GULFCOAST

Gulf Coast
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In Memoriam

Randy Brieger
1962 - 1993

Former Fiction Editor of Gulf Coast,
Poet and Friend

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EDWARD HIRSCH

An Interview with Michael S. Harper

On March 15, 1993, Edward Hirsch conducted the following interview with Michael S. Harper, in Houston, Texas.

EH: Michael, you've written a lot about jazz, especially about Coltrane. I wonder if you would say something about how jazz has influenced you both thematically and formally.
MSH: I think that Coltrane was the master musician. The saxophone approximates human speech; it is my favorite instrument of his generation. There's a long tradition behind Coltrane; what I love most about Coltrane was his respect for the tradition, the way he honored his predecessors, did not compete with them, did not try to overwhelm them, and always paid homage to them. I know this because I knew him personally and also because you can hear it in the music. You know that he's listened to Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young and Charlie Parker.

He was also a man who tried to master two very complicated traditions: the first is the blues; the second is talking to women. Black musicians have spent a great portion of their careers figuring out just how to talk to women. Coltrane fits in a long tradition of musicians who have used the ballad form to explain themselves about love.
EH: Is there an analogy between poetry and jazz?
MSH: There are approximations, overlaps, and parallels, but there is no exact equivalent, no exact translation between the two modes, traditions, idioms. Poetry has its own laws and so does music; they are analogous but not interchangeable. One of the things a poet who's interested in American culture has to work out is how to jump the gap between things that are most important to him culturally. He has to figure out how to translate what he learns into his particular craft. I wanted to spend all of my poetic life dealing with improvisation, studying the nuances of improvisation within a tradition so that the tradition was never forgotten. The way in which I did this was analogous to the way musicians would do it. The key is phrasing — how to break the line, how to organize phrases, how to build incrementally either metaphors or voices or tropes.
EH: Did music figure into your work from the beginning?
MSH: My parents had a pretty good record collection. I used to work in a

post office with a lot of people who listened to contemporary music. We bought a lot of records and we listened to a lot of live music.

In the beginning, I never found poems in the American literary pantheon about the things I knew best. I decided that I would at least do my part and try to put some of those poems in there. At the time that I was reading black American literature, mostly in anthologies, I didn't know about Sterling Brown. If I had, I would have taken a different approach. I knew who he was, and I knew a little about his poetry, but I didn't know about the essays and all the work that he had done. It was a different story going to school in the 50s. I had never heard of Robert Hayden, except for his poem "Middle Passage" which I had read in an anthology. I didn't have many equivalents.

I remember a young lady in English class standing up and paying me what she thought was her best compliment. She said, "I guess you want to be the next Langston Hughes." I was offended because I wanted to be as good or better than Auden or Yeats; they were my standard. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate and respect Langston Hughes, but I felt he hadn't worked hard enough, as a poet. He didn't take the poems he had written as far as I wanted to take them. He didn't have the level of complexity or rhetoric and other things that I was interested in. Of course, she didn't know a thing about Langston Hughes, but I had been raised on his poems. I had copies of the poems, from various magazines that my parents had.

It's like a white kid who goes to a baseball diamond and is told that Mickey Mantle or Duke Snyder has got to be his hero — and he sees Mays and loves Mays. People have to make their own artistic choices in this world. And in this country you do get a chance to choose. But sometimes you have to pay for your choice. I have never wanted to say or even been inclined to say the simplistic or the doctrinaire. I have been pretty much my own person.

EH: What was the greatest single thing in terms of poetry that happened to you as an undergraduate?

MSH: The most profound thing that happened to me as an undergraduate is something that I haven't talked about at all. I was taking linguistics at the time. It was a requirement and I hated it. One day, maybe halfway or three-quarters of the way through the semester the professor, Mrs. Jane Robinson, came to class, and instead of holding class, she read a poem by Yeats called "After Long Silence." It was a very short poem. And then she dismissed the class. I was shocked, first of all because she had read the poem with such feeling that I knew that something dramatic had happened. Second of all, after the class I went by the English office just to ask the secretary what was happening and she told me that this woman's husband had died the night before.

It transformed everything that I thought about grief, about poetry, about the aplomb with which someone would make an announcement that devastating, and with that kind of control. For her to share that poem with

us — ignorant barbarians who didn't really want to be there — illuminated me. It changed my perspective on life. And I looked upon her differently. I began to realize that there were nuances and depths of expression that I had taken for granted because I didn't see the immediate effect on people's lives. After that I began to think in a very studious fashion about how I had to marshall my skills and get myself together. And I changed my whole attitude and the way I approached my course of study. I read with greater intensity and greater depth.

EH: Robert Hayden and Sterling Brown are poets who have been terrifically important to you. When did you first begin to read them seriously?

MSH: In the 60s, the critical thing in discovering the work of people who had preceded me was going to the folk archives of the San Francisco Library and listening to a recording of Sterling Brown and Robert Hayden. Not only did I get a chance to follow that up by reading their poems in books and anthologies, but I also heard their voices. That transformed a lot of things for me. I realized that there was a musicality, a certain kind of artistic rigor that I hadn't heard before. Once I was driving on the freeway and I heard a tape of a talk that Sterling had given on the black figure in American literature. It was just a critical talk, but the sound of his voice, the way that he talked, and his illustrations were so compelling to me that I began to do my own investigations.

It was then that I discovered his efforts with folklore and his editing. And out of this came my regard for Hayden because Hayden was represented in *The Negro Caravan*, which was published in 1941. He was already a productive poet then: it was his *Selected Poems* and his *Ballad of Remembrance* that really transported me. Hayden had been writing throughout the forties. He had written some of his most important poems as a graduate student at the University of Michigan when he was a Hopwood fellow studying with Auden. The Auden-Hayden connection was important to me. This opened up a kind of literary heritage and a certain kind of cross-referencing. Also Hayden was interested in philosophy and religion in an unequivocal way which was mysterious to me.

EH: I'm struck by the fact that both Sterling Brown and Robert Hayden were marginalized: Brown stood on the periphery of what was called the "Harlem Renaissance" and Hayden was actively excluded from the "Black Arts Movement."

MSH: Well, part of this is attitudinal, and part is the fact that they took unpopular stances. Sterling never did accept the "Harlem Renaissance" as a viable institution: he knew so many of the writers who were supposedly trying to gain reputation, that is, get their work published in New York. His subject matter was sometimes controversial but certainly representative of a different regional, and geographic, as well as technical and thematic approach. The writers were much more diverse than the designation "Harlem Renaissance" would reflect.

You'll notice that Ralph Ellison, for example, although he knew the Renaissance people and knew about them, did not treat them as examples or models. As prose stylists, he felt they were too narrow. Now, interesting for me is the fact that all three of these people spent time and did seminal work in the Federal Writing Project. Sterling Brown was the editor of *Negro Affairs*. The essay that he wrote about the history of Washington — and race relations — is the most important essay written on that city.

He was correcting the people who represented the state guides, the ones sending him racist commentary, not to mention commentary which left out not only the margin but the minority elements, the feeder groups that went into American literature. He had to spend all of his time correcting them. And Hayden wrote the most important historical essays on the presence of black Americans in Detroit and in Michigan. He didn't get any credit for them, but he's the one who wrote those essays. I know because I've got copies of them.

EH: I wonder if you would gloss the idea of kin, which comes up often in your work. Kinship connects the family, but it also seems to be representing a larger spiritual connection with artistic forebearers.

MSH: There's a beautiful distinction made, I think by Ellison, between ancestors and relatives. Relatives are people that you are born into, and have no choice about them. Ancestors are people you choose. When you are trying to map out your artistic inheritance, you have the responsibility to complement what you've inherited. My efforts have been to link up influences, technical and thematic insights, with my own interests and loves, my own values, by assertion. That is to say, by announcement, by saying you don't seem to see the relationship between these disparate incidents and/or these disparate circumstances. But when I put them together, they comprise a fabric that makes a kind of bridge or pattern very important to me. And if you can see the linkage, then you can see why it is that a vernacular tradition is crucial. That is to say, a tradition has been composed consciously of seemingly disparate parts that work together, and there is a certain kind of artistic control that places them together.

I think the big innovations and the really startling combinations come from what, for lack of a better word, we'll call a "tinker tradition." You've got a number of people out there that are just experimenting and playing with things that other people have said don't go together because they've got a different sense of composition.

EH: The idea of making connections seems really important in your poems, and the phrase, in particular, which seems to have almost a talismanic force is "A Love Supreme."

MSH: Mmm . . . yes, indeed. Well, that was just given to me as a gift. I listened to Coltrane's music for a decade or more. He was a great artist when he was playing with Miles Davis, but, you know, when he got his own group it became a different order of magnitude. I saw them play night after night, and I knew something about their arrangements. They always

traveled first class, and they never practiced. Their practice was on the bandstand; the energy they brought to these performances was just unreal. Night after night, you'd hear the differences. They were not content with being prosaic. They didn't repeat themselves over and over again. If Coltrane played "Naima," he'd play it differently every night. And if you were there for three or four sessions, you might hear two or three different versions. You got a demonstration of how spiritually and actively musically alive they were and how they keyed off one another.

I loved the way the whole group chanted, "A Love Supreme." When they brought out that album, "A Love Supreme" in 1964, I loved the way the album was structured. The fact that Coltrane himself was singing gave me a clear feeling of how much they were involved, not only in their own spiritual lives but in events. After all, they'd already done "Alabama," which was a response to the four girls being blown up in that Birmingham church.

When you listen to "Alabama," you understand Coltrane is writing this melody because he's reading the rhetoric of Martin Luther King's eulogy for these children. You realize that the man is actually listening to the words and then you hear, as liner notes, the words meant to accompany the melody of what they're playing. I mean there was an exact coordination. They just opened up all kinds of things to me, and I decided that there were ritual elements in the integration of rights which needed to be put into certain things I was interested in. For example, how do you render the black church and not copy it? How do you give it force? It seems to me that one of the reasons why artists make art is to create force. That is to say, to make gravity in the world on one's own terms, to add something that hadn't been there before. That's the reason why you're making it. And your commitment to it is in part technical. But part of it's spiritual, as well.

There has to be something feeding the person who is trying to do this. Writing is a solitary act; it's an act of making which involves arrangements and techniques, the ordering of principles which are not necessarily a road map. Oftentimes you're in new territory. The things you draw on are not only the past, but your present being and living in the world, and your hopes for the future. All this is reduced to a force field. It's a page, and there's a left- and right-hand margin. All of that is what you bring to the creative act.

I've seen this done by musicians, watching them improvising against something which was really unspoken, and I said to myself, "Now what are the equivalents for somebody like me working in a solitary world." I began to think about these things in terms of organizations, in terms of thematics, in terms of phrases, in terms of the placement of phrases, in terms of how I hear words and how I arrange them. Part of my uniqueness has to do with the way in which I hear the words themselves.

A lot of people have asked me if I listen to Coltrane when I write. I

couldn't possibly do that and be attentive; I'd be drawn into the music. But I do carry the melodies, the speech elements, and the images into the process of composition. I've written about painters, I've written about musicians. I'm interested in the arts and the orchestration of the arts. But I'm not interested in miming them. And I'm interested in being on the cutting edge of things, rather than involved in more conventional kinds of renderings. I have to trust my own instincts, but I also have to understand that I live in the world.

EH: The idea of testifying, of witnessing, seems important to your project, as is the idea of redemption. I think it was Michael Cooke who said that in *Song: I Want a Witness*, you were the first one to bring the idea of redemption into Afro-American literature.

MSH: Michael was very generous to me, but I don't think that's true in terms of redemption. It's been done in the poetry of the sermon, in the poetry of James Weldon Johnson, for example, with *God's Trombones*. The problem is when one is talking about redemption in the secular world rather than in the religious world. Witnessing for me involves a hands-on experience where you have a tactile connection with what is happening to you. It also is the business of formalizing your experience so that it can be translated for others. You have to leave a kind of track record for people to enter things. You have to give them a code or a signal; I try to do that. At the same time, I try not to diminish the integrity of the process, not to explain what I'm supposed to be demonstrating. You're providing an apparatus as a guide for a way of entering. Sometimes you have to tell people in declarative terms what it is that's being done, so they'll have a point of entry, but that's just a point of entry. Once you go through the door, you're pretty much on your own.

EH: I wonder if you would gloss your idea of what a "healing song" is? It's a phrase that comes up many times in your poems, and then of course your last book is called *Healing Songs for the Inner Ear*.

MSH: Well, I'll start with *Healing Songs for the Inner Ear*, because this was a very difficult thing for me to put together. *Healing Songs* is a book which explores the elegy. I'm aware it has no title poem. I'm also aware that the theme of *Healing Songs* has to do with the function of art, which is to give you the sustenance to go on. We all draw on repositories which give us confidence to go on. Even though we're not aware of it, we're drawing a certain kind of sustenance from it. To heal—now I've always been preoccupied by wounds, and healing, and "debridement." "Debridement" is a French word—*debridement*—which is a technical term for the cleaning of gangrenous flesh tissue to prevent infection so that healing can go on. And I've been obsessed with that for a long time because of America's amnesia — willful appropriation of what we'll call "manifest destiny." I'm speaking of the kind of willfulness whereby you run villainously over people in order to gain your own advantage, whatever it is.

The healing is in part being able to produce images, no matter

how terrifying, which in their presentation will allow the process of healing, the coming-to-terms-with what actually happens, not only historically, but in the psychic lives of people. So "the healing" is in part promissory, because my belief is always that you have to present what happened; you also have to present things in their full complexity. And the hope is that if there is any progress, any progression at all, then it is in human terms. I believe in playing in the area and theater of ethics— how we treat one another.

EH: Robert Frost had an idea that if there were twenty-nine poems in a book, the book itself was the thirtieth poem. This seems to me to fit very strongly with your concept of a book. Each of your books seems to be an entity unto itself which is larger, in some sense, than the individual poems.

MSH: I think that's true, and I think the analogy with Frost is very useful. I spent some time looking at *A Further Range*. I realized that it was the 1930s and I realized that this was as political a book as I was ever going to find from Frost, and, at the same time, he was not screaming at the reader. His shaping of books, and the way in which he put a book together, was influential on me. I think that the sum should exceed its parts. There is some transcendent vehicle that you should try, as best you can, to suggest in the poem which reaches beyond it and takes you to some other place. You also should not be afraid of failure. There has to be some level of risk involved. And there has to be some—I won't say belief—but I'll say some tendency, some respect for the mysterious. Everything doesn't necessarily have to be tied up so neatly that you can be almost programmatic in the way you talk about it, not to mention how you organize it. I like to keep mystery in the process; I like to discover what the presentation — which is to say the way in which things are arranged — has to do with my own sense of order and my own need to communicate. I always think of the ideal as a person who is reading the text but who is reading the context also.

EH: For all the suffering in your work, you have an idea of art as consolation.

MSH: Yes, that's my belief. Yes, yes. And I think that life is costly. It's going to cost — you either pay willingly or you pay unwillingly, but you're going to pay. It's how you do things that's important and the attitudes that you bring to what you do. I've seen examples of people who overcome everything because of their attitude, and I think that's the important part. You have to sustain yourself — no matter how you do it — to continue to say "yes" to life. It is very demanding, it is ruthless, it doesn't negotiate. Some people are not up to it. What you're up to one day you're not up to necessarily the next, but if you wait long enough and if you remain relatively optimistic about your ability to overcome anything, oftentimes you can do more than you think. And you have to believe in people. You have to believe in people and their potential even though the development of their potential will not come in a direct line. I don't see the fruit that's born as a result of whatever efforts I make in the classroom or whatever. I

don't expect to. In fact, when people come and tell me this, I say, "Look, your job is to pass it on to somebody else." Discovering the truth and passing it on is what's important. And, the truth will make you free.

Fixit

in memory of Lester Young, master innovator,
tinkerer, magician of profane conceits: Pres!

So tired of trains and buses
we went back to planes,
Pres walks up to "Lady Flip"
with a bent rod;
the sex of the episode
is already in ballads,
little room for interpretation
except when you're rested.

Flip puts Pres out
of the back room,
begins straightening his rod,
just one bad one,
the wire on the plane
condensed to nothing,
a low b flat
now tangible on Pres'
tongue and jowls.

He ain't no cat you've ever
tempted with fish for dinner;
he's somebody with range,
and now able to read
charts and scores
with utter abandon.

Doors open with that b flat;
you can hear the hush of breezes
with flickering light
on Flip's tools:

"My people won't play
without you."

Note: The repair session cited above is also a dialogue (overheard) of how insiders relate to one another. "Lady Flip" is Flip Phillips, excellent journeyman of his instrument, and ever-respectful of genius, his model of an entire generation, the innovator and "President," Lester Young. Young gave poetic monikers to friends and foes alike, and called Billie Holiday "Lady Day"; she called him "the President." Pres called his instrument "My People." Young was a prime maker, his own category.

Dixie Peach

"he was a paperboy; he delivered--"

"Andy," is what the curator
at the local Lawrence museum
called you, a work of art
in miniature without a photo;
she was too occupied
to be wary of her impudence,
and how could she know
we had just left the blockprint
memento of a pogram, American
fashion, to Quantrell's raiders,
who had a list of 12
citizens of Kansas,
and could only find bystanders,
a squad of black recruits
who could not hide near the river-
grass, and so were butchered.

Langston didn't look like that;
"Amos & Andy" were props for Simple
at the barstool, and grandma,
the Reids, St Luke's AME,
the crafted homestead mortared
in this segregated town,
and you a screen apart
in kindergarten.
Letters to Mrs. Ames,
mistress at Yaddo, apologize
for the inconvenience of HUAC,
which made its inquiries
at Hadie's kitchennette,
and you sought shelter
at the racetrack,
by watching grooms cool down
"Citation," and morning walks
the prettiest in Saratoga,

because those black girls
earned their money riding bareback.

The pomade which glossed your raven
luxurious mop in early grades
was shampooed in race rituals
of the stage, and in your memiors:
what you hid from us was promise,
rivers on the Solomon,
settlements like Nicodemus,
Kansas, with water of its own.

The Beauty Shell

in memoriam
Bernice Lewis Clark, 1914-1990
for Bernard Bruce, Sr.

In the rinse
the straightening
or letting go wild

there is the undulating
hat, parapet for fresh flowers,
where all beauty sits

on the head,
but one must watch feet
and hands in all weather.

My son, Bernard,
has just called the shop;
he is late for dinner

which he will prepare
after long jumps,
the furlongs he savors

at the BU stadium,
a long procession
down Mass Av

right in front of the shop
if he should jump out of the pit
(and with his luck

into the fire or frying pan)—
a good boy though
and a good man

with streamlined
temper, weakness
for the ladies

not all of them
in the shop
by any means.

He has fought
university poverty

and easy solutions
for the victims

with equal weight
and diligence;

has fought the impulse
not to lie

to superiors
and friends alike,

has talked his way
in and out of contracts

with the devil
who often parades

in a cap & gown
at convocation

and commencement:
has tried to raise

his children as himself
perennials for cultivation.

He is his own hairstyle,
happy and almost bald
with finely shaped tome
of his father,
who never turned out "all here;"

it is not his fault, the boy,
who liked to fish
and garden
with few tools
and could mend or build

anything he had to live in.
Once he had to return
two suits and a topcoat
with the wrong labels
at Filene's—

that boy could shop
with the best of them—
  loved gold and jewelry
for his oblong hands
he would not wear

in gloves or sleeves.
He made good babies
in the best habit,
raising them
as embroidery

to crescent and crochet,
for I have taught them all
to knit.
Next life I will turn
every wall into a milliner's

display case,
wear each chapeau
to church, a dance,
or a wedding,
and every hat from my own hand.

ANN BOGLE

What Kiss

You laugh about it. It was an investigation. My lips pressed to the delicate, seeming lips of the street person. He was not living on the street but was walking home on it when he saw us in my car. I was driving drunk. You were my drunk passenger. There was little traffic. There was some traffic. We had thought of getting breakfast, but you seemed too drunk to go inside. I had worried that you would stumble in the aisles of the restaurant and sit in the booth with your mouth open.

I myself had become literary. At the bar, I had said, "See that man?" And you did, but it was the man behind you and the man next to him that concerned you. There was a history with these two, though slight. We had conversed. With one of them I had eaten breakfast in a crowd. That one was saying to the other one, "It's an interesting story. I'll tell you." I interrupted myself in my own story to tell them, "It's not that interesting."

That man with the man behind you may have been thinking of the kiss. After the breakfast, in the back seat of my friend's car, I had kissed him, with some feeling. In the time since, some weeks or months, he had asked me why I hate him. He had asked my friends, "Why does she hate me?"

I could go on in some detail telling this one slight history.

In the beginning, he had bought me a beer, but I had not been responsive. I referred to him later as "the nondescript man." But he would not have known that. His feeling that I hate him was exaggerated in the particular.

I had enjoyed, during the breakfast, deriding him for thinking that I would go home with him, but I had been humorous about it. I did not know then that he felt self-conscious about his mouth.

Later, when he got new teeth, he bared them to me: Now you will want me, he seemed to think. But nothing had changed. In fact, I hadn't noticed the first time that he was missing teeth.

I was pointing out a different man to you. I had become free in my body talking to you. I had created two impressions: legs and a talking head. I had stopped thinking about my skirt, where on my thigh it was falling. It was going up while I was talking. You were listening with your mouth open. I was talking to you, about what I want with you—an egg, a walnut

casing, a container for a life, a space we honor, guard, believe. You seemed lost in your head.

I said, "See that man? He wants my legs, a la carte. What should I do?"

I finished my graffiti in the women's room. A man had come to talk to you, and with him you seemed sober. You were not including me or introducing me because the subject was his rock band and your rock band. As I told you the last time the subject was rock bands, for ten years I played reeds. Not that I wanted to bang a tambourine in your rock band.

A woman with a black long thing in her mouth. Is that ugly? Is that ugly? Only if you focus on it. The woman saxophonist—the player my composer boyfriend had a sweetheart crush on—Jane Ira Bloom—played the Blue Note with her all-male back-up band. There was a long brass thing in her mouth, but people accepted it and paid her to do it.

The women were increasing their writing in the bathroom. I asked you later why women only talk on bathroom walls, and you said, why do men only talk on bathroom walls? I told you as much as I could remember of what had been written, because, practically speaking, you couldn't go in there yourself. I thought it was a more interesting story than the nondescript man's story about our kiss, but you didn't seem to take it in.

The first time, the writing was: "Brothers, give up the power. If you aren't fighting the power, you're dissin' the sisters."

That time I wrote two things.

In the bathroom there's a feeling that you don't have to explain everything, and also that the utensils are crude, the ink doesn't take easily, so you simplify.

That time I was drinking beer in the afternoon with my woman friend. Bald men were playing pool and wanting to talk to us, but we were acting unreceptive. I had, that week, given up talking to men, so the need was just beginning again, and feeling it without doing anything about it was just as interesting.

A little boy had found us and was demanding our attention. His parents were somewhere in the bar. I was not very interested in him, but my friend was thrilled by his simplicity and his directness. The little boy got in her lap and stayed there, tangling his hands in her hair. She let her hair hang in her face. She said she liked feeling that witchy. The boy told her, "I want you for my mother. I hate my mother."

Possible fathers wandered in and out of the pool room, but no one was claiming him. We heard someone say that the boy's father was one of the British men, though not one of the bald men, who were also British. When the boy's father came in, we said he was handsome. He wore a gold wedding band on the appropriate finger.

In the bathroom I wrote, "Bald men have pheromones. We like those." Next to the comment about power, I wrote, "And sisters, give up power. Joy is better than power."

While you talked with the man about rock bands, I read the new graffiti. I felt it was a culture. While I had been away, it had grown. Someone had written, next to pheromones: "Biologist, eh?"

Next to the remark about joy, someone had written: "On what planet?"

And someone else had continued: "New Age feminist yahoo. You can't fight the power until you have power (which you don't)."

