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Editors:	Susan Davis Amy Storrow
Fiction Editors:	Terri Burns Eric Williamson
Poetry Editors:	Christa Forster Seth Hurwitz
Art Editor:	Jack Livingston
Design Editor:	Allison Smythe

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Creative Writing Program  
Department of English  
University of Houston  
Houston, TX 77204-3012

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## Dropping the Line

It's hard. Like having struggled with an enormous fish full of fish. It's letting that fish go, letting the clear line loose to fly out as deep as it will into the murk of the lake. The hooked beginning will emerge on a shore I can't see, get lost in the reeds, trailing its great, wet wads that weigh as much as anchors.

How could I part with all that, you ask, after I'd wound it in so patiently—a mossy bundle of father, one tangled tatter of mother and then the bloated parts of all the lost others. I fished so much like soaked sweaters out of the numbing water just to let it all fall back under? Is this a willpower of sorts, you want to know.

Oh, no. All else was misunderstood. This is my last attempt to disobey. I've let it all race away. The rod and reel beat the boat as it floundered to follow what were once mine back into the sweet-water dark, no more light in between.

Now I look out across the lake and notice for the first time the continuous surface. I try to breathe naturally, just to float on top of all that I'd found and then let slip away.

I remember moments, before I'd yank those lumps up, how they'd hover just below the surface and distort. They looked bigger than they were and disconnected from my line out in the air, as if below were the place of things misplaced, or pushed aside, the way things appear even through the clearest water.

## Double Sonnet, Failed

While I'm falling into sleep, across  
the ocean you are climbing out. Heavily  
soaked in sleep, you mumble of some loss,  
eyes closed. My theory is we're bound, every  
now and then, to pass each other. We are  
travelling the same road, you gazing  
into one direction, I the other. So far  
there's been no moment of this near-grazing  
before the gap between us widens once  
again. I've waited for it like an eclipse  
of two outer, unlit planets. Days, months  
don't exist there, nor light and dark unclasp

when it is over, an eclipse in total darkness.  
We know that dreams cannot touch but maybe  
sleepers can, pure in their forgetfulness,  
brush as if traversing some dim lobby  
or any place not a destination. Awake  
we once did pass on Viale Volta, down  
where it crosses the periphery to take  
you up the hills above, out of town—  
we walked our antipodal courses even then,  
you on the other side of flint-hot  
Volta, waving out a match. Even then  
we walked so like strangers, I almost did not  
call to you. These nights I search with doubt  
calling into myself for you, not out.

## Cocks and Bulls:

### Pressing the Limits of Heterosexual Dating on *Studs*

Ever since I was a young girl, I have loved horses. Although I was never much interested in the racetrack, I learned its terminology when I was about eight years old. I learned then that to put a thoroughbred stallion “to stud” is to signify the end of his racing career. Granted, the stallion himself is most likely content with his retired lifestyle—eating, sleeping, and procreating being his sole studly responsibilities—but I have never stopped associating the term “stud” with the idea of demise. The reader should be forewarned, therefore, that my investigation of Fox Broadcasting’s 1991 contribution to the dating game genre will be inflected by certain apocalyptic expectations.

What is the purpose of a dating game anyway? Who and what does it attempt to set up? and what gets elided in the process? One might begin by asking, “what’s in a name?” Contestants on *The Dating Game*, *Mystery Date*, and *Love Connection* all seem to tacitly desire some future appearance on *The Newlywed Game*. That is, all three shows overtly enter into and support the marriage plot; all three work openly towards traditional romantic heterosexual closure. But what of the show in question here?

Due to the barnyard connotations that inspired the title of this essay, it is nearly impossible to think of the term “stud” without thinking about the penis. *Studs*, in fact, seems to reduce the marriage plot to a reproduction plot stripped of its romantic garb. Being “put to stud” is not even tangentially about love. It is about sex and pleasure, or, to put it in the show’s own terminology, it is about coming. One must ask, however, whose and what kind of pleasure this is, and if this show, in its subversion of the institutional dating game, marks the coming of some new look for sexuality.

Things come and go in literary theory, but, for the past few decades, the term “phallus” has held its ground firmly. In psychoanalytic discourse, the phallus is a marker of desire, sexual difference, and subjectivity. A Foucauldian reader might see the phallus with respect to access to certain types of power. In post-structural linguistics, the phallus mediates the slippery line between signifier and signified; in cultural criticism, it is over and again emphasized, both simply and complexly, as

both being and not being the penis. Gender theories, both straight and queer, argue for and against the possibilities for specifically sexed bodies to appropriate phallic power, and theoreticians debate strategies of deconstructing normative categories of sexuality by enacting deliberately “perverse” phallic practices such as female body-building, dildo play, drag, transsexualization, and so on.

It isn't often, however, that one finds phallic power both displayed and ridiculed on national television. Given the misogynistic imagery that continues to infect mainstream culture, there is something refreshingly subversive about a show in which the shoppers are women and the commodities are men. No simple meat-market this; on the block here are beefcakes, packaged within a format that, while it reifies conventional gender roles, disturbs them with surprising efficacy. Offering up the male body and reducing it to its “studly,” or genital, function, *Studs* presents an interesting opportunity to examine what happens to men when *they* are presented as sex objects. Beyond that—and what will be the topic here—*Studs's* lopsided inversion of the traditional dating game allows one to see what happens to conventional heterosexuality when it is stripped of its romantic trappings and is made into a spectacle.

Every night at 11:00 p.m. central time for over a year, *Studs* host Mark DeCarlo ushered three women and two men into the living and bedrooms of America. After introducing each of the contestants, DeCarlo would define the show's purpose: to “find out which of these two guys is the bigger stud.” Each prospective stud had dated all three women. Their studliness was ostensibly to be determined by their talents in two categories: first, each man was asked to identify which of the three women said which of three statements. On one particularly eventful evening, this segment resulted in the following scenario:

DECARLO: Are you active in sports?

STUD #1 (DAVE): Very active.

DECARLO: Active in the community?

DAVE: Also. After I work out, then I go and feed the hungry.

DECARLO: Beautiful, Dave. Speaking of hunger, we asked the girls what they thought of your bod. And they told us, Dave. One of them said, “My eyes bounced from bodacious biceps to bitchin' butt.” The second lady said, “He's got a ferocious fanny.” The third lady said, “He's gifted with the body of a god.”

DAVE: Okay. “He's got a ferocious fanny.” Julie.

DECARLO: There you go! What did you mean by “a ferocious fanny,” Julie? It didn't bite you, did it?

JULIE: Almost. No, actually, I noticed he had a very nice butt . . . and he mentioned that he has a tattoo of a panther on his butt, so . . .

DECARLO: Get out! [To Dave] Can you show us? Is it too low down on the butt to show us?

DAVE: No, I can show you. [Dave unzips his jeans and reveals a roaring panther smack dab in the middle of his left butt cheek.]

Following this, each stud must then guess whether the women considered he or his "rival" most likely to do . . . or to be . . . an assortment of embarrassing or flattering things. For example, DeCarlo might ask, "Tell me, Jake, according to the ladies, which of you guys is more likely to scream out his own name during sex, you or Tom?" or "Who's most likely to own mink-lined handcuffs?" For their prowess in identifying first the women, and then these women's perceptions of themselves, the male contestants are given decorative paper hearts with velcro backing, which they usually adhere to their jeans. The show concludes with each man announcing with which of the women he would prefer to sow his wild oats. Each woman has written down the name of her preferred Stud, and, if the man with the most hearts chooses a woman who has chosen him, they get to go on a "dream date" and he is proclaimed "King Stud."

Men who expose their rears on national television, and female contestants who make remarks about "bodacious biceps" or "ferocious fannies" certainly shake the bedrock of canonical gender stereotypes. One of the more immediately visible subversive aspects of *Studs* is its open display of female desire. In a system which has long presented the ideal woman as passive, reticent, and without agency, the studettes' affirmations of their sexuality are both surprising and surprisingly refreshing. This is not to claim that *Studs* is a feminist endeavor. It is far from it, and, in fact, predictably reifies many dangerous stereotypes. On *Studs*'s "Fantasy Week," for example, one show featured women who had been *Penthouse* pets, while, on another, the potential studs were both millionaires. The formula, "women want money and men want sex," is hardly liberatory, and on the "Pets" episode, one man described his interest in women this way:

DECARLO: So, how do you decide whether or not you find a woman attractive?

STUD #2: Well, I've got my own theory.

DECARLO: Okay, let's hear it.

STUD #2: It's the four-B theory.

DECARLO: Four-B?

STUD #2: Yeah. I think I'm initially attracted to a beautiful face.

DECARLO: That's one B.

STUD #2: And then move downstairs a little bit, to the, uh, breasts.

Breasts

. . . breasts are nice. Then, spin 'em around a little bit, and uh, nice set of buns. Butt, buns, you know, so that's three Bs.

DECARLO: Sure.

STUD #2: And then, uh, brains. I almost forgot brains.

DECARLO: Yes, you did.

What rescued these two “fantasy” shows were the facts that two of the three women chose “neither” millionaire, and that the “Four B” man went home alone. So, if some of the show’s more startling moments are provisionally recuperated into a typical patriarchal frame, this recuperation is in no way complete. One *might* argue that the structure of patriarchal power is only momentarily toppled so that it may be erected anew at the show’s close, but I have found this second erection to be less rigid than one might expect. The show’s openly parodic stance and its ridicule of the very conventions that enable its existence make it extremely difficult to claim “reification” in any uncomplicated manner. Because *Studs* portrays the marriage plot as an excuse for sex, and, through the extended use of barnyard metaphor, conflates the erotic with the functional, the very structure that sets up gender stereotypes finds itself exposed to a blatant critique. This critique extends to the conventions behind male/female relationships, and, ultimately, to sexual identity itself.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is something of an academic diva when it comes to sexuality studies. Her groundbreaking work, *Between Men*, examines how male homoerotic desire not only supports male privilege but is consistent with homophobia. *Between Men* also explores the ways in which women function to mediate sexual desire between men by functioning as conduits of forbidden erotic energy. While one could certainly construct a Sedgwickian argument about homoerotic desire on *Studs*, I am more interested in Sedgwick’s more recent essays which critique the notion of “sexual identity” from a different stance. In “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” Sedgwick takes issue with the neat binarism of the terms “hetero” and “homo,” challenging “the presumption . . . of their symmetry, their mutual impermeability [and] the presumption . . . that ‘hetero’ and ‘homo’, even with the possible addition of ‘bi-’ do efficiently and additively divide up the universe of sexual orientation.”<sup>1</sup> Examining the many avenues that sexual pleasure may take, she attempts to find a way to look beyond binarisms, beyond the dyad of the couple, and even beyond the triangle that has dominated discussions of sexuality from Freud’s oedipal model on. Although the triangle’s three points certainly generate more erotic possibilities than a “straight” line, for Sedgwick, “three” is still too restrictive.

Three is a popular number in both fairy tales and in barnyard nursery rhymes. There are three blind mice, three little pigs, and the proverbial black sheep has three bags of wool. There are three men and three women on *Studs*, but here the cute little numbers don’t quite add up. While Mark DeCarlo, the show’s “constant,” would seem to balance the ratio of men to women, he is actually extraneous to the show’s romantic plot. The host’s persona—he is the show’s “match-maker,” as it were—disturbs the continuity of heterosexual relations by making him an emphatic non-participant. DeCarlo is literally, the “odd man out” (and I

will return to the connotations of the term “odd”). Were this show a *Dating Game* clone, each “stud” would select the woman of his choice, the women would passively accede to these choices, and one woman would be left as a remainder, an “odd woman,” a representative of the notion of female surplus that still echoes from Victorian times. However, *Studs*’s presentation of active female desire does not end with the blatantly erotic statements in the show’s earlier segments. Each woman is granted not only the right to desire, but the right to choose her own stud, and no man can be “King Stud” if the woman of his choice does not choose him. Furthermore, while each man has three women amongst whom to choose, the women too have three choices. They may select either of the two men, or they may choose “Neither.”

Although it does even the number of options for the studs and studettes, one must admit that “neither” is a rather odd quantity. If the trajectory of romantic desire is assumed to travel from point A to point B, what happens when point B turns out to refer to nothing at all? This “null set” has a very definite value, however, for it allows the women to exit from the scene of dating, and to do so in a dignified manner. On *Studs*, choosing “neither” man is far and away the most noble option.

The entire agenda of the show, in fact, dignifies bowing out of heterosexual dating altogether. What’s the purpose here? And what’s at stake in affirming the pleasure in choosing none of two, of remaining a one, of, as Eve Sedgwick puts it, “escap[ing] . . . the narrative of reproduction”? If one returns to the term “odd,” if one thinks it within a sexual frame, one comes, sooner or later, to connect this solitary pleasure with autoeroticism. And, as Sedgwick writes, “[I]n the context of hierarchically oppressive relations between genders and between sexualities, masturbation can seem to offer . . . a reservoir of potentially utopian metaphors and energies for independence, self-possession, and a rapture that may owe relatively little to political or interpersonal abjection.”<sup>2</sup>

What does this mean for *Studs*? Does this elevation of the single woman, of the unengaged host, point out other avenues for sexual desire? Well, yes. The men have dated all three women, *and* they are snuggled together on a love seat, *and* are remarkably physical with each other. As the *Village Voice*’s Arion Berger writes, “I don’t need to tell you that no same-sex couples smooch under these particular stars, but . . . [the men] look like a couple as they nudge and whisper, especially since the women are grouped in threes—a phalanx, not a sexual unit.” Berger also notes that the show’s ostensible interest in masculinity is further destabilized by the fact that “‘points’ are symbolized by frilly satin hearts backed by stickum, which the guys plant on their thighs. DeCarlo flings them with genial contempt; in the end, the guy with the most points is the one who looks most emasculated.”<sup>3</sup> While the women, on a sofa, are less inclined to touch each other than are the men, they *are* allied at the very least through their shared determination of which stud is more likely to have a tattoo on his bum, for

example, and often through their thematically linked costumes—all three seem frequently to be of a type, forming a trio of rock and roll babes, for instance, or of successful young professionals. DeCarlo himself seems far more interested in the male contestants' prowess (which is, of course, the show's theme) than in the women, which only calls attention to the unsettledness of his gender position as well. DeCarlo's matchmaking summons up visions of both the patriarch who arranges the marriages of his children and the traditional maternal function in negotiating the business of marriage. One could also, no doubt, say plenty about his voyeuristic proclivity for provoking these men to make their bodies into public spectacles.

While it is true that the women cannot officially choose both men, nor can they choose each other, overall, on *Studs*, desire seems to go everywhere. The men and the women, among themselves, in pairs, in triangles, touching each other, supporting each other's erotic assertions, are allied in so very many ways that no simple "straight" continuum could possibly contain all these energies.

The show's entirety persuasively demonstrates that there is pleasure outside normative romantic configurations, and this virtual explosion of sensual practices, sites, and targets returns me to my initial apocalyptic expectations. By advocating pleasure for the sake of pleasure, the show makes any subsequent attempt to regulate the forms that pleasure may assume not only incongruous but impossible. *Studs's* "anything goes" attitude unsettles the neat binary between acceptable and unacceptable sexualities, and makes ridiculous—or, at least, posits the limits of—the "dating game" structure which forms its base. While *Studs* is in no way an unproblematically liberatory endeavor, its emphatic ambivalence certainly suggests the inadequacy of canonical erotic categories. In its insistent refusal to reduce sexuality to a one-two-three operation, *Studs* reveals the limitations of conventional sexual geometry.

I have always found there to be something dangerous about cultural criticism, not the least aspect of which is the brevity of its currency. Two years after I first succumbed to the seductions of this particular late-night activity, after I first attempted to justify a secret penchant by producing a paper about it, I return to these musings and am surprised at my optimism, saddened by what I now find to be my task, namely that of writing a postmortem for this once beloved show.

I experienced its demise in slow but definite stages. First, I witnessed the disintegration of my carefully formulated mathematical theorem. One fateful Thursday night, one Stud refused to choose any of the three women and my delicate balance of threes was undone. I found little consolation in the fact that the man later revealed himself to be a journalist for *Details* magazine who was not much interested in establishing the finer

points of his studliness. Rather, I found unnerving the recuperability of *Studs*, the ease with which smarmy, snobby columnists could exploit it for their own purposes. Not much later, I encountered another horror as *Studs* reruns appeared at 5:00 p.m. Within a year of its relegation to later and later time slots (first 10:00 p.m., then 10:30, then 11:00), *Studs* had clearly become familiar enough to be assimilable into a news-hour lineup. DeCarlo trumpeted his heterosexuality in a *People* magazine feature, Fox fired one of the *Wunderkind* producers for his suddenly too outrageous ideas, and *Studs* slowly faded from sight. Now a mere screen memory, its promise stale, its risks tamed and faded, *Studs* has gone the way of all flesh. Although briefly tempted by *American Gladiators*, I have not since found anything to entice me into staying up late, into rushing home early, to be alone with my television. It seems a sign of the times that, these days, even David Letterman can be billed as a nice guy.

<sup>1</sup>Eve Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," *Critical Inquiry* 17:1 (Summer 1991), 824.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 821.

<sup>3</sup>Arion Berger, "(If Love TV is Wrong) I Don't Want to Be Right," *Village Voice*, 28 April 1992, 47.

## Ken's Divorce

It was good manners, I suppose, that made him wait  
until the meal had ended—the napkins set aside,  
the steakbones in the shallow graves of our empty plates—

to tell us it was final, that the settlement, like a lightning bolt,  
had split the house straight down the center, half for her,  
half for him: it would go in the market in the spring.

We sat awhile not knowing what to say, breaking the stale  
bread of silence together. Then my girlfriend called his wife  
a lying bitch, and I muttered something about trust

that sounded like I knew. He said that we were right,  
but mostly out of kindness for us, I think, a couple  
who needed to be right just then about what keeps two people

from falling apart. It's midnight now and I can't stop staring  
out the window by my desk. Slats of light are falling  
through a gaping hole in the late-September sky,

falling on my friend's front porch like stacks of shirts  
and bedsheets from Kopeck's Linen Service—  
on the two white birches in his well-groomed yard,

gleaming like the stockings of that prostitute  
he brought home one evening for the entire block to see,  
while his wife was away "on business" in Detroit.

The woman spent the night, but they never went to bed,  
just talked until the pink bruise of dawn appeared,  
two old warriors swapping stories, comparing wounds.

She told him pain could sometimes be a gift,  
but that wasn't why most people found it better to give  
than to receive—something to that effect, though

it's been months since I learned the details, and it could be  
I'm just filling in her words because I want some  
larger part of my friend's repair, because I envy what she,

as a stranger, could offer then: the soothing distance  
I could not. Envy, yes—so I'm no saint. Neither's Ken.  
Still, watching moonlight strike the brown garbage bags,

stuffed with yardwork, against his curb, all I can see  
are monks in cassocks huddled to pray devotion in the dark,  
backlit by grace. I don't know, maybe that's just how

I say my prayers these days, the imagination picking up  
where the Catholic left off years ago. Anyway,  
he was good enough to do the dishes afterwards,

even scrubbed the blackened grill. It took him twenty minutes  
with a Brillo pad, while my girlfriend and I polished off  
the cabernet, watching the candles die. Their flames swayed

like two lovers I'd once seen at the end of a wedding  
reception, one on either side of the empty dance floor  
while the band still played. It was clear they'd had a spat,

a little too much to drink. That's why they were slow-dancing  
with themselves, each too angry at the other to move toward  
the center, each too proud to make the first move to leave.

## Madonna and Child

He screws up his face into his sphincter expression as she gives him the bottle. Eyes, nose, chin and forehead dissolve into a band of muscle surrounding a small black orifice: the source of long, tubular howls which rattle as if they are traveling through aluminum piping. She does not reverberate to these howls; rather she absorbs them, like the thick black rubber walls of a sound-proof room. Perhaps she lacks empathy, but not compassion.

She holds him in her arms, this warm bag of feces and half-digested milk. His soft powdered skin is smooth and pale, like freshly hardened agar, and it smells like yeast. Not the yeast of fresh baked bread, but yeast when it is grown in the isolation of a petri dish. His hands and feet wave and clutch at the air, as spastic and unmotivated as little pink hydrae. The fingernails scratch her arms, and are surprisingly sharp, criss-crossing her skin with thin red lines. She encloses his hand in one of her own, immobilizing it. The free hand and the two feet only wriggle all the harder, voraciously expanding and contracting at nothing.

Maybe he will stop crying if she puts one of those large, thick towels Olga keeps in the bathroom around her shoulders. After all, studies have shown that baby monkeys raised with mothers constructed of metal wire covered with terricloth are better adjusted than those left to cling to mothers of bare wire. She places Olga's baby in his crib and goes to fetch a towel. Wrapping the towel around her shoulders, she tries picking him up again. The duration of each cry seems to be lessening— maybe because he likes the touch of thick, soft terricloth, or perhaps simply because he is exhausted. He doesn't stop crying completely, however; his chest continues to heave, like a rat being put under chloroform.

Like a rat being put under chloroform. That may have been a little strong, indicative not only of a lack of empathy, but compassion as well. All this may seem more reasonable if I tell you that she has had scientific training. As a scientist, she has learned to practice a rigorous objectivity. Thus, if two things seem comparable, a baby's skin and a petri dish of freshly poured agar, for instance, she does not hesitate to expose their similarity, regardless of people's accusations that she is cold, inhumane, unnatural, etc. She will confess to a certain detachment, but never a lack of compassion.

Therefore, she holds Olga's baby as carefully as a box of fragile

glass test tubes, as she sits in the bedroom, with the futon on one side and the crib on the other. She remembers the first time she came into this bedroom, with its eggshell white walls and worn brick fireplace. She'd come to Olga's apartment for dinner, dressed in levis and her favorite black turtleneck. Olga, in a pale green crepe gown with a marabou trimmed neckline, had taken one look at her, shaken her head, and said Frankly darling, those clothes will never do.

So she'd followed Olga into the bedroom, watched her pull dress after dress out of the closet, tossing them onto the futon: a pale pink lace thing, the pink of virginity, the pink of deceit; a black taffeta one with an accordion pleated skirt, full enough to hide a grown man; a long black silk gown, gauzy and spectral as illicit glances; a bottle green satin sheath with a little harem jacket embroidered with blue glass beads; another sheath of pink and red rose strewn satin wrapped in a cloud of black netting, which could be worn to make love in the overblown light of day and then again in the concealment of dusk; and finally, the light yellow silk one, a pale shimmering puddle, half on the bed and half spilling onto the floor.

Most of the dresses were much much too large. Most of them had hung on her thin, lanky body like drapes or towels on a hook, as if there was no flesh beneath them. And when she had moved over to the mirror to get the complete, sad effect, it was as if the dress had been pulled through the air on an automated rack. But the pale yellow silk one, though cut like the rest to fit Olga's ample curves, was different. Maybe because the dress was not actually silk after all, but some sort of rich synthetic which clung ecstatically to her body, not tightly, but in large loose folds that gently filled out her thin ass, her flat chest, while at the same time not failing to accentuate her slender waist.

Olga, in the meantime, had stepped before her in front of the mirror. Together they had looked at Olga's body, full, fat, teeming, barely contained by the green sheath, which set off her creamy skin as pale green grass enhances the purity of fresh laid eggs.

Or as algae enhance the bloated white bellies of cold, scaly fish.

She had been able to see, beneath the dress, the big soft roll of flesh above the top of Olga's hip, where it began to flow forward into the gentle mound of her belly. She had reached forward and touched this place with two quivering fingers. Olga raised her arms above her head. The red silky weeds beneath Olga's armpits shivered and she smelled something moist and dark, like moss or wet stones.

She stands up, the baby in her arms, and walks into the next room. Walking into the living room from Olga's bedroom is like walking into a deep forest. It is startling, in fact, to walk from the airy bedroom into the dark, obscuring light of the living room. This is the reason why Olga

painted the living room dark blue-green; it was actually her intention, to create a space like the underside of a moss-covered stone, the sort of place where one finds cool damp newts with deceptively flame colored skin.

She does not really feel deceived, however. In fact, at the back of her mind she suspected it all along. To have ignored the swift glances shot from beneath thick red lashes, the subtle, flitting smiles, the furtive brushings of hip against groin, breast against arm, would have been self-deluding, like ignoring data that doesn't support one's theory. Thus she never really believed the turkey baster story, despite the fact that it is not uncommon for us to impregnate ourselves in this way, using the seminal donation of a trusted male friend. For although her story was perfectly plausible there is something about her that is heterogeneous and impure. She has seen their heads turn when Olga walks past them on the street. And she knows that she secretly enjoys their appreciation.

Yes Olga secretly enjoys their appreciation, that cunt. But she's not really angry. Objectively, she realizes that this is her nature, that it is simply a biological propensity. Olga's need for men oozes out of her like the pollen-entrapping secretions of certain flowers.

In fact, she sees their eyes following Olga with the same detachment that she sees this room, which is simply furnished—a couch upholstered in cracked black leather sits on one side of the room and a stereo sits on the other. Next to the couch there is a low black lacquered table with a telephone on it and also a plastic baby bottle half filled with congealed milk. To the left and right of the stereo are two crates filled with compact discs that hold the low, throaty recordings of various female performing artists. Precisely over the stereo hangs one of Olga's paintings, an oil of a purple flower. Out of a background of diffused violet, the flower materializes, color and form solidify, converging together to form the deep purple hole that is its center.

But the real focus of Olga's living room is at its far end, where the four windows which overlook the street form a half octagon, encircling a small space of hardwood floor. It is necessary to step up into this space—it is raised about two feet above the living room. A thick red rug, patterned with overblown roses, covers most of the platform. In the center of the rug stands a small wooden table, again black lacquer, but inlaid with bits of ivory that form a circular pattern of leaves, on top of which sits a ceramic incense holder formed like a woman's torso with a stick of incense rising out of the cleavage; a green glass bottle labelled L'ONGUENT D'AMOUR; and a gilded green ashtray shaped like a lily pad in the center of which glistens, like a fat brown slug, a wooden pipe eight centimeters long. Scattered around the table are five large leather pillows embroidered in abstract floral designs of red, purple, and green, colors which are repeated in the bleeding hearts which hang from hooks over the windows, along with various other plants. The late afternoon sun filters through these plants, overlaying the floral designs on the pillows and table top with a

leafy mosaic of light and shadow, creating the effect of a double exposure.

But the real focus of Olga's apartment is at the far end of the living room and so after she'd changed they'd carried glass tumblers filled with golden wine turgid with the taste of flowers and fallen apples there, tripping over their long gowns. She'd walked behind Olga, watching her ass move beneath the green crepe, round and full, under the fall of thick red hair. Her own dress was yellow, pale yellow like *liefraumilch*, pale yellow like a baby's urine.

She'd sat opposite Olga at the little inlaid table, on one of the embroidered leather cushions, shivering slightly in her sleeveless gown. Shivering not with cold but with dread, dread mixed with pleasure. Specifically, she'd shivered at the sight of Olga biting her dark lip, so round and plump she thought that the two sharp white upper teeth might burst it. As easily as a fingernail punctures the membranes of a fat garden slug.

Olga lit the stick of incense rising up from between the clay breasts of the incense burner. The incense sizzled and then glowed, the red cinder at its end releasing a muggy spice, sweet and soporific. Then Olga reached for the pipe, already full, which was resting in the leaf-shaped tray. She held the match over the bowl, inhaled, and then released the smoke which curled up from her nose and mouth, stretching lazily towards the ceiling, like a cat getting up from a nap.

A nap. She can't remember the last time she took a nap. To allow one's consciousness, in the very middle of the day, to sink from the clean myelinated corridors of the neocortex down into the dim soft filth of the lower brain, is not only poor mental hygiene, but dangerous as well. For once one starts making the way easy, allowing the consciousness to go slumming whenever it pleases, not just from eleven at night until six in the morning, but at any time of day or night, one provides for the passage of all sorts of subterranean debris into the upper brain. The mind will return, after rooting around in the subconscious, with shreds of rotten meat in its teeth.

Olga takes naps. She takes them all the time. Even more often now than before. In the late afternoon, after letting herself in with the key Olga keeps in the clay flowerpot outside the door, she will often find them sprawled out on the futon, or curled up on the couch, or stretched across the rose covered rug at the far end of the living room, or wound together in the baby's blanket in the middle of the kitchen floor, or even half reclining in the dry bathtub with Olga's long red hair streaming down over their faces. In most cases, Olga will be lying on her side, one arm over her head, spit glistening in the corner of her mouth. The other will be curved around the baby, who will also be drooling, his gray-pink lips streaking her exposed breast with saliva, like the trail of a garden snail over the fungus colloquially known as the puffball.

Yesterday afternoon, however, Olga was not napping.

Like artists, scientists must occasionally deal with a world that is out of joint. Whether in the laboratory or in the personal sphere, unforeseen incidents must be accepted with equanimity. And then again, yesterday afternoon was not entirely unforeseen. In fact, to be honest, she'd suspected it all along.

At first she thought it was the baby, the low whimpering noise as she quietly turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door. Moving soundlessly in her sneakers across the bare wood floor, she had found the door from the hallway to the bedroom partially ajar. She stood, her fingertips resting on the panel, expecting to find... Olga and the baby in the middle of the dirty sheets, wrapped in Olga's hair. The baby would be thrashing weakly, like a half dead crab caught in a net, while Olga slept, snoring softly. But the bedroom was empty, the sheets lying in a twisted heap, gray in the wintery light, at the end of the futon.

Creating the effect of a double exposure.

Her watch beeps. It is 4:00 p.m., exactly, and Olga is out doing errands. She stands up; holding Olga's baby in her arms, she steps back down into the living room, over to the couch. She lays him upon it, then draws the pale blue towel from her shoulders and shakes it over him, once. As it settles over his body, she tucks the edge under his chin and around his face. He is asleep, deeply asleep.

Olga has a baseball bat. She knows this because once Olga swung it for her, in the middle of the living room, legs braced and long red hair streaming out from beneath a Dodgers cap. She thinks Olga keeps the bat in the coat closet next to the front door.

She finds it behind a long, gabardine trench coat that brushes smoothly over her back and shoulders as she withdraws the bat from the back of the closet. The nylon mesh Dodgers cap is hanging on a hook and she lifts it off and pulls it down hard over her head. She likes the way the cap feels, tight on her skull, as she shoulders the bat and walks back into the living room, across the floor to the far end.

The first swing of the baseball bat, high up, over her head, sends three potted plants sailing out into the living room, where they smash onto the floor. Red and purple petals of bleeding heart expire delicately on polished wood, among clots of damp earth and shards of pottery.

The second time, the bat swoops down and smacks the center of the small table inlaid with ivory, sending the bottle of L'ONGUENT D'AMOUR into the window glass as the incense burner hits the wainscoting and the gilded lily ashtray with the pipe in it tumbles into the living room, skidding and clattering across the floor.

She stands with her back to the left window and surveys her work. Shards of the green bottle stick to the viscous oil coating the web-like crack in the right window glass. The right breast of the incense burner nestles in a fold of the red rose rug, under the edge of the table with its broken garland of ivory leaves, and the left one lies in the corner, turned against the wall. The lily pad ashtray, the pipe still resting in it, sits on the living room floor, intact.

Damp with sweat, she drops the bat and walks to the bathroom. She takes a razor blade from the little plastic packet in the medicine cabinet. Then she returns to the far end of the living room, sits at the edge of the platform, and takes one of the embroidered pillows onto her lap. As methodically as if she were performing an autopsy on a lab rat, she slits the pillow with a razor and yanks out the stuffing, wads of musty, grayish white felt. Tossing it into the corner of the platform, she then proceeds to eviscerate the other four.

When she is finished with the pillows, she steps down from the platform and walks back into the bedroom. The silky yellow dress is hanging in the closet and she pulls it out, still acrid with the smells of incense, pot and sweat. Back in the living room, she spreads it out in the middle of the floor. She steps back and looks at it, splayed like a squashed yellow flower. Then, with the razor blade she begins to cut it, starting at the jewel neckline, through the empire waist, all the way down to the scalloped hem. She cuts again and again, at even, narrow intervals, slashing the dress into long golden strips. When the dress has been completely sliced to ribbons, she gathers them up and carries them over to the couch, dropping them at the end opposite to the one where the baby is sleeping.

