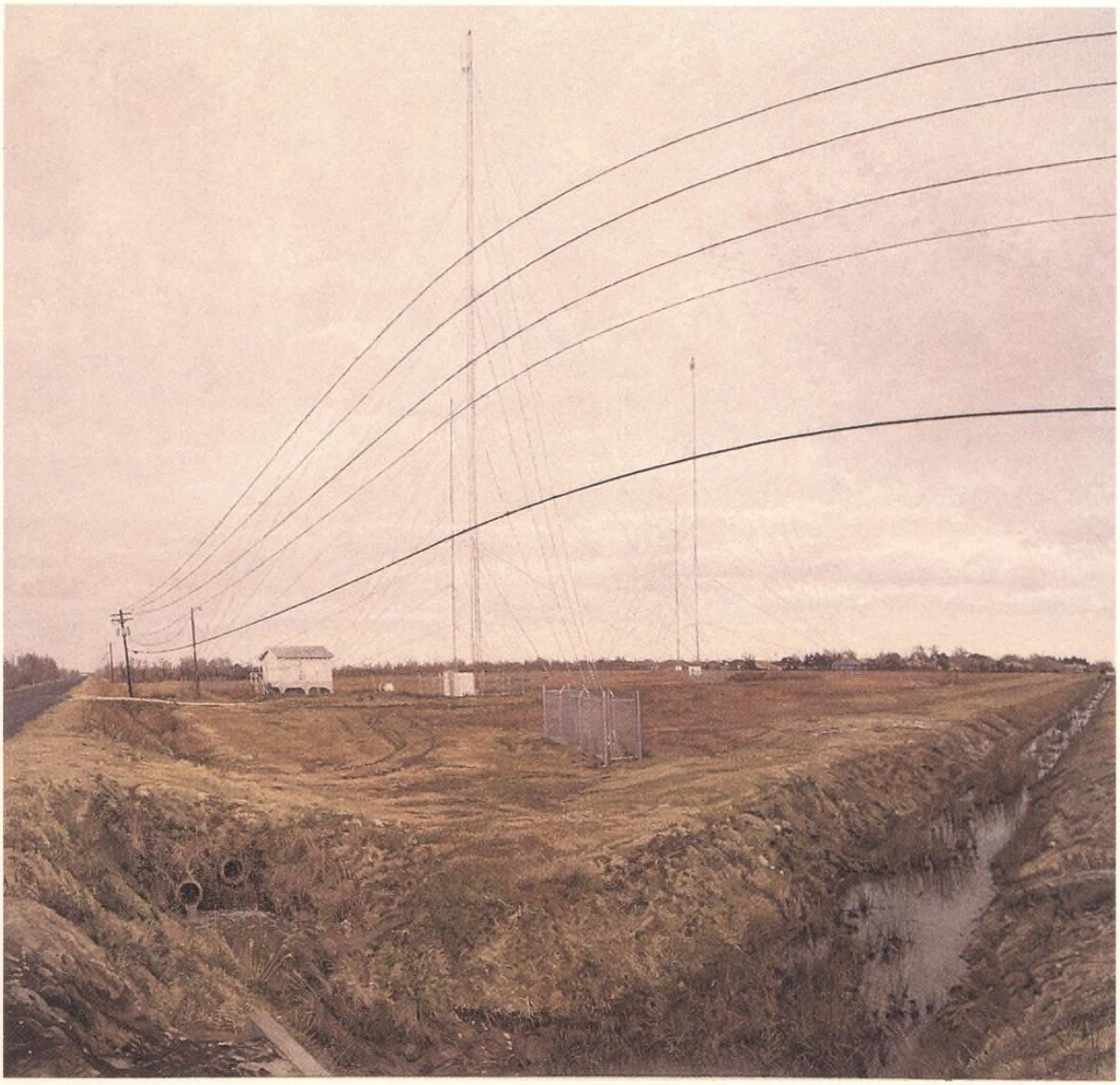
Gulf Coast



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FICTION

POETRY

NONFICTION

ART

Cover art by
Rackstraw Downes
At the Confluence of Two Ditches Bordering a Field with Four Radio Towers, Texas City
1995
Oil on Canvas, 46" x 48"
Courtesy the Artist

Practice

Miami Beach, Florida

Lux et Veritas. Light and Truth. A good motto,
along with *Levavi Oculos,* raise your eyes, look up,
lift your spirit.

There is a photo of my mother, a young woman
lying on a beach towel looking up
with such a radiant loving smile, just to recall it
I am fortified.

Take this, sweetheart, she seems to say,
and put it right in there with the big abstractions.

We do battle with truth and each other.
Something, *it,* escapes us. We love it,
but we don't get it. At least not often enough.

So it goes, we say, and then it doesn't.

Hungry, thinking these thoughts, I stop
at a fast food place on Collins.

I take my burger, fries and Coke, on a red tray,
to a table near the window to sit in the light
and watch.

The steady traffic, the changing light, the old
beach front hotels and apartment buildings,
some occupied, some abandoned.

Rooms where the honeymooners honeymooned,
where runaways and the homeless hide.

My mother told me, this used to be known,
back in the forties, as Chicago Beach
because of all the people from Chicago
who vacationed here in the winter.

I sip my Coke and imagine card games

on beach towels, baby oil on sunburned backs.

Levavi Oculos. I look up
to see the reassuring blue of the sky
and someone flings a rope
from the top of the building.

A man in green fatigues,
a pump gun strapped over his shoulder,
rappels down the face of the building,
stops abruptly next to a closed window,
unshoulders the gun, pumps a shell
into the chamber, smashes the glass
with the gun-butt, turns the barrel
into the dark room and fires and fires again.

Someone is dead or about to die, I think,
but before an image of that room
can form in the vacuum after the blasts,
the routine way he reshoulders the gun
tells me this is practice. I am watching
the S.W.A.T. team practice.

He drops down the rope in no great hurry.

I look up in the light.

Another man in green fatigues
steps off the roof, rappels down the rope,
fires two blasts into the room and so on.

Lux et Veritas *Levavi Oculos*

The Rose

Fix an orgasm so it stays?

I don't know. It would probably kill you.

How do you represent one to a world dying for one,
a world that won't admit such a thing exists?

You build a frame, a strong frame. You get some plaster, some rags.
You imagine a rose opening that goes on opening,
but the petals don't fall, the petals disappear, leaving strong
bright lines radiating through layers and layers of time
outward from and inward to a definite center.

Jay De Feo wanted to make something that "had a center to it."
She worked on it every day in her apartment for eight years.

It was eleven feet high and weighed 2,300 lbs.
when she was evicted and had to stop her work.

They had to get a crane and a crew of strong men
to remove it from the upstairs apartment.
Bruce Conner made a movie of the event, and in it
Jay De Feo looks sad. *Up you go little smoke.*
Dear Landlord, Go to Hell.

Where is the brave and beautiful Jay De Feo now?
They say the paint she worked with killed her. I don't know.

Jay De Feo made *Doctor Jazz, Applaud The Black Fact, Deathwish,*
and then she made *The Rose.*

*

What is the right music for this?

Slow blues, smoky jazz, mourning dove in dusk?

Dust and dirt will do, will do as they have always done –
hold us up, cover us, muddy the water, soften the light.

Through the dust I see a sunflower and a woman walking away.
Light steps in fine dirt, raked and smoothed, soft

to cushion the fall of figs in the orchard, gone orchard
of the San Joaquin.

Naked in late afternoon light, barefoot on the soft dirt,
down a row of fig trees loaded with fruit about to fall,
she walks – no way to describe those steps without stumbling.

She walks and then she runs, gone in her pleasure, her pain,
gone down a long converging row of silvery contorted bodies
in the last orchard, and each step raises a small cloud
of golden dust I lean into trying to coax another transubstantiation,

dust into water, pallor into blush, a closed unimagined space
into the rose.

Reno

You are the quirky little sister of Las Vegas
that never finished high school, with your Kurt

Cobain slot machine, where instead of apples
and oranges, different brands of pharmaceuticals

revolve frantically in a rock star's head. A pair
of valiums doubles your bet, but three shotgun shells

is the big pay-off. Reno, your pawn shops
are loaded with prosthetic limbs and wedding rings.

One night a lucky bastard cackled down your strip,
chucking twenty-five dollar chips over his collar,

then dumped the whole six thousand into the river
just to watch the panhandlers plunge.

When the moon's right, their femurs still glitter
like rods of gold. I could stay here forever

whispering the details of the life I left behind
to the black jack dealer who flicks me my future

one card at a time, the Jack and Gingers piling up
into a glass chimney, as the losers are hauled out

on gurneys, howling for one last chance. Lady Luck
could turn into a hag with a wishbone wrench,

prying my smile off one membrane at a time,
and I'd wander the desert at dawn like a general

returning to his senses, after bombing his own people,
muttering: my God, what have I done?

ELIZABETH GOLD

Houdini's Mistress

First time I see him, he writhes
in chains. I like a man
dapper in a straitjacket, who knows
how to get out of a locked box.
Now he takes me in his arms.
Rolls me, as the old songs say,
blind crack, shade slit traveling
up the wall, trolley car ringing
stops and destinations:
This is what it's like to disappear.
The heart is a muscle.
Muscle me, Harry. Unhook
these corsets, ordinary rope,
teach me the wait under
water, how the spine can undulate
like an eel, this plummet
towards sunlight, this moment we forget
the locked box –

The Bullet

The bullet entered the house at ten-thirty. It lodged in the living room wall, where it hid for the night. Ms. Munsey was in bed with a crossword when she heard the shot; she was so startled, she drew a line straight through the puzzle.

The blast sounded like a car backfiring, but when Ms. Munsey rushed to the window and found the street was empty, she feared that a door had been smashed downstairs and that someone had broken into her home. She returned to her bed and stared at the doorway. When enough silence had passed, she left her room and crept down the hall. A stair creaked beneath her. She ran into the kitchen, grabbed a knife and, for an hour, she sat and listened.

She slept fitfully, with the lights on. But in the morning, she forgot about the noise. She made breakfast, read the paper, and was on her way out the door when she looked to her left and saw the plaster on the piano. She walked into the living room and noticed a tiny hole in the wall. Her finger pushed straight through it. She called the police, and when a man answered, she said, "I think I've been shot at."

The officer arrived and looked at the bullet hole. He wrote some notes in his pad.

"If it had been a hollow-point," he said, "it probably wouldn't have passed through the wall. But this was a high-velocity round. Should be here somewhere."

Ms. Munsey watched him search the room.

"There," he said, spotting the bullet – a small stud embedded in the wall, across from the piano.

The officer walked out to his car and grabbed a keyhole saw and a pointer. He cut around the bullet and placed the chunk of drywall into a baggie.

Ms. Munsey stared at the baggie and at the hole in her wall.

The officer stepped to the window and parted the curtain. "Who lives there?"

"You think it's the neighbors?"

Outside, the officer removed a ladder from the garage and propped it against the house. Ms. Munsey watched him climb up and slip the pointer through the bullet hole. He faced the street. "Well, it's not the neighbors. It came from the corner."

Ms. Munsey and the officer walked down to the corner. The officer searched the grounds for casings. He spotted a street sign with a large eye in its center, the words *Neighborhood Watch* written below. He turned to Ms. Munsey's house.

"You want to know what I think? I think a bunch of kids were driving down this street, drunk, on a Saturday night, and one of them saw this sign, and he saw how much it looked like a bull's-eye, so he took a shot at it. Target practice. But he missed. Aimed too high, and it went right over the sign, straight into your living room."

"How do you know?"

"I don't. But that bullet hole says it came from this corner."

He stepped into the street.

"I don't understand," she said. "If they were driving, and he saw the sign, wouldn't they be past it before he could shoot?"

"Maybe that's why he missed. Maybe he'd seen the sign before, so he knew it was coming up. Already had his gun out." The officer bent down and lifted the casing. "Here we go."

Ms. Munsey watched him drop it into a baggie.

"A drive-by," she said. "In *this* neighborhood."

The officer shrugged. "Used to be baseball bats and mailboxes. Now they got guns."

"You better get somebody to take that sign down."

They walked up the street. The officer returned the ladder to the garage. Ms. Munsey thanked him and went inside. She swept the plaster off the piano top and walked upstairs to finish her puzzle.

That night, the bullet entered the house at eleven. It sailed through the kitchen and stuck in the freezer door. Ms. Munsey was asleep when she heard the shot. She ran downstairs to the living room and found nothing. She walked into the kitchen to grab a knife and noticed the plaster on the counter.

The officer arrived. Ms. Munsey handed him a baggie with the bullet inside.

"You really should let us do that," he said.

"It popped right out with a dinner knife."

The officer walked outside, grabbed the ladder from the garage, and carried it around back. He slipped the pointer through the hole.

"It came from there," he said, facing the yard and clicking on his flashlight. He stepped down from the ladder. "Who lives in that house?"

"No one. It's been vacant for six months."

"Wait here," he said.

Ms. Munsey watched him walk across the yard and disappear. She waited. She glanced up at the bullet hole and down at the pointer on the ground. She climbed the ladder and slipped the pointer through the hole. When she turned, she saw the officer crossing the yard.

"Found it near the front door," he said, showing her the casing. He removed his pad. "They moved out six months ago?"

"Yes."

"Who were they?"

"Ted and Joanne. Becker."

"Where'd they go?"

"Jersey."

"And you haven't seen them since?"

"No."

"Ever have any problems with them?"

"No."

The officer wrote in his pad.

"Why do you think it's them?"

"I'm not saying I do."

"I guess it wasn't a drive-by."

The officer stopped writing. "I guess it wasn't."

The next day, the bullet entered the house at three-thirty in the afternoon. It sank into the wall, above the couch, in the den. Ms. Munsey was outside tending her garden when she heard the shot.

The officer walked up the ladder and surveyed the hole. He faced the driveway and pointed. "If we follow a straight line out this way, we'll probably find our casing."

"I don't care about the casing."

"I know, I know. But we can only go with what we got."

"Yesterday he was in back of my house, today he's in front."

"According to the trajectory of the bullet. . ."

"I don't care about the trajectory."

"I understand, Ms. Munsey. But trajectory is key. Wait here."

The officer hooked down one side of the U-shaped driveway; Ms. Munsey hooked down the other and picked up her mail. On the way back, she spotted the casing. "It's over here," she said.

"What is?" the officer said.

"The casing."

"No, it can't be."

"It's right here, by my feet."

"But it should be over here."

"I don't care."

The officer walked over and shook his head. He ran back to the ladder and looked at the bullet hole. "No, no, no. It should be there."

Ms. Munsey walked up the front steps and opened the door. "Please return my ladder to the garage."

"He must have thrown the casing. He fired the bullet, picked up the casing, and threw it to the other side." The officer removed his pad, and wrote.

"Why?"

"I don't know, Ms. Munsey."

"Aren't you going to take that casing?"

"Yes. Of course I am." The officer stopped writing. "It just shouldn't be over there."

The next day, the bullet entered the house at four in the afternoon. It struck the chandelier, bit the edge of the dining room table, and dug into the floor. Ms. Munsey was in the kitchen, eating, when she heard the shot. She drove to the supply store and bought a pointer. Then she drove to the gunshop. When she returned, the officer was at the side of her house, on the ladder.

"How did you get up there?" she said.

"This is very serious."

"How did you know about the bullet?"

"Ms. Munsey, this is very serious."

"Did you break into my house?"

"You left the garage door open." He stared at the treetops. "Ms. Munsey, we have a problem."

"What?"

"Well, this bullet came at a severe downward angle. Too severe. Higher than that rooftop. Higher than any of those trees."

"Let me see that."

The officer stepped down from the ladder. Ms. Munsey climbed up, slipped her pointer through the bullet hole, and looked at the trees behind her. "Yes, I see what you mean." She stepped down.

"Ms. Munsey, it's as if he'd been flying a hang glider, or a balloon, when he took the shot. Bird's-eye, you know?" The officer looked at his pad. He showed her the blank page. "If I can't get a trajectory, it makes it very difficult."

"I don't care. I'm going inside."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Munsey. This guy's a real crafty one. It'll make it all the more satisfying, when we nab him."

"Goodbye."

"I don't think you should stay in there. I think you should move out for a while. I have to be honest with you – we're really not close to solving this thing." He pointed to the treetops.

Ms. Munsey walked up the driveway.

"In a normal investigation, we'd analyze the bullet, check its markings, its grooves. Then we'd hope to find the weapon, and test-fire a bullet, in a safe-retrieval area, in a big water tank, actually, because the water won't damage the bullet, and then we'd compare this bullet with the suspect-bullet, and if they lined up, well, then we'd know that the markings in the bullet matched the markings in the barrel, and then – then you'd start building a case. It's important for you to understand how thorough. . . . This is highly irregular, Ms. Munsey."

The next day, the bullet entered the house at two in the afternoon. It pierced the frame of the dormer window, shattered the bathroom faucet, chipped the sink, and fell to the floor. Ms. Munsey was in the dining room when she heard the shot. She watched the officer move the ladder. She walked into the den. She turned on the television, so she wouldn't hear him on the roof.

When the doorbell rang, she answered it.

"Ms. Munsey," the officer said. "Ms. Munsey. . ."

"What?"

"Ms. Munsey. In a normal investigation, we'd analyze the bullet, check its markings, its grooves. Then we'd hope to find the weapon, and test-fire a bullet, in a safe-retrieval area. . ."

"You've already told me this."

"Fine. Okay."

"Just leave."

"I will. I will. At some point, though, we need to consider who might have a vendetta against you."

"Nobody."

"Now, we know a few things. The first bullet tells us that he owns a car, or knows someone who owns one; the second bullet tells us that he's poaching around your neighbor's house; the third bullet establishes a second gunman; the fourth bullet, as I've said, shows that we're dealing with an individual with some hang gliding or balloon experience; and the fifth bullet tells us nothing, so we'll just pretend it didn't happen. So you see, Ms. Munsey, we're beginning to build a profile on this guy – although I think it's important to keep an open mind, as far as gender goes."

The next day, the bullet entered the house at two-thirty in the afternoon. It ripped through the basement floor and bore into the ceiling. Ms. Munsey answered the doorbell and let the officer in.

"Where is it?" he said.

"Downstairs."

"Wait here," he said.

"No."

They walked down to the basement. The officer stared at the floor and the ceiling. "Is this house built on stanchions?"

"No."

"Well, I'll need to get into your root cellar."

"I don't have a root cellar."

"I'm just trying to solve this case, Ms. Munsey. How about a storm cellar?"

"No."

"Wine cellar?"

"No."

"A crawlspace, of any kind?"

"No."

"Bomb shelter?"

"Please."

"Well, what the hell's under here?"

"Dirt."

"Wrong, Ms. Munsey. Not dirt. The gunman. The gunman is under here. If you knew anything about the trajectory of the bullet, you'd know that. Now, I think we should seriously consider digging up your front yard, and your backyard. The sides, too. Because this guy has obviously tunneled in from somewhere. We dig down there right now and I bet you we nab him."

"You're not digging up my property."

"Dammit, Ms. Munsey, he's getting away! He's laughing at us!" The officer grabbed his pistol and fired three rounds through the floor.

"Get out," she said.

The officer re-holstered his gun. He tried to write in his pad, but his hands were too shaky. "I'm sorry, Ms. Munsey." He walked upstairs. "I'll be outside."

The next day, the bullet entered the house at three in the afternoon. Ms. Munsey grabbed her gun, found the bullet hole in the living room, and fired straight through it.

She answered the door.

"Drop the gun, Ms. Munsey," the officer said, his pistol drawn.

Ms. Munsey dropped the gun.

"Ms. Munsey, I just traced the trajectory of that last bullet. It's lodged in the tree out there. It came from inside the house – and you're the only one in here. I'm afraid you're the gunman, Ms. Munsey. You're the one we've been looking for."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"I fired the second bullet. Didn't you hear two bullets?"

"I just want to solve this case, Ms. Munsey."

"But didn't you hear two bullets?"

"Yes."

"Well, the first one came through the living room. From outside. And I shot back."

"Why?"

"To catch him, right where he's standing. That's what you did."

"That's different, Ms. Munsey. I shot through the floor. But I see your point. Okay. Yeah. Just this once. But I think I should take the gun." The officer picked up the gun. "It's a shame it wasn't you, Ms. Munsey. I've got the bullet, the gun – open-and-shut case." He walked down the steps. "The living room, huh? Just like the first one. You think that means anything?"

"No."

"Okay. Okay." He looked at his pad. "I should probably write it down, though. Damn, Ms. Munsey, lucky I wasn't out here."

"Where were you?"

"I was in your backyard, poking around. With a shovel."

"I told you not to dig up my property."

"I know, I know. I just wanted to check a few spots. I figure, if he didn't tunnel in, maybe I'd find the place where he shimmied under. Don't worry, I'll stop. He's obviously not down there anymore. Anyway, I'll be outside."

The next night, the bullet entered the house at six-thirty. It flew through the front hallway and burrowed into the bureau. Ms. Munsey was watching television, when she heard the shot. She waited for the doorbell, but heard nothing. She walked into the hallway, withdrew the bullet, and went outside. She found the officer sitting on the steps. She sat down beside him and offered him the baggie.

"No, Ms. Munsey, I don't think I want that. Far from it. If there's one thing I don't want, it's evidence. If this were a normal case – yes, by all means, I'd take that bullet."

Ms. Munsey placed the baggie between them.

"You see, Ms. Munsey, I've been sitting out here the whole time. And

when that bullet came through the door – a few feet above my head, by the way – well, I looked up, and I should have seen the gunman. Because the trajectory of the bullet – you see, there should have been someone, Ms. Munsey. Right there. In the street. But it was empty. I was the only one out here. You probably think it was me."

"No, I don't."

"Thank you, Ms. Munsey. I appreciate that. And you're right – it's not." The officer looked at the baggie. "You know that game – twenty questions? Animal, vegetable, mineral. You ever play that?"

"Yes."

"Well, in a way, that's what this case has been about. Except, I've been playing it all wrong. The way I've been doing it – you start off, you say, 'is it an animal?' And they say no. And then you say, 'is it a giraffe?' And they say, 'I just told you, it's not an animal.' And you say, 'Fine, fine. Is it an elephant?' You see what I'm saying? Because all the facts scream, 'Animal! Animal! Animal!' And it's never been anything else. So even if you say, 'Fine, Fine. Is it a vegetable?' and they say yes, you're next question is still gonna be, 'Is it a pig?' Because all the evidence, all your training, points you in that direction. I wasn't trained for this case, Ms. Munsey."

He lifted the baggie.

"But I've been trying to learn on the job. The whole time, I've been writing down theories. At first, I thought it was a drive-by, and then I thought, maybe you had had an affair with your neighbor, Ted Becker, and his wife Joanne wanted to get even with you. I didn't think she wanted to kill you. If she wanted to kill you, she would have done it differently. She just wanted to scare you – that's why she fired it through your kitchen at eleven at night, because she knew you'd be in bed. But she shot from her old house, from her front door, so you'd know it was her. And then she headed back to Jersey. My third theory – well, I thought maybe you were trying to kill yourself. That you were lonely, and you had hired some guy – a marksman – to shoot you, through the wall, so it would look like an accident. And you were supposed to be somewhere in the house, at a particular time, like you had staged it – on the piano bench, for the first bullet, playing scales; or by the kitchen table, for the second, eating a sandwich; or on the couch in the den, watching TV, for the third. You had paid him and everything – but you got scared. You kept paying him – each day. And each day, you'd get scared again, and put yourself at the other end of the house. But why wouldn't you just leave – if you really didn't want to get shot? Spend your days inside a shooting gallery – crazy. Unless you didn't know what you wanted?

"And then, today I was thinking, that maybe it's the house. Maybe it's not you that's old and in pain and wants to die – maybe it's the house. And it's drawing these bullets from all different directions. But who's the gunman? Is it you, is it me, both of us – because like I said, the third bullet had a second gunman. Is it no one – just shadowboxing? No, it can't be. Because those are real bullets, and bullets come from guns, and when a gun is fired, someone's pulling the trigger. So who is it? Is it the whole neighborhood, is it society? Is that who it is? Because if it is, I'd bring the whole damn society in for questioning – but what I'm still having trouble

with is the trajectory of the bullet."

The officer pocketed the baggie.

"Why don't you come inside?" she said.

"You think I have a better chance of solving it in there?"

"No. It's getting cold, though."

"Maybe I would. Maybe that's been the problem – trying to solve this thing at arm's length. I think you're right, Ms. Munsey. Time to get in the ring. Hold on one sec."

He walked to his car, popped the trunk, and removed a bulletproof vest.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Munsey, I only have one."

"That's okay."

"When I get back to the station, I'll put in a request." He slipped his arms through the vest. "You're right, though – the only way I'm gonna figure this thing out is if I'm in there, with you. The answers are not out here." He grabbed his helmet. "You know, we should sit down with a sketch artist – get a picture of this guy. Half a dozen bullets – each one tells us something. Tomorrow, Ms. Munsey. That's what we'll do. Bring you downtown – have you flip through some binders – see if you recognize anyone." He loaded his gun.

"You don't need a gun," she said.

"You know, sometimes when I close my eyes, I can really see him – eyes, hair, complexion. Hatchet-faced? No, no. Size? On the tall side, I think. Nothing too striking, though. Figures, huh. Damn chameleon. Like I said, a real crafty one. In the front yard, in the back yard – ambidextrous son-of-a-bitch. No matter. We'll talk to a sketch artist – tell him everything we know– he'll get us there. Put us in the ballpark, at least. Then I'll sit down with the other detectives – get the think tank going, nail down a profile – education, employment, behavior."

"You don't need a gun."

"I know. You're right. Instinct, I guess. I won't shoot it, Ms. Munsey. I'm real sorry about before. The basement – I didn't mean to flare up like that. As far as damage goes, we'll pick up the tab, of course. But I need the gun. If you don't mind, I'd like to hold onto it." He put on his helmet.

Ms. Munsey and the officer walked inside.

The bullet entered the house at six-forty-five. Ms. Munsey and the officer were in the hallway when they heard the shot.

"It came from the street," he said, and he opened his pad and saw that the pages were filled. "I'm out of paper, Ms. Munsey."

"That's okay."

The officer stepped into the den, and was walking towards the curtains when Ms. Munsey stopped him.

"I should check it, shouldn't I?" he said.

"There's no one out there."

"I know. I know. Maybe this time?"

"There's no one."

The officer nodded. He scanned the room. He saw the plaster on the chair.

"Sit with me," she said.

They sat down on the couch.

"Do you have any paper?" he said.

"No."

The officer looked at his pad. "I shouldn't have written so much."

He stared at the curtains. "I should check."

He gazed at the walls.

"How can you stay here, Ms. Munsey?"

Ms. Munsey saw the bullet in the wall, above the couch. "I didn't say I was staying. I just haven't left yet."

RAVI SHANKAR

Before Sunrise, San Francisco

Bruno's by sallow candlelight,
the jacketed barkeep counting
tips from a jam jar and horseshoe
booths burnished bright;

the stained mahogany walls
and the lazy lament of Spanish
horns from speakers huddled
in the corner speak a different

language altogether, one that rolls
effortlessly off the tongue and fills
the room like myrrh, a promise sent
that four walls can indeed keep out

the world, that when horns wail
for percussion and those walls
are elegantly attired, why there
is no need to ponder the gristle

in the Mission outside, no need
to wonder why that one left you
or why you are always too
late, the weight of your existence

roughly equals the martini glass
in front of you, the thick mass
of the past collapses into a brightness
as well-lit as the dripping star

at the center of your table.
Nod. Snap your fingers. Order
another drink. Let horns grieve,
let the wristwatch think on sheep

before you leave. Tonight,
the only eyes on you are two
pimentos stuffed into olives,
bloated with vermouth and gin.

VIVIAN SHIPLEY

A Glossary of Literary Terms for My Son

Two warring needs – the need to be accepted
and the need to be revenged
David Mamet

Sunday, leaving Grand Central Station, at 125th Street
you stop, see your father running the New York City
Marathon. Keying train windows, waving handkerchiefs,
jumping out the door, his name do not interrupt the pace.

Metaphor: The train, window, marathon melt to
a statue of the father you cannot touch

Simile: as if he were a limousine driver raising
darkened glass after he drove off nineteen
years ago. Seven, you did not understand.

Motif: Twenty six, you understand. The phone call
next week, your dream each night. Dawn.
The phone call next week, the promises

Pathos: broken. You pile rhyme upon rhyme about
love, time your father withheld that keeps
you framed on his office desk as a child

Flashback: eyeing trophies awarded for the Boy Scout's
Pine Car Derby at the VFW hall. Sanding,
shellacking yellow flame decals down each
side of your red car didn't keep wheels on.
In the middle of the first heat, you cried,
blaming me, the only mother there, for not
being a father who'd know to secure axles.

Allegory: A luna moth is trapped between the patio
sliders. Pistachio wings pollen the glass like
your hands on Amtrak's window. Thinking
ornithology, a direction for your life, I point
out the luna's antennae are feathery like
fronds of a fern, not clubbed like a butterfly.

Image: A circle jewels each wing; I call the four jade
spots outlined in black and yellow eyes

of God. Like a father on earth, an idea – even
one like heaven – can never be grasped,
can never be embraced, unless it is physical.

Symbol: Trying to escape, the luna has torn one
underwing just where it narrows to a tail.
Like you, this moth is not a specimen for
a display case. No athlete, totaling one
Volvo then another, you were not perfect,
shining like the trophy from a marathon.

Cliché: Molasses fails to lure the moth from the
doors. I light a candle, blow out the flame
right before the luna can singe its wings.

Programmed like a fibrillation, the relay medal matted
with 1964's picture of your father standing right next to
the Olympic torch in Tokyo, Japan is a magnet for your
heart. Balled, your hand through a door is no metaphor.
Used over and over like a cliché, your fist is raw, has not
lost its adolescence. Fresh each day, rising like the sun,
your pain is blinding as white light off chrome bumpers.

DOUGLAS W. LAWDER JR.

Traces: Some Old Photographs Recovered

You who are free,
Rescue the dead
David Ignatow

Jacob's Model T

This Jake's got X-ed out, cartoon eyes,
his blacksmith arm hooked on the car's roof.
And who's that woman behind in a swirl
of white clothes who has smeared herself from the scene?
More raw light was let in then
through the skinny trees along the shore
so the lake further behind's
like a flat aluminum lid.
Jake's black Ford shines like a wet plum, but

On the North Shore

Too much light's been leeched from this.
Nameless, they ghost out even more
from the moment: her head's cocked
as if listening for what it was
that splashed into the lake,
but then we see in one dim corner a child's
small shape tottering with its first
ungainly gait over the lawn,
and the woman in white?
is raising her arms to her legacy, like

Sarah on Belle

Sidesaddle, frightened, trying to hold up
a string of bass and pike. Belle won't stand
for the stink. Her back's humped up
ready to buck. Jake has her snubbed down tight
by the reins and with one hand
clamps her breathing shut
where there's no bone along the nose.
Was he the one who led the mare out
over the ice, weighted,

then killed her, whose wired momenta mori bones just
last week came to light on shore? near

Benson's Ice House

A place without windows, an archive
and a heaped-up pile of sawdust that
tries to preserve through another summer
melting away what happened in the lake through the years.
It must be cool as a crypt inside,
the great monoliths of ice marbled with oxides.
Through their blue translucence
will be teeth chips, hair,
mineral traces of our lives
with rows and rows of hollow breath beads
scored like a rising run of notes or voices,
sustaining as the hope of water is
into its other state.

ALLEN GEE

An Interview With Ernest J. Gaines

Editor's Note: Ernest J. Gaines was born January 15, 1933, on Lake River Plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish near New Roads, Louisiana, the Bayonne of all his fictional works. He is the author of six novels and one collection of short stories: *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), *In My Father's House* (1978), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), *Of Love and Dust* (1967), *Catherine Carmier* (1964), and *Bloodline* (1968). *A Lesson Before Dying,* published by Alfred A. Knopf, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. It was an Oprah's Book Club selection in fall 1997. Among his many honors, Gaines has received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in recognition of his lifetime achievements, and he has also been named a Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture, a distinction reserved for only a handful of American writers. He divides his time between Miami, San Francisco and the University of Southwestern Louisiana, in Lafayette, where he is Writer-in-Residence. The following conversation took place at the Wyndam Warwick in Houston, Texas on April 10, 1998.

Gee: I read a short piece you wrote titled "A Very Big Order: Reconstructing Identity" that appeared in *The Southern Review*. You write about your beginnings, about going to the library, trying to find something there about your people when you were young, and not finding anything, exactly, reading Twain, Faulkner, Welty, and later, Steinbeck, Cather, Turgenev, and Chekhov. Who are you reading now to try and find something?

Gaines: Well, usually I'm reading manuscripts now. More manuscripts than anything else. There's always someone sending me galleys to read. Recently, I read James McPhearson's *Crabcakes*. I've just received a book by Ernest Hill, who teaches at Southern University in Baton Rouge. His first novel was *Satisfied With Nothing,* and he's just written out another novel, *A Life For A Life*. I just started that; it's in galley form now, because they would like me to make a little blurb about that. And I'm reading a collection of essays by Shawn Ofalaun, the Irish writer, on the vanishing heroes in contemporary fiction, so I only read novels now that somebody will send for me to read, for a blurb, or manuscripts that former students of mine would like me to read. I'll make some comments if the manuscript is a solid piece. That's what I'm doing now, and I'm doing a lot of travelling because we're pushing the book (*A Lesson Before Dying*) since the Oprah thing. Since my interview there with Oprah, a lot of people have gotten excited about the book again. The book was out four years before Oprah

had me on her program, and suddenly there's more excitement, and we've sold more copies in the last six months than we did in the past four years. So my wife and I have been travelling all over the country, and Vintage Press which publishes the paperback version of the novel is sending us about. So I'm not doing too much reading since I'm doing more travelling now than anything else.

Gee: You mentioned reading about heroes, and I've seen that often in your work, with *Miss Jane,* and reading through *A Lesson Before Dying.* Are you going to return to motifs again with heroes in your work?

Gaines: Oh, I really don't know. In most of my work there's a common theme, a common motif. And that is what is manliness? What really is manliness? Is it a guy who can knock a guy out with his fists, or a guy, who can – you know, the John Wayne type who can shoot a guy with a black bullet and the guy dies – you know things like this. Or is it someone who really stands up at a moment, because no matter who you are in the world, you can be the richest guy, you can be a Bill Gates, or you can be yourself, or me – there comes a moment in life when we have to say yes or no, and what do we say at that moment? And I think this is where what I consider manliness comes in. Not only what you say at that moment but what do you do at that moment. What do you do? If you saw someone out there bleeding to death right now, falling off one of those scaffolds out there and bleeding, what do you do? Do you go there? Do you try to help this guy? Or do you say, well, that guy's a different race than I am? I ought to forget it. The hell with it. So what do you do? This is the kind of thing, the kind of theme, that I suppose I will always write about because I've been writing about that since my very first novel back in the sixties. And I've been writing about rural Louisiana, rural stuff when everybody else – when you were supposed to write about urban, Northern urban cities. I was writing about rural plantation life, field life, men working with their hands, and that sort of thing in the South, and I like to write about that sort of thing.

Gee: Are you going to go back there again?

Gaines: Oh, yes. I've tried to write about other things. I've tried to write about Bohemian life in San Francisco, and I've tried to write about interracial love affairs in San Francisco. I've tried to write about my army experience on Guam. I've tried to write about all that sort of thing. But none of it has really come out. None of it has been good enough to be published. We have it in a suitcase at the library in Louisiana where I'm Writer-in-Residence. We have them in the archives there. So I don't think I'll look at it now, but after I'm dead I want students to go in there and search through it to see exactly how bad the thing was. It's really bad stuff, and I'd like for students to see that, because they think that writers write what they – what gets published. But a writer goes step by step, makes all kinds of mistakes, puts manuscripts aside, and takes on something else, and puts that aside, to get the work done. So we're saving those manuscripts where I know I failed. They'll be there for scholars, or whoever

manuscripts where I know I failed. They'll be there for scholars, or whoever would like to read through them. Not now, but when I'm dead.

Gee: Do you think your finished novels, that you consider to be more successful now, does their strength come from the impressions of your childhood, from those emotions?

Gaines: Yes. I think writers are really impressed by their early childhoods. I left Louisiana to go to California when I was fifteen years old, and I think I learned a lot about the place, and the people, and the way of living there, from those fifteen years. I worked, went into the fields when I was a very small child, when I was eight years old. I went into the swamps to pull the end of a saw to cut down wood because that's how we cooked our food and warmed the house, with wood. We didn't have gas or electrical things, so when I was about eleven years old I had to go into the swamps to do this kind of work, with my uncles. I knew about the swamps. I knew about hunting. I knew about fishing. I used to fish in the bayous, fish in the river. I picked cotton, cut sugar cane. I knew all of these things before I went to California. I learned a lot. But I think if I'd have stayed in Louisiana for another five years until I was twenty or twenty one years old, I think I could have been destroyed as so many of my contemporaries were. They no longer went further into education. They became quite bitter about their situations. Many of them ran away, went into the military, did other things, but I was fortunate my folks took me away from there. At fifteen years old, they took me to California, to be educated. I went to school in a completely integrated area. I lived in government projects, and a lot of the poorer people lived in those projects at that time, just after the war. The projects were built for people who came there to work during the war. My classmates and my playmates around the recreation center and on the playing fields were of different nationalities. Asians, Hispanics, whites, the blacks. I got a chance to get around and be with people, much – so different than the experience I had in the South, where everything was white and black. There were no other groups. Whites here, blacks there. You didn't see anybody else. You didn't see Hispanics, or Asians, or any other group. It was just white and black. So this kind of experience that I came from, I was fortunate that I went to the North when I went to the North, to see that people were different, and that they were the same in so many ways, but they were different in so many ways.

Gee: Do you think you'll ever write about that experience in a memoir or essays?

Gaines: I think I've done this many times in interviews. I don't think I've ever tried to write an essay about it. In interviews I'm sure I've said something about the different stages in my life, from being a fifteen year old in California to being sixty five.

Gee: Who were the most important writers you had as mentors early on?

Gaines: My mentor was Wallace Stegner at Stanford, and there were a couple of writers at San Francisco State. The person who was the most influential at San Francisco State was not a creative writing teacher, but a teacher who taught composition writing. The only reason why he was so influential in my work was because I was flunking his class, and he gave me the opportunity to write fiction instead of writing those essays which I just couldn't get. I was getting D's writing essays.

Gee: Did you know that you wanted to write fiction, that that was what you wanted to do?

Gaines: Oh, I knew I wanted to be a writer even before I went to high school or college. I wanted to be a writer when I was about sixteen years old. I knew I wanted to be a writer. It's all I wanted to do with my life. I had discovered that when I went to California at fifteen and went into a library when I was about sixteen years old. It was the first time I had done that because I was not allowed to go into the library in Louisiana, in my town. The library was for whites only. I couldn't go to the library there. But when I went to California I found myself in the library just reading and reading and reading everybody, and I didn't understand what I was doing, but I loved what I was doing.

Gee: Do you think it's the love for fiction that keeps you writing novels, and not writing in other forms?

Gaines: Well, I think so. I love reading great works. I love reading great plays, poetry, and of course novels. That's the only thing I can do. I used to write little skits – I had to take a drama class, and I used to write little skits for that. But I never took it serious, you know, that I would try to be a playwright or anything like that. I prefer the novel. I was much more free with the novel. I could do things. I didn't know anything about acting or setting up stage, although I use a lot of dialogue in my work. But I never thought about putting this in play form.

Gee: Can you tell me about how your style evolved, because it's very distinct?

Gaines: Well, I don't know what style is, but style is the man. I can't do anything else. I suppose my style comes from the way I walk, or the way I talk, or the way I make gestures, or something like that. I don't know anything else. I don't know any other way to write. I remember when I was in college I was imitating everybody. I imitated Hemingway a while. I imitated Faulkner a while. And I remember one professor told me at Stanford – this is Malcolm Cowley – he said, "Ernie, one Faulkner a century is enough, so stop imitating this guy." And then I started imitated Hemingway, and I tried to write like Joyce, and then finally I just began to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite, and began to find myself.

Gee: The style is deceptively simple.

Gaines: Yeah. Yeah, right. I may have gotten some of that from Hemingway, but I think by listening to the way people would talk, and what they're saying and what they're not saying, especially among my own people, my own black people. Many times they're not telling you everything that they want to tell you, and you have to sort of figure out what exactly are they telling me. Especially when they're talking to very well educated people, or when they're talking to other races, you know, they don't say everything. But, I mean, that's common among man. A man's gonna hold back – say maybe he doesn't trust a guy for a while, you know, he's just gonna hold back. But you have to be the guy who should learn to read between the lines, and as Hemingway once said, also, a writer must have a great shit detector. I mean, what if a guy is bullshitting you. . .

Gee: A built in one.

Gaines: Yeah, built in shit detector. Right. You better know what you're talking about, because this guy could pull things on you that you have to understand. You have to separate the husk from the grain and be able to figure out exactly what's going on here. This is what I try to do in my work.

Gee: Can I ask you about your writing process, for stories, or novels, in terms of how you handle plot? Do you do entire plot sketches, or do you start from one moment?

Gaines: I never plot out anything. I sort of plot it out in my mind. Well, I never really plot it out completely. I'll use an analogy of going from San Francisco to New York by train, and I get on the train in San Francisco and I know I want to get to New York. I know I want to get there, but I don't know all the things that are going to happen during those four or five days between the trip. I know some of the things. I know some of the states I'll go through, but I don't know – for example, until today I didn't know that you'd be wearing a white shirt. I didn't know what you'd look like. I wanted to meet you, but I didn't know that you would have glasses. I didn't know that – whatever – all these little things. But these are the things that come about during that trip from San Francisco to New York. The weather changes. It gets cloudy in some places. You go down into valleys, over the hills, and the train is moving around curves. All these sorts of things come in while you're going. Now you have a destination. You know some of the things that you're going to try to bring in, that you'd like to bring in, but you don't know all the things.

Gee: Do you know the end point?

Gaines: Well, sometimes I know the end point. Sometimes I don't. Sometimes it changes during that route. For example, I did not know when I started *A Lesson Before Dying,* I did not know that Jefferson would die. I did not know that. But as things accumulated during the travel, there was no

other end but that he should die. And that he should die that particular time of day.

Gee: Can I ask you about Paul, the deputy in *A Lesson Before Dying*? He really reaches out.

Gaines: Yeah. I've written about Pauls before, and sometimes I've named a guy Paul in other stories and not realized it, forgetting what I've named people. But Paul is. . . if there were not any Pauls in the South during the whole Civil Rights Movement, then we'd still be fighting out there today. There would still be a lot of bloodshed. But there were those kind of guys out there, who, caught up in the system, had to go along with the system, but would like to change the system, would like to do something else, and that's how Paul is here. That's what he is supposed to be here.

Gee: I'd like to ask you about American fiction. Where do you think it's going?

Gaines: I don't know where it's going, but I think that the writer has in the past, and always will, write about what the hell he wants to write about it, and I think this is what you should do. Just write about it. Write your kind of work, the way you want to do it. If you want to write history, write history. If you want to write a contemporary event, write it. If you want to write about racial clashes, if you want to write about difference in classes, if you want to write love stories, crime stories, whatever kind of thing you want to write about, you write about that. And I think America is so vast, so broad, with all its multiple races, that you will find different races writing about the same things, and different races writing about different things. So I don't know about what someone should or should not do, whether you should write about family, or not. You make that decision. You should make that decision. We have all – among African Americans, you can see that my work and Jim McPhearson's work are two different kinds of work. Jim is predominantly a short story writer. He writes more about urban life. I'm predominantly a novelist. I write more about rural life. There are commonalities there, but Jim and I are different kinds of writers. We look at things differently. And Ishmael Reed, or Al Young, or Toni Morrison, or Alice Walker, we don't write about the same thing, and I'm just talking about one race. Now, you get another race. Get that Asian race. Chinese, or Japanese, or Filipinos, or Koreans, or Vietnamese. They have the right, and they will, they will interpret life as they see it. That's what you're supposed to do. That is what you're supposed to do. There's no such thing as a blueprint as to what a writer should write about. A writer should write about what the hell he wants to write about. See, the world will let a writer starve to death, and then as soon as he makes anything, then they'll start telling him what he should do. Well, hell, they weren't telling him what he should do when he was starving out there, man. When you starve, you starve on your own. But after he starts becoming somebody, then everybody wants to tell you, well, you should write about this. You should write about this protest over here. You should write about this political

thing. You should not do this. I don't agree. I don't agree.

Gee: Is there an elusive novel that you want to write, something you've thought of, a story?

Gaines: I have a couple of stories I'd like to write about, but as Hemingway once said, "It doesn't do to talk about it until you write it." There are a couple of things I'd like to write about. The most elusive novel that I've completed that I always wanted to write about was *In My Father's House*, and I think in ways – I just reread it about a month or so ago – and I think it's much better now than I thought it was before. But that novel, I feel that it could be one of my weakest, maybe my weakest novel.

Gee: No.

Gaines: Good. Occasionally, you run into a person who says, I like that novel very much, and then you find a whole group of people who say, well, that's your darkest novel because it doesn't have the humor that, say, a *Miss Jane Pittman* has, or, *Of Love and Dust*, or even of *A Gathering Of Old Men*. It doesn't have that kind of humor that comes out, you know. And there's a little humor in *In My Father's House*. But that was the novel I knew that I jus had to write. I just knew that. The others I wrote, but this one I had to write about a father. And the father and son theme is another theme that runs throughout my books. Fathers looking for sons, and sons looking for fathers.

Gee: And spirituality, always.

Gaines: Yes. True. Absolutely true.

Gee: On the subject of fathers and sons, can I ask you about what you think of the portrayals of African American males today?

Gaines: By whom?

Gee: Oh, you don't have to name names.

Gaines: Do you mean by female writers? By African American female writers? As I said, you can interpret anything any way you wish. Now, if they want to look at, if African American female writers want to look at the African American male as brutal, or uncaring, or inconsiderate, or whatever I think it's their right to look at or interpret life that way. But, as I said, I don't think there should be a blueprint as to how it should be interpreted. I don't think Toni should tell Alice, or Alice should tell Terri McMillan, or Terri McMillan should – I mean, one writer or another shouldn't spread a blueprint – as to say, this is how those black s.o.b.'s are. No, I don't agree there. But the individual writer I feel can do anything he or she wishes. Now, you can be shot, you know. I mean, that's your problem. If you write certain things, that's your problem.

Gee: You write women well, and you have strong women in your books.

Gaines: Well, I believe, that's because I love women. I love the lady who raised me. I love my aunt who raised me. I love my mother. I love my sisters. I love my wife. So, you know, I try to see the whole person. The same when I'm writing about whites. I can make them decent people or not, depending on how it balances the work.

Gee: Whether it's the chief deputy or the younger deputy.

Gaines: I've done the same thing in all of my books. So it depends on the kind of character that I'm trying to portray in a certain position in the book, whether it's a good character, or a bastard. For example, both of those characters – if Paul was like the other deputy, the chief deputy, I think something would have been lost there, in the entire story. It would have been lost. It would have been too much of a race thing, then, too much of white versus black. I didn't want that. I wanted what Jefferson could give to Grant, and what Grant could give to Jefferson, under those conditions. This is what I wanted to do, and since people like Paul did exist at that time, alongside of people like the chief deputy, then they should be in that book.

Gee: Can you tell me about the differences in how you approach your writing now that you're an experienced writer? There's the baseball metaphor, of the younger pitcher throwing fastballs, and the more experienced pitcher being able to throw the change-ups and curves. . . .

Gaines: When I was younger I thought I'd win the Nobel Prize by the time I was forty. I remember one guy telling me once, "Gaines, your ego is so big you ought to carry it around in a trunk." I said, "Listen," you know I was in my early twenties – I said, "What the hell, I can compete with all these other people out here. I'll compete with Hemingway and Faulkner." He said, "You have to remember, now those guys are white." I said, "I don't give a damn what they are. I'm as good as those guys. I can compete with those guys." He said, "Gaines," you know, this was a black guy telling me this, a very intelligent man, a critic, he said, "Your ego is so big you ought to carry it around in a trunk." When I was much younger, I could write eight, ten hours a day. You know, I'd get up and I'd write. I'd write. I didn't give a damn about anything in the world except my writing. I would not get married. There were women in my life, but if she didn't want to hang around, okay, leave, because she wasn't going to take the place of the writing. I was too poor to buy gifts for my family at Christmas or anything. I didn't have anything. I was ready to eat pork and beans, crackers, just to be able to write. I worked just enough, held part-time jobs. I worked at the post office, at a print shop, at a bank, did some mail work, just enough to make just enough money to pay the rent in my little apartment in San Francisco. Just enough. And I'd write eight to ten hours a day, because I only worked part-time. Now, of course, it's different. I work, but I'm in a marriage, and do things for the family, and I've slowed down a hell of a lot. And of course, now today I write maybe five hours a day, and concentrate

much more now. There I could just take pen – I still write longhand – I'd take pen and pad and I'd go anywhere and just write and write and write. But today it's slower. I think more about it. I think a lot about my work long before I write it. Then I go to work, sit at the desk. So this kind of thing changes between that time and now. I'm much more conscientious about things around me now. At that time I cared only about the writing. Nothing else mattered in the world. Nothing mattered. Only my writing. Now, of course, I'm aware of other things.

Gee: Part of manliness?

Gaines: Yeah, you grow. At least you're supposed to grow.

Gee: John A. Williams came through here, and he said he wasn't going to write fiction anymore because he was discouraged by publishers and editors. How do you feel about that?

Gaines: I have a good relationship with my publishers, Knopf and Vintage. I would never ever tell some young writer not to write because of publishing. It's always been difficult for most minorities to get their works published and accepted, because the first thing the publishing house is interested in is making money. And they feel that, okay, whose going to be your readership? Who's going to read this? Can I sell enough books? And until you get a reputation, you don't sell those books if you're a minority. Some publishing houses, like Knopf, will publish my work, as well as publish Ann Rice's work. Now, they know they're going to sell Ann Rice's work, but they may not sell a "literary" piece of work over here. But it sort of balances it out. You know, they make money over here. They say, well, we're not going to make any money here, but it seems like a good thing to have. We should have some of these books here, too.

Gee: Until Oprah holds it up.

Gaines: Well, when Oprah speaks, people listen. It's like that old commercial. When she speaks, people listen, and here's what happened.

Gee: They couldn't win the lawsuit against her down here in Texas.

Gaines: No, no, no, no. She's very popular. She's so popular. She brought the whole show down to Amarillo. She brought the whole show down here, and she brought in the biggest names. When she put Garth Brooks on, the Texans down here, you cowboys with that beef stuff might as well give it up, because the world loves Garth Brooks. The kind of people you are representing, who you are supposed to be representing, worship Garth Brooks, and here he is on the Oprah show. So you'll have a hard time trying to convince those people that Oprah is wrong, since this is the kind of person she can have on her show.

Gee: I see race relations in so much of your work. You can read *A Lesson*

Before Dying set in the 40s, and of course see so much back then, looking at it as a historical novel, that's pertinent to now. Do you think so much hasn't changed?

Gaines: Yes, it's true. So much has not changed. That was the way of life at that time. We wish, that after the whole Civil Rights Movement of the sixties, that that way of life would have changed. Of course, there are still problems. I mean they're not as stringent as they were at that time, but you find the same things. When I left the South in '48 – it was the same year *A Lesson Before Dying* would have taken place – I could not go to the local high school there. I could not go the local library there. That was why I was brought to California. Today, of course, my books are in all the libraries. I'm Writer-in-Residence at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. Those kinds of things have changed. However, only four or five years ago, David Duke almost became a senator in Louisiana. Sixty-five percent of the white people there voted for him. And if we were not able to vote, if blacks were not able to vote in the state of Louisiana, this guy could have become senator in the nineties. So the old French saying, "The more things change, the more things they remain the same" – so you have some of the same problems today that you had in the 40s, yes. But I don't write entirely about race. Race comes after. I think what I try to do is ask, How can I, or my character, live as a man. How can he make it as a man, in this oppressive society? And I think I'm much more interested in that than I am in the race thing, blacks, whites, cutting at each other's throats all the time. Because in the story of *A Lesson Before Dying*, the relationship is between two black men most of the time. Not between, not the clashes between Grant and the sheriff or the sheriff beating up Jefferson. That's not even there. It could happen, but it's not there. That's not the story. Someone, in reviewing the book, has said that "Gaines is not interested in whether Jefferson goes to the electric chair or not. His interest is how do Jefferson and Grant communicate?" And that is the point of the story. How do they communicate. How can Jefferson help Grant? How can Grant help Jefferson?

Gee: I have one last question. In "A Very Big Order: Reconstructing Identity," you reveal that as a younger man your audience – who you were writing for – was the black youth of the South, and the white youth of the South. . . .

Gaines: Well, Wallace Stegner asked me, "Who would you write for? Who do you write for?" Well, I said, "Mr. Stegner, I don't write for any particular group, because when I look at that wall, when I look at that paper, I don't see faces down there. I don't see any face. I just try to write as well as I can. Because I've been influenced mainly by Western writers, white writers. The European writers. Joyce, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Chekhov. American white writers. Hemingway, Faulkner, Twain. So I never pick groups to write for." And he said, "Well, what if a gun was put to your head?" So I said, "Well, then I'll come up with an answer." And I said, "Write for the black youth of the South, so that he could – I hope to have him find his humanity." And

he said, "Suppose the gun was still at your head?" I said, "Maybe the white youth of the South. Because I hope, I would like to inform him, that unless he knows his neighbor of the last three hundred years, he knows only half of his own history. Unless he knows the black over here, who's been next door to him, and in the South, more than in any other part of the country, your next-door neighbor is – we grew up like that, where I grew up. The white guy was next door, but still segregated – I said unless he knows that neighbor, he knows only half of me. He's on the other side of the street. He doesn't know very much."

Gee: If Wallace Stegner were to ask you the same question today, how would you answer it?

Gaines: I don't know how I would answer that. When Stegner asked me that, I hadn't published anything. Today, my books are translated all over the world. Germany, Russia, Japan, China, Israel, Portugal, all over the world. So I would just try to write for a man, I guess. Let him know a little bit about this little – this little space, in this time, where I am. And I hope that in that way, I can – and in letting him know about this, I would show him that we're all here together. The world is so much smaller. I think I said something on the Oprah show, about how what I try to do is write character in my character so that the reader can better his own character; that is, create character, with character, so that the reader can develop his own character. That's what I like to do, with anyone who picks up one of my books.

JAMES COOPER

Twenty-Five Years Ago Today

The damp dark ground in my head
when I was twenty let the spores
I took into my mouth grow mushrooms
so fat that I opened up a roadside
stand, my sign reading, "fungi
for sale." After each harvest,

I opened up my head for the sun
to warm my soil, the hinge so stiff
I had to use all of my strength.
Earthworms went deeper. My eyes –
the pupils so large I could see
inside a cave, without a torch,

without radar pinging off the walls –
scared the tourists back into
their cars, engines already running.
I scared myself. I was afraid
of them, too. I only wanted
a gardener to come and turn over

my dirt with her spade. My sign,
up close, read, "gardener wanted."
And now when oak, maple, and spruce
trees fill my head, enough space
between them to keep the ground lit,
and when my gardener helps me grow

daffodils and tulips each spring,
peonies in the summer, I look
onto rooms in the afternoon, squares
of light on the floor, the curtains
blown back from the windows, the drone
of an airplane overhead, needing no more.

Maybe Not Lost at All, But Forgiven

The minaret's been missing for months. Cows
devout and solemn in the corn fields have
their own brand of prayer, and chew their cud slow
out of respect. Loss takes on many forms.
No one's left out. I imagine wind is
responsible. In town, people know wind
by its family name. No one bothers to
get more familiar. Wind's not invited
anywhere. It just shows up, loud and drunk
and feeling us up until we shudder.

No one knows who gives the wind alcohol.
All the managers of shops in town say
nothing's missing when they inventory
after storms. Still, I picture a drunk wind
staggering through corn with the lonely roof
of a minaret. I want it to mean
something, this awkward dance. Religion is
what broke the bitter man who drinks whiskey
every night and ends up cursing the bar
before dancing through abandoned streets home.

I've heard he was once a priest. Love isn't
all it's cracked up to be, he likes to say,
sometimes shouting it from the street, waking
me. I go to the window and watch him
stagger out of town almost in a dance
I'd say was a waltz if the right music
were playing somewhere near enough to hear.
He lies down with cows nodding over him
as if to bless his tattered soul, I've heard,
and mumbles matins while he sleeps for them.

It's easy to blame wind for everything,
to imagine it's a drunk thief who leaves
clues we're supposed to be clever enough
to put together. But no wind worries
about religion. All wind insists on
is faith. And whatever music broken
men stagger home to, wind's there to lean on.
Still, even old men curse wind as they dance

in its arms, as if it were memory
or something that forgives them everything.

Forgiveness is a sacred cow, I heard
him shout once in my sleep. Now, the cows have
wandered into town and wake me with prayers.
The lowing is a form of praise, I'm sure.
But are they praising the solace of sleep,
or is it the way the traffic light blinks
red and burns grief into their tired hearts
that will be cut out and sautéed and loved?
They pass through town like ghosts who are hungry
for the comfort and forgiveness of touch.

The wind can't forgive anyone. Nothing
is open late enough for light to bless
the heavy-hearted, lowing ghosts. I hear
a slurred voice shouting scripture at the cows.
Salvation's not easy, and all the pain
I believe is sleeping all over town
is clear in the drunk's voice and the chorus
of cows confused by a wind they followed
to a place where they watch themselves in dark
glass and low hymns that echo in my room.

When the drunk starts in shouting parables
from the New Testament, the ghostly cows
begin a chant I'm afraid might level
everything. And nothing can stop the drunk,
defrocked priest. This is his congregation
now, the bitter, lost souls he has to save
or die for. I want to sing some raw hymn
and have the gentle voices of the cows
harmonize and soothe the drunk's misery,
but it's been years and nothing comes to me.

So I go out and touch the cows that slip
through the sleeping streets because I don't know
what else I can do. Their lows rise around
my tired body. I shiver and feel
blessed. I stroke the soft hide of a Holstein,
and in those eyes find the lost minaret
dancing, and recognize the suffering
its dance celebrates over quiet fields
of corn that can only nod in a wind
I've heard tell of whose family name is Loss.

Or maybe not Loss at all, but something
closer to Forgiven. Translation is
always more or less an issue of faith.
The music I just make out moving with
the cows heading south of town makes me want
to serve up my own heart with a garnish
of sautéed onions and peppers. I don't
know where it's coming from, but the solemn
violins and cellos make my skin twitch
as if black flies bite and bite and won't stop.

I believe the music's the confession
of a lost minaret dancing through fields
where every crop is driven to witness
by the wind's arrogance. The bitter priest
has gone on ahead and left me with cows
that low what could be my name. Everything
I've lost hides in their enormous bodies,
and the odor of what could be whiskey
rises with their breath as if to forgive
the wind and bring back whatever's been lost.

ALYCE MILLER

Metonymy

Everything important I have ever made can fit in a small suitcase.
Marcel Duchamp

After sundown in Chicago,
riding the El,
you press a special red button:
bing! the passing windows
light up in miniature. Cornell boxes,
illuminated peep shows:

Un objet trouvé: an owl feather,
not the owl any more
than the broken-off leg of a doll is the girl,
or the woman she grows up to be,
ragged with grief and knowing then
that what is seen in windows
is only the framing of light.

You stare out
at the torso of a man
visible in the vapor of his shower,
fooled into imagining
him to be the whole whole man,
because you've glimpsed a part.

You don't know his name, you know only
his habit
of setting out a red geranium on the sill
(every morning)
before he leaves for work
and his taking it in upon his return.

There is not room in the box
for two whole people,
and what are you to do with the red petal
that has suddenly blown in through the open El window
except to sweep it back out?

Somewhere down below a child watching
for the light to turn green sees instead
a red petal falling through the air
and believes the sky is full of flowers.

MARCY DERMANSKY

Body Falls from Sky

Bernard and Isabel Bisson were having troubles.

Bernard had discovered Isabel in the spare bedroom, in the spare bed with the neighborhood grocer. Though this was not Isabel's first extra-marital affair, she had promised to behave and she had failed. In her own defense, she offered tales of an unstable childhood and a long list of faults in her character. A good woman would not chew her toenails in the bath tub, she said, taking a deep breath and smoothing the hair off her face. Bernard stared at his shoes as Isabel rambled. She drank glass after glass of wine, promising to try harder, squeezing Bernard's delicate hands so tight that his knuckles cracked.

They took the train to Paris for the weekend. They bought a sculpture by a celebrated young artist and reproductions of Bernard's favorite paintings in the gift shop of the Louvre. Returning home from their brief vacation, they departed again, driving at dawn to the Mediterranean to catch a sunset.

Unfortunately, Isabel had enjoyed her infidelity. She had enjoyed it immensely. She found the practice of honesty and devotion impossibly tedious. Her affection for Bernard turned to gnawing irritation. Isabel stopped speaking to her husband. She slept each night in a separate bedroom, cuddling the dog, a large and good-natured standard poodle.

* * *

Bernard shaved his head.

He ambled about the house, head down, eyes fixed on the carpet. He hoped Isabel would appreciate his despair. He wanted to assault her each morning at the breakfast table with his bald head. But Isabel slept until noon. She did not mention the change in her husband's appearance.

Bernard began the habit of taking morning walks, wandering through a small, dense wood outside of their suburban Parisian home. He enjoyed watching the sun rise from the darkness; he enjoyed the new and wonderful sensation of warmth on the top of his head. With every walk, the tightness lodged in Bernard's chest eased.

Isabel could barely stand to look at her bald, sad husband. With his slow, deliberate gait and his shining, pink head, he reminded her of a cancer patient undergoing chemotherapy treatments. It occurred to Isabel that he might be ill, and sometimes she watched him, but she did not talk to him, not even to inquire about his health.

* * *

Bernard and Isabel agreed to lunch.

Bernard was a fine cook, but for this particular occasion he did not trust himself to create even the most simple sauce. He had grown wary of heavy food; he was unwilling to chance the repair of his marriage on a complicated meal. Bernard laid out an extravagant assortment of bread and cheese and fruit and chocolate, elegantly arranged upon a silver platter shaped in the shape of a fish. He selected a red wine to complement the simple meal. Isabel and Bernard sat rigid in their silence, taking small bites of the good food, sipping small sips of wine. The dog slept beneath the table.

"Bernard," Isabel said.

Bernard scratched his sunburned scalp. The wine caught in his throat. He coughed loudly and a thin trickle of wine and mucus dripped from his nostril.

"Oh, Bernard."

Isabel controlled the urge to slap his hand off the top of his head. She restrained herself from wiping the blood-like smear of wine off his face, instead pushing a strand of dark hair off her face and tucking it carefully behind her ear.

"This is a lovely meal," she said.

Isabel rolled the stem of her wine glass back and forth slowly between the palms of her hands. Bernard said nothing. His hands remained folded on his lap, wine dripping onto his chin.

"You look so extraordinarily different, so extraordinarily strange without any hair, Bernard. It makes it so difficult to talk to you."

The telephone rang.

"Shall I answer it?"

Bernard nodded.

Isabel rose to pick up the phone. She did not return to the table, engaging in a conversation with a magazine salesman while watching Bernard neatly rip a baguette into small pieces. Dry flakes of skin dotted his scalp.

Isabel was signing up for a six-month subscription as a gust of wind came through the window, blowing hair into her mouth. Bernard dropped his wine glass. There was a loud noise outside the window. The dog, who had not barked in over three years, barked. The telephone went dead before Isabel had finished giving her address.

Isabel and Bernard walked slowly together into the garden. Without thinking, each reached for the other's hand. The dog trailed behind them, growling hesitantly. Next to the rosebush lay a body – head sunk deep into the ground, legs pointed to the sky.

"Jean," Bernard thought, smiling happily. "It's Jean."

Isabel walked over to the body. Rose petals were scattered on the ground. She touched his shoe, a torn and faded sneaker made of canvas. The dog licked his ankle.

* * *

Bernard and Isabel Bisson had a dead body lying in their garden.

According to the local police, the man in the Bisson's garden was a Russian stowaway who had fallen from an airplane. He was not Jean, Isabel's former lover, killed by some strange and marvelous twist of fate, tossed into the garden by God.

"We are baffled," the chief of police said, scratching his chin with one hand, petting the dog with the other. "Never in my entire career have I encountered a body in such an unusual circumstance."

Bernard wandered into the kitchen, no longer interested in learning the details of this particular dead body. He was disappointed. An unknown Russian – 55 crumpled rubles in his pocket and not even a name to claim to – was not a gift from God. Bernard wanted only a sign, a symbol. He did not need a peasant. He stood at the dining room table, drinking the wine in Isabel's glass and contemplating the injustice of death. He listened to the insistent ring of the doorbell.

Isabel explained to the police that she did not know any Russians.

* * *

Until late that evening, a steady stream of people entered the Bisson home. A dead body from the sky generated considerable interest. There was the press, the media, and the local gendarmes. Taciturn men in badly-tailored suits walked through the garden, measuring the perimeter with tape measures and jotting notes into black notebooks. Camera crews trampled the flowers setting up their equipment. As the day turned to evening, Bernard fed these strangers from the bread and cheese and fruit and chocolate of the interrupted lunch. He brought up the remaining bottles of wine from the cellar. The dog was petted and admired, fed lavish scraps under the table. His picture was taken next to the body, surrounded by detectives and the still-dropping rose petals.

Bernard enjoyed entertaining these people who walked through his home. He described the moment of the crash again and again, grinning as he spoke. Bernard wanted desperately to approach Isabel, to impress her with his sudden grace and ease of manner. He chose to wait until the police had completed their investigation, until the body had been covered with a sheet and removed from the garden. Bernard cleared the table and changed out of his wine-splattered shirt. He put on a black bowler hat to cover his bald head. Isabel ushered the press and the secret service agents through their home and into the garden. They allowed the garden to be photographed. They allowed themselves to be interviewed and later, after Isabel had changed her clothes and drank some more wine, they posed for pictures.

A telephone repairman appeared at the back door. He had seen the story on the local news; he told Isabel that she had a lovely garden, beautiful eyes. Holding his toolbox before his chest, he offered her his services. His name was Jean-Claude, stitched in bright yellow letters on his uniform. After repairing the severed wires, he settled himself on a bench in the garden, staring at the hole next to the rose bush. Isabel asked him quietly for his telephone number. She offered him a glass of wine, calling to Bernard to come out from the kitchen.

The body had dropped thousands of feet from the sky, yet little trace of death could be found in the garden. There was no blood, only broken branches and a round, deep hole from which the man's head had carefully been extracted. The hole would be filled with two scoops of a shovel. The ivy covered trellis only inches away had not been not damaged. Isabel and Bernard joined Jean-Claude on the bench.

"Do you think we might have imagined it?" Bernard said, aiming pebbles at the empty hole in the ground.

"I touched him," Isabel said, shivering slightly. They sat quietly, passing round the bottle of wine.

"Your wires were pulled from the poles," Jean-Claude said, fingering his pliers. Bernard slipped his arm around Isabel's waist.

A detective stuck his head out though the open glass doors. He asked if there wasn't any more wine.

* * *

Bernard and Isabel had not had a party in years. They had not had a pleasant evening in months. The sudden and unexpected attention was wonderful. Isabel changed into a black dress and put on a dark red lipstick. Bernard ordered another case of wine and hugged Jean-Claude for his excellent phone repair. Neighbors arrived with their cameras and were offered expensive wine in crystal glasses at the doorstep. Photographers took pictures of the guests, reveling outside the very spot where a destitute and unknown man had recently died. Inside the house, someone turned on the stereo. Isabel noticed Bernard, handsome again in his bowler hat, talking to a reporter about the benefits of morning walks, his feet tapping to the music. Bernard could feel Isabel studying him from across the room, and much like the warmth of the sun on his head, he enjoyed the sensation.

Bernard and Isabel danced. Their many guests for the evening applauded. The dog barked and jumped on the happy couple. The night was extraordinarily clear, the stars sparkling bright, a warm and gentle breeze running through the garden.

* * *

Hand in hand, Bernard and Isabel Bisson left the party and walked upstairs to the bedroom. Isabel found the invisible fuzz on the top of Bernard's head surprisingly soft and wonderful to the touch. The books and dirty socks covering Isabel's bed reminded Bernard of the scattered, sloppy woman she had been in school. His pleasure increased with the discovery of crumbs in the sheets.

Outside, alone in the garden, the dog vomited large chunks of bread and cheese and fruit and chocolate.

MAXINE KUMIN

Keeping in Touch

Either a series of minor earthquakes or
the weekly announcements of another
paroled rapist offsets the clement weather,

mimosas loosing showers of yellow pollen,
the worst of a series of offending allergens
in this graduate student cinderblock warren

where pipes burst and playgrounds overflow
and every aspiring Asian family makes do.
Three black-eyed toddlers under my window

trill back and forth in their mother tongue
scolding dolls they pick up and rock and abandon,
shake them, forgive them, rerock and put down

mornings when you call me long distance to report
it is 5 below in English and Fahrenheit
in New Hampshire, and I remember my high school part

in Thorton Wilder's one-act, "The Happy Journey
from Trenton to Camden"– thirty miles by early
auto – staged with wooden chairs to signify

the family coupe that sported running boards
as now 3,000 miles apart we prop our words
in place of touch, dial, redial, and hoard

absence with its pucker of California citrus
that comes between and yet keeps us.

Letter Never Sent to Haiphong

The doorjamb's puncture wound is where
the starlings I'm learning to love while you

are away wake me mornings with their raucous
bouts of eating. The greedy starlings.

The mother fixes beetles in her long yellow beak,
feeds her young without landing just hovering

and beating her wings against the wood.
The evening grosbeak is a bully who craps

when he lands at the feeder. He loves the rain
for it makes him look feisty, feathers pushed

about his head, bare patches under race-car yellow.
He brazens the rain, for no other birds dare it,

save this purple finch, who shreds his sunflower
seed with his honey-dun mate. When you left

you sounded far already, shouting away
from the phone "I didn't touch anything,"

and then telling me, "*My father won't leave me alone
for a minute.*" Say something singular to me

to match the singular you put me in.
Say something openly desirous.

You are never needful except in your fear about the future
you. Starlings are greasy birds with humped shoulders.

They siren even as their hunger is met with the tubular
abdomen and dead-kicking legs of the dung-beetle.

They never let silence happen.
I let it happen all the time.

In the dead air of the three thousand
miles between us, blood roaring drowns

out the quiet gesture you give me
when you say you are sewing

the Buddha prayer stone I sent you,
sewing it into your underclothes.

Covenant

These milky breath-clouds
drift away like the old country,
defy gravity a moment,
join bodies of water,
unlit rooms of waves. . . .

I am by nature
an odor of you, an air of you,
something less than I was before.
Harbor that you are. Ocean.
Island in the ocean.

Your breaking is the breaking of water:
father after father now a single undertow.
I walk among what you do not have
time for. *Spartina Patens*, sharp
inedible grass that holds the world

to the world. Georgie Ennis,
carry your pail across the straw-strewn
farmyard, fists like gray potatoes.
I'll walk away whistling.
The tune, yours, a white lion, a lamb.

Big talker, crab shell in the wind,
I would be as you were
if I could go backwards.
What if it's true?
There's the wrong way and there's yours.

Three corners of the sail,
only one to fold in first.
A little cloud that shrouds me.
I live down here
on the corner of the mouth

and the ocean. I return
to this intersection, warm the air
that will not love me,
this water and light, fingers
that will not come to my mouth.

Our Daughter

For her we must be macaques on a limb,
head pressed, for life, into wet matted head.

We live in this setting without name or address.

We don't leave the house for days.
We make the long walk to the car,

and the longer walk back in memory
to our house in the trees.

Our arms hang empty at our sides.
The new snow gives in to a patch of earth.

We peer into the dark spot, into that room,
like humans

switching off a light. We listen
to the stillness. Its breathing.

In that body of darkness,
in that closed-off room,

daddy's girl is immense in her sleep.
She must be beautiful by now.

Inconsolable sorrow, we cradle her

like humans, very much like humans.

Screen

My father did not mean to shut me in, but when the raccoon who lived on our back porch died, I just think he saw his opportunity.

There weren't any trees in my childhood; there weren't many books. We were an unlettered part of the salt-marsh prairie, longing, I think, to be a suburb. The houses around us held more shotguns than books – even if you counted the Bibles. And I never saw anyone actually reading the Bible; I don't think I ever saw one open – except on the pulpit at church. When Reverend Kelley preached on Sundays, his palms rested with a kind of breath-taking familiarity on the pages of the open Bible. Sometimes his fingers would wander over to the edge of his lectern. Then the fingers might grab the thick wooden edges as if the Reverend were taking oars into his fists. He would lean over. Perhaps he was thinking about rowing out among us.

The Bibles were big as baby coffins. Our always-shut Bible was bound in shiny, grained black leather; a thin red ribbon trickled out of the gold-leaf pages. It sat in our living room, too heavily, on the glass top coffee table. The living room had bare high-polished hardwood floors. My mother kept the floors as other women might keep their silver; they were a perfect shining expanse except for a place near the dining room where after a prairie flood, two boards had buckled into a permanent cresting wave. No one visited the living room or was invited to sit in there except the occasional salesman, who sat in the single armchair that matched the couch, his sample case opened with so much hope between his knees. Under the glass of the coffee table were studio sepia baby pictures. So the Bible had to be scooted over if you wanted to admire me.

One evening in the dark living room, my father bought all twenty-six volumes of *The World Book Encyclopedia* in ten minutes. The coffee pot was still percolating, the black coffee rattling up into the glass knob on the lid while the installment papers were being signed. The salesman's opening, feeling-his-way line had been a question to my father: Had he ever thought about the extra educational benefits that *The World Book Encyclopedia* could bring to his child? Simply enough, Daddy replied that yes sir, he had thought about it. He said he would like to buy the man's books.

"He hasn't even had his coffee," my mother said while Daddy showed the amazed fellow to the door. His speech about the annual Atlas and the extra educational benefits kept spilling out of his mouth as if my father's pre-emptive timing had robbed the man of sense. He kept selling even as my father walked him to his car. When the salesman turned on his headlights, tiger stripes came on my bedroom walls as the light came through the open Venetian blinds. His car roared like a motor boat down

the street, droned away, and then flipped the night back to the possession of the katydids and the jet engine. The man who lived across the street from us was a machinist who worked at the refinery with Daddy. He kept a jet engine in his garage, tuning it up each night after supper.

Daddy turned off the front porch light. In my bed, I heard the front door's snub-nosed dead bolt click. A satisfying, a concluding thud. The dead bolt was the only lock ever turned in our house and, then, only at night and only by my father. It signaled to him, perhaps, that his little family was safe inside for a night, safe from the dangers of a prairie that was barely there anymore. I got out of bed and went into the living room. My father sat in the arm chair, tentatively – as if he were thinking about buying the chair, too. In his right hand, folded against his chest, he held the large red book, trimmed in dark blue. Daddy shifted the book so that I could crawl up into his lap. "I just bought us twenty six books counting this one." The us was him and me.

"I'd like to know where you think we're going to put it." My mother said this as if *The World Book Encyclopedia* was one thing, like an icebox – rather than 26 things. It was nine o'clock at night. She had appeared from the kitchen with a blue and white cup towel and a bottle of Windex. She heaved the Bible onto the couch, and, on her knees, beside the coffee table began to wipe the glass that the baby in the picture would look out from for what remained of her life.

Like a Hercules, my father stood up with the twin weights of me in one arm and the A in the other. He sighed a very superior and, at the same time, hang-dog sigh, a gentle reproach to his wife that she should have more confidence in him.

He didn't have any idea where he was going to put those encyclopedias.

The back porch was screened in on three sides. The raccoon and I shared it – I got days and she got pacing nights. I spotted her first; she was hanging from one of the spindly limbs of a Chinaberry sapling someone had staked out on Finfrock Street. We were in my Daddy's work car, coming home from the baby-sitter's. I rode standing up in the front seat, my ankles crossed, elegantly, just where my ruffled socks turned down, my arms draped out on the seat, practicing to be a float queen. When I yelled out that there was a kitty up in the tree, and requested, shrilly, that he needed to get her down for me, he didn't stop the car. He didn't always do what women told him to. He would sometimes exhibit a crazy and abrupt stubbornness over little things if only to assert to himself that he still had his soul in tow. (But he had just about stopped shooting pool, hunted fewer weekends in the season. If he still kept a handgun and a pint of bourbon in the glove box of the work car, then so did every other trustworthy man in southeast Texas.) He slowed the car and lowered his head to rest his chin on the steering wheel. Then this handsome young man who was my father peered up through his gold wire-rim glasses and the glare on the windshield. The car filled with dust motes and a rose gold submerged twilight and he smiled at the sight in the tree. That night he brought her home in a twisting gunny sack, holding it out from his legs and shook her

loose on the back porch.

The screened-in back porch was where I played with my dolls, concentrating on the plots in their lives, on the cool concrete slab floor. At my elbow, the other side of the screen, was salt marsh prairie, wild or wild enough to the end of the world. We lived in the last house in the last row of a new subdivision for one poised turning moment in the middle of the century. (1950 and we were at the top of the slide.) The encirclement of the prairie made whatever was transacted or thought of on the back porch seem more serious, more secure. At the end of the salt marsh plain, the world as prophesied ended in fire. (Even if we didn't read the Bible, we knew all its figures by heart.) Lined against the sky were the superstructures of the refineries, towers with burn-off flares, continual flames that swallowed stars, battlements streaming black smoke, grey smoke, white steam. The descriptions of hell in Vacation Bible school failed to excite – although I never thought of it as hell, nor did I confuse it with an actual city.

The full horizon was a thicket of tiny lights, winking like stars . The sky had shrugged them off. (Only a few stars, mostly the strong winter stars, were to be seen in the half-dark sky.) I think I was most content thinking of the lights that defined the plants of Dow and Diamond Alkali, Shell, duPont and Atlantic Richfield as a fairy city. There were the spires, you see, and the towers, battlements and unexplained (none needed) belch of orange flame that gilded the shadowy underbellies of the humid clouds. Which is to say that this most modern of landscapes was taken by me to be something akin to what I saw in fairy tale books, illustrations which in their turn had been taken by their illustrators quite often from the medieval or the fanciful delicacy of the eighteenth century. Dragons breathed flames that looked like natural gas being flared in the night sky; the spirals of catcrackers were the same in kind as the one that lead to Rapunzel's window. But as I got older, the fairy city metaphor wore itself out in the tens of thousands of times I drove past the refineries. The massive complex begins at the turning basin in Houston, sprawls in a wide belt along both sides of the ship channel for about fifty miles, and then fans out on the north shores of Galveston Bay. No. The 'fairy city' metaphor won't do. No metaphor does do. The refineries, the largest petrochemical complex in the country – not a small fact – are peculiarly resistant to metaphor. (I know, I've been trying to apply one to them for years.) Lately, I've come to understand their resistance. A metaphor unleashes power. The refineries, inserted with a purgatorial efficiency along the horizon between the earth and the sky are, precisely, power. The refineries are the way in which we have come to extend human desire, for good or for ill, beyond our selves. Metaphor is difficult or impossible to apply to the refineries because the two are competitors. If, as T. S. Eliot once said, "some day automobiles will exceed thirty miles an hour – making even dreams unnecessary," I've had to ask myself what is made unnecessary or seemingly less valuable by this complex that fuels millions of automobiles that handily double Eliot's outside limit. And jets that bring us to Oxford or Paris in hours, and VCR's, and vessels that orbit the moon, and the world's supply of boom boxes, all

playing the same song, and. . . .

The prairie that lay between my window and the distant limit of the refineries belonged to me. It was some time before I realized that the prairie was and would be the figure of my own unlived future, as well as that of my own imagination. The emptiness one prefers to begin with, the blank page, or canvas, the uncluttered desk. But, that was later. As a child, I took the prairie to bed with me at night. Flat, portable as a Monopoly board or one of the encyclopedias that my father would read – in alphabetical order throughout his life.

I lay in bed in the almost dark. My window screen – the air conditioner would not come until I was twelve – was a wiry veil, a thin criss-crossed shadow and the only thing separating me on my bed from out there. Clouds, wide bodied and two-toned, as my father's dress shoes were, as cars would be, were burnished by the reflection of the refinery flares. The walls of the room that I had to myself glowed. (I assumed that everyone's childhood was so enchanted, just as I believed that winter everywhere smelled, as mine did, wintry and strong, like the paper mill.) Several times in my childhood and, later – as late as now – my father lowered his paper or his book, and said to me, "Did you ever see it get really dark? Really dark? When I was a boy I would wake up at Dad's house and run to school across the prairie and it was so dark you couldn't see your hand. And the stars, you never saw so many stars." He seemed to believe that his six-year-old had some option as to the kind of sky under which she was born, or that, perhaps, she had some world traveler's experience with which he was unfamiliar. But, no. I never did see it get really dark – until I was grown up and away, away.

At night in bed, I ran my fingertips over the rough screen. Suspended between waking and sleeping I cannot ever remember being unaware of that almost limitless (to me) flat shadowy expanse that ended when it did after a long time in the story book spires and towers of flame. At some point I began, like everybody else, calling the open space the prairie or the salt-marsh prairie. And later, no one but my father called it even that. It was as if he could see through the apartment walls and the litter of signs and the neon thousands of distinct lots of division and discrimination the land would take unto itself. All my younger cousins know it by its proper names: Walmart Handy Dan USA Auto World Arby's McDonald's Pottery Mart Red Lobster Jiffy Lube Western Auto Dillards Foley's Taco Bell Colonel Sanders.

I was and am reluctant to call it anything. Between waking and sleeping, the prairie's time and space, lots of both, then, was continuous with my own, save for the thinnest wiry veil of consciousness. And on one of those half-dark nights, the shadowy emptiness that lay and did not lay beyond the screen (did not because it was also within me), became an expectancy that existed, as a page in a manila tablet or a washed blackboard existed, as a ground for invention. "There wasn't anything there, so I began to put things there," a painter who grew up near me once said of her own backyard, adjacent, as mine was, to the prairie. I knew what she meant. For my part what I put out there each night was: houses, stories, gardens, balls. Most of these stories did and would require me to

wear elbow length white gloves with a small pearl button to fasten at the wrist. These storied events began and unfolded, occurring as I imagined them – but they also were to occur in the future, the figure of the prairie being not only space to me but actual time, the time I had ahead of me in my life. It was, it is, a naive figure – and it would be decades before I read in Frank Kermode that "we can distribute our fictions in time as well as in space, which is why we must avoid an easy translation from the one to the other." My only excuse is that I made do with what was at hand and that I do not know why our first landscape has such dominant land and mineral rights on the individual imagination. To say that, then, the time-ahead seemed like "lots" is imprecise; the time-ahead seemed, exactly, infinite. Not the infinity of physicists or mathematicians, of course, but a more homely, more human thing: an emotional soaring, born of longing, roaring as an unheard sound within someone who has not yet understood that the prairie and their life just will have an end.

So, perhaps, that is why the stories that I conjured each night under the two-toned, indulgent clouds never had proper endings. Before I reached the end, I would fall through the screen of words and pictures into sleep.

At night, if I got up to go into the kitchen to get a drink of ice water out of the jug in the refrigerator, I could stand on tip-toe at the back door and just make out the raccoon's shape through the glass, a lithe shadow pacing back and forth, back and forth, stopping every once in a while to poke on the screen. She wasn't a pet. During the day, I forgot about her entirely – except for those times when I was startled from concentration as the metal painted doll cupboard started to rock. It rocked as if possessed.

"She's dreaming," my father would say standing in the doorway. He was so pleased with her.

But she wasn't always asleep in there. If you opened the bottom flowered door of the doll cupboard, you might catch her grooming herself, holding a wire baby bottle brush with her terrible brown human hand. She had the same hands as my three maiden great aunts. And either the crimped up old lady hands, or her notable lack of affection for us, or the solitariness of her life, made me feel about the raccoon as I felt about those old women. The three of them lived in separate houses, not much more than shacks, out on the prairie not far from us but in what was still called the country. Each of them lived with her zinnias and her crochet, lived with her feral cats, her uninterrupted view of the prairie, and her spite. Each had asked my father not to let her be buried next to the other two.

"Promise me, Robert Keith," they would remind him, extract the promise again, an ungraceful grace note ending each visit. My great aunts had voices like squabbling blackbirds.

"Yes ma'am," he would say, patting each of them in turn on their raccoon hands.

As we drove away down the long caliche shell roads, the crazy unkempt rows of zinnias high as the car windows, my mother would say that she didn't see why Grace (or Lucille or Babe) didn't build herself a brick house. Each had the money. Then, my father would say that all he

hoped was that the coyotes would come in and eat the cats. And I took the impression as I lay down on the back seat – stretched out with it all to myself because I didn't have brothers and sisters – that if you were a woman who didn't attach herself to a man and to children, no one would be sorry if you died.

At some point in my childhood – maybe on the day I asked him to call the raccoon out of the tree – my father said that the only people who could call cats, or for that matter 'coons out of a tree were witches. He would have nothing to do with religion. He would say, if asked, that he was an agnostic, a word that made the people we knew look baffled. Similarly, he would have nothing to do with superstition, but he would often say that he believed in witches, that he had known some personally.

When *The World Book Encyclopedia* finally arrived, he was ready for it. The old raccoon had conveniently died – although I was told she had been given away. My father had built our house, so it wasn't much to him, then, to panel in the back porch. His work car pulled into the drive with the sheets of knotty-pine paneling tied with ropes to the top of his bulging old Plymouth DeLuxe. The car looked as if it had a toothache. Over the concrete slab, he laid a reddish linoleum and I picked out a rag rug from Sears. He left a space, an alcove, between the shelves he built; in a few years, a television on a wrought iron stand would be fitted into this space. Over it, he hung his best gun rack and polished for it a row of shotguns that had belonged to my grandfather, the gunsmith. Frame prints of green headed mallards in flight lined the walls. One wall would in time hold a piano, so that I could learn to play "*Clair de lune*" for him, and, high on the wall, a square hole was cut for the air conditioner. There were no windows in this new room and the existing windows in the house were closed and shuttered to cater to the efficiency of the two new window-unit air conditioners. I never again owned an uninterrupted view of prairie. But I wouldn't have had it anyway: new subdivisions, more clapboard houses built on the GI bill, were going up west and south of us. I was sealed off. And that state of being has turned out to be mostly permanent.

After he lined up the encyclopedias, my father brought from the crawl space of our attic, wooden fruit crates, the blue Washington Apple labels still on them. These crates were filled with old brown books. Some were leather, some were cloth, the lettering on them a wonderful swirling gold. Bulwer Lytton Byron Kipling Dickens Chesterton. The books had come through a maiden aunt. Not, of course, from one of the Harpies on the prairie, but from another lady dangling out there all by herself on some other spindly branch of the family tree. It was as if a Victorian gentleman had mailed his library with a kind of desperate hope into the middle of the next century and we had received. In fact, it is rather what did occur: the woman's father had come to Texas before the Civil War to teach at a school called Fairfield Female Academy. It was through these people, I suppose that my father heard that an educated person must have their Greek gods and goddesses by heart.

So we set to it. I learned the Greek names and the Roman names. Each passage of stories in the encyclopedias was accompanied by a picture,

a face card of each deity. Athena, Hera, Zeus, Hermes (god of reading, messages). Did his winged sandals ping the air like the jet engine sound ringing through our neighborhood? I felt that I had something very large upon deposit as the list of known gods grew. Sometimes I would take almost all of them off the shelves, lay open the shining pages so that its gods and goddesses could step out, stretch, reconvene the pantheon in the knotty pine paneled room with the braided rag rug. My mother seemed unable or unwilling to treat these beings as our company. "Put every last one of them back where you found them."

The face cards were no more imaginary to me than my future. It was wonderful to me to discover that Edith Hamilton (I think a school teacher gave me her book) knew about these same gods. Literature was laid out like the intersections of our neighborhood. The pomegranates explained in "Persephone" in the "P" volume, were the same dark pink leathery fruit that fell bursting jelly and tomato-like seeds from the tree between our house and our neighbors. One story or passage, I perceived, might be used from one book to decode a story in another. I did not feel shut in, then, because I was really reading. And once I could really read, it did not matter to me that it was then the middle of one century, or, now, as I write at its end. Once I could really read, I felt as if I had been alive for ever.

With this bounty of gods upon deposit, I sailed into adult life with the confidence and sound of lifting engines. Out in the world, in college, I even fell in love once with a philosopher – but I was too embarrassed to reveal to him the poverty of my own mental treasures, stored up in the knotty-pine room. What were my World Book gods and goddesses, set beside his *Crito*, his *The Republic*? Later, I married and almost forgot and did not remember again what was mine, until, one day, after swimming in a choppy bay – a bay that I had as a child fished with my father – my lover came up with tiny iridescent shells and seaweed wound in the curls of his beard. "Poseidon," I breathed – a ridiculous, a wholly heartfelt, a girl's, rapture.

I had disappointed everyone by then; all their hopes for me were capsized in a hurricane sea.

My lover was a boat captain. Sometimes we would make a fast run out to an offshore oil rig and tie up. The little boat would sway, then, beside the open work steel structure of the rig. The rig was a gigantic scaffolding, the one used, no doubt, to paint the fabulous swirl of evening clouds. The clouds swirled and swirled, burnished in gold, like the titles on my father's famous books. Tied up beside the rig, I could not get enough of just looking out on the uninterrupted immensity of blue sea, pale sky. I loved this other man, you see, because he let me out.

ALISON JARVIS

Ice Fishing, Lac Qui Parle

At night light shines in the houses
on ice. Our fathers silently
hunch over mouths of dark water,
wait for silver fish to flash
in the black just below them. Out there,
in the blackness surrounding, the sky
lets go of its snow. Think of the houses
as lanterns, or words,
that rise in the throat.

Weeks ago, when they were certain
cold had frozen the lake
beyond melting, our fathers
hauled their houses onto ice,
dragging them like lives
they longed to inhabit. How far

away from them we wait
in lit kitchens. Listen,
there are words that simmer in us
like liquid, almost soundless. Soup on the stove,
steam rising to the slanted ceiling. Lost
drops gather there and fall
to stream the frigid windows.

At night the wind is fierce
enough to bend the rigid pines
and drown the sounds of dark
longing: the hunger that pulls
weaving bodies to the surface,
mouths open, shaken fins
flinging drops of water,
silver in the fire.

ROBERT BENSE

A Brief History

Smoke curling on the long
horizon of Asia: Troy
crackles, the old palace in
flames – after hippodrome,
the suburbs, each brick
once a trust in perpetuity.
See how flammable such places
are – from the great house
of Atreus embers fanned by
three thousand years catch
the prevailing winds, spark
new passions, reappear like
Greek fire. Our own cities
burn, the outskirts damped
down for now, the sea full
of water: on the horizon
a grievance under sail,
the curl of smoke already at
the narrows, a small world
round again. How the Greeks
feared, knew the sea.

C. DALE YOUNG

The Philosopher in Florida

Midsummer lies on this town
like a plague: locusts now replaced
by humidity, the bloodied Nile

now an algae-covered rivulet
struggling to find its terminus.
Our choice is a simple one:

to leave or to remain, to render
the Spanish moss a memory
or to pull it from trees, repeatedly.

And this must be what the young
philosopher felt, the pull of a dialectic
so simple the mind refuses, normally,

to take much notice.
Outside, beyond a palm tree fence,
a flock of ibis mounts the air,

our concerns ignored
by their quick white wings.
Feathered flashes reflected in water,

the bending necks of the cattails:
the landscape feels nothing –
it repeats itself with or without us.

JOHN SPARAGANA

An Interview with Rackstraw Downes

Editor's note: I left on Rackstraw's phone machine a list of questions concerning his orientation to landscape painting. He considered the questions, and a week or so later we spoke. This transcription does not adequately convey Rackstraw's animation of mind and speech as he articulated his responses. I begin with the question which framed the interview, and which Rackstraw first addressed.

Sparagana: What is your orientation to landscape – that is I know there is a great deal more to it for you than making a formally beautiful painting. Another way of phrasing this question might be, what is your subject?

Downes: "Relations never cease." Henry James said, relations never cease, and that's my subject I think. When you stand in the landscape, soon as you free yourself from that artificial idea of holding your head still, and closing one eye, from that stationary pinhole vision of perspective of the camera, then relations never cease. You look to the left, you look slightly to the right, and you look further to the left, and then you look up and you go on until you've made a 360, and you've gone the whole way around, in the horizontal, and you've gone the whole way around in the vertical, and you're in the center of a sphere, it's continuous all around you, you're enveloped, you're actually in a dome, but because you're standing on terra firma, you don't see the bottom half. That's my response to it all, that's where I start from really, that idea, I think. And then there's "relations never cease" in the sense also that identity, the identity of things – what I just spoke of is the spatial ceaselessness of it, but there's also the identity ceaselessness of it. If there's a power plant in front of you, it's also standing in the middle of a field, and in that field there are weeds, and among those weeds there are rocks or wildflowers, or something going on that is neglected and out of control, and you have wild land right there, in the middle of your industrial situation. And I'm interested in that – in responding to all of what is really there. I'm not interested in editorializing that, the way a guilty power company will depict egrets living in its oil field. Or an angry environmentalist will depict beer cans floating in a stream. Actually there are both egrets and beer cans in that stream. And so I'm interested in that completeness of all the identities being represented in there somehow. I think those are my subjects, those two things, fundamentally, as they have been. And then the ceaselessness is interesting. You said something in another question, about interiors, and I have started painting interiors recently. And the difference, of course, is

that interiors stop. They're not ceaseless. Relations do cease there, they stop with the wall and they stop with the ceiling, the ceiling is finite and absolute, whereas the sky is infinite. One of the series of interiors I've painted is of a building where the roof's not seen finished, and you see through to the sky, and there you're sort of in a courtyard situation where you feel the enclosure all around you, but above you there's an opening into the infinite. So that would be a major issue and a difference between the two. And also, of course, the light is much more controlled. I mean interiors are an effort to control and curve up and define the nature of continuous space, on the part of the builder or architect or whatever, the consciousness of interior space.

Sparagana: I know you are working down in Marfa. Is it a fascination with those particular building interiors or is it a matter of checking back in with the limitation of finite space which has motivated you to return at this point towards the interior?

Downes: I went to Marfa actually with the idea of painting the mountains. I'd been painting in New Jersey and Galveston – they're both completely flat, they're flat-scapes, and that in itself fascinated me a great deal. When I first went to Galveston I didn't know what to do. There was nothing there somehow because nothing went up or down in the landscape, it seemed. So my paintings got extraordinarily much longer when I went down there than they ever have before and that was because really there was no up and down. It was all lateral extension. I began to paint right up to my feet. Otherwise there was really nothing but a very thin strip. So if you brought it right down to your feet or even into the ditch, which is underground after all, it's digging into the ground that gave you some more up and down. But then I looked at the mountains, and I thought I'd really like to take a crack at that. I went to Marfa just to see the art that was there, to see what Judd had done, and I wanted to go back to paint the mountains. But when I got there I was fascinated by the buildings, and they are very extraordinary structures, mostly built before, which Judd has modified, or in the case of the things that I actually painted in the end. They were two buildings that Judd made from scratch, two concrete buildings that he designed, one of which is finished, one of which is unfinished. And so that was a fascinating comparison to me.

Sparagana: In that situation are you responding to this particular individual (Donald Judd's) decisions about how to limit and determine space?

Downes: Well to some extent you are, yes. They are very severe for one thing, they're very chaste buildings, except that – you know Judd was interested in order, absolutely controllable order – but you know you can't, you can't have it in this world. So all the surfaces of these concrete buildings are covered with the most extraordinary stains that are completely random. I mean that's the way when you take the plywood forms down, you have this amazing hymn to contingency on the wall which may disappear when the interior finish is done. I don't know what

the finish will be, but right now you have those astonishing festoons of stains which fascinated me and which I painted with the minute particularity. . . by the way, the issue of detail in my painting has precisely to do with particularity. . . that I want to respond to. If I'm going to stand out there, I want to do what's there – all of it – every blade of grass, the whole thing and you sort of, I fall in love with the particularity of those things. And I want to get it, I want to get the real individuality of them, and document it fully. The original idea of painting from nature when I was turning away from abstract painting was to put something in front of you, to force your hand, and so I've let that be totally in charge really, that idea of letting the outdoors tell my hand what to do.

Sparagana: Are there any painters, historical or contemporary, who you feel share your subject?

Downes: You mean the endless relations of things? Well yes, I certainly do think so. I think that in the interior space the Dutch painter Saenredam does that. He paints very a large interior view. He has some perspective method of a vanishing point, but he expands it enormously so he does have a very large range sometimes, either very high, or quite wide, with his churches. The thing about them is, unlike Canaletto, another architectural painter, they're not mechanical. And that's what's so interesting about them – clearly Canaletto could say there's the vanishing point and here's where you're standing. Now go finish it – you know, to the assistants – just draw in the vertical columns, according to the map, and you've got it. There's that deadness in there. Sometimes you get some painting energy in there, especially in the early ones. But to me, Saenredam's surfaces are unbelievably alive.

Sparagana: Do you think about your audience? Do you have certain desires as to how your audience engages your work?

Downes: Yes. I certainly do, yes. I'm interested in criticizing the concept of "landscape." There is a lovely phrase by E. M. Forster, he's talking about bird watchers, and he says you look through a pair of field glasses and suddenly it makes you wise and good. That's very funny. There's a kind of pretension about relating to the landscape, that it somehow makes you better because you appreciate it. And I think there's a lot of hypocrisy in all that. Most of the landscapes we see we get to by getting in a car which runs on fossil fuel, that's been made out of steel and batteries and rubber and all kinds of processes. If we saw all those things going on in the landscape we'd say, "Oh, it's been ruined." But you know we got there in that car. So I'm interested in – I refuse to have anything to do with that. And I'm trying to needle people a little bit by saying, "what are you talking about? This industrial plant is magnificent looking if you just relax and look at it. And it's the way you live." We talk about "its a shame this landscape's been spoiled," and we yearn for a landscape which isn't there any more. But we changed it. It's not there because we changed it. So that's definitely one aspect of the audience's relationship. And I want to keep edgy what is

the landscape, what is our landscape. I want to get a little edge on that all the time, without preaching. I have no interest in preaching, but teasing more. . . . Agility is all.

Sparagana: Has there been any essential change, due to social, economic, political changes, say in the last twenty years, in terms of what you're engaging as a painter with these sites?

Downes: Yeah I do, oh yes. In the mid-sixties when I first started painting landscape, right through the seventies, I was involved with a sort of critique of the whole industrial sprawl idea. The paintings I made in Maine in those years were a celebration of what I considered values that I came to be more skeptical of later on – about living some kind of a somewhat different life. But it was hard to sustain that because I spent three quarters of the year in the middle of a huge city. And I wasn't going to give up the values that the city stood for, and gave me in terms of stimulation and so on. So slowly I allowed more and more into my painting, more evidence of the functionalism of the landscape and the questions that that raised and the problems it raised. I think that's right. I don't think that, when we build a power plant we're doing anything radically different, philosophically, than a beaver building a dam. Some beavers build dams in the wrong place, flood an area they didn't mean to flood, or that doesn't yield what they want. In terms of environmental changes the Aswan dam is kind of a fuck-up. And we have to learn to be good beavers or we'll make ourselves extinct. So there are a lot of things going on I think, and you don't want to limit yourself at all. You know I was thinking about those interiors that I've painted and what I could say to you about them, and I don't know that I can say anything yet, very much. . . you have to sort of make these things out of instinct, out of curiosity about what you're looking at. And then as time goes by they cease to be your paintings in a way, cease to be things you're working on, and you can sort of look at them and think about what they mean or what the consequences of doing that were. But, yeah, I did start out with a strong fascination with the rural in painting the landscape, the rural values which were terribly important to me, terrible important to my painting and way of thinking, and that gradually changed, and I wanted a more complete view of all the aspects of life together, including the factories on the coast and so forth and so on, the whole thing of it.

Withstander Palms at the Demolition of the Old Cotton Warehouses, Galveston, Texas
1995
Oil on Canvas, 13" x 55.75"
Collection of William F. Stern, Courtesy the Artist

Rainwater Ditch with Six Culvert Bridge, Texas City
1996
Oil on Canvas, 19.125″ x 90″
Courtesy the Artist

Concrete Ditch with Sewer Main in Spring, Texas City
1997
Oil on Canvas, 22" x 72"
Courtesy the Artist

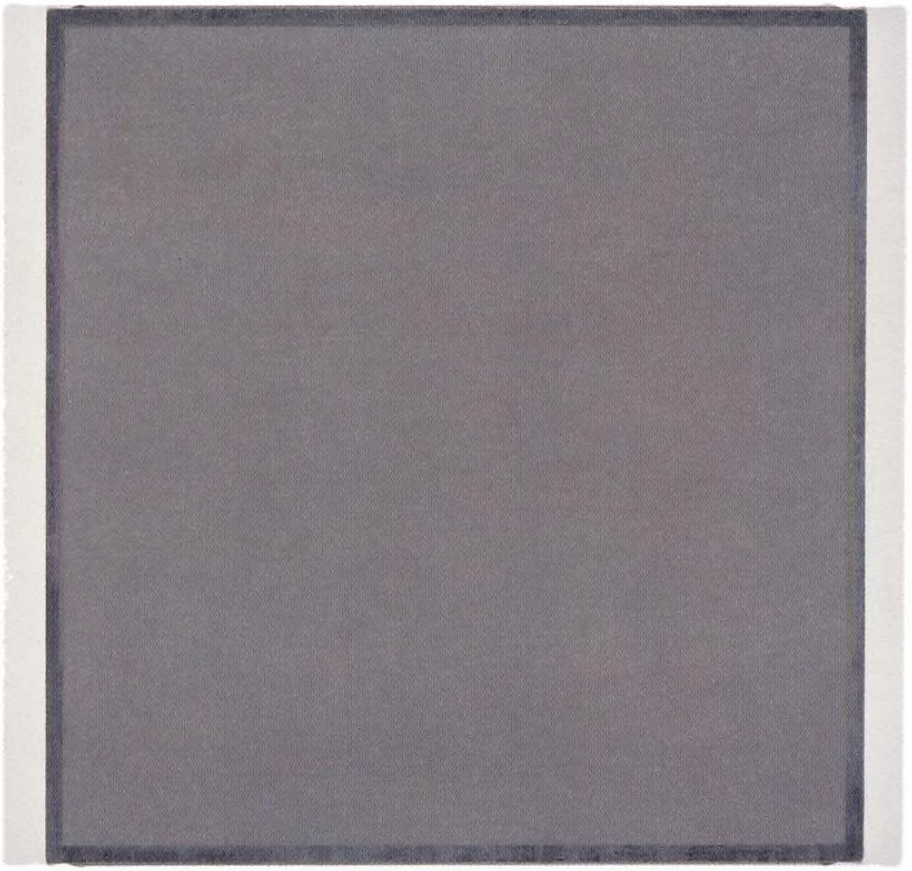
In the High Island Oil Field, Looking West
1990
Oil on Canvas, 16" x 108"
Courtesy the Artist

Arcadian Landscape: The Red Grove
1998
Lambda Print, 10″ x 28.75″
Courtesy the Artists

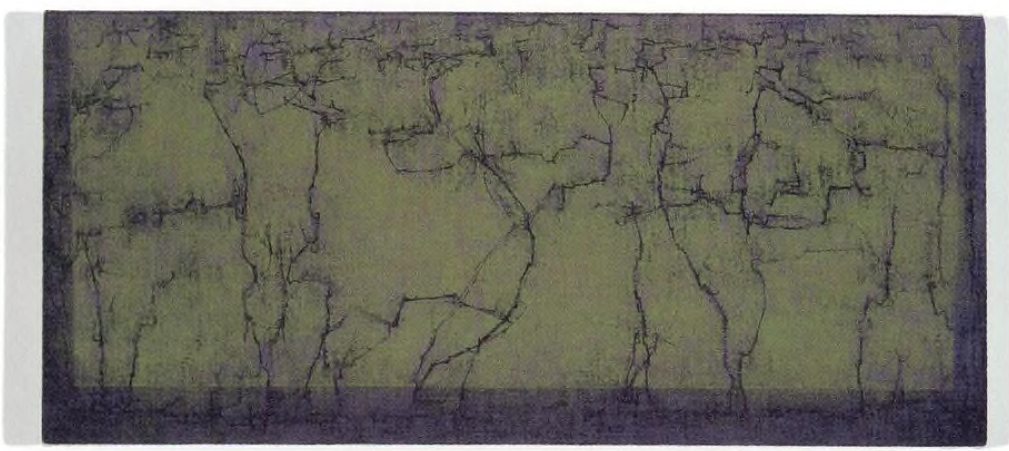
Arcadian Landscape: The Blue Shepherd
1998
Lambda Print, 10″ x 28.75″
Courtesy the Artists

Arcadian Landscape: The Pastoral Tradition
1998
Lambda Print, 18.75″ x 53″
Courtesy the Artists

Et In Arcadia Ego: *Observer and Tomb*
1998
Iris Print, 35″ x 47″
Courtesy the Artists

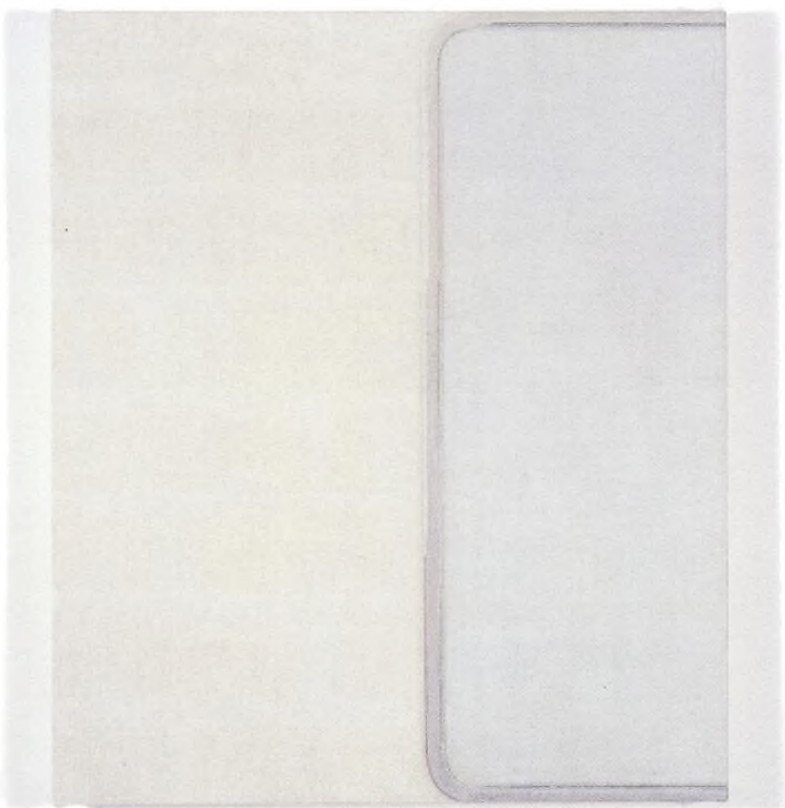


Grey Sky (Window)
1993
Oil on Canvas, 28″ x 27″
Private Collection, courtesy the Artist and Feigen Contemporary



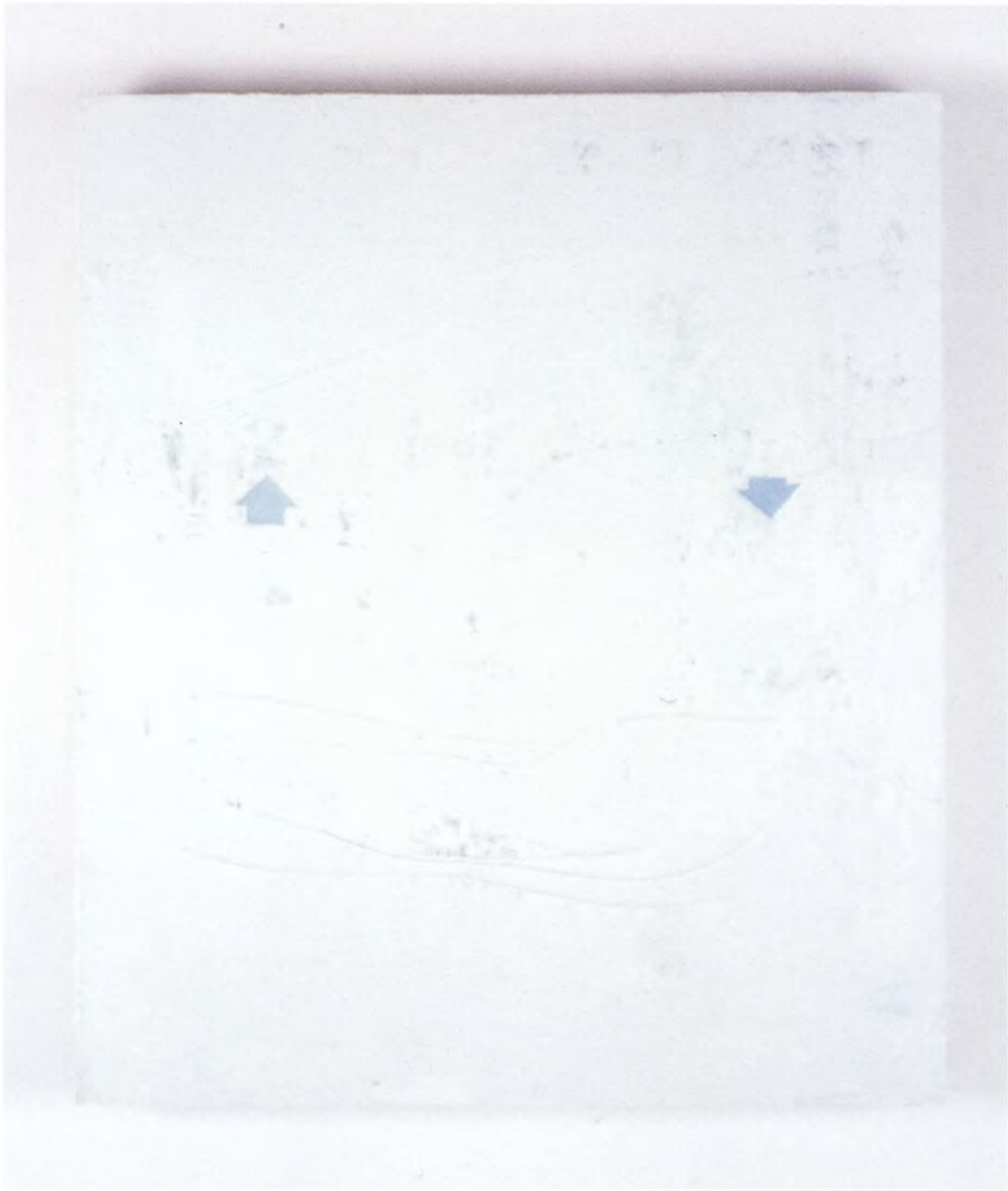
Transom
1993
Oil on Canvas, 15″ x 33″
Private Collection, courtesy the Artist and Christopher Grimes Gallery

Siding
1994
Oil on Canvas, 44″ x 42″
Private Collection, courtesy the Artist and Christopher Grimes Gallery



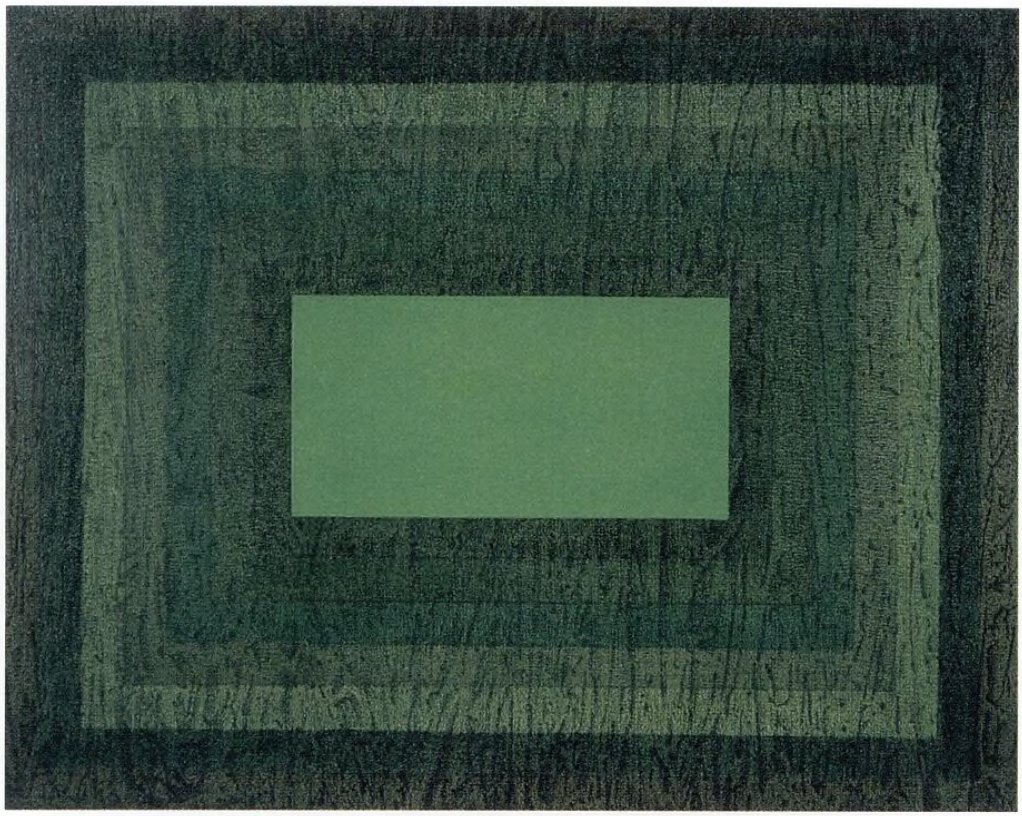
Bricks Mirror
1997
Oil on Canvas, 22″ x 19″
Private Collection, courtesy the Artist and Feigen Contemporary

How it Was
1997
Oil on Linen, 20″ x 45″
Courtesy the Artist



Snows
1996
Oil on Linen, 31″ x 21″
Courtesy the Artist

Tree
1996
Oil on Linen, 25″ x 10.25″
Courtesy the Artist



His Perfect Lawn
1996
Oil on Canvas, 19″ x 24″
Courtesy the Artist

The Trouble with Arcadia

But when, at Zephyrs' call, joyous Summer sends both sheep and goats to the glades and pastures, let us haste to the cool fields, as the morning-star begins to rise, while the day is young, while the grass is hoar, and the dew on the tender blade most sweet to the cattle.
– Virgil, *Georgics Book III*

In our current extended project we are trying to loosen the concept (and reality) of "Arcadia" from its unexamined niche in world history. While Virgil's shepherds roamed in classical pastoral settings, technology had already visited the fields and woods where they watched over their sheep, goats, or cattle. And by the time Nicolas Poussin painted his various scenes of Arcadian shepherds in the 17th century rural industry had modified the landscape even more extensively. Arcadia evolved as the construction of a privileged class of urbanites who longed for a simpler life in a primordial place. All they could do was recreate its appearance as they fancied – or wished – it had been.

The concept lingers into our age of highly advanced computational technology. It is from the deliberate perspective and using the protean tools of electronic culture that we are attempting to revisualize and reconstruct ancient Arcady.

There are two Arcadias: one real, the other virtual or, more accurately, ideal. It's this one that gets all the good press, recurs in our collective (Western) dreams, is celebrated by the arts, and masks the truth about the first one. Pastures aren't born, they're made. And the effects of grazing can be extremely destructive to fields, streams, and forests. This is not the popular view.

Arcadia, a mountainous district in the Peloponesse, supplied the Greek timber industry from ancient times and, despite being the sacred domain of Pan, was the poorer for the exploitation of lumbermen and shepherds. In his most famous essay, "*Et in Arcadia ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," Erwin Panofsky (referring to the writings of Polybius) describes it as, "a poor, bare, rocky, chilly country, devoid of all the amenities of life and scarcely affording food for a few meager goats." This is not exactly what reading Virgil calls to mind. Panofsky explains that Virgil's model derives from Theocritus who took inspiration for his *Idylls* from a more naturally fecund Sicily. In fairness to this bleak picture we're drawing, John Bernard, a scholar of English pastoral poetry, and his wife, the writer Artis Bernard, having travelled recently in Arcadia, reported the landscape seemed actively pastoral and, to all appearances, healthy. As

every eco-aware individual knows, however, appearances sometimes deceive.

It is our position that there is a problematic gap between images of ideal landscapes and the realities of actual human use – or abuse – of the land. The trouble is that the idealized image has great power; done well enough it can seduce us into taking – or mistaking – it for the real. Ansel Adams has been accused of producing just this effect with his grand and popular photographs of the West, i.e., a kind of false assurance, a preferred version of things. In our Arcadian Landscape series we try to destabilize this effect with visual and referential clues we hope might lead a viewer to reconsider the hyperreality of these highly constructed landscapes.

A friend once said he'd rather sit on a park bench all day counting pigeons than spend an hour at an exhibition of Poussin's paintings. Until recently we wouldn't have entirely disagreed. The received ideas from our art school days had taught us to see Poussin through Cézanne's eyes as part of the modernist tour of past masters. The lesson to be learned was how he had built the *space* of his painting. Content was ignored. Although we got the point, it didn't really captivate either of our imaginations. In 1994, an article on our work was published in the Dutch photography journal, *Perspectief*. The author – an English writer, Stephen Hobson – made what was for us a very provocative reference to Poussin's *Arcadian Shepherds*, famous for the inscription, "Et in Arcadia ego" which appears on the tomb surrounded by four shepherds, one of whom kneels deciphering the text. In his article, Hobson awoke what we'll call our highly dormant interest in Poussin.

The Arcadian Shepherds is an extraordinary painting. If you've not seen it, we'd like you to take our word for that unqualified observation. An impressive body of critical writing has evolved around the painting, most well known of which is Panofsky's essay. What strikes us as extraordinary about all the writing is the nearly complete absence of comment about the landscape. Poussin did not intentionally overlook or under-paint it, although the middle distance is uncharacteristically vague; at the same time, he lavished no special attention on it either. Yet the landscape is meant to be more than mere scenery; after all, it is *Arcadia* where one might dwell in a state of perfect, eternal bliss. All attention of the four shepherds reflects inward on the meaning of the inscription. The tomb with its enigmatic inscription takes up perhaps one-fifth of the canvas area, but it affectively displaces the landscape from our vision. Arcadia in this work is taken for granted as a distant horizon to the melancholy fact of human mortality. The message might be that the state of bliss one experiences in Arcadia may be perfect – at least to a shepherd of the ancient world – but it is not eternal except as it is passed (through art) from one living soul to another.

Shall we assume then that Arcadia itself is eternal in this representation? Apparently so, but only as a virtual topography, that is, as a poetic construction. Nature, however, is as mortal as we are – a fact more widely understood now than ever before. Still the seduction of *Arcadia*, a virtual and perfect nature, persists in its power to quiet our fears over nature's loss.

We live half the year in a state, Vermont, that understands its true nature as pastoral. A hundred and fifty years ago three-quarters of the land was cleared of its impressive white pine, spruce, fir, maple, beech, and birch trees. The land that had supported vast forests was turned largely to the support of cattle, dairy cows, sheep and some goats. Over the last fifty years it has become increasingly difficult to sustain small farms, and pastures have more and more returned to forests. All of this to the great dismay of most Vermonters who lament the disappearance of a way of life and the closing in of their view. Here Arcadia is losing its shepherds except for the most persistent or privileged. But then there is hope to be found in the labor and industry of loggers throughout the state eager to meet the demands of the world's timber markets. Arcadia may yet return.

JULIA FISH

Artist Statement

As with the fiction writer, I live and think through images. I make paintings and drawings which, I hope, might test language, which visualize questions rather than tell stories. I want the painted object to stretch the meaning of a given 'subject,' to rearrange its visual syntax into another form of knowing, and to engage the larger history of images that have preceded it.

My work of the past six years has been generated from the modest circumstances encountered within my everyday environment – sections of floors and walls, house-siding and brick, the garden in all seasons, or views held within the windows of home and studio, as in *Grey Sky (Window)* and *Transom*, both from 1993. Despite their relative simplicity, these sources have generated a sequence of exacting questions regarding the scale of the given subject and my physical relationship to it. My challenge has been to construct a painted surface that would manifest a specific place, to translate forms so as to encourage the activity of looking, and looking again a second time. Such paintings have provoked questions regarding the character and history of representation and abstraction, and have proposed that images have the capacity to encapsulate a synthesis of site, weight, materiality and immateriality. This work has led me to understand that the static nature of a painted image is to be embraced as a substantial subject in itself.

My most recent paintings have shifted from the re-presentation of a continuous surface of a singular nature, as found in *Siding* (1994), to specific images which are, as 'found' or 'given,' made-up of distinct parts, and thus able to amplify visual and/or conceptual oppositions. With *Bricks Mirror* (1997), a fragment of the visible world appears to be dislodged from its familiar site, to be constructed as a painting: picturing its own displacement.

Artist Statement

I am working to integrate an essentially abstract painting language with themes and metaphors that reflect my interest in landscape, modernist painting and memory. I have been producing paintings that explore a series of images that permit painterly qualities to open onto social narratives and personal history.

I often use two-dimensional images such as map fragments, airmail envelopes, postcards of landscape and photographic details as a starting point for what ultimately appear to be abstract paintings. The reference in these paintings is often the contemporary practice of painting itself. At times, I am inspired by a specific painting in history, or a retrograde painting device will evoke in me a new imagined procedure. I am interested in how unexpected meaning comes about in painting and in furthering a tension between recognizable imagery and the non-objective. For example, in a painting called *Lost Lakes* (1996) a topographical image taken from a childhood camping map is fixed with under painting and resolved through a process of glazing and sanding to bring the various drips and pentimenti back up to the surface. This results in what I think of as a painted ecology. Other recent works allude to the photographic close-up. I have reduced the painting to a skin, or represented it as tree bark. In *Tree* (1996) and *Two Charles* (1992) the surfaces are made up of layer upon layer of paint which I texture to create a surface tension that can also be seen as opening to a deeper space. I started working with the metaphor of snow in the early 1990s. These earlier all white paintings referred to the events surrounding the break-up of the Soviet Union. More recently the white paintings refer to a different process of thawing and repression; that of memory and it's emotional manifestations. In the painting *Snows* (1996) meaning lies buried beneath a thick encrusted surface, its simple truths revealed in pale blue arrows pointing up and down. I am presently working on a series of gestural paintings whose compositions refigure and abstract a studio installation of landscape postcards.

The physical nature of my paint surfaces reflect the emotional syntax of my process, a process of touch and rumination. I seek to transform the rhetoric of abstract painting's distanced aesthetic into a language of identification.

In the Mist of Almost Blue

And just when I'd thought of a trip
to Australia, flying out of the clouds,
and that blue reef, they asked and I said

okay I'd do that job, I mean something
to stir things up that were down
to earth and so very cozy. Don't let

yourself get tired, he said, while people
who'd shared a country were killing
each other off, and guns were selling

like ice cream on the streets
of major cities, and then the President
dropped some bombs and everyone said

Ohboyohboy. Ends we lose means no
one wins, but doing's what we set against
undoing – it's how we're made. In the midst

of all that blue is where I'd like
to live, wavy blue floor, floor-to-heaven
blue walls with only a line between, and once,

I'd swear, I did. Now the clouds cloud
that scene, and it's just as well: beyond
the blue horizon's no address in anyone's

book, and besides, there's plenty to keep
us going here at home. To lie back
in those fabulous arms, relax and enjoy

the view, this is your home away
from home, is premature. Up in Adam!
I thought I heard, or was it up

in atoms? But where we live's in time
between: whatever they are, they're what
we're at, so early these late mornings.

Silver

Spoon in her mouth, rings
on her fingers, fox around
her shoulders, watered moon.

Lining, threads, bodies
on the screen, little fish,
swimming money in the pool.

Change, loose or counted
on, to keep the same. Some
lights, like this, silver gray.

MICHELE BOWMAN

breaking the levee

I want windows down a migration of bees

a baby mockingbird black as his smooth tiny tooth

fat root in the soil of a stone and I want

red clay between my toes bone dust in red hair

I want tender weeds at the edge of the alley I want

to take water down my chin from the tin star cup

to be held to the chest like a girl in her spring

I want a soft piece of bread from your hand

an eyelash and fingernail moon from the last time

the first touch of skin to the glass you will pour then

I want to grow smaller as small as the seed of a cloud

I want to be the wet sidewalk by your old house or

inside it and nothing else for I love you

so much I want to strand you in Missouri

Song of Austin

When the bats finally smoke themselves,
burning from under the bridge,
we throw our wine bottle in Town Lake's sedge
and turn toward home. Vague nightbirds budge
daybirds into illustrated birdbooks on shelves.

Where the strongest conviction is the Club
sleeping outside on the steering wheel
we lay our heads, secure in the feeling
that tomorrow's drive will be east
and wherever we stop we'll dine on crab.

Branches angle from the stump. In California –
how many days ago? – beside a redwood
one deciduous straggler fell, splitting its side
on the giant-shrouded ground, but not quite dead,
sprouted autonomous twigs, as in mock-mourning

for the shape of the parent they are.
Is the secret this simple? Fall to grow?
Sprung fresh from old headaches, I no
more will listen to those stupendous groans
whose creaking causes I barely remember:

something about the rain and the traffic.
Nearly asleep I hear my traveling companion
begin to snore. This should have been
a waking tour, untethered to machine.
Slumber in a haybarn – that would be terrific.

M. REBECCA RANSOM

On Undreaming Walls and Others

As a girl you remember
trying to walk through walls.
Standing in the dining room,
eyes closed, you'd press your hand
to the green and ivory wallpaper,
willing your cells to divide,
slide and flow past molecules
of wall, your hand
sinking in up to the wrist
with a tingling fizz
in your fingers like ginger ale.

But when you opened your eyes
your hand remained firmly your own,
wall standing flat in its place.
Perhaps that should have warned you,
you say now, that merging
is impossible, that you are discrete.
Each day of your marriage
you woke under white sheets
feeling bruised, sore,
too aware of your tongue
pressing against teeth,
heart beating behind a rib cage,
still inside your own body.

Some day, you say,
someone will make your fingertips tingle,
your body pop and crack
like static. But in your dreams,
one morning you wake
alone, go to the mirror,
see yourself in a green
and ivory nightgown.
You will still have ribs and teeth,
but something in your own face
will cause blood to beat
softly all around your body
like a moth in a lampshade.
You will stretch your hand

toward the mirror, feel glass
cold like water under your palm,
imagine your arm sinking
into its own image, into the mirror
like flesh into water.

ELIZABETH DODD

Northwest Passage

We walk across cottongrass flox
lichen and moss where the headwaters flow
from the season's snow melt.

We follow old glaciers wildflowers
murdered Nez Perces.
A few large footprints: moose.

Beyond the marked trail we're
kneeling in eons of stone-
dust stonecrop pearly

everlasting the beautiful work
of the world. Like Impressionist flames rosy
paintbrush reddens the high meadow.

Explorer gentian presents
its night-blue throat one
after another. In this the middle

of my life I try carrying
nothing everything only
what each day I can lift in the pack.

Last night as if cobbled in light
the Milky Way showed one of the many
visible directions.

CARROLL SUSCO

A Small Love

What he gives me is a small love, pinched between his index finger and thumb. A pinch is held between the cheek and gum, something to suck on, spit out – ping! His other fingers brush up into a fan when he pinches his love for me. He holds his hand up, the two fingers forming a hole to look through, the sign for OK. That's what he tells me. Things are fine.

With others he is smiles and flourishes, walking into a room with cape flapping so that people think "The nerve," and some women think, "He's doing this for me." I don't remember thinking that, but I must have once. Must have thought all the commotion was his mating dance as he stopped on a dime and turned. In that way I saw him able to give more than I was capable of wanting.

Probably it wasn't like that. Probably it was just that once he listened. His face matched mine. We frowned together, gave each other a small warm smile.

What I tell him now: what you give me is not enough. I need more words of assurance and squeezes. I need you to call and say you thought about me. I need nights out like we used to have, when we leaned over the table, talking, when we used to lie in bed after sex with no covers, showing each other our scars. He tells me, "This is how I am. You'll just have to get used to it." How he is is quiet and uninterested, too tired to go out tonight or too broke or too busy. He wraps himself in the sheets like he's been mummified. I can't see his face.

We are invited to a party. To appease me, we go to dinner first. At dinner, the hostess seats us in a heavy traffic area. At the restaurant he's said two things: "No smoking," and "Hamburger with everything and fries and a draft of what's cheap."

Sitting in a restaurant silent in a crowd waiting for food, waiting for something to happen, waiting for the fun to start, is not appeasing me. Hunger makes me tired and irritable. It makes me a driver who swerves too close to the curb, someone who honks, screams out the window, a potential killer.

I say, "We're not *talking*."

He looks confused. He didn't know there was something he was supposed to be saying. Usually at home, we sit with the TV on when we eat together (or alone). It's something to watch and listen to, something that isn't us.

The food comes and we eat it.

"How's work been going?" I say.

He looks up at me. He says. "That doesn't look like a chef's salad. More like a spinach salad."

"Some sort of hybrid."

"What is that?" He says, "A mixing bowl? It's huge."

It's the world's largest salad, even without the cheese. Pounds of spinach leaves topped with chunks of crouton, hard boiled eggs, bread and butter, bacon, and salami on the side. "Doesn't eating a salad that big defeat the purpose?" He says.

I say, "No, it still feels like dieting." For a moment I can't look at him. We pay the bill and go to the party.

I don't know where the words went, the ones we were so full of. Maybe it's true – you can use them all up. You can run out. Now I stand at the edge of the group, watching heads turn while he laughs too loud at someone's joke.

What I want may be a nameless thing, a not-tangible free-floating unreal want, irrational, displaced leftovers from childhood. He's so nice with his drink in his hand, laughing. I'm on the other side of the room, a wet noodle. A hungry noodle. The whole party is floating away from me, slow, and I am standing at the dock, watching, not even attempting to board. I never booked passage. After awhile, we leave.

He kisses me goodnight and I ask him doesn't he want to come in and have sex? He says, "All right. Sure. Why not," and turns off the car. Maybe I'm not sexy. I'm not even aroused. I just asked, because we should be making it. Maybe even in the dark he is aware I am flabby. But I can't stop eating. I can't stop my hunger.

I run and run, up and down my street, my neighborhood, back again, month after month, despite inclement weather. Neighbors raking, the boy pumping gas, see Jane run each morning, my face a fold of wrinkles, my upper teeth biting on my lip. I learn to live with the cramp in my side, the burn in my lungs, the weight of my legs, for that long thin feeling running gives me, that feeling of stretched muscle defined. My collar bone pokes out from under my skin.

A man in a car waits at a stop sign for me to pass, waits for me so he can blow a cloud of smoke from his cigarette in my face. I look at him like he hit me and he steps on it, drives off scared.

Sweat stings my eyes. Glorious sweat signals me when it comes in drips that the rush isn't far behind, that "turn on the sprinklers on a hot day and run through" feeling.

All I can think about is thirst. I imagine a large glass of lemonade I bob up and down in, taking gulps until I'm full.

Standing at the refrigerator still puffing, my heart still trying to even out slow, I tilt my head back and drink ice water out of the pitcher. The cold makes an outline of my lungs that hurts. Dehydrated. An Olympiad. A camel. I chug down cold until my teeth ache, my belly swells. I swallow to hold down, even if it burns. So much water I'm nauseated. I think of Tom then, again, let his picture float in and out. I look down at my slick sculpted legs and swallow.

Something happens. Eating dinner at a bar with him I begin to swell. Sitting on a bar stool eating fried provolone sticks, looking at the same hanging plant I saw there last week, I bloat. People sit alone together watching the TV, which hangs from the ceiling in the corner with the sound turned down. The row of men and a few women nurse half full-half empty glasses, watch the pictures, listen to oldies when someone springs for a song or two on the jukebox. I want to grab their drinks and tip my head back, let the liquid flow, but I know they would say "Look at the crazy woman who stole all our gin and tonics, drank our wine, gulped our beer." That's not something I aspire to – to be the talk of the town.

I settle for my own drink and look at Tom who is reading the bottle labels behind the bar. He is forever unhappy and unwilling to admit it. I order another and drink it and another until I feel not drunk but full and sick of the taste of beer but I am unwilling to switch to wine now mid-tying one on. We order zucchini sticks deep fried.

"What do you think?" I ask him.

"They're better up the street at Harry's."

"But there's always that man there, the one with the runny nose." He smiles and we look into each other's eyes. Momentary recognition.

I know something is happening to me. I am bloated. I lay off salt but still I swell. I join Weight Watchers. I'm tired of being the only one to watch my weight. A man waiting for the bus checks out women's rear ends. It makes me feel terrible. Puffy. The man is no one special. No one to give such power to. I am offended and worried both. It doesn't matter what he thinks. I know by now what the standard of beauty is. I know I don't measure up. The man at the bus stop, unless he is crazy, knows this too.

The first day of Weight Watchers and I am an alien. Women with rolls of fat, large breasts, give me the evil eye. I push out the fat under my upper arm but even I know it's not enough. They look away at the floor, at their shoes, at the places in the floor where the white tiles fit together. No one will look at me, not even the woman with chocolate-chip eyes.

The instructor comes in. Her name is Maryanne. She wears a sticky label on her breast that says "Hello Maryanne." She is not fat, not thin. She is the example. Scanning the crowd she stops when she sees my face. She was the one who signed me up. She was the one who said we all could learn to eat right, eat better. I didn't ask her how people learned to eat right before, back in the 1800s, back in prehistoric times. No sense in asking – all those people were dead. I told her I ate Twinkies. Twinkies are the worst, all chemical, showed I didn't even have good taste in picking my fats. She shook her head and cringed.

"Everyone," she says. They look up. "This is Jane. She's new." Most people smile. But a woman in the front row eyes me up and down.

The instructor pretends not to notice the commotion, but she asks in a singsong pretty voice "And what brings you to Weight Watchers, Jane?"

"Lately," I say in my new earnest way, the way I imagine they want me to sound, "I've begun to swell."

The woman in the front row sneers and pulls back. She doesn't care if she offends. She leans over to her friend and says loud enough for the first three rows to hear, "What's she talking about? To me, she looks hungry."

If I had the guts I would scream, I belong here! and shake my fist. They

took my money! I made it under the wire. I have ten pounds to lose. Ten pounds of anything. All you need to join Weight Watchers is an extra ten pounds. Swollen, I think I have more than enough, despite the peanut gallery. I sit through the lecture called "I love you but I'm not hungry." It's one of many – a warm-up for the upcoming holidays. The others eye me in the hall during break. What are they saying – she's not fat, she's swollen. The bold woman with the big mouth makes her move as we shuffle back inside the classroom. She works her way up behind me and says in my ear, "Do yourself a favor. Go home and eat a pizza. Eat a slice for me." I turn around but she won't make eye contact. Maybe I imagined it. We file in and head for our seats.

Afterward, I go home. I won't come back.

I make Tom dinner. Used to privations, he doesn't mind the skinless chicken, the plain green beans.

We sit on the couch with blankets over our legs and he listens to me. I say, "I have the ten pounds to lose. What's their problem?"

"You look fine," he says, but what does that mean? My skin doesn't stretch taut over my hips anymore but sits on a soft pillow there. My breasts have begun to change shape. They're not so full looking anymore. Despite my feeling of being bloated. It's my cheeks that are bloated, and blotchy. I've turned blotchy. Tom shouts out the answer to *Jeopardy*. "What is California?"

And I fantasize that he said, "You do look hungry," and picked me up, this tired bag of bones, scooped me up like cotton candy, wrapped me around and around the stick and some of me floated off, a wisp of cotton candy cloud.

We watch the whole prime-time lineup. We sit in the dark and watch it all, even the commercials. During the eleven o'clock news my stomach rumbles. I say, "They didn't want me, not fat enough!"

He says, "Give it time."

What I give myself is a small love. Everything, I tell myself, in moderation. My legs are a sculpture of muscle, bone and tendon. My arms small hills that collide. I carry water with me because I am thirsty. A guy at the gym says, "Lay off salt. Chew gum." I'm feeling obsessive. Who knows why. It's so hard with all the things we should do to do them all. But I feel like I should. The spokeswoman for Tic Tac with her hard white teeth and water blue eyes that smile makes me feel vaguely guilty of something.

I look for love in all the wrong places. Tom has a meeting and I go to the country bar, alone. I put on boots and jeans to blend in. But it's too close to Christmas and the being alone depresses me. I leave a message on Tom's machine to meet me there. He never shows. When he plays the tape back all he hears is party noise – music and yeah yeah yeah for talking, my voice calling "Tom?"

I sit at the bar reading a romance novel and thinking, In this age of restraint we've left passion to the imagination. I order a shot of whiskey. Overcome with dry mouth and burning throat I order another, at three dollars a pop. The bartender read this book in a past life, the one where she was married and spending a lot of time alone. But she remembers the book

well enough to point out the good parts. I have another whiskey, my eyes roll back in my head, and as if I have been thrown by the mechanical bull, I fall to the floor.

I wake in a hot steamy smoky place – only for a moment – to see haggard men in cowboy hats. Marlboro men. People who need a shave. Eyes that look scared for me.

I wake in a firm bed with stiff sheets. I have been awake a moment or two before a woman in blue scrubs rushes in, looks at my chart. "You're awake," she says, "Good." And she leaves. But she's back again, now with a doctor. The doctor points a penlight in my eye. The doctor says, "So, you're awake." I must be awake. I feel her warm beside me, smell something sweet and fresh, shampoo maybe, coming off her. I feel the weight of that thick white cotton smock. She leans closer, grips my wrist and counts. Her lips wordless, move one, two, three.

I remember vaguely the color of the whiskey, the burning feeling and then the numb. "Since when do they admit people for tying one on?" I say.

She says, "That's procedure when someone goes into a coma."

"A coma. Wow," I say, "Did I drink that much?"

She says, "Do you remember your name?" and asks me memory questions, like on TV.

She says, "How long have you been a diabetic?"

"I don't know," I say, "How long?" We look at each other, embarrassed.

Tom comes in. He says he wasn't here the whole time. He's called my family. I've been out for 12 hours.

My sisters come in and greet me with pretend smiles. "How are you?" they say in unison in a way that makes me say "Just fine, how are you?"

"Us?" they say. Margaret says, "Silly." They act surprised to see me, as if they didn't fly here for me, ride over in the cab talking about me. Both of them terrible fakers. I know they are worried. But they are comforting in their bright colored clothes. Margaret in fuschia colored silk, Sam in bright yellow synthetic fabric. They dress to cheer, all smiles.

Sam says, "You're going to have settle down now, have to stop living on the edge."

I don't know what that means, exactly, but I think it has to do with staying up late to watch the end of a movie or not being married yet, or having an extra ten pounds. So I say, "Those colors you're wearing, that's living dangerously. "

Margaret says, "I talked to the doctor. It's not that big a deal. You can control it with diet. You'll just have to watch what you eat."

Sam says, "No more drunken binges." She smiles, her large mouth nowhere near laughing.

"I can't watch what I eat *more*," I say. Sam shakes her head. She doesn't believe me. Already I weigh my food, buy Lite bread, nonfat cheese, low-sodium soups. I long for a large pizza with pepperoni, long forbidden from my food repertoire. Margaret says, "Sure you can. In fact, the diet looks so good I asked for an extra copy."

Margaret says, "You're all right now, that's the important thing. So you're a little more careful with your food. You have your life." Funny, when she says it like that, it's hard to get excited. Life reduced to the practical.

Margaret says, "By the way, I told Mom and Dad you fell and broke your leg. Not about the other. I didn't want to worry them."

"The doctor wants me to ask about a history of diabetes," I say.

Sam says, "Don't tell them. Mom won't be able to stop worrying you'll go blind."

"This is ridiculous, don't you think?" I say.

Margaret says, "Well, you don't see them that much anyway."

Sam says, "If you'd only take care of yourself."

I get crosswords and sugarless gum, balloons and plants. Tom sends red roses and sits uncomfortably in the chair by the bed. We watch something, try not to look at each other, *Three's Company*. I always hated that show. I hide the IV. He has bags under his eyes and clutches his stomach, as if it were trying to leap away. I want to say "Hold on!" Later he calls and tells me he got sick on the way out. It was all those smells – ammonia, and urine, the smells of rotting. All those containers for infectious waste. The smell of surgery – removed organs tossed in a container. He says he smelled blood. I don't argue even though all I smell is disinfectants, perfumed cleaners, all I feel are stiff, sterilized sheets.

Sam fights Margaret for the right to push me out of the hospital. Neither one has pushed a wheel chair before. I'm their first.

My sisters stay for two days over the weekend after I'm released and before they have to get back to work. They're going to get me back on my feet, get me started on my new menu. They go to the grocery store and are gone for hours. Over broiled chicken breasts and lima beans, we talk about Margaret's husband. "He didn't answer the phone last night at three a.m." she says, pointing a lima bean at me. I make like I'm busy cutting but Sam says, "He's just trying to freak you out." If Tom were here he would say, "Maybe he was asleep."

Their last day we go for tea and shopping at the department store downtown. That's what we'd do if I wasn't sick. And I'm not sick, I'm diabetic. We buy skirts and shirts, several pairs of shoes, and then head for the cafeteria on the top floor. I love cafeterias – all those choices, everything already made and warm or refrigerated. All of it waiting. The two meats and two vegetables, the potatoes and gravy. In cafeterias, they always have macaroni and cheese. This one does not break with tradition, and because they made it, I get some. Margaret looks at Sam and they both look at me. "It's OK," I say, but really I'm not so sure yet. Margaret gets out her list and checks.

"I guess it's OK, just fattening," she says.

Near the end of the food line sits the glass case filled with meringues and cream pies – chocolate, banana, key lime – fruit pies – rich blueberry that dyes your mouth blue, strawberry with its baby seeds, apple. I think of fall, fresh apple pies still steamy with their cinnamon smell and globs of butter. I think of pouring on top a little fresh cream, some brown sugar. On

the top shelf of the dessert case sits a chocolate torte, vanilla chocolate puddings with whipped cream and a cherry, Jell-Os – orange, green, red. They don't look like poison.

Margaret reaches for the Jell-O. "No," I say, "I insist you each get a real dessert for me.

"Jane," they say. They look guilty. I've asked them to sin. Their eyes say, You can't ask us to do this.

"I'll scream," I say, "I'll down that chocolate pudding." My hand reaches for the cooler. They look at each other, they can't rip my hand away.

"All right," Sam says, "Just put the pudding down."

I fill a large glass with water and ice, drink half before I reach the cashier. "Sprite?" she says.

"No."

I watch. Margaret eats chocolate cream pie and Sam white cake with chocolate icing. I eat macaroni and cheese. We sip coffee – mine black decaf, both of them two sugars. Margaret says, "You have to take care of yourself now." She just says it, out of the blue. We look at each other, then down at her pie. My eyes won't leave. Simply refuse. She pushes the plate away and it just sits there, uneaten, the chocolate cream leaking out into a thick puddle. "For God's sake, eat it. It tastes good, doesn't it?" I say. She does.

I should have eaten that cheesecake that night my friend turned twenty-one and the other girls wouldn't eat a piece, either. I should have eaten it, no matter how it looked on my hips. It just sat there on the kitchen table and my friend's mother looked hurt. She had the plates sitting out. She'd made it herself, her daughter's favorite, but no one touched it.

I tell my sisters, "Thanks for helping me, now get the hell out." I drive them to the airport. I have a short fuse. Temperance wears thin. Usually, by now, I have had twice the caloric intake, sugar, and caffeinated coffee. In this world it is necessary to have vices. So I act like an ingrate. They'll blame my being sick. They'll hold it over me later when I'm feeling better. I fight the urge to call my mother and come clean, but I imagine this killing her and stop dialing after the first six numbers. If I have to shoot up insulin and she sees the tracks I'll just tell her I'm a junkie. I laugh, loud and hard.

Tom and I go see the movie *The Three Temptations of Eve*. I figure beforehand they will be fat, chocolate, and alcohol, but we get there and find out the temptations are men. I would take anything as a distraction, settle for a box of Gummi Bears. "Jane," Tom says, his mouth open so drool could come dripping out, a gasp stuck in the back of his throat, concern, a mother hen who can't wait to tell the world the sky is falling. "Jane, don't," he says, like I have cursed my soul with a box of two dollar candy, like the world could tilt, spin loose and be sucked into the black hole. He rests his hand on mine, holds it on the counter so I can't open my wallet. "We'll take popcorn instead." He looks at me and smiles, "My treat." I imagine how it would feel to bend down and bite the hand that feeds me, the hand

that restricts me, his hand. With my calmest uncalm voice I say, "Gummi Bears won't kill me." I show my teeth and know now how it must feel to be mad. The counter person is looking alarmed and I tell myself, "Reality check. One Two Three Four." We go sit down and watch Eve be tempted. The one that tempts me is not the guy who seduces her in the bath house and their towels drop to the floor – although that one is not half bad – nor the others in the subway and under the stage while *Cats* is being performed.

What tempts me is the man who makes her breakfast in bed. What tempts me is not so much the man as what he does with his hands – the fresh Belgium waffles he's topped with real strawberries and whipped cream and the homemade espresso. It's a quick cut-in/cut-out of her husband, the one she doesn't appreciate, him being nice to her on their anniversary. The scene is showing us, the audience, the obvious, what she's taking for granted, him. But what she is really so ungrateful for is that fabulous sugar, natural and unnatural, the caffeine, the devil-may-care attitude toward her meal and her trim little unfaithful thigh sticking up over the cover so thin in all its seductiveness. No wonder she's tempted and tempting – who wouldn't want her in all her luxuriant wealth.

When the lights come up, Tom sees the red eyes and tear tracks on my cheeks and looks concerned. I seem to him to be obsessed with the credits but I am trying to maintain control in the face of meager portions. My lack of opportunity for extravagance. He takes my hand and says, "Ready?" I know he is afraid I will say no. My body says no. Won't get up, go.

I slip my hand out of his, take his wrist and squeeze. I say in my most uncalm calm voice, my low screeching roar, "If I can't have Gummi Bears I will kill everyone in this theatre and rip all the projection screens."

"OK," Tom says, "OK." We walk together up the long hall back to the concession stand, like a couple after a long year of air raids walks back from the shelter to the town. I hold the Gummi Bears in my palm. They're soft and springy colored gelatin. I pop one in my mouth and suck. Tom with a Gummi Bear hanging from his mouth looks at me shocked and scared. He doesn't have to say what I thought, too, that people die, people live. You can't wait for one or the other. He says, "I could use a belt." So I belt him.

I lie in wait in a black teddy I bought on a whim. I cut the tags off. It still smells new. It's silly to be sitting by my door dressed this way with candles melting onto the table and soft jazz on. Silly. I laugh like a drunk imagining Tom's face when he walks in the door. Or the UPS guy. Whoever comes to the door gets it. I wish Tom were a stranger. I'm so crazy. He is late. I hope he hasn't fallen asleep.

What I will give him is my big tongue when he walks in. My arms and legs will wrap around him like Medusa's hair and I will suck his tongue and bite it. On the way to the floor there will be a flash of regret but then my hair will be whipping and we will take a small bounce and I will forget my reservations. He will be locked inside my spinning eye and give himself to it. There will be no use fighting. He and I, we will be arms and legs flailing

and I will suck and suck his sweet tongue, his sweet skin and never get my fill. I will eat him all day like thick whole milk chocolate pudding or melted bars of chocolate warm in the pan. I will eat him like lumpy tapioca, rice pudding, cheesecake. He will be my aged red wine, my truffles, my clams casino. I am insatiable.

GREG GRUMMER

The Doctor Upstairs

I was upstairs in the attic gathering dust
when I was visited by one particular patient.

He brought with him the dog he had walked most of his life.

There, in his eyes, were the affairs
of two moons looking over a cliff.

And there, in hands empty of clothes,
were his bones.

Sit down, I asked him, then spread out
the white sheet and the candles.

I let him whisper
because that felt holier.

Then I let him out on a February morning.

Never come back, I advised him.

Now I'm thinking about evaporating water.

Now I'm thinking about sand falling down
in one hundred year old glass.

JOSEPH O. LEGASPI

My Father in the Night

My father sleeps when the city rages
around him and rises in the nocturnal hours
to work the graveyard shift
in the linen department of a hospital.
Boxed in his heavy-curtained room,
the glass window shut,
we would think him dead if not for his
snoring, amplified by the thick, stagnant air
which holds the sound before it
dissipates and is absorbed by the walls.
Before he leaves for work,
my father sits at the table, eating
his meat and rice, his children
engaged by the sight of him.
When he rises to work
with boiled eggs and bread slices in a brown bag,
stealing into the urban darkness,
my mother stumbles into bed, alone,
re-arranging the disheveled sheets.
And my father in the night
changes the sheets on hundreds
of hospital beds, the kind where he laid
when his skin was like potato-sack burlap
from dialysis and chemotherapy.
He removes the soiled pillow cases, replacing
them with starched ones. He puts on the white
sheet, unfolding it in the air like a woman's
skirt, settling it down onto the mattress.

SOFIA M. STARNES

The Limp

Between posada and posada,
we limp sideways,

graceless in our unknowing.
We should have

watched where the lamb strayed,
listened to the creak,

creak of the sheepgate, portent
of our bedroom door.

We tossed our sheets too promptly,
the moonface dropped

its loneliness, cheek-first on the pillow;
and the soul nuzzled back:

Bind your left foot to his right. . .

Some nights Lazarillo sleeps
at the foot of the bed.

(Are you shocked?) He snores, purrs,
reminds me of a possum

on the road, for whom we swerve or not;
either way, something

is forever changed: the thrush
we would have blinded

with our headlamps twitches right,
our tiremarks open riddles

out of rain, a naysay-yeasay
river for the next car.

Because of this, they, not we, have splattered
mud against fair ankles,

long-limbed, iridescent pedestrian. . .
Hence will her shadow mourn us.

Come, wake up, Lazarillo, with our limp
we tip the fickle balance.

SHELDON FLORY

Luna Grande

(after Jiménez and Lorca)

Moon, light
my kitchen. Read me
my herbs, spices,
recipes. Strike
cold fire in
my oven.
White
descends the peaks near
Saranac where,
as I listen here,
Bartok still
winds celeste,
percussion,
strings so taut that

even you,
moon,
check your
ascent beyond my
window,
reined
in only to be,
like this gathered
music's sudden
plunging,
loosed
to wander, naked,
on our mountains.

Road Song

Do you know,
it's not hard to imagine
blood in the shadows
of trees. What's the
difference between
dark, dark green
and red. Not much.
I like the sun,
to feel its clear
shawls of light
slide down my skin,
to think my face
meets it
at least half-way.
That I am that sure.
But mostly, I'm not.
Something pulls
at the corners,
almost deep
as bone.
Not quite.
If it were not
for this and that,
if I were someone
else's daughter,
it would be
a different road,
but the shadows and trees
would be the same.
I know this,
and some days
it's what keeps me going:
sun riding on my shoulders,
hands swinging,
rocks snapping loose
under my feet.
I would go the rest of the way
that way,
and keep on going.

DANIEL BLASI

Assuming There Is No Other Way Out

I will walk out the front door with Jane Austen's *Persuasion*
the pages falling away from the binding; the top right
corner of each page stained with dirt from my thumb
and index finger turning and returning them over
the past five years because *the tax of quick alarm*
will have caused me to leave everything behind without thinking:
The photograph of my mother and I sitting on the jetty
at Rockaway Park in Queens, the sea so blue it is difficult to discern
where it ends and sky begins; my wallet with its perfect
Kennedy half-dollar will remain on my pine night table
next to the clock radio that only receives one station.
And it would seem as if I had no good reason to leave.

SCOTT BLACKWOOD

Prodigal Fathers

On the phone Kay said, "Where's your integrity, Darnell?" in a voice that threw up its hands. I wasn't sure. I'd just lied about rain pushing back the shooting schedule so I could spend Christmas in Austin with Jo, a woman I'd met working on the movie set three months ago.

"We're slaves to the elements around here," I told Kay on the phone. Around Jo's kitchen window, a string of red pepper lights blinked. The kitchen smelled like oranges and sausage.

"Slaves to something," Kay snapped. She breathed hard into the phone. I sipped my champagne and orange juice and looked across the kitchen at Jo, leaning back against the counter, eating a breakfast taco. She was wearing a pair of too-big train conductor's overalls I'd stolen from wardrobe. White skin shone underneath. Her rusty hair was pinned up and loose strands hung in her face. She dipped her chin and gave me a look like she was staring over an imaginary pair of glasses. Choose, the look said.

Jo sometimes sang open mic night at The Hobby Horse, a bar off highway 290, near the state park where we were shooting. Old country standards. Patsy Cline. Kitty Wells. From the stage, her voice wavered, dipped, rose. *I've been so wrong for so long.* On those nights, a hum started somewhere under my ribs and spread downward. But I worried that if I stared too long, it would fade, the way a dream does in the shower. So I'd drunk beer and watched the orchid pattern of her dress out of the corner of my eye.

Kay knew about Jo, though not the specifics. When I was home two months ago, Kay and I got drunk at dinner on a few bottles of merlot and played Scrabble with our prozac-repaired friend, Bill Comeux. We'd met Bill in grief counseling. "Oh that's choice. You correcting *me*," Kay said when I challenged FEALTY and won – she'd spelled it with an I. Kay scattered plastic letters onto the floor. "Fealty's wasted on people like you," she said, glaring. Bill sipped his wine and shot me a nervous smile. I winked, told Bill he'd have to do the challenging next time. That same night, after Bill left, I drunkenly suggested Kay might be happier if she found a boyfriend. It would be okay with me, I told her, since we couldn't seem to comfort one another. I felt my stomach flutter when I said it. Then I didn't feel anything and it didn't seem like the truth at all, only a jumble of words. "What?" Kay said from the doorway, "What?" her eyes squinting like she was under water and couldn't make out the blur in front of her. "Go fuck yourself, Darnell," she said in a voice like a bed sheet ripping. I wondered if I already had. She tinkered with her shelf full of Japanese tea sets, their tiny orbiting cups. Then she stared at me, clear-eyed. "Why did you stop building

houses?" she asked as if she'd peeled back rough skin and found the heart of our trouble. I tried to think of a reasonable answer. "I never liked the people who lived in them," I said, finally, certain it was true. I wandered into the living room and popped my tape of *Red River* into the VCR, exactly where I'd left off the night before. On the screen, Joanne Dru fretted over Montgomery Clift. Down the hall, I heard Kay shut our sons' bedroom doors, though one was sleeping at a friend's and the other was, of course, dead.

On the phone in Jo's kitchen, I told Kay I'd be home three days after Christmas. I'd drive our son Michael out to Waxahachie to hunt down a tree, like Dad and I used to do. Sure, it wouldn't be Christmas day, but we'd make the most of it, I said. My voice sounded strange, a mix of assurance and panic. Thoughts stuttered. I felt like a bad actor, like I'd been cast but couldn't carry off the part. "We can decorate it together," I told her, quiet, the receiver close to my mouth. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Jo holding a bottle of champagne. I turned to her for – what? Consolation? – but she'd grabbed my glass off the table and was refilling it. Her face was tight. She was standing still, staring at the bubbles, like she was conducting an important experiment. I wanted to hang up, but I wanted to give Kay hope too.

"Well aren't you Mr. Traditional," Kay said in a limp voice. In the background, Elvis sang "Silent Night."

"I get it from my dad," I told her, letting her sarcasm roll right off. I'm not cynical. For the most part, I think we do the best we can with uneven results. Dad used to take me to a Christmas tree farm every year to cut our own tree. One year, when I was about eight, we hit and killed a buck with our car on the way. When Dad and I got out to look, the buck was lying on its side and one of its legs was still kicking. Each kick seemed measured and natural, not jerky like you'd expect. It seemed he would've been there kicking the cold air even without our help. Then he stopped. Dad walked to the car and fiddled with a cracked headlight. I could see tufts of brown hair stuck in the car's grill, specks of blood. Later, when we came back with our Christmas tree, we passed a man strapping the dead deer to the top of his station wagon. "Two trophies in one day," Dad joked. "He's lucky we're so generous."

My recent good fortune: Jo's ex-husband wanted to hurt me, though he didn't know how badly yet. He was young. It takes time to sort out which feelings go with which actions. The fire he set in my truck was a start. And, though I knew I 'd never use it, I kept a gun under my charred truck seat as a deterrent. My dad was a safety engineer for an oil company and stowed this same .38 in an Imperial cigar box when he traveled around. When I was little, he used to joke that if he met any trouble, he'd hand out cigars.

On the phone, Kay wasn't saying anything. Along Jo's windowsill sat sunlight-spattered Mexican knickknacks she'd picked up from Ciudad Acuna. In a yellow-painted clay helicopter, half-a-dozen grinning skeletons rose to heaven. The pilot leered out of the cockpit as if he knew something they didn't.

In 1977, Dad was burned up in a refinery fire just outside Fordyce,

Arkansas. They found his ashes stretched alongside those of the office cat, Harold. All together, Dad and Harold weighed less than a can of coffee. Against my advice, Mother keeps the urn in her china cabinet, and, beside it, champagne glasses etched with their wedding date. Setting the table or doing a crossword, she can glance up at him. At least I know where he is, she thinks. I've considered grabbing the urn some Christmas while she's out visiting her sister, tossing his ashes into the Oauchita river, which eventually joins the Mississippi somewhere near Baton Rouge, Louisiana. From there, it's out to sea.

"Maybe we won't be here," Kay said on the phone, cracking the silence.

"What's that mean?" I asked, the miscast feeling returning.

"I guess I don't know. I just want everything to quit happening."

The thought that Kay had taken my wayward advice about the boyfriend suddenly blind-sided me. I pictured Bill Comeaux and Kay cooking dinner. Wine glasses on the counter. Bill's shaky, side-effect hands seizing her shoulders in a moment of passion. Kay, still holding a whisk, stabbing at a mixing bowl. They'd collapse to the floor, sobbing.

On the phone, Kay didn't say anything for a few seconds, then she asked, if I had time when I got back, could I mount the basketball goal she'd gotten as a Christmas present for Michael. Sure, I said. Then she hung up.

Jo pulled a Zip-Lock baggie from the freezer, came over, and sat down at the table. She unzipped the baggie and took out what looked like a shriveled, gold tongue and laid it in front of me. It was a used condom. Splinters of frost clung to its tip. Jo stroked my arm with her smooth, small-boned hand. For a few seconds we just sat there in the quiet, a wedge of sun flaring off the table.

I drank my champagne and orange juice down. I poked the condom with my finger. I stared at it stupidly.

"Preserves," Jo said, narrowing her eyes at me. She spun the condom on the table with her finger.

"Whose?" I asked.

Jo said, "What do you care? It's my Christmas present to myself."

"You're keeping a man's semen in your freezer. I think I'm entitled to know whose it is." My face felt numb.

"Entitled? Why?"

"I sleep with you," I said.

"So did this fella," Jo said.

"It's kind of sick, don't you think?"

"If it was yours, would you feel that way?"

"Is it mine?" I said, feeling suddenly hopeful.

"No."

My stomach fell.

Jo climbed onto my lap. She pressed her breasts against me. She cupped the back of my head and kissed my mouth. Hair strands caught in my teeth. She pulled away. "It's a secret," she said. "I stuck it in a hotel ice bucket when the donor fell asleep." She smiled, the tip of her tongue between her teeth. "Brilliant, huh?" She let go of my head. Her face

stiffened, serious. "Darnell, I'm thirty-four. I've miscarried twice. If you won't knock me up, he will." She tapped the condom with a fingernail.

I pictured Jo, her tiny, black-stocking feet shuffling over a white marble hotel lobby, an ice bucket under one arm. I knew it was more scientific than that. But I believed her, sitting in that kitchen. She had a biology degree. Before working for parks and wildlife, she'd worked on a catfish farm raising channel cats from eggs. Preserves. It seemed possible.

Even though I was hundreds of miles from the town I'd always lived in, severed from my other, paler life with Kay and Michael, it still seemed possible I might retrace my steps and re-enter that life, take Michael camping at Lake Whitney or help Kay retile the guest bathroom.

"Darnell, you know what the H. stands for in Jesus H. Christ?" Jo asked, tossing her hair from her face. "Haploid." She laughed.

"Haploid?" I stared, confused.

"Jesus doesn't have a human father, see, so he's only got one set of chromosomes. Essentially he fertilized himself."

On the table, I could see the condom glistening.

On Christmas Eve, Jo and I went to the Hobbyhorse Bar. Some of the movie people were there, hunched over beers. Production people, set designers, a few stranded actors. Merle Haggard sang "Ramblin Fever" over the speakers.

Upright against the bar leaned the canvas-wrapped body of *Lonesome Dove*'s Gus McCrae someone had bought at a prop auction. A Santa hat perched on its head. Gerry Hutka, one of the assistant producers, patted the body on the back. "You think Gus here gets paid union scale?" Gerry asked. He got two mugs from the bartender and poured us margaritas from his pitcher. Gerry was fifty-two. His face was puffy and red from allergies. A few months earlier, Gerry's asthma had flared up so bad, his heart went crazy. The doctors thought he was about to have a cardiac arrest so they induced a kind of coma. During this coma, Gerry had a vision that wires were sticking out of his chest. People he cared about held onto them. His wife and brother were there. He said he knew if he cut those wires, or if the people let go, he'd die. But they held on. He made it through. Later, in a *National Geographic*, he found a picture of some Hindu men with hooks piercing the skin of their backs and attached to these hooks were taut ropes held by other men. "It was like that," he told us, showing us the glossy clipping. "I could feel them tugging."

In the bar Gerry kissed Jo on the cheek and said, "guess who poured me a Mexican martini last night?" He waited. "Lee Harvey Oswald's daughter. Swear to God."

"Where?" I said.

"At the Chili Parlor. A guy at the bar told me she waitresses there. Sure enough, the door opens, and I see a woman with sandy-brown hair, putting her purse behind the bar. She's late twenties. Pretty in an angular way. All elbows and collarbone. Same dark eyes, I noticed right off. Well, there's lots of Texas memorabilia on the walls in there. And for some reason, who the fuck knows why, above one of the tables, someone's hung a framed newspaper photo of Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald. The

guy at the bar said it's been there since the seventies. Lee Harvey, with his eyes closed, mouth gaping, like he might be belting out words to a song. The guy says she was born right before he was shot, so she never really met him. All she knows are photos. Nearly every night, she has to smile and carry sweaty beers to that table, a photo of her dead father right above it." Gerry drank from his mug.

"Why does she work there then?" I asked.

"Well, why don't they just take the picture down?" Jo said, stiffening up.

"The guy said she doesn't want anyone to know, so she keeps quiet," Gerry said, ignoring my question. "She needs the job." Gerry fingered his lime wedge. "I've seen that image, I guess, a hundred times. It never meant anything to me. A famous man, getting shot. That's all. I didn't know him. But at first, sitting at the bar, I couldn't look her in the eye."

Jo propped her elbows on the table, rested her chin in her hands."You felt bad? Like ashamed?"

"Maybe. I guess so. I felt like I'd cheated or something. Like I'd peeked in her window."

"You sure you didn't?" I asked.

"What?" Gerry said, like I'd spoken a language he couldn't understand. He was drunk. His eyes were jittering around. I looked at Jo. She was twisting a straw between her fingers. I wanted Gerry to shut up.

"Finally, I asked her what her name was," Gerry said, "even though I already knew it. Rachel. We talked for while. I told her I worked in the movies. You know what her favorite western is? *Stagecoach*." Gerry looked over at Jo. "John Wayne's the Cisco Kid. Claire Trevor's the whore with a heart of gold. Great flick." He smiled and eased back in his chair. "Later on, I thought about asking her out for some coffee." For a second Gerry didn't say anything. Then he said, "But it wasn't like I wanted to get in her pants."

"Right," I said, grinning. Jo shot me a look.

Gerry sipped his Margarita. "I didn't ask her out, though. Around closing, her boyfriend, or whoever, showed up and that was that."

"We ought to toast something," I said, raising my mug.

"To those who can't be with us," Gerry said in a wobbly, mock-drunk voice. We toasted and he looked right at me, smiling. Then the smile faded and he looked over at another table. I knew he was thinking about my son Andrew. I wanted to tell him it was okay, that a toast was nothing but cheap sentiment anyway, like his Rachel story.

Jo was looking out the window at the dark. She seemed gloomy and far away. I tried to think of a way to cheer her up. "Let's go look at Christmas lights," I said, finally.

We left Gerry at the bar, climbed in Jo's Buick and headed down Guadalupe Street until we hit 37th, where strings of colored lights stretched over the street. Roofs and porches hung with them, thick like cob-webs. Flaming tiki torches lined one front yard.

We parked and walked up the street. It had gotten cold and the wind was blowing. We downed our beers and I stuck the bottles in someone's trash. A man with a sleeping child in a backpack passed us. A few bundled

couples walked up ahead. Blinking red and gold lights curlicued through the trees.

Under the glare, Jo's features were thrown into relief. Her eyes deepened. I imagined her as a mother with worry lines, then an old woman, a silver braid of hair. She saw me looking at her. "Stop it, you," she said, her forehead wrinkling. A mother's scold, I thought, feeling the familiar hum under my ribs. "I'm a lucky man," I said, and felt this was mostly true. I pictured our future daughter waddling through our own light-drenched yard. I would bring her Mexican sweet breads from Del Rio, where we were filming some border saga. I'd come home to her mother's warm breast.

"I don't think so," Jo said.

"What?"

"That you're a lucky man."

I reached for her hand, but she walked ahead.

In one yard, a small TV was suspended from an oak branch by wires. Its pale glow flickered over the yard. Jo and I walked into the grass where a couple was standing, watching. On the screen, the Grinch's piled-high sleigh teetered on a mountain top.

"Christ, I need to pee," I whispered to Jo. I looked down the nearly-empty street. When the TV-watching couple left, I slunked off down the side of the house. At the back of their property, it was dark and trees were clumped together. All the light from the street seemed soaked up.

Unzipping, I could see a woman and little boy framed in the sliding glass door playing some kind of board game on the coffee table. Standing there holding my penis, I imagined catastrophe: What if they saw me? Flashlights. Howling dogs. What would they think when they brought me into the light?

Ron, Jo's ex called us up about one a.m. "Merry Christmas, Cocksucker," he said.

"Ron, you can get arrested for phone harassment," I said, calm, though my heart hammered. I didn't know if you could get arrested or not, but I figured Ron didn't know either. "I didn't press charges for the fire. That was a gift."

Click.

"My Ex?" Jo asked in a sleepy voice.

"Whenever he calls to apologize, somehow threats slip out instead," I said.

To drive Ron off, Jo had told him about my stay in the Travis county jail on assault charges, but left out the details. A drunk fell down outside a bar and claimed I shoved him. Not the stuff you'd tell your kids about, but hardly intimidating. In jail, they give you square oranges with your lunch. No one could tell me how they got that way. A minor wonder. They come in a paper bag along with a peanut butter or egg salad sandwich.

After Ron's call, I couldn't sleep. I went into Jo's living room, found my tape of *Rio Grande*, with John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara. Wayne's a cavalry officer holding off the Apache. He and Maureen O'Hara haven't seen each other for sixteen years. They have a son who's enlisted in

Wayne's regiment. She comes out to force her husband's hand, so to speak. He's supposed to choose, the Apache or his family. Miraculously, he gets both.

* * *

"All that dirt's sinking in on him," Kay said when it started to rain the afternoon we buried Andrew. We were in her sister Maggie's dining room, linen on the table, our plates covered with untouched food. Aunts and uncles doddered up for dessert and coffee.

Roller skates on wood. That's what the thunder sounded like.

When Kay started shrieking, Maggie and my Aunt Jessie led her back to the bedroom. I walked with her halfway, still carrying a buttered roll in one hand. I put my other hand to her shoulder. She snatched it off without looking at me. "Kay didn't know what she was doing, Darnell," my Aunt Jessie said later. "Sure," I said.

When I was little, my Aunt Jessie told me to say knock wood and rap my knuckles on whatever was handy, wood or not, so I wouldn't jinx my luck.

* * *

When the two cops knocked on the door, I thought it was about my unpaid speeding tickets. Once, back when I built houses, I'd seen my tape and float man handcuffed on the job and taken off to jail. So I hid in the utility room. Kay answered the door. They came inside and I could hear low voices in the living room. But then the washer changed cycles and I couldn't hear anything. I cracked the door. On the couch, I saw the backs of their heads. Kay raked through her cropped hair with her fingers, a nervous gesture from years ago when it hung down to her rear. When they got up to come get me, the spin cycle was going. Kay flicked on the light and I froze. Her face seemed bruised in the harsh light. Her eyes were red. "Hey there," I said in a bold voice, my eyes jumping from her, to the cops, to a shirt I was holding and beginning to fold. And then they told me Andrew had been shot.

Andrew and his buddy Jeff had broken into a house. It was afternoon. No one was supposed to be home. They'd pried open a back window using a metal file from my toolbox. They'd done this before. Inside, they tracked mud across the salt and pepper Berber carpet, found a bottle of vodka, drank some with Tang, and finished the leftover pizza in the fridge. At some point, Andrew spilled his drink on his new down jacket. Then they somehow found time to unplug the stereo, VCR, and breadmaker and stack them in the entry way. Andrew sauntered off to the bedroom for more. The door was closed. The man who lived there was sick with the flu, the cops said. Someone from his work had driven him home. He was sleeping and heard a racket in the kitchen.

The shotgun blast ripped away most of Andrew's jaw.

Down stuffing floats in the empty doorway.

Fade out.

That's how it would be in a movie.

In the hospital, they rigged a covering for the missing half of Andrew's jaw. Before they did it, I saw the length of his tongue inside there. Saw where it connected to bone in back, its obscene purple beginnings. I couldn't take my eyes off it. Once, when the nurse left the room, I felt at the back of my own tongue with my fingers and gagged.

They put in a tube to relieve the pressure on his brain.

Fifty-fifty, they said. First twenty-four hours critical.

Michael wouldn't go in. He played his Gameboy in the waiting room.

When we called relatives about Andrew, we didn't give details. There had been an accident, we said.

In the hospital room, the machines whirred and beeped. Kay and I held Andrew's hand. We loved and forgave each other with fervor and hope.

He lived three days.

"False hope is a prick tease," Jo told me the morning I left to have a belated Christmas with Kay and Michael. She was in the kitchen repotting some rosemary. Her fingers were black with dirt. "You make promises you can't deliver, Darnell."

"I'm following through," I said.

"Part of you is," she said, "but the other part's cut away."

I winced. Felt around with my hand, found my crotch. "Which part, you think?"

I carried an armload of Christmas presents outside, piled them in my truck seat and headed for Fort Worth.

I pulled in front of my split-level in the early afternoon. Bare tree limbs and powerlines broke up the sky. In the yard, Kay had made some changes. A bird house swayed on a pole wound with blinking Christmas lights. Flat stones the size of garbage can lids made a path to the front steps. I wondered if Michael had helped her with these projects.

Inside the house, Christmas presents were piled in a corner of the living room, waiting for the tree. Kay had moved the furniture, bought a new rug and a lamp. A coffee table with inlaid tile my father made was gone, but I pretended not to notice. "The place looks great," I said, hugging Kay. She smelled like maple syrup and lemon peel. I pulled her to me lightly, not sure what was required. She kissed me on the cheek, smiled and pulled away. "You look nice too," I said. And she did. She had on a new dark green dress and white hose. She'd let her hair grow out.

"Thanks. I'm experimenting a little," she said, touching her hair. She stared at something on my shoulder, then with her hand, brushed it away. "Flour," she said. "I've been baking." She folded her arms in front of her. "So, how's the soggy cowboy epic coming?"

"Swimmingly," I said.

"Ha. Ha." Kay grinned in spite of herself. "You and Michael should have fun on the tree hunt – your sophisticated senses of humor."

We stood there in the living room for a little while, not saying anything. "Would you like some wine?" she asked. I thought about what I'd said about a boyfriend last time and hesitated. "A glass with lunch, sure," I said. Kay went through the kitchen door and it swung closed behind her. In the dining room, I could see the table was set, candles burning. I could hear the TV down the hall, where Michael was. From the kitchen, glasses clinked, then the oven whumped closed. Kay's feet crossed the wood floor. A cabinet door slapped shut.

I knew a movie sound engineer once, who used dozens of microphones to record the sounds of his house so he could dub them into movies later. Kitchen door creak, take one. Water groan in pipes, take two. Private sounds of his very own life. "Even after I'm dead," he said, "I'll still be making noise."

Standing there in my living room, it struck me that I had no private sounds, nothing to save.

I wandered down the hall and found Michael in the den watching TV. "Howdy do," I said waving from the doorway. "I made it. Ready to get that tree?"

It was nearly dark when Michael and I drove back from Waxahachie with the tree. Beside the road, the fields were great stretches of purple. A lit billboard offered tracts of land at bargain prices. Another said, LIVE THE WAXAHACHIE WAY, but didn't give instructions. Every once in a while, the wind gusted and I could hear the tree shift on the camper top.

Michael fiddled with the radio, then turned it off.

"I'd hate to live out in nowhere like this," he said.

"Now you think that way, but later you won't mind it so much," I said. "I'm serious. There are worse places."

"Where?"

"Wichita, Kansas. Cold. Ugly. Gray. Sirens wailing all night. You were a toddler. Andrew was eight.

I wasn't sure why I'd brought this up. Who wanted to hear about worse places? Michael was quiet for a long time. He opened the glove box and got a U.S. road atlas out and thumbed through it. I wanted to lift the dusky silence off us. "Andrew was a crazy little kid," I said looking over at him. No reaction. "He set his bed on fire, once." Wind whistled around the window. "He took your granddad's Zippo from my chest of drawers and crawled under his bed to test it. The darkest place he could find, he said later. Well, the gauzy stuff under the box springs caught fire. Andrew ran out of the house. I ran to his room. You couldn't see the ceiling for the smoke. I crawled under the bed with a wet towel and smothered it. The hairs on my forearm singed off. Anyway, afterwards, we went outside, looked down the street, called him. No Andrew. It was nearly dark. Your mother was worried." I paused.

"Where'd he go?" Michael asked. Concern flickered through his face and was gone.

"A neighbor found him up a high voltage tower, sitting thirty feet off the ground. He thought he'd burned up the house and us with it. He could see the damage better up there, I guess. He was scared. He wasn't coming

down. Fire department pulled him off. They're always there when you need them, right?" I laughed, looked over at Michael. His face was a blank. "See, Andrew thought they were coming to arrest him."

"Yeah," Michael said, like he wasn't listening anymore. He was staring at the purple fields.

"Anyway, later on, he didn't want to go back into his room because of the smell. You guys roomed together for a while."

Scrubby oak trees flew by. As the road dipped, I could see cows' dark bodies along a creek bed. We were thirty minutes from the house. Kay would have a ham and casseroles ready. Pecan pie. After dinner, we'd decorate the tree, open presents. Maybe watch a movie together.

"I can only stay a few days," I told Michael. "We're doing some filming in Del Rio the next few weeks. You ever want to come out some weekend, just say the word, Bird."

"Do you have a girlfriend in Austin?" Michael looked at me steady, as if it was the most reasonable question he could think to ask.

My stomach rolled.

I pretended to check my side mirror. I thought about earlier when I stopped off to call Jo at a payphone and she'd asked about Michael, wondering if he'd liked the rod and reel she'd picked out. I explained we hadn't gotten to the presents yet. Then she said maybe she should call the house later and ask him personally. I laughed, but I was nervous.

"No," I told Michael. "No girlfriend. Does your mom think I have one?"

He shrugged.

I tried to think of something to say, words that would fall meaningfully into place, like in Scrabble. Single truths about relationships, integrity. How you get to remote locations from familiar places. I thought of John Wayne in *Rio Grande*. He gets to know a son he's never seen and falls in love with Maureen O'Hara all over again. I tried to pair my fatherly urge with a comforting gesture, a pat on Michael's knee or shoulder, but nothing would come.

In my rearview, the car behind me started to pass, but pulled back. Its headlights glared off the mirror.

"I heard a joke," I said. "But don't tell your mom I told you this, okay? You'll get me into trouble."

Michael rolled his eyes.

"There's a guy on an airplane sitting next to this lady. The guy keeps sneezing. The lady notices after each sneeze he sticks a tissue down the front of his pants and wipes himself. Finally, she can't take it anymore and asks what the problem is. Another sneeze. Another wipe. We'll Ma'am, he says, I've got this peculiar medical condition. Every time I sneeze, I have an orgasm. My God, she says, is there anything you take for this? Pepper, he says." I looked over at Michael, grinned. Michael's face was turned to the window.

Whump. I heard the tree before I saw it in the rearview. For a second, branches hung in the camper window, red-stained by taillights. Ropes whipped the air. Then it fell into the road. The car behind us swerved hard onto the shoulder. Its lights went sideways, then off into the trees.

"What was that?" Michael looked out the back and then at me. I slowed down. From where we were, I couldn't see them.

I thought about stopping, turning around seeing if everybody was okay, retrieving the tree. But what if they weren't okay? What if they had whiplash or broken bones? And the worst thing – I wasn't thinking of them. I was thinking I had warrants on unpaid tickets. An expired license. They'd pick me up, revoke my probation. "I'm not sure, but we could've lost a tree back there," I said.

"Why don't you pull over?" Michael asked, turning around in the seat, looking out the back. "Dad?"

I kept driving. Outside, dark shapes rushed by. I tried to think of what to do. I grabbed my wallet to tuck under the seat in case we were stopped. On the back of my license it says Organ Donor. I'd never given it much thought until we donated Andrew's kidneys and liver – people walking around with parts of other people inside them. Wouldn't you wonder what the donor was like? Wonder if some of that goodness or badness might rub off inside?

Michael watched me, his face splotchy in the dash glow. He waited for an answer. Loose strands of rope slapped the camper top. Ahead, in the distance, clusters of lights, neighborhoods. I was headed toward them, but it seemed any moment, I would ease onto the shoulder, turn around, undo what had been done.

MARK DOW

The Hustler

"You need the words?" Paul Newman playing Fast Eddie Felson
asks Piper Laurie as Sarah Packard after she twice tells him

"I love you," and she says that she does, which is close as
they come to "I do," his fear disguised as patience till she dies,

kills herself after writing the words "Perverted Twisted Crippled"
in lipstick on the mirror in the bathroom where her full body lies,

her full breasts, her full belly, her full hips, her full thighs,
pushing the thin skin of her slip so that "voluptuous" means what it
sounds like it does.

The steps of the dance of his need become impenetrability and hers
anger toward him and then toward herself had become rules.

So you just go and come back when you want, she wants to know,
then go again, "is that your idea of love?" and he says,

"I got no idea of love," and in fact only says he loved her, past tense,
once she's dead, and in the third person, with passion but of anger,

accusing his manager and himself of having killed her, Fats the while
sitting there,
Jackie Gleason as Minnesota Fats, wet eyes tired but taking the story in

now that he's conceded victory to the young hustler, heavy
face hiding what he has seen but showing he has seen it,

not patience but resignation, survival, to a story not told in this story.
He is the jokeless jester, the father, the toppled king.

He snaps his fingers, the colored attendant brings his coat,
and his eyes are still elsewhere as he straightens his tie

and walks from right-background to left-foreground and off-screen
bearing his weight in defeat with the self-respect reflected in Eddie's name
for him;

what the Fat Man cannot know but cannot not have surmised is that
before the girl's death, George C. Scott as Eddie's manager finally kissed
her,

having to hold her slumped, unresponsive body up from under the arms;
as the pool hall closes he sits with the uncertain secret of his pathetic
betrayal,

narrow-eyed and beak-nosed, bird-legs crossed, without the strength to
feel shame,
unequal to the story outside the game, the more intricate rules and higher
stakes

of getting hurt, of hurting, of getting used and striking back but
too late, if it's ever too late, and of needing the words and trying

to evade the stammer with a show of strength, and of finally saying them,
maybe just for yourself, though you got no idea what they mean anymore.

JULIE MOULDS

Playing Catch

There was an old person of Minety,
Who purchased five hundred and ninety
Large apples and pears, which he threw unawares,
At the heads of the people of Minety
Edward Lear's *More Nonsense*

If you are big enough, I suppose anything can be thrown:
circus strong men, elephants, fat ladies. The trick is to grow

larger than anyone else, like Menja, the Norse jewel-maid
who rose through her girlhood tossing truck-sized boulders.

The great nonsense painter, Edward Lear, in numerous journeys
through remote terrain, often had to dodge rocks while sketching.

Those nineteenth century natives of Albania and Greece would yell,
Scroo, Scroo! and *Devil, he draws!* as Lear exoticized

their turbans for his posh Anglo patrons. Edward had probably broken
some taboo in each attempt to replicate a human spirit; and spirits

having mouths and hands, often choose to pelt a captor. A boy coughs
as he passes the house on a bicycle, and that sound travels and spins

through the screen, proving we are always throwing something:
plates, fits, fists. Even heads, back to the killers who severed them –

back and forth and back, the slain man's daughter saying,
I don't want my father's head. Don't want to carve daddy's

head up for dinner. And motherless Lear, old Victorian,
had a heart that pitched quite improperly against the walls

he decided to obey. Perhaps this explains his travel to climates
so far from the gentlemen he craved. His heart would say,

if he'd let it, *We need love and love and love in this life,*
in a steady dose of capture and toss, and his limerick man

fulfilled half that equation: throwing his affection at the heads
of the people he lived for. And if they didn't throw it back,

apple or pear, perhaps they bit in. A woman, grieving, said
to her open-casket mother, "You did not teach me happiness."

You did not teach me happiness. And maybe we can learn it,
like the rules of any game with balls. This is the proper stance.
That is where you hold your hands.

CAROL ANN DAVIS

Moviehouse

He has come
all this way
to sit in a row
and stare upwards
at the screen;
as if in a dreamstate,
the theater
the size of a ballroom.

It's before
sound and a local band
accompanies
the important emotions
with interpretive
chords. The owner
has sunk his savings
into this venture
and watches.

It works, keeps working,
the woman's skirt
larger than a curtain
and blowing, the band
trying for that sound.

Sonnet About a Parade in Riverside

These autumn snows have ripened in me a despair
That Joseph can't imagine. An evergreen
Rises from Franklin's square lawn, covering
Me from the drowsy snow, the blue plein-air.
A float is driving down the thoroughfare.
We wave at Clara, there, on her trampoline.
Miss Riverside shivers, in her velveteen,
And so do I, it's late, I'm lonely here.
Follow the Porters home tonight for dinner.
Delphine has chicken roasting in the stove
And this morning she baked two sweet potato pies.
The scent of rosemary will fill their yellow tudor,
As will the television's bluish glow
When Arnold, belt-unbuckled, rests his eyes.

BYRON BAILEY

A Dying Man Remembers a Dream

for Wallace Stevens

The earliest thing he can remember
Is a dream
A dream of a blue bicycle
A blue bicycle which he rode
Weightlessly
Along a blue gravel lane

The blue bicycle
Was the universe
And its concentric rotations
Were the orbits of planets
And the blue gravel lane
Was the firmament

Sunlight sparked
From the front wheel's
Nest of spokes
As stars spark against black
As our lives spark
Matches struck against the black

Streamers spouted
From the handlebars
Trailing red and yellow
Puncturing the air
As solar flares spout
From coronae red and yellow
Puncturing the skins of suns

The wind
Moving in the tall grass
Beside the blue gravel lane
Was mute
Like the mute wind
Between stars

The narrow black tires
Tight as melons
Mashed the blue gravel
And the air rang
With pings
And the universe rang
With vacancy

The movement of the bicycle
Described a parabola
As memory folded in
On itself
And replayed the dream
Pulling points of blue light
Along the fibres of his cortex
As a dying star folds in
On itself
And pulls waves of blue light
Along the reaches of its vortex

The movement of the dream
Is a firing
Among many firings
As the movement of a planet
Is an ellipse
Among many ellipses

Inside the dream
A cicada buzzes
A small machine
Of atoms
Outside the dream
The universe hums
A large machine
Of atoms

The man imagines that when he dies
Nothing
Will have been added
And nothing
Will have been taken away
From the universe
Except the dream

ALAN AINSWORTH

Prose Review

My Brother
Jamaica Kincaid
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997

Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother* is an interesting book in that it's nonfiction from an autobiographical fiction writer whose stories and novels have fascinated me for some time, and in that Kincaid's masterful style is used to ostensibly describe the loss of her brother from AIDS, but is really used to make a statement of loss of family, homeland, and "native" language, in order to gain family, homeland and "native" language. It is also a tale of not coming to terms with her mother, not really. In articulating her losses, she moves to accept her gains. When Joan Didion states some place, "marriage is the classic betrayal," she means that when one marries one betrays one family in order to form another. Kincaid not only has betrayed one family for another; she has betrayed one love for another, one given, the other chosen: "I love the people I am from and I do not love the people I am from, and I do not really know what it means to say so, only that such a thing as no love now and much love now, these feelings are not permanent, or possibly not permanent." And yet there are the paradoxes of Kincaid's subject, her life in Antigua, is being written in her chosen American written dialect. This book is full of paradoxes. The loss, the gain of family, of culture, of language, of wealth is fascinating. Her answers are not clear, but her articulation is; her feelings are mixed, and she struggles for control, but the sense of story is fully in control. Her brother dies, but because he dies, Kincaid is able to know him and to help him in a limited way. The ending scenes, which I won't describe here, show that she is able to write his story dying of AIDS, yes, but she needs to write her story about reading and writing in her life as a writer, her life.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ALAN AINSWORTH'S poems, reviews and stories have appeared in *The Atlantic, The Paris Review, New England Review, Chelsea,* and other journals.

PRISCILLA ATKINS has work appearing in *Southern Poetry Review, The Nebraska Review, The Midwest Quarterly, Flyway,* and other journals. She lives in Holland, Michigan.

BYRON BAILEY is presently studying English at Portland State University. Previous to this, he was a carpenter, cook, dishwasher, oyster-shucker (the key is to prize open the pointy end) and a songwriter/guitarist/singer for the obscure, but modestly well-regarded band, Clockhammer. The inclusion of his work in *Gulf Coast* is his first important publishing event.

ROBERT BENSE teaches English at Bucks County Community College in Pennsylvania. His poems have recently appeared in *Chelsea, Poet Love* and *Sou'wester.*

SCOTT BLACKWOOD lives in San Marcos, Texas and teaches at St. Mary's University in San Antonio. His stories have appeared in *Other Voices* and *Whetstone.* He was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize for his story "Riverfest" and was interviewed in *The 1997 Novel and Short Story Writer's Market.* He is currently working on a novel set in central Texas.

DANIEL BLASI received his MFA from the University of Maryland at College Park. He resides in Boston, Massachusetts. In this poem the phrase, "the tax of quick alarm" is taken from the last sentence of Jane Austen's *Persuasion.* The full sentence reads: "She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance."

SUZANNE BLOOM AND ED HILL (MANUAL) began their artistic collaboration in 1974. Exhibitions including their photo-works, videotapes, computer programs, and multimedia installations have been seen in 30 solo and over 250 group shows held in 10 countries, 24 states, and 66 cities, at museums and galleries, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, San Francisco Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Art, Houston, International Museum of Photography, New York, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, and Inverness Museum of Art Gallery, Scotland. Hill and Bloom are professors of art at the University of Houston. They live in Houston and Vermont.

ROBERT BORDO'S most recent one-person exhibition was at Tibor deNagy Gallery in New York. He has been designing sets, and more recently costumes, for Mark Morris Dance group since 1983. Robert Bordo is professor of art at The Cooper Union School of Art. He is represented by Alexander and Bonin Gallery in New York. He lives and works in New York.

MICHELE BOWMAN recently completed her MFA in creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she works as a freelance editor and odd-job aficionada. She holds a JD and a BA from the University of Texas at Austin. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Field, Midwest Quarterly, Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review,* and *The Greensboro Review.*

MARTHA COLLINS' fourth collection of poems, *Some Things Words Can Do* will be published this fall by Sheep Meadow Press. She co-directs the Creative Writing Program at Oberlin College, where she also serves as an editor of *Field.*

JAMES COOPER holds a PhD in English from Oklahoma State University, where he was a poetry editor of *Cimarron Review.* Some of his poems have appeared in *Indiana Review, Kansas Quarterly, The Midwest Quarterly* and *The Any Key Review.*

CAROL ANN DAVIS lives in Northampton, Massachusetts. Her poems have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review, Denver Quarterly* and *QuarterlyWest.*

MARCY DERMANSKY recently received her MA from the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. Her fiction has appeared in *Naugahyde Literary Journal* and *The Mississippi Review.*

PAMELA DIAMOND won the 1998 PEN Texas Award for Fiction and a Barthleme Fellowship for nonfiction. She has stories forthcoming in *Hampton Shorts,* and her essays have appeared in *Houston City Magazine.* She lives in Galveston.

ELIZABETH DODD lives in the Flint Hills of Kansas, where she teaches at Kansas State University. She was the 1998 winner of the Kansas Arts Commission fellowship in poetry.

MARK DOW is seeking a publisher for his first collection of poems, *Something Like Love*. He has work forthcoming in *Pequod, The Boston Review* and *Crazyhorse*. He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

RACKSTRAW DOWNES is a New York-based landscape painter who works on site, and winters in Texas. He will show working drawings at Marlborough Gallery in October.

JULIA FISH lives and works in Chicago, and is Associate Professor in the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She received a Tiffany Foundation Award in 1991, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Painting in 1993.

SHELDON FLORY'S first book of poems is *A Winter's Journey* (Copper Beech Press, 1979). His poems have appeared in *The New Yorker, Poetry* and *Epoch*, among many other journals. He lives on the shores of Canandaigua Lake in Naples, New York.

ELIZABETH GOLD'S poetry has appeared in *Notre Dame Review* and *Third Coast*. She lives in New York City.

GREG GRUMMER currently lives on the fashionable east side of Milwaukee. He is heavily involved with paper and associated products, working, as he does, for a living. He's been published in numerous small press magazines.

JOHN ISLES lives in Oakland, California. Recent poems appear in *Black Warrior Review, Fine Madness*, and *Sonora Review*. His manuscript, *Elegy for the Present Moment*, was a finalist for the 1998 Amy Lowell Travelling Scholarship.

ALISON JARVIS is the recipient of the 1998 Lyric Poetry Award from the Poetry Society of America. She was born in Alberta, Canada, and raised in Minnesota. She is a psychotherapist in private practice who lives and works in Manhattan.

MAXINE KUMIN lives on a farm in central New Hampshire. She has published twelve volumes of poetry, as well as novels, short stories and essays on country living (most recently *Women, Animals, and Vegetables*). She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1973 and has been a poetry consultant for the Library of Congress and Poet Laureate of New Hampshire. She was awarded the Poets Prize in 1993 and received the Aiken/Taylor Award for Modern Poetry in 1995. That year she also became a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

DOUGLAS LAWDER received honorable mention in the 1997 *Gulf Coast* Poetry Prize and has also received an honorable mention for a poem in the most recent issue of *Atlanta Review*. His poems are forthcoming in *Cumberland Poetry Review*. He was awarded a Colorado Council on the Arts grant in 1997, and has a collection of poems, *Trolling*, from Little, Brown & Co.

JOSEPH O. LEGASPI was born and raised in Manila, Philippines, and immigrated with his family to Los Angeles in 1984. He holds degrees from Loyola Marymount University and the Graduate Creative Writing Program at New York University. He lives in Manhattan and currently works for a non-profit organization. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Seneca Review, Mudfish, Poet Lore* and *Many Mountains Moving*, among others.

GEORGE LOONEY'S first book, *Animals Housed in the Pleasure of Flesh*, won the 1995 Bluestem Award. In 1996, he won both the New Letters Literary Award for Poetry and The Eyster Prize from New Delta Review. Recent poems of his have appeared in *The Missouri Review, New England Review, Shenandoah, Alaska Quarterly Review, Denver Quarterly*, and other journals. He teaches creative writing at Bowling Green State University, where he directs the BFA Program and edits *Mid-American Review*.

JEFFREY MCDANIEL is the author of *Alibi School*. His second book, *The Forgiveness Parade*, is being published this fall. His poems have appeared in *Ploughshares, Epoch, Willow Springs*, and *Best American Poetry 1994*. He lives in Los Angeles.

ALYCE MILLER'S collection of short stories, *The Nature of Longing*, won the Flannery O'Connor

Award. Her novel, *Stopping for Green Lights*, is forthcoming from Anchor Doubleday. Recent poems, essays, and stories have appeared in *Kenyon Review, Witness, Prairie Schooner, Michigan Quarterly Review, Puerto del Sol, and Glimmer Train*. She now lives in Bloomington, Indiana.

JULIE MOULDS' first book of poems, *The Woman with a Cubed Head*, will be published this fall at New Issues Poetry Press. She has been published in *New York Quarterly, Cream City Review*, and *Easyriders*. She teaches creative writing to kids and likes mystery novels.

WILLIAM OJENDYK lives in Iowa City, Iowa. He has work forthcoming in *The Colorado Review*.

GREG PAPE'S most recent books are *Storm Pattern*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992 and *Sunflower Facing the Sun*, University of Iowa Press, 1992. He teaches at the University of Montana. His poems have recently appeared in *The Atlantic, Doubletake, Shenandoah*, and other magazines.

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