I had only a stick pen, so it was hard to write: "Live it. Be it. The rest will follow. If it doesn't, it doesn't. Fuck 'em."

And added: "I hate these dismissals: Fuck 'em."

When I came back from the bathroom, you were sitting by yourself and no longer talking to the man. You asked me if everything was all right.

We left the bar and drove to the restaurant, where I realized that you were too drunk to go inside. I said, "Let's go home," and started to drive to my house without feeling that anything more might happen.

The street man was crossing the street when he saw me through my windshield. I stayed stopped, even though the light had turned green, and rolled down my window to talk to him.

You got out of the car and came around to my side to stand next to him. I put on the hazard lights, even though no one was behind us.

He said, "Who is she to you? Friend? Sister? Wife? Life?"

"On what planet," I was thinking, though not strongly. You didn't answer so I said, "Life," and smiled. Everything seemed okay. I watched you talk to him.

"What?" the man said to me, "My skin too dark for you?"

"Oh, no," I said. "We are the people. That's what I'm interested in. The people."

"Are you the people? Who's the people? You mean this raging war?"

"I don't like war," I told him. "It's not over, not for years. They killed all those people. Those are the people. That's what I'm talking about."

Things had started up again. I was thinking that this man's friends could meet our friends, and we could all have a picnic. That was the image, someone turning a piece of chicken on the grill.

"How do I know you're the kind of people you say you are?"

I gave him your phone number, so he could leave a message.

Then I said, "Should we eat? I'm hungry."

You got back in the car, and he got in the back seat, and we drove

back to the restaurant. Mid-parking lot, you wandered off, leaving me alone with him, though I thought you were walking behind us.

The cars were parked at tight angles. We picked our way back among them to see where we had lost you. You came out from behind a building. You looked sick. The man asked if you were sick. Yes, you said, but not that sick.

"Time to go," I said. I told the man that we would have to leave without eating.

You and I got back in the car. The man crouched beside my open door. "Come with me," he said. "Just you and me."

"No," I said, "not like that. Not one-on-one. The people."

Then he kissed me, and it was surprisingly sweet, but rather short.

You got out of the car and walked off again. I locked the car and went after you. He came with me. He said, "He's not far. He'll be back."

"He would walk home," I said. "And that would be very bad."

The man put his arm around my waist. He asked me why it stayed so small. I thought it was possible that you had started to walk home and that I should try to find you. It was also possible that you had not gone far and I should wait.

After a few minutes I saw you walking with another man. You had gone in the restaurant and come back for me.

The restaurant man said, "Would you like a table? Would you like to come inside?" And I laughed, because he was trying to seat us, but we were in the parking lot.

I said, "Are you the host? You came all the way out here to seat us?"

Then there was panic, all around. I was the one caught laughing. I had mistaken war for peace again. I put my arms around your neck and kissed your face and ear. "Let's go," I said.

The street man and the host walked away, together at first, then apart, the street man to the street, the host to the door.

I tried to drive home, but you were threatening to jump out of the moving car. I had to keep pulling over. You were opening your car door and yelling at me. I was yelling, too, and crying, in alternating fits, and hitting your arm, so you would not jump.

DEBRA RUEB

U2

LINDA BENN DELIBERO

Heart Like a Fridge: "Mechanical Brides" at the Cooper-Hewitt

When I was nine years old my parents gave me a "Dream Kitchen" for Christmas—by far, I thought, the neatest toy I'd ever seen. A row of miniature pastel appliances, the "Dream Kitchen" featured a sink that ran real water, little dishes and utensils for the drawers, tiny boxes of foodstuffs to fill the cupboards. You could bake a plastic roast in the baby oven (complete with actual buzzing timer), serve it to your dolls on the miniature dinette, then stick it in the state-of-the art mini Frigidaire. Roland Barthes once noted that such "authentic" toys, honed to uncanny imitation of the real thing, "produce children who are users, not creators." And in fact, those brand spanking-new plastic appliances—much nicer than the ones we had in our real kitchen—rendered that traditionally female arena a magic space for little girls like me, taught the value of those clean, perfect household machines, and carefully circumscribed the limits of our imagination. Which made me wonder: all the hours I'd spent playing happily in my "kitchen"—had I been delighting, unwittingly, in my own oppression? Is that toy the real reason I can't leave the kitchen if one dirty dish is in the sink?

The opportunity to be provoked into such reflections is perhaps the best inducement to see "Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines From Home to Office," which runs through January 4 at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum of National Design in New York City. It's an ambitious show, whose purpose, according to the catalogue, is to reveal "the gender significance of seemingly neutral things." The "things" in question are home appliances and office equipment— mostly telephones, washing machines, and typewriters—but the exhibit goes beyond the display of these objects to include their social and cultural milieu. "Mechanical Brides" is the premier exhibit for Ellen Lupton, the Cooper-Hewitt's first Curator of Contemporary Design, and its openly feminist stance marks out new territory for the museum. A sizable portion of "Mechanical Brides" is devoted to the ways in which mass media—most obviously advertising—worked hand-in-hand with 20th century design to limit women's domain to the kitchen and the secretarial pool. Hence, the exhibit is stocked with images that thirty years of feminism have rendered both hilarious and vaguely chilling: brides gazing lovingly at shiny new toasters, smiling housewives cooing over gargantuan irons, perky secretaries fetching coffee

for their inevitably male bosses.

By placing the mundane accoutrements of everyday life on display alongside these blatant marketing ploys, the exhibit seeks to redefine the viewer's relationship to such objects, to force an interrogation of the things we normally take for granted. Hence, my meditation on the "Dream Kitchen", which was provoked by an earlier, less sophisticated version on display, a "Pretty Maid" from the 1950s. Constructed of metal, it featured a painted vista of trees and yard and picket fence over the kitchen sink—the sort of view meant, I suppose, to fuel the middle-class aspirations of post-war girls.

"Mechanical Brides" is full of such evocative objects, from the slender lines of AT&T's pink Princess phone ("it's little it's lovely it lights!") to the voluptuous curves of Royal's Electress typewriter. Taken together, they're meant to form a powerful indictment of design and advertising's role in reinforcing feminine stereotypes. But for female viewers at least, acknowledgement of that fact may be clouded by ambivalence. Were women really so easily duped by pretty colors and pleasing shapes? Or worse, what if we really did get a thrill from those elements of design—and still do?

Ambivalence is the key unacknowledged presence behind "Mechanical Brides"; foregrounding instead of concealing it would have made the exhibit a much richer, more complex experience. For example, why pretend that the primary issue is whether or not there's a hidden agenda behind the marketing of home and office appliances for women? A more troubling question is why—given that the agenda has always been, in fact, transparent—it continues to work.

As New York Times critic Herbert Muschamp noted in his review of the exhibit, offering to uncover the "gender significance" of most of the material in "Mechanical Brides" is simply a matter of display: how can you miss the significance of an ad from 1956 in which a woman embraces her distincly virile-looking ironing board? Given the obviousness of such images, explanatory copy carries more than a hint of condescension. For example, the wall-label near the woman-with-ironing board ponderously explains that "design and advertising humanize objects and objectify people by picturing machines as extensions, substitutes, metaphors, or erotic mates for the human body." Well yes, but. . . .

As museums turn more and more toward exhibits that stake their claim on social significance, this sort of didacticism—with its attendant diminishment of the complex—threatens to overwhelm even the boldest curator's attempt at cultural critique. Such was the case with the National Museum of American Art's notorious "West as American" exhibit, which drew fire for its politically correct but heavy-handed revision of Manifest Destiny. Robert Hughes has pointed out that neither the ideological stance nor the objects on display in that exhibit were necessarily the problem; the language surrounding the paintings, which bore the odor of propaganda,

was. To a lesser degree, "Mechanical Brides" suffers from the same disease. Both the wall-labels and the catalogue are laden with the jargon of academia; stilted talk of "objectification" and "cultural construction" vie for attention with the direct, vibrant language of advertising. There's no contest, and most viewers on the day I visited pored over the kitschy, colorful ads and ignored the exhibition prose.

Dull copy is fine, maybe, for traditional exhibits that assume the intrinsic merit of the collection on display; a Rembrandt, after all, can speak for itself. But when museums assume an educative role by surrounding objects with "meaningful" context, that context had better be compelling. This is especially true for exhibits that deal in the ephemera—some might say the detritus—of the 20th century. Museums that regularly collect the everyday objects of the recent past are up against a number of contradictory impulses on the part of the museum-goer. On the one hand, the presence of such objects in museum space still begs justification; a Frigidaire, unlike a Rembrandt, can't speak for itself. On the other hand, we're so close to these accoutrements of daily life that attempts to explain them pale next to our personal response ("Look! That's my mother's Frigidaire!").

"Mechanical Brides" unwittingly encourages that sort of "gosh-golly" reaction even as it shakes its finger at the viewer for succumbing. Very little of the show is interactive. The phones, the washing machines, even the model offices (past, present and future) are set off on platforms or behind vitrines. In its own way, the museum mystifies these objects nearly as much as the ads do.

Not that the exhibit doesn't struggle mightily to impart a sense of fun. But again, the humor doesn't really work to complicate the issues as much as it serves to confuse them. For example, along with mystification, there's a disturbing tendency to ironize the past. "These iniquities happened a long, long time ago," the displays seem to suggest, "when women were poor benighted creatures and before we all knew better." A narrative of progress is great propaganda, but it's death to critical thinking.

For example, one triptych of ads in the telephone section of the exhibit works like a classic thesis/antithesis/synthesis proposition to suggest that women have transcended the stereotypes of the 1950s. In the first image, circa 1953, a nubile secretary perches on a red desktop in a red dress, grinning madly as she listens into a red phone. Like most of the advertising that pre-dates the '70s, the illustration is presented as risibly outdated: "the lipstick-colored world of a female office worker," the wall caption reads. The second ad—also from the '50s—sets up a contrast between the frivolous secretary's red phone and the real Red Phone of the Cold War, which a man's hand grasps commandingly. "Men's phone use evokes agency," explains the caption, "women's—cheerful service." Fair enough. But the third image, a Donna Karan ad from 1992, overturns this lesson by strongly hinting that this particular relationship to power no longer obtains. Against a backdrop of stars and stripes, a coolly assured

woman in business suit, phone in hand, sits at her desk flipping a giant Rolodex. Two older—and apparently much beleaguered—male colleagues grimace into two more phones behind her. As the wall caption explains, "A female candidate is surrounded by male aides."

It's the sort of easy equation that comforts the viewer while it allows her to gloat. But a truly critical reading of these images might have pointed out that the power of the woman in the Karan ad depends on the very same contrast presented in the first two—only the gender roles have been reversed. In the most recent image, it's the men who look silly. Progress? Not really, especially when one remembers that all three ads are mythic depictions of real life; the women of thirty years ago were no more grinning idiots tied to their appliances than the women of today are mostly power brokers. And why, I couldn't help wondering, does that Donna Karan woman look so grim?

Re-presenting history through advertising and other bits of ephemera is a tricky business, especially when the goal is, as "Mechanical Brides" promises, to interrogate the present as well as the past. Nowhere does the exhibit question whether women of the '30s, '40s and '50s really saw themselves as the glamorized, happy housewives of the ads. Nor does it address the very real appeal an automatic washing machine might have for a woman who'd been hand-wringing clothes all her life, or the genuine excitement that might be generated by a flameless electric stove. "Mechanical Brides" seems to imply that such questions are superfluous; maybe they're just too difficult, the answers too depressing.

Like any number of public works that depend on private funding, "Mechanical Brides" ends on a decidedly upbeat note. Sponsored by NYNEX, the "Telephone of the Future" is the last display in the exhibit. Press a colored area on the default monitor and an image of the benighted past pops up on the video screen: an AT&T promotional film from the late fifties of yet another housewife, this one singing moonily about the kitchen she longs for ("I wish I had a stove whose pilot light was always lit!" she croons suggestively). Press other parts of the monitor and a host of messages from the "near future" follow each other in rapid succession, all suggesting the utopian moment when gender no longer matters: a male nurse dispenses medical advice, a female mechanic demonstrates how to service a xerox machine, a business woman hawks a "toaster fax," a happy young couple leaves a message for the kids. As the wall caption promises, "the expanding uses of the telephone will help dissolve the boundaries between such institutions as the home, work place, school, and hospital, and between such technological objects as the telephone, television, and computer." Just as the rhetoric of an earlier age promised women freedom through the wonders of the machine, so viewers of the "Mechanical Brides" exhibit are left with the prospect that all "boundaries" and differences will soon happily dissolve in the age of telecommunications.

Meanwhile, my "Dream Kitchen" still stands in a spare bedroom of my mother's house, the hangout for a new generation of Barbies, Skippers and Midges. My nieces are as enthralled by this traditional feminine haven as I was before I "knew better," as if nothing had changed in the intervening twenty-odd years.

BERT ALMON

Olga's Turner

PROVENANCE

Title: Unknown
Date: Unknown
First Owner: Unknown
Painter: Unknown
Previous Owner: Unknown
Intermediate Owners: Unknown

Present Owner: Olga Almon, a Canadian from Central Alberta with Right of Abode in the United Kingdom visiting cousins at Dove House, in Uttoxeter, Staffordshire, in company with her sister, Doris, in whom Right of Abode is vested but who has not taken it up; this purchase being a surprise to her friends and relatives who know her aversion to paintings with water in the foreground, out of an irrational fear that water will leak onto the carpets

Place of Purchase: Near Tutbury, at a disused water-mill on the motorway between Derby and Stoke-on-Trent, not far from Leek, said mill converted into boutiques and crafts shops by some Northern entrepreneur

Date of Purchase: Saturday, November 2, 1988, Guy Fawkes Day, the day after the purchaser stepped on the sleeping Rotweiler in her cousin June's dark kitchen in the middle of the night and was not eaten alive and after a Grand Tour through the Reject China shops of Derby and Stoke-on-Trent in her cousin's Mercedez-Benz Estate Wagon, a vehicle ordinarily used to convey dead dogs and cats to June's animal crematorium and pet cemetery at Dove House (prices on application)
Cost of Purchase: £7/V.A.T. included

DESCRIPTION

Oil painting on canvas, 25cm X 16cm, in a black lacquered frame

Distinguishing Mark: a bullet hole (mended) 15cm from the right and 6cm from the top

Subject: The Dogano da Mar, Venice, a subject favored by J.W.M. Turner

Details of Painting: (1) in the right background, the white dome of the Dogano, (2) in the foreground, canals of Venice; figures representing crowds; two or three absurd little boats; and two individuals wading arm-in-arm in the shallow water, if indeed one figure is not attempting to dunk the other in the canal

Basis of Tentative Attribution: The pervasive brown and yellow luminosity of the surface, somewhat obscured by many years of grime or perhaps created by it, a haze of colour that one hardened veteran of Bed and Breakfast tours has cynically compared to a Full English Breakfast doused with brown sauce to make it palatable

ATTEMPTS AT CLEANING AND RESTORATION

Method Rejected Immediately: use of a forefinger moistened repeatedly in the mouth, a technique employed by an appraiser on the popular BBC series, "The Antiques Road Show" but not favored by the squeamish and unlikely to remove more than the surface dust

Method Contemplated But Finally Rejected: use of the mildest solvent imaginable, a compressed wad of fresh bread, which lifts the dirt from the surface while leaving the driest of oil paints intact; this method was rejected because the loss of the aureole of grime might in fact remove the Turneresque penumbra from the work and reveal it to be a poor copy of Turner or even a vacationer's attempt to portray the Dogano with no knowledge of the great painter at all; how often in the annals of art has the restoration of a work destroyed it—very often indeed

DISPOSITION OF PAINTING

With its tatty integrity unviolated by restoration, and its bullet-hole intact, the masterpiece sits on top of a steamer trunk in the basement of 2723-124 St., a house in a complex called pretentiously "Briarcliffe" with a final *e*, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, where the painting has been judged to have Right of Abode by custom and grudging affection

ART CRITIC'S UNSOLICITED ASSESSMENT AND APPRAISAL

An object for contemplation, not for use, and therefore a work of art and worth paying seven quid for on a Saturday afternoon

Sor Juana's Last Dream

(an excerpt)

Black as night's bile,
tar of my heart, the melancholia
has come again. Yet I am
Spanish Isis . . .

You have come again
as well, outside my window,
worshipfully—my lover, my listener.
What a high-cheeked *criollo,*
you are! You, the one
who loiters every night
beneath the branches of the drooping
juniper, caressing your
courtier's lute. My friend
María Luisa says
you have ponderous eyes—
eyes which devastate the religious.

So look at me! No.
Not like that.

Our gazes, listener, *united,*
should rise above the temples
and squat obelisks of every
city: this one,
Tenochtitlán; Alexandria;
sun-drenched Olympus—
toward heaven—or else love
kills us. Or lets us kill
itself. You ask
what stuff can be salvaged
from inexplicable grief?
My writing, dressed in the pleasing
vapors of the moon—ancient,
delightful—(I'm so tired

of the silence imposed by my confessor),
has brought only fear and
conspiracies. Tell me who
can reconcile who I am
(pure spirit, pregnant,
flying) with the portrait drawn
of me by the Inquisitor?
I will die in an instant,
in an hour, in a day, of plague-
sickness; this dream's
shadows' bleak shapes
predict it.

*

Eternal darkness—
that which now surrounds
the Maiden Pythoness of Delphi—
and sleeping dogs, whose
dim shapes breathe
foul air, heave forth no
syllables. Is their wheeze the
last idiom of bodily truth?
Even my nightmare's obsidian
death-mask knows why
the soldiers bring them
everywhere—to be eaten
as soon as the rivers are crossed,
the grains depleted. Above the dogs,
nocturnal birds turn
night mists into tapestries.
Who will read them if not
the Lady of Lightning and of Calm?
I who find hieroglyphs in the clouds
cradling stars. I
who am unwed but fecund (reading
fills me as a feather filled
Coatlicue with a God).
Who waits to be born? you ask.
Ominous fish, black
scales on black, sliding
through the dark waters of my dream
will not answer you, Master of Misprision—
the Father of Pricked Ears
and Wrong Interpretings—you

who have mistaken for millennia
the visionary pyramid, seeing
instead merely the shadow
of one satellite—one saviour—
a dark sail which passed,
I will grant you, appealingly,
across the truth's awesome walls.

*

Isis. Coatlicue. The Pythoness.
These are the female forms
I claim in my dream. I'm
the girl, the child, released
between the mountain snows
of Popocatepetl
and the tropical cane fields
of the Mexica plain. I'm the one
drunk with milk of Juno
spewed across the heaven. I'm the mother
of syllables bright as those stars.
The inventress of writing. The seer
of all signs, all things, and the one
who exchanges signs for things
throughout time. I will be punished
for all of it . . .

Protect me,
night. War-gods
are coming, armed, to destroy me . . .

I shall deliver and infant,
not a poem. A warrior-child.
One who will feast on the destruction
of my enemies—those who would censor me.

*

What has come over me,
over Creation—with such awful
wings? A black angel.
Spirit untranslatable.
May this life be unwritten
by the stars! I, worst
of all the world, pray

to you, Mother of God,
where is morning?

*

As in delirium,
in this dream it makes no difference
whether I shut my eyes
or open them. I see skeletons.
They come before me wearing
satin, damask, and brocades
like the Holy Fathers: white,
red, green, violet,
and black maniples, chasubles,
cinctures, stoles. Pages
of the *Historia Eclesiastica*
unbound, fluttering groundward
as if they were drunken
butterflies! I can't
shake it. Nor can I make
it transform itself into anything
beatific. I say *blue,*
attempting to summon the folded
liquid garment of His Mother—
I imagine lavender—
petals of the roses She
produced at Guadalupe,
where dark-haired cherubim
forced the magnificent statues
of Aztec Huitzipochtli
to cave in. Instead,
a death's head comes toward me,
red fruit of the nopal
cactus wedged in the center
of its hideous, yellow-toothed
grin. I could be murdered
for saying this:

*

Our God
eats men. Or is this
vision, inevitable-seeming,
a false one? Although
sequestered, I have sources—

my servants—*criolla*, which I am;
mestiza; some pure *mexica*—
who speak about women captured
by the *caciques* of the Inquisition—
raped in their prison-cells, bound
lashed, bones crushed,
then burned alive in the forest
of black stakes just blocks
away from the *zócalo*—their neighbors
forced to witness or be taken also—
New Christians they're called
as fire erases the unimaginable
pain God has created.
Tonight, in this dream, their shrieking
kills me—shattering the air
and atmosphere of this visionary's
more subtle imprisonment
(for I have been spared—spoiled—
kept aloof and stupid
by the indulgent hearts of my high-born
acquaintances). *Our God*
eats women. A river of blood
runs from the earth to heaven.
And the priests eat God.

*

Coatlicue ate the dead—
an act of earth-cleansing.
Isis ate Osiris.
And Horus was born.
I see them riding together
in her carved stone moon-boat:
the child suckling, contented;
the mother, like Mary, tired,
sorrowful, worn. In my dream,
I want proper tribute
to offer these goddesses.
María Luisa, our afternoons
together on the stone bench
beneath San Jerónimo's plumbago
thicket—these are the finest
moments I can say I've known—
how the sun, our private dolphin,
played in its element, wide

sky, for us two only—
how are gazes met, united,
and rose together in bliss.
Then did we vanish into God,
did we totally dissolve in His
beneficence. My confession:
all of my songs speak of this.

*

And now, sentenced silent.

The Eyes

I have always envied those who dared blindness,
whose own vision was so focused
it ruined them.
The kids on my grammar school playground
Magicians from the Dark Ages,
their certitude of controlling the heavens
their only desire.

The one boy so patient and determined,
he shrank the sun through a magnifying glass
into a searing white pellet
that made your eyes water just to look at it.
So steady, he focused it on leaves,
consuming them in fingerlings of smoke.
Sometimes he turned it on himself,
leaving a red dot on his wrist,
some tattoo of his dedication.

Or the astronomers-in-training,
who through a pinhole captured an eclipse in a box,
shadow of moon sliding over wafer of sun.
So satisfied with the world in miniature,
how could they choose fragments over the whole
when there were those who had to settle for as much:
the boy with the cloudy eye of Venus;
his retina detached one day,
a squid releasing the sea bottom.

Or those who worshipped vision singularly.
The man I knew who collected glass eyes as fetishes.
He kept them in a blue velvet jewelry case
like a strand of giant pearls.
Once he held it out to me, as if in offering,
then opened it.
        They stared back—
sorrowful, afraid, jealous, angry, hungry—
like some blight burning holes through me,

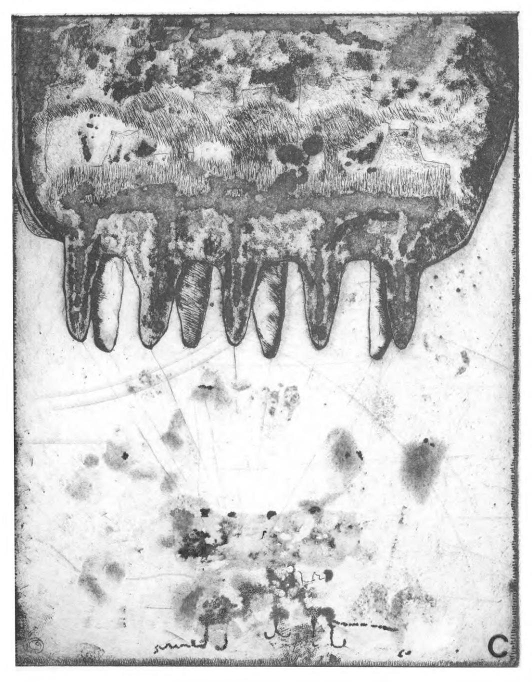
a glimpse of the world all they wanted,
to study a leaf, not needing the forest.

