

Gulf Coast

With Nancy Eimers Boyer Rickel May Swenson Derek Walcott Franz Wright



TRY TO STAND AS WELL AS
JAMES DOES



FIG. 119



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Gulf Coast

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n emor m

I gave your copy of O'Hara's *Selected*
to the Salvation Army.
The loss was marginal; I kept my copy.

We saw his footprint in Paris
at the Pompidou,
a plaster mold coated in sand,

an artist's rendition of one he left
on the shore the night he died
"This is his last footprint," I said.

"No," you replied, "The prints he left on the beach,
those were his last.
Could someone have followed them?"

Part dissolved like scraps
from the Dead Sea Scrolls,
they lead nowhere and stop suddenly—

as if his body following his mind
took flight, as if it disappeared
as your copy of his *Selected*

which I searched for today
among the used books at the Salvation Army,
hoping to discover it

like some lost and ancient tome,
like some half-forgotten memory
I can't remember the words for.

I imagine it found by someone
who cannot decipher your scrawl,
thumbing over it, rubbing it off,

until it is no longer legible,
and leads nowhere and stops suddenly—

Notes from a Q&A

The poet says, "The brain roof chatter of the fudged fucked up world."
He is discussing the position of the I, "For perfect perspective you might have to die."

The poet says, "Because there are now too many people on earth to imagine having feelings for all individual lives, people have become repellent."

He is explaining why bourgeois sympathizing has fallen out of fashion in poetry, why Wordsworth and Whitman seem sentimental.

The poet says, "Sentimentality is loving yourself more than God could love you."

He is suggesting that the proper relation to sentiment is either tragic or utopian.

"There is the problem of agency, of accountability for the connections the mind makes..."

"Should I go down and wash the dog?" she says.

He hears, "Are you going to wash the dog, or should I go down and do it?"

The poet says, "Feeling is a result of conflict."

He is trying to tell us where irony comes from.

She is lying in bed, twisted up in the sheets, she is holding her book turned over so the mylar cover faces up, an outcrop on the alp of her knees.

He is standing at the foot of the bed, looking down at her, having just brought her coffee.

The poet says, "What you don't want but you know is the truth."

He is suggesting that this is a fortunate position from which to write a poem.

He feels the low ceiling, the slanted walls' unmitigated descent to the floor.

He wants her to say, "Why don't I go down and wash the dog?"

The poet says, "Anything I repeat more than fifteen times, I begin to become suspicious of." He is repeating his conviction that any affirmation in a poem has to resist a powerful negation.

He tells her that her syntax precludes any possibility of love. She says, "You want me to say, 'Why don't I go down and wash the dog?' So you can say, 'No let me,' and then I say, 'No, really, let me,' and this is your idea of ideal love?"

Talking about a friend, a novelist who can only get published by presses that deal in bad self-help, the poet says, "One of you will write the poems for the next zeitgeist."

The friend is by the poet's estimation a great writer and thinks Vermeer and Tolstoy, along with a few others, are in heaven playing pinochle, judging artists morally for what they do, condemning him for watching too much television.

He feels what he calls guilt.
He turns and goes downstairs to wash the dog.

Leaving the Q & A, they walk into the first spring day that meets their expectations of spring: sky as blue as the water of Greece or Hawaii in high-gloss travel magazine advertisements, sun gilding the almost imperceptible reverberate color starting on the dark branches of trees, after a week of low temperatures, gunmetal skies, frequent rain, and the threat of snow.

They pass protesters holding the Socialist newspaper and try not to make eye contact; so, when they ask them to sign a petition to stop the bombing in Kosovo, they mumble "No, no," embarrassed but eager to get to the restaurant because, as they say to each other with anticipation, "I'm starving."

Flying in Over Key West

I keep thinking it will be different here.
Maybe the clear water leads me
to believe coral is God's last hiding place.

It's likely just the end of the highway,
the way U.S. 1 both stitches the islands
and tethers them to the bony finger of the mainland.

Something makes me feel some of it will last,
a tin roof, the wood of a lobster trap,
bougainvillea winding through a wire fence.

The plane comes down across the haphazard flyway
of pelicans. A heron waits, motionless
beside a fishing boat rocking against a canal wall.

If you were here, we would go out tonight
and look for Key deer in the mangroves. We
would watch them trusting us, then go home.

Instead, once I hang up my shirts, I'll
go to Arnie's Seawater Shop and buy
you one of those pieces of pink coral,

the kind with a phony blue dolphin
rising up behind a seashell,
a bit of yellow glue showing along the edge.

Forgetting How to Sleep

The parallels of the wind lengthen
into the next day's overstuffed afternoon
the way my father would open the back door
and say the church was a dent
in his car. He kept the family Chevy clean.
My sister and I would watch out
the windows, two birds, two questions,
as we drove to his mother's hydrangea-
smothered trailer, sitting alone
on the stained outskirts of Pittsburgh.
She lived with her salt and pepper shakers
and the August heat, and her husband. She
was a fur coat, a couple of Manhattans, and
an ashtray, lavender, bee stings. She laughed
in spite of her eyes. We'd watch the staggering
clouds and pull down the skin under our eyes
and pull our lips wide across our faces.
The church was silly, lopsided, and bald.
It was a cracked window. I suppose
we suffered. My father said we ate.
He told us how his mother
carried an old hoe and walked around the lawn
looking for snow peas. Later, she'd give him a nickel
and tell him snow peas turned your blood sunny.
We'd drive through the town where my father
was a kid. "There's where I bowled," he'd say.
"There's where they found Mrs. Simpson."
We'd watch the broken windows, see
the bent stop sign, and the hummingbird
feeder outside Frampton's Hardware Store.
My father would say, "I see something
that is tangerine." At my grandmother's,
we'd sit and watch her husband try to talk.
Once when we got there around three

in the afternoon, he was sitting in front of the refrigerator, on a ladder, asleep, his head in the freezer. It was always August and always the weekend. It was always sometime after church.

Three Late Adventures

I.

The housepainters reminded him of the boys who once swam with him at Walden Pond. High on their ladders, shirtless, tan shoulders bunched as they scraped the bubbled paint beneath the soffit, they carried out their ritual with a grace all the more graceful for its artlessness. One painter in particular moved him: a blond boy, eighteen years old, who wore a crucifix and a pair of cut-off jeans. His nose was long and porous, his bum compact, the hair on his legs golden. You never saw such legs any more with all the fears of melanoma. Heebner watched the boy scrape from behind the venetian blinds while his latest project, a study of alcoholism and boating, sat unfinished beneath the paper clips on his desk. He would later muse that but for the boy the article would have made the deadline for the fall issue of *Popular Sociology* and a whole three months of drowning accidents might have been prevented. In the mid-afternoons Heebner would walk across the lawn holding aloft a tray of sodas. He once brushed the boy's overlarge hand as he passed him a glass of ginger ale, a sensation so delicate that his knuckle retained traces of the touch until the next day. In his seventy years Heebner had never been partial to men—neither in his waking nor his dreams—so he wondered: had he repressed a crucial experience from childhood? Finally he realized that in his heart of hearts he had believed that all such golden boys were dead.

They spoke toward the end of the job. Heebner cornered the boy in the back yard as he bent over the plastic tarp, retrieving from the water bucket a tiny brush for detail work. The boy's dark lashes stretched like awnings over his cheeks. No orthodontia: his teeth were tiny white bricks.

"Are you in school, son?"

"Naw," said the boy.

"Well, well," said Heebner—he never knew how to respond when a young man wasn't in school. He slipped into a professorial role. "And are your parents all right with that?"

"Oh, yeah. You know. Whatever is fine."

"That's a pleasant attitude."

The boy peered at him carefully, his clear blue eyes not altogether different from a cat's. He turned away. "I'm just going to finish up the windows on the left."

"Pardon me, I shouldn't have distracted you."

"It's all right," answered the boy, "I never mind, every house I've been at I never mind."

"You never mind?"

"I—never—mind," the boy said slowly, and he swaggered across the grass, his bum swinging like a metronome, the delicate brush dangling between thumb and forefinger. "You've got a nice wife," the boy called behind.

The boy had seen his wife leaving for work in the mornings. Was it a jab? Could it be that he was smirking? Later Heebner saw the painters joking with each other in a circle, the golden boy punching a fist into his palm, and he resented them.

His wife arrived home late from work, tapping her way up the stairs to his study. She knocked lightly on the door before pushing her way into the maelstrom of books, periodicals, binders and loose leaf papers. A knee operation had left her with a limp which required a cane, and she had chosen a stately antique stick, its base sheathed in brass, its crown topped by the carved head of a basset hound. As she folded herself onto a stool, the basset hound's dark brown tongue came to rest on the handle of a filing cabinet. Heebner's wife was only ten years younger than he. She had a porridgy face, and despite the suit jacket she wore, her torso was shaped like the Liberty Bell, widening quickly from the breasts to the hips. Heebner loved her for the concern she showed to others—for her habit of asking before telling—and he was glad that today was no different.

"I seem to have spooked the painters," he admitted, giving himself over to a shrug. "I tried to talk with one of them about his aspirations, or anything at all, and he took it badly."

"Of course he did," she said, bending forward to swat him kindly on the knee. "Let me guess: you took a sociological interest. You probably peered at him a little too closely, and said, 'What are your aspirations?' And you jotted the response in a notebook."

"I'm not that bad."

"No, but he probably thought you were a shrink."

"We didn't get that far," said Heebner, and he allowed himself a bemused reflection. "He probably thought I was a social worker."

"Touché!"

"Really, I don't know *what* he thought."

"He thought you were hitting on him."

"True enough."

"And you probably were," sighed Mrs. Heebner, stroking away the wrinkle on her skirt, her thick underlip falling open in a pout. "You're cooped up in this house all day. It's little wonder that you haven't gotten funny."

"Oh, but I have, dear. The real wonder is that you haven't seen it yet." Heebner mussed his hair, stuck out his tongue and crossed his eyes. It wasn't all that humorous, and to his relief she rose, patted his shoulder, and tapped her way downstairs to assemble a dinner of chicken casserole, leaving Heebner to consider his mistake. He concluded that retirement is a war with boredom.

Despite the bizarre conversation and the new way that the painters would regard him, Heebner thought it essential to maintain appearances, so he brought them the usual tray of sodas the next day. He folded the same four napkins beneath the same four tumblers, put three ice cubes into each glass and poured the soda close to the rim. Though he was overweight and tired, he put as much bounce into his step as he could, relying on his sky blue flip-flops for the illusion of lift. It was lunch time and the four painters were sitting on the stone retaining wall in the yard, chewing rye bread, wheat bread, Wonder Bread. They were quiet as he approached. The golden boy was intent upon eating his tuna sandwich, though the foreman—a short young man never without a Sigma Chi baseball cap, his black ram's curls spewing out around his ear—greeted him with a Halloo!

"Thought I'd bring you your daily ginger ale!" shouted Heebner.

"Thank you, sir," said the foreman. "Tony here was waiting for you."

The golden boy grimaced, raised his sandwich so that it concealed his expression.

"Well, that's all very fine," dissembled Heebner. "He tells me that he's not in school."

"Only the school of hard knocks," said the foreman wittily. "Out all night again, weren't you Tony?"

"Yup," murmured the golden boy.

"Got smashed at the Gallery, eh?"

"Yup," said the golden boy.

"Got into a fight?"

"Not *last* night."

"Whoops!" The foreman returned to Mr. Heebner, who stood with his large belly protruding and his free arm raised like a visor to block the sun. "Tony got some butt last night," said the foreman confidentially, and he winked.

"Some butt?"

"Tony got laid."

The golden boy was crouched in place. Through the veneer of a hangover, the bum of his cut-offs frayed, he assumed a posture both naive and lonely, though it was clear that the golden boy was neither. Heebner knew that the foreman—indeed, all the painters—intended to enjoy themselves at his expense, much as the corn farmers of Iowa had wished to enjoy him decades ago when he was studying the norms of the collapsing family farms. He wanted to make some kind of grand gesture to persuade them that he was a genuine man, but it was too late to bring them beer in place of ginger ale, and it was probably too late to be taken seriously.

"I, too, got butt last night," Heebner lied, kicking past a soiled rag to the retaining wall. As he set the tray on the stone and wished them well for the afternoon, he noted the wry discomfort his remark had caused. "Actually, I got it in both directions. Put the glasses on the tray when you're done, eh boys?" He returned across the lawn, feeling fresh and young.

"Have a good night," the foreman yelled after him.

"Oh, I will!" shouted Heebner, and he heard them laughing.

He would show them! Oh, he would show them!

That night, after the table lamp was out, the moon light entered the windows and outlined his wife where she lay with the rocky solidity of a mountainscape. A stained glass night light in the shape of a frog glowed on the baseboard plug. Under the covers Heebner scratched his wife's shoulders through her green satin nightie and pressed himself against her. "Honey?" he asked. "Sweetie? Are you awake?"

"Of course," she said, not unkindly.

"I know we haven't in a while. But do you want to? That is, if it's not too late...."

She sighed, a sure sign that it was late, even too late, but then the covers rumped.

"Why not?" she said.

She revolved sportingly to receive him, and her mouth tasted of rain and onions. As they began, Heebner wondered if she knew his motivations, or if she forgave him—but it was silly to think otherwise. Afterwards, when they had washed and said good night, he nestled in his pillow and reflected on Walden Pond, the municipal beach where he swam as a boy among friends as inevitably youthful as the painters. His boyhood friends were no less crass or vital than contemporary teens. They were no less brave, either. Heebner's crowd drank, then swam in pairs into the middle of the lake, daring each other to dive

twenty feet down into the muck, the boy holding his breath, his toes leaving a moil of white water at the surface, a plane to be broken a minute later by the gasping, muddied head. Given such patterns of behavior, repeated night upon night in the black water—and given the customs of young men in general, and his own friends in particular, always swimming further, always working harder for length and breadth and depth on moonless nights—wasn't tragedy inevitable?

And so the next day he could not help but observe the golden boy through the slats of the venetian blinds as he painted this window, then the next. The boy's sleep-deprived lids were constantly blinking in slow motion. He appeared ready to fall from his perch. The motion of his one inch sash was haphazard. Heebner went outside and surveyed him from the ground.

"I'm simply concerned about your future," he found himself saying. It was best to speak frankly. "Your name is Tony, right?"

"That's right, Mr. Heebner."

"I had a friend like you once," said Heebner. He felt stupid. He was mad at himself, and he slapped his own thighs. But above him, the boy's back was stiff and his ears were pricked. He had stopped painting. Heebner would try sincerity. "You take care!" he shouted.

"You, too, old man," said the golden boy. "Watch you don't fall down the stairs or something."

And that was the end of that.

It relieved Heebner when the painters left for good. The golden boy had disappointed him, for he felt that the boy had misinterpreted something lovely as something vulgar, whereas Heebner was guilty of doing the reverse. He decided to stop thinking of the painters. As far as he could have noted, he did.

However, although Heebner was unaware of it, the golden boy and the other painters had not departed from him altogether, but had merely left the regions of his mind to settle, like silt, into the corners of his body. At night he would fluff his pillow and return to the implications of alcohol for boating, drawing heavily on a graph he had memorized from a study done in North Carolina. As he lay restive beside the bulk of his wife on their king-sized Georgian bed, Heebner dwelt on images of Walden Pond: a suntan, lily pads, a drowned friend, and youth.

II.

After Heebner rose, showered, shaved, and inspected himself for growths in the mirror, his flesh began to bother him. He had always been aware of his weight, which in prior years

had seemed to him a temporary defect. But as he was looking at himself in the mirror, a sheet ringed by baroque molding, he experienced that rare tumbling into selfhood which must always end with an exclamation mark. "I am Lucius Heebner!" came the voice from the depths of his self: "I am fat!" From the hairless buttons of his nipples, his chest sloped outwards to the rounded beach ball of his tummy. That fat should have become the very essence of his selfhood made him feel older than ever.

"You don't look so bad," his wife assured him over breakfast. She, too, was a bit overweight, a condition she hid behind a wardrobe of suit jackets, baggy pants and wrap-around skirts. She ate bacon every morning and insisted on whole milk, even though her doctor had warned her that a sixty-year-old cannot ignore her cholesterol. Heebner wondered about the sociology of denial.

"But I want to look better," Heebner said.

"You don't *feel* bad, do you?"

"It's not how you feel. It's how you look."

"Please don't get superficial on me."

"Moi?" asked Heebner, a hand fluttering to his lips.

"Haw-haw-haw! You haven't been watching too much TV since you retired, have you?"

Neither Heebner nor his spouse was an expert on weight control, but over breakfast they discussed an exercise plan. It was simple: day after day Heebner would walk and walk and walk. When the sun began to creep across the spider plant on the mantle, his wife gathered her briefcase from atop the wicker hamper and drove to work. That was when Heebner put on his shoes.

Heebner's daily walk brought him to the Bread and Circus on the corner of Brookside Drive. His neighbors took care of their houses and hedges, and several people kept flower gardens in their front lawns, so the circuit was always pleasant. Sometimes the passing postman saluted him from his postal Jeep. At the store, Heebner filled a back pack with loaves of wheat bread, bottles of vitamins, and assorted roots and sprouts. He also bought fresh juices, fat-reduced pasta mixes and cartons of pre-fertilized, range-grown chicken eggs. The end of May was hot and the return trip from the store sapped his strength, leaving him a poor scholar and a worse writer. As the weeks passed, and as he continued to exercise and to eat low-fat meals, he lost several pounds.

His wife was pleased. Each day after she finished work at the Social Worker's Union, a non-profit lobbying organization near the state house, she would tap her way into the living room

and call, "What did you lose today, Lucius?" It was Mrs. Heebner's idea to keep track of Heebner's weight in a log purchased from an office supply store. Among the first things she did each evening was to lick the tip of a pencil with her tongue and extract a bound red volume from the cabinet above the phone.

"What did you lose today, Lucius?" she asked, wetting the pencil.

"Twenty-four hours and another black hair!"

"Haw-haw. Be serious."

"Well, if I'm Sirius, you're Andromeda."

"Haw-haw-haw," laughed Mrs. Heebner, bending over and clutching her side.

"What dear? Are they showing reruns of *Hee-Haw*?"

"Stop! Be serious! You're killing me!"

"All right," he would say seriously. "I lost three ounces."

"Excellent!"

In this way that middle summer they enjoyed each other's simple company. Now that Heebner was a professor emeritus (he had been emeritus for a year), they discussed the different books he had read and all the movies they intended to see on weekends. After the painters had finished the house, Heebner had found time to return to the classic texts of sociology, among them Gordon Kramer's prophetic work, *The Tribe*, which half a century before had ignited his interest in the field. Hunched over the dinner table, his elbows resting on the laminated cloth in the familiar middle class fashion, Heebner mused to his wife that people often revisit the touchstones of youth in their retirement years. Though spare and overly simple, Kramer's book still rippled with energy. As a young teacher, clad in bow tie and ceremonial tweed, Heebner had been a fervent Socratic, a passionate chalk scribbler, a dedicated expounder of tidbits. He loved his field. And whether it was the power of Kramer's book or of his new exercise routine, the aged Heebner rippled with energy, too. Each time he stepped on the scale, he felt a greedy tremor at the lowered decimal on the digital display.

Mrs. Heebner praised him every night for the first twenty pounds. Then, late in June, her attitude changed. She tallied the last nine days and fretfully announced that Lucius was losing four pounds a week.

"It's too much for a man of your age! You need to walk less, eat more."

"I need neither," Heebner explained in a professorial tone. "I am simply working hard. When you work hard, you reap the rewards."

"It's too late for another mid-life crisis, Lucius. If you're not careful, you're going to get into trouble."

"Leave it alone, dear!"

"It was those painters."

"So what if it was?"

"I know you," and she shook her basset hound cane at the floor.

"Of course you do. So what's wrong with a little envy? You should be happy that I'm losing weight."

"I only hope that's *all* you lose."

Heebner heard her warning—he was adept at hearing her warnings even before she issued them—but it meant nothing to him. In the days ahead he exercised harder.

One day he found an aerobics video tape in the remainder bin at Bradlee's. He took it home, popped it in the VCR, adopted it as his own. His walking workout needed a supplement, something to address the upper body, so in the late mornings he put on a pair of shorts and did the exercises on the shag rug that faced the television. At first he could not last the whole videotape, but his stamina improved over a matter of days, until he was tossing his arms with the same grim energy as the older fellow on screen.

The man who led the exercises had completely gray hair, and looked to be a fit fifty. He wore tight black Spandex and a youthful t-shirt, and his assistant, who performed the routine with perky vigor, was young enough to be his daughter. Heebner fancied that the two aerobics instructors were married. From his knowledge of patriarchal cultures, that hazy zone where sociology bleeds into anthropology, he knew that in some countries, like Guatemala or China, it was customary for older men to take wives barely out of puberty.

Even in America the successful professor emeritus might take a wife of twenty-five. Not college girls: Heebner had taught enough of them to know that their minds are unformed, and that they beat about ideas like moths around a light bulb. He had considered them at the time, and with few exceptions had decided summarily against all the little Betty Sue's and Muffy's, brilliantly blue-eyed and clear-skinned, who over the decades had gravitated toward the sociology major. But Heebner could see his way to a good solid woman with a jump on mid-life, young enough to be fresh, old enough to have a sense of humor and know her way in the world. Heebner often thought of her in the midst of his jumping jacks. She would be a graduate student. She would wear red blazers with flashy epaulettes and make little fists in mock anger. She would laugh at all his jokes. Not

that he didn't love his wife.

Soon Heebner started a daily post-video round of sit-ups, push-ups and curls. So exhausting was the total workout that he would nap in the late morning before turning toward the alcoholism and boating study which lay still unfinished on his desk. That weekend he was executing his fifteenth push-up when he felt an explosion in his shoulder. Each push-up that followed was more difficult than the last. On the third, the pain was unbearable. His wife heard him yelp, and she hobbled into the living room. She found him curled on the rug, panting.

"My God!" she screamed and she dropped her cane.

"It's not what you think," he said.

"You're so pale, Lucius!"

"Just help me off the floor, dear. It's no calamity, it's just my shoulder."

She held his hand while he rose, and she escorted him to the front door. Standing beside him, she peered into his eyes for a clear sign.

"It's all right," he said.

When she saw that it was, she folded herself into him, her amber bead necklace against his chest. She was shaking.

"Stupid," she said.

"I know, I know."

"You're so stupid, Lucius."

"I know."

"But your arm. Can you move it?"

When he tried to rotate his shoulder, the turn of the socket made him wince.

"Stupid," she repeated.

His wife hobbled back to the living room and picked up her cane. Then she went upstairs to fetch her husband a pair of sweat pants to wear over his exercise shorts. Running all the yellow lights down Manchester Street, she drove him to the hospital.

In the examination room Heebner waited on a cot covered with tissue paper while his wife reviewed the jars of cotton balls, tongue depressors, and band-aids arrayed across the steel shelf above the industrial sink. At last a lady doctor entered the room and approached them with an expression of sterile formality, her tiny fists folded into the lining of her white coat. She wore thick-rimmed glasses, her nails were cut nearly to the cuticle and her blond hair was fixed in a bun. Her energetic movements reminded Heebner of the young woman from the aerobics tape. She paused to read the chart affixed to the wall before approaching Heebner's arm.

"I see you're about to chart my course!" he joked, trying to catch her eye.

