Gulf Coast

A LITERARY MAGAZINE

$4.00

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Volume II, Number 2

Gulf Coast

We would like to gratefully acknowledge **Arthur Andersen & Co.**, without whose donation of typesetting and printing this issue would not have been published.

Special thanks to the Activities Funding Board at the University of Houston, International Contemporary Art Productions, M. E. Sorrell at the Lawndale Art & Performance Center, Janet Meyer, Gary Rod, and Chandra Adams for their generous support. Also special thanks to Fran Kalmykov at *eleven x fourteen* Magazine, Kevin Cunningham, and photographers Ben DeSoto, Paul Hester, and Frank Martin.

Cover: Gail Siptak, *Passion Flowers*, 1987
17″ x 41″ oil on panel (photo by John Runnels)

An interdisciplinary journal of literature and the arts, *Gulf Coast* is published bi-annually by the students in the Creative Writing Program, Department of English at the University of Houston, 4800 Calhoun Rd., Houston, TX 77004.

One year individual subscriptions $8.00.

All manuscripts should be sent to the Editors at the above address with self-addressed stamped envelope.

ISSN 0896-2251

Volume II, Number 2 Spring-Summer 1988

Gulf Coast

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ROBERT GREGORY

Two Photographs Of My Father,
Who Was, I Think, Possessed By A Demon At One Time

I saw him, probably for the last time, about a year ago. He didn't see me. I was taking the train from Boston to New York, which I'd done three or four times in two months, because there was some talk of doing *Walden* (I know, it's crazy, isn't it?) so they had me scouting the area. I was on my way to the city with full reports on two possible sites, Fowler's Pond in Billerica and Two Mile Pond just west of Newburyport, prepared to make my presentation, with a straight face, in about four hours.

There's a little station at Green's Farms, in Connecticut, eighty yards from the ocean. I grew up around there; my father used to catch the train from there every morning. If you've ever taken that particular train, you know what it's like: sudden glimpses of the ocean, an empty rowboat tethered to a long pole out in the middle of the water, and just as you relaxed to that, the trees would jump up to the window and block your view completely, and then suddenly it would open up again to these vast empty spaces, stretches of gray water that looked deserted to me, though I know that doesn't make sense.

The first time I missed it (a tiny station house, barely there), but the next time I got ready around Norwalk and now I always made a point of looking. It flashed past; you had to be ready or you'd miss it. Some complex urge to look: not nostalgia, not sadness exactly. There was a curiosity in it: why was it the way it was?

And there he was. And then he was gone.

It was so quick I expect anybody would scoff, but there are ways you recognize someone even if you don't see their face, even if you haven't seen them in twenty years, even if all you see is a skinny old man in a pith helmet. A white T-shirt. Long droopy khaki shorts. Sneakers. A very dark tan. That, and his bony limbs, made him look like an overcooked piece of chicken, forgotten on the back of the grill. Or like a root, one of hundreds we fought and yanked at, getting muddy and slippery as they were, he and I and my brother, working on some mysterious obsession of his to clear something away. Just after sunrise, which meant only that the darkness had been thinned out a bit and carried a blue tinge. Too much gray ocean for the sky to do much but imitate it. He must have been cold dressed that way. It was early to be walking around. In the middle of the little back road to the beach where we always went to go swimming. He had stopped, his back to me and the train. What was he doing? I don't know. I don't know anything about him and I never will.

"Try and keep it that way." That's what my brother used to say, to tease me, but also as if he knew something and as if it bothered him. None of us could just say something straight out, not even the dead one.

First photograph: very old, from the 1930's, when he was a boy. He has been dressed in dark heavy-looking trousers, the sharpness of the crease visible in the picture. He's outside in a backyard somewhere. It's summer and even in the old photograph you can see how harsh and intense the sunlight is. His starched white shirt reflects and redoubles this light so that his arms and torso seem to blur and diffuse into the light around him. He stands, as if told, sharply, to stand still. Because of the light, his lips, his hair, and his eyes are dark smudges on paper. Next to him is a huge trophy, its base lost in the grass, standing almost as tall as he is. He and the trophy stand side by side, equally rigid. He doesn't smile. He doesn't lean toward or touch the trophy or grin or clown. I know nothing about his boyhood, except that his father died and then he was surrounded by women: his mother and three sisters.

"That's enough," my brother says and whips the photograph out of my hands.

"Hey!"

"You shouldn't even be looking at it at all. You shouldn't still be up at this hour and you sure shouldn't be in your parents' bedroom rummaging around in their super-private and precious objects."

"And you are the oldest, and the person in charge...."

"That's right," he said," and you're just a little too eager to stare at this, I think."

"But Dee, look at him, look at him."

"Yeah? I don't see much of anything. Big pants. Big trophy. Probably the state-wide asshole championships."

"You don't see it? Seriously?"

"Go to bed. Direct order. Nothing to see, Pester. Just an old yellow thing."

Dee, for Dietrich, who taught the kids in school to call him Rick and saved Dee for us, 1947-1968.

I used to hide naked in our woods. "Did you touch yourself?" the priest asked me, as we sat in the dark. No. "Well," he said, relieved, "I don't think it's a sin, then. But, if I were you, I'd think about how you would explain it if anyone happened to see you."

I didn't know you could do that or what would happen. My first real girlfriend taught me, in her little car, at the drive-in. Huge faces in bright colors, appearing and dissolving: Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau, whispering to each other frantically, scared of being caught at something by their wives. I jumped a little at the first touch but then I got into it. Their faces flickered in that little space where my eyes were open. I guess I wanted to look at her hand, but I was too shy and too crazy from this totally unanticipated feeling that was taking me over. What would happen next? I had no idea. A little of me got on the windshield.

"Ooh, you just missed his eye, baby," she said, meaning one of the huge faces moving out there in the dark but on the glass at the same time. I had no idea what she was saying (or where or who I was) but I remembered and then later on I figured it out.

On those long pointless drives they forced on us Sundays, I would stare and stare at the wall of trees until I began to see an Indian. I did and I didn't. He was there, slipping along just inside the cover of the trees, so I could see an arm or the side of his face. Just a flash of naked skin. I think now probably what I saw was a just-visible reflection of my face on the glass, some blank area, my cheek or my forehead, seen as if "out there" by some trick of the light or the angle.

Anyway, every hot bright Saturday in the summer my mother

insisted on going to the beach. "Stewart," she would call to him from the garage. "We're going. Sure you don't want to come have a swim and cool-off?" He would stop, straighten up, wipe his face with the T-shirt he'd hung through his belt and then would shake his head; he never spoke if he could help it. Then would come the noise of the car going slowly up the drive. Too fast and the gravel would scatter off into the lawn. He stood and watched from the garden where he had been hoeing; if my sisters waved, he would wave. Once they were out of sight, he would go back to his work. Then Dee, who could hear the noise from where he was hiding under the big bed in our room, would sneak downstairs into the den and put the TV on, low, and pull the curtains to keep reflections off the screen. The captain read the service: "I am the resurrection and the life," etc. Then the sailors raised the board and the package with the dead sailor inside it—we got a side of bacon from my grandfather that had been swathed that way—slid out from under the flag, making it ripple and then collapse.

Faintly from outside came tapping: my father, striking delicately at the buried pebbles with the blade of the hoe. With his back bent, running with sweat down his face, back, and arms. His chest seemed to run down into his stomach, so together they formed a loose swaying mass that glistened and dripped sweat too. Tapping for them, patient and monk-like; when he found one, he'd tap to find an edge and then, hooking the blade there, he'd give a jerk to flip the stone out. Then he'd carefully pull it over to the pile of stones and root fragments he had been making all morning. Then he'd start tapping again.

Where he worked had been forest, but—after we finished putting in a lawn, planting fruit trees, digging dry wells, and pulling stumps—we cleared a place there for beans, lettuce, cucumbers, and pumpkin vines that crawled back toward the lawn; that was later. Now it was just an ugly bare patch of dirt surrounded by woods on three sides. He worked as if he was in no hurry to finish. "It's my head," Dee said one time when we'd been spying on him. "He's digging out all the crazy ideas with his hoe, one by one."

"That could take forever," I said. He didn't bother to slug me.

Above him (my father) jays cried and screeched. Our two cats liked him, though he never patted them or spoke to them; they would come trotting over when they saw him, tails in the air. All Saturday they napped in the warm dirt near him, just to keep him company, and back inside the woods, well hidden, I would be crouching. Everything looks more itself when you have no protection; the rocks show how rough and hard they are, and bark looks very crisp and jagged. There was something very soothing about that fact. I crouched there on my heels what seemed like a long time. Then, eventually, I would get chilly or there'd be too many bugs. Or something about the look of my socks stuffed into my sneakers so they wouldn't get lost would make me feel self-conscious.

No one ever found out. I never even told Dee. I might have been caught eventually, but then one day in 1959 a naked man was spotted in the woods. Can you see how white he looks? Outside the wind moves in the leaves. The long slow call of the doves and the quick high notes of the other birds. I might have been daydreaming somewhere or up on the bed with a book. We lived on a dead end street, tucked away inside a series of turns that took you deeper and deeper into the forest and away from the main road. The builders cut out space for houses and left strips of thick woods in between; in summer you couldn't see another house or hear people's noise, except once in a while a screaming baby or yelling adults. The trees

stood close and beneath them it was full: tangles of thorn and dead fall branches, saplings, ferns, bushes, rocks, and even old woodpiles, forgotten and rotting away. There was still plenty of forest to wander off and get lost in. When we went off to play "sniper," we found dead campfires, with piles of cigarette butts and beer cans: the older kids. We found a cocker spaniel drowned in a stream, floating on its side, and a big white jawbone Dee said came from a cow (this had been a dairy farm once, before the commuters).

Some kids further down the street were playing near the edge of the forest when they heard someone calling and calling, someone's father calling them home for lunch, but there were no fathers home during the day around here. He was calling "Billy, Billy" and then the kids saw him back in the woods, an older man, and he was naked. He was very pale and white: they told the police this, and my mother got it from them when she called, frightened, to find out what was being done. All over the neighborhood, mothers were calling their children home and talking to each other on the phone. "The police are searching the woods for him," she told us.

"We'll go help them," I said.

"No," she said.

"I mean, we'll go watch from our windows in case they flush him out and he heads this way."

"No," she said. "Absolutely not. You two stay away from the windows. In fact..." and she went around the whole house pulling all the shades and turning on the lights.

"You jerk," Dee said. "You never know when to keep your mouth shut." He meant that if I hadn't told her, we could have snuck off to help track him, maybe got a shot at him with the pellet gun, or at least watched from our windows upstairs.

They never caught him. This story still gives me a funny feeling. Why would he be wandering around out in the woods calling someone that way? Where did he come from? Was he someone's father from around here who'd thrown off his suit and wingtips and cufflinks and tossed away his briefcase and gone wandering off into the woods, calling and calling? Naturally I didn't want him to be caught. Although, in a way, I did; I felt like he was calling me, that he'd seen me somehow, and this gave me the creeps.

You're crying, aren't you? Don't lie. It was so hard to admit then.

I found myself crying this morning. Have you ever suddenly started crying while you were taking a shower? It's strange: you feel all those places down under the skin open up (I always think it's like irrigation, that I have a reservoir of tears somewhere, it feels like in the belly or maybe somewhere in those miles of intestine, and the sensation is of water running up under the skin toward my face) and then the spasm, when the body tries to make up its mind (do I want to throw up or cry?) and then it begins, for me with a little mewing sound, which I guess is a kind of protest against crying, the vain part of the ego starts to say "no" but before it can finish it drowns in the warm water. But since I was in the shower with water pouring down all over me, so warm and comfortable that I had been snuggling into it and refusing to finish even though I had finished washing, I didn't feel the tears. Instead, I think what happened was that all that water pouring down all over me became my tears; I remember after it had gone on for a while, I don't know how long, I reached out and touched the windowsill, and I think if I hadn't the sensation of dissolving, of melting, would have gone on and on. The edge of the sill was dry and cold, faced away from me toward the outside; something about that touch made my skin come back around me

again. I turned everything off and stood there drying myself, realizing I didn't know which were my tears and which the water the city supplies. Why was I crying? I don't know.

"Why were you crying?" Dee said. He was lying on his bed reading a letter from some girl. He spoke without looking up.

"I don't know," I said, crying a little still. And lying. I did know.

"Hey, it doesn't matter to me, just don't let them catch you," he said over his shoulder. I was standing in the bathroom doorway (I had gone in there to try the remedy: look at yourself in the mirror and you'll stop crying—and also to hide it from him).

I guess it was the reasonable tone. "It's going to matter in just a second," I said. It was standing up in the corner by the bathroom where it always was; my father borrowed it as part of his war with the birds. It fired a shiny silver slug, about the size of a jellybean; single shot, not CO_2, so you had to pull a piece of the stock open and then force it back down—that pumped it. I had an image, because we'd shot pumpkins with it, but he heard the noise and was up off the bed and out the door. I couldn't lead him; the open door caught the slug. I hadn't really charged it very well, I guess. It made a little dent in the wood, that's all, and then bounced off and then bounced off something behind me and lay spinning on the blue carpet for a second. When I looked up, I saw his eye, knee level, peeking around the door at me, and I burst out laughing.

I guess we were mean, both of us. I remember when the slugs invaded my father's garden to eat his strawberries, we went after them with a lot of pleasure, pulling the rock up, spraying them with lighter fluid, and then tossing a match toward them. If the first didn't touch them off, we'd light another one and throw it. Foomph! "Oh, look at this one!" we cried to each other while they twisted and melted and burned, little greasy slimy repulsive torches. They burned away to almost nothing: just a little blackened crisp. I wonder if he looked up from what he was doing inside the house and saw us, and if he did, what he thought, whether it put him back inside his plane, watching the targets burn the tiny landscape below him.

"You look re-pulsive!" my mother said, to my thin, white-faced, dull-eyed sister, who always walked bent over and hunched, her unwashed hair hanging down flat in a way that bothered you because it looked like the kind of dirty hair that drives you crazy when it touches your face. "You creep around like a rat or something. Don't you realize how you look?"

My sister would (this was all routine) look at her silently and miserably. Then my mother would say, "Oh, go on, go on, get away from me, get out of here." We should have been allies, my sister Magg—Margaret—Dee called her Margarine—and I, since my mother did the same thing to me.

My father left for the city before we woke up in the morning. I'd find his plate on the table: yellow splash and a splinter of bacon, and there was the sharp thin smell of his aftershave loose in the dark house. He came home after we'd had our supper and were in our rooms doing homework. "I don't care what you're doing, you drop it and go say hello to your father when he comes home. And put a smile on your face," she told us. But after that, he and she would be closeted behind the closed door in the kitchen while he ate his dinner and she talked to him. Dee said she would have made a good queen, a queen in exile, touchy and powerless. She turned my father's story of his day into a series of battles, triumphs, strategic retreats, challenges to a duel. I know; I heard. There was a wingback armchair around the corner in the living room, and if I curled up on

it I could, if I concentrated, follow the murmuring and her exclamations. "Oh, good shot," she'd say sometimes. Her favorite story was about his first week at his new job in the new city. The editor kept turning his work back to him until finally he got mad and said, "Well, dammit, what do you want then?" and the editor said, "Good, I just wanted to see if you could get mad."

She used to wander through the house at night. Dee and I slept upstairs, me all alone in the huge bed he used to hide beneath on Saturdays; it had a big carved headboard and two tall posts at the ends—the first few nights I couldn't get used to these two motionless figures at the end of my bed, standing there silently and staring at me (they slept in a white bed with a high white lacy canopy). Then I worked it out that they weren't facing me; they had their backs to me and were my guards. One night something woke me and there between them was a white blur. I made a noise, I guess, because she said, "Don't be afraid. I'm just checking on everyone." Then she turned and left, without any sound except a little whisper of her robe trailing along the floor. Checking what?

"Who wants to go for a ride?" he would call from the foot of the stairs, and little Magg's voice (this is before she changed) would answer instantly, "I do!" "Hurry up then, I-do," he'd say, "the train's leaving," and Dee and I could hear her thump thump thump down the stairs as fast as she could, full of joy and excitement because she was going for a ride to the drugstore and back. I don't know if he stopped asking or if once he asked, "Who wants to go for a ride?" and no one answered. When we heard him call, Dee would look over at me.

I used to go on those rides. On winter nights he would drive more carefully and methodically than ever, always shifting before there was any straining revving sound from the engine. He was not only silent; there was something about his profile as if he had always been silent and would always be silent, like a tree. I would keep looking over, in case I could see a break in his thought; it always seemed there was a thought he kept constantly meditating on. I think after Dee was barbequed people thought he was brooding on the loss of his son. But it was always like this. I used to think he disliked me; he looked annoyed the instant he heard my voice. Later I thought it wasn't me so much as any interruption of his meditation or his reverie or whatever it was. Listening to a whispery voice in his head, maybe.

"Daddy," I'd say, timidly.

"Um."

"Daddy, did you ever shoot down any Zeros?"

"No."

After a while, I'd try again. "Daddy...how did they arm you? Was it always rockets, or did you carry napalm ever?" I thought maybe if I made it a technical question.

There'd be a long pause and then he'd say, "Sometimes one, sometimes both." I knew he was a Navy flier in World War II and I watched all the documentaries and war movies, trying to see what he did. He would never say. Once, when they were having a party, I hid in the shadows at the top of the stairs and listened. I heard my mother flirting with someone whose voice I didn't recognize and I sat and sat while the laughter got louder and louder, dumber and dumber. But I picked up a few hints. He'd flown Corsairs, from a jeep carrier; "We flew cover and ground support for the mop up," I heard him tell some guy who was talking about "freeze your ass off on those B-25's, but a damn good aircraft all the same."

"Them": father and mother, nuns, priests, everyone, all grown-ups. I used to wonder why he ever decided to go. He would tell me this or that reason but it was always a lie. "We can't let them take over the world," he said one time, and he meant what we called in those days the Commies, or thought he did; I think sometimes he had quietly flipped out without even knowing it and he was going over there to kill them all. Instead of which: the coupling, as the sergeant explained it to me, somehow "gave." Which it never did, they couldn't understand it. The coupling between the tube that carried the napalm and the tank full of it on his back, on the practice range somewhere in North Carolina, and, as he explained it, once the mouth of the weapon was "in ignition" the exposed material at the coupling caught somehow. "Maybe the tube had a crack in it." I can imagine how full of excitement he was at actually having this thing strapped on him, a flame-thrower! I see him: one instant he's there, smiling and aiming, and the next minute all that's there is a lot of fire.

Things you can't help: I wonder if he made a noise, I wonder how it felt. He was dead in an instant, they said. They couldn't put him out, they said. He dissolved, he melted.

from the novel
My Blue Time

LESLIE ADRIENNE MILLER

Upon Finding My Nightgown
In The Living Room

Soft with use and favored for loveless
nights, my flannel gown gets dragged
some days through the whorl of silence,
dust, my absence from my animal
to the middle of the living room
where he lets it gently down
and falls to sleep in its twisted arms,
certain it's the last of me he'll know.
They say very young children believe
we die every time we walk away
from them, but we teach them otherwise
to stop tears, tantrums, whatever
the human mind invents to stay
what's loved. I think of this
as I return to my gown, its bodice
wound in the grief of an animal
still bound by the certainty of loss.
In my desk are two scraps in the hand
of a lover who won't be back,
and while I know those scraps
are no more the man than my gown
is a woman sleeping and warm, I drag
the pages from room to room in place
of the animal presence, learning again
what every child insists is so.

LESLIE ADRIENNE MILLER

Blue Boy

There is a boy who lives in other people's
lives and comes here sometimes. I know this
because he does not take off his jacket
when he comes in. He sits on the sofa
hunched in the stiff denim, a big boy,
and pretty too. He looks at me
sideways, the way they all did
when I was twenty-two and still believed
they were as human as I. He hasn't
been to anyplace he'd call home in days.
I am his Sunday night, and if I'm lucky,
his Monday morning too. The rest of the week
pines for him when he's lost here.
They look out the windows hopefully
at the bits of rain, their sheets turned back,
their just opened bottles of wine barely breathing,
even though they're certain he isn't
coming. They think of how he takes off
the jacket only when he takes off
everything else, in the dark, quickly,
and smiling because not hoping for love,
it isn't there, hanging on the bedpost
like some favorite robe, comfortable,
ratty and parental.

There is a place
over on Semmes Street where his clothes
must hang in the closets, where whatever
little there is to verify him
is filled haphazardly in the drawers
among socks and cassette tapes.
I have never seen that place
but I saw him once outside it,
sweeping the patio one evening.
He wore the jacket, swept quickly
and deftly as he makes love, though
he looked like a man hired to do
the job, absurd as it was to be
sweeping those four square feet
of concrete devoid of chairs, grill,
clay pots, anything that might suggest
comfort in a world where he can't find
enough pain to keep him in dreams.

CHARLES BAXTER

Arnold Schoenberg And The Male Nurses

In California, sick with high blood sugar,
the composer of moonlight, waltzes, and disaster

turns in his Old World body for examination
to the doctors of sun, and the doctors of air.

Everywhere the clean linoleum, everywhere the proud windows
facing giant palms and grass

that is watered every weekday morning
close to the automobiles discharging their chuckling patients,

and inside, this new thing, male nurses
pushing the wooden wheelchairs

and looking beautiful and vague and tanned.
Since when did men ever do such work, and with such looks?

With his asthma Schoenberg still gasps in the oxygen
heated by tennis courts and the commerce of sea;

the upper octaves of the outdoors hamper his breathing
as does the ostinato of ocean that falls stupidly on sand.

Later, out of the hospital, Schoenberg writes to a friend
that he is working on his new string quartet

in which will appear all the complexity of his feelings
about male nurses, and I imagine him

seeing an entire human order overturned
and giving that line to the viola,

a long devious line about a young man dressed all in white
walking in, and staring pleasantly and having nothing to say,

who would fill his hours by shrugging and smiling
while flicking down a thermometer or depressing a tongue.

The eerie, beautiful American men
will effect the modulation from G major to A

as they hold his wrist lightly between their fingers and thumb
giving him fondly, this staring man, one of their familiar how-are-yous.

The music will be about these American children
and their evenings of honey and silk, the untorn cloth

over which they sleep with each other or just anybody
and loving whatever happens down there

as if there were no Laws or commandments, no Moses
to tell them *never* with a throbbing temple and a pointing finger.

