

# Gulf Coast



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# Gulf Coast

Volume XI, Number Two

Summer 1999

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*Cover art by*  
Luis Jimenez  
*Pelican*  
1988  
Oilstick on Paper 60" X 49"  
Courtesy the Artist

## Green Thumb Boy

*Dr. L.H. Pammel*

Hybridization, cross-breeding, evolution:  
He takes to new theories  
like a puppy takes to ice cream.  
We whisper that our Green Thumb Boy  
is the black Mendel, that Darwin  
would have made good use of Carver's eyes.  
So clear his gift for observation:  
the best collector I've ever known.  
I think we have an entirely new species  
of *Pseudocercospora*.  
And always in his threadbare lapel  
a flower. Even in January.  
I've never asked how.

We had doubts  
about giving him a class to teach  
but he's done a bang-up job  
with the greenhouse. His students  
see the light of genius  
through the dusky window of his skin.  
Just yesterday, that new boy,  
what's-his-name, from Arkansas,  
tried to raise a ruckus when Carver  
put his dinner tray down.  
He cleared his throat, stared, rattled  
his own tray, scraped his chair legs  
in a rush to move away. Carver  
ate on in silence. Then the boys  
at the table the new boy had moved to  
cleared their throats, rattled their trays  
and scraped their chair legs as they got up  
and moved to Carver's table.

Something about the  
man does that, raises the best  
in you. I've never asked what.  
I guess I'll put his name next to mine  
on that article I'm sending out.

## The Nervous System of the Beetle

No, I can top that one. Today  
in my Intro to Invertebrates,  
we had mid-term review.  
I asked one of the men  
to describe the nervous system  
of the beetle. He stood and pronounced,  
“The nervous system of a beetle begins  
with a number of ganglions  
on either side of the thorax  
and extends entirely down  
on either side of the backbone. . .”

What happened? Well,  
the class was silent, taking it in.  
Then Carver started in to laughing.  
He laughed so hard he cried,  
until all the others laughed with him,  
shaking their heads and exchanging shrugs.  
I had to ask him  
to explain the joke. By then  
the boy who'd said it  
had blushed from red to despair  
and stumbled from the room.

Carver? He just sat there  
wiping tears from his eyes  
when I let the class go.

## Cercospora

*Iowa State College, 1895*

He smooths a square of butcher-paper,  
licks his pencil stub, looks up, and loses  
himself in the cool of deep woods,  
mossy watersong over stones. *This species, with  
conidial scars on the conidiogenous cells.* . . .  
Puffballs, *Calvatia gigantea*, curd-white melons  
among the leaves. *Boletus edulus* scattered  
like gumdrops under the trees: sliced and sauteed  
in some sweet butter, with a little bit of chopped onion. . .

The door bangs open. White hands,  
a blindfold. But he knows that laugh,  
and that. But they are white men's  
voices, whiteman laughter. But  
they are his classmates, his friends.  
But they are white men.  
White. Pushed and dragged down the street,  
into a doorway, hearing the door close behind him,  
in whom  
does he place his trust?

Standing alone in a hush  
of whispers, rustling paper,  
in whom can he trust?  
He does.  
Eyes unbound see,  
then do not see  
the new suit, shirt, hat and tie  
thrust into his trembling hands.



Hit ENTER            the Mediterranean  
this minute            is uncut sapphire

And your Catalan sky?            Behold how to hide  
one must . . . like God            spend all one's blue

*(for Rafiq Kathwari)*

## On Hearing a Lover Not Seen for Twenty Years Has Attempted Suicide

I suspect it was over me.

## Driving Mel

She wasn't NPO until midnight so we drank until eleven. I told Mel about my third knee surgery, how they instructed me to write "wrong leg" on the good one before wheeling me into the O.R. I thought they were joking. I asked them if they couldn't just follow the scars, then thought I had better do it. Working in a hospital, Mel and I know there is a reason to tell them what not to cut open or off.

After my knee story Mel found the permanent marker in my lab coat and wrote "wrong breast" over her right nipple. I told her I hoped the ink wasn't carcinogenic; I laughed a little with her, but didn't think it was funny.

I drove Mel to the Day Surgery Entrance at the hospital where we work. We had to be there by five a.m. to do the two hours of fidgeting in the waiting area. We had decided to stay away from our unit. Mel wanted to be a patient and I wanted to be her friend – the one she listed under "responsible person" to drive her home. Neither of us knew anything about caring for a new nipple, being used to the larger surgeries that required removals of parts, like the one that had taken Mel's breast to begin with. Nurses are used to vacancies and shortages and teaching people to stretch their dismantled bodies back into life. It's rare that we can say "Here. This is something to make your life less ugly."

We gossiped about the docs we recognized. I told about Dr. Enzer not losing privileges after all, but that he wouldn't get in-house referrals anymore. He somehow manages to keep finding patients. I said it's because he is nice. Mel said he has to be nice. Mel's surgeon is gorgeous. He strolled past without looking into the waiting area. He isn't very nice, but he doesn't have to be – he's good.

The receptionist called Mel. She nudged me and said "Don't forget our pact." We believe that if you name the worst that can happen, it cannot happen. We imagine the worst that could strike us at our age, and diseases that could take our kids. Mel and I are in the Multiple Sclerosis, cancer of the cervix, Lupus years. We should have had a few more years until the breast cancer years. Our pact is that if one of us ends up on the ventilator in an I.C.U., the other will come and wash her hair.

I don't have to wash Mel's hair. I drive her home, feed her flat coke and broth and tell her that I'm sure things will look better when the swelling goes down. And I hope it *will* look better. I call Mel's mother, who's keeping both of our kids. Mel's mom has no breasts because hers were removed before the time of reconstruction. Back then they took you in for a biopsy with the "understanding" that they could take out just a lump or, if things looked bad, the whole of one or both breasts. She woke

up to the wrapped indentations on her chest and realized that she had never had an understanding.

In nursing school we spent three months in Surgery. Usually I was stuck in the GYN room where women in stirrups had their uteruses removed by doctors sitting between their knees. Sometimes, I got to see an abdominal hysterectomy with or without a salpingo-oophorectomy which was a little more interesting. I never saw a beating heart, but I did see a breast in the pathology room when I dropped off a specimen. On the counter by the sink, a whole breast floated in a plastic bowl. The nipple was pink and large like a flower. They had sliced off the entire breast of a young, fair-skinned woman. I had imagined a more delicate, more complicated procedure. This seemed medieval. I realized something about medicine and bodies and the desire to live. Something about sacrifice and nerve. The thing that made me have to leave right then and return to the dorm was my decision to exist somewhere between the anesthetized woman on the surgical table and the doctor cutting her.

What I know now is that it is a matter of accommodation. You get used to anything. Look at me, at Mel. I can, with professional ease and detachment, inflict pain on terrified children. I unroll the clamp separating a bag of chemicals from the tubing connecting it to a patient, and ten days later that patient has no surviving white blood cells and few platelets. I unroll more clamps to infuse hopefully-safe blood and platelets. I wear gloves. You can't be the chemo nurse if you are pregnant – it might not be safe. I give chemo to balding infants and toddlers and teenagers. I step outside the room during CT and MRI. I wear masks and gowns and eye protectors. And now I am watching over Mel, who has protected herself as I have.

Mel is in bed and mumbling about Dr. Gorgeous. She says the pills work. She says, "They said breast feeding our babies would protect us."

I say, "Yes, they said that."

## Bulletins

### *Bulletin from the Vacant Lot*

A sadist crawled through my apartment window  
to steal four jelly glasses

and found, on my body, a small round area,  
like a yo-yo, worth vibrating.

If my head and stomach weren't throbbing  
I'd be a worthwhile stop on the "Homes of the Stars" bus tour.

I live near a Rite Aid.  
Now I must go babysit the rain.

### *Bulletin from the Bronchial Passages*

A blonde triathlon athlete,  
victor of previous meets,

rammed her petite head  
against a fence and cried

"Bring me a balanced meal!"  
At her behest I chopped

parsley and olives  
but hid the cornucopia:

I didn't want her  
to know I was alive.

### *Bulletin from the Bottom of the Sea*

"Structure," says the cat –  
that's why I love cats.

Flowers on a hillside in May,  
my virginity:

if I thought  
it would do any good. . . .

*Bulletin from the Tightrope*

A man fixes  
my window with his window:

our windows  
rub together.

Only the sights  
hanging from my eye

occur to me.  
To reach farther is

his window's  
hubris, now mine.

*Brief Bulletin*

Often she said "brief"  
in the middle of sex, to infuse

it with honey,  
cream-of-tartar?

Our attitudes toward school  
fun differed.

I had no soul.  
I gave brief answers,

like a stud,  
and stared at the horizon.

## Mystic Islands

A padded brown envelope arrives two days before my birthday. It's from my brother, Michael, so it's bound to be entertaining and a little weird, with all the loaded significance of an in-joke. I can't help but think of his other recent gifts: a cassette tape of songs from Russ Meyer's *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*; a photo album of various Levitt developments; a coffee mug adorned with the face of Faith Seferis, failed Channel 27 newscaster, from a snapshot he took of the TV screen.

What could be more personal than these presents?

Still, nothing quite prepares me for what I'm holding in my hands: a customized "memory calendar" of Mystic Islands. I laugh and I laugh, absolutely delighted and bewildered by this painstaking, nearly obsessive gesture. I flip through the spiral-bound pages to find NOVEMBER: a green box with a flat roof, faded pink trim, and two 12 by 24 jalousie windows masked with strips of frosted contact paper. Its front yard is but gravel and weeds. Beside the carport: a saltburned hydrangea, a dented trashcan on its side, and a multi-branched gas meter resembling something from a science fiction movie.

\* \* \*

How could we ever understand its hold over us?

On the edge of the world, on an isolated thumb of filled-in wetlands, the original Mystic Islands bordered Southern New Jersey's Great Bay, a huge expanse of water once noted for its pristine oyster beds. Its sales office first opened for operation in the late 1950's, its first house occupied not long thereafter. Over the course of ten years, the developer built over 3000 waterfront homes on land created through the dredge and fill method, gearing the modest properties to second-home buyers from Canarsie to Rahway. It might have continued expanding to this day (imagine a Mystic Islands stretching 13 miles from north to south!) had not the Environmental Protection Agency put the kibosh on the destruction of the saltwater marshlands back in 1970.

But describing its inimitable aura isn't so easy; it's almost certain to point up the inadequacy of language, the slipperiness of thought. Or even worse, one's ugliest traits: snobbery, elitism. But how else to describe a place in which its own residents seem to have mixed feelings about it, where, when you go into the drugstore to ask for some local postcards, you're practically hollered at: *Why would you want that?*

Without, at the same time, acknowledging its weird beauties?

Perhaps it's best to take the tour. It's 1962, and you've been lured by

the lively advertisements of the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* real estate section. You drive through the gates down Radio Road past the Rotunda Lounge (a round affair in which community meetings are held), the Mystic Islands Casino (the local bar/restaurant), and the Mystic Islands Playhouse (a huge tin structure – a hanger? – built to keep the kids in line). Huge blocks of concrete hunker throughout the property; you learn later that they're the remnants of World War II lookout towers. You think of German submarines cruising ominously offshore and are fully, entirely interested. Yet nothing readies you for the sight of all those houses. How could houses be so tiny? You think of porches, enclosed porches with minuscule windows and pastel siding. The word "functional" comes to mind. But they're waterfront; every last one on a man-made, navigable lagoon, which lends the streets a festive air. You drive over a wooden bridge and you're out in the marshes, signs everywhere insisting on the future: Future Golf Course, Future Marina, Future Park. You make it to the dead end cul-de-sac of Radio Road. An already faded sign says PRIVATE BEACH, but someone's pushed down the chain-link fence, and two figures – two teenage boys – are sitting on the yellow sand beside the breezeless bay, slapping at the mosquitoes on their arms.

The whole place seems to be held together by pins and needles.

You turn back. You find it within yourself to check out the "model home mall." The developer, for some odd reason, has positioned the sewage treatment plant directly across the lagoon from the sales office, perhaps only to remind you that all properties are connected to city sewers. You walk down the sidewalk, trying to ignore the faint hint of the fecal on the air, instead concentrating on more pleasant things: the seagulls on the wires, the slap of a wavelet against a bulkhead. The sewage plant's humming louder now, groaning. But you've had enough, and you walk back to your car, driving all the way home.

\* \* \*

Is it only that our parents took the tour that year, enumerating its deficiencies in the most energizing, exhilarating manner? Did they fan this desire in us?

I look at my calendar now, at the 1997 version of things, flipping past the house with the multicolored metal tulips in the window boxes. Mortville, I think. If John Waters had grown up in New York or New Jersey, he'd have set one of his early movies here. I can almost hear the late Divine – florid, loud, beautiful – of 117-25 Flushing Bay Drive calling out the window to her next door neighbor, played by Edith Massey, or the amazing Jean Hill.

But is this flippant or glib? Real people live here with real lives.

Is it possible to make fun of something and have affection for it all at once?

As years went by, as soon as I was old enough to drive, my brothers and I visited a couple of times a summer to pay our homage. (It was twenty miles north of where we spent our vacations.) I wasn't even sure what we were looking for: Hope? Ruin? Some combination thereof? Still, something

about it must have satisfied, or at least offered the *possibility* of it. We were so compelled by our mascot community that we even took our friends there, some of whom understood its elusive appeal, some of whom refused to. Michael's friend, Robert, got it right away, even though he seemed more compelled by our devotion than by the place itself. "So Lisicky," he said cryptically. (We took it as a compliment.) On the other hand, my friend, Mark Champlain, a native Wisconsiner, who would shortly move back to the Midwest, seemed both disturbed by Mystic Islands and by our tender regard for it. Even by our acknowledgement that it existed. "New Jersey," he mumbled, shaking his head, already thinking about those deep Wisconsin lakes.

His assessment was probably more on the mark than we knew at the time. Where else in the world could you find this conflation of funk and glory, muscularity and decay? In some ways Mystic Islands seemed to distill the true essence of New Jersey, with all its nervy contradictions. Certainly my own way of seeing developed from having grown up there; how else could you thrive in a place in which refinery abutted farmland, in which fancy custom houses were built atop toxic waste sites, without embracing the *full* of it, without recognizing the fluid relationship between damage and beauty? I suppose there are consequences to this perspective, if you don't keep it in check: detachment, cynicism, a hyper-awareness of the gap between appearance and reality. (Now I get it: that Jersey sense of humor!) But how could one not admit to the monstrous radiance of the Meadowlands, that stretch of wrecked marsh between Linden and Secaucus, that place outsiders point to when they say: *Jersey*. All that buzzing energy. All those tanks and high tension towers, all those fires and carcinogenic streams, and the ghost of the World Trade Center towering beyond, barely seen through the scrim of smog. That smell. Poisonous and fabulous. Of course it's an ecological disaster. Of course it embodies shortsightedness and brutality. But, as much as I worry about the hole in the ozone layer, global warming, and the destruction of the rain forests, how can I ignore the otherworldly beauty of the place? The obverse side of heaven? At the very least I'd rather look at it, take it deep within, than pretend it doesn't exist.

Don't we all bear some responsibility in the creation of such environments?

\* \* \*

Here's another question: Would we want everything to be rolling green Wisconsin? Would Wisconsin be what it is without New Jersey?

\* \* \*

One more time: You're driving down Radio Road, and you're looking at the rushing blue sky, the wheeling gulls, the vast tract of marsh past the bridge. A great blue heron dips its bill into the tidal stream, and all at once it takes off, an explosion of flight. It drops the minnow to the reeds. The breeze off the marsh is warm, redolent of cattails, bay mud, and the sweet

insides of pilings, telephone poles.

Enough. How to think about the place without taking in the houses beyond, the entire picture?

\* \* \*

Maybe the whole place seemed to us a huge gesture of faith. How could we not be moved by all these efforts to make the very best of one's limited lot?

\* \* \*

Or maybe I'm just skirting the issue. Maybe I'm not going deep enough, digging around in the mucky, uncomfortable part.

Were we just embarrassed by the place? Did it give us some voyeuristic, prurient thrill, stirring up our inherent feelings of shame? Could it be, as Michael Cunningham suggests in one of his short stories, that we're "drawn to humiliation against our will?"

Is the lure of embarrassment written into our souls as our century winds to a close?

Think of the standup comic in a Holiday Inn; the aging businessman performing "My Way" in some Manhattan karaoke bar. Or the chilling crackups in John Cassavetes's films. Or better yet, the young newscaster from the Cape May station, the smallest NBC affiliate in the country, flubbing her lines, angry at the cameraman for screwing up yet again. Throughout our high school years my brothers and I watched the broadcast with an almost religious ferocity, almost praying for Faith's pursed lips to snap, which, believe it or not, they did from time to time. *Stupid*, she seemed to say with every gesture. *Stupid, stupid*. Human folly, incompetence, mediocrity, self-absorption – she couldn't bear these qualities in anyone, especially in herself. Paired with the vacant Mary McClaine, former Miss New Jersey, all teeth and smiles and good cheer about the world, Faith fell into a deeper gloom. Their nightly drama lasted for more than two years. Oh, the nasty glances, the sighs. Still, she wouldn't quit: persistence, persistence. Cup of our darkest thoughts: Faith filled us with as much dread as we could possibly need.

\* \* \*

Did these encounters relieve our psychological pressure more than we knew? How could we have known what we were getting into, immersing ourselves in the drama of getting ahead (whatever that meant), struggling toward roles that must have felt so far from us? Bobby drawing blueprints for architectural school applications, Michael auditioning for Juilliard. And what should I do: music, writing, art, some combination of the three? Didn't failure seem to be lurking around every corner? Wasn't it tempting to throw it all away? How could we not be in thrall to flop, fiasco, and disaster, when all around us, in our village of the self-made, behind the masks of achievement and style, the costs of excessive striving were already

becoming apparent? The high school soprano who finally recognized she was tone deaf once the entire audience laughed and chattered through her senior soloist recital. The divorced mother of three, burdened by the payments on her \$350,000 house, arrested for shoplifting frozen dinners ("I had to feed the kids") from the 7-11. Our next door neighbor, months after installing a pool, tennis court, and detached four-car garage, standing outside his house with his hands balled in his pockets as the tax sale commenced in his living room. Even those who seemed to be on the up and up were watched with the most obsessive, exacting eye, while everyone else, with an urgency we couldn't quite name, hoped at least to be *seen*.

No wonder we were soothed by any demonstration of damage outside ourselves. I only see it now: Weren't we only coming to love what might someday happen to us?

\* \* \*

I'm drinking from my Faith Seferis mug, just as I do several times a week. The ultimate irony is that the place that seemed to be held together by pins and needles is still standing after almost 40 years, undiminished by flood, hurricane, age, or neglect, both regenerating itself and falling apart at once. Though my brother has attempted to arrange the calendar's photos from examples of the heroic to the disastrous, chronicling Mystic Islands's inevitable collapse, it seems to resist a received linear narrative. Sure, it's become a little more threadbare over time, but the houses haven't changed as much as I thought they would. In all honesty, the place doesn't work its charms on me as much as it used to. Maybe it's only that I'm getting older, and it's harder and harder to feel so detached from struggle and compromise. How much different that is from when the whole world seemed to be about possibility: *what if?*

Sometimes, lying in bed, I like to imagine myself walking down the streets of Mystic Islands. It's dark, and if I'm quiet enough, over the crickets and the murmurings of the lagoons, I can hear the lighted windows talking to me: *You who think you're better, you who think the towers you're building are going to save you: If you only knew how close you are to us.*

## Dove Hunting in Mexico, 1989

My father does not kill  
because he likes death,  
but for the art of it:  
the white undersides  
against a turquoise sky  
flashing clean in the afternoon sun;  
the cry of "it's yours" from his sons;  
the solid weight of the gun;  
the element of precision  
in the decision and timing,  
the power of a moment chosen right  
from eye to hand.

He is the one in the cave  
who feels the animal  
in the curve of the walls  
and throws the stone.

And I, reluctant daughter,  
late disciple of the blood,  
find the old trance of the hunt,  
my body tensed against recoil,  
in the silver moment between sound  
and descent of stilled wings;  
I feel the kinship of the hot barrel,  
the benediction of his eyes  
as I pop the neck of the dove.

DAVID KIRBY

## Moderation Kills (Excusez-moi, Je Suis Sick as a Dog)

I'm tackling this particularly chewy piece of sushi and  
    recalling the only Japanese words I know,  
"Fugu wa kuitashii, inochi wa oshishii," meaning,  
    "I would like to eat fugu – but live!"  
which, I've read, is something Japanese executives say  
    when contemplating a particularly risky

course of action, because whereas the testes of the fugu  
    or blowfish are harmless  
yet highly prized as a virility builder, the liver,  
    which is almost identical  
in appearance to the testes, is toxic, so that  
    a less-cautious individual,

a fisherman, say, who thinks himself as skillful  
    as the chef who has actually been  
educated and licensed in the preparation of fugu,  
    might eat the wrong organ and die,  
face down in his rice bowl, chopsticks nipping  
    spasmodically at the air.

Coming in from the vegetable patch, the fisherman's wife  
    sees him cooling in the remains  
of his meal and shrieks, and I don't know  
    the Japanese for this,  
"You have eaten fugu – and died!" True, though  
    for anyone other than the new widow,

why should his death be exclaimed upon as though  
    it were a failure or defeat,  
since the fisherman had finished a good day of work  
    and was not only enjoying his tasty snack  
but also looking forward to the enhancement  
    of his powers of generation,

this being therefore a fine moment in which to expire  
    and certainly preferable to  
countless moments of life as a fumbling drooler

(since fugu testes can paralyze  
as well), a burden to his loved ones as well as  
the object of their contempt.

Then someone across the table from me says he's *heard*  
of a state of mind called boredom  
but never actually experienced it, and I wonder,  
can a mind that never sinks  
into the cold gray waters of boredom ever rise to  
the blue-and-gold heavens of ecstasy?

Then someone else shouts, "Excusez-moi, je suis sick  
as a dog!" and disappears  
laughing, but that's okay, because "ecstasy" =  
"ex stasis" = "get off the dime" =  
"fish or cut bait" = "lead, follow, or get out  
of the way," does it not?

Besides, who's to say the fisherman didn't hate  
his wife, couldn't stand her?  
And had to eat fugu testes in order to be able  
to countenance her and  
therefore is better off dead and unknowing than  
alive and fully sentient of such misery?

Or hated himself and therefore is better off dead, etc.?  
And therefore who is  
more admirable, the executive who fears death  
or the fisherman who actually dies?  
Does the former feel brave merely because  
he has *talked* of taking a risk?

Would the doughty fisherman have said "Fugu wa kuitashii,  
inochi wa oshishii" and taken pride  
in his temperance? Certainly not –  
offered the same challenge under identical  
circumstances, he'd have said, and I don't know  
the Japanese for this, either, "Moderation kills."

DEBORAH PHELPS

## Foremothers

Who was she, the first to come here?  
Married, of course. Think about it.  
No woman would come to this place  
Unless she had to, hauled in the back  
Of a wagon by a man running west  
From what he could not stand for one  
More day. Perhaps the jail in Tennessee,  
Tuscaloosa shack, or the stink of the Norfolk  
Harbor drove him here. It doesn't really matter.  
He had a lust for emptiness, a vista  
With enough problems of its own to care  
Who he used to be. Even better, this was  
A place to either be a man or die. But his wife  
Wouldn't have understood this. Not exactly.  
Her sex was always with her, swaddling her  
Dutiful hours, whispering constantly  
From the nape of her pinned hair: *be or die*.  
A woman wanting a challenge can try it  
Almost anywhere. Like a miniaturist she  
Is used to the odd corner, construing the whole  
From the part she is given. She doesn't need  
This crushing heat and the certain lack of rain  
All summer. There are ways and ways  
To prove yourself. This is not a criticism,  
Necessarily. But when death can enter so  
Blandly in the middle of dinner or a quiet bed,  
Why go looking? Be about your business.  
Just eat yesterday's stew, have the wrong child,  
Or open your finger on the letter to your  
Sister that will later be amended in another,  
Darker hand. Any daily accident will do.  
There is no need to prove this. Women are  
Women through and through.

## Spare Lake

Eerie cerulean blue oil covers Spare Lake like a film. When we oar through the water, it resists, seems to thicken as the oil spills around the paddles to reestablish the surface and fill all the spaces. Every now and then, I'll look back over the bow, thinking we're on an ordinary lake, that our boat will leave a trail of disturbed water, but they'll be nothing there, just that calm thick blue. And sometimes, overhead, the birds make mistakes too. Fooled by that strange blue, they'll dive bomb the lake, thinking its sky.

Howard insisted we get out on the lake at night, when things are at their best because you couldn't yet see them for what they are, only for what you wanted them to be. Looking at Howard, who seemed to be shriveling before my very eyes, I couldn't argue with that logic. He was dying and there seemed no point in either of us denying it. The chemo had shrunk him and taken the color out of his skin, fading him out like an old photo.

I brought him out of the VA convalescent home, a place where everything turns to salt and crumbles, to go fishing on the lake. Spare Lake is kind of a lost and found collection of cast-off prosthetics and used parts. At first it was just an overgrown swimming hole that no one claimed. Then people started dumping their spare parts and pretty soon the lake garnered a reputation. Especially since replacements are so expensive these days, doctors aren't bothering to beat around the bush anymore: if you bring in your own parts, you're guaranteed to get in and out of surgery faster.

It was Saturday night, just minutes before Sunday, Veteran's Day. A full moon bright as a new silver dollar hung in the sky, and we pushed in right after midnight to take advantage of the night's quiet and the light of the moon to fish. We navigated our way across the lake strewn with floating debris tangled up in the reeds: walkers, canes, artificial hands, arms, eyes even, the cast-offs of every geriatric village. I wondered if some of those old folks weren't lurking down there too, like carp, and if in the reeds or the shallows, I wouldn't accidentally snag one of them on my line. Still, it was a great place to fish because no matter the lure, you usually didn't come back empty handed.

We rowed around the lake in circles, stirring up a deep pocket of hip replacements near the tip of the south end. Howard really needed some hair, and at this point, he wasn't too picky – any sort of toupee or hairpiece was fine with him and we were poling around in the reeds where I thought I'd seen a wig last season.

"Did I ever tell you the story about the traveling lampshade vendor with the flea-circus?" Howard asked me.

We were waiting on daybreak and the mist had collected over the skin of the lake, hanging low as if the lake itself was breathing. In the damp, I could feel my hip joints throbbing and below my right knee, where I used to have a leg, I could feel an imaginary ache. Ghost pains they called them in the VA ward.

"Nope."

"Want to hear it?"

"Not really." My joints hurt and I didn't feel like listening to anything but the sound of the oars pushing through the oily water and the scrape of parts against the underside of the boat and I didn't want Howard to wear himself out. Just then I saw that wig and fished it out of the water and let it drop without a sound at my feet. I hoped Howard didn't see it and that I could take it home, clean it up, and surprise him with it later.

"What was that?" Howard asked, leaning forward and squinting.

"Nothing." The trouble with Howard is that he's a full-maintenance shopper, just like my ex-wife, Eda. He needs so many parts that he can't ever focus on fishing for just one and, like some of the newer vets, he gets a little too excited when he thinks someone's finally found something good.

I kept rowing and thought about how when I was a kid I used to think that if I prayed for someone, a prayer of protection, let's say, that if I could name all of the diseases and afflictions I wished to prevent, then I could save them. So I would lie in bed at night, unable to sleep, listing every disease – real, imaged or otherwise – I could think of, determined to save the ones I loved. It never occurred to me that I would ever lose something important, as important as a leg. Praying to keep the parts I already had never occurred to me as I lay in my bed all those nights, and the fact that later, some twenty years later, I would lose my leg seemed to me a bad joke, one I was still learning how to take.

We kept fishing, each of us pretending that we didn't care if we found anything or not.

I could hear a ticking sound, like a clock or a stove-timer and I kept peering over the edge of the boat, out of habit or paranoia, I guess, because it sounded just like the measured ticks of a bomb.

"It's me." Howard pointed to his chest. His heart failed last year and since then he's been fighting with a temperamental mechanical heart.

"I swear they put a damn egg-timer in my chest," Howard said, pulling out his pair of binoculars and cleaning the lenses with his shirt.

I studied my leg, that place where my pant leg folded in over the stump. Sometimes I forget that I'm missing the entire lower half of my leg and I catch a glimpse of my incomplete limb and the shock takes me by surprise. *This can't be me*, I think. Then I touch the end of the stump, thinking I will feel something, shocked again to find that I feel nothing. In a way Howard is lucky, I think, because at least he could feel all his parts, as imperfect as they may be.

By mid-morning, there were more boats out, other vets looking for parts. As day lit up the lake, the water grew thicker, the oil stiffer, like the pricking of skin in fear. We rowed into the shallows where the rubber pointed end of a crutch got jammed up into the oarlock. I already have a pretty big collection of crutches so I let it go.

"How's it going back there?" I asked.

"It's not so bad," Howard said. His voice sounded jaded, edged in pain, and it didn't hardly sound like him. I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose with my fingers.

Then he coughed. "Aw, Hell. Forget it, Rusty."

\* \* \*

I came home that night in a mood to drink and headed straight to the freezer for the vodka. That's when I heard a muffled cough and the slide of shoes across the linoleum. I flicked the lights on. A very old man and woman, his wife, I supposed, and two little girls and an older girl, maybe in her teens, all sat around my kitchen table, plates and silverware set out.

"Who are you?" I asked, pulling out the bottle from the freezer and offering some to the old man. I decided to play it cool, pretend like I was used to these sorts of late night calls.

It was a stupid question to ask because I'd seen them many times before – in my dreams, usually – and though I didn't know their names, I knew they'd come from a tiny hamlet in Mekong: they all did, the people in my dreams. And though the features of their faces differed from dream to dream, they were all wounded in some way or another, their scars and burns in different stages of healing, and I knew that in each case, for each of these people, I was to blame. Still, I think the shock of seeing them, this family of strangers whose lives I had irreversibly crossed and ruined, standing there in my kitchen looking at me like they were mysteries for me to solve, rattled me.

The old woman, who I figured was the grandmother, or maybe even great-grandmother, hopped up from the table and nodded at me. Then she climbed up onto the countertops.

"How about some food?" She called down to me, her hands on her hips. She had a thick gash on one arm and her face and neck were one big burn. "Watcha got in here, huh?" Grandmother opened and closed each cupboard, one by one, and rifled through the canned fruit, the boxes of cereals, and my cache of pretzels. The old man and the girls drifted into the living room where I heard the snapping pop of the TV spark to life. That's when Grandma spotted the wet tangled wig weeping in the sink and she crouched to inspect it.

"Nice." She stroked the hair as if it were a live animal. "But fake," she said, tossing it over the neck of the sink faucet. She smiled at me then and I could see she was missing most of her upper teeth. She looked a little like my own grandmother who lost her molars in Dachau. Watching her carefully place her feet around the pots I'd left on the countertop and the raised burners on the range made me think she was hunting a rare animal or a word that is created and used only once for that one occasion. Finally, she found what she seemed to have been looking for: a flip-top can of pork and beans. She dropped it into her apron and jumped off the counter without a sound, flashing me that smile of my grandmother's and gliding into the living room where her husband was talking back to the sports announcers.

I followed her out into the living room, where the kids bounced up and down on my couch.

"I did it for you," I said, handing over a bag of microwave popcorn and a box of Cheerios. "I did it to save your country."

"Sure you did, Rusty." The old man said, studying the shifting patterns of light coming from the super-size TV screen. He aimed the remote control at the screen and changed the channel. It was summer and the Olympics were on. Flo-Jo was burning up the cinder track and leaving the competition somewhere beyond the scope of the TV's wide-angle screen.

"Wow," the teenaged girl gasped. "Look at those fingernails." Her own hands were burned and she hid them in her lap when she caught me looking them.

"Neat," her two little sisters breathed in unison.

"I'm sorry. Really." I could hear how the breath behind my words fell and my voice sounded thin in my own ears.

"Sure. OK," the old man said, pointing the remote control at me and pressing the buttons, as if to change the channel.

"It's OK," the grandmother said then. She was shifting her weight from one foot to the other and I thought maybe she needed to use the bathroom.

"Why are you here?"

"We brought you something," she said, producing a small cabbage from her apron pocket. The cabbage had wilted and was losing its outer leaves. "Here," she said, handing me the cabbage. "We grew this for you. It was from the last harvest." She smiled at me again, waiting for me to eat it, I supposed. Behind her, on the TV, Carl Lewis was stretching. "Still, we would have liked to have seen another day of water stiffening in the wind, or to see how the mint would come out later that summer."

"Or see the sliding light of the sun behind the fabric of sky," Grandpa said.

"Or gather Siberian Iris," one of the girls called out, without turning from the TV.

"Or have a boyfriend," the teen-aged girl said quietly, looking at her hands.

"I'm sorry," I said again and leaned heavily on my crutch. I looked at the grandmother then. Her smile was slipping a little, but her eyes were bright.

"It's OK, Rusty," she said. Then I watched as they all faded to shades of gray, until there was nothing left of them, but the remains of the popcorn and the wilting cabbage.

\* \* \*

In one of his more obscure films, Alfred Hitchcock, an avid hater of eggs, conducted an experiment in violence on film. He wanted to show that the beautiful heroine just sitting down to a breakfast of fried eggs was getting stabbed in the back without actually showing the stabbing. After several attempts, he trained the camera on the bright yolk bubble of a fried egg and when she got it, all the audience saw was her fork stabbing the

bright yolk bubble and a stream of yellow running off the plate.

Killing without violence. Dying without gore. That was how I envisioned what Howard and I were doing, up there in our F115, howling over the jungle, bending the tops of trees. I was raining down silver eggs, each of which would quietly, neatly unfold like a forbidden origami, the hunted ghost bird with a name that could only be uttered once and heard only on that one occasion.

Sometimes on a mission, I'd imagine that I was back home, dusting my grandparents' crop, taking preventative measures, purifying the land. How could I know the strength of the ways those eggs tied me to them, the people in my living room eating my Cheerios? Or the other people in my dreams, the ones who applauded me, threw their empty tins of rice, old shoes, their vegetables, then scattered with hands folded over their faces at the sound of choppers as if the sound itself could slice them as the blades did the air?

\* \* \*

I was tempted to tell Howard about the vision I had the other night. But Howard has enough troubles of his own without having to deal with my guilt and shame. It was Saturday, and we were back on the lake, at sundown this time, grubbing in the shallows where we were both hoping to get lucky. Sure, we were cheating just a little bit, but I've noticed that most people just don't pay attention anymore. Not to us, not to the water, not to the twilight, to the way the light changes, or how one color block fades out first like an old TV screen burning out, until you're left with a strange glow of pinks and reds, the colors of a new heart.

The lake surface was crushed lapis lazuli and I thought then that the blue of the lake was that of a lost memory. Brilliant, immutable, beyond language or name.

"Remember Mekong Delta?"

Howard didn't answer and I kept pulling at the oars in even strokes.

"Do you ever see them, the people I mean, in your dreams or anything?" I glanced over the side of the boat and caught Howard's reflection off the oily water and watched memory rework the shape of his face. There were tears streaming down his face, huge ones, illuminated by stars and the lights off the lake mixed with the sky.

"Nope," Howard said, but I knew it was a lie.

Above us, the stars burned in and out, and we glided in silence over the lake's dark surface, below us, I imagined, the beautiful soft whirring of machinery and artificial parts. I heard that ticking again, and stopped rowing and let the boat drift into some reeds. I turned and looked behind me, half-expecting to see the very old grandma and grandpa sitting behind me on the boat, come back for more breakfast cereal and Olympics, troubling the calm of the lake. Instead, I found Howard slumped over his knees, a thin drool as fine as any spider's thread, stringing to the bottom of the boat.

"Howard?" I pulled the oars out and let the boat drift. I wanted to get him away from the reeds. They look pretty enough, lavender tapers to the

lake's bottom. But they'd give the Coroner hell, all stuffed in and choked up like batting in Howard's lungs.

I bent Howard over the side of the boat. He looked like he was saying a prayer, the way kids look, their palms together, hands straight out, elbows locked, just before they take that terrifying plunge into the deep. *Well, I guess this is it.* I thought of all the well-intentioned prayers I had said as a kid, and thought how strange it was that now I couldn't think of a single thing to say on Howard's behalf. My only thought was that man is like lake, made of water and mud and how much I'd like to see it rain. How I'd like to see it come down and slide everything away in a great big wash, turn dirt to mud and send mud pushing the borders of the lake past the shallows where some of the best parts are rumored to lie. I'd like to see the lake flood and the lowlands surrounding it, see water flush out this entire spare-parts swamp or just cover it completely with more water. I looked at Howard, stiffening there on the side of the boat. Then I gave him a little push and he rolled right over.

It's times like these that I hate myself so much, I feel an ache thrumming in my gut. I hate myself for being the one left, the one who both makes the mess and covers it up. In my stub I felt a sharp stab and I drew a quick breath through my nose. The nurses told me to do this to manage the pain. Nothing stings quite like memory. And I decided again that Howard was the lucky one, there in the lake's deep, looking up, skyward through water, the lavender rushes gently swaying about him, above him a thousand lakes of violet turning to sky pocked with star.

I spent the rest of the night, rowing over the lake, around and around in big slow circles, wondering what it all meant: the folks in my living room, Howard, our fruitless search. In a moment of clarity I realized that I was not the kind of person who would have very many moments of clarity and for some reason, that made me feel light-hearted, like the press and crush all around me, under me, didn't really pull on me. I thought, *it's not my job to connect what's between the limb and the heart, wing and hand, mind and memory.* I leaned into the oars. I could still hear the ticking of a clock, quieter now, faded into a dull throb of a tired heart. The boat, lighter, moved over the surface of the lake in gentle glides. I rubbed my eyes, and rowed to shore, wondering what I would tell Howard's ex-wife.

## Smokers

Smokers leave the best tips –  
so says my friend Mary  
who's spent ten years balancing trays  
and studying the impulses of men.  
And what's more they never  
complain about the food;  
they don't send back the escargot;  
the red meat is never too bloody  
for their taste.

While the prudent huddle  
in the smoke-free section  
inhaling caution in gulps,  
the smokers signal Mary for  
another round of martinis  
scattering ash  
with every flick of the wrist.  
Heedless of the mountain  
of grey dust they have left  
in their wake,  
the darkness that has entered  
their lungs,  
they have given up trying to hoard  
their days, attempting  
to number their breaths.  
And in the end,  
they open their wallets freely  
and wink at my friend Mary,  
as they amble into the darkness  
leaving behind a starkly empty table,  
the ash  
of their reckless generosity.



and graceless, abject stubbornness pressed to decide.

The junkie – a woman named Noni I've only talked with once,  
whose habits and boyfriend force her to turn tricks –

has asked an orderly for a light.

I like the way the ball's release and cigarette's removal from her lips  
are one motion, her deft handling of

awkward transitions, how she exhales and  
rebounds an errant shot, fires again,

two hand jumper, this one

kissing

the rim, swirling through before the long drag's  
prompt reward.

What could I say

that would help her walk out

next time she's ordered to sell herself

for a nickel bag?

"Begin at the beginning" Dylan intones,

the Caedmun recording I bought

bringing back the play's smokelit opening night,

a few months before his death.

Words can't save us

though I walked off court, however tongue-tied,

intoxicated

by the slap and surge of slow vowels.

This must be the boyfriend,

long sleeved on a sweltering day,

come to take Noni on pass.

Let him tell Noni

one too many times

*you'll never be anything  
but a strung-out whore.*

Let him break

her nose again, if that's what it takes.

Too long I've fought against

becoming one thing or the other:

all right damnit, force us to choose.

## An Interview with Alan Hollinghurst

*Editor's Note: Alan Hollinghurst was born in 1954. He read English at Magdalen College, Oxford, and subsequently taught there and at University College London. He is the author of three novels: The Swimming-Pool Library (1988), The Folding Star (1994), and The Spell (1998). He has been deputy editor of The Times Literary Supplement. He was selected by Granta as one of the Best of Young British Novelists 1993. The Folding Star won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and was shortlisted for the 1994 Booker Prize. In the fall of 1998 he was a visiting professor at The University of Houston. The following conversation took place at the Roy Cullen Building in Houston, Texas on December 12, 1998.*

Gee: I wanted to ask you if you could comment on the progress of your work. I see things changing, moving from what some critics have called the groundbreaking work of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, and then describing *The Folding Star* as a gay Lolita. But of course, *The Spell* is very different. Can you tell me about the changes?

Hollinghurst: I know my work has changed. It's very hard to keep a clear sense of what your own earlier things are like. There are bits I occasionally look at for a reading or something, but I haven't read *The Swimming-Pool Library* for eight years, and as with any book that I read some time ago, I've forgotten a lot of it. But when I do look at it I feel pleased with something uncomplicated about it. It has that sort of first-book lack of circumspection, whereas there's something much more involved and complex about *The Folding Star*, which is such an introspective book. *The Swimming-Pool Library* has dark undertones, but it's about people having fun. It was partly to ironize such appetites that I chose to write a third person book which is much more transparent and lighter in tone and texture. I think that of course one's life view changes subtly over a period of ten or fifteen years. Although I'm not quite aware of it at the time, afterwards it always seems to me that my books have reflected my state of mind in particular ways. Although I'd been thinking about it before, *The Swimming-Pool Library* very much grew out of the time when I moved to London in 1981, after having lived in Oxford for nine years. I had a great sense of expansion in having arrived in a great city, knowing that from then on I was going to be a Londoner. Part of the impulse of the book was to write a love song to London itself, as well as to portray all sorts of much less loveable things, about English attitudes to class and race and other questions. And I think perhaps that *The Folding Star* grew out of a period when I did become very inverted and depressed. I don't think I realized until years later that the book crystallizes something about that, just as *The Spell* more consciously,

grows out of the time after I turned forty, which I had been rather dreading. But in fact my life suddenly picked up. I felt much happier, gave up my job, started having fun, in a way which I don't think I had for a long time, and I knew soon afterwards that I wanted to write a book about pleasure. So I can see that literary changes in the books probably reflect a number of personal things of which I'm not fully aware.

Gee: Can I ask you about – in terms of representation of gay life – what you choose to write about?

Hollinghurst: Yes.

Gee: Some writers like David Leavitt are branching away, choosing to write about the mothers of gay men or their families, whereas I read one article that describes your writing of *The Spell* as always writing about a quartet or tribe or exclusively populating your fiction with gay men.

Hollinghurst: Yes. Well, that was sort of a device with *The Swimming-Pool Library*. But actually the fact that there weren't any female characters who were ever as it were onstage was something I didn't quite design to start with; and then after about fifty pages or so I thought, there's something funny about this book. Then I took a decision in a slightly whimsical way, that there actually wouldn't be any female characters. There are times when you think a female character is going to appear, that Will's sister is going to come round. But then at the last moment she sends her husband. You never actually meet any females. I'm not, of course, saying that this entirely male world is an absolutely realistic representation of gay life.

Gee: Oh, no. That's not what I meant. I meant more so that many gay writers will choose largely to write about very specific facets of a world, or themes – such as AIDS. How do you make your choices?

Hollinghurst: There certainly are questions which you have to decide whether you're going to tackle or not. Leavitt seemed to keep writing coming-out stories for a long time, which is a subject which never really interested me. I wanted from the start to write books which were based on the presupposition of the gayness of the narrator and their world and which took that for granted. The AIDS crisis I have written about only very obliquely. I didn't really know how to write about it in a way that would satisfy me artistically. It's a difficult thing to be presented with. Things have changed so much in recent years, but the storyline used to be: someone's well, then they get ill, then they get more ill, and then they die. And the medical story, and its pathos seemed to present me with various things I didn't know how to work with to my own satisfaction. I think I slightly resist being given a subject or the sense that I have an obligation to write about a subject. In *The Folding Star* I have the device of the person who is dying of AIDS actually being killed in a car crash, which I suppose is a sort of conceit to show that I know this huge question affects the world that I am writing about, but that I have chosen not to write about it directly.

Gee: I saw the same thing in terms of the way one of the characters is arrested in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, and there is anti-gay violence, but you tend to stay with the storyline of your characters. Their personal lives.

Hollinghurst: Yes. I write about what I'm most interested in. Although people don't ask anymore, they used to ask me why I didn't write about AIDS more. I think there is a lot of good AIDS writing in some of Edmund White's stories. Adam Mars Jones co-wrote a book of AIDS stories with Edmund years ago called *A Darker Proof*. They were interesting and successful because, being short stories they could focus on some small detail that implied a larger world of suffering and loss. I think it's a fairly difficult thing to treat over the extended length of a novel. So how do I choose, to come back to your question. I suppose the heart of *The Swimming-Pool Library* lay, in a way, in a thesis I wrote at Oxford, which was about gay writers of the generation of E.M. Forster, L.P. Hartley, Ronald Firbank, writers who couldn't write openly about their own sexuality, and about the ways they concealed and also covertly expressed their sexuality in their fiction, and about what happened when these constraints were removed. And often in their cases it seemed to result in work that was artistically far less interesting once the constraints were taken away. From this I think I took the idea of juxtaposing the life of someone who was living very uninhibitedly in the present with the story of someone who has lived under quite different conditions. I was fascinated by talking on the one hand about appetite and how deeply driven by their lusts and appetites people are, and on the other about the sublimations of those lusts and appetites.

Gee: Once you write that breakthrough novel, and you continue to write in that vein, wanting to write openly, does it change? For instance, in *The Spell*, I see different concerns, since the characters are older and they want more than to just be open.

Hollinghurst: That's right. It is a book about lusts and appetites, but within a context of some desire for stability. I see it as a book about change, really. It starts out looking as if it's going to be a book about one problem, which is Robin's sexuality. But actually, as with life itself, it turns out to be about something slightly different. It's about how the characters attempt to embrace or resist change: the changes that are forced on you as you get older. I've always liked that play of generations – all my books have relationships, often sexual ones, between people of different generations. I'm not sure why that is, but I see it as a feature which becomes more formalized in the pattern of this book.

Gee: Where do you see yourself as a writer in terms of craft? I'm speaking of how some writers prioritize plot, or how they think of their strength as lyricism. What draws you most to fiction?

Hollinghurst: I never thought of myself as being terribly good at plot. I would start off with vague images, and they would slowly coalesce, and a

world would build up around implied relationships, and characters would begin to take on substance. Plot is the thing that emerges last of all for me. I'm aware that both my first two books have odd plots, since they're both about people who really don't do anything, people who hang around and waste time, who are lost in their own inner worlds of desires and obsessions, and into whose lives is thrust some quite complicated thing which has happened in the past. They rather resent being presented with all this apparently alien material from other people's life stories. And of course I hope some sort of synthesis between the two histories takes place. I was perhaps more self-conscious from a formal point of view in *The Spell*. I wanted to write something, the form of which grew out of the subject more purely, to write a book without all these historical parallels, a book which is just a study of the relationships between four people. I wanted it to be formally cleaner and purer than the other books. I like describing behavior. Actually, one of the other things which gives me the most pleasure in writing is describing things. I love trying to evoke what things look and sound and smell like. Those are the sorts of things I most often jot down in my notebook. I hoard all these details which I then try to find a place for in a book. That's the reason I think I could never write a play, because that's precisely the sort of stuff you can't have in a play. I think some people regard the different elements of a book as being more separate than I do, and they say someone can't do dialogue, or he's not very good at description. But I actually think of them all as being aspects of the same thing.

Gee: I brought up plot because it seems evident in your first two books that there are things that arise that we don't know about but that are crucial to events. For instance, Lord Beckwith is hiding that it's Will's grandfather who was responsible for his being arrested.

Hollinghurst: I think I've become a little bit wary of that idea, the kind of Dickensian idea that the resolution of a novel should turn on the revelation of a secret. You implant a secret, and wait to the end to make sense of things by disclosing it. Once you know the secret, though, it loses its potency. It's a quite common plot device. I wanted to get away from that. I know that in both of the first two novels, there's a lot of plot resolution just before the end, and then they each have a coda which leaves other things more open ended. *The Spell* moves away from that pattern.

Gee: I read one review in *The Irish Times* that spoke of *The Spell* as uncrusading unlike your first two books. Would you like to talk back to that interview? This comes back a little to what we were speaking about before, but do you think there's a perceived responsibility for a gay writer?

Hollinghurst: I very much resist that, and I don't think in terms of responsibility to anything but my imagination. But I suspect my first book has a "message" in a way that the other two don't. Part of the thing about the secrets and so on of *The Swimming-Pool Library* is that the book has a pattern, which is slowly revealed, of oppressions, one which is still going

on today for instance, when James is arrested by the pretty policeman. I hope it opens up a picture of what gay life had been like. The pattern of oppression is matched by one of creativity: Firbank, Forster, Benjamin Britten. The AIDS epidemic in Britain broke in 1984, when an old friend of mine died – he was one of the earliest group of people who died of it in England; and there began the ghastly and well documented period of anti-gay backlash, that was precipitated and licensed by the fact that this so called gay plague had arrived. So I felt more inclined to depict gay sexuality uninhibitedly at a time when everybody was sort of being pressured to deny it or give it up altogether. I think there was a political impetus to that in a way. But I've never thought of anything I've written as being campaigning. And then I think nonetheless that it may have that effect on readers sometimes, and that there may be something exciting or liberating about reading a book which expresses things close to your life that you haven't seen written about before. So there may be some sort of inadvertent campaigning going on; but I've certainly never written to make sexual-political points. Edmund White commented on *The Spell* in *The Guardian* that there was something sort of bold about carrying on writing books all about gay men when other people are so doggedly writing about heterosexual relationships.

Gee: The review in *The Irish Times* was really favorable.

Hollinghurst: Yes, but I actually hadn't seen the book in those terms myself, so it is perhaps another instance of people taking your work in ways that you might not have anticipated. To me *The Spell* just grew naturally as the story of these four men, which might have incidental interest as social commentary, but I suppose seen in a different context it may appear to have some sort of campaigning point or to be subversive in ways I hadn't thought of.

Gee: I've read comparisons of you and Edmund White and Iris Murdoch. Can you comment about influences?

Hollinghurst: Edmund had quite a big effect on me because he wrote so honestly about himself and about himself behaving badly. There was something self-accusatory, especially about the earlier books – in his extraordinarily baroque orchidaceous prose, he paints a rather unsparing picture of himself and human relations. I think that interested and excited me. Some people say there's a lot of Iris Murdoch in *The Spell*. I had a period as an undergraduate when I was crazy about her work, but now I haven't read anything by her probably for twenty years. I remember being very excited by the emotional intensity of her books, the way everyone was madly in love with everyone else, the dense web of amorous relationships. I think it's very hard to talk about influences. Influences are usually more apparent to readers than they are to authors themselves. I've never tried to write like somebody. I suppose the writers I most revere are Nabokov and Henry James and Proust. What I love about them in part is the example of their understanding and intelligence, which is itself a kind of

encouragement and liberation. I don't think I've ever tried to write like any one of them. I try to shut other voices out when I'm writing.

Gee: I notice that often when writers write as much about sexuality as they do, they don't write about their families of origin. Can you comment about that?

Hollinghurst: That's interesting. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, the writer's family is deliberately put out of view, but it gets its revenge when the grandfather figure is revealed as a kind of monster from the past. There's more about domestic life in *The Folding Star*. There's the central episode set in England, which is in part an elegy for Edward's father. But I guess the social pattern in general in my work is of gay men going away from their families to find relationships which don't conform with normal family expectations and stereotypes. There is the obvious idea that the sexual adventure will take the characters away, that it's not easily integrated into conventional life. I suppose in *The Spell* you see more of someone trying to set up a domestic life. Relationships are pretty fragile in all the books, really. I wanted to depict in *The Spell*, people at least attempting to make longer lasting or more deep rooted relationships.

Gee: After writing your first two novels in first person, was the shift to the third novel written in the third person difficult?

Hollinghurst: It was harder than I expected. I felt I had to write those two books in the first person because the point of view was essential to the books themselves, and they were partly about the ignorance and the mindset of their narrators, as revealed in the process of narration. But I did feel technically trapped at times, as well as appreciating the things the first person frees you to do. I think there's a sort of stylistic, not extravagance, exactly, but richness, particularly to the *The Folding Star*, which you can get away with if you're following the arabesques of your narrator's thoughts. You can't nearly so easily do that if you're writing in the third person and you're not depicting an essentially subjective world. So you have these freedoms in the first person, as I was saying, but you also feel technically trapped, because there's all this information that you can't bring into the narrator's sphere of knowledge. There were times while writing *The Folding Star* when I longed to be able to dart back to 1910 or 1944 and to describe events then directly rather than having to filter them through some device such as a journal or one of the characters telling a story. So being able to move around from person to person and place to place in *The Spell* was liberating. But I found it harder than I'd expected. It turned out in general to be a process of clarifying and discarding, and I think it resulted in a clearer style. There are little problems, such as pronouns. If one of the people in any scene is "I", it sometimes clarifies what's going on. But if you have a scene with three men, you have to keep using their names because you can easily confuse the characters. There are lots of tiny but actually rather irritating technical questions like that. I'd always imagined the third person was the simple way to write, but it took me a while to understand what its constraints were. I'm still a little uncertain about the book I'm

thinking about at the moment. I can see parts that demand to be in the first person, but then again, I don't want to be in that first person trap.

Gee: I've read how you were a poet and an editor at *The Times Literary Supplement*. What brought you to fiction?

Hollinghurst: Well, I was always writing novels since I was about fifteen or so. But when you're young, your ideas change so quickly, and it takes such a long time to write anything, that all of my earlier novels I just grew out of. It was so difficult early on to write to the end, or find one that was worth sticking with. I've abandoned four. Some at quite early stages. I had always written poetry, as well. I thought that if I was going to be any kind of writer I was going to be a poet. I had one or two published in magazines. I was in a series Faber publishes called "Poetry Introduction" where they publish work by people who previously haven't had a book out, and they have first refusal on your first collection. To my immense surprise they said they did want to publish my collection, although I hadn't finished it, and I signed the contract. I think it was in 1985. It seemed to completely paralyze my poetry writing faculty. I've hardly written a poem since, so I'm in the position of having an unfulfilled contract with Faber. Maybe there's a connection to why I don't write short stories. Any ideas I have are hoarded up, and I tend to see them in the context of some larger structure. But I don't feel that I've completely left the poem writing business behind. When I'm writing a scene or a paragraph, it's in a way like writing a poem and getting the music and the rhythm of it right, and the imagery. And I'm interested in coordinating a novel with patterns of imagery. But I can't now at all recapture the mental experience of writing a poem, as such.

Gee: Do you have any desire to write memoir?

Hollinghurst: I quite often think of how I would write about my parents or particular friendships or relationships that have been important to me, and it's quite fascinating to consider how you would crystallize your feelings about, say, people you've known all your life. People who have been very close to you, people who have died. I've never quite followed it through to the point of wanting to do it. I know people have started writing memoirs recently at early ages, but I'll probably write one of those very dull memoirs when I'm completely forgotten, and very old. Actually, I don't think I'm likely to do it.

Gee: Are you at work on another novel now?

Hollinghurst: I'm still thinking about it. I don't like to start writing until I have a clear sense of the shape and movement of the whole thing. I can see certain parts of it, and I know what kind of book it's going to be, but the whole thing's not quite clear enough to me yet. I hope I'll start writing it next spring. But I always have quite long fallow periods, hardly thinking about it, and then there are lovely moments when something just clicks, and you see what the relationships are between things that had seemed

disparate before.

Gee: Someone was discussing how you write about collisions of certain worlds, such as in *The Spell* when Alex takes E's in a club scene, and his character is new to that experience.

Hollinghurst: Yes. It became clear to me in my first book that if I was going to write about sex or the prominence of sex in some peoples' lives, then the language of sex would have to be incorporated into the text in perhaps slightly unusual ways. The collisions keep happening, I find that quite fun. It's become sort of second nature to me. There's a high and low of things, not just for the sake of juxtaposing them, but to suggest that they're both integral parts of the same thing. A gay novel, or a book about gay experience, had tended to be either a rather guarded and oblique thing, or it was pornography, and this division seemed to me to do some violence to the way that life is actually lived. I wanted sexuality to be seen as an essential thread running through everything that was happening in a person's life. There was an attempt to break down that barrier and mix everything up together. I like living between different worlds myself. To a novelist it's fascinating and nutritious to be able to move between different people with different ethos and understandings.

Gee: Do you have any interest in examining race more because I notice that your main characters have black lovers?

Hollinghurst: Well, intuitively, I do. It was obviously an element in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, and in *The Folding Star* I think I don't make any issue at all about Edward having a Moroccan lover. I think again, as with the treatment of sexuality, I wanted it to be something that was just taken for granted. *The Swimming-Pool Library* is much more a book about Britain, and it's very difficult to write about contemporary British life without writing about questions of class and race, although I think questions of race seemed much more pressing in the late seventies and the early eighties, when there were race riots all over Britain.

Gee: Less so now?

Hollinghurst: Much less, I think. I'm not saying that Britain is some sort of multi-racial paradise, but there has been a perceptible shift, as there has in attitudes towards homosexuality: it's partly a generational thing. I know it's easy to get this wrong if you speak from or live in the metropolis, and that the experience of people who live in remote provincial towns, say, would, of course, be different as regards both gay people and people of different color. There are certainly lots of things that are becoming more and more successfully integrated. I know terrible things still go on, and classic divisions between a black laboring class and an Asian shopkeeping class still persist. Let's get back to whether I'm going to write about it more.

I feel it less pressing as a fictional subject somehow. Personally I've always tended to be very emotionally involved with black people and have had several black boyfriends. I think particularly in the first book I wanted to look at the question of how such personal experience could be interpreted in political terms, which it very evidently isn't by Will. He doesn't go in for that kind of thing at all, but I hope the reader may; there are obviously all sorts of ironies which go over Will's head.

Gee: What are the things gay fiction should do that it's not doing now, and what is there you wish fiction would do these days?

Hollinghurst: Fiction does a hell of a lot, doesn't it? I don't read quite enough of it to know what it's not doing, I think. I think there's a genre of the American gay novel which is all about cooking and wine and style and a kind of snobbish reverence for Europe, and I find that slightly depressing. And there's a lot of gay genre fiction which honestly I don't read, some of which might be quite good. I'm oddly unattracted to gay fiction in general.

Gee: In England as well?

Hollinghurst: Yes. For a long time, gay fiction was American fiction, you know, so that I felt to some extent when I wrote *The Swimming-Pool Library* that I was doing something as it were novel. We had Edmund White, and we could have Tennessee Williams, but there was very very little in England, so rather as I was doing in that thesis I wrote, I found myself revering increasingly remote gay ancestors like Forster, or Isherwood, though of course he had gone to live in America. Homosexuality hadn't been very much explored as a subject in English fiction. So there seemed to be still absolutely everything to do. But again, things have changed a lot over the last ten years. There has been a proliferation of writing about it. This is one reason I suppose why a lot of gay writers are now turning toward more conventional fiction and subjects. I've never thought about it actually as schematically as that. As I say, my books sort of come to me. I don't actively make a decision to tackle a particular subject. The book I'm thinking of writing next does seem to have some prominent heterosexual characters in it, to a degree that my books never have done before.

Gee: Oh, no. The common people?

Hollinghurst: Yes! I like making jokes from the gay point of view which illustrate the mutual incomprehension of straight and gay, and which sometimes rattle the heterosexual reader. It seems a funny way to me of turning the tables. I suspect the profile of some things as being distinctively gay will diminish as time goes past. Like many people I have mixed feelings about identity and integration, about wanting being gay to remain a peculiar thing and at the same wanting the peculiar thing to be generally accepted. I have the feeling I'm always going to write about that peculiar thing, though. It's one of the things I've been given, and I think it's going

to carry on interesting me to explore it, to work it out as I get older and the world changes, to work out what it means.

Gee: A lifetime of work.

Hollinghurst: Yes.

## Luxury

Soon the lily-white suburbs will leave nothing  
for the plough, swimming pools will flood  
oceans of grain, and ancient oaks  
fall for the Oaks Mall.

Then birds of paradise and lavender roses  
will perfume manicured beds of mulch  
where a farmer once harvested  
a few acres of apples.

Then we'll have Briarwood  
where a thicket stood. Under Washington  
or Jefferson the tattered flag  
meant liberty or life.

They were content with slave plantations;  
the great ideal was common government.  
No private citizen built a Taj Mahal  
on the shores of New Jersey;

no law allowed the rich to clearcut native forest.  
Like the steel baron Carnegie, they should  
have built libraries, or wasted marble  
on something to believe in, like God.

(Book 2, Ode 15)

## Muskrats

The muskrats rose  
in traps those mornings, a miracle  
before the neighborhood trappers  
pulled their hairy skins off.

Slopping through the ditch,  
dawn a dim light across low houses,  
each boy yanked his trap line  
like a line of old virtues.

The muskrats nosed  
through black salty underbrush  
below the ever-expanding cemetery.  
Perpetual rest in perpetual uproar!

A yellow backhoe jerked and grumbled,  
clawing the glacial rock  
like a tyrannosaur, soon out of work.  
The new graves grew no headstones,

just brass plates screwed into concrete,  
where at night young crickets sawed  
their untuned, cheerful music.  
That icy summer cicadas clambered

from their seventeen-year graves.  
The frontier was closing again.  
Each boy tended his leg traps,  
then washed blood from his hands

and shouldered books for school.  
The fresh pelts lay piled  
in each garage, unreconciled,  
just one more *rite de passage*,

like Michelangelo offering  
his own flayed, beaten skin  
to the disbelieving cardinal in *The Last Judgment*.  
Such savageries, too, were soon forgotten.

## At Our Backs

Births were nothing new in New Hope,  
the only surprise being the high school Prom Queen  
who *wasn't* pregnant. It was, after all, *birth*,  
not its barren opposite swinging from the hip  
brass knuckles to connect with precarious jawbones,  
delicate facial structures collapsing with windshields,  
roofs squashed beneath the eighteen-wheeler milk tanker  
backing across the county road at 4:00 a.m.,  
the driver and the dairy farmer frozen  
in the Chevy's headlights topping the hill at 90,  
the three Friday-night football heroes  
in the front seat, squeezed together.

It was not the speed boat revved to bursting  
like a rodeo bronc in its chute,  
the engine slammed into gear, a projectile  
screaming from the dock, the daredevil driver  
acknowledging only a slight bump, a hesitation  
bisecting the Sophomore Class Favorites in their rented rowboat.  
And it wasn't the Future Farmer of America  
who sold his calf and bought a bus ticket to Dallas  
for three nights in a hotel on Deep Ellum  
before lying to the Marine recruiter and joining up  
to be incinerated on a hill north of Da Nang.  
We passed, each day, his blown-up, framed yearbook photo  
hanging beside the trophy case.

It was the prayed-for climax of sock hops.  
Last dance, we squeezed our teen angel tight  
and ebbed and flowed like the tide we'd never seen  
in North East Texas but felt rising  
to crest and crash and tug us back where we started  
in fathers' Fords and Chevys, dying again and again  
until we parted.

## Underwear and Other Hard-to-Swallow Things

I have bad eyesight. I turn schoolgirls into homely, long-haired men; I make rats out of Dachshunds, and graveyards out of patches of clear-cut forest. People who look through my glasses blink, squeeze their eyes shut, and say "Geez, Lucy." I like this, I can't help it. Mostly because I work at the library, where a strong glasses prescription is like a war decoration. My lenses are thick, and scratched so badly they numb and lighten the shapes that pass through them. When I go running with Honey, my golden retriever, she looks like she has a halo around her.

Bad eyesight: so maybe I didn't really see that name on the e-mail list, I'm thinking. The name I thought I saw. But I know I did.

After I get the e-mail I take Honey running. We run fast; we are strong, fierce, crazy wild women. I have a smoker's lungs, and Honey isn't a speedy dog, but we do our best. On the way back she brings me something: a stick, I think, but then hair scratches against my fingers, and my thumb finds something wet. A deer leg, that's what it is. Honey pants at me. *Let's go*, she says. *Throw it*. So I do. It'll be a good story.

A good story for Jim, my boyfriend, who doesn't deserve any stories, who's been sending e-mails he shouldn't.

But of course I tell it to him anyway. That night, when he comes home, I pour two glasses of wine. The tumblers look like they were made for better things than our little kitchen in Marshall, Colorado, and Jim seems the same way – he's too ironed-looking against the crooked linoleum. Neat. But he does seem at home. His feet are on the table, and his mouth is curved up in a way that my friend Wendy calls a smirk. It's a look I love, though: you can tell something fun is going on inside his head.

The wine is red and vinegary. Jim scrunches his nose, although his mouth is still smiling. "From Chile," he says, reading the label. "Aged in the finest oak. Huh."

Honey gives him a steamy pant, as if she wants a taste.

"There's beer in the fridge," I say.

He glances at me, and I think maybe I've been too eager. We've been living together for a year, since just after we started going out, and sometimes I think we should've waited.

"This is fine," he says.

Outside the mountains are washed in gray. Honey strains toward the window, as if she's sniffing for more animal parts, or for elk turds, which she likes to eat. I launch into the tale of the deer leg, making it as grisly as possible. Tendons coming out, I say. Blood and hair. And Honey – gnashing her teeth, galloping away, holding it like a trophy. As I'm talking Jim leans toward her, makes kissy noises. I pause. Should I tell him about

how I threw the leg, even after I knew what it was? In the past he's laughed at stories in which I'm featured this way, blind, groping things, later sardonic and rolling my eyes at myself. But then I remember the e-mail.

Jokes, they were. Supposed to make me laugh.

*Why can't Helen Keller drive? Because she's a woman.*

Why didn't I just delete it? I'd seen it before. Why did I look at the recipient list? I get a pitty feeling in my stomach. I'm wimping out, I think.

I say, "About that e-mail you sent me -"

Jim looks at me. Honey looks at me. *Yes?*

"I have bad eyesight," I say. "I feel some solidarity with Helen Keller."

"Oh, right, Luce," he says, starting to laugh. "Don't pull this. You're hardly blind."

"No," I say. "I guess I'm not blind."

He smiles, thinking we're joking. He pushes his chair up on its back legs and balances. With the chair tilted his feet don't touch the floor.

"Or at least, not that blind," he says. He holds up a hand. "How many fingers?"

"Stop it," I say.

Already I'm feeling better. I love that Jim doesn't act all cautious about my bad eyesight. If I'm truly lost, if I can't find people at a party, he'll steer me around with his fingers on my elbow. But otherwise he just makes fun of me, like he is now. He picks up the wine bottle with his free hand.

"I didn't know they made wine in Chile," he says.

"Quite a lot."

There's a silence.

"Santiago," I say. "That's the capitol. Santiago. Like that old man in the Hemingway book, except the town isn't on the sea."

Honey looks at me, panting, then looks away. *Whatever*, she seems to be saying. *Don't embarrass me*. But he doesn't even answer. He just stares, his blue eyes blinking.

"Iago means James in Spanish," he says.

It does? I think. How did I not know that? Elena would have known. But then I have a thought that is much, much worse: he knows *because* of Elena. He took German in high school, after all, like me. Not Spanish.

*Fahrvergnügen*. I mean, isn't that what we all want out of life? German seems a better language. An arsenal of Legos that you block together, with millions of pieces, so that you get whole intellectual concepts neatly rolled up into one: ta-da! Monsterword. Ex.: *Weltanschauung*. *Zeitgeist*. And you get honesty, that blunt brutality that's so German. *Schadenfreude*: hearing your boyfriend's ex-girlfriend has been thrown out like yesterday's garbage; learning that she's had her heart broken.

And Spanish - what does it have to offer? All it brings to mind is irritating high school classmates, girls who walked around in mini-skirts with their arms around each others' shoulders. *Hola! Hey, chiquita!* Leaving notes in bubble script on their friends' lockers. They were the ones who took Spanish. And then there were the girls who didn't need to take it, the girls with big smiles and bigger teeth named Elena, who knew

Spanish since the time they were born, the girls who didn't stay away from the boys they'd discarded.

The next day I get another e-mail, and once again E.garcia is among the recipients. E.garcia@getlost.com, I think. E.garcia@screwyou.net. But it's her – sanitized, scrubbed, but definitely her. I see her again, her teeth, her balloon hips, the wings of black hair. I am suddenly all wrong: too pale, too smoker-skinny, with arms that are as thin and hard as monkey bars on a jungle gym.

I take the dog for another run, and she brings back the same leg.

"You don't learn," I tell her.

She smiles. *Do you?*

When we get home I call my friend Wendy, who comes over, bringing her two-year-old. She stands in my doorway, blowing thick brown bangs out of her face, holding her son across her stomach like a load of firewood. He's kicking to get at the dog. Wendy looks sturdy, like she can take care of all of us, and for a second I think it'll be okay.

"Am I supposed to give advice in this situation?" she says, as she comes in. "Tell me I'm not supposed to give advice."

"I want advice," I tell her.

"Well, I'm not giving it," she says, putting Charlie down. "I've screwed up things too much to be giving any kind of advice."

"It doesn't work like that," I say. "Anyone's entitled to give advice. Fuck-ups first." But this sounds like she's the fuck-up, so I say, "Like me. Here's some advice, Charlie. Share your toys, don't let your dog eat poop, and don't fuck anyone over. It's that simple."

Charlie's a drooler. He looks at me, a strand connecting his mouth to his fly, and drools again, so that a newer, faster bead threads down toward his pants.

She shakes off her ski jacket and settles onto the couch.

"Did I tell you what Jeff did?" she asks. Jeff is Charlie's father. "You know he owes me like three thousand dollars?" She looks at me, nodding. "So I call information, call him, and find out from his answering machine he's living with some woman. So I start leaving a message, telling him I need some of the money, and he picks up in the middle and, get this, he starts yelling at *me*. Calling me a bitch for getting after him."

It takes me a minute to understand that she's turned the conversation to her, but when I do I'm right there with her. Jeff hasn't paid alimony in a year.

"What?" I say. "You're kidding."

She blows her bangs.

"Yeah. Can you believe that?"

Her voice is heavy, disgusted, but I know better than to say the things I want to say – *what about court? what about selling the ring?* No one wants to hear questions like that. *Are you really going to let yourself be mistreated this way?*

So we don't give advice. We sit on the couch smoking, and Charlie chases Honey, who gives me a bleak look. *If I weren't a golden retriever, she says, I'd do something about this.* I pat her head on one of her rounds, and

that's too much. She stops, lets Charlie maul her, presses her head into my lap.

A little while later Charlie starts to smell, and Wendy scoops him up and asks if she can use the kitchen table.

"Sure," I say. It's an old table, brown plastic made to look like wood, with strange green shapes that are somewhere between stars and Celtic crosses. "I can't think of anything I care less about," I tell her, hoping my nonchalance will spread. "Use it all you want."

Wendy hoists Charlie up onto it and opens up a quilted bag with blue elephants and pink ducks on it, the kind of thing that would make a lot of women start cooing. I don't, since I only go desperate over men. She undresses Charlie. He wears cloth diapers, with polka-dotted undies that go over them – environmental, Wendy says, but she has to scrape the used ones into the toilet and I don't see how she does it. It smells stronger and Charlie's face twitches, as if he's about to cry. His tiny pink penis points straight in the air.

And then it happens. The dog swoops down, going straight for the chair Charlie's clothes are on, and she grabs his little underwear and heads out the kitchen door. For a second we just stare after her. Then I'm moving, yelling.

"Honey!" I say. "Drop it. *Honey!*"

I run after her and she picks up the pace. Soon we're on our way upstairs, her blond butt bobbing two steps in front of me. The hair on her back legs flaps gracefully, her behind stares at me. When I reach the top of the steps, I see her head for the bedroom, and her jaws are working like crazy. We run around the bed, then she gets up *on* the bed and scrambles across it. My feet are pounding on the carpet and I'm yelling.

"*Bad Honey! Bad Honey!*"

But she makes it, swings out the door. Her jaws are still moving but I don't see the underwear. Her instincts are wrong this time – she heads for the bathroom – but just as I've got her cornered, she plunges through my arms and into the hall. Then it's back to the bedroom. Finally I grab her collar. She's making gulpy noises. The underwear's nowhere in sight. I look around the bed, then yank her back to the bathroom, but it's gone. She retches as I haul her downstairs.

Charlie's running around the kitchen, excited to be so suddenly naked. His pants have been moved to the table.

Wendy blinks. "Where is it?"

"I, uh." I pause. "She ate it."

"What!" She stares at me, then begins to laugh. "Shit, Lucy. Are you sure?"

"Mm-hm. I wish I weren't."

"Well," Wendy says, like she has no idea what she's going to say next. "I'm sorry," is what comes out. I start laughing.

"You're sorry? My dog eats your kid's underwear and you're sorry?"

"I shouldn't have left it on the chair," she insists, more sure of herself now, of her duty to apologize. "I should've known she could get them."

"My God. Don't do this."

"No, Honey might be hurt. You should call the vet."

"I will," I say, "but if something's wrong with her it's her own stupid

fault. What kind of dog would eat underwear?"

Honey pants at us. Wendy has a crease between her eyebrows like a plumb line, thin and straight and delicate, but what she doesn't have is an answer for me. She runs a hand through her bangs.

"Maybe I'll donate you to a medical research lab," I tell Honey. She sniffs and looks away.

I call the vet in Boulder. He says Honey should be fine, but that I should take her in just to be sure. When I tell Wendy everything's okay she sighs.

"All right," she says. "If you're positive."

"Look. She'll be fine. The dog's not the one we need to worry about."

"Yeah," she says, thumbing a loose thread on the elephant-duck bag. After a minute she says, "A woman! On his answering machine. Can you believe it?"

The vet is a young man, maybe younger than I am, sandy-haired with eyes that are clear and pretty like a girl's. He does not seem surprised at Honey, but then this is Boulder, and people probably bring in golden retrievers that are strung out on acid. He writes up a ticket with Honey's stats: her color is buff, her sex is female, her patient ID number is 34555. Under "reason for visit" he writes, "Underware Consumption." He is a kind man, if a bad speller: under "prognosis" he writes, "All will be well with Honey."

Which is more than I could say for both of us. Where was his composition teacher in college? And me: here's the reason that I'm stuck, the reason I can't face the singles world again.

The vet takes Honey's temperature, and she gets a funny look when he sticks the thermometer in her butt. She tries to scoot forward on the examination table.

He strokes her back. "Cats sometimes purr. Strange, isn't it?"

"Masochism," I say. "It happens to the best of us."

He gives me a bland smile that tells me he hasn't the slightest idea what I'm talking about, and he doesn't care. Honey's temperature is fine, so he gives her some Kaopectate. After some gulping and some panicky looks (*what what is going on?*) she coughs up a slimy polka-dotted rag.

"You want it?" he says.

Is he crazy? "Um, no, I guess not," I say, and he puts the underwear in a clear plastic bag, ties the mouth, and leaves it on the examination table. It looks like used toilet paper. I have trouble not looking at it, and trouble not gagging when I do. Honey is unperturbed; she smiles and pants.

When the vet hands me the ticket, I see he's wearing a ring.

So tonight I've got a good story, a great story, *the dog ate the kid's underwear, can you fucking believe it*, but there's a problem. The question is, do I whore myself by telling it to him, by trying to be funny (if I can just be funny *enough*, I think) in spite of E.garcia?

The answer: I do.

But at least this time he's appreciative. He's amazed first: isn't it too big? (No.) How did she get it down? (While she was running around, with

her eyes slanty and crazed.) Is she going to be okay? (Apparently.)

After I finish he laughs and lifts up Honey's front paws. They begin a dance, a tango. He moves her back and forth, and they actually look like a couple, the neatly dressed blond man and the startled dog. When he puts her down she starts inspecting her hindquarters, as if she's still expecting the underwear to come out.

"What a weirdo," he says, leaning down to scratch her ears. Then he comes around behind me, puts his hands on the crease between my hips and thighs, palms flat and angled down. That decides it: how can I say anything? He kisses my neck, trolling around the nape with his lips, his tongue edging toward my hair, soft and wet. Soon we move to the bed, him holding my arms down and moving toward me as if from a great height, only his lips touching mine, everything else high up, teasing, holding back, until I'm almost crazy and then finally he comes to me, presses down into me and jams his tongue in my mouth.

Afterwards we lie under the sheets, not bothering to put our underwear back on, and he traces words on my back. *Hi beautiful. Hi baby.* Honey wanders in, and I see her orange head bobbing down near our feet.

"That dog," he says. She moves closer and looks at us, her eyes unsettled.

"Maybe we should get our underwear," I say.

He laughs. Honey looks alarmed, unsure. Suddenly she begins to flip toward her tail, twitching, first this way, then that. Snatch. Snatch. She spins in circles and bonks into the mattress.

"Stop!" Jim says. "Stop it this instant, Honey."

She's hitting the bed hard enough to shake us, so hard that the ringer on the alarm lets out a *ting* of protest.

"Chasing your tail is such a cliché," Jim tells her.

She pauses, out of breath, and pants at him.

I give her a kiss. "You think you still have those undies?" I say. "You doing a wash cycle? Getting them all cleaned up for Charlie?"

Jim giggles, and flops down on his back, his bare chest looking up at me. "I just can't believe she ate *underwear*," he says. "I'm going to syndicate that and send it over e-mail. It's too perfect."

The word "e-mail" makes me edgy, and for a minute I debate. I reach over and put my underwear and jeans back on. Honey looks at me owlishly. After I've got a T-shirt over my head I turn to Jim.

"Why is Elena on your e-mail list?" I say. My voice is surprisingly normal, the voice I use for helping people at the library. But Jim gives a little jolt, and his eyes go gray. He's sitting up, naked under the sheets.

"What?" he says.

"Elena," I say. It's strange to say the name out loud.

His feet kick under the sheets. "Luce. . . ."

I wait. He looks like a boy, I think: small, serious, smooth-skinned.

"We're just friends," he says finally.

I look at him. "Friends?" I say.

"Yes," he says stubbornly. "She's a good friend of mine."

I laugh, not very nicely, and move to the edge of the bed. He looks annoyed.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I thought she was the one who devastated you. I seem to remember your using that word."

His face goes dark, and he moves his knees in toward himself. He's quiet for a minute.

"I was upset," he says finally. "I think she could've handled it better, I know, but so could I."

I laugh again, and it hangs in the air, high and disbelieving.

"Right," I say. "The *Mr. Rogers* school of break-ups."

He shakes his head. His face has that stubborn set again, and he looks at me with something close to hate. It's startling, heart-breaking. *He hates me*. It's amazing how fast things have turned around.

I should be outraged, I know, but instead I just feel sick. It's okay, I say to him silently. I don't like myself either.

"Okay, well," I say. "What about what happened before?"

"I knew you were going to bring that up," he says, sounding disgusted. "Why is it so hard for you to let me be friends with an ex-girlfriend?"

"Because," I say. "You kissed her after you were with me."

*Kissed*. It hangs in the air, a lie, an easier word, and, not the word I should've said.

"Once," he says. His toes are making little white tents out of the sheet. "Once. And I told you about it."

I nod. I know most guys wouldn't have said anything. Most guys wouldn't have said anything, and maybe that would've been the smart thing to do. Because now he can't keep me from remembering.

"I never said I wasn't going to be friends with her," he says.

"But why do you *need* to be friends with her?"

"I don't," he says, and I know he's lying. "I just don't like you limiting who I can see."

"Are you trying to make me crazy?" I say, talking to the bedspread.

He shakes his head. "No."

"You aren't."

"No." His voice has gone quiet too, and I have a prickly thought: he understands about craziness. It doesn't make me happy, but it gives me some leverage.

"Then stop," I blurt out. "Don't see her anymore. Don't. I don't care how smart she is, I'm smarter. Okay? I'm better for you - I'm - I'm -"

What the hell am I doing? Screwing myself, it seems, but I can't stop.

"She's not that great," I say. "When I first met her? I remember her from that, and at that point I was totally objective, because I didn't like you yet, okay? And she had bad breath, coffee-breath. You know what else? She mixed up a few of her words. You can say that's because she's bilingual or whatever you're going to say, but she *mixed them up*. Okay? Look at Nabokov. He was like quadrilingual and he never mixed anything up -"

He has his hand on my arm. The only reason I'm still talking is because I don't know I've gone way too far.

"Stop, Lucy," he says. "Stop." His chest presses into my shoulder.

Finally I do. He doesn't say what he could say: *you're being like this* is

*only going to ruin us.* But I can feel it, and I know, no matter how shitty he's been, that it's true. It's me that is ruining us, not just him. I could be acting better, rising above the mire of suspicion and jealousy, preparing to move on. But some part of me can't; some part of me wants to stay right here, wants to be desperate and miserable and angry.

The next morning, I tell Wendy about this conversation. She doesn't tell me I've misplayed my hand by sleeping with him first; she just hisses at the right times, and pushes swaths of hair behind her ears.

"What I like least," I tell her, "are the little unexpected jolts. You know? Every time I meet someone named Elena or Ellen. Every time I hear the word 'Guatemala.' Every time someone mentions the Dead, since that makes me think of Jerry Garcia, which makes me think of her."

"Maybe you should think of Joyce instead," Wendy says.

"Huh?"

"*The Dead.* Joyce."

"No," I say. "All chains go back to her. If I think of Joyce, then I think of Irish people, then I think of people discriminating against the Irish in the old days, and then I think about current discrimination and Hispanics and then her."

She blinks, then laughs. "Hm," she says. "That one seems a little – tenuous. Maybe we could work out a better path. Something thematic."

"I don't need a path," I say. "I don't even really think of her anymore, I just think of how I'm *going* to think of her and I start feeling shitty."

"I know," she says, suddenly gloomy. "The short-circuit route. You think I got it easy? I get it every time my kid smiles. Babies look like their fathers the first few years, it's a biological fact. Charlie looks so much like Jeff sometimes it kills me." She shakes her head. "It's some kind of evolutionary thing, to make the dads know their kids are theirs and stick around. Lot that worked, huh, Charlie?"

He smiles at her.

"Stop it," she says.

His smile wavers, and he looks worried.

"Oh baby," she says, stroking his cheek with her thumb. "I didn't mean it."

She scoops him up. I get a whiff of poop, and then he's on her legs, stomach bared in a basketball of white skin, and she's tickling him. When she puts him down his mouth is shiny with drool.

"Again!" he says.

She shakes her head. His face crumples, then contorts in rage. But Honey chooses that moment to walk in front of him, and so he pitches off after her.

"He's into repetition," she tells me.

"Ah," I say. "I know how that goes."

She looks at me, not understanding.

"Like this," I tell her. "You're boyfriend is obsessed with another woman. Okay. Now your boyfriend is obsessed with another woman *again.*"

She has that faint line between her brows again. *Don't do this*, it seems

to say. Maybe she's right. I'm turning into someone I don't really like.

The e-mails stop. This of course is to be expected, and doesn't prove anything. I am still on the hunt. I am still suspicious. But a week later I have a good run, where Honey and I go buzzing through the woods with the snow crunching and humming under our feet. Not only does she not find any deer parts, but she even keeps up with me, which is rare. She's barrel-stomached and has arthritis, and besides that she hasn't been eating well the last couple of days. But nevertheless we cruise, and I'm feeling good, good enough so that when I start thinking about those e-mails, I don't get depressed. I get mad.

A friend of his? A *good* friend?

That night I'm feisty, dancing around the apartment while Honey looks on with alarm. It's my turn to make dinner, and I fix tacos with jalapeños and extra spicy salsa. When Jim sees them, he gets the dent in his nose.

"I thought you didn't like Mexican food," he says.

"I don't," I say. "Too strong, too unobtrusive. I prefer French."

He looks at me, unsure.

"But I know you have an appreciation for Spanish cultures," I say. "A passionate one. Don't you, sweetie?"

He closes his eyes as I say this. When I finish he clears his throat, and says, very clearly: "Screw you, Lucy."

The smell of jalapeños and onions cuts through the air, itching my nose.

"Sorry," I say. And suddenly I am. Jim shakes his head, and then his shoulders slump. We stand there in the kitchen like two old grandparents. Outside, in the blue night, snow has begun to fall. It comes down in big, compound flakes that settle on the pine trees, and I know that this should've been an evening for a fire, for hot cider. It should've been different.

Jim puts a hand on my shoulders.

"Most people," he says, "have about a coffee cup of acid in their stomach. I think you have about a gallon."

"I'm all spleen," I say. "But maybe you're making me that way."

"Seriously, Luce," he says. "Why are you so bitter?"

I shrug. The stench of onions clogs the room.

"Why was Helen Keller bitter?" I say.

Later I try this out on Wendy. "It would just be so much easier," I say, "to be a man. I saw this nature special, on crocodiles. Their sex is determined by temperature. If the eggs are lying around in hot weather, like above ninety, they're all male, but if it's below eighty-eight then they're all female."

Her eyes widen. "Really?"

"Yeah," I say. "Wouldn't it be great? Just get put in an incubator when you're born, and double your chances in life."

She laughs. Wendy usually laughs at what I say, and it heartens me – like I may actually be funny after all, that it's just Jim who doesn't see it

anymore. Then she says, "I used to think that, until I had Charlie. But it's not all one-way." She pauses. "For instance," she says, "baby boys are more likely to be abused. Their breathing systems aren't developed when they're born, so they cry more, and then their parents hit them."

I frown, looking at Charlie's egg-shaped head. He drools at me. I try to look away but can't.

"No one's talking about babies," I say.

"Well I'm just saying. I'm sure there are some men who don't have it easy either."

I close my eyes.

"Dean's been a jerk," she says. "I'm not trying to pretend he hasn't."

"Good."

"But Lucy. . . look at what he gave me. It's not all black-and-white."

I open my eyes. Charlie blinks at us, his eyelashes wet and beautiful. But I feel suddenly savage: *what will you be when you grow up?* I think.

But his wet, murky eyes remind me of someone else, and I see Jim back when we were just friends, before we started going out. The afternoon he'd come over to my apartment and stumbled over the story of Elena breaking up with him, how he'd had to blink away tears.

And I was there, wasn't I? I was there to listen, to stroke, to be the good friend. To wait until he turned to me. It wasn't long until the night we ended up on the couch and I could feel his heart drumming against mine like a rabbit's.

Foolish, maybe. A little too quick.

But still, how can't it be real? What about all those moments? Like this: on Main Street, pushing each other into snowdrifts; outside a bar, giggling, after we'd been kicked out for setting our sambucas on fire with my cigarette lighter; under the sheets, when he'd made noises on top of me, he who was always so quiet.

And other times too: the night Honey swallowed the condom. The evening we went for a walk in the wet snow, so that by time we took our socks off our feet were as hard and white as peeled apples. After that we were so cold we got into bed to warm up, and I lay on top of him, and we stayed like that for a long time and didn't do anything.

What about all that?

I grow bigger, more confident, because there's no room for confusion behind moments like these. Elena seems suddenly impossible: a nuisance, a pest. After all, he asked me out before he even met her, didn't he? I even said no; back then I wasn't interested. He'd liked me for years, friends have told me, they've *said* so.

I am the one he loves. I'm sure of this, because I don't understand yet how other moments can stay with you. So I tell myself I'm sure. What were our times otherwise, the sambucas, the swirling snow, my jokes that I worked so hard on? I am the one. I am it.

But of course at the same time I'm being eaten alive. *He still likes her.* I don't know how it's happened, and I get the feeling that he'd change it if he could. I try this out: sympathy. He's being acted upon by outside forces, externalities. I don't quite get it.

Honey is still only eating about half her dinner, which I take as a gesture of loyalty. I empty the trash can in secret, because all those Kleenex seem like a bad sign.

And then one afternoon it happens. I come home from the library to find Honey trotting around, excited, doing a goose step. On the kitchen floor is something that looks purplish and wet and shiny, like the mashed-up skin of an eggplant.

It's underwear. I know before I even look at it.

I pick it up, and it's underwear all right. Made for someone with wide hips, but skimpy, with string sides, which is probably why Honey could get it down. She sniffs it as if she, too, is seeing it for the first time.

The washing instructions are in Spanish.

I start laughing, because there's nothing else I can do, I laugh and throw myself on the bed, then curl up into a ball. When did this happen? My afternoon shift at the library? When Wendy and I were shopping last weekend, as we'd been combing through the bargain bins of children's shoes?

How could he *here*?

Honey wanders into the bedroom, to see what the noises I'm making are about. I reach for her and hold her while I bawl. She burps at me, and then yawns, her tongue spiraling like the tail of a sea horse. But she seems patient, quiet, all right with being suddenly relied upon like this. My girl, I think.

After an hour I feel a little better. I have a plan. It always helps to have a plan. I turn it back and forth in my head: crazy yes, stupid no.

Just friends, I think. That's what he said.

I mean, I have to do *something*.

I wait three days, until the night of Jim's office party. "A nice restaurant," he tells me, so I wear filmy black pants and a silk blouse. He himself has on a suit, and he's carrying himself in the way that short, good-looking men often do, with his chest slightly puffed.

Get ready, I think. You get ready.

The restaurant turns out to be perfect. Smooth cherry tables, amber lighting, bottles of oil with leaves floating in them. The dining room is packed, and our table is so jammed together it's hard to eat without jostling elbows. Jim's friends talk in low voices about the partners at their firm, about a man who was fired and had to be escorted out by security.

During the main course, I lean over and cup my hand around Jim's ear.

"I'm wearing edible underwear," I say.

He's chewing an artichoke heart. He smiles, his cheek full, but he looks like he's had a sudden twinge of nausea.

"Wanna see?" I whisper.

"Here?" he asks. But I've already turned toward him. I pull down the waist of my pants, enough to reveal a snatch of purple. He stares at them, then looks up at me. His eyes are like pebbles.

"Those aren't edible," he says.

"No."

He looks at me, so stupidly that I laugh.

"No," I say again. "But Honey ate them."

He blinks. "You're wearing underwear that – that was in a dog's stomach?"

I nod. He swallows.

"That's nothing," I say quietly. "I'm wearing *her* underwear."

His mouth dangles open. People across from us are laughing about Monica Lewinsky, making jokes in jovial, self-satisfied tones. A busboy edges by with a round tray.

After a minute Jim gives a hollow laugh. "You're pretty amazing," he says. "I hope you washed them."

*Amazing.* I know he doesn't mean it as a compliment, but my skin begins to tingle. He's going to remember this.

"You dick," I say. "You total dick."

He's looking at his water glass.

I shake my head. "You really don't have anything to say, do you?"

"No," he says. He sinks his gaze further into his glass. "I'm sorry. She didn't say she'd lost them."

She probably likes walking around with no panties, I think. A trashy Mexican tramp. But I can't do this; I don't even know her.

"I'd like to blame her," I say. "I hate her, of course. But I can't really can't blame her, can I? There's only one person I can really blame."

He looks at me, the ridge in his nose deepening. He swallows.

"You were too nice," he says finally.

I stare at him. "Too nice?"

"Yes. I'm not trying to blame this on you, but you were."

What? I think. What about the Mexican dinner? What about how I yelled at him after last time?

"I don't know that I was so nice," I say, my voice tight.

"Okay," he says. "You weren't." He pauses, looking back at his water glass. "But you didn't leave."

So I should've left, I think. So he wanted me to leave. He *wanted* to fuck it up, to finish it, and he never told me.

But he's right, I should've left. I can't think about it. My head begins to itch.

"Come here," I say.

He turns his head further toward me, not understanding – and that's it, I'm winding up, and my hand hits his face, *crack*. It's a solid hit, a loud one, one I can be proud of for years to come – and will be, it turns out – one that rattles through the whole restaurant.

His hand goes to his face and he gapes.

It's quiet. The whole restaurant, quiet. The clink of wine glasses and silverware stops, the Monica conversation dribbles off, and people turn to stare without making a sound. Our waiter falters by the door to the kitchen. The room seems to float.

I can't quite believe it. I've hit the mark, slapped him as hard and loud as anyone could've (and thank God, for what if I'd missed?) but I'm in shock, I can't follow through. It's Jim who seems to know what to do.

He's up, pushing back his chair and yanking me toward the door.

Finally, when we're almost out of the room, I snap to. "He deserved it," I tell everyone. Their eyes are huge, their faces like a sea of starving children. "He's screwing this Spanish girl. I know you think I'm crazy, but it's true."

"Lucy!" His voice is furious.

He gives my wrist a yank and we're out the door, through the lobby and out into the cold, my heels skating on the ice. I steady myself against the wall while he paces up and down the sidewalk outside the restaurant, shaking his head. Then he realizes the people inside can see him. He pulls me around to the back of the building, near the service entrance. The light is orange and there's a sour smell coming from a dumpster.

"What did you just do?" he says. "What the hell did you just do, Lucy?"

I blink. He can be mad this quickly, when it took me so long?

"You deserved it," I say. At least he jolts when I say this. But I then see his face, rigid, unloving. "You did," I say. "After everything we went through over her."

He strides up and down, his mouth moving but no words coming out.

I laugh, and it sounds evil. "What is this," I say, "the James Watt dating plan? Try a Hispanic, try a blind person? Now you just need a Jew and a cripple."

He jolts again, and licks his lips.

"Are you crazy?" he says. "Have you just completely lost it?"

"I'm just saying," I say. "If you're going for the marginalization factor, I think I win. There are more Hispanics than blind people."

"You're not blind!" he says, almost shouting. He's in shock. I don't think I've ever seen anyone this obviously in shock before: his mouth gaping, his eyes wide and blinking fast. *I hate him*. He can't grasp it. When he moves away from me he grows light and fuzzy, but then he strides back, trying to say something but not getting it out.

There are so many comebacks I imagine he'll think of later: *Yeah, you're marginalized all right*. Blind and crazy! But he's not thinking of them now. He can't. He's just pacing, staring, aghast. I've got the upper hand: I've been rehearsing this conversation..

"Are you crazy?" he says again, and his voice sounds like it's about to break. He's thinking of his humiliation, not me, I know. Of the eyes looking at him, of the tongues wagging. But the part of me that still cares hurts to see it, hurts to see his face so naked and surprised like this.

"Yes, I am," I say. I push back my shoulders – it's a marvel, I've kept my head – and start walking away.

He moves his things out of the apartment, but later I find reminders. His German-English dictionary, an empty box of condoms in the drawer of the bedside table. An extra condom free, the box advertises: 13 vs. 12. So when was the extra time? I wonder. I hear myself asking him this, in a voice laced with sarcasm. Was it the time you wrote *hi beautiful* on my back, or the time Honey fished it out of the trash afterward and made us gag? Which one was the freebie?

But I have no one to say this to, no one to hear my jokes. Which is probably good. I am getting snappier and angrier and more bitter and less

funny, spinning out of control. My wastebasket brims with tissues, my curtains are drawn, and Honey goes unwalked. She whines, stares at me, pants in my face: *Can't we go now? Come on, let's go!* But I'm holed up, just me and my righteousness. It's not always unpleasurable, although it is miserable.

*How could he?*

I try to map the recovery time-line: is it a sine wave, an exponential function? But it can't be plotted. When I think I've reached a minimum it turns out I'm still falling. Finally I just pretend to feel better. I act like things besides Jim matter, things like Kosovo and Iraq; but really I've never been interested in politics, only in politicizing my own life, and now even that seems fruitless. I notice beautiful men in an abstract way that depresses me more than anything else.

Three months go by. I start dating another man, but it ends quickly. With him I'm determined not to be too nice, and as it turns out I'm not nice at all. I'm bothered by the lack of guilt I feel over this. Maybe Jim never felt as bad as I imagined, either. I can appreciate my hypocrisy, but I can't seem to do anything about it. I make myself think of the new boyfriend sometimes, and how I've wronged him, but it doesn't seem real.

I can still be amazed, though. I'd thought I was past it, past thinking that anything about love could surprise me. But I'm amazed one afternoon when Wendy comes over crying. Jeff has been killed in a car crash.

Wendy is devastated. Her tears are loud and messy, her eyes so swollen that the contours of her face have changed. It's fascinating, grotesque: she looks like a fiend, a slab-faced Buddha. Her bangs are still thick and healthy-looking, awful to see with her face. She sits at my kitchen table, letting the tissues fall to the floor like leaves. Charlie runs around the room, pounding the floor so that the toaster shakes.

"It's just that I'm never going to know now," Wendy says. Her nose is raw from Kleenex burn. "I'll never know if we were going to work things out, you know? If he was going to come back."

Jeff has been killed along with the woman who was on his answering machine. When was he coming back? I think.

But what I say is: "Yeah, I know what you mean."

Charlie stops running and eats a cigarette butt, which we both pretend not to see. Who cares, right now? Wendy puts her head on the fake-wood table and sobs. She cries with total abandon, long, siren-like wails that wrack her body. Her feet kick against the linoleum.

I get a chill, even though it's summer and the kitchen is warm. Because of Jeff, who's suddenly gone – Jeff who was probably eating eggs this morning, having no idea that by this afternoon his only legacy to the world would be Charlie running around eating cigarettes. But the shiver comes even more from Wendy, because I know, looking at her shaking back, that I'm seeing one of those moments when somebody's life is changing forever.

Charlie runs into her knee. I reach for him, but he's gotten heavy now, and he squirms off my legs and goes back to her.

"You've got Charlie," I say.

Her voice goes tight. "Yes," she says, looking up at him. She lets out a shaky breath that makes her bangs flutter. "Oh God. Yes. What would I do without Charlie."

After they leave, I think about what I would've felt if it'd been Jim. More often I've thought about the inverse possibility: what if I were killed in a crash, would he come to my funeral, give a choked speech about not waiting until it's too late? The romance of this strikes me as savage and beautiful, but I'm a realistic kind of girl, and it seems unlikely. I wouldn't break down at the funeral of the man I have just wronged, so I can't expect more of Jim. And if Jim were to die? But for me he is dead already. I see him around town sometimes, and my heart thumps, but afterwards it's like it didn't happen, like our story was finished long ago. So I think: no. It wouldn't be the same as Wendy and Jeff.

It's not until later that I'll understand that you can still feel bad, sorry, long after you thought yourself capable of it. It'll happen when I move to a new apartment, one that allows smokers but not pets. I'll give Honey to my parents until I can find a new place.

But Honey's old now, her kidneys aren't good, and she won't make it. The last I see of her is at the airport, her face looking out of the cage as she moves down the conveyor belt. *What's going on?* she says. *Where on earth am I going?* Her brown eyes look sad and I almost take her back, almost tell them to stop the belt right then and there. But how can I? I've signed the lease. "You're coming back," I call after her, "it's just for a while." Her cage moves behind the rubber strip curtains and she disappears.

A month later I get a call from my parents: she isn't doing too well. She can't walk up the front steps, so he's built her a plywood ramp. He tells me she thumps her tail when I say hello over the phone. But the next day he calls again. His voice is heavy, hesitant, and then he tells me. He had to put her to sleep, her kidneys failed on her. It was quick and he didn't have time to wait.

That call is short.

Later, when I'm feeling better, we talk for longer, and make a few jokes: he still takes her for walks, he just puts the little pewter urn in his pocket. And there is, absurdly, frequent flier mileage to be gotten out of the deal, since Honey won't be using her return leg to come back to me. We laugh at this, say I'll have to go to Jamaica or the Virgin Islands. But it's half-hearted, because we're trying to be flip and ironic about a very unironic dog. I look at the tag he sends back to me, nicked and dull from her years of licking it. *My name is Honey*, it says. And then there is the line beneath it, the *I belong to* line, which I can't read right now. It's too blurry through my glasses.

This is it: I can be nice to my next dog, and I am. I can be a better person, and I try. But I'll never get the chance back to be nice to her. She thinks I left her, and I did.

So maybe Wendy was right. Maybe Jeff did have regrets. Maybe Jim has them once in a while. All you can do is hope, which I still do. Honey hasn't changed that.

I'll be nicer, I think. To the new dog, to the next boyfriend.

I look at Wendy and then at Charlie, who's even bigger now, who likes to play Nerf football with my new dog. And I think: maybe I'll get another chance, another Charlie, another Honey. The new dog and I are trying.

But I keep calling her Honey by accident – I forget, I forget that she's not the same one, and I think I'm going to screw it up again. The old moments will get in the way of the new. Because in my mind I'm still seeing her, the first one. I can't help it. I see her as she used to be on our runs, when she was depressed and lagging behind, how when I turned around and said *let's go* she'd perk up and then charge off in the other direction, bouncy, as if this time she was really going to keep up.

## Luis Jimenez

*Artisans sometimes choose to live, and strictly operate, within a very special world defined by very special boundaries that are self-imposed. They do not set out to discover these worlds; they appear to be born within them. As they mature and develop, the shape and character of their environment, accepted or adapted, increasingly appears to strengthen and sustain them technically as well as philosophically. When we read, inspect, or listen to their work we enter into their domain far more than they do into ours. This, it seems to me, is always so.*

David McCord

Within the body of these next few pages is an overview which primarily focuses on the drawings and prints of the artist, Luis Jimenez. The article begins and ends with brief stories of how I came to know and write about the artist. These narratives seem an appropriate way to open up a conversation about Luis, since it is through the collective accounting of a few stories about his artistic career that one can gain some insight into the artist and his work. History is a series of recorded narratives that one is either actively involved in or just passively observing. Once, Luis over the course of a few days allowed me to be involved in one of his stories. He gave me a brief glimpse into the way that he lives, works and creates. Luis' work informs its audience and speaks for itself in its own way, but it often keeps secret the history of its creation. Only the creator knows the origins of a work of art and what inspired its conception. On occasion, Luis exposes the shape and character of his environment to the audience and allows the observer to see the technical and philosophical beginnings of the work. His hands-on approach, in relation to the world in which he lives, exposes a little of the type of person that he is. Let the story begin.

Several years ago, in the middle of December, I left Houston to visit Luis at his studio. Luis had given me an open-ended invitation to come and tour the place where he worked and lived, so off I went. At the time, Houston was hot and humid, so the higher elevations and cooler temperatures of New Mexico were inviting. Crossing the desert of west Texas, the sun stayed high and hot, but as the blue sky of New Mexico came into view, the air turned dry and chilly. The trip to the Jimenez household in Hondo was filled with beauty and went without incident. When I arrived at the door of Luis' studio he gave me a firm handshake and warm smile and within minutes was showing me around his work space and talking about his work. The hills and fields surrounding the

studio space are overwhelmingly beautiful, and it appeared that life could not get much better than this.

Luis' studio is the gymnasium of an old WPA school, complete with a grand high ceiling and remnants of the foul shot lines of the basketball court still visible in the floor. As we looked at the work, I asked Luis about a sculpture that was sitting on a small lot in the town of Roswell, New Mexico. The town is best known to most people for its history of being the supposed visitation sight of UFOs. As Luis began explaining the particulars of the sculpture I'd seen in Roswell, he paused briefly, and suddenly remembered that he needed to pick up a sculpture from a museum in Taos and get it ready for another show. Cutting short the discussion of the Roswell sculpture, Luis explained to me that the artwork in Taos was a *Border Crossing* piece that was about fifteen feet tall. The piece was hard to handle alone so he would need some help to get it on his truck.

It seems an amazing fact, that in the contemporary art world where artists often are not even involved in the construction of their own work, that an artist of Luis' stature would still be toting his own work around. Luis told several stories of arriving and setting up his work within hours of a gallery or museum opening. As the accounts of his stories unfolded, they explained the necessity of his working processes. He said that quite often he was completing the work within days of it needing to be delivered and installed in a show. So, for him, precious time for finishing the work was gained by removing the shipper/middleman from the process and loading and driving the work to the show in person. Many of the stories that Luis told of moving his work from state to state were at times funny and on occasion exciting. Now, Luis was giving me a chance to be part of the ever-continuing adventure that is part of his artistic career. This was to be an undertaking that became less of an effort and more of an unforgettable event for all involved.

\* \* \*

Luis, his two sons Adan and Orion, and I started out early the next morning for Taos. It was a cool day but the sun was out and it looked like a great day for a trip, but that was soon to change. About halfway to our destination, it started to snow and we began to see cars with fair accumulations of precipitation on their hoods. At one point as the falling snow got heavier, Luis stopped at an intersection in the road and began to question the sanity of continuing on. He explained that we were over halfway to Taos. We seemed to be at a point of no return. We would likely encounter the snow either way we went. We pressed on. As we restarted, the trip into Taos seemed uneventful with only the occasional road closing to change our course. Then, as the truck slipped sporadically and the snow continued to fall, the tension in the truck's cab mounted. Luis' hands were tightly grasping the steering wheel as he arched his back and kept his eyes forward, never deviating from the road, until his youngest son Orion began reading jokes from a thick book. The stress

broke as we all chuckled and Luis sat back in his seat a little. As the truck pushed onward, his son's voice rose out of the back seat again and asked, "Why did the chicken lay disheveled in the middle of the road? Because he had gotten tired."

Finally, we drove out of the storm and when we arrived at our destination it was a fairly nice day. As the truck passed the town line, Luis realized that he was not exactly sure where we needed to go, but was feeling fairly confident. He explained that he'd forgotten the street name, but he would remember it when he saw it. The next several minutes were spent driving around until Luis, true to his words, recognized the street. Wasting no time, he drove down the narrow road which passed by the front of the Taos Museum and positioned the truck so that the process of loading the sculpture could begin. Backing the truck up into a narrow driveway, Luis placed the back bed parallel with the sculpture so that he could utilize a small crane hoist in the effort of loading the large figures. The moving of the sculpture was going well as Luis, the veteran of many sculpture moves, directed the action to avoid unnecessary activity.

The sculpture itself is comprised of two pieces. The cast fiberglass portion depicts a man carrying a woman with an infant in her arms across the Rio Grande. His back is bent from the strain. The colorfully painted figures stand proudly on top of a large welded steel base that constitute the bottom portion of the sculpture. By nightfall we had already loaded the fiberglass section and were in the process of tying onto the remaining steel base when the temperature began dropping rapidly and it started to snow quite hard. The storm we had driven through had caught up to us. We stopped for a moment and looked at the streetlight at the end of the narrow alley. It appeared to be beautifully encased in fog. The snow was like a thick, heavy blanket and seemed to mute the sounds of the town that surrounded us. It brought to mind Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening": "The only other sound's the sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake."

After a few minor inconveniences like getting very wet and cold and then managing to freeze our hands to the plate steel, stuck to the massive base with a glue that could only be dissolved with a mix of warm breath and heavy puffing, we got some lifting straps around the base. As the crane began to carry the pedestal into the air, a light in an upper room of the building behind us came on and just as suddenly went off. Stopping the base in mid flight, Luis looked at the light, and then looked back at the base. "I guess someone's home. I don't know, maybe not," Luis said. He grabbed a corner of the pedestal and went back to work.

Just about the time that Luis finished tightening the last hold-down strap on the base, locking it to the bed of the truck, the silence of the snowy night was broken. A young Taos policeman, looking very scared and with his hand strategically placed on his gun, called to us. He explained, with a loud but somewhat tentative voice, that he was an officer of the law and ordered us to put our hands in the air and not to move. A gruesome picture quickly developed in my mind of Luis and I being shot and tumbling off the bed of the

truck face first. We would hit the icy driveway and slide down its gradual slope to the feet of the waiting officer as he blew the smoke from the end of his revolver. Luis, on the other hand, was obviously not sharing this paranoia. Thinking quite clearly, he began to speaking to the young officer in a calm and very soothing voice that brought on a feeling of assurance. As Luis spoke, the atmosphere calmed, and we knew that everything was going to turn out O.K. Neither Luis nor I were going to take the unwanted trip to the bottom of the driveway. Within a few minutes, Luis had convinced the officer that we were not in the process of stealing the sculpture and that he was actually the creator and owner.

In just a matter of moments, Luis and the officer were in the middle of friendly conversation. As they talked, the policeman explained that he was not going to be able to let us go until the director of the Museum arrived. The director, our liberator, showed up a few moments later and verified Luis as the owner of the sculpture. The situation was resolved without harm, and everyone involved was pleased and relieved that it was over. A relaxed atmosphere settled over the crowded driveway, now filled with what appeared to be the entire Taos police force. Luis explained that he had simply forgotten to call the director and tell him that he was on his way to pick up the sculpture. The director, after receiving a call from the room upstairs, had assumed the worst – that it was being stolen.

This story illustrates that Luis is an artist who literally has his hands on every aspect of his career. There are those who would argue that a percentage of the events that make up a successful art career are outside of real control and are often left to luck. In the case of Luis Jimenez's success, it seems that the percentage left to chance is very low when compared with the amount of time and pure hard work that he expends on his art, a man who on a cold December day allowed me to participate on an adventure that also illustrates the fact that even great artistic success isn't all glitz and glamour.

As soon as we returned to Luis' studio from Taos, he immediately went to work getting prints and drawings ready to be mailed out to one of many of the shows he would do that year. For a brief period of time, I helped him sort through several large boxes of lithographs and etchings. The sheer number of different images is a testament to the work ethic of the artist. The experience of pulling back the sheet separators and seeing the prints up close was exciting and exhilarating. They looked fresh and vibrant on the clean white sheets of paper they were printed on. An education in the arts often makes students suspicious of the well-publicized artist who is usually seen in the limelight and rarely at work. Luis is an exception to what seems a rule in the contemporary art world; he always seems to be working regardless of his success. Boxes of prints, framed drawings and sculpture fill his studio. Everywhere the eyes travel, there are broad strokes of color and line coming together in number, creating the mass and forming the outline of images that when combined with confidence and poise of the creator, make up his art.

*Continued on page 73*

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LOUIS JIMENEZ



*Vato Loco Con Su Wisa*

1993

Watercolor, Colored Pencil, 90 1/2" X 52 3/8"

Courtesy the Artist



*Cholo Van*  
1997  
Lithograph, 27" X 39"  
Courtesy the Artist



*Cholo Van with Southwest Pieta*

1993

Watercolor, Colored Pencil, 48" X 71 3/4"

Courtesy the Artist



*Illegals*

1985

Lithograph, 30" X 40 1/4"

Courtesy the Artist



*Reasonable Force*  
1992  
Lithograph, 30 X 36 3/4"  
Courtesy the Artist



*Canine #12*  
1995  
Hand-Colored Lithograph, 52 1/4" X 35"  
Courtesy the Artist



*Self Portrait*

1995

Soft Ground Etching, Multi plates, 53 3/4" X 40 3/8"

Courtesy the Artist



*Esteban Jordan*  
1984  
Lithograph, 30" X 22 1/2"  
Courtesy the Artist

Since it was Luis' two-dimensional work that originally caught and continues to keep my attention, the decision to focus on the drawings and prints was easy. Over the course of many weeks of collecting and reading an innumerable amount of information about Luis, a series of questions developed that only he could answer. Some of what was written as facts and quoted as spoken by the artist did not seem to fit the characteristic qualities of his ideologies or working style. In an effort for some clarification, I called Luis and he said that much of what had been written might make for good fiction and was not necessarily true.

Throughout the history of printmaking there is a theme that is pervasive. The content of the motif shows a direct correlation between an artist's need to reach a broader audience and the use of the medium. If an artist wants his work to be accessible to a wider range of people that reaches beyond the very wealthy, the cost of production must come down. Of course, an image that is printed as a multiple does not carry the same value monetarily as the singular, unique work. The production of multiples of a single image, wood block printing, was invented in China during the T'ang Dynasty. The process was introduced to Japan during the eighth century as a way to produce inexpensive illustrations for religious charms and low-cost guide books for certain regions. During the period of the Northern Renaissance in Europe, the artist Albrecht Durer was given the title of "The people's artist" because he circulated and sold single prints which people of ordinary means could buy. In the 20th Century where mass-production seems to be at its height, the practice of printing multiple images is commonplace, but Luis Jimenez continues to use it as a tool for reaching an extensive audience.

Luis began by relating some significant facts about early events that shaped his career. An important event in his early artistic development happened when as a student he made a change in his college class schedule. Luis had gotten interested in drawing and later printmaking when he took a drawing course as an elective while in architecture school at the University of Texas.

During the semester, a professor from the art department approached him and asked, "My god, you really love to draw don't you?" The professor's statement was true; Luis really did love to draw. Soon after hearing those words pass through the lips of the instructor, he changed the focus of his studies from architecture to art. Art became his passion as he went on to finish a Bachelor of Science degree, majoring in Art and Architecture.

After graduating from college, Luis set out for Mexico because, as he explained, "Mexico was a marvelous promised land to me." He was raised in the Texas border town of El Paso. His father was originally from Mexico City and Luis' grandmother lived there when she wasn't in Los Angeles, San Diego, or El Paso.

With many relatives to visit in the area, Luis had several opportunities to travel to Mexico City as a young man. On his visits there, he was exposed to Henry Moore sculptures and paintings by Picasso and all the other great works

of art which a city of great culture can offer. Luis would then return to El Paso where, "there wasn't any art to see." Luis went on to say that if he had grown up in rural New England, New York City would have been his cultural Mecca, but, "I didn't grow up there, so Mexico City was where we went."

Some of the time Luis spent time in Mexico City after he was graduated from college was utilized sorting through that great morass of culture and diversity, with hopes that he would find his roots and use the information to inform his art. Soon after arriving in the city, Luis found his search to be disappointing and futile because, as he explains, "I arrived, somewhat quickly, at a realization that many Mexican Americans have, that culturally I am an American." He was raised literally on the border between both the Mexican and American cultures. Even though he spoke Spanish and understood the customs of the Mexican people, Luis stated, "My way of thinking was really very American." Mexico and its people were culturally foreign to Luis, and so could not provide the foundation information he was seeking. Luis left Mexico City and crossed the border back into the United States to stay, and began a different pilgrimage.

While on a journey that would take him first west and then northeast to New York City, Luis developed the philosophy for the work he would create: "I picked fiberglass as one of the mediums I wanted to work with because it was a material straight out of the popular culture and because it allowed me to reproduce three-dimensional images.

"What had happened was that I had an agenda that was based around the cultural aspects of mass production. I loved to draw, but at that time I had no way of reproducing my two-dimensional images as multiples. When I decided that it was imperative to my work that the works would be produced as multiples, I felt we had reached a point in our culture where the unique object was no longer really valued. I mean if you buy a car, let's say a Corvette, that car is probably very special to you, but how many thousands of Corvettes are there out there and worst yet, how many of them are exactly like yours?"

New York would become the site of many of Luis' first great successes as an artist, but the prints would not become a central part of his work until after his second New York show. He explained that some time after his second show with Graham Gallery, which was primarily sculpture but did include drawings, he was approached by print publisher, Sam Shore, owner of Shorewood Publishing. Shore told Luis, "I really like your drawings. Do you realize that what you're doing would transfer very easily to lithographs?"

At the time, Shore's publishing house was on Bank Street in an old building where many French printers had come to work. The print publisher asked Luis to join artists from Documenta working on prints at the Bank Street building. Luis jumped at the chance to work with another medium that could produce multiple works of art.

The image Luis chose to work on and print was one that he previously reproduced three-dimensionally, *American Dream*. Luis said, "The *American Dream* image was crucial to my career at this time." This marked the beginning

of Luis Jimenez's long and prolific relationship with print as a working medium: "So, in fact, that was how I got started working on prints. I was actually invited. It wasn't something I had ever sat down and planned out or even intended to do. I was invited to go down and make a print. It was an *American Dream* print. That was in 1972 just before I left New York for New Mexico."

The *American Dream* print is a vivid depiction of a buxom woman with long flowing hair who appears to be copulating with an automobile. The body of the woman lies under the frame and tires of a purple car, both positioned in the middle of a highway. As the woman smiles and wraps her legs around the body of the car, the road trails off around a bend seeming to drag the red, white, and blue words "American Dream" along with it. The large letters take on the semblance of the American flag. Another artist who pulls his images from the popular culture and uses them satirically in his work is Robert Indiana. He uses lettering from the billboards and highway signs such as EAT, USA, and THE AMERICAN DREAM to collage together paintings that graphically speak about American desires. Indiana's *L.O.V.E.* and Jimenez's *American Dream* prints, both in their choice of coloration and graphics, expose the truly American love of objects with which they could form insipid unions. The artists remind us that "happiness" in America is often found when we love those material things that do not love us back.

The drawings and prints would now become intertwined at the same time that he was rapidly becoming known for his public sculpture commissions. He was building vividly painted sculptures out of fiberglass, also as multiples, for public and private commissions. The drawings and prints he created became the financial backbone of his art career. Luis emphasized the importance of the two-dimensional work: "If it weren't for the drawings and prints, I don't know if I could have made it. In fact I think the first piece of work that Ivan Karp bought was either a drawing or a print." Ivan Karp, a New York art mogul who liked Luis' work, referred him to Graham Gallery. Speaking of his sculpture as compared with his drawings, Luis states, "The truth be told, for me the two-dimensional work is fun. Sometimes when I'm drawing I feel guilty because I feel I should be doing some work. The sculpture is real work."

Some of the drawings and prints would take on a level of importance that went far beyond their artistic or market value. Luis explained, with much candor, that the development of the Lowrider series of work started as a cooperative effort between he and his daughter, Elisa, who due to a divorce, saw him only in the summer. They had already built up a history of working on drawings together when she was much younger, so the possibilities for success were high. Luis had started doing collaborative work with her when she was eleven or twelve because she distrusted her ability to pick up a brush and paint, so this was a way for him to support her creative efforts. He went on to explain, "It was a way for a father who was not with his daughter all the time to find a common ground with her. I guess it was somewhat conscious on her part also."

After Luis and Elisa decided they would work together, a chance encounter with a Lowrider wedding spiked her interest so much that she asked Luis to do a series of drawings of Lowriders. This series of work, that Luis would later describe as the El Paso subject matter, turned out to be a perfect cooperative project. This was to be a truly El Paso experience because many of the cars in town were brightly colored with wide expressive paintings. The images pictured on the metallic painted bodies of the old cars acted as a springboard for the imagination of a young girl and translated well to the wide expressive strokes of Luis' drawing style. There was no lack of subject matter for the drawings. Luis' studio was at a central point in El Paso's second ward, and he said, "I was living and working in El Paso, so the subject matter was literally very close to me."

The exact location of the building was at McGoffen street, where many of the street kids hung out and could be seen at all hours of the day through the studio windows. Luis said, "Of course we knew a lot of these people, so it was a natural subject matter. We drew what we knew."

One of the greatest benefits of drawing the lowriders was to be found in the decoration that covered both the inside and outside of the vehicles. The vivid patterns that covered the lowriders broke up the mass of the object and left a lot of room for the artist and his daughter to manipulate and create new images. It would be easy to become enamored with the sheen and shine of the lowriders; they were already beautiful manifestations of art. In the beginning phases of the project, Luis said that they wanted to focus primarily on the cars themselves. "The people around and in the cars were incidental." However, as the project progressed, they realized they were missing out on a significant element in the lowrider scene – the culture that created them. So they began to shift their focus to the people who were in and around the machines: "When we started the series, the ideas and beginning drawings were basically hers, and then I would do the finished drawing over the top of those drawings. There was a lot of collaboration, as often happens in these things, and after awhile, you lose track of who came up with the idea first and just move on."

The one print that would come out of the drawings that Luis and his daughter worked on would bear the title *Rose Tattoo*. They knew the drawing as *The Lowrider Bar*. The title was a description of an old car that had a bar built into its back seat. The print is actually a close-up of a full-bodied woman in a red dress. She sits poised on the velvet-cushioned car seat as her male counterpart places his arm around her shoulders and seems to speak into her ear. The title of the drawing derives its name from the rose image tattooed on the powerful forearm of the hand that holds a drink and not the woman. Elisa's imagination gave birth to a story that placed the two people in the back of the red carpeted car, but the image of the man with his arm bent in a power pose is clearly created by Luis. Many of his drawings, prints, and sculpture depict humankind in a struggle with some aspect of life that makes the figures tense their muscles in a show of power and opposition.

Luis explained that the experience of collaborating with his daughter in El Paso fueled ideas that would appear in other drawings and prints. A print that came well after Luis and his daughter worked together, but was clearly influenced by their collaboration, is titled *Cholo With Lowrider Van*. It was the only van inspired by the *Lowrider* series, interesting in that vans are not usually turned into lowriders. It is a drawing of a van with an image painted on its side that looks remarkably like Luis' sculpture, *Southwest Pieta*, recently declared a national treasure by Hillary Clinton.

Most of the *Lowrider* prints and drawings up to this point had been pictorial stories of the people in the cars, but this print seemed to change the focus to the image on the side panel of the vehicle. The van and the painting on its side were created in unison, and the picture of the *Southwest Pieta* that embellished the shell of the van would later be the image for the sculpture. Looking at this image of the lowrider van, one can not help but see the influences of that summer when Luis and his daughter worked on their *Lowrider* project together. It would seem, at least in part, that Luis' daughter helped him find some of the roots he was looking for in Mexico. The El Paso experience, as Luis referred to it, was recorded in that brief summer union between he and his daughter Elisa.

While wandering through the images of people, places and things that the artist has chosen to commemorate in print, some illustrations stand out as departures from his normal subject matter. The image of *Reasonable Force*, the *Self Portrait* prints, and the etching titled *Trapped Coyote* can seem a little out of the ordinary. Luis described how he chose which would become a print: "I have to say that I never think, oh boy this image is going to make a really great multiple."

He explained that while he is working on an image, the subject matter is important to him personally. So, as he works out his drawing, the only audience he considers is himself because he feels the need to get the image out on paper: "Mostly, my choice of images is fueled by what I feel strongly about today; what image is strong in my brain. The *Trapped Coyote* print was drawn out on the stones and plates in one day. I drew all five runs, and they were proofed for a print demonstration for a group of printmakers in Des Moines, Iowa."

Sometimes a great image arises out of a shared need of an artist and his public. The *Trapped Coyote* print would become a multiple in the time span of a day, and for Luis was a personal success, but it would share a legacy with the *Self Portrait* print of having very little financial success.

Speaking on the different success or the lack thereof in terms of specific prints, Luis related an interesting story of a print he had wanted to do. The idea was born out of the images from the *El Paso* series of prints. The lithograph would be seen by a large national audience but was actually seen unfinished. He had wanted to do a print of an image that was created in El Paso and was going to title it *El Chico*: "I ended up doing the drawing, but I could never talk Landfall Press into letting me make it as a print." Even though Luis knew he

could not get the image reproduced, he still believed the print would have been remarkable. One day he grabbed a lithographic stone and drew out the image, which was a version of a single lowrider car, but Landfall was still not interested in the project. Ironically, when the Museum of Modern Art did a show that included many prints from the *Landfall* collection, *El Chico* was one of the images that appeared. Luis explained, still seeming somewhat disappointed, "It was a unique print. It was never editioned. At the time I don't think it was seen as something that was marketable."

When asked if his primary audience is the "Chicano working class," as was reported by *Art in America* (March 1999), Luis answered, "No, that is not correct. I may have once said it, but if this were true, I would most likely not be able to support myself as an artist." He went on to explain that most of the people he knew who fit the description of Chicano working class do not have the financial means to support an artist's career. The background material for his drawings, prints, and sculptures comes from culturally-rich sources surrounding the Chicano working class. The work is a mix of myths and images pulled from the Mexican and Anglo-American worlds in which Luis grew up and currently lives.

He began his life in the border town of El Paso, the son of a sign maker from Mexico. His father crossed the border from Mexico to the United States and became a citizen fourteen years later. Luis Jimenez is an American artist who has used his talent to explore and expose the cultural diversity of his Mexican-American background and make it accessible to all. One cannot help but see the cultural influences in Luis' work, but the images cross ethnic lines. The drawings, prints and sculptures that Luis creates are borne out of the cross-cultural heritage and vision of an American artist who constantly reminds us of what it means to live a life of substance.

Years earlier, as I stood in a small crowded room on the upper floor of what was then the ARA building at the University of Houston, the voices of fellow students filled the space, but I was not listening. At that point in time, I had become very nervous. A life-drawing class was about to begin in this room, and I was reconsidering my decision to ask the instructor if I might join the already overcrowded class. Upon hearing that Luis Jimenez was teaching the class I grabbed a fist full of pencils, a pad of paper, and the largest eraser I owned and sped off across campus. I was determined to take advantage of the opportunity to meet and receive instruction from the well-known artist. I had seen Luis' drawings, prints, and sculptures at the Moody gallery in Houston and I was quite certain that he could help a student learn the art of representation.

I first met Luis as he walked into the crowded drawing room and he extended his large hand in greeting and welcomed me into his class before I had the chance to ask to join. Feeling somewhat unsure of my drawing abilities, I reluctantly handed Luis my late enrollment slip. Unfazed by such formalities, he signed the piece of paper in the wrong place and told me to find a seat and start drawing. In class, Luis constantly looked over our shoulders in

an effort to help us improve our skills in rendering a likeness of the model. More importantly, he also gave us the opportunity to look over his shoulders. As he created images of the people posing for the class, with what seemed effortless precision, I knew that I wanted to know his work more fully. A simple life-drawing course would start the succession of events that has led us here. You already know the rest of the story.

## Euclidean Mergings

Archimedes moved from Syracuse to  
Alexandria  
And rented the flat  
Where Euclid had lived and discovered the  
Truth that God wanted  
To keep hidden deep  
Inside the human brain where a cluster  
Of cells half the size  
Of a pinhead does  
Nothing but store every memory  
You have ever had  
In luminous and  
Flawless detail waiting to play them back  
In the cold nano-  
Second between the  
Fact of death and the awareness of it.

Euclid wrested the secret from himself  
In the dream where he  
Reached into his head  
With two gold toothpicks and speared five simple  
Axioms plus five  
Common notions and  
Woke and began combining them into  
Everything that  
There is except for  
The single thing he most needed to know.

Too awed to sleep in the presence of the  
Immortal spirit  
Archimedes sat  
Contemplating whether anything more  
Could be said when he  
Heard a voice within  
And found Euclid in his library at  
Work by a dripless  
Candle talking in  
A language that he did not understand  
And on the table

Archimedes saw  
An elliptic sphere and gasped with certain  
Recognition and  
A startled Euclid  
Looked up as if to speak but instead stepped  
Through the wall into  
Space leaving behind  
The sphere on the surface of which he had  
Drawn intersecting  
Parallel lines and  
Next to which lay a notebook where he had  
Scrawled solutions to  
Problems that were not  
Yet invented which some take to be a  
Sign of madness but  
Archimedes knew  
To be proof that this is not all there is.

At the edge of the universe he wrote  
There is a place I  
Have been between the  
Present and the past and between the here  
And the beyond and  
There all lines are round  
And there all edges are smooth and when I  
Am there every  
Mystery yields but  
One and all there is is not enough to  
Explain how any  
Element can be  
Made into any other but a cold  
Heart will never be  
Warm and no man  
Will ever be anything he is not.

Here he said is proof. Take it as you will:  
If you were to take  
This piece of paper  
And fold it thus and so twisting the long  
Axis one hundred  
And eighty degrees  
And attaching one end to the other  
No longer would there  
Be an inside or  
An outside because the two sides would merge  
And what would remain  
Would not be a side  
At all because it would be all there is.

This perfection lies  
In two dimensions  
Or even four but not in three where the  
Good is yet confused  
With the desired,  
Where to be alone with you is enough.

## The Secret Ministry of Winter

Here in these northern cities it seems that we are always waiting – for spring, for the drought to end, for the heat to let up – and when our best season, autumn, finally arrives, we spend most of it groaning about the long, long months of cold ahead. Yet, perversely, we are incurably romantic about our climate. When I moved to Minneapolis more than forty years ago I assumed that the legendary winters would have created a citizenry imbued with a tightlipped stoicism about such matters. Nothing of the sort. Minnesotans cultivate the subject of their weather as if it were an endlessly fascinating enigma that must be held up to the light, examined, and discussed at length to be certain that no aspects are left untouched. We are much given to warning the newcomer of blizzards and days when the wind chill index hits sixty and seventy below, as it did frequently in 1996-97, the worst winter since 1917.

But if you listen carefully you realize that these are not really complaints, they are survivors' tales. Ours is a lover's quarrel with the climate, stemming from a desire to reassure ourselves, and infiltrators from more temperate climes, that a trace of frontier toughness remains in our bones. As soon as the temperature eases up above freezing, the hardy shed their parkas and overcoats. Well-groomed business people walk around Minneapolis streets in their suits as if spring had arrived. I have seen customers sitting outside of Dunn's coffee house in St. Paul, sipping their espresso on a March day when we were having a heat spell – temperatures in the thirties. On New Year's Day associations of local masochists take to the Mississippi River for a bit of water skiing, provided of course that it isn't frozen solid. Ice slick walks fail to faze runners who keep up their routines in all weather. One day with the wind chill at zero a young woman bicycled along the river road in a flowery skirt and not long ago on another bitterly cold day I looked out to see a woman skipping rope on the sidewalk across the street from my house.

\* \* \*

After a long warmish fall several years ago, our first storm arrived in early December. One third of the front page of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* was taken up with a photograph of cars "scattered like debris" along Interstate 94 as though this were something unusual. There is always a good deal of print space given over to headlines like "Big bad storm blew the flakes, downed mercury" and "It's beginning to look a lot like winter." What reporters really revel in are communities without power and tales of heart attacks, broken legs, deaths. And not only do we get the current weather; newspapers regularly run stories of great storms of the past, as

though we were personally responsible for them. The first thing an old timer will tell you is the saga of the Armistice Day blizzard of 1940 when inaccurate weather forecasting was the norm. A severe temperature drop – from the sixties in the morning to near zero in a few hours – caught the unwary who had dressed for warm weather, and days later hunters and motorists were found frozen to death.

Yet I am suspicious of places that have no real winter. Summer does other things for us, but it can never give us an excuse to wrap up our spirits in an old afghan and read Coleridge's wonderful words on "the secret ministry of frost." A film on the grate, a "stranger," was thought to portend the arrival of some absent friend.

Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature  
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,  
Making it a companionable form. ("Frost at Midnight")

At our house winter gives us an excuse to use the fireplace, a pathetic little thing in one corner of the living room, so insignificant that it lacks a mantelpiece. With its capacity to either destroy or regenerate, fire is an ever tantalizing element, and a balm to our spirits as we survive on the increasingly diminishing island that is old age. My husband and I bring end tables and chairs close to the hearth. Next, our eldest son's oil painting has to be removed from the wall over the fireplace to protect it from smoke damage. