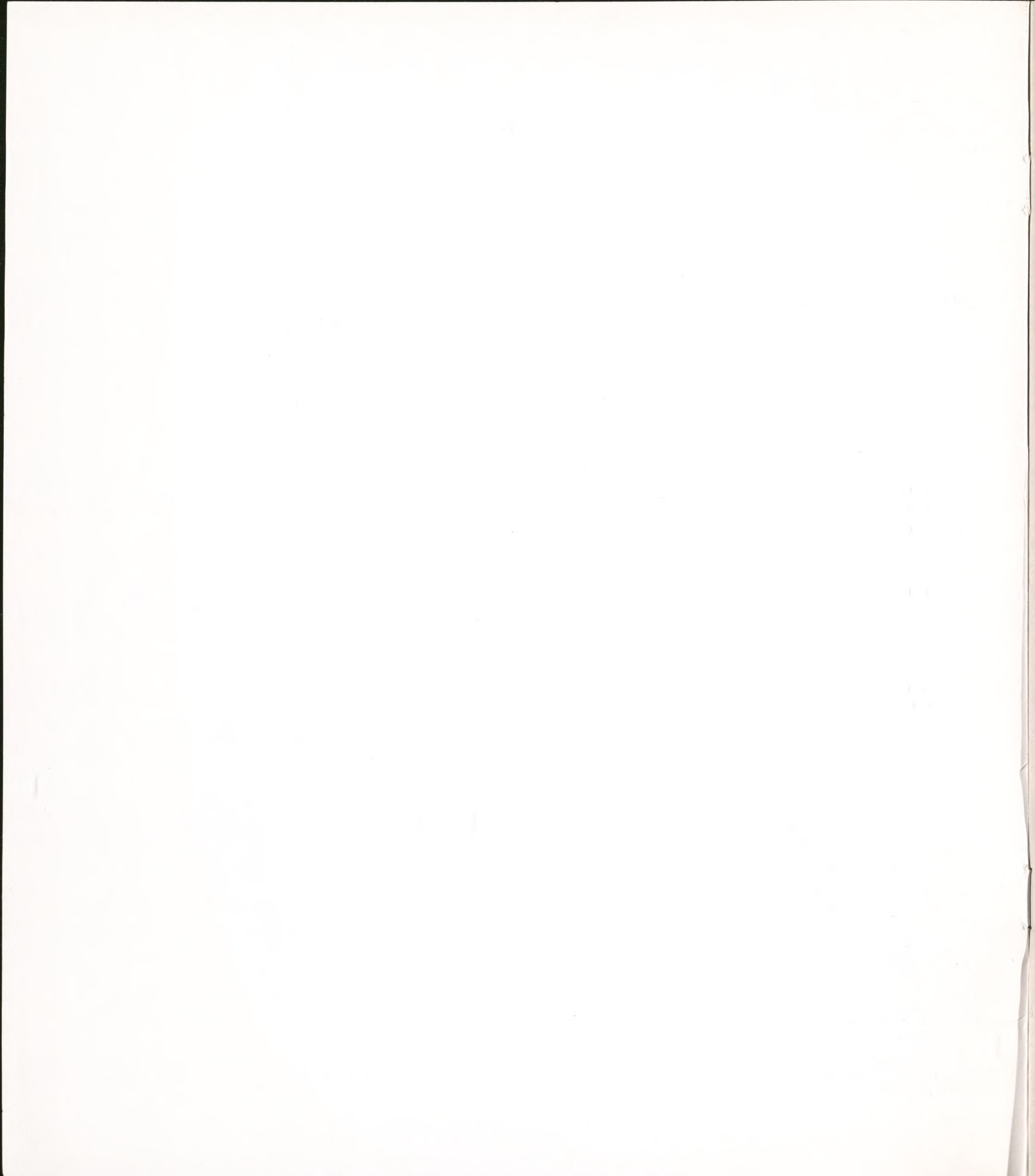

Domestic Crude

Vol. 1, Number 4





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Table of Contents

Poetry and Prose

4	<i>Jeffrey Greene</i>
5	<i>Elizabeth Ashton</i>
7	<i>James Ulmer</i>
8	<i>Ginger Bingham</i>
8	<i>Kathryn J. Burt</i>
9	<i>James Ulmer</i>
9	<i>Nancy Eimers</i>
10	<i>Kevin Cunningham</i>
12	<i>Nancy Eimers</i>
13	<i>Glenn Blake</i>
14	<i>Michelle Boisseau</i>
15	<i>Randel Ann Mott</i>
15	<i>Tomas Tranströmer</i>
15	<i>George Manner</i>
16	<i>Roberta Kozak</i>
17	<i>Ntozake Shange</i>
19	<i>Francis Mayes</i>
30	<i>Francis Mayes</i>
31	<i>Virginia Carmichael</i>
32	<i>William Virgil Davis</i>
36	<i>Natalia Ginzburg</i> (trans. <i>Lynne Sharon Schwartz</i>)
38	<i>Lynne Sharon Schwartz</i> and <i>Phillip Lopate</i>
40	<i>Gary Myers</i>
41	<i>Lionel Garcia</i>
42	<i>Joyce James</i>
43	<i>Gary Myers</i>
44	<i>William Matthews</i>
45	<i>Patricia Kimbrell</i>
47	<i>William Olsen</i>
47	<i>Katherine Coles</i>

From San Francisco
Running
Trespassing
Scranton Miracles
Frog-Snake
Sunlight, Memory, Word
Science Fair
The Assemblagist
Winter Solstice
The Hankamer, Texas Rice and Grain Elevator Night Guard Application Form, Question Four
Beneath Santa Maria della Conzenzione, Rome
Buying Cigarettes in Ecuador
Satellite Eyes
Genealogy
There and Here
Highlights of Twanda Rochelle Johnson's Wedding, Houston, Texas
To Merida
Net
Wynning in the "General Prologue"
Five Poems
Portrait of a Friend
A Correspondence
The Blue Soldier
Some People are Just That Way
A Pattern in Pieces
St. Mary's Bay
Al Lopez Field, Tampa, Spring Training
The Salvation Army
Nostalgique Du Mal
In Lavender

Art

21	<i>Lynn Foster</i>
22	<i>Jackie Harris</i>
23	<i>Carter Ernst</i>
24	<i>Sharon Kopriva</i>
26	<i>Lynn Foster</i>
27	<i>Jeff Marshall</i>
28	<i>Wendy Punttenney</i>

From San Francisco

Jeffrey Greene

The last time the world
seemed to hit something
or someone upstairs in the blue
slammed a door left ajar,
some of us were paying attention,
some of us weren't,
and we went around asking
who felt what or saw
the glass move toward them
or wondered if the quake
would stop or start up again.
I imagine how years from now,
praying that it will be years,
maybe beside some statuary
in a garden we will feel
a little nudge of our lives ending
and whisper to each other,
"Did you feel anything?"

In this city the weather's redundant,
each day perfect for months.
And the moon at night gazes
on the nasturtiums and Japanese tile.
One night it gazed on me
when I couldn't sleep
with a cracked tooth.
Early that morning
we drove through the city
looking for painkillers
while the wind blew
and numberless traffic signals
changed for no one
against the powdered sky.

The other night at dinner
the talk was about death rituals—
the need to see the dead in person
so that they don't come back
living in our dreams.
I remembered how the Anglo-Saxons
sometimes buried the head
apart from the body
to keep the dead from wandering back whole
and shaking the thatch.
In the *Gazette of Old English Burial Sites*,
they list one skull full of nuts
collected there by a squirrel
the way some of us keep track
of our worst years.

My stepfather, who I never saw buried,
had his small service in springtime
in Southington, Connecticut.
My mother called and we talked a while
when the world seemed to hit something
and no one else felt it.

Running

Elizabeth Ashton

There she goes, with no breasts and no sex. The lack of one does not preclude the other, and I fight the notion that either of them could be weighed and packaged as items of consumption, of gossip. She has or she has no breasts. They have or they have no sex. "They have sex." Frequently. Infrequently? Three times a day before meals with plenty of fluids? Taken at bedtime? Once by mouth weekly, as needed? As directed. Tepid? Raw? Never? (How do you *have* it. I thought you did it. At the best of times shared it.)

But there she goes. No breasts. That's a medical fact. No sex. That is, no lovemaking. Her husband is driving the car, his arms supported by steel braces. He has no muscles, you see. And it's true, I am assuming much. I am assuming that she has *no sex*. She hasn't told me that. But I do know that she cares for her husband, cares for him as a nurse cares for a patient, that kind of cares. She also, *cares* for him. They've been married a long time. I don't know how long. But they've lived on my street for twenty years, and they came here with two boys in junior high school, so they may have even been married forty years for all I know. At least thirty five. He was in World War II.

I saw her after her last operation, when she was finally symmetrical. She went around with one breast for possibly five years. Anyway, the day I saw her she had on a striped T-shirt, and she hadn't put in her prosthesis, or -theses, I guess. There was something rather charming about her flat little chest (She hadn't been a victim of the "radical." They'd left her with muscles.), something rather charming about this fifty-eight-year-old woman with a woman's shoulders and a little girl's chest. Erotic even. I hadn't seen the scars. I chose to imagine a smooth, even expanse. Had they worked the nipples in? Or had they bothered? Or had she cared? Maybe she hadn't cared in the first place. Maybe she hadn't cared whether she *had* sex or not. I don't know my neighbor too well. We talk

in the street sometimes about the house up for sale on the corner, the cold weather, what's going on with that lot across the bayou where the trees are being leveled, and some things my husband told her the last time he talked with her in the street, before he died. He had a sympathetic ear there.

She said to me the last time I talked with her, "If you ever need anything, just let me know." And I said to her, "You know I'm here. All you've got to do is call me." We both meant it. We knew each other meant it. We don't drink coffee together. But then I don't drink coffee with anyone. I don't visit around the neighborhood during the day. Never have. And that has nothing to do with it.

I find myself standing at my kitchen window (It looks out on the street.), watching with curiosity as they drive by. Do they *have sex*? And if they don't, how do they manage? And if they do, how do they manage? How do they do it, do it, do it? How do they *have it, have it, have it*? Do they grapple flesh to flesh, or is her chest tender and can't stand grappling? But then, he can't grapple anyhow. Those pesky braces. Do they lie side by side and just touch? I saw her in the grocery store and tried to read her eyes. Was she wanting release from this caring? I do know that she told my husband, the last time they talked in the street, that she has to do "everything for Dave," that this atrophy-ing of his body could take years . . . thanks to the advances of medical science. She didn't look bitter. She didn't look like she missed her breasts. But I don't know.

The woman in the next block lost her husband. That is, he died, six months after mine. They're dropping around here. Something to do with the age. She woke up three days before Christmas and found she'd been sleeping with a dead man. I imagine the tree was trimmed, presents mostly wrapped, and maybe a turkey defrosting in the refrigerator. Perhaps the fishing rod he'd always wanted was in the

closet. I'd only known him to wave to and say, "Hi," as I passed him on the street. Maybe he didn't fish.

A year after his death, just before Christmas, I saw her at the check-out counter in our drug store. We compared notes. She was wearing a plum velvet jogging outfit and false eyelashes, though she doesn't jog, in fact is quite plump. But the velvet was a wonderful brave flag of color in the store, and I liked the lashes on her plain, round face.

"Looks like you've got your lights up and everything," I said.

"Well, we've been having trouble with the lights. There's a short somewhere. But Don's working on it." (Don's her son.)

"Do you find that the loneliness gets worse?" I asked her.

"I don't have time," she said. "The house is always full of kids." (They're grown kids. She'd been married and lived with that man almost as long as I had with mine. At least 30 years.)

But do you miss it, miss it, miss it? I said. She didn't hear me, nor was she intended to.

"Have a good Christmas," I said.

"You too."

Other deaths have been recorded on my street. John, the husband of my best friend Joanne, died two years before mine. He wasn't sick quite as long, but they'd been married longer. The heart took the man in the next block. With my husband it was kidneys, and heart. With John it was a short year with a mushrooming liver. Muscles will take longer.

When John was home for the last time, Joanne and I were sitting outside on her lawn swing one day. I could here him screaming for her in the house. She said that he wouldn't let her get out of his sight. She told me that he'd said that he wished she were the one that was sick, not he. That she were dying. Though he didn't say dying.

They called me down to the hospital when John finally had to go in again. He hadn't made a will, and they wanted me to witness. They had him propped up in the bed. He was pop-eyed and staring wildly across the room. "Hi John," I said. We gathered at the end of the room—the preacher, the lawyer, two other friends, a sister, the sister's husband, Joanne and me—and talked about John as if he weren't there. Then we were ready, and we all converged around his bed. He looked at no one. I wanted to get out of there.

"John. John," they said, loud and slowly. "We want you to sign your will now. It's what you want." Everyone nodded at one another. They put the pen in his hand. He

dropped it, or rather he hadn't even grasped it in the first place.

"John. John." Somebody leaned over into his face. "You must do this, then you can rest. Be a good boy now." John wasn't. John's eyes rolled back, his head twisted on his shoulders, his fingers clenched and unclenched. Somebody picked up the pen and put it in John's hand again and held it there, fingers tightly squeezed around John's. Slowly—and, I don't know who did this, I was only staring at the hands—slowly and laboriously the hand moved his hand, holding the pen, over the page and wrote . . . "John."

I tried to visit him a couple of days later. My husband was having one of his particularly bad days (It took five years to kill him—my husband.) and either couldn't or wouldn't go, so I went alone. I intended to walk into John's room, say, "Hi," and sit and hold his hand and talk to him. But when I saw those staring, terrified eyes again, I couldn't do it. All I could do was stand at the side of his bed and say, "John, I just want you to know that we love you." Then I left.

When my husband died, in a different bed, in a different hospital, his eyes were also staring. But they were different. He couldn't talk. His throat was jammed with tubes, his body with drugs and needles. He couldn't move. He couldn't have closed his eyes, even if he had wanted to. The muscle relaxers were very efficient. But his eyes were trying so desperately to focus on something. He frowned slightly. "Do you hurt?" I said. He barely moved his head. A whisper of movement. No. And still he stared, frowning, focusing up into the blinding globe light suspended over his bed. I wanted to say, "What do you see?" But I didn't. He couldn't have answered me anyhow.

He lived a few days after that. By then, the eyes, though still staring, were blank, yellow, and striated red. No revelations. The brain wave flattening. I wanted to run, screaming through the halls of the hospital, wrap my body in black clothes and tear at my hair. But the doctors would have only caught me and jammed me full of needles and said, "You need a rest." So, I sat with him and held his hand. I would have sat with him regardless. I wouldn't have cut and run, even if the eyes had been wild and shattered. I held on to that spark of life, no matter how unrecognizable, bloated and icy. Because he was mine. I'd known him. As best I could. I'd known the familiar feel of the rough, jutted bone at the base of his spine, a genetic malformation. The slick scar on his shin, from a childhood accident where

hair never grew. The weight of his body. His laugh. And God, he could be an authoritative bastard done up in pin stripes and subdued tie—which I had selected—headed for town. "What do I care about that shit?" I'd yell out the back door. He wouldn't answer. He'd pull his mouth tight and gun the motor. And, I admit to chasing the car a couple of times and throwing whatever was handy. I smacked his back window with a raw egg one time, but I caught him laughing as he turned the corner. He'd come home in the evening, and as he passed me at the kitchen sink, kiss me on the forehead and say, "Why do I love you so much?" And I'd say, "Damned if I know." A friend of one of my daughters remembers those sink kisses with wonder. She'd seen nothing like it at her house. How lucky I was. I'd known the feel of his hands. His smell. His taste. Sleeping thigh to thigh, belly to back.

I wanted to lie down beside him and warm his icy body. He'd gotten in bed once with me when I was in the hospital and had just held me. I hurt so bad. The black nurse had come in and found us and laughed. She hadn't made him leave. He was such a bullshitter. He'd laid it on, and she loved it. But Christ. All I could do was sit in the forest of I.V.'s and electronic screens cooking red and green, cold chrome and sleek smells, hold his hand and say, "Hey Chief, are you still with me? Come on. Gimme a squeeze." And as the bare tremor moved through his finger—what a lot of work that must have been—say, "That's my boy. Come on. Give it to me." And then there was nothing. All systems flat.

Last week I went home with a young man who runs in the park where I run. I went home with him, because I hadn't touched a male body in two years, except for my son who hugs me, my sons-in-law who hug me, and indiscriminate male friends who hug me, but not grappling flesh to flesh. I went home with him because he lived alone, and because we had been looking at each other for a year as we passed, running, and he liked the way I looked, and I liked the way he looked. And because I wanted to touch a male body, flesh to flesh. He said he'd been divorced a year-and-a-half before. And whether he'd had a woman since then, I don't know. *Had* as in *had* sex, I guess. *Had* a woman, part by part.

We sat on his couch and listened to unintelligible poetry on his tape deck and talked inconsequential. We propped our feet on an ottoman in front of the couch and it was cozy. I looked at his long strong legs—we both had on jeans—at his gym socks

and topsiders. I pretended to enjoy the poetry, but I couldn't hear it, a mush of fervid words. I was missing the significant moments, but I didn't want to be rude so I gave him the A. O. K. sign, finger to thumb.

"Whatta you think of that part?" he said.

"That's really something."

I shook my head and looked at my legs lying next to his, measured the distance between our feet. To the susurrus of the poetry I entertained him with a thousand-and-one stories as I watched with interest a hand groping slowly across the gulf that separated us, watched as he got up and down adjusting lights, and moving ever closer to me with each return to the couch. Still I entertained, and the hand moved closer. I began to think it was absurd. As the hand finally reached my thigh and began its laborious climb up the side, I reached out and took hold of it. The effect was startling. He threw himself on me in desperation. That's the only word for it. Desperation. Nothing was said. It was soundless, and I went with it. I took the cue. I was ready for anything. Dirty words, if that's what he wanted, at least some class B dialogue: "I've been wanting to fuck you ever since I saw you," or "I haven't had my hands on a woman since my wife left." I would have accepted "cunt," a word I loathe. But instead it was soundless, wordless grappling. I reserved a part of myself to stand aside and watch these two people with curiosity, going at each other on the couch. And then he stopped, and oh so gently, given the previous frenzied grappling, picked me up and carried me through his house towards the garage. I said, "The garage?" Ready even for that. Whatever *that* was. He laughed. The garage was the bedroom, or rather the bedroom had been the garage. He yanked off my clothes, and his, jeans, shirts, bra, socks, pants, everything went flying. It was amazing. Five seconds flat.

For two hours we sweated and stormed each other's bodies like deaf mutes. And though he endlessly kissed my eyes and my breasts and stroked my hair back again and again from my forehead and twined his fingers through mine, and though I pressed my body into his and wanted him, wanted him, wanted him, he kept his eyes closed, and the rhythm didn't catch.

I fell asleep beside him, the curve of my hip against his back. I woke up at four in the morning and wondered why I was there. I went into the strange bathroom, austere and cold. The tub needed to be scrubbed and the raised seat of the commode was stained with yellow. On the counter were dental floss and a toothbrush and paste, a razor. I used the floss, wiped

my body with one of the wadded towels hanging on the rack, and dressed. Then, I couldn't figure out how the front door lock worked. Besides, I didn't want to leave without saying something. I went back into the bedroom and climbed on top of him and laid my cheek to his.

"Bill? Bill?"

"Wha'?"

"I'm sorry to wake you up!"

"Tha's O.K."

"I'm leaving!"

"Unh? Sneaking out in the middle of the night are you?"

"Yes. Except I can't figure out how the front door lock works."

As he told me how to work the lock, he put his arms around me and slowly rubbed my back. And that was very nice.

Trespassing

James Ulmer

From the shadows I called to your window.
It brightened, threw its shape on the grass,
darkened. Without a word
you appeared near the corner of the house,

hushed me and took my hand,
careful not to wake your father.
We slipped across shadows of hedges
and the blue, moonlit lawns

in a charmed circle, crickets silent
around us, dodged a sweep
of headlights and made our way to the lake,
to the fence overgrown with honeysuckle.

We waited, out of breath and almost
safe, holding back our laughter.
You twisted the vines and thin throats of those flowers
into chains for your ankles, your wrists.

Fifteen years. Have you cut your black hair?
Often in sleep I'm immersed
again, see you floating before me,
the flare of your body extinguished in water,

green eyes as you turn.
On that last night of summer
I boosted you over the fence,
heard you fall to the grass and run.

I climbed after you, pausing at the top
to watch as you neared the lake's black light,
saw your clothes falling from you like shadows,
and I dropped to the ground and followed.

Scranton Miracles

Ginger Bingham

Oh, Rose, why did we doubt you
when you said you saw the Virgin
between two bolts of cloth
at Taylor's Dry Goods?
Now the holy signs fly thick
and fast: print of a huge wing
in dust at Legion Hall Twelve,
the tongue of fire that followed
Pinky Salazar down Snyder Avenue.
The statue of St. Francis we ordered
special last year from Harrisburg
is nodding in answer to Father Drynen.
They have sent us a Jesuit to help
Father keep careful track
of all the questions and answers.
Then there are the lights, sounds
of bells, voices out of the air.
Few yards are undamaged by cables
and vans used for live interviews.
Channel Four reruns *Song of Bernadette*
as a public service. No comfort.
She's special, and we become
more common every day.
Together we are waiting for letters
and depositions to reach Rome.
If we get the shrine, we've got it made.
Hershey will have nothing on us.
That's the thing to do, plan ahead
for the summers full of tourists.
But Rose, who among us asked to know
a little and then got greedy?
Who brought us this windfall
the learned call "democracy of grace,"
which is too much like paradise
to be paradise at all.

Frog-Snake

Kathryn J. Burt

Webbed and pale,
its legs stuck out from the unhinged jaw
beneath the heavy pine bough I'd wormed under,
my brother's bad throw stunning them still
as the hooped muscles funneled them, and the frog attached,
back to the coiled tip my finger straightened
could have touched, that skin one I'd known before,
only bone-snagged, pinned to a post until the nail splits
loosed it to the bushhog's whirr and spit.

My brother wanted to pull them free,
him the snake-end, me the other
as if I'd flung off the one before, the one
my father'd fished out from the pond with a fishnet
and dubbed as it dangled gold-eyed past my knee,
then that thin and tendoned skin unmarred
by any kicked ground's pebbled dirt or sunned shore's
long suck, the pond's scum where I held it
stringing us still.

I remember later,
darker, the pond moon-ringed,
it calling and me going down careful past the light-
bleached yard to where tipped willows crowded the washed edges,
their pale roots draining the leaves gold, then dark
the rushes bending and the soft swampy shallows
still giving up their sudden, sparked breath.

Sunlight, Memory, Word

James Ulmer

I lift the lid of my grandfather's trunk
and a gaze rises from the clutter

like a face seen at the bottom of a well.
The woman is twenty, dressed in black muslin
with a bow at her breast, a starched lace collar.

I recognize the broad mouth and dark eyes,
though I've never seen her face so young

or tanned from haymaking, a chore she loved
for the scythe's arc and the scent of cut grain,
the good ache in her arms at night.

In another picture she stands in her garden,
forty years later, among the wide leaves

of wax beans, tomato plants higher than her waist
cucumber vines woven on their trellis,
the pumpkins and squash growing round.

Early fall. The weighted heads of sunflowers
seem barely able to follow the light, straining,

as if to hear some word their lives depend upon.
She holds a ripe tomato in her palm,
and a cardinal tries to balance, its wings spread,

on the clothesline above her. The last time
I saw her the skin was stretched tight over bone,

the pale color of the shells she'd scatter
in her garden, wave-polished, translucent, as if
a light were shining from within.

The Science Fair

Nancy Eimers

Beach balls, kick balls,
the small planets of children
are spinning too aimlessly ever to come down
except by accident. They make us huge,
you and I taking the room up with our talk
about childhood, leaving the real
moon for a part of the night we had wanted
to look at more closely. How small our first friends stay
in their imagined spaces, waist-high
beside us and moving so lightly
among the clunky desks they seem weightless,
touching the floor by choice.
In a serpentine line of children
I moved without moving across the playground,
my hands on the wrists of the friends
on either side, an irresistible ripple dividing
itself from the rest of the world.
We wound back and fourth to the pull
of our own centrifugal force
as if we knew we were secretly
photographed, arms arranged around each other
always to keep from falling
away from the line, the same way
Saturn's tipped rings now seem about to float
together, to flood the tiny sky.

The Assemblagist

Kevin Cunningham

The Friend

He stumbled through the accumulated junk from years of scavenging. A large automated medical lamp (whose cylindrical head opened like a pod at the press of a button to reveal glowing rows of ultraviolet tube lamps) bit him on the shin with its chain drive. His red tennis shoes, covered with blotches of paint, clanked through the red-brown darkness of the warehouse.

He bore three boxes brimming with jagged objects unknowable in the light, some matte, some glinting with the high polish of metals or the translucency or transparency of plastics. Colors were impossible to discern.

He was tall and thin, and his legs had a loping and fluid stride. He drew on his cigarette clamped between his teeth, his breathing heavy but regular from the exertion of carrying the boxes. The glow as he drew in the smoke lit his mouth and the tip of his nose green and orange, and the light from behind shone through the cotton of his shirt, yellow going to pink.