Gently, she pulls the towel back from around his face and lifts it up from his body, draping it over the back of the couch. Smoothly she raises him just a little, her hand supporting his back and wobbly head, as she slides one of the yellow, silken strips beneath him with her other hand. Silently, she wraps it once, twice, three times around his body, securely tying the ends. She does this again and again, using up one strip of cloth after another, until finally only his face is visible. Before she is quite done, he wakes up and starts to whimper softly. She hums to him, low and sweet, like the women whose music Olga is always playing, as she ties the last knot. Then she picks him up, mummified, and carries him back to the platform where she sets him on the floor, next to the wainscoting, as she makes a nest with three of the pillows and some extra wads of stuffing, in the center of the broken table. When she is finished, she picks up Olga's baby and places him in this nest. Before she leaves, she takes off the nylon mesh cap and lays it over his face, the features of which have once again begun to disappear in a long tubular howl.

*An Artist in America: Letters of  
William Goyen*

Taos—Sat. night  
May 8, 1948

My dear Zoë:

Your letter a few days ago—and yes indeed spring comes late here, it has scarcely shown its green face; but since Mayday the cottonwoods have put out lime-green feathers and the little orchards down in Taos Valley have burst into bloom, so lovely—we have some in the house and it smells so good—and all around the desert out here where we live in El Prado the little pink and white wild flowers have sprung up everywhere. And the birds! such beautiful wild ones are coming in—I am up between 5:30 and 6:00 every morning and the calls of the birds are like human voices, a glittering chorus of them. And all day long we hear the mourning doves in the distance, and yesterday we saw some wild canaries, two pheasants were on the top of our woodpile, and a yellow-breasted Oriole was down on the fence. Oh it is lovely here now. May and September-October are the most beautiful times—but during the past two days we have had cold and very windy days and nights, the wind's about to drive us all crazy. Of course out here on the desert it is worse since we have no trees to protect us; but everywhere there is heavy wind and blowing dust.

I have, in the past days, dug and planted a rather impressive little garden down the slope from the house. Last year a garden was out of the question—we couldn't even plant flowers—because of the extreme scarcity of water. There was an irrigation ditch running on the land below our place, but we had no rights to it. But this year there's gallons and gallons of water for everyone because of the heavy winter snows; and the irrigation ditch has been diverted through our property so that it may irrigate a big bean crop planted by the Spaniard who owns a strip of land next to ours—and we may use all the water from this ditch we wish. When I learned of this new privilege, I promptly started digging and planting. Now my little garden lies right along the swiftly flowing ditch in some very rich soil, and there I have planted beans, peas, carrots, onions, lettuce, turnips and mustard greens. They are already coming up. And I have made a few flower beds around the house; some iris, some poppies, morning glories

and petunias—we'll see what they do. You know how I love planting and gardening, my mother gave me that. Now, after a hard morning's work inside at my desk, I go out on the land and work hard in the brilliant sunshine and pure air for two or three hours—makes all the difference in the world, keeps a clear head and gives time for thinking and meditation.

Zoë I am terribly excited over my work, I am full of it, it has really come alive for me. A portion of it will appear in *Accent* shortly in the Spring issue—I corrected and returned the galleys about three weeks ago. I don't know whether you can get a hold of a copy there or not, but please try to if you can, for I want you to see what I have done there and what I am doing. Surely some more of it will be taken by someone—I believe in it so—I *know* what I am doing. As for *New Directions*, I am just about through with that bird Laughlin and his crew. I had a letter from him in January saying the anthology would be out "soon"—and to this date I cannot get any information about it, either from him, whom I've written again recently, or from bookstores. I don't know what's happened, but I'd sure as hell like to have my money. We'll just keep waiting.

Make up your mind about this summer and let me know. I still can't say whether I'll be here or not, but then if not here then where? Of course I want to stay here and will hang on to the very last cent (and then probably borrow some if no money has come in); it's a constant scrape and scramble, but then it is right, it is the only way, the *only* reality for me and I know that for myself; so I go on in that faith and belief. I have only just begun. But you come on if you can manage it; I know you'll love it and consider it a real discovery of a place to be quiet and simple in and in which to do good work. It really isn't arty as most people think—life is too damned hard here, you have to work just to eat and be clean. That may be, finally, my objection to it—one spends so much of his time with the necessities like cooking getting fuel, getting food, keeping house, fighting the elements, etc. But then it seems to me that a creative life might demand just this: a kind of elemental life far away from sophistication and superficiality. Yet sometimes I feel that perhaps a one-room efficiency apartment in a city with the world just outside one's door might be the best way. But, strange thing, Zoë, I can't stay away too long from the woods and the land and nature—so I suppose that's where I belong.

Enough for tonight—I am tired of fighting this brutal wind and must get to my bed. Hope your work is going well, keep whittling at it, that's the way, go at it your own way and to hell with authority and this and that. Send me news when there is any and when you decide what you'll do, let me know and I'll help any way I can. Thanks for the Margo clipping and birthday greeting. Walter sends best wishes, and let us hear—

Yours,  
Billy

## Notes

*Zoë Leger*: A stenographer for Humble Oil Company in Houston, where Goyen worked briefly. She was a dark and very beautiful Cajun woman.

*Taos*: After the Second World War, in which Goyen served in the Navy, he took off by car for California in 1945. He stopped in Taos, New Mexico, along the way and fell in love with the landscape. He built a small adobe house there on land given him by Frieda Lawrence (1879-1956). He lived in Taos until 1949.

*Accent*: "Four American Portraits as Elegy" appeared in *Accent* VII, 3 (Spring 1948), pp. 131-141.

*Laughlin*: James Laughlin (b. 1914), poet and founder of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

*the anthology*: Goyen's story, "A Parable of Perez," was accepted by Laughlin for publication in the *New Directions Annual* 11 (1949), pp. 240-243.

*Margo*: Margo Jones (1911-1955), founder of the first modern professional theatre-in-the-round and first professional resident theatre in this country. Goyen met her in Houston in 1928 when he was a junior in high school. He worked for her and appeared in some of her productions.

*Walt*: Walter Berns (b. 1919), Goyen's housemate in Taos.

To Ernst Robert Curtius

614 Merrill Avenue

Houston 9, Texas

October 31, 1951

My dearest Ernst:

Bless you with all my heart and love for the most wonderful essay—how could I possibly change it? It is more than I ever dreamed of, and please do let it go as it stands. These are your words and your opinions, and, for me, the very greatest I could ask for and from a very great man of letters, dear Ernst—for me, this is a kind of crown upon my long and lonely work on *The House of Breath*. Concerning the Katherine Anne Porter essay—it is still, I find, in preparation, and may be very slow in forthcoming—and, moreover, I find that you have touched on many of the points her essay will set down: that my work in this first novel carries to its extreme length the explorations made by Joyce, Flaubert, and Proust. So let us keep this yours, dear Ernst, and wait to see what Miss Porter will say—

Dear Ernst, though they all speak in America of "influences" on my book, I do know that it came from deep within me, that it flowed out of me, and that in America when I wrote *The House of Breath* I was a completely isolated young writer trying to find his own voice and his own language, as well as his own landscape, for I would have no other. I do feel, and I hope you might say in your *Nachwort*, that I have after very long and lonely and arduous meditation and work, found my own language and my own landscape, and that these are not at all a regional language and landscape,

for upon the language and landscape, for instance, of East Texas, has been superimposed the language of men, of human beings "alive in the world and involved in each other," and the landscape is one through which living men and women walk. My relation to the other young writers of my time, my contemporaries, is again very much an isolated one, since I am a poet and a lyricist, among other things, and I speak of the deepest simplicities that bind men and women together or sunder them apart, and I speak of tenderness and love; my contemporaries choose to speak of brutes or of contemporary monsters, freaks, psychotics, etc. It is my purpose to continue to try to show a *continuity* in the world of men, through men, a "chain," one to another, to return us to the first things, as Genesis, as any beginning; but mainly to speak of love, to sing of love, and not to let love die. Many critics and readers say that I am the Faulkner of the next generation, that I shall add something to his world; I have been compared to Thomas Wolfe, but it is stated that my art is more disciplined and my skill greater. Yet, I am simply myself, and you know it and I know it, and thank Heaven enough critics know it to have raised me to a rather solitary position in American Literature as . . . "William Goyen." What more to say, dearest and beloved friend? I am opposed to and the enemy of the sensation in modern American literature, to the simplification of modern life, I want to make *literature* that will speak for my time and out of my time and stand for all time.

For as you know the people who inhabit *The House of Breath* are the people of my time, isolated, separate, lonely, but bound to each other beneath and below themselves; and they exist through thinking of their lives and trying to find a meaning out of their lives and out of human life, among so many other things. The point is to keep one's *selfness*, one's personal identity in a world that will try to make us anything but ourselves; for only as ourselves can we be the good instrument, the faithful and honest instrument for what happens in our world and in our hearts.

Incidentally, it might be interesting to you to know that I has been said that my work marks the end of the Hemingway influence on young American writers and a return to the lyrical, narrative and dramatic.

And, bless friend, I am asking Random House in New York to send you a copy of Faulkner's Nobel Prize Address; it is very fine.

I have been working very very hard, exhausting myself, sleeping little, for I am trying to finish a play by Christmas. My second book, *Ghost and Flesh*, is now in proof, and when there is a copy available, you shall have one at once. So please forgive me for delaying this answer a little; I have been trying to make a bit of money by writing some book reviews, and there have been other complications, too, in my life—as all of us have. Just please do not speak of our not ever meeting in the flesh again, for that breaks my heart a little; I am so sure that we shall be able to meet before too very long, beloved Ernst; believe in that, be patient for that, for we shall have so much to say to each other. Despite our meeting or not meeting in

the flesh, we have our union you and I, we have our joining, and it is a magnificent and beautiful and permanent one, and I do thank God for that joining with you, I cannot tell you how much I thank God for that.

One other thing—do you think you might send the excellent essay to either the *Partisan Review* or the *Kenyon Review* here in America? I feel sure either of them would welcome it most warmly—and your essay will be the first serious critical appraisal of the first magnitude that my work will have had in America. Do please think of this and let me know what you think.

Dear dear Ernst, we do have our bridge of breath and our marvelous friendship does now exist within the life and warm flesh of speech, and between our minds there fly, like birds from tree to tree, our thoughts of human love and human understanding; and wonderful friend and great man, these thoughts, we know now, will never die. Your beautiful and moving letter has made me weep tonight, and I love you, Ernst, for it.

Goodnight,  
Bill

#### Notes

*Ernst Robert Curtius* (1886-1956): German scholar and translator of *The House of Breath*, Goyen's first novel published in 1950. Curtius put into German many American masterpieces, including *The Waste Land*.

*614 Merrill Avenue*: The address of Goyen's parents' house in the Heights section of Houston. It stands today.

*wonderful essay*: "Zum Erstlingswerk eines jungen Amerikaners," *Neue Schweizer Rundschau*, Heft 11 (1952), pp. 669-675. Slightly revised, the essay appears as "Nachwort des Übersetzers" in the Curtius German translation of *The House of Breath*, titled *Haus aus Hauch* (1961).

*Katherine Anne Porter essay*: The only piece on Goyen published by Porter (1890-1980) was her review of *The House of Breath*, "This Strange Old World," in *New York Times Book Review* (Aug. 20, 1950), p. 5. Goyen met her in 1947.

*finish a play*: Goyen had begun the first of several dramatic adaptations of *The House of Breath*.

## From *Half a Look of Cain*

*America, my wildwood, break your old wilderness back through me!*

I write this down before me on a page of paper to remind myself that I am, by nature, pioneer. It is my instinct as it is my destiny to cut clear, to blaze free, as trail and clearing. For this, something keeps me rude and ground-minded and turns me from worn paths into thickets. This force of making clear, traversible, navigable has borrowed my life's time for labor mission of hand-chopper, of taking to myself for my own and to make new what has always been living in the lasting world, is as primitive as forest and grass and thorn, and it is lent me like a good plain axe to hew with handlespit my own clearing out of the brambles where I find myself to be, discover myself to have arrived (through going my way), making use of the materials of that place to make it, like a bird its nest of twigs and grass, and to consider what is given a divine generosity so that it be honest, authentic work, of a time real and inevitable, turned under a travelling man's hands, of humanity, product of mortality cut clean out of what was wild and grown over upon itself does not die but flourishes up and grows over again, obscuring the work of the blazing hand. The instrument of clearing and blazing, the axe, is the enduring monument to the energy that used it, the indestructible, unrusting axehead in the wilderness.

I distrust all roads that do not crumble and are not overthrown by grass and weed in the crevices between the stones; all bridges that never weaken and fall under washout of the water they cross. I tickle the tombs of Caesars with a blade of grass, and my own flesh.

The struggle to *rise*, to *climb*, to disencumber of this fragile new round us that holds us on the ground, this feeling of being held down, or of having stumbled down: the history of stumbled-down, fallen-down peoples, what there is to know and to help *up* in it, to help *rise up* from it: there, there.

The only times I have been free, that I have risen out of this net that briefly and miraculously fell away from me was in the act of love and in the act of work: one led me to the other.

I think I must have some instrument of marvels on me, trilling gladest tidings, that it stands up for so much good and truth and is of such simple message: that there is no good or truth except in this mortal disaster of love that holds the heartbreak in it: that we go nowhere, only arrive, only come somewhere, and come again . . . and come again.

So I think I will go away, now; I think I will go, now, and find me  
a place of earth and unclothe myself and sink, naked and erotic, between  
the loamy thighs of earth, sowing down into dirt and cutting through shale  
and clay to a very bottomland, seeding in fountains as I clip down and  
down and down—this oh great glory of flesh of grass.

Depart Rome, 19\_\_.

## Smoke

I wish I could be funny  
like the time when I was fourteen  
watching Lisa O'Neill, with her thin  
waist and auburn hair, swimming laps in  
Stardust Pool, and Vince Blodelli  
shouted "Harriet get ova heere," the Blodellis  
called me Harriet although my name is Greg,  
they needed a fourth for knuckles so we  
sat in the hot sun, bare-chest, shaggy  
haired, shuffling and dealing; I didn't win,  
Karl Babson was picked to pound my  
fisted hand with the deck — eighteen  
times — but he dropped the cards  
after nine, "you dropped the fuckin'  
deck — fifty two or the boot," Karl, his  
left hand still scabbed and swollen from forty  
hits a week ago, chose the boot, so Joe Blodelli  
stomped on Karl's hand and broke it, we  
snuck him out of Stardust pool, Karl,  
tear-streaked, and made up a story  
to tell his mother; once I tried to be  
funny, I was on the phone and my girlfriend  
said, "I want to sleep with other men,"  
outside a blizzard had buried the street in  
four feet of snow, "sleep with other men?"  
I asked, "I'll sleep with you, too," she  
answered, my roommate came in the kitchen and told me  
to stop blocking the fridge, "how many men?" I asked, "no  
limits," she said, the air was all snow  
and silence, except for the fridge humming,  
I wish I was funny, like the time I was riding  
the A train, leaving my fiancée's place in  
Brooklyn, the car light flickered and  
a black man a few seats down started shouting  
"I hate phony white liberals, I want to kill phony  
white liberals," I looked up from my book to see

the phony white liberals, but he was referring to nobody but me, the subway was about to go under the East River and I wished I could have said something funny since bad things never happen to people who can be funny like the time my girlfriend — a different girlfriend — told me she was a witch, “a what?” I asked, we were lying naked in bed on a warm June night, “a witch,” she said, “I make ballerinas fall and cause blackouts in New York,” I didn’t know what to say so I walked downstairs and locked all the doors; back upstairs I asked again, “a witch?” she nodded and dumped me two months later, I wish I had said something funny then, and since I didn’t I know that someday I will see my name spelled in smoky letters in the sky and then flying monkeys will carry me away to a damp castle with skulls for company.

## Flak So Thick

For a moment he thought he was home, a sobering thought. Judy didn't find anything funny these days. If she laughed, it was never around him. But she wasn't here. He was alone in a Midwestern hotel room, a small square of space with flame-proof curtains and matching bedspread. Convenient were a dressing room with mirrored walls, a television, telephone, bathroom: everything one could need. He twisted to turn on the lamp by his bed. Three a.m. He felt on edge, about to drop into something, usually shit, but this time maybe something wonderful. He had woken laughing at something that made no sense now and didn't seem particularly funny. A new player complained that his wallet had been stolen and Harlan, knowing that his advice would be impossible to follow, had told the guy to go to Lexington and Third, two avenues that never converged. Had he meant to offend? Yes! And the man's meek response confirmed his confidence, at this early hour, that whatever he did now would be beyond reproach. He couldn't wait to report back to Dundis:

They're in. They had some doubts at first. That Williams is a real niggler. Yeah, time was tight, but I read the information on the plane, practically memorized it. Yep, I'm your man.

I'm your man? He winced to think a line like that might occur to him. His father had always said, "Blow your own horn" (another painful line), but Harlan could never find a tune anyone would listen to. He was a business man ill at ease in the world of commerce, where the language—words like "customer," "sale," "profits"—had always sounded dull and dishonest to his ears. As an investment banker, he spoke to "clients" about "deals," "cash flow," "valuations," words that begged inflation. For the past couple of days, though, suspended in some fervent yet carefree state, he had found the appropriate vocabulary rolling off his tongue.

Out of bed, he smiled at the youthful, worldly figure reflected in the dressing room mirrors. Since he had arrived, this image had detained him. He had looked at himself from every angle, belly in, belly out, muscles flexed. The lighting was perfect for self-congratulation. Business was completed late the night before and it had gone much better than anyone who had memorized the wrong information had a right to expect.

Upon arriving, he had gone straight to a meeting and waited for Williams and the others to begin talking about something he knew. When that didn't happen, he tried to sound intelligent about the numbers being

tossed around, to no effect. He settled on looking wisely attentive. He had screwed up again, grabbed the wrong blue book. They all looked alike: the pitchbooks, the transaction analyses, all blue, the company color, with that diamond logo in gold that Harlan always felt unequal to. One of these days Dundis was going to catch on to him. Everyone else had, beginning with the secretaries. He got no respect. There were some in his office who were expert at containing the tide of their own incompetence, great at damage control. They were better at it than anything else, having had so much practice. Harlan was not one of them. He might be going under for the third time.

So easy to capitulate to failure, so familiar. It was what he deserved. Judy would leave him, taking with her the two youngest. No, she would kick him out. A cheap motel room with a television, phone, etc.—the bare necessities—would be his home, a post office box his mailing address.

Fear had compelled him to the phone, and that evening a secretary faxed the right papers to him. He poured over them all night. A speed-reading course offered off campus during his sophomore year—designed to cut down the time it took to study, it had, in Harlan's case, to no time—stood him in good stead. It required detachment from the material and at the same time an intense focus such as he felt in moments of panic.

The next morning he dazzled them. They had wandered away from the facts, he brought them back: to the annual report, the 10-K, the proxy. Some seemed to think he was way ahead of them. Harlan maintained his advantage. He figured a discounted cash flow analysis off the top of his head. He reminded them of the performance of comparable trading companies. He evaluated various multiples, offered optimism, idealism and all the rest of it. Praise for his company he took personally.

The mirror in his dressing room confirmed their high opinion. He was still young at almost forty. His gaze was steady. His skin glowed with health, despite two days of sleeplessness. This morning there was a fine gloss on everything.

At six, he was on his way to the airport in a black stretch limousine. "I'll sit up front," he said to the driver, a tall, elderly man in a rust-colored polyester suit. Frail and deliberate, the driver cleared a newspaper and some magazines off the passenger seat. His face was badly pockmarked and he had a heavy drinker's nose, with a fleshy addition at the tip where the skin was pitted like a citrus fruit. The reddish hair combed stiffly over his forehead was dyed and didn't look real.

"Beautiful morning!" Harlan said, as they rounded the hotel's circular driveway.

"Yessir," said the driver. "Good day for flying."

"Good day for anything." Harlan felt himself expanding into the trip ahead. "Have you ever been in an airplane?"

The driver responded with forbearance. "I fly whenever I can. My neighbor has his own plane. He's always inviting me to come along."

"Really?" Harlan felt, briefly, outshone. Who did he know with a private plane? "One of my neighbors had his own plane. He used to buzz the house."

"Yes," the driver said, as though intimate with the thrill of it, and Harlan imagined him in the copilot's seat, eyes burning, smiling through gritted teeth, just like his crazy neighbor Ernie Retkey.

"I was a bombardier during the war," the driver said.

"Where were you stationed?" Harlan prepared himself for an exotic answer. China? The Seychelles? This man would surprise him.

"England. In fact, I married an English girl. We're going back together next month. First time in over forty years."

Harlan had no war. He had done his best, or worst, depending upon how you looked at it, to avoid Vietnam. That convulsion in the middle of the physical had clinched it. Just a little bit of strychnine in his Fresca. Who had advised him? Probably a stranger, a casual acquaintance. It gave him chills, now, to think of the chance he had taken, but he was sympathetic to his younger self: his luck would never have seen him safely through war; it hardly served him in peacetime. Sitting next to this old warrior, though, he was infused with a sense of daring. Heroism, even. Yes, it was as though he had just finessed a dangerous run and was winging back to base.

"I was in France a few years ago with my wife and her parents," he said. "My father-in-law was in heavy maintenance, right behind the front lines."

The driver nodded and smiled.

Harlan felt heavy just talking about it, but he had the right audience. "We must've visited every old battleground, war memorial, museum and American cemetery in Europe." Traipsing through war sites had worn down everyone but Judy's father who, as they rode through Normandy, had enthused, "This is great tank country!"

Near the end of the trip, Judy looked through her clothes wondering what to arrive in Paris in. "How 'bout a tank?" I said." Harlan still laughed at the line.

The driver smiled gravely. "Saw all that from the air," he said. "Dropped plenty of bombs on those folks. Never stuck around long enough to see the damage, though." He speculated, briefly, on the impersonality of murder during wartime. "I suppose I'll pay my respects at the American Cemetery over there."

"An American Cemetery in England?" Harlan sputtered, overcome by a sudden giddiness. He tried not to giggle. "Were soldiers dying there of old age?"

"There were plenty of planes came back with bodies," the driver explained gently.

"Oh. Right."

"Sometimes the flak was so thick you'd think you could walk on it."

Everyone had his own reasons for being glad to be alive. The early morning sun illuminated the road signs to their left: Pick your own strawberries. Harlan was tempted. Welieving. Some new sect, probably. The Welievers. Turning to see if he had read it wrong, he encountered the long, empty car behind him: two more rows of plush gray. It hardly felt excessive. With satisfaction, he noted the Indiana hills rolling away from either side of the highway with no help from him.

A man with a pony tail in a tan Ford pick-up passed them on the right, smiling at Harlan as though he knew him. Harlan had been told, by someone who watched television in the middle of the day, that he resembled a television quiz show host, which might explain the half-smiles he got from total strangers.

As the truck pulled ahead, he saw a serious white duck painted on the tailgate and was reminded of a joke. "You know the recipe for Peking duck?" The driver did not. "First you pluck the duck. Then you scald it and singe the remaining feathers. Then you kill it." He looked with affection at the humble soul behind the wheel, a real American patriot, a man of feeling who, nevertheless, was not laughing at his joke. "Did you get it?"

"I get it, I get it," the man said, smiling obligingly.

At the airport Harlan tucked a ten dollar bill into the driver's breast pocket. It was guilt more than gratitude, for the way laughter had choked him, like an irrepressible cough, during the hour drive. "Maybe we'll meet again," he heard himself say. But they wouldn't. The world was small only for people of importance. The driver could go back to bed, the man in the pickup draw his blinds and watch television for the rest of his life, and no one would know the difference. But Harlan was on his way.

There was only one ashtray in the smoking section of the waiting lounge and the two people sitting next to it were not smoking. Harlan had just started again, with a sort of reluctant joy: he carried cigarettes but no matches in a futile salute to his health. A wiry woman at the other end of the bench was furtively knocking ashes onto the carpet and rubbing them in with the toe of her ankle boot. When Harlan held his unlit cigarette before her nose, she looked up in alarm, thinking, maybe, that it was a summons for littering. "Can I borrow a light?" He was sorry, in a way, to put her at ease. He would have liked to be in uniform at that moment, with a gun and a badge. He would have liked to arrest her.

She rummaged nervously through the open purse on her lap. When Harlan suggested he take the light from her cigarette, she surrendered it at once. He was confused. He looked at the two cigarettes in his hands, put the unlit one in his mouth. Then, remembering what to do, he banged the woman's cigarette against his, almost knocking off the lit end.

Handing her bent cigarette back, he excused himself this clumsiness. He was overtired. He had forgotten to bring more than one change of underwear and one clean shirt, and though he had given them a

good airing the night before, he was aware of a faint aroma of perspiration that hung about him, as though on someone else's clothes.

Across from him sat a well-dressed woman wearing several varieties of silver and turquoise jewelry: American Indian, Mexican, Chinese. Judy had the same penchant and searched obsessively through markets and antique shops. The woman sat sideways on the edge of her seat holding onto an aluminum walking stick with a seat sling folded between two branches. Her long nails were well manicured, painted. She wore a wig.

The driver had been wearing a rug too, as it turned out. When he stepped into the light, the real hair at his nape had glowed pink, revealing a sad attempt to match the red wig. Harlan's hair was thick but receding and there was something about hairpieces that jumped out at him. Maybe it was their artful insincerity. He had once worked with a man who had three different toupees, identical except for their length, which varied to give the impression his hair was growing. There was sympathy in the office towards the vanity of this aging bachelor. The conspiracy was not to let on that anyone knew. But the hairpieces had a cunning of their own, arranging themselves rakishly upon the man's head, sometimes low on his forehead, other times allowing their part to slip toward an ear. Harlan was younger then, impulsive. One morning the toupee-bearer appeared with his shortest piece set perfectly upon his head, inviting comment. "Got your wig cut, I see," Harlan quipped. And he was told that for days afterward his name had whipped around the typing pool like a comet, with his witticism streaming behind it.

Oh, he was wicked, he was cruel. Or so he had been in his youth. He'd had no tolerance for other people's frailties. Still didn't. Now that he recognized his own, he had no tolerance for them, either. It had been years since he had felt dangerous, immortal. Amazing what success and lack of sleep could do. It was enough to make him believe in infinite dimensions. They had been talking about that last night, about black holes and such, immensities. Harlan liked to think he had inspired the conversation.

The woman across from him was exchanging worried murmurs with a man wearing a short-sleeved white shirt, blue trousers hitched up beneath his pectorals, and a string tie with a turquoise and silver tie pin. They may have been coming from a trip out west, a buying trip. Harlan could see the last ten years of their life together quite clearly: retirement in a rural setting, where they opened a touristy shop in a quaint little village, or an antique shop, yes. They were the arbiters of taste in a small place.

Frowning, the man stood up and stepped carefully over Harlan's briefcase, which protruded into the passage. Harlan got up to dump his ashes, then the rest of his cigarette, into the ashtray at the end of the bench. When he returned, the woman leaned across the narrow aisle and whispered, "Do you mind moving your briefcase? My husband doesn't see very well." As Harlan complied, she added brightly, "Yesterday he took a

flying leap!" Then she caught herself. Her eyes grew wide. Had she sounded too gleeful?

The man returned, making his way across the floor with his eyes closed. No wonder he tripped, Harlan thought, until he saw that the man's eyes were not, in fact, closed, but that he was carefully observing where he was going through the crack at the bottom of his glasses. There was a moss green and purple bruise on his right arm. He mumbled to his wife, who cooed consolingly in return. Older couples, Harlan observed, were solicitous when together, but a menace to each other when apart. Or they might be like his in-laws, meting out doses of poison lethal in a younger couple, but to which they had become immune. While the turquoused woman had been broadcasting her husband's most recent embarrassment, he had probably been explaining to an airline employee that the vagaries of his wife's bowels had kept them from catching an earlier flight.

Some idiot had left a cigarette burning in the ashtray. Acrid smoke drifted towards the wall of windows overlooking the runway and back into the lounge. Harlan remembered putting out his cigarette without thinking, or rather with his mind on something else. Which was probably exactly how disasters happened. The idiot, he realized, was him.

He looked around the room, but no one seemed to notice. He should have got up and crushed the offending cigarette, but he couldn't move. And then a man appeared, an angel in a blue uniform wheeling a large garbage pail to the ashtray and smoothly dumping it, smouldering cigarette and all, into the bin.

Could he not picture his bin catching on fire, the plastic lining melting, then bursting into flames with everything in it? There were people, Harlan thought, whose minds were either otherwise employed, like his own, or just not capable of dealing with the simplest tasks. And how was anyone to know which it was? Stay out of blue uniform, he told himself. Stay out of any uniform.

When the first call was made for his flight, Harlan lined up with the children and disabled passengers. He waited for someone to notice and laughed when the woman collecting boarding passes advised him to wait his turn. When the time came, he joined the line not quite at the end. No one objected.

A tearful chorus of women stood between the window and the seats. Some were black, some white. All were big-boned, overweight and clearly related. There was a black child and a white child, cousins maybe, well-fed, who would grow up to resemble their mothers, large, emotive women with short curly hair. They were all crying unabashedly, breaking away to indulge in some private grief, then rejoining the others. A young black man, about to disappear through the doorway to the plane, turned and waved, careful not to appear too cheerful. This parting gesture refueled their sorrow.

As Harlan shuffled past the ground assistant who took his ticket, a

door to his left began to rattle, then opened to let in two short, cocky-looking men in blue uniforms. Harlan scuttled in front of them.

With a graciousness that had not occurred to him, one of the men said to the other, "You can cut in front of me, captain."

"Thank you," the captain said in Harlan's ear. He tapped Harlan's shoulder. "Mind if I move in front of you? I promise not to sit in your seat."

"As long as I don't have to sit in yours!" Oh, was he quick.

The young black man was occupying the aisle seat of Harlan's row. "I think they were sorry to see you go," Harlan said as he squeezed past him.

The young man smiled ruefully.

Harlan sat next to the window. He was in the non-smoking section. The smokers, he thought, were a much more interesting bunch of people, and there were rarely babies among them. But there were no babies on this flight anyway. It was made up mostly of businessmen such as himself, men who had woken up in a strange room and might be proceeding to another. Some of them had suits whose jackets they slung casually into the overhead bins: these were Americans. Others had foreign accents or spoke in strange languages. They kept their perfectly-tailored dark suits intact despite the heat, spoke in loud voices and looked around imperiously, above it all. No one but Harlan appeared to take much notice of them. To be foreign here was a waste of energy.

On the ground outside the plane men in blue uniforms rushed around wearing headphones. Doors shut, engines revved. Soon they were moving toward the runway.

What if the pilot had insisted Harlan take his seat? The plane would do strange things then. It would dance around the runway. People would smile at one another, make jokes. As long as they were on the ground they would think they were safe.

The grass in the divide along the runway rippled from the gust of the engines. A red-winged blackbird hopped into a clearing. How exotic it looked, how out of place, like the foreigners on the plane. There was no other sign of life along the runway. They might as well have been airborne. Empty cars moved along the road beside the airport. Signs on buildings advertised local businesses to those for whom it was too late to care.

Now the plane was rounding a corner of the runway and Harlan saw, behind them, a long line of other planes, airbuses mostly, 737s, and one commuter plane, squeezed out of line and standing alongside a 737 like a pilot fish. Or maybe it was a tug plane, guiding the others out of port. It was all silent show. Even the noise within his own airplane was subdued. Concentrated air gushed from the duct above, more distracting than the muzak, background for the dangerous ascent.

They were speeding down the runway now. Had Andrew Carnegie ever gone this fast? Henry Ford? Harlan could die today having accomplished this much more than they had. But he wouldn't, he wouldn't

die today.

Flying didn't scare him. Not really. He envisioned worse ways to go. One day he might lean out of the car to greet someone he knew and be cut in half by another car. Or he'd spot a ten dollar bill on the street, slam on the brakes, and go right through the windshield. He wore his seatbelt not in the event of someone else's mistake, but against his own. Because he would make mistakes. While he was away, maybe even now, as he was airborne, his most recent mistakes would be stirring things up, preparing a rough landing. Dundis would have found out what an imposter he was, that his evaluation had been spun out of thin air. They might be drawing up Harlan's severance package at this moment. Judy would have decided, finally, that she could no longer live with a jerk. He was fallible; he wasn't safe. Not on the ground, anyway.

The ground was overcast with a thick, patchy mist. Whole communities appeared gradually and then gradually disappeared in the soft covering. Up here he felt safe. Funny voices whispered in his head. Did you hear the one about the man who won the lottery? And the guy whose name wasn't Fred? He remembered a story he had heard on a flight from L.A. about a man heading to New York on a business trip who dropped his dentures down the toilet of the plane. Reaching to retrieve them, his arm got stuck, and he arrived in New York several hours later, toothless, with his arm still down the toilet. And he never did get his dentures back.

