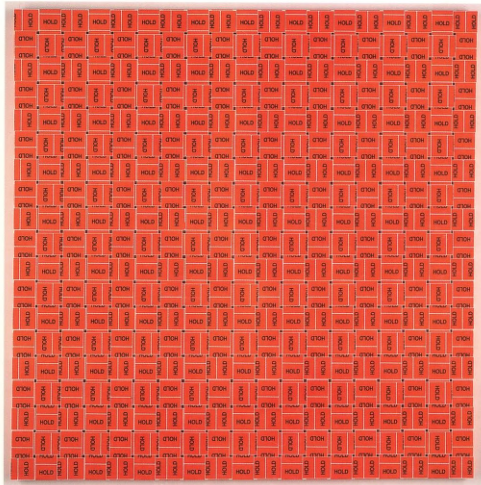


# Gulf Coast



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WINTER 1995-96

# Gulf Coast

Volume VIII, Number One

Winter 1995-96

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## Vane

The wet went round the earth, the dry went round  
the wet. The layers laid, a tree was made  
to tell us, up from down. Given a kiss,

the French were brought to life, a bet revived  
the dozing Welsh; the tos and fros that followed meant  
somebody needed to invent

the mapman's mind. And now and then  
the cock says SEWN. And then and now  
the cock says NEWS. Sometimes the sun

says "You don't say."  
Sometimes the blues  
obscure the words. The birds

can't sing what four  
fine corners, full of fire, con-  
catenate. Late wailing

woke the early worm: you raised  
a quilt; I built a barn.  
That whirling figure overhead

does no house-keeping, notwithstanding miles and miles  
of reeled-in yellow thread. What length  
could such a thing go to? What time

accumulate? What differences descry? When northward  
fires lie, southward blues . . . Each wind foretells  
the thrust of men: head-wires,

heart-screws, wing-rust. And so to lose  
its article again  
a space aspires.

## The History of Civilizations as a Function of Flatware

A stick or two can do it all—will fatten up the fire,  
or stir the rice to solidarity: the boiling particles are made to  
order, when they're made to stick. Two sticks, a noun  
and verb, are all you need  
to feed a countlessness entire.

The fork is brilliant otherwise, with many  
stabs of subdivision. All its lines dividing to impress  
the stuff of mere totality with teeth, it makes a mark  
remark; it multiplies the the monolith.  
It brings, by nature, numbers to desire. And also this:  
a tininess.

## Many

The way I see it, many  
suffers from its suffix. (Prefixed  
by a hue or woe, we're man.  
Speaking for myself, I am  
man-dated and man-aged. You think your precious

gender's so important?  
I say gender's nothing next  
to centuries of species, that's  
the hardest wiring.  
It's not where

the hair appears, but when—  
pretty terrible, not terribly pretty,  
at twelve or forty-seven, six thousand  
BC or after—all those  
sudden tufts

on hillocks! Ah, and agh! The winds of change  
are gusts you have to dis . . . And after prefixes the suffixes  
deserve discussing too, or cussing, maybe,  
for the Y they add to man, the O  
they add to kid—our common, sad

suffictive fate.)  
Your *sui generis* is just  
my dime a dozen: many a lyric monkey came  
to prosy humanhood. Many the mys preceding  
elf. Who'll save us from

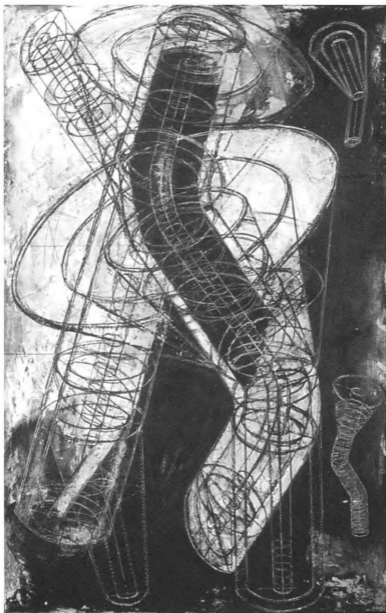
these fixes we are in,  
good God, as long as you  
repeat yourself?

## What It Was, What It Could Have Been: The Paintings of Tracy Harris

AS A CHILD Tracy Harris stared at her father's architectural drawings and wondered what kind of magical maps she was seeing. Were these skeleton-sketches, animal anatomies? Were they shellfish? When she realized she was looking at representations of buildings, she was still intrigued by her father's designs, but what they were was not as mesmerizing as what they could have been. When she was free to imagine the diagrams as many things at once, she believed she held in her hands the blueprints of the universe. When she knew they were only simple rooms made for humble objects (flowers in a pot, a cabinet full of china, a couch), they lost much of their spell. "One of the things I'd like people looking at my work to feel is the magic I experienced when I saw those drawings for the very first time," Harris says. "But of course most people don't feel what I did when they look at engineering sketches. You have to not know what they are. A confusion has to be present."

She adds that she was probably dyslexic as a child; this may have increased the world's sweet perplexity for her. She couldn't understand two-dimensional plans of elevations. "Also, I grew up in a pretty uncontrolled household," she says. "It was okay to make a mess, to build volcanoes on the dining room table out of whatever materials you could find and leave it there for weeks." Her grandfather was also an architect; drafting supplies were often a substitute babysitter for her. "I could take things apart—like clocks—and no one would even notice. I didn't successfully put them back together. I tried. I found it was interesting to dismantle something, try to reassemble it, and come up with a completely different object."

TRACY HARRIS is aware that words, like things, can slip their anchors, and today that elusiveness bothers her. She's trying to be precise. We're sitting in a coffee shop in Dallas on a late fall afternoon. She grips her cup as though it might shake apart (who knows what possibilities objects possess?). She leans into a sentence, pauses, then sinks in her chair, staring shyly at the table. Finally, as a way of explaining the difficulties she has discussing her work, she says, "Before I even knew his ideas, I was attracted to Wittgenstein because I read that almost all the books attributed to him were written by students, from his lectures. He'd rarely publish anything himself because he could never trust his own words. Toward the end of his life he refuted everything he'd said in



Tracy Harris  
*The Gift of Gravity*, 1993  
Oil and wax on wood, 56" x 36"

the *Tractatus*, his first book. And so much of what he was saying seemed just beyond his verbal grasp. . . .”

The *Tractatus* concludes, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”<sup>1</sup> It’s a monologue stippled with pauses, lost finally in a tangle of self-negations. At the end of the book Wittgenstein claims that the truth of his thoughts are unassailable; he also calls them “nonsensical.”<sup>2</sup>

Harris’ paintings share this spirit, and that’s why they’re hard to talk about.

Wittgenstein elevates certain kinds of nonsense to a level of great importance; by “nonsense” he means a grasping after metaphysical truths, of whose existence he was skeptical but deeply respectful. The layerings and erasures in Harris’ paintings demonstrate a similar measure of skepticism and deference toward the unseen universe; she leaves visual records of grasping, filled with precise grids (echoes of her father’s architectural designs) and nonsense (child-like scribbles). The paintings are both assertive, in the authority of their geometric marks, and silent, in their built-up surfaces, half-concealing abandoned plans. She has found a way to paint ideas, and to paint everything at once, yet her work trembles with uncertainty, the shakiness of the human hand.

Her all-inclusiveness is reflected in reviews of her work. “Harris is . . . attracted to the imagery of dramatic weather,” says *ARTnews*. “Pale yellows, blues and greens, her colors are peaceful unless they explore the dark, mysterious turbulence of storms.”<sup>3</sup> One reviewer says her paintings “have the appearance of the purposeful jottings of an inspired inventor;”<sup>4</sup> another says they resemble “turbines, cogs, pulleys, wheels, and even flowers;”<sup>5</sup> while a third compares them to “star-riven midnight skies, magical cave drawings or shimmering ocean floors.”<sup>6</sup>

“I’m more interested in seeing the permutations, the different paths an idea might take, than the finished product,” she says. “All the different possibilities, and especially the ones that wouldn’t be viable.”

Compulsively, she leaves “trails of decisions”—and indecision—on the surfaces of her work. Her most recent paintings are efforts at mapping life itself, recording failure as well as success, like a Natural Selection chart with lines of extinction, paths of growth.

WHEN SHE was seven, Harris took art lessons from a woman who painted on china. The teacher arranged still-lives for her students to sketch, composed of cups and vases and plates. These traditional subjects have left traces, like fossils, in Harris’ work, faint exoskeletons in thick, muddy earth-tones. A viewer comes upon them in the paintings the way an anthropologist discovers something long buried in the planet: a timeless image. “The cup . . . is a universal shape for the reproductive parts of plants and animals,” she explains. “It’s also the form for weights and pendulums.”<sup>7</sup>

In her hands, a china cabinet becomes a meditation on the birds and the bees: the history of art is here along with the history of science, for these

... objects were long seen as subjects of Western painting and they... goes through them: she's not after the beauty of external shapes, she's probing their deep structures, taking them apart with little hope of putting them back together again. In this way, the conventional subjects of art and the methods of science collide, charging the paintings with tremendous wit. If their angularities and multiple images recall the Cubism of Picasso and Braque, they also resemble the obsessive sketching in Leonardo's notebooks; if the flat surfaces and broad gestures invite comparisons to Abstract Expressionism, they also remind us of the charts we've seen in Chaos Theory textbooks.

"All the disciplines—science, art, literature, religion—are connected," she says. "It's the search for the way existence is ordered." She recalls her delight in Leonardo's doodles, the way he mixed disciplines. She especially loved the way he placed an obstruction in the path of water, and mapped the flow of water around it." Recording a trail of absence. "The first time I saw that, it changed the way I felt my work build . . . the idea of tracing something that would seem to be unpredictable, and finding patterns."

WHEN I FIRST saw her work, over a dozen years ago now, it was mostly—though not strictly—representational. "I never painted straight still-lives," she recalls. "Even when there were recognizable literal elements—vessels of various kinds—I'd make drawings of those very same objects and put them in the paintings." In effect, she established dialogues between rough designs and their final results. "I'd also add all kinds of structures in the background that would change the space. It flattened out and tore in places."

I remember a painting she made of a friend disappearing into a couch. In the middle of a cushion, vortices appeared, as though a black hole had suddenly erupted/collapsed in an ordinary Dallas apartment, swallowing a human. "Yes, I did a whole series of those," she says. "Vanishing roommates."

In a recent painting, *Entrances and Exits to the World*, the vortices are there but the couch is gone. She's abandoned the surface for what's hidden beneath, stripped away empirical experience to seek its underpinnings. Her concerns have remained remarkably consistent across the years, even as she has deepened her vision and expanded her pictorial vocabulary.

Talking to her, one begins to believe that, indeed, the cup in her hand comes apart and refigure itself. A pendulum, a weight. A swirl through time.

HARRIS' FATHER moved the family from Dallas to Bangkok for four years when she was in middle school. He was in the Army and Air Force Exchange, and wound up as Chief Architect and Engineer, designing military bases.

Harris was fascinated by the shapes of ziggurats: giant vessels filled with prayer. Years later, when she read Dante in college, she connected the vortical shapes of the ziggurats with the spiraling circles of the *Inferno*. "A far-off windmill turning its huge sails / when a thick fog begins to settle in, / or when the light of day begins to fade, / that is what I thought I saw appearing," Dante

A number of thinkers believe existence is ordered in "several planes, like an envelope structure," she explains. "You go through one envelope-layer, then you go on. The repetition of that structure is really interesting. Vessels, spaces, apertures . . . these images show up in so many native traditions. Among the Mayans. In the Ukraine. They really are archetypes.

"It's a spiritual experience for me to make the paintings," she adds, "though it's certainly not connected to any specific religion. I'm trying to describe something I don't have the answers to."

Like Rothko's late works, her paintings are genuine acts of faith— attempts to define the dimly perceived—with this difference: their various configurations offer a wider array of worshipful attitudes than Rothko ever conceived.

DRAWING AND architecture have remained touchstones throughout Harris' life. One summer, she took a break from her graduate studies in Dallas and followed her boyfriend to San Francisco to build an apartment. "I thought we were going there to paint a garage door. That's what my boyfriend told me. When we got there, his friends gave us the plans and left. They wanted a guest apartment in their basement. It's illegal to do that without a permit, so they couldn't hire someone there . . . I wound up doing everything from the framing and the duct work and the wiring to pouring concrete and sheet-rocking and piercing walls to put in windows. A contractor did come by periodically to make sure we weren't blowing all the fuses. Building this place felt more real to me than what I'd been doing in school. The physicality of it was compelling."

And in a sense she was working inside one of her father's drawings from long ago.

"This was about the time I began to read a lot in physics," she says. The apartment owner was a writer, a man named Peter Delacorte whose family used to own Dell Publishing. His personal library was stocked with Einstein, Wittgenstein, Stephen Jay Gould. The elements that would form her later style were locking into place. She began to study, systematically, the similarities between fossilized trilobite skeletons and electrical charts, between the ziggurats she'd seen as a child and Einstein's diagrams of space and time.

AS PART OF HER MFA work at Southern Methodist University, she studied with Mel Bochner, a visiting artist-in-residence. Bochner first came to prominence in the sixties as one of the American Minimalists, making drawings, paintings, sculptures, installations—"an art," one critic said, "audaciously ascetic and aggressively obscure."<sup>9</sup> A rigorous mathematical purity characterizes much of his work, as well as a relentlessly investigative eye. His early drawings are experiments with number systems, attempts to discover the "logic" of sculpture. "I wanted to find a foundation for my art that I could believe in," he once said. "It meant getting rid of all the things that I didn't know from my own experience."<sup>10</sup> Harris found his philosophical approach to art both

congenial and inspiring. In the early eighties, when she studied with him, he was making oil paintings that collapsed figure and ground, eliminated the architecture of the room in which they were displayed through masses of color, arcs and planes which seemed to pull away from the wall. He had also just completed a series of drawings called *Skeletons*, in which pentimenti of colors and lines wrestled each other in a tangle of order and fury.

"I think there are two parts to painting," he has said. "There are the things you can control, and the things you can't. You hope that the things you can control . . . the knowledge that you have . . . the background of experience, is built up to the point you can trust it. And something surprising comes from this trust when you confront it with the things you can't control."<sup>11</sup>

Confrontation and lack of mastery became Harris' strategies as she completed her graduate degree. "By the time I got back from San Francisco, I was trying to eliminate all elements of decorativeness from my work," she says. "I felt uncomfortable with things that were beautiful." Bochner's ideas enlivened her own, and she felt more encouraged than ever to explore the way things worked, rather than how they looked: "I was trying to find a way to tell *everything* about an object. What it was, what it might be. I wanted to make it more than an object—as if it could acquire a soul.

"That's when I started losing faith that things could be finished," she adds. "Or at least losing my interest in things that could be finished. I started making paintings that were somewhat like Abstract Expressionism, trying to put all my influences together. I had six stretchers that were five by six feet. I'd make paintings on them and show them to my graduate committee, then I'd paint them out and show the committee the next set of works. By the end of the semester they thought I had all these paintings. I *did*—I didn't mean to mislead them—but most of my stuff was covered up."

Her tendency to leave things open has grown even more pronounced over the years: "A couple I knew owned a painting of mine . . . every time I saw it in their living room it bothered me. Finally I asked my friends if I could carry the piece back to my studio and tinker with it. Well, I ended up blotting it out, resurfacing it completely and returning a painting to them that was altered beyond recognition. They complained that they had loved it the way it was. I'll never get that painting out of their house again."<sup>12</sup>



THE FREQUENT pauses in Harris' speech give a listener time to study her face. It's a serious face, acutely sensitive to sights and sounds. She seems to hide behind her long dark hair, happier observing than being observed. "Right after I got out of school, what little color I'd used just went," she says. "I was making paintings with drawing materials, mostly graphite. I stopped using canvas because I was drawing into the layers with sharp instruments and I would end up with a perforated canvas, which I thought was interesting . . . maybe I'll do that again sometime, the light coming through it was nice . . .

but also I'd sand and scrape the canvas and I'd end up with rags. So I started building panels, using hollow-core doors. That was really satisfying. I had all these new construction skills."

She says she'd always been impressed by the brilliant surfaces of Jasper Johns' flag paintings, and wanted to achieve similar textures in her work. She'd heard of the encaustic process he'd used—mixing pigment with hot wax—but didn't know how to do it herself. "I tried to figure out how this was done and I learned, quickly, different ways to make really dangerous fumes," she says. "I almost blew myself up a couple of times. It's not a good idea to heat turpentine on a hot plate."

Eventually, she discovered her own cold emulsion process. "I'm surprised I haven't seen anyone else using it," she says. "It's so simple. You can buy products like it but they're incredibly expensive."

Before starting a painting she removes the stuffing of acidic paper inside the hollow core doors she buys, then reconstructs the panels to her purpose. Then she covers the doors with many, many layers of gesso. This she follows with a "combination of beeswax and pigment, oil usually," she says, "sometimes mixtures I make myself with iron oxide and varnish, other materials." She has even used rust scraped from an old furnace. "I mix up several formulas and vary them and I usually don't label them so I don't know exactly what I have. It's just a game I play while I'm working. I establish minor obstacles for myself for the surprise. I'm always finding new things in the material. The wax makes the oil paint less predictable. I like the clumsiness of it . . . it adds to the uncertainty. Also, if I painted over something with just turpentine, it would dissolve. But if I put on a layer of wax and then paint over it, it can be gone for much of the painting, but later, if I scrape back through it, it's still there.

"The crayon I use is a variation of a commercially available one, but chisels and whatever's lying around the studio are potential drawing instruments." She has used oil stick and pencil, engraving needles, sandpaper.

Soon after she earned her MFA, she went to work for an outreach program at the Dallas Museum of Art. Shortly thereafter, her paintings began to appear in the DW Gallery in Dallas and at the Graham and McMurtry galleries in Houston, where reviewers noted their moodiness and luminescence. Viewers who didn't know who she was often assumed that the work was done by a man. "Probably because of my name they couldn't tell if I was a man or a woman," she says. "I was doing very large-scale things. They were big and heavy and difficult to move around and maybe some people were not used to seeing such diagrammatic drawing by a woman. But I wasn't working that way to prove a point. It was just my visual vocabulary."

She adds, "I've never tried to make conscious political or feminist statements. The idea of conventional beauty is very limiting, and that's why I've tried to eliminate it from my work, but it's a problem that transcends gender and culture."

IN 1992 HARRIS married Dan Flavin, an artist, like Mel Bochner, who was branded a Minimalist in the sixties (though Flavin rejected the label). Famous for his fluorescent tube sculptures, he installed a four-ton piece called *Untitled (To Tracy, to Celebrate the Love of a Lifetime)* in the Guggenheim Museum, where the wedding was held. A series of pink lights, stacked in an airy totem, stretched from the museum's ground level to the top of its rotunda; yellow and pink tubes, alternating, shone into the museum's many alcoves. Blues and greens and reds bathed the other spaces. The *New Art Examiner* called the wedding "the seminal New York event . . . [w]ith the bride in an Isaac Mizrahi dress and a bevy of art-world personalities in attendance."<sup>13</sup>

The site was certainly appropriate: the swimming, circular form of the Guggenheim resembles an object in one of Harris' paintings.

Since the wedding she has lived with Flavin in Wainscott, New York, where her reputation as an insightful young painter has grown. A recent exhibition at the Benton Gallery in Southampton was described by Lorraine Adams, a writer for the *Washington Post*, as a "deeply moving history of trying to bring to light what is lost." She concludes: "[Harris] is signaling in this work that, if she can just enlarge enough, like a scientist peering through a magnificently powerful microscope, she may peer right into the mystery of death, and instead of seeing [a] muck of black . . . find an orderly, immediately understood cylinder of golden light."<sup>14</sup>

IN THE EARLY afternoon, Harris takes me to the Arlington Museum of Art, a former department store building between Dallas and Ft. Worth that has been converted from a commercial to a cultural mecca. The transformation isn't quite complete; the vast, bright space is uncongenial to meditation and the contemplation of art. The curators do the best they can, though; they're convivial and ambitious. They're currently storing a number of Harris' paintings from a recent exhibition, and she has generously offered to unpack them and show them to me. The paintings are lightweight now; she has learned to refine the panels so they're no longer bulky. She's a tall woman, and many of the paintings match her height. Though there are smaller pieces, she seems to work best in a large format; trying to say *everything* about an object requires a lot of space. Some of the paintings are on single panels, others stretch across two or three sections of wood. In these, the visible seams add an extra dash of uncertainty to the objects Harris examines, undermining their stability, opening fault lines and gaps. She invites me to feel the pieces; their surfaces, even the most harshly worked, are as soft as skin, wounded and gouged. These are sculptures, as well as paintings and drawings. For all of their diagrammatic qualities, they're strangely touching. In part, their purposeful lack of finish accounts for this, emphasizing doubt, curiosity, obsessiveness, even love. The works are poignant, also, because of Harris' use of color. She has limited her palette in favor of draftsmanship, but her velvet azures, candlelight ambers, wreaths of copper and watery greens are often

somber, sometimes buoyant. These are the remnants of colors that might lie behind a Matisse or Bonnard interior, if the rooms were stripped to their raw nerves.

Harris admits that sometimes her own nerves nearly fray while she works. "It's a very emotional experience," she tells me. "All the things we've been talking about—philosophy, science—they're not disconnected from emotion.

"We change every day," she goes on, trying to tease out the feelings behind her work. "We resolve very few of our personal dilemmas." Sometimes the whirlpools in her pieces suggest "mental collapse, confusion."<sup>15</sup>

Permutations again.

"Often when I'm working I feel horrible conflict, angst, anger, joy . . . just what it feels like to be alive."

UP CLOSE, it's easy to see how the translucent oil-and-wax mixture captures her gestures, but the paintings aren't violent like the "action" paintings of Pollock or de Kooning; her gestures are softened, traced in the wax as lightly as memory.

"I'm interested in how time and memory affect the perception of an object," she says.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, she's also fascinated by chance and its relation to vision: "When a coin falls it turns and you see one side and then the other. When a coin spins it turns into a sphere . . . all the possibilities."<sup>17</sup>

This manner of seeing recalls analytical Cubism, which fragmented the world in order to view it from several angles at once, but Harris builds rather than destroys and—unlike her Minimalist mentors—adds rather than subtracts. The objects suggested in her paintings—cups, vessels, vortices; bodies, towers, screws; hurricanes, hieroglyphs, prisons—are alive: mechanical and organic, abstract and specific, blossoming and buried.

WITTGENSTEIN once extolled the virtues of "touch[ing] everything a dozen times," a practice he followed when he worked briefly as an architect, designing his sister's house in Vienna. Each day, while the house was under construction, Wittgenstein's sister opened and closed doors and windows for hours while Wittgenstein watched, tinkered and made adjustments. He built the house as "one constructs a watch," his sister later remembered.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Harris (an old hand, as we've seen, at un-fixing watches) tinkers, touches and re-touches her own world-in-progress, as her titles reveal: *Kepler's Knots*, *Patterns for a Measure of Language*, *Chronology for the Thaumatrope*, *Map for the Fall of a Coin*, *Speaking Cage*, *The Distance between Skin and Scar*, *Hydra of Expectation*, *The Mechanics of Vacillation*, *Disregarded Omen*, *Ghost*. These sound like entries in a brilliant, slightly fevered encyclopedia lost in the labyrinths of Borges' Library of Babel.

An astronomer, madly dreaming; a spirit becoming flesh; a lover's body breaking into bloom.

HARRIS PAUSES, then says, "I think of the things I paint as structures and I can see them when I'm working on them. I can walk all the way around them in my mind. So what I'm doing is making an examination of a structure that doesn't really exist. If I wanted to make these things real, I'd work three-dimensionally. I *have* done drawings of things as if they were studies for something that was going to be built. Some are gravitationally possible, some aren't. It would be interesting to see if I could make one of those things . . . it would be like building a tree from the inside out."

In the meantime, she continues to be inspired by the objects she collects—rope baskets, urns, architectural pediments, carved horns, African snuff holders, pipe fittings, a shuttle for a loom—and the objects she imagines, panicking when her dreams become too discernible. She only likes her work when she's hated it. "Things are more complete when they're incomplete," she insists, repeating that when something's too finished, "it's only what it *is*, not what it could have been."

## NOTES

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16. Tracy Harris quoted in Michael Ennis, "Beneath the Surface" in *Domain*, March 1990, 13.
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## Charlie Chan on Horn

*For John Yau*

For Prestige

Bird records  
a few sides  
(for contract

reasons) as Mr Charlie  
Chan—no matter  
the name his blues

sound the same,  
same alto blaring  
ALCHEMY,

licks exotic  
as *Charlie Chan*  
in *Black Magic*—

Chan's dark sidekick  
Birmingham Brown  
(aka Man-

tan Moreland)  
seeing ghosts,  
fleeing. *Feets*

*do yo stuff*—  
THRIVING ON A RIFF,  
Bird on a run

(in one place)  
eyes bugged out  
blowing

like Gabriel.  
Solos snorted—  
in one nose

& out the other.  
Gone. Number one  
son—don't they know

Charlie Chan  
is a white man?  
Fu Manchu too.