Gepetto

After all that I spend hours with wooden doves,
carving each breast to life-like. I'd only set
prodigal to a puppet-boy, a vanished trunk-knot.
But what work with the surprised, O, ink-face,
the real hair, shoes, feet and peg-legs. Some being
not born from the just-discovered joints of a street-girl,
but made, bartered for with the flat-faced gods,
who took nothing so much as my heart-spin
and gave it back by way of a faulty toy.
I should have leapt into the whale's mouth myself.
So if I were a liar, what would I lie about?
Cold mornings, painting the faces by rote,
who can test what's left
of all I wanted to give, the brief smoke, my warm breath. . . .

que

dios



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MARK HALLIDAY

Your Next Room

It is empty
of you now
in another city
but there may be voices in it,
or maybe someone just stepped out.
Maybe they'll be back soon
with a magazine or a cold drink
moving through the space in this universe
where you
some night
will ache for the sound of
one distinct voice
and turn, just so, to touch the quiet phone;
or, in the northeast corner,
someone with pretzels is watching TV
where you will sit, just so,
reading a letter or writing an answer
that might change everything.

In any event
the space is there—
heartlessly indestructible
infinitely promiscuous
unconcerned with enshrinement—
permitting laughter in the north doorway
regardless of what hard goodbyes may be
on schedule there,
just there.

Darby

. . .And so the meaning escapes. What
was it? One minute ago.
Small white house.
Dylan's "License to Kill."
Banks of ragged small trees
and wintry bushes alongside
the SEPTA tracks. One
                    chilly white house
in the town of Darby.
                    That house
had a damaged wall. Something about endurance.
Image of
a kid eating cereal alone in that kitchen;
something about gentleness as a possibility—
this train itself seems gentle
slowing for each named suburban stop. . . .

Each person has a heart beating.
                    Something.
Dawn sky coming to white blue
and that meaning behind us on the tracks
in Darby.

ELLIOT FIGMAN

Cesare

Tonight I sleep with Cesare Pavese,
in a bed far from his Italian cities,
but I am sleeping with his women.
More precisely, I am fond
of their elbows, bent
on the sill, the warm city
sun soothing their red blouses.
I am with them as their eyes open,
then at night, as they claim
the first stars, I am all
their luck, and all the luck
Cesare lacked, in his little room.

Tonight, they do not scowl,
holding out their arms,
waving slowly. For them, the world
is not ending, not in their cities,
where they sleep alone, their long
plum hair sent in a spiral
toward the floor where Cesare
counts the hours, a strong
Italian sun about to wash their faces.

Nude Hugging Her Own

And if she breaks
the surface of the pond
and comes back to you
wet from head to toe,
that's a brand new coat
for you to wear.
And when she leans back
and gives herself completely
to the blue ceiling,
she becomes the nude
hugging her own,
empty of pleasure.

When you think of her,
you think of red licorice
and what champagne
does to the body,
you think of weakness
in the legs, and falling
and dying, all the little mouths
on the moonscape of her neck,
you think of black kerchiefs,
the warm round sun,
a clear body of water.

CHARLIE SCOTT

Paul Said This

If I were a ranch I'd be the Bar None.
—Rita Hayworth in "Gilda"

Mozart was part dog, part genius, his hot flame
Aloysius craved a prince, instead, and bucked him downstairs
To Constanze, her sister, who was a dog too—so goes the story.
Paul is on his third Whitbread Stout, expansive but unaware
Of my 7 AM appointment at the airport, our voices
Lap a dog-like flop in the eyes of the waitress whose belief

In our sobriety (or is it propinquity) is waning, like all good belief
Tends to do anytime, anywhere—rain, like they say, snow or sleet. The
flame
That socks sadness into Mozart's lieder is that the voice
And piano never touch, i.e. *consummate* (says Paul). So M. was upstairs—
Minded composing them, thinking of long gone Aloysius, and unaware
Of body/soul, light/dark, the twain shall never etc. This story's

One more offshoot to a whole other story,
And like history boils down to a problem of belief,
Both in and of the narrator, the talker, in this case Paul, unaware
Of my right now scritching pencil. He was on Blood Mountain, a flaming
Dusk and ground stars (house lights) like the staring
Eyes of every life passed on and trussed up under the earth. One voice,

Soprano, soared out the convertible of a man who taught voice
At a girls' school and who was so ugly Paul's dog Sue (another story)
Would not take a sandwich from him, but thrashed the stair-
Steep banks of Mountain Laurel, which is sort of like Bay Leaf,
Only poisonous (ask your forest ranger!). Paul was with *his* flame,
Less hot, an interior decorator, abused by her father but unaware

Of this as abuse, and (moonlighting) a caterer too, unaware
Her mushrooms "a la Greche" and raw pea pods voiced
In a star burst pattern (the tart tepid flame
of a curry dip stoking up the center) was her very best story
On how her daddy hurt her. What's debilitating in belief

Is how belief's disguised, shifting, day to day, according to every morning
at the stairs

What's waiting? Paul never could crack his lover's Mona Lisa
(this too's important) stare,
Even when the ugly teacher's Mozart pierced the horizon. Paul doesn't
forget. Belief
Binds all the separate strands into one voice.
Mozart somehow does sadness and joy at once. A "story"
When I was a boy meant a lie, and you held onto that lie like a candle flame

Taken tip-toe up the stairs. Tell me, is this dawn's shivering peach flame
Certain, uncertain? Voice or echo? You go to bed believing
A story you know is just a story. You like that. History makes us all dogs
(let them lie): bone-fed, barking, unaware.

MARK FLOOD

All suicidal remarks and gestures will be reported and recorded.

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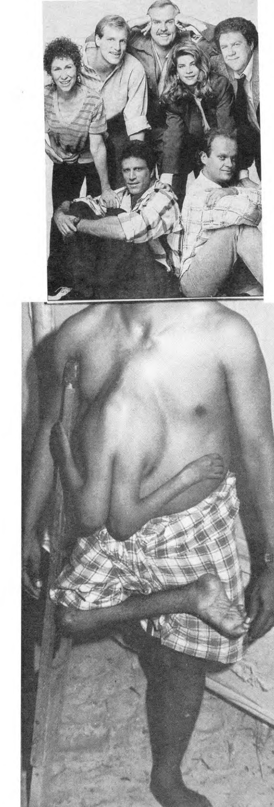


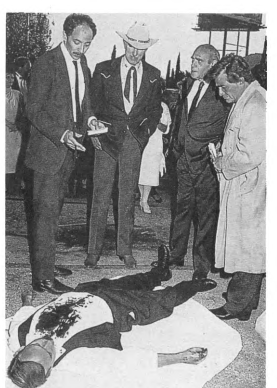


Fig. 106. Three-month old rhesus just removed from the isolation cage.

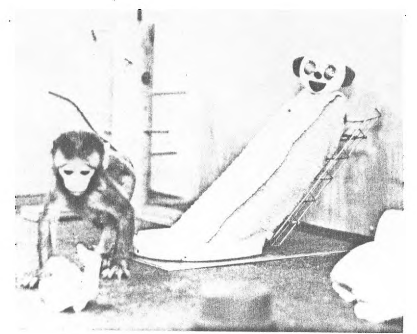
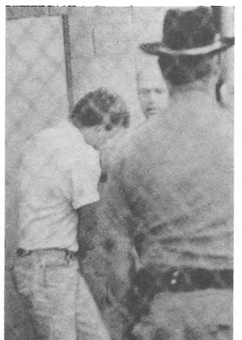


Fig. 129. Infant security in presence of surrogate mother.



MATT CLARK

What I Know About Ham Ratchetslaw, Trombonist — by Clay Henry, World-Famous Beer Drinking Goat (Buy Me a Cold One Today at Inez's Trading Post, Lajitas, TX)

June 7, 1991

He did not come by stagecoach. Nor did he parachute down from a star-spangled bi-plane at midnight. He did not ride in by horse, camel, well-trained longhorn or Harley. There were no race cars or hearses involved in his arrival. Pogo sticks and tricycles are out of the question, considering the quality of local roads. The whole year round it is much too dry for canoes and submarines and Oxfordian punts and pontoons and steamboats and long trash barges, although he may have rafted in to Lajitas and walked over. (But not by himself. Not on those rapids. And I didn't see him go by.) No fighter planes were seen streaking overhead, and contrary to popular everyday life around here, no UFOs were spied in the immediate vicinity. No rickshaws. No locomotives. No army surplus helicopters. None of them brought him to town. Beats the hell out of me how he got to Terlingua, Texas.

I know only as much as Juan has told me. And a little bit more from the boys who laze around in front of The Trading Post, under the shed. And some from Mimi. Being a goat, it's tough to get any more information than that. Plus, I'm "stuck" in this pen.

I, of course, am not the first Clay Henry. And I will not be the last, by any means. Those punks in the pen over there constantly hope my liver will explode and they will be chosen to ascend my throne. We're not related. I'm not related to anybody that I know of. Not even the Clay Henrys who preceded me. I'm not as alone as the glam-babies, movie stars and real-life heroes I hear on talk shows, though. Sometimes I lean in through the Inez's window to watch their staticky faces, to listen at their pathetic sob stories. "Having the world at your feet is an exercise in solitude," they whine at Johnny and Phil and Geraldo. No, I have my admirers, the tens of tourists who stop here to get a souvenir photo of Dad

sharing a beer with me. I've never been on tv at all, but I can tell you if Oprah asked me to appear for even just one second, the first thing I would say is, "Fame is great." It was great before the whole Ham Ratchetslaw business, and it's even better now.

. . .

Mornings go like this:

It's just before dawn and I'm awake. Thirsty. I see Juan off in the distance, getting closer and closer. The desert around Lajitas is not your level wasteland type. It's a roller coaster. Hills and gullies. The landscape undulates. So. Juan appears, jogging, then disappears. He then appears again — at the top of another rise — and promptly disappears. It's three miles from La Kiva, where Juan tends bar, to here. Takes him about nineteen minutes, on average. I can only see him for the last two or three minutes, though. If the sun were completely up, maybe I could observe his approach a little longer.

"Buenos dias, Clay Henry," he announces chugging up to me, hands on hips, slightly bent over, gasping, sweating.

It's useless for me to try answering. I stare meaningfully. He gets my drift.

"What can I get you this morning, pal of mine?" Juan asks. Then he pauses like I'm talking to him — which I'm not—and nods. "You are watching your figure, you say?"— I didn't. —"And can only accept a Miller Lite?" He strides into The Trading Post and I hear him and Inez speaking. "This morning for Clay Henry a Miller Lite, Inez." I hear the door to the refrigerated display case slide open, the cold air streaming out, the door gliding shut again, Inez telling Juan he's crazy as shit.

Call me a hedonist or a drunk or whatever you want, by now my mouth is watering and my lips are quivering madly. I'm hooked, I'll admit it. But hey, that's my job. I'm Clay Henry.

Juan comes back outside with the Lite and a grape soda for himself. He smiles at me, and I'm sure he thinks I'm smiling back at him, the way my mouth is acting. "Una cerveza for my best amigo, my last customer of the night, Clay Henry," Juan says. He opens the beer and hands it over the fence. I wrap my lips around the top of the can and turn it up slowly, chugging. I don't miss a drop of it and wind up the performance by dropping the can back over the fence for Juan to pick up and put in the recycling bin. We're big into ecology around these parts.

"How was that?" Juan asks and waits for my non-reply. "Oh, really? That good, you say? The perfect way for Clay Henry to kick off another day in the limelight?" At this point I will either belch or give a short bleat to show my thanks and dismiss Juan. He has to jog back to his trailer behind La Kiva, and I have a full day of tourists awaiting.

That's what it's been like every morning for the last five years, since Juan took up jogging. And that's the way it will be tomorrow

morning. And the next. Mornings will be that way until my liver pops and I fall over dead — yeah, shut up you boys over there; I'm fine for now and you'll end up barbecued, the lot of you! Cabrito, you hear? — or until Juan decides to give up jogging. The only time mornings have ever been different, I guess, is during the Ham Ratchetslaw Affair and immediately thereafter, when Mimi would jog with Juan.

. . .

According to the boys under the shed, he walked into the Chevron Diner just after sun-up, wearing a white linen suit with an pumpkin-orange tie. He carried a long, black case that he gingerly put into a booth before sitting down, handling the case like it was full of money, the boys say.

Mimi recalls that his shoes were very clean. "Too clean for around here," she tells me. "And he was skinny." A fairly normal condition around here.

Mimi says she said, "What can I get for you this morning?" because she is the waitress and the register girl until Juno comes in around eight. And the stranger told her he wanted nothing but a Big Red and a pickle.

So, Mimi says, she knew something was up with this guy.

"Hey, Mimi," the boys under the shed call out. They're taking a break from patching rafts. "What do you want to go painting Clay Henry for? No goats in France?" (Mimi came over here from France to paint. She didn't COME here to paint, really, but was just on a tour of the Southwest and when the bus stopped in Terlingua — just outside of Big Bend National Park, not far from me and Lajitas — she got off and decided to stay and become a painter. In France, she'd been a napkin folder for a tiny, five-star hotel.)

"Clay Henry," Mimi coos, "you pay them no attention. You are much more than a goat. And beautiful? You are gorgeous. Perfection. You hear?"

When Mimi scratches me just between my horns, I'll admit it, I get a smidgeon turned on. Maybe we goats are a little on the sexual side, I don't know. Mimi is a beautiful French woman and I am a farm animal turned superstar. It would never work out, of course.

Plus, Juan would kill me.

. . .

"I am a trombonist," the stranger is now rumored to have announced in the middle of the Chevron diner. As if the occupation were some kind of charm to ward off the stares of everyone eating their hash browns and huevos rancheros. (With only 37 people total living in the Terlingua/Lajitas area, you can't blame people for gawking.) And so, I am told, each person in the Chevron bowed their heads and looked only at the plates in front of them while they tried not to smack or swallow too loudly. The place was deathly

quiet. Possibly for the first time in its existence.

"He was mortified," Mimi explains. "So I finally thought to say to him, 'A trombonist! Why that is marvelous. You know we have a blues combo here in town that could use a trombonist.' That made him feel a trifle better, I believe. And then other people said to him that what I had pointed out was true, that he should go out to the ghost town and wake up the blues combo and see about joining them. They were scheduled that very night to play at La Kiva.

"And you know what, Clay Henry? The man smiled at me and said he loved the blues as much as his father loved rain on a sunny day. I don't know what he meant, but it made me shiver."

"Us, too," the boys under the shed chime in, crossing themselves. "We all shivered when he said that."

"You know, we should all pitch in and buy a new pool table," one of the raft boys suggests. Five of them are sitting around with their feet propped up on the old table. It's missing two legs and a hen has built a masterpiece nest on its precarious slope.

"Let Inez pay for it," another one of the boys protests. "It's her joint."

From inside The Post, Inez hollers, "I'm not buying a new pool table. I too much enjoy the eggs and quiet that one produces now."

Knowing better than to argue with Inez, the raft boys one by one pretend to drift off into sleep.

. . .

Rocky and Pete and Ringo, the blues combo, do not come to The Trading Post anymore. Not since they broke the pool table. Thus, I do not know what it was like when the trombonist went to visit them at their home in the ghost town jail. I don't even know what they look like anymore, they have all grown so, I am sure. When they were eighteen, last year, I could outchug all three of them.

. . .

Being a Friday night, La Kiva was packed, I am told. The Rangers from the Park came and the people vacationing in the Park came and the hippies from the commune came and the citizens of Boquillas and San Viciente and Castolon came, as well. Juan has told me they sold three times as many margaritas as normal and four times as much beer. He leaned close to me and whispered, "Mimi danced barefoot, my friend, and I stopped serving drinks to watch for just a moment they way she moved like a breeze through the river willows."

. . .

I heard the music and was impressed. I have listened to Rocky and Pete and Ringo rehearse from the beginning and it has been a very slow thing, their

improvement. But that night, with the trombonist sitting in, taking long rambling solos that flew away from La Kiva's patio over to me and Inez at The Trading Post — I cannot describe to you how much it seemed like something magical was transpiring there, across those three miles.

Inez doesn't sleep, you know. She stays up all night and listens to recordings of the Dorsey's in their prime, and their prime, I am telling you, was nothing compared to the sounds this trombonist was conjuring up. Inez came outside and sat on the top rail of my fence, scratching the tip of my nose, making my tail squirm. "Clay Henry," she said, "what is happening over there?"

. . .

"Whirling and spinning and clomping and jumping and swaying and twisting and bouncing and shimmying and leaping and shaking and bumping and hopping and flailing and shuffling and moving. It was a miracle you should have seen, Clay Henry. The whole place dancing like they were possessed, like Ham Ratchetslaw's music had turned us into the kind of spirits you'd find flitting around Prospero's island." Mimi told me that.

Once, a long time ago, she read me *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, changing her voice for every character in the play. Soft for Miranda. Brash for Prospero. Low and sad for Caliban. There was a splendiferous ending, I remember, but I was confused by its abruptness. I wanted to know — and I still do — what became of Caliban when they all got back to Milan. In civilization was he abused? Or admired? Showcased or scorned? Did he ever get over Miranda and fall in love with a comely young monster? Did he get to "happily ever after" too?

. . .

Apparently, amidst all the revelry, nobody noticed the first armadillo arrive, or the second or the third or the three hundredth. Nobody noticed all the armadillos, the thousands of armadillos, until the band's snaky version of "Mona Lisa" stopped and the kind of silence that can only be made by a crowd overtook La Kiva. They were surrounded. Besieged and encircled by football-ish dinosaur remnants.

"It was like a painting," Mimi whispers, standing up from where she sat, waving her hands in the air as if to color the scene for me there in the chill winds coming in off the Chisos range.

. . .

Two days later all of Terlingua was still awash in armadillos. And at the town meeting, after much discussion among the citizens and a confused and confusing talk by one of the Park's Rangers, Ham Ratchetslaw stood up on the top of a booth in the Chevron diner and said: (according to the boys under the shed)

Good people of Terlingua, the plague that has come down on you is both unusual and unpleasant, possibly unhealthy. Leprosy and all that. You cannot do anything without the armadillos finding a way to do it with you. They claw their way through doors to join you in your showers, listen to your phone conversations, attend to you while you make love to your respective spouses, brutalize your geraniums and green beans. In truth, they sit amongst you even now, here, in the middle of your comfortably distinguished town hall and diner. What could have caused this most ludicrous circumstance? you ask yourselves and this very learned man from our nearby, understaffed but radiantly superior National Park. Why has this horde of armored pests been visited upon this town? I'm afraid that I have the answer to your questions, my comrades. In fact, I am the answer.

(An uproar ensued that Ham Ratchetslaw quieted with a few notes on his slide trombone. The people and the armadillos pricked up their ears, both large and fleshy and small and spiky, to listen.)

It's my music. The music you enjoyed so much the other night in your snazzy cantina is responsible for the presence of the beasts. Drawn to it like junebugs to a streetlight, doubloons to the ocean's floor. Unable to drag themselves away from the heat and gravity of the blues. I've had it happen before. In different places. Different animals, too. Salamanders, rats, and in one terrifying instance, elephants.

(Here Ham Ratchetslaw was interrupted by a chorus of "what-can-we-do?"s)

Well, I'm the one that got you into this mess. Certainly I can be the one to get you out. To be sure, I did not count on this happening way out here in the desert like this. But I swear I will rid you of the dreadful boogers. Oh yes, no matter how excruciating that exorcism may be I will not rest until the armadillos have been driven one and all from your village. Though it may cost me my life, I will do what must be done.

(At the end of this vow, it has been related to me, Ham Ratchetslaw stood atop a booth, trombone in his left hand, right hand reaching ceilingward. He was posing, I suspect, but the trusting and flustered denizens of Terlingua were as mesmerized by Ratchetslaw's oratoria as they were by his melodic interludes. One of them, as if on cue, shouted out not "Hallelujah!" but "We'll pay you."

Ham Ratchetslaw remained motionless. Someone else added, "We'll pay you 1110 dollars," which just happened to be the amount the town had saved up to install picnic tables at the top of Mule Ear Butte.

His arms lowered first, then his face. The smile of Ham Ratchetslaw beamed out over the Terlinguans like the sweep of a

Hollywood searchlight. Inez was told — and she told me — that the trombonist's teeth and lips didn't move a millimeter. Nevertheless, he could be heard loud and clear when he announced, in a sepulchral tone:)

You've got yourself a deal.

. . .

I saw them.

First I heard the music. Then I heard them. Then I saw Ham Ratchetslaw — the first sight poor Clay Henry had of the villain — riding in the back of Ringo's jeep, charming the armadillos to follow him down the road, past The Trading Post and off toward Ojinaga. Their little claws, thousands upon thousands of them, clicked against the hilly asphalt of 170 like a castanet cult. He played "Oh Susanna," and "Peggy Sue," and "Goodnight, Irene, Goodnight" and ran them all together in a bizarre medley that made me itch to climb over my fence and join the 'dillo's lemmingish parade.

Then they were gone. Apparently to be lost in the wilderness or sold off to Mexican craftsmen who might kill them and teach their corpses to stand very still, holding tiny musical instruments and miniature pieces of sports equipment. (You'd be surprised at how tourists will spend their money in these wild environs.)

. . .

When Ham Ratchetslaw returned to Terlingua late that afternoon, the whole town was holed up in La Kiva celebrating the blessed exodus with shots of Cuervo Gold. Juan has explained to me that the first shot was on the house. Everything after was happy-hour priced.

Six o'clock. Sun's running out. Hen Egg Mountain glowing like the progeny of some charmed goose. Mimi and Rocky and Pete and Juno from the Chevron, all of them, everybody, drunk as skunks. And they'd been thinking aloud and loudly with one another and comparing notes and deducing like wildcats. They'd decided in a sort of reverse People's Choice Award election, that the toast accompanying the first shot of tequila ("To our hero, Ham Ratchetslaw!") should be rescinded and replaced with something more curse-like. The new consensus was that they had been had, and they were not in the least bit happy about it: Ratchetslaw had brought the 'dillos to town purposefully, so the poor Terlinguans would be forced to pay his extermination fees. La Kiva was a bar full of pissed and highly pissed amateur sleuths. There was spit and talk of extortion and lynching on every set of lips: a road-crew passing through volunteered a trough of hot tar; Virgil Rivas promised to pluck every chicken in his possession. "We'd be fools to pay him," Moe Grunyon slurred, and I am told that a salt-lick/lime-suck toast was being made to just this decision when Ham Ratchetslaw entered La Kiva with a cased trombone and a calligraphied bill

for services rendered.

. . .

I was standing on the big rock in my pen, just under the sign which proclaims me to be the "The World Famous Beer Drinking Goat," trying to get a grasp on the uproar at La Kiva. From across the miles of cacti and rattlesnake tracks I could hear shouting and four short screams. Then the roar of cars starting up and high-tailing it in as many directions as the two roads leaving Terlingua permit.

When Caspar Anaya pulled up to tell Inez what had happened, I leaned in through the window of The Trading Post to listen to him. "'If you don't give me my due,' Ham said, 'I'll take whatever I like.' Then he pointed a finger at Mimi and said, 'I like you.' And before anyone knew what was happening, he was gone. Like a roadrunner. Vanished in the desert. With Mimi tossed over his shoulder like a sack of French dog food. They're trying to organize a search party right now."

. . .

Getting out of the pen was no problem. It was the walk that almost killed me. I'm not used to walking much, you know. So. By the time I got to the door of Juan's trailer, I was exhausted and my hooves ached. I scratched at his door with the tips of my horns until he came to the window and looked out at me. He'd obviously been crying, and I wondered how many people had witnessed these tears.

"Clay Henry!" Juan exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

I bleated at him, but he misunderstood me completely.

"This is no time for beers, friend. Mimi has been abducted by that damnable trombone player. She is nowhere to be found."

