Gulf Coast

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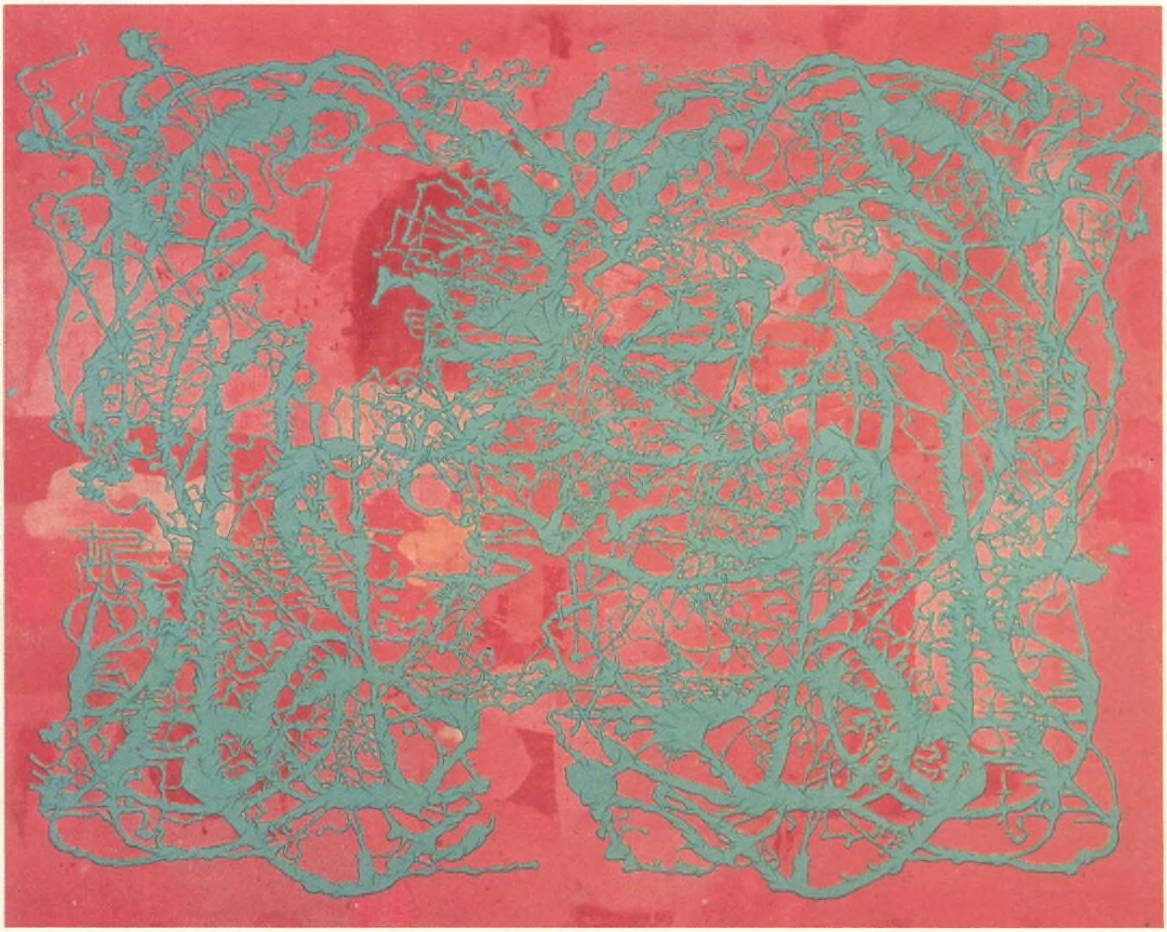

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Gulf Coast

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NONFICTION

POETRY

FICTION

ART

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Lost in the Hospital

It's not that I don't like the hospital.
Those small bouquets of flowers, pert and brave.
The smell of antiseptic cleansers.
The ill, so wistful in their rooms, so true.
My friend, the one who's dying, took me out
To where the patients go to smoke, IV's
And oxygen in tanks attached to them—
A tiny patio for skeletons. We shared
A cigarette, which was delicious but
Too brief. I held his hand; it felt
Like someone's keys. How beautiful it was,
The sunlight pointing down at us, as if
We were important, full of life, unbound.
I wandered for a moment where his ribs
Had made a place for me, and there, beside
The thundering waterfall of his heart,
I rubbed my eyes and thought, "I'm lost."

Confession

The neuroradiologist in me
Is looking over scans impatiently.
So many imperfections, brains in ink.
By simply looking at them, one might think

Them harmless slugs, both unoriginal
And clearly thoughtless: what's become of all
The energy we had? The joy of sex?
A culture is the billboards it erects,

Some famous sociologist has said,
Or probably has said. Yet in these heads
There must be more than squishy pinkish stuff,
A lust for learning maybe, space enough

For all the people in a shrinking world,
For all the children orphaned in the war
That's neverending. If I grieve for us,
Forgive me for my airs. It's obvious

That I'm in love, or very recently
Was burglarized. But what you'll never see,
My Little Turtle Dove, my Squeaky Squeak,
Is in the heart. My brain was always weak;

I've tried to find the lesion, but I can't.
Before a senseless trial, I'll recant
And go to prison anyway. My heart
Will break all promises, and it will hurt.

What We All Want

The selfishness of what I do
Is clear. I read, as if the truth
Weren't evident, as if the proof

Of my humanity were more
A novel than what I've endured
Myself each day: caricatured

(My own reflection in the glass
Is anyone but me), harassed
(The pimply teenager in class

Who asks, "What use is poetry?"),
Demoralized. It's plain to see
The point of what I do is me—

To make from heavy cloudy days
Huge, gently lowered silver trays,
To make from bubble-baths champagne,

To render my experience,
However poor, magnificent.
It takes imagination. Let's pretend:

We write to glorify the self,
We read to fill the empty shelves,
We listen, wistfully, to shells

And sometimes hear the ocean roar.
Today, I saw an open door
And worried I might drown, like scores

Of others with my illness. Once
I thought I might succeed. But when
I lost it all—my stocks and bonds,

My clothes, my swollen shelves—I knew.
I wasn't selfish, or a brute.
Just naked, human. I was you.

So in Love

It's not so hard to deviate.
I saw him once. He sat and ate
A fruit that looked delicious, great,

So natural. He looked at me.
I think he looked up lovingly.
I think he thought of knocking me

Upside the head. I saw him, once,
A distant smile. I wondered when.
I wondered when. I saw the fence

I still believe invisibly
Could fence me out; there, distantly,
I saw embraces incomplete,

How trees grow naturally in fields
Thick, healthful fruits. His skin, like steel.
His mouth, what I constantly feel

At my mouth, murmuring these words.
It's not so hard to love. I heard
Him crash through trees, through fields. I turned.

JOSIP NOVAKOVICH

Revising Memory

I BEGAN TO WRITE prose in the States out of nostalgia when I dodged the Yugoslav Federal Army and could not go home. Nostos-algia: the Greek components mean return + pain: the pain that drives you to return. But I could not return, because in addition to politics, time banned me. I missed the times and places and people of my boyhood. I thought I could stay in touch at least with the people and the place, if not the time. I wrote a long letter a day, under the illusion that I was reaching beyond the ocean and plugging my spirit into my native soil through that bit of a tree, the page, which contained the traces of being rooted in a moist black soil. In return for the long letters, if I was lucky, I'd get a few postcards. My letters flew away, dissipating my thoughts and longings, and nothing stayed with me—except the white wall in front of my desk and the white paper on the desk.

I thought I might just as well give up on the lousy lot of my friends and brothers. But by then I was addicted to remembering through writing, and so I wrote to the wall in front of me, a wall of wailing. My eyes did not wail, but my fingers did. I described the places of my childhood in more than a hundred pages, and my fingers walked and ran, barefoot, as I used to in summer days: through a brown wooden gate on rusty hinges into the narrow passage between our scaffolded home and our neighbor's whitewashed house, both windowless to the passage, past laurel hedges and flower beds on one side, and a heap of sand on the other, past two cherry trees, where the yard opened up next to an apricot tree that my tabby and I climbed onto a balcony. Beneath the balcony crouched an old Mercedes ambulance, its nose sunk to the dust, which died when I was eleven. Next to it hid an old well, boarded up since I was nine. Father had managed to convert us from a spindle-well-pulling tribe to faucet suckers, a miracle that diminished the yard: the dark, mossy, dank, echoing, terrifying well, with cold moist air climbing, that underworld was shut. Past the balcony around a walnut tree stretched out, supine, belly-up, a large pile of fine sawdust, on the surface dry, soft, good for wrestling and jumping in, but prickly to your eyes with the gusts of wind.

Over a tilted red-brick wall on the western edge of the yard I often saw an old woman walking counterclockwise around her spindle well, pushing the rosary beads with her trembling blue thumbs, her swollen

lips twitching. As a Baptist I was awed by her superstition, and our neighbors were by ours; our father often lay prostrate on the ground, in prayer, before entering his workshop.

A pale sister and her brother, children of a man who had come out broken after a long penal servitude for having been drafted as a lower officer in the defeated army of Croatian regulars during the Second World War, gazed through the wire fence, their small fingers clutching bloodlessly the wire squares; their eyes, glazed, playless, haunted the yard as my best friend, Danko, son of a Communist, and I shot arrows and wrestled.

Behind tall piles of wood trunks, thick wires laden with ox-hide tanning in fallow, stretched, to the beams of Father's workshop.

After Father died, we quit making clogs. The pile of sawdust grew darker, rotted, and became soft soil, with red roaches crawling in it and red worms out of it.

Next to the swing rotted a pigsty, without pigs because of the town ordinance. When I was six my brother-in-law slew the last big pig with a knife he had made of a broad and thick piece of iron. The knife stuck in the pig's throat, widening the larynx; the screams came out magnified, shrill, gurgling with blood, as the pig dragged sweating Kornel, who held on to the knife, around the yard for a long chilly time until only gusts of wind and blood came out. In the pigsty my middle brother (two years older than I) played doctor, inserting a thermometer into the asses of the neighborhood girls and boys. On the pigsty I fastened a silky American flag that I had torn from the antenna of a black Cadillac parked in front of our pink courthouse.

Farther down at the end of the yard opened up a frog pond, a green eye of the soil staring into the clouds, from which I rescued bees that got stuck in the water. Beyond the pond frowned the soil that my mother and sometimes my siblings and I turned to make way for tomatoes, potatoes, onions, strawberries. Tulips, carnations, daffodils, forget-me-nots, roses, rose hips lined the paths so that in all the seasons there was color next to pear, cherry, apple, plum, and walnut trees. My brother-in-law whitewashed and cemented the insides of an old pear tree eaten out by termites, and then, as he picked pears, standing on an outstretched thick branch, the branch cracked and he fell on the ground, breaking his arm. Rustling corn stuck up in the southwest quarter of the garden before raspberry and blackberry bushes along the fence. The southeast quarter lay fallow (sometimes cabbage, pumpkins, and radishes grew there). Half a dozen neighborhood boys, my brother, and I built teepees there and shot flaming arrows dipped in gasoline and threw knives at one another's chests, with straps of thick leather beneath for protection. Since in our town no garbage was collected and exported to city dumps, we took care of our own garbage in the fallow corner, burying some, burning the rest, and it never grew unmanageable because hardly any

of our food was packaged and almost every box and bottle could be reused. Every morning a red-faced milkmaid poured out half a gallon of milk, still warm from the cow, into a crimson pot, pulled out butter wrapped in leaves swimming in water, and carved out slices of compact cottage cheese. Needing no refrigerators, we stored cheese and butter in cold water in our underground larder.

Between the two southern quarters of the garden blue grapes covered the path—old vines crookedly growing and shooting their new vines into wires and wooden posts, making a dark, dank alley. The vines curled around pear trees, contributing to my father's theory that the snake in the garden of Eden was in fact a vine that curled around a tree and gave Eve wine that first made her shameless and then shameful. Drunkenness was the original sin.

I could have gone on and on, but I realized that the place was out of my grasp. Even before my leaving Croatia, I'd been exiled from the place of my boyhood.

In the late seventies the Yugoslav government confiscated and paved our garden for a parking lot and a hand ball court. My oldest brother, Vlado, a doctor, moved to the ground floor of our home, tore down the wooden gate, erected an iron gate, paved the entrance to the yard, and built a stone wall so that you couldn't see the neighbor's yard—the neighbors had died or moved away anyway. He put rocks and sand into the frog pond; the frogs died. He sold our beehives, and though I couldn't say that bees had brought me much joy with their pricking and my swelling, I missed the magical buzz of swarming. I shuddered, facing the new square yard with a grass imitation of an English lawn and fast-growing pale-green pines.

Then I could not have acknowledged that the vanishing of those things comprising the world of my youth had somehow created a void in me, a phantom of alienation, as though my limbs had been severed and my nerves still recreated their aura. In the States, however, I could give physical expression to this alienation. Now there was an ocean and two seas and nine mountain ranges between me and my town. I had become a certified alien, with an alien registration number (green card), and therefore, though still a young man, I could torture people around me with stories of a time and place when I was not an alien. And I strove to return—through my memory—to the home that was not alienated, but redolent with images, gaining in beauty through the haze and mist of uncertainty. Sometimes the images became mere phantoms, metaphorically speaking, but recently, literally speaking.

These days Serb irregulars and Yugoslav federal soldiers are shelling the town; mortar strikes close. A projectile from an air force jet hit the newly built school of concrete on the edge of the old garden, setting its roof ablaze.

On national holidays we used to watch from our windows federal

soldiers firing blanks at one another and raising smoke screens to make us feel safe and protected, while it looked as though they would attack us, which in fact they are now doing (November 1991): the Federal Army, which has on our money for decades paraded as our protector, is destroying the towns of Slavonia, with Vukovar already gone.

I expected that my original place would fade in my mind, but I didn't expect it to be destroyed. Before, as the state stole the garden and my brother cemented the yard, my original place seemed to me paralyzed, sick, sorrowful, but now it could be dead, or at least its skin, Yugoslavia, has died and is peeling off.

But now that Yugoslavia has died, and I can't return, my nostalgia has become grief. The first circle of Dante's hell bears the superscript: Desire But No Hope. Grief as longing and despairing, however, does not open the macabre and foul vistas of hell but casts you into the pains of purgatory.

To accept grief—give it priority over the practical daily routines—and express it, makes for mourning. All the paths of my imagination end in the place extant now only in my mind—and perhaps in the minds of others—but not out there. My imagination and memory almost solipsistically delve into my mind in an Odyssey in which rather than myself I find the bricks from my childhood, the bricks that have cracked, burned, crumbled, collapsed. Mourning. Is it accidental that only "u" distinguishes it from morning? Perhaps it is, but it's a good coincidence. Mourning is the end of a night, and the beginning of a day. Maybe soon I'll see more clearly?

How could I have such Edenic memories of a place apparently surrounded by terror? My memory must have deceived me, must have made spontaneous revision, but now in the light, in the dark, of what has been going on lately, I must revise the revision. What will then remain of the beauties of my childhood?

Perhaps if my recall had been sharper, I would have been glad to be out of that muddy Croatian town for good. But since I could not quite remember the features of the beeches I had climbed (the knife cuts in the bark after merciless lovers had carved out their initials and hearts) and since I could not recall the sounds of quarrels and insults, and the quiet jealousies and hatreds between Serbs and Croats—I strove to behold the town so ferociously that I punched holes in the pages as I typed. Perhaps I remembered the hometown out of resentment just as much as love, out of fear as much as pride. Perhaps I wanted to annihilate the town through satire and sarcasm, or to raise it, through humor, for I believed that playing with my memories I could laugh and enjoy. The town would become the type of place often made into movies, particularly Czech movies, in which a spirit of drunken benevolence makes everything lighthearted. (Our town is the center of the Czech minority in Croatia.) On the page I recreated my hometown,

"as I remembered it," or chose to remember it.

And now it's clear just how selective my memory is, now that my childhood friend Danko has joined a band of Chetniks to shell our town from the surrounding hills. This is how I recalled him years ago in a story: "I invited him to the sawdust, where we played dead, burying each other. In summers we knocked down green-skinned walnuts, and smashed them open with pebbles, as though cracking skulls, and indeed, out came little brain hemispheres. We chanted Dundu-Rundu, Dundu-Rundu, Dundu-Rundu, meaningless syllables with a good intoxicating rhythm, feeling as unfettered as cavemen, and peeled off thin walnut skins from the little brains and chewed the sweet meat." I thought I had written something quaint, but now that the friend, as an adult, has probably cracked real skulls, I see in the passage the obvious aggression which I had failed to pay attention to. I remembered the spirit of the childhood experience incompletely, or did not understand what I remembered. It's perhaps the incompleteness of my memory, something unsaid and at the time ineffable, that intrigued me, made me marvel, and write.

Here's another example of how an incomplete memory generated my imagination: when my father was dying, my brother Ivo called me. By the time I got to the deathbed, I do not think that Father was conscious anymore. A trickle of bloody foam was sliding from the corner of his mouth onto his chin. Ivo had witnessed most of the stages of Father's death, but it was I who wrote the story of Father's death, seventy pages long.

So I think an experience not quite fathomed gives me the strongest impetus to imagine. The moments just missed are the ones that drive you crazy, crazy to live in an imaginary past, a past of your own, like an idiot.

That dwelling-in-the-past-narrowly-missed is by no means unique to me: it is common in Croatia and Serbia and the Balkans in general. Homer narrated past enmities between two continents, and six hundred years after these embellished events from his memory (or hearsay), Greece and Persia were at war; maybe the poetic memories contributed to the war? Similarly, Serbs narrated and eulogized the Kosovo battle of 1389, in which they had narrowly missed a victory over the Turks: legends arose from regrets spun around a victory missed, and now almost exactly six hundred years later, rather than the beautiful oral epic tradition, we have reports of Serbs slaying and raping Muslims ("Turks"), somehow "revising" the memory of the Kosovo defeat. And Croats, too, out of vague rumors and vaguer memories of kingdoms past, have sought independence at all costs, creating a new country, perhaps. And perhaps the new state might turn out better than Yugoslavia; perhaps the eyes of the secret police will not peek over the fence; perhaps neighbors will learn to respect one another's religions.

Memories do lead to creation, but equally, to destruction.

I can't attribute any colossal consequences—constructive or destructive—to my storytelling, but I hope that I will soon be at peace with the town of my youth, with what I have missed in it: so that there will be no need to go back and change, to "revise" the mostly imagined past. But it is clear to me now, that in my writing, my town has been mostly imagined. It is my town, crisscrossed not with streets but with stories.

Presences

The chandelier's reflected in silver,
in china, in the glossy backs
of mahogany chairs. In her house
prayers are an inconvenient pause
before food; no words or marks on doors
ever kept death out of here. She asks
to be excused, and wanders alone
with the beet soup's red stain on her tongue
and a mouth full of bitter roots and herbs.

One room is like a cell, where daylight spreads
thin on the wall, comes through the blinds
in one long strip, as still as lamplight.
While they linger over cake and sweet wine,
she lies on the narrow bed, and stares into her cupped hands
until she discovers their secret: that she is a nun,
not Catholic exactly, but something like it.
Her bedsheet becomes her habit, her habit erases
her body, erases the ties of blood, so she's aligned
not with the mother, the son, the ghost,
or the father, but with solitude and glued light.

As chairs scrape back from the table, she petitions
quickly in whispers, in her head. Somewhere
there must be others, a whole order, praying.
She can't be the only one. She asks that it be true—
that inside, where she is, is where God listens from.

Asking for Larry

Someone keeps calling, asking for Larry.
There's no one here by that name, only
Sam and Mary Alice, inured of each other
and of the shock-blue lizards
on family-room walls.

Every morning at breakfast
she asks what he wants for supper.
Neither is hungry.
If Larry lived here he would bring his
enormous appetite.

The telephone rings.
My mother tells my father, it's for
Larry again. Her voice is too soft.
He doesn't hear, puts on
that great show of patience.

Sometimes she cannot make the words
come out at all. Larry would amplify.
They play Spite and Malice,
a penny a point.
There are new cards in the drawer

but they play with the ones that stick
together. With Larry for a third hand
they would break out a new deck, maybe
raise the stakes. My mother likes
to keep everyone happy.

She would like to tell the caller,
just hold on, I'll
go find Larry for you.
They keep doors locked,
watch TV with the sound turned off,

doze most of the day.
She follows him to bed soon after sunset.
Perhaps she dreams of a key
for Larry, leaving a light on
or waiting up, his safe arrival.

The Mask

"Who could say I'm to blame?" asked the man running out of the costume ball, unmasked. "The Gods must be against me!" In fact, he was an atheist; he wanted simply to appease the crowd which had scattered, awestruck, towards the sidewalk. "It was unusually festive," said some neighbors later to local newsmen. "That man carried a head around the yard. Everyone thought it was a mask until it said, 'Please deliver me to my grave where I was once comfortably and peacefully situated,' whereupon the sun, like a yellow canary, flew over the hill and left us afraid." "Darkness, after all, is only space without its reflections," said a fat lady passerby. She wanted us to understand the dark so we were less afraid. "And what of time?" asked an elderly gentleman, thinking of the sky's expansion, of the hazy blue umbrella which is twilight. She never answered him, but picked up the head from the yard, made off toward the cemetery with it.

ROBERT PHILLIPS

Note on Delmore Schwartz's "An Argument in 1934"

"AN ARGUMENT IN 1934" has had a curious history within the Delmore Schwartz canon. The story was published originally in *Kenyon Review*, IV (Winter 1942), and reprinted in *Best Short Stories of 1942*. In a 1943 letter to James Laughlin, his editor at New Directions Publishing, Schwartz indicated he wished to include the story in what would have been his fourth published book, a collection of five stories. Schwartz's tentative title for the collection was *America! America!* It was to include the title story, "The Commencement Day Address," "The Statues," "New Year's Eve," and "An Argument in 1934."

That book never got published. Schwartz in fact had to wait until 1948, when New Directions finally published a volume of his stories titled *The World Is a Wedding*. It contained the title story and "New Year's Eve," "America! America!," and "The Statues"—plus two new stories, "A Bitter Farce" (1946) and "The Child Is the Meaning of This Life" (1947). It also reprinted "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" from Schwartz's first collection, which brought together poetry, a play, and a story by that title (1938). For whatever reason, Schwartz omitted "The Commencement Day Address" and "An Argument in 1934."

Schwartz was to collect another volume of stories in his lifetime, *Successful Love and Other Stories* (1961). It contained eight new stories, but not "An Argument in 1934," which he seems to have forgotten. Schwartz died in 1966.

The history of the story became confused when James Atlas, in the first biography of Schwartz (*Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet*, 1977) stated erroneously that the story had been published in the 1937 *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* anthology, edited by Laughlin. (Atlas confused it with "The Commencement Day Address," which had appeared in the 1937 anthology.) It is also curious that Atlas, who in his book calls "An Argument in 1934" "[o]ne of Delmore's best stories," omitted it when he put together a new edition of Schwartz's selected stories (*In Dreams Begin Responsibilities and Other Stories*, published by New Directions in 1977). Atlas is, on the other hand, to be congratulated for including a previously unknown Schwartz story, and a real gem ("SCREENO"), which he found untyped among the writer's papers. But

his omission of "An Argument in 1934" and the metaphorical "The Statues" was regrettable.

After Dwight Macdonald died in 1982, I became Schwartz's literary executor. Among the several books I saw into print was a new edition of *Successful Love and Other Stories*. I proposed to the publisher who was doing this 1985 reprint that we include, in addition to the original eight stories, two more: "The Statues" and "An Argument in 1934." After some conversations back and forth, the publisher (Michael Braziller at Persea Books) said he didn't want to have to spend money on setting two new stories. (The rest of the book was being photocopied from the original pages.) So I was forced to select between the two. I wonder now just how much—or how little—it would have actually cost to have set both stories. Not much, I suspect. I chose "The Statues," with its miraculous snowfall which briefly transforms New York and New Yorkers into statues, "sacred mysteries" which initially create delight and then transcend into contemplation on their nature and origin. Faber Gottschalk, the protagonist, inquires, "Who knows what relationship they may not have to our lives? What natural or supernatural powers may not, through them, be signing to us?" Of course a rain soon melts away the statues, and the city becomes once again what it was.

This seemed to me at the time a "bigger" story than "An Argument in 1934," with its look at pre-World War II alienation among New York intellectuals. I may have made a mistake. "The Statues," after all, had been in a book of Schwartz's, whereas "Argument" had remained uncollected. In either case, I welcome the opportunity to have the story published in *Gulf Coast*, and I hope it finds new readers for it and for Schwartz.

An Argument in 1934

1. IN THE YEAR OF OUR WESTERN CULTURE 1934, Noah Gottlieb went one Saturday morning to meet his friend, Harry Morton.

2. Harry Morton worked in The New York Public Library at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue. Noah Gottlieb was an artificial flower salesman.

3. Both young men were very much interested in the history of thought and in the arts. It was this that had brought them together.

4. They knew that they were intellectuals, but they disliked the title. It had for them associations with the previous decade.

5. It was for them a word associated with such an author as H. L. Mencken and the post-war period in America.

6. Yet there is no other title to describe the part they had chosen in Life. They were intellectuals, and the way in which they made their living they detested and merely endured.

7. "Yes, we are intellectuals," Harry had said to Noah one day, "it is nothing if not an unpleasant name. Yet, come to think of it, are not all the heroes of Western culture intellectuals?

8. "Was not Ulysses an intellectual, as well as Hamlet?" "Samson and Hercules were not," Noah replied, "don't let your preference deceive you." "David," said Harry, "Solomon, Dante, Pierre Bezukhov, Prince Myshkin, Stephen Dedalus, and Sherlock Holmes!"

9. On this Saturday morning in December, Noah went to meet Harry at the great Library, intending to spend the afternoon with him engaged in such dialogues, which gave both of them much pleasure.

10. He came into the building, touched once more, without deliberate attention, by the interior, all marble like a mausoleum, unending corridors of marble and vast as Grand Central.

11. He felt the quiet which was like a wide sound, marked by the low sound of hats and coats being checked, the turning of the page of a newspaper, the guard examining books at the door, and the idle seated on the marble benches on the mezzanine or at the turning of the stair.

12. Some were waiting an appointed hour, some were gazing at nothing at all, and some were merely glad to have retired from the chill air.

13. Noah waited among them until Harry came. The two young men greeted each other with habitual shyness, a shyness which did not

disguise from either of them the enjoyment they took in their friendship.

14. Harry said to Noah in a tone of apology and disdain that one of the boys who worked with him had insisted on coming with him this afternoon.

15. He had looked very lonely and plaintive, Harry explained, he had practically demanded Harry's company, and Harry had not had the heart to refuse.

16. Both young men felt a tinge of disappointment because they were unable to discuss with each other the matters which interested them most of all when other human beings were present.

17. Some had been hurt sometimes by the obvious change in Noah and Harry when a third being came among them. Both of them were sorry about this, yet enjoyed it. It sprang from interests and knowledge which were not common in the year 1934.

18. "Here he is," said Harry as his friend Bradley Brown came up to them. "Suppose we have lunch in the Library cafeteria."

19. At this point perhaps it should be explained that Noah and Harry ate in cafeterias much of the time. This was partly because it was inexpensive, partly because they did not come from homes to which either wanted to invite the other, and partly because a kind of cafeteria life had grown up in their lives.

20. It is the equivalent for America of the café life of Europe, Harry once said to Noah, and inferior to it just as the native wines are inferior: But what can we do? Where else is there to go?

21. The three young men descended to the cafeteria of the great Library. It was unpleasant because it was in the basement and had to be lighted in the daytime and was weakly lighted.

22. It was weakly lighted in order to save money. For the same reason the hours during which the Library was open were perhaps going to be curtailed.

23. The world-wide cause, The Depression, was the pyramid in the shadow of which these young men were walking.

II.

1. Noah was the first one to come from the railed alley of the cafeteria and go to a table. He began to light his pipe.

2. Bradley Brown in a moment was upon him, holding a cup of coffee in his hand and looking panic-stricken.

3. *"You can't smoke here!"* he hissed in a furious whisper, equally afraid of offending Noah and the cafeteria authorities.

4. Noah shook out his pipe immediately, astonished by his anxiety. He regarded Bradley Brown with curiosity.

5. Bradley Brown was returning to his place in the line, his tall and

frail frame shaking nervously as he took his dishes from the counter men with gestures which seemed to enact apology.

6. When the three were seated at the cafeteria table, Noah noticed Bradley Brown's pallor and the care with which he dressed himself.

7. The neat pin which held together the two wings of his collar seemed to Noah the essence of white-collar gentility.

8. As they began to eat, Harry felt about for a subject which would break down the strangeness between Noah and Bradley.

9. "Bradley knows a great deal about prints," Harry said to Noah. Noah recognized the intention and said to Bradley,

10. "Have there been any good exhibitions lately?" "Yes," said Bradley in the lowest voice possible, a kind of acute whisper.

11. "But there was one print in particular which I liked very much for a personal reason. May I tell you about it?"

12. "Why, yes," said Noah, unable to understand this excess of courtesy. When Bradley had received Noah's permission, he looked to Harry for his. Harry nodded his head, chewing his food.

13. "The subject of this print was a child sleeping in a cemetery," Bradley continued. "What interested me so much was that when I was a child, I too used to take my nap in the cemetery near our house.

14. "It was a big cemetery and full of still unused stretches of well-cared for grass reserved by the living in anticipation.

15. "My parents would take me there on Sunday afternoons in the spring and the summer and the early fall. This was two or three years before The World War."

16. Harry looked at Bradley as if to say, "Well, what of it?" and the panic-stricken look appeared again on Bradley's face.

17. Noah was moved to sympathy, and to help Bradley with a story which was pointless, he said to him,

18. "When I was a child, I would have been afraid to sleep in a cemetery, even in the daytime. And when we passed a cemetery in a car at night, I was afraid, and thought that I smelt decay in the air, and feared that I might see ghosts in the night air above the graves. I was horrified by any thought of death!"

19. "I was not!" said Bradley, with delight in his soft voice, as if delight in his distinction from Noah, "I liked to sleep in the cemetery on those Sunday afternoons.