The doctor appeared not to have heard him at all, though she winked conspiratorially at his wife. "Mr. Heebner, you just lay back on the table now. A little too much exercise, eh?"

"He's been overdoing it lately," said his wife.

"He has, huh? Uh-oh. And what was it you did today, Mr. Heebner?"

"Push-ups," spat Heebner.

"It looks like they got the better of you." The doctor asked him to raise his arm above his head, but the shoulder was too weak and sore. After several abortive tries, the doctor diagnosed a torn tendon.

"You mustn't overdo it, Mr. Heebner. For one thing—you did them every day?"

"Yes."

"You can't do push-ups every day."

"I thought I could work up to them," he protested. When he tried to gesture, the pain in his shoulder made him wince.

"Nobody does push-ups every day, Mr. Heebner. Nobody. The body needs rest, especially in the later years. And I'm afraid that now you'll be resting that shoulder for months."

"I've been trying to get him to cut back," said Mrs. Heebner.

The doctor smirked. "You've got a smart wife, Mr. Heebner." She told him to take some aspirin.

Outside the hospital, the day was waning. Mrs. Heebner did not remind him of their prior conversations on the ride home. The car pulled slowly to all the stop signs, and halted at the yellows, and lingered gingerly before pulling into an intersection newly green. Other cars passed them in the left and right lanes. Heebner couldn't begrudge her the pleasure of being right, since all along she had been warning him out of concern for his welfare. Still, if it was her victory, it was his defeat.

"You got me," he finally admitted as she turned down their street, passing the rows of elms, the maples, the gladiolas, the picket fences ranged in dual rows of mourning. He wanted it to be a kind of surrender: Lee at Appomattox relinquishing two centuries of Southern aristocratic norms to the drunken, the inevitable Grant.

"Don't think of it that way, Lucius. Please."

At home he escorted her up the driveway and into the front hall. She kissed his cheek. When she took a seat at her desk to review a sheaf of manila file folders from the office, he retired to the living room to watch television. There was nothing to watch but car racing, and he accepted it, because there was nothing else he was good for, nothing at all—not with a damaged body, not with all the hours stretching before him. The culminating study

of alcoholism and boating would wait.

He had always felt a dim fascination for the people willing to observe a gaggle of cars drive four hundred miles around a circular track. The cars pulled into pits, they pulled out again. They passed on the straight-aways and smashed up on the curves. For some people the races constituted Greek Theater. For Heebner they constituted a rout.

III.

Days without exercise, hours of television, and the slow drag of the sun in the windows made Heebner lethargic. While his wife was at work, he sat beside a bowl of potato chips, his feet propped on the coffee table, and flipped through the channels on the remote. The day time talk shows offered an engaging cross-section of people whom he had read about in studies. He also supposed that he had passed them in gas stations, had avoided them at genealogical reunions, and had dismissed them as imaginary from the marble and mahogany serenity of his campus office. But their sudden fame was no comfort. There was nothing in them to nourish him.

His funk ended with a trip to Footlocker, where Heebner purchased a Spandex jogging suit ringed by reflective silver bands and an adjustable odometer—a small black box which could be secured to the calf by a Velcro strap. He began to run a mile or more each day. If he wasn't careful to keep loose, his ruined shoulder would grow sore, rendering jogging impossible, so he always did some stretching before he started, and he kept the shoulder tucked at his side. Nevertheless, sometimes his lungs burned, or his heart pounded so hard that his chest ached. His Spandex suit was shiny and yellow, and he looked like a neon bee as he jogged, or walked, through the humid July mornings. The drivers of passing cars braked to point at him. Though his mood improved with the running, he hated to be the object of ridicule. His exercise career might have ended late in July if he hadn't captured a criminal.

It happened at the Bread and Circus on a late morning when Heebner was purchasing low-fat yogurt, fresh garlic, and several vine-ripened tomatoes. He had paid in cash and he was just reaching for his sack of groceries at the end of the counter when he noticed that at the next register, a boy in jean jacket and scarf was stabbing a finger onto the till and looking wildly from side to side. The boy had long, shaggy red hair. He appeared as though he might smell bad. Heebner believed that the boy was merely a whiner—he did not see the cashier stuffing a wad of five dollar bills into a plastic baggy—so he cradled his groceries

in his one good arm, passed the robbery in progress, and headed for the exit.

Heebner was walking through the automatic doors when, in an effort to make a quick escape, the boy came running up behind him, broadsided him, and fell to the concrete. A dainty silver gun and a plastic bag of money scattered across the parking lot. As the boy fell down, Heebner lost his balance and fell on top, the grocery sack landing beside him, the yogurt container rupturing through the brown paper sack. Heebner's nose came to rest on the boy's angry red eyebrows. The security guard was handcuffing the boy even before Heebner could apologize.

"What was going through your mind when you saw the alleged robber running straight towards you?" asked the reporter. She wore false eye lashes and lip liner. The news camera pursued her like a lover. "Mr. Heebner?"

"Nothing," said Heebner in a daze. "I didn't see him."

"How does it feel to have stopped a robbery in progress?"

"It feels good," he said slowly. He wanted to go home because his shoulder was sore.

"You must be proud."

"I'm just glad to have done my part, Trudi."

Despite Heebner's modest responses, the local television news ran the report as its top story. *The Boston Globe* did an article for its Metro-Region section. The Watertown police department mailed him a special certificate. Friends phoned to congratulate him. So it was that Heebner acquired a local celebrity. Although he started by acknowledging that he had foiled the robbery by mere chance, after all the attention he received, he began to think that some special prophetic power had allowed him to be in the right place at the right time, and that a sixth sense had made him fall across the boy's body rather than clutch the handrail beside the automatic door.

"It was funny," he told his wife days later, reflecting at the table after dinner. "I felt a little tingle at the back of my neck just before the boy ran through me."

"That was growing pains, dear. It meant your head was getting bigger."

"I'm quite serious. As you know, I've never put my faith in extra-sensory perception. But the sensation was uncanny. I actually felt in the store that something terrible was about to happen."

His wife shrugged. "I believe you."

"No you don't."

"I said I believe you, Lucius"—though she was giggling into

an upraised coffee mug. She turned away to finish washing dishes, her upper torso convulsing with spasms of quiet laughter.

It was infuriating. He dwelled on her slight the next day while he sat in his office, copy-editing with a red pencil the alcoholism and boating study that he was almost ready to send off to the chief editor at *Sociology Today*. Ever since Heebner had started to get in shape, his wife had belittled him on one pretext or another: first it was losing too much weight; next it was growing too strong; next it was watching television. Was she jealous? Was she padding her own ego by tearing his down?

They attended a Sunday afternoon matinee at West Newton Cinema, a sub-titled showing of the French film, *Second Sight*. Heebner brought apple slices in a plastic bag which he concealed in the pocket of a light jacket. His wife purchased a bucket of popcorn and a Sprite at the concession stand, and he carried them for her as she tapped her way up the carpeted staircase to the theater. The movie was about a girl, blind at birth, who undergoes a revolutionary medical procedure that will give her vision. After she wakes, she sees for the first time in her life her parents, her friends and her boyfriend arrayed about the gurney holding pocket books and bouquets. Contrary to expectation, none of them are as attractive as she imagined—her boyfriend has a hare lip and her father has a cleft chin. Examining herself in the mirror, the heroine realizes that she is prettiest person she knows—and that with a little make-up and a fancy dress, she's an absolute knock out! So she abandons all the people who she once loved for a modeling career, and she winds up rich, alone, and desperately addicted to heroin. Although the film was improbable, Heebner thought that the bedrock metaphor was compelling.

Heebner supported his wife on the way across the parking lot, her basset hound cane swinging limp at her side. A sparrow swung across the macadam, pecked at a bread crumb wedged in a pothole, sighted the approaching Heebners, and flew away. "That movie was a real reversal, eh?" said Heebner. "A pretty profound vision of the world. Only when that blind girl could see did she really begin to see."

"That girl was a superficial bitch," sighed his wife. "I can't believe you didn't notice."

"Isn't that a harsh judgment?"

"How could she do that to her boyfriend? Her parents?"

"What do you mean?" said Heebner, easing his supportive grip, allowing Mrs. Heebner to drop her cane—though he picked it up for her. "They were ugly. It was a metaphor."

"It was a stupid metaphor."

"I thoroughly enjoyed it. A movie about a young girl with hidden gifts who—"

"It would have been better if she had remained blind."

The portable beeper key unlocked their doors. Acting with dramatic solicitude, Heebner guided his wife into the passenger seat and waited for her to adjust her seat belt. Slamming the door, he paced round the rear bumper to the driver's seat, upsetting a sparrow in his path. He could not accept his wife's interpretation of the film. If it had been her way, she would have asked the girl to collapse back into her old, decrepit life, groping blind among a menagerie of grotesques.

As days passed, Heebner continued jogging. He also bought a black leather jacket at Sears, the kind with zippers sewn into the cuffs, vest and pocket. He wore it on his walks to the Bread and Circus, where the pimpled cashiers hailed him as "Lucius," or "Lucky," their tone just admiring enough for him to ignore their condescension. He referred to them by name, as well, especially the robbery victim, a pie-faced Nordic girl with bleeding cuticles who called him "My Hero" and sometimes kissed his cheek. Once on his way home, a young black man in a basketball jersey slowed his convertible Camaro to shout, "You the man!" The greeting left Heebner ecstatic, not least because it was an endorsement. He bounced all the way home.

And what of the woman he married? When Heebner looked in the mirror, he saw a fit man, a man of some accomplishment and drive, a full professor emeritus, the author of numerous studies. His study of people's attitudes toward seatbelts had refuted the libertarian view that drivers resisted seat belt laws as an infringement on individual rights, and the consequent federal legislation owed its passage partly to his efforts—a small but real contribution to the world. And his wife? She was a dear friend to him, a steady companion—but when he looked in that mirror, spotted as it was by ointment, soap, and hard water, and when he looked into the ridges of his face for a simple accounting, he could not say that she had made any crucial difference to the trajectory of his life. He loved her of course. She was his Rock of Gibraltar. Yet sometimes in the afternoons, when he was alone to putter from the refrigerator, upstairs to the paper hurricane of his study, then back downstairs and outside to the hibiscus, bougainvillea, dahlias and pansies rioting in the sod, he had to wonder if he might not have loved another woman more easily (he could count a half dozen girls from the department, maybe), and if another woman might not have made him a better man. And would another woman have brought him children?

He imagined that he concealed his misgivings well. Heebner thought he was craftier than he really was. But his wife confronted him one morning while he rummaged in the hydrator. She was sitting at the breakfast table. She seemed sluggish, and her back was bent as she poured the milk carton first over her mug of herbal tea, next over her bowl of corn flakes, slopping a thimbleful across her microwaved slices of bacon.

"Is everything all right, Lucius?" she asked in a tired tone.

"Everything's fine! Just fine, dear."

He hoped that she would change the subject. Heebner sat across from her to unpeel a grapefruit. As his wife put two lumps of sugar into her mug and stirred with the silver-plated teaspoon, it seemed safe.

"I've been worried about you lately," she sighed. "I mean, first it was the exercise, then it was television. Now I'm not worried about those things any more, and you've lost all that weight. But you seem different."

"You can retire soon, too," he said. It was an effort to make her sound jealous. It drew a sneer.

"Of course I can, Lucius. But that's not my worry. You haven't been yourself lately. You've been brooding and distant." She picked at the napkin in her lap, a habit so familiar that it appeared theatrical. The basset hound cane, its silver tip caked by mud, slid across her knee to the floor. "I miss you, Lucius. Why is that?"

"Geez, I don't know."

"Why aren't you the same old Lucius? Speak to me."

"It's nothing, dear."

"Lucius, this is stupid."

"It's *not* stupid," he said, growing warmer, "it's nothing at all."

"Don't hold out on me. Why are you holding out on me?" She thrust a slice of bacon in her mouth. As she closed to chew, her nostrils grew wide. "It's so stupid."

"It's not stupid," he repeated irritably.

"Haw," she said.

And then he grew angry.

"What do you want from me?" demanded Heebner, rising from the table. "I try to do good for myself and you tear me down. Everything I do, you belittle me."

"That's not true," she murmured. Her face filled with fear.

"It is true," he said, raising his voice. "You're always the critic."

"Lucius, honey—"

"You're jealous and possessive. You're envious and bitter. You're sarcastic and cruel."

"I'm sorry, honey, we'd better stop this—"

"You never stop! Never! You're *malicious*."

"Oh, Lucius, honey—stop." She was pasty in the face.

"Look what you've done to me!" he shouted.

She wouldn't reply.

"You're ugly. Can't you see? Ugly! I have wasted my life on an ugly woman!"

As he backed away from the table, the figure before him shrank into a shocked, mousy lump. A piece of bacon hanging from her lip, the amber bead necklace lapping from her shirt, she peered at him as though he were an enemy. Under the black press of her eyes, Heebner experienced a tremor of guilt—but there was blood coursing through his neck, and he felt righteous, if not right. He put on his jogging shoes and strode down the hall. He left by the front door, cursing under his breath even as he hurried across the walk.

The morning sun beat his shoulders. He jogged as best he could, but he had to move slowly because of his exertions the day before. The first mile took thirteen minutes. When he reached the rusted fire hydrant which served as a marker, he was forced to stop. He tried to jog again a few minutes later, but within several steps his body resisted. The noise of the morning commute—bleats from a row of cars piled up behind a lone compact stalled at a traffic light—broke his focus.

Walking beyond a crew of gardeners who trimmed the rhododendron in front of a tall colonial, he considered the argument more reasonably. He knew that he had spoken cruelly. What would she do? What if she left? He shook his head at a passing compact car—the long-haired driver raising her eyebrows in a question—for such an outcome was unthinkable. His wife's position was fixed; she would always be there to endure whatever cruelty he could dispense. If anything, her dependence on his kindness made his cruelty all the more amazing. He considered buying her a dozen long stem roses, red for passion or yellow for friendship, or maybe an arrangement of both. Perhaps that evening he would buy her some earrings with his emergency money or take her to a nice restaurant—though the idea of taking her into public unsettled him.

He entered a corner pharmacy for a bottle of mineral water.

"How you doing, Mr. Heebner?" asked the cashier—middle-aged, graying, a family man.

"Been worse," Heebner replied.

"Isn't that the truth," said the cashier. They saluted in a spirit

of camaraderie and the cashier passed him a few dimes in change. "Say hello to the missus, won't you?"

"Will do."

"How's her leg?"

"No worse than my shoulder."

The cashier raised his eyebrows in bafflement. Heebner realized that he had spoken like an ass.

Pressing the cool water bottle to his cheek, Heebner exited into the heat. He was ashamed. In the last few months he had contrived nothing less than the murder of his marriage. He had descended to the point where he would betray his wife even to the neighborhood cashier. And for what?

He passed the neighbor's boxwood hedge, stunted by a recent clipping, and slouched down his driveway to the freshly painted back door. He would go inside to apologize. He would throw himself to his knees. "I'm sorry," he rehearsed in blind bitterness, and he mounted the glossy staircase with his head bowed.

This Paradise Valley: A Blues for Robert Hayden

Three ages of a life are nailed into
my wall—corpse cleaving into soldier,
soldier into infant—an inverted calyx
you would have recognized at once.

As it is, I have Memphis Slim in a three-inch
speaker and the night songs of Alabama
to comfort and conduct me past the trellis
to some place where you are—distant

as the pharaohs, now—quiet as this midnight
fog that wraps the long-needle pines in their enduring
mystery. It's a claustrophobic space—always
too hot—the box we're sealed in—blind

as night itself. The ink flows as from
a wound to you. Our weary language buckles—
I speak American, like you, drink long
drafts of fake beliefs, sweet for *that old jelly-roll*,

what can I do? Double-back in history,
stake some claim that shifts and grows up
wrong before my eyes. My daughter on
the ethernet might one day abide us

confused fools of the United States—
Paradise seekers, crumblers, singers taking stock.
When she comes to you I hope she's wide
awake, so your songs can drum the nation home.

Autumn Techne

On command, a thousand dogs explode
from the banks of manmade lakes,

tails whipping on fat swells of water,
muzzles off, chokers thrown aside.

Then the masters' muted dialogue begins
as the formations of perforated birds

fall to every rippling surface. Two thousand
years of breeding, so the canine jaws

lock tight around each carcass—the kills
secure as dollars in a wallet. This way,

dawn light's tinted with blue smoke—
gold sunglasses, shotguns and cigars.

That way, each wild animal's on its haunches,
frozen deeper down the starvation chain.

We've burned gas, kerosene, loose tobacco,
whiskey, cooking oil, and above all, cash,

just in order to arrive. A drawn-out process
of *aficion* replaces wilderness with a formal thing

that shoots sparks, fells branches, takes
hulking steps and churns up brackish water,

gets drunk, paints its face, speculates
on weather and the land, dons rain gear, debates

forces driving this economy, then finds its own
natural catastrophe mandated by machine.

On My Mother's Wall Carpet of the Last Supper

Fall. Remember. Sleep
which is Fall and Remember.
See colors of whom names
are differently twelve. Yet
so blind I am silver
and nearly a coin
and man who absorbs
nearly coin.
That their faces all
are undifferently worn.
But look. You may regret.
You may also mortar
and make palatable. It is
a round window; it is
a zero unto the garden wherein
are twelve too many sounds,
and they are particular.

The Ray

*after Chardin,
N.Y. Metropolitan Museum 2000*

Small beads of the lost sea
dot the place where
his brow would be if
he were human. A finned
ghost, gutted,
hung from a hook, he dies
and goes on dying for
our pleasure and
astonishment, the holes
of his eyes vanishing
into the cloud-
like body, his mouth
slightly open in disbelief
that there is a world
without water where
time does not touch
the kettle turned
on its side, or the
scallions, or the cat
with rapacious eyes
stalking split oysters.

Orphan

There is a garden in the courtyard of the hospital.
A border of river stone contains lifeless things:
files and bees, bits of thorax, antennae, torn wings.
A page of news, yellow-brown and blurred.
There is a woman in one frame, running, or burning,
or dissolving in the rain, and in another
two men in uniform shaking hands—
millions of lives in their clasp—but not text,
no names. What century is this? Which war?
Amid trash, one last orchid grows: the white lips,
the dried blood in the open throat, demand impossible
tenderness: *you must hold on, you must let go.*

Ms Winkler Regrets (She's Unable to Lunch Today)

Prison's not so bad. Or not so bad as to inspire regret. What woman, even a lowly school teacher such as myself, hasn't felt oppressed by fashion? In a way these white cotton shifts are a relief.

Of course, here in Texas many of the lady inmates have "particular friends"—it's no huge leap for females to pair up in the absence of alternatives. There are more born queens, I suspect, than born bull daggers. Three years ago I myself nearly made it with Daddy. Daddy's real name is Geneva, but other people call her Gene. She's a big black woman with a criminal record incommensurate with her bad attitude (credit card fraud, hmpf!). She claimed me the moment I arrived in Dorm B from the cell blocks. I could never have fended her off (not without my Wüsthoff!) had she forced herself upon me; fortunately, unlike our male counterparts in the Ellis Unit, even the butchest of ladies here aren't terribly interested in unrequited love.

Eventually my safety was ensured by a new addition to Dorm B, a bona fide femme and hot check artist whom I now refer to as Mama. Not long after consummating their relationship, Mama and Daddy adopted me. Though I'm not the youngest member of our family, I am nevertheless the Baby Girl.

All my life I never had a nickname, and now I have two. The papers called me Lizzie Borden, though I never took an axe, and I certainly never gave my mother forty whacks. I did take a chef's knife, though, and gave my colleague and so-called friend Faye Pfarr no multiple of ten but one single, unaimed yet exceedingly effective slice through the breastbone. It must have gone in at an angle, because I'm told it lopped off a sliver of her gizzardly heart.

Parole boards thrive on *mea culpa*, which means I will probably never set foot in the "free" world again. My case was definitely a disappointment to Mitchell, the defense attorney who took me on *pro bono* for the exposure. Middle-class women who kill are rare entertainment. About the only news item that could have knocked me off the front pages would have been a

Plano mommy eviscerating her fair-haired triplets. Alas, during the weeks after my arrest the only murderers were boys, mere barroom-brawlers and drive-by thugs, their arraignments buried in back-of-the-book City News blurbs.

"Fake it," Mitchell urged during the sentencing. "Can you not feign remorse? For Christ's sake, can't you cross your goddamn fingers?"

Well, I'm as big a liar as the next gal, but this is a matter of principle.

Faye always said she wanted children. Only her weight and her moods fluctuated so she could rarely get a date of a comparable IQ. She was rather long in the tooth for the sperm-donor, turkey-baster route, and she inexplicably refused to adopt.

Miss Faye Pfarr's lack of extracurricular obligations and her inexperience with the realities of parenthood gave her a leg up in the contest for Most Beloved Teacher on Campus, at least among the kids. "You just got to love 'em," she'd coo during faculty bitch sessions. For that reason, along with her predilection for reporting colleagues for fire drill violations, most of the teachers at Jeremy H. Chroner High gave Faye a wider berth than even her bulk required.

Our friendship occurred purely by accident. We'd been assigned the same planning period, and for an entire semester were relegated to sharing a table in the upstairs lounge. It was just the two of us, since the other teachers spent the hour behind the auto body shop, smoking cigarettes with the cafeteria ladies and the Dean of Special Ed.

That was the year my husband left me. That was the year my daughter turned seventeen.

Me now, I'd never wanted kids, had never been especially keen on holy matrimony. But we do these things. Some hormonal perturbation kicks in and the next thing you know you're heating canned formulas and saying "no."

When Bert split (you know what happened—I have nothing original to contribute to that sad song) I felt sabotaged, duped into mourning a state I could have once done without. Time, I vowed, to reconnect with my former self-sufficiency. "I never even wanted to get married," I told my daughter. I moved us to a smaller apartment and drafted a more realistic budget.

Missy had always been a daddy's girl—what young girl isn't? But up until the divorce, our relationship had been relatively conflict-free. I braided her hair and bagged her

lunches, and her father offered her a lap to crawl into. He tickled her under her chin, I tumble-dried her blankie with fabric softener; he played "This Old Man," I taught her to say "please." But when she got to an age where such gestures were unappreciated (or worse), I think Bert and I both were at a loss as to how to proceed. It's a tricky business, loving a teenager.

When the skirmishes first began—the tears and the hurled hairbrushes, the door-slamming and the hyperbole ("always!" "never!" "hate!")—they seemed mainly about money. But how could I feel sorry for Missy? She attended school (Jeremy H. Chroner High, where I could keep an eye on her) with kids with free lunch cards and terminal head lice. So we had to cut back; break my heart.

Then one night she actually began *sobbing* because I would consent to pay only for a Packet C of school pictures. "Eight by tens are tacky anyway," I said.

"Daddy would have bought the biggest packet of all!" she whined. "And why does everything have to be so *funny*?"

"Daddy," I said, "is spoiling some other girl now."

She chucked her comb across the kitchen linoleum, booted a chair with her bare toes, and departed to her bedroom after wishing me sweet dreams with three little words: "I," "hate," "you!"

A week after the Packet C fiasco, Missy still wasn't speaking. In the end I'd written a check for Packet B, but even so she glowered through our morning drives like a constipated chipmunk, her only sounds the smack and pop of Double Bubble. "Spit out your gum," I told her when we entered the premises—her detentions were my detentions—and, slowly, she bent over a trash can, letting the chew slime across the empty milk pints and discarded homemaking projects.