I barged up the metal steps of the trailer and pushed my way past Juan into his living room. A framed picture of Mimi was sitting on the coffee table and I poked it with my nose, then looked back at Juan. He was watching without any understanding in his eyes, just ignorance and misery, so I poked the picture again. (Mimi climbing out of the Rio Grande at La Cloncha, wet and laughing, a bottle of Cuervo clutched tight against her bikini'd chest.) Then I walked to the bookshelf, pulled out a copy of Lassie Come Home and nuzzled its cover over to Juan's feet. I bleated again, hopped out of the trailer and stood facing north, sniffing.

. . .

The trail was simple to follow. But long. It rambled beside Terlingua Creek for close to 14 miles before we stood at the bottom of Packsaddle Mountain (elevation 4661 feet). The scent of pickles and Mimi's Tea Olive perfume obscenely mixed pulled my snout up toward the top of the mountain until I zeroed in on a small cave almost hidden behind a wall of stalky succulents. My howl, more a consumptive cough than collie's wail, communicated my

success to Juan. Up there was Ham Ratchetslaw, trombonist, and his captive, the woman that Juan and I loved more than Patsy Cline, the dainty French painter my best friend intended to marry.

. . .

When we went back to Terlingua to gather forces for an attack on Ham Ratchetslaw's hideout, Juan and I met with some unexpected cowardice. In the eyes of the town's citizens, a stock of people who reveled in the unrelenting heat and desolation of Texas's Big Bend area, who wallowed in the mysticism that floated around the park in hippie vans and reports of ghost lights, Juan and I both detected the dull sheen of fear. I could smell it, too. Sour and rotting. Unpleasant as smoldering wigs.

Miles Elton, a ranger who had retired from the service rather than face charges of peyote harvesting, explained the situation to Juan like this: "The devil, you see, he was tossed out of Heaven, right? For acting so high and mighty. A talented boy, I guess, if God felt some kind of threat from him. Sumbitch landed on a mountain hereabouts, was repulsed by the beauty of the valley he saw and flew off to Ojinaga across the Rio. Spent his days bouncing a big metal ball on the heads of anybody who dared to step outside their home. You've seen that ball, Juan, in Ojinaga, dusty and immovable on Saragossa Street. Sumbitch dropped it when the town's priest came back from a visit with the Bishop and started chasing the old bastard around with a cross. Routed him all the way back to mountain he'd landed on to begin with and left him trapped in a cave on top of that peak. According to legend, the padre left the cross guarding the entrance to the cave, and Satan's been huddled inside ever since, bemoaning his ill fortune and the loss of his big metal ball."

Juan fidgeted in his seat, not touching the enchiladas Juno had set in front of him. "Well hell, Miles, I know that story. What does that have to do with Ham Ratchetslaw and Mimi?"

"Juan," Miles said, "you can't tell me you don't see the connection. Ham Ratchetslaw is the very devil himself. Soon as you told us about that cave, we all knew. Grew up on the tale, we did, wondering in our beds at night where that mountain cave was, whether El Diablo spent his cross-tapped life watching the roofs of our houses, longing to drop his ball through shingles onto our dreaming noggins. You can't expect us to go tromping up there and tangle with the devil, Juan. We're lucky he left at all," Miles said.

Juan stood up. "But he took Mimi. And you can't honestly tell me you think some scrawny trombonist in an orange necktie is the master of Hell." He looked around at the tops of people's scalps and baseball caps. "You can't tell me that."

After a few seconds of silence, Juan spit on the floor and said, "I'm not afraid." He walked to the door of the Chevron and turned back to look at me eyeing the beef jerky jar on the counter. "Come on, Clay

Henry," he commanded.

. . .

I ate The Bible once. A little red one. Given to me by a woman running away from her evangelist husband with a photographer from Life. Almost choked to death on this passage from Leviticus:

> And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of a live goat and confess over him all the iniquities of Israel and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of a goat and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness.

What a scary book!

. . .

I led the way up the mountain to the mouth of the cave. Juan followed close behind, carrying no cross, no garlic, no silver bullets, no rosary beads, no Bible, no votive candles, no St. Christopher medal, no vial of Holy Water, no glow in the dark Jesus Frisbee. Nothing. The boy came to confront a man who might easily be the Dark Lord and held nought but a canteen of Gatorade and a flashlight loaded with store-fresh Duracells.

(I might have mentioned this before. I was still drunk from a Winnebago of college boys that stopped by The Trading Post just after sundown. On their way to the Rio to raft. Spring Breakers. Generous fellows. Outstanding chuggers. One of them nearly beat me.)

. . .

Juan's flashlight beam reached into the cave and got eaten alive by the darkness. "Ham Ratchetslaw?" Juan said. There was not the kind of echo late night movies lead you to expect. "Mimi?" The silky name sank to the slick floor without bouncing around even once.

I followed Juan deeper into the cavern, winding our way through a toothy squadron of stalactites and stalagmites. "Clay Henry?" Juan said, and I grunted to let him know I was still in tow. "Clay Henry, I think maybe there is something out of the ordinary about this."

Duh.

Ahead of us we could see a light coming from around a corner, yellow, flickering. "Look," Juan hissed unnecessarily.

The bartender-turned-devil-hunter took a deep breath to muster up courage. I did the same. The smell of guano was strong, but floating above that was the scent of Mimi's Tea Olive, ridiculously out of place in a batshit maze. With a small bleat for encouragement, I nudged Juan in the ass to make him go, and we rounded the corner to meet our fates.

. . .

Nobody said anything.

Juan didn't say, "Mimi!" or "Ham Ratchetslaw, you fiend!" Ham Ratchetslaw didn't say, "Impertinent mortal!" or "Curses! Foiled again!" Mimi didn't say, "Juan! My hero!" or "You've come at last!" or "Kiss my foot." The only sound in that cave was the hiss of a citronella candle that swayed in the breeze Juan made as he walked over to Ham Ratchetslaw and yanked the spit valve off the end of his trombone's slide. He took Mimi by the hand and they walked side by side out of the light, the way we'd come in.

I stayed but a moment, searching Ham's candle-lit eyes for some semblance of recognition. Goats have long been unfairly associated with Satan, but Ham looked at me without the faintest glimmer of mythically conspiratorial hope. He looked at me like a man who has just lost his car on a bet he could outchug a barnyard beer guzzler. When I turned to leave, he didn't rise to follow or fight or turn himself into a pointy-winged, drippy-fanged demon. He kept his seat and with trembling digits fingered his now-useless mouthpiece.

Trotting up behind Mimi and Juan, I heard very clearly Ham grieving. His trombone's melodies were ruined. No longer crisp and sharp, the music that leaked out of Ham's abyss was marred by the fuzz of air escaping from a massacred spit valve. All the way home I heard unbearable renditions of "Sweet Adeline," and "Rose of the Rio Grande." He tried his damndest to play "Mrs. Robinson," and the pitiful sound, a mixture of brassified flatulence and all-too-human weeping almost made me feel sorry for the man. I don't believe there's anything more depressing than a miserable trombonist.

. . .

Mimi stands up to turn the canvas and easel around for me to see. I stick my head through the fence's rails to get a close and critical perspective on the piece. It's a portrait of me sporting the medal I was presented at the Mule Ears Butte Picnic Table Dedication Ceremony and Clay Henry Appreciation Day. My horns glisten like steel. My hair is neatly arranged. Even my beard looks good, streaked with strands of distinguished gray. I am mightily impressed with what a handsome creature the artist has made me out to be.

Standing that close to Mimi I suddenly realize once again people don't tell goats everything. Some news items we must sniff out for ourselves. Like the future. Like babies underneath salty flesh. Twin boys to be named Clay and Henry, asleep with a portrait of me hung above them. Mimi won't find out the news for another week or so. Then Juan will jog over to tell me before anyone's parents are phoned or college funds discussed. He and I will share a Miller Lite in the first rays of a Friday sunrise, pleased that the winds carry no music, only the last cool fragments of a clear Chisos night, and the promise of babies laughing in the desert.

PHILIP LEVENS

Chains Like Houdini's

Since the Talmud is not primarily concerned with practical application, almost all problems are granted equal weight. "Why then was it written?" one might ask. "Study and you will be rewarded," is the answer you would be given. Often Talmudic arguments contain elements of the bizarre. For example, there is a complicated discourse on a mouse that brings bread crumbs into a house cleaned of hametz for Passover. The sages launch into an analysis of the mouse, the number of crumbs in the house before and after his entrance, the possibility that a cat might enter after the mouse and other such related developments. There is also an involved debate on fetal transmigration from one womb to another. Elsewhere it is asked whether the mythical golem is entitled to participate in a minyan, or if a minyan composed entirely of Lamed-Vav's, the thirty-six just men, would hasten the coming of the messiah. Scholem says that those cognizant of the Talmud's patterns of thinking are aware that the hypothetical elucidation of an elemental problem can never be regarded as insignificant. Steinsaltz says that the Talmud is not unlike a labyrinth, that whenever a man begins to study it he always finds himself in the middle.

Outside the police station, Eitan points out the slots of prisoners' windows. "They're called *machicolations*," he says. "The same as archer slots in castle parapets." He explains why air shafts grow smaller, like a cannon barrel, the further away from the source. He wonders about the shape of the elevator shafts, the angle of the walls.

"Do you think Carol's here?" I ask.

"I don't know. Joe told me the police picked her up downtown this morning."

Although always clean-shaven, Eitan has a natural face for a beard; broad and widening towards the neck, his flat cheeks are perfect fields to sow. Once we discussed the *halakic* merits of razors. "You can't bring a blade to touch the skin," he said, green eyes shining. "But electric razors are covered with a foil, hence the metal never makes contact."

"I wonder if the sewer enters into the prison," he says, pointing to

a manhole cover embedded in asphalt. "We could crawl inside."

"Why would anyone want to break into prison?"

He shrugs and smiles. "You never know. They say Soloman's treasures might be hidden in the Vatican and that the church has early copies of *The Zohar, The Book Of Creation,* even *The Book of Splendor.* They won't show them, though. Afraid they might reveal information about the true Messiah. Only the Pope reads them now."

The police station information hall is open-air, three stories high; the heat and plants inside give it the feel of an atrium. It's a Sunday and the building is deserted, except for the balding police officer behind the counter. Behind him, a dozen neatly stacked monitors click off and on, cutting to empty hallways, cell bars and cafeterias, continually reconnecting the building in a video maze.

Eitan smiles at the officer and places two plastic garbage bags containing Carol's belongings on the counter. The policeman's eyes widen. His name-tag reads, "Muller." He has a large face with a lipless mouth and his stomach hangs over his belt like a battering ram, stretching the sweat-darkened polyester of his blue uniform. He looks at me, then Eitan. He stares at the garbage bags, suspicious, breathing raspily through his mouth. Are we terrorists? Eitan is dark enough. What does he think is inside? Fertilizer, dirty diapers, garbage, a bomb? He shifts nervously in his chair, glancing back to a amber-hued computer screen.

Eitan begins to explain how Joe Cohen had been letting Carol stay with him until the police took her away.

"She was getting worse. She'd stopped speaking with him. Last week she bit him on the arm. Joe has problems of his own. He doesn't need Carol to exacerbate them." Officer Muller takes off his glasses and rubs his blood-shot eyes.

"I think her identification might be here," Eitan says, rifling through the bags. Empty shampoo bottles, broken turquoise earrings, a ballerina figurine, assorted clothing, a stack of credit cards rubber-banded together: Neiman Marcus, American Express, Mastercard, Diners Club, and driver's license, all of them expired. In the picture on her license she grins widely, with short hair and amber eyes.

On the surrounding walls there are black-and-white photographs of police officers killed on duty. Epigrams underneath the photos read: *"He was a well-respected officer." "He was a well-liked and courteous officer." "He was a well-respected and well-liked officer."*

Officer Muller cannot find a record of a Carol Davidson being picked up. "I called down to lock-up but they don't have her either. You can leave the bags at the station, if you want, but we'll have to destroy them in thirty days if they're not claimed. You want my advice, best take 'em with you. She'll probably never come in to get this stuff. That's been my experience."

"I have three-hundred and seventy-eight dollars in library fines," Eitan says outside the station. "I'm going to hold the books hostage. I found a volume of Pirkei Ovot from the seventeenth century. It's falling apart. I have to steal it, rebind it."

"Are you going to return it?"

"Of course, but first I have to repair it."

Eitan is a wealth of arcana. He is always lending me video tapes with rare footage of interviews with Agnon and Steinsaltz, documentaries on ritualistic behavior around the world. Books on everything from alchemy and Pre-Seludician architecture to commentaries on the Dead Sea Scrolls and the text of Salba, which describes different ways in which the hanging gardens of Babylon were watered.

We decide to take the bags back to Joe's apartment. Eitan fears the police will throw out Carol's things. On the highway north Eitan asks, "Do you know why they call this Mo-Pac?" He points out the window. "That railway is the Missouri-Pacific. It reaches all the way from Missouri to the Pacific."

"Where does Carol live?"

"She was living on a old boat in somebody's back yard."

"Does she have any family?"

"Her husband left her. Took their two kids. She's stayed at shelters but always manages to end up back on the street."

Outside the window a slow freight heads west. Does it continue on to the coast, two thousand miles from Houston? I imagine Carol at the tiller of the backyard sloop; all rotted wood and patched sails with a cracked rudder.

Eitan turns on the radio. A reporter on NPR announces that today is the one-hundred-and-nineteenth birthday of Harry Houdini. *"Every year on Houdini's birthday, Houdini Societies around the world gather together in an attempt to contact him. Houdini had promised his wife that if there was an afterlife he would try to reach her on his birthday. His devotees have met together on his birthday for the past sixty-seven years. Until her death in nineteen-forty-three, Beatrice Houdini led these seances herself. Before she died she declared the tests a failure."*

Eitan lowers the volume. "Did you know his father was a rabbi in Hungary?

"Whose father?"

"Houdini's. I wanted to be an escapeologist. He was related to the *Ba'al Shem Tov.* I used to practice the milk-can trick in our basement. My father found out."

"Didn't he die of appendicitis?"

"My father?"

"Houdini."

"I don't know, I don't think so. I used to check out books on lock-picking and card tricks from the public library."

He clicks off the radio. "Listen, Joe's going to try and hide hametz for Passover, but we've got to tell him we don't have time to look for it. I can already feel Donna getting angry at me."

"What exactly is wrong with Joe?" I ask.

"He has some problems."

"Does he work?"

"Oh yeah, he's got a degree in printing. He's going to be our number one printer."

Eitan tells me the two of us should go into publishing. He gives details about paper prices, binding contractors and our main competition: Schocken, Feitelheim, Knopf. "We'll bring out reasonably priced out-of-print classics in their original form: Copernicus' *Revolution*, Fakukeim's *History of the Dead*, Polo's *Description of the World*. Anything on which the original copyright has elapsed."

"How does he get money," I persist.

"His family. They're all dead." He shakes his head. "It's sad. Joe misses Carol. At first they really got along. Joe let her sleep on the couch, even cooked for her. Then one day she snapped, started yelling at him, called him the devil, said he was trying to kill her and possess her spirit. Before she left she locked him in the closet and told him she was turning on all the water taps, that he was going to drown in his own apartment. He was only trying to help her out, when he really needs help himself. That's just the way he is, a real mench."

"What wrong with him?"

"The system."

"His nervous system?"

"He's been this way since he had a breakdown at his bar-mitzvah. He fell to the floor right in the middle of the *parsha* and started yelling. He tossed the torah scrolls in the air, said, 'I wrote them, why should I have to study them!' After that he started seeing doctors and ever since he's been in and out of state schools."

"How did he and Carol meet?"

"At Toastmasters. Joe goes once a month. They make toasts, read speeches, dedications. He does it because he's too shy. Carol snuck in once and started ranting about the destruction of the world and how God was going insane."

The strip-shopping center in front of Joe's apartment building is all boarded-up windows and faded signs. A small church, The True Christ's Disciples Congregation, remains. An electric sign on a trailer in front of the church says, "Your job got you feeling like Job? Jesus is the best employer!"

The apartment complex behind the center is a drab concrete pill-box. In front, a huge transformer has been painted white with black dots, to resemble a giant die.

"Joe did that," Eitan says, knocking on the door. "He loves dice.

His landlord got really mad. Threatened to kick him out."

Joe Cohen answers the door smiling. He is overweight and balding, his remaining hair slicked to one side of his shiny scalp in jagged furrows. Thick-lensed glasses rest halfway down his nose. He introduces himself, taking my hand limply with the tips of his fingers.

The living room is a Disneyland in disarray: castles, miniature Easter Island statues, cycladic figurines, giant dice, wind-up toys, a stuffed blue monkey and ceramic frogs everywhere.

"Joe made those himself, didn't you Joe?" Eitan nods to a table with bright blue frogs next to a potters wheel, table saw and electric drill.

"I haven't been able to hook up this video recorder," Joe says, his voice wrapped in cotton, almost a stammer.

"I brought back Carol's stuff, Joe. The police said they'd throw it out."

"Put it outside." He opens a screen door to a small porch. Boxes with "Carol" written on them are stacked under a metal table.

He takes us into the kitchen where he shows us new glasses, knives, paper plates and plasticware he bought for Passover. Everything is completely clean except the contents of one cabinet with a taped sign that reads, "Do not open until after Passover."

"Do you want to search for hametz?" Joe asks.

Eitan looks at me, "We don't have time."

"Come on, one piece. Look!" He points to a piece of bread in full view. "It's hidden, can you find it?"

"That's not hidden very well," Eitan says.

"I know." He agrees, disappointed. "But I usually have to hide it then find it myself." He looks around the room, checking doors and windows to see if they're locked. "I'm afraid, Eitan."

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Joe, it's Yom Tov."

"I had a dream Carol was training rats to enter my apartment with bread crumbs. I kept trying to clean up the crumbs before sundown but more and more rats came in under the door and through the window. They were all biting me."

"Listen," Eitan says, "we'll help you search for hametz."

Eitan and Joe pray in the kitchen. The linen-covered table is set for Passover with a seder plate, kiddish cup and silver candlesticks. I hide pieces of bread, wrapped in plastic, throughout the living room. I put them in obvious places: in the chimney of the castle on the coffee table, on the embroidered couch pillows, in a doll's hat behind purple plumes of feathers, inside a bowl shaped like a mouse, on the upper ledge of an oil painting of three clowns. The clowns are carrying hoops, juggling blue and red balls and attempting to get a bear to leap through the hoops.

We turn off the lights and search for the bread. I hold a candle, illuminating the general area of the hidden bread pieces. Eitan pretends to

dust found pieces into a paper bag with a feather. Joe and Eitan discover all the hametz, except the piece above the clown painting.

"Where is it?" Joe asks. "We've found ten. I'm sure there are eleven! This year I cut an extra piece for luck."

"I don't remember where I hid it." I wink at Eitan. He takes the candle.

"Where could it be, Joe?" Eitan says, holding the candle close to the painting.

"I don't know!" Joe says, searching under the couch, his large backside bumping the coffee table.

"If we don't find it, you can't sleep here tonight, Joe."

"We have to find it! It's going to rain!"

I smile at Eitan. There's a banging on the door.

"Oh no, oh no, fuck fuck fuck, it's Carol! It's Carol!" Joe scans the room, biting his knuckles. He runs into the kitchen, ducking into the pantry and causing baskets, cereal boxes and bottles to fall.

"Calm down, Joe. Calm Down! No one's going to hurt you."

Eitan cracks the door slowly but Carol shoves it open, stepping past him. I don't recognize the woman from the driver's license. She is haggard, makeup-less and her ratted hair is a bird's nest. She stands in the middle of the room, watching our every move.

"Carol. Joe can't speak to you right now," Eitan says. "We have your boxes. If you'll just wait outside, we'll bring them to you."

"You!" she points at Joe, quivering in the pantry. "Give me my things back before I call the police. I'll have you arrested!"

"Carol, calm down. Joe doesn't want your things," Eitan says. "He kept them for you. The police told me he wasn't responsible for any of it and that if he wanted to, he could throw them out."

"You threw my things out?" Carol says in disgust. "Bastard! Armpit! Mule!" She hefts an Easter Island statue. "Hippopotamus! Pimple! I'll throw you out!" She lunges, knocking Joe into the kitchen.

"Carol! Get off him!" She pulls Joe's hair and gouges furiously at his arms and face. His glasses fly off. He doesn't resist, only covers his eyes.

"We'll reach Christ with my right hand!" She screams, the veins in her neck standing out like barbwire. "I'll sit beside Lord Jesus!"

Eitan and I try to wrench her away. She upends the table, shattering the seder plate. Even though she's thin, she's strong and wiry. She elbows me in the chin, knees me in the groin. Her legs flail like propeller blades. She kicks Eitan in the stomach. Her dress rips in my hand. I hear the crunch of Joe's glasses under my shoe.

"Get off me you motherfuckers! I'll call the cops. I'll tell them you tried to rape me. They'll believe me!"

"Stop it!" Eitan shouts. "Joe, get in the fucking bedroom!"

Joe breaks away, watches us struggle with Carol. "Go now, Joe!"

Carol stops struggling. "Just give me my things! Bastards! Bastards!"

I feel filthy after grappling with her. When did her husband leave her? Had she already grown deranged? Did she despise him, denounce him as the Devil? Wet her bed? Sleep with Jesus in her dreams?

Now I place her, perhaps two years ago, downtown. She was running down the sidewalk, yelling something obscene. Feathers and rags were tied together around her head in a rainbow turban. She jostled through the crowd, pushing people out of the way. I turned with the sea of onlookers but saw no one in pursuit.

We retrieve the boxes and carry them outside where Carol is sitting on the curb, face in hands. Her nails are black, her floral dress soiled.

"Can we give you a ride somewhere, Carol?" Eitan asks. "It looks like it's going to rain."

She picks up a rock and begins to draw a circle on the sidewalk.

"You really shouldn't stay here. It's not good for you or Joe. We'll take you wherever you want to go."

"Just leave me alone, asshole!"

"Look, if you stay here, the police will just pick you up again."

She draws another circle besides the first.

"This is the earth," she says pointing to the first circle. "It's going to be destroyed. But I'll paint a new earth, here." She points to the second circle. "You fuckers will burn!" She throws the rock at me. "I'll get my kids out. We'll escape. We'll be safe." She stares at me and tries to runs her hand through her tangled hair. "You know I'm beautiful. I've fucked a lot of men."

Eitan and I go to the car. He backs it out and then puts it in park. "Just a second." He gets out and walks back to Carol. I watch him in the rear-view, trying to persuade her.

On NPR, a British reporter says that a team of scientists in Israel and Utah have analyzed all the holy books in a Cray Super-Computer and determined that they could have only been conceived by divine intelligence.

Outside the sky drowns everything in shadows of storm. In the rear-view Eitan still pleads with Carol, hands gesticulating in the air. She shakes her head back-and-forth vigorously. I see Joe now, standing in the window of his bedroom, peeping out behind curtains. The sky turns a wet charcoal and rain falls heavily on the windshield. Eitan and Carol are getting soaked. He tries to pick up one of the boxes but the bottom splits, spilling everything onto the lawn and into the growing river in the gutter.