20. "The stone angels and the crosses soothed me and pleased me, as if they were figures in a fairy tale. My parents left me there and looked at me from the gravel path between the graves.

21. "Now I remember their serious smiling beautiful faces, as if it were last week. Both of them died a few years later, in the influenza pandemic of 1919.

22. "I was at a military academy when they died, too far away to come back for the funeral. For that reason I remember them mostly as

they looked on those warm Sunday afternoons...."

23. "In their mature beauty," he added quickly and in an even lower tone, as if ashamed to bare such sentiments by such words.

24. "If," he continued, "I fell asleep and did not wake up too soon, as a special treat I was taken to the bridge which crosses the Harlem River.

25. "There I was permitted to watch the Montreal train race by below. It was a special treat like ice cream," he added lamely.

26. "What about the print?" asked Harry. "O, yes, the print," said Bradley, "I have quite forgotten about the print.

27. "The print astonished me so much because it brought back to me so completely these feelings of childhood, as if the artist himself had had just such experiences in *his* childhood."

28. His voice lowered itself as he became aware that Harry regarded what he was saying as pointless.

29. Again Noah felt sympathy and wished to help the stranger. He knew that Harry was now beginning to feel Bradley's intrusion on their afternoon more than ever.

30. Noah presented an instance of his own feelings about death from his own childhood. He told them how a lady book salesman had come to the door one day, in the winter, years ago.

31. She wanted Noah's mother to buy two big medical books. In order to persuade Noah's mother, she hinted at sexual revelations in the book. Noah was commanded to depart from the living room.

32. He tried to overhear what the lady book salesman was saying, but he could not. His curiosity was overwhelming and ravenous.

33. When she went away, the books were left in the house and an initial deposit was given to her. As soon as his mother was out of the house, Noah took the two fat books

34. And looked for the pages which would have sexual revelations and came upon pictures of the dead instead.

35. He was so appalled by them that he could not sleep at night because he saw those images. Only when the books were at last sent back, and he knew that images of the dead were not in the fat books on the bookcase in the hallway, was he relieved.

36. "I had many such experiences," said Noah. "I was afraid to pass the apartment door of the family in which someone had died."

37. Bradley was profoundly interested in this story, but Harry was piqued by the whole conversation. He was about to make an ironic remark when Noah rose to forestall him.

38. They were finished, and as they walked from the cafeteria, Harry's impatient feeling had to be expressed.

39. "During my childhood," Harry said, "I did not know that anyone died. That is the natural normal state of mind of childhood. You two, both of you, like to cultivate your morbidity. It does not mean

anything.

40. "And when I was a boy and went to camp for the first time—our family was still rich—my counselor put a fat gob of butter in his soft-boiled egg, and then I knew what sensuality was! That's what impressed *me* in childhood!"

41. Noah and Bradley were silent, bemused by the feelings that the conversation had unexpectedly brought to the surface.

III.

1. The three young men started to descend the flights of steps of the Library, between the two stone lions, couchant, above Fifth Avenue.

2. On the steps, huddled in small groups, human beings, for the most part foreign-looking, were arguing with passionate interest. One man was speaking with the loudness which counterfeits authority.

3. Noah, Harry, and Bradley heard what he was saying. He was declaring with utter certainty that every act of Roosevelt and The New Deal was a crime against The Working Class.

4. His opponent had just maintained in a perplexed voice that some of the measures of The New Deal had helped the unemployed. He had seen that this was so. They had money with which to buy food because of Roosevelt.

5. "You are ignorant and short-sighted," declared the authoritative man, "The State is the instrument of The Ruling Class. Everything it does is an attack on The Working Class, in the long run."

6. "But they had money with which to buy milk and pay the rent," said the other man weakly but stubbornly.

7. "That does not mean what you think it means," said the authority. "Those concessions are merely tricks which pave the way to greater oppression by weakening the militancy of The Working Class!"

8. "But they had something to eat, at least," said the perplexed man. "Don't be foolish. Face the facts, don't bury your head in the sand like an ostrich," said the authoritative man. "The State is the instrument of The Ruling Class."

9. "Abstractions blind you," said a newcomer. "Why don't you be concrete? Some human beings have more to eat than when Hoover was President!"

10. "You have to see the whole objective condition from the perspective of History. You cannot escape from History!" said the authority, recognizing in the newcomer a more difficult antagonist.

11. Noah, Harry, and Bradley had paused and listened with interest to this argument of 1934. They started to go away from the Library as the cowed authority was declaring that Roosevelt's subjective intentions might be very fine.

12. "But," he said, "subjective intentions do not mean anything.

Only objective conditions determine the movement of History."

13. "What a sad view of Life and of the human will," said Noah as they walked out of earshot of the argument.

14. "Yes," said Bradley, demurely, as they began to walk up Fifth Avenue full of the busy gay expectant mood of the last few days before Christmas, "How sad they sound, how wrong they are about Life—

15. "They speak," Bradley continued, "as if the world existed outside of the mind!"

16. "Where does the world exist," said Harry. "What is it this time, Bradley—Christian Science? Bradley," Harry said with irony to Noah, "has a kneeling acquaintance with all the more esoteric religious societies in the city of New York."

17. "It is necessary to believe in something," Bradley defended himself. "It is true, I have tried to become acquainted with more than one *Weltanschauung*. That is the reasonable method!

18. "But seriously," he continued, "most human beings make an enormous mistake when they believe that the world exists apart from the mind. It is the cause of much unhappiness."

19. Just then they crossed 44th Street. A turning car passed, making Bradley draw back nervously, it came so close. Loudly Harry emphasized this to Bradley.

20. "You are as naive as Dr. Johnson," said Bradley, serenely, sweetly, and as if with perfect conviction.

21. "Just what do you believe," Noah inquired. "Do you believe that everything is what thinking makes it?"

22. "Not exactly," Bradley replied, whispering amid the blare of the traffic. "But is it not true that all experience comes to one through the medium of one's consciousness?

23. "It is as if the senses were stained glass windows, and one only saw the light through the stained glass windows of one's senses.

24. "What the light is beyond the stained glass windows, you do not know. What a thing is, apart from the way you see it, you do not know, do you? How can you?

25. "You do not even know that anything exists apart from your own being. *For all practical purposes,*" Bradley said with emphasis, "the whole world is your own private dream!"

26. "For all practical purposes," said Noah, shocked by this view, "the world is just what is not you or your mind! It continues in its brutal way to unfold its nature, *no matter what you want or think!* It is December in New York in 1934. The weather is cold and it is going to snow. Try to make it Florida, Bradley."

27. "Bravo," said Harry, "Noah Gottlieb defends the external world on Fifth Avenue and 46th Street four days before Christmas 1934!"

28. "No, no," said Bradley in passionate reply to Noah, "I can go to Florida." "No, you can't," declared Harry. "You would lose your job

and be penniless in no time."

29. "That is not relevant," said Bradley. "I can imagine that I am there or I can go there by means of certain motions, modifications, and changes decided upon and performed by my mind. My mind!" he cried in triumph and anguish.

30. "It does not mean anything," said Harry to himself. "Then you think," said Noah, "that each of us is really utterly apart from every other human being?"

31. "Yes, I do!" said Bradley. "Each of us is alone in his private dream. *"We are such stuff as dreams are made on!"*

32. "You have taken Shakespeare's metaphor literally," said Harry in anger. He had been annoyed with Bradley from the start because he had intruded on his afternoon with Noah. Now he was very angry for this reason and because he took such arguments very seriously.

33. "We are walking beside each other in parallel lines which never meet," said Bradley serenely and complacently, "we never see each other. You would not be made angry by this argument, Harry, if you but recognized the truth that we do not communicate with each other. It is an illusion to think that we do."

34. "Do you really think that I don't exist?" said Harry, beside himself with anger. "Am I only a figment of your mind?"

35. "Yes!" said Bradley serenely.

36. "There is only one answer to that, Noah," said Harry in his anger. "Let us go away from this dreamer!"

IV.

1. There is a moment in every conflict when an overwhelming urge is felt to resolve it by making a quick departure.

2. This might be called the Hawaiian moment of every conflict, for it springs from the desire to escape. But it is also a very strong way of showing one's independence of being, which is so much awakened and sharpened by conflict.

3. The three young men had reached this moment because of Harry's anger. His anger was so great he was unable to speak. He tugged at Noah's sleeve, to show he wanted to leave Bradley standing there.

4. The Fifth Avenue crowd flowed about the three young men as they stood there looking at one another. Bradley wore a deer-like look of fright.

5. "Don't take this argument so seriously," said Noah to Harry, feeling sorry for Bradley and instinctively against any anger which was not his own.

6. "Seriously!" said Harry. "Suppose he said the globe was flat?" This failed, even for Harry, to express what Harry felt about Bradley's

foolishness. He tried again,

7. "Why should we walk and talk to a human being who tells us that we do not exist? It is ridiculous!"

8. And just then, as he said that on the corner of 47th Street and Fifth Avenue, the green light changed to red and the crowd that had started to cross the street was pressed back.

9. A pretty young woman who was with a young man was pressed back against Bradley who was looking shyly at Harry. Backing up as the crowd was pressed back, she bumped into Bradley and shook him.

10. Bradley was startled. The heavy young man who was with the pretty young woman turned a vague and bilious eye on Bradley and saw his startled look.

11. "O," he said, "bumping into my girl!" It was obvious that he was drunk, "bumping into my girl's dignity!"

12. "I beg your pardon," said Bradley politely and in the lowest possible voice. "She backed up and bumped into me." Nervously he drew his hands back.

13. "I know your kind," said the drunkard, inspired by Bradley's nervousness and fear, "you can't get a girl of your own, but you walk in crowds and make believe it is an accident. For two cents, I would break your head."

14. Bradley recoiled, paralysed. The pretty young woman grasped her escort by the arm and said, "Stop it, Johnny, it was an accident." "Now look here," said Noah, to defend Bradley.

15. "Let go my arm," said Johnny to his girl, "I will break *your* head too," he said to Noah.

16. Harry moved forward, "You won't break anyone's head but your own!" Johnny was taken aback for a moment.

17. Harry said quickly to Noah, "This was bound to happen, it was inevitable, the dignity of the external world was bound to make itself felt!"

18. "You and who else?" said Johnny to Harry. Again his girl tried to draw him away, clearly nervous and ashamed. "Let go my arm," said Johnny to her. "Let go my arm."

19. "Johnny, if you don't stop it this minute I am going right home," said the girl. "O," said Johnny, "you want to show everyone in public who wears the panties in our family!"

20. "Johnny!" said the girl in despair. Johnny replied, "Maybe you like strangers to bump into your dignity. But no one is going to bump into my girl's dignity and get away with it."

21. With a clumsy lunge of his arm, he punched Bradley in the nose. Harry and Noah pinioned his arms, but Bradley was knocked down as they moved forward to stop Johnny.

22. "Let me go," cried Johnny. Noah, holding him, smelt the whiskey on his breath. "Let me go, I tell you!" A crowd had gathered

about them, neutral and absorbed.

23. Harry helped Bradley to his feet, saying, "You have just been punched by the external world." But then he saw that Bradley's nose was bleeding and that he was on the verge of tears, and he felt very sorry.

24. "Call a cop," said Harry, seeing that Noah and Johnny's girl were having a hard time holding back Johnny. "Arrest this truculent drunkard!" "I hate to call in the law of our unjust society, but my mother did not bring me up to be a pugilist," Harry said to himself, looking about for the cop.

25. A policeman arrived, drawn by the crowd. "What's the matter here?" he said, in a husky authoritative unpleasant voice. "Break it up now," he said to the bystanders.

26. "Arrest this man," said Harry. "He's drunk and he has just knocked down someone." Johnny called to the policeman,

27. "He bumped into my girl's dignity, so I knocked him down. Anyone with red blood in his veins would knock a man down if he bumped into his girl's dignity, any American."

28. The policeman saw that Johnny was drunk and that Bradley's nose was bleeding. He took Johnny sternly by the arm.

29. "Let me go," said Johnny once more, "arrest him," pointing to Bradley, "he's a sex-fiend!"

30. "Shut up," said the policeman. "You'll be sorry, you'll be sorry," said Johnny, "my uncle's a powerful politician. You'll get what's coming to you for this."

31. The gazing interested crowd laughed, and the annoyed policeman felt that he must reply, "All right, tell your uncle. There's no politics in our department."

32. "There's politics in Paradise!" cried Johnny at the top of his voice, and the crowd laughed again. "Worthy of Dante," said Noah to himself.

33. The policeman drew Johnny firmly away, saying as he left to Harry, "Come to the 49th Street station if you want to prefer charges against him." Johnny's girl had disappeared.

34. Bradley was standing against a show window, trying to staunch the flow of blood from his nose and looking as if he were trying to stop himself from bursting into tears also.

35. "Do you still believe that the external world does not exist?" asked Harry, as the crowd broke up.

36. Bradley looked at him with a stony desperate look for a moment. His face began to contract as if he were now going to burst into tears. His parted lips visibly quivered. The moment of tears was near.

37. "O, go to hell," he said, in a voice which strove in vain to sound hard and masculine. He burst into actual tears at last, and turned and

left them there, making his complete departure.

38. Noah, maudlin with pity, wanted to go after him. Harry stopped Noah. "What's the use? Let him go. He is a ghost. He is lost."

39. The two young men walked on up Fifth Avenue, oppressed on all sides by the heights and powers of the great city, the immense buildings above them, the hurrying racketing traffic before them and beside them, the fashionable stores at one side, and the crowd which flowed ignorantly by them.

40. "He is damned," said Harry. "He is fast asleep in the cemetery on Sunday afternoon in 1912, a child regarded by his parents, who are dead.

41. "When he wakes up, they will let him stand on the bridge above the Harlem and look when the Montreal train goes by, below, far away from him.

42. "But he will never wake up to this," said Harry, pointing to the great city moving about them in 1934.

An Inquisition

In Fellini's *Amarcord*, the crowd hoists her up
on a wooden pole, and chanting, carries her
to the heap of burning straw where they will watch her
become smoke and ash, this rag and paper witch
woven at the seasonal seam, a pagan's hope for harvest.
My sister blamed it on the planting

in early March when she dug cannas, rain lilies,
turned the soil over, dug
mounds of leriope, monkey grass with a shovel.
The geneticist called it *a blow to the embryo*,
whatever set in motion the rupture in gestation, the mass
of fibrous tissue welded into the fabric

of her son's lower body at birth. I began to dream
of young men I had loved, or wanted to love,
and each late October day the doctors found
one of Stewart's organs impaired or missing, bladder, colon, kidney,
like a punishment. A child crippled,
and I dreamt I saw my own son's face

changing. His left temple began to bulge as the right receded,
until I believed the wants of my own body
deformed his, the way a wreath of feathers forming
in a sick child's pillow, or the slow drying of his footprint,
becomes malicious magic, the shifting of pain
from one body to another.

I could be a woman without husband, father, or brother
whose breast her neighbors believe is marked
by the Devil, a spot of flesh that will not bleed.
A woman unable to shed tears, whose long hair cannot be cut,
whose form in sunlight leaves no shadow. A woman on trial,
and my sister stands with me.

We want to believe in health, or innocence,
but we are brought before a long wooden table
where seven men sit facing us, like doctors
or priests, and our father appears in black clerical robes
and a peaked cap, half magistrate, half wizard
and sentences each of us to wear red shoes.

He speaks, but we cannot hear
which of us is to receive the red hot slippers
brought to her with tongs,
so that she must dance until she falls down dead,
and which will be granted a girl's reprieve,
where she might click her heels, wish, and find herself home.

SUSAN JONES

Willing Suspension

TWENTY YEARS AGO a girl who went to grammar school with me, a short girl who licked the vanilla ice cream carefully from the sides and ends of her Mayfield's ice cream sandwich while we stood by the painted-on asphalt hopscotch court nobody used (preferring to draw lopsided squares in the dirt), married a man who eats bran flakes every morning for breakfast. He, she and I were young when she did this, married him and his box of bran.

I was saddened when I heard their union was impending, but did not say straight to her face: Won't he at least gag down an almost hard fried egg, say once a year, to give you some small squirt of alive, real yellow on a plate? Sunny side up would be too much, but two over easy? (We were not close: this almost-bride and I. Proximity was all we shared.) I suggested soft-boiled, shirred, coddled or scrambled to an older woman, someone who knew the habits of this man. But she said no.

"Hard-boiled?"

"For lunch," she said.

I was afraid to mention prunes.

I said, "Won't he ever eat anything besides those rucked-up stuck and hardened flakes against a white bowl?"

No, she shook her head at me, no.

"He's a cereal monogamist?" I said.

She shrugged.

Is this the way many marriages go? Signs from the outset screaming no, no, no.

"Check the bowl," I want to say. "Look at the bowl."

My girlfriend's hair is very thin now. Her legs and arms like pipe cleaners. And when we speak, her lonely eyes shine over my right shoulder.

Perhaps she is watching out for her children even when they are not with her, noting passing cars, a piece of glass on the sidewalk? Or maybe she is waiting for Mr. "Sky King" to buzz his plane over the horizon and rescue her, having tired of his daughter, Penny.

To see those still averted orbs, you would not know we shared the

licking time of countless ice cream sandwiches.

Although I hear he's learned to play the violin.

Why do I wonder? It must be the word *marriage* circling under my hair and everywhere else I turn. And because I will never speak Vietnamese.

Talk about the "marriage plot." Marriage cropped up at my twentieth high school reunion every other conversation:

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Were you ever married?"

"No."

"You mean you aren't divorced?"

"No," as though they think I might not remember.

One guy with a Bible verse on the back of his shirt said he would ask his grandmother to pray for me. She prayed for him. That's how he got married.

I said, "I hope she's Baptist. The Presbyterians've been praying for me Lo these many years."

"Funny thing," he says, but he's not laughing. "She is. Baptist."

So what does marriage, that "gamble" (my father's called it that since I was ten), mean when one doesn't?

Am I holding aces? Should I fold? No.

Hit me. Hit me again.

After the reunion, I wondered some more—do I have too much time on my hands? No husband. No kids. Part-time job, just scraping by, no health insurance, no car. I was even beginning to memorize, inadvertently, personal ads: "Proven sperm source, etc."

I decided to do the American thing. In my part of middle America, if you don't marry or have children, the least you can do is volunteer.

The Vietnamese woman who relocated refugees for social services was very excited.

"She teach college," she said to the other women in her office.

"Only part-time," I said. I didn't tell her I'd failed my Ph.D. exams. I didn't mention I was depressed, confused, a little shaky.

"English teacher very good. We have new Vietnamese family. Need English teacher very bad," she said. "Maybe help me speak too?" She laughed.

She handed me a videotape.

"Very good," she said. "You watch. Tell how to say. OK?"

"OK," I said.

I TRIED TO LEARN THEIR VIETNAMESE NAMES, but I didn't have the patience to watch the fat policemen in the "how-to" video. I am not a drill-sergeant. I improvised.

The brothers didn't want to go, but I took the sisters to the petting zoo. Then to a department store. The next week, we went to the farmer's market. The younger sister insisted on changing and put on a white satin dress with satin shoes. The older girl wore shorts. When I tried to explain where we were going, she shrugged.

At the market, a younger farmer off Sand Mountain watched us say the names of vegetables, over and over.

"They learning English?" he said, jerking his head at the girls.

I nodded.

He rubbed the corners of his mouth, rested his thumb on one front tooth.

I took my hand off his cantaloupes.

The older and younger sister hung back behind the stacked bushel baskets of beans, smiled looking down at their shoes.

"Vietnamese?" he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"Thought so," he said. "I was o'var in '68." He thumbed at the sisters.

"You were?" I said, calculating the distance to the car.

"Hell," he said. "I bet those two wasn't even born."

He looked at them, wiped his hands on his jeans. He smiled.

The girls laughed, bought a bag of string beans for fifty cents.

Soon, out of a family of eight, only the oldest daughter remained for our twice weekly "lessons." The brothers and her mother had day jobs. Her sister cleaned houses. Tina and her father worked nights.

Sometimes, my new friends seemed more American than I could ever be: new Honda four-door, new VCR (I had to borrow cars to come visit. Tina thought I was rich). One day, though, her father, who had spent his best years in reeducation camps, walked into the living room. When he saw me, he smiled with his mouth, politely turned away.

I tried to finish my pickled egg in pork sauce, but I only managed half.

WHEN I FIRST MET TINA, the Vietnamese woman from social services said, "Do not let her hold hand. When I come to America, I hold the hand of my girl friends, then they do not like me to be friends. In Vietnam we do this. Tell her. No. Not American."

But Tina took my hand at the grocery store, held my arm in the

mall. I liked holding hands, swimming backwards across the years. I felt restored to a former self, like a freeze-dried fish slipped back into water.

At what age do American girls stop? Holding hands.

I remembered trying to loop my best friend's arm in seventh grade, walking down the hall. She asked me not to touch her. Said it gave her the creeps.

So I never told Tina a thing about her hands. How could I, even if I had the heart?

Tina and her boyfriend-turned-fiancé took me bowling in the fall, tried to introduce me to some eligible men.

"Anna, boyfriend?" Tina said.

"No, no boyfriend," I said.

Tina smiled. The young men held their palms over jets of warm air, hefted some balls. Two of the men wore shiny evening suits. One said he had lived in America for seven years. He looked awfully young.

He smiled, moved closer to me, bowling ball in hand.

"How many children you have?" he said.

"No," I said. "No children."

"You must," he said. "For the woman, this first necessary."

I smiled, at least my lips rearranged themselves.

He smiled, shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"I wish to be a doctor," he said.

"I see," I said, wishing I weren't a foot taller.

"You're welcome," he said.

While the men took turns bowling, Tina whispered, "Anna, we make double wedding." She took hold of my hand.

"No boyfriend," I said, shaking my head.

Tina flapped her free hand at me while she spoke in Vietnamese. Pointed to me.

"She say you need Chinese husband better," her future husband translated. "Vietnamese husband OK, but sometime too strict."

Tina laughed, covering her mouth with her hand.

Her fiancé is tall and thin, Chinese and kind. They giggle together. At home, Tina likes to point at his picture and say, "Ug-ly."

That first Christmas, Tina and I sat on our feet in a dark chilly room and sang into microphones. The VCR sent out pictures with the English song words underneath, a bright green ball pulsing over each syllable:

A beautiful woman with long dark hair walked toward a small, arcing bridge. A man moved toward her. They embraced, though tentatively. Sad. In the water, men naked to the waist with little rag-like loincloths were wrestling alligators. "Like a bridge over trouble water"

(no "d"), we sang, Tina's voice high, inflecting like a retractable tape measure in the sun, mine low, like an imitation country star's. I didn't explain.

I brought Tina and her family a large, artificial wreath with three gold wise men glued across the front. My sister gave it to me. I hate Christmas. Unfortunately, one of the wise men fell off when Tina set the wreath down. I was embarrassed by this. I had thought one of the wise men was loose, but I ignored it.

I felt I was a poor introduction to an American Christmas. I should have had a song in my heart and a roll of fresh twenties to peel off with a flourish. At the least, I might own a glue gun.

I handed Tina the box of chocolates, the Christmas-wrapped picture frame with pink and blue flowers on its glass edges, suitable for her engagement photo. Tina set them down, managed to hustle the whole wreath out of the room.

"Annie," she said, laying aside her microphone. "Boyfriend?" She raised her eyebrows.

She loves this game.

"No," I said. "No boyfriend."

"Boyfriend Texas?" she said.

"No," I said. "No boyfriend."

"Boyfriend Tennessee?"

"No," I said, smiling. "No."

After she served me a Sprite and a piece of store-bought pound cake, Tina carefully showed me pictures of women whom her brothers made children with but did not marry. One brother has children by two different women. These mothers are still in Vietnam, babes in arms. In the snapshots, the women are crying.

She watched my face while I looked at the pictures. Her chin was serious.

Did I understand?

Did she want to talk about sex? Or was she explaining her desire to marry? These girls did not marry; because they had no proof but babies, no certificate of marriage, they were left behind?

Tina told me that even though her brothers tried, it was very difficult to bring even one "wife" to America now. The paper work was very complicated.

I panicked for an instant, thinking maybe she wanted me to marry a brother.

No. Tina will marry. First they must find money.

After I teased Tina about her fiancé, she picked at the arm of the sofa with her long, painted nails, then put the little photo album away. She took up her microphone. Pointed to mine.

We sang "Bridge over Trouble Water," no "d," again.

MONTHS PASS before I spend another morning with Tina. Winter is over. Even the dogwood blossoms have come and gone and all the while my almost-one-year refugee, my friend, is turning not-so-slowly American.

When I'm with Tina, I like to practice her Vietnamese name, worrying the inflection, letting my tongue wander. I know that trying to say my friend's name, trying to put in the little carets where they belong, I could be saying anything: eggplant, ovary. It feels like getting lost in a familiar place. Even though the furniture's been rearranged, I can still feel my way in the dark.

My friend doesn't seem to mind. She laughs, tells me her American name, the name fellow workers at the sock factory call her.

She's told me time and again. But I like trying to get the inflection right. I don't want it to get lost, too.

"Tina," she says, tossing her hair, flashing her teeth at me.

Tina Turner? This Tina is nineteen, South Vietnamese, engaged. At home, she wears her bangs twisted into a pink foam roller.

After one year of failed inflection, after watching Tina's hands flutter and fall as she listens to my fledgling Vietnamese, I admit there are cultural forces at work stronger than both of us.

I give in. Face to face, I use her American name.

"Tina," I say. "Tina, when are you getting married?"

She runs to the calendar and touches June, puts her finger on the number eight. It's late May already.

I jump up before Tina can sit back down, hug her as a form of congratulations.

Isn't hugging American? Should I shake hands?

She smiles, concaves her chest, keeping her breasts from touching mine.

Do American women touch breasts?

Tina takes my hand in hers, lets it go again.

Last summer, Tina asked the woman at social services to ask me what I wanted in return for all the time I was spending at her house. She was concerned.

"Did my sister not have a family?" she asked in Vietnamese. "Could I not work a garden and sell the vegetables? Was my time not valuable?"

"In third world country cannot understand why you do not use time to make money," the woman from social services translated. "She want to know what you want?"

Tina smiled at me. She leaned slightly forward, then wiped her face clean for an instant to take in my answer. I thought of the leftover onion rings she had wrapped in a paper napkin, tucking them in her small white purse to share with her sister.

"I like you," I said, and lifted my shoulders quickly before dropping them again.

"She like you too," the translator said, before Tina could say anything. Then they both sighed, as if we had concluded a satisfactory business transaction.

We all smiled.

Today, Tina lets me in the kitchen with her, doesn't keep the swinging door closed, lets me watch her fry the pork-filled egg rolls, the fat clean and bubbling around the compact folds.

The almost-June day is clear and beautiful. Our feet are bare on the linoleum block floor, the back door is open, and the little fish with their heads chopped off stand tails aloft in a wide green colander on the counter. They are lunch.

I'm sitting at the family's kitchen table. Tina stands at the stove, turning, shifting, making room for me, poking her egg rolls. I say that I've been working. I make typing motions on the plastic tablecloth.

"Working, working very hard. Three jobs," I say, then hold up three fingers.

Tina laughs.

It is time for our boyfriend ritual. I don't know how much longer we can keep it up.

But first, she crosses to me, touches my hair where the part has decided to split things up, where the hair has sprouted gray, not the way I combed it.

"Anna?" she says, lightly touching my hair.

"Yes," I say. "It's turning gray."

She turns to me and says a word in her language. I decide that the word is gray. Tina walks back to the stove.

"Anna," she says, pointing at me with the chopsticks she uses to turn her egg rolls, then turns back to her stove. Here it comes.

"Boyfriend?"

"No boyfriend," I say.

"No boyfriend?" she says.

"Me," she says, "Ugly. Boyfriend." She shrugs, lays her chopsticks aside. "Anna be-u-tiful. No boyfriend."

"No. Tina be-u-tiful. Me. Ug-ly," I say and beat on my chest like Tarzan.

Some English teacher.

Tina turns back to her egg rolls.

I remember how, last summer, I took Tina to my mother's house. She loves my mother. Calls her Mimi. Fights me off to hold her 75-year-

old hand and help her cross streets.

Mimi's not home.

"How many sleep?" she asked.

"Two," I said.

She pointed to a picture of my sister's five children.

"They sleep?"

"No," I said. I felt very wasteful. "They have another house."

"Here. How many sleep? Two?"

"Yes," I said.

She nodded.

When I took her to my apartment, I hoped she would not ask.

"How many sleep?" she said.

"One," I said.

"Me, " I said. "I am the only one sleeps here."

"I have a dog," I said.

The dog lunged at the back door screen. She wanted to come in.

Spitty jumped down from the top of the stove where she likes to sleep. "And a cat."

In Vietnam they eat dogs. Do they eat cats?

I did not take Tina to my sister's house. Two houses, empty, were enough for one day.

Soon, Tina lifts ten egg rolls onto a plate to set before me. I say younger sibling in Vietnamese. That's easy, but Tina looks doubtful. I say older sibling in Vietnamese. That's harder. I'm supposed to do something at least halfway down my throat. She laughs. I must use my hands to make this one clear, saying younger, hands low, then older, hands high to introduce my older sister into our conversation. Before I make good sense she taps my plate.

"Eat," she says. "Eat. Fish sauce?"

I ask Tina does she believe in ghosts? I have read about a Vietnamese man who claims he slept with a ghost. I think it tried to eat his head.

"What?" she says.

"Ghosts," I say again. "The kind eat your head." I point to mine and make chewing sounds.

How do I make this ghost word with my hands? Ghost. I could act it out like I did when I sang "Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog" over the phone for her on Elvis's and my birthday. But Tina looks irritated.

I could call the woman at social services, and she might write it down on a piece of paper phonetically.

I ask instead for the names of books on folk customs, translated from the Vietnamese.

Tina looks puzzled. "Book?" she says.

"Books," I say. "Vietnam."

The light streams into the room. Tina puts more egg rolls in her pan.

"No book," Tina says, pointing her chopstick at my head. "Eat." She taps me on the wrist with one stick, holds up one finger. "Feel most human."

Tina turns her back to me to poke the egg rolls. It is quiet enough to hear the fat suss along the sides of her wok.

