

# Gulf Coast



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# Gulf Coast

Volume XII, Number One

Summer 2000

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## INTRODUCTION

Allen Gee 7

## FICTION

|                                |                       |     |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----|
| <i>Summer</i>                  | Kathleen Cambor       | 14  |
| <i>Undertow</i>                | Cate Marvin           | 33  |
| <i>The Man Who Would Not</i>   | Daniel Stern          | 56  |
| <i>Sperm No. 186</i>           | Gail Donohue Storey   | 91  |
| <i>Creusa</i>                  | Eric Miles Williamson | 108 |
| <i>The Forgotten Children</i>  | Chitra Divakaruni     | 152 |
| <i>The Rubbed-Away Girl</i>    | Mary Gaitskill        | 182 |
| <i>The Lawyer</i>              | Ira Sher              | 207 |
| <i>This Whatever We Have</i>   | William J. Cobb       | 224 |
| <i>News Watch</i>              | Thomas Cobb           | 254 |
| <i>The Petroleum Allocator</i> | Tony Diaz             | 257 |
| <i>Nomads Exquisite</i>        | Mark O'Connor         | 264 |

## POETRY

|  |                        |    |
|--|------------------------|----|
| <i>In the Shed the Baby Poses</i>                              | Cynthia Macdonald      | 9  |
| <i>Veneration</i>  | Pattiann Rogers        | 10 |
| <i>Tyrrhenian</i>  | Nicole Cuddeback       | 12 |
| <i>Mexico City Bird Dreams</i>                                 | Richard Lyons          | 20 |
| <i>Late-Breather</i>   | Andrew Feld            | 21 |
| <i>Before the Invention of Color</i>                           |                        | 22 |
| <i>Street Music I, IV, VI, VIII</i>                            | Tony Sanders           | 24 |
| <i>Glass</i>   | Gregory Fraser         | 30 |
| <i>One Moon View of Puget Sound</i>                            | Leslie Adrienne Miller | 31 |
| <i>Nathan Fiske Near the Remains<br/>of a Plantation House</i> | John Harvey            | 43 |
| <i>603 Cross River Road</i>                                    | Robert Phillips        | 44 |
| <i>Neighbors</i>   | Robin Reagler          | 55 |
| <i>Portrait of My Polish Lover</i>                             | Edward Hirsch          | 63 |
| <i>Ravenna</i>   | Christopher Bakken     | 64 |
| <i>Black Globe</i>   | William Olsen          | 78 |
| <i>Creed</i>   | Erin Brooks            | 87 |
| <i>Cold Ode For the Starlings of<br/>Baltimore</i>             | Arthur Smith           | 88 |
| <i>Generosity And Intelligence</i>                             | Robert Pinsky          | 89 |

|   |                   |     |
|---|-------------------|-----|
| <i>Single Room, Ocean Crest Motel</i>     | Averill Curdy     | 98  |
| <i>At the Ear, Nose And Throat Clinic</i> | Gail Mazur        | 103 |
| <i>Three Views on the Crucifixion</i>     | Martin Scott      | 112 |
| <i>The Bisbee Donkeys</i>                 | Deborah Cummins   | 115 |
| <i>Nessun Dorma</i>                       | Michelle Boisseau | 117 |
| <i>Model Home</i>                         |                   |     |
| <i>And the Sun Was Veiled</i>             |                   |     |
| <i>Varanasi</i>                           | Timothy Liu       | 127 |
| <i>Cicada</i>                             | Sidney Wade       | 147 |
| <i>Halloween 1998</i>                     | C.T. Lawrence     | 148 |
| <i>It's Not About Remembering</i>         | Dave Parsons      | 150 |
| <i>Champagne</i>                          | William Olsen     | 162 |
| <i>A Box of Clementines in the</i>        | Jessica Greenbaum | 164 |
| <i>Maternity Ward</i>                     |                   |     |
| <i>Rock School</i>                        | Patricia Clark    | 181 |
| <i>Only a Little</i>                      | Lisa Lewis        | 191 |
| <i>The Hawk</i>                           |                   | 192 |
| <i>Cry Heard, Far Off</i>                 | Cate Marvin       | 206 |
| <i>The Age of Aquarius</i>                | Laurie Newendorp  | 214 |
| <i>His Good Thoughts</i>                  | Randall Watson    | 215 |
| <i>Sitting</i>                            |                   | 217 |
| <i>The Talk of Two Hospice Nurses</i>     | Maryjo Mahoney    | 239 |
| <i>From Cinema Neurosis</i>               | Tonya Foster      | 241 |
| <i>To a Fellow Spastic</i>                | Vassar Miller     | 256 |
| <i>In Memory of Jozef Czapski</i>         | Adam Zagajewski   | 276 |
| <i>Imaginary Prisons</i>                  | Stanley Plumly    | 278 |
| <i>Durian</i>                             | Bao-Long Chu      | 279 |
| <i>Cardinal</i>                           | Howard Moss       | 280 |
| <i>The Manatee</i>                        | Richard Howard    | 281 |

## NONFICTION

|  |                   |     |
|--|-------------------|-----|
| <i>Strange New City</i>                      | Mark Doty         | 27  |
| <i>Home</i>                                  | Beverly Lowry     | 47  |
| <i>Remembering Donald Barthelme</i>          | Vikram Chandra    | 75  |
| <i>Lost in Place</i>                         | Garrett Hongo     | 81  |
| <i>Memoirs of a Wishy-Washy Left Liberal</i> | Phillip Lopate    | 99  |
| <i>From Hampstead to Houston</i>             | Alan Hollinghurst | 119 |
| <i>Dress Down for Transylvania</i>           | Amy Storrow       | 165 |
| <i>Father Time</i>                           | Jane Creighton    | 194 |
| <i>Profile</i>                               | Allen Gee         | 218 |
| <i>While You Were Away</i>                   | William Goyen     | 245 |

## SYMPOSIUM

|                       |    |
|-----------------------|----|
| Thomas Cobb           | 65 |
| Tracy Daugherty       | 65 |
| Nancy Eimers          | 67 |
| Lance Larsen          | 67 |
| Emily Fox Gordon      | 69 |
| Gail Donohue Storey   | 70 |
| Eric Miles Williamson | 71 |
| Annie Finch           | 72 |
| Mark Damon Puckett    | 72 |
| William Olsen         | 73 |

## ART

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
| <i>Untitled</i>   | Walter Hopps                               | 129 |
| <i>Healing Plants 7</i>   | Virgil Grotfeldt                           | 133 |
| <i>Out of Sight, Out of Mind 2</i>  |  | 134 |
| <i>Out of Sight, Out of Mind 5</i>  |  | 135 |
| <i>After Gethsemane</i>   |  | 136 |
| <i>The Market from Here: Mise in Scene<br/>and Experimental Ethnography</i> | Abdel Hernández and<br>Fernando Calzadilla | 137 |
| <i>Salt Cured Books</i>   | Tracy Hicks                                | 141 |

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS | 283 |
|-----------------------|-----|

## Introduction

Last spring, Chris Haven, one of *Gulf Coast's* editors, suggested that we should publish an issue commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program. Indeed, there is a very long list of talented people who've sacrificed and worked very hard to pursue M.A. and Ph.D. degrees here. Our editorial staff has done its best to solicit work from as many student alumni as we could find, and we've solicited work from current and former faculty.

It's January in Houston now, and lately the temperature reaches the fifties and sixties in the afternoons, though the TV news speaks of winter storms cerementing the northern states. This morning, even on one of our coldest days, I went running outside in only shorts and a t-shirt. Later I drove on "The Loop," part of our highway system, but kept calm and weaved smoothly through seven-lane-wide traffic. Five years ago when I risked moving here to study and write, I couldn't imagine ever feeling as ensconced, as comfortable with an automobile culture, or proud to claim this is where I live. I'd resided happily in upstate New York for several years before. But Houston is now home; I could do without ever having to leave. Kathleen Cambor, our current creative writing program director, remarked recently about the whole experience: "This is an affordable city. There are stories to tell in a city this size. It's a place where you can live a life of the mind, where you can always find good music, theatre, and foreign films. Houston is always a surprise."

Within the pages of this issue, Mark Doty, Beverly Lowry, and Alan Hollinghurst reveal their wonderful and unique perspectives about Houston. My own view of the city is as a gigantic sprawl, something akin to a Baudrillard simulacrum, so much for the eye to see as unreal but real. Our streets stretch for miles lined with stage set buildings evoking elsewhere, especially the restaurants—Little Italy, Bombay Palace, Reggae Hut, Seoul Garden, Outback Steakhouse, Blue Nile Ethiopian, Zydeco Louisiana Joint. Street signs tell you where you are in Chinese or Vietnamese characters. Shops signs proclaim what's for sale in Spanish, Arabic, and Greek. On Martin Luther King Day, there are two competing African American parades. In addition to the countless, unending retail strips that glisten with flashing lights and entice with neon, there's "The Galleria," a fashionable steel and glass retail city, the trendiest stores built around and above an ice rink, level after level of railed walkways jammed daily with shoppers. Within "The Loop," one can't miss Montrose, the site of the annual gay

pride parade, an area with abundant cafes, tattoo parlors, bookstores, and clubs for new traditional lifestyles. To the north the quieter "Heights" have plentiful bungalows, second hand shops, and cozy garage apartments. This city, I should also mention, is the domain of the cellular phone and pager. Last year, to our horror, we began mandatory 10 digit dialing for local calls; otherwise, there wouldn't be enough numbers. Then there's what some like to call our "authentic" or "regional" culture: cooking Texas barbecue or Tex-Mex, listening to the Fourth-Ward blues, doing the two-step, or going to the Houston Livestock and Rodeo Show. To me it's all a fascinating postmodern melding, a splendor of difference and an endless surge of consumerism and technology, sprawling not only geographically, but from low brow to high brow, and across racial, gender and sexual lines.

Much is made these days of the tenuous future of the book, but if anything, Houston, its writing program, and this issue conspire openly against any hostility toward the written word. I've enjoyed working with our editorial staff on this project immensely. And it's been a rewarding experience to correspond with writers who have stayed here or moved across the country, some even overseas. Most of all, I've had the continual pleasure of finding a quiet space and reading all of the poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and the symposium that's in these pages. I've had the enjoyment, as well, of viewing the art images in advance. While there's a part of me that's always watchful for warning signs or apparent censure against those who endeavor to make a literary or artistic life, the writers and artists in this issue reassure that language and art are foremost; they confirm that's why we're here. Indeed, to read these pages is like encountering our city. There's "always a surprise," and something here for everyone.

## In the Shed the Baby Poses

You try everything. Nothing works. It will not go away. There's nothing for it but to wait. If age does not bring wisdom, it brings experience: you know it will recede. The date is two days after Christmas. So, what's the problem? Not only did you get the gifts you hoped for, your loved ones gathered round you, love filled the room. Each apple was unblemished, each pear a green delight. Perhaps the bright part of chiaroscuro depends on blackness. Of course it does. From this precarious duality descends the answer to the question that we all have asked: but why? The slats of the Venetian blind are partly open sending bars of sun and dark onto the wall beside you. Gondolas of blind Venetians are ferried on canals by Charon. They cannot see because the answer is elusive. They join the boatmen singing Santa Lucia: "*Sul mare lucida...*(On the bright sea...their mouths beneath unseeing eyes continue through the song hoping St. Lucia will come to them to lift the scales from their eyes. But justice is not present. Waiters are dusting off tables beside the canals. Bars will open soon. Some tourists will cross the canals, and some will cross their legs, and some will cross themselves. And you who waited with despair invite it outside for Campari. Writing has saved your life again. But you are tired and afraid. Grief is not so easily shed.

## Veneration

What is it in the body that wants  
to go on living, that heals the wound,  
that knits the bone even while the I  
is sleeping, that takes air to blood  
unnoticed while the singer prays  
for grace, while the thief darts in  
and out pedestalled doorways,  
while the player plucks the guitar,  
while the reader deserts his own  
to enter the book?

Not summoned, what is it in the body  
that quickens by itself, goes sharp  
and dimensional at near thunder, that lifts  
and lightens in the presence of laughter  
across a lawn, purple and rose lanterns  
strung through trees at dusk?

Is it just an emptiness, like the motion  
of an empty cape that undulates  
and flutters at its edges as it flies,  
like the emptiness inside the cape  
of the midnight wind, inside the fluttering  
shadow-cape of the manta ray flying  
across the ocean floor? Maybe it's just  
a nothingness like the vision of lightning  
to the blind—never known, only remembered.

But it stays a place. It genders  
warmth. It contrives. It is as tangible  
and exact as the stone of a stone idol,  
as straight and alert as a ghost riding  
a riderless stallion. It creates like sunlight  
on water makes fire. It maintains  
as if its message were entire in simply  
making message possible.

What is it in the body that wants  
to stay alive, that itself has no name  
except keeper, except vigilance, except  
above all, except undeniable?

## Tyrrhenian

Rare moments deliver you fully into  
life that's always straying. Fleecy stars

off the poplars swim  
blindly through the streets

as elements swap properties and even  
the spirit might dream itself elemental,  
floating just above you,

already pushing off

like so many ships that didn't come back.  
Yesterday I made my way into the sea.

First time in years. Crowds  
of Italians. It wasn't

the Gulf where I used to go, but in the waves'  
rough play lifting me off the drowned sand—

was it the grief in bliss  
of just the kindred salt

that drew forth the tears? Cold sea against  
the bloodstream like a second life,

the one that lives while you,  
sealed away, manage

to get a few things done. As if shreds  
of life (I could say death, but I won't)

sometimes come home.  
A fine spit of foam

gleamed on a blurring, gray surge. I was  
seven years old falling backward into the waves.

Indelible, devastating joy.  
The eternity in my lost life.

## Summer

She writes letters to her Latin lover every day. On ecru vellum, white cotton bond, deco postcards, backs of envelopes, an edge torn from a grocery bag because the spirit moved her. They say, *How are the tropics? The water here is still too cold for swimming. Are the breezes much like the foehn that brought the fog on your travelings last year? In this place, the blankets smell of camphor from their storage through the winter. Be careful of the cordonazos on the western shore. I miss you. When will you return?*

She always regrets asking that, knowing how he winces each time she makes demands. A man's a fool if he doesn't love his freedom, he likes to say. And then... don't pull away, he adds, running his finger down the hurt length of her cheek. Without him she feels the system breaking down. Light that illuminated, blinds; passageways narrow. Her vision blurs and breaks; she hesitates, weighs the simplest of decisions—the black dress or the harebell blue? Broccoli or asparagus for dinner?

*Wish you were here.*

The Latin lover is on vacation with his wife and children and he manages to move them almost every day, even though, in Mexico, the traveling is difficult—flights are cancelled, small herds of scrawny cattle block dusty roads, fiestas fill the streets. Sadness is set aside, joy unbridled. Cannibals lurk in the bushes; there are piñatas, death masks, sembradoros danced in the fields of Michoacan. He likes to travel where he speaks the language. *Anything can happen in a country so exotic*, he writes. *The earth might crack, what has been swallowed could at any moment be revealed. My nature is nomadic*, he likes to say when they're together. *I want to go everywhere. I'll know the wonders of the world before I'm through. But you wouldn't understand.* His dark indictment; it deepens dangerously the wound that is her heart. I would, I would, she wants to say, but in his absence, she says it on the front porch to the night. Her breath makes vaped figures in the air before her lips. Bears and babies, a wildebeest and a chimera. The glider on which she sits groans its perfect pleasure as she guides it, keeping up the rhythm with her toe.

Tequisquiapan, San Miguel, Michoacan, Queretaro, Ixtapa, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Isla Mujeres.

New Hampshire. Where her husband's family keeps a small house on a lake to which she takes her only child, a son. For fun, she says, telling him why they're going. On the journey they are alone together,

lonely side by side, not talking in the car. He's busy keeping track of travelers flashing past them on the highway. Two hundred twenty from New York, sixty-four from Pennsylvania, seventy Live Free or Die. Daddy stays behind, in the city, doing business. I break my back, he says, and then struggles for a breaking metaphor. Like waves against the shore? Once there, she sighs and places fragrant flowers in a small vase on the table in the kitchen of the cabin-house, marking time's reluctant passage by the angle of their stems as they wilt and droop down toward the wooden surface where they rest. Gone to weed, the outside garden offers no replenishment, swallowwort the only perennial to thrive in spite of so much strangulation.

The boy is nine and folded in upon himself, remote and serious. Princox, reluctant to be cooped up with his mother for the summer, womanhood at this time in his life being nothing more than a scourge that men like him must bear. He rides his Huffy on the paths that skirt the lake, reads the Rover Boys that have accumulated on the bookshelves of his father's childhood. He lets his mother read to him aloud from *Treasure Island*, and inspired, draws maps where X's mark the spot, scours the woods and brambles. Patient, frowning, hoping for a treasure. Bored, bored, bored, he writes in his childish hand to the friends he's left behind. He gathers crickets, chilopods and a praying mantis for the mesh and wooden bughouse he has had since he was two. His hands, cupping a firefly, glow orange in early evening. He puts the captured lightening bug in his little screened-in prison, slams the door, and imagines that it will be like a bulb inside the bughouse, offering light to insect darkness. He weeps when morning light reveals the mantis's black business, its prey eviscerated, the sweet light dimmed.

I want to learn to fish, he tells his mother, eager for distraction. Fly. He shows her a photograph of his father he has found, standing in hip boots, rod slightly bent, the fine line undulating in the air above his head. And she says fine, seeing in this a way to pass the time, to put aside her misery and missing. So she finds the fly rods, old and worse for wear, but there, where they've been since early in her marriage, in the farthest corner of the little shed outside the house. The tackle box is cobweb-coated underneath the sink. She lies abed at night and works her right wrist round and round then snap! To see if her muscles can recall the flick that is required to cast—fly, transparent leader, then the line—across the water. She dreams of eating fish so fresh it leaves blood in the corner of her mouth; a fish bone wedged in the angle of her throat when she was five years old; the piece of bread her mother made her eat to ease it out and push it down; the chunks of cheddar she used for bait on the fishhooks of her childhood; the lunches that she packed for her excursions; peanut butter oozing from her sandwich, brown on the white rocks, melting in the sun. Her lover's lips against her ear, the still

surprising shifts and aberrations of his accent. You're tougher than you look, he says, so softly that she can hardly hear.

From Chichen Itza the Latin lover writes about the ruins, the pyramids they climb, the ancient observatory from which the Mayan natives searched the sky for the meaning of the constellations of their lives. News of an enemy approaching, indications of the pleasures of the gods. *A colonial hotel is tucked away outside the ruins, so much a part of the jungle that tendrils of the paradisaal green creep across the balconies and enter through the windows. Parrots, not knowing where the jungle stops, roam freely through the lobby, bold and brightly dressed, with their crimson chests thrust forward, strutting, so that paying guests must step aside. At the ruins, Mayan virgins hurled themselves into a well cradled on a hillside. But legend has it, no one ever heard a splash, he writes. At the urging of our native guide, my wife threw a rock over the edge, testing the myth, and pulled back, frightened, when she heard no sound although she'd listened carefully.*

*I am bringing gifts for you. The shell of a conch from Cozumel, a mask from Melague, a sliver choker from Oaxaca, a slender urn, unearthed by the diligence of diggers in the ruins, a hieroglyphic message chiseled in its side. The etching, muted by the time and the pressure of the soil and the slightest hesitation of the craftsman's hand. We'll break the code when I return, he writes. Together we will search and find its meaning. Some ancient truth, perhaps, a love note, or just the idle jottings of an old man passing time. A list of his belongings? A stanza from a favorite song?*

*Hurry home*, she writes on the postcard that she cannot send, both because she is his secret, and because he moves too quickly through the tropics, tanned and glistening from the sun that warmed him as a child.

Ginger quill, brown bomber, royal coachman parachute, Adams irresistible, pale evening dun, golden marabou muddler, grizzly wolff, fur caddis pupa. Wet flies and weighted nymphs. She searches through the tackle box, shivers in the pre-dawn chill, greedy, like the pirates of the boy's imagination, fingering her treasure. She takes the lures and hold them one by one to the lamplight at the small desk by her bed, admiring the red hackle fiber tail of brown wooly worm, the lemon wood duck wing of dark Hendrickson, the olive chenille thorax of the damsel. A feathered azure streak laces down the side of the blue charm; salmon irresistible has a porcupine-like plume. Eager for instruction, she checks the Orvis catalogue to determine which fly will work best at dawn in late July on a small lake in New England for a mother and a son. Black prince? Chinese claw? Apte tarpon fly? And rather than chance the choosing, she decides to take them all. She tiptoes to her boy's room at the corner of the lake house, and whispers to him as she reaches down to touch his hand, cool, one knuckle bruised, his fingers splayed across the striped sheet like a sturdy little fan.

Come now, she says, and goes to make the cocoa that she'll use to fill his thermos. They whisper during breakfast as if there is something

sacred in the silence of the house. We'll slip down to the lake, he says. We'll take our lights, but use them carefully. We'll be quiet and invisible. The cocoa leaves the dark edge of a mustache on his lip, but his face is flushed with sleep and pink as if he were very, very young.

And as they make their way through the wet grass glistening at their ankles, she talks about the nature of the fish. The lures that catch their eyes, their longings to return to old familiar places, like the shallows of the lake where they would swim when you were just a baby, she says to him. Her boy. She smoothes the bangs that have grown to fringe his eyebrows while she wasn't looking.

They think they'll sit a bit when they get down to the lake. They choose the dock, the wood stays warmer than the rock through chilly Eastern nights. She shows him how to hold his rod. She takes his wrist in her fingers and moves it for him until he gets the flair for it. They share a peanut butter sandwich that she brought. Chunky childhood flavor. The bits of peanut crunch between their teeth, the only sound.

They lack the passion for the kill, so their casting is half-hearted. But even so she gets a strike, and old instincts make her land it. The fish struggles in the dirt at her feet. Gills gape, expecting water, finding only killing air. It flops about defiantly, inching towards the water's edge, until she reaches down and takes it by the tail, and sends it in an arch out through the air. The boy leans against her when he hears the splash, and the mist that shrouds the lake so early in the day acts like a prism. It shatters the first sunlight into wild colors cast across the rippling surface.

The Latin lover writes: *My daughter will be certified in scuba in Tzihuatenjeo. Lithe and lovely, sleek in her rubberized protection. She takes a flashlight and an underwater camera with her on her forays to the depths, brings a light as harsh as day to prod the fish from black protected caverns at the reef's edge, and only allows them to return to loving darkness when the moment has been captured and she tires of intrusion. There is a wreckage of a ship beneath the sea just off the shore. We are exploring it, and taking color photographs. We drift past unmade beds, empty cups that might have held unfinished tea. The images are haunting. Sleep eludes me, courage catches in my throat. Everywhere there is evidence of interruption, of attenuated thought, feelings never spoken; words, mere bubbles in the half-opened mouths of trapped skeletons; jagged rotting teeth, the cutting edge. He says, I miss the sweet sound of your voice, your slender arm across me as I sleep.*

In New Hampshire they rise each morning early, the mother and the son, have cocoa, pull on heavy sweaters, sometimes ponchos if the clouds seem bleak and burdened with new rain. The fish grow bolder; a few break the surface with a purl. He tells her his secrets; his passion for a gray-eyed girl named Franny, how much he hates football, even though he's strong and "quite a boy," as his father likes to say. He tells her she looks funny in her rubber boots and poncho. Like a kid, he says.

You look like me. He wonders why his father never comes to visit, and the gentle aspect of his face, no guilt or guile, makes her lose the precision she has patiently perfected through the years. She lets her rod drift back too far, her line gets tangled in the nearby bushes. The branches twist and turn in on themselves to make a grid that's intricate and inescapable, so that she has to lose the Engle's butterfly she has worked so hard to tie. She must cut it off and let the bushes have it, her day's sacrifice to the dense, dark web that is the underbrush.

It rains most often in the evening, early sign of the season's shift to autumn. They play UNO and Monopoly, and many times, she lets him win. He brings out camp brochures, rife with Kodachrome enticements; burnt orange and auramine sunsets in the Colorado Rockies; sailboats with the wind abaft the beam, spinnakers full of sea air, pulling them along the Carolina coast. Rapid riding down the Snake River through Washington, plummeting past salmon that push up against the foam, leaping for their lives and the lives of their children. He spreads the folders on the table in the kitchen. Next summer he'll be ready to go away and stay. He says, I'm sure. He has used his father's soap, and smells just like him as he points with some strange masculine authority, showing her what each place has to offer. They work a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle with a complicated kaleidoscopic design, and he, who loves to be the winner, lets her put in the last piece and complete the pattern. You did a good job, he tells her, and stands to pat her on the head.

*Have you forgotten me?* the Latin lover wonders. His letters get longer the longer he's gone. She keeps a folder of them in the top drawer of her desk; a smaller pile of her unmailed replies lies thin and spare beside his. Trillium that she dried and pressed in early summer is blue and crumbling, scattered in the drawer for sacheted fragrance. It's lost its scent. Her lover tells her about his boat trip across the lake at Patzcuaro to the island of Janitzio. *This place is best known for its celebration of the Day of the Dead, which takes place in autumn. Torch-bearing villagers make a slow midnight procession to the graveyard on the mountainside—take food in woven baskets to the dead that they once loved. It is strange and wonderful, he writes. The island is a hilltop that juts up out of the water. From a distance, its sharp edge appears to make a jagged tear across the sky. I'm told that on November second, the flaming torches queuing up the path appear to be a line of slightly trembling stars. With so much exposure, my children's Spanish is improving every day.*

*Did I tell you that something killed the proud parrot in the hotel in the ruins? An irate guest, perhaps, tired of parrot presumption, sick and sleepless, awakened by so much squawking in the night. Someone found the bloody corpse on the alabaster stairs that lead down to the sunken pool. The native workers scrubbed and scrubbed, but sun bakes blood, and some seeped through a slight flaw in the surface of the stone. More noticed now that when it*

*squealed and preened, a fuchsia flash through white that seems to try to trip us when we go down for a swim. Just four more days, then home. Once in the states, I'll come quickly to see you.*

A postcard falls from the pages of the letter. On it, small fishing vessels dot the lake where death is celebrated every year. She puts it down on her desk and writes her brief reply.

*You never should have left me for so long. My son and I have worn a path through the long grass that lies between the small house and the lake. We no longer need a flashlight when we go there in the dark, so familiar is the landscape. I know the sounds of my son's footsteps on wood floors the way I've known the beating of your heart when I pressed myself against you as I lay with you in bed; that old arrhythmic murmur that made me fear for you the first time I heard it. Such was the love, such the connection then. You could have blindfolded me and pressed my ear against a hundred thousand chests, I could have picked you out of any crowd.*

That night, she checks her list for leaving, the things she must prepare. She gathers up her correspondence and means to make a place for it before she goes. And as she works, her eyes come to the postcard of the small boats on the lake. The caption calls them mariposa. Butterflies. Small canoes that make their way across the water, dipping languidly from side to side. Long nets shaped like monarchs' wings extend out from the body of the boat, and they gather fish into themselves with each inclination to the sea, until, finally, they are made unwieldy by bearing such a burden in appendages that were only meant for flying.

She would like to see that lake, she thinks. Maybe with the boy, maybe alone. Maybe next year, maybe in another lifetime. A summer in the tropics.

## Mexico City Bird Dreams

I've never been to Mexico City so I know this dream  
will trump all other severe universally accepted ways

of saying, yes, the gritty air blowing the cages on their hooks  
is childhood void of memory, that the incidents & events

sold for a wad of bills, the clipped underwings, the bound prehistoric  
feet,  
those illegally trapped gray-eyed parrots, the pink macaw,

a dozen conures an unnatural intense green, all these, leave a sour smell  
that precedes, blows through & around what we might say about the  
past

and so keeps me hopeful that some kind of syntax, levied near twilight,  
will lend an architecture to what is the dust, pollen & dirt.

A man dying in a hospital insisted on talking through the tubes in his  
nose,  
insisted on all the nonsense his words were making, on a few trills,

and then on nothing, on the fact that my words were eating away  
at his next-to-last wordless moments with his withered & loyal wife.

In the dream she was a miniature black swan & he her sad swain.  
She chirped repeatedly as I left the room, thanks, thanks-darling,  
thanks.

Maybe we have to admit that the only thing worse than the sour smell  
of the hearth stone is the way we love ourselves &, having admitted  
that,

admit too that the mean little trees ornithologically unspoken for,  
will unencumber the horizon because we're looking that way, just  
that—

the alphabet itself growing tired & pulsating.

## Late-Breather

*"But words came haltingly forth..."*

He came from there not red and howling his one note like all the rest. And so we had to worry. For years he didn't cry. Or speak. Until, with such strange fears and panic-quicken hearts, our senses finally woke to what he meant. So long unheard he'd spoken in the thirty-seven different dialects of rain and all the languages of frost, shrinking in sun and growing scratch by scratch upon the windowpane.

We'll wait. And when he finds the fragile hiss of mist no longer answers to his growing needs, we'll tell him what to say, instead of the thing itself. We'll twist his tongue around our consonants and syllables. We'll force our language down his throat, until he spits it back at us. He'll have to take our words for it.

## Before the Invention of Color

It wasn't really black and white back then,  
but an endless variety of grays.  
We knew it was our time. Our lives were spared  
by the war and sheltered, charmed, insured.

We drove on new-made roads down to the beach,  
picnicked and swam, staying close to shore,  
breathing the calm, suspended air so rich  
in neutral tones. With time and life to spare

our resources seemed inexhaustible.  
The food may have been bland, but quantity  
can be a spice. And then there were the horrors  
overseas. In *Time* and *Life* the hungry poor

stretched out their hands. It was an effect, but still:  
where was their pride? Couldn't they be more stately,  
like the Walker Evans black and whites we praised?  
It had to end. The time, our lives, all changed

with that first, awful shock of color, its bright,  
fuzzed-out, crayola-like intensity:  
the ad-wife in the kitchen, with Frigidaire  
and frozen smile, inviting us to share

a Coke, and husband who's a cut-out clown.  
"It's life like," they said. Is *this* what life is like?  
Whose life? *O wonderous self! O sphere of light!*  
gone in a flash. The grays and blacks and whites

we wore, cotton, wool and linen, cheapened  
into rainbows of polyester and velour,  
and right there, to capture these prisms,  
some shutter-bug with an Instamatic

or Polaroid buzzing the command:  
"act natural." But who remembered what  
that meant? *Time* continued, but *Life* stopped  
and then resumed, the same new thing, divorced

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from context. But isn't context everything,  
the world beyond the frame? Limited, limiting,  
what *can* the camera do but lie? I see  
my face in these pictures, but that's not me.

from "Street Music"

I

It has just started to rain and the macadam is coated with an invisible,  
viscous glaze  
that's treacherous,  
particularly when one of the woozy drivers heading uptown from the  
red-light zone  
stops short  
in order to ask directions to the final tavern or to let the passengers get a  
closer look  
at a hiked skirt.  
Dawn! What dawn is this one wades through like an anonymous  
tugboat in an eddy  
of the river?  
How long have the bells in the parapet of the dilapidated church been  
open-throated  
and hammerless?  
Night's rival is nothing more than a blank scroll of vellum parchment  
hiding the sky  
from the city  
as the first passenger buses make their servile way from street to street  
along a route  
with no riders.

IV

At certain hours of the day the incinerator chimney atop a high-rise  
across the street  
belches smoke  
which has a way of hovering against the backdrop of white sky with the  
irreverence  
of an idler  
from the last century dressed in a shabby cape who looks about and  
doesn't believe  
his ash eyes  
how much of the river is now obscured by tiers of plain buildings made  
out of glass  
and steel.

When the wind is headed right the smoke drifts to the edge of the roof  
 as if the idler  
 wants to see  
 a long, slim line of traffic below stretching out in both directions like an  
 oily necktie  
 and how far  
 we have come from the contradiction of parasols and horse dung before  
 he vanishes  
 into the air.

## VI

We are linked, you know. Not necessarily like the fifteen kindergarten  
 kids walking  
 in single file,  
 all tied together in canvas vests of a yellow so intense they appear  
 mildly radioactive  
 in certain light  
 as cheerfully they snake their way through the mid-morning  
 crosscurrents of people  
 to a playground.  
 Not necessarily like the man on the street who pretends he is talking to  
 the President  
 of "this fuckhole"  
 via a phone receiver with a severed wire that wraps around his neck  
 once and hangs  
 down his chest,  
 but by the exaggerated gestures he makes with his free hand suggesting  
 he is aware  
 of his audience,  
 especially the ones who look up at him with a peculiar mixture of  
 wonder and terror  
 as they're led by.

## VIII

Tonight somebody wants to cut flesh on the jagged outcroppings of  
 corrugated steel  
 on the avenue,  
 somebody wants to bound down to the rank gutter along the subway  
 tracks to touch  
 the third rail.  
 O city of knee-deep potholes and manhole covers spewing maniac  
 demons of steam  
 in the streets,  
 city of gypsy rats and cabs rummaging about after midnight with the  
 rabid insomnia  
 of base instinct,

O city of the overabundance of perpendicular angles where verticals  
and horizontals  
dice the air.

Tonight the major constellation is an acetylene blue star which bursts  
into an infinity  
of white sparks

every time the chop-shop workman touches the fender bolts or engine  
block mounts  
of a hot car.

## Strange New City

It's a December afternoon in Houston, and I'm stuck in traffic on Westheimer, in a strip of shopping centers—an unrevealing detail, since Houston mostly is a strip of shopping centers, more retail opportunities stretched endlessly along these roads than you'd think even the fourth largest city in America could ever make use of. To drive through nearly any part of town is to encounter a repeated string of terms which together make up a kind of local vocabulary: NAILS, COMIDAS, CELLULAR, AUTOS, ESPRESSO, FUTONS, TACQUERIA, BIG N' TALL, SUSHI, SHOES. (My friend Alan Hollinghurst, visiting from London, asked, "Is all of America so interested in nails?")

Some fifteen per cent of the cars registered in America are registered in Harris County, which gives some idea of the automobile's primacy here; this is a drivers' place, developed over the last forty years or so on flat and swampy land an hour from the Gulf Coast. This urban world's designed—to the extent it is designed—for the convenience of the wheeled, and largely inaccessible by any other means. It's the only place I've ever lived where the homeless and the panhandlers actually work intersections by the freeways, standing out in the sun with handmade signs (HOMELESS, PREGNANT, NEED HELP PLEASE) and hoping that drivers stopped at intersections will roll down windows closed up tight to keep the air conditioning in, even this close to Christmas, and dole out their spare change.

I'm stopped this particular afternoon because a heavy orange piece of equipment is blocking the street, beeping and idling loudly. In its big metal claw is a peculiar looking object, a roughly textured stalk about twenty feet long, held horizontally in the air. It takes me a moment to figure out what it is: a palm tree, trimmed at the top, almost rootless, about to be set into place in a row of matching trees along the edge of a particularly glamorous strip of shops. The cordon this new palm will join is already decorated for the holidays: their trunks are wrapped in little white lights, and illuminated stars jut out into the air a dozen feet above the ground: a long row of Stars of Bethlehem, as if every one pointed to the location of a commercial miracle.

This is the sort of juxtaposition which this city offers all the time, and in fact it's one of the things I really like about living here. I came to Texas a few months ago, for a new position in a wonderful creative writing program. I knew from my first week that I loved the job, and knew equally that this sprawling, unlikely town was going to take some serious getting used to. The skies were big and dramatic, full of towering clouds blown up from the tropics; the city was low-slung and, at first glance, truly disorderly. Houston's never had zoning laws, which means that an adult bookstore sits next to a "luxury townhouse loft complex," a car wash by a cathedral, a museum by a bodega, an "erotic cabaret" by a Radio Shack. What do you want to buy today? the town says. And if you want to build it, go ahead. This lack of restriction seems

metaphor for a larger kind of de-centeredness. There's no real geographical center, no heart of things; a car culture makes everything a destination, nothing any more central than anything else. There is no dominant culture, and just barely a dominant language; in some areas the street- and shop-signs are in Spanish, in others Vietnamese. A teacher friend told me that there are some fifty-two languages in use here. In the classes my partner Paul is teaching, there are students named Gustavo, Batya, Senait, Jameka, Blas, Rogelio, Vonda, Mohammed, Chitra and Bobbie Lee. Wildly disparate lives go on in the same city, entirely separate, occasionally overlapping. There are exclusive neighborhoods, of course, maintained by something called "deed restrictions," but even those are pierced by stacked freeways, and minutes away from collapsing apartment complexes side by side with new corporate towers poking up randomly here and there, all conjoined by the ubiquitous shopping centers: FAX, BUFFET, QUIK LUBE, CHRISTIAN BOOKS.

What surprised me about all this, after the initial shock a New Englander feels on entering the rawly energetic Sunbelt, is the odd exuberance of it, an unexpected feeling of human energy, the room, even in these endless asphalt acres, for individual expression. (What else are all those shops promising "NAILS" in big bright letters offering? Some sense of personal distinction, expressed as stripes and diamond chips, five-color lacquers, metallic two-tones.) And I began to understand that this is what the future looks like; if America has a ready example of life in the twenty-first century, this is probably it: artificial, polluted, a little dangerous and completely confusing, yes—but also interestingly polyglot, open-ended, divergent, entirely unstuffy and appealingly uncertain of itself. Which reminds me of a rather brilliant thing that Salman Rushdie said, in defense of his novel: *"The Satanic Verses"* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and that is how newness enters the world."

This understanding—the bracing impurity of the future—still startles me a little. I'm a child of fifties & sixties sci-fi; the future had a whole design ethos, which was about streamlining, a perfection of ideal solutions, sleek arcs of plastic and metal. The futuristic was, in other words, modernity, in a kind of idealized, chilly form. But postmodernity shows us that the old predictions of what was to come—which was a sort of vision of the triumph of earlier avant-gardisms—isn't to be. And I suspect this is true in literature, too. Distrust, dear reader, whoever says that the future belongs to the non-narrative, or to new formalism, or to minimalism, or even to the kind of formal self-consciousness and quick juxtapositions we've come to call "postmodern." Here in Houston, it looks like the future belongs to everything. And what I first took as disheartening disorder begins to reveal an interesting richness and variety of life between the cracks, along the seams; there's much more to see in Houston than first meets the poor eye overwhelmed by all this visual info on the horizon.

Rushdie's right; newness is "entering the world" in the form of various literary practices rubbing against each other, a cheerful polyglot disassembly of boundaries. An odd thing about literary history is how

the breaking down of boundaries—consider the innovations of the Modernists, for instance—is so quickly followed by the work of flinging them back up again. It seems to be in the nature of avant-gardes to ossify; what begins in a spirit of adventure soon calcifies into codes. But if Houston at the end of the century is any indication, we may expect that experience is about to challenge whatever certainties about art we might arrive at; we might expect that growth, excitement, energy in poetry and in prose will come from collisions which won't let us hold our realms—either in terms of content or of form—apart.

That palm tree decked in its holiday finery, newly upright, looks both lovely and out of place; it's a stab at beauty and a sales-pitch come on; it celebrates life in the heart of winter here where there isn't much winter. It reaches for the "natural" in an environment manipulated to the point where that term is an empty one. It is a gesture which plays on nostalgia, sure, but one so strange as to ultimately go beyond the cynical. Palm and star are far from home; maybe they represent the reinvention of tradition. Might this bright, tawdry new world display some loveliness, a strange kind of authenticity—its falseness complexified, if not exactly canceled out, by all these odd new conjunctions?

## Glass

*for Andrew Robinson*

The summer we first drank the clear blood  
of juniper berries, and took our first hard pulls  
of rye and bourbon, sucking the hot milk down  
in long, amber waves of distilled grain.  
Our balls were made of brass—one copper,  
one zinc—and we drove around in circles hooting  
like dogs at shadows, then over three towns to the quarry  
to holler for those we howled to undress,  
just to hear walled rock repeat their names.

We drank Mad Dog 20/20, till our words and eyesight  
blurred, from bottles looking nothing like the ones  
that gleamed in the constant morning sun  
of the 1950s, on the porches of our parents'  
childhood homes. The summer we learned you are  
what you drink from. Their bottles had rounded  
shoulders, soft, full mouth—were honest,  
homogenized, felt nothing like itching desire.  
They were devoted to sturdy bodies, fortified souls.

Ours were rectangular, biting at the lip, screw-topped.  
We drew them from the secret inside pouches  
of our jean jackets. Pints of Comfort hugged  
our asses, in place of wallets. We dared anyone  
to pick our pockets. The summer we learned you are  
what can be pulled out with a jerk and shared,  
what must be held with fingers and thumb at hard  
right angles, never in some nurturing, cradle-like grip.  
The summer we were as yet unbroken, smooth as glass.

## One Moon View of Puget Sound

I loved a boy and green water dared near my feet,  
roses fell apart in my hands, stones turned their troll  
shoulders and said *go ahead, stumble*.

And I did. All the green days I combed my straw-colored hair  
and patted my eyes with creme. All the warm days I hid  
my dragons in a fen of remembered trees.

We went to the edge of his mother, but I wasn't invited  
to drink. He washed my ribs with a long hand, dressed me,  
tied my shoes upside down and tight.

I loved a boy in a house that wasn't mine. The sun bled most  
beautifully going off, and stars bounced like unstrung  
beads on the porch floor. I gave him views given to me.

We loved a dog that wasn't ours, pulled limp sheets  
above our heads against slithers of light, skin that wasn't  
ours, pillows and dishes and lettuce and basement steps

that weren't ours, windows and closets and high ceilings  
in deep pink rooms, green bricks, white cups full of being  
not ours. The animals belong to a child younger than all the years

between us. Somewhere a clock I never found still ticks.  
Comes a time in loving when there's nothing to tell, but that the light  
was right, and the rain behaved. I loved a boy and the gulls wept

inside a fog. Nothing happened except that I couldn't remember  
the name of the flower I loved best in that city, hydrangea,  
hydrangea, hydrangea, blues and violets so unnatural

it hurt to see them swelling at the steps and railings, holding  
the hills up. Salmon thrashed through us toward the streams  
of their birth, gaping red slashes where they'd leapt

over rocks and piers and come back down behind  
where they were going, scales and fish flesh streaming away  
in the backwash. Purple coins of the money bush.

I loved a boy because there was a long bandage of water  
and dark enough for me to smell everything again. His father  
said he knew a story like this, and it was good.

He must have made Spokane by noon. Between love  
and lust is a green fish, swifter than ever you'd guess,  
a wish of wings. I'll go home to Russian olives,

books and eager autumn, but I cannot look into the face  
of anyone young without hearing freighters scraping piers, a door  
nosed open by a cat who wants to walk on that mist.

I loved a boy and nothing changed. I knew already  
what tenderness was, how breath collects behind the knees  
and two bodies begin to need different skins.

My hands are brown as leather and not new. I turn  
them palm up so they match anyone's. Come now,  
I'll dress you for all the days ahead. I'll hold

your feet like heavy blooms about to fall apart.  
I loved a boy and lost nothing except momentum.  
Ferries polish away the fog and the islands hunker

while something, *is it wind?* rocks the wicker rocker.  
A house here and there blinks out of the fog, and I can tell you  
this which was once secret: I've wanted anyone's child all along.

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## Undertow

### 1. Drunkenness

My father kept a big jug of white wine in the basement as back-up. When the bottle in the refrigerator ran low, he would refill it from the jug, pouring the wine through a funnel. One night, after my parents went to sleep, Leigh and I crept down the basement stairs, poured warm wine from the jug into a huge thermos. The same thermos my parents used to bring to my softball games when I was ten.

Leigh and I went to meet Evan Moore and his friends at their tree house. We climbed out my window, which wasn't difficult since my bedroom sat on the first floor of the house. We walked down the winding, dark streets of the suburb, taking occasional swigs from the thermos. Leigh was singing softly under her breath, then she stopped and said we'd found it. The path wove between trees that stood behind a large house. We walked further and further back, until we saw a tiny light. A flashlight. Poking between the trees, then pointing down on us. The light directed us to the base of a tree. Evan's laughter filtering down from the leaves. There were several wood steps nailed to its trunk. Leigh went ahead of me. We climbed up and up. I could hear Leigh's breath huff as she pulled herself into the tree house.

### 2. Then

I did not like her at first. Her dyed red hair and tight blouses made me uncomfortable. I did not know what to say the first time she bent to my ear during Spanish class, whispering a joke, *No comprendo*. I may have laughed, I may have pretended she wasn't there. I don't remember, but the next thing I knew she was always at my locker, and I'd dyed my hair the same deep red. And by then she'd already taken me to the tree house, where we sat with Evan and two of his friends, passing the thermos till we all bent over laughing, and I'd already been kissed. Leigh made history move fast. So fast that before I could forget I was a pale girl who spent most of her time inside reading books, I'd gotten drunk and kissed Danny Turner. I spent the next morning in a fog, walking around with my head in a painfully air-tight bubble, trying to recollect exactly what had happened the night before. Danny never called me. Once, I saw him in front of his house, mowing the lawn. I was too embarrassed to approach him, and he never came back to the tree house after the first night. Leigh said he was an asshole and I should just forget about it.

Her parents said I was a bad influence on her. Upon discovering the

near empty jug in the basement, my parents said the same of her.

And cigarettes. Pretending to inhale until after coughing I finally could inhale. Leigh laughing. Leigh in her tiny skirts, Leigh lending me a blouse when we dressed for a party.

### 3. Her

Leigh wasn't beautiful or even pretty. Evan said she was attractive.

He tried to kiss her but she wouldn't let him.

In the tree house, he was all over her in the dark. His hands, their many fingers.

She had red hair and a loud laugh. She smelled like the shampoo she used, coconut and jojoba, thick and sensuous. The men who worked at the construction site across the street from our school called out as she boarded the bus.

*Baby Hey Baby Hot Today Baby!*

I was thin and pale and too tall. *You have nice legs*, Leigh pointed out. When they didn't shout at me she said, *They just can't see you from over there.*

That Friday night, Leigh stayed over, slept next to me in my double bed. The sheets smelled like her. When I crawled back through the window, she was already beneath the covers and I could hear her crying. She left the tree house after Danny kissed me. Evan and Dale threw condoms down at me and Danny, laughing as if they'd planned it all out:

Lure the loose girls here so we can have our fun.

But her: she was angry at not being chosen. Now, Leigh, weren't you the lucky one? That it wasn't you under Danny's drunk weight, feeling his snail tongue in your ear, rolling beneath him on the tree house floor while Evan and Dale jeered?

### 4. You

Leigh, you always had the body.

Packed it into tight skirts and cotton t-shirts. There wasn't anything that wasn't sticking out. Why cry over one sloppy kiss that wasn't yours?

You who got everyone, were used to me being the ugly one: unknissed.

The eyes spying the hem of your skirt. The man who strode toward you on the boardwalk, his t-shirt offering

### 5. Mustache Rides

He had a handle-bar mustache and looked near thirty. Leigh and I were fifteen. He looked dirty. We went to his house where I sat on a couch, overhearing disruption occur. Between him and Leigh. A cry. His house-mate, Gary, sat next to me on the worn couch. We watched seventies singers on TV sway in bell-bottom jeans and slap tambourines

to music. He turned to me, asked if I wanted a beer.

An hour later he begged to pry loose my spandex bra. There's nothing under there, I swear, I said. He was nineteen and sweet. Unshaven.

## 6. Earring

The gold hoops Leigh wore. She said she liked wearing them because she could hear wind whistle through them. They hung heavy from either lobe, thick gold hoops. They shook against her neck when she laughed. They shook when she shook her hair: red curls. In this picture, two girls in bathing suits. A tiny plastic vista-view, the plastic contraptions they sold us on the beach. *Let me take your picture*, the tricky man said. When we picked them up later that afternoon, the pictures were set small inside tiny plastic porta-views, attached to metal key chains. *This will help me remember you.*

*Ocean City Summer of 1985*, the plastic key chain says. Where along the boardwalk Leigh walked with me in tow. What did I know. I was wearing the uniform of girls waiting to be adored by the panting glances of indiscreet men. Fifteen. Hardly a body, I had. Leigh walked with hips swaying, and all the men called out. One whistled. Leigh turning around. *Yes*, the man mouthed, *I'm whistling at you.* Leigh looking nonchalant. The lights at night, blurring reds and blues, Leigh and I turned over and over on a ride called the Twist-A-Whirl. Gravity pulling us against the edge of the seat, against each other.

Earring.

Her laugh ringing in my ear.

It's said when your ears ring it's a sign. *Someone is thinking of you.*

My ears ring sometimes, out in this field, when I stand by the house I live in now. A cloud passes, low in the evening sky. The wind rolls across the field, encounters my resistance. Pushes me over, almost.

*Ocean City 1985.* Some things refuse to leave us. They crawl out from the waste basket they were tossed into, climb back into drawers, wait for us to find them yet again.

The pair of earrings, one bent, now a dull gold, lying at the bottom of the jewelry box my mother sent me. *You forgot this*, she wrote, *when you took all of your stuff.*

## 7. Now

I live outside of town. The house I live in looks like a ship marooned from a distance. Driven toward, the house, old and white, looks anchored to the green sprawl of field. Here it's hard to remember what the ocean looked and smelled like, yet in my mind I always liken the Midwestern landscape to it. From each of the house's several windows pours a light. At night, it bandages the field with squares of gold. Whatever the ocean really looks like, I can't say anymore.

Inside the house, I walk downstairs to the basement, dump an armful of clothes into the washing machine. Inside the house, I open the

refrigerator, remove the carton of orange juice, fill a glass with its sharp flavor. It's been ten years. I received the letter yesterday, inviting me to the high school reunion I couldn't afford to attend even if I wanted to. What would I say if I were able to sit at one of those cloth-covered tables, across from people whose gay faces I said nothing to in the halls of Winston Churchill? I have nothing to tell those faces about the years that have passed since I left the town we grew up in. I have nothing to say to any of them, except Leigh, who probably wouldn't go to the reunion anyway.

## 8. Water

Sometimes we'd walk to Cabin John Mall instead of taking the school bus home. Thumbs tucked under our backpack straps, we'd trudge along Tuckerman Lane, singing that Animals' song together. *We've got to get out of this place . . . if it's the last thing we ever do . . .* We'd always turn to look each other in the eye with a mock seriousness when we came to the part, *Girl, there's a better life for me and you.*

When we got to Cabin John we'd head straight for the gas station where the man who bought us booze worked. We'd look around to find his truck, so we'd know whether or not he was working that afternoon. The truck sat on enormous, pumped-up tires more suitable for an eighteen wheeler. Its cab was black and glossy, sides airbrushed *The Marvelous Moolah*. He had a long beard and his arms were dark with tattoos. Our interactions with him were always brief; he took our wadded bills and walked into the store as if he were performing a community service. He never asked us for anything in return, not even a six-pack. Within a short time we'd be trekking back to my house, our backpacks weighted with bottles.

We didn't drink after school. We kept our liquor in a stash, hidden in the far back of my bedroom closet. Leigh's parents were the kind who snooped. My parents, on the other hand, prided themselves in the extent they trusted their only daughter's privacy. They often rationalized their obliviousness by claiming deep faith in my "common sense." For this reason, Leigh always stayed over at my house on weekends.

My parents lived in a housing division called Tally Ho. The streets wound round and round, each ending at a point where it met another. The houses that lined the roads were built in three different styles: large, middle, small. They were all painted varying shades of beige, gray, and brown. After months of sneaking out on weekends, the suburb at night became as familiar to me and Leigh as the brightly lit hallways at school. We knew every road, every path in the woods, had even found a hole in the chain-link fence that guarded Tally Ho Swim Club. Sometimes, we'd go there with Evan and Dale. I could tell Leigh was growing bored with them, their pathetic excitement over a couple of six-packs. Their skinny, young-boy bodies flailing in the pool's dark water. Where we swam so drunk it was a wonder none of us drowned.

## 9. Waving

When I came home one Christmas, I sat looking through the *Nottingham Gazette*, eyes sharp for announcements about the people I'd gone to high school with. I insisted I hated them, wished only to forget them, but the truth was I thirsted for news of their engagements, their graduations, their untimely deaths. Then I saw a feature about Mrs. Jones, the Spanish teacher Leigh and I despised. The article praised her mentorship, her long-standing commitment to excellence in teaching.

Mrs. Jones passing my desk, a condescending sneer forming on her face when she handed back my test: "F." Mrs. Jones with the enormous boil on her right cheek, which never showed signs of improving or getting worse during the entire year of Spanish class. The thought that such a condition must result from her inherent hatefulness. *No comprendo*. Mrs. Jones frowned at me.

Would I read the class announcements, please? A punishment for talking to Leigh after the rest of the class fell silent. I read slowly, clearly: *An actress portraying Sojourner Truth will be visiting Churchill this afternoon. All classes will be let out early to attend the assembly at one-thirty. The Showstoppers are selling yellow carnations for a dollar at the cafeteria during lunch period.* My voice alone in the room's quiet.

And should I also read the college recruiting announcements? Being fifteen and in ninth grade, I wasn't sure. Mrs. Jones' small smile. *Yes, Virginia, some of us are planning on going to college.* Leigh turned to offer a look of sympathy. The class was a blur of macabre faces, laughing. *Shape up or ship out.* That's what Mrs. Jones told me after class, when I approached her tearfully, tried to explain that I just didn't know if I should read that part. Mrs. Jones shaking her head, frowning, *Shape up or ship out.*

I clipped the article, underlined adjectives I knew Leigh would find particularly ironic, and sent it to her parents' house with a brief letter. I let her know I was doing fine, was about to finish up with college. I let her know I'd like to hear from her, know what she was doing with herself.

## 10. Drowning

There is an allegiance between students who fail to perform up to par. It's easier that way. Leigh and I never criticized each other for getting poor grades. We never brought it up. By the time we weren't speaking to each other, we both somehow managed to graduate. I heard she went into the vocational program. I suspected she studied cosmetology. But I didn't really have a clue as to what she did after the last time we spoke.

I always pictured her married after an accidental pregnancy. It may be that I expected her to continue making mistakes. I had always learned from her. I started smoking, took my first drink, had my first kiss because she'd convinced me I'd like it. But I saw how she paid for her own indiscretions and was careful not to fall into the same traps. A

man never had to beg to get her into bed.

Men loved her early on. They called out to her. She grew into her body before the rest of us. She was the girl everyone ostracized in elementary school, all because she was the first to get breasts. She was the victim of early maturity. And she wanted the calling of men on the streets. And who wouldn't want that? Who doesn't want to be recognized?

### 11. Reach

Before I knew Leigh, I spent my afternoons and weekends mostly inside, reading numerous thick historical romances I'd found at the local library. I'd plow through those books, all the while growing paler and paler. By the time Leigh lured me out into the world, by the time we climbed the boards nailed to the tree trunk and I pulled myself into the wood shack Evan and Dale built, I'd had little contact with people my age outside of school. Even at school, I spent homeroom, lunch and study hall with my head down, nose buried in one of those trashy books. *He clutched her hands and pulled her slender body to his. Their lips touched for a moment and a shiver ran down Alyssa's spine. Clint's adept fingers began working at the laces that stitched her heaving bodice. His searing kiss . . .* I read with a detached curiosity; intimacy struck me as being an otherworldly experience, and I looked forward to being transported myself, eventually.

Then Leigh leaned to my ear during Spanish class. All it took was that leaning, and her words, *No comprendo*. Did I laugh? I laughed. And then we were in the tree house, Danny resting his hand on my knee. Danny, who I had seen mowing the lawn in front of his house. Whose lankiness I'd admired from afar. It couldn't be happening to me. Leigh crying in the distance and Evan whispering, *She's just upset*. Leigh crying and Danny's mouth wet in the small, dark space of the tree house, everything reeling horribly. Trying to sit up and wipe his slobber from my chin. Evan and Dale throwing the condoms at us. Not knowing what the packets contained at first. *We'll leave you guys alone*. Danny moving his hand over my chest, under the spandex material of my bra, touching what wasn't there. Did he know he was the first person I'd kissed? *Where's Danny?* Evan saying, *He went home, he was tired*. Staggering back through the woods, arm looped with Evan's as he walked me back to my house. *Where's Leigh?*

*She's inside, asleep. I walked her back earlier because she was upset*. Evan pointing his flashlight at the glass. *Here is your house, here is your window. Climb back through it*.

### 12. Reach, Grasp

The last time I saw Leigh was after we'd graduated. I'd run into People's drug store to pick up a pack of cigarettes and she was in the check-out line. I saw her from behind. I didn't need to see her face to know it was her. I knew the backs of her calves, her feet planted in tiny

high-heeled sandals. I hid by the magazine rack, suspecting she'd seen me walk into the store, assuming the desire for avoidance was mutual. I didn't want to explain that I was only in Nottingham on a visit, that I lived somewhere else now and went to college.

I knew her then as well as I know her now, as well as I knew her a long way back. Her laugh. Her quandary of sorrows. If we were to speak that afternoon, it would have only been a commotion of sorrow.

### 13. Ocean City

Leigh's older sister sneered. "Is that what you're wearing?" Rolled her eyes and walked out to the car. Evening sun shifted light across the asphalt. The sound of cars tearing down the main strip.

A ritual, we had, choosing which skirts and shirts to wear, pairing colors. Peach and pink. Blue and yellow? No, blue and green. Leigh pinched the gold hoops onto her ears, then dug out the perfume spray from her duffel. She pulled out the neck of the tank top and aimed the scent at the space between her breasts. She'd settled on a yellow top and a short, orange skirt. For me she chose a blue skirt, short, "shows off your legs," and a green t-shirt. We took turns appraising ourselves before the mirror, nodded, then walked out to the car where Leigh's sister waited angrily.

"I'll pick you up at this corner," she said, steering the car toward the curb. "Midnight, no later."

"12:30?" Leigh pleaded. "A little later?"

"Midnight, Cinderella," her sister snapped. "No later."

The beach stretched gold alongside the boardwalk. The sun was setting, an angry orange melting like lava on the ocean's horizon. The air smelled of caramel, saltwater taffy, popcorn. Crowds of people milled around with cans of beer wrapped in paper napkins. Men sat back on benches, reached down into the Styrofoam coolers that rested by their feet. A mile's walk to the rides, a tangle of colors distantly apparent. The Loop, the Pirate Ship, the Treasure Spin, the Twister, the malicious machines spinning people, swinging car loads of people, turning them over and over. Their distant screaming.

*Yes, I'm whistling at you.*

### 14. Why Touch

The gyrating hips of the dancers, tambourines slapped at their hips, their smiles barely discernible on the fuzzy screen. I sipped from the can of beer and it left a metallic taste on my lip.

"Shitty reception," Gary said. "Sorry."

"I don't mind." I smiled. We exchanged the looks of people who recognize the absurdity of the situation they've been forced into. Leigh was off in another room with the Mustache Rides man. Before shutting the door behind him, he winked at Gary, "Keep this girl entertained, will you?"

But Gary wasn't the predatory type, not like our Mustache Man.

After he snapped the TV off and led me upstairs to his attic bedroom, he took out his guitar and played my favorite Led Zeppelin tune.

*Babe, Gary sang, You kn-ow I'm gonna leave you.*

He let me try on his black cowboy hat.

"Looks good on you," he said. "Keep it."

*I'll leave you in the summertime . . .*

We talked about where he was from and why he lived in Ocean City. "Seemed like a nice place." He came from Pennsylvania and wanted to make it as a musician. "I'm moving to L.A. in the fall."

"I'll be starting tenth grade," I told him. He was nineteen, which seemed to me impossibly old. The Mustache Man told Leigh he was twenty-three. Gary laughed. "Really? More like twenty-eight." His hair was goldish-brown and smelled sweet as he leaned toward me, began to kiss my cheek and then my mouth. He put his hands gently on my shoulders, then moved them down my back. *This is what it feels like, I remember thinking, to be touched by someone, a man.*

"So," Gary said, eyelids low over his pupils. "Do you want to do it?"

"Do what?" I said, genuinely confused.

"Do what people do." He looked embarrassed.

"What do people do?" I asked.

"Have sex," he said, exasperated. "You know."

"Oh," I laughed. "I don't think so."

He was quiet.

"You see," I explained, "I can't. I haven't done that before and I don't want to yet."

The guitar lay on the floor, next to the bed. Gary sighed. "That's okay," he said, touching my hand. "We'll just kiss."

His stubble grazed my cheek as he moved his mouth over my ear. A flicker of tongue. *Leigh, I thought right then, Leigh must know what it's like to feel these things.* For me touching simply felt like touching. A hand pressing a hand. A mouth, wet and real, on my mouth. I couldn't recognize the abandoned passions I read heroines experience when embraced. Those stories I devoured. Leigh, I realized, understood the gesture of touch, interpreted it, felt passion as the Mustache Man pushed the red hair back from her face, then leaned to kiss her neck. Leigh: her cry and her sigh. Her disheveled hair as she poked her head into the room, saying, "Midnight, Virginia, midnight. My sister's going to kill me."

We ran blocks to the corner where Leigh's sister sat fuming in her parked car. I ran toward the car, one hand keeping Gary's cowboy hat atop my head.

Leigh's sister put the car into drive and tore off. "You little bitch," she hissed.

## 15. Leigh

Out in the field, where I stand next to the ship of my house, marooned in the field, alone and wandering beneath the star's clarity, I

can hear you.

## 16. Holding

In the damp light of the school bathroom, Leigh and I stood side by side, applying eye shadow. Leigh's eyes surveyed our paired reflections. Her eyes narrowed, then she laughed. "Your body's changed."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Your boobs are as big as mine," she said, "at least."

"They're not," I protested. But the truth was I hardly recognized my reflection. It was detestable. I'd grown used to be Leigh's skinny sidekick and felt disheartened when I saw my body taking on similar proportions.

That year, men began to call out to me the way they'd always called out to Leigh. I wore enormous t-shirts, walked with a hunched posture. Leigh stopped calling me. I got a job at the mall, and became too busy to notice or care. I started dating someone who worked at the record store. He'd come to the Famous Chocolate Chip Cookie and buy cookies just so he could talk to me. When I had the closing shift, he'd wait to drive me home. In his car, he'd kiss my neck and murmur that I smelled sweet. I reeked of sugar. The smell of cookies sickened me. After getting home from work, I'd wash my hands over and over, but the doughy-sweet smell permeated my skin and hair.

Sometimes, wringing my hands beneath the faucet, I'd think of Leigh. I wore the gold earrings she gave me. They felt like weights suspended from my lobes and never whistled as I walked across the mall parking lot. In my mind, the wind trimmed me, pared me down until I was back to the girl Leigh loved: skinny, whittled, without definition.

## 17. The Lover

He strokes my hair, touches my neck. Whispers me out of a bad dream. I wake in the strange house, the large and old house, find myself home beside him. He is what I now know of touching. For that I thank him. It is easy to slip my tongue inside his mouth and not feel a thing. I know my lover will never leave me, even if I don't feel a thing.

We rise to the alarm clock, set the table with breakfast, read the paper silently across from one another at our large, wood table. The lover and I each lift cups hot with milky coffee to our lips. We get into our cars and leave for the day. We drive away to our respective places of employment, and we are always happy to come home to each other, if only because we are simply happy to come home.

## 18. Undertow

Sometimes, while wringing my hands beneath a faucet, I think of Leigh. In this old house situated in the center of a green field. Green. The window's eyes on an endless green. I think of Leigh as I look at my

face in the mirror that hangs above the sink. My hair. Strands of white and gray amidst the black.

My lover calls me to bed and I wonder how I ever got here. To live with him, within the circumference of his warm arms.

"You're distant," he says, and I say, "I'm sorry."

And I keep staring at the ceiling until he closes his book, turns out the lights, turns to me with the expectation that I know about touching.