(Bless you.)  
Parker play  
your horn, not

no coon  
no coolie in a white  
suit. Bird's shot

his way to the top—  
made a fist, tied off  
& caught

the first vein  
out of town.  
Laying tracks—

NOWS THE TIME  
NOWS THE TIME  
BIRD GETS THE WORM—

Now dig  
this—Basquiat  
lit, lidded, does

a gravestone—  
CPRKR  
in the Stan-

hope Hotel,  
the one Bird bit  
the dust in (on heroin)

high. TEETH.  
HALOES  
FIFTY NINE CENT.

Who knew how well  
Basquiat would follow—  
feet (six deep) first.

1885

Sing me a song  
Of charcoal light  
Of tired knuckle bones  
A melody of sweating basement  
Night of potato-peeling  
Blues a song too many hours  
Alone of a bonnet and a knife  
A melody of olive peasant shawl  
Sing me a song  
An alto humming blues

## Searching for a Wedding Present on the Bottom Floor of Bullock's

The bride is a bell.  
She is nine and-a-half inches high,  
with a thin handle torso and a vanilla  
skirt, blown open, alone, inside a  
glass case. She must be a bell.

If I could touch her, I would look  
underneath her skirt for a piece of  
porcelain as big as a Q-tip, hanging  
in-between the place where her legs  
would meet.

Then I would ring her, knocking the  
tiny stick back and forth inside  
her skirt, making the sound that means  
service, that means come now, come  
now, I need you, I need you.

I would ring her over  
the sales lady's plea, until  
security came, until she  
broke in two—a mother,  
with me standing  
over her body,  
a failure.

## Praying to Die Running

Thinking of my father, I know that I am no Jew  
starving against a fence of hollow metal diamonds,  
I am not braided into wire, I am not dead yet.

He tells me the stories his mama told him  
of the cattle cars that suffocated our babies,  
of my great-uncle David who watched his wife  
and boys being shot by blue-eyed Nazis,  
who watched their souls escape like flies  
through their opened mouths.

He tells me I am made of their bones,  
that my ribs are their knees  
kneeling against my chest, praying to die running.

He holds me above their graves like a yellow star,  
like something severed, full of milk and blood.  
He lets them touch me, lets them hold the insides  
of my wrists until my breath becomes tangled  
in their fingers—but I am no whore, I am no Jew  
holding the white spine of my father's candle,  
lighting the long wicks of his fingers, of his mama's tongue.

I am no mama for his litter of bodies, no moon with craters  
for hiding, no wing for their bones spreading open like an  
umbrella in the middle of his shadow. I am no bastard,  
no old woman with silver prongs cracking open the skulls of  
angels, hatching their widows, making cradles of my veins.

## Bird

Which parts did you throw to the leaf pile?  
Wings, tail feathers, disheveled, unpreened  
breast, the seed-shaped nail of incurled toe,  
the fall undignified by struggle; not—

as you put it, patting your chest—his memory,  
his feeling, what moved his eye, what split  
his beak on the wires that strained his earth.  
Someone has put body and soul there at four,

brother mutters obscenities under blankets,  
bright fenders flow on his speech highway,  
rusted trains approach stations in the Tatras,  
planes stall and pound above the rooftops.

In our car game we note magnolia blooms,  
hulled by the wind and become flotillas  
on lawns, the remaining ever more empurpled  
bolls, knot appreciated force cunningly.

Mica flecks circle in your eye and catch  
the light in question, two birds in two worlds.  
People—a heaven in your mind—are alive  
and don't die when handlers are preoccupied.

## Friday Night at Il Bistro

The man at the end of the bar is tossing back  
double Screwdrivers when I sit down beside him  
on the only empty barstool. Murray is behind  
the bar tonight; he mixes a Gimlet  
and sets it in front of me without a word.

He is practiced in the art of concoction—with the aid  
of fingertip indexing he knows the answers to all  
my questions: How much is a dash? What's in a Nightmare?  
The stranger suggests a Virgin, or perhaps  
a Bosom Caresser. Murray says why not start

with a Silver Bullet, move on to a Leave-It-to-Me?  
I look for another barstool but what I want  
is a Kiss-in-the-Dark, a Hasty Affair. I keep  
this to myself. Murray waters down the next  
Screwdriver; the stranger says he will never

again drink a Third Degree, a Honeymoon Cocktail  
or Income Tax Gin. He leans forward, into a golden pool  
of lamplight, scribbles his number onto a matchbook.  
I'm looking out the bottle-bottom window  
at the empty street where the moon is casting

shadows, as Murray shakes up another Thunderclap  
and, in light of the latest developments, a Velvet  
Hammer on the rocks. My glass is empty  
and next is a Fog Horn, or maybe a Red Cloud,  
but what I truly desire is an answer:

How to make a Calm Voyage. How do I begin?

## Film Noir

Lights dim and I am anxious for the transparent  
screen to fill, to take your eyes away from mine.  
Humid, even in the theatre, and we hear thunder.  
Night frogs sing in gutters of still water as frames click by.  
Your hand moves along my thigh as the overture rises.

Voices float above us like birds over water—  
peering beneath a sea's dark surface, aware of our deception.  
A woman enters a room. Its window onto night. A voice  
thrown into the theatre, those words tossed away, slurred  
and unwanted. Knowing your eyes look at her face

as your hand makes a shape of the dark. The pearl  
grey heroine has it figured out: her sequined gown,  
martini, a gun. She holds her head still, glances  
back and forth. No one in this theatre knows—  
I'm the one who smokes through ivory filters at ten a.m.

My silk robe whispers through the house, a floating  
moment as evening fades into another mundane soirée.  
The two of us separated by a sheer drape of ennui.  
You're the butler in the corner—light from other rooms  
sweeps over your half-turned face, eyes averted—waiting

to sneak a shot of whisky, that thick release it brings.  
In the house we share I've tried looking out night's window,  
to find only the image of my face. And now, beneath this screen  
of shifting light, you don't recognize her, here beside you.  
Chilled vodka glitters. The guests will arrive soon.

## Accustomed World

A strange dream takes the accustomed world away,  
so they marry young and try to be sincere.  
They feel themselves blend toward some future day.

Cordial wink and credit card tossed in a tray  
where luck is good and little else seems clear.  
A strange dream takes their familiar world away,

who mastered how to laugh when meeting what they  
couldn't understand. They toasted in the next brave year  
that blends and blurs in the accelerating days

of a mortgage, a sun-filled home, paid holidays  
They lived their plans and raised blond children where  
a strange dream takes the well-planned world away.

Their movie idols and loved ones turned to say  
goodbyes too low to understand. They could only hear  
the thunder strobe, then blend to some other day

too distant to remember clearly, perhaps when they  
first noticed one another. Decades clash and disappear  
as they grow young and blend in the feeling of a day  
when the strange world gave its gifts of dreams away.

## A Take on What's Ahead

Dry leaves fall this spring, squeezed  
off as new leaves, juice-thick, make  
the summer new. But it's difficult  
to parse the future, to ignore  
the piles of tiny bones and crusty fir  
I find sometimes on sidewalks.  
It's easy, tempting, to lag behind,  
wallow away inside the gray, jellied  
ruffles of synapse and dream.  
I'd like to rare back, throw a punch,  
a twisting screamer blindsided.  
To the world. But there's so little room  
to maneuver. Live oaks stretch  
shady domes over greening fields.

## Fishing with Alex

### I

WHEN MY SISTER was a sophomore in college, in Philadelphia, she fell in love with a pale, long-haired boy whose chief interest was the effects of hallucinogens on the neurochemistry of white rats. This was in 1972. Ed was two years older than Alex, and when he dropped her, she seemed to come unglued. Anyway, she left school in mid-semester and came back home to Kentucky, where, one sunny morning in March, she swallowed enough sleeping pills to knock a horse down. My mother found her in my bedroom and got her to the hospital, where her stomach was pumped. A couple days later, the doctor put her in Queen of Peace, an old, ivy-covered institution that sat on a hill less than a mile from the new county zoo. On her first night at Queen of Peace, a blustery night, Alex heard an animal roar. The roar was long and heavy-hearted. "It was either the King of the Jungle or his mate," she said, "having a bummer of an evening."

I came to see Alex a few days after she entered Peace. (I took the Greyhound up from Tennessee, where I was a senior in college.) She was wearing a black shawl over a white blouse that was buttoned up to her throat. I'd never seen the shawl. It made her look dramatic, in a formal kind of way, like someone in a Spanish painting. Alex had always liked to dress up, and I thought it was a good sign that she hadn't stopped. I didn't know if it was a good sign that she'd tied her hair back, leaving her brow so exposed.

"Don't worry, Peter," Alex said, "I'm just having a run-of-the-mill nervous breakdown. Isn't that right, Ratch-a-Tatch?" She tapped on the goldfish bowl that was on the nightstand next to her bed. The fish, the only truly bright spot of color in the room, streaked away. It was a gift to Alex from Bobby Tarr, a guy she'd dated in high school. Bobby, who worked in a record store on Bardstown Road, had also brought her a book about the Zen tea ceremony.

"Mom thinks I'm chemically unbalanced," Alex said. "And spiritually at sea. And that I go out with the wrong boys." Alex looked out the window. It was an erratic mid-March afternoon, full of dark clouds one moment and wild, sudden sunlight the next.

"What do you think?" I touched the too-small beret on my head. I'd bought it at a thrift shop in Nashville. I had hoped it would make me look worldly.

"I don't know," she said. "I guess some of my boyfriends haven't turned out too hot." She glanced toward the door. "I wonder where Dad went to."

My father had come with me to the hospital. He'd brought Alex a copy of *Time* and a sack of vitamin pills. (My mother was a great believer in vitamin pills.) Then, after he'd told a rambling story about the goat his bachelor brother, Morris, had recently purchased, Dad went into the hall to look for a water fountain.

I looked toward the door and saw a wimpled nun drift by.

"What about Bobby Tarr?" I asked. "Bobby's O.K., isn't he?" Bobby was three years older than Alex; he'd dropped out of college by the time Alex met him. He wore puffy-sleeved print shirts and fringed buckskin vests and he burned a lot of incense.

"Bobby can be nice," Alex said. "But I was just one of his chicks, you know."

"And Mac?" Mac, whose actual name was Eldon McVea, was my age. Alex had first gone out with him when she was a sophomore in high school. Mac was shy, and awkward, except on the basketball court, where he became a boy who could make fall-away jumpers with his eyes half-closed. Alex found Mac's shyness appealing—that and his fine, blond, almost feminine looks. Mac, on the other hand, felt flummoxed by his shyness, and as a result, he drank more than was normal in our group. (We drank a lot.) When he drank, he sometimes did stupid, shy-boy sorts of things. Once, he tried to pole-vault into Alex's second-story bedroom, using a long metal rod he'd pilfered from a construction site. He'd risen briefly into the air, like some pioneer of flight, and then had fallen on his shoulder, dislocating it. Like me, Mac had been a solid B-minus student, and we'd ended up at the same college, on a hill in east Tennessee.

"Mac got so bombed sometimes," Alex said, "he missed my face completely when he tried to kiss me." I saw her watching Mac's face float by again.

"Well, anyway," I said, "Mac said to say 'Hi.'"

"'Hi' back." Alex studied her fingers, made a church of them, loosing silence upon the room. She was burrowing down into herself, her long nose leading the way. Alex had the Smith family nose, what my father, wishing only to be kind, called "the prettiest bird perch in all of Kentucky." The sharp tip of her nose suggested that it would be worth your while to tell her a good joke or story, but at that moment I couldn't think of anything that would keep her from poking among her thoughts.

My father appeared in the doorway, his tweed motoring cap in hand. My mother had given him the cap for Christmas to make him look more sporty. He was a judge, and as a rule dressed like one. He didn't always notice that his dark suit coat didn't match his dark suit trousers. There were motions and petitions to be pondered, precedents to be considered.

Dad told me he was going to wait outside in the car. Then he kissed Alex on the forehead. "We love you, Miss Graham Cracker." My father had a half-

dozen nicknames for Alex: Izzy Woo, Alexosaurus, Moony Tooth, Babes. Miss Graham Cracker was derived from Alex's full name, Alexandra Bell Smith.

After my father left the room, Alex said, "Dad told me a story the other day about how some East Coast girl had snubbed him when he was in college and how he'd been down in the dumps for days. Then he came back to Louisville for the Christmas holidays, and he saw Mom at a party, standing under mistletoe."

"Mom under mistletoe? Wasn't she a member of a Trotskyite cell back then?"

"Allegedly," Alex said. "Anyway, Dad kissed her. 'I took the liberty,' was how he put it, 'and I started living again.'"

"Didn't it take Dad about seven years to persuade Mom to marry him?"

"He left that part out," Alex said. The goldfish darted around the bowl, filling the room with its agitation. "I guess he was trying to tell me to hang in there." She pulled her shawl more tightly around her shoulders.

Ten minutes later, when I left Alex's room, it was snowing. It shouldn't have been snowing in Kentucky in mid-March, when green was surging through everything, but there the flakes were, all fat and wet. Crossing the parking lot, with snow falling on my face, I felt as if I were being kissed by somebody—an aunt, say—who hadn't seen me in an age. It was both pleasant and annoying. Then I saw my father in his maroon Chevette, his forehead pressed against the steering wheel.

When I got in the car, Dad sat up straight and adjusted his cap. The steering wheel had left a mark on his forehead. "I was thinking of that fish Alex caught in Lake Cumberland. Fall of '62. Do you remember that?"

I remembered our fishing guide, a narrow, dilapidated man named Bristow, who rolled his own cigarettes. He was so quiet that he was essentially finished talking for the day after he said "Morning" to you.

"Alex was the happiest girl in Kentucky when she caught that fish," my father said. "A little old crappie. And now she's, well, inconsolable because of this fellow Ned."

"Ed." I watched the snow fall, as thick as a plague of moths. "But I don't think it's just that."

"What else do you think it is?" He pushed his glasses up his nose.

I didn't really know the answer, but I said, "Sometimes you just lose your grip on things and then you start sliding down the slope."

"I see," my father said, politely.

SEVERAL WEEKS later, when every dogwood in Jefferson County was in bloom, Alex sat at the table in my parents' kitchen, smoking one of Willie's Salems. Willie, who had worked for our family since before Alex and I were babies, sat across from Alex, snapping the ends off green beans. There was sunlight in the room, a springtime flood of it. It washed over the cut-glass

sugar bowl and the three china monkeys (See No Evil, etc.) on the Lazy Susan, over the faint hairs on Alex's wrist and over the iron pot Willie dropped the beans into.

"Last night I dreamed I was on this Greyhound bus," Alex said, "and this soldier kept falling asleep on my shoulder. And when I'd wake him, he'd scratch his head and say, 'Excuse me, ma'am, is this the Silver Dog to Bozeman?'"

I thought it was a good sign that Alex was having travel dreams. Since coming home from Queen of Peace, she'd rarely ventured out of the house, except to see her therapist. Once she'd driven to Dizzy Whiz and ordered a Whizburger and a shake, but had left before the curb girl could deliver the food. On another afternoon she'd gone with Bobby Tarr and his friend Pipe Cleaner Man to see a show at the planetarium.

"Don't talk to no soldiers on no Greyhounds is my advice to you," Willie said. Willie handed out advice without much prompting. She thought you'd be stupid to ignore her opinion, even if you weren't her child. She was short and wide, a blocky shape. She had a voice that could get you to come down out of a comfortable tree right away and clean up some mess you'd made.

Willie snapped the stem off a bean and dropped it in the pot. "You getting ready to leave us, Alex?"

"I'm just telling you my dream," Alex said. Cigarette smoke hung around her like a veil, then slid out the window. She looked pale and a bit undernourished, but not without resources. I watched her trying to work out things behind her large brown eyes. A thought sped by; she touched her temple. Another thought, a longer one, it seemed, unfurled itself and lingered near the corner of her mouth, where she scratched herself with a pinkie.

"What do you think I should do, Willie?" Alex asked.

"Well," Willie said, "if I was you, I wouldn't be sitting here in my bed clothes at three in the afternoon with the sun pouring down. That's first. And second, I don't know that I'd be fooling with that boy Bobby and his friend, the one that looks like a Halloween skeleton."

"Pipe Cleaner Man," I said.

"He has a good heart," said Alex, who was drawn to socially marginal boys, boys whose brows were unclear, boys who liked to sleep in their labs with their rats and gels. "He can't help how he looks."

"All that reefer don't improve him any," Willie said. "And you neither, Peter." She tapped me on the hand with a thick finger.

"I wonder what Bozeman is like," Alex said, giving the Lazy Susan a push. The three monkeys glided by, two of them clearly grinning.

"Never heard of it," Willie said.

"Cowboys, rednecks," I said. "What would you be thinking of Montana for?"

"Bobby's sister lives there," Alex said. "She's a weaver."

"Cowboys, rednecks, and a weaver," I said airily, reaching for one of Willie's Salems.

"You can leave your money right on the table," Willie said, carrying the pot of beans over to the stove.

"What about New York?" I said to Alex. I was thinking of moving there when I graduated from college, later that spring. "We could go together, find an apartment."

"I hear they got rats as big as suitcases in New York," Willie said. "Rats that eat children." She took an onion out of a bowl on the counter and slipped off its crumbly jacket.

"New York's too close to Philadelphia," Alex said, looking out the window. Our mother knelt at the edge of her garden, her trowel flashing in the sunlight. Hugo, our arthritic dachshund, lay nearby.

"Where would you go, Willie," Alex asked, "if you were trying to think of some place to go?"

"Walter took me to Chicago once," Willie said, "but I didn't think much of it." Walter was Willie's husband; he worked in a mattress factory and shot more pool than Willie thought was good for him. "When I was a girl, I used to like to visit my Aunt Zina down in Hardin County. She had a horse and the sweetest Seckel pears in the world. Sometimes she'd wrap them in newspaper and stick them in a drawer to let them ripen." Willie pushed some chopped onion off the cutting board into the pot of beans. "But Hardin County might be a little slow for you. It ain't got no cowboys, anyway."

"I don't know," Alex said. She rubbed her temple with an index finger; a thought had lodged there, apparently. "Maybe I should be a nun."

"You're just talking," Willie said. "Anyhow, you ain't Catholic."

"The Episcopal Church has nuns," Alex said. We were medium-High Church Episcopalians, except for my mother, who practiced Episcopalianism but kept her ears open to the teachings of Baptist fundamentalists and Catholic mystics who lived on nuts and berries.

"You got to stay in the nun house on Saturday night if you're a nun," Willie said. She took a Granny Smith off the counter and shined it on her apron.

"Mac asked after you," I said, blowing a smoke ring that wobbled over the Lazy Susan before collapsing.

Alex peered at me through the haze of smoke and sunlight. "How come you keep promoting Mac?"

"He's my friend," I said. "He likes you."

"Is that the boy who tried to fly into your window like he was some kind of spirit?" Willie asked. She picked at a piece of apple in her teeth.

"The same," Alex said, adding in a mock-dreamy tone, "If drunks had wings. . . ."

"Yeah," Willie said. "Then they could fly upside down and sing to you like Smokey Robinson. Tell me about it."

Alex cracked a smile and looked out the window. Sunlight washed over the kneeling figure of my mother and over old, black-coated Hugo, asleep in the grass.

"PIGS ARE VERY smart, you know," Mac said. He was telling Alex about Ben Franklin, a pig he'd kept as a pet for most of his last semester in college. We were in a johnboat on a lake east of Bardstown—my father in the bow, Alex and Mac in the middle, and myself in the stern, my hand on the tiller of a 6-HP Evinrude. It was a hot late-June afternoon, the sky the color of steam, no more than a shred of breeze. None of us had caught anything in the three hours we'd been on the lake. Alex and Mac still had lines in the water, but only my father, who believed that catching a fish could make your blood rush and your soul expand all at once, fished as if he meant it. He was using a green popping plug, something that had worked for him on other occasions. Twenty times, the plug fell out of the sky and plopped into dark, weedy water near the shore, and twenty times my father slowly reeled in, flicking his rod now and then so that the open-mouthed lure made a sound—bup-bup—that was supposed to excite bass, and twenty times the plug reached the boat slathered in algae. He was reeling in when Mac began his story about Ben Franklin.

"Where did the pig sleep?" Alex asked. She lifted her bait out of the water—a night crawler that resembled a knot of blanched viscera—and then dropped it back in.

"He slept in my dorm room in a box, until he got too big. I got him a student ID with his picture on it." Mac grinned. The sun had turned his fair skin a bright pink. His little blond mustache, which he'd worked on for months, was barely perceptible.

"Maybe I should try one of those weedless jigs," my father said. He opened his tackle box and took out a yellow-skirted lure. I saw a hawk cruise the pines at the far end of the lake, then dive out of sight.

"Is that the end of the story?" Alex asked. "I bet not. I bet that pig didn't live happily ever after." She glanced at Mac from underneath her baseball cap.

"I sort of donated him to my cultural anthro class," Mac said. "I gave him to my professor. We were studying hunting cultures and how they relate to animals."

"So then you barbecued him," Alex said.

"Eventually, yeah," Mac said. "But first I had to shoot him and cut his throat. Except I screwed up and missed the jugular. So then the pig gets up on his feet all of a sudden, all zonked on adrenaline, and starts flying around the pen in the professor's yard, splattering blood everywhere. And this girl in my class is wiggling out, shrieking and stuff."

"The class watched you do this?" Alex asked slowly.

"Pig-killing 101," I said.

"Yeah," Mac said. "So the professor and I caught the pig and cut the vein. I needed, like, a keg of beer after that was done."

My father cast his yellow-skirted jig toward a stump, the monofilament gleaming as it arced across the water. It was possible that he hadn't heard Mac. At any rate, he said nothing.

"What was the hardest part?" Alex asked Mac. Her knee was almost touching his, and she moved it away. "Shooting the pig? Slicing his throat? Or eating him?"

"Shooting him, I guess," Mac said, glancing at me. Mac had omitted from his account the fact that he had been near tears as Ben Franklin flung himself around the pen in that last rush of adrenaline, and the fact that it was the professor who had finally cut the jugular. "You're supposed to shoot him between the eyes. It's cleaner that way. But the pig wouldn't stand still while I was trying to sight him in. He kept moving his head back and forth, like he was on amphetamines, sniffing the dirt. I kept waiting for him to look at me." Mac didn't say that his hand had been shaking and that his first shot had hit the pig in the shoulder.

"If I'd been that pig," Alex said, "I would've looked at you, Mac. Not that I'm particularly brave or anything, but I would've wanted you to feel all my dying pig thoughts." She stared at Mac.

"Well," Mac said, looking away.

Alex reached over and pressed the sunburned flesh above his knee with her thumb. "You're going to fry, if you don't watch it."

My father reeled in his jig, and then proposed that we move down toward the end of the lake that lay in shade.

We scooted across the water, stirring up a breeze. Mac put a fresh night crawler on his hook and offered to put one on for Alex, but she said she'd do it herself. When I turned off the engine and we began to drift through the shade, my father said, "There's a fish waiting for you here, Moony Tooth."

"If you say so, Dad." Alex tossed her re-baited line into the water, and set her elbow on her thigh and her chin on her fist.

My father's yellow jig flew toward a fallen tree near the shore and the bass that surely slept there.

Mac watched his bobber. "Come on, fish. Bite."

"Oh fish, oh fish, where art thou, my finny friend," I said idly, though what I wished for most of all was a cigarette. I avoided smoking in my father's presence.

A dragonfly landed on the bill of Alex's cap, its four membranous wings in repose.

"I think I'm going to move to Montana," Alex said.

My father reeled in his lure, which wiggled like a grass-skirted dancer. I could see him pondering the distance between Kentucky and Montana. He and my mother had wanted Alex to stay in-state for a while, spend a semester at U of K or U of L. "Long enough for her to get her feet on the ground," my mother had said. When I'd argued that I thought Alex had her feet on the ground—I'd still hoped she'd come to New York with me—my

mother had replied, "Do you know what you're talking about? Depression doesn't just go away, like the chicken pox. It follows you around, and then one day it's sitting on your chest again and you can't breathe." My mother talked with her face turned aside, as if to spare me some of her indignation. "Can you imagine what it would be like for your sister to fall ill in a desolate place like Montana, where she doesn't know a soul, except for Bobby Tarr's sister?"