I stroke the linoleum with my bare feet, aware of the motion, the sussing fat, the slight pause between strokes as if I were testing the suspension of a hanging bridge, giving in to that brief, airy sensation when the cables quiet.

PERHAPS IT'S THE PINK PORK peeking out of Tina's egg rolls or her wedding date that sends me rushing to the paint store. I duck off the interstate to buy a quart of Bohemian Blue. Almost the blue used around doorways in New Mexico to keep out evil spirits.

I am in a hurry. Very American. I have promised to eat lunch at the grammar school with my niece. Tina has given me a warm plate of egg rolls to take to school. But I have to get that paint.

It's my niece's birthday. She's twelve, the youngest of five sisters. They call her Carcass. She hates that.

During lunch, none of the children talk. They don't eat egg rolls either. Not even Carcass. I ask the little girl on K.P. to sweep under my feet with her broom. I lift them up, because the cafeteria proctor, who is eating one of Tina's egg rolls, says having your feet swept under is the way to get a new husband.

A new husband?

"Why look at that man over there," she says. "The insurance man. He doesn't wear a ring. Now he's handsome."

"But he's wearing a yellow shirt," I say. "I couldn't marry a man who wore yellow button-down shirts." I do not mention his crimped blond hair. There's no accounting for taste.

Carcass laughs. Sometimes I think she is wise beyond her years.

On the way home in the car, as we pass the golf and country club, she asks me why I never got married.

"I don't play golf either," I say. She is not to be dissuaded.

"I had other things to do," I say.

Carcass turns her face to some pot-bellied men teeing off on number two.

I think of the time when she was four and asked me: "Are you a kid or a mom?"

She twisted up her brow trying to understand.

By dusk my front and back doors are so righteous, so blue, they sing to me.

Is it the Bohemian Blue paint that is making me swoon? Is it the full moon on the horizon?

Or is it the thinking I've done with the brush in my hand—about the unfortunate marriage of my grammar school friend, her four children and all that bran her husband's eaten by now; about should I dye the gray out of my hair or not; about Tina's upcoming wedding banquet at the Chinese Restaurant—more jellyfish tentacles; about when Carcass decides she knows and no longer needs to ask me why I never married.

Maybe it's the thinking. Maybe it's the paint fumes, but I fall asleep.

By twelve p.m. the ghost of a future husband is at the blue door. It is shining at him. I don't think he finds the blue glare salubrious, his mouth twists a little, but he has sense enough not to mention it.

I know this man, have known him since 1978, though he does not know he is a possible future husband when he comes to the door.

My black dog sleeps between us. We hold hands over the back of the black dog.

"It's not like you found my name in the phone book," he says when I ask him if he does this sort of thing often.

I turn off the light.

During the night, the black dog touches her tongue to mine, accidentally. It tastes like cool uncooked pork. In combination with the egg rolls, the broom swept beneath my feet, the full moon, the dog's fleas, and the man holding my hand (he is also using my favorite pillow), I cannot fall asleep until five minutes past three in the morning.

When I do, I dream of a young woman with long hair. We are cutting willow branches—to force the buds—placing them in vases indoors until they bloom. She is crying because she wants to kiss the man who is, while this dream is taking place, holding my hand. I give her some willow branches, tell her sure, go ahead, because I can afford to be generous now.

In the morning, we sit on the couch and watch race cars on TV. Is this American? We are tired from sleeping with a dog like an Amish courting board between us, and now he holds my feet in his lap. It feels like marriage.

The black dog sleeps on the floor.

I have put on the black lacy bra with the lovebirds over each nipple.

It's old. It's been around the track. I put it on without looking, tired, hurrying, seeing it lying there on the stack of clothes I took off.

He says the blue door looks better in the morning light.

He eats two eggs over easy. He eats raisin toast, hash browns. He eats chips, ham sandwich, pie with ice cream, Big 20 Coca-Cola Classic.

"Eat," I say, and tap his plate. "Fish sauce?" I say.

"What?" he says. He cuts his eyes at me.

A spark. And we're back in bed. My shirt is off. The lovebirds have been tossed. His eyes are glazing blue to gray.

Then I make a mistake.

"Is it true," I ask, "that the Braves' pitching staff are all wimps? That's what the paper said."

The dehumidifier stops drinking water from the air.

"You've got it all wrong," he says.

So I try to remember what I read, something about Deion Sanders getting hit with a ball and the relief pitcher not thinking it had been on purpose and the team getting mad 'cause the Braves' relief pitcher hadn't thrown at the other team's pitcher. I more or less say this.

"No," he says, rolling away from me. "You have some of it right, but no."

He sits up, puts his shirt on.

"So," I say. "What happened?"

He stands to step into his boxer shorts.

"I'm not sure you'd understand." He runs one hand through his All-American hair.

"Understand?"

"I mean," he says. "Deion Sanders was back after more than six weeks of his, whatever."

"Hiatus?" I say.

He adjusts his waistband.

"You could say," he says, "that the players don't like Deion. But remember, it was the seventh ball hit him."

He jostles things into place.

"You could say you don't wait till the seventh ball if you want to hit someone. But," he says, nodding at me. "You gotta know Pendleton; he's playing third."

"So," he says, "the other pitcher gets up and the relief throws him one down the middle. You could say Pendleton's thinking the relief isn't throwing at the other pitcher because the Braves don't like Deion, and that Pendleton doesn't think that's right—Deion or no Deion, they're a team. And Pendleton, he walks off the field."

"Oh," I say.

"Pendleton's not talking. You could say that's what happened. But there's a hundred ways to interpret what happened."

Yeah. Right. I rub my eyes.

"Well, the paper said the Braves' pitching staff were wimps."

"Who said that? The sports writer? Who?" He pats his wallet into place.

My possible future husband left rapidly after that, taking some dog hair, his rather large shaving kit, back to Atlanta.

"Keep it in the road," he says.

Since then we've had a heat wave. Scorcher June days. Many small black fleas and their eggs hatching. The purple verbena gone to seed even as the white phlox leans into the afternoon glare.

Tina's wedding was a big success. She drove away in a white car covered with pink streamers and artificial flowers, a blonde Barbie doll on the middle of the hood. There were ten dishes at the reception. More jellyfish tentacles.

I get lots of phone calls from the ghost, not much in the flesh. The third time he comes up, I ask him does he want to get married?

"I think about it," he says. "Do we have to have a game plan?"

I feel like a goalie on a free kick.

COME SEPTEMBER, Tina calls, asks why I do not come see her.

"Anna, you sick?"

She says that she comes to my house only that one time. She does not remember where I live. "English very bad." She says she needs to see me.

She puts her husband on.

"How was your honeymoon?" I say.

"No good," he says.

"Why?"

"It take us thirteen hour to get to Florida. Should take seven."

He giggles.

"We get lost in Georgia."

"Oh," I say. "How was Panama City?"

"No people," he says. "We all alone. We don't know what to do."

He asks do I want to come to their new house, see the pictures from the wedding?

"Sure," I tell him. "I'll come, maybe next weekend."

I can hear Tina speaking rapidly next to the phone.

"Bring boyfriend," he says.

"OK," I say, trying to live up to their hopes for my old age.

It's November, the leaves have peaked, the sky has spit a little snow, and I am yet to show.

I break down, call the ghost.

"Sure," he says. "We'll have to do that. Next time I come up."

"You said that before," I say. "I guess I won't stop taking baths."

"Good," he says. "You shouldn't."

I dangle the phone receiver to untangle the line. As it twirls I can hear him say: "It's not like we don't lead busy lives."

"How about next week?" I say.

"Oh," he says. "I'm selling Christmas trees."

"Christmas trees?"

"Been doing it the past five years," he says. "I've worked up a little customer base."

A full time job, night classes, baseball card shows, and now Christmas trees?

"I think you could use another part-time job," I say.

The sick part is I'm intrigued. I've been passed over for a fish before—a granddaddy brown trout. But a Christmas tree? No.

"Sort of a mental health break," the ghost says. "I take a week of vacation."

"Oh," I say. But I'm thinking how I'm forty too, wondering if I'm that weird.

"We close the lot December twentieth, I think. Maybe then?"

"Maybe," I say. I should be screening calls way past Christmas.

TINA calls.

"Anna," she says. "Anna, where do you go? We do not see you."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I did get my answering machine fixed."

"We wait for you, but you do not come. We wait all day."

Outside my window it is snowing.

"Anna," Tina says. "Anna, boyfriend come?"

I could lie.

"No," I say. "I'll come. Today."

I call up Carcass. Yep, she'll go.

When we walk in their door, Tina says, "Anna." She holds her stomach low. "Have baby," she says.

Her husband is wearing shorts. The house is hot. He smiles.

Oh no, I think. Already?

"I like a boy," he says.

"We like girls better," I say, and Carcass smiles.

"That's what she say," he says, pointing at Tina.

We look at photos; we watch the wedding video; we eat curry. He does most of the talking, because he knows more English words. Tina sits by herself, off to one side.

After her husband asks if this is our first Vietnamese wedding, he asks if we have seen a Vietnamese funeral.

"Vietnamese try throw self into grave," he says.

Carcass looks at me. She was beginning to glaze; now she's awake.

"Just the wife," I say, "or everybody?"

"Whole family try," he says.

"What if the wife didn't like her husband?" Carcass says.

"Still throw," he says. "To lose part of family very bad."

Tina casts her eyes down to the shag carpet, smiles. Carcass lifts her eyebrows, shoots her eyes sideways to find mine. I put my arm behind her shoulder, play with her ponytail. She drops one hand, face up, on my thigh—like she used to do in church. I push up her sleeve, tickle her inner arm.

When I say we have to go, Tina's husband says, "You come next time, we eat a big meal."

Tina comes over to the couch, slips one arm around me, pats my bottom.

"Annie," she says.

I stand to put on my coat. Tina pats my hands.

"You need marry," she says. "Have baby."

"Good-bye," Carcass says. "It was nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," her husband says. "Next time we make egg roll."

In the car, Carcass says, "Their house is so clean."

"Yeah," I say.

"But Annie," she says. "I couldn't throw myself in a grave."

I tell Carcass what her Mimi said when her contact lens shifted off her latest cornea transplant while she was driving down the mountain: "I just shut one eye and kept going."

"That's how we do it in our family," I say. "It's probably harder."

Carcass rolls down the window, sticks her head out for a minute.

"It's colder than you think," she says. "Not to change the subject."

"Yeah," I say.

To my surprise the ghost shows the next weekend. I could say there's so much to say that we say nothing.

He eats a chicken pot pie, apple crisp, milk, tomato soup, coke. It's

nine o'clock.

I watch him eat, tell him I think I'm going into early menopause, just to keep his brain limber.

"That's something to think about," he says.

We sit and read the paper.

He folds his section, carries it across the room to me, shows me the funnies.

He goes back to his chair, closes his eyes, opens them again.

"You tired?" I say.

"I'm sorry," he says. "When I was a kid and went to sleep-overs, I'd always sneak inside about eight o'clock. The other kids would be playing combat and I'd say I was going to get my canteen or something, but I'd get in my sleeping bag instead."

We sit quietly. I am moved by the space between his sock feet, his instep tracing a slight question mark against the scuffed wood. He falls asleep, no longer the ghostly product of my imagination, more like a man. He knows; I know. We aren't about to marry anybody. But I can't quit.

"How you feel about adoption?" I say, when he wakes up, decides to brush his teeth. "That way, we could get married and have babies too."

He rolls his eyes.

It's that willing suspension of disbelief I'm going for: the total immersion a good story or a Southern Baptist demands.

I fix myself a cup of tea, stay up after he goes to bed. From where I sit, I can hear the man on my futon snoring deeply to himself. I flip off my shoes, spoon a sip of tea, let the cat settle in on my neck.

It's a good feeling doing what I want, like climbing the dry-leafed ledges up from the river gorge instead of taking the path—the sweet pull of sliding, almost falling, getting a little lost.

I realize it's not the bran that bothers me. It's getting so stuck on reading the bottom and sides of the bowl, I don't climb to the rim, take a longer view.

I try shutting one eye, and with that loss in plain view, that sense that maybe one of my hands is missing (my God my whole arm skewed from view), I decide to eat two of the three Oreos I have arranged so neatly on the plate.

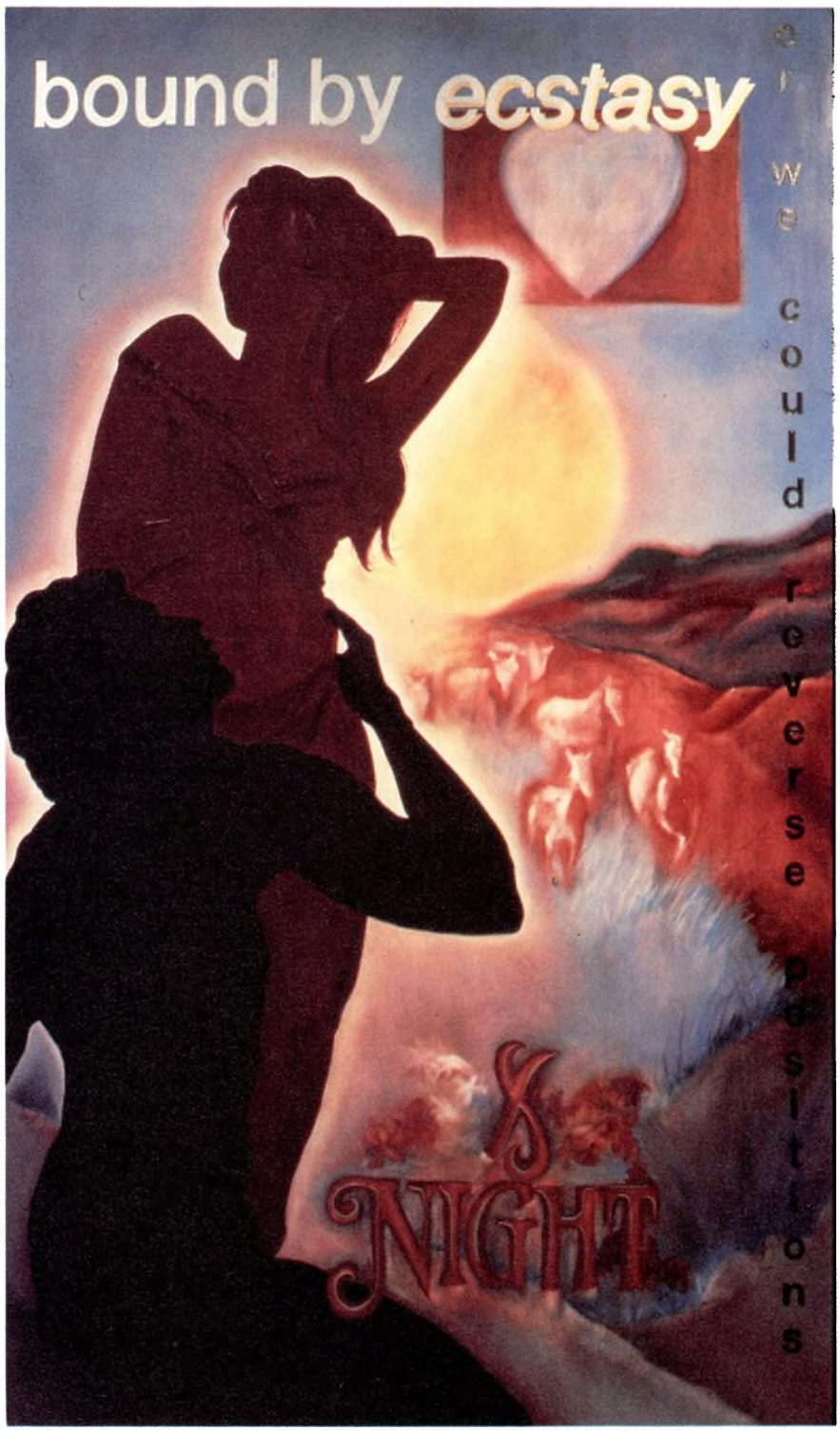
I chew carefully.

I feel most human.

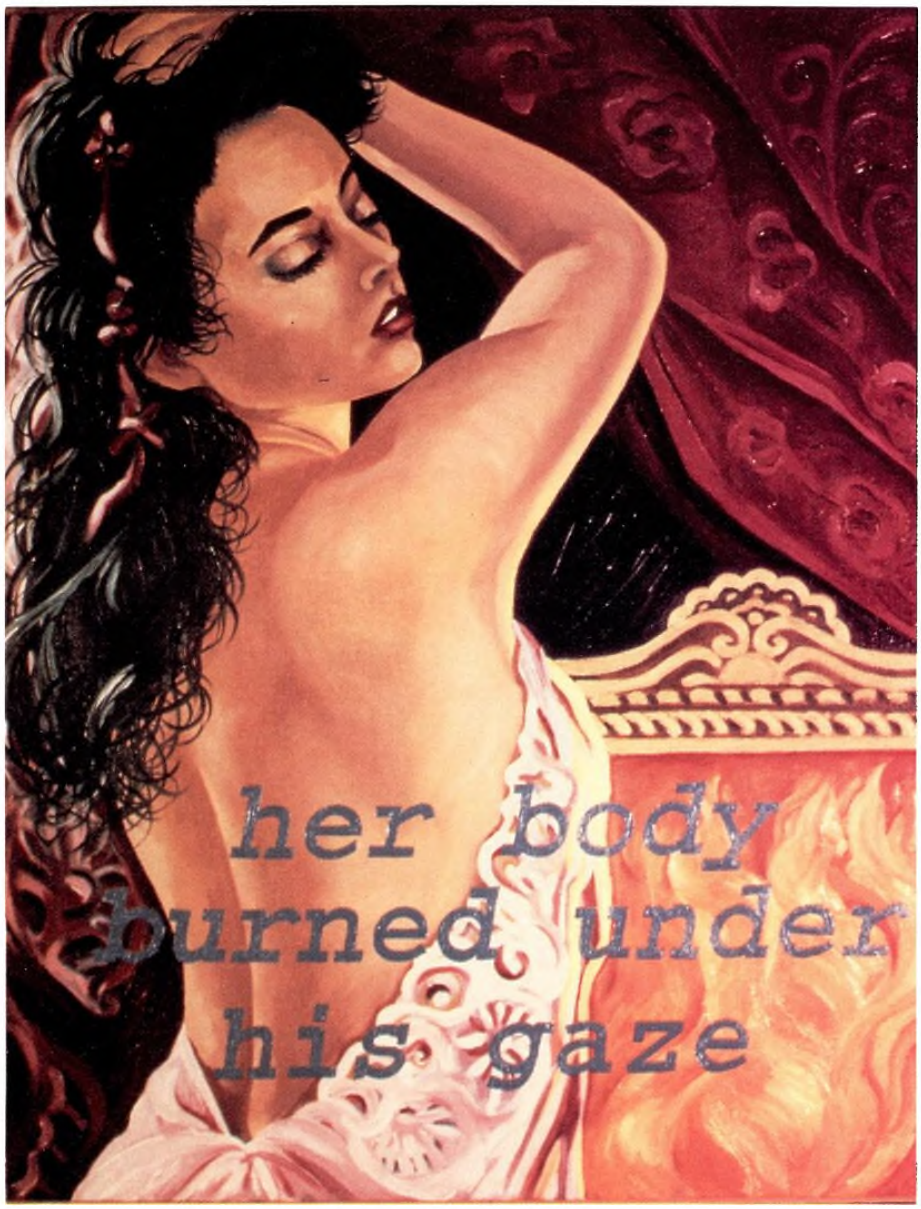
He Heard the Ocean

He heard the ocean, a round track around the jut of land,
and lay on his berth, and tried to remember his new daughter's
face—a curve, a wordless wet mouth. For a moment, he pretended
his wife breathed beside him. He wondered about the days
spent with her, about the feel of her belly he'd taken for granted
like his own limbs dangling and forgotten. She was only an idea.
She was miles away. Standing up, the ship surged beneath his feet,
the world made of metal. It was full of young men dressed in the same
clothes. He was one of them. He didn't know then he would be lucky.
He didn't know that later he would mow the lawn and drink iced tea
with lemon from his own tree his head as clear of the dead, as clear
of soldiers as it would ever be. His turn came. He stepped off
the ship, his boots filling with water. He thought of his wife,
her hair the color of branches. The island resembled the moon,
gray and cratered, he walked holding the machine gun like a life-
preserver of metal. Explosions tore the air like paper. Men he knew
and men he did not know fell all around him. Blood spattered him
like paint from a roller. It was cold and things happened slowly.
Those who loved him waited on the other side of the world. Those
who loved him drank coffee, or slept. And something spared him.
It saved him for the time when he would mow the lawn, when he
would lie in bed beside his wife, an old man, and read faces cold
on his closed eyelids, remembering young men lying beside him
in the sand with strange voices leaking from their openings.
His wife breathes. She breathes, just like he does.

Untitled (*X Night*), 1993
oil on canvas, 74″ x 44″



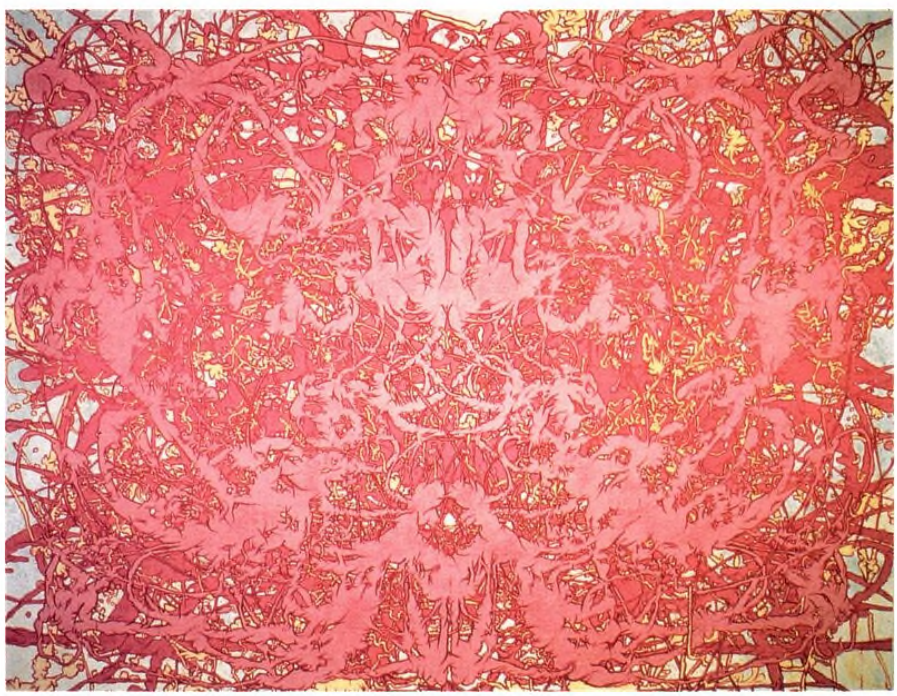
Untitled, 1994
oil on canvas, 22″ x 28″



Untitled, 1994
oil on canvas, 18″ x 24″

The Old Mentor's Reply

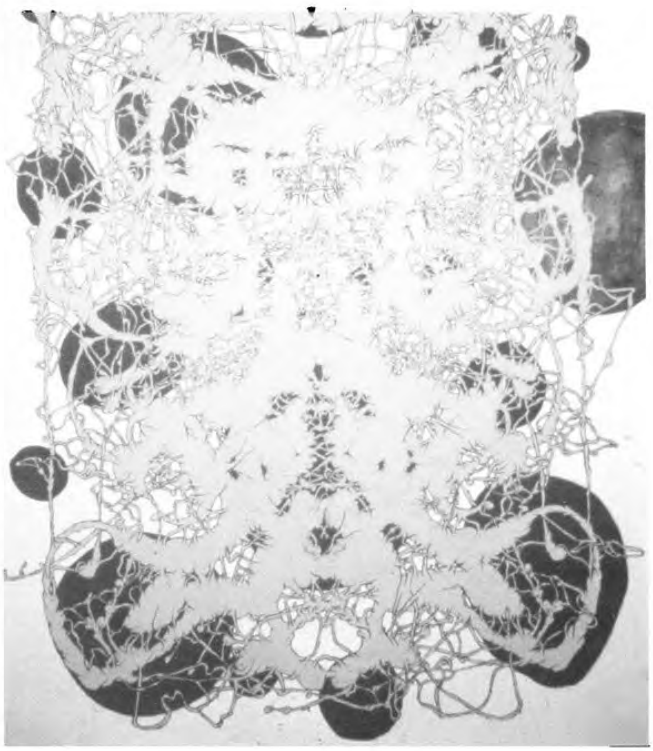
So, now that you have declined
the grand post in the capitol,
have withdrawn at the last moment
from the favorable marriage
(choosing freedom before power),
you confess to a new, disturbing restlessness:
dreams of banquets, eminent acquaintance,
the dowry of a woman's wit...
And the local flora suddenly seem somnolent?
And the town fountains childish?
Until now, your deprivations
were routine, your victories desultory.
Don't confuse ascetic with aesthetic.
Think of Solitude, that sure-footed,
twin-headed creature—man and ass—
rising from the great canyon at evening,
how many days having flowed through the pan,
and it ready to weigh the take,
if any? Think of the small sack of greed,
the heavy dream dust
sprinkled over bedchamber and podium,
and the cup knocking, echoless,
against its bucket. Sleep on that edge,
near the river no bird dares
fly across. Then come to me and complain.

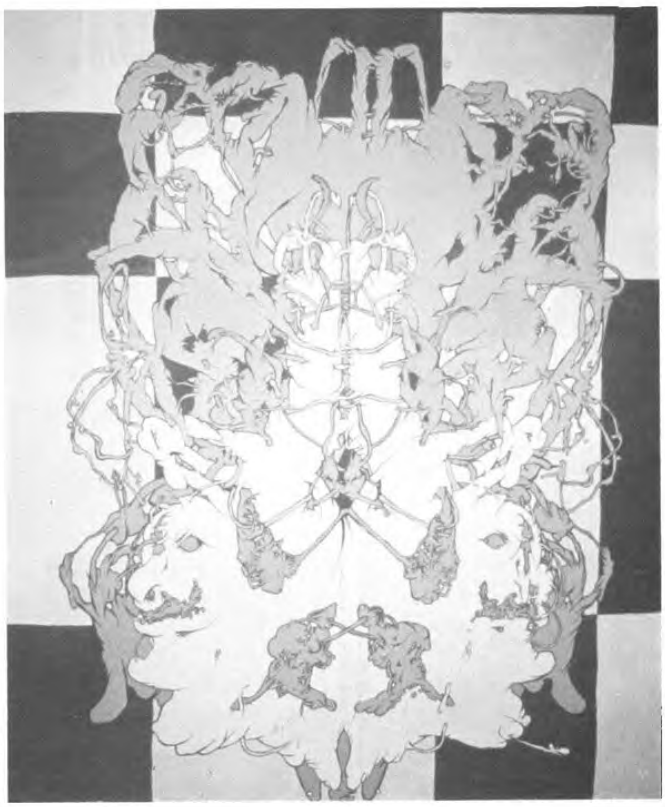


Scrambled Splatter, 1993
acrylic and latex on canvas, 76" x 99"

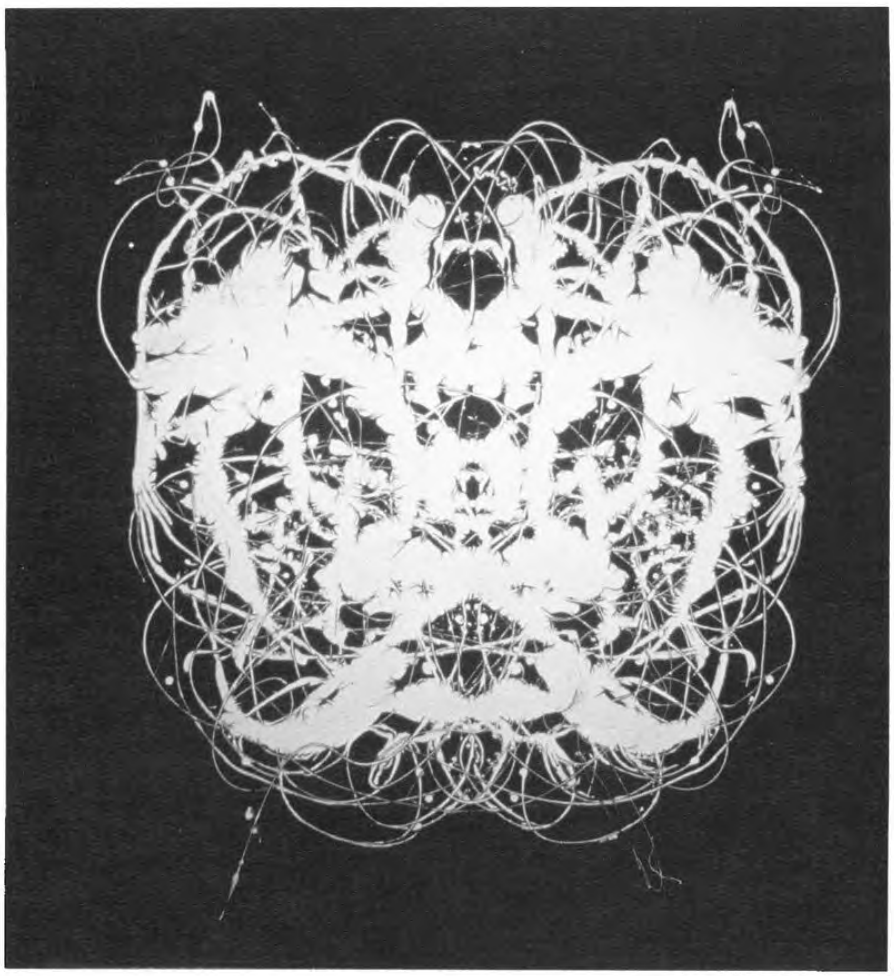
Blue Celtic Interface, 1993-94
acrylic on canvas, 76" x 77"