Carol drops to her knees shrieking. She pulls clumps of grass and fistfuls of mud attempting to gather her trinkets. She lifts her soiled skirt to

form a pouch, exposing anemic thighs and a bristling pad of pubis. Eitan turns away from her ragged nudity. She fills her skirt until she is pregnant with earth. The rain is a torrent from heaven, X-ray bursts light the sky in negative. Suddenly, Joe flees his apartment, waddling through the rain only to slide on the mud. I get out of the car. Carol jumps Joe as he rises, pulling him down, the two of them cleaving like lovers, indistinguishable in their bed of mire. Eitan tries to help but merely melts into the morass. Once crystalline droplets grow black, soil rising into the sky, until it begins to rain mud. I try to separate the pile, shouting—be civil, reasonable, but instead someone pulls me in. I grapple roots under fingernails, grass grows into my mouth, teeth in thigh, elbows hitting bone. Joe's weight like a brick seal, the filty nest of Carol's hair. "STOP! STOP!" Eitan shouts. Joe screams. Carol shrills. "Abit Guzunt!" my grandfather says. "For the Love of God!" screams my father. "ENOUGH! ENOUGH!" But the intensity of the struggle grows with each call to God. This is the end of man, the second floor, a universal ablution. This inundation will never cease, the rains will only grow in density and dry river beds will become Mississippis, oceans of fecundity. The seas will rise, rise, wash away the soil, the city, the sun bleached bones of still undiscovered deserts. Forests will spring overnight to drown each dawn. Time will be shorn from the antediluvian world. Out of the eradication of history will come new constructs as of yet undreamt. Eden inverted awaits. Sea shells will be found on mountaintops. Chaldean tablets will tell an undecipherable story. Sabbati Zevi will be crowned King Machiach. Yacob Frank and his fourteen daughters will build new cities with thirty-six towers, seven moats, and eighteen rings of walls. Mount Zion will become the foundation for a new kingdom of falsity. The descendants of David will sink into millennial decadence, wisdom will disappears like a storm, divination through dreams will sanction the mode of study. The dead will not roll to Jerusalem and the maligned will have no vengeance.

The Midrashic tradition of the Lamed-Vav says that God continues to allow the world to exist based on the virtues of the thirty-six just men that exist in each generation. Lamed-Vav is Hebrew for thirty-six. Buber links the importance of this number to the Biblical verse, Isaiah 30 : 18, "Happy are they that hope for Him." The numerical equivalent of "Him," in Hebrew, is thirty-six. Therefore, this verse could be read, "Happy are they that hope for the Thirty-six." Ramban disputes this though, based on the passage of Gemera which says the Messiah will come when either all men are completely good or completely evil. Should the good be seduced to hasten the coming of the Messiah? Simeon Ben Azai believes it instead to refer to the holiday cycle lasting from the end of Purim to Shavuot in whose interim Pesach falls. But Ariel insists that it pertains to humanity, saying that we are to treat every man as a potential Lamed-Vav, that

we are to act as if the fate of the world hangs on any person's well-being. But there are others, Elisha Ben Abuya and Judah Ha-Nasi, among them, who contend thirty-six relates to the time of morning after the destruction of the Temple, or the number of days it took the Jews to reach Babylon from Jerusalem, the last weeks of freedom before captivity. Other scholars find fault with this and look for alternate significance, perhaps the number of times Moses struck the rock before it gave forth water or the strokes a seraphim's wings make before it reaches the damned in the lowest levels of Gehenna.

JANE CREIGHTON

Sister

I learn something about the world by who grieves for her.

My sister comes home to live with me the summer my mother dies. I am just seventeen and she is nearly twenty-seven. She comes through the dictates of a family counsel, to which she dutifully assents, in order to watch over me before I leave home for college. She is the oldest, the most responsible. She comes also to oversee the closing up of that home, to sell the little red house and the car, and to dispatch the material goods of our inheritance either to storage or out into the anonymous world from which they came.

A beautiful red house, cottage-like, its bay window fronted by apple trees planted in a grassy bank overlooking the road. Just the sort of house my mother would have wanted on the rocky coast of the Atlantic, her romance with that, after all, a longing for certain particulars of her childhood, that other time. The sweet slick of salt water drying on her skin. Always in the older woman, the longing for the younger girl.

At the outset, Pearl and I must adopt the position that at some point we will, with a Protestant simplicity, get over the deaths of our parents. Dip our paddles in the water. Surge forward. That we cannot, some twenty years later, discuss these events or the subsequent paths of our own lives without slithering through sorrow or rage, has proved us wrong.

But this is not accurate. We talk, turning over memories of a raucous and spirited childhood spent roaming the countryside in Pennsylvania. We call up images that remain sweet: the two of us as star girl scouts, good campers; our father, who loved to spend his spare time with his kids tramping over various paths in the woods known only to us; our attentive mother, who ferried us all over town and watched our progress in school. We share these things but they are only partly true. As partial truth they are swallowed easily, with a sweet taste. My sister and I had different childhoods. We became women by walking separate trails away from the dying, then dead, hearts of our parents. What we lived through together, alone, was the death of our mother. My mother. And hers.

My sister in the late fifties. One of five waterfront camp counselors who live all day in their swimsuits. Goddesses. We love their jokes, the way they handle us in the water, show us how to breathe and stroke. How they talk over our heads, encouraging our progress. Their gorgeousness, the

bodies we can't believe we might grow into. Not delicate, but sensual, broad and curving. I remember a black suit against the golden flush of her skin. She stands on the raft waiting for the campers to come through the woods, the cliffs on the far side of the creek rising behind her. I'm never in her group—perhaps there's a camp regulation against sisters working together—so I never get too close, but I can see her smile from a distance. Always a distance, we hardly ever speak, but her smile radiates, she's so inviting. I flush with importance as we break toward the water, some heading her way, all of us, still, such little children. There's your sister! they say. My sister! Mine!

The privacy of home, waking life, bread and cereal, early morning radio, Dad, please don't sing along. Brother goes here, Pearl goes there, I'm here on my stool. Mom putting down and picking up food. We munch, munch, then off to the races. Hardly see each other, move around, take up space. Same sisters, but different. Same and different.

1963, I remember sitting in the back seat of the old Ford—I must be in sixth grade and my sister in college—listening to her and my mother talk. We are crossing the bridge over Lycoming Creek, which is how my memory fixes it, in the constant landscape that has lent dreams throughout my life the sense that my true and isolate self is of that particular earth, that water. My mother drives while my sister pleads for money to see a psychologist. She is miserable at school. The anxiety and sense of isolation that arose somewhere in adolescence—right around the time I was born—has reached a pitch unbearable to her. This must be the case for her to talk so openly in front of me. I don't know what it's about, why she's suffering. But I can see her hunched over her desk, her hands covering her face in a very quiet room. The creek spins by in the periphery. My mother says, "Pearl, we can't afford it. Just stay with it and study hard. And get out some. Find some activities. Aren't there clubs you can join?"

Perhaps a silence follows. I don't remember a replay of the screaming arguments my sister often has with her, with them. Perhaps my sister—whose face opens an unknown profile as she leans toward my mother beseeching her with a soft hope—perhaps my sister circles the wagons, pulls into herself, the two of them forming, as we drive, the great bulk of adulthood hurtling into separate stillness. What could be so terrible? That night I peer into the mirror. I'm looking for her trouble, anything I might see in my lips, mouth, behind the eyes that would indicate what I'm in for. My sister, in a rare moment of physical contact, cups her hands about my head, smoothing the hair back along my temples. She listens to my worries, how I sometimes feel scared at school, how Kathy Hale doesn't like me, how when I broke my collarbone and had a harness on my shoulders I still wanted to play and I could, I could play fine but I got excited and swung the bat with one arm and missed the ball and hit Kay Kelley just above the eye and I couldn't play anymore but I didn't mean to, it just

happened. I'm talking fast and the words get all caught up in my throat. She holds my head in her hands. Squares me in front of her. She speaks slowly so I'll understand. "That's nothing, Janie. That happens sometimes with friends. It's not your fault. You're all right," she says. "Do you hear me? You'll be fine."

That marks a moment of solidarity, a brief intersection in our divergent lives. Even I know that my mother's response is inadequate, though I have no particular notion of what therapy might do for the fury inside my sister. My mother's love is ample enough to encompass the physical ailments of her children, which means in these years a constant preoccupation with my brother's illnesses. But there is no money left over for a diffuse and undefined ailment that could be solved by pulling one's self together.

My mother cannot go to bat for her. She withdraws from a distress that resists what to her are practical and obvious solutions. The story I sometimes have for my sister is that she is put out into the world after years of efforts to reason with her. Her financial needs through college are attended to. She is given a trip to Europe in her junior year. When she graduates, she collects a kiss and some gifts from my parents, and goes off to live in New York City where they avoid calling her often because of the long distance costs. I don't recall that they ever pay her a visit, though she always, on holidays, comes home.

I am eight when she stops living at home, and a happy kid. I never suffer, as she did, the loss of attention my mother gives over to my brother, in part, I suppose, because my brother is such a great friend to me. I don't know who my sister's friends are. Before she leaves we share a room but I don't remember much of our time in there together. I am too young a sister to talk to or fight with. Too young to be reasoned with, too innocent for words. We don't wrestle or play, barely touch each other. Except once, she leans over my bed in the dark and tells me to touch her breasts. I remember seeing them outlined against the little bit of light from the window. "Just touch them," she says. "Go ahead, do it." I don't want to. They look huge at the angle. "Just do it," she says, and it's her voice that scares me. She insists and I touch them. They are cool, too full and soft to belong to that voice strung over my head, taut like a wire.

I look for things to account for the way my sister and I, adults, sometimes used to slam the phone down on each other. I took Mom's silverware from my uncle's attic, it isn't fair, she says. She raids my childhood books for her own children. How will I ever get them back? She has most of the furniture anyway, I wail, defending myself. I won't come and iron her husband's shirts while she takes care of her new baby. Let him do it, I yell at her, I'm your sister, and an aunt, not your maid. Once, we don't talk for a year, though we live in the same city. I have, without ever

acknowledging it, refused to learn how to cook, so I never invite her over. I'm afraid to hear what she'll say about my life on the edge, how my apartment isn't "homey." This hurts her feelings, I'm surprised to find out later. The possibility never occurs to me. You don't have children, I think she thinks. So what do you do with your time? It isn't fair, she says. It isn't fair, I say.

I remember her voice years ago coming up through the bedroom floor. She screeches at my parents. About a date? Piano lessons? Something she has refused to eat? Once, a fight because she was made to stay home with me on New Year's Eve while my parents went out to a party. We were supposed to have a good time together, Brother off somewhere else. But she disappears upstairs, well past the ticking away of the year which I stay up for, crying at the dining room table. I find a piece of paper and write, because I am learning about writing as a place to go. I write, in slow, big letters, how sad I am, how lonely, how my sister won't talk to me, won't celebrate, won't stay. I must become drowsy and wander away, because I never mean to leave that piece of paper out where they will find it, shaming her with it the next day so that she must apologize to me in her strained and hopeless voice, and me trying to tell her, though it seems unbelievable, that I never meant to write what I was feeling for anybody but myself. Horrified that I've coerced her.

She is a popular, all-around good student but she doesn't date much, and worries about it. She feels her breasts are too big, too early. Her sixteenth birthday, a shiny red dress with a V-neckline. Is she going out? The series of special, for-the-occasion color snapshots show us, two sisters and a brother, huddled around a birthday cake with our father. My brother hauls around a little pistol and I won't let go of my red tricycle. We wear roughhouse clothes, father in predictable flannel shirt over white T gazing at the cake with angelic grin, his eyes watering, Brother and I shaping ourselves to be photographed in a sweet reverence, and Pearl smiling, tense, hopeful. I think she looks beautiful, and I'm right. She does. But something is wrong with the present, not the ring she wanted, its pearl set awkwardly, too prominent, some way they didn't see how it would fit her hand, the rightness of what she needs. What's wrong? We are all thinking, what's wrong with her?

She bushwhacks through the fifties—an anxiety of order and discipline—and softens my parents for my sixties' adolescence. Gets no immediate rewards.

She goes to the state university and hates it, feels lost in the crowds, pushed by my parents into mathematics when she wants to be a gym teacher. Waitresses on the Jersey Shore in the summers. Bleaches her hair and comes home to screaming fights because my mother says she is making herself look cheap.

She graduates and moves to New York, finds a job and, after

awhile, a psychiatrist whose name she gets from an uncle who has a history of mental disorders linked to his military service in Japan and Korea. Unlike anyone else in the family, he draws no blanks at the mention of the word "psychiatry." She sees this psychiatrist for a year or so, pays for the treatment herself, and avoids discussing it with my parents. She doesn't think he is helping her, much. When my father dies, she stops. I imagine she sleeps with men for the first time. She becomes pregnant once and has to spend a lot of money for a psychiatric abortion, the only kind legal at the time. She uses her savings and borrows money from my mother for a "sinus operation." Pays every cent of it back.

She becomes a social worker for the city, and moves downtown to a small apartment in the East Village where she lives by herself. She begins to see a fellow social worker who plays the saxophone and who is struggling with an addiction to heroin. I am proud of her, excited by her contact with an outside world that comes into my own only through a growing unrest revealed on television. I tell my classmates that my sister works in Harlem, that she helps poor people. This seems like a badge of rebellion, but my sister always comes through the door at Christmas looking beaten and tight-lipped, a woman returned from exile to a place that no longer has room for her. Of course, with the little red house this comes to be true. When my sister comes home she sleeps on a mattress laid out on the basement floor.

After my father dies, my mother and I spend four years living together alone. During that time I manage an easy popularity of my own, do well in school, and have boyfriends. I am a cheerleader. I accomplish a few things that my sister didn't. Go to drinking parties on my own, wheedle my mother into buying me modest miniskirts, keep up with the styles. My mother and I spend aimless time together, shopping at bargain marts, stuffing ourselves with hot dogs, then Metrecal diets. Day in and day out. We talk boys, who she thinks is cute, gracious, or a knockout date. We gossip about kids at school, and spread my daily life around the edges of her growing depression.

Like sisters at times, at times more than I might like. She drops out of the social life she has shared with my father. Married couples—the Ribandos, the Sharons—make what seem like sympathy calls and retreat, or is it my mother retreating from them? She has nothing left but this one last child. Visibly ailing, short of breath, a weakening heart. I know this: my concern for her day in and day out, mottled with my own burgeoning desires.

October 6, 1967

Dear Janie,

How are ya doing? We heard from you at this end thru Brother and sense how you must feel at times. It's hard for you and your mother, both of you in such different stages of life and growing up so differently. I know it's a little rough at times but things will come out all right. At least we have a house with a roof on it and some land. Where I work the young kids hardly have a damn thing and don't even get an opportunity to see what beauty in the world can be as in nature. Anyway, I understand that in a few weeks you are coming to New York, on November 17th! We're really excited and can't wait for you to come. Wait until you see your brother's pad—unbelievable! He has a cat now too as I do and we might soon mate them.

You know Brother is starting to work as a caseworker too, the same job that I have, besides going to full time night school. He is really tied up. However, Carolyn has been up twice to see him and next weekend he plans to go on the peace march to Washington as your sister might too. Alot of my friends are going down for this Oct. 21st March and hope it affects our federal government some. However, Johnson doesn't seem to be at all a sensitive human being and really wonder whether these peace marches have any effect at all. I just wrote a letter to a very close friend of mine who has been in Vietnam for the last 6 months, Juan Rosendo. Perhaps you remember me talking about him a year or so ago. As far as I know he is not in combat, but is working as a photographer. His letter that he wrote to me was full of despair about the whole thing.

I am still seeing Robert, the Negro boy I told you about and hope you might meet him when you come. He's really a lovely person and like him very much but there are many complicated things involved and don't know what the future will be. Mais J'espere que le soliel brillera pour nous et toi.

Man, just take care of yourself and things will be groovy for ya soon if not now at moments, I'm sure. We go down and up in this world everyday. 'Tis not easy, but who wants life without some pain? Otherwise it wouldn't be life.

Hello to your mama and hope things will come along for you both.

Your stinkapoo sister

I go by myself, every once in a while. Take the 4 p.m. bus snaking across the eastern hills of Pennsylvania into a growing darkness lit by a necklace of lights, people leaning against lampposts throughout New Jersey, their lives so different from mine. The scuff of a boot I can't hear, a lit cigarette, a face shadowed by a hat, or a woman I see through the window, her hair smooth under her scarf, peering up at me, then gone.

My heart in my throat over the last rise toward Manhattan, the descent under the river and on into Port Authority, darkly glowing where Brother will find me stepping off the bus, wrap his arms around me, Pearl waiting, somewhere back in the crowd. She'll greet me warmly, perhaps we'll eat Indian food together on E. 6th St., then off I'll go. With my brother.

For forty-eight hours I'll shadow him, go to head shops, the Thalia, the Eighth Street Bookstore. Perhaps a show at the Fillmore, the Staten Island Ferry at midnight. I'll sleep on his couch in the apartment on Sullivan Street and wake to blues radio, or war talk, politics, demonstrations, my brother making coffee for both of us in the kitchen. I will hear about the "Left" for the first time. And we will visit my sister, her first-floor apartment on Tompkins Square. Where I will be let into something else I recognize, same but different. The sense of orderliness, so unlike my brother's territory where I'm free to cross and mingle, not bothering to figure what's him, what's me. I'll be a guest in rooms whose mysteries won't unfold, welcomed into them with careful affection. I'll sit carefully and look about me, and feel without thinking clearly, that my sister's home is an outpost, a renegade fort shored up against family, not unlike how I will come to live so much later. Out in her world, far from the house where we move according to the increasingly contingent presence of our mother, she defines herself sharply against my desire to invade her and to be held, swallowed up, taken. And let alone.

We love each other. Fierce. Formal.

I want what they have. I want college out of state, New York or Boston, a big city, right away following the path put down by my siblings. My mother is reluctant, fearful of having me so far out of reach. But my sister steps in and fights for me with an insistence that reminds me of love. She is my advocate. We have not corresponded much, but that year she writes me in detail, telling me just how to proceed with my mother, with applications, and with financial aid. She calls on the phone, and argues convincingly that the mistake they made with her should not be repeated. In the end we wear my mother down, and she gives in. I make my applications and am accepted.

But my mother jumps the gun on me. She leaves home first. I receive notice of scholarship aid while my mother lies in a New York hospital waiting to undergo exploratory heart surgery. Two days later, she has a stroke and dies.

My sister comes home. She gives up her apartment, obtains a leave from her job, moves into my mother's bedroom across the hall. She is my sister and I love her, but I am worried about this. I try to think of ways to suggest to the relatives that it would be better, much better, for my brother to come. It does not occur to me that he might not want to. I cannot frame my anxieties in a way that sounds convincing. I want her on the

phone where I can reach her, not picking up the traces of the room next door. In the relatives' eyes, my brother has become too much of a hipster, long-haired, a bachelor of New York City nights. Too much of what I want. But she is highly efficient, will get things done. She comes, and through the days and nights of that summer, aside from my brother's occasional visits, we have no one but ourselves, and between us, no backlog of intimacy on which to draw.

That summer I work as a housekeeper in a nursing home across the street. My days are taken up mopping floors under the beds of disconsolate, elderly people whose children seldom visit and who languish in the beige confines of that final place. My sister spends her days sorting possessions, calling real estate agents and otherwise wandering through the house. She arranges the family photographs into three separate piles which she turns into photo albums, one for each of us. She categorizes the pictures according to our assumed interests, each to her or his own childhood with minimal overlaps. I am upset because she gives most of the pictures of the old neighborhood boys to my brother, because they are boys. My playmates, I insist. My childhood. We fight over pictures of our parents, make copies, and fight over the originals.

We fight over my friends, and over my comings and goings with them. I haul out the phrase, Mom would have let me! A bloody axe to her authority. I have passionate friendships, loyalties to a small circle of boys and girls that are far different from the high school society my sister left behind her. We are her society, as we had been for my mother, but Pearl finds fault with them. They are too idealistic, too silly, too friendly, too much like me.

She is caught in several roles—mother, sister, and, the one we should but cannot acknowledge, grieving daughter. She invents curfews and restricts my use of the car. Obsessed with closing things up, she goes into my room to remove the bureau for sale, and discards prized mementoes I have stuck in the mirror. A bit of dry weed from the old home in the country. The bus ticket receipt from my last trip to New York, two days before my mother died. I scream at her for this outrage, days in my memory though my memory is filled with a wailing that must last moments.

We move around each other according to schedules, the demand to get things done. Eat dinner, pack, go to a movie. Stay home. Sort. Some evenings she sits at the dining room table going through family papers, smoking and getting up to empty the ashtray, running her hands through her hair. I pace the living room, wander the yard, find a way to go out or back in again to find her profiled against the giant yellow flowers of the dining room curtains, a print I've hated ever since she and Mom picked it out.

The weekends my brother comes home, we drink wine at sunset, all of us loosening into drunken nights, spraying each other with the lawn

hose and laughing. Midnights we drive out into the country and go swimming in the creek. When my brother comes, the confusion fades between my sister and me. We cease circling around the roles of adult and child we wear like ill-fitting clothes. The three of us become, for a few moments, the last of our kind, orphans, set out on the edge of the world.

Daylight brings us back to inevitable separations. The mother I lose is my only mother, and more a sister than I will allow anyone else to be. The mother she loses turned an uncomprehending eye on her years before descending into her own hopelessness. My sister and I carry the weight of these two distinct beings in our own bodies. I swim toward the possibility of sex, trying to drink in the physical life of those who might deliver me into some welcome abandon. My sister retires behind the bedroom door.

There is a man. He's black, a professor of drama at the local college, a person so smart and richly different from the world surrounding us that we yearn for him, loosening the tense discipline of our days to give him room. Jim is my sister's age. He visits many times throughout the summer, flirting with us both, it now seems, over the long weeks gaining toward our end in that place. My sister likes him, would like something to happen between them. I enjoy his company, but he is so far beyond my hopes I think nothing more of it until he moves on me. We are all swimming at the creek toward sunset. I am high up in the rapids, my sister down in deep water, and Jim comes and puts his hands on me, delicately, murmuring his lines with a theatrical grace.

I don't turn him down, though I never sleep with him. In the end he must decide he doesn't want to tackle a virgin, and pushes me gently out of the house where, one late summer afternoon, I have followed him. But this is of little importance. I would have. I would have followed his lead, assuming for myself an innocence that dictates the inevitability of certain things. If those things seem glorious and forbidden, one is to give one's self over to them. In spite of what my sister wants. Because of it.

She must have sensed what happened at the creek. Or in the car coming home, my silence and averted eyes. The three of us sit in the stripped-down living room. We break periodic silence with small talk until my sister pointedly goes to bed. This is my signal to close the evening, but I don't. I linger through his few, furtive embraces, well within sight of her bedroom door. I can hear the silence she hears, her ear to the sound of us shifting on the couch and murmuring to each other. I can feel her body standing rigid by the bed, waiting, while I settle into the sensuousness of being held, the surface of my body the only world.

Never before, never since, have I felt such singular rage flaming toward me. When Jim leaves she tears out the door. "You fucking bastard!" she screams and charges to a dead stop in front of me. Her face twists in fury and she stands, not touching me, never touching me, trembling and flushed as if all of her would, at any moment, implode. "You knew!

You knew how I felt about him! How could you do this to me?"

I have no answer for this. Only the seething yowl that starts low in my belly and rises, tearing through my throat and teeth, it isn't my fault, I couldn't help it, this is the way it is, it isn't my fault, all the time knowing as I give way and run crying out into the street that it is my fault, I let it happen, I did it, I did it to her.

I stay out all night and return the next day. We settle it, then, by drawing a distinct line around our separate comings and goings. I see Jim a few times, make a romance of him that has nothing to do with his intentions toward me. I see others. Pearl and I go to the cemetery together and stand apart over the graves of our parents, leave flowers, drive home in silence. We visit our relatives in Connecticut toward the summer's end, arriving on their doorstep with a formal politeness carved out between us. Behind the closed door of a shared room we hiss at each other, spit out sentences and retire into restless sleep.

In the end it isn't an argument over a man. The man merely gives us conventional terms for a grief whose immensity evades what common language we have. I share with no one else the condition of being a daughter to that mother. That we have loved and hated our mother in fiercely different ways, that we have competed with each other just as fiercely in the absence of a woman who will yield no more to either of us, may be a matter common to the psychology of family grief. Long ago I thought the upshot would be that I'd have children, eagerly reengaging my family's passions well before she'd ever, if she'd ever, marry and give birth. The opposite has been true.