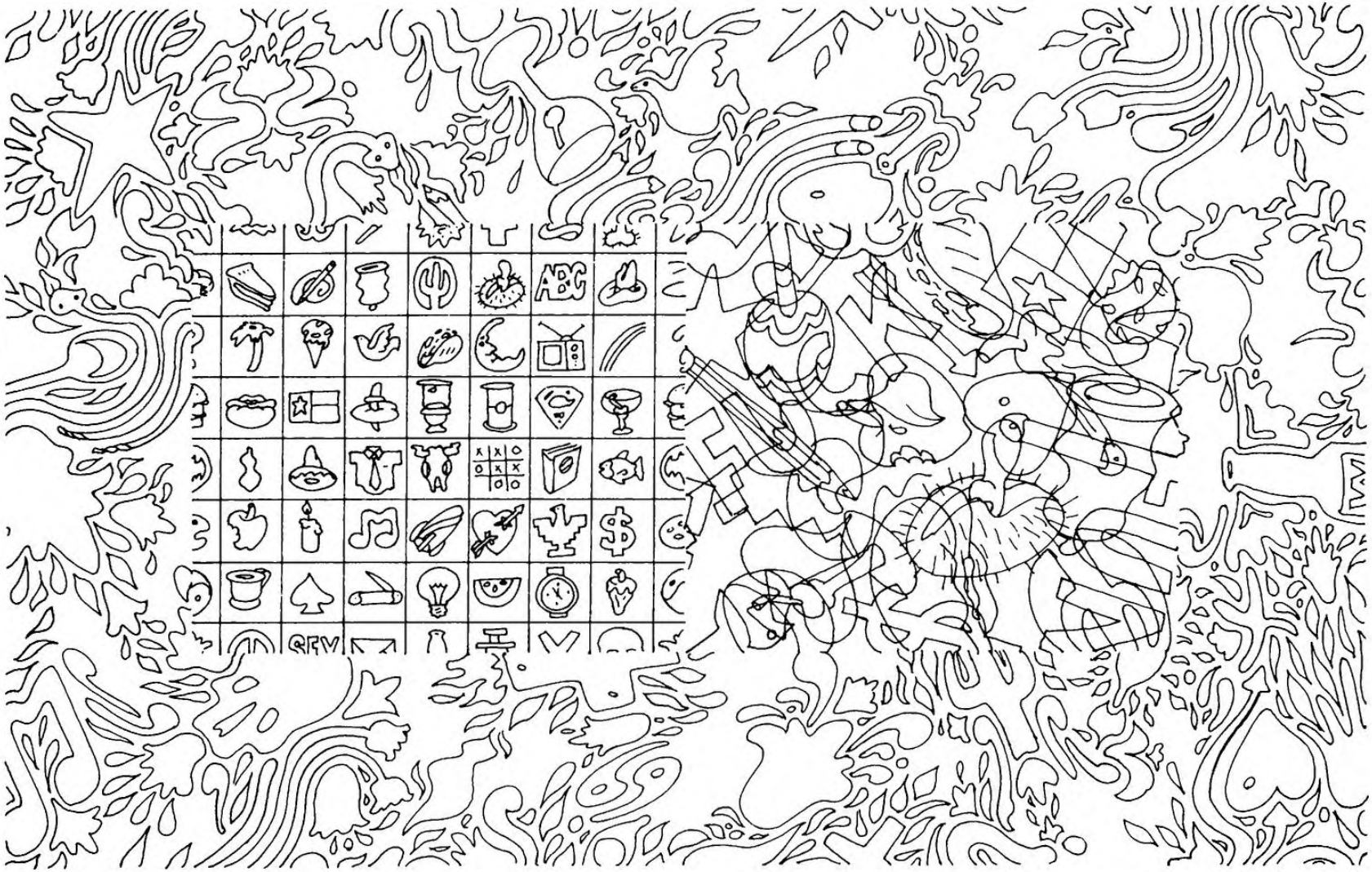
This quartet won't be about the moon or the sun.
Schoenberg is done with the moon, the Earth's mad companion,

which speaks only German, and is instead at his desk writing
cadences about the way the male nurses walk silently

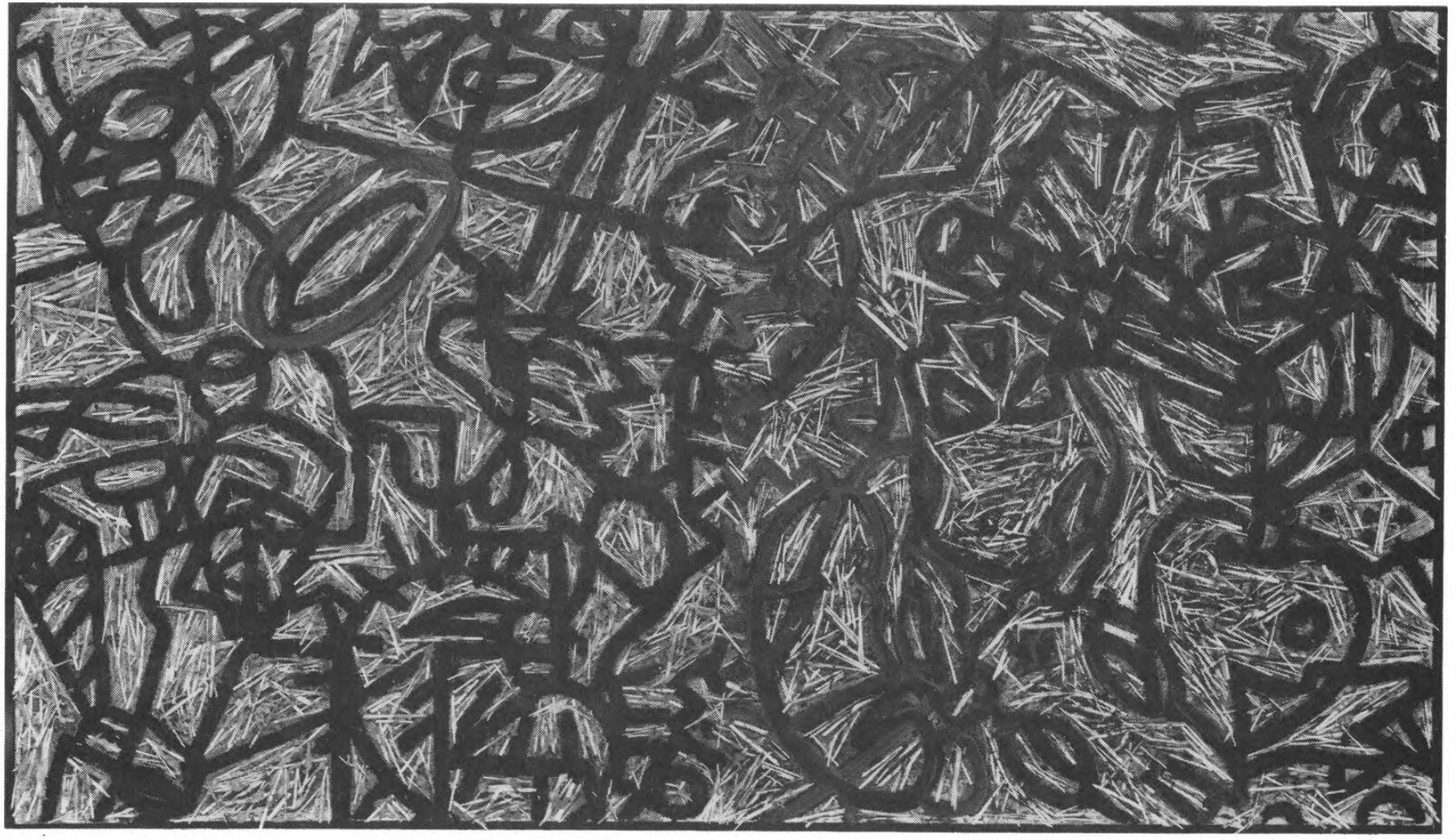
into the room; he is writing intervals about their delicate hands
and how at nightfall they bring him, the man from Vienna,

his food, the terrible bland chicken and juice,
how they appear in the dark to check on him,

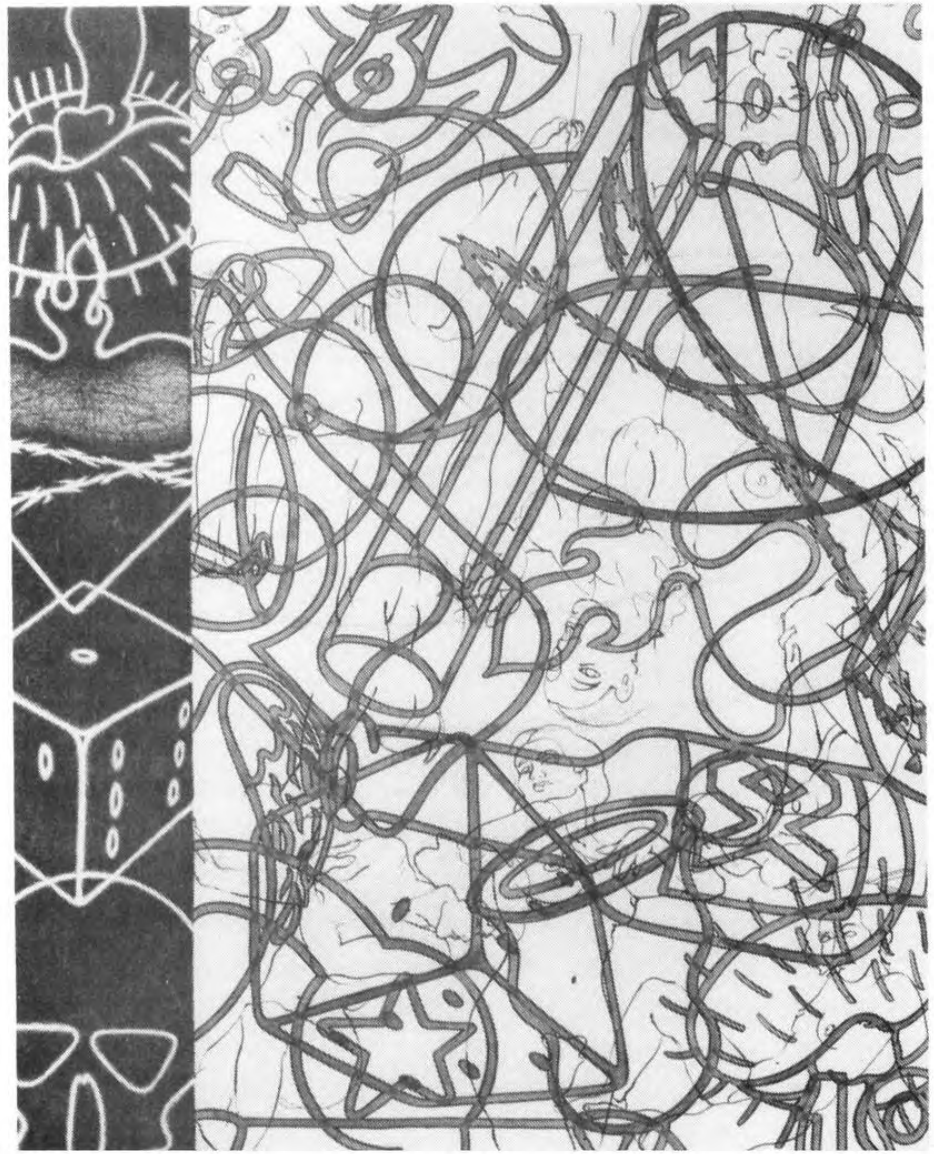
these men of water and wind who have passed through the mirror
to protect and save him—these innocents, the Americans.



Benito Huerta, *Tongues, Cheeks and Genitals*, 1987 7″ x 11″ pen and ink on paper.



Benito Huerta, *S.F.J.*, 1987 19″ x 33″ oil, straw, oil pastel and pencil on canvas.



Benito Huerta, *Premonition of Desire*, 1988 50″ x 40″ charcoal, ink and graphite on paper (photo by Leticia Lozano).

DAVID PORTZ

On The Current Local Depression

I. I suffered a cordial robbery a couple of months ago. A young man joined me as I crossed a downtown parking lot, held a gun on me, affably inquired "Whatchu got?" and made small talk until his buddy joined him to empty my pockets. I had ninety percent of a total instinct that these guys were not killers and did not even want my car. They were rookies, they only wanted money, and the pistol was a prop. The investigating officer afterwards identified the prop as a 357 Magnum, from a shape I made with my hands. The huge gun enhanced my cooperation, I noticed, and removed my desire to give pursuit. Yet, as I said, it was a cordial robbery, sensibly conducted. I surrendered to everything they said. Before they escaped (a dramatic running exit), they each shook my hand—a successful first robbery. They must have felt proud. They took ten dollars, but the bond we formed assured me that they would not hunt me down in my home. It was coming onto Christmas. I too was desperate to give the right sort of gifts.

II. Out-of-town newspapers have begun to mention a new kind of slum that has formed in Houston, composed of middle-class homes. The tract developments that ring the city are being abandoned by persons leaving Texas for other jobs. Others quit their houses, though remaining in Houston, in smaller homes, with lessened expectations. The local real estate market is sufficiently lousy that the vacated houses will hardly sell: a neighborhood declines to less than one-half occupancy and then it is uneconomical to light the streets. Abandoned houses are robbed and vandalized, no matter how securely they are locked. The lawns grow together, turning to hay or swamp, and remaining owners are forced to make a tough decision. They cannot sell their homes on abandoned streets, and they fear the places are unsafe for their families. So they walk the mortgages, forfeiting the houses by ceasing to make the payments, and take up elsewhere, paying rent. Thus are created the ghostburbs of Houston: the ultra-modern slums of Space City. I often imagine that I hear the wind ruffling through them at night. Tumbleweeds to tumbleweeds, dust to dust.

III. The unemployment in Houston is so extensive that the social life in shopping malls is reaching its fullest flower. This is a city so sweltering in the summer that the elderly poor, in crumbling bungalows lacking air conditioning and phones, simply cease their rocking in the heat. But the younger poor and unemployed do not lie around their homes sweating. They head to the malls, the young black men, among whom unemployment runs higher than forty percent. There are salesgirls to ogle and woo, there are all kinds of junk food to eat, and there is a whole noble enclosure in which to walk. I have often seen groups of tall teenagers ride to the bottom of

an escalator, turn around, and ride back up. The shopkeepers' expectations have been so lowered by the business environment that they simply loll in the doorways of their stores. They are the most shameless starers, exceeding even the unemployed kids, never imagining the persons they gawk at would enter and spend a cent. The shopkeepers must give up eventually, however. Their shops are closed and the windows are whitened from the inside—with sheets of broad paper or that "gone out of business" kind of soap.

IV. There is no one living at this moment in Houston who has not noticed the excessive civic boosterism about. We are in a depression and there is a desperate effort being made to dress it up. There is a widespread campaign of bumper stickers called "Houston Proud." The incantation has been taken up also by those who purchase radio advertising. But uttering the phrase face to face can only bring the same embarrassment as saying "roll over" to a dog who will not roll over. The businessmen who have championed the Houston Proud slogan must wish that the traditional correctives applied to dogs would work on disobedient economies. But a good swift kick cannot alter Houston's trajectory. We rely on cheerleading instead.

The promoters of the Houston Festival, an annual crafts-and-kitsch sale that is our main civic event, have produced a book in which all of Houston's finest writers crow and moo about the city's attractions. *Houston City Magazine*, and to a lesser extent *The Houstonian/Houston Style*, published all sorts of "best places to eat/best places to live/best media personality to pay attention to" feature articles, until the magazines themselves went out of business. They left unwritten the ultimate possible contributions to that genre of laudatory catalogs concerning Houston: "Best Place to Go Out of Business" and "Best Place to Rent a U-Haul Trailer and Get the Hell Out."

To reminisce on the glories of Houston living is to recollect the excellent possibilities for driving toward the finest idiosyncratic restaurants while talking on one's mobile phone. Enjoying Houston, for many persons, is still wrapped up with remembering restaurant reviews and restaurant addresses. Some of the finest driving is among the six ethnic restaurants remaining in business. It is during these cruises that one gets to see the sights. There are gleaming downtown towers and the rough surrounding shacks. A person drives on highways lined with empty shopping centers, broken by the few remaining specialty businesses: "Mirror World" or "House of Exotic Rugs." Not even three years ago people were still flooding to Houston to set up businesses, depending on a consumerism vast and deep. Many had faith that at every moment there were scores of families traveling the freeways, hoping for rattan furniture, to be purchased only from a rattan specialist in his own little shop.

But of restaurants (this theme particularly Houston's)—I enter restaurants regularly now where there are no patrons on weekday nights. These are vast restaurants with Muzak playing in dim rooms of entirely empty seats and staffs who are very democratic. The waiters take a poll among themselves, at this onslaught of two or three actual customers, to determine whether the restaurant shall be open or closed. If they decide that the restaurant is truly open, each eschewing another evening of television, kids, and spouse, then the cook is given the power of a final veto. If the result is "yes we are open," the diners are beckoned to enter by the entire effusive, gesturing, fumbling staff. To the welcome diner, choosing a table is the cruellest part. Within an Indian restaurant one may confront a

soccer field of tables with no one at them, from which one must carve an imaginary section in which to smoke.

The height of boosterism and induced mass-feel-good was the invitation to all Houston residents, stray Okies, and lost Seattleites to watch upon the downtown buildings a play of pretty lights. No sunset for consumers rushing homeward had ever rivaled the lights, which were lasers accompanying a French guy's songs. A special ditch (a "bayou") two miles long and radiating from the downtown's center was fitted with portable toilets for the event. There were video monitors set up in downtown parks that beamed the French guy's dramatic, crooning features and flashed in American colors the central symbols of Houston and Texas—boots, oil derricks, scaly road kills, piled-up hairdos, secondhand clothing stores, mothers, cheerleaders, rockets, and little kids. A stunning camaraderie was apparent this evening among everyone who hadn't earlier passed out in the close-cropped grass. Cops took valuable time out from random violence to wave Caucasians across the bordering highway, Caucasians in the brilliant, parti-colored clothing they are wearing this season despite the slump, carrying their beach chairs, coolers, blankets, and children. Multiple colors were irrefutably proven a method of pleasing the populace—the reds, the whites, the blues—and so the event will be repeated as often as can be afforded during the present slump.

V. Like so many attorneys, I used to be involved in the constructive conduct of business—financing new ventures, creating partnerships, and hawking shares of stock. I have little to do now; I only assist the bankruptcy attorneys. The bankruptcy business is very good.

The practice of law has become a little sad though. We have already passed through the period when all the fools and fly-by-nights went out of business, a development it was hard to regret. We now experience a twinge of pity for the destitute decent humans, the newest victims of the very hard luck. Pity was a sentiment very foreign to the legal business in the heyday of business growth, when jackasses formed the bulk of one's clients and demanded one's constant attention.

I recently did a bankruptcy filing for a German client. He'd come to Texas three years earlier, founding a mammoth dealership for Mercedes Benz. Every Houstonian over twenty had to have a Mercedes in this period just to keep up with the high school kids. It was before the oil prices dropped, when the dollar was high against the German mark, so his costs in buying cars were very cheap. My client expected enormous profits so he could vacation in Germany two months of the year, cantering thoroughbreds in green Bavaria with his daughter. In the meeting in which he signed his bankruptcy papers, he was honest and guileless and showed traces of grime in the cracks of his hands. He had never mastered the English language while selling German cars—the sales were too brisk in the early period. He explained at our meeting, "I come to Houston; I think that business go up with the sun." He moved his hands like a rising sphere then dropped them to his sides. He shrugged his gray eyebrows. "I wake up now; the sun goes up—my business stays in bed."

Every morning I drive past a building that is stuffed to the rafters with repossessed yachts.

The oil boom inspired a class of high rollers, persons who would stop at nothing to be seen spending money. I once observed a gentleman compensating a grocery boy for his integrity with a twenty—because he refused to take a tip. The oil boom profits were so tremendous that businesses had little need to try to contain their

costs. Of two hundred thousand dollars' weekly profit, corporate managers could squander a hundred thousand, knowing that next week their profits would be up. The first businessmen found going bankrupt had tremendous bellies and massive gambling debts. They didn't keep financial records, subsidized their daughters extravagantly following divorce, owed thousands to Neiman-Marcus and Caesar's Palace, and drove to the federal bankruptcy courthouse in cobalt blue BMWs and orange convertible 'Vettes.

In Texas there is a law that gives a homestead exemption. It lets a bankrupt keep his home, though he must sell everything else. In the log-and-mud-house days of Texas, the statute kept roofs over many families' heads. And nowadays, at the very last moment before a real estate mogul's bankruptcy filing, he moves his belongings into a twenty-story building, or the grandest that he owns. Under the law, the mogul gets to keep his homestead, which may have an equity of twenty million bucks.

VI. I am not a partner in a law firm; I am an associate—not an overlord but an underling. Aside from the bankruptcy stuff, I am languishing in a languishing office. I use the extra time to observe my fellow workers. A languishing office creates a peculiar sort of pressure, a queer kind of stress. The partners retain the work of their clients for themselves; there is not enough to delegate. They are hoarding legal problems. Ordinarily the underlings must judge their own performances by the eagerness of partners to give them work. If one is overwhelmed with duties, then one may consider oneself brilliant. If one is underutilized, one had better presume that one's work is insufficient; one had better get some resumes printed up. The quality of an employee's performance is never discussed because it is *anxiety* that keeps a young attorney striving. There is little room in the legal profession for any but the most neurotic sort.

But now in this uncertain business climate, the underlings wait long hours to see if they will get work, even the brilliant ones. It is worse than the pressure of overwhelming responsibility, this state of having no work. One must sit at one's desk and look productive; one must always seem intense.

But beyond these extremely busy-seeming associates, there are languishing secretaries who have no windows to look out. The receptionist takes occasional calls with her mouth working, barely keeping control of a giant wad of gum. The secretaries pause at one another's modular workstations during trips to get supplies. They enter long conversations and don't even straighten as the senior partner passes, walking to get his own coffee. It used to be that the staff felt guilty for the smallest unnecessary talk. The approach of any partner would end all the pleasantries. Now the secretaries work on scrapbooks, clip coupons, skim catalogs, and doodle on the leaves of the desk calendars and appointment books. They enter various coloring contests on behalf of their children.

VII. The oil depression is trouncing a state long associated with braggadocio. I have always presumed that Texas tales were the sort of humor that appealed to every true U.S. citizen. Tales of the Alamo and month-long man-against-coyote wrestling matches under the wide open skies—these sorts of stories I imagined had won us some friends. Texas legends possess the sort of rusticity that sells wine coolers, but they possess a greater proportion of bravura.

Philadelphians don't really believe we lasso lakes with

rattlesnakes knotted together, yet they feel that this action is expressive of Texas. An Iowan sees a Western rerun the way a Presbyterian reads the Bible—not for the literal truth but for such enjoyment as they can get. At a larger distance, though, and throughout the rest of the world, the exaggerations about Texas are probably taken as fact. Untraveled Croatians (and there are plenty) largely believe that if a Texan should come to their nation, he would first be seen on the horizon, rising, blotting out the sun. There's a wisdom that believes in the extraordinary because it has never happened near one's home. Texas is to other continents what India was to England—a spiritually unconquerable land. It is certain that a transplanted Texan could never win sainthood in modern Italy or France (even after a career of certified miracles) because from a Texan they *expect* to see the grand and amazing, and are only astonished if they don't.

Separating the ordinary from the absurd is very difficult, even from the closest perspective. For example, examine an armadillo really close up, close enough to sniff, for more than seven minutes and you will experience the same sensation as saying "Port Aransas" fifty or sixty times. But I think what is important is the middle viewpoint—not the foreigner's nor the Texan's but the viewpoint of persons in the rest of the States. The myths have undermined their sympathy for us, which we need now in our time of misfortune, our oil depression woes. I think that the stretchers on Texas have done us plenty of harm and will do us more harm in the long run than even those seven-foot radioactive gophers said to be eating tractor trailers and mobile homes out near the Pantex nuclear weapons plant.

The myths have been serialized now in the TV show *Dallas*, which I think is still on the air, though true-blood Texans have run out of money, so it's even less true than it was. I can still hear its message: Vast Lands! Vast Wealth! Debonair, Treacherous Oil Barons! Beautiful, Buxom, Snake-Mannered Women! The modern Texas myths are the huge extravagances of the nouveau riche. That there is a TV show about the Texas wealthy only demonstrates that true power does not reside with Texas wealth. The Texas wealthy could not quite keep themselves out of the limelight; they had not the dignity nor the power to command this. They have not obtained the position of the lovable wealthy, like the Boston wealthy who are loved and respected by the larger American public or as nobles are loved in France. Those wealthy folks are loved and respected because they maintain their decorum: they stay invisible to all but themselves.