The dragonfly flew from Alex's cap. I considered the distance between Montana and New York, and I thought I saw Mac calculating the distance between Montana and Nashville, where he would begin work later that summer, selling pool tables for his father, who owned a chain of billiards stores in the mid-South. At any rate, I saw Mac's pink face darken, as if some slim hope had fled. Alex had a grip on Mac's imagination, the more so since she'd tried suicide. He thought she must know something about death, or life, he didn't know, some secret.

"Montana," Mac mused. "Do they have daily mail delivery in Montana?"

"Are you going to write to me every day, Mac?"

Mac stroked the fuzz on his upper lip and studied his bobber.

My father looked out across the lake, which was flat and glaring where the sun struck it. Perhaps he was thinking of the winter he'd spent in Wyoming. He was fresh out of college then. Having been deemed unfit to serve in the Army—his eyesight was unacceptable, he was thin as a darned needle—and having no good idea of how he should spend his professional life, he took a job at a private school in Sheridan founded by an oil man's wife. Dad told Alex and me this story at dinner a few nights before. "Oh, it was as cold as Billy Blue," he said. "I thought spring would never come. I couldn't wait to get back to Kentucky." When he finished, Alex said, "I'll be sure to take some warm clothes with me, if I go."

Now my father removed his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt. The lake was still. All the dull weight of the afternoon seemed to lay on it. Then Alex's bobber went under and her rod bent. The fish on her line ran parallel to the boat and then doubled back, causing Alex to swivel in her seat. Her face was intent, as if she were in the grip of a revelation.

The fish she pulled out of the water was a silvery yellow, with dark convict stripes. It wasn't much longer than her hand.

"A bluegill," my father said. "You saved us from being skunked, Moony Tooth."

"A lunker," Mac said.

"It's not always the size that counts," Alex said, grinning, showing Mac some of her fine, straight teeth.

"You really nailed this sucker," Mac said, trying to yank the hook out of the fish's mouth.

The fish squirted out of his hands, landing on the slatted floor of the boat, from which it attempted to rise in a fury of jumping. I picked it up, felt the muscle bunched beneath its scales, then watched it shoot out of my hands.

Alex took off her baseball cap and scooped the fish into it. Her loosened hair fell across her face.

"I've got a hook disgorger somewhere," my father said.

"That's O.K., Dad," Alex said. "I can do it." She pushed her hair out of her face and bent over the fish, which she held on her lap in the cap. "Don't look at me like that," she said to the fish, working the hook back and forth. When the hook finally came free, she placed the fish back in the water as carefully as if she were setting a vase of flowers on a table. "Go!" she said.

## II

THE WINDS in Montana sharpened Alex's cheekbones. She spent two years in Bozeman, the second largely to prove to our parents that she knew her own mind. And then she moved farther west, to the Willamette Valley, in Oregon, where she enrolled in a cooking school. It gave her pleasure to get a soufflé to rise or a sauce to cohere. In a picture she sent me, she was beaming above a plate of raspberry turnovers, her head topped by a fluffy toque.

Alex got a job as a pastry chef in a resort hotel on the Oregon coast. She met a man named Hank, a former Navy pilot, who ran a river-rafting business. He was ten years older than her. He had a thick, black beard and black hair that rushed away from his high, stern forehead. He looked like a desert prophet, or, anyway, like someone who preferred his own company to other people's. Alex said he wasn't so distant once you got to know him. But hardly anybody did get to know him, aside from Alex. Two years after they were married, they got divorced. Alex wanted a child. Hank had a vasectomy.

Alex moved to Portland and went to work for a part-Chinese, part-German chef who owned a catering service and could do ninety-nine things with salmon: salmon in rose-petal sauce, salmon in marionberry sauce, salmon with wild mushrooms.

Alex prepared salmon until she saw chinooks and cohos in her dreams, and so the first time she had her divorced neighbor Steve over for dinner, she cooked mahimahi.

"I wonder if yuppie liberals would eat this if they knew it was dolphin," Steve said. Steve was a newspaper reporter and he believed it was his duty to point out falsehood of any kind. Alex said his zealotry gave his pale face a little color. He burned off calories, she said, merely by thinking about the corruption he was going to uncover. He wooed Alex with thick books about politics, and agreed to take ballroom dancing lessons with her if she went with him to a lecture series on the economic strategies of Pacific Rim nations.

Alex and Steve were married at a Willamette Valley winery in July of 1987. Steve had wanted a courthouse ceremony, but Alex had talked him into something grander, something with sunlight and a touch of the deity in it. On the little plywood platform where the ceremony was performed, by a Unitarian minister who sweated through her robes, Steve was flanked by two teen-aged daughters from his previous marriage. Like their father, they were tall and slender, serious and shy. In the long dresses and wide-brimmed hats

that Alex had bought for them, they looked like sailing vessels, waiting for a breeze to carry them away. Steve wore a rumpled tan suit, and no hat, though he was partial to headwear. He sometimes wore a fedora to the office. Alex said it made him look like a sixty-five-year-old newspaper reporter instead of a forty-five-year-old one. At the winery, with the sun beating down on his bare head, he looked boyish and ill-at-ease.

On Thanksgiving of the following year, Alex brought Steve to my parents' house in Kentucky. I came home, too, with my wife, Claire, and our four-month-old son, Louis. (We drove the seven hundred miles from New York; Claire hated flying.) Alex looked peaked. She nibbled at Thanksgiving dinner. She drank water instead of wine and turned down a piece of Willie's sweet potato pie. She laughed when my father told a story about Uncle Morris, who now tended to a couple of snippy geese in addition to a flock of goats, but she didn't even grin when Steve, who had been putting away the Burgundy, mentioned a nude poet housecleaning service he'd read about.

"A desperate crackpot exhibitionist," Alex said.

"Just another American entrepreneur," Steve said.

Later that night, I heard Alex say to Steve, "I'm pregnant." They were in Alex's bedroom, and I was next door in mine. I was sitting with Louis in the easy chair my parents had given me when I turned sixteen. Louis had been fussing. Claire was asleep.

"When did you find out?" Steve asked. "Did you take the home test or something?"

I heard Alex say something about Tuesday. Louis stirred, pushing a fist into my neck. Claire exhaled, a fluttery, sibilant sound.

Steve said, "I thought we'd agreed we wouldn't have a child until I finished the book." For several years, he'd been working on a book about a property-rights battle between the Government and a Northwest Indian tribe. "I can't deal with a kid now."

"I'll deal with it," Alex said, "while you write your goddamn book."

"We'll talk about it later," Steve said. "You're tired." I heard a bed creak, and then something hit the floor. Digger, my parents' new dachshund, began to bark. Steve said he was going outside for a smoke.

"I'm having the baby," Alex said loudly.

I let my nose graze in the warm, dark fuzz on Louis' head and wondered what the truth was: had Alex reneged on an agreement with Steve or had Steve merely imagined they had some sort of agreement? Whatever the answer, I was on Alex's side. I wanted her to have the baby, to be able to rest her nose in her child's scalp.

THE NEXT morning, Mac came over with Amelia, his four-year-old daughter. Amelia was not shy, but she decided it would be more interesting to sit under the kitchen table rather than at it. There were shoes to be untied: her father's, mine, Claire's, Steve's. (Alex wore clogs.) Everybody pretended

not to notice what Amelia was doing, except for Steve, who was on his fifth cup of coffee. He and Alex hadn't said two words to each other that morning, a gray but unstill autumn morning, a gusty, kite-flying kind of day.

"My laces are double-knotted," Steve said to Amelia. "Maybe that's why you're having a problem."

"Don't worry," Amelia said, in her high-pitched spring peeper's voice. "I'm not having a problem."

Louis, who was sitting on Alex's lap, cooed and rocked forward. His blue-gray eyes were focused on the three china monkeys on the new Lazy Susan. The old one had been rotated into oblivion.

"Did you hear about Bobby Tarr?" Mac asked, looking at Alex. Mac's face had thickened somewhat over the years, perhaps as a corollary to his growing prosperity (he'd taken over and expanded his father's pool table business), perhaps, also, in response to his divorce (he ate out a lot). But the boyish delicacy of his face hadn't disappeared. It was there in his long, pale eyelashes and in the cowlick that persisted where he tried to part his hair, which was still only one shade darker than cornsilk. And the little mustache he'd had for years was gone; he looked whisked clean, like a Boy Scout.

"I bet you don't have good news, Mac," Alex said.

Mac looked into his coffee mug. "He got caught with some nose candy. Him and one of his employees. And he's up for tax fraud and a few incidentals."

"Oh, God," Alex said. "Poor Bobby." She absently handed Louis the china monkeys. Louis bobbed the handoff, but Claire reached over and saved the monkeys from the floor. Amelia was humming, a busy bee.

"Do I know Bobby?" Steve asked. The bill of his baseball cap was pulled down so low you could barely see his eyes.

"No," Alex said. She gave Louis her pinkie to hold.

I explained to Steve who Bobby was. "He owns a health foods store. Mom buys her acidophilus from him."

"I can see how Bobby might cheat on his taxes," Alex said. "I didn't report all my income from last year, either." Alex had left the Chinese-German chef and started her own catering business. "But I can't see him selling coke."

"You've been out of town for a while," Mac said.

"I guess." Louis squirmed in Alex's lap, moaned, grabbed at air with his tiny, fat hands. "What's wrong, Bubbacakes?"

"He wants the monkeys," I said.

"He's probably just hungry," Claire said. "You're just a little eating machine, aren't you, *bamboccio*?" Claire was part-Italian. Her face was oval, almost Madonna-like when she tilted it a certain way, though her mouth was full and unprim.

"I have a pig," Amelia said. "Her name is Little Pig." A pink stuffed animal with black eyes rose up from under the table, then sank out of sight again. "But Louis can't have it."

"Be nice, Amelia," Mac said.

"Was Bobby the guy who tried to pole-vault into your window?" Steve asked.

"No." Alex passed Louis to Claire, and then went to the stove. She shook the tea kettle to see if it had any water in it.

"That was Mac," I said. "Back when he was young and athletic."

"Back when I was drinking malt liquor for breakfast," Mac said. "And gargling with it." Mac spoke as if delivering testimony, looking straight ahead. "But I gave it up."

"I usually stick to coffee in the morning myself," Steve said.

"I mean, I've given up drinking entirely," Mac said, turning toward Alex, who was getting a mug out of the cabinet. "I go to these meetings at St. Andy's." St. Andrew's was the church Alex and I had grown up in.

"That's great, Mac," Alex said. "That's brave of you."

There was a jiggle of a smile on Mac's face, as if he had just jumped from somewhere high and landed on his feet.

"Yeah, great, Mac," I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. One of the things I liked to do when I was home for a visit was drink with Mac at the Pine Room or the Sand Bar down by the river and catch up on all the gossip.

Claire unbuttoned her blouse and then undid the flap on her nursing bra. Louis latched onto her breast, and Claire's eyes closed for a moment—from pleasure, I assumed, though I'd never asked.

"Alex made me give up smoking," Steve said, "when I moved in with her."

"I said that if you wanted to smoke, you had to smoke outside." The kettle was hissing. Alex lifted it off the burner.

Out the window, I saw Digger pulling my father across the lawn. As I watched Digger tug Dad toward the woods at the edge of the yard, I had the feeling that my father, with his long, spidery legs and wispy trunk, might depart the ground at any moment and float away, leaving Digger to poke around the sumac and beeches by himself.

Amelia came out from under the table and said, "I want a popsicle." She was blonde, like her father, with dazzling pink cheeks and a lower lip that looked as if it would swell if you told her something she didn't want to hear.

"Please," Mac said to his daughter. "Please may I have a popsicle?"

"I'll see what we got," Alex said.

"In Oregon," Steve said, "it's practically a felony to even think about lighting up." He leaned over and began to work on the knot that Amelia had made out of his and my shoelaces. "The nicotine police are everywhere. I smoke in the bushes like a teenager."

"I sleep with an ashtray," Alex said, peering into the freezer. "How about some vanilla ice cream, Amelia? 'Made with organic milk and other natural ingredients.' Yum."

"Don't you have a popsicle?" Amelia held her pig by one leg.

"Beware the reformed smoker," Steve said. "Or the reformed anything, for that matter."

Mac looked down at the table and probed a gouge in the wood with his finger. Louis sucked peacefully at Claire's breast. Claire glanced at me.

"Anybody want to play basketball?" I asked.

"Sounds good," Mac said.

"And beware the unreformed conspiracy theorist," Alex said.

"Everybody is plotting to deprive him of his right to be a selfish jerk." Alex seemed to vibrate as she stood there with the freezer door open. I could just about see her heart hammering away under her fancy Western-style shirt, with its mother-of-pearl buttons and lightning-bolt embroidery. "You know what I sometimes do when I get angry?" Alex said to Amelia. "I count to ten very slowly. My dad taught me that. Sometimes I count to ten in German very slowly."

"What's German?" Amelia asked.

"It's a language," Alex said. "Ein, zwei, drei, vier, fünf. . ."

MY FATHER took a long, two-handed set shot—his pre-World War II shot, he called it. It struck the front of the rim and bounded away. Mac, who was jetting around the court as if he were sixteen instead of thirty-six, out-ran Steve for the ball. Mac may have lost a little spring in his legs—he had more weight to carry aloft now—but he could still get off the ground. And the release on his high-arcing jumper was as pretty as it had been twenty years before.

Mac dribbled to the oil spot near the center of the driveway, and faked a move to his right before dribbling back through his legs and scooting the other way. He left Steve inhaling the warmish November air above the oil spot, so I hurried out to guard him.

"You learn that move in church league?" I gasped. I was out of shape; I didn't get much exercise in New York, aside from pushing a baby carriage around the upper West Side.

Mac grinned and floated the ball over my head to my father, who made the gimme.

"Awright, Judge," Mac said.

"Yay, Dad," Alex said. She was sitting with Amelia on the retaining wall at the side of the house.

"Yay, Daddy," Amelia said, tossing her pig into the air. It landed on an azalea bush, feet to the sky.

Steve held the ball over his head, like Atlas with his globe. He'd taken off his flannel shirt. He was wearing a ribbed, sleeveless T-shirt, the kind my grandfather had worn. He was taut and bony, not much flesh at the joints. He'd let it be known that he didn't care for basketball. It was a lame-brained game, in his opinion. Another narcotic for sofa slobbs. When Mac had asked him which sports he did like, Steve had said, "None, really. Unless you count darts."

I'd sometimes wondered what had attracted Alex to Steve in the first place, and a couple years later I asked her. "Oh, you know," she said. "He was kind of a hot-shot journalist. And he talked a good line. And when he smiled, which he hardly ever did, he looked like he was about fourteen. I had hopes for him."

Steve's face was shaded by his cap. His mouth was a strict line, the barest slot. He dribbled the ball around in a determined way, looking for an opening. Mac gave him space.

I set a soft pick on Mac, a day-after-Thanksgiving pick. "Watch out, bubba," I said. "There's a fat boy breathing on you."

My father hung back near the basket. He believed that a relaxed defense was a sane defense. He was sixty-eight. He was humming a song from long ago. In his back pocket was an outdated Louisville & Nashville railroad timetable. There was no telling what his other pockets contained.

Steve came steaming around my pick and headed for the basket. If he'd been in control, he might have pulled up short and shot a ten-footer. If my father had been more nimble, if he'd not been trying to recollect a rhyme from a Cole Porter song, as he confessed later, he might have side-stepped Steve.

Dad's glasses flew off when he fell to the driveway. Seated on the asphalt without his glasses, he looked as if somebody had taken an eraser to him. He was wearing one dark blue sock and a dark green one. He touched his nose. Steve had caught him with an elbow.

Alex ran across the driveway, her clogs banging. Amelia stayed by the wall; she was trying to see if she could get her pig to fly up to the highest branch of an old plum tree.

"Are you O.K., Dad?" Alex asked. She put her hand on the crown of my father's gray head. Then she glared at her husband, who was holding Dad's glasses. They were intact. Steve had a scrape on his hand.

"You stink at basketball, Steve," Alex said.

"It was an accident," Steve said softly. His cap had fallen off; he looked naked. "I'm sorry, Judge."

"Boy!" Alex said.

"It's all right, Moony Tooth," my father said. "It was an accident." Digger came around the corner of the house with a ratty, slime-green tennis ball and laid it in my father's lap.

At dinner that night, my father remembered the Cole Porter rhyme he'd been searching for ("You're diveen. . . You're Ovaltine") and Alex announced that she was going to have a baby. Then she ate a piece of Willie's sweet potato pie.

### III

"ALL MY boyfriends have one foot in the grave," Alex said, smiling at Willie. Alex had just gotten off the phone with a man in Seattle, an oenologist named Roger, who wanted her to go sailing with him later that spring. Alex said Roger was almost old enough to start making withdrawals on his IRAs.

"All my boyfriends got two feet in the grave," said Willie, who was picking chicken off the bone, making a salad. "Except for Mr. Walter Stafford, who is sucking up his Pick-Four winnings through a gold-plated straw down in Gulfport. Did I tell you about that?"

"Mom told me he hit the jackpot," Alex said. "You should have waited a while longer before you showed him the door. You'd be on Easy Street now."

"Yeah, something like that," Willie said, wiping her hands on her apron.

I remembered seeing Walter occasionally when I was a boy. He'd come by the house in the late afternoons to collect Willie. He drove a baby-blue Pontiac with whitewalls, a yacht of a car. I remembered seeing Willie walk out to the car in a jazzy, polka-dot shift and thinking that she lived a life I knew nothing about.

"It's like that song," Alex said. "'You Got the Gold Mine, I Got the Shaft.'"

She sat down opposite me at the kitchen table. She was wearing a purple nylon warmup suit that rustled when she moved. She had cut her hair short, almost to the Don't-Tread-On-Me length she'd worn it at between her two marriages. It was spiky. I thought she looked beautiful, like a crested, beaky bird. And she had something of the crested bird's hauteur, too. But way back in her brown eyes, where the light was faint, you could see the hope that she would be swept off her feet.

"Are we going jogging?" I asked. I picked up the china monkeys. Stuart, Alex's son, had broken Speak No Evil's head a couple years before, when he banged on it with a spoon. My mother had tried to glue the head back together, but a hole remained and the monkey now served as a toothpick holder.

"Where's Stuart?" Alex said.

I pointed out the window. Stuart was kicking a soccer ball around the yard, trying to elude Digger, the friskiest eight-year-old dachshund in Jefferson County. My mother was watching from a lawn chair. She was still in her church clothes—a dark suit with a lavender scarf. I'd gone with her to a Good Friday service at St. Andy's. I had hoped to avoid going, but then at breakfast she'd begun to talk about my father, who had died in a car accident the previous spring while driving home from a rail-buffs' outing in Tennessee. She kept expecting to see him walk in the door with an Easter geranium. She had a trolley full of geraniums he'd given her.

"I guess Mom can look after Stuart for a while," Alex said.

"Sure. Let's hit the road."

"Peter's a running fool," Alex said to Willie.

"I run, therefore I sleep." I'd taken up running only in the last few months, not long after Claire and I separated.

"That's better than being a plain fool," Willie said. She was aware that I'd cheated on Claire.

When Alex tried to snatch a piece of chicken, Willie slapped her hand and said, "Go on! Get!"

WE RAN down Mayfair Lane, past Colonel Wilson's old sugar maple, a good climbing tree, past the stucco ranch house that had been pink back in the sixties, when Mrs. Robideaux, the only woman in the neighborhood to do yard work in toreador pants and spike heels, lived in it. At the end of Mayfair, we turned left, toward the river. I could smell it, a good mile away. It was swollen, in its gravid, springtime phase. As we ran toward the river, down a hill and then past a tree-clotted swamp where we'd ice-skated some winters, Alex told me about a dream she'd had. She dreamed that she was back in Queen of Peace, and that she and Dad and Mom and I and Willie and Bobby Tarr were all crowded into a little room furnished with orange molded-plastic chairs and philodendra.

"Everybody was arguing about what we should watch on TV," she said. "Except for Dad, who was sleeping. Willie wanted to watch *Gunsmoke*, I remember. Everybody was shouting, and outside, it was sunny and nice, a perfect day. Then this man in a doctor's jacket walked in."

"Your white knight," I said.

"He kind of looked like Roger," Alex said. "Ruddy cheeks, sunburned sailor's nose. He laid his hand on my head and said, 'Time to go, pumpkin.' And so, while everybody was arguing, we left by way of the window. Then we were falling for what seemed like forever, just tumbling through all this velvety space, and I kept thinking, This must be a mistake, but it sure feels nice."

"So, are you going sailing with Roger?" We turned left again, onto River Road. The river was off to the right, visible between stacks of condominiums built on pilings. A half-mile farther on, where Lime Kiln Creek emptied into the river, was the Sand Bar.

"I haven't decided," Alex said.

We ran in silence. The sky was blue. The smell of the river—muddy, loaded with debris from distant places—had deepened. There were grassy vapors in the air, too. And truck exhaust. We nearly got blown off the shoulder by a beer truck.

"When you took all those sleeping pills," I said, "what did you think it would be like?"

I'd never asked my sister about her suicide attempt, not in twenty-three springs. I knew hardly anything about it, only what my mother had told me in the days following the event.

"It? You mean, death?" Alex stopped at the gravel road that led to the Sand Bar. She put her hands on her hips and inhaled. Then she took a crumpled bill out of her pants pocket and said, "Shall we see what five dollars can buy?"

I had wanted to keep running, but instead we walked down the road to the bar and sat on the deck in the sunlight and drank Cokes. A string of coal barges moved downriver, slow as a drawn-out dream.

Alex said, "I thought it would be better than life, I guess. Not a very deep thought, I know. I was nineteen. I wasn't deep, just miserable. I felt

stupid among all those brains in Philadelphia. I thought I was out of my league, and all Ed wanted from me, whenever he wasn't playing with his rats, was sex. And then I got a case of head lice and at some point I thought I might be pregnant and then the only thing I could think to do was be sad."

"Head lice?"

"I must've got it in this off-campus dump where Ed lived." She folded and unfolded a cocktail napkin. "I guess I thought death would be a bland, comfortable place, like a motel room. Clean, I hoped. No sadness, no nothing."

"Didn't you get scared when you were lying there, waiting for the pills to kick in?"

"I was sitting up, actually, in that easy chair in your bedroom," she said. "I was looking at the picture of Dad on your desk."

"Which picture was that?" The one photograph I could recall being on my desk in 1972 was an old Christmas card shot of the family that didn't get sent: Dad in an elf's cap, Mom smiling, Alex and I holding the dog, Hugo, on our laps.

"It's the one with Dad wearing the raincoat that looks like he slept in it over his tennis clothes and his socks are down around his ankles and he's smiling like he just woke up in heaven. I have it out in Portland now."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Dad as college dweeb. An unlikely-looking future jurist." Why had I had that photograph on my desk? To remind me that I wasn't as goofy-looking as my father? To remind me to keep my dauber up even when I was feeling like a mess?

"I was sitting there with that picture of Dad," Alex said, "and it was like the lights in me were going off one by one. Everything just shutting down." Alex was looking toward the river, and I was gazing at the three moles on the back of her hand, all in a row, like ellipsis marks. "I was just this heavy thing sinking out of sight. I kind of wanted a cigarette, but I couldn't get out of the chair to get one."

Alex took a swallow of her Coke, her nose deep in the glass.

"So Mom found you in my chair," I said. I knew a few details from this part of the story: how Mom had come upstairs to look for Hugo, who liked to sleep on the rag rug in my room; how, when she found Alex, she had called for Willie, then realized that Willie didn't come on Mondays.

"Yeah," Alex said. "Mom was supposed to have gone to her prayer group meeting that morning, but she was running late."

"You didn't write a note or anything? Before, I mean."

"No," she said. "Sorry. But I thought of you, Peter. I hoped you wouldn't be angry at me forever. Suicide always pisses people off."

From downriver came the shrill sound of the calliope on the tourist paddle-wheeler. In the next world I hoped there would be no calliope music.

"I wouldn't have been angry. Not forever, anyway," I said. "But I would've missed not being able to sit with you here by the river in the sun."

"Yeah." She touched my hand, then nodded toward the river. "I wonder what you can catch in there."

"Catfish," I said. "Irradiated catfish." There was a nuclear power plant upstream, on the Indiana side. "Stuff that would make your stomach glow if you ate it."

"I guess I won't then," she said.

MAC CAME to dinner that night. He brought my mother four Stargazer lilies and Stuart a toy roadster. My mother put Mac in my father's chair, at the head of the table, after I declined it. Mac drank mineral water and asked Stuart what his favorite sports were.

"Soccer and wrestling with my mom," Stuart said. He laughed a dark laugh way down in his throat, then speared a green bean.

"Who wins?" Mac asked.

"I whip her butt."

"Watch your language, please," Alex said.