It was the sort of story Harlan could imagine telling about himself, that he might tell about this trip to Indiana, where he had arrived incomplete, unprepared, and how fast he had learned, and how he had wowed them. Because while some people might have thought the experience traumatic, unsalvageable for the man who had lost his dentures, Harlan liked to think it had been triumphant, that without his teeth the man had risen above the details, mocking those who couldn't. That he was bald as a baby. That he had gone around New York grinning like a maniac. Tall, well-built, he had charmed by the force of his personality. Women and prizes crowded his path. Heavy hitters tried to engage him in all sorts of transactions. The town was his. And all around it people stood over toilets tossing their wigs and dentures into the water, hoping to achieve the same state of grace.

As the plane bounced gently on the clouds.

## Dangerous Doubts

The mind invents its own inadequacies  
But not the power to erase illusion  
That schemes and wholesome dreams  
Can become actual despite the truth  
That thoughts invest themselves in flesh  
and direct motion

That you have 30,000 shots at immortality  
But only one you dare not miss at being rich  
Or at the least escape the nag of destitution

That maybe exercise shows on TV  
Are really harmful  
That sound bodies just  
Amplify our empty minds

That platitudes contain a grain of wisdom  
And fortune's a rush hour train that doesn't wait

To really live means needing other people  
That whatever that means love  
Could conquer hate

## Tirade

Now I know old age is cruel  
It brings fears you never knew

There is hazard in the morning sun,  
A thirty percent chance  
This day will pass without  
The birth of a regret  
Or the blossoming of a sorrow  
So well behaved and mild  
Shyly, patiently  
Gaining courage all these years  
Blurting into the bliss  
You've sown around you

These passions make your life last longer  
Waiting for the day  
You can no longer push them away.  
Arms weakened,  
Your heart grows stronger  
And wisdom clinging to you like a child  
To her broken doll,  
You may finally sort everything out  
And end with nothing  
Left to fear tomorrow

## Spirits You All

*The Charles Gayle Trio at the Houston Jazz  
Festival on 16 September 1992*

*for Charles Gayle*

All it is is

Church

If you hear it

He

Church

He

Concerthall flame breath

To sidewalk

Breathes

Through a saxophone

To deep pulsing tunnels

The people

Whipped by the money changers

Beat down by money

Hang wearily

Awaiting darkness

Bats

He church

Speaking no words

Their souls are not silent

He

Makes audible

The sonar of thousands

The horn coaxes measured Jesus

Sing

Gayle,  
Angular  
Erect  
Vattel Cherry dances  
Bass  
Bells like the click of cowries  
Flash like sparks  
Around his instrument  
Marc  
Edwards reaches  
For a distant drumbeat  
Snaring it, then lets  
It go  
To fly around this space

Inside his saxophone  
Are all the voices  
Spirits You all  
The shrieks of Daddy Grace  
And grandmaw's moan

Young girls  
All that is truly precious of the earth  
Loud and laughing  
Who do not know  
The troubles of this world  
Glowing  
With bells in their ears  
Fluttering bird-like  
In girl conspiracies

From concerthall under red lights  
To sidewalks exiled from neon

If you can hear it  
Spirits you all  
Dance from this saxophone

Cold light in falling darkness  
Under the shudder of Suburbans  
Fuming on the overpass  
A woman in a carton  
She might have asked a husband  
To break down  
And stack beside the drive for heavy trash

Busies her hands  
Folding rags with gracious care  
Into a plastic bag

Her heart just idles  
And her mind curls up  
Around a picture of a small white clapboard  
Missionary Baptist Church  
Nestled in hope beside a county road  
Where the choir voice  
Was all the sound of life  
To laughing girls  
And soft brown faces  
Some of them softened only  
When they sang

Church don't mean religion  
May even be a verb

Sleeping in fits  
A man 10 feet away  
Wrapped in a sheet of cardboard  
Does not dream;  
That lobe was leached  
In floods of liquid flame  
That made 1,000 nights like this  
Instant forgettings  
And survivable  
He does not see himself  
In marcelled hair  
Long gleaming Stacey Adams cordovans  
As dangerous as German U-boats  
On the Dreamland floor  
As the orchestra  
High trumpet, hoarse trombones  
Slides into "Cherry Pink  
And Apple Blossom White"

You think these cracked feet  
Have no mambo memory?  
Well, no they don't  
He never did that  
But he saw it in a movie once  
A century ago

He  
Church in trembles

Joy?

And struggle

Jjoy and and struggle

Here  
Where night's a cloak  
Of heavy hopelessness  
And day a flash of puzzled patterns  
Lining it  
A fashion  
Such ill-fitting materiality  
That even those who grab the most  
See themselves scrambling  
To barely cover their behinds

And now the brazen shofar of a horn  
As the commuter bats  
Unfold themselves into  
The evening  
And step along the sidewalk  
And do not look around or down  
And if they do don't see  
What you can hear  
Spiralling out of Charles Gayle's saxophone  
Spirits you all

Know where it comes from

Church if you feel it

## An Interview with Susan Wyatt

*Susan Wyatt was the Executive Director of Artists Space, one of the earliest and most influential alternative arts spaces in New York City, from 1985 - 1991. I met with Wyatt in late December 1993 to discuss issues such as alternative arts spaces, public arts funding, and freedom of expression. All of these issues have been extremely important to Wyatt who has been an outspoken and active advocate for the arts. During the late 1980s, controversies developed over legislation which tried to label what type of art could be deemed obscene and therefore, be refused government funding. In 1989, during heated debates over censorship and obscenity in the arts, Artists Space and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) became embroiled in controversy over the exhibition "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing," a show about sexuality, AIDS, death, and memory.*

\* \* \*

EL: Let's begin with some background on your tenure at Artists Space and the history of the organization itself. How long were you there?

SW: I was at Artists Space for 17 years. I actually started as a student intern when I was at Sarah Lawrence College. After I graduated, I started working there part-time doing odd jobs while I was looking for something else. It gradually became a real job.

EL: When you took over as Director in 1985, what was your vision? What did you want for Artists Space?

SW: At the time, I didn't have one. People were always asking and people still want to know. I don't think I totally buy into that concept. What I wanted to do at Artists Space was to continue some of the things we had always been doing. It had less to do with my vision and more to do with what was going on in the art world. I wanted to be responsive to what was going on in the community. One of the things that I did was to increase the publications in an attempt to document the shows. We started organizing international shows. Between 1985 and 1988, there was so much focus on younger artists and commercial galleries. It was a time when 22-year-old artists were having solo shows in those galleries. For us to be a showcase for younger artists' work and provide one-person exhibitions for younger artists in New York didn't mean too much. We also started a series of exhibitions of artists from around the country who were chosen by curators from other parts of the country. Part of that was because we didn't have a staff that could travel. It was a way to utilize curators from different regions who would not normally have the opportunity to do a show in New York and

who would be knowledgeable about artists working in that area.

Regarding international shows, one of the major shows I put on was an Eastern European exhibition entitled "Metaphysical Visions/Middle Europe" which took two years to plan. It was just before the break up of the Soviet Union and during a time when Eastern Europe was very closed off. Valerie Smith, who was Artists Space's curator at the time, had a very particular interest and a desire to learn more. It took two years for us to get the funding, but it wasn't so much the funding that made it difficult, though at the time, it seemed insane to take on such a thing. We actually were able to raise the funds. Valerie went over and traveled around to figure out what we could do. In some countries, it was easier for her to have meaningful contact with the artist community than others, but overall she had a very difficult time. Once she came up with a concept and some of the artists, we had to figure out a way to get them and their work out. I think there were seven or eight artists in the show and all of them came to New York for the show. It was, for some, the first time they had left their countries. Yugoslavia was easy to arrange. It was a very different place then. But with the Czech artists we had a lot of difficulty getting them out. One of them was "unofficial" and that was very tricky but we managed to do it. Getting the work out physically was also very difficult although in the case of the Polish artists, most of them created work on site. The kind of work the Poles were doing involved materials like dirt, scrap wood — materials that one could duplicate very easily here. We did several international shows.

The international exhibitions were a way for us to carve out a different niche in New York. Besides the NEA, we could get funding from the foreign governments involved and from certain foundations. We were able to get money for the Eastern European show because there had been nothing like it in New York before. When you're working at a place like Artists Space, you need to make the resources and the mission come together somehow. You can't do things when you can't find funding for them. But you can't do things just because the funding is available either.

EL: For you, what is the major difference between alternative spaces and museums?

SW: I think a major difference is the focus. It wasn't so much going into a studio and looking at all the work and making an interpretive judgement or thinking thematically. Partly because of the type of artists we were dealing with, in most cases, it was the first time they were showing. We wanted to present an opportunity where they had choices and could control how the work was presented. Rather than mediating between the art and the public, the idea was to present the work in a more direct way.

For instance, I think The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City has more of a focus on the curator. Our focus at Artists Space was more on the artist. My predecessor, Linda Shearer, had a good way of putting it. She would say, "We curate artists, not the art." We wanted to take leaps of faith and we did, many times. I'm sure museums also do that but for

us the point was not about putting together a perfect exhibition. It was much more about experimentation.

EL: Is Artists Space the only alternative space to have a slide registry?

SW: There are other slide registries but I think it's one of the most effective. The registry has been a part of Artists Space from about its second year. By the 1980s, it became more utilized after Linda Shearer selected from the slide file for her first exhibition which then started an annual series of exhibitions which we called Selections. It was a way to highlight the file and for us to have a non-thematic presentation of eight to twelve younger artists' work.

Artists Space has always had a service component. In fact, when it started, it never really intended to be an exhibition space. Artists Space started with the idea of assisting artists. The primary focus was on financially supporting artists and the first program was called the Emergency Materials Fund. This program made small grants to artists who were having shows in other non-profits (colleges, libraries, galleries). If they needed basic costs for shipping, insurance, framing, etc., we gave them grants. The grants were not intended as sole sponsors. Artists who show in non-profit spaces have to bear so much of the burden of exhibiting. The program was set up to help ease that burden.

EL: What was the original intent of the founders of Artists Space?

SW: In 1973 the two founders, Trudie Grace and Irving Sandler, had a series of meetings with artists and asked them what kinds of things were important and what they needed. What kept coming up over and over again was the need for exhibition space which was free from political and commercial considerations. And that's how the exhibitions began.

EL: So, I assume you carefully watched other alternative organizations.

SW: Oh, you have to. To survive, an organization has to develop its own identity so you have to have a sense of what others are up to. It's interesting, though, because the first year I was at Artists Space and probably up through the 1970s, we had very little interaction with the other alternative spaces. There really wasn't any vehicle for that. One of the reasons the National Association of Artists Organizations (NAAO) was founded was to try to foster, not just locally but nationally, what these places were about and to advocate for them. It's hard because so many organizations are struggling and there's so little money. It's as though you're swimming out there in the ocean and you don't see the other swimmers. So NAAO was important; it helped us to see the other swimmers.

In some parts of the country, there is only one alternative space in that city and it has to serve the whole broad range of constituencies. That's a very different kind of role than a place like Artists Space in New York. If you don't have a variety of commercial galleries in a city and you're not dealing with an active art market, a different kind of program would make a lot more sense. I think the sad thing now, because of the decline in funding, is that some of the bigger alternative spaces have really suffered. The Washington Project for the Arts (WPA) and Los Angeles Contemporary

Exhibition (LACE) in Los Angeles have had severe cutbacks and cannot do the types of shows they did six or seven years ago. You want to have diversity; you want to have both the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Walker Art Center. Even the major museums are suffering from budget cuts.

Some people feel that alternative spaces should exist when they are relevant, then die. The attitude is that another will come along, I can understand that argument but I don't agree with it. I think that will happen anyway but I don't think it's a thing to foster. Also, it is just so hard to put together an organization and get it established and stabilized. There have been so few new alternative spaces lately. It's so much more difficult to start them in this climate.

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*In 1989, Senator Jesse Helms, for which the Helms Amendment is named, fought to curb federal financing of art deemed obscene, and a modified version of his bill was passed into law that fall. Organizers of exhibitions of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano both suffered as a result of this legislation. Susan Wyatt had been speaking out against what she saw as blacklisting. Wyatt was very concerned about the fact that when the Helms law passed, the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECA) in Winston-Salem, N.C. which had received \$45,000 from the NEA were singled out by Congress and that the NEA received a symbolic \$45,000 cut to its budget as punishment for the grants. Those two organizations had been put on a list, essentially where in order for them to receive an NEA grant, they would have to give detailed justification to a Congressional Committee. Wyatt suggested that if they were on a blacklist, all exhibition spaces should be on a blacklist. Wyatt also suggested that arts organizations call the NEA, ask about some of the work that they were showing, and ask about the law and its language.<sup>1</sup> For these suggestions, Wyatt received both support and criticism. Some agreed that a blacklist was being established and Wyatt added that blacklists were only powerful if they were small; if it was a large list, it would lose its power.*

*While Wyatt was the Director of Artists Space, she and that organization became involved in a difficult controversy with the NEA and the Helms Amendment over an exhibition entitled, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" (November 1989-January 1990). Artists Space received a \$10,000 grant from the NEA for the exhibition; however, that grant was later rescinded, then reinstated, after much controversy. I asked Wyatt about the origins of the show and about the controversy that followed.*

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SW: Artists Space hadn't done a photography exhibition for quite some time and so we invited the photographer, Nan Goldin, to organize a show for fall 1989. As time passed, it did cross my mind that "Witnesses," which was going to be primarily photography, dealt with the subject of gay sexuality and that it might be questioned or a problem in some way.

That summer of 1989, it became increasingly clear that photography was a hot issue. It seemed to a lot of people, including myself,

that part of the problem with photography was that many people could not understand that photography was an art. It seemed that there might be some controversy. I believe I talked to the Executive Committee of the Board of Artists Space at some point that summer about the potential for controversy. Talking with the Board about upcoming shows was something I did on a routine basis anyhow. I didn't want any kind of controversy to come up or have any weird vibes out there in the community without the Board having some knowledge of it so that they wouldn't be caught off guard.

EL: One of the pivotal pieces in the "Witnesses" exhibition was actually in the accompanying catalogue, and I remember it provoked the most concern. The artist, David Wojnarowicz wrote an essay entitled "Post Cards From America: X-Rays From Hell" which is a very personal account of his experience with AIDS. Tell me about that.

SW: Nan Goldin and Connie Butler (who replaced Valerie Smith as curator) had been working together on the exhibition and catalogue. Nan wanted several artists to participate in the catalogue, including David Wojnarowicz and Cookie Mueller. Cookie was very sick with AIDS and couldn't write anything but we figured out a way for her to participate.

Just before I left to go to the NAAO conference in October, Connie Butler received a copy of David Wojnarowicz's text for the catalogue. She wrote me a note which said that I might want to read this. I read David's essay and I felt that this essay was something I needed to run by our Board. We had never even published the words "fuck" or "shit" in any of our catalogues. Beverly Wolff, who is a lawyer, had recently joined the Board at Artists Space, and it seemed like an opportunity to utilize this new Board member who could help us with legal matters. I asked Connie to have Beverly look over the text. Since I'm not a lawyer, I didn't know about libel laws. I didn't know if the public figures mentioned — Cardinal O'Connor, Jesse Helms, William Dannemeyer — might sue. It was a totally new experience for me to deal with these issues. So I asked Connie to get the text to Beverly in preparation for an Executive Committee meeting. It was something I knew I wanted to advise Artists Space's Executive Committee about and to also talk about what we wanted to say to the whole Board about the show. There was no question in my mind that we would go ahead with the show and I knew that there might be some controversy. I had known that even before David's text came up. It was just a way of being prepared.

When I got back from the NAAO conference, Beverly and I talked about the text and some of the NEA issues. Both of us were very interested in the question about the constitutionality of the Helms law. We talked about the grant and about the pros and cons of giving the grant back which she had posed to me as an option. And I had argued with her very strongly against doing any such thing. It was more a theoretical discussion than anything else. One of the things she said was that she couldn't assure me that the text was not libelous. The implication, the sense I got from her, was

that it might not be libelous but she couldn't guarantee that Cardinal O' Connor's or Jesse Helms' lawyers might not think that it was nor that we would be protected from a lawsuit. She recommended that I call David and ask him to remove the names and to discuss them generically as government officials. I was under a lot of pressure, and I called David. I don't think I got into any of the specifics but I did say that we had some concerns and that I wanted to talk to him about the text. We talked about it a little bit. He was extremely forceful about wanting to keep the text exactly the way it was. It was a difficult conversation and I can't recall many other situations I had like that at Artists Space but I felt that I had to talk to him about the essay.

Once I talked to him and had hung up the telephone, I realized that there was no way in hell that we could press him for changes in the text, nor did I want us to. I called Beverly and told her that we had to publish the text the way it was and asked her what we needed to do to protect ourselves legally. Beverly wanted David to sign a legal waiver, which was actually very standard, and we discussed the fact that we had no contracts with any catalogue writers or artists. That was something we discussed changing. She also suggested that we have a disclaimer in the catalogue. That seemed feasible. In the more theoretical discussion when we discussed our options, Beverly and I had talked about the idea of taking the catalogue out of the scope of the grant. Our catalogues generally cost \$6,000 or \$7,000. We had received a small grant from a corporation that wanted to be anonymous and we had applied for money from the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation which granted us \$5,000. So when I met with the Executive Committee, one of the things I talked about was possibly allocating this \$5,000 grant from the Mapplethorpe Foundation to the publication of the catalogue.

I called the NEA the day before the Executive Committee meeting and spoke to David Bancroft who supervises Special Exhibitions grants, which is the type of grant we had been awarded. I asked him about the possibility of changing the scope of the grant and I told him a little bit about the show. I wanted them to know that it was possible that some of the works were sexually explicit. One of the reasons I did that was because I was concerned about an incident that occurred during the controversy over the summer regarding the Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe grants.<sup>2</sup> Hugh Southern, who was then the Acting Chairman of the NEA, wrote a letter to members of Congress basically saying that he was personally offended by Serrano's work.<sup>3</sup> I was horrified by that and I didn't want the NEA to write anything like that about the Artists Space show. Part of my thinking was that if we removed the catalogue from the grant, we would remove the most potentially contentious artwork involved and the one where the NEA would probably have to be the most apologetic. And I didn't want them to be apologetic in any way about this grant or this exhibition. I made several statements at the time which were quoted in various news articles that I wanted the NEA to stand up for the show. In his book,<sup>4</sup> John E. Frohnmayer, the then new Chairman of the NEA, said he didn't understand

what I meant by those statements. What I was thinking about was Southern's letter. I didn't want them to be apologetic so by shifting the money, my thought was that it would allow the NEA to be supportive and not cast aspersions on the work in the show. From a practical and political point of view, to remove the catalogue would make the grant more defensible. This wasn't necessarily my point of view, but I was trying to protect our artists and the organization. I was really horrified by the way Mapplethorpe and Serrano had been attacked. During a visit with a colleague in the fall to see Senator D'Amato, my colleague had gone through the Congressional record and made a list of adjectives that had been used to describe Serrano and Mapplethorpe. I remember her reading that list in our meeting with Senator D'Amato. I was amazed by the degree of hostility and ridicule these two legitimate artists received. I didn't want any artist showing at Artists Space to be dragged through the mud in that way. I knew Andres Serrano and that it had been an extremely difficult time for him. I didn't want that to happen to David Wojnarowicz or anyone else.

EL: How did the Board respond to your suggestion of taking the catalogue out of the NEA grant?

SW: Prior to the meeting, I looked into the possibility of making that shift, and I was told that it could be done. David Bancroft advised me on the type of letter to write to the NEA. I posed it to the Executive Committee and they agreed. The Mapplethorpe Foundation grant was to be used in any way we wanted for the exhibition. I discussed this with Bancroft and he said we didn't need to say anything about the show, just that we had raised the money for the catalogue. He told me to request a change in the budget. It was very straightforward and simple.

But when I re-read the award letter, I realized that it wasn't just a question of changing the budget. In the letter, the grant included the exhibition *and* the accompanying catalogue. At that time, it was known that Senator Helms was going through NEA files, so I called Bancroft back, and I asked him about the possibility of getting a new letter because I was concerned about Helms reviewing the Artists Space file some time in the future and claiming that the NEA had funded a catalogue personally attacking him. Bancroft explained that the same language was used in every letter whether there was a catalogue or not. This would ensure the NEA getting credit for any publication. I also asked him if the NEA wanted to be credited as a funder of the show. I wanted to ask about this specifically because I had been thinking about the funder who had asked to be anonymous. One of the things I noticed while looking over the list of conditions for grants from the NEA was that they suggested receiving a credit line, but it was not required. Bancroft referred me to Ana Steele who, at the time, was in the Chairman's office. In the meantime, he told me he would check into my question about changing the text of the letter so that "accompanying catalogue" could be removed. I also called Steele before the Executive Committee meeting but she told me that she couldn't give me any

advice. So, the Executive Committee basically left the credit issue up to me. It seemed ridiculous to not credit the NEA and as they hadn't asked to have their name removed, there was no justification for my hiding their involvement so I went ahead and put the credit on the announcement card which went out to 10,000 people.

In the meantime, John E. Frohnmayer had just begun his tenure as NEA Chairman and as he had been unable to attend the NAAO conference, he offered to meet with Charlotte Murphy, the Director of NAAO, who invited me and Inverna Lopez, the Director of International Arts Relations (INTAR) in New York City, to also attend. I was also planning to go to the National Council<sup>5</sup> meeting which was scheduled for early November. I wanted to follow up on possible cuts to the Visual Arts Program and to hear the National Council discuss the Helms language.

Anyhow, I went down to Washington the day before the meeting with Frohnmayer. I reconnected with Bancroft about changing our award letter and he advised me to send a letter requesting the change and that it would not be a problem for NEA to issue a new award letter. I told him that I had gone ahead and credited the NEA on the announcement card. We agreed that I should let Ana Steele know. I called Celeste Dado, the Assistant Director at Artists Space and asked her to draft this letter and get it out because Bancroft had okayed the change.

Meanwhile, Charlotte, Inverna, and I went to meet with Frohnmayer. When we got there we were told he would be a half an hour late and we should wait. So with half an hour to kill, I called Steele and told her everything — letter, credit, etc. She said she wanted to advise me that the Chairman had been briefed about our show and that she thought he might raise it in our meeting. Charlotte, Inverna, and I had carefully planned what we wanted to say to Frohnmayer. I didn't want the "Witnesses" show, something I considered a completely separate issue, to take up NAAO's time with the Chairman. I told Steele that I was concerned about that and although I would be happy to talk to him about it if he wanted, we were there to discuss NAAO matters. She said she could try to get a message to Frohnmayer but she couldn't guarantee it. By that time, I was fairly panicked. I had never met this man so it was off-putting. Anyhow, we ended up having a very nice meeting and covered all the topics Charlotte, Inverna and I had planned. One of the things we discussed included arranging a tour or town meeting in New York for Frohnmayer and he was very positive about that. When we got up to leave, he said "Susan, I need to speak to you privately." Charlotte and Inverna looked shocked, and they left. I stayed. We had a perfectly straightforward conversation. I brought him up-to-date about the show and went over all the details that I had gone over with Bancroft. He asked me a few questions about the show and asked if it was still possible to put a disclaimer in the catalogue for the NEA. Since we were already putting in a disclaimer on behalf of Artists Space, it seemed odd for me to say no. It had taken us a little time to figure out what Artists Space

had wanted to say so I told him I did not know what a disclaimer for the NEA should say. He asked if he supplied us with the text, would we include it. I said yes. He said that Andrew Oliver Jr., the Acting Director of the NEA's Museum Programs, would be coming to New York and would like to visit Artists Space to see the work for the show. I explained to him that we had not yet collected all the work since the show was not to open for another month but that we would make an effort to get what we could together. He said that was fine, to let Oliver see whatever he could and also to let him read the catalogue text. That was the whole discussion. He never gave me any indication that the NEA might withdraw the grant. He was clearly concerned about the grant but my understanding was that Oliver would come and no action would occur until after his visit.

I went back to New York and collected what we could for Oliver's visit. There were some people who criticized me for allowing Oliver to come. Some of my colleagues thought I shouldn't have allowed him to.

EL: Are these people other arts administrators?

SW: Yes, one is a director of another alternative space. I said, "You mean you would have said no to a visit from a funder?" I had nothing to hide. If the NEA had a problem with the work, let them say so. I admit that it was nervous-making. We thought carefully about who should be there. It was decided that Nan Goldin not be there for the meeting itself but that she should be in the gallery or stop by to just say hello. Connie, the curator, and Celeste, who wrote the government grants, and I were there. No Board members. Since Beverly and I had talked about some of the current pornography laws, I had shown her some of the photographs. There was one image which she advised me could potentially be problematic. It was a Peter Hujar photograph of a nude baby, and she expressed concern because of the child pornography laws. That was the only image she thought might be problematic. She advised us to try to contact the parents of the child and get a letter on file indicating that they had given permission for this photograph to be taken. We tried to track them down.

EL: Was that photograph included in what you showed Oliver?

SW: Yes. I don't remember if he said anything about it although I doubt it. We did everything we were supposed to do. In fact, I attended a seminar which Beverly and another lawyer, Barbara Hoffman, had given at MOMA for arts organizations about some of the recent changes in the child pornography laws among other things. It was quite amazing what things one had to do to comply with the law. We never were able to track down the parents of the baby in the Hujar photograph.

EL: How was Oliver's site visit?

SW: Oliver came on a Tuesday morning, looked at the work, and was very pleasant. He acted very unsurprised by everything. The catalogue at that point was too long for him to sit and read so I made him copy of the galley. I explained Mr. Frohnmayer's interest in a disclaimer and told him that we needed him to get back to us promptly as we had a deadline. He already

knew about the NEA credit on the announcement card. Oliver said that he would read the catalogue, report back to Frohnmayer and that we would hear from them. This was also the week that I was planning to go down to Washington for the National Council meetings. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Hess of *The Village Voice* had already contacted me about the show. She wanted to do a pre-review.

That afternoon, Frohnmayer called. He knew that the announcement cards and press releases had gone out. He asked if there would be copies of releases that we would distribute later. When I said yes, he asked us to put a disclaimer on the press release and any other material. I was confused but I said yes. I didn't want to get into any kind of argument with him. I wanted to hear what he had to say, hang up and then figure out what to do. He read me the disclaimer which I recognized as being out of the legislation. It said something like "the findings, recommendations, and opinions included herein do not reflect the views of the NEA." He basically instructed me to remove the name of the NEA from the show — from press releases, walls of the exhibition, the catalogue — and told me the disclaimer should be posted on every publication and anywhere else appropriate. But it seemed contradictory to put up a disclaimer without a credit. It was as strange as posting a sign like "the Pope doesn't agree with this . . . ." It made sense to have a disclaimer alongside the acknowledgement of support but not separated. I didn't know how I was to answer the question about whether the show was funded by the NEA. I told him that there was press interest in the show. He said to have them call him directly. It just seemed very strange and I didn't want to get into any heavy discussion so I got off the phone. There was no way in the world I was going to say to Elizabeth Hess when she asked if the show was funded by the NEA, "you better call John Frohnmayer to find out." It just didn't make sense. On top of that, what about our receptionist who sits near the entrance of the gallery? Here's this show about AIDS and sexuality and it's also full of photography and it's funded in part by the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation and it has this disclaimer about the NEA. She was going to be asked this question about whether the show was funded by the NEA by most every visitor. It wasn't clear to me what kind of answer she could give.

In our conversation, Frohnmayer said nothing about taking the grant back. Oliver had acted so calm. But I guess he was shocked by the work or at least that's what I heard later. I called Beverly and some other Board members to try to figure out what would make sense. I finally decided that I would try to call Oliver, which I did. I reached Nancy Pressly instead, the second in command in Museum Program, who was as perplexed as I was after I explained Frohnmayer's request. I thought about it that night and talked to other Board members but they, too, were confused. I thought that I would try to point out to Frohnmayer that his request didn't make any sense unless the disclaimer was accompanied by credit. I also thought the disclaimer was awkward and would likely raise more questions and cause

more notice. When I spoke with Oliver the next morning and told him that I was seriously considering calling Frohnmayer back, he said he didn't want to discourage me from calling Frohnmayer but that he did not think he would change his mind. I consulted with Board members and thought more about it that day. Eventually we decided that I would rewrite the disclaimer with less strange language and call Frohnmayer with the proposal that we would be willing to put up a disclaimer if we could credit the NEA. I wanted to point out the absurdity of his instruction. Beverly had warned me before I called him that if I brought up anything about giving the money back, that he would pounce on it so I should be careful. She was right. I was very careful about what I said to him.

When I spoke to him, Frohnmayer wasn't very pleasant and essentially said that he thought that I was calling to give the grant back. I said no, that I wasn't and told him my proposal. I told him that if he wanted to ask us for the grant back, I would convey that to my Board. He started to try to press me to give the grant back, so I got off the phone. A few minutes later, Beverly called to say that she was getting calls from the Legal Counsel's office at the NEA. I told her what Frohnmayer had said. She called the NEA back and tried to explain our point of view and tried to make clear that if there was a way the NEA could force us to give the grant back, that was what they would have to do but to expect us to voluntarily give it back wouldn't work.

Beverly received a draft of a letter by fax that the NEA was going to give to me, essentially asking for the grant back. They knew that I was going to Washington, D.C. for the Council meeting the next day. I managed to get a torn copy of the draft before catching the last shuttle to Washington. Beverly told me that when I arrived for the meeting at nine am, I should look for Art Warren who was the NEA's legal counsel and that their letter would be waiting for me to pick up. So that's what I understood. But when I showed up at nine the next morning, the first person to approach me was Allan Parachini, the prime reporter on this story, who was writing for the *Los Angeles Times*. He said that he understood that I had a letter from the Chairman requesting our grant back for our AIDS show. I was flabbergasted. I wanted to know who told him about such a letter and he said the press person at the NEA had. I hadn't gotten any letter so I told him his information was wrong. I connected with Art Warren and Julie Davis, a special assistant to the Chairman who later became legal counsel. Frohnmayer had recently issued a statement telling grantees that if they had questions about the new Helms law to call his office and they would work with them to resolve any problems. I told Davis that I had advocated that policy at the NAAO conference but that if someone asked me now if they should do that, I didn't think I would say yes. She agreed that I had a good point.

I was given a copy of the letter in draft form, and I had a fairly long meeting that afternoon with Warren about the draft. I asked for all the legal

grant requirements and I tried to understand exactly what was involved with the termination of grants. I asked for all the legal papers which he said he would get me the next day. We went over the draft line by line. I asked over and over again if we were being asked to voluntarily give the grant back, to voluntarily put the disclaimer up. I wanted to know what their reason was for asking us to give the grant back. I was just trying to get as much information as I could. I also wanted to keep the fact that I had this letter completely confidential. I didn't want it coming out in the press. I had seen what had happened at the Cocoran with its Board and what had happened with Christina Orr-Cahall over the Mapplethorpe exhibition; half the board thought canceling the show was the right thing to do and the other half thought it was the wrong thing to do and both factions had talked to the press. I didn't want my Board to be divided — half saying we should give the grant back and half saying we should not give the grant back. I wanted to have as strong a statement as possible from Artists Space and I felt that if it came out in public too soon, I didn't know where all the shoes would drop. The staff had voted unanimously as I left for Washington that we should not give the grant back. I didn't want to see the organization ripped apart. I wanted to make sure everyone knew what was going on before it became a public event. I asked them to please instruct Parachini and I was assured of confidentiality. I really had no direct dialogue with Frohnmayer that day although all the accounts say that I did. He came up to me before I got the letter and basically shook my hand. It was an indication of respect and that we had agreed to disagree.

The whole event was very strange. I felt like every eye in the room was watching and that Frohnmayer was watching my every move. I was told that the letter was completely confidential and I could tell the press when I wanted. They had told no one and they had corrected Parachini. I also tried to convince them not to give me the letter. If they wanted Artists Space to give this grant back, I would convey that to my Board. They didn't need to write it in a letter. By that point, we were in the process of setting up an emergency Board meeting that was scheduled for the middle of the next week. I had also volunteered to Julie Davis to remain in Washington to talk more to Frohnmayer. Although the National Council Meeting would be meeting on Sunday, I explained that I could meet with them on Sunday afternoon or I would even be willing to stay until Monday and meet then. I just wanted to have as much dialogue with them as I could and to get as many reasons as I could. I managed to put off Parachini by agreeing to have lunch with him the next day.

I didn't tell anyone that I had the letter. It was burning a hole in my briefcase. The only people I told were Beverly and Carolyn Alexander, our Board President. I had also been in touch with the Artists Space staff including Connie Butler who kept in touch with Nan. I was not in touch with David Wojnarowicz directly but I did want to keep him apprised. Richard Elovich was a very close friend of David's and was, at that time,

running an organization called Movement Research which also gets NEA money. After my last conversation with David, he was very angry with me. I didn't feel that it was productive to have that much direct dialogue with him. I did speak to Elovich several times that weekend. I thought he would understand what I was dealing with. I also knew that he would be in touch with David and keep him informed. We were trying to keep it all together; I didn't want it to fall apart in an ugly way. I wanted Artists Space to take a really strong stand. We also had finally sent the letter requesting to make the change in the award letter and the budget.

Shortly after Warren handed me Frohnmayer's actual letter asking for the grant back, I mentioned the letter which Artists Space had just sent requesting the change in the scope of the grant. He said it hadn't arrived so I told him to expect it. During all those discussions I had that entire weekend, no one said anything about not allowing that change nor was there any disagreement. Unfortunately, later that did occur. In Frohnmayer's book, *Leaving Town Alive: Confessions of an Art Warrior*, he said he knew nothing about my letter requesting the removal of the catalogue from the grant. What they tried to do later, when it all became public, was to use the catalogue as an excuse for killing the grant. That was exactly what I had tried to prevent. The NEA knew about the change we wanted to make in the scope of the grant. I waited all that time to insure we could get permission. Bancroft assured me we had that permission.

I had lunch with Allan Parachini the next day. Parachini told me, before I agreed to meet him, that he was going to do a story in the *Los Angeles Times* which would appear Monday no matter what. I decided it was better to talk to him generally about the show, to explain what Artists Space was about and also to explain my concerns about the Helms amendment, rather than have him publish a story without the background. It had been on my mind that even though our grant was from 1989, Frohnmayer used the 1990 language as his primary reason for taking the grant back. Actually, he said in his letter that it was for political reasons that he was asking for the grant back. At least, that's my interpretation. Parachini said Joe Slye, who was then head of the press office at the NEA, had told him that I had gotten a letter from the Chairman and that was why he asked me about it. I assumed that the NEA had corrected him.

EL: Do you believe that?

SW: I don't know. I think Slye did tell Parachini in the beginning. I don't know why I was told by the NEA that Frohnmayer's letter was confidential. I don't really think Frohnmayer was lying. I think they were trying to be confidential. They told me the next day that while it was strictly confidential, they had sent it to three people on Capitol Hill which didn't surprise me. I assumed they sent it to Representative Sidney R. Yates (D-Illinois) who helped defeat the Helms Amendment in its original form, Representative Pat Williams, and Senator Claiborne Pell, both of whom head re-authorization committees for the NEA.

I decided it was better to meet with Parachini because I thought it would be better to tell him directly about Artists Space and "Witnesses." I wanted to tell him about Day Without Art, that "Witnesses" was not just some isolated, wild, and crazy show about AIDS. It was part of a national event. I wanted to be somewhat vague so the NEA could change its mind, so that it wouldn't be locked into a hard and fast position. That was one of the reasons I suggested that they not put their request in a letter because I figured that once they did, it would be harder for them to switch back. I wanted to allow as much possibility for change in the situation. Parachini seemed excited about the show and clearly thought he had a big story. I asked him to fax me a copy of his article as I was planning to stay in Washington, D.C. until Monday for the possibility of meeting with Frohnmayer.

I spent Saturday and Sunday talking to Board members and on Monday, I met with Art Warren, Julie Davis, and John Frohnmayer. I told Frohnmayer about our Eastern European show, about official and unofficial art. I tried to suggest that there was a tremendous amount of sympathy for "Witnesses" and he should talk to the NEA staff. I asked for specific reasons for his requesting the grant back and he said that there were three. First, that the nature of the show had changed and had become political rather than artistic. Secondly, that portions of the catalogue were inflammatory and that he believed strongly in respect for individuals. He said because the catalogue attacked specific individuals, it violated his principles. Thirdly, there was a particular photograph of an erect penis which he called the "masturbation" photograph. He objected to that photograph. We talked for about an hour and a half.

I was to return to New York that afternoon and an emergency Board meeting was scheduled for a few days later. I told Frohnmayer that we would be back in touch after our Board met. I don't regret anything that I said even though I was quite direct. He seemed to be someone who was willing to listen. And as long as he was willing to meet and talk with me, I thought it was best to lay things out as clearly as I could.

He was still very interested in a meeting with artists in New York City.<sup>6</sup> I wanted to continue the dialogue with him. It wasn't very often I had the chance to meet with an NEA Chairman and I wanted to utilize this opportunity. Also, if there was anything I could do to argue for the NEA, I would do it. At his confirmation hearings, Frohnmayer was asked if the NEA got enough money and he said no; I thought that was great. I wanted to reinforce the positive things that he was trying to do. But, if Artists Space had to choose between the good of public funding and the good of artists, there was no question that artists had to take precedence. I was lucky because Artists Space had a very clear and strong mandate about its priorities. I wanted to find a strategy that would allow the NEA to fund the show, be supportive of it, and be clear about what it was funding and not be apologetic. It was very hard to think that this situation could cause

organizations like Artists Space to have to give up on public funding. I didn't want that to happen.

EL: What was your reaction to Allan Parachini's article?

SW: I was very upset when I read it. First of all, he mentioned a lunch that Charlotte, Wendy Luers,<sup>7</sup> and I had which made it seem as though there was some sort of conspiracy. He used a quote from me about how these issues didn't just affect small institutions that dealt with emerging artists, but that they affected all arts organizations. I said something about the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). So he quoted this thing about the Met and included Wendy Luers in that passage. I was terribly upset about that. He also said that I had received a letter from the Chairman. I never told him that I had the letter. One of the things I told Art Warren was that I would not tell anyone about the letter but when I did, the NEA would be informed. I didn't want Frohnmayer to think that I went ahead and told Parachini without letting the NEA know. I called Parachini immediately and asked him if I had told him about the letter. He said no and I asked him if he would tell that to Frohnmayer but he refused. He said it would lead to a series of questions that he did not want to answer. I immediately called Frohnmayer and spoke to Julie Davis who had just received a fax of the article but hadn't finished reading it. I did reach Wendy Luers later in the day. I wanted her to hear about the article from me. She was extremely kind.

But I am suspicious about the article; whoever leaked the story was trying to set up this situation in a particular way. There were specific details which no one would have known except someone who was extremely well-informed about our negotiations. It had to be someone who was very closely involved and who had access to details about the grant and our negotiations. Also, Artists Space was described in a certain way to set up a particular image, an image which was not flattering and would make it politically difficult for the NEA to give us the grant.

EL: What finally happened?

SW: The Board and the staff all agreed that we would not voluntarily give the grant back and I drafted a short letter to Frohnmayer which told him what our position was. Meanwhile, to keep the artists in the show informed, we set up a meeting with everyone to go over the situation. Connie and Celeste organized this meeting with the artists. Because I was busy trying to rally as many prominent, important politicians and others with influence to understand the issues and be supportive of us, I wasn't able to be as attentive to the artists as I would have liked.

I was also trying to get the other arts involved. Visual arts, especially contemporary visual arts, is so misunderstood. I couldn't understand why other disciplines didn't see how this affected them. For instance, why hadn't PEN spoken out on these issues earlier? I spoke to Frohnmayer about that to some degree and I remember telling him that it was fortunate "Witnesses" was about AIDS because there was a lot of

sympathy for this issue. I felt that the artwork would speak for itself. It seemed to me that there was a possibility to help change people's perceptions. This might help red-flag questions about legislation and make people question what was going on and try to advocate against restrictions. This issue might get more people involved since this wasn't just a visual arts or a photography issue.

Anyway, when the NEA and Artists Space released to the press Frohnmayer's letter and our response, all hell broke loose. It was on the front page of the *New York Times*. It was like a war. I kept in touch with Frohnmayer and Julie Davis. It was my understanding that Frohnmayer's letter to me asked for what is called "termination by convenience." We had said no, so Frohnmayer told the press that the matter would be turned over to the Justice Department. We didn't know what that meant. At that point, Beverly Wolff was trying to get us a lawyer who would look at our case for a first amendment lawsuit and to see what legal grounds we had. Beverly advised me that if we did file a lawsuit, it would be a several year proposition and a lot of our resources would go into that lawsuit. We really had to think about our priorities. I thought the best thing to do was to get people together to speak out against this termination of our grant. There was a lot going on. For example, the Visual Artists Organizations' panel was happening, which is the panel that makes decisions once a year about artists organizations all across the country. A lot of panelists were calling me and saying that they didn't know whether or not to go ahead and serve. I was very upset at the idea that some of them would resign. I was afraid that if some or all of them resigned, there would be no grants in that category. I was worried that the whole field would be defunded. I asked them all to go to the panel, to make decisions, raise the issues and talk to Frohnmayer about the issues but have their panel meeting. Some of the articles accused me of trying to lobby panel members. That wasn't what happened. Rather, panelists were calling me and I didn't want them to quit. I was afraid the NEA would fall apart from within. I had invested so much of my life in this field and I did not want to see it screw itself.

At this point, I was trying to find out who the recipients of the National Medal for the Arts were because a White House ceremony was scheduled for the next week. Leonard Bernstein's manager called to say that Bernstein was interested in possibly refusing his medal. Rather than refusing the medal, I thought it would be better for the medalists to show up at the White House and make a statement in support of free expression. I had this fantasy about a unanimous statement, that the Medalists would say something to the President. Bernstein's manager wanted to read the catalogue text and by that point, I figured out what to say to these requests. I pointed out the absurdity of reading the text because the catalogue was not funded by the NEA so what difference would it make? Also, I pointed out that we believed in free speech in this country so no matter what the text said, it could be published and available. I told Bernstein's manager that this

was our position and if Mr. Bernstein wanted to read the text upon understanding that we found no reason for him to do so, then to let me know. I never heard back. I also suggested that Mr. Bernstein show up to the medal ceremony and make a statement rather than refuse the medal. But Leonard Bernstein did refuse his medal and it was a wonderful, powerful statement. It saved us. It turned the tide and it hit Barbara and George Bush right in the face. I think this gesture had a lot to do with our getting the grant back. And it also made a lot of people think about what was happening to free expression and about the issue of AIDS. Robert Motherwell, who was also a national medal recipient, wanted to give us a contribution to replace the \$10,000. I had to explain that we were refusing those kinds of contributions. We wanted and needed money, but we did not want to drop our claim to the grant. Mr. Motherwell ended up giving us an unrestricted gift of \$10,000.

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*On November 16, 1989, the day "Witnesses" opened, Frohnmayer, in the face of a great deal of public and political support for Artists Space, announced that the grant had been reinstated. Cookie Mueller died the day before the show opened, and Mark Morrisroe had also just died. Both artists were in the show and they were close friends of Nan Goldin's. Because several artists did not want their works to be photographed for fear that their work might be manipulated by the media, Artists Space had to work out logistics regarding how to handle the media. I asked Wyatt about the exhibition's opening and the final outcome of her experience with "Witnesses."*

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SW: This was an extremely emotionally-charged time. Several artists were nervous about their works being photographed. A poignant example was a very beautiful portrait of David Wojnarowicz taken by the late Peter Hujar which David did not want in the show. David did not come to the opening, I think, partly because he was angry with me and because Artists Space had removed the catalogue from the grant. He had an idea that we could refuse to accept the grant back but there was no way we could. David was also afraid of being physically attacked if he were identified. At a reading scheduled during the show, he read with a mask on. He was also afraid that an NEA grant for a retrospective of his work which was to open in Illinois a few months later might be jeopardized. He didn't want his text to be quoted out of context and he was very concerned about the copyright issues. He didn't want his text leaked to the press before the show opened. I didn't realize it until later that one error I may have made was to give that text to Andrew Oliver. I shouldn't have done that, I guess. Someone at *The New York Post* managed to get David's home number and after several conversations, David decided to trust this reporter and quoted some of his text which then appeared in a very damaging story in the *Post*. David was extremely upset and angry that this reporter had tricked him. David and I had a lot of discussions and I have a tremendous amount of respect and

affection for him, though he was angry at me. I learned a lot from him. I was very sad when he died in 1992. But I'm not sorry that I asked him those questions about the text and the possibility of change. If I hadn't had that conversation, I never would have understood how strongly he felt. My understanding of the depth of his feelings allowed me to be much more forceful in my defense of that text. I never would have understood how much it meant to him if I had not questioned him. I'm sorry he could never understand that. I will always be grateful for my interaction with him. Up to that point in my life, I don't think I really understood that kind of anger or that kind of fear; I don't even think I do now. I have a somewhat better understanding because of some of the things I've learned in the last few years about human hypocrisy. Anyhow, David and I had very different world views and I think it was very hard for him to trust someone like me.

Through it all, I have to say that this incident did get a lot of people involved in the issue and spurred action. That was great. People in different disciplines started to realize that these restrictions affected them. So, that was all really important. On Day Without Art at the Museum of Modern Art, Leonard Bernstein played the piano and David Wojnarowicz appeared without a mask and read from his text. Seeing David without a mask in that very public situation — knowing that his voice and words were resonating far and wide that day — made me very happy. A few weeks later, Hujar's picture of him was on the front page of the *Village Voice*. So there were a lot of good things that came out of it. But it had a big effect on Artists Space. That part of it is very sad, all the stresses and strains which hurt the organization.

I remember going to a local NAAO meeting, although I don't remember whether it was before or after the show opened. It was not a warm and cozy meeting. A lot of people had questions about what I did and were angry at me. It's very odd when in your own community, you get these strange vibes but then everywhere else you go, you're treated like a celebrity. It's hard not to be bitter about it. I'm still sort of recuperating from it, I guess. I have continued to be extremely active on arts advocacy, but I've learned that people make up their minds about who you are and if you do something they don't expect, it's hard for them to deal with it.

EL: Why did you leave Artists Space? What were your thoughts about it?

SW: I left for a number of reasons. I had been at Artists Space seventeen years and had been its Director for six years. I felt I had accomplished the things I wanted. I had expanded the exhibition program, established an effective and influential video program, increased its artists services, greatly increased its visibility and expanded its funding base. Partly because of the "Witnesses" event, I had become very interested in arts advocacy. That event opened new arenas to me, and I wanted to participate in them. I was invited to speak at a variety of events across the country and that meant I was constantly on the go. In addition to running Artists Space, keeping up with these opportunities to advance dialogue on issues which were increasingly

important to me, I was trying to follow up on the access the event gave me to legislators and others with influence. It was exciting but very exhausting. I finally realized I needed a break, to assess what I was doing and where I was going.

The effects of "Witnesses" had also caused me a great deal of personal strain. It caused tensions in relationships among staff and board members at Artists Space and among the community of my peers. Those pressures were very draining and caused me pain. I found I disagreed with some Artists Space board members on certain issues, and I felt my productivity as the organization's leader was affected by these conflicts. I saw many different avenues through which I could pursue my career, avenues which had been opened due to my accomplishments at Artists Space and through my arts advocacy work. I discovered skills and interests I had not realized I possessed. So it was a combination of factors and it was bittersweet.

"Witnesses" changed my life and it touched many others. I will always remember it with great pride. Though it brought pain with it, I would do it over again just the way I did at the time. Its effects on the harmonious staff and board relationships at Artists Space and among my peers are the one thing I wish I could have prevented. But realistically, they were inevitable. Growth is always painful as is learning. I grew a great deal and learned a lot. I realized it was time to move on.

<sup>1</sup> Part of the wording of the Helms Amendment prohibits the NEA from being used to "promote, disseminate or produce materials considered obscene, including sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children or individuals engaged in sex acts" and that grant proposals will be denied "which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value."

<sup>2</sup> An exhibition of photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe was scheduled to open at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. during the summer of 1988. While the exhibition did receive a grant from the NEA, due to the debates in the Congress over homoerotic art and obscene art, the director of the Corcoran, Christina Orr-Cahall, decided to cancel the exhibition.

<sup>3</sup> The art work in question was a piece by Andres Serrano entitled *Piss Christ* (1987), a photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in urine.

<sup>4</sup> *Leaving Town Alive: Confessions of an Art Warrior*.

<sup>5</sup> The National Council for the Arts advises the NEA.

<sup>6</sup> This meeting took place at Artists Space at the height of the controversy, the day before Mr. Frohnmayer returned the grant.

<sup>7</sup> Wendy Luers is a member of the National Council for the Arts. Mrs. Luers is also married to William Luers, President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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JANE SHERRY

you are almost bound to be mystified

You cannot experience your  
own interior  by closing your  
eyes and concentrating on it  
In order to discover your own  
contents you have to investigate  
the inside of someone else.

this is the sort of pain you

have had it before



WITCH BITCH HARPY WHORE  
 HA CRO  
 SHREW TARMAGA  
 FOX CHICK BEAV  
 WRESS ENCHANTR  
 WRESS CHARRAN  
 AMP  
 SIB  
 S WEIRD SISTE  
 MERMAID MAENAD  
 GON TERMAGAN  
 HUSSY VIRAG  
 CH BITCH W  
 HAG CRONE  
 P ERMAGAN  
 AMP VAMP V  
 TART TROI  
 SEDUCER S  
 LARPY SCOLD SUCCUBUS



It's my first day on the job.  
 I'm a topless dancer or a whore.  
 I don't understand why I'm there.  
 A woman approaches me and asks me  
 why I didn't show up at the  
 healing meeting last night.  
 I don't understand what she's  
 talking about or why I am working there.  
 She says she has just the thing  
 to clear up my confusion,  
 one of her holistic cures.  
 She gives me a piece of white felt.  
 I go upstairs to the healing center  
 where there are many men  
 with the women who work downstairs.  
 I see that the men are not physically ill,  
 rather they are psychically or spiritually ill.



A woman is with a man who is an Arab  
prince. I am the woman. He isn't very  
nice to me. I am his wife.



Across the cobbled road is another  
white stucco house with another  
Arab prince inside with <sup>his</sup> several  
wives

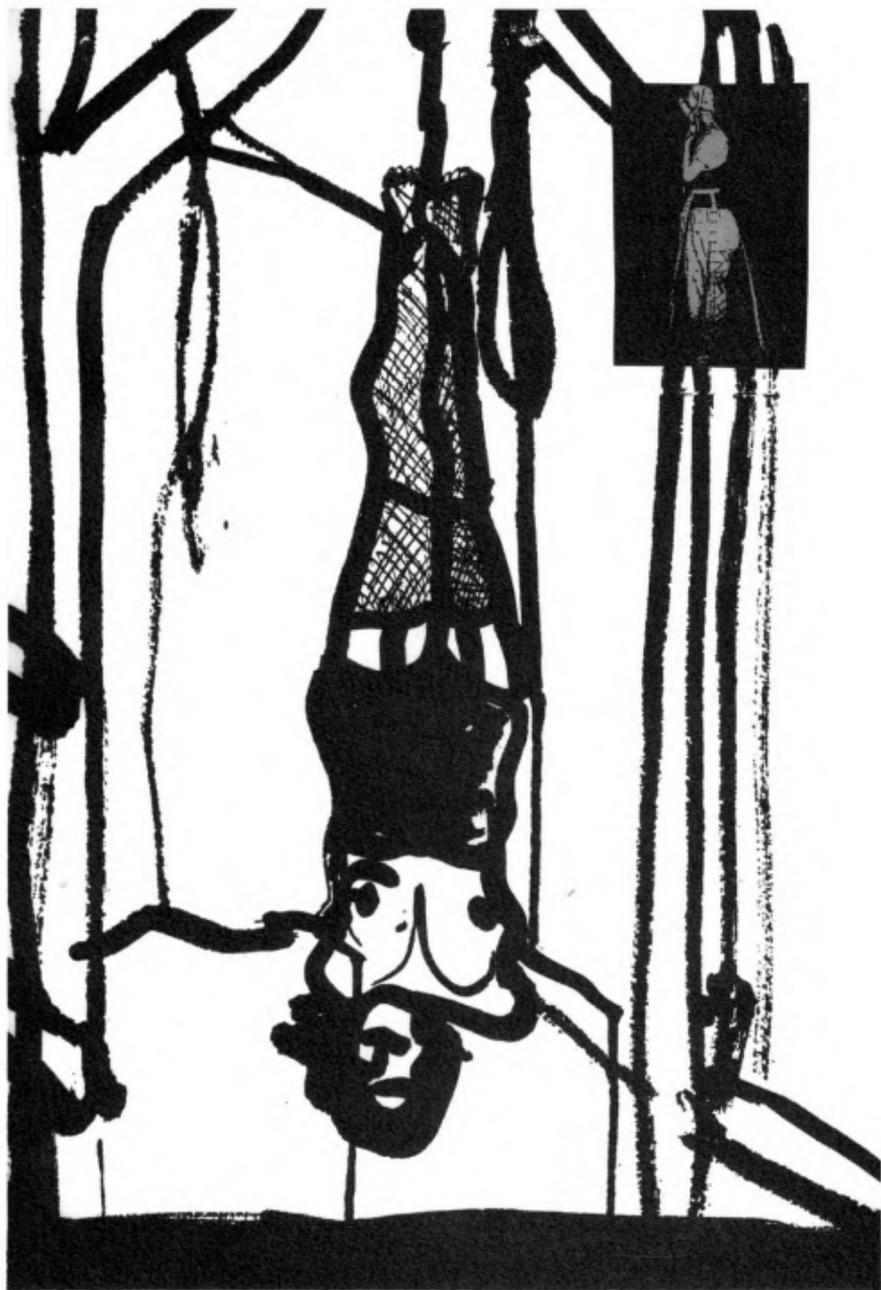


A storm is coming. I watch out the  
upstairs bedroom window as he gets  
ready to move his wives & their  
children & some baggage & some large  
animal horns.



I am jealous that the other women are  
moving to safety as my prince leaves  
me in the upper story room to weather  
the storm.





block

in the past two months the poems have  
riveted themselves to paper in ungodly  
numbers  
and if a poet may judge —  
most of them were of high quality.  
now I have become spoiled,  
I walked into here tonight expecting  
more luck  
but the night has been slow.  
and rightfully so —  
occurrence must precede action,  
the tank must refill.  
writing, at its best, is not a contest,  
it's not even an occupation,  
it's a hazardous madness  
that arrives at its own  
behest.  
prod it and you lose it.  
pretend it and the words fall  
ill.

when the lulls arrive there is  
nothing to do but  
wait,  
do other things.

the writing must leap upon you  
like a wild beast.

there are none of those in this  
room with me  
tonight.  
they are elsewhere  
they are with somebody  
else.

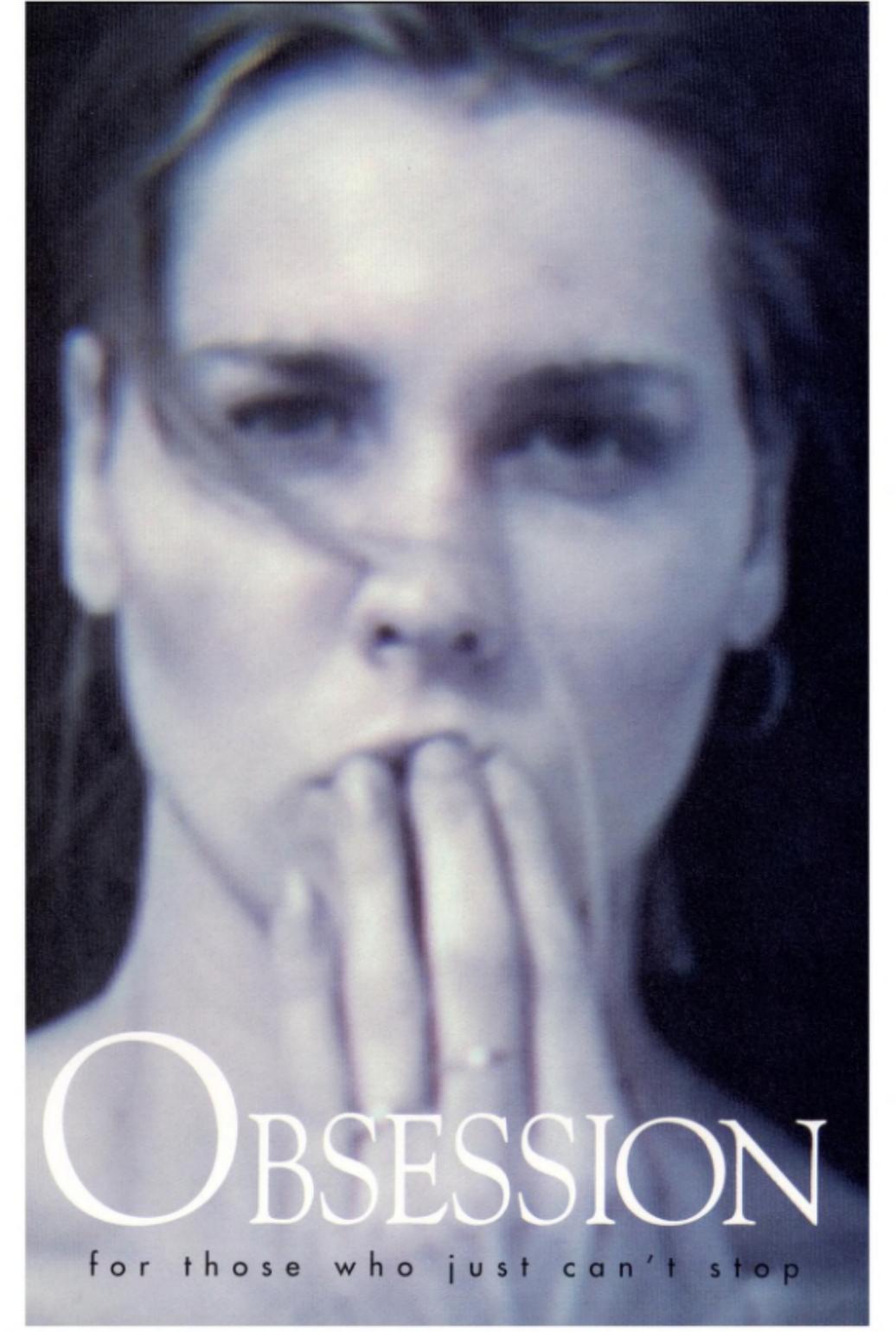
so all I can do is sit in this chair  
tonight  
and tell you that I can't  
write.

there are other things to do.  
like now I am going downstairs  
to see my wife  
and my 6 cats  
and they will see me  
and we will look at each  
other.  
It will be all right.  
I'm sure it  
will.

they might remember  
me.

## the pile-up

the 3 horse clipped the heels of  
the 7, they both went down and  
the 9 tumbled over them,  
jocks rolling, horses legs flung  
skyward.  
then the jocks were up, stunned  
but all right  
and I watched the horses  
rising in the late afternoon,  
it had not been a good day for  
me  
and I watched the horses rise,  
please, I said inside, no broken  
legs!  
and the 9 was all right  
and the 7  
and the 3 also,  
they were walking,  
the horses didn't need the van,  
the jocks didn't need the  
ambulance.  
what a beautiful day,  
what a wonderously lovely  
day —  
I had gotten three winners in a  
single race.



OBSSESSION

for those who just can't stop

## The Harbor Scene

Daddy opens my book to the two-page picture,  
the harbor scene:

so many colors jig, jostle, beckon:  
too many.

My round child-eyes blink in fear and desire  
over the din of color —

*What's this? What's this?*

Where did the red ship come from?

Where will the green trucks go?

Who is the man with the black moustache

and where will he open his black suitcase?

It must have in it his favorite tiny cars,  
tiny red cars and green trucks . . .

The little fat policeman left of center  
signals the trucks with his white gloves,

he knows where things go

and he's very busy —

because look at the business!

Look at the seven high-piled wharves,

look at the eighteen dark blue sailors

lowering four tall yellow sails —

and down in the corner, there

by the lettered brown boxes on the seventh wharf:

see the little boy with the polka-dot scarf?

*He's not afraid.*

See how he watches the jig-jag-jangle of traffic:

won't he be a sailor too some day?

Not afraid of the yellow canvas, brave with ropes.

My child-eyes find him

again and again in the huge harbor scene

while my father's voice  
promising like spring wind  
demanding like spring wind  
above me urges again:  
*See how busy?*  
and  
*No, he's not afraid.*

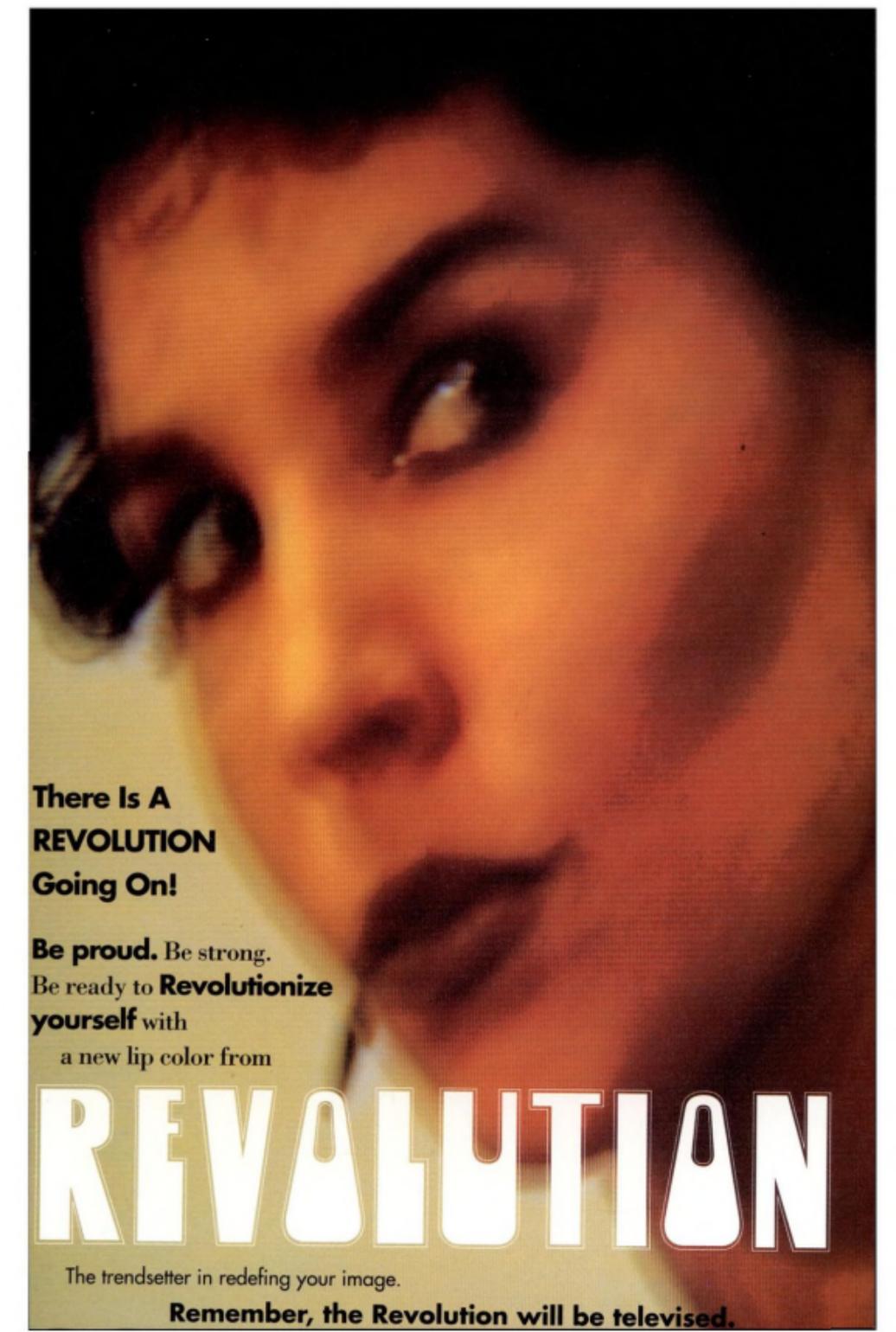
## Novelists of 2007

The novelists of 2007 will reach back, back, trying  
to capture 1991. They will hunch at their computers,  
wearing the goggles that will have become standard equipment,  
peering at the dark gray measured spaces between the yellow words  
to see the softly lit rooms of 1991; who  
is there on the sofa? Who  
is calling from that narrow kitchen with the brick-tile walls?

Poor loyal earnest novelists, wanting not to fake it,  
scanning their inner screens for the true blips of what was:  
they will see the rooms of 1991 in mesmerizing subliminal flashes  
as if from windows of a speeding train and their heads will ache  
with the effort to make that train slow down.

In the end they will have to settle for  
accuracies of street names, brand names, news —  
black clouds over Kuwait on TV, some fairly true claim  
about clothing styles in 1991 (so easily confused  
with those of '92) and how we still imagined  
we could safely stay on the beach all day in July,  
and jokes about Dan Quayle (not Gerald Ford) . . .  
But when the novelists give up and go to bed in 2007  
they'll still feel (the honest ones) that the truth  
of '91, its life blood, has not been saved on their disks;

they'll sense the escape of how Donna laughed  
when Gabriella tried to feed herself yogurt for the first time  
and how the yellow roses leaned when Jill put them in the water glass  
and how they themselves (the novelists) felt good and bad  
about being only twenty-five  
and how the dialogue when Cathy and David nearly broke up  
was not efficient and crisply dramatic but still held  
fears and love swirled over fears and love  
like the water of three rivers that come to fill  
a storm-rippled lake.  
That's the book they'll read before they wake.

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her eyes and upper lip. She has dark, dramatic eye makeup, including heavy eyeliner and mascara. Her expression is intense and slightly mysterious. The lighting is warm and directional, creating strong highlights and deep shadows.

**There Is A  
REVOLUTION  
Going On!**

**Be proud.** Be strong.  
Be ready to **Revolutionize**  
**yourself** with  
a new lip color from

# REVOLUTION

The trendsetter in redefining your image.

**Remember, the Revolution will be televised.**

## Side Show

On tiny patent leather shoes the fat lady balances.  
Her toes kiss the dirt as she sits spread  
voluminous-legged on a cranky wood chair.  
Don't you want to grab puffs of her flesh,  
roll them in your hands for texture?

A woman like this doesn't disappear  
and if she did, those hot kisses would last,  
forever imprinted on the side show dust.  
Kisses forever—the dream of children  
jettisoned, ballooned by their mothers,

sent off with nothing, to where life becomes  
all levels of people visiting back and forth—  
the queen from zone five to the lion-faced twins—  
crossing time and places, where a shot  
to the head with a spike heel means being noticed.

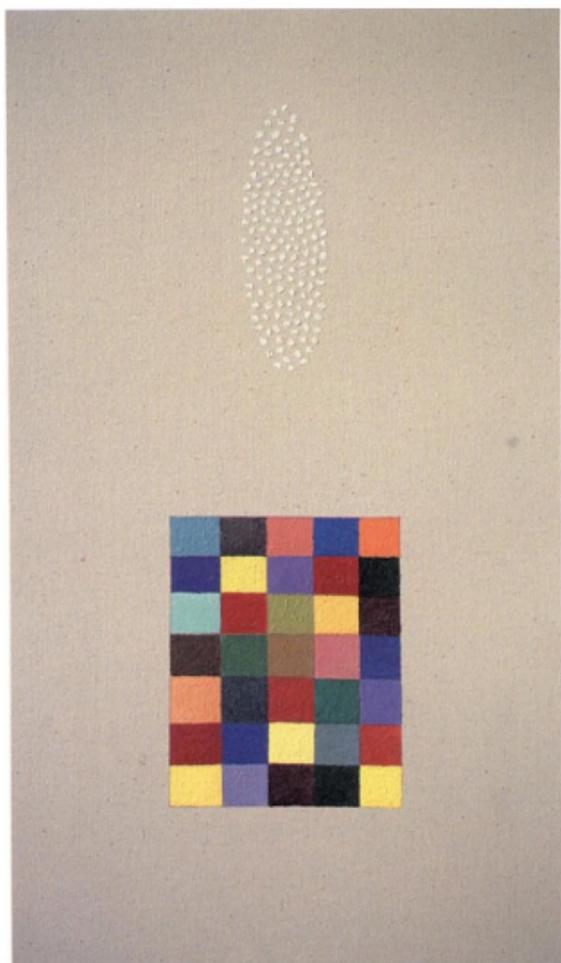
Come to the side show now. Become a hologram  
under glass, jumping rope in perpetual  
motion, as if swiping at flies  
that circle your head. You are etched  
with a hologram tattoo—Tiger Jimmy

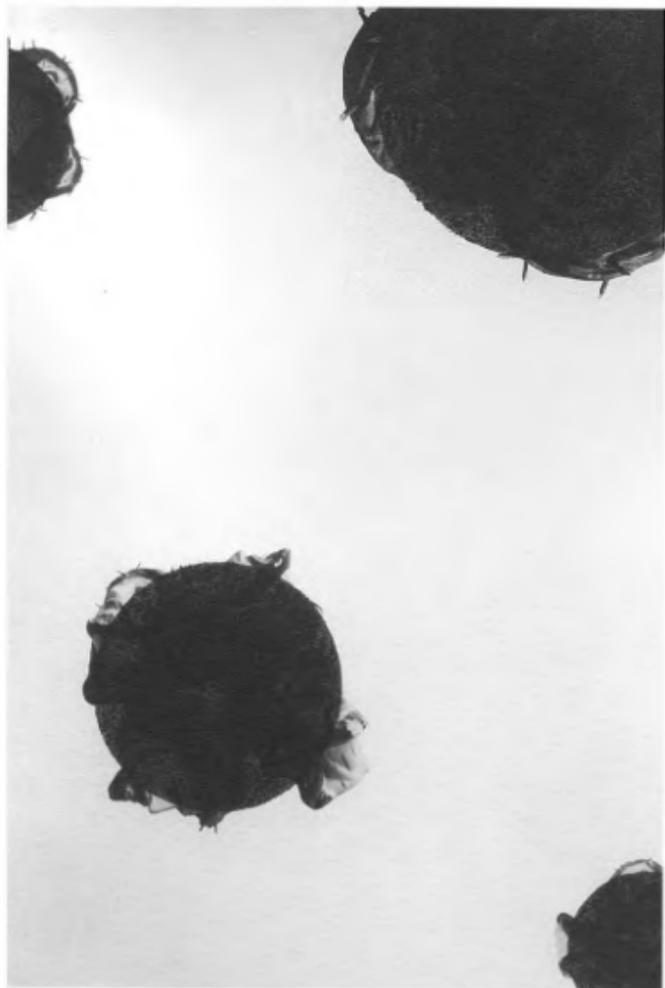
shimmering one fine layer above your skin,  
whispering *tell her to give it back to you.*  
Or you ride a Harley to the deaf end of a drive-in  
where all pictures and no words spell  
the precision of your travels without

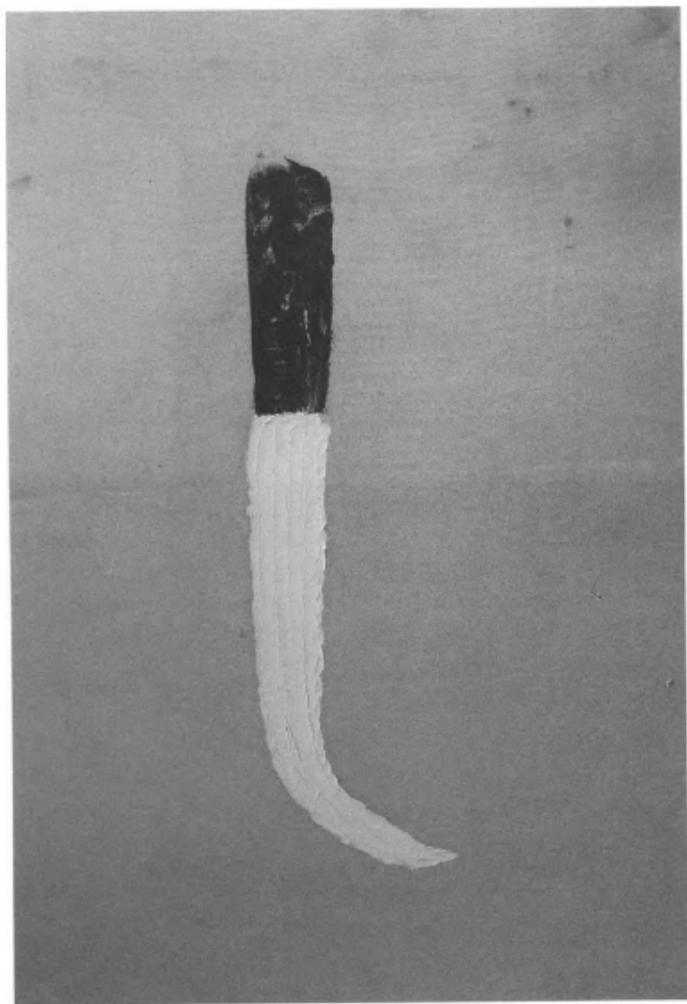
*Mother, I love you.* The fat lady opens  
her arms wide, offers a nipple from which to suck  
your geography. The result is her edges rattle,  
you leave a child, and it is impossible to tell  
where the body begins and where it ends.

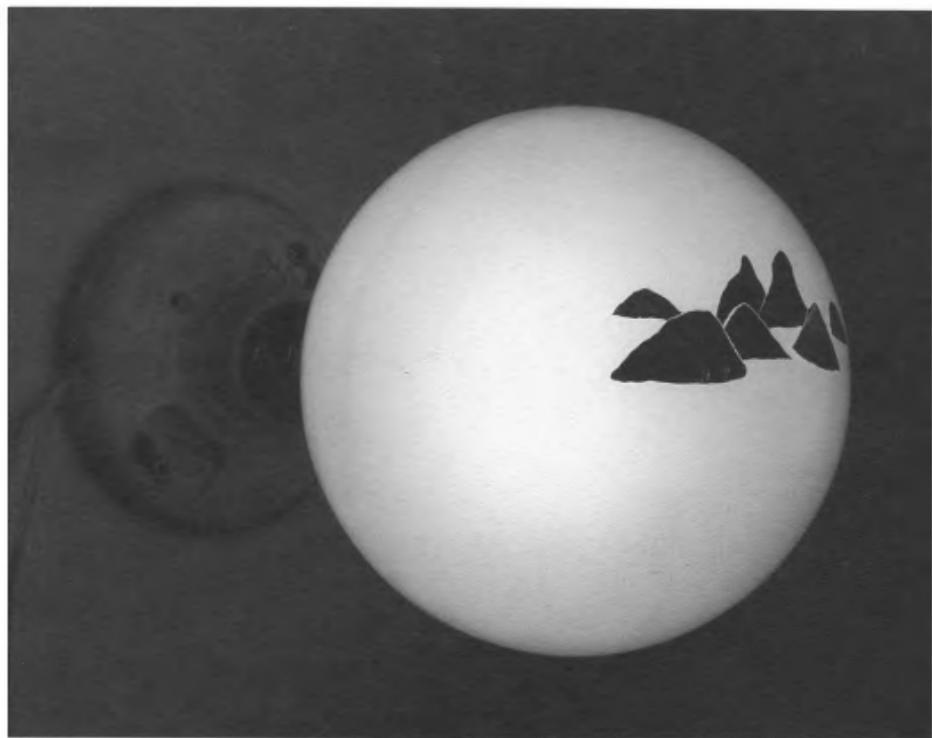
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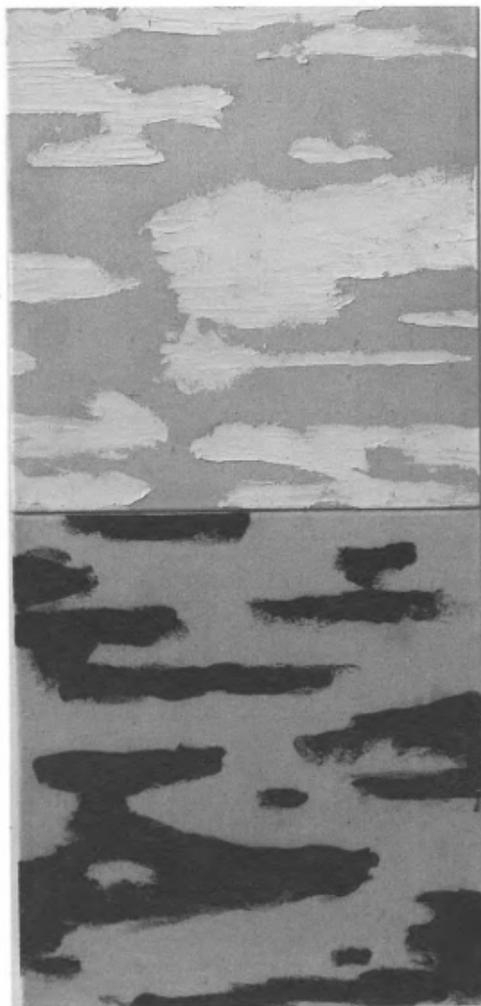
WILLIAM STEEN

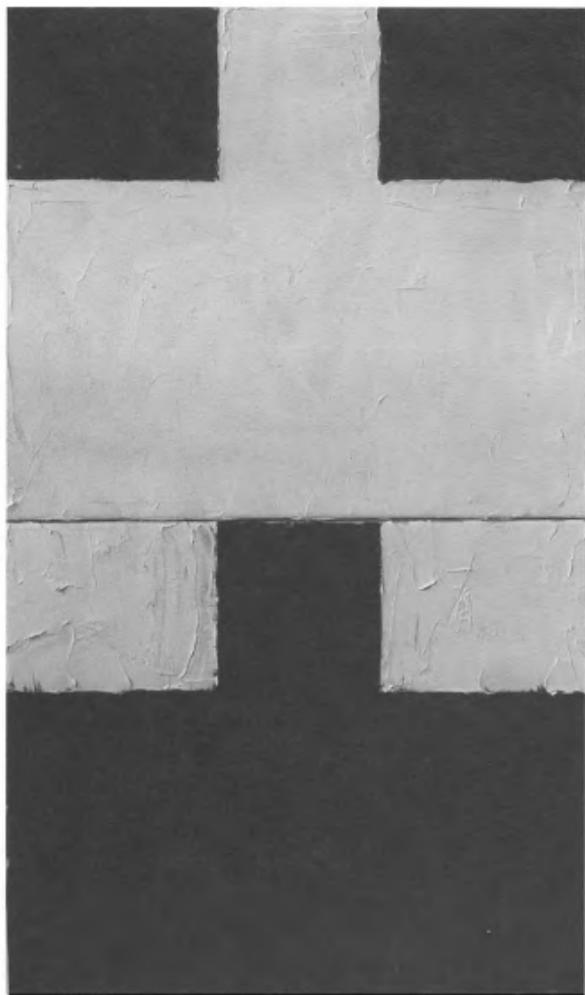












## Going To Laredo

Finally, enough dry air  
to soak me up — brush and tumbleweed  
and the word *fiesta*.

No yield signs, no caution,  
a red Cadillac  
with license plate: ON FIRE.

The Rio Grande is somewhere  
around here, cow skulls and cans  
pile at the side of the road.

It's an instruction tape,  
the secret to living:  
eat sensible, talk slow,

don't throw yourself on a cactus  
no matter how confused your desire.

## September

*For Petr Král*

I was in Prague. I was looking for the house of Vladimír Holan,  
the prison-house in which he was cornered for fifteen years.  
I was convinced that I would find it easily, that roosters  
would guide me and an old priest wearing a meticulously  
mended cassock would tell me: here lived the poet  
and suffering slept here like a stray cat  
hiding once a week in the sleeve of a fur.  
The light was already the light of light of autumn, the sun  
slightly offended. September was kissing hills  
like someone who is leaving for a long journey  
and only at the airport realizes that he lost his house keys.  
Within the labyrinth tourists were walking prudently,  
consulting the black void of their cameras.  
Flames of elms were floating above parks.  
There were fires in gardens and grey smoke above the earth.  
But chestnut leaves, like a certain kind of the sorrowless  
old age, were flying higher and higher.  
What are baroque churches? They are like luxurious  
gyms for the athletic saints. They did not want to help me.  
Who is looking for someone else's home,  
a well read and handsome angel whispered,  
will never find his own.  
Children were yelling loudly, joyfully  
and for no reason (a little cruelty, just in case).  
The wind was full of air, air was full of oxygen,  
oxygen was remembering an overseas trip.  
Was I right that the palaces' walls, yellow  
as if from nicotine, were concerned with border disputes?  
I could not find the Holan house.  
Life was triumphing, like always, and the dead poet  
lived in oblivion, in sparks ejected

by the welder's hand, in my growing fatigue.  
Nowhere, nowhere, just nowhere.  
He is coming here but only at night,  
someone told me who was not there.

*Translated from the Polish by the author*

## An Interview with Daniel Stern

*This interview took place in Daniel Stern's office overlooking the Houston skyline, on March 15, 1994.*

TB: Some have called your work "moral fiction." To what extent do you accept or reject that label, or find it irrelevant?

DS: I would say that's a dangerous term. I would agree with Robert Frost's definition of a poem in "The Figure a Poem Makes," that writing follows a course of lucky events and ends in a moment of clarification, but not "moral" wisdom or the kind of wisdom you can find systems on. Rather, he calls it a "momentary stay against confusion." That says it for me.

I don't really know what "moral fiction" might mean as applied to my work, except perhaps that I've sometimes written on Jewish themes, and behind Jewishness often lurks the moral life. But in fiction the word would need to have about ten sets of quotation marks around it for me to accept it. I believe in the accidental, the contingent, the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. I'm very interested in the shaping of fiction to achieve a kind of experience of meaning, of value. But that's woven into the texture of the story. You couldn't snip it out and hang it up to dry as the morality of the fiction. I would finally say, I suppose, "no," I don't write moral fiction, especially if you think about what John Gardner meant by it in *On Moral Fiction*. I disliked that book.

TB: What did you dislike about it?

DS: It was the exact opposite of Chekhov's view, which I share, that there are no ideas in fiction which are not satisfied entirely in terms of the character's lives, no ideas which can be taken and applied outside. Remember Tolstoy's awful essay, "What is Art?" which he wrote at the end of his life, in which he excoriates Shakespeare for not holding any moral positions? Indeed Shakespeare famously doesn't. As Henry James said, the real tragedy of life is that everybody has a case. The "moral" in fiction, to John Gardner, really means being on the side of the angels, and that's by no means what I do. If you'll forgive my quoting myself (and why should you?), in my novella "The Liberal Imagination by Lionel Trilling," the narrator tells Katherine Eudemie, "You can't write good fiction if your heart's in the right place." He's right. Your heart has to be ready to be in every place.

TB: So when you have a character taking certain moral stances, they are the stances of that character alone? I'm thinking of, to name one of many, the comments of the narrator in "The Liberal Imagination by Lionel Trilling," at the end of the eulogy.

DS: Not only are they the character's, but what he says is a mixture of esthetic, emotional and moral statements. When he says "Come back, Katharine Eudemie, come back beautiful, wheat-shaded girl of my one and only chance," that's simply longing for the return of lost time, for a second chance. Hardly a moral position. Previous to that, there *are* moral statements, when he says "I have seen my generation go from the love of truth to the skirmish for advantage," et cetera. But that's him speaking absolutely. I may share certain beliefs he's expressing, but whatever power the ideas have, derives not from so much from their moral rightness or wrongness, but from the pressure of the circumstances in which these ideas are uttered.

TB: Could you say something about how you began writing twice-told stories?

DS: One of the steps in the genesis for that whole literary adventure was the fact that I'd just finished a seven-year long psychoanalysis. I took a deep breath, and suddenly I found that by looking at these texts in *Twice Told Tales*, I was able to move, for some reason unbeknownst to me, from what you'd call the lyric voice to the comic voice. In my system of values that's a step upwards. The first story I wrote was "The Liberal Imagination by Lionel Trilling," and I reached back into my own youth when, as a new writer who had published two or three books, I had indeed met Lionel Trilling, and encountered that wonderful literary excitement of New York in the 50's. It occurred to me there was a fictional gold mine waiting for me in these books, and that a novel or a book of essays could suddenly be as real as a love affair. I've had love affairs with books; who hasn't? You fall in love with a book, and have a whole web of feelings about it. Why shouldn't that be as important a part of a story as another kind of relationship?

TB: Do you find pressure on you now to continue writing *Twice Told Tales*?

DS: Yes. It's hard to be impervious to the fact that people seem to like this odd child of mine, the twice-told. A couple of years ago Joyce Carol Oates asked me if I'd like to do her novel *Because It Is Bitter And Because It Is My Heart* as part of the series. Who knows, she may have just been kidding around. I was flattered, but I told her that you have to be a dead author before I can do a Twice Told Tale based on your work. She thought better of the idea, immediately.

TB: When you write a story like the one you have here in *Gulf Coast* that's not a twice-told tale, do you feel any impulse to make it one?

DS: Yes—there's always a pull. And I was tempted to do it with "The Exchange." It's a new story, though one that's been in my computer for about three years. I'd played with it, shaped it this way and that way, as I've done with stories for quite a few years now. No story gets out in less

than a year. Some, three or four. And towards the end it occurred to me there were a number of stories I could have used to make "The Exchange" into a Twice Told Tale.

TB: Really? Would you mind naming one of them?

DS: Well, for one, Henry James' "The Lesson of the Master," where the young writer meets the older, great writer, and the older man says, "Listen, don't get involved with women. Especially that woman. Bad for your life as a writer," et cetera. He tells him just to stick to his art. Of course, the old writer then marries the woman the young writer loved, thus undermining his own advice and betraying both his young admirer and his own role as mentor. It's very much a story about mentoring as double-edged sword. As is "The Exchange"—except the mentor is the loser in my story. But I could have used the James.

TB: Have you ever taken a story, already written, and turned it into a twice told tale?

DS: You got me. One of the stories in the second book, *Twice Upon a Time*, was "The Communist Manifesto, by Karl Marx," a long comic fantasia also about youth, spanning some two decades. As it turns out, that was actually a rewrite of a story that was not a twice-told tale, called "Missing the Point." I decided to just feel around, to smell what text might go with it, what ideas, and suddenly the "Communist Manifesto" hit. The communist idea was a very big thing with the youth of that time—it was, you could say, already latent in the story and I sensed that. Then I literally just laid it in there, and I think it worked.

TB: In both *Twice Told Tales* and *Twice Upon a Time*, you seem to draw on the same conflict between the world of the flesh and the world of ideas that you have in this story, "The Exchange"; a kind of Apollonian/Dionysian split.

DS: Well, it's a never ending conflict; the mind-body problem every writer has to face. Think of Mann's *Death In Venice*, or Don De Lillo's *White Noise*. Both also involved love and death.

In the "Liberal Imagination," as an example, the sexual affair with the young woman and her ambition terrify the speaker, and he pulls away. The narrator totally loses the life of impulse, and is frozen dead. She, on the other hand, ends up devoured by the world of ambition and appetite. So it's complicated, not a simple Apollonian/Dionysian duality, but there's certainly a tension of that sort in a lot of writers, some as far apart as D.H. Lawrence and Bernard Malamud. The writers I really like sometimes merge them, like Camus, for example. He's very close to the life of the mind, of morality and the senses. His novel *The Fall* is a perfect example of the tension between the two, and the despair caused by it.

TB: To what degree are the writers you are twice-telling the writers who have influenced you?

DS: The engine that drives this process is the emotion I felt and feel on reading and rereading the stories I'm building on. A good example is the

sense of the uncanny, primitive anxiety when I first read *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Freud—an emotional reaction I then give to the young wife in the story by that name. But to speak more directly to the idea of ‘influence’. What’s usually meant by influence is linguistic style. But in fact Henry James, Hemingway, Melville and Freud were influences for me in the way that a love affair with an older woman may influence a young man—more a question of certain ways of looking at the world—and at the nature of writing—than of specific stylistic mimicry.

TB: A reviewer in the *New York Times* said *Twice Told Tales* showed the “overwhelming need for myth in literature, art, and especially in human relationships.” To what degree do you agree or disagree with that?

DS: I do think there’s a deep need for myths, but the way they present themselves to us changes as times change. With the playwright Sam Shepard, it’s the myth of the old west, the frontier that’s still operating, even though it’s a degraded myth. Thomas McGuane has the same degraded myth.

But as the world becomes less and less reliable, the old myths may not suffice. Frank Kermode says, in “The Sense of an Ending” . . . “Among all the other changing fictions, literary fictions take their place. They find out about the changing world on our behalf. . . .”

Putting it simply, I think literature gives us the myths we need to deal with our lives. I used Hawthorne’s “Wakefield” because the myth of the Vanishing Man—or the Vanishing Husband—haunted me ever since I read it. In fact it’s become a kind of prototype. Alice McDermott’s first novel, *The Bigamist’s Daughter*, is about vanishing males in families. So Hawthorne’s “Wakefield” is an ongoing modernist myth, the story of the man who vanishes and watches his family from the sidelines. Or Bartleby the Scrivener—the mysterious sayer of the ultimate ‘no’. We stand to those stories in the same relation as earlier cultures stood to certain Greek models. They have a lot of resonance for our lives.

I think there are many people who feel modernist literary mythology in their bones more strongly than religious or ancient mythology—people who feed on the hopeless, stupendous hope of Gatsby, or the sense of the unlive life in Henry James . . . as in *The Beast in the Jungle* or *The Ambassadors*; even the lyric stoicism of Raymond Carver’s people. Or the magical dream-labyrinths of Borges.

TB: Have the writers who have influenced you changed over the years?

DS: [pause] It’s funny, I look at the window here in my study, and I see four pictures. There’s Hemingway on a stamp—he finally got on a stamp, the old guy—there’s Bernard Malamud next to him, and there’s Balzac next to him and there’s Camus. There’s a bust of Balzac, too, and there’s a picture of Balzac as you walk in the door. Balzac’s the ruling god [laughter]. But it’s strange: people can admire a writer or writers tremendously, but not seem to be literally influenced by them. Henry James went around the country reading a lecture called “The Lesson of Balzac,” yet I can’t think of

a less Balzacian writer than James. Or perhaps not so: maybe influences are more subtle. Both were deeply involved with society, although Henry James was a Mandarin and Balzac was a sort of wonderful klutz who sprayed language around him and whatever stuck to the experiences and the characters, stuck. But I love the energy of his imagination. He's been a tremendous lodestar to me.

Hemingway has been a lodestar in terms of his controlled perfection of rendering experience in language. These are all instinctive, you understand—it's not as though you think about these things when you work. Camus is kind of under my skin as a kind of barometer of honesty. With Malamud, who was a close friend, I came to realize he was an influence after the fact, after he'd died and after I'd published these last two books. Some of the critics said there was a Malamud flavor to them. Maybe so . . .

TB: You point out that Malamud was a close friend of yours, and you've recently finished writing a screenplay of his novel, *The Tenants*. Have any of your other writer friends been major influences?

DS: Many of my influences have been people like Trilling and Harold Bloom, who influenced the way I thought. As far as novelists: well, I've known Philip Roth for many years, and I was delighted when somebody in a review said they laughed out loud reading my stories. But I'll never write a *Portnoy's Complaint*, where you fall out of your chair laughing. Still, a laugh or two is nice. Cynthia Ozick is a good friend and I admire her tremendously, but there's not a direct influence you could trace. The writer-friends of my own rough generation: Ozick, Jerzy Kosinski, Elie Wiesel, Malamud, Joyce Carol Oates—clearly they're all much more famous than I am—they're not so much influences as artistic tuning rods. You sort of test your own song against their perfect pitch.

TB: You have so many characters who are in the writing game in one way or another—as writers, agents, editors, screenwriters, movie producers, publicity and advertising executives. Could you comment on that?

DS: Either I've imprisoned myself in a ghetto about the creative life and people who create, or else I've found my world. I think it's my world and these are my people (often, by the way, failed creative people—that's part of the interest.) I'll have to live with it either way.

Even the story for *Gulf Coast*. I had another story I'd considered submitting, called "Comfort," about people I'd never written about before—Raymond Carver people, alcoholics, a bartender, a woman whose son was in trouble with drugs. Nobody in the story has written anything, not a song or a poem or a novel, and it was a reach for me. My agent got quite excited because it was such a reach. But I'm not sure: I think maybe I should just follow my own craziness and stay with the people who interest me.

They once asked Malamud why he wrote about Jews and he said "I like the drama." And there is a drama, a long historical one as well as

present day drama. Well, I like the drama of the creative life, and the comedy of the creative life. The characters who live in the Russian Rendezvous in that last story in *Twice-Told Tales*: that story is kind of special to me—full of writers, genuine and would-be, musicians, theater and film people. So I'm going to follow them as long as it stays interesting.

Actually my new novel, my first novel in more than ten years after writing all these stories, is about an architect, but he's spent his youth much as I did, hanging out in a seedy tavern with Franz Kline, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Jackson Pollock. I was a cellist then, and I did this movie on Jackson Pollock by Hans Namuth. We hung out at Pollock's studio watching him paint and I played the Feldman score. In fact, I was supposed to get a Pollock as my payment. I didn't have an apartment. I didn't want a painting, and I never showed up to get it. Think it's too late to ask for it now?

In any case, the whole issue of the life of western art, or high western art, which is now under attack a great deal, is at the core of this novel. This character comes out to a place in the southwest, and is confronted with the old American gods—the native-American gods and their special spirit—as opposed to this Eurocentric high art he grew up with. That's the central conflict, and so I'm really still playing the same ballgame, even though an artist isn't at the center of it.

TB: You also mentioned your work had shifted from the lyric to the comic. Is there anything in particular you consider comic about being a writer?

DS: I'm not sure the comedy extends to the subject matter. I don't think there is comic or tragic subject matter, only a comic or tragic take on it. Look at Don DeLillo; that wonderful novel: *White Noise*. A comedy about death. Who was it who said life is a tragedy to those who feel, and a comedy to those who think? If you cut off your thinking mode, you'd just weep all the time, and if you cut off your feeling mode, you'd just laugh all the time. The best is when you have both. I really like it when the comic mode walks a tightrope of strong emotion.

TB: How would you differentiate between the embracing of the world of high art and the academicizing of that art into writing programs, music programs, art programs?

DS: Well, I'm new to the writing programs as a way of life. It has its excitements, particularly those of discovery: discovering young writers, young writers discovering themselves. One of the main values of these programs is to be a safety net. As a young writer, I lived a crazy life. I just bummed around until I was thirty. I'd borrow money from relatives or friends—even girl friends. When life got intolerable on the East Coast, if I got in trouble with a girl or about owing money, I'd go to the West Coast, then when I got in trouble there, I'd get on a plane and come back to the East Coast. I don't recommend that as a way of life for a young writer, but at least I kept writing. It's interesting that my subject matter now comes down to the creative life. Earlier, because of the life I've led, I wrote novels

with backgrounds in the motion picture world, the theater world, about concentration camp survivors whom I knew, about everything but academic life.

I do think that bumming around for a while and being in the world gives you a chance to see the fluidity of human relationships, either as unstructured or in a million structures, whereas in a university the structure is more rigid. So that's the positive side of the other way. But in a university there's a community of writers which no longer exists elsewhere. When I hung around with those painters, that was a real community of artists. When I hung around the New York publishing scene, what you got was a kind of clustering of wonderfully abrasive and interesting people. I remember once I gave a string quartet evening for Joyce Carol Oates. It was originally just going to be Joyce and her husband Ray Smith, and a few of our friends. By the time we got done we'd invited the world to come see her. She was new to the East then, just down to Princeton from Windsor, Ontario. Cynthia Ozick, Dwight MacDonald, Philip Roth, Ted Solotaroff, Wilfred Sheed, and all kinds of editors from New York were there. The scrimmage of appetite, to quote Delmore Schwartz—there's a jockeying for advantage, but there's also a genuine exchange of excitement about writing. That community is hard to come by now. I keep seeing this in statements of intent from young writers applying to our program. They frequently say, "I want to be in a place with other people struggling with the same writing problems I am."

TB: Could you tell us the story about sending off your first novel?

DS: Actually I began my writing life in a writing program. But only for about a half hour. I was living in New York, having played the cello with Charlie Parker, on tour. Then I went to the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. When I came back to New York, I didn't want to go out again for another symphony season. I had an uncle, a dentist who played the viola, who suggested I take a short story workshop at the New School, since I seemed to be at loose ends. So I took one with a man named Charles Glicksberg, and I wrote a story called "Conversation in Prague," my first short story. I'd never been to Prague. But I'd read a lot about the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia, and I wrote a story about an American who'd gone to see a Czech friend right after this takeover. I stood up and read it to the class, as one did there, and at the end they burst into applause. I've never looked back since. Life has never been so good. That was the high point of my life [laughter]. No story in the class had received applause before that. Maybe it was an easy story to applaud for, dramatic, political and so forth.

At any rate, I later took another workshop—in the writing of novels—with a man named Hiram Haydn, who was also the editor-in-chief of Bobbs-Merrill Publishing. After four or five weeks of turning in parts of this novel I was writing, I began to feel—all with the snottiness of youth—that I was the only serious one in the class. These others were all dilettantes.

I asked him if he'd consider my novel for publishing. He said okay, he'd consider it. We met again, and he said the novel didn't work, he couldn't accept it. However, he said, there's this young woman—actually in those days they said “girl”—there's this young girl in this story, this beautiful troubled young girl, and if you give me 100 pages on her, and I like it, I'll give you a contract. So I went home and I reset the whole thing in my mind. I set the clock, and I wrote a page every fifteen minutes, and in ten days I had a hundred pages. Listen, I was twenty years old or something, lots of energy, living with my folks, didn't have any money.

I turned it in, then I went off to Hartford. I'd just gotten a job as a private detective, and I was checking on movie theaters, to see if they were stealing money from the movie companies. The Hartford Capers, I called it. Anyway, I went up there, and I called Hiram Haydn from a payphone. He said “I love it. I'm taking it.” I quit my job on the spot . . . only to find out I was getting \$500: \$250 then, \$250 a year later when the book came out. But I didn't care. I was officially a writer. I was quite spoiled. I was 23 when my first novel was taken, 24 when it came out. I had my picture in the *New York Times*, and figured that happened to everybody all the time, right? That's the way books get published, right? Hah! I didn't know how much luck was involved. But the experience of the writing workshop was neither bad or good, creatively, for me at that point: I was just ready to go. I was burning up to write a novel, with or without a workshop, and it helped me to meet a publisher.

TB: You've had eight novels since then. [pause] This next may seem like an odd question, but I'm wondering if you would comment on the prevalence of death in some of your novels?

DS: The prevalence of death, hmm . . . Well, I've been asked about this before—and I'd sort of not noticed it on my own. I mean you write your stuff as it comes. But on reflection, I think maybe it's all about the question of endings. And death is, of course, the super-ending. For me, the value of a story or a novel is what happens as you approach the end—and when you reach it. The small deaths and rebirths which are the waystations en route to the big one. In Frank Kermode's memorable phrase ‘the sense of an ending’ is inherent. And I try not to deal out endings or deaths arbitrarily, but I can't ignore even the titles—*Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die, The Suicide Academy*—In *Twice Told Tales*, is death so prevalent, would you say?

TB: Well, the final lines are “Everything ends in comedy.” But you said you'd shifted there.

DS: That's right, that's right. But again, I'm very fond of laughing on the edge. (Done best, of course, by the three great B's: Beckett, Barthelme and Borges.) There are four lines from a poem by Alan Dugan that say a lot of this:

Therefore it is not tragic to stay  
and not tragic or comic to go,  
but it is absolutely typical to say

goodbye while saying hello.

TB: Did you think *The Suicide Academy* was a risky title?

DS: Didn't occur to me—titles are a funny thing. In fact, Cynthia Ozick, who's a dear friend of mine—we have a mutual admiration society where we write letters to one another about our work, a terrific support system, not that she needs one—anyway, that's the one book of mine she won't read. It's the title. *The Suicide Academy* was a risky subject, but the book did very well. Maybe it was because it was the late sixties and early seventies—you could publish a novel with a fantasy element, a place you go where you can decide whether or not to commit suicide and you have 24 hours, and you could have elements of the real and fantastic, elements of Blacks and Jews in conflict, and yet have it very well received. I even got a very good advance for it, for a literary book. I think the times were more adventurous. Publishing now is in dire straights. They take very few chances.

TB: You wrote that novel while working sixty hours or more a week as Senior Vice President at McCann-Erickson and then as worldwide head of advertising for Warner Brothers. Is it a coincidence that you wrote one of your more experimental novels while working at such a high pressure job? Or would you attribute it more to the times?

DS: Neither. Though I wrote *The Rose Rabbi* then as well, for me an adventurous novel in terms of form. I made a decision that I would write a page a day no matter what happened. 250 words. If it took an hour or a half hour, my wife and I could go out to the movies that night. If it took till four in the morning, then you sit there until four in the morning, that's all. I finished the novel in nine months.

But I also wrote *Twice Told Tales* and *Twice Upon a Time* while under heavy pressure at CBS, where I was Vice-President of Advertising for the East Coast. CBS was then in danger of collapsing totally, and was finally taken over by Lawrence Tisch. My department was abolished and I got thrown out, and went on to do other things. So that was a great deal of pressure. But then, I suppose those stories are also somewhat experimental in form. So it may be true. But pressure has never worried me. I have a lecture I give to my students about how to survive in the real world as an artist. And it's about dealing with pressure.

TB: What do you tell them?

DS: Well. Of course I can't repeat the whole thing here, but some of the key elements are that you should never have contempt for your day job, whether it's waiting on tables, working in an undertaker's parlor, or being an advertising copywriter—don't have contempt for it. Just do it well, according to its own needs and demands. Then do your own work. They do not come from the same place. You cannot foul the source. Nathaniel West wrote *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *Day of the Locust*, two of the most daring, experimental and enduring novels, while writing cheap "B" westerns in Hollywood. So it doesn't come from the same place.

Secondly, (this is the tough one) don't assume that you need time

to write. Writing is written in words, not in time. Anybody can find 250 words in the course of 24 hours. Where do you find them? You can be sitting at the dinner table, you can be watching television, you can be riding on a bus. One of the problems with living in a commuting culture, I find, is that it cuts down my *ad hoc* writing time, the improvisatory writing time that's good for buses and taxis. Behind the wheel of a car you can't do anything. Although, even there . . . I was in analysis for a long time, and my analyst was up in Westchester. I found that I was playing a particular piece of music by Schubert, and that piece became the climactic scene of a play I was then writing. I began writing it in my head in the car. It was a short trip, so I could get there and begin writing things down. I'm not a 'dictator', so I can't dictate fiction.

Those are two of the main things I tell students about survival as a writer. I imagine the same thing would go for teaching. People feel terribly drained by teaching, and maybe it comes from closer to the same place as writing does, but I still believe it's different. I'm teaching here very seriously, and my writing is going well.

TB: Looking back now, which would you say is your favorite of your earlier novels?

DS: That's not such an academic question. Because Rice University Press is going to be reprinting four of my earlier books, something I'm very pleased about. There's a book called *Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die*, which, though it's somewhat early work, has its own power, and I've very glad it's going to be reprinted. It was one of the earliest books about concentration camp survivors, and one where survivor guilt is dramatized. I got to know Elie Wiesel around that time, and he was very interested in it. He became a close friend because of that book, though I wrote the book before I met him. So it has a special meaning for me.

As far as novels go, I think *The Suicide Academy* and *The Rose Rabbi* are among my favorites. *Final Cut* I also have a weakness for, and *An Urban Affair*. Well, you can see where this is going. I'm going to say they're all my favorites. You can't win.

TB: You said in your introduction to *Twice Told Tales* that writing those sorts of stories allowed you to separate yourself more from your real life. Yet the stories still tend to be set in New York, and filled with artists, Jews, live-wire intellectuals . . . characters not unlike yourself.

DS: It's a matter of the treatment. For example, I wrote a novel called *Miss America*, my third novel written when I was very young. It's about a love affair I had with an ex-Miss America, written quite autobiographically. By definition, that is a lyric mode. And it's fine, people still like it, but I didn't get the real juice going until later. There's a line I discovered more recently from Kafka: he said, "When I left the 'I' for the 'he,' I entered literature."

Now I wouldn't make any such fancy claims. I'm just writing the best I can. But when I go for that kind of comic detachment, I can look at life experiences from a step away. For example, the people in my story

"Bartleby the Scrivener" are a young screenwriter, which I've been, and a Hollywood agent; I'm using a world I've known first-hand, but I chose to tell it from the point of view of this aging European refugee, this Hollywood agent. Now that's me, but it's not me, but it is me. That whole world is one of my worlds, but it's not taken one-for-one. There's no "me" that can be traced directly. That's the strength of it, I think.

In "Aspects of the Novel by E.M. Forster," that editor in the wheelchair was my own, a wonderful man at Crown named Arthur Fields. But I chose a weird Green Beret-type guy from Vietnam, Lewis Griswold, to be the narrator and protagonist, because that step away gives it a tensile strength. Yet I had some of the same experiences as in the story. Fields made me rewrite insanely. For four years, I rewrote *Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die*. I went crazy with this guy. We had a dinner at Le Pavilion just as in that story, where he tried to make me change the finished manuscript into something more commercial and I went nuts, yelling at him in the street. But if I'd used myself, it would have been much weaker. Hemingway somewhere has a formula, and I always get it wrong—I'm not very good at formulas—it's either "you use real people and make up the experiences," or "you use the real experiences and make up the people." But the trick is, you can't use both. That's hopeless.

TB: Where do you see yourself in your career now? You're shifting back to writing novels again after many years of writing short stories.

DS: I think I'm now going to be doing both. For years and years, Elie Wiesel was after me to alternate novels and story collections. In the classic French mode, you write a novel and then a book of short stories. And indeed, in the twenties, Hemingway and Fitzgerald and the others all write a novel, then a book of short stories. I consider it a very good ping-pong effect, to go back and forth. Ann Beattie's done this, Joyce Carol Oates, also Malamud, and a number of other contemporary writers. These days, I see that as a very good idea. But I do everything late in life. I'm a late learner. I'm going to continue to write screenplays, too, when I'm asked. And paid. I'm also very excited about the teaching here.

TB: How does teaching about writing connect to your own writing?

DS: I find teaching stimulating, not at all draining or boring. Dealing with other people's writing, whether on an undergraduate or graduate level, is not something I find problematic. I think it's interesting. I find dealing with the problems of the craft and the art in someone else's work, or in my work, a kind of seamless web. I learn a lot about what I'm doing in my own fiction by teaching—workshops, in particular. And when you find talent and young writers who respond to the process, it's terrifically rewarding. Teaching at the University of Houston feeds my soul as a person and as a writer. I'm glad to be here.

## The Exchange

It was the summer of the sweating streets, the summer of the silent computer, of the broken sentences, of the anxious sense of a permanent silence impending. At least that was Sachs' summer. And into this summer she had come, to organize, to help, to distract, to save—Sachs hoped for all of these. After she had organized some of his traditional chaos, lost drafts, misfiled letters and contracts—after he could find a paper path leading from the confused past to the anxious present, after all this, it turned out she had an urgent request of her own.

He held her off with vagueness and postponements for a week, but she was persistent, she was in pain, she needed an answer. The Saturday before her last week she nailed him.

"So, what do you think?"

"I don't know," Sachs said. "It's a strange idea."

"Not really," she said. "A lot of people in Seattle and Port Townsend are doing this."

"Are they?"

"Mentors are a big thing in the Pacific Northwest."

She had come to Sachs from Port Townsend, through a series of exotic maneuvers—poor Jack Lash's wife had known her ex-husband, and the young woman's sudden need for a three-month job meshed exactly with his need for a summer assistant. She was a touch exotic, herself. For example, leotards, though she had to be at least 30 and had never been a dancer. Purple, tan and gold leotards. Once he'd asked her why she always wore them. They were easy to get into she said, though not so easy to get out of. There were the eyes that slanted for no apparent ethnic reason, and a cupid's mouth sucking ceaselessly on a bottle of Gatorade. And there was her name: Tamar, chosen, she told him carefully, from a poem. It was not clear if it was parent-chosen or self-chosen. Or if she knew that Tamar had lived in the Bible before arriving in a poem.

She finished labeling a file and slid it into the drawer. The file drawer hissed shut.

"Okay," she said. "That's your current stories file. You're up to date."

"Thanks." He was stalling.

"So what do you think?" She closed the space between them and stood shifting her weight, not all that much of it. Sachs, who was always

careful to know details like his characters' height and weight, even if he didn't put them in the novel or story, would have guessed maybe a hundred and twenty pounds. She reached up on tiptoe to replace a book on the shelf next to Sachs's face: a mix of sweat and perfume arrived in the hot, humid air.

"Look, I don't want to push you," Tamar said. "But I've saved some money from these secretarial gigs—and my fiction writing is important to me. I must have spent two thousand dollars on workshops this year. I'm workshopped up to here. I'd rather spend my money this way—and I think you'd be a terrific mentor."

"It's the idea of being *paid* to be a mentor . . ."

"It would be a favor to me, actually." She was relentless.

"Well," Sachs said. "That's sort of my problem. Money attached to favors—you see what I mean."

She shut her eyes suddenly. He'd noticed that when doing frustrating tasks, shuffling recalcitrant files which refused to yield to her systems, she would often close her eyes in exasperation. When she opened them, something had changed.

"I was *afraid* you might be a little moralistic about this."

"That's not—"

"I am the world's leading authority on the writing of Maurice Sachs—and you take an almost sensual pleasure in moral positions. God this place is small."

He said, "Tamar, it's been the same size for three months. I can't afford a bigger place. My fiction is too moral."

"Now you're angry."

"No, but I'm damned hot. How about we have some air conditioning?"

"I hate that sterile freezing. You promised."

"When I promised it wasn't ninety degrees."

"The paper says eighty."

It was an argument born the day she arrived clutching what turned out to be the ubiquitous bottle of Gatorade. 'Energy,' she'd explained, unasked. She'd brought vitamins, an insistence on all natural foods, leotards in many colors and the energy needed to straighten his papers out, no small task. She'd also brought a Pacific Northwest hatred of air conditioning.

Un-natural, she'd said. Fresh air is fine, hot or cold. Comfortable, he'd replied. Neither natural nor unnatural. Just comfortable.

She'd won because of his need. He had persuaded himself that if he could ever get his papers straightened out he would be able to climb out of the hole he was in; would be able to understand what writing prose was, again, galvanize the book of stories, get his thoughts in a straight line again, finish the novel whose advance was long since spent, find a lyric or comic conclusion, best of all both at once. It had been a terrible time. Never, never

had he had such a spell, such a time in which the actual idea of writing down the simplest of sentences seemed so hopeless, foolish, without meaning, the only continuous meaning he'd ever counted on just gone as suddenly as the heat lightning of that oppressive summer.

He had written to Marie Lash, Jack's widow—it was coming to that, his friends having widows and him only in his forties for God's sake; a thought which connected in Sachs's mind to his writing dying on him. "I don't know what Jack would have said, writing coming so naturally to him, everything came so naturally to him, but I can't get myself to believe it matters that I spend the time of my life on earth writing down, 'She opened the door,' or 'summer afternoon.' If you can't write something like 'she opened the door' or 'summer afternoon,' the world is a bleak place and you can't do anything and you certainly can't end up with '*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times*' or '*For a long time I used to go to bed early.*'" It was the most painful letter he'd ever written. Maybe, he'd concluded, grasping at the idea of an order which had always eluded him, maybe what he needed was some organizing principle in his life.

Marie had written back with sympathy, had suggested that Tamar, Jack's former student and secretary, bringer of order, might be the answer. When the promised answer to his troubled life arrived and insisted on no air conditioning—he'd consented to sweat.

"You *are* angry," she repeated.

"No, just hot as hell and bewildered. Let's look for help in my favorite place."

He pulled down a fat book. She smiled.

"The Bible?"

"The Dictionary."

Sachs rustled the pages of his old friend.

"Here—Mentor. *Experienced and trusted advisor.*"

"Ha." Tamar feels vindicated. "Presidents have experienced and trusted advisors. And they get paid." She paused and regrouped. "Okay, how old are you?"

"What?"

"About mid-fifties, right? Probably. Well, Jung says the proper tasks of late middle age include mentoring. It's in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections.*"

Sachs brushed past Jung, placing him for the moment alongside the air-conditioning issue. "Look," he said. "I can always use some typing. Can you handle the Mac?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were closed again, but this time they were closed shut the way children shut their eyes—the end of the world. Sachs unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and flapped his arms gently to dissipate the gathering sweat.

"There has to be a way," Tamar said. "Your stories are some kind of doomsday machines of craft. I've studied them in Jack's class and by

myself. He used to say, 'there are writers who do what they know and writers who know what they do'—and that Sachs was the second kind. You *could* see yourself as a mentor to me, couldn't you? It's just a question of doing it for money, right?"

He sat on the couch, a place he never used; he needed a neutral zone. It smelled musty, like a reproach.

"Sure—I haven't lost everything. I *know* about how to do it. I just can't seem to do it, myself, these days."

"I know. It's temporary. All men have this problem, sometimes. It goes away. You get it back."

"All *men*," Sachs said, wondering what he was getting into here?

"The writers I've worked with have been men. A coincidence, I guess."

"I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll look at your stuff now from time to time, as long as there's no hurry about getting back to you with my reactions."

She shook her head, remorseless. "A mentor is what I need, not a pen pal."

Tamar sat down on the couch, too sweatily close to Sachs. Feeling like a clumsy, lecturing moralist, he said, "Listen, there's a kind of natural, appropriate space between people . . ."

"It's different in different countries," she said.

Anxious, he made a joke out of her inappropriate closeness. "You expect this from Mediterranean people. Not from Port Townsend."

"Oh, for God's sake . . ."

He swerved in self-defense. "Did you know Jack Lash very well?"

A jagged slash of heat lightning split the sky outside the window.

"Well enough. I liked him and he liked me. He was a restless soul."

The answer satisfied Sachs although he doubted it would satisfy Marie Lash.

"Jack was sort of fed up with Port Townsend. If he hadn't had that heart attack something else would have taken him away from there."

"Did you—?"

"Listen," she said. "This is important enough for me to think in different categories."

He listened for more thunder. "Wasn't that somebody's last words? Some great writer," Sachs said. "Think in different categories?"

"I don't know. You're the mentor," Tamar said.

"Mentor-elect. Not in office yet."

"Then suppose I pay in ways you might need—but wouldn't involve money?" Her legs were curled under her arms, fetal-natural. A caress of sweaty calf touched Sachs's hand. "Would that make it all right?"

"What makes you think I need that? I mean any more than anybody else?"

"I didn't say you needed it any more than anybody else."

He felt he might be getting red in the face; it could just be the heat; he felt foolish at the idea but there was no way to test it. "Listen, Tamar," he said. "I'll give you all my wisdom in one sentence. Keep a notebook and be sensitive to every experience, even better, everything you imagine, that can help you into fiction, then find the right models in the library, use their footsteps for your own, and when you've written a draft keep revising till you can't do it any more, then stop. There! Now you know what I know. You don't need a mentor."

"I never saw you use a notebook."

"That's because I'm stuck."

"You mean blocked."

He shivered, staring out the window at the sky.

"Don't use that word. I usually use a notebook. When I'm alive."

"Maybe I can bring you alive."

"I thought I was too moral."

"That's up to you, isn't it?"

She stood suddenly and put some distance between them.

"You must think I'm crazy," she said. "I mean to put so much pressure on for this."

"No, but I do wonder—"

"I'm stuck in the same way. Oh, it's not really the same, I suppose. I'm on the bottom rung of the ladder. I'm not even *on* the ladder, yet. But I was going great for a while. Jack was reading my stuff and guiding me. Then, after he died, it—just stopped on me. Look—" She pulled a long pad out of the backpack at her feet. "See this? I bought pads with different color pages, a rainbow of writing paper, just to tease myself back into it." She dropped the pad back into its nest. "Not a word. Why do you think I came East to file papers when there's a delicious breeze this time of the year in Port Townsend?"

"Maybe you've got the answer yourself—you just have to keep trying, and wait for the return button."

She turned a steady stare of large gray-green eyes on him.

"Suppose I said the same thing to you? What would you say?"

Sachs shrugged. "It's different. We're in different places, different times."

Tamar came back to the couch. Sachs stood up. His trousers were sticky with sweat between his legs when he moved. He was thinking of ways to change the flow of talk; another direction, any direction, even silence. But she was ahead of him, as she had been from the start.

She stood in front of him, head turned up towards his eyes "How close," she said, "is too close in the USA?"

In the instant between her provocation and any action forward or backward, Sachs ran a quick jumble of thought, "Maybe a change, any change, maybe it's a sign—from Jung or from Port Townsend . . . from poor

Jack . . . don't be too fucking moral for this world, certainly for her world. Just let it go he thought, . . . just let go . . . just let . . . just . . ."

It turned out that leotards came off with less difficulty than he would have guessed. The only words they exchanged were when Sachs felt her hand caressing his back and a callous roughened the moment. He held her hand and touched the bristly part to his lips.

"What?" he'd whispered.

"I play the lute," she told him straight, not needing to whisper for sensual atmosphere. "It's hard on the thumb."

"The lute," he'd marveled into her flesh, thinking: Jung, leotards, mentors, lutes . . .

As it turned out, Sachs could forget all of them, and even the astonishing heat, in the heat of touching Tamar and being touched by her. After all the sparring, it was surprisingly uncomplicated, exciting for both. Afterwards, lying next to her, one elegant leg of hers across his thigh, he wondered if he had been touched enough to make a story, an anecdote, a sketch, something of the surprising experience, something which might surprise him back into the flow of words. Any motif might do to jump-start his writing head: feeling guilty about the difference in their ages, the coincidence of Tamar and he having the same trouble at the same time, the fact of his now having signed on, willy-nilly, as her mentor—a tremor of self-mockery at having taken payment in advance.

Judgment could be suspended as long as experience produced the necessary energy. He ran his fingers over the ripples of thoughts but nothing stayed; only the memory of the touch of the callous on her finger, her lute-callous, lingered. Nothing else—no rack of sense on which to stretch a story. Only the meaningless, roughened, sandpapery touch of a callous presented itself to the imagination. Not enough, not even enough for a beginning, let alone an ending. And instantly the old despair returned.

Sachs wiped his sweaty face with the corner of a sheet. Only then did he notice that while he'd been poking at himself for signs of hope, Tamar had gotten up and gone into the bathroom. When he turned the air-conditioner on, grateful at least for the rush of cool air, he thought it might bring her storming out of the bathroom.

He waited for a long time but there was not a sound from within, nothing. He had taken his watch off but it seemed to him as if at least ten minutes had gone by. Finally, he grew dry and shivery and he pulled on his pants and shirt. He knocked on the bathroom door, feeling foolish, the way a man does when the sex hasn't worked.

"Hey," Sachs said. "You okay?"

Silence.

"Tamar," he called out. He waited as long as his sense of weird and vaguely guilty panic allowed and then knocked again. Still no sound except for the tremendous, it seemed to him, new noise of the air-conditioner. Unconventional as a writer, when at his productive best, Sachs

had never been unconventional enough to open the closed door of an occupied bathroom—certainly not one occupied by a young woman. He hammered once more and then, not able to stop himself, pushed at the door and it swung open.

Tamar sat on the closed commode, naked, small round breasts pressed against her long rainbow pad. The floor was covered with sheets of paper, blue, yellow, orange, purple, brown, all in turn covered with a tiny, fine script. Sachs felt his throat become tight and he swallowed hard; it felt scratchy, a natural act made difficult.

"Tamar," he said.

She did not look up, she did not acknowledge his presence or existence by a movement of an eye.

"My God, Tamar," Sachs said.

Her subtly slanted eyes squinted at the pad and her hand was scrawling as fast as she could move it, then tearing off another page, blood red, she let it fall to the floor amid all the others, covering the cold, white tile floor with a wonderful confusion of color and words.

## Following Up: Letters to Ralph Ellison

From Dexter Foley, 1962-1991

Note: The above title should not suggest to the reader that a correspondence existed between the two principals. In fact, Mr. Foley's letters from 1973 on remained unopened by Mr. Ellison, who, in his benevolence, donated the entire collection of Foley letters this last year. Aside from the long-out-of-print book of Mr. Foley's, *Illuminating the Blackness of Invisibility: A Critical Study of Ellison's "Invisible Man,"* these letters represent an academic career that, up to this point, has been woefully neglected. It is the hope of the editor that this might mark the beginning of a renewed look at Mr. Foley's criticism. At present, though, Mr. Foley's whereabouts are unknown.

Dec. 16, 1962  
Johnson C. Smith University

Mr. Ellison:

This following letter must number among the thousands of appreciative notes you receive monthly; yet, as a reader new to your work, I cannot hesitate from adding my name to that long list of "converts." For it is my belief that you are the finest living Negro writer. I do not say this due to the fact that another of our voices, Mr. Richard Wright, has, as my father, the minister, would say, "crossed the sands of the desert." Though Mr. Wright's books are powerful testimonies to the darker aspects of Negro life, it is your novel that (a) gives me the most pleasure, and (b) captures all the facets of the lives of colored men and women.

Of course, you needn't hear all this from me; one need only look at the long list of awards along with the biographical sketch in *Who's Who* to ascertain the reknown afforded you. Still, I offer this praise as a true token of my esteem. Sad to say, many of my fellow-students here at the Johnson C. Smith University are woefully under-read; they know your name but not your work. I feel that this is a common condition of the young Negro. As this is the case, I have decided to forego my family's plans of divinity school and the ensuing (and lucrative) position as minister at our church. My new route takes me to the English Department at Rutgers University. There I

intend to write my dissertation on your novel, then hopefully return to one of the many fine Negro colleges and educate our young brothers and sisters.

Here I might add that it was your novel that convinced me to make the switch from theology to literature (a very unpopular choice with my family). Up to that point, most of my readings of American Literature had been the works of Hawthorne, James and London. All very fine writers, indeed, but none possessed the kind of spark I received from the first few lines of your novel. After three more readings (one, fortunately, under the guiding hand of my professor, Dr. Luther Ammons) I then went back to some of your predecessors: Chestnutt, Wright, Hughes, et al, and was so pleased to realize there was such a thing as a Negro Literature. Though I had to take many trips to Baltimore to purchase these tomes; you will probably not be surprised to learn that the Negro University has not much changed since your protagonist's days at "The College": the library's selection is a short step from pitiful. Still you remain a veritable prophet of a new gospel to me, a gospel I hope to remain as true to as my family has with the AME. So I again take this opportunity to thank you for your novel. It has truly changed my life.

Yours,  
Dexter J. Foley

P.S.: This is a letter of appreciation. Do not feel the need to return a letter to me, as I know you are a hugely busy man. In fact, you're probably at work on a new novel.

May 4, 1964  
Univ. of Rutgers

Mr. Ellison:

Congratulation on the publication of your new book, *Shadow and Act*. When informed of the presence of a new Ellison, I grew excited at the thought of a novel, but any disappointments were mediated by your splendid essays. Forgive me for being so presumptuous in the opening of this missive; it is most likely necessary for me to re-introduce myself: Approximately two years ago I wrote you a letter detailing how your novel made me decide to become an English professor (changing from a minister—thank god I read your book when I did!). Naturally, picking me out of the countless many who have written to you with the same intentions of displaying gratitude is a difficult task. Still, I would like to inform you that I have recently—after a virtually non-stop two year period—completed my Master's Degree and intend to begin my progress toward the Ph.D. My family has gotten over the initial shock of my having "fallen from the flock" (my grandfather's mixed metaphor) and are overjoyed with the

knowledge that soon their Dexter will be a professor. My younger brother, Stuart, has willingly fulfilled my absence at the pulpit.

I have collected many articles written on your novel, and feel that, though much work has been done with IM, my thesis will be a fresh one. I won't bore you with the details. As the writer, the last thing you need is a wet-behind-the-ears student telling you what you meant.

Life here at Rutgers has been an exemplary experience. There are two other Negro students here—Messrs. Walker and Bradley. By choice and necessity, really, we three are as thick as thieves (excuse the cliché, please). Many of our evenings together wind up with never-ending arguments over Negro Lit, specifically, who is our most important writer. Obviously, I am your champion; Bradley favors James Baldwin; Walker, the addle-brained Northern Negro that he is, prefers Chester Himes. And, too, there is discussion of our own "writing"—if you can call it that—and how we hope, perhaps, to one day count ourselves among the great Negro writers. In an article I read recently (naturally, it is one by a white man), the discussion was of the Negro novelist and how he, after pouring out his heart's experience—typically autobiographical—in his first novel, cannot truly find the means to produce a second or third. To this sentiment I quote an uncle of mine (though he often used it in a far different context): "Bull-s—t!"

No; the Negro is still struggling to find his voice. In these days, we follow your lead, Mr. Ellison, and we search through the dark side of experience to forge our words (Obviously, the influence of Joyce colors this). And I hope that if my name is not on the same list as yours—albeit far below—that I will be the man who directs his students to your work and to others as necessary to the Negro's vitality.

Thank you for your talents,  
Dexter Foley

Dec. 22, 1968  
East Lansing, Michigan

Mr. Ellison:

This short note is but one of repeated thanks, for I gratefully inform you of having been offered a position as Assistant Professor at my new home, Michigan State University. From Alabama to Jersey to Michigan—I've literally retraced the steps of our brothers and sisters in their Underground Railroad and Great Migration treks. And I owe this all to you.

My memory seems to tell me that I once confided to you through the post that my studies would hopefully bring me back to the South, and thus to a traditionally "Black" college. However, when the time for decision-making came, it was ultimately between Morehouse College and

MSU. It was then I decided that we needed to get our youngsters to leave the South, along with showing them the new roads at the "White" schools. A companion of mine, Artis Bradley, had the audacity to tell me I was ignoring "the problem." He also claimed that you yourself did something very similar in your novel. For as that esteemed gentleman said: "He ducks it. There's no solution for the Black man's dilemma." Quite the contrary: I say that by reading the book and receiving by way of it, your gift, your talent, we then find our own way. And that is what I've done. As of Fall Semester, 1969, I will be MSU's first black faculty member. Perhaps, as I understand you are a member of NYU's faculty, we might be travelling in the same circles soon. Again, my heartiest of thanks and blessings (news is here that the new novel will be out soon. For me, that would mean more material for a possible second book. Ha!).

D. Foley

P.S.: I can't end this without relaying this story: When the family received the news, I was telephoned by a local news-wag for an interview. Of all things, he asked me to rank the best "Nigro" writers (with football so big in Bama, they only understand who's number one). Here it is: Yourself, Baldwin (though the homosexuality unnerves me), Wright, Toomer, Chestnutt, Cullen and Hughes. Totally extemporaneously did I respond, and I hope that you are not worried that this ranking will get beyond the *Herald* from my hometown.

November 4, 1970  
East Lansing

Ralph:

In the few letter I've sent you, all have been just thank-yous for *IM*; however, this time, I'm in a slight need of a favor. Over the holidays I'm to be in NYC for the MLA convention, interviewing prospects (we're looking for more minority profs: they must think I'm lonely); my favor is to stop by and perhaps conduct an interview with you. I know that this idea probably sounds like a dreary task, but it is not just for my own prestige that I ask this of you. Recently, I've been teaching a Black Lit course at nights for our "non-trads." They wonder how it is that I'm so knowledgeable about you and your work, but have never even met you. It's a wonderful class. Full of the down-home folk that I thought I'd never miss; you too must feel an occasional need to talk possum-hunting and share barbecue recipes, detached from Dixie as you are. My feeling is that an interview would help the class understand the work behind the novel. While many of them share experiences from the novel, they know not how you got the gumption to put it down on paper.

I promise not to be too much of a bother, but as I figure to be in the city, it would be a proverbial killing of two birds. I'll be staying in the

Broadway Hilton from Dec. 29 to Jan. 3. Hope to see you.

By the by, I've got a class of thirty people as voracious as I am for the new novel.

D. Foley

Jan 5, 1971

NYC

Ralph:

I'm staying over a few more days in the city with my former classmate, Artis Bradley, who says he's talked with you on occasion. Please call me at his number: 291-1760. I feel as though I'm imposing, so if it's too difficult a task, just tell me so.

D. Foley

Jan. 10, 1971

East Lansing

Ralph:

Ordinarily, I would consider the events of Jan. 7 and 8 an affront to me personally. But since your only knowledge of me is through my letters, I feel it was just a slight mistake on your part. Though I wish you could have at least joined Artis and me for dinner. I've told my class that I got the chance to meet you; they were mildly impressed. Your lifestyle is a busy one; I understand; and, yes, one should prepare an interview first, rather than just start firing off questions when the interviewee is in the other toilet stall, but it seemed a chance for both of us to get this project done quickly. Sorry for the embarrassment. My jaw still stings occasionally but there was no serious damage.

Foley

P.S.: Artis says your new novel is on course to arrive the same day as the second coming. I hope you are about to prove him wrong.

June 29, 1973

East Lansing

Ellison:

Artis was right. This writer's block thing has got to go. Don't you know you've got people out here dying to hear your voice? The brothers and sisters need you, and what do they get? Promises. Excerpts in ofay journals. Why don't you at least give us a little taste of it in *Jet* or *Ebony*?

Foley

September 16, 1973  
East Lansing

Ellison:  
WHERE IS THE GODDAMNED BOOK! YOU OWE US!

September 20, 1973  
East Lansing

Ellison:  
My new list, as follows: Baraka, Baldwin, McPherson, Wright, Morrison.  
Writers who write, dig?

Foley

August 31, 1975  
Detroit

Ellison:

Well, I finally got out, Brother Ellison. Out of those goddam ivory towers and bourgie house-nigger halls. I'd suggest you do the same, my brother; get out of that poison city and back where you belong: down home. My feeling is that you got soft, got scared, didn't think all the NYC Jews would jump up and down over a new book, so you're just gonna leave all us niggers hanging. But that doesn't bother me at all. We've got us some good stuff now, stuff you probably never dreamed about. We don't need to wait for you anymore.

Since I quit, life just opened right back up. That brother who used to write all those ass-kissing letters? Remember him? Doesn't exist anymore. I've got a new life, and I don't need your tired-ass, poor poor colored me sentiments any longer. There's Amiri, Ish, Toni, this new girl Alice Walker. They're the ones telling the tales that need to be told. Meanwhile, you're just the same sweetback that all those Harlem sisters used to call you.

So I got fired? What's that to me. Trustees don't want an Afro-American Studies Department? Fuck them. I'll just take my show on the road. And you know we got some real African boys to take your place, too: Wole, Chinua. Old-timer, you been put to the back of the bus for good.

Consider this the end of my tenure with you, as well.

Get to work,

Kwame Abdul-Quawi aka Dexter Foley

April 10, 1979

Toronto

Ellison:

I thought you were dried up, done, man. And here you come out with a quote-unquote “new” book. Leave it to you to swipe the title from that cracker Mark Twain. Going to the Territories. My man, Ralph, afraid to show us the real deal so he’s gonna tease us with some more of his stale essays.

You know, even when I gave up on you I would tell the brothers and sisters that you were The Man for the first half of the century. Not sure that’s the case anymore. A lot of sharp sisters have been pushing Zora Neale on me, and I’ll be damned if she can’t write circles around your ass. That’s a book that comes from the heart. Been brushing up on Rich, too; and I think now he’s got you beat.

Just tell me you’re still working on the second one. Just tell me.

Quawi

January 6, 1987

Lagos, Nigeria (Know where that is?)

Mr. Invisible Man:

Greetings from the Motherland. Thirty-five years is it? You remember Shirley and Lee? Had that nice little New Orleans tune, “Let the Good Times Roll”? Question is: What do they have in common with you? Time’s up. One hit wonders, man. Straight from the fifties.

Allah be with you (you need it),

Quawi

October 5, 1991

Lagos

Ellison:

I thought I was done with you. But, I guess I had to’ve known you’d catch up with me sometime. I’d swung me a nice little job out here as a translator, using the off time to work on my novel (Don’t worry; I’ll get it done). Then the boss asks me to do a translation of guess what. Even after I told the man how much a sell-out you are.

I’m gonna do it. You can count on that. And I’ll play fair with you. It’s not like me to punk you out ten thousand miles away. Hey, I made money off your ass before—got me a job off you—it’s not like I can’t collect again, though now the thought of rereading the damn thing’s like a week

with dysentery. Who knows? Maybe the folks around here have been caught up so much in insurrections and leopard skins *IM* might do the job for them.

I'll leave you with this: 1962, I would've stretched my pipe out on the block to keep you tidy and soft in your apartment. A man of your talents shouldn't worry about the concerns of mere mortals such as I (that's Dexter talking). Now I'm sitting here swatting flies and paying out the ass for a simple can of High-Life. Where are you? Heard you retired or something. Guess you'll have time to finish now. Why even bother, brother Ellison? Your time's long gone. Found yourself a niche in the white man's canon, why blow it by writing something they might not swoon over? And, yeah, folks are gonna read you for ages. They've got to; I've heard it's practically law to read *IM* before you can graduate. Make everybody from the engineers to the home ecs buy a copy.

Nowadays, I often think that if you'd gotten with some real brothers, instead of hanging with the white folks, things might've been different. And don't go away thinking I'm bitter because you never wrote back (like you'll even read this) I didn't want you to write to me; I just wanted you to write.

Peace.

## The Agony of T. Bandini

Tiger Bandini was a short sort of prowling fellow with plump red lips and black ashy cheeks. He came from sports people but even to other hardbitten fans he was over the line. He knew intimately about all the quick and larger hitters in American football. Above all he liked the linebackers and other violent crushers. He worshipped the violent crush. His eyes would close as if in a dream when he talked about Lawrence Taylor, for instance. He would begin screaming and white liquid would form at the corner of his lips. Giants fans in the bars who had begun in agreement with him would edge away and huddle together to avoid him. But Bandini was in a zone of screaming delight and was not conscious of this. One day after a Giants game on the television he went into a tirade of celebration and lost consciousness. They let him lie there on the floor, and in a few minutes he was back up on the bar, his eyes gone to slits and a vicious grin wrapped around another whiskey. He was whispering "Taylor. Taylor." He had been there since morning and when he left he got in his car and killed another man in a bad head-on accident.

He was forbidden a driver's license in perpetuity by the judge. His family had struggled in measures grievous to them to keep Bandini out of prison and Bandini advised himself that he could no longer exist in his own town in upper New York state under the burden of shame and guilt.

Before his college experience was interrupted by the accident, Bandini had met a pair of Southern boys who were crazed for the work of William Faulkner, and even more crazed as their homesickness grew. They could quote long passages from Faulkner which sounded to Bandini like a black preacher schooled on an enormous dictionary. Bandini sided with blacks, especially now that he was in disgrace and felt shunned. The Southern boys, like Faulkner, had elaborate reasons for doing almost anything. Bandini was impressed by this. He felt he was in the world of pain and ruin now after the wreck, but he saw there were elaborate reasons for it, and he relished this, as he drank only beer now at the end of the bar, only sometimes shouting.

For instance, their college was not a very good college and was even falling apart physically. The buildings were erected by inferior contractors supported by the New York mafia. Around the campus, interior and exterior walls fell apart in chalky gravel that the students walked over daily. Sections of ceiling were apt to drop out, especially after

a big snow or rain. Bandini liked to expatiate on the complexities of this in a patient beered-up review of the history of the New York mafia. The Southern boys agreed nothing worthy was as plain as it seemed. The only worthy subjects were coiled-up and crossed like nylon fishing line. Like them, Bandini began to speak much of destiny and twists of fate. This comforted him. Much was inevitable and bound to the blind dice-thrower of fate. Fishing line left overnight would coil of its own.

So he thought it was in the dice and natural that he wind up way down South in a rental home in the precincts of the great author Faulkner himself. The town was storied and cozy, filled with shady lanes under great oaks. Around even his poor house in the student section were a bank of weeping willows.

One night, uncommonly drunk on Jagermeister, Bandini fell into them. It was midmorning when he awoke in a dream of green wigwam. A skinny cat came in there with him. Bandini took off all his stinking clothes, picked up the cat and began weeping. This seemed a sad and wonderful place in here. He cursed the pavement and steel outside and did not come out of the trees until evening when the cat began mewling loudly. The animal continued mewling in the house but he had got too drunk all over again on a pint of sloe gin thrown out of a car into the willows and did not understand what it wanted since he hardly ever ate himself. He looked at the creature and passed out on his nasty fluorescent sofa.

In the night when he woke up the cat was still calling out and he recognized what it wanted because now he was hungry too. He put the cat in his overcoat pocket and walked a mile and a half to Kroger's intending to provide a feast for the both of them and pushing the cat down by the shoulders. It scratched and hurt Bandini's hand gravely but he staggered on. His cheeks were blown and red, and his cheeks were like somebody had thrown a full ashtray on them.

Bandini had forgot his wallet, and he was far, far from his resources, a cold desert away it seemed. So in the lonesome store with scant personnel he put his free hand down into the aquarium and shoplifted two great lobsters and set them in the other pocket. Now he was truly fastened in by the hands on both sides and he went out the front electric door with a rictus of his big red mouth and some kind of song it might have seemed to the policeman, bored in a car. He got far out in the lot before he could truly whimper. The night manager came out and the policeman swung toward Bandini in his vehicle but Bandini saw this and scampered like a goat-fiend over the hill behind a branch bank and into the thorns, dead wortvine and minor gullies where only the most wretched of animals went, and down closer to another road he stumbled on yet another bottle with half its liquor, so he secured the lobsters and drank, then he stayed to the backyards and overcame the trifling fences of the middle-aged and wifeworn, where had they shined a light on him they would have seen a man near vomitous with joy.

Tiger Bandini had got new lungs and legs off the boon of drink and he was again that twisting shifty dodger who had almost made the team nine years ago in the town close to the Canadian line. He came out of an alley into the town square free of the police, crafty and game, rid of the pain in his hands, which failed against the found whiskey. He tossed the bottle into a grate and saw in the cold moon before him the courthouse statue of the lone Confederate looking curiously southward. He became infatuated right off and with great conviction he emancipated the cat and lobsters, then began climbing the ten feet of pedestal and statue. He did not see the cat remain in the gutter only a short time before it ran at both lobsters huddled and alien there.

Bandini had a free wide heart for the vanquished. He scaled toward the man, all fours engaged, in an act of hunching and embracing. The policeman had driven up to witness this remarkable love, as Bandini almost reached the boots of the defeated. The policeman heard the man cry out like a thing impaled and then it was too ugly for him to watch any more. The odor of rank sea and a low hissing brought the officer to kneel with his light. Above him, Bandini was going nowhere.

In jail Bandini was given the drunk tank where Cruthers, a lean black man, squatted. Cruthers was a police informer and chauffeur for a town writer who specialized in the burden of history.

Cruthers had twelve or fourteen DUIs. He claimed to be a sergeant in the Viet Nam conflict who carried about an M-60, his sweet big baby, and mowed down hundreds. He slept in a tree and went native, a lizard of death from above, abandoned to independent slaughter by an army who did not love it enough and did not have the hair.

Cruthers would drive the writer to far parts, even New York, where the writer would introduce him to his cronies as the burden of history. Late at night with enough whiskey the writer and Cruthers would listen to Sinatra and Presley on a small cassette player and begin weeping over the Viet Nam dead and the Confederate dead, and, appropriate to the writer's novel, the Korean dead. When Sinatra sang, it was the dead of World War II.

The lobsters and cat and scaling of the soldier were precious to the writer and Bandini was in solid at the writer's campus bungalow. He read up on Bruce Catton and could account for the Northern agony, better and better, when the topic moved over to Those Who Fell once Elvis sang his medley of "Dixie" and "Battle Hymn of the Republic" with the highly sincere Las Vegas band behind him.

Bandini insisted Cruthers move in with him and share his lot and the few hundred a month he got from his parents to stay out of New York. In fact he rather kidnapped Cruthers from the writer. But this was all right, since the writer was growing tired of Cruthers a little. Lately he had begun running the car out of gas and leaving it in mean places where crack fiends prowled and respected nothing. Also there was the problem of Cruthers

always being in jail to be bailed out. Some money had disappeared, too.

Bandini filled up the old shabby yellow house with history books. He was studying to be a student in the future, but this could wait. Through the writer he was let in to practice sessions of the football team, and he watched from the sidelines for hours, memorizing the players, especially the swift monstrous crushers. The coaches did not know what to make of the screaming little man with the New York accent who seemed to know and hate the weaknesses of individual players even more than they did. He used the word *pussy* a great deal. Soon he was asked to quieten down or leave. But he seemed to think of himself as a man with true work and vicious responsibility. Bandini knew that college players were semipro recruits only tenuously connected to the university. Half of them were not on familiar terms with the phrase *alma mater*. Bandini loved this. He wanted to think of the boys as pure cruising crushing meat, a kind of express ham. He was partial as always to the blacks, who he thought of as bursting out of their little nasty nowheres into the howling arenas of the world in the manner of Spartacus. This was their only shot and Bandini worshipped this wild simplicity.

The first time I saw Bandini in public trouble was after a game our team had lost in November when it was first turning chilly. Twilight was coming on and we filed out under the end zone stands. In the end zone we had a sort of rowdy club made up of professors and artists. It was fun seeing the touchdowns and murderous defensive plays from just a few feet away. Bandini sat with us and always brought Cruthers to the games with him. Without cease he would yell insults at the players, naming them, when he saw an error. He became hoarse doing this but never relented even when the game was far gone and the loyal were trickling out.

Under the stands a large professor who was also drunk had not cared for Bandini's style and was beating Bandini on his head, really pounding him, as the man's wife and Cruthers looked on. But Bandini would rise and rise again, crying out hoarsely. The wife seemed angrier than the man beating Bandini, actually. She had been personally insulted but the large professor was going about clobbering Bandini in a dutiful way, just socking him as if stamping the price on groceries. Cruthers was holding the man's coat and smiling. Bandini would not fall and stay, and when he rose once, I heard his hoarse voice still going, hoarse in a whisper through his big bloody lips. He was still yelling about the game, the errors. He was barely acknowledging the professor, and I believe there was even a little smile on Bandini's lips, a tolerant thing, as if this were a small social misunderstanding.

Months later, toward the end of my own serious drinking life, I was in a bar in an alley off the center of town. This bar prided itself on its roughneck and biker atmosphere in a town devoted to campus fashion in nearly everything. A crowd made way on the dance floor in front of the

rockabilly band. I thought at first it was Bandini dancing by himself. But he was doing his moves and staggering from having been hit. A man in a leatheroid long cowboy coat had struck him for defending Cruthers, who had been dancing with a white girl. Cruthers was still standing beside the girl with his arm around her shoulders sweated up from the dance. I noticed he was beholding it all with an expression of implacable scorn.

I really felt for Bandini, who went over to a booth by himself and sat there a long time, with an awful bruise rising on the side of his face. He was saying something over and over to the table but you couldn't hear it for the band. I asked him if he was all right.

He lifted up his head and said: "I'm always all right."

I heard that later in the night, however, Bandini had come out of the booth having shed his clothes. He had begun dancing and whirling. The boy who told me this commented that Bandini had an enormous penis, a thing almost not a part of him, it seemed. Nobody could believe it, and the band quit. Bandini lifted his penis and shook it all around at everybody, baiting each and every one, as it was quiet now.

"You can't hurt me. Nothing you can do. You can't hurt me."

They were astounded but nobody seemed to mind that much. Bandini was in bad luck, however. There were two cops at the door and they broke through and hauled off Tiger Bandini, who still proclaimed himself hurt-proof. One drunk woman dancer began crying and saying what an awful thing that was, that it was too much like Jesus and it was a terrible, terrible thing to witness. She was hysterical.

I visited Bandini and Cruthers several times that year. I was running out of friends to drink with and it seemed that my worst anguish over a drink came on Sunday evenings when all the liquor was gone and the stores were shut. I think Bandini and Cruthers were moderating their drinking somewhat now after the incident at the bar. Cruthers I'd guess was simply a vast consumer and not strictly alcoholic. He simply drank whenever it was provided and you never saw him begging for a beer. He was a seasoned blithe leech and the campus provided him with a perennial supply of white liberal donors. He had a certain style and I never saw him thank anybody for a drink they had bought him. Bandini always seemed to have a few cold beers or the good part of a bottle left on Sunday nights.

The last night I visited he had two whole bottles and a half a case of Heineken. It was his birthday and they had had a party yesterday, he said.

After three drinks, I could not get a lift, only the poisoned flat feeling. I told Bandini I thought I was alcoholic. This made him very angry, not at me but at the idea.

"You are *not!*" he insisted. "Don't take the cheap way out. Nobody is really . . . anything. Everybody is just a collision."

I wondered where he got that. Around the room, all over the sofa and the bed, were books of history. I noticed markers were in all of them

just a few pages deep. He seemed to be reading many at once instead of one at a time.

I was over there hours talking history, football and great art. I started talking about women but that stopped everything for a while. There was a long pause during which I drank very rapidly and finally felt a little. Bandini had nothing to say about women. He looked at me vacantly. Cruthers said he liked sleeping with a fat woman when it came winter. He said he had children about who were pretty. Bandini was flat to this too.

I recalled then I had never seen Bandini with a woman. He was not gay, but I had never even seen him in conversation with a woman.

But he was getting emotional now, well into the good whiskey along with Cruthers, who seemed to be getting sadder.

Bandini put a tape of the soundtrack to the movie *Platoon* in a small player and a trumpet began crying out.

The two of them were moving into something and I'll never forget it. Cruthers leaned against the window, and outside, the cat that Bandini had saved sat poised like a monitor on the other side of the screen with an orange moon behind it. They listened intently to the soundtrack and I felt to say anything would be like speaking aloud in church. Cruthers got to shuffling and became moodier and distant. Bandini raised his head and said to Cruthers softly, "Tell it all."

The mood had gotten almost holy and eerie.

Cruthers began talking.

"I could sleep and make myself little but I always woke up the second anything anybody in range. I could smell them, my nose wake me up. I was on that tree crotch and had me a good limb with my honey and I start fucking her. They come over a hill five black pajamas in a row across like they was hunting rabbits. I blow all they heads off. Then I let myself down and each and every one I stomp they balls. But one of them a teenage girl just the top of her head blown back. I commence giving it to her mouth when I hold her up by the shoulders. That was the best I ever had."

The room was as quiet as a tomb. Only Cruthers' voice was going and the cat never moved. This must have been going on a long time. Cruthers finished the story and went in the kitchen to make himself another drink. There were going to be a lot more stories.

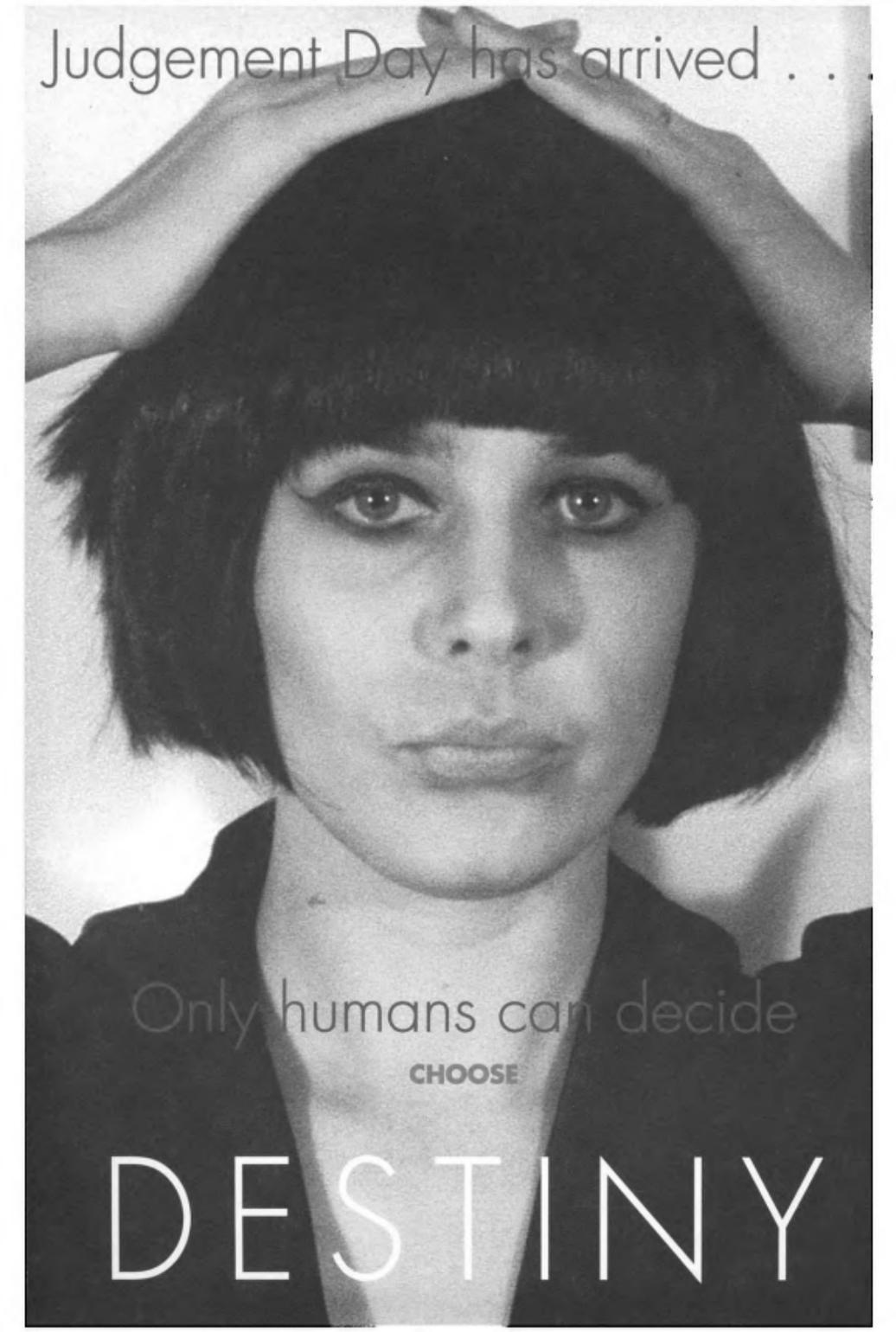
I looked down to Bandini and he was staring at the floor with a smile. His eyes were wet and he was in a hypnotic region.

"*Feel* the turning and the twistings of all that, how Cruthers got there and the dispossessed without any mission but this rendezvous with a boy from Water Valley, Mississippi and the gun he sleeps with in a tree, making love to it sixteen thousand miles from home. Nothing could stop it, nothing."

I was stunned by the new deep voice of Bandini, and this whole

language.

When I looked at him again I believe he had forgotten I was in the room. He smiled just slightly and I could see how deeply in love he was.



Judgement Day has arrived . . .

Only humans can decide

**CHOOSE**

DESTINY

## Donnie Boy

Donnie Boy who killed himself didn't mean a thing to me. Well, nothing more than any human being means to another human being. We went out four or five times, mostly to the Palace Drive-In over at Jasper. He had quick hands but was purely harmless, his white southern, creased doughboy fumbling fingers trying to insinuate themselves between the elastic of cotton panties and my skin. We had a correspondence going when he went off to war, from me—all news of which pigs were butchered, hung up and smoked, from him—how when sleeping he dreamed of being covered in all the letters he received from home, their rattle and skitter giving him away to the enemy. While he was gone I slept with his brother. His tall, lean brother who wore shifting bruises on his bare hands and face from flying pieces of wood at the sawmill, and I never thought of Donnie Boy once. I couldn't take a man seriously who would spend his life being called Donnie Boy. I wrote this down and told him you may have been stuck with the name your mama gave you at birth, but once out of her house, in a uniform, licensed to kill you had a choice. He started using his initials on his letters after that.

Donnie Boy finally came home from what he said was a place God didn't forget but was just never much interested in and I smiled and kissed his cheek and said I was glad to see him. That's all. And today they want to cut down the tree. Not owned by my people because no living thing can belong to another, but the tree that stood on land my family said they owned. An aged, roiling thick-bodied, oak that ripped through red clay and flatland topsoil for over two hundred years, long before there was a Tejas or republic or confederation.

When Donnie Boy rammed his shiny, bright-white Chrysler into that tree he cleaved past only twenty years of bark, past my being wrenched from that perpetually unmentioned's womb, beyond her leaving. Donnie Boy peeled back only a few layers farther than my father's pigeon-toed march through Tyler, Limestone, Comanche, Stonewall, Briscoe, Hartley and more counties than I can muster names for, thinking he could catch up with a woman who didn't want to be caught. He may still be out there, who knows. Branches were twisted and mangled from the impact of Donnie Boy's dense, stumpy torso, branches that once cut the sun off soldiers from Jacinto's ragtag army, men who had clambered through the pine, and birch and cedar and sweetgum wooded hills, men running from the tusked

javelinas and urine scented bobcats. When they pulled Donnie Boy's body from the tree his blood and brain and marrow dripped and mixed with the new spring acorn buds and my hands were covered with the sap of the tree and the blood of the man. A show put on just for me.

Now his brother Charles and his mother Willie Lee want the tree down. His papa never spoke a word about Donnie Boy or the tree, not to me, not to his family, not to the Methodist preacher the congregation sent over to his smokehouse to collect him after he refused to come in the same room with Willie Lee or Charles for seven days straight. I was pretty sure Donnie Boy's papa knew about Charles and me. But he never said and I never asked.

"That tree had nothing to do with Donnie Boy killing himself," I said.

Willie Lee looked at me, tapped her foot against the linoleum, pulled a toothpick from between her teeth with less than clean fingers. She had dainty size five feet that she infrequently balanced her three hundred pound bulk on. She was mostly a sitter, usually seen wedged into a specially built double wide, cushioned chair pulled up to her kitchen table, legs spread to birthing girth by her massive thighs. Her tiny feet twisted beneath the chair and I watched amazed at the miniature blue veins on her instep that blossomed into straw sized channels on her redwood dimensioned calves. "It's a tormenting reminder of the death of my baby." She snuffled into a red gingham handkerchief.

"Then don't come over here anymore," I said. "Besides, why would you want to forget that he died?"

"Hold up Ellen," my uncle Curtis said. "That's cruel. You got no business saying things like that. She's grieving over her son."

I walked over to the wall and took down Granddad's 10 gauge. "If anyone touches that tree they're going to get shot."

Charles stood up and took his hat off the kitchen table. "This isn't over Ellen," he said. "Not everything's got to go your way. Giving everybody ultimatums. I'm not afraid of you or that gun."

"Good, then you won't be bothered hardly at all picking buckshot out of your ass for a week." I could smell him from across the room. He worked at the sawmill mill in Pineland and his skin was saturated with the scent of cedar and pine shavings. On summer nights, when his skin was sticky from wood resin that sifted through the air of the mill, we would walk down to the creekbed beyond the barn, strip and dunk in the creek. Standing behind him I'd soap the piney residue off his heavy curved buttocks and sharp bony shoulderblades. Always I did this before I would lie down with him on my grandmother's blue chenille bedspread in the pasture. He was twenty-five and I was fifteen the year we started up. The year after his brother left for boot camp. Three days ago I turned sixteen.

Willie Lee got up from the table. "You better get hold of that girl Curtis or she's going to get in trouble. We've been doing business and

having friendly relations with your people as long as we both been here. I want that tree down. It's the right thing to do."

When the dust from their pickup had disappeared past the cattleguard Uncle Curtis took the gun from me and put it back on the rack. "The last time you used that thing it knocked you flat on your butt," he said.

"We ate off that deer for a harvest season." I ducked my head and smiled.

"I know about you and Charles," Uncle Curtis said. "For a long time."

"You never mentioned it."

"What's to say. Don't do it? You don't listen to people, you just go on and do what you damn well feel like doing anyway. And it hurts you or pleases you. I don't figure you at all."

"Well, I didn't know you were trying to figure me out."

"That's what I'm saying Ellen. What does that mean."

I reached over and pinched his arm until he pulled away.

"Did I hurt you? Maybe you should just make me disappear. Shoot me, burn me up, there's dynamite out in the shed, blow me to kingdom come."

He sat down at the kitchen table and began to pick at the chipped corner. "What are you planning to do about your boyfriend?"

"Nothing." I started stacking the breakfast dishes in the sink.

"Charles blames me for his brother." Through the sink window I could see our ancient bluetick hound Cesar chasing the geese around the backyard. "That dog's going to get his eyes picked out."

"You told Donnie Boy about you and Charles."

"No. I would have, but he didn't ask." I turned to face my uncle. "But Charles doesn't believe me. At least I don't think he believes me. He said I must have told him. That there was a reason for what Donnie Boy did."

"If Charles loves you, and this were just between you and him," he said, "that's one thing. But he can't fight some guilt he has over a dead brother and a grieving mother if you don't give a little."

"I'm through with Charles. "You all . . . no don't shrug like you don't know what I mean. All of you think that tree killed Donnie Boy. He killed himself. That tree's innocent of any wrongdoing. And you aren't taking it down and Willie Lee is not taking it down or Charles or the Methodist or Baptist minister or the state police. You'll have to put your heads together and have a town meeting and then decide to gather up a posse of big, brave, armed men to kill me first."

I moved back over to the kitchen window and rinsed a few plates. The geese had joined forces and were chasing Cesar around now. "You'll probably have to shoot me more than once to get to that tree."

I threw the washcloth down on the drainboard and slammed out

the back door. Sally, our newest piglet started wheezing when she saw me and tried to shove her whiskered snout through the boards of her pen as I passed by. I stopped and scratched her bristley hide for a moment checking to make sure she had a trickle of water to keep her giant mudpie wet enough for rolling in. Down at the creek I rinsed my hands to get the caked mud from under my nails. Summer rains had pushed it up over its normal water line and there was a slow current moving sticks and debris along. The sun glistened off a gold and tan cottonmouth resting its head atop a thick drifting branch of cypress, its wide body brushing back and forth through the water.

My uncle was a good man. But he hadn't been there that afternoon. He'd gone over to the Leakey's to help out with the hog castrating. Donnie Boy called me up on the party line.

"Girl, I got something for you."

It was hot and I had been sleeping on the swing, little pools of sweat collecting on the plastic cushions beneath me.

I said "Fine, I'll wait. I don't have anything better to do." His brother wasn't coming over until after second shift at the mill, around ten or so.

I sat on the top step of the front porch reading a copy of the Jasper Times, tossing the paper behind me when I heard the car coming up the drive. The iron bars in the cattleguard shook as Donnie Boy rolled the convertible back and forth over them and I could see he had the top down. The brake made a popping sound when he pulled up on it. He hopped up on the back of the red leather seat and shouted, "Stand up, you gotta see this."

"Look, look, look at this," Donnie Boy yelled as he slid back down in the seat. He waved and laughed. The car bucked when he released the brake and slammed his foot on the accelerator. The dirt road kept the tires from squealing but I felt the breeze from the car as it rushed past me and hit the tree.

They cremated Donnie Boy's body. Charles said his ashes were not in an urn but a brown box wrapped in butcher's paper with the name and address of the mortuary on a small gold label pasted on the top right hand corner of the paper. The Baptists wanted him in a grave, but I heard that his papa stole that box from the back of Willie Lee's closet one night while she was at prayer meeting. I don't know what he did with it but I have my suspicions.

I sat in the swing and stared at the tree. The bark would grow around the lick where it had been ripped away, leaving a jagged edged hole. And inside the hole on the fresh, clean bark I had dug, with my Uncle's ivory handled hunting knife, carved to a depth of an entire inch, the initials D.B. From a distance you would always be able to tell that something had hit the tree hard. Hard enough to make a scar you could see two hundred years from now. The initials lacerated into the hide of the tree

though, they were deep enough to last longer than that, but you'd have to get really close to see them.

## Friendly Fire

*Many societies respond to threats to their way of life by creating a powerful apocalyptic dream of a future time when enemies will be overthrown and the world returned to a divine order established in the beginning, from which we can all derive hope and strength.*

Andrew Wiget, "Ghost Dance Songs"

*The Heath Anthology of American Literature*

As kids we all read Dr. Seuss.

We saw the tube and ate the quiche and got the results of Friday's poll. The tubular poll of what we thought and ate the burger and gave it up.

We saw the tube on Tuesday night and ate the stew and gave it up. We gave it up on Saturday night and ate the beer and drank the tube.

In drinking tubes one pours some beers in a upright tube which feeds into another's mouth. He lies on his back and opens his mouth and drinks the beers. That's drinking tubes on Saturday night. And got the poll and saw the war on CNN sent out for wings and ate the wings and gave it up.

We gave it up on Wednesday night to see the poll and isn't it clear my dear emir? A friendly fire we sat around warmed us. A friendly fire flashed on our faces and warmed us.

A friendly fire will warm us.

A friendly fire will harm us.

A friendly fire will warm us and harm us.

My Dad's Roy Rockwood. That's not his real name of course. He wrote Bomba the Jungle Boy at the Giant Cataract.

Staff sergeant! Who is this man? It's just my good friend Toucan Sam. You remember our Fruit Loops pal. Now with an advanced weapon system in every specially marked box. A breakfast window of opportunity. It's just my good friend Toucan Sam. Just open his beak and blam blam blam!

My Dad's Roy Rockwood and I'm cleaning my oven. We baked pearls made of denture material in this blueberry pie. I'm Dan Rather I'll see you tomorrow night. I'm Dan Rather I'll see you tomorrow night.

A friendly fire will warm us warm us.

Where is Mars? It's in the stars. Where is Mars but in the stars. In the stars I see Mars. Mars for American stars and bars. Mars with American stars and bars my dear emir. My dear emir here's what I fear. Isn't it clear? My Kuwaiti emir if it isn't clear what thing I fear you needn't worry or consult the stars or look to Mars. Mars with American stars and bars.

Did you hear the one I heard today? American boys got porn to fly. Got porn to fly and took to the sky. I heard today American boys got porn to fly. They saw the porn and took to the sky. I heard this from my good friend Robin.

As kids we all read Dr. Suess. We saw the tube and ate the quiche and got the results of Friday's poll. The tubular poll of what we thought and ate the burger and gave it up. We saw the tube on Tuesday night and ate the stew and gave it up. We gave it up on Saturday night and ate the beer and drank the tube. Sent out for wings and watched the war. We gave it up on Wednesday night to see the poll and isn't it clear my dear emir? A friendly fire we sat around warmed us. A friendly fire flashed on our faces and warmed us.

