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c r u d e

1983

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A BORN

The Hospital on the Hudson

The Hudson is the Rhine of the New World. Many estates landed themselves on the hilly embankments overlooking the Hudson; castles, mansions, immense tudors. This one house, it looked like a haunted mansion, was donated to the town along with a great expanse of land, in order to build the new hospital. My father could remember the old hospital. Every time we drove up to the big house I would ask who lives there? I just liked to hear him retell the history and he didn't mind.

Then I jumped out of the car and went running down the hill, or rolling down. Then I would roll down the hill again and my father, in his suit pants and sweater, was still locking his stethoscope in the glove compartment, locking the car, and walking down the hill. Every weekend we always had to go walk Honey, our Golden Retriever. My sister and brother had just started being teenagers and they weren't interested in family walks. We always said that we would come here in the winter sometime and how far could you go on your sled, to that line of trees or down to the dirt road? Maybe Bernie, my brother and the leader of the sled-riders on our street, would want to come along. He would appreciate this new territory. We never did go on our walks during the winter.

Then I went under the tree. Its branches touched the ground and it always kept its leaves and I played under there for five or so minutes until my father laughed, "Jean, you there?"

I would say, "You've got to see this, come here come here," but he couldn't find his way in although once I got him to step inside, take a look around and say, "Yes, I see, I see, it's great, c'mon, let's get started, we have to be back by six."

A Sterling Silver Ring and My Sister

Once, while we were on the road through the woods at the bottom of the hill, my father found a sterling silver ring engraved with some flowers. The ring became our project and we got home that Sunday and wrote an ad for the newspaper and ran the ad for a week, but no one ever answered. The ring was much too big for me, but sometimes I wore it on my thumb.

For two weeks I wore the ring every day and my sister made her favorite ugly face at me whenever she saw my hands. She wouldn't look at me, her eyes slid right past me, but one nostril lifted into a wrinkled, misshapen hole in her pale face.

One day she asked me, "Where did you get that ring?"

"Dad and I found it at the hospital." I answered her quickly, since I was always happy when she talked to me.

"It's much too big for you," she said, "Do you want me to take care of it for a while, so you don't lose it?" I felt she was going to look after me, so I gladly took the ring off my finger and handed it over to her.

A beautiful, feminine gaze came over her face, not an ugly expression at all.

"It fits me perfectly," she said, "I'll give it back to you in a couple of years."

In a couple of years I took it back. I wore the ring on my thumb again, sure to have it always, but always taking it off my finger nervously in school. Dropping it on the floor in classes. Apologizing to the teacher for the small clatter and retrieving it. Once, I left it in the girls' locker room and that was it, I never had it again, after all those close calls.

The Newborn Babies

Occasionally, after we had finished our walk, the end of the walk climbing up the hill and out of breath, we would take a trip to the maternity ward.

"Jean, you want to go look at the newborns?" This was my favorite activity when we went to walk the dog at the hospital.

In fact, I often suggested, "Dad, you want to go look at the newborns? The newborns today, Dad?"

"I don't think so, well no, it's already five-thirty." Sometimes he said, "OK," a little surprised, and I even more surprised to see that he hadn't been thinking about the newborns even though our walk was finished, we were getting into the car, and it was time to see them.

LISTENER

My Mother and I

We made cakes together. She made the vanilla and I made the chocolate and then we swirled my batter through hers with a knife. She did the marbling, but not because I couldn't handle a knife. I liked to mix everything up and she said a cake was not a mud-pie.

My father would reach for my mother's hand where she sat next to him at the dining room table, closest to the kitchen door, and say, "You make the most magnificent marble cake." She pointed at me, the real baker.

He would tell me, too, "You are the world's best marble cake baker."

In the back yard, I made salads from weeds, onion grass, and wild mint. My mother washed off the dirt from my salads and told the family I had picked scallions and put them into the real salad we ate for dinner. My father chewed them slowly.

She told me to put on long pants, not shorts, when I went on walks outside. During the height of poison ivy season she washed me with brown soap when I came home. She told my father to wear blue jeans.

"I can't make a housecall or show up in the emergency room in blue jeans," he would say.

"You're walking the dog, who's gonna see you?"

"I'm always running into someone up at the hospital, and you know, if Jean and I go to the maternity ward . . ."

"That's true," she said.

The Sum Total

We took our Sunday walks during the newborns' feeding time, that's just how it worked out.

Through the side door on the first floor and up a back elevator where test tubes, jingling on a cart, got out at the second floor, and we at the third. Everyone said Hello Doctor, and he had nicknames for everyone ("Mel-My-Old-Buddy," "Sherry-Lee-Sunshine"), all the doctors, nurses, and patients who'd found a whole family of familiarity and couldn't stay out of the hospital.

Then he swung open the double doors that said No Visitors between 11 and 2, 3 and 6, and so on. It was almost always feeding time for the newborns. I liked to remark on our disregarding the No Visitors sign just to hear my father say that We Were Allowed. For a while we just stood in front of the glass. Then my father would point out which ones were new this day, last night, two hours ago, and look at that one being wheeled in right now, straight from Obstetrics.

"Just now?"

"Sure."

"But was it just born now or was it fifteen minutes ago?"

"What can I tell you, Jean? The baby is born and they bring it in here."

"Five minutes? Did it have to come up in the elevator?"

"No, it's right here on this floor. They

wash it off, show it to the mother . . ."

"Oh, that's right, the mother looks at it. So it must be, fifteen minutes, yes?"

"About that." Then he smiles and hugs me, "That's right."

The nurses are busy, but they have noticed us in front of the glass by now. They wave to my father and they like me too. Once or twice, they have carried a newborn right over to us, to the glass between us. The baby doesn't have its eyes open yet and I stare at it, trying to make it smile back at me. Sometimes, they wave their fists, kick off a corner of the blanket, smile and cry all at once, as if they didn't know how to have one feeling at a time. The nurse would look at the baby too and then at me, and then smile at my father.

"Is that Patricia's baby?" my father asks the nurse. She reads his lips and understands, no, she points to a crib in the far corner. She puts the baby she is holding back in its crib. She makes signs to show that Patricia's baby is eight pounds and my father shakes his hand from the wrist.

Finally, I am torn away. On the way down to the car, I total up the number of kids on my street that my father has delivered. The count includes my best friend Cindy.

Years later, when the children in town got married, he would say, "Can you believe I delivered that kid?" and he would shake his hand from the wrist.

The Children's Talk Show

At the dinner table, waiting for our meal, we would imitate an educational children's talk show called *The Smart Alecs*. My father would ask the questions. "How do you pronounce C-H-O/P-H-O/U-S-E?"

"Next question, the Santa Maria is one ship in a fleet of which three ships, and who sailed them?"

"Niña, Pinta, Christopher Columbus," I whispered to my brother who likes to ignore my answers and advice. "Isn't that right?"

"No," he says.

"Yes it is!" I say urgently. Time is passing quickly. My sister has already answered.

My brother looks at me, says firmly, flatly, "'Yes' means 'No' and 'No' means 'No'."

My father asks another question. "Name a country on the equator," and suddenly I am alert because my brother and sister are having a difficult time answering this one and even my mother has hesitated in the midst of adjusting the meal in the kitchen. My brother despises mulling over a challenging question, but my father gives us a few more minutes to think. I am thinking as quickly as I can seeing my sister is still unable to answer. This was an opportunity for me to make my debut. "Florida?" I say because my grandparents live there and it's always hot. I imagine groves of palm trees but cannot come to any conclusion about the name of a steamy land mass situated on the equator. "Equa, equa, Equador," I say. "That's right, look at that," says my father, my brother calls me a cheater and my sister continues to eat in the European fashion, showing the back of her fork as she brings choice morsel to mouth, little precocious bites, chewing cleverly. My mother runs into the dining room looking frightened that she may have yet another child prodigy on her hands. Finally everyone's nerves are calmed and we begin to eat. During the first half of the meal, my father looks at me too during the various conversations and my mother insists that I be consulted for my opinion. I don't know what cardiology is and I wish they would stop asking me questions, because they're interrupting my thinking. By the second half of the meal, they have stopped including me, what a relief.

The Sound of Talking

Most of the time we talked while we walked. If not, I climbed rocks and trees and went running after the dog. If we were silent I would ask my father a question, sometimes it took three questions, so that he would have to talk on one subject for a while, explaining. I just wanted to keep him talking because I liked the sound of his voice which was easy to daydream to. I would daydream, but understand just enough of what he was saying in order to make the appropriate exclamations or ask another question if he paused.

I developed the ability to skim what he was saying and summarize it as if I'd been listening astutely while thinking about cowboys and Indians. Then I would go running after Honey. I was the Indian messenger chasing my horse through the forest. My father and I would watch Honey go swimming in a stream, then climb back up to the path silently, and dry off Honey before getting back into the car so that she didn't ruin the rug at home.

The Educated Guess

But my mother never forgot that I had ventured to make this educated guess and she returned to me often, asking for example, my thoughts on my brother and sister's schooling. I had no thoughts on this matter. Often I had to make up an opinion when asked to speak, so that it would appear that my thoughts were in context. This process of spontaneous invention slowed my speech considerably and naturally they all became quite impatient with me. After I finished one of my short speeches my brother and sister would huff, puff, and sigh, my father would have glanced at my mother, irritated that she had held up the conversation by calling on me, and my mother would stare at me intensely for a minute, feeling she had made a mistake by attributing the familial intelligence to me also. She was continually trying to make a space for me in the family talks and I continued to refuse the offer.

A Cement Heart

Paula Webb

Marriage makes me mean, wrote Connie Lou in her goodbye letter to her husband Wade.

I love you, but a woman like me can't make a man like you happy for long. My music is my only pride. You know this is true. I'm the best damn bass player in southwest Arkansas, and when I sit in Friday nights at the Smokehouse, I feel almost beautiful, like these big hands can do something special, not just be too big and get stuck in fruit jars.

I just can't make any more casseroles, Wade. I just can't join the Volunteer Firemen's Auxiliary and go to those conventions in Little Rock, like you want me to. I don't know how to talk to people, especially wives. But when I play, I feel real elegant, only I'm the only one who knows. Playing bass is not like playing guitar. You just can't whip it out and charm people. I'm no showboat. I just do what I do, keep the song on course, the harmony steady.

Wade, I love you, but we've been together three years now, and there hasn't been even one week when I haven't seen that look of tired disappointment come across your face. I just can't see that sad face anymore, Wade. You were born to laugh, be a father to a bunch of kids. The whole town lights up when they see you coming down the street. I feel like the bitter shadow in your life. I can't do a thing for you, Wade. You don't need me, and since you'll never leave me, I've got to leave you. I'm sadder than I can ever tell you with words, my darling. Goodbye. Your loving wife, Connie Lou Hollywood.

She left the letter propped up against their wedding toaster on the round kitchen table. Wade got in early from work, disappointed not to see the camper, since he'd had a good day at the John Deere Company and had sold three new yellow posthole diggers to a statewide outfit out of Magnolia. He wanted to take Connie Lou into town for dinner, maybe run by late and see that new band at the Holiday Inn Rainbow Room. Connie Lou would like that, a little celebration right here in the middle of the week, a little music, no dishes to wash.

"Being married to a musician has real advantages," he told all his friends. "When she listens to music, she takes it all apart, hears the guitar, the bass, the voices all separate. Then she puts it back together, plays variations on the table edge, tells me what she hears. I never knew music 'til I met Connie Lou. It don't matter to me she

can't cook."

"It's a good thing that's how you feel, Wade," said Joe Robert, his best friend. "We 'bout died last Thanksgiving, choking down that yellow squash casserole at your house."

When Wade found the letter, he put his head down on the oilcloth and cried. "I love this woman," he said out loud. "But she has never believed it. I should've known this was coming. She's been brittle as pine kindling ever since her daddy died."

Zack Taylor was a legend in Fayette County. The youngest son of a country Baptist preacher, he learned early on that the Lord's grace might be contrary and that he'd have to take matters into his own hands. He inherited a gift for storytelling from his preaching daddy, but he used Biblical references in only those cases when he felt his audience slipping away.

On a hot and sticky summer night on the front porch—the little kids already in thin, cotton pajamas but still wrestling out the day's insults; the older kids and the adults shelling peas into big, white, enamel pans, wishing the little ones would just hush or fall asleep on the floor pallets, or both; the bugs, way too many of them, buzzing and swarming around the mercury vapor light by the wellhouse—Zack was always welcome. He could make that heavy heat go away in a minute, all for the price of a tall glass of sugared iced tea. He could make you shiver, wish for a sweater on a muggy August night, telling you a story about duck hunting in the Louisiana swamps some cold, wet November.

Zack called himself a trading fool, but there wasn't much foolish about him. He was born to sell and play poker. Cards, he was good at, although he declined to play on Sundays, but at selling he was downright masterful, seven days a week. He could sell anything, find anything, trade anything, and take pleasure in every turn of the negotiation. He hunted for high risk deals, playing on people's vanity and greed, and while he committed to no specialty, he achieved considerable success turning rusted-out steel into cash. He would find some old, barely working, fishing tool equipment in a new widow's backyard in Amarillo, then sell it in two days to a young and hopeful independent rigger with skin too fair for outdoor work in Hattiesburg. Everybody'd be happy with the deal, especially Zack,

who'd go off right away to Houston or New Orleans and buy himself a brand new Buick.

He always drove a Buick, claimed they were the best cars on the road, and everybody was mystified how he kept those cars so clean and shining, driving those dusty, red-dirt, Arkansas country roads. He was a big man, stood a whole head above most people, and he always wore a city hat, white straw in the summer, brown felt in the winter. He wore white, half-sleeve shirts ordered special from Battelsteins in Houston, he carried a leatherette briefcase nobody ever saw him open, and he always knew the latest jokes. Giving advice to his daughter Connie Lou, or anyone else who might be listening, he pushed his hat back on his head with his cigar-smoking hand and said, "Never drink cheap booze, and always do your banking during regular hours, so you can be sure and wave 'hey' to your loan officer."

For address purposes, Zack kept a room at the old hotel in Lewisville, but he was rarely there, always on the scent of some hot new deal that would make him rich. When Connie Lou finally decided to marry Wade, she couldn't even find Zack to tell him, but he found out somehow, he always knew everything anyway, and showed up at the very last minute, an armful of camellias for his daughter and a whole case of Jack Daniels for Wade.

"She's a good woman," he told Wade, over two shot glasses of bourbon from the bottle he kept in the glove compartment. "But, she's as moody as her mother. The first time I saw her, nearly three weeks old, I regretted my whole life and considered settling down, going to pharmacy school, having my own store, just so's I could be near her. She was the littlest thing I ever saw, born too early, but she had her mama's eyes and my great big hands. I loved her like I loved nothing else in this world, but she wouldn't let me comfort her, never has. I hoped her body would grow up to her hands, but that didn't work out. Everything about her just continued to grow with a powerful stubbornness to confound scale. By the time she was three, we all had to admit that daintiness was not her destiny, so I figured we might as well say to hell with all that regret, and start concentrating on how special she was. She was, too, special as spring. She loved music, stayed real close to the radio in the kitchen like it was a bonfire on a



Alcin Clement

freezing Halloween night. So for her fifth birthday, I traded 2000 feet of four-inch cable and an old diamond-bit drilling head any Oakie could use with happiness, and got her a Gibson guitar. The music teacher in town said she had a lot of ability, as if we didn't know, but said she got frustrated with all the strings, so I traded the guitar for a four-string Fender bass, and after that everything went fine. I remember coming home, driving all night from Gulfport the night her mama died, and finding her out by the wellhouse, hugging that bass and playing steady, the tears streaming down her face. She looked like the angel she is, but would take no hugging from me for her sorrow. I love that child with all my heart, but with all my traveling, I've never been able to raise any recognition in her. I tell you, Wade, I feared it would be just Connie Lou and her bass and those big, lonesome eyes for all time, until you came along. I'm grateful to you, Wade, for calling out her trust, and I wish you all the happiness and glory there is in this life."

Zack couldn't stay for the wedding, a big deal was brewing in Lake Charles that he had to attend to. "This could be the big one," he whispered to his daughter, kissing her quick on the cheek, and then waving goodbye to everyone, honking his horn all the way down the road. Zack Taylor was never one to leave a party quiet.

Almost three years later on a rainy December night in Houston, a single sheet of newspaper floated like a threat in the air above the lanes of traffic. Zack Taylor, in his brand new Buick, hurrying to meet a group of young real estate developers, lurched into the fast lane, hoping to beat the odds, and lost. The floating newspaper glided slowly toward the Buick, then dropped quick, stuck to the windshield, hung fast, and got caught in the wiper. Zack was blinded. He braked too short and skidded everywhere, crashing into cars, trucks, the railing. An independent trucker with a load of salvage pipe saw him coming, but could do nothing. The impact of the Buick on the truck's rear end loosened the safety ropes, and the load spilled out over five lanes of heavy traffic. Eleven people were injured, fifteen cars were damaged, 34 wreckers came. Zack Taylor and two others were killed instantly, by the mercy of the Lord. The Buick was totaled.

With an irony everyone understood, they held the funeral at Zack Taylor's daddy's country church up at Stamps. Wade gave the eulogy and sang "Amazing Grace" in a high, sweet voice. He broke down at the end. People came from everywhere to say goodbye to someone they all knew as well as he would let them. "He

was as close as kin," they said in low voices. "Sometimes closer." They brought their children and their memories. In their best, Sunday clothes the men sat in the front room before the service, talking softly, shaking hands all around. The women fluttered in the kitchen, unwrapping and arranging covered dish specialties, made from family recipes, and offered on big china platters, received long ago as wedding gifts.

Corrine Knighton, Joe Robert's wife, stood as family by the kitchen door, receiving the food for the eating before and after, making sure masking tape labels were stuck to the bottoms of the cake pans. After the services, back at Preacher Taylor's old house, Corrine let the kids take off their coats and run off their good manners outside with the dogs. The women joined the men in the front dining room, a fire roaring in the double fireplace, eating a meal worthy of Thanksgiving, sharing their grief, and contradicting one another. "That waddn't the way I heard that story," said Joe Robert. "But come to think on it, I never did hear that son-of-a-bitch tell any story the same way twice."

All in all, it was a worthy tribute to the deceased, but Connie Lou participated in none of it. She sat to the side, alone and gray, didn't talk with anybody. "I hate cold chicken," she whispered to Wade, and left her husband to do the gracious thing. "Thank you for coming," he said again and again. "She'll really need you in a few weeks, you know. Your flowers are beautiful. Yes, we'll miss him in the future even more than we can guess now."

Connie Lou never cried, anyway not so's anybody ever saw, and everybody was looking. "She's in shock," they said. "It'll hit her in a few days," they said. "Call us if you need us, Wade."

"He was a miserable, thieving son-of-a-bitch," Connie Lou screamed on the way home in the car. "A blood-sucking, no account, son-of-a-bitch skunk. He ran some shady deal on almost everyone there and owed them all money or favors. You know, he ran out on my mama. I think he killed her with his fast-talking, dandy ways and celebrated exits, all those promises of the big deal coming. What a load of horse crap that man was. The world is better, rid of that trash."

"It was diphtheria that killed you mama, Connie Lou," said Wade, driving slow on the road he knew as well as Connie Lou's variation on Waylon Jennings' "Good Hearted Woman."

"Wade, you better get this clear. I hate him, totally and complete. And I'm beginning to hate you, too, you and your princely ways. I'm giving you warning: get off my back." With that, she settled down quiet,

not speaking another word. She moved as far away from Wade as she could and still be in the same car, looking out the window, wondering why it wasn't raining.

"She'll be back. I know she will," Wade told Minnie, the ironing lady who came Tuesdays. "She's just upset, been that way ever since her daddy died. You know this is true. She'll be back in a week or two."

"I don't know, Wade," said Minnie. "Looks to me like she really cleaned out. No lady born in Mississippi is planning a real quick return when she takes all her mops. I think you better face it, Wade. That wife of yours is gone."

The trouble was, Wade couldn't face any such thing. To face Connie Lou's permanent leaving was to face defeat, and Wade Hollywood was never one to do that with any grace. He was a good-looking man, played varsity football in high school, leading the local team to the state championships. He went to the business school in Magnolia for two years at night, working days at the John Deere Company with his daddy and uncles, like he had in high school. "It's my pride to have him as a son," his mama said, and the whole town agreed that there wasn't a thing that could come up that Wade Hollywood could disappoint a person about. The men liked him, and the women hoped for him. He had a lot of chances to marry early, but he waited out all the gardenia-smelling overtures and somehow never hurt anybody's real feelings.

But, it was all over one Saturday morning in February when Wade saw Connie Lou at the drugstore. His throat got dry at the back, he felt his heart racing, a tingling low down. All he could do was grin, and the pharmacist, Mr. Clyde Billingsley, who was witness to it all, said he'd never seen Wade look so hot and cold at the same time, or act so foolish. The whole town watched the courting, which lasted a good while, and when Connie Lou finally relented and said, "Yes," everyone rejoiced in Wade's contentment.

"She's the prettiest thing I ever saw," Wade told Joe Robert. "She's got eyes ten miles deep, as green as the river, and the blue-blackest hair I ever hope to see. She's quiet, you know, most of the time, but that goes with her music, and I tell you, I feel like some kind of hero when I can get her to laugh."

Wade was known for his tender ways, but nobody ever saw anything like the way he carried on about Connie Lou. "I tell you, I feel a good bit of personal relief at this union," Joe Robert told Connie Lou at the wedding. "Wade just about ruined duck hunting for me this fall, going on and on like he does about your virtues. I wel-

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come you as a sister, Mrs. Hollywood, and look forward to many more happy times."

They liked her okay, although she really was a quiet one, and most everybody gave up trying to draw her out. She was pretty, everyone said, and a damn hot bass player, although she about ruined Wade's Saturday morning productivity, keeping him up late on Friday nights after her playing. She had come into their lives highly recommended, the love of Wade Hollywood's life and the only child of Storytelling Zack Taylor, the best supper visitor anyone could ever think of. When she left Wade, the whole town grieved, not for her so much, since they never really knew her, but for the trouble her life had been, the losing of her daddy in so tragic a manner, the cloud of disappointment around the two of them when she lost their baby, born two months before its time. But she was gone. There was no doubt about that, and everyone felt it was about time Wade took to getting over his grief and getting on with his life. The trouble was, while the whole town passed around Wade's shame and sorrow, Wade Hollywood wouldn't have a thing to do with any of it.

"She'll be back. I know she will. Connie Lou's not like anybody else in this world, and she just has to make her path through her own pain in her own way. She'll be back, I tell you, just any day."

"That plumb makes me sick, Wade," said Joe Robert. "She's been gone 'bout six months now, and you just keep holding on, waiting by the mailbox for a Valentine that ain't ever coming. She's gone, Wade, cleared out. Left nothing but an old sweater under the bed to torture your memory, which she more than likely just forgot, since she never was much of a housekeeper in my opinion. My cousin Roxanne from Texarkana has expressed an interest in your welfare, and you're a damn fool if you don't study on her invitation and do something for yourself. I'm afraid you're gonna go crazy if you keep on like you do, just pretending nothing real's happened."

"My own true fear is that he won't go crazy," said Joe Robert's wife Corrine. "Wade's life's been just about the way he wanted it all his days, 'til Connie Lou left him. He don't know nothing about crazy, and most of us figure it's about time he learned, what with this opportunity and all. Everybody thinks Wade got left, but I'm of the mind that Connie Lou left him, and I'm most concerned about her grieving. Remember how she got Wade to finally go to bed late Friday nights, so she could sit on the front porch alone with only the memory of her playing? If you were on

the road early, you could almost always see the front porch light on at their house at dawn, that little Connie Lou in her flannel nightgown on the porch swing, pushing one foot and playing that bass real low."

In September, finally, a letter came, but it wasn't the Valentine Wade was hoping for. Dear Wade, she began. I grieve that I have caused you a good deal of sorrow, since I've got to tell you, you're the kindest man I've ever known and deserve the contented life you want so much. I hope you can now understand why I had to do what I did. It was for me mostly, and I am shamed at my selfishness. But, it was for us too, and what we could never be.

It has been a good while now since I've been gone from you, and I'm playing regular with a band I like pretty much. I joined up with them in Waco, and we've been traveling all over Texas and New Mexico for the past few months, playing in seedy little joints where they don't always listen and confuse us with the jukebox. Still, I'm playing real good and learning a lot about music and myself. I think of my daddy sometimes and realize how lonesome he must've been a lot of nights in strange towns. When you're just passing through, you take what comfort you need from strangers and try talking yourself into the lie that they're really your friends. It's true I've missed you many times, but I can't see us ever being able to reconcile our different ways. It's time we talked, Wade, about the legal ending of all of this. I want you to get on with your happiness. We're playing two weeks in north Houston, a greasy little dive called The Memories Lounge. The irony of my current life is, the place is not two miles from where my daddy had his final accident. Strangely, I feel his presence with me, and at night I dream the stories he used to tell. Try to meet me here as soon as you can, if you're able to get away. I look forward to seeing how you're getting along and what your plans might be. All my best wishes, Connie Lou Hollywood.

Wade had been checking the mailbox by the road twice a day for months, and although this wasn't the kind of letter he'd been hoping for, any news at this point was like a dream come true. Everybody in town knew the letter had come, since the postman, Mr. Lewis Kirksey, had never been able to keep a private thing still. When Wade roared into town that afternoon in the truck, weaving like a drunk Indian, and rented a jackhammer from Joe Robert's daddy's concrete company, the whole town figured he's snapped clean out of his composure.

"You'd best go see about him, Joe Robert," Corrine telephoned her husband.

"He was all wild-eyed and almost hysterical. I would've thought he was drunk right here in the middle of the day, had I not been sure he wasn't no drinking man. Still, you know, I sure wish he'd get flat out drunk, just one time, to purge himself of all this foolishness."

By the time Joe Robert got out to Wade's place, Wade had worked up a real good sweat and most of the driveway. "What in the sam hell is going on here?" yelled Joe Robert, over the loud fury of the jackhammer.

"Help me with this part right here, Joe Robert. I got a pretty woman to see in Houston, and I ain't got a minute to talk."

Joe Robert shook his head, then rolled up his sleeves, and pitched in with the work. There wasn't a damn thing a man could do for a best friend who'd gone crazy, except to get right into the craziness with him. They worked together for as long as it took, which was a pretty good while, and when it was over, Joe Robert thought he would've killed for a cold beer and a sit-down on the front porch. But Wade was still moving real fast, and Joe Robert just figured he couldn't voice any suggestion that would get him any ear, so he just sat down in the shade and tried to remember what his normal breathing was like.