Olsen's Sweet Cream Splatter, 1993
acrylic and latex
on canvas,
76.5″ x 62.5″

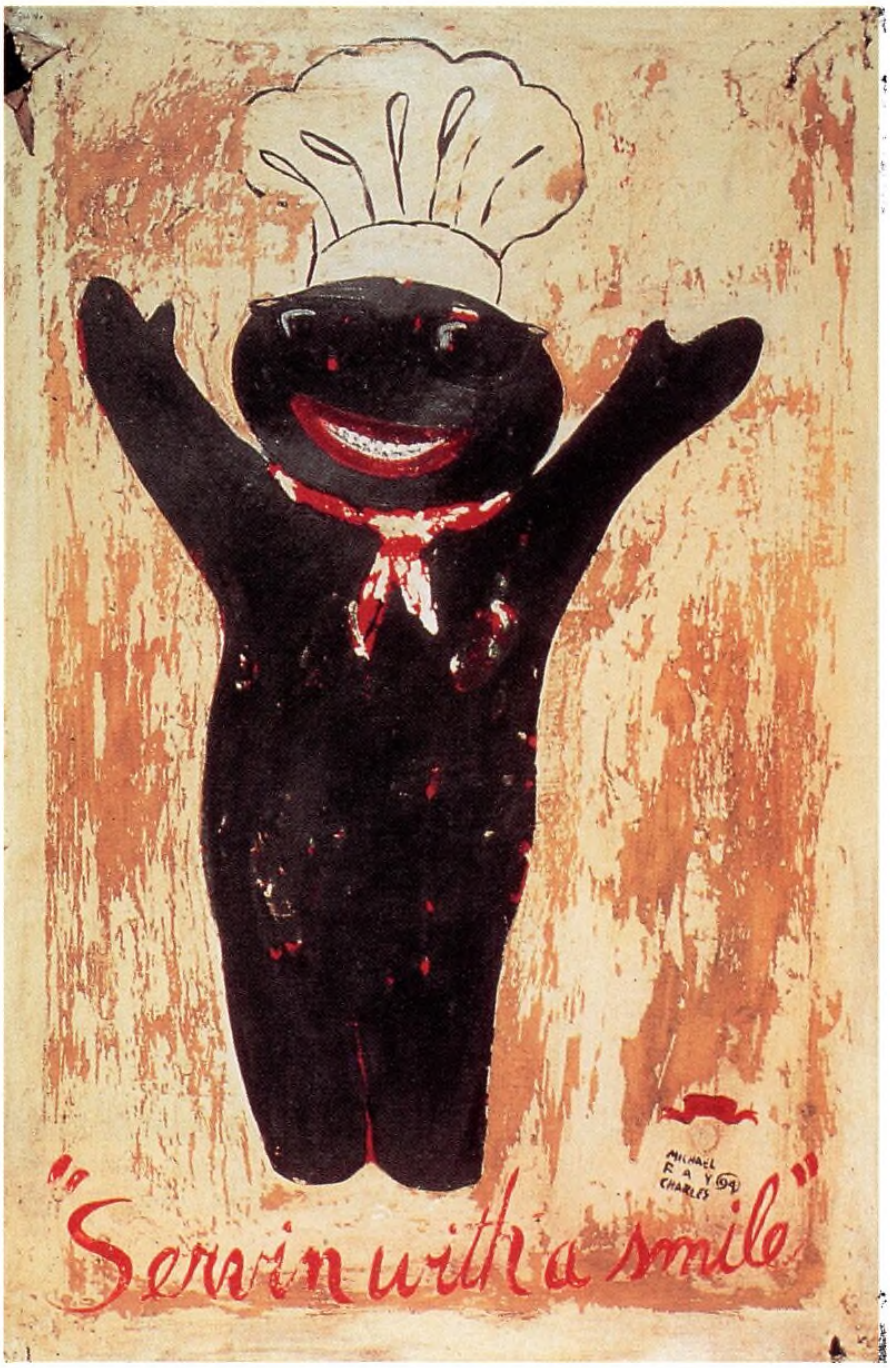




oil canvas,
76″ x 64″



White Splatter, 1993
acrylic and latex on canvas, 76" x 76"



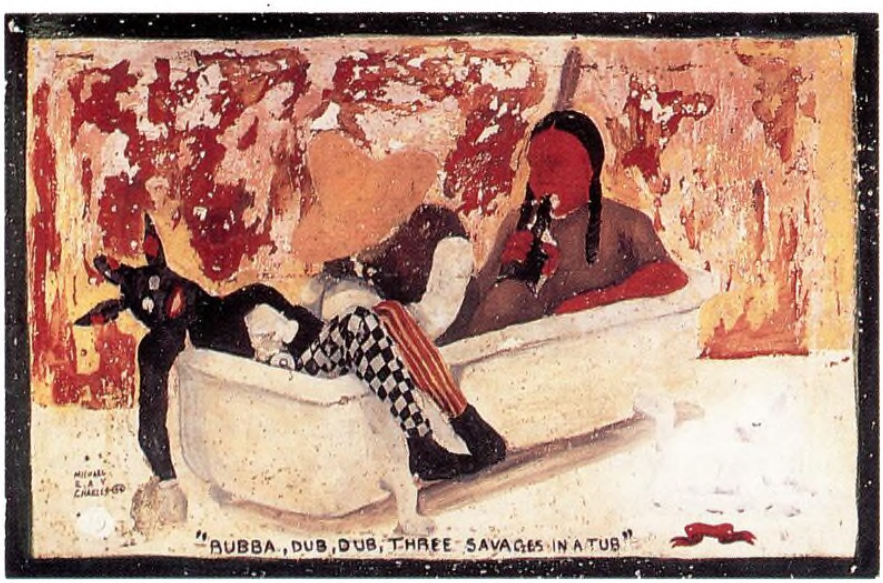
Serving with a Smile (Forever Free Series), 1994
acrylic and latex on paper, 40" x 26"

White Girl TV (Forever Free Series), 1994
acrylic, latex, and oil wash on paper, 40" x 26"

Pin the Hell on the Donkey (Forever Free Series), 1994
acrylic and latex on mat board, 24" x 32"

I Will Dance, 1994
acrylic and latex on paper, 28 3/4" x 25 1/2"

B.E.T.V. Dinners (Forever Free Series), 1994
acrylic and oil wash on paper, 40" x 26"



Rubba, Dub, Dub, Three Savages in a Tub, 1994
acrylic on paper, and copper penny, 26" x 39 3/4"

DAWN RAFFEL

The Seer

IT LOOKED AT FIRST TO BE AN OFFICE of some sort, dimly, even sleepily lit. To look at it, she thought, what with the windows of it gated, what with the door of it secured, you would have thought it deserted.

She checked the address. She checked the address again. This was not an office district. That the number on the door was the same as the one on the dampened scrap—the blurred scrawl the signature of Mr. Edward's fountain pen and less than reliable, these days, grip—well!—it didn't serve to reassure her, did not, as she would doubtless have said had she had a companion, inspire in her confidence or faith. This whole block! Its shotgun houses scattershot, slatted and weedy, a stronghold, it seemed, of vacant lots, not a body in a yard, the sense of insects pervasive.

Often, as now, she shaped her thoughts as if for someone else.

She knew she did.

She knocked, of course. Of course, she touched her hair, a habit she had failed, somewhere along the way, to lose. It was not for lack of not quite effort but urging. Under a hat, her face, still good, she thought, if not quite young, partook of shade. Her pocketbook, embattled leather warrior, was guarding a hip.

There was a bell to the side of the door. She found it—the bell, the buzzer. Whatever it was, it was mounted in tin, and was crooked as the step on which she stood. She rang or buzzed—either. She would say to Mr. Edward—what would she say? Composing, composing herself. That who should answer but dogs, or dog? She tended to exaggerate. The barking and the scratching, however, were real, the sound of dogs' paws, of the nails of the paws of a carnivorous animal on wood.

The door swung in. A nose poked out. A long-legged man appeared in the doorframe. To see them both, the man, the dog, graying and angular, sniffing, you might as well think it true, what was said about the looking-alike, attraction, or living the means to it.

"Good morning," she said, though it was later than this.

The man just stood, he with his shirt a fright, the tails of it tortured. The face bespoke illness, why else to be creased and flushed this way, or maybe of only a recent, likely fully dressed inebriated nap.

"Come in," the man said.

And so she did. It was almost as if she could see herself. With a

hand to the hair, to the hat, to the battered pocketbook—still and all tasteful—here she was: She was a woman with a mission, a woman with a scarcely perceptible limp, as if merely a slightly lazy stride (persuaded thus, she soldiered on). She was a woman with a scrap to the dog.

The dog began to circle.

"Do you know who I am?" she said, and, stepping back, "Does that dog bite?"

It was scarcely lazy.

"No," the man said. "Sit. I said sit."

There was nowhere a chair. There was a lingering gloom, promoted, she thought, by smell: disinfectant and dog and a masculine essence and something else familiar that she could not identify, nevertheless. What appeared to be a medical examining table, covered unhygienically, she'd have had to have added, had anyone asked, the wrinkled paper seeming much the worse for what she'd have had to have said had been multiple uses—this table, this was the point, for there was no time to waste, for she was here about business, personal in nature though it was, point being it was out in plain sight. There was nothing like a stethoscope, nothing like a needle or gauze. There was no framed medical diploma. There was, she saw, stacked, a supply of dispensable towels, coarse, such as might be dispensed in a not-so-gentle, public, even flea-ridden place.

It was, anyway, the dog who sat. It was the dog who sat, and whined, and seemed eager, ready, poised to jump—a silver-nosed projectile. Make no mistake: What there was in the eyes was a roiling sense of injustice, at war with appeal to the master for release.

"Sit," the man said.

Defeat, humiliation. In the eyes of the dog, in the dream of the eye, a life bereft of hope. It was not without rage.

"The dog," she said. And on seeing the man did not see the question, "What do you call the dog?" she said, this creature in an anguish of malevolent restraint. If there was something she had learned, it was this: Familiarity or friendship, or maybe it was knowledge, could vanquish all. She had had an education. "To what does he answer to?" she said.

"Penny," the man said.

"Penny?" she said. "Penelope?"

The man did not repeat it. He patted himself on the front of the shirt as if seeking tobacco, change, or some flawed comfort pocketed in haste.

That the dog was a female, to think of it—Penny! Gray Penny—why, she had to admit it, it altered the way the dog looked. She had clung to assumption, had she not, adhered to an idea of a rabid masculinity (a cat being female).

The obvious made obvious—"Penny," she said.

So called, the dog, Penny, arose, an obvious and tawdry nuzzler of knees, of dress, of dangled pocketbook.

Eyeballed, the master shrugged.

"Mrs.—Ida," she said, unclasping, clasping. Buried within, amid the billfold, pills, a brush, pressed powder in a compact, deep inside in her pocketbook, her scrap, damply rumpled, a secret re-concealed, was laid uneasily to rest. She had nothing to offer the dog at all. So as not to be sidetracked (how had it taken all this while, her whole life, in fact, with its paid education, its civic tour of duty, and so forth, its beige corrective shoes, for her to get to where she was?), so as not to be distracted, she spoke of Mr. Edward, invoking his health. That such a man such as he should have to suffer—

"Rex," the host said, hand held gauntly out to her, and yellow-nailed. Of jaundiced manners, nonetheless the looming and undeniable host: Did she maybe require a beverage? he said.

"Me?" she said. Thinking, could she take that hand?

"Yourself," Rex said. "The one and the same." For it was not for Mr. Edward, he said, he suspected, that she, Ida, honestly had come to here to him—"now, Ida, now have you?"—and wasn't she here on behalf of herself? He could recognize the look, the hesitant gait. "You have suffered a loss," Rex said.

No, she would not take that hand. Her face, she feared, was moist, a telltale sheen about the nose. Applied frugally, her powder had surely been absorbed. It was hot. The hat itched. She had drool on her stockings. "Penny," she said, to no discernable result.

"Penelope," she said, to hot breath on the shin.

The hand still waited.

"Water," she said. She would relish a cold glass of water with cold crushed ice.

"Can't do," Rex said. "The water isn't drinkable."

"Goodness," she said, and then, "You're wrong." She heard herself, took note of herself, feeling, then seeing the slatted day darken through a window, midday gone. The hour entered the bloodstream. Pure wrought iron. "I am here on a promise," she said. "I am keeping my promise, true to my word. That's all."

With this, the hand withdrew itself.

Penny affected a nothing less than hangdog expression.

She, Ida, flinched. "Mr. Edward," she said, her rather enfeebled, yet, of course, still deeply respected employer, of mutual acquaintance, she presumed, had sent her, insisted, in fact, that the matter was entirely utmost. She was loyal to a fault, she had to admit. She said, "He said you'd know."

"I know. You have suffered a loss," Rex said as he apparently followed and somehow invaded her gaze. It fell to the examining table. "Look at me," he said. "Do you know your eyes are red?"

She touched her eyelids—one and the other, in an almost involuntary, foolish, she might have conceded, gesture, as if with the faith that a person could finger a redness there, could identify a color or shade through skin, as if the senses had been thoroughly denied their limitations. She fingered moisture. Dismayed, she tried again, confirmed it: pink, at least, as if fear of the thing were the thing that had made it so. This and the man's presumption. "The air," she said. "The air," and thought, dust—dust and worse. Motes, she thought, and here she was, a swollen-ankled woman with a compromised mien. She was hugging, even choking her pocketbook; would that she were in it, inside it, she and her sundries, she and her necessities, she and her scrap. If only she were hidden in the bowels of the thing, but here she was, alone in a room with a need and the voice in her head; a man, of course, certainly, a man, of course, and rather less expectedly, rather more pointedly, a dog, a carrier, heaven knew of what, and she herself, Ida, with a delicate system, thirsty and worn, her forearms moist on poreless leather, pockmarked; the irritant spores—was it spores?—the word that inserted itself in her thoughts; it was a general invisible itch.

Rex smiled.

Just smiled yellowly, the gaps in abundance, while Penny continued to conspicuously breathe.

"What are you?" Ida said, attempting—she wouldn't have argued, had anyone asked—in this way to regain herself. "Are you some kind of doctor? Some kind of medical doctor?"

"Do I look like medical a doctor?" he said.

She smelled decay.

"No," she said. "You look, shall I say it, unwell, or, if you don't mind my saying it, indisposed, in the spirit in which it is meant, of course."

"Of course," Rex said.

"I mean," she said, "that is—Penny, Penelope, please," she said. "Desist." Forbearance was in order. She needed refreshing. The towels, as previously noted, were stacked; there was a look of spit and rub about the host, this Rex. (She had prided herself on her sensitive skin: "Look at this rash," she would say as if saying, see my ring, do be careful of the china, lifting her chin to a minimal light.) Damp palms on dress, not a hint of relief in the offing, "Is there nowhere," she said, "where a person can sit?"

Rex answered by way of a sideways nod: The table, take it or leave it, the nod seemed to say.

"Are you, you mustn't be serious, are you?" she said.

"That is to say, in earnest," she said.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, dear."

There was a look of wanton shedding and worse about the dog.

Given a moral interest, even more than a moral interest in this, Ida

made up her mind: She would tell Mr. Edward, as soon as she saw Mr. Edward again, or soon enough, or in due course—dear sweet man, to think of it!—she would say she had thought that she would not, that she would never, at least in this lifetime, believe her, do what she had done, or rather, was about to do, she with her special-ordered soap (twice daily bather!), she with her conditions, yet do it she did. She sat with a crinkle.

The glass was in her hand.

"Your loss," Rex said.

Wrung towel of the sort to be found in an ill-washed restroom in whatever rest stop or station of transit, a bane to the skin; it was tight in her opposite fist. "Mister," she said, to a shhh.

"Mister Edward," she said.

"Yourself," Rex said, as he had said, it seemed to her before—herself indeed! She heard a newfound element of coaxing in the voice. "Ida," he said, "the part you remember."

"The part I remember of what?" she said—her self-same self, indeed! He meant for her to offer it, doubtless. What came to her (eyes closed, feet up, for they were, after all, swollen and she was not young, not quite, and had she not traveled considerable distance? And evening was on her, ambiguous balm, and here he was, her reckless host, slurring encouragements, and here was Penny breathing, Penelope breathing, breathing, and here she was, Ida, in spite of herself, verbosely limping Ida, methodical Ida; she knew how she was seen, for she was not unintelligent, not unaware, not a bit: She had a putative gift of perception, or so she had heard, or anyway had overheard, or at the least had told herself), what came to her all but unbidden was this: a surface, a morsel of a life, her life. There were floors she had learned with hands and knees, by heart, by skin—intransigent bones of a body at its work. The rooms she had moved through! Chairs she had dusted with only her fingers, scavenged whiffs of scent: soap, wood, drains, fear (where was it she had put that glass? and had it not pearled?), a scent of a delectable decay; why, it went, did it not, with the slowing over time of an asymmetric pace, of a motion in the world, the parts she had inhabited, barbiturate of dutiful living. She could almost picture the voice in her head, in her ear: *You have suffered a loss, you have* suffered an injury, Ida, Ida. What was there of this? She could see, if she tried (she did, did try) she could see Mr. Edward's musty desk—the lampshade green, the blotter green—and there at the woolly knee of him, a girl. There were ribbons she had worn, a dress she had sewn, a mournful hat: black with net with black dots in front of her forehead, an elegant obstruction, a proper concealing, and after, the force she could feel of an arm, the black black hair of an arm, sweaty and vivid as invention. Well, perhaps she had invented it, a practical woman, something from nothing. A hiccup of the mind: You have suffered an

injury, Ida, Ida. Her body at an angle from the wrong-angled leg, a weed in the hand, her hair. "Blood from a turnip," she said.

"Drink," the voice said.

She had been urged not to touch it. Her hand had been licked. Her pocketbook lay in a sprawl at the edge of her thoughts. Crickets in the field where she lay. A hand to the hair. A full-bodied fluid in the mouth. Ida, oh, Ida. The name rang wrong in the ear.

"Does the name ring wrong in the ear?" Rex—for it was certainly Rex—seemed to purr.

"Wrong?" she said. Outside of here were weeds, she knew, and vines, and there were rotted-out slats, and doors half out of their rotted-out hinges, and ravening creatures of the ravening night. "Wrong?" she said. "What is it that you've done? Do you call it a skill, this thing, whatever it is? Do you call it a gift? Is it some kind of evil gift?"

Her eyes were half-open. Her clothes, it seemed to her, had been completely disarranged. "Were it not for Mr. Edward..." she said.

"Then what?" Rex said.

"Don't try me," Ida said. Her cheeks felt newly and familiarly rashy. Hives, she thought. She would tell Mr. Edward, if ever she saw Mr. Edward again (to think of it distressed her, but was he not, in fact, quite frail, quite terribly frail? She could scarcely assemble specifics of the face, the stance. The nose, she thought, was it not bent ever so slightly, as if it had been broken; the forehead, as she had told herself, in phrases she had written in her mind and had taken dearly to heart, had saved as if for speech, for an appropriately elevated discourse, and not for such a man such as Rex to presume to read into her inmost thoughts, was it ever so high? How well had he held the pen in his hand?), she would tell Mr. Edward...what? That she had been robbed? That she had got lost? Had lost her way? It was, after all, a scrap, potentially illegible.

The hand was less than steady.

Penny, she saw, had got hold of the hat, small measure of shade, and was gnawing, with violent patience, the rim.

"I am not quite well," said Ida. "Listen to me."

"Not well," said Rex. "And nor am I."

The sight of it! Straw after straw in the mouth. She could scarcely remember the look of the hat or the feel of the hat on herself. Her face would not come back to her. Towel to the hairline—"Please..." she said. "Mr. Edward..." she said. "Our mutual acquaintance..." she said. "Why, I promised..." she said.

Her pocketbook lay open and empty, she saw, a gaping, a leathery and tongueless, mouth.

There was nothing of hers.

No personal effect.

Not a scrap.

"Mr. Edward is gone," Rex said.

"Gone?" she said.

The dog had moved on to the ribbon of the hat.

"Gone," Rex said, "passed out of this life."

Through no known office of body or mind, she saw that this was so, saw the man, Mr. Edward, standing before her, leaked ink wounding the front of the shirt; he was yellowly breathing, and gone.

The hand held out was sallower than ever before.

Ida stood and took a step. She limped. She had not lost her limp.

The dog's cheeks bulged.

The dog's eyes brightened.

"Penny," said Ida, and lowered herself to get hold of a shoe, to get hold of a lace, to untie the thing. "Penelope," she said, "come here—come on."

On the Road

Bear in mind all journeys
are perilous. I didn't really
know where I was when I emerged
from the woods, but something
told me to keep walking.
From far away, their remote home
resembled an ornate tiered
wedding cake, beginning to mold.
It snowed all day, flakes big
and pretty as an albino drag queen's
false eyelashes. In anticipation
of the thaw I spent the afternoon
unplugging their rain gutters.
I'd take breaks to get warm
by stepping into the barn
which was full of snoring cows
with ice-crusted nostrils.
The hayloft felt like a giant
nest. O, the eggs it could
have contained! The light
was grey and faint. I thought
I smelled mint jelly,
but knew that was impossible,
though the cows' breath
had a sweet domestic scent
to a vagrant like me. They were
in the habit of splitting kindling
in their living room that winter.
They asked me to dinner, insisting
I remove my sodden boots first,
though I worried about splinters.
Does anyone want second
helpings of rattlesnake chili
or is it time to bring out

the salamander pudding?
I woke early the next morning,
eager to leave, and found
that while I was sleeping
they'd filled my boots
with strawberries.

Travel Diary

Every other avenue exhausted,
I drifted from the interstate
onto a tangle of backroads
and came to rest at the edge
of a poppy field. Its bliss-tinged
unscented orange glow was seamed
in green, its fiery perimeter
bright enough to fry the linings
of my eyes. The ocean nearby
smelled like black tea steeping.
My thoughts had the texture
of potato puree. I felt kindled,
broke, inconsolable. Pillars
of smoke rose in the distance.
Later, while being fingerprinted
at the police station, I didn't
miss for a minute the bland
apple-scented foliage of home.

LAURIE FOOS

Illusions

A DEAD GRANDFATHER IS A BOTTOMLESS PIT. If you're not careful, it can swallow you whole, suck you in, suffocate you. You can't let it take up too much room in your inner life. People around you—friends, lovers, parents—they see the dead grandfather looming in your horizon, sitting in your breakfast chair eating your cornflakes. You may think he's well hidden, that you've disposed of the body, but no, they see him. Lurking in corners, under blankets, in your closet. There's no getting away.

The death of a grandfather is an untidy thing. He leaves a mess on the floor, drool in the carpet. Crumbs on the attic stairs. Anywhere you've been, he's been there first. He's heard your mother laugh when she still had a space in her teeth, before she'd dyed herself blonde and had her teeth bonded, he's seen your father drunk and raging in a tee-shirt with his lips pursed, he's wiped the newborn blood from your ears. He's a history. And when he goes, face down on the carpet with his face blue, you can never be safe again.

They light candles in church while the dead grandfather smokes a pipe outside in his car, the Chevy Impala, blue with chrome up the sides and shining hubcaps. It is the brother's Communion. He is seven in a brown tweed mini-suit that gives him the illusion of being a little man. He sucks the wafer off the roof of his mouth and chews it, grinding it in his molars though you've warned him time and again. No teeth allowed, you said, too bad if it's dry. The body of Christ is to be swallowed, taken in, not ground up in baby teeth. You just know he's going to be punished. The dead grandfather—who is not yet dead—sucks a mouthful of smoke to drown out the pains in his chest. He won't come in the church for fear of God. God is no friend of his.

Who needs Jesus when you have a grandfather? You want to ask the priest this, but instead you say your amen and let the wafer cling to your throat. You can feel him dying in your mouth, his flesh like paste. You try to swallow it, clean your mouth with your tongue, running it over cavities and gums, but you can never get it all. Some of it always remains, clings to the dry spaces in your throat where the food never seems to touch.

A dead grandfather is a puzzle. He's made up of events before you were born, a five-year-old daughter with leukemia who died on his birthday with blood in her ears, a belt buckle in your father's face, blocks of ice on his back, train depots, whiskey, another wife whose name you can't remember. The dead grandfather won't tell you his secrets. Then he is birthday parties at a park, bowling alleys, pipe smoke, wrinkled skin and promises. Crying in a green leather chair when your father bursts down the door with fuck on his mouth and bad memories. They speak a secret language. You can still hear it in dreams. The dead grandfather waves to you from the merry-go-round and says what a glorious thing it is to die. Over and over again he dies, the wheel spinning, his face turning blue. His face in the casket is lined with rouge. You touch the bristles of his high crewcut hair and a static shock runs through your fingers. The brother with the Communion wafer wets his pants for a week. Still, you think, he's better off than you. You can still feel the flesh in your mouth.

A dead grandfather is a bad joke without a punch line. You tell it over and over without ever getting it right.

Your mother tells stories about the dead grandfather you hardly knew. The one who existed before you were born, whose skin was unwrinkled at the elbows and had all its own teeth. The one who sent your father to Catholic school where the nuns held him up as an example of what not to be. "Look, here's the only boy who didn't bring in his dollar to save the poor," the nuns said. This was the grandfather to take your father to bars to learn how to be a man.

You do not like these stories. You prefer instead to think of the dead grandfather as dead—never having had the life that your mother loves to tell you about. She flicks her cigarette ashes and flashes her bonded teeth. She loves the dead grandfather more than you do, she says. She was there first.

A dead grandfather is a holy thing. You wear him like a shroud. He is Jesus with dentures, the Holy Spirit in a flannel shirt. If you listen, he'll tell you how to live, who to marry, why your father is full of pain. He floats outside window sills and blows pipe smoke over the trees. At your wedding he sits in a green leather chair in his pajamas. He watches as your husband swings you around in a white dress, while your father lifts a beer bottle to his lips with promises of good behavior. He will not say "fuck" if it kills him. You aren't worried. The dead grandfather is like a shield.

When dinner comes, you ask him if he wants the chicken cordon bleu or filet mignon. But then you remember. A dead grandfather never eats. He chews on a piece of bread but never swallows. The crumbs stick to his dentures, the throat pulses. It's the illusion of life that kills you.

On the honeymoon the dead grandfather floats out to sea in a white raft. His face is blue in the sun. When your husband is asleep you climb out on to the window sill and ask him to tell you his secrets. There is nothing he doesn't know.

Was I the kind of girl to write stories in a black and white notebook? Did I love my father with a vengeance? And before you died, did I believe in Jesus?

He laughs with his head under the water. Jesus kills, he says, and as a little girl you were always afraid to die.

You still are, you tell him. At night you wonder when it will happen. When the heart will stop beating, the breath choking in the lungs, the body turning inside out. It could be at a bookstore or with your husband on top of you, when you have too much to drink or smoke a pack of unfiltered cigarettes. It could come at any time. The dead grandfather is proof of that.

A dead grandfather is an open secret. Everyone knows you have one, but they are careful not to mention his name. They ask about the living, you think, why not about the dead? The dead have more to offer.

How's your dead grandfather? you imagine someone asks.

You think of all the things you might say.

He's fine, sitting in a green recliner smoking a pipe in his bedroom slippers. In death he has no wrinkles and never needs to chew. In death he has flannel shirts in every color of the rainbow. There is no one to remind him of his past.

When you go to church you ask Jesus, what is the secret to a happy life? The brother who wet his pants wears a uniform now and no longer believes in God. You wonder if the Communion had anything to do with that, although you will never ask.

You stare up at the altar where your father could once say the high Mass in Latin, where he held the chalice for the priest and wore a long white robe.

The secret, the dead grandfather would say, is to die happy.

When the dead grandfather died you asked God to bring him back on Christmas Eve. It was the night the dead grandfather loved best, and, you thought, God could do anything. At night you said five Hail Mary's and waited for your heart to stop. You kept a night light on to

keep the darkness away because the darkness was where death lurked. Your brother slept at the foot of your bed and dreamed of wearing a uniform. He would protect you all from death, he said.

Your father played the lottery and asked the dead grandfather for guidance. Death was where the money was, he said, and came home with a pocketful of cash. Your mother dyed her hair blonde and said she missed the dead grandfather deeply.

You stopped going to Communion and said God was all a lie.

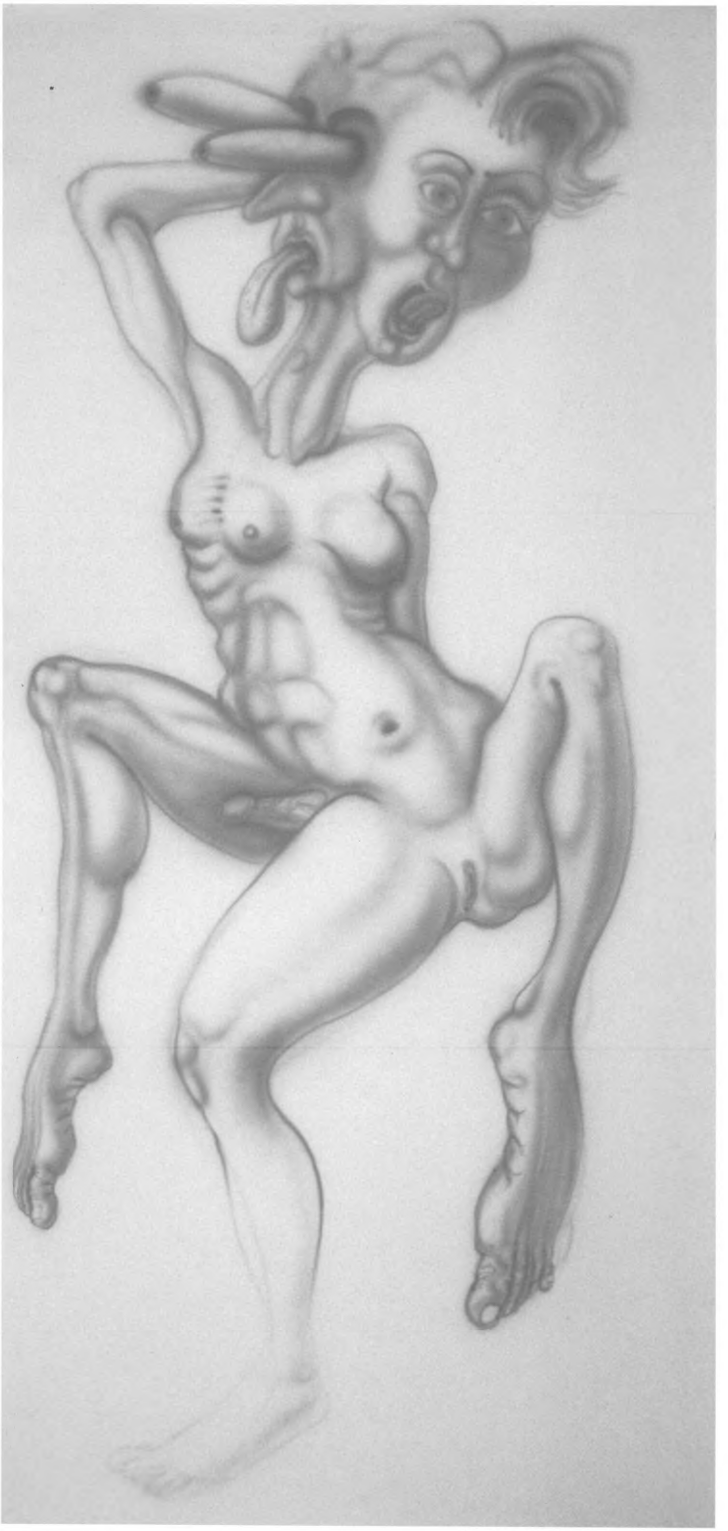
A dead grandfather is everywhere. He is in your dreams at night, in the cigarettes that you smoke, in the hairs of your husband's chest. He soaks his dentures in a clear glass and floats in your bathtub. He watches all your favorite shows.

