, looking furtive outside Temple Square. Instantly I change my mind about their fashion choices. *Go wear your Brady Bunch T-shirts! Smoke away! And pull up some of those red Temple tulips for me.*

* * *

Or is my lust for the shiny far less serious than I think? Is it just a sort of fashion penance? Am I just paying the debt on all those mistakes in my past, the childhood garments from Grants or Korvettes, the adult attempts at, say, grunge? Last week, while organizing some old photographs, I came upon a picture of myself from 1993. I'm grinning, wearing a vintage olive-green coat with fur collar, something I found in the thrift store of an Episcopal Church in Chatham, Massachusetts. I loved that coat at the time, wearing it everywhere from poetry readings to the opera, but now I'm just alarmed by the sheer wrongness of it. Such an unflattering fit! What on earth was I thinking?

* * *

Do such revelations cause us to look down at what we're wearing right now? In five years will we look back at pictures of ourselves, flustered, humble? Or will the evident change in our faces help us resist that?

* * *

The Hall of Shame: 1971 – a sheer brown shirt with four-inch fringe at the sleeves. 1973 – a pair of oversized aviator glasses with a strange trapezoid above the nose that trapped skin oils. 1979 – a body perm (enough said.) 1983 – a black polo shirt with yellow collar and lavender horizontal stripes. 1985 – an oversized pair of black velour corduroys. 1988 – a colossal black overcoat (vintage again) worn solely because it was bought on St. Mark's Place. 1992 – cranberry-colored Doc Marten boots. 1993 – grunge! 1994 – double processed white/blonde hair, which the hairstylist came close to dying a Windex blue. 1995 – earrings, earrings. 1996– pointy vampiric sideburns.

Stop now: Too close, too close.

But on the other hand: why *not*?

* * *

On our way back to our parents' from Sawgrass Mills, Michael and I take the long route home down Sunrise Boulevard. We're waiting in traffic when outside a beauty shop, The Pygmalion Salon, I see an older lady (a widow, I decide) wearing a boxy bright orange dress imprinted with windowpanes. It's breezy, and any work that's been done to her hair suddenly doesn't matter anymore. It stands up in wild white tufts through which bits of her freckled scalp are visible. I'm in awe; I can't take my eyes off of her. How fearless she looks beneath that rushing sky, standing beside the bus stop in her bright orange construction. The Peggy Guggenheim of Fort Lauderdale. It wasn't so long ago that she was beautiful. Her entire look is shaking its fist at time's ruthlessness, its steady, exacting damage. It says one thing alone: Not my style. You're not going to take *that* from me.

* * *

Given my attachment to clothing, it's no surprise that I spent several years "in the trade," as some of us like to say. This was in the resort town of Provincetown, Massachusetts, where I lived year-round from 1991 to 1995. I worked in a store which tried to be everything to everybody, selling everything from pricier lines to pastel Cape Cod T-shirts (which, unfortunately, flew out the door.) The job was harder than I knew at the time. It wasn't just that the owners instituted a competitive sales system which pitted salesperson against salesperson, or that they changed their minds almost daily about when they'd close down for the season (leaving all of us to worry about being laid off, freezing and starving in our tiny cottages for the winter.) It was that the endless entanglement in peoples' dramas of self-transformation eventually taxed the spirit.

On the one hand, I loved making strangers feel seen, a task which I embraced with all the zeal of a young Sister of Mercy. I loved telling someone that he or she looked terrific in those linen pants when it was so clearly the truth, when they so much needed their own beliefs affirmed. "Oh, thank you." I especially liked working with people who felt

uncomfortable shopping for clothes, who had specific issues about their bodies. There was one older woman, an old-school butch, who, motioning me aside, whispered, with an almost unbearable vulnerability, that she hated the size of her breasts. Could I help her find something? It would be easy to poke fun at such a request, but I couldn't help but feel humbled: she picked me over everyone else in whom to confide her secret. I led her to the table featuring the new arrivals. When she finally found something – a long aqua sweater – we smiled, unnerved by our moment of intimacy. I left work that night with all the satisfaction of a kindly whore, knowing that I helped someone, if only for a moment, feel more authority and self-delight.

But there was a darker side to all this. It didn't take long before I soon learned the strategies of manipulation, exactly what the owners wanted to develop in all of us. For example, when working with someone a little too hungry for attention, I'd say, "I don't like that shirt as much as the other," even if it wasn't true, even if I wasn't really relying upon my eye. The trick was to create an aura of trust, and once that was established, you could get away with anything. One noted singer/songwriter walked into the store on an uncharacteristically quiet morning. She'd clearly seen better days (in truth, she looked like she'd just spent the night on the street), and I wouldn't have even recognized her had she not asked me a question in her unmistakable contralto. Instantly I asked her if she was whom I thought she was. When she nodded (annoyed but grateful nonetheless, in that way specific to people who've been in the limelight), I admitted I'd seen her in concert fifteen years earlier during her heyday at Philadelphia's Tower Theater. "You were amazing," I said, though I'd always had mixed feelings about her work. She smiled. "That was a good concert," she agreed. And soon enough she was buying 15 expensive hooded sweatshirts in every conceivable color to give me the largest single sale of my retail career. "Thank you," she said. Then walked down the street swinging those weighty shopping bags in her hands.

Still, in spite of my ethical reservations, there were plenty of things to like about the job. There was that wondrous sense of being on stage all day, of dressing up, playing a character, wearing the newest clothes off the racks. (Take note, dear customer: after wearing a shirt for an eight-hour shift, we never thought twice about returning it to its hanger.) Or of inviting people into my space: welcome to my party! I loved taking charge of the music, something which my fellow employees – I thank them forever – allowed me to get away with, playing my favorites that year, which shifted back and forth between Joni Mitchell and underground house. I loved helping my boss and good friend, Stephen, assemble the window displays, a series of tableaux featuring manikins in the likenesses of James Dean and Marilyn Monroe. They got wackier and wackier as the season ground down into winter. The very last one, thrown up two weeks before Thanksgiving, featured James standing before a toilet in Lucky Jeans, a glistening wire extending from his you-know-where to the gleaming white bowl. Marilyn stood off to the right with affectionate appreciation. I couldn't believe we were getting away with it (alas, it lasted all of two days), and neither could some of the more conservative residents of our

liberal town, who didn't like it, no siree, not one bit.

* * *

I'm going through my closet, deciding what to keep, what to give away. We're moving from Salt Lake in exactly two weeks, and I probably should be doing anything but writing an essay. But moving's always the occasion of re-evaluation and of taking stock. It stirs up time, and one can't help but go through all the attendant activities without looking backward and forward at once. It doesn't get any easier. Even if you've moved a dozen times in as many years, as I have. Cherry Hill, Anchorage Point, Tampa Bay, Provincetown, Iowa City, Key West, Salt Lake City, not to mention shorter stays elsewhere – all these names and places fade as we turn our eyes toward Houston.

I stand before an open box wracking my brain over my decisions. There's no law saying I have to get rid of anything; certainly I could just pack up every T-shirt and pair of jeans and send them off with the mover. But moving seems to necessitate something like paring down, so that's the way it'll be.

To keep: the black rayon shirt with the pockets over the chest.

To give away: the plaid yellow jacket with the slightly threadbare collar.

But it's harder than I think it is. There I am, six years ago, standing at the register of a now defunct store, pleased with my new jacket (there's nothing else like it at the time), hopeful about my new life in Provincetown. In only a few short weeks I'll wear it every Wednesday night to the Crown and Anchor, where I'll take it off as soon as I pass the bouncer, fold it precisely, then tuck it beneath the stacked chairs. I'll dance for two and a half hours straight, without a break, utterly alone and *with* people at once, almost convincing myself the whole experience is sealed, safe from the workings of time. I'll put it back on when I'm finished, my sweat soaking into its sleeves. I'll wear it walking through the dunes one brisk October morning. I'll wear it when I've heard a friend has died unexpectedly of pneumonia. I'll wear it for hours and hours until I've latched onto the next jacket, and I'll lose interest in it, until I've stopped wearing it at all.

But maybe I'm just being the worst kind of sentimental. Maybe I'm investing my living with a significance it doesn't merit. Mere narcissism.

I stare down into the yawning dark with my flashlight. Shirts and jackets and shoes and trousers: I have hours of work ahead of me. I'll be up all night if I keep up like this. *Goodbye, you.* And I drop the jacket into the giveaway pile.

* * *

It's evening now, a breeze wafting through the open window. It's chilly enough to merit something warmer, so I reach for my father's robe, which I haven't yet packed, and slide my bare arms into its sleeves. It's looking shabbier by the minute. A few nights ago I lay down on the living room

floor in it, the lustrous wool picking up more animal hair than I thought possible. I sit before my desk now, naming the sources of each individual strand, courtesy of our two dogs and two cats.

(Not long ago, Mark told me that his friend, Mekeel, had a dream in which she learned that he must buy me a new robe. He thought she was probably right; he's hinted on more than one occasion that I might look better in something else.)

I stare at the picture of my father sitting on the dock behind my childhood summer house. With my chunky black hornrims, I now look just like he did in 1962. He looks amazingly content, fully himself, no sense of doubt about the future. I'm resembling him more and more by the minute. On my last visit he introduced me to their downstairs neighbor, a former dentist, who cried instantly, "Man, you look just like your dad." Something which would have flustered me when I was younger.

(I push my glasses up the bridge of my nose. Will these, too, end up in the great Hall of Shame?)

Once again, I've forgotten to call. Now if I could only get him to keep his word. Though my father's been promising to set up an E-mail account so we can stay in touch more easily, six months have gone by without any progress on the matter. This seems to be his method of dealing with getting older: delaying choices as if there's no such thing as the passage of time.

But who am I to judge? For the moment, at least, everyone I care about is well. I hold in my breath. Like Virginia Woolf, I want to whisper to each passing moment, "stay, stay, stay."

I tie the robe tighter around my waist. If I'm lucky enough to get old, I wonder how I'll be? Like my father, putting things off, moving through the years as if he's convinced he'll escape death? Or like the elderly woman in her shocking orange dress, saying no, *no* with her style, lunatic, defiant, refusing to accept the inevitable?

PATRICIA GOEDICKE

What Holds Us Together

is almost nothing, a little
surface tension at the edges.

Inside ourselves, but how?

Two blood bottles,
weak capillaries in pajamas

rowing across the night.

Into whose arms, the
self says,

will I permit it, at last
let myself go, trust others

to receive me when I'm dead?

By day we irritate each other, unwitting.
At breakfast, say, over burned toast.

By night, over the black potholes
of the snores between us I reach out

for you and find only
a piece of bare, unfeeling

forearm. This flesh

I touch so carefully in the dark
ignores me, in its sleep

indifferent, cold, unknowing
as the cold hiss of the ocean

and who we are is buried in it.

I know you'd mother me
forever, and I you

but here, at the end of everything
we know

as waves spill themselves on the beach
in foaming avalanches, crackling

stone suckles stone. Even the kindest

words scrape against each other like seashells;
flesh, kneecaps, numb lips

nearly raw now, almost ready to break up,

crumble themselves into that loud
nameless energy we must return to

and can't, not yet,
nervously tying our pajamas

as tight as we can against the taut
temporary skin

of the bodies we tremble across the world in.

Natural Burn

Only I sit here: no body
else in my place, the
Slurry Bombers bump overhead, fat
aluminum ducks waddling downhill
to the Bitterroot forest fires, helicopters thudding
with buckets of water from the Clark Fork –

"You're not worrying about anything but your own
extinction",
Connie says on the phone and I shudder –
just me
or the whole world, it's the same
"process", we call it, choking
on thick smoke, leathery
as pomegranate skin.
With potash in the nostrils,
with the fat moon wallowing up over the mountains,

down on the campus, red-faced
an awkward student winks, inviting
other students to help edit his magazine,
pick and choose poems,
short stories, essays from the stout soldiers
(but sausage-making is the real metaphor)
flooding over the transom –

"Come see how we make sausage!"

– squeeze, grind the entrails dry,
toss the remains into the incinerator?

As for the rest, the *saved*,
the words we love crackling
in gold grease on the page,

not even these, not even my own
cramped guts will stay
live meat for long,
here doubled beneath me
on my two hip bones sitting

"with pen in hand" to write it
all down, never mind these oily
unbidden gurgles, embarrassing
burps, the slight
tension
of toes locked in the shag rug and stiffening on up
to the elegant corridor of the neck tunnel:

as squeezed capillaries inch
through clogged membranes, though the student insists we choose,
Choose! – right now, how can we? –
which twin

red blood cell at the pass
shall be let free or thrown, casually
with tendrils of steam licking
on the trash heap next to the house, such
melodrama!

– But here among the scrape,
scrape of dry leaves, in the intense heat
of late September rattling
witlessly on the sidewalk,
with students scuffling by, *what is it?* – we must
tell each other but who
can pick out anything

among the brute legions
of teeming sensory insult,
limp minnows all heading one way

then belly up, gray flocks of pigeons
wing tip to wing tip turning and
suddenly tacking, floating in ruffled air like flakes of ash,

ash, Connie, *Listen* –
the long hiss and bitterness
of fire's already slithering

up the valley, the hairs on my two arms
and the roofs of all our houses are crinkling
in red blasts of heat.

With Alexandria's volumes goldleafed
and tongued no longer,
with death sizzling in the ear drums,

whoever's sitting here's talking – *what, again?* –
once more about nothingness,
soon no more

than a last chitter of wood,
the insects of ego scurrying
to perch on charred desktops
for the moment only, chirping their small *scritch,*
scritch, tentative as a few left-over rags
in a burned backyard stretched out on the line

like black twigs, torn pieces of text stuck
together but still whimpering *Choose, Choose* <u>*Me*</u> –

MARK HALLIDAY

Editorial Meeting

That's them, those three at the corner table,
with sandwiches and beer and the pile of folders.
Don't let them see you glancing – they can probably recognize
the pleading Save Me glance even when you think
you're looking self-reliant and cool. They look

half-bored; it's a working lunch, and they are working,
but not with any sense of life-or-death. . . I mean,
do they realize what it would mean to you, or to me,
if they accepted our submissions? Chicken salad
is what means most to them at the moment.

Just think, you sat at home typing Version #7
of "Farewell to Jan" as if it would be received
at a desk on a mountain by someone wearing a white shirt
and a dark blue tie. Instead here they are
in very old sweaters and flannel shirts, with merely American beer

and chicken salad. There is a cosmic wrongness here –
a great spirit lies pining beside that plate of onion rings.
(*In chains beside that dish of fries*
a noble figure aching lies. . . .) The editors plow through
some sixty folders and three large sandwiches

while we wait, and wait, sipping ice water, taking in
the fact that Horst Denkler himself, Editor-in-Chief,
is someone who dips his pickle in ketchup
before he dashes off the line that keeps us starved and hungry:
"Sorry. Not these." Not these, Horst?

Not these? But if you knew, if you knew
from what wrack of chicken salad and greasy chips
my lines rose up, I mean, how hard it was to make ART
on the planet of lunches, and how strangely love has left me
alone at my gray typewriter – if I could make you know!

The Jan Hanks Museum

1) Jan Hanks broke up with me on the first night of 1975.
This was incredibly important at the time
and all these years later I still wish to press this story
upon you so you can help it keep *some* importance;
please serve as assistant curators
of the Jan Hanks Museum.

2) I met her when she auditioned for a theater group I was in.
During the improv scene about a family quarrel
she wielded the term "breakfast nook" so deftly
that I was smitten. I said to myself "Jan Hanks."

3) In a cafe called The Blue Parrot I said
"I think I'm falling in love with you"
and Jan replied "Go slow."
She seemed marvelously serious and wise saying "Go slow"
but later it seemed frighteningly a warning
which she knew I would not heed.

4) Our first night together we watched a James Bond movie on TV
and I tried to calculate how different from James Bond
she would want me to be, then Jan said
"Okay take all your clothes off"
and to cover my alarm I gruffly said
"I need to take a shower." Halfway through my shower
I sensed something and looked up and saw Jan
watching me from above – she was standing on the side of the tub
and peering down over the shower curtain.
This seemed to me weirdly nervy and extremely unromantic
but also terribly charming.

5) Her hair was the color called dirty blonde
but she kept it clean. She was not tall but seemed tall
or long, she walked like a defensive end
ready to lunge and intercept a pass.
She liked to bump shoulders, hard. When she wanted to wrestle
I expected coy mock resistance and then lovely submission
but Jan wasn't kidding:
she thought a desperate muscle-sweating struggle was erotic
and I felt the opposite, missing my dignity
as I strained to pin her shoulders to the mattress.

6) In the two months that followed the night of James Bond
Jan felt *something* for me and experimentally she called it love.
Her eyes were green.
She sang in a throaty low voice –
"I like bread and butter, you like toast and jam."

7) Jan Hanks was the name. Hanks –
rhymes with juicy *shanks,* rhymes with demonic *pranks. . .*
Watch out for anti-personnel vehicles and *tanks;*
don't let the enemy charge your unguarded *flanks.*
Rhymes with "Thanks but no thanks."

8) Something is missing.
One late night we sat on the floor of her dark living room
and Jan lit a white candle
and sang a Donovan song called "Widow With a Shawl" –
she sang gazing up through the ceiling
and I could hear an ocean indifferently rushing across
miles of dark beach where a sailor's wife stood forever
waiting, hopeless, expecting no glorious union. . .
Jan's voice low and her soul untouchable.

9) She thought I was intellectual and responsible and
might be a good influence. But after two months –

oh I don't feel like analyzing the mistake.
The point is how I felt: I was hurt! Hurt!
That's why a museum had to get built;
dig out pain and hang it on the wall.
I'm curator but I can't do it all
shuffling down the empty hall
hearing Jan sing "Widow with a Shawl".
I need a volunteer support staff; you.

10) Minutes before the break-up
Jan was reading *Mother Night* by Kurt Vonnegut
with far too much concentration. I've felt
a certain coolness toward Vonnegut ever since.
On the following morning,
see me
at the Shell station across from Narragansett Electric
leaning on the roof of my Aunt Dorothy's blue Volvo
ready to drive two hundred miles away from Jan
feeling so lost: my hair was clean
and I was so beautiful at that moment
worthy to be painted
but it didn't feel good to be so beautiful at the time
with the world treating me like just some guy buying gasoline.

For several years after 1975
I avoided abbreviating the year's first month.

11) To her Bonnie I was not Clyde; I was more like the banks.
Jan Hanks.
The museum gate clanks.

12) Where is she now?
Who cares? She married a tough Italian
and disappeared.
Where is she now? Jan Hanks? She's here, in a sense,
here in this eternal structure, is she not?
So I've got her now. Thanks for your help.

13) But in the far wing of the museum
past the room of green eyes
a sound of receding footsteps;
and a chilly draft, as from a window left open

ANN HOOD

New People

Marjorie Macomber is stretched out on a chaise lounge in her backyard, eyeing the new boy her husband hired to take care of the lawn. She is wet with Hawaiian Tropic suntan oil; she is pretending to read a home decorating magazine; she is thinking the boy is too young, too sexy, too trashy to be here, in her yard, distracting her. His name is Justin, one of those soap-opera names people give their children. He is shirtless, tanned, tattooed. He makes Marjorie nervous.

The Macombers live in a big white house with stone pillars in the front that was built back in the forties. Some of the neighbors – like the O'Haras next door – have divided up their large lots and sold them off so that now new slapped-together houses are wedged in between the older, better homes. Marjorie has a burning distaste for these new people and their boxy houses. They have come in and ruined the neighborhood, which used to be quiet and friendly, the kind of place where neighbors got together for barbecues in summer or skating parties in winter – and even the pond has been filled in and sold; there's no place to skate now. Cissy O'Hara used to babysit Marjorie's daughter Bonnie. Bonnie used to babysit the Hummers' three children down the street. That's the kind of place it was. Now people move in and out, build sloppy homes, fill their yards with junk.

The yard boy is one of these new people, Marjorie knows. Her husband mentioned he lived down the street, in the Exeter's yard, which means in a tacky little house in the part of the lot the Exeter's sold off. Marjorie tries to focus on her magazine, but the boy is shearing the hedges nearby and he's noisy about it. She watches his muscles ripple, his shoulder blades roll, and wonders what in the world Gary had been thinking when he hired someone like this? Their last gardener was a kindly old Cambodian man named Phong, who moved in and out of their yard with great quiet and grace.

The boy is, suddenly, right in front of her.

"Hey," he says, "you know what time it is?"

Marjorie slowly lifts her sunglasses off her nose and slides them onto the top of her head.

"Almost noon," she says, pointing to the sky.

He follows her finger with his whole body, then turns back, smiling a smart-alecky grin. "Someone up there telling you something?"

She levels a stare at him, the one that used to send Bonnie running to her room but that has no effect on this kind of boy.

"The sun is directly overhead at noon," she tells him. She hears the condescension drip from her mouth and it makes her feel satisfied. He is a stupid, beautiful boy and she doesn't want him in her yard.

Justin looks back at the sun and then at her. "Cool," he says.

The shears droop like a gun from his left hand. His tattoos are sprawling and colorful – the yin and yang, a dead rock star, even a heart with a banner of roses and the name Janis written inside.

"Joplin," the boy says, startling Marjorie. He has caught her staring at his big arms and he grins a different, slyer grin now. This boy is used to girls wanting him; he's too cocky, too sure of himself.

"How interesting," Marjorie says, and lowers her sunglasses, hoping he doesn't see her hand tremble. From the safety of her Wayfarers, Marjorie takes in his face: angular, a good straight nose, full lips and bright blue eyes. The eyes are surprising; his hair is very dark, as long as Bonnie's, and wavy.

"So," Justin says. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

She can smell him, all sweat and earth and male.

"No," Marjorie manages.

From next door, there is the sound of children, splashing and squealing with delight. The people who live in the O'Hara's yard have two or three little girls, all with tangled hair and sunburns. The children always seem to have on clothing from a Disney movie – a *Pocohantas* T-shirt, *101 Dalmations* bathing suit, even the pool is decorated with *Lion King* characters. Marjorie wonders how the O'Haras can stand having them in their yard.

Justin is still standing there, close enough that Marjorie can see the dark curly hair on his legs.

She turns the page of her magazine.

"Are we paying you to stand around?" she says.

He grins again. *What a wiseguy!* Marjorie thinks, and decides she will insist that Gary fire him. Surely Phong has relatives, dozens of them, who could work here.

"You tell me," Justin says. His voice has a flat affectless quality that disturbs her. "I'll do whatever you want. Boss."

"Honestly," Marjorie says.

She gathers her things – magazines, bottled water, suntan oil – gets up and walks away, aware of his eyes following her across the long expanse of green yard. There are neat lines where he's mowed. She hopes her bathing suit bottom isn't riding up on her, hopes that her thighs aren't jiggling at all, hopes that he understands exactly what kind of person she is.

Marjorie and Gary are eating on the patio. This summer, she has decided to serve only salads for dinner, and to eat out here whenever they can. She has citronella candles burning, the too-bright outside light off. The salads tonight are mozzarella with fresh tomato and basil, and mixed greens with red onion and Cannelonni beans. There is sourdough bread, extra virgin olive oil, the pepper mill, all spread out on the table between Marjorie and Gary. Already Marjorie has had too much wine. She isn't drunk, but she is light-headed in a pleasant way.

"That boy," she says. "I don't like him."

One of the reasons she has kept the light out here off is so Gary won't sit and read the newspaper while they eat.

"Which boy?" Gary says. His white golf shirt seems to glow in the candlelight.

"Jason, Justin, whoever he is," Marjorie says, knowing it's Justin but wanting to demean him, even here with Gary. "He gives me the creeps."

"He's only charging five dollars an hour," Gary says.

"I liked Phong," Marjorie says. She is pouting a little; all that wine.

"Phong has some awful cancer," Gary says. "Bone cancer, I think. He certainly can't come and cut our grass with something like that."

She knows why they've lost Phong. She sent a fruit basket to his house.

From the yard next door, those children scream and play.

"Don't they ever go to bed?" Gary says, his voice hushed. "They're so. . ." he struggles for the word. "Untended," he says finally.

Gary's hair is silver, cut short. He is tall and lean, like he always has been, and he plays tennis and golf. Five years ago he quit smoking. He is aging well, Marjorie thinks, pleased.

"It's just for the summer," Gary is saying.

"He's the sort of boy who will break into the house and kill us while we sleep," Marjorie says. She doesn't really believe this. But how can she tell Gary her real problem with the boy? "Like those Menendez brothers," she adds.

Gary laughs at her, affectionately. Even though she went to Wellesley and got a degree in English, he has always seen her as a scatterbrain. It charms him, this image of her.

"They killed their own parents," he says, reaching across all the food for her hand. "Not someone else's."

He follows her hand like it's a lifeline out of deep water, follows it around the table, holding on tight, until he is at her side. Then he lets go, and moves his hands onto her shoulders so that he can turn her toward him, then moves them inside her button-down shirt and inside her bra until he finds each nipple. He is kissing her too, urging her off her chair down onto the stone patio.

"There are berries," Marjorie says. "For dessert."

Gary laughs. He is tugging on the zipper of his shorts.

"Here?" Marjorie whispers. "Not here." But she is taking off her own shirt and shorts and underwear.

From next door, a woman's voice, high, too shrill: *"Jessica! Jessica!"*

Gary has found his way inside her. Marjorie sees his tanned back, his white buttocks, clear in the candlelight.

"Jessica!"

The stone patio is hard and cold on Marjorie's back. Above her the stars seems to drip from the sky, toward her. She hears herself sigh. She closes her eyes. The silly tufts of gray hair that have sprouted on his shoulders and back in his middle age tickle her hands when she moves them there.

"Oooh," Gary whispers into her ear, his breath sharp with red onion. "I'm glad the little girls are having fun too."

Of course they aren't; one of them seems to be lost. But Marjorie doesn't care. She lifts her hips up to meet her husband.

*

On Wednesday morning Bonnie stops in for coffee. Like her mother, Bonnie is small-boned, wiry. Her hair is the same dark blonde Marjorie's once was; now Marjorie gets hers frosted so that it is more of a silvery blonde. They both wear it in a blunt cut, collarbone length, with headbands or pulled back in ponytails, which is what they both have today. People used to think they were sisters.

Bonnie is a lawyer and lives on the East Side in Providence, in a condo in what used to be a church. She and her husband – a lawyer too – sunk all their money into a beach house, where they disappear every weekend. All of these things make Marjorie proud of her daughter.

This morning Bonnie has brought Portuguese sweet rolls to have with their coffee.

"Daddy and I are just having salads for dinner these days," Marjorie tells her daughter. "This way I don't need to turn on anything – oven, stove, nothing. It's really made life simpler."

Bonnie smiles in a way that makes Marjorie think she has a secret.

"What?" Marjorie says. "I know you've got something up your sleeve."

Bonnie grabs both of her mother's hands. "I told Ted I'd wait because he thinks it's bad luck to tell too soon. But I can't keep it from you."