I was in a vulnerable position then, the afternoon I so foolishly bonded with Faye. I was sitting across from her grading algebra quizzes when suddenly my forehead dropped to the pile of mimeographs. I could smell Lauren Cobb's *Evening in Paris*, that new Cambodian kid's breakfast of garlic and filterless tobacco. I could smell the failure.

Faye later told me she'd thought I had a stroke. I simply could not lift my head. "Ms. Winkler!" she cried. "Ms. Winkler!" She was in one of her less prodigious stages at this time, so without too much effort she was around the table and beside me. Not until I felt her fingers probing inside my mouth did I muster the will to sit up.

"I'll get the nurse!" she said, but I shook my head with gusto

sufficient to decline the aid of smelling salts and Band-Aids.

"What's wrong, then, Ms. Winkler?"

"Oh call me Betty, for Christ's sake," I said, and then suddenly I felt all the blood in my body rush toward my right ventricle. For the next twenty minutes my face was buried in Faye's bosom. I had never bawled like that before, certainly not in front of another woman. You'd have thought my own mother had denied me Packet A.

When I finally recovered, Faye's oversized blouse was wet against her skin, with purple blotches amidst the lavender. I should have known she was not to be trusted when I saw that she was crying too. But at the moment—to demonstrate my prison forthrightness I'll admit this (one great thing about felonious conviction: Why lie?)—all I felt was a shock of warmth and a giddy, childlike devotion.

Missy was in Faye's world history class, and when, after a few weeks of my True Confessions, Faye volunteered to talk to Missy, to feel her out, I immediately consented. Missy's guidance counselor, Mr. Addams, the JV football coach and resident testicle-puller, was universally considered a leech. Missy would never talk to him, she obviously wouldn't talk to me, and her father, whose help I couldn't bear to seek, was still off with his child bride on some overseas assignment.

Faye promised to be discreet. She would solicit Missy's help on her bulletin boards (Missy had a knack for spatial arrangements), and by the by attempt to ascertain the problem. Then she would, as if counseling a pregnant teen, gently urge Missy to open up. *To me.*

On my Mathletics days Missy waited for me after school, did her homework in the library, meandered past the boys' gym twenty or thirty times until five o'clock, when practice was over and it was time to go. On one such afternoon Faye discovered Missy snoozing in a microfiche carrel and took her to her classroom to staple crepe-paper borders around some typically perky geography displays ("Sherpas Off to Siberia!" "Balaclavas Off to Belfast!").

For the next several days Missy dabbled with Faye in her classroom while I got my lessons in order for the following morning. Finally, one night my daughter condescended to share the supper table again. I'd hardly characterize her demeanor as intimate or chatty; throughout the meal she studied a sidebar in her history text. But after all, I was a teacher; how could I object?

"Well?" I asked Faye during the next day's conference

period. "You must have said the magic word."

She pressed a yellow smiley-face sticker onto a graded Scantron and glanced up. "Grand," she said. The toilet in the unisex restroom flushed and someone hawked into the sink. The physical science teacher, Harmon Bulber, lumbered out, peeling down the wrapper of a Snickers bar.

"So what'd she say?" I asked once he'd disappeared (and how long had *he* been there?). "Where'd she get that chip on her shoulder?"

"Now Betty," Faye replied, with a tolerant smile. "I thought we agreed I wouldn't spy."

"I'm not asking you to spy," I said. "I'm her mother—I can manage that. I'm just asking you to *inform*." Faye held her smile and shook her head. "You're too much." My face must have fallen then, because after a moment she opened her arms. "Come here, sweetie," she said. I glanced toward the hall door, then sheepishly obeyed.

That afternoon my daughter actually ventured into the living room for her allotted hours of television. When I told her I was preparing duck *à l'orange* for dinner she even said, "Yum."

My own mother was not much of a cook, had fairly blanched at food preparation. Her appearances in the kitchen or even in the dining room were irregular, to say the least, and after my father, despite all his Hail Marys, disappeared, I was left to my own devices for sustenance. I actually developed into a competent chef, and when I put my heart into it I could, with the aid of my slicing, dicing Wüsthoff, whip up something quite special.

Of course, in the penitentiary I have no need to cook. We always eat as a family, though—Daddy, Mama, and me, sitting at our end of the stainless steel table, bolted to the floor. We get exactly ten minutes to move the starchy grub and watered-down fruit punch from tray to mouth, so there's little conversation. But at least we're all together.

The duck was delicious, if a tad sweet, and afterwards Missy, of her own accord, washed the dishes and even sprayed the sponge with Lysol without any reminders. When at eight-fifteen I retired to my room—determined to quit while I was ahead—my daughter even said "Good night." Somehow things were back to normal, and I had Faye to thank for it, which is why the next day I presented her with an extravagant ivy for her classroom window, along with a thank-you note. Had I known the note's contents would later be pored over by twelve good

men and women I would have toned down the mush; the prosecutor went so far as to imply my intentions had been less than platonic. And in fact, at the time I'd felt overwhelmed by foreign emotions that verged on romantic. I was constantly close to tears—while listening to Missy's Top 40 tunes, while explaining yet again that $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$, while uttering more than five consecutive words to Faye. But what do "forever" and "tender" and "precious" have to do with sex?

No, my words to Faye, if rather stomach-turning now, described a dedication much more essential than sexual attraction. Though on campus I was thought of as unflappable, tough enough even to stand up to the school secretary, I began to look forward to conference periods just so I could experience the weakness of heart resulting from Faye's ever more probing questions about Missy and even my own past.

"What are the men in your life running from?"

"Why was your mother so fearful?"

"Is Missy afraid of you, do you think?"

"Betty, are *you* afraid of Missy?"

Like many New Age types, Faye seemed to regard weepers as a higher species. When I sniveled she smiled, humming in sympathy and invitation. "Times like this," she cooed into my temple once, swaying slightly after I'd broken down during the story of my mother's mid-life collapse, "I think you're really getting in touch with your inner light."

Meanwhile back at the apartment my daughter and I continued to enjoy rancor-less evenings. Of course, Missy spent a lot of time out and about—she was a teenager, and after twenty years of teaching, did I know teenagers! But as long as she met curfew, did her chores, remained civil, I wasn't going to pester her.

Some nights, though, when she was behind her door with the stereo bass just shy of too loud and I was once again puffy-eyed behind mine, I almost got up to talk with her, not about geometry and chemistry and weekly allowances, but about the things that Faye and I discussed. But then, I didn't want to scare her.

You know how they say, "Violence never solves anything"? Now I know better. Violence fixes *lots* of problems. The threat of Daddy's muscle saves me from all kinds of scams and abuse in here. I buy her soothing body lotions or Ivory soap (the prison lye aggravates her eczema) from the commissary, I hoard my plastic sandwich wrappers (Mama is HIV-positive, so they have

to take precautions), I grab her about her double-Ds and hug her like a Baby Girl. I mean it, too.

Violence, or the threat of it, protects me here, but it also solved my problems out in the world. That's not to say violence didn't cause other difficulties: the noise level in prison is ungodly—television, steel bars, loudmouths. Everyone knows Baby Girl's a bookworm, but you can't expect sixty-some-odd TV-addicted and under-educated women to tone it down just so one inmate can read *In Search of π*.

I was undergoing a terrible crisis at the time I became a violent offender: *Someone was stealing my daughter*. And that someone had all the joys and none of the complications. That person did not pay the price, did not thrust her head back, teeth clenched, legs spread-eagled, strange men's hands up in her, shrieks of pity, anger, fear—*my independence sacrificed in the wails and blood and afterbirth, my baby, my daughter, my life*. No stretch marks for Faye, no chapped nipples, no sleepless nights and no mess.

I had a big problem, and a violent act solved it. I'm not sorry.

The day I plunged into a life of crime began with a box of fresh kolaches. Missy had recently been violating curfew and making mysterious phone calls after the nine o'clock cut-off. Worse than her breaking of house rules was her refusal to tell me where she had been, whom she was talking to, why on earth she was skipping meals.

Meanwhile Faye had seemed vague and distant, and when I tried to discuss my fears she was unsupportive, condescending even. "Missy's an individual," she said once. "You don't own her." Then she got up to go to the restroom (Harmon having finally vacated it), and when she came back she sat on the opposite side of the table. At the time I attributed her frigidity to drug withdrawal—the FDA had banned her latest brand of appetite suppressants. I wouldn't have bought her the kolaches the next morning had she been watching her weight, but I figured if she was going to go through six or seven Little Debbie's in a sitting, she may as well consume something with yeast.

She wasn't in her classroom when I arrived, so I set the warm box on her desk and sketched a quick smiley face on the top with her red felt tip. Then I went to my room to wait. But when the tardy bell rang, I still hadn't seen her. Later when a runner showed up with an envelope I thought perhaps Faye had composed a heartfelt thanks, perhaps even an apology; instead I unfolded a note from Mr. Addams, alerting me to Rory Glover's

budding goatee.

I was rather shaken, then, when I headed to the lounge during fifth period. But what did I find when I finally got there? Just an open box on the table, half a weenie tip-up in the bottom. I peered under the lid, and my own red grin leered back at me.

Of course, I couldn't have expected Faye to consume a baker's dozen kolaches; surely she'd had her fill, then offered the others to hungry colleagues (schoolteachers being a voracious tribe). But the fact she didn't show up with explanations or thanks, that she didn't *show up* at all...!

After school I lingered in my room, peevish and resentful—hey, who needed this? And now that I was prepared to get the hell off campus, my daughter was missing.

Down the hall Faye's classroom was dark, as was the library, and behind the school the backstops were empty. I nearly fainted when the first sign of life I discovered was smoke rising from a stall in the girl's restroom—Missy had always been an adamant abstainer. "Come out of there immediately!" I demanded, rattling the door. The toilet flushed, the smoke dispersed by a wave of an unseen hand, and out emerged the bulldog countenance of the remedial reading instructor.

In desperation I returned to Faye's room. The lights were still out, and I didn't see any movement through the narrow window. Then I peered into the far corner, in the direction of Faye's desk. A brown-haired girl with a single long braid faced the blackboard, resting the seat of her blue jeans upon an oaken desk, her back toward me. To her left a woman's stretch-knit hips splayed along the same sturdy surface. The girl's head tucked, then angled toward the woman to reveal a dainty chin and a shy smile; her pinkie caressed the other's plump thumb on the strip of desk between them. The woman lifted her own hand toward the girl's cheek, stroked stray hairs behind her ear, opened her mouth to speak....

Missy must have jumped sixteen inches when I threw open the door. "What ... what about MathLetics," she asked, as I pointed toward the clock. She was on her feet then, rearranging her blouse; you'd have thought I'd caught her going to second base.

"We forfeited—I told you that outside the kolache shop, didn't I? *Didn't I?*"

"Excuse me—Jesus Christ...." She looked to Faye, who bore the smug expression of the outsider who fancied she'd seen it all.

Faye nodded at her, smiled, winked. "Go on and go, babe. We'll see you tomorrow."

Missy swung her backpack over her shoulder and pushed past me through the door.

"Sorry, Ms. Winkler," Faye called behind me. "My bad."

On the way home, Missy slumped against the passenger's-side door, rolling balls of dried mascara from her eyelashes and sprinkling them onto the floorboards.

"Lock your door," I said, narrowly avoiding a Pentecostal daycare van. Why had everybody chosen this afternoon to drive like fiends? "If we had left by four o'clock we'd have beaten the traffic," I said. "At your age you may think you have all the time in the world. But listen, I know better. I'd rather not fritter away my remaining moments on earth waiting on you."

"You're just jealous," she said, planting her Keds on the dashboard. "You don't own Miss Pfarr—"

I punched the accelerator to pass a Town Car on the shoulder, and Missy gasped. I could still hear the honking as I sped back into the fast lane. "My bad," I said. How very Faye, adopting the lingo of her adolescent charges. Damn right your bad.

As soon as we got home we retreated to opposite ends of the apartment. I couldn't concentrate on my grading, so I fussed around the bedroom, re-arranging more than tidying. Then I lay across the bed, reflecting with awe and disgust on my recent nights blubbering into these same pillows. Around six o'clock the phone rang, and Missy and I picked up our extensions at the same time. Someone was on the other end, but no one spoke. "Hello?" Missy said, and then she repeated, like a babysitter in a slasher film, "Hell-o-o?"

I had to turn aside to keep from laughing maniacally into the receiver, attempting to frighten her into throwing down the phone and fleeing to my room, the way she'd done when as a child she'd dreamed of cockroaches and Medusas. It would take something like that, I thought, the two of us trapped in a fallout shelter for seven years, sharing K-rations and panic-induced honesty until it was safe to come out. Unfortunately nuclear meltdown had failed in its promise with me and my own mother, and I had little hope for it in the future.

Minutes after we hung up the phone, I heard the front door open and then quickly shut. By the time I got to the peephole, Missy was gone. I should have grounded her while I had the chance.

When I think about how I felt before and after I stabbed

Faye, I've no doubt I'm in a better place. Because three hours after Missy's curfew, two hours after I'd tossed our hideous frozen meal into the garbage, my daughter still hadn't come home. That's when I got in the car and went looking for her.

I drove past the rec room, past the Stop-n-Go where the kids smoked cigarettes and guzzled shoplifted Champale, and, farther away, past the houses of Missy's old chums. I didn't knock on doors, though, because I knew she wasn't behind them. These were just places I had to pass before I went to where I didn't want to go.

I stopped at a phone booth and scavenged some change from the console. A line was already forming behind me on the sidewalk when Faye answered. "Let me talk to her," I demanded.

"Bet-ty . . .," Faye said, her voice moist as a cookie.

"Now!"

"I think it would be better," she replied, "if we wait until the morning. Give you some time to cool down."

"We?! No 'we,' *babe*. You have no say, no authority. She is my daughter—I had her, that can never be changed."

"Your *daughter*," she said now, letting slip the cruelty of her pathetic need, "does not care to see you. There is more to motherhood than biology, and quite frankly we're not sure you get that. Quite frankly, you should be glad she has someone to turn to right now."

I thought of all the times I'd shown my tears to Faye, and I shuddered. She and her Gaea act—she should take it on the road. All the fun, none of the complications—none of the history.

"Right now?" I demanded. "Right *what*?"

"You don't get it," she said after a moment. "You just don't get it."

I had the law on my side. Had I called the police they would have shown up on Faye's doorstep. But my daughter was going on eighteen. If she'd refused to leave they would have balked at carting her out. And after I got her home, then what? What would I do, complain to the superintendent, admit my daughter couldn't bear my presence? What was I going to do, incarcerate her?

"I hate you," I said, and I hung up.

And I waited. My therapist believes I should have waited longer, that all girls go through a period of loathing their mothers, that almost always they come back. But most girls don't have Faye's prolong the separation. My daughter was nearly a woman, and I wanted her back as a child.

During the months after my arrest I was terrified my actions had backfired. With the exception of one ugly meeting with Bert (a murderess for an ex—how humiliating for him!), my only visits were from Mitchell. I had eliminated Faye to recover my daughter, and if I didn't accomplish that then this death was not wholly fulfilling.

"And what was your response," the D.A. inquired, "when Miss Pfarr asked you to put the cleaver away?"

"It was a chef's knife," I said.

"Objection...!"

"Overruled."

"And did Miss Pfarr ask you to put the knife away?"

"Actually," I replied, "what she said was, 'Ms. Winkler, when you raise your hand to me, I feel frightened and resentful. I begin to wonder what I ever got from this relationship.'" Across from the witness stand, Mitchell groaned and held his hands up toward the gods.

"And you...?"

"And I said, 'You're getting what you deserve, sister,' and I stabbed her."

"With the intent to kill."

"What was I supposed to do—cut my own daughter in half? Listen, have you ever felt—"

"No further questions," he said, and I was never allowed to complete my explanation. My misguided affectionate thank-you note to Faye, discovered in a cigar box on her desk, was introduced as evidence to mitigate my own mitigation—to the judges and lawyers my irrefutable-if-fleeting affection for Faye only exacerbated the evil of my deeds, though of course in my opinion they only highlighted the evil of Faye. Perhaps it's unreasonable to expect a man to understand such things.

Harmon Bulber had been the first person to see the body, having, it seems, been lackadaisically eavesdropping from the faculty restroom. Missy had to bum a ride after school that afternoon, because by three o'clock I'd been yanked from a pep rally and taken downtown. It bears pointing out that in the end my daughter turned Faye's housekey over to investigators, and she went back home.

The trial lasted just three days, and it wouldn't have lasted even that long had poor Mitchell not attempted to cop me an insanity plea (my ability to answer the judge's queries about the Pythagorean theorem ultimately rescuing me from my own mother's fate). I hadn't been allowed to see Missy since my arrest, but during the sentencing, who walked in, in my own

best suit no less? She was beautiful, I tell you, and almost but not quite a woman. I never realized until then just what a beauty I'd given birth to.

The jury sentenced me to seventy years, and within hours I was rumbling in a whitewashed school bus to the Lady Bird Johnson Unit for Female Offenders, just north of the city. My feet and wrists were cuffed, and it must have been a hundred degrees. School, I realized, was out for the summer.

It's difficult on the whole family when Missy comes to visit. Mama has a hard time accepting that her Baby Girl is a mother too, with allegiance to another. Also, with the exception of Daddy, whose old Maw-Maw comes to see her sometimes, I'm the only one who gets regular visitors. Daddy and Mama have put the maximum number of people on their guest list, and I have only one. But at least twice a month and sometimes weekly I'm called out for two hours with Missy.

Well of course my daughter comes to see me! No, she's not thrilled her mother's a criminal; some of my notoriety inevitably taints her reputation, and for that, I am sorry. But honestly, our relationship just continues to blossom. A convict has so little to hide, so few distractions. Prison life pares you down to the bare essentials.

It's as if, yes, as if we'd bolted the doors of the fallout shelter after all, just the two of us, and we had nowhere left to hide. Nothing's pent-up anymore, not hate, not fear, not love.

On her initial visit I was only allowed to face Missy through the acrylic panel, like in the movies, talking into a phone. If she'd learned anything through the ordeal, my daughter said that day, it was that she didn't want to lose her mother. And I was her mother, the only one.

After that I worked hard to get off the cell blocks, because only then would I be allowed contact visitations. Not that I was so miserable alone; it's one thing to feel the world busy about you, indifferent, but when you're incarcerated, when you know your isolation is due to higher powers, not just to your own unworthiness, it's much easier to take. Now all I wanted anymore—but I wanted it dearly—was contact with my only child. In fair weather outside under a covered picnic table, cheek to cheek, hand in hand, myself willing even to abide the mandatory strip search afterwards—bend over, squat, see if whatever the loved one's slipped in slips out—if only for my daughter's touch.

Anti-Psychotic

The beating of her neighbor's heart
upstairs keeps her awake
all night

We don't learn
she thinks
we remember

If we're lucky

Now she is going to put on some
nice cut-your-wrists music

Most of the poetry I read
makes me feel like I'm already dead

And look everything is turning
into something else
(and that is true)

Risperdal whisperdoll

all alone in the dark
garden

blowing out a dandelion

June Storm

Voices from the first dark heartshaped green of summer
leaves, rain;
birds'.

What are they called.

I'm leaving here, and still don't know.

I'm going there, though,
where they are—
I feel this.

Feel that I was there
before.

I felt this
as a child, and now
I know it.

P.S.

I close my eyes and see
a seagull in the desert,
high, against unbearably blue sky.

There is hope in the past.

I'm writing to you
all the time, I am writing

with both hands,
day and night.

Brand-Name Fiction

Drohan, Heather. *False Alarm*. Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 2000. 191 pages. Paper. \$14.95.

McCown, Marjorie. *Death by Design*. Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 2000. 172 pages. Paper. \$13.95.

Let's suppose that *Fight Club* and Beaudrillard and Robert Bly have it right and consumer capitalism has succeeded as the monoculture of significance, the hegemonic solitary system that recapitulates itself and its values in every formerly diverse corner of what used to be life. If you are a football fan, you've seen the commercial for a financial services corporation that depicts players in their after-game ceremonial kneeling circle—a ritual in which, in this version of the story, prayer is replaced by a lesson in financial strategy. That's the kind of substitution I'm talking about, the cash nexus taking the place of deity and scripture.

In this world, then, what role does fiction play? In one version, fiction becomes like film, one more "platform" for product placement (the Dr. Pepper leaking out to reveal the holes in the spacecraft in that awful De Palma film about a Mars mission). Both of these first novels from a Berkeley small press can be considered "brand name" fiction, as chock-full of consumer goods as any superstore (*False Alarm* manages to squeeze Mountain Dew, Calvin Klein, Rice-a-Roni, and Home Depot onto the first page), and *Death by Design* even returns the favor by pushing the film industry into the foreground, tossing around brand names like Sylvester Stallone and Steven Segal (and others less sibilant) with approximately the same value as Ritz crackers or Fancy Feast cat food. In fact, this capably written mystery-genre novel stays well within the narrative system provided by films noir such as *The Big Sleep* and *Chinatown*, rationalizing its crimes first in terms of incestuous sexuality, which itself is only a surface effect of the real motivation—power and money. It does seem like an inescapable system, this monoculture capitalism.

None of which is to deny Marjorie McCown's talent or flair—*Death by Design* is a fun book to read, well-paced on the feature-film three-act narrative pattern, and full of interesting insider information about the making of movies (you'll come away from the novel with a greater appreciation for the hard work that goes into the art design of a film, if nothing else). It's a classic detective story, which is to say that it's only as good as its protagonist-narrator, and Maggie McGrath, with her east-coast police background playing counterpoint to her current work as an L. A. private investigator, is a strong and well-rounded character who may, in further installments, prove to be more interesting than the formulaic genre-convention plots. At its best, this book combines compelling action with the appropriate spirit of tragedy: "What was the point," McGrath muses at one point in the last third of the book, as the depressing lies and violent machinations of the rich and acquisitive pile up around her, "of getting up to participate in a world where people so routinely brutalized and damaged one another?" (139).

There's another aspect to "brand-name fiction," though, which *False Alarm* is even more adept at working with and within: the commodification of "lifestyle." This is an insightful book, on its own terms, almost painfully so: reading it is like acquiring some weird *Twilight Zone* power and being able to listen in on all those cell-phone calls annoyingly present everywhere and always, only to find out that the illusion of power and freedom sold with the wireless service in fact only masks the dreary sameness of painfully pathetic passive-aggressive pop-culture despair. In *False Alarm*, characters can't stand to have people angry at them (57), worry about why they're not having any fun yet (152), and don't want to commit (179). This is, of course, brand-name Yuppie/Bo-bo (Bohemian-bourgeoisie) angst, the stiff, static, inevitable result of a paralyzing tension between observation and insight, expertise and agency—the impotent wail of a generation discovering that infinite information carries no value without a willingness to commit to anything outside of the consumerist monoculture (e.g., religion, moral judgment, etc). This may well explain the flattening effect of the brand-name saturation of both these novels, in which Harrison Ford, the Pilsbury Doughboy, and God are all about roughly equivalent in value.

Heather Drohan's book, like McCown's, takes as its setting a domain of entertainment, here sports, in which all values are potentially reducible to the economic (who knows how many RBI Alex Rodriguez hit in 2000, but most baseball fans have heard all the particulars of his new multi-million dollar contract).