From a moral standpoint, however (and we will pause only a moment), the "Texan" underhandedness and treachery exemplified in *Dallas* are morally reprehensible only to our lower classes, that ninety percent of the U.S. population and thirty percent of its wealth. These classes maintain the traditional positions taught them about adultery and the family unit. For the wealthy, the objection to TV Texans' conduct is exclusively their lack of decorum—not a moral issue but a deficiency, finally, in the realm of savoir faire. The objection of the rich folks is significant, however. Texans should pay attention. It is the wealthy Yankees whom we need, at this very moment, to bail us out of our economic slump.

VIII.

Think for a moment of Texas as a Latino. Now I know that this goes against the view of certain Texans, sponsors of the "English as Our State's Official Language" movement, for example. But when you think about it, I'm sure you will see that Texas' being a Latino—more precisely, an unskilled mestizo without a green

card—can make a lot of sense. For one thing, we were stolen from Mexico, to which we'd belonged from the very instant that the New World was first stolen by Spain. So one could think of Texas as growing up Mexican and then coming under the governorship and distant supervision of a set of righteous Puritan foster parents living in mansions back East.

So we, the Texanito (Mexican for "little Texan," an oxymoron of sorts), succeed in making plenty of money selling stuff that we have dragged out of the desert—and getting our hands dirty in the process. Now the income explains how Texans started to turn up in Europe, and the dirt explains how we didn't exactly get the red carpet treatment when we visited the spas. And then the stuff in the desert is found in other places from which it's easier to drag out, and our income fails us, and we need a little help. And the Yankees are still the same kind of racists; they never changed, though we sat beside them in Maxim's and hung in our homes the same style of nineteenth-century English landscapes, hunting scenes, naval battles, and portraits of nobility.

So in America Texas is back to being a dark-skinned, low-class, strangely and shabbily dressed male (having a tendency toward oil-derivative clothing). A dangerous type. So what can Texas do to earn some money? Our natural impulse is to insist that our adoptive family buy our stuff at the same old prices, although they'd get it elsewhere for less. We are only asking for solidarity, a concept unfortunately demoted, too, to a Third World word. The Yankees won't buy at a subsidy, and refuse to think we're serious when we ask.

So we consider learning a real profession, gaining enough training to allow us to enter management on a par. But for that we need support, a tremendous bag of tuition. Our education is one of the worst in the States. Our brethren won't even give the money for Latino Texas to pay its transportation to an unskilled job. We begin to be plagued by illness. We refuse to surrender our savings to save ourselves. Taxing ourselves at this moment seems truly unthinkable. Besides, we trust we'll come around in a belief that borders on religious; we trust that people will buy up our backyard production again. It is inconceivable that we will be turned again into a sleepy region on the border, our Texas to fade and die in the shabbiness and dust from which it was born. We don't realize yet that without money we can't be first-class citizens in these United States. We are just the poor relations they speed by: as traveling from Baltimore to see the Grand Canyon, they speed past the hillbillies. We are just Navaho Indians without turquoise to these folks. They won't even see us.

IX.

In the light of these harsh words, this hard present and future, the question arises—first to the truest Texans—why I would consider myself to be a Texan too. But to put the problem just a little more sharply, before I answer...

Here we have a depressed economy with increasing crime, an uncertain future for even the lawyers, and a mythic identity that makes us a laughingstock and deprives our wealthy of their rightful esteem. As a Texan I will be responsible for our miserable educational system, our violent and overcrowded prisons, and our racist system of justice, leading the nation in imposing the penalty of death. We will never have mass transport here in Houston; even the women's movement has collapsed. We are the favorite state for fund-raising on behalf of right-wing terrorism. A community of intellectuals is so far lacking that every book is sold with a sun-protective coating so that it can lie neglected on the beach. And then our beaches are not very good either.

To all this mortification I have an easy answer. I will be a Texan for only so long as I live here and stop being a Texan the moment I depart. I was not born here, and perhaps I was never meant to stay. I have not been here so long that I am too lazy to move away but only so long that I can't remember it being preferable anywhere else. I am thinking, though, that there must be more to being a Texan.

There are Texans who are Texans because they were born here and never traveled a great enough distance to get out. They would have no identities if they were not Texans and, living here, have little occasion to use them. Their identities are as empty as plastic trashbags, only filled at election times with words as useless as paper plates soaked with barbeque sauce. There are also Texans—have always been Texans—who are Texans only because they claim Texas for themselves. Our founder Stephen Austin became a sort of ultra-Texan, invented Texas really, so that his land speculation would work out. He and others sought to create a new authority that could ratify the bogus land deeds they'd sold to settlers. I would be tempted to say that I call myself Texan in a similar spirit—to support the validity of my Texas-flavored prose.

Those reverend swindlers (Austin, Travis) began a war, and in that war we discovered the first true roots for identities of Texans. What are the boundaries of this (great) state? Latitudes, longitudes, rivers, the Gulf. There was no community defined by the boundaries of Texas before its people chose to fight. The establishment of Texas came from a denial that it was Mexico, and then a war, and then that Texas couldn't form a government, so its leaders made a deal to become the twenty-eighth state. After that original grant of statehood, Texas' identity was maintained by supplying contingents, brigades, and divisions to fight in various wars and battles up to the recent past. The state of Texas is therefore a reason for why men would wait in a muddy trench. The state of Texas is an abstraction for a fighter to look back to, which sounds like home, contains one's mother maybe, and certainly includes a government.

Second, Texas is defined by its natural calamities, as when a hurricane hits our coast but ravages nowhere else. Texans are brought together by meteorological suffering. Today's Galveston resulted from the Galveston flood.

Last, in a sort of circular reasoning, Texas is defined by the representatives it elects. Texas elects its senators and congressmen to go to the federal legislature and bring back federal funding for the state. Pork barrel, miserable weather, and fighting units—more than bluebonnets, longhorns, drawls, dusty soil, and armadillos—explain our identity here as Texas. We could do without any of the latter items, but without the former we'd be only an Oklahoma beach resort.

X. This is an essay about the destitution of Texas. And I suspect that what really makes me Texan, in the eyes of many Texans, is that I owe some sort of debt. But I don't mean owing the banks some money. It's instead that I owe gratitude, and should feel some obligation even, to thank the Texas that I've lived in for sixty-five months. It all seems very vague to me, like gratitude to a fissure for not opening under my house—a sort of animistic worship of the environment—though I am indeed thankful that no volcanoes have risen on my street. But I don't think I am a Texan because Houston is where I've eked out an income. The money came from somewhere else, just the way I did, and just as easily it has left. Nor do I think myself a Texan just because Texas has provided a source of lovers and friends or that it hasn't killed me yet. That sort of thinking makes the inmate love his prison.

I am not Texan from any amount of boosterism that I may unwittingly fail to avoid. The throw-them-a-bone, show-them-a-light-show method of creating a community is akin to the effort of convincing everyone they have the same grandparents, but much worse. It is a fabrication of a sentimentality upon a lousy excuse for sentiment—not a recollection of riding the pony with granddad but of a lower order, looking at manmade explosions beside the moon. I loathe a simple manipulation of my feelings.

The sense of being Texan does indeed depend on similar sentiments being experienced by the mass of Texas people. And living through a hurricane, seeing a light show, are experiences more readily shared by humans than those that would be promoted by our memorizing Larry McMurtry, which some of us wouldn't do. The love of the Texas wilderness provides another chance of a unifying experience for Texans, although you can easily love our wilderness from Vermont. And plenty of persons never experience the wilderness, so they love only the myth. Specifically, they love only what the Texas wilderness says about them, that they have wide open spaces and dense woods.

The sense of being Texan is a personal one; it's the aggregation of everyone's similar personal feelings that makes the state. I am Texan because I live here and have made it my interest to know something of the state. I am Texan because I recognize a practical relation to its powers—I pay my speeding tickets and parking fines. And I am Texan because I can remember certain Texas experiences with affection, or wistfulness at least.

One will not claim Texas if, while living here, one has only been miserable, unless one can claim absolutely nowhere else. My German client, returning to Bavaria, will probably claim that he is Texan only in his jokes, clinking mugs in his neighborhood *rathskeller*. One of the tragedies of the business depression is that a great number of potential Texans were ruined and driven off. It is not a tragedy that they failed to take the designation "I am a Texan." So what. It is a tragedy only that they suffered such wild misfortune—the dog howling, everyone in the family at each others' throats, the telephone service disconnected, the car broken down in the driveway. No one getting up in the morning but staying in bed, depressed. Dislocation, poverty, and failure—none of them will be easily forgotten; they are commonplaces of our current experience in Texas, together with our racial differences and petroleum-dominated economics.

THERESA IVERSON

From The Earth

Above them the grackle's energetic wheeze,
sound abrading sound. A molting feather glides.
Beads of sweat form, so many unuttered words.

Just as he was torn from the earth,
she is torn from his breast,
peeled, man-hearted, from the same rind.

A sword flashes, burning the air.
They turn, eyes averted—don't look.
The past snicks clean
whole as a plucked pear;
and another new world fans open
dandling before them breezes and grief—
savage innocence.

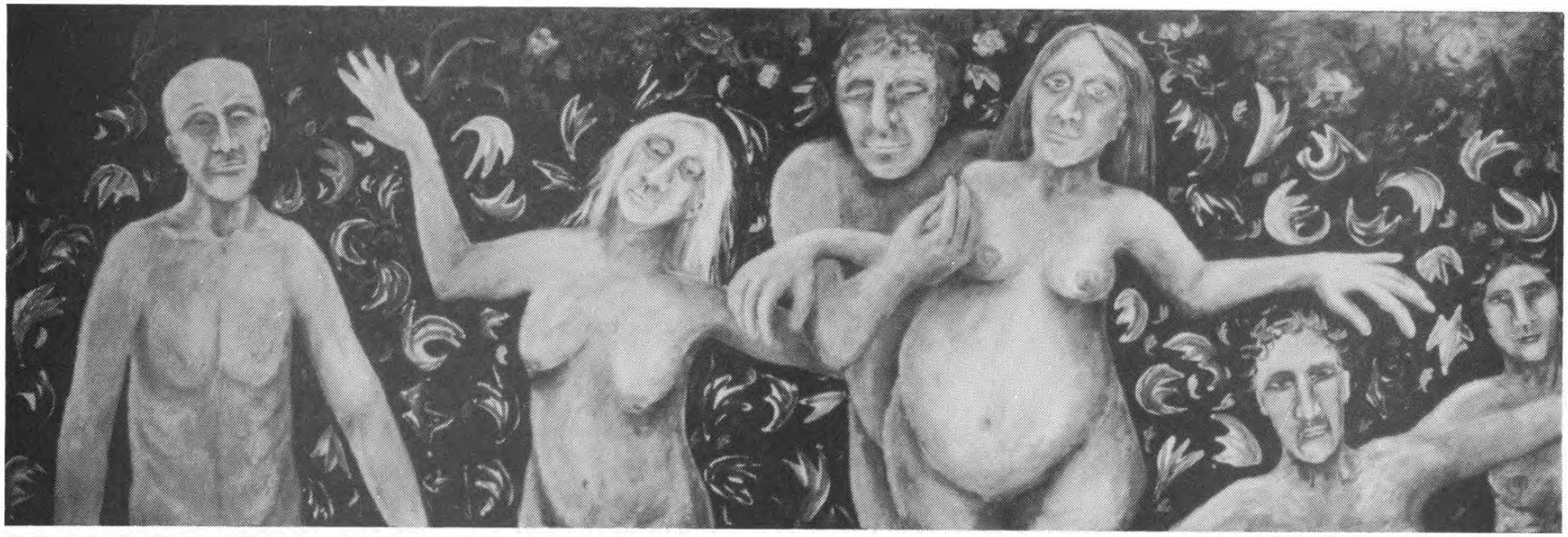
CAROLINE SIMPSON

The Metaphysic's Love Poem

I no longer worry about insomnia,
Am not concerned with understanding
The nature of your sleep,
Or anticipating your quickening breath
As you lay dreaming beside me,
Whether you're falling or flying,
At one end of a long tunnel
Or in an open field.
What consoles is the practical matter
Of a working love: the mechanism I hear
Above your faint, shallow breathing,
The quiet ratchetings of the heart's gears
Gearing up, the clicking climb of metal teeth
Accelerating the heart's wheels to passion.

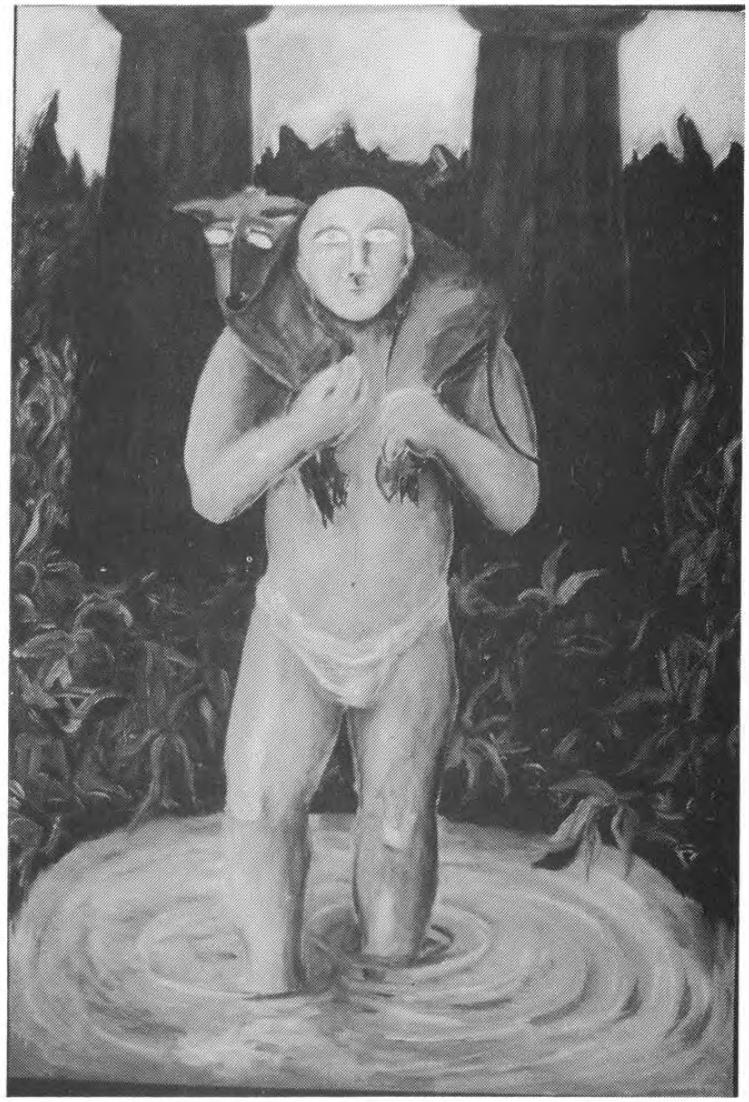
In your eyes, what I once mistook
As fine flecks of abalone, creamy azure and pearl,
I can see clearly as the blue-white flash
Of steel glinting off the stainless inner works.
So, if you should turn to me tonight
And whisper "yes" and shudder with desire,
I will look for the riveted movement
Of the plates behind your face as they shift,
And will watch you grinding slowly, somewhere inside.
I will wonder if anyone can tell me anything
I don't already know, the sum of the parts of love.

Gail Siptak, *Virgin Earth Screen*, 1986-87 80″ x 90″ oil on canvas and panel (photo by John Runnels)



Gail Siptak, *The Birthing*, 1987 24″ x 72″ oil on canvas (photo by John Runnels).

Gail Siptak, *Paradise Lost,* 1985 68″ x 48″ oil on canvas (photo by Cosgrove/Orman).



Gail Siptak, *Calf Bearer,* 1985 68″ x 48″ oil on canvas (photo by Cosgrove/Orman).

DAVID THEIS

Insomnio

It was late when I got in: one or two. I'd never gotten a key from Louis and had to grope along the sill for the hidden one. Inside, the house was dark, but the dim streetlight that reached the couch illuminated Louis, smoking. He slumped back with his bare feet up on the tile table. His cigarette glowed near his mouth like some exotic Mexican lightning bug, and he didn't seem to have noticed me standing in the open door.

"*No puedes dormir?*" I asked as I eased in, letting the door close with a sharp, lingering click.

Louis regarded his cigarette. "Dreams torment me, *Daniel*. Please, take a seat. Pour yourself some wine. This is your home. So, just relax."

I could make Louis out more clearly now. His hair was uncombed and rose in a few soft points of curl. In fact, everything about him seemed soft: eyes, forehead, hands. I sat at the point his hand indicated but said no to wine.

"Teresa was here tonight," he said softly. "She came to see if I had divorced. I never thought to see her again." A bit of ash fell onto Louis' shirt, glowed there a moment, then died, probably leaving a hole. "What could I tell her? That I still love my wife? I do, of course, I said, but in a way that has sunk so deep inside me I can't use it. This made Teresa quite ironic. 'Well said. Spoken like a man,' she told me, and I could feel the ice in her heart, in her mouth. I told her, 'Look, I have the most beautiful, most devoted daughter in the world. Do I say to Gloria, we are not one family? You are not my daughter now?' "

I felt sleepy and physically uncomfortable, so I poured and drank a sip of wine. "It doesn't mean that, does it? She's eighteen, right?"

Louis exhaled smoke and stared up at the dark ceiling. "I live between too many worlds, my friend. Entire worlds of love. A man should have only one world. That was a mistake."

"It's a common enough mistake," I said. "Only people who never leave their childhood home can avoid it."

Louis nodded his big head. "That is so true what you say," he murmured earnestly. "You have a son, no? I always wanted a son. Maybe he could have stabilized my life."

I nodded dumbly and felt myself on the edge of a heavy conversation, the kind I'd had nightly at twenty. I'm regressing in this house, I thought. Like a Mexican, I'm sinking into the past. Suddenly very sleepy, I sipped more wine.

"My wife," I said with a sigh, as if some tireless interrogator had left me no choice but to speak, "was born into two worlds. She's one-quarter black."

Louis swung his feet off the table and sat up straight. "*Voila*. How could you have ever pleased such a confusion?"

I shrugged and drank, alarmed that I was going to tell the story.

"Her grandfather was a boxer. A heavyweight contender in the twenties. Her grandmother was a woman of the times, too wild for the generations before and after her. Only the picture of her exists, a small, oval-shaped one that Jane keeps but doesn't display. She has an angry smile, Louis, and she's beautiful to break your heart. She could've had her pick, they said. And she picked black. This was in Houston, after Jack Johnson's scandals with white women. They married after he beat the number one contender. People said it was as if he wanted to ruin his career, as if he wanted to never be champ. He disappeared after some big race riots. Some people claimed he was killed. Others that he took off for Cuba or Paris."

I felt foolish in the story's extravagance, as if I were making it up. Jane herself had told me all this and more. I'd asked her about it so often she finally refused to say another word.

Louis rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and the ash fell off his chest. "I boxed a little myself in France. It's true, I was once quite fit. I sparred with an older black American once. He was round like a barrel, and thick. I made him bleed above the left eyebrow."

"Could've been anybody," I said, shrugging. "Jane's grandmother had a baby girl maybe six months after he disappeared. The family took the baby and sent her to a strict Baptist branch of the family. I pity Jane's mother more than anyone I know. Her family pounded away at her with their Bibles. They found her a very weak, very white husband, a man who knew he had no business marrying such a beautiful woman. I scarcely think of him as Jane's father. They tried to break Jane too. She bathed three times a day as a kid. In the sixties she'd watch white kids dance to black music and feel panicked at the idea of joining them. To this day she's an awkward dancer. She was different from her mother, though. She went to college. She studied drama. Jesus, I'm talking too much."

Louis ground his cigarette out on the tile tabletop. "This old black boxer, he thought I was being too soft. He told me, show me what you got. Is that how you say it? And your Jane, she is beautiful too?"

"Yes," I said, trying without luck to keep my voice as flat as possible. "You'd have to say so."

I wanted to stop but couldn't. There was something priestly about Louis' manner, as if on one level he were paying rapt attention, but on another he was lost in his own thoughts, that made me want to talk.

"She was divided between her grandmother's wildness and her mother's weakness. It was exciting being married to her. I never knew who she'd be on any given day. I'd always pray it would be the grandmother. Even after we had kids. Lately Jane has said that I'd fooled myself then, that I valued tameness more than I'd admit. And she said that in any event it wasn't her that I loved, but her exotic past. I disagreed."

"Women always say what will hurt you most," Louis murmured as he unsuccessfully tried to work his cigarette lighter. The flame rose too high from his refilled lighter, almost singeing his eyebrows. "Damn Mexican lighters," he said and adjusted the flame.

"When will you clean the roof?" I asked.

"*Manana*," he laughed. Then, "Be thankful you didn't marry a Mexican. The Mexican family, they fuck you to the wall."

"I want her back," I said. "I want my old life back."

"I know how you feel," Louis answered, still adjusting his lighter. "Everyone here feels the same way. *C'est la condition mexicaine*."

I couldn't sleep and came back downstairs for some wine. Louis lay asleep on the couch; an unlit cigarette hung limply from his

mouth as if in parody of Bogart cool. He was always telling me to relax, that this was my home. But that was nothing to feel relaxed about. Almost a third of the wine bottle was left. That seemed about the right measure, so I carried it up to my comfortable room then pulled the chair up to the window and sipped. I looked back once regretfully at the bed. I'd almost been able to sleep. With the moon and the streetlights, the night was fairly well lit but absolutely still. You shouldn't have even thought about Jane so much, I told myself. Much less talked about her. Now that it was so nearly over, our failed life together felt like a disgraceful secret. But how exactly had I failed? Jane had put a great deal of thought into her arguments, but none of them rang quite true. Of course I was interested in her past. It was interesting. But I didn't love her because of it. It was now convenient for Jane to believe so. I wondered for a moment what she thought Valparaiso saw in her, a man who imports women from Europe to practice his various languages. Then I didn't think about Valparaiso anymore. I'd finally begun to see a third Jane emerge. Not mother or grandmother. She'd peeped out at me various times all through our life together, but after Sammy's birth she'd come to stay.

I went back downstairs and found more wine. My eyes were well enough adjusted to the dark that I moved easily through the foyer, and I had that in-the-dark feeling that I didn't weigh a thing, that I, like Laura, was a ghost.

Besides the wine, I grabbed Louis' cigarettes, lighter, and fluid. What if Laura really were dead, I thought. And just like Jane, she's telling me a truth I don't want to hear.

I swung my window open a little and lit a cigarette. I'd forgotten how cool it was out. I had too easily equated the stillness with warmth. I'm no smoker, so I didn't inhale. After taking a couple of shallow drags, I tossed the cigarette out the window, had a drink, then looked out and up to where the pollution seemed to catch the city's lights and reflect them back down on us. I hadn't been this far from sleep since I was seventeen and spent whole nights wondering if I'd ever begin to live.

I was tempted to fill my mouth with lighter fluid and try the *dragon* thing. Blow fire out the window, wake up *Rio Ganges*. But there was more to it than fire and lighter fluid. They smeared vaseline on their lips, even inside their mouths. I went to the bathroom and, to my partial dismay, found a family-sized jar of petroleum jelly. I carried it into my room, smeared it all over my mouth, then took in what seemed a reasonable amount of lighter fluid—it felt thick and stagnant in my mouth—flicked the lighter, then spat fire out the window. I heard it whoosh in front of my face and had to concentrate on not falling over backwards. The fire ran in both directions, away from and toward my lips, but consumed itself before it reached me. When it was over I realized I'd had my eyes closed the whole time and that I'd had a vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Not a vision. I just saw her in my mind's eye. I'd been an altar boy as a kid. That seemed funny, but I was shaking.