Marjorie gets a sick feeling in her bones. She knows, of course, what Bonnie is about to tell her, and she knows it should make her delighted – *a grandchild!* – but she feels awful, like Bonnie is about to tell her bad news.

"You've guessed, haven't you?" Bonnie says, slightly deflated. "It's just six weeks. Hardly pregnant at all."

"There's no such thing as hardly pregnant," Marjorie says. "At any rate, Ted is right. Things can go wrong early on."

Bonnie looks horrified.

Marjorie pats her daughter's hand. "I'm sure you'll be fine," she tells her, then takes their coffee cups to the sink. She wants Bonnie to leave. She says, "Rhoda Harris and I are going to play tennis today. Then have lunch." It's all a lie. She has no plans today. Rhoda Harris is in England with her husband.

Bonnie has come up behind her. "If I didn't know better," she says, "I'd think you weren't happy about my news."

"Don't be silly," Marjorie says, letting the water run too hot and plunging her hands under it. "It's just that if we get all excited and something goes wrong, we'll feel just terrible." Saying this, Marjorie realizes it is exactly what she wants, for something to go wrong, for there to be no baby. "It's wonderful news," she says, forcing herself to turn around and hug Bonnie. "Imagine! A new little person running around."

Happy now, Bonnie says, "I guess I should get to the office. I wish I'd get some morning sickness or something. I mean, I feel really wonderful."

Marjorie has always heard that's a bad sign, to have no symptoms. "You're sure?" she says.

Bonnie nods. "Positive."

Marjorie turns back to the dishes in the sink.

"Mother," Bonnie says, standing on tiptoe and peering over Marjorie's shoulder to see out the window. "Who is that young man?"

Marjorie glances up. "That is your father's idea of a gardener."

"What's happened to Phong?" Bonnie asks.

"He went and got sick and this is who Daddy replaces him with."

They both watch Justin push the lawn mower. He has on cut-off jeans and nothing else.

"He's like a Greek god," Bonnie says.

Marjorie laughs. "Hardly. He's practically illiterate and he has these terrible tattoos everywhere."

"I think he's very handsome," Bonnie says. "Maybe he can come and cut our grass at the beach."

"You would be very disappointed," Marjorie tells her.

Still, long after Bonnie leaves, she stands at the sink looking out, watching the way his muscles push against his skin. He hesitates at the white fence that separates their yard from the O'Hara's. Marjorie cranes her neck to see what it is he's doing there. For a moment she thinks he's pissing – his hands seem to flutter somewhere in front of him, his back arches oddly. There is a flower bed there, but he isn't stooping. The boy is pissing on her flowers, on the neat rows of anemones and petunias that she herself planted and that Phong tended for several summers. Marjorie isn't certain what she should do. But then the boy, with an elaborate shudder, moves away, lugging a large garbage bag. Still, Marjorie stands there until the doorbell rings, and leaves to answer it, disappointed.

Marjorie doesn't recognize the woman standing on her doorstep. But she recognizes the little girl clinging to her leg. These are the people next door, from the O'Hara's yard. The woman is pregnant – *God!* Marjorie thinks. *Is everyone pregnant these days?* – all white doughy flesh and bumpy cellulite thighs. She shouldn't be wearing shorts. Her toenails are bright pink. And the little girl has that same tangled hair, screaming for a good brushing. She's the one with the *101 Dalmations* bathing suit.

"I'm sorry to bother you," the woman is saying. "But I can't find my little girl. Jessica. The older one?"

Marjorie waits. The woman's hair is the color blonde you get when you do it yourself.

"I was on the phone and she wandered off."

"Again!" this little girl blurts. "Mommy says stay in the yard or in the pool and Jessica just doesn't listen."

"Ashley does," the woman says, touching the top of her daughter's head. "But Jessica has a mind of her own."

"Then she lies and says she was right upstairs in her room or something," the little girl adds.

The woman shrugs, a what-are-you-going-to-do motion that irritates Marjorie. *What you're going to do,* Marjorie thinks, *is watch your children, comb their hair, and stay off the telephone.*

"I'm sorry," she says. "I haven't seen her."

"If you do," the woman says, "can you give us a holler?"

"Yes," Marjorie says. "Of course." And they live close enough that a holler would do it too. Disgusted, she closes the door.

That night, they still haven't found the little girl. While Marjorie and Gary eat their salads on the patio, they can hear the mother give an

anguished description and details to the police, whose car sits in the middle of the street sending a blue light across Marjorie's yard.

"The woman can't keep track of those children," Marjorie tells Gary. "It's no surprise that one has gotten herself lost."

"They're like little ragamuffins," Gary says. He has turned the patio light on himself tonight, and the paper is spread around him like a fairy-tale princess's hair. "Little sweet girls," he adds, distracted, turning a page.

Gary is a messy newspaper reader; he turns it all inside out, pulls the guts of one part away from where it belongs and leaves the whole thing in disarray. If Marjorie doesn't read it first, she can't piece it back together into a shape that makes sense. She has not read today's yet, and watching Gary tear it apart she knows she won't get the chance now.

Bonnie's news grabs hold of Marjorie. She isn't supposed to tell Gary; Bonnie and Ted want to break the news themselves, in some elaborate manner, at the appropriate time. Bonnie has asked her mother to act surprised when they do. Still, she wants to see Gary's private reaction herself. All day the word *grandmother* has scraped away at Marjorie's insides, eroding pieces of her.

"Gary," she says, her voice low enough to hold a secret.

From behind them, cutting through the kitchen, comes a man's voice.

"Excuse me?" it calls. "Mrs. Macomber?"

Marjorie jumps to her feet, banging her thighs on the sharp metal table. Gary looks at her.

"Probably the police," he says, calmly. "Canvassing the neighborhood."

Marjorie remembers how the garden boy, Justin, stood so long by the fence that morning.

Gary has stood too, to answer the door. But Marjorie grabs him by the arm, hard.

"That boy you hired," she hisses. "Justin. He was up to something over by their yard." She indicates with a tilt of her head so there's no confusing what yard she means.

"By the flower bed, you mean?" Gary says.

"No," she whispers.

The policemen are knocking, banging the M-shaped knocker against the door with an urgent desperation.

"I think he was masturbating," she tells Gary. *Is that what she had thought?* she wonders.

Gary laughs. "Marjorie," he says, in that same affectionate way that seems, now, condescending.

Marjorie remembers how long he stood there, his arms jerking about. She remembers the way he shuddered before he moved on.

"I'm telling you," she says.

But Gary is shaking his head, laughing to himself, heading toward the door.

By the time she joins him, he has already assured the policeman they have not seen the little girl. He is shaking the policeman's hand.

Another policeman comes heavily up the front walk.

"Joe," he says, "we got her. She's been in the garage all day. Hiding."

"Jesus," the first one says. He looks at Gary. "Sorry to bother you."

"They don't watch that child," Marjorie blurts.

She is, oddly, relieved that the little girl has been found. Maybe Justin was just weeding over there. Her own imagination seems enormous, out of control.

"She says she was scared to come out," the second policeman says. "Won't say what she's scared of. Just that she's scared."

"They probably watch horribly scary things," Marjorie tells them, even though no one seems to be paying her any attention. "*Jurassic Park* and things of that nature. She's just a little girl."

"Yes, Ma'am," they both say, as if it's something they learn in the police academy.

Gary and Marjorie stand on the front steps and watch them get back in their police car, its blue light spinning silently.

"Remember that sweet little doll Bonnie had?" Gary says. "It wore a ragged sort of dress made of burlap? And it had a big tear stuck to its cheek?"

"'Little Miss No Name'," Marjorie says.

She can't imagine why Gary would remember that doll of Bonnie's, or any doll, for that matter. He hardly seemed to notice Bonnie when she was a little girl. He was too busy then, trying to earn money, to make a name for himself at the insurance company where he now holds the largest office, the corner one with its own cubicle for a secretary, its wide view of things below.

"Yes," Gary says, closing the door. "Those little girls remind me of that doll. Unkempt but lovable."

"Really?" Marjorie says, surprised. "They aren't lovable at all to me."

"Mrs. Macomber?" Justin says.

He has a way of appearing behind her, out of nowhere, and frightening her. It is very hot today, and humid. He is covered with a shiny layer of sweat, and standing close enough that his smell seems to cling to Marjorie.

"I can't find the gasoline, for the mower. Maybe you're out?"

Marjorie sighs. She has left the cool comfort of central air conditioning inside just long enough to get in her car and drive to the pool at the club. All she has on is a navy blue shift dress, her bathing suit underneath, and sandals. She doesn't want to get all hot and sweaty rummaging through the garage.

"Well," she says, "did you root around inside?" She motions toward the garage behind them. Between them, the hot air ripples. What was it Bonnie said he looked like? A god? Dizzy from the heat, Marjorie can agree. But he smells so un-godly, so earthbound. She wishes he would wear a shirt, at least.

"That's how I know you're out," he says, cocky.

She can't imagine Gary would let something like this happen. It's his job to take care of things like gasoline for the lawn mower, and oil changes for both cars. And hiring gardeners, she adds, turning around and going into the cool dark of the garage. She never comes in here. It smells like

metal and fuel, a smell that tastes metallic on her tongue. The light has to be turned on by a string that hangs from a bulb somewhere; she can't find it. But the boy has followed her inside and says, "It's supposed to be over here."

Instead of searching for the light, Marjorie follows him to one distant corner. She wonders if she's ruining her sandals, getting motor oil on them.

"See for yourself," he says.

She pokes around, among mulch and watering cans and a garden hose coiled up like a snake.

"Hey," the boy says. "Boss."

She turns and he is right up behind her in that way he has. Marjorie feels a dull throb in her groin. *This is so cliché,* she thinks. She wonders what he expects from her. Is he stupid enough to believe she will grab him and take him right here? But as she thinks it she feels a quiver in her thighs, high up.

"You're a stupid, arrogant boy," she says.

He laughs and moves right up to her, pressing her lightly into the bags of mulch. The garden hose is hard against her shins.

"Lady," Justin says, not even bothering to whisper. "You drive me nuts. I mean, I know you're probably even older than my mother, but the way you lay out there all greased up, with that flat stomach and those gorgeous tits, I'm about to go crazy."

Was this really her he was talking about? Marjorie thinks, excited by the idea that a boy who looks like this boy would think of her this way.

"I'm going to be a grandmother," she says.

It is the first time she has ever spoken to him in such a voice, inviting and honest. She imagines she has not used this voice in years, since she was a girl not much older than him, before all the things that happen to a person have happened.

"No shit," Justin says, and lets out a low whistle.

Marjorie reaches up and pulls out the rubber band that holds his dark hair in its ponytail. His hair spills out around him like a girl's.

"Can I touch you?" he says.

She is surprised he asks; his boldness and confidence imply that he just takes what he wants.

As if someone else is controlling her movements, Marjorie takes his hand and moves it under her shift, inside her bathing suit, to where she is hot and wet.

He moans.

Is it possible that she still has this kind of power over someone so young and beautiful? His fingers, rough from garden work, slip inside her and move in the right way. She wonders how many girls he has had, so young?

When Marjorie was in high school and college she believed her virginity was a precious thing, and she held on to it until she and Gary were properly engaged, the wedding date set, everything official. What she did in those days – and what she has not done since – was to take boys into her mouth, feel them swell and push and then burst with come that she used to drink up.

It had seemed back then, groping in cars, burning for sex – her too! she had wanted it as badly as she wants this boy now – that taking them in her mouth was a less intimate act than the real one. That it was somehow all right; that it didn't count. And even though now she knows better, knows it is much more intimate to swallow someone's come, that it does, indeed, count, she kneels on top of the coiled hose and unzips Justin's cut-off jeans – no underwear! His penis springs out at her, beautiful, young, hard. A pale blue vein pulsates across the length of it; Marjorie takes all of him in her mouth, and it is as if she is a young girl herself, a teenager in someone's white Impala, kneeling on the dusty floor, swallowing every inch of them.

Justin comes in such a loud burst, shooting warm come into her mouth, grasping her head between his hands so that he is even deeper, forcing his come down her throat. It is bitter, lovely. When he finally slides from her mouth, he kneels too, on the hard cold floor, and kisses her for the first time, as gentle as a baby.

Bonnie and Ted have invited them for dinner. This is the night, Marjorie supposes, that Bonnie will tell them the good news. But ever since the morning she first went into the garage with Justin six weeks ago, Marjorie has felt disembodied. She waits for him to arrive on Wednesday and Saturday mornings; she watches from the little window over the kitchen sink as he weeds and clips and mows. By the time he arrives she is all ready for him – a dress, her sandals, and nothing underneath. Marjorie is forty-nine years old and she has never done anything like this. She has been a faithful wife, a good mother, a friend and neighbor whom others rely on. As summer wears on, she has even helped the woman next door, now almost obscenely pregnant, search for this oldest daughter, Jessica, who hides in small places and will not talk.

Still she meets Justin in the garage, goes to the dark cold corner, and does things with him that she has not done since she was young. She and Gary, who always have had a good solid sex life – even now, married twenty-seven years, they make love once or twice a week. Even now, there are surprises, like that night on the patio.

But there is nothing like this, with this boy, except what she had when she was young and passionate, the hands everywhere, in and out of holes, the desperate licking, as if they could actually literally devour each other. And then, *this* Saturday morning, she finally took him inside her house and inside her, right upstairs on Bonnie's childhood bed, with the white eyelet spread bought at Bloomingdale's, and the frilled canopy that made Bonnie believe she might be a princess.

And now here is Marjorie, in her navy blue summer slacks and striped boat neck cotton sweater, her crotch filled with the ache that good long sex leaves with you, sitting in her daughter's living room at the beach house with an ice-cold martini, chewing on cashews, listening to Gary and Ted discuss their morning golf game. She had forgotten what young boys were like, how they stayed hard so long, and could make love twice in the same morning, growing hard again so quickly.

"How is that gorgeous thing?" Bonnie asks Marjorie.

Marjorie holds her breath.

"That god that Daddy hired for the yard," Bonnie says.

"He's off to college," Gary answers. "Phong's son is going to take over next week."

"But that can't be," Marjorie says, with too much enthusiasm so that they are all staring at her, confused. "I mean," she stammers, "he isn't bright enough for college."

Gary shrugs. "Just the state school. But he'll be living there. Besides, you don't like him. Mother thinks he's going to steal something. Or murder us."

Ted and Gary laugh, but Bonnie is studying her mother's face, and frowning. Marjorie recognizes the bloated, blotchy skin of early pregnancy.

"I think Mother has a crush on this boy," Bonnie says finally. She eats the olive out of Ted's martini, and sits back, self-satisfied.

"Absolutely," Marjorie says, coolly. "Every morning when he's finished with his work, I take him inside and make love to him until Daddy pulls up from golf. He's delicious actually."

Only Gary laughs. "That's a good one, old girl," he says, slapping her knee.

Ted and Bonnie look at each other, embarrassed.

Then Ted refills all the drinks, and stands, raising his own martini glass, his initials TBC etched into it, and says, "Well, then. It seems time for a toast."

He's practically bursting with his news. Marjorie feels smug, satisfied. She already knows their news, and she has secrets of her own. *Good ones,* she thinks, still feeling the sting of Gary's playful slap.

"A toast," Ted says, "to the new, about-to-be grandparents."

Gary looks shocked. His cheeks redden. "My God," he says, then shakes Ted's hand with ridiculous enthusiasm, as if, Marjorie thinks, fucking is something to be congratulated.

"Here's to me then," she says. At first, downing the cold martini, she is smiling at her own little joke. But suddenly, from nowhere, she finds herself crying. Sobbing, really. Unable to stop, to catch her breath, to do anything but stand there and cry.

Marjorie does the unthinkable. She waits for Justin to come loping up the street and, before he can disappear into the garage to get the lawn mower, she calls him inside, in a too-loud voice – those new people seem to be everywhere, all the time.

"Justin!" Marjorie says. "I need some help with the air conditioning system. It's making an odd noise."

He stands at the foot of the driveway, thumbs hooked in his cutoffs' pockets, smirking.

"Really?" he says. "I'm not very good with electrical stuff." He speaks loudly, too.

In high school, Marjorie was an actress, the star of all the school plays – *Our Town* and *Streetcar Named Desire* and, in her senior year, *The Children's Hour*. She has forgotten how that felt, to be on stage, to be watched, until right now.

"I'm hot," she announces. "It can't wait."

And then she does the really unthinkable. Marjorie leads him into *her* room, hers and Gary's, onto *their* bed. The room is, she realizes as Justin stands naked in the middle of it, stuffy and imposing. The smell of peach potpourri hangs in the air with its false aroma, not at all reminiscent of peaches. It's the room of two old people. Marjorie sees that now.

But Justin is on her, with his sex talk, dirty and guttural in a way that no one has ever spoken to her.

"Give me that pussy," he says. "Fuck me."

And later he tells her that her tits are fantastic, that she tastes so good, that her ass drives him nuts. The talk does something to her, to *them*, because even though the clock – a silly old lady clock from a long ago trip to Germany, Switzerland and Austria – is inching toward noon, when Gary gets back from golf and late-morning martinis, Marjorie is back on Justin, frantically pulling him into her.

The voice that floats up from downstairs – *"Mrs. Macomber? You home?"* – frightens Marjorie so much that she yelps, and thinks for a moment she might faint.

"Mrs. Macomber?"

Marjorie grabs her robe, pulls it on, and races downstairs where, standing in the foyer, is the mother from next door.

"I'm sorry to bother you," the woman says, frowning. Her maternity top, pink with blue giraffes bouncing across her grossly large belly, is pulled tight.

Marjorie knows what she's thinking, how odd it is for someone like Marjorie to be still in her robe this late in the morning. Is she thinking too that the garden boy has come in and never gone back out? The lawn is unmown, the hedges unclipped. Dandelions poke their heads out here and there.

"I was getting into the shower," Marjorie says.

A thin stream of come trickles out of her, down her thigh, and she pushes her legs together.

"It's just Jessica again," the woman says, arms open in apology. "Except this time she took Ashley with her."

"You know she hides in the garage," Marjorie says.

The grandfather's clock chimes noon; Gary could walk in right now. Upstairs, Justin is naked, hard, waiting. And more than anything, that is where Marjorie wants to be too, with that boy, in his tattooed arms, feeling his long hair on her breasts. For a crazy moment, Marjorie thinks she will run off with him. She will leave everything and go with this boy somewhere.

Annoyed, Marjorie says, "Have you looked in the garage?"

The woman blushes and nods.

"It's just so hard for me to get around," she explains. "And it's so hot out." Then she looks at Marjorie, expressionless, and says, "It ain't hot in here, though. Is it?"

Marjorie meets her gaze. Beneath the pink silk of her robe, she feels her heart fluttering like a butterfly trapped in a jar.

"Let me get dressed," she says finally.

The woman smiles a broad smile that shows all her small teeth.

Marjorie was right; Justin is still on her bed, stretched out naked, stroking his penis.

"You have to get dressed," she says, turning her back to him as she takes off the robe and slips on a beige cotton shift.

"Not until you come here and sit on this," he says.

Everything seems to be off-balance, Marjorie thinks. Because she is afraid the woman knows, and she is afraid that Gary will walk in, and yet she takes the shift back off and does what Justin asks, and riding him, she imagines again that she will leave here with him, that they will just do this, somewhere, anywhere.

When they are both done, toppled over him, she says, "You didn't say you were leaving. Going to college." Saying it, she feels as betrayed as she did when her high-school boyfriend – a year older – left her behind to go off to Yale.

"Yeah," he says, his fingers tangled in her hair. "Well."

Marjorie sits up, looks down at him, at the sweaty curled hair that climbs down his chest and belly, and his penis laying pink and soft, pointing lazily upward.

"We could go away together," she says.

"Like to the beach or something?" he asks her, puzzled.

"No," Marjorie tells him. "Really away. Run off."

Justin laughs. "You're crazy," he says.

But he is happy with the idea. She can tell by the way he pulls her back down to kiss her, fully, on her bruised lips.

By the time Marjorie appears next door, the girls have been found. They make themselves small, roll into tight balls, like a Persian cat Marjorie once had. She stands in the open garage door, where their mother kneels before them. Both girls are sucking their thumbs. The younger one has her eyes closed, and she rocks back and forth like she is trying to soothe herself, to go to sleep.

"I knew they were okay," Marjorie announces. Her voice is bright; maybe tomorrow or the day after she will be gone.

The mother turns toward her. "But they say they're not," she tells Marjorie.

Marjorie is impatient with this woman, who clutters the neighborhood, the O'Hara's yard, with *Lion King* swimming pools and lost children, who has babies she can't take care of, and expects everyone to give her a hand.

"But here they are," Marjorie says. "Fine." Actually, they don't *look* fine. They look frightened or even a little crazy.

The older one says, talking around her thumb, "The bogeyman got me again."

The younger girl nods, eyes still closed, rocking back and forth.

Their mother gets to her feet with some difficulty. "That's what I've been hearing all fucking summer."

Her language out here on a bright summer day shocks Marjorie.

"The bogeyman, the bogeyman. They say he comes in here and gets

them. First it was just Jessica. Now Ashley's starting too."

"He's hairy! And he's ugly!" Ashley blurts. "And he hurts us!" She runs past her mother and Marjorie, into the house. .

The older girl says solemnly, "He has a big long thing, like a dragon has maybe, and he makes us touch it and today he put it in my mouth until fire came out."

Of course it's the girl's imagination talking. Marjorie can't believe it's anything else.

"My God," the mother says. "What is she telling me?" The woman looks to Marjorie and asks again. "What is she saying?"

When Gary gets home it is after two, and he has had too many martinis.

"I'm drunk," he says happily. "God, it's good to get drunk in the middle of the day." He is red-faced and red-eyed.

Marjorie has put her robe back on and is sitting in the cool dark of the family room. She is almost happy for her husband's drunkeness; she has not showered away all of the sex she had that morning, she has not made the bed. She has simply sat here, trying to piece together what is going on. Gnawing at her is that she was right all along; something is very wrong with Justin. He has done something to those little girls. But when? she keeps thinking. She watched him come up the street. And she reminds herself how the older girl is a liar; someone has said that.

Sloppily, Gary makes room for himself on the chair where she sits. He licks her neck. When she pulls away, he says, "I'm probably too damn drunk anyway."

She doesn't know why she brings it up, but she says, "There's something going on next door. With those children."

Gary buries his head in her chest and murmurs, "Why you smell funny! All sweaty! Where's your kiwi soap and your grapefruit bubblebath? You smell like you've been in the hot yard."

Marjorie tries to pull away, but he holds on too tight. She says, "You don't think Justin would do anything to those girls, do you?" She laughs when she says it out loud. "That's ridiculous," she says. "I know it is." Somehow, she does know it. They have told themselves ghost stories, the way children do, and frightened each other. They need friends. They need to go to day camp somewhere and make bracelets out of gimp and eat s'mores.

"Oh," Gary says, "those beautiful delicate little things. That one, that littlest one, has yellow in her eyes, like that old tabby we used to have. She is the prettier one, I think." He climbs onto Marjorie's lap, awkward and drunk, smelling of booze, and wraps his arms around her. "I wish I could," he mutters, resting his head on her shoulders, "but I'm too drunk and tired and old. Probably in this condition, that gardener you like so little could still manage. But I'm a grandfather, after all."

Marjorie cannot get her own arms around him, so they sit there, like that, for too long, in the cool, dim room.

It is later that night, as Marjorie stands over the hot stove frying bacon for a bacon and egg supper, that Gary, head aching, breath sour, says: "I'm

so ashamed."

The bacon hisses and splatters Marjorie's arm, burning her.

"It's just that I told them our news, about Bonnie and the baby coming, and they kept toasting me, buying more drinks." Gary stares into his cup of black coffee. "It's humiliating really."

Marjorie takes the bacon from the pan and lays it to drain on paper towels decorated with homespun advice: *Home is where the heart is. There's no place like home. Friends and family matter most.* She cracks eggs, four of them, right into the hot bacon grease. This is what makes the best fried eggs, she knows.

As they cook, she studies them, the way the white part bleeds and the yolk clots.

"How do you know about that girl's eyes?" Marjorie says.

"What girl?" Gary asks, and Marjorie hears the chair squeak across the floor as he sits up straighter.

"The little one next door. Ashley." She prods at the eggs with a spatula, letting the hot grease seep beneath them.

"I don't know about her eyes," Gary says. "Those poor little things," he adds, changing the direction. "No one tends them at all. They smell sour, you know."

Their faces float above the heat that rises from the frying pan, the snarled hair and frightened faces.

"They're just children," Marjorie says, her voice flat and even. "Little girls."

Gary doesn't answer. When she finally turns to face him, he has his face buried in his hands. She watches his shoulders shaking, sees the bright red of a flush creep across his forehead and scalp. Outside, the automatic timer sends light across the patio and the ragged lawn. Beyond it, Marjorie can see the sloped roof of the new people's house, where inside those little girls are doing what – cowering? hiding? telling everything? Smoke rises from the burning grease and eggs, foul.

Marjorie stumbles to the sliding glass door and yanks it open. She steps onto the patio, its stones cold on her bare feet, and she keeps walking. The grass – twice now she has kept Justin from doing what he came here to do – is wet and scratchy on her ankles. She goes to the garage and takes the mower from its place, and pushes it out to the yard. It spits, then turns on, and Marjorie takes all her strength, everything, to push it in a zigzag line across her yard, cutting away the weeds and grass. Funny how the yard looks so flat until you do this, until you push this way; then you see how uphill it really is. She mows and mows, unable to put her thoughts in any order that makes sense. The timer shuts off, leaving just her kitchen illuminated, with her husband sitting at the table, unmoving, a distinguished man with silver hair.

In the darkness, Marjorie chews up flowers, fallen twigs. When the silent blue light from a police car spins across her old, stately yard, she keeps going. They are outside her house, those policeman. They are about to come in.

VASSAR MILLER

To a Fellow Spastic

Yes, often I have wondered why
We two were born so, you and I,
And all the rest of us who come
To birth: the blind, the maimed, the dumb.

Do shambling hands and feet indite
A prophecy against delight?
Does ugliness recall afresh
The mortal defect in the flesh?

Yet take that man whose height averred
Itself the height of the absurd –
The goose-necked fellow used to stare
All privacy from earth and air.

He made me think of those who go
Seeking some faceless dream. Just so,
A halting hope, a stumbling doubt –
We are men's souls turned inside out.

Our tears that we suppose drain off
Only into the narrow trough
Of self are the same instant swirled
Around the sorrow of the world.

No Surprises

The T.V. antenna might become a rose,
the rocking chair a unicorn,
the walls a ring of fairy mountains.
Instead,
only myself and the world,
so here, so there,
a dull married couple
with their terse interchange of hot, cold,
clock, car, plumbing, groceries,
cat, spoon –
their fixed lines never wavering
even for an instant.