False Alarm's central character, Kate McCabe, is not quite Jerry McGuire—she works for a sports agency as something between office manager and chief accountant. The novel is loosely plotted, in essence recapitulating the problem of commitment: is this about Kate's ambition to become an agent by signing big-name baseball star Pedro Araguz or her desire to cheat on her husband with this attractive and good-spirited athlete (they attend Midnight Mass together)? Kate's "home life" is constantly overlapping into her work, as she nurses her daughter while on the phone with a client or calls her boss while on the way to the airport to pick up her mother for a Christmas visit. Her husband Sandy, meanwhile, is involved in his own "boundary issues" (to use the easy diction of pop psychology to which the novel is so prone), giving up his job as a corporate lawyer to become a fireman, a job that will allow him to spend nights away from home, on duty in the firehouse (apparently he's figured out what he wants to be now that he's failed to grow up).

Credit Drohan with guts—she resolves the book's plot lines with an almost impossibly farcical conclusion in which seduction becomes a kitchen-fire resulting in the appearance of—who else?—Fireman Sandy, who sweeps Kate off to their home for, presumably, a long winter's nap. This would be disastrous if the novel took itself seriously, but fortunately Drohan has written the book with loads of wit and wry humor arising out of insight. When Kate is interviewing a surgically-perfected Barbie-doll of a girl for a job as receptionist at the agency, she tosses out the old saw of interview questions, "If you could improve anything about yourself, what would it be?" The successful applicant replies, with the certainty that probably comes from never having expended energy imagining that things could be any other way, "It wouldn't be my breasts or glutes... They're already enhanced" (125). "Self" here is simply a perfectible commodity. Another great allegorical moment when the novel puts its finger upon its own predicament might help to wrap things up: in the middle of a serious discussion of "marriage and parenting issues," Sandy snaps to attention when a preview for the movie *Lost World* comes on the TV, and the narrator (clearly allied to Kate) observes that it was "a timely commercial break from their discussion. Or was their discussion the commercial break?" (68). Which is our lives, the program or the commercial? I wonder, though, if that question misses the point that there might not be any program at all, nor any breaks in this commercial we're living, only the endless restless shifts between products, lifestyles, and selves that we are doomed to look to for our salvation, so long as we are "afraid to commit"?

Thoughts of the Moon During Mohs Surgery on My Nose

*The sky is pitch black...The moon is quite light...
A vastness of black and white, absolutely no color ...
forbidding, foreboding extents of blackness.*

—Apollo 8 crew, from space

Somewhere between the hoverings of the doctor—voice and
hands—
and the nasal bone and cartilage
is a perfect numbness: skin without memory.

He and the nurse must pass to it from the outer reaches
of noise, traffic of door and telephone, dumb show of shadow
trees—
through the zone of tension

that radiates from the shoulders, jaw and neck.

They must pass down
to the surface of my everything—my skin—
and slice the epidermis horizontally in fine layers.

How many layers deep will we go?
How deep is the skin? And which comes first, clean skin or bone
or stars shining through from the other side?

Two or three hours, maybe; the answer has nothing to do

with the question taken out of the epithelial me.
I hear the scrape of a something on a skin,
not mine just now, it's rented out.

And there are monosyllables. *Dab here. Hand me the—*
what was that? Some instrument with *double-teeth* in its name.

Downward, towards my listening face, he says
Everything we do here has teeth in it.

And parts of me can take a joke: the sad moon smile,
the sleeping nose, the cheeks adrift.
One layer down and he says he's got to the end

and to the beginning of me.
Let's sew you up and be out of here early.

I close my eyes. Where does space begin?

At eighty miles up the sky appears velvet black.
Outside it is a summer day.
I can hear the frail voice of a thread.

Scriptura Vulgaris

The bees' calligraphy was partly sound
 rising out of itself, a long brown humming
 sentence strung out from the beehives to the fields
 and back again. I could almost hear crossbars and hairlines,
 swashes and bowls in that nervous hand.
 What was it saying, who or what was it writing to?
 We were walking there, he and I taken in
 as commas, in and out of the trees and the passing breath
 of nutmeg from the spice factory. Today, no living bees—
 a few dead scattered around on the hard lid
 of snow—and the beehives are quiet inside.
 Their boards are warped, so weathered-white
 I covet them: oh to lug one home and fill it
 with anything white. Paper. And maybe the sentences
 of bees would have drifted into the weave
 like a watermark when I held a sheet to light.
 Today I am here with a friend who has talked us
 all around the field's four equilateral sides
 as the snow goes on, beehives sealed by snow,
 the field a field of snow, with blackened stalks and grizzled
 leaves

so wide apart and crabbed I can't read
 what they were in summer, green and fringed things
 wafted to us, one by one, as wind. The spacing
 between things is part of the math of calligraphy,
 a covenant between the white and black
 to parcel out the saying evenly and then be done.
 That stern and simple choice of lettering,
 words wreathed in curves or curves squared off,
 a human font, a pouring forth, foregone—
 yet I have seen the writing under bridges and on walls
 of Dairy Mart and the 7-11, on a cardboard sign held up
 by a man at the side of Drake and Main
 and on a clapboard house that used to be a neighborhood
 bar: **KiD** and **freak** and I WILL WORK FOR FOOD
 and Bar-bee-Q and ROCK OF REVELATION.
 Scriptura vulgaris. And what it says is

what my street says sometimes late at night
by streetlight bloom: o | o | o | o |
when all we have are sleep and the speechless
telephone poles. Beside a field of ellipses
and exclamation points my friend
leans her head to a beehive but hears nothing,
Hears through and through the thready boards.
This morning I saw my father's bold hand
disintegrating on an envelope, my name and address
gone shaky, dotting in and out of this world. Out here
I feel a force of utterance, its stalks that opened
their hearts and bled the world black and white.
Utterance tramping along to the bitter **<End of Field>**.
It's a little ruthless but I want to be as real
as that field of stalks pushing up out of snow
like the wreckage of typeset, some book crash-landed there
all arms and stems, ears and loops and tails.
Or a winter afternoon sent forth as the light
on an envelope tilted in an open mailbox
half-filled with snow. When we quiet down,
do we fade like old typewriter ribbons? Where do we go
when we aren't saying much of anything?
Maybe other voices, other hands in us
take over, going about their business as quietly
as needlepoint. Even as I was all icy cheekbone, forehead,
nape of neck and fingertips and toes desiring heat and light,
I was laid down as a square of sunlight on a winter day,
I was moving inside all day like warm spring currents under the
rug.

Double Entendre

There was ever reason for us to call it quits,
though careful management of our facial expressions helped us cope
with the daily subterfuges—vague, upbeat accounts to family and
friends.

Not that we didn't slam doors or curse.

Careful management of our facial expressions helped us cope
with how we felt about each other, even in desire.

Not that we didn't slam doors or curse
within minutes of our usual tender fucking.

Given how we felt about each other, given our desire,
the contour of our emotional lives was complex, as you might
expect.

One Sunday a.m., within minutes of our usual tender fucking,
news broke that the nation's leader had been caught in lies like ours.

This complicated the contour of our emotional lives, as you might
expect.

The morning headlines provided unintended personal ironies
as more news of the leader, caught in lies like ours, unfolded.
Stand up comics on late night shows cracked jokes

derived from the morning headlines—with unintended personal
ironies.

All over the globe people could talk of nothing else.
As night after night the comics cracked jokes,
the leader's troubles, as if they'd been widely exposed, seemed
trivial.

We were lucky, I suppose, to be led by such a fool,

whose private life became a matter of public discussion
revealing subterfuges—vague, upbeat accounts to family and
friends;

lucky, beyond reckoning, to be led by such a fool,
who could help us see we had no good reason to call it quits.

Relief in Gestures Artificial and Oblique

Risen again, insomniac, ungainly from a bed
of broadcloth helixed in a knot, and all the spinning
portions of my blood gone Hollywood with bile:

I know the blocking in and out, the hand held
stiffly boned, theatrical, inclined to shape some
portent in the bar of muscat light; I know what way

the head should droop, hypnotic as the pendulum
that took a mind to stop, and then another
to resume, the body subject to the dark, the shadow

phase of photosynthesis, when ivy climbs
the north of me, imperial and quick; when creeper claims
the south of me, riddling the brickwork, bringing

down the house. Nature is ridiculous. Once in a car-lot
switched with weed, I chased the partridges of Newark
and they ran as rodents run, roguishly mammalian,

headstrong not to fly. Sir Reason tolls, "You are mistaken."
The night is thick with folly, twists and false alarm.
It is my lot to be mistaken. Every ether's charm, I glow

aware of passing phantoms and aghast, a tendril tapping
at my pane with all the pomp of high occasion.
When convoluted in a slump, when shawled in big

exhaustion, when sleep should come instinctively
as flight will to a wing, I find myself in fits
of poorly rigged behavior, a little repertoire

I've scripted just to keep me, half-awake:
*Now touch a match-tip to the wick. Now strut across
that glowy floor. Now play you are Vespasian,*

staggering from emperor to god, upon your feet.

In an hour of affright, there will be those who'll pan
for comfort in river of maneuver, who'll find

relief in gestures artificial and oblique.
I don't know how much I mean. There's a part of me
that thinks this need to lie is merely physical.

I lie now lying down, submissive to the vine,
allowing it to coil, wring and spirit off
with what weird molecule of life I may have

left in me. Nature favors ruin, and it will
leave me ruinous, the binding breaking up
the mortar of my cell and mortal home.

A doom runs through my family. *Now kiss goodnight
as children kiss, mechanically, afraid.*
The cloven votive falters; I know the close by heart.

(The cloven votive falters, spits and flickers out.)

Once You Believed You Could Stop

On the back porch you hear
the fat leathery thwap of softball

on wooden bat but can't see
the route the ball travels

through open air. Men converge
and you turn back inside.

Let wood bang against wood.
You, a bluebird reducing city

lights to night, suddenly stop
stone from grinding to dust

and trade the long space between
two places for nothing. You

tie tight your god-awfully small
shoes. Walking from work to the bus

you overhear the song of drunks
stacked like fish on fishboxes.

What to leave and what to take?
The moment is an open suitcase,

socks piled on pleated pants
draped over nylon. Tie your shoes

in that moment resting between
other moments, which are softballs

stopping and going, stones, jewels,
stopping and going. Later, walk

to your car, open the door, drive
off to a day of intersecting highways.

Making turns, you'll want to know
how to leave everything that has

become you. The 10 times and 10 times
before, 10 times 10 times. If only

you were a bluebird, flying over
a still city. You tie

your shoes. Shut and open the door,
never walking though, never not.

11
Summer

First comes the month of
sweat. The air is all sweetness
as if the angels of God had gone
through it bearing spices homeward
out of every tree & silve
but advise come "God is
in me" But is a deeper
work than fame can perform
The earth must drink of the
heat before she knows her
nature or strength. Then shall
she bring forth her treasures.
For there are things hidden
far down & the deep things of
life are not known until the
life reveals them.



Goblet.

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Author's purpose
Reader's impressions



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CHAP. X.]

Companionship of Books.

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Discipline of Experience.

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CHAP. IX.]

Manner—Art.

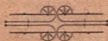
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and kindness. Politeness has been described as the art of showing, by external signs, the internal regard we have for others. But one may be perfectly polite to another without necessarily having a special regard for him. Good manners



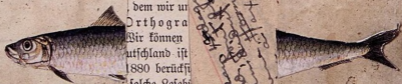
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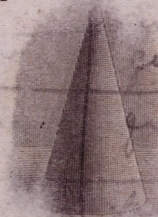
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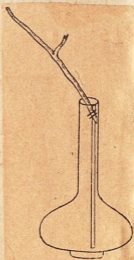
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Art Editor's Commentary

Paths Cross

Standing in a doorway somewhere between the past and future, decisions are made. Rituals of cleansing the human condition reveal the present. Lives are affected. Everything changes, while not sane life goes on, and nothing will ever be the same, again.

Obsession, pain, and mystery, the baggage of the human condition, are opened, revealing our common thread.

The aesthetic sensitivity required to manipulate these seemingly simple paper fragments is astounding. While the medium of collage appears deceptively easy, the metamorphosis from scrap to epiphany touches the depth of reasoned transformation. The individual elements assembled in these collages sing to our senses.

Again, paths cross and synchronicity is revealed in the surface of these collages. The individual who responds with his or her own baggage open, can see into the depth of this work, and so the mystery continues only partially acknowledged.

Patricia Forrest is a romantic living in the age of mass culture. Her work resonates with self-awareness and reflects the loss of innocence in her lifetime.

The aesthetic transcendence of these small collages engages the loneliness of the untouched child living in a mass culture. And they reassure us that the child is aware and will always live within each of us.

Tracy Hicks
02.20.01

On Accidental Grace: A Conversation with Derek Walcott

Many “conversations” with Derek Walcott have been published over the years—most notably Edward Hirsch’s famous interview for *The Paris Review* and David Montenegro’s for *Partisan Review*—so many, in fact, that a book of these conversations, edited by William Baer, was published in 1996. Anyone who knows Walcott, or has even met him for an hour, understands why a conversation with him would be worthy of public interest, and not only because he is a Nobel Prize winner (1992) and the author of some of the strongest poetry written in English in the past half century. Walcott has an uncanny ability to shift, without transition, from casual banter and verbal sparring (this always includes an avalanche of ruthless puns and bawdy jokes—he seems to have an endless supply of them) into nonchalant, but profound seriousness. If the conversation is about poetry, in particular, Walcott’s speech assumes a vital sincerity; so much is at stake, one realizes, when he is speaking of the central art of his calling. One cannot ignore the fact that he is a gifted playwright, essayist, and painter, but Walcott turns back so frequently to poetry, as one might return to a safe harbor, because it is so critical, one feels, to his consciousness. Our interview took place on March 7th, 2000 at The Warwick Hotel in Houston, just one hour before Walcott was scheduled to engage a substantial crowd in a question and answer session on the University of Houston campus. He had arrived the night before from St. Lucia, a place he calls home once again. Though we first settled into the elaborately cushioned interior of the Warwick’s lounge, the canned music wore on all our nerves and, at Derek’s suggestion, we quickly migrated to the balcony. Walcott was brought to Houston to read poetry in the Margaret Root Brown Reading Series at the Museum of Fine Arts. This series is sponsored, in part, by the creative writing program of the University of Houston, and he was gracious enough to grant this interview to *Gulf Coast*. Sun-blinded and wind-whipped, sweating in the invariably humid weather of Houston, we talked through the bleating of traffic, returning most frequently to a subject appropriate to two novices and a master: the education

of the poet.

Pablo Peschiera: You know the United States so well from living here off and on throughout your entire life. How have your experiences in this country changed, or how do you think your perspectives have changed?

Derek Walcott: As a person?

PP: As a person.

DW: That would require a very detailed kind of answer because it would mean how do you live here? Basically. I have done pretty well. I have an apartment in New York, in the village, which I like a lot. And then I go to Boston and I'm very well treated. So, a lot of it is very benign, very nice, which is one kind of attitude. But what becomes... what continues to be very disturbing, increasingly so, and I don't want to make this the topic of the afternoon, but the recent things that have happened racially are frightening. Not frightening to me personally, but I think it's unfortunate that nothing has really developed in terms of racial relations. Like the recent events, the four officers, that guy getting sodomized... it's not the sort of thing I thought would continue 30 years, almost half a century later. It doesn't affect my daily life visibly. I don't suffer from it. I'm on a higher financial level so I don't come close to it. It's disgusting and frightening that that should continue. I don't know why it continues. Theoretically it should disappear itself, but that's here in this country. In a way, it's... I wouldn't say it's a penalty of living in the states, because I myself don't suffer from such a penalty particularly. It's disturbing how it still infiltrates everything.

PP: Did you see these sort of things affect your students in the past?

DW: My students?

PP: Yes.

DW: Well, I don't know what students talk about, but one of the things is that they don't seem to engage in that kind of subject in the classes that I teach, the work that I read. They seem to write from a very protective position.

Christopher Bakken: Protective of themselves?

DW: Protective maybe of their status. Perhaps it's the kind of people who come to a creative writing class. There are not a lot of minorities sending their children to become poets or fiction writers. Most of the places that they come from are, in a way, insulated from that kind of contact. I don't think you can live in America and not be affected, yet most American poets don't seem to take this on as a subject. They confuse what I'm talking about with politics, political writing. That's not true of some black writers, but I don't think it can be divided into black writers and white writers, especially when you get such enormous examples of injustice.

CB: Do you think that this sort of elitism—elitism is maybe not the right word—you're talking about, say in Creative Writing programs, or even in literary arts in the States... do you think young Caribbean writers are in the same predicament?

DW: A young Caribbean writer who is in the Caribbean is different than one in Toronto or London. They have to go through a daily experience of racial reality of how they are. And they write about that too. A young writer in the Caribbean doesn't suddenly wake up to that problem, because obviously Caribbean writers live in a society of one color, and so on. But there may be more of an active sense of connection between poetry and political climate that exists there. And some of the stuff that I read here, including magazines, doesn't engage in that problem as a subject.

CB: Does this run as deep as apathy?

DW: No, I think it's part of a privilege. There's also maybe a fear to write something that is rhetorical. To take on that reality of politics has become something that is not a subject to write in poems. That's not necessarily true for novels. Maybe it is there in fiction. For some reason it doesn't seem to enter that other place. The other thing is that there is a meter attached to the kind of writing I'm referring to. And that kind of writing, for some people now, may seem a little passé in terms of an echo. In other words, one writer who did engage in it is a very rhetorical poet, Allen Ginsburg, and people now might feel there is something much more muted required than the pitch, the almost hysterical pitch of Allen Ginsburg. Sometimes in Latin American, Spanish American writers, you get that. There's a group of poets still, out on the coast, who write some fantastic poems, satirical poems, but the central sound of contemporary American poetry is one

that doesn't engage in politics.

CB: So you think this fear is primarily aesthetic?

DW: I think it basically has to do with meter, the meter of contemporary poetry as it is taught and modeled and developed in certain classes in the central privacy of a university, which means a scansion of meditative, personal verse, that is, the slowest scansion. In other words, it's a syllable by syllable, syllabic approach to a subject. You can't do that really in a political position because what is theoretically expected of a political poem is not a personal statement but something more generic. To some people who have been brought up in the certain tightness of scansion, which is more or less personal, the reality of the scansion limits the wit of the subject. Nobody can do the Whitmanesque line anymore because that sounds rhetorical, it sounds too polemical, whereas in certain other countries that is where you begin. There, you begin with a polemical expectation of writing. It also depends how much pressure there is. There's no pressure on the writer in some situations to have to do anything. There doesn't seem any need to do anything. This is the character of so much journalism and editorializing and writing, and there is almost a bias against becoming too pompous. The general sound of most American verse for me now is mild and subdued, in a generic pattern, boring. It's really all about *very moi* about what happened to me.

CB: Do you think this is something applicable to "the American character"? Or does it come out of a confessional tradition?

DW: I don't think it's deliberately isolationist or deliberately personalized. I think that the instinct that would be there in political verse might have dissolved, maybe because of free verse, maybe because of scansion, the tightness that happens in terms of an interior scansion. We've been discussing the exterior subjects. Do you know what I'm saying?

So that poets consider themselves as the subject more real than something beyond them. I think it has to do with how one is hearing oneself, the meter that is within one's style of writing. Very few of the poems I get break out into the bravery of rhetoric. There's a great timidity, or caution or maybe indifference to something that they might consider too large, too political, or whatever, because the fierceness of scansion makes them concentrate on their own experience, as opposed to anything large. You don't get many poems that address an event.

Therefore, if you don't get that, then what you're not getting is... you're not getting an expectation of anger or satire. There are very few satirical poems written by contemporary poets because you have to have a solidity of scansion to have good satire. What is uncertain, I think, in a lot of the scansion of contemporary young poetry is exactly that. There is no formal basis from which you can launch a satirical poem that will be immediately apprehended by your contemporaries.

PP: Vallejo, in his book *The Black Heralds*, especially with that poem called "The Black Heralds" seems to have an interior landscape yet still employs this broader sense of meter. Do you think a South American or Caribbean poet should gravitate towards that?

DW: I don't want to make a sudden melodramatic contrast in terms of poets. Poets may reflect where they are. Society may produce a kind of poet because that's what the society is. In other words, there's something in Restoration verse that has to do with the society in Restoration times.

Poetry now doesn't have the anger it used to have: the American saying that Europe has nothing to do with us. There's another kind of isolationism that happens. It increases, I think, even in domestic policy. Attitudes to welfare, attitudes to whatever. That is there in the politics. Given that, you would say that the climate is, in itself, isolationist, cautious in terms of what it provides. Therefore, it may be a generally non-rhythmic attitude to society. In that, rhythm and anger are related. Rhythm and satire are related. So, if that's not there, perhaps it's because it's not there in society. I'm saying you can look beyond that and you can have an anger against that, but to satirize it within its own rhythm would take a really terrific poet. It has been done. E.E. Cummings did it. Berryman did it, but you're not saying where is the Cummings of today, the Berryman of today.

Also, there's not enough of a monastic atmosphere of the university. It's quasi-monastic. And that's what's wrong. If it was totally monastic and medieval and monkish or Buddhist, then that would help you write a poem. You do more than that, you find the rhythm of the society. You can do it within the meter of the society the way E.E. Cummings did it. I don't know how much there is of a need to satirize the society and basically it doesn't seem to invite satire, in part because it's almost its own satire.

CB: So how do we educate the poet? I remember at Columbia,

Derek, the way you'd teach, you'd say "Write this down," and you'd give us ten lines of Auden or Swinburne. I wondered if you'd speak a little about your education as a poet and what you'd think about the education of American poets. You said, "Medieval" earlier. There's a sort of education by memory that doesn't happen anymore: is it something that's lacking?

DW: I hear a lot of people say that they teach less editing, they teach memory. There's a lot of writers that do that. I know Joseph Brodsky was insistent on it. I think a lot of the whole mnemonic idea of not knowing your own words, words of other people, and a lot of it. It's not only a matter of discipline. Now you're getting into territory that is going to sound very pompous, depending on the context. I think I can talk like this in Spain, in Italy, and in the Caribbean. If I talk like that in America, what I have around me is a lot of implied cynicism about, well, poetry doesn't have to do that... it doesn't have to do that, it doesn't have to raise its voice to engage in x and y. The people who get into that rhetoric are people who are reacting passionately about some oppression that they feel. Therefore I can't share their passion, someone might say, because I'm not really oppressed. They pretend they're a black writer, which is bullshit. If you know that x has happened and you're a white writer, then make yourself black. Be black. I think there's so much division and separation because of the wrong kind of democracy.

You cannot say "because I'm black I have a different attitude to Shakespeare and Dante." We've heard that. That has been said. Or even, because I'm in Latin America, I don't want to hear anything from a gringo, a gringo poet. All that bullshit comes from a part of democracy because it means that everyone has a right. Everyone does have a right, but there is hierarchy in poetry, which is almost at conflict with the concepts of democracy. So you get objections from any minorities, whether Indian or black or whatever. It's a complicated thing. It's okay for Hispanics to get hysterical because that's the way they are. It's okay for blacks to get angry because they have a right to be. So wherever you go, you can withdraw by ascribing certain expected behavior. When you get the self-expected behavior that happens in a writer who feels that people are going to demand from him that he has a particular anger, you get into dangerous territory of intimidating the writer into a certain attitude to things. If a white writer got very excited about black rights, there would be a cynical attitude about that. It would appear as if that particular writer is sort of hanging out with an ideology that is

politically correct. So it's complicated.