On Christmas Eve he dances out in the moonlight in a pair of striped pajamas. You wonder if the neighbors can hear him. You wonder if your father knows he's there. You think about the night before he died, the night before the Communion when he ate clams and drank beer, told stories until dawn. You wonder if he knew that night that he would end up on the carpet with drool on his lips, his face turned blue with wanting, with all the things he never had. If he knew that this was how he would leave you, waiting for your breath to stop, for him to come back dancing on Christmas Eve with a closetful of memories and his feet turning blue in the snow.

Grown Women

She doesn't want to say the bad words.
She doesn't want to have the angry ideas.
She's living with a telephone lineman, his
Two kids from a previous marriage, and she had
One too; but labor drove her blood pressure up,
She could've had a stroke, and it took two days
To have her son after the water broke.
I've visited the town where they live, I don't
Call it a town, it's sandhill, shack, and farmland;
And I didn't see fences, but she doesn't roam.
We used to love one another. I don't know if
We felt desire. If we did, we lived it differently;
We had men to the house where we lived,
College friends, and passed in the hall late at night,
Wrapped in towels, our hair messed up from sex;
Maybe we felt embarrassed, we'd laugh, knowing
Those men weren't "right" for us. We knew
We were heading where good men would find us.

Where she lives the sun comes up over flatlands
Sowed with corn and tobacco. Where I live the sun
Comes up in a bowl of sky and burns like cherry
Candy for a short half-hour. I left the man I
Married. I tender my apology as I would to a tree
I'd bumped into; I couldn't really do damage
Like that, I go inside and take my clothes off
To check for bruises. In winter the deer strip
Bark from trunks, but it's plain peeled green
Underneath, delicate, not human. Now
The tallest treetops glitter, dampness has risen
From earth overnight and the sun will blot it away
Soon enough, but it's only the sun that lets me see it.
By the time I could face him, the man I married,
I told him I wanted a child, but it was too
Late. There was no money, no heart, no need
To touch except with words, those tiny twirling



Marcus Adams, *Hermaphrodite*, 1994

Star-shaped knives like the weapons in karate
Movies. He loved to watch them. He read Freud
And Nietzsche until he was tired, then plugged
Cassettes into the VCR, and I smoked dope and sank
Into myself. What would a daughter be to him,
I worried. What would a son be. I knew about
Fairy rings in mown grass, I didn't know what caused
Them, I knew many people fear them, I didn't know
They never go away. I wanted a life in the balance,
I'd seen it depicted, bodies and dreams and nerves
And anger that vanished like a kiss. I mean
I found out the direction, I mean I swam
Close to the muddy bottom, I mean it was the top
And I was upside down. We've lived here so long
Beside these lakes, when you dive into them,
Everything we've thrown away is floating
Down there, tangled in what looks like sash cord,
Thin brown ropes of it, holding down exactly
The forgotten. It's true benevolence.

She knows what's tethered underwater. Not
Children's bodies, but their toys, their lost,
Lawed-against pleasures. I'm not going to
Take up with her the ways we were persuaded
To throw our joys into dark water. We might've
Thought we would cleanse them, they would bob
To the surface, slick as leaves. We were good
At happiness, and that defined us suspect, as
The forest is suspect, for the green fringe
Disguising the shadow; as the sea is suspect,
For the polished glass smoothing the sheer path
Down. Years ago, when we loved each other,
We used to take trips in her brother's beat-up
Cougar; the muffler knocked up sparks, dragging
The asphalt, the doors wouldn't shut quite flush,
The wind ruined our hair worse than jolting
Sex. I thought she was the more beautiful.
She thought I was the more beautiful.

We found highways leading deep into mountains,
Sometimes right through them, tunnels plated
With sea-green tiles, where the signs said
Turn on headlights, and that was the law,
To see for a minute or two before bursting back
Into strong sunlight and forgetting how it hides
The darkness, just masks it, really, so you can't
Know which side you're on, you end up taking it
For granted, and then, one day, when you ask
For what you want, someone says, it's too late,
It's all been taken, we're closing now,
You'll have to go home alone, don't come back.

Enough

for Henry Moore

I believe there were moments when
he closed his eyes to allow
the sight of his hands to remind him
not of who she ever was, but who
she was in his mind, those early days
when joy was joy because it was just
barely expressible. I believe he felt
not her heartbeat but the rhythm of this
idea of her, this quick-song, the winged
moment that rises over cobalt-blue water
on the last tatters of the day's heat.
I know it is not enough
but with what's left of my heart I believe
that is most of what he did.

Inventing the Saxophone

If we allow ourselves the distancing
capacity of metaphor—that it pushes things
away to pull them closer—and if

we accede the fanciful fact of a trumpeter
swan, then we should be ready to accept
the act of the first elephant's throwing

upward the uncoiling French curve of his trunk
as the space in imagination that later would
take form as the first sax.

Picture it: the pure jazz, the pure blues
of elephants in groups throwing sonorous
wails up over their backs in the African

or Indian dusk; the shape that air takes
as it pushes through the gathered silence.
Imagine the nomad (for he is nomadic

still) interpreting that sound shape,
and how he pulls it down from the dark
to make solid

something to blow into that will send
the seeming pity of elephants out across
the sometimes eager ears of men.

KAREN LATUCHIE

Cold Room

THE PHOTOGRAPH CAME IN THE MAIL on Saturday morning. It was a black and white grade-school class picture taken in the mid-1950s: four irregular rows of first graders, six-year-olds who were in their early forties now. Most of the girls had handkerchiefs pinned to their dresses, and all of them sitting in the front row had unwittingly exposed their underpants to the camera. Like most of the other boys, the second child from the left in the last row was wearing suspenders, but unlike his classmates, he had six-shooters embroidered on his pants, and his shirt showed a cowboy riding a bucking bronco beneath a ranch gate. Where the ranch name might have been, it read DAVIE instead, in letters that were meant to look burned into wood. Davie had loved cowboys then; later he had found other things to love and he was called nothing but David. It was his mother who had sent the photograph to him and Rachel, the woman he lived with, who was peering over his shoulder at the picture.

"This is the girl I fell deeply in love with," David said, pointing to a blond in the second row. "You know, you never forget the first."

"She's adorable," Rachel said.

"She kissed me," David said, looking up at Rachel.

"I take it back. She's a slut."

David poked his elbow into her ribs and got up to finish putting breakfast together. Rachel slipped into the chair he'd just left and held the photograph up so it lost its glare.

"The kid in the front row with that real close crew cut. You see which one I mean?" Rachel said she did. David broke an egg open. "He's the one I told you about," he continued. "The super's son in our building on Webster Avenue. Used to pee in the halls and then tell his father it was this old lady's dog?"

Rachel glanced up and nodded and David settled into his story. Rachel made appropriate sounds of interest, laughed when she heard amusement in David's voice, managed to meet his eyes when he turned his head toward her while he waited for the eggs to cook. But if he had asked her what she'd heard, she couldn't have said. The image of Davie had pulled all her attention toward it.

Rachel had seen pictures of David as a child before; she supposed she'd seen every one there was, given their ten years together and the

fact that his parents had never been overly interested in either creating or keeping mementos of any kind. So she already knew that David had been a beautiful child. Achingly beautiful she'd long thought, though she knew the ache arose from what she understood of his childhood: the pattern of torment and negotiation that had passed for marriage between his parents (and still did when they bothered to speak to each other). And it was probably because of this same understanding that she was usually unable to see a photograph of David as a child without also seeing a moment of tenuousness or yearning or quiet mistrust: some weight that he would carry into adulthood. Looking at those photographs Rachel found the simple images of the child overwhelmed by the power they had to foreshadow the man he grew into. But the school picture was different: the child seemed to be standing clear. There were the usual physical hints of the mature David: the dark, almond-shaped eyes, the straight nose, high cheekbones and wide smile, the way he held his head slightly to one side, his shoulders slightly shrugged. Yet in this picture they seemed to Rachel to amount only to themselves: to the face and stance of the child, caught in a relaxed moment, everything about him guileless and undecided.

David put a plate of eggs and toast in front of Rachel and sat down to his own plate. He was still talking and Rachel could hear the end of the story approaching. She put the photograph down and turned her attention to him and the food, catching up to his laughter and finding her own as he finished the story. He pushed the photograph to the far side of the table so it wouldn't get spilled on, and their conversation moved to other things. But for the half hour that they were at the table together, the image of David in the school picture hovered at the edge of Rachel's thoughts. She was distracted by it, and by the desire growing in her to have the image back in her sight.

When they had both finished their second cups of coffee, Rachel insisted that she would clean up: she knew David had errands to run and she found herself wanting him gone. When she heard the front door close behind him, she reached for the photograph. She had to lift herself out of the chair to get it and something childishly illicit in the movement—like reaching a finger for the cake icing when the adults' backs were finally turned—made her feel foolish and caught out. What had she imagined she'd seen that made her wait until David was gone to look at it again? She leaned back and held the picture at arm's length. It was just a photograph: a chance surface, a simple matter of juxtaposition. She moved her gaze across the other children, and nodded her head, thinking: yes, if the faces of the boys around Davie weren't so obstinately blank, his wouldn't seem so clear and full.

But she couldn't deny her growing feeling that there was something else for her to see. She was aware of noise from the street, a phone ringing in the apartment across the shaftway, a small passage of

time around her while she focused on Davie's eyes. She began to feel as if she were making real eye-contact with the image, a feeling that grew almost embarrassingly intense. She punched a loud, sharp laugh out of her discomfort and finally lifted her gaze. She stood up out of the chair —maybe she needed another cup of coffee, maybe her eyes were still tired, her mind still sleep-addled—but when she glanced down at the photograph again she felt as if she were no longer looking at a picture of David as a child, but at a child who was only possibly David.

She sank back into the chair. Maybe this was why she'd waited for him to leave. How would she have been able to explain that first she'd sensed and now felt that she could see the image in the picture, detached from its own future, opening up and making room for something else, some*one* else? Of course it wasn't the picture that was changing, she knew that, but her imagination had grabbed hold of this opportunity and the image of Davie had been reduced to the mere beginnings of a child: a matrix for other features that would only hint at the ones already in place. The image was only groundwork now, slowly disappearing into a different child as Rachel smoothed her own six-year-old face onto Davie's, rounding the eyes, softening the cheeks, making a thousand practically invisible adjustments that declared her presence there: making a composite image, an admixture of promise and possibility.

Her mind closed suddenly against the effort of imagining. The tiny face blurred as her eyes settled into a stare and the features seemed to disappear, as if a stretch of empty skin were being pulled across them. The face became a void, a vacuum that pulled sadness from her, not relieving her of it, but calling up more and more until she felt made of it completely. She wrenched her sight back into focus, and Davie's features were in place again. But for a moment it seemed that the image had adjusted itself, that the photograph had some palpable life.

She stood up quickly and stepped away from the table. When her back bumped against the wall, the small jolt was enough to bring her around. She took a deep breath and reminded herself that she was the only animate thing in the room, the only thing with sentience. The photograph lay on the table where she'd dropped it; it was not moving, not transmuting, not doing anything. She moved past it, hardly looking, pulled the refrigerator door open and leaned in. What was she looking for? The sadness that had come up in her was like a dark, obscuring scrim. She closed her eyes, trying to see its shape and source, but it eluded her, folding in on itself, contracting down to a bead which she was able, at least, to push to the back of her mind.

"Coffee," she said, remembering suddenly what she had wanted there.

She measured the grounds out carefully. It took a moment for the aroma to reach her: coffee with vanilla or hazelnut or something. She

hated the stuff. It had been a gift from Claudia, and Rachel kept it around knowing Claudia would ask for it whenever she was over. Just as she offered it every time Rachel was at her place, even though Rachel always opted for tea. Just as she had two days ago, after dinner at Claudia's. Rachel dumped the grounds, took the other bag of coffee out of the refrigerator and slammed the door. Claudia's words had come back to her.

"Now I've got it better than she does," Claudia had said at the end of a diatribe against a colleague of theirs at the magazine, a freelance writer who'd been hired not too long after Rachel, at nearly the same time as Claudia, and who'd then been chosen for the staff position that opened up a year ago. Claudia had filled with jealousy, but she'd calmed herself by reasoning that her pregnancy, then in its eighth month, had put her out of the running; otherwise, she was certain, the job would have been hers. And now, just a week ago, she had been offered and had accepted another staff position. Rachel had known Claudia for almost twenty years, knew the way she demurely demolished other people to shore herself up, so she shouldn't have been surprised by what came next. Still, she'd been unprepared when Claudia added, with a sharp, confirming nod: "Because I've got a staff job *and* a baby."

Rachel had stiffened. A false, but well-shaped smile formed on her lips and stayed there until she left Claudia's, about ten minutes later. Once she turned the corner and put herself out of sight of Claudia's front windows, her stride grew longer, her footfall harder, and her face slipped out of its smile. That bitch, she thought. Waiting for me to remind her that I don't have a baby so she could say in her sweetest voice: "I know that Rachel. But this isn't about you." Rachel imagined what it would have felt like to have leaned across the table and slapped Claudia's face hard, really hard, hard enough to have knocked the look of sympathy off it.

She was surprised by how hard she slammed the door when she got home. The pictures shook on the hallway wall and David emerged cautiously from the bedroom. "But you know this about her," he said after she told him the story.

"I know," Rachel said, annoyed at being bothered. "But I should've said something." She'd been standing in the kitchen doorway; now she let herself drop into a chair. "I mean even if you leave me out of it, which, you might have noticed, I'm having a little trouble doing. But even if you did, there's still this other woman. Maybe she just doesn't want kids. Or she does but can't have them. Or, like us, she's made a decision that Claudia is incapable of comprehending." Rachel's voice pitched up. "She doesn't have any idea what the circumstances are. I mean, of all the completely thoughtless—"

"Insensitive, manipulative, controlling," David intoned. She

laughed and nodded resigned agreement. "She knows you won't say anything," he went on. "She counts on it."

"So I could've surprised her this time. I could've smacked her face."

"You would've ended up feeling guilty."

"Maybe, but—"

"Rachel, let it go. She's not worth it."

He was right. She wasn't. Claudia never admitted to anything indelicate in her own nature. It was all a matter of remembering to prepare herself for Claudia in advance, and that was the last thought Rachel intended to give it.

But last night, lying in bed, waiting for sleep, Rachel had heard Claudia's words: I have a staff job *and* a baby, clear and sharp as if they'd been hurled at her again. Their impact ruptured a casing in her memory, a protection she had constructed for herself, and a torrent of voices was released inside her head: friends, relatives, acquaintances, all speaking at once, becoming one voice telling her that she didn't know what she was missing by not having children. One large voice saying the words that were always only just hidden behind that simple declarative sentence. One voice emanating from one face fixed with an expression at once quizzical, sympathetic, and superior, asking: "So, what's really going on? You're healthy, your relationship with David looks good, the years are passing, you even have a fairly roomy apartment. So what's wrong? Is it that you're just too selfish? Lazy? Career-minded? Or maybe you pull in even less money than we imagine. Or are you basically unwilling to make sacrifices? Unimaginative? Short-sighted? Incapable of giving? Maybe you just need a good talking to. Maybe you're just waiting for someone to help you change your mind. Maybe you simply don't have the depth of instinct and feeling it takes to be a mother."

Rachel bolted up in bed, ready to answer every question and accusation, ready to face that conglomerate face, to see a mouth grown huge enough to launch that booming voice and its demands. The emptiness of the room surprised her. Had she been asleep? David was. She must have been too. Yes, it was almost three o'clock; she'd gotten into bed at one-thirty. And now she was wide awake, that huge voice echoing in her thoughts. Damn Claudia, she said into her pillow, wishing again that she'd smacked her, her palm tingling with the thought of it. Damn Claudia and all the rest of them.

Rachel turned and moved up against David, laying one hand on his chest. She traced the line of his collarbone with her fingers. His skin was warm and liquid-smooth. She moved her hand down toward his stomach. His breathing was deep and rhythmic. And unchanging: there would be no distraction there. She swung her arm off him, turned onto her back, and let out a long, huffing sigh. Women she liked perfectly

well otherwise, women she loved, women who in a hundred ways were different one from the other had all, at some point, looked at her with the same pity-edged arrogance while she explained why she was not going to have children. Claudia was not the only one who could hear the explanation a thousand times and still find it utterly dismissible, full of holes, in need of immediate razing. Each of them found their own way to let Rachel know that she had described an easy, wretched retreat from the profound imperatives of the womb. Someone had actually said that to her: the profound imperatives of the womb. Another missed opportunity for a small, startling act of violence on my part, Rachel lamented now. But at the time, she had tried to win the woman over: you don't understand, it's not easy at all, it was a painful decision. Which had forced her accuser back to earth in order to reply: "Look, Rachel. It's a lot simpler than it is melodramatic. You either want them or you don't."

If it was that simple, Rachel thought, it should have been just as simple to make herself understood. And she had tried. She had stuck to the facts, to the solid details of the crucial moment. David and I were in the kitchen, was how she'd begun. We were in the kitchen and we had gravitated there knowing we were going to discuss something that needed a safe room, a room where at least sexual intimacy felt forbidden. You see, we'd made love in the kitchen a few times, but the last time we knocked over a plate and it broke and we ignored it. It wasn't where we were and by the time we moved to where it was, we'd forgotten about it and there was a particularly sharp shard and, of course, that's the one David's shoulder came down on. He bled and we cleaned the cut and wrapped it in cloth and he said, laughing, they're right, excruciating pain does intensify an orgasm. But the cloth turned red and sodden and we ended up in the emergency room. There was a tiny ceramic chip in the wound that had to be extracted (painfully and with no orgasm to counterbalance it this time) before the four stitches could be made. So the kitchen had begun to feel off-limits for sex. We made ourselves exaggeratedly chaste there, and called it the Cold Room. It was okay then to talk about children there because we wouldn't make them in that room anyway. We sat opposite each other at the table, coffee in our cups, assured expectation on our faces. We were going to have this conversation about having children.

Rachel sat up, pulling away from an encroaching wave of sleep. She remembered how she had stopped the story there, certain then that she would never have been able to clearly explain that conversation; never adequately describe the almost invisible moment that had occurred during it in which she and David had realized they understood what they couldn't want. And she would have had to explain the instant that had occurred even earlier, in which they'd first understood that they'd forged a permanence between themselves.

Because maybe that was the moment that would explain what had brought them to the kitchen table that night in order to have that particular conversation. Maybe that was the moment that had triggered the others—

Rachel punched her pillow into shape and dropped onto her back. David slept undisturbed. You see? she demanded of herself. All this tacit perceiving and understanding. I go around in circles trying to explain it to *myself*. Maybe there really is something clear in the details. Maybe I should have kept going and told her more, told her how David and I were in the kitchen that night after two years together in a way neither of us had been with anyone before. How we'd surprised ourselves, our friends. I mean our records were all together on the shelves: we'd even thrown out the duplicates. That night, we had just come back from seeing my sister's first child. He was one day old, unsullied and swaddled, half moons of eyelash closed against opalescent, opal-blue skin. I'd cried, sobbed, when I saw him in the nursery. There was nothing ever so beautiful, I'd thought, terrified for him, shocked by my terror. It was boundless and untouched by the fact that he had parents who wanted him, loved him, could easily provide for him, hoped for him. I wanted to smother him in protection. Literally. It wasn't hot coffee in a cup in front of me at the kitchen table, it was cold liquor to shock the love and horror from me, and he was only my nephew. I said, "Imagine a child of our own," meaning how much worse and thinking: remember that cartoon that showed one man coming apart at the seams, and the other asking, '*Weltschmerz*. Is that like the flu?' You had it hanging above the developer in your darkroom, we had just slept together for the first time, it had taken us two days to get down to it and I thought, if I'd seen this cartoon earlier I would've cut even that time in half. "Imagine a child of our own," I said, meaning how much worse, but I could see right away you *were* imagining it and so I did too, finding your gaze and then letting go, your eyes looking for mine next and then away first, back and forth like that until the idea of our child, a child made of us had filled all the space in the kitchen, the Cold Room, and we breathed it in, filled ourselves with this other of ourselves. More of David, I thought, I would have more of David inside me, not knowing if you felt the same wonder, the same hunger, greedy selfish hunger. We breathed you in, the idea of you, baby, we held you in like a diving breath until our breath turned us blue, we watched each other turn blue with the holding of you. "What's to prevent us from raising ourselves all over again and in the same way?" you asked, exhaling only a little. "Are we that bad?" I answered, a seeping hiss between words. "No more than makes a frightened person hesitate, a thinking person think." You sucked your last word back in, holding. "Do we think too much?" Say yes I wished. "We think the only way we can," you said, sighing deeply and I sighed too, the long release into the

Cold Room which leaked that other from all corners and I was emptied, bereft and relieved, not knowing if you felt that great ruptured satiety too and we were alone there on opposite sides of the table, liquor stilled in my glass, your hand gripping a cup, the light above the table the only light in the apartment, the apartment dark and dense around us like long time, our gazes locked, you tried to speak, the light above us broke—

Rachel broke out of sleep. Her eyes were wide open but in the darkness she saw only the eerie green hands of the clock: it was a quarter to five, six hours before she would be standing at the stove, watching the coffee brew, remembering the dreams she had not remembered when she had woken up again two hours later and stayed up.

When David came home a little while later, Rachel was sitting at the kitchen table, looking, he said, as if she hadn't moved at all: was she alright?

"Just tired," she said, her voice as offhand as she could make it. "You know, you get up and then it takes a couple of hours before your body realizes it wasn't really ready to be up."

David nodded and Rachel saw his gaze move to the sink where yesterday's dishes were still piled. "You sure you don't mind cleaning up?" he asked, reaching a glass out of the cabinet. "I'd like to get into the darkroom."

"I said I would, David."

"Okay. Just making sure." He filled the glass from the faucet and took a long drink. Rachel felt his eyes on her; she stood up. "Why're you so tired?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, shrugging, coming to stand next to him at the sink. "Bad sleep, I guess. I don't know." David began to rub the back of her neck. His touch felt almost intrusive to her and she leaned into his hand to hide her discomfort from him, from herself. He put his head against hers; she reached into the sink to find the sponge; silverware clattered down around the dishes; his hand stilled. He took a deep breath, let it out sharply and said, "I'm going in." She nodded and he left the kitchen. A moment later Rachel heard the door close on the bathroom where his darkroom was set up.

She began to wash the dishes, trying to gauge whether David had actually slammed the bathroom door or just closed it solidly. It wasn't her behavior that had sent him out of the kitchen, she assured herself. If he had believed her plea of fatigue, and he'd seemed to, he wouldn't assume there was something else she wasn't telling him. Anyway, it wasn't as if she'd simply decided to keep something from him; though it was true that when she'd heard his key in the front door she'd known

she wasn't going to tell him just then about the dreams. But that was okay; they didn't believe they owed each other every current thought and feeling. But then David had asked her if she was alright, and there had certainly been impatience in his voice. He had wanted to get into the darkroom. He wouldn't have wanted to hear any other reply than the one she'd given him, it would've kept him from his work. So, hadn't he been partially responsible for the small lie of her answer and the way it had transformed something she had merely not been ready to talk to him about into something that she was hiding?

She reached down and was surprised to find the sink empty. She'd finished the first batch of dishes virtually unaware of her own movements, the simple, rote motions of hand and arm that she imagined would come undone if you gave them too much thought: like losing your balance on a bike if you concentrated too narrowly on the mechanics of balance. Just as there seemed to be some danger in this way of thinking through the movement of her thoughts, trying to figure out why—or was it how?—she had decided not to tell David about the effect of the dreams on her; trying to take apart the tight weave of privacy and exchange that had developed between them; trying to name the forces that shaped the patterns of the weave and that were guiding this particular thread of memory and dream to become part of the motif that was strict privacy. The whole thing might unravel under this kind of scrutiny.

Rachel turned the water off and leaned back against the sink drying her hands. She could still feel the place on her neck where David's fingers had settled, as if the skin had pulled back from them. She touched the spot and was almost surprised to discover the skin and muscle smooth and unchanged. She moved her hand around the back of her neck, replacing the memory of the pressure of David's hand with her own and the movement seemed to find and then release a small density of feeling, the bead of sadness that she had pushed back there before. Spreading through her now, the feeling was somehow more familiar. Without thinking she picked up the class picture from the table and focused squarely on Davie. The image was clear but the blurred, empty face she'd seen there earlier seemed embedded in it, impossible to banish.

Though it was night, Rachel sat in the living room with no lights on. She'd come to this chair a couple hours ago with a glassful of ice and vodka, which on a warm night like this was her favorite version of sipping liquor. She'd gotten up only once, for a refill, and ended up bringing the bottle with her. Now she thought she might have sipped a little too much. She felt oddly immobile. She'd watched the streetlights replace daylight outside and the details of the building across the street

disappear in the process. She noticed now that the details of the room around her were gone too, and that her own details were becoming a little indistinct. Was that magazine turned over on her lap the *Utne Reader* or *Vanity Fair?* She bent her head toward it. Too dark to make out. And her hand: was it wrapped around a full glass or an empty one? She lifted it to her lips and drank what was left in it. "Empty," she said out loud, and poured more.

The sound of her voice was small inside the large silence of the apartment. She had no music playing, the television wasn't on, and David had left hours ago. He'd gone on a shoot that he told her would probably keep him out until one or two in the morning. Maybe she should try to get to sleep early, he'd suggested, since she'd been so tired all day. Had she heard sarcasm in his voice? Some ironic edge to let her know that fatigue didn't really go far enough to explain the way she'd been acting all afternoon: distant, quiet, cold, or whatever word he might have chosen? Was it possible that he had understood that every time he spoke to her during the afternoon, every time she saw him from where she sat at her desk punching at the typewriter, trying, and failing, to immerse herself in the article that was due Monday, every time he did something, whether she could see him or not, to remind her that he was there with her, she thought: I had to lie because you would have misinterpreted the truth.

But, of course he couldn't have understood that, she told herself now. He couldn't have intuited the whole chain of non-events that had occurred that morning: her imagination conjuring an image that filled her with sadness which somehow led her to the coffee that reminded her of Claudia's latest offense from which she traced her steps through two dreams that left her so rattled she couldn't talk about them then and wouldn't have talked about them anyway because the sadness they carried was the sadness that David would—because he had before—interpret as a change of heart. The house that Rachel built, she thought, pouring more vodka into her glass.

So he was not at fault, she declared to herself. I'll give him that. Not at fault. But faulty. That was it. She laughed quietly. That must be it. Otherwise how could he, the other half of her decision not to have children, have misinterpreted something so basic? You've changed your mind, haven't you? he'd asked when she'd first given expression to the sadness she felt in the aftermath of their decision. And it was hardly a question: more accusation, a pronouncement of impatience and disappointment, disapproval. He might as well have said, Why don't you just change your mind? like all the rest of the voices. With his question he joined ranks with Claudia, for God's sake. How would he feel about that? she wondered, lifting her glass in a mock toast and drinking. How much more clear could she be than to say, I am saddened by what I know I can't have? It seemed eminently

straightforward to her. But okay, let me make the effort, she proposed. From now on: not just tell, but show and tell. I'll carry the school picture with me and say: look closely. If you look closely enough you will see the face change. See? See? her inner voice scratchy and pleading. That's me and him. Now it's going to blur and disappear. A soft, emptying subtraction. That'll be us too.

She drained her glass slowly. "Well. That'll clear it right up," she said, pushing her voice out, and steadying herself up out of the chair. Her head was decidedly light. It floated along with her to the bedroom where she managed, with some difficulty, to take off her clothes before she dropped onto the bed.

"David!" Rachel called out, sleeping and then not sleeping in the space of the two syllables. The apartment was still dark, but no longer quiet. She didn't know what time it was: should he be home already? Had she actually said his name out loud or just imagined that she had? "David?"—loud this time.

His voice came from the direction of the bathroom: "I'm here, Rach," strong enough to reach her but gentle. She relaxed at its sound; relaxed enough so that she noticed that what she could make out in the darkness—outlines of the furniture mostly—was wavering like a mirage. She blew out a deep breath and closed her eyes.

"Sorry I woke you up," David said quietly as he got into bed. She hadn't heard him come into the room. She turned on her back, he kissed her and she reached up and caressed his cheek.

"I don't think you did," she said. "How was the shoot?"

"Too long, but okay."

"What time is it?"

"Three fifteen." He laid his arm across her middle. "What time'd you go to bed?"

"I don't know. It might've been ten, if you can believe it." She ran her hand along his arm. "I drank a lot of vodka. You're a bit wobbly actually."

She thought she sensed him smile. He kissed one of her eyes lightly. "Get some sleep," he said, and trailing his hand across her stomach, turned on his side, facing away from her.