I know nothing about touch. Even today, almost ten years since I last saw Leigh, I still can only think, *This is what a body does. This is called touching. Here, a man touches a woman.* Sometimes it seems my mind is capable only of orbiting my body. An intrusive camera. A detached onlooker. Whatever Leigh knew, she knew it well enough to make the Mustache Man smile, so that when we ran from his house, he called out to her, "Don't make yourself scarce now!" And that means, in plain English, "I liked how you touched me. Come back."

Nathan Fiske Near The Remains of a  
Plantation House: Fredericksburg,  
December 15, 1862

no one you should know or care to  
a fifteen-year-old boy walks toward  
broken ground half a house  
blunt hooks

he watches an ugly color  
float in a drainage ditch sink into a road  
sink into a stone wall that stretches  
through an endless december afternoon

he tries to know this he listens to a voice  
order the piling of legs trunks  
he watches holes open in the earth mouths  
promising *if you are to be saved*  
*if you are to be damned*  
*you will be*

in a window a missing room at the edge of a field  
he presses his face against glass against a bruise  
a low relentless shuffle of cloth and skin  
he studies a beam of light a morning bell  
he walks past a table  
a moldering plum

a winter half gone to dust  
washes across his shirt his hands  
he falls back from rifle-pits a seam in the line  
falls back from a soldier  
writing home *and with bullets whacking against trees*  
*solid shot cracking skulls like egg-shells*  
*I'm reloading*

## 603 Cross River Road

*for Judith*

### 1972: The Land—A Love Letter

This hill and the old house on it  
are all we have. Two acres  
more or less—half crabby lawn,  
half field we mow but twice a year.

Some trees we planted, most gifts  
of the land. The pine by the kitchen?  
Grown twice as fast as our son. The bald  
elm lost the race with my hairline.

The mulberry—so lively with squirrels,  
chipmunk chases, and songbirds—  
fell like a tower in the hurricane.  
My chainsaw ate fruitwood for weeks.

(I stacked the heavy logs by the cellar  
door, to be retrieved winter nights  
for the fireplace, not knowing it's easier  
to burn a cement block than a mulberry.)

The juniper tree, the one that all but  
obliterated our view? Men cut it down  
to make way for the new well and water  
pump. That pump should pump pure gold:

we lay awake engineering ways to get it  
paid for. But we'll never leave  
this mortgaged hill, we thought.  
This land is changing as we change,

its face erodes like ours—weather marks,  
stretch marks, traumas of all sorts  
and conditions. Last night a limb broke  
in the storm. We still see it limn the sky.

Wife, we've become where we have been.  
 This land is all we have, but this love—  
 letter is no more ours than anyone's  
 who ever married the land...

1982. Autumn Crocuses

Basketing leaves during earth's  
 annual leavetaking, we've realized  
 with a start-something's missing.  
 The autumn crocuses that would spring

each October by these rocks.  
 no longer here! We never planted them,  
 but they implanted themselves  
 on us. Now, for their lack

we are poorer. Purest orchid color,  
 they astonished amidst the season's  
 dwindling. Crocus in autumn?  
 How perverse, to reverse the seasons.

Each year we bore a bouquet  
 into the house with pride,  
 surprising guests who'd never seen  
 their like. They thought them

foreign, remote, inaccessible—  
 like edelweiss. No vase, glass or jar  
 ever contained them. Their soft white  
 stems always bent, jack-eared blossoms

loll'd like heads of old folks  
 sleeping in rocking chairs.  
 I read once where their yellow pistils  
 are a saffron source. For us,

source of satisfaction. Now gone.  
 A woodchuck? Frost? My failure to care  
 for bulbs? They were the unaccountable  
 we thought we could count on.

1992: Farewell to the Blue House

Our favorite time of year was Fall.  
Autumn crocuses had blazed  
in rock gardens like gas flames,  
trees painted themselves pumpkin,  
apple, fireplace smoke traveled

in the breezes. The fall of leaves  
created a cinematic panorama—  
the spangled lake blue, bluer  
than blue beneath Westchester's  
skies. Mornings, Canada geese

vectored down, honking and hunkering  
in the lower field. Evenings, deer  
leapt stone walls, drank their fill.  
In the upper field, wild turkeys  
strutted. The peaceable kingdom.

Whenever I tired of the city,  
I lost myself in trees.  
Whenever I tired of human faces,  
I bent down sunflowers,  
Gazed into friendly countenances.

The sun setting over the reservoir,  
Orange overcoming bruise-colored clouds—  
No one felt luckier to have landed somewhere.  
Somedays I felt as if I could walk across that water.

## Home

In places to live I am always looking for openness and glass, for air that moves and floorspace enough for morning yoga on a sticky mat and improptu dancing any time of day or night. Remarkably, I seem to find these things wherever I go, and in the past ten years I have lived in a number of places. I don't mean just cities. I mean numerous addresses within the same town: houses bought and sold and houses rented, bedrooms vacated by the grown children of friends, small and large apartments furnished and unfurnished, houses fixed up for the hired transient and those filled with other people's belongings which I lived in—using their toaster, their coffeepot—until I decided whether to leave or go. Within one recent four-year period I bought and sold two houses and didn't attend the official sale of either one. By the time they sold, I'd moved a thousand or so miles away.

I live in Washington, D.C. now, in a secret apartment high in the trees. You can't see my front door through the leaves, only the glow of lamps and a front porch light. Large windows line the front wall beyond my desk. When I look up from work, pretty much all I see is green. I hope I'll be here for a long time.

But the city I stayed longest in was Houston, where I lived from 1965 until 1981, the year my third novel was published. Those were important years. My older son started school, my second son was born. I gave up acting as a possible career. I became a writer. For fourteen of those years I lived with my husband and two sons at one address, in a frame house at the corner of Rutgers and Pittsburgh, in the then comfortable but not fancy neighborhood of West University Place. We had a double lot and so as Houston real estate values began climbing, people were always calling us asking if we wanted to sell the extra lot. We told them that wasn't a lot, it was our yard. Fourteen years is the longest I have ever lived in one house in my life.

Rutgers and Pittsburgh wasn't our first Houston address. When we first moved to town, we rented a yellow brick house in Montrose, across the street from a leaning, two-story wooden house where migrant farm workers lived for a time and then moved on. I picked Montrose because it was arty and slightly bohemian, something Houston itself was not in those days. My husband, Glenn, went along, and we moved in. Our older son Colin, who was four years old at the time, became friends with the children who lived in the leaning house across the street, Polly and Mitchell. Polly had a moon face and a lyrical expression. She raided our refrigerator for fruit. Mitchell was pale and blond, a little devious and—I feared—headed for trouble. When Colin went to their house he

came home smelling of baloney and powdered milk. He loved the baloney, hated the milk.

In January, 1966, I brought my second son, Peter, home from the hospital to the Montrose house, which had a greenhouse attached to the back wall. I loved the look of the greenhouse but, having no ease with plants, didn't use it except to sit in and rock Peter to sleep. Glenn and I had lived in New York for the first five years of our marriage. By the time we moved to Houston, I'd begun to write—notes in a journal and, on pads of yellow legal paper, most of an unredeemably self-pitying novel I eventually pitched—but I hadn't committed myself to writing as a career, as my life. In those years I still thought I wanted to become an actress. This desire was born in college and it hadn't yet petered out. In Houston, I auditioned for and was cast in one play, an original script to be performed at the Autry House on South Main and directed by the infamous Roger Glade. One night on stage during a performance, reality crashed. "What am I doing here?" I wondered. And felt completely stupid, publicly pretending to be somebody else. A defining moment. My stage career was finished.

I lived with an actor for some years. In Montana, he directed a production of "Under Milk Wood," and asked me to be in it. I remember where we were at the time, outdoors in the Bitterroot Valley, a brilliant sunny day. And I read a few lines of Thomas's gorgeous language. And the moment at Autry House came back, the feeling of stupidity and heart-stopping vulnerability. "No," I said simply. "No."

In the yellow brick house in Montrose, I ran through many legal pads, working on the novel and then the owners wanted their property back and we tried to buy a house but because we'd always paid cash for whatever we'd bought, we had no credit and were turned down for a loan. And so we stacked our furniture in an empty storeroom at Glenn's parents home in Baytown and made a temporizing move into a furnished place in a huge apartment complex called the Bissonnet Plaza, on Buffalo Speedway between Bissonnet and the railroad tracks. The apartment had a white vinyl sectional couch and a plastic-laminated mattress that crackled when we turned in our sleep and made us sweat all night. We lived there for fifteen months. A friend I made there, JoLynn Clark, who lived downstairs from us, called the apartments The Projects. And she wasn't far from wrong. Nobody wanted to be at the Bissonnet Plaza. Nobody valued the place or thought of it as home. The kids overturned garbage cans and pulled laundry off the clotheslines, ripped up the diffenbachia to use for funny hats, slashed branches from the oleanders for no reason anybody could come up with.

And then, in the late summer of 1967, just after Charles Whitman took an elevator to the top of the Texas tower at U.T. to go kill people, we again began looking for a house to buy. I wanted old-fashioned Colonial, two-story brick: rooted, immovable, secure.

From the outside, 6445 Rutgers looked completely ordinary: white wood with green trim, three windows across the front, concrete front stoop with wrought iron trim. The first time I saw it, I thought, "Boring." But when I opened the front door and saw how walls had been torn

down, leaving open space and wood floors stretching from front door to back windows, and how the back windows overlooked a lush, overgrown backyard, and when I went inside and saw how the owners of the house had laid pieces of scrap marble in a variety of shapes and colors into the kitchen counter-tops and breakfast bar, I felt like I'd come home and knew I had to have it.

It was in that house that I unfolded my new self, like an ancestral wedding gown wrapped in tissue. I began to write more seriously and pretty much all the time, and when I wasn't writing I was either reading or thinking about writing. I began sending stories out, getting them back, sending them out again. It took some years but in time, I stopped trying to sound like a New Yorker and found my own voice which—long and hard as I might try to deny it—came from the South. I developed a vision of myself as a writer. This, I said to myself, is what I am going to do. Colin went to West University elementary school. When Peter went to nursery school I had two and a half hours of silence and solitude, first for three days a week, then five. I stopped volunteering to teach art at the elementary school. I worked. Wrote. Peter called it typing. Mom's typing, he told his friends when they wanted to come in the room where I was.

People felt at ease in the Rutgers house. Children hung out there. A few years after we moved in, Colin and his friends began dressing up like the Beatles—full regalia including bang-y bobbed wigs—and pantomimed songs in the kitchen. Colin was Paul. I couldn't convince him to do John instead. We got a dog, a cat, another dog. All that time, I was buying and reading books right and left and after a while the books took up more space than the dogs and children and we began installing floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Books lined the walls, and when you walked in the front door you saw wood floors beneath your feet and books to your right all the way to the back window. And in the backyard there was that jungle of trees and a spool for a patio table. Along the Pittsburgh side were more trees and, among the ferns, a small concrete goldfish pool—oddly shaped, like half a doughnut—with no drain. Peter used to fill up the pool to play in. Then we had to scoop out the water or wait for it to drain through cracks. This took days, during which time the pool became smelly and everybody steered clear. I have photographs of Peter with blond tangled hair to his shoulders, playing in the pool with his pal from across Pittsburgh, skin-headed Kevin. They are about four years old, squatting naked in the ferns.

We weren't re-doers or fix-it people, Glenn and me. We were used to apartment life, and our parents were renters as well. Glenn's family didn't believe in buying what you didn't have the cash for and mine didn't have credit or the cash and so we moved all the time, at the mercy of landlords demanding their property back. And so Glenn and I inherited that sense of here-today and, expecting to leave any day, and so we looked for a place we liked the way it was, then—after maybe a paint job, some new kitchen flooring—moved in and made do. And that's what we did in the Rutgers house. When the back wall of the house began to rot, we did add a kind of sun room with long windows,

which we called The New Room from the minute work began on it until the day we left, some ten years later. Otherwise, everything stayed, including a noisy Rita Hayworth bamboo curtain in the door between the kitchen and living room.

It's gone now. When we moved from Houston in 1981, the people who lived in the house next door bought 6445 Rutgers and within a year or so, tore it down. The double lot became a big yard for their children to play in. There is no Rutgers house anymore and nothing is there except the trees. Or that was the way things were the last time I drove by. West University is now a neighborhood of wall-to-wall mansions. I expect there's one where we used to live. Maybe two. I don't go by anymore. I became a writer in that house. I wrote three books there. Glenn and I raised two sons there. I don't like going back to find emptiness—or, worse, the product of a developer's hot idea—where I discovered what I can only think of as a calling, and where so much life—mine, ours—was lived.

There is a time in which a life culminates and comes to a reckoned point. Afterwards, things go this way and that, up and down, difficult, easy, but for the most part life is, from then on, a kind of playing-out of possibilities. This happened to me at 6445 Rutgers. There, against the back wall of the house in our bedroom, I wrote and wrote, sometimes in notebooks and sometimes on a portable Smith-Corona I'd been awarded when I was 16 and won the local "I Speak for Democracy" contest in Greenville, Mississippi. Wrote, re-wrote. Submitted, received. Read and read. I didn't give myself a certain number of years. I didn't think in terms of time limits. I just did what I did.

Writing was more tedious then. We used messy carbons and corrected errors with Liquid Paper. We did a lot of cutting and pasting, not by clicking on a mouse but with scissors, patience, and glue. A Rice professor I knew from the Bissonet Plaza came by one day. When I told him I was writing, he asked point-blank if I was thinking in terms of the *Ladies Home Journal*. I wasn't insulted, I was too focused on what I was up to, to be insulted. In 1976, at a precinct meeting in support of Sissy Farenthold's run for the governorship of Texas, I met Bill Broyles, who introduced himself as the editor of a new magazine to be called *Texas Monthly*. On faith and instinct, he gave me my first writing assignments, one about teaching a Great Books seminar to children, another about swimming laps.

I was in print.

I'd like to think it was the writing itself that changed my life but really, it was publication. The anonymity and obscurity and privacy of a person who has no life beyond the walls of her house and family were gone forever. My name was in a magazine and then in a literary quarterly called *The Falcon*, which published a short story of mine called "Mama's Turn." In 1977, my first novel, "Come Back, Lolly Ray" was published. I couldn't quit looking at that book jacket, not so much because of the way it looked but because my name was on it. I was a writer, and I had to deal with that. My name would be listed forever at the Library of Congress. And from then on, whatever twists and turns

and loves and losses I found myself facing, there would be a difference. Experience would be more than what Virginia Woolf calls the cotton-wool of every day life. Experience might be transformed, one way or the other, into art.

A year or so before we moved into the Rutgers house, I had attended the Southwest Writers' Conference at the University of Houston. There, Donald Barthelme read a short story of mine and gave me a writing lesson—my only formal class—and taught me how to edit in one session. But there was no writing community in Houston at that time. Just after her first novel was published, the novelist Susan Shreve lived in West University for a year, about six blocks from me. She was the first fiction writer I knew personally. The poet Susan Wood, who at that time was Book Editor of the *Houston Chronicle*, introduced us. The three of us became friends, and now, twenty years later, Susan Shreve and I live in the same city again, only blocks from one another. We teach at the same university and are still friends.

I met Cynthia MacDonald at a book party Susan Wood took me to, at the Plaza Hotel. Cynthia didn't live in Houston all of the time. She was commuting to Baltimore to teach at Johns Hopkins. But she had a sharp eye and spirit enough for the big gamble, and she saw possibilities in Houston. She was thinking about things she wanted to do. She was talking to people about getting those things done. Max Apple had come to teach at Rice. His first book *The Oranging of America* was published only months before mine. When we met, he told me, "You're the most famous person I know." And I said the same thing back to him. Neither of us was of course very famous but that was how Houston was at that time. Both of us were invited to become members of the Texas Institute of Letters, which I'd never heard of. Shelby Hearon was president then, and she insisted that Max and I should be allowed in, even though we lived in oil-rich and literature-impooverished Houston and hadn't been born or raised in Texas. Things seemed to be changing all over the state, but nowhere was it happening faster or more dramatically than in Houston.

Susan Shreve had moved back to Washington by then and so as far as fiction went, Max and I were pretty much the Houston writing community. When we had coffee or ate lunch at Rice, the fiction writers of Houston were meeting.

And then Cynthia was actually doing it, starting a writing program, not at Rice or St. Thomas but down the Gulf Freeway toward the oil refineries where nobody wanted to go, at the school that was then widely known as Cougar High. And in that same year the Cougars were allowed into the Southwest Conference and the football team went and won the championship. And suddenly the upstart, raggedy U. of H. was getting a new kind of attention. And I went to meetings with Cynthia and she convinced members of the English department that I—with my B.A. from Memphis State University and no teaching experience—was somebody they should snatch up and hire right away to be a part of that program. And since I'd never attended a college

writing class in my life, Max Apple gave me a possible way to structure a class, and I went out and—one day a week, a Visiting Professor—began to teach. To give myself confidence, I wore a muscle shirt from a Tina Turner concert to my first class. And now I wonder what the students must have thought when their professor walked in wearing a tiny t-shirt, Tina wild across her chest.

From here, those years of so many breakthroughs and new beginnings seem a time of studied innocence on my part, and I wonder at my audacity and what good and harm I might have done as I went on my way. I wasn't young—nearly 40 when my first book was published—but looking back I see myself as callow, somewhat arrogant and wild-headed, and, most of all, doggedly determined. And so was Houston. It was a raw city then, hopeful, rude, wild, like a teen-age boy on his first date, driving his parents' car way too fast and reckless. And all of us along for the ride, waiting to find out what happened next. And there was a freedom to all of that. And the rowdiness suited us, even as Dallas sneered at everything Houston did, including getting a symphony and a museum and a professional football team. Who did we think we were, the Cowboys? Roger Staubach?

I remember so many small events and surprises. One night, late, during those same years Cynthia—who had been an opera singer earlier in her life—sang "Un Bel Di" in my kitchen. I can still see her, standing in front of the sink just down from the washing machine, singing away. The next morning Peter came to breakfast asking who was doing all the screeching.

Things changed so fast. By the time Donald Barthelme came home to Houston, the writing program was in place, and with his help we started a chapter of PEN and to kick it off, threw a big conference. Grace Paley and Richard Howard and Susan Sontag came. Frances FitzGerald advised would-be Texas writers to move to New York. The last night of the conference, I gave a party. We served tamales and beans and ice-box pie, and put ice in the washing machine—next to where Colin and his friends wore wigs and pantomimed the Beatles—and bottles of beer in the ice. I played hot music and we danced and danced. When the party was over, we drained the melted ice from the washing machine. The visiting writers said the New York literary establishment didn't have parties like that. I don't think we even knew we were the literary establishment.

After Houston, I lived in San Marcos in a glass and light-filled house on the river, for about eight years. Wonderful and terrible things happened there. And then I went to Los Angeles, where I lived in an apartment with a tiny patio with glass doors which faced the sunset. In Missoula, Montana, after living in other people's homes—four of them in two years' time—because I had so many books and a beloved dog, I bought a small jewel-box house that looked more like L.A. than Montana. The living room had four full-length windows looking out over a very green back yard with lilac bushes along the back fence. I'd never seen a lilac bush in my life until Montana. People would walk in

and marvel at the light streaming in the open windows, unheard of in a region where houses were built dark and inward for winter. I had a one-year chair at George Washington University during my Missoula years and so for a number of months one year I was in D.C., where I was provided with a house with a historical plaque, two blocks from the Lincoln Memorial. The house was furnished in Ethan Allen fancy, and had flowered wallpaper. Then I came back to Missoula and decided to leave my own house and live in a furnished one south of town in the Bitterroot Valley for ten months. Then came back to Missoula and decided to move back to Washington. This time I lived in a friend's daughter's bedroom until I could find my own place, a big house I bought and couldn't afford. I was living with the actor then. We let the yews trees along the front of the house grow scraggly tall, so that we could leave the big windows glassy bare. Then when I went to Tuscaloosa, Alabama for six months to take a one-semester chair and live in another furnished house, I rented my D.C. house out. By the time I decided to put it up for sale, I had moved again—first to a friend's guesthouse in Wimberley, Texas, and then to Austin. I negotiated the sale of the house and the removal and storing of my furniture and dishes, my books and pictures and clothes by telephone and fax and through the great good help of a loving friend. In Austin I lived in a small frame house which reminded me of 6445 Rutgers. Walls had been torn down, there were windows and light and a ceiling fan in every room. I borrowed furniture and dishes from friends.

Now I'm back in D.C. in the secret apartment with big windows that are so far from the ground, in nice weather I can leave them open all night. The apartment is small and so when I moved in I divested myself of approximately half my worldly goods. But I have my dining table back, and I can cook for my friends again. The oak washstand my mother loved is in my kitchen. My friends' books and my mother's watercolors are on the walls, as well as the paintings and photographs that connect me to the stages of my life and the places I have lived, not by subject matter but by reminding me of where I was when each one became a part of my life. My apartment dwells within the walls of someone else's home. From my bed, I hear my landlord's footsteps above. If I walk down a hall and open a door, I am in their home. But my apartment faces the opposite direction from their house and so I have my own entrance and view. This is all fine, good. I have no interest that I know of in owning real estate, or in moving. I am at home here.

The apartment also reminds me of the Rutgers house and so did the jewel-box house I bought in Missoula. Something about the surprise of open rooms, light and wide spaces within the confines of a small dwelling pleases me, amuses me, makes me feel at home and safe.

Currently, I am writing a non-fiction book about Sarah Breedlove, who was born in 1867 in a Louisiana sharecropper's cabin and in time went on to invent a successful hair-care product for African American women. At about age 39, the same age I was when my first novel came out, Sarah Breedlove renamed herself Madam C.J. Walker and became the first self-made millionaire of her race and gender in this country.

Because of this book, I am reading a lot of biographies. And I have found that it is the early arc of a life that interests me most, whether the life is that of Elvis Presley, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, or J.P. Morgan. I want to know about the time leading up to the culmination, or reckoning point, when the biographical subject makes the leap from where she started to the point in which she has become somebody noteworthy enough to merit writing and reading about. Of course, I'm also interested in how Sarah Breedlove Walker built her business, once she established it. I am curious about how she knew how to do that, and I want to know everything about the causes she took on once she had money, and the cars and clothes she bought and the trips she took and the contributions she made. But what fascinates me most is the impossible leap she made, from obscurity, ignorance, poverty and racial oppression, to the woman who dressed like a duchess, ran a business like John D. Rockefeller, and named herself Madam C.J. Walker.

Obviously, my leap was nothing close to hers. Compared to hers, mine was a puddle jump. Still, I made it. And it happened in a house that, like all of hers except one mansion, is long gone. Nothing left but the ground it stood on.

Nostalgia, frankly, is for the birds. Mooning over the destruction of 6445 Rutgers is pointless. The whole neighborhood of West University Place as I knew it is gone and so is the raw adolescent Houston we moved to. Things come and they go. In all this moving about the country I have lost many precious items, which I have learned to quickly mourn then move on from, there being no use in pining for things in the first place, even—maybe especially—when they are gone. But that house mattered to me, more than any I have lived in. And its loss is a hard one to brush off. It was a place which had a life of its own, beyond the four of us, beyond contracts and money and ownership. I'm sorry not to be able to imagine other lives in the Rutgers house, books on those shelves, parties with tamales and dancing, adolescent boys dolling up like a rock group while smaller ones squat naked in the ferns watching the goldfish pond fill, loud music playing on and on.

## Neighbors

Some dogs were barking at blind noise  
in a hedge. Automatically the built-in  
sprinkler system stopped. Garage doors  
whined, then let their cars fly free. I  
put my eye to slot in the wooden wall  
between our houses and peered into your  
eye staring into mine. A friendship quivered.  
As the sun caved, we were mirrors.  
A bullet swam through suburban sky.  
You caught it between your lips. I lost  
my shadow in a maze of mending, eyelids  
slowly closing, driveways buckling in the rash  
sunshine, clouds coming undone. Pleasure  
is the penny on the swimming pool floor.  
Dive deep.

## The Man Who Would Not

AMELIA: Doesn't it hurt? I mean, after a while?

BLOOM: At first it did, and now and then I have to revert to, you know.

AMELIA: Ah.

BLOOM: But after a while it's okay.

AMELIA: Ah...

This was how Bloom's imagination shaped the beginning of the conversation to come with Amelia, a conversation ripe with innuendo, euphemism and implication. He was on his way to propose marriage, something he'd never done before in his thirty-two years and there was no way he could do it without telling her, thus risking the possibility of such a conversation—worse even.

Amelia lived in a shabby-chic brownstone in Brooklyn Heights and there was a long walk from the subway, giving him time to shape and reshape imaginary conversations-to-come in his head. Some were even more threatening than the one above.

AMELIA: But have you never...?

BLOOM: Not for years.

AMELIA: So you're a bloom who never flowers.

He threw in the imagined joke, there, to cheer himself up. It wasn't really Amelia's style, a joke so broad would not pass her lips; there was something fine about her, appropriate for an illustrator with such a delicate hand. All this came up when Bloom had fallen in love with Amelia. He'd been in love before and marriage had often been a question but this time it was the answer.

There were puddles of April sun spilled through openings in the checkerboarded clouds and two young women, one with long, scissoring legs, walking in the sunlight in front of him. Her full skirt rustled between her legs in involuntary implication and her lips curved in a sweet o as she listened to her companion. Bloom felt a twinge of interest situated in his groin and, as well, in some part of himself not quite his mind, not exactly his soul or his heart, but a part that made him feel more alive than not.

It was something of what he would miss if he gave up what seemed to him, the closer he got to his destination, to be his crazy way of sexual life. He would have to tell Amelia that he had been faking it, the way women did in trashy novels so as not to have to explain that he didn't want to finish, to complete, to end, to give out, to give up, to arrive, to be drained, to be done, to lose control, to experience *le petit mort.*, in short or in long—to come.

In his anxiety at the approaching encounter he entertained a collage of words including snippets of his own sense of what, why and how he would not, but also fragments of angry words of lovers who'd found him out. On the other hand, why testify against himself; he could put it in a positive light. The gain: the sharp sensual edge, the sense of possibility, the feeling of being in touch with an unfolding physical existence, living in a world of multiplicity in which he did not have to take action to enjoy each day as if it were always the first page, the opening sentence, the first look. (He was an editor and his images came from the daily process of reading.) These were the gifts his odd little trick gave him. They were hard to give up.

Over the years there'd been no shortage of explanations, some angry, some more like interpretations thrown instead of dishes; others, apparently cool under the cloak of objectivity.

This from Lisa Leonard, ex-lover and analyst in training, bitter at their breakup.

—Anna Freud says the more possibilities kept open in a situation, the more certain it is that we're in the presence of immaturity.

—I never said I was mature. Only holding back to keep the sharpened edge.

"My God," less cool, now. "Who lives on such a sexual edge? I'll tell you who—adolescents, priapic adolescents." In the face of cant words like priapic he was helpless.

Or Martha: —You insist on controlling the most basic, uncontrollable thing in the world. The thing that's designed by nature to be out of control.

Or Nina: —You can't stand to be vulnerable. What do you think is going to happen to you if you're vulnerable for twenty or thirty seconds out of a lifetime?

But Amelia—Amelia lived on line and color, not abstractions. Amelia had been educated at a convent school in Fort Wayne, pale blonde hair, fragile smile, the peachfuzzed delicate complexion; she gave, she yielded with a soft, low voice—an excellent thing in woman, God you couldn't think that way, today, even if it was Shakespeare. Still, Amelia was an artist in giving, in yielding—except where her work was concerned.

How would she take such a revelation along with a proposal of marriage? Perhaps he should do it in two parts. But no, he'd planned it all week. It was the perfect occasion: a leisurely Sunday afternoon and the idea was to go over some sketches she had done for a new edition of Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*.

It began well: on the kitchen table, coffee and bagels with lox and jokes about her Indiana Catholic conversion to Bloomian New York cuisine—(for New York, read Jewish.) Then to work, the table cleared except for coffee cups, the galleys, the sketch pad and conversation about Isabel Archer the heroine famously proposed to by all the wrong men.

"Why not a cluster of illustrations showing each of the proposals,"

Amelia suggested. "After all, that's the drama of the early part of the book. Then, an illustration of Isabel miserably married to the wrong man." Her hand is busy sketching while Bloom demurs.

Bloom saw his chance to take off his editor's hat and put on his suitor's hat. Did husbands have hats? Nobody had hats any more; he was just ridiculously apprehensive. It was not the proposing part, it was the rest of it. Proposals were a cinch compared to confessions. "Do you realize," he said. "That we became lovers on a Sunday afternoon much like this, sketches all around, both of us nervous as hell."

"You didn't seem nervous," she said. "And how do you know I was?" She still held onto the sketches, ready to resume the argument.

"Because you started to hunt for your diaphragm and then remembered that you'd switched to the pill."

She laughed softly. Soft, Bloom thought, an excellent thing in a woman, feeling how much he liked being with her, not just crazy in love but pleasure at talking, coffee, arguing, touching and all the rest waiting in the wings. But Bloom was now nervous as hell.

"Listen," he said. "I have something important to ask you."

"Ah," she said and he realized at once that her habit of saying ah, the way she said ah, breathing it out on two notes, a small descending musical piece, was one of a thousand small Amelia-things he liked in her. He plunged.

"I think we should—get married."

Another, "Ah", only longer, more drawn out, and accompanied by a smile.

"I would like that," she said. Now she put down the drawings and turned towards him. He walked around the corner of the table and spilled his coffee cup over everything. Grabbing a wad of tissues from his pocket he mopped wildly and said, "Only like?"

She brushed all the papers from between them, dry and wet. "Love, I should have said. I'd love that."

"That or me?"

"Oh for God's sake stop being an editor and kiss me."

"I can do both," he mumbled through the kiss making her laugh.

In a moment or two the kiss was over, never intended to move on to more intense matters.

They stood, the soaked drawings between them, unsure of which way to direct the conversation.

"But there's something I have to tell you first."

"Ah..."

She began to clean off the table, ran to the kitchen for a towel and a cigarette.

"I didn't know you smoked."

"I don't except under pressure."

Bloom laughed, feeling a little relieved, his mission at least half accomplished, the other half pulsing in his wrist, on his tongue. He remembered how she'd looked at that first meeting seven weeks ago, coming in from the rain clutching her portfolio, hair all over the place in her eyes, one or two strands in her mouth, coughing hello, laying out

samples confidently. It was hard to believe you could amass memories in seven weeks.

In those weeks he'd opened his life to her: introduced her to Alice, who could make connections for her in publishing, to George and Arthur who had the open sesame for advertising, to Alfredo who knew real estate and arranged for the brownstone apartment in Brooklyn Heights, to Sam and Hester who had great seats at the Met and never had time to go, giving Amelia her first taste of Tosca, of Wozzeck up close, thrilling to the girl from Fort Wayne—as was The Union Square Cafe and Soho, tacky and touristy in the afternoon, Riverside Drive, the dark Hudson, mysterious, glamorous at night.

New York was permanently his own so he could give it to her without going broke. And she accepted it the way she'd accepted Bloom, generously. All of which was why he was so panicky about confessing the one intimate detail that could throw everything off course. He moves them into the living room. You need a couch for confessions.

When he tells her he waits for an 'Ah' but none comes. She frowns in much the way she does during editorial meetings, then lights another cigarette. Her first response is a question, characteristically generous. How about pleasure—and he explains how pleasure grew, subsided, then grew still more powerful. It is all a question of destinations—the journey was the same as anyone else's.

But Amelia is no dope. Has he been faking it, acting a climax, still unsatisfied? Well, only to avoid explanations because the time was not ripe yet. And 'unsatisfied' is the wrong word. He tries to tell her how the intensity of feeling is communicated and experienced as a kind of culmination...the moment to stop sometimes related to her pleasure, sometimes independent of it.

Desperate to get out of the hole he is digging for himself he tries to make her laugh, not usually a difficult task. Think of the implications of the word, he tells her. If you've come you've arrived. Where do you go then? Back where you started.

No laugh—Amelia is struggling to understand. In response, Bloom sings his song: the world in a perpetual morning, on the knife edge of uncompleted desire, a sexual act lasting twenty four hours of every day. He springs to his feet and throws a window open to clear the room of cigarette smoke and at the same time, in some weird way, illustrating: fresh spring air, the sensual sounds of voices floating through the brownstone windows. The way the world felt when you hadn't blunted it by ridding yourself of sexual tension even for a short time.

She is still struggling to get a handle on it, as if it is a crossword puzzle, a Scrabble word she is unsure of.

"Is it *homo animal post coitum triste es?*" she asks. She was a good Catholic girl who'd studied and retained her Latin; she sang Bach Masses in choral societies on weekends, back home in Fort Wayne, would do the same in New York after they were married.

"No," Bloom replies, "I never believed that stuff about sex taking it out of you. Just the fact of it, finished or not, gives you something back,

starts your engines, doesn't close them down."

"You're a romantic," she grins at him, uncertain. "Will you feel that way when we've been married for ten or twenty years?"

"Try me," Bloom says.

"I've already agreed to that." She swerves. Did he want some more coffee? When she leans over him to put down a fresh cup of coffee she kisses him—out of the blue. This time it is Amelia who spills—it is an afternoon for spills—coffee, cups, saucers, all onto the clean beige couch and beige rug, as if to show Bloom how to be impulsive, heedless. But this time it is a kiss meant to be continued, serious stuff.

In seconds she is on her knees before him, unraveling his clothes to make him available. Bloom is taken by surprise but he is, indeed, available and he watches Amelia in a kind of exotic but ironic slow-motion gaze, present in pleasure but at the same time distant in thought. He senses, already, behind her impulse, her plan. Women always think the mouth is the super-charged gateway to high-pitched, irresistible pleasure for a man. Though, for Bloom, like any other sexual, sensual caress/contact it ebbs and recharges, is utterly singleminded aimed outward, changes its mind, then changes back: not necessarily a plunging rollercoaster ride with a wild cry at the end, rather a loop-the-loop.

But he feels that Amelia's heart, like her mouth, is clearly in the right place. Like the women who involve themselves with gay men and convince themselves they can convert them, this, too, is an act of missionary work. She will trick him into 'giving,' a better word than 'coming,' though perhaps a touch more sentimental—your average, home-grown orgasm is more a natural eruption than a form of openness, of generosity. Only the opposite, Bloom's obsessive, idiosyncratic withholding could be embellished with ethical and moral decorations. (Stingy—his therapist had stung him with a one-word dismissal.)

She makes such an appealing picture, the gentle, tactful, soft-spoken but alternately firm, unyielding professional woman, kneeling before him as if to say: I know what's needed to push a man over the edge; I can transform myself from one vision to another. Suddenly, without stopping, she reaches behind and hikes up her skirt in a deliberate, rump-exposing provocative gesture. This is extraordinary; clearly designed to add an extra visual component to his pleasure, the entire gesture from front to back an attempt at heightening, an erotic act of pornographic generosity. Or is it more an intensification of control, of a desire to convert her newfound fiancé from a not now, to a now? I can make a man change for me, (that old story). Bloom senses he does not know this woman he has just asked to marry him. But it is enormously pleasing, as if she is speaking to him, with her mouth otherwise occupied, speaking to the whole man, not just the organ of this particular road to satisfaction.

The pleasure in her, the whole woman not just the lips and tongue which forms the grammar of this communication, lets him relax, feel easy. He will stop at the right moment; he will not be converted, he will

not make a foolishness, a triviality of his confession, of his discipline of years; he will not accept the banality of fulfillment. He can handle even this new level of pleasure joined to admiration.

But suddenly he moves to the other side of some barrier, a promised delight suggests itself beneath Amelia's persistent caress, the delight of yielding; and just as suddenly he has no desire for control, a function of appreciation, of gratitude, as much as nerve-endings, and Bloom pours, pours, gives, spills—it is, after all, an afternoon for spilling.

Like an old married couple they gathered up the coffee cups and saucers; some perfunctory mopping up of the Rorschach-shaped stains on couch and rug with Kleenex, then back to the kitchen. While Amelia gathered up and smoothed out her coffee-stained sketches, Bloom washed the dishes. They were, for the moment, silent, each of them afraid of saying the wrong thing at the wrong moment. The question of a lifetime of happiness could wait. The smell of victory and defeat was in the air—the only question was whose.

Bloom was an editor. He knew that all climax, all completion was of the same order. It was the middle of stories that made them different. Now he was watching himself, waiting for the anticipated sadness of completion, the beginning of a life of endless repetition, the sharpened edge blunted. But it didn't happen, at least not yet. What did happen was his turning to Amelia to break the ice, only to find she was weeping, back turned to him, trying not to let him see.

He held her, tugging, to turning her around to comfort her, face to face, to see in her face what there was that needed comfort so badly it arrived first with tears. Her resistance was fierce which showed him how strong her slender body was. Did she work out? She'd never mentioned a gym. Finally, she turned, face streaked, wet; she leaned against him.

"I feel like such a fool."

"A fool, you?"

"Well, a fake, then."

"Why, because we just—because you—because I—?"

"No..."

And, standing there in her kitchen, holding onto Bloom as if in the middle of an earthquake, she pours out everything she'd been holding back. It seemed that, at Wayne State she'd been a Lesbian. Oh, only for about a half hour, but still there it was. She'd been a LUG.

"A what?"

"A LUG. You know, Lesbian Until Graduation."

This was only the beginning of what she had to spill. She'd been married before—when she was twenty-two, to a sailor—the whole idea of the sea in Indiana had been enough to sweep her off her feet, until she found out her romantic sailor-husband had been in jail for theft and attempted rape...She'd given Bloom only what she thought he'd want, not herself, actual, complete...Oh, yes, there was worse to come. She'd never come with anyone...Didn't know why...In their seven weeks

together she'd been hoping it wouldn't come up. She'd had excruciating pleasure, didn't have to fake a climax, it was sort of all climax. It seemed in her own way she was like Bloom, both of them orphans of the orgasm. Which was why she hadn't been as astonished by Bloom's confession as she'd seemed...wasn't quite the Hoosier hick she liked to play...

Comforting Amelia, Bloom feels he has taken charge, regained ground, yet at the same time has lost something. Yesterday, he thinks the sharpened edge of experience, the daily sense of endless possibility, today the flat comfort of open familiarity; yesterday the world in perpetual morning, unfinished, waiting; today the slow rebuilding of sensual promise; yesterday the rich hoarding of a lifetime of open-ended intimate touching, today the poverty of starting over again and again, nothing gained, nothing learned, nothing kept.

Now it is Bloom who clings to Amelia murmuring little slogans of comfort, fortune cookies of consolation. "Now that you've told me, there's more of you, not less." And, "If I were a woman I'd be a Lesbian, too." Silly half jokes, Amelia joining in with, "Now you've given me the most precious thing a man has to give." They both collapse in laughter, clinging, promising to love, honor and withhold nothing, Bloom secretly wondering, was that why he's held off asking any woman to marry him for so long? Is there to be nothing withheld from now on? What kind of a life will that be, so vulnerable, so—available.

He tells her this.

"Ah," she says.

Ah, Bloom thinks, giddy with happiness and terror, a new way to be. A first birthday—and at his age!

## Portrait of My Polish Lover

I was a 23-year-old "innocent American"  
when she picked me up in a Warsaw bar  
and talked to me in English she had broken

off from school and neatly patched together  
from Jack London novels and Errol Flynn  
movies with the help of her older sister,

who deserted their tiny flat so my 19-  
year-old Delfina, an Olympic fencer  
who fashioned herself a warrior queen,

could ride me against the male abuser—  
a drunken father who lived in Cracow,  
a violent boyfriend, that Soviet soldier—

and cry my name with contemptuous awe  
and call me her American slave, her Jew.

## Ravenna

*after Aleksandr Blok*

Not everything disappears, not even here,  
city of exhaust and one-way streets.  
Ravenna, your wide-bodied buses

overflow with sunburned Ostrogoths.  
Remnants of Byzantium sparkle  
in buttressed nooks, on holy limestone,

but even in San Vitale's church  
tourists tire of so much Eastern light.  
And the sea waves goodbye as it takes off

for Greece, littered with thousands of *lira*,  
and your baptized conquerors come each May  
for Chianti and *pasta e fagioli*.

Your vine-choked wastes, houses and people,  
all of it veers towards the grave.  
And no one's alarmed by that vulgar tongue,

the grafitti on government buildings:  
*Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni.*  
What emperor, now, do we kneel before?

Only on rainy days can we see  
some new life blossom in Ravenna:  
as today, when into the shadows

of Dante's dim little tomb steps  
a French girl, her hair in braids,  
bearing a bouquet of peacock feathers.

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## Gulf Coast Symposium

*Describe the event that led to your defining yourself as a writer.*

### Thomas Cobb

I can't for the life of me remember an event that really led me to "defining myself as a writer," but I do remember a significant moment with Donald Barthelme. He had called me at home and invited me to lunch. While lunch with Don was neither unusual or unpleasant, being summoned from home was not good news. And I had been concentrating on finishing my lit classes and working, rather than writing.

We ate in the old Galaxy room of the hotel. We made small talk, some of it about the band Moist and the Towelettes, for which Don played second percussion, and I played rhythm guitar. I kept waiting to hear the reason for the invitation. Near the end of the meal, he said, "There's a lot of money to be made in air-conditioner repair."

"I know I haven't been writing much lately," I said.  
"With air-conditioner repair, there's work every day."

About a week later I started my novel *Crazy Heart*.

### Tracy Daugherty

I trace my first real literary impulses not only to the books I scrounged as a child, but to my grandfather, Harry Tracy Daugherty, who was named after a populist rabble-rouser. My great-grandfather was a populist—later a socialist—farmer in southern Oklahoma. One day, at a revival meeting in 1898, he heard Harry Tracy inveigh against capitalism and racism. He was so impressed, he appropriated the man's name for his son (he named his second boy after Fred Warren, who published the great socialist paper *Appeal To Reason* until the government shut it down during the First World War).

As a child, my grandfather displayed a precocious talent for public speaking. His dad taught him the socialist gospel, toured him by horse-and-buggy through Oklahoma and north Texas, and set him up on streetcorner soapboxes to spread the Word. He became known as "The Boy Orator," and the first time I saw my name in print, it was on a yellowed flier in his scrapbook proclaiming Tracy Daugherty a "GOOD

LOUD SPEAKER" and "Oklahoma's finest young lecturer."

He went on to a distinguished political career, serving twice in the Oklahoma House of Representatives. Throughout my childhood, I thrilled to see his name—*my* name—on campaign posters, emery boards, buttons, and in newspaper ads. Willa Cather once said her impulse to write came from seeing her name in print, in a newspaper piece. I know the feeling.

I don't come from a family of readers. Novels and poems were scarce in our home. My relationship to crafted language, then, is rooted in the tradition of American oratory practiced by my grandad. The sermon. The soapbox speech. The call to arms. I'm also compelled by the fact that my first name can be traced to a rebellious muckraker.

Now, we've all heard literary critics insist that politics and art don't mix. As Edmund Wilson said of *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck's cry of rage and sympathy for the poor, "human sentiments and speeches [have] been assigned [here] to a flock of lemmings"—the Joads—who simply mouth their author's opinions. But because my grandfather was a speechwriter and a politician, someone who delighted in turns of phrase as much as turns of fortune, I've always believed aesthetics and social ethics were inseparable. When he told a crowd, in October, 1933, after witnessing an electrocution at the state prison in McAlester (where Tom Joad served time), "To watch men die and call it Justice, a man must be imbibing very freely on Oklahoma's Mountain Dew," no one can tell me the *zizzle* of art wasn't traipsing through his language.

American oratory is now in decline, in both our public life and our literature. Among other factors, television's (and now the internet's) love of the instantaneous has reduced our national vocabulary to byte-sized bits of rubble. But the epic effort to *speak* hasn't fully been silenced. Two recently published books, both appearing posthumously, both unfinished, attest to the power of oratory, and—to my mind, at least—lead us back to the wellsprings of American literary art. Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth* and Marguerite Young's *Harp Song for a Radical: The Life and Times of Eugene Victor Debs* thunder and roll like summer storms, their heat-lightning pulsing to the rhythms of Cotton Mather, Abraham Lincoln, Gene Debs, Kate O'Hare, Mother Jones, Martin Luther King; to the cotton-picking agony of field-hollers and the spontaneous release of hoe-downs.

Listen: "History erupts and boils with its age-old contentions. But ours is the freedom and decision of the New, the Uncluttered, and we embrace the anguish of our predicament, we accept the penalties of our hopefulness."

"Debs was cast into a prison cell by those who had on their side the pomp and power and glory of immediate circumstance...he who had no inherent instinct for martyrdom had welcomed this fate of incarceration by the masters of rails and iron and steel and lead and coal and coke and oil, whose desire was to stamp down the least evidence of the independence of the human spirit."

That the authors of these visionary books both worked nearly forty years on them, and were unable to complete their projects, tells us in

part how vast and shifting our democratic ideals still are. Art and democracy converge, Ellison once wrote, "with the development of conscious, articulate citizens [reflected in] the creation of conscious, articulate characters," particularly characters who can speak for the perennially disenfranchised, as well as for the broader population. Further, as Dan Carpenter, a reviewer discussing *Juneteenth* in *The Indianapolis Star*, said, "To be [truly] of this land is to have jazz and the blues and...back-and-forth wordplay...in your DNA, if not on your tongue. If you honor forbearance and forgiveness as national virtues, you are the actual or spiritual descendant of slaves." This strikes me, grandson of an orator, as a profound, and struggle-worthy, identity for any American writer.

### Nancy Eimers

I am trying to think of what triggers those moments of getting past the first layer, the edges, the—mereness. I feel most like a writer during those times. It happens when I am alone, reading usually, and looking out of the window, and the world in dropping away from me seems most mine. I can't say this occurs in reference to any particular event, or that it ever explained itself as happening in direct response to an encounter with a fellow passenger at a bus stop or to the alighting of ten goldfinches on the perches of the bird feeder. If it did I might know who or what to seek out. And yet when, reading, say, poetry or Oliver Sacks or Alice Munro or even *The Perfect Storm*, I feel close to language, I seem, too, to feel close to the bus stop encounter or to the alighting birds. Those I think of as potentially defining events—my mother's piano playing, a walk in the snow—are never quite events anyway; beginningless, endless, plotless, they seem to circle back irresistibly into speculation and uncertainty. What really happened anyway?, I ask myself. How much does one thing have to do with something else? Until, in search of it, I have wandered far away from the so-called event...

Language, someone else's, is what most leads me into language, where, wading in, I can feel, if not in my element, in an element that doesn't belong to me, element in which I can for a time—yes, I think that's partly it—lose myself. Lost not obliterated, lost as in lost weekend. Rapt?

### Lance Larsen

It was Christmas break, and I was trying to recover from my first semester as an English major. One morning my father, who had been organizing old files all week, casually dropped a child's theme, entitled "Hope," into my breakfast bowl.

I hope that the war going on  
in veiknomb will stop real soon.  
I hope that my uncle won't get hurt  
in veiknomb. thoses are two  
setences yousing hope.  
Hope is a word something like  
the word wish. hope is a word  
that you can not draw like you can  
draw a tree. It is a feeling in your head.

I read it. Or rather took it in: the misspellings; the labored printing; the pulpy tooth of the paper; the dotted horizontal lines; the way the last few words bunched together, like cars after a train wreck. And in the upper right hand corner, crooked and tentative—my name.

If I wrote this in first grade, picture tiny, wizened Mrs. Pew, and behind her a bank of windows facing east. If in second grade, think of bright, first-year, sleeveless Miss Welch, windows to the west. In either case, I don't remember writing it. In either case, I must have looked at the trees, which everywhere surrounded our school. Now, twelve years later, I was puzzling over this fragment, which had arrived, unbidden, as if from someone else's shadowy past. I remember thinking two things. One, I want to be a writer. Two, maybe I already am.

By this last statement, I obviously did not mean an accomplished writer. Nor did I mean a writer with special promise. Rather I meant a seven- or eight-year-old someone who had found, at least during this exercise, a way to wrestle with forces he didn't understand. Didn't understand, but had witnessed. Walter Cronkite reporting casualties. Body bags filling up. A career army uncle in harm's way. And my long-haired, peace-sign-loving older brother who would shortly be eligible for the draft. When my parents weren't around he played Country Joe & the Fish on the stereo: And it's one, two three, what are we fighting for? Don't ask me, I don't give a damn. Next stop is Vietnam . . . That grade school exercise, though I didn't know it at the time, was a way of dipping into myself and witnessing.

Poem, essay, journal entry, confession, message in a bottle? Even now I don't know what to call that piece I wrote. Even now, reading it, I feel as if I'm eavesdropping on a devious ghost, whose words I must somehow account for. What startles me is how accurately that piece reflects my sense of what writing is—an act of hope. Or what Czeslaw Milosz calls in a different context "cynical hope." Yes, the whole enterprise of putting words on paper is vexed, impossible. And yes, language almost always fails. Still we lift the pen, like any seven-year-old under duress and anxiety, and we write. Now, as back then, this means trying out sentences from my life, defining, using simile and imagery, relying on oxymoron or paradox to suggest the strange and ineffable. And in the process I produce something both utterly familiar and completely other. How else account for the way this tiny piece teases and haunts me thirty years later? If hope is "a feeling in your head," then perhaps writing is a buzz, a darkness, an inkling, a hosanna,

a shudder, a plea, a prayer that cloaks itself in words.

### Emily Fox Gordon

I believe I became a writer when Rosellen Brown took me aside after a fiction workshop one day and told me that I was an essayist. For years I had assumed that fiction was the only genre that really counted. I had been writing short stories in what was then the *New Yorker* style, chasing people around begging them to read my two misbegotten novels. Rosellen suggested that I attend to the strangled voice of the *boulevardiere* crying out in my fiction, and urged me to sign up for her Personal Essay workshop. I took it twice, and emerged a published essayist with a head full of essayistic ideas.

Let me say a word, parenthetically but ardently, about Rosellen's teaching. She is the most gifted teacher I've ever had. Before I saw her in action, I was skeptical about the teachability of writing. Rosellen proved me wrong. Given a spark in the student, she could do the job. She showed her students how to translate their specific critical reactions to one another's work into general terms, and then to apply them to their own work. Her workshops were like master classes—the students who observed could benefit as much as the student on whom attention was focused. More, perhaps, because their minds were free of anxiety and self-consciousness. She was the first workshop teacher I encountered who made a connection between ahistorical "creative writing"—that genre which, by some accounts, began with Raymond Carver—and the larger world of literature. She alerted us to the family resemblances between our struggling first drafts and various great works by literary progenitors—Chekhov, Woolf, Kafka, Montaigne—to whom we would never have dared claim kinship. This thrilled us, and gave us courage. She encouraged us to try different genres: like the literary equivalent of a thrifty French housewife, she deplored waste. If a short story failed, she helped us find the living nub of a poem or a play or an essay somewhere in its husk.

Rosellen's advice to me came when I was forty-five. I was discouraged, frustrated and angry, and I think if providence had not brought me to her, I would soon have given up. Once I had taken to the essay I understood why, as a novelist I had always felt like some evolutionary sport—lungfish, perhaps—forever struggling to heave myself onto the banks of fiction. With a mighty heave I could make the transition from the sea of self to the land of invention, but I never got very far before I executed a lumbering turn and gratefully resubmerged myself in the waters of autobiographical narrative. No reason, said Rosellen, that I couldn't stay there, and she produced Phillip Lopate's newly-published *Art of the Personal Essay* to show me what good company I could find in my wallowings.

In her preface to the 1994 personal essay issue of *Ploughshares* (a collector's item) Rosellen compared the essayist to an explorer, and the novelist to a "landed inhabitant" of the world. A personality profile of

the essayist emerges. From Phillip Lopate's introduction to the *Art of the Personal Essay*: "The essayist tends toward self-doubt and self-consciousness. Perched awkwardly on the rim of social life he finds compensation in observation and rumination." Yes, I said when I read these descriptions. That's me.

Is this too Panglossian a gloss? In making my last-minute conversion to essay I was able to rewrite much of what was wastefully unhappy in my own history. As a fiction writer I had been wandering aimlessly in what Kafka called the "shameful lowlands" of writing. But looking back with essayistic eyes it seemed that all along I had been serving a writer's apprenticeship. The internal writing I had been doing since adolescence was the true track of my development, not the imitative fiction I had been flogging myself on to produce. I knew this in some way, but it took Rosellen to make me recognize it. Fairy godmother that she was, she sprinkled me with her pedagogical magic dust, and I became who I was meant to be.

### Gail Donohue Storey

Gaston Bachelard wrote "...that reverie gives us the world of a soul, and that a poetic image bears witness to a soul which is discovering its world, the world where it would like to live and where it deserves to live." (Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, trans. Daniel Russell, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, p.15)

I first believed I might find my way through reverie to the poetic image one Tuesday afternoon when Donald Barthelme and Cynthia Macdonald combined their respective fiction and poetry workshops. The piece of fiction I presented was strange even to me. It went, in part: "if it is, who will be the first to admit it? (No) one no longer says so because it would be arrogant to assume such responsibility. Does it come in the windows like twilight, do we go out to watch it like a sunset? John strokes the window at the inside. The bell is on the windowsill/wondersill. When one thought of crying, like John at the wonderwindow, one rings the bell." Then I literally rang a little bell.

You had to be there, but it was as if some sound barrier had been broken. Deeply interior, rooted in both conscious and unconscious life, subtext could be shared and still remain a secret conversation. What I call writing is a nexus of obsessions, the transformation of hysteria into reverie, loneliness into solitude, the absurd into humor, the sexual into the erotic, violence into love. Things could be done with language and sound. I could learn to do them, and everything would be all right.

What was that deeply experimental story and the others that followed about? In a later one, I wrote: "The bell is a signal I devised, water ringing inside itself. whispered to him what it was all about, give him his own bell and a copy of the water. outer beings trying to

communicate itself to us about the created world, which like a crane lifts itself down piece by piece."

### Eric Miles Williamson

Me? I'm no writer. I'm a musician who writes.

I've never defined myself as a writer—and probably never will. Hell, I don't even *like* to write. It's awful work for me. I have no talent for it. When I took my SAT tests in high school, my verbal scores qualified me for remedial English. Reading hurts my eyes and my back, and writing makes me feel bad. I'd rather *play*. You don't *work* musical instruments—you play them. And unlike when I write, I never feel bad after playing a gig.

In the blue-collar slums of Oakland, California, we didn't read books. My brothers, my father and I lived in a 21-foot trailer on the lot of the Texaco station where my father pumped gas, changed oil, and busted truck tires. The furniture in the trailer was built-in, and the designer hadn't included bookshelves as part of the floor-plan.

In school we didn't read books either. Most of us who could read wanted nothing to do with books. Where I went to school, if you got caught reading books, you got your ass kicked. Books were for pussies. We wanted to get out of high school and land steady jobs at the docks or with the post office. But seeing my father stooped over pumping gas, saying, "May I check your oil, sir? May I check your tires, sir?" made me hate anything that smacked of blue-collar work. To this day the smell of gasoline makes me sick to my stomach. I was a fairly decent trumpet player, though. I come from a family of musicians—my father had played trumpet in the Oakland Symphony, and so had his father. My brothers are both musicians. I decided to try to make a living on my horn.

I got work playing in Mexican bands by night, playing rotten jobs like weddings and quinceañeras and broken-down Mexican nightclubs. Days I worked construction, digging ditches, lining the walls of sewer tubes of concrete, busting cement sacks and shoveling sand, jackhammering the floors of earthquake-fractured buildings. Eventually, I hoped, I'd be able to make a living solely on my trumpet.

Everything was fine until I ended up rooming with a tenor saxophonist. After his gigs, he'd come back to the apartment and read while I got drunk or stoned. One night I picked up a book and started reading. The book was Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. I pulled an all-nighter, read the thing cover to cover. I was 21 years old, and it was the first novel I'd ever read. I found myself in a state of near-hysterical euphoria. I had no idea that a writer could write such things, such *true* things, that a writer could use language that sounded like the way people *actually spoke* and could write about things that people *actually did*. I thought writers knocked out poems about nightingales and daffodils and about sitting around by lakes. I thought writers referred to other people as *Thee* or *Thou*.

I'd never before *read* a short story, but the next day I wrote my first, an awful autobiographical thing about growing up with the Hell's Angels. I sent it to a little magazine at the University of Nebraska, and they accepted it for publication. I'd never cut a record, but I was now a *published author*.

Writing has become a bad habit, a habit I can't kick. I'll keep on doing it, because at this point I'm addicted to it like I am to cigarettes and coffee, but when I ask the question, "What *am I*?" my answer will probably always be, "A musician."

### Annie Finch

"Look-look!"

In my earliest single memory, I am standing on the cracked, dark, uneven sidewalk of Poplar Place just outside the overgrown back driveway of 106 Liberty Avenue. Though the silent moon, sailing over the branches of the big chestnut tree, looks at us, full, I haven't seen her yet. My eyes are full of the vertical, tweed-covered laps of Mummy and Grandy, who loom beside me, their postures, like their coats, in easy harmony.

From that quiet, almost-legal moment of bestowal I remember only three drawn-out words, with long and open vowels counterpointing the steady drawn-out heartbeat of their vibrancy: "Look!—The Moon!"

They are saying it to me together, staggering their voices so they seem linked but not united, as if many women are speaking in the interstices between them, after them, before them. "Look," they call to me, taking my hand so I'll hurry, nudging my shoulders to guide my gaze towards her—she who slides through the sky in her scary, saucy solitude, who agrees to act as my beacon when they are gone.

That paean, that multi-voiced duet was the first poem I remember hearing. Its counterpointing lent me consciously, for the first time, to the chain of women. As I held on to the raw end of the chain for the first time with my small fingers, I didn't yet know it was a poem. But I was sure it was a lifeline, woven invincibly with two threads that would keep me alive and nourish my veins on the past and the future: a thread of rhythmic language, and a thread of many women.

### Mark Damon Puckett

When I discovered a pile of my naturalist great-grandmother's diaries describing wildlife around her tobacco farm on the James River in Amherst, Virginia, I knew that writing was in my blood and that what I had been penning aimlessly for many years at least had an origin.

My mother kept these journals in a box in a closet and during my junior year of college she presented them to me. Grandma Frankie

Harris typed on an Underwood typewriter—in duplicate—then rewrote her work to perfect it. She sought discrete, not just taxonomic, details of her surroundings.

There was her agony of cleaning the flues at the beginning of every summer before harvesting and finding "ten or fifteen dead blue birds" that could fly into the chimneys but not fly "up and out." There was the tick-infested raccoon caught in one of her homemade traps (yes, she was a trapper) that she scrutinizes as if it were an existential conundrum.

Not even five feet tall, she scurried about the 200 acre farm and accounted for every bird she saw, even developing a correspondence with a local newspaper writer that cited her peregrinations in his column. She thought the grackles were selfish. She felt pain watching a robin fly into her house then beat itself to death against a window one morning. She discovered a fern never before seen and it is catalogued under her name in Latin at Virginia Tech.

I was able to win my first grant as editor of these journals. As I read her work and shaped it into a book, I realized what a gift it was to receive confirmation that I was not the only one to pursue very personal writing in my family. And she did it, as a woman, at a time when women were not encouraged to write. I feel so much pride for her and have wanted to tell her in person how writing has taught, comforted, and saved me in so many ways.

There are also letters intermingled with her journals. In one correspondence to my mother, her granddaughter, Grandma Harris mentions seeing me during a visit—when I was age three. Coming to the words, "Mark Damon is a Superman," I stopped, my mouth open in surprise, a silent moment between her and me—and only between us.

Somehow, I think that her eye for the small thing transferred to me, as did her editing and her need to see with sensitivity. I believe in her presence. I see her in me: someone who not only catalogues the world but feels for the occasional hurt bird when no one else can—because they simply don't know how or where to look.

### **William Olsen**

I'd resisted for years thinking of myself as a poet and preferring to think of myself as a person who sometimes writes poems, or at least tries to write poems. I probably should keep fast to that resistance. But there was one day, about five years ago, while I was walking around a marsh lake outside Kalamazoo, my home now, thinking about Keats, and how thinking about Keats requires thinking about death and thinking about poetry in the face of death. It was so unexceptional a day and so unmemorable an experience that I now can't remember if it was fall or spring or summer—it certainly wasn't winter, I'd not have been out walking then, I'd at best have been on a treadmill at the Y. And this is a walk I'd walked again and again. I had crossed a little wooden footbridge over a filthy mud stream and was coming on absolutely

nothing novel or memorable, nothing, in the weather or the landscape, and nothing memorable in my thoughts, my vagaries about Keats, when it occurred to me that the life I'd thought free from conventional or unconventional definition had somehow arranged itself around a love of words—or a fear of wordlessness—that I would not have been walking or having the undistinguished thoughts I was having had it not been for, specifically, poetry. Up to that moment I'd harbored the illusion that I'd come to poetry upon the path of least resistance: I didn't want to work in an office like my father, then I didn't want to take all the required classes for my journalism major, then I didn't wish to submit myself to the unimaginable rigors of a life of scholarship. But here I was, on a nearly eventless day, having a nearly eventless recognition—I shouldn't be surprised that I could have been this stupid—that the life and the seasons and the schools and the houses and the towns had changed like clothes all around a few constancies of my limited self-knowledge, and that one of these constancies was poetry. I cannot and will not say I felt chosen, but I can say that at some instant on this walk I felt drawn to, or drafted by, some awareness surer than mine, as if, even, poetry had dreamed up this life, at turns ordinary and preposterous. In a sense, for an instant poetry seemed a central event and my life its horizon. I'm not at all sure I should trust or even listen to this self-serving figment, this memory, or any memory, but sometimes there is so little else to go on, and I am still trying to find out, among other things, who I am.

## Remembering Donald Barthelme

The stories about Donald Barthelme started the moment I told people that I was going to Houston to join the graduate writing program at the University of Houston. He was, of course, an almost iconic figure in the post-modern American culture, and his novels and stories—the latter often published in the *New Yorker*—had influenced a whole generation of writers, who treasured his wit, his whimsy, and his hilarious and completely unpredictable juxtapositions of language and situation. In the world of writing programs, he had the reputation of being a good but fierce teacher. There were a lot of workshop stories. There was the story about the writer who featured an annoying infant as a major character. Swinging a booted foot at a small imaginary object, Don commanded: "Boot the baby." There was the story about the writer who began reading his story aloud, only to be interrupted succinctly with: "Stop. Burn it."

I heard these stories in Baltimore. By the time I walked into my first workshop with Don, in September 1987, I'd heard half a dozen more. My first impression of him was that of an Old Testament patriarch, or maybe an eighteenth-century whaling captain. He leaned back in his chair at the head of the table, fingering his white beard, and had the annoying habit of calling on people without warning. "What did *you* think of the story?" This three minutes after you had heard the tight-voiced author read the thing; add to this the sweaty tension of sixteen would-be writers who were fully aware that they were in the presence of a Great Literary Figure and One Hell of a Good Connection, and what you got was a circus pack of nervous poodles performing for an unpredictable and all-important audience of one.

So there was a lot of writing for Donald Barthelme. Many of the stories that came into class seemed to strain to achieve that precise balance of irony and sadness, all that characteristic brilliant sprightliness that gleamed from the pages of *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* and *The Dead Father*. Not surprisingly, most of these stories fell flat on their face: some were conceited, others cute, and almost all (I thought) boring. No-plot post modernism is a hard thing to do well; if you were going to try to be Barthelme, in the presence of Barthelme, your words had to get up and fly, because the man didn't let cripples by. He was far from sporting, and sometimes it seemed that the floor was littered with small carcasses.