What is missing, I think, in a lot of writers I teach or have taught is that kind of inheritance of an anger that all poets have because it's formed of injustice. I don't confront, I don't see things that say anything about injustice in America. What I find missing in a lot of contemporary verse in young people is that rhythm, that absence which fuels a kind of response that is polemical. There's nothing really wrong with that. After a while, the subject you get tired of... I'm talking about magazines here, about opening any journal and beginning to read through the stuff and seeing the same thing, really, all the time. It would be okay if the same thing had in it a sense of the generation that we are talking about, had an anger about things. Not only the anger that emerges when they're having a beer or something, but part of the work. If you think of the scale of the scansion that is there in contemporary American poetry, including well-known names, someone from outside would say, "You lived at that time and you didn't write about this? You were there, and all you can show me is verse about how you came from a European country and your grandfather would smoke a pipe and talk about Macedonia? When all that shit was going on in front of your nose?" Do you feel that?

CB: I do. Is there anybody doing it? Bill Merwin was for a while...

DW: Oh, he is talking about what is going on now. There are ways without being audibly angry, ways particularly under tyranny where you can avoid saying "yes" by writing out a plea. I'm not talking about that. If that were there, that would be a different thing. I'm talking about a feeling, but I can only describe as maybe a sense of career. That career thing can come out of the university, it can even come out of tenure-track writing. The thing about the university is that they should be more monastic.

CB: To force us into our isolation?

DW: They should do something that makes that isolation more intense. Because you have to make it for yourself when you go there. You have to create a privacy, an intense privacy. The risk, of course, is that if you have that, people will begin to think you're a show-off. I'm not just talking about university writing. I'm talking about the fact that I think somebody who knew, who lived in an age of...

PP: So you're not just talking about subject matter, you're talking about a timbre to the language and poetry that allows, that would bring on a kind of...

DW: I could jump immediately to that Yeats statement about quarreling with ourselves. You have to quarrel with yourself. But I don't see that quarrel happening with a lot of contemporary poets.

CB: Now is when we make the sound of poets agreeing...

At the conclusion of our interview, we escorted Derek Walcott to a cavernous chapel on the campus of the University of Houston, where a considerable audience had gathered for a question and answer session to be moderated by Walcott's friend, Edward Hirsch. Since that conversation continued the subjects of our interview rather organically, we have decided to include a transcript of that session here. The audience also included Adam Zagajewski, a fact which, as you shall see, Walcott found worthy of comment.

Derek Walcott Q&A

Edward Hirsch: I have been reading Derek Walcott's work very deeply and with great engagement since I was in my early 20s. I was so moved by his book *Sea Grapes* when I read it in the 1970s that it spurred me into writing criticism, probably of misdirection, but nonetheless I responded to *Sea Grapes* and wrote my first review of it, my first review of anything, in *The New York Times*, because I loved the book so much. I felt I needed to respond in some way to the tremendous richness of the language rendering West Indian life. I felt that Derek Walcott had found a way to think about and write as an American poet that seemed enormously useful to me and to other poets of my generation. I've been reading him ever since. I was one of many people around the world who was deeply gratified when he won the Nobel Prize. So please welcome Derek Walcott.

I wondered if you would start by just talking about your engagement with American poetry and your sense of American poetry. It's a narcissistic question in that there are so many American poets in this room.

DW: That's a very heavy beginning, I think. Maybe we can get there. I really do not mind the simplicity of the question. Well, that's badly put. What I meant is some of the simplest questions are the best ones. Like what was it like working with Paul Simon? I'll get through that very fast. It was terrific. Next question. We did work on a musical together, which flopped. Why did it flop? We're not going to go into that today. So I'd like to begin by inviting you really to ask whatever you'd like to ask. I'll probably get more warmed up after that.

But I like the idea of this audience because I teach young writers. I don't so much teach them, I don't think a good teacher so much teaches, as *educes*, if he or she is smart enough to know what an education is, for the talents of the writer. To be a writer in a university is a complicated thing. It's complicated in the sense that it really is a challenge to one's own idea or one's own identity, that can be very seriously altered in a classroom or in a context like this. The idea of writers going to universities is a totally new idea, whereas the idea of, say, someone serving in a priesthood, which eventually is the same sort of thing. This is not a contemporary modern idea, but a very old one. I think the dedication required is the same as if one were entering something hermetic or disciplined... I really mean a monastic education, for whatever religion. The community of poets collected in one place virtually has the same sense; it's very medieval, I think. The idea of a medieval experience in contemporary America may seem to be a contradiction, but I think that's what preserves the dedication and sanctity of poetry for me.

Audience Member: I'm a teacher and a poet. I wonder if you'd expand on the idea that the life of a writer is like that of a priest.

DW: Sometimes in a situation like this I have a presence that frightens me and that presence is Joseph Brodsky, who is dead, but who remains my friend. If he was asked questions, he never did the dismissive thing of saying something casual if the question was such a powerful one. The question of vocation, of a vow, I believe in and Joseph believed it. I believe that every poet, male or female, does believe it. I'm not necessarily making a distinction between someone who writes fiction and someone who writes verse. But I think there's something much more enclosed and almost liturgical in terms of the rhythm and composition of verse, which has to be done alone, in the same way that meditation even in a community of monks is really done alone. It may sound very corny, in a way, to think of poetry

today as that kind of devotion, that kind of dedication, but that is the process. That is the process that happens in the attempt to write a poem. There is something very close to the preparation of prayer whether that person is a believer or apparently secular, that the state of mind that has to be induced for the creation of a poem, which does not happen every time. In the same way, presumably, that prayer does not necessarily make contact with a superior being, but the custom of prayer, the ritualistic aspect of it, is very close, or almost identical for me, with the effort of trying to write verse and to make a poem. One would have to go into the whole question of what a poem does, what effect it has. Who does it help? What does it save? I don't think that's the immediate question when someone prepares a poem. But I think that the state of mind that is a prologue or the preliminary condition that leads to the sacredness of and devotion of a poet trying to compose a work is similar to the preparation of a prayer in an orthodox situation, even if there is a cynical and dismissive approach to this... it's just a kind of a game, which it is. It's a kind of game with words. But it certainly goes beyond that and I'm not talking about the service that poetry renders to a society. I'm talking about the individual poem and the individual poet entering into that "hum" that lies beyond the individual composition. The discipline, and by discipline I mean something much more than getting up and sharpening pencils and burning through a particular ritual before you do it... the discipline that is there is inevitably a spiritual experience and all of these words are no longer valid in our time. We don't use them anymore because they imply epochs allegedly different. It sounds romantic; it sounds like a romantic concept or a medieval concept.

Where I come from, those terms of poetry don't matter really because I don't have that history. So I can't divide the past of poetry into particular epochs so I'm hoping I can become attached to this or that particular epoch. I live in the Caribbean and I live on an island where I'm surrounded by a total sense of freedom, a freedom even from history. But, if I'm working, I don't want to give the impression that I go into a kind of heavy Japanese state before I begin to write anything. But I know that it remains a miraculous craft. It remains a craft that depends on the accidental grace, the accidental benediction. The great thing about it is if that benediction does happen, it is not personal. You can take pride, technical pride even, in doing a painting. But you can't if you think that you may have written a poem. We spend our whole lives writing verse in the hope that the grace of a poem could happen. I remember talking to [Robert] Lowell and

asking him 'about how many pages do you think you have?' He said, 'Oh, I don't know, twelve or thirteen.' I think every poet feels that. But every poet feels that out of a whole lifetime of work of writing verse, occasionally the benediction has happened a couple of times and if it has happened a couple of times, it is not even the property of that poet. All of this sounds mystical and it sounds... whatever one may want to call it, but I think poets know that that is the truth.

Audience Member: How do you regard your plays in all this?

DW: Well, it's different. The form of fiction that theater entails involves everyone else. It's not you alone. Once that begins, the process of production, of change, becomes a very practical thing that is manipulated by people outside your self. I've been extremely lucky in life because I worked with a company that my brother began and there's nothing more pleasurable than watching an ensemble work together to write directly for a theater company. This is one of the great joys of life and to be able to write to the point where you can change the direction of the play or take advice from actors. That's a common experience, one that's very different from the private inspiration that one depends on in the writing of the poem.

If you're working in poetry though, which is how I write plays, I remember this happening. I remember a woman from the BBC coming out to St. Lucia and looking at a couple of my plays and saying "Oh, we don't do that anymore", meaning we don't write plays in verse anymore, the time when people wrote plays in verse was when Christopher Frye was doing it, and T.S. Eliot tried doing it, but really that's sort of passé. Well, the indignity of having an English woman come out and tell me this, that I'd better take another direction because we aren't doing that anymore, is typical of the conceit of the metropolitan, the alleged center. It still happens in criticism today: "we don't do that anymore, we don't tell stories anymore, we don't write three-paneled novels anymore. You're catching up and it's very good, but not really." They said this to American literature as well.

One of the theories I have about Shakespeare and ensemble, is that Shakespeare with his company—and he was an actor in his company—wrote speeches that were technical challenges to his actors. There is a speech in *The Tempest* that Prospero gives at the end, a translation and adaptation from Ovid, this magnificent thing: "Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves, / And ye that on the sand, with printless foot / Do chase

the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him/ When he comes back.” Fantastic! There is an image of the birds going out to the ebbing Neptune and running away from the tide when it comes back. Right? Elizabeth Bishop has a poem like that about a sandpiper. Anyway, he goes on to say something about a weed or a flower and then he has the parenthesis: “Whereof the ewe not bites.” Then I think the reason he said that is to say to Burbage “You think you’re hot? Try this.” Why give the guy that to say? All of those speeches are great exercises in diction, but this is like contradiction intruding, because you don’t really need that parenthetical. In the end it becomes great, because once it is clear—if it’s possible for an audience that is standing up and doing whatever it’s doing—to hear that parenthesis clarified by the rhetoric of an actor’s diction, that’s a hell of a challenge. All I’m saying is, in response to the question, there is an excitement in writing verse for a performance. And it is unimaginable, the joy that can happen if the speech does work, especially since it is in verse, to an audience, and I’m talking about an audience in the Caribbean.

There’s a concept of literacy that we have to change when we think of the theater. We shouldn’t think of the theater audience as an audience that needs to be told something directly, which is the American attitude to writing, theater, plays. “Make it clear, get to the point.” I know a film director, a television director, who was told when he got a job: “Listen, no nuances.” That was the warning he got to do T.V. You can do nuances and you can do a language based on rhetoric, based on performance. The joy that I’ve had working with my own theater company has been the joy of writing in verse and hearing that verse. I think that the parenthetical, colloquial thing that, say, that actor has to do for Shakespeare is one that becomes a part of the tone, something that may have otherwise been missed, maybe. But I don’t think it could have been missed because I think the clarification would have made itself so clear that it would have been a part of the rhythm of the piece. That thought that you don’t have to simplify to make it clear to somebody is something I would warn against. That’s what makes so many plays from here—and movies—basically banal. The people in Shakespeare’s time or even now in St. Lucia aren’t interested in that idea. You have to reach the lowest common denominator. They’re interested in the music in the language and it clarifies itself out of that melody.

Audience Member: I wanted to say that a former student of mine is now one of yours and she and I have been emailing each other

about you and she said what a great teacher you were and I wanted to give you that compliment. You alluded to the theater company. What was the status of that company and how successful was it, in your opinion. Was it anyway related to what Langston Hughes wanted to do with his theatre?

DW: The Trinidad Theater Workshop is something I began although I had begun another one when I was in St. Lucia. I wanted to take all the Trinidadian actors who were interested and tried to work on the evolution of something that was Caribbean or Trinidadian. Not only because of dialect, but because of the interior attitude of what we were doing. That grew and became very solid and included dancers and artists and so on. But The Trinidad Theater Workshop, which has had a terrible history of moving place to place, is tragically now diminishing because of money. One thing I had hoped that might have happened in the Caribbean is that we would be more aware of the necessity of supporting the arts. Instead we inherited the same thing we had when we were colonials. There is no real difference in attitude between a current government and when the Brits were in charge—at least the Brits gave scholarships. We were just evicted from the best place we had because people believed that a theater and a library didn't go together, which is a hard thing to take. They could have made space for us as an adjunct of a national library. It has been a thoroughly exhausting battle to make people aware of the work we do. The company, which has performed in America, just to make an aside, won an award from the *Boston Globe* as one of the best productions in that particular year on the east coast. There are great actors, fine actors in that company.

Carnival is going on today, but the theater workshop is threatened with total extinction unless it is really supported. Okay, now that may be a plea and so on. You have to realize that this country's support of the arts is incredibly minimal. I don't know what proportion is given in the budget for the support of art in America. Do you know, Ed?

EH: It is tiny, less than a quarter of a cent.

DW: Maybe that's a standing problem of the arts not being supported. I had hoped in the Caribbean, because of the history of the Caribbean, the reality of the necessity of that kind of support would have been there. Ed is whispering that I should remark how the middle class hasn't stepped forward to support the arts, but I don't think it's just that. There are terrific writers. I

think and hope there would have been a policy, especially if you consider the number of writers and quality of writers in two or three languages. A high quality of writing has come out of the English and French-speaking Caribbean. What has not come out of the Caribbean, as great as these writers are, is a policy. There has not come a policy, which I hoped would be inspired by the creative artists of the Caribbean. That's what the Caribbean could have done, especially the English-speaking parts. If you had said "which would you prefer to have, sewage or theater?" I would say the theater. You can put sewage anywhere, especially in the Caribbean. If we had gotten rid of this inherited idea of what is necessary, then the situation would be much more healthy and much less desperate than it is now. That is what I have polemically gone after most of my life.

CB: Jamaica Kincaid dedicated one of her recent books to you, *Autobiography of My Mother*, and you have published a long letter to Patrick Chamoiseau. I was wondering if you could talk about the conversation between Caribbean poets and Caribbean novelists—and I know you have a history with Naipaul—I was wondering if you would talk about those three figures, Chamoiseau, Naipaul, and Kincaid.

DW: The novel that I reviewed for *The New York Review of Books*—and I think I asked to review it—was Chamoiseau's novel, *Texaco*, which is as much a masterpiece as Wole Soyinka's *The Road*. There are certain masterpieces that exist that are recognizable and one of them is "Going to Lvov" by Adam Zagajewski. Adam is my friend and I taught him everything he knows. [laughter] There are certain things that you just say that they are there. The writer may be living, unfortunately, but that's a reality. [more laughter] Seriously, one of the realities is that *Texaco* is a phenomenal book. I think one of the aspects of a lot of Caribbean writing is this principle of the phenomena. The phenomena is not based on the fact that one is saying "here's an Indian writer writing as well as anyone in English, or better," and that's Naipaul. No one writes sentences that have the incredible balance and symmetry and piercing clarity of Naipaul. Not another writer I can think of has what Naipaul has in English, and that is the sentence, on which fiction is based, and since the sentence is hard to pin down—it's hard to find an idiosyncrasy that you attach to a certain kind of syntax that makes it the prose of Hemingway or the prose of Faulkner or the prose of someone else... What you have is this thing that is supposed to be there which you cannot delineate or pin down,

and that is clarity. And that is phenomenon and it is globally phenomenal in terms of what the English language is doing. Jamaica [Kincaid] has that quality and, I think, so does Jean Rhys. Just take an example of these three writers we're talking about now—and this sounds like a setup question, but you didn't do that—the accident now in what I'm showing you is that the three writers I'm talking about, well, one of them is Indian, East Indian, Naipaul, one of them is black, African, Jamaica Kincaid, and one of them is white, Jean Rhys. They are all from the Caribbean: one from Trinidad, one from Antigua, and one from Dominica. Those are only three writers and there are others who represent the Caribbean achievement. But each of them has come from an island. If an island means an isolation of a kind, they are like islands within islands but they don't interchange, there is not a common direction that is there within Caribbean writing at this point. Yet, there is a common fertility in terms of what they do. But each one does that differently, and they don't really intercommunicate. That's the phenomenon of an archipelago: each of them is an island. You can think of the whole Caribbean symmetry of expression as an archipelago but in which each island is different from the next island. The phenomenon is there, it had to happen. If the expression of people has been repressed for a long time, either by poverty or some very ordinary examples and circumstances, and then, they begin to utter and find themselves, well, that was inevitable too. We're talking about several hundred years of repression of expression that began to be articulated when these writers began to write.

Something about *Texaco* that I would try to explain is this: I come from a Patois-speaking, Creole-speaking, French-speaking island, as well as an English-speaking Creole situation. The things that touched me that I recognized, even in translation—and that's another subject—you can get the magical sense of what is happening. In translation, for example, a poem can become an English poem by a Polish poet that is a great poem or it may be a novel by a French Martinican writer that the French Academy may dismiss because it includes French Creole in its melody. No one is more arrogant about language than the French, but I keep repeating as often as I can that French speakers are the worst speakers of Latin in history. The number of demonstratives needed in a French sentences to make a noun work is less than the number of demonstratives used in Creole to make an object appear. In other words, you do not need the redundancy of using several verbs to get to the noun. You don't need *parler de la*. You have *parler* you have *de* you have *la*. Why

do you need *parler de la*? The Latin word is *ibi*. You know what I'm saying? I'm just saying that that's part of the attitude that exists in terms of a Caribbean writing. In Chamoiseau you get a blend of that delight in language that comes from the native African thing as well as the French legitimacy of style. When these things blend, as they do in any culture, as they do in Joyce, for instance, then you get the real delight of cultures fusing.

PP: Would it be possible that a similar thing exists in the United States with minority writers?

DW: I don't think so. I think they are all ghettoized formally. The self-definition that can happen in terms of black literature, which allows us to say, this or that is peculiarly what we are... well, that's a subtle way of continuing a repressed attitude. In other words, it would have been a person with great vision to have said at the times of *The Sun Also Rises*, that Jewish writers would soon be entering the writing establishment they had been excluded from—to have told such a person, "Listen, I have some very bad news for you, there is going to be a lot of them in the next twenty years, in fact, they are going to be American literature. They are all going to have these names that the establishment doesn't like: Mailer, Doctorow, Roth." I don't think that that can quite happen in terms of black writing, because black literature cuts itself off, almost deliberately, in terms of contact. It has been forced to do that. And one is not saying "Join them," but I think there is a racial thing that is very strong, that I think is self-perpetuating in the American black writer. This is different than Jewish literature being absorbed into American literature, so now we can't say, "You can't read him, he's a Jewish writer". It is based very simply on color, it is as miserable as that. The distinction that is made sometimes by the Afro-American writer who says "I can't be, I don't want to be," that can be understood, too. That's August Wilson's position, and as much as I disagree with the position, I understand the position.

EH: There are some writers like Robert Hayden who went against the grain.

DW: I remember an experience in Washington at the beginning of the Black Power revolution in which I was on stage with Robert Hayden, and some young black sent up—we were reading notes and replying to them—and some young black writer had sent up a note that said: "Get off the stage, Uncle

Tom." And he was crying when he got that card. That was sad to see. But since I wasn't an American and I felt like saying a few more expletives back to "get off the stage Uncle Tom" I said, "If he's an Uncle Tom, then I'm his nephew." But that happens in revolutions. The young crowd rejects because the young crowd can say, "Well, that's the old crowd," and they think a particular way. On the other hand, the pain of that and the fact that seems to be necessary, that's really tragic. The incredible stuff that just happened in terms of that cop shooting, that guy going for his wallet and those cops shooting him... that's happening, that's yesterday's stuff and it's hard to take. It's very hard to think of literature and the fusion of literature under such conditions.

Audience Member: Based on what you were saying earlier, could you talk about trying to write outside of history?

DW: You can either think about it or ignore it or think why does it matter, why are you getting so worked up? I just had to review a book [*Caribbeana: An Anthology of English Literature of the West Indies*] that was a collection of early writing about the Caribbean. The book is full of usual stuff like Negroes, cannibals, Negroes do this and they do that. These documents in that collection are supposed to be historical. But really how are they historical? Why are they of any interest at all? They're very mediocre as writing. They don't have the power and beauty of real hatred, which you get in Dante. Dante is full of hatred and is full of tribes, sects and so on. There's redeeming sarcastic beauty that can sometimes happen in a great writer. These early Caribbean documents are not, really. Where do you begin to say that this is a literary history of the Caribbean simply because that text written by some amateur writer exists and is preserved archivally? Who does it belong to? Does it belong to some idea of needing to form tradition and needing a concept of history that regardless of the subject has to be there because it exists? I'm not saying we should ban it. On the other hand, the person who thought that such writing was necessary to give the history of the Caribbean some kind of dignity is doing the wrong thing, if that's the reason why it was done. These tracts have no importance to the descendants of people who are slaves not because they are political, but because they have no aesthetic value. It's because they have no aesthetic value that they should not be made part of history. Certainly if it was great, if it was somebody really talking, like Prospero talking to Caliban in *The Tempest*. Shakespeare does not make Caliban talk like Tarzan. The best poetry in *The Tempest* is given to Caliban: "Be not afraid

the isle is full of noises." That is beautiful. "You taught me language", that is what he said. Joyce said about Shakespeare that it is the happy hunting ground of lost minds. Caliban says "You taught me language and my profit on't/ is I know how to curse." That is not the only level of Caliban, yes, he learns language to curse his master. The language that he speaks when he says, "be not afraid the isle is full of noises" is poetry and that exists in all languages. It does not exist only in Prospero. It is not dependent on English when he is talking. The other idea of Tarzan learning how to speak English is a standard civilized idea of civilizing cannibals or whomever. The beauty that exists in Caliban is the beauty of poetry and not the beauty of English being spoken by Caliban, and that is there too.

There are other such instances. There is even an artistic bias about the seasons—about one country having four seasons and the other none. Spring, summer, autumn, fall. The seasons are used as a metaphor of manhood, of time: the spring of your life, the summer of your life, the autumn of your life, the winter of your life. If you don't have that, how alive are you and what is the expectation of time if you don't have seasons? Your conjugation of time as a calendar is not the same as the conjugation of time in a temperate country. How does that affect everything? If you have no visceral examples of decay, isn't your concept of time and consequently history as chronological time affected also by the reality of where you live? I'm talking about a generic thing that may apply to a basic idea of the seasons. One of the subjects of poetry is seasons. If you don't have snow, how can you write poetry because you don't have that idea that says snow means old age. There is a lot of stuff to look at that is radical in terms of a turn that happens in narrative time, time as chronology. If that begins to happen, it leads to a lot of baffling stuff. Certainly, rhythmically it is true. Certain concepts that come from another climate do not necessarily apply to a feeling to those who do not know those distinctions. All of those things are explored by Caribbean writers and certainly by Caribbean painters. The things I have always had irritation about is the respect paid to history, in which, in that abstract noun, everything is acceptable as a part of that rhythmic calendar that forgives massacres and horrors if they occurred in precincts of an extremely good looking landscape or if you walk out into a European field and see a great castle that annihilates whatever massacre took place in the vicinity of that castle. We don't have that in the Caribbean because we don't have that memorial. Our present tense is much more celebrative, rather than our past tense. I'm including the past that concerns the annihilation of the

original Indians and slavery. I'm not saying forget them but there is a way not to respect that as history. Like everyone else, we have to have a history, but I don't think we have to have a history in that sense.

Midlife: Three Portraits

1. The Winds of the Quirang

Along the peninsula of Eilean Iarmain, where the saw-toothed Cuillin Hills serrate the sky, in the dark outside Kinloch's one, remote, hotel, stands a solitary American, a businessman from Miami who has somehow come to the shore of this forbidding place, the landscape of the heart. Unmoored from his life of palm trees, bank lobbies and sun, he is suddenly a man on the brink of age, one of those men whose taut hold on the body has begun to snap and flutter like a pleasure craft's tacking sail.