Island Carnival

The wrinkled reptile crawling toward the shore
Wriggles its hide, flicks moonlight off its scales.
The ferris wheel, twirled lariat of glare,
Loops our attention while the beast unrolls
Its coils unseen. The hobby horses' tune
Drowns out the monster's snuffle and the hiss
Its tongues make licking silver from its skin.
Let us not glance behind and see, cut loose
A buoy drifting out against the whorls
Of darkness, lest the jangle and the stir
From Whitecap Playland seeming like a girl's
Giggle before assault, we tremble for
The little mile man's toothpick towers cover
Before the sea. . . before the sea takes over.

Song of Science

This is how the music goes –
Stone and star and stalactite,
All composed must decompose.

Morning's bud bloomed evening's rose
Drops its petals into night.
This is how the music goes.

Like the tune or not, it grows
In crescendos height on height:
All composed must decompose.

Time sings only what it knows,
With no care for bliss or blight.
This is how the music goes.

Yet the deadliest of foes
Turning, puts himself to flight.
All composed must decompose.

Chaos into chaos flows,
Darkness shattering to light:
This is how the music goes,
All composed must decompose.

ROBERT LUNDAY

"My Whole Heart in my Eyes": Vassar Miller

"Is expression the same as guilt?" asks Gottfried Benn, in his essay "Artists and Old Age," written, as you might guess, in his old age: guilt, it seems, at the possibility of having wrongly chosen expression as the truth, pure and simple. But he doesn't bother fretting for long: "There is no turning the clock back. The things of the mind are irreversible; they go right along their road to the end, right to the end of night." And a little later: "What you don't say will not be there then," that is, when the epoch of your life, or of all lives, is done.

Such is the conflict in a German expressionist of the century's first half. But Vassar Miller, a poet of the second half, suffering from the harsh betrayals of her body, took expression no more lightly than Benn. You could say her body resembled an expressionist object: it seemed to have fought the battle between interior meaning and the exterior limits to meaning. She lived a long life and fought hard, an activist always, even when she could no longer move or act of her own free will. She took the notion that thought makes us free as a direct challenge, because in the end, for several years at the end, gesture, expression, the full ability to write as she wanted, were only a dream.

Twelve years ago on Cape Cod I worked as a reader for another disabled artist, the painter Myron Stout, who had gone almost completely blind some years earlier. He told me of the day he put his brushes and pencils down, making the loss concurrent with his will. One day he took me back into his studio, and the sight of it made me see the value of his decision: I could see it, in the unfinished paintings, the materials left lying where they had last been put down, years earlier; I could see the decisive will, and later it struck me that someone can be an artist even after they've lost the ability to make art – not merely by resting on laurels, by talking about art, by having been an artist, but by making the silence itself a form of expression.

Critics of Vassar Miller's poetry have often focused on the references to silence in her work. At least two contrast the poet's and the mystic's attitudes to silence by arguing that the mystic seeks the silence itself, whereas the poet intends to return to us, to speak of what she found. I'd rather say that Vassar worked within a vast continuum between the good silence of prayer and meditation, and the bad silence of isolation and loneliness. We who were ready to listen – I, for one, joined very late – most likely could not begin to understand either end of the continuum as well as she did. And at which end is the truth, pure and simple?

For a brief period, a little more than a year, I worked a few times a week for Vassar, reading to her and helping her write: letters, a few

attempts at poems, and – chiefly – her autobiography. Vassar had cerebral palsy; she achieved a kind of celebrity status, at least in her native Houston, as a result of her achievements in the face of this disabling illness. Several years ago, it was the degradation of her living situation that brought renewed attention from the local press; without proper care, she had lost all her money, her home, her books and most of her personal possessions, and the last of her many beloved animals. Her physical condition had greatly deteriorated, much more, perhaps, than if she had not been so severely neglected by others, and had not neglected herself over the previous decade before she hit bottom.

One good circumstance arose from her misfortune: the woman who bought her house, Sue Nash, became Vassar's legal guardian, giving her the attention she should have had much sooner. It was necessary, though, for Vassar to live her last few years in a nursing home. Her body had almost completely failed her: she could not walk or use her hands; her speech was very labored and difficult to comprehend; she could not eat or drink, and was nourished by a tube. She did not take well to therapy, and although her friends and admirers had raised funds for her support, no affordable technologies could be found to give her back some of her earlier autonomy. Everything she wanted had to be asked of somebody else.

I first met Vassar one Sunday in July 1997, while she was waiting in the nursing-home lobby for the para-cab that would take her, as on every Sunday, to the first of two churches she attended. Sue had arranged the meeting, to see if Vassar and I could get on together; a lengthy search had failed to turn up anyone willing to stick with the job. That summer I was out of work. Frankly, if I had not been so desperate, I would have declined the opportunity. Even so, I made excuses for several weeks, because I couldn't force myself back to the nursing home. It was not the best or the worst of such places; but it was the best that could be done for Vassar, because she was "difficult." For all her immobility, or rather because of her immobility, she could raise a mean ruckus. How else could she have called attention to herself? And she wanted attention, not only to satisfy those needs most of us take for granted, but to keep giving us what she had. Vassar Miller was the sort of person who wants to be in on everything. She wasn't only an activist; she used to throw a great party as well.

The nursing home depressed me. You entered through a grand, very Southern portico, as if something venerable and genteel waited inside. Once in the lobby, the sense of gentility was replaced by a phantasmagoria of smells, none of them pleasant, and the residents, all of them in different stages of physical and mental decay, either looked at visitors with deep yearning, or seemed to apprehend nothing at all. Many sat in wheelchairs, dressed in robes and smocks, lined up in the hallways; if they could walk, they did so aimlessly. Occasionally someone somewhere would scream, or a pathetic argument would break out. Many of the staff seemed compassionate and competent, but a few were cold to the residents; even in the presence of outsiders, they could be quite hateful at times. It seemed a battle on both sides to maintain some semblance of decency and respect. Medication, fading out, watching television, and dwelling on the past seemed to me the few modes of escape available to the residents.

Vassar's writing her life was an attempt at escape, but it was also much more. One of her critics, Paul Christensen, drawing from some beautiful lines in the sonnet-sequence "Love's Bitten Tongue," calls Vassar's deep religiosity an attempt at recovering the past:

> Of praying may (in mercy become prayer)
> My backward journey be – Christ, teach me this!*

But her faith was more than a search for her own past, or for the greater human past. It was a search for her true, whole self. Her effort at autobiography seemed to me an act of religious devotion: she meant it to tie her back to the world she loved, in spite of the close prison she felt her final circumstances to be.

The nursing home bothered me, no doubt, because it was a warning of my future, of everyone's: in our culture, we need to put the aged and dying away from us. The resulting loneliness and aimlessness I witnessed in that home disturbed me far more than the sickness and the impending death. Thankfully, I found a way to put aside my own selfish concerns, and Vassar and I got to work. When I'd met her in July, she had been listless and dull; the woman who greeted me when I walked into her room for the first time, in September, was energized, happy, and ready to write. It took me a while to understand just how much of a gift I was receiving: my time with Vassar was the most creative relationship I've had – even though, in a sense, we failed. The autobiography never really took shape; Vassar's energies could not stay charged throughout the period of our collaboration. But the things we both learned while looking for the architectonic of her life, for its literary shape and purpose, helped give Vassar the strength to die bravely, and have given me a cause for writing I could not have imagined without her.

When I arrived at Vassar's room each session, I'd find her propped expectantly in her wheelchair, facing the open door. She got upset when anyone tried to close the door to her room, even slightly; I think she was afraid of any confinement over what she had already surrendered to. Her existence was all waiting: for me; for Nathen, the private therapist who read to her in the morning; for her sister Joy; for Sue, or for the few church-friends and others who paid her brief visits when they could. She had more visitors than any other resident in the home, as far as I could tell. Her mind was still strong, though her body wasn't; she had a great need for stimulation. Classical music on the radio was her most consistent, dependable companion; I think she kept her sanity throughout all the waiting, mainly because of the music.

Although I knew her as a greatly talented poet, within those walls she was just another sick, old woman. She had few opportunities to talk with people about the things that mattered to her; even some of the people who knew her and should have known better sometimes talked to her as if she were a child. One had to learn how to listen to her difficult speech, but also how to read her expressions and gestures. She was often emotionally distressed, and it is easy to understand how people could fail to perceive, in her contorted body and harsh voice, the woman of great complexity that

* *If I Had Wheels or Love: Collected Poems of Vassar Miller.* Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1991.

she was. Sometimes I was guilty of it as well. She never got angry with me; but several times, it was too much for her to accept that I had to leave after only a couple of hours, usually to go teach a class, or to pick up my son at school. It wasn't selfishness that made her want me to stay. She was terrified by the knowledge that she'd have no one to transcribe her fleeting thoughts, most likely no one to talk to at all, until Nathen came back the next morning. So she'd panic, and scream for mercy as I was leaving; it unnerved me, made me feel guilty, and I resented her for it. But always, the thought of her courage cleared away the negatives. She was a writer who couldn't lift a pen; she couldn't make her simplest ideas or most basic needs known to others without great effort; she craved real food, sustenance she could taste, and longed for some brief, simple form of communion with the old friends and family who'd abandoned her, and, it must be said, whom she had sometimes driven away.

Part of my regret is not for Vassar, but for the rest of us: that such a relatively small number of people came to her, and thus only a few were able to learn from her. She deeply appreciated even the slightest consideration paid to her, and that was perhaps the most remarkable thing. There was nothing pathetic about it. To a stranger, perhaps, Vassar's physical condition cut her off from normality; but despite her frequent depression and loneliness, she knew herself that her own condition was part of what connected her to the rest of us. There is no individual blame to be apportioned: that we seal ourselves off from the gifts of the old and the sick is simply one mark of the world we live in.

From the funds raised for her, her guardian bought a computer for Vassar, and it sat beside her bed, dominating the room. She was very suspicious of it, having written all her life by pecking at a typewriter. Sometimes she spoke of selling it, and using the money to buy another typewriter, and to pay for more assistance; she would have preferred the company to the technology. But the main benefit of the computer was that she could look at her words as I typed them: Vassar spoke, I typed, and although she often had to repeat herself, or spell out each word, we made good progress during the first few months. After a while, I could sometimes type ahead of her speaking, having learned the contexts she was giving to her life. But the physical effort was exhausting for her. We rarely worked for more than half an hour, after which we would read: biographies and autobiographies, nineteenth-century novels, books on science, religion, and history, and of course poetry. Every book gave her a dozen others to add to her list; we usually had several going at once, in addition to those books Nathen and a few other people were reading to her. Sometimes she'd make me stop before we got to the end of a book, I think because she nurtured the superstition that an unfinished book would prolong life. In any case, she hated good-byes; and closing a good book is saying good-bye.

I realized along the way that writing is very much a physical act. At home, when I sat at my own computer or picked up a pen, that material base would assert itself. Writing and thinking is of the hands, the whole body: thumb-twiddling, hovering, shifting, propping the chin, head-scratching, sighing in disgust and flinging back in the chair. Never mind the walking into the world, seeing something new every day: for Vassar, the

world mostly had to walk in on her. Most of us write in solitude, even when others are nearby; Vassar was forced to have someone present to write. That need made it much more difficult for her to receive inspiration. So the irony was that she spent so much time alone, tortured by ideas she could not write down herself; and yet, when I was there, she could not fully enter the space of her own thoughts.

Even as our process improved, it became more frustrating and difficult for Vassar to break through. The project of her life was too vast; her physical and mental stamina could not maintain the necessary pace, and as we lost momentum, she became afraid of the task, resentful of what she couldn't do, and we wrote only sporadically, sometimes for no more than a few minutes. Most often, in the last months, we'd simply read for the entire session, and sometimes Vassar would nod, finding the sleep that she said wouldn't come at night, that had often evaded her over the years. She wrote several poems on sleeplessness, and connects it to the success or failure of creativity in "Insomniac's Prayer":

> I lie with my body knotted into a fist
> clenching against itself,
> arms doubled against my ribs,
> knees crooking into a gnarl,
> legs, side by side, martialed.
>
> My sleep is a war against waking up,
> my waking up is a slow raveling again into dark
> when dreams jump out of my skull. . . .
> . . .
> Who will nudge the dreams back into my head,
> back into my bones, where rhyming with one another
> like wind chimes,
> they will make music whenever I move?

It is no idle figure that her body "gnarls," that it seeks communication; or that the body is fused to the poetic project. The body of her work is a space for the corporeal body. Her poetry is often twisted by the "strong lines" she learned early on from Donne and Herbert: always formally masterful, beautiful, as if she could live there, and not in the betraying flesh. "Bones" in her poetry is a common figure for some interior, unseen, and yet physically real self – precisely the element of fusion between the two, the part of her that feels the hand of God most acutely.

Religiosity in a contemporary artist is sometimes a stop for people who are allergic to organized faith. Spiritually unmoored myself, I was a little frightened of working with a Christian poet: I tend to get nervous when God is a third party. But Vassar's faith is, as her poetry demonstrates, rigorous and questing. She loved God as she loved her friends, family, and succession of dogs, as she loved poetry, which is not to say that she loved God *no more* than those others, but that it was a real relationship, one that went up and down, and always changed. Much of what we read together was of the variety of beliefs in the world – other religions, and science, which for her was an extension of the religious quest, not a replacement

for it. She was both Episcopalian and liberal Baptist, and somehow the combination made the perfect spiritual matrix for her. She loved vigorous, heated discussion on theological concerns, and was never easily satisfied with what the tradition seemed to demand of a believer:

> We'll form a committee to discuss the Second Coming
> and talk our way out of the Last Judgment,
> not to mention holding debates with death
> as to the appropriate time for its arrival –
>
> Because, had we only known the way to say it,
> our world and hence our lives would have turned out better.
> It is strange, you know, what hangs on the turn of a phrase.
> For instance, the connective *and* once split the Church like an
> apple.
>
> Galileo hauled in his drowning integrity on the reel, "But it does,"
> and under the Nazi noose Bonhoeffer spun out his threads so
> precious
> we have inched across them with a tremulous tread
> uncertain whether we'd fall through them and to which Abyss.
> ("Naming What we Love")

But on the other side, she loved ritual: loved the music, the iconography, and most especially the Eucharist, which comes into many of her poems – "Bedtime Prayer," for example:

> Thank you for Holy Communion this morning,
> although it was the ritual I enjoy most –
> the bowing at the right time, the crossing myself at the right
> place,
> missing no trick –
> like a child with a new toy. . .
> . . .
> Finally, thank You, O Lord, that I am so sleepy.
> I thank You for this without reservation,
> my need urging my gratitude, my gratitude urging my need. . .

"although," because the items on her "thank-you" list are not meant as pleasures (visiting a sick but boring friend, for example), nor as chastisements. The poet has realized that all events of the day, even the failures, are opportunities for communion: need and gratitude, gratitude and need.

Vassar was asked once, in an interview, if her usual preference for writing in rhyme and meter was due to her fondness for hymn and liturgy. She said that the influence was really the other way around: that liturgy was out of poetry, that poetry was the foundation. There is no easy way to separate the faith from the poetry, just as there is no easy separation of her physical hardship from the achievement of her art. She fought to make people pay attention not only to her own condition, but to that of all disabled people. Poetry offered a way to speak of the healing silence she found with God, and also to speak of the painful, isolating silence, the separation between her and the rest of the world, that she sometimes

blamed on her illness. These two forms of silence often trade places. In an early poem like "Faintly and from Far Away":

> Between the wheeze of her torpor and the wind of her falling,
> Between the whey of her face and the snow of its blanching,
> Between the vacuum of her monotone and the voice of its stilling
> Was only the difference between the cicadas on a summer
> afternoon
> And their declining into the bottom of evening,
> Only the difference between the sparrows pecking the rock of
> silence
> And the rock of silence itself.

Or another early poem, "Ceremony," that figures the limits of the body in the conventions of the love poem:

> . . .offering these follies up, these tokens
> Of tokens in this fable of a fire
> Upon an altar no man's structure likens,
> I gesture beyond gesture to explore
> For sign or symbol till the lack of any
> Has clothed my nakedness in ceremony.

I take the "gesture beyond gesture" as transfiguration of the malfunctioning body; the lover is someone human, but also Christ. And the speech-to-one-absent, the paradoxical silence of lyric, also allows some reflection of the poet back to herself, or out toward anyone else now willing to listen, anyone she had tried to reach, whether or not the first effort failed.

In a later poem, "Exile," she seems to fuse even more compactly the figure of Christ with those others: the fugitive lover, her own body, or another "spastic" like herself:

> Wrenched from the wiles of your truth,
> lost on the lawns of our fiction
> somewhere between birdsong and Bach –
>
> you walk the wavering ways of our affection,
> bleeding sometimes from our pavements,
> your tongue lolling in a put-on laugh,
>
> your secret unparsed by our grammars,
> tell me: who can be silent enough
> to speak with you?

This silence and search for shared identity also figures in the poems she wrote for the many animals in her life. "For a Dog":

> You lie there, not sleeping,
> only looking at me,
> who dare not impute to you thought
> and dare not deny it.

Or, in "Sick Dog":

If I look like that, liquor is only
lapping my brain, yet one day I will lie staring
stupefied, stunned,
dumb before doom.

Sometimes I wonder whether the sky is God's wide gaze
embracing me as mine embraces my dog
bowed, burdened under
unendurable strangeness.

The microcosmic shift in the last stanza doesn't diminish the reality of the dog's world; to the contrary, as given elsewhere in the poem, it is the dog's "sniffing death" that allows the poet some real sense of her own death. Vassar seemed terrified of dying; but in truth she simply wanted more time, and did not want to die alone. She spent her last few weeks in the hospital, and although she was well cared for there, she spoke once or twice of the nursing home, that "prison," as *home* – because she knew that her return to it would be a temporary victory.

She never made it back. But when she stopped breathing, one afternoon at the end of October, she had people she loved around her. They took turns in a marathon reading: all night, all day, until she died; and it must have been heaven on earth for her. She had no fear, and was hardly finished with us: a few weeks later, Sue, her guardian and keeper of the last true home, opened a forgotten file cabinet and discovered armfuls of manuscripts – most, it seems, never published, or never collected in book form.

Death pulls us up short. I don't think I can finish the books we were reading together. Somehow the life-story will get written, but it won't be *finished*. I didn't know at first what to read as my part of the funeral service, but I went with the obvious: "Death Song," one of many on the subject, though a late one:

Hear culex mosquitoes sing in my ear,
Minute Bachs composing Komm Süsser Tod
Ad Major Gloria Dei, to God's great glory, where
No composer will find them later, save odd
Folk who may come to my puny grave
Where my bones will lie buried, providing
Nutrients to the living. Till then now
I lie near where my two dogs lie buried
Guarded by a stone St. Francis, who preached
To the wild creatures, God's Little Poor Man,
God's poor retard more likely, who reached
A credulous Pope's attention, as can
People of that ilk. Now those bones are less
Than dust, no longer feeding even the grass.

The sonnet's turn brings us up short; but look how far we went, in such a small space! She loved St. Francis, actually; Chesterton's little book on him was one of our last reads. And the saint in the Pope's ear has learned his way from the (Houston-bred) mosquito. The bones, mangled anyway, can rest; the voice will stay.

Artist Statements

ANN STAUTBERG

Editor's Note: Photographer Ann Stautberg was hired, in the fall of 1998, by the conceptual presentation company ttweak (Randy Twaddle and Dave Thompson), as the still photographer for their documentary film on the Willed Body Donor Program with the working title, "Anatomy and Humanity: Conversations with Donors and Dissectors."

In their letter to the Director of Graduate Studies at the Institute for the Medical Humanities, discussing the prospectus and philosophy of the film, ttweak writes, "We suggest hiring a photographer to take stills of the trip to scatter ashes. We strongly believe that Ann Stautberg is the person for this gig. She lives on Galveston Bay, and the Gulf is the subject of most of her photographs. Her photographs are elegant, straightforward, and convey an absence that seems appropriate to our film."

The four pages of contact sheets reproduced here are from that voyage, fourteen miles out into the international waters of the Gulf of Mexico to scatter the unclaimed ashes.

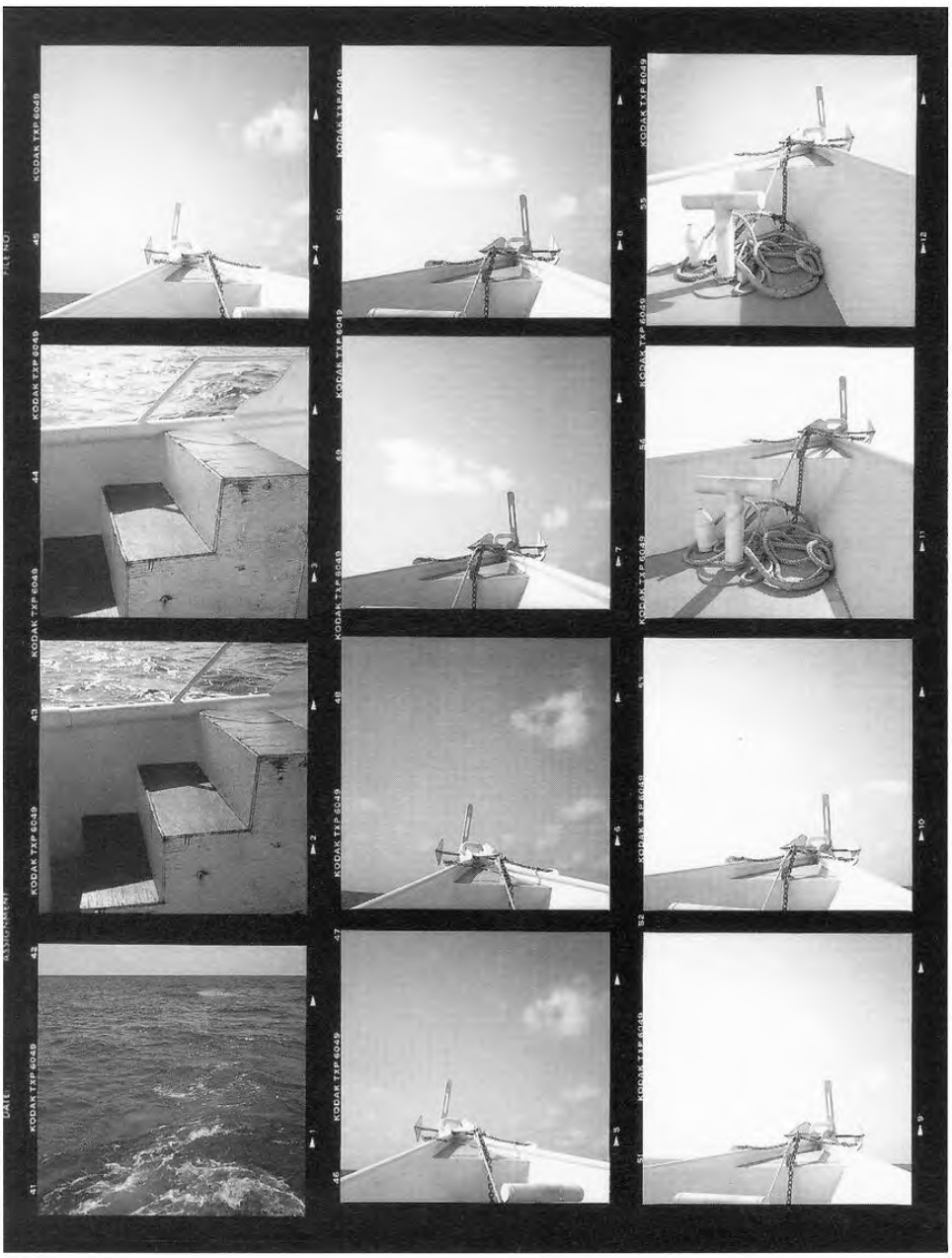
ALISON RUTTAN

The images I make flirt with ideas of excess and libidinal pleasure. Mixing images from pornography and gourmet food magazines, these photographic works draw attention to the indeterminable relationship we have to appetite and desire. Sexually suggestive imagery, in particular, has an ability to undercut ethical boundaries, titillating in seeming disregard for any position one might take regarding the images themselves. I am intrigued and envious of imagery so overwhelming it gathers attention to itself without even trying!

In seeking to create a more complex image I have attempted to counter the immediacy of the pornographic by deliberately slowing it down. I have tried to retain a sense of play while creating compositions that are as distracting as they are engaging. Like the source material I use, this work is most interesting when I can undermine caution or prejudice, slipping in before rational thought can begin to deconstruct the image.

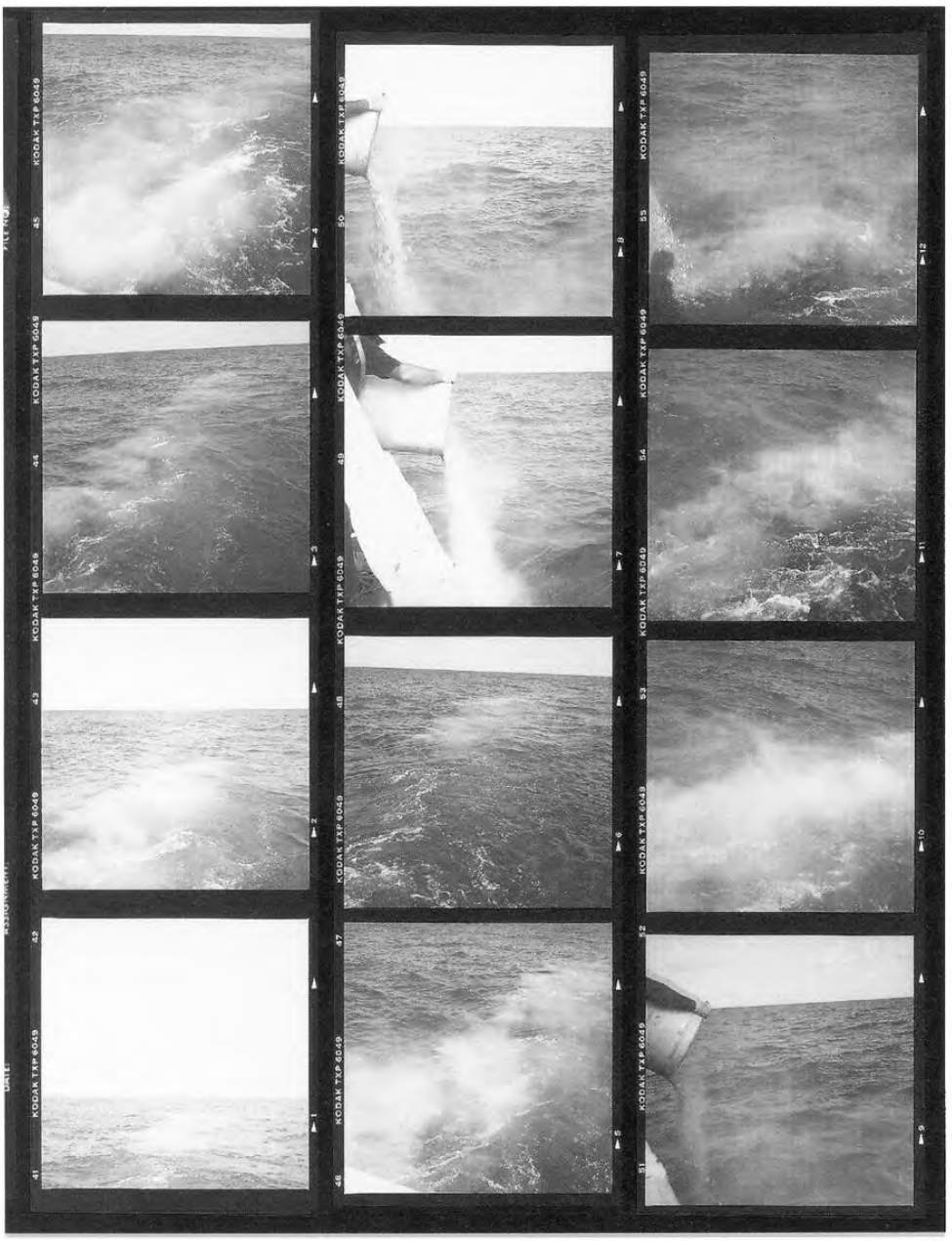
AL SOUZA

These puzzle works are a visual fusion of diverse, popular images and materials. They were arrived at through repetitious activities and chance operations. Associative meanings are provoked by the proximity of the images used and tempered by the meditative motions involved in physically constructing the work. I try to lose myself in the process of the work's creation and hope the same feeling of freedom is imparted to the viewer.