"Are we going to let Mr. Chandra get away with this word?" Yes, my day came too. That year I had been working on what would become *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*: a melodrama concerned with India and with

the colonial nineteenth-century British in India and the imperial twentieth-century Americans in America, narrated mostly by an Indian monkey in the presence of various Indian gods. I had been dreading bringing a section into the rarefied, minimalist atmosphere of the workshop. But I did have to bring my work to class, and as I half-expected, Barthelme didn't like it. The class, following his lead, liked it even less. It was too long, too florid, had too many characters, too much happened—there was just too much, as it were, language.

So that evening, after a poetry reading at a bookstore, I drank a beer in the parking lot, nursing myself. I trotted out all my usual defenses: The others in the workshop didn't understand what I was trying to do, they were stuck in their brainless minimalist horseshit, gutless irony-addicts that they were, damn all workshops and the stupid idea of writing programs anyway. Then a figure loomed—and he did exactly that—out of the darkness. It was Don, and he leaned on the hood of the car I was sitting on.

"I hope we weren't too hard on you this afternoon."

"No."

"I just want you to work harder."

He was quiet then, and then quiet some more. I tried to think of something to say, and the silence grew and bloomed and ripened, and finally he nodded and walked away. I sat there and tried to figure out how I should react; what he had said was so obviously supposed to be provocative that it seemed stupid to be provoked. I was working hard, damn it; what the hell was he talking about?

Over the next few months, I listened in workshop, and checked *Sixty Stories* out of the library and studied Barthelme's technique. Meanwhile, I heard more tales: how Don had helped student writers—Padgett Powell, Olive Hershey, Glenn Blake, and many others—bring their work to completion and publication; how Don had leased a copying machine and bought the paper with his own money so that writers trying to survive on teaching assistant's wages wouldn't have to pay for making copies of stories for workshops; about how he had used his own money to set up an emergency loan fund for writing students. I was impressed: Here was a writing teacher who seemed to understand the simple truth that what writers need above all to write is money, and was willing to put his out. It seemed he really did want us to write.

So I wrote, and brought another section of the novel into the workshop. He still didn't like it, and I gave up. I mean I gave up trying to please him; this wasn't out of integrity or courage or anything nice like that. It was because I had seen what he seemed to like, and I had read his own writing, and I knew I couldn't write like that. He told a whole story in three pages, and it took me two hundred just to get my protagonist born. I was from another place, and I was interested in different things, and that was that.

So I gave up, and after this burden of caring was lifted from me I was really able to listen to him in workshop. What I think I learnt was how to see a word in a sentence, and that sentence in a chapter, and all of it together, and how nothing must be superfluous—in short, how to

pay attention, how to be careful, how to do this so often and so well that you didn't have to think about it. I also noticed that Don's tastes were catholic and that he hardly encouraged Barthelme-imitation and eager-plunging-down-various-literary-dead-ends. There was some very good writing in the workshops, and those stories he nurtured impartially and carefully, with much close attention, encouragement, and good humor, whatever their native terrain.

In the fall of 1988, when I took my last workshop with him, he was recovering from surgery for throat cancer, and his voice caught sometimes, but he seemed relaxed, content, jovial, almost paternal. We had that happy and rare thing: a really good workshop. Everyone laughed a lot, the criticism was incisive but not murderous, the work was good.

Then it was my turn again, and I distributed a chapter and resigned myself to the usual long afternoon of dodging and weaving. Don came in, sat at the head of the table, and for some reason I remember the sound that his cowboy boots made on the floor. He picked up the stack of pages in front of him and said, "After reading this last chapter of Vikram's, it has become clear to me that this is going to be a major novel, and so I think it deserves a round of applause." And then he started clapping, and they all did, and I was sitting there feeling mostly embarrassment, then, later, a sort of buzzing numbness. I don't think I was able to feel happiness until the next day.

For an unpublished author, writing a long novel is like a long trek across a desert: You do it in small bursts day after day, month after month, year into year. During these times, a small morsel of praise, carefully hoarded, can give you the strength to keep on walking. I don't know if my work is going to be major, or even a novel, but in large part because of what Don gave me, I know I will finish it. Perhaps something will become of it, because Don didn't stop with money and praise. As he had done for many other students, he started sending my work out to people he knew in New York. A few months later, in the spring of 1989, I got a call from a Big Agent. Don was in Rome on a fellowship, and so I called to tell him. "That's what I thought would happen," he said. "Just finish the damn book." That summer, in July 1989, he died of cancer.

What happens between a teacher and a student is strange and sometimes combative and full of contradictions. In the ancient Indian epic the *Mahabharata*, the warrior Arjuna asks his guru, Drona, what he can give to pay for what he has been taught. Drona replies, "Promise me one thing: If you ever come against me, you will fight to win." I think what Don wanted for each of his students was what only the most selfless of teachers can want: that the student find a voice and a victory that was truly his own. Don was the most generous of teachers, and this is how I remember him.

## Black Globe

There's dust on it.  
Someone hasn't taken care of it,

someone has let it go  
from the smiling glance

of fingertips.  
A hunk of junk

with a rakish tilt,  
shores cancerous

with populated dots,  
seas riddled

and zippered by plane routes,  
impaled by its axis,

the Southern Icecap  
haloed by twelve

timeless giant clocks,  
tattooed with old-style planes,

crosshatched by dashed-off  
demarcations,

creased with puckering seams,  
the poor Atlantic

mightily dimpled.  
The Carribean has chips out of it

the size of states.  
We bought our world

from an antique shop  
specializing in stolen

graveyard angels.  
Three dollars.

It's on a bureau  
below our silk screen

from Guangzhou—  
a yellow silk moon

spouting ideograms  
into a smudged charcoal

flowering plum.  
Neither moon nor

earth are unbuyable.  
Earth can be hurt

time and again,  
its final mercy

its vulnerability.  
It lives for us

and on it we live  
and it can hurt and suck us in,

but not this globe.  
Its seas are tar,

bituminous childish nightmares,  
as much in the dark

as blood pulsing  
beneath the temples.

It is alone, so we bought it  
a blue sister,

a child's globe,  
a lawn sale find, a shrimplet version—.

It is alone, though  
with its glowworm analemma,

fifty years old.  
Soon my age.

And it moans  
now when it spins,

and its spin wobbles,  
but the beautiful names

don't fall off,  
it still spins

here in this light  
as my grandfather's spun

my childhood off the map.  
And if the adult can stop it

please don't.  
This dust ball could

break the heart  
of outer space.

Come in come in—  
our satellite dishes

are starved for a friendly word.  
I can see

my face, a shadow  
shawling black

a little blacker,  
without a single feature,

upon vast tribulations.  
Its words are white and ghosted

but I can read them.

## Lost in Place

One Labor Day some years ago, I was sitting at the dining table at my place in Eugene, Oregon, gazing out of the picture window over the front lawn at my two boys, Hudson and Alex, as they took turns splashing around in a wading pool with a small group of their friends. It was Alex's seventh birthday party, and his mother had arranged for about a dozen other boys to come over and celebrate with him. It was hot in Oregon, and the children would queue up in the most well-behaved manner and then yell like rioters as they took long jumps, triple jumps, and belly flops into the tiny pool I'd filled with a garden hose earlier that morning. Alex was loudest of all, improvising a variety of whoops, giggles, and *Ohh, mannnnn!*'s as he took his sailing dives into the grass-specked water.

"Watch, Dad! Watch!" he'd yell, and then take a sprint toward the inflated skirts of the pool, leaping and splashing down, showering that summery water on his brother and their playmates.

This might have been happiness itself, but, from inside the house, gazing up from the book of poems I was trying to read, I had the acute feeling that much of this was wrong. Except for my two sons, the hair on all the other boys was blond. Shiny yellow blond, strawberry blond, dirty-dishwater blond, or towheaded straw blond—but blond. No one else seemed bothered by this or even to notice—not my wife, who is brunette, not my in-laws, who are also brown-haired. But it drove me into an instant panic. And I began to feel angry.

I grew up among a mix of peoples both in Hawai'i and in Los Angeles. Born in Hawai'i, I spent my childhood among Hawaiians and Filipinos and Samoans on the North Shore of O'ahu before my family settled in Los Angeles in the late fifties. I went to primary school in midtown L.A., to fifth and sixth grades in Woodland Hills, and to junior high school and high school in Gardena.

We moved first to a neighborhood of apartment houses and old bungalows that housed a mix of peoples who arrived there from Jalisco or Hattiesburg, Honolulu or Hong Kong. I heard jump-rope rhymes in Japanese and the English of Southern blacks, I heard hopsotch songs from Sonora and Seoul, and I played cat's cradle with my cousins, who gave me elaborate instructions in Hawaiian pidgin English. In Woodland Hills, my family had moved on up, and that meant most of the other families in our neighborhood were white, and I felt racially isolated and socially quite lonely for a couple of years. We moved to Gardena, therefore, where there are a ton of Japanese Americans and their grocery stores, nurseries, auto-body and transmission-repair

shops, and teriyaki taco stands. I was home, and, in junior high, I had a ball learning the boogaloo and the Philly dog from the black kids based in from Compton.

By high school, I dressed and talked "black-jap" while beginning to read deeply in the literature books our white teachers assigned to us. But only the Jewish kids would talk about books, so on Friday nights, rather than rumble with recidivist car-club boys or take a date to a Chicano dance hall, I drove over to the Fairfax district with my new friends, who introduced me to their cousins who went to Hollywood High and University High. Rather than chase the waves for good surf in Hermosa Beach, I started feeling comfortable hanging out at kosher delis, the Samuel French Bookstore, all-night diners and art-movie theaters, talking Salinger and LeRoi Jones and Buñuel with kids who reminisced about Hebrew school and their bar and bat mitzvahs.

When I got bored, I went to hear jazz at Spanky's on Washington with my black friends. Or I went to the Lighthouse down in Hermosa with a white saxophone player I knew. At home, my family still did things Hawaiian—and Japanese-style—no shoes in the house, gas-station calendars from Kahuku Plantation, rice with every meal, chopsticks instead of forks, and vacations in Vegas that I avoided. And, within myself, none of this seemed especially strange. Yet I was aware I was crossing borders, that I couldn't carry with me too many signs as I traveled from one neighborhood or group of folks to another. A cultural slip could cancel my ticket-of-transit. I had become a magpie, an ethnic chameleon, a junior-league multiculti before the fact.

My own children, though, were growing up in a very different kind of world. It was all white, and, I began to think, I'd made a big mistake. How could they know about others? And how could they relate to me?

Last month, my son Alex asked for some photographs of himself as a baby. He needed them for a bulletin-board project his fifth-grade class was doing. The idea was to scramble up a bunch of baby pictures with current ones and make everyone try to match the baby with the fifth-grader.

I rummaged around in the family albums and came up with a set of snapshots of Alex in Hawai'i, Houston, and Missouri. He swam with other kids in small *keiki* ("sprout") ponds by the ocean in Hawai'i, sat alone in a fire engine and wore a fireman's hat in Houston, and waved a tiny American flag at his younger brother by the forsythia bush in Missouri.

"Oh, no," Alex groaned. "This isn't going to work."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because no one else in my class is Asian American," Alex said. "All people have to do is choose the baby with the black hair, and they know it's me. There's no mystery and there's no fun."

"Well," I said, improvising, "you're just unique, man. That's all."

"I'm tired of being unique, Dad," Alex answered. "I'm tired of being easy to pick out." I had to admit I could understand his feelings. Being different wears you down.

Eugene had been a choice of ours, my wife's and mine. She is from here and grew up feeling supported and secure. We came because we knew the schools would be good, because it was a way to give our children grandparents and an extended family, provide the base of familial and geographic stability she'd enjoyed as a child, as opposed to all the shifting around that I had done. It was safe, cheap, and manageable for the middle-class people we were becoming.

We'd met in college, at Pomona near Los Angeles, and fell in love sharing our family histories. On her father's side, my wife is descended from Mennonite farmers who moved to Oregon from Manitoba, where they had lived on a commune like the ones they'd been forced from in Ukraine and in Holland before that. The Mennonites are both a religious sect and an ethnic group. On her mother's side, my wife is descended from North Dakota Quakers who moved to Oregon after the Depression. My people are southern Japanese peasants and samurai who, dispossessed of their farms and swords, immigrated to Hawai'i at the end of the nineteenth century to work as laborers, union organizers, and storekeepers in the sugar cane fields and pineapple plantations. We recognized each other as children of a world diaspora.

She played the violin and studied music, while I set about trying to build a career as a poet, writing largely about the Japanese American past. I found work in universities far-flung from L.A.—in Texas, Missouri, and Orange County—with colleagues schooled in literature but ignorant and, I thought, scornful of the kinds of histories my wife and I had sprung from. We lived in Hawai'i for a while, then I was offered a job at the University of Oregon. It seemed an end to our wanderings.

But eventually I realized that, as an academic inducted into what Caribbean poet Derek Walcott once called "white fellowships," I had become too far removed from the world of urban ethnic and cultural diversity from which I had sprung. Living in Eugene had been happy enough for my family, and, mostly, for me in it, but some years ago I began to have problems with the town.

I grew bored with the two of three "good" restaurants, the commercial cineplexes in the shopping malls, and the company of blandness that characterizes the generally suburban life I'd fallen into. I lamented that there were hardly any black people, Latinos, or Asian Americans—no brothers and sisters at all.

At faculty mixers hosted by the dean, I zoned out. I faked my way through neighborhood get-togethers and receptions at my kids' elementary school. I was getting angry and depressed. Everyone around me talked mainly about fly-fishing, pasta salads, and summer classical-music festivals. Even the style and rhythm of their speech wore me down. It was all so complacent, untroubled, so blandly innocent of woe, that I resorted to moviegoing for my dose of the real. I shouted in

celebration at Sam Jackson's soliloquy in *Pulp Fiction*.

"We need that man in Eugene!" I yelled. The good people in the dark theater, stunned and embarrassed for me, stayed politely silent.

Failing to stand guard over myself at backyard lawn and sundeck parties, I'd kid the sweet neighbors, the colleagues and their wives dressed in cottons from L.L. Bean, try switching subjects, and even risk putting them down. When things like the L.A. riots, Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, or the Million Man March made the news, acquaintances in India Import skirts would start saying something mildly disparaging and then stop, realizing my sympathies were different.

Recently, a woman I recognized from the PTA stopped me in the popcorn line at the movies.

"Oh, Mr. Hongo," she said, "I'm so glad I ran into you. I've been meaning to ask if you'd come and speak about your native culture to my son's third-grade class?"

"Oh," I said disingenuously. "You mean gangs?"

I was becoming cruel. People now saw me as dangerous. I got quieter, meditating, reading. I distanced myself at the university, isolated myself within the town. I realized that, along with my own misanthropy, it was the ignorance and social homogeneity up there that was the cause of all this. I felt like I'd had a revelation. I told my acquaintances in Eugene that I could no longer tolerate being the only person of color they knew. We dropped each other and I started feeling better.

Now, I nod to folks, but barely anyone engages my conversation. People in the supermarkets assume I'm a foreign student on academic sojourn. I'm not supposed to be here—I'm not part of their community, but just passing through, using the post office or dry cleaner. Like James Baldwin once was in Switzerland, I have become a stranger in their village. An exile.

My conversations come largely on the telephone now, with other writers, jazz and literary critics, and documentary filmmakers.

Many of them are white, some black and Jewish, and a few Asian Americans. Another few come from abroad. They are of wider acquaintanceship. The phone chatter lasts me for a while—I laugh and get good stories, find out about new things to read and listen to, hear the latest in their lives, and gossip about publishing—but it isn't enough. I still get restless.

These days, to supplement this tricky, exilic kind of life, I've started making regular trips to Los Angeles. Sometimes I go on invitations to speak to students at UCLA or out in Claremont, to address a museum club and bookstore audiences in Pasadena and North Hollywood. Just as often, though, I make my own arrangements so I can stroll along the Third Street Promenade, cruise the 405 freeway and Santa Monica Boulevard, eat barbecue ("You don't need no teef to eat my beef!") and Chinese takeout, trying to reenter, as an adult, the world I grew up in.

This part of winter I was on my way to Riverside, riding a shuttle from the Ontario airport. I was alone in the van with the driver, a

young, streetwise guy who needed a haircut. He kept tucking and retucking his brown hair behind his ears, while the wind whipping in from the open driver's-side window repeatedly undid his work. He said that he was going to community college at night, taking courses in criminology. He was trying to prepare himself for work in law enforcement or as a prison guard. His name, he told me, was Presco Montoya.

"Presco?" I said.

"Pretty interesting name, huh?" he answered.

"Yeah," I said. "But I've heard it before. I used to know a Filipino cab driver named Presco."

"You got it," he said. "Presco's short for Precioso—you know, Precious One. My mother's Filipina from Manila—she's romantic to the bone. My father's Chicano and tough, *pero*. They met overseas when he was in the military. They come home then, had me, and I grew up in El Monte."

I was liking anything he said by then because of the music in his voice, the way he formed his sentences, the torque and torsion of his speech. It had the city in it and a touch of some kind of twang I guessed might be from relatives who came from "the Valley"—which meant the San Joaquin Valley in my old circles. I told him I knew El Monte, that I used to go to dances there at the Legion Stadium when I was a teenager.

"Oh yeah," he said, glancing up to the rearview mirror. He wanted a better look at my face, I guess. "You know, my uncle used to hang out there back in the sixties a lot, *vato*."

He was letting his voice catch even more of a lilt.

"You know Rosie, of Rosie and the Originals?" he asked, looking in the rearview again, searching my eyes for a reaction. "Sure, I know them," I said, laughing softly. "Ahh, let me see..."

"Well," he said, "she used to come over to our house a lot when I was a kid."

I was impressed. I thought back to some oldies I'd slow-danced to in the sixties.

"Angel Baby," I said, selecting the right tune from my memory.

"She used to go out with my uncle, you know?" Presco said. "I remember they would *lean* against the door of the pickup."

And the way he said that—slowing his speech way down, *decelerando*, shifting his hands on the wheel, scrunching up his face and his shoulders—made me laugh. I saw his uncle leaning a foxy lip-glossed Rosie up against the Turtle Waxed cherry red door of a citified pickup chopped low for cruising. She wore a sparkling sequined dress, and he was planting some deep, love-searching kiss down her throat, his rough hands riding up on her nyloned, barrio-soul-singer's leg. It was the L.A. version of a Cinzano poster, a kind of family photograph from the old days, and I got it simply by passing the time with the limo driver.

In L.A., whether I'm walking up the ramps and through the turnstiles in Dodger Stadium or ordering chow fun at the Far East Café in Little Tokyo, I feel a little grateful, even excited, to be reinhabiting

uncelebrated zones of the familiar.

A Japanese American friend might pick me up at my hotel, pulling up to the curb by the lobby in a Lexus the color of silver fox. We'll drive over to the West Side, stroll through the downscale streets where the community nurseries and Nisei import shops used to be in the fifties, and then find a place where we can order a nouvelle-sushi lunch. We'll talk about my trying a screenplay, doing some work that will be seen by millions. Distracted, I'll notice that the waitress looks like the sitcom Morticia Addams, except that what I thought were the cutout black sleeves of the dress are really dark, spidery tattoos covering her arms. Jiving with her, I find out her name is Sachiko, that she's the daughter of a community activist I used to know. It's a frail, almost absurd connection, but a connection nonetheless.

And inevitably, there will be someone—maybe a guy name Sol, short for Soldofsky, who went to Uni High—who tells me some intricate, speech-synopated story about his ex-girlfriend Vivian-from-Scarsdale, who, once a publicist for Tom Synder, is now housewifed to Sol's schlemiel cousin Stephen-from-Scarsdale, big deal, and they're rich as thieves, don't work for it, have a house in Topanga, buy their groceries at Bristol Farms Nieman-Marcus-for-tomatoes markup crazy.

It's not solely the style of the telling that does it for me, but Sol will have a hand in concomitant gesture I'll recognize as the Jewish sign of a sentimental love of place from the Lower East Side, itself evocative of my own infinite memories, then lean, some lazy, old-fashioned way, up against the outer brick wall of what used to be the Lighthouse jazz club out near the Hermosa Beach pier, and I'll be home suddenly, feeling the fog funky-chicken in from slow offshore breakers I can't see but hear, like a good pulse running in my blood. I'll turn and smile to my companion then, take a drag from the cigar I got at the beachside stand, invoke the night in 1968 when I was busted at the Old Burbage Theater for watching a performance of Michael McClure's play *The Beard*, and walk up the strand with him, feeling puffs of wind fill up my sports-coat pockets like handfuls of spiritual change.

In L.A., moments like these occur for me all the time now. I seem to need their humble affirmations in order to survive. My sons, sweet innocents in their unpitiable cloisters of sameness and comfort, need to know these things, too. They need to know that diversity is not danger. I need to bring them into this brave new world.

## Creed

I believe in bluntness, and bluntly speaking,  
it's not the heat, it's the stupidity  
that's stifling. Dead air from here to  
the border: Mexico is burning. *Seek shelter,*  
says the tv. *Don't breathe.* I don't  
believe in tv, the way it back-slaps, acts  
boss. Round the clock, it won't shut-up  
broadcasting some politician or others'  
dirty laundry. As if it were news  
that people are lonely, lead lonely lives.  
That they smear themselves everywhere  
trying to put out the sadness and burning.  
*A terrible tragedy,* says the tv. I believe  
even the sun and stars are crazy on fire.  
Not like the footage of embassy bombings.  
Or the monks immolating themselves.  
Or how twice nightly—at six and ten—  
planes crash for no reason, any reason.  
None of that. I am talking the burning  
of the invisible, the kind that blazes so  
and to such degree, that I would sooner  
die that see it stop, and not because  
I don't love life. I do. No matter how  
stupid or plain wrong the words sound,  
I mean them, dammit. My heart is singing,  
abyss and all, like a rock at the end of its rope:  
I believe I'm just what you're looking for.  
Give me a chance. I can save lives.

## Cold Ode for the Starlings of Baltimore

Once, in a December bitter even for Baltimore, I paced one sun-baked glassy afternoon into its darkness.

I had been sweating it out in one of those high-rise rooms sealed off from the Chesapeake and from the one step separating me from two men I could see far down below.

They were turning down what looked like bedcovers the same stiff color as their overcoats, and easing down, and sitting down and leaning back, their feet banked in the hiss of the sun off the bright ice of the building I might have seemed to them a part of.

While I looked down, their voices whitened and flattered whatever warmth they issued back out into the coldest of cloudless skies, and I wondered how it was possible to pillow their heads on the same cold steps Poe might have closed his eyes forever on.

All I can see now, thinking of this, is dusk heaping up whatever dust it can.

—And now God's ugly, that starling, on the ledge again.

I had forgotten the two birds we were that whole time spent together separately, the starling huffing up against the heated glass while I walked to the door and back trying to be done with something I couldn't name, let alone shed.

The closer I came to the windowsheers, and to the windowpane, and to the bird, and to what was beyond it, the more I had to stay away.

There are some places you can't beg your way into, or out of, this being an example—one leathery wing for company and one drunk dead.

One can't stay.

The other won't leave.

## Generosity and Intelligence

Abundance of generation, a yielding more.  
And a picking-out of insight from afar.

For instance, Babe the cat: old, fat, demure,  
Fond of routine arrangements: her dry food here,

Wet food and water there. The basement door,  
For access to her litter box, always ajar.

Intelligence distinguishes, in her,  
The sound of not just one, but another car

As well, among so many. But the blur  
Of difference is a gulf or barrier

Between the species that intelligence's fire  
Can't leap unaided-Generosity's frontier:

As when the real estate agent, unaware,  
Clicked shut that basement door and left. Nowhere

For Babe to move her bowels, and no one there  
To work the door she scratched at. No one to hear.

Mewling, upset, uncomfortable, unsure,  
She paced the Persian carpet, passed the armoire

And closets with their inviting atmosphere  
Of cloth and leather. She quested everywhere,

All through the house in her confusion, before  
Generosity and Intelligence made clear

The place to drop her pellets: the bathtub floor  
Of the spare upstairs bathroom, eerily near

Means of disposal and clean-up-that austere  
Room of clod tile, where she least would interfere

With the dark customs of us other ones who share  
Her dwelling, our needs that she did not ignore.

## "Sperm No. 186," excerpt from *The Bad Girls Dinner Party*

Lexie drove to the Annapolis Mall in her red Beetle to pick up Kissy for her fertility appointment. An orchid right out of Edgar Allan Poe bobbed in the Beetle's bud vase. It seemed Lexie herself could want a baby, but the thought was as distant as her own mother. Even feeling her way into it led to a vast nothingness.

But Kissy have a baby? Kissy was a reverse spin doctor to the elected and the appointed in her efforts to keep her clients out of the media. She worked mainly behind the scenes through caterers, hairdressers, bartenders, massage therapists. She oiled the Washington machinery by social machinations and everyone paid her in favors, which she exchanged for other favors. It was a sensationally effective barter system. She climbed out of her Boxter in the parking garage under Nordstrom, in tennis skirt and sunglasses.

"You need a racquet to choose a sperm donor?" Lexie said.

"I want to look like I'm on my way to tennis. If I get pregnant, I'll say I had a fling on Nantucket. If I don't, no one inside the Beltway has to know."

For a spin doctor, Kissy was obsessed with personal privacy. She was recently widowed after ten ecstatic years of marriage to one of Washington's most high-priced attorneys. Diplomatic and fun, Townes had helped her negotiate her potentially clashing circles of friends: Maryland and Virginia aristocracy, Cabinet secretaries, congresswomen, media moguls, White House officials, a vast empire of straight, gay, and bisexual la-di-dahs, luminaries, appointees, and functionaries.

"I thought you were going to use Townes's frozen sperm," Lexie said.

"They lost it. It was stolen or something."

"Was it insured?" This baby thing was following Lexie around like a curse. Everyone who hadn't done it already was doing it now. She immediately felt guilty. If having a baby would help Kissy survive her grief, Lexie should be all for it. "I thought widows were supposed to wait a year before making any major decisions."

"At my age, it could take a while," Kissy said. "What I thought was Shopping Affective Disorder turned out to be Baby Affective."

"Wouldn't it be better to do the man first?" Lexie had a man but no baby. She drove at the edge of the speed limit to beat the storm.

"That could take forever. I'm still grieving, for crying out loud."

Once Lexie almost had a baby, but no man. "You're pregnant,

sweetheart," the gynecologist had said. "You had sex with this boy, you have to marry him." Lexie saw that doctor only twice, the first time to be fitted incorrectly for a diaphragm and sent home without instructions. She'd found him herself, in the phone book.

An ambulance sped by, lights flashing, as they drove into Historic Annapolis. In the parking lot of the doctor's building, big drops pelted them when they ran for the door. Corridor after corridor, they made their way deeper into the maze of offices. At every turn, Lexie asked directions while Kissy hid behind her racquet.

"If we were sperm, I'd get there first," Lexie said.

They stood behind two floral delivery men in Dr. Tyler's waiting room. The puce carpet had more pile than a regular ob-gyn's, more like a plastic surgeon's.

"Am I nuts?" Kissy said. "I'm crazy, aren't I?"

"As long as you've thought it out."

"I went to a shrink inside the infertility loop."

The receptionist slid open the window to accept three huge flower arrangements from grateful new parents of triplets, then slammed it shut.

"I'm over forty," Kissy said. "This'll never work."

"It's obviously working for somebody." Lexie leaned on the buzzer.

"My eggs are old and tired. Kaput."

"Then what are we doing here?"

"Tyler's the best, but he doesn't take Medicare."

The receptionist opened the window a crack. "Be with you in a minute."

"In a minute I'll be menopausal," Kissy said.

Lexie took a seat next to a table piled with pamphlets on various aspects of assisted reproductive technologies. "If you get pregnant, you won't be able to fit behind the steering wheel of your Boxter to drive from one cocktail party to another in your catsuit."

"It's just nine months." Kissy served an imaginary tennis ball.

Lexie didn't know how to tell her she wouldn't pick up where she left off, accessorized by the baby as if it were a Judith Lieber purse. She wanted to be supportive, but how would Kissy fly off to Aspen or New York or the south of France the way she did? What if one of her major friends had a crisis and needed spin yesterday?

"I'm ready to totally refocus," Kissy went on. "I just want something meaningful to show for my life. The girls I went to Holton-Arms with have babies instead of my Shih Tzu."

"Those girls have husbands."

"They hate them but like the lifestyle. They knew they were making a mistake when they walked down the aisle. I can afford to go straight to the baby, work in the man later." She flounced onto the sofa like an aging cheerleader, looked sorry she'd brought Lexie on board.

Having a baby would make Kissy harder to place, man-wise. Lexie tried to visualize what the baby meant to Kissy. She saw a charming cottage in Nantucket on a summer afternoon, Kissy on the porch with other tanned mothers drinking gin-and-tonics while her little girl

played with other toddlers with red pails and blue shovels. No men were around; they were back in the city earning money to pay for the lifestyle. "You don't have a baby to give meaning to your life—you have one because you and some man love each other so much you create a third being to lavish all your extra love on," Lexie said. "In theory."

"Why don't you and Adam have a baby?"

"Adam takes up all my lavishing, and I take up all his." Lexie was terrified of a responsibility Kissy wasn't even aware of. "My mother said once you have a baby, you never have a free moment the rest of your life."

The walls of the waiting room were papered with photos of babies. Cute ones, fat ones, bald; tiny girls with full heads of dark hair, boy twins. But no mothers or fathers—they didn't want to broadcast they'd gone the fertility route, or they looked like shit from giving birth and staying up all night.

Dr. Tyler's nurse materialized. "Mrs. Green?" She grinned at Lexie. "I'm Linda. Follow me, please."

Kissy stood up in her tennis outfit. "I am Ms. Green." She took off behind the nurse, dragging Lexie by the wrist. "Even Linda doesn't think I'm mother material."

Lexie already felt a failure as devil's advocate for this possible baby.

Linda took the big chair behind the desk, lifted an eyebrow when Lexie took the seat beside Kissy. She was a knockout in her tight white uniform and white angora sweater. Wind-chime earrings jangled in her teased hair. "What sort of daddy do you two have in mind?"

"My appointment is with Dr. Tyler," Kissy said.

The doctor's corner office, with floor-to-ceiling windows, spread out like a putting green. His screen-saver was of flying golf balls.

"He doesn't donate sperm, he plays celebrity golf."

Linda flipped through her looseleaf binder of sperm donors. Her purple nail polish matched her lipstick except for the brown lipliner. "Most of these are medical students."

"They do it for the money?" Kissy said. "Too poor."

"They're going to be doctors," Linda said.

"Any HMO execs?"

"Intrauterine insemination deposits a boatload of spermatozoa right up her twat," Linda said to Lexie. "You okay with that?" She turned away to answer the phone.

Lexie turned to Kissy. "She thinks we're a couple." Linda was off the phone before Lexie figured out how to correct her without sounding as if she thought there were something wrong with that.

"It's five hundred dollars a pop or I can give her a special of six shots at it for twenty-five hundred," Linda went on to Lexie.

"What if the first six don't work?" Kissy said.

"Three hundred and twenty-five each additional, and we can step you up to hormones for six cycles. Then maybe we might do a laparoscopy, but that's more invasive."

Money was no object to Kissy, as long as the sperm came from a professional. "How do you recruit these guys?"

"Word of mouth. Everyone wants to deposit in Dr. Tyler's bank. I make them fill out a twelve-page questionnaire. The married ones have to tell their wives."

"What if I don't want a doctor's sperm? Do I go to a different bank?"

"FedEx it to us if you get it somewhere else." Linda huffed over her binder. "One of ours is a dentist, actually. I do have a dentist and a banker. I don't know how the banker got in here, but he's really smart, good sense of humor—not a macabre sense of humor like the doctors—"

"Gorgeous?" Kissy said.

"You want gorgeous, the dentist is six-feet-four, Polish-German, also part Lebanese, very, very nice guy—"

"How much does he weigh?"

"He's proportionate, okay? Two hundred and fifty, maybe."

"Got a thinner gorgeous one?"

Linda sighed and pushed her hair off her forehead. "My bangs are driving me crazy," she said to Lexie. "My truck broke and I stood in the rain this morning with the mechanic until my hairspray gave up."

Kissy reached across the desk for the looseleaf binder.

Linda slapped her hand and grabbed it back.

"To be perfectly frank, I know all the guys on this list. One is balding, but what the hell, balding comes from the female."

"Who would you pick?" Kissy said.

"No.186 isn't tall, but he's brainy. All of them are brainy, but this one has a lot of common sense and he'd complement you that way."

"What does she mean by that?" Kissy said to Lexie.

"I wasn't going to let him in the program," Linda went on. "He had a ponytail and earring, but was born in Minneapolis like me. His mother had blue eyes, brown hair, went to Goucher. His favorite movie is *Pink Flamingo*, his favorite book the Bible. His father went to Notre Dame, was in retail. His maternal grandmother choked to death, but it was sausage, not genetics."

The man who impregnated Lexie was a black musician. It was the late sixties. It wasn't love or sex, but attention. Lexie's mother told her the price of sex was a baby. Back then, Lexie believed the price of attention was sex.

"Tell me more about this guy," Kissy said.

"He's nearsighted, vegetarian. His hobbies are rock-climbing and playing the mandolin. He's thirty, never been in the military so you don't have to worry about herbicides. His values are his health, family, girlfriend, career."

"Girlfriend?"

"Don't bother being jealous," Lexie said. "You don't get the man with the sperm."

"From what you're telling me," Linda went on, "he's what you're looking for. If you don't mind a Presbyterian, he's your skin tone, hazel eyes—"

"You said smart?"

"What are you worried about? You're no dummy and it's your egg."

He's not like the guy who came back with his jar for instructions."

"Has his sperm been tested for speed?"

"They don't need to be real speedy; we put them up there close to the Fallopian." Linda stood up. "One more thing—it's probably just beer and wine, but he checked the box for seven to ten drinks a week."

Lexie and Kissy argued over whether that was a plus or a minus.

"Hell, I drink fourteen to twenty drinks a week," Kissy said.

"That's what worries me," Lexie said. "It'll have Fetal Alcohol Syndrome while still a zygote, or whatever you call it."

Linda put her hand to her forehead. "You two talk it over while I go take a Tylenol." She walked out of the office, took the donor book with her.

"God's sake, don't wear her out," Lexie said to Kissy. "She's in charge of all those sperm, you need her on your side."

Kissy read aloud from a piece of paper Linda had left on her desk: "Penile Injector Flow Sheet. Why can't I just take the donor book home? No.186 sounds good but I want a look at 1 through 185. How many do you suppose she has altogether?"

It wasn't like comparison shopping; they'd drive themselves crazy sorting through all the variables. One might be a genius with Mayflower ancestors, food allergies, and overactive sweat glands. Another could be the most desirable stud in their stable but get his ejaculate surfing the Net for porn. "Let Linda steer you to the right one. She's met all these guys."

"She doesn't know me."

"She's like a personal shopper with some idea of your tastes, but what she really knows is the merchandise."

"She can't know a sperm."

"What do you want, a warranty? She's giving you options, so you can choose a Honda, a Lexus, or a Ferrari."

"Which sperm was the Ferrari?"

Lexie stood up so fast she knocked over her chair. "Any of these donors would work, okay? The sperm bank is like a stock index fund."

Linda came back, more composed. Her bangs were combed behind a headband, and she wasn't the headband type.

Lexie had exhausted her metaphors. "She'll take 186 and like it."

"I will?" Kissy sulked.

"If you want a ride back to your car."

"We're always pleased when the partner takes part in the decision," Linda said to Lexie.

Lexie looked Linda in the eye. "We're just friends."

"Used to be," Kissy said.

Linda sighed as if she'd heard all this before. "You won't be sorry you picked 186. He's one of the few who checked the box that said 'Would not object if the child chose to meet me.'"

Kissy perked up.

"Of course in this case I'd recommend against it," Linda went on. "But it's a good indicator of kindness and generosity."

"You'll tell 186 if I conceive with his sperm?"

"We'll give him an extra sixty bucks."

"To take his girlfriend out to dinner." Lexie didn't want Kissy to try to make it even more worth his while.

"Let's do business," Kissy said.

"You're going to call me the day you start your period," Linda said. "Then we'll talk about how you use your ovulation predictor kit."

"My what?"

"You have to order it, sweetheart. Didn't I tell you to do that?"

Kissy's Nantucket baby fantasy didn't include ovulation prediction.

"Take her shortest cycle, count back seventeen days," Linda said to Lexie. "That's the day she starts using the kit, between four and six p.m., three drops of urine on the pad. Get it? Got it? Good."

"How long will it take to become pregnant if all systems are go?" Kissy said.

"Expect six to nine months. I have some girls who call me hysterical every time they get their period. Don't do that. It irritates me."

Lexie gave Kissy a significant look. "We very much appreciate your time," she said to Linda.

"What a bitch," Kissy said outside the office. "Linda hates me."

"Your child, your future, your child's future as far as college and being a success in life depend on Linda, so don't fuck it up."

They squeezed into the elevator. Kissy was a little more pushy than necessary.

"Sorry," Lexie said to the small crowd. "We're trying to have a baby."

The others edged away.

The thunderstorm had passed, it was just raining normally. Lexie felt weirdly protective of Kissy. She opened the car door for her.

"Did you get all that?" Kissy said.

"I'm totally confused." Lexie felt like one kid explaining to another how babies come from bellybuttons. "Something about follicular ultrasounds, semen processing, then your intrauterine insemination."

"The semen has to be processed? I thought 186 was a done deal!"

"It's been harvested. It's been frozen and apparently has to be thawed and washed. Or washed and thawed, I forget."

"Like fish!"

Lexie once asked her mother how she felt when she found she was pregnant. "You were a most unwelcome surprise," she said, and smiled so Lexie wouldn't take it personally.

"How old was your mother when she conceived you?" she asked Kissy.

"My age. She thought she was too old to get pregnant so she had a fling."

"On Nantucket?"

"Martha's Vineyard."

"See?" Lexie said. "The repetition compulsion is making you have a baby by yourself to heal your wounds as your mother's surrogate spouse."

"That's the great failure of psychotherapy," Kissy said. "Even when

we know why we're doing something, we still have to do it."

"You could decide not to."

"How can I let little 186 down now? Do you think she'll be a girl?"

By the time she pulled up next to Kissy's Boxter in the Mall garage, Lexie was into it herself. So what if Kissy didn't know what she was getting into—Lexie would come over and walk back and forth with the baby so Kissy could get some sleep. She'd throw a shower so the baby would have pink everything, Washington's best diaper service, and a feminist mobile over her crib. She'd shop in the little bad girls' department for ruffled dresses and white patent leather shoes with tiny straps.

"This was a terrible idea." Kissy hopped out of the car with her tennis racquet. "Little 186 is lucky I haven't yet been inseminated."

Lexie rolled down the window. "Go home and start trying to ovulate."

## Single Room, Ocean Crest Motel

In the one saucepan that tilts, like a toy,  
on its base, I boil water for coffee.  
To answer the silence, I narrate myself:  
Rinse the pan. Put away the groceries—  
soup, crackers, cereal and milk—nothing  
that can't be fixed on the Cervitor hotplate.  
Between me and the cookies I'll create  
small dramas of temptation and resistance.  
This afternoon I found a dead sea lion.  
High above the tide line, skin gone, its bulk  
bloomed cerise on the grey sand, beckoning  
scavengers—gulls, me—in for a closer look.  
Bending to the mini fridge, I hear age rush  
toward me with the plangent roll of the Pacific—  
noise of deep bells clamoring from a distance,  
more vibration than articulate sound.

## Memoirs of a Wishy-Washy Left-Liberal

Hazlitt said it all for me, as usual, in an essay called "On Jealousy and Spleen of Party." Unfortunately I seem to have misplaced the book with that essay in it, so I'll have to paraphrase the gist of what he wrote: that the alignment of an individual with a political party or ideology commits the person to tit-for-tat distortions and vituperations in public.

A friend phoned the other day in an outrage, because of some conservatively-skewed *New York Times* article by a correspondent whom he knew to be "on the right," having gone to school with the fellow. "We have to do something about it," my friend said. "We have to counter this nauseating reactionary propaganda." He used the word "we" with some justification, knowing that I belonged to the same left-liberal faction of intellectual opinion he did. But I had no intention of dashing off an angry letter to the *Times*, or whipping up a satiric sendup of the offending journalist for the *Nation* or the *Village Voice*. The newspapers would always be filled with opinions that ran counter to mine, and if I were to retort to each one I would be worn down like a fastidious fourth-grader's eraser. This quietism, if you will, is not so much a matter of "Resist not evil" as an economizing of energies, which I find myself, as a writer in middle age, increasingly obliged to do.

When I was younger, I had energy to burn. I could go on protest marches, dash off manifestoes and still write poems, essays and novellas. Moreover, I didn't know who I was—I might yet turn into a leader of men, a writer like Lamartine or Malraux or Havel who ends up in the government. I had a slight tendency in that direction: in 1968, for instance, I got elected president of Alumni for a New Columbia, a leftist group formed during the Columbia Strike as an alternative to the official alumni organization. We were sufficiently naive to think that revolution was around the corner, and that everyone needed to get "organized" by joining some group. Alumni for a New Columbia's main tasks were essentially to support the student strikers: raise bail for those arrested, provide medical assistance in the event of police brutality, and file *amicus curiae* briefs in court. It was actually a rather small organization: two hundred or so on our mailing list, and a hard core of two dozen working members, including a few lawyers, a few old CP organizers from the Maritime Union who had scurried out of the woodwork, a militant shrink, and writers, writers, writers like myself, who had graduated only a few years earlier and envied the students their rebellion. The group seemed larger than it was because we writers were always issuing statements to the press, about how "shocked and appalled" we were by the "insensitivity" of the university

administration.

I ended up becoming a kind of group spokesman, going on radio talk shows debating the conservative alumni, and inveighing against the university's complicity in "racism, sexism and the Vietnam war machine." A good deal of the time, it seemed to me, I didn't really know the facts, but I was a quick study and an adequate bluffer. Besides, no one was listening to each other anyway: it was an example of what a friend calls "synchronous narcissism." I was against the war, I liked the attention and the excitement of thinking on my feet, but I could never get over the queasiness of indulging in a public rhetoric which took me further and further from my own interior language, of which skeptical ambivalence plays a large part.

I remember once being interviewed by a Pacifica-WBAI reporter in a live hookup before a rally. We were standing in front of Ferris Booth Hall facing the Columbia quadrangle, and we were looking out at the lawn, and he asked me a question about strategy and as I started to frame my answer a bluejay hopped about, twittering on a nearby branch. It so mesmerized me, that bluejay, that I forgot to speak, and the interviewer began sweating, since nothing is more terrifying to radio people than dead air time. Finally I muttered the requisite clichés, but I could never forget that a part of me was truer to watching the bluejay than to worrying about the impact that a new gymnasium in Morningside Park might or might not have on the adjoining Harlem community. (By the way, decades later I am no longer sure that the detested gym would have been a bad idea. What looked at the time to be Columbia's "imperialist expansion policy" could have helped anchor and improve a decrepit public park.)

I was in over my head, in short. I had started reading Marx and going to classes at the freshly-formed SDS Liberation School, where I was fascinated by the very rigidity of left-wing sectarian thought. It was here I first heard that we must cast overboard Dostoevsky (a "reactionary"), Erich Fromm (a "liberal"), Nabokov (an "elitist") and Hamsun and Celine ("fascists"). I had no intention of dropping so many of my favorite writers, and thought even at the time that this grading of writers by standards of political correctness alone was near-sighted, but I was intrigued nevertheless by the clangorous sound of conviction and dismissal.

It was here, too, I first heard human rights and civil liberties contemptuously referred to as "bourgeois freedoms." Could it really be that these noble ideals were nothing but a smokescreen, as Sartre and Fanon argued, by the ruling class for the domination of people of color? Could it furthermore be that a revolutionary situation justified the suppression of free speech, assembly and religion—as well as mass executions of class enemies? A chilling thought. It was the onset of that political-academic process by which "humanist," "universal" and "mankind" came to be treated as dirty words.

What I most resent from that era was the degree to which the truth was being distorted and manipulated for party ends by progressives, men and women of good will. Of course the United States government

lied massively and daily, and its misdeeds in Vietnam and the ghetto were the greater wrongs. But we left-liberal foot-soldiers were also shamelessly lied to: told, for instance, that the People's Republic of China had no capital punishment, only "re-education." China was the model, the wind from the east.

This notion of the "exemplary" revolutionary model, what a comedy! How well I remember a German graduate student, Fritz, who had come to New York to study the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican ex-street gang turned political, which he kept referring to as "exemplary." Personally, I was scared stiff whenever the Young Lords appeared in public, with their paramilitary red berets and macho military discipline. This was the period when the student left fantasized making political alliances with street gangs like Chicago's Blackstone Rangers—a prospect which also scared the shit out of me. Maybe the difference was that the vast majority of student radicals were middle-to-upper-middle-class, estranged from their backgrounds of suburban privilege, whereas I had grown up in the tough Brooklyn ghettos of Williamsburgh and Fort Greene/Bedford Stuyvesant, had seen street gangs up close, and wanted no part of them.

Most exemplary of all the exemplaries was of course the Black Panthers. That some of the police actions the Panthers complained of turned out to be shootouts between rival street gangs is a part of our history we still have trouble accepting. At the time, we even told ourselves that a burglary or a shootout was, in a sense, a revolutionary action. Huey Newton, who we later learned was something of a psychopathic criminal, a pimp who killed a prostitute, dealt drugs, robbed warehouses and so on—was our movement's prince and poster boy. By virtue of looking beautiful in a rattan chair, in a ubiquitous poster, he was granted all our love, his Paul Newmanesque ambiguous smile more compelling than Che's saintly-loser scowl. I don't mean to say that I swallowed all the Panther rhetoric at the time, but I certainly felt a kinship with their "struggle" (as we then loved to say), and on one occasion even went out of my way to demonstrate that. I think of it fondly as the Night on the Barricades.

It was during the winter of 1969, when the police were making brutal raids on Black Panther headquarters. The raids always came in the early morning hours. Fred Hampton was shot to death in his sleep in one of them, and hundreds of ammunition rounds were traded in the Los Angeles shootout. Everyone I knew had the same reaction of stunned anger. A call went out for supporters to assemble in front of the Oakland National Headquarters to *protect the Panthers*. The assumption seemed to be that the police would not dare to storm Panther headquarters with an integrated mass of witnesses around.

I was living in Berkeley at the time, and feeling that I had to "do something." I arrived around 10 PM at the Black Panther storefront, which was near the border between Oakland and Berkeley. Strangely, everyone who had come to demonstrate seemed to be white. We looked at each other and our eyes snapped away in embarrassment. I could understand that no top-level Panther, no Bobby Seale or David Hilliard,

had bothered to come down and address the volunteer brigade, but at least the Minister of Fundraising or the Chairman of the Anti-Fascist Alliance! Only two black high school kids had been left behind the counter to accept donations and sell the newspaper, and the Berkeley ideologues, hoping to rustle up a sympathetic political discussion about repression with the novitiates, found them ill-informed. It was going to be a long night. There was nothing to do but leaf through the police brutality literature at the counter and wait.

A framed portrait of Joseph Stalin hung above the counter. Not one of my favorites. What I am doing here? I began asking myself. If the police do stage a raid, we'll all be massacred. If they don't come, we'll be disappointed.

Eventually, the group formed a "presence" in front of the storefront, moving in a slow circle, talking about everyday stuff: teaching loads, landlords. A stiff wind blew across Shattuck Avenue. The cars whizzed past on their way to the freeway without braking for a closer look. So many traffic lanes separated us from the other side of Shattuck Avenue that we could only make out a fuzz of pink and green stucco.

Occasionally a person on foot approached us, a sympathizer, but he was immediately pressed into our midst. If only he had stayed a proper distance, looking at us, say, from the traffic island, we might have felt less deserted. He would have served us better by being a spectator than by joining us. Without an audience we were walking in circles for the benefit of a lone street-lamp. We might as well have been protesting the coldness of the night, or the unapproachable distance of the stars.

At midnight the temperature dropped further and we tried to keep warm by walking faster, or rubbing our arms. Someone went inside for a cup of hot Postum, and brought out some additional cups for the others. I was lucky enough to get one. We were suddenly in high spirits—who knows why? Maybe it was simply that the absurdity of the situation had been acknowledged and accepted. If the police should come, we had nothing but this hot Postum with which to arm ourselves. We must remember to throw it in their eyes.

## At the Ear, Nose and Throat Clinic

One of those appointments you postpone  
until anxiety propels you to the phone,  
then have to wait too long for, to take  
an inconvenient time... Late in the day,  
an old man and I watch the minute hand

on the waiting room wall. I've papers  
to grade, but he wants someone to talk to,  
and his attendant's rude, so he turns  
his whiskery face to me: "Y'know, I lived  
my whole life in Waltham, worked 40 years

at the watch factory—oh, that city used to be  
so beautiful, now it's a mess, those Cubans  
and Puerto Ricans, they ruined it."  
Coiled in his wheelchair, he's mad  
for company, probably scared he's dying,

\*

and so am I. I don't remember Watch City  
as beautiful the year I was eleven,  
when Merle and I rode the Grove Street bus  
to Moody Street to shoplift haircurlers  
and Pond's Vanishing Cream, nickel items

at the Waltham Woolworth's. It was  
an old factory town, wooden triple-deckers,  
water rats swimming in the oily river.  
Merle and I didn't risk a furtive life  
of crime in well-kempt Auburndale

where we thought we were well-known,  
and canoers paddled the same Charles River  
past our homes. And I wonder still  
what could have vanished when we rubbed  
the mystery elixir on our silky cheeks?

His cheeks sucked in, this geezer could be  
my gentle grandfather forty years ago, so  
I ignore his racist overture and agree  
Waltham *was* beautiful, as the attendant  
takes his Social Security card,

and whistles: "Boy, are you old!"  
then mutters something else in Spanish.  
The number must be low.... "1936—  
that was the first year of Social Security,"  
the old guy brags. The hostile kid forsakes

our ancient history, flexes his muscles.  
He's probably been listening  
to insults for an hour in the ElderVan,  
he's bored and angry—why should he be  
nice? Yet hungry for a distracting

fact or story, I encourage the grandfather,  
I want to be treated well myself some day,  
when I'll need it even more than I do now...  
*My little bids for attention, my birds, fragile  
fluttering words, desire to be visible and heard...*

"FDR was okay, wasn't he?" I'm playing  
90, it's what I do to make us both  
less lonely, reminisce as if we'd shared  
the '30's, as if I'd been there, come  
from Sicily or Limerick, a seamstress

earning her hard living one town over.  
I always sat this way with Doc, years  
after he'd retired, his best treasure  
(besides my golden mother) a gold  
pocket watch, a handsome Waltham watch—

a different time, when the things  
a person held or owned weren't many  
but were permanent, a part of who you were.  
So the elegant watch confused me toward  
the idea my little dentist grandfather

had some connection to the company,  
 as if he'd labored there, a master craftsman,  
 had been rewarded by a grateful boss.  
 His bit of luxury, the swirling monogram  
 on the back (which opened with a click),

IR, for Isaac Rosenberg, timepiece  
 connected by a chain to a safety pin  
 at his frayed striped trouser pocket;  
 another pin secured his Shawmut bankbook,  
 deposits he'd made decades before

\*

that I'd inherit, \$214, Shawmut branch  
 nearby the long-gone Waldorf Cafeteria  
 where he idled week-day mornings  
 with his cronies, also reminiscing,  
 I suppose (although then I didn't think

of it), the Good Old Days before  
 the motorcar, before their children  
 moved away. Dexterity and skill gone, too,  
 from his arthritic hands. He relished  
 those mornings! The black-and-white

tiled floor, the nearly empty tables,  
 the Perfection Salad, Welsh rarebit,  
 the "bloomberry pie." The counterman.  
*They serve an elegant porridge there,*  
 he told me, gourmet of the ordinary,

*State-of-Maine-ah* grandfather, my *mainiac*.  
 The soon-to-be-widowed wives elsewhere,  
 polishing mahogany veneer, or playing  
 bridge, or shopping Coolidge Corner  
 from butcher to baker in prescient

black dresses. Old men and women  
 so relieved to be rid of the burden  
 of one another for a whole morning,  
 of the tired bickering sentences  
 of long American marriages, of pain

and disappointment. What memories  
they'd had of courtships long since passed on  
to grandchildren, and half-false anyway,  
like studio photographs, mythic stories  
they could live with; now forgotten,

the mistakes they'd been too fearful  
or devout to rectify. I miss that  
cafeteria, the whole *idea* of cafeterias,  
although Doc never took me, just pointed  
to it on our Sunday drive, repeating

paean to gray porridge, something no  
description's glow could make me want.  
Waltham had them, too, free-fire zones  
a kid alone could enter with five cents  
for huge iced cookies, black-and-whites,

\*

half chocolate, half vanilla, all Crisco  
and white sugar, chewed in gluttonous  
companionable half-light, wonderful—  
But who'd know that now? Who cares?  
Merle and I did everything subversive

we could imagine—which wasn't much.  
I'm sure I cruised Sin City in my mind,  
decayed old town—nowhere—but to me  
forbidden fruit: the 5 & 10, eyelash  
curlers, odd metal torture instruments

I smuggled home that pinched my lids  
and made my lashes angle wildly up,  
delinquent startled in the bathroom  
mirror; Tangee lipsticks the size  
of my little finger, unflattering coral;

pink girdles I'd eye furtively, wondering  
that I'd have to wriggle into one someday,  
or wear the bony corset my grandmother  
assured me was my fate. Oh, esoteric glamorous  
puzzle of the vanished vanishing cream...

•

Later, not so much later, the first day  
of my driver's license, I drove the family  
station wagon down Moody Street and banged  
the traffic policeman's rubber perch.  
He jumped down before it bounced the street,

and yelled me over in a rage. Or maybe,  
he was kindly, it's my criminal terror  
I remember still, of punishment fine-tuned,  
my ruined life, my new rights vanishing.  
Hardly a threat, I know now, the feckless cop.

I gripped the steering wheel so hard  
to stop the huge recalcitrant Ford, doomed  
to lose my brand-new temporary license—  
How could I think, my budding power stripped,  
I'd ever get the chance to live or drive?

## Creusa

Many times after he had cleaned his brushes and scrubbed the oils and acrylics from his face Romero had walked below her second-floor hotel room on Toulouse Street on his way to his favorite bar, The Dungeon. He had heard the sound of a flute playing solo and had thought the player very skilled. Sometimes Romero would stop and stand and he would listen in the humid delta night for a long time, wiping hot pools of perspiration from his forehead with his forearm. He would listen to the flute whistle low beneath the electric whirring of the cicadas and he would wonder if he could paint the song the flute was playing, if he could make the oils swirl and trill and crescendo and diminuendo and dance like notes of color yet still represent something from nature. If he could paint like the flute played he would paint something very good.

But Romero could not tell what it was about the flute's songs he liked so much, why they were so different from his own work; he didn't even know what songs they were, who wrote them, where they came from. Perhaps it was that though the flute was a tangible thing, the music was not. Perhaps that was why he liked the songs. Romero used paint and brushes and canvas and when he was through the finished product was just a rearrangement of things that already existed. But the music, once played, was gone, and existed only in the infinitely resonating echoes of memory and space. Romero did not like to think about this too much because he had not yet even perfected his own imperfect medium, so most of the time he did not stand and listen for a long time.

Romero had never actually seen her, but the nights he walked home from the bar instead of driving he would see her vaguely defined silhouette passing back and forth across the sun-browned window shades and she would still be playing. All the while he had been drinking Scotch in The Dungeon she had been creating, and none of it was left. Why isn't she playing somewhere where people can enjoy her music, Romero wondered. He had always thought of art as something that needed an audience, that wasn't complete until it had stood the test of criticism, and that was why he thought it so important that he someday paint a very good painting again and let people see that he still had it in him to paint a very good painting. He had always thought that art wasn't art until someone else had perceived it, that art could not exist in a vacuum, that creating art for only one's self was the lowest form of masturbation. But the girl with the flute was not playing for anyone, so far as Romero could tell, and yet he could not think of her

music as anything but art. And if what she was doing was art, then what was his work? Many times Romero had stopped in front of her house after drinking many Scotches and listened to her music and he had studied her vaguely defined silhouette.

Romero could not tell from the silhouette how she looked, but strangely it did not seem to matter how she looked.

One night Romero decided to walk home because he needed to think and he did not want to go back to the house just yet and he was still very drunk. The streets were not quiet and he could not tell the buzz of cicadas and mosquitoes from the buzz of electric wires and neon lights. Cars passed by and the drivers did not know who he was only that he was a man who was drunk and a man who was walking. Romero tried not to listen to the sounds of tires thumping into pot holes and prostitutes calling out of windows to other men on the streets and people laughing and sometimes not laughing. Romero was a painter and he was used to seeing and not listening, but tonight he tried not to listen and the more he tried the more he listened and all he wanted was to not hear.

Romero did not hear the flute when he reached her hotel. Her light was on but there was no silhouette and no music and still he could hear only street sounds and he did not want to hear them. He stood outside and tried not to be drunk but he was drunk anyway and still she would not play the flute. He might have said something but he could not tell if he had or not. Romero sat on the sidewalk, his back against a cold iron lightpost, and he waited for her to play.

She did not play and Romero did not know what to do because he wanted to hear her play so he walked into the lobby and up the rotting and splintering wooden stairs and he did not like the way the stairs creaked as if they would not hold his weight. He walked down the corridor and stopped at the door he thought was hers and he knocked twice.

"You may come in," came a female voice.

Romero opened the door and saw her for the first time. She sat on the bed with the flute in her lap and her feet did not touch the plywood floor. The bed was not made. She wore a long black dress and her ankles did not show. Her hair was long and stringy and bleached blond with black roots and her eyebrows were shiny black. Her eyes were painted with a great deal of makeup, not like a whore, but like an actress who had not yet cleaned up after a performance on the stage.

"You're not playing tonight," Romero said.

"I am Greek," she said.

"You play very wonderfully."

"Tonight I do not play."

"I would like it very much if you did."

"You have heard me before. You do not need to hear the flute tonight."

"Tonight I especially need to hear the flute."

"I cannot play for you to listen."

"I am Juan Romero. I am a painter."

"Yes," she said. "I am Creusa and tonight I do not play the flute."

Romero sat down in a chair and asked her if she had anything to drink and she said yes she did, she had rum. It was not good rum but it was rum and they poured drinks and they drank.

Romero wanted to paint her. He wanted to paint her with her flute and paint the music too. He drank more rum and wondered how he would do it and he thought of the painting of the whale-spouts in *The Dungeon* and how he did not like it now.

Creusa had not looked beautiful at first, she was short-legged and short-bodied and unathletic and her skin was the same bleached color as her hair and her skin and her hair were whiter than the exposed sheets of her bed. But now Romero studied her figure as if he were going to paint it and he saw that she had the figure of a Reubens woman or a Durer woman and even her plumpness was very beautiful. To paint her, Romero thought, I would have to paint like she plays the flute. When I paint a subject the subject ceases to exist and only the painting remains and the painting is not the subject anymore but only paint and canvas. But to paint Creusa correctly I would have to take something from her and put it into the canvas and paint and perhaps I cannot do that. She can play the flute and the music is both her self and music at the same time; but a painting—can it be both paint and her at the same time also? Juan Romero poured Creusa another rum and he poured himself another rum.

"Play your flute for me."

"I can only play if you do not listen. Promise not to listen and I will play."

"I promise."

"Then I will play," she said. "But I am not playing for you and if you listen you will not hear what I play."

"I won't listen."

She lifted the silver flute to her lips and closed her eyes and her eyeshadow glittered in the lamplight and she tilted her head down and Juan Romero watched. She held the flute in her fingers more delicately than he had ever held a brush and she blew air over the flute and the flute made no note but Romero heard the air hissing low and sure and it sounded as beautiful as a note.

She pulled the flute away and opened her eyes and she looked at Romero. "You're listening," she said.

"No, I'm not," he said.

"Stop listening to my music."

"Yes," Romero said.

She played again and Juan Romero tried not to listen. Again she blew a long breath of air over the mouthpiece, but this time Romero listened to other things. He heard footsteps in the corridor outside the door and he heard a bottle break below on the street. He heard her take in air and he imagined he could hear her lungs filling beneath her dress. Someone coughed in the room next door and a door slammed shut. Romero picked at his index finger with his thumbnail and he heard the click of flesh peeling.

She was playing a long note now and he tried not to listen but it wasn't working. No matter how hard he tried to listen to certain sounds the note she was playing seemed to be the base of them all, the tone underlying all the noises of the hotel, of the city, of everything Romero could hear. She began playing different long notes, holding them longer than Romero imagined possible, especially for such a small woman. It seemed that her notes were the key in which all sounds were played and each time she changed notes the key of all sounds changed at her command.

She played faster and faster. Romero kept trying not to listen and he drank more rum and he did not feel very drunk anymore. He heard her fingertips sliding across the keys and he heard the keys slapping against the pads of her flute. He heard her take in air and he heard the hiss of her breath across the mouthpiece. The vibration of his ears seemed to make their own sound and the sound he heard was not only Creusa's music nor Creusa's breath but every sound humming through the New Orleans night. Romero knew that even if he wanted to he could not listen to her music alone now. Her music was no longer isolated, it was a part of something much larger. Romero could not listen much longer.

He did not realize that she had stopped when she stopped. He sat slumped in the chair and she stood over him and nudged him.

"I am finished," she said.

"I did not listen."

"Yes," she said.

"It was very nice."

"You are tired now."

"I need to rest," he said.

"We will not make love," she said. "You have heard enough for tonight."

"No," Romero said.

## Three Views on the Crucifixion

*Jesus said, "Woe to the flesh that hangs  
from a soul. Woe to the soul that hangs  
from flesh"*

*The Gospel of Thomas*

Dear Meat: you have a problem we can't fix.  
You can't be saved, since you're not spiritual.  
You may as well just suck that crucifix,

Curl like a dog that licks an injured paw  
Over and over, just making everything worse.  
Your disease is what you are, and all

The tricks, the spells, the quoted Bible verse—  
*This day you shall be with me in Paradise—*  
Are proofs the soul will kill to get a divorce.

Rib cage burst to mouth, and mouth to vise  
Too clear for teeth, and teeth too sharp for lips,  
Lips too cut for anything that's wise...

You sit at the bar while little girls with hips  
Fight over you, or what they think you are.  
One is angry, and would love to cash your chips

With a nail in either wrist, a nail to star  
The ankle's nebula together loud.  
I could have called an angel legion here

Or disappeared into the milling crowd,  
Laughing as they crucified my double.  
*I don't belong here!* We say this when in doubt,

Or when it's clear we can't seduce our trouble.

\*

The demons of mercy came to me, and they

Weren't wearing much, as if to tempt the flesh  
 Of me turned to skinless, moaning  
 Meat. I wanted them inside me, like bone  
 Beneath a wound, bruised and aching to poke  
 Bloody air. I wanted them to take  
 Control and whip me into whatever shape  
 You need to take the nails right up the wrists.

The demons of mercy licked my skin, my nipples,  
 I felt as pretty as Jesus on the Cross,  
 His perfect body, mostly nude, and cut  
 Like vinegar, not wine. Oh, Christ is hot  
 For you, he wants the part you keep inside  
 Your mouth, the pearl that only tongues of flame  
 Stiff up to tongue. And when you speak in foreign  
 Languages, your lips produce new blood.

And don't forget the crown of thorns. I want  
 Mine forged of white titanium and wrapped  
 Like a bustier around my waist, as tight  
 As flesh bites down on soul, and won't let go.  
 Oh, little girl, the world is coming to an end,  
 You may as well just let the boys come pull  
 Your hair, the way I let them suck my side—  
 The only thing they draw is wine and water.