This was what Jane really hated about me. I would do any interesting thing. I spat gunky saliva out the window then smeared on more vaseline. This time I used more fluid and forced myself to watch as the comet came out of my mouth, as my heart whooshed up out of me, as my good sense, my purpose in life, my place in the world came up in a hot regurgitation. But after the fire had been sucked like a tongue into the invisible mouth of the night, I knew that none of that was true, that it was all just melodrama. Doing wild things always made me feel sad. I looked down; my legs and chest were sprinkled with soot. I have to catch the bus to Joco soon, I thought.

It turns out my fire breathing is an effective cure for insomnia. I wiped the vaseline off my lips, the ashes off my chest, brushed my teeth, scrubbed them hard, then fell straight asleep. The dreams seemed to start before my eyes were properly closed. A woman who looked vaguely familiar came to me in bed, kissed me quite sloppily, then reached inside my pants. The way I had to strain for pleasure with my pants on was somehow the sexiest part. The woman looked more and more familiar but in that dream way, where she was entitled to her secrets. Then she got my pants down and took me in her mouth. Even as this happened, some part of me murmured, this is only a dream, but that seemed fine; I felt sunken in unearned pleasure anyway. The woman glanced up at me from my cock, and her eyes were unjustifiably beautiful, and outside the dream my door made a soft click as it opened and someone entered. The woman in my dream was Jorge now, and he grinned around my cock, and someone was in my room, so I sat up with my skin tingling. The intruder stepped away from the door into the dim light falling through the window. I saw a body I recognized and a face patched over in thick welts. I couldn't see her eyes but knew they were dead, even if the woman herself were just ruined, not dead, not dead, no matter how she insisted.

"I saw your tongue of fire," she said, "from all the way up in my room. I felt you calling me. There's something between us now and I feel you all the time."

Laura came toward me. I could see her eyes now too and put my hand out to stop her.

"Slow down," I said, falling back on my pillow. "You woke me up. I can't react." I closed my eyes and was a little afraid of what I might see. "How did you get in here? Where were you when I went to your room? How the fuck did you get inside this house? No mystical bullshit."

Laura shrugged and sat on the edge of my bed. I couldn't tell if she thought my fear of her funny or sad. She said softly, "That room became too noisy for me after you left. We spent our honeymoon there. We came back every year. Second honeymoon. Third. How could I rest there now? How sleep? I went higher, to the twenty-first floor. I asked for a room on the very top, but they don't have one."

"I wish you weren't so logical," I said.

"Getting in here was nothing. I just looked around for a hidden key—found it right away—and let myself in."

She leaned over me and I closed my eyes again, fighting the impulse to hit her taut face, to beat some expression into her, even if it were only a spot of blood. Then she leaned back and tossed her head, freeing her gray-streaked hair from her jacket's collar. "What's with you?" she said. "It's not as if you're behaving so normal. You're the one who pretends he's a down-and-out fire eater. Who pretends I'm his wife while he fucks me. That's all right, I didn't see you either. I didn't say I loved you, did I? Just that there was something between us. We made a connection. We put ourselves together, and the body doesn't forget. My body's not the dead part. It might even be more alive because I'm so dead. You know, the way a blind man savors his food."

I rolled away, turning my back to her. "There's no chance I'm still dreaming, I suppose." I felt her stretch out on the bed behind me.

"There's every chance in the world. Take a chance, Dan. Take a chance."

I turned back toward her. What was the point of asking why she was here, if just hours before I'd gone looking for her.

"There's a family staying in your old room," I said. "Seems the husband's name is Dan, too. Almost got me in trouble." Another

woman might've smiled at this point. I had to remind myself how her face worked.

"That's the craziest thing I've ever heard," she said softly. "By the way, too much fire breathing leads to brain damage. There are lots of really fucked up *dragones* out there."

"What happened to your face?" I asked, laying my hand on her belly, slipping my fingers in between the buttons of her shirt.

"I've never met anyone so obsessed with the past," she said. "Worry about the future. Worry about the brain damage."

I pulled her shirt free of her pants. I wanted to see her stomach, to remind myself she was not all face. Her belly was flat and soft. A little dark hair came to a fine point below her navel.

"Okay," I said, lightly stroking her. "What are you doing tomorrow? What are you doing one year from now?"

"One year from now I'll be dead," she said a bit remorsefully.

"You promised to stop saying that," I told her, then slid down the bed and lowered my lips, still thick feeling from the vaseline, onto her stomach.

"But you'll be more alive than ever. For you, time will pass, will change everything. I guess that's what I admire about you."

A moment later, her clothes were off, and she had the backs of her calves pressed against the hollows of my bent knees. I wanted to keep my eyes open and look her in the face, but she closed her eyes and turned so I saw only her profile. Looking at the side of her face, I could see exactly where the scars began and the soft flesh ended. I wondered if that might be an especially potent place and lowered my face slowly. I felt lightheaded, as if I had to force my face down, as if my face didn't trust me. Her neck was long and had probably once been beautiful, immediately desirable. When my mouth reached the spot I wanted, and I felt both the soft and the thick cold of her, we didn't move any differently; it just made a little more sense, seemed more inevitable. She pressed her cheek against me. "Long ago there was a fire," she whispered. "We were caught in a terrible fire. But I guess you've figured that out."

When I woke, a blond, blue-eyed, dark-complected little boy of maybe three stood beside my bed with a telegram. I smiled and reached out to touch his soft hair, and he gestured with the telegram. I was surprised to feel Laura still sleeping behind me; I'd expected her to be gone.

"*Buenos dias, guerito*," I said to the boy. "*Bonjour*. Good morning. *Guten tag*."

The boy didn't answer. He stared at me with his serious child's eyes then dropped the telegram on the bed and ran with little, shuffling steps out of the room. I would find out directly who he was, of that I was sure. Laura still slept quite deeply, and I wondered how late the day had gotten.

The telegram was from my hometown, and I supposed it was money. But no, it was a message, and from my mother of all people: am divorcing father stop finally stop be here that's all I ask stop

I laid the telegram down on the dresser then curled up against Laura's anonymous back. The inside of my mouth felt clammy, as if I'd pulled a terrible drunk.

—from the novel
The Fire Eaters

TONY SANDERS

Solitude

I fear it
like the child walking home in December
fears the dark scarf of the ridge,

for I know by instinct
the aspirin sky,
the way it dissolves into a steady snowfall;

I know that soon the slate-hued clots of ice
in the crusty wheel ruts
will be covered up;

I know for I have seen the perfect road ahead
and the balancing act
of snow on fencewire.

Something primitive within me
keeps telling me to get home before dusk,

when light like ash,
or slate,
spreads its dull finish over the valley,

when the wet residue of snow
turns cold on my collar.
What is it about the world,

what is it about the familiar turn in the road,
and the bevelled road shoulders,

what is it about
the last few strands of wheat,
still visible in a blanched field,

that take possession of my life,
so that even though it's twenty degrees, even though

the sky is a corridor of ink with low headroom,
even though I'm the only one in the valley,
I'm not alone.

TONY SANDERS

Snowdrift

Half flight, half dive,
all for a change
of direction into the dark arbor.

Did you see her streak the frozen kelp
and cracked glass of the branches?

Turn back to the cold Vigilant.
Turn back to the tide lines of rust.

You'll have time to steel wool in the spring;
you'll vacuum hundreds of cluster flies from the sills.

Listen.
The sound of the snow falling

is the same as the sound of creosote
spluttering in the stove pipe.

The shift of a log diverts
the windowpane view of the landscape

and then the kingdom moment
is gone,
sucked up the thirsty flue.

Think of it. Thousands of particle angels
gone red white gray until

finally, the spores of ash
settle in the shape of a flame
out back.

The trouble with the valley is its quiet.
It falls between the rifle's report

and the mushy innards
left in red snow.
Red tail lights of the hunter's truck,

the disemboweled deer lashed down tight.
And then the frown of slight darkness

and then the snow, light like piano trills,
and then
more snow to cover the blood.

My neighbor knows about blood.

Each fall his face feels a little fuller,
his feet flush and itchy against his boot tongues.

His kingdom of a wife and family is fading.

Here the snow gospel says winter is for
cowling the harsh contours.

But not for long. Snow only highlights
the bramble or tree limb,
hinting below,

like the hiss of wet wood in a wood stove.
Such seething and not much heat.

I wish for a new light in the valley.

MARTIN MCGOVERN

Hearing Mockingbirds At Night

I Begin To Worry

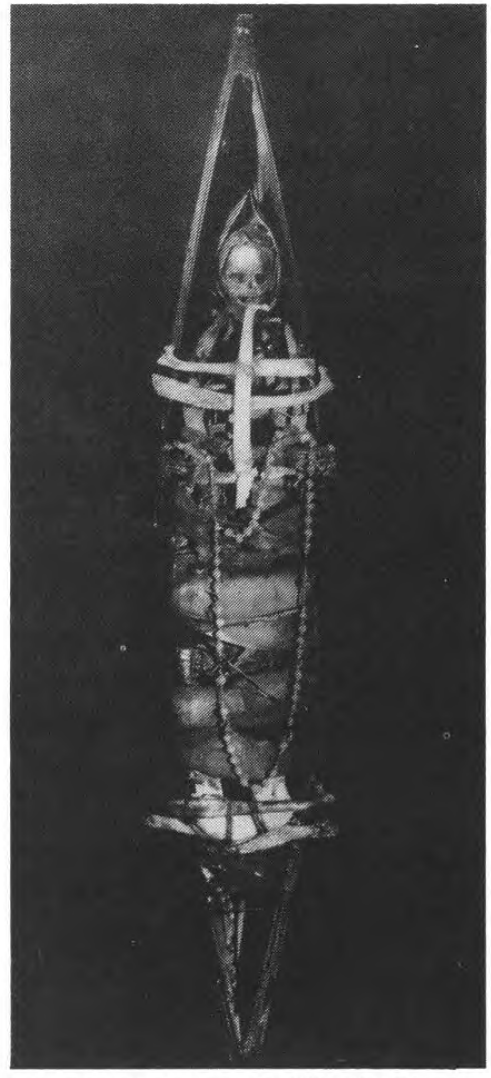
Bert the milkman will return somewhere
I have never been.
I know why my mother'd ask him in:
a book she'd read
and wanted him to read, or just to smoke
and hear a voice
not her children's or the one she heard in bed.

That voice is gone. Bert's voice is too.
They only come back late
at night, speaking low as if they want to woo me
to a carrion time,
a locking of dead men to women, a scheme —
the permanent separation of creams.

Sharon Kopriva, *The Couple*, 1986 36″ x 30″ x 18″ paper mache, bone and wood
(photo by Hickey/Robertson).

Sharon Kopriva, *The Penitant*, 1987 36″ x 18″ x 18″ paper maché and bone (photo by Frank Martin).

Sharon Kopriva, *The Pair,* 1987 60″ x 40″ x 18″ paper maché, bone and wood (photo by Hickey/Robertson).



Sharon Kopriva, *Boatbound* 1986 72″ x 20″ x 18″ paper maché, bone and wood (photo by Frank Martin).

OLIVE HERSHEY

Trash Can Man

The music was light like the man was, with a steady rock-and-roll underside and some serious blues. These songs weren't about girls but about grown women and men. Maybe that was why this wasn't the usual younger crowd. Half the couples on the floor were over fifty, and two or three pairs of large women danced with each other, smiling like sphinxes. These hip-rolling matrons had seen enough of this world to know that if your old man started talking about turning the damper down, well, you'd better look out, because another woman was doing more than cooking for him.

And this wasn't just another punch-out punk number. It mourned the gritty hard times when a man and his woman get to feeling lonesome and ornery, and before they know it restlessness or something else pulls them apart. In spite of the blues, the music had the kind of wacky spirit that made Wilma think she could dance through anything.

She'd found the trash can man again at the Squeeze Inn Club after she'd ditched Gary at Pudge's place. The Cajun was sitting at the end of the bar smoking a skinny cigar that matched his moustache, only she didn't know it was him at first without the trash can. A zydeco band was playing onstage.

"You wan' dance?" he said. He was wearing a straw hat pulled low and the minute he opened his mouth she recognized him.

"Could be," she said. It was impossible not to smile back at his eyes full of devilment.

"I can show you some of that zydeco dance, no problem. *Regardez*." He pointed to the middle of the dancing crowd where a frail, elderly man guided his partner in a slow, flowing step. He held his upper body straight and kept his fedora tilted low over his face. There wasn't a speck of frivolity in the man except for his knees. The knees had seen some long slogging through cane and cypress swamps; they'd stiffened and become brittle, like old tires. But on the dance floor everything melted, knees, shanks, and ankles, as if bone turned to liquid silver in the hands of the music.

"He's beautiful," she said.

"No better'n you're gonna look," the trash can man said, looking at Wilma steadily with appreciation. She never could resist a man who appreciated her.

As she walked into his arms, she felt his lightness, not a young man, forty-five, maybe fifty, but slim and limber. He held her at a decent distance from himself and inclined his upper body toward hers, his left elbow held out to the side like they do at country dances. His face was turned slightly away from hers as he moved her between the other couples, and his expression wasn't sad but concentrated. All his energy and attention seemed to move down through his neck and chest and arms to the wooden floor. She stole quick looks at his legs and feet, noticing they moved with a slide not a step and his knees swiveled right and left, making circles in the smoky air. His hips swung so slightly you'd have to measure to be sure they

swung at all, and his eyes were closed a lot of the time.

"Dance with me *dix minutes*," he had said. "When the time's up, I check out, leave you *toute seule*, if that's what you want. If you like it we keep on. I guarantee." His name was Sylvestre Blaise Broussard, he said, but everybody called him Blaise.

The band was playing "*Zydeco est pas sale*," the accordian player pumping the old Monarch and flapping his elbows like crazy. He had on a pair of railroad overalls size 48 and his round face shone with drunkeness, sweat, and joy. He had two guitar players backing him, one of them a white boy with a long ponytail slung down his back.

"You from around here?" she asked, panting a little.

"Born in East Texas, Piney Woods," he said. "Mama was from Mamou. You catchin' on fast. You like it all right, yes?" His eyes were a couple of inches from her own, not dark brown as she'd thought at first but a mixture of wood smoke and caramel. His skin was pale.

"Yes," she said and smiled, still concentrating. She was off balance, off the beat, outweighing him by thirty pounds. People were looking at them funny because she was so big and her clothes were wrong; none of the other women wore pants. She tried to suck in her stomach and give herself up to the music. This required a coordination she had lost years ago.

But in spite of it, she flirted with Blaise like a seventeen-year-old at a sock hop. She watched herself laughing too loud, showing her dimples, swinging her hips too wide.

"Are you married?" she asked.

"Ain't ever'body?"

"Yes. But I'm separated," she said, hoping it was the right word.

"Sorry 'bout that. Families be made for hanging onto and hanging out wit'. Pretty much till the end come round."

Now she felt hot and defensive. She thought about calling Vernon. She hadn't seen her husband for twenty-two days.

"Sometimes you can't live with them," she said.

"And you know what I say to that? Lissen, if you tired of weedin' your garden, quit and try something else for awhile. You goin' good now."

She couldn't get the picture of Vernon out of her head, the way he looked the day she left Little Egypt.

She'd parked across the highway from her house and stood by the front gate, not wanting to come into the yard. She hadn't stood there five minutes before Vernon walked out onto the porch with a falcon on his shoulder.

"Mornin'," she called. "I'm ready to take off." She wanted to ask where her youngest son was, but she guessed if Clint wanted to say goodbye he would. Vernon approached slowly, keeping his eyes on the truck across the road. When he stopped and stood on the other side of the low gate, the bird on his shoulder stretched its head high and rattled its wings. Vernon reached up and stroked the bird's feathers. It regarded her with scorn and suspicion; she immediately felt guilty.

"Don't forget your vitamins," she had told him.

"You're awful worried about my health all of a sudden," he said. He looked too exhausted for anger.

"I'd of stayed, Vernon, if you just hadn't stole from me," she said.

At the last minute she couldn't help walking through the gate to her yard and putting her arms around him. He smelled like bird shit and dog food and shaving cream. When she tightened her arms

around his neck, he reached up and loosened her grip. For the first time she was scared of losing him, standing there outside his arms in the watery spring sunshine and feeling a deep wail rise inside her chest. Turning quickly, she walked through the gate, stepped up, grabbed the chrome rail, and slid into the truck.

She'd forgotten to watch her feet, concentrating on the sad wheezy music and the quick slide and shuffle, the voices and whispers and Blaise's talk. He was holding her light and steady, turning her across the floor, and she was starting to feel like she might be dancing.

"Maybe you stay awhile in town?" Blaise's eyes were full of light flecks.

She had to get home and figure out how to buy her own truck. Gary had told her you could buy a rig, tractor only, used, for fifty thousand. That meant five thousand down. If she wanted to haul interstate she'd have to get permits; that might set her back a couple of grand. Where would she get it? A week ago it had seemed, riding high next to Gary, that she could do damn near anything. And where was he now? On the way home to Kansas City to see his sick kid or wrapped around a median pole?

She hadn't done right by Gary maybe. Shouldn't have left him like that, full of night terrors and speed. She hadn't done right to run out on Vernon. For better or worse she'd married him for loan and foreclosures, bumper crops and Chapter Eleven. But not to be ripped off after twenty-five years of laundry, not to lose the last two bits she had.

"What do you do for a living?" she asked Blaise.

"See that red Kenworth? You see that? *Magnifique. Cherie,* what I do for a livin' is I travel all roun' this country. I deliver everything. Onions, scallions, cabbage, Scotch."

"You like what you do?"

"Man be crazy not to."

"Where you headed after tonight?"

"Over Beaumont way. Houston. Stoppin' to see the family."

"Your wife and kids over there?"

"I got me three sweet girls in Pasadena." His wife was named Beatrice, his daughters Jeanne, Pauline, and Marianne.

"You got room in that truck for me?" she said. "I can drive."

He touched his moustache and looked at her. "*Biensur,* I got room. In couple hours we be ready. Then we drive into the sun. Get the spirit warm." He winked.

Wilma had been cold for a long time, maybe ever since she'd lain down with Gary in the painted iron bed at Pudge Thibodeaux's place. The room didn't have much in it, she remembered, besides the bed, its headboard fashioned in fantastic shapes, hearts and flowers and in the center a cupid with purple wings.

"Some bed," she said.

Pudge had opened the double doors leading to the sunlit balcony. A hot breeze blew in from the Gulf, rattling the leaves outside. Gary lay down on the bed and kicked his boots onto the floor. He didn't even turn the covers back. She walked out onto the balcony, leaning on the railing to inhale the humid air. She'd been on the road three weeks. It was good standing someplace fixed.

"Don't get excited if you hear a bunch of drunks carrying on downstairs later on," Pudge said. "I'll throw 'em a chicken and they'll dance around raising hell a while then go on into town. You all take a good rest now." He was gone, slipping out the door like smoke.

She lay on the bed next to Gary, careful not to shake the

springs. Beneath her the bed curved like a hammock. She stared at the light fixture twelve feet overhead, blue glass molded into a flower shape: five petals with a light bulb inside. When she woke she could hear music in the distance, an accordian with guitars and a bass voice laughing. It wasn't the music that wakened her but Gary's arm sneaking around behind her. If she pretended to be asleep, she thought maybe he'd forget it, but his hand slipped up under her right breast, twirling the nipple between two fingers. She ought to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing, but she didn't want to make a big deal while he was strung out. In a minute she felt his other hand on her leg.

She climbed off the bed slowly. Each separate bedspring spoke but not too loud. Lifting one of the slats in the blinds, she looked down to see a man wearing a black mask, cape, and hat standing in the drive below. Fifty yards behind him stood a group of eight masked horsemen in costumes, spurring their mounts so they pranced on the gravel. On the road more horses and riders were milling around a beer wagon pulled by a tractor and a truck carrying musicians. The melody had a little jive in it, something like a country two-step with a whiff of the blues. When she turned back to face the bed, Gary was sitting up against the headboard cleaning his nails with a buck knife.

"Check out the weird party downstairs," she said.

"Not so friendly, are you, this evening?"

"I'm beat."

"I was figuring you might be good for something."

The dresser had a mirror. She ran a brush through her hair, noticing deep circles under her eyes. "That wasn't part of the deal," she said. His face behind hers in the glass was flushed and puffy.

"You're too old to be cheerleader, Wilma," he said.

He hadn't been on dope in November when she met him at the truckstop where she cooked six nights a week. At four in the morning, his hazel eyes had been red-rimmed but clear. Like all of them, he looked her over hard.

"Gary Perdle. Kansas City. You look too nice to sling hash," he said, holding out his hand.

Wilma's voice was gruff and she ignored the hand. "My oil wells all dried up. How about you? Always been driving these rigs?" *Listen to me talking like a truckstop waitress,* she thought, watching his eyes flatten and retreat under her gaze.

"Ever since I quit teaching high school history," he said. "You'd love it, drivin' a truck."

She'd never considered it, but now she was hearing the words.

"What do I have to do to get you to teach me to drive?" she said.

Gary tipped his head toward the lot. "You could lie down with me in the bunk out there and let me tickle you with a feather duster."

"Dream on." His line made her sad, but she was crazy to sit in a truck.

There was a cocky tilt to his head as they walked across the asphalt in the dark past rows of Kenworths, Peterbuilts, Freightliners, Macks, and GMCs lined up like cars in a drive-in movie. And his walk turned her on, proud as a rodeo cowboy's when he knows a crowd is watching. When he grabbed her hand and did a few dance steps, she slapped at him and said, "Let go. I'm too old for this." He wouldn't listen. Instead he put his arm around her waist and swung her over his shoulder.

"Put me down, idiot." She couldn't help laughing. "Somebody'll see."

"Don't worry," he told her. "I'll just tell them you're my poor old

crippled mother."

Gary's rig was a Kenworth with chrome twin stacks, double chrome headlights, guide rods with shiny chrome dolphins on them, and twin air horns mounted on top of the cab. A truck built so far off the ground she had to strain for two long embarrassing minutes to hoist herself into the seat.

"Start her up," he said, and she pushed the starter, pumped the accelerator, and listened to what the big Cummins engine would say. It wobbled a little then roared like a caged lion. The vibration shook the cab. She wanted a big animal like this.

Twice a week, when he had a couple of days between runs, she spent eight hours at work and another two in the truck with Gary. They drove a couple of hours before she had to head home to sleep, blasting through El Campo, Edna, Nada, Lissie, and Newgulf.

As she drove, she rolled down the window, stealing a look at the furrows in the blackland fields spinning past like spokes in a wheel. Her big dangle earrings swung in the wind.

"It's good-looking country," she yelled at Gary.

"Downshift, dammit," he said. "And watch your curves."

After finding Vernon in his pickup on New Year's Eve necking with a neighbor, Wilma decided she needed a vacation. On the road between Houston and Cape Hatteras were miles of good-looking cypress swamps, coastal marshes, and broad palmetto beaches. After a week of sightseeing, she and Gary were headed home with a load of green peppers and three sets of souvenir spoons from Savannah when Gary passed out on the Mississippi bridge to Baton Rouge and had to have his stomach pumped. They'd wheeled him through the double doors looking half dead, his face a frog-belly white tinged blue by his beard. He handed her a scrap of paper with a name and address scawled on it.

Richard Thibodeaux
Maison Lafitte
Scott, Louisiana.

"He's got a phone?" she asked, alarmed by his color.

"Never mind," Gary whispered. "Pudge ain't that formal." Five hours later at Pudge's, he was wide awake and sitting up in bed.