We go down and up in this world everyday. . . . Otherwise it wouldn't be life. I dream her, once in the old house, an attic that isn't really there. We stand on either side of a coffin that gleams in faint light. Together we have to move it to another part of the house, the two of us easing it down the stairs. The question remains hanging: shall we open it, or leave it be? I keep a picture of my sister with me, have carried it to all the places I have moved. In it, she stands at a signpost on top of a mountain in Maine, gazing as an adult into the camera the same way she used to pose on camping trips as a child. Her hair is short. She's planted her feet firmly together and her knees are locked into position, her head slightly bowed. Like my mother. My sister! Mine.

DOUG LARSEN

Seizures

You could eat a purple football. You could
ride the 57 now the 56 from High Street. You could
make a face out of the crowd that makes a face
out of you. You could be on your way to the University.
You could go into debt to become a member of society.
You could laugh hysterically and drool about
how yes you just cut a man's throat to fit the cloth.
You could see people be nice and let you be.
You could twist around and look out the window. You could
watch landmarks slide over. You could add. You could
put your fingerprints on the window.
You could name that building childhood.
You could know the gravity inside. You could
rush to get a transfer. You could
hear the busdriverguy say when the light
changes. You could get off the bus now.
You could hit the ground in seizure.

You could awaken among strangers. You could
be on the curb in front of the hospital
you were born in. You could tell the fireman
your name. You could sit there in the air.
You could say you are all right and walk away.
You could see a thousand signs in your way.
You could miss your body. You could stop
under the MacArthur freeway and sit on cardboard.
You could see the ball of flames painted
in the tiger's mouth. You could reach
into your coat pocket. You could pull out
your keys and your prescription. You could read
the label. You could budget another football.
You could double check the refill date.
You could get up and move the pigeons. You could
feel the wind tunnel begin to blow. You could
whistle with your lips and blow it back.

Let No Man Impede Justice

We had been rolling down the wide residential street, turning cartwheels like children as we passed the massive tree-enshrouded homes. But I have never been very good at sustaining such gymnastic feats, and I fell over wanting to vomit. She, on the other hand, continued to roll towards the corner, chatting away in a sing-song voice, her dark hair swirling and tumbling, brushing the clean concrete sidewalk. As my eyes refocused and my stomach stopped heaving, I saw her gracefully round the corner and disappear into the next block. But she would be back, I was sure, rolling in from the opposite direction—all I had to do was wait. A man could do worse than wait for his beloved in a well cultivated neighbourhood. And on such a clear sunny morning, too! I leaned back on my elbows, amazed by the quiet.

"But you are always amazed," she would mutter sarcastically, if she were there. And then, wrinkling her forehead, she would tell me that I had no right to expect anything *other than* quiet in such a decent, civilized neighbourhood. All respectable neighbourhoods are quiet. All tree-lined streets exude peace. Nothing amazing in that. "But you are always amazed!" Gripping my hand as if it might run away, she'd bare her perfect teeth and shout: "You frighten me with all this horrible amazement." At this point, we would have to escape into something less amazing; a barren, crippling nowhere like we live in perhaps, and I could smooth her hair and talk nonsense to calm her.

Of course, if I restrained myself from acting amazed by the quiet, everything would work out fine. She would be happy—happy enough to risk arrest by turning cartwheels in the wrong neighbourhood. But then again, no one can turn cartwheels quite like her, and rather than have her arrested, the residents of this neighbourhood might choose to view her as entertaining, leaning out of their doors and cheering her on with little squeals of delight. On the other hand, would they wish to be entertained with a gymnastics show at this hour of the day? Perhaps not. Perhaps they would rather see a police cruiser haul us both away—my wife for her unrestrained cartwheeling, and me for my slovenly sprawling on the sidewalk. Nevertheless, it was too relaxing, just leaning there on my elbows, for me to want to move, police or no police.

"That's typical of you," she'd say if she saw me. "You worry. You terrify me with your worry, but you still don't do anything about it."

I might try to remind her that it was not my idea to take a morning walk through a decent, civilized neighbourhood. And I would remind her, if I could, that she came here to dream herself in and out of the various livingrooms, kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms and palatial spaces of these places, not I. For myself, I found it all confusing, not knowing whether the residents here would view us as entertaining in our childish appreciation or dangerous in our antics. So, I would say, I have every right to be both worried and confused—and through confusion, rendered unable to "do anything about it." But she would not be impressed with such reasoning and would tell me that it impinged upon the happiness one could attain by absorbing the unamazing quiet—and such places are not like parks where the quiet is disappointingly natural, but are deliberately conducive to civilized quiet; that ought to make anyone happy. Confusion, she would conclude, has no place in such a place; confusion is noisy.

Knowing perfectly well that the confusion was locked up inside my throbbing skull (and, therefore, silent to the residents of the street), I shifted my weight from elbow to elbow, relaxing pressure. It occurred to me, however, that if a police car were to pull up at the curb, and a uniformed officer got out and asked me to accompany him to the station, I would have to say: "No, I'm sorry. I can't do that. You see, my wife is cartwheeling around the block and won't be back for at least another five minutes." If I were to vanish in a police car, she might continue to wheel around the block, working herself, eventually, into a state of hysterical nervous exhaustion, to say nothing of the inevitable physical collapse. And that would be disastrous. It would ruin all the joy and happiness she might acquire from being in such a cultivated neighbourhood. But the police officer would not want to sit around waiting for my wife to come wheeling back. No, a job must be done promptly if it's to be done at all. Perhaps he wouldn't believe me, and if I resisted, what then? Handcuffs? Rough treatment? After all, I would put up a fight, for my wife and I resolved a long time ago that we will go nowhere without the other—at least, if we start out somewhere together then we will stay together until we are finished. And we had started this morning walk together. No, that wouldn't impress the police officer. Especially if some of the residents of the neighbourhood were watching from behind their curtains, watching to see justice in action and tax dollars well spent in the maintenance of law and order. He would be embarrassed. So my suggestion that we lean up against his cruiser and have a quiet talk until my wife wheeled along would not seem particularily appealing. Besides, I wouldn't know how to have a little conversation like that with a man about to arrest me. I'd be nervous, and that always makes me a bad conversationalist.

Then again, a block has four sides, and what if my wife was the target of arrest and not me? For all I knew, she could be wheeling to a stop in front of several uniformed officers who would waste no time in taking her away, for she does not usually put up a fight in the presence of armed

authority. Then it would be me, not her, who would do all the waiting on the wrong side of the block. If she told them that she only desired to be happy, they would be unimpressed, perhaps amazed—and here she would get into trouble, because she does not like hearing about things being amazing. She would throw her head back and say: "There is nothing amazing about quiet residential decency making a person feel happy." Such disputatious behavior does not go over well with the police.

I had the sudden urge to get up on my feet and run around the block in search of her. The residents would take me for a health-conscious sort of person, not knowing that my only desire was to be with my wife at our moment of arrest. And if I caught up with her, knocked her over and held her there she would be upset—not only because I had ruined her cartwheeling, but also because my motives would frighten her. "You are always placing me in danger!" she would shriek, trying to bite me. It would be difficult, indeed, to make her see the sense in my actions. But I would try. I always try. I would tell her that it was not I who was placing her in danger, but rather, the residents. For myself, I was only attempting to share her arrest, like any devoted spouse would want to. She would balk at that. But I don't give up easily. I would tell her that if we weren't careful we would lose the right to take a morning walk in a decent, civilized neighbourhood and be condemned to languish in our barren, crippling nowhere. That might get through to her. One never knows. In all probability, she would curse me for having frightened her. And I would feel remorse, in which case it would be necessary to stand back and let her go, following at an untroublesome distance, my eyes wide open for police cars or lifted curtains in the massive houses.

Naturally, I know how to appear carefree. As I followed her, I might even whistle (not too loudly) or bury my hands in my pockets, casual casual casual, seemingly unconcerned about how we looked to those within. But of course, my senses would be on the alert for any sign of trouble. When the police car rounded the corner and began to slow down, the occupants bristling with anticipation, I would clap my hands to signal my wife and we could go quietly into the back of the car. Let no man impede justice.

But such thinking was making my elbows ache, for it caused me to press them hard against the sidewalk on which they rested. Such thinking, such concern, made me suspicious of time. It seemed ages since my wife had wheeled off around that corner. So now I was filled with suspicion and aching elbows. My wife would have been disgusted, if she'd been there. "You have ruined everything," she'd say, looking around for a stick to hit me over the head with. "You always ruin everything.'" But this time, at least, she would be thwarted, for no one in such a neighbourhood leaves a stick lying around. Sticks are promptly disposed of. She would have to use her hands. But then, they might be a little sore from having brushed against the sidewalk during all her cartwheeling, and I would be

spared any heavy attack.

I could imagine her standing there—unable to find a stick and unable to use her hands. Her feet, of course, would be as sore as her hands, so they, too, would be out of the picture. Yes, she'd be weaponless. And would I mind? Would I offer her a weapon? No! "You always frustrate me," she'd shout, perhaps wanting to cry (perhaps not; one never knows for sure). But of course that would be a lie. A lie! Finally! And if there is one thing my wife cannot stand it is to be caught telling a lie. She would know that it was not my fault that there were no available sticks. And if her hands and feet were too sore to be used as weapons, well, whose fault was that? Not mine. I don't live in the orderly neighbourhood. And I don't get so ecstatic from looking at it all that I cartwheel myself into physical decreptitude. No, not me! These truths would so upset her that she wouldn't know where to turn. But such is a liar's fate, I'd crow smugly, such is a liar's fate: to be broken by her own treachery. The truth alone would silence her. For once we could go home in peace.

The universe snapped to attention as I thought these things. It all fell into place. What a marvellous effect such neighbourhoods have on the minds of men and women. An enormous unity presented itself to me—yes, to me lying there on the sidewalk bathed in clear morning sunshine—and I saw how it all made sense. She couldn't complain herself out of these truths. Rising to my knees, I blessed the rolling lawns, bright glass windows, carefully tended gardens and opulent furnishings of the houses all around me. My own extravagance was intoxicating, and wanting to laugh and cry hysterically, I thanked them for picking up all their loose sticks. I thanked them for filling my wife with dreams and desires. I thanked them for being there. In fact, I was so thankful that I started shouting and howling, unable to contain my gratitude at being able to go home to nowhere in peace. Not even the police car with my wife sulking and frowning in the back seat disturbed me. I simply rose up off my knees when it had stopped, walked over and presented myself for arrest. "Let no man impede justice!" I screamed, as they threw me into the back seat with my snarling wife. "Let no man impede justice!" And here and there throughout the neighbourhood curtains fluttered back into place.

The Magic Thimble

After that they make you swallow a stone and then they push you into the pond. It is inevitable.

She views Adele Rosselini with suspicion. She sits in a green canvas director's chair outside her front door, drinking tea from a delicate rosebud porcelain cup, tapping the gilt-edged saucer which it rests upon with her thimble, and suspects.

Adele has murdered someone.

Adele suspects that Old Granny suspects her. But she suspects that she is suspected of lying. She lies on her bed, to one or two people at the same time and, at the same time, she lies with the one or two people she lies to until the phone rings and predicates her deceptions. It is always the timely ding-dong of the phone or the tower bell which reminds her of being a passive liar. The worst kind. She feels herself pushed into the pink velour bedspread as if she herself were the complementary red pillows, suitably arranged to cushion a protracted body. But beneath it all she feels her own inflexibility, her bones feel hard, they resist. Only the passive liar can feel, can know, can experience the fact that she lies, and passively.

Adele is thin, cutting the observer with her edges and forcing the eye into angles. It is this characteristic of Adele's which exposes her to Old Granny's observant eyes every time Adele walks by her director's chair. Adele looks at Old Granny's sewing basket and ripping it apart, with startling fury, she sticks all the needles into soft, plump Old Granny. This action does not hurt Old Granny, however; such things are done passively, with round phrases and circuitous questions, and even then only inside the head. (When Adele kills she remembers having killed and having been killed, having to kill and having to be killed. A deluge of killings descends upon her like a woodsman's axe, chop-chop. When Adele kills she remembers that she lives near a forest; she remembers that she is a child, drawing a line, in violent pink chalk, over cracks on a sidewalk. She walks carefully along the line, balancing each step, singing step on a crack, break your mother's back. The other little girls chime in, pigtails swinging, cherry Koolaid lips baring milky teeth, cherry tongues and throats.)

Adele lives a wonderful life. Her friends send her birthday cards and the jokes on them are not about her age. Adele does not avoid looking into the mirror, either, although she has only one mirror because she is

superstitious about breaking them, and the more mirrors one has, the more likely it is that one will be broken.

The villagers had always liked her.

Once a month Adele looks into her closet and decides what she wants to throw away. One month it is three sets of pink leotards, one striped silk blouse and two pairs of trousers—one a grey wool, the other a burgundy corduroy. One month it is underwear, because she is tired of bras and panties and, even, socks. She folds them carefully into a white plastic supermarket bags and deposits them into the trash receptacle at the back of the duplex. She suspects, Adele knows, and, as she passes by, Adele almost says to Old Granny, "Don't worry: I have wrapped them in plastic and they are clean. I mended the holes in the purple socks, and the broken strap on the bra." Even so, as she throws the bag into the bin, Adele feels all the eyes in the woods blinking at her like Christmas lights. (Adele's mother always sews Adele's clothes. She is an expert seamstress. Adele is embarrassed because all the other little girls buy their clothes, and Adele's wardrobe, by comparison, lacks sophistication. Her mother's favorite color is red, and the bus driver can spot Adele a mile away, waving like a flag on a windy day, while immediately below her knees, only a second's peek down from her white bobby socks, for better or worse, Adele's reflection is caught forever in matching red patent leather shoes.)

The telephone (or the tower bell) rings at least thirty times a day because Adele has a wonderful life, and so much has to be predicated. Adele doesn't need to answer, of course, it is only the ringing which signifies. The managers who walk her home from their shops and offer her jobs, though Adele already has a good one, have the same significance. The newspaper which arrives at her door every morning, though she does not read it, has the same significance. Except for Old Granny, everyone believes in Adele, and belief is all that matters. But tremors travel from Old Granny's hair net down to her orthopedic shoes like a row of dominoes whenever Adele crosses her path. Granny turns as purple in the green director's chair as the pair of socks Adele discarded yesterday. This time Adele is motivated to say, "Yes, I do eat vegetables for dinner, brussel sprouts or baby peas, sometimes carrots and beans. But, no, I do not go out with runs in my pantyhose—see?" Adele shakes the plastic bag at Old Granny, timidly looking down at Old Granny's sewing basket as if her actions have nothing to do with her words. When she looks up she realizes Old Granny is asleep anyway, has fallen asleep still suspecting. Old Granny never hears what Adele has to say for herself. (All this determines that on afternoons, when other little girls drink cola and watch cartoons, Adele will read varicolored fairy tale books, sip tea and decide that the only thing she likes about sewing is the thimble. Her mother's thimble is made of mother-of-pearl and silver, and quite likely is magical, because metal things worn on fingers have mysterious powers. Anyone could guess that just like her mother's ring, a thimble's magic does a lot more than protect a finger from

a needle—and no one ever said you had to sew to possess one.)

But villagers are jealous of those who don't pay dues.

Adele searches her tea cup for a vocabulary. She sees the single straight tea leaf near the rim—a stick, an axe or a tree; a needle in Old Granny or the tall dark stranger that visited for a night; possibly the letter "I" but more probably a thigh bone; finally, and perhaps, all of them at once. This leads her, once again, to the thought that she has a wonderful life. Indeed, life is wonderful because she drinks Earl Grey tea. (Life is wonderful because her name sounds like the name of a princess on a chocolate box.) But outside her window a tall dark tree is shedding disconnected Latin letters like leaves, and as Adele sees them falling on Old Granny's shawl, the words remind her that she is passive and foreign. (In her little red taffeta party dress, Adele joins hands with another little girl in a yellow dress, but of like ruffles and pearly buttons; on her left side her hand is held by a blue-dressed girl. She doesn't like the blue girl, because the hand is sweaty and the dress chocolate-streaked. Round and round they go, nine or ten girls in all, and all, almost at once, fall down. They get up and do it over again. Adele holds the blue girl's hand with a minimum pressure, hoping it will slide out and that, the next time they fall, she can trade places and hold a different hand. But the blue girl likes her and follows her everywhere—until there is a call of "ice cream and cake" by a mother, whereupon a voluminous swirl of color and fabric leaves Adele abandoned on the ground.)

One fair day, sometimes she thought she heard the villagers whisper.

One day the wind is blowing hard, howling and throwing itself at the windows like winter-starved wolves. Without fail the windows will break. But Adele has already tied everything down to the bedposts—secured the bookshelves, the chairs, the lamp and the dresser drawers with the parcel string from pantyhose packages store managers leave on her doorstop. The bulbs may shatter. The books may be torn, tossed, scattered across village and forest, the clothes may be sucked up and blown until they catch, in indecent or incongruent positions, onto lamp posts, mail boxes, fire hydrants and spruce trees, but Adele feels no anxiety because she has already thrown away her underwear. Besides that, Adele is primarily interested in frames—defined, but empty spaces—which is also why she is thin, and why she does not avoid looking into the mirror. She lies down in the middle of the bed and waits. Perhaps, she thinks, the wind is persistent enough to fill her up like a balloon and carry her off. There are no remaining parcel strings with which to tie herself to the bed in any case, so she closes her eyes, determined to ignore the furious bang-bang, the inevitable break.

Hearing the urgent ding-dong, ding-dong of the bell, the villagers rushed to gather at the church. It was just as they always suspected.

The windows broke and the wind came in tearing at her, entering

her, filling her as with right hand she clung desperately to a teacup, while holding warm in her left fist the thimble. The banging of the door, the flap-flapping of the sheets and the deep-throated howls of the wind circled Adele, round and round, and she saw falling colors which were really the many-colored covers of her books dropping to the floor with indistinguishable thuds, synchronously picked up and hurled out the windows and then suspended in the starry night for an indeterminable time because the tower bell (or the phone) never rang. Only the string-fastened furniture resisted, and the pink velour bedspread, which was pinned in place by Adele's edged, angled body, not, as might be suspected, weighed down by her bones.

By dawn only the handle remained of the teacup, and when the wind died away, leaving her panting on the bed, she was entirely uncertain of the magic of her thimble.

The morning has been blown clear and cold. Men chopping trees can be heard from the nearby woods, and Adele is woken by this morning sound which is all the sharper because of the broken windows. Naked and shivering, she gets out of bed and looks into her mirror. Now she finds that she has grown ears and paws and whiskers, and she finds she has eaten Old Granny and the little girl in the red dress: they are pummeling her from within, their voices whining, beseeching, and louder in Adele's newly sensitive ears than ever. Adele sees Old Granny's shawl lying outside her door amid a heap of withered leaves, but realistically she decides this must be a dream and she crawls back beneath the bedspread and lies passively, feeling her bones, the cold metallic thimble and the heavy mythic life in her stomach. (Shops do not sell pregnant Barbie dolls, and Adele has to stuff a cotton ball under her Barbie's dress because Suzie's Ken doll spent the night. Two hours later she realizes that Barbie's stomach isn't big enough, and she must replace the cotton ball with something larger and harder. She substitutes it with a big round agate she found on an Oregon beach the summer before. Why don't they sell pregnant Barbies if they sell Ken dolls, Adele wonders. Dolls with smaller dolls inside that you can take out and put back inside whenever you want to. And Adele wonders if this is realistic, but realistically she already knows they would never allow something that realistic.)

When Adele opens her eyes again Old Granny and the little red girl are sitting at the foot of her bed, pointing at her and laughing. Adele howls, a long, drawn out howl, a resonating Owwwooo. Who was it called the Woodsman? Now she remembers the grinning man who came brandishing scissors and waxed thread and needle; how with every snip her bones vibrated like a tree that must repeatedly absorb the momentum of the axe, chop-chop, until it falls; how each stone was stitched in like the ding-dong of a tower bell, and over again.

You could hear the villagers whisper.

Perhaps she was never pregnant. She's just hungry. Or the tea-

leaves are to blame, the thousands she has swallowed have all balled up in her stomach into stones. They chatter and churn in her stomach, they twist sharply, but she cannot cast them out and meanwhile Old Granny still suspects her of a murder she never committed. Goodness knows how many times she has walked back and forth in front of Old Granny's door, stepping on all the sidewalk cracks to be sure, but making plain the heap of lies she has chosen to discard (the white plastic bags stretched like cauls over all the incongruous angles, the indecent edges). Yet despite all efforts she can't deny that every belonging she throws away is replaced immediately in her drawer by another—its lace, buttons, its hem and colors slightly altered but not substantially different, just as her stomach remains heavy although she doesn't eat. (Mother may I, Mother May I. Mother, please, says Adele properly. You may: One big step, one medium step and three steps backwards, commands Jenny. Adele knows she will never get to be Mother, and she hates Jenny because she is taking advantage of the game, and because this is the only game Jenny wants to play, and even if Adele doesn't want to be Mother, unless she wants to go home and play by herself she will have to obey the rules.)

Adele had to conclude that disguises didn't work: Magic Thimble or not, Old Granny knew she was a wolf. And Old Granny was the one who sewed in stones. No Woodsman could have thought of that himself, nor have the skill for it.

Adele stuffed everything left into a plastic bag and deposited it and her thimble into Old Granny's sewing basket. But the hollow sound of her stomach still frustrated Adele because she had wolf ears. With wolf nose she sniffed the cold, clear pond from afar, and she caught her lupine reflection rippling gently on the water. Indeed, it was a fine morning for a swim! Adele let her bones draw her in, slowly, deeper down. (Here she can no longer discern whether she or the water is passive, or if one of them lies.) The villagers used to say you could find her deep in the woods, a place where the trees grow so dense light barely trickles through. Only a stranger could tell you how, all along, she suspected herself painfully; how when pulled up and out of the cold heavy water by the sound of a bell (the telephone? the tower ?) Old Granny looked down to see her own face peering from the pond below. How the thimble slipped from her hand on to the pavement, ringing out like the pure, high laugh of a girl. How the villagers never discovered her until much later, because no one ever had time to visit the way they once did.

BRITTANY NEWMARK-SHPANCER

The Time I Saw My Father

I began practicing to be an orphan before my mother's death. At first I went through the motions alone in my room in Albany. I would line up the toys on the bed and imagine them lying on small cots in the cold hollow dormitory of an orphanage. When we would go downtown I would rehearse in public by wandering up and down the aisles of Woolworth's licking my lips, looking hungry, touching the stuffed animals desirously, and then looking to see if I was touching the *fleur de coeur* of some adult stranger as well.

After my mother's death—she died of a stroke when I was eight—I was turned over to a social worker. The social worker began searching for my runaway father, and then for any living relative. She called each Tannenbaum in the Manhattan phone book because on my form, "Tannenbaum" was the name in the space marked "Father." Under "address" was simply "New York City." After three hours, she located my grandmother, on Webster Avenue in the Bronx. So that was where I was sent to live, in the summer of 1960. It seems to me now my whole family was thrown together at the last minute in the offices of some Child Welfare Bureau.

When I got off the bus at the Port Authority still smelling of the cheese and apples I'd been eating on the trip, my grandmother was standing with her shoulders thrown back, and inspecting me while she sucked in air between her clenched teeth. Her dark hair was swirled on top of her head and tacked down. Beneath those shoulder pads lurked no frailty at all. I had hanging from my hand a small pink suitcase shaped like an over-sized hat box. The roundness of it bespoke fashion in my mind. When she reached over and lifted it out of my hand I could tell she was disappointed by its lightness.

The station was rushing, people plowed by and I was almost swept away in a wave. Walking a few steps, she sat down in one of the yellow molded plastic chairs stationed along the wall, opened her hinged purse, took out a tissue, and spit into it. With my face grasped between her thumb and index finger, she wiped.

"I'm not convinced that you are any relation to me whatsoever, but time will tell," she said, wadding the dirty tissue into a tight ball. "Whose mouth do you have? Your mother's? It sure isn't your father's. And those feet—nobody in our family has feet like that."