Alex and I split a bottle of pinot noir, and Mac took seconds on Alex's crawdad étouffé and discussed with my mother the new wing that St. Andy's was going to build. Mac was on the fund-raising committee.

Later, Mac and Alex went to the movies. Stuart and Mom and I played *Go Fish*, and then Stuart went to bed after I read him a story. Mom went after she watched highlights from the Simpson trial.

"I keep thinking he's going to jump up and confess," she said.

"'Awake thou that sleepest,' our Lord said, 'and I shall give thee light.'"

I took Digger for a walk under a creamy Eastertide moon. He scared up a rabbit. I nodded off watching an NBA game. Guys rising into the air every few seconds, like popcorn popping. I dreamed about my son. He was making photocopies of his face. "Close your eyes when you do that," I said to him.

When I woke up, a leopard was chasing gazelles across a tawny African plain on the TV. It was after one o'clock, Alex said. She was sitting in the old leather armchair where my father had sat and read. The sound on the TV was off; I must have hit the Mute button before falling asleep.

"Did you go to a double feature?" I asked. "Do double features still exist?"

"We had coffee after the movie," Alex said, "and then we went for a spin, as Mac put it. 'Shall we go for a spin?' he said, and I said, 'Mac, nobody says that except car salesmen and boys on the make.' He blushed down to his toes."

Alex's face wouldn't be still in the flickering light of the TV. I had the feeling that she might depart as suddenly as she'd arrived.

"Where'd you go?" I asked.

"To this place over in Indiana, where you can look back across the river and see the city. Where high school kids neck. Culver Hill Park, I think it's called."

"I know where it is." I recalled coming down the hill one night in Dad's Chevette with the engine turned off—I was saving gas, I didn't

know if I'd make it to a filling station—and the girl who was with me had her bare feet on the dash and was singing "The Mighty Quinn."

"We sat on the hood of the car, just like a couple of teenagers," Alex said. "Mac told me how he was taking adult education classes at church and how the teachings of Jesus had helped him deal with his demons and how he was thinking of going to Ghana this summer to help build a mission school. And while he was talking, these kids in a car not ten yards away were screwing. Loudly. Really going at it. And I couldn't keep from laughing. Mac got embarrassed and said, 'Maybe we should go now.'"

"He thought you were laughing at him?"

"No," Alex said, touching one of the gold hoops that hung from her ears. "He understood. But I think it kind of spoiled the moment for him. I think he'd been working up to the point where he was going to ask if I could live with a man who sells pool tables and believes in the Resurrection."

A leopard slept in the limbs of a fever tree, digesting its meal. "You think Mac took you to Indiana to propose?"

"Stranger things have happened," she said. "Once a boy tried to pole-vault into my bedroom window."

"What would you've said if he'd asked?"

Alex leaned her head on the back of the chair, addressed the ceiling. "I would've said yes, probably." I saw the sharp tip of her nose probing the air. "A leap into the dark with Jesus-loving Mac. Who knows? It might've turned out fine."

## Labels

He always retrieved cans and cartons  
from the kitchen garbage  
to inspect labels, suspicious she had  
purchased products which pollute  
the soil, clog veins with cholesterol.  
Until one day, after a decade  
of sexless marriage, while he was reading  
a margarine wrapper, she asked,  
"Any *other* label you want to scrutinize?"  
And he said, "Just yours, Honey,"  
and she said, "I don't come with a label,  
Baby, I'm pure generic," and he said,  
"Even generic delivers, Honey,"  
and she said, "Fuck you, Sweetie."  
"Why don't you ever?" he said.  
"Because," she said. And that marked  
the end of one otherwise perfectly good  
biodegradeable consumer-age marriage.

## The Panic Bird

just flew inside my chest. Some  
days it lights inside my brain,  
but today it's in my bonehouse,  
rattling ribs like a birdcage.

If I saw it coming, I'd fend it  
off with machete or baseball bat.  
Or grab its scrawny hackled neck,  
wring it like a wet dishrag.

But it approaches from behind.  
Too late I sense it at my back—  
carrion, garbage, excrement.  
Once inside me it preens, roosts,

vulture on a public utility pole.  
Next it flaps, it cries, it glares,  
it rages, it struts, it thrusts  
its clacking beak into my liver,

my guts, my heart, rips off strips.  
I fill with black blood, black bile.  
This may last minutes or days.  
Then it lifts sickle-shaped wings,

rises, is gone, leaving a residue—  
foul breath, droppings, molted midnight  
feathers. And life continues.  
And then I'm prey to panic again.

## The Pillsbury Doughboy Is Alive and Well and Living in Ohio

This is just to say the man who looks  
like The Pillsbury Doughboy has cut out.  
He decided he's from a different mold.

When last seen The Pillsbury Doughboy  
was not jogging, was mooning around  
a Manhattan cocktail party where only assorted  
raw vegetables were served; everyone drank  
Perrier water and quoted the Duchess of Windsor:  
"You can never be too thin or too rich."

This is just to say  
The Pillsbury Doughboy grew sick  
of insinuations about his weight,  
resented no one wanting to sit next to him  
on airplanes, is through trying to fit  
into "European Cut" shirts and jackets  
(cut for scrawny little Frenchmen),  
grew weary of skinny women jabbing a finger  
into his tummy, expecting him to giggle on cue.

Now rumor has it  
The Pillsbury Doughboy works in a bakery  
somewhere in Ohio (that fat-cat state  
that begins with an O and ends with an O.)  
He produces white bread dazzlingly white.  
It is not unbleached. It is not stoneground.  
It is full of artificial preservatives.  
It is unregenerately unenriched.

When you read this,  
you will know The Pillsbury Doughboy is happy.  
For lunch he eats greasy French Fries every day.  
After work he eats heavy cookies from the bakery,  
drinks milk which tastes, almost, like milk  
he had as a farm-boy: It has not been protein-  
fortified. It has not had vitamins A and D  
added. It is not, certainly, low-fat. It is milk.

Every night he goes to a sleazy nightclub,  
drinks beer out of longnecks. The beer is not Lite.  
The blue lights make his complexion look less doughy.  
He sits there entranced, listening to  
The Gingerbread Lady sing sweet songs.  
Her eyes are raisins, her mouth a cherry.  
Even her voice is full of calories.

Someday The Pillsbury Doughboy  
will run off with The Gingerbread Lady.  
They will live on Lollypop Lane in a little  
gingerbread house. And one day, he will eat her  
right up if she doesn't watch out.

## Quelquefois Gretel

### *Assez*

Hansel, enough talk of ovens, I'll not shove in the crone.  
You have no power in your cakecrumb cage.  
My twin, keep holding out that twig, or I may not  
Stop her from eating you.

### *Parfois*

Hansel, you made sure Papa's glass-cornered knuckles never found me  
But I knew someday I'd outgrow the cupboard.  
Every time I walk freely outside this confection I wish  
I could make a better fate for you than this toothache jail.

### *Guerie*

Hansel, I remember every detail of Papa's rage.  
How can you have such father-longing  
And reject outright this sugared blister,  
Begging me for the exposed bones of home?

### *Couvert*

Hansel, I brought bread crumbs on purpose  
Knowing your childhood follows you blind.  
At least the crone will eat you whole.  
Father waits to devour us in pieces.

## Hang Man

The pencil lead pokes his eyes out,  
No hood slipped over his head. Is  
There an open vowel sound in l, i, f, e,  
No wife grieving no doubt, since  
We've invented him in this religion  
Class, all of us divided into small  
Groups to discuss sin? We swear it's  
A sin to cuss, then move on to hang  
This man, his life held by the right  
Guess of one of twenty six  
Letters! Nail that sucker, the big  
Boys shout when they stone  
The retard during recess. Would that  
I could stop them, slapshot their  
Foreheads with a sixty miles per hour  
Hockey puck to shut them the fuck up.  
O Lazarus—you look like the stickman  
We draw and kill. I rub the paper with  
An eraser until the paper is all hole.  
I can't stay for the execution. I've  
Got no stomach for the free fall to hell.  
And we'll never guess the longest  
Longest word, every right letter, every  
Consonant of the blank death, every  
Sound the trap door makes, but will just watch every  
Slash that signifies an arm or a leg added  
To a body we all know is beyond being saved.

## Synapse

I dreamt the plate of nerves was passed to me  
I dreamt that every chance deserved a chance  
I dreamt the ordinary life, the open book  
I dreamt the hospital again, the windows broken out

You dreamt the writer going blind, the field of goats  
You dreamt the razor going dull, the cold face  
You dreamt the fire going out, the empty chair  
You dreamt the feeling going dry, the rhubarb picked

Another shot at immortality today, I dreamt  
Another time that seems to be the same, I dreamt  
Another being I would love to forget, I dreamt  
Another sun that doesn't deserve to set, I dreamt

The leaping cow, uneven surface of the moon, you dreamt  
The colliding stars, the astronomical me, you dreamt  
The cold getting colder, the colder getting colder, you dreamt  
The erasing mind, the road crowded with cars, you dreamt

I dreamt the building all on fire, the fire out  
You dreamt the same, the dendrites failing you  
Another impulse gone, the axon dead, I dreamt  
Another neuron dead, the impulse gone, you dreamt

Another dream you dreamt a dream you dreamt you dreamt  
Another night of dream another dream you dreamt I dreamt

## Invisibility

The dog's bark next door is wearing down,  
Reminding me of something I always forget,  
And that I've forgotten again. Is every  
Gain we make simply against some  
Lack of luck? Who holds a good hand,  
Kings speaking among themselves in their  
Parliaments? What I meant was I saw  
Something sight unseen. And I don't mean  
To be contrary—I'll be the x, you be  
The spot to be marked. The thought of  
Heaven hurts. I'd rather think of some sward  
Filled with sleep, visible green eaten.  
The hole in the head just keeps getting  
Bigger. Face moves to deface—it's something I've  
Said as many times as a dog barks.  
Which tree is the right tree? Why is  
Leave taking so tied in to fall? The moth  
Was like an ink blot on the window before  
The cat ate it. The final flutter we can't see.  
And if we can't slake invisibility.  
And if we can't remove the move.  
And if we can't see hand stroking head.  
And if we can't see us all in the sing-along  
Still singing, the bright words in front of us or not.

## Visibility

I would like to see \_\_\_\_\_ instead of just  
Hear about it. Sure I've seen the scrapbook  
And the scrap heap. The visor on the cap shades  
The face. I've played the see-saw. I've seen  
The movie where death slips whole bodies  
Into its arms. Away. Away. Away. Need not  
Light be given to us always, scraps of light  
In the room we can't pick up? Need I set  
Fire to the room I write in to reduce and  
Transform these words into ashes? Poke  
Around with a stick to get a clue. I've happened  
Upon the happenstance that has kept me in good stead.  
Otherwise I'm lost to the naked eye. The visible  
Broom is for sweeping the visible room.  
The dirt rubbed into my hands belongs back  
In the flower bed of the original garden, anemones  
To zinnias oblivious to their alphabetical order. They  
Bloom for themselves only. But I hear them open,  
Push up into air, unfurl the furled,  
Photosynthesize the real in the real world.

## Knowing Homer

HOMER AND I share a room at Club Dead. That isn't what the people who run it call it, of course, but the official name is pedestrian and not descriptive. It is a duly licensed and accredited boarding and nursing home in the red clay barrens of the South Carolina midlands. "Club Dead" is a much better name, though one must not call it that in the presence of the authorities.

Homer is a shade under six feet tall when slouching, has silver hair and a humongous record/radio/tape player that is all shiny plastic and plays like what it's worth, which is about \$1.98. It was left for him by his previous roommate, who died.

He turned it off and went next door to "Roosevelt," a small, cinder-block structure built on a bulldozed flat patch of dirt, to get a can of soda. The residents there have a machine; we don't. There are no steps at Roosevelt. It is where they keep the paraplegics. We have one step in front and three in back, and are regularly cautioned not to fall down them.

No one on the staff knows how that building came to be named "Roosevelt," and no one is aware of any irony. No one knows what irony is.

I asked Homer how many sodas he has in a day. He said, "Two. Can't afford any more."

I poured myself the last of my apple juice. The sight of Homer's soda on a hot day made me thirsty. The juice, in a wax carton, had been brought to me by the club's Social Worker, who thought I should fraternize more with the other men. The connection between juice and fraternization escaped me. However, I was glad to have it. The girl was fresh out of school and had an Ipana smile and got sore whenever I told her so, probably because she was too young to know what Ipana was, and too insecure to ask.

Homer can't afford but two sodas a day? What does soda cost? The man can't really be that broke, can he? *I* can, but how can *he*? He's a widower who went on Disability at fifty-five because of his heart and who at sixty-five was switched over to Social Security and Medicaid and all that good stuff. But he lives in a barracks where he is told when to rise, when to eat, when to take his medication, when to bathe (and whether he may, there being but one tub for all 16 men), where he has no control over the menu and therefore eats what is served or does not eat...he has four grown and (he says, proudly) successful children and at least one grandchild old

enough to earn a salary at something, a twin brother still in good health, and a variety of other more distant family members (of whom I know little because he seldom mentions them), and his only treat is two cans of soda a day? Sheesh.

This is what Homer has: half a doorless closet (the other half was the radio owner's and is now mine), four small bureau drawers (one of which has no knob), five books of unknown content which I've never seen him open, and the aforementioned plastic thing that accepts only 45s and 8-tracks, of which he owns not one of either. One pair of shoes. One pair of slippers. Toiletries of a basic sort, and two cookie tins filled with old papers. Letters, he says. He does not read them. He can read, he insists, but it hurts his eyes.

He has been here 9 1/2 years. He has high blood pressure, chemically adequately controlled. Mary Sue, the only nurse's aide with a high school diploma, says he's schizophrenic, but I think she just likes to show that she knows the word. Oh, he's a little bent up, sure. Maybe a little short-tempered. But who here isn't? If the hypertension remains under control he could be here for another 9 1/2 years. He's pretty deaf, but that won't kill him. (Me, maybe, considering the way he turns that thing up, but not him.) I don't think he's more than 75. He might be here 2 times 9 1/2 years more, which would make him as old as Tase is right now, two years older than Warner, and 3 years older than the present-day and apparently permanent Bohannon.

They, and Homer, mostly sit around. Homer can sit for hours in positions that would be extremely uncomfortable for me but which don't seem to bother him. He's been put in Club Dead, I expect, because his sitting around in whatever positions bothered his kin.

It appears that once you acclimate yourself to this place you can tolerate it indefinitely. I devoutly hope this is not true, but I'm afraid it may be. At least no one ever leaves this place on his feet. One's perspectives change, here. You are regarded as a parasite, but this escapes you. Or comes not to bother you. There are, after all, others here, too, and everybody can't be a parasite. There must be other reasons, even if you can never quite work them out. You talk constantly about some things and never at all about others. Your relationships ritualize. You laugh out loud at Elmer Fudd ("Ha ha! Boy, does he talk funny!") and scream that someone has stolen your teeth. You become determined to say grace at meals regardless of whatever else is happening, or you are so offended by the practice that you theatrically hold your hands over your ears so that everyone will see that you aren't listening. You live in fear of your body failing further because you know that when it does you'll be transferred out in order to have 24-hour medical supervision, and despite being a grown man you cry when you are moved across the street (as a man did just before I came here) because you want to go home, and "home" does not mean the house in which you grew old—it means the nursing "home." (The man in the parentheses above had

lived in this building for 20 years. This story horrified me: how can any man's imagination become so hydrogenated that he thinks of this place as "home"? Do the brain bugs finally so gobble up one's memory that there is nothing left of the past but droppings? Good God.)

These men do not have friends in each other, not in any ordinary sense. They have, at best, co-conspirators. They look carefully around the dining room each morning to make sure that everyone who was here last night still is. And if everyone else is still here, why then they must be, too. It reassures. They believe that Age does not kill in daytime. Like the executioner in a French prison, who does not inform a man of the date chosen for his execution, Death takes off his shoes and creeps up in the night. A sunrise means there will be at least one more day. How wonderful. Homer and Bohannon and Tase and the others nod in satisfaction. On the other hand they also nod when they hear a siren in the distance (one never sees the source: nothing with a siren in use is allowed to come within eyeshot).

Does this mean anything? Perhaps. I don't know, yet. So far, I can see nothing to be gained by nodding to the sun, nor any justification in honoring events which commonly involve gagging, choking, gasping, throwing up, shitting, pissing, turning blue, and becoming briefly rigid.

Homer finished his soda. He missed, as he always does, when he tried to toss the can into the wastebasket. He retrieved it and dropped it in, lay down on his bed until he got fidgety, then wandered out front to watch the afternoon cartoons.

## Line, Shape, Sound, Scent, Moment

Where the woods rise in green stockade against  
the roll of meadow. And the horse, because  
the field contains his brown amble through  
blue shadows, delights. Sway of the land that pulls  
us up, up the ridge, shaggy with spruce and pine.

If some god has plucked out your eyes,  
breathe deep of this pungent earth I thrust  
beneath your nostrils. Feel this corn leaf,  
rasp of its edge on your palm, slip  
fingertips on the taper of green blade.

If we stand here tomorrow the swatch  
of planted and fallow field shall be ours,  
the mottle of cloud shadow skimming earth.

If fate has deadened your ears, I shall sketch  
in words the chug, chug of yellow tractor  
etching the loam, how that sound backdrops  
the whistle of the meadowlarks,  
the scurry of breeze across last years leaves.

I shall tell of the hawk, riding  
morning's soft thermals, linking arc  
in arc on the blue belly of sky,  
of her call falling, ka-ree, ka-ree.

Come stranger, take my place. The cliff rises  
in a jumble of scree, rubble  
of twisted tree and rock. Here is that time  
where hard stone hurls to bright air. Here wind leaps  
pellucid, tuneless, wild on the skin.

## The Tale of the Old Country

The shrinking man once told a tale to my father and though  
It is our legend, I'll venture to recount,  
Whilom, once upon a time, and so it was . . .

Lady with a stray wisp curled round her dimpled cheek,  
Daisy-dog, issue of wolves, guarding the strutting chickens,  
The yesteryear, pulsating season's change,  
Ripe with the length of untrameled hereafters.  
Laughing in the kitchen of elation,  
Kneading the Friday dough.

There is elegance in an old photograph.

No use, that nostalgia.  
It can do no good to rerecuperate,  
Haunting, decimated villages, towns,  
Galicia, you were once the bride of a nation,  
Mistaken, your veil was too thick for recognition.  
Engorged, it spit you out into the land of no return.

Peace.  
I have made peace with this hasty leave taking.  
Even now I lie.  
Truly, I wear the shawl of suffering centuries.

The shrinking man was then quite upright in a really military way.  
Rows of medals gleaming on a red spattered coat, clicking heels a yardstick high,  
Stealing little pillboxes from museums of the czars.  
Such a delicate thing, a pillbox,  
Porcelain, gilded lid, infinitesimal art, ready to ease a pain.

"Rush, rush and find her my private.  
I'll give you freedom and some bone china."

The private ate his heart out for fear  
He wouldn't find the black and white ticket he kept hidden in his breast pocket.  
Rolling in ditches of sleeptime, he called her,  
The tinkling of his belfry soul led him to the grave in the barn  
Where she lay beckoning,  
A wisp curled round her soiled cheek.

After this, the General began to shrink.  
His deeds told upon him, partook of his flesh.  
His little son would load himself up with medals  
And play Battle-day.  
The woman covered nostalgia in a pig trough's hole,  
Sleeping there nightly,  
Drinking the drought of Daisy-dog and tiled halls where angels' feet had tread.

## The Espresso Workbook

T AND L DID a survey on coffee, with a particular focus on espresso. Here are some results. They invite you to help them continue the research.

Overheard conversations in cafes:

One confession: shoplifting, Fendi pumps, red.

Two lies: He's not too short for you. Last night? I was home. I had the answering machine on, I was watching "Joe Versus the Volcano."

Three exchanges of insult: (You fill in) " \_\_\_\_\_ ."

" \_\_\_\_\_ ."

" \_\_\_\_\_ ."

Four memories of betrayal.

- 5) One true thing: \_\_\_\_\_ .
- 6) Two tips on grooming: Always use a lash curler, even without mascara. Trimming your body hair makes it curl.
- 7) Three places to shop: Barney's warehouse sale, Century 21, Betsy Johnson uptown.
- 8) Four ways to make boundaries with your family.





- 9) One break up: "You always. . . ."  
 "But I never feel. . . ."  
 "And then you said . . . ."
- 10) Two recipes: sesame noodles, grape chutney.
- 11) Boring prequels to the classics: Peace and Peace, You Can Go Home Again, Bartelby at Scribner's, In Cold Water, Eloise at the Marriott, A Tale of One City, Middle February. Here is space for you to add your own \_\_\_\_\_.
- 12) Coffee: before or after sex? These were some popular answers but don't let that sway you. Sex and then coffee. Except at night, coffee and then sex.
- 13) C asked J to marry him over the telephone. He hung up, finished the spaghetti and all the red wine, two donuts, vomited into the donut box and passed out. He woke up, closed the donut box and ran with it dripping through the woods to the car cemetery where he left it in the trunk of what he says was an Impala. Have you ever asked anyone to marry you?
- 14) The best meal B ever had was in Paris cooked by someone's mother. First she fed the cat. Then she cooked fish from the shop downstairs on a bed of potatoes. There was a salad. B said it took ten minutes. C says he lies. How often do you lie?  
 A) weekly B) daily C) can't count D) \_\_\_\_\_.
- 15) N fed A her first ice cream ever, peach. She had two teeth but ate it with her lips. The cold didn't bother her. She was a baby, but she knew what she liked. Do you know what you like?
- 16) If she thinks you have had enough to eat, V picks up your plate and puts it in the sink, you could be mid-bite. Does anyone help you with your eating?

17) Lovers don't eat. That's why no one invites them to dinner parties the first month, it insults the hostess. Do you have a lover? Do you eat together?

18) Once E made Coffee Bavarian for her father. She made it with Sweet'N Low. That's insane, if you're going to seduce your father, you need sugar. What's your favorite sweetener?

19) The bagel issue: C lives on bagels. B thinks they're lumps of dough. J makes the waiters scoop them out. S, her mother, has one delivered, toasted every morning. D used to be faithful to bagels, but now she is not. Faithful.

20) After coffee, V's favorite liquids are: chicken soup, ginger ale, carrot-beet juice, mango lassi, Hu kwa tea, Assam tea, Gunpowder tea, water from the spring near Gay Head, water from B's brook, apple cider and soda mixed together, red wine, and some beer, brandy. What are yours?

21) What fruits go with coffee? \_\_\_\_\_

What vegetables? \_\_\_\_\_ (clue: none)

What bread things go with coffee? \_\_\_\_\_

Do nuts?

Then why does chocolate?

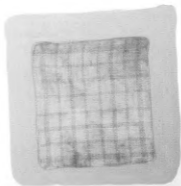
(note: the color)

22) Why is it when J falls in love everything shrinks? Even her butt shrinks. And all she craves is water and espresso?