The odor of Gudang Gadam had always clung to him: a sharp odor of tobacco and cloves that nibbles sweet on the tongue. He insisted that the cloves were more addictive than nicotine, and somehow an association with opium and the organic psychedelics was attached to these cigarettes by him and his friends who smoked them, too.

In a way he was a gangling anachronism, smelling of marijuana, cloves and the faint odor of beer pushing lightly from him with his breath and the wind that passed as his slender body brushed by on a long but intensely quick stride.

He pushed aside a wooden box full of wire loops as he entered the area, defined as territory by a desk and work benches, crude but stout, squatting almost a foot below his waist like rectilinear, splintered

dwarves. Bending down he released the boxes with a "Fuck!" as one (the small, long one) fell. He sat on his haunches Vietnamese-style, arms roping out to pick up every tiny piece and placed them carefully back in the box. Adjusting his drawing pad clenched between his arm and his side, he sat the small box on the desk pausing to arrange the other two larger ones with his foot. Opening the tablet, he pulled out a small piece of paper about four by five inches and placed it carefully on top of the contents of the box. Then he left.

The Assemblagist

He walked quickly to the breaker box. Throwing the switches, he trudged through the blue gray, dusty air of the warehouse past the medical light, crunching along on top of the scraps of steel (seemingly the only thing in the large room which was not blue or gray), past wooden slat boxes (gray) full of wire (covered with gray dust) to his desk (also gray).

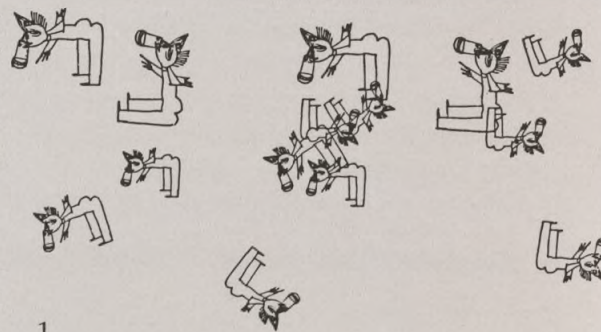
There was a box on his desk, a smile took his face and he shook his head and looked at the box with affection. Lifting the paper from the top, he looked at it, but his eyes did not move across its surface in lines; instead they moved in a jiggling circular pattern and his face rose up to become a laugh.

Carefully setting the paper aside he sat, and slouching back, stared at the box. It was a cardboard box. The top had been ripped off leaving a pointed corrugated piece of paper sticking up like a skeezix. The bottom corner facing him on his right was undermined and the box sat off kilter, leaning its weight on the weakest point. A crinkle was thus formed, and the box looked at him with a knowing smirk.

He rose and peered into the box and walked across the room ducking under the chain hanging from the lift to the refrigerator and got a beer. Then he returned to his desk assuming the same slouch, legs outstretched. He grinned as he took a gulp from the bottle. Then he sat up and began removing the objects from the box and arranged them on his desk top. He settled back and just looked at them.

Now there were five beer bottles accompanying the irregular, colorful silhouette of what seemed to be organized trash on the desk. A light film of sweat had risen on his forehead, fighting the dark cast around his eyes from dominance of light absorption in his face. His slouch was more pronounced and his stare more intense. He almost seemed to glare at the group of useless cripples sitting just below eye level in front of him. He reached across the top of the painted piece of log sitting on end and grabbed a pencil, opened the drawer to his right, pulled out a spiral notebook, opened it and began to write.

The Inventory



1. A drawing of thirteen naked, primitive people (children, adolescents and elders) either compulsively into anal or rear entry sexual flirtation and indulgence or weighted down from their noses by heavy, false teeth on wires for the crime of wearing bird beaks on their foreheads. Apparently the

former is the case with at least some and has been taken to extremes. Further, if these are x-rays, sexual tastes in the culture have reached a high state of refinement and pain and pleasure have little meaning as relative terms. Then again, maybe the drawing is a depiction of single, multiple and impending breech births accompanied by religious ritual. Stranger things have happened.

2.

One taped, gashed stump with scratched, rendered knee cap, stapled, swirled and flattened in back, sitting askew like the leaning tower. Perhaps suggesting Houston's yearly subsidence and the effect it has on the balance problems of amputees. It is a wooden and smeared with cobalt blue.

3.

One filthy and stressed piece of plexiglass with burned nipple. It has amiable stress cracks—wrinkles as if it had been smiling or grimacing for 85 years. It can be no more than three. What does this say about organicity? What does it say about synthesis? Why does it have only two holes? Can it speak? Is it too an amputee?

4.

A three-legged composition board stand for an unidentified appliance (conspicuously an amputee) affixed to which is the WARNING: To Prevent Shock or Fire Hazards DO NOT Expose This Appliance to Rain or Moisture. Very inhuman not to say antagonistic to sexuality. Even though it is wooden and rubber, I resolve not to expose it to rain or moisture out of respect for AUTHORITY and further not to use it while camping in the rain or as a sex toy in the shower.

5.

One paint by number clown by "ME." Numbers 1, 2, 3, 6, 7 and 10 unpainted. The only one of the seven colors which are painted through which I can read the number, is number 9 which is aqua. It is the color of the clown's smiling irises. I shudder to think how this will effect color theory when

I disclose the information. If I wait to disclose it at the right time in my career it could shake the very foundations of modern aesthetics, but of course it will have the most profound effect on the worlds of advertising, clothing and textile design and, to a lesser degree, interior design. I will wait, fidgeting.

7.

Two blue jean legs cut off at the knee. Where is the other stump?

8.

One Folger's coffee can containing:

a. an empty ink bottle, not to be seen as a symbol for the current psychological state of most single adults living in urban areas or for the content of contemporary literature.

b. a bottle neck (having nothing to do with traffic or bureaucratic strategy) with beige paint (or the bottle neck's aesthetic or decorative skills).

c. seven rubber bands, though seven is considered to be a mystical number these objects should not be seen as an indication of some god-like, supernatural or mystical flexibility.

d. one piece of string, no linkage or bondage reference inferred.

e. three bicycle brake pads, badly used, no reflexion on their capacity for restraint intended.

f. a twisted piece of conduit, no reflexion on its psychological status.

g. one broken clothes pin, no reflexion on its ability to hold onto what it has.

h. one disconnected transformer, no reflexion on its ability to cope with change or to network.

i. four disenfranchised caps for plastic bottles, no reflexion on their capacity to achieve closure.

j. three Japanese-made hinges, not to be associated with or put at fault for being unhinged.

k. one bent bearing wheel which is not responsible for failure to keep the ball rolling.

l. ten scrabble tiles painted Prussian Blue obscuring the letters of their native language with its nonexistent nationality.

m. three assorted rings of different species which are definitely not symbols, parts of a nursery rhyme or adjuncts to an ancient primarily rural ritual.

n. and not to be forgotten, one coffee can for containment, which (despite the scene on its side which glorifies industry) is to be commended for so egalitarian and charitable an attitude in housing these misfits, and even more for keeping them out of sight of the general public.

9.

One small piece of paper with the words

"quality the tech" on it, though this directive is admittedly obscure, again I leave it to your interpretation.

10.

One rubber hose which has never been used to beat anybody.

11.

One nail which has never been used to nail anybody.

12.

Two screws which have never been used to screw anybody.

13.

A third piece of paper with linguistic symbols . . . Okay, I'll attempt to put this piece of paper with linguistic symbols on it in context, but I will only do it through addition; after all, I should remain true to process (or so they tell me). My additions will be bracketed. It reads, "PLANS A, B & C ARE LOVE[RS] DETACHED[.] [A] GARAGE WITH COVERED [ACCESS WAS THE POINT OF CONTENTION.] [EVEN THOUGH] THE LIVING AREA HAS BEEN EVENLY [DISTRIBUTED BETWEEN THEM] PLANS TO ALLOW EQUAL SPACE ON THE [VERANDA AND IN THE GARAGE HAVE FAILED.]" Note: There are no three car garages in Clear Lake City.

Winter Solstice

Nancy Eimers

Snow takes everything
trivial from the pines, honing them
to the white edge of remoteness.
What my father shouts back
is layered by wind;
my boots cut down through powder,
a harder crust now shattering cleanly
into something like my footprint.
In bulky coats, we almost touch
this happiness made so lightly between us
it is lost or inaudible,
flutter of snow on fur.
We look at a signboard, missing the moment
a deer steps perfectly into its silhouette,
having always been there.