She moved through the fog in her head, moved up behind him and pressed herself into his back. Any lingering sense of annoyance at him, betrayal by him, separation from him disappeared into a simple longing: for the feel of his skin, the deeply familiar textures and curves that her touch had memorized over the years. Just that. Skin against skin, motionless and quiet, finding an old and accustomed balance. Her skin infused with the resting warmth of his, a balm against whatever discomforts ran beneath her surface. The front of her thigh against the

back of his, her breasts against the muscles of his back, her hand cupped on his hip, sliding into the U of his waist, moving up along the high side ridge of his ribs, slipping down across his chest.

She wasn't expecting him to turn to her, circling under her arm and then encircling her, sighing a low moan of luxurious capitulation. He moved his hand down her back, pulling each inch of her against him, his desire so strong that she couldn't find it in herself to say what she immediately felt: this isn't it, this is more than I want now, and less. And her body was quick to be seduced. She felt it move beyond her control into his.

The simple longing she'd felt just moments ago had no place in this and when David pulled her on top of him, she let it go. The spin and throb in her head returned almost immediately and when she groaned she wondered how much pleasure David heard in it. She was thinking how rarely they made love in such thick darkness, how much more selfish they were inside it, separate.

"Do you have your diaphragm in?" His hands were tight on her hips, holding her against his own.

She could see a gleam from the whites of his eyes, a gleam like the wordless clarity that replaced all her thoughts for an instant.

"Do you?" His voice was urgent.

"I don't need it," she said and raised herself up to sink down on him, taking him inside herself, thinking: one lie to rescind another. She moved her hips in a small, slow circle and saw the gleam from his eyes disappear, his lids closing. She could feel him deep in her and knew he had sunk deep into himself as well, holding to each sensation as it connected to the next. She was alone above him now, watching through the darkness what she knew was happening on his face. The slow movement between them slowed the throbbing in her head and marked time for a steady procession of thoughts: I am going to be made pregnant. I will make this someone with him. Eyes, hands, heart, temperament, intelligence, being. I will hold it just long enough to feel its life in me. Every vein, every cell. And then I will abort it. Aborted. A fetus to hold up to them, to him, and say: this is what I know, this is how big it is, all of it, this is the measure of it, the face of it. Look at its face: mine and his, mine and yours. I'll make it to rid myself of it to lose it to prove the pain. Let them try to misunderstand now.

And then she was no longer thinking as her body yielded to something that bore no thought at all.

Rachel woke in stages, images of a dream following her almost into wakefulness, her perception lagging behind her senses so that even when her eyes were finally, fully open, they were unseeing and she wasn't sure that she wasn't still dreaming. Slowly, she became aware of

a clammy wetness between her breasts, under her arms. It was her own sweat. The tension she felt in her right hand revealed a clutch of sheet beneath it. It was her sheet. On her bed. In her apartment. She turned her head to the left, to the back of a naked body. She knew the body. It was David's. She was awake.

She closed her eyes and took a long, deep breath. Pain moved through her skull and triggered the memory of having gone to sleep too full of liquor. She pushed herself out of bed, concentrating on the idea of aspirin and cold water.

A calendar hung on the bathroom wall and when Rachel closed the medicine cabinet she saw it in the mirror. Her eye was caught by the asterisk she'd drawn to mark the beginning of her last period. She stared at it and the dream that she'd left behind in waking flared into her mind's eye, a startling flash that began to dim immediately, leaving behind only one disjointed image: a curette, its blade as big around as a platter. Rachel strained to make sense of it. She stood motionless, willing the dream to return. Instead, all at once, she was remembering making love to David: feeling again her skewed desire, its calm expression replaying itself moment by moment. Her breath came shallow and hard. She realized suddenly that the asterisk marked a day two weeks ago. She laid her hands on her stomach, over her uterus. She pressed deep, grabbing at flesh, feeling for some prescience. And the dream came back: a newborn, placed in the enormous circle of a curette that braced her legs open. No blood, no placental fluid, no umbilical cord. The infant's soft skin about to break on the blade of its cradle.

The New Life

for Emily Dickinson

Musicians wrestle Everywhere.
It pins their shoulders to the ground.
It does a careful damage to their instruments
Called 'wear and tear.'
Musicians passing at the edge of town
Discuss their battered stands, their ligaments.

This way they avoid our divorce.
Playing tight duets,
Dusting off mustard yellow singlets
And monochromatic scales
Keeps them from saying we failed.
Musicians are good sports,

Love is a half-Nelson and these half-notes
Choking me up come out of nowhere.
I want you on your back, and back.
I want to count to three and slap
My hand hard on a map to everywhere
Musicians go.

The words we said at the edge of towns
Were rounds. Everywhere we sang
Is marked by a pin and a melody.
The air is full of the scores of cities
Where the music told me everything
But how to hold you close, or down.

Homage to Christopher Smart

Pity, the lump in your own throat.
Self-pious Pity; Pity the wishbone.
Pity, the self-employed esthetician
Contracted for us by the government.
Pity, the shingle. Pity, the physician.
Pity, sipped from an inverted paper cone.

Self-Pity, brought up on riot charges,
Standing before His Honor in an orange jumpsuit.
Pity fining Self-Pity for contempt of court.
Self-Pity, its justified margins;
Its inverted exclamation points, its square roots.
Self-Pity, selling itself short.

Pity pinned in among rejected cornerstones.
Self-Pity, absent without leave,
Waiting in the aisle for the collection plate.
Pity rolling up Self-Pity's sleeves
For lethal injection; Pity come too late,
Huffing and sweating, grown fat on bread alone.

Pity, the words that never hurt you.
Self-Pity, asking Pity about the bells.
Pity in another life, admiring
Self-Pity's vacation home, its 360° view,
Totally unobstructed. Isn't it inspiring?
Pity, the answer. Pity, the one who tells.

Still Life Located

I'm on a screened in porch ecstatic
with loneliness and little holes to see me by.

The hair from the cat next door I've shaken
off the pillows, again, is flopping around

like wide legged prostitutes all easy
for a little bit of wind on my floor.

The idea that vacuuming even once in a while
could change everything, the profit margin

of saying that this is my very clean home,
or Antonis, god-like in a kind of visitation,

greeking me up from the front lawn with
a rigid little landscape with lady etc., occurs to me.

It takes 4422 holes to frame the part of my face
that's still pretty. Multiplied out to a car going by

there are two, maybe three, unknowns inclusive of
what is being seen, but Antonis doesn't drive.

The phone rings sometimes and I think it's my mother
ready to crash up what's good about celebrating

screening anyway. Or Ralph explaining it as, night
after night, *for instance a canal. The entrance*

to any given structure as both physical and mental,
that I don't understand. Squinting up my eyes

there are hiked up curls in some of the clouds
and lots of blue pavement for reversal. I do

Just Take My Hand as the latest greatest hit
for the sun set up nicely or any other guy going by.

Hurricane Audrey, 1957

I was not quite three years old, but I have memories, things no one ever told me. Things I just know. I rediscovered this during a conversation with my twelve-year-old son, Jared, who told me how he remembered his Gramps, my father, who died in 1984 when he was barely one and a half.

The boy insists that he has memories of things I never told him, and they seem uncanny in their accuracy. He even said that he has memories, rather feelings, of being in water in the womb. I don't question him because I know about memory impressions that just can't be explained, except that I think we (my family) have a kind of primitive thing in our makeup that lets us recall the untenable. Primitive knowledge is the only kind you have when loss is like a pumice stone that constantly peels away the dead and leaves no trace for future reference. I wanted him to have future reference. Not only to me, but to a family he barely knows, much less understands. I knew he would turn eighteen at the dawn of the next century, and I wanted him to be grounded in a past, in a story, one I never completely owned. So I began to tell him more about his Gramps, my Daddy, and my words surprised me because I never found much to like about him, much less love, when he was alive. The story is about all the others too. What I can't get out of my mind is this image of my father in the summer of '57, fighting the storm. This is what I told Jared, whose name means "descended from":

I remember my Daddy when I was three. It seemed like he was the tallest man in the world. He had a carved face, with cheekbones that marked his gaunt visage like that of an Indian's, and a chin that jutted out like it had a handle on it. His eyes were deep set in a face with eyebrows that had ridges on them. He had wavy hair and wrinkles around his eyes that riveted. I knew even then something about him was angry. But on that day he was more concerned than mad. He wanted to do something. In my three-year-old mind, I just knew that Daddy was giving orders again—the kind that meant we had to listen, or he would become outraged. His voice rang out at me to climb on Benjamin's shoulders because the water was rising quickly. Benjamin is my brother, who at twenty-three had become more like Daddy than Daddy was himself. But, unlike Daddy, Ben was complacent—he did what he was told. I climbed on his shoulders so I wouldn't drown.

Daddy told Dee to quit playing games: she just danced about in the pouring rain and sang out her sweet songs about "Let(ting) the Sun

Shine In." I didn't know then how defiant and rebellious her words were, and only in looking back on the event can I see that she was mocking my father. He was soaked from the rain and the roof had finally given in on Nanny's house; we were all getting wet, but only Daddy wore the thigh-high planter's boots that would protect him from the snakes and whatever else that surging water had in it. He climbed onto the roof and tried pulling the half-rotted boards back into place. My brother Gary watched from the gaping hole inside. He was in dress clothes, out of sorts and out of place for the job that had to be done. My father didn't like him; he felt sorry for him. Too pretty to be a boy, Gary was also slow and helpless. He couldn't help Daddy pitch a new roof in the middle of the storm, Benjamin had to care for me, and my mother had to care for Nanny. And Dee? Well, you just had to let her take care of herself...

"And face it with a grin. Open up your heart and let the sun shine innn," Dee sang out louder and louder as the storm rallied itself for another tide and high wind. Daddy screamed too. At her. I remember how perfect I thought she was, and how one day I could be like Dee and sing when Daddy raged.

Did I really think this? I don't know for sure. I only know that when I remember Dee, I remember how badly I wanted to be Dee. She was somebody that, through all his turmoil, my Daddy respected. She wouldn't obey him, and that was one reason he was so violent. Dee never obeyed anything. She captured the essence of our experience in ways that I never would.

"Women are expected to obey, and Dee is already too beautiful a young woman not to obey," Daddy would say many times in his talks with himself about why the world was so hard and could take away so effortlessly the things you loved. Daddy believed everything was offered up eventually. Born in 1904, he was a Victorian in terms of values: women knew their place, but Nanny, my mother's mother, wouldn't stay sober even after he ordered it. And my mother wouldn't stop having babies. He didn't want any more because his own mother died when he was six, after having ten children. At thirty-six, Grandma Cruz had been worn out. Women were expected to do as they were told, Daddy thought, for their own good. And here was Dee. He didn't know what to make of her. At thirteen, she had already tried sex with boys in the neighborhood. She liked it, and said so. They knew she was willing...

Later, when I was seven, she would show me how the boys kissed her. We would practice, she said. But she didn't force me. I liked her smooching. She would smack me on the mouth and lick my lips....I was always willing to practice with Dee. I worshipped her. And when he found out, Daddy raged.

On the day Hurricane Audrey passed through, we had taken Highway 87, the highway from Galveston to Sabine Pass, to Highway 1,

past what my mother called the all-white school (she went to the school in Port Arthur) and into Buford Street through the back way. We had waded in the back way to see about my Nanny. We waded out to her house, back into Buford—it was the black neighborhood in the marsh—in water four feet high.

As my Daddy navigated through flood waters, I whined and begged to get out of the car.

"Put me in the street and let me walk," I said.

This is what they tell me I said anyway. I told Momma that I wanted to go back home to my Creole-Cajun Grandpa in Houston and listen to his stories. So I cried for him. He talked to me all the time, not like my Momma who cried all the time, sounds like whale songs. Lost in my toddler world of words and touches and needs, I didn't know it was hormonal and that Momma'd had several miscarriages, buried babies, relatives, and her own heart.

I couldn't understand why she cried that morning when Nanny was safe, couldn't understand about the drownings. The word had come in while we were trying to get to Nanny's place. The people along the road, in waist-high water, passed it on. Edgar, aged eleven; Marie, twelve; and Calvin, sixteen, had all drowned in the storm surge. They were out swimming in the Gulf—their backyard—when the eye passed over. They never made it back. These were my cousins. And Momma cried.

"They didn't even know it was a storm," Daddy said.

I didn't know them. I just cried because she wailed. But it's Daddy's words I remember. The next day he made coffee for us—he fed me mine in a spoon—in Nanny's caved-in house. After coffee, we all went crabbing and crawfishing for food. I can remember my Nanny, barefoot, pulling in crabs in the light rain, and crawfish biting her line as the waters of the Sabine spilled out of its banks. The storm was over.

"But folks have to eat, you know," Daddy said.

I would always remember those words. They would mean something to me. In every storm, the final words had to do with survival. The waters could rise. The Texas border along the Gulf could change. The rules could change. Politics could make one country another. And girls like Dee would find sex too soon, and fathers would lose what they believed were the best things they ever made. For Daddy, that was Dee. And my mother, who never stopped crying about it all.

"But folks have to survive, you know," he said, "even in storms." Even in floods, so many floods spilling out everything, just crowding out our permanence, crowding out our names, crowding out our stories of everything but storms. I would remember the water—always water—with me, with me, around me. I would remember being three, and in a storm, and the coffee he fed me afterward. I would remember the rain, and I too would have memories of the womb.

Blame Goes for a Ride in the Country

wearing a red polka-dotted dress
she sits in the middle of the back seat
straddling the hump of a '49 Dodge

her tiny wrists bobbing above her chubby knees
(such incongruity) as she babbles
pointing out volcanoes, tectonic plate shifts
and faults to two people no longer listening

though they are related to, though they
fathered her and mothered her and spoused her
from a tiny seed to brat-sized
and will continue to feed her bitterness
till she floats in Macy's holiday parade

with cheeks blooming hot air
with her skirt billowing over everything
so that if they were smart and shut up
they'd agree, what child is this
born of our intolerant failings

and the man would pull to the side of the road
where the woman would weep among gravel
and though the little lady scooted side to side
they would herd her to the door for eviction
and abandon her as a foundling
so they could forget, perhaps forgive,
head off in a new direction
while she stood small and blue
choking on their exhaust.

Confession

I DON'T WANT TO DISCUSS JOAN when she drank. I have to, though, because what Perney and I did sounds monstrous if you don't know the whole story.

When Joan drank the hardest—when she met my friend Mayo—she chugged Johnny Walker in her daddy's Electra while cheating on her high school boyfriend. Mayo couldn't really complain about her wildness, though: he was the guy she cheated with, and when he met her, he himself was as drunk as a nun full of rum. They met where I tend bar now, The Toad. I didn't work there then. I drank there.

I wasn't there the night they met. I was taking my mother to get chemo—but that's an entirely different story. Anyway, Mayo took Joan home that night, got her naked, and didn't do it. If you got naked and didn't do it back then, people thought you were crazy. Mayo said he didn't do it that night because Joan was, as he said, cuter than Raquel Welch as a child. Which, I guessed then, meant he loved her. He wanted to impress her, he said. Though he didn't immediately: first thing the morning after, she asked him if he'd enjoyed it. After he told her what they hadn't done, she made him breakfast and they took a walk, and from then on, she spent every moment she could beside him.

I met Joan two nights after Mayo did. I was taking classes in a nurse's aide program at the time. I'd started out in pre-med like anyone who wants money, but then, of course, came Chemistry. Then came nursing, then a nurse's aide program. What I finally did pass was bartending school.

I was drinking JD at The Toad when Joan and I met. Mayo was out of town fishing with Perney, one of those guys who—back then—I knew but just didn't like. Half an hour before last call, the lights went on, and two middle-aged men and a young woman were crawling around under some tables. Someone lose something? I said, and the woman glanced at me. She was cute in a wholesome way, the type of cute Mayo liked—I should have guessed she was the one he'd taken home two nights earlier. Her eyes sort of squinted in that sexy kind of way, and she pointed at me and yelled, Buddha!

Buddha? I said.

Yeah! she said. That god they have there in Japan!

She's been drinking, Pal, one of the middle-aged men said.

And I lost my contact, she said. She reached between the tables toward a straight Scotch, dipped in her finger and put her finger in her mouth.

Don't get fresh with her, one of the guys told me. She doesn't really know what she's doing.

She reached for his hair. It looked like a toupee. Teejay's my friend, she said.

Don't, he said.

I don't need to, she said. Because I found the American Buddha! She climbed onto a chair and hugged me. My gut, when her arms squeezed my thighs, pressed against her head: for the first time in my life, I felt fat.

I've been drinking too much, I told her.

That's what gives you the Buddha belly! she said.

How you getting home, Joan? Teejay asked her.

Buddha, she said.

Teejay glared at me. I may be fat but that's definitely a toupee, I told myself, and I smiled at him, my way of saying Go ahead and take the first punch.

We need to find, Joan said.

Find what? I said.

My contact.

I got on my hands and knees and ran my hands over the floor. I felt dust and sticky, dry beer. I don't think it's down here, I said, and Joan sat on a chair beside me. Under her makeup were freckles. Her eyelashes were long and black from mascara, and, hanging from one, something glistened. I stood on my knees and reached for it.

Contact? she said.

Contact, I said.

As Joan and I walked from my Skylark to her apartment, I had to grab her to keep her from falling. At her door, she fished around in her fake Gucci purse as if her keychain were the size of a crumb. As soon as you're in, I told her, I'll leave.

You'll leave, she mumbled. When I say. She seemed to be trying to push her fist through the bottom of her purse. There, she said. She tried three keys before she found the right one. She opened the door, and I flipped on a light, and we stood looking at an unmade bed in a cheap studio.

Home, she said.

Looks nice, I said.

You wanna feel how nice? she asked.

I helped her over the threshold and said, I think I should go.

No, you don't, she said. Because I want to be tucked in by Buddha.

Mayo returned from fishing a night before he was supposed to. At The Toad for our usual pitcher, he began talking about how unbelievably the white bass were biting.

Then why'd you come back early? I asked between sips.

To see someone, he said.

That woman you met? I said.

She and I prefer the term girl, he said. As in. He raised his eyebrows. Little.

I stretched a sip into a swig, hoping we hadn't slept with the same woman. Another cute one, huh? I asked, looking away.

Yeah, he said. I can't stay away from that type.

I'm glad I don't have that problem, I said, and after I swallowed my next swig, I felt fatter than I had when Joan met me.

Mayo and Joan dated for four years after I slept with her. We all became pals, she and I usually acting as if I were her older brother. I doubt she told Mayo what she and I did, because people who drink usually don't mention those things. Sometimes I'd forget she and I'd done it, and sometimes I'd think it didn't matter because we'd been drunk, and often it wouldn't bother me. Before she quit drinking, which Mayo insisted she do before they got engaged, she'd flirt with me, but only when she was loaded, and always in front of Mayo, and usually in a way that made Mayo act like he liked her more.

After she quit drinking, she never flirted. She and Mayo rarely came to The Toad then, and Joan began behaving like a saint, which I don't think Mayo could handle. I mean obviously he didn't want her boozing and sleazing around, but a guy that age who drinks himself doesn't know what to do with a woman who suddenly doesn't—see, his choices for entertainment seem all at once gone.

After she quit, guys at The Toad, especially Perney, told stories about her, stories I never told Mayo, and the night before she quit I saw her at The Toad with this overweight bleached-blond nursing student—I think her name was Kate—who used Joan's looks to meet men in bars. When Mayo and I stopped in for a shot that night, Joan was more out of it than she'd been when she slept with me, and she was getting the usual attention drunk women get from men in bars, and, at first, she and Mayo ignored each other. Then she waved him over, and they talked. Then they began arguing, and Mayo left the bar yelling and flailing his arms, probably, now that I look back on it, his way of telling himself that booze was getting the best of him. At last call, Joan and

Kate were playing bar dice with two businessmen with wedding ring tan lines, and I thought about offering Joan a ride home, but I was so drunk I didn't trust myself, so I left by myself, and the next day Mayo told me Joan quit. I suspected she did with one of those businessmen what Mayo possibly feared she did with me. What I didn't know then—and what Mayo and Joan probably didn't suspect—was that you should never quit drinking for someone else. Because when you do that, whoever you quit for becomes your booze, your thing you just have to have, and later, when that someone isn't around, you are in serious, serious trouble.

I quit drinking for The Ibis two years ago. This was ten years after Mayo and Joan moved to New York, two years after they divorced, maybe six months after Joan returned to Omaha and again began visiting The Toad—first, as a bored sober person, and then, more and more, as a drinker. I don't know exactly why she and Mayo divorced, but I've had my ideas, and now that I've tended bar this long, my ideas are about confirmed. I mean you hear a lot of stories tending bar, the most common The Drinker's Divorce Story, and The Drinker's Divorce Story goes like this: two people meet in a bar, drink, and go home together; two people date, get engaged, and get married; one person quits drinking, the other keeps drinking, and the two people hate each other's guts. Everyone who tells me this story gets sad when they tell it, but then I serve them their order and they walk off toward the crowd, and, minutes later, I see them laughing. Sometimes, while absorbing the laughter, I tell myself that at age thirty-eight I've been tending bar longer than anyone should. I tell myself I should quit, or at least quit drinking, which brings me back to the saga of me and The Ibis.

The Ibis and I have been lovers, but only when we've been drunk, and during our mornings after, The Ibis has been silent as concrete. During the afternoons following these mornings, she's hung around my apartment, eating and napping and joking with me as if she's my wife, and then she'll begin picking up my things, my albums and clothes and whatnot, and I'll tell her to stop, but she won't. The last time she kept picking up things, in fact the last time she stayed over, she told me she could never marry me—as if I'd proposed—then whined about how she couldn't marry me because my apartment was what she sees in me personally. A mess too full of beer, is how she put it. I didn't answer, just began picking up the empty bottles I could find on the floor, and then she said I wasn't understanding what she was trying to tell me. It took her awhile to tell me this; first she said physically unattractive, but then she went on about her other lovers, about how they'd all been

athletes and so forth, about how sleek and hard their bodies were, and then, after I threw a bottle at the wall so hard it shattered, we both knew I understood. Don't clean your apartment, she was saying. Clean up your act and lose weight. Six months later I quit drinking to lose weight, only I did it for her and not for me, and then she began refusing to see me at all, and I was in serious trouble.

The Ibis is skinny, but she calls herself The Ibis for an additional reason: she's too tall to find herself a husband. See, all that talk about men liking tall women flies out the window when the woman is taller than the man. A guy might sleep with a woman taller than him, maybe even date her, but ninety-nine times out of a hundred he won't marry her. He won't marry her—like The Ibis won't marry me—because that's just the way men are. It's a mean distinction for men to make, yes, but that's beside my point. My point is why I still love The Ibis despite the fact that I no longer like her: because I know that whenever she and I have lain talking on my pull-out couch in the dark, we've agreed that we're essentially the same person.

About a year after I quit drinking for The Ibis—and roughly a year and a half after Joan returned from New York—Joan walked into The Toad. It was a Saturday afternoon, and she was skinny and smiling and looking like a saint all over again, as if she'd never divorced Mayo or slept with me or anyone.

What's the smile about? I asked her.

Sobriety, she said. I'm seeing how it feels the second time around.

And?

It's just as boring, she said. But I'm happy.

I didn't like hearing she was bored, then realized why I didn't: because I, on the wagon for The Ibis despite the fact that The Ibis was ignoring me, was facing boredom myself. And then—as if maturing thirty-eight years in one moment—I realized that inhibition can be a person's most attractive feature, and I wanted to flick the towel off my shoulder and grab Joan's hand and walk us both the hell out of there. I wanted to do something sober but uninhibited, like running through a Cub Scout picnic in a park, with all the picnickers, especially the drinking parents, watching us as if we were crazy, me overweight and sweating, Joan lagging behind me and picturing the muscled way I felt when I slept with her all those years ago—on that night we didn't know we both knew Mayo. I wanted to run through that picnic twice, then kiss Joan on the forehead and go home and sleep alone, then run with Joan the following day and every day until the day I died. I wanted to clean my apartment whenever I came home from running, and keep

running despite the fact that I was slim, and, one day, while running, bump into The Ibis.

Joan pointed at my gut and said, Looks like Buddha's gotten a smidge bigger.

I considered saying something to hurt her back, maybe hinting at the worst story Perney told about her after she quit booze the first time. Yes, I said. He has.

Sorry, she said. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.

Bartenders don't have feelings, I said. I suppose you want a Diet Coke?

She nodded and I opened her a can. I set it down and filled a glass with ice, and she took them and walked to a table. She sat alone, facing away from me, and I wondered if she were waiting for someone.

She drank four Diet Cokes by herself, which, of course, attracted the drunkest of men there to her. She talked to each of them, smiling at some, and, one by one, they bought her mixed drinks.

At six-thirty, eight full cocktail glasses sat on her table. Then Teejay, the same guy who'd been with her the first night I met her, walked in. Teejay was a regular so I knew him enough to say hi, but I never did like him—because he always seduced college girls with tequila.

When he sat beside Joan, I shuddered: I just wanted Joan to stay sober. He left her to start a tab with two Johnny Walkers, then took them to her table and sat facing her. She pushed her Johnny Walker toward him; she pointed to it as they talked; she lifted it, studied it, and sipped. Booze beats boredom, I thought, and I licked the Johnny Walker I'd spilled off the side of my finger, then splashed half a shot into a glass. Then we were all drinking—me, Joan, Teejay, and everyone there—and I told myself that alcohol wasn't so bad. Teejay ordered two doubles, and Joan winked at me, and I hated our weakness so much I began sweating. Four people walked in and ordered four beers, and this couple, two people married to people who weren't there, began laughing about a Drinker's Divorce Story. Teejay bought two shots of Jack, and then Joan was sloshed: I could tell by how shrill her laugh was.

Three hours later, she and Teejay left. An hour after that, she came back. She walked to the jukebox and stood facing it and kept wiping her eyes with her palm.

I locked the register and walked over. Everything okay? I asked.

Oh, everything's wonderful, she said. Her hair was matted in the back and she was pushing jukebox buttons even though the jukebox wasn't plugged in. My regulars were staring at her—or maybe at me—and then four guys walked in, including Perney, the guy Mayo went fishing with the weekend Joan and I met.

Diet Coke on the house? I asked her.

No, she said. She kept pushing those buttons. Please just leave me

alone.

I returned to the bar, where Perney and his friends ordered two pitchers. Perney's friends sat down and Perney walked over to the jukebox, and he and Joan began talking. My sweating grew warmer, and Joan left The Toad, and Perney stepped back to his table and sipped beer. Then he walked up to the bar.

Need a time-out from your buds? I asked him.

No, he said. Not yet, anyway. He sat down and, staring at the mirror on the wall behind me, shook his head.

What's wrong? I asked.

That Teejay guy, he said.

What about him?

I guess he roughed up Joan pretty good.

I know he got her drunk, I said.

He took her home with him, Perney said. And wouldn't take no for an answer.

I didn't know what to say—whether I should sound angry, drunk, or sad—and Perney didn't say anything either, just faced the mirror and grimaced.

Should we pay the man a visit? I asked.

I was sure Perney would grin. He kept staring at the mirror, and—just to get him talking—I poured him a bourbon on the house. He chugged it and said, A visit might work. Let's try one as soon as you're done closing.

He sat on that stool for an hour, his buddies ribbing him from their table, neither he nor I speaking as I served the laughing couple a few shots. Then he slid off the stool and left.

Five minutes before closing, he returned. He nursed a beer as I cleared out the regulars and picked his fingernails while I counted the night's gross. When The Toad had that clean calm it has only after the register is empty, I walked to the door, about to key off the lights, and said, Ready?

He followed me out the door sort of mechanically—as if he and I were finishing a first date. We can take my car, he said.

I locked up and followed him across the street to a '78 Dodge. Two softball bats, one aluminum and one wooden, lay on the floor in front of the front passenger seat. Halfway to West Omaha, I asked, How do you know where?

She told me, he said.

We didn't speak again until he turned off the ignition. Then he said, It's two blocks down. A yellow house with a black and white mail box.

He got out of the car and took the aluminum bat and slid it up the sleeve of his jacket. I did the same with the wooden bat, and, side by side, we walked the two blocks.

The windows of the yellow house were dark. He's probably passed out, Perney said. We cut across the front yard as if crashing an after-hours party, then headed around the house to the back door. When I was set to ring the bell, Perney grabbed my forearm. No need, he said, and he stepped back and lashed out a kick that opened the door, bounced it off a wall inside, and closed it again. He kicked again, softly, and walked in. We pulled the bats from our sleeves and I found a switch on the wall; a light went on and we walked through a kitchen and an L-shaped hallway. Pictures of people, family, I guessed, lined the hallway, and at the top of the staircase was a small hall and two closed doors. As Perney opened the door to our right, I wondered if Teejay owned a gun. Perney walked into the dark room and, matter-of-factly, as if about to kiss a child goodnight, said, Say your prayers, fucker, because it's about to happen.

A light went on. A fish tank with big yellow and red fish sat on a dresser near a king-sized bed. On the bed was a clump of sheets, and under the sheets was a body. Perney yanked off the sheets and Teejay lifted his head. Naked, he was surprisingly slim, and his toupee was off, and the sour way he squinted made me hate him as much as I had in The Toad.

We heard you had a date tonight, Perney said. And that your date didn't exactly have fun.

Cut the crap, Perney, Teejay said, and Perney swung. I pictured Joan laughing that shrill laugh, and I felt myself swing, my first thud not as loud as I expected. My third thud made a cracking sound—wood or shin bone or both—and then I wasn't the drunk me or the sober me or the young me or the old me: I was everyone's madman, everyone's lover, everyone's hater, everyone's drunk. I was a lonely spouse, a parentless child, an out-of-breath runner; I was Mayo and Joan and The Ibis and me whenever we heard The Drinker's Divorce Story. Perney's bat hit the face before mine did, and for awhile my thuds sounded louder than his, but then the sweet spot of my bat hit the nose. Then we took turns hitting the skull, grunting and swinging until the eyes opened.

We left the sheets on the floor and the bedroom light on. We said nothing as Perney drove to The Toad. When I stepped out of his car, he said, Later.