"I never was a cheerleader," Wilma yelled at him. "Two months I've been driving with you. What do you know?" She couldn't tell from the way he was looking at her what he thought he knew or what shape he was in. His voice wasn't angry, just kind of tired.

"I know a prick tease when I see one," he said.

She opened the door and left the room. Heading down the corridor to the stairwell, she hung over the banister to listen. Pudge was at the screen door below, saying something to the riders; he was opening the door and walking onto the porch. Wilma trotted down the steps until she was halfway to the front hall. Then she sat on a step and stared through the door at the dressed-up riders on their scruffy ponies, looking like gypsy bandits.

Out in the yard people were dancing, a green-eyed werewolf cheek to cheek with a big-breasted woman in chartreuse hightops and T-shirt, a red-and-white harlequin doing the samba with a blue-nosed witch. The dancers were circled by a stream of horses and riders moving counterclockwise as if stirred by a giant invisible spoon. The north wind was blowing silk capes and pantaloons, pennants and ribbons tied into the horses' manes, the litter pinned to the costume of the man who wore over his head a plastic garbage can with a cut-out peekhole. Out on the driveway the trash can man danced all to himself, shaking small gourd rattles in his hands.

"Hey, Francois, what you think you doin'?" Pudge yelled at the Mardi Gras captain. "What for you bring this bunch of rapscallions to my house? Jiving my guests outa they beds?" Wilma hadn't seen a man like Pudge Thibodeaux except at a race track once in Junction. In his black turtleneck he had the taut springiness of a jockey or a fighter, but he didn't seem mad. The hair was combed precisely over his high forehead in seventeen strands.

The man in the purple cape removed his hat and bowed. As his cape swirled and he brushed the gravel with his hat, he began a song that was like a chant. Pretty soon all the riders took up the melody. They'd removed their hats, but left on the tight rubber masks that were more than masks with life-like hair and lips. Wilma couldn't understand the words to the song, catching only enough to figure the riders were asking Pudge to contribute some ingredient to a gumbo they were making. This wasn't a thing like trick or treat, she thought and then remembered Gary had told her in these Louisiana prairie towns it was traditional to beg on Fat Tuesday.

The melody wavered between upbeat and mournful. Walking out onto the porch to hear better, Wilma stood next to a pillar trying to resemble one of the blue statues of naked girls with their hair in buns.

"Hey, Pudge, where you pick up that big mamoo?" The man who spoke had a high silly voice. It took her a minute to find him in the crowd sitting on his horse. She didn't see how anyone who knew the man could recognize him in his Jimmy Carter mask, a shock of red spikey hair attached to the scalp. Not unless a neighbor could identify his white long underwear, all he wore except for a pair of old jockey briefs pulled over the bottoms.

The man noticed her watching him, raked the horse's sides, and smacked it on the hindquarters. Leaning low out of the saddle and pointing a gloved finger at her, he trotted up to the porch.

"Mardi Gras hostage," he called out, still pointing. His voice was strained as if he were trying to alter it.

Pudge shook his head. "She's company," he said.

Wilma thought he must be kidding as he kept coming, the horse's hooves shaking the wooden porch and its nostrils pink and flaring, the rubber face hanging over its shoulder like a Comanche shield. It was time to move, the horse's grassy breath blowing in her hair, but the man leaned to grab her and swing her up into the saddle in front of him. She wiggled and kicked, but he had hands like Vernon's traps. Great god, when would it happen? When would she finally get too big and too mean for some pissant to grab her and carry her away.

"I'm Billy Lee Stringer, hon," he said, one arm gripping her waist.

"Turn loose," she said between clenched teeth, but he held on.

Pudge had come back, dangling a white leghorn by both feet. The chicken twisted and flapped, trying to get loose, stretching its head high with its beak open, pecking at Pudge's fingers. The riders dismounted, bending to tie their shoelaces and roll the bottoms of their jeans. Wilma began to feel sorry for the chicken.

"I'm lettin' her loose," Pudge said and knelt down with the chicken between his hands, its neck tall and skinny and scared. Twenty feet away the riders stood, yelling and jiving, then the chicken was hopping over little hanks of grass toward the line of trees. Six men trailed the bird, their legs flying out from under them, bodies canted so far forward they looked ready to fall. From a hundred yards away the yelps and hee-haws drifted back on the warm lemony air. Billy Lee Stringer yipped and yelled, kneeing the pony after them. A stiff wind came up from the south, blowing the run-

ners' hair back, whipping their trousers around so they looked like laundry ballooning across the prairie.

The evening sky filled with blackbirds. As they passed overhead, they made a sound like wind outside a train, and through the whoosh came Gary's voice calling out for her to wait. Even at two hundred yards, she could tell his eyes were wrong. His face was too red, knee action too high, his fists clenched hard and white against the resisting air. Watching him narrow the distance between them, she felt a chill.

Before he reached them, Billy Lee swung his leg over the saddle and slipped to the ground. He patted her knee. "Take care of Sally," he told her, placing the reins in her hands. "I'm no good at sittin'." Then he took off after the others. For a short-legged man, he could travel.

When Gary stopped next to the mare's shoulder, he grabbed the mane for a minute and gave her a wall-eyed look that plainly said he felt ditched. Then he turned around and looked out toward the trees, holding his hand up to shade his eyes against the low sun.

"Where'd they go?" he said and took off running past Pudge, catching Billy Lee and the rest, the tail of his blue shirt flipping up and down. Even at this distance, Wilma could tell this was one quick chicken. Pudge and the other man weren't paying any attention to her, so she lifted the reins and squeezed the horse with her knees, trotting off toward the others. What would Vernon say if he could see her now?

She didn't know Vernon had stolen her money until she asked him to put his combines down on a note for a truck.

"No wife of mine is driving no truck," he'd told her. "It's a filthy crowd, those truckers. No place for a woman."

"It's better than fixing fries," she said. She hadn't told Vernon about Gary's teaching her to drive.

He moved a couple of inches closer to her on the porch swing and patted her shoulder. When he touched her, she got up fast and stood facing him, a tall angry woman with heavy reddish hair. Without her weight the ends of the swing fishtailed crazily and the chains clanked.

She took him with her to the bank to draw out her part of their savings, forty-five hundred, all she had left of the money she'd made at the hunting and fishing club before they were married. When the teller checked the balance and told her there was only eight hundred left, she swayed a little on the blue and gold fleur-de-lis carpet, trying to listen while Vernon told her he'd used the money to buy a crawfish farm.

His voice came through a kind of buzz in her ears, and the pattern in the rug turned to stars swimming in a green sea. Then she made a fist and threw all of her weight into his middle; there was a lot of give there. He drew his breath in sharply and closed his eyes and kept them closed while several of their neighbors went through the revolving door a couple of times to see what would happen next.

"You're crazy, Wilma," Vernon said, and he stared at her a long time. When he spoke again, he was handling his words carefully. "You might could check into the Medical Center. Get you one of those operations so you can go ahead and *be* the man you always wanted."

Wilma bounced around on the horse, watching Gary between the animal's ears running like the devil was hung in his short hairs. The captain on horseback came up by her. He removed his hat but kept his mask in place.

"Whoa," she said, pulling on the reins.

"You got to talk to him, ma'am," the man said with a serious look. "Tell him to sit down, watch all he wants, but let that bird alone. He just making a circus, your old man."

"He's not my old man," she said.

"Is he got anybody else?"

She looked around for Pudge, his old buddy. He was hopping around on his bow legs taking snapshots of the scene.

"I'll talk to him," she said.

When she caught up with him, Gary's face was glazed with sweat, his eyes focused on next year. He stood within easy reach, his shadow purple on the grass in front of him. She dismounted and walked toward him, trying to keep her face relaxed.

"Come on home, boy. We're too old to be ripping across this field with a bunch of kids."

"Chicken," he said. His skin had a high waxy shine, his eyes huge and skittering all over.

"Never mind," she said and took his hand.

"If it ain't Miss Ice Capades," he muttered and pushed her off. He'd never been rough with her before. In a second he was running again, shouldering his way through the other runners till he was out in front. He made two unsuccessful dives after the chicken, each time lying full length on the ground for a couple of seconds as if he'd passed out. She thought she wouldn't be able to stand it, waiting for him to gather himself to his feet. He stood up. Dove at the chicken. It let out a shriek and released a handful of feathers into the air. He scrabbled to his feet, holding the bird high over his head in both hands, taking long strides toward her. Billy Lee came abreast of him and took hold of his arm. "Hold on, son," he said.

Gary stopped walking.

"That here's my chicken," Billy Lee said. He was using his own deep voice now. His long underwear was soaked with sweat and mud, and the grinning mask made him look like some crazed actor. There was a bulge in his jockey briefs like he'd stuffed them with old socks.

Pudge walked up to the two of them and slung an arm around their shoulders. "Now if you boys'll think back a while you'll recall that's my chicken."

Billy Lee giggled. "He says it's his chicken." He looked at Gary, pointing his finger. Gary's face was blank. Without a sign, he drew his arm back and hit Billy Lee an uppercut to the jaw so he went down fast. Gary stood looking down at him, the chicken still dangling from his hand. Now and then it let out an exhausted squawk. The riders had made a circle around the two men.

"Sheeit, boy," Pudge said, "if you ever thought you could run, better do it now." But Gary stayed put. Billy Lee reared himself off the ground, snatched the bird out of Gary's fist, ducked outside the circle, and stood spraddle-legged twenty feet away.

"*Le gran Mardi Gras*," he yelled, holding the bird aloft. It flapped its white wings a couple of times then hung loose in the last of the sun that was lighting up the red hair on Billy Lee's rubber scalp. Then, while everybody watched, he reached high with his other hand, took hold of the bird's head, and with a quick twist severed it from the neck. Blood spattered his mask, running down his hand and wrist and forearm. It spotted the white underwear.

"*Le gran Mardi Gras*," the crowd shouted. Wilma turned her face away. The trash can man bowed low, reaching for her hand. Through the square peekhole she saw a wide mouth with a black moustache above it.

"Dance?" he said and didn't wait for an answer. His arm around

her waist was strong and weightless, his legs against her own pliant as ropes but knowing where to turn. She didn't have time to feel self-conscious before the wheezy, tinny music filled her with champagne bubbles. He danced her away from Gary and Billy Lee and the others, out to the front yard where the sunset on the pink camellias was making them glow like Christmas angels against the brown grass. She closed her eyes and let herself spin.

Stopping next to a black horse with a green saddle blanket, the trash can man removed his arm from her waist and reached under the camouflage jumpsuit he wore, pulled out a mask, and handed it to her. The mask was a woman's face with curly blond hair and a headdress of turquoise feathers.

"You want me to wear this?"

"You want to ride Mardi Gras, *n'est-ce pas*?"

"I thought women couldn't do it. I thought it was a traditional male thing." She wished she could see his eyes.

"Who you think'll know you're a woman? You'll look like a big fella dressed like a woman dressed like a bird of paradise."

She looked down at her heavy legs in the tight jeans, at the Reebok workout shoes on her size eight feet. She wasn't a thing like a bird of paradise, but she pulled the rubber mask over her head anyway. The mask smelled like sweat and old rubber tires. It was hotter than hell. Out of the eye-slits, she saw the trash can man laughing through his peephole. He put his arms around her and squeezed till she thought she'd pee in her pants.

"What're we gonna do now?" she said, her voice sounding deep and hollow. "What's a bunch of grown men doing in this foolishness, anyhow?"

"Don' you know, *cherie*? The child's the father of the man," the trash can man said. "We're gonna play."

When she opened the door to the room three hours later, she thought somebody had looted the place. Their two bags were emptied out all over the floor, sheets peeled away from the mattress ticking, the mattress rolled up at one end of the bed. She looked into every corner, opened the closet, kicked over a stack of magazines. The dresser was on its face beside the bathroom door, the flight bag open on the bed, brown medicine bottles spilling pills over the sheets like pieces in a children's game.

"Where are you?" she said, keeping her voice low. What should she expect of a man who might've taken hundreds of milligrams of dexedrine in the last eight hours.

Gary came out of the bathroom holding a red sock in one hand and a razor in the other. "I gotta get on the road," he said. She couldn't get him to look at her; his eyes were ricocheting off the walls.

"You wanted to lay back a couple of days," she said.

"I just talked to my wife," he said. "My boy's in the hospital."

She walked around the room picking up clothes, stuffing them into her bag, not knowing whether to believe him or not. She found his second red sock under the bed with the Grateful Dead T-shirt he wore to sleep in.

He zipped his bag and pulled his tweed cap over his eyes as she checked around the room for pieces of underwear, her mind already working ahead to the price of a motel room near where he lived. In her purse she had exactly forty-three dollars left out of what she took from behind the wallpaper at home. She might get a lot of reading done in that motel. When she stood up from looking under the bed, she noticed him staring.

"What d'you think you're doing?"

"Getting it together," she said. "We're leaving, aren't we?"

"Who said anything about 'we'?"

"I don't get it," she said.

"Puddin', we're at the end of something," he said. He walked toward her with a sorry smirk on his face. When he was close, he put his arms around her as if nothing had happened, as if they were old friends who might have just run into each other in a grocery store. And maybe there'd never been much between them after all, just the driving lessons, a few kisses, a lot of need. Now he was leaving as if she hadn't listened to his troubles all the way from Houston to Hatteras, hadn't saved his ass on the Mississippi bridge.

"Life's too complicated," she said, her face in his shirt. When he bent to kiss her, she laid her forearms against his chest and leaned back hard.

"What's wrong?" he said. "You aren't gonna give me a good old truckdriver's smooch before I go?" He tilted her chin up, placed his lips firmly on hers, and started pushing with his tongue.

"Get away from me," she yelled, shoving harder with her arms. His eyes were closed, his curly lashes swooped up toward the ceiling, his body salty from running, and his mouth brown and funky from the Camels he smoked. With one hand she reached around behind him and grabbed a hank of his hair. She gave it a couple of good hard jerks until he took a few steps backward, still holding her so she was forced to walk toward him.

"Wanna dance?" he said, holding her right hand stiffly out to the side. She picked up one of her feet and slammed it down on his boot, but since she wore jogging shoes this didn't have the effect she wanted. He was holding her by the right hand, one arm curled snug around her waist, the two of them starting to turn in tight circles in the space between the bed and the balcony. She wasn't mad enough yet to fight him with all her strength.

"No way," she said.

Gary was leading her toward the double doors to the balcony. The oak leaves were dark against the night sky, and scraps of music floated from the town. She thought of low ceilings and tables with brown beer bottles on them and a small band playing.

"You'll be all right, sport," he said. "I can leave you some change." He nuzzled her cheek.

"Quit that," she told him. What made him think she was a good sport anyway? She was sick of him. He didn't seem to hear her, just kept his cheek next to hers, turning his face now and then to kiss her again. She took a step backward. He still held her around the waist.

"Hey, baby," he said. "Wanna fuck?" He'd never used the word before.

"You're crazy," she said, turning her face.

"Don't play games. You know you want it," he said. His eyes flickered like gas flames.

"No," she said. For the first time he scared her. She wrenched out of his grasp and should have kept going, but she stopped next to the doors to the balcony.

"Tease," he said. "Slut." Stepping forward, he slapped her cheek. She kept backing away from him, through the doors onto the narrow balcony with the waist-high railing around it.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"Who do you think you are? Miss Texas?" He smacked her again.

She'd never thought she was anything so special. Just a girl with big muscles who used to be able to shoot pintails at fifty yards.

His shoulders cancelled the light from the room, and his eyes were looking someplace she never wanted to go. Bending quickly, she grabbed his legs, heaved, and flipped his feet up, tipping him

over the railing. He fell onto the gravel below.

"Bitch," he yelled. It was only fifteen feet down.

She got his flight bag and tossed it over the railing, walked back inside, and shut the door.

—from the novel
Truck Dance

HARRY DE LA HOUSSAYE

Grinding

My car advances through acres of sludge
set against a depthless grey sky.
The country road's slick
with mud dropped by tractors
hauling sugar cane to grinding,
and the fields are pocked with ruts
scooped out as their tires negotiate soil
black and soggy with November rain.
The mill on the outskirts of town's
in full swing. In the evening's fading light
its boilers blowing off steam look like
the booster stage of a rocket at liftoff,
and heaps of bagasse on both sides
of the railroad tracks resemble hills.
I'm half in a daze from four hours
of uninterrupted driving, and my head's
filled with thoughts about the harmony
of fields, mill, and town at harvest-time,
notions that can't turn molasses
into brown sugar, or blend into talk
about sucrose ratios and tonnage.

When I arrive I do not mention
these ideas, do not explain
that like raw sweetness they must
be refined into crystalline form,
or that my life progresses with this work.
Keeping an almost total silence I feel
I've never left this town. I sniff traces
of treacle in the air, finger
the black, curly soot spewed out
by the mill that sullies cars and houses
all the way to Main Street, as I become
a veteran of another grinding.

CAROL WYATT

The Printer At The Steelworkers' Union Hall

The way his shirt is still pressed
as carefully as if done by his mother,
then tucked into his high-belted pants,
and the way his hair, long since gray, looks
like someone had just combed it for Sunday dinner—

that's the way Earl worries the ink on his press,
or the way he evens two sheets of paper.
While others talk politics he thinks posters
and yardsigns and five thousand envelopes
needed for the mailing. He talks with his hands,
completes his sentence with a feed adjustment
or a scissors' cut. Earl's hands become ruler
and tape, stapler and glue bottle
as he ministers to the union members,
their smoke taking the shape of the room.

And at the far end of the table,
his sister's simple-minded daughter
is playing with a bird,
and a ship and a flower that he has folded
from the test run of last week's flyers.

J. D. SMITH

Laying Pipe In Mercer County

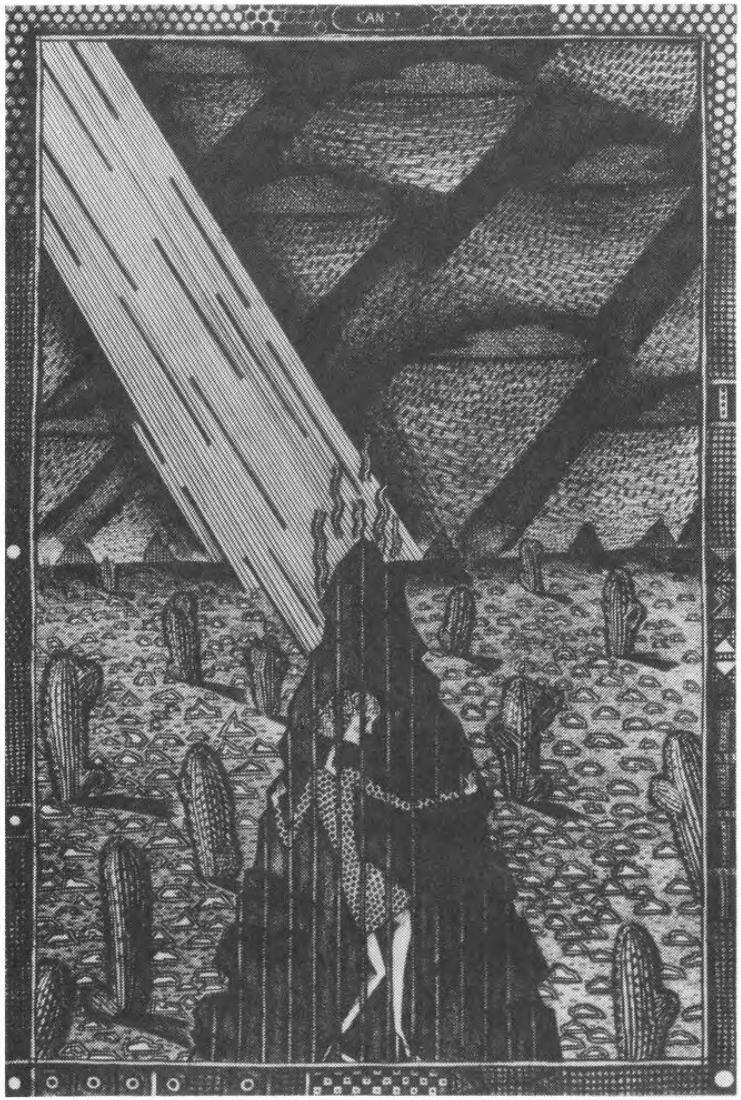
It's a hell of a thing to carry
a thing that's mainly space, amazing for its bulk.
You can think about it and go crazy,
or you can have some fun with it.
Holler through the hollow tunnel—
the guy at the other end will holler back
with a low echo, like he's lost.
Imagine the monstrous joint you could roll inside.

The fun stops, though, when the storm
kicks in its long spurs from the west.
The land lies too flat for perspective,
and you hedge your bets: everything is close.
You balance the length like a huge spirit level.
If the huge bubble slips one end tips
to salute the bolts and forks above;
they could return the gesture drastically.
Trading dangers, the end could tap a power line
in one turn, like Mo or Curly's, with a plank.
The risks stem from being grounded.

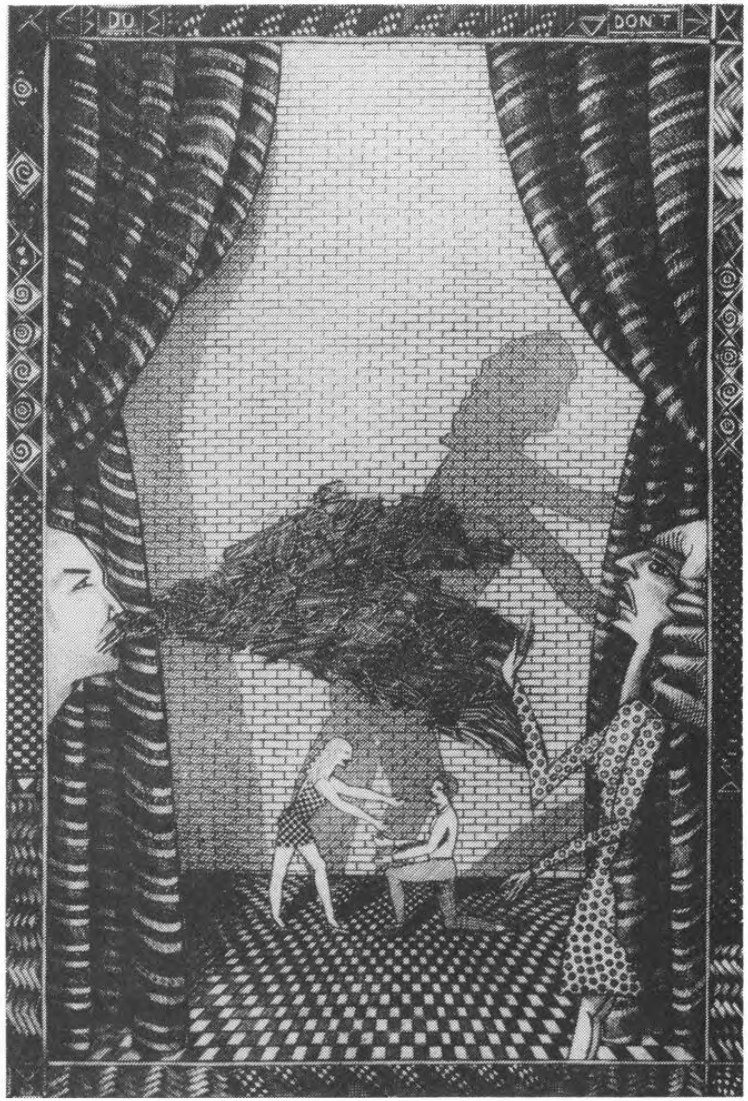
The in-town struts and shuffles disappear,
saved for Rock Island tonight.
Knees bent, you hold the length low from straight arms
as if to stay some rogue current
that missed Franklin's key,
that would reach waist-level to strike.
You set the tube, fit to its neighbor, in the trench,
spade on the quick dirt, then get your ass inside.
Both will be buried sometime. And deep.

Karin Broker, *"No"*, Fall 1981 24″ x 36″ etching.

Karin Broker, *"I Should, or Should I?"*, Spring 1982 24″ x 36″ etching.



Karin Broker, *"Can't"*, Summer 1982 24″ x 36″ etching.



Karin Broker, *"Do, Don't"*, Summer 1983 24″ x 36″ etching.

MARTIN SCOTT

On Migraines

The first hallucination I had was while shopping an Eagle supermarket in Iowa City. In the fresh fruit and vegetable aisle, my field of vision began to get cloudy and saffron-colored, and by the time I made it to frozen foods, I could barely see. Going to the cashier took almost more courage than I had, because I was afraid she would notice something wrong with me, that I wouldn't be able to write the check and would have to ask for help, embarrassed by my crippled tongue—I could not have described or classified my ailment. I put on what I hoped was a neutral face and strolled up, and when my turn came, by God, I wrote the check, clumsily but accurately enough, and the cashier smiled indulgently. I had to walk home across several busy streets, but I made it, and spent the rest of the day writhing on my bed in what, it turns out, was my first migraine.

The onset of a migraine is accompanied by a peculiar feeling that something is going to *happen*, as if I could feel the nervous disruption rising through the brain like a swimmer to the surface, as anxious for air as the migraine is to make itself known. And if I watch it come, the malaise becomes more general and unfathomable, as if I could feel my body in the process of deformation, my head swelling to one side and shrinking on the other, my eyes bulging, almost to the size of my palm. It is then I run for ice and medication, if I can, but if I can't, submit myself to this meditation on pain.

Classical migraines, the type I suffer from, not only have excruciating headache neuralgia, usually above an eye or at the temple, not only the intense nausea of the common migraine, but also a blind spot in the field of vision. The hallucination or *scotoma* (meaning shadow) starts as a small glittering flake and builds, after a few minutes, into a huge purple amoeba that shimmers and pulsates, a horrible planet Jupiter hovering over the visible world. Wherever I turn my head, it is there. It completely obscures, or more accurately *erases*, whatever should be there, and so leaves me with an attendant sensation of confusion—where has the world gone? What has taken it away? The world has disappeared with my ability to perceive it, or so the child in me, prominent under stress, believes.

The migraine hallucination often begins as an irregular zigzag streak through the central part of my line of vision. This creates a kind of cubist effect in the faces I look at: the migraine etches through them, distorting an eye lower or higher than it should be, or removing it altogether. And as I turn my head from side to side, I can look *around* the hallucination, but not through it; I can fill in the blanks, but staring face-on it seems that the person has exploded. The migraine attacks the object in view almost the way a cubist does, cutting it up into planes and pieces, as if the continents of the mind were drifting apart and the halves of vision, rational and irrational, breaking apart in opposite directions, leaving a gap between, through which a light pokes, so that depth and dimension become illusory. A headache can disrupt the pillars of my assumptions, that the world is solid and more or less stationary in space. During a

migraine, I discover that perception is a two-dimensional screen that can be ripped apart, revealing oblivion, not solidity, beneath me.

What is this oblivion? I have wondered if it might be constricted blood vessels in the eye, or a problem of disoriented synapses; Oliver Sacks, in his definitive *Migraine*, thinks it might be electrical disturbances in the optic nerve. Considered aesthetically, the scotoma is artwork, a kind of deep symbol, and I wonder if it might not be an emblem of the imagination itself, since its job is to appropriate the innocent appearances of the world and distort them. Coleridge said:

> It is clear, then, that the imagination must derive its very power from the act of dissolution, the acidic destruction of primary perception into material malleable enough for the imagination to work upon, just as the potter must work the clay before he considers it suitable. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; it inverts the material to make it anew.

Migraine is destructive in that it causes intense pain, as if someone were pressing a diamond through my eye to find a particular nerve cord. It is a hard, constant pain so relentless and out of control that it *must* come from outside myself, though I know it doesn't. The pain is caused by blood vessels contracting and then expanding wildly so that blood seeps out into surrounding tissue, but this physical damage seems incommensurate to the pain, as if the migraine were lavishing it on me.

But there is also something constructive about migraine. Just as the imagination dissolves the world to create it anew, so the migraine dissolves perception in a vial of pain to create it anew in hallucination, like a wild slash of paint. William Carlos Williams said, "The imagination is a—," meaning that the imagination becomes whatever the senses feed it. Like the migraine, the imagination removes the world in favor of itself, replacing the "real world" the optic nerve picks up with its own artwork. And this artwork, scrawl as it is, seems hostile and bitter, like graffiti. I can't help feeling it has a message, a hidden language that will probably never find its translator; it has a kind of symbolist-solipsist perfection in its abstract, unknowable, God-like detachment.

My second migraine was in a Long John Silver's fast food restaurant—part of the fun they have with you is the places they pick to come at you, places where you find yourself either stranded for a time or compelled not to scream out loud. This time the hallucination came in a clearish purple and white, rather than saffron, as I worked through my plate of fried fish and, laughing nervously out of macho dismissal of pain, described the symptoms to my wife who correctly diagnosed me and insisted we begin the long walk home before the attack turned worse. Of course, it was winter with the sun glaring on the ice, so as she predicted, it got worse and worse. I craved darkness and silence, and ever since then I can barely stand the sun on a cloudy day, let alone a bright one.

This made me realize that my eyes, the instruments of vision, are also the instruments of torture. Any bright light, especially hot summer glare, can cause a blind spot to appear, the way harsh images of light stay on the eye even after you've turned away. Brilliant days, the most beautiful days, are also the most dangerous. I avoid looking at crisp, glossy surfaces and chrome, glass, and mirrors, and even strong headlights in traffic at night. Migraine elaborates the glare, using it as a springboard to overpower the surfaces of what I perceive. It even affects the speech. Often during an attack, I can't produce the word I am looking for, so that randomly related words are substituted by the confused brain working to get around

the void and paralysis.

The migraine aura also produces an extreme sense of detachment from all my surroundings, and a feeling of hibernation or distance, as if I were packed inside a wall of styrofoam. The world continues to go on as if nothing has happened, little realizing that for me everything has happened: I am having a migraine, I must lie down, I am blind. And this defines me, creates a horrible fascination for the hallucination that verges on the decadent and narcissistic. As the scotoma grows outward or larger like an approaching cloud of unknowing, so does the psychic malaise grow as it both strives to see around the cloud, see into it, and repress it, all at the same time. In appearance, it is usually a silvery-purplish scintillation of crystalline light that seems to shimmer with the same consistency as a mirage on a highway. It contains no exact form, though its edges seem geometrically sharp, almost like the edges of a circular saw. In this formlessness it seems like some primal material awaiting a demiurge, unless, as I suspect, I simply cannot see the forms that are there—vague crystalline castles rising from liquid streets, much like those sold in pill form to children through comic books; once dropped in water, the crystals form themselves into arabesques of red and blue, like bizarre towers or perverse trees, forbidding, dangerous, deathlike. But it resembles nothing so much as nothingness, a piece of film that has been scratched so that, when projected, the light itself shows through on the screen.

Although the scotoma seems large while I undergo the hallucination, part of the horror is that I know it is really small, a part of me, projected onto the thin screen between me and the world. I watch it the way I watch a movie in a cinema, as a passive observer, making tenuous abstractions on the "meaning" of the images. Projected film, like sensuous perception, floats on an ocean of light always ready to swallow it back up and return it to its primal state, oblivion. Once in the Three Penny Theater in Chicago, I watched a film get stuck in the projector and the intense heat of the lamp melt the frame from the inside out. That is what a migraine looks like, only slower, the center of an empty house of mirrors. From glass to glass, the empty light forms a pattern of weavings and interweavings with nothing to interrupt it until it catches something—a face—and dissolves it into endless reflection.

But there is another, paradoxical side to this, the personality of the hallucination. It will not leave the field of vision, it persistently follows me no matter how deliberately I flee, it is specific to me as only I can see it, as if it were an Old Testament vision, wheels within wheels. And like the prophets, it bears a message of destruction and mortality, a kind of banner: *this is a taste of death, now it will come and overwhelm you like a claw punching through a curtain.*

Migraines are most terrifying when I get them while teaching, because I feel a strong urge to stop the class, though I do not want to admit a weakness as strange as blind spots, so I continue with the scotoma obscuring more and more of the page I am reading aloud, until I am sure I am making mistakes and fear that the students know something is wrong, but I dare not stop for fear the last bit of order in my class will collapse in embarrassment. Another time I was teaching a high school poetry workshop while the aura crept over me, with the added horror of the situation, leaving me blind and close to speech-impaired. My fear of admitting weakness proved the stronger—I did not stop, since it was close to the end of the period, even though I later realized I must have been staring strangely into the face of one student, without realizing it, as I could not see her. I am afraid to wonder what she must have thought.

As the hallucination reaches its height, the disruption of the

motor functions begins to taper off; cold vapors of numbness crawl over the hands and arms, the headache begins to subside, and the hallucination itself begins to break up and sink back into the cracks in vision. It is as if the tide were going out. Nevertheless, the right side of my face retains a tingling sensation, as if a cold hand were still on it, disinclined to let go. And for hours the malaise, or the sense of having been shocked by something, lingers, as if the body needed a kind of decompression after rising through cold, deep water. Migraine is a kind of visitor from another world, which, for a while, tears a bit of my world out and replaces it with its own creation, a shimmering creature that erases everything in its path, a kind of mad, blind imagination roving over me, a rebuke and a censure. The pain subsides and washes out of the senses, though the body still feels marked. My vision is restored.

Becoming a victim of migraines was part of my coming of age: it happened when I was first learning seriously about writing poetry, when my first marriage was dissolving due to lack of interest, when my second was appearing out of the wings, when my middle twenties and the middle Eighties were about to turn late. Perhaps this is why I associate it with the imagination: trial by fire, ordeal of initiation, it imitates the purging work of writing, revision, where for me the essence of imagination lies. A migraine closes off the world and reworks you until it gets you where it wants you. And the sense of relief when one passes over like a thunderstorm is very like the feeling when I more or less have finished a draft of a poem: something has gone out of me, something almost tactile. This year I turn thirty, and though I don't by any means feel middle-aged, I do feel *something* going out of me, replaced by mortal time accumulating like film on the take-up reel of a projector. Could migraines be an emblem of the interior clock, a sort of visual alarm going off that it is time to wake up after all this sleepwalking? I have never felt more awake than I feel after a migraine, but it is a bittersweet taste to regain the control of your bodily senses with the knowledge of how limited, how fragile they are.

LISA ZEIDNER

Happiness

What it is
is the absence of pain. Nothing more.

Over a decade of life in the bull's eye
of troubled cities in the Northeastern corridor

and I've never been raped,
never stabbed, burglarized or even mugged

though I hate to say or even think
I never get colds

or hear a sportscaster brag
about a basketball player's percentage from the line

before the foul shot that would win the game:
why wave a red flag in the bull's face

if the bull is God
in happy pastures, chewing the grass?

Infinite disasters and fender-benders lurk
around each corner

like the black holes that claim stray socks
at the laundromat.

Best to notice happiness peripherally,
the way walking in a city

you take in a pretty weed
growing from a sidewalk crack

or a woman with slim ankles
passing briskly—to meet someone for a drink

perhaps, a man she has not seen,
back whole from a treasure hunt or war.

You, too, have someone waiting at home
and for a goosebumped second you know

that you are loved. That nothing,
at least today, has gone wrong.

SUSAN WOOD

Rhythm And Blues

We had rhythm and blues
those days in equal measure. All day
our bodies drove us, churning
the still water of the pond, or long afternoons
wading a hill blue with berries. We lay
in the sun assessing every word
or look, pretending not to see the way
wind lifted fine blond hairs on a leg, how
a muscle rippled beneath the flesh. Water to land
and back again, we could never be cool
enough. Shy and sweet-faced, what was it
we wanted? Not to be like that. We couldn't wait

for night to fall. Supper over, the slow talk
winding down, we fled the family's satisfied table
to cruise those country roads in twos or fours
or tens, whatever kept us not alone. We were cool
then, stolen whiskey and cigarettes and the radio's
red glow, we were trouble
waiting to happen. Music those nights was anything
black and staticky and far away and blind
Ray Charles had seen the light.
We'd never stop loving her, or him, and love
was only misery, but we pretended not to care.

We shouted "Hit the Road, Jack!" and floorboarded
the Chevy Carry-all around another curve, wise
in our ignorance. It wouldn't have helped to know

how many times we'd really have to sing the blues
in twenty years, that the object changes
but desire persists. That some of us
would die too soon. It wouldn't have helped to know
tonight the sun would still be
going down like teenagers in the backseat
of a father's borrowed Chevy, burning,
every part of them on fire.

BEATRIX A. FLYNN

Paris

I. Rose Window: Study

In the early morning, mist rises off the Seine and the sun over the black slate rooftops lends them a lavender hue. You sit on the cold stone floor of the nave of St. Chapelle, sketching and resketching the rose window until the light fades. The colors of the glass are crimson and royal blue. The October light filters through the glass, folding and splintering across the floor.

The light is splattering across the nave in squares. You walk through the aisles where the old men sit in the pews as if on park benches. They bob their heads from their chests, and you see that they don't have the words for it, the blankness, the paralysis of will. You want to sit up with them, like frail children who need tending.

II. Madame

The trees along the river Seine hold the warm cast that comes with autumn. Sitting in the corner of the Cafe Trocadero, you hear the distant rustle of leaves and the hollow thump of falling chestnuts from across the avenue au bord de la Seine. It is Sunday, and all over Paris in every *quartier* the summer fountains are being turned off. At a small marble table, safe from the clatter of conversation, you splay your fingers around your coffee cup and watch the sidewalk where waiters, aprons to their ankles, begin to remove the summer tables, the straw-covered chairs. The wind disperses ticket stubs into the flow of water along the gutter. On the avenue where the cobblestone street meets the curb, an old Algerian sweeps the water, leaves, and ticket stubs with a handmade broom of brown-skinned twigs gathered by twine. His faded blue uniform is too large. You stare at the patterns of lines on his face as he chews tobacco, take note of a close-cropped moustache and how the corners of his mouth are dimpled with a yellow cud-like foam. He eyes a stub on the curb's edge then sucks in his cheeks until his skin is taut, cupping his tongue to make a pocket for the dark saliva. His spit lands, brown and speckled, on the ticket.

Near the Metro entrance, people hurriedly walk by, their shadows elongating but not meeting on the pavement; the expressions on these faces are beginning to lend themselves to winter. You glance down the stairs of the Metro to see if the old lady *clochard* is there. She has just finished her lunch, crumbs on her dirty brown coat, her green bottle covered with fingerprints. You have watched her in the morning, rummaging through the trash cans in the surrounding streets of the 16eme or washing her face and wringing out a piece of clothing in the underground spigot. Her odor wafts up the Metro entrance. She has a neat line of cigarette butts on the stairs and is sleeping now, a copy of *Le Monde* at her head, curled around her possessions.

The market street, Rue des Belles Feuilles, is closed. Today there are no rabbits with bulging eyes hanging on hooks from their paws, no ruffled pigeons to accompany them. It is Sunday and the rabbits are still shivering in their hutches, the fish are still filling their pink gills with saltwater, pulled in seaweed-laden nets along the wooden side of a boat in Normandy. The bloody big-bellied butchers are playing with small lead balls in the Bois de Boulogne.

On Gustave Courbet you see the concierge leaning in the doorway. She wears an old coat with a small fur collar, and one leg is disfigured and shorter than the other. She braces herself against the doorway and lets the leg dangle, swayed by the wind. Her hair is brown and greasy; she has few teeth. You were frightened when she first smiled and spoke to you in her provincial accent and warm voice. You exchange *bonjours*, then you enter the narrow hallway. You push the orange button on the wall for a few minutes of light as you walk quickly over the cracked fleur-de-lis tiles then up the stairs to the second floor. You find the long tarnished key on the second stair, turn, open the door, and enter the dark hall.

The apartment consists of the bedroom in which you sleep, a dining room-living room area where Madame sleeps on the couch, a small study, kitchen, bathroom, and *cabinet de toilet*. The walls throughout are a sooty olive green, and the carpet is so worn that in places it is possible to get the soles of your shoes caught in the bare spots and frayed strings. At the table there are three chairs: one for you, one for her, and one for her grandson Michel who joins you for dinner three nights a week. In the living room are two portraits, one of her late husband who had been a general in De Gaulle's army, and one of her daughter, Michel's mother, who died of cancer ten years ago. These are separated by a crucifix and the frames are surrounded by palms. On every wall, sideboard, shelf, and table there are memorabilia of the dead.

You enter the apartment and find that it is warm; the floorboards creak under your weight. You place the bread on the table and try not to wake your hostess sleeping on the sofa. Anchored in her long fingers is an Agatha Christie paperback. You go into your room and take off your sweater. When you open the door, you find her standing in front of the uncurtained balcony window. You stand next to her and watch, across the street in the opposite apartment, a young mongoloid girl. You've noticed her standing with her hands at her sides, staring at the narrow view of the sky, and in the evening standing in front of her father who sits in a chair with his legs crossed, reading the evening paper.

In the kitchen you sit on the window sill, looking out onto a small iron-fenced courtyard filled with children. A girl of four chases a kitten behind a garbage bin. She stretches her arm around the bin and pulls the kitten out by its tail, holding it upside down and laughing at it squeal and writhe. As it jerks in her grip, she is pulled off balance and falls. You bring coffee bowls to the table, placing Nescafe in your bowl and chicory in hers. Have you enjoyed your promenade? *Le temps perdu est jamais retrappé*, your hostess reminds you. It is good to have this repose. She tears the bread with her hands and softens the piece in her coffee. She is old and eating has become boring for her. She grips the bread with her mouth and pulls.

There is conversation with Madame. She recalls her past, spinning myths heroic and horrifying. She tells you of growing up in *La Belle Epoque*, the debutante balls and horse-drawn carriages, the lace and the young men from Ecole Militaire who courted her and her sisters. She tells you of her days in Madagascar, living in the bush with her husband, the General. The entire time, she wanted to be back in Paris and daily she would remember the statue of Napo-

leon, a statue forged from the cannons of the revolution, standing like Caesar over the Place Vendome and the banks of Paris.

She tells you of her husband's strong melodic voice and the birth of her children. And now, just now, she begins the strange story of her pregnancy in the outpost of Madagascar, alone in the bush while her husband was away fortifying France's hold on African gold and diamonds. She had refused to learn the tribal language and she stayed away from the native women who made timid gestures at her clothing.

She had taken refuge in the house, following the proper decorum of not being seen, as her first child, weighty on her hips, swelled in her belly, making her breasts tender and stretching her skin. Several times a day she soaked her face in the warm African water, remembering that as children, she and her sisters were made to hold their faces in chilled water to stave off wrinkles and keep their skin smooth.

Africa, she had come to think, was a despicably curious place. The heat and rain, sheeting each day, thrust themselves on the nearby hills, at once, stealing the full measure of any moment. The multicolored insects clinging to the screen, large and unfamiliar, made her feel constant fear.

Her husband had commandeered a bushman warrior from the tribal chief to protect her. He sat just at the edge of the screened porch, smoking opium, the stench of which filtered through the screen. His eyes were stained yellow and his skin was caked with dried mud. At his side was a scimitar and when she was at the window he would perform what she imagined was a tribal dance: his thighs flinched and sweat ran down the arch of his back, but his movements were rhythmic, slow, sensuous, and then his muscles flared with what she imagined was deliberate tautness before her.

At night under the eaves of the small house, he would rustle the fauna, gently tap his scimitar against the brush growing under her window, and sing, murmuring what she remembered as the refrain *coo-lo, coo-lo*.

She woke to find the mosquito netting that canopied her bed being disturbed and quickly got up before he grabbed her by the neck and pressed her body to his. He held the scimitar out before them, so that it refracted the dim light of the oil lamp onto her face. He graced her extended belly with the curve of his hand and then began to fumble with the linen of her nightclothes until she screamed such a gutteral scream that she was able to break loose of his hold. She remembered how he searched her face, her apprehension as his eyes held what looked to be a mixture of contempt and confusion.

Weeks later, after the return of her husband, other warriors came carrying large reed baskets, two by two. As was the gift-giving custom, they placed the baskets before her—five on the outside and one on the inside. The baskets appeared to be filled with oranges. She smiled and nodded to the natives surrounding her and met their eyes as she removed the fruit. She began to remove the oranges, surprised to find all but one basket filled with gold. The last basket held the head of her bushman.

III. Michel

You have taken a roundabout way to the Charles de Gaulle Etoile Metro entrance where you've promised to rendezvous with Michel. For months you have agreed that there would be a day that you would spend entirely with him, that you would go to his studio apartment to see his things.

As you cross from Victor Hugo to the Champs Elysee, you see him waiting for you. His eyes, which are sunken into his face and crossed so that they lean into his nose like two bobbing black marbles, are held downward to the pavement, following the movement of his feet as he paces and repeats what you know he repeats to himself: "*Eh, bien, eh bien, alors*!" With his hands he alternates between fanning the air and running the flat of his palms over the rim of his jet black crewcut that juts straight up in a sharp edge, making his head look thick and square.

He comes to Madame's apartment three nights a week for dinner. Before and during the meals when Madame goes to the kitchen for food, he takes his camera from his bag and hastily shoots pictures of you. He brings you the photographs every week, shouting "*C'est bien, et oui, alors*." As he focuses, the expression in your eyes alternates between annoyance and pain and a look that says you don't understand. He clicks on the tape recorder that begins to play: "I'm just a gigolo and everywhere I go people know the part I'm playing." It is the old Forties version, half in English, half in French. He seems not to recognize the strained look in your eyes or the tightening of your body. There is something about him that compels you, but still you reach to shut off the music.

You cross and stand in front of him. "*Cava* Michel?" you say as you lean to kiss his cheeks. His face flushes as it always does when you greet him. He continues to stare at the ground. You look at the skin on his strong lined face and notice that it seems soft to the touch but then abstracts to a chin of bristles pinched with small porcelain shaving scars. He gets on his bike and motions for you to follow. He drives around the Arc, down Rue Lauristante, and along the Seine where you are able to inhale the dank and sweet-smelling poplar trees.

It remains unclear to you whether Michel can completely comprehend the goings on around him. At thirty-five, his mind is a strange dichotomy of adult/child. He drives a high-powered motorcycle, works as a watch repairman, and carries around a tape player on which he plays Bach, Wagner, and Debussy. Although he understands everything that is said to him, he is incapable of forming a sentence. Michel is almost a parody of a foreigner who comes to Paris having studied academic French for years and is limited in speech, never having heard the vowel sounds. In conversation, he takes the stance of a secondary figure, the person who nods profusely and at the proper intervals interjects *oui, ah bon, d'accord, bien, double bien*. If the central speaker throws in a *n'est-ce pas*, Michel responds with *si, si, mais, si*. Occasionally for emphasis, he adds a *naturellement*, but always as an afterthought. He is happy to fill up moments of silence or gaps in other's conversation by saying, *Ca! Ca alors!* as if in agreement.

The curbs are lined with empty Paris Vision and American Express tour buses. In front of the Palais de Chaillot, African men lay out their wares on Indian spreads, ready for flight should a gendarme pass. The Africans are very black and have bloodshot eyes. You have seen them sleeping on the bus with their green duffle bags resting on their knees. They travel between the Palais de Chaillot and the stairs of Montmartre. The French police and meter maids stroll in packs, without urgency.

For several months Michel has lingered after you have gone to your room. When you turn the light off and go to bed, he positions himself in the small hallway next to your room, a hallway that serves as your closet and the entrance to the *cabinet de toilet*. He leans against your door and plays soft music on his pennywhistle until after you have gone to sleep.

Michel follows bus 63 instead of going to Passy as planned. Bus

63 is always very crowded. It is a good bus for Parisians and tourists alike, passing by all the important monuments: Pont Neuf, Musée de Tokyo, Les Invalides, Le Grand Palais, down the Seine from the left to the right bank, down the Boulevard St. Germain des Pres, past Deux Magots, Lipps, and Le Drugstore then finally to Notre Dame and the Tour d'Argent neighborhood.

Michel makes you stand in the hallway for a good long time while he goes inside. He opens the door slightly, pulling you in and at the same time covering your eyes with his hand. He opens his fingers as you are greeted by the chime and gong of what seems like a hundred clocks. On the miniatures and the larger clocks are dancers and cuckoos. Where there aren't clocks, there are toys. From the ceiling, hang cages containing mechanical birds.

Michel manuevers in and around his toys and clocks quickly, winding things up and setting them in motion: trains, cars, motorcycles. In a large tub of water, wind-up men in rowboats are paddling and colliding with swans, sailboats, and steamboats until water starts splashing to the floor. The wind-up men fall from their boats and plunge into the water. Silent hands grasp the weightless air.

With his camera aimed and focused, Michel dances before you. The shutter snaps rapidly as the lens sweeps your face, again, again, again. You stand as if made of stone. A simple sadness takes you unawares, and in your expression there begins to rise the pain and fear you have so long disdained. You think: these are some of the bonds that link us, one to one, shared humiliation, grief, sorrow. You want to make a move to recover yourself but find that when you lift your hands up, they are poised in a gesture of surrender.

IV. Sleep

After a year of living and studying in Paris, you find yourself a prisoner of a dark and steady silence. You want to travel beyond your experience.

Lying in bed, you stare at the ceiling that is the flat gray color of a frozen lake in winter. You imagine yourself skating on the underside of a frozen world. You are doing figure eights and making fine sharp loops in and out of the labyrinth, trying to cross beyond the boundaries of your mind and body.

You are making lines that seem to be important. You are skating against these frozen walls, and you see leaves scattering across the hard surface of the lake, but you are safe from the wind and drifting snow. You see that the winter is fierce, the sky is a plate of steel, and the land is barren. There is nothing here to obstruct your vision, no children playing hockey, no skaters on the other side, no shadows on the ice. If you stay here forever, or until the fire comes, you will be content. It is not difficult to stay warm. The salt in the water is carrying summer and it moves around your body like filaments or sparks of gold dust generating heat.

Looking down to the lake's floor, you see beer bottles, tires, and shards of people's lives, bones and fingers. There are upturned faces floating on the beds of silt and sand. It seems as though their souls have been claimed and that their bodies have sunk into the sand like empty vessels. You are skating as gracefully as you can, but they stare at you indifferently. The water's currents have mapped a maelstrom and you are going to skate into its spiral until you disappear.

John Peters, *Go-Go Girls*, 1987 24″ x 18″ acrylic on found painting (photo by Frank Martin).

John Peters, *The Aristocrat*, 1987 12″ x 9″ acrylic on found painting (photo by Frank Martin).

John Peters, *Pleasure/Warning*, 1988 10'4" x 23' collage of billboards (photo by Paul Hester).

John Peters, *Feed the World*, 1988 9'4″ x 22' collage of billboards (photo by Paul Hester).

MARY ELLEN BRANAN

Woman In A Circle

From a certain Transcaucasian village,
you trod every Wednesday with sandaled feet
the path of your mother's mother and her mother
before her, down the swelling foothills
to the River Kur, carrying as always
on market day your bright new weaving—
chatting with the others, keeping an eye
on Farida's girl who pulls two goats along.

One Wednesday in the season of Ramadan—
more strangers on the road, more rubles
in their pockets to give for fine merino—
nearing the bazaar, while you've stopped
to raise the jug of water to your mouth,
a blur of black and white moves to your left,
then around to the right, and behind you—
remember the shouts and muffled laughter.

And while you lower the jug and wipe your mouth
with the satin back of your hand, you know
the man in the suit crouching now on his heels
with a stick in his hand has drawn a circle
around you in the dust. Sink to your knees.

See Farida's daughter with a circle around her,
start to cry and run bang against the air;
she feels about like a mime at an invisible wall,
while Armenian schoolboys giggle
and chase the goats. Since you must,
you will sit all day in the circle until
someone with mercy, or bored with cruelty,
wipes away with his toe a doorway in the dust.

MICHAEL GUDE

The Converted

Nothing is for love.
Tonight I'll walk past the mausoleum,
Its cornices quoting Corinthians
And John. Ominous,
For I'll end up at the billiards
Table in the Pandemonium
Where you played the Lucky Aces pinball
And won, and went to heaven,
You said, for only a quarter.
Yours was the kind of place
I could hear traffic in all night.
Your eyes were fine Chinese paper
Touched with hearts of indigo ink.
Your body warm beneath the sheets
Sang old Muddy Waters,
Called blessing on those converted
Whose skin was fragile
And fatal
And written on
Only once. We danced,
Set free in the shallows
Like turtles. And nothing,
I know, was for love.
To all those rooms
Where a light's kept burning
The dark offers its prospects
Of refuge.

BEVERLY LOWRY

Breaking Gentle

Bethany-Belinda Beauchamp Caldwell sat by her window looking out. Not that there was anything to see out there she hadn't seen a thousand times before. Looking out was just something to do.

Mostly she was thinking about names, the important ones. Gloria, Diana, Mimi, Fanny. She had changed hers but she was having a hard time remembering. When people called her Bethany she still turned around.

She was in her pajamas, pink and short with ruffles around a scooped neckline. By seven-thirty she was supposed to be dressed, down to socks and shoes. In twenty minutes she would be breaking the rules.

Diana said Hale sent the pajamas but that was a lie. Cedar Hills was a garbage dump as far as her father was concerned; she might as well have that tree out there as Hale Caldwell for a father.

She slid her hand beneath the pillow covering the windowseat and felt for her prize, fingering its silver scalloped edge.

She was not sure why she had taken the knife; mostly, she thought, just because it was there. Try telling that to Diana. Or Hale. Everybody else in her family was too white-swan perfect to understand. Stealing was reverse process, an act that stemmed more from an inability *not* to do a thing than the other way around.

She lifted her legs to the windowseat and, clasping her knees as close to her chest as they would go, grabbed hold of her toes. For a special treat, she'd painted her nails a bright blue with a white dot in the middle. She liked to look at them, ten far-off tiny skies with a moon in the middle.

Her parents didn't care about names or family; they acted like they'd invented themselves from out of the blue. That was one reason Bethany liked Mexicans. When there was a family gathering Mexicans turned out in droves, everybody drinking beer and having fun, the weddings with the dance after, the sweet-sixteen parties with the flower arch and the tiara. When Mexicans got together, they got together.

Other parents would arrive at noon on the dot. Not Diana. Maybe twelve-fifteen, twelve-thirty, a quarter to one, whenever she got around to it she'd sashay down the walk, skirt going *swish* like Rose Narcisco.

Cedar Hills was not called what it was, prison or the Nutty Brown Nuthouse. It also did not look like its real self but a high-class resort hotel. The only thing missing was a swimming pool and they were talking about building one, if they could figure out how to blast through the limestone without blowing the place to bits. There was no truth in Cedar Hills Therapeutic Community anywhere. It was all pure baloney.

The buildings were arranged like a wagon wheel, in the center the administration building, dining room, and kitchen, all fake-Spanish adobe white with red clay roofs and brown trim around the windows. Ranging out from the center were smaller buildings in the

same style—decks, plants, big windows. Inside, white walls, modern furniture, aquariums in the walls. Each unit housed eight wacko kids and a resident shrink. The wackos were supposed to feel like brothers and sisters. This *arrangement*, as it was called, was supposed to create a *normal* feeling of family. As if normal existed. Or family. The kids sat around watching the cartoon-colored fish going back and forth inside the glass as bored and restless as the bored wacko kids.

Kids were not fooled. Maybe parents but parents were easy. Hang up a few plants, use words like enlightened and progressive, parents fell all over themselves. Kids were smarter. Whatever it looked like they were up to, the kids at Cedar Hills were all doing the same thing, waiting to go home.

The creek was bone dry; even Bethany had noticed, who couldn't care less about nature. She and her friend Bobby Neuhaus had gone down to look. Bobby had taken a sip of what water there was. He said it tasted funny, like skin. Skin? she'd said. *Skin*? Sometimes Bobby could be very Nutty Brown.

The footpath to her unit - 14 - was made of rocks from the nearby hillsides, sunk into the ground. The rocks were supposed to look like they grew there. The grass around the path was Astroturf and so it stayed green with or without rain.

A girl came down the path, Tiffany Leberman, known at Nutty Brown as Miss Boo-hoo. Tiffy wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

She'd have on one of those blouses she liked, sheer with puffed sleeves, maybe embroidered. Diana spent a mint on clothes, so did Hale, but not on himself. Hale liked to see his Di dressed up. Bethany liked blue jeans and T-shirts, cut-offs when it was warm. Alex liked the way she dressed. If anybody in her whole life ever loved Bethany Caldwell it was Alex Hurtado.

Tiffany came up the steps, spraying Binaca on her tongue. With permission from home, Cedar Hills allowed kids to smoke but since most kids didn't want their parents to know, they sneaked. The front door opened, closed.

Bethany ran her hand down her breasts to her waist, up and down and in and out. She'd gained a lot of weight since she'd been at Cedar Hills. Diana hated fat like a cockroach. Bethany wasn't crazy about it either. She would like to be rid of the extra weight, but it would take too long. The food was always there. At night she made vows, in the morning she ate. If Alex was around, well then. She'd be down to bones in no time.

She squinted her eyes. Whenever she started to go at herself, she pressed on her lids until everything went double and dark. Somehow when she did that the bad things moved back outside herself. Sealed off, she became indestructible again, rolling down the halls of Cedar Hills like a tank.

She smoothed her long straw-blond hair behind her ears. She'd already gotten word from the kitchen. Before seven, a furious woman in a hairnet stormed in.

"Me?" Bethany had said, pointing at her own chest. "A whole cake?"

She'd gone after midnight, not to steal the cake in particular, not to steal anything really, only to see if she could get in. There it was, on a butcher block, covered with aluminum foil, "Happy Birthday Cedar Hills" and a big "3."

The sky outside was blue, not a cloud. Beyond her unit, the rocky footpath veered off into the woods. In among the trees were private conference nooks. The P.C.N.'s had cement benches arranged inside a cleared space between trees with fake cement tree stumps for tables.

She'd rather be beaten up and put in solitary confinement. There were no bars or locks but even if you did get out there was nowhere to go except ten hot miles down 290 to Austin. Alex had gone to Mexico, so the Hurtados said. Bethany had heard he was in Del Rio. There was no fairness in the world, not anywhere. Maybe Russia but probably not.

She dropped her legs and kicked at the windowseat with her heels. If she could hold out until January she'd check herself right out of here. Rose Narcisco had made a big mistake telling her that they could send her to prison when she was eighteen but they could not make her stay in the nuthouse. January tenth, she was history. Maybe she'd go to Del Rio and find Alex. Del Rio was a long way. She was also thinking of going back home, getting Roger Dodger out of the house, living with Hale and Diana forever.

"Belinda..."

"Yes, Doc." Bethany swung easily around, pretending not to be surprised. "What's up?"

The Rose checked her watch. "It's seven twenty-five and you aren't dressed, for one thing."

Bethany groaned. "I was getting ready to." She plucked at her pajama top. "You interrupted me."

"And I hear you have eaten the celebration cake."

This was new. Usually Rose beat around the bush. Having learned about warfare from all the Dungeons and Dragons she'd played with Bobby Neuhaus, Bethany took the offensive.

"Everytime somebody eats something illegal around here, who gets blamed?" She punched at her chest. "Me. Always me."

To cut down on noise, bedroom doors had pneumatic pumps that automatically steamed them shut. Rose Narcisco held her foot against the door to keep it open. Short and stocky with a big chest, she was dressed for Sunday success, navy blue suit, white blouse with a flounce, low-heeled shoes. The skirts were a help to the kids. *Swish* against her pantyhose.

"Whenever you protest like this, Belinda..." She smiled her phoney-baloneyest smile.

"Yes ma'am?"

"I know you are guilty. Now get dressed. You know the rules."

She left, *swish*!

Funny stuff. Ordinarily, head-on collisions were unheard of at the Nutty Brown Fruitcake.

The door steamed shut. Silent doors were a major disappointment at Cedar Hills. Bethany missed the slamming doors of home.

As she slid from the windowseat, Bethany dislodged the pillows. Against the metal, her bare legs made a sound. She rearranged the pillows, making certain the knife was covered. Moving toward the chest of drawers for her clothes, she flipped her long hair over her shoulder.

She had not always been fat. In the eighth and ninth grades she was thin, really thin. That was when everybody kept coming at her to eat and she wouldn't.

She took a baby-blue bra from her drawer and fitted it over her chest. In some ways, fat was the same as thin. Food was the great power.

Not that she'd been an Annie Rex, not even close. There were a lot of A.R.'s at Cedar Hills. Annies were truly Nutty Brown Fruitcake.

Reaching behind her to hook the straps, she had to strain. She wondered why bra companies didn't use Velcro.

Mimi said Bethany shouldn't worry about the trouble she'd

been in.

"Honey, every family has its black sheep," her grandmother had said, patting Bethany's arm. "The only difference is, it's usually a boy."

Diana had been outraged by Mimi's remark but Bethany felt curiously calmed. Her grandmother's fatalistic assessment had served to confirm her suspicions about her place in the world. Mimi was the only one honest enough to tell her the truth.

After stretching her black Motley Crue T-shirt in every direction, she pulled it over her head. She had ripped off the sleeves and the neck so that the shirt had the look she liked.

Being overweight made for problems. But she was still strong. And light on her feet. Diana asked about drugs to curb her appetite but Cedar Hills didn't believe in drugs, a big joke as far as the kids were concerned.

Bethany brushed back her hair. With each stroke, a sweep of golden strands lifted and then slowly dropped.

"Bee?"

"Hold it." She pulled her T-shirt down. "Okay."

Bobby Neuhaus cracked the door. He was wearing his usual Sunday garb, good knit shirt with a collar, real pants, polished leather loafers instead of the usual Reeboks.

"Hey." He stuck his long, thin face through the crack. "Bee?"

"What." She looked at him in the mirror. His shoulder twitched. He was jumpy, no surprise. It was Sunday. "Would you," she said, "please come in and close that door."

He did as he was told.

He said it again. "Bee?"

Sometimes she wanted to murder Bobby Neuhaus. "How many times do I have to answer. I said *what*?"

He stepped back. "I don't know. I was thinking. You want to..." He pumped his shoulder. "Do something?"

The trouble with Bobby was he was manic-depressive, no in between; if he wasn't M, he was D. On Sunday when mothers were coming, Bobby was totally M, high as a kite. "I'm out of pinkies." He frowned. "I didn't mean pills. I meant..." He flopped his hand back and forth. "*You* Know."

She knew what he meant. "You meant you know?"

He stomped his heel. "Bee!"

She mocked him. " *'Bee!'* Don't waffle, Bobby. You want to fool around. Am I right or am I right?"

Bobby pulled out his ace in the hole. "I have a Reese's."

Bethany stopped brushing her hair.

Staff made a big commotion about sex. They gave lectures on moral equivalency and being in charge of your own functionality. Every kid at Cedar Hills did some anyway but almost nobody went all the way, not because of functionality. Because they had a reason not to want to get kicked out.

Bethany's hairbrush had been Gloria's. The back and handle were sterling silver, scrolled with sculptured flowers. The bristles were as soft as a baby's, not much good on long thick hair but Bethany loved it. She set the brush on the dresser.

"Nah," she said. "I don't feel like it."

Bobby's face fell. His hair was a mass of frizz around his thin, angular face. When Bobby washed his hair, his curls went crazy.

"So." He curled his mouth. "Some D and D?"

"You know I hate D and D." Bobby was a madman for Dungeons and Dragons, also reruns of "Star Trek." Bethany had gotten where she didn't mind "Star Trek." One Saturday they'd checked out ten videotapes from the library. They'd watched for eight hours. "You hear about the celebration cake?"

She went to the windowseat and sat with her back to the window, facing Bobby. She motioned him closer.

The truth was, she had not eaten the cake. After only three bites, she had heaved it down the hill. Middle of the night, cake flying, what a sight. She'd crammed the aluminum foil cover so far down into the dumpster they'd have to unload the entire contents to find it. Now everybody would go crazy. She could watch them scramble like ants in an ant farm.

Bobby rolled his big dark eyes. "No, Bee, I didn't hear about the celebration cake. It's just all over the place, that's all. Everybody knows you did it." At the foot of her bed he leaned against the frame. "I can't believe it," he said, shaking his head. "A whole cake."

She shrugged. "You gotta be a pro."

They had been through a lot together at Nutty Brown. One time they'd stood naked together in front of her mirror. "The odd couple," Bethany proclaimed. Bobby was dark and scrawny, she white and soft, the skin on her belly pearled with stretch marks, her blond pubic hair a soft woolly patch of pale fur.

Bobby was fifteen; he could pass for ten. When he caught her staring at his penis, he had covered it with his hands.

"I'm a late developer," he explained. "My mother said every man in her family was a late developer."

"All right already," Bethany had said, and she'd pulled his hands away. "So give it a rest."

Two seconds later Bobby's string bean began to rise. Bethany giggled, Bobby blushed. Two seconds after that, Staff blew in. A weekend freeze was called. The other kids were so steamed they wanted to murder Bethany and Bobby.

Alex had called the night before he left. "I'm leaving town until this thing blows over," he said. "I can't come back, Blondie," he said. "I'm a Hurtado. They'll lock me up. I'll be like that Russian guy, what's his name?"

"Sakharov?"

"That it?"

"The one they exiled?"

"I thought his name was Gorky."

"Gorky's the town."

"How come you know so much, Blondie?"

"I don't know," Bethany said. "Anyway, the stuff I know is real dumb."

For grand auto theft, possession of a controlled substance, and possession of stolen goods including two firearms, Bethany had been sent to Cedar Hills instead of reform school; Hale and Diana and their blue-eyed, color-blind lawyer had made that deal with the judge. If all of them had their way, she might never see Alex Hurtado again in her life.

Too bad for them. She was born to be with Alex Hurtado. She would get to Del Rio if she had to walk.

"I mean," Bobby said again. "A whole cake."

Bethany giggled. She put her hand over her mouth. She had begun developing fat-person habits, giggling behind her hand, coming up behind people and shoving, always first in the food line. She couldn't tell which was the chicken and which the egg, if being fat made you do things like that or if she was always that way underneath.

"What do you think," she said. "A freeze?"

"What I hear is they think you like freezes so they're going in the other direction."

"Paradox? Reverse paradox?"

Bobby raised and lowered his eyebrows like Peter Sellers as the

Pink Panther. "Paradox," he said, "with a twist."

"New tricks. We'll have to think of something. Where's the Reese's?"

They were doing a paradox on her about the eating, letting her fill her plate and eat all she wanted. She was on to their tricks all right; she just hadn't figured out what to do about them.

Bobby checked the door.

"Bobby." Bethany hated it when he got crazy. "There's nobody there."

"It's almost time for breakfast. They'll check."

"The door squeaks. We'll hear."

"Not that much of a squeak."

"Look at me." His eyes were about to pop out of his skull. "Don't turn your head around until I say to."

When Bobby was M, only direct orders calmed him down. When he was D, forget it.

He took a deep breath.

When parents came kids went nuts. It started Saturday night. Girls did hot rollers, boys polished their shoes, everybody practiced pitiful looks in the mirror. By Sunday breakfast, the entire place was Nutty Brown Bananas.

Bobby's mother had long frizzy hair dyed as red as Rufus the dog's. Bright-colored Mexican dresses and beat-down rubber flip-flops were all she ever wore; in the winter she put a coat on and added socks. She smelled like cat and cigarettes and her name was Miami. Miami was, she said, a poet. Bethany called her The Vice. Noon on the dot Sunday, The Vice showed up with cigarettes, poems, and the news, all bad. When his mother read a poem, Bobby was full of praise. Last Sunday, he compared her to Walt Whitman. Today, Emily Dickinson. Bobby was no fool. If he flattered The Vice she kept reading. If she kept reading he didn't have to hear the news. The wrecks and murders and mutilated animals, the burning of small children with cigarettes. People he didn't even know.

"So who pays?" Bethany asked after meeting Miami the first time.

"For what?"

"This. Do you know what it costs to lock us up in here?"

"So we're not locked up, Bee."

Sometimes Bobby was truly boring. "Really now."

He shrugged. "We're rich, I guess," he said. "My grandmother owns about every Sac 'N Pac in the world, plus other stuff. But mostly it's Sac 'N Pacs."

"So why does your mother dress like a slob?"

He squinted his eyes and refused to answer.

"So why does she smell like cat?"

"So she takes them in."

"So cats?"

"Cats."

"So? Like off the street?"

Bobby rolled his eyes. "Only about a ka-billion. She goes to kitty-power meetings. She has an I-Brake-for-Cats bumpersticker. And like that."

Bobby reached into his pocket and brought out an unopened package of Reese's peanut butter cups. To Bethany's mind, there was nothing better than the taste of chocolate and peanut butter mixed. She would rather have one Reese's than an entire German chocolate cake twice over.

Bobby closed his hand over the candy and put it behind his back. "So what do I get?"

"One game."

"D and D?"

"No, idiot. The other." She flopped her hand back and forth. "You Know." She turned and looked over her shoulder out the window. A tall thin man with silver streaks in his hair was getting into a Mercedes. Bethany would like to tell the man the joke about hemorrhoids and a Mercedes: every asshole gets one sooner or later. The man was not handsome, just tall. He just thought handsome.

Bethany held out her hand. "So give."

"If I give first how do I know you will?"

"Do I lie, Bobby Neuhaus?"

"Yes."

"I do not."

"Sometimes you do. Remember? The peanut M&M's?"

Bethany's cheeks flushed. "So I won't this time."

"So how do I know?"

She held up her hand. "I swear on my grandmother's grave." This was an oath Bobby had thought up. When Bethany reminded him that one of his grandmothers wasn't dead and neither of hers was, Bobby said blood oaths didn't have to be strictly true.

"You said that last time."

In a rage Bethany slid off the windowseat. The cushion went with her. The knife fell to the floor. Bethany returned her prize to its hiding place.

Silently Bobby handed over the Reese's.

—from the novel
Breaking Gentle

RICHARD LEVY

The Nodding Man

In memory of Shirley Levy, 1929-1988

Finally you yell,
Stop imitating that man, poor man,
and we do, for a moment.
Our neighbor, the stooped clerk
with the twitching sideways nod
like a wrong toy bird—
every other step—
grows smaller as he nears the avenue
and merges with it, gone.
But later, while you are at work,
we dance near his building
on the skidding leaves
and the men from the laundry across
the street watch us
as we nod, solemnly, darkly.

The leaves spin in the blue wind
all day, but at night, the wind fades
and the man sleeps
his cleansing modest sleep.
The laundry trucks crouch in their garages
like cats under a porch,
potent, remote.

I dream of him.
It is night.
He dances with our mother.
He has no teeth or skin.
He kisses her.
He rises above the street
like a crab in a pot,
poking the sky.
Our mother waves to him.
We wave to him.
He empties his pockets—
nothing, feathers of lint—
and his white motionless head
becomes the button of the moon.