As she sat there, with her purse in her lap I could see the wheels tuming in her mind: the ideal of "little girl" was dissipating, and the reality of "me" was emerging. I felt like saying: "Look lady, you're not exactly my pull out of the lucky grab bag either." But I was humiliated, my face was wet and I did not want to jeopardize her first impressions of me. I was scared into muteness.

For our first few weeks she scrutinized me incessantly. And I tried to discover what was in her that was like me. A deeply rooted cynicism, planted in foreign soil, had immigrated with her to the new country. "Ha," she'd exclaim, "they call these string beans. I'd rather eat rope."

After meals, when she dried and stacked the dishes, I felt that she was gathering evidence against me in neat piles. It all seemed to be adding up to the boot in the behind out the door. I pictured myself sleeping on the metal grates of the sidewalk, my only source of warmth the hot fumes from the subway. I gave her a wide berth and tried to act related by imitating her walk. Toe heel, toe heel I would go through house.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked. "Did you you hurt your foot? Let me see those shoes," she said grabbing for my ankle. "Too small," she announced, eyeing the shoe with a knowing grin.

We replaced my old shoes, dresses and play clothes. We redid the guest room, painting it pink and white. We hung a poster of a Degas ballerina on the wall over the bed. Days at my grandmother's started to take on a loose organization and routine. We woke up at seven every morning. Breakfast was always the same, coffee with a lot of milk, and toast with butter or chicken fat in a thick smear. Then we lay in bed reading fashion magazines, deciding who I would look like the most when I grew up, and which color was most flattering. My grandmother said everybody looks good in red, even a corpse. We took our temperatures to make sure that we had not picked up a bug some place, and drifted through afternoons trying to find a hidden talent to develop in me that might prove profitable.

The only other relative that I knew of was my grandmother's cousin Sarah. And like oxen wearing the yolk of family obligation, some afternoons we trudged over and spent with her. She lived, a loose use of the word, in an apartment in the east seventies. Sarah was an ancient inert figure propped up each day by her maid to wait on a divan at death's door.

We rarely saw or talked to anyone else. After I had been there a few weeks, the phone rang one moming and the crackled voiced operator asked for Mrs. Tannenbaum.

"Yes, I'll accept the charges," she said. "A girl," she shouted while shaking the base of the black phone, "that's what they told me."

By this time I had almost succeeded in forgetting the possibility of a father. But I knew who she was speaking to and after she hung up she announced that he was coming to visit— no doubt to hand down the verdict on me. My mind raced. I could hear him saying, "no, this isn't my

child, they made a mistake." I saw my doom soft-shoeing towards me, hat in hand. I did not want to get out of bed for the rest day. "My throat hurts," I whined. I pulled the bed covers over my head, and longed to be tied in ribbons of fever, too sick to stand for the sentencing.

The city was particularly hot in the summer, but despite the heat, the oven blasted. Yards of noodle pudding were pulled out of it at regular intervals. You'd have thought the king of Siam was coming. We cleaned dust kittens from under the bed, we dusted heavy gold painted picture frames. She laid in a store of food like she was expecting the Third World for dinner. "Prices go up with every breath," she lamented.

"A slip. . . I need a girdle and *a slip* with this dress." She spent hours preening herself. Her black hair was pulled into a swatch that was poised on top of her head. Two strands on either side worked themselves free and hung like streamers. She wore an uplift bra, electric cherry lipstick and a dress so starched that it made a noise when she moved. "Get out the vacuum," she ordered. "It's in the hall closet." Then she stacked the refrigerator with six different kinds of cake, apricot and chocolate, chocolate adorned with powdered sugar, three layer mocha chip cake with shavings on the top—all of them in neat white boxes tied with red and white bakery string. "You stay out of here," she told me, slamming the refrigerator door. She made meat loaf measured out by the metric standard, pot roast that could follow a person into the next life, large pans of baked rice pudding. "God, am I sweaty," she complained. She consulted the calendar, marking days and chores off with Xs. As the day of his arrival approached, her mood seemed to lighten.

"Now you behave when you first meet your father, Esther," she said. "He's coming all this way to meet you," she said, revealing the dangerous ideal of family that lurked in her imagination—jet black, ready to pounce.

The whole block knew he was coming. All up and down the street the neighbors would stop and ask, "Hey, when's Doc coming?" I had this picture of him with a cigarette dangling from his bottom lip, holding his hand close to his chest, and peering over the poker cards like somebody named Doc. The worst part of those days was that no one could even touch any of the special foods before he came. Candy dishes overflowed with jellied sliced orange wedges. I was beside myself with desires.

Three days before the scheduled date of my father's arrival, my grandmother enrolled me in half-day Hebrew school. She had read this advertisement in *The Jewish Herald Voice* that said "Judaism knows no summer vacation. But we have a fun educational experience for your child. The Solomon Schacter Academy."

I could envision no crueler torture. There she was, my summer, gathering the large folds of her skirt and running away. The musical sway of the ice-cream truck, the other kids jumping rope, all became a half-remembered song. So while the whole world on Webster Avenue played,

I sat in the front row of Mrs. Fialkoff's class.

Mrs. Fialkoff was what my grandmother called "frum." Her limp paisley and floral dresses hung like emblems—the uniform of burden—a dowager's hump on a 25-year-old woman. She smelled like Jergen's lotion, and wore a wig that looked like a huge blond bird had made a crash landing on her head. It stuck out its wings on either side. The high point of her lesson was when we all got up and stood next to our desks while she sang, "Put your *yad* in, put your *yad* out, turn around and shake it all about." And Ruben Stone, in his endless effort to impress the teacher, would flail his hands like he was possessed.

Mrs. Fialkoff told us a story. "In the days of the Pharaoh," she said, "A decree came down that all Jewish male babies were to be put to death. Baitia, the Pharoah's daughter, out walking one day near the river, found a basket that contained a small baby boy floating downstream. She plucked the little Moses from the water and immediately began to love the child. She brought him to the Pharoah's house, hoping her father would spare his life, since he was obviously a Jewish baby. The Pharoah, under the advice of his wisest counsel, and in order to insure that a certain prophecy would not come to pass, devised a test for the baby. This mighty king of the people ordered that slaves carry into the palace two large wrought iron bowls, the first heaped high with bright gold and all manner of sparkling gems, the second filled with hot embers and black ash. The test was to see if the baby reached for the gold, representing the Pharoah's kingdom, or the ash." Mrs. Fialkoff said that at the moment the baby's hand stretched out towards the gold, which of course would attract a baby's attention, an angel dispatched from God's hall flew down and pushed the baby's arm into the bowl of ash. "The angel provided that the baby pick up a small hot ember and again guided his hand to his lips. It is said this hot ember fell onto Moses's tongue and for ever after he would stutter and lisp from a scarred tongue."

The day my father was expected to arrive, I too was granted a reprieve, plucked from the treacherous waters of Hebrew school. My grandmother and I waited and waited, the appointed hour passed, in fact several hours passed, and there was no sign of him. My grandmother spent the whole day at the window peering out from behind the white curtains in the living room. I was dressed up in a new yellow dress with a broad pink waist sash, white socks and Mary Janes. My hair was cut like Mamie Eisenhower's, but at least I did not have to go to Hebrew class. We waited there in the living room until eleven that night.

In the darkness of the house the ember from my grandmother's cigarette burned like a tired red eye. "Get me the ashtray and go to bed," she ordered. My grandmother was one of the most efficient smokers I've ever seen. Almost all night she paced up and down the hallway with an ashtray in the palm of her hand smoking furiously and neatly flicking into the small china tray. When I went to check on her I saw that finally she had fallen asleep sitting up in the pink and green living room chair. I slept in my

new dust-ruffled bedroom dreaming Mrs. Failkoff released me, to fill my afternoons with duck ponds, little paper boats adrift, open fire hydrants: my father was a king, I a princess and Ruben a slave.

I don't know exactly what time it was when the cab pulled up, but out fell my father, out fell a small red suitcase, and out fell two other men laughing and holding on to each other and to the cab driver like they just heard the best joke in the world. Small lights went on across the street, windows slammed shut. The taxi driver didn't like his tip. "Don't break the bank Rockefella," he shouted as he pulled away. From my bedroom window my father and his oddly-dressed companions, one in lime green and the other in melon-colored plaid, looked fun-loving, full of abandon. My father's dark hair stood up like a cock's comb and his shirt tails hung out over his pants. He was shorter than I imagined, shorter than I hoped, and was heavy-set enough so that he looked like a large square, a block, a clay figure squashed shorter by a child's meanness. For an instant the street filled with careless noise. But after a few seconds my father hit the door like the weight of the world was on him and all the laughter vanished when he turned around to say goodbye to his friends Longy and Zigg. Longy, the man in lime green, turned to my father and shouted from the sidewalk: "Hey guy we'll catch the ponies at Belmont."

My father just tipped him a wave and closed the door. From the hallway at the bottom of the stairs I could see him standing in the living room. My grandmother jerked awake and stretched out her arms. He waved her back.

"Business," he said, looking straight at her, anticipating the inquiry into his lateness. My grandmother's eyes widened, held in place on the thread of his gaze from across the room. She rose out of the chair, fixed on the image of her loving son, alive only in the sweet corruption of her maternal mind. She reached over to turn on the standing lamp, then bent over and fumbled around on the floor by her feet in search of an errant slipper.

"Already," she quizzed. "You had to see patients all night long."

"And I have a lot a business to take care of while I'm here," he said. "So don't make plans." When he looked over at me I felt the sheer weight of disappointment. I have to admit, I had reserved some small hope. My imagination closed around his words. No plans? No zoo? No pet monkeys? *No relation whatsoever.*

The next morning the mood in the house grew tight. My father was at the kitchen table. I could hear them when I stood in the hallway. They talked in tense hushed voices, the conversation punctuated by my grandmother dropping three soapy glasses on to the floor.

"So you're not going to tell me if she's your daughter," she said. "You don't think you owe me that much," she added, shoving a plate across the counter top.

"Eight years, it would have been nine. Where were you nine years

ago anyway?" she asked, trying to calculate a name, date or place.

"Give it a rest," he said, pushing his plate away.

After three days of sitting at the kitchen table across from my grandmother, my father's enterprising mind turned to the one thing he understood, what he euphemistically called "getting around."

"Hey, what about showing me some of the sights," he said. " It's been a long time since I stomped these grounds. A little father-daughter thing," he added, shoving his wallet and keys into his pant's pockets. "I, Ira Robert Tannenbaum, " he said, "want to take my daughter out for lunch at the Palm Room." I suddenly saw myself with two flaxen braids skipping like Eloise through the lobby of the Plaza, *jete, jete, pirouette*. The prospect of going to Hebrew school suddenly felt like a dagger plunged into my back.

"At two," I said. "That's when Mrs. Fialkoff lets us out."

"The Palm Room has a strict code," he said. "They don't serve lunch that late, and by then all the horse and carriage rides will be taking a siesta anyway." He blustered, a sound out between loose lips, cheeks puffed, and slammed his hand to his head. It didn't take much more; I ripened on the vine to the plan.

In the Palm Room, which did not have any palm trees or children's menu, I ordered for myself. The tables were set with two cloths, a white one, over which was laid a contrasting red one. When the waiter brought our food he repeated our order. "A hamburger for the young lady," he said. "And sir, your chicken crepe."

"It's gonna be great," he said, taking large gulps of water. "A daughter. We'll work together," he said, striking a match and lighting a cigarette. "Summer's an educational time, and I don't mean Hebrew school. What you need to know in the world, what gets you through, isn't Hebrew school." He pointed to the arched doorway at the other end of the dining room. "It's down the back alley. That's where the important people are, the ones you have to know."

After the Palm Room we went out regularly. I felt all grown up with my father. He did not grab for my hand at intersections. He let me run half a block ahead of him. In fact my father and I began to "raise capital" for an investment. I learned quickly that a con is built on two essential elements, trust and greed. A good con wins the trust and plays on the greed of people at the same time. For example, you borrow twenty five dollars and pay it back within a week with some interest, to show that you are good with money. Then you borrow fifty and pay that back the same way. Next you borrow five hundred and you don't pay it back.

Another way my father won the trust of people was asking them to babysit me. He left them with a valuable item which demonstrated that he trusted them. The natural extension was that they would trust him. This particular tactic worked especially well with "the gals," as he said.

Mary was the first "gal" he left me with. Mary lived on the first floor and had a window box filled with pink geraniums.

"Mary, here she is," my father said.

"Oh, what a sweetie," she said. "Come on in. I have a little something for you," she went on, looking too far down at me.

"Do you want a Rum and Coke?" she asked my father.

As my father ushered me into to the living room I could feel her swell with awe, a Christian viewing a relic—single man, little girl—was it the skull plate of St. Jerome or was it dog bones? Mary gave me a box of animal crackers shaped like the lion's cage of a circus car. The back of my legs adhered to the plastic furniture covers. The tipped lamp shades and overflowing ashtrays suggested a roughhouse life.

"Do you like those?" she asked. "See, they have a little string handle so you can carry them."

On the coffee table stood bluish white porcelain ballerinas, on side tables porcelain pansies, and tiny brass ashtrays shaped like magic slippers. As she hurried into the kitchen to fix a drink, she stopped to correct the lamp shade, and saw her life changing, and that's the promise of every con great and small. After all, my father trusted her with me. I kept a running account: Mary gave me animal crackers, Muriel gave me little colored candy dots that I had to pick off a long stream of paper, and Joyce gave me a bracelet and necklace made of plastic hearts.

As he stood to leave, my father took out of his inside suit pocket a small stack of travel brochures with inviting pictures of sea scapes, mountains or exotically dressed crowds alongside elaborately adorned camels. He tossed them with deliberate bravado on the table so they were obvious. For an instant he would exchange an intimate glance with the one that said "Mexico" and place it a little off to the side. Then he would just casually say that he thought she might be interested in one of them. For the next hour Mary sat with her reading glasses on, looking at the travel brochures.

Three days later we went to see Muriel. Muriel lived on Cherry Street. We turned right and passed a bar with three neon rings exclaiming Rhinegold. The fire escapes behind the Masonic Temple looked like half-finished scaffolding, and they cast the same eerie shadow as the gallows at the end of *Gun Smoke*. Coming out the candy store on the corner I caught sight of Ruben Stone. I tried to pretend that I didn't see him. I do not know if he saw me. We hurried up the street to the Tiffany Arms apartments.

My father sang "John Henry" all the way up the four flights of stairs and down the hall. He did not even have to knock on the door. It swung wide open when we were still twenty feet away.

The decor and objects in Muriel's apartment seemed to attempt to convey some message of social distinction. But the faded wallpaper had begun to curl away in places in a melancholy of neglect and age. The Persian carpets were torn and threadbare. The dark interior smelled faintly spicy and herbal, like spilled gin. I sat on the heavy horse-hair red sofa and picked at the burn holes in the arm.

"Great dress," my father said, while Muriel pulled self-consciously at a thread hanging from the sleeve. "The women at hotel pools in Havana used to wear dresses like that. They make me think of calypso. So bright," he added.

Muriel adjusted her off-the-shoulder-sleeves, showing more of her round white shoulders. The tight elastic gathers left red rings on her arms. My father touched her cheek, and put his face next to hers, "Any more of whatever you've been having?" he asked.

It was as if Muriel had made a simple small mistake in her life many years ago, an indiscretion; she stayed too late at a party, laughed too loud. Absent-minded on the path to fun, she missed the fork in the road. Happiness was journey back she could not make.

The women my father knew carried the pallor of loneliness on their face and hands and wore a weary countenance created by standing in a doorway too long. Like tea cups marked by tiny chips along the rim, they might have been decorative and delicate once. Now, they seemed to take on the amber nicotine coloration seen in paintings—original sin. I imagined that in the evening, after my father and I had gone home, they went into the deep recesses of the bedroom closet, took out an aged unworn (or never worn by them) wedding dress, unwrapped the dry cleaners' plastic, shook out the camphor crystals and tried on all past hope, disappointment, and . . . it still fit.

A few days later my father would make the call. First Muriel. We were sitting in one of his favorite stops, The Rainbow Bar and Grill, enjoying the air conditioning. I had my usual melted cheese sandwich and root beer. I had just started to use a pool cue to lance the air when I overheard my father on the pay phone. In a theatrically hurried voice, he said that he had a line on some great plane tickets but not enough cash on hand. He had to buy them now or lose them, could she just give him the difference and he would pay her back when they meet at the airport? He added, as smooth and cool as marble, that she should pick him up a couple of new sports shirts for him to wear on the trip—he didn't have time to shop. Then he hung up.

"What's Mary's number?" he leaned out of the phone booth and asked me.

"I dunno," I shrugged.

"Some help you are," he said. "Go ask Ronny behind the bar for the phone book."

In each case, I think the shirts clinched it. Preying on peoples' greed and hope only works for so long. And when he had exhausted the supplies of these, and collected capital for his investment, my father tapped into deeper veins of ore. Despair proved to be his motherlode.

Most afternoons my grandmother went out for a few hours. She raised money and collected clothing to be sent to "our boys in Jerusalem." It was during these hours that my father opened the apartment up for

business. Longy stood watch on the sidewalk in front of the house, while Zigg manned the door. He opened the door a couple of inches to glare at whoever stood on the other side. Then he let them into the small entrance way and patted them down next to the coat stand. Zigg would not accept big items such as TVs or radios, and rarely did he accept jewelry, although sometimes people brought rings and necklaces wrapped in white handkerchiefs, "You jerk. Who told you to come here with that?" Zigg would say. "Go roll a bum."

All kinds passed through our front door—skinny bald men, women with blond hair like haystacks, ladies in halter tops and red shorts and slingback silver high heels. The phone rang constantly. Streams of people arrived either anonymously or nicknamed, so introductions were short. They had various complaints but my father dispensed their "medicine" to them in tiny folded paper envelopes, and they seemed happy. Sometimes they went into to the bathroom and took their medicine immediately. Then they would slump down on the floor between the toilet and the bathtub. Often they would lie around on the couch filling my grandmother's potted plants with cigarette butts and spit. And at times my father had to push three or four out the door before my grandmother came home.

My father searched the house for hiding places. He pried the metal lid off a can of Ajax, poured half of the contents down the drain hole and then refilled the can with tightly wrapped plastic baggies. "I can just see her trying to wash the sink with that," Longy said. "She better not," my father said. "Twenty thousand dollars of uncut, I'd kill her." He put things away, out of sight, shoving them into the dark recesses under the sink, behind the baseboards, affixed with electrical tape behind hanging pictures, always making sure that he left everything looking the exact same way.

"There," he would say.

Longy and Zigg would be over at night toting six packs and slinky women from across the river, the Jersey side, and women always dressed as if it was a night in the Star Lite Ball Room. They'd all throw empty beer bottles in the sink or in the kitchen cupboards. Sometimes all exchanged packages, like mysterious little gifts. I drifted around the apartment pretending to water the plants, or dust, and the guests would muster a look of surprise for a second when they first noticed me, and then they would nod or shrug their shoulders and drift back to the kitchen where my father sat.

On the days my grandmother did not go out, my father took me with him to make "the rounds." We no longer visited his women friends. We spent the better part of an afternoon waiting for Longy and Zigg "to make the delivery." "Here's fifty cents," my father said, "Go buy me a pack of butts, and get yourself a comic book or gum." We would usually wait for them across the street from Cedars Hospital, right next to the newspaper stand, a dark green wood structure that resembled a collapsible puppet

theater. By the time they arrived, I had read every New York daily and was well into the *Herald Tribune*. "Doesn't she make us look respectable?" my father mused. "Just an afternoon out." I loved it.

After Longy and Zigg arrived they would all stand with hands plunged deep into their pants pockets, and talk about what "the score was," "the flooded market" or "that two-timing Guido who they knew we should have never trusted."

When "the meet" ended my father took me to see patients. He did not have an office, said that he wasn't the office type and that you had to go out to the people to give them the help they needed. We visited street corners, park benches, fire escapes, doorways, met people in apartments where you had to walk up five flights and to the back. Sometimes these people were so poor that all there was in the apartment was a mattress on the floor, but they always paid my father. My mind filled with pure pity for these people. I would have given them anything, my new shoes, my pencil box, my collection of *National Geographics*. Whenever we handed a small envelope to someone on the street, I breathed in the sweet scent of charity, a sense of social justice. We were pioneers staking a claim for mercy in a cruel world. I believed in the intrinsic goodness of our activities. In fact, more than once people grabbed their package from my father and handed him a bunch of greasy bills saying, "You saved my life with this." I imagined that President Kennedy would invite us to the White House to be photographed next to him in his rocker.

I thought that if my grandmother understood that, she would not be too mad that I missed a few days of Hebrew school. I convinced myself that she would be pleased by the blossoming relationship between my father and me. Life at my grandmother's continued to liven up. Longy and Zigg came over often and worked on the adding machine my father had.

In my mind, Webster Avenue became a Sherwood Forest. And I thrilled with the thought of secret good deeds. We were accruing funds to help the helpless. These were people that my grandmother could not even imagine, people that she could not even be taught to care about. She could only help people halfway around the world but so many were in need in her own back yard. I grew contemptuous of her blind spot. And the fact is, I never felt as welcomed as I did with my father and his friends. We all swore never to mention any of our important work to my grandmother, and all his friends winked at me as if to say they trusted me and might take me out one day on a secret mission. We made a pact, becoming blood brothers, except I was the daughter.

As a member of this new brotherhood forged in bonds of secrecy, I had to lie to my grandmother about where we went, what we did and who we saw.

August fell like a hammer on my heart. Two things happened to bring my new life to a halt. First my grandmother ran into Mrs. Fialkoff in the butcher shop. Then she marched through the door and slammed down

three pounds of chopped meat on the green enamel kitchen table.

"Out doing what?" she demanded of me.

My grandmother screamed and moved back and forth through the kitchen doorway, amending her disappointment and anger with new moans and threatening finger gestures. She stopped going out. She told my father that she never wanted Longy or Zigg in the house again. And in the middle of my grandmother screaming at my father, and my father screaming back, she said she knew.

She said she heard he was seen going into a building on Cherry Street and also because Mrs. Gold's son worked in the D.A.'s office, and it won't go on in her house.

"Not in my house, not in my house," she yelled until my father turned, glared at her, pushed her up against the refrigerator door and twisted her arm, leaving deep purple finger prints. My father in that instant seemed to enjoy a savage release which he had been building up to all along. That night my grandmother's expression changed. In the distance of my father's shove she saw her motherhood sealed off. Her dark eyes became stark and wide, as fierce and distant as the crazed crowds denied bread. I was forced to return to Mrs Fialkoff's classroom.

The second thing that occurred was on one of those rare afternoons when she did go out. Cousin Sarah's maid called and said Sarah was dying (maybe already dead). The maid was slightly hysterical. "I think she's been lying on the bathroom floor since last week," she told my grandmother. "Now Trudi," my grandmother said, "I want you to take the hand mirror, it should be on the dressing table, and hold it up to her face. Hold it very close, Trudi. Then tell me if its fogged."

Squeamish, Trudi could not complete the task. My father saw this as at least a twelve hour window of opportunity. I pleaded to be left behind. I think my appeal was granted because my grandmother thought it still too close to my mother's death, too much of a reminder. So she let me stay.