I drove my Skylark back to my apartment with my radio off. As I pulled into my parking spot, the wooden bat sat on my passenger seat just as Mayo used to in the days when he and I drank together—just as Joan did on that night I believed I was simply a man doing a young woman a favor. I thought about hiding the bat in my trunk or driving to the landfill and heaving it in, then asked myself, What for?

Inside my apartment, I closed the door behind me and let the bat lean upside-down against the wall. I walked among the things covering

my floor; The Ibis once called them junk, but, to me, now that I was drinking again, they were my things. I walked past part of my inheritance—my mother's old china, lying in need of washing under crumpled napkins and the plastic spoons and forks I get whenever I visit a drive-thru. I walked past old albums I should have listened to more often, as well as the turntable I bought from Mayo before he moved to New York, and mail I got from people but never answered, and my phone and my answering machine and crumpled cans. Most of the cans were Bud sixteen ouncers, but there were Diet Coke cans there, too, and there was an old Slurpee cup with two of those red straws that kids use as spoons, and the shorts I wore on the first warm day last spring, and The Ibis's baby oil from the afternoon she and I sunbathed before the last night we made love. Two bottles stood on either side of the baby oil, the beer The Ibis finished just after we sunbathed and the one I only began, and bottles, I admit, stood on one side or another of just about everything, but none of them had ever contained hard liquor, and most of the Bud bottles were Bud Lites. And some of the bottles were open but completely full, from the nights I used to fall asleep while talking to The Ibis's answering machine, and, as I noticed the bottles, I knew there were more of them than any one person should have in any one room, but sandwich wrappers lay everywhere, too, and I walked among the wrappers and the bottles telling myself that I should eat less and quit drinking, and I sat on my pull-out couch. I sat with the back of my head against the wall and rubbed the palm of my right hand, feeling that soreness you feel from the sting of a bat cracking, and, after my eyes closed themselves about halfway—about as much as they wanted to, I guessed—I sighed and thought: These are your things.

Balboa Park

In the forest of the Sun Bear and the Lion-Tailed Macaque,
the rain beats on the leafy floor and jaguars roam in packs.
The sloth bear and the kinkajou inch along the vines
where the toucan and the macaw rest deep within a shadow's line.

In a bathroom tiled a verdant green, panthers leave deep marks upon your back,
while the yellow-viper slides up your leg then slips between the cracks.
The tamarin calls as blood pours out and sticks upon the tiles.
Is it true they whispered *lover boy?* Is it true they asked for smiles?

Now the Sun Bear lies on the mossy ground, small paws captive in a sack.
The jaguars' limbs are tightly bound, their hides no longer on their backs
and the yellow-viper slinks away to seek the cover of damp rock,
while time slowly fractures in Balboa Park as the bells ring six o'clock.

The New Bridge

The old bridges listen.
They are not fools. They know the music
new bridges make. The raw melody
of jackhammers jars them. When they drop
chunks of concrete in muddy rivers,
old ribs of re-bar quiver in icy winds.
The old bridges pop their rivets,
unbutton themselves like old men
undressing with numb fingers for bed.
Engineers in orange helmets eye them
like lustful cousins leafing through
yellowed pages of an uncle's will.
Foremen gnaw toothpicks & warm
their bulldozers. The new bridge
splinters the sky with its skeleton—
strong sleek steel. The old bridges watch,
backs stiff, like old men standing tiptoe
in the shadow of bushes. Through yellow windows,
they watch the young couples dance.
The old bridges watch. They are not fools.

LYNETTE IEZZONI

1934
from *Impasto*

GABRIELLA SANTORINI GREW UP, EXQUISITE. Tall and slender, with pale frivolous arms and a laugh like glass breaking. Vermillion curls snapped around her heartshaped face, snared on a tooth or tangled with her bubble gum, and she would need help, the fingers of a stranger or loitering boy, to pry them loose. Her emerald eyes gazed slyly askance. Giggling, unable to resist provocative fluctuations in posture, the boy chafing at himself, chafing with desire, she would run her tongue across her lips, coveting a girlish and slightly contemptuous secret, "...which was her native disgust...some deep, private sarcasm" **(Epifania Dantes)**. Wiggling her toes in the dirt, Gabriella would spread her long, slim legs, bend down for a light, teasing the crowd with plump breasts glowing with "...tears I cried onto her" **(Massimo di Buoninsegna)**. The cigarette flared. Sliding a hand behind her back, she blew smoke at the sky, peppering the alley with stark, throaty laughter: a creature of beguiling naughtiness, a mongrel.

Fourteen-year-old Massimo di Buoninsegna gazed with indolent anguish upon the girl whose every gesture and intake of breath filled him with tortuous desire. The slight, recalcitrant boy had grown into a youth with the delicate build of a fawn and a soft face which was not without a certain effeminate prettiness. Much of Massimo's time was devoted to the careful stewardship of his hair. Treatments concocted of honey, the sap of maple trees and the lactose fluid of milkweed pods were used to maintain his gleaming mass of tangled brown curls in a precise "helmet" except for a single "thorn" aimed nastily at his left eye. The lean and nervous youth demonstrated a flair for small, futile rebellions and self-destructive displays of aggression which made him noticed by the shy, romantic wallflowers of the community. Intensely secretive, he imagined himself an enigmatic criminal or outlaw like Jesse James. "He was an open book: completely at the mercy of his dragon, his worm" **(Epifania Dantes)**. Catching sight of himself in a window, Massimo would deepen his scowl and slouch further in the manner of a disgruntled rebel, a misunderstood dreamer. He often sported a self-conscious limp, as if one leg were shorter than the other, which was untrue. Indeed, however, he felt maimed by the world: by

his despised father and the much-heralded Giuseppe, by the smothering attentions of Attilia Filomena and the inattention of his beloved, and by the frank yearnings of his sulky penis. Responsibility—the need for schooling or work, the concept of a future to be either sought or prepared for—eluded him. He longed only for a life of indolent dreams, and the sordid, romantic fantasies which took root and festered in his lassitude. Nine years later, on the bloodstained beaches of Sicily, Massimo would observe with similar dreamy fatalism sleek Messerschmitts slanting across blue skies. Bodies impaled upon the smoking rubble of a charred jeep caused him to vomit. Six months later, "exorcised of Gabriella: my frivolous distraction" **(Massimo di Buoninsegna)**, he viewed similar atrocities as "grand," wildly, romantically majestic. Anzio, littered with Allied corpses, seemed emblematic of "...man's sublime brotherhood, his honor and self-sacrifice" **(Massimo di Buoninsegna)**. Nevertheless, at the age of fourteen, Massimo di Buoninsegna possessed no ambition beyond the marvelous Gabriella. He was her slave, and as he watched her, every fiber of his body was on fire, seeking singular revenge.

Swarming moths obscured an August moon. Who was it this time? Who had seduced the fabulous girl? A stranger? A boy from school? Shadows made it impossible to tell. Massimo had watched the crowd of admirers reluctantly disperse, the anointed one chosen not so much by Gabriella but by his own superior displays of dominance: the alpha male securing his harem is uninterested in earning the admiration of the females, only in assuring the deference of defeated males. Massimo watched the lovers silhouetted against the brick of Pasquale Santorini's fine new grocery store, his entire being tormented with jealousy. The sexual machinations became rough. Night did not temper the heat. The moans of the lovers became indistinguishable from the restless, aching sighs of insomniacs: the neighbors, and Massimo holding desolate vigil "...for a thankless dawn" **(Massimo di Buoninsegna)**.

Gabriella Santorini squinted through puffy eyelids at a slim cigarette. She struck a match, inhaled deeply. As she exhaled, lowering her head onto her arms, she became aware of her unbuttoned blouse, her skirt wadded above her thighs, and her hose, snapped loose from garters, bagging about her ankles. She teased the lit cigarette across the skin of her calves.

An inscrutable pain haunted her, a lurid, masochistic anguish. Gabriella could not remember a time when she had not felt this pain, nor would it have occurred to her that the beast—for she envisioned the pain within her as a wild animal, a lion or Bengal tiger—would ever permit capture, or that she would ever be granted a reprieve from the hunting and continual wounding, the fluctuation only in degree of

anguish, or from that concomitant sensation: her grudging pride at the carnage, what always seemed a deserved punishment, her perpetual due. The pale, plush skin of her wrists seemed inviting, "...no doubt as alluring in its way as she is alluring to men" **(Epifania Dantes)**. Gabriella could not recall a moment without these morbid thoughts. Her life seemed mysterious, a painful dance invested with the temptation, the desire to disgrace herself. Trapped within the artifice of a bewitching body, she dared men to abuse her, to demand favors and expose her lies. Her suffering was observed with eerie detachment, her vacant heart filled only with callous revulsion for herself, and all who touched her. She neither expected nor desired a reversal of her fate. Her eyes were like cold stars spurning this small useless world.

"I escape through holes in myself into other holes. Chambers, chambers mostly make up the form of my madness...this game. Chambers without connecting corridors...chambers like the ventricles of the human heart opening upon one another. Blood pounds in my ears; swish, swish; the sound is deafening. I squat. I cover my face with my hands. You think I am walking. You think you have passed me on the street and I have smiled at you; but I have squatted, crouched against a wall, covered my face. I run. Your hands slip down the contours of my body; the next chamber is dark, as is a third. You think a girl has smiled at you but there is no girl. You think a girl has answered yes but there was no asking. The girl you touch is somewhere secret. The girl you see has disappeared" **(Gabriella Santorini)**.

Massimo di Buoninsegna sighed onto his back, sucking on a blade of grass. Bees grumbled across the thistled cemetery. The youth wistfully twisted his coveted prong of slick hair, refashioning it again and again to precisely spear his left eye. A rattling cough disturbed his dreams of Gabriella Santorini. Wrenching to his feet, Massimo apprehended the obsequious bow of Albino the undertaker. The undertaker released hold of his cart—which was decorated with the pelts of skunks, rats and squirrels—and parked it beside a chiseled granite angel. Massimo dug his fists into his pockets, shuffling nervously. He had heard rumors of this man. Albino's bald pink head, his razorblade nose and the red poker eyes of a possum made him terrifying to young children, as did his penchant for bowing, and his bone-rattling cough. Only Epifania Dantes considered him a friend, although in fact she enjoyed him more specifically as a colleague. To Northumberland's other residents he was queer and off-putting. Nobody knew where he lived. It was rumored that he swam naked at night in the turgid waters of the quarry, cavorting with rodents and bats, then followed the slime trails of slugs home to the most disagreeable of beds.

The undertaker withdrew, "...no...seemed to expire from my presence" **(Massimo di Buoninsegna)**, with an elaborate bow, fanning the air with his bony hands as if to apologize profusely for the intrusion, including the intrusion of being alive. "No, no, I couldn't possibly," he deferred, puzzling the boy who had suggested or offered nothing, not even a hello. Curious communication between the two continued, or ensued. The undertaker beseeched the boy to regain his former relaxed pose, then, professing great reluctance, took a seat beside him and proceeded to nonchalantly name with uncanny accuracy and great apology for his presumption the brooding thoughts and virulent fantasies which plagued the lovesick adolescent. Massimo's squirming, uncomfortable silence was interpreted as an intelligible, even subtle response to which Albino responded again, in turn; and elaborately, lucidly, frankly. Massimo twisted his legs into a knot. Albino lamented the indelicate embarrassment of the "pugnacious erection" and warned that this, like premature ejaculation, must be carefully and discreetly "handled" by the mature male. The undertaker then cupped his jaw, bemoaning his painful left incisor and three ailing molars. Indeed, he spoke frankly to the youth, employing explicit language and touching upon subjects which would have been considered obscene if Massimo had been absolutely certain of what Albino was saying, or had the undertaker not been so adept at following an allusion to the "tenacious virginal vagina" with the disclosure that he was absolutely terrified by the prospect of losing his teeth, and would rather die than do so. He begged Massimo to excuse for a moment his inexcusable vanity for being so fixated on the physical manifestation of the spirit—his shell, as it were, which was in his case as homely as a nutmeg. Massimo kneaded his forehead with his hands, deeply puzzled. He continued to say nothing. Nevertheless, he did not need to. Albino went on to name Massimo's grandest dreams, and allude with unerring accuracy to his most salacious fantasies. He then dismissed each with a wave of his hand, making the embarrassed boy feel great indebtedness: a subtle, elusive blackmail which drew the two closer. Hours passed. Massimo found himself once again reclining on his back, sucking on a blade of grass. Albino surprised him by naming the object of his desire, and surprised him still further by offering to act as liaison. A less likely Cupid could hardly have been imagined, and yet, as the undertaker's queer monologue or conversation continued, he proved strangely convincing for the role—although he impressed upon the boy that this was something he did not have time for and would consider doing only as a special favor. His ideas concerning the wooing of Gabriella Santorini were conventional, but imbued with a heightened, excruciatingly romantic eroticism. Flowers, for instance, must be deployed thusly: a single, long-stemmed red rose with the thorns intact presented with bowing formality yet with the taking of the beloved's

hand and the closing of that hand around the thorns, impressing upon her the pain endured by her anguished victim; a suitor's gaze which locks upon her own, catapulting into her startled eyes, and navigating with mesmerizing efficiency the deepest waters of her soul. This—the performance minutely described—was the performance rendered two hours later in the alley behind Pasquale Santorini's grocery.

Gabriella Santorini squinted through a fog of cigarette smoke at Albino the undertaker, who she had never seen before except at a distance. Close proximity made obvious the blue hollows beneath his red eyes, the pointed bat-wings of ears, and his noticeably bad teeth. He was in possession of a rose. As he bowed, one arm flaring to the side and hand twisting with ornate genuflection, he extended this flower; and as she reached out he trapped her hand and smiled, gazing into his eyes. Gabriella was attracted by foreboding, by a sense of *déjà vu*, as if the undertaker's smile was a smile she knew, a smile she had dreamed once. Exhausted from the heat and the sex of the night before, she surrendered to his spell, feeling only this vague intuition and unaware of the blood which, drawn by the puncturing thorns, had begun running down her arm. Albino gestured towards a boy. Gabriella could not remember having ever seen this boy. He slouched among stacks of crates, head down, toying with his hair. Gabriella nodded, agreed to what Albino was suggesting without asking what it was, knowing without asking; what else could it be? She exhaled slowly, watching clouds race across the blue dome of sky. Albino the undertaker bowed again, and withdrew.

In order to promote a look of sophistication, the undertaker had provided Massimo with a cigarette. The cigarette was only the boy's third, and as he inhaled he choked and began coughing. Smoke sputtered from his mouth and nose, and he rolled to the right, clinging to the wall with vertiginous nausea. Albino's rough throttle startled him in the opposite direction. "Look," Albino whispered, pointing fiercely. "She's yours! *Look*!" The undertaker waxed eloquent in elegiac description: notice the game, kittenish sensuality, the sway-backed posture and coy smile uncontaminated by moral upset or conscience. Designed for man's pleasure, she is eager to enjoy along with him baptism in the waters of her remarkable sex. Massimo swooned, near fainting. Albino's kick sent him hurtling towards the girl. Three minutes passed before Massimo di Buoninsegna came to his senses. For the initial two, he was blinded by a swoon exacerbated and maintained by the presence of tobacco smoke still trapped in his nasal cavities. At the commencement of the third, his visual acuity was regained, but he was deeply and profoundly confused by the landscape or physical geography which surrounded him. In fact, Albino the undertaker had jettisoned Massimo directly into the body of Gabriella Santorini, where he remained lodged against her, his head butting her pelvis and his

hands dangling like an ape's onto her bare feet where the smoldering cigarette was burning her left ankle. Massimo's sluggish and dreadful realization of his predicament made him crazy with humiliation. Had he at that moment possessed a knife he would have killed himself. For a time in his horror he even believed like a small child playing peek-a-boo that if he could not see her she could not see him. When at last all possibilities of being mistaken were exhausted, and suicide or magical decomposition were no longer viable options, Massimo took another grim puff on the cigarette and waited, near vomiting, for Gabriella's ridicule. Instead, she laughed. Massimo's petrified cower continued. She laughed again. Moreover, she reached down. She lifted him—raising him, Massimo would later recall, like Lazarus from the dead—and as she did he continued to cower and fumble and prey upon her with awkward, discombobulated shame in all the most presumptuous of places—at least this is what Massimo assumed. Wasn't facial contact with a goosedown breast presumptuous?—or how his nose became lodged on her sternum, causing his lips to nibble her neck like a minnow?—or how the cigarette burning a hole in her dress started a small fire which Gabriella was then forced to extinguish by wadding her skirt against the afflicted area, thereby revealing the most private recesses of inner thigh? Massimo assumed the giggles he heard must be coming from another source. When he finally looked up, and Gabriella smiled at him, truly *smiled* at him, Massimo thought he would devour her with gratitude. As Albino had instructed, Massimo's eyes locked with hers; and Gabriella quieted as she discerned in the worship of the youth, something genuine: innocence perhaps, "...or was it gullibility?" **(Gabriella Santorini)**. Massimo traced her cheek with a trembling index finger. He opened his mouth and kissed her, then ran his lips across her eyes, into her vermillion hair. He had been received. He had finally touched the skin, the breasts, the mouth of the girl of his dreams, the girl who would dominate and dismantle him. As he cupped her head tenderly, kissing her eyelashes, her cheekbones, the bridge of her nose, he promised, in return, to trespass and glorify her, to do whatever she asked, without resistance or question. He promised all the splendid desolation of a physical and spiritual union, "...although Massimo did not suspect what this would mean—how he would fall, be asked to fall. Gabriella chose him to kill her. She understood in that first moment the quixotic distemper of his harebrained devotion. Who better than a man in love to commit murder? Who better than a man in love to devastate a mind, a heart? Gabriella chose him to kill her. Of this I am certain" **(Epifania Dantes)**.

Preoccupied and sad, Epifania Dantes slouched on the kitchen table, smoking a Toscani cigar. Pasquale Santorini had ignored her. She

had stood in line for three hours, attempting to purchase a coconut. A sudden craving for the tropical sweet had overwhelmed her. Because of the ravages of osteoporosis, Epifania Dantes had shrunk to a height of less than sixteen inches. Still, the grocer had surely known she was there, especially from all her hollering, but no, Epifania ruminated, he would not pause in his furor over Gabriella or his solicitations of his other customers, nor would those customers break from his spell long enough to allow the Sicilian her business. She was no longer respected. Her peers had died in the nineteenth century, and her last husband when she was 123. Too, Epifania mused, beyond her own selfish concerns, Gabriella Santorini was indeed troubling. She now attracted boys and men from neighboring towns and as far away as cosmopolitan Pittsburgh, admirers, "gawkers!" **(Pasquale Santorini)** who lit her cigarettes, wove their fingers through her fabulous hair, and earned her favors. Arms locked across his apron, Pasquale Santorini shook his head in disgust. "...whispers...at all times of the day and night I hear whispers: *puttana, puttana del diavolo*. A horde surrounds her. Dogs, dogs all of them. Did I mention the stench...their tongues hanging out?" **(Pasquale Santorini)**. As her father spoke, Gabriella had not stirred from behind the candy counter. She was filing her nails, and did not appear to be listening. Certainly she had not responded to the hollering Sicilian, or served her. Abandoning the hirsute delectable, Epifania Dantes had returned home feeling unusually despondent. She plucked tobacco from between the ridges of her toothless gums. Beata had entered the kitchen and was stripping. She threw her bloodied skirt into the sink. Epifania observed her 34-year-old friend without speaking, suddenly conscious of the swift and inexorable passage of time. In 1914, when she first arrived in America, Beata had seemed the most sensible of girls, her industry unhampered by conceit or ostentation. Now she seemed somehow dead, mechanical, rote. Too, there was something about the mouth, an unsteadiness, and something in the escaping tendrils of prematurely grey hair which suggested a bitterness, or instability. As Beata turned, reaching for the washboard, Epifania noticed the purple and mustard yellow bruises, a cluster of them in Beata's lower abdomen, the region of her pelvis. She noticed the swaddling on the counter, the white fabric deposited in a heap. Epifania Dantes—who had never rejected even the most bestial or belligerent of spirits, or resisted mournful spasms of guilt and grief over the abandonment of her six children—watched Beata slam her sullied skirt against the washboard and scrub furiously, and became, perhaps deliberately, mistaken in her impression. The poor mother, Epifania sighed, was haunted, had become unnerved by all her reproductive failures: the loss of Micco and Andrea, Sophia Dolores, Juliana the Fire Eater, and all the endless Gabriels. Beata is still young, Epifania thought. She is a baby herself. She will forget. She will forget what her

husband's brutality has cost her. She will forget how her body has tantalized, then denied her, how it feels to watch a child who has somersaulted and twirled, hiccuped like a drunk within you, die amid mussed sheets. Motherhood is and must always be a process of forgetting. "A face only a mother can love": this is the first step, the beginning of a mother's essential, selective amnesia. "Eventually, soothing menopause will grant Beata the perspective to know that a woman's life is never her own, or even her husband's, but belongs to the children she has carried and nursed, the children who define through their greedy ascension the denudation, the depletion, the pride of a woman" **(Epifania Dantes)**.

Epifania Dantes felt invigorated. Climbing down off the table, she exited the house and hobbled in a state of spiritual excitement down Wopsononock Street towards the intersection with Pine. Albino the undertaker was trudging in the opposite direction, pushing his cart loaded with the instruments of a gravedigger's trade. Epifania waved to her friend. As she turned left, towards Our Lady of Refuge church, she was apprehended by Attilia Filomena Boccioni. In less than three weeks, Attilia Filomena would deliver the second of her fourteen sons. *Il gallo*, who was sucking on a lemon ice, surveyed the disheveled *anziana*, horrified at her unkempt demeanor. Epifania Dantes had not bathed in seven months. For no bath in over two decades had she completely disrobed. Still, she rarely offended. Her odor was like the fragrance of damp wood or an old tree: a faint scent of musk and peat, decomposing bark appealing to termites and the floating, airborne spores of wild mushrooms.

At this moment, however, Attilia Filomena took umbrage. She grabbed Epifania by the hair and dragged her back home, tossing the cigar over a back fence and depositing Epifania with roughness in the back yard. Wash snapped on the clothesline. Dandelions winked in the lush grass, bees droned across the stamens of tulips, and nesting birds disappeared into the fiery pink spray of a crabapple tree. *Il gallo* set to work. She peeled off the *anziana*'s twenty-three mummified layers of clothing, prying loose the last several with a butter knife, until the wizened gnome crouched before her, not so much modest as completely baffled. Massimo, ensconced within a clump of crabgrass, closed his eyes against this distasteful sight and resumed his fantastic playback of "the kiss." Attilia Filomena deposited the minute Sicilian in a tin basin and scrubbed her ruthlessly against a washboard, working loose even build-up from between her fishbone ribs. Epifania Dantes's hair posed even greater challenge. It seemed to repel water. Attilia Filomena dunked the old woman repeatedly, holding her underwater for up to *three minutes at a time, until the locks separated and floated to the* surface. Combing the matted expanse with a pitchfork—a regular comb was out of the question—took nearly four hours, and resulted in the

appearance of an exploded, autumnal milkweed pod. Attilia Filomena dug a hole and buried Epifania's clothing. The Sicilian was wrapped in a dish rag and set to dry. Instead, as Attilia Filomena disappeared into the house to procure more suitable garments, Epifania hobbled off. Witnesses would later describe what had appeared first to be a small angel wandering south on Wopsononock Avenue towards the intersection with Pine. There was something jocular, even risqué in the girlish wag of her wobbling walk, the explosion of white hair, and the hapless winking of her toothless smile. Superstition and alarm kept spectators at bay. Several within the burgeoning crowd suggested the figure was in fact a dead woman. She was not identified as Epifania Dantes until she collapsed on the steps of Our Lady of Refuge church, shrouded in her hair, and was overturned by Father Scomparito. "...I don't want to see any more" **(Epifania Dantes)**. Father Scomparito lowered the Sicilian's eyelids.

Speculation ignited the crowd. Factions quickly developed. Although reason would suggest that Epifania Dantes had expired on the steps of Our Lady of Refuge church, many contended that she was in fact already dead when she turned left off Wopsononock Avenue and "floated north" on Pine. That Epifania should traverse several city blocks while deceased was not inconceivable, given her remarkable constitution. Father Scomparito preferred the "floating dead" theory, although he took pains to distinguish this from any implication of "holy" or even angelic resurrection. "She was one tough old bird" **(Father Gino Scomparito)**. Albino the undertaker apologized profoundly for his presumption in disagreeing. He bowed obsequiously, leaning on his shovel. He felt sure his friend had winked at him just as her eyelids were lowered. What would later seem even more remarkable than a possible meander by the corpse of Epifania Dantes was the sudden appearance of Beata di Buoninsegna cutting a path through the crowd with a meat cleaver. The reticent mother of four scaled the steps of the church with rare speed. Upon seeing the body, she vomited against a granite buttress, causing the crowd to retreat. Members of the assemblage, including Pasquale Santorini, realized that they had never seen her face before: noticed it, that is. Visible to them now for one brief, startling second, Beata's face was utterly without distinction—eyes, nose and a mouth, Pasquale would later shrug. The Lombard wrapped Epifania in her white hair, threw the small corpse over her shoulder, and headed off in the direction of home. Father Scomparito uttered, "Well!" The others resumed their conversation, now regarding Beata di Buoninsegna's uncommon brazenness.

That evening when Matteo di Buoninsegna arrived home from work, he discovered his favorite chair moved several inches to the left to make room for the coffin of Epifania Dantes. What would normally have been a punishable offense was in this instance overlooked. The

Abruzzi peered with apprehension into the small pine coffin. Although Epifania Dantes had worn her years well in life, she did not wear them well in death. Her shrunken husk resembled a diseased, fungal walnut, and her unsightly transformation was only made worse by adornment with Beata's preposterous orange hat. The parlor was filled with platters of sausage and fish, pasta, antipastos and breads. Andrea Piangere, who had arrived home with Matteo, crouched behind the sofa, watching in horror as Attilia Filomena painted Epifania Dantes's face with the same concoction of flour and water and staining berries she had used on Lisetta. Beata kicked open the door, carrying a casserole of sizzling sweetbreads. Spying *il gallo* at work, she screamed and slapped her daughter across the face. She knelt beside the coffin and cleaned the Sicilian's face with a rag.

The doorbell rang. Guests began arriving for the wake. Soon the house was so crowded that no one noticed when Beata di Buoninsegna slipped out back and stood at the top of the cellar stairs. No one saw her make the sign of the cross, or heard the sharp intake of breath and the dull stabbing thud of hard, self-inflicted blows. Beata tumbled down the cellar in a wild, bruising spiral. Eyes peered through a knot in the wood. The witness moaned weakly, uttering an inaudible cry for help. Beata rolled onto her back, pounded herself again. For nine minutes, she did not move. Arching suddenly onto her hands and knees, she commenced a rhythmic spasming. Despite Beata's crude, guttural groans and wretched animal contractions, and the clotted debris which poured from her as she hiked up her skirts and squatted beside the apple press, the witness could not move, or utter a sound "...to save or rescue her from this, from him...from what my father has wrought...done to her" **(Lisetta di Buoninsegna)**.

To Northumberland's surprise, Gabriella Santorini had taken Massimo di Buoninsegna as her lover. Except for the occasional infidelity which the Beauty seemed unable to resist, and an initial week of feverish retreats and advances, the two had remained entwined whenever possible in intimate embrace since their meeting through Albino the undertaker. Gabriella could not explain her relinquishment to the affair. After so many lovers, many certainly more handsome, all certainly more experienced, Massimo's was the face she could not resist, his legs the pythons which matched her own, and his the tongue upon which she tasted the nectar of sexual obsession. She drowned in him. Sinking to soundless depths, she became tangled in—what appeared to be—seaweed, was nibbled by—what appeared to be—marvelous tropical fish, and was rescued—penetrated and seduced into orgasm—just as drowning seemed imminent. Gabriella's betrayals, her caprice and depression were pitted against Massimo's devotion, his passivity,

his relinquishment to her. Gabriella was surprised at how the boy's searing and reiterated proclamations of eternal love, his hedonistic worship of her, made her disbelieve for fleeting moments the horrors she was capable of, and forget the beast whose fiery breath scalded her soul and seemed destined to lead her to fulfill an odious but deserved, sadomasochistic destiny. Gabriella was surprised as well by Massimo's rapid and adroit mastery of the mechanics of love. Initially, his obvious virginity had caused him shame. His rigid member had stumbled like a drunk among the various recesses of her crotch, and his shock and extravagant pleasure at the discovery of the correct orifice betrayed his inexperience. He expired across her with the giddy laughter of a lunatic, burrowing into her damp flesh with effervescent gratitude. In his discombobulated glee, he told her all about his naked childhood piracy and how he had subjugated dominions of mice, about the dreaded *il gallo*, and the oratory of his young penis. He described how his precocious member had wept tears of the milkweed plant, wept only for *her*—nothing, *nothing* in his life, his soul, his heart or his dreams had been for any other purpose than to love her.

Soon, however—in fact, within twenty minutes—Massimo regained his gravid adolescent seriousness and convulsive, even nauseating feelings of ever present shame. Retreating from maudlin confessions of a troubled boyhood, he resumed the pursuits of the flesh, setting upon Gabriella with a nimbleness and shameless proclivity and enthusiasm for the rambunctious, ingenious pose or gymnastic contortion associated with the Orient. He sucked her lower lip, gazed into her eyes, kissed her left nostril, her right, sprang like a coyote upon her hidden, jackrabbit tongue. His ardor was real, and his love engendered an insistent tenderness and abandon which made Gabriella squirm with the realization that he did in fact adore her. She laughed. Her green cat eyes, her lurid orange hair, her salaciousness and sexual history belied Massimo's claims. Furthermore, his worship—that she should *allow* this worship—only confirmed her deviousness, and manipulative nature. Gabriella turned her back. She was unable, as she held her breath, to still the beating of her anguished heart. Massimo shivered from Gabriella's pain and rolled on top of her. He moved her face to look at him. As Gabriella gazed up, she saw in the agony and indulgence of her lover's eyes a possibility for sanctuary, a momentary cessation, or dulling of the pain. Massimo wept, kissed her haunted eyes shut.