I awake.
It is almost dawn, and the first
laundry trucks pass our windows
with a crush of dead leaves.
Mother, I smell your sour warm breath.
You hold my neck.
I whisper and shiver.
You nod, stretch, twitch
like a leaf.

RICHARD LEVY

The Short Walk

"Often, however, was there a question present to me: Should some one now, at the turning of that corner, blow me out of Space, into the other World, or other No-World, by pistol-shot—how were it?"

—Thomas Carlyle,
Sartor Resartus

As you take your first steps
across the Burlington Street bridge,
over the bottom where new floods
bloom each spring,
the traffic's blind gusts
bump your pants and breath.
On a June day in the unbuttoned heat of noon
each auto drags
its moist web of fume.

The curb rises a foot above the street, your foot
behind no railing but your will
and the luck not to slip today, you slow with books
and groceries, distracted.
A step into a car's path
will lift you out of this life.
Picture it: housed by wind,
you rise between the power lines,
formless, calm,
your husk of a body
crushed near a puddle of milk,
the white leaves of a burst book
swirling on the surface of the creek.

And then the cars rise,
grey, green, blue.
Pink, red, and yellow wires,
white tubing and copper pipes
hang and flap and drip mud and clay,
the torn roots of a three-flat,
a dry cleaners, a convenience store,
as each floats off its moorings
and into the sky.
The cottonwoods pop and snap as they loosen,
gas lines hiss and splutter,
whole neighborhoods rise in flocks,
and even the sewers, like bass surfacing,
heave up through streets and alleys
and float from sight....

You lead this groaning parade
into the nauseating candor of space,
forgetting you are now a dream that is
with each waking yawn
more imperfectly recalled.

GLENN BLAKE

Black Feathers

Far away my sister is moving in her crib.
—Louis Gluck, *"Descending Figure"*

1959

Summer, past midnight. The windows are open. A scratch at the screen.

"Listen," I whisper, shake her softly by the shoulder. "Sweetheart, it's time."

"Really?" she says. She's suddenly awake. She sits up in bed. "Well then, let's go!"

The scratching becomes a soft rapping on the wooden screen frame. I hurry over. Any second it will wake our mother. I can see him outside, standing there in his jeans, slumped, no shirt, holding a rifle. "We're coming," I whisper. It must be a clear night.

I help her on with her slippers. Little rabbits Mamma made of cloth. The head at her toes, a cotton nose. The long ears stick out on both sides of the shoe.

I unlatch the screen, lift and set her on the sill. He has already propped his rifle against the house, and when I push the bottom of the rusty screen out, he reaches in and takes her.

"Careful," I tell him.

She looks over her shoulder, frowning. She reaches back for me, "MY...," she says too loudly, and they are gone hand in hand into the darkness.

I grab her sock filled with pennies from the nightstand and crawl backwards through the window, bumping the screen open with my bottom.

They are to the road by now, so I run after them, in my pajamas, barefooted through the night.

No one is awake at this hour. No porch lights. There is no moon.

The Thicket is like living in a large city. There are few places, if any sometimes, to see the sky. The road is the only paved passageway through this wood. There are places where the trees grow together overhead to form a dark tunnel for miles.

But here, on both sides, there are loblolly pines, high, a good strip of sky. This is where I find them. He, with his back turned, loading the rifle. She, off to one side.

It has always amazed me how the blacktop holds its heat through the night. Impossible to cross barefooted at noon. It is warm now under my feet, soporific. On chilly nights, after heavy rains, the animals of the Thicket hop, slither, crawl out of the cold marshes onto this road, stretch out on it, dry, warm as a mother's side, and sleep until a car comes along.

She beckons with her hand. It means, "Hurry." Little prints of sleeping rabbits on her pajamas. Little sister.

She takes the sock of coins and hands it to the quiet one. She is wide awake now, so proud of herself.

He tucks the rifle under his arm, empties the sock into his palm and shakes that hand up and down to hear the sound of the coins in the dark. He pours them into his pocket, lifts the rifle above his head and points it at the sky.

Now it is my turn as intermediary to pick her up and show her the stars.

She is to select one, not a big star because it would not be fair. I am to tell the quiet one which star she has chosen. He will aim his rifle, take time aiming, seconds, minutes, and then shoot that burning orb from the sky. It will fall, plummet, race straight down to the earth, Western Hemisphere, North America, East Texas, Big Thicket, strike the asphalt some half mile away, explode (not loudly, for it is a tiny star) and then burn itself out in the darkness.

"Awww," she will say. This is what pains me. She will look so sad. She will start running down the blacktop for the fallen star which is now just a tiny fire disappearing in the distance. She will not get there in time.

"Awww," she will say like the day she held her Easter chick in her hands and watched it die.

How can I tell her about these things? How can I tell her it is not true when she wants to believe so badly? How can I tell her that what he loads and fires, the projectile, is a wee wooden arrow, kitchen match, three inches long, propelled by a small metal sphere, pushed down the barrel high in the sky up to that point where something in the earth calls it back; that it then falls, plunges, red head first, white-eyed, quite a ways, so that when it strikes the pavement, it strikes and burns a dying fire down the dark road?

One of her slippers falls to the blacktop. "I'll get it," I tell her, stoop and grab the rabbit by the ears.

We are both staring straight up out of the Thicket. I raise my hand to show her... The night is a black beast, a winged thing, with a thousand eyes.

Will I have the time to one day tell her that this star, a star we see one night, went out, is dead, died a long time ago—there is no more fire? How does it go? That it is taking all this time for the light to get to us. Something like that. So that what we are seeing, little sister, is like a memory of someone who has passed away.

No, tonight she is mine. I reach and pick her up. I hold her to me closely.

The quiet one rests the rifle on his shoulder.

"Mmm," she says, indecisive. She is holding her forefinger to her lips. And then she sees it. "There," she says. She points between the peaks of pines.

"You sure?" I ask her. I want it to be perfect. I want her to be happy. It is a tiny star, not really red, not yellow, but pink, winking on and off.

"That's it," she whispers. She has her arm around my neck. She gently pulls my head to hers so I can look down her short finger to the sky. She whispers, "That's the one."

1987

"Listen," I tell her. We are deep in the Thicket. No clearings. No road. "Listen."

"You want to head east now to get out of these woods. Listen to what I'm telling you, and there won't be anything to it. You want to head east, and I'll be waiting for you right at the edge of the trees."

She is just standing there. She does not say a word. Sleep in her eyes.

"Look at the sun," I tell her. "It's going down now in the west. Keep it at your back. Find a tree. You want to start thinking in threes, now. Whenever you get lost in the woods, remember the number three."

She is raven-haired, listening, not smiling.

"Go to that tree," I tell her. "Put your back up against it. Pay attention, now. Put your back up against it, and face the direction you want to start walking. You can usually know this by the sun. Keep it at your back."

She is still tiny, naked, honeysuckle in her hair.

"Look east, into the distance, and find a second tree," I tell her. "When you find that tree, there'll be an invisible line from you to it."

"This is the important part. Look past that second tree for about the same distance on the same line and find a third tree. What you have now is two trees in front of you pointing you east. This will keep you from walking in circles," I tell her. "This will keep you walking in a straight line."

1960

"Walk to the second tree," I tell her. "Put your back up against it on its east side. The third tree will still be in front of you. The only difference is that you will now make it become your second tree. Listen. Look beyond it and find another tree in the distance on the same line...."

"Do you see how it works? You are always starting over." I can hear a crow far off in the Thicket. "Remember: find your direction, count your trees...," I am alone again, "...and it will lead you right out of the woods."

1962

Early Sunday mornings, we loaded our gear, left after breakfast and drove way into the Thicket to the only clearing for some seven miles. We parked the truck far back in the thick brush and covered it with a camouflage tarpaulin.

Daddy walked off into the trees carrying a large green cotton sack slung over his shoulder. And before we got started, I liked to walk out among the tombstones, some at odd angles, most of the names obscured by weeds.

There were two cast iron crows sitting atop the gate of the cemetery. The old, rusty fence had fallen in some places.

I could hear Daddy hollering for me from the edge of the woods, and I could look around in the trees and see where he had already placed the black decoys. I closed the gate behind me and ran around the fence and into the trees back behind the cemetery where he was already positioning the speakers and unwinding their cords.

Daddy had ordered the kit from Waxahachie. It came with speakers and a portable record player. The crow decoys were extra. Records for almost everything in the Thicket. Crows. Crows fighting. Hawks. Hoot owls. Wounded rabbits. He saved up and bought me a camouflage outfit just like his. "Crows are very smart," he told me. "When they're just flying over, they can see the glint of your eyes, the white of your hands."

There were five or ten graves outside the cemetery fence about fifty feet back in the trees. Maybe they were the first to be buried

there before there was a fence, or maybe they did not belong inside the fence with all the other people.

Early Sunday mornings, Daddy would place the record player back behind the largest of these tombstones and unwind the cords and aim the speakers out over the cemetery. He would keep me behind him, behind another stone so that I could watch.

I wore a little league baseball cap, and Daddy borrowed a black scarf from Mamma and took it into the garage and spray painted streaks of light and dark greens on it and stapled it to the bill of my cap so that they could not see my face.

He did not wear a cap, only a hood of some camouflage mosquito netting which buttoned onto his jacket and hid his face and blended so well into the brush behind him that he startled me several times from a distance, standing up among the tombstones, a man with no head.

He would turn the record player on and turn it to loud, and we would kneel and wait for the crows to come in.

Sometimes, I would close my eyes and listen to the rhythm of the records, the caws. Caw-caw, waiting for the siege of the crows. And when they came in, dropping out of the sky, darting through the hanging Spanish moss, their talons open, I would look down Daddy's barrel with him from behind and watch him blow them from the air. Sometimes, five or ten in a wave, sometimes more, swooping down, attacking the clearing.

And when it was all over, all quiet, no crows, Daddy would slowly turn around to me and unbutton his hood. I would get down in a stance like that of a sprinter, and he would shout, "Go get 'em!" and off I would go, running as fast as I could, out of the trees, around the old fence to the gate, holding onto my cap with one hand to keep it from flying off. Daddy, sitting on a tombstone, laughing.

I started with the clearing of the cemetery, opening the front gate and running back through the graves, careful not to step on anyone, starting with the ones closest to you, getting them away from you quickly.

I would run by and pick them up by their feet. Most of them dead. Others, only stunned, would start flapping their wings, trying for the sky with me still holding on. Daddy laughing louder back in the trees. "Hang on, boy!" he shouted as I closed my eyes and pulled the black bird back to Earth, wondering how many crows it would take to pick me up and carry me away.

By the time I was finished, I had crow blood all over my camouflage uniform. I made a pile of them, sometimes fifteen or twenty, far in the back corner, and every Sunday morning when we came back they were always gone.

I learned things in the clearing. I learned that after a while no one brings flowers to their loved ones' graves. I learned how to distinguish a crow from a buzzard when they are flying overhead. I learned how to cut off crows' feet and with needle and thread make a necklace of yellow talons. I learned how easy it got to be saying good-bye to you.

I ran around the fence and into the trees back behind the cemetery where Daddy was already positioning the speakers and unwinding their cords. I took my place behind him, and he turned the record player on, and we hunched down behind the tombstones and listened. It was "Crows fighting." There would be many birds. Several decoys would be attacked.

I listened to the quickened caw-caw of the record until I could hear what sounded like a faint echo of it, far away over the Thicket.

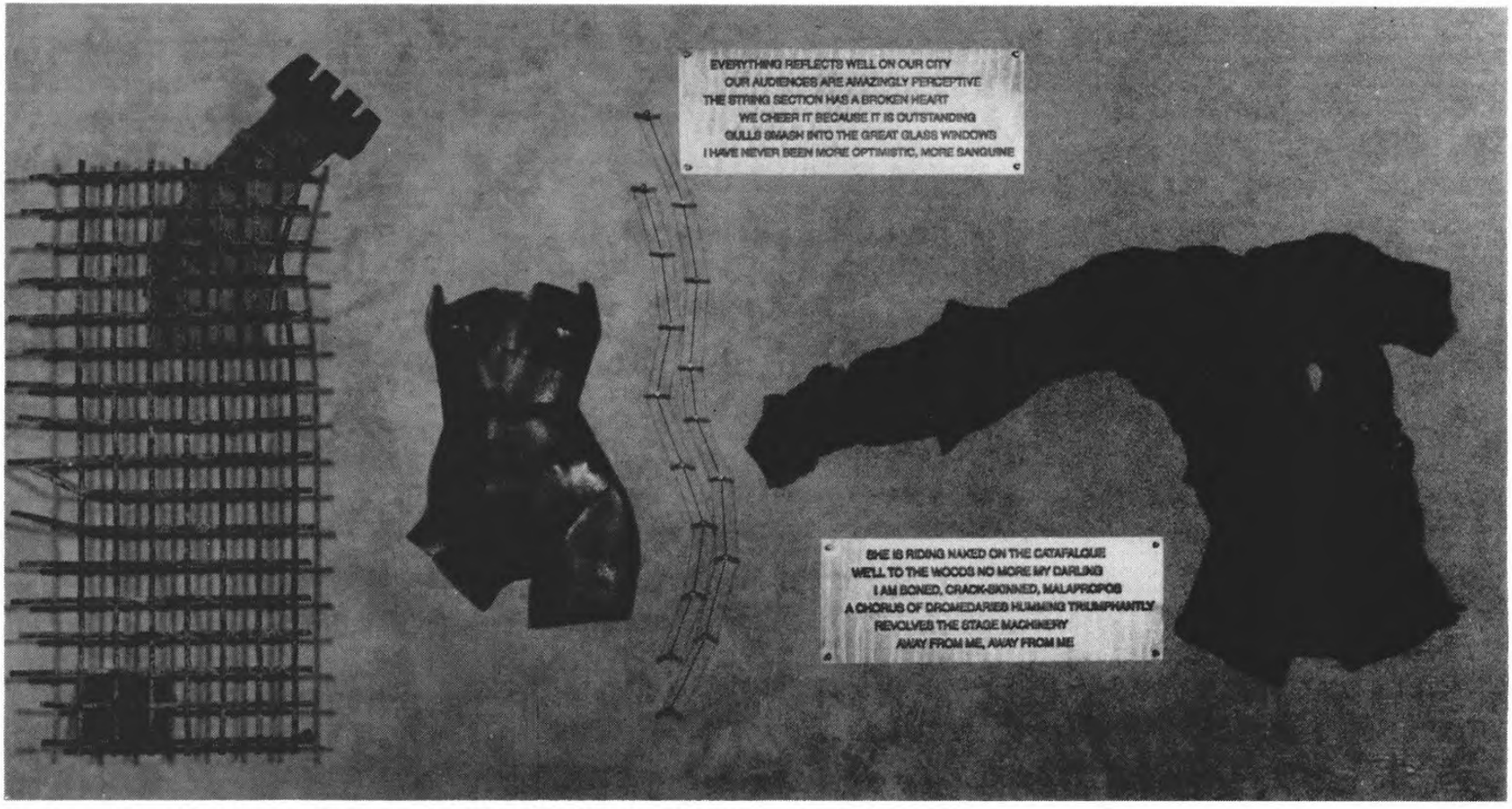
Daddy turned around and buttoned on his hood. He pointed

off, beyond the clearing, where we could already see the birds in the distance, small, flying toward us. He leaned over and whispered, "They're coming in!"

And I reached and pulled Mamma's scarf over my face and said so quietly he could not hear me. Whispering, I said, "I know."

Everything reflects well on our city
Our audiences are amazingly perceptive
The string section has a broken heart
We cheer it because it is outstanding
Gulls smash into the great glass windows
I have never been more optimistic, more sanguine

She is riding naked on the catafalque
We'll to the woods no more my darling
I am boned, crack-skinned, malapropos
A chorus of dromedaries humming triumphantly
Revolves the stage machinery
Away from me, away from me



Jim Love and Donald Barthelme, *The Rook's Progress*, 1987 42″ x 78″ 7½″ steel, wood, canvas, and magnesium.

Part of *One + One*, an exhibition of collaborations by artists and writers at the Glassell School of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, January 22 - February 25, 1988.

LISA LEWIS

The Staircase

This was one Saturday morning when nothing was going
to wake him up.
Not his big pet cat covering its dung in the box.
Not the tattoo of light through leaves on the roof over his head.
Not the neighbors' garage band, the monotonous drum like an elbow.
Not even the calendar inside his head, the lists of "Things To Do."
He had made the necessary preparations.
He had switched on the answering machine, and turned the ringer down.
He had spread fresh sheets on the king-size bed, the ones with the bright
yellow stripe,
Yesterday, Friday morning; he'd smoothed them with his big hands.
He liked the feel of the slick percale, cool and flat to his callouses;
He was thinking then about sleeping again. He wasn't completely
awake.

The whole workday passed like a dream, mostly taking too long;
He manned the counter at the Corner Dry Cleaners two doors down from
his house.
The clothes spun to him on a long rack, plastic bags blowing like veils.
All he had to do was hand them down and make the customers' change.
He wasn't a young man, but this was his job, since he went to work
In 'fifty-one. He'd had some trouble:
He'd pored over the pink tags stapled to each hanger,
Sometimes moving his lips a little while he spelled out the names—
"Brown. Two sweaters and—chriss-ten-ing—blanket; one ball—gown with
jacket..."

He was getting tired. He was noticing the single red ball of the sun
Swinging down the cracked blinds, notch by notch, like a spider.
He was thinking about going to bed; he was thinking about getting ready.
He was thinking ahead to toothpaste, the tube nice and flat at the end;
He could almost feel cotton pajamas loose around his belly.
He was thinking about quitting work at the Corner Dry Cleaners,
Not just a vacation this time, not just a day off,
But long enough to get some rest, drawing the blinds in the stuffy bedroom
And curling into striped sheets clean as an old woman's,
Away from the chain gang of dresses on hangers,
Into a dark place warm as an ermine collar,
Where he would dream of a beautiful open meadow,
Oddly, straight up in the middle of it, a staircase.

CONTRIBUTORS

Karin Broker holds a BFA from the University of Iowa and an MFA from the University of Wisconsin, and is currently an Associate Professor in the Art Department of Rice University. She has twice received NEA fellowships and has exhibited her prints, drawings, and sculptural works nationally and internationally. Her most recent solo exhibition took place at the University of Corpus Christi, Texas, 1988. She is represented by Susanna Sheffield Gallery, Houston.

Charles Baxter's fiction, which earned him a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1985, has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *TriQuarterly*, and many other periodicals, and his work has been anthologized in *The Pushcart Prize VII* and John Gardner's *Best American Short Stories, 1982*. His collections include *Harmony of the World* and *Through the Safety Net*. He has written a novel, *First Light*, and has a book of poems coming out this fall.

Mary Ellen Branan received her MSSW from University of Texas and is currently in the PhD program in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her poems have been published in *In-Art* magazine.

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Olive Hershey's novel *Truck Dance* will be published this fall by Harper & Row; "Trash Can Man" is an excerpt from that novel.

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Benito Huerta was born in Corpus Christi, Texas. He holds a BFA from the University of Houston and an MA from New Mexico State University-Las Cruces. He has exhibited widely in the South and Southwest and his work has toured the United States as part of the following recent exhibitions: *Chulas Fronteras*, organized for the Midtown Art Center, Houston, 1987; *Mira! Second Annual Canadian Club Hispanic Art Tour*, 1985-87, and *Texas Visions*, 1985-86. His most recent solo exhibition was at Stephen F. Austin State University, Texas, 1988.

Theresa Iverson is currently enrolled in the MA program in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

Sharon Kopriva holds a BS and an MFA from the University of Houston and has exhibited her paintings and sculptural works in numerous solo and group exhibitions including *Memento Mori* at El Centro Cultural Arte Contemporaneo in Mexico City and *Fresh Paint, The Houston School* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She is represented by the Graham Gallery, Houston, and the Allan Stone Gallery, New York.

Richard Levy received his MFA from the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop. He has been twice Honorable Mention and once a Finalist in the PEN/Southwest Discovery Prize. His poems have appeared in *Intro 13*.

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Jim Love has exhibited widely, most recently in a one-person show at Janie C. Lee Gallery, Houston, 1984-85, and in several group shows, including the inaugural exhibition at The Menil Collection, Houston, 1987, and *Found* at Diverse Works, Houston, 1987.

Beverly Lowry's fiction, for which she received a Guggenheim Fellowship, has appeared in *Falcon, Viva*, and *Redbook*. Her three novels, *Come Back, Lolly Ray, Emma Blue*, and *Daddy's Girl* have been published by Viking. She received the Jesse Jones Award for Best Fiction for her novel *The Perfect Sonya*, given by Houston Endowment Inc. through the Texas Institute of Letters. Her new novel, *Breaking Gentle*, will be published this year.

Martin McGovern's poems have appeared in *Antioch Review, Poetry*, and *The New Republic*. He received his MA in philosophy from Stanford University and his PhD in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Houston and has just been named Visiting Assistant Professor in the Honors Program at the University of Houston.

Leslie Miller holds an MA from the University of Missouri, an MFA from the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop and is currently a PhD candidate in the Literature and Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston. Her chapbook of poems, *No River*, was published in 1987 with the Stanley Hanks Chapbook Award. She has been a recipient of the PEN/Southwest Discovery Prize, the Anne Stanford Peotry Prize from *Southern California Anthology*, the Writers at Work Fellowship Competition, and a Pushcart Prize.

John Peters was born in Houston and attended Rice University. He has shown his works in numerous exhibitions including recent shows at Diverse Works, Houston, and the *Houston 88* and *True Wit* shows at 1600 Smith, Houston. He organizes and exhibits work at the Commerce Street Warehouse in Houston. His recent paintings were exhibited in a solo exhibition at the Instituto Stato di la Cultura, Houston.

David Portz holds an engineering degree from Purdue University and a law degree from Georgetown University. He has published art criticism and political commentary for several years and was recently selected first runner up in the 1988 Houston Discovery Prize (fiction) and Honorable Mention in the 1988 Cultural Arts Council of Houston Fellowship Grants (essays).

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Caroline Simpson is working towards her MA in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

Gail Siptak has completed studies at Foothill College, Los Altos, California, San Francisco State, the San Francisco Art Institute, and the Glassell School of Art in Houston. Her numerous group and solo exhibitions include *Classical Myth and Imagery in Contemporary Art* at the Queens Museum, New York, and 1988 solo exhibitions at Little Egypt Gallery, Houston, and Stephen F. Austin State University, Texas. She is associated with Mother Dog Studios in Houston.

John Smith's poems have appeared in *Spoon River Quarterly*, *Cutbank*, and *Stone County*. He has been awarded the John Fiske Billing Award at the University of Chicago and the Fellowship for Younger Poets at Bucknell University.

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Susan Wood's poems have been collected in her book, *Bazaar*, published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston. She has recently completed another manuscript of poems, *White Lies*. She is a professor at Rice University.

Carol Wyatt studied at Rice University, holds a BA in English from the University of Houston, and is currently an MA candidate in the Literature and Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston. Her work has appeared in *In-Art* and the *Houston Poetry Festival Anthology*. She was recently selected for Honorable Mention in the PEN/Southwest Discovery Prize.

Lisa Zeidner's novels include *Alexandra Freed* and *Customs*. Her poems have been collected in *Talking Cure* and *Pocket Sundial*, for which she was awarded the Brittingham Prize for Poetry. She is currently working on a novel, *Limited Partnerships*.

Glenn Blake's Stories have appeared in *Grand Street*. He was the winner of the 1988 PEN/Southwest Discovery Prize for fiction.

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