He holds himself upright, but it is the studied poise of the executive, looking out over the landscape as if over a giant boardroom. He examines like a chart the big autumn sky, where black clouds image canyons threaded by rivers of moon. Around him, light from the hotel windows spills across the lawn and its circular gravel drive, empty now of cars.

He has brought a woman to this remote place, a West Palm Beach beauty approaching 45. Scotland in November sounded so romantic when he proposed it, nothing like this dank, windswept bleakness with its horizon the color of eyeliner.

At dinner she comes down wearing a red dress and rhinestones, although they are the only people staying at the hotel. They have drinks without talking. He stares into the fireplace; her eyes wander to the continents of damp that have formed on the brocaded wallpaper near the ceiling. Novelty still seethes just below the surface of their glances, but she no longer hides her disappointment. She is restless, and her impatience is beginning to crackle like electricity in the small dining room. They will probably fight again tonight, he thinks, and imagines the two of them framed in yet another bedroom window, caught in its cage of light. He wishes he could be a watcher on the dark lawn below, looking up at the coming pantomime of passion and acrimony.

But their relationship is irrelevant to the bigger feeling he has had all day, the sense that he has come to a place where he can no longer draw his life safely around him. Nothing in his past has prepared him to meet this juncture with either grandeur or tragic

recognition. He feels himself only a slow machine winding uncomfortably down, a man in a pastel suit on whom unhappiness sits like a heavy meal.

After coffee and the inevitable disappointment of cream liqueurs, the beauty from West Palm Beach has finally had enough of the evening and goes up the staircase, her red-Valentine bottom twitching with annoyance, even her jewels sending off angry glints of brittle light. She knows, as some women do, that she is precious cargo that has yet to find a harbor, drifting in and out of the placid blue bays of countless dressing-table mirrors in an endless archipelago of beautiful hotels.

The Floridian businessman returns to the dark lawn to finish his thoughts. Below him, the harbor winks like a gold-toothed crone; in the hills above, he hears the throb of water in the river's veins. In the distance is the tympani of the ebbing sea, the ocean's great heartbeat drumming fainter and fainter against the rocky breast of this midnight-colored land.

2. Ruth

The week Ruth left her husband, he drove a motorcycle off a cliff and broke nearly every rib on one side of his body. It was the motorcycle Ruth had bought in college the year she'd met Joe, which was fortunate since its age kept it from accelerating to any genuinely dangerous speed, and as the cliff was only eight feet or so high—an embankment, really—it allowed for the drama of a symbolic and desperate act without the inconvenience of fatality. Broken ribs (what were they after all but palpable heartache) were a small price for metaphorically depriving his faithless wife of two big things that had once belonged to her: the R-660 and himself.

For Ruth, who cared far less about either than he supposed, the accident was mostly an annoyance. Her card reader had foretold on Monday that the week would bring some change of plan, and now, as she put in for a sick day at work, she thought how it was just like Joe to do something histrionic and after-the-fact, and incomplete to boot. Although it wasn't the reason she had left him, still she couldn't deny that this need of Joe's to tempt whatever came his way—women or Fate or disaster—had long since become a performance played to an empty house. It was a charm that had backfired, the spell of eternal wild youth that now looked like nothing so much as middle aged panic. Ruth had decided that it was unbecoming for anyone to push luck and push forty at the same time.

On her way to the hospital she stopped to bring along a friend from their married days, a fairly famous avant-garde poet who could be counted on to say something diverting about the male nurses. While he rasped out bedside insights—most having to do with the body cast in which Joe had been encased like a huge pupa—Ruth occupied herself with reading a stack of get well cards on the corner of the hospital room's melamine dresser. They were addressed to someone named Adam and must have been left behind by the previous occupant.

Joe watched her with a practiced, wounded look. How he had loved her, he was thinking, loved her like the pain that was this moment crooking its fingers up and down his side. Now especially as he felt her going from him, gone already, could feel her heart emptying itself of him, closing like a stranger's door. Flipping the bike now seemed as arbitrary as anything else in this chancy universe—birth, catastrophe, passion. He couldn't remember staging anything anymore, his bad luck seemed so real.

Ruth had begun looking out the window, listening to Canada geese clearing their throats, each honk squeezed out as if they'd swallowed billiard balls. The block lumbered airborne from the felt-green lawn exactly in the shape of an unbroken rack. It was true that their whole life, hers and Joe's, had been impelled by accident. Their biggest windfall, when they were poor and in their twenties, had been when a police car collided with the back of their Buick while they were stopped at a stoplight. They had sunk all the money from the settlement into land—a rolling, windswept tract of undeveloped mesa outside Santa Rosa—that they later discovered had no possible access to water. A brushfire swept through half of it that first year, too, so they were left with nothing but what Joe called a big dry piece of place, its eastern slope blackened like barbecue meat.

Ruth, though, had always had a stubbornness that, when it had to, could sort life out like laundry. The ability to look things in the eye just when they got dicey and say, *Not so fast*. It was one of the things most men who had ever known her eventually fell in love with and which later, consciously or not, they sought in all the women who drifted into and out of their lives.

The diviner Ruth found was a natty-looking man in his fifties who worked out of a local term life insurance office. She brought him out to the land one Saturday, hazel rod and all, to see what he could find. The three of them walked the property slowly, looking down, almost as if they were scuffing the dirt for dropped change. It was midmorning and already the California sky was beginning its hot-oil shimmer; spare tufts of squirrel

grass leaned listlessly. The man moved with caution, like he could smell the ground beneath him, or as if waiting for some vibration to register though the soles of his Rockport Executives. He held the split rod on the tips of his index fingers, lightly, as if it were leading him across the charred ground.

When the rod finally pointed down for real—shuddered sharply, bent almost double like rubber—it was over a gully in the most desolate segment of the land. But the sign was unmistakable. As Joe clasped Ruth's hand, she could feel a spasm, a current of sheer fortune, sharp as desire, flow through his palm to hers and into her blood like a tonic. Once more wild youth, the plunging kiss of grace.

The hospital room had grown airless. She saw Joe's frizzled head nodding on the pillow, the poet pocketing a couple of pills from a tray on the bedside stand. The visit that had not really been a visit seemed to have ended and was just waiting for the principals to close the door on their way out. She hoped Joe wouldn't be calling again.

It was only years later that I heard she was getting remarried, to a firefighter from Petaluma named Hank. I sent them a set of Lalique crystal candleholders as a wedding gift and got back a card that read *Thank you for the shot glasses*. I could imagine Ruth, happy and dazed with exhaustion, sitting on their suburban living room carpet amid piles of wrapping paper, trying to make out Hank's handwriting on the reply list. Hank, who I knew must be thick and certain and good looking. I have to say I envied them. I knew their lawn would always be green, their sidewalks uncracked. Nothing any longer left to the odds. I envied them their lovemaking in their pretty home, her firefighter husband keeping them safe from the triple mysteries of charm and chance and disaster.

3. Facets

They wake one morning to find themselves encased in crystal.

We who remain, loving them, can only look in, softly signaling, our reaching hands refracted through the hard, clear impenetrability of their grief.

Look. The first thing you notice is the silver at her temples, although she is still only in her thirties. She is beautiful and tired-looking, her eyes bruised with woe like the skin of water darkened by cloud.

He seems calm, sitting at the table with an unopened book in

his hand, or perhaps the last segment of an apple on a plate, uneaten. He gazes at these objects for long, still moments, as if each span of sight were a deep breath.

Slowly she gets up to change the water in a flower vase which has turned the color of lymph, removes those flowers whose tender aureoles have browned too badly, tweaks leaves that have slimed below the waterline. The January light cuts through the vase's crenellations as she holds it, quivers in living fragments on the tablecloth.

I used to be baffled by the phrase "through a glass darkly." It seemed a paradox to me that something transparent could at the same time be murky, confused. Now I know that many things can be sure but not clear: change, love, rage, blessing, loss. The waiting that inhabits this house like a third body.

He turns and opens the book but doesn't read. She moves to the window, still cupping a palmful of crisped petals and wonders why there are far fewer birds at the feeder this year. Caught in death's headlights, they are frozen into an apparent calm that is really just not knowing which way to run.

Outside their kitchen window the tight fist of winter closes down, white-jointed, the frozen knuckles of trees cracking in the cold. Frost spreads like lizard footprints across the clear panes, rampant silver flora gradually colonizing the view. Together they listen to the season's stillness, hearing something even past the silence, as if registering some true pitch that we on the near side of this opacity cannot even begin to hear.

The Secret Lives of Fish

I wrote my college AP essay in English on Ted Hughes' poem "Pike," while six hundred miles away my parents were divorcing.

An August morning, the room itself like a pond—quiet, airless, light falling in watery sheaves onto silt-colored, Catholic-school linoleum, and onto the uncertain heads of students, undulating in the shallows. *Ready?* the proctor said. Above him a crucifix and a clock—Christ and Chronos—hung ticking against the cinderblock like cooling engines. *Begin.* I bent my head, cast off into the gorgeous, terrifying stanzas. My pen scratched peacefully in the dusty light. Across two states, a woman was hurling photographs down from a mantle, a man was shouting words I wasn't far enough away to hear.

* * *

Everybody has this story, or one like it.

They're young—six or seven—near water, alone. When the fish surfaces, no one else ever sees. It is just there, an aluminum gleam, a skirl of water, fin, eye, belly, and then it's gone.

* * *

Two weeks earlier my cousin had gotten married in St. Louis, in a gazebo under a sky that glowered with rain. After the ceremony, my sister and I wandered off and stood watching the water boil with carp under the little Japanese bridge in the arboretum gardens. They smelled weather, rose to our two shadows as if we were gods.

They wanted food and we had none, so we threw down pebbles and sequins from our bridesmaid gowns and watched the fish spit them back out like pop-guns. Their faces seemed exactly formed to register disgust and disappointment. They were fat as loaves, impossibly scarlet, mustachioed—

* * *

When my friend Irene was a newlywed she went to live in Sweden for six months, where her young husband had been offered a research fellowship with Lucent Technologies. One weekend they went boating on a clean manmade lake near Stockholm with a couple from her husband's office—very polite people, unruffled and blonde, who spoke perfect English and would never dream of letting on how powerful they were in the department, something her husband naturally already knew.

Irene liked the Swedes, and their big, clean country where everything seemed open and on the surface: even the sex in their advertisements felt fresh-air and healthy, and their sandwiches were open-faced so that you could see right away everything that was on them. She liked her husband's two fair-complected colleagues and their cool, Nordic sociability. The idea of boating was fun because it was a little unusual. They had brought fishing poles, not really with the intent to use them, but during a short half-hour when her husband and his two colleagues were discussing radioactive isomers, she decided to lower her line into the lovely blue water. The day was beautiful, the sky as rare and fine as porcelain, and she was newly married and happy and everything was perfect until she saw the fish with her father's face.

Without warning, the line had given a huge, impolite tug that nearly pulled the boat around at a right angle. The three colleagues stopped talking abruptly and reached for the boat's sides. Irene, startled, wasn't quite sure what to do, so she held on. Her husband was looking at her with dismay; she had somehow begun to disrupt this fine afternoon, and it was important that it go well. The sky was still blue, the couple still neat and politic, but Irene was having trouble just managing the pole, which had made a u-turn into the water and now looked as though it wanted to double right under the boat. She was perspiring and hoped it didn't show.

When the fish came up alongside the gunwale it had her father's face laminated onto its head. It was the look he'd had at the trial, six years after he'd abandoned them—her mother, her brother, and her—that look of disdainful annoyance, like a stranger who'd just been offended on a street corner. And there was something more—something sly and victorious and horribly honest in its cold, dismissive stare. Helpless, she gazed up at her husband, who appeared to her as clean and foreign as the Swedes. *No*, he was saying, *no. Honey, you can't bring that thing into this boat.*

* * *

The carp in the arboretum gardens that wedding afternoon had looked like film noir gangsters, tough but sad. When it started

to drizzle they mouthed the raindrops despondently. The bridal party moved under an awning for photographs, my cousin's train trailing her like a sorry tail.

My sister and I leaned over the railing in the rain, feeding each other meaningless baubles. Just words.

She reminded me of the time I thought my father was in love with a woman named Carol. He was always "going to his Carol" in the library, working on a dissertation that never seemed to move ahead. When I got up my nerve and spoke of this, my mother laughed and laughed.

Words surface and double back like fish—scaled, measured, flashing.

In fact, he was having an affair, with an auburn-haired receptionist named Dallas. *Dallas?* A woman named after a hot city known for cheerleaders and oil wells. It was like calling somebody Pittsburgh.

Sweet crude. Did I only imagine my sister whispered it in my ear, enigmatically, sounding each word like a hushed drumbeat? Behind their bedroom wall my parents' voices surged and ebbed, riding their bridled rage around and around.

* * *

As a child I thought language made a bubble in which you could survive. A weightless stillness, a clearing—something, anyway: a wake in the unnameable dark. I was the girl writing alone in the lamplight, unschooled, seizing at something that wouldn't stop leaping, that kept changing shape.

I was always the last to learn, timid, invisible. The summer I turned nine my father ran his nerves and patience to ribbons trying to teach me how to dive. His face seemed permanently indecipherable, shifting between sternness and exasperation.

I'd stand at the dock's edge for an hour or more, my knees locked, until even my sister grew tired of teasing me and went away, even my father turned to other tasks. *Call us when you're ready.* I was trying to make the mathematics of diving come out right, to calculate trajectory, arc and entry, but all I got was zero. Beneath me the lake was a world of fish, of death, tangled lines, sinkers, hooks and the revengeful gills waiting, translucent, moving like the wings of terrible angels in the green and deadly water. I'd seen the fishermen at noon, motionless in their aluminum boats, staring into the black water like they were looking for their own lost souls.

This I imagined. All I could really see was my own reflected silhouette over the rails, a shimmering black shape against the

seared white sky. It was like a dark cutout, the space where I might have been, but where cowardice had made a hole in the shape of me, an emptiness, a shadow. I stared so long that even today I can bring back with absolute precision the fear-leached outline of myself at nine.

* * *

Everybody has a story like this. When it first surfaces, no one ever sees.

A poet I know tells me about a time he was fishing alone on the Wapsipinicon River in Iowa, when suddenly a bass so huge he couldn't see past its dorsal fin took his lure for a split second, churned the river's surface like a cauldron, and then disappeared, snapping the 40-weight line as if it were sewing thread. He had been struggling with his own writing, but after that he never wrote another poem. Instead, he married a quiet woman and took a teaching position at a small university where many years later he was given a chance at a soul-transforming love, but that got away from him too.

Alone in my room I sketch characters that I myself don't understand: a fourteen-year-old contemplating the blue filigree of her wrist. A battered woman lying on a gurney laughing when asked what hurts most and answering *Hope does*. There is something here that will not stay still. I catch it and it turns, gleams and vanishes, rolling its alien eye back at me, black as an eclipse. I invent a Jungian therapist, clientless and depressed for months, who turns to Schubert and Prozac. He too knows the knife and the gauze. He too knows that sometimes you have to let something go when it's so big you can't see the end of it.

The students' heads genuflect over their exams. Words rise, smooth as salvage, murky as isinglass.

"And indeed they spare nobody.
Two, six pounds each, over two feet long,
High and dry and dead in the willow-herb—

One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet..."

So die, my father sneered. My mother's rage had costumed itself finally as desperation. Anger perfumed with Certs and gin. I saw her later standing at lakeside for an hour, thinking it over. I did nothing, went back to my homework.

The proctor trolls the room like a pike himself, young Jesuit wafting past me the acrid smell of celibacy, jaws aflame with

acne and suspicion. *Silhouette of submarine delicacy and horror*. The monastery in the poem was a ruin, had always been one, long before the poem began. *Decaying institutions* I wrote, pressing hard on the ballpoint pen to make my mark.

* * *

At night in bed I listened to love's octaves, fury and grief. Storms swelled in the belly of that house while I tossed, leaving in the morning only a signature of limbs on white sheets.

Twenty years later I grade the essays written by other children whose adulthood is still too long in the sleeves. Healthy and self-referential as integers, they are baffled by compassion. I've seen them negotiate the schoolyard, sinuous as young raptors, designating prey. It soothes them to be cruel.

One black boy stays behind and we go over his paper. *I think this is a poem about looking hard at something horrible that scares you but that at the same time you need to.* "That's not bad," I say. "What do you make of the rainbows at the end?"

Monday morning he's nothing but an empty seat. The secretary stops me in the hall. Did you know Marlin was a junkie? You couldn't have helped him. Nobody can now.

* * *

Going under. For five afternoons I stared frozen at the water while my father praised me impatiently. Finally I walked to the end of the dock and simply let myself fall off, stepped into the outline of my own absence. The lake came up and smacked me like a big open palm. I wasn't prepared for the sting; I thought it would peel open softly and quietly take me in. The sounds underwater were alien too—bubbles rushing past my ears, then dimly from above I could hear my father shouting, far away, as if from a country whose language I couldn't understand.

Anything

When it came down to it, my mother always took the side of things. She'd forget to take us children in for rubella shots, but she'd remember an umbrella she'd left on a bus in Chicago in 1961. The recollection of it still left her inconsolable.

I guess she figured people could look out for themselves, but things—things were always getting lost and never turning up again. As if once out of circulation, they couldn't find their way back by themselves into the evasive loop of use.

I thought of the doll's heads that would wash up under the boardwalk at Asbury Park, the lengths of string, underpant elastic, plastic cup bottoms, tennis socks. Things from ocean's limbo coming back as enigmatic bits of trash. Nothings, nothings.

When the wave took me I must have been about five, and I remember standing near the shoreline looking down at my feet under water, two toeless refracted blobs of dough on rubbery sea-stalks. Then the light was all green and my body turning in the water's long soft suck, the huge green tongue of the sea moving over me tasting, testing.

In the car on the way to the Jersey shore my sister and I would play *If You Could Come Back as Anything*.

"If you could come back as anything, what would it be?"

Fox cub, racehorse, baby whale. Along the roadside the dirt under the bush pines would begin to mix with white sand as we approached the beach. *A dolphin. A gazelle.* My father told us that sand came from rocks, that beaches were nothing but huge piles of eroded land. *The McMurtry's dog. A flea on the McMurtry's dog. A microbe on the flea.* It seemed strange to me that the fresh white talc along the edges of the earth stood for the remains of something, was a thing worn down and dead and not the happy harbinger of summer, the white spoor that signaled we were getting close.

"If I could come back as anything, I'd come back as God."

"Shut up. You're so dumb you'd come back as a rock."

"You're so dumb you'd come back as a roll of toilet paper."

"You'd come back as Christina Fenucci's underpants."

Christina Fenucci was our babysitter, a fast girl of sixteen who teased her hair so high it looked like she'd just gotten out of electroshock.

"Shut up."

"*You* shut up."

"You're so dumb—"

"You're so dumb you'd probably forget and come back as yourself."

Last year the man I was with and I went on vacation to Lake Como with friends, a couple approaching their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. They had broken up and reunited so often in that time that the air between them seemed thick as scar tissue. During the whole trip they never touched. I wondered whether each time they ventured back together they truly meant to be new people, more loyal spouses, to try again, to come back better. Or was it each infidelity that promised them the hope of becoming someone else, the desire to try life all over again?

I would run in the early mornings on the road that curved like silver piping along the lake's shore. Near Bellagio there was a hospital for the lame, and in the still dawn light the nuns would take the cripples out for exercise on the beach, piloting them slowly, gently touching an elbow or holding a gnarled hand, their habits pinned up to their knees so they too could feel the cool surf on their toes. Near them, a lone bodybuilder out for his morning's worship took his physique to the water's edge and without a ripple cut the glassy lake's surface.

The man I was with swam like that. In the afternoons we would wander down to the small pier near our hotel, and he would stand for a moment examining the hills in the distance, blue as a new bruise. Then he would enter the water smoothly without looking back and begin to swim, striking out, as he did in most things, alone and with graceful self-sufficiency. He had divorced for me, had left behind another life, yet sometimes I felt that the moment I had turned to grasp him, he had disappeared through my arms like smoke. I remember the look of his head, varnished by the waves, taking the lake like a bobbin stitching a rippling blue fabric, dipping and rising rhythmically, growing smaller.

When word came that a barge had broken up on the Rhine in that winter of 1943, my mother, they said, put on her swimsuit in the freezing dark and dove into that numbing current to drag back a crate of candle tallow they ended up cooking with like grease. Maybe the war explained my mother's attachment to

things.

I can imagine her at that age—pert, pinup-pretty—looting under searchlights. There's a photograph of us on the beach near Cape May, worlds and lives later, my mother sitting on a blanket with my sister and me, just toddlers. She is tanned, made up, with her permanent wave and starlet smile, holding us by the arms. But our faces are inexplicable figure-eights of tearfulness, our fingers splayed, squirming. I have a straw sombrero halfway off my head, like a dwarf Mexican bandit, a cartoon of misery. But my mother seems oblivious. She is smiling broadly for the camera, and she is holding us so tightly you can see where her fingers leave white dots.

When the wave took me it lifted me gently, held me up so softly in its curled dark fist. I remember opening my eyes underwater and seeing a wall of green glass between me and the day, a substance like amber in which all sorts of things were suspended—fronds of kelp, a child's shoe, my mother's umbrella, bits of shell and cork, and me—waiting to be deposited again as something else. A dolphin, a jellyfish, a whale. The big palm of water nestled me for what seemed a long time before it turned and, with the force of disdain, slammed me against the churning sand so that I tasted blood in my mouth, gave me back to the hard world.

No one had seen anything. I threw up seawater like a puppy and got to my feet. Up on the beach my mother was reading her magazines, my father dozing beside her. Everything was the same and everything was changed. My sister was right: I had gone and come back as myself. But it was something anyway, to be staggering up that beach on rubber legs, happy as anything to be back.

Misty Museum

The outer store of the Misty Museum on Chincoteague Island is lined with shelves that hold paperweights and quilted pot holders and snow domes and the famed Ponytails taffy in the soft color of Easter eggs. Shelf after shelf sags with Marguerite Henry's books about Misty and her numerous descendants; miniature flocked horses prance and paw, and every one of the Breyer's series of collectible horses stabled in their cellophane-windowed boxes awaits a small buyer. And of course, there are hundreds of sweating, whining children who want everything.

In the small anteroom that connects the store to the outside stable and arena stands the real Misty—preserved and stuffed—shut up behind a false paddock rail. Insert one dollar in quarters into a slot on the wall, push a flat black button and step back to listen while Misty first whickers hello and then talks directly to you. Adjoining this small room is a wooden ramp that leads to an equally small stable where Chincoteague dwarf ponies all live in separate stalls secured by what look like swinging Dutch doors. The ponies' name plates are all slightly ominous: Spunky and Cranky, Pancho Villa and Spud. Beneath each plaque is a hand-lettered index card giving further warning, i.e. "Careful! Spud bites!" or "Cranky is as Cranky does." All of the ponies' heads are turned firmly away from the public, many of their noses burrowed deep into a corner of the pen. Six hard little rumps with squat haunch muscles like barrels twitch irritably. Pancho wears a flat straw Borsolina hat and his ears stick straight up out of it. Snorting, he conveys annoyance in the same way a prissy matron tosses her head.