"Now pick this end up here, Joe Robert, real careful like, and help me get it into the flatbed," said Wade, breathing heavy.

"Slow up, Wade, you miserable fool," said Joe Robert. "You're going to give us both a goddamned heart attack."

"That's exactly what's happening, Joe Robert. I'm having a goddamn, five-star heart attack." And he jumped off the flatbed and ran into the house.

"Wade, you sure you know what you're doing?" Joe Robert called out to Wade through the shower curtain. "I do admit, I admire your plan, but I'm worried about you, boy. You've always had the luck and leaning for winning, but your attitude these past few months has been downright peculiar to most folks. You sure you want to do this? What if she says 'no'?"

"I guess she could say that, Joe Robert. She might have to, for herself and her own plans, and she might even be right about us. But I love her more than I can ever say, and I just can't roll over and die cause things haven't worked out the way I'd hoped. The trouble with me is, you know, I get real worked up about my own hopes and forget to check with people to see if they're going along. Connie Lou's got her own mind about most things, but I gotta try and tell her how I feel clean through, all the way to my heart. Living with that woman is all I want to do, and I ain't gonna accept anything different 'til I'm convinced

that's how the cards really lay."

"You romantic dog," laughed Joe Robert, and punched his friend hard on the arm. "The best of luck to you, cause I think you're gonna need it, you son-of-a-bitch."

Wade took off in the truck fast, throwing shell and bits of concrete, waving wild out of the cab window. Joe Robert waved back, laughing and yelling, "Just get back home in time for duck hunting." Wade kept on waving and grinning to himself 'til he couldn't see Joe Robert clear anymore.

When Wade and Connie Lou moved into the new house their first happy year together, they put in a new driveway. Joe Robert, and Joe Robert's daddy, and Wade's cousin J.T. from Hot Springs all came out to help and did a real good job. Later, Corrine came over with a picnic supper, and they all sat outside until the mosquitoes got too bad and had a fine time. Connie Lou strummed a little on the bass, and J.T. played banjo. They all sang songs in lousy harmony and laughed at themselves until it got late.

When everybody had gone home and Connie Lou was getting ready for bed, Wade called her to come outside. The moon had just come up, and the light was still that pretty deep-violet the night holds onto sometimes in the spring before it releases the day and goes all black. With long switches Wade cut from the china-berry tree, they drew a big heart in the still wet cement and wrote their names. Wade Keith and Connie Lou Hollywood, In Love for Now and Forever. They sealed the vow for all time with prints of their hands and feet, then made love under the chinaberry tree while the light changed, at its own pacing and theirs, from deep-violet, to deep-blue, to silky black.

"Hot damn," yelled Wade, driving south toward Houston. "Double rainbows at twilight, and I was counting on my own good luck."

He drove straight through them, taking all of nature's blessings, while the cement heart rode steady in the flatbed.

The Nipple

Mother, you told me when I was born
the air raid sirens and blackouts
made all the babies scream.
I alone was quiet. I'd found your breast.

In that hospital you were happy,
a woman who loved to conceive.
Your favorite time was nursing, confident
your large breasts would never run out.

You used to speak pityingly
of women who didn't lactate.
And when I read of wetnurses in books,
I thought you had missed your calling.

Instead you went off to factory work,
miserable and making us miserable.
We kids raised ourselves, like urchins
running through the rubble of empty lots.

And ever since, I've been looking for your breasts
in the avenues, on women I pass,
on city trees in vest-pocket parks
triangling to a dead end, or even on

the Woolworth Building's Egyptian friezes
of bearded pharaohs with plump chests.
The kind, indifferent pillow of granite
which is New York, I imagine your bosom.

This love I feel from the surrounding streets
I will never hug, make personal, take home
with me, but the yearning keeps me a writer,
remembering Whitman's disappointed rapture.

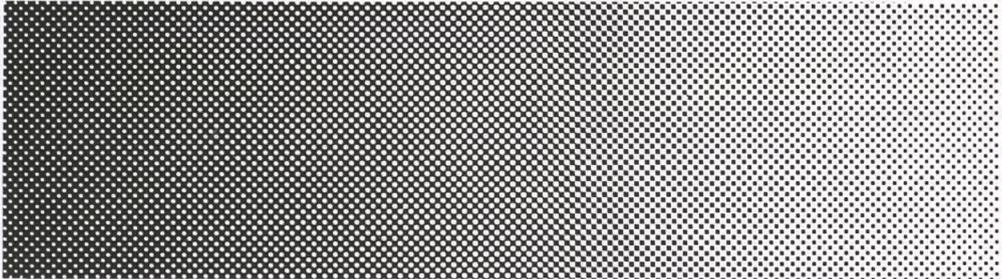
Mother, now that I've made you into the world,
how do I scale down from your beckoning,
rejecting plenitude to reach the one
I could allow to cradle me in her breasts?

(Smaller than yours, Mom, that has to be.)
Must I finish with you first,
bruise or embrace you once and for all,
before I can become a father?

As though you even had to be forgiven!
Once, I'll admit, I thought it was your fault
for loving me
so erratic after so pure a start.

Silly of me. You who gave me the nipple
must take it away, leave me to figure it out.

Phillip Lopate



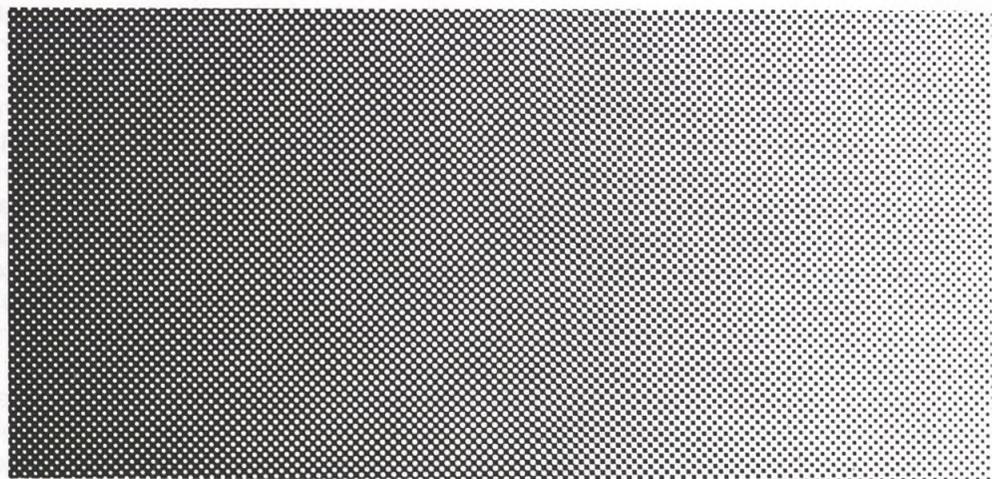
MRS LOT

There has to be something good said for Lot's wife, for looking back, not moving on, for, in other words, nostalgia, that onetwo threefourfivesixseveneightnine-letter dirty word, when even the Bible, which condemns her says to remember Lot's wife, and why else if it doesn't mean what it says (of course, Jesus said it, and He always liked women, unlike Paul, who didn't like them much)—maybe because he knew they were apt to cling to their homes, not having in those days much else to cling to—and what if they clung—like Lot's poor old wife whose name we don't even know to recall, she having to pull up stakes and get out just because some men liked other men, that being none of her affair, besides which she'd never liked Uncle Abraham's loose foot she swore he was born with, and so she has long gazed back on her past which she couldn't put back any more than a pulled tooth, for which crime she stands changed to a briny pillar, still turned toward her yesterdays and her God who surrounds her on all sides—right, left, front, and back—her sad but salty stare.

Vassar Miller

Job, down in the dumps, sat on a dump, groaning and cursing his birthday and every single candle sprouting like thorns on his birthday cake when God shouted down to him, "Where were you, Job, when I created the stars from the stuff of light and scattered mudballs of matter everywhere?" and Job answered, "Not here, that's certain!" "Yes, and where were you," God asked, "when I made the hippopotamus and the crocodile and the horse and the wild ass?" "Not here, but getting there," Job sighed, "if you know what I mean." "Where were you," God went on, "when I made the rain and the snow and the hail?" "Not here," said Job, scooting his sore rump over an inch or two—until God kept on peeling Job down to the nub of his nothingness and poor Job cried out, "I will lay my hand upon my mouth!" when, so the writer tells us, God gave Job more than he had before, but the writer had switched to prose in writing this, and we know only poetry can tell the truth.

JOB



Prophecy

Babette Fraser

The phone call is from my mother's friend, Ella Jamison, who knows everything. She tells me she saw the photograph in an antique shop on Ferndale Street. I like that street and walk along it frequently for exercise I don't find boring. That's because of its houses. They continue to look like houses, but are instead galleries, restaurants, a nursery school, and several shops like the one Ella mentions. Their former and present selves survive together. Even flourish. And that comforts me. "Go and see for yourself," Ella Jamison says. "I could be wrong."

It's too hot to walk on July mornings like this one, but I do it anyway. The heat doesn't bother me and, walking, I see things drivers miss. Bird migrations. The flowering of plants. Repairs and new construction. Changes that walking slows down.

As I enter the shop, I notice a lovely yellow and blue quilt at the rear. I am a nut about old cotton quilts with their soft colors and smooth, cool textures. This one, in a double wedding ring design, particularly attracts me, but halfway to it I see my destination. A wedding photograph from around 1930. Four attendants flank a bride whose fluted gown and marcelled hair say the date better than any label could have. They are, as Ella guessed, my aunt, my mother, their older sister and two friends. Right there on the wall of this store. It's odd to see your family that way, as a stranger would, when that's not what you're supposed to be at all. I also see that in the collapsed time of the photograph, they are beautiful. It is a surprise I don't enjoy. By my theory, generations should progress, if only to justify life. I should be smarter, prettier, more sane than the people who came before me. Because of science, maybe. Vitamins and so forth. But the photograph denies this.

Well, I tell myself, at least it works as decoration. A stranger might choose it for the wall of his country inn or theme restaurant. I've seen similar pictures in the restrooms of such places, or possibly in upstairs hallways where the light is dim. Borrowed forebears. Pictures that say more than the innkeeper expects.

Maybe I should buy it, I think, but immediately that seems a peculiar idea. Almost as peculiar as selling a family photograph. Or asking a dealer to sell it for you. I lift the picture off the wall and turn it over. On the back is scrawled "Norris," the name

of the oldest sister, who died last year. There is no price. "Is it for sale?" I ask the proprietor. "Oh, yes," he replies, looking encouraged. But I'm more interested in the beautiful quilt, I decide, although I don't buy that, either.

In the weeks that follow, I can't get that picture off my mind. Not just for the wrongness of it to be where it is, but for all it suggests of the way our family was and isn't any more. It rises before me in the car on my way to buy new underwear for my forthcoming trip. I see it at the stoplight two blocks from the kennel where I'm leaving the dogs. The faces of the sisters at such times are hopeful. In the picture they can be judged only by what they show: fine bones, good posture and attire. Their faces expect a happy future, full of love and money. I think of my mother, too, the way she is now. Fighting age and illness. I would rather think about the photograph. I would rather see the face she wore then.

The next day I go to Dalhart. That's where the bride in the picture moved fifty years ago with the groom who wasn't photographed. I've planned the trip for months. I like to visit my Panhandle relatives: my aunt Therese, my cousins Liz and Steven and their respective broods. Getting to know each other all over again once or twice a decade. That lets me see their children growing in stages. So they are new people every time with faces that remember how they were, but vaguely. I have no children of my own.

It's especially important to see Liz. Of all the cousins, she's the closest to me in age. But, naturally, it is more than that. On the first night after I arrive, I am standing in her kitchen. She has put me to work dredging chicken pieces in flour while she chops vegetables for salad. We are talking about my mother. "Seventy is the cracking point," says Liz, bringing the blade of her knife a little too crisply into the meat of the board. Her mother turns seventy this fall and precedent has Liz worried. The women of our family tend toward robust health. Then, at seventy, come cataracts, arthritis, bad hearts, burst aneurysms. As though invitations had been sent. This was true of our great aunt and grandmother; of Eugenie, the sister who died. "It's hard to watch the people you love get old and sick," I say, thinking of the girls in the photograph. And for a moment they seem more alive to me than my mother did the day before, when I told her goodbye. I want to talk to Liz about the picture, but I don't know what I want to say.

The meal we sit down to is served on porcelain dishes, passed across one of my grandmother's tablecloths. The lace one I remember from holiday dinners. We

are using her monogrammed silver in the intricate old pattern she loved. And her crystal. I think it is her crystal, as I lift my goblet toward the chandelier. The red Bordeaux it contains pools and intensifies the light like stained glass. This, too, is as I recall from my grandmother's house where growing up was measured by where you sat and how much water they put in your wine.

Some things are missing, of course. Particularly, the clatter of French people speaking English. The conversations stepping on one another with words that could only be inserted sideways, where they are thinnest.

But the talk at Liz's table isn't so different, really. Like me, she and Steve speak quickly. Too rapidly for most people we know to appreciate. Tante Therese, across from me, speaks just as fast. And all this talk bristles with energy and opinion. What others would call argument, we have always called discussion. I'm more at home here than anywhere.

Later, as we are clearing away dessert, I ask Liz whether she thinks our family has changed much over the years. "Do you feel any sense of loss?" She looks at me with my grandmother's eyes. When they look at you directly, you know you're being seen. "No," she replies, gently. "Not loss."

"I was thinking about the extended family situation," I explained, "where everybody gets together and socializes. Where the family are each other's best friends, no matter what they say to one another."

"We do that," she says, moving two wine glasses to the sideboard. And she's right, of course. We've been doing it all evening. With her parents living across the street, and Steve raising his children one block over, they've recreated in Dalhart the family life I knew, following a pattern they weren't a part of, living so far away. I tell her then about the picture.

"I remember that photograph," Liz says. "It was hanging in Eugenie's study when I came down for the funeral. I thought it was odd."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that it was a picture of my mother's wedding and I'd never seen it before. I've never seen Mother's, assuming she has one."

"Assuming they all had one," I add, wondering about my mother. "Do you sometimes feel our family is unusually secretive?" I am balancing three dessert plates, with forks, in my left hand.

Liz smiles. "Absolutely."

"Do you have any idea why?" I put down the dishes. I want to concentrate on her answer.

She hesitates. "No. It probably comes out of their childhood, which they con-

sider perfect and won't discuss." She is still smiling, as though she accepts the situation.

"I guess so," I say, but I don't like it. Here's another secret, I think.

When I get back to Houston, I go to see the picture again. I've travelled in blue jeans, which my mother deploras but I prefer, so I don't even stop to change. The late afternoon air is heavy and damp on the skin and, as I climb the porch steps, I notice the shop's windows are nearly opaque with condensation. Going in, I head straight for the photograph. I'm determined to learn something from these faces. Some idea of myself I've missed. There must be a clue here, where the forces that shaped me are present under glass. I study the picture carefully. The expressions in the sisters' eyes aren't guarded, as they are in life. There isn't the opportunity for movement, either, to distract them from thoughts they don't like. Here, as in death, no movement is possible. The proprietor approaches, looking hopeful. "How much?" I ask. "Fifty dollars," he replies, but I shake my head.

That night I tell my mother about the picture. I am having dinner with her as I do twice a week which she considers minimal, hoping for more. She still lives in the home where I was raised, although now a lady comes at nightfall to cook and keep her company. Tonight she has let her companion go home early. This means she wants to talk business. She enjoys discussing finance, the stock market, that sort of thing. My father ran a lumberyard which she kept going for several years after he died and then sold for a good price. So she's no slouch where money is concerned. But this is different. Tonight she's talking bankruptcy. Her own imminent bankruptcy. What's going on? I wonder.

"Honey," I say, leaning forward in my chair and taking her hand. It looks like my hand, now it is thin. The skin on the back is smooth, unblemished. "There's no way you can go bankrupt. You get the statements. You see the dividends. You're OK. Better than OK, even."

"Do you really think so?" She turns her dark eyes toward me. My grandmother's eyes again. Too large for ordinary faces.

"Yes, I really think so," I say, as firmly as I can say anything.

"I hope you're right," she sighs, but I can see she isn't convinced.

"Is there something more to it?" I ask. "Is it something you can tell me about?" My heart beats faster. I am offering what I have offered before without success. My mother doesn't like to confide in me, but will occasionally, if I don't act interested. I have to be careful. This time she is weaker

than usual. She may give something away. She looks at me, measuring advantages. "Oh, it's nothing, really," she begins, her gaze drifting off into the air around her dressing table. "Something a fortune teller told me once, a long time ago."

That surprises me. She's always dismissed fortune tellers as frivolous. "You don't believe in that stuff, do you?" I ask. Then I remember how she won't let anybody put a hat on a bed. Ever. So that to this day I whisk hats off beds, in my own or anyone's home. I contain myself. I know better than to ask what the fortune teller said. "Was it a crystal ball or tarot cards or what? It makes a difference, I think."

"It happened before you were born. She read my palm."

"But palm reading is so obscure. All those little lines and you make up junk to fit them. Who was she? Was she a professional?" I am sure she's holding back the most significant detail.

"Just a woman at a party." Her eyes slide away again.

"Well, who? Please tell me. It might help."

"It was nobody," she says, but her voice is stronger. She is becoming annoyed with me. "Can't you see I don't want to talk about it?"

And it is later, as I'm leaving, that I tell her about the photograph. It just pops out. There's a picture of my father that I love, but which has faded badly, so Mother turned its face to the wall for protection. I see it standing there like it is being punished, and I remember the photograph of my aunt's wedding. So I tell her and she hits the ceiling, like I thought she would. She more or less collapses onto the *chaise longue*, gasping for breath. "How could they?" she says. She feels betrayed. That much is clear.

"Maybe it's an accident," I say, trying to calm her. "Settling an estate isn't always as tidy as a person might like." But Mother isn't listening. She's muttering about how strangers are looking at, even handling, this portion of her life. "Someone might buy it," she says in a constricted voice. After a minute, she whispers, "Sarah's responsible." Sarah is Eugenie's oldest daughter. They've never gotten along, competing as they did for Eugenie's attention. Mother goes silent, then, and as I monitor her breathing, I notice a funny thing. It may be true of any old person, lying down, especially if they're thin when they weren't for a while. Gravity seems to smooth the facial skin that time has stretched. So, as I watch her lying there with her skin resting closer to the bone than it has in years, I can see the girl she was in the photograph showing through the person she has become. I can see

both people in her at once for the first time and also myself, the way I will look and possibly be at her age. It isn't a pleasant sensation, feeling time just rush away beneath you like that, in both directions. "What do you want me to do?" I ask, finally, but she doesn't answer and a few minutes later I leave.

The next night I am invited to a party. That's unusual around here in August, since so many people are out of town, escaping the heat. But it's the hostess' fortieth birthday and she said the significance wouldn't be the same if she waited until September. "It's now I need distraction," she told me. So I go. Without a date. Dates are hard to come by at any time, but especially in this season. I don't really mind. Having a date doesn't make that much difference at a party anyway. I mean, if it can't be someone you care about. Either way, parties are usually lonely for me and this one is no exception. I steel myself. Walk up to a group of people standing inside the door. I know the women from my weekly exercise class. "Hi," I say, smiling intently.

"Hi, Mary." It's Joan who greets me. They're discussing her new car. An Audi.

"Why can't they make American cars handle that well?" a man asks. He is nice looking. Two lines connect the ends of his mouth with the sides of his nostrils. Otherwise he seems a contented person.

"But don't the new ones?" I interject, wanting to be part of the group. "The ones with front wheel drive?"

The man continues as though I'm not there. "I drove a rent car in Dallas the other day and it handled like a cheap boat."

"Speaking of boats," says the other woman, Betty is her name, "didn't you get a new ketch, recently?" She's addressing the man who made the comparison.

"What is the difference between a ketch and a yawl?" asks Joan, with a pretty smile. "I've always wanted to know."

At that point I leave them. I need a drink, I think. I need to examine the bookshelf. If I'm lucky, I might find something to read. Hear voices more interesting than the live ones so far encountered. Or someone equally spare might talk to me, for the short time I'll stay.

As I'm getting ready for bed a few hours afterward, the phone rings. It's Liz, calling long distance. "I hope I didn't wake you," she says.

"Oh, no," I reply, glad to hear her. I'm surprised how glad.

"I just had an interesting talk with Daddy and I wanted to tell you."

"Sure. Go ahead." I sit on the side of the bed.

"It's about that photograph. I've kept

wondering about it. I mean, why wouldn't Mother have shown me such a beautiful picture? You'd think she'd have been proud of it. I know I can't ask her, so I asked Daddy." She pauses. I hear her exhale. "He was reluctant to talk at first, but gave in when I swore not to mention it to Mother. He didn't say I couldn't tell you."

"I won't say anything, either. Go on."

"Well, he said there had been trouble at the wedding having to do with one of the friends in the picture. Apparently, one of them said something at a party the night before the wedding that upset your mother terribly. Daddy wouldn't tell me what. I'm not sure he knows. But your mother fainted and they had to call a doctor. Daddy said the photograph makes everyone unhappy and it's best left alone."

"It didn't make Eugenie unhappy," I say.

"What?"

"It couldn't have made Eugenie unhappy if she had it in her study."

"Yes, I guess that's so," says Liz. "It is odd, isn't it?"

"What's new?" I say. "But thank you for telling me. I've been trying to decide what to do about it."

"Yes, well, a *propos* of that, there's something else. I think I know how you feel, and I don't want to interfere, but there are some things a person can never know about another person. And maybe shouldn't try too hard to learn."

"OK," I say. "Thanks for the advice." And when I hang up, I realize I'm angry. Maybe I've been angry all along. Needing answers and getting lies, or blanks where explanations ought to be. So I've never understood the actions of people. The

connections or gaps between what they say and do. My family has abandoned me to this confusing world without directions. That's why I have to buy the picture. There's an answer there, if I look hard enough. There's an answer in the way it affects the people of my mother's generation, who are disappearing so fast. If I can take that picture to my mother, maybe it will force her to reveal why everything changed. Why the family get-togethers stopped—long before Eugenie died. Why she and I are so isolated here in this city of our birth.

So the next morning I go the store, but the photograph isn't there. In its place hangs a caricature by Spy. I can see the proprietor at the back of the store behind the glass partition, talking on the phone. I tap gently on the glass. He nods.

"I've come about the photograph," I tell him when he comes out. "You remember the one I've been looking at. It was hanging there." I point to the Spy cartoon.

"Oh, yes, I remember," he says. He has a round pinkish face that appears to be smiling even when it isn't. "There was an elderly lady in about it yesterday afternoon. I took it down so she could see it more clearly." He glances around him, a small frown beginning to dent the smooth curve of his forehead. "I thought I put it right here," he says, staring at the bare top of an English lowboy.

"The old lady," I say. "She didn't buy it?"

"No. I had to go into the office to take a call and when I came out, she'd gone. There were several people in the store at the time so I didn't notice at first. My assistant must have hung the cartoon this

morning."

"Maybe she took it," I offer.

"Oh, I rather doubt that. She didn't look the type. Well-heeled, you know." He looks at me, his natural cheerfulness rising again. "I say, I am sorry. It may turn up. Perhaps it's only been tucked away in a drawer. I'll have a look myself and ring you, shall I? If you'll leave your name."

So I do. I write my name, phone number and address on the back of one of his cards. I even smile. And slowly I go out, again, into the heat that is always a surprise. The noise of cicadas crowds me. I look for reassurance to the house across the street. One of my favorites, with its dark grey shingle siding and white trim like Nantucket houses. But it has become unfamiliar. Its lawn is as tidy as Astroturf, the color artificial, too blue-green for grass in summer. I sit down on a porch step. The house looks silly, I think. After all, this isn't Nantucket. And the house is a home for objects, not people. I am sitting on the front porch of one shop, looking at another across a street that has only survived by changing everything that is true about its nature.

Of course, I continue to think about the photograph and its disappearance. I would like to see it. To have it on my wall, for instruction, if nothing more. And I may someday, if my notion is correct. That my mother took the picture, as I believe. But the important thing is I've decided not to pursue the issue. Liz was right, on the phone that night. There's so little Mother can tell me, even if she wanted to, about any of the things that matter. Just the details of sad old stories, keeping the sadness alive into another generation, when we have enough of our own.

Reading Other People's Mail

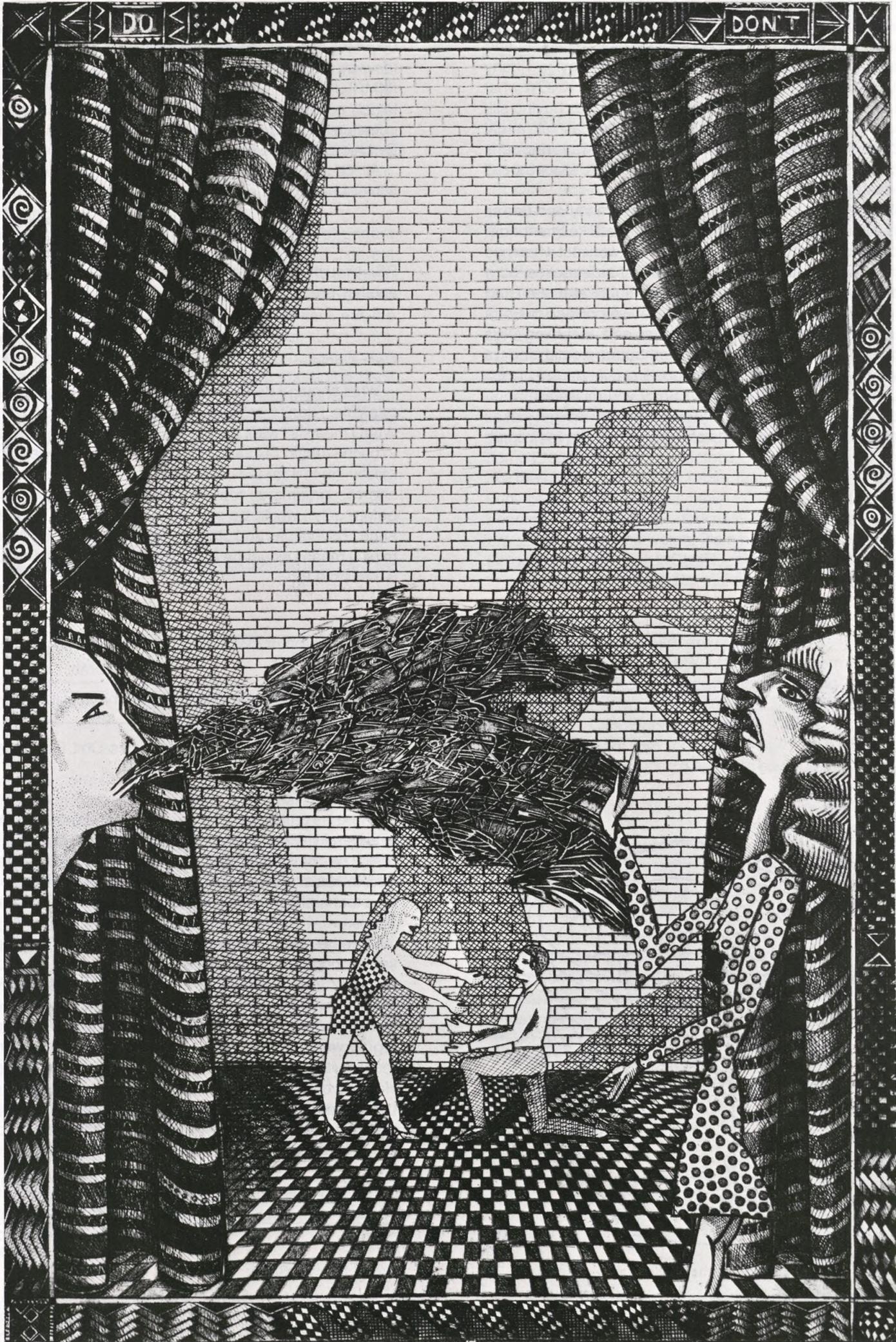
Gail Donohue

The Gold Coast
Tuesday

Dearest, and then more dear, Sarah,

Hottest news is that Peter and I have decided to become Feminists and stop being so campy and self-denigrating!! Don't you love it?? Daddy says I cannot be Vice-President of the Corporation until I get a wife on my resumé. Meanwhile I open the mail and get coffee for the secretaries. Mumso keeps saying, "Why don't you ask that nice girl with the Preppie boobs?" She means you of course swee'pea, but what can she mean by that??