A wind tilts branches open and closed,
emptiness meshing its black and white.
For a time we are lifted into the trees
out of loneliness, one with the simple
curve of solitude we can't help
but live in. Sometimes deer wander
across the wide lawns in town,
browsing at the half-buried garbage.
I saw them once as I stood at a window,
half-asleep, not sure what I believed
was real: the deer still bending to fathomless
snow, the houses that couldn't be taken
for trees. When I looked again, they were gone
into sunrise, deer and houses overflowed
into the red around them, made
larger by it, no longer impenetrable.

There might as well be millions
out there beyond the duck blind
for all their racket. They stand around
on the ice. But when I stretch,
they skitter off into patches
of water and bob apart. What keeps me
watching almost to numbness is a sandhill crane.
It looms on one skinny leg, balancing,
cold, as if through absent-mindedness
it might pass, unnoticed, into winter.

The Hankamer, Texas Rice and Grain Elevator Night Guard Application Form, Question Four

Glenn Blake

Question #4:

What is your uppermost fear?
Please be completely open and honest with your emotions. (If these lines do not suffice, please feel free to use the back of the sheet.)

First of all, I think all of us have fears. Don't you? But if I was to have to write down what my uppermost fear was, I would probably start by saying that the only thing I'm really scared of is being alone, in a big house, at night, when it's raining. When the rain is pattering at my window pane like it wants to come in, when the old doors of the old house won't lock, and the pictures on the walls look at me and follow me with their eyes as I walk around the house closing the curtains so nobody can look in. When I'm afraid to look out the windows to make sure no one's there for fear of seeing someone's face pressed flat against the pane, like a dead man's that someone has just stabbed and is bleeding on my front porch. When the lightning strikes and the lights go out and my hands are shaking so that I can't light a candle. And I sit in the corner and hug my knees for fear of walking down that long dark hall past all them black open doors like big old mouths waiting to grab me and gobble me up. When the picture of the convict from *Great Expectations* haunts my mind, when the picture becomes a real man and I light out of the front door for help and he catches me and throttles me around the neck with both hands and picks me up offa the ground and it's raining and it's dark and I'm all alone.

I think that's about it. Let's see, my uppermost fear?

Roaches! I don't like roaches. If you grew up around here, you know that they're everywhere. On the wall, on the ceiling,

in the closets. Watching, with their antennas just a twitching, waiting to crawl all over you.

I make damn sure everytime I go to the bathroom to check beneath the toilet seat. I can just picture one of them basterds sitting and waiting for me there and crawling on me where I sure as hell couldn't swat him off.

Do you ever sleep with you mouth open? I do sometimes. Some nights I'll wake up and my mouth is wide open as hell. Do you ever worry bout one of them little basterds crawling in there and laying eggs way in the back of your throat and them hatching one day? I think about that ever now and then and try to sleep on my stomach.

I think the worst thing about roaches is killing them. I just can't do it. You ever squished one barefoot? There just ain't no good way a killing a roach. What you end up doing is hollering at it and flapping your arms up and down and chasing it like it was a calf until it runs under a bed or something.

I'll tell you, I damn near killed myself once. I was taking a shower one night, and the very instant I turned on the water, I saw one big as a damn shoe-box on the back wall, and the shower water came on scalding hot, and I screamed, and he took flight with a two-foot wing span and there I was screaming, dodging this damn flying roach, and trying to keep from getting boiled alive.

I had a termatic experience once at my Granpa's. Me and Lizzy and Mamma visited Granpa after church one Sunday. And I was in my Sunday School clothes. Well, Granpa had just bought a new tractor and he wanted me to drive it, but I couldn't you see because of my good clothes. So we

went out to the shed and found a pair of Daddy's old overalls that he wore when he was a kid bout my size, and I put them on and walked outside. And for maybe half a second, I froze in my tracks, even still on the tips of my toes, and I had this funny feeling kinda like when I'd accidently peed in my britches, and then I knew for certain that them basterds were in there with me. And for maybe a second, I looked down with my eyes without looking down with my head, you know, looking down but not really wanting to see what was down there and it looked like them overalls was alive. And that's all it took for me to start hollering and screaming and I could feel all them little feet running all over me and I screamed so loud that I thought my eyeballs would pop out. And then I took offa running, I didn't know where, I just run, out to the road towards town. I figured at least some of them might fall off if I ran fast enough. Granpa was trying to catch me and tackle me and roll me all over the ground and squish them dead. But when I thought of that icky, oozy, snotty stuff inside them basterds, I just screamed louder and ran faster.

I'm just about out of room. If I have to be honest with my emotions and tell what I'm more scared of than anything, I'd have to say snakes. I ain't never told nobody this before, but ever now and then I have bad dreams about snakes. Not snakes on the ground that you can chase around with a hoe and chop into pieces, but snakes in the water when you're in the water too.

My dreams all take place in the rice canals, you know the wide ones that are always full to the banks with the water flowing fast.

Somehow, when my dreams start, I have fallen into one of them canals and the water

Beneath Santa Maria Della Concenzione, Rome

Michelle Boisseau

Along the ceilings, cornices of clavicle,
rosettes of vertebrae.
Across the walls, vaults of scapula
where tibia lie in clusters.
To defy Him who sent the plague again,
the Cappuccini monks dug chapels
then settled the bones inside.
The design of the church above is simple,
a mathematics fitting of pious men,
but the style beneath,
a callow baroque, a conspiracy
the traveller understands only later.
Even unburied bones grow
more of this world, browning
in our time, earthen vessels gone soft
under dust, dust blown smooth by the wind
when the caretaking monk opened the door for me.
He wanted to show me the perfection
of bodies lost in each other:
they've lain so long in the anonymous mix
they can be only reluctant to separate
into their own bodies when He bids them
rise for his paradise.

Hankamer continued

starts to take me away, and when I start trying to swim to shore to get out, the snakes, the big black water mocassins come in through the bushes and come into the water like the alligators in them Tarzan movies and all I can see is their heads and behind them the water moving in S's. But they don't bite me, they just swim in between my legs to let me know they're there. When I'm finally bout to reach the bank, they start wrapping themselves around my legs so that I can't kick any more. And I'm clawing at the bank and leaving finger holes in the mud and all I can grab is weeds and the canal is carrying me away and the snakes is pulling me down. The canal water is muddy brown like chocolate milk and the snakes look like hundreds of wiggling licorice sticks. And ever time, the horriblest part is right before my head goes under the water, I see a big snake head, big as a football, right in front of me with green bloody eyes and a smile.

Well, I guess that's about all I'm afraid of. I'd sure like to have this job. As you know, my Granpa worked for the Canal Company till he died.

I hope I said enough fears. If I didn't, I could probably tell you some more if I get the job.

Buying Cigarettes in Ecuador

Randel Ann Mott

In Quito I buy paper-wrapped Kings,
rubios with filters and without.
The señor who sells them talks about
condors and the span of vultures' wings.
I try to tell him I'd seen the birds
all week near mother's casa in Paján
tapping their claws on her roof. On
Eduardo's path one day I heard
huge black wings rush over yucca.
Eduardo was dancing to disco
with his sisters, pretty niñas,
but for me they put on a cumbia.
I think of stirring air and of Eduardo
as I deal sucres for red tobacco.

Satellite Eyes

Tomas Tranströmer

The ground is rough, no mirror.
Only the grossest spirits
can mirror themselves there: the Moon
and the Ice Age.

Come closer in the dragon mist!
Heavy clouds, teeming streets.
A rustling rain of souls.
Army barracks.

(translated from the Swedish
by Göran Malmqvist)

Genealogy

George Manner

Again today I came upon the shell
of a cicada, vacant but still
clinging to a pecan tree's bark.

And not until now, hours later
(hours spent thinking of my father),
do I think in the closing dark

it's time I shrug, to shed
this too-complex and agitated
shell I've nestled in. The torque

of watching my son is enough.
Rainclouds ranging from the Gulf
make it easier to work:

under their upward-building darkness
I take my time, coolly undress,
my clothes nesting in the fork

of the pecan. The rest is waiting
for someone to come (mistaken homing
instinct) and rescue me, talk me back.

There and Here

Roberta Kozak

We waited for this storm, the clouds deepening
all week and then rain, steady overhead.
You're quiet next to me, sleeping through it
the way you learned in Seattle, the rain there
soaking the ground over months, the trees so thick and needy
they demanded all the weather could offer.

You told me the Sound took the sky's light
like a mirror, gulls and their bright young
diving for the surface, trailing the ferry north to Canada.
On good days, you'd travel the coast until dusk
with the woman of that time, shopping the wharves
weighed down with fruit and fish,

pocketing small stones for their color.
Her eyes reflected the blue of early morning,
sunrise burning fog from the water.

What we shared with others comes back.
I remember how I'd bottle seawater
to bring home in August, every year, wanting the summer
nearby, the clear intensity of sunlight.
The lakes my family visited in the fall
faded, beautiful in their isolation. Cumberland Gap—

our boat by the dock, containment, the hovering, green metal
dragonflies. How wonderfully you sleep,
as if all women blend into a dream of a lake darkened
by sundown, sky moving toward amethyst, water
for you to drift over. In the flash
from the window, I lean over you, now,
and watch you holding her. This is the sleep

we give ourselves to—rain outside, there and here,
streetlamps blurred, the road alive with sound.

Highlights of Twanda Rochelle Johnson's Wedding, Houston, Texas, or Spectacular Escape from AFDC

Ntozake Shange

I married myself today in front of the \$6,000 opal next the \$4,000 aquamarine from Brazil where I seduced the taxi driver for the sheer pleasure of such gloriously full lips, licking my forehead at the red lights, long black curls seeping through my individually applied aqua-blue super long lashes: dew in a tropical place. I was a scented collection of crystal sweat from my elbows to my chin. My legs sweating, so. While my vulva trembled, dripping woman all over the backseat. Sweet years ago with the Cariocas.

Beverly wanted the man to drive us home. I told her that was exactly what he was doing. My mouth murmured, filled with lip, tongue, moustache. Oh, moustache massaging the corners of my lips, tickling the crevice between my ears and hair falling over the front seat. "For God's sake, let the man drive us to the hotel," Beverly screamed. I know she did, but the kisses were synchronized to the yellow and red lights from Corcuvado to Leme. There was so much of Rio we hadn't seen. She should lay back with some cachaca and sight-see or huddle up, take a little nap. But, definitely forget the notion that the kisses could be stopped by dawn or high noon, unless we fell asleep tongue to tongue somewhere near the sail boats headed toward Itaparica. I forget his name, but that's how you should be kissed when the minister proclaims, "you are now man and wife."

I'm going to get a veil to wear to the jewelry store and carry my Sony Walkman behind my bouquet, listening to Prince croon, "you, you, I would die for you." Then I'd slip the wedding ring over the wrong finger: the independent second finger right near the real wedding finger. After all, this friend of mine told me if the so-called "wrong" finger was manicured

and long, there was no mistaking what all he could bring out of you, anywhere. That wrong finger was a telling sign of incurable delights, up and over labia, vulva, clitoral sambas, etc.

I sang to my self a la Irene Cara and Natalie Wood, "There's a place for us." And asked the price of the Swiss digital watch embraced by diamonds and sapphires: \$8,556 American dollars. Nicaraguan currency was not negotiable. Cuban pesos by the thousands, totally unacceptable. So, I couldn't give myself that sparkling, glinting tease of a timekeeper as an engagement present. I had missed my engagement party 'cause I had impulsively accepted my hand in marriage without so much as calling my mother. I hadn't even visited my Dad to ask for my hand, nor had I listened to what he expected from me as my life-long partner: the man to take Daddy's place in my life, choosing and buying my silk dresses and lightly salted sweet butter at the few Weingarten's left in Texas. Nothing takes the place of Jamail's, but my Dad couldn't know that. He's not intimately familiar with Houstonian traditions or fads. Why, his cowboy hat doesn't even have feathers on it and his boots got that thin, "eastern" leather that would surely tear if you were bull-dogging or barrel-racing.

We didn't have the conversation.

I continued the marital ceremony over malacite and Australian opals that have black and navy hints amidst azure, pale green and coral rose swirls esconced in gold where my Maid of Honor would have held my fiance's ring for that sacred moment, the exchanging of rings. Giving oneself to another in the view of the Holy Ghost, through the haunting chime of the Sikh's gong, with the blessings of Ochun

and Shango, never far from the reach of Elegua or Ogun and Krishna, the Breath of Fire ridding my soul and flesh of the now inconsequential past: pushing me toward purity and passion and innocence. My mate, familiar with my blazing uncontrollable untouched bronze-rose longings, knowing—never having carressed me—where I might sigh, closes my eyes humbly, accepting more palm right there, more thigh, more thigh over here. Please, listen. To marry oneself surrounded by semi-precious stones and crystal is quite an experience.

If one's ballet dancer is somewhere in Latin America, rehearsing blocking for "Swan Lake" or "Fix Me, Jesus, Fix Me," a gift from Ailey to Pinochet in memory of Allende to the repertory company at the Teatro Municipal in Santiago/ out of Santiago/ in Bogata/ on to Caracas/ el Distrito Federal, where I might honeymoon at the Maria-Isabel, drink margaritas in sight of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Shall I make my pilgrimage on my knees with the shrouded Indias, approaching our Holy Mother? Shall I execute triplets and pique turns to our healer, our conduit to Christ, while the dancer goes on to Guadalajara?

I am marrying myself under a new moon in East Texas: care-taker; provider; disciplinarian, the only alternative, still smelling of Opium, magnolia incense. My rings on the wrong finger in this, the last days of the twentieth century. I shall have been a wife for 14 years by the year 2000, breeding poems, novels, a graceful clarity to my people in the New World where all things are possible. I don't know my campanero yet, but when he finds me I'll be certain to look him directly in the eye to see courage, see fearlessness and honor in the carriage of his torso. Legs revealing deft continuous preparation for an assault contra nuestra

dignidad y liberacion. Cultural aggression skipping to Uxmal, Macchu Picchu, the Pyramid of the Moon. My lover and I shall seek out Curanderos and Padrinos to put us in touch with mountain cloud river soil. The wedding ceremony very simple, wasn't mentioned in the *Enquirer* or the *New York Times Society Pages*. The *San Juan Star* ran a five line announcement. *Jet* magazine edited our union out of "People are Talking About," to *Ebony's* fashion section, since my dress was designed by Beverly Parks of Miami who had studied with Valentino. After all, they had to acknowledge that my flower girl wore a Norma Kamali mid-calf satin gown, while I paraded around the \$10,000 bracelets and earrings as if I were wearing them all under a raw silk canopy studded with aging ivory tusks, facing from opaque white toward fawn, rippling spirals 'tween boar's teeth, Chinese monkeys of silver and cornelian, jade beads swinging from one lapis oval to another, a loop of garnets in semi-circles enclosing my bridal carriage, enveloped with U21 machine guns and .357 magnums at each corner. Bands of ammunition lay across the palominos' backs, slowly tracing the paths of Guillen and Neruda, sidling up to Marquez and Galisch. At Casa de las Americas, the entire wedding party was treated to mohitos.

We moved on to the silver services: punch bowls, champagne glasses. They do not carry sterling silver machetes or gold Gilils. But these things may be ordered, if I would sign the wedding book near the Chippendale parlor chair which is not for sale. I really hadn't intended to have so grand a ceremony that *Jeune Afrique* carried a two-page feature in their August issue. *Marie-Claire* and *Elle* critiqued the designers of all the bridesmaids' dresses. I hate symmetry. Nothing in nature is symmetrical. So, how could I marry myself surrounded by a slew of bridesmaids in the same color with poie de soie heels dyed somewhere near 42nd Street and 9th Avenue. I couldn't bear it. My gorgeous friends appeared as themselves near the crystal wine glasses and delicate liquer sets which could be monogrammed, if I knew my husband's name, which I did, of course, since it was me. But I didn't want to upset the saleswoman who didn't realize she was the only woman in American with an 8-inch high bleached honey-blond beehive and a circle pin on the left lapel of her mauve two-paneled jacket. I just said my husband's name was Johnson, so a "J" would do on the liqueur glasses, but the water, champagne, wine, and brandy glasses were to remain clear of design or inscription of any kind. Who knows? Some guerrellero from Guatemala

or Nambia might find me irresistible, put the rings on the right wedding finger, but have a last name that began with "X" like Xiomaro, or "V" like Valenzuela, or even "M" like Malinke. Something told me my marriage to myself would end gracefully, but would certainly not be the last venture to the guarded fears and hopes of another whose very name drew tears on occasion, whose acerbic temper cut sinews, breastplate, clammy hands, trembling fingers, only to elicit the aching pain of truth. One cannot marry and lie. A lot of people will testify to that. Tween husband and wife is a ravine where spring water finds its way to the creek, then to the river, where silt and aluminum cans infect the coming together of disparate currents leaving swamps and signs reading, "this water unfit for bathers." And who are bathers but lovers chastened with sacred drops of pungent perspiration and mild sweet white water crests, racing to ankles, roaming toes, irrigating the very soils where spirits seek ambrosia.