For an additional two bucks you can stay for the thrice daily show, so of course, with kids clamoring "stay stay stay" everybody does. That means shuffling along the straw-strewn paddock floor past the ponies' malodorous stalls to a tiny open arena. Two tiers of metal bleachers blistered by sun sit to the right of a small ring, and the audience is seated amidst an upsurge of groans and shrieks and the squirms of scorched flesh. All heads turn to the right as tinny music is piped in. Pancho, in the lead, trots the shaggy troupe out. He puts the ponies through

their paces: canting a wide circle, then tighter counterclockwise circles; now ponies paw the earth with hard little hooves; then ponies count to ten by nodding their heads in time to Pancho's patting foot. Cranky lets go a stream, and the stench of urine in heat is hard to bear. But that misdeed livens up all the kids, who shriek and point and giggle. Next equine trick: six ponies rise on dwarfed back legs (so foreshortened by plump muscle they could be turkeys popping out of the pan), and twelve hooves paddle the air. Pancho's grim mouth flecks with the foam of responsibility. The music swells and ponies glumly stand again, and in an Escher stair-step effect scrabble their forelegs onto adjoining rumps; tiny Spud in the rear barely hangs on, and he casts a walleye around as if to ask the audience: "God, when will it end?" Wild applause as ponies trot the ring again—it's the size of a large wading pool—then briskly make their way back to the stalls where they hastily chomp apple slices or the sweet feed now available for sale—50 cents the pack. It is now that one notices how chunky all the ponies are, in addition to being very short. They are no longer miniature and petite, but have over time moved into the equine version of pudgy sumos.

Our son begs to hear stuffed Misty talk once again so we sigh, pay the dollar, and press her button on. Misty neighs (do I detect resignation?) and repeats her history, the mysterious and wonderful tale of the wild ponies of Chincoteague. Misty's voice is high and light and vaguely British. The tape is old and its speed unreliable. Sometimes her words slow and a word like "sea oats" becomes a sound impossibly sonorous—seeaaaaoooaats, she draws. At other times Misty's clipped scratched voice has a desperate edge—think a schoolmarm spy making a call that's sure to be monitored. Every now and again in the middle of the frightening story of horses being herded into a ship's hold and slipping the ebb and swell of sea, the horror of wooden vessels cracking apart in the storm, and the fury of wild waves that push the ponies to this new world, Misty neighs. It is a sweet sound, a full heh heh heh from the back of her sawdust stuffed neck. You'd expect Misty to stamp her small foot, or jingle a collar bell now and again at the endless repetition of her tale, but she stands still in the spirit of all statues, dignified in her immobility, grounded in her place in history.

This elevator-sized enclosure is merely dry straw strewn over brown household linoleum, the railing is wide and burnished like a bar in an Irish tavern. "Too bad," you think on this hot afternoon, "that Misty's not a bartender, you could order a beer." It's sweltering in this enclosed space and the tape is running down—you can tell because underneath the pony's pipe

of history is the hiss of dissolving reel. Misty's back can no longer be patted, or her neck caressed, since so many children have loved her almost piebald. The sign above her head does not warn like the signs about the real ponies on the island: Caution. Ponies kick and bite. Here a girlish looping script that might have been written by Misty herself implores, "Please no touching Misty. She's losing her coat."

A last soprano heh heh heh and then the final hiss of rewind. The little space is quiet. Misty's head is tilted slightly towards the railing, her visible eye is the color of dark honey. She might be an Appaloosa, she is brown and white and shaggy, and you notice that her little hooves are shiny as patent leather, as if they've been shoe polished. Your six-year-old son is as close to Misty's head as the paddock railing will allow. He is whispering something to that pony. You edge to hear what, and he hunches his shoulders in a way that means "Go Away." For a while you lean against the door jamb that leads to the gift shop and wonder if you'll be able to get out without another box of taffy, or another plastic container of horses, none bigger than your thumb. Your boy continues to whisper into Misty's ear and you see his hidden hand has slipped inside the pen where he's stealthily stroking her front flank. His secret message to Misty has the same odd whisk of the tape that spoke her sad history to him. "Oh my Misty," he says sighing and straightens up. "See you next year."

But next year the Misty Museum is gone. Misty herself you hear has been commandeered, taken somewhere—who knows where?—to be with all the Henry materials. For one wild moment you recall Roy Rogers had Trigger stuffed; maybe he wanted the stuffed Misty as a companion? No one knows where the performing ponies are. Who would take Cranky? Spunky? Or Spud? You could imagine that Pancho might be all right. He was resourceful, he'd been a leader; he could become a Little Person's companion; or join a combo canine-equine corps, a cop's companion. You can just see Pancho trotting and biting at the same time, rearing up on his gnarled legs to feint in air. But Spud, who barely hung on? Who would ever take him?

Your son, surprisingly, is not bereft. He's grown thinner this past year, lost two front teeth and inexplicably grown fuzzy on his arms and legs. Two days before, in the car on the way to the island, he confessed he thought he might be becoming a werewolf. The three of you stand in dense humid August island heat, a triumvirate of mother, father, son, on the plywood ramp that leads to the museum's chained front door. It's hard to take in. The physical plant is all still there, even the new sign of just

last summer: Misty Museum, it simply says, and in each corner is cameoed an artist's version of each horse—Pancho, of course, wearing his rakish straw hat.

"Oh well," your husband says, "things close. Things change."

"Let's go to Dream Cream," your boy begs and so you all crunch across the oyster shell and gravel drive to where the car waits baking in the heat. Another landmark gone, another place, another memory, you think.

A few years later on a rainy Saturday when you're arranging years of photographs, you come across one taken on that final sojourn. Your son poses in front of that barred door pointing west as though that is where the ponies have fled; his legs are impossibly spindly, a bandage is on his right knee.

"What was it that you whispered to Misty that day?" you ask your boy and he turns his emerging adolescent face to you—it is both puzzled and blank. "I did that?" he asks and runs his fingers dramatically through his own hair.

Abundance

I wish the queen could see, the ultra-

violet flowers, the compass
sun. The world offers abundance,

a type of return. Lilies

return, the night, the same lily
yesterday, I taste it still
on my tongue. We chased a child once

who swung a stick too close, chased her
to the river. It seems so

unlikely now.

If we sting we die, we don't survive
our anger.

Withheld

Sometimes
it happens, one morning apple blossoms
refuse, we hover
the tree, the odor wafts,

tight fists we cannot pry. What is withheld
pushes us to frenzy, as if the tree

has forgotten everything. Even

the rose, plush velvet, today—
a thousand doors impossibly sealed.

We know what awaits. The air

smells of rain, the wind pushes us
rudderless, we bang off buds,
but the hive wants nectar, so we keep on,

blind, fight over beer

spilled in the grass. Tomorrow
it may happen,

the rose may call us back.

A Flat One

You have no idea how depressed I get
thinking about quilts.
I used to have one on my bed
the color of concrete.

My mother has been making quilts for years,
lining her trailer like a funeral barge.
When I visit her I feel I am falling
into a Samuel Beckett stage.

I know there must be fellowship
in working on a quilt,
scraps from everyday life stitched together
to intimate design.

But I can't stop thinking a girl can be
left alone under the slabs,
after the fingers have gone home
with their rings.

When I was 13, lying in the sun
was my least favorite thing to do.
I would look through the hair of my underarm
at boys playing ball in the surf.

I would let the sand sift through my toes
the way thread slides from a bobbin,
but nothing was going up and down,
and I had hoped to be lively.

Montgomery County Jail, Virginia

Between hyacinth and hawthorn
April lies locked.
If you look from your cell
each year you can note
the same unvaried procession:
redbud, violet, dogwood, cherry,
phlox, wisteria, forget-me-not.
Never have poppies bloomed in April
nor quince held on till May.
The outbreak happens every year,
as punctual as breakfast from a slot.

Insert Rabbit Here

When the neighbors first got a rabbit, the woman thought it was cute. It was a bunny then. A white baby rabbit in Brooklyn. Adorable, fluffy and round like a powder puff.

These were not neighbors the woman and her husband had a good track record with. When these neighbors first moved in next door two years earlier and had the front of their attached brick row house cleaned, they didn't bother to warn the woman and her husband. Red muddy water soaked the front of both their houses, so afterward the woman had to wash all her front windows. Red water leaked under the man and woman's front door and wrecked their hall rug, so they had to replace it. Then the neighbors rented a jackhammer and drilled out their basement to make it deeper. They drilled night and day for fourteen days until the woman threatened to call the police. The two families didn't speak to each other for several months after that. Finally they formed a truce. The man and woman nodded and said hello when they passed the neighbors on the street, and the neighbors nodded back.

The man and woman were still disturbed by the appearance and treatment of the neighbors' little girl. Sometimes they observed the girl, who was only about five years old, playing alone behind the iron fence that guarded the neighbors' front stoop. Once, the child was allowed to play there for over an hour early one morning although she had obviously soiled herself. The little girl stood in a puddle of her own urine inside the neighbors' gate for a long time. Sometimes the man and woman heard the child screaming for hours on the other side of their shared wall. But children often scream and wet themselves. Still, the man and woman didn't grow to like their new neighbors. They avoided them. All the first year the new neighbors worked furiously to remodel their home.

Early one morning as the man and woman were leaving for work, a garbage truck came down the street. A large pile of debris from the neighbors' renovation was stacked at the curb in front of the neighbors' house. A small olive-green car pulled up behind the garbage truck just as it stopped to pick up the neighbors' trash. The man and woman watched as a fat man waved over the neighbor man from his front stoop.

"Is that asbestos you're trying to throw out with your regular garbage?" the fat man asked, not bothering to extricate himself from his tiny green car. He pointed to a four-foot-high pile of white shredded plaster material on the curb. "When I drive back around this block in fifteen minutes, that asbestos better be gone. Did you know I could slap a fine on you for a hundred thousand dollars for that?" From his car window, the red-faced garbage inspector waved a small green book with a hard cover. The official-looking olive-green book matched the inspector's green car, and the green shirt that stretched tightly across his fat shoulders. Then he drove off. The neighbor man grinned and hung his head.

When the neighbors got their pet rabbit a few months later, they put it out in their backyard. A single waist-high chain link fence divided the man and woman's backyard from the neighbors'. The woman was surprised when she first saw the bunny. It looked like something out of a magic trick. Its white fur glowed in the evening air.

"Look, honey," the woman said to her husband. "The neighbors got a rabbit."

"I know," he said. "I saw."

When the woman saw the rabbit the next day in her own yard she was extra surprised. How did it get over here, she wondered? She caught the rabbit by chasing it around for half an hour before dinner, then put it back over the fence. *Please keep your rabbit in your own backyard* she wrote in a note that she slipped in the neighbors' mailbox. That evening she and her husband examined the fence that they shared with the neighbors, but they couldn't find any openings that looked big enough for the rabbit to have sneaked through.

The man and woman didn't see the rabbit again for several weeks after that. Then a cage appeared—a white plastic box the size of a picnic cooler with screens on the sides and the door. Now sometimes the rabbit was out of the cage and hopping around the neighbors' yard, and sometimes it was nowhere to be seen. When the woman couldn't see the rabbit, she assumed it was in the cage. One day when she came home from work, the rabbit was in her own yard again. This time she looked up the neighbors' last name in the phone book—she knew their last name by now. The woman called and got the mother.

"Please come get your rabbit out of our backyard," the woman said.

The neighbor woman came over with her little girl. They chased the rabbit around the man and woman's yard for half an hour, squashing the new plants the woman had planted recently.

"Please look out for my plants," the woman said to the neighbor girl who the woman suspected was slightly retarded from neglect and abuse, or maybe just deaf. The girl was pretty but responded little when the woman spoke to her. The girl ran around in a pink dress and stepped on the baby plants.

The woman felt afraid of the rabbit. She had caught it by herself that first time, but now she noticed the sly way the rabbit evaded them, standing still cutely as if posing for a photograph, then slipping deftly behind the steps that led up to the deck. A few more minutes and one more plant stepped on by the retarded girl and the woman got fed up. For an instant, she forgot to be afraid of the rabbit's long front teeth and grabbed the animal by the scruff of its neck. The rabbit squirmed in her grip but couldn't escape. The woman was determined.

"Here, take it." She thrust the pet into the hands of the neighbor woman while the retarded girl stood by not saying anything. "Good-bye," the woman insisted to the retarded girl and her mother.

"I hate those neighbors and their rabbit," the woman told her husband that night at dinner. "If that rabbit ever comes over here again..." she threatened to the broccoli on her plate. Her husband had turned on the TV with the remote and was watching the news.

One evening when the man and woman were sitting on their deck after dinner, they saw the retarded girl playing alone in her backyard. The neighbors' yard was bordered on the opposite side by the back wall of a large church. The girl picked up her pet rabbit and threw it headfirst against the brick wall of the church. The man and woman ran down into their yard and told the girl not to do that. She stared at them blankly, then went inside. The rabbit hopped away to the far corner of the neighbors' yard.

Then it was winter and the man and woman didn't see the rabbit or the neighbors for months. In the spring, the neighbors built a one-room extension with a deck on top to match the extension and deck on the back of the man and woman's house—same size and height, only cheaper. The cinder block extension appeared in days. The deck sprang up on top of the neighbors' extension almost overnight like a big blond mushroom. A few days after it was complete—stairs running from the neighbors' yard up to their new deck—there was the rabbit outside the glass door on the woman's own deck. A surprising flash of white on the serene May morning. The rabbit had gotten very large over the winter. The neighbors must have been feeding it nonstop in that cage.

The woman opened the door to the deck quickly. She wanted to grab the rabbit but it dashed away, crossing back easily to the neighbors' deck and disappearing underneath it. The geography of the man and woman's narrow city house was strange, with the kitchen on the second floor, and their bedroom in the ground-floor extension. The deck sat on top of their extension, accessible from the kitchen by a few steps that led up to a door. The woman went inside the kitchen again, closing the screen but leaving the glass door open. She stood at the counter and ate her oatmeal, keeping an eye on the deck to see if the animal would reappear. Her husband came into the kitchen.

"The rabbit was on our deck," the woman announced.

"Really," the man said, crossing over to the door. "Hey, there it is, and it's eating those flowers."

The woman looked outside and saw the rabbit fastening its mouth around one of the tender purple tulips she had grown in a pot on the deck. In the next instant she was outside but the rabbit was gone. She bent to inspect her flowers. One or two blooms were missing. The rabbit had gobbled them up. "Fucking rabbit," she said.

Her husband was kneeling on the steps in the doorway, peering under the deck. "The rabbit's under our deck," he said.

The woman got down on her knees beside her husband and peered under the deck. There was the rabbit. It sat hunched in a far corner, far out of reach. It looked determined to stay there. The man got a long golden carrot from the fridge and placed it under the edge of the deck. The rabbit didn't come forward for the carrot.

The woman's husband had to leave for work. The woman was grading exams at home that day. Every half hour or so she came into the kitchen from her office to see if the rabbit had touched the carrot, or the leaf of tender, green lettuce she put out next. But no. The rabbit sat firm, tucked under the deck, far out of reach. All morning she checked on the rabbit but it didn't budge. She tried going out and stomping heavily across the deck to get the rabbit to move, but when she looked under the deck again the rabbit still sat in the exact same position. She noticed marks along one edge of the deck and realized the rabbit had started gnawing on the wood. She wasn't getting much work done.

She called a friend at the friend's office and asked for advice. The friend said she was busy and could only talk a minute. The woman explained her rabbit problem to the friend. "Rabbits are rodents," the friend said. "Think of the rat."

"Thanks," the woman said. A plan began to form in her

mind as soon as she hung up. She was going to get rid of this rabbit. She was going to get rid of it for good. She would kill it. But not in the noisy, public way most rabbits are killed—shot by hunters, or hacked to death by regular butchers. No, she would do it quietly. She would poison this pet and the neighbors would never find out.

After she made a baloney sandwich for lunch and ate it, the woman searched the kitchen cupboards, looking for rat or mouse poison. She found an unopened package of poison pellets under the sink with the dried-out, old sponges. She read the label on the package, but it only discussed how to use the poison for mice, not even rats. Rabbits were not mentioned. The woman decided this poison would have to do, at least for now. She filled a small dish with turquoise pellets and set it under the edge of the deck, next to the wilted lettuce leaf and carrot. When she knelt down to check in the doorway, Mr. Bunny still hadn't moved. She decided to give the rabbit a bowl of water too, and pushed it under the wooden planking along with the poison, lettuce and carrot, and went back to work at her desk.

Half an hour later, the woman went upstairs again. The rabbit was at the dish of poison, gobbling it up like the greedy pig she knew he was. When the dish was half-empty, the rabbit hopped away slowly but steadily to the corner under the far edge of the deck. When the woman stood up from peering under the deck, she looked across her backyard at the row of other houses behind hers. What if someone over there was home and noticed her repeatedly squatting in the doorway and peering under her deck?

This time on her way to her desk, she remembered the bathroom window. The bathroom was next to the kitchen. Because of the deck right outside, they always kept the bathroom window shade down. She went in and raised the shade and saw that, yes, the gap between the roof and the deck came at the same level as the bottom of the window. If she squatted on the bathroom floor beside the toilet, with the bottom of the window at chest-height, she could see under the deck. She raised the window and peered into the dimly lit space. There was the rabbit, sitting in the far corner. Was it watching her? She could observe the rabbit from this spot without being so visible.

She went to the kitchen doorway and quickly withdrew the dish of poison pellets and the water bowl from under the deck, pausing in the kitchen to refill the dish with more poison pellets, and throwing out the carrot and wilted lettuce in the trash. In the bathroom, she pushed the poison and the water into their new position under the deck, where she could check on them

discreetly.

She had never killed an animal before, not even by accident while driving. The label on the package said it would take up to 48 hours for the poison to take effect, and that was with mice. How many times bigger than a mouse was a rabbit? And this was a big rabbit.

From her kneeling position on the bathroom floor, she slid her hand under the deck and shook the rabbit's dish of turquoise poison pellets. At the rattling sound, the rabbit eyed her with pink eyes from its dark corner. Then it hopped trustingly forward. The rabbit came all the way up to the dish, pushed its whiskered nose into the pellets, and began to eat obligingly. It seemed to like the poison pellets, but didn't touch the water.

The woman thought of reaching between the deck and the roof while the rabbit was sitting near the window, and grabbing it by the neck. But when she raised her hand to slide it out the window, the rabbit looked up from thrusting its nose into the poison and started to back away. The woman lowered her hand. Besides, she hadn't forgotten the rabbit's long, yellow front teeth.

She sat back on her heels and watched the rabbit eat. It glanced at her between mouthfuls, twitching its nervous nose. She wondered what would happen when the rabbit died. Would it just curl up, lie down and stop moving? Would it regurgitate something half-digested? Would some turquoise liquid drain from its half-open mouth onto the tar paper roof? Would some magic elixir, essence of life, drain out of the rabbit? From where or what did the essence of life emanate that filled and billowed up the being of this one small animal, or of anyone? And what did death look like?

Again, after the rabbit polished off half the dish of poison, it hopped back to the far corner and flopped on its side in the dark. The woman felt like a character in a Hitchcock movie and slunk away from the bathroom window to her desk, after making sure to refill the dish with more poison.

The rabbit didn't eat any more poison after that, although the woman returned to the window several more times to check. The rabbit must have gotten tired of the pellets. When the woman shook the dish, the rabbit only stared at her with its pink eyes. At six p.m. the woman's husband returned home. The woman was crouched on the bathroom floor between the toilet and the window.

"What are you doing?" the man asked.

"The rabbit's still under the deck," the woman said. She explained how she'd been feeding the rabbit poison, and how it

had eaten two half-servings of pellets, but they hadn't taken effect yet.

"This stuff takes longer to work than that," the man said. "And it'll take more than that to kill a rabbit." He picked up the cardboard mouse poison package and read the instruction panel. "I have an idea," he said, handing the package back to her and going downstairs.

When he returned, the woman was in the kitchen making dinner. The man had changed from his work clothes into jeans and a T-shirt. He carried a blue plastic storage box with a matching snap-on lid. The woman recognized the box as the one she and her husband had used several times in the past for holding food on camping trips, and then later put their worms in when they tried unsuccessfully to compost all their food garbage with worms. For that experiment, the man had punched holes in the bottom of the sturdy box and in its lid. Now, though, the air holes would make this a perfect box for holding the rabbit, the man explained.

"You have to catch it first," the woman said.

"Just wait," said the man.

They finished making dinner together. When the woman turned around with a pot of water in her hands, there was the rabbit. "It's here," she said.

The man and woman popped out the door onto the deck. The rabbit had vanished. "It must be under the deck again," said the woman.

"It'll be back," said the man. "I think it likes us." He put the blue plastic box on the bench at the edge of the deck and sat beside it. The woman stood nearby holding the lid. The box stood open, waiting. The man and woman talked quietly together about their day. The woman pointed out where the rabbit had chewed on their deck. She pictured how the man would catch the rabbit behind the neck in his hand. The rabbit would kick once or twice, then hang down uselessly in the air, its white body going slack and heavy, but still solid like a rabbit's foot lucky charm. How would they ever lure the rabbit out from under the deck though? The woman stood still, thinking. Then she saw it. The sly fellow poked its nose out from under the side of the deck, getting ready to slip back over to its own deck, trying to evade capture.

"There it is," she whispered.

"Okay, get ready," the man said.

Ready for what, the woman thought. The man was standing up, then he was up and over the railing of the deck, balancing one story up on the rim of the roof, balancing in his old sneakers.

The rabbit was out from under the deck, also on the roof rim, about to hop over to the roof rim of the neighbors' extension. The man crouched down and grabbed the rabbit by the neck, and the rabbit—it hissed. A big exhale, a ferocious sound, almost a growl. But still the rabbit hung down when the man lifted it, and kicked in the air from the man's hand. A wild animal, a broken house pet, an escaped rabbit. Now caught.

"Get the box, get the box!" the man barked. The woman shoved the box toward him along the bench on her side of the railing. She held the lid ready, a mouth waiting to snap shut. The man lowered the rabbit quickly into the box, and the woman snapped on the lid.

The woman couldn't believe it—they had the rabbit. What had she expected? That the rabbit would spring up, shoving the lid aside as they tried to trap it. But once it was caught, the rabbit had gone passively into the box. Her husband climbed back over the railing. The woman felt conscious that anyone in those other buildings could have witnessed the kidnapping.

"We better take it inside, don't you think?" she said. She lifted the box in both hands and felt the weight of the rabbit inside. Her husband opened the door and she carried the box into the kitchen, set it on the floor.

Inside the box, the rabbit was quiet. The woman felt worried about the rabbit, it was so quiet. She found it strange to feel so much concern for the rabbit now that she held it prisoner, since she'd been trying all day to poison it. Would the rabbit die on them now that they had it?

"Why is the rabbit so quiet?" she asked her husband. "Is it the poison?"

"I think this rabbit's just used to being put in a cage," the man said.

They ate dinner in the kitchen, the door still open to the deck, the air outside cool and moist and growing dark. As they ate, they talked about what to do with the rabbit, still in the box in the middle of the kitchen floor. They decided they couldn't just release the rabbit in a nearby park because a white rabbit would stand out. The neighbors might put up signs around the neighborhood about the missing pet, and the rabbit might be found. Could they give the rabbit to a pet store? Would the neighbors go to a nearby pet store to get a new rabbit? What if they found their old rabbit there? Would they also find out who brought the rabbit there? Would a pet store even take a second hand rabbit? Should they take it to an animal shelter? That seemed a bitter end. What should they do with the rabbit? Now that they had it, it wasn't so easy to get rid of.