I have been Trying not to Pressure you but I just took a Diet pill and I can't Help myself!! WHEN will you see the merits of my proposed contract, you little silly?? I mean Our contract. My



Karin Broker

attorney (a terribly cute number) is writing in an escalating clause for Inflation. Should you accept today (PLEASE, my little Croissant) you would get \$15,000 a year plus expenses and charge accounts at Bloomingdale's and Lord & Taylor. Tiffany and Gucci if you're good, when you're fifty. Do you KNOW what happened to me last Sat. at Bloomie's? While I was buying silk pajamas? The silly cash register broke and the cashier (a real Miss CandyTw*t) freaked and shrieked, "This always happens on Saturdays when you boys come to this store!" Now what did she mean by that?

I took a Diet pill because there have been so many won-der-ful FABULOUS dinner parties that we are all stuffed like Strasbourg geese. I am waiting to be patéed!! It doesn't work out when I go to the Y to work out because I always get sidetracked by a (censored!!) in the Snooze Room. Friday night Peter and I had one of our own notorious dinner parties—we popped out of a giant Baked Alaska and danced for the guests, including Olga the Amazing Ambassadors from Luxembourg; we did Isadora Duncan and Twyla Tharp for hours, knocking over drinks, plants, guests, and removing CLOTHES!! Sorry you missed it.

And Peter says if we have to marry somebody it might just as well be you, although he can't remember if you have Preppie

boobs or not. You have Got to come back and help me manage him—he has become a screaming Fuddy-Duddy!! I had to go up on the sun-roof to work on my tan and he informed me that a tan was something one shouldn't have to work on, that it was IMMATURE!? What the? But do you realize that it is impossible to tell someone Older than you that he is the one who is immature?? Take my word for it, it does not work. Also, his Byronic poses are becoming Tedious.

All my other news could be summed up in a word if I could think of one.

Toodles, Schatz,
Alfred.

P.S. You must come back and rescue me from becoming just another pretty Stereotype!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

From my existential capsule to yours

Dear Uncle:

What should I do? Alfred presses me to become his Corporate Wife. I don't want to BE married, I just want to GET married. What I mean is I want the big wedding with lots of presents and to be the center of attention for a day. And a big wedding cake, mostly I'm in it for the cake. Fifteen frosted layers with a bride and two grooms on top. And afterwards life would go on as before only I would be settled and would have to go to insurance conventions and other company picnics with Alfred in my mink. I mean I would be in my mink, although the Freudian slip is possible too.

Write me! Write me! Send me your business card in an old envelope.

Your affectionate niece,
Sarah

P.S. There is another boy I like, but he is still in school.

Boodles, Dolt, Bertle, and Smith
TGIF

Sarah, my friend,

There is no time so satisfying as one *in extremis*. One revels in adversity when it points directly to final things. But can you really be thinking of contracting this bizarre marriage with Alfred? His attorney sidled up to me at a Bar Association dinner the other night and whispered to me between speeches by the Twits.

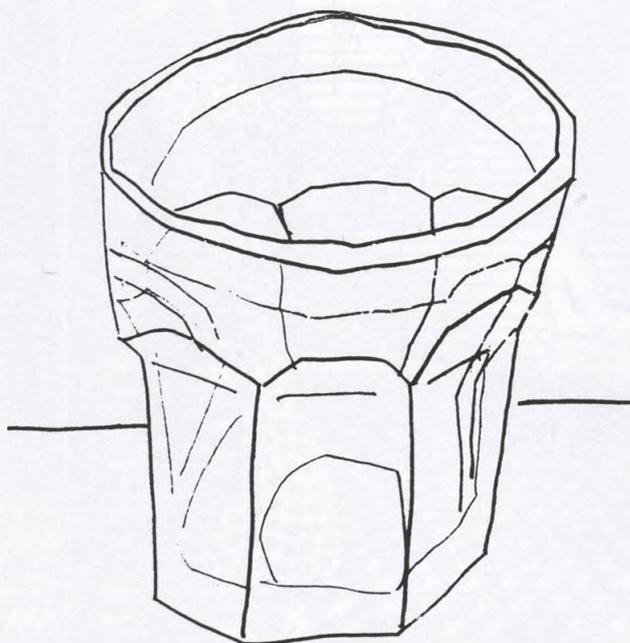
With the rest of Mother Nature's creatures, I too spent the spring longing for a mate. However, my nutritionist loves me because I stick to my diet and show the world that the Museum of Science and Industry display on a balanced diet is accurate. My hairdresser does very contemporary things and I'm learning to wear make-up. Reading the ladies' magazines one receives the impression that most of our sisters are floundering. Hardly a comfort, but one does feel less singular. I am going to be a federal judge and retire after my heart attack at 45. Marry Alfred? I already have an index card typed out for you in my Blackmail Box.

Your friend in anxiety,
Martha

The University Club

Sarah, Sarah, Sarah:

Attach yourself to Alfred or not; only do not delude yourself, illude, allude to changing him. Unfortunately, I've this week decided that all evidence overwhelmingly confirms my gloomy



Chris Plowman

theory that people don't change very much at all and that we all constantly repeat everything, mostly our errors. Squash is what's brought me to this conclusion; when I go to my Club, to my vast surprise I find that the same people are there and that all their strategies and skills are exactly the same. The games people play in squash are very distinctive; I'd have thought that everyone would have progressed, but it's not true. I also have the same game and the same philosophies, but lack the ability to make shots and move around the court as I should, which is very frustrating.

Examining my whole life, of course, provides overabundant evidence for this theory, since I've not done anything different for twenty years, but I'd always thought that was my problem and didn't apply to others. Alas; I find that, on closer examination, everybody does about the same stuff all the time, has the same weaknesses, and doesn't do anything at all about them. So, if you decide to jump over the proverbial broomstick, as it were, and don't care for it, you might consider jumping back over it the other way. But do nothing 'til you hear from me. What have you been doing? P.S. Who is this boy you like who is still in school? You are 35.

Uncle

Dear Uncle:

I know I am 35. I have just turned it.

When I was 34½, Aunt Maxine sent me a sympathy card for having passed marriageable age. Not a tragedy, she said, because who would have married me anyway?

Your pear-shaped, graying, wrinkled niece,
Sarah

University of Illinois
September 9 (36) see footnote

Dear Sarah:

Today my Doctoral Committee shook my hand and informed me that I too am a Doctor of Philosophy. A ten year undertaking, and now, regrettably, I am forced to learn a trade and have enlisted in Library School. Please continue to wait for me.

In addition, I am library student intern at the Urbana Public Library. My primary duty is wiping book jackets clean of soot from a fire when the boiler exploded. No one was here except the gerbils in the Children's Room, who were saved when the firemen put them in their pockets. A marvelous deistic metaphor. If only a large and capable hand would lift us from our smoky cages and carry us in its metaphysical pocket to safety! Perhaps I could have ghostwritten sermons for John Donne. I don't really want to go to Library School—maybe in Tahiti, when I'm fifty, should there still be libraries then. The world is going to explode and we deserve it, we decided recently at a tea in the Rare Book Room.

I have a new hobby: taking highly magnified (3100x) photographs of collagen fiber bundles of hot dog casings through an electron microscope. I am going to make Christmas cards from them.

All I really want from you is that you make an index for my dissertation which has to be published or perish. I can't bear to ever look at the Thing again.

As ever,
Spurgeon

P.S. Footnote: Those little numbers after the date come from Sweden, where they refer to the year in terms of weeks, rather than months. I understand from my reading, that, elsewhere,

business corporations sometimes see the year in such terms. I prefer to think of it as Swedish, and I plan to spend my life propagating its benefits.

The Gold Coast

Sara, Sweetums...

Talk about STEREOTYPE CASTING . . . we all flew out for the Fateful Night at the Oscars. Where is Hollywood GOING? But our lives remain unchanged: all that was always certain still is; all that was unsure remains in limbo and the dance continues, Kick, Shuffle, Step, "Higher, Girls!" If you were here as you ought to be, I would have dinner ready for you: flounder roll-ups with fresh-cooked spinach, homemade popovers, onion soup with melted mozzarella, saffron rice, a lovely white wine, tossed salad of Boston lettuce and escarole and cherry tomatoes, with the simplest of vinaigrettes. The napkins are blue and white, from Bloomingdale's; the plates are clear glass; through the glass plates one can see the table, insuring the stability of the undertaking!?

I have been THINKING of you; I mean to say I have been thinking of your CLOTHES! Do come for a shopping trip and go home ENGAGED! All your clothes should be the kind that look like they need to be ironed rather than ugh, that tacké permanent press, and all must have POCKETS. Colors such as charcoal, dark red, black, dark navy. No jewelry save some thin bracelets and a good watch. Plain black shoes, perhaps some Belgian flats. The Look is QUIET, conservative, with a bit of Flair in, say, the watchband. No make-up and stand upright. Of course good boots and dress length always below the knee. Tights under the dresses and above the flats. And a SMART winter coat, all-wool, dark grey.

Here is my favorite, ABSOLUTELY, line from *Trash*—Holly Woodlawn is having an affair with her sister, and Joe D. says to her, "How could you ***** your own SISTER?" to which the irrepressible Miss Woodlawn replies, "Well if you'll do it with strangers, why not with your own family?" So if all those nasty heterosexuals are getting married to each other, why shouldn't WE????????????????????

Kiss Kiss,
Alfred

Dear Uncle.

P.S. I forgot to thank you for your incisive comments on Immutability. I myself hope to survive existentialism by living on platitudes, like the one about the cup half-full instead of half-empty, and don't count your blessings before they hatch. Quite impulsively I bought a raffle ticket that said, "Need Not be Present to Win" and won a quilt made out of Salada tea bags, the ones with the sayings on them.

What have I been doing? You and I might both ask. Winter makes me capricious and perverse; I am afraid I am going to do something untoward.

Nervously,
Your niece

Boodles, Dolt, Bertle, and Smith
Today

Sarah, my poor friend:

You simply must do something about Alfred or do something to relieve me of my duties as your substitute. I thoroughly misrepresent myself, unbecoming in a future federal judge, to say the least, as Alfred's intended, *i.e.*, you. Alfred and I were forced by his parents to join their Arts Club Bowling League.

The bowling etiquette is most rigid, the scorekeeping complex; each box is bowled as ceremoniously as if it were a coronation. A strike entitles its bowler to a chaste kiss from each teammate of the opposite sex; I keep kissing the members of the opposing team and Alfred forgets where he is and kisses the men. Alfred's mother bowls in her mink. I confess I am fascinated to see how the other half bowls, but it is hard not to want the other ladies' jewelry. How do they handle balls with all those rings? Please come back and assume some sort of responsibility before I am compelled to steal, which would be unbecoming in a future federal judge.

Why do I have to be your substitute? Why do you have to marry Alfred? Why not be independent like me, and become a federal judge? I acquire a new strategy for the state of single blessedness daily, the way others assimilate new words into their wretched vocabularies. Today, for example, I learned how to change a tire, at Stewie's Tire Sales. I bought the tire, put it on myself, and paid Stewie's a dollar for the edifying lesson.

Can Alfred change a tire? Do you think Alfred would change a tire for you? If he would, let me know and I will pay a dollar to watch.

God Help Us All,
Martha

University of Illinois
46

Dear Sarah:

Thank you for making my dissertation index and for sending me a copy, which I am returning without corrections. As I have neither a copy of the typed ms. in its final form nor the printed page proof, I soon found that it was useless to try to check against my copy of the text. Since only the text is being indexed, and since the table of contents refers to them, I suppose it would be inconsistent to refer to, in the index, with inclusive pages, the bibliographical essay and the two appendixes. The only corrections I have noted are:

1. Dieresis for Kohlrube: Kohlrübe, Wolfgang, 54-55.
2. Omit Mögen and put page reference under Möhren, Gerhard, 72, 76.

The Mögen in the text, page 72, should be changed to Möhren. I find no "Mögen" in my ms. or in my typed copy; the reference is evidently to the legend by Stevens on the Appendix map to the contributions of Weil and Moren. I used the spelling Moren because that is Stevens' spelling, but I had corrected it to "Möhren" in my typed copy and evidently in some typing the "h" was misread "g." I am chagrined that I did not catch the error in the proof or galley. There is no Mögen, and Stevens' reference to Gerhard Moren's map in the legend is clearly a reference to Gerhard Möhren's survey. That the "h" is the correct spelling is proved by a holograph copy of the map that I came across in the Public Record Office after giving my dissertation defense and found in my notes later: P.R.O., C.O.6, 1956 (M.P.G. 734 (3)): "A map of the Province . . . compiled from actual surveys, the latest maps and other information. A.D. 1771 Per G. Möhren" (3'4.6 x 2'5.7).

I am sending a copy of this letter to the university press with the request and hope that the "Mögen" be changed in the text to "Möhren" (Moren is possible if the addition of "h" would cause difficulty in resetting: then "Mohren" in the Index could be followed by Moren to indicate that the spellings referred to the same person).

As ever,
Spurgeon

Dear Uncle,

Thank you for the 3-month membership at the weight-lifting studio. You are right that it is a good place to meet boys, but all these boys do is talk about mag wheels and when a Corvette goes by they drop their barbells and run to the window. Don't mind me, I'm just bitter this morning.

I have just come back from a visit to Alfred, who choreographed a trousseau expedition. He tore an ad for Geoffrey Beene pants out of *The New Yorker* and off we went to Lord & Taylor to tear them off the mannequin. Not an easy thing to do, as mannequins these days are in psychodrama poses, like people. Alfred also sprayed me with some kind of expensive perfume that I can't get off and that makes me smell like lettuce.

Your distraught niece,
Sarah

Cupcake, Iowa

Dear Sarah, dear,

What is it you are going to do that your Uncle won't tell me about? This birthday card will reach you late but I did not want to wish you Happy Birthday until I knew what it was. Which I still don't. It's a regular birthday card because I did not want to send you one of those belated ones. Anyhow, you think your birthday has come and gone and of course it has, but I think it is nice to have another about a month later—don't you? Especially when no one is expecting it.

Have enjoyed your notes! Nice to be appreciated even tho' it is not expected.

No doubt you and everyone else are wondering, "Whatever happened to Auntie Maxine?" Well I am still alive and kicking, but never seem to get to the things I want to do and should do because by the time I get the things done I have to do I am too darn tired to do anything else. How do you like that?

Well I bet by now you have given up on me, well I am still around. I just made my yearly donation to the hospital, this time it was my gallbladder, there is nothing left to donate now so next time it will be for an autopsy I guess. I am feeling just fine, don't you worry about me.

Your Uncle is so sweet. While I was in the hospital he sent me a dozen roses with a sweet note to eat the rose petals because they contain Vitamin C.

I have been busy, busy. You know how busy I am with the house and making sure your Uncle doesn't get sick. I only hope I get the housecleaning done before I die. I have been doing Spring housecleaning in the Summer, and Fall housecleaning in the Winter. It was long overdue. You should come and help me have a garage sale. If you don't I might sell just the very thing you treasured. Glad we didn't have one this weekend because we are having a tornado right now, and of course everything would blow around. The weatherman on the radio is so excited he is stuttering! Your Uncle wants me to come down in the cellar but this is the only time I can get to write your birthday note. Besides, I want to be on top of the rubble.

Must say bye for now. Uncle has been scolding me for not getting enough rest. I am flirting with a cold. You know how my poor body is booby-trapped.

Love,
Auntie Maxine

P.S. Happy Birthday dear.



Richard Thompson

Lena

"It's a miracle," she whispers
into the telephone, never says hello.
Lena dreams and wakes up dreaming.
The moon gives her messages
which she must then deliver:
monsters in the laguna,
lizards cause disease.
If a mama sees a lizard,
her baby is born pale green.
This is the oldest math,
one plus one equals anything,
and something else tomorrow.

"Mira, I saw a baby shaped
like an alligator,
his mother had too much water
in her blood."

It's easy as aspirin,
that little white pill
finding the pain.
Jim calls to say
his sister is ailing.
To which folktale
shall we turn this time?
There are worms in the apple,
snakes in the soup.
If I sprinkle rose petals
on the first bad dog I see,
we shall all be redeemed.

Lena, I follow you
trying to hear what you hear
in the creaking shift
of wood against wind
but all I hear are our sloppy feet.
You say St. Jude pinned to the sofa
will stop robbers.
I saw a steer loose in the street
and did not turn into a rustler.
I placed my hand on the face
of a mouse big as a rat
and felt nothing but his soft white beard.

Trying to Name What Doesn't Change

Roselva says the only thing that doesn't change is
train tracks. She's sure of it.
The train changes, or the weeds that grow up spidery
at the side, but not the track.
I've watched one for three years, she says,
and it doesn't curve, doesn't break, doesn't grow.

Peter isn't convinced.
He saw an abandoned track near Sabinas, Mexico,
and says a track without a train is a changed track.
The metal wasn't shiny anymore.
The wood was split, some of the ties were gone.

Next door butchers crack the necks of a hundred hens.
The widow in the tilted house spices her soup with cinnamon.
Ask her what doesn't change.

Stars explode.
The rose curls up as if there is fire in the petals.
The cat who knew me is buried under the bush.
The train whistle sounds like it used to sound,
only bigger. But when it goes away,
shrinking back from the walls of the brain,
it takes something different with it every time.

Hawaiian Punch Prayer, August

Pablo and I Have Lunch

Yesterday I felt comfortable
with my life of chicken coops.
A possum came to visit: this was news.
Today you list film-makers, dancers, writers,
quick foreign names. I have nothing to say.
You attack whole armies of thought
with a single spear and win.
Now you are telling me what to order,
sneering at pickles, raising your hand
like a priest over this shabby world.
Listen brother, I like my city.
I am getting older. This is not news.
The years between our sandwiches
have been slopes, gradual as New England.
Remember when we stood arm-in-arm
on the last day of the year, burning mail?
I live like that smoke.
I live like that poof and hiss, I stock up nothing.
This agenda you give me, this urgent demand
that I "branch out," is the last door
closing between us.
We are the twins
who did not live like mirrors.
On the way to the car we pass
Julio's Shoe Repair Shop,
scuffed heels piled like junk.
Julio hammers in the belly of the store.
He saw two miracles once.
I think you should be his apprentice,
learn to hold nails in your mouth.
And I want to ask him what goes through his head,
holding this thing of leather, this very simple thing
that has walked so far
for somebody else.

They pound on my door so long
I have to open it.
He asks if I'm sick,
if anyone in my house is sick.
"A man of optimism!" I say.
He does not smile.
She holds a Hawaiian Punch can
with the label soaked off.

One hundred degrees,
some months should be sidestepped
like dogs in the street.

"Is your mother home?"
he asks with that fishy voice.
I think, Probably. Maybe.
She is home in her own home,
who can see across
three hundred miles?

He offers to sell me a prayer.
"Very cheap, you name the reason."

I think how 30 years ago
my mother put me to bed
in a cradle of prayers,
stood singing in the shadows
till I let go her hand.

There were prayers
lodged between the teeth
of nuns in Cuzco.
In Guatemala
children whose parents had fallen
into the ground
touched our hair
and sang hymns.

And this is what I have come to?
Some days it looks like a long life
all up and down the street
with tired fans wheeling
and doors that only go shut.



Charlie Kubricht

Penson Roller Pigeons

Part I

I understand why you keep the pigeons.
They are the books
you write, scholar's achievements, leatherbound.

And the flights with them are
like the medieval monk's
in a hilltop monastery:

His flock was carefully edged, rowed and intermingled
with fleur-de-lis on delicate pages of manuscript
in renaissance colors, red, blue and gold.

On the other hand, you fly real birds upon water-marked skies.
The flock—a sphere, full of Japanese umbrellas—
becomes luminous purple, yellow, buff and grey.

You know each bird that will soar and twirl,
roll head over tail
as if shot in formation.

The performing space gathers to a center
and you return them to a coop—
pets to be praised with a handful of grain.

Part II

You know about praise,
held back too long—
the sunlight in your mother's eye.

You were her young dancing partner
she pressed like a wildflower
in a heavy book.

"Classical," she'd say of your writing and your teaching,
snatching a poem from your notebook
for her own.

So with age: The black roller hens have become buff,
teetering on weathered perches,
wobbly as young pullets.

Your imagination cannot pull you
from the pigeons, tumbling like spools of thread
on a string.

Their wings flutter and are reflected in your eyes—
a near perfect image spins
and spills off, freed.

Joyce James

On This Sunday

He moves around his friend's dead body
like prairie women tidying up on Sunday.
Searching for being
and unable to find anyone he knows,
he turns away, his back to the winds, a dust cloud following.

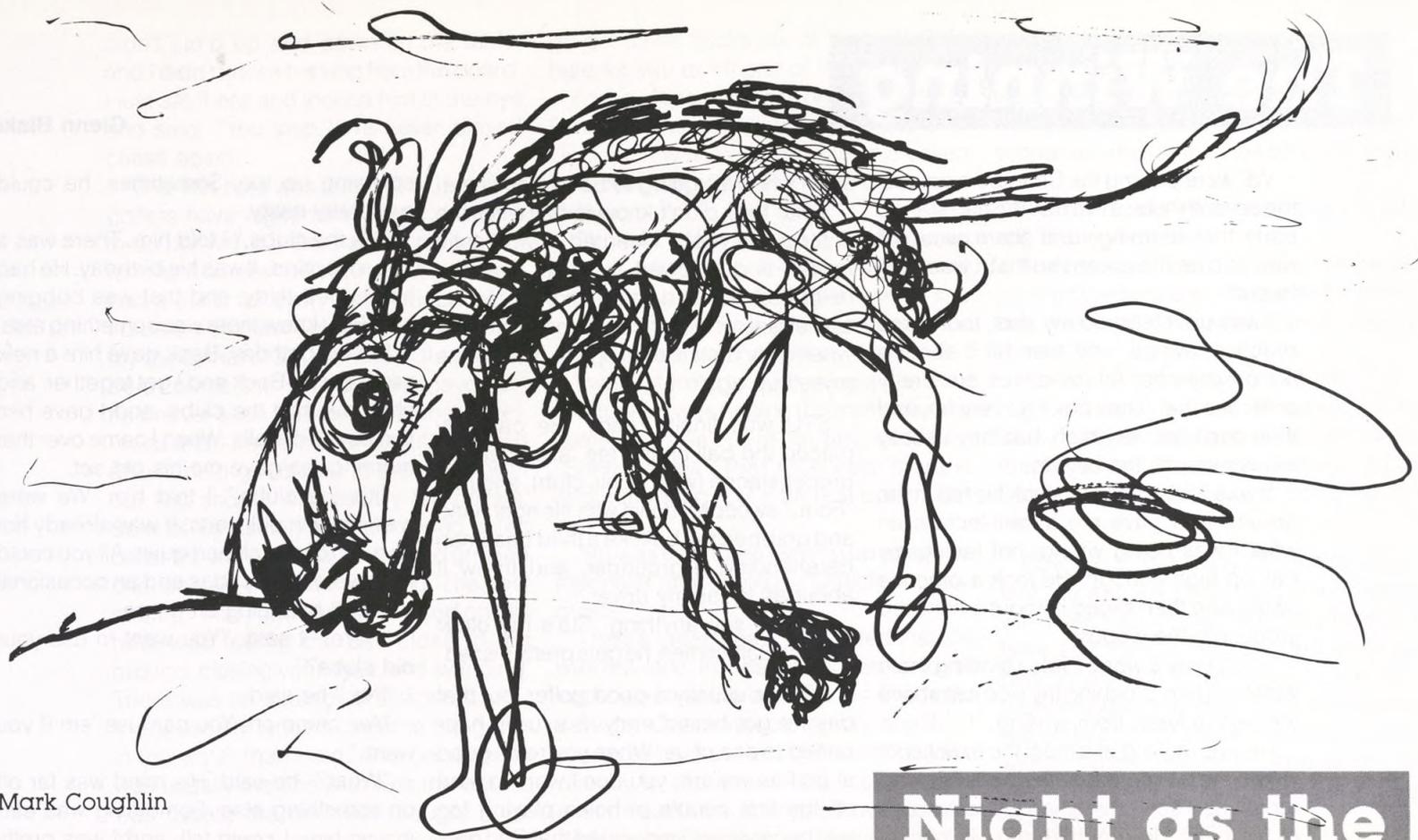
He tells me the great plains whipped life,
and mourns his dead friend, uncontainable
as the weather that stormed against West Texas homesteads.
The wind of the plains, straight and magnetic,
pulls through grain and grasses.

The women learned from the wind.
They dust the furniture
moving quickly across the room waving a gestured hand
as though pushing bothersome hair
out of their faces.