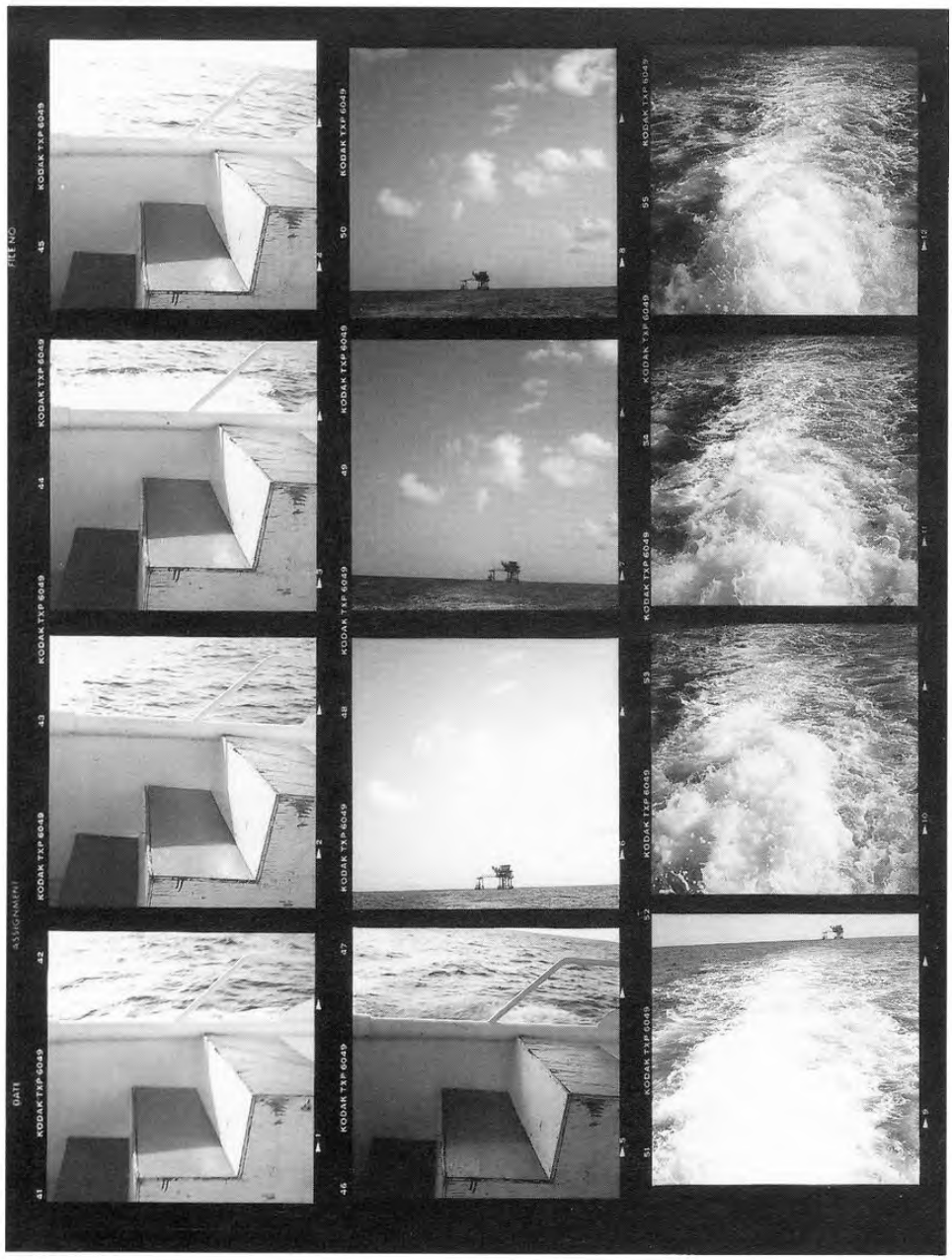


Contact Sheet #6 from "Anatomy and Humanity"
1998
Black and White Photograph, 10" X 8"
Courtesy the Artist and ttweak

Contact Sheet #10 from "Anatomy and Humanity"
1998
Black and White Photograph, 10" X 8"
Courtesy the Artist and ttweak

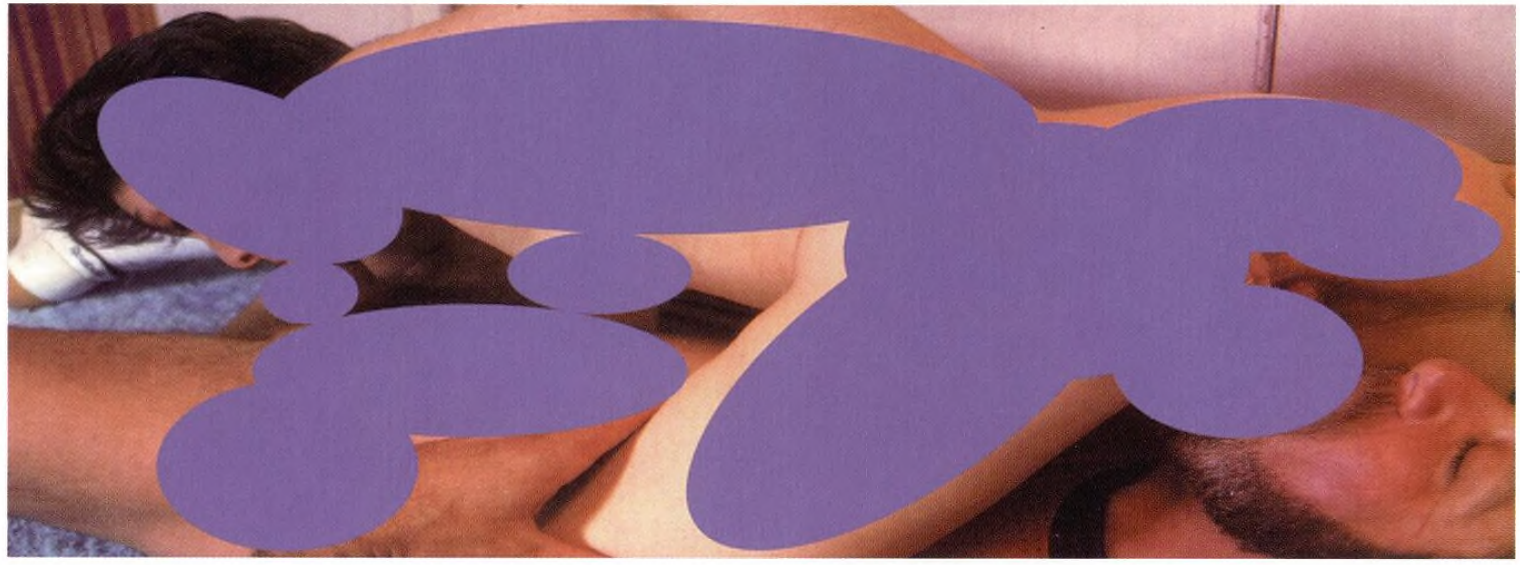


Contact Sheet #12 from "Anatomy and Humanity"
1998
Black and White Photograph, 10" X 8"
Courtesy the Artist and ttweak

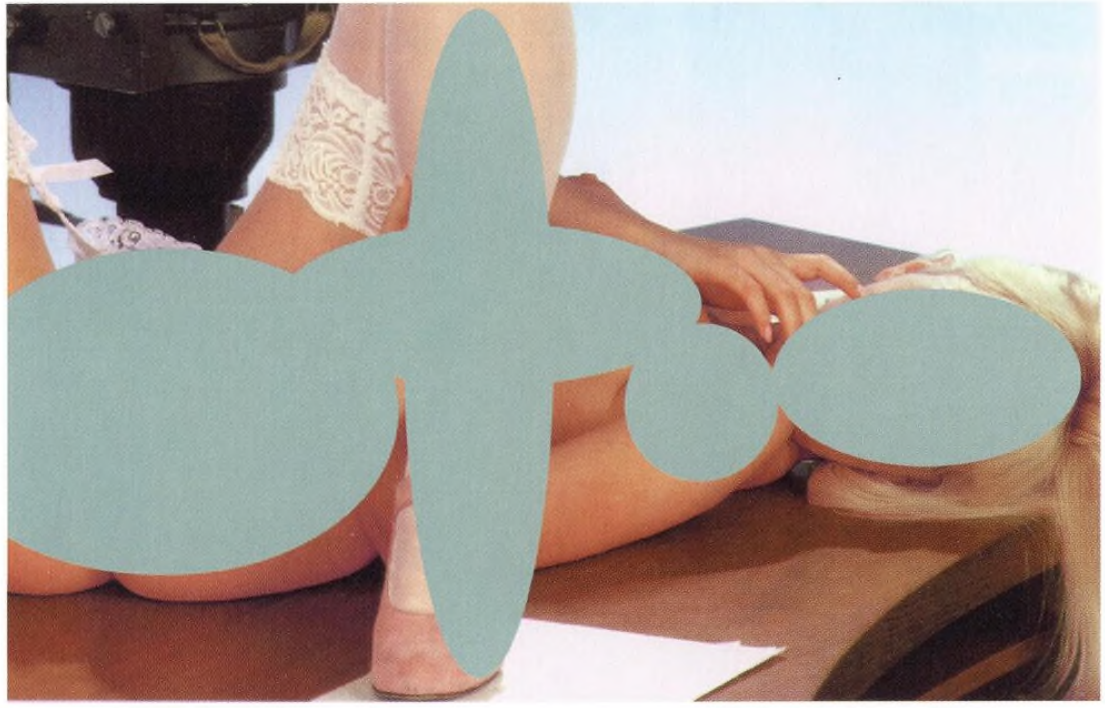


Contact Sheet #13 from "Anatomy and Humanity"
1998
Black and White Photograph, 10" X 8"
Courtesy the Artist and ttweak

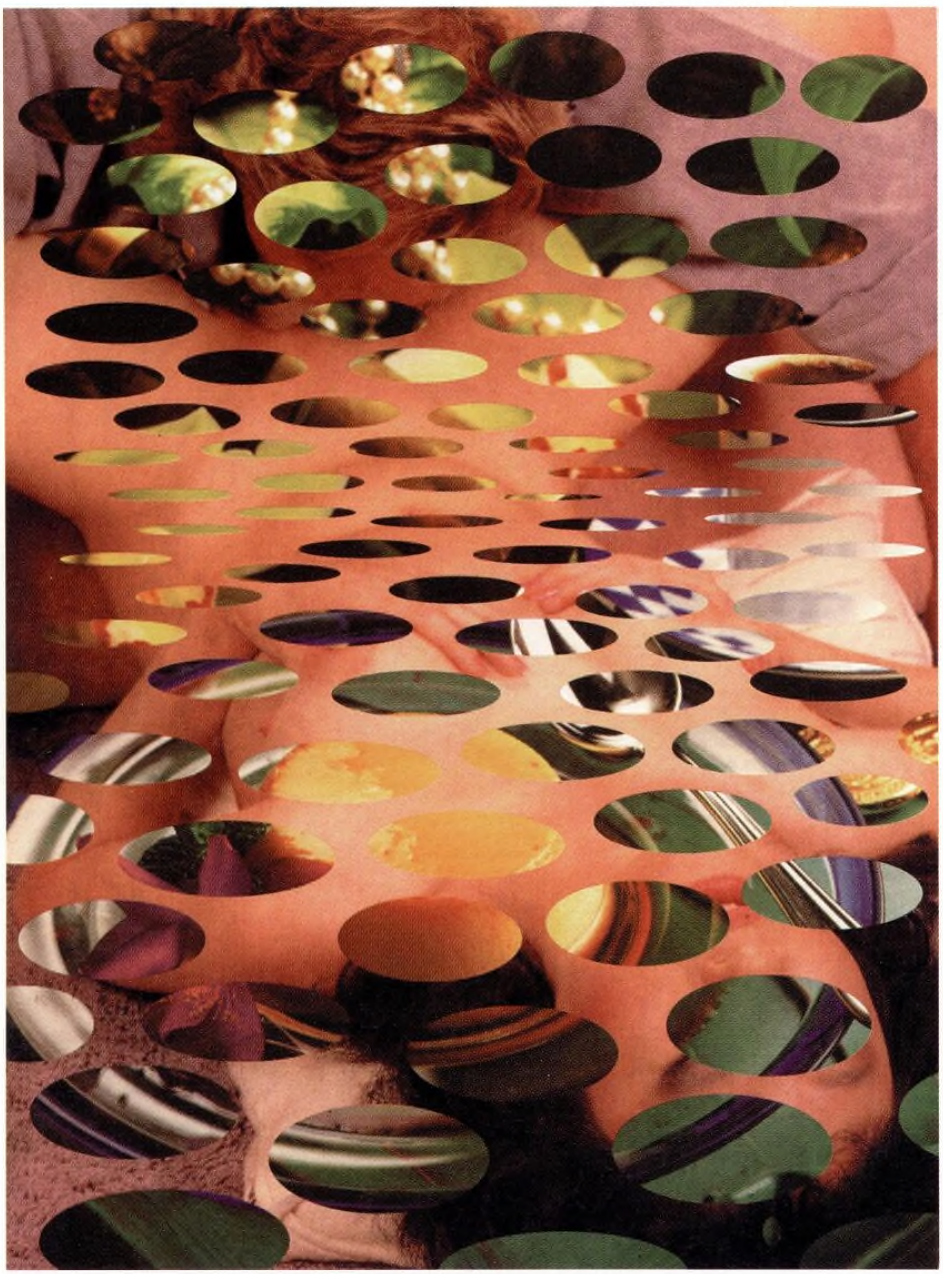
Citrus Salad
1997
Digitally Composed Photograph, 30″ X 40″
Courtesy the Artist and Beret International, Chicago



Untitled (Blue)
1997
Digitally Composed Photograph, 38″ X 78″
Courtesy the Artist and Beret International, Chicago



Untitled (Teal)
1997
Digitally Composed Photograph, 30" X 40"
Courtesy the Artist and Beret International, Chicago



Carmel Custard
1997
Digitally Composed Photograph, 30" X 40"
Courtesy the Artist and Beret International, Chicago

Another Colorado
1998
Puzzle Parts and Glue on Wood, 36" X 42"
Courtesy the Artist and Moody Gallery, Houston, Texas

American Pie
1997
Puzzle Parts and Glue on Wood, 84″ X 72″
Courtesy the Artist and Moody Gallery, Houston, Texas

Ridicule
1997
Puzzle Parts and Glue on Wood, 84" X 72"
Courtesy the Artist and Moody Gallery, Houston, Texas

Malted Milk
1998
Puzzle Parts and Glue on Wood, 42" X 36"
Courtesy the Artist and Moody Gallery, Houston, Texas

Chair 1
1990
Wood, Brass Tubing and Brass Screws
Courtesy the Artist and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Chair 2
1990
Wood, Brass Tubing and Brass Screws
Courtesy the Artist and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Chair 3
1990
Wood, Aluminum, Stainless Steel and Perforated Steel
Courtesy the Artist and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Chair 4
1990
Wood, Aluminum, Stainless Steel and Perforated Steel
Courtesy the Artist and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Artist Statement

DAVID GUTHRIE

I am a little reluctant to write about this work, wary of influencing the way it is perceived, wary of attaching a single, crystallized reading to the exclusion of something else. Any written description will certainly fall short of pinpointing or surrounding the essence of the work, like describing the taste of chocolate. The most honest way to describe the chairs is by telling stories about them, about the process of making them.

A friend of mine was horsing around in a bentwood rocker and rolled all the way head-over-heels backwards, splitting the side rail of the chair back. When I saw the chair the next day, I had an instant epiphany. He was mending the splintered wood by pressing the two pieces together with wooden clamps while the glue dried. Something about the image struck me, the organic form and mechanical parasite.

When I started working, this image was hovering in the back of my mind, but it wasn't part of my agenda. I wanted to get to that without starting there. There was no overall vision or even the idea of making a group or series. I just started working on one chair which led to more ideas, eventually culminating in a whole greater than the sum of the parts. The chairs were not intended to be interdependent, but they turned out to say more together than they say individually.

I began with just a couple of rules. The one imperative was that no matter how much the chairs were manipulated, in the end the final product had to be comfortable. The chairs I started with were all sturdy and comfortable. In some way, these qualities provided the datum or context for the various operations performed on the chairs. By preserving these qualities a vital component of the context remained intact, no matter how much I chopped, distorted, altered. Well that's not entirely true; the original chair had to remain recognizable or readable.

It's been almost ten years since I made the Four Chairs, and I haven't produced anything else like them. At the time I felt like I'd tapped into a rich, inexhaustible vein. Maybe it is still, but the circumstances change and I have not attempted the same direct, hands-on process that produced this work. Since that moment, I have concentrated mostly on architecture, though not exclusively. Most of my work depends on a hands-on approach, yet the furniture I have made in the past few years has a quality closer to architecture than to these chairs; that is, a certain distance between conception and execution inherent in that "design" process, a coolness, a reserved precision that resonates more with the head than the gut.

CHRIS CARPENTER

The Jitters

I am susceptible to that antique notion of love at first sight, and what girl isn't, forget what they yammer about female stereotypes, and so what *else* was I supposed to do when I saw Harvey sitting nervously on the other side of the meeting room, shy as a cicada, a strangely gorgeous thing having just wormed from a long entombment into the autumn warmth to sow seed for a few days and then die with a happy grin stretching his mandibles? Actually he didn't look like an insect so much as Shaun Cassidy. And I mean to tell you I still have that poster – *you* know the one.

So what *else*? Opportunity, doors opening, etc.

"Hi," I told him, and he turned the color of the $800 pie-slice on the Wheel of Fortune. I wanted to pick him up and carry him away, I thought he was so marvelous, sitting there squirming. "I haven't seen you before. I'm Debbey. Welcome to the group."

"Hi, I'm Harvey," he said. "I moved here last week. Hello." The crimson was just invading him.

"Oh," I cried, delighted, "I'm going to bring on a tic, aren't I? I haven't done that for so long!"

"S," he said, and one shoulder galloped two or three times in its socket, under his black leather jacket. "Sh. Sorry. I. . . ."

"Harvey, I'm so pleased to meet you," I said, and saw Regina coming over, storming really, gamely firing up the kiln under her skirt. To hell with you, I thought. I'm landing him, right *now*.

"Harvey," I declared, "I thought maybe RGLK! SHIT! I–you–FUCK!" I went reeling backward, arms pinwheeling. Thwarted Regina, still yards away, began to furiously bounce on one foot. And Harv – he looked up at me, pup in need of training, his face almost purple now, almost metallic purple what with the welling perspiration on his skin, and he said, "You're, I, GodDAMN!" Then he cupped his hands and slammed his face into them.

We went on and on like that, twitching and stuttering, swelling the place with our giddy noises, until finally I managed to lean down and embrace him and we grew calm together.

Euphoria! You can't fake an attraction like that. It's the greatest tic of all, a gusher that heaves everything else aside, those walls slathered with colorful posters, the circled chairs donated by the high school – those plastic blue Virco chairs with the cutout trapezoids in the back where your kidneys rest – and the computer and television and charts and addresses of groups designed to "help" you.

Madeleine, my group leader, came doubletiming over, her gait and movements made fast and accurate by jealousy. "Debbey," she said,

accurately gesturing at the chair from which I had bounded, knocking it askew, "we have a meeting to conduct."

"Yes," I said to her, and then turned to wink at Harv, and it became a series of minor convulsions that made my face ache. But he smiled at me and I fluttered back to my blue plastic chair, dizzy with heat.

I knew then that I was really in love. I'm here to tell you – yes, it may be true that arrows hit you when you finally unearth that Somebody, because nobody was ever punctured by an arrow who didn't twitch a time or two.

Actually, even now, I shouldn't speak ill of Madeleine (she always wanted me to call her Maddy but I wouldn't; I couldn't tolerate the resemblance of that to my own name) or her group. I was with them the longest of any. Usually I've averaged about a year with each group, but for various reasons she took me under her wing for almost two. When I met Harv my expulsion from the last group still seemed recent – a group in Chicago which, to a person, insisted on facing its trial with that desperate, silly humor every grouping of fucked-up people insists they have a special right to. They talked always of "paying the tic tax" and peppered their offices with cartoons, including that ubiquitous picture of a TS clinic next to a pet shop that is offering a 95% discount on all its talking birds.

When it hit the fan, it was a nasty scene (it always is, but there especially). Six or seven of them had decided to gang up and confront me at the weekly meeting, and so there I was, pressed up against the wall while they crowded around, tics rippling through their bones and over their lips as they attacked, growing ever more agitated, a Greek chorus out to do no good. They spoke in frothing waves, staccato syllables.

"Don't you get it?" one asked, a big man whose fists were always balling, sometimes so tightly that he had to wear mittens to keep from squeezing his fingernails loose. "We know you're Ff. Ff. Faking!"

"Symptoms and clinical features are ever re-defined as research continues," I half-begged, whipping out one leg.

"Debbey *if* that's your real name you're a LIAR AND YOU OUGHT TO BE ASHAMED," a woman screeched, unaware that the amplitude of her voice had trebled.

"I don't believe how *ek ek ek* you could the the *shit* fucking *liar* not professional conduct," someone else seethed, and then slapped himself in the face.

As always, my veracity had been questioned, and so I had to prove my credibility before leaving behind this band of traitors. I did what I have done before: I imagined Reason and Decorum as predictable courses of action, winding past expectations, constraints, and then I merely rerouted them so that they were no longer those old mule-paths that have been sadly worn into the neural circuitry of most people. In short, I did what I believed the Magic Stream would dictate; I did the true thing; I heard the voice of God; I picked up a blue plastic Virco chair (these groups all use them) and clubbed the screeching woman with it, once, twice. Then, as they wailed and seized her falling form, I marched proudly away.

When I moved to this city and found my usual data-processing job I

ran into Madeleine almost immediately. During my interview I explained to the office manager that there were certain things he would have to be prepared to experience, certain *contingencies*. I wildly threw my head back after each sentence. He nodded pleasantly and then called Madeleine, whose number was in a pamphlet he was required to have, I think, by law.

Of course I had to tell her, what with my past difficulties, that she was my first. If she'd called Chicago, or Seattle, or Eugene, or Salt Lake, or Pullman for reference, she probably wouldn't have accepted me. (I was told, during one ejection, that the TSA actually has a file on *faux* Tourettics. "Though I can't imagine why anybody would fake this *wheet wheet* goddamned thing," she dumbly lectured before my chair silenced her.) Madeleine was delighted to hear this little fabrication, leering at me with molasses-eyes – one quivering orb slightly larger than the other – which were not aware of their own lust. She'd help me, she said. She was going through some Tough Things herself. It was hard being a Grade 3, especially one who had Overcome so much, and she had just broken up with a boyfriend whose "tics" included flailing about with his elbows during sleep and beating the male members of the support group. She cradled my hand, stroked it like a hamster. I'd feel at home with her. The frantic kind of loneliness scraped her words like a razor.

So it was off to the races. This group was unusual in that it met every two weeks; usually you're dealing with weekly or monthly meetings. Though Harv hadn't shown up yet I was still pleased with this group, which held its collective tongue long enough to let you speak; it was pleasantly short, this group, on Experts, or people who Knew What You Ought To Do. I even liked Regina and Thurmond, two people who now believe themselves to be the architects of my destruction, along with dozens of other mouth-breathers between here and the deep blue sea. But I liked them. And Madeleine liked me, that much was clear. After meetings she would pull me aside and rope my waist with one lanky arm, and she'd fight those tics as she spoke to me – oh! that girl could ride tics like some men ride Brahma bulls! She would speak very slowly because if she didn't her true intent would leap past her lips and she'd find herself out.

"Madeleine," I told her once, "you look like you're keeping something down. Don't you know that with this great gift we have you can't keep anything down? Don't you know you're damned to reveal the truth to those who need to know it?"

"Glrgh," she'd say, neck flinching. "I suppose. So. But nothing's. Wrong. Excuse me for a minute."

But it wasn't only lust purveyed by the coquettish hand-squeezes. There was also something else, a mommy-ishness, maybe, that I craved, what girl doesn't, forget that Oedipal gingivitis, and it reminded me not of my mother but of my aunt, from whom in an opaque way I contracted my fantastic disorder.

What I remember is this: A distant cousin, one of those who appears for a few memorable eye-blinks and then vanishes into the obscurae of stuck-together photo album pages. *I had a cousin once... he would jerk and flap around at the dinner table... (Criiicckk)... Look, there he is. He'd have to be thirty, thirty-five now....* In any event, this cousin visited one Thanksgiving and spent the meal bolting up from his chair and then settling back down

into it, as if he were being repeatedly shocked. My aunt – not this boy's mother, but Pauline, my favorite aunt – kept asking if anything was wrong. Finally, this boy's father, from Ohio, said that his son had a Neurological Disorder, didn't we remember him telling us long, long before they arrived, and that we'd all agreed not to Barnumize the whole thing? At about that time the boy rose from his chair, slapped his forehead, half-waltzed over to my father's place at the head of the table, bumping porcelain subcontinents of butter pats and cranberry-muck, and shouted, "Oh, NO! Oh, NO! Turkey turkey turkey TURKEY TURKEY!"

"Dear Lord," my mother opined, and in an instinctive gesture placed both hands on her chest.

"Dirlid Dirlid Dirlid," the boy shouted, and began whapping his palms into his sternum in a Looney Tunes rendition of my mother's response. Then he howled, weeping, in embarrassment, I suppose, "FUCK! FUCK! FUCKING TURKEY!" and fell. His parents swooped on him like mantises, forearms clutching, raising, holding. The rest of us sat with our mouths drawing flies.

"He didn't mean it," said my cousin's mother. "It's a Neurological Disorder. He didn't mean it."

But looking down at my own forkload of stiff white tinder, I knew – he *did*, he *did*. He could not help it. He could not swallow down what was unswallowable. He could not stand for what was awful. A shameless oracle, a buzzsaw, a buccaneer, he could only sling words and limbs, describing the truth. Deceit was impossible.

So I caught his disorder. What *else?*

My parents reluctantly ascribed it to heredity. I hijacked my cousin's misfortune to create the new Me. As it turned out, one of his even more obscure uncles, long dead, used to pat his ear every now and then – a tic that most people never even noticed. But in my cousin the disorder had slunk down under the porous genetic floor and had frolicked around down there until it had burst up, squeaking and scraping like a katydid, through the spindly barriers of DNA, momentously pushing intricate lawn-grass to the left and right. He had Grade 3 TS, and I was happy to acquire it from him. Of course, as is the case with most real Tourettics, it took years to properly "identify" the disorder; most physicians dismissed me as an excitable teen, while others recommended lobotomies which thankfully never tempted my parents. At school, my IEP had me reading quietly in my own little classroom by the administrative offices while the other students trudged through curriculums that I could finish in a half-hour on my own. Whenever an authority-type peered into the room to check on me, I accommodatingly manufactured a tic or two.

So back to my aunt – my favorite one, Pauline – and her early, crucial encouragement. Within two weeks of my first tics, she had found a treatise written by someone whose child was autistic, a typo-riddled triptych that advised all grieving parents of Touched Children that it was all right – that their twitches and screams and writhings were the Voice of God, and the rest of us, who had been passed by, could but tend to them with a kind, delighted envy and allow the divine divinity to garble forth.

She would visit regularly after that, coming to watch me eat on

Saturday mornings, leaning against the jamb of the kitchen door while my parents feigned industry. Her near-worshipful gaze would elicit some demonstration from me – leaping foot, errant elbow, lunging lips, a hard, earnest obscenity. I was an amateur then, inventing most of my tics, believing research unnecessary. My muscles were never sore, my limbs never bruised. But the family was none the wiser.

"God speaks," she'd say, "in that child."

"I don't know," Dad would confess miserably, washing some already-clean item in the sink. "This all basically started overnight." He'd guessed the truth, of course, but having seen that his child had focused on an inexorable course of action, he had decided, as most parents do, that resistance was futile and that the offspring's ruination of familial reputation was a small price to pay for what seemed to be, blessedly, a *vocation* of some kind, however warped.

"That child," my aunt would repeat.

The table would rattle as I battered its underside with my pumping knees. "HORSESHIT HORSESHIT," I'd screech, clapping one hand against the top of my head. "Cheese, please!" My aunt scrambled then to bring me the sharp-cheddar block and the paring knife, the syrup, the sugar, whatever my oracular hunger desired. This process taught me that God had lost much of His clout. In what seemed to be the recent memory of all the old people I knew, He'd roared down into Biblical plains – wide desolate mustard-colored spaces, I always imagined, with a few cowed, ramshackle cities here and there – and set bushes alight, rent apart the earth, set the seas to spouting. Now He sent forks clattering, burped foul words, hopped up and down, turned a few dour heads. But that didn't bother me, for in my little revving buzzsaw of a heart I knew that from that point on I could indicate only that which was true, and honest, and if folks confused that with the presence of God, well, so it was.

Much more composed, we confronted each other a week later over milkshakes at a corner table behind which leered and loomed a six-foot Grimace, whose purple coat was sadly fading. The Hamburglar skulked not far away. Children writhed through the ubiquitous lagoon of plastic spheres. For whatever reason, this is how dates usually are for me. It just works out somehow that candlelight and ethnic food and imported films never quite make it on the agenda.

"Harv," I said, reaching across the table to take his hand, "I'd sure like you to come home with me this afternoon." What was the point of denying it? It was going to come out sooner or later anyway, in burbled fits or starts.

"Well," he said, and squirmed, which was something I couldn't get enough of – so *cute!* In his discomfort he almost resembled the other customers, dumb submariners who mouthed dull incantations at one another in their aqua-vinyled swiveling seats.

"You'll like it with us," I continued, moving on. "Madeleine has a Wheel Room in the back. It's the only one of its kind – all kinds of wheels, Harv, you can watch for hours. And sometimes we have these contests – who can hold their tics the longest after she sets her egg timer."

"What do you win?" he asked, and shifted in his seat.

"Time in the Wheel Room," I said.

"So," he said. "So." One hand began squeezing the sleeve on the other arm, and he began clicking his tongue between words. "So you. We're going. To your *s s sh sh sh* DAMN couldn't hold it couldn't hold it there it goes godDAMN," he said, and as the shimmering faces turned toward us there rose a cripplingly foul smell.

"Harv!" I said, somewhat disappointed. "See what happens when you try?"

"Couldn't hold it. Damn," he hissed, turning red, fighting a smile. "Here it comes, little kids. Better *whoop! whoop!* burrow deeper." Then he rose and walked quickly and stiffly to the men's room.

By that time I had already begun to admire the way he walked, which was totally unlike the way most people do, dawdling along as if their lives depend on nothing. Everyone makes so much out of our fast-paced world of today etc. etc. and yet you walk down the street and you'd think most people were looking for property to buy. Not Harv – he moved fast, delightfully fast. That was clear enough from the speed with which he'd relocated for most of his adult life – another cord binding us together. Some tiger beetles can cover two feet in two seconds, a speed comparable to a racehorse hitting 200 miles per hour. Speed I admire.

A man several tables away suddenly recoiled, lowered his paper, stared at me in awed disbelief.

"Didn't you hear him for Christ's sake?" I asked. "It was *him*, not *me!*" My elbow angrily jerked thrice. The man rose and dawdled away.

Harv came back pocketing a vial of pills.

"Oh, no, Harv," I said. "No. What are those?"

"No, dear," he said, and reassuringly stroked my hand, but more forcefully than Madeleine – as one might stroke a kitten, perhaps. "This is sinus medicine."

I was glad. I could not accept a lover on Haldol, or even Orap, fierce neuroleptics that country-fry the brain and leave one as peppy as a damp biscuit, drooling, fumbling, sleeping, worst of all suppressing. In Seattle there had been several of these people, whom the group leader had cheerfully admitted and then propped up in blue plastic chairs against one wall, where they grinned wetly at each polite inquiry and oozed inexorably forward until some of them came close to pitching out of the chairs altogether. These people were Grade 3s and it was clear that when the chemical pirates took the TS from them there was simply nothing left. It was a terrible thing to see, and it made me cling with even sharper talons to the persona I had brilliantly crafted.

And to think that most tics vanish by early adulthood.

Not for me. Over my dead body. I won't shed such a fine thing that easily.

On our way out of the restaurant he said to me, "Are you sure?" He was starting to quiver again. I hadn't met anybody in a long while whose frame was so profoundly and commonly wracked with tics.

"Oh, I'm sure," I purred, wanting to make it worse.

"So," he ventured, "what sort of stuff do you, you know. Like."

"Like?" I asked. "I like you."

"What else?" he replied. "I mean, lesbian? do you? no – *wait* – I mean –

I didn't –"

I revved, yes, and stopped where we stood and put one hand on my swiveling hip and another on the indeterminate black slope of the Hamburglar's crotch. "I go both ways, yeah, if that's what you want to know," I husked, and suggestively squirmed against the plastic. Small children nearby, frightened, flailed and grubbed through the ocean of spheres.

"Wow," Harv said. We walked out to his car, and I fondly saw as I followed that he was obliviously walking on the balls of his feet. His left hand made a whirling motion. I imagined it spinning in an autonomous frenzy above the planes of my body, generating lovely cool vortices of air, breezy kisses.

No self-warfare, no Drama Class, just *flow*, that was Harv. In our little world half the people you meet are determined to convince you that they're suffering worse than you; the other half, in their wild gusto to show you all they've Overcome and how easy life is for them, succeed in doing so. It's hard to find a mate with TS, and not only for the reasons that you or third-rate standup comics might assume. It's that battling – battling, battling. Self-espionage, self-fascism. But not with Harv.

He carried me, the balls of his feet cracking under the weight, over my spotless champagne plush, and he threw me down too forcefully upon the bed and the shoulder that had been under me started its galloping again.

"Poor thing," I cooed. "A bundle of nerves, just a bundle of nerves, aren't you?" But the shoulder stiffened when I grabbed first it and then its twin and pulled him roughly down. We rolled around and his eyes took in the Remington print I had removed from the Salt Lake clinic as reimbursement for my ouster, the framed vista of the San Juans taken from Seattle, the stoic countenance of the Granddaddy, Georges Albert Edouard Brutus Gilles de la Tourette himself, which came with me from Chicago.

"Nice room," he said.

"Watch it," I told him. "Watch your hands. You're going to cut off my circulation." He released my thigh. Then for a few minutes we slid and shuddered against one another. No sweet nothings here, but rough somethings: flung spittle, quick yips and ululations, sharp elbows, gnashed teeth, bucking limbs. Communication haloed us. At last I said, as my head jerked once or twice, "What I do like is," and I rolled my tongue at him and palmed his groin.

Here came the maroon again – sweet teen idol! darling cicada! – and he eyed my twitching neck. "I'm not so sure," he observed, "that would be a good idea."

"Don't worry," I told him. "I have remarkable *yik! yik!* control when the *mmmm* occasion is right." Then I showed him.

He calmed then, everything, that is, except the province that I governed. He grew relatively silent; his twitches subsided; he sank into a daze of glass.

At one point I raised my head and asked, "What sort of Grade 3 are you?" I was growing angry. Was this the truth? Utter calm? This was what I inspired?

He didn't move.

"Don't hold back, now," I said in a cautionary tone, and jerked my neck again.

His tics returned. Grateful, I moved to pin his left arm with my knees, and steadied him. In sympathy with his skittish shoulders, my own jumped suddenly.

"I love you, too," he said, knowing, understanding.

"I'll spin," said Drummond Fornaker of Sarasota (I remember every name I hear, and a lot of other things besides). He leaned out over the Wheel with the careful but wide-eyed delight of a small child granted *carte blanche* at the ice-cream counter. The audience began its ritualized crowing.

My head was in the crook of Madeleine's arm; I was lying across her lap and the lengthened tips of her fingernails swept sweet, gentle furrows across my scalp. Men, while carrying out the same theoretically affectionate activity, dig and gouge as if they are trying to surreptitiously prize something out of your cranium.

The audience was noncommittal as Drummond's spin ended on the metallic-blue $200 wedge.

To the left of the television, which as usual was playing a prerecorded tape, there was a miniature windmill, spinning with motorized serenity in the hot stillness of the Wheel Room; to its right was a series of foil-gilded pinwheels, bowed leaves glinting, gold silver crimson sapphire, ready to receive the urgings of an unplugged oscillating fan parked on a nearby table. From the walls, hanging on pegs, were caps of cable spools, bicycle-wheels, even a reconstructed wagon-wheel Madeleine had found at an antique auction. You could saunter up to them and spin them. She kept the pegs oiled. On top of the television there were tops, several tops, some from exotic places. Sometimes, out in the meeting room, a Grade 3's tics became so persistent that he or she was unable to utter a syllable without folding into a blubbering, twitching heap, but then they could quiver back into the Wheel Room's sanctity of circumferences, and Madeleine would fetch them ten or twenty minutes later, their tics gone, lips placidly curved, and all around them things would be spinning, spinning. They spoke with perfect clarity then, for a while.

"Money in the bank," I said.

"Money in the. . . *hand*?" Drummond ventured. The audience winced audibly at his triumphant ignorance.

"You're so smart," Madeleine said, and leaned down and kissed me.

"I'm very calm right now," I told her.

"That's how it's supposed to work," she said, and *whoop* here came her hand, edging down my belly toward a place Harv had only the day before declared his "personal orchard."

"Wait," I said. "You've got me all wrong."

"Tch. Tch. Tch," she said, flinching. Her hand wormed. "Been waiting," she said.

I was nervous. It definitely wasn't that she was a woman – forgive me, but that's kind of old hat. There was more to it.

"I can't concentrate," she murmured, and ground her brow into my belly. "There's so much. Lost. In you."

"You ought to take more Dexedrine then," I commented, but arched a little.

I felt for Harv. I couldn't help it, really. My pretty cicada had started a new job himself that day, filing orders in a warehouse. But Madeleine, her curiosity piqued, had wanted to "talk," and now one thing was leading to another. And I could not stop it. Harv was one thing and Madeleine another, and again not just the man/woman thing; there was something else, some other membrane that separated them, and Lord help me but I wanted to frolic on both sides, to find out what the membrane was, why it was there.

I will say this: I'll soon check my truculent ramblings about men, but it's sort of a shame that three times out of four the one in ten thousand is a male. It's wasted, kind of. Now there's Harv, let's leave him out of this, but usually the fellas have no appreciation whatsoever of their gift. It's pure gold, and most of those bumbling, stumbling flailers see it as merely another potential sexual impediment. They don't see that it makes everything *better*.

And so here was Madeleine. She was strong down there – I don't mean that in a bad way. But she was strong – an organic, profound strong. I did my part but I was the docile half. Our flesh gained the deep crosshatches of the couch's harlequin weave. Madeleine jolted, babbling syllables, the fingers of her left hand snapping. Completed, she unveiled an unfamiliar glare of martial determination and trussed my hips with her hair and arms and pretty soon finished me.

And I forgot to tic. I lay there and rolled and clenched and made no noise, no jitter, no exultation: a Big Fuckup. Now even more nervous, I reached down to mannishly scrub her scalp with my fingertips. My eyes moistened. I still wasn't sure about the identity of the membrane, but there it was, hovering over the couch and the whirling spokes and blades, soft and mocking in the firmament's sparse, dirty light.

And in the damp afterweb I peered over and saw that Drummond hadn't even made the first cut. I had seen this one before, but I couldn't recall who eventually won – Sherrula Ides, the fat woman, I intuited.

I felt new moisture plinking across my knees: Madeleine crying.

"For Heaven's sake?" I asked her, composing myself, clearing my own eyes. "Madeleine?"

"You didn't," she said.

"Oh, no, baby, I did," I said quickly. "Didn't you? – couldn't you? –"

"Not *that*," she said. "You didn't *tic*. But you were thinking of him?"

"Who?" I asked, startled. "Harv?"

"Yes," she quavered, "and you didn't do anything, not his name, not a flinch." Her expression firmed. "But I guess that doesn't mean anything." She started to rise.

"What, Maddy," I asked (thereby reluctantly using that squirmy diminutive), "are you nuts, too? What are you talking about?" I scrambled to an upright position myself, anxious to manufacture some type of kinship. "Look, I was crying, see? See?"

"Okay, Debbey," she declared suddenly, in her Bringing the Meeting to Order voice. She sat back on her heels on the couch and regarded me

from behind the wan drape of her hair. "Nothing."

I listened for the windmill. I berated the oscillating fan for its silence, wished the pinwheels to be flashing. I hoped that the Wheel of Fortune might suddenly go into an inexplicable, eternal spin, free forevermore of human interference.

I remembered one of the first ugly scenes, perhaps in Pullman. The chair-dueling had gone both ways. I caught a metal leg in the shoulder, while a Lutheran minister, one of those annoying bastards who have Overcome So Much, had borne the brunt of that cutout trapezoid right across his forehead; it had left an angular stigma. A sudden mob had muscled me toward the parking lot: the usual melodramatic declarations, warbling at me like sirens, the capsizing of cheap furniture, the uneasy glances from the sidewalk. At the clinic's threshold I felled the minister and brandished the chair above him.

"Liar!" one woman screamed. "Motherfucking LllLLIARRR!"

"I'm not *lying!*" I roared back at her. "I'm *appreciating*, you idiots! Don't you get it? I'm *appreciating!*"

The reeling, slobbering fools didn't get it. Six days for assault, not to mention a bleedout of my bank account. I was on the next bus, figuratively speaking.

Another old hoary concept, like love at first sight, but forgive me it's worth bringing up –

What is a *lie*, anyway? Who decides *that*? What's the *real* issue?

Mohammed Buddha Christ Calvin Joseph Smith Moses the Lama *liars*?

Madeleine's silence, like a rapier. Her businesslike way of donning her clothes. Fuck the membrane, I thought, I don't want to know it. To hell with it all, all of them. The end was near, as always. I needed my prince.

"Harvey!" I cried at her. She flinched, hurried away, hand visoring her crimping face. "Harv!" I walked around the room and spun those wheels. I sent the tops whizzing. I bounded, a calliope of tics, hitting flailing cursing spitting.

"I'll spin," said a new guy, new show, fuck him. FUCK him can't stand all around FUCK THEM with the eyes madly peering TCH F FUCK they can't conceive F F TCH gift-repudiating C-list freaks FUCK THEM can't see can they TCH TCH awful rib-cracking loneliness.

There are times, usually when I am utterly alone in the bulrushes of a cheap first-floor apartment witnessing some city's Cyclopean feet as they trudge on toward teeming doom, that my heart breaks for Gilles himself. Put yourself in his position: overshadowed by the dandyism and alchemy of your alleged peers, credit thieved from you by a long line of miscreants including your own beloved father-figure Charcot, relegated within a few years to studying the perplexities of lunatic provincial wives – analyzing their shrieks, their froths, their puddles. Insisting that hypnotism might be the finest delving-tool yet known to medicine; insisting that those who jolted and whooped from within inscrutable prisons might not be merely possessed by Satan; ridiculed. A dead son. And then a bullet, fired from a gun wielded by one of those owl-eyed women you'd so carefully been

tending – she claims to love you even as the reek of saltpeter drifts down the hallway. Surviving, but only to be shelled of your rightful glory.

But women don't take guns to people unless they've a good reason, and I too, out of lonely desperation, might have plugged Georges Albert Blah Blah Gilles de la Tourette, who in my pilfered picture looks vacuously off to the left, a handsome well-schooled hyperromantic Frenchman, a sort of Daddy, and yes girls love those, our tear ducts well for those, forget that feminist tonsillitis. The calm sexual symmetry of that facial hair, the powerful brow, those eyes full of dumbish lust – I'd load for bear, all right.

So what did he accomplish? What did he find? Did he, like so many others, manage only to lend his name to some genetic disappointment which would wear it about forevermore like a cheap tiara? Another Parkinson Munchausen Friedrich Eaton-Lambert Duchenne Stuart Thomsen Wohlfart-Kugelberg Welander? Stretch the notion a bit, and even Lou Gehrig?

But you did more, so much more, didn't you, dear? Wasn't the truth clear to you? Didn't you find the Magic Stream?

Autosomal Dominant. A dreary explanation, hammered into being by those who would credit every feature of humankind to some dull accounting of chromosomes. But I can imagine Gilles escorting me to a great royal ball, not even royal, it could be just a rural high-society joint, pulling me by the hand as I enter a huge vaulted room full of well-heeled well-fed French couples, pairs of pudgy macaws spinning in neat circles to the melodies of a hidden orchestra. Now here we come – he brings me in, his fawning, sputtering, twitching date. I jerk, utter strings of baroque gibberish, clutch at clothing, tongue protruding, radiant, flush with beauty.

I know some useless high-school French, but even that wouldn't be necessary, for we wouldn't need words. The Magic Stream flows through the centuries, linking life to life, gracing with true brilliance a globe gone crazy with cheap megalomania. From one vessel to another it makes its swooning way. And I dream that in the ballroom I become the rule, rather than the exception. The macaws jabber and flail. The orchestra suddenly hacks and picks and squeaks its instruments in a cacophonous eruption.

And the partygoers, epiphanous, beam:

We see! We see!

Tell us! *Tell* us what you know!

No thank you, I tell them, and give my date a wink, which reverberates through my bones and heart and goes crazily on and on.

The eviction from Eden I saw coming: six weeks to the day after I'd met Harv. The session had just begun. The chairs creaked and bounced along behind crouching figures as they were wrested into a rough circle. The radio had been tuned to an easy-listening station, always an important conceit. Madeleine moved to the center of the forming ring and hovered beatifically, rotating to greet each of us individually. Harv and I linked hands, the metal legs of our chairs scraping as they entwined. The circle peeled away from us on either side. The others, as always, were reluctant to be close to us, to feel the singe and pulse of true love.

"Hello, all," Madeleine said. "Well, you know what's coming. I put

together a little presentation on this new vitamin diet. It's supposed to do some really sort of wonderful things with suppression."

At once the insurgency started. Regina, glowering and sandal-tapping to my left, pursed her lips and emitted a terrific raspberry, then another, and another. Her ally Thurmond, on the other side of the circle, the incorrigible passive-aggressive ass-pincher, began rocking his chair to and fro and counting rapidly to six, over and over.

"Uh-oh," I said. In response I flicked my left arm once or twice; Harv jumped in his seat a few consecutive times.

It was truly remarkable how quickly the magma rose and brimmed and then crashed white-hot and splashing through the delicate apparatus of shared misfortune. The duelling tics picked up speed. Harv writhed sideways, breaking free of my hand; I began to whoop; Regina harshly pounded her knee with a fist until it seemed that the bruising of her flesh was an audible thing. Thurmond, ever competitive (he was the one who was always wagering on the taped "Wheel" episodes), increased his robotic count to twelve and began cursing for good measure on every third numeral.

"Hey, hey," Madeleine began, already helpless, sensing a terrible calamity of her own. "Hey, now. All of you."

Regina rose then, rocketed to her feet, slavering, pointing at me, or some space behind me. "She's full of SHIT!" she screamed. "She's FULL of it! Always HAS been! Can't you *tell*? Or *won't* you?"

"Twelve," groaned Thurmond desperately. "Look at her sittin' there and she ain't the only one."

And that peanut-gallery grumbling, that hot sparking amid the dry underbrush with which I was already too familiar, began.

"Now wait," Madeleine pleaded.

"Ain't but one of twenty twenty-one twenty-two has coprolalia," wheezed Thurmond. "And we got two right here in the same room both Hollywood-style Grade 3s and both act like they life is the best thing that ever happened."

Harv stiffened. "To hell with you, Thurmond," he cried. "What *hsst hsst* suffering we've endured! What horrors!"

"You don't know a goddamn thing about horrors," Regina hissed. She moved around behind her chair, seized it down low in order to assure a good heft.

Thurmond shouted, "You want to live in hell! You want to live in hell! Well hell is mine! And I ain't sharing!" He bolted to his feet.

Madeleine wailed, rushed over to Regina, attempted to stay her spindly palsied arms as the other woman struggled to raise the chair. But the truth of it, Madeleine, is that the truth of it cannot be concealed.

"Back, you SLUT!" screamed Regina. On the edges of the chair her bony hands displayed a pistoning fretwork of tendons, muscles. "You're no better! Aider and abettor! Slut! SLUT!" She turned away then from Madeleine, who knew that she'd been husked, dismissed, defeated. Maddy wheeled, gave me a slow, woeful shake of her head, and then wove, devastated, toward the edge of the circle and then out of it, heading vaguely toward her Wheel Room.

"Seventeen," Thurmond panted hoarsely. "Goddamn walking publicity stunts. Been onto you, Debbey, since you first darkened the door. Eighteen nineteen." He stood with his own chair now.

I was prepared, as always. I was used to such things and in a second's time had flourished my own chair, raising it between myself and the raging wreck of Regina, who was not experienced enough to keep her chair's legs straight as she advanced. The flat caps of its legs wobbled and dove.

"Harv," I shouted, "run for it! Harv!"

But then he was right there next to me, wielding his own chair with a seasoned sure-gripped elan which, I was nervously and immediately certain, had also been borne out of experience.

"We live in darkness," Thurmond roared. "Our war is perpetual! Death's a savior! Demons are housemates! Twenty-five!" He lunged across the circle.

Madeleine let out one final wail from the periphery and vanished into the Room. The whizzing of multiple discs on pegs began and with a crashing of metal and plastic we battled across the room.

For the first time, ever, we – I – got the worst of it.

I thought I could take Regina. In her scanty sundress, ugly and orange, hanging grimly on the sharp girders and rafters of her asymmetrical body, she looked more comical than any opponent I had ever faced. But her rage was pure. Her jerks and gibbers and flinches made her movements untelegraphable. I swung once, twice, glanced ducking brittle shoulders, then took one chair leg below my right breast and another in the pelvic area. I staggered, felt my chair lowering; Regina struck again and the tough plastic lip of the seat bounced hard and cruel off my brow. I fell and began to crawl toward the door, glancing over at my beloved.

Harv had become Conanesque in his resistance. His shirt had unbuttoned a few notches and he scythed his chair to and fro with one hand locked through the hole in the back. But Thurmond screeched and dove in at an opportune moment and one leg jammed into Harv's sternum and another caught him full in the mouth. A single tooth clapped free and dove from his lips, somersaulting across the floor to safety.

Both of us reeled and staggered but now there were more legs, more chairs. I made one last lunge and seized the doorknob, desiring the cool calm air-conditioned length of the hallway beyond, and then those double glass doors leading to the lot, but Regina's hand snaked through my hair and writhed until it had gained a certain purchase and she yanked my head back.

"You slutty fraud," she rasped above me with an inverted scowl. She was radiant, delighted at how wonderful it felt to finally be released of constraint, free to aim that internal neurological howitzer at some external source. In the slight slurring of her words I detected the presence of overprescribed Haldol. "You didn't know it so well after all, did you? You don't really know a fuckin' thing, do you, do you?"

"Yeah, guess I drew the black bean this time," I gurgled, and she slapped and released me. I stood and careened out, Harv behind me.

At the outer doors we turned to see Thurmond come into the hallway,

dragging his chair behind him, looking woeful and deflated. He dropped to one knee and examined us. His lips were set, fighting the counting tic, the cursing tic, the spitting tic, whichever tic currently sizzled through his synapses like ball lightning, cleaving through tissue and fluid and hope and happiness.

"Come back, please come back," he said, and twitched.

Harv beat me out into the lot and the cold clasp of evening.

Though Harv's apartment was only two or three miles from the clinic, I found myself unable to complete the drive, and within minutes I ground the car onto a gravel shoulder and nearly toppled a blinking sequence of construction sawhorses.

"Debbey," Harv said.

I couldn't reply. I was thinking: Where next? I could use a nearby beach. Or a place with many lakes. Or I could head East, where there seemed to be an anonymous overabundance of people. Perhaps there the chairs would be metal, or vinyl. I could be packed in minutes. But these thoughts crumpled under the weight of the terrible truth which could be borne no longer and so I burst into tears.

Again: "Debbey." But now he seemed less like a cicada than a mantis, or a ferocious diving beetle.

I whirled, the seatbelt twining across my neck, and cried: "Why did you do it? Why?"

"Why do you *think?* Why do *you* do it?" he countered angrily. "We stand out any damn way we can!"