"I hope we're not going to all this trouble to get rid of this rabbit just so the neighbors will get another one," the woman said.

"Whatever we do, we better do it soon because when the neighbors get home they might look for the rabbit," the man said.

The man and woman cleared the table and washed the dishes. "Maybe we should just give the rabbit back to them," the man said, handing the woman the plates to dry, "and tell them they have to take care of it and keep it out of our yard."

The woman imagined for a moment—or tried to—carrying the box over to the neighbors' door and ringing, and when the neighbors appeared, along with their retarded girl, announcing to them: Here's your rabbit. You can have it back, but only if you promise to keep it out of our yard, and to not let that girl throw it headfirst into the brick wall behind your house.

"No," the woman said, putting away a plate. "I can't imagine that would work. The rabbit would just be back over here tomorrow."

"Sshh!" the man said, turning off the water. He flicked off the light.

"What is it?" the woman whispered.

"Listen. The neighbors are looking for the rabbit." The man and woman stood in the dark kitchen and listened. It felt safer to have the light out now. Safer, but also more frightening. Standing in the dark room, the rabbit waiting quietly in the box at her feet, the woman could hear the neighbors outside. Through the screen door the woman heard the neighbor man out back. He was talking loudly. She heard the sound of someone, or more than one person, crashing around. People talking loudly to each other in the still night air. They must be looking for the rabbit. Why were they so concerned about the rabbit now that it was missing? They never seemed to notice when it was missing before.

"They're going to come over here in a minute," the man said, picking up the box.

The woman felt disbelief. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm going to hide the rabbit in the basement."

While he was gone, the woman went to the bathroom window and brought in the things from under the deck, the dish of poison and the water. She washed out the bowls, and threw the rest of the evidence in the trash. She thought about how hard it would be to ever really murder anyone, and get away with it. All the evidence proliferated so quickly and easily. And this had only been a rabbit. When the man came back from stowing the

rabbit, the front doorbell rang.

"You get it," the woman said.

"What should I say? Should I say we have their rabbit?"

"No, just say we haven't seen it."

The woman hung back in the hall while her husband went to the door. She could hear the rise and fall of the two men's voices without understanding their words. "What did you say?" she asked after her husband shut the door.

"Just that we'd tell them if we saw their rabbit." The man and woman stood in their dark downstairs hall. "Listen," the man said, "I know what we should do." Below them in the basement, underground, was the rabbit, waiting in the box. The man reminded the woman of a place they had driven to once. A nature preserve. About an hour away. They had gone walking there. A rabbit would be happy there. Happier than in a nearby city park, or pet store, or animal shelter.

They waited until the neighbors were no longer outside looking. The man got the rabbit box from the basement and carried it to the car. In the darkness, the neighbors would not so easily spot the man leaving his house with a large box in his arms. The woman waited a few minutes then went to the car. She got in the front passenger seat. The rabbit box was on the back seat. The man had the engine running and they took off, the man driving. They drove on the highway. Traffic was light since it was late. In the dark car, lights flashed over them—red, yellow, green, red. Flash, flash. The woman grew sleepy. They talked little. Is this a good or a bad thing we are doing to the rabbit? What would someone else have done differently? Would the rabbit even live long in the nature preserve? It was a pet, not a wild rabbit. Or would the poison take effect after all?

The motion of the car soothed the woman. She tried to keep her eyes open, to look out for their exit. They rode for half an hour, then left the highway. It was another long way down a neon-lined busy street. Adult video stores butted up against nail salons and Shop Rites. Why were so many people out so late in their cars? What brand of loneliness occupied their late night activities, their car trips across this neon suburban desert? The rabbit was silent in the box.

"Is it dead?" the woman asked.

The man said he didn't think so. The road out to the nature preserve was quiet. No other cars, the turn-off to the parking lot deserted. The woman thought the place felt creepy. She wouldn't want to be left out here alone. The sign said NO PARKING AFTER SUNDOWN. It was long after sundown now. Not even a single car swished by out on the road.

"Let's do it," the man said and got out of the car. He was all business. The woman had to rush to keep up with him. By the time she stood beside him on the pavement, he had already opened the back car door and opened the rabbit box. He held the rabbit in his arms. He seemed to hold the animal affectionately, cradling it almost. Like a baby. But the rabbit looked scared, its clawed feet splayed up against the man's chest. Its ears stood up alertly. Could it tell the vast space around it? This was not the neighbors' backyard.

"Where?" the man said, looking around.

The woman gestured with her chin. "There," and they walked over to the side of the parking lot—a grassy field beside a marked path that led back into some trees. The woman vaguely remembered hiking there once. Was it two years ago already?

"This looks good," she said, and the man set the rabbit down in the grass. Immediately, it stood up on its hind legs as the man backed away. The rabbit's ears lifted all the way up on top of its head like antennae turning this way and that, its nose twitching. It looked not excited, but afraid. It started to hop toward the man and woman at the edge of the parking lot, not away from them into the field.

"No," the man said aloud and stepped into the rabbit's path. The woman saw now in the light of the one streetlight a large wet spot on the front of the man's T-shirt.

"What's that?" she pointed. "Did the rabbit—?"

"Yea, it peed on me." The man was still blocking the rabbit's path. "What should we do?" he asked. "Should we move it somewhere else?"

The man pointed to another grassy area on the other side of the dimly lit parking lot, but the woman said that was no better, no different. The rabbit would be dead by morning anyway, she thought. It stood out in this natural setting. A foreigner. So white it glowed in the darkness on the perimeter of the yellow ring of streetlight.

The man and woman got back in the car, the man driving again. The woman kept her window rolled down partway to stay awake. They drove away, their faces pointed forward. Forward, not looking back. The rabbit, left behind, would have to fend for itself. They drove away, cool air from the open window washing over their faces.

Pater Noster

This garden is a betrayal. It has nothing
to do with me—the brooding columbine,
anemones measuring the wind, the rose
involved, roes uninterrupted

in their browse through rows of indigo.
Cardinals hinge on air, draw flight
in a thread of scarlet. Fishpools gaze
at clouds, full of clouds

like fish and fish-like clouds, golden
in sunlight, finning the double blue.
The wallflower flings pale kisses at the sky.
The silver maple flaps its silver at any passerby.

Pater Noster

This garden is a miracle
Aphids dropped with April, gorgeous emeralds
with teeth. They preen against the petals,
distill sweet sap to honeydew.

Down bark, down fencepost, tazzled branches
dart and pull their braiding shadows, a slapstick
of diffraction. Downwind the barnstormers
perfect their spectacle—stiff cloth, wood

prop, 2-cycle engine ascending like a prayer
to flame out, hang breathless, cartwheel
over and power swooping earthward.
It's all for show, the windswept scarf

from forties matinees, the smoky trail,
the drama of the stall. The pilot streaks
to level, tilts a greeting as he buzzes
overhead, milks the throttle, rolls

headlong into a spin, whining, frictive, the form
of glory, and gloriously sunstruck. Seasonal
the ritual, pinching aphids as I kneel
upturned, squinting sunward for the sleek

daredevil flight, for the promise of the climb,
of sunlit wings, of plain things charged
and fulgent, of one perfect
performance, of *earth as it is in heaven*.

Rain Through High Windows by Edward Haworth Hoepfner

In "The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery," William K. Wimsatt, Jr., conceives of "a scale of structures having at one end logic, the completely reasoned and abstracted, and at the other some form of madness or surrealism, matter or impression unformed and undisciplined..." According to Wimsatt, Romantic poetry is a step away from the logic of the neoclassical poets and "toward the directness of sensory presentation...." Two hundred years after the Romantic era and decades after a direct encounter with surrealism, it is fair to say that a great deal of contemporary lyric poetry has moved further on that scale of structures away from logic and toward the surreal. This change should be marked with the monument of a new label. If M.H. Abrams called the greater Romantic lyric a "descriptive-meditative" poem, then the more surreal, image-centered lyric of today is an "expressive-suggestive" poem.

The differences between the descriptive-meditative poem and the expressive-suggestive poem are as follows:

- Whereas, even though it complicates its argumentation with the need to pose that argumentation as a quest, a gradual triangulation, the descriptive-meditative still retains many of the vestiges of logic—for example, its investigations into external circumstance are initial gatherings of premises from which the meditation follows—the expressive-suggestive does not so much argue as much as evoke and echolocate.
- Whereas the two elements of the descriptive-meditative imply separation between perception and thought, the elements of the expressive-suggestive are not so easily distinguished; joined by a pervasive participation, the mind and the matter of the expressive-suggestive are always at work on each other, making each other up.
- Whereas the descriptive-meditative is made up of images and insights, the expressive-suggestive is made up almost completely of images, but Poundian images, those already infused with thought ("an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time").
- Whereas the descriptive-meditative moves slowly to

seductively persuade, the expressive-suggestive is highly mobile in its attempt to scintillate to hypnotize.

* * *

In *Rain Through High Windows*, Edward Haworth Hoepfner often writes in the expressive-suggestive mode. While Hoepfner's work regularly—and, at times, quite engagingly—participates in the more mobile, more surreal promise of the expressive-suggestive image, it struggles when it comes to the difficult task of structuring those images, at times failing to fully enchant.

The use of the expressive-suggestive mode is absolutely fitting for Hoepfner. Hoepfner is a poet transfixed by transformation—often his poems occur in threshold spaces: at windows, in evening, between sleep and wakefulness—and the expressive-suggestive mode allows for easy movement, including dream-like digressions, in these typically reverie-filled realms. "Spring: The North Shore" employs a litany of odd transformations to evoke that season's power to change: "Chilly gods are dropping crutches off / inside the pines, elk and sturgeon, / thundering mares with human eyes. // So the hatching leaves, in full sun..." The poem, "Reading Long," employs the expressive-suggestive mode to register the quick changes in consciousness, the transports, that occur while reading: "All evening, while rain was trailing / fingers off the stern, I have gone on // reading, these pages, glass-bottomed boat, / peering down into a reef, the words / like brighter coral. It seemed that I was // not alone. The light dimmed, the book grew / large, floated in my hand and disappeared..."

The expressive-suggestive mode also works well for Hoepfner's poems that deal with family as those poems do not retrace hierarchical structures of familial relations but instead enact the strange and constant recalibrations of selves that occur in the presence of significant others. More comfortable with the strange idea—"The Child is Father of the Man"—that Wordsworth argued for in his "Immortality Ode," Hoepfner is freer to evoke it imaginatively. Often father and son find themselves in relationship in flux. "Rest" contains an almost Coleridgean meditation on a—sometimes—sleeping son; however, Hoepfner goes further than Coleridge in trying to express the strangeness of there being an other so intimately connected to oneself. "Rest" concludes: ". . . Still, he's startled me / inside his bed, like this night we have, / as if I've caught myself punching // the car's poor radio, and looked up / too

far down the road. He wants to know / if his dreams wake me,
 sometimes, ever. // If he cries out, I tell him, I don't really mind.
 / No, he means, not when he makes noise, / but like this wind,
 soundless at the glass."

The great difficulty in composing a successful expressive-suggestive poem is the arrangement of its images. Because the expressive-suggestive image is itself so complex, it is difficult to put those images together, to make its various glimmerings and refractions hypnotic. Hoepfner's poems sometimes suffer due to this difficulty; at times, their images shift and leap so much that their shimmering amounts only to lack of clarity. This difficulty is most readily apparent in Hoepfner's overuse of a circular structure. Although Hoepfner can use a circular structure's characteristic return at poem's end to revised, initial images to great effect—two of Hoepfner's poems, "Landscape Minus Figures" and "Parallelogram," combine the circle's geometry with different mathematics to create suspense and surprise—the sheer number of poems with circular structures seems to admit to a certain cluelessness about where else the poems might go. After a while, the circular movement seems forced, imposed. In "Eyelid," while on a plane on the way to the funeral of a friend, the poem's speaker describes the ascent through cloud cover into "a sudden brilliance, arctic waste" and then considers its surroundings and imagines the friend in it: "... But nothing lives // on this pole, and no one's dragged her out / some freezing blowhole. That's not her, // lying there, a long carnation on the ice." However, just as this meditation begins it is cut off. The poem turns suddenly to reconsider the airplane, coming to call it—after looking down at the frozen farmland and the city the speaker left which now seems like "a galaxy"—a "deep-sea thing that glows for hunger, / breathes great pressure, death-defying dark." But what's the point of reconsidering the plane? The plane has little to do with the emotional content of the poem, and the final lines simply contain a barrage of new images, foreclosing the poem's greater possibilities.

In one of the strongest poems in his book, "Texts for Wednesday's Class," Hoepfner both approaches a familiar topic, reading, and employs a familiar mode, the expressive-suggestive, in a way fairly unique for him. Rather than establish an occasion or a setting for the organization of that poem's images—a method of organization that can be used by the expressive-suggestive but is really the province of the descriptive-meditative—Hoepfner instead brings together, by listing, disparate images and uses the simple fact of their textuality as the organizing principle. Hoepfner's list is a small

collection of atrocities and accidents—hiding during wartime, medieval torture, a car wreck—made all the more terrifying in their reduction to the status of texts. Hoepfner, though, uses this state of things to advance a strong understanding of the job of the writer and the reader. He concludes: "... but look into the mirror hanging / from the visor hanging where the windshield was. / It too is a hole, through which we must pass our hands." Moving straight into his subject matter and revising his use of the expressive-suggestive so that it participates not so much in the logic of narrative as much as in the freedom of the list, Hoepfner consequently arrives at a new possibility: the possibility that the thresholds his poems are used to dwelling in might also be passed through. This possibility needs to be actualized by Hoepfner for his work to not repeat itself but to break into something new, for the sometimes too well-mannered poems of *Rain Through High Windows* to become instead, in Hoepfner's future work, constantly miraculous.

The Way We Were

The east village glows with slush in early February.

It's Monday & the week seems endless
at the Second Avenue Laundromat, where a girl
with cropped green hair & silver nose ring
sits reading *Portrait of a Lady*, while two waiters
from the Indian restaurant across the street
wash & fold a pile of burgundy tableclothes.

A trace of cardamom & cumin cuts
into the warm, soapy smell of love, which hangs
over all in this place, even the gym queen
who pouts while his boyfriend sorts their Calvins.

When the radio turns to all news,
the Latina laundress stops making change to reach
for the dial & a sad, clear voice fills the room,
which seems to sigh as the present slips away.

The girl with green hair stops reading
to stare at the dryer, thinking of the farm
in Wisconsin where her mother
hangs their sheets out to dry in the wind.

The waiters stop folding to smile
at one another, as if to croon like shiva divas,
while the pouty boy rises to tickle
his boyfriend, who's lipsynching, eyes closed,
remembering their first kiss.

And me with my *Voice*, projecting nostalgia
onto strangers, willing the present
back to memory of wanting to be held
by my father, my desire unnamed,
before boys, before I glimpsed the way I would be.

What can heal the churning shame
of childhood? Only the future forgives,
the image of yourself
beyond the present, which allows you
to smile at strangers listening to Barbra,
whose voice carries me into the winter night
whole & alone & humming.

Close-up of a Couple on a Couch

Creases in his clothes
creases in his flesh
creases in his arteries
The inner walls shrinking
while the outer walls slip and shift flabbily
Pepper grains in the chin-furrows
in the pale ear-basins
the inelastic lobes sagging tits

She sits still
until it is over
holding her breath her tongue curled back
like a fastidious animal
aloof before an old cur
circling and sniffing her

The bald unfevered brow
the eyes anaemic fish
each under a goldrimmed glass dish
fish suffocating on sand
rills of watery blood in their scales
suddenly pressed between the thrusts of her breast

His hands with wormy veins
tremble tentatively climbing her arms
tightening to the round bare bicep
his nails rasp on silk

His palms feel like old cold rubber
but she does not shudder
it is too ludicrous for that

I'm not going to hurt you
Of course he's not
Who could be hurt but him
Juiceless chameleon
dragging his belly through clover

Detected at once he is crunched
by his own steel heel of self-esteem

If I were younger What's the use
I'm older still I reek
against her so-green cheek
And there between beneath
it flips and flaps like a hen's dewlaps
but the stem bends will not swell with its lust
The very breath in my chest
the blood of the pump alloyed
with dust and rust

When we are young the wizard's wand
waves in vain
above our dumb and glossy flesh
though we could use it then
had we the palate precious and fresh
When we are sunken diminished stale
it sometimes seems
(oh memories of embraces
not as they felt but as they would now feel
now that the dams are closing
the torrent choked to a trickle)
that could we rub ourselves in roses
wallow in new-squeezed milk
our gray skin sloppy like a too-large suit
would tense and firm and fit us slim again
and we'd be keen as jack-knives
and arrogant again

His glazed tongue hunts
between her hard bud-lips
for the moisture of youth profuse
A draft of it would she let it flow to him
his last lascivious dregs
grimed with fear
(but for that the more rare)
would turn to sharp wine in his shrunken flask

Purple kiss like a plum
returned to him she would not miss
(the tree is so laden)
But too raw with spring she is
unwilling to admit ripeness
at least for him

She holds her breath waiting
until it is over

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Gail Adams' collection of short fiction *The Purchase of Order* won the Flannery O'Connor Award and has been reissued in paperback. Adams is the Fiction Editor for *Arts & Letters: A Journal of Contemporary Culture*, and an Associate Professor in Creative Writing at West Virginia University.

Christopher Bakken's First book of poems, *After Greece*, won the T.S. Eliot Prize and will be in stores May, 2001. He teaches at Allegheny College in Meadville, P.A.

Tama Baldwin's poems have appeared recently in *Many Mountains Moving*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Spillway*, and *Borderlands*. She lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

Michelle Brockway's work has appeared in *Poets & Writers*, *Working Woman*, and *Mother Jones*, as well as in *Whatever It Takes: Women on Women's Sport* and *Comp and Rhetoric: A Writer's Guide With Readings*. She received her MA in English from the University of Houston and an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College.

Timothy Donnelly is a poetry editor for *Boston Review* and a graduate student in English at Princeton University. He has new poems forthcoming in *Fence*, *Ploughshares*, *TriQuarterly*, and elsewhere.

Nancy Eimers is the author of two collections of poetry, *No Moon and Destroying Angel*. She teaches creative writing at Western Michigan University and in the MFA program at Vermont College.

Charles Flowers received his MFA from the University of Oregon, and his poems have appeared in *Puerto del Sol*, *Indiana Review*, and *Barrow Street*. He lives in New York City.

Nick Flynn's first book of poems is *Some Ether* (Graywolf Press, 2000). The poems herein are from a second collection, *Ultraviolet* (Graywolf Press, 2002). He lives in Provincetown, MA.

Kimberly Johnson's work has appeared recently in *Colorado Review* and *New England Review*. A new collection of poetry, *Leviathan with a Hook*, is forthcoming from Persea Books.

Peter Kessler was born in Boston. He graduated from Yale in 1994, and from there went on to receive an MFA from the University of Arkansas.

He was the recipient of a 1999 Truman Capote Fellowship, and his 2000 Intro Award story, *Elizabethan Principle*, has appeared in the *GSU Review*—or so he has been led to believe. He's currently studying law at Stanford.

Julie Lechevsky's recent poems have appeared in *Crazy Horse*, *Green Mountain Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Hubbub*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Nerve Cowboy* and are forthcoming in *Hanging Loose*, *Pearl*, and *Green Hills Literary Lantern*.

Steven P. Liparulo is a writer and PhD candidate at the University of Houston. He has published reviews of contemporary literature in *War, Literature, and the Arts*, *Mid-American Review*, and *American Book Review*.

Jim Murphy is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Montevallo. His chapbook, *The Memphis Sun*, won the Stan and Tom Wick Poetry Award, and was published in April 2000 by Kent State University Press. His poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from *The Alabama Literary Review*, *Brooklyn Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Mangrove*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Southern Poetry Reivew*, *Tomorrow Magazine*, *Turnstile*, and other journals.

Bradley Paul is a poet and screenwriter living in Baltimore, MD. His works has appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Boston Review*, and other magazines. He has recently produced several short digital films.

Pablo Peschiera has had poems published in *LitRag*, *Poetry Miscellany*, and *Sky*. His interviews have been published in *Third Coast* and *Poetry Miscellany*. He is the Managing Editor at *Gulf Coast*.

Hilary Plattner is the founder and director of Brooklyn Writers, a community-based writing program in Brooklyn, NY. She holds a Master's degree in fiction writing from Columbia University. Her fiction has appeared in *The Brownstone Review*, and her poems have been published in *Fence* and *Bellowing Ark*. She also has poems forthcoming in *Mudfish*, *GSU Review*, *Cider Press Review*, and *Poetry Motel*.

A.J. Rathbun has had poems published in *Crazyhorse*, *Gulf Coast*, *Monster*, *The Poetry Miscellany*, *Pontoon III: An Anthology of Washington State Poets*, *The Sonora Review*, *Weber Studies*, and others. His first book, *Want*, comes out in April 2001, from ZYZZYVA/The Creative Arts Book Company. Currently, he is co-editor of *LitRag*, a Seattle-based literary and arts magazine, which has an online component at www.litrag.com.

Frances Richey teaches yoga and meditation in New York City. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Many Mountains Moving*, *The Cream City Review*, *The Notre Dame Review*, *Poetry Northwest* and *Willow Springs*.

Boyer Rickel is the author of *Arreboles, Poems* (Weslayan/UPNE), and *Taboo*, *Autobiographical Essays* (Wisconsin). He's the assistant director of the University of Arizona Creative Writing Program, and has received a 2001 NEA fellow in poetry.

Jack Ridl is in his 30th year of teaching poetry at Hope College. He has recent work in or forthcoming from *FIELD*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Journal 5 am* and *Chelsea*. He is co-author with Peter Schakel of *Approaching Poetry* (St. Martin's Press).

May Swenson was born in Logan, Utah, in 1919. A major innovator of her generation, Swenson lived much of her life in New York City, though she also taught at a number of universities around the country. She served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and published eight volumes of poems in her lifetime. Three collections have appeared since her death in 1989, including *Nature: Poems Old and New* (1994). Her poem in this issue, which has never been published previously, appears courtesy of the Literary Estate of May Swenson.

Melita Schaum has published poems, essays and stories in such journals as the *Notre Dame Review*, *The Literary Review*, *The Denver Quarterly*, *PRISM International*, and *New York Quarterly*. She currently teaches Modern Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Michigan, Dearborn.

Michael Theune is a poetry editor at *Gulf Coast*. Currently a PhD candidate in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Houston, he has studied at Hope College, the University of Oxford, and the University of Iowa. His work has appeared in *Verse*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The New Republic*.

T. Clayton Wood has recently moved from Iowa to Berkeley in order to pursue his PhD.

Franz Wright's *The Beforelife* was published by Knopf in February 2001. He is also the author of *Ill Lit: Selected and New Poems*. He and his wife Elizabeth live in Waltham, Massachusetts.

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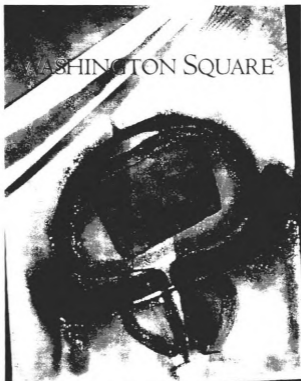
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