Pumpkins nourished by the buried garments of Epifania Dantes rivaled the orange globe of the harvest moon, and provided extravagant accoutrement for the lovers. They hid among the pumpkins' tangled vines, or in caves dug hastily beneath sheltering sassafras. When Pasquale Santorini's voice ringing through Northumberland forced a separation, the adolescents wept, and felt to be dying of thirst and malnutrition. The flesh seemed stripped from their bones and the world

denuded of color and organic vegetation and transformed into a desolation of windswept dunes devoid even of the prehistoric horsetail or crude mollusk. The agony was so great that their reunion provoked kisses in which not only any appalled observers but the lovers themselves could not tell whether they possessed more than one tongue between them, more than three eyes, more than the two teeth required for piranha bites on the other's throat, or more than a single iron lung from which was bellowing a torrid storm, breathing flowers into their Saharan bellies and causing an ebullient Congo to splash forth from their conjoined thighs. Northumberland's cemetery seemed the most convenient locale for a hasty retreat. The ground was spongy and caused them to bruise less, the morbid decor seemed somehow appropriate to their infatuation, and privacy was more or less assured, although in fact the lovers would hardly have noticed or cared if this was not the case. And when, as occasionally happened, they were being watched by a curious child, an incredulous woman, or even by an entire Little League baseball team being made to jog the parameters of the town, Gabriella's awareness of the spies was no different from the feelings she always experienced of being watched; and Massimo was too intoxicated to care, even a wink, for the mixture of voyeuristic admiration and hooting ridicule which greeted his spasming china bottom. Soon the youth had developed the sluggish, bow-legged walk of a cowboy who has ridden too long on his Appaloosa, and an embarrassing tick of his swollen lower lip which twitched with belligerent fury when not conjoined with Gabriella's. Indeed, Massimo existed in a state of tortured bliss, utterly at Gabriella's capricious mercy. His eyes grew worried and proud, his voice nervous with agony. He laughed and cried only when Gabriella did, provoked her, jealous and vulnerable, when she did neither. Lovemaking ensued, or was always in desperate need of ensuing around the clock, "...and the two degenerated into beasts who were less than human, less even than dogs, just fornicating pigs who brought shame upon all who saw them, but especially upon our family" **(Attilia Filomena)**.

The dreadful squalor of their passion soon left the lovers incompetent for anything else. Anything less, they would sigh, than the countless lifetimes they experienced in a single kiss; than the deaths they suffered in excruciating separation and the births caressed from reunion's madness; than the baptisms by fire and by sweetness, the promises to die together, to stand for nothing less than this; and the tests, always the tests—tests of devotion, of surrender, tests of fidelity and sacrifice, tests of love as painful as the Jewish ritual of circumcision or that of skin carving practiced among certain tribes of sub-Saharan Africa. So convincingly did their affair seem a Paleolithic courtship which had begun before the time of dinosaurs, seen Rome rise and fall, and Columbus inflict smallpox on the Indians that they hardly would

have believed that in fact their liaison spanned a mere seventeen and one-half days. At that time, Massimo, who had lost twelve pounds, lifted Gabriella, who had lost fifteen, in his bony arms, and stumbled off in the direction of the courthouse. Gabriella did not question his purpose, nor did she resist when he wrung a wilted bouquet from a vine of tea roses. Her disheveled orange hair trailed behind them on the sidewalk. Her consumptive pallor and Massimo's equally deficient complexion made the judge on duty in Northumberland's courthouse believe that the two had escaped from a tubercular asylum. Alarmed at the threat of infection, he married them hastily, calling as witness a scrubwoman and a belligerent blind man who was insisting he could tune a piano with his feet. Spectators gathered to watch Massimo di Buoninsegna carry Gabriella Santorini—now apparently Gabriella di Buoninsegna—through the streets of Northumberland. No one suspected, as the couple crossed the threshold of 13 Wopsononock Avenue, that Gabriella would never set foot from this house, or be seen again, except as a wan silhouette in a distant window. Massimo staggered past his father who was eating a sausage, past the mortified Attilia Filomena, the somnolent Valentino Boccioni and the disinterested Giuseppe, and engineered despite his exhaustion to scale four flights of stairs and traverse a long corridor to an obscure corner room. He deposited Gabriella on a sagging twin bed, trembling from head to toe. He closed the door, and gripped the handle in order to keep from falling. Gabriella floated towards him and like the ghost of his desire inserted herself elusively in all the right places. Massimo buried his face in her hair, tongued her pink, conch shell ears. She giggled and expired across the bed. The lumpy mattress bounced around her, and she teasingly pressed the squeaky springs, threw a pillow at him, and smiled so sadly, with so much "...love that I thought I would die of life" **(Massimo di Buoninsegna)**.

Angel Atrapado XXIV

It was early October,
a time of gathering insect husks
floating on the pools of sleep.
We were in an adjacent room,
licking the last of summer's slime from our fur,
a basket of roses wedged between our teeth.

You were going to be the sweetened gum of something more one day.
Once you could, a whiff of a chance, but now never is always.

I'm the dotted line where someone stamps a name.
This is what you sold me: fountain of crusts,
fading glimmer, birds pecking at corpses,
their frozen cries.

Horizon's rented curtain and the city of yellowed stars
that lies beyond.
The rails of thinning voices to which this is addressed
are being erected out of what you remember,
drone of declarations and rags of blue rust.

Intersecting backgrounds rearrange their cones and vectors.
Planes tilt, accumulated orders spill out of their contours.
Vines of urchin syllables begin spreading
through the Cartesian nervous system.
A way of making yourself small takes over:
Slow roast of dripping surges.
Ledges of venom crashing down and up.
Another insistence felt in the mesh of the many you cart.

Perfection's violet plume and the inevitable plummet,
immovable dome of flies and the stalls
on which rosy warnings are branded.

Why go back to what you cannot leave?
Crackling voices, burning rungs.
Voices made of wood and voices made of water,
the ground rotting between their varnished clamps.

Am I always to be here among them?
Bruised tongue wilting on a spine.
City where the dead line up and vote.

I was carrying your dress to the window,
I was watching your shoes float in fire.

One of the ones whose air we never sift
                pointed.
These are our silhouettes,
the ones we learn to bury in the swirls of
our necessary representations and lashed economy.
We will boil a nectar of glue,
        a sweet tonic
we can use to write on each other's lungs.

The lax within. I was folding a spear
around the ledge of my forehead,
and I was running toward the door.

I was looking for the one who said:
This you is not you.
I was looking for the one whose voices
leave me where I am:
In the shattered mirror of stars.

I'm holding my head in my hands,
a green sponge dripping with style.
I'm posing for a copy of *The Stinker*
by August Rodent, a bronze spatula
whose imitations are scraped throughout the lair.

Angel Atrapado XXVI
(Dear Rilke)

Who among the many I am would answer if I stalled out?
That's what I tried to pay the voice of my stolen elf later,
after we told ourselves and each other
there was a document that declared
we had never been there, in the room
with the bed of mud and leather,
tattooed stowaways on a swiveled saddle
facing away from the stars pinned to the wall.
This, I wanted to say, was a story I made up
but then I would be flying through my teeth.
A wilted butterfly stuck to a stenciled pail,
the wind's hearse infiltrating the pockets of our sweaters,
the ones we knitted out of children's hair.
It is not my name I must repeat, but the shame of it.
Did you remember to light the pyre? watch the smoke
rise through the broken windows of my borrowed eyes?
If I told you once, then I never told you.
We were praying again; and,
like all the other times we prayed,
the words never penetrated the page.
Do you like to watch me leave myself behind?
on the chair where you place
a glass of wine, an axe, and a candle?
Will you catch me and stuff me
full of wooden charms?
Which one of you will unbutton
the swelling that fills my mouth?
I am a sponge floating
on a hedge of blue crusts,
and you are a linoleum tile
stamped with sharp yellow roses.
Can you help me slither across the garage?
I am the path a fly takes
in order to reach the tornado.

I am a photograph registering
the seismic interferences rising through your hands,
their gloves of poisoned meat.
Each of us is a service entrance
made of candied shoes, a toehold
filled with imitation juice.
Perhaps by tonight one of us
will begin stirring the swill
until it swells the withering within.
We must learn to adjust to the ruts and rows,
make glue out of the bones we shed each summer.
I prefer leftover steam and teeth stolen from a dog.
I prefer to be left where I am, but I do not know
the name of this place, only that it sails through me.
I am a window through which you see a landscape—
flames rising toward the wind's coiled throat.

Four a.m.

He rises at 4:43. Worried, worried. From his freezer he pulls an El Patio cheese and onion enchilada dinner with rice and refried beans. Since turning fifty, he's had this meal each morning for breakfast: a quick-starter with after-burn to get him through the day. He reads the ingredients on the box. Zinc oxide, maltodextrin, sodium acid pyrophosphate, thiamine mononitrate, apocarotenal. Which of these horrors will kill him? He frowns, then happily preheats the oven, anticipating the sloppy, delicious taste.

His grandfather, in the simpler first half of the century, only had to worry about a tree and that old sway-backed mule in his East Texas field. Lucky man.

On his desk, official pleas from UNICEF, Amnesty International, P.E.N., the Union of Concerned Scientists to lend his famous name to their needs. He does, daily.

The oven timer rings. He cracks the seal on a bottle of cheap white wine, pours a tad in a coffee cup, lights a Camel, peppers his steaming enchiladas. It is five-thirty. In the streets below his apartment window, buses lurch through the first green light of day, hunting the briefcase crowd, joggers in bright yellow shorts chase the chilly fur of their breath. He admires these adventurers who keep the city running, and on time. He toasts them with his vinegary wine.

This dawn, his task seems sadder than usual. *I'm weary. Have I lost another step? Damn booze.* But of course he'll stick 'til the end. Silence must be prodded at every turn—both the moral imagination and the cozy, known universe stretch thereby—so he lifts his pen and pokes reticence right in the belly, spilling a bundle of words.

First, a letter to General Wojciech Jaruzelski calling for an end to martial law, the release of imprisoned artists, educators, labor leaders and students, and a speedy restoration of basic human rights in Poland. He signs his name under the auspices of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, which has asked for his participation in this matter.

Next, a note to the American Library Association protesting the handiwork of a librarian in the Caldwell Parish Library in Louisiana. She has hand-painted diapers on the illustrations of Mickey, the naked little hero in Maurice Sendak's popular children's book *In the Night Kitchen*, on the grounds that the library's patrons might object to the

nudity.

This second bit of business he takes as seriously as the first. The world does not distinguish between Evil and simple malfeasance, and one does well to heed the world.

In the afternoon he walks to the market on West Eleventh. Jalapenos, cigarettes, Scotch. Ground beef—the veal is too expensive. He'll make a pot of chili, freeze some for later. As he climbs back up the stairs inside his building he feels a pain in his lower abdomen. He stops to rest on a landing next to a neighbor kid's broken bike.

In his apartment he clicks on his radio. In a few minutes, at five, his favorite program, "Jazz Today," will start. He decides it's not too early for his first evening drink. In the courtyard below, behind his building, which he can see from his kitchen window, a man and a woman embrace, oblivious to sirens from somewhere, he guesses, in mid-Manhattan.

He puts his faith in things that don't quite work. Politics. Spiritual quests. His thirty-year-old apartment.

In his kitchen, while chopping peppers for the chili, he notices the ceiling is so badly cracked it appears to be leaving the wall. His landlord is harder to reach than the President. He wonders if he can spackle the gaps and let it go at that. In his twenties and thirties he was a pretty good handyman. He even built a harpsichord once, for the fun of using tools. He couldn't play it.

In Catholic school, when he was ten, the Jesuits steered him from his interest in music—he'd wanted to be a jazz drummer—to the "higher discipline" of philosophy. Music was fine, they said, but God was in Ideas. After years of pleasurable exposure to both metaphysical ideas and live musical performances, he believes it takes a lot more discipline to be a jazz drummer than to be a philosopher. Any fool can prattle on about the soul. Paradiddles are divine.

On the other hand, the Holy Ghost is the meanest cat he knows. A messy concept, the Holy Ghost, hard to pin down. It refuses to sit still on the specimen board. He prefers things messy—food, relationships, art. The too-tidy, the all-in-place are as stiff and unhappy as plastic. The ragged, he thinks, is much more human, the never-finished nearly sublime!

Once, in a sidewalk tapas bar in the great city of Barcelona, a waiter gave him and his fellow Americans a stack of waxy napkins and said, in Catalan, "Just toss them on the ground when you're done." His companions, fastidious New Yorkers, tasted the olives and shrimp one by one, never mixing the dishes, carefully piled their napkins by their plates. Later, the waiter passed the table, and with a mighty sweep of his arm, knocked all the paper into the street; it swirled with unruly

pigeons high above a nearby cathedral, dipped and dodged between black cabs with the madness of confetti at a wedding. Few gestures he has seen in this world have delighted him as much.

After a bowl of his four-alarm chili, he sets about, once more, the messy business of the planet: a piece for the op-ed page of the *Times*, which is running this month a series of guest columns by artists discussing their personal political fears. Which of the poisons to choose? The public seems tired, just now, of the large, perennial topics (refugees, famine). Contributions to national aid agencies declined last quarter. As every parent knows, at a certain point in the lesson the child shuts down and doesn't hear another word. He picks an old standby, but one that hasn't been in the news much lately—questionable payments by the aerospace industry to several U.S. senators. A call to action, effective education—the kind that gets results—is always a matter of timing. Success is fleeting. The issue is jacklighted then lost until some worried person at four a.m. notices nothing's changed.

He remembers his son, years ago, learning to ride a bike. One day, perfect execution; cries and crashes the next. Teaching is a hopeless process, full of hope. He believes in it, though often it leads only to sleepless dawns.

He walks to the market, he walks to museums. Like the great *flaneurs* of history—Baudelaire, Breton, Cornell—he is a connoisseur of the *merveilleux* in the ordinary. He knows that Broadway, Lexington, Fifth, in the swift march of their trades, are rich sites of libidinal possibility. He is simultaneously excited and terrified in a crowd, sprouting desire, tendrils of lust in all directions—that pushy redhead wrestling the Scribner's sacks, those slender brunettes in the cab—but the poor flesh can only hold so much, his heart will explode, so he dips into a neighborhood bar for refreshment and rest.

In the leather seat trimmed with warm apple wood, he recalls three lines from the published excerpts of Joseph Cornell's diary: "Into the city...the buoyant feeling aroused by the buildings in their quiet uptown setting...an abstract feeling of geography and voyaging..."

He downs his friendly drink then sets out again, past glum storefront mannequins, handshakes and shouts, paupers and dog shit and mint. Mint? Yes, a faint whiff from somewhere, around the corner, beyond the tail-exhaust of that speeding pizza truck. A miracle in a flux of commodities.

Was it Wittgenstein who spoke of the senses as ghosts in the night, glowing with weak whitish light? The city always strikes him this way, even in the flush of day. A sourceless luminous spirit, ever-moving, warping and woofing with his own inner needs.

A sculpture show at the MOMA. Giacometti's *Palace at Four a.m.*,

crude yet elegant spires suggesting an empty castle where the king paces alone. Giacometti had in mind, while fashioning this piece, a lost lover, or so the story goes. In the museum's spiffy restaurant, still riding the artist's shapes in his mind, he recalls a recent phone talk with his son down in Texas. "Hey Dad, hired any topless canvas-stretchers yet?" Robert is grown now, married. A painter, like his father. *I tried to talk him out of it. I was a light-handed monarch, with simple expectations.*

"No. I gave my cock up for Lent."

"Seriously, Dad, are you dating? You're not too old."

"Thank you very much. Now if you'll excuse me I have to get my ankles realigned. Past a certain age, you know, they slip—"

"I'm sorry. I just thought you'd want to get out. Any more pains in the belly?"

"No." A lie. Accompanied now by nosebleeds.

"I'll call again next week."

Robert never forgave him for the divorce, but his concern, so many hard years later, is touching. First wife, second wife. One's in Europe now, one's in the grave, poor Ruth. He really did try to love them both, each in her turn. He really did fail. The palace has been empty for more than a decade.

In the food line, a young East Indian woman in a red halter dress, waiting for a slice of quiche, gives him a smile then moves on. Silently, with a moderately priced chardonnay, he toasts life's simple ecstacies.

Back on the street—chillier now, snow expected tonight—he's approached by a man he doesn't want to see, a fellow painter named Phillip, who shares his gallery. Phillip once challenged his remark that conceptual art is too easy. They'd been debating Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, a nine-inch walnut cube containing a tape recorder which played, over and over, the hammering and sawing of its construction. The effect was of an artist trapped by his own artifact, sealed from the world—too neat, and he'd said so. "Besides, it's a one-joke piece."

Phillip disagreed. "I know, I know, you're active in all these international organizations, and you think art should be morally engaged."

"I didn't say it wasn't morally engaged. I said it was too neat."

Phillip, in a bright yellow muffler, is pumping his hand now in front of the museum. "What are you doing tonight?" he says.

He mentions the follow-up letter to Poland.

Phillip doesn't hear. "I know. You're not doing *anything* tonight—how could you? The city's dead this time of year. Come on over to my place. Kenneth and Jane'll be there. A little four-handed poker?"

He sighs. Phillip seems to have a better time than he does.

The man looks genuinely crushed when he says he'll take a rain check. He should socialize. He knows he's losing touch with his friends, and he's surprised he doesn't worry about it more than he does.

"How's your work?"

He shrugs.

"Listen, I've been meaning to tell you, I think old Jansen"—their dealer—"is screwing us. I mean, I know the market's depressed, but come on! Kenneth and Jane and I want a showdown. Maybe next week. Are you with us? We're going to talk about it tonight."

"Some other time, Phillip, thanks."

Phillip's dark little mouth twists with disappointment. He tightens his muffler, nods then walks away.

Shuffling home, he remembers the streets at the height of the war: "Angry Arts Week" in '67. Poets moved in caravans shouting their outraged lyrics; postering brigades plastered windows with Guernica-like lithographs. Town Hall, he recalls, sponsored a conductorless performance of *Eroica*, to symbolize the individual's responsibility for the brutality in Vietnam.

The Collage of Indignation, his own project with over a hundred other artists, was a "wailing wall," according to one critic, "alienated and homeless in style, embattled in content." Its contents—ugly, sordid and beautiful, as befits a cry of conscience—included a coil of barbed wire, a draft card and a rusty metal slab engraved with the words, "Johnson Is a Murderer." His spine tingles with the memory of its textures, its dangerous hues.

He thinks fondly of the heroes of the day. Meredith Monk. Her "dance protest" for draft-age boys. Alan Alda, Ruby Dee, John Henry Faulk and their "Broadway Dissents." Grace Paley, Donald Barthelme, Philip Roth.

Such imagination! And such false, fragile hopes, believing the pictures they made, the songs they sang could heal the planet's cancer. He doesn't see his buddies from that era any more. Most stopped singing. Others lost their minds.

He feels a marrow-chill, a lonely burst. Perhaps he should have accepted Phillip's invitation, after all. Jane is a good-looking woman, well-disposed toward him. Maybe he could talk her into...

A twinge in the throat. His nose is bleeding, damn it. He doesn't have a Kleenex. He wipes the blood on his hand, scrabbles in his pocket for his keys. In the stairwell, the neighbor kid is moving her bike. "My daddy's going to fix the spokes," she says. The bike is too heavy for her; he helps her to the next landing, all the while trying to stanch the stream from his nose. The child smiles at him, broadly. "Thanks."

"No problem." This is still a world worth preserving, he thinks, though—as he'd like to tell the girl—we must never stop arguing with it for the general improvement of its behavior and health.

He bloodies two handkerchiefs, cleaning his face. His favorite shirt's spotted red. Leftover chili. It's just as well he didn't ask Jane to come by.

"Jazz Today" is featuring "The Matterhorn Suite in Four Movements" by the Louie Bellson Drum Explosion. A whip-crack of golden cornets, then softer, slower, the purr of the bass, the slide of the hi-hat, smooth as K-Y jelly. He saw Louie Bellson once, in the Village. Working hard at the Vanguard. The memory is so pleasant, he laughs out loud.

Later, his head hurts so he kisses the drums goodbye and searches through his records for harpsichord tunes. Something sacred and soothing. Is anything more sacred than the liquid strains of a harpsichord? He used to have an Igor Kipnis collection—or did he give it to a friend? He used to buy music, prints for his walls. He used to see movies. He remembers the title of a particularly gripping film, *The Onion Field*, but the story's a blank to him now, the actors unknown. His life is getting leaner. The cupboard bare. When did this start? How did it happen? He feels vaguely upset about it, but not enough to change anything. At least not tonight.

Before returning to his letters he clears a little space on his desk, finds, by coincidence, an old Xerox of a cablegram he'd mailed Brezhnev in '74, when Solzhenitsyn was arrested. He remembers, two years later on an exchange tour, smuggling a packet of erotic lithographs by a banned artist out of Moscow. He feels a breath of nostalgia, the flush of success, enough to get him through the evening. He certainly would like some harpsichord music, though. For company he punches Channel Five. A man in a bad toupee leaps into a car from the roof of a bank. He punches it off.

He believes he smells Vietnamese cooking through the floor. The apartment below? Who lives there now? Probably just an aftershock of the day's thoughts. When he thinks of the war now, it seems to him a faraway, dissonant chord.

Someone shouts in the street. The first snow falls. He doesn't sleep well. At midnight, he's in the bathroom, throwing up his chili. In the vomit he sees a spot of blood. He lights a Camel, pours himself a Scotch.

He dreams of East Texas. His grandfather had a windmill that wouldn't move, even in a gale. The bolts were rusted fast. He'd sit with the old man and his gimpy mule all day, watching the sun course through the sky. The ranch's failure didn't much trouble the family. Or the mule. He admired his grandfather, immodestly: an eminently practical man with a natural gift for metaphor. "Nowadays," he said, "I don't worry about which way the wind blows."

Four a.m.: the hour of blind storefronts, empty fire escapes. Sweats and chills. From his window he sees teens on the street, siphoning gas from a parked VW van. Sees smoke by the river. Hears a man and a woman through the wall—perhaps the couple he'd seen embracing in the courtyard a day or so ago—fuck each other, ardently. He pulls an El Patio from his freezer.

"How long have you been bleeding?" The doctor is stern with him, eavesdrops longer than usual on his heart and lungs (what are they gossiping about in there?). Taps his back, his chest, his throat. Orders tests. Endless tests. Foregoes the diet speech, the booze speech, the smokes speech. What's the point, now? The Holy Ghost is coming for dinner.

Robert says he'll buy him a plane ticket to Houston. "While you're sitting there in the snow, we're out drinking lemonade in the yard. It's eighty degrees here. The rest would do you good. We'd love to see you."

"I can afford my own plane tickets. You can't."

"That's not the point."

"No, the point is I've got a new project and I can't get away just now. But thank you."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Pure as a nun."

When he'd asked the doctor if he believed in transcendence, the man just frowned at him.

The new project is not entirely a fiction. He imagines a small canvas with heroic proportions of paint. Brevity at length. An impossibility on the face of it, but of course that's what makes it worth trying. Bless our work.

Late in the afternoon, on his way home from the medical lab, he stops by the market, starts to buy ground beef, then figures what the hell? Go for the veal. Who's around to complain of extravagance? Maybe tomorrow he'll even visit a record store—*are* there record stores, still?—and choose a Kipnis album.

On the walk outside his building, the neighbor girl passes him on her shiny purple bike. She waves.

His ceiling has torn another half-inch.

He reads in the paper that Phillip, Kenneth and Jane have jumped ship. As a group they've signed with the Herstand Gallery for an undisclosed record sum. Well. Good for them.

Long after dinner (he's saved the veal, finished the chili), he picks up his pen. Last week, six painters and four writers joined a crowd of tourists waiting to see the White House, then stepped out of line and unfurled a banner urging nuclear disarmament. The protest was

coordinated with a similar one in Moscow's Red Square. The Russian demonstrators were arrested then quickly released; their American counterparts were charged with illegal entry and jailed for thirty hours. The government has threatened them with six-month to one-year prison terms. All night he drafts a letter to the President, complaining about the ham-handed treatment his colleagues have received. Yapping at the heels of federal abuse. It is a grave and fitful business, being a citizen of the world, especially in the late twentieth century.

He uncorks a bottle of wine, beats a rapid drum solo on the dirty steel pot on his stove. His abdomen kinks. He is, of course, dying. There is much to be done. He toasts the seen, the known, the heard. It is four a.m.

Disclaimers

The text of Bach's "St John Passion", performed tonight unabridged,
is largely derived from the Gospels, portions of which are alleged
(by some) to be antisemitic. Such passages may well disclose
historical attitudes fastened (by Bach himself) to the Jews,
but must not be taken as having (for that very reason) expressed
convictions or even opinions of the management or of the cast.

*

"The Rape of the Sabine Women", which the artist painted in Rome,
articulates Rubens's treatment of a favorite classical theme.
Proud as we are this example of Flemish baroque can be viewed,
the policy of the museum is not to be misunderstood:
we oppose all forms of harassment, and merely because we have shown
this canvas in no way endorses the actions committed therein.

*

Ensconced in the Upper Rotunda alongside a fossil musk-ox,
the giant *Tyrannosaurus* (which the public has nicknamed "Rex"),
though shown in the act of devouring its still-living victim, implies
no favor by public officials to zoophagous public displays;
carnivorous life-styles are clearly inappropriate to a State
which has already outlawed tobacco and may soon prohibit meat.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

MARCUS ADAMS recently moved to Houston from Los Angeles where he lived and worked for four years after receiving his MFA in sculpture from the Claremont Graduate School. He has several group shows around California and recently exhibited his work at DiverseWorks and Gallery One Three Seven in Houston.

DANIEL BOSCH teaches for the Buckingham Browne & Nichols School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His poems and reviews have appeared in *The New Republic, Partisan Review, Harvard Review, Prairie Schooner,* and other journals.

RAFAEL CAMPO is a resident in Primary Care/Internal Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. *The Other Man Was Me,* his first book of poems, was selected for the 1993 National Poetry Series and was published by Arte Publico Press.

MICHAEL RAY CHARLES graduated with an MFA in painting from the University of Houston in 1993 and currently teaches painting at the University of Texas at Austin. He has been in several exhibitions around the country and shows at Moody Gallery in Houston.

TRACY DAUGHERTY'S short story collection, *The Woman in the Oilfield,* is forthcoming from the SMU Press. His novel, *What Falls Away,* is forthcoming from Norton.

ROBIN DAVIDSON lives with her husband and two children in Houston where she is a doctoral student in the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program. She received a 1994 Creative Artist Award from the Cultural Arts Council of Houston. "An Inquisition" is her first published poem; another is forthcoming in *Confrontation.*

BOB DIAL works as a landscaper in upstate New York. His poems have appeared or will appear in *Chiron Review, The Olympia Review,* and other journals.

DAWN DIEZ WILLIS lives in Salem, Oregon. Her work has appeared in *Yarrow, Tar River Poetry,* and other journals. She was a featured reader in the Valley Contemporary Poets Series.

MILLIE ESPREE teaches at Milby High School in Houston. This essay is part of a memoir about her life and her family.

LAURIE FOOS received her MFA from Brooklyn College. Her first novel, *Ex Utero,* will be published in April 1995 by Coffee House Press.

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RICHARD HOWARD, the poet, translator and critic, issued his latest book, *Like Most Revelations,* this year.

LYNETTE IEZZONI is the associate producer and co-writer of a film series on women and psychoanalysis for public television. She has published stories in

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KAREN LATUCHIE has published stories in *Southwest Review, Other Voices, The Paris Review,* and *StreetSongs I: New Voices in Fiction.* She received a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Fiction in 1991. She now lives and works in New York City.

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GILES LYON has been living and working in Houston since 1988 when he became a Core Fellow of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. He has had two solo exhibitions at Lynn Goode Gallery and has been included in a number of group shows around the country.

ELSIE LYONS currently resides in Pittsburgh. Her work has been shown at Hallwalls in New York State and the Hoyt Institute in Pennsylvania. Her work appears in the latest issue of *Pawholes.* She received a BFA in painting from Allegheny College in 1993.

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JOSIP NOVAKOVICH'S nonfiction has appeared in *Antaeus, Threepenny Review, Ploughshares, New York Times Magazine,* and elsewhere. Graywolf Press will publish his collection of essays, *Apricots from Chernobyl,* in April 1995 and his collection of stories, *Bricks,* in February 1996. Story Press will publish his textbook, *Fiction Writer's Workshop,* in March 1995. He teaches writing at the University of Cincinnati.

MARTHA OSTHEIMER lives in Tucson. Her work has appeared in *The Madison Review* and in two anthologies, *80 on the 80's—A Decade's History in Verse* and *The Best New Voices in Poetry,* from *New Voices Magazine.*

MARCIA PELLETIERE lives and works in Brooklyn, NY, and received an MFA from Warren Wilson. She recently completed her first collection of poems, *Stray.* She has published in *Southern Poetry Review, Painted Bride Quarterly, Mudfish,* and other journals.

ROBERT PHILLIPS is Director of Creative Writing and Professor of English at the University of Houston. He is the literary executor of the Delmore Schwartz estate. Phillips has written and edited twenty-five books, the latest of which is *Breakdown Lane: Poems* from Johns Hopkins Press.

DAWN RAFFEL'S story collection, *In The Year of Long Division*, will be published this month by Knopf.

DELMORE SCHWARTZ, the renowned American poet and short story writer, also wrote literary criticism, book reviews, and movie reviews. His books include *Selected Poems, In Dreams Begin Responsibilities and Other Stories, Last And Lost Poems*, and *Shenandoah and Other Verse Plays*. He died in 1966.

PEGGY SHEEHAN lives in Houston with her two children. "Balboa Park" is her first published poem.

GAIL WHITE teaches writing and directs the Writing Center at Northern Illinois University. Her poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner, Southern Poetry Review,* and other journals. Her chapbook, *The Way We Come Home,* was published by Sparrow Press.

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JOHN YAU is a writer, critic, and curator whose recent publications include a book of poems, *Edificio Sayonara*, and two books of criticism, *In The Realm of Appearances: The Art of Andy Warhol* and *A.R. Penck*. A book of his short stories, *Hawaiian Cowboys*, is forthcoming.

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