"No, no, that's not," I began, but had to close my eyes and bow over the wheel. I was a normal person now in a car with another normal person and the calamity was so great that I wished myself dead, for now, it seemed, I was, I was dead and had been irreversibly set at last down that sunken pitch-black path – that one in which every thought is predesigned, every reaction prerecorded on some musty interior phonograph – taken by all but one of ten thousand. Neither of us bothered to tic or speak. With wretched clarity I could see Gilles turning to me among all those revelers at the ball, speaking sharply, confounded and enraged, and dragging me toward the back exit and an ignominious dismissal by an elbow which suddenly refused to twitch.

It was a dark moment indeed, the darkest I have seen.

But then Harv reached out to touch me, and tried to speak, and I looked at him, and we sat there for a moment and maybe both but I do know one of us that would be me thought back upon all the time and hope and energy spent becoming an adept of God at least that was what it had long seemed like and then at the very same moment without prompt or syllable both of us twitched. Just a minor tremor, one which a Grade 1 would barely notice. But it was unbidden. We twitched.

JAMES ARMSTRONG

A Bakery at Night

The counter girls in white aprons
stand around like unemployed barbers:
they replenish the dispenser with waxed paper,
or straighten jars of *biscotti*. This detracts
from the sureness of stainless steel,
as if the hand-lettered sign
that says "Help Wanted" referred to them,
as if they desired to say to the bread-slicer,
How far have I come
to end up this unsatisfied?
The wall clock with its hum
surrounds the hour – the rolls, the cold croissant,
the stiff baguette, the weakening brioche,
all wait with the look of an execution
postponed. Everywhere there are crumbs.
At every moment, with increasing sadness,
night presses her migrant face against the glass.

The Annunciation

I always felt you were real, even in school;
when others talked of
the dialectics of capital, the sexual struggle,
the fragments of each hour
moved in my watch
with a skeletal whisper.
I heard your wing-tips dragging the ceiling,
the rustle of linen as you bent lower
and peered into the face of a local girl
drunk on the scent of beeswax.
She was not frightened, just empty.
She had expected a message
but you were disturbingly literal,
holding a lily whose mouth
was a star of sorrow. A flutter of Latin
rippled in mid-air above you. It read,
when we translated it: "Beware
my sweet mouth, the beeswax, the rustle of gowns –"
Of course it was too late. From the moment you entered
she was yours utterly, as I was:
the two of us set off immediately
without our coats, along the Way of Sorrows.

JEAN ERVIN

Sunday

> I saw a Puritan-one
> Hanging of his cat on Monday
> For killing of a mouse on Sunday.
>
> Richard Brathwaite, *Barnebee's Journal*

> It was a Sunday afternoon, wet and cheerless: and a duller spectacle this earth of ours has not to show than a rainy Sunday in London.
>
> Thomas DeQuincy, *The Pleasures of Opium*

> Sometimes there's nothing but Sundays for weeks on end. Why can't they move Sundays to the middle of the week so you could put it on the OUT tray on your desk?
>
> Russell Hoban, *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin Boaz.*

It's a funny kind of day. Eccentric, unpredictable, full of promise, but undermined with sinkholes. Dedicated to the sun since antiquity, in the primitive church it became the Christian day for worship; under the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century citizens were ordered to rest. Later, the term the "Lord's day" was used by Protestants, especially Sabbatarians, to promote restrictions on every part of life. In reading the genealogy of a branch of my own family, I discovered that even in the early 1980s distant relatives on the Isle of Lewis were still Sabbatarians: no work, no play, no Sunday "visiting." My Canadian cousin, the genealogist, reports that she was not even allowed to use the telephone.

Even for a former Christian like myself Sunday can be unsettling, like a relative whom I thought myself shut of, someone I hadn't heard from for years, but here he comes, big as you please, the bad egg, the one who arrives unexpectedly with unsavory family tales. When I say Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Monday, Wednesday, I feel no emotion. But Sunday, ah. Sometimes just thinking it engenders a strange, voluptuous feeling of loneliness. It seems permissible to let myself sink into a mild depression, but because I know that it is a short term self-pity, Sunday depression is safe, self-pity for a limited time only; underneath the top layer of sadness lurks reassuring Monday with its tedious but necessary tasks.

I grew up in New England in the 1930s and 40s when the Blue Laws made it illegal for stores to be open. As Congregationalists my family never felt impelled to give up all worldly pleasures, but on Sunday even my

parents seemed to take on a new coloring, a kind of family caul that didn't have much to do with their weekday selves. On Saturday night they often went to parties, returning home with recriminations that I half-overheard, but in the morning I was rousted out of bed, dressed in finery, and driven to Sunday school by my father. Until I was a teenager I went willingly to these vapid classes where we were encouraged to learn ridiculously easy lessons although there was no particular punishment if we failed to do so. Once a year our minister led us on a Children's Day walk through the two-hundred-year-old graveyard where, armed with bouquets of flowers, we were allowed to honor some dead person of our choice. Lugubrious as this procession might sound I looked forward to it as a pleasant diversion.

My Catholic friends Sara and Elaine had to attend Mass, but after that they could do anything they wanted. I envied them their casually run household, especially on weekends when they almost always had visitors overnight. Once an uncle emerged with his girlfriend.

"You kids want to go for a ride?"

Frank was not exactly young – probably at least twenty-five I thought – but in his belted camel's hair coat and his fedora he looked single, free of a married man's crease between the eyes. He was pulling on a pair of expensive looking pigskin gloves and his girlfriend's fur collar nestled around her throat in a way that made her seem protected from the dowdiness of the married world. Sure we wanted to go for a ride. We had time to kill before dinner and the inevitable drag of Sunday afternoon. Not for the world would I have passed up a chance to go out in Frank's snappy little roadster because it had the very thing I loved the most in a car, a rumble seat. This contraption was fitted into the back of a small car with a hinge that allowed it to open up to form a seat, but anyone who sat there had little protection and, since seat belts were unknown, riders were often thrown out. Understandably my parents had forbidden me to get into one.

It was awkward climbing up, steadying myself and then hoisting my back end into the rumble seat while trying to keep my skirt smoothed down so my underpants wouldn't show. In our bulky winter jackets, Sara, Elaine, and I were jammed together like rag dolls in a toybox. The light that morning was the hard cold sunlight of early spring, the kind that makes you feel naked and alone in the world. No one else seemed to be out. Frank hadn't said where we were going, but we headed down to the state line that joined Massachusetts to Connecticut. Once we were over the line I was disoriented. I didn't know these towns – rough places like Thompsonville and Windsor Locks. Somewhere – was it Hazardville or Thompsonville? – the roadster pulled up in front of a small, furtive building. Frank and his girlfriend told us they'd be right back. We three girls, normally all great talkers, were astonishingly quiet that morning as if we were afraid to break the spell. When the uncle and his girl came out they were laughing and they handed us each a bottle of soda. Every time the two emerged from a Blue Eagle or a Dunrovin they laughed a little harder. We too were happy, for whenever we stopped they brought us bottles of pop – Sarsaparilla, Coke, Moxie – and soon I was near bursting with gassy sweet liquid, bloated but joyous. I wondered just how long the

strange expedition would last, fearing that soon, like a balloon, our morning would burst and fall to earth. Surely any minute now Frank would turn around and head towards home, but on we drove, on beyond Hazardville. I had no idea where we were. Each time Frank and his girl got back into the car they looked at us and laughed, and we giggled back like fellow conspirators, although we weren't quite sure what the conspiracy was all about.

As we rode, Sara, Elaine and I nudged one another, a tacit signal that we'd better keep quiet about the morning when we got home. It was cold in that rumble seat and the wind knotted our hair into tangles. Frank's driving seemed a bit cuckoo when he turned to his girl as though he had forgotten he was behind the wheel of a car. Once we bounced off a curbstone and then for a time we were driving straight down the middle of a street. But we never said boo to Frank. Who would want such a morning to end?

Why did it seem so glorious going to towns like Hazardville, Thompsonville, and Windsor Locks in a rumble seat? We were not quite inside the car, yet we were going along for the ride as if we were closing in on something. It was not just the thrill of riding in the forbidden rumble seat that day; there was something out of kilter about spending a Sunday morning this way because Sunday was supposed to be a family day when we took Sunday afternoon rides with our parents, rides that were to be endured, not enjoyed. But guzzling Sarsaparilla and Moxie and Coke before the big meal of the day, going too fast in a roadster's rumble seat on a Sunday morning with a laughing uncle and his girlfriend was like stepping through the looking glass into an unknown zone. It was as if we had been given a preview of what the adult world would be: exhilarating, unpredictable, hazardous, and filled with hard cold sunlight.

Until my grandfather died in 1938 Sunday night supper at my grandparents' house was a weekly haven, when my parents acted their Sunday roles for the old folks, not letting on that there had been a row at three in the morning. After supper I would leaf through my grandfather's copies of the *National Geographic*, and wander out to the kitchen to listen to boring but comfortable talk: someone they knew had failed terrible, another had driven his trolley car blind drunk down State Street. And they went on about relatives who lived in the middle west, Scotland, and Canada, whom I regarded as Sunday people, for they were not in my life any other day of the week – the Scottish great grandmother who was said to give everything away, and the great uncles, one who had fallen off a ship in Russia, another who worked in the Vermont quarries, and Uncle Ben, the family teetotaler who had been held up at gunpoint by the Chicago gangsters on his evening stroll. It was as if they all ceased to exist when Monday came, waiting in the wings for the following Sunday.

Since we never attended church as a family, the radio had become the altar at which we worshiped together once a week. In those pretelevision days the air seemed to be filled with voices of people whose very invisibility invested them with larger-than-life images – Jack Benny, Mary Livingston, and Rochester, Fred Allen and Portland Hoffa, Don Ameche, Edgar Bergen and Charley McCarthy. I knew that even my talkative parents had to be

quiet while Grandpa listened to his favorite program. "Good evening Mr. and Mrs. America! and all the ships at sea!" – the rat-a-tat-tat of Walter Winchell's delivery was electrifying, a style that had something of the bright energy of vaudeville and 1930's movie musicals. Winchell provided a mixed salad of real news and gossip about who was getting storked and what couple would soon be renovated. But he was one of the earliest newscasters to alert listeners to the perils of Nazi Germany as well as its American counterpart, the German American Bund, although I suspect that for my grandfather Winchell's fascination lay less in any particular news item than in the weekly half hour of champagne-popping excitement that he brought to an otherwise barley-water existence. Just as I wanted to hear the same old talk from the grown ups, it was the predictability of these programs that made Sunday night a warm comforter.

But in real life unexpected things happened more often than they did on other days. Once as a small child I stood with my parents on a pier at Cape Cod. It was growing dark and people were milling around a dead shark that lay there. Someone said, "You don't want to get near one of those fellas" making a move as if to cut off his leg. I had no idea that the shark had been caught some distance away and was horrified when a voice called to my parents, "Hop aboard, I'll take you out." The notion of stepping over the gap between the pier and boat with that menacing dark seaweedy water waiting to catch me was more than I could bear; after my exasperated father picked me up and carried me onto the boat I spent the entire trip worrying about how I would ever get off safely.

A few years later – I must have been seven or eight years old – we had driven to the Berkshires for a Sunday visit. When I walked into the mucky-bottomed lake I screamed – some blackish things had stuck to my legs and they wouldn't come off. My shrieks were loud enough to pry the grownups from their talking until someone removed the leeches with salt and a few tugs. Out on the water a group of older boys were diving from their rowboat, swimming, shouting, horsing around. On the porch my parents and their friends continued their interminable talk about the price of food and cars, that villain Franklin Roosevelt, and regretting the end of Hoover's presidency. Suddenly there was a lull in the talk and all the grownups were standing up, peering out onto the lake. The boys were swimming around and around their boat, looking down into the water; the word spread that one swimmer had failed to surface after diving. A hidden rock, a drowning. Sunday could turn nasty in a minute.

No wonder that writers have found it a gold mine. "A Sunday face" is usually meant to be a sanctimonious expression, although the Anglo-Irish see it as a festive countenance. The English say a month of Sundays or a week of Sundays when they want to convey a time of utter boredom. During the 1930s it was said that the song "Gloomy Sunday" was banned in Hungary because it had inspired so many suicides. A French popular song of the 1950s, "Les enfants s'ennuient le dimanche" – children are bored on Sunday – ends by declaring that "les parents s'enuuient le dimanche."

John Updike wrote *A Month of Sundays*. Alan Sillitoe entitled his first novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Wallace Stevens and Louis

MacNeice each chose "Sunday Morning" for a poem and Elizabeth Bishop "Sunday , 4 A. M." Intended as an ironic echo of the 1920 Bloody Sunday in Ireland, the 1971 film *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* was prescient in its anticipation of another Irish massacre in the following year, although the actual screenplay has nothing to do with the Irish troubles: two upper middle-class Londoners, in love with the same man, are willing to settle for crumbs as they cast about for something to fill up the empty hours, with Sunday as a metaphor for their loneliness.

It is a midsummer Sunday in John Cheever's story "The Swimmer." Neddy Merrill – the very name suggests his view of himself as forever young, able to fend off dewlaps and wrinkles – decides to "swim" home from a party by way of the pools in his upper middle class suburb for ". . . he knew that he would find friends all along the way." But as he goes he notes signs of change and decay, a party has been abandoned, a pool is dry, an old friend has clearly been suffering from a wasting disease for some time, though Neddy cannot remember hearing about it and wonders if his "gift for concealing painful facts" has let him forget. Even more disturbing is the news that his own house has been sold and his children are in trouble. Early in his swim people are delighted to see him, but eventually he is snubbed, and at last his former mistress, whom he had left without much regret, snarls at him, "Good Christ. Will you ever grow up?"

Jean Stafford lifted the title of the French song for her story "Children Are Bored on Sunday." Emma wanders around the Metropolitan Museum of Art on a Sunday afternoon, searching in vain for a painting by Botticelli. When she sees a man with whom she had flirted at a cocktail party months earlier she tries to avoid him. Emma had felt out of place at these intellectual alcoholic sessions which sometimes ended in fisticuffs, but it becomes clear that she has become a solitary drinker and has heard that he too has had some sort of life-collapse. Suddenly he sees her and recognizes their mutual desperation: "Their recognition of each other was instantaneous and absolute, for they cunningly saw that they were children and that, if they wished, they were free for the rest of this winter Sunday to play together, quite naked and innocent." It is a superb evocation of two lost souls on the loneliest day in the week.

For adolescents Sunday hours can seem both endless and far too short, a time to blot out the homework not yet done, and the last chance to snatch the missed opportunities of the previous night. A Sunday afternoon. Winter had almost disappeared and though it was windy and cold, the sun was shining. We had gravitated to a friend's house with the aimless certainty of youth that happiness could exist only in numbers. What to do? A whole empty afternoon loomed. Time was falling through our fingers like so much money that would be worth nothing the next day. We were convinced that the world would stop if we did not do something. Then the Daniel brothers appeared. Pimply and undernourished looking, they spent as little time as possible in school and had been driving flivvers patched together with chewing gum and bravado since they were fourteen and fifteen years old. Usually I avoided them, having watched them drive like maniacs up and down Elm Street for years, knowing they were headed nowhere that I wanted to go in life. But the afternoon would have been

wasted if we didn't hurry up and do something.

Another car full of wanderers had arrived and then we were out in the country. Both cars would have been dangerous to ride in even if we had had seat belts, but I was standing on a running board as we moved at top speed along a rutted road. For at least an hour two junkers raced over potholes and rocks as I held on for dear life. I was recovering from a bad cold, and trying to breathe in the wind created by the speed of the car I was standing on nearly choked off my breath altogether, but far from deterring me, this made the whole experience even more exciting. Not long before one of our classmates had been killed when her mother was driving and I was entrusting my life to a madman. Tires were poorly made and blowouts were common, often throwing a car out of a driver's control. It was only my increasing breathlessness and coughing that called a halt to my lunacy. At some point, gasping for breath, when the cars stopped I got off and waited for my suicidal companions to return to town.

With the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Sunday became a metaphor for daily life. Today it is hard to convey how completely the war affected our existence – everything that anyone wanted was rationed or unavailable, and the war effort was always cited as a reason for not doing something; indeed living itself seemed to be put off "for the duration." "Don't you know there's a war on?" was a routine answer to any complaint. Our job on the home front was to be cheerful at all times, not to pass on any gossip personal or military, to keep up the morale of our servicemen when we wrote to them, never to let on that we felt lonely. In 1944, I was nineteen and convinced that the war would never end. Friends had been killed, others were prisoners of war. My brother was a tail gunner on a flying fortress in Italy, every mission a near-death experience.

My parents had bought a house on the edge of town with some acreage, actually worn out farmland that had no particular value at that time. It was an odd place, with an abandoned quarry nearby, and woods on three sides cutting off views of any other habitation, as if, along with the separations brought on by the war, we were now removing ourselves from the communal life of town. I was living at home while attending college because my family had no money for dormitory fees, but I was pulling away from them in every respect, particularly their political and religious beliefs. Thrown into their company more than I had been in my high school years, on Sunday night I found myself sitting around with them and their friends having a drink before supper. Inevitably some of my recent discoveries such as atheism, and my new found snobbery, including a hot-potato-in-the-mouth Smithie accent, grated on their nerves, while I felt an intense resentment at being stuck out in the woods with people whose Model-T notions were at odds with all those refreshing ideas that I believed I was imbibing in my classes. Looking back I realize that our feeling of helplessness and uselessness – sitting comfortably at home while so many others were risking their lives – brought our mutual resentments to a head during those long wartime Sundays.

On the other side of the highway trains passed frequently, but it was only on Sunday night that my father would call out, "There goes the Montreal train!" It made me lonely to see those railroad cars flying north,

though I had never been to Montreal and had no particular interest in it. But there is something strange about this picture: surely the train made that trip to Montreal on other evenings, yet memory insists that, surrounded by those woods and that abandoned quarry, it was only Sunday night when I saw those lighted train windows flying past my life.

1947. I am living in a fifth floor walkup in Greenwich Village and have survived many lonely Sundays since moving here months earlier. I have found that the city that never sleeps does nevertheless go into a mild coma on that one day of the week, when most stores are closed. This vulgar metropolis is almost sedate; even the noise seems to have disappeared, and nothing is worse than being an early riser in a quiet city. I wander around my squashed up little rooms, look down on MacDougal Street where only a few hours earlier an apparently endless party had been going on. Going out to buy a copy of the *New York Times* takes up a half hour if I dawdle. Now and then married friends invite me for drinks, and we sit around their cozy, crowded apartment, whispering so we won't wake the baby. I have learned that the single girl, no matter how lonely, must resist hanging around too long, so I make excuses about some nonexistent date before reluctantly leaving this pale approximation of family life. Even the subways are eerily empty in the early evening. On other Sundays, like Emma in Jean Stafford's story, I wander the museums trying to convince myself that I am soaking up culture, although I am really filling up the hours until I can drag myself back to my apartment.

But this Sunday in late winter I have plans. With my Iraqi friend, Kamil, and his roommate Bob and Bob's cousin Jo, I am on a train going to Asbury Park, New Jersey. Jo is a bouncy, cheerful midwestern girl out to take New York by storm. I am somewhat intimidated by her enthusiasm and confidence, and perhaps as an easterner I am also a bit contemptuous of anyone so obviously ambitious. We have been invited to visit a compatriot of Kamil's, a fellow Iraqi who is living with his wife and two little girls in an empty resort hotel on the New Jersey shore. The hotel is large and impressive looking, and I suppose expensive, although this is my first glimpse of such a place so I have no idea of what the cost of staying there might be.

I have never known what I am supposed to do with children; although I assume that I will some day have them, I can't really see myself as a mother. Truthfully they don't interest me much, but from the moment we enter the hotel Jo enthusiastically chases the little girls through the hallways and the empty public rooms as they laugh and scream delightedly, a treat for children bereft of playmates in this rich man's temporary shelter. As Jo plays with the girls, I sit mousily with a tight smile on my face trying to think of something to say about them. I can not bring myself to exclaim over their looks; it is the sort of thing that always sounds hypocritical when I hear other people insisting how beautiful someone's kids are and I have no idea if they are precocious or stupid, so rather than risk making some gaffe, I sit with my rictus grin.

Kamil's friend is a dignified businessman, his wife a tense, beautiful Hungarian who talks even less than I. I cannot tell if it is because her English is limited or she disapproves of us. Perhaps she is put off by

boisterous Jo, or my lack of interest in her daughters. Our host has ordered two complete meals, an American Sunday dinner – I recall mounds of fried chicken, and I suppose there were mashed potatoes, squash, gravy, apple pies – and a full Middle Eastern feast of lamb, rice, couscous, and condiments that I am wary of eating. Before and during the meal we are served glasses of arak and sickly sweet manhattans. It is Kamil's friend Philip rather than his wife who urges more and more food and drink on us, and it is he who looks unhappy at how little I am eating and drinking. I have a glass of the arak as well as a manhattan or two, and soon I am in a headachy stupor. Kamil is a lively talker so he and Philip banter on about business matters and news from their homeland, but even in my boozy state I sense their forced gaiety and their efforts to fill up the empty space with talk, talk, talk. All afternoon platters of food and trays of drink continue to circulate in those echoing rooms and instinctively I know that no amount of nourishment from a kitchen can fill up the empty space in this sad family. Living in a hotel, even a rich homeless family is by definition a displaced one. In such a place it is always Sunday.

On Sunday the traveller feels that everyone else in the world has plans – with family, friends, lovers – plans that exclude the stranger. Museums inexplicably open at nine and close at two or, as in Lisbon, open at 2:30. Sunday is the day when the train tracks must be repaired so that the ordinarily brief trip from London to Richmond becomes a nightmare of diversions and we arrive at Marble Hill House fifteen minutes before closing time. The beautiful old city of Laôn, France, perches high above the modern lower town. Monday through Saturday a fine little funicular runs between the two parts of the city, but on Sunday apparently the city fathers feel that everyone should stay put. Like so many voyagers we seem to have left good sense at home and decide that we absolutely must get to Soissons for the day; to reach the train station we walk down three hundred and sixty steps to the lower town. With my unreliable knees I would have seen the folly of this at home, but no, we must not waste the day. Soissons is empty, the walk from the station to the town center long and boring, the cathedral not all that interesting, and we eat a pick-up lunch on a dusty bench. Of course on our return to Laôn there are the three hundred and sixty steps back to the upper city. The outing is punctuated with phone calls to the taxi company, pleadings, standing around a hot dusty parking lot until the town's lone cab driver on duty finally arrives.

In England we get off the train from York to London for a brief stop in Peterborough, to see the magnificent cathedral, expecting to leave our luggage at the station. Sorry, love, no left luggage attendant on Sunday. My husband and I take turns sitting with the too-heavy bags while the other strolls the cathedral. Time for lunch. Too tired to drag our suitcases any distance, we find that the only available restaurant is McDonalds, damned welcome even to vegetarians.

Still, European cities are often best on Sunday; with quieter streets even the locals seem to enjoy strolling. We have walked for hours in Rome on Sunday morning without our weekday feeling that we take our lives in our hands every time we try to cross a street. Grafton Street, Dublin, 1996. We found a poet dressed in a threadbare overcoat with torn button holes, a

tatty handmade sign listing the poetry he would recite. Like all Irishmen he proved to be a born actor as he gave us Yeats, Seamus Heaney, Oscar Wilde, many others, including a delightful one of his own about a policeman who made him move on, for whom he wished a kind of hell where he'd have to answer the questions of American tourists all day.

Sunday is best for those vignettes never found in any guidebook. The train from Naples took us to the Royal Palace at Caserta, but of course we arrived when the Villa itself was *chioso*. Never mind, it gave us an excuse to walk the magnificent grounds at our leisure. The park's perspective, which extends for nearly two miles, is punctuated by a cascade that drapes down the side of a long hill, really a small mountain. But the vast grounds include not-so-pristine areas including a woodland where we came upon a family having one of those oh-so-Italian outings. In England their counterparts would be enjoying the out of doors in all deliberate earnestness, but here a father stood on the hood of his car holding a small boy who had his hand inside a hollow tree trunk. As the child dropped mushrooms to a larger boy on the ground Papa yelled continually that the day would surely be a bust if there were not enough fungi for their meal. We watched wondering which would happen first – what unseen animal would bite the intruder's hand, or in his frenetic desire for the hidden prize would father loosen his hold on the child? If nothing else surely a park attendant would arrest them. An old man rode up on his bike. He stopped. We expected instant orders to move on, but of course this was Italy, you mind your own business; the bicyclist pedaled off. Great excitement from Mamma and the rest of the family as Papa lowered their boy from his mid-air adventure. The day was saved.

* * *

A late summer Sunday of an aging atheist. Ours is a yard of dappled sunshine. In addition to its old oaks and box elders, it is overgrown with untidy bushes – wild grape vines that resist eradication, strangling any nearby plant if I don't whack away at them, ancient lilacs that no longer bloom, ditto some mock orange and honeysuckle bushes. As I walk around I see that we'll have to call the tree trimmer to amputate dead limbs. One particularly gothic oak lost a huge branch some years ago and looks lopsided, but what did I expect? It was part of the normal aging process. Nearby someone is hammering, repairing. It is the day for tinkering, for fixing up, but sometimes such work is useless. We think we can repair, splice, fix up forever, because we don't want to admit to what is ahead. It's easy to discuss the "normal decay" of an aging oak tree, but not the aging me. Like Neddy Merrill in "The Swimmer" we don't want to look at the shadows, to admit that we will not always have the strength to swim from one pool to the next.

It occurs to me that the tired phrase mid-life crisis might better be termed a Sunday realization that one has wandered onto the wrong path, but rather than being viewed as a crisis, it should be seen as a time to pause to let mistakes and losses be remembered and if possible washed

away with some tears. Like my yard, the misnamed sun-day is a dappled time.

It has been ages since I've had any reason to cordon off that one day from the rest of the week, yet it retains something of its peculiar force. With its hold on us, Sunday is like some witch, a relic who reminds us of an era peopled by fabulous beings, a creature with powers to invigorate our dull existence or kill us with some simple she has concocted out of woodland plants. Like the old woman, Sunday holds both promises and threats.

MICHAEL STEIN

Warhol's Last

I am his doctor, but he still hates being touched
and takes his own pulse
in the private room.

He orders Coke, Del Monte peaches in heavy syrup,
Martinson's, then covers all the windows
in silver foil.

A hairpiece keeps his neck warm.
"X-ray everything," he scolds,
and the magnet he sucks on

shows up whiter than his hair.
"Would you like to be in a movie?" he seduces,
looking an unsettled color, sick,

breathing quick and quiet, his skin blushing.
I'm the only one he takes advice from.
I'm the one who has answers to his questions.

When I hold up the mirror, he mumbles,
"Oh, how fantastic."
At the moment of legend,

I'm in the doctor's lounge having soup.
He's as dead as anyone with an entourage.
After, I bring in a friend

to snap a few pictures of me and Andy,
some stiff plastic tulips in the background,
me on the right so if it reaches the papers

I'll be first in the caption.

Miss Victory (1895)

Monument Circle, Indianapolis

You can't fool us, Miss Victory, queening it
over the roofs of this city, one hip swishing
toward the long sword you cock
like a walking-stick between your calves.