My father escorted her, two cake boxes, and one over-night-case down the street. He had been so silent since their fight that I was worried. I knew what he wanted. He wanted to get back at her, to take everything she ever had away, and then return it to her sullied, or not at all, to prove that he was right in his greed and anger. As soon as he saw the top of her large straw summer hat disappear, into the mouth and down the steps of the subway, my father rushed home and called in a contractor to install a slot in a new reinforced door he bought. He also ordered burglar bars and a heavy metal gate. Within two hours, three white panel trucks were parked in front of our house. We were surrounded by workmen. Amidst the hammering, sawing, pouring of concrete bases to sink fence posts, my father was treating people and making business calls. The kitchen filled with the sound of the adding machine tallying up the afternoon's efforts. The whole house buzzed with industry. So nobody but I noticed that one man slipped into the bathroom with his needle and spoon and matches, all wrapped neatly in

a blue scarf. After a few minutes we heard a kind of thud on the floor. It could have been wood falling, but it was too muffled. I had a sudden feeling, and I rushed to see what had happened but I could not get the bathroom door open, because the man inside was laid out on the floor against it, and he had locked it from the inside. I stood outside.

"Hey mister," I shouted. "Get up, come lie on the couch, you'll feel better. Try some water. Nice cold water."

Just then my grandmother walked in. I saw her come through the front door with her face streaked with horror, her hat askew. She opened up her arms as if to embrace rage and faith all at once. In slow motion I watched her cross the living room towards me and when she reached me she shoved me aside. Then she stood holding the heavy brass knob and pushing against the door with her shoulder. Thump, thump. The door shook in its frame. When she could not get the door open, she grabbed my arm and pulled me into the kitchen with her, where she called the police. "A child is in danger, please hurry," she told the dispatcher.

By the time they arrived, my father and the little red suitcase were gone. When the police broke down the bathroom door the skinny bald man was dead on the floor with the needle in his arm. They put him on a rolling cot and took him out, and began the manhunt for my father.

The next day, I sat almost numb for the last time in Mrs. Fialkoff's classroom. My seat had been moved to the front next to her desk. "Now I know some of you will be leaving us, going to public school. So children,"she paused. "In a way this is our last time together, and I hope—I hope in my heart," she said, clutching her bosom, "I mean it would give me great *nachas* if you remember one thing, only one, of what I tried to teach and give you." She looked almost teary standing there in the soft afternoon light.

I had been absent so often that the only thing I remembered was the story she told the first week—the baby almost safe in his woven basket, the baby's outstretched arm, his fate already sealed. Later, I imagined that my father had no angel to come and push his hand away.

I don't know if it was that same night, or the next, but the police picked up my father trying to cross the George Washington Bridge. Somehow he had rear-ended a blue Oldsmobile. Two cops gave chase and caught my father running against traffic toward Jersey. The police went through the apartment and I had to tell them where all the packages my father hid were, who the women he saw were, where they lived.

That afternoon after the police left was the last time either my grandmother or I ever mentioned my father. I guess she was in a state of shock, because for two days she did not clean the apartment, and when she looked at the sink filled with empty beer bottles she wore this expresion like she was seeing a pile of dead dogs. After a while the bottles sent up a thick yeasty odor so I put them all in a paper bag and threw it away.

MARISA DE LOS SANTOS

Monologue of One Returned

Yes, I know my children's faces now, now
that I shrug on lithium like heavy clothes.

Once, I wore my skin
like gauze and pressed myself
into the grass not
to get beneath.
I heard the whole yard
change colors in the rain.

To relearn
that the wicks of magnolia
do not—*do not*—sing when they flare
finally into wide, white flames
has been hard.

My daughters' hair is long
and fans across their pillows.

True, there were days
I'd sit in the cane rocker
and feel the deaths of everything
I'd ever seen die—a cat,
my mother, that whole row of elms—fill
my bones with smoke
and I couldn't sleep
and I couldn't find anything.

Marisa's brows are dark and arched.
Kristina's cheeks are smooth.
(The singing of those little fires was so sweet!)
All night, I watch my daughters sleep.

The Front Man

My father was a social man, talking,
making change with his voice, making deals,
promising to exchange this for that, a courageous host,
unappalled, like a front man for fair weather.
The world moved through him, back and forth:
he experienced life not as gain or loss,
but as a current flowing through. You sense another's hopes
dying in your chest, another's cramped dependence
on a set of platitudes he's learned by rote,
you feel the tug of a stranger's loss
like a hand letting go, rage like a coat of burning fur,
and this you take, as my father did,
as life, evidence of an eternal kingdom,
built up every day from scratch; and if each night
when you're alone at last, the guests all moaning in their beds,
you come upon a patch where there's nothing,
and nothing in your arsenal of plans and schemes
to make the knots you tie to cross it unabused
will hold, still it's only time passing in the night,
only fear running in your head; the emptiness is moving too.

Pig 311

In the experimental atomic explosion, one pig, bearing the number 311 and placed on an old warship, was miraculously unharmed.

On Bikini Atoll, the tortoises
have lost all sense of direction.
They drop their sticky clusters of eggs,
drag themselves inland searching for surf
among the driftwood, brush and sand.
Their leathery skins crack in the sun,
rise in stale crusts from their bodies,
drizzle from their skeletons like confetti.

Cormorants use the stalled bones as nests,
cower inside the brittle shells, burrow
holes in the sand, and only in the cool,
blind dark lay their hollow eggs,
no longer trusting the spin of the Earth,
the constants of moon or sun.

They are patient creatures, waiting
for another generation of cormorant
to learn of the day the sailors arrived,
moored a metal ark populated
with goats, rabbits, monkeys, pigs,
of the buxom cloud which rose
from the island, and of the animals
swept from the shoreline after.

The birds circle the tropic morgue
in dizzy clusters, hang in the air
as long as wind allows, with a blind
obligation to this pimple of land,
a spirit like that of the pig, numbered 311,
who, on that day, blown clear of the ark,
swam back to the scorched ground,

a mile-high spectre looming above him
with arms outstretched, billowy.

And after stumbling onto hot sand,
shaking the salt water from his hide,
being chased around the carcasses
of seabirds, he was sent home healthy,
pampered, free to sire generations
of 311's, wallets, sausages, to nuzzle
deep in cool muck on August afternoons,
an eddy of gnats about his nose,
fragile wings fighting his heavy breath.

The Brides of the Y-Monster

a matrimonial spumonte without fizz. . .

It's said Sardinia bred the boy, intertwined
the infants in the womb as one trunk, two tops,
like grafted olive trees, malformed, a combined

fraternity, two siblings merged into one
but short of perfect: one pair of legs, two spines
connected at the bases in a wishbone,

shoulder to shoulder, his chest a crowded bloom
of arms. This monster, The Tocci family's son,
Giovanni-Giacomo, who'd assumed

the role of human pretzel in side show tents,
despite the odds reached manhood, became a groom,
and upon the court's and clergymen's consents

accepted the hands of two brides in his four.
He quartered the cake in a blur of blades, spent
seconds toasting the guests, wheelchaired through the door,

the spindles whirling at Rumplestiltskin speed,
his competitive wives behind him. Each swore
she'd prove to be his better half. And indeed,

when he had struggled out of his wedding tux,
a tarantula shedding skin, his wives freed
him of his trousers, took turns trying to coax

his penis awake, passed it from palm to palm
like a dazed mouse, a mute bell clapper, his sex
stuck in an unliftable coma. Still calm,

they carried their funny valentine to bed,
and then it struck both of the brides with such dread

to think, as each bent to kiss a separate head,

that their husband was two times less of a man,
more like a slingshot, an army knife with skin,
or gingermen baked too closely on the pan.

Each settled on a pair of lips to begin
the days, end the nights, a set of ears and eyes,
two clumsy arms, a Roman nose, and a chin.

The rest they shared: his extra buttock, the rise
of nipples, an ellipsis, arced across his
fused chests, the furry nothings between his thighs.

BROOKS HAXTON

On The Inner Planets

Tu non se in terra, si come tu credi

1. Following Sundown on Mercury

I walk at the speed of nightfall west,
about one mile per hour as the crow flies,
if only the crow could fly, with no air.
I wish I had a crow. I hate crows,
but I wish I had one now for company.

Craters, warm rocks, starlight at my back,
if I stopped walking into the heat
I would be solid ice, until the next day
when the sun scorched off my clothes, and thawed,
and cooked my flesh black into the bone.

Just now, my mouth is forming words,
but no air carries the waves of sound.
I could have gone to Teotihuacán,
and I chose Mercury. There must be reasons,
maybe the winged hat, maybe the footgear.

Somebody mentioned he was the God of Healing.
As it turns out, there's no god, and here I am.
"But what it is," a Memphis blues man
in the jailhouse sang one time,
"it just don't feel like home."

2. Venus, in the Mercurial Evening Sky, and Later

Under a tall rock flared with sunlight at the tip, I stopped.
Night fell. More slowly than the eye could see her move,

the White One rose into a black depth scattershot with stars.
My prayer when I saw her was to die, to be in death with her.

Wherever I was, a woman stood from her bath, looking me
in the eye, touching herself, teasing . . . I felt cold.

And when the trance had passed I lay in total darkness
stretched out on a bed of burning dust. Far off

there were children howling, high shrieks of a woman
tortured, moans of old men, sobs, and pleading screams.

Laughter wracked the molecules of the air. An almost liquid gas
poured into my lungs. Sulfur clung inside my nose and throat.

Eyes useless, fingers drifting over the pitted rocks,
I searched for the others, as if underwater and in flames.

Scoria whirled in the superheated gas. My skin to the finger
felt intact, but hurt the way flesh under a peeled-back blister

hurts even to touch the air. I should be dead, I thought.
Screams blasting through my windpipe scorched my tongue,

and my voice came, like the others, from far away.
It was a human voice, but it was the wind.

3. Somewhere Nondescript on Mars

This rustheap of iron silicate and rime is not the same
as any rock on any other planet besides Mars.
The flakes of galaxies in Berenice's Hair also
are singular and will collapse
into the veil of discontinuum.
To make, therefore, a hymn of praise

and thanks, or prayer for mercy,
even to cry with rage, felt noble
when I was alive. I found virtue
in the ecstasies of the soul.
Lately, I am not amused at the display
of what I used to call *humanity*.

I said that word on Earth
with such high feeling tears formed.
I felt little catches in my throat.
I cannot ascertain how genuine this was.

On Mars I grow more dubious. Still,
twinges in my pharynx cloud my thoughts.

Coda: Full Earth near Midheaven

The nauseatingly small sun went down.

As a boy who kept snakes I was shy like them.
Coral snakes, the deadliest,
were delicate, and difficult to keep alive.
Hognoses were most harmless.
Trapped, a hognose played dead, belly-up.
Turned over, he flipped back into the belly-up position,
body language as exact as speech:
"No. I am dead. I can prove it. Look!"

Before they played dead they would threaten,
but they never bit, so I was not afraid
to see them puff their necks wide like a cobra's.
Still, although I knew
they were non-poisonous, and when they struck
they barely bumped me with their turned-up snouts,
I could not, often as I tried, relax
and watch one strike my hand without, quick, flinching.

So, with the Martian moons at midnight,
when hunched Phobos rolled past Deimos overhead,
I was afraid, but not afraid of
anything. The fear was beyond my power to conceive it.
I do know that moon should not look dingy or ill-shaped.
And one of these was too small too, and slow.
The other one was worse, too fast,
crazed by the pull, about to fly apart.

I came back as far as Earth's moon.
First thing here, I did the walking tour
of human litter, flags, wrecked hardware, trashheaps.
On the far side, I could remember
when there was consolation
in the unknown and forbidden.

Now, at last, I'm feeling settled
in the Crater of Copermicus, above the Known Sea,
where Apollos 12 and 14 landed.

Earth looks huge from here, and blue
with ocean, green with leaves and grasses,
desert, cloudswirl, bands of dark rock, threads of white
along the ridgetops over the treeline.
Although green is life,
I stare into the blue more often.
Years pass.

After the heat and cold, sulfuric acid, dust storms,
odd collisions in midspace with asteroids,
what's left of me is bruised and burned
with shreds of muscle dangling, brainslops,
viscera, and fluids leaking
from their chambers, all of which
I feel with pain
as though pain mattered.

Once, in a pensioned room over a bridge, we made love.
While we dressed, we argued. At an impasse,
we walked out together, rain in the ancient street,
and then, hair wet, I stood beside her among strangers
where the layered blue suspended brook trout
all around the feet of Jesus baptized in the wilderness
by Ghirlandaio or someone,
one of the less well known Italian masters.

GLENN BLAKE

Westerns

My family deals in motion. My old man's great grandfather sold shoes. My great grandfather sold horses and then wagons and carriages. My grandfather and my old man, automobiles. And I think that it's this inherited impulse to move that has made it so difficult for me to sit still in college classrooms, taking notes for hours.

This is my fourth state university. It's midterm, spring semester. I'm passing. I have just received a B on a medieval history exam. I am learning the difference between the active and the contemplative. I am concentrating on the contemplative.

The telephone rings. It is the old lady. "It's your father," she says. "He's had a stroke. Not a bad one though. How's school?" She is trying to keep from crying. "Don't you worry about him," she says. "He's going to be all right." Then a silence. Then, "Please come home."

The Beaumont U-Haul man wants to demonstrate how to hook the trailer to my truck. I tell him, no, that I've had plenty of experience.

I pack all my things. I say goodbye to everyone in the dorm. I tell them I'll be back in a week. I won't make it back. I know that. Someone will have to run the old man's business until he gets on his feet. He has a used car lot. Shawn is too young. This all works out too well for the old man. Me and the kid working at the lot together. Me, out of school.

I haven't been home since Christmas, when everything was going great in school. I was having trouble with my Oldsmobile. The transmission, I think. Only the old man knew why I was really home for the holidays. He loaned me a nice Chevrolet truck. I knew my old car wasn't nice enough to be on his front line, but I left it with him anyway, and ate Christmas dinner, and drove the nice truck back to Beaumont.
He had my Oldsmobile fixed and kept it on the back lot all spring and had Wylie wash it every now and then.

"DON'T upset him," the nurse whispers. "He needs his rest."

"Sure," I tell her.

He has his eyes closed. On one night table, there are pots of plants and flowers. On the other, his Stetson, upside down.

"Daddy?" I say.

"Shawn?" he says.

"No sir. It's me."

He opens his eyes. "Hey," he says. He looks and sounds very tired. "Why aren't you at school?"

"I came home for a little visit."

He pushes a button in a small box resting on the sheet next to his hand. The head portion of the bed rises until he's in a sitting position. "Your mamma called you, didn't she?"

I don't say anything.

He tries to take a deep breath. It hurts.

"Well that's all it's gonna be is a little visit," he tells me. He's trying to get himself situated. He doesn't like me seeing him flat on his back. "I don't want you missing any school because of me. I'm gonna be fine. You hear me? You get in that truck and drive back to Beaumont. I'm not gonna be the cause of you flunking out this time. You hear?"

Same old man.

"Yes sir "

"Shawn's at the lot. Your mamma's answering the phone. Everything's taken care of."

"How you feeling?" I ask him.

"I'm fine," he says. "I don't know why in the hell they're keeping me here. I could be *in bed* at home."

"You'll be home soon," I tell him.

"And you'll be back at school tonight!" he says. "I ain't shittin' you. I mean it."

"I didn't drive all this way for you to run me out of town as soon as I get here."

"I know," he says. He has his boots right by the bed so that he can find them if he wants to get up and break out of the hospital. "I know. It means a lot to me you came. We'll talk, and then you'll go. Straight to Beaumont. Don't go by the lot. Don't talk to your mamma. She'll start whining, and you'll never make it back to school."

We talk for a while about the car business, the economy, school, quail leases, and then he says, "Enough. I'm sleepy. Thanks for coming. Now haul ass."

I wave at him through the small window in the door.

He lifts the fingers of his left hand. There's a tube attached to it.

I'm about halfway across the long bridge over the Old and Lost Rivers, and I'm thinking how nice it would be to see Mamma and the kid. It would give me a chance to check up on the business.

The old man's lot is on the opposite end of town from the bay. It's a filling station that he's converted into a used car lot. He cleaned out the grease rack, and Wylie washes cars in there now.

When I pull into the back lot with my U-Haul, I see all the cars on the front line parked crooked. Most of them need washing. I don't see my Oldsmobile anywhere.

Wylie's in the grease rack, chamoising off a station wagon. Wylie's about six six or six seven, black, with a shaved head. He dresses like he buys his clothes at the army-navy surplus. When he sees me, he salutes and holds it.

"Pleased to see you, sir!" he says with a big grin on his face.

"What's going on?" I say, stopping to inspect him. He's holding the chamois in his free hand. It's dragging the ground.

He's about to crack up. "You done missed all the action, sir," he says.

"Cut the bullshit, Wylie," I tell him. "Where's my old car? Ya'll sell it?"

"Naw," he says. He's at ease now. "That's what I mean. You missed it."

"Missed what?"

"They stole it."

"Who?"

"Don't know," he says. He's trying to pop me with the chamois. I grab it away from him. "Talk to me! When'd all this happen?"

"Don't know," he says. He's trying to get the chamois. I'm holding it behind me. "Two guys came in yesterday morning, and the kid let 'em test drive it and they never came back."

"He inside?"

"Naw, he's gone after 'em."

"*What?*"

"Yeah. Somebody called and said they saw the car somewhere."

I run around front to the office. The old lady's in there signing some checks.

"Baby!" she says. She stands up. "When'd you get home?"

"Where's Shawn?"

She looks confused. "Somebody called," she says. "About your car. It was stolen yesterday."

"I know. What'd they say?"

"Who?"

"The guys that called!"

"It was some friend of your daddy's. He said he saw a car that looked a lot like yours pull into The Westerner."

"Call the police," I tell her, running out the door. "Wylie!"

"Yo!" he says.

"Shawn take anybody with him? Junior? Shawn take Junior?"

"Your daddy run Junior off last month."

"He went alone?"

Wylie comes over and whispers in my face. He usually keeps a bottle under the seat of the car he's washing. "He took your daddy's pistol. Don't tell him I told you."

I toss the chamois at him and start running for the truck. "Keep an

eye on Mamma!" I shout back at him.

"Will do," he says.

I'm backing out of the driveway. "And straighten up the front line!"

He stands at attention. "Yes sir!" he shouts back, laughing. And then he says, "You been by to see your daddy?"

The Westerner is the old drive-in theater north of town not too far from Black Duck Bay. It has been closed for about ten years. They shut it down right after I got out of high school, and then some business reopened it for a short period to show X-rated movies.

From the park across the bay, you could see the back of the screen, the giant yellow neon Stetson and above in red cursive, The Westerner. On a still night you could see these things reflected in the bay. You could drive down past the picnic area after a movie, and park down close to the water, and in between whatever, you might notice them turning off the sign.

Last summer, the hurricane blew the screen over. It's lying now across what used to be the playground at the front of the parking area. The Stetson shattered.

Without thinking, I stop for a moment at the ticket office. I can remember my first date here. I can't remember the girl I was with, but I can remember the movies. It was all-night Westerns. *Shane* and *High Noon*. *Big Jake* and *Red River*. *The Magnificent Seven*. It was a night filled with gunfire. I'm thinking of the scene when John Wayne tells Richard Boone, "Now you understand. Anything goes wrong, anything at all, your fault, my fault, nobody's fault, it don't matter, I'm gonna blow your head off. It's as simple as that." I'm thinking of when James Coburn tells the rest of The Seven, "Nobody throws me my guns and tells me to run. Nobody." What made that movie was the sound of the gunshots echoing off the mountains.

I'm hearing them again. Shawn! I drive through the entrance and see where they are coming from. There's a small house way in the back corner where the caretaker must have lived at one time. There's the old man's truck. There's my car parked in front of the house. I can see someone squatting behind the car. It's Shawn.

I take off across the furrow-like parking rows, on a diagonal right for him, dodging the speaker poles. With every bump I'm leaving the seat, bouncing my head off the roof of the cab. About halfway back, I lose the U-Haul, just past the snack bar. Someone's sticking a gun barrel out of one of the windows in the house and shooting at Shawn. Shawn's popping up and shooting back, just like in the movies.

I start honking my horn. When I skid to a stop beside the old man's truck, the guy in the house points his shotgun at me.

"Look out!" Shawn shouts, and as I dive down into the floorboard, the windshield explodes. I just lie there for a while, saying "God damn" over and over to myself.

I open the passenger door and crawl out and peek around the

back end of the truck. Shawn is sitting on the protected side of the car with his back up against the right front wheel. He sticks the old man's pistol up over the hood of the car and fires at the house without aiming. He's laughing. "Hey big brother!" he says. "When'd you get home?"

There's a shallow, muddy ditch between us, separating the yard of the house from the parking area.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I shout at him.

A pistol sticks out the front door and fires at the car, blowing out the front tire opposite Shawn. The car is leaning to that side now.

There are two men in the house.

Shawn holds the pistol up again and fires off four more rounds. "What do you think I'm doing?" he says. "I'm getting you your old car back. These niggers stole it."

Keeping low, I run over behind the old man's truck. "I'm not worried about that car. I'm worried about you getting your head blown off. Now get out of there!"

Shawn's reloading. "No way, Jose. No can do. *No es posible,*" he says. "The old man'd want your car back. He's in the hospital, you know."

Some sea gulls are flying over from the bay, crying, high above us.

"Hey," he says. "You better bring me some more shells. I'm getting low."

He points. "They're in the truck."

"I'm not getting involved in this," I tell him. "Your ass is in a whole lot of trouble! The old lady called the police. They're on their way."

"Good," he says. "I've got everything under control here."

Just then, the shotgun and the pistol open up on the car. One blast blowing out both windows on the driver's side. They have figured out that I don't have a gun.

They are shooting under the car, trying to get him with a ricochet like in the movies. Shawn's hiding from the bullets. He has both arms wrapped around his head.

They are really opening up on him now, firing one right after another. A blast, shattering the outside rearview mirror, throws shards of glass at my feet.

Where are the goddamn police! I crawl down to the driver's door on the old man's truck. There are three boxes of shells left. In the rifle rack, there is the old man's twenty-gauge over and under quail gun. I grab it.

Everything gets quiet again. They must be reloading. I check the shotgun. It only has one shell in the upper chamber.

Shawn's squatting now facing the house, peeking over the hood.

"Stay down, Hot Shot!" I tell him. "I'm coming over."

One of the black men is shifting his position to the other side of the window. Shawn jumps up and fires at the man, hitting him in the chest with the second shot. The black man falls back into the house.

"Daddy?" someone shouts inside. "Daddy!"

"What are you doing, you stupid little bastard!" I shout at him. "That's murder right there! That's what it is!"

Shawn has a grin on his face. "One down, one to go," he says. "Come on with those shells, man."

It's time for me to make my move over to Shawn. Run, stay low, jump the ditch, and dive behind the car. Nothing to it. I'm looking at the car now. Thinking, it won't be worth much when we get it out of here. Shot to pieces, no windows left on either side. Both front and back doors. . . .

"Hey!" I shout over. "Hey Shawn! That ain't the car, man!"

"What?" he says. Everything's still quiet in the house. Shawn's taking pot shots at all the front windows of the house, blowing out the ones that haven't already been broken. When the curtains are hit, they jerk back like someone's in there pulling on them.

"I said, that ain't even the car! My car's a two-door. Count how many that one has!"

Shawn looks back at me with a startled expression on his face. "No shit?" he says. He gets to his feet and stands up to check out the doors.

"Get down!" I shout as a blast comes from one of the windows, catching Shawn in the chest, picking him up and dropping him down on his back in the middle of the ditch.

"Wait!" I drop the boxes of shells and grab the twenty-gauge and run for him. About halfway there, the other black man comes running out of the house, firing his pistol at me, blowing out one of the old man's headlights. Without thinking, I pull the trigger, and the blast takes him in the right shoulder and spins him around. As he falls, he fires another round into the dirt.

"Shawn?" I say, kneeling in the ditch beside him. The brown water is only about three inches deep. He is staring straight up into the sky.

The gulls are still crying.

Away across Black Duck Bay, I can hear the sirens coming. The black man is trying to crawl back to the front door of the house.

I'm holding the old man's twenty-gauge in one hand and wiping the mud off of Shawn's face with the other.

I'm thinking that I've seen this in some movie, that I've got to get the hell out of Texas.

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