\*

Dear Gas: the orthodox are not so sure  
 The soul arises without heavenly flesh.  
 And anyway, who'd want to be so pure

You'd lack the eyes to see with, skin to touch  
 Those sexy angels, and their diaphanous gowns  
 So clear you can see colors through, like fish

In lacey nets, the ruby pinks and browns  
 They like to rub against your spirit back  
 As if by accident. Don't get me wrong,

I know the flesh can take you off the track  
 And dump you in some barroom all alone  
 With country music and a mood so black

You'd blow your brains out if you had a gun.  
 That's why everyone I know's unarmed:  
 Depressive, we would suck the bullet home

In hopes it hit the burrow of the worm  
That coils around Pleasure. So crucified,  
It would be worth the flat and useful burn,

Meat free of consciousness, free to decide  
If tongue and skin, exploring space, should frisk  
Each other, blood and muscle, or retract inside

False teeth, that candy-ass spear of a leafy kiss.

## The Bisbee Donkeys

*Lowered in by pulleys and belts,  
donkeys were once used in the  
Bisbee Mine to haul carts of ore.  
Some lived as long as seventeen  
years in the mine. Most went blind.*

Going down, they must've kicked,  
fighting for a last breath of real air, a final  
glimpse of light. Below,  
they must've stumbled over iron-rutted tracks  
until darkness thickened, shadows disappeared.

Here, I should remind myself  
animals don't think, can't differentiate  
between justice and fate,  
have no knowledge of dust,  
how it packs lungs, smothers desire.

They have no memories  
of wet, green grass. Still,  
beneath bright planets, a dispassionate moon,  
if only for an afternoon, an occasional night,  
the miners could've hauled the donkeys out.

And here, I could change the story,  
write that they did. But I prefer to think  
of those men as incapable  
of such cruelty. They wouldn't haul  
the donkeys out, only to drag them back,

considering, especially, the newest arrivals  
who knew only a mother's shaggy flanks,  
her black milk, born  
into the palpable pitch  
out of whatever instincts, urges, even if hobbled,

nevertheless break free.  
How blinding all that sudden light would be,  
that unfathomable blue.  
A kindness then. By the men  
who day after day had to coldly

ratchet themselves down, descend,  
Stygian, with shovel and axe,  
the pinpricks of their lantermed miners' hats  
a constellated sky brought underground:  
distant celestial animals, fixed, wheeling.

## Nessun Dorma

No one sleeps, each window flickers and glows,  
the highways hum all night with loaded trucks,  
and stores never close in hell. At all hours  
patrons are checking out the latest thing  
in vacuums, nasal spray, and valance covers.  
The freezer section has the newest foods  
like farm-raised buffalo in pepper sauce  
and why wait till tomorrow to try the features  
of TVs that turn on when you come home?  
There's plenty of parking and it's so well lit  
beneath the blank night you could read the paper  
or have a snack while listening in your car  
to the radio's top forty countdown.

## Model Home

The radio's top forty countdown barely  
emits white noise, perched on the breakfast bar  
where also are waiting ceramic cookies  
on a plate and a glass of painted milk.  
It's neither silk nor ivy, nevertheless  
it trails along the window sill. A few books  
are staked out on the brass etagere  
to keep the rooms from floating off like flakes  
of paint from prairie farmhouses, the weather  
bearing down, the wind, the sun, the great  
blank places out west so honest and restless.  
The imagination's hungry without beauty.

## The Sun Was Veiled

Imagination is hungry without beauty.  
Honest work, back-breaking work—lugging water  
or chopping a house out of the sod—may build  
your character, but the imagination  
demands release. If no clouds rise, no rain.  
Next hail flattens the crops or solid clouds

of locusts, shimmering where light strikes their wings,  
descend to eat every green thing, then the roots,  
the flour in barrels, harnesses, blankets,  
the sweaty handles of pitchforks, tree limbs  
that snap under their weight, and the green stripe  
through a girl's dress as she screams for help.  
No one sleeps, each window flickers and glows.

## From Hampstead To Houston

When I tell people that I'm working in Houston for four months, those who have been there say, "My god! The drive from the airport!" They mean the drive from George Bush Intercontinental Airport, down Interstate 45 or 59. It's a ten- or twelve-lane highway, flanked by teeming feeder roads, and you career along it to the gathering rhythm of power pylons, used car lots, motels, the cacophony of billboards selling burgers, judges, vasectomy reversal, everything exposed and unashamed, the great aesthetic shock of America in all its barbarity and convenience. After twenty minutes or so, the famous downtown towers of Houston appear in a distant silhouette across the utterly flat and uncharming landscape. The freeway traffic hurtles towards them with daunting confidence, and before long you are right up beside those thousand-foot-high buildings, looking amongst them from the circling elevation of the road as the chasms of the streets flicker past. They have an extraordinary presence, the glamorous giants of the 70s and 80s half-obliterating surviving brick-clad structures that were giants in their day, and spelling out already the fiercely Darwinian message of this boom city. Then they are behind you, and you get a confused hint of the rest of the place, which looks to a British eye like an endlessly extended suburb. Houston is now the fourth largest city in the United States, but it is hard to imagine when you arrive that you could ever come to like it, much less, as I think I did, to love it.

Houston is full of space—partly because there is a Texan endlessness of space for it to use, partly because so much of it has been knocked down. Any journey across town runs through zones of emptiness, intermittent blocks of ruin and decay, garish disjunctions, seams of poverty. It is a car city, second in that only to Los Angeles, and the parking lots are themselves a part of the pattern of emptiness. They give an odd rhythm to much of downtown, like a half-cleared game of cyclopean solitaire. Newer buildings there aim at concentration by being raised on plinths of parking-garage eight or twelve storeys high. In between them are numerous other vast parking-garages, sometimes half disguised, but distinguishable by the oblique lines of their inner ramps. The buildings themselves are often linked by passages below ground, to avoid the astounding heat and humidity of the summer, so the sense of empty space is subtly intensified. There is no Manhattanish bustle between office and subway (there is no subway); just the coming and going of the cars.

In my early days there it was perhaps some unacknowledged form of homesickness that kept me perversely reading the wonderful fat news

dition of Pevsner's *City of London*, revised and expanded by Simon Bradley. I found myself repeatedly escaping from the shallow architectural culture of Houston (founded 1836, the year of Texan independence) into imaginary rambles through my own city (founded 1600); and indulging a slightly self-conscious relish for the lanes and ivy-halls and melancholy churches of London, alongside a faintly upercilious dismay at the trashiness and sprawl of my temporary home. Bradley has written an enthralling introduction, giving a historical overview of the growth of the City and bringing out to the full its oddity and insularity as well as its almost ungraspably layered density. To marvel at it was a kind of defense mechanism while I struggled to absorb the initial disconcertment of Houston, so torrid and extreme, so faceless or recklessly ugly, its inner life so hidden. I am still haunted by the number of windowless buildings there.

Houston's Pevsner, and my main means of imaginative entry to the city, is Stephen Fox, a professor at both the large and unlovely University of Houston, where I am teaching, and the elite Rice University, which has a beautiful campus laid out by the Boston architect Ralph Adams Cram just before the Great War; Cram's original Byzantine-eclectic halls and quadrangles are still being gracefully augmented by sympathetic architects such as Cesar Pelli. Fox is the author of the covetable AIA guide to Houston, published in 1990 and so covering the immense expansion of the boom years between the Arab oil embargo of 1973 and the mid-80s slump, a revised edition appeared in 1999. His knowledge of the place is inexhaustible, scholarly, loving but not uncritical, and all the more remarkable in that he does not drive. There is something touching about this last fact, as a testament to his own devotion to his adopted city (he comes from the far south-west of Texas), and to the constant readiness of others to take him round. Houston needs its defenders and exegetes. It is not a tourist city, and it strikes me early on that Houstonians don't expect their environment to be admired, and are wonderfully generous to anyone who shows an interest. Fox flatteringly offers me a Houston tour, on the obvious condition that I take the wheel.

The Sunday afternoon agreed upon is one of heavy rain, and everything we see is craned at through the splosh of the windscreen-wipers. Yet oddly I can't remember the impediment, and recall only the communicated pleasure of looking, and the new sense of logic as the growth of the city is explicated: the competitiveness, the accelerated flux of fashion and money, the westward migrations of the rich, the impact of one or two key developers. The contrasts are certainly astounding. Houston has no zoning laws, and the mood of planning *laissez-faire* is both exhilarating and melancholy. Something, like nothing, happens anywhere. The downtown area once contained the mansions of the rich, but they have all gone; some of those baking dusty parking-lots were once their gardens. Elsewhere "little" twelve-storey office buildings of the boom years were mere teasers for vaster projects which never had time to be built. Or as a commercial development ran into the slump it

turned into a residential one, to slightly eerie effect. Just occasionally an owner held out, and an older house huddles stubbornly in the shadow of the surrounding high-rises.

Stephen directs me to go through the former Fourth Ward. It is an old African-American quarter, much of it demolished to make way for new middle-income housing in the horribly bastard sub-postmodern style common in Houston—fanlights, balustrades, other bits of tat. Beside these, the late nineteenth-century rows of tiny wooden shotgun cottages along potholed or unpaved roads exhibit an architectural dignity that is only a part of their eloquence. Most of them are well kept up. One or two have collapsed into the engulfing vegetation of this swampy place. Then you lift your eyes and just beyond the trees, startlingly close, the downtown towers loom and glitter. Stephen says how moving the Fourth Ward is, and I feel deeply touched by it myself—as a late symbol of close-knit urban life in a city that is all suburban dispersal and avoidance of focus; and a poignant architectural survival in a city of such rapid erasures. But apparently the black mayor does not support the preservation of these archetypal Southern working-class dwellings. And one can see that they perpetuate (if that is the word) the original distinction between the white downtown and the adjacent black area which serviced it. Later I find myself questioning my surge of emotion. Later still, an African-American friend speaks of the place as a kind of disgrace. When I suggest showing it to a friend visiting from England he says, "My god! Don't take him there!"

The flatness of Houston. An early arrival on the bayou sailed straight past it without noticing, so utterly did it lack elevation; certainly the later mania for elevation is part of the city's crudely defiant dynamic. When landscape is reduced to invisibility the buildings take on a new supremacy. Living on one of the steepest roads in London I find the flatness after a while emotionally oppressive, and book a flight to San Francisco, really just so as to see a hill. True, there is a northern area called the Heights, which sounds as if it ought to be the Hampstead of Houston, but the altitude in question turns out to be a mere 23 feet: not enough to notice, at least until a tropical storm comes in and the rest of the city is underwater. Otherwise it is only from the raised race-track of the freeway that you get any kind of view over things. Or of course from a high building itself. I. M. Pei's 1,002-foot-tall Texas Commerce Tower has an observation deck on the 60th floor, a good way short of the summit. From it you look down into the Deco crown of a nearby 20s block, and across other rooftop areas not quite meant to be seen. The rest of Downtown clusters around, but its glamour is reduced and exposed. What strikes you more is the leafiness of the rest of the city, much of which is almost invisible among trees, browning now in the late quasi-Autumn. It is like a poetic resolution of the vacancy and transience of Houston, as if nature had reclaimed the place. It looks at least like a garden city; until you see, far off, the secondary downtown of the Galleria area, and the glinting monolith of Philip Johnson's Transco Tower.

Johnson is perhaps the most conspicuous architect in the Houston cityscape. He was brought in by the Menils, the city's great artistic benefactors, and his later career is interestingly represented here. First there is the economical Miesian mini-campus of the Catholic University of St Thomas, built in the late 1950s, a place and moment at which, as Stephen Fox says, "the spirit of the new entered Houston." Nearly twenty years later he designed with John Burgee the first of his giant commercial buildings, Pennzoil Place. It stands towards the edge of the downtown cluster of corporate towers, and makes a subversive play on them by actually being two towers, only ten feet apart. Their surface is refinedly Miesian, articulated by close-set bronze verticals, but in the dynamic play of forms and angles Johnson is his own man. Pennzoil Place becomes one of my favourite Houston sights, constantly changing as one circles round it or walks through the narrow ravine between its two parts—which mass and merge and separate again with a lightness and tension never quite achieved, for example, by the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

It is a repeated dull shock to glimpse, between these finely honed forms, the sterile and bombastic Republic Bank Center which Johnson built seven years later on the other side of the street. This is one of his buildings which blows up a traditional but alien form to a colossal scale—like the broken-pedimented tallboy of his famous AT&T building in New York. Here it is the pinnacled stepped gable of a Flemish cloth-hall raised in overtopping triplicate seven or eight hundred feet. It must be said that it's a popular building with Houstonians, and in a sense a trademark one amongst the relative anonymity of its neighbours. If the Transco Tower is more successful it is because the language it adapts is that of the visionary skyscrapers of the 20s and 30s; like much new design of the 80s and 90s it has a slightly camp quality, as if it were imitating a long-ago imagining of the future. Also it stands alone, like Cesar Pelli's more blockish but very American Canary Wharf tower in London, and its soaring glass surfaces, like Canary Wharf's stainless steel ones, help make it a theatre of sublime effects when seen from a distance in storm, haze or sunset.

I watch a documentary about the Loisaux family—three generations of demolitionists. Their technique is described, not quite accurately, as implosion: they hollow buildings out and then collapse them inwards; and there seems something efficiently nihilistic about this, unlike the dogged poking and swinging of bulldozers and iron balls, which dramatise the doomed resistance of the structures. We see them at work removing the inner walls of great sad inter-war apartment and office buildings, thirty-storey hotels with ballrooms at the top and huge neon HOTEL signs stilted up on the roof. One building has gone from being a hotel to a masonic temple to a private home: an odd recession. The Loisaux are perfectionists, bringing down their prey with the minimum of charge in the exactest area. We see them demolish the Douglas Building in downtown Omaha: rough brick side-walls and grandiose corniced and pilastered street façades. One set of charges

weakens the building, a second set brings it down. Each victim looks indescribably obsolete in its last erect moments; yet the technique is devised to assault what is essentially modern about them all: their immensely strong metal or reinforced concrete frames.

Demolitions of a slower kind are depicted in an exhibition of Paul Hester's photographs of Houston, *The Elusive City*, shown at the Menil Collection, the serenely long and luminous museum by Renzo Piano which is one of Houston's most treasured resources. Hester's vision is rather at odds with it: he has a clever eye for what is actually seen but rarely isolated and framed: his subject is less architecture than the spaces between architecture, that interstitial emptiness which is so potent a part of Houston but not of New York, or New Orleans, or San Francisco. He observes the obviously ephemeral—shacks, strip-joints, neighbourhood Tarot parlours—alongside the monumental sheen of bank lobbies and Downtown towers too tall to fit the frame. Like any close observer of a place he loves, he produces anecdotes and memorabilia, but he also has pictures with no discernible subject at all: a bit of freeway, an empty parking-lot, figures waiting at a bus-stop in a featureless street. And then he has pictures in which the monuments themselves become nothing: the demolition of the Shamrock Hotel, or of the colossal blank cylinders of the Rice Elevators. He shows the Memorial Baptist Hospital ripped and trashed against a beautiful but pitiless background of night-lit office towers.

I go to visit a friend who is converting the former Southern Pacific railway headquarters into lofts. This grand bleak brick-clad nine-storey building of 1911 stands at the edge of the Downtown Historic District, an area belatedly defined in the hope of protecting the few original things that remain along the bayou and round the old market square. Changes of use, which people seem not to have bothered with much in Houston up to now, are a necessary part of this scheme. The enormous Rice Hotel, once the social focus of downtown, derelict for twenty years, is now being refurbished as apartments. The local basketball hero Hakeem Olajuwon is converting a magnificent Doric bank into a mosque and Islamic study centre. At the Southern Pacific building, all the interior walls have been removed, as it might be after a preliminary visit from the Loiseaux family, except that in this case the architects await instructions from purchasers as to how to redivide and disguise the space. The reinforced concrete frame of the building has been revealed, and the vast interiors have an almost Roman seriousness and monotony—I mean ancient Roman, though the exterior design refers remotely to a Renaissance palazzo. The elevator has been demobilised while asbestos is removed from another part of the building, and we are trapped on the top floor, pacing about and drawn anxiously to the windows, with their airy view down Travis, the processional axis of downtown, which today is characteristically sunstruck and deserted.

Boom-town thoughts. I remember how in 1982 the TLS, which I had recently joined, moved to Clerkenwell, an area of obsolescent trades, little printers and watch-menders. I liked it, despite its shabbiness and

apartness and oppressive closeness, for a vegetarian, to the bloody squalor of Smithfield meat-market. But then, as that convulsive and destructive decade continued, Clerkenwell changed. It was discovered, clustered around a deep railway cutting half way between the City and the West End. People moved in and out. And it wasn't all bad. The stinking little cafés and third-rate trattorias were suddenly supplemented by bracingly pricey restaurants. Galleries, wine merchants, even night-clubs opened. There was refurbishment; but there was also massive destruction. A sombrely impressive Piranesian warehouse along the railway line was demolished, and replaced by a meretricious street-long office block in the ubiquitous grey and maroon of low-class 80s development. Bits of post-modern nonsense were quickly run up. Whole blocks of small-scale Victorian commercial building were reduced to rubble and anonymous new projects begun. And then the boom was over, and the building stopped, and for years and years there were just the concrete stumps, sprouting their reinforcement rods, and empty half-built frames encroached on by weeds and small bushes. They were premature ruins, and very symptomatic ones. And they seemed to have a curious formal kinship with the real ruins, the Blitz bombsites which were still numerous when I first came to London in the early 1960s, and the last of which, deployed as rough carparks between shattered walls, survived into the late 80s. This was the devastated City that Pevsner had had to describe in his original volume of 1957, and I realise that I was lucky to have seen it on the threshold of its delayed (and sometimes disastrous) redevelopment. The presence of the different types of ruin keeps coming back to me as I drive each day through the gappy urban fabric of Houston; though Houston, of course, has never been bombed by anything but money.

I am invited to Galveston by some friends, and taken on a windshield tour by Ellen Beasley, co-author with Stephen Fox of an excellent architectural guide to the town, and author of a book on the alleys which run behind the houses, like long, straight, slightly countrified mews. Galveston is a boomtown of the later nineteenth century, a port, founded, like Houston, on cotton, and a major point of immigration. It covers a long narrow island, and the journey to it, past the oil refineries and petrochemical plants of Texas City, is one of the most hideous I can remember making. Galveston suffered from a terrible hurricane in 1900, and a decade later from the opening of a ship canal to Houston, forty miles to the north-west, which effectively took its business away. In its decline it became famous as a gambling town. Nowadays it has a long delightless front but behind it an amazing amount of the old town survives and has been beautifully conserved. We drive round block after block of raised white wooden houses, distinguishing the different formats, the variety of gables, the follies of the rich, and again the little back-houses in the alleys, where the mainly black servants once lived. The town has its own architectural hero, an Irishman called Nicholas Clayton, who designed a number of vigorous

polychrome brick buildings in a medley of late Victorian styles. Ellen is deeply attuned to her subject, and has a particular appreciation of the simple geometry of the more modest houses, which have their own subtleties of vocabulary and proportion. About ten times she says, "This one is my favourite." We drive on and on, through derelict black neighbourhoods, boarded-up social housing, past the last surviving bordello, gaping behind a chain-link fence, and out to the desolation of the town's edge: the vast ruined Falstaff brewery, zones of salt marsh, distant lines of grey concrete silos. The car humps over half-buried railway tracks and caught up in Ellen's emotion I find myself nodding and murmuring in melancholy appreciation of a scene that is undeniably frightening and sad.

The writer Phillip Lopate described Houston as a "covert, lyrical city," and as the months go past these unexpected adjectives slowly reveal their rightness. The lyric has the lightly thudding rhythm of the car's tires over the concrete blocks of the long straight avenues, and the sedated pace of American town traffic, so different from the communal frenzy of the freeway or the clogged aggression of London driving; as well as the generalised sense of aptness which comes from falling in love with a place. And as the open-sesames of Texan hospitality follow each other, new districts unfold. One evening it's a party in North Boulevard, the street at the humblest end of which I live, but which, as one drives eastward, grows grander and grander by the block, until it is a triple avenue of live oaks flanked by 1920s mansions—now Spanish, now French, now severely Georgian, now picturesque Lutyns Tudor. The juxtapositions are as surreal as you could hope for from a new plutocracy, but the houses themselves have space to breathe, unlike comparable avenues of the same period in North London, with soulless and pretentious neo-William and Mary manor-houses packed side by side. Next it is a party in the Heights, in a different kind of twenties house, a corner bungalow with candles on the porch and a profound suburban calm in the roads which seem to stretch away forever under the trees.

And then, one of the best surprises of Houston, a visit to the architect Cameron Armstrong, who lives in one of a number of "tin houses" he has built in the West End (so named from its being the end of the long-vanished Blossom Street trolley line). These houses are sided in Galvalume, an alloy produced in flexible sheets which can then be crimped into rigid folds. They pick up on the forms and scale of various metal-sided sheds in the area, but their language is sophisticatedly modern. Armstrong speaks of the influence of the great Viennese architect Rudolph Schindler, who worked so inventively in the climatic conditions of his adopted California; and certainly the interiors of Armstrong's own house and of others he shows me round display a refined modernist apprehension of the ever-changing subtleties of light, the multiplicity of whites, and the ambiguous margins between inside and outside. There is grandeur and intimacy, and surprising relations between the two. Unlike most new Houston domestic architecture the houses are both practical and beautiful. Where brick can reach 140

degrees and turn a house into a kiln, and stucco absorbs the damp, and wood rots and drops off, the tin is resistant and cools quickly and should prove to have a long life. The architectural press seems to have passed Armstrong's work by, but its new synthesis of modernism with its industrial roots is highly original and satisfying.

In general it is artists and collectors who have commissioned the best—though not by a long way the biggest—new houses. It takes time, a good guide or good luck to come upon these quiet unannounced enclaves, leafy, almost rural-feeling little quarters in the West End or along the inner curves of the bayou, where you sense a sudden change of terms, and the vulgar suburban conformism of latterday Houston is shot through with originality and beauty.

## Varanasi

A rainbow of bright saris left drying on the steps at dusk.

Had tried to write a ghazal and failing that.

Where marigolds by the armful festoon an empty stage.

His boxers having fallen below the knees.

His tongue all adolescent angst.

As lights of a distant railroad yard plug into the world grid.

The dirty Ganges say it three times fast he said.

Turtles poached for food.

Water buffalo cooling off on slabs of earth-colored stone.

## Sequence of Images

WALTER HOPPS

Untitled, 1955/1956

Light drawings on silver bromide photographic paper  
Approximately 10" x 8" each

VIRGIL GROTFELDT

*Healing Plants* 7, 1996

Coal dust, watercolor on found ledger paper  
17" x 11"

VIRGIL GROTFELDT

*Out of Sight, Out of Mind* 2, 1997

Coal dust on Braille paper  
22" x 11" (broad center peapod shape over circle, antennae at top)

VIRGIL GROTFELDT

*Out of Sight, Out of Mind* 5, 1997

Coal dust on Braille paper  
22" x 11" (two swirling forms connecting with thinner "tails"; open coal circular mass at top)

VIRGIL GROTFELDT

*After Gethsemane* 3, 1998

Coal dust, watercolor on found ledger paper  
17" x 13 1/2"

ABDEL HERNÁNDEZ AND FERNANDO CALZADILLA

*The Market from Here: Mise in Scene and Experimental Ethnography*, 1997

Four Views

Multimedia installation presented at Rice University, Houston, Texas, in the context of *Artist In Trance*, with the Anthropology Department at Rice; collaboration by Hernández and Calzadilla, presented in Venezuela in 1996, and then at Rice in 1997.

TRACY HICKS

Salt Cured Books, 1992 through 1999

Wire-bound books, salt and wax

Dimensions variable

(Back text image for this page: Walter Hopps, detail of box for untitled photochemical light drawings, 1955/1956, made from television cue cards, found by Hopps in alley in Los Angeles)





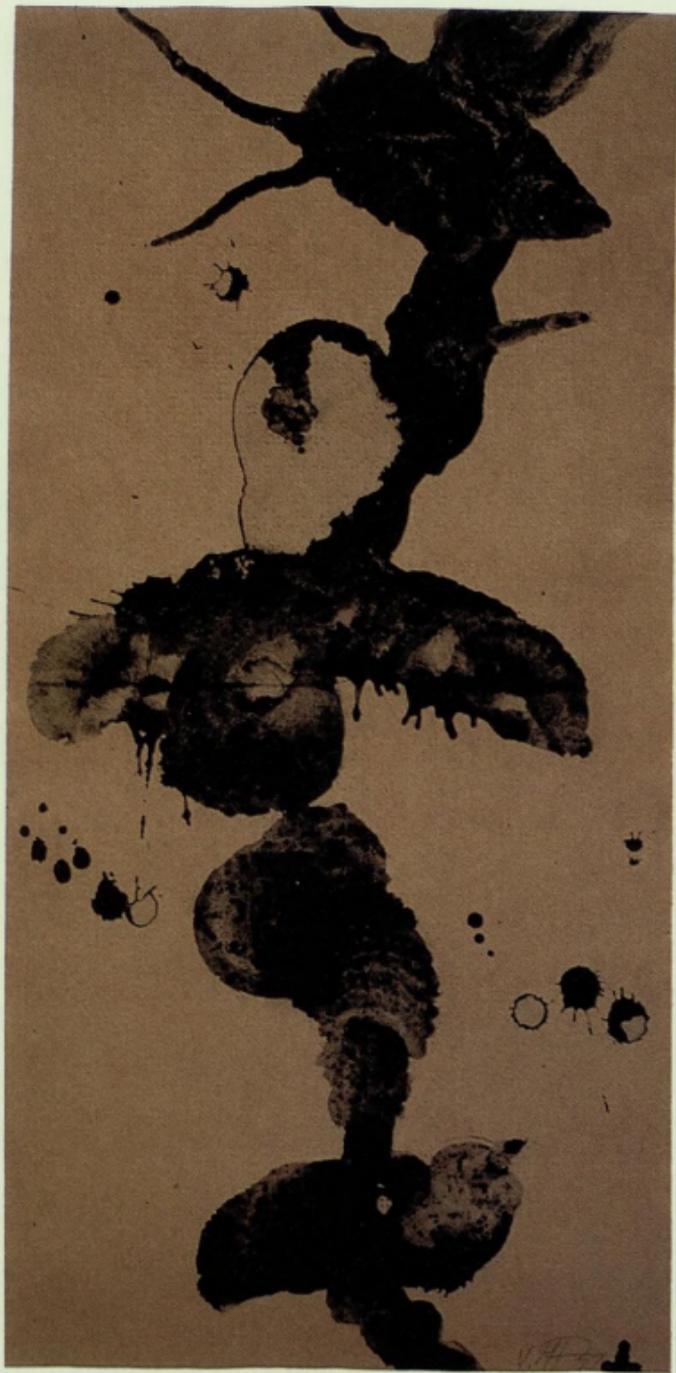




# Proprietorship Balance & Lid

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| May 1940          | 4 11 10 | April 1 To Balance | 4 11 10        |
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| May 1941          | 2 5 3   | May 25 "           | 12 6           |
| 1942              | 2 7 7   | 24 "               | 15 4           |
| Jan 1943          | 4 12 10 |                    | <u>4 12 10</u> |
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| May 1941          | 1 6     | Dec 16 Goods       | 6 6            |
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VAD 6













Escucha con atención las voces que allí resuenan, el mundo polifónico en que hemos sido hablados. He pensado lento en tu laringe, en tu tímpano. He visto como descendes lánguidamente en tu caída sobre la fibra de vidrio, rozando la cobertura de nuestra piel. He sido usado por esas voces y ahora me curvo en tu dirección. Quizá te he repetido. Quizá hay algo en todo esto que no nos pertenece o nos pertenece demasiado. Deja que a través mío se hable por tu boca y sienta entre nosotros ecos de un mundo donde nadie observa ni nadie es observado, donde no hay adentro ni afuera y no hay YO y OTRO







*We shall all suffer for  
what the gods have  
given us, suffer-terribly.*

—OSCAR WILDE'S *Dorian*

UNITED STATES

THE DISCOVERY OF  
THE PRESENT TIME

ANDREW

NEW YORK

AND MAPS

## Art Editor's Commentary

The artists I have selected for this issue of *Gulf Coast* are engaged in the transformative activity in art. Process drives discovery. Image is evoked rather than described. The viewer is offered a direct experience of subjectivity, finding an emphasis on the openness of interpretation, and beyond, exploring alternative empathetic relationships. In exploring subjectivity, memory, time, mapping, the body, and text merge as research. Implied is the invitation to "completion" by the viewer.

In Walter Hopps's light drawings, apparent accident and incidental mark create an inevitable form. The delicate tracings that result literally are drawn with light on photographic paper, as particular and unrepeatable as the immediate gesture that caused it, recording time and the body's movement. We may name images: twig, cell, cloud; but these things are felt, intuited, not represented. The light drawings are contained in a slender box Hopps constructed (see image checklist page for detail) from discarded television cue cards, found in an alley in Los Angeles, around 1955. Words once making full sentences are truncated, invoking interpretation, suggesting narrative; but again, hold back objective or known meaning. We are thwarted in our effort to read the text, but still we try to invent the narrative.

Virgil Grotfeldt's works often involve accident, careful drawing, and preexistent text elements. In the *Healing Plants* series, Grotfeldt manipulates coal dust on top of ledger sheets from another time. Plants are used in healing; early pieces in the series look toward specific botanical studies. Images are isolated on the page, first as the whole plant, then by its parts: seeds, roots, petals, fruit. Later ones, such as the one included here, become looser in form, less scientific in their reference. *The Drawings for the Twenty-first Century and Those Who Cannot See* are manipulations of coal dust on Braille text. The sighted can see or "read" the image, but not the Braille text. The blind can "read" the preexisting messages in Braille but not the forms on top. Then the works are exhibited with glass on top, or in reproduction, flattened by the mere fact of photographic reproduction; Grotfeldt says "Now the blind cannot read it." The second part of the title, *Those Who Cannot See*, refers to all of us, not only the blind. Virgil says, "Who knows what it is? What it means? It's more of a *feeling* than an *understanding*."

Next we see details from Abdel Hernández and Fernando Calzidilla's installation *The Market from Here: Mise in Scene and Experimental Ethnography*. The piece is an environmental recreation of the every day life

of Venezuela, evoking imaginary people and activity in the market place. The installation crosses genres of theater and art, dealing aesthetically with ethnography. Here visual art becomes process, a lab and workshop.

From room to room within the walls of the installation, objects are transformed as the spectator moves between a stage set and memory. Plastic envelopes, veils, traps the objects assembled. Transparency exists in daylight; opacity, at night, as artificial light reflects and shields objects behind plastic. As light plays throughout the day, the scene changes. Within the *Market*, transparency and light become writing and erasing, and time is an active agent for change.

As a place to experience stories, memories, new identities, Hernández and Calzadilla's market place invites our engagement in the environment created, thus unfurling a process of the spectator's reflection. This is not an imposed narrated definition or even interpretation about meaning. It is, rather, the effort to evoke something the viewer may have been living before. But as Hernández told me, "These are stories you can never complete. Traces. Evocative clues, invoking human situations." Hernández mentions the influence of Beuys, "in the material connecting with cultural experience." The artist as contemporary ethnographer channels expression, communication, and language, here invoking a philosophical dissolution between art and every day life.

Tracy Hicks's works on the cover and within the art section transform books themselves. They are bound books, turned into sealed and cylindrical objects resembling candles, suggesting light. Hicks's installation work often examines what, as a culture, we tend to collect and preserve. In a recent conversation about the bound books, Hicks spoke of the connection between light and enlightenment. "Books are a way to enlightenment. They represent the continuing process of going on, of expanding your way of seeing. Extending the search. These books are a symbol of that sense of extending, in a very physical sense, rolling them into candles, turning them into light."

The works assembled here bring to the physical realm that which is usually intangible. Each is involved with a sort of immediacy, the immediacy of perception, questions of community, primal material: what it means to be a person.

## Cicada

little swath of dark  
joy through summer bones  
ants in a hot shell mowing

## Halloween 1998

I.  
Most Texas kids say  
*Hollow-eeen*, as if the holy  
and the empty

were one and the same.  
Their accents come through  
mouth holes in masks;

at my door  
they wish me a pleasant  
void and leave,

after I feed them.  
Hungry ghosts roam  
the neighborhood;

they eat souls  
to fill their stomachs.  
A soul would taste

like nothing or  
cotton candy. Sugared air.  
Put one in my bag.

II.  
The neighborhood teens  
pull the black hoods  
of their sweatshirts

over their faces  
flash the tattoos  
on their hands

and go out to meet  
death. Take me too.  
I am on the porch.

I have an invitation  
on my right thigh,  
a round black

hole, an eclipse,  
a darkened sun,  
as if death

snuck down and gave me  
one perfect  
burning kiss.

III.

This is a year of holes.  
Yet I have left  
my pumpkins uncarved,

their fat skin  
unpunctured.  
One is white, one orange—

a ghost pumpkin  
and the real one  
it remembers being.

A boy, burnt-edged  
bullet holes  
and blood on his shirt

says, I'm a dead  
man. Dressing up  
as the body

discarded makes sense.  
The leaving is over  
is done.

## It's Not About Remembering

The rare books were on the top floor  
of The University of Houston's library,  
a building that did not tower  
and offered very few windows.  
*The Gentleman's Magazine* offered the view  
of England's news events, a medieval  
*Reader's Digest* that we of Rothman's  
seminar were to glean the details  
for a paper that would be a proof  
to our proper awe for the curiosities  
of the period, a report that is lost to me  
now, though a fragment of the search  
has revenantly appeared again and again  
to me at odd and unexpected times  
through these many years—a small news item

beside the long list of timely  
and mostly untimely deaths: ox cart accidents,  
family ax murders, and the peculiarly high  
instances of suffocation's caused by a swelling  
of the celebrant's throats after swallowing unseen  
bees that had lighted without a discernible sound  
on to the froth of the goblets of golden mead,  
perhaps, buzzing only as they delivered  
their stinger to the root of the dumb tongues  
in the dark crimson tombs of their throats  
where, I imagined an odd death rattle duet echoing,  
echoing as a body's tumble and worlds change. There  
besides these mostly timeless obituaries  
was the terse report from Spain: citizens  
from a small mountain valley town  
had experienced a bolting earthquake

that was so severe their church perched  
over a mile above had been totally destroyed  
as witnessed by the sound of their tower's famous  
bronze bells playing the chaotic melody finale  
as they rolled down the rough, dry gullet  
beside the vibrant village green road  
to that dark quiet, always reminding me of that early December

evening, sitting bone-cold in those common high school bleachers of what is now the Stan Slaughter Jr. Gym, the clarity of that precise moment of silence among the fleshy throng of pre-holiday cheer, when Stan Slaughter Sr. could sit no longer sanguine next to me, leaping to his feet to thunder down the stadium seats to his fallen son, the undefeated senior captain of the Blue Devil wrestling team, limp in the arms of that dark referee, having broken his neck to escape a first pinning in front of an Athletic Director father and the stunned crowd, momentarily speechless

in the square confines of a single horrific thought, trapped among the bees, and the bells, and the other dead friends.

## The Forgotten Children

All through the years of my childhood when there wasn't much else to hold on to, I had a fantasy. Those rum-scented evenings when father's slurred yells slammed like fists into the peeling walls of wherever we were living at the moment, I would lie wedged behind a sofa or under a bed, and close my eyes and slide into it. Sometimes my brother lay there also, curled tight against me, sucking his thumb although mother had told him he was too old to be doing that. The knobs of his spine would push into my chest; his heart would thud against my palm like the hooves of a runaway horse—like my own heart, so that after a while I couldn't tell the two apart. Maybe that's how he, too, became part of the fantasy.

Our family moved a lot in those days, flurried migrations that took us from rooming house to dingier rooming house as my father lost one job after another. He always managed to find a new one because he was a skilled machinist—perhaps that was part of his trouble, knowing that he would. But each job was a little worse than the previous one, a small movement down the slippery spiral that our life had turned into. We never spoke of it—we were not a family much given to discussion. But we saw it in our mother's face, the way she sometimes broke off in the middle of a sentence and stared out the window, forgetting that my brother and I were waiting.

We children learned some skills of our own as we traveled through those small hot factory towns of north India which after a while blurred into a single oily smell, a grimy, burning dust in the air. We knew how to be almost invisible as we sat on the last bench in class, not knowing the answers because we had missed the previous lessons or didn't have the books. Or as we sat in the far corner of the canteen at lunchtime because we didn't want anyone to see the rolled brown rotis mother packed for us in old paper. We looked longingly—but sidewise, so no one would guess—at the starched uniforms of the others, their tiffin boxes filled with sandwiches made from store-bought bread so white it dazzled the eye. Each time they laughed we flinched, pulling the edge of a skirt over a bruised thigh, a shirt sleeve over discolored finger-marks left on a forearm. Were they talking about us—how mother had asked the sabji-wallah for credit, how father had to be helped home from the toddy shop last payday? How long before they learned of the noises that sometimes exploded from our flat at night? We learned to arrange our hair so that the pink ridges of a forehead-scar would hardly show. To look casually into the middle distance, as though oblivious of the curious eyes. To not think of the futile, scattered trailings we had left behind: a book of fairy tales, a stray yellow dog we used to feed, a

mango tree perfect for climbing, the few tentative friendships formed before we knew better.

We. That was how I thought of my brother in those days, as though he were as much a part of me as my arm or leg. Indispensable, to be protected instinctively, like one shields the face from a blow, but not something one thinks about. It never occurred to me as he followed me around in silence (he was never a talkative boy) that he might feel differently about our life—that knotted, misshapen thing, like a fracture healed wrong—which I accepted because it was what I'd always known. Perhaps that was my first mistake.

The year I was eleven and my brother eight, we ended up in Duligarh, an Assam oil town sagging and discolored as a cardboard box left to rot in the rain. It was a town of many toddy shops, all of which my father would soon discover. A town where credit was difficult to get, where from the first people looked at us with faces like closed fists. I didn't blame them. We were a far cry from the model families displayed on the family-planning posters pasted all over town.

One of these posters was pasted on the back wall of our school. I remember it perfectly from all the afternoons I stood there looking up until my neck ached. My fantasy fed on that poster through those sweat-studded afternoons, spreading its insidious roots, leading me to my other errors.

In the poster, a young couple held hands and smiled into each other's eyes while a boy and girl played tag around them. The man carried a shiny leather briefcase. The woman's gold chain sparkled in the sun, and the edge of her pink sari lifted in the breeze. The children wore real leather Bata shoes, the kind I'd seen in the store window in Lal Bahadur Market, spit-shined to a mirror polish. *We Two, Our Two*, declared the poster, as though it were the mantra for a happy life. *We Two, Our Two*. Where then had our parents gone wrong?

Sometimes I stood watching until the sky changed to the dull yellow of late afternoon and my brother tugged at my arm in exasperation. Let's go Didi, I'm hungry. Why do you like to waste your time staring at that silly picture? He wanted, instead, to be shaking down ripe guavas from the trees on the edge of the orchard across the street. People shouldn't plant their trees along the public road if they don't want anyone to pick the fruit, he said, thrusting out his chin, when I protested.

Sometimes we missed the bus because of that poster and had to walk home, trudging through the heat, our clothes sticking to our skin, our books getting heavier and heavier, all the way past the edge of town. Walking through the bazaar I would feel the shopkeepers' unsmiling eyes on us, a lanky girl with hair pulled back in two tight, careful braids, a juice-stained boy with his wrists sticking out of a shirt he'd outgrown, striding impatiently ahead of his sister. Did they connect us with our parents, that woman who came down to the bazaar at the end of the day, moving among the shriveled beans and dull-scaled, leftover fish with a swift, decisive grace, that man who held his body with a brilliant belligerence, like a boxer who knew that the key to his

survival was to trust no one? Did they compare us to the family on the poster?

\*

In Assam we lived in an old British bungalow which we children loved. It was the first real house we'd lived in, a long, low structure built for some forgotten purpose outside of town. It was inconveniently far from everything (it took father an hour to bike to the factory where he tested drilling equipment), but the rent was cheap and there were no prying neighbors. If it was lonely for mother all day when we were gone, she didn't complain much. Perhaps she was glad to have the time to herself. Only occasionally would she grumble that the house was falling apart on us.

And it was. Perhaps in physical manifestation of some deeper change within our fragile household, chunks of falling plaster coated everything with a permanent layer of dust. The windows would not shut properly, and malevolent-looking insects with burnished stings wandered in at will. The roof leaked and when it rained, which was often, we had to make our way around strategically placed buckets. But we children thought it was perfect—the wooden porch where we played marbles, the old claw-footed bathtub where mother would pour steaming water for our baths, the spear-shaped wrought-iron grills at the windows that made us feel like we were living in a medieval fortress.

Best of all we loved the servant's quarter, a small cottage set far back into the bamboo grove that grew behind the house. My brother and I were the first to discover it. When we told mother, she gave an unusually bitter laugh. A servant's quarter for us! she said, the corners of her mouth turning downwards. What a joke! For a while she kept asking father to see if he could rent it out to one of the factory watchmen. But nothing ever came of that. Perhaps we were too far from the factory. Perhaps father, who wasn't the type to go around asking, never mentioned it to anyone. My brother believed it was because he and I had prayed so hard for it to stay empty.

The cottage was dim and cool even in the brassy Assam afternoons because it sat under a huge tree of a kind I'd never seen before, with large round leaves like upturned palms. Spiderwebs hung from its ceilings, intelligently angled to enmesh intruders, and in the far room we discovered a trapdoor that blended almost perfectly into the wooden flooring. Underneath was a small space with a packed dirt floor, just right for a make-believe prison or an underground cave. We told no one of it, and never used it ourselves. It was enough to know it was there. We dusted off a rope cot that was in the corner and dragged it over the trapdoor to hide it further. Then we smuggled an old sheet from the house. In the afternoons when we got back from school we lay on the cot in the half-dark and I told my brother stories.

That was when I told my brother about the fantasy. For a long time I had kept it to myself, knowing instinctively that it was not for sharing.

But something about the cottage made me feel weightless and uncatchable, as though I were a dust-mote turning in lazy light. When I looked up from the cot, the leaves made a canopy of hands, holding off the rest of my life. I had thought my pragmatic brother would laugh at the fantasy. But from the beginning it was his favorite, the final story I had to tell before we returned to the house to help mother with chores.

Here is the fantasy:

My parents are moving again. Everything is packed and loaded. They climb into a battered three-wheeler loaded down with bundles and boxes. But we are not with them because they have forgotten us. From behind the bamboo grove we watch as the three-wheeler lurches to a start, as it becomes smaller and smaller and finally disappears. We emerge from the fronds cautiously. Yes, they are really gone. For a moment we are stunned by happiness. Then we grab each other and spin until the world is an ecstatic whirl.

The fantasy is not without its problems. The most important one is our mother. Just before she gets into the three-wheeler she looks around uncertainly, the way a wild animal might, scenting something amiss in the air. (I do not tell my brother this, but I know he sees it, too). I would love to include her in the fantasy. To have her see a flicker of white (my brother's shirt) in the bamboo. She would walk into the grove to explore and never return to my father. But I know it cannot be. Their lives are tangled together beyond my powers of extrication. So, sadly, I let her go.

We live in the servant's quarter. By now the bamboo has grown so thick that no one remembers the existence of the cottage. I cook and clean and teach my brother everything I had learned at school. He catches fish for us in the stream behind the cottage, lots of fish, and we sell some of it in the bazaar and buy rice, salt, shoes. We begin to look like the children in the family planning poster.

You think I'll be able to catch that many? my brother always asks at this point, not totally convinced of his angling skills.

Of course, I reply.

In our fantasy no one snatches us out of sleep by our hair. No one drags us over the cracked driveway so that its exposed brick scours our backs. In the dark garage, no one lights a match and brings it so close to our faces that we can feel the heat of it on our eyelids. In our fantasy, the word *bruise* doesn't exist.

We keep on living like this.

What about when we get old? my brother asks.

We don't, I say. But he is not satisfied. So I have to devise an end for the fantasy.

One winter it snows and snows.

Snow? asks my brother. He has never seen any. Nor have I, but in my geography book I've come across pictures of the silvered peaks of the Himalayas. I explain it to him.

One winter it snows and snows. The snow drifts in through the windows and doors. It falls on the bed where the brother and sister are

sleeping side by side.

Just like this? My brother slips his hand into mine and lays his head on my shoulder. A pale scar whose origin I cannot remember slants across his cheekbone.

Yes, I say.

The snow forms a thick white quilt that covers the brother and sister. It doesn't hurt. They never wake up. They sleep like this forever.

Sleep forever, repeats my brother consideringly as we walk back to the house through the humid afternoon.

\*

Things were disappearing from the house. At first it was food, little items that mother wouldn't have noticed if money hadn't been so tight—a small box of biscuits, a half-empty packet of sugar. Then it was clothes—an old shirt of my brother's, my green kameez with the frayed collar. A moth-eaten blanket that mother was intending to throw away as soon as we could afford a new one.

Did you take it for a game or something? she asked when I came into the kitchen for a snack after school.

No, I didn't, I said, glad not to have to lie. I was afraid she might follow up with questions I'd have more difficulty sidestepping. But she shook her head in a preoccupied way and started kneading dough for rotis.

I can't figure it out. It's not as though we have a servant who might be stealing, she said. And now the level in the rice bin seems to be dropping.

Spirits, that's what it is, declared Lakshmi-aunty, the old woman who sold spices down in the bazaar, when mother mentioned it to her the next day. Spirits. People say a sahib who lived in that house a long time ago—a smuggler, they say he was—came to a bad end. Hanged himself from the living room rafters. Here, take this mustard seed and burn it in an iron pot while chanting the name of Rama. That should make the spirits go away.

The next afternoon when we returned from school, mother did as Lakshmi-aunty had instructed. We helped her with the homemade exorcism, chanting and sneezing as the acrid smoke rose from the pot and the mustard seeds began to sputter. We said nothing to father. For a while after that there were no more disappearances. By the time they started again, mother had worse problems to worry about.

\*

Father had fallen foul of the foreman. It wasn't unexpected. At each of his jobs he found someone to hate, someone who, he believed, was out to get him. (Why does he always have to fight with people, my brother asked once, and mother sighed and said, he always was a free spirit, he never did take kindly to being ordered around). It was only a matter of time before the chance remark exploded into a fistfight or

worse. In the last town he'd gashed an overseer's arm with a broken bottle, and the police had taken him away for a while. Then we would be packing again, looking up railway timetables, deciding what to leave behind.

At dinner father ate sullenly, muttering curses at the foreman, not noticing what kind of food mother put in front of him. He held tightly to the neck of a bottle, raised it to his mouth in one glinting arc. Mother would rub his arm, a gesture which sometimes calmed him. From the table in the corner where we did our homework, we could see the muscles of her back through the thin fabric of her blouse, bunched with tension. Just try to avoid him please, she'd whisper. Why don't you ask for a transfer to another shift. Think of the children...they're just beginning to settle down, to catch up in school. Times are so bad, what if you don't find another job. You're not getting any younger either....

Some nights he would merely shake his head and say, You're right, mother, that whoremonger isn't worth the spit out of my mouth. Or he would swat her entreating hands away, growling, Leave me alone, woman, don't interfere in things you know nothing about. But there were those other nights. Bitch, we'd hear him bellow, and we'd melt into the moldy shadows under the porch. Here I am, killing myself to feed all of you, and all you do is nag at me. Sound of a slap, a pan clanking onto the floor, spilling the dal that was to have been our lunch tomorrow. A breathless grunt. We knew how it felt, that fist slammed into the side of the head, turning everything black for a moment. The kick against the ribs that left you knotted and gasping on the floor. And the pain. We knew all about pain. How it rose like a wall of water and crashed over you. We knew about drowning. We gripped each other's hands, afraid even to sob, hating ourselves for not trying to stop him. We held our breath and plunged into our other fantasy, the one we shared without ever having spoken it, where our father was dead, dead, dead.

I never asked mother why she didn't leave him, though I often wondered. Why didn't she run away with us to her parents' village? She sometimes spoke of it wistfully, as a peaceful cluster of huts under emerald coconut trees filled with singing birds (I didn't know then that she had eloped with father and, in the traditional Indian scheme of things, had shut that door behind herself forever). Was it that she feared father was just too powerful? That wherever we went, he would smell us out, like the ogre in a fairy tale?

No. There was something else, which I couldn't quite put into words. It had to do with my father's broad shoulders, the muscles that played, snakelike, along his arms when he swung us up. The way he could make us feel safe even when we were high in the air. The way he could make us forget. Maybe it was the sun that glinted in his thick black hair, the fresh smell of ritha in it on holidays after mother had washed it for him. He'd burst into snatches of song (he had once taken lessons, mother said), his voice rising pure and unhesitant as light—Mehbooba, Mehbooba, my dearest darling—until it came up against the words he had forgotten. Then he'd throw himself at mother's feet in a

typical Hindi film-star pose, arms flung out, until she couldn't stop herself from grinning like a teenager. Or he came home with a package tied with the flat red string used by sari shops. He would gather her to him and thrust it into her hands. And while her trembling fingers tugged at the knots and a fierce blush rose up from her throat (my mother was unusually fair, with skin that bruised easily), he would drop a kiss on the top of her head or play with the ends of her long braid.

Once when I woke late at night and went to the kitchen for a tumbler of water, I found them sitting at the table, their backs toward me. Perhaps it was one of those times when the electric company had cut off our power because we couldn't pay, for there was a small kerosene lamp on the table between them, turned low.

Shanti, my father was saying in a small, choked voice, I've only made you unhappy. Sometimes I wish we'd never met. Or that I were dead. On the wall his shadow hunkered, anguished, against her slim silhouette. My very own Beauty and the Beast. My mother put her hand over his mouth, and her voice, too, was choked. Hush, Ashu, (it was the first time I heard her call him by his name) don't say that. How could I live on without you?

I tried to back away silently, but father saw me. I was terrified that he would be mad, that I had spoiled it all. But he held out an arm, and when I edged over he sat me on his lap and stroked my hair. His hand was awkward with the unaccustomed motion and his calluses caught in my hair, but I didn't want him to stop. Mother leaned her head against his shoulder. The planes of her face were angular and lovely in the flickering light. It took me a moment to realize that her eyes were tightly shut, as though in prayer. He crushed us both to him. I breathed in the odor—his tobacco blended with the clean smell of her neem soap—and in that way I came to know something of love, how complex it is, how filled with the terrible need to believe.

\*

We came home from school and the black trunk was in our bedroom. Its lid was open and when I peered in I saw that some of our clothes had already been thrown inside. They formed small wadded lumps at the bottom of the box, and when I looked at them I wanted to cry.

We went to find mother, who was in the kitchen emptying the rickety wire cabinet where she kept the spices.

"We're leaving day after tomorrow," she said. She didn't offer any explanation and we didn't ask. In the hot light streaming from the curtainless windows, I saw new lines at the corners of her mouth, her eyes—as though someone had lifted the skin off her face, crumpled it in his fist, then put it back. We went back to our room, and I emptied out the trunk to pack it right, shoes and books at the bottom, clothes on top, folded into neat squares, like I knew from all those other times.

"Come and help me," I said to my brother, but he just lay on his

mattress and stared at the cracks in the ceiling until it grew dark and the cicadas outside started their buzzing. He spoke only once, when I tried to pack his clothes. "Don't touch my things," he said, and his voice was unhesitant in its viciousness, like a grownup's.

When I woke in the morning, he was gone.

"Where is he?" Father yelled again. Furious spittle from his mouth struck my cheek and I flinched though I tried not to.

"Leave the poor girl alone." Mother's voice rose up behind me, startling in its brittle loudness. For a moment I didn't recognize it. Her hair, come undone from its neat knot, hung wild about her face, and her sari was splotted with mud from the ditch behind the house where she'd been searching, calling my brother's name. There was an unmoored look in her eyes. "She's been telling you all day that she doesn't know. Why don't you bike down instead to the bus station in the bazaar and ask if anyone saw him."

I drew in my breath and stiffened in readiness, but father didn't say anything. Perhaps he was as taken aback as I. He got on his cycle and left.

Once my father's silhouette, wavery black against the setting sun, disappeared around the bend, my mother slumped down on the kitchen floor. She did this jerkily, in stages, as if a series of springs inside her were snapping, one by one. Surrounded by cheap aluminum cooking pots and chipped dishes—the emblems of her life—she put her face in her hands and began to cry. It was a rasping sound, like a soft cloth tearing. Never before—not even the time when her arm was fractured and she had to go to the clinic to have it set—had I seen her cry like this. I went and put my arms around her. My chest felt as though it was tearing, too. I wanted so much to take away her sadness, I almost told her then. But I couldn't betray my brother.

Suddenly mother looked up as though she could see all the way inside me. She wasn't crying any more.

"You know where he is, don't you," she said. It wasn't a question. She came to me by the elbows. "Please tell me, please." Her voice sounded as though it were pushing its way past something that had broken and stuck in her throat. "I promise I won't let your father hurt him."

I bit down on my lips to keep in the words because I'd been brought up, like a good Indian daughter, to never speak back. But then I heard my voice. "You always did before," it said, bitter and adult. "What's so different about this time?"

Something passed over mother's face. Was it sorrow, or a cloud of shame? She took a deep breath, as though preparing for an underwater journey, then cupped my face in her hands. Her fingers were long and cool—queenly fingers, I always thought them. Her nails were broken and dirt-caked. "I'll protect my baby," she said simply, quietly. "I swear it on my dead mother's soul."

I believed her then, although she hadn't answered my question. Perhaps it was because I knew that mother wasn't a woman who promised lightly. Or because her face, so close that I could see the pores on her skin, was so like my brother's with those same straight eyebrows. The face I loved most in all the world, after his. Or because finally, with the tarry night pressing itself down on us, I accepted what I'd always known in some vanquished part of myself: fantasies can't really come true.

\*

He was exactly where I thought he would be, huddled against the far corner of the crawlspace my parents had missed in their perfunctory search of the servant's quarter. (They hadn't really believed he would choose such an obvious place, so close to home, to hide in). When I pushed away the cot and lifted the trapdoor, his eyes glinted for a moment like an animal's in the beam from mother's flashlight. There were crumbs around his mouth from the biscuits he'd been eating. Around his shoulders was bunched the old blanket he'd secreted away a long time back, believing in imagination, how it can create a self anew. I reached down to help him up, but he shrank from me, his face heavy with hate.

\*

Mother carried my brother all the way back to the house although he was really too heavy for her, holding him close to her chest as one would an infant. She asked me to walk ahead with the flashlight, so I didn't hear what she was murmuring to him, but by the time they were in the kitchen, he had stopped struggling and crying. He even managed a small smile when mother fixed us mashed rice and bananas with hot milk and sugar, which used to be his favorite meal when he was very little.

We had just started eating when we heard father. He made his way up the porch slowly and noisily, and once it sounded like he bumped into the wall. We froze, my brother and I at the table, the food halfway to our mouths, mother at the counter where she had been chopping bananas. Then he was in the kitchen, the kicked-open door banging against the wall, the hulk of his shadow falling on the table between my brother and me. His huge voice filled my skull, the echoes booming outward until I thought my head would split open.

Later I would remember the rest only in fragments, black-and-white frames that appeared without warning, branding themselves across my vision, forcing me to abandon whatever I was doing. I'm going to kill you today, you little shit-eater. Heavy metallic clunk of a belt being unbuckled. My brother runs for my mother. She must have thrust him behind her, because he's gone and instead I see her hands, the fingers stiffly splayed, pushing against father's chest. Her mouth's open, she's shouting something, she's on the floor. The belt moves

through the air in a perfect, lazy arc. Now it's a cobra, striking, the metal fang gashing my brother's cheek just under his left eye, gouging out a piece of flesh, and the blood exploding from what is left behind. A thin scream that goes on and on. Mother you promised you promised you.... She pushes me out of her way, grasps the edge of the counter to pull herself up. Her hand closes around the knife. And now the voice is screaming again. I listen. I have no control over the voice, which I recognize vaguely as my own. Father turns. The belt buckle catches mother's wrist. A crack, as of a stick snapping. I hear the knife clatter down, each metallic unit of sound clear and disparate. A sound, half-whinny, half gasp, reeled back into itself. They must both be on the floor, grappling for it.

But I can't really tell what's going on back there because I've turned to watch my brother, who is running, who has made it through the door and past the porch and out to the bamboo grove. The sheltering dark gathers him in—elbows and knees, hands, the back of his head. Only his shirt glows in the moonlight like the snow we had imagined together, then disappears as he steps into shadow, then glows more palely further ahead. There are fireflies everywhere tonight, pinpoints of light blurring into a luminous ooze. Perhaps to disappear is the next best thing to being forgotten. Am I crying from happiness because he has escaped, if only for now? Or is it regret at that thin scream (my final error?) which shot from my mouth like an arrow of blood? Is it because I know I cannot join him? That in a moment I (my mother's daughter, bound after all by her genes of mistimed loyalties) must turn toward whatever is behind me, wheezing wetly, trying to get to its feet? All I know is that this is how I will remember my brother forever, a patch of dwindling white (melting, melting) as the bamboos shiver close. As the fireflies hover above him with their frail, fitful light.

## Champagne

That hot August day was one held bubble of my first funeral before my first wedding, both on the same day. Some adolescent metaphysics was fermenting inside the bottle of my body. When all of what the minister said fell away, the silence among us seemed right, smarter, or at least more respectable, honestly hopeless, precious, immaterial. Seated in oak pews aswirl with the grain of the trees and the groan of the years, we the immediate family members were grouped off to the side of my grandfather's casket: blue plush curtains with a piss-gold sash kept us as out of view as the corpse, the quarrelsome fit of our suit coats, the strange thing of the grandmotherly legs straightjacketed in nylons, black flamingoes of high heels, a fleet of dreadnought leather wing tips, and a row of shoulders and heads copied—this was clear to the sixteen-year-old—from some ideal that shoulders and heads could conjoin in grief, or even in this flubbed funeral, all of us like Siamese twins. I refuse to cry or feel a thing and I probably don't feel but one or two things anyway, mainly outrage at the phantasmal thing that we were all alike, I and my relatives who never see each other except at weddings and funerals, their profiles such different signatures but clearly writ by the same pen—at different times?—I don't know—should I?—. The flower vases had emptied at curbside, their mouths looking at us, before our limo had even pulled out of that Omaha mortuary, before the lowering of more of our past into the earth. Though the casket stayed above ground, under a light blue canopy, and the ties of the men may have fluttered, or one handkerchief fallen, a grave blossom. And then we are off to a wedding, son of an old family friend and my older brother's frat friend, who I am sure I thought was shallow. My older brother was done sobbing, and I hadn't even begun, I understood his grief to be real and tinting the air like the incense in the chapel. But the church and the wedding ceremony went the way of the flowers, cleanly, and then we were in a reception hall the shade of stale margarine, our stumped foursome of a family seated with a couple newlywed themselves, both hitting the free champagne a little zealously. The champagne was in the middle of the hall by the cake that towered like a gigantic crank shaft, the acrobatic glasses stacked, sluggish bubbles creeping up plastic sides of the wide-flared glasses they had in those days, a Wallenda-family of glasses, rim kissing base, stems twinkling, bubbles blinking bathyspherically, perpetually rescued from their form. I was trying to look through the champagne at my family at their table distant from the dance floor, alone now, the three of them and some absence of myself that would always be. The younger married couple

had drifted out of the champagne, dancing closer and closer to a rag-tag polka quartet, an accordion opening and closing like a family Bible, and my family remained in each glass, poured to the next level, down to the bottom where it all got sucked up to the top again. They needed to walk out of the effervescent fire they were multiplied by sitting in. The warmth was not there at the center of any moment, some concept needed to be refused and wouldn't be, not when we left the wedding for the outside tree-choked Omaha dark for Illinois, cars on black streets carrying caves of light, not on the bridge across the Missouri, not in the constant arguments I used against my adolescence, not on the freeways across Iowa's rollercoastering pig farm hills, wheels grinding us quiet, streams of bubbling headlights replicating a madness like any other, a light as scarce as that of sanity, light of the past, no light talks. Light doesn't even read.

## A Box of Clementines in the Maternity Ward

*for Rebecca Rose Marcus*

You couldn't sleep and you cried  
unless I nursed you while I walked  
around the room. On the oval table  
in their small wooden crate  
sat the clementines, packed neatly  
and glowing like embers  
beneath their red netting. Rounding  
the dark room, singing a song  
that came with you and is lost  
with those early days (half of life,  
my love, is disappearance) I stopped  
at the table and peeled one clementine  
every few laps, the skin falling  
off the globe with completion and ease,  
a yellowed veil barely clinging,  
the little smoke rising to your initiating  
dream, the whole fruit punctuating  
my thirst and hunger. My body  
was an enormous land you just left,  
my belly so soft after your departure  
it seemed to ripple like a lake.  
Into that darkness  
dropped the clementines,  
both you and I lifting to our lips  
something we tasted  
for the first time, in an orbit we followed  
without haste or destination.

## Dress Down for Transylvania

*Let fear be defined as a sort of pain or agitation derived from the imagination of a future destructive or painful evil.*

—Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*

I went to Budapest that winter of 1993 mostly because I wanted to make sure Jenny was okay. She'd moved there four months earlier, not knowing where she was going to live or work. When she arrived, she'd had only a hundred dollars to tide her over until she found a job. I'd tried to give or lend her money, and she'd refused.

Plus, I thought going to Budapest would be cool.

Because Jenny might need them, into my suitcase I put Extra-Strength Tylenol, vitamins, Chloraseptic spray, copies of *The New York Times Book Review* and Pringles Potato Chips.

Two weeks before I left, Jenny called from a phone booth in Budapest and said that we'd been invited by her friend Judith to spend New Year's in Transylvania if Judith's teenage daughter, who had run away from home, returned in time to be put into an institution. I said simply, "We must go," figuring that we probably wouldn't.

Jenny and I had met the previous summer when we shared an apartment while teaching at a camp for academically talented teenagers. She was a thirty-four-year-old poet who grew up in Boston, the third of six children known as the David Dynasty. Both of her parents were doctors. She went to Harvard, which she hated. (She'd chosen it because "a cute boy [she] liked" was also going there.) When she graduated, she decided to give herself her own education in the senses, and took up playing the guitar and studying Hungarian folk dance, though she was not of Hungarian descent. She had very long light brown hair, blue eyes, and a lithe dancer's body. She laughed a lot and lived in a world full of absurdities that others did not recognize, a world that originated, I think, from growing up as the only asthmatic in a household with ten cats.

She laughed when she saw me at the airport. "You are here in Budapest," she said. "It's so strange."

"Igen. Yes," I replied—one of the few words of Hungarian I'd mastered from language tapes.

We took the minibus back to the apartment she was subletting for sixty dollars a month. It was large and sober. My bed was a small couch in the narrow, high-ceilinged study. Books lined the walls—*Jane Eyre* in English, Faulkner in Hungarian, Goethe in German, calculus in calculus. The room made me think of Freud.

I lay down on the sofa in Jenny's room. "Uh," I said. I took off the money belt hidden inside my clothes, dropped it on the floor, and closed my eyes.

"Today is Thursday. On Monday we will go to Transylvania—Judith's daughter came back. Judith says that we have to buy a lot of chocolate to give as presents and hide it among our clothes so the border guards won't steal it. Also, we'll pay for the gas, which will be about a hundred dollars. She wants one of us to drive across the Romanian border, pretending that she is our Hungarian guest. We have to bring a lot of dollars to flash there. Once we get to Romania, there is no gas, so we don't know how we'll get home, but we'll manage somehow. We'll be eating nothing but cornmeal mush mixed with lard and cottage cheese once we get to a little town called Ghimes. We should dress down. Also we need boots for deep mud."