Girlfriend, who welded that eagle to your scalp
and posed you with the liberty torch
like some bridesmaid's lucky catch?
Miss Victory, why you're a certified virgin of war.

Your waist isn't wasp, there's no rumble-seat
festooning your behind. In the lingo of the parlor,
not the brawl, you remind us how we pussywhipped
the South. Are you trying to start something?

Your pectorals are rippling through your dress
and you've squared your Julius Caesar jaw.
Those damn shoppers down below
view you as just another fashion mannequin.

No blood stipples your bronze bodice,
the polished cones of your breasts. Truth is,
you make war a costume drama, a tease,
your left hand flaming, the other hugging the hilt.

SUSAN BROWN

Ball of Fire

Barbara Stanwyck as Sugarpuss, singing
"Drum Boogie" acapella except for match sticks
scratching their box in lieu of drums.
Past 2:00 Sunday morning, I wonder if it's true
that the average American will spend over a year
watching TV commercials. Earlier
this evening he smelled so warm, like bread
and soap grilled over a campfire, early fall.
I felt my bones twitch. Who knew I'd get lucky
flipping channels later, just in time
to see Stanwyck stand on two encyclopedias
to kiss Gary Cooper? My student said the poem
I gave her didn't make the hairs on the back
of her neck stand up, not even on the second reading.
Just once I want to come home to shelves of books
I've *read*, spines cracked and opened to the word
"hands." I want the one light bulb that never
burns out. At least my cat nips my calves
when I walk in, the last Goo Goo Cluster
still sits in the back of the fridge. Sugarpuss says,
"Brother, that's corn," as if she'd read my students' poems
this week, the single tear always slipping down
someone's cheek in the last line. I tell them to forget
about neck hairs, just write about what's in the back
of the fridge. Why can't the Taster's Choice couple
stop talking about coffee and just percolate, already?
I think about the hammer propping up his window
all night, the moths throwing themselves
at the screen. Last week my grandmother sent me
an article from The Post about James Wright,
scribbled "I had no idea poetry was getting so *big*"
on scrap paper, then "How's your love life?",
as if metaphor was the way to his heart, not just
a desperate linking of what is always, eventually,
separate. But I can't stop trying: when our elbows
brushed in the supermarket tonight everything responded
as it could – the Pop Tarts kept popping,
kernels exploded in their bags. Orville Redenbacher
would have been proud, the corn so full of longing
it strained to break out of itself like Wright's blessing:
blossom, blossom, and my heart still throbbing.

ALISON UMMINGER

Breathing in the Millennium

When Anna married David it was because she loved him. There were other reasons, of course, but that was the most important. The love she felt for him was twofold, the love of the person coupled with the love of what the person did for her. She loved him because he was intelligent without a hint of pretension, handsome despite eyebrows that nearly met in the middle. She loved his broad hands and practical mind. And at the time she had loved that he could face the world, that her own fears seemed to shrink back inside of her in his presence.

Before she met David, Anna had been living with Carl in a one-bedroom apartment in a run-down housing complex in South Arlington, Virginia. The building was made of red brick, chipped around the edges, and the bottom units had bars across the windows. In the spring there was a lone row of tulips that bloomed yellow in the strip of dirt surrounding the building. Anna had lived there long enough to see them flower twice. Most everyone in the building kept to themselves, herself included, although at night she and Carl could hear their neighbors making love through the skeletal walls that divided the units.

"I like to listen to our building," she had told Carl. "At night the building sounds like it's crying. I can feel it inside me, the way the voices all become this fractured moan."

Carl liked to tell her that she thought like a poet, but she knew that was only because they thought alike, and he fancied himself something of a poet. Before Carl she had dated other men like Carl, artistic types who could counter her best crying fits with fits of their own, men who never thought that she was crazy or irrational simply by bent of possessing their own well-developed neuroses. Carl painted and wrote poetry. He was alternately Zen and Christian and Pagan depending on the books he was reading, the medication he was on, or the weather. Living with Carl was like orbiting a sun. There was such a pull towards the hole inside of him that she never had to think about her next move. The gravity of his emptiness, his need for a satellite planet, was a kind of fate that kept her in the apartment.

At night, when the building was quiet, they used to talk about fear. She told him that fear was like a pearl forming inside of her, adding layer upon layer until she thought it was going to explode her soul. She said that God was like the lining of a shell, churning the fear and making it brilliant. Though she hadn't gone to church since she was fifteen, Anna still believed in God. Sometimes, when it was late, she was afraid that God would come to her wanting an explanation for the world, and she would be called upon to provide one. The world, for Anna, was a mystery: ominous and best kept at a distance. That she could not explain it meant that even the smallest

gestures were suspect.

Her last month in the apartment, she told Carl that she couldn't stand riding the subway.

"This morning I could barely breathe," she said, "I let three trains pass before I finally got on, and when I did, it was like the pressure of everyone was crushing me.

"Then someone dropped a soda, and I literally went white. I heard this thud and it sounded to me like a child had been dropped and that its skull had split across the floor. Even when I looked down and saw ice slicking between my shoes, I couldn't shake the feeling."

Carl listened attentively, rubbed her back, and suggested that she stop riding the subway.

Anna met David on the bus. They waited silently at the same stop for a week before he talked to her. His car was in the shop, he told her, and no one seemed to know what was wrong with it. He was starting to think that he would never see it again. She told him she couldn't have a car. That when she did, everything about it became a sign. When it wouldn't start she worried that it was a sign that something bad would happen on the way to work. When she couldn't find parking, she took it as a sign that her life was superfluous, that all the spaces were taken and she should just move on. Cars were intimately linked to fate, she told him.

"Cars are meant to take people from one place to the next," he had countered.

She decided that meeting him was a sign. He was a tax lawyer who worked in the District of Columbia, but to Anna he seemed like an ambassador from a different race of people, people for whom the world made sense. Lately, when Carl made love to her, she felt like she was falling into a gray space from which it was harder and harder to return. And when she could pull herself out of it, the face she began to see was David's. She could not explain this, not even to herself.

When David asked her to dinner, she said yes. She told Carl that she was working late, but he didn't seem to notice. He hadn't left the apartment in almost a week, and Anna knew that the only thing that would mobilize him was the imminent shortage of weed.

For her date with David, Anna wore a long black skirt with orange and red flowers and a white sweater low in the middle, showing the flat spread of ribs across her chest. She powdered her face and skin all the way down to her breasts, erasing the freckles she had had since childhood. Her red-blonde hair she flattened in a clip against the nape of her neck, and she darkened her lips a shade of rusted red glossed with a coat of Vaseline. She left her eyes alone. Carl hated make-up, and she hadn't worn it in so long that she felt like a child who had raided her mother's vanity.

David picked her up outside of her office building in Rosslyn. He was driving a car that looked expensive, shiny and gray with leather seats. He told her that he almost didn't recognize her, but his tone was complimentary rather than disapproving.

They drove across town, to the restaurant where she had gone for her Senior Prom and later to celebrate her graduation from college. She took that also as a sign, that something equally important was about to happen.

Halfway through dinner she started smiling and couldn't stop.

"I feel like one of my parents," she said. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I don't usually date people like you." She started laughing. "I once dated this guy who used to pick through the garbage of restaurants and shellac the food as a kind of protest against the bourgeoisie. I think that this restaurant was his favorite source of raw materials."

She surprised herself at how easily she could put Carl in the past tense, how cartoonish and distant he became.

"What happened to him?"

"He just started getting really stoned and after a while he never left the bed. Then he ate whatever I gave him. I even fed him a piece of his lettuce collage once, and he got really sick. I didn't mean to make him sick, though."

"So you like the brooding type? Did he wear black turtlenecks?"

His tone let her know that he was kidding, but she also sensed pity, and the fear began to turn inside of her. She clenched her fingernails into the palms of her hand until she felt more calm.

"I understood him. And sometimes that goes further than like. You put up with more when you understand someone. I used to think we were soul mates or something."

David cut into the poached salmon in front of him. His hands were olive-brown, like the rest of his skin, and the dark hairs across them looked soft and graceful.

"I don't believe in all that soul stuff. And you don't strike me as brooding or desperate."

"Oh, no," she said. "Look at how we met. I've been riding the bus because the subway gives me panic attacks, and I've told you about how I get with cars. I think that everyone on 395 is going to shoot me, and the only highway I'll take is 50, because it's smaller, but it's out of the way and makes everything take twice as long. Which just leaves the bus, and now I wonder what I'm going to do when that starts to spook me. Then I'll just have to stay home, and then I'm not even sure that anyone will notice, except maybe my parents and my boss, and that just makes me feel even more freaked out."

David started to laugh. She realized that he thought she was kidding, and it made her feel like she was kidding as well. There was a surety to his demeanor that seemed to flatten the world into manageable dimensions. If he didn't believe in souls, then this wasn't a sign of anything, it was just dinner, and it didn't seem like so much. She looked hard at him, at the warmth of his eyes, and put part of herself in the past tense as well.

"So what you're saying is that your life would all fall into place if you had a driver."

His tone was lawyerly, searching for the flaw in her logic so that she would make more sense. She liked that he couldn't quite figure her out; it made her feel more present.

"I think it's a little more complicated than that. Sometimes I get my right and my left confused when I'm driving. I can't think directionally."

"So what if I were to pick you up and drive you to work?"

He reached across the table and touched her hand, and the shell was motionless around the fear.

"I need to tell you something," she said. "It's kind of embarrassing."

He nodded.

"I still live with my parents. It's sort of to save money and sort of just one of those things."

"I lived with my parents for eighteen years. Who am I to say? I'm a tax lawyer, not a judge."

She laughed at his joke, not because it was funny but because she liked him. After dinner she asked David to drop her off at her parents' house. David kissed her in the car and offered to walk her to the door, but she refused. She fumbled for the key, worried that David would think that she had locked herself out. When she found it, she waved him away before turning the lock. The door was chained from the inside, and she had to wait for her mother to let her in.

Once inside she explained the situation, and her father insisted on driving her back the half-mile to her own apartment. Anna waited for him in the living room, where her mother had candles lit beneath a faded portrait of Jesus at a makeshift altar. They had moved from their old house to this town house the year after her brother had died, and her parents hadn't moved since. Anna had fought against the move, and she never felt like she had lived here. It had the same furniture as the old house, the same paintings hanging on the walls, even the same altar before which Anna had spent half her childhood, trying to pray her brother well. Tonight Anna found the altar difficult to stomach, a final temptation against her new-found resolve. But she stared at Jesus until her father came down, until Christ became nothing but an accidental etching on an old canvas.

The next day she told Carl it was over. He went in the bathroom and shaved his head while she collected the few belongings that were hers. Then he got very, very stoned and presented her with a lampshade that he had made out of thin slivers of beets. It had glowed red the first time they made love, and she felt sad when he handed it to her. His hands looked translucent as the beets, and they were shaking. The whole thing felt very far away.

Now it was the end of March, 1997, and instead of a one-bedroom apartment Anna was living in a four-bedroom colonial-style house with a round driveway and a two-car garage. Anna was a member of the Fairfax County Garden Club, and in front of the house she had planted three large rosebushes, a dogwood tree, and a potpourri of tulips in violet, pink, and white. Her backyard was a concert of colors, with twenty different kinds of flowers woven through the grass, between the trees, and along the house. David had arranged to have the yard photographed professionally in April. Her life with David felt safe and contained, far removed from the current headlines which, this month, were about a mass suicide in California.

Most of the time Anna read headlines with detached curiosity, reminding herself that none of them had anything to do with her, but lately the space between her and the world had started to shrink. In line at the supermarket one of the tabloids had caught her eye. The cover featured pictures of the Heaven's Gate cult members killed in the California suicide, and one of the faces looked identical to Carl's. It was even aged just the

right amount, like the speculative portrait of a child who had been missing for years. The picture was fuzzy in the details, just a head smiling against a light blue background. The smile was forced and sad, and the man looked exactly the way Carl looked when he had emerged from the bathroom the day she left him, head newly and shoddily shorn.

She had trembled as she flipped through the magazine, searching for the article, and was then both relieved and exhausted when she read the man's name. It wasn't Carl. She devoured every word of text, every fact about the man on the cover. He was from Arizona. He had gone to Berkeley. He had a daughter whom no one had been able to locate. This is not Carl, she repeated as she read the text, but it could have been. The man on the cover could have been Carl, and the more she looked at the grainy faces in androgynous black shirts, the more she thought that one of them could have been her as well. She found herself reading about a women who had died, and her chest began to pinch. With her fingers she traced the edges of the woman's face, etching an unspoken prayer, a way of saying back to the newspaper that she understood.

Now she had to leave the room when David listened to the news. Since that day, she didn't want to hear about the millennium, or about the end of the world, or about anyone who took the world at something other than face value.

March was also the month in which she and David celebrated their eighth wedding anniversary, and the month in which their first son Joshua had been born five years ago. And this afternoon in March she was late picking Joshua up from kindergarten. Micah was crying in the seat beside her. Micah was one and a half years old, and his middle ear was infected. She had just been to the doctor and had the medicine beside her, but she wanted to wait until they were home to put it in his ear.

"I know it hurts," she said. "Just wait until we get home. Mommy will make it feel better."

She reached across and rubbed his knee. His face was flushed from the long, sustained wail that had lasted from Fairfax to Alexandria and back. Now he had simply worn himself out, and his head dropped over to the side.

Joshua was waiting outside the kindergarten with his teacher and two other children. Anna slowed the car long enough to pass polite greetings with Mrs. Lopez and to get Joshua securely fastened into the back seat. He had on his green soccer shirt and shorts, and his legs and elbows were filthy. His brownish-blond hair hung over his eyes, and Anna noted that a haircut was in order.

"Be quiet," she whispered to Joshua. "Micah's asleep. His ear hurts and we need to get him home without waking him."

Joshua was silent just until Anna pulled away from the curb.

"Mom," she heard.

"Shhh," she said. "Quiet voice."

"Mom," he whispered. "Are there such things as UFO's?"

"No."

"Carlos said that these people all killed themselves so they could go on a UFO."

"That's true," she said. "But there wasn't any UFO."

"Then why did they do it?"

They were almost home, and the question seemed to crowd the car.

"Because this is an odd time we're living in, and people don't have very much in their lives. People do funny things when they don't have very much in their lives. They believe in things that aren't true because it's easier than believing in nothing."

Joshua was silent for a moment. They were already in their driveway.

"Like Frank and his family believe in God?" Joshua asked.

If David had been in the car it would have been simple. He would have said "Yes," and Joshua would have quieted in the glow of his father's atheistic calm. Normally, Anna didn't discuss religion with her sons. She wanted them to grow up better equipped for life that she was, and David's way seemed simpler. But now it was just her, alone in the car, called upon to explain the world.

"Mommy believes in God," she said. But the car had stopped, and Joshua was in the yard before he heard her answer.

Inside, Anna gave Micah his medicine and put him to bed. She walked from Micah's room to Joshua's, which was decorated with soccer posters and football memorabilia. His bed was unmade, and she pulled the corners of the blanket around the edges of the bed, then sat down. From the window she could see Joshua playing out back, rough and indifferent to their conversation. The two older boys from next door, Frank and Kevin, had joined him and were kicking the ball around. Frank and Kevin went to Catholic school, and they still had on their uniforms, navy shorts and white shirts.

Beside Joshua's bed was the beet-shade lamp, which he had found in the attic last summer and claimed as his own. David told him that it could only be turned on when someone was in the room, in case it was a fire hazard. David had never asked where it came from. Anna turned on the lamp and ran her hand beneath the shade; the skin patterned in deep shades of red and scarlet. She closed her eyes and for a moment she saw Carl, the light diffuse against his skin, with tiny patches of pink. She turned the light out and felt something open up inside of her, something that had been closed for a very long time, and what emerged was hard and brilliant. She ran her hand against her chest where it was buried; her hand which now looked small and gray. She wondered if somewhere Carl, the real Carl, had children of his own.

That night, after the boys were asleep, David came home and they ate dinner. He had steak and she had a salad.

"You're not hungry?" he asked.

"It's Good Friday," she said. "I don't want to eat meat."

David ate without pause.

"This Sunday is Easter," she said. "I was thinking that I would take the boys to church. Would that bother you?"

"Doesn't bother me," he said. But he added after a moment, "We didn't even get married in a church."

She placed her fork at the side of her plate, and felt her hands drop to her lap as if guided by an outside force. For the first time in a long time she

wanted David to be someone else.

"I'm afraid," she said.

David stopped eating and studied her. She knew the look; he was checking to see how serious she was. They had had conversations like this before. She concentrated on her wedding ring so that she wouldn't have to look at him when she talked.

"I'm afraid of my son's questions," she said. "Joshua asked me about that cult today, and I was afraid to answer. It was like when I opened my mouth, suddenly my whole life became two-dimensional, like a coloring book of a life where I'd spent all my time trying to stay between the lines. And I didn't believe in it anymore. But I don't even know how to tell my son what to believe in. And then I realized that it was too late. That it doesn't matter what I believe in anyway, because Joshua had never seen anything but the straight, black lines of this colored-in world. That I couldn't say anything that would make any sense to him, and that scared me. So suddenly, I'm afraid of my children."

She heard David put his silverware down and push in his chair, and she watched the movement of his body across the dining room, a blur caught in the margins of her peripheral vision. She felt his hands kneading the skin between her shoulder blades, and her head limp on her neck like an unwatered flower. She knew that he hated when she talked in metaphors, but he wasn't saying anything. She knew that he was taking this seriously.

"You can take the boys to church if you want," he said. "And your children are nothing to be afraid of. You're a wonderful mother."

She started to cry and felt angry at herself.

"I don't want to take them to church," she said. "I should never have brought it up."

"No," he said. "I know how you feel."

She shrugged his hands off her shoulders.

"You don't know how I feel."

David was silent.

"Do you want to know how I feel? I feel like when I got married I closed my eyes and held my breath and dove in, and that I've held my breath as long as I could, and now I've finally come up for air. Only now I don't know where I am, or if I can even swim, or why I dove in in the first place."

The silence hung between them until he got up and slammed his chair against the table.

"Thanks for letting me know how you feel. I'd hate for you to feel the need *not* to express yourself."

"I'm sorry," she said. "If it weren't for you I'd probably still be stoned on a mattress in a studio apartment. It's just that I feel like I never accounted that I'd need to come up for air, and now I'm breathing again and it hurts. I wouldn't tell you if it didn't hurt."

"Spare me the images," he said. "They're pretentious. You're not even making sense. And you're not the only person who hurts. Or who gets frightened. Not in this world, and not in this house."

"I told you I was crazy," she said. "You just didn't want to believe that."

"You're not crazy," he said. "Do you really find your life two-dimensional? What do you think would give it depth?"

She focused on the cracks in the hardwood floor, on the sanded-over places and the dust in the corners.

"Fear," she said. "I'm not trying to say something about you. That's not what I meant. It's just that I know how those people waiting for the comet felt. I know what it's like to want the end of the world, because it would almost seem like a relief. Like there wouldn't be anything more to worry about."

Her face was between her hands, and she heard his voice closer to her now. The anger was gone.

"You don't need to be afraid," he said. "You have a family, and me, and I'd like to think that would give your life depth."

He sounds like Carl, she thought to herself, and then she was very sad.

"I wish the next three years were over," she said. "I'd like to take a pill and wake up three years from now. Everyone is so crazy, and I don't want to be around for it. I don't want to be around while it all gets worse and it's me who ends up going nuts."

She stood up and started clearing the plates from the table. Her eyes felt dry, and she closed them tightly to squeeze the sting out of them. David helped her with the dishes.

"Do you know what happened in the 990s?" he said.

"No."

"I saw it on television the other day. It was as crazy as it is now, and evidently nothing got accomplished. People stopped. No great ideas. Nothing. Just this slowing down, this inertia while everybody waited."

She nodded to show that she was listening.

"And then when the world didn't end, when there was no final judgment, historians agree that the optimism from making it through to the millennium lasted a full three hundred years."

Something in her chest loosened for the first time that day.

"It's all going to be okay if history repeats itself," he said. "And it does. You can't avoid it, it's like death and taxes."

When the dishes were finished they went upstairs. Anna opened the door to Joshua's room. He was sleeping soundly and had kicked the covers off of his bed. She picked his blanket up off of the floor and nestled it around his shoulders. For the first time in three nights Micah was quiet as well, and when Anna went in to David and told him that she felt better, neither of them knew whether or not that was the truth.

The next morning when Anna went to wake Micah up he didn't respond. She rubbed his shoulder and his eyes opened abruptly. There was dried blood on the blanket and a thick mixture of pus and blood curdled around his ear.

"Oh my god, David," she said. "Oh, my god."

David went to the bathroom and wiped the side of Micah's face clean.

Micah didn't appear to be in any pain, and he began to babble happily at the attention, but stopped when he sensed his parents' seriousness. David cupped his palm against Micah's healthy ear and whispered his name from above his head. No response. Anna called the doctor.

"I don't know," she said to the receptionist. "I'll be there as soon as I can. We'll drive him in immediately. I think he can't hear." And then she started repeating, "What if he can't hear?"

She hung up the phone and sent Joshua over to Frank and Kevin's house. David drove them to the pediatrician's office, and Anna sat beside him with Micah in her lap. His face felt warm and damp against her shirt.

"It could be nothing," David said to her. "It's probably just one of those things that seems worse before it gets better. What did the receptionist say?"

"She said she didn't know."

"She didn't know," he repeated back. "She didn't know."

She couldn't tell David what she was thinking, that she had laid Micah down facing the windowed side of the room so that the medicine would stay inside his ear, and that the ear that had been bleeding was the opposite ear. Her head began to throb again, and again her eyes began to tear.

It's my fault, she tried to say, but couldn't.

When they arrived at the pediatrician's office, Dr. Dachelle, a woman who wore sneakers with flashing lights and a lab coat with elephants on the pockets, took Micah and balanced him on her hip.

Anna and David followed Dr. Dachelle down the hall to the examination room where she turned out the lights and looked intently into Micah's ear. And Anna began to say a prayer, a prayer for Micah, and a prayer that David would leave the room. She clenched her body into a silent message for the heavens. And then, as miraculous as water becoming wine, David's pager began to beep.

"Shit," he said.

When the door closed behind him, Anna began talking.

"I'm sorry," Anna said. "I just have to ask you a question. I'm worried that I put the medicine in the wrong ear."

Dr. Dachelle looked up at Anna, but Anna couldn't see her face. The light from above the doctor's head was blinding, and Anna felt like someone about to be tortured.

Dr. Dachelle removed the headband.

"His eardrum is ruptured, but that's not that uncommon. Maybe it would have made a difference if you had put the medicine in the correct ear, and maybe it wouldn't. I can't say. But he'll be fine."

Micah's feet beat a slow rhythm on the examination table. He focused on the play of shadow against the wall.

"Okay," Anna said. When David returned Dr. Dachelle explained the prognosis again and handed Micah back to Anna. She turned the lights back on and wrote two more prescriptions that were to be filled immediately.

"Now you'll want to keep him still," she said. "I know that's going to be hard, but I put something in his ear to help it heal. He should be fine in

a couple of weeks. Bring him in again in a week just to be sure."

"Thank you," David said. "We were worried sick."

"Thanks," Anna repeated. She couldn't look Dr. Dachelle in the face.

In the car David was almost himself again. He tapped his fingers unconsciously against the steering wheel as he drove and sang nursery rhymes to Micah. Anna was quiet most of the ride, and at the stoplight nearest their house she told David that she felt like it was her fault, but he was having none of it.

The rest of the afternoon Anna cleaned the house. She made sure that Joshua didn't make any loud noises while Micah slept and David worked in his study. The morning felt like it had happened a long time ago, as did the day before, and she felt like something was shifting. She scrubbed the bathroom floors until her fingertips began to split, and then she flexed her palm to make them bleed. But even the pain could not touch her calm, and she knew that this realignment, this shifting inside of her, was something mystical being done in secret. When she slept that night she kept very still, and she listened for sounds from the house, which neither wept nor moaned, until silence passed into sleep.

When Anna married David it was eleven o'clock on a March morning in the rose garden of a local park. Not an Easter morning, though the air this Easter smelled to Anna the same as it had eight years ago, rich with roses and heavy with pollen. So much so that as she sat in her backyard the years seemed to fall away, and she sat outside of time, alone with herself. The shifting inside that she had felt before was finished, and her soul was still.

In the house next door she saw the first light go on in Kevin's and Frank's room and knew that Joshua would soon be awake. She had let David sleep and hidden the Easter eggs herself. Their pastel shells crested over the grass like tiny moons, and she imagined Joshua hunting them down, determined and methodical as he was at everything.

Anna closed her eyes and tried to say a prayer. As a child she had thought that she understood God. She had told her mother that Easter was about losing things, that you couldn't appreciate something until it was taken away, and even when you got it back that was only to show that you couldn't keep it. Christ may have risen from the dead, but He hadn't stayed.

Christ lives in your heart, her mother had said.

And she had looked for Christ in her heart, but found only a dreadful longing tied to a simple truth: the harder you held on, the more friction there was when something slipped away. She knew when her brother died that this was the truth of her life, and that each person carried within them a different truth. She would go on living, but there would be another time when life fell away again, and she would be left only with the words inscribed on her soul: Loss and Fear. Loss, which translated into daily life became its precursor, Fear. The only thing that actual loss accomplished was erasure of the fear. But this morning something had been given back to her, and she was no longer afraid.

Inside her house Anna heard the whir of the coffee grinder and knew

that David was awake. A few minutes later she smelled coffee through the window and the first pangs of hunger began churning in her stomach.

This morning in her back yard, she was no longer afraid. She felt that she had been given a gift, and that she was once again blank as slate.

A.J. RATHBUN

Foreign Policy

In the Italy of your life, everyone
is pouring red bottles of Merlot
and has put out the cat after candles
shimmied down to warm white nubs.
The shades are cracked to cool air,
sheets pursed like lean lips almost
open. One couple becomes two couples
who in turn become three and like
a sweet stain everyone is suddenly
the next glass of wine, the next
scotch and soda, the next imported slice
of American cherry pie a la mode.
Someone effluent enough dims down
the lights. The experience
expands until the world is eaten
by one couple who shed skin,
waltzing past each other.

Then, of course, there was that night
when I was 28 and absolutely nothing
happened while I waited for your call.
It became the Austria of my life
as I traveled between brown couch
and brown chair, a drinking glass
full of yesterday's news, a man downtown voted
again against something, for something.
I watched an episode of *Hawaii 5-0*
awhile while eating a pear grown
in a green orchard miles away. Then
two thousand lonely others put dishes
into cupboards and I did, too.
The world's shutters turned down
and everyone shut off electric
evening in one large movement, one
large field of urban calisthenics tucking
an empty night in bed. What about the next

morning? What about suicide and madness?
What about India and the lovers buried
under sleet in Siberia? My crowded globe
stops its spin right on you, waiting
for Bus 74 on University Avenue
as kids speed by on skateboards
that have been around the world. Drop
eighty-five cents into the metal slot
and twirl the meter, ride the Seattle bus
with three quarters and a stubby dime
that equal the road to an apartment,
a crowded gondola, a submarine,
a random moment of being apart
or together within billions, ride
all the way into the tropical Aruba
of our later life together.