My Dad's Roy Rockwood. We last saw Bomba in the pit of vipers. We feared for Bomba among the vipers but along came the snipers and he was okay. He feared the vipers and so did we till the snipers arrived and we sure were glad. I'm cleaning my oven with denture material baked in tubular blueberry pie.

How often do you soften?

Soften often? Then use what I use. With bluing for extra whiteness. Get it up and hit em hard. Then back to Bomba in an airplane hangar threatened by thugs looking for the map to the secret cache of buried jewels. Back to those thrilling days of yesteryear. Back to the future. Back back back to the tarpits. Back back back back.

Return with us now back to those thrilling days of yesteryear . . . the lone ranger rides again!

When we last saw the masked avenger and his faithful sidekick Tonto they had just discovered the fiendish plan of the Clancy brothers to rob the noon stage heading into Dry Gulch. Ned Clancy, the boys grizzled ne'erdoowell uncle, confessed their sinister plot in a cave miles from town.

You'll never make that stage in time cackled Ned Clancy.

Indeed mere minutes remained before the stage reached Dry Gulch.

You stay here Tonto and wait for the proper authorities. I'll have to hurry if I'm to catch that stage on time.

The Lone Ranger departs with the microphone and in years to come a team of cameramen.

Hmmm Kemosabe leave take microphone. No get say now. Uhhh me left guard prisoner feed horses. No fun Tonto. Me want be hero but no get be hero. Hmmm. Crow land on branch nearby. Crow you like Tonto. No

say word no have microphone. Tonto able speak but no got grammar. Maybe get grammar get microphone. Uhhh Tonto no think too hard guard prisoner feed horses. Maybe Tonto make clever knot use next episode. Practice track animals. Crow let Tonto see sizum foot. Crow standum still. Why crow fly way? Uhhh crow return but out Tonto's reach. Crow hard bird track no let Tonto see sizum foot. Clancy now sleep. He have no more scene in show. Tonto one more scene at end but no more lines. Tonto give silent look full of meaning at end when Kemosabe go on bout Merica. Clancy you lucky. You sleep. Tonto have to wait give meaningful stare at end listen propaganda. Where crow now? Hey! Who you? Why you wear sacred dress? What you mean buffalo return? Ha. Crow no speak. No foolum Tonto. This trick of white man producer makum fun Tonto. Where white man producer? Tonto no fooled. Tonto no barbershop injun. Why try trickum Tonto? What Tonto do? Where producer? No foolum Tonto crow-man. Buffalo dead. Makum way for soundstage propaganda. Where sound technician? Sound technician always try fool Tonto. Sound man no like Tonto. Tonto don't get money so much. Why sound man not like Tonto? Be quiet crow-man. Buffalo no return. Tonto got good job no reservation injun. White man puppet make three square. No got time dance. Dance no good. No dance good no more. Buffalo dead. Crow-man leave Tonto be. Why Tonto brain taunt Tonto. Tonto want live good life be good injun. Tonto give up on crazy dream of past. Tonto no like life now but it okay. Tonto no want dream. Tonto no want dream no more.

He wanted her badly. If I don't have her he thought to himself I will regret it the rest of my life. Just like that he thought it to himself and then regarded the sentence with wonder. If I don't have her I will regret it the rest of my life. If I don't have her I will regret it the rest of my life.

He wanted her badly. He wanted her so badly that he pictured her. He could see her. He could see how she looked. He could see how she felt to his fingers as they slid down her bare torso. He could see how she felt as he turned her onto her stomach in bed then raised her hipbones. He could see how she looked as he mounted her front raised stiffly on his arms. He wanted her badly his mouth moving to between her legs. To kiss her stomach to bite her nipples her neck her throat her ear her neck as he entered her she gasped. As he entered her he worked slowly his hands over her body as he entered her worked slowly lifting her into the air from impossible positions as he entered her worked slowly. As he entered her he could see how she looked and felt and tasted as he moistened her he worked slowly. As he entered her he could see how he would enter her again and again and each time he wanted different. As he entered her again he wanted it different every single time she gasped his hands over her bare torso. Or holding her legs as the ankles came around his back as the ankles came to his neck. Or as she straddled him like a horse he saw her. Or as she held him close like lovers he saw how he felt her. Or as he entered her he

saw how he heard her gasp. Or as he worked slowly he saw her soften into something pliable which had to have him which wanted him which gasped which was moistened on which he worked slowly. He wanted her so badly that he pictured her. He could see her slowly slowly. It was an image in his mind at half speed.

Like any American male he was familiar with the image of a perfect women's body. Like any American male he had seen many perfect women's bodies. Like any American male he had seen more perfect ones than not perfect. Like any American male perfect women had handed him beers. Like any American male he had had women hand him beers sleek brown bottles in slender fingers and red nails. Like every American male he had seen more perfect ones than not perfect handing him beers with the slender fingers and waists. They handed him beers in bikinis. In bikinis they outnumbered him and all of them were perfect. These perfect women's breasts were enormous. Their bodies were like slender reeds bearing grapefruit impossibly perfect. What perfect bodies they had. Their impossibly perfect bodies he had seen them again and again. (Like any American male at times his lover's body had seemed perfect. At times his lover's body seemed perfect but never to his lover who would point out how her body wasn't perfect.) Like any American male he wished he could rid himself of the image of a woman's perfect body. Like any American male he found it impossible not to desire it and desire to be rid of it. Like any American male he wished he was rid of it and yet saw them again and again and tried to turn away in disgust. Like any American male he tried to turn away in disgust he couldn't because they were already an image in his mind. Like any American male he was sure to see the image again and again because he was particularly targeted. Like any American male he was an object. Like any American male he could succeed again and again to turn away from the image of a perfect woman's body but one day he would succumb. Like any American male he was begged to succumb every day and more than once a day. Like any American male he wanted his cock sucked. Like any American male he was offered perfect women to hand him beers and suck his cock every single day every single day. Like every American male he was particularly targeted because it wasn't particularly difficult to target every single American male.

It's true that boys got porn to fly got porn to fly and hit the sky.  
 The showed boys porn to get them up  
 To get them up to hit 'em hard.  
 To hit the enemy with all they had.  
 To hit 'em hard the enemy hard.  
 Hard for American stars and bars.

Much madness is divinest sense to a discerning eye. Much sense the starkest madness. It is the majority in this as in all which prevails. Assent and you are sane. Demur and you're straightaway dangerous and handled

with a chain.

Much madness is divinest sense. The surgical nonetheless explodes. No other reply is acceptable. The tape undergoes editing before broadcast time.

I was in Louisville Kentucky the day George Bush gave Iraq until sundown of a certain future day to get out of Kuwait. I was asked on the street by a man with a microphone and a cameraman. I had driven down that day from North of Cincinnati where my sister-in-law lives and had heard the news over the car radio all the way down. We would be going to war in all likelihood. I told the man that I thought we were making a grave mistake. I told the man that I thought President Bush's rhetoric was straight out of a Western. Was it sundown in Washington in Greenwich in Bagdad in Jerusalem? No it was a symbolic sundown only in language. It was to shame the leader of Iraq before the world. It was two schoolboys out on the playground. Whaddya mean? Oh yeah? Says who? You and what army? It was John Wayne. It was Gary Cooper. It was the president reacting to people who said he wasn't tough enough. Oh yeah? Says who? Whaddya mean? You and what army? I had driven down to Louisville to give a paper on Gertrude Stein. I had to deliver the paper the next day but I wanted to get to the University as soon as I could in order to hear one of the afternoon sessions. I was already late and had missed the papers given that morning. I had now just checked into my hotel and I saw the man with the microphone and the other with the camera. I walked over. I wanted to say something. I wanted to get to the conference but this was more important. We would be going to war in all likelihood. I wanted to have a statement in the public record. But I forgot. The tape undergoes editing before broadcast time.

I did some research several years ago for a professor writing a cultural history of the 1940s. Among the things I turned up that later found their way into his book were pictures and descriptions of the phenomenon known as the TV Party. When television began not many people could immediately afford the novel new devices which few expected would one day dominate their lives. A single television in a neighborhood could become a magnet. One image in a forties magazine showed an assembled group of perhaps twenty people watching a screen perhaps ten inches wide. A TV Party! This the post-war America which the development of television awaited. Introduced at the World's Fair in New York in 1939, the technological infrastructure needed for broadcasting could not be put into operation until the war effort was no longer needed. American author and modernist Gertrude Stein dead in Paris in 1946 just missed seeing the thing that probably would be the most influential cultural instrument of the next half century in her native land.

When the Persian Gulf War began I was living in Buffalo, New York, and Nicolette and I were the only people in our circle of friends with cable TV to pull in CNN which quickly defined itself as the channel on which to watch the war. Our phone hardly stopped ringing and soon we

had a roomful of people watching the war. A TV Party! The dimensions had gotten a little bit better over the years. We had about twelve people all of whom disapproved of our nation's involvement in the war watching a screen of about twenty inches. But the next few days began our introduction to a new type of math. A poll soon demonstrated scientifically that 91% of the nation favored the steps taken by the president in our behalf. I began to realize what a statistical aberration myself and my friends were. In order to correct the twelve people in my and my wife's apartment given the 91% figure there must somewhere be assembled a crowd of 133 people who all approved of the war. What were the statistical chances that in a nation where only nine people of every hundred held a certain position twelve people assembled in a room would all be of this tiny minority? And that was only the beginning of the new math. A week later I went to a demonstration at Lafayette Square in downtown Buffalo. There were about 80 people there protesting American involvement in the Persian Gulf War. It was ten degrees out that day it being January in Buffalo but even so in order to subsume us within the poll's figure one would need an assembled crowd of 880 people all of whom supported the war. In January a few days before the Super Bowl there was a massive demonstration in Washington DC where it was estimated 20,000 people showed their disgust with American policy in the war. I wasn't there but I have a videotape of the event I will be glad to show to anyone who asks me. Let's say for argument's sake that the number was exaggerated. Let's say only 10,000 were there, 10,000 people who belonged to the 9%. The failure of a crowd of 110,000 people approximately .05% of the nation's citizens to ever assemble to physically controvert the evidence of such a demonstration and prove the polls correct convinces me that the polls are in error and that people who believe them willingly swallow a lie.

One might say that people have lost their natural habits of living.

Usually I resist the idea when I hear such because it sounds too much like Chicken Little's The sky is falling! The sky is falling!

I usually resist the idea when I hear such a thing but now I agree one might say people have lost their natural habits of living. Think of the fireplace. People don't sit and watch fires in the fireplace as they probably used to. Not only do people no longer sit and watch fires in the fireplace like they probably used to but people my age and I'm not that young don't know of a time when television didn't perform that function. People my age and I'm not that young had televisions for fireplaces.

I agree one might say people have lost their natural habits of living.

I visited a restored house a couple weeks ago. It was restored to how it would have looked in 1860. Aside from styles it probably would have organized itself much the same in 1940. In 1860 or 1940 while I can only say probably about the past people looked at each other or looked at the fire. In 1940 people probably would have listened to the radio Bomba

the Jungle Boy escaping from the Mad Arabs but the radio probably didn't replace the fire or other people. I agree one might say people have lost their natural habits of living.

I was standing in the living room when I was told the house had been restored. It organized itself differently. What was different? There was no television.

I'm not that young and I have trouble imagining a living room without a television. It seems to me while I can only say probably about the past life was probably different in the days of the fireplace or even of the radio. What was different? There was no television.

I don't want to sound like Chicken Little and I know I have to say probably about the past but unanimity makes me nervous. I have to agree people have probably lost their natural habits of living and I say that because unanimity makes me nervous.

The wars Americans prepared for in 1860 and 1940 must have been different although I can only say probably about the past. That unanimity I can only say probably wouldn't have made me as nervous.

Scared or perhaps angry anticipating but not the feeling of queasiness at the knowledge of a widespread lie. Unanimity the result I have to agree people have lost their natural habits of living probably.

Everybody during the most recent war different from 1860 or 1940 when people probably looked at each other or fires was saying the same thing. Not just the same ideas but the same words.

Saddam Hussein is another Hitler.

Don't you support the troops?

I was on the phone with my mother and told her I was against the war. She told me she didn't like the idea but supported the troops. My father heard from my mother's response that we were talking about the war because he got on and said Saddam Hussein is another Hitler.

I told my brother although I'll give him credit this was in the early days and he later had more complex opinions. I told him I was against the war and he said Do you support the troops?

SUPPORT and TROOPS kept turning up in the same sentence.

Don't you SUPPORT the TROOPS? I SUPPORT the TROOPS. We should all get behind the TROOPS and show our SUPPORT. Channel eight will be sponsoring a SUPPORT the TROOPS dinner tomorrow evening at the Civic Center. Come on out and remember SUPPORT the TROOPS. That SADDAM HUSSEIN is another HITLER.

My father-in-law is Hungarian and he left Europe during World War II. Someone told him Saddam Hussein is another Hitler. Do you have any idea who Hitler was he asked the man. ANOTHER and HITLER kept turning up in the same sentence as SADDAM HUSSEIN.

At the protest at Lafayette Square in Buffalo there was a small counter-demonstration with people shouting We support the troops and carrying signs that said SUPPORT THE TROOPS.

My father and mother lived five hours away in New York's Catskill Mountains. My brother lived further South in New York City. My father-in-law was told about SADDAM HUSSEIN and HITLER by a man living in his home city on the other side of the country Boise Idaho. On the news I saw a demonstration of people supporting the troops in Newport News Virginia. A friend of mine expressed disbelief that SADDAM HUSSEIN was being compared to HITLER. He was calling me on the phone from Houston Texas. How were we all over the country using the same words in our different sentences? We were all hearing people saying SUPPORT TROOPS SADDAM HUSSEIN ANOTHER HITLER. How else but television?

And there were yellow ribbons.

Where did the yellow ribbons come from? They seemed to simply arrive one day, tautly strung from the tops of lamp posts down Main Street, tagging street signs, recalling the pop song of years ago where the boy comes home from the war to discover everyone has been thinking about him, has put their lives on hold until his return. But where did they come from? They were impossible to miss. Every public space belonged to them. And civic buildings — the town hall, the police department, the courthouse, forget about it — tied up and down with ribbons, oodles of them, like spaghetti kids have thrown all over the refrigerator to see if it's done. But the ribbons didn't stop there. One almost expected, standing too long on the corner waiting for the light to change, to be strung up with ribbons, to be tied to the stake with ribbons, the fire licking up at your heels, the ribbons browning, melting rather than burning, another taken into the conflagration. *Where did they come from?* They were everywhere, but I myself never saw a single one put up, the way one sometimes actually sees crews spraying double yellow lines on the road or climbing scaffolding to hang a banner for the Grand Opening of something or other. The ribbons entered our public spaces and then it was hard for people to remember when they hadn't been there, so that it was a surprise to me when, after the war was officially over and the bright yellow of past days had become the color of an old teeshirt, it surprised me, walking down the street with my friend David, when he said, Can we take the ribbons down now?

By that time it actually had become a problem. No one seemed to know when the proper time to take down the ribbons would come, or who should be responsible. Would taking down a ribbon signify that the person taking it down didn't believe in what the ribbon had originally stood for? No one was so brave to test it in daylight. Was it unpatriotic to admit that life went on after a patriotic effort, or that patriotism simply demanded too much effort to continue on day after day? And who had put the ribbons up in the first place? Now they were starting to become eyesores. Rains came and the ribbons streaked red with rust or grey with street soot or the dissolving bark of trees. Boys played games, leaping for the frayed end of a

ribbon tied much too high for them to reach, hardly tied at all anymore, but raggedly falling from above. Of course, they never leaped for ribbons they could reach. You knew you weren't actually supposed to touch them. Someone might see you, and then how would you explain that?

But then you saw one as you were walking along the road well after the events that had put them up. It was unrecognizable at first because, rained on and run over by cars and tossed across perhaps miles by steady daily breezes, the knot that had been tied in it now resembled a stone, the ribbon itself the most miserable strands a beggar ever wore. Yet something in the memory clicked to remember a fury of enthusiasm, someone else's rather than your own, which was what the knot had once meant. The knotting of the muscles behind the shoulders and the neck of a back hunched over all day at work or typing out letters of application for work or scrubbing the dishes or vacuuming the rug. The knot that had been tied in the ribbon lifted one out of all that briefly, or that was the promise. Come, be lifted, feel yourself flap in the wind, march with cracking snare drums in attendance. Why would anyone wish to deny such a feeling? There are enough cynics in the world — does one really have to analyze this yellow ribbon that makes so many people feel so good? Well, not me, but some people — many, I suppose. It is true that none of my friends seemed to respond to them positively; a number even mumbled complaints. Most said nothing at all about them, the tacit agreement being that if we didn't speak they would soon go away. But then maybe I just don't hang around with the right people for these types of things.

In any case, the ribbons didn't go away. They fell in tatters. No one removed them. Nor did anyone ever admit putting them up, at least that I know. But I have pictures in my mind of those who did it.

I picture a woman who organizes a lot of different things and doesn't think anyone appreciates her, but while she gets angrier each day because of that, instead of ceasing to organize things each and every day, she instead organizes more and more. She had decorated the town many times with banners and posters before the yellow ribbons came along, but when they did, she was angry that she had not put them up in her town before seeing them on TV. At least she didn't have to see it in the newspaper. Hers would be the first town in the area at least. People describe her with the word "tireless," but she's tired all the time. Fatigue angers her even more, there's so much that needs doing to make the town look nice. It will look nice when the town is all covered in yellow ribbons for the war. People will want to take pictures, it will look so nice — and, oh, she'll have to get a photographer to do shots for the tourist brochures and for the offices in the town building and the courthouse. No one appreciates all of the nice things she does. This will be the first town in the area to be decorated in ribbons; she'll have to remember to call the county newspaper as well.

But she wasn't the first person to think about decorating the town.

The first person to think about decorating the town thought not just about this town but about the whole county, maybe even the tri-counties if he could move fast enough. Everyone likes these yellow ribbons, but he knows there'll only be a small "window of opportunity." What a phrase, "window of opportunity." He doesn't make the ribbons himself. He's a "people person," makes phone calls, drives around from place to place, gets prices, quotes prices, brings people together, that's what he does. Now with a phone in the car, he's moving, moving, moving. Any requests he gets from anyone to do anything his response is invariably the same. Will do, will do, he says. Gotcha. Will do.

Tony.

Ruth? This's Tony, sorry about the bad connection, I'm on the car phone, but I got it all set up, got the price, Federal Express, you'll have the whole town covered in ribbons by tomorrow night.

Well, that part is for me to worry about, but you're sure you can get them here by morning?

Yeah, don't worry, will do. I've got ckkrrx ckkkssxx ckrxkssk

What? Tony? Hello, Tony? Are you there?

ckkkccrkk crkkxxxxk

Tony I can't hear you. Tony? Hello.

And the conversation is over, interrupted somewhere in ephemeral space. The next day, though, the town is wearing ribbons.

Says Ruth several weeks later: It was so wonderful to see everyone supporting the troops like that. We don't see enough of that anymore, not like we used to. But I think there's a real spirit coming back into the people in this country. You see it in the young people. (Her own son didn't want to have anything to do with her or her stupid ribbons.) I just think it's nice when everyone supports the president and the soldiers who have to go away from home to fight for what's right. It just gives everybody a really nice feeling.

Says Tony: I hit the ribbon thing just right. I don't know why, but I was right on top of it. Lucky, I guess. But you got to hustle, too, you can't wait a day when something like this comes up. You wait a day and all of a sudden nobody wants to talk to you. You can't even wait an hour. Not even a minute, not when you really have to move. So it really wasn't luck. (He's having a drink, talking to his brother-in-law at a family party; the brother-in-law wants to go to the bathroom as soon as he can escape.) That's why I'm successful. I'm there when people need me, and I get them hooked up, bang bang. So when you see me driving down Main Street in my Lincoln Town Car, you have to say, There goes a guy that hustles, and when you hustle, that's what you get. I'll tell you, I bought my Lincoln right after the ribbons went up and it was such an incredible feeling, driving down the middle of that little town knowing that I had put up those ribbons like that in that town and had other things like that happening in Green Lake, Omro, Rosendale, throughout the area — let me tell you, it was like I was the one

returning home from the war and they were throwing me a parade. It sounds dumb, but that's what I felt like, going down the street like that with the ribbons and my beautiful new car, I thought I was going to start seeing ticker-tape at any moment, I was so proud to be an American.

Tonto no get rid of dream. Tonto can't get rid of dream. Tonto where is rid of dream? Dream persists and dream persists.

Tonto lives within a dream. Tonto listens Kemosabe. Kemosabe tells a dream. This is Kemosabe's dream. Set breaks down and actors leave. See ya Fred see ya Hal. Dream construction done for day dreaming the dream of 1940s. Not Tonto's dream not Tonto's dream. Tonto can't get rid of dream. Dream persists and dream persists.

When they came and took our way of living we said are you crazy are you crazy?

When they came and took our way of living we asked them were they crazy?

Now the buffalo will not come back. No matter how long you sing father the buffalo will not come back. The buffalo will not come back and the new possessors will not leave even if they are crazy.

Ghosts return in the evening light. They tell us of what's long since gone. They tell us of what's long since gone returning in the evening light. We respond to our missing lives by inviting ghosts back again and again inviting ghosts again and again. But father the buffalo will not come back. No matter how you sing the buffalo will not come back.

Ghosts return in the evening light unreal things just dreams of the past. The buffalo are long since dead and will not come back. Father no matter how long you sing the buffalo will not come back.

The Paiute saw a crow who told him the buffalo would return.

Don't believe him father don't believe him don't believe him. The Paiutes are as crazy as the new possessors. They are crazy they are crazy.

Ghosts return in evening light but are not real and do not bring that which we lost that which we lost. They do not bring the buffalo. They do not bring the buffalo no matter what the Paiute says. Come we are Sioux and do not believe in reruns.

Turn off the reruns and come enjoy the evening light. Come enjoy the evening light the evening light. You do not need ghosts you do not need ghosts you do not need reruns no reruns.

A future time created dream of reruns when the buffalo return? We do not want this do not want this.

A future glow of related past when glories stood beyond the unseen feats of our possessors? Come away from the light father it ruins your eyes.

A future time made up of pasts and new creations to topple the possessors? Come away from the light father it ruins your eyes and you cannot see.

A future time when patriots' glare light our hopes in eveningtime?  
Do not look father do not look it isn't real it isn't real.

Our future time a future time when the past returns in glory? Do  
not look father do not look it isn't real.

A future time a future time a future time a future time a future  
time a future time a future time a future time a future time a future time a  
future time a future time a future time

Do not look it isn't real it's just a rerun does not exist an  
evening glow just a dream a created thing of future time is not real do  
not be crazy the buffalo dead will not return it's just a dream it's just a  
dream it's just a rerun it's just a rerun we only respond to our missing  
lives by inviting ghosts again and again inviting ghosts again and again  
inviting ghosts again and again inviting ghosts again and again again  
and again bomb Baghdad again and again bomb Baghdad again and  
again bomb Baghdad again and again again and again it's just a rerun  
it's just a rerun

## The Death of Turnus

*Traytor, dost thou, dost thou to Grace pretend,  
Clad as thou art, in Trophees of my Friend?  
—Dryden's Aeneid*

Far on the outskirts, Turnus watched in dread  
As firebrands rained into the wounded city—  
Rooftops falling in in sheets of flame—  
He took a step, then broke out in a dead run

Toward the town, flying through undergrowth  
Without pain or effort, like a ghost  
Down paths of its childhood. Approaching the Trojan lines  
That ringed Laurentum, scattered stragglers stared

At him in wonder; without breaking stride  
He cut through rank on rank of troops drawn up  
In earshot of the front, their earthworks, pitchfires,  
Horses shivering in the dew-drenched shade.

He ran through the roaring of his own blood, and there  
In the midst of the siege itself, smoke drifting across  
The cleared ground, singing of arrows, thudding hooves  
Of the calvary in sorties, called him out:

\*

Beneath an eerie mingling of Latins and Trojans—  
As women thronged the ramparts, craning to see  
Aeneas himself in gold and crimson, awed  
By the pine-tree spear, and the spectacle of the shield—

There, far below, two figures fumed in glare  
Closed hand to hand, and Turnus lunged for blood—  
Flaring up at full height, lashing out,  
The shield at first shock shattering his blade—

And ran again  
 On dream-legs drained of sense, stared at the broken  
 Hilt he still held, hemmed-in, circling, treading  
 Water, blankness, lostness, stride for stride,

His life poured out like water. He heard Aeneas  
 Gasping for air, and distant cries of friends—  
 Each footfall, breath, all happening again  
 As he'd imagined it. He called to his friends

For his own sword, their faces blank as the walls  
 That shadowed him. Sleepwalker-slow beneath  
 The yoke of armor, raving at a loss  
 Five times around that tract of trampled earth,

At last he spotted a huge stone, wrenched it loose  
 In one swoop, staggered beneath its mass  
 A little way, hurled it against Aeneas—  
 But as he bent and gathered himself, his knees

Gave out, and the boulder, conjured there against  
 The blue of dream, fell short at the other's feet.  
 And everyone watched what had been written, happen  
 As Aeneas let it fly with all his might;

Everyone listened with one ear to the hymn  
 Of the hurtling spear, the sharp report of impact  
 Punching through bronze armor. One cry swept  
 The crowd of Rutulians, one cry shouted back

From oaktrees swayed in wind like anchored men-  
 O'-war, as Turnus reeled and crumpled on  
 His gored leg, looking for all the world like someone  
 Losing his balance on the ocean.

\*Still in sight of pastures drowsed with bees,  
 Ordinarity he was the issue of,  
 Turnus gouged the dust he lay in, mind  
 Clouded but coming to. He propped himself

On one arm, drinking in the air of heaven  
 The images of leaf-fire falling loose—  
*And skittish flames like torn sails blown from mast  
 To mast, from hull to hull of the Trojan fleet,*

*Its rigging and moorings melted off like cobwebs.  
—As if for him alone, an apparition  
Taking form he had no words for—one  
By one, ships shuddered and swam off, cutting the waves*

*To Together, homing seaward like a school  
Of dolphins . . . .*

*What bore them back at last was time,  
In dusk of sawshriek, clatter of chain and cartwheel,  
When pyres of cargoed numberless and nameless*

*Cast off on Laurentum plain.*

*Now all light  
Blazed across Aeneas' breastplate. Turnus,  
King of the humming weeds, raised his right hand  
In ritual: "Lavinia is your bride,"*

*He said, "But go no further out of hatred."  
And these words moved Aeneas  
So much that who he saw, who prayed for his life,  
Was Pallas, wearing the swordbelt Turnus had stripped*

*From him, and in a flinch of rage, he called  
For Pallas! Pallas!—roaring out the echoed  
Syllables across the spilled-gold ridges  
Of riffling heat, his swordthrust driven home*

*Through cuirass and the cage of bone within.*

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Charles Bukowski is an internationally famous figure in contemporary poetry and prose. He published his first story when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He has published over forty books of poetry and prose, including the highly acclaimed novel *Ham on Rye*. His books of poems include *Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*, *You Get So Alone At Times It Just Makes Sense*, and *Play the Piano Drunk/Like a Percussion Instrument/Until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit*. He is also the author of *Barfly*, a screenplay. Mr. Bukowski died in 1994.

Terri Burns is a fiction editor for *Gulf Coast*. Her stories have appeared in *Amaranth Review*, *i.e.*, and *Buffalo Press*. She is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, Platteville.

Nicole Cuddeback currently lives in Houston, Texas, where she is working on her M.F.A. at the University of Houston. She is a writer-in-residence for Writers In The Schools, teaching creative writing to high school students.

Gregory Fraser is a student in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston. He received an M.F.A. at Columbia in 1992.

Augusta Belle Griffith is a writer, past publisher and present editor who is also a native of East Texas, which she writes of extensively though not exclusively.

William Goyen, who died at the age of sixty-eight in 1983, was born in Trinity, Texas, in 1915. He is the author of the acclaimed *House of Breath* (1950), *The Collected Stories* (1975, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1977), and the novel *Arcadio* (1982), as well as numerous plays and short works. His novel *Half a Look of Cain* will be published for the first time this spring by TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press. A volume of his letters, edited by Robert Phillips and with an afterword by Stephen Spender, is forthcoming from University of Texas Press in January 1995.

Mark Halliday's first book of poems, *Little Star* (William Morrow, 1987), was a National Poetry Series Selection. His second book, *Tasker Street*, won the Juniper Prize and was published by the University of Massachusetts Press last year.

Barry Hannah grew up in Mississippi. His first novel, *Geronimo Rex*, was awarded the William Faulkner Prize and nominated for the National Book Award. His collection of stories, *Airships*, is regarded as a contemporary classic. His novel *Ray* was nominated for the American Book Award. His most recent novel is *Never Die*. Barry Hannah's achievement in fiction has been honored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He lives in Oxford, Mississippi, where he is writer-in-residence at the University of Mississippi.

Nancy Johnson has published her poetry in *The Antioch Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *College English* and many other magazines. She lives in Washington, D.C.

Evelyn B. Leong received an M.A. in Women's History at Sarah Lawrence College in 1993. She is an independent curator and scholar living in Nyack, New York.

Y. C. Murphy received an M. A. degree in Creative Writing from New York University and was a Stegner Fellow in Poetry at Stanford University from 1991-1993. Currently she works as an editorial assistant at Hyperion/Walt Disney Press and has poems forthcoming in *Epoch* and *Black Warrior Review*.

Ted Pelton is a native of Long Island, New York. His fiction has appeared in a number of small magazines, and this year he was awarded an NEA Literature Fellowship in fiction. Currently an Assistant Professor of English at Lakeland College, he is working on a collection of short fiction entitled, *Me and Walt*.

Caila Rossi has work appearing or forthcoming in the *California Quarterly*, *TriQuarterly*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Cottonwood*, *Quarterly West*, *Shenandoah*, and *The Year's Best*

*Fantasy and Horror Stories* (St. Martin's Press, Summer 1994). She is an editor of *Chelsea*.

Gregory A. Ryan has published poems in magazines such as *Agni*, the *Seneca Review*, the *Literary Review*, *Midwest Quarterly* and *Central Park*, among others. He received an M. A. in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University and currently teaches at the County College of Morris and the Morristown-Beard School.

Elisabeth Sheffield has an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of California at Irvine and a recently completed Ph.D. in English from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She lives in California and is working as a nanny until she can find another job.

Jane Sherry has had numerous solo and group exhibitions since 1977. Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Getty Museum, and The New York Public Library. Ms. Sherry currently resides in New York City.

Jenny Silitch is an artist currently working in Houston. Houston exhibitions include "Spit Happens," an installation at Diverse Works in 1992 and "Landscape With Sales Pitches" at New Gallery in 1993. Upcoming shows include a one-person exhibition at CRCA University of Texas at Arlington, opening in September 1994, and "Forging Ahead," a group show curated by Al Harris, director of University Gallery at the State University of New York, which opens there in October 1994.

William Steen, since deportation from Mexico, has resided in Houston, associating with the likes of The Magnificent Pretty Boy, Chico Hopps, Perry Webb, le Grand Fromage, the late James Reaben, and other individuals of dubious character. Currently he is publishing a series of monographs on visionary artists entitled "Revelations." He is also engaged in the life and death struggle to protect his physical and psychic being from transmogrification by spirit entities more or less everywhere.

Daniel Stern is a cellist, screenwriter, and the author of ten books, most recently *Twice-told Tales* and *Twice Upon a Time*. He holds the Cullen Chair in fiction at the University of Houston.

Rebecca Stern is a doctoral student in the Department of English at Rice University who spends most of her spare time pursuing the illicit pleasures of shlock culture. She is currently at work on her dissertation, which explores bad acting in Victorian life and literature. Rebecca has worked as a trail guide at Talbot Stables in Lenox, Massachusetts.

Lorenzo Thomas's books of poetry include *Chances Are Few* and *The Barbers*. He has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards, including a fellowship from the NEA and the Lucille Medwick Prize. Recently, he was elected to the Texas Institute of Letters. His work is widely anthologized and is forthcoming in the 1994 *Norton Anthology of Modern American Poetry*.

Michael White recently accepted a teaching position at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. His latest collection of poetry is *The Island* (Copper Canyon Press, 1992). He has new work in *The New Republic*, *The Paris Review*, and *The Best American Poetry of 1994*.

Tom Williams teaches at Houston Community College. His work is forthcoming in *Another Chicago Magazine*.

Adam Zagajewski's most recent book of poems, *Cantus*, was published by Farrar, Strauss & Giroux in 1992.

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