I opened my eyes a crack. Jenny was taut with excitement.

"Uh," I said. "How safe is this excursion?"

"I asked a lot of people. They said that two American women should not travel unaccompanied in Romania, especially not on trains, because we might get robbed or worse. But, as long as we were going with someone who knows her way around, we'll be fine."

"This makes me nervous," I said. "I'm worried about catching my plane back to Houston if there's no gas in Romania." Actually, I was worried about everything.

"Judith said it would be okay."

"And you trust her?"

"She's been a good friend to me. She's found me most of my ESL tutoring jobs. I can't imagine she'd take me anywhere I'd be in danger."

"Okay," I said.

Over the next few days, we saw the castle in Buda, the stores in Pest, cafés all over; bought a Christmas tree and made decorations for it; watched John Wayne dubbed into German; exchanged presents. I gave Jenny two novels by Rosamund Pilcher for when it rained and she felt the need to stay in bed and eat bonbons. She gave me a map of Transylvania.

"I have a duffel bag you can borrow," Jenny said. "It isn't practical to take your suitcase."

I come from a family that makes acronyms of its fears. F.O.B.R.O. is Fear Of Being Run Over. F.O.B.E.B.B. is Fear Of Being Eaten By a Barracuda.

The night before we left, instead of sleeping, I imagined disasters. In the parlance of my childhood, I "gave myself the horrors." By the time Jenny woke up, I was convinced my own death was imminent. I cried, told her I knew I was being irrational, but I was very scared. I volunteered to stay in Budapest while she went to Transylvania.

"Explain to me something you imagine," Jenny said.

"Okay. We have no gas in Romania, so we carry it in tanks in the trunk. We get rear-ended, and the gas explodes. We are burned terribly

and die in agony. Our mothers do not know where our corpses are." The part of Jenny that made it possible for her to move to Budapest made it difficult for her to truly understand my fear. She thinks disasters always take you by surprise, so there's no point in imagining them beforehand.

"You decide," she said. "We shouldn't go if you're going to be uncomfortable all the time."

I do not believe in God, but in moments of crisis, I believe that my grandmother is up in Heaven watching over me. She cuts deals with other dead grandparents to keep me safe. Granny, watch over me, I thought to myself.

"Let's go," I said. "But I will not drive across the border pretending Judith is my guest."

"There is nothing to be afraid of," Judith said as she ran a red light. "The border guards are just stupid, that's all. They're Romanians." We skidded around a corner. "But on the way back, because I have you with me, we will go through a special line. Hungarians sometimes have to wait fourteen hours to cross the border, but with your American passports, it is no problem."

A few minutes earlier, we had stood outside her car, a ten-year old Volkswagen Passat, in the early morning dark. I had eyed Judith hopefully. She had shoulder-length, fine blonde hair, green eyes, a broad face with high cheekbones. She was tall and wide and competent. Her self-confidence jutted out from her like a shield. "Come on, girls," she said. "Come on, Samú. Come on, Tomá."

Samú, the dog, had settled himself in front of the passenger seat. Tomá, the eight-year-old son, lay down in the backseat. Jenny wedged herself behind the dog and I wedged myself beside the son. We had not known that they'd be coming until we saw them.

Soon we plowed along the Great Hungarian Plain, gray in the early light. Villages floated on the landscape occasionally; so did industrial plants. The traffic was heavy along the one-lane road because many people were taking detours around Bosnia-Herzegovina.

"Girls," Judith said, "you must learn to distinguish. Hungarians have blue or brown eyes with light hair. Romanians are black."

Jenny and I stiffened. Tomá, still asleep, felt himself lose about a quarter-inch of seat space and kicked me.

"They have black hair and black eyes. The Romanians are not creative people. They are good servants, except that they steal."

The guidebooks had told me that Transylvania used to be in Hungary until 1918, when Hungary lost two-thirds of its land to neighboring countries. The Romanian government had persecuted the Hungarians, taking ancestral lands, sometimes banning them from speaking their language or giving their children Hungarian names. Even now, Hungarian books could be confiscated at the border. Judith's thoughts on Romanians, though painful to hear, were typical.

I am driving with a bigot to eat cornmeal mush mixed with lard and cottage cheese, I thought. And I hate cottage cheese.

After two hours, we reached the border. "Say goodbye to Europe, girls," Judith said.

We surrendered most of our dollars for visa fees. Other than that, the crossing was painless. It would have made no difference if Jenny or I had driven the car to the checkpoint—we all had to show our passports, even the dog. A man took Jenny's and my passports into a shed for about ten minutes and then returned them with elaborate stamps, and we were on our way.

"That wasn't scary at all," I said.

"You see, you must trust me," Judith said.

"How much further do we have to go?" Jenny asked.

"We should be there by ten tonight."

It was noon. Could our car drive for ten hours on one tank? Where were we going, anyway?

I decided that sleeping through the remaining part of the journey was a good strategy—and, failing that, feigning sleep was as a sound back-up plan. I edged into Tomá's territory like kudzu.

"This village has been abandoned and then taken over by the Gypsies," I heard Judith say after a long while. "They do not know how to take care of the houses. And the Hungarians were forced to move to a place where they live in poverty."

The hours trickled by. I fell asleep and woke to hear that we were passing Count Dracula's castle. I sat up to see, but it was dark.

Tomá's knee had somehow managed to rest against my bladder. I had not peed since eleven that morning. I will wait for someone else to say something, I thought. Above all, I wanted to be a polite guest.

After a bit, Tomá woke up. He started whining. Judith translated, "He is very thirsty. He needs to pee." She spoke sharply to him.

He reached into a bag, pulled out a sandwich, and began chewing slowly. I strained to see the clock: eight-thirty.

When we finally reached Brasov, Tomá and I raced each other to the bathroom, until I remembered I was the adult, and he was the child. After I returned to the kitchen, Jenny said, "I will teach you how to say, 'I would like a glass of water.' *Szeretnék egy pohár vizet.*" An elderly woman headed for the sink. I brutalized the phrase several times. The woman smiled graciously. I had no idea what her name was. Judith had introduced her to us as "the granny." Her daughter was "the mother." Jenny and I were "the American girls." Only the two men in their early twenties had names. They sounded like "Chubby" and "Shoney."

The granny pointed to me and Jenny and said something to Judith.

"She says you must not drink water after a long trip. You must drink *pálinkát.*"

"Moonshine," Jenny whispered. "Plum brandy."

"In Transylvania," Judith intoned, "everybody drinks *pálinkát*—the adults, even the children. They start very early in the morning."

The granny and the mother got out shot glasses and poured. I drank, grimaced, then gasped. It was the first action on my part that seemed to bring satisfaction to all the Hungarians in the room.

Late that night while we lay in bed, Jenny said, "I just wish she'd shut up about poverty. These people aren't poor. My dad grew up in poverty in the backwoods of Washington State. If she really wants to see poverty, she should go to South Central L.A."

"Or any big city or the Appalachians or a lot of other places," I added lamely, for good measure.

We were staying in an apartment with six large rooms. The heat may have come from coal stoves, but it was warm. Before we had gone to bed, Shoney had asked us if we would like to hear his *Deep Purple* album.

"Is this the biggest adventure of your life?" Jenny asked.

"I guess so." I turned over. "How long are we staying here?"

"I don't know," Jenny said.

For breakfast the next morning, we were served bread, a special holiday-season pastry, cheese, bologna, raw (but smoked) bacon, and tea with rum in it. I did not eat the bacon. "*Palinkát?*" the granny asked.

Shoney took us on a tour of Brasov, a city of 320,000 set in a valley surrounded by a ring of hills. We started at the STAR Department Store, just like one at home except the floors were covered with mud from people's boots, and some kiosks displayed eighty identical medium-sized blue sweaters. From there we went to the University of Transylvania, where Shoney placidly showed us bullet holes left in the walls from the Revolution and, across the street, graves of those who had died during the fighting.

Back at the car, a dog trotted down the middle of the street. A white car came along, clipped it, and the dog yelped and fell. The car kept going. Everybody on the street stared. The dog tried to get up, yelped more, had a seizure, and tried to rise again, but its legs collapsed. It twitched.

Samú, Judith's dog, was paying close attention.

"Life is hard," Judith said.

At five-thirty the next morning, we had a breakfast of bread, bologna, raw bacon, and rum-laced tea.

It had snowed perhaps six inches the night before.

"I don't suppose they have snowplows in Romania," I said to Jenny.

"They probably don't have a snowplow in Romania," Jenny said.

We packed into the car—Judith, Tomá, Samú, Jenny, I, and—to our surprise—Chubby, who took the wheel. The car had mysteriously acquired a full tank of gas. Chubby turned on the ignition, and we trundled slowly through the snow. People in fur hats crowded the edges of the roads, walking briskly.

"The Romanian government does not provide bus service to Hungarian villages," Judith said. "Some people walk ten miles to get the bus to work."

We passed only six cars the whole morning but about forty horse-

drawn sleighs. After the sun rose, Judith explained the difference between a Romanian and a Hungarian haystack. Romanians wasted valuable wood building theirs. Hungarians did not need to use wood at all.

We stopped at a pub in a small town for lunch. It was dim and cold inside. A woman wearing a kerchief around her head stood leaning against the wall. After Judith unpacked sandwiches, Jenny and I ordered beer.

"Romanian beer is awful," Judith said. "Do you not think so?"

"It's no worse than American beer," I said.

She looked at me with shock, then suspicion. "Everything is dirty and nothing is first class? That is what you Americans think."

"No, no," I said. "The people are very kind. That's what matters."

"You must try some of this goose liver. It is phenom. Not quite foie gras, perhaps, but very good." She held out a plastic bowl filled with white animal fat mixed with occasional streaks and lumps of grey. It smelled a bit rancid. She picked up a barge-sized slice of bread, spread it with great globs of the stuff, and passed it to me.

I looked down at the naked lunch. Lard mixed with cornmeal mush and cottage cheese was beginning to sound delicious. I took a swig of beer.

I looked at Jenny. She also held a trial in her hand. She took a bite with no expression, then swallowed. I discreetly peeked under the table for Samú, but he sat next to Judith.

I do not like to eat fat, not even the dark meat of chicken. Also, I am a world-class gagger. Judith gazed at me with a fixed smile. What are the limits of being a good guest when your hostess designs ways to make you miserable?

I took a small bite, swallowed without chewing, pulled on my beer, and had managed not to taste it.

After about the twelfth bite, I gagged freely. Tears ran down my face. And I still had the hurdle of a big lump of gray, veiny liver in the middle of the piece of bread. I remembered reading an essay in *Spy* about a woman who taste-tested different kinds of dog food and felt envy for her, since even wet food is mostly soy.

Jenny had dispatched with her burden. She stared down at the table.

Today is Wednesday. On Sunday, I will be back in Budapest. On Tuesday, I will be back in Houston.

I closed my eyes and ate.

We arrived in Ghimes at about three-thirty. "You will wait here," Judith said after introducing us to a room full of people. She closed the door tightly.

"*Palinkát?*" said a stout woman wearing a white knitted cap. She gestured to a plate of blood sausages, liver sausages, bacon.

Judith came back just after we switched from *palinkát* to tall glasses of a wine that looked like apple cider. "Come on girls," she said. "I wanted to put you in the house next to where I'm staying, but there are

already four people there. So I have put you with a family I know, the Tankos. First we will go to where I am staying, eat there, then go to where you are staying, eat there, then come back to where I am staying for a big dinner."

"I can't," I whispered to Jenny as we walked through the snow. My stomach felt like a large squirming animal trapped inside me.

"Just eat as much as you can," Jenny said with surprising sternness.

Misery lodged behind my eyes like a tumor.

The older couple at Judith's house, Peter and Virag (Flower), welcomed us so generously that I felt churlish for not eating and drinking all I could.

The family with whom we were staying obviously had not been expecting us. For dinner, they were having roasted potatoes. I am a fan of potatoes under any circumstances, but I had never been as glad to see one. I even knew the Hungarian word for potato, *krumpli*.

The kitchen was in the basement of a green house. As the wife, Elizabeth, pulled potatoes out of the wood-burning stove's oven, she asked Jenny, "Do you have a husband?"

"No."

"Do you have a child?"

"No."

She shook her head with worry and satisfaction. "Then you have nothing." She put a plate of roasted potatoes split lengthwise onto the table next to a small Christmas tree. A large bowl of milk rested under the tree. She handed us each a knife and a paper napkin. The husband and two teenage boys sat in the corners of the room watching.

"Are we eating their dinner?" I asked Jenny.

"I think so," she said.

Elizabeth put a great mound of a yellowish something on the table. I looked at it with dread.

"She says it's butter," Jenny explained. "She says take as much as you want. They made it themselves."

With exaggerated gestures, Elizabeth spread some butter on a potato half as if it were a piece of bread then ate. She pointed to me as if saying, "Now you try."

Jenny and I did our best. *Pálinkát* appeared. I took a gingerly sip. I took a small bite of my potato. Would my stomach behave?

Elizabeth looked at my potato, shook her head, and spoke to Jenny.

"You must not be so stingy with the butter. Really, there is plenty."

Without any warning, a huge burp erupted from some nether region of my interior. I apologized. Elizabeth took another potato half, put about a stick's worth of butter on it, and handed it to me. "I don't know about this," I said to Jenny.

She did not reply. I was embarrassing her.

I took a bite, but packed it into the side of my cheek. Another burp erupted. I apologized again as everybody laughed.

Jenny looked at me with newfound acuteness. "Are you going to be

sick?"

"I might." I swallowed the butter and potato. Then I knew. I bolted from the table, heading for the door. Elizabeth grabbed my arm and pulled me toward a bed. I broke free, ran outside, and threw up on the snow.

Jenny arrived a second later.

"I just wanted to be polite," I said.

She gazed down at my vomit. "Fuck politeness."

I wiped the tears off my face.

She looked up at the sky. "Okay, here is your new story. You have just arrived on the big plane from America, and you have not adjusted to the time difference. It makes your stomach hurt. Just eat whatever you want."

"I just wanted to be polite," I said again.

"I'm so sorry," Jenny whispered.

The house had no interior staircase; to get to our room on the second floor, we trudged up a hilly path that went around the house and entered the "clean room" from outside. Many Hungarian houses have a room for show, decorated with finery and displaying the winter's bounty of foodstuffs. Judith had said to expect to dodge barrels of sausages. Elizabeth handed me a large plastic bowl to double as a chamber pot and vomit vessel. György, Elizabeth's husband, stoked the stove while I sat on an intricate, handwoven bedspread.

There were no sausages on display in the room. The Tankos' winter bounty consisted of two sacks of corn.

We did not see Judith again for two days. At first, we assumed she was just late. Then we realized we'd been ditched. When we tracked her down, she was always rushing away to visit someone desperately in need of her help.

"She was spending a lot of time complaining that she had to leave earlier than she wanted so that one of the American girls could catch her plane," Jenny said.

"What?" I said.

"But she was planning to start back on Monday morning. She doesn't have to be at work until Wednesday morning."

"What?"

"And since it took us two days to get here, there's no way you could catch your plane on time. Now, don't freak out on me. We'll have to take the train. We have a few days to figure out the logistics. Meanwhile, let's have a good time. Tonight is New Year's Eve. We'll see world-class folk dancing. Do you have any idea what a privilege that is?"

The day before, György had taken us on a walking tour of Ghimes. We had seen the old Romanian/Hungarian border of 1918, which ran right through the town. György's son, Zoli, had arranged to have a friend take us on a horse-drawn sleigh ride, and we went up a mountain and played in the snow. I knew I was seeing something few Americans ever see, in a culture that had not changed significantly in

the past 1,000 years. I felt gratitude toward the family we stayed with but little gratitude toward my situation. I was an Ugly American, and I didn't care.

I had eaten nothing but bread and cottage cheese and, at lunch time, a bowl of soup made mostly from the "outer parts" of the pig and a few carrots and turnips—still, my only source of vegetables. I was entirely constipated. I had my period. I had not bathed since we'd left Brasov, and I had no hope of bathing until we returned to Budapest—if we could get there. The only bright side was that I was too unhappy to be afraid. Fear, like gratitude, takes energy. I was spending my small energy reserves on anger.

"At least Judith will have to wait in the regular, fourteen-hour line at the border," I said.

Zoli, Elizabeth and György's nineteen-year old son, brought in a pail of fresh milk and poured it into the bowl under the Christmas tree. He was strong and stocky. He'd taken up changing his shirt in the kitchen while we were there—he seemed very proud of his broad, hairless chest. He also liked to demonstrate his strength by picking us up and laughing. His favored target was Jenny; he often stared at her as if she were an event—a circus, perhaps—that he'd never see again. He asked her if we were ready to go sledding with his friend Doofy. When she nodded, he poured a round of *pálinkát* for the four of us. It was, he said, a sensible precaution against the cold.

At ten a.m. on New Year's Eve, Zoli, Doofy, Jenny and I trudged up the biggest sledding hill I had ever seen. Really, it was the base of a steep mountain.

Jenny and Zoli got on the larger of the two sleds. As they flew down the hill, Jenny shrieked louder and louder, reaching a crescendo as they went over a bump that launched the entire sled into the air. They stopped just short of a wooden fence.

Doofy gestured to me to sit down on the front of the small sled, about the size of a Flexible Flyer I had when I was six. I hesitated. But even an otherwise responsible and mature thirty-year-old does not like to be thought chicken, even by a seventeen-year-old. He sat down behind me and gave us a great push. As we gained speed and the decibels streaming from my mouth escalated, we started to wobble frantically from side to side. In half a second, the snow, the mountain, the sun were all a blur, and I found myself lying face down in the snow with my leg twisted, the sled half on top of me and Doofy twenty feet farther up the mountain. "Ow," I shouted.

Silence.

"Are you all right?" Jenny shouted.

Jenny and Zoli pushed up the mountain, dragging their sled behind them.

"Are you okay?" Jenny shouted.

"No."

I lay in the snow. I was afraid to move because I was afraid to find out I couldn't. What would I do if I had broken my leg? What sort of

deal had my grandmother cut with the other dead grandparents?

Jenny and Zoli pulled me to my feet. I tried putting weight on left leg. It hurt, but at least I didn't collapse writhing into the snow. "No more sledding for me," I announced.

"Zoli wants to know if you've ever skied," Jenny said.

I nodded. "I'm pretty good, too," I said.

"Zoli said not to do that again."

"Perhaps Zoli should use the smaller sled," I said. "It's not as steady as the one he's hogging."

Jenny chose not to translate. "Are you sure you're okay?" she asked.

"No," I snapped. But after walking slowly for a bit, I felt better, as if I had been granted some sort of reprieve.

To the untrained eye—namely, mine—world-class Hungarian folk dancing looks like a lot of men stomping their heels in intricate rhythms. When a man dances with a woman, he twirls her around until she might throw up. Stomping is for men only. (Of course, to the untrained eye, ballet could look like a lot of pointless twirling and prancing. Jenny said that Hungarian folk dance is as rigorous as ballet.) Two musicians play, one on the violin and one on an instrument that looks like an unvarnished cello whose strings are plucked and hit with a stick.

There were about thirty people at the party. Some wore the traditional costume—a white, billowy shirt, a sheepskin vest, and a wide beaded belt. The women wore pleated skirts designed to take maximum advantage of their twirled state. The men wore black trousers and stout stomping boots. Jenny and I wore dirty jeans. Judith had told us we would not need any "nice" clothes, though she wore the traditional dress. After a few minutes, she waved to us from across the room, approached and said it was good to see us again, as if we were old friends rather than her guests.

After about an hour of watching people drink and dance, the women brought out the food. Every family had made open-faced sandwiches with slivers of pickled peppers and brought blood sausages and liver sausages. Only our host family had brought donuts, which quickly vanished. Mysterious glasses of *pálinkát* kept arriving in front of Jenny and me from men in all corners of the room. She consulted György who said, no doubt much more politely than the translation, that the men were trying to get the easy American girls drunk. When the food ran out, the dancing began again, though now everyone was considerably more drunk.

Zoli asked Jenny to dance. The room seemed mesmerized by her skill at being twirled. When they came careening off the dance floor, Jenny laughed and put her head on my shoulder. "Zoli is a very good dancer."

I sighed.

While I was in the outhouse, the New Year was ushered in. "*Buldog új évet,*" everyone shouted. "*Buldog új évet!*" (That the Hungarian word for "happy" sounds like an ugly medium-sized mammal in English

suited my mood perfectly.)

I emerged and was kissed by the entire village. Zoli, Jenny's new love, stood apart from the crowd and, along with some young children, cracked a whip, the noises like firecrackers.

Nobody sang "Auld Lang Sein" and nobody—at least as far as I knew—spoke of New Year's resolutions. I felt a brief burst of contentment, then sleepiness.

Jenny wanted to stay longer, so Zoli walked me back to the house. He had learned a few words of English, and I'd picked up a few more phrases of Hungarian—enough so that, between the two languages, Zoli could pump me about Jenny.

In Hungarian, he asked how old she was. I could only count to ten, so I flashed "thirty-four" with my hands. He stopped and looked like I'd just hit him on the top of the head. He thought that I'd misinterpreted the question, that I was giving the age in human-years of my faithful dog at home. When he asked how old I was, I held up all ten fingers three times, and he peered at me suspiciously.

He said in English, "Zoli love Jenny," and patted his heart for emphasis. "Jenny love Zoli?"

I replied in Hungarian that I didn't know.

"Doofy love Amy. Amy love Doofy?"

This was pure, unadulterated silliness. "No," I said.

He shrugged. I was an impossible, inconvenient female, not the easy American girl he'd hoped for.

I sank into bed fully clothed. My left leg felt stiff. I massaged my knee. As I waited for sleep, I imagined fresh vegetables jumping over a fence.

Every time I tried to turn over, I screamed in pain. But I didn't think to consult my dead grandmother.

At nine the next morning, Zoli knocked on the door and said we needed to be at church in half an hour. Jenny raced out of bed to get dressed. I didn't know whether I'd be able to stand up.

As long as I kept my knee totally straight, the pain was just a dull throb. But if I moved my knee at all, I screamed. Hiking half a mile to the church seemed unwise.

"Do you mind if I go?" Jenny asked.

Of course I minded. But I supposed I could play at being brave and selfless. "Go," I said. "It's your vacation, too."

Jenny said she'd tell Zoli's parents about my knee, so that I could go down to the kitchen and eat when I wanted. I hobbled down after a bit. When György asked me about my knee, I pantomimed the sledding accident, and he laughed. Elizabeth added some cottage cheese to the plate of food on the table and cut the crusts off some slices of bread.

There was a new kind of food on the plate. It was an opaque, yellowish and seemingly jellied piece of animal flesh about an inch high and two inches long. A third of the way up the slab ran a stripe of reddish something—a vein? a strip of muscle? Judith had told us that we'd be eating their very best holiday food. Now the holidays were over. Blood sausages and liver sausages had been a huge treat. György

dove right into the glistening slabs. I stuck to cottage cheese.

Jenny returned an hour or so later. Zoli had kissed and hugged her all through church, told his grandparents that after lunch they would go for a "little walk," and his grandparents had looked upon this turn of events with arched eyebrows. His mother was spitting mad.

At five p.m., we'd take a local train for two and a half hours to Ciceu, then the Express train for twelve hours to Budapest. We would have to buy new tickets at the Hungarian border—we could either stay on the train or get off and find a travel agent. The train would not have any heat, so we must dress warmly. We would hide our money and passports in our clothes. One of us would stay awake at all times to make sure nobody stole our bags. Elizabeth's eagerness to see us leave strained against her usual graciousness.

She kissed each of us on both cheeks and solemnly handed us hand towels. She and Jenny argued fondly. Jenny relented. "She wanted us to have something to remember them by, but these are all she has to offer."

I examined my towel closely while Elizabeth examined me. It was green and white, flowered, fuzzy, and much used. "Szep. Beautiful," I said solemnly and meant it. Mostly in English I gave them a long discourse of thanks for their generosity and the opportunity they'd offered me, hoping that my facial expressions would convey what I felt.

Zoli asked if we had any dollar bills. I retrieved one from my wallet. The whole family crowded around, staring at it, stroking it to release any magical properties. Zoli said he would take it and buy a plane ticket to America. Jenny and I did not comment on the impossibility of that plan. We said they should keep the bill. They put it in their cupboard, right next to a statuette of the Virgin Mary.

I used the outhouse one more time. As I tore out a page of the book that doubled as a toilet paper dispenser, I looked at it for the first time. The Tanko family wiped themselves with pages from a Romanian grammar textbook.

"I am worried about you," Judith said in our farewell visit to tell her we would not be travelling back with her. "Do you think you will be all right?"

Jenny and I nodded.

"Of course, it is not so good for me. I will have to wait at the fourteen-hour line at the border."

Jenny and I nodded.

Judith embraced me suddenly. "I would like to write to you back in the States."

"Jenny has my address," I said.

She hugged Jenny, then we said our goodbyes to the assembled crowd at the Peter-Virag household.

As we walked away, I said, "If Judith writes to me, she'll probably ask me to put her son through college."

"I'll miss Zoli, my little friend," Jenny replied.

Zoli and Doofy would accompany us on the first train. György insisted—it would be too hard for us to buy the tickets without knowing Romanian. We protested but were overruled.

Half an hour before the train left, we set out.

The train station was cavernous, unheated and dimly lit. I gave Zoli the money to buy our tickets—thick cardboard rectangles about two inches by an inch, with dull red stripes running down the edges, a hole in the middle, and a bunch of tiny, illegible writing on the back.

When the train arrived ten minutes later, two things about it surprised me the most: that the illegible writing on the back of the ticket meant something to Zoli, and that inside the train there was only the barest glimmer of light.

Jenny and Zoli sat down on a bench and immediately started smooching. Doofy and I looked at each other and shook our heads. He got up and went into the next car. I thought of leaving, but I was too afraid. My only link to the world around me lay with Jenny. As Zoli's hand clamped down on her breast, I pulled my hat down over my eyes.

I believe that real friends must not only like but also admire one another. I was willing to have my friendship sacrificed, at least temporarily, for True Love, but not for an obviously doomed infatuation.

Maybe half an hour later, Jenny whispered in my ear, "Are you just tired or are you incredibly pissed?"

It wasn't a fair question, so I answered with the truth. "I'm lonely." I have seldom felt loneliness so keenly.

"But you have me," she said.

I pulled up my hat.

Zoli stared at me from across the compartment, impatient, annoyed. After a few more minutes of patting my head, Jenny went back to him. I pulled my hat over my eyes again.

I tried to focus on seeing my aloneness in the world as a strength. I would nourish myself, rearrange my furniture, clean under my living room rug so that I'd no longer feel haunted by the millions and millions of dust mites living out their lives there. Every morning, fresh orange juice and *The New York Times*. I would be so meticulous, in a state of grace beyond bravery. I would be my own adoring wife, my own best mother.

"What are you thinking about?" Jenny suddenly whispered.

"Cleaning under my living room rug."

"What?" She pulled up my hat, looked impatient, annoyed.

My eyes were dry.

The station at Ciceu was mobbed. Zoli bullied his way to the front of the line, only to be told that nobody could buy tickets for the express train until forty-five minutes before its departure. So Zoli and Jenny went outside and disappeared, while Doofy and I stayed in the crowded station.

When Zoli and Jenny returned, Zoli bullied his way to the front of a long line again. He emerged with two more pieces of thick cardboard. When the train arrived, he shoved his way past car-lengths of people

and into a compartment, argued with the people sitting down until they left, and then, in the near-dark, showed us the indecipherable writing on our tickets—two seats at opposite ends of the compartment. Jenny and I thanked Zoli and Doofy profusely, and after Jenny and Zoli exchanged tender remarks and kisses, the boys left.

People surged into our compartment, taking the other seats and standing in the narrow aisle. As the train pulled out, I could not see Jenny crying, but I could hear her.

After twenty minutes or so, the occupants in the compartment aisle shifted out into the crowded hallway. Tears streamed down Jenny's silent face. "You'll see him in a month," I said. I knew that her reasons for crying were more complicated than leaving Zoli—she had briefly belonged to a place and people—but the most important insight about insights is that sometimes they shouldn't be shared.

The train's motions, the heat (Elizabeth had been very wrong!), and the near darkness lulled almost everybody to sleep—everybody, that is, except a suspicious compartment companion clutching a romance novel and me. Then I realized that I didn't feel scared. None of these people seemed dangerous. Of course, I didn't know them at all, but they seemed less sinister than the average Amtrak passenger, perhaps because of the exhaustion etched on their faces.

After a few hours, the train stopped and most of our compartment companions were replaced by a fresh lot. A young man took out a picnic. There, on a piece of bread, was a slab of meat. I stared at it. This person must be incredibly rich and wasteful, I thought. Why kill a cow for its flesh when you can get milk from it for years instead? But oh, that meat—probably a quarter-inch thick—looked good! In that moment, I was unwittingly Transylvanian myself.

We stopped at the border for nearly two hours, while first the Romanian and then the Hungarian border guards checked our passports. We bought new tickets for the rest of the trip. Scenes from *Julia* rushed through my head. But I had no ridiculous hat stuffed with smuggled money, no friend fighting for a just cause. All I had were some very dirty laundry, a clean hand towel, and gratitude for my American citizenship.

At eight a.m., the train arrived in Budapest. Jenny charged through the Metro, not speaking. I rushed to keep up. Because I had simply invaded the personal space of the people sitting across from me on the train by sticking my leg out straight, my knee didn't feel too bad—I could hobble pretty quickly! When we arrived at the apartment, I headed straight for the bathroom.

I washed and washed in the bathtub. The hot, soapy water rushed all over my body. I shampooed my hair three times. It smelled good—I would smell good again! I composed little odes to H<sub>2</sub>O. When I dried myself off, I looked in the mirror.

I had lost more weight than I realized, and my eyes looked desperate behind the gaunt bones of my face.

I have a reputation in Houston for being diplomatic to a fault.

Always saying the right thing is a very safe and generally agreeable game-plan for living one's life. You get a lot done, most people like you, and if you're empathetic enough, you're usually even sincere. But while diplomacy can be a moral code, it can also be a habit formed out of laziness, convenience, expediency. The goal is always to stay within the confines of the "appropriate." And the big test of the system comes when it fails.

As I combed out my hair after my bath, Jenny looked across the room at me and asked, "What do you think of my relationship with my little friend?"

Without pausing to measure my response, I replied, "I think it's silly."

"Silly!" Jenny said. "How can you say that? There's so little love in the world—why should it be passed by just for the sake of convention?"

"He's a nineteen-year-old Transylvanian farm boy," I said.

"So! He has a heart of gold, and it's all mine," she said, as if his image in her mind confirmed her words. Then she glared at me. "Your attitude is very arrogant and narrow-minded."

My heart pounded. I was not used to such direct attacks. "Probably so. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings," I said without thinking—my words were reflex diplomacy—and I still do not know if I meant them.

She shook her head with short little jabs and stomped off to the bathroom. I stuck out my tongue at her retreating back. Tomorrow, I said to myself, I'll be going home.

When Jenny emerged from the bathroom, she had clearly decided to glaze politeness over all of her interactions with me. She dazzled me with a fabulous false smile and asked if I was ready to go. We shopped for presents for my friends and family, Jenny speed-walking and I limping along behind. We ate lunch in a pizzeria, where I had never been so happy to see mushrooms and tomato sauce.

After our shopping trip, Jenny said she wanted to take a nap. I went to my room to read. Hours passed; it grew dark. I went into the kitchen to look for food. Because we'd cleaned out the refrigerator before we left, and because I didn't know how to work the stove (Jenny had to contort her body in some special way while she held a knob continuously in order to keep the gas on), I settled for apples, then went back to my room. Somehow, waiting there to go home was more painful than waiting for the night journey across Romania to end. I read in my guidebook about getting to the airport in case Jenny didn't wake up in time or—though the possibility seemed remote—if she refused to take me.

At about nine o'clock, on my way back to the kitchen for more apples, I heard the low drone of the television coming from Jenny's room. I knocked on the door. "You can come in," she said. She sat propped up in bed, reading a book and drinking beer. She translated the title: *Yesterday I Walked in Ghimes*. She began reading aloud in Hungarian. I watched her, stupefied. After ten minutes or so, I interrupted her to make plans for getting to the airport the next

morning. Then I said I'd pack and go to bed. She grunted and continued reading aloud.

I packed my suitcase with the gifts I'd bought for my family and friends—a mirror, painted eggs, little bottles of a digestive called Unicum, which tastes like Pine Sol mixed with licorice. My suitcase would protect those fragile things. I would go to bed hungry.

There was some warmth in our goodbyes at the airport, warmth, perhaps, based on nostalgia for our friendship of the previous summer. We made promises to see each other over the summer, and I didn't know if the promises were false right from the start.

At home, I had strange urges, strong reactions. I cried for the Tankos and their poverty when I saw the produce at Whole Foods. I succumbed to naps on my office floor. My friends fed me. I did not say the trip had been great, the countryside was beautiful, the food was exotic. I said it was miserable but interesting in a horrifying sort of way.

I didn't know if Jenny and I were still friends. We communicated only sporadically. In March, she wrote to say that she'd gotten a job at the university, which came with a terrific apartment. Right after she'd moved in, Zoli had appeared on the doorstep, and though she'd felt ambivalent, she could not turn him away. He had moved in for the month before he joined the Romanian army, wanting to toss everything and stay—just before he'd arrived he'd been arrested by the Romanian police and "interrogated" on suspicion of stealing a TV, and they'd beaten him up and broken his eardrum, which still drained continuously. She told him he had to leave.

Although there are still plenty of dust mites under my living room rug, I have found contentment here—or perhaps, I am better able to recognize the contentment I had all along. I am less fearful, less responsible, more grateful for both fresh vegetables and Pringles. I will not return to Budapest anytime soon.

Nor will I eat bacon.

## Rock School

*"We are the birds of the same branch." Wendy Ewald*

How many evenings, the grey shawl of dusk  
wrapping the two story house,  
the sisters lined up on the porch and one  
pacing in front, a lecture underway,  
parental, imitative, *I'm going downtown  
to smoke my pipe*, this a game  
repeated, played until the words  
entered bloodstream and cells, stayed  
like syllables of prayer. *And if you let  
the wicked witch in*, here a cold spurt  
of fear, shiver of half delight because we knew

this witch, igneous rock combination blown  
out of the dark, the first grade nun,  
brittle as bone, and mother on a bad,  
bad day, the time we knocked a whole shelf  
of seedlings down, smash, dirt and green  
all mixed behind the dryer. *I'll spank you  
with my old rubber shoe*. Here the hand  
coming down, hairbrush, spatula, anything  
stiff enough to hurt, vacuum cleaner  
attachment, and she screams at father,  
you get out too, go, go, leave me alone.

The trick was to pick a name she didn't know,  
a word or fruit she couldn't guess, or else  
the witch transformed us by her spell. A girl  
reads every night, pages turning like days  
or leaves on a tree, looking for *huckleberry,  
quince, salmonberry, rose hips, blue rounds  
of deadly nightshade*. Mother to daughter, the fallen  
shelf, the word made magic, the wicked witch  
casting a spell to trap one forever, a turn of phrase,  
motion of hand, the sister in front of us turning  
on her heel, becoming Mother in front of a mirror,  
or her face looking out from a photo, a voice soft,  
then harsh, then deeply soft and calling my name.

## The Rubbed-Away Girl

My sister Daphne is 42. I am 43. She is married with children and she also works. I live with someone and I work. We don't visit each other very often and when we do, we are quiet. We don't say that much to each other and what we do say seems incomplete or muted. I think mean things and I think she feels my thoughts.

Daphne was once beautiful in the way of a common flower: it's easy to overlook, but once you notice it, it seems better than the fancy kind. I used to stare at her, thinking that no one could be more beautiful, even if they were models or movie stars. I think she felt those thoughts too. Once when we were both in high school, Daphne and I lay on the bed we shared, reading. The sun was so thick that the room seemed dry and viscous at the same time. I turned to Daphne to say something, and saw that she had fallen asleep, her face on a folded, faded blue pillow, her lips opened, one knee bent up to her chest so that one hip stuck up. I took in the blue and mauve tones of her skin and lips, the glinting brown of her hair and dullness of her short, blunt eyelashes against her radiant cheek. Her beauty almost shocked me. Fascinated, I grazed her lower lip with my finger. She frowned an innocent sleep-frown and licked her lips, bumping my finger with her tongue. She almost smiled, then went more deeply into sleep.

But now she looks exhausted and brittle, as if she has collapsed inside, leaving her skin stranded with nothing to support it. Like mine, her face is lined; like mine, it sags.

She seems weak and enervated, even though I know she's not. Sometimes I'm mad at her for losing her beauty and then I'm mad at myself. Daphne is dutiful and she's kind; she makes me feel selfish and ashamed, and yet determined to cling to my selfishness like it's the only way I'll survive. We never lie in bed together and read.

It seems strange to me now that we were, as teenagers, still sleeping in the same bed. It seemed natural to us because our mother shared the same bed with both her sisters well into their teens. The frame and headboard of the bed shared by Daphne and I had belonged first to our grandmother, then to our mother, and it exuded beneficent matriarchy. It was a massive and handsome stained oak piece painted at the center with a pastoral scene so faded it was barely discernible—the outline of a plump arm, the ghost of a wide-rimmed hat, a flying scarf, a rose bush, the fluttering frock of a rubbed-away girl on a rubbed-away swing shimmering through a nasty scrape in the varnish.

Daphne inherited the bed when she moved into her first apartment. She slept in it by herself and with half-dozen boyfriends until she was

thirty-five years old. That's when she got married. When that happened, she dismantled the bed and kept the head and foot boards in a basement storage room. It's possible that she's even thrown it away by now and that she didn't think to tell me. The last time I saw the pastoral scene, covered with dust in the basement, it was so faded that it looked like the wood had been defaced with some crude substance. It did not look like it had been specially painted with a wonderful scene to take little girls safely into sleep.

One of the first pictures ever taken of Daphne was taken with me, and it still sits on her dresser in a cunning plastic frame shaped and painted like a coiled cat. We are two and three, and I am grabbing Daphne with both arms while she flails and buries her head against me, resisting me and clinging to me at the same time. I am smiling in ignorant triumph. She looks blurred and stunned.

One of my first complete memories is of Daphne and I, at two and three, lying with our heads at opposite ends of the couch and our feet pressed together, wildly pumping our legs, laughing and screaming, "Two twos! Two twos!" until our mother ran in and said "Stop it! You'll make yourselves sick!"

As we grew older, we were constantly together, almost ignoring our younger sister Margot. We played games that spanned the course of days and sometimes weeks, for which we arrayed whole villages of toys across our room so that we could enact ongoing stories. (We didn't completely ignore Margot; we would occasionally put one of her stuffed animals on trial, find it guilty of something and toss it out the window while she screamed.) We could spend whole afternoons sitting on the floor of our shared bedroom feverishly drawing characters and then telling their stories in crayon scenes which we took turns drawing. I remember us moving at a contemplative crouch through the wild strawberry patch in back of the abandoned hot-house next door, picking berries with a rhythm so deeply sympathetic it was as if the movements of one physically propelled the other. I remember holding hands as we ran up an inconsequential hill, drunk with the joy of our arms and legs and the fact that we could move them.

I remember playing a game which consisted of me chasing her around the yard, whipping her with a supple branch while she whinnied like a horse. I remember our tickle-fights which I would always win, not because I was stronger, but because when Daphne straddled and tickled me, I would scream so desperately that she would just give up.

With Daphne I felt an emotional fullness I have rarely felt as an adult. I have never felt more intimate with a lover—and really, if you stretch the term, Daphne and I were lovers. In the guise of "practicing" we, eleven and twelve, stripped naked under cover of night and embraced beneath the maternal auspices of the phantom pastoral romp, rubbing our little groins together until the bed springs creaked. Because I had rudimentary breasts, I would always play the woman—which was, for us, the position of honor. Daphne would lie between my opened legs with her legs together and her hips thrust resolutely

forward, chivalrously supporting herself on her elbows as she made love to me with a gentle rocking motion, every now and then pausing to ask uncertainly, "Is it in?" Afterwards, we would kiss and she would touch my breasts with theatrical reverence while I turned my head in an expression of doomed abandon. We would giggle and joke, inevitably banging into the cheap air conditioner that jutted from the window next to the bed, heightening our fun with the thrill of being heard and caught.

Gradually these sessions fell off with the mutual goodwill or our former tickle-fights and then stopped altogether.

Then I started high school. All at once I had what our mother called my "problems." I had been a good student and suddenly I almost flunked everything. My friendships disintegrated. I abruptly grew four inches, and with grim inexorability, added two more as the years progressed. The unexpected height—I was all at once taller than my mother—caused my narrow frame to droop strangely, my ribs and pelvic bones to protrude. I didn't have the grace to carry it. I was funny-looking. I stayed up all night crouched by the radio in the dark, writing poetry and reading fashion magazines. I would go to sleep in my clothes so I wouldn't have to spend time getting dressed in the morning.

My mother took me for free therapy at a state-run clinic. That was okay with me as it meant I skipped a couple of classes a week.

But Daphne lost respect for me. I didn't realize this until I published a poem titled "Lemons Under A Teakwood Tree" in the newsletter put out by the state-run clinic.

I was proud of the poem and I read it to everybody at dinner. Later that week, I dug Daphne's diary out of her underwear drawer and read it while eating from a bag of candy.

I did this every now and then, and it didn't occur to me to feel bad about it. But I did feel bad when I read what she thought about my poem. She wrote that it was stupid and pathetic and it made her feel sorry for me. She wrote that I thought I was so great for having it printed in a mental hospital paper. I went into the closet and lay under a pile of clothes and cried so loud everybody in the house could hear me. She said it was my own fault for reading her diary, but I thought she knew I read her diary and that she'd written those things in there on purpose.

But sometimes we were friends again. Sometimes when one of us bathed, the other would come into the bathroom to keep the bather company, sitting on the closed toilet, playing the radio and talking. I remember one time in particular. I had read something by Henry Miller at the library which I had Xeroxed and brought home for Daphne. It was about a man having sex with a woman he didn't like who had, for some reason, come to visit him wearing nothing but a garter belt and stockings. She gave him a bath and then he had sex with her while thinking about how horrible she was. When they were finished, he told her that he liked her cunt, that it was the best thing about her.

The story he told scared us and bewildered us, so we were sarcastic about it. Daphne splashed and clowned as she made fun of Henry

Miller. She stood and bent over like the woman in the story, except she exuberantly squatted and peeped from between her legs and made a funny face. The water ran in rivulets from her wet pubic hair, her smiling eyes were all for me, her sister who loved her, mean diary entry or no.

Who else has she ever done that with? I mean, in the bathtub, with a funny face, in the middle of a literary conversation? I wonder if she even remembers? And, if she does, how it makes her feel. I think she might feel embarrassed. I am not embarrassed exactly. I am uncomfortable because the memory engages my emotions more fully than I am used to. It makes me feel titillated in a way I can't categorize. It makes me feel queasy too. Because in some way it illustrates Daphne's frequent, tacit agreement to submit to me—an agreement which often entailed her mild contempt based on our secret knowledge that I was the weaker one. She, after all, let me win at tickle-fighting because I couldn't stand to lose. She gave me the honor and drama of the woman's role, but she fucked me.

I flunked out of school when I was seventeen. My parents accepted my decision to drop out in a way that was both sweet in its toleration and infuriating in its assumption of defeat. I lazed for a few months then got a job at the concession stand of a small theater, serving candy and popcorn and primary-colored drinks from droning dispensers.

After work I would stuff candy bars in my purse, and go to meet my boyfriend Ed in the parking lot of the hardware store. We would drive to the playground of a deserted elementary school on the edge of town, the broken turn signal of Ed's old car flickering at hysterical hyper-speed at each turn. His friends would be there, and we would smoke and drink together, seated gangling and overgrown on the iron instruments of play, our shadows intermingling with those of bars and spans of metal and chain, our car doors open so that our tape decks could blare.

We didn't do anything on the playground but talk and drink and smoke. Still, weird energy seeped through all our gestures: slowly, a girl would comb her hand through her hair, then collapse the hand palm-out against the side of her neck, woefully crumpling her fingers, then jerking the hand into her lap as if remembering something shameful, then reaching for her can of beer, her ringed hand weakly coruscating as she lifted it slowly, so that she could bring her cigarette to her lips before she drank, all the while talking and talking so quickly, rocking herself, her ankles locked tautly together for leverage. And everybody would shift their hips, play with their hair, pull at their lips, clap their hands, collapse in on themselves with giggling, then suddenly flex erect, chest and pelvis thrust frontal. All movement was soft and mute in the gray tenderness of the street lamp light, even when somebody chased somebody across the playground and playfully slammed him on the asphalt. The music from our open cars surged through us in gross currents and came out refined through our small, special movements. It was as good as going out to dance—better really, because we were too shy to dance.

I was especially friendly with a girl named Sheila, a small, royal creature with dark, sensuous circles under her flat, bitter eyes, narrow hips and tiny breasts. And I was fascinated by a girl named Denise and her boyfriend, Jeff. In our group, they were the best, and Denise was even taller and thinner than I. Her austere fleshlessness gave her round face, heavy-lidded eyes and frenetically shaped hair a chic grotesquerie. She slouched with her shoulders pulled down and back and her pelvis thrust forward, her stance authoritative, yet also sad and humane. As if you could show her your baseline gracelessness, your embarrassing noises and odors, and not only would she understand, she would admit you into the aura of her fleshless glamour. Her boyfriend Jeff was also slim and slouching, with an affable pouchy face and sweet little lips that he pursed and nervously bit. He wore long sweaters in shapes of relaxation, and suede loafers with tiny chains spanning the arches, which we saw as indicating his special tastes.

I remember them partly because of their glamour and partly because of an incident which stuck them in my mind as examples of a certain sort of horribleness that no one, apparently, was exempt from.

One weekend one of Jeff's friend's parents left town, and he gave Jeff a key to the house so that he and Denise could have sex in his bedroom. Unfortunately, on the second night, a vigilant neighbor who suspected a break-in called the police who then surprised Jeff and Denise. The cops cuffed the naked kids and then stood there and laughed at Denise's body. They even called the back-up cops in the car outside to come in and laugh. After they stopped laughing, they questioned the couple, every now and then pausing to snicker at Denise's chest. Apparently they believed their story because they just took the house keys and released them without telling their parents.

All their skinny glamour laughed at! How bewildering it must've been—or maybe not. Maybe it was what they expected, even agreed with, in the secret part of them that pulled their shoulders forward and down.

But if their slouching shoulders expected to be humiliated, Denise's stubborn pelvis thrust up against it in defiance, and her defiance was strong enough to carry Jeff.

They were back on the playground the next night where they perched on the teeter-totter and made jokes about handcuffs. Everybody was very delicate about it.

When Ed and I left the playground and drove to a quiet place to have sex, I brought Jeff and Denise and Sheila with me. I didn't exactly think about them, it was more that I felt them, especially when Ed and I made love. It wasn't like a sexual fantasy—I didn't want to have sex with them, at least not all of them. But their imaginary presence in the warm car made me feel safe and ardent in a way that Ed by himself did not. The feel of them made me feel more loved and loving, in a way I would not ever put in words.

I would get home at around four, crawling into the big bed I shared with Daphne, inhaling her warmth as I lifted the light summer blanket, firmly planting my back against hers, letting the breath of her deep

body take me into sleep.

I'd wake alone in the afternoon. The days were a grand torpor of late breakfast and long phone calls to Ed. When the family sat down to the dinner table at night, my father would point to the side of the table where Daphne and Margot sat and he would say "These girls want to be part of this family. They want to contribute something." Then he would point at me and say "You aren't contributing anything." Daphne and Margot would lower their heads. I would scowl.

I began to resent Daphne. It was unfair and I knew it, and my knowledge made me ashamed, which made me resent her more. I was keeping my own diary during this time, and it is, among other things, a record of my peevisish, furious resentment. In it, I described the time Daphne and I took a drive to the mall, and on the way, took some of our father's mail to the post office, which he had asked us to do. He'd specifically asked us to take the mail inside the post office instead of using the drive-by mail-box on the curb, because he'd read that pranksters sometimes poured glue or pitch or even more ruinous substances into mailboxes. We made fun of his fears on the way to the post office, but when we got there, Daphne insisted that we park and take the letters into the post office instead of disobeyingly dropping them into the drive-by box.

"But he won't know!" I protested.

"But if he did, he'd be upset," Daphne answered.

I maintained an annoyed silence all the way to the mall, and in my diary I spent a page heaping violent sarcasm on Daphne's obeisance.

Another time Daphne thought to buy a stuffed animal for the birthday of a sad, fatherless little girl we both baby-sat for, and I criticized her in my journal as a do-gooder. To her face I said, "You're nice like a TV person." She flinched so imperceptibly only I could've seen it. Then she assumed the same expression she wore when my mother came upstairs and asked her to "act as a buffer" between she and our father—which meant that she wanted Daphne to amuse and soothe our father and so keep him from picking a fight with our mother.

At the end of the summer I quit my job at the theater and took one at a small packaging plant. It was slow-paced assembly line work, mostly putting products inside boxes as they ground by on a conveyor belt. It paid well, and after about seven months I moved out of my parent's house and into an apartment with Sheila. My immediate memories of that short-lived time are: lifting my feet to wash them in the bathroom sink because the tub was backed up. Sitting on our tiny fire escape with Sheila, tipping our chairs back luxuriantly as we ate tins of frozen cheesecake for dinner. The burst of purple lilac in the yard below. Getting up at 7:00 in the morning to eat cold cereal with Sheila before we went to work. The dirt on Sheila's bare heels as she paced the kitchen waiting for the coffee to be done. At night, the people from the playground would come to the apartment and what had been so mute and tender in the lamplight became startling and loud. People yelled at each other. The music was a blunt instrument. Denise sat regally spread-legged on the edge of the couch, a ring-mistress of loudness, cutting

lines of coke with martial precision, her fingers rigorous and expert. Ed suddenly got mad about something Jeff said; Denise screamed and Ed punched Jeff in the face. He fell with one pointy little foot twisted under one skinny calf. Denise stood up so fast she knocked the table over, she and I fell on Ed and we lurched sideways, Ed numbly groping the air. A boy from Pittsburgh pulled Jeff to his feet, knocked over Sheila's goldfish bowl, stumbled back and ground a little dancing fish into the floor. Sheila moved around the room, agitated and chattering, her bitter eyes sparking deep inside as she yelled, "No! No! That's not cool! That's not cool!" The body of the little fish, mashed except for its poor staring head, was still there the next day when we got up for our cereal.

I visited my family once a week. I would sit with my parents and watch TV as Margot passed through the room like a ghost and Daphne did her homework at the dining room table. My mother would laugh and comment on the television characters and my father would go along with her comments half-way, like he thought it was stupid to be talking about TV people, but that at least she was making the effort to talk.

When Daphne went up to her room, I would go with her and we would lie across the bed and talk. She had decided that she wanted to go to college and become a therapist. She was getting A's in school. She was volunteering at an old person's home, although she quit when one of the old people bit her. She carefully filed her nails and shaped the cuticles. She used pale-pink fingernail polish that was almost transparent. She would apply it with intense concentration and care, like it was one of the things keeping her on the path to college and therapist school. She would apply her polish and listen to me talk about Denise and cocaine and Ed and Sheila and Jeff getting punched and the crushed goldfish.

I think she liked to hear me talk about those things. I was doing something messy and she was doing something neat. It made sense, like when I was three and she was two, I was the one to grab her and she was the one to flail. Like I was the one to chase her around the yard with a little branch and she would run and whinny, even though she knew she didn't have to run from me at all. I didn't have to tell her things I knew she would find ugly and stupid, but I did. I even made them sound more that way than they were.

The summer came. It was so hot in the apartment that Ed and I brought the couch cushions out on the fire escape and slept on them under a sheet. We woke with the sun warming our eyeballs through their lids, the inside of our mouths sore and sweet with residual alcohol. By the time the summer ended Ed and I lost interest in each other. I took a GED high-school equivalency exam, sold my car and moved back into my parent's house. My father walked around alternately scolding me for dropping out of high school and praising me for taking the GED. Then they just accepted me. I enrolled in the local community college. Daphne, who had graduated high school, enrolled too.

Since there was only one car in the household, our father drove us to the college on his way to work. We would walk across the parking lot

to the campus, close together, our steps small but intent, our movement forward but also inward, as if we were walking deeper and deeper into ourselves. At the end of the day, our father would pick us up in the parking lot and take us home, usually stopping at the A&P for groceries. We would tell him about our classes and teachers. We could tell he was very proud and pleased that we were both in college, and secretly, I was glad to have given him that pleasure. When we arrived home it was often with a sense of unity and satisfaction that felt so good we sometimes went nuts and ran around the house imitating chimpanzees shrieking and pretending to scratch our heads and armpits. Our father started it. Part of the fun was that he would just start doing it and then just as suddenly stop. "Well, I feel better now!" he would exclaim. Then he'd go get a beer. It was as if to say that, under the daily things that got us through the world in one piece—school, work, grocery shopping—we were sweet, friendly animals that wouldn't hurt each other.

Except that we did hurt each other. College scared me at first. I flunked science; even remedial writing class was hard for me. Daphne took advanced classes and got all A's. I told Daphne I hated her, and that if she became "more successful" than I did I would kill her. When I said this, her expression left her face so swiftly it was almost as if she had disappeared. She left the room.

We had a reconciliation that was partial and tense. She said, "Well, if you want to feel like a success, you're doing the right thing by going to college. Because you're smart and eventually your teachers will know it." Her expression as she said this was careful; I had, after all, not taken back my threat on her life.

She was right; after the first semester, I started to get A's too. I went to a big university sooner than she did. But I don't know if either of us "became successful." The idea of it makes me sick. I threatened to kill my sister for it. I didn't mean it literally, but I did mean it some way. I thought there was something she might take from me, like there was only one thing and if she got it, I couldn't have anything. It was the thing in the photograph from when we were two and three; I'm hugging her, there's love in it, but I'm also saying, this is mine. She's letting me say it, but only because she is little and she doesn't feel like she has a choice.

But then there's the time we put the bottoms of our feet together and screamed "Two twos!" Or ran up the hill together or picked the strawberries. Then we didn't have to fight over anything; there was an endless supply, and the more she got, the more I had. We could roll it back and forth between us. When we were older, and we lay on the bed and read together, we weren't rolling it back and forth anymore, we were planting ourselves deep inside it and drawing it up into us. The more the one got, the more the other had.

I know that feeling is still there in us, that inside we both remember it. But it's at the inside of a labyrinth with too many hallways, too many complicated turns. At that inside place, music is playing. We can hear it through the walls but we can't quite make it out. Maybe that's why,

when we're together, we're quiet and don't say much. We're listening, carefully.

## Only a Little

I hear lots of stories about people who have it rough.  
I might claim it's compassion making me listen close,  
But I'm playing a game of comparison; suffering's  
Secret wages amount to nothing hoarded, but there's  
A penalty for saving when they're spent. To say  
You've suffered, you have to look the part; but you  
Can't come out with everything on top of years  
Of passing for untroubled. Maybe I don't give  
Anyone more than partial credit; there has to be  
A reason I'm not the kind of person conversations  
Are reported to: "John said you're the saddest person  
He ever got so sick of," or such like. Maybe they've  
Got it all sewed up, my sack of innuendo; I wasn't  
Quick to figure out I was an unwed mother's child,  
Though nothing added up to say I wasn't. Since  
I'm no longer a child at all, it seems too late to talk  
About it. But sometimes it's like what my grandfather  
Wanted the day he got the bandages off and new glasses  
After cataracts; he asked to be driven around town  
To all the scenes he thought he'd seen. He grabbed  
My mother's arm at a crosswalk; "Baby," he said,  
"The light is *green*." It wasn't that he was in a hurry.  
He hadn't noticed the light before. So after I worked up  
My nerve to ask her—I had to try it over the phone,  
Seven states between us—and realized she'd just been  
Waiting to be asked the very question she'd chosen,  
Maybe decades before, I set the receiver back  
In the cradle and walked outside to look around.  
At the roses weighing down the tips of brittle canes.  
The mud where I stepped out cigarettes. The clouds  
Unbuckling their belts in the heat. The poorly  
Dressed children walking home from school,  
Swinging plastic bookbags. The hoods of cars  
In sunburned colors barreling down from the stoplight.  
It was going to cost to tell what I could see.  
It *was* a little different. But only a little.

## The Hawk

More snow last night, today icicles melting  
From the roof's guttered edge onto the man  
Repairing the heat pump. "That's enough  
To piss you off," he says. "One of those  
Could run right through you." I catch  
A flash of wings through the trees,  
Other side of the creekbank, slipping  
Into a slot between elm trunks; not much  
Heavier than a jay, but more emphatic  
Movements. Slate wings and back, belly  
A shade darker than snow, feet hooded  
In feathers, and neck curving over  
Something squirrel-gray, though it might  
Be a rabbit. Snow stained orange.  
Not blood-red, blood-orange, and the beak  
Tearing pieces easier than you'd think,  
Tearing and tossing. "You see that hawk?"  
I say. "Look between those trees, you'll  
See him." "How'd you ever . . . ?" The heater  
Man moves to the front of me, hoping to  
Get my eyeshot. Maybe I'll take him  
By the shoulders and set him straight;  
But I can't touch him, even though I  
Spotted an animal, that means there's  
Something wild in me. The heater man  
Works his freon machine, a hiss of gas  
Escaping; he shakes his fingers  
Where they dipped in. I've been reading  
A book about a woman and her mother.  
A friend lent it to me, I asked her to,  
But I don't like it, it's making me worry  
The only decent thing is demand to die.  
The mother in the book has a tumor;  
Her head's bald from chemotherapy.  
My mother's head's same as ever, outside.  
The stroke inside's made her stupid.  
I can't ask her if to live still means to live.  
I want her back, but she's not coming back.  
I watch the heater man jump back; he says  
He's scared to touch hot wires. Some people

Think there are better ways to die, at times  
You choose before they choose you. My  
Mother had made a will. She didn't think  
If she were paralyzed. All I have to go on  
Is when we watched tv, long lugubrious  
Stories of victims of disease; she sat still  
And watched intently, sometimes knitting,  
Sometimes stroking her gray cat's back,  
And sometimes said, "Let's turn this off."  
She didn't like to be reminded. She was  
More like an animal that wants to keep  
Killing whatever it has to till something  
Bigger gets it; it does what it can to run  
From that. I didn't notice the sparrow hawk  
Until he'd landed with his prey. Maybe  
Something bigger killed it; I've seen a hawk  
Ripping road kill. My mother and I weren't  
The same in our thinking, but I'd rather be  
Hawk than rabbit. It's not much better.  
But it's better. Tossing shredded meat  
Through winter air. Not even hungry.  
Just sharp-eyed, lonely, scanning  
The earth for movement; you can't pick  
Trees like yard birds, starlings, flocks  
Settling and rising together like crabapple  
Leaves when the breeze hits. My mother's  
Half-gone. Most people think a woman  
Like her would be smarter if she'd  
Keep going. She's left me in a small town  
Where it doesn't seem right to distrust  
Repairmen. He asks me to help him  
Thaw the ice locked around the heat pump  
Blades; I carry water, but I don't like it.  
The hawk takes its time tearing the carcass.  
I ask the repairman if he ever saw it,  
And he says Yes, but I can tell by his gaze  
He didn't. My mother's eyes spot distant  
Birds. I've watched them focus on points  
In the sky distant as the afternoons when  
I wonder if I ought to pick up the phone,  
This time she's going to be dead.

## Father Time

### I

How much of him am I permitted? Beloved among men, I try sometimes to find him in the bodies of others. For years, not knowing what I am up to. Resist the reductive quality of it, disciplined psychological categorization. She loved her father, the real body of him who was, who was? Always turning, turned away. Will him back here. At forty years of age, just this once, a forbidden scenario: a young girl, she is ten? Eleven? Lying in her bed and he arrives, peels the clothes from his body. She wears her summer nightgown.

He makes love to her. The father to the daughter, in the half light of a fantasy constructed for her use after he has been dead twenty-seven years. Let me be careful how I write it. Nothing ever happened. Daylight streamed through the window, early mornings. I woke to sounds of the radio floating up from downstairs, his singing. Joint parental movement. I took my share of bathroom time, dressed myself and ate—Cheerios, I suppose. And off to school, usually cheerful. Nothing happened.

Except that he died and I was thirteen. My mother quickly filled the gap with her longing. I missed him, became sentimental about it, mourned him on the anniversaries of his death, went to the cemetery with her. Standing beside her while she knelt and wept, I learned how to do it, to weep with her and through her. After a short while to make her the subject of my weeping, to make her loss mine, a woman grieving for her husband. Already so unhappy when he left her. Her, then me. Is this competitive?

Who is he?

A photograph of my father as a young, teenage boy. Seen for the first time when I am easily old enough to be his mother. He is swimming just off a New London beach, has turned and stood upright in the water, his face to the camera. His slim boy's body gleams in the salt sunlight. For an instant I don't recognize the father he will become. Nor does he yet resemble a child I still could have. He lives before and after the mother who bore him, the women he might love. An unknown boy I might notice while sitting in a beach chair at some distance, drenched in withering sunlight and the languid unfolding of my own thoughts, in the middle of my life. How lovely he is!

## II

November 18, 1932  
Cambridge, Mass.

Dear Mother,

*Please forgive yo bad rascal for not writing. Doggone it, I should have, but my pal procrastination got the best of me until before I know it, here it is Friday.*

*We arrived back in fine style with the thermometer about twenty. The tire went bad where it was fixed over in Stonington, so we had to take the whole business all apart before we got here and fix it right.*

*I'm sorry to hear about Aunt Lida. Isn't it sad that our lights all flick out one by one and we fade off into the darkness with only a few lingering memories left behind.*

*I'm glad you liked Sally. I had a strong hunch you were skeptical knowing her to be connected with Shirts.*

*One of the fellows, Calvin Mohr, gave me a ticket to the first Dorm Formal Dance tonight (\$2.00). I decided to go and am taking Alice Metcalf, Harriette's friend. I'm getting free transportation too. Tsk Tsk. It's probably the only dance I'll get to this year. I'll be home Wed. evening if all OK.*

*Much Love, Al*

Lately I've been re-reading literature from the thirties: the articulate anxieties of city immigrant life in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*; Djuna Barnes swimming across the frontier of gender certainties in *Nightwood*; Henry Miller; Faulkner; *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. A decade where overt ideological writing mingles freely with sexual and social variegations, despair and conquest. Hungers. Resistance. The flow of power across physical territory, blood and body, desire. Dispossession.

Somewhere in the midst of that writing, my boyish father rides up and down the coast of New England. In all the time since his death, I've avoided reading his letters, notes, the spare journal entries. I've had other things to do, my mother to remember. And a life, after all, contingent upon the threat and joy of living arguments threading the immediate atmosphere. My neglect has been further fueled, I suppose, by an inchoate longing to harbor the physical memory of a man with whom I never had a complicated conversation. I've been afraid to find how little there might be left me. How little might be left? Awkward and uncertain, I try to read the mystery of his class and time, worrying the breach between voracious sentiment and distilled fact. Get his voice.

Daughter slips the distance. Tries to insert herself. *My father*. Twenty-years-old and a student at M.I.T., he writes to his mother. I am surprised to hear of an unknown aunt over whom he expresses a glancing sorrow. Could there have been anyone else but me, my sister and brother? *We fade off, the drift of a genteel sorrow into the darkness with only a few lingering memories*. Daddy, I could tell you something different. *Isn't it sad*, you said, having recorded elsewhere in a few short sentences the loss of a handful of family friends to pneumonia, and possibly other diseases that will never kill your children. Your losses

seem so coherent. You move on. Who is Sally? Alice Metcalf? And who was Shirts, that wild thing who seems to have given Granny pause?

My father had a life long before I showed up. I won't begrudge him. He floats back, a hardy man on delicate, penciled surfaces, his voice lifting out of a handful of papers from the Depression, perhaps where he learned his avid "Scottish thrift," we used to call it, but probably it came before, from that secular Anglican household. Particular ways of saying things. Made-up "black" talk from listening to Amos and Andy, and always a penchant to arrive in "fine style" on the patched tires of whatever vehicle he was lucky enough, in those years, to hitch a ride on.

He was lucky enough, and always happy, as far as I can tell from the scant stories I pull from my relatives. His father was born in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, and grew up to be an architect. Naturalized in 1920, Pappy built up a business in Groton and New London that suffered during the thirties but never entirely failed. They had enough to eat, and all three of their children worked their way through college, the two sisters, my namesakes Margaret and Jane, living at home. My father seems to have been a delightful older brother, playful and teasing. He gave kid-sister Jane the nickname "Beans," because she was wild about baked beans on Saturday nights. The name stuck so that we, among all the children we knew with sedate aunts and uncles, had an "Aunt Beans" who was rugged, could sail and go clamming, wore bikinis into her fifties and windsurfed at sixty-five. At seventy, still does.

*January 8, 1934. Mother sent back shoes I bought for Beans. They were a little too old for her yet so I returned them. Went all over Boston trying to find something for Marg's birthday. I decided on a set of gloves or mittens and socks that are very snappy. I put big holes in her mittens at Christmas.*

A brand new, favorite pair of mittens I placed on a burning hot radiator in the cocoa shack, because they were sopping wet from the snowy spills I took the day we skated the pond near Warrensville. He said they'd dry there. They were navy blue with a white snowflake design and red trim. I loved the way they looked swooping in air. I was the ice queen, the *prima ballerina*. Or sometimes, on ice patrol. A bloodhound, a saviour. How I saw myself was different from the effort it took to be what I was, a little kid in loose jeans made stubby with long underwear. He dipped and flew across the ice, always circling back to his waddling daughter whose sense, later, of a perfect joy cut with deep disappointment will occasionally reside in the image of thick clouds on a winter day, the figures we cut in the blue-white landscape, all swallowed into scorched holes ravaging my mittens, the blue, white and red design.

Can this be so simple?

*January 9, 1934. In fact that outfit for Marg was a little too snappy for one with "auburn" locks, so I took them back and found some snappy white,*

*brown and blue ones. I'm sure they'll be lots better. Went to orchestra & glee club. Glee club all ready for Colby N.H. Sat. Oh Boy! Orch. pictures are to be taken in W.M. Thurs.*

*January 10, 1934. Wheeeeeeee! A letter from Suzzie. Nice going ole pal. I wasn't expecting that for some time yet. Tsk. Tsk. Letter—very snappy—from "Ma" to-day. Dads has the grippe but is doing OK. Dick & I started our crew training by running to the boathouse this aft. It's going to be good dope if we keep it up.*

I break into frigid lake water and swim hard. At forty, I say I feel confused about my body, but that's just laziness. Too much to explain to the listening self. My body borders youth and age. A clear fade or swelling voluptuousness flowing more and more from the inside out? The way we live a plethora of arguments about gains and losses, flesh, metabolism, skin texture, what could possibly be both safe and attractive. Talk show talk. One's real life resides away from the perfectly realized body. "Your parents," Aunt Beans says, "were very concerned about their weight. They went on crazy diets, even took pills." I find this hard to believe, about him anyway, then remember the red meat diets, the banishing of carbohydrates for extended periods of time. Oh Daddy, I think, shaking my finger at him, you should have known better.

There was a regimen, only intermittently grasped by his sluggish children. "Oh Boy!" he'd say. "Let's get up at the crack o' dawn and run around the barn!" How did we respond? The children, settled around the living room evenings doing homework or watching TV, had to look up, might have been eager. Didn't I squiggle and shout, "Yeah, Daddy, I will, I will!" while Brother burrowed a bit further into his classic comic book, perhaps let off by an abscess, Pearl already aloof, and well into her evasive teens? Or was she eager—which of us ran? It sounded so good. We would be "rollicking children" in a footrace with a dancing bear. Which is not entirely what it was like. In the snow, groggy and stumbling over the uneven rise by the barn, I remember I failed to keep up with him even though he was kind and held himself back. But I was turning sullen inside, and his kindness didn't matter. A split formed between the picture of us swarming to his melodic voice and the sibling body I was becoming, the youngest daughter with fierce, conflicting allegiances to health and illness, father and brother, sister and mother.

I swim hard against a sweet chaos of familial limbs, my mother's sedate breast stroke slipping into my brother's loping crawl always to the farthest point, where he becomes a solitary figure on a rock, until I grow big enough to catch him when he lets me, and he does. My sister beautifully paces a synchronized medley of strokes, but now it's my father's body I swim into, his heart I bring back with a vigorous kick into curving water.

## III

*January 11, 1934. Marg's birthday. 20 smackers by golly. Gosh how time twerps the snerp. Many happy returns Maggie ole pal. Dorm prom date set today. Feb. 9th. I sho would like to go, but I don't know whether I can afford it now. Good old Cab Calloway is up at the Met. I'll have to find time to get over there. That's all there is to that.*

*January 12, 1934. Went to the Met with John Bradner and Dick to see Cab. Had a grand time. He asked for vocal response from the audience to the Hi-de-ho in Minnie the Moocher. Oh Boy—He sho got it. We had sandwiches & ice cream in room after. I did some last reviewing for 2:20 quiz to-morrow.*

Thirty-five years after my father Hi-de-ho's with Cab Calloway, I leap to my feet at a Jefferson Airplane concert in downtown Boston, 1969. I'm there with people I don't yet know well, fast-talking girls from Long Island, Manhattan, and my beautiful New Hampshire roommate who has already had an affair with her high school English teacher. I am afraid of disappearing. Grace Slick slams across the stage. She doesn't sound as good live as she does on *Surrealistic Pillow*, which has sailed me through the spooky half-lit nights I have sat cross-legged on my bed entertaining the complete collapse of the twentieth century. But she's plenty good enough when they hit the chords for "We Can Be Together." We're up, all of us, singing *We must begin here and now / new continents of earth and fire / tear down the walls / tear down the walls* and we've found ourselves nameless, and without pasts. We close our eyes to the beat and soar along the rafters, up onto the ceiling in my brain that is sometimes the exact pale green of the living room in the house on Log Run Road lit up at night, now exploding with rockets and tracer fire. Something is out there, a war. Jungles strafed at a distance, framed black and white trails across televised rice paddies littered with writhing bodies. Angry and disapproving adults and all their wretched assertions about prosperity, and a long life. *When you marry and have your own children*, my mother whispers to me, *you'll see what I mean.*

She sits at the window of her dormitory room across the Charles River from the railing where he stood as a young student casually leaning into the winter wind in the photograph she holds. He is terribly handsome. She thinks that she has come down in the world. She is orphaned and lodged at a lesser institution across the way from the Ivy Leagues. Her hair is long and scraggly, she wears dirty blue jeans and a big plaid shirt, probably his. She is trying, like the best of her generation, to be defiant, and she seems to be. Reason has nothing to do with the way she feels. She can eat a lot of sandwiches and ice cream at one sitting. Hot dogs. Graham crackers and peanut butter. Cheese. She thinks the man in this picture would never look twice at her.

*February 12, 1934. I sent off my present to Beans for her birthday. She will be thirteen tomorrow. How the time flies. Good old Beans and Marg. I hate to think of us all growing up and away into different walks.*

A moment I still hear. My mother is seated somewhere, at the table or in the car, looking straight ahead but not at me. We have been talking about dating and I ask her, again, what Dad was like. "Well," she starts out, "your father was the type of man who—he was very enthusiastic, but he hadn't had a lot of experience."

My mother smiles, a little dazed with memory.

"Once he was walking along hand-in-hand with me and Aunt Beans—this was before we were married—and he got things mixed up and kept squeezing her hand instead of mine."

We both sigh. *There's not much to this story, Ma*, but this is not what I think at the time. I think it must be wonderful to hold hands with a man who's that giddy. My father has become a cherub.

Was he really a virgin when he married? I'll wonder, at twenty, at twenty-five, thirty, measuring my own behavior against what his might have been. The question will always seem cranky and invasive. I'll cast it behind me, and go off to some new country, city, new body and beloved, to the things I can do myself without either of them. Once at the Genesis Project on Ossabaw Island off the coast of Georgia, I'm trying to recall self-sufficiency. I hunker over the wood stove that heats my A-frame cabin perched on a point in Buckhead River. I'm newly arrived, have come to live out a subtropic February starting a book about travel in Asia that will become, over the years, something else, a book about them and me, my sister and brother, growing up and away into different walks. It's damn cold. I jam wood into the stove. Try to remember what I know about fires from old camping days. His physical confidence is observable in the way I masterfully throw open the damper, strike the match on cast iron, and light the base. I observe myself, minutes later the firm set of my body thrown into a panic by the blazing heat. Nearly burn the place down.

As if somewhere just behind me, the bodies of my parents leech into my own. The mother pulls against the father, a close call. I turn thirty on Ossabaw Island, a Yankee foraging in the South amidst wild stories about spirits said to haunt that place. African and Indian. Don't believe that stuff, but. So much wanted. I try to be respectful. Walk carefully the paths made dangerous by things I imagine but can't see in the encroaching swamp brush, hibernating alligators and dormant snakes. I hope for voices to shake my solitary Protestantism, wondering occasionally what exactly I have to give back. Dolphins feed at sunset along the banks of the Buckhead River, just out my back door. They do not come for me, the realist. I'm shaken by their beauty, their sleek flanks absorbing mutations of sky over water in last light, pink and purple and grey. I am not now cold, not hungry, neither sick nor dying. Nothing tears across the particular grandeur of this moment. Here by chance and blessing. Close in my skin, willing myself toward dusk and salt slime, mollusks, barnacles, and rotting, submerged wood on the border between a life I am conscious of living and one where all our subterranean dead live. *Let them go* an irritating voice says. *Go forth.*

March 29, 1935  
Cambridge, Mass.

Dear Dads:

Mr. Nalle, head of the placement bureau, called in nine students for appointments to jobs in the Canal Zone on Canal Operation. There will probably be six students taken as there were last year. They want three mechanical engineers, two electrical and one civil.

I almost said that I would not be interested but then decided to write and ask you about it. The work consists of the problems which come up with regard to maintenance and operation of gates, machinery, etc. I don't imagine that it is very technical, but there would probably be considerable good experience involved.

Salary is \$150 a month with traveling expenses paid from New York and two months vacation with pay, which is about \$41 a week working time or \$1800 for the period of appointment of one year. The two months vacation would offer excellent opportunity for some travel in South America and I could save very nearly enough to pay off my debts. Quarters are supplied to the men at \$7 a month with lighting, etc.

Now, the question is, is it worth a year or would the experience warrant the time? We are supposed to turn in our applications on Monday, April first if we wish to accept. I feel pretty sure that I could get it with my experience at Electric Boat which, while it isn't much, is a lot more than most of the fellows. Please think it over and reply by special delivery or telegram so I will know by Monday. If you would like to telephone I will be here Sunday evening. I cannot decide for myself very well. I like the idea of going, but on the other hand, the possibility of getting started on a permanent job with some company balances heavily on the other side.

Well, I guess I better get this out to the box. Much, much love to you all. I may come down with Gray Jensvold some weekend. He has a car up here now and drives down sometimes.

Al

Sometimes, way back: Ossabaw, harvesting oysters well before sunrise. Kickapoo joy juice, yip yip! She don't need nobody, past or future. Along the riverbank at low tide, the oysters cluster like flowers. No, teeth. Ragged and misshapen, bunched and blossoming from single roots. Scrambling through water and mud, she cleaves to the labor, wrenching each from its cluster to the sound of sand grating against shell. Pleasing. Feel of it, the tug and twist, breaking loose, the clank of the oyster tumbling into the bucket. The way she's straddled in big boots, one foot up the bank, the other submerged in water, leaning into the pickings. They will cook them later on a sheet of aluminum over an open fire, until the muscles that clamp the shells together relax their hold. Then she'll pry them open with a knife and suck the soft insides down with horseradish, lemon. She'll eat the hot cornbread they've made and watch the clouds gather, going into a storm.

There he is, a Friday morning before writing his letter, drenched in

the possible. At twenty-three, he is seven years younger than the woman crouched over a succulent feast who remembers him in her body. Same and different. I invent them, him seeing himself until I see him full-bodied on the isthmus, a civilian diligent at work and delighted to play, harboring the first words of a foreign language in the contemplation of something delicious. Rice and beans. *Plátanos*. *¿Me gusta esta comida! ¿Cómo se dice?* Daddy way south, two months to tramp volcanoes in Nicaragua, Guatemala, handling homemade hardware in a Chichicastenango market, if he could get there singing astride a burro the way a simple, good-hearted Canadian-American might. Meaning, interested in the way things work, the make of the harness and saddle, how the trail meal is put together, and what might be taken from the countenance of the trail guide. *¡Muchísimas gracias!* he would learn to say, whistling his pleasure. "Dear Mother," he might write. "Yo bad rascal has been riding the range in fine style on a donkey named Rosario. She's a great girl and takes me over mountains and no flats! Tsk. Tsk. The country is beautiful here and though the people are very poor, their life is simple and they seem happy. Our guide is a Mayan Indian named Enrique, that's Henry for short. Today he showed me how to catch fish in these cool, mountain streams. Oh boy! I smacks my lips."

Unless something, somewhere, comes across his vision. Alters the fundamentals. A whisper of history, rumors of blood, in 1935 just a few years past the *matanza* in El Salvador, that slaughter of peasant cooperatives. Or something more risky to him, more personal. A misunderstanding that leads to violence in the wrong place, wrong time. Even something undramatic, at first less tangible. A slight fever, an illness intimate enough to draw him, for a brief time, deep into the border he might not know he has between *gringo* and *indio*. He lays himself lightheaded on a straw mattress in a hut that might be, is, a way station on a densely thicketed road toward a place he cannot name. *Una madre* tends to the stove, her face, somehow, impossibly like his own mother's. She watches him while the fever grows. He tries to talk, a fervent babble of Spanish/English, but she speaks only Quiché and regards him in silence. She has lost a son, perhaps, to the government, to disease, or to the sudden thrust of a swelling river current. He hallucinates the North Atlantic. His body billows before him like a sail swerving to the tack. He sees her through water. She dips a rag in a jug and carries it toward him, wetting his lips and squeezing droplets into the parched and raging furnace of his mouth. How he yearns for her. But can't get close enough Mother, good ole Beans and Marg, *all my relations*. They flee to the corners of the room. One instant they loom like giants in shadow, their flesh fluid and grotesque. They mouth words he cannot hear. In the next, they shrink away, flailing and helpless behind a mother whose face crowds with the untranslatable details of her own history.

No. No, something like this happened to me.

My father never went to Central America. Instead, he took a job as a research and development engineer for the Waukesha Motor

Company in Wisconsin, where he worked for three years on a new design for heavy duty internal combustion engines in small aircraft before returning to Connecticut where he met and married my mother. After engaging the advice of his parent, he gave up that chance to travel in favor of landing a career-track job. I'm struck by the novelty of it. The planning and guidance.

*I cannot decide for myself very well.* I graduated from college immersed in the Beats and Black Mountain poets, Pound and Williams and *vers libre*, the politics of breath. Hitchhiked across Canada amidst hordes of others, 1973; by train and plane to Mexico, 1974, '80, '89, '90; Guatemala, 1974; Italy overland to Pakistan, 1977; Jamaica, 1981; Nicaragua, 1983. In between I lived in California; Colorado; upstate New York; Vermont; New York City; Edna, Texas; Houston. I worked as a Kwik-Lunch truck driver, landscaper, dishwasher, barmaid, house painter, bloodmobile assistant, photographic cataloguer, typesetter, teacher, a feminist—then Central America solidarity—organizer and wrote in fits and starts, poetry, essays, criticism, leaflets, used odd-sized journals, a typewriter, a computer, published a poetry magazine, traveled to see poets, marched in demonstrations, fell in and out of love, made friends all over and worked to keep them. At times grew silent, watchful, distant.

In and out, the bodies of others who could not balance the weight of the missing, a father locked into innocence, a mother mourning. "I love you to death," a lover once whispered in my ear and I lied to myself, moaning, and said I love you too.

High desert at sundown. "Outback," the dream says. A dry valley between two arid mountains. There is a shack and the dreamer paces alongside it, testing her boots on the dry earth. She kicks up dust. She is absorbed in the pleasure of that contact, intent on the crunch of desert plants that crumble beneath her feet. The dreamer knows she's in for something, always, but never what. A man rests inside the shack. Perhaps he waits for her to enter. But she doesn't know him, really. They have been dropped in this place by a traveling party, and she has received directives to survive the night. She assumes that means both of them and so, since she barely knows him, she spends the night outside, naming herself the protector, the one who keeps watch. She is too pleased with this adventure to sleep. The dreamer plays it over and over, how the shadows of the two mountains dissolve in the coming darkness, how the night desert unveils itself under the moon. Now walking, now standing still, now hunched, she traces her fingers in the dirt and expertly cases the horizon for trouble. The cool air mingles with her sense of alertness. She feels herself living in her own skin. All brain, heart, breast bearing down and settling through the hips to her tenacious legs, the muscle that will anchor them both through the night. The dream belongs to her. The traveling party returns in the morning to find her straddling the first rays of the sun. Her face is lit up and she seems to be drinking the light, as if the sun poured an exact and

quenching liquid. She remembers seeing that her hands looked red against the rough, dark wood of the shack. She turns confidently toward the door and pushes it open. The man inside has rolled off a straw mattress and lies sprawled on the dirt floor. He's dead. "That's what we brought him here for," the leader of the party says. "That's what he wanted."

Land felt through dreams. Places I return to so that I might walk them again. Something always different. At the end of a valley, a panther. At the top of the hill where a cornfield used to be, a volcano. Takes days of dream time to get there climbing from the tropics into ice and gravel. Houses become huts, the people distant as if seen through a camera lens hanging out of a bus. They have chickens and hogs, wire fences around patchy dirt yards. I travel miles at night through one valley in Pennsylvania and it shifts to Afghanistan to California to the Mediterranean, above the timberline looking down. On hooded men who give chase shouting to each other in an unknown language. Once a race of iron giants long buried in the ground shook themselves free and stood up. Slowly they turned toward me. That's when I flew. Out over forests and down to a vast body of water, swooping out over the beach, Nicaragua? In the distance a warship shimmering in the water.

Land. A house on a dirt road with a stream running by it. She digs her hands through sun-warmed pine needles into the dirt which feels sweet and cool. Lie back, who is it? He's a Scottish nurse working in Nicaragua, lapsed Catholic, socialist, his girlfriend is a doctor working in San Juan del Sur, she wants him to see other women, it's a political thing, or is it personal? He tries, he can't, he's too loyal in his love but, and, soft to touch. He's soft, lie back, hold him, sleep. Moonlight through the window, and beyond that, light on the horizon, the volcano out there and inside the family lies sleeping throughout the three or four rooms of the house they have let me make my home, and now there is Michael, struggling with himself, and then me. A husband and wife in the house but they have given me the one big bed, and when I stretch my arms out across the sheets to invite Michael in (it's alright, they won't mind, they trust me, we are family to each other) he comes carefully, like someone stepping into cool water.

How might we lose ourselves?

Back up. Play it over. He removes his clothes. Everyone is asleep. We have walked miles to get here from the bar, we have a certain sense of purpose, rather I do. I mean to have him, to fill myself up with his sweetness, his urgent sorrow, and so, will him home, 3 a.m. I fumble for the keys and let us both in, go in, I undress and stretch myself, invite him in. He steps gingerly, lies down, lies back, but he cannot reach for me, shuddering in his sleep.

A moment of falling, the dream where I'm in a bed that shudders in deep space, I roll off startled to catch myself sitting in the front seat of the car, lodged between my parents. My father is driving. He pats my knee. "It's alright sweetie," he says. Trees spinning by, on our way to

summer vacation, a small peninsula on the still wild side of Lake George where we'll sleep on the ground and plunge over and over again into the water.

Feverish and awake, in and out of Kabul, Bandiamir, Bamian, staring at giant first-millennium Buddhas and reading *Moby Dick*. I roam the markets, thinking about my America, its clamor toward ruggedness. Starbuck, first mate: "the condensation of the man." The bigness of the book pitches against my own diminishing flesh caught out in high desert. We eat only what's necessary: dal and rice, occasional goat meat, chapatis swallowed down with hot tea. I become angular. Treading across pavement and dry, packed earth, I swim the arrangement of bones, my spine a mast, hips a ship's hull and all that it contains. A woman on a bus mistakes me for a young man invading the women's section. She refuses to sit next to me. I lose track of where I am, who I'm supposed to be.

In Kabul, a man walks up to a water vendor. He has shrouded his head in dingy, cotton cloth and carries a green straw. Drawing back a piece of his veil, he somehow, by gesture of hands or head, orders a plastic bag of water. He has no face. Maybe one eye, but no nose, and little enough mouth to suck with, or if, only a gaping hole. Speech? A young boy stares, the whole clientele—Afghanis and aliens alike stilled in a horror so abrupt it seems, for a moment, to unite us. The man pays and moves off, a whirlpool within a sea of faces. As if there were no cause, no story, history that made him, us, apart from:

"But in the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature. For you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he has none, proper; nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, plaited with riddles; dumbly lowering with the doom of boats, and ships, and men. . . how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I put that brow before you. Read it if you can."

"The Prairie," *Moby Dick*. Land felt through dreams. Physiognomy. Immigrants heading west with a shape in mind, a house that destroys native hunting ground only to be laid to waste itself by storm, burning, disease, bankruptcy, and another flood of rampant life, all looked upon as a vast ocean within which the particularities of features both hideous and gentle sometimes erupt. The shape of his head if I could only place it, unseeing hands feeling for its largeness, the broad forehead, clipped curly hair, his sharp nose and sweet mouth marked by a faint scar on the upper lip from an auto accident in which Beans was driving, and because of which he would never again properly play the jazz trombone. A child's fingers trace the slightly ragged and misshapen teeth until my hands grow into themselves, large, adult, separate. Keeping, among the many other things that they do, a memory for

weight, the shadow of a beard limning the generous jowls so much like mine. Enough like mine to fashion him out of myself where I sit, holding him to my breast, fanning the curvaceous air.

## Cry Heard, Far Off

A prehistoric noise saws the air.  
Will someone please help that creature?  
The silver dome of the Elephants' House,  
clouded in drizzle, is closer to this house  
than other exhibits, but that ancient noise  
cannot be theirs. Gray against gray,  
the day will not unsettle.

City trees clump, stuporous in grinding  
atmosphere. Will someone please help  
that creature? It sounds up high, caught  
in the traffic of trees. At its cry the dog's  
ears prick. Now she moves her length  
along the door anxiously. Struck it sounds,  
stuck and unhelped.

It sounds up high, caught in the traffic  
of air. It is time, I know, to discover  
what creatures are housed there. But, Zoo:  
I hesitate, I do not like to see a cage.  
Though that screech: a noise bent like a saw  
to split dull afternoon. I would have it high,  
trafficked by trees.

I know it is time I discover the creature  
large enough to raise that noise, feathered.  
How does it preen, where does it sleep,  
what sorts of things do they give it to eat?  
Its noise says it is caught and uncaught.  
Now the noise has stopped. Someone replaces  
a cage to its creature.

## The Lawyer

It's a terrible thing to make a man: at the end it's hard to tell if you're raising or killing. I imagine a surgeon feels this at times, quiet before the attending nurse, cutting in, folding back; electrolyte drips under his cap and mask, he moves gently through the flesh to something vital, knowing that to stop at any point before the end would be precise murder, nothing more.

My basement was the operating arena. The floor was covered in dog-eared rubber mats to keep down static; the big iron table, on which I made you, lay in the middle of the room, and then the old furniture from the house was set up at the bottom of the stairs, tossed down there over the years. I had a radio which received one or two stations. Perhaps you remember the things I'd made, hung on the walls like trophy heads or perched on chairs with their tiny lives in them like insects: Mr. Bose—the mannequin with a single, articulated arm capable of a few kind gestures; across from him another start, incomplete, with an eye which blinked thoughtfully; the face of my father looked down on all of us from the wall, a photograph only, behind which I played the sound of him sleeping on an endless loop of tape. There was the little, leather box with the sound of a heart inside, warm like the body of a mother cow. There were many others. I'd begun with simple lives. Not lives at all, really, only something which refuses to stop, things given the power to remind themselves to go on. I wondered sometimes if you felt anything for them, moving gently around us in the basement like a forest of limbs and eyes. I don't know if you ever recognized yourself in them.

But for all that, we were alone down there, or I was alone—it was difficult to tell which, and this gave me some hope: long before I finished you I began to think that it would work this time, because I didn't feel alone. I would sing to you as I bent over your open trunk like a tank in which the bones and organs hung suspended, sleeping, aquatic. I sometimes sat in one of the armchairs with Mr. Bose and the others, smoking my pipe and reading the paper to you with the wet plastic tented over your body. I knew it was a good thing to do: I'd heard about mothers reading or talking to their children in the womb. Besides, I read a lot then. I had theories: I thought that life might lie outside of us in the world, a pure will to live shouldering for a place to enter. I'm not sure that's how it is now, but I will say this: it is unforgettable to come down wooden stairs into the dark from the world of kitchens and running toilets, lit by an ordinary sun, watered by rain which dries and spots the windows; to pull the chain of the light, and

find a perfect boy's body laid out on its table with the needles and knives stuck upright in the belly from last night's unfinished work. It is unforgettable to see something swimming toward life not from death, but from life's other hand.

It's a voyeur's game. Late at night I'd come upstairs to sit on the front steps, watching people coming back from the bars and clubs. Young people, especially, with their bodies which work so well: legs snapping smartly back and forth, arms counter-weighted, hips swaying automatically, spines supple—look how they fold, like the curl of a hand, when someone bends down merely to tie a shoe. Beautiful, but not so difficult—the kind of thing which can be faked. What cannot be faked: they looked at me as they passed, and afterward I tried to reconstruct what made them alive: a taught neck; the well behind the ears, flush-drunk; the gate of a man who'd forgotten something and walked half-heartedly, his body moving forward and backward at once; the density of so many days layered in their eyes, like cards which became lost to them under each new deal of the deck, until their eyes become opaque even to themselves. One day, I hoped, I might give that to you.

It took me a long time. I could only work in the shop evenings and nights. During the days, I sat in the office, trying to appear engaged as the clerks passed back and forth, bringing records to me from thickets of files, inseminating one drawer with the pages of another. One time I actually found two of them, the clerks, copulating on the floor in the stacks. I stepped across them, gingerly. Busy as bees. These young people bring me the files, their hands grayed with ink, and I take the files in my gloved hands and watch the low flicker of life in the clerks' eyes even then, at its lowest ebb. When one of the other partners sends them to ask if I'm finished with something, I try to imagine what it means to finish anything. I smile. In the law, everything is already finished. We record, we assign a place—the law is already waiting.

I'm a lawyer. You might say I have none of the equipment to make men. I have never studied medicine or anatomy except in the most amateur fashion; I can't even draw very well, though in school I would make things out of paper sometimes. You are surprised, perhaps, that I was a poor student? I was—but it was a calculated poverty. I was voted most likely to get by or go under. I had sharp eyes. I cribbed exams. While my classmates studied I leaned against the windows of the library, looking past the stone steps and the wrought iron gates with the lions, watching people go by outside: old people estranged from their bodies and forced to get at themselves through walkers and canes; children just learning to walk, throwing themselves down on the ground; but injured, damaged people most of all—you could see exactly how they were made, damage exaggerating every motion, displaying it brutally. I studied the old photographs of Muybridge and Marey: many-legged horses like Woden's beast, silver stars and lines of movement creasing their bodies like lunar tracks. The buzzing wasp with its gilded

wings tracing two mirrored infinities, one either side, like the hands of God, each a sky, which had to grasp atoms and the legs of insects to fashion the world. I looked for laws.

It was back there, in my knee-socks and bloody noses, I made my first life.

I remember quite clearly. We grew up in a simple world, and as the law comprised everything at that time, we were taught to record. I am thinking of a particular afternoon: I was young—ten or twelve—sitting in class with the others and we were copying everything out. The chalk dust was acrid in my nose, the front of the class bleached and indistinct with refracted light, the green slate board an overlay of writing that was less and less legible. The teacher stood with his back turned to us in a badly tailored jacket, writing angrily with a knuckle of chalk, writing invisibly into the board, then turning back when he'd reached the end, erasing or softening his work with the sleeve of his jacket, continuing. Now and then he coughed. He hated us, you could tell, but mildly: he hated us for ruining his sleeve, for the chalk dust which forced him to clean his glasses often, for the colds we gave him in the winter. We recorded. The supplies were old, the light from the tall windows cold. Many of the chairs were broken and it was necessary for some of us to stand. None of the pencils had erasers anymore, and so we were all being very careful. No one spoke, though periodically the instructor would cough again out loud, and we would lower ourselves a little further to our desks, or a student leaning against the wall, hip resting against the plaster, writing, might press closer to his paper.

I don't remember what we were copying that day. I only remember that I made a mistake. There was rain dashing against those windows, distracting me, making the light swim on the blank sheet eaten up with my gray hand. It wasn't a very large mistake, but it spoiled the paper, and when I tried to erase it I made it worse by scraping the raw metal back of the pencil over the page and leaving a streak. There were no garbage cans in the room, and all the drawers were locked—perhaps they contained better utensils for the upper classes. I realized later, as I left the classroom with the ruined page tucked beneath my shirt, that there were no garbage cans anywhere in the building. I had never needed one before. When I got to my room in the back of the building, I took out the paper and tried to get the mark off, but couldn't. Eventually I crumpled up the page and tried to stuff it behind some clothing in a drawer.

All night I worried about the mistake. They cleaned our rooms periodically, and if they found the mistake I didn't know what they'd do. I'd never made a mistake before. I tried to open a window to throw the mistake out, but the sashes were painted shut. I thought about tearing the paper up and trying to flush it down the drain, and I might have done that except the plumbing was so bad. Imagine if my mistake had clogged one of the toilets, and the water had backed up, and they had rooted it out, soiled, obviously hidden from them, and pieced it together in all its secrecy. I thought about eating the paper, but there

was a boy who for some reason had done that the year before and he'd been very sick. He sat in the back of the classrooms, now, breathing delicately through a plastic tube.

I decided instead that I would carry the paper on me. There could be no risk then: in the showers I might hold it in my mouth, under my tongue. The boy who shared my room, Roman, had given me the idea while reflecting that it was exactly by losing something that someone else might find it later. He was gifted with an analytical mind, already diligently studying the law. Looking up from his homework to where I stood fretting over the paper by the window, he suggested I stop trying to destroy it and simply try to make it as small as possible.

I went to the library and took out a book on origami, looking for a way to fold the page into the smallest object I could conceive of. I made I minute piano, a rooster, a rocking chair, a dozen other things. Between us, Roman and myself, we borrowed all the origami books we could find. The paper became soft like cloth from repeated foldings. I worked the folds with my teeth to make them crisp, damping the paper with spit. It carried old shapes in it like ghosts after a while, and I had to keep it pressed flat when I was determining a new form, to prevent it from collapsing back into the remembered designs of flowers or fetal mandarins. When I worked now, I held the paper with tweezers. Roman stood over me with his glasses removed and held in hand, magnifying the meticulous procedures adopted from increasingly complex plans. It took many nights merely to undo one of these creations, working with flashlights under the blankets; and it took as many nights to make the next, even tinier object. I would appear at class in the morning red-eyed, raw-fingered.

What I finally settled on was a cricket no bigger than the creatures you find marching through wet grass on summer evenings, diminutive musicians dragging their instruments through the dew. The plan for the insect came from a book whose diagrams were captioned entirely in Chinese; it was devised in such a way that, following its natural model, the folded paper legs could scrape against the hollow belly to make a singing sound like a tiny violin. During the day I carried it around in a match box stolen from the teacher's lounge, and at night, when the door to the room was closed and Roman and I lay in our beds, I would let the little creature out and it would sing quietly in the tuneless way such things do. It was quite beautiful, pale like an animal born in a cave, with the loops of my writing printed in tight fans on its back, its eyes nests of ink.

Roman was a quiet boy, small without being furtive, a favorite with the other students. He never breathed a word to anyone about what was happening in our room. When I mentioned it to an upper classman, boastfully, while we stood around in towels in the locker room, he looked down, as if embarrassed for me.

His modesty—he always showered in the corner, for instance, turned away from everyone—was matched only by his near fearlessness. Once, I watched a teacher put a cigarette out in his ear without his giving me away, after I'd released the cricket into his

shoulder bag, among his pencils and rulers; he'd reached inside, felt it moving beneath his fingers, and screamed. You see, he had a single mortal fear of all small lives. As we lay in our beds at night, before I turned off the light, he would grip the edge of his mattress, peering around to see where the cricket was. When the light was out, and it began to sing, I would see his silhouette across the room from me, bolt upright in the sheets, listening to be sure it wasn't too close.

Even much later, in our senior year, he was afraid. He joked about it, but made me wait all the same until after he climbed into bed before he allowed me to release the tiny creature, and only then, in relatively good humor, could he lay back and listen to it singing to its comrades out in the grounds behind the dormitories. The beds were the same child-sized beds we had always slept in, and so while they were large enough for Roman, I lay awake, propped in bed, listening and sometimes whistling to the cricket, until finally I passed into sleep, leaned against the wall. It amazes me that for so many years Roman was able to bear the continuous presence of this creature, which he once confessed appeared constantly in his dreams as a sad auditor, a periodic commentator in the fashion of a tragic Greek chorus.

It was for this reason that when we graduated and walked out the doors of the school into the open air, into a place where the mistake no longer mattered and no one would look for it, I offered it to him to remember me by. We were standing on the front steps of the school, beneath one of the stone lions which had seemed so large the distant day my father deposited my fist in the chalky hand of one of the instructors. Roman looked regretfully at the box with the cricket inside.

Knowing he could never accept the cricket as it was, I took it carefully out, cupped in my hand so he wouldn't see, and gently unfolded it. I borrowed his pocketknife, and we sat together on the steps. It was morning when I began, and nearly dark when I finished, handing him the sheet of paper, an indecipherable mesh of folds, still quivering and curling toward its old, remembered shape. I've visited him several times since in his home on Long Island, and he always brings me to the library and takes the cricket paper out of the encyclopedia volume he keeps it pressed in, along with various flowers and leaves he's collected from his garden. We look at it together, laughing about hardships and whippings and whatnot; the mistake is only a mistake now, and so bad a one, I guess, that I can't tell what it refers to anymore.

I've long since stopped reading books to make life. There is a limit to the teachings of origami, and no advice offered for such a task in a literature which is so purely descriptive. I did, however, employ some of my old books, no longer read, to help flesh you out: I began with papier-mâché, interlarded with wire and plumber's piping. Hard-bound volumes with acid-free pages were the most desirable. I used thousands of feet of sewing thread, a case of vaseline.

I needed models: I studied meat. In the refrigerator, I assembled all

different cuts and kinds; rich, glistening organs like enormous agates and opals. I let everything else spoil and sat with the door open in a cool fog, gazing into that bright box where the meat rolled and mounded. When it began to smell I brought it to the roof where it could breathe and watched the last actions of life on dead tissue.

Yet, because I had to shape you out of durable, less perishable things, I could use no meat for your flesh. I studied the meat during the day, and in the evening, on what I didn't allow to rot, I gorged myself like Kronos. I tried to duplicate those textures and shapes inside, reaching past the knot of your navel into the round opening of your gut to lay clusters of opaque marbles, rubber tubes, flaccid balloons. I sewed your heart up with tiny threads of gold, like a tailor's heart. I laid the ribs carefully over your chest, warping them with heat and moisture, preparing your body like a ship.

I did all this, but one Sunday evening, after a weekend away visiting Roman, walking with him in his garden, playing with the delightful little boy he was bringing up, I returned with new eyes. Lifting the damp tarp I was horrified to discover that you looked like a starving man. I gave up on the interior and began to pay attention to the muscles and the skin. Perhaps there are things you don't need to know, but I'll tell you: I realized then that I had to abandon the idea of making a perfect life and try to just make life, any life at all. This was the most important decision I could have made.

You were the color of ash, yellow in the places light had degraded the paper, hands suspiciously large and already well-formed. It was the hands I'd begun with—those and the head, naturally enough. I liked to pose the fingers in various gestures while I worked on the trunk and legs. The head was shaped but featureless, it hung unconscious from the body laid out on the table. Sometimes, when I was done for the day, I took a glass of wine in the basement and admired your beginnings: playing with the hands, having you sit up, assume various attitudes. When your feet were completed, I stood you with crossed arms in the middle of the floor. You were always slight. I liked to think of you as younger than myself, and I suppose you are. I began to imagine how your voice would be, whether you would sleep on your side or your back, whether you might be right-handed or left.

It may seem like a glorious thing to make another man—Roman was so pleased when I told him he made repeat the whole thing to his little boy—but allow me to tell you about the first time I brought you to life. It was an accident. I can see why things often choose to come alive when given the chance—and I was trying, I wanted that—but not everything is made to live. Does that disturb you? Do you remember?

I don't think so: this wasn't your life, or not exactly your life. It was more like a life you nearly had.

You were almost finished, or the insides were complete; you were a skinned carcass on the table, a flayed saint I had to keep wetting down so you wouldn't dry out under the fluorescent lights. The basement stank of formalin. I didn't really know what I was doing. I remember

there was a waltz playing on the radio, and I was tapping my foot in time, reaching with one hand into your leg to untangle a knot in the plastic piping from an irrigation job badly done the night before; I was thinking about the color of your hair. I remember feeling something warm, and I began to reach further in, when suddenly the whole body tensed. Blood shot ruby streams through all the lines, and there was a tiny sound in you, a mechanical noise as something fell into place, as if I'd just turned a key in the tumbler of the front door to a house and all the locks in the house, all the bolts, every latch in every room, fell open wide.

And you began to scream. I hadn't given you teeth yet, or even a proper mouth, so you opened a naked tube, the mouth of a fish, and the scream came out an endless ribbon while I scrambled around the table, feeling the surface of your body and realizing how tenuous everything had been. I had no idea what was happening beneath the rubber sheeting and the tiny gold wires lacing the musculature of your chest. Your eyes were pure white, without pupils yet, without sense. Only the screaming mouth and the rigid body expressed the small life in you that had woke up to itself as if from a dream.

After ten minutes I could see there was no way to end this, nothing to do. I apologized aloud—I felt I had to, either for what had come before or for what I was about to do. I reached in and stopped your heart with a putty knife. It had started too soon.

## The Age of Aquarius

And now, in this mutable darkness,  
when time has forgotten  
the green lights of love  
I remember my body  
—tantric—  
the grace of my balance

above you,  
a posture called *flying angels*,  
the way we translated  
the night flight of swans.  
And poets translated their music,  
traveling by mind-car

through avian spheres.  
In exile, they knew *purgatory*,  
a journey, like ours,  
through conditional light:  
*day & night, black & white*  
*a star* on the crown

*of a magi.*  
*Or the moon hiding out*  
*in a sky thatched by clouds—*  
*when you touched me,*  
*I felt sudden glory.*  
There is this, how your hand

reached for Dante,  
how you read me a passage  
with beasts and strange sings,  
and I heard the lines  
of a new age,  
*transmutable hearts*  
*near the lamps of our minds.*

## His Good Thoughts

It was almost always yes. Yes when he met them  
on the stairwells of old hotels with glitter left,  
the junkie with his deaf son propped on his shoulder,

a college girl shouting the unintelligible language of the saved.  
And they were wonderful, really. Vein and synapse, noumena and rose,  
that shuttering exchange of blood and static,

the fragile current that gave them their beauty  
and the strange commands this beauty gave them.  
Was it to imitate the movements of children, he wondered,

hopelessly racing a river downland toward Portland, NY, Houston,  
or was it to obscure the stillness beneath the surface of motion,  
a rowhouse stilted on block cement, the landscape afterburn,

crescendo finale? Even then it was yes, still yes, o yes, yes-yes.  
He thought of the woman he loved who lived in a different  
neighborhood than his own  
and it was a good thought. He thought of the heaviness that made it  
difficult  
to move the body uphill and this too was a good thought:

When the pepper plants appeared, potted in their plastic tubs.  
When the memory faltered and the body gradually weakened.  
When one could wake without trying not to and it was OK

to speak for hours on end with no one listening.  
And so he walked on in the predictable linguistic summer heat,  
bent down, rose up,  
met with difficulties and the eyes of strangers thinking their own  
good thoughts.

Take this and this and this they said. Take that.  
Until he was thankful for it, finished and shiny and pleased  
with circumspection,  
sure of consolation and cliché and of love o yes the short word

so much easier to spell than equity or science,  
its list to gather and fade and gather and so on,  
its fondness for drought and inundation.

## Sitting

Whether it's an art or not as my neighbor John proclaims I couldn't say.  
There are those I've heard who are, ironically enough, unsettled by it.  
I can agree only so far as art is personal (if that's its source and power)  
and I felt the need to make it more than singular, to justify it somehow,  
giving it shape and balancing its margins.

Quite simply—if such is possible—I prefer it undefined,  
the body shifting, one leg sprawled, another folded.

One sore foot propped up that someone watching, seeing, might enjoy.  
For me—as example—it's best outside when the sky is cloudless  
and the air is 23 degrees, a kind of plenty.

But I also know—forgive my vagueness—the value gained  
when the stranger who abhors the cold is pleased to see  
that someone else is pleased to love it.

Which brings me back to what I really want to say:  
how cool the air is, how warm the sun.

How pleasant it is to sit inside this brightness.

To think, like love, light is sometimes what it touches,  
pale gray of cinder, russet of brick, the green of a small, unfamiliar  
weed.

## Profile

In mid July during a summer when I wanted to remain in only one place, my mother called from upstate New York and asked, "Won't you visit? You aren't going to miss your father's sixtieth birthday, are you? What about Matthew?" she said speaking of her first grandchild, my nephew who was almost nine months old. "You should see him now. He's trying to walk, and you should hear him laugh. Can't you leave work for a while?" Hers was a selfless voice that strove to weave connections, that valued community and the continuity of tradition. Listening to her, I recognized how much I missed her sensibility. I recognized how much she was expressing a desire to create or uphold what would last beyond death. For a part of us always lives with the knowledge of death. This is what the Spanish philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, in his essay, "Man Of Flesh And Bone," calls "the tragic sense of life." I have thought that my mother's Asian American response to death, or her "tragic sense," was to invoke a constant plea for family.

Soon after my mother's call, I departed from the heat and humidity of Houston, Texas. I drove north with my lover to the town of Granbury, near Fort Worth, where I left her so she could visit with her own parents. That next day I continued north on Interstate 35 and reached Oklahoma. The verdant hills and ripe fields of the farmland there were beautiful, serene; this pastoral landscape practically soothed my eyes. I kept heading due north, and by early afternoon I reached Kansas, where the fields seemed to grow yet wider, opening up and rolling on and on like expressions of infinity. I felt the range of my vision was being tested with every glance. I felt benevolently inspired to imagine the lives and the excitement of pioneers forging westward long ago. As I began to feel the freedom and anticipation that so many Americans associate with travelling, I felt younger and somehow innocent. I felt very safe for a while. After heading northeast, I stopped for the night in the town of Emporia and looked forward to the rest of the journey on the scenic road.

But the next morning, not twenty minutes up the highway, I spotted a Kansas State Police cruiser waiting ahead on short grass. I was not speeding, but when the troop car pulled out and started to follow my pickup truck very closely I couldn't help feeling at risk. The troop car swerved out, shot ahead of me, steered onto the breakdown lane, and allowed me to pass. It abruptly swung back out, started to follow my truck again, and I felt frightened, and any thought that I possessed the freedom to travel safely across the country began to devolve into a foolish notion. The troop car passed my pickup truck a second time,

sped by a tractor trailer, and although I passed the tractor trailer and followed at what was a very cautious distance, the troop car immediately steered onto the breakdown lane and slowed once more. He waited until I passed by, then began to pursue me with flashing red lights. As I sat stopped along the shoulder and felt every other motorist's eyes upon me, I saw the intense brightness of the flashing red lights in my rearview mirror and began to feel guilty. I began to believe that this incident was partly deserved, or entirely my fault, because I should never have left Houston, but should have stayed there, tending to the relationship with my lover, living in my work, remaining in only one place.

But I had the state trooper to contend with. To display the compliance that there must be, I removed my registration and insurance card from the glove compartment, found my driver's license in my wallet, and held these items outside of my driver's side window as I used the side mirror and watched the officer approach. When he reached my vehicle and leaned over, I saw he had short-cropped blonde hair and vigorous blue eyes. He was a shorter man, and as if to compensate for his height he had obviously weight trained to add muscle to his chest and arms. I judged from his smooth face that he was in his late twenties or early thirties, a man just starting out in life, younger than myself, and I thought, What reason could there be for stopping me? "I'm sorry for all the flybys," he said, "but the first time I ran your license plate, nothing came back. I stopped you because you failed to use your signal changing lanes." I sighed and asked if he was going to write me a ticket. "No," he said, "I'm only going to give you a written warning. There's no fine or court appearance."

Despite the absence of any anger or hostility in his voice, I didn't trust him. Then he asked me, "Where are you headed?"

Now I still believed that there might not be any further problems. It had been established that I had committed no serious offense, and I held onto the idea that he might be able to see me for who I was. So I told him that I was a doctoral student who taught English and Asian American Studies at the University of Houston. I told him that I was driving to Iowa and Ohio to visit some old friends before a brief vacation with my family in Albany, New York. I pointed to my bags, some fishing tackle, a boxed computer and printer in the truck's extended cab, before explaining how I still needed to finish some research while I was on vacation. I said this in a regretful voice, hoping that he might realize how I felt overworked and underpaid, a sentiment probably shared between us. On that morning I wore a faded gray v-neck shirt, khaki shorts, Asics cross-training shoes, and polarized sunglasses. My haircut was short and neatly-trimmed. I presented, most of all, a clean, professional image. I was a doctoral student, worked hard, and was en route to visiting my family—I exemplified the model minority.

But when the trooper returned to my driver's side window and handed me the written warning along with my license, registration, and

insurance card, he did not admonish me to drive carefully and release me. "Allen," he said in a deceptively amiable voice, "can I search your vehicle?"

I asked why. I was becoming angry. But in the part of myself that has always tried to remain observant and rational, I knew that because of my out of state license plates, and because of my Asian features and how I was travelling from Houston to New York, that he suspected I was carrying drugs. He answered my question with: "You aren't in a hurry, are you?"

I thought of the Rodney King incident and pictured the officers bludgeoning King with their batons. I imagined being marched from the side of the highway and flung down into an irrigation ditch and having the toe and heel of a black leather boot pressed hard into my spine. Or the trooper might have radioed for another trooper, then fabricated a charge or planted drugs on my clothes or in my pickup. As angry as I felt, and as much as I wanted to protest, I told him I wasn't really in a hurry and assented to the search.

"I need you to sign a form," he said and motioned for me to step out. In the following seconds I stood on the side of the highway, and my eyes beheld the Kansas fields that flowed on and on, the land that had earlier inspired me to feel the freedom and anticipation of travelling. How quickly that feeling vanished was disconcerting. I felt powerless and vulnerable. Contemplating that moment, I have since thought of Thomas Jefferson's writing at the beginning of *The Declaration Of Independence*, of how "all men are created equal." I have not thought of how Jefferson intended for his famous phrase to be read, for he was only addressing European American males; rather, I have recalled Senator Charles Sumner's interpretation of Jefferson's famous phrase, since it was Sumner who, in 1802, insisted that Jefferson's words actually meant, "all men," with no respect to race or color.

Certainly, that morning in Kansas, when the trooper brought the form out and compelled me to sign it, he did not view me as "all men." He viewed me as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's other. For I signified everything the trooper was not. From his perspective, I represented what is feared and exists to be conquered.

He led me around to the passenger side door. "Start with the computer box," he said. I asked if he expected me to do the work of pulling off all the masking tape securing the top. "Yes," he said with a smile.

Imagine the indignity of having one of the symbols or instruments of your life of learning set down on the side of the highway in the gravel and dirt to be inspected for illegal contents. Imagine the further indignity felt upon also being told to set the printer down on the side of the highway, and then your luggage. I hated him for his covertness, for his cowardice, for not once voicing his suspicions. I watched without any means of recourse as he unzipped one of my nylon cordura travel bags—an old graduation present from my parents—and ran his hands, his fingers, between my folded t-shirts. As he searched through the last

of the t-shirts, I told him to pick it up. He did. On the front of the t-shirt there was a print of stick-figure children of all colors with their hands joined, and the words: "Not one more. Making Children, Families, and Communities Safer From Violence." I told the trooper to turn the t-shirt around. He saw on the back the emblazoned cartoon and national campaign figure of McGruff, the crime dog, and the slogan: "TAKE A BITE OUT OF CRIME 1-800-WE-PREVENT." In an assertive voice, I told the trooper I wasn't the drug type.

Still, he ordered me to open a tote bag. Inside he found my Asics running shoes, quarter socks, DeSoto shorts and mesh tops. I told him that I ran five and ten kilometer road races, that I still lived partly like an athlete, which I had once been in high school and college. "What's in that bag?" he asked, pointing to another piece of my luggage. I opened my black, three-compartment shoulder bag which contained almost twenty hardcover books. Each book, across the top of the pages, bore the black ink stamp: "University of Houston Libraries." I repeated that I was doing summer research, then asked if he thought I could ever have the time to sell drugs with so many books to read. His expression feigned indifference. He hid any possibility for realization behind a mask of procedure and told me in an irritated voice to open a small knapsack. So he saw fishing reels and a few fly boxes. I stated that if I ever had any real time off, I spent it on rivers or lakes, or down at the Gulf of Mexico, as far as possible from the city, and that was the type of person I was. "Your reels are nicer than mine," he said. He gazed at one of my fly rods and commented, "That's a fancy case." In his voice I only heard distance and resentment, as though it were also difficult for him to perceive my becoming part of an aspiring middle class.

I asked him if he fished largemouth bass and crappie, which are common in the mid-west. I told him I was going to do some fishing for channel catfish and flatheads on the Skunk River in southern Iowa for a few days and, especially, at night, which is when most big catfish are caught. I was still attempting to establish a human connection, despite how there has never been a shared history between Asian Americans and European Americans, despite how there have never been mutual alliances, but exclusion laws, internments, glass ceilings, restrictions based upon over representation, and an ever evolving accumulation of stereotypical images. Indeed, from Supreme Court rulings on immigration and citizenship, to the matter of hate crimes, there has also not been a long or distinguished history of fairness, but only a lack of trust, or suspicion, between Asian Americans and the law.

I should not have been surprised, then, when the trooper pointed to the truck bed. "I need to see what's in that tool box," he said in an impatient voice.

Tools, I told him, were all he would find. He still searched the box, and he didn't find anything. Then he walked around to the tailgate, bent down on one knee, and inspected the spare tire stored below. I told him that he shouldn't even bother getting his pants dirty for no reason, asserting he was wasting his time. He couldn't stop, though, and as he

examined the tire for over a minute I rearranged my luggage.

Afterward, we stood like farmers with our hands resting on the sides of the truck bed. We faced each other. "It was because you were packed light," he said, needing in some way to justify his search. I heard what can be described as scant regret or slight apology in his voice, but that did not matter. Not after how he'd treated me. I shook my head and walked back to my driver's side door, and I wanted very much to regain my composure for the long distance I had left to travel.

The hopeful and ameliorative side of me would like to believe that due to the tone of regret or apology I heard in the trooper's voice, and since I had talked fishing with him, that his judgments and expectations might have been altered. But I am certain that is not what occurred; instead, I feel confident stating that the trooper is still determinedly waiting out on that long, lonely stretch of Kansas highway, brazenly stopping drivers for no real violations, carrying out searches without probable cause. For his behavior was that of the rugged individual, who seeks conflict and lives by aggression. His response to the knowledge of death, his "tragic sense of life," causes him to seek heroic fame, to attempt to create his own legend, or to make, at all costs, the most significant drug arrest, a story that we might even see reenacted on television, on a program such as "Stories of the Highway Patrol." Therefore, if he succeeds, his story will loom large and be recalled for many years; one man's deeds alone shall live far beyond the grave.

As for my own sense of self, two days beyond Kansas, I woke early in the cold of morning and prepared to fish on the Skunk River in southern Iowa. Since we would be setting bank poles and trot lines on a remote stretch of the shallow water, I asked my friend, Tony, if he thought I needed to buy a fishing license. "Don't worry," he said. "The local conservation officer won't be out. He's old and fat, and all he does is sit and drink coffee at the diner." I asked Tony if he was going to buy a license, or if he already had one. "No, I don't. Why bother?"

The sick feeling from the knowledge of how I could be viewed still resided within me; I thought about how common it was, how accepted it would be, if most men from that part of the country were to see someone like myself fishing on their broad, abundant river. I knew the judgment and scrutiny I would provoke.

Although we wouldn't reach the fishing camp at the most desirable hour, I directed Tony to drive instead to Iowa City. He objected and tried to convince me of the innocuousness of the Skunk and the sedentary habits of the conservation officer, but still I didn't allow him to head straight to the river. We stopped first at Paul's Discount Store, where at the front counter, I opened my wallet and counted out the requisite dollars. Begrudgingly, I purchased the license.

Some months later, in September, I heard of the "DWB," the "Driving While Black or Brown" bill proposed by state Senator Kevin Murray of Los Angeles, California. The bill would have required the California Highway Patrol and major police and sheriff's departments to record detailed information on the practice of stopping people on the

basis of race. This would include the numbers of minorities searched and detained. I wondered how many motorists there might have, like me, preferred that it be a "Driving While Black or Brown or Yellow bill." I wondered how many "Americans" badly wanted for the bill to pass. When Governor Gary Davis vetoed it, he said that he found so-called racial profiling "abhorrent," but that the "DWB" could cost too much and placed too heavy a burden on law enforcement.

What cost? What burden? Sumner's view of "all men" must thrive everywhere, whether it be in California or Kansas. Why shouldn't there be, for everyone, the freedom of travelling? What is a profile but a racial attitude, a stereotype?

I don't wish to feel cordoned off, to feel like I have to remain in one place, but for myself and many people of color I have spoken with, that is, for the time being, part of our being American. It is part of our sense of the shape of this democratic society.

We must imagine and create something different, for none of us feel like patiently waiting.

## This Whatever We Have

It was the kind of day the kind of moment the kind of embarrassing incident that you later wish you could take back you wince groan kick yourself ask stupidly what was I thinking? But the moment occurred, someone saw something—not that those allegations could not be denied. There were no actual records of it—if there were, I'd use the paper shredder. I have one in my office. I don't really need it. I think it's cool. It gives me that 007 *savoir faire*, like an insider with secrets to hide. Think *espionage*. Think *Mission Impossible*. Think self-destruction.

But this is hardly the Pentagon. In my office, the paper shredder—a shiny metal box with blades, like a prop from Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*—is mainly art. (The *idea* of destruction. The *idea* of rewriting history.) Plus, it serves as a recycling tool. We must keep things tidy in my world, which is an office on the eighteenth floor, a nice view of midtown from one window, Japanese comic book posters on my walls, a light box for viewing slides, my cluttered, glass-topped desk, modeling agency black books neatly shelved. I'm the brains behind people selling things. My job is seduction. But there are limits. And on the day I crossed them, Elke had the tips of my fingers in her mouth—well, just inside her mouth, lipstick glazing my fingerprints—when June walked in and dropped everything, stopped everything, threw a monkey wrench in the middle of my struggling career.

"Pardon me," she said. She glanced about, scanning the room, searching for a handy subtext, for neutering scissors, an excuse for living. In her distraction, I wiped a pink streak of lipstick on the white cotton of my cuff.

"Maybe I caught you at a bad time," said June. She lifted the file folders in her hands, like a bailiff with today's docket. "I've got mock-ups for you to look at, but it's okay. I'll come back."

Elke squirmed her shoulders, shifting her blouse into place. "That's a good idea," I said.

"Better yet, when you're ready, give me a ring."

"I could do that." I touched my face for no reason whatsoever. "We were just going over some things that needed attention."

June smiled. "I'm not your mother."

I said, "I never thought you were."

Elke was sitting on my desktop, her pumps resting on the drafting table behind me, her back to the door and to June. After that slight adjustment, she did not move. She did not flinch. She did not reach to button her blouse. It had a wide, soft collar, pearl buttons, silk fabric of

the deepest blue, that when the halogen light shone on its edges, shimmered to purple. It was untucked and unbuttoned, and undone was the clasp of her it's-a-girl pink French 34C cups. Without turning to look at June, she asked, "Is it raining again? Tell me it isn't. Tell me it's sunny."

June pretended for one moment that Elke did not exist. There is hate and there is envy, and then there is a cloudy, viscous, rancid mixture of the two. Elke was famous around the office for being the new boss's illusive object of desire. June was famous around the office for having mistakenly, drunkenly confessed that it had been six years since the last time she had experienced what some call sexual intercourse, telling this to Shelly Curapada the Big Mouth. June's lips were coated with sneer and disgust as she took two steps backward, crossed the threshold, and paused before closing the door. "Open or shut?" "Shut."

She closed it slowly, as if the room were wired to blow. That simple movement took approximately ten minutes. Finally, the tongue of the lock clucked gently, the sound you hear while trying to walk a straight line down the halls when returning red-nosed and wobbly from a two-hour, four-gimlet lunch.

Elke pushed her Jerry Hall hair out of her face and blinked as if she were being blinded by the flashes of paparazzi. "That woman is a menace," she said. "If there is any justice in the world, any at all, her car will die on the FDR tonight." She narrowed her eyes. "Is sabotage a crime?"

I leaned over my desk, put my forehead against the documents of neglect there, and started to pound, once for every word. "We. Are. Now. Totally. Fucked."

When I looked up, Elke was buttoning her beauty back into place. The tiny cupid tattoo above her left breast said buh-bye as I saw my career flash before my eyes, the way the drowning are said to review home-movie highlights of all those swirling years. In recent months, mine were all lowlights: the wacky toothpaste commercial in which the woman's smile so dazzles her boss she gets the big promotion, cued by the catchphrase, *Teeth this white can't be beat!* Or the Chevrolet campaign with a Lumina—carefully circling a crater on the moon, voiceover saying, *Lumina—It's positively lunar!* I hadn't had a pitch that was used in nine months. I'd lost the touch. I'd hit a lull. A dry spell. Or, as someone had said about June's revelation of six years without sex: "That's not just a dry spell. That's, like, Ethiopia."

Elke saw the panicky look on my face and scrunched her mouth—a twist down and to the left—to signal wrong-reaction-in-progress. "Don't be the Drama King."

I told her that I wasn't. I wasn't paranoid. But this was Trouble. I said, "You know what this means, don't you?" Even sitting down, I felt weak. Like I was donating blood by accident.

Elke stood, smoothed her miniskirt, and ruffled my hair. "Have tongue will wag? So what. Besides, it might be to your advantage. It

will throw the dogs off your trail."

"Since when did I become the hunted?"

"Everyone thinks you're doing Mia."

This was news to me. For months now Mia and I had been obsessive-compulsive for each other, but I didn't know it was so obvious. I said, "But she's lesbian."

Elke gave me a we're-not-that-stupid look. "With her I think that's a good faith agreement, not a binding contract."

"With me it's more like Double Indemnity."

Elke shook her head, her hair swaying, loopy as a grass skirt of harvest wheat. She was raised in Hawaii, the daughter of a rich divorce lawyer. Think questionable moral fiber. Think luau. Think the TV commercial: *How 'bout a nice Hawaiian Punch?* "Get a grip," she said. "Remember the words of Mr. Wilde. The only thing worse."

I sighed and began to rearrange the seventeen felt tip pens on my desk top. "No. That's not true. There is something worse. It's called Unemployment."

Elke rolled her eyes, rolled her hips, rolled back the welcome mat for yours truly. She lifted a clear plastic sheet of 35mm slides off my desk and swatted me with it. "Now I know you're overreacting." She sashayed to the door and paused before touching the knob, looking back without anger, without fear, with years of good luck behind her and a certainty of the same ahead. "Cool is the way to be."

Cool was easy for Elke to say. She reigned as the No. 1 office ingenue. An ex-fashion model who came on like Miss Innocent in a cute meet, but once you got to know her, evolved into a daily edition of bad news. She pranced about the office to the tune of "I Can't Help It I'm Beautiful!" She'd already been the black widow for one poor shmuck. If not for this, she probably would have put the sting on me. But I wasn't having it. I saw her riding in that self-obsession parade, sitting high in the limousine, waving, tossing candy to the crowd. She saw others only in relation to what they could do for her, how they could shower her with attention, how they could adore her, tell her she was beautiful, offer the adulation she certainly deserved now didn't she? My design assistant and No. 1 forbidden love, Mia, agreed with my take on Elke, finding her fascinating and repulsive at the same time. We made up story boards for a TV sitcom titled *All About Elke!* With a cartoon gorgeous girl figure—half-*That Girl* and half-Barbie doll—prancing before a backdrop of island huts on fire, we'd have a Phil Hartman voiceover saying, "There may be CIA operatives waterskiing in Puerto Rico, but it's *All About Elke!*" Cut to image of Barbie-doll Elke with matching outfits and accessories, prancing before a high-drama EMS scene, a la the true crime TV shows, the voiceover saying, "There may be an eight-year-old trapped in an abandoned mine shaft, but it's *All About Elke!*" Follow with an image of a hydrogen bomb mushroom cloud, and the Elke character refusing her gas mask, sassing, "I don't think so!" as

the voiceover says, "The world may be trembling on the brink of nuclear holocaust, but it's *All About Elke!*"

We were not having an affair. I knew better. Yes, the flesh is weak. But my fingers in her mouth, her blouse unbuttoned, that was just a game, that was *All About Elke*.

It started when she E-mailed me that she had some juicy dirt to make my day. After lunch she popped by my office to chat. This was right before June caught us in her net of envy. (Caught Elke trying to wrap me around her little fingers.) This was the dirt: She told me that, the day before, our new boss, Chevron Cameron, had come on to her in his office.

What did she mean, come on? I wanted dirt. Were we talking a proposition? Were we talking sexual harassment? "What exactly did he say?"

"Wouldn't you like to know." She scooted her rump onto my desk and took the pen out of my hands. Her legs, sheathed in pantyhose, were endless and otherworldly. I told her she should be careful, and she just gave me a stupid-you look, tucking the pen behind one ear. "You really want to know?" she asked.

"Sure."

"He said he'd like to see me naked."

I shrugged. Cameron had a way of getting to the point. I said, "He's not the only one."

Elke smiled with the innocence of a hardcore website, and arched an eyebrow. "Oh, really?"

"Really."

That's when she began unbuttoning her deepest blue silk blouse till she reached the pinkslip lace of her C-cups, watching me sip a nervous cup of titillation and dread. Leaning forward, she squirmed half-free of her sleeves, revealing more tanning-spa skin than I should see, and said, "Don't you hate that word? Bra? I do."

I pointed my right index finger at her like the barrel of a gun. "You are trouble." She made a pouty face, and the crisp edge of my resolve softened like milk chocolate in a warm pocket. *Melts in your mouth, not in your hands!* She looked through the clouds of my willpower, catching a glimpse of my murky and unredeemable soul. "But you love trouble, don't you?" she asked. We were plunging earthward, but I was the only one who lacked a chute; my bones would shatter, but Elke would land like a feather boa. I knew what was happening: I was the guest star in this week's episode of *All About Elke*. In the inappropriate glow of the office lamps, she floated above me like a Madison Avenue angel, like a sexy ad for chocolate or liquor. The air around her was all Obsession. I felt like the victim of one of those surprise-birthday-party pranks, as if I'd been blindfolded, taken up in a small plane, and pushed out the door to try the thrill of skydiving. As in an out-of-body experience, I watched as she reached out and took my pointing hand, pulled it to her mouth, and began to lick my fingers.

That's when June opened the door.

I moved through the rest of the day like a deep sea diver in giant squid territory, like a poet in Stalingrad, circa 1937. Like a fad on the way out. The office cleared after six, and Mia, who could tell something was up, invited me over for drinks. She was my wildest lover and female best friend, famous for being a lipstick lesbian, which provided a nice smokescreen for that Robert Palmer way I thought of her—Simply Irresistible. She was all about contradictions. Mix and match. Black leather jacket and junior-high I.D. bracelets. She read Mark Leyner and listened to Ella Fitzgerald. She had a thin silver nose ring, but wore her hair in a good-girl French braid.

Sipping martinis, she listened to my whole story, eyes going wide when I reached the finger-sucking demonstration and June's dramatic entrance. But she didn't think it was that big of a deal, certainly not like I did, like *The Beginning of the End*.

"Poor baby." She pooched out her lips, making a pouty face, and brushed the hair off my forehead. She advised me to calm down and not overreact. I had a tendency to do that, she noted. "Get a haircut. It'll make you feel like a new man."

"Cameron will can me if he thinks I'm after Elke."

She didn't think so. The world wasn't as bad as all that. Good will prevail. To stop me from stressing out, she offered a hug, pulling me from my chair by my hands and wrapping me close. The warmth of her body was an aura, a glow that emanated from her clothes, and I lingered there, wrapped in the cocoon of someone I could trust, someone who knew the shape of my scars and still loved me.

Talking into my shoulder, she said, "There's more to this than you think. June knows there's something going on between us, and she's jealous. So she's trying to use this thing with Elke against you."

"She makes my scrotum shrivel."

Mia laughed. "Don't you worry. If she so much as hurts a hair on your body, I'll scratch out her eyeballs."

In the silence that followed, we held each other tight, until I pulled back from her and lifted her chin to look into her eyes, "Really?"

"Yes, really. Isn't it really obvious? You really aren't that bright, are you?"

I smiled at her and said, "I'm really not. But I'd really like to kiss you."

She stared at my mouth and asked if I remembered the recent Nike shoe campaign.

"Just do it?"

In the dizzy spell of her eyelashes, we began to kiss. I couldn't stop. She finally turned her mouth away and whispered wait, stop for a moment, her toes were itching.

"Your toes?"

She nodded, flushed and dizzy and vulnerable. "When I want to make love to someone, someone important to me, my toes itch."

I didn't know what to say, but she added that it was a good sign. Her toes only itched for the best people. She started walking backwards, toward the stairs, toward her bedroom. "My toes are never wrong."

The next day, my One Hope—Richard Boone, chief officer in charge of consumer brainwashing and one of the best—took me to lunch. When we ordered drinks, and when they arrived, he gave me the longest look, flipped his napkin into his lap like a miniature picnic tablecloth, and generally assumed the role of the gay uncle I never had but always yearned for. He said, "What . . ." He paused and looked around the Italian place, as if scanning for corporate spies. "What do you honestly think we are going to do with you?"

"We," I started to say . . . then stopped. Who is this we? We are salaried types. We don't get paid by the hour. We do our jobs. We do them well. We're good at them. So we make a mistake now and then. So we got caught sexing around on our down time? Is that a sin? It was a Tuesday afternoon and there was nothing better to do. We stay late, we work weekends, we fucking *live* at the office. We eat there. We fight, break-up, make-up, yearn and frustrate there. Sometimes we even sleep there. If you ask me, we might as well fuck there. Is that a crime? Tell me. Show me the clause in my contract.

Still. Love is one thing. Company policy is another. "We . . ." I said, "are waiting for the ax to fall."

Richard frowned at this poor excuse for the power of positive thinking. "Don't go throwing a pity party. What's that? Your first taste of breaking a sexual taboo? Join the club."

I agreed with him, admitting he was right, that I shouldn't overreact.

"The first step in solving any difficult situation is identifying the problem. Do you know what yours is?"

"Elke works under me."

Rick made a questioning face. "I figured her to be the one on top."

"Would you stop?"

"Touchy touchy." Rick stared at his drink as if there were a feminine hygiene product in it. "Did they put any vodka in this? This looks like one of those restaurants where they've substituted Folger's Instant for the real thing and no one complains when they come to the table with a video camera to ask their reaction." He had the waiter bring us two more, doubles this time, and in the lull between drinks, explained, with the patience reserved for the slow-minded, that my behavior could be perceived as taking advantage of my position of power. Not to mention said love thing was the boss's Dream Girl USA.

"I know. You're not telling me anything new here. I need Insight."

"For your benefit, I think it would be a good thing for us to review the Sexual Harassment Policy handout." He took a personnel brochure from his coat pocket and unfolded it. "Shall we?"

As he scanned it, I told him it wasn't necessary. Nothing was going

on between me and Elke.

"What about Mia?" He gave me a you-can't-fool-me look. "That girl is cuckoo for your cocoa puffs."

I insisted that she wasn't, but he only nodded and said, "Uh huh." I asked him what was so wrong with that, anyway? Show me the line where it's forbidden. We're consenting adults!

He said, "It's a question of how that consent is obtained."

Truth was, I hadn't read the sexual harassment policy statement. Yadda Yadda Yadda. I skipped it. I didn't want to know. After a moment, I admitted all of that. I told him, "I'm a busy man, you know. I had something pressing. Better things to do."

"What?" he asked. "Consensual digitilingus?" He held his finger in the air to catch the waiter's attention.

"That's not a crime," I said. "That's only Incriminating."

He smiled like I'm-On-Your-Side, Pal. "You don't have to tell me. Save it for the deposition." The waiter arrived and Richard ordered another martini for himself, and pointing at me, he said, "And bring him another. What's that you're drinking? A Long Island Lolita?"

To get my mind off Looming Doom, I plunged into work. It was my mission impossible to come up with a new slogan for the Montenegro print, radio and TV ads. We had a huge budget. Money no object. Not when you're in the brainwashing department. We pay for this, of course. All of us. We pay millions to have idiotic jingles planted in our brains. Just do it! Just say no! Does it make us happy? Where's the beef? Don't ask. Do your job. I holed up in my office, door closed and locked, and brainstormed. Avoiding everyone, even Mia, I snuck out later and went home. Coffee was the key. A good cup of joe. Requiem for a java junkie. I needed concepts:

Coffee, not love, is what makes the world goes round.

What if there were no coffee? We'd get less done.

(We'd get some goddamned sleep. I would kill for that. I would kill for sleep. Wrong track.)

Ask not what you can do for your coffee, ask what your coffee can do for you.

Testimonials would be the key: Picture a worn-out fortysomething average guy with loosened tie and a briefcase: "I want a cup of coffee that will brighten my day."

That seemed the best idea I could come up with, and after jotting down a list of possible slogans, I took a break. From the balcony of my Riverside Drive apartment, I checked out the world across the Hudson. The skies were clear over Jersey. Air traffic coming into Newark International was heavy as always. The jets were beautiful lights drifting through the blue-black sky, twenty or thirty of them in motion at a time. Beyond its beauty, there was the hint of disaster. It could have been an evacuation. Hearts in throats. A rush for the gates. "You don't understand! We have to make that flight! It's our only hope!" I'd sworn

to myself not to have more than two drinks a night and felt the ice of number four clink against my teeth. It reminded me how, when I got home, my answering machine was blinking like the navigation lights of a Virgin airlines commuter jet. I had three messages. Richard asked, "Where were you all afternoon? Did you fall off the world? Don't start slinking around now, acting guilty." Someone from my alma mater called, requesting money. And there was Mia: "I miss you. I need you. Meow meow."

Next day at the office the hallways were filled with a threatening buzz. Voices softened when I passed by, conversations hushed; in this mood of muffled rumor, the most ordinary sounds—the click of a briefcase lock, the whirr of a harddrive, the coughs of now-suspicious colleagues—scored the skin of my brain like papercuts. At coffee break, June trailed me to the corner deli and confirmed that my small world was getting smaller.

"Are you okay?" she asked, a total lack of concern in her voice. "You're not looking very well."

I shrugged. "Couldn't sleep."

Her eyes registered joy but her lips said, "You should take something for that."

"I do."

I take a lot of pills. I take pills at night to fall asleep. I never sleep. Pills help, though. I take everything. Lightweight stuff like Tylenol PM, which gives me woolly dreams right after sex, right as the PM part kicks in and I'm falling asleep, the smell of Mia's juices on my lips, my fingernails, under my fingernails, in the curls of my hair. The nightmares: I'm in an underground parking garage, trying to find a place to have sex with Mia, there are soldiers searching for us, I'm carrying this huge weapon that looks like the cross between a pike and a snow shovel; it's completely dark and I stumble through the concrete murk, Mia covering my back . . . I take Xanax, which gives me a wonderful drowsiness and makes for easy sex and a quick light's out. I take Darvocet and talk in my sleep about Chinese girls in sequined gowns and I take Melatonin when no one's in bed with me. Not long ago Mia got her hands on some pharmaceutical morphine, and we couldn't keep our hands off each other. They were delicious green pills. We didn't know what to expect but what the hell, you only live once. We put a movie in the VCR, but became quickly distracted, kissing and rubbing each other, sweetly describing how much we loved each other, slipping our tongues over our mouths like they were the lips between her legs. In the middle of watching a bad Hollywood witty hit-man movie, *2 Valleys in a Day*, I think it was, she shimmied out of her jeans, opened her legs, and I curled into her like a comma with a vigorous tongue, lapping happily at her lollipop, as she grinned ecstatically at the video we both never finished watching.

But I couldn't mention this to June. She would not approve. She

would note how I had supported Mia's last promotion. Is it sexual harassment yet?

She stood behind me in line just to make me miserable, tapping the counter with her pepper-mace key ring. I ordered a double latte and offered to buy her one, but she shook her head.

"I can't take caffeine. It makes me nervous."

June is a classic case of short woman's complex, a Napoleon Bonapartette. She's short and fat and hyper-everything. She approaches life as punishment, not reward. Her hair is cut severely and her glasses have squarish black frames. She sees me as a threat. I'm having too good of a time. Life should be miserable. She's been on antidepressants for years now and they don't help. Nothing helps. She's miserable and resents the fact that the rest of the world isn't. She's chock full of Zoloft and if you licked her neck, the skin would taste bitter as bad aspirin. She told Shelly Curapada that she thinks her father molested her as a child. She doesn't remember it. In truth, her father is a kind and now-discouraged man, but that means squat. She's sure the lurid memory is repressed. What else would cause this angst? Maybe it was Uncle Marvin? Cousin Wagner? The problem is men. They only want one thing you know. And that Elke. She gives the rest of us a bad name. She's fucking her way to the top, is what she is. Doesn't she have any self-respect? Doesn't she know it's not fair? We can't all be beautiful. We can't all be talented. We can't all be smart. Most of us aren't. What about us? Huh? What about the miserable of the world? There are rules prohibiting this kind of behavior. There are laws. She can't get away with this. *The time for misery is now.*

On the elevator, June asked if I had a minute to talk something over.

"Well, I am kind of busy."

"It shouldn't take long."

Her office was decorated in a Drab World scheme. She asked how my coffee campaign was progressing.

"Just fine, thank you."

"It's hard to do something new with commodities, isn't it?"

"We try. Is there something in particular . . . ?"

She kept her focus dead on me. "It's a rather delicate matter. It's just that I think we may have some trouble with Elke." She blinked for a moment, giving me pause to flinch. When I didn't offer anything, she said, "We've already had one law suit. I don't think another is necessary, is it?"

"I hope not."

She held a pencil in her hands, and for a moment, as it felt the pressure, it stood in as the metaphorical equivalent of my neck, under threat of snapping. "I just wanted to warn you. It would be most unpleasant if she filed charges."

"Well." I stood up. I didn't know what to do with my hands, so I brushed the disgust off my slacks. "I think that's my phone ringing."

After that, I huddled in my office with a cup of latte and a quart of rage. Even cottontails, when backed into a corner, turn ferocious. I felt very much the white male tired of taking his licks. I wanted to stand at a podium before millions and defend myself. Be like Peter Finch in *Network*, shout, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!" Declare my firm belief in consensual sexual harassment. It's a good thing. If two people are willing to break the rules and risk everything just to pinch each other's nipples, or put their tongues in each other's ears, kiss till their lips are swollen—more power to 'em. It's a sign of courage. A sign of life. Defiance.

My ace card was that I sensed Chevron Cameron shared my convictions.

We might well be the convicted, and remain free.

Like, maybe, Henry David Thoreau with a hard-on.

Besides, June was assuming she had power to wield, and I sensed that might not be true in this new regime. June had been the favorite of our ex-boss, Morton Lieberman, who had recently been spirited away by a major cable network to help brainwash millions of very-much-suspecting and suspicious but nevertheless easily duped Americans. In his glory days, Morton would introduce June at staff meetings by saying, "Gentlemen, let's give a warm welcome to my pit bull." His replacement, Chevron Cameron, was a wild card. He was a dead ringer for Donald Sutherland, and, like Alfred Hitchcock, wore the same suit every day. He was famous for ending conversations if not relationships by saying, "Enough. We'll talk later."

He was rumored by some to be a degenerate. But what—in this day and age of bestiality websites, Frank Gifford cavortions, and *Mad About Threesomes* Marv Albert dressed in ladies scanties, biting and sodomizing "bad girls" who snatch his hairpiece in horror—does that mean? There were stories. He dated Jennifer Anniston before she became a Friend. He had a column of ex-girlfriend names tattooed on his back. He was glimpsed smoking opium with Jack Nicholson at his place on Martha's Vineyard, and he'd once been romantically (and perhaps physically) linked to Princess Di, the stock of this story rising after she reached the end of her road. All this was in the category of legend, not truth. The only thing certain: He preferred women over men. So do I.

In only his second week aboard, he caught me and Mia on the roof, a pipe in her hands and the incense wind of marijuana swirling about my face. For a heartbeat the three of us blinked and looked each other over like Lee Van Cleef, Eli Wallach, and Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Then I offered him a taste.

He nodded and grinned. "Generosity is a virtue," he said, then ripped off a mean hit, sucking it deep into his lungs and not exhaling till he coughed. After the third hit I asked why he'd been looking for us. He seemed to be thinking for a moment, then grinned. "I forgot."

We all broke up laughing, our voices echoing down the stairs.

When we returned to the office, he asked if his eyes were a knock-off. Mia graciously offered her Visine: *Gets the red out!* He inserted a few drops, blinked and wiped them away, smoothed his jacket, then left us, saying, "I think misbehavior is a good thing. It keeps the blood flowing. Carry on."

To vent my spleen, I came up with new slogans, fresh from the inspiration of June:

"I want a cup of coffee that will make mine enemies' crops wither on the vine. I want a cup of coffee that will spoil the food in their refrigerators, that will make their cars not start in the morning. I want a cup of coffee to make their body odor strong and their water pressure weak, so they'll never get the shampoo out and will be visited by a host of bad hair days."

Elke and I agreed to meet for lunch, to map a strategy on how to deal with this. Already I didn't trust her. She was acting funny about the whole thing. More than anything, she seemed amused. Even pleased. She liked to be the center of attention, the focus of the buzz.

In a Spanish restaurant specializing in tapas dishes, we met. I had chicken and she had not a care in the world. "Do you realize I can see the future?" She played with her hair as she spoke. "You don't believe me, do you?"

What's to believe? Time is linear. The future is what comes next. After dinner, Elke would say she was tired and could I make an excuse for her back at the office? She wanted to do some shopping. Later I would go home to my bachelor's apartment with my electric sockets and cable TV staring back at me. I shrugged. "You're not Cassandra, are you?"

"Who's that? One of your many exes?"

I smiled as if Snow White had just stepped on my foot, thinking how my life had been played out in restaurants. Truth is, there is one with that name, but that was not the point. The point was that I could see it coming. It was like the cycle of seasons: old man winter, youthful spring, lusty summer, chilly autumn. And leaves fell, snow covered the sidewalk, and flowers bloomed as we sat there with menus in our hands, wait people hesitating, waiting for the heartbreak to end, so they could tell us the special of the day was Shmuck Elke, yours truly sauteed and skewered, served on a bed of rice pilaf. There was always the sound of silverware clinking on china as my heart broke. It didn't do this noisily. Not like a busboy dropping a tray of dirty dishes—the clatter, the shatter of it. Not like that. More like what follows: The sudden hush. I heard it then. The shatter was Elke's foreign voice. Who was she? I had no idea. A year later I would not be able to spot her in a crowd. And even if I did, she'd pretend not to see me, even were I to be standing there on my tiptoes, waving with both hands like a fool.

"Really," said Elke. "I can see the future." Elke continued braiding her hair, glancing lazily about the dining room, trying to focus on someone more interesting than me, another bright fellow who would humiliate himself for her. "We would never work out. I think we'd be like a piece of gum."

Juicy fruit? Double bubble? Trident? *The brand that four out of five dentists recommend for patients who chew gum?*

She claimed the flavor was not important. It's more a matter of texture. Of feeling. "You know. At first chewing gum is all sweet juiciness. You love to have it in your mouth. Sliding against your tongue." She closed her eyes and made a swooning face, the tongue-across-the-lips, Pearl Drops routine. "But that doesn't last long. Then you reach some point when it starts to turn bad. It starts to feel like a disgusting thing in your mouth. And you can't spit it out. It just won't stop. It's just there, you know? Relentless. At some point you hate it." The next look she gave me was pure Gross Out. "At some point it begins to feel like you're chewing a midget's kidney." She lifted her napkin to her lips and dabbed. Her eyes focused on a table of six Wall Street types, all belly laughs and take-no-prisoners. I considered plunging my fork into her throat. Just a thought.

As the account review loomed closer, I did my best to block out June and Elke, keeping only Mia close to my skin and bones, locking myself in the grip of This Whatever We Have, my heart filled with nothing but her and my mind concentrated on coffee. She spent most of her nights at my place, giving it life: Mia in bed, with the white cotton sheet wrapped around her head, like an old woman's shawl, a mischievous look on her face, smiling at me, saying, "Have you seen the baby Jesus?" When she cooked dinner for me, she always began by sauteing onions and garlic, standing over the cutting board, her hair pulled back, done in that I'm-a-nice-girl French braid, casting curly shadows on the wall beside her. When she was not around, there were always mementoes to remember her by: her peppermint foot lotion in the shower stall, her white bra in my magazine basket.

We couldn't find a name to fit our relationship. It was secret, and for a time, we liked the label forbidden. The ring of *taboo*. But as we came to care more for each other, things got tangled and messy, and none of the terms hit the mark. *Affair* implied the whole husbands-and-wives thing, *fling* sounded like something litterbugs do. The L word, for a variety of reasons, seemed off limits. A padlock on the gate, a sign warning THIS PROPERTY PROTECTED BY GUARD DOGS. Once, in a conversation, cozy and warm with her in bed, I said, "I don't know what to think of it, this whatever we have, but I like it." The name stuck.

She helped with the testimonials.

"I want a cup of coffee that will knock my socks off and put the fear of god in me again."

"I want a cup of coffee that will do my taxes and return the phone

calls of all those people I've been meaning to get back to but never have time to fit in my busy schedule they're far away and you know what they say out of sight out of mind."

She made me dizzy: the joy of sleeping beside the warm limbs—arms, legs, breasts, belly—of a lovely naked woman. Her warm skin. The alluring, shrimpy steam of her pudenda. As she fell asleep, I would scratch her back. As she dreamed of ex-girlfriends, I would slip my fingers down the cheeks of her bottom, grazing the tender, shaven skin of her sex.

When she came to bed, she loosened her hair and it sprayed out over her shoulders, long and wavy, her body lithe and willowy, her shoulders narrow and her hips wide. Her breasts were small but gently round, and she stood naked, putting a CD in the player, asking what I wanted to hear, thrusting out her belly. She did not hurry. I admired her nakedness. She liked this. Liked me looking at her skin. When she returned to bed she slid into my arms, smiling at me, saying, "You are the sweet one, aren't you?" I kissed her eyelids and eyelashes. She came with me inside her, her fingers on her clit, her limbs lurching as if she were guinea-pigging for electroshock treatments: ask and ye shall receive.

As we fell to sleep she whispered, "I want a cup of coffee that will fuck me silly and do the dishes while I read the movie reviews."

The day before we were to pitch our campaigns to Cameron, office scuttlebutt via Shelly Curapada had it that June was in Cameron's office for two hours, saying I was having an affair with Elke and possibly "other employees." If I wasn't fired, June threatened to file a class-action law suit on behalf of the women in the office, victims of my unwarranted sexual advances. Even those who asserted it was consensual were coerced into the sexual relationship with me for fear of losing their jobs, or did so in an attempt to curry favor and gain promotions.

In the aftermath of this meeting, amid the rumor and hubbub, Mia fucked me like you wouldn't believe. Like she had something to prove. Like let's give them something to talk about. It started when she straddled me on the couch, and when we decided to move upstairs to the bedroom, she locked her legs around me tight, and I stood up, still inside of her. I had to blow out the candles as we left the room, and squatting down to blow out the flame, felt myself slipping out, saying, "Oh, dang."

"Close," she said. "You get an A for effort."

Blowing out the candle, I splashed candle wax on my feet and legs, gasping in pain. She spilled her drink across my back and laughed till she broke into a coughing fit. When I came, my vision polka-dotted with purple spots, as if I could see the very corpuscles of my plasma exploding like cartoon bombs. In that moment, I didn't care about the Risk. I didn't care about the Others. I only cared about This Whatever

We Have. As long as I could see her the next night, I didn't care what they did to me. Throw me in the slammer. Drag me to the dungeon. Lock me in my cell. I'll spit at the guards and throw my metal plate of gruel against the stone wall. Fuck you all, fuck all of you. I don't care. You heard me right. I don't care. I am beyond the edge. In that moment, as she clawed me to sleep, I had Wile E. Coyote written all over me: I just didn't care. With a foolish grin on my face and the expectation of further frames to be drawn, I saw the canyon floor rushing toward me.

Mia and I were the last creative team to go. The others were all slick and polished, but ours had nerve. When it was time to stand and deliver, I showed Mia a note I had just scrawled. "Fuck art. Let's dance!" As we pitched it, Cameron watched with seeming indifference. When we finished speaking, the room was silent. Elke smoothed her hair away from her cheeks and wondered just who was most in love with her. June did her typical rendition of a barely controlled antidepressant slow burn. Richard crossed his fingers for us. And finally Cameron said, "I want a cup of coffee that will splash my face with cold water and tell me I'm beautiful?" He grinned. "Now that's good." He looked around the room for other reactions. "June? What do you think?"

She removed her glasses and polished them with a Kleenex. Her keep-them-waiting shtick. "I don't get the point."

Cameron gave her a penetrating look, his chin held high, then nodded. "Enough. We'll talk later." He then stood and came to shake hands with both of us, telling everyone that this is what he'd lead off with, directing a pecking order to the others he'd fall back on if the client didn't like it. As the meeting broke up, he headed off for lunch with Elke, and asked Richard to see that the necessary arrangements were made for tomorrow's conference, adding that since June seemed disinterested in the chosen campaign, see that she didn't attend the pitch. I heard him say, "Her negative energy might pollute the psychic waters."

Back in my office, with the door closed, Mia literally hopped upon me, wrapping her arms around my neck and her legs around my hips. She said, "You know what? My toes are itching something fierce."

To celebrate the success of our account review, Cameron chartered a Circle Line cruise around Manhattan, which some of us followed with a night on the town: *Come on along and take me to/The lullaby of Broadway*. It was all-aboard on a blustery afternoon. Seagulls hovered and dipped in the fishy-smelling air above us. The gusty wind blew my hair in my face, flags popped along the docks, and Richard leaned close to shout, "Word on the street is, June is history!"

I smiled and said, "And April is supposed to be cruel, isn't it?" I also reminded him that May usually saw an upturn in the hotly contested retail clothing market. He had just been given responsibility

for the Tommy Hilfinger account, and needed to think Fashion.

Mia was there, camera in one hand and cigarette in the other, her hair pinned up and tumbling down in Seventies retro prom-night curls, lipstick bright as candyapples, eyelashes as long as ever. We sipped champagne in coffee mugs and struggled to refrain from conspicuous gloating. People slapped me on the back and gave me looks that began in Surprise, passed through Admiration, and arrived at Envy.

Elke made a heart-stopping entrance, walking slow-mo down the gangplank, giving me the whammy. She looked to-die-for in a black-and-white, Pierre Mondrian dress, sporting a new do—blonde locks cut in swirls and arcing bangs hanging in her eyes—Veronica Lake Does Dondi, copycatting Elaine from a recent *Seinfeld* episode.

"Who are you?" she asked. "The cat's meow?"

I shrugged. "I'm more like a rock," I said. "You might even think of me as an island."

She smirked. "And will your poetry protect you?"

Mia squeezed between us, taking polaroids of everyone, playing Annie Liebowitz. "Say *That's not my husband, that's my stalker!*" She left my eyes scored with paparazzi spots, but it was a welcome interruption. As we pulled away from the West side docks, below us the props swirled a frothy wake in the gray waters of the Hudson, their churn threatening to bring the bodies of mob informants to the surface. We looked away. We didn't need to see that. Nobody likes a snitch. Soon the lovely menace was posing promo stills for *All About Elke!* Mia saved my skin. It was all I could do not to squeeze her. We could keep a secret. We could keep This Whatever We Have to ourselves. I grinned like the luckiest of all. As we passed the Statue of Liberty, the sky above swarmed with gulls, and like a java junkie after a fix, the world seemed jittery with hope.

## The Talk of Two Hospice Nurses

(after Czeslaw Milosz)

Let us not talk God again, Elizabeth.  
So many faiths, so much refiguring; I cannot do it.  
But I stretched the truth about distancing myself.  
I still worry about my work-a-day life.  
It is no better, perhaps worse, than any usual happiness.

For nearly five months we have been hedging our bets  
as we do now, on the phone lines, cables transcending the traffic's  
speed.  
We find something like relief in the eaves of evening that nearly rain  
but don't, and I am wiry again, weightless in the light of our dead  
spaces.

We rise above the saturated clouds which warn the limits of air space;  
we transcend to where the weather reports make sense looking down,  
magnolia trees dropping fruit in the city heat. The swollen, tropic  
weight  
hangs. And I am never questioned: That I am sure of only human  
power,  
that I have certainty in my claim,  
as I know no meaning in hearing psalms, except  
my scorn for the opinions of faith relaxes.

I try-on some angel hair and look to the moving people.

There is no hope, Elizabeth, yet I know how to care about the  
salvation of my soul.  
No one is called; we all function with particular skill.  
I accept what befalls me as other than just  
though I pretend to the dignity of a godless age.  
No reflection in the words. My home chooses me hollow.  
Nothing existing in this world, for that reason, disappoints us:

A city of green trees and lakes, a tropical Hawaiian dress,  
hell in the ghettos, amalgam paint, marijuana plants ornamenting  
the circumference of the city, all our lives, polite glances,  
and the fevered pace, the car engine, the engine  
of how we find each other, the kiss-me and talk, limes  
and Tecate, or any Mexican beer, and a bed of green lilies

in a museum where the walls keep you from the false notion  
that peace offers you a twin bed beyond the canvas  
in the lost spaces. I've been sleepless. No love transcends there.

Death, you say, yours and ours, is beyond us,  
though we assist and insist this rich life is not enough.  
But the peach turns brown in such heat.  
We will be here until we are not.  
The sky, tonight, as I see it, is for us  
small enough to step on, look around,  
and step down again and says nothing of being free.

from *Cinematic Neurosis*

I.

Loop—a length of film (w/sound track) joined head to tail to form a continuous belt so that the sound either contains can be repeated endlessly for mixing and dubbing.

Looping—a dubbing process in which the original sound track recorded during filming is replaced by another, recorded under more favorable conditions.

I.

There is a picture of us  
I keep in a drawer  
beneath socks and t-shirts:

We are paused  
from picking blueberries  
on a mountain in afternoon.

Dead of summer,  
in short-sleeved shirts and shorts,  
we squat in unobstructed sunlight.

The light looks down on us  
with something approaching  
clarity and cruelty.

And although they are in themselves  
unaware of this, our blue and lifted fingers  
describe how we make beliefs:

we say that what and that we touch  
mark us, even though they only meant  
to shield our eyes from the glare

of the August afternoon  
in which we are paused  
dissolve

2.

A memory of a thing is only an idea  
of the thing without the shape  
by which we recognize it—a mountain, an afternoon,  
a blueberry, a squat, a pause. You—

"What about a picture of a man and a woman squatting?"

You are a thought I turn over  
like a bird on a spit.  
It's the old struggle between me and us,  
between a moment and a memory of a moment,  
between a picture and a page about a moment.

"So the picture is only a pretext?"

You equals a man or equals a picture or equals a reader, beloved.

To answer your question: No.  
The picture is a frame  
around a moment and around  
our unawareness in that moment  
of all that it like a blueberry seed contains:  
pit and pulp: other moments: inevitable and impossible:

Say we are standing together

"We are standing together."

in front of a full-length mirror, not long  
after we've come down our mountain.

"minor moses."

You are almost a foot taller than I am  
and behind me. Looking at you  
involves some kind of turning away.

"Love, is this what love comes to?"

What I might remember  
is how your stained hands hover above my shoulders.  
Not a touch but an intention  
your hands inhabit like gardening gloves.

3.

In memory, the only picture of us  
I've kept becomes the first frame  
of a B-movie. In successive frames,

you fall and fall and fall  
like electric light across a dark  
and solipsistic room  
down the side of a mountain

in Maine in August in afternoon.  
The light is flat and unrelenting.  
You roll over bushes and grass  
and blueberries and brambles and nettles

and stones. Dead. Because the dead don't leave.  
The mountain, treated  
with an experimental pesticide,  
grows beneath you.

"Playback is a bitch.  
A black dog gone mad one June."

Memory is just a way of treating a moment.  
"This is a rough treatment..."  
of you.

II.

Treatment—the intermediate stage in the development of a script.

Treatment—conduct or behavior toward a person.

Treatment—manner of proceeding in applying medicinal remedies or  
surgery to cure an  
illness.

1.

I have a vague picture of us:

We are sitting in a car  
oceans and languages away  
from our first meeting.

Yellowed planes of streetlight  
enter the windows in calculable  
and different angles.

You tell me that you'll say  
the story began  
with me opening a door.

You say that you'll say  
that I was apparently angry.  
"Think again," I say

leaning back against my pane.

This is the way  
with so many stories:

someone opens a door  
or a jelly jar or a book  
or a purse or a zipper

or her own mouth, and someone else,  
half in shadow, opens  
his mind like a glove compartment

and draws out a meaning  
Meaning? Meaning?  
And exactly how does this movie end?

This is how the movie ends  
This is how the movie ends  
This is how the movie ends

With the bang bang  
of a car door or a gun.

## While You Were Away

A talk delivered by William Goyen at Houston Public Library, April 24, 1978.

Dear Father:

I have been asked to speak about the city you brought me to. Houston! I could not speak of Houston without speaking of you. For in the image of my boyhood and young manhood, Houston is you and you are Houston. Though you are, for me, one of the founding citizens of this new metropolis I see around me in 1978 when I come to deliver this communication, you did not quote "build" Houston; you had no realtor's "vision" of Houston's destiny. You did not even "grow" with Houston. For you were a "failed" man in a boom town. Your earnings did not triple, or double, you gained no commercial power in a city of commerce. You did not own a bank or try to get one together (in a city of banks); you did not cut a new street through woods for a sub-division with your name on it, did not start an insurance agency, get the franchise for a car dealership, buy up some land by what might be an airport.

The Houston I saw, dear father, on my daily journeys through it by foot, from other people's automobiles by hitch-hiking, above all from the automobile you drove, was the Houston of the Nineteen-Twenties and Thirties. After that, from the Forties to the present, I left and came back, left and came back, year after year. You were always, until you died, waiting for me. My daily travels were spiritual journeys; that is, I was experiencing a place deeply, on my own secret terms, as I moved through it. Were I was going, why I was going there, and when, will compose this letter to you. I was not just a walker in a growing city. I was in a kind of flight from my place, a fugitive from the very scene I traveled; I saw later that I was, from the beginning, saying good-bye as I said hello, in the same breath—already giving up what was being given to me. And so the places I passed, on my way, the houses and the buildings, were symbols of my intimate feelings, the state of my mind, of someone longing (and planning) to get out of where he was into some other place. Dear father!

You brought me to the young city of Houston when I was eight years old, in 1923, and you guided me and led me through the changing place, I, "growing with Houston" as the slogans on the billboards began to tell me, watching the changes from your company car (did you ever own one of your own?) on my daily schoolboy and job routes (you even

drove me to pick up my first date and I remember that I asked you in my timidity and fear, to go in and get her for me). But car-less in the sawmill town, we had walked to church through the fields or strode along on sandy roads to neighbors and kin, back up somewhere in a clearing. You walked the railroad tracks to the sawmill, walked through pastures to the store in town, walked me to the little doctor's office, walked me with my mother to Trinity school. Transferred to a new place, you were my driver, my conductor, chaperone to my early simple journeys; and in my later returning you gave tours of the new, the wonders rising up and stretching out and over the city you loved and felt so much a part of, showed me year after year the replacements of old disappeared places, after I'd left your house and gone away—into a world that you could not comprehend, beyond Merrill Street, beyond Houston new or old, beyond Texas. Proud watcher of the city of Houston, your city passed over you, even while you were giving to it, never giving you back very much, taking more and more from you, a swift town passing over a man who could not catch hold of it.

You were one of those young men come up out of a large poor family in a poor place, lumber people in your case, Mississippi in your case, that moved from work place to work place: mill towns. You started work early, after you finished the fifth grade. When your family moved to East Texas for a sawmill at Trinity, you found my mother there (she had been born there, her father was Postmaster there and her brother and sister worked in the Trinity Post Office -- mail for 900 people). When the sawmill petered out, you moved us to Shreveport for a few months, then on to the small city of Houston where you could sell lumber for a Houston lumber company. You sold lumber for this company for over fifty years, and when you recently died, you were still in the employ of that company on your deathbed. You were the possessor of no pension, no company "benefits". At your death your annual salary was less than the cost of a good Cadillac. You had finally paid off, when I was forty, the mortgage on the house on Merrill Street, whose buying price was no more than the cost of a good Cadillac.

We lived briefly in two little houses before we settled down for the rest of my Houston life in Woodland Heights, on Merrill Street. For a while we lived on Yale Street in the Heights, in what was called a duplex—a two-family house—and I remember especially the faint sour smell of gas always in the air; and I saw, when we went riding, the natural gas reservoir with lights strung on it at night, not far from our house, over around Thirteenth Street, I believe. (Later, the more pungent odor of a paper mill hung in our five rooms.) Next we lived on Morrison Street, off Bayland Avenue in Woodland Heights, in another duplex, and I remember our church just behind us, the Woodland Methodist Church on Houston Avenue to which I could get quickly through a vacant lot. Down the street was a boy whose father had a portion of the concession to rustproof parts for the Niels Esperson Building. I dipped a million bolts in a chocolate-colored liquid one summer for a dime an hour. Later, when I saw the grand Esperson

Building, with its blue-lit little pagoda on top, I felt a part of it, deep in its innards. In a few months you found for us the little two-bedroom frame house on Merrill Street, number 614, that was our home, enlarged to include a sleeping porch and a breakfast room, until you died, not long ago. Your Azalea and Lily garden was your pleasure there. We couldn't afford an electric fan for a long time. There was some machine in the attic that rumbled and roared and brought in bug-studded cool air. When we were being cooled off we could not hear what each other was saying.

In those days (1923-24) Woodland Heights was like a soft woods with little houses in close rows on dusty streets. There were few cars, we played in the street. Merrill Street was a little street that ran nine blocks long, east to west, and it was a neighborhood of shy immigrants from small towns, like us. Merrill Street ended at each end in a school, and from 1923 to 1929 my simple daily itinerary during school months led me down the sidewalk east to one of them, Travis Elementary School, and west to the other, James S. Hogg Junior High School. What I saw and felt as I walked through this neighborhood from the ages of eight to fourteen became a part of the foundation of my writing for the rest of my life, whether I lived in Zurich or in Chicago, Rome or New York. What caught me up so early and made me feel that I had to be a voice for it was the sense exile, misplacement, the poverty, spiritual and material, of city living, the growing hell of automobiles, the loss of open nature of woods and rivers, the simple lyric yearning of people out of place. This was the lament I heard from these gentle uprooted people in their singing speech, their poignant outcry (my mother's joined them, often led them): "When we go back one day to Red River"; "When we all go home to Polk County". Or to Honey Grove, or to Lovelady, Tyler, Big Springs. Houston in those early days seemed to me a place of the half-lost and the estranged, even the persecuted. The theme in mother's household, my dear father, was the very same. You know well how it was often gloomy and so sad, sometimes threatening to a young man like you, hardly thirty and feeling his thrust ("I'll just take the children and go back home and you can stay here in your Houston, without us. We'll be all right, don't you worry. At least we'll have a little breeze in the early mornings and be able to sleep without the sirens scaring us to death at midnight.") You consoled her, and us, and, looking to the new city, promised that it would be better, that we would buy an electric fan, and a Hoover, have a chickenyard and some chickens, a garden of peppers and greens and tomatoes like we had back home; that we would have us a car and ride through the city or park on Main Street in front of Munn's or Kresses and watch the people walking on the sidewalk; or ride back to Trinity to see the old place and all the kinfolks. Dear young man my father, you had your young spirit in you, keen-eyed and ready in a young city. You were going to grow with Houston, provide for us from the good things it had to offer, give us a new life in a new world. Houston! "Where seventeen railroads meet the sea", we heard them say it on the radio. You consoled, and made us promises.

(Few Materialized). The young city boomed and spread and rose up.

This longing for place, spoken at dinner table ad sobbed softly from beds in the nighttime, became Eden-like in my vision of it, a sweet place where everything would be all right again if only we could go back to the familiar fields and the dear river and the river bank, the brethren trees and the gardens of vegetables, of East Texas flowers, the kinfolks in their houses up the dirt roads, the church meetings and the family reunions. I was infused with such a sense of a lost country, with such a feeling of being foreign and alien and transferred, against my will, that the city if Houston represented a kind of internment, Merrill Street a kind of inner city, in those early boyhood days. Naturally, my dear old man, I began to fabricate, to devise ways to break out of that captivity when I was able; and I, too, was growing along with Houston, with life itself, getting more and more courage to be free inside, and beginning to look for ways that would give me that inner freedom, if not yet outer. By the time my daily walks to the eastern end of Merrill Street had ended and I began my way toward the other end, to my junior high school I was able to express a little of these feelings I had now taken on for myself, which had been given to me, indeed had been mine, too, from the very start, now I knew. And I was beginning to write down these feelings of homesickness, of loss of place, reveries of my beginnings, of a countryside that now seemed like the Garden itself, like a country of Paradise. A world I had lost became the world of my dreams and a world to go out and search for when I could. It was the only solace I knew and the only beauty. The city got rawer, harsher. When a girl from our Sunday School at Woodland Methodist Church was knocked down by a car on Houston Avenue and lay dying in the Church vestibule, I cursed the city and wept for the place of my town and vowed I would run away. I must tell you again, dear father, what you knew so well later and grieved over, that my search began for physical escape within the confines of my young city; and already I knew the bitter feeling of being torn between plans for flight and the certainty that I could not abandon you. Already the lifetime torment had begun: I couldn't leave and I couldn't stay. I used to talk to you about this. But it was only when I began to write about it that you began to understand, to take my book and sit away with it and begin to understand. And oh my beloved father you saw yourself in me, your plight in mine, when it was too late to change your own—if ever you could have.

Every morning at 7:45 we left Merrill Street, you and I in your Company Chevrolet. Our destination was my high school, Central High, soon to be changed to Sam Houston Senior High. Our trip to school led us over a low-lying road along the bayou that was often flooded, once so disastrously that the markets and warehouses along its side were water-wrecked ruins for some years after. We passed the S.P. hospital, passed a structure whose sign read "Bemus Bag," rode by the shantytown built of fruit-crates and townsacks in the bayou bottoms shaggy with weeds and lush with trumpet vines, honeysuckle,

blooming morning glory. "Lots of Cottonmouths in there," you told me. "Coming home some nights I've seen 'em crossing the road." We crossed a bridge over the muddy bayou and arrived at your office in the Union National Bank Building on the corner of Main Street and Franklin Avenue. And let me recall with you, my father, the day we came upon your own father, the silent and defiant little man with the crooked foot and the Roman head and a pint in his back pocket, selling *The Houston Post* on that very corner, sitting on nail keg—but not for long. We crossed Main Street and saw the old City Hall and when you got to Louisiana you turned in that and went on, in the stinging tropical heat of early morning through a city sprouting up out of its own castaway like a new plant, past boarded-up facades, empty buildings under renovation. Something new was rousing and stirring fast and visible. "Houston's going to be a big place, Son," you told me. "All kinds of opportunities. Get your education." But already, Sir, I was dreaming of escape, release, brightness, dazzle—some unknown, unnameable beautiful thing. And there, at the colorless brick building that held what was called High School, you put me out and watched me go into the dark entrance.

In the afternoons I stepped into the little Watson streetcar at the corner of Main and Texas, from a little island in the middle of the street. Rice Hotel seemed the largest building I had ever seen; it was cool under the quiet arcades. The afterschool ride home on the Watson streetcar in the early Nineteen Thirties has been a part of my sleeping dreams for many years. We rocked along on narrow streets so close to the little houses on either side that we could see in the poor kitchens and shabby bedrooms. Two brothers drove the Watson streetcar and they were the riders' and the neighbors' friends. The little car made its way to noisy Washington Avenue then to wide Houston Avenue until somewhere near Luna Park it turned into a neighborhood of poor houses with tin roofs and clothesline washings and barking dogs running along with us, rooster crowing. When the little ringing car come out of the neighborhood like a local toy, it slowed to prepare itself for a trip that seemed always to be hazardous and frightening—like a tightrope walker poised before he begins his feat. The Watson streetcar felt its way along what seemed the narrowest highest bridge in the world, a trestle over Buffalo Bayou and its wilderness below. Sometimes boys would be caught on the trestle and have to hang by their fingernails until we passed. When we had successfully accomplished this crossing, we came into a neighborhood that received us intimately like something of its own, and we rolled and rang on to the end of the line on very Merrill Street.

But month by month the turmoil was building. I recall scenes of street jams of trucks and cars, of beginning traffic lights in places, and accidents. Our Watson streetcar conductors said it was going to get worse and that eventually the automobile would drive the little streetcar off the street. Now my dream was changing, father. I longed for the splendid, the magical, the exciting, the melodramatic, the

fantastical. Where would I find this in a city of plainness, in a neighborhood of lower middleclass exiles? I began forays on my bicycle out into a wilderness of thick woods and cliffs. This wilderness lay at the end of Eleventh Street, beyond Heights Boulevard. It took me no more than thirty minutes' bicycle ride to get to this wild place. There I took my notebook and wrote fantastical passages. It was in these days, Central High School days, that I began a hidden life of reaching out, most of which you never dreamt, dear father Charlie. I began to feel a new boldness, born out of hunger. I was secretly making my way to the Houston Conservatory of Music far out, it seemed, on Caroline Avenue, where I announced to Dr. Hoffman, the Director, that I had ambitions to compose musical creations; and closer by to the Lamar Hotel Ballroom where Mrs. John Wesley Graham sat, as if she were expecting me, at a long narrow grand piano flanked by palm trees. I had to walk all the way across a shinning slippery waxed ballroom floor to arrive at her, positioned at her Grand, flounced out in an organza evening gown with a large Gladiola corsage bristling under her chin. It was here, in this undreamed-of spacious hall, by these palms and at the side of this piano, that I heard the hoarse but tender voice of Mrs. Graham inform me of my talents, imperfections and potential. "You have a singing talent, Billy," she reminded me. "Only thing is, you'll have to do something about a bum operation on your tonsils. The damned doctor in your one-horse town left a piece of tonsil in your throat. If affects the action of your vocal chord, holds the bubble down. That bubble's got to rise, Billy." "Oh," I said. "Never mind honey," Mrs. John Wesley Graham went on. "We'll do what we can with a piece of tonsil sticking into your vocal cavity like the tip of an asparagus. Sing! *ah-ah-ah*." And oh I sang *ah-ah-ah*, dear dad. If you'd known this, or could have seen me there by the palm trees in the Lamar Ballroom, singing in Houston, age fifteen, what on earth would you have done? Nothing, I guess; but I'd have surely quit Mrs. John Wesley Graham's singing lessons and let the left-over tonsil have its way if you'd asked me to. Just as I did in the case of my secret music lessons at the Houston Conservatory of Music when you discovered my music book of Chopin Preludes (I had had about six lessons on the "Dewdrop", still can play about six lessons of it). It hurt you so, it was just—I said so, much later—the kind of thing you could not comprehend—that's it, my father, you just had no comprehension of it. You sat away from me for a long time, we were strangers for some days and nights; I was already entering a world you could not comprehend; you had no words for anyone. "Why's your daddy grieving?" my mother came to me to ask. I simply could not say. The morning I asked you to drive me to the Houston Conservatory of Music to turn my music in to Miss Tree, my piano teacher, and to tell Dr. Hoffman, the director, that I would have to quit my composition class and he said, "It's too bad, Billy, because you have a lot of talent," that changed you. After that you were all right. Remember, dad?

In 1932 we began another daily morning trip together. You were proudly escorting me out a long distance to my university. Rice

Institute! Straight out Main Street we'd go, gathering hitch-hiking students as we went past the main hitch-hiker's location, Main and Lamar. Arriving at the ivy-covered gate, you'd make a half-circle and stop there, at the entrance, at the long path that led far back to my place of learning that would change everything for us, make life different from what it had been for you. You put me down, out of your automobile, onto the path tenderly but strictly; and you waited, watching me move away from you. When I'd turn around I'd see you there; I'd wave and you'd wave back. And far down the gravel walk I'd turn again and see you there, in the distance, see your old felt hat, see the shadowy shape of your Company Chevrolet, dear dear father.

Days at Rice, a quiet awesome place of only three buildings standing in a meadow on the edge of town. The end of Main Street was not far beyond—there was Bellaire Boulevard, and beyond were the prairie and mud roads. Across from Rice, across Main Street was Hermann Park, a wilderness where I spent most of my days during the first year. You never knew that most every day after I saw your automobile drive away, I turned away from that cold campus and went back on the gravel path, in flight. In the empty part I sat under trees or wandered through the empty spaces. It was usually raining, soft Gulf rain, warm and melancholy. From the little Zoo a couple of lions uttered a forlorn roar. Their sound often fell over my reading in the silent stacks of the library in the days after when I had abandoned my wilderness for a corner with a table and books (you had triumphed, dear father, though you never knew what a close call you suffered, your boy of the wilderness had a close call). Studying at late night in the room on Merrill Street, I heard the sound of the freight trains haunting the quiet neighborhood. It urged me, and the distant roar of the lions had stirred me. And as I learned and grew and matured, I saw my peers training for commerce in a growing city of opportunity; I felt estranged; I had found, in the library and classrooms of my university, poetry, words of feeling, what seemed like salvation for me. I heard the lion's call and the trains' sad whistle. You, dear young Charles P. Goyen, slept on in the back room: we had come a little way, together, more than we both knew. But you had brought me, under your gentle force, to what would free me, and free me from what bound you. You armed me for my beginning. Thank you, Sir.

Not only Rice University but S. Hurok and the City Auditorium freed me from the great world. as an usher—Rice students were given free admission with this job—I say from aisles, from the back of the house, from high balcony seats, what I at first could not believe to be true: San Carlo Opera Company. *La Boheme*, *Madame Butterfly*, *Tosca*. And the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo! *Les Sylphides*, *Giselle*, *Gaite Parisienne*. When the performance of Danilova and Eglevsky was over and they had departed, I wandered through rainy Houston in a trance, feeling forsaken as if lovers had left me. Their world would be my world. What was Houston? What was Rice, Merrill Street? A city of automobiles and oil, a neighborhood of sadness and drabness. (But both had given me

my feeling—and both were giving me, day by day, now, my freedom).

You stood in the street, Franklin Street, behind your office in November, 1939 and saw me, flanked by hundreds of young men, march away from you. It was the war. I had been drafted. As I marched away, I didn't dare acknowledge your fear and your heartbreak—nor my own. That was the beginnings of the leavings and returning, forevermore.

In the years that followed, of going away and coming back, going away, coming back ("Why don't you stay here, Son? Sure wish you'd come on back. Don't worry why you have to live all over the world, Houston's got everything any place else has."), in all those years until you died you'd give me a tour of our changing city. Spokesman for a flourishing city, the conscience of it, you'd show me the changes and wonders on the way to Merrill Street (Merrill Street hadn't changed, our house was the same. Each year it was clearer that you were not going to move to a larger house in a new part of town, that you hung back in you old neighborhood—where few of your old neighbors lived: they had moved to new subdivisions, to modern little airconditioned brick homes, you lingered back in the old place.). You told me to look up in the night at aerial strips of cement hanging, unended, over an old Henke and Pilot's grocery store; we were suddenly speeding on elevated pavement below which I saw landscaped bayou banks; suddenly we descended onto a little street of whitewashed houses and Canna lilies. Each time, more had risen up out of the bayous. The new laid its shadow on the old. Each time the whirling shapes that seemed to be built of automobiles, folding under and over and running on like a river of fuming cars and trucks, turned over and around my old places like a living stream that was pulling down into its current the little houses, the backyards, the chinaberry trees, the drugstores and barbershops and barbecue stands. "When did they do that?" I asked you. And you answered, "While you where away."

Yes, my beloved father, so much happened, so much changed, so much vanished forever, while I was away. And while I was away one time you vanished, vanished out of Houston in the twinkling of an eye; and one of my returning was to honor your burial in the ground of your cherished city, out on the way we used to drive to the Ship Channel on a Sunday afternoon. The airplanes you used to meet, that brought me back so many times, fly over your grave in a wooded cemetery.

And so I've written you this letter, beloved man, to tell you that this is what my stories, which sometimes hurt you then, are about, and that now it is very clear that what they are about is what you gave me, what we shared, hard and unhappy, what we had come to in our life on Merrill Street, what come to us to bear, in your own restless city, thankless, too, where, standing on the threshold year after year, no door opened for you; all I saw in that kind of dying, far away from home, a vision of my mother's lost town: two towns, two places stamped upon my senses—one without the other would not have meant as much, the city without the town, the town without the city—two places shaping

my life, shaping my art, two places as we saw them, now wiped away,  
hers the little lost bitter town that hurt so much, yours the wild  
ungraspable one, that hurt, too.

The last time I came home I stayed high up in a new glass hotel  
overlooking a Freeway. From a window looking northwest over packed  
acres of houses, streets, shining buildings holding sunlight and cloud in  
their mirror walls, I saw way out what ought to be our old  
neighborhood on Merrill Street. A white cloud wrapped around it as  
was so low that it swaddled down into the thick green that must have  
been, as clearly as I could see from that distance, those ancient live oaks  
on Bayland Avenue that have not been uprooted.

## News Watch

### News at Sunrise

During the day, men move the river. At night the arc lights of the news crews flare against the river in its new location, banked in concrete, reflecting a broken moon. This is the future of Providence. A bold and ambitious undertaking, says Kay Summers, Newswatch 9, her mouth a taut bow, her teeth perfect. A wind blows up from the river, lifting her hair, the color of a match just lit.

### Where I Live

Is the Capital. Whatever was there is torn up and replaced. I live on the wrong side of the river, where thin boys prowl the streets and machines move the earth that moves the river. I live in the third floor of a two-story building. A simple life. There are no windows, nothing on the floor except a pile of bills from Filene's. There is no furniture. I own only a 32" Sony Trinitron. It is chained to the wall. Six gauge chain on ten inch lag bolts to the studs. The head of the bolts hammered as round as the moon. When you and I are long gone, the television stays. While the river is moved, thin boys plot. I have returned home to find more of me missing. A Toyota Corolla, 1985, two TVs, a radio, a tape recorder, a Martin D-18, a Sherwood amplifier, a Radio Shack C.D. player and fourteen C.D.s, a sleeping bag, one down parka, Mr. Coffee, a Proctor Silex toaster. I wear all my clothes. I buy the other TV on time. The Sony Trinitron 32", from Filene's. Then chain and bolts. The bills pile up.

### News at Noon

Last year in Providence, there were nineteen murders. One hundred and sixteen rapes. Six hundred and six robberies and six hundred and one assaults. There were four thousand, one hundred and sixty five burglaries. Six thousand two hundred and ninety five cases of larceny. Four thousand, six hundred and eighty five cases of malicious mischief. Kay Summers, Newswatch 10. Her eyes squint against the fall sun. She pulls her hat closer to her in a gesture of grace and need.

### How I Live

I watch the news—sunrise, noon, six and eleven. I work only to survive, and I survive to watch the News. Kay Summers, Newswatch 10. Work is only a way to eat. Eating is the way to build blood. At Traveller's Aid on Union Street, the Street Sheet lists the free lunches. Mostly it is bread and stale. Before dawn at the Dunkin' Donuts at Weybosset, the Ford F150's, the Chevy C10's begin to circle. "I got a construction site to clean. Who wants to work?" You can pay the rent and eat while your body builds new blood. And you can watch the News. Afternoons you can go to where the news is likely. The State House, the District Court, Federal Court, City Hall. News vans and satellite dishes. Remote feeds. She is shorter than you might think, but her phrases are elegant. Around the corner from Traveller's Aid, you can sell blood. Once every two weeks. The rest of the time, your body turns stale bread into new blood, and blood buys news.

### News At Six

At the Thurbers' Ave. Overpass, the news vans are gathered like flies on a corpse. I fight my way through them. Kay Summers, Newswatch 10 in parka and cap. Everywhere the lights, obscuring a clouded moon. "It has been snowing for nearly an hour now. It will likely snow through the rush hour. Traffic, as you can see, is moving." Down below, cars drive past, the drivers trying to get home to see the snow on television, to hear their lives from the mouth of Kay Summers.

### What I Live For

Constancy, love and devotion. Kay Summers does not report these. I would have her know faith and passion. I do not know who first said, "You are so beautiful, you should do the news." True, she is a woman of grace and elegance. I study her mouth as she repeats the vocabulary of news, "extortion," "fraud," "conspiracy," "collusion," "indict," "confess," "stab," "assault," "rape," and "murder." I cannot pretend to understand her fascination with the halt and the lame, the wretched and strange, misery and oddity, the clownish and dull. But her words ignite me, and I spend my nights burning in the pure flame of the news.

### News at Eleven

They pile wood on tiny barges, light it and send the barges down the river. It is a bit of strangeness in the summer night. Crowds line the river, pointing at the fire and water, reflecting a fractured moon. They point and moan. This is news, and they are part of it. Kay Summers winds up the broadcast, and pushes her way through the crowd. She passes in front of me. I reach out to touch her and catch my breath. I cannot let go. I cannot let go.

## To a Fellow Spastic

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

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

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

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

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

## The Petroleum Allocator

Tulsa Power Service sat on the north side of The South Side of Chicago, in front of The Back of the Yards. It was the last of the truly full-service gas stations, and when I was 15 I lied and said I was 16 to get a job there.

After one week, being a gas attendant inspired me to experience my Economics class differently. Supply and demand. Limited returns. The allocation of good and services. The invisible hand of Adam Smith. My role in the theories of Economics was becoming clearer, apparent, 3-D. And I conjured the words for it: *Petroleum Allocator*. And this pre-occupation would teach my central nervous system the true value of a buck.

Now there wasn't much lingo to learn as gas attendant, so in our esoteric tongue, the bell was...the bell.

It was more of course. And depending on who heard it, and what they heard, and what it meant to them, well, it was a philosophical question. If the bell rings at the gas station, but no one moves, has the bell really made any noise? Maybe it was you who just thought you heard the bell, what with your expectations about what should happen when you run over that black hose draped along the driveway into the full-service gas station. Isn't that why you go for full service? To experience the bell. Wouldn't you feel as if you were running over a finger, or someone's foot if you sped over it, felt that blip in your quick coast over that hose but did not get your "ding, ding, ding"?

Sometimes, as an experiment, I would unplug it, the really long hose that worked with air and pressure and was connected to a red bell, the type you would see as a fire alarm in a high school, if you have ever imagined one or seen one before you pulled the fire alarm.

It was a simple matter of sliding the hose off of the bit of metal that linked it to the bell, and it was like giving the place a heart attack.

When the hose is plugged in but not ringing, there is a slight, soft buzz of electricity silently coursing through the vein of the hose connecting the outside to the inside.

I believe we could all hear it. The hairs on our head, necks and arms stood up with it, there was just that slight electric current that we all reacted to, and that it was fun, and a bit appalling, to see us deprived of.

After a while, slowly the workers would appear from wherever they had gone, and look around, as if on withdrawals, a little something was missing, and then of course, a car would be on the drive, blowing its horn to get served, and then someone would say, "Someone

unplugged the fuckin' bell."

So *Full-time Gary's* ability to ignore the bell was his gift. He was making a fuckin' philosophical statement. He muted his sense, he fought the buzz, he turned his body against the sense of the bell. But he tuned in to other senses. Billy, the shift boss, liked to say, "That no-mind Gary can see out of his asshole."

What this meant was that Full-time Gary experienced a customer differently than we did. His tall, skinny body was an antenna, and though he would not hear the bell, maybe he could smell something different, maybe hear things beyond the imagination of most of our hearing. He could slowly walk up to a waiting car at the pump, and in the time it took him to saunter his skinny ass from "inside," up the drive, to the island, he could figure out how shitty he could treat the customer. It was like his thin body was some kind of antenna, picking up information that regular people would just let pass through them.

So even though he was the most legendary lazy ass who ever worked and managed to keep his job, Joe, the owner, thought he was the hardest working man on the drive, after himself of course.

And Gary had *regular* customers. Like unheard of. Gas station customers who came and asked for him. And who he would duck. We would be like, "Hey Gary, this guy, this lady is asking for you. And he'd say, "I'm not here. Tell them to die." Or he would ignore you. Whichever was right until it was time to get up and do them on the fifth, the sixth, the third time. Only he knew when was the perfect time because he knew how to make them miss him, appreciate him, and then damn, if that bastard didn't get tips, which most of us never got, or just got if we worked Christmas Eve. Christmas Day you just got looked at like you were a sucker.

There were two ways Full-time Gary could go with this gift. He could cultivate that insight, the knowledge, that special octane within and bring to life the expression of capitalism, thus removing us, all of us from being categorized, departmentalized. He could wake up the system, the parts of the system to be their own system, animate the language of "Ten dollars no-lead please." HE could do that. Or he could just become a gas attendant, the bearer of the gas, the collector of the money for the gas, and this would determine if for the rest of his life he just bore but never bore. And that day, it would be decided who would be knighted.

It was a winter day, and I was experiencing the highest level of school spirit that I would ever be possessed by, and I am glad that I experienced it, expressed it, and expended it at Tulsa during a Saturday morning shift, during basketball season. The manifestations of this obvious spirit were the assemblies of athletes performing on the court as agents of two of the schools courting me because of my performance on the PSAT, a pre-version of the SAT, a test widely condoned as an interpretation of intelligence.

The De Paul Blue Demons were from Chicago, just an El train ride away uptown on *The North Side*. The Georgetown Hoyas were from our

nation's capital, Washington D.C. Both gathered on my home turf, and their endeavors were transmitted to Tulsa via the magic of TV.

Gary was the first to take a side. "I bet ten bucks." He always had this angry look, too, and he spoke deep and slow with a crackle in his voice like he was fighting the urge to start yelling, or he had really been moved by tough-guy movies when he was a kid, and he always stood straight, but he was too skinny to be as bad of a badass as he wanted to be with his dirty blonde hair, and skinny fuzzy mustache that looked like it had clumps missing. So maybe that's what the customers liked. He could not possibly seriously think he was as badass as he suggested with those major minor costume problems, "I bet ten bucks that Georgetown beats the shit out of those college boys from De Paul."

The Joyas had a bulldog for their graven image, of course as must be done to make graven images socially acceptable, they had cutified it, they had rounded its k-9 edges, softened his wide shoulders, huge chest, with a five-o clock shadow (because dogs don't shave), and put an old-fashioned baseball cap on him, did everything short of branding him with a tattoo that said c-u-t-e.

When I pictured demons in my head, I saw them as human almost, and saw scales. A lot of this was based on bad Hollywood images of demons, but then with the blue skin, I always saw "fish." Fish skin scales. So really, though I can put my finger on it only now, while thousands of people were cheering for the Blue Demons, I could not get entirely into "The Fish." (But then, who *can*.)

The cartoon of the blue demon had been rendered even sweeter than the dog, skinny arms, legs, body, short, even in mural-sized billboards the blue devil never really looked huge because I suppose demons are nicer than devils. The school, after all, was a Catholic University. If it named its team after a demon, it must have been a nice demon. A school for real bad ass mutherfuckers, those guys would simply call their team "Satan."

Gary was not a bad ass mutherfucker, but everyone ignored his bet. He was like some drunk in a bar yelling that he could kick everyone's ass, and all the other bad actors ignoring him because their instructions were to ignore him, as in turned away from him, as in we were gathered around the small color TV which was placed on a blue and white five-gallon kerosene can. And everyone turned away from Gary and the TV. So he read something from the script that no one else got: "Think about it. Georgetown's given us Alonso Mourning, Patrick Ewing, Reggie Williams.. What's De Paul given us? Nothin' but the clap."

This, to me, was like saying: regular unleaded—68 and nine-tenths a gallons. Premium unleaded—71 and nine-tenths a gallon. Regular—59 9/10 cents a gallon. Premium is the best. Just look at the price. Under Full-time Gary's mental regime, De Paul was regular and the Hoyas were premium unleaded. But petroleum allocating is not about the static statistics. It's about the nine-tenths that can throw your gallon off. That was the point to having the game with the points.

Gary had these numbers, and that was enough DNA for him.

The bell fired off, and someone besides Gary went to get the car. I followed Little Mike, a part-timer from high school, on to the drive. Before I stepped out, Gary said to me, "You better not become an asshole when you go off to college." I informed him that I would inform when I decided which body part I would become: hand.

"Saturday Morning shift" meant that here were four full-timers working with four part-timers. None of the full-timers, Bruno, Ron, Billy, or Big Mike were going to bet because they didn't gamble. (They were, after all, playing it safe by working at Tulsa and getting that steady pay, even if it was just a steady drop.) That left the part-timers. There was a new guy Jeff who was too new to get involved, Alfredo, who is not important to this story, and Little Mike. I followed Little Mike as he walked up to the driver side window of the white Cadillac that had pulled in, and the old man driving said, "Ten regular."

And then we always had to ask, "Regular unleaded or leaded?"

"Regular regular," the old bird barked, and stared at Mike until he slowly moved toward the pump. This was not the best time to convince Mike to bet anyone anything because he had just been witnessed getting bullied because he was a gas attendant and trying to follow Joe's order of "Always make sure you know what you are giving the customer. You gotta ask."

I got the squeegee out of the pail of soapy water and gave it a swing, to rid it of the excess water. And did a few flips with it, like twirling those chaku sticks that Bruce Lee used to throw down with in Kung-Fu flicks. This small glimmer of flare would placate the bully, or at least impose my petroleum allocating ways on his view of gas attendants. When I was cleaning his side of the windshield, I looked him in the eye and gave him the old head nod, none of this smiling shit, and twirled the chaku stick once before wiping off the water from the windshield. Not one streak. Clean like the damn thing was invisible. Enough said and done. I sauntered in front of the car to the passenger side and left that part clean, too.

I could hear Mike playing with his changer as he stood over the hose buried in the gas tank of the caddie. For that year, the license plates were on a hinge that you lowered to get at the gas hole. I walked over to the young man, and he whispered, "Dick." He shook his head, stared at the rolling number on the gas pump, registering how much would go in, waiting for the nozzle to click off. I know what he meant. He meant the guy driving was a dick, he meant Gary was a dick, he meant some other fucks like these two guys were dicks. And of course, I agreed, but not in the same way.

So at that time, it was good to just talk to him. We simply stared at the numbers. The numb-ers. Those which numb.

Mike didn't care about or understand those stats.

And Gary thought he understood those stats, that statis, enough to not want to look at the players to bet on them. He was dictated by the numerical expressions of luck, work, talent. The numbers of the players on the court, for him, under the rules of the game, created numbers on

the board, were the fodder of the stats, were the guide for him, believing firmly in the Dogs, The Hoyas sent from The Capitol.

But without the static statistics occupying my mind, I could actually see the players, and saw the Blue Demons glow. It was one of those days when though they lack the scimitar, I could see that these boys had fury and were right. Their sharp movements, in unison, their spirit glowed.

But it would have not been the same thing for me to bet against Gary. They all knew I was *the petroleum allocator*. I make no secrets, nor could I make a secret of that. So of course, if I were to win the bet it would simply be recorded in the gas attendants' minds as, "Oh, the Petroleum Allocator beat Gary. Of course, he did." Or if I lost. It would be, "Man, I can't believe Gary beat the Petroleum Allocator." And then they would feel something like, "That will never happen again."

But if *Little Mike* beat Gary, *then* the numbers would look like dead armadillos on the highway. (I have never seen an armadillo.) And that would add to the aura that leads to Petroleum Allocating ways, the gas fumes that blend into petroleum allocating fumes. And perhaps the whole shift would go up in a puff of smoke.

After the Caddy left, a catering truck came in. Mike walked off to do it by the propane tank just to left of the drive, behind a huge sign that boasted our prices.

And this was the way Gary did it. He had willed this kid to stay out on the drive. And no one even checked to see if someone got it. I can even hear Gary saying, "Don't worry. *Little Mike's* got it." And everyone laughing a knowing smirk.

So Gary was inside dominating.

And I was outside planning a revolution.

Mike stuck the propane hose onto the propane opening of the catering truck. These trucks had burners to keep warm the food they sold to the workers on their route. We were required to make sure that the flame was off so that they wouldn't blow us to shit. And the drivers knew this. But we were required to ask them to show us, and Mike always did, and the drivers always gave him a hard time because it was a pain in the ass for them to stop what they were doing, usually counting their money, usually a fat wad of singles; it was a pain in the ass for them to stop that, get out of the truck to open the back of the catering truck and to open the panels necessary to show Mike that they were not suicidal or stupid.

And this particular guy had gotten really pissy about, jerking his neck and body when he heard Mike ask if the fire was out. He shoved the driver side door open, the truck like hopped when he jumped out, ran to the back of the truck, flung the panels open, and like scream-said, like biting his teeth, talking through clenched teeth, said, "See, see, the fire's out."

Mike had just turned on the valve, and was slipping into that waiting zombiness that we step into while we are waiting for the fuel to stop pumping, the place we run to to hide behind the rules and

regulations, vegging out by clocking in. I slapped off the propane valve, and said in the voice of God, pointing at him: "Mike, I am not supposed to let you know this, but I am from the future. And I am here to help you. You will be a very, very important man some day, but only if you defeat the Evil Gary. Of course, I don't want you to think that this bet is *the* fight with him, there will be others, but those will be different after this bet." The catering truck driver said, "You better listen to him," and disappeared around the passenger side of his truck.

Mike was smiling, but not wide like a nut, but like trying to control the glee caused by the vision I was putting in his head. So really he just had a goofy smirk. I said, "I'm gonna go get the car this is presently on the drive. Here in the present." And then a car crossed the bell, making it go ding, ding, ding.

So why wouldn't anybody bet Gary? Because it was nicer and quieter when they didn't. Plus it was not just ten bucks at stake, it was ten bucks and hearing Gary brag about beating you. That was his other talent. He had a gift for imposing that asshole image of himself on you. And then from there, you pictured him bitching about getting his money back, or not paying you if he lost, or trying to get out of the bet.

And then, on the economist end, it added to inflation. It inflated ten bucks to twice what it was worth, to twenty bucks, or no-bucks, if you lost. Ten bucks annihilated, like not even the taste of the food, the candy, the beer you could have tasted with it at least if you had blown it that way. And what was ten bucks worth anyway? Same as now. Depends.

In terms of a Gary or Mike, Ten bucks was about how much either of them made in roughly three and a third hours. And I had already calculated that I made about five cents a minute. So ten bucks must of been 200 minutes of Mike's existence. Of course, since Gary was full-time he got paid more. And since Gary worked so hard at being lazy, for every three or four hours that he was on the clock, he probably stole an hour or two back.

And roughly, the bet was worth about twelve, twelve and a half gallons of gas—regular unleaded that is. If they wanted regular gasoline, that was still legal at the time, a few more gallons. And since they both got a five-cent-per gallon employee discount, and since this also extended to relatives of employees, and since Gary sometimes wrote down discounts for cousins that he didn't have, well the bet could mean up to twenty gallons, maybe 25. That's if Gary won. And that's if he just didn't blow it on a dime-bag.

And somewhere, Mike had looked on a computer and traced the flow of Joe's gas from his pump, from where it drips out his nozzle to the company that brought it from Saudi Arabia.

And one time Joe had told me that most of the price of a gallon of gas was all taxes for Chicago, and Illinois, and then the Federal government, and that was added to price. So there was the price that folks plunked down for a gallon, for which Joe paid a certain amount before doubling the amount and adding taxes, and then there was the price that some gasoline distributor charged him for getting his 8,000

gallons to Tulsa Power Service on the South Side of Chicago before they doubled what the price paid by company that brought the hundreds of thousands of barrels to the U.S., after translating into American dollars and cents the price charged to them by an agent of Saudi Arabia, Iraq or Iran for huge amounts of black gold after they had created this figure out of their own value system which the media portrayed as including a lucrative market for effigies of that American devil, that American dog—Uncle Sam.

Ten bucks was about the price of a barrel of oil, I had heard on the news, and oh so many more gallons of gasoline could come out of that barrel than the gallons of oil in that barrel. But of course, you just can't decide to go and buy a barrel of oil. You need to know where to go, who to ask, how to ask for it, and where to have it delivered, and how. No one is going to mail you a barrel of oil. But with that one barrel, seeing as you gotta have a lot of them to even have one, with just a few gallons of gas, you got your ten bucks back.

So the ten bucks that starts the orgy are worth more than the ten bucks at the end of the ride. Or vice versa.

Another car had slipped behind the car that was waiting for the car I was attending to leave. You show someone a line and folks will get into it. Never mind if you are in a car in line for a gas pump even though there are other pumps to line up in front of and behind. But when my car left, I walked in front of the next car. It was time to pretend to have to use the bathroom, or to tell those mutherfuckers inside to get to work.

And as I shoved open the door to get inside, Gary and Little Mike were shaking hands, agreeing on the bet.

And it was the first time I had really *seen* anyone shakes hands.

But there then they did it, like bad knife-hand strikes to the solar plexus, they put each other in each other's grasp, and wagged their arms up and down.

They didn't understand the true value of ten bucks, but they agreed in front of everyone that it was worth at least as much as their agreement.

But that lesson was priceless. And my central nervous system would never let me forget what a buck is worth.

And to make a long story short, the devils beat the dogs, just like they always do. And I would attend the university of the Blue Demons.

## Nomads Exquisite

I am back in Florida for the funeral of my best friend's father. It is in a part of town where I have never been, and I get lost coming from the airport. The street in front of the Earthman's mortuary is a shock of bright orange city trucks that are parked halfway up curbs, on the sidewalk, and one even straddles the median, both ends of the truck jutting out into the street. I had forgotten about the casual arrogance of city workers and search for a spot around back. It is so hot the air seems to bend the rose bushes planted along the cream-colored walls. For 45 years Mark's father walked through rooms of floating silica in decrepit buildings, rooms that hid mercury pools which had slowly gathered beneath dusky floorboards, and then he spent the last two years of his life coughing out everything he had inhaled on the job. And one morning during breakfast he stopped coughing, and when Mark's mother looked up, he was dead in his chair.

An attendant in a crisp black blazer with an Earthman crest embroidered above his pocket opens the door for me and I pass from the blunt heat to the cool entrance hall. It is thick with mourners and I re-remembered how brightly people dress in Florida—city workers in orange jumpsuits compete with women in loud, floral print dresses, even at a funeral, as though it were merely another weekend barbecue. Mark and his family are nowhere to be seen. I sign the guest book and another man in a blazer directs me to the viewing room.

The casket is on a dais up front, surrounded by tall candles and flowers on wire stands. Up close the coffin is so heavily shellacked it looks sticky; I can almost feel the heavy odor of lily, rose, and wax on my skin. The top half of the coffin lid is locked open with a gold hinge and I do not want to look inside.

At first all I see is a flash of silver—his tie is a fish, a trout knotted perfectly at the neck, going under his folded hands, and emerging atop his stomach. The tie looks oddly real, as though the fish is trying to swim away, down into the darkness below the half of the lid that is closed off.

When I finally look at the face, it is a mask, chalked and lipsticked into something that is not the coarse old man I knew. They have filled in the dark, cragged wrinkles around his eyes and the backs of his hands have been powdered to hide the age spots. I suppress an urge to laugh as I feel someone walk up beside me.

"That stupid tie," my friend Mark whispers, "a steelhead trout. He never fished freshwater his entire life."

I turn to look at him and he is tired and older than I remember and

I think how much loss ages people.

"Dixie's idea," he says.

He almost spits his sister's name out and he is staring down, as if he could contain all his grief in raging at the tie. Dixie is the baby of the family, a late surprise born to already-old parents. Now in her early thirties, she has apparently bullied the family in this thing as she has elsewhere her whole life.

"They're gonna begin," Mark tells me, frowning. "Sit with us; I saved you a place," he says, and nods at the two front rows, roped off with a gold cord. His family filters in from a side room and I am grateful Mark has seated me with them.

He stays with the coffin a moment, and I choose the last seat in the second row. One of Dixie's kids, the red-haired girl, is next to me. She is dressed in her church clothes, but has removed one shoe and sock.

"Mosquitoes," she whispers as she scratches at the bottom of her foot.

I smile at her.

Mark sits in the front row, next to his mother.

Tina, Mark's oldest sister, comes from the back, up the center aisle and the rows of mourners quiet as she passes by them. She builds swimming pools for a living and looks awkward in her black dress. Her face is brutally tan, a dark pink version of her father and Mark's face, and I am struck by how alike they all are, how I would know them as family even if I had only seen them today for the first time.

Tina waits a moment, until everyone is looking and starts, "Thank you all for coming today. As you know, my daddy hated ceremony. He was not a formal man."

"He sure disliked the city building department!" someone yells from the back. There is sporadic laughter, but most are uncertain at the breach of etiquette and look to Tina for a guidance.

"That's right," she says, blinking quickly, "it was not his favorite place." There is a collective exhalation, as though encouraging her to go on.

"Being with friends was what he loved—his family, cooking out, fishing, drinking beer."

This time the laughter is easier and she goes on.

"So what we wanted, what *he* wanted to do," she adds, "is to have a kind of talk. A memorial. We thought folks could come up and say something they remember, something good about him. What they remember best. I want to invite anyone to come up and talk, just talk about what you remember about him, about my daddy."

She steps off to one side and looks at the floor.  
Nobody moves.

On the plane I had thought about this. After my own father died, I started hanging around with Mark's family. It just kind of happened, that I would spend a Saturday fishing with them or helping reposition the always-fragile satellite dish they bought at a flea market so Mark's father could watch high school football games broadcast from small

towns only the satellite picked up. And his family never once let on; so much have I have since come to appreciate that they never mentioned me being around too much, needing to be there so much. The sheer embarrassment I felt then about death and *needing* human contact would have made me vanish forever if they even slightly, ever marked upon it.

They let me assume it was natural I would be out there every weekend, often as I wanted, until I no longer had to be and the exception would be the weekends I did not want to stay. But that too was never spoken. And maybe that is why I flew down for the funeral, purchased an overpriced plane ticket at the last moment, for an unspoken debt owed all of them.

On Saturdays when his father could muster the energy after a week of work, the three of us fished off the rundown Chris Craft boat. In one of the bait wells he would always pack on-sale beer into ice he had crushed the night before in a tiny chrome machine he and his wife had gotten as a wedding present 30 years earlier. By early afternoon, when the sun was just beginning, you would have to plunge your arm in still-freezing water, all the way up to your shoulder, to grab a beer. Your hand almost stopped working then and you could bring it back by trailing your arm it in the ocean as the boat moved, briefly creasing a green fluorescence in the water where you had once been.

Or when the sun was highest and it hurt to look up, Mark, his father and I standing, lines out, in perfect stasis, the quiet limned by the near-imperceptible splash of the prow on the water, the three of us atop the entire world. We rarely caught anything then, and that silence was usually the last signal before we quit the water and headed back to the air-conditioned surrender of his father's truck. On the way home we purchased smoked mullet from a stand on the side of the road and Mark and I would eat the sweet, dark fish under the banyan trees in their yard, drinking the leftover beer and eating corn on the cob his mother always had ready for us, as his father rinsed off the boat.

But I say none of this. The loudmouth from the back of the room has not come forward. Mark has his head down but I know I too would be unable to speak if I were in his place. The room is silent except for the occasional fizzing of a candlewick. Dixie's daughter offers me a Sugar Baby from a crumpled pack in her hand. She gently places it the middle of my palm and I close my hand over it.

"Well then," Tina says finally, "why don't everyone sit here until you all feel ready to go. The service is at Christ the King, ten tomorrow morning. They got maps in the back. And take some flowers, we wouldn't know what to do with them all."

People start slowly coming up to the family and most pause to look in the coffin before turning to hug Mark's mother. She looks kind of surprised, and the mourners move along the front pew, hugging the women and shaking the hands of the men. It is a kind of receiving line in reverse and I feel acutely out of place. I know none of these people. Some go back for a second look, and I wonder if this is for the ridiculous

tie, or a final glimpse to fuse in their minds an image of what is with what was. Mark's niece limes Sugar Babies like dead flies on the backrest before us and counts them off.

I hear a rasped voice in front of Mark's mother, look up, and see Tom DaLeo. He has lost none of the harsh edges of his Brooklyn accent, and his "so sorry, so sorry" makes me wince. My own voice was smoothed out in Florida public schools but I hear my origins in his tin scrape talking. DaLeo is sickly thin and the dark suit, worn shiny at the lapels as though he has been giving speeches a lot, does nothing to hide the ravage on his body. He sees me staring, but my face is ten years older than the one he knew and he goes away.

Mark appears at my side and jerks his head towards the door.

"Who's that guy?" I asked, pointing at DaLeo's retreating back.

Mark stares for a minute. "Insurance guy; works for the city. He did the policy on my dad. Good guy. A good guy," he repeats, walking out a side door. I follow.

Outside Mark collapses heavily against a wall.

"Useless and expensive," he says.

He cups his hand over a lizard, but it scabbles away through a narrow mortar valley between two bricks.

"See that son of bitch at the door?"

I nod, remembering the black blazer and red crest.

"Cost 75 bucks for him and the one at the guest book. Like it's a wedding or something I want to remember." He clenches his jaw. I can see the muscles in his face working and wonder at the extraordinary control he exercises not to cry in front of me.

"And nobody talked. Can you believe that shit?" he says. "If you asked me the boat would have been much better. Prop him up in the seat, kick it out into the Gulf and set the whole thing on fire."

His eyes are watering up and I dig a handkerchief out, offering it to him. He shakes his head for a long time, staring at the parking lot.

After a while he says, "It'd be better than all of that," waving at the departing crowd.

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My father held the same job his whole life, which Tom DaLeo got him. They served together in Korea where Tom DaLeo got his right leg blown off below the knee. After the war they returned to New York and DaLeo played up the wound, contacting veterans for jobs, the two of them ending up at Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. As DaLeo limped through night college he rose quickly in the company. My father married instead and his ascent was less quick, always in abeyance to a man who became his boss.

In the 1970's the company sent them and hundreds of agents south, trailing the thousands of Americans swarming to the warm optimism of Florida. These agents lined the passage of transplanted Midwesterners and Niagara Falls retirees with hurricane insurance and homeowners

polices and papers against accidental death and dismemberment, all designed to ensure that these latest immigrants could ease into their new lives without care or forethought.

The middle level managers like my father moved out to the new suburbs on the north of the city, suburbs that edged orange groves and cow pastures and eventually consumed them all. Our house was behind a small dairy farm and at night I lay in bed and listened to the farmer calling his charges home. The vice presidents migrated down to the water, to the old money homes that lined the bay's edge. Tom DaLeo and his new wife moved to Davis Island, a dredge and fill island created in the same 1920's Florida boom that spawned the limestone mansions of Boca Raton and they seemed content.

Their house was a squat takeoff on an Italian palazzo, with a second floor terrace and a grey slate pool—terribly impressive to Northerners used to the steamy, chlorinated stench of YMCA pools or plastic, above ground pools from Sears that had to be drained with the first leaves of autumn. The DaLeos painted their house pink. My father and Tom DaLeo tried to keep their friendship going and two Saturdays a month we dutifully drove to their house for cookouts and swimming. The slate pool further enunciated the distance between the DaLeos and us; the transfer to Florida had opened a gulf between the men that could not ever again be easily traversed. The mothers would sit in the den and talk and the fathers would grill steaks and drink Ballantine beer out back.

The DaLeos had adopted an older girl right after moving to Florida. I had a crush on Theresa DaLeo who perpetually sunbathed out by the pool and smeared Coppertone deep tanning oil on her body. I thought then there was nothing better in life than sitting by a slate pool in Florida, drinking RC Colas, and secretly watching Theresa DaLeo turn brown as I pretended to read.

Davis Island had one entrance, a concrete bridge made to look like Florentine *pietra serena*. And always after we crossed the bridge on the long car trip back to our cinder block house, my mother consoled us with the thought that though our home was small, and backed up on a cow farm, and had window units for air conditioning, at least we had the good taste to paint it white.

Sundays were family time. We would drive north, along small lakes, on farm roads that had not yet been developed, remnants of rural Florida that people like us were helping to destroy. These farms had small, un-air-conditioned houses tucked beneath ancient oak trees, with tethered goats in front, or trailers stuck in the middle of huge yards, hovering on bright green islands of grass. Once we passed by an old man and woman pruning orange trees along the road and they waved us down, offering us free oranges. The handed my mother a paper grocery sack crammed to overflowing, which she passed to me in the back seat.

"Thank you citizen," my father said. He always addressed strangers in this way.

"We got so many," the old woman said, "anytime you all want, stop and take 'em. I mean it."

My father thanked them again. And then my mother did. All the way home my parents remarked upon the generosity of native Floridians, content in the very rightness of our removal down to this promised land.

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Our third year in Florida, about a week before Christmas, Theresa DaLeo disappeared. We were at their house and Tom DaLeo and my father were joking about calling their friends back in Manhattan, asking them if they too were just about to go swimming in December when Mrs. DaLeo asked Theresa to go to the store to buy cigarettes.

Her father told her to put a T-shirt on over her bathing suit and I remember her tucking the dollar bill she took from him into the waistband of her bathing suit and the wet slap of her rubber flip-flops as she walked out.

It seemed a long time later as Tom DaLeo was putting steaks on a metal platter that I asked, "Where's Theresa?"

My father looked at me strangely and said, "Tom, it has been a while, hasn't it?"

"She probably just stopped off at a friend's house," he said, limping over to the picnic table set on the grass. But my question had shaken something loose and the dinner was too quiet; my mother tried talking about winter; a wind had started up which threatened to upset everything on the table and Mrs. DaLeo kept moving things around on the paper tablecloth to keep it from blowing away. Finally my father said, "It's been too long Tom."

"Go look," Mrs. DaLeo said, and the two men got up, leaving their desserts half-finished. Mrs. DaLeo went inside and started telephoning Theresa's friends. My mother cleared the picnic table and I was sent off to the den to watch television. Through the door I could hear Mrs. DaLeo's voice rise as each call ended, with the ever-widening space where she had hoped to find her daughter.

I fell asleep and was awoken by my father.

"Time to go sport," he said gently.

"Did Theresa get home?"

"Nope, not yet," he said, "but we have to go."

We passed the DaLeos. She was crying softly and he had his arms around her, looking out the window. As we walked by I was conscious of wanting to get away as quickly as possible, as though their spreading grief was infectious. We said nothing as we let ourselves out. My mother, already in the car, was crying too.

For once we went over the bridge without saying anything and it was silent all the way home.

They never saw Theresa again. The city police and county sheriff both said she probably ran off, that girls that age, especially adopted

ones (though I never learned how they found this out) are prone to running away. Metropolitan Life offered a huge reward, and I remember getting up early, before school, and going with my father to staple "Have you seen me?" posters run off at the office, on telephone poles all over their neighborhood. I remember thinking how odd it was to be in their neighborhood on a weekday, and the sharp crunch of the stapler as I set a poster and my father fixed it. The DaLeos hired a private investigator, but he too found nothing. It was like she just walked away, forever, and Tom DaLeo went a little crazy.

We were never invited again to their house again. I think they somehow thought we were bad luck, or at least as witnesses to their loss, it was too painful to have us around. They divorced a year later, and Mrs. DaLeo moved back up North. He sold the pink house and moved into an apartment complex filled with single people. It had one poorly maintained tennis court in front and we saw him there a few times, trying to play tennis, but the ball kept hitting cracks in the court and spinning out of bounds. He seemed too old for the place, and I could see how his neighbors looked at him. We gave up on his new home.

Tom DaLeo then began appearing at our house on weekends. He would arrive in a tomato-red Ford Ranchero he said he had planned to purchase for Theresa's 16th birthday, and tap the horn as soon as he pulled into the drive, a tentative signal before he came to the door.

He would sit out back with my father, drinking beer and staring at the cows in the pasture behind us. Once my mother got fed up with him as my father's excuse for doing nothing, she assigned him chores and he seemed happier for the attention. I would overhear my parents talking about him after he left, how he had fallen in the company and might soon be doing rookie work—selling policies door to door in retirement communities.

Tom DaLeo's favorite job was mowing the lawn. My father's first purchase in Florida was a self-propelled, industrial grade Toro lawnmower that was so expensive he never let me use it. It had a floating cutting blade and was so perfectly balanced that my father sometimes pushed the mower with his index finger to show off. He quickly got bored just mowing the grass and began cutting designs in the lawn, spirals, rectangles, and one Fourth of July he was right in the middle of the "F" in "Fourth," having already cut an enormous "Happy," when my mother came out of the house and told him to stop it.

Tom DaLeo loved mowing our lawn because of the cows. Attracted by the huffing engine, they would patiently wait at the fence, swiping their tails from side to side and instead of bagging the freshly cut grass, Tom DaLeo simply dumped it over the fence and the cows got fat on his grief.

After the mowing was finished, he would rest against the fence, his face and hair stuck with blades of grass. He would pat the cows as they ate, running his hand over and over their soft skulls, around the their bony eye sockets, and he would talk. We let him alone then, and

eventually he would stiffly raise himself up the fence, wire by wire, favoring his bad leg, and come inside to thank my mother before leaving.

Once, while playing with a glider that went errant and landed near him, I heard him talking; he was describing his daughter's hair and the bathing suit she wore the day she disappeared.

I heard him ask, "How can a girl disappear from an *island*? There's only a bridge, one way off and one way on. And I searched the whole island, walked and walked until I couldn't walk anymore, looked everywhere. How can it happen?"

As I retrieved my glider, he stopped and turned to me with a look I recognized only years later on my own face, after my father was dead, and I would see men his age and think—Old man what have you done to still be alive, what have you done to earn your place on this earth, why are you here and the person I love is not?

The last time I saw him was early in summer before I went off to college. My goal that summer was to sleep late every day and when I heard Tom DaLeo's horn, I just turned over in bed. He was my father's friend I thought, and not even really that, an odd sort of charity case.

It seemed but a moment later that my father came into my room and snapped on the light.

"Get dressed," he said.

When I came out, he and Tom DaLeo were in the dining room. DaLeo was talking loudly and my mother called in for them to shut up, that she was still sleeping.

Outside it was already warm and the bed of the *Ranchero* was filled with something bulky covered with a canvas tarp.

"Get in," my father said.

"Where're we going?" I asked, as the three of us crammed into the front seat, me in the middle.

"Up," DaLeo answered.

My father ignored me and said to DaLeo, "Go north, turn left at the light and then go on a few more miles. I'll say when."

"What's in back?" I asked.

"You'll see," DaLeo said. I could smell that he had already been drinking.

We drove a long way and turned onto a dusky farm road that lined an orange grove. The *Ranchero* hopped in ruts caused by fruit trucks, but the thing in back stayed put.

My father said, "Here" and DaLeo stopped the car in a clearing of close-cropped grass. Dirt paths radiated outward and vanished into the interminable groves and off in the distance a dark green lake shimmered.

"Perfect," DaLeo said, shutting off the engine.

"Told you," my father said, getting out.

We followed as DaLeo limped around back and dropped the lift gate. He yanked the tarp off, revealing a gleaming mass of metal, plastic, and wood. He pulled two long boards down as a ramp and my

father got in the bed of the Ranchero and pushed. Nothing happened.

"Help," he said irritably to me and I tugged with DaLeo as best I could.

We got the thing down on the ground behind the car and I waited to ask again because my father had once accused me of being impatient, an unseemly virtue in a young man the first in his family about to go off to college.

But finally I could not stand it and asked, "What is it?"

"The future," DaLeo said proudly.

"It's a helicopter," my father said wearily, and I saw for the first time that he was not so much obligated to be kind to Tom DaLeo because he worked for the man, but he felt sorry for the way his life had turned out.

"It's a lot more than a helicopter," Tom DaLeo said, hopping on his good leg, "It's a one-man solution to the energy crisis, to traffic problems, to anything that ails you! Hold on, hold on," he said and went back to the car.

He returned with a pamphlet and read out from the front, "The Scorpion helicopter is the miracle of flight, the realization of Galileo's dream. It's an mechanized version of the American impulse towards individuation!"

My father raised his eyebrows at me. "Let's just get it done," he said.

The helicopter had a black plastic seat welded to a metal frame, and the rotors, laid out on the ground next to the body, were beautiful, maple shafts bolted to a bright metal core. Together my father and Tom DaLeo easily attached the rotor blades to the flight housing and I realized that my father must have been helping assemble the helicopter in DaLeo's tiny apartment on all the Saturdays he went to visit him.

I helped my father push the helicopter into the middle of the clearing while Tom DaLeo put on a white motorcycle helmet. The helicopter rolled easily on its tiny pneumatic tires and when we stopped, Tom DaLeo sat in the chair and cinched a seat belt tight across his waist.

"Clear the takeoff area," DaLeo said.

I stared at this utterly silly man and my father yelled, "Move it" at me in a voice I had never heard and I walked back to the car.

"If this works out right," DaLeo yelled over to me, "I won't need that car anymore. You can have it."

I tried to see if he was joking or not, but could not tell. I decided he was not and suddenly felt an inordinate kindness towards Tom DaLeo.

"He's not taking it," my father said simply.

"Contact," he yelled.

My father said quietly, "I'm right next to you, Tom."

"Sorry," DaLeo said, "all the excitement."

"Yeah," my father said, rolling his eyes. I thought that college and a red Ford Ranchero were a beautiful combination and was eager to see Tom DaLeo fly. I hated my father at that moment.

My father grabbed the rubber pull start and jerked the cord a few times. Nothing happened.

"Again," DaLeo ordered.

My father pulled again, ten or eleven times in quick succession, but the motor only sputtered briefly and then died.

"Does it have gas, Tom?" my father asked patiently.

"Yep."

"Oil?"

"Yep. Check the plugs."

"Anything you say, captain," my father answered. My father leaned into the engine and said the plugs were fine.

DaLeo sighed, undid the seatbelt, went to the Rancho, and retrieved a toolbox. He flipped open a metal door beneath the rotors and with a screwdriver started poking at the engine.

"It started yesterday," he said to my father.

"Maybe you should have flown it yesterday."

DaLeo grunted and began removing parts, spreading them out on the grass next to the helicopter.

They looked like they were going to be at it for a while so I walked towards the lake. It was the kind of thing my father criticized me for, wandering away from a task, though the helicopter seemed to me their business, and my inexperienced hands were unwelcome, unwanted. I came upon a row of white boxes on stands. As I drew closer I heard a low hum and saw bees languidly circling above the boxes. I knew orange growers hired on beekeeper's hives to pollinate the groves; and soon the bees would be trucked north to work cranberry bogs, looping north to south, following the growing season. Once along a highway I had seen such a truck overturn, with a pulsing dark swarm dipping towards the driver who danced about as he slapped them away.

At the edge of the lake I found a dog's skull half buried in mud. I rinsed it off in the lake, and then clacked the jaw open and shut, growling for the dog. Behind me I heard the helicopter start; the engine popped, and it sounded like the loudest lawnmower I had ever heard. I dropped the skull and ran back towards the clearing and saw DaLeo steering the helicopter away from my father who was smiling.

"I didn't think it'd work," he said when I came up next to him, putting his arm on my shoulder.

DaLeo turned the helicopter around and accelerated. He sped by us, very fast and up close the machinery was so loud I covered my ears. DaLeo circled us a few times and the wind from the rotors whipped my hair across my face. He looped around us in ever-widening arcs, gaining speed until the front tire lifted.

"Take it up," my father yelled.

"Yes, up," DaLeo answered and accelerated. The front tire lifted a bit more and as he made another circuit he accelerated wildly.

"Will it go higher?"

"I have no idea," my father said smiling.

"Success," DaLeo screamed as he went by, the contraption barely a

foot off the ground.

He made a graceful circle, around us, skimming the grass as though he were power mowing it, hit the accelerator once more, and shot up into the sky.

We chased after him. It was utterly beautiful, my father and me jogging through an orange grove, Tom DaLeo soaring above us in his one-man helicopter, the smell of orange blossoms thick in the air. My father was laughing as we ran, a thing he did not do often. The engine noise faded to a lovely drone above us as Tom DaLeo flew on, and we followed, like small boys chasing a balloon.

But the sound changed; there was a loud pop and the engine began wheezing, as though something were stuck, in spite of Tom DaLeo's desire to go forward.

"That doesn't sound good," my father said.

We had followed about three-quarters of the way to the lake when it suddenly got quiet. We slowed to a walk and it seemed like the motor simply stopped. There was noise and then there was not. Then I heard new sounds behind me and turned. Cows had been trailing us, stopping when we stopped, running when we ran and now they just looked at us.

My father was staring and I saw Tom DaLeo and his helicopter paused above the lake, and then drop into the water as though yanked from the sky. The fall was silent except for one very loud "dammit" from Tom DaLeo and that was it. The helicopter just quit, fell, and disappeared.

My father sprinted ahead of me and I was amazed at how much faster he was than me. He waded into the lake's murky green water. By the time I got there my father had his around a dripping, incoherent Tom DaLeo, who was bleeding from his mouth and ears.

"The leg," he said, spitting blood as he talked, "it came off in the water."

Sure enough Tom DaLeo's pant leg flapped emptily below the knee as my father helped him onto the shore's edge. I put my arm under Tom DaLeo's other arm and helped. The cows had followed and looked eager as we walked past.

"Cows," DaLeo said, reaching out to touch the nearest one, "no grass today, go home."

At the car my father told me to gather the up tarp and boards and jump in back.

"The leg," Tom said, "it was wood. You'd think it'd float up. We got to find it."

"We can get it later," my father said, helping him into the passenger seat, "but citizen, you got to know when to leave things alone."

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After Mark's father was buried, on my way to the airport, I went up to the lake. At the end of that summer I did get the Ranchero. My father

hugely overpaid Tom DaLeo for it, a kind of loan for which, as far as I knew, he never received satisfaction. The weekend before I left for college I took a girl I had met the day before in a bank up to the lake. I knew I would never see her again and as I was kissing her I suddenly found myself telling her about Tom DaLeo's helicopter and his daughter and his missing leg.

I had not been back to Florida since my mother had passed on and the road up to the lake was paved now, and there were small, new houses where pastures had been. I parked under an oak tree and walked down a narrow fire ditch between two rows of orange trees. A few feet in, the tall trees stopped and the rest were stunted and broken, like they had been caught in a bad freeze. Florida was like that, with hot and cold spots everywhere, so that in a harsh winter, one grove could be devastated by frost and across the road another would make it through just fine, even flourish the next season.

In about a year my friend Mark will tell me that it only comes upon him when he is tired, when he is driving home late at night, on highways that run alongside empty fields, that he can never talk to his father again, that he can never call him up and ask how to repair something, how to fix a leak in the boat, that he is utterly gone and Mark will be aware of this absence as long as he is alive.

I remembered the lake was below a cypress stand, but as I topped the hill, there was nothing—no water, no beehives, nothing but a slight bowl-shaped depression in the earth. The heat was already impressive and as I walked down, I regretted not bringing sunglasses. It was all so much smaller than I remembered and there was a kind of leveling off at what I presumed to be the nadir—grass, sand spurs, the tracks of a snake—nothing more. I half expected to see Tom DaLeo's leg and helicopter there, surely the desiccated bones of an alligator or the shell of a box turtle, but there was nothing. Just a field burning up in the heat. Maybe I had gotten it all wrong, that I had misremembered, but Tom DaLeo's fall was too clear in my eyes. I was in the right place.

I heard voices and several children topped the lakebed. They were dressed in bright soccer uniforms, kicking a ball before them. They seemed very young, boys, girls, all playing together and as they came towards me I heard them, laughing, speaking in Spanish and English and I even recognized some Portuguese and they flowed all around me, yelling for the ball as I walked through them, away from home.

## In Memory of Jozef Czapski

He was very old. But his spirit held.  
Of one old acquaintance (old as he) he said:  
that glorious Petersburg beauty; just watch  
her face. He still painted. Lived. Wrote. Thought.

He knew Akhmatova. Spoke with de Gaulle,  
Andre Malraux also took note.  
Gide (too Parisian) disappointed him.  
A penniless count, he helped the poor.

So tall (and good), as if proud  
nature wished to put him on display.  
Mary McCarthy once glimpsed him in a crowd  
and jotted down: a righteous man.

Beauty thrilled him. He spoke  
more often though of ugliness and pain—  
things it seems he scarcely knew  
(but how can we be sure?)

What's the moment when divinity appears?  
How can we tell, since we always keep it  
in the past tense of the future (hopefully!)  
We describe it from a distant country,

where we've been carried by a mad express  
with no stops at that small still station  
we call Beauty, a resting place  
too modest for its taste.

But we can talk of ugliness  
at length, and pain will still fill  
many tomes; our quick sight-seeing trip  
becomes a tortoise-humble city tram.

His death was long and patient; perhaps those  
who rule the earth and play at chess demurred:  
should such a splendid upright shape, a king,  
be made a horizontal form, a line of print?

*Translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh*

## Imaginary Prisons

A Piranesian interior—  
operatic space, bridges, balconies,  
arches, trusses, piers, pendulous chains dropped  
straight or tied like bell ropes, incense burners  
hooked to the ends like jewels; the texture  
a charcoal smoke of paper worked, re-worked,  
then left for a while, some of the structures  
paler, for perspective, most of them as  
massive as invented Roman ruins,  
stairs and broken stairwells leading away  
like passages within the various  
body; fear of the dark, fear of locked doors,  
visible lines drawn to vanishing points;  
a city built sub rosa, like Venice,  
celestially domed over, with soft night  
leaking in, water reflecting water,  
via vulva, vagina, vestibule.

## Durian

Look: it is the width of a man's skull,  
 Melon green or lemon yellow rind that is hard  
 As bone and covered with thorns  
 Arranged in clean rows. Like teeth, but sharp.

Hooked. In Vietnamese, it is *sàu riêng*.  
 Translated, it means separate sorrows.  
 It is not a secret we eat this fruit:  
 The dead flesh fragrance clings

To everything. The truth is the scent  
 Stays on my skin long after the fruit goes,  
 Soaks into my fingers, pillows, dreams.  
 I sleep breathing in the fingered remains

Of this fruit. Difficult to find in Houston,  
 My mother managed to dig one out  
 Now and then in a Chinatown store.  
 After dinner, she would bear the secret

Fruit, centered on a tray like a bridal gift.  
 I, unable to believe the sharpness of thorns,  
 Floral fetor, wanted to cover the fruit  
 With my palms and see how deep

The hooked thorns cut. My mother  
 Heaved, pulled the heavy fruit close,  
 My father and I watched the quick  
 Slip of knife into the ripened slit

Beneath curled stem. Straining, she plunged  
 The blade down until the hard skin gave up  
 Its secret, thick yellow segments in two's,  
 Nestled and closed like fists in anger.

Breaking the solid flesh among ourselves,  
 We relished the custard-softness, tasting jasmine  
 And almond oil. My mother would feed  
 My father. She would linger on his lips.

## Cardinal

Over the years, among the fallen, the survived,  
The mad, the helpless, the drunken, the unachieved,  
I see what it is to make a tiny flicker,  
A New England barn glimpsed in summer,  
a red sign rising among the green,  
Like the cardinal posed on the bird feeder this morning,  
God knows between where and where, fall coming,  
Winter about to swing its brutish cubes,  
And the cardinal here in its light landing.

## The Manatee

*New Smyrna Beach, Florida*

She never took much credit for "The Moose"  
—"it all just happened that way"—  
and sent our questions packing as abuse

of her privacy; Elizabeth Bishop would say  
enough had been said, would smile,  
and class, we knew, was over for the day.

We longed to ask her, "Why, why do we feel  
this sweet sensation of joy?"  
an ecstasy attributed to all

of us on that bus of hers... Was that the only  
appropriate response when  
some great big (harmless) lummoX "happened" by?

Had it been joy for Robert Frost (a man  
more likely to feel alarm  
than unaccountable delight upon

being looked over by an Alien Form)  
that time Whatever-it-was  
appeared to him "as a great buck" and swam

providentially out of sight across  
the pond? Would either poet  
make common cause with odd affects like those

of Witold Gombrowicz (who, I admit,  
is an apocalyptic  
sort of witness)? In June, 1958,

G was walking down a eucalyptus-  
lined avenue when a cow  
sauntered out from behind a tree. "I stopped,

and we looked each other in the eyes; so  
tense was the moment I lost  
my bearings *as a man*—that is, you know,

as a member of our race. It was the first  
time, apparently, I was  
experiencing the shame of a Man come face

to face with an Animal. What then ensues  
is obvious: one becomes  
an Animal also, and uneasy, as

if Nature, on all sides, were watching." Shame!  
Fear! Joy!—reactions vary  
strongly when we meet The Other, it seems,

but given such discrepant histories,  
I realized that our great  
human hope, watching the manatee rise

or emanate—no other verb could state  
so well the means of its ap-  
arition: a *manatee* must *emanate*—

out of its New Age of jeopardized sleep  
in the slime of Turnbull Bay,  
is to greet The Other (whatever gap

grins between us) as Another—let's say,  
members of a cast one is  
proud to share the Comedy with today.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

CHRISTOPHER BAKKEN received his Ph.D. from the University of Houston in 1999. He has poems forthcoming in *The Paris Review*, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, and *The Texas Review*.

MICHELLE BOISSEAU (Ph.D. '85) is the author of *No Private Life* (Vanderbilt 1990), *Understory* (Northeastern University Press 1996), which won the Samuel French Morse Prize, and, with Robert Wallace, *Writing Poems*. Recent work appears in *Gettysburgh Review*, *Southern Review*, *Poetry*, *Crazyhorse*, and *The Ohio Review*. She is currently an Associate Professor of English at the University of Missouri-Kansas city.

ERIN GRACE BROOKS is currently a Wallace Stegner Fellow in poetry at Stanford University. She received her M.F.A. in poetry from the University of Houston Creative Writing Program in 1997. In 1996, she was awarded a Ruth Lilly poetry fellowship.

FERNANDO CALZADILLA is a stage designer and theatre director, born in Venezuela. He is currently a student of theater and performance at New York University.

KATHLEEN CAMBOR's novel *The Book of Mercy* was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award, and the winner of the Janet Heidigger Kafka Prize for Excellence in Fiction by an American Woman. Her new novel, *In Sunlight In A Beautiful Garden*, will be published in the autumn of 2000. She is director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston.

VIKRAM CHANDRA is the author of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain and Love and Longing in Bombay*. He divides his time between Bombay and Washington, D.C., where he teaches at George Washington University. His awards include the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and the David Higham Prize for Best First Novel.

BAO-LONG CHU's poems have appeared in *The Asian Pacific American Journal*, *The Viet Nam Forum*, and the anthology *Watermark*. He is currently Program Director for Writers in the Schools, a non-profit organization that places writers and poets in schools and community settings in and around Houston.

PATRICIA CLARK is the poet-in-residence and an associate professor of English at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. Her book of poems, *North of Wondering*, won the first book competition by Women-in-Literature, Inc. and was recently published. Her essay "Walking Into Poetry" has just appeared in *Sleeping With One Eye Open: Women Writers and the Art of Survival* (University of Georgia Press). Her poems have also been on the web at Poetry Daily's site, poems.com and at ForPoetry.com

THOMAS COBB graduated from the University of Houston in 1986 (Ph.D.). His novel *Crazy Heart* was published by Harper and Row. He is currently a professor at Rhode Island College, where he directs the creative writing program.

A 1993 Ph.D. graduate of the University of Houston, WILLIAM J. COBB is a novelist, essayist and short story writer who currently directs the M.F.A. program at Penn State. He's published over thirty short stories in magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Mississippi Review*, *The Antioch Review*, and many others. His first novel, *The Fire Eaters*, was published by W.W. Norton in 1994, and he's recently completed a second novel, *The Page of Lips*.

JANF CREIGHTON is a member of the English faculty at the University of Houston-Downtown. Her work has been anthologized in *Close to the Bone: Memoirs of Hurt, Rage, and Desire* and *Unwinding the Vietnam War*. Her journal publications include *Ploughshares* and *The American Voice*.

NICOLE CUDDEBACK's poetry has recently appeared or is forthcoming in such journals as *Quarterly West*, *The Seattle Review*, and *The Paris Review*. Originally from Florida, she now lives and works in Florence, Italy.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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DEBORAH CUMMINS, of Evanston, IL, is the author of *From The Road It Looks Like Paradise* (State Street Press, 1997), a chapbook of poems. She is also the recipient of a James A. Michener Fellowship, a Donald Barthelme Memorial Fellowship, an Illinois Art Council Award, and the Washington Prize in Fiction. Her work has recently appeared in *The Gettysburgh Review*, *New England Review*, *Orion*, *Third Coast*, *The Laurel Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *The Crab Orchard Review*. She serves on the Board of Directors of the Modern Poetry Association.

AVERILL CURDY received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her poems and translations have appeared or are forthcoming in *Calyx*, *Cream City Review*, *The Partisan Review*, *The Western Humanities Review*, and *The Paris Review*. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

TRACY DAUGHERTY is the author of three novels, *Desire Provoked*, *What Falls Away*, and *The Boy Orator*, and a short story collection, *The Woman in the Oil Field*. In 1998 he received a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. He teaches at Oregon State University and in the Low-Residency M.F.A. Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

TONY DIAZ earned an M.F.A. in Fiction from the University of Houston in 1994. He is the author of the novel *The Aztec Love God* and the editor of the anthology *Latino Heretics*. He was the 1998-1999 visiting scholar at the University of Houston Center for Mexican American Studies. In 1998, he founded *Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say*, a Houston-based Latino Literary and Cultural Movement. Its website is at [www.nuestrapalabra.org](http://www.nuestrapalabra.org). "The Petroleum Allocator" is from the collection *Sombrero Hysteria*, and Diaz is currently completing a second novel.

CHITRA DIVAKARUNI is the author of the short story collection *Arranged Marriage*, which was awarded the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Prize for Fiction, and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. She is the author of the novels *The Mistress of Spices*, and *Sister of My Heart*. Her fourth poetry collection, *Leaving Yuba City*, was published by Anchor in August 1997.

MARK DOTY joined the creative writing faculty at the University of Houston in 1998. His most recent book, *Firebird: A Memoir*, appeared from HarperCollins last fall.

NANCY EIMERS was a 1987 Nation Discovery winner. She has won two NEA Creative Writing Fellowships, the '98 Whiting Writer's Award, and has poems in the *Breadloaf Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*, and has a chapbook in the 99 *Chapbook Edition of Black Warrior Review*. Her poems have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *The Nation*, *Antioch Review*, *TriQuarterly*, and many other journals. Her second book of poems, *No Moon*, was published in 1997 by Purdue University Press. She teaches at Western Michigan University and lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

ANDREW FELD's poetry has appeared in *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, and *Ploughshares* among other journals, and is currently forthcoming in the *Yale Review* and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. He is a Wallace Stegner Fellow in Poetry at Stanford University.

ANNIE FINCH's book of poetry *Eve* appeared from Story Line Press in 1997, and her next book of poetry, the narrative poem *Marie Moving*, is forthcoming from Story Line. She has also published a book on poetics, *The Ghost of Meter*, and edited several anthologies including *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women*, now in its third printing, and *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art*, forthcoming from Michigan. Her poems have appeared in *The Hudson Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Agni Review*, *The Southwest Review*, *The Paris Review*, *Partisan Review*, and elsewhere.

TONYA FOSTER lives in New Jersey and has neither pets nor child. She received her M.F.A. in Poetry from the University of Houston and currently teaches at City College and Cooper Union. Her most recent reading appearances have been at the St. Marks Poetry Project and Here and the Ear Inn.

GREGORY FRASER has poems in the current issues of *The Southern Review*, *The Texas Review*, and *Riversedge*. He lives in New York City.

MARY GAITSKILL is the author of one novel and two short story collections, the most recent of which *Because They Wanted To*, was nominated for a Pen-Faulkner award in 1998. Her stories and essays have appeared in many publications, including *The New Yorker* and *Harper's*. Ms. Gaitskill taught at Houston's Creative Writing Program from Fall 96 to Fall 97.

ALLEN GEE is the author of the novel, *Far From The Beautiful Country*. He received his Ph.D. in Creative Writing and Literature from the University of Houston in 1999. He currently lives and teaches in Houston.

EMILY FOX GORDON's memoir, *Mockingbird Years: A Life In And Out Of Therapy*, has just been published by Basic Books. Her work has appeared in *Boulevard*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Salmagundi*, and *Mirabella*. One of her essays has won the Pushcart Prize, and three others have been reprinted in the *Anchor Essay Annual*. She lives in Houston with her husband and daughter.

WILLIAM GOYEN taught at the University of Houston in 1939, before enlisting in the U.S. Navy. Later he was one of the first writing faculty in the Creative Writing Program, spending the spring semester of 1981 teaching fiction writing. His best known novels are *The House of Breath* and *Arcadio*.

JESSICA GREENBAUM was in the first graduating class of the Creative Writing Program, that's how old she is. Her book of poems, *Inventing Difficulty*, won the Gerald Cable Prize for a first book and will be out from tiny, but handsome Silverfish Review Press in April, 2000. She is a winner of the *Nation* "Discovery" prize and P.E.N.'s New Writer Award. Poems, essays and criticism have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Partisan Review*, *The Texas Observer* and elsewhere. She now lives in her native Brooklyn with her husband and their two young daughters. For her survival during her Houston tenure she thanks Kathy and Karl Kilian, David Kaplan and David Theis.

VIRGIL GROTFELDT lives and works in Brooklyn. Future plans include further work in China. He has exhibited his work in the United States, Mexico, Europe, and China.

JOHN HARVEY received his Ph.D. in Creative Writing and Literature from the University of Houston in 1997. His poetry has appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *The New Republic*, *The Paris Review*, and *Poet Lore*. He currently lives and teaches in Houston.

ARDEL HERNANDEZ is an artist, writer, and independent critic of Cuban origin. He is currently the Artistic Director of the Transart Foundation, and is living in Houston. He is Research Associate in the Anthropology Department at Rice University, and has lectured at many universities and museums in the United States and internationally.

TRACY HICKS lives and works in Dallas, Texas where he teaches intermittently at Southern Methodist University, serves as Artist-in-residence, and raises endangered species of amphibians.

EDWARD HIRSCH is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *Earthly Measures and On Love*. He has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Literature. In 1998 he was granted a MacArthur Fellowship. *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*, a guide to the magic and meaning of poetry, was published in Spring 1999 by Harcourt Brace.

ALAN HOLLINGHURST spent the Fall of 1998 as a Visiting Professor in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston. He is the author of three novels: *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), *The Folding Star* (1994), and *The Spell* (1998). He lives in London.

GARRETT HONGO is a poet born in Hawai'i, and raised there and in Los Angeles. He is currently a professor at the University of Oregon at Eugene, where he lives with his family. He has written two volumes of poetry, *Yellow Light* and *The River of Heaven*, and is the author of the memoir, *Volcano*. He is also editor of *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* and *Under Western Eyes: Personal Essays From Asian America*.

Born in Los Angeles in 1932, and trained as an art historian, WALTER HOPPS has served as curator or director at museums throughout the country, including, as director, the Pasadena Museum of Art, Pasadena, California, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art; as curator of Twentieth Century Art at the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; and as founding director of the Menil Collection, Houston, Texas. He currently works as curator, Twentieth Century Art, for the Menil Collection. Hopps is the art editor for the literary and art journal, *Grand Street*.

RICHARD HOWARD taught for many years in the University of Houston creative writing program. He has published over 150 translations, including works by Cioran, Stendhal, and Roland Barthes; in 1983 he received the American Book Award for his translation of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*. In 1970 he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his third book of poems, *Untitled Subjects*, and latterly received the Academy of Arts and Letters Literary Award for his books of poems. He is a Chancellor of the American Academy of Poets, and Professor of Practice in the School of the Arts (Writing Division) of Columbia University. In 1996 he received a MacArthur Fellowship.

TERRELL JAMES is a painter and educator, living in her native Houston. She is director of the painting department at the Glassell School of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Her work is currently exhibited in the United States, Mexico, the Netherlands, and China.

LANCE LARSEN, who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Houston, is the author of *Erasable Walls* (New Issues Press, 1998). His poems have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Antioch Review*, *New England Review*, and elsewhere. His work will also be featured in the "under 40 anthology" *American Poetry: Next Generation*, to be published by Carnegie Mellon in the spring. A professor at Brigham Young University, he serves as poetry editor of *Literature and Belief*. He is married to Jacqui Biggs Larsen, a painter, and they live beside a mountain with their children, a pair of rats, and a grand piano.

CLAIRE LAWRENCE has published fiction in *Terra Nova*, *Terrain*, *New Earth Reader*, *The New England Writers Anthology*, and *The Best of Writers at Work*, poetry in *Western Humanities Review*, and *Ekphrasis*, essays in *Puerto del Sol* and *Art Lies*, and literary criticism in *ISLE*. She has received the New England Writers Award for short-short fiction and an AWP Intro Journals Award for non-fiction. She is currently an assistant professor at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania, and she lives in Danville with her husband, Michael.

LISA LEWIS's two books are *The Unbeliever* (Wisconsin, 1994, Brittingham Prize) and *Silent Treatment* (Penguin, 1998, National Poetry Series). She is co-editor of *Crazyhorse*, poetry editor of *The Cimarron Review*, and creative writing program director at Oklahoma State University.

TIMOTHY LIU received his M.A. from the University of Houston in 1991. He has subsequently published three books of poems (*Vox Angelica*, *Burnt Offerings*, *Say Goodnight*) and is the editor of *Word Of Mouth: An Anthology of Gay American Poetry*, forthcoming from Talisman House. His website can be found at <http://euphrates.wpunj.edu/faculty/liut>

PHILLIP LOPATE is the author of several essay collections, including his last two, *Portrait of My Body* and *Totally Tenderly Tragically*. He taught at the University of Houston's Writing Program between 1980 and 1988, and currently teaches at Hofstra University.

BEVERLY LOWRY grew up in Memphis and Mississippi, and then lived in many spots all over the country, Texas longer than anyplace else. Currently she lives in D.C., teaches at George Mason University, directs a new Creative Non-fiction Department in the M.F.A. program there, plans to be finished with her book on Madame C.J. Walker this summer, the hot season of the year 2000. After that, she has another non-fiction book in mind to write, more microfilm to watch whiz by, meantime dancing whenever possible.

RICHARD LYONS received his Ph.D. from the University of Houston and his M.F.A. from the University of Arizona. His first collection of poems, *These Modern Nights*, received a Devins Award with its publication by the University of Missouri Press. His second collection, *Hours of the Cardinal*, received a James Dickey Memorial Award and is forthcoming in April 2000. Lyons has also been a recipient of the Peter I.B. Lavan Award for Younger Poets from the Academy of American Poets. His work has been published in numerous journals, among them *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *The Paris Review*, and *The Gettysburgh Review*.

CYNTHIA MACDONALD has published six collections of poems. She taught at Sarah Lawrence and John Hopkins University and is a professor at the University of Houston, where she founded the Creative Writing Program in 1979. She is also a faculty member of the Houston-Galveston Psychoanalytic Institute.

MARYJO MAHONEY earned a Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Houston in 1999. Her poetry and fiction has appeared in a variety of magazines and journals, including *The Kenyon Review*, *The Nation* and *Hampton Shorts*. A non-fiction essay, "The Little Girl Who Would Not Listen," will appear in the May/June issue of *Teachers & Writers Magazine*. She teaches in the Department of Literary Studies at Hofstra University in New York.

CATE MARVIN's poems are forthcoming in *The New England Review*, *The Paris Review*, and *Poughshares*. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Cincinnati.

GAIL MAZUR's fourth collection of poems, *They Can't Take That Away From Me*, will be published in early 2001 by the University of Chicago Press. Her earlier books are *Nightfire*, *The Pose of Happiness*, and *The Common*. She teaches in Emerson College's M.F.A. in writing program and is the founding director of the Blacksmith House Poetry Series in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She lives in Cambridge and Provincetown, MA., where she is on the Writing Committee and summer faculty of the Fine Arts Work Center.

LESLIE ADRIENNE MILLER's third collection of poems, *Yesterday Had a Man in It*, was published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in 1998. Her previous books of poems include *Ungodliness* (CMU, 1994), *Staying Up For Love* (CMU, 1990), and *No River*, winner of the Stanley Hanks Memorial Award from the St. Louis Poetry Center. Her prizes and awards include a Loft McKnight Award of Distinction, a Goethe Institute Fellowship to Berlin, Germany, an NEA Fellowship in Poetry, and the Strousse Award from Prairie Schooner. She has published in many magazines and anthologies including *American Poetry Review*, *Antioch Review*, *The Georgia Review*, and *The New England Review*. Currently Associate Professor of English at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, she holds an M.F.A. in English from the University of Missouri, an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop and a Ph.D. from the University of Houston.

VASSAR MILLER, a life-long Houston resident, published 10 collections of poetry, including *If I Had Wheels or Love: Collected Poems of Vassar Miller* (Southern Methodist University Press, 1991). She earned a B.S. and M.A. from the University of Houston. Her poetry was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. Ms. Miller agreed to publish "To A Fellow Spastic" in *Gulf Coast* before her death on October 31, 1998.

HOWARD MOSS (1922-1987) was Poet-in-Residence at the University of Houston twice—first in the fall of 1979 and then in the spring of 1987. He was the author of twelve volumes of poetry, one of which won the National Book Award, and served as the poetry editor of *The New Yorker* from 1948 until his death. "Cardinal" is a late, uncollected poem.

LAURIE NEWENDORF received her M.A. in poetry from the University of Houston in 1992. She has published work in *Analecta*, been awarded an Individual Artist's Grant from the Cultural Arts Council of Houston, taught at Houston Community College Central, and currently lives and writes in Houston.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

---

MARK O'CONNOR has performed spoken word texts at the Menil Collection, the Art Car Ball, Zocalo Performance Space, and elsewhere in Houston. He is currently the Literary Arts Curator at DiverseWorks, an alternative Artspace, and is also a member of the faculty at Houston Community College. In 1999 he received his Ph.D. in Creative Writing and Literature from the University of Houston.

WILLIAM OLSEN's poetry has been published in numerous journals, including *The Paris Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *Triquarterly*. He has twice won awards from the Academy of American Poets, is a recipient of a YMHA/*The Nation* Discovery Award, and his first book, *The Hand of God and A Few Bright Flowers*, was a National Poetry Series winner. A recipient of a 1996 NEA Fellowship, William Olsen lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan and teaches at Western Michigan University. His third book, *Trouble Lights* will be published by *Triquarterly* in the Spring of 2001.

DAVE PARSONS lives in Conroe, Texas, where he teaches Creative Writing, Marketing, and Graphic Communications. He is Chairman of the Montgomery County Literary Arts Council Writers In Performance Series and the Conroe Commission on Arts & Culture. His book *Editing Sky* was the winner of the 1999 Texas Review Poetry Prize and was published by The Texas Review Press (Texas A&M University Press Consortium).

ROBERT PHILLIPS is John & Rebecca Moores Professor at the University of Houston, where he directed the Creative Writing Program from 1991-1996. "63 Cross River Road" is from his forthcoming sixth collection of poems, *Spinach Days* (John Hopkins University Press, 2000). His last collection, *Breakdown Lane*, was named a *New York Times Book Review* "Notable Book of the Year" in 1994.

ROBERT PINSKY is completing an unprecedented third term as Poet Laureate of the United States. He has taught at several schools, including the University of Houston, translated Dante's *Inferno*, and the *Figured Wheel*, a volume of his collected poems, was published in 1996. His new book is *Jersey Rain* (FSG, 2000).

STANLEY PLUMLY was born in Barnesville, Ohio in 1939. He grew up in lumber and farming regions of Virginia and Ohio. He has received Guggenheim, NEA, and Ingram Merrill Fellowships and taught at the University of Iowa, the University of Michigan, Princeton, Columbia, and the University of Houston. He currently is the Distinguished Professor at the University of Maryland. *Now That My Father Lies Down Beside Me: New and Selected Poems, 1970-2000*, appears this Spring from Ecco/HarperCollins.

MARK DAMON PUCKETT holds an M.F.A. from the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program and a M.A. in English from the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College. Director of International Analyst Relations at Onyx Software, he resides in Greenwich, Connecticut. "Respect for the House and Sleeping," a long story about his grandmother (daughter of the woman in this issue), appeared in *The Crescent Review* in 1995. "The women of my family are impressive," he says. "My best writing revolves around them."

ROBIN REAGLER's poems have been published in the *Colorado Review*, *North American Review*, *Ploughshares*, *American Letters & Commentary*, *Quarterly West*, and many other journals. She earned a Ph.D. from the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program and an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers Workshop. She is the Executive Director of Writers In The Schools (WITS) and lives in Houston, Texas.

PATTIANN ROGERS has published nine books of poetry. *Firekeeper, New and Selected Poems* (Milkweed Editions), was published in 1994 and was named by *Publishers Weekly* as one of the best books published in that year. *The Dream of Marsh Wren, Writing as Reciprocal Creation* was published by Milkweed Editions in their Credo Series in July, 1999. Milkweed will also publish her *Collected and New Poems, 1981-2001*. *A Covenant of Seasons*, a collaboration with the artist Joellyn Duesberry, was published by Hudson Hills Press in 1998. Pattiann Rogers has received two NEA Grants, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Poetry Fellowship from the Lannan Foundation, five Pushcart Prizes, three prizes from Poetry, two from Prairie Schooner and two from Poetry Northwest. She is the mother of two grown sons and lives in Colorado with her husband, a retired geophysicist.

TONY SANDER's poems have appeared in *The Yale Review*, *The Paris Review*, *Grand Street*, and elsewhere. Grove/Atlantic, Inc. will publish his new collection, *Transit Authority*, in the spring of 2000.

MARTIN SCOTT graduated from the University of Houston in 1994 with a Ph.D. and received an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1984. He is currently a full time faculty member at Houston Community College and has published poems and essays in *Asphodel*, *Willow Springs*, *Sow's Ear*, and *Paiduma: a Journal of Ezra Pound Scholarship*, as well as previously in *Gulf Coast*. He has also presented performance at Diverseworks Art space with guitarist John Edward Ross.

IRA SHER lives in Manhattan, New York. He is currently working on a novel about astronauts, real and imaginary. His work has been published in *The Chicago Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and been read on National Public Radio. His fiction has also been adapted by two independent filmmakers.

ARTHUR SMITH teaches at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. His most recent book of poetry is *Orders of Affection* (Carnegie Mellon UP, '96). Poems have recently appeared in *Kenyon Review*, *Crazyhorse*, and *The New Broad Leaf Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*.

DANIEL STERN currently teaches at the University of Houston. He is the author of nine novels, a play, and numerous essays and short stories. He has been at previous times a professional cellist, a professor at Wesleyan University, and the head of advertising for a television network and a major motion-picture studio. The former director of Humanities at the 92nd Street Y, his latest short story collection is *One Day's Perfect Weather* (SMU Press).

GAIL DONOHUE STOREY is the author of *The Lord's Motel*, Persea Books, NY, cloth 1992, paperback 1993 and 1999, and *God's Country Club*, Persea Books, NY, cloth 1996, paperback 1999. She is currently working on her third novel, *The Bad Girls Dinner Party*.

AMY STORROW's essays have appeared in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Gulf Coast*, and other publications. Her nonfiction has also won a Creative Artist Award from the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County as well as a Pen/Texas Award. She currently lives in Houston.

SIDNEY WADE's second collection of poems, *Green*, was published in 1998. Her third collection, *From Istanbul/Istanbul'dan*, was published in Turkish and English in 1998. She currently teaches at the University of Florida at Gainesville.

RANDALL WATSON's life is veiled in mystery.

ERIC MILES WILLIAMSON is the author of the novel *East Bay Grease* which was recently published by Picador, St. Martin's Press. His fiction has been published in *The Southern Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Chelsea*, and elsewhere. His awards include a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and he currently teaches at Oregon State University.

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI was born in Lvov, Poland in 1945 and studied philosophy at Cracow's Jagiellonian University. He lives in Paris and teaches each spring in the writing program at the University of Houston. His most recent book is *Mysticism for Beginners* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997). His previous books, all published by FSG, include *Two Cities* (1995), *Carus* (1992) and *Tremor* (1985).

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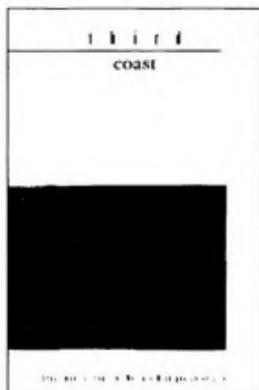
ou sit cross-legged on a Windsor chair eating black beetle pudding over a tatted table-cloth in a subterranean saloon. Thirteen bards, nine yarn-spinners, two maids and one melancholy painter line the bar. They drink grog. The bartender calls over to you, insists that you stay the night. "Catch up on your reading," she slurs, "many a great tale and verse await you." All twenty-five of the in-the-bag patrons spin on their stools and size you up. You recognize two—no, three. One of them wears a crimson fez. Another carries a potted plant. About to introduce yourself, you hear a low, guttural growl. This should be good.

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