I've been here a long time. I am almost joined to myself, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer, till death do we part." But I've got to get over to I-10 to the gun store. I did promise my fiance a gilt silver antique zip-gun that was actually used by the Blackstone Rangers. I have asked for a black leather jacket, the kind the Savage Skulls wear on the east side train: silver studs on the sleeves and round the waist. Very hard to come by. They are passed down in families. And my family left the Bronx as the War in Europe was ending, before Hiroshima or the Bandung Conference, before I was born. So I agreed to settle for one of Ben Webster's mouth pieces or a Jimi Hendrix diary.

The yellow bee-hive lady caught on that I was not a regular customer. I might be a single black mother, you know, a statistic. But she was wrong. I simply got married, swathed in cascades of nature's rugged rocks refined by human hands to steal the sunlight, shake the moon from her sleep, and let the world know I am well taken care of. Diamonds, emeralds, silencers, rapid fire machine guns, poetry, Dom Perignon, camouflage suits, gold lamé high top sneakers, mindful we must be twice what we believe we are, two times more than expected. I'm so literal I had to get married to get two of me.

But we're joined: a union of two minds, two spirits/ two believers in la revolucion/ not even a free trip on the Concorde could pull us apart.

I heard a Nicaraguan, only 18 years old, and in the militia, jokingly reply to a possible chabala: "But you know I can't marry

you, I'm married to the revolution. You better be careful, she's jealous, and never loses. She loves to dance. See you at Rich's Thursday.' We'll bring the struggle to every night club in Houston. Come on, why stay fighting for truth and commitment, if your companero (lover-male) or companera (lover-female) can't dance. No one has ever said a bomba was counter-revolutionary or that break-dancing was an anarchist distraction. My lover, also known as La Victoria, chose the wrong finger for the rings, but gave me lessons I'll never forget. I am like you the strength of two, la lucha y la cultura. The D. C. Bop and a shotgun, Siempre, our spouse calls out: "La lucha continua." We dance by the sea between the land mines. When I married myself among the jewels of our planet, my husband taught me to aim accurately, to never weaken, and never, no matter what, never forget we fight for love, por amor y la luna; for the future y nuestro derecho to know how to read; to have a pair of shoes; to watch our children grow, not dying flaccid in our arms, puss oozing from their miniature limbs. We fight for love.

If you married la lucha by yourself like I did we can dance all night and wake facing our beloved, La Victoria. We can't put the rings on the wedding finger til the earth's jewels swing a treacherous merengue from the hips of our children and whip like braided rawhide the columns of the courthouses where we are tortured and made ugly, when we know every scar is a beauty mark.

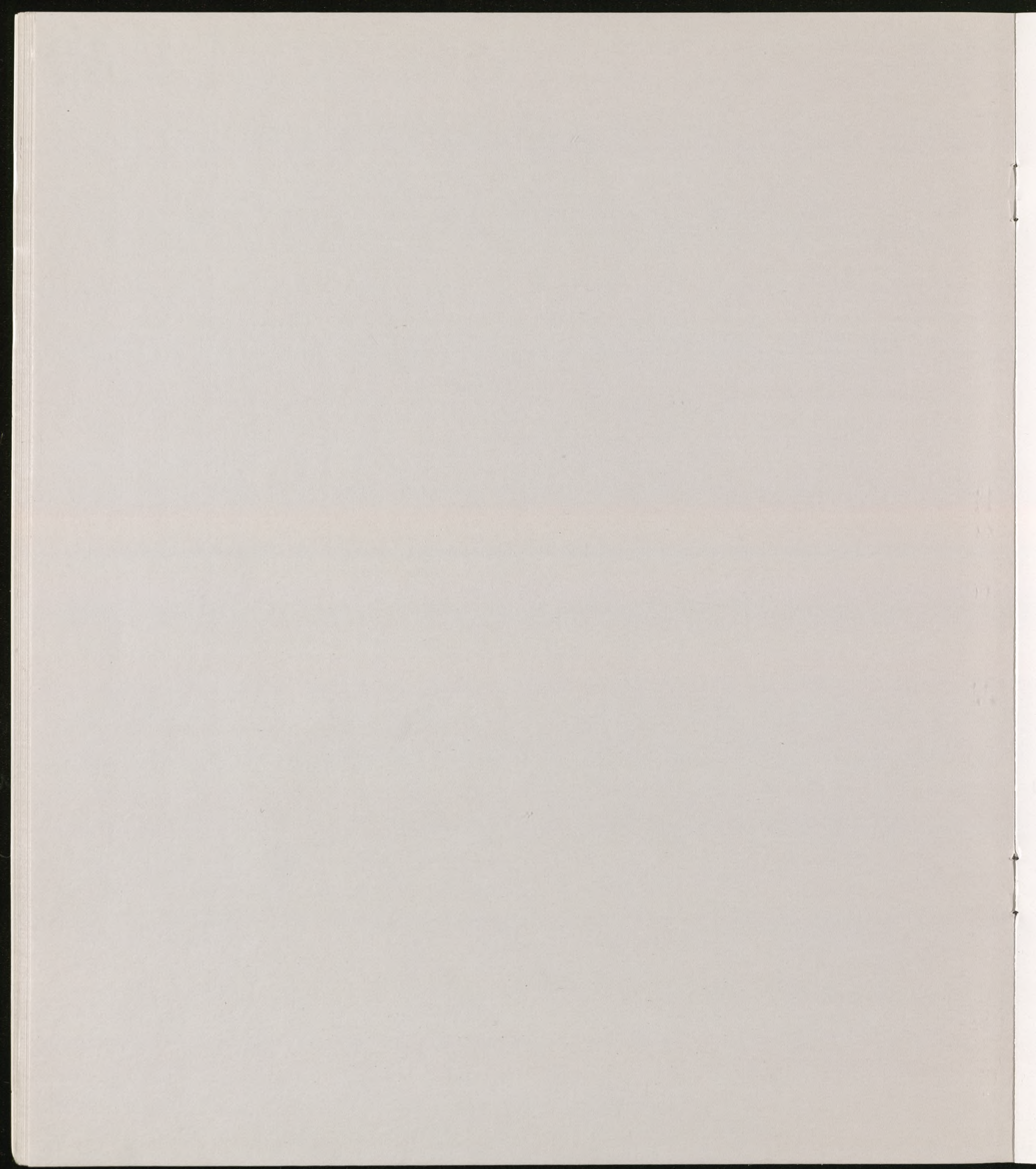
The bee-hive lady is dimming the lights in her gilded room. She's walking me to the door, not knowing that next time I shall bring a brigade of unwed mothers who will marry themselves, however they please. We're our own electricity, lady. These lights won't dim till nuestras companeros come racing through Hermann Park, embracing the women who know so well what they wanted. She married herself. Her hands moving with his to shout or caress by bouganvilla, always close to the soil. He or she moves the wedding band and the engagement ring to the right finger. La Victoria is not common. I don't stray from my old man, though he's not around much. I can feel his feet trudging those mountains, feel his breath searching my cheeks, my neck for a sign that I am there. Yes, kisses by the glass doors just as the iron gates slam shut. Kisses that make me shake til I scream out for more, por amor, amante. We must be two for everyone of them. We are the jewels of the New World, hard and sensual. Our romance is tough like la gitarra armada. A loaded fast dance. Hey, look every woman on the IRT is trying

to catch the bouquet I bought myself when I changed from the Flushing Line to the A train. It's on you honey. You got to be all you can or you'll find yourself standing at some altar all by yourself, trying to imagine why the rest of you is sauntering down Westheimer looking for a precious stone without an appropriate setting: some jewel mistaking herself for rhinestones. Damn, I only have fifteen minutes to get to the gun store. Oh, I hope they are not out of those silver zip-guns. The ballet dancer is still in Buenos Aires. The taxi driver in Rio doesn't even know that he is a fascist. None of that will do me any good, if I try to carry myself up the stairs. I'ma do a time step like the Nicholas Brothers. No one will know the difference. I mean, do I look married to you?

To Merida

Frances Mayes

A woman is soaked to the bone.
She is dragging her suitcase on
jammed buses that keep quitting.
Mud sucks off one shoe. She's alone.
Does not understand directions.
Clay, surge of faces, raw meat,
fish heads and trays of chiles, sweet
steam, the weight of the black
suitcase pulling her shoulder.
She stares at a small girl,
black eyes and starched white dress
of lace and air in a doorway.
The farther she walks
The farther away she gets. Good.
Plaza, park, she's lost, the sky
won't stop, even for the ready
sun. Her hair snakes into curls,
thin clothes showing her skin.
She keeps walking. Tomorrow she will
wear cotton. Tomorrow she will buy
a white gladiola outside the cathedral,
go in and rub one flower on the foot
of the first wooden Jesus she can find.
She will be dry and new.

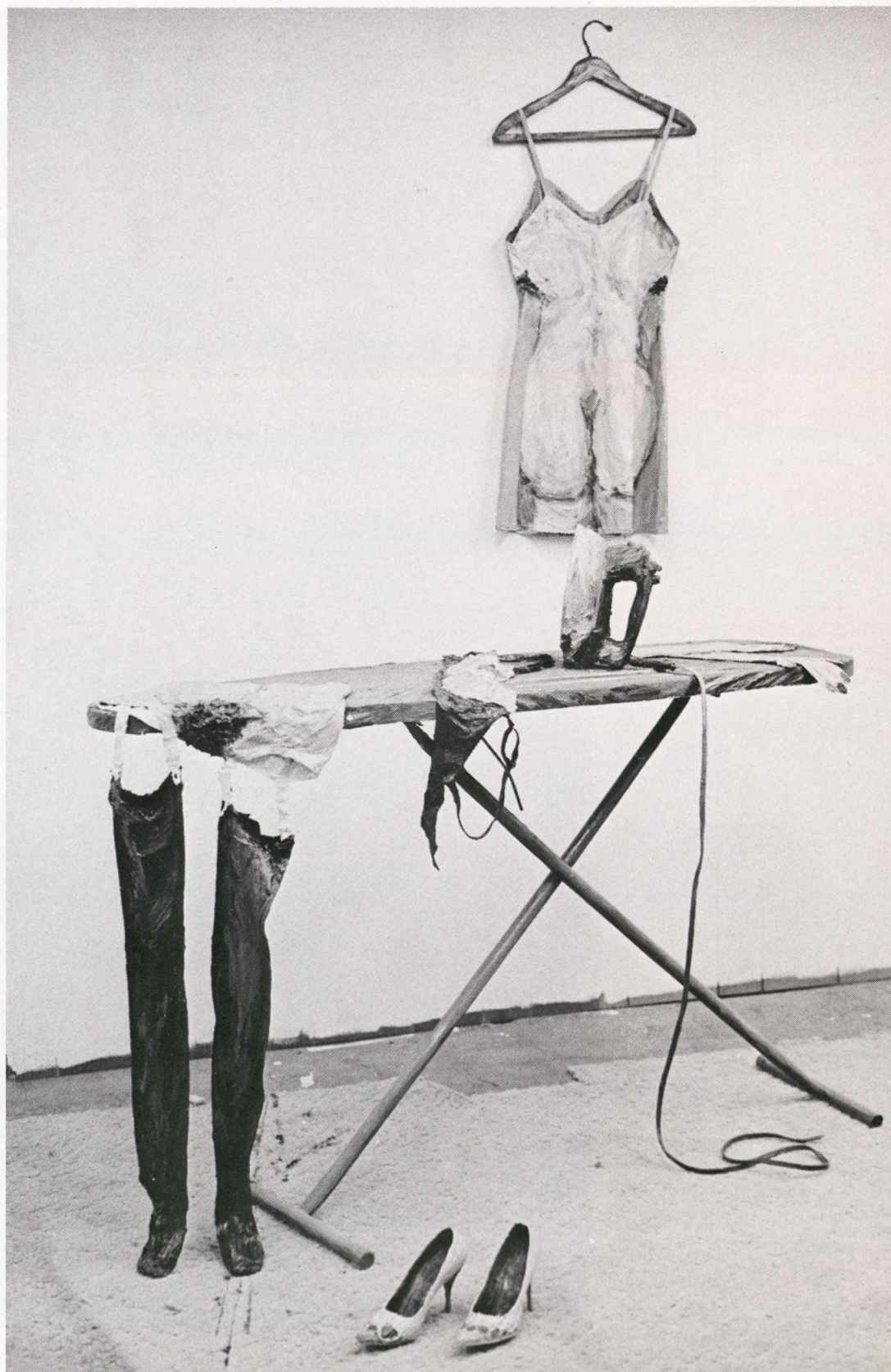


Lynn Foster



Self Portrait

Jackie Harris



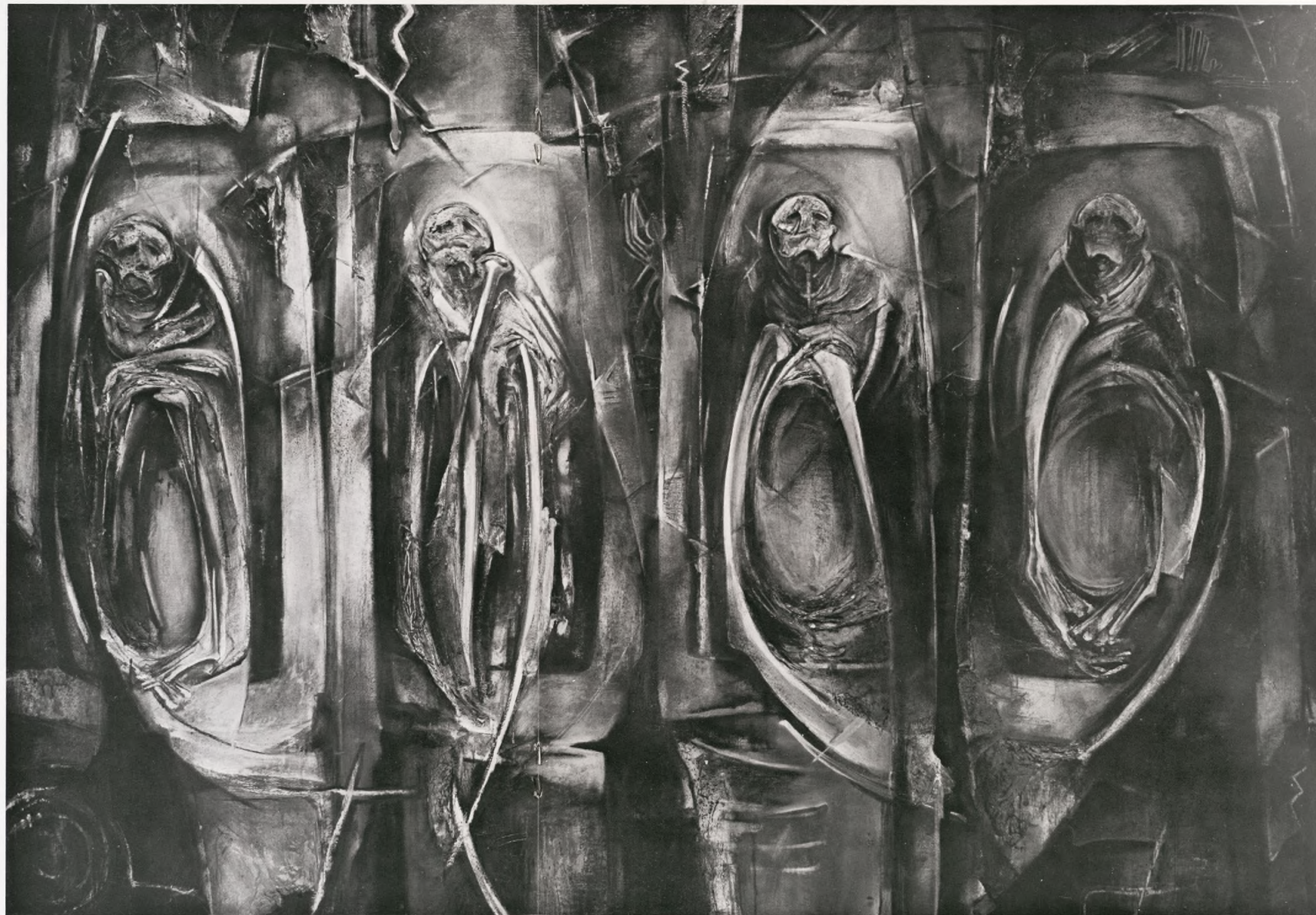
Hope

Carter Ernst



**The Bad, The Ugly,
The Proud, The Disconcerned**

Sharon Kopriva



Lynn Foster



Jeff Marshall



Jim Jones

Wendy Puntenney