CLYDE TRESSLER

Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation

Even in casual conversation
such as might be heard at a New Year's Eve party
where the large woman on the bed is describing
the window of opportunity
and how she jumped right in;
perhaps she meant that her husband jumped right in;
perhaps she was speaking for her husband
who was given to understand that she was the window
and he had better jump in or out
because life was at stake.
And I wanted to tell them
that it is possible to jump both in and out
and fall without the promise of a bottom
even when caressing the smooth bottom
of the baby who also falls out of the window.
I wanted to say that women always give these windows of opportunity
and I have always jumped and fallen
so that now faces appear on every slick surface
calling to me.
But I could not say to the woman on the bed,
who was so sure of herself, pregnant with twins,
that it is possible to hit every window of opportunity,
fly through like greased lightning,
and have love everywhere staring back at you
reflected in shards falling at exactly the same speed.

JEFFREY THOMSON

A Town That Sounds Like Leaving

The town I live in now sounds like leaving. That is the only way to describe it – a constant, physical sound of motion and abandonment. Trains pull through the night in mournful laments, long, choked, sobbing whistles. The highway to the north of town hisses and buzzes all day. There is nowhere to escape it, this general overbuzz of vacating.

The wide, too wide, almost-Mormon streets blow with dust and smell like cattle, beefpacking, and sugarfat – the twin industries of town are the slaughterhouse and the Dolly Madison factory. Most days, the wind carries the smell of doughnuts or scalded blood. Cars swing their wide turns at random. And people leave. They move, packing everything in small, flat boxes, hauling bicycles and cars, mattresses strapped to the roofs of their cars like airfoils. Even if they don't, they spend hours imagining leaving. They plan and scheme, imagining new lives in towns far distant, towns that carry the smell of evergreen, towns where the air holds the salt of the sea, towns with a staggering skyline. They imagine new jobs, positions of authority, dealmaking and posturing. They call the Chamber of Commerce in these places just in case.

But I have reversed course – moving against the drift of people and their belongings, moving out here to the prairie where the wind begins. I have come for a job I like well enough, teaching English and creative writing to students whose dream is to be anywhere but here, to students who blink and shake their heads when asked if they ever consider staying around after graduation, who want out to cites like Wichita, Fort Collins, Boise. The irony is, however, that many do stay. Our graduate roster is in no small part made up of students (our students mostly) who never really made it out, who stayed around and said to themselves in a tight, resolved whisper, Well what the hell I'll just finish up my degree, my year, my semester, my life.

I have gone against the grain; I have come here, maybe to stay. I have come here for a job and maybe that is enough, especially in the humanities, but maybe there is something more. . . . So now, too often it seems, that I cannot help but wonder why there's that constant pull for the horizon, why the highway on-ramp appears like a funnel into the future.

I have been to the places my students dream of going. I have lived in Chicago and Crested Butte. I have walked out of my door into an alley behind a dry cleaner, scurried through the underground subways and tunnels, and bopped from club to club all night. I have opened my porch into a deer-rich pasture below a twelve-thousand foot mountain; the early morning light catching the edges of the peak like a thumbnail moon. I have lived a few other places too.

These days, I eat lunch at the Malfunction Junction restaurant. It is not as though I have to; there are other restaurants in town, though they all have the same menu, which continues to bother me. Burgers and wings and a fried chicken sandwich. Salads of bronzed iceberg lettuce and hot house tomatoes. It is not even because I like the name, but because the plate glass windows that look out Eighth Street and down Commercial try to recall the time when there was something to see. When the theater wasn't boarded up, when the dime stores were still there and the bars weren't. Quoting Richard Hugo, the patron saint of towns like this:

> You might come here Sunday on a whim.
> Say your life broke down. The last good kiss
> you had was years ago. You walk these streets
> laid out by the insane, past hotels
> that didn't last, bars that did, the tortured try
> of drivers to accelerate their lives. . .

That tortured try is what I hear all around me in this town; it's what leaving sounds like. The metal on metal clanking of the trains, the aeronautic hiss of the tollway, the whisper of the lonely remembering their last good kiss. And this town's last good kiss, who knows when that happened. Thirty years ago. Forty. Small and spiked with dust it must have been, even then, when the railroads still meant what the streets were named for – Commerce, Merchant, Constitution, Mechanic (Hugo was wrong there, at least about my town; these streets were names for promise). The names conjure up a mixture of law and progress, order and money, a wet wind coming out of the east that meant rain. These days a sweet taste still remains on my lips, like an uncommon fog or perfume off a woman's neck.

This town had a famous newspaper publisher once, and a famous newspaper. He fought against the Klan – a noble thing in anyone's world. William Allen White – school children learn about him now – the ferocity of his editorial stance against the night riders, against the dark, common soul of the country. He took his fight seriously when the rest of us still wanted to simply turn our heads. He wrote biographies of presidents – Coolidge and Wilson – and made the town famous, they say. But I have to admit I hadn't heard of him before now. But now the *Gazette* is reduced to what, gossip? Happy talk? Arrest reports? Ads? Questions of some importance, I think. Who's doing what to whom. Celebrations of the traditional and the status quo. The need to be reassured about who we are – that's part of the reason we read these papers. But here, even a lot of the typical small town gossip is absent – a space given over to silence. What does gossip mean when everyone is leaving? Gossip is who left. When and how. As I sit here finishing my sandwich and pulling the last bit of beer from the dark bottle, the day's last light runs down 6th and settles against the courthouse. Touches it with wet auburn. The sunset takes its time.

This town sits in a hard space on a hard pitch of land that slopes down to the Flint Hills and into the badlands of Oklahoma and West Texas, the sagebrush prairie. The cottonwoods rope in the creeks and dig their roots deep into the gaping soil. A heavy chalk of dust blows up in the fall. And

above it all the sad, strange sound of the trains. It is a noble kind of life, I think, a last outpost mentality, although it is far from being such. There are places farther gone, abandoned by the world, where the county highways that once brought traffic and commerce now carry only truckers running the backroads in billowing sacks of wind, smugglers trying to avoid the Highway Patrol. The tollway comes through this town, on a tangent really, and then it quickly leaves again.

There is a man who lives west of town, near a disheveled Christian youth camp draped across a low rise above the railroad tracks and the bracken filled ravines of the Flint Hills, who still makes delicious milkshakes by hand. When I kick open the stuck door to his store with my toe, he looks up from a band saw where he is slicing a side of beef into steaks – agriculture meets industry. He uses this same saw to cut lumber. Sawdust has collected in the corners of the store. It sops up the running blood.

His name is Mr. Baumgartner; his friends call him Bummie, and he digs into the ice cream, its soft, cold mass, with thick forearms. When he bends down, I can see the sweat on his balding pate, his thinning hair patched gray and silver. He spoons the ice cream into an unclean goblet. Actually, it is not unclean; it just looks that way from so many uses, frosted like glass out of the ocean. He adds milk and vanilla, a small cap of ground nutmeg. I look at his hands and I realize he hasn't washed them to make this shake. I can see them clearly flecked with blood and smeared with congealed fat. There is blood on the rim of the half-gallon, the scoop. What he gives me tastes like a perfect kiss.

The steaks Bummie cuts are a rich magenta, marled with pearled fat. The band saw stretches almost to the ceiling. It is pea green, like the refrigerator of a college apartment. He turns back and bends to his work. The machine hums, the blade running in frightening arcs. He pushes the slick white haunch towards the blade.

As I pass the afternoon at the counter, grading and reading and watching the sky, the regulars come in. I do not count myself among them, although I come here often. I am still new – the place working its touch on me. There's no sense that I belong to this land the way these men do, with their families buried in rows beyond the treeline. I want that sensation, but what I feel is different. A space to move into, an opening of wind and air and light. And flush of unoccupied distance. They come in and help themselves to coffee, their high rubber boots flared at the calf. Gimme-caps in garish green and orange. They speak in a common language, a language of names and places long familiar – Farrow's Creek, the Selridge farm, Johnson County – one I follow as if from a distance. It is like a foreign language I don't know well, one I know by ear but cannot speak.

On the road home, the still-life of a grey barn beyond low white hills, blown snow, a redtail high in a bare cottonwood. Another carving huge turns in the brilliant air. The corduroy fallow and a sense of loss burned deep into the line of fence poles running to the horizon.

Sometimes, late afternoons in the winter, when I drive out into the prairie, when the sun hangs low in the west a long time and the clouds are just right, I can be surrounded with sunset. Perhaps it is these moments

when the sky touches the stalk-clumped fields, there's a distant sense of snow in the air, and the earth glows with a generous indigo light that is really the absence of light below and its presence above. This place becomes all places in a contourless land I slip into and become one with. The velvet glow of the earth and sky blending beneath the wind. The world loses its texture and dusk reaches out to encircle the horizon.

KAREN HOLMBERG

The Dog Skull

I loved to crash the net on the surface
and to press it, to feel the shape fill with water,
feel the water force through the cloth
and the cloth yellow down till it was lost
in the tea-colored marsh. My weight
buried the edge of the dock in water

hot as a body. A plume of silt followed
it back. Particles of mica turned
in the water, made sparks off the sun.
The animals I found in the net were like none
I'd ever seen, blunt-headed
tabs of life, mud-clean and unnamed, I thought.

A heaviness in the net could make
a pounding in my chest. Once I pulled
and the net with a second yellow shape
inside it glowed up, broke into the air
and the net held a skull. My father
unhooked it from the bag. He touched

the canines, smoothed the zigzag seams
of the pointed crown. He told about
the first days of spring when the ice broke into rafts
he could captain with a pole. His young red dog cried
and ran along the shore, shattering the web of ice
between the reeds. Then he called her name
and I felt him pull the world into that sound.

DAVID GUASPARI

Paradiso

Grimm was in the atrium of Paradise Mall when the timber wolves took down their first dachshund. The breeding pair, released in the hardware department of Sears, had begun adapting to their environment, learning to forage on its fauna. Sweet vindication: the clock *could* be turned back – to a time when indigenous peoples patronized indigenous malls, before Europeans arrived with their diseases and chain stores. (Grimm planned to prove that the shopping mall was an Iroquois invention, the cultural root of their current success in gasoline and cigarette retailing.)

The timber wolf initiative had been a big first step. Every morning now Grimm sprang from his bunk in the ranger station on the food court mezzanine and crept to the atrium fountain. The thrill was fresh each time he found paw prints on floors mopped the night before. The stream that fed the fountain made a sad contrast – a barren sluiceway that, if only it were freed, would be thronged with salmon. Grimm had at least put a stop to bridge repairs. Shoppers could ford at low water: Paradise was a wilderness mall.

Shoppers understood, he thought. He loved to watch them dart across the food court – wary, yet alive for the first time since childhood to sounds and smells and predators in the shadows. He felt vicarious thrills when they spotted feral employees.

Grimm left the ranger station and picked his way along the mezzanine, one eye peeled for fresh scat. A commotion was bubbling down below. Grimm leaned over the railing and shouted, "Chuck!" – then blew his whistle and shouted again. Hi-I'm-Chuck of the How-May-I-Help-You clan was wrapped around the calf of a flustered senior citizen. Chuck knew Grimm's voice and looked up guiltily, then uncoupled and loped away.

Ferals were a unique feature of the Paradise shopping experience. If you asked one for assistance, as newcomers often did, he might lead you to the requested aisle – or he might start humping your leg. The bush made them strange.

Grimm rappelled from the railing and touched down beside the victim. She had been feeding Chuck, of course, but Chuck would get the blame. Grimm tried to explain: balance of nature, culling the herd, healthy fear of people. Chuck would be relocated if he got addicted to food court snacks--and, separated from his clan, would pine away. (Chuck qualified for a clan with his old RiteAid name plate. That was the usual way.)

The lady didn't care. She'd be lodging a complaint with the "owner." Grimm shook his head. How could anyone *own* a mall? It would be like owning the sea or the stars.

Another senior citizen tugged at his sleeve: a wolf, she said, had run off with her lunch – the "owner" word again, and a reimbursement request for two dollars and sixty cents. It would do them good, Grimm thought, to live before they died, to meet some Iroquois.

"Ma'am, wolves have as much right to patronize the Friendlys as you do. They 'steal' food," he drew quotes in the air, "because their culture doesn't support a cash-based economy."

A small crowd had gathered. Mothers held their children tight – though Grimm had brought back every youngster ever snatched. These moms didn't care what made the Mall special. They wanted it to be like every place else, which didn't bode well for his future initiatives.

A spokesman installed himself and stepped forward. "You're a safety officer," he said. "Your job is to make the Mall safe."

But Grimm didn't think so. We should die in the old ways, he thought, the ways we evolved to die in – the jaws of an animal, not a pickup's bumper and grill.

* * *

Higher authority decided: There would be no new initiative (no bear, no lynx, no wolverine) and the dams would stay (no salmon in the stream). Paradise was going to hell. When the wind was from the north Grimm could see the smoke of cabin chimneys. Homesteaders were clearing fields and planting crops, and there was talk of a land grant college.

Grimm took to the sweat lodge: he needed peace. He fed the coin slot with quarters and stewed in his customary visions: proud wolves patrolling bounteous retail space, ghostly Iroquois shoppers. When Grimm reopened his eyes a man was seated on the other side of the fire. Small and fat, with sturdy black-framed glasses.

Grimm pointed to himself and said, "Wolf Who Walks the Mall," his sweat lodge handle.

"Mighty Deed."

Odd name. Odder that a man that chubby didn't seem to sweat. Oddest that he should be here after hours.

"The Great Mall is closed," Grimm said. "You can shop today no more forever."

"To me it is not closed always. This I own."

The owner of a mall. Grimm had never seen such a thing, even in dreams. Was it a vision or could the man, if it was a man, be touched? The gas valve banged shut, choking the flame. An exit sign now shed the only light. Grimm groped his way around the fire pit but found no one – or, at least, touched nothing. He peered out the exit door: the Customer Service Center was empty.

Grimm bought quarters by the roll. He sweat with John Channel Changer, Eats Many Nachos, Ralph Who Bowls – and others, less glorious – but Mighty Deed did not return. Grimm was granted visions of his death, a noble one, embraced by wild beasts (different species in different versions).

On the third day he arose and wobbled back to his station. A wolf-watching caravan would be leaving for the Radio Shack uplands. Grimm had tried, but failed, to stop these circuses – half a dozen jeeps, dragging bait. Worst of all, he had to lead them.

Through the mezzanine railings, Grimm's eye was attracted by the swift traverse of a short fat man – heading for the quickest entry to the backcountry, a steep pass just beyond the multiplex. By the time Grimm touched bottom, the man was out of sight.

Grimm ignored the idling jeeps and their ticketed passengers. Hours later, breathing hard, he stood on top of the pass, scanning the high basin spread out on its other side: a handful of discount stores, a shuttered arcade. Past the shops and their untended burial grounds hurried a solitary figure. Grimm followed to the standing stone that marked the spot of the aboriginal mall. Here his knowledge stopped. Beyond, for all he knew, be monsters.

He entered a dim hallway lined by stores that made no sense – items, prices, ads all random. As if someone had forgotten the point of selling but still went through its motions.

Grimm felt his way to the end and emerged in a vast atrium, unroofed and heavily landscaped. He took a few steps forward and looked back. Undergrowth made the entrance invisible. Beside the path lay a pair of sturdy glasses, half buried in forest litter. They might have been there for years. But the ground beside them was scuffed, and fresh footprints led into the bush.

* * *

Wolf-Who-Walks-the-Mall, founder of the Ranger clan, reached into a tangle of brush to pull out a fluffy blanket scrap and add it to the load in his sack. To Trainee-Kit of the Have-A-Nice-Day he said, "Item JK 23245." Kit took this down. She still remembered how to write. "Luxurious merino wool seat cover keeps you warm in winter, cool in summer, comfortable any time."

"Available in Tan, Charcoal, Pine, and Oatmeal Heather," she added. Then the feminine touch, "Imported." She and Wolf had reached the final phase of courtship, setting up shop. Breeding would be next, or perhaps a pet.

Wolf-Who-Walks-the-Mall picked up a barely-chipped ceramic tile and brushed away a smear of dirt. "Our favorite trivet," he said, "makes a handsome addition to any table. In Forest Green or Matte Black."

Kit gave this some thought. "Item JK 26795."

Hi-I'm-Chuck, hauling his load in a mail bag, overtook them. He liked to flirt with Kit. "Very sales event." He was pointing to her sneakers, an almost-new pair Wolf was said to have snatched in the Great Mall. "Classic."

It was closing time, when shopper-gatherers hailed the end of day. Chuck loped ahead to claim a seat in the multi-faith chapel. The elders sat frontmost, on folding chairs, invested with signs of their authority: eye-glasses in differing states of repair. Few remembered how to read.

The jabbering creole of English and ad-copy quieted when Wolf arrived. He had donned his splendid spectacles – black-framed and sturdy, both lenses intact. Reverently he opened the Book. (L.L. Bean, Spring 19__, the cover torn, the final digits unknowable.) He declaimed the day's page.

When Wolf finished there was always a demand for more – a part of his work in progress, or a vision, or a tale of the Great Mall. Many had been to the Mall, or thought they had, or had seen it in a dream. The distinctions were fading, even for the founder of the Ranger clan.

Wolf-Who-Walks-the-Mall sang a vision of his death and all joined in, gazing through broken skylights at the stars. The same stars shone on the Great Mall and on the high basin – where travelers, leaning into a dusky corridor, would cup their ears and strain to hear monsters howl.

SARAH HANNAH GOLDSTEIN

Eclipse

Every so often I am dilated; the pupils
swallow everything – a catchall soup,
two cauldrons, stubborn in the bald glare

of bathroom light. They are hunting sleep –
the sea grass, the blue cot rocking;
in sleep I am a Spanish dancer,

awaiting my cue at the velvet curtain,
now and then groping for the sash,
or on horseback, abducted, thumping

through pampas. I sleep too much;
I curl in at midday, sheepish,
in strange rooms. Clouds are hurrying by –

the walls, a wash of white; still my eyes
are mazing through their dark gardens,
the great lamp shut, the crescents duplicating.

It is only a temporary state of affairs.
The sun, blotted, boils behind the moon.

BRIAN LENNON

Wedding of Birds and Stars

I

As stars and as water
The spirit spoke to living things
And every wheel upon the hall like star or shroud
Spoke to the likeness nodding its heads

And I beheld the heavens
And tasted the charmed water

Declared its beauty
And slid into the star

II

Whispering birds
Came from their bodies for the Wedding

And the slimy things lived on the wheels

As specks
As moons
And when those were plagued

Agape they turned and the living creatures spread frost

Like a pulse pumped the speech

I watched their wings
The color of a great cloud

III

Had I not gone when they spread frost
Had I been sure of my heart
That chased south winds
Had I not cursed my heart

instead of the firmament

may it not have plunged about
may all not have been stone and restless
may not the Wedding in the ribbed sea

have been as gold
and killed

and slid into a star
within the likeness

IV

Not of the Wedding nor into a star to slide

And blessing them in shapes of drifts

The sun now rose on living things

That brought the wheels and whispered to the likeness

Around them rings of stars and listening

And the blast came from his face

And with every tongue I blessed them that made the birds

And slid into the one

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JAMES ARMSTRONG has an MFA in poetry from Western Michigan University and a Ph.D. in English from Boston University. In 1996 he was awarded the PEN-New England Discovery Award in Poetry. He teaches creative writing at Northwestern University and at the Writing Program of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Armstrong lives in Evanston with his wife and daughters.

SUSAN BROWN's poetry has appeared in many literary journals, including *Crazyhorse, Hayden's Ferry Review, Beloit Poetry Journal, Poetry Northwest,* and *Kansas Quarterly,* and is forthcoming in *Black Warrior Review, Florida Review, Passages North, Sonora Review,* and *Quarterly West.* The recipient of a 1995 AWP Intro Journal Award, Brown was the 1994-1995 Lilly Fellow in poetry at Indiana University's MFA program. Also a freelance film critic, she currently teaches writing at George Mason University and at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

CHRIS CARPENTER is a native of Dallas, Texas and is currently pursuing his MFA from the University of Arkansas. His work has appeared in the *Cimarron Review* and *Aethlon.* He fervently hopes that he will never again have to return to the world of disability insurance claims.

MARK DOTY is the author of five books of poems and two memoirs, *Heaven's Coast,* and *Firebird* which is forthcoming from HarperFlamingo in 1999. He recently joined the faculty of the graduate program in creative writing at the University of Houston.

RUBÉN DEGOLLADO is an English and creative writing teacher. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Hayden's Ferry Review, Beloit Fiction Journal* and *Image.*

JEAN ERVIN's work has appeared in a number of publications, among them *Best American Essays 1993, Twenty-Six Minnesota Writers, North Dakota Quarterly, Connecticut Review, Nimrod, South Dakota Review* and a college textbook. She has written two books on the Twin Cities and compiled and edited an anthology of Minnesota prose.

ALICE FULTON's most recent book is *Sensual Math* (W.W. Norton). Her collection of essays, *Feeling as a Foreign Language: The Good Strangeness of Poetry,* was published by Graywolf Press in 1999. A recipient of a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, she is Professor of English at The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

PATRICIA GOEDICKE teaches creative writing at the University of Montana, and she was Rockefeller Artist in Residence at Bellagio in 1993. Her most recent collection of poems is *Invisible Horses* (Milkweed 1996), and her twelfth collection, *As Earth Begins to End* is forthcoming in the winter of 2000 from Copper Canyon Press.

SARAH HANNAH GOLDSTEIN's poems have appeared in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review, The Southern Review, Southern Humanities Review, Poetry Northwest, Gulf Coast, Sou'wester, Nightsun, Poet Lore,* and *Interim.* Her work has also appeared in *The Literature of Tomorrow,* an anthology published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. She is currently a Marjorie Hope Nicolson Fellow in the Department of English at Columbia University.

DAVID GUASPARI lives in Ithaca, New York and has a Ph.D. in pure mathematics from Cambridge. His work has appeared in *Journal of Symbolic Logic, Annals of Mathematical Logic, Transactions of the American Mathematical Society* and *Antioch Review.*

DAVID GUTHRIE has a Design/Build firm in Houston, Texas. He was included in the Architectural League of New York's 1997 Young Architects' Forum in the Urban Center.

MARK HALLIDAY directs the creative writing program at Ohio University. *Selfwolf,* his third book of poems, appeared from the University of Chicago Press in 1999.

KAREN HOLMBERG lives and teaches in Columbia, Missouri. Her work has received the Discovery/The Nation Award, and has been published in *BOMB* and *The Nation.* She is currently completing a collection of poems entitled *The Swan's-Foot Purse.*

ANN HOOD is the author of seven novels, including *Ruby* and *Somewhere Off the Coast of Maine.* Her short stories and essays have appeared in many publications, including *Story, Glimmertrain, The New York Times* and *Doubletake.*

KAREN KOVACIK teaches creative writing and literature at Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis. Her book of poems, *Beyond the Velvet Curtain,* is forthcoming from Kent State University Press in 1999.

BRIAN LENNON edits the electronic journal *Xenia ()* and assists at *The Iowa Review.* His work has appeared in *Conjunctions, Fence, The Gettysburg Review,* and other journals. He reviews poetry and fiction regularly in *Boston Review, The Boston Book Review,* and *The Review of Contemporary Fiction.*

PAUL LISICKY's novel *Lawnboy* is forthcoming from Turtle Point in October 1999. His stories and essays have appeared in many magazines and anthologies, including *Boulevard, Mississippi Review, Flash Fiction* and *Men on Men 6.* His awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Michener/Copernicus Society and the Fine Arts Work Center.

ROBERT LUNDAY is a Ph.D. student at the University of Houston and a recent winner of the Brazos Bookstore/Academy of American Poets Prize.

VASSAR MILLER, a life-long Houston, Texas resident, published 10 collections of poetry, including *If I Had Wheels or Love: Collected Poems of Vassar Miller* (Southern Methodist University Press, 1991). She earned a B.S. and M.A. from the University of Houston. Her poetry was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. Ms. Miller agreed to publish "To a Fellow Spastic" in *Gulf Coast* before her death on October 31, 1998. The following month, her legal guardian Susan Nash discovered several unpublished manuscripts from which the other poems featured here were selected. *Gulf Coast* thanks Susan Nash for her generous assistance.

A.J. RATHBUN has had poems in *Monster, Teacup, The Poetry Miscellany, The Senora Review, Weber Studies* and *ZYZZYVA,* among others, and is poetry editor for *LitRag,* a Seattle-based independant literary magazine, on-line at www.litrag.com.

ALISON RUTTAN lives in the Chicago area and teaches at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is represented by Beret International in Chicago.

AL SOUZA lives and works in Houston, Texas. Last year, he was awarded a Pollock-Krasner Fellowship and a Roswell Artist in Residence Fellowship. His most recent exhibitions were at Moody Gallery in Houston, the Galveston Arts Center, and Quint Contemporary Art in La Jolla.

ANN STAUTBERG lives with artist-husband Frank X. Tolbert III on Texas' Gulf Coast. Her work has been widely exhibited, including recent shows at James Gallery, Houston, Texas, The Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston, The Glassell School of Art/Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and ArtPace, San Antonio, and an upcoming exhibition at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas.

MICHAEL STEIN's work has appeared in *Doubletake, Three Penny Review, Southwest Review* and *Denver Quarterly.* His new novel, *The White Life* will be out in July 1999.

JEFFREY THOMSON is a writer and teacher at Whitman College, Walla Walla Washington. His collection of poetry, *The Halo Brace,* was published by Birch Book Press in 1998.

CLYDE TRESSLER is Chairman of the English Department at Scarsdale Middle School in Scarsdale, New York. He is also a member of Marie Ponsot's X-Y Group, a cohort of writers for whom Marie is the guiding spirit. His poems have appeared in numerous magazines including *The New England Review, The Lyric* and *Commonweal.* He is currently at work on a screenplay based on one of his longer poems.

ALISON UMMINGER is an MFA student at Indiana University. This is her first fiction publication.

GULF COAST CONGRATULATES:

HESTER KAPLAN, whose story "Would You Know it Wasn't Love" (Winter 1997) was included in *The Best American Short Stories 1998*.

* * *

KATHARINE NOEL, whose story "Visits" (Winter 1997) was listed as a Distinguished Story of 1997 in *The Best American Short Stories 1998.*

* * *

NANCY BARRON, whose story "Lagtime" (Winter 1997) received an Honorable Mention in *Prize Stories 1998: The O. Henry Awards.*

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VQR THE VIRGINIA QUARTERLY REVIEW
A National Journal of Literature and Discussion
AUTUMN 1997 *Volume 73, Number 4*
FIVE DOLLARS

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One West Range
Charlottesville, VA 22903

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