Tomorrow: more dust on top of dust.

The wind blows in this open-air parlor;
outside the cottonwood leaves rattle;
particles settle on Sabbath clocks.

Tom Ryan, 1913-1977



Mark Coughlin

Night as the Distance to Morning

Margaret Tufts

Living in the Cold

I remember how the window pane felt cold against my face
On the day you called to tell me he had died.
And how I leaned with the phone up to my ear
Toward the outside.
The ground was blank with snow.
And bodies bent into the solitary cold
Checked their steps across the icy walks.
All around, the air held that long blunt
Isolation that winters linger in.

Later, my forehead still pressed against the pane,
I watched the charred shell of the house next door
Being taken apart from the inside.
The ice house left by firehoses
Falling with its ashes into snow.
Those brittle noises hanging in the air
Like the ring of the phone.
And thinking they would go like cold,
I tried to stomp them from my bones.
But deep into the night I could hear the chain saws
Buzzing in the cavity, breaking the icicles
So that they fell away like long knives from the eaves.
I felt their wounds in my throat
And my words leaked out dwindling and unpronounced,
Having no sentences left to contain them as they were.

From where I lie I can see the door,
Ajar for the insects' ease,
And the peeling, shredded screen.
The night moves across rocks,
A river over my body.
The dark becomes hot summer
Hanging as thick and heavy
As wet wool around the halls.
I am held in by rumpled sheets,
Your arm close around me.
The air is blue, black and
Full of the echoes of my last conversation.
They grow louder as I listen.
Your easy monotonous breathing
Moves in and widens the river.
The boatman refuses to let me across.
I have only a leg-aching impatience for morning
And I know this is not enough.
The night entices me, full
Of the round promises of sleep.
And sleep flits in and out the door
Romancing the insects,
Until I want to scream
For it to lie with me.
Upstairs there is water running,
Not in drips but a ticking stream.
I see it coming through the ceiling.
It is either sweat or tears.
I can no longer tell the difference.
The heat is fusing our skin
But what is close becomes too distant,
Like sleep and the morning.

The Winning

Glenn Blake

WE were playing the Chambers course, the seventh hole, a five par. We had started early that morning, and there was still dew all over the greens so that it was hard to putt.

I was up. I teed up my shot, took three practice swings, and then hit it about a hundred yards. All my drives are pretty shitty like that. They don't go very far, and they don't get very high, but they usually always stay in the fairway.

It was Stu's shot. He stuck his tee in the ground and gave me a mini-lecture on what I was doing wrong: not teeing my ball up high enough. He took a practice swing and then sliced it about a hundred yards into the woods.

I didn't say a word. I was standing there watching him, pinching my side just above the belt to keep from smiling.

He was looking at almost the exact spot where the ball entered the woods, looking forlorn as if something had just eaten one of his pets. He reached into his pocket and pulled out another ball and took an illegal Mulligan.

"Sure, go ahead," I said, as if it mattered.

He very carefully placed his ball on the tee, slowly addressed the ball, took a practice swing, and then hit it like a center-fielder. The ball hit a pine tree about fifty feet out to the right. It rolled back in our direction, back on the tee box, pretty close to where his tee was. He reached down and picked up the ball and inspected it like maybe it was defective.

I was standing there biting an inch out of the inside of my cheek. I was trying to concentrate on the trees at the far end of the fairway, trying to act as if I didn't see him muff it. I could barely see the pin, the red flag hanging straight down. There wasn't a breeze. I could remember playing in the woods not too far from there, before we moved to the city, playing Houdini, the magician.

I was always Houdini. Stu said it was a big honor. Some days, Mamma would drive into Beaumont shopping with Mrs. Fischer, and Stu would have to babysit me. We would wake up real early on those mornings, and Stu and Bubba Fuller would take me way out in the woods to their clubhouse and tie me to this chair. Then they'd tell me that I was Harry Houdini, the greatest magician that ever lived, and that if I concentrated real hard, I could untie myself and escape. They usually came back for me sometime in the afternoon about the time Mamma would be getting home, arguing the whole time between

them who was going to be Houdini next.

What they didn't know is that after the first couple years, I learned how to untie myself and followed them all over the neighborhood and spied on them, found all their secret hide-outs. Then I'd run back when they'd start coming for me and tie myself up again.

STU was finally ready. He carefully placed the ball on the tee, assumed the proper stance (without his club), shouted "Fore," swooped down with his right hand and grabbed the ball like a third baseman barehanding a grounder, and threw it about as far as my drive.

I didn't say anything. Stu's my older brother. Sometimes, he gets pretty pissed.

HE was usually a good golfer, but that day he got hexed early. It usually happened to one of us. When you're as good at golf as we are, you don't want to start off the first couple of holes playing too well because we've decided that God gets pissed at you and starts screwing you up, puts a hex on you. Any golfer will tell you. You start playing great on the first two or three holes, and then you start trying to concentrate on what you're doing right, and then it gets to the point that you can't even *hit* the ball.

That day it was Stu's turn. The first hole was a four par. He parred it. The second hole was a difficult four par with a hard dogleg to the right. He had a great drive and a super great approach shot that landed about fifteen feet from the hole. He could two-putt it, and he'd have another par. He one-putted it. He got a birdie. When he pulled his ball out of the hole, he looked at me kind of sorry that he'd made such a good putt, shook his head and said, "Well, I'm fucked to the gills now."

Stu was in a good mood. He was always in a good mood as long as he was winning.

"Yeah," I said. "You'd better just go back over and sit in the car for the rest of the day. God's not even gonna let you hit another ball in the fairway."

The third hole was a five par. He got a twelve. On the next hole he had to take a penalty stroke for hitting his ball out of bounds. It was a four par, and he got an eight. It was already the fifth hole, and he was already pissed, saying things like, "This is a wasted goddamned day," and "Next time, don't call me! I don't care anything about playing this game again. Don't call me! O.K.?"

Stu usually said all that kind of stuff to hurt my feelings or to make me start

screwing up too. Sometimes, he could get pretty nasty.

"It's the clubs," I told him. There was a lot on his mind. It was his birthday. He had just turned thirty, and that was bugging him. But I knew there was something else.

For his birthday, Beck gave him a new set of clubs. Beck and I got together, and she gave him the clubs, and I gave him two boxes of balls. When I came over that morning, he gave me his old set.

"It's the clubs," I told him. We were walking with pull carts. It was already hot as a son of a bitch and quiet. All you could hear were the cicadas and an occasional golf ball bouncing off a tree.

"Here," I said. "You want to use your old clubs?"

"No," he said.

"Aw, come on! You can use 'em if you want."

"What?" he said. His mind was far off on something else. Something was eating on him. I could tell, and I was pretty sure I knew what it was.

"Sure you don't want to? Use your old clubs? Sure?"

He stopped walking. He turned around and looked me in the eye and said, "No! Now would you just shut up! Just shut the fuck up, and I might be able to play!" If you work on some people and get them pissed off enough, they won't even be able to curse right.

He turned and started walking again for the fifth tee. He had a pretty blue and silver golf bag that the old man had given him. I had his old reject.

"Jeeesus!" I said. "I'm sorry. I just thought you might have better *luck* playing with your old clubs, but I'll shut up."

I had never beaten him at golf. Come to think of it, I had never beaten him at any game that meant a lot to him. Except chess.

He taught me how to play when I was in kindergarten (anyway, that's what Mamma tells everyone). I only remember that I was real young and that he would fool's mate me about every game. I can still see him sliding his queen slowly across the board and knocking my king from the table. He'd grin and say, "Checkmate Scrote! What you need is a lot of practice. A *lot* of practice." He'd laugh, get up from the table, kick the screen door open, and go outside while I'd sit there, pick my king up from the floor, and practice.

One Christmas, some thirteen years later, after a *lot* of practice, I came home from college, and we played a game that lasted over two hours, and I beat him. I

didn't jump up and down on the table, and I didn't knock his king from the board. I just sat there and looked him in the eye and said, "You lose." We never played chess again.

THE fifth hole was the kind of hole that golfers have nightmares about. It was a three par with a water hazard in front that formed a horseshoe around the green. If I had a dollar for every ball in that hazard, I'd be a rich man. There was no doubt in my mind, that of all the holes of the Chambers course, the fifth was God's favorite. I had never seen a human clear that water.

Stu and I had a standing bet on which of us could get closer to the green with our first shot. It was usually ten dollars. Both of us usually brought along a ten dollar bill and a special ball, an old gnarled one, one we didn't mind losing. The best strategy that I had ever seen used on this hole was teeing the ball close to the ground, closing your eyes, and swinging. There was no strategy that worked.

Stu usually landed closer to the green in the water than I did. And because he was usually the one who won the bet, he was usually the one who brought it up. That day, considering the way he was playing, I knew that I could get closer. And I knew that he knew it. It would be interesting to see if he would bring up the bet. If he didn't, it meant that he was afraid of losing.

"O.K. Scrote," he said. (That was my nickname. That's short for "Scrotum." That was Stu's favorite. His old school friends used to call me that when I was little, along with "Asshole" and "Shithead." But "Scrote" was their favorite. That was my informal name. My real name is Richard so that when I was in public, it was a more formal, "Hey Dick! How's it hanging?" A lot of thought always went in with the creation of those names. Back then, I had a few for him too that I'd use when I wanted to get the dog shit beat out of me. Big brothers are wonderful. Everyone should have about a hundred of them.)

"O.K. Scrote," he said. "What's the bet? Ten big ones? You're up."

I pulled a seven iron out of my bag. "All right," I said. "This is your idea now. If you lose, don't go screaming at me all afternoon."

"Come on, little brother," he said. "Which of us is 'the loser'?"

"Fuck you," I said.

"Don't nut up now! Don't hit it in the water!"

I was concentrating on the green. No, I was concentrating about fifty or a hundred yards past the green. There were some ducks in the hazard. They were swimming around, quacking.

Stu said, "Hey Scrote! You want me to

go get those ducks out of the water? I'd hate for you to kill one of them."

I was concentrating on the cliffs of Dover. I was standing on the shore at Dunkirk. It was just a nice, simple seven iron over the channel. I took a practice swing.

Stu said, "Hey Scrotum! I just saw an S.P.C.A. van pull up. The driver's got some binos on you. He said he's gonna sue your asshole if you get anywhere near one of those baby duckies."

I was listening to every single quack of the ducks. I was hoping the mother would somehow raise one of her wings and say, "Shhh babies! That man over there is about to swing. Let's be real quiet!" But she didn't.

Stu was over there leaning up against a magnolia tree going, "Quack, quack-quack."

I had a great idea. I pretended that Stu was real little, that he was buried up to his neck, and that the ball was his little head saying, "Quack-quack, quack-quack." I swung as hard as I could. The ball headed directly for the water like a line drive, but when it got there, it skipped twice on the surface and landed on the fringe of the green.

Stu said, "You lucky little bastard."

I wanted to jump up and down and shout like a kid, but I didn't.

Stu pulled a club out of his bag. He was just looking at me and shaking his head. He was ready to hit. "By the way," he said. "You are coming tonight, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm coming," I said. "I thought I might bring a date if that's all right with you."

"A date?" he said. "A date?! That's fine with me, little brother, if you think you can handle her, but I don't want you getting a hard-on right in the middle of my birthday party." He laughed.

"You want to double that bet?" I said. He stopped laughing. "Or are you a chickenshit?"

"You got it," he said.

The ducks were going wild. They were really quacking it up, trying to get out of the water. They had realized that they were in the line of fire.

Stu drew back and hit a beautiful shot that landed almost exactly in the center of the water hazard.

It's enough to make you wonder sometimes if there's not a special kind of water in those hazards.

I was about to let out a good laugh that we could both share when he kicked a large divot out of the ground and shouted, "Son of a *bitch!*"

Then I said something I didn't think before saying but I said it to make him feel better which it didn't. I said, "Come

on, Stu. It's just a game."

"No!" he shouted in reply. He spun around and pointed his finger at me. "No! No it's not just a goddamn game! And the sooner you realize that, the better off you'll be."

"Well," I said. "I just don't see you letting it ruin your day."

And he said, "You don't see it because you don't understand. You never have had and never will have what it takes to be a winner."

"Let's just get nasty," I told him.

"That's what it takes sometimes," he said. "It takes getting nasty. And if I don't teach you anything else, I want you to learn how important it is to come out on top."

FOR Stu, it had always been too important. He was the kind of guy who loved to win. I don't doubt that that's why he didn't have any friends. He used to love to go play tennis with some of his high school friends and stomp the shit out of them. He got off to that. Of course, nobody played with him more than once. And as one by one his friends left him, I was getting old enough to be his patsy.

Stu never bragged. I'm not saying that. But he could play you, and he could look you in the eye and still stomp you at damn near any sport you could name.

It was *totally* because of this that I loved to beat him. Sure, there were times when I was younger when I'd run to Mamma after he'd beaten me, but those times passed, and I decided that no matter how long it took me, no matter how much I had to suffer, that of the two of us, one day, he would have to admit to himself that I was "the winner."

ONE day we were jousting, and he split my head open. We were playing knights of the Round Table, and he was Arthur (he was always Arthur), and I was Lancelot. Of course, whoever got dubs on being Arthur was guaranteed victory. Arthur always won. He had Excalibur. *Almost* always.

We didn't have steeds or armor so we used bicycles. Bicycles were the steeds, and because you couldn't hold both lance and shield and steer your steed, you needed a squire. The squire steered and ducked his head to keep clear of the action and pedaled like a fiend. Both of you sat on the banana seat. The squire sat in front. For shields, we used garbage can lids. For lances, commode plungers.

We followed normal jousting rules. Both squires took the steeds to the opposite ends of the street. Then each knight raised his lance high in the air and screamed. The squires started pedaling, building up speed, and the knights lowered their

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lances, preparing for the attack.

As in regulation jousting, you tried to stick your lance to your opponent's shield and then pull it away from him. Then on the next pass, you could poke him or his squire in the head with your lance and knock them off their steed.

On that particular pass, Stu stuck his lance to my shield, but as it happened, I pulled it free from his grip. So as the squires turned for another pass, Stewart had only a shield. I told my squire I wanted a fast pass. I threw down my shield, grabbed the squire around the neck with my free arm, and shouted, "Let's go!" I got my lance ready. (That was another good thing about those plungers. You could swing them like a battle ax if you wanted. That was in the rules.) I was going to behead Stu or his squire. When we met, I was preparing to hit his squire in the throat when Stu crashed his shield into the side of my head.

I spent something like a week in the hospital.

STU was quiet for the rest of the nine. I didn't want him quiet. When he got quiet, he quit trying. I didn't want him to quit trying.

As we walked to the sixth hole, the ducks were regrouping, recuperating from the shelling.

I told him the story about the judge and the geese. There was this judge from Georgia or Virginia or somewhere who was playing a game with his doctor friend. They were betting something like a hundred dollars a hole, and it all came down to the eighteenth. They were even. That hole had a water hazard with a lot of geese in it. Anyway, the judge was putting, and one of the geese slipped up and pecked him on the ass. I think he screwed up his putt pretty bad, knocked it off the green and into the water. Then, he said, they all started laughing at him, the geese I mean, kind of honking, so he hauled off with this putter and killed about six of them. I think he's in prison now.

AND so on the seventh hole Stu was throwing it. I told him that I'd read somewhere that the world record for throwing the ball for eighteen holes was ninety-three. "Jeeesus!" I told him. "We ought to both start throwing it."

When we got to the greens, he got down on his knees and shot the ball like a marble. He got a ten and a nine on the seventh and eighth holes.

As I was walking up to the ninth tee, he said in almost a whisper, "Let's just go home, O.K.?"

"What?" I said. I was beating him for once. "You don't want to play the back nine?"

"No," he said. "No, let's just go to the house. Now. If you don't mind."

"All right," I said. "Sure. You don't want to finish this hole?"

"No."

"You're not sick are you?" I said. "Why? What's the matter?"

"No," he said. "Let's just go home."

I put my driver back in the bag and started walking for the car.

About halfway down the fairway, he said, clear out of the blue, "Richard, promise me you'll never get married."

"What?!" I said.

He said, "Promise me."

"Sure," I said. "I hadn't planned on it. Why?"

"Because it doesn't work," he said. "I don't know. You see all those T.V. shows where everyone's happily married. Well, it's all a lot of bullshit. Don't ever buy that bullshit that it works, O.K.? Because it doesn't."

"I won't," I told him. "Trouble at home? You and Beck having some problems?"

"No," he said. "Yeah, sort of. Nothing I can't handle though. Nothing I can't handle."

On the next fairway, normal people were playing golf.

THAT night I picked Connie up at eight. We had been dating about two months. Nothing serious, just a nice, slow, no obligations relationship. I don't care much for her. She's a nice girl and all, a blonde, on a good day she's probably a five on a scale of one to ten. She's not a barker. Don't get me wrong. Let's just say she's "sweet" looking. Personally, I prefer brunettes. I sort of howl at the moon when I'm around one. But Connie doesn't give me any bullshit. That's what I like about her. She hardly says anything. I like that. So I'm sticking with her for the time being.

Connie had seen Stu over at my place once, but she had never met Beck. I told her that Beck's real name was Rebecca, and that she'd probably better call her Rebecca at first. I told her that Beck taught at the high school; she was the girls' gym coach, and she was probably the most beautiful brunette I had ever seen.

Connie asked me to stay close and not run off and leave her around people she didn't know very well. I told her I would. She made me promise.

When I turned onto Stu's street, I told her that that was the street I grew up on when we moved to the city, and that Stu's house was just two houses down from where Mamma still lives. I told her how the old man died the week before I was to graduate from college and how, about six months later, Stu had bought *his* house to keep an eye on Mamma.

I pulled into Mamma's driveway and parked and told Connie that she'd better wait in the car until I saw if Mamma was feeling O.K. Mamma got "sick" just about every day and couldn't get to the phone so that it was good that Stu lived so close and could check in on her. If she was feeling like it, I was going to take her down to Stu's for some cake.

It was just about dark. The gas light hadn't worked since the old man died. I picked up the two morning papers from the lawn and got the mail from the box. Sometimes, I liked to check to see if any of the mail was still for me. It wasn't. The T.V. was blaring so loud that I could hear every word before I opened the front door.

Mamma was sprawled out on the couch with her mouth open, snoring. I turned the T.V. off. "Mamma," I said. "Mamma?" She didn't move. There was a cigarette still burning on the lip of the ashtray about to fall off onto the carpet. I spread her Afghan over her feet.

I wanted to look at my old room before I left. It was at the end of the hall, next to Stu's old room. There was the fist hole at about eye level in my door. I hated coming back to that old room. I don't know what I expected, maybe for things to return to the way they had been before Stu moved out, before the old man died, before Mamma got sick.

It was empty. I had moved everything out when I left home, and Mamma had taken down everything else, all the pictures, the posters. She had even taken the drapes down. All that was left were three ceramic chess pieces on the far wall. There were only three of them, the king, the queen, and a knight, maybe there had been more of them at one time.

I looked through the window and saw a young boy with a B.B. gun walking through the back yard. It was time to go.

Without thinking, I said, "Good-bye Mamma."

And she said, "You going?"

I turned around and said, "Yes ma'am. I didn't mean to wake you." Her eyes were closed again, and she was snoring. I turned the T.V. on again and walked out through the garage.

It was empty. Stu had moved all the old man's tools down to his garage, the table saws, the drill presses. He set them up exactly like the old man had them. He had his garage arranged exactly like the old man's used to be, a couple of houses down. He even had the old man's sign, "Stewart Morrison," nailed up over his workbench in just the right spot.

In a way, I think that Stu was trying to recapture the old man. I can see the old man in him. And sometimes, I'll drive up in his driveway, and the garage door will be



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open, and he'll be slumped over his workbench, hammering or sawing on something, and for an instant, I'll think that he is Daddy and that I'd better hurry up and get in there and help him.

I turned off the garage light, closed and locked the door, and walked to the car. I told Connie, "Maybe you can meet her some other time."

"Is she sick?" Connie said.

"In a way," I said.

WHEN we got to Stu's house, the garage light was on, and he was in there sawing. I knew that if he cared anything about seeing us he could have been inside. Besides, I wanted to see Beck first and see what was going on so we walked up the sidewalk to the front door. I opened the door and said, "Knock, knock!"

Beck was in the kitchen. "Come on in," she said. "I'll be in there in a second." She walked around the bar, carrying the cake, and set it on the dining room table. She had different shades of icing on the sleeves

of her pullover. She looked delicious.

"Hello gorgeous," I said and gave her a shortened hug because of Connie. "Beck, this is Connie. Connie, this is Beck." And before they could say their "Nice to meet yous," "I've heard so much about you," "You have such a pretty house," I said, "What's old Stu doing in the garage?"

Beck smiled at Connie and then looked at me and said, "He's on a little tirade. But it's his birthday." She looked at Connie. "He's entitled to it."

"Sure," Connie said.

Beck pointed to the cake and shook her head. "Look what he did to my little golfer."

The cake was white with a putting green centered on the top of it. There was even a blue water hazard to the left of the green. On the green was a little man that looked like he was putting.

"That's *absolutely* adorable!" Connie said.

"I did it all by myself," Beck said. "But

look what he did."

I looked closer.

"I had to special order that little golfer from Houston," she said. "And a little while ago Stu walked through here with a pair of scissors or something and cut the guy's little putter off."

I could see the little guy on the green, but he didn't look much like a golfer. He looked more like one of those little plastic army men I had when I was a kid, the one with the mine detector. This little guy was just standing there, holding something.

"I threw the little thing away," Beck said. "I thought it looked kind of disgusting."

"Well I'll tell you what it looks like now," I said. I looked at Beck then at Connie. "It looks like that little fellow's standing right out in the open, in front of God and everybody and taking a piss right there on Stewart's birthday cake."

"Richard!" Beck said.

Connie just bit her lip and shook her head.

I got a good chuckle out of it and said,

"I'll go out and cheer up old Stubert."

"Good!" Beck said.

"I'll go out and tell him some guy's in here taking a leak on his birthday cake." I gave Beck a big grin. She turned her head away from Connie and winked at me.

Stu was at the workbench with his back to me. He was using a hacksaw.

"Here's the birthday boy," I said. "Hey not so big brother, Mamma said to tell you she was sorry she couldn't . . ."

"Go back inside," he said. "I don't feel like talking to anybody." He had his golf bag leaned up against the workbench. He had something in the vise, and he was sawing.

"Why?" I said. "What are you working . . . What are you doing? What in the hell are you doing?!"

He had one of his new clubs, an iron, in the vise lengthwise, and he was sawing it in half. I looked in the trash can, and he had already done two or three.

"Have you lost your fucking mind?" I said. "What's going on?"

"This is a symbol," he said. The handle part of the club he was working on fell to the floor. He loosened the vise and gave me the other end. It was the seven iron. He pulled the six out of his bag and clamped it into the vise.

He said, "This is a symbol of what I think of Beck's little affair."

"What?" I said. I tried to sound surprised.

"Yeah! She's sleeping with somebody."

"How do you know?" I said.

He stopped sawing. He turned around and looked at me. "I know!" he said. "I don't know who it is yet, but I know she's doing it. You know, when we first got married, she told me that if I was to ever kiss another woman, I mean *really* kiss another woman, that she'd be able to tell. Well, that works both ways, sport. It works both ways."

"Aw, come on, Stu," I said. "Beck wouldn't do that to you."

He started sawing again. "Yes she would," he said. "You see, she hates me in a way. Just like you hate me, Richard."

"Well, let's just feel sorry for ourselves," I told him.

"Listen!" he said. "If you're going to give me any of your bullshit, I don't want you out here!"

"O.K." I said. "Sure. I get the picture." I opened the door.

"Hey Scrotum!" he said. He still had his back to me. "I had a bad round today, and you beat me. You beat me on what has been maybe the worst day of my life. Now when you get home tonight, you be sure and celebrate."

I closed the door behind me. I could

hear the girls talking. I listened. They were talking about school. Connie was studying to be a school teacher, and Beck was telling her about our school district. I put a smile on my face and walked into the dining room where they were drinking some of the birthday punch.

Beck stopped what she was saying and asked me, "Did you cheer him up?"

"Sort of," I said. I couldn't tell her. I knew there would be fireworks as soon as we left. I didn't particularly want to be around Beck and Connie in the same room so I asked her, "Where's little Stu?"

"In his room," Beck said. "Don't get him all worked up."

The hallway was dark, and I could see the light on beneath his door. I knocked once, and the light went off in the room.

"It's open," a voice said from inside. I opened the door and stepped in. "Close it behind you," the voice said. I closed it. I was trying to locate him by the sound of his voice. A flashlight was shined in my face, and the voice said, "Password."

"Talleywacker," I said.

"Uncle Rick!" the voice said. "I didn't know it was you."

"Bullshit!" I said. "Now where are the lights?"

"Behind you," he said.

I found the switch in the dark and flipped it. He turned the flashlight off. He was on the top bunk of Stu's old bunk bed. He had a football helmet on, a flashlight in one hand, and some kind of ray gun in the other.

"My god!" I said. "It looks like you're ready for an attack."

"I am!" he said.

I looked around the room to see if I could find any of my old toys and stepped carefully over the things on the floor. "You know, Stewart, you really ought to clean this place up," I told him. "One of these days you're gonna get lost in here, and your mother's not going to be able to find you. Where are they?"

"I already set them up," he said.

"Good! Where's the gun?"

"I'll get it," he said.

"Get that and get the tape."

He brought the tape and the B.B. gun that looked like a Winchester, and I started taping the flashlight to the left side of the gun barrel while he was opening the drapes and opening the window.

"You go first," he said and turned out the lights. He had already taken the screen off when he had crawled out the first time.

The windows in his room were full length so that we had to get on our bellies to shoot. I cocked the Winchester and turned on the flashlight and surveyed the back yard. There were a dozen six inch plastic army men situated at strategic places

prepared to attack the Morrison household. The way we played is that each of us took turns shooting, and whoever killed the most out of twelve won that round.

I located each soldier and shot the one closest to the house, a hand grenade thrower, perhaps the most potentially dangerous. I handed him the gun.

"You know, Geek, you did a really fine job setting up those men," I told him. "Now take that damn helmet off so you can see what you're doing!"

"You're the geek!" he said. "You even smell like a geek."

"Shut up and shoot," I told him.

WE played for about half an hour until I saw it was around nine and time for us to go. I helped him get the screen back on and closed the window.

It had been a close game, and he had won, or he, at least, thought he had won.

I told him good night, closed his door, and walked back into the dining room. The girls were still talking, and they had already started on the cake.

I asked Beck, "Stu didn't blow out the candles?"

"Ha, ha," she said. "I thought we'd better go ahead without him. Besides, you don't ask a dragon to blow out candles."

I looked at Connie and said, "We'd better be going."

And Beck said, "You don't have to run off."

I looked at her, pointed in the direction of the sawing, and nodded my head.

"O.K." she said. She looked at Connie. "You'll have to come back and see us. Hang on, and you can take some of this cake." She walked around the bar and brought back two paper plates. She cut the cake and placed the pieces on the plates like a pro. She wrapped them and handed them to Connie.

"Thank you," Connie said.

We walked to the door.

"It was nice to meet you, Connie," Beck said.

"It was nice to meet you, too," Connie said. She had a plate in each hand.

Outside, I said, "I'll go say bye to Stu."

Beck said, "Good night."

Connie said, "Good night."

I walked around to the side garage door. He was up to the woods now. He was on the three wood. I stepped inside and said, "Happy birthday, big brother."

"Yeah! *Happy* birthday," was all he said.

I walked back around front. Connie was already sitting in the car with her door open. I waved at her and pointed to the front door. I wanted to tell Beck about Stewart. I wanted to warn her. I opened the door and leaned in and said, "Enjoyed it!"

Tree Heart

In my wondering I circle it, back-curved
From the trunk of an oak, one of many

Stalled, as every living thing is stalled,
Between the earth and sun. The heart is shaped

As we are fond of thinking of a heart,
More and more round, and cleft, and wounded

With desire, the words that are desire adding
Little to the present, nothing to the past.

It isn't much. What can be sensed, perhaps,
And what is sought is something of the spirit

Of the loved that is tangible, something more
Than this alphabet of longing—the need

To state the need, at least once, clearly,
In terms that might last only slightly longer.



Tea Rose

If it grows at all, it grows in early March
Alone, by a field, stubble
And partly plowed,
The sadness of its salmon-colored buds
Apparent in perspective.
From the other side,

Looking back, toward what soon will be remembered
As her life—the gardens, walks,
The screened porch
Where one summer the piled-up Santa Rosa plums
Sweetened the air for days—
The rose is central.

It is hardly dawn. I've been up and troubled,
Torn by what she suffered and
Survived, by what
Dies, and what lives on. Slick and clustered,
Magenta, the leaves turn,
And turn again

With the wind, like fish wallowed in a current.
I hadn't thought that time
Could show the loss
I feared the most, in all its waste, as something
Less than final, though now
I find it focused

At the end of winter in a tea rose, so single-minded
In its mindlessness that pain
Follows in its course.
New growth, I think, and I'm empty and at ease.
And now the leaves roll pale,
And that too passes.

Change of season :

High-water-time : a new mark set.

In the Hydrosphere, silt-rain : oxides, silicates :
how the valleys (ranks of slate-clefts,
pre-Cambrian shoulders dismantled) fill in
particle by particle.

Creekside : temperas draining from root-buttresses :
burl-caves opened to Otter's snout.

All over spring-flats, still-tethered rosettes
(plantain, curly dock) are flushed
to their downhill-sides, twining & gathering
their leaf-stem streamers
as do dead squid their legs.

Site cleared 1793 (toepaths having grown to wheel-
roads : Senecas exiled to Cattaraugus, Erie, the
Wind-Lands)—1st survey, rod-&-chain mindless of
freshets; gullies that defied climbing conquered by
the maps . . . Seth & Elizabeth Radder, then lately
of Massachusetts, lived here to 1809, the year when
typhus pecked at the settlers like a crow at a cob . . .
Their 1st-born lies in this cemetery—stone face-up
to the weather, read with difficulty—an occasional
verse runs down chalky to abundant wild violets,
barbarea . . . Parents laid nearby. The other children,
unnamed but numbered here in their mother's strict
biography, somehow have escaped the annals of this
little town—Italy, NY, County of Yates.

Who'll taste? feel?

Duck-nests flooded : I've seen eggs carried off,
seen them swelled to foggy-glass chambers
in the mud-saucer of a gar-hole,
then gone.

Culverts overrun : on the asphalt, feelers
like worms migrating to drained soil
that can breathe thru them—
but this time what's striping the road
is too slick
to be clipped or crushed
into half- or double-selves.

All's past before the alert is believed.

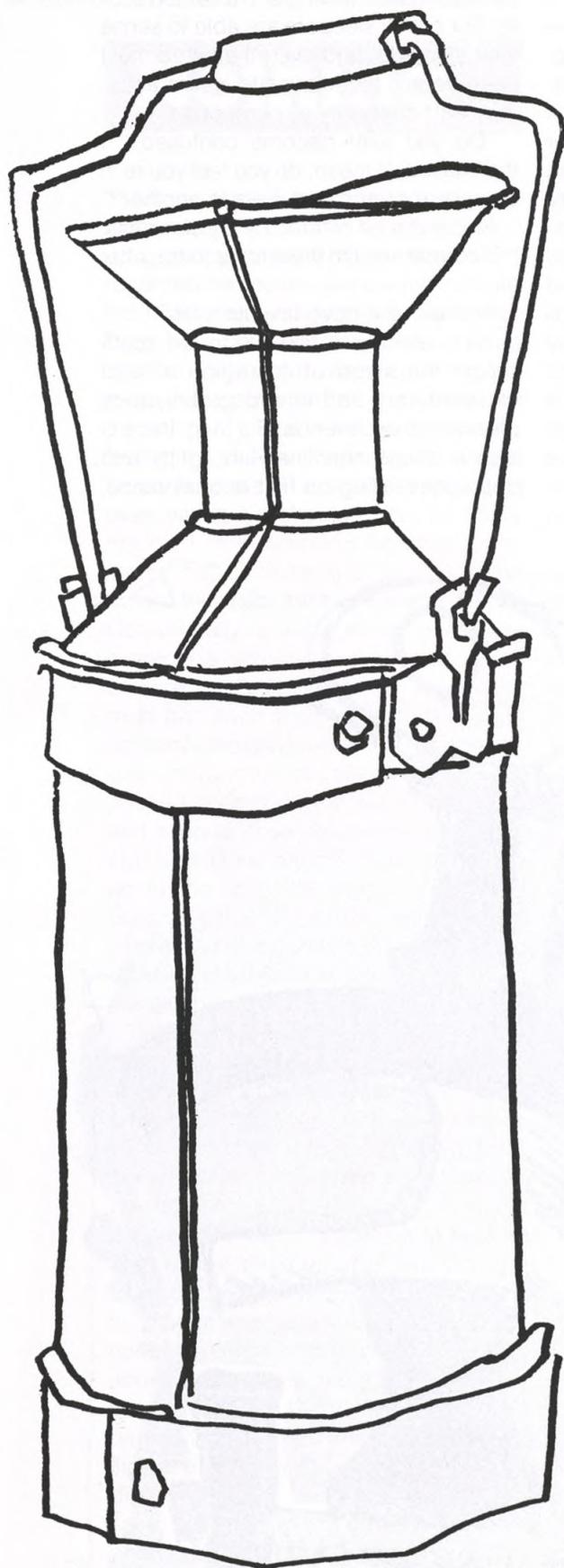
In the gravelyard by the town barns
where trucks have firmed things,
where salt-leachate from gray dunes
brings to mind a wet down-cluster
plucked from a bigger myth,
many shifting prongs of water
are soon gone too—

no lure works.

(I come to strangers' graves because the loved
speak from theirs shamelessly, but not for
attribution.)

Likewise the squatters : all it takes
is summer or one night
& the nests are gone anyhow
& squalls come to nothing.

Red squirrel



Chris Plowman

in the cabin.
Suppose so.
Whole winter.
Well damn good part of it.
No hassle getting in
(under warp of the rafters?
gnaw-vent in the east peak?)
but hell getting out.
Or, offered Out, thought
No Way!
Later reconsidered.
Tried window-frames:
had only incisors for breaking
& exiting.
No luck:
on the bright side
chip by chip thru hardwood
but glass proved more
than a mouthful.
Provided a view tho.
Showed what snow can do
for exteriors
(wealth of detail &
movement
whited over)
but no route to same.
Passed awhile on a stash
in the walls
(so suppose) then
on a diet of railings
chair-backs
-arms.
Then took off.
Or holed up.
Or was snatched up.
If last true
one lousy meal of fur
sawdust bone.
But for who?
Can hardly think more.
Only found the signs
not the signer.
Would indulge theories.
Send a good one.
Your smartest.
Hold it.
Wise up.
Send your most
private.

Jack Spula

The Somnologist

Heidi Rentería

We met in a Bolivian airport. She appeared to be dozing and didn't speak when I sat down, but when we were still waiting there in the morning, I offered to share my crackers and cheese, she gave me one of her oranges, and we began to tell each other our stories.

She traveled, she said, for only one reason: to sleep in different countries. Nightly, whether fed a five-course meal (salad after meat, sherbet in between) or dried fish and bread (no butter), whether bathed in a six-foot tub brimming with hot bubblebath or sponged with cold water stinking of sulfur, whether bedded under embroidered sheets or in a hammock (the special hooks implanted in two walls of the room), she slept and, sleeping, studied the qualities of sleep in that particular place.

Oh certainly, she played the tourist in the daytime, admiring the craftsmanship of the stonework, the strangeness of the vegetation (the pines of Tierra del Fuego, the giant ferns of New Guinea), the sunsets after a hurricane in the islands, the dust-reddened moonrises in the deserts. But her days were secondary to her real researches, which began when her eyelids closed. Life being short and the world large and various, she was limited in the length of time she could spend in any one place, and she felt that seeing the conventional tourist sights of a region was one way to prepare for her serious study, that these traditional routines had evolved (she mentioned natural selection) just because they are, on the whole, the most satisfactory means of encompassing the diurnal aspect of an unfamiliar location. And after all, didn't the local inhabitants also have parts to be played while the light lasted?

"But," I asked, "do you then dream about where you are?"

That missed the point, apparently. Dreams, though fascinating, were but a peripheral part of the study, like the fluttering fringe of an elaborate shawl.

"No, the infinitely intricate texture of sleep becomes most compelling toward its center, where it grows finer, more subtle, more radiantly beautiful," she told me.

"And is sleep so different in other countries?" I asked.

"Oh absolutely. In its coming, in its being with one, in the way it departs. In its weight, most assuredly. In the expansion of one's body, and in the tone of one's sighs. In the depth of the waters one swims through, and under. In the gold or blue

color of the light. In the height at which one floats, or flies. In the distance from which the sounds come, the herd-bells, the thunder, the treefrogs, the voices."

She said that in some countries the sleeping wasn't completed by morning, and that to finish her work required putting in extra hours, sometimes staying at it almost around the clock, pausing only for quick meals and brief walks to refresh herself. And elsewhere, there was very little there to study, and after conscientiously exploring various towns and hotels, trying hot milk to give sleep the broadest possible chance, or local drugs (her dedication was truly admirable) in case they offered some necessary introduction to the sleep of the region, she would move on, having first, of course, recorded her experiments in a little notebook that she carried with her.

She confided that she was not the only scholar so involved, but that she corresponded with others in far places, and they found a reassuring congruence in their experience of sleep in, for example, Upper Nubia.

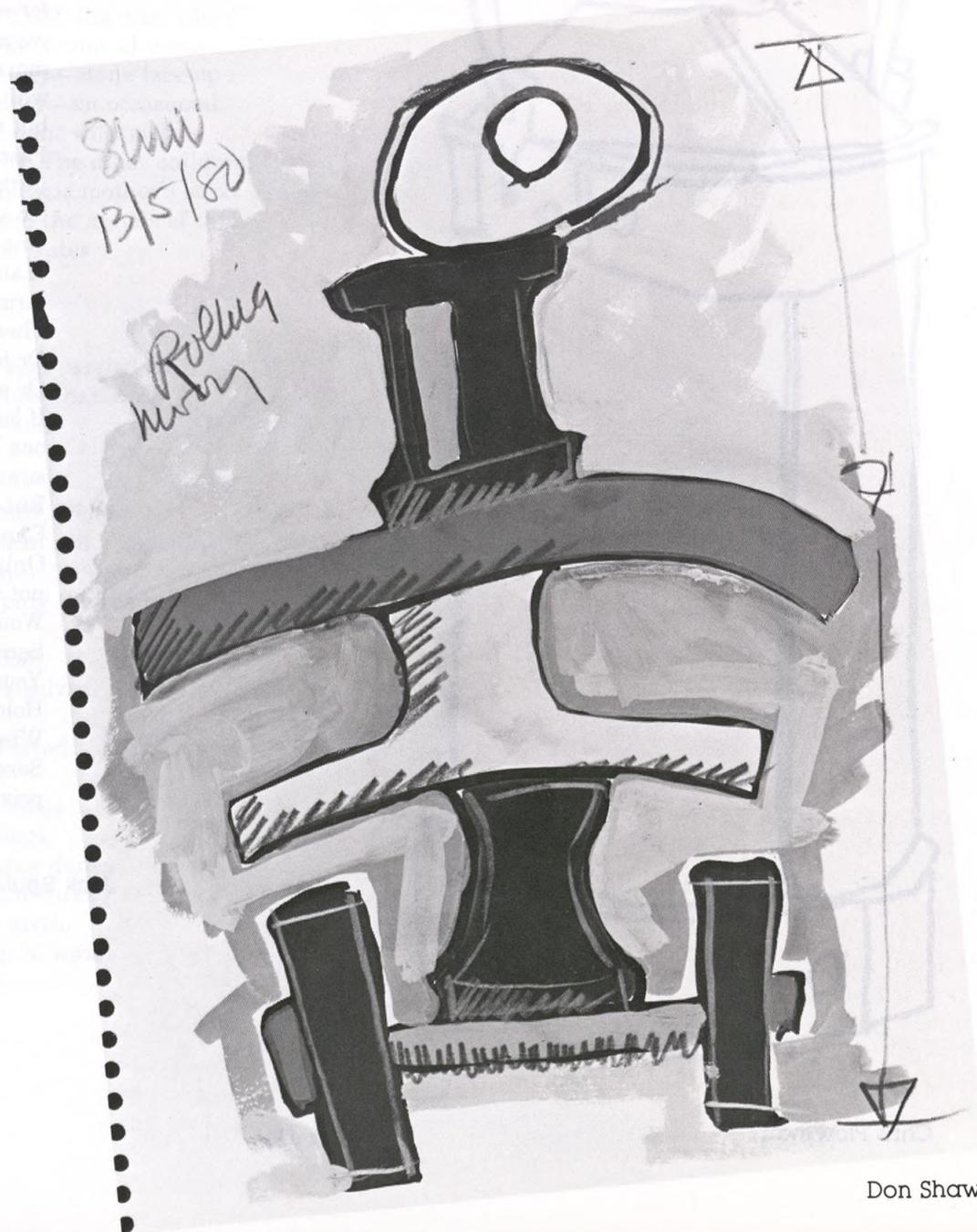
"There is most definitely," she affirmed, "an Upper Nubian sleep, easily confirmed by anyone with training and a certain acuity. For not all sleepers are able to sense their sleeping, and even the gifted must learn certain techniques to insure accuracy and continuity of perception."

"Do you ever become confused?" I then asked. "I mean, do you feel you're in one place asleep and wake in another?"

She was a bit irritated by my slowness. "Of course not. I'm there to be there, after all."

And did she have favorite sites?

"Oh naturally. A lake far to the south colors the sleep of its region a most extraordinary and limpid green, quite pleasant to experience. But then, there is also a village near the Ruhr, gritty and unprepossessing on first acquaintance,



whose sleep has qualities of complex freshness like a tray of many varieties of chilled apples." These metaphors, she explained, were only a way of communicating with the layman; she and her colleagues used terms much more precise among themselves.

"It doesn't change, you know," she remarked. "The sleep. Not when the

apparent aspect of a place changes. I've been at this long enough to have slept in a village before it got a water well, or suffered a plague, or had a border moved over it, and after. The sleep stays exactly the same, always. Because, you see, it isn't the language of a place, or the look of its people, or its technology, or rock formations, or buildings, or weather, that

make it be that place. Its essence is not in what appears to happen, what is said and done and seen by the waking. The very being of a place is accomplished by its sleeping, by its sleepers, by its sleep."

Enchanted, I asked her no more questions, but closed my eyes to listen, smiling, to the air arriving from and departing for distant lands.

Nothing

Catherine Austin

Julian slipped his right foot into the black rubber flipper, then his left. He stood up, grabbing onto the mainsail boom and regarded the ocean—aqua waves rocking the boat, deep indigo twenty feet away. Drop by drop, swimmers were jumping into the chilly water, following the guide through the coral garden. Julian was still adjusting his face mask, side to side, testing the suction, the tension cutting in below his nose. The snorkel kept falling over, hitting his shoulder, but he finally resolved, from watching the other swimmers, that once he was stretched out across the water the snorkel would work. Occasionally, a wave would pass over someone's snorkel, and a head would bounce up, gasping for air, but for the most part each snorkel tip stuck straight up above the waves, sucking the salty air down into one trachea after another. Julian pushed himself off the side of the boat and slipped down under the sea. Massive formations directly below stretched up to the tip of his flipper, down and beyond, across the sandy floor to a point where everything visible dropped off into a chasm of black blue, gaping, not unlike the darkness beneath the bathtub drain.

Julian turned away from the depths and paddled out across the cold aqua. Globes of brain coral glided underneath as he paddled. Undulations harboring sea life within their folds, a tiny head would occasionally poke out, without eyes, with no way to see. But at some sign, it would instantly jerk back. Julian could feel the chill of the darkness behind him, the four-hundred foot drop. He paddled in a semicircle and began treading water, the tips of his flippers passing back and forth above the coral. He peered down through the liquid light to watch his feet and then he submerged his snorkel and turned a flip beneath the surface. His surroundings dissolved into a dizzy swirl. He blew a spout of water out through his snorkel and scanned the bottom once more. The ocean garden stopped growing before it reached the dark blue edge.

Julian thought of the antique nightgown,

still limp, untouched on the hook in the bathroom. It was made of white cotton worn soft, lined with tiny mother-of-pearl buttons on the front, a ring of spiderweb lace around the collar and sleeves, and a rip was beginning under the left arm. Julian had bought it for his wife. She had pulled it up by the shoulders, up from the tissue-papered box, with hardly the chance to speak before Julian interrupted in an enchanted voice. It was more than a nightgown; it breathed mysteries. The store owner had said it was at least one-hundred-fifty years old. The woman to whom it belonged had lived by the ocean. Her husband was a sea captain, and she must have been understanding of his desires. Her heart was as much with the sea as was her husband's, but at that time, only mermaids could accompany voyaging sailors. Townspeople passing by had seen her swimming, the fence by the road lined with kelp and conch shells, and after her husband's ship was reported missing, she was sometimes seen standing out on the porch in the early morning, her nightgown billowing up around her legs like a sail. As Julian retold the tale, his wife held the gown out at arm's length, paling, looking more frail than the gown. The blood flow had been cut off from the tips of her fingers, the half-moons beneath her nails had disappeared. She said she would try it on later after supper, and it had been hanging on that porcelain hook for three months.

Julian paddled in a circle, his arms remaining limp and calm across the surface. He stopped when the chasm was straight ahead and began drifting in that direction. A layer of fire had rippled across the top of the candles on his birthday cake, forty candles pushed down into the vanilla icing. His wife slipped off her wedding ring and dropped it through the fire, encircling one of the candles. She wanted her own wish as well. And after a final gust from Julian's lungs, little trails of smoke circled up into the air. To forty more years, she said. And to my wife, Julian added, who embodies an entire world. You see

more than is there, she whispered.

Whenever his wife went to the beach with Julian, she sat in the shade or wore a long-sleeved shirt and a wide-brimmed hat. And she refused to go into the water over her knees. When Julian would leave the shore to swim around, his wife always stood at the edge clutching a shell she had just picked up, the lines in her white face quivering as she watched him and waited. She had listened intently this morning as he read from the brochure leaflet about the coral garden. She had rubbed the goosebumps on her arms. And Julian had seen her pulse beating rapidly. But when asked to look down through the layers of the ocean's darkness herself, she had refused.

Fire coral and purple fans passed beneath Julian. They slid away from the dropoff as he paddled up to its edge. Last year his wife had taken up painting. She started out dabbing colors on small etching pads and gradually worked her way into canvasses that Julian was unable to fit through the doorway. She chose to paint in the empty room on the east side of the house, and she waited to assemble the frames and stretch the canvas until she was within the room. As a result, the larger paintings never left the room. No one ever saw the paintings except for Julian, and what Julian always saw was an attempt by his wife to paint a thick skin. In the beginning of each painting she would spend hours swirling and splashing reds and purples. And then she would close the bedroom door and let the colors dry unseen before she began covering them with long strokes of raw sienna. But the thick sienna skin was never successful in sealing off the life beneath.

Sometimes Julian would sit on her footstool and stare at one of her finished paintings. She always claimed that there was nothing there, but she never showed her paintings to any outsider. One evening she walked in on Julian as he faced her latest painting, and she asked him why on earth was he looking at the painting so intently—there was nothing there.

Aubade

You look up, and suddenly it's there:
Dawn, the strange fruit squeezed
Through the blue cloth. Though a front
Is bringing in to Texas the beginnings
Of its winter, you've hardly waked up there
Before a girl in Boston dreams you to
Her side, dreams you back and back
To a May morning with the same
Chill air, but at the turning of a different
Season; and you watch each object in her room
Lit out of the dusk and the color of snow
Slip from her body back into the sheets.
She smiles in her sleep because she's
Brought you to her dream, though she doesn't
Know how well. Still, you're sure it wouldn't
Work like this, because if you were to
Stay until she dreamed herself awake and
The trees turned irretrievably the green
Of going-into-summer with you beside her,
You would first have had to fold the
Other loves that lend you heat, and
Put them in your case for the dream's daily
Wear. But you've brought nothing, you're naked
Here, so you have to get back, taking one
Of two ways: but if you wake her, if you cut
Her dream off like the flowers she's picked
And put in the window, you'll have to see
Her go, Eurydice, gasping as the blankets
Become an impenetrable tent of fog; and
Since you cannot think of her as a broken
Stalk in the misty water jar of a far-away
City, you have to sneak away step
By step, leaving her asleep in May, while
You walk home across six months and a mass
Of states this morning; and all the way
Is black, because the vernal sun she
Dreams coming up comes up only to her room,
And today's November light will not be
Breaking over any bed except your own,
Will not be breaking till you get home.

Paul Graves

Hour of Smoke

In this scene,
notice how the smoke
complements the air, in fact
becomes the air itself,
only receding at the edges.
The figure must have heard
voices; there is a light under the door
of what must be a tavern.
There must have been sounds
from that factory, just defined
on the left, though this is disputed.
(If only the artist were alive!)
And the figure itself. Notice
he is smoking, and of course
the famous pause—
a turning back, a stop,
momentary or profound?
Time is important throughout,
as important as the dusk borders
stretching lighter to the very frame,
and the two curbs are often thought
to symbolize something.
But back to the figure. Though
it has no face it is assumed
to be a man going forward. See
the very slight inclination, despite
the obvious lack of motion.
Perhaps the seeming pause
was unintentional; the artist
was old when she painted this.

Lawrence Broch



Jeff Delude

Houdini Meets Cotton Mather in Paradise

Our heads covered,
all the blank day we inscribed prayers,
reconjured dreams, even ate together,
and I left, unsatisfied.

Was it wonder to start a fire
when the three elements of fire
were *visible* in your sleeves?

To go behind the mind with
a pair of handcuffs and a cast-off
straightjacket is indicative;
but squandering Indians in broad
daylight, burning children of children,
what sign is that?

But all is white here; the old
metaphors are dead; because we're here,
a track is crossed, a schism revised.

And yet I'll swear the moon
has only risen once, has no phases,
never hides her face, and can
slip through the universe like ice,
in the right hands.

Lawrence Broch



Unwritten Legacy

Holiday from the still heat,
wind, caught in the low trees,
sings for its release.

Like the rhapsodic grandmother, tied
in her own tongue, wind signals
Houston, Texas, tapping china,
heralding the arrival of beauty
from an unused, wiser city.

No one, however, and nothing
arrives. Nothing dies or is reborn
here where the imagination strains
to make four seasons

from the bland string of months
scalloped across the used-car lot,
the uniform cabbage palms lining
shopping streets like east and west
companions to my travel plans,
and to my unplanned travel back.

This September evening feels
the same as August's fat, Mobius
middle, the girth I tried to circle
and be done with, but fear that nothing
changes is one faithlessness I have
to live with. Faith is the bone
I broke, the oath drawn from your
unsteady heart, a twig snapped
in the ear of a dreaming world.

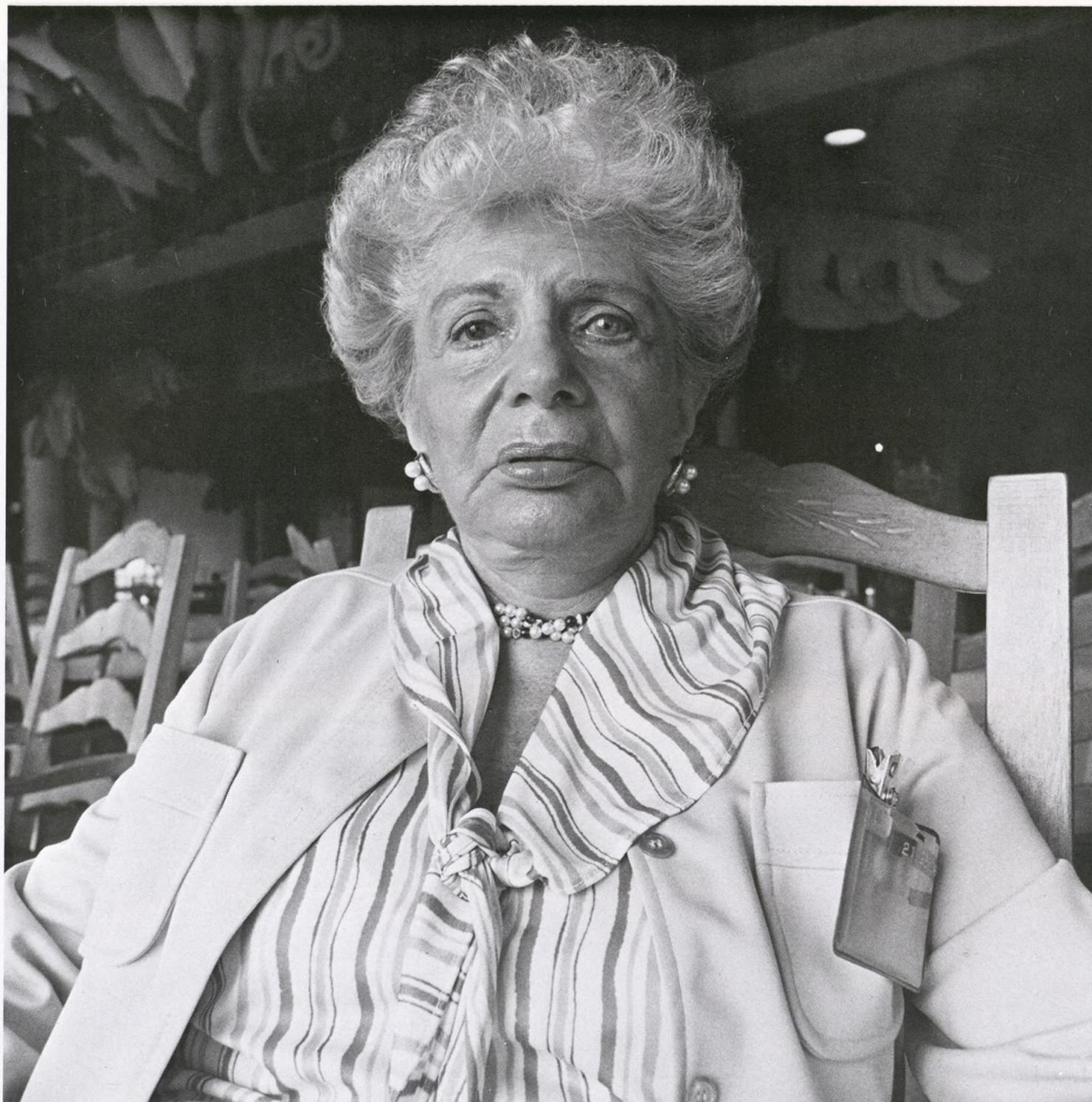
And faith is the fire called all-
or-nothing: orange sun that changed
my grandmother from a suffering woman
to a well-served one. She died
like a ball rolling down the street,
and in my dream of disbelief,
latkas and applesauce were served
while her look-alike looked on,
the companion to her memory
whose perfect imitation made it more
and less painful to imagine her
gone: as if it were a

holiday, the family around a table
she swept over, the second-hand
deeming us one hour. Faith is the fire
called all-or-nothing, the orange
sun that rose above airport traffic
like a raised right hand,
the orange sun that rose, a queen
above her subject. It was a morning
of mercy, a holiday from the still heat,
I remembered how her heart beat
against the small apartment's walls—
Let me out! she cried, I've lived here
since I was a bride, and that was
fifty-eight years ago. The sun
is her face, and simply tells me
it is time: either I can trust your love
or I must prepare myself to suffer.

Grama, if I take the oath,
I'll take it in its original tongue,
but only from his burning mouth to mine.

Jessica Greenbaum

Jim Pogg



Gay Block

The Eulogy

Eleanor Totz

Mother didn't believe the coffin held his body. "Of course it does," I muttered. I didn't believe it either.

We couldn't agree on the "essence" of his life. The rabbi, new to Mother's temple, visited the apartment the day before the funeral to gather our memories for the eulogy: our remembrances. My parents had moved into the apartment three years

earlier. Never having lived in it, I was having trouble assembling my childhood feelings. I closed my eyes hoping to transplant myself back into the house where I had been raised.

"He was totally unmaterialistic," I heard my sister say. I thought of the blue cardigan sweater we had jointly given him one Christmas-Chanukah. He was a poor receiver of gifts. "But I already have a

sweater," he had said after opening the box.

Blue was his favorite color. He hated green and red so Mother never bought dresses in those colors, which was a shame; she has brilliant green eyes. As the family rebel I bought only red and green clothes which would make Dad laugh; he loved my spirit. I used to imagine Mother feeling jealous.

The rabbi was getting confused. My cousin was disagreeing with everything being said. An aunt was trying to summarize and interpret information for the rabbi. I noticed a nerve over Mother's right eye twitching; she was nervously twisting her wedding rings; light hit the facets of her twirling diamond and danced off the walls in fragmented rays, reminding me of the circling mirror ball hanging in the gymnasium at my high school prom. My sister prepared hot tea for Mother while I poured myself a scotch.

"He only loved and lived for his family," Mother said. Too plebeian we all agreed—my cousin for the first time.

"He was a character," someone said. Our intellectual pride suddenly surfaced as the supreme emotion. We became speech writers: ghost writers.

"He hated the practice of law," I said. Debate broke out on whether his colleagues at the funeral would be insulted if it was mentioned. I was overruled. My eyes drifted onto the small balcony suspended off the living room where two lounge chairs, covered with semitransparent tarpaulins, sat on green Astro Turf. Beyond the railing, bare branches appeared to be floating unanchored in the sky. I imagined the balcony stretching into the sleeping porch of our first home. On hot summer nights we would line it with roll-away cots, the whole family sleeping dormitory style, my sister and I giggling with parental threats of being sent into our steamy bedrooms to sleep. Before sleeping I would shake the jar holding

that night's collection of lightning bugs and with delight watch the fireflies flutter and illuminate. In the morning they were always dead.

The porch at our next home, the permanent home, was where Dad would sit watching birds through binoculars while mimicking their songs. Dad was an accomplished whistler. He was disappointed if I didn't recognize the different calls. I never did.

The porch was cantilevered over Dad's rose garden: squared-off beds filled carefully with colorful bushes between the bricks as if shapes in a coloring book: dark red Crimson Glories, peach-pink Good News, and lots of Peace buds with their yellow petals shading to melon pink at the edges. At planting time the backyard was covered with a thick layer of rotted manure; a month later, vases of fragrance filled the house.

I was speaking aloud: "Mom! Remember how annoyed you used to get when he planted the roses. You wanted to design curved, aesthetically pleasing beds. One year he filled a square with only yellow Goldilocks."

"I don't want that in the eulogy," she said. The rabbi reassured her.

Before moving into the apartment Mother had reupholstered the furniture. The cerulean blue sofa was now mustard herringbone, and Dad's favorite rust armchair was now covered with a saffron twill. Repainted faces. The carved mahogany picador still stood in the center of the coffee table, his back curved forward for

the attack. The picks were always falling out.

The apartment walls seemed to open into one large square room. The home I had grown up in had dark corners for talking secretly on the phone, and a private recreation room filled with soft sofas.

"I used to be so embarrassed when my dates picked me up at the first house." My sister was speaking. "All those fish tanks in the living room smelled." We all laughed. I could still see the huge tank of angelfish to the left of the front door, their compressed bodies with lacy fins flitting hellos and good-bys. The house was filled with the bubbly noise of water filters; their whimsical hum evoked the ridiculous image of gargling fish.

"I bet he was on every crackpot government list—all those letters of advice he wrote to the economic advisors." My cousin was speaking with excitement. The rabbi stood up to leave. "I'm sure I have enough information," he said.

We stopped by a florist on the way to the funeral parlor. Before the service I taped three roses on the coffin—two yellow ones for my sister and me, and a crimson one slightly higher for mother. I don't remember the eulogy.

Before leaving the cemetery, the rabbi ripped the roses off the casket and handed them to me. "Don't do that," I whispered. I tried to replace them but the tape was too damp; they slid off the coffin and disappeared into the burial plot.

Waking God at Dawn

This is the steady shell, as dark as bone,
That has always determined his sleeping.
This is the full notion that becomes the flesh
Of his body and the thought that is the measure
Of his breath. And this is the statement
That constitutes his rest, as easy and lulling
As the draw of shining insect legs, as the haunches
Of thin stars shifting in the late night grasses of his sleep.

This motion, which intends to imitate here
The early morning gathering of water from sheer
Lake-fog to the tip of each beach burr, is the actuality
Tracing through his veins like blood.

And *now* is the first streak of light coming
Between firmament and heaven, the quick flashing
Division of the deep passing suddenly between thick branches,
Out of black water and clouds, creating this moment
Just before his closed eyes begin to open.

And this is the dream which is urging him to wake,
Which presses itself to his vision like a pale leaf
Floating on a morning pond, like a sleeping
Forehead presses itself against a deepening sky,
The dream which becomes the careful ear
Of its own whisper, which becomes the shudder
In the body of its word, the kiss discovering his cheek,
Moving as lightly as a teal lifting over new
Grey marshes, the dream that imagines itself to be
The first object in which he clearly sees himself
Rising on one elbow in the wide sun
Of his complete waking.

Little Fugue

Felicia and Albert, running through the thin grasses
In the mown field this afternoon, are attempting
To keep up with the red-tailed hawk's shadow
As it glides across the pond and the meadow.

Cecil can also see the red-tailed hawk
In the sky in the pond as he dangles his feet
In the water, his toes startling the basking killifish.

The curious killifish rise slowly now to suck
At Cecil's toes in the same way the hawk soars upward
Toward the basking sun, its winged shadow becoming a small
Black fish swimming through the slender grasses.

Cecil sees the killifish as flashing slips of light
Darting through the fins of the hawk as it glides
Across the blue water of the heavens.

Albert thinks Felicia's laughter soaring
Over the meadow is like slips of light
Flashing off the fins of little killifish.

Felicia can imagine slips of sun darting like killifish
In the sky between her legs as she runs after the wings
Of the red-tailed hawk over the mown meadow.

Cecil can see the red-tailed hawk growing smaller
And smaller, circling his feet, disappearing finally
Into the black mouth of a killifish gliding
At the bottom of the pond.

The killifish, simultaneously swallowed like a slip of sun
By the shadow of the hawk, can be seen as itself once again
Inside Felicia's laughter.

Felicia, catching up and stepping on the shadow
Of the hawk, has finally seen the black wings of her feet.

When Sonia calls from the porch, telling everyone
That the magician has arrived for the party, all the sounds
Of finned light passing like laughter over the stubbled sun
Are swallowed by Albert's announcement
That this is the end of the game.

A Modicum of Decorum

Blind Juggler

For Simon Moss and
Tom McBride

Eduard, Felicia's tutor, having read
A current best-seller entitled,
The Potential Sophistication of Life and Limb,
Is attempting to improve Felicia's behavior.

He has given her a list.

Somersaulting and leaping confuse clear-thinking.
Running and bounding lead to chaos in the brain.
No one can deny that shrieks destroy
The most delicately balanced tedium.

Strolling in moderation is tolerated.
Twisting ribbons and twiddling by small
Quiet fires is cultivated.
Sighing is admired.

Eduard, quoting from Chapter IX, has told Felicia
She must envision herself as a heavy, metal bell
Hanging with no pull-cord in a dark, vine-covered
Belfry, her only meaningful reality being the potential
Of her ring. To actually ring then, being the destruction
Of potential and therefore the destruction of meaningful
Reality, is a sin.

Yesterday Felicia, confined to her bedroom
For singing her part in the morning blessing
With too much intensity, wove ropes of pink
And purple crepe-paper and hung them from her window.
There they blew in the breeze beside the veranda
Where Eduard was tentatively meditating on the potential
Reality of ringing in bells not yet forged.
Now he is reading aloud to Felicia Chapter XXIV,
"The Abuses of Flags, Banners, Streamers, Confetti,
And other Paper Paraphernalia."

Felicia, attempting to walk at the pace her tutor
Has approved, thinks if she could camp-out all summer
Heading east, then she might be able to make it
To the field and back once before autumn.

Eduard says a backpack is unseemly.

Last night Felicia, tip-toeing
(which Eduard hasn't yet discussed) across the lawn
To the gazebo, lay inside its latticed walls
With moonlight diamonds covering her body
And giggled with the dogs until dawn.

He couldn't tell you himself how he does it,
But offstage first he fondles each orange separately.
He nestles them all, barely kissing them
As if they were the bald, throbbing heads
Of his own new and perfect children.
He worships their sweet surfaces by touch,
The sugared orifices, the rounded pips.
His tongue remembers every nuance in the tangy
Blossom of their citrus skin.

The way he presses them to his mouth and face . . .
It's no wonder that afterwards on stage he can follow
Their paths by scent, those definite loops
Of fragrance in the air, that he can chart their orbits
By ear, having heard so well before, like a steady cry
From the cradle, the only sound that rising nectar possesses.

He catches and sends each one soaring again and again.
He tilts his face upward, staring into his enduring night
As if he could actually see those suns filled with seeds
Circling each other like perpetual daylight in the sky.

But he knows that each sphere when it leaves his hands
Disappears completely from the universe
Except for the orange trace of its trajectory
In his mind. He knows he is bound then to remember
How those swirling spheres multiply, making a solid
Circle of brilliant motion inside his rock-dark eyes,
Bound to recall the way that ring widens, spreading
To match the curved line of his skull, the way it unites
With the narrow rim of daylight circling the horizon
Inside which he performs forever. He is certain
It is only by the faith of his fingertips
That this illumination ever returns as the separate
Orange flesh of itself to earth.

What else can be the use of his empty eyes
Except to provide those necessary vacancies
Filled over and over by the balancing handiwork of his dreams?

At the close of his performance, as he gathers
The falling oranges one after the other undamaged
Into the soft white billow of his satin shirt,
It's clear to his audience
That he never once misses his vision.

Pattiann Rogers

Requiem for a Foot

Maureen Brown

A foot arrived at the mortuary tonight. The reputable funeral director was quite disturbed with the arrival of the foot, and nothing more of Ralph. The family waited in the parlor, uninterested. The Uncle Ralphs had not been heard from for ten years. When the hospital called, to say that he had been admitted, a fight ensued. Was it Bertha's Uncle Ralph or Merle's? They couldn't decide. No one visited the questionable Uncle Ralph while he was hospitalized, and why should they? On walking in prepared to see Bertha's Uncle Ralph one would not be able to mask surprise if, indeed, in a blue flowered hospital gown, was Merle's Uncle Ralph. There had been true relief when the hospital called to say Ralph had died and asked would they claim the body. At last they would know whose Uncle Ralph it was. They waited in silence, except Tilly who wept, having liked both Uncle Ralphs greatly. The funeral director was puzzled. The foot did not even have a tag around its big toe identifying it.

During Vietnam it was easy. After a battle the corpsmen combed the fields for bodies. They carried sacks with them, body sacks, waterproof with a zipper. Sometimes it would take two corpsmen to roll a body into the sack. If one could keep from puking. It always smelled lousy. But after Danang Americans were anxious to get their boys home. The corpsmen would spread out in a field with dogtags in hand. No bodies, just dogtags that had been found at the scene. The men in the companies couldn't see any bodies. But they weren't trained. Corpsmen picked up lengths of intestines here, a finger there, and anything that resembled an organ, shoved it into a body bag and tagged it. Sent it back to the States.

The funeral directors were onto this game—they told the family that the body was too decomposed to identify, the dental charts had to be used. A memorial service would be held, a bronze coffin lowered into the ground and a government marker erected. Everyone was happy. But how do you keep a family from identifying Uncle Ralph when there is no war?

Orthopedics is one of the oldest of the medical specialties. Its history well documented. Not a Western is filmed in Hollywood without the kitchen amputation scene. Not a war movie goes by in which a young, blond, blue-eyed Native Son is not told that he must sacrifice limb, not

life, for his country. He reunites with his fiancée, always at a train station in dense fog.

The young woman has no idea she will be expected to live her life with a handicapped man. One must sacrifice for one's country. Her reaction is always perfect—first shock, then disbelief, then she runs to him careful not to push him over, he precariously balanced on crutches, pant-leg folded up and tucked into his belt, she tenderly kisses him. Smiles. Yes, she is made of what this country is made of!

Having lost only a foot would give the illusion that one is still whole.

But when the foot only appears, the illusion is broken.

Tilly's crying was annoying. Bertha sized up Merle. If it's her Uncle Ralph, Merle's brown double-breasted suit will fit and they'll save the expense of dressing a dead man. If it's *his* Uncle Ralph, Merle will have to work overtime to afford a decent burial. Billy Bob was restless. He wanted to go into the back room and watch the undertaker suck out the blood of one-of-the Uncle Ralphs. Billy Bob was quite expert at this. Not a frog, salamander or slug has lived trying to cross the lawn in front of Billy Bob's house. He only came along because Bertha promised him a "maybe" that he could watch.

During World War II young men lived because of penicillin. Nasty shrapnel wounds didn't stand a chance against the mighty mold. Legs, arms, hands, feet were given up with less effort. The infection they incurred did not threaten life itself with penicillin roaming the veins looking for an infection to happen. Its real challenge was gangrene. Army doctors held onto limbs in defiance. Penicillin conquered all; only in the worst of cases were limbs still lost.

The reputable funeral director was on the telephone with the hospital. Pathology is closed for the day, would he please call back tomorrow? Didn't they understand? He was delivered a foot and the family waited in his parlor ready to pick out a suit and satin pillow. Sorry.

"Why should I work overtime? What if it's *your* Uncle Ralph?" Merle demanded.

"Can't be mine, last heard from, he was in Tucson, nowhere near here. Anyway, I've got to be home by three for Billy Bob," Bertha countered.

"Hell, no union steward alive gonna let me clock overtime for no burial suit!" Merle announced.

"Hush, Tilly, stop that cat-a-walling. Hell if I'm gonna use my grocery allowance to dress him!" Bertha declared.

Student nurses are assigned to the operating room rotation. Filled with textbook colored photographs, laboratory cadaver anatomy class, nightmares, plus the latest ghoul shows at the local drive-in, they enter the OR suite gowned, masked and capped, ready for a day's work. Debra was assigned to orthopedics. She read the schedule for her room: lumbar laminectomy, followed by removal of bilateral bunions and that followed by amputation of left foot, contaminated procedure. The word amputation froze her into place. Her first day and she must face an amputation.

By the Korean War vascular surgery had made great strides because M.A.S.H. units were experimenting with arterial grafting everyday. Meatball surgery had its moments of gourmet accomplishment. Legs no longer had to be sacrificed. If wounds were identified soon enough in triage and OR quickly followed, a graft could be successfully placed between proximal and distal ends of a shredded artery. More-than-routine dressing changes and massive doses of antibiotics (penicillin's kissin' cousin) allowed the graft to "take" and the limb to be saved.

All this possible because someone thought to place the surgical hospital only yards from the front. Or was it because the "front" remained a "front" longer? For the first time our boys were exposed to our expert surgeons within minutes of receiving wounds. If the hospitals were any closer the wounds would be redundant.

Bertha met Merle at a skating rink in 1944. He had a punctured eardrum and was sitting out the war. They were attracted to each other because their last names were Olson, both of them Olson. They named all their grandfathers and mothers, cousins and aunts, sisters and brothers, traced their lineage back as far as either of them heard stories tell and finally concluded it would not be incest. But they did not figure on Ralph, Ralph (Bertha) Olson or Ralph (Merle) Olson. When the hospital called and said Ralph Olson was admitted they said of course, Uncle Ralph!

Contaminated cases needed trash bags inside the OR door and outside the door. They needed more personnel—the “clean” ones outside the door and the “dirty” ones inside the door. The gangrenous foot was the result of poorly managed diabetes, Debra learned. There were no wars.

The key to working successfully in the OR is seeing bacteria with feet and imagining that they will walk anyplace. The job then makes sense. A barrier must be maintained between bacteria and an open surgical wound or between contaminated wounds and the rest of the world. Point-of-view is everything. If a patient is having his gallbladder removed all is done to keep bacteria from walking into the patient's open abdomen. If the patient has a gangrenous foot then all is done to prevent bacteria from walking out of the infected foot and onto everything else. Easy. One only needs to hallucinate.

The specimen would have to be transported to pathology, in the basement, and it was nearing five o'clock. How would Debra accomplish carrying a contaminated foot through the OR and into the hall, onto an elevator, down to the basement and through that hall to pathology? Would they have a special refrigerator? It is a contaminated foot. Would anyone be there? She imagined that she should put the foot into a sack, a waterproof sack, place it on a cart and wheel it, respectfully, down the hall, onto the elevator, et cetera, to pathology. She would find an empty refrigerator to place it in.

Ralph Olson was admitted, two days before the amputation, with malnutrition and D.T.'s. He was a drunk. In his ward room, eight beds in all, he had managed to barricade the door with all the bedside tables, then he poised himself on the window ledge to avoid stepping on the creepy-crawling things on the floor, which in reality were the tile's pattern. The orderlies broke in through the bathroom because it connected to the next ward room (sixteen men to one john, but this was charity). Ralph had only moved Mr. Blanton's bed in front of the bathroom door.

Coaxing Ralph off the window ledge was easy—one orderly got his attention, two others grabbed him.

An X-ray showed the surgeon where to place his saw. Without the rotting flesh, this would be a neat case, the kind alias Doc Holidays like to perform. The limb was placed onto a green towel, it blended in well, and handed to Debra. She gagged. Folding the towel over the foot she quickly placed it into a plastic bag, then onto the waiting cart. At the door she removed the “dirty” gown and gloves she wore, and

stepped out of the OR with the cart. She swabbed down the cart with a disinfectant. It was six-thirty.

The basement was dark. Naturally at every passage there were shadows. Her heart raced. Did she hear something? She pushed the cart faster. The double doors leading to pathology were straight ahead. Quickly now.

Pablo the janitor was accustomed to napping at the receptionist's desk in pathology. Debra crashed through the double doors, waking him. She screamed, he screamed. Once they identified themselves they were anxious to unload the ghoulis foot and be gone. Pablo nervously opened the refrigerated room. Where to stick the foot? To save time they rolled out an unused slab and dumped the remains into the drawer, slammed it closed and left.

Ralph had pneumonia. Penicillin, I.V., was ordered.

Dacron! The wonders of tubular dacron. Merely slice open an artery, lay the length of dacron inside, attach proximal and distal ends, fold the artery close over the graft and release the clamps. The blood flows immediately through the synthetic tube, the cells immediately begin to line the material and the body is tricked into accepting the graft—it can't recognize the material as anything it should fear, so the body ignores the dacron graft. So easy. And in Nam so useful. Time was saved with dacron grafts—a vein did not have to be ligated and prepared to be used as a graft. The right length of dacron was selected, that's all. Dacron grafted legs did beautifully. Army doctors' chests puffed with pride. Amenities were extended to Vietnamese allies. The doctors imagined the Vietnamese patients proclaiming the miracle that had befallen them: a limb saved. As the doctors watched these patients walk out of camp on crutches swinging two legs they daydreamed of all the Asian world knowing the wonders of the American surgeon's skill. But the soufflé was mistaken for a cake and cut right into. Men returned to their villages with one leg, foot or arm. A clean skin flap over a clean sawed-off bone has proven the most effective measure to curb the mortality rate in Southeast Asia. Life was lived on one leg, no legs, two legs, no matter.

Tilly's crying had stopped. Billy Bob had fallen asleep by the embalming room door.

“When's the last time you heard from your Uncle Ralph?” Merle asked.

“Oh, I dunno. Think he sent Tilly a birth-day card a few years back. Postmarked

Tucson,” Bertha replied.

“Mine's in Kansas, I'm sure. No reason for him to be in Texas,” Merle said.

“Tucson ain't far. He could hitch a ride back here easy enough. Rig count's down everywhere but Texas,” Bertha said.

“Think he'd still be working rough-neck?”

“Sure.” Bertha wiped her nose on the back of her hand. “That's all he knows! Him and daddy. That's all they knowed.”

The pneumonia had advanced, not helped by the failed liver and kidney and malnutrition. The next-of-kin had been called. No one wondered why they didn't show up, probably hadn't seen the ole coot in years. Oxygen was in use. Made everyone in the ward room pissed because no one could smoke. The john got crowded and fights ensued. Ralph was comatose.

Orthopedic surgeons carry the most malpractice insurance after anesthesiologists and neurosurgeons.

Ralph would have never started to drink if he had known that Tilly loved him so much. A roughneck before the War, Ralph never married, and roamed the oil fields. Rather shy. He was at Bertha and Merle's wedding, even caught the garter, took quite a ribbing about it too. The closest he came to love was Marilou Higgins, little gal that made the best chicken fried steak in all of Texas. Met her in a cafe in Port Aransas. He was just passing through after spending a weekend in Nuevo Laredo blowing a wad he'd won in a poker game. She was pretty and talked nice to Ralph. Port Aransas was real pretty too—faced the Gulf of Mexico. One could become romantic over a good chicken fried steak, a pretty woman and a beautiful sunset.

It took him three weeks at the Mission on Franklin Street in downtown Houston to dry out enough to realize he had left Port Aransas. Never saw Marilou Higgins again and worst of all couldn't remember why he'd left. Talk around the Mission was she had been married, slipped out with Ralph and they got caught. He was never sure.

Tilly came along ten years after Bertha and Merle were married. Some asked what took them so long? Ralph came around a lot in those days, bouncing Tilly on his knee was as close as he came to feeling like a daddy. But his drinking didn't stop and Bertha threw him out—not in front of the children, she scolded.

In front of the children, Vietnamese doctors dressed wounds, mothers peed, fathers took a crap. When a mine exploded, no Vietnamese corpsmen combed the

field for identifiable parts to send home in oversized body bags. What was gone was gone. Families moved on, memories their only funeral service.

Bertha rested her head on Merle's shoulder. The funeral director was holed up in the embalming room.

"Should have written to him," Bertha muttered.

"What?" Merle asked.

She lifted her head, and searched through her purse for a tissue. "Hell, I should have written to Ralph when he sent Tilly that birthday card."

"But you didn't know where he was."

"There was a return address." She blew her nose.

"No way to know he was still there," Merle said.

The oxygen didn't help Ralph. His lungs filled up and he frothed at the mouth. The doctors knew they were fighting a losing battle. They had learned. They were ready to pull the plug, although no plug was tangibly available. Ralph would go in peace. It bothered no one. The frenzy to fight to the death had been over-dramatized. They were all tired of it. The pharmacy bills were astronomical: no one knows how much adrenalin, sodium bicarbonate and calcium chloride cost—in volume. No urine, no liver, no lungs, Why? One suggested the exercise might be good for the interns. The others stared him into a crack in the floor tile.

With reverence a post-mortem bath was given to Ralph. The nurse was glad. This one went quick and clean. It took three orderlies to lift Ralph onto a cart. They propped his head on a pillow and slipped his arms through the sleeves of a hospital gown then pulled the sheet up to his chin. Someone combed his hair. Siderails up, they were off. Down the corridor, to the elevator, the visitor's elevator. Ralph on the cart, two orderlies and a nurse crowded onto the elevator with the chaplain and half a dozen visitors. The nurse and orderlies tried to suppress their giggles when the elevator rode up, probably to the twentieth floor, before descending to the basement.

The nurse watched the visitors watch Ralph. She couldn't help herself. "Looks like we're going in the wrong direction, Mr. Olson," she whispered loudly into Ralph's ear. The orderlies turned their backs to the visitors to keep from laughing. The chaplain eyed Ralph suspiciously.

Convulsing from laughter, the nurse and two orderlies unloaded Ralph into a drawer in the morgue. They were walking away when the nurse remembered she had the identifying tag in her pocket. She ran back and slid it into the metal frame on the drawer. She had missed Ralph's drawer by one because she was eyeing the autopsy table and the two orderlies, wondering how ghoulish her thoughts might be perceived.

Bertha and Merle were assured that all humanly possible had been done for poor Uncle Ralph Olson, and that they need not come to the hospital. The nurse would give the funeral director Ralph's personal possessions which consisted of a half-empty flask, a set of keys, an empty wallet and a picture of a little girl—Tilly.

The reputable funeral director charged his nephew with collecting Ralph. The nephew had worked for his uncle long enough not to question the foot, half-empty flask, set of keys, empty wallet and picture of a child. He merely brought all of it back to the funeral home.

The funeral director knew immediately that there was no war, that the foot had inappropriately turned up on his embalming table. Memorial services and requiem high masses in the U.S.A. have been held over lengths of bowel, fingers, organ parts, nothing—but never a foot without a war.

Merle put his arm around Bertha. "Remember when your Uncle Ralph brought us hot Italian bread on Sunday morning?"

"Remember how he loaded a slice up with butter for Tilly then let her dunk it into his coffee?" Bertha added.

"Yeah. He was a good ole bird."

"I should have never thrown him out," Bertha said as she wiped her nose with the lipstick stained tissue.

Risen to the surface, lured by corn
the way a horse nuzzles a jacket for a carrot,
this one is rosy from gills to tail,
and pocks the water with its nudging.
Hooked and netted, it bleeds on the snow
from a torn mouth. A bad generator
keeps blinking the lights off. Each time, stars
swing back into place. Maybe if I lived here,
if names of towns—Arlee, Ronan, Ravalli—
merged and became a medley of river sounds,
I'd resemble the woman in this house. A child
curls at her breast, cheeks ruddy from sleep,
close as her heartbeat. She holds the view in her eyes,
the blue thrust of mountains behind wide fields
of cattle and wheat. If I'm different from my mother,
tell me why I notice the flickering tongues
of candles, piles of laundry limp as the soiled
vestments of priests. Hope, horizon-wide, fades
like linoleum on the stairs, sunlight and tread
too tough for its lasting. After the dark
of winter, blind mornings and evening's heavy hand,
I walk unsteady on feet unused to snow, a coastal
animal needing cloud cover. My solace in new weather
includes a going-away, a goodbye to inland reaches
and the smell of sage. Until her death, until
the destruction of the house, this woman saves it for me.
If I return, she will add a place at the table,
open another door into her life.

At the Trout Farm, North of Wondering

Patricia Clark

Wassail

I

A. R. Dryden

So what
if proper young ladies are
not supposed to swill bitter in
the Courage pubs? I rather like
the impropriety of several pints. Besides,
Thackeray's Mayfair is a red-light
district now.

Here we discuss the pedagogy of
beer drinking: the soft amber London Pride,
a thick, hand-drawn with an inch of
froth which you remove from your upper
lip so decorously with your
tongue. And the dregs chase up
the side of the glass as though
they aspired to the same fate.
There is a dignity in this drunkenness.

II

Now, given to wandering down
Lower Regent, I smile thinking
of an indiscretion committed in
the recess of an office doorway.

Pass the Grouse.

The Mews gather, clowns at
a muted carnival; and taxicabs, like
shiny, black seals, slip through
the streets under their instruction.

JITTERY LETTER TO JENNY

Jeff Gustavson

I.

You would have built & unbuilt my life,
Storied & unsteadied my mind's minarets,
Married me without faces & faces . . .

II.

I would have built for you estimably.
I would have belled for you volubly, broken
Consciously for you, I would have had bracken planted

Unconscious & conscious to hide you;
I would have longed for you classically,
Waited for you anciently, wasted for you

Ardently, watched for the clouds whom you sleepily
Covet; I would have emptied all superiority.
I would have lied to my last ideas to calm or delight you!

□

I would have warred for you cunningly,
Quipped for you cuttingly,
Crept on my belly through furze,

I would have censored my bitter-harsh praise,
Quilted & onion'd your heart in my heart,
Chatta'd & bratticed your breast & your brow,

I would have drevylled, & dredged, & designed.
I'd've battologized my *abbozzi* O long & long &
Quailed with the terror & shame of not pleasing you,

Boasted & begged of you, bedded you, prayed for you
/to aggravate
My exaggerations, to magnify

& mollify the shadow-shallowing,
Shadows-hallowing dawn,
Whom at dusk I, empty, envy.

Pindar

(for Jenny)

Jeff Gustavson

Envy I appoint my weather-vane,
Alert cock-of-all-breezes, brainless
Perfect vassal to his duchess nose.
When she pursues, I'll perempt pursuit;
When she dispatches armies, I'll send
Plenipotentiaries aplenty
To the king of earthquakes & the queen
Of muddy floods—entire armies
Shall weep! And when her impatience grows,
O weather-cock, jewel-weed, touch-me-not,
"Greener & paler than copenhagen,"
I'll compesce her crazy compass, prick
Her proud closed heart, calm her, spend her to
Windlessness.

Marie Ponsot

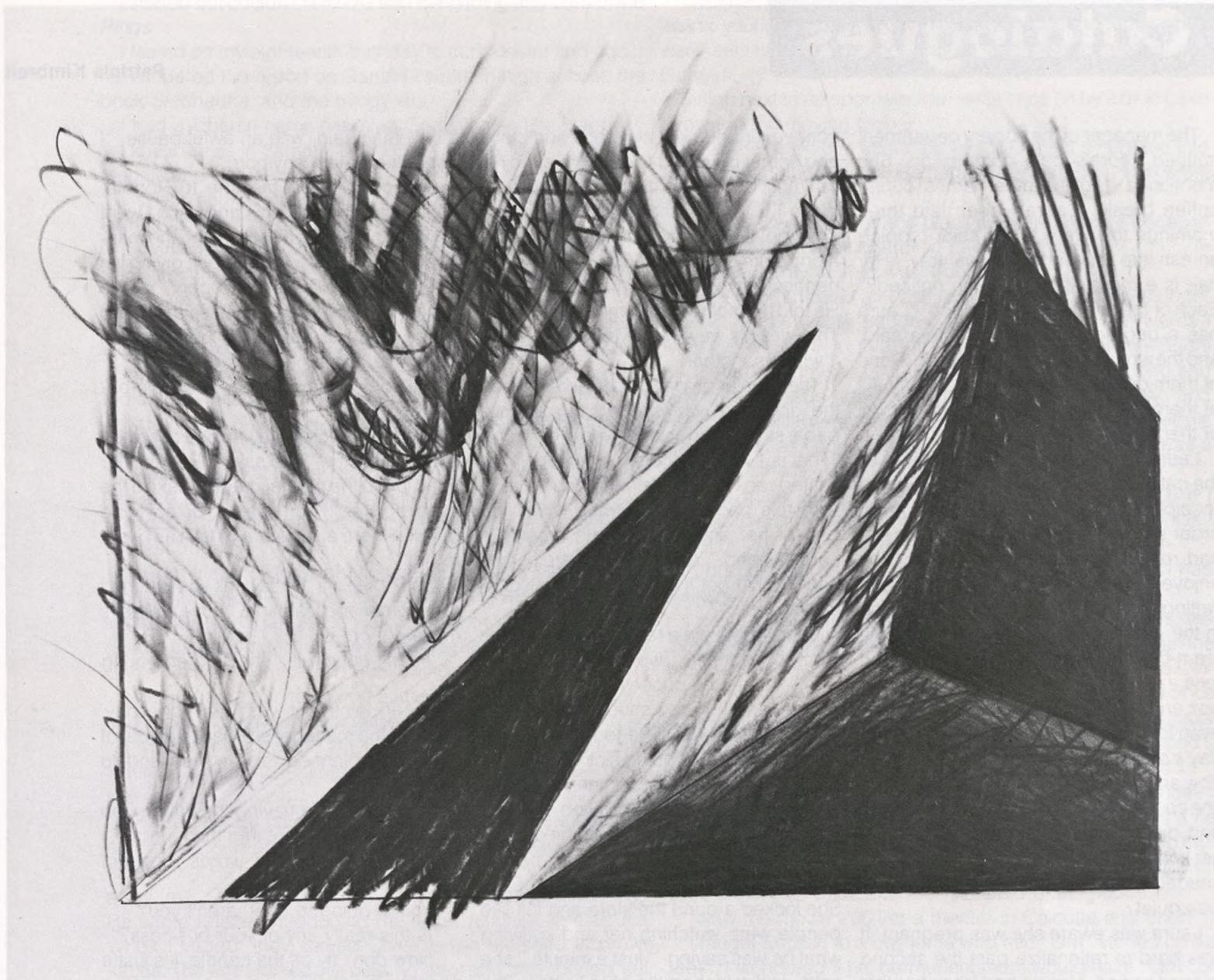
Foreign Correspondent

"I solicit of women that they will lay it to heart to ascertain what is for them the liberty of law . . . Let them be Sea Captains if they will!" . . . "With the intellect I have always overcome; but that is not half the work. The life, the life! O, my God, shall the life never be sweet?"

Margaret Fuller
(drowned in shipwreck, July, 1850,
off Fire Island)

Margaret, always at Fire Island I swim
with you in mind: you afraid of the sea
you ended in or as, chalk your neckbones,
in the lobsterclaw
the lime of your kneecap, in the buoyant
embrace of the water the blent chemistry
of you and your armful of child—
while on this sea floor
shifting sandbars still disturb your locked
sea-chest, its lumpy key, the victory
medals of your avanti husband whose luck
disdained our shore.
I still pretend you want me to evoke your ghost,
my elbows and nose out in the air of your urgency;
I used to pretend I'd find your lockbox,
and dove to explore,
imagining you the exhausted exile
as the last bubble of your hope broke free
and you sank down to drown your politics
in metaphor.

As the undertow makes itself felt I gulp breath
and swim harder going against your destiny
riding the slipstream of your working changes
as your eager flawed
prose groped through the given facts taking on slowly
the ample reportable shape of history
from NY jails, sickrooms, streetlife, mealtimes
of the raw poor.
Turning, checking the beachline you never reached
but likely saw
I ride waves soft as your early lake summer days
with Indian women, you unknown they unknown, gesturing
in the amity common among them, holding
a baby, a shawl;
your account of this like the rest of your writing,
Margaret, long out of print in my city;
your major works drowned in their only versions,



Lynn Hurst

and, angry, sore,
I tear myself
out of your warm
element to walk
desolate as Thoreau
all that day from dawn on
rushing, sickening, between
tides, scouring
the Fire Island beachfront for
something, some sign, for the sea-chest
of manuscripts, for your two-year-old child,
for you or your body,
racing staring without finding until he
began to be able to think what to do,
gave up, crossed back over water glittering
in windwash, transcendent with afterstorm.

At Bay Shore
the train came;
he caught it
with no one
and went back
to work.

Catalogues

Patricia Kimbrell

The manager of the hosiery department noticed Laura's pale complexion. She mentioned it to the other ladies during coffee break. "Laura's been late three mornings this week," she said, tapping an ash into an overflowing ashtray. "Her hair is a mess, too, have you noticed?" Each of the three women nodded. "Laura has a decision to make," Thelma said, and the women sipped and nodded. None of them except Laura were under fifty. All of them thought Laura was pregnant. All of them were right.

Laura worked the phone machines in the catalogue department. She collected receipts, filed them in their slots in an order she had devised and for which she had received compliments. Usually she enjoyed pulling out the chart book and writing the date on a new page first thing in the morning. Today, she sank into the foam-filled chair in front of her desk and took a pile of invoices out of the incoming box and began to dial the phone without even looking at the final results of yesterday's sales. The booth had only one window and a narrow door. When it was shut, she couldn't hear anything but dull thumps and distant scraping sounds. A bell let her know if anyone was at the counter and needed a package. For the moment it was quiet.

Laura was aware she was pregnant. It was hard to rationalize past the second missed period. Nerves had been her first thought. Then tiredness. She'd had a test at the hospital, but it was negative. A nurse said that happened occasionally. Laura told her boyfriend and he said he would do whatever was necessary, which wasn't reassuring. Laura listened to the phone ring. A woman's voice answered. "Mrs. Wallace, your towels are here. You can pick them up at anytime during regular store hours." Mrs. Wallace thanked her and hung up. Laura opened the chart book and marked the square for completed connections. She liked that, the long list of checks of people who had been notified.

Ronnie Dean told her that he would do whatever was necessary. What kind of response was that? She thought about his apartment and how he loved for her to

come over and help him cook and clean and sometimes he'd take her to a movie, but most of the time they'd just sit in front of the T.V. It was all right, she didn't mind. They got along O.K. He was easy to get along with. He liked kids; he took his nephew out to play ball when it was warm. He told his mother Laura might marry him. That was his way. He always had to clear it with his mother.

The counter bell rang and Laura opened the door to a woman carrying a white paper sack which was bulging in her arms. "This is full of feathers," she said. "The mister can't stand feathers. You have to take this back." The woman thrust the bag at her and slapped the receipt in Laura's hand. "You can take care of this, can't you? I got it here. It's your responsibility, isn't it?"

Laura wrote out a reorder and gave the woman her ticket. "Two weeks," she said, as she heard the phone ring. She picked up the bundle. "You should get another one in two weeks." She took the bundle and put it in the outgoing slot. She picked up the phone on the counter.

It was Ronnie. She'd given him the number on the understanding he'd never call her unless it was absolutely necessary. "I've changed my mind," he said. She looked around the store and felt like people were watching her and knowing what he was saying. "Just a minute," she said, and punched the hold button. She went to her room and shut the door. Before she picked up the phone, she took a deep breath.

"I'm ready to take on the responsibility," he said in a voice that echoed around the booth. "I'll go to school. I'll help with the housework." Laura shook her head. "I've got to get to work," she said.

"Call me back," he said, "I'm right here, waiting on you."

"Just a minute," she said as her phone lit up. A man wanted to know if his copper plated pipes for his toilet had shown up. "No sir," she said, "but we will call you the moment they do." She ran her finger under the next number, ignoring the flashing light on line one. She called a woman about her order for newborn sleepwear that had been in the store longer than usual and

the woman said, with an awful pause, "I don't need them anymore."

She opened up the line to Ronnie. "We've talked about this and I don't want to live with you." At that moment, the manager stuck his head in the door, giving it a brief knock as he pushed it open. "You've got a customer out here," he said, smiling at her. "It's busy as it can be. Can you work time and a half for awhile?"

"Sure," she said, rising, "it's no problem."

She finally picked up line one out at the counter. "Listen," she said to Ronnie, her head low to the phone, cradled next to the cash register. "I don't want to do anything but work here at the store. That's all I want to do."

"You're selfish," he said, as she watched a customer approaching. "I love you, let's make a try of it."

"I can't handle it," she said and hung up.

Her appointment was for Wednesday. She told the manager she had to go out of town. She planned for the weekend to recover.

The ladies were having their afternoon break when she went into the lounge.

Thelma didn't waste words. She did keep her voice down.

"You're going to do it, aren't you?"

"Is this really any of your business?"

"Now don't fly off the handle, it's just a question."

A small boy was sleeping on two folding chairs—one of the clerk's sons—his mother was sitting next to him, reading a magazine. The mother did not see the child squirm over the edge. Laura jumped up and caught him by his bottom. He crawled into his mother's arms giving Laura a sleepy helpless look that made her feel suddenly old. She left the room and left the store and went out to the park across the street. She saw a man coming down the sidewalk with a bag in his hand. He was eating something from it. Just before he reached her, he crumpled the bag and threw it on the ground. As he passed her, she pointed at it. "You dropped something," she said. "So I did," he said and walked on.

Marilyn Stablein

In India in the Sixties

In India in the Sixties I wore cotton saris and buffalo hide sandals called chappels. I was so skinny my thighs were no wider than one pound coffee tins.

I had a bit-part in a Rita Tushingham movie called *The Guru*. I played a hippie singing on a houseboat.

I started but couldn't finish *All and Everything* and *Lord of the Rings*.

I fasted on my eighteenth birthday to curb desire and ego. I remembered the report on Gandhi I wrote in high school, the book *Siddhartha*, and the trilogy *Apu*.

I had a Tibetan name meaning God Woman Life Happy.

I knew lamas in Sarnath, Bodh Gaya, Darjeeling, Dalhousie, Manali, and Kulu.

I spent hours reading from the *Tibetan Dictionary*, such entries as 'Void.' There were eighteen definitions.

I memorized prayers to female saints and goddesses. I translated the twenty-one verses for Green Tara and the *Heart Sutra*.

I went to the opening of the first disco in Delhi which coincided with the Moon Walk and danced until my sides ached.

I met a palmist who told me I had spent my previous life in India. "You will have two children," he said.

I ate ginger omelettes, chapatis, yoghurt, lentils and drank tea every day for three months.

I washed pots at a river using sand as a scouring pad. Also, ash and straw worked just as well.

I had a landlord named Tenzing who had a room full of Everest trophies.

I had a friend called eight-fingered Eddy who, sitting cross-legged in a houseboat, would go into a trance listening to scratchy Beatles' tapes. He waved his arms and fingers in the air and called it 'dancing.' He received checks in the mail from Uncle Sam and developed a following.

I heard about but never met a junkie named Mayflower who had a pet monkey who was also a junkie.

I met the man I would later marry in the bazaar in Benares when he asked me if I knew where he could buy a milk pail. I showed him.

I visited a yogi named Chen who hadn't left his meditation cell for twenty years. I brought him some home-made fudge as an offering. He loved it. He published pamphlets which he gave away free. One was called, "Welcome Hippies By This Way." He wrote a letter introducing me to his relatives in Calcutta. When I visited, they served Chinese fish steamed in brown sauce. The wife worked in a beauty parlor and shampooed, set, and styled my hair. I looked different for two days.

I signed letters, "Seek Within," and "From the vacuum of liberating chaos."

Once, besides money, I needed a Japanese brush painting set, bikini underwear, preferably black, and a book on magic squares. I wrote home, "Send Immediately." The package took four weeks to arrive and I had to pay the postman *baksheesh* to get it.

I read the *Kama Sutra* and practised making love cross-legged like the tantrics. I wondered why Indian men and women never hugged and why movie stars weren't allowed to kiss on screen.

I saw a cow calve on LSD. It took four hours.

I nicknamed a kid, as a joke, 'Razor Blade Bob' because he was so young and quiet I couldn't believe his bandaged wounds were self-inflicted. He took datura and disappeared in the Ganges.

Sitting next to an open window, I was once hit by a mud cake thrown at the moving train.

I was the guest of a Maharaja who had meat smuggled into his strict vegetarian town. He had an Austrian guru with waist length red hair.

I hoarded white sugar and black market kerosene because it was so hard to get when you needed it most.

I dreamed my mother was Tibetan.

I saw the Canadian ambassador take Buddhist vows under the Bodhi tree where Buddha was enlightened. Afterwards I went to meditate in a cave that was a day's walk from the Bodhi tree. After two days I got constipated from sitting too long and eating only seeds and dried fruit. I stopped meditating and watched a village-gathering in the valley below. The people waved red flags and beat on drums. Then, I realized it was a Communist rally.

I met many gurus. The Hare Krishna one asked me if I wanted to cut my hair and go to England and set up a center. I didn't.

A bullock cart ride I took once was so slow I wished I had walked.

I never drove a car. I rode in three kinds of rickshaws: the motorized kind that looked like it belonged on a golf course, the bicycle rickshaw, and one pulled by a muscular man in a loin-cloth and barefeet. I knew all of the rates. I had an argument once with a city rickshaw *wallah* who wanted three times the usual rate. In anger I threw the money on the ground and ground it into the dirt with my foot. He never picked it up; nor did I.

I was frisked going into the Dalai Lama's reception room. I sat very still when Richard Alpert asked the Dalai Lama if he thought the highest form of consciousness was like an acid trip. He replied, "No." Outside, we gave away mirror disks with stick-um on the back and took polaroid photographs.

I saw the movie *2001* at a theater in Calcutta and cried.

I taught English to a boy lama who had "Om" etched on his teeth. I wondered if his permanent teeth would have "Om" on them, too.

I thought about becoming a Tibetan nun. Once I covered the grounds of a temple on my stomach like a pilgrim. Going up and down steps was the hardest part. I also did 25,000 prostrations on a linoleum board. I wore waxed gloves to help my body slide up and down smoothly. At best, I did one hundred prostrations a day keeping count with a rosary placed on the ground in front of me. My arms became very strong.

I found a leech in a head of lettuce.

I dreamed Tibet was a province in California and I was sent there on a Quaker Peace Mission. At one monastery, I took an underground shower and worried, "Why am I naked in front of these monks?"

In Spite of Everything . . .

Rabie Harris

Mr. Lampkin gave his son Freddy a package wrapped in yesterday's newspaper as the boy was pulling up weeds from his mother's flower bed.

Freddy's heart lept when he saw the knife, but he was quick to hold back his

feelings and not to show too much delight, too much appreciation. He knew that the knife, like his bicycle, his telescope, his coin collection, would be destroyed at the slightest vexation his father experienced.

Freddy looked at the knife carefully as

it lay on the newspaper on the ground in front of him. He rubbed his hand over the smooth black plastic handle, then he picked it up. A nice knife, Freddy thought. He pulled the blade out; it was five inches long. He ran a finger along the sharp

edge, along the back of the blade, and touched the long tapered point. The blade was sharp enough for him to whittle with. He could even use the point to take apart the radio his uncle had given him.

He noticed his father watching him, and he doubled his fist and pushed against the back of the knife until the blade was once again enclosed into the handle. Freddy stood up and looked directly at his father and said,

"Thank you sir."

Mr. Lampkin touched Freddy on the shoulder.

"You take care of that knife, boy."

"I will Father," Freddy answered. He knelt down and started pulling up weeds again.

"I wish to God that boy would stop calling me Father. It's not natural. It's his mother's fault. I keep telling her to cut him from her apron strings, but she won't listen to me," Mr. Lampkin thought as he walked towards the kitchen door.

He looked at his vegetable garden and rubbed his large, rough hand over the back of his neck. Weeds covered the six by seven area which had been left neglected after heavy rains washed away his young tomato plants, that he had so hoped for, that he had planned to sell in the market along with his callaloo.

"Life, life, life," he murmured wearily.

Mrs. Lampkin was standing at the kitchen sink scaling fish when Mr. Lampkin entered. She turned when she heard the door opened, and from the narrowness of her husband's mouth and the rapid blinking of his eyes, she knew that he was in an arguing mood.

"Edna, when you going to let that boy grow up into a man?"

"I never knew there was any question about the sex of our son."

"Him don't act and talk like other boys. Father. Now where him get that from? I called my father Daddy all my life, and my father called his father Daddy, and so did his father. I know I'm his father; him don't have to keep reminding me. Him lucky is me him have to deal with; I too easy with you and him. My father would have straightened him out long time, and not with words either."

"What's wrong with Father, Lampkin. At least the child shows respect."

"Well, tell him you hear me. Tell him to call me Daddy or even Pappa."

"I wish that was all I had to worry about," Mrs. Lampkin said, and regretted the words instantly. Mr. Lampkin looked up at her and without saying a word asked her with his eyes what she meant. Mrs. Lampkin sliced a lime in half and rubbed it over a fish.

"Woman, did you hear me ask you what

you talking about?"

"Lampkin, I don't want any fuss."

"Who's fussing? I just want to know what you mean by what you have to worry about."

"It's nothing, Lampkin."

"Don't tell me it's nothing. Why open you mouth for nothing." He was shouting.

"Stop raising your voice."

"This is my house and I will talk as I please."

Mrs. Lampkin put down the fish she was holding, wiped her hands in her apron and walked away from the sink.

"Where you think you going?" He went

over to his wife. "A tell you, it's because of you why the boy is the way he is. Here it is I'm talking to you and you walking away. He is the same way."

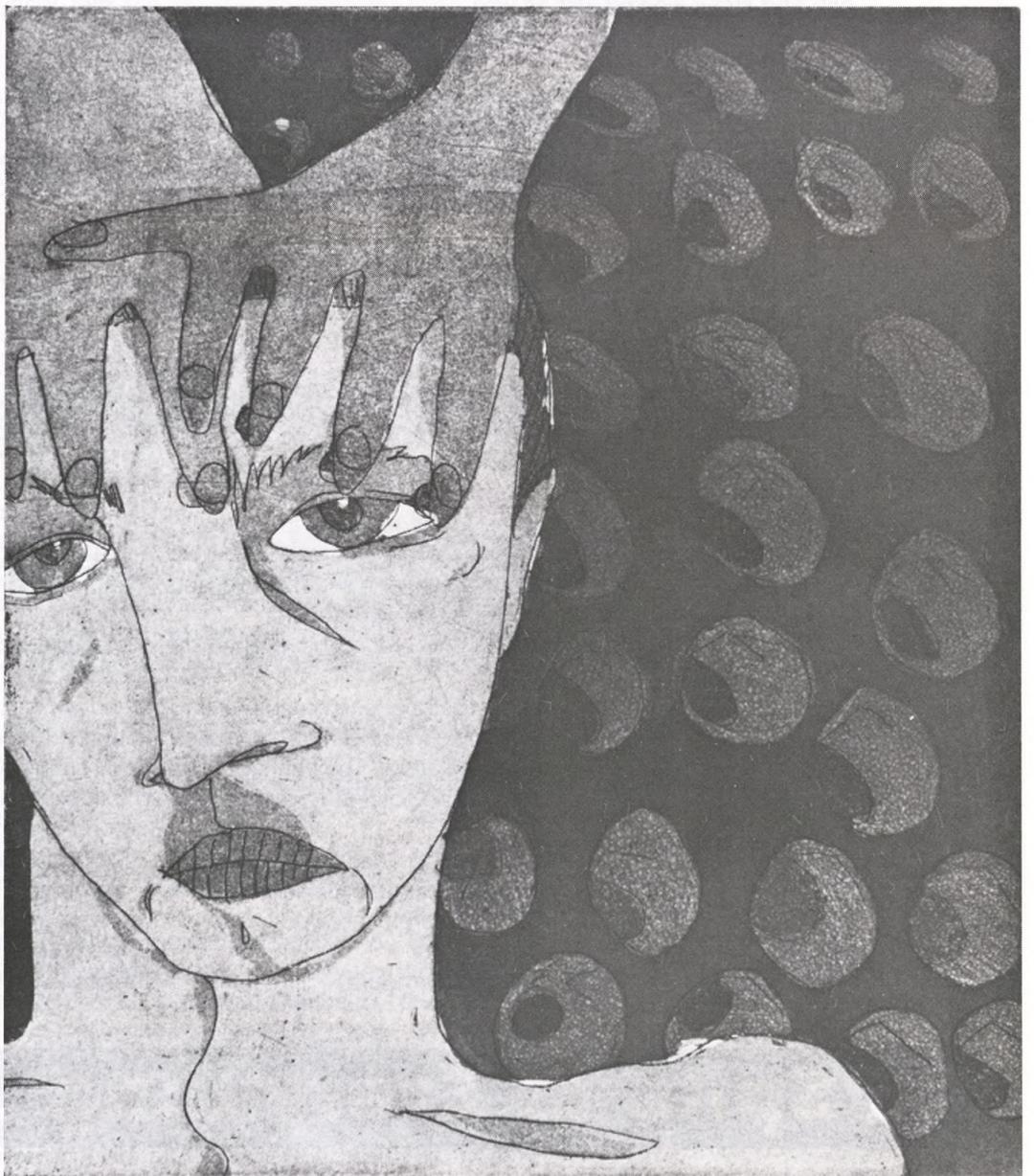
"Maybe if you took more interest in him, criticized him less, he would be more like you," Mrs. Lampkin said.

"Now you blaming me. Well, you can stop right there."

Mrs. Lampkin stopped in front of their bedroom and was about to open the door when Mr. Lampkin put his hand on the doorknob.

"Edna, I'm talking to you."

Mrs. Lampkin moved away from the



Beth Secor

Dust Storm

We watch north as red
edges the horizon, then grows,
changing the color of the sky.

Though we know to dread
this storm which has no rain,
my brother and sister and I

thrill to the scent which comes
first as wind. We pretend
the smell is smoke, and red

clouds mean fire coming hard
on the stand of live oaks
where we play, marking rooms

with rows of swept leaves.
We hurry through the thicket house
gathering valuables, waiting

till the walls begin to scatter
before we leave, riding together
on a low slung branch to a safer place.

A neighbor who is also our mother
takes us in. She secures windows,
but can't keep out the unfamiliar

light, colored like a sunset
going on too long. On the porch
my father strips to his shorts

leaving a dusty heap of khakis.
He comes in like an outlaw,
white triangle of handkerchief

protecting his face. He built this
house, meaning its thick limestone
walls to withstand any wind,

but doors thought tight fail somehow
against the gritty air. Every table
becomes a surface for tracing names

that Saturday's dusting will erase.
Then we'll sweep what was air
into dustpans; tonight we improvise

soft shoe routines on the kitchen floor,
dancing our way to a supper
which tastes of someone's field.

bedroom door and went instead to a side door that led outside.

Mr. Lampkin followed his wife outside, running and walking. She went around the side of the house to the front where Freddy was. Mr. Lampkin's voice raised as he neared his wife.

"Most men wouldn't stand for all this botheration."

Mrs. Lampkin knelt down beside Freddy, near a large rosebush which was just in bloom, its small red buds only slightly opened.

"See what I mean, you are two of a kind," Mr. Lampkin said.

Freddy looked up at his father, his face without emotion, but his eyes glistened with controlled anger.

"Boy, don't look at me like that, you hear me."

Freddy looked down, away from his

father, and his eyes rested on the knife which was still on the newspaper. He reached out for the paper, but Mr. Lampkin quickly put his foot on it, then he picked up the paper, and the knife fell on a patch of weeds that Freddy had unearthed.

Mr. Lampkin raised his foot high and brought it down on the knife. The plastic cracked. He took up the knife, forced the blade from the handle and pressed against the back of the blade with his foot, forcing it into the ground. The handle gave way, and the blade was left sticking into the dirt.

Mrs. Lampkin shook her head; Freddy continued looking at the ground. Mr. Lampkin pulled the blade from the ground, carried it to the small wooden shed that housed the pit toilet. He lifted the latch from the door, walked in, took the lid off the toilet and dropped the blade in.

Ritual for Father and Daughter On the Shortest Day of the Year

for my father

Even though you taught me about trees,
I ask you to do the lesson again,
for I am rusty, like the saw you choose,
and I need you to remind me and to show my sons
how the pickup must jounce us over outcroppings
of limestone, over stands of bluestem grass
in your pasture, how we must move from one
cedar to another, saying our lines: *too tall,*
too small, two trunks, before we come to one
which we accept, though its point is too fragile
to hold a star and its flat side must turn
toward the wall. Your hands at 70 are surer
on the saw than any of ours as you carve
into the scent of the yellow wood. I remember
to push the trunk, opening the cut
for the oiled blade, till with a crack
the tree whooshes to the ground. We celebrate,
sipping bourbon from your cup, and talk
of how we are used to warm weather at Christmas,
to the carefully laid fire which stays
unlit, to the stars our squinting eyes make
of colored lights, to the fragrance of cedar
which will fill the house and stain our sleep.

Nancy Luton Tynan

YOU

Dodie O'Donald was surprised to see my new watch. "I thought you were getting it for a birthday present when you turned eight," she said, lifting my wrist to inspect more closely. "Hey, this is Gene Autrey. You said you were getting a Cinderella like mine."

"It's an early birthday present," I answered, although on receiving it that morning I'd wondered if it were a punishment from my God for praying for a watch to Jesus, who was Dodie's God. "The baby sister's going to be a present, too." My new friend hardly looked impressed. "Anyway," I said, wanting to be as much like nine-year-old Dodie as I could, "the bands are the same."

Dodie's father owned a restaurant in Manhattan, which we in Franklin Square called 'the city,' as if no other existed, and he lived there during the week. My mother said the restaurant was a 'saloon.' Mr. O'Donald always gave us kids the loose change in his pockets when he came home. "My father gave me fifty cents this weekend," Dodie said. I made my eyes big to show appreciation of the amount. "Let's go get ice cream cones. I'll treatcha."

I loved the way Dodie talked. She came from the Bronx. I'd lived my whole life on Long Island and thought it very romantic to come from someplace. Mrs. O'Donald came from Ireland. My father said the reason she was hard to understand was she had a 'brogue.' I thought a brogue was much better than an accent which was what my grandmother had. My grandmother came from Russia, and she embarrassed me all the time in front of my friends. "Yehudit'l," she called me, the Yiddish diminutive of Judith, my name. Sometimes it was *Mamale*, because, my mother explained, when you grow up you'll be a mommy.

"When I grow up to be a mommy, will you still be my mother?"

"Yes, and I'll be a grandma then, too, to your children." This discussion took place at night when I was in bed and my mother ready to leave the room. I wished

WANT

it were my father tucking me in. He was my favorite; I was going to marry someone just like him when I grew up. My father gave better explanations than my mother. If he didn't know something for sure he'd look it up with me in our big, blue encyclopedia or in the dictionary. My mother didn't have time for such research. Keeping house for us, she said, took a lot out of her. She looked tired that night and anxious to be done with me. "When you're a grandmother," I said, "will you get your accent while the baby is in me, or after it comes out?"

My mother folded her hands across her swollen stomach and took a deep breath. "Please go to sleep," she said. "We'll talk about it tomorrow." She was always saying that and then forgetting.

"Mommy," I asked her, settling down on the pillow, "where do babies come from? I mean how do they get in the mother?"

"The daddy plants a seed in the mother's tummy; I've told you. Go to sleep now."

"How big is it?"

"How big is what?"

"The seed."

"Oh," my mother said, looking relieved, "it's tiny. Small as a chocolate sprinkle on an ice cream cone."

"How does it get planted in the mother?"

"Judith, that's a secret."

I pictured my father holding the trowel with the chocolate seed on it to my mother's mouth. Obviously one would swallow something so small. I wondered what all the secrecy was about and if it had anything to do with being Jewish. I suspected Dodie knew. She had a lot of brothers and sisters. "Catholics," my mother had reported of the new neighbors to Mrs. Rogoff when that lady dropped in for coffee. The two women had exchanged knowing looks across their big bellies and the kitchen table. A lot of ladies we knew were expecting

TO

babies then. It had something to do with the war's being over and the world's being safe again. Mrs. O'Donald's belly, however, was flat. I assumed Mr. O'Donald had gone out of the seed planting business once his family left to live on Long Island. "That dirty Irishman," Mrs. O'Donald had called him the day she met my mother. "He sticks me away out here away from civilization with all these brats and only comes out on weekends." And to the eyebrows my mother raised she added in a changed tone, "I've seven babies. I had to get my babies away from the city, you know."

My mother had nodded perfect understanding. The women had exchanged the same kinds of looks my mother and Mrs. Rogoff always shared. That night, my mother told me to be careful when I went to the bathroom at the O'Donald's house. With seven children she doubted the toilet could be too clean.

"Catholics," she told my father. "They have a lot of girls for Judith to play with."

"*Shiksies*," my father had said dubiously, "she'll get a lot of strange ideas."

"What can you do?" my mother answered him. "The world is full of strange ideas."

"I won't have chocolate sprinkles on my ice cream cone," I told Dodie as we walked toward Hempstead Turnpike where the stores were.

"How come? I'm treating."

I just shook my head, too shy suddenly to tell Dodie you could get a baby in your tummy from eating chocolate sprinkles.

Dodie and I, eating our ice cream cones, walked slowly toward home. We made castles with the tips of our tongues, going round and round the scoop of ice cream just above the cone, so that the ice cream formed a turret-like ball. Then we licked until the turrets were gone. You had to be very careful. Over-zealous licking could result in the loss of your ice cream, *splat*. It would land on the sidewalk in front of you, and all you'd have left would be the empty cone. We didn't talk until the turrets were gone. Usually, this happened when we were halfway home, on the wide con-

SEE

crete apron in front of Saint Catherine of Siena. That was Dodie's big, stone church. She would genuflect before the open doors. So would I, if no one was looking. It seemed such a glamorous thing to do. Once I went in and waited for Dodie while she went to confession. There was a big plaster statue up front of a lady in a long, blue dress. She held a rosy-cheeked baby, like a doll. "Was that Saint Catherine?" I asked Dodie as we left the church.

"No, that's the Blessed Mother," Dodie said, amazed at my ignorance. "You know, the Virgin Mary."

"What's a virgin?"

"A lady who never got pregnant from a man."

"But she had a baby," I said, marveling at Dodie's easy use of the indelicate word 'pregnant.'

"That's the miracle," Dodie said. "Don't you believe God can do miracles?"

"Sure," I said.

"Mommy," I asked my mother when I got into bed that night, "before you had me were you a virgin?"

"Judith!"

My father must have heard her. He came into the room asking, "What's the matter?"

"She just asked if I was a virgin before her," said my mother, who wouldn't say 'pregnant.'

"What do you know about virgins?" my father asked me.

"Dodie said . . ." I began. My mother and father exchanged looks.

"She plays with *shiks*," my father said. "Sometimes I think we shouldn't have left Brooklyn."

My mother folded her hands across her stomach. "It was your idea," she said. "There was a war on in Europe. I was this big with her, and you were looking for a house on Long Island. 'A boy should have a place to ride a bicycle,' you said."

"A boy?" I broke in. "Didn't you know I'd be a girl?"

"We hoped you would," my father said hastily, "but you don't know for sure what you're going to get."

"Oh, no. What about the baby sister?"

"Judith," my mother reminded, "we told you it might be a boy."

"But I hate boys. Everybody hates boys. The teachers, especially." This last was a sudden inspiration. I was sure it would make them do something to insure a girl. My parents revered teachers. They wanted me to become one. The hours and the vacations in teaching, my mother said when I announced a desire to be-

ME

come a dancer, were perfect, and you could still be one when you became a mommy. There was no other job where a woman could do that.

My parents ignored the warning I gave them. "Now, Judith," my father said, "what could you do with a sister you can't do with a brother?"

I was filled with a sense of foreboding. I'd been praying for a sister, but the episode of the watch had made me chary of the power of prayer. What I needed now was a miracle. I cast about for an answer to my father's question and remembered the one I had just asked, the question that had brought the three of us together in my bedroom. "If I had a sister," I said, "we could be virgins together."

Conflicting emotions played on my parents' faces as they wished me goodnight. "Virgins," I heard my father say as they walked off down the hall toward the kitchen. He sighed heavily. "I suppose it was inevitable. What do you think we should do?" Their voices trailed off. I lay back on my pillow and worried about what 'inevitable' meant. It sounded like a word that could stop you from playing with your best friend.

"Mommy," I called.

"Go to sleep, Judith."

"But, Ma . . ."

My father showed up. "Mommy's tired," he said.

"She's always tired since she got the baby in her."

"It's hard work, having a baby."

"Why don't men have babies?"

"Men aren't made for it. That's where women are special. You go to sleep now."

"Daddy, I'm not tired. I'm not having a baby. I just want to ask you, what's 'inevitable?'"

"It means something you can't avoid. Something that was bound to happen. Tomorrow I'll show you. We'll look it up in the dictionary."

"Dad, is it inevitable for the baby to

DANCE?

be a boy?"

My father smiled. He had a very wishful look on his face. "Judith," he said, "go to sleep."

The next day he showed me 'inevitable' in the dictionary and printed it out for me on a piece of paper. "It's so long," I said. "This is the longest word I've learned since 'Mississippi.'" I stared at the word for a long time after my father left the table where we were sitting. It was long, as long as a river, and my eyes focused on the 'v' my father had printed. Its point came down lower than the rest of the letters, and it seemed to be sinking into the river that was 'inevitable.' I felt drawn to it, as if it somehow represented me. If I were that 'v,' I thought, I'd swim hard. I closed my eyes and pictured myself as the 'v,' swimming, pushing away with my arms at the currents of the river of the inevitable, fighting the limits of what was bound to happen, floating above it, coming to a place where there were no limits, dancing in a spotlight endlessly fixed on me. In such a place it wouldn't matter if the baby were a boy or a girl. Differences between people wouldn't count. A person could do anything, be anything she wanted . . .

"Judith, what are you doing?" My mother's voice startled me. She was not the sort of person to whom you said you were floating above the inevitable. To my father who had looked it up, who never kept things from me, I would have told the truth. "Nothing," I answered my mother.

"Well, help me set the table," she said. "It's time for dinner."

I came into the kitchen the next morning and found my father there. "Where's Mommy?" I asked.

"You have a *brother*," my father said. I stared at him. "Aren't you going to say something? Judith, this is a happy time." My father's eyes were red-rimmed, and he had a stubble on his face. He half-stifled a yawn.

"You don't look happy." I buttered the toast he handed me, scattering crumbs, and fought tears.

"I was up all night. Mrs. Rogoff stayed with you. Grandma's coming today." I burst into tears. "Judith, Grandma'll take good care of you," my father coaxed. "We told you when the baby came Mommy would go to the hospital for a few days." This only made me cry harder. "She's barely gone, and you miss her so much already?" I nodded. My father came around to my side of the table and stroked my hair. "I miss her, too," he said. "How'd you like to stay home from school today?" It was the first time we had ever been without my mother. Staying home from school was small comfort; I felt as though she had died. My father came around to my side of the table and stroked my hair. "Don't cry," he said. It sounded like a plea, as though we were children together and one's tears might set off the other's. "I know what let's do," my father said. "The baby has no name yet. Let's look in the telephone book and find him a name." Any of the names would have done as far as I was concerned, but the thrill of having my father all to myself kept me at his side. As we made a game of it I became more interested. Soon we were finding and rejecting outrageous names: "How about Bartholomew? Bartholomew Rabinowitz, can you imagine?" We were all the way to Ulysses when my grandmother came.

"Leib'l," she greeted my father with his Yiddish name when the taxi man had been paid. "You look terrible, and the child isn't dressed. Shame on you, the breakfast dishes are still on the table. What kind of a home is this for our little David'l?"

"Who's David'l?" I asked.

"You didn't tell her? Your new brother's name is David—for my father. Your mama told me before she went in the hospital: 'If it's a boy, his name will be David.'"

On Sunday my mother brought the baby home. "It'll never be as much fun to play over here," Dodie said when my father's maroon chevy pulled up outside my bedroom window, cutting short our game of house. "Babies stink."

"Not my brother," I answered loyally, but I was secretly glad she's said it. The baby, even before his homecoming, had begun to interfere with my life. I didn't like having my grandmother take care of me. She served pot roast with the fat still on it, and made me take my bath before dinner and eat in my pajamas. I was more interested in hugging my mother than in looking at the red-faced bundle she'd brought home.

"Don't squeeze Mommy too tight," my grandmother warned as I tried to hide my dismay over my mother's stomach, which if no longer the size of a watermelon was still at least as big as a basketball. My grandmother took the new baby in her arms, and my father helped my mother off with her coat. "David'l," my grandmother cooed, not at all in the voice in which she'd hurried me off to the bath, "Tatele," little father.

My mother, pale, sat down in the wing chair in the living room, and my father went off to help my grandmother unwrap my brother and put him away in his bassinet. "Come here," my mother said. I ran to her, threw myself to the floor at her feet, and buried my head in her lap. My mother smoothed my hair. There was a funny smell about her, milky and antiseptic. Jealousy stirred in my stomach. She smelled like the baby. Lines were being drawn, and my brother shared with her something I didn't. I wanted my own back, and I began to cry. "Judith," my mother soothed, her hand still on my hair, "don't cry, Mamale."

I stood with my mother, watching as my grandmother changed the baby's diaper. "What's that?" I whispered to my mother as with an alcohol dampened cotton ball my grandmother swabbed at the baby's navel.

"That's where he was attached to me," my mother said. "The doctor had to tie it off and then cut it. It'll fall off in a day or two."

"Oy, oy, oy," my grandmother said suddenly. My brother had let loose a thin stream of urine and was soaking the wall. My mother laughed, and so did I. The baby started to cry. He sounded a little like the O'Donald's cat when she was hungry.

"Meee-ow," I said to him.

"Go help Daddy warm a bottle for the baby," my mother said above his noise.

"Meow," I said again.

"Judith, go now," my grandmother said.

"When's Grandma going home?" I asked my father as we waited for the bottle to warm.

"She's going to stay a few more days," my father said. "Mommy'll need help. David's going to have a *bris*."

"What's a *bris*?"

"It's a party for the new baby. You'll have a good time. You can invite Dodie."

"Tell me about my *bris*."

"You didn't have one. Girls don't have them—only boys."

"Why?"

"It goes back a long time," my father said. "Thousands of years ago God made a bargain with Abraham . . ."

"I know," I said, my sense of injustice fading at the prospect of showing off for my father. "We learned about it in Sunday school."

"Well, the remembrance of that deal is a *bris*. There's a little operation involved." My father looked uncomfortable. He squirted a little of the formula in the bottle against his wrist, then stuck the bottle back in the pot. "It's called a circumcision. See, all boys are born with something on their—down there." He wouldn't meet my eyes and finished hurriedly. "To make a *bris*, it has to be removed. Well, the bottle's ready. Do you want to take it in to the baby?"

I put my hand out for the warm bottle. "Does it hurt?"

"No, they barely feel it."

"Did you feel yours?"

My father turned a little red. "It doesn't hurt. You'd better take that bottle in."

sat with Dodie later on the curb. "You're invited to my brother's *bris*."

"What's that?"

"It's a party, but first they have to do a little operation on my brother. It doesn't hurt. They take a little piece of his"—I used the word my mother had taught me—"wee-wee, and cut it off. First they tie a string around it . . ."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," said Dodie, going pale and crossing herself.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, indeed," echoed the angry brogue of Mrs. O'Donald. She approached us from behind and jerked her daughter to her feet. "Get in the house, Dodie, and you, Judith, go home!" I stood, frightened, rooted to the sidewalk. "Go home!" she shouted again as Dodie scooted indoors. "I move all this way away from civilization, and now it's Jews with filthy stories. Go home, Judith Rabinowitz, and don't be bothering with Dodie no more." Mrs. O'Donald took a step toward me. I bolted at last, calling for the surest safety in my world. "Mommy," I yelled, "Ma."

My mother was resting when I came in. "Leave Mommy alone," Grandma said. "She's tired, and tomorrow's the *bris*. She'll be all worn out . . ."

"Ma," I yelled again.

"Judith, Judith, you'll wake the baby." My mother's voice preceded her into the kitchen. I lowered my voice; the story came out in a sort of strangled hiss.

"Do something," I finished, begging. "She's not going to let me play with Dodie anymore."

My mother straightened her yellow housedress. "I'm going across the street," she told my grandmother and me. She walked very slowly. There was a stain on the shoulder of her dress where the diaper she kept there to burp my brother had slipped and his spit-up had oozed.

"When I'm a mommy," I said to my grandmother, "I'm not going to let anybody spit on me." I waited at the door until my mother came back.

"We had a very nice talk," she reassured me. "Mrs. O'Donald's not mad at you anymore. Dodie can't come to the *bris*, though. There's a party in their family, too—a christening—and they have to go to the city tomorrow. I'm going to lie down now."

I hugged her. "I won't bother you ever again, Ma." My mother nodded and left for the bedroom.

The day of the *bris* I was up early and ate breakfast in my white slip. By nine in the morning I was wearing my favorite dress, a blue velvet, smocked at the shoulders front and back with a huge white lace collar. "A *kallah-maid*," my grandmother said when she'd zipped me and spun me around to look. It meant I was pretty enough to be a bride, and I held my head high as I went off to show my parents.

"Nice," my father said, "very pretty."

"Take that dress off right now," my mother said. "The party's not 'til four. You could spill something on it."

"Please, Mommy . . ."

"She wasn't ever going to bother me again," my mother told my father from the table where she was changing my brother.

"Listen to your mother," my father said.

I turned to go and from the corner of my eye noticed my brother's navel. The little cord was gone. "When did that happen?" I asked my mother, pointing and drawing closer.

"Yesterday. Last night, actually . . ."

A sudden stream of urine bypassed her face and interrupted her. "What a *pisher*," my father said proudly and then looked, annoyed, at me. "What's the matter with you?" he asked, for I had begun to shriek.

"My dress. He got it all over my dress!"

"You shouldn't have had that dress on in the first place," my mother said, and my father nodded agreement. "Go ask Grandma to wipe it with a damp towel and then for heaven's sake take it off until the company comes."

I looked as menacingly as I could at the baby. Had anyone else messed my dress my parents would have blamed the culprit and not me. "Babies stink!" I said. "Especially boys."

"Go clean up your dress," my mother said.

At three-thirty I was allowed to put the dress back on. My grandmother by this time had heaped dozens of sandwiches on trays and set out wineglasses and napkins. There were jam cookies, raisin-studded *rogelach*, sponge cakes and a honey cake, two fruit bowls as well as a smooth mound of chopped liver surrounded by crackers, and chick peas in blue fluted paper cups. "It looks nice," my father told his mother, who must have stayed up to do the baking long after I'd gone to bed the night before.

"Do you think we have enough?" my grandmother answered.

The first to arrive was the *mohel*, the man who did the little operations. I shrank from him, embarrassed at being a girl and never having needed his services, and fearful of his long black beard, black coat, and worst of all, the ominous black bag he carried. Soon there was a throng of relatives and friends in the house. Most came carrying gifts for my brother. Only Aunt Frances, my favorite relative, blonde and blue eyed, smelling of a perfume so special it had a number as well as a name, brought me a present. It was a cellophane package of balloons. She pulled it from her purse after setting down a handsomely wrapped gift for the *pisher*. During the ceremony of the circumcision the women scattered through the house, and Aunt Frances stayed in the kitchen with me. We sat opposite one another at the round table, and she blew up a balloon for me. There was a hush in the house, and then my brother began to scream. This was no soft cat-cry, but a series of sharp, pained yells. "The *baby*," I said to Aunt Frances, beginning to cry a little myself.

"It'll only hurt for a minute," she said, and I ran to sit on her lap.

"They said it wouldn't hurt at all."

The baby's screams subsided. We could hear my father crooning to him. "Poor

thing," my aunt said. The hubbub of many people talking picked up again.

"Does it bleed a lot?" I asked my aunt.

"No, no," she said, twirling a strand of my black hair around her finger to make a curl. "Only a little bit."

"Well, I'm glad I'm a girl," I said, "and nothing can ever make me bleed down there."

"Oh," said Aunt Frances, and set me down. "We can go back in the living room now."

In the living room Uncle Max, my father's oldest brother, took me by the hand. "So?" he said. "How do you like your new brother?"

"He's okay. You want to see me dance?" I pirouetted three or four times.

"Judith," my mother called, "no dancing now. There're too many people. Be a good girl, pass some mints." I passed Uncle Max a mint and handed him an ashtray for his cigar.

"You're going to make somebody a wonderful wife, young lady," he said. I moved proudly on with the candy dish.

The baby, who had been given a few drops of wine, slept soundly. The food disappeared at an impressive rate. As darkness settled outside my father turned on all the lamps. "Get ready for bed," my mother said presently. The uncle on whose lap I'd been sitting released me.

"Soon you'll be too big to sit on my lap," he said.

"Yes," I answered, feeling important. My grandmother moved to unzip my dress. "Not here, Grandma, in the bathroom." I kissed everyone goodnight.

"Goodnight, Judith," my mother said pointedly.

In my room I waited in pajamas for her to come in. My father was gone, driving back to Brooklyn some carless relatives who had come out by train. I brushed my hair in front of the mirror, then arched my back, sticking my stomach out to look as though I were carrying a baby in it. There wasn't enough stomach to do the job convincingly, so I took the balloon Aunt Frances had blown up for me and shoved it under my pajama

top. "Hey, Baby," I said, smoothing the pink, flowered flannel over the balloon, "you'd better be a girl in there." Then I waddled about the bedroom. My back began to ache with the effort of arching, and I stood up straight. The balloon fell out. I yawned and got into bed. My mother soon came in.

"I thought you might be asleep," she said. "I'm exhausted."

"I thought you wouldn't be tired anymore, after the baby was born.

"All new mommies are tired in the beginning. The baby keeps me up half the night. He wakes up to be fed at two and at six in the morning."

"I don't make you tired, do I Mommy? Only boys make their mothers tired. When I grow up to be a mommy I'm only going to have girls."

My mother shook her head. "You take what you get," she said. "You go to sleep now."

"But, Mommy . . ."

"No, not another word."

"I just want you to say girls are better. Aren't girls better?"

My mother leaned forward. She kissed me goodnight. "Judith," she said, "go to sleep."

p."