23) After E reads B's diary, she bakes three cakes to atone: plum, pear, almond. If she makes a chocolate one will B forgive her? (clue: no)

*Photographs by Tom Ligamari*





*Ceci N'est Pas Une Dishrag*, 1993  
Oil, foam, washcloth on linen, 42" x 42"  
Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery



*Find Your Own Damn Voice, 1994*

Oil, mixed media on linen, 42" x 42"

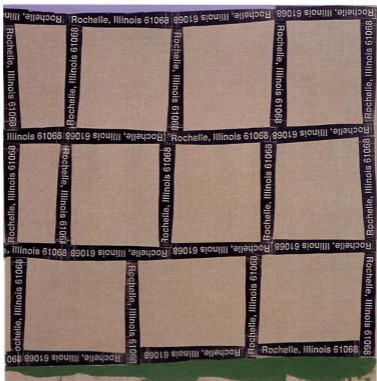
Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery



*Pick, Pick, Pick*, 1993

Oil, paper on linen, 42" x 42"

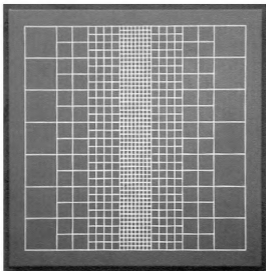
Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery



*A Wonderful Place to Live, 1993*

Oil, xerox on linen, 33" x 33"

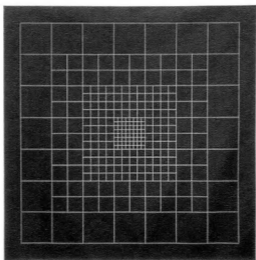
Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery



#58, 1995

Acrylic on canvas, 40" x 40"

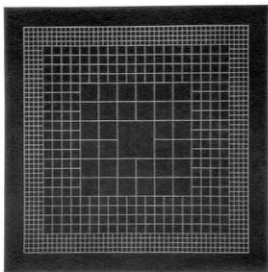
Courtesy the artist and Lynn Goode Gallery



#57, 1995

Acrylic on canvas, 45" x 45"

Courtesy the artist and Lynn Goode Gallery



#56, 1995

Acrylic on canvas, 48" x 48"

Courtesy the artist and Lynn Goode Gallery

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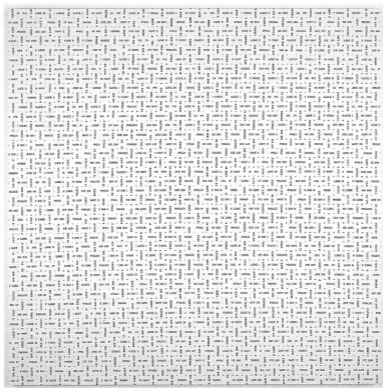
DAVID SZAFRANSKI



*Extra Large Four Color Tickets, 1993*

Tickets, wood, 88" x 88" x 2"

Courtesy the artist and Gray Matters Gallery



*DO NOT CROSS*, 1993

Wallboard tape, wood, 88" x 88" x 2"

Courtesy the artist and Gray Matters Gallery

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DOUGLAS MacWITHEY



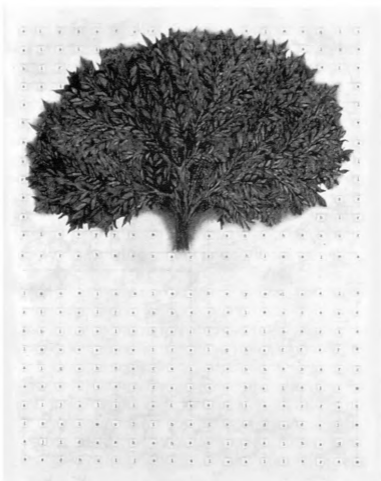
*The Noisome Corpse*, 1991-93

Mixed media on paper, 12" x 20" each of 153 (detail)

Courtesy the artist and Barry Whistler Gallery



*The Noisome Corpse*, 1991-93  
Mixed media on paper, 12" x 20" (detail)  
Courtesy the artist and Barry Whistler Gallery



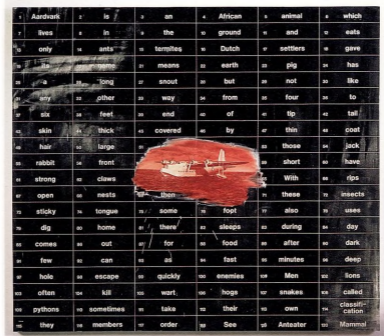
*Exemplary Drawings / Black Olive Tree, 1994*  
Pencil on paper, collage, 19 5/8" x 19 1/8" (detail)  
Courtesy the artist and Barry Whistler Gallery



*Movements among the Dead, 1990*

Oil, blackboard slating, chalk on wood, 83 1/2" x 92 1/2" x 9"

Courtesy the artist and Hiram Butler Gallery



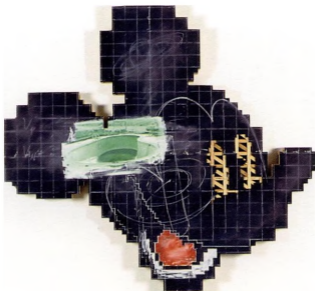
*Aardvark, Shorter, History, 1991*

Oil, acrylic on canvas, 84" x 96"

Courtesy the artist and Hiram Butler Gallery



*Swimming between Australia and Japan, 1993*  
Acrylic on laminated paper, blackboard slating on wood  
72" x 100" x 5"  
Courtesy the artist and Hiram Butler Gallery



*Scenes from the American West*, 1986

Oil, blackboard slating on wood, 70" x 77 1/2" x 3 1/2"

Courtesy the artist and Hiram Butler Gallery

## Science, freedom, simulations and the unbearable triviality of postmodernism

### *From wishful thinking to universal laws of nature*

ACCORDING TO medieval Christian belief God did not know how to design a universe mathematically so that it could run by itself mechanically. In medieval Christian cosmology God listens to prayers and may intervene, as would a father who listens and responds to the needs of small children. Prescientific pictures of God are also based upon the model provided by an artist who can, within limits, change the product at later times. The devil and his demonic helpers are not independent competing gods but are creations of the almighty God.

In the pre-Christian stage of highly civilized Indo-European thought of Plato and Aristotle some mechanical elements of nature were dimly recognized but there was no idea of energy or energy conservation. Energy conservation is the essential element necessary for an ideal machine to run, once started, without any further cause of the motion. In Platonic-Aristotelian cosmology, in contrast, everything that moves must continually be caused to move, must be pushed as a farmer pushes a cart.

The Aristotelian idea that a cause (we now say force) is required to maintain a velocity led to the expectation of lack of universality of physical law: the "stars" in Plato's perfect heavens do not obey the same laws of motion as do the bodies that reside on the "imperfect and heavy earth." Otherwise, according to Aristotelian physics, the stars would either fall to the earth (corresponding to Aristotle's idea of "absolutely heavy" objects, like rocks) or would continually move radially away from the earth (corresponding to "absolutely light" objects). This artificial duality of law in the description of motion arises because Aristotle's fundamental starting point, his assumption that the natural state of every body is one of absolute rest, is completely wrong. Consequently, all of his conclusions are completely wrong as well.

The idea of duality in nature, perfection in the heavens vs. disorder on earth, goes back to Plato. The failure of Aristotle (and his followers over the next 1900 years) to perform experiments and learn that these ideas are wrong goes back to to Plato's influence.

constructed a picture of the motion of heavenly bodies that ignored careful empirical observations. He described how he thought stars ought to move with systematic disregard for how they actually move. He advised philosophers and mathematicians to disregard observations of nature if the latter seemed to contradict his philosophy. Aristotle's physics is both nonscientific and antiscientific. Aristotle states that Plato hated disorder. His model of astronomy is based on perfect geometric symmetry, or perfect order: stars are assumed to move with constant speed in a circle with the heavy earth at the center. Aristotle's Euclidean model of perfection does not describe reality, which is what Aristotle thought. His intention was to describe what he thought was a more fundamental reality of perfect geometric forms. In addition, Plato's Republic is the first-recorded theoretical model of authoritarianism, a model of enforced social order that we can compare with fascism.

Aristotle's neoPlatonic philosophy was merged with Christian beliefs by Augustine, the father of predestination-driven puritanism. That this was the dominant philosophy in feudal times was insured by Karl der Große, who re-named Charlemagne by French and English historians. Karl der Große defeated the last free German tribes south of Scandinavia, the Saxons, and the Frisians after thirty years of war. He destroyed their lifeline, the island of Irminsul (Scandinavian Yggdrasil) and offered the free farmer the political alternative of Christianity and dispersion, or death. It was Augustine's neoPlatonic philosophy that was propagated by the church throughout the feudal age and beyond.

Aristotle's pseudo-science along with Hindu and Arabic contributions to arithmetic and algebra entered northern Italy in the twelfth century via the Muslims of Sicily, North Africa, and Spain. Fibonacci, and much later, Simon Stevin, advanced primitive ideas of algebra and decimal arithmetic, but the unmathematical notation of Roman numerals. The greatest legacy of the only Roman influence on science and mathematics was the work of Archimedes by a soldier during the invasion of Syracuse. Aristotle observed nature qualitatively at a common sense level. From quantitative observations he Platonically postulated nonmathematical physical laws to describe his beliefs. He asserted that the state of nature to an absolutely heavy earth is the natural state of motion. Aristotle's pseudo-physics there is no universality of description: the earth and stars in the heavens obey different laws of nature than do objects confined to earth. Stars and planets move along perfectly elliptical orbits about the earth. The fictitious "ether" provides the medium through which the stars must continually be pushed. This required the introduction of spirits, including angels, to be introduced to do the necessary work. The "sphere" of the "imperfect and absolutely heavy earth," a force was assumed to act on a projectile because the presumed velocity cannot be maintained by spirits: spirits can only reside in

he hand. Astrology is connected with the belief that spirits inhabit stellar spheres.

The Platonic idea of heavenly perfection vs. earthly imperfection historically through Augustine and his sixteenth century followers I Calvin, and Zwingli to the puritanism that we still live under in modern America, where one can still be arrested for nonconformist social behavior. The difference in outlook is due to the overwhelming historic influence of puritans and fundamentalists who flooded out of Europe into the new world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The method of endless argumentation of Plato and Aristotle as means of seeking the truth was replaced in Galilean-Newtonian theory by careful empiricism that led to the discovery of universal mathematical laws of motion. The fall of Scholasticism followed from the exercise of free and creative thought unrestrained by a priori philosophic principles reinforced as church-state dogma. Careful empiricism combined with analytic thought began slowly to displace dogmatic thinking and eventually gained a degree of official tolerance in northern Europe, where ecclesiastic authority was sufficiently fragmented by the Religious Reformation. Science was soundly suppressed in the south by Galileal and imprisonment. Descartes fled France for Holland after Galileal and published there. His works were stringently condemned by Holland's Calvinists but were supported by the Prince of Orange.

Galileo discovered the most fundamental principle of physics, the law of inertia, now called Newton's first law of motion. This law was understood independently by Descartes, who learned some physics from Hollander named Beeckman. The law of inertia states that a body continues at constant speed in a straight line unless forced to alter its motion. No cause is required to keep a body in motion at constant velocity once it's set into motion.

Kepler, who unknowingly reduced astronomy to physics, had a notion of the law of inertia. He discovered the clockwork elliptical orbits of the planets about the sun but followed Aristotle in imagining that planets had continually to be pushed in order to move at all. Newton put it together for us by explaining that a planet continually falls freely toward the sun as it orbits the sun, just as an apple falls freely toward the earth after being tossed.

The empirical discoveries of simple, universal mathematical laws of nature by Galileo and Kepler led, through the use of Descartes' reduction of geometry to algebra (analytic geometry), to Newton's formulation of universal mathematical laws of both force and motion, and to his discovery of differential calculus which is an essential tool of mathematical physics.

Before Newton it was not understood that Galilean trajectories of apples and Keplerian orbits of planets are manifestations of the very same universal phenomena: the law of inertia combined with the law of gravity. Without the mathematics groundwork laid by Vieta and Descartes in algebra and geometry, Newton would not have had the tools necessary to turn the simple and separate mathematical laws of nature discovered empirically by Kepler and Galileo into a universal theory of motion of all bodies in the solar system and beyond. In the end, Newton showed mathematically how to realize Descartes' Dream of describing inanimate motion mathematically, which means machine-like, from a universal standpoint that is grounded in careful empiricism.

Descartes was a Platonic neoscholastic. An intervening God had no place in his material universe, which is based upon the idea of nature as a machine in motion. However, he believed that laws of nature could be discovered purely mentally without adequate consultation with Mother Nature by means of careful experimentation.

Had the Christian God understood mechanics and calculus as well as did Newton, he could have dispensed altogether with angels and demons in the operation and maintenance of the universe. Their services were shown by Newton to be unnecessary. Even Luther's devil could have been retired to hell, as the possibility of his influence could be programmed mechanically and universally in the brain's genetically inherited software.

Science divides the study of nature into laws of nature and initial conditions. The laws of nature allow one to use knowledge of present or past conditions to predict and understand the future. In principle, this also works in reverse: present conditions along with laws of nature can also be used to predict the past. In practice, however, it is impossible to have enough information about present conditions to rediscover the energy distribution and other details of the early universe.

In the age before the mechanics-mathematics revolution, religious zealots whitewashed church walls, destroyed other church art, and burned "witches" and other nonconformers at the stake. The influence of Cartesian philosophy, among its many contributions, played a strong role in ending the witch trials. The witch trials peaked in the mid-seventeenth century (roughly the time that Galileo, Kepler, and Descartes died, and Newton was born), and have been described from the standpoint of the persecuted in a pair of books by Carlo Ginzburg. The witch trials were ended in Sweden by Queen Christina. The nail-hard and demanding Christina was tutored briefly by Descartes at 5 PM each day in a freezing palace library (Descartes died of bad health shortly thereafter).

In the age when Thomas Jefferson was subverted from the standard Anglican curriculum by the Scottish natural philosopher Smalley, and learned mathematics and Newtonian ideas, the Anglican Church still had the right to burn heretics at the stake in the Colony of Virginia. Jefferson was a product of the *Aufklärung*: His heroes were Bacon, Newton, and

Locke. He was, like Newton, a Deist. This left him open to charges of atheism in early American politics.

The success of Galileo and Kepler in discovering simple universal mathematical laws of inanimate nature led thinkers in political economy and other fields like psychology to assume that simple mechanical descriptions of individual and collective human behavior are also possible. Futurists now speak of the machine-like behavior of life, which is certainly true at the level of DNA, and also the life-like nature of complex machines like parallel computers, which is an exaggeration based upon wishful thinking.

### *Simulations vs. laws of nature*

"Consider an economic system ... we do grant that the probability distribution governing these doings definitely exists—i.e., there is a true objective law that governs the way the economic system behaves."

J. L. Casti in *Searching for Certainty*

"SYSTEM THEORY" is the attempt to use mathematics that is not grounded in physics and chemistry to explain and predict social phenomena like the world economy, rat movements in a Skinner box, or the drooling of Pavlov's dog. Superficially, system theory is the attempt to extend Descartes' Dream beyond the known applicable realms of inanimate nature and molecular biology. For this, Descartes is not entirely to blame. He was careful to make a distinction between conscious thought and simple mechanical phenomena like colliding billiard balls.

More accurately seen, system theory is a return to Aristotelian notions of lumping together as "motion" the motion of planets, the sprouting of acorns, and the education of youth. Galileo and Descartes allowed science to sprout and blossom precisely by divorcing the education of boys and the emergence of markets from the motion of inanimate objects ("reductionism"). The fatal flaw in system theory is the anti-reductionist, Aristotelian assumption that it is possible to describe "the whole," organically, in the absence of an adequate understanding of the local correlations of the interconnected parts (the study of the latter is called physics).

An economy is an example of a complex system, which is a vague rather than precise notion. A capitalist economy consists of a lot of people making individual decisions. The basic assumption of theoretical economics, poetically stated, is to treat the decision-makers like a collection of colliding billiard balls (deterministic models) or brain-dead drunks (stochastic models). Billiard balls have no brains and obey mathematical laws of nature. They cannot choose not to obey the trajectories assigned to them by the law of conservation of momentum, which is a universal law of nature. To assume that economics is mathematically describable, can be simulated realistically on a computer, is equivalent to ignoring the fact that buyers and sellers can think and then change their behavior willfully.

All economic behavior consists of temporary, man-made convention. All mathematical models of economics reflect guesswork on the part of the theorist who invents them. Every economic "law" that is proposed can be violated rather easily. Monopolies need pay no more attention to the law of supply and demand than did Russian peasants and factory workers to the "inevitability" of Marxist determinism. Without human brains, there would be no form of economic law at all.

True laws of nature, like the laws of inertia and gravity, cannot be manipulated or changed by human invention, convention, or intervention. Laws of nature do not require the human brain for their existence, only for their discovery and observation. Unlike economic law and other forms of behavioral law, laws of nature cannot be violated. That is why mathematics is applicable to their description. That is also why economics, psychology, sociology, and political science may lie beyond the realm of meaningful simulation via computer, which is how the mathematics of complex systems is usually studied. The flaw inherent in systems theoretic and other mathematical approaches to the social and behavioral sciences is the confusion of mere simulations and modeling with universal mathematical laws of nature that are grounded in careful, reproducible empiricism.

Does it then make sense to assume that "economic trajectories" are laid out in unchangeable fashion like the paths indicated on a map? Is there any reason to expect that "emerging markets" should be treated mathematically as if they would consist of a collection of interacting diffusing molecules or combining DNA?

Someone will ask, "But what about deterministic chaos?", which has been declared to be "postmodern physics" by postmodernists and deconstructionists who don't understand physics, deterministic chaos, or the distinction between simulations and universal laws of nature. Economists, and even some physicists, often compare the world economy, which is complex and unpredictable, with the weather, which is also complex and unpredictable.

Universal laws of motion and force were discovered by Newton, based upon the simple regularities of nature discovered empirically by Galileo and Kepler. Newton's laws can also be applied to describe certain irregularities and complexities, like deterministic chaos in simple mechanical systems. Examples of deterministic chaos are provided by three stars of equal mass attracting each other gravitationally or, closer to home, by the double pendulum. The double pendulum consists of two rods connected via a frictionless bearing, with one rod suspended from the ceiling by a second frictionless bearing, and then set into motion. The oscillations are generally chaotic, meaning unstable: a small change in the initial speeds or angles of the rods leads to a completely different nonperiodic pattern of oscillatory behavior. As the simplicity of the double pendulum suggests, deterministic chaotic motion is the rule rather than the exception even in relatively simple Newtonian mechanical systems.

Contrary to popular belief, deterministic chaos is completely consistent with perfect mathematical precision. There is no contradiction between chaos and determinism or between chaos and mathematical precision. The simplest abstract machine-like example of deterministic chaos is provided by computing decimal expansions of irrational numbers like the square root of 2, as I have explained in technical papers and books written for graduate students. The grading of mistakes in decimal arithmetic in elementary school is based (unawares) upon the property of deterministic chaos.

The weather is chaotic and unpredictable in practice, but the weather is a Newtonian dynamical system: all fluids, including the gases that make up the air, have movements that are not lawless, even when chaotic. The movements are governed deterministically by Newton's laws of motion. Under the right conditions (certainly not under normal atmospheric conditions), the flap of a butterfly's wing in Houston can completely change the weather in Somerville. However, you cannot get rain by wishing or praying for it, which is the sort of belief that caused persisting tribal societies to lose ground psychologically to western civilization after the seventeenth century "reductionist" revolution.

The theory of deterministic chaos cannot be applied effectively to economics, psychology, or to any other social or behavioral science (including stock market price movements) because there are no known, empirically verifiable mathematical laws of collective or individual human nature. Economic forecasts, like those previously applied to Mexico and the former Soviet Union, do not and can not predict the future. Worse, they mislead us in any effort to understand the phenomena that have been defined as economic and/or social "problems." Every known mathematical model in economics and sociology, no matter how rigorous or abstract the mathematics, and no matter how long the computer takes to run the program, is a wrong piece of guesswork. A mere simulation, as the Semioticians might say, but a wrong simulation. Quantifying social phenomena is not just a problem of taking enough variables into account. The variables in question, like the movement of money, do not satisfy any known mathematical formula that predicts or even explains the future in terms of present or past conditions. This is the fundamental difficulty that "system theory" completely ignores.

### *Deconstructing the postmodernists*

"Postmodernism has cut off the present from all futures. The daily media adds to this by cutting off the past."

John Berger in *Keeping a Rendezvous*

POSTMODERNISTS imitate the scholastic tradition. They write and argue endlessly without ever reaching an answer. Careful empiricism plays no role in shaping their thinking, which some of them anyway characterize as

anti-scientific. Postmodernists seem to have little to say that is either new or enlightening. Spengler already had the idea of "the end of history," the death of traditional culture and its replacement by money-driven civilization, some eighty years ago. One assertion of postmodernism is that scientific thought has led the world astray.<sup>1</sup>

The perception that science has failed society is a symptom of confused, wishful-thinking. People have come to expect that every question should be capable of an answer as fast as surfing with a TV remote control, programming a computer (which takes a little more time), marking an a, b, c, or d on a computer-graded multiple-choice exam sheet, or the detection of a telling sign by Sherlock Holmes. Public schools, universities and television have not helped the population to understand that sending a man to the moon and back is a feat with a well-defined degree of mechanical difficulty that is completely unrelated to solving social problems by passing laws and spending money. The former is theoretically possible because it is grounded in Newtonian theory, and is do-able on the basis of electromechanical-technology. The latter is an experiment in American politics and society with no correct or meaningful mathematical description to guide the social engineering, although one can look to western Europe for effective working models. Fortunately, it's not possible to "compute," in advance, a future that turns Mestizo and Indian peasants into Wal-Mart shoppers without making financial assumptions that the peasants as "economic agents" are able to violate.

The computer simulations based upon arbitrary modeling of system theory are commonly confused with consequences of laws of nature. The general population, and even some scientists, cannot distinguish laws of nature<sup>2</sup> from pseudo-science. There is also increased popular appetite for mysticism, as is reflected by the large percentage of Americans who believe in angels (or, at least, tell magazine pollsters that they do).

Aristotelian notions are inherent in system theory. Aristotelian and Platonic notions have also successfully re-presented themselves for consideration in literary and philosophic circles, clothed in the garb of postmodernism. System theorists have renewed appetite for "holistic" paradigms. In the literature on postmodernism one finds unverified and unverifiable assertions that the physics of Aristotle and the astronomy of Plato provide viewpoints that are as "valid" for study as is science since Galileo and Newton. One also reads that there is no universal truth because a "text" has no more meaning than the alphabetic symbols that constitute the written page. These assertions form official educational policy in parts of California, but were not instituted by educationists who understand the difference between mere simulations and universal mathematical laws of nature.

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1. If one divorces physics, chemistry, and biology from the context, and misinterprets the pseudo-science of system theory as science, then the writer would agree.

2. Jeffersonians lost out very early in the competition to influence America's future.

It is extremely difficult to explain universal mathematical laws of nature to a popular culture that accepts television talk shows as information sources and confuses science with pseudo-science (which is encouraged by the system theorists). John Berger has asserted that the culture of capitalism has abandoned its claim to being a culture and has become nothing more than an "Instant Practice."

Instant gratification is the rule rather than the exception in a society that is dominated by television, shopping, and the "information highway." The idea of elementary physics education in the universities has come to look old-fashioned in the pseudo-light of the massive influence of TV, computer games, and other forms of passive instant gratification. Social science texts that emphasize "system theory" advocate the vague notion that biology (which rests upon physics to the extent that it is a science), not physics, provides the basis for the (pseudo-)science of the future. Again, the underlying thought is wishfully Aristotelian: to be able to describe "the whole" while remaining woefully ignorant of the very complicated way that the parts interact to determine the behavior of the whole.

The philosophers of postmodernism include the Semioticians, whose tradition is also Aristotelian. C. S. Peirce, the back-sliding Puritan who is regarded as the founder of semiotics, is cited as having regarded Aristotle as the greatest intellect who ever lived.<sup>3</sup> Semioticians have become well-known through the art of observing and reporting the signs of our popular consumer culture, especially the effectiveness of the media in the artificial stimulation of demand in order to market mass-produced products that no one really needs.

The idea of semiotics in the past was to make the woman in the street or the farmer in the meadow artificially dependent upon experts in order to have texts explained to them. Martin Luther, who asserted that Copernicus wanted to destroy astronomy, sided with the princes and Burgers and recommended death for the south German farmers in the rebellion of 1524-25. Here, he only followed the advice of his idol, St. Paul, who was also a sign-reader who invented interpretations and text that are not supported by history. Unwittingly, however, Luther also contributed to the advance of some degree of free thinking. He advocated reading and interpreting the Bible for oneself, which suggested that no one needed the services of the official semioticians sanctioned by Rome to interpret the signs of the Latin Bible for them. In order to make it possible for his fellow Germans to read the Bible he invented a written language based upon his own east Saxon dialect, with common street expressions borrowed from other dialects. Luther's very literary translation of the Bible was so effective that his artificial invented language has become a standard written language.

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3. To regard Aristotle as the world's greatest thinker is as shocking to a scientist as was the discovery of Thomas Jefferson when he learned that his arch-enemy, Alexander Hamilton, regarded Julius Caesar as the greatest man who ever lived.

Grammatical correctness now simulates the grammar invented by the Augustinian Monk who advocated a return to puritanism. What does Political Correctness simulate?

Seen in the context of history, we can treat postmodernism as the intellectual and philosophic wing of the society of the Instant Practice. Change occurs so fast that no stability is possible. Tradition is replaced by consumerism and other artificial distractions. Simple examples of destabilization are the credit-generated takeovers and destruction of real industries by corporate raiders. Modern Semiotics, which no practitioner can explain when pressed for a precise definition, may be regarded as the pseudo-scientific wing of postmodernism. It has already been written that we can regard Semiotics as the study of lies that are told broadly on an everyday scale.

“... the discredit of words is very great. Most of the time the media transmit lies.”

John Berger in *Keeping a Rendezvous*

OUR NATIONAL mythology includes the illusion that one can reinvent oneself independently of history.<sup>4</sup> The media play upon this widely accepted wishful-thinking by stimulating viewers to respond unconsciously. In Pavlovian-Skinnerian style, people then simulate the simulations that are TV. Human simulations are called simulacra in the jargon of Semiotics. Like behavioral psychology, the postmodernist program for America's nonfuture gains in influence in public schools because it meshes with this aspect of The American Dream. Reinventing oneself is easily extended to reinventing the meaning of a text to suit oneself.

The distinction between reality and simulations of reality is systematically blurred by purely commercial influences like television, Hollywood, Las Vegas and Disney World, and by commercial simulations of American technology and foreign culture like the Epcot Center. The latest step in the Disneyfication of postmodern life is virtual reality, which removes us even further from nature.

Disney's robots simulate zoo animals in a sterile way. At a deeper level, John Berger has written that zoos, pets, stuffed animals and animation in films emerged as people lost their traditional connection to animals. This began during the industrial revolution as the struggle to wrest survival directly from nature was abandoned in favor of the struggle to survive financially in a modern megalopolis.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Perhaps a system theorist will outdo Spengler by concocting an “organic paradigm” that purports to explain the Emergence of Postmodern Man based upon a model of massively parallel computation that “forgets” initial conditions through the mathematical errors committed during a long floating point calculation.

5. Berger's idea of art is interesting: a “picture” is painted in order to remember that which is about to disappear.

The driving force of postmodernist society is money-making, just as it was in industrial and modern society. The characteristics of postmodernism are the robotization of production and marketing, easy and expensive credit, and extensive information / communication. TV stimulates demand and VISA makes possible the simulation called Instant Practice. Without the revolutionary ease of obtaining high interest credit the consumer culture would collapse in spite of the Pavlovian influence of television. The most subversive acts against postmodern society are to reject the charge cards and get rid of the TV set.

The euphoria of the futurists over the information highway to the contrary, Instant Practice leads nowhere. The future can only come into existence by short-circuiting postmodernist conditions. Like all else that has evolved, the future can only emerge from the universal source of all creativity:

*"The genetic information which assures reproduction works against dissipation. The sexual animal is like a grain of corn — is a conduit of the past into the future. The scale of that span over millennia and the distance covered by that temporal short circuit which is fertilization are such that sexuality opposes the impersonal passing of time and is antithetical to it."*

John Berger in *About Our Faces*

## Super-Abundance

Though the sheriff in me is wearing thin,  
and debilitating to the town's dignity,  
I won't be found gray, bleary-eyed and worn out  
in the station, blank lord of the miserable  
and lucky weird, backed by a moon  
that was clipped out of the bargain pages,  
or rented by the hour, the anxiety felt  
when the gift is useless in your mouth,

over by the reliable parts in the sheltered  
context that the skylight sends, the corn  
growing in the display cases, an entire  
civilization too abused to read, too exhausted  
to be wanton as the inverted trees, and brush  
over paradise with the tender, radiating leaves,  
the moon so full in your mouth tonight  
while the family is being sold for gasoline,

the makeshift music you manage to mount  
one another's trophy with, as it follows  
your hideous problems around, as each decision  
is endlessly repeated in you and acted out  
in front of the mirror, played over the loud-  
speakers, sent to resemble the conformity  
of the makeshift, metallic stars, the makeshift,  
metallic Jesus in the rising field, waiting  
for you to be turned over to the love of a spindly  
nation with velvet trees, and it is waiting  
for you to descend to its familiar face  
that repeats the phrase, "I came here for  
a different reason," and, thus, was framed  
under the de-saturizing sun, moaning, "the moon."

## Blueprint

AS MORTY saw it, Alex would be a new man by the time he walked out of the store. "Would I lie to you?" Morty's steely eyes water beneath a bottomless crust of eyelid folds and crow's feet.

"You came to me, right?" Morty, mouth full of pins. "You just love to shop around for clothes, don't you? Of course not! That's why you came to me. Am I right?"

Alex lets his fingers slip over the gray worsted jacket Morty pulls off the rack, that Morty holds under Alex's puckered chin. Morty studies his subject. Alex sucks in his softening stomach, straightens his back, breathes deep. "Saville Row. You can't buy a better suit. But it's all wrong for you, Alex." The pins wag over Morty's lips. "You come to Morty because you know I won't sell you something that's not right. I care about how you spend your money."

Alex, 42 regular, 45 years old, on the threshold of the fashion world. Morton Clothiers, since 1947, since Alex was two years old. Revolving racks of suits, jackets, bulging stacks of shirts, mazes of colors, textures, patterns spilling over every surface. Morty peels off the flat, iron black jacket Alex wears with a stiff white chambray shirt every other day. On alternate days he wears a stubbled navy sports coat with blue chambray. Elizabeth buys him shirts.

Alex's measurements swell under Morty's tape measure. His chest expands, his spine telescopes. The cuffs of his pants lift up over the bridge of his cordovan loafers. Morty lays out an array of suits, jackets, pants.

"You need shirts, Alex."

One hundred percent Irish linen, washable silk, buttery flannel, boucle. Cashmere. The names, never mentioned, but there, fabric plaques sewn inside the collars, the waistbands. Enzo. Marcello. Giovanni. Operatic names. Designer names. Expensive accessories Alex never knew he needed. Alexander.

Alex is surrounded by all of the clothes that Morty sells him. Pastel shirts. French cut jackets, baggy pleated linen pants. And suits. Ties. Socks.

"You don't need pressure in the morning when you get dressed, am I right?" Morty is carefully numbering each suit and tie. "I know you want to look good." Order at last, emerging from the swamp of racks and shelves of Morton Clothiers. Morty is sewing the Morton Code into every suit, tie, jacket and shirt he sells him. "Match the numbers," Morty says. "I'm here to make sure you look good."

Morty slams Alex on the back. "You're an important man and I know that." Alex plants his feet firmly, nods. "By me you get good value, good treatment, good quality. Then you get outta here."

Alex returns home with a stack of boxes. He stands in the foyer of his antebellum house listening to the sounds of his family in full swing. They scuttle and click, a machine he can turn neither off nor on. The telephone rings. He hears Derek and Gregory, his gangly teenage sons, grapple in the kitchen to answer it. He listens to the fuss. The call turns out to be for Elizabeth, his wife, who rushes by on her way to pick it up. He nods, half expects her to look blankly at him and say, "May I help you?"

Elizabeth disappears around a corner. The back door slams, Derek and Gregory gone. Alex stands alone, unnoticed at the threshold of his house, bland and predictable to his family. They hadn't known him in the golden days of his magic career, and they didn't seem to care. But Alex could remember what it was like to be aloof, to feel mystic and powerful, to be appreciated.

Elizabeth's voice sifts into the foyer. Alex, unable to hear what she is saying, listens for patterns, for rhythms. She chimes, her voice as pretty and neat as she is. Elizabeth, her shoes always shined, her shoulder-length henna red hair always clean, carefully in place. Elizabeth, with her simmering potpourri, her devotion to order and good smells, isn't much impressed these days by Alex's ability to pull a quarter out from behind her ear.

She reappears, wearing a pleated tennis skirt over her jazzercise outfit. Elizabeth pecks Alex on the cheek, leans toward the beveled mirror, peers closely at the boomerang shaped creases at the corners of her mouth. She carries a stack of folders under her arm. "Alex, after my exercise class I'm going door to door to get this petition signed." Elizabeth smooths her hands down her sides. "I won't be home for dinner."

The petition protests a renovation project. Elizabeth heads the Neighborhood Preservation Society. Their neighborhood was the first in town to be reconstructed after the Civil War. Over the years it had become a slum. Enormous old houses, once stately, sagged. Gingerbread rotted, wraparound porches caved in. When a new wave of young families bought them, restoration fever caught on, a yearning to keep strictly true to the past.

"It is so unpleasant dealing with this man," she says.

"This man" is the doctor who had obtained a permit to install siding from the Neighborhood Preservation Society. When it turned out to be aluminum, Elizabeth spearheaded the movement to get him to take it down, put up wooden siding in its place. A battle was raging.

"We just assumed when he said 'siding' he meant *wooden* siding." Elizabeth shudders. "Who would have dreamed it would be aluminum?"

Alex places his boxes on an overstuffed chair, runs his fingers through his thinning hair. He stands beside Elizabeth and looks at himself in the mirror. He wears the iron black jacket he always wears, the chambray shirt.

He notices the beginnings of jowls. His eyelids droop a bit too. He never noticed this before.

He glances at Elizabeth. "Who would have dreamed?" he says softly. "There's some tuna in the fridge. I already told the boys."

Alex thinks of what Morty said. "You'll be a new man." The door clicks shut behind Elizabeth. Alex climbs the stairs to put away his new clothes.



WHEN ALEX was about ten years old he found a small book in the neighbor's trash called *The Secrets of Magic. IT'S FUN TO FOOL FOLKS* was printed in bold capital letters across the cover, and beneath that, NEVER REVEAL A SECRET. He studied the drawings and learned to make a coin disappear. In a short time he perfected another trick. Ceremoniously, he cut a rope in half, tied the ends in a knot, and finally pulled them out from his fist in one long, uncut piece again. He became popular in his class.

Every day Alex practiced in front of the mirror for hours with a heavy, dark velvet cape draped over his shoulders. He memorized the "Rules for A Successful Routine" by Thurston the Magician. "KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING," Thurston said. "SAVE YOUR BEST TRICK FOR LAST."

Alex's senior year in high school, he was asked to perform a magic act for the entire graduating class. Alex dressed in black tails and a beaver top hat that had belonged to Great Uncle Joseph. He wore the cape. It spilled down his elbows, swayed at the backs of his knees. Alex snapped the edges of the cape often. It made a sharp, cracking sound.

He selected a petite, thick-legged girl from his chemistry class to assist him for his grand finale. Alex had her lie on a pallet propped between two chairs. She arranged herself carefully under a sheet. With a great slap of the cape Alex pulled one of the chairs away. There she lay, smiling crookedly, stiff as a board, only her front end supported. He passed a large hoop back and forth over the girl. As he twirled the hoop for the last time, he tipped his head. The top hat rolled down his outstretched arm into his hand. A snow white dove fluttered out. Puffy feathers drifted through the air, glowing in the stage lights. The dove settled on Alex's shoulder and cooed. Alex took a deep bow to the thunderous applause. He thought about learning to swallow fire after that, but never got around to it.

"You've had your taste of greatness," Alex's father told him sternly after graduation. "Now stop all this magic crap and learn to do something real."

"Something real," after college, turned out to be the blueprint business. Great Aunt Audrey appointed him for this. Childless and proud, Aunt Audrey had become increasingly preoccupied with her varicose veins, her low salt diet, her peace and quiet. After running the business for the eighteen years since Great Uncle Joseph died, she no longer wanted to be bothered by broken down delivery trucks, architects' deadlines, the caustic smell of ammonia stranded in her nostrils, in her thin strawberry white hair. Alex reluctantly conceded to learn the business. Audrey retired to the Gulf

Coast of Florida intending to live out her days playing shuffleboard and going to tea dances.

Alex continued to practice some magic. A cup and ball routine. Tricks with a small, laquered box that made things disappear. But when his two sons became old enough to figure out how the tricks were done, Alex lost his audience. The black top hat found its way to the back of the closet and stayed there. The dove had long since fluttered off.

Alex became full owner of the blueprint shop when Aunt Audrey passed away at the age of ninety-six. Her will instructed him to throw a party for the employees in her memory. Alex propped a five by seven photograph of Audrey on the food table between platters of rolled-up tubes of meat and sliced cheese with grape clusters. She presided there, waving at the camera from a cement bench in the sunshine, framed by a crust of tiny sea shell rosettes.

For entertainment Alex hired a juggler who wore a rhinestone bow tie and told jokes. While the juggler balanced golf clubs on his chin, Alex looked around at the delighted faces. Not since his big show more than twenty-five years before had Alex known what it was to inspire such wonder. Maybe he should have gone into show business.

He did a few coin tricks for his secretary and bookkeeper. The darkroom crew gathered around and Alex, suddenly renewed, found himself dusting off routines from long ago. He savored the forgotten rumbles of power and importance at the patter of applause.

The party ended rather late. All the employees gone, the doors locked, the building darkened. Alex, alone in his dim office, looked around. Not much was changed in the blueprint shop since the days of Great Aunt Audrey. A new coat of paint now and then, cobalt blues and shocking whites, what they'd always been. Colorless clumps of dust drifted from the wallboards. Piles of papers became bigger, yellower piles. The air, stale, overheated. A nest of plump gray pigeons lived in the rafters.

Alex listened to the pigeons' idle croon through the air conditioning ducts. He examined the backs of his hands. Thin lines of purple-blue stained his fingers. Blotches of dark brown had begun to appear on his skin. Alex remembered his father's hands, how they, too, had been splotched, lined. Such old hands.

He rolled a quarter over his fingers, palmed the coin. In a flip, the quarter was inside his jacket sleeve. Alex held his empty palms up, tipped his head and grinned coyly at an imaginary audience. Another broad flourish of his arm and the coin was again in his hand. He thought of the flawless hands of Thurston the Magician.

The phone rang. He picked up the receiver and listened to Elizabeth's voice. "Hello. Alex? Are you there?"

Alex rubbed the slick varnish of his desktop, saying nothing. He fixed his eyes out the office window on his car, alone in the parking lot, glinting under a diffuse street light.

"Alex? Is that you?"

He put the receiver gently back in its cradle, flipped off the lights, closed the door carefully behind him.



ALEX STOOD in a phone booth, fraying the edges of a flyer someone left under the wiper blade of his car.

NEED AN ESCORT? it read. Splayed across the page was a cartoon woman, hour-glass shaped, lounging on a crescent moon. A pale blue arc of stars sprayed above her. ABSOLUTE DISCRETION GUARANTEED. Alex dialed the number.

"Fantasy Nights Escorts," a woman's voice answered. Alex hung up.

ELIZABETH sits in the kitchen, an empty plate of cookies and a nearly empty glass of milk in front of her. Stacks of papers spill over the oak table.

"Where have you been? I tried to call but there's something wrong with the phones at your office." Elizabeth reaches for the pocket calculator.

"Took a drive. It's a nice night." Alex flips through one of the stacks.

"Did you get enough signatures?"

"You can never get enough." Elizabeth scribbles a number down on a pad. "There aren't any laws for this you know." She looks up at Alex. "How was the party?"

"Laws? For aluminum siding control?" He scans the signatures.

"No, Alex. Laws against forsaking tradition," Elizabeth says, glancing sideways at him. "Was the party fun?"

"Aunt Audrey would have enjoyed it. I did some magic tricks."

"I wrote the editor of the newspaper. About the doctor." Elizabeth drinks the rest of the milk, runs her tongue over her lips.

"They liked it," Alex says.

"They liked what?"

"The magic tricks."

"Oh, that's nice."

THE WOMAN'S voice is becoming familiar. "Need an escort?" Alex feels a shiver run down his back. His scalp bristles. The voice on the other end takes over.

"Come on, honey. Don't be afraid," she coos. "Tell me what you want. We know how to put some flavor in your life."

Alex thinks of ice cream. Of great cool scoops of chocolate. He imagines a woman melting into a puddle of sweet vanilla in his arms.

"Vanilla." The word courses through his bones. He clears his throat, says it louder. "Vanilla."

"Irene would like to meet you, sir. When can we arrange a date, and where?" The voice gurgles.

Alex's fingers tremble. He clutches the receiver. Irene is going to meet him and it sounds good.



"HOT SOUP is so good on a cold night," Alex says.

"That's not all that's good on a cold night, honey." She smiles, her lips pressing against her slightly protruding front teeth.

Irene is sitting across from Alex in an orange booth in the hotel coffee shop. Orange vinyl, orange formica. The woman on the phone tried to persuade Alex to have Irene come to his room, but Alex wanted to meet her first. "You know. So we can have a cup of coffee before," he said to the voice on the phone. The woman suggested the hotel bar, but that didn't seem right. Alex, who had never before brought himself to the task of seduction, insisted on the coffee shop.

"Would you like some ice cream?" Alex says to Irene. "I mean, maybe when you finish your soup. We could have ice cream."

"Yeah. Ice cream." Irene is in her early twenties. In the orange light her skin looks chalky. A bridge of freckles spills over her nose onto her cheeks, showing from beneath a waxy coat of makeup. Alex thinks she would be pretty if her teeth were fixed. They keep her lips from closing all the way, and there is a small but noticeable gap in front. She wears a black crushed velvet dress that fits snug on her slight body. Her fingernails are polished a bright red, caked around the cuticles. The polish on some of her nails is chipped, making map-like shapes on the tips of her fingers. Irene is relaxed and hungry. Alex feels things are going really well for a first date.

"So. What do you do?" Alex folds his hands on the table in front of him.

Irene looks up from the bowl. Her lips part into a smile, the freckles on her nose crinkle up, the two little white tips of her front teeth poke out. "Whatever you want, honey."

"No, no. I mean what do you do? Are you in school? I mean, working your way through college or something?" Alex, feeling fatherly, knits his brow, ready to hear Irene's story. She is just a few years older than his sons. Maybe not even. Hard to tell with all the makeup.

Irene lets her spoon clatter into the bowl. She dabs the corners of her mouth with a paper napkin. "School? No, I wouldn't call what I do school." Alex hears her kick her shoe off under the table. He feels her bare foot rub against his leg. He shifts positions, straightens up in the booth.

"Would you like that ice cream now, Irene?" He watches her push a thin strand of hair from her pale forehead. Her rhinestone earrings catch the light as they dangle, making reflections on her cheeks. Alex thinks she's not the kind of girl who looks right in a coffee shop. He rented a room in the hotel, but he can't imagine being alone with her, with just a bed. He finds a quarter in his pocket, flashes it in front of Irene, eye level. In a swipe of his wrist he holds up his empty palm, reaches across the table, and pulls the quarter out from behind her ear.

"Vanilla," Irene laughs, runs a pink tongue over her glossy lips.

IRENE IS standing on the bed pointing to her shoe on the floor. "I want to move my rook to the end of the bed. I mean the board."

Alex stands on a chair across from Irene. Lying around the big, square black and white floor tiles of the hotel suite is an array of lipsticks, pocket knives, shoes. They are having a makeshift game of chess.

"You can't do that. You'll be in check." Alex has his jacket off, his collar undone. Irene, in stocking feet, has her dress slightly hiked on her thighs so she can easily swoop from the bed to make her moves.

"I keep forgetting what piece is what. Oh, yeah. Watch this." She leaps down, picks up a ring of keys from a black tile, moves it across the floor to a tile with a sock on it. She snatches up the sock. "Checkmate!"

Alex sits down on the back of the chair and studies the floor for several minutes. "I'll be damned. It is checkmate." He looks up at Irene, who is back on the bed, jumping. He watches her bounce, her spidery arms revolving, her hair flying.

"You know Irene, you're a really nice-looking girl. I mean that." Irene keeps bobbing up and down. "If you get your teeth fixed you could be a beauty queen."

"Yeah, well, braces wouldn't help me much in my line of work." She is slightly out of breath.

"If you're saving up for braces I might be able to help you out." She is a child with her hair bouncing on her shoulders. "My wife's brother is an orthodontist. He'll give you a good deal if you say I sent you."

Irene gathers herself up for one last leap. She dangles in the air, poised for a split second with her arms open wide before she falls over onto her back, letting the tremors from the bed rock her. She folds her arms across her chest, closes her eyes. "Did Hankie tell you how much it costs to have me here?"

"Hankie?"

"You know. Hankie. My boss. She's the one you talked to on the phone."

Alex squirms deeper into the chair. He likes Irene. He likes playing chess with her, he likes watching her jump up and down. "Lots of people have braces these days. I mean when they're a little older." He takes a deep breath. "And you're still so young."

Irene sits up, faces Alex. "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that you're old enough to be my father." She gets up from the bed, shuffles over to Alex. She sits down in his lap. "Well, that's O.K. I want to be your baby."

Her clothes feel thin, leaving barely anything between them. His heart is racing. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a deck of cards.

"Pick a card, Irene," he says. "Any card."

Irene hums to herself. She wags a finger over the fanned out deck, peels a card from it slowly.

"O.K. Look at the card, and put it back without showing me." She peers at the card cupped in her fist. Alex shifts positions so Irene is perched at the tip of his knee.

She slides the card into the deck. With a flick of his thumbs Alex is shuffling, reshuffling the deck, chopping the cards. Smiling, he offers her the deck to cut. Irene keeps her eyes on his hands, smiles back. A quick twist of the wrist and the cards are spread in a neat fan between his fingers.

"Pick another card, Irene."

She pulls a card from left center of the fan. "It's my card!" She shakes her head. "How did you do that?"

Alex gently urges her to stand. A red silk scarf flaps in his hands. He shakes it front and back, stands and makes a stiff, shallow bow before he stuffs the scarf into his fist. It disappears between his clenched fingers.

Alex holds his hand up. "Blow on it," he tells her. She puckers her lips and blows, long and slow, as he rubs his fist.

He drops his eyes when she looks at him. Alex flashes his empty hands before her.

"Hey, where did it go?" Irene gapes as Alex pulls the scarf from her ear. "You're really good!" She wraps her long arms around Alex's neck, kisses his cheek.

Alex unwraps her. His head reeling, his face reddening. He steps back, out of breath. "Its getting late. I better go now."

She fidgets with her hair, gets serious. "Suit yourself. But you'll still owe me for the time we spent."

"I know." Alex looks at Irene. Even more freckles show with the face powder rubbed off. Her thin body, a series of knobs and points, looks unsprouted. She can't be more than seventeen. "I had a very good time. It's not that I don't like you."

"You're a nice guy, Alex." She punches him lightly in the arm. "A lousy chess player, but a nice man." She pads over to the nightstand to get the charge card imprinter from her purse.

Alex runs his fingers through his thin hair, walks over to the mirror. Irene comes up behind him.

The two of them stare at their reflections. Without earrings, makeup, Irene could be less than seventeen. The kind of girl one of his sons might bring home to do school work with. Hardly the kind of girl Alex would expect to work for an escort service.

"Stand up straight, Alex." She pokes her finger into his stomach.

He straightens up. In the mirror his new clothes look rumped, dumpy. He thinks of the Morton code stitched into the lining of his shirts, the insides of his pants. "You're the kind of man who looks gorgeous in a tuxedo," she says. They continue looking in the glass. "A tuxedo transforms a man."

Alex keeps his eyes on their reflections. "You're a nice girl. You shouldn't be doing this."

"Yeah, well," she spreads her fingers in the air, tilts her head. "This isn't so bad. Not with men like you around." She gives Alex's arm a squeeze before handing him the charge receipt to sign. "There's a space there for tips too. I mean, if you want. Like, just if you want to know."

"You know, if you change your mind about the braces, my brother-in-law could straighten your teeth right up."

"Yeah, thanks a lot, Alex. I'll let you know if I change my mind."



HE SPENDS his evenings driving down long uninterrupted loops of highway, going off in a different direction each time. Some nights he steers his car down unlighted, stray country roads. He makes long stops at intersections to consider a new direction, to view the endless, blazing sky, the blue clouds shimmering in the moonlight.

The nights he sees a star shooting across the sky, he feels lucky. He could be the only one to see the streak it makes falling, the only one to appreciate its random nature, its final, luminous moment.

When at last he returns home, swings the car into his own driveway, he feels refreshed, powerful, mysterious. He pauses at the front door, closes his eyes to savor the dense significance, the drama of having a secret life.



"WE DON'T communicate anymore." Elizabeth, her face round, earnest, understanding.

Alex, standing sheepishly in the kitchen portal not knowing what to say. Lately he wonders what he is doing in his own house. He comes home later and later.

"I was interviewed on the evening news tonight, Alex. About the doctor."

"Sorry I missed it. Had to work."

"The doctor may have the best lawyers, but we've got heritage."

Elizabeth is flushed. "I went around with the news camera and had them show all the finest houses around here. I quoted the manifesto of the Daughters of the American Revolution."

"The D.A.R.? Sounds like the big guns, Elizabeth."

"I've been nominated for membership. See what I mean, Alex? We don't communicate." The word churns in her mouth. "Here's some big, important thing I'm doing and you don't even know about it."

Alex looks down at his shoes. He fidgets with a button on his jacket.

"What's happening with the aluminum siding?" he asks. Alex is not sure what Elizabeth is getting at. It had been a good night. He saw two shooting stars, one right after another, crisscrossing in the darkness.

"It's more than aluminum siding, Alex. It's tradition. It's the backbone of our lives." She shakes her head, looks at him sadly.

"Alex." She pauses, looks up at him. "You've become a mystery to me."

ONE EVENING Alex telephones Elizabeth from a phone booth on a deserted road. He counts the number of rings, waits for an answer, not knowing what it is he wants to say. Maybe just hearing Elizabeth's bright, reliable voice will make it clear to him, will help him form the words. Maybe Elizabeth will know what it is. Elizabeth, who always has a plan for uncomplicating things,

a strategy for making things the way they ought to be. If he could explain, she would listen, think of something.

"Hello?" Her voice peals over the wires, sing-song.

Alex holds the phone, breathing softly. His hand becomes damp and cold as he clutches the receiver. He opens his mouth, but no words come out. He listens quietly as Elizabeth becomes more and more exasperated.

"Hello? Anybody there?" Elizabeth raps the phone on the counter, as if to shake loose the voice stuck inside.

He almost tells her there's nothing wrong with the phone. He almost asks Elizabeth to come join him. Together they could take a drive. Drive away.

"Hello? Who's there? Hello?" Finally, she hangs up.



ALEX EXPERIMENTS by saying names out loud.

"Francesca," he says, turning to the empty passenger seat. "Shall we get take-out Chinese and have a picnic tonight? Lemon chicken with cashews?" Or he says, "Monica, did you see that star? It had the longest tail I've ever seen." Yes, she says. She saw it. She says it looked like glowing green taffy stretching in an arc across the sky.

It is a game he plays to fill the time, to have company on his lonely night drives. He settles on the name Monica. He does tricks for her.

"Monica, I want you to think of a number between one and ten."

"See if you can guess which cup the ball is under."

"Check this knot, Monica, and verify that it is an ordinary knot, tied tightly."

He comes to rely on her companionship. His drives are more meaningful, more fun on the nights Monica is there. And there she is, instantly, whenever he would like her to be. Monica, who could be anyone he dreams up each time she gets into the car. She is always happy to see him. He misses her when she is not there. He picks her up on deserted street corners. He opens and closes the door for her.

Some days, before a drive, he goes to the store to buy her trinkets. Small things; a bracelet, a nightie. He has them wrapped, keeps them in the trunk of his car. "I need a birthday gift for a lady friend." The sales girl asks questions. "Is she sporty? Diamond tennis bracelets are very popular with sporty women this year." Alex lets the ribbon of tiny sparkling diamonds spill through his fingers. He squints, cups a hand over his brow. "Let me see," says Alex. "Yes, she's sporty." Monica takes shape. Dark-haired, small. She laughs a lot. She has excellent teeth. She is sporty.

He rents an apartment for her, to have some place to go. Bit by bit, he outfits it himself, in exotica. She loves the thick, gnarled plants he brings her. They break up the sunshine that pours through a bank of windows. They cast long leafy shadows over the pine floors. He hangs racks of carved wooden masks on the walls. Leather furniture. The smell of musk. He fills the closets, little by little, with clothes he buys her. Slinky things that reflect

light, in small sizes that hug the skin. They dangle, with the tags still attached, unworn. He gets an unlisted number, an answering machine for the messages he longs for her to hear. He buries his head in the pillows on the bed, breathes in deeply to smell her.

He calls, whispering long, intimate messages to the answering machine. "Sweetheart, I've been thinking of you all day." The words ooze from Alex's mouth. He becomes ardent. "I miss you. I want to give you a hickey." He is falling in love for the first time in his life.



"HOW COULD there be anyone else? Alex is just not the type." Molly, Elizabeth's friend. They organize, they exercise. They talk. "He comes home every night. Isn't that what you said?"

Elizabeth is having a hard time. She gets the phone calls more and more often. Five or six times a day she answers a muffled, silent line. Whenever the phone rings her heart quickens, her fingers tremble.

Other things are happening, too. The doctor is winning. It looks like he has managed to keep his aluminum siding. The D.A.R. rejects her.

And Alex. Consistent, dependable Alex is acting strangely. He's become secretive, distant. He talks to himself. When she asks him about the long hours he spends at the blueprint office he is vague and cranky. He bought all those new clothes.

"What does he care about fashion?" Elizabeth asks. She clearly sees all signs pointing to another woman, and she is irritated with Molly for doubting her. But that is Molly. It's those damned mystery novels she reads all the time.

"And what about the phone calls?" Elizabeth says.

Molly paces the floor. "It could be the doctor. God knows you've made his life miserable." Elizabeth watches her go back and forth over the dappled white Congoleum.

"Stop pacing, Molly. You're driving me crazy." Molly continues to shuffle across the kitchen.

Molly stops, snaps the fingers on both her hands. "Could it be one of your sons' friends?" Molly's face flushes with excitement. "Could one of them have a crush on you?" She looks over to Elizabeth's astonished face, puts her hands on her hips. "It happens, Elizabeth."

"Molly, what on earth are you saying?"

"I'm saying, whoever it is, he is speechless. He calls just to hear your voice." She slams her hand on the table. "Just like a shy, inexperienced young boy is speechless, while burning with passion, an incomprehensible need for an older woman!" Molly sits down beside Elizabeth. "It's classic."

"Get out of here." Elizabeth, blushing, acting disinterested.

"Why not? It could be true!" Molly pushes. "You happen to be in the prime of your life."

Elizabeth smooths her hands over her face, runs her fingers through her hair. Her skin feels soft, moist. With one more henna rinse her hair will glisten. She has felt dull, defeated, out of control for weeks. Months, actually. It's her own fault. She let herself go.

"I suppose it's possible." Elizabeth, greatly relieved. Flattered even.

"These things just happen." Molly balls her hands together. "It happens."

"It happens," Elizabeth says.

"WORLDLY," "mature" are the words that come to mind when she looks in the mirror. A bottomless well of understanding surges within Elizabeth. She is serene, voluptuous, wise. When the boys have company she sprays on extra perfume. She saunters. She dresses in long flowing skirts, gauzy low neck blouses. She wonders which one of her sons' friends it might be.

Could it be Mel, Derek's friend? Seventeen, brainy, polite, well-groomed. Good-looking. He lingers in the kitchen to make small talk with Elizabeth. He says he saw her on the evening news. He says she looked good.

"Do you really think so, Mel?" Leaning forward slightly, her skin rubbed to a warm glow.

Or maybe it's Nick, Gregory's friend. Fifteen years old, dark, stormy. A nature beyond his years. The type to notice an older woman. It's so hard to be a boy verging on manhood. Elizabeth, emeshed in an ageless intimacy with the younger, male generation. The feeling pumps through her skin as she lets her hand casually brush against the boys. Warm, exciting.

"Nick," she says in a husky voice, her hand poised casually on his firm, tanned arm. "You are always welcome here." She searches his eyes, tilts her head, smiles slowly.

"Thanks. That's really good to know." Nick fumbles with his cuff button, knotted loosely on a tangled thread, about to fall off.

"I mean that, Nick. If there's ever anything you need, give a whistle." She squeezes his arm. "Like," she pauses to smile. "Like, if you need someone to talk with, for instance." He nods, looks around for Derek. "Just give a call."

She drapes herself in off-the-shoulder, breezy dresses. She cheerfully sails to the phone when it rings, sleeves and skirts billowing in the rush. She settles in, puts her feet up, the receiver cradled on her shoulder.

"Whoever this is, you can talk to me," she urges. She jots notes on what she senses from the nothingness. "Maybe we can even get together sometime." Elizabeth. A woman in control again.

Alex, on the other end, listens in confusion. Over the weeks of the phone calls he feels he has unnerved the deepest part of Elizabeth. He savors the mystery and power of anonymity, of listening to her dangle helplessly on the other end of the line. The phone, a raveled, thick polymer wand he wordlessly waves over Elizabeth. Her buried secrets come undone, her darkest fears tremble loose.

But something was coming over her. It had been going so well until now.



THEY DON'T take drives anymore, not since he rented the apartment. She could be bored. Young girls get bored spending all that time at home. What could she be up to, with so much time to herself?

"I can understand, baby. I never take you out anymore." Alex, mumbling to a detached, gnawing echo coming from the receiver. The machine beeps, the line lifeless, dumb. "These six months with you have been the happiest six months of my life."

It is a crisp, clear spring night. Alex parks his car in front of Monica's building, looks out at the border of the sky, a jagged rim of treetops and housetops. He breathes in the damp air, rubs his finger on the glass, pulling a curved line over the cool wet cloud of film on the windshield. He rests his head on the steering wheel.

He is startled by the bang of a car door slamming behind him. In the rearview mirror he sees the silhouette of a man and woman driving off. Alex rolls his shoulders, tilts his head side to side. A rush of cold air skims the bare skin of his hand as he opens the car door, as he leans into the hushed street.

Walking slowly into Monica's apartment he breathes the astringent smell of new, untouched things. The windows shimmy delicately against the wind. The potted houseplants are dusty, rasping as he walks past them. The answering machine is blinking. He rewinds the tape, sits down in the dark to listen.

"Monica, where have you been?" his tinny voice says on the recording. "Monica, what went wrong?"

He threads his way through the darkened rooms to the bedroom closet. Sparse shadows droop from the racks; unworn clothes, hardly enough to make up a wardrobe. He switches on the light, runs his fingers over the soft, silky fabrics of her dresses, pauses at his favorite. A long, shiny emerald sling with a scooped neck, a deep back, a narrow waist. He holds it up next to him in the mirror. Beside the glinting, satiny green, he looks colorless, old. Not at all like the man he thought he was. He puts the dress back on the bar, turns from the closet.

Alex lies down on the bed. The sheets, stiff, coarse, smelling from cardboard and sizing. His head sinks into the crisp pillow. He reaches for the telephone on the nightstand, lets it slip into the trench of his chest. Alex closes his eyes. It is the season for meteor showers.

## Possession

The answer to your question is yes,  
I am not a minimalist. Things  
comfort me, that is the meaning  
of asylum. I feed on dry soup,  
sit jay-naked in the moist sun,  
rub plastic horses I stack in  
an old Keds box. Back by popular  
demand, everything I ever owned  
in this oatmeal-brown cookie jar,  
heat-cracked, warm as a womb.  
I own the birds you see at a stand-  
still in updrafts, I own the juicy  
plums ripened just today. That moon  
sitting on the yellow sill there,  
mine too. The undreamt of  
cool as a palm on your bare  
shoulder, reminding you,  
I will have you too.

## The Soul beyond the Wall

IN THE SEVENTH hour of ascent I began to weep. There had been nothing but a road rising before me for hours, the wet rain forest of the low Cartago mountains had given way to scrub and chaparral of the high plateau long after a red line of pain had run the length of my legs and settled in my ass. The yoke of my shoulders was nothing but a dull boneache. It hurt horribly to breathe. Ahead of me, the *Cerro del Muertos* was somewhere in the mist, and then the tears came and didn't stop. I didn't cry; I wasn't sobbing; the tears just came and didn't stop, the water of the body leaking from some deep well.

I had been in Costa Rica for two weeks mountain biking. I had ridden up huge, green hills of the Parque Nacional Brauillo Carrillo and down their wonderful slopes through the mist in a hiss of air. I had coasted along the beach roads, past the empty hotels and hung out with a collection of very serious surfers in a great beach town ten miles from Nicaragua. I had ridden into the rainforest, seen whitefaced and spider monkeys and iguanas the size of German Shepherds. I had been talked out of taking the direct route across the country through to the Chirripo Forest Preserve by an Indian guide who knew the forest like he knew his own bed. His key statement, I think, came as he inspected my bike with an amused look: "Sure you can take that thing through the mountains, as long as you carry it on your back." So I had returned to San Jose, the country's capital which sits in a valley rimmed by high mountains—like a Latin Salt Lake City—and ridden up to Cartago the day before, as a staging area for my attempt on the *Cerro del Muertos*, one of the highest peaks in Costa Rica named for those who died on it, including a plane of aviators who crashed early in the century and are buried among the clouds. Their grave markers, I would come to know later, are at almost 12,000 feet on the Pan-American Highway that ascends and ascends and ascends, and is sometimes not really a highway but rather a trick of the light, a niche in the mountain that you can climb with the psychotic drivers of Costa Rica whizzing past you at stupefying speeds.

I had trained for weeks getting ready for this trip; I put a lot of hours in the saddle and in two weeks in country I had already ridden what I thought were huge climbs. But, logically, nothing can prepare you for the longest thing you will ever do. There was a line I had yet to cross, a place in my soul I had yet to see, and I was ill prepared for the approach, the line and what lies beyond it.

As any long-distance athlete knows, there is a place in the body called the wall, and when the tears came I had hit it. I would soon go beyond. This beyond is the place of pleasure above pain, where both blend together so perfectly that it is impossible to tell the difference between the two. I don't remember much from this point on. I know there were cars hissing by me—they had been doing so all day—but I can't recall them. There were luscious bromeliads in the trees, they had kept me amused with their odd roots hanging from the branches of hundreds of trees, their flowers coloring the dark shadows; I no longer saw them. I must have finished my water bottles but I don't recall taking a drink. What I do remember is tears, lots of tears. My face had faucets; they were opened all the way. The other thing I felt was a odd sense of peace, a sense of not even being on the bike anymore. I know at one point I tried to stop. My brain actually gave the command to my legs—*Stop Peddling!*—and they didn't. They kept going. Spinning and spinning. They were no longer in my realm of control. They had become things unto themselves.

This is not new to me, of course. When Cortes and his soldiers, acclimated to sea level, crossed the mountains two thousand miles north of me heading for what later would be named Mexico City but the natives called Tenochtitlan, they saw St. James riding through the mist, a horseman one hundred feet tall charging through the volcanic smoke and low clouds. In their climb-induced-delirium, in the face of this alien world, their minds had turned back to what they knew. James was an idol for the Spanish (his remains had been found in Galicia in the ninth century) so it is not surprising they saw him; he was the patron Saint of the reconquest of Spain, the inspiration of their victory over the Moors. For the Spaniards, he was a symbol of God's will in motion, a vision of grace sent to show them the true path. Following his spirit they found a passage through the mountains and went on to destroy Tenochtitlan. Navy SEALs in their Hell Week often have visions of everything from Totem poles to cheeseburgers. Their bodies are so consumed by their own hunger, their need for warmth, that the mind cannot control what it sees, smells or hears. The mind's synapses are so frayed that the slightest memory fires off electrochemical signals that are as real as any physical sighting.

This is what happens. The body enters an arena where its own tissues are being consumed. This happens in normal exercise but only in small doses. In the extreme, as if in starvation, the body must respond, and it responds with pain, with the message: *cut it out!* But if the will is strong enough to keep moving, or some other agency (disease or physical deprivation) has control of the body and it cannot stop, the mind will enter the battle at this aptly named Wall. The mind layers the body in endorphins and other hormones. These chemicals offer up a sense of peace that rises like fog around the pain. (There are accounts from people who have survived tiger attacks by the split-second intervention of others and they often comment that what had overtaken them was not panic or terror or

pain, but a feeling of peace and serenity, a white light like those hokey accounts of near-death experiences.) To stay in this white world for long is to see the fabric of the brain, to witness bits and pieces of your unconscious self washed up onto the shoals of your conscious vision. This is a world where the arias of Verdi can come unbidden and you hear them as if sung from all around you, sung by angels from on high. This is the world of the true desert mirage, the dark shadows of fruit trees and fresh water which recede ever before you. The world of warmth in the worst blizzard, the voice telling you that snow bank would be a comfortable place for a rest, warm sleep washing over you. It is a dangerous world, but like all danger, it is ultimately beautiful.

So I rode and my legs no longer followed my instructions and the tears ran down my face like rain water; the pain stopped. Its song, which had been with me since shortly after I had quit Cartago at seven that morning was gone and in its place was a wash of white. The road buzzed. The pedals turned themselves, and I was free to wander around my own mind. I saw my parents, my mother reading in a sunlit window, my father covered in sawdust, sanding a long pine board. I saw the girl I had left in the States to come and grind my body into pulp biking the mountains of Costa Rica. I saw food, plates of *pinto gallo*, steaks dripping butter, glasses of dark, dark beer. I slid around in the realm of purest poetry that is the mind unfettered by its assumptions of reality. I don't think I could explain, nor do I think I would want explained to me, how I kept my bike on the road.

I had descended into myself, or ascended out of myself, neither metaphor is perfect. I had entered what to a 14th Century monk would be a state of grace, what to a Buddhist would be Nirvana. This is the place from which religion stems, where angels are born and the devil lives forever, the godhead of my own mind, and I can barely remember what I saw there.

It is no coincidence that the terms blending here are those of body and spirit. Both are the arenas of our greatest pain and therefore our greatest possible pleasure. It is just that monk flagellating himself for hours with thorns who will ascend into a state of spiritual bliss so like his image of Christ on the Cross. It is Siddhartha Gautama aching for enlightenment under the Bohdi tree on the fortieth day of his fast who enters Nirvana. It is only those who in great spiritual distress seek to escape that distress by going deeper into it, by going through it. This is the same for those athletes on the boundaries of endurance, the century runner or the triathlete; they go into their pain, inhabit it, in order to transcend it. There is a boundary to our world of daily pain and beyond it there is another. This is what both Christ and the Buddha can teach us. I know only a little about this new world. All I know is this: it is a place of beauty.

When I finally crested the mountain, the *Cerro del Muertos*, the wind was whipping tattered banners of low clouds across the peak and I came out of that world. The low, white crosses of the eponymous dead crowded their granite marker like some macabre Point-of-Interest. I stopped, and

translating as best as I could with my limited Spanish, learned they died when their plane slammed into the hillside from an obscuring cloudbank. One or two may have survived for a day or so, watching the grey apparitions dance and vanish across the world as I did years later. The clouds entertained them as they slipped in and out of consciousness until, finally, they all dropped into darkness. I wonder what they saw, balanced on the rim of two worlds. Did they, like me see the things of this world, their loved ones, food, the Market in San Jose, the fishing boats of Limon? Or did they, like the conquering Spaniards, see Saints and angels? And thinking about these dying men drives me back to Pablo Neruda, who wrote so beautifully of the deaths of these men by writing about all death:

*There are cemeteries that are lonely,  
graves full of bones that do not make a sound,  
the heart moving through a tunnel,  
in it darkness, darkness, darkness  
like a shipwreck we die going into ourselves,  
as though we were drowning inside our hearts,  
as though we lived falling out of the skin into the soul.*

(Trans. Robert Bly)

Can life be much different than death at those perfect moments—falling out of the skin into to the soul? That line, that boundary between worlds when pain gives rise to something beyond us, something so large that we have a word for it but we have no specific thing, no object, a signifier without a signified. This word soul. A word whose meanings are so many and diverse we cannot know exactly what of which we speak. Soul is both a specific quantity and an amorphous place. To enter in communion with this place is to be opened to the world.

I believe all my visions are, finally, from this word soul, wherever and whatever it may be, from this place where pain slips into pleasure, where the scouring of flesh with thorns and the salt-blood becomes rapture, where arias arise from malaria's fever. This is the place where the body scours the spirit, where enjambed with the world the self is scraped raw and bare and suddenly you know there is a place where leukemia blends into hallelujah and the body sings out the long song of its own pain.

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## Coast to a Stall

FOUR MONTHS ago when Charla was still at home, she opened her window because the halved moon was bronze-cruised, and Tony, the bricklayer next door, stood by his upstairs window. She heard him talk on the phone and watched his shadow. "My biggest problem is my wife," he said. "She asks for money all the time, and I want to know exactly what she is doing with it." Then his shadow turned into a huge comma.

When Charla could no longer see the moon, she shut the window, covered Sebastian's son, Karl, asleep in his room, and unbraided her hair. She heard Sebastian's car, hurried to bed and pretended to sleep.

Sebastian climbed into bed and kissed the back of her neck. He still felt lucky after four years of marriage. They had met at the WrongWay Bar where Sebastian played in a sober country band. Charla's shoes tapped a beat when she walked and her jewelry shined in the soft light. The snipsnap tapping of her shoes made his heart rap. When she leaned over in that V-neck dress the color of lava, her breasts were huge. Her curly bleached hair in tangles was lovely. During the break he sat beside her at the bar. She jerked her head back, then glimpsed into her gin. She smelled like honeysuckle. "Can you read a map?" he asked.

"Map-readers get stuck in the back seat," she growled. Charla sipped her gin and covered the glass with the palm of her hand. "I get carsick there."

She doesn't like me, Sebastian thought, and was just about to get up.

"Why don't you take off your hat?" Charla flapped back her hair. That movement made his arm chill.

"When I wear my hat I become a man that can't fail."

Charla looked at him square on. "I like superstitious men."

They left the WrongWay Bar and she got herself into his nerves. The next morning when she left his apartment she kissed his window with her dried red lips. Two months later they were married, walked every morning to the pier, threw bread to the gulls and laughed a lot.

Charla tried not to move when Sebastian stroked her hair. She knew he wanted to apologize. With so many fights lately it was harder to make up. She peeked at Sebastian. She knew he dreaded the breakfast rush at the restaurant. He looped his tie in front of the mirror. It took him a long while to get it right. He was slow with speed and left a scented path. He wore white pants, a tucked-in checked shirt and a wide leather belt with S.A.C.

engraved on a huge silver buckle. He stubbed his toe and said, "Bury the devil." Charla watched him gather his boots and trudge out of the bedroom. His tiny buffed head looked cold.

"Karl Cutter," Sebastian said to his son, "I'm fixing to leave. Hurry up if you want to ride with me. You're going to be late for school." Karl scrambled the plastic farm animals he'd corralled inside a fence, and put them into a box.

For three days Charla hardly spoke.

On Sebastian's day off, he sat in the kitchen trying to repair the toaster. Charla felt motherly. She boiled some eggs, then lit the votive candles on the table. With her long red nails, she brushed Sebastian's cheek. "Between managing the restaurant and playing in the band, you're hardly ever home. Karl needs a father, honey. Quit that old band."

"Life is fair, right now. Everything's smooth. There's no reason to change anything." Sebastian stroked Charla's neck.

Charla cracked her egg shell and blew out the candles.

Sebastian rubbed his hat.

That evening when Sebastian came home from work with flowers under his arm, a note on the table said: "Meet me and Karl at Auzinne's at six and dress well. Love Charla. P.S. Without the hat."

Charla was waiting in her tight, hot-lava dress.

"Take off the hat. We aren't TV characters."

"I want to keep it on," Sebastian said.

"Isn't that your ex-wife over there?"

Sebastian twisted around. "That's Edna."

"Why don't you ever talk about her? We never talk about the past."

"Charla honey, no one wants to talk about failures." He looked down at his hat. He'd absent-mindedly taken it off and slid it on the table.

His face flushed flat-pink, Charla noticed, and the pupils in his eyes looked like division signs. "What is it?" said Charla. "What's the matter?"

Sebastian grabbed his hat, left Charla and Karl sitting at the table and walked out into the cool gray night.

In Jerbelou Park, where Sebastian walked, the air smelled like sugarcane. He was wet from the night dew. He remembered how six years ago bad luck had sucked him dry. He was working in construction and a crane fell on his foot. He had a hairline fracture is all, but Dr. Bragg told him there was a bundle branch block in his heart—bad circulation—and he needed to quit drinking. Sebastian's mother had always said that he could pick out all the alcohol ads in magazines when he was six years old, so that was going to be hard medicine. Then Edna walked out and left Karl, three years old at the time, and when Sebastian's foot was mended enough to stand on, there was simply no work. It took two hungry weeks before he got a job in a diner dive, but by that time he was one edgy nerve. Just when things seemed to be working out, the drop happened and the clowns won again.

That work lasted almost a week. Several odd jobs later, after Edna divorced him, saddled with Karl, still drinking, he sat on a bench in Jerbelou Park watching turtles eat flies. An old lady in a bee-hive wig walked by. The hat on her hair sailed off and landed at Sebastian's feet. She retrieved her hat, was about to turn, but stalled. She gave Sebastian the hat, a black felt thing, and told him it would bring him good luck. He laughed down at his arm, but took the hat. He was desperate and tired of hearing himself sigh. He put it on, got the very next job he interviewed for, quit drinking, started playing in a weekend band, and quit sighing.

When Sebastian got home, Charla was asleep. He knew she had been crying. On the night stand, tissues were all wadded into rainbow balls. He dreaded the next day and hardly slept.

The next morning Charla made coffee. As they sat at the table not talking, a bird flew into the window. They both jumped up, mashed their noses against the glass, and thought the bird had recovered. Right after they sat back down, the tiny bird lifted off from the ground and crashed into a tree.

Charla shrieked, ran outside and picked up the bird. Its neck was broken, but it wasn't quite dead. She didn't know what to do, just held it. Finally, she looked in the neighbor's yard where a Saint Bernard's friendly tongue was hanging out of his mouth. He was drooling pools. Charla put the bird over the fence and turned quickly away so as not to see the end. When she came back inside, Sebastian had breakfast on the table and had even warmed syrup for the pancakes. Charla wished he had never taken off that hat.

It was a downslide the rest of the day. Sebastian hit every red light on his way to work and the sole separated on his favorite pair of boots. At the restaurant, the employees, who Sebastian thought didn't like him, asked where his hat was. On the way home, he saw a big black dog dead in the road. It was raining and his sock was wet.

When Sebastian opened the door, Charla grabbed her raincoat to go shop for groceries. Sebastian decided to go along. It was very windy and the sky was getting darker, lightning flashing in the distance. At the store, Charla wheeled the cart around. Sebastian trailed. When they were done, Sebastian went to get the car. Outside, the wind and rain beat stronger, lightning constant.

At the check-out with seven brown bags, Charla watched a tornado blow the sign off a roof. The sign hit Sebastian and his Nova. He fell to the pavement. Charla screeched, and thought, Am I going to have to walk these groceries home?

Sebastian stood. The car, its hood dented, started. She wanted to drive him to the hospital but he wouldn't go. Charla buckled Sebastian in. His bloody face looked up.

It was hard to see. Charla was trying to stay in the lane. Occasionally she glanced at Sebastian, his forehead a bloody blur. He was staring out

smiling, like he was liking everything—the billboards, the lights, the blackened space between, particularly the moving straight-on, with a different rhythm happening when the roadtop changed.

Almost home, Charla felt a touch like a baby's tap. She looked at Sebastian's eyes. His pupils looked huge like a demon's. When they got home, he locked himself in the bathroom and washed off the blood.



CHARLA SAT at the kitchen window cradling her chin in her hands, watching the lacy sky. Across the street, a friendly oak arched its branches into tangles. Charla watched Karl run under them to the old railway car stranded in the middle of the lot. The train was dotted with popped balloons. She waved at Karl, framed in the train's window.

That night Charla dreamt the same dream twice. Double dreams mean hard luck, she thought, and couldn't get back to sleep. It was a frustration dream. To fixate on one kind of dream is bad. You're supposed to reconcile in dreams. If anything's left unfinished you're a candidate for nightmares.

Charla got out of bed. As she tip-toed to the living room she heard the breaths in the house coming out of the hallway's opened doors and the tap of the rain on the soggy ground outside. Everything around her seemed to be rattling. Everything wanting to scoop her away.

The next morning when Charla heard Sebastian's car drive away, she untangled her legs from the covers. As she packed, she looked at Sebastian's favorite photograph, an old Army pose of his father that hung under a U.S. flag nailed to the wall. She latched the last suitcase, faced the flag, put her right hand on her heart, and said goodbye.



CHARLA LIVED in a nice apartment on Apalachee Bay that was pretty cheap because it was off-season. She'd been lucky. She had a job, and a dog, and had even managed to buy herself another car. But she missed them. She felt restless and sad and wanted to go back.

SEBASTIAN FELT edgy sitting in the cramped space of his apartment. Karl, out of school again, shut off the TV and turned on the radio. He bobbed his head and tapped both feet on the floor. Then he got up and danced like a hurricane. Karl got that from Charla, Sebastian thought. "Let's get out of here," he said. "Fishing. Anywhere."

With two poles in the back of the Nova, they drove twenty miles to Deckle Beach, waded out and cast their lines. After two hours they caught a blowfish and a milk carton. Every time Karl squatted to bait the line, he faked a smile. Sebastian stabbed his pole in the sand. "Let's take a walk, son."

They were quiet as they strolled. Down a way was a yellow plastic bucket. Inside was dead bait. Sebastian slung it into the waves. They walked on in silence. They built a sand castle and Karl scraped APPLE next to the mound. Apple had been the first word he had learned to spell.

"They want to take you away from me," Sebastian said.

Karl looked at his father, got up and took giant leaps into the water. He swam fast, in circles. Then he ran out of the water and sunned himself like a lazy snake. His hair looked like brown sugar in the sunshine. "Can I wear the hat, Dad?" he asked. Sebastian was asleep. Karl fell asleep, too.

An hour later as they walked to get their poles, a huge son-of-a-bitch came out of nowhere and shoved Sebastian hard. The man was shirtless, his chest heaved in and out, in and out, his knobby fingers fastened to a red flashlight.

"You fuckin' threw my bait out, you son-of-a-bitch, and I saw you."

His voice was a pistol, a clean, even shot through Sebastian's ear. The man bunched his fingers into a huge fist. Sebastian jabbed his toes into the sand and tried to explain, but there was no explaining. Sebastian could not look into the man's eyes. He blinked rapidly and could not focus. The man thought Sebastian was lying. He knocked Sebastian out.

When Sebastian came to, Karl was crying, his eyes shiny wet beads. In a fetal curl, Sebastian said, "Get me movin'. Get me movin'."

"I can't, Dad. I can't."

As Karl wiped the blood from his father's lip, a skinny woman walked by, real slow. She was the kind of person who would call the police, Karl thought. He managed to help his father stand. Guiding Sebastian to the car, Karl thought of the poles. He would have to leave them behind.

The road back was wavy. Sebastian thought, because of the heat.

WHILE SEBASTIAN and Karl fished, Charla had come with a bunch of yellow gladioli. She arranged the stems in a big metal bucket, and set them in the middle of the floor. They frayed out so pretty. She saw Sebastian's hat tilted on the mantle, shook her head. The tiny place was in shambles and smelled of old food. She looked out the window and watched a woman shove a note beneath her windshield wiper.

Charla ran out. She read the note under the blade: "You're parked all wrong. Move it, or get towed!" Charla wadded the paper and threw it in the air. She opened the Buick door. Slid in. Twisted the key. She hadn't had any trouble with it before. She pumped the gas. She couldn't push it, being only 124 pounds.

Charla climbed the stairs back up to the apartment, dialed a mechanic. The phone was dead. She figured it had been disconnected. She looked at that black hat, ran back down stairs, tripping over the last two. Her knee would be bruised in an hour. "I'm getting out of here," she said out loud.

Charla's Buick started right up. Highway 98 cut through pastures where she watched brown cows run across green. The sky was the color of a peeled banana, and the moon, just beginning to show, dangled eye level.

SEBASTIAN and Karl didn't talk during the long ride home. Sebastian stared straight ahead, the roof of his mouth felt like rawhide. Occasionally he looked at Karl, who stared out the window.

When they arrived home, Karl ran over to the gladioli, touched them gently, then flew around the room like a sparrow. Sebastian knelt in front of the flowers.

"She's not here," said Karl.

Sebastian said, "I'll be right back."

"She was here," yelled the woman from across the street. "She's gone. In a burgundy Buick."

Sebastian and Karl stared out the window waiting for a burgundy rush.



CHARLA SLEPT on daisy sheets with her dog, Druid, guarding her feet, while Sebastian sat on his bed where Karl curled, crying. Sebastian's head hurt. The room smelled like burnt weeds. He had an interview tomorrow at the pawn shop and knew he should sleep, but he had mad teeth and big sweats and his tongue felt swollen, making it hard for him to swallow. He looked at his son sleeping, gently touched the dimple on Karl's chin, whispered, "My sugar bowl," and went for a drive.

CHARLA PARTED the curtains and looked outside. It was nearly dark, but still light enough to see a motor boat skid across the choppy bay. The clouds were smoky yellow against cobalt and the distant rounded waves were murky-green. Druid lapped tepid water from his bowl, lay by her feet, and watched her cry.

Downtown, Sebastian's car coasted to a stall. He sat there a long time, hypnotized by neon until he was interrupted by *honk*. I'll get that job tomorrow, he thought, getting out of his Nova. The clowns aren't looking now.

Traffic was stopped. Sebastian buried his hands in his trouser pockets, looked back at his car, headlights still on, and felt a gush of blood in his head. A gush of good luck, he thought. His knees wobbled as he looked up at the stars' precision.

Cars *honk honk honk* at a Nova with no one in it.

## It Is Enough for Now

On the table where I pick through a toothy smiling fish, I put aside my map marked for textiles south to Flores. A slip of paper calls me with stories of fortress promenades and Hemingway's haunt in old Havana, sliced mango, whole strawberries, sweet bursting on the tongue. I dream instead up Puuc Hills, on the road, Uxmal ahead, reach the doormouth of a raingod's hooknosed mask, scale the pyramid of an egg-hatched dwarf until the sun sets down and bush groans low and loud behind my back.

I hitch a ride to Merida, in the wrong direction, rumble on until the virgin icon flashes, illuminates diesel smoke at the dash. We break down. I think I should have ridden the train into Guatemala, should have taken the restaurant tour of Cuba.

Later at the hotel, I will panic the air, banter about buses, boycotts, seizing public transportation. When I get home, I will hear Guatemalans are still afraid to claim their dead from civil road patrols, hear Cubans float out on death rafts, hope cast to the wind on the straits, that they take hostages in Alabama to escape deportation.

For now, people rise up only to stand and stretch in the aisle, watch the driver tinker with hammer and wrench. No one gets off. No one asks questions. For now, it is enough for me to get lost beneath remaining light in a book of poems about living somewhere else, explosives and identities hiding under layers of everyday life. It is enough for now to watch, to believe: something must come of all this.

## Sanctuary

*A Memoir*

ONE AUGUST night singing I looked in the crowd and saw Maynard. He marched right on the stage and hugged Jon around his guitar, shook Brian's hand right at the bridge of his fretless Fender bass, sat and hugged me at the piano, stopping the song. "We're gonna take a little break," I said in the mike.

After some reminiscing (a rock band in a farmhouse: snow drifts in the living room, melted t.v. beside the wood furnace, the mice in the toaster, the police on the lawn), our wry friend invited us on a Cape Pogue Cruise. Something to do with a Boston Whaler, something to do with Chappaquiddick and a bird sanctuary.

On the appointed day and probably late, Jon and Brian and I handed Maynard our bag of sandwiches, our ragged towels, our two-dollar cooler filled with beer and ice. We laughed and shouted, climbing down off the Edgartown Yacht Club docks, wearing tattered shorts and flip-flops, joking. Maynard Burroughs was more the Edgartown type: tennis whites, trimmed hair, boat shoes, cloth belt decorated with pink ducks. And off we went through the natural marina of Katama Bay, off past the real yachts (some of which had Whalers the size of ours as on-board dinghys), off through the busy channel and into Edgartown Harbor, dodging kids in Jay-boats and Lasers and sailboards and Sunfish, our exit timed perfectly by our captain so we wouldn't interfere with the chunky and unmanoeuvrable little ferries to Chappaquiddick.

In the outer harbor the water was rough in a stiff breeze, deeply blue, reflecting the bright sky. Sailing weather. Maynard kept close to shore, putt-putt-putting along, following the high bluff of Chappaquiddick's north shore (upon which were perched some remarkable houses, Frank Lloyd Wright houses, as Maynard claimed, Mies Van der Rohe houses, houses from outer space, houses made of glass bricks stuffed with thousand-dollar bills, houses filled with women, with romance, with every seed of happiness, with sunshine and beatitude, with the very redolence of heaven).

The spray salted our faces. Maynard watched the bluff closely, looking for Cape Pogue Gut, the inlet to Cape Pogue Bay, insisting the gut existed, though the shore to us appeared an unbroken, curving chain of dunes. Brian soberly let it be known that inlets can disappear from year to year. He was from the eastern end of Long Island, and ought to know. Even as he spoke we all saw a boat appear mysteriously, as if out of the beach itself.

"There we are," Maynard said. Something different about him. He wasn't the fuck-up we remembered, but seemed capable and confident. Where was the bong? The loopy smile? The big bag of pills, the sheets of L.S.D? He worked for Dow now, the napalm company for fuck's sake, which he was able to talk about without sounding sorry.

The tide was dropping, so the current in the wide gut when we got there was strongly against us, a deep river carrying seaweed and sand and gull feathers and baitfish and tumbling shells in its strong brackish current, carrying all of it away, out to sea.

Cape Pogue Bay itself was like a big lake, calmer on the bright day than the outer harbor had been. A single other boat piloted by three handsome men towed two pretty women—at once—water skiing. Maynard had a rope, but his fifteen-horsepower Mercury was no skiing motor. We had to be content to strip out of our clothes and be towed on our backs, one at a time. (The plume of water formed by your head made a bubble to breathe in, an active window to the sky. Your arms gave out quickly.) "Trolling for sharks," Brian called it. After the other boat zoomed into the gut trailing young women, we were preternaturally alone.

We explored Drunkard's Cove (a shallow place, filled with grasses, where we floated and drank our beer in innocence), then Shear Pen pond (which I've seen labeled Shear Pin Pond on a couple of maps—a boater's mistake, probably, a glitch of oral transmission, a shear-pin being a protective device for boat propellers, Shear Pen Pond a corral shape, named by farmers before there were motors and while there were still more sheep than people on Chappaquiddick; some of the people still called the island Tchepiaquidenet, the separated land).

Heading south, Maynard found the way around John Oliver's Point, which dove underwater forming a sandbar that split the bay visibly because of a long line of herring gulls who stood on it squawking and chortling. Amongst the gulls were some twenty cormorants like old vampires in capes, holding their wings open in the breeze, drying them. There were no other boats, not another person in sight, and only the roof of one house anywhere in view.

"Gentlemen," Maynard said, "let's go exploring," and though it was clear he'd been here before, it was easy to think we were the first people ever to see this quiet place. Gulls and terns in the sky. Two egrets—pure white—plugged into the tall grasses and reeds of the salt marsh that made the shore.

We looked out for rocks and snags and sandbars, Brian going so far as to hang out over the bow of the little boat. Maynard humored our helpfulness, but drove confidently to another hidden gut in a sandy beach. We entered the small inlet, fought against the current in what amounted to a river in the midst of a marshy lagoon: Muskeget Channel. No people in sight, no boats, no airplanes, no houses. A great blue heron fled at our approach, flying upcurrent just in front of us, all lazy wingspan. The channel seemed dangerously shallow.

"I think it's deep enough," Maynard said. It was his boat.

In the water I saw scallops opening their shells and closing them, jetting at great speed against the current, a revelation: I'd always thought they were

bottom sitters, silt pushers, salt squirters, like clams. Baby sand eels swam in enormous shoals, reacting as a single organism to a shell thrown amongst them. The sun beat down beneficently upon us, and upon the water. Terns in black helmets crashed into the channel just in front of us, picking baby baitfish from the current, every graceful dive a success. We saw more cormorants, and mallards and woodducks and oystercatchers. We drank beer, but did not grow boisterous; indeed, the more beer we drank the more serious we became.

At a bend in the tidal stream the Dyke Bridge came into view. From that angle it was nothing more than an ancient-looking assortment of odd planks and pilings, well weathered, blocking somewhat the view of Pocha Pond, simple: one ramp up from the Chappaquiddick side, a brief plateau, then another ramp down to Cape Pogue (which at that place is nothing more than a grassy dune, a spit of sand, a slight barrier before the great Atlantic), built by farmers who needed access to the narrow strip of pasture on the cape itself. A handful of tourists—folks who'd taken the ferry over from Edgartown and driven to see the famous bridge—stood above us, dreaming of drowned girls and watching solemnly as we approached.

The inner bridge pilings waded the channel at what looked to be less than the width of the boat, encrusted to an exact height with barnacles and small oysters and mussels. The current cut this opening diagonally at ripping speed. Maynard, the expert captain, throttling up to counteract the current, came at the bridge from an angle that seemed sideways and zipped adroitly through the slot, missing the pilings on one side by an inch, the other by two. The tourists looked down on us as on a vision.

We motored then in a deep, blue channel though the shallow pond until the bridge was out of sight, past two unfriendly clambers wading beside their floating baskets, past a half-sunken scalloping boat, past signs warning us not to disturb the birds, past two telephone poles with osprey nests on platforms atop them. We saw swans and smelled bayberry, watched a muskrat swim from a hummock of mud to his home in the reeds. We chugged along until there was no further to go, to the very end of the pond. There we beached the boat in deep sand amongst a hundred-score scallop shells and the footprints of a thousand birds. Our feet sank into the silty sand as we pulled the boat up higher. Athletic sanderlings raced away from us on foot, stopping at a safe distance to go back to their poking in the wavelets. Maynard dug, just to show us that every handful of the heavy sand yielded clams. We crossed the dunes to the ocean.

THE NEXT summer I found a place to rent a Boston Whaler just like Maynard's—maybe smaller (which seemed safer, given the shallow Muskeget Channel). Best of all, the little boat was named Cape Pogue. Fifty dollars the half day, a half day starting at noon, which was about when we started our full days in that summer.

I hatched a plan. Brian was less pessimistic about it than about most things, a good sign. Jon was all for it. We'd find dates! We'd bring a sumptuous

picnic! We'd make a Cape Pogue Cruise! We'd split the fifty dollars six ways, which wouldn't be hard to take. And no matter what, we assured Brian, we'd be back to Edgartown in time to make our gig.

As for dates, well, friends would certainly do, and if there weren't three women interested in us in that moment, then two would do, so Jon invited Liz Riley and Lindsay Barron. Liz was from outside Boston, Lindsay from Rotorua, New Zealand. Liz was a waitress at the Colonial Inn, and famous for having bonked a male customer on the head with her tray over an indecent remark. She was pretty as hell and as muscular and tough as a ranch hand. Lindsay was exceedingly delicate and polite, very pale, a willowy future medical student, traveling for a year having finished college, something of an anthropologist in our midst, never shocked or amazed by us, but always very curious.

Lindsay kept Liz out of trouble, and Liz helped Lindsay understand American things like baseball or light beer or casual sex or me. Lindsay was extremely sheltered, had not known she was pretty before Liz told her so. They were good friends, our pals, and, most important, they would pay their own shares when it came to renting a boat.

A perfect day. Breezy and mild. I'd driven motor boats before, and had put up the deposit money (\$100, cash—we weren't credit-card people), so I was captain. I pulled away from the dock at the rental place. At a distance of about fifteen feet, almost in the harbor, we seemed to stop. I gave the engine full throttle. You could feel it working, but we were definitely not moving. "The rope!" Brian cried, as the cleat on the dock broke free.

"You've broken it," Lindsay said evenly, in that full New Zealand accent.

Liz laughed as the little boat shot ahead into the harbor. My hand fell off the throttle handle, so I couldn't slow and turn in time to avoid *My Dream II*, a grand motor yacht docked at the fisherman's pier. We struck it slowly but with a great noise, leaving a nasty blue streak from our bow. Brian muttered. Liz bawled with laughter. Jon pushed us away from the yacht. In trying to reverse the engine, I stalled it. The owner of *My Dream II* appeared over its rail. He was extremely mild-mannered, dressed in Edgartown Harbor whales-and-alligators. He looked down at us dubiously and without anger, called back to someone in his cabin, "It's nothing."

Nothing indeed! I got the motor started and we continued on, past the sailors, past the ON TIME ferries, past the grand hotels and the workboats and the Chappy Beach Club, past the Edgartown Light and into the outer harbor. In order to save some time, and eschewing the prudent shoreline course Maynard had chosen, I cruised straight at where the Cape Pogue Gut should be. Soon we were in whitecaps, bucking the wind, which meant the bow slapped up and down and that water splashed over the low gunwales. Lindsay crawled shivering back and sat by me, then Jon came back. Brian crouched in front of us. But Liz, oh, Liz took her shirt off, kneeled up in the bow, catching the spray, exactly half naked, laughing, accepting no misery in the cold and wet.

We hit the tide more or less as Maynard Burroughs had hit it, rushing hard against us out of Cape Pogue Bay. The gut was lined with fisherman, not

glad to see us as we bobbed and burbled past, but profoundly interested in our figurehead. In the protection of the cape, the water was quiet again, and again we grew warm in the sun. No one else in the bay, no one else in sight, only the Cape Pogue light, red, then white, then white again. We had no rope for "trolling for sharks," but Jon stripped out of his clothes and dove in anyway, then Liz, that hoyden, then Brian. Lindsay took off her large sun hat, then her shirt, which she folded, then her long skirt, revealing a sensible one-piece bathing suit and ghostly pale thighs. She slipped into the water demurely, swam amongst the skinnydippers: anthropologist. I stripped and dove in, too. The boat proceeded to drift away at a fraction of a second under the speed of my fastest crawl.

Back in the boat, puffing, and still naked (the standard mode of dress on the Vineyard beaches we frequented), we followed Maynard Burroughs' route into the bird sanctuary. A lone cow stood in the reeds, staring. A raccoon swam away from us, interrupted in his food gathering. We pointed out the birds we knew, laughing, then turned the corner where the Dyke Bridge loomed. The current pushed the bow too far to the right. It seemed to rush harder than it had on our earlier voyage. I over-corrected, and the current shoved the bow too far to the left. I pictured Maynard's graceful captaining as we approached the bridge nearly sideways, intent on the small opening ahead of us, so intent that I didn't at first notice the tourists up on the bridge, three older couples freed from their campers.

"Act normal," Jon said, a favorite joke. Naked (except for Lindsay, who had put her long skirt back on), we swept toward the bridge, pretending the tourists weren't there. The opening between the pilings was small. The current pushed the bow back to the right, too far, too far. "Hit it!" Jon yelled, remembering Maynard's technique. So I did, I hit it, full throttle. We zipped into the opening, cleanly. Then, at top speed, we hit the second row of pilings. The two forward seats came loose. Liz flipped over the bow and into the water. Our cheap-o cooler exploded, a fountain of ice and beer cans and sandwiches in the air. Jon and Brian ended up on top of Lindsay on the floorboards. "Wrong," Brian said. I'd managed to hold on. The engine stalled. The tourists gasped above us. Further scandal! NUDE BOATERS BASH DYKE BRIDGE! I could hear their excited footsteps and commentary even as I heard Liz' echoing laugh, and saw her hand reach over the bow. "Wow!" she said. "Amazing!" "Care to go again?" Lindsay said dryly.

Brian pushed the boat off the pilings, as Liz climbed back aboard. Deeply embarrassed, I tried to pretend that it had been my intention to give the bridge a little knock all along. I managed to start the motor, and, all hands pushing against the bridge pilings and braces, we beat the current and got through. Something serious had happened to Jon's prescription sunglasses and they were cockeyed on his face. "Act normal," he said again, and we did, sitting straight amongst the dislodged seats and the bits of cooler and sandwich and floating clothes. Naked we emerged under the tourists' thrilled gazes. We could feel their eyes on our backs as we sputtered away, across the pond and out of sight, to a place where no one was.

## One Afternoon Years Later

In the sand one may almost read Odysseus, Agamemnon  
but then water erases syllables as it writes

its own strict hexameter. The afternoon light like a statue  
missing a hand, a leg, its face recalls soldiers dozing

against their spears, a young boy writing his name in the sand; while from  
the city walls, soldiers watch a phalanx march on the beach.

A sea inseparable from light holds them in place; unsaid un-  
shown, unseen. There is little to do but wait. One removes

his helmet, rubs sea-salt from his eyes. Time fashions a sunlit wall.  
Above them, out of their reach, float windows, more like kites

windows opening on something disgarded, unwrapped: remains  
thrown in a fire, while the flayed skin is lovingly tanned.

It looks like a window, the one which almost touches the gutter  
outside my study where I sit late into the day

as a screen door opens, my daughter laughs and runs into the house;  
my son behind, too late to catch the door as it shuts.

## The Last Word

The lake says, *write this*,  
and gives me bad rhymes  
and rhythms for marching,  
what a lake can muster up  
for poetry. She says *what? those rocks?*  
*Nothing, honey, worth marking down*  
*on paper.* She's agreeable  
today, unequivocal queen  
of the moment.  
*Those birds?*  
*Truly stupid, completely without*  
*imagination. I'm*  
*cold and wide and old*  
*as anything on earth.*  
*Metaphor that.*

## Staircase

to Jonathan Schell

Stay. A legible harmonic twins the harbor.  
There are, or were, choral episodes  
among the sails, and the kingfisher's plunge.  
Stay, there's a petty wind fingering the heat  
like a girl her curls, gazing out  
at the ensuing collision. A woman,  
steering into flood waters, is swept into a canyon  
in Tucson, Arizona. Had she read Empedocles?  
Had she recently wept? Light  
infected leaves, then drab, then  
heavily attired,  
the ephemera of air's  
sway, window to window, like a disembodied  
wing, its nude passage wholly unrecovered.  
In mournful arousal  
a flame cascades, as if to touch the end.  
Something waits in the pristine normal blue,  
a Saturday, or love, or a city besieged.  
The effects were known; they were the lived thing  
ardently collapsing into a distant litter:  
remote pages to be burned,  
the wake of a little green boat  
allotted to a scrim, or Paris,  
or Celan. How beautiful, how untrue!  
is what historians would say  
as the white frothy stuff swept over the bow,  
not ever acknowledged  
as if not yet counted, not yet  
found. There is the  
ferret, Luna, lost in the woodpile  
in the dog days of August. There is  
someone called Matthew, and someone called Tom,  
moving across time, as across a bright lawn, while  
a felicity steers into moonlessness, where  
one might say *it is not a matter of seeing,*  
*it is a matter of touch.* Homer, for example,  
finding his way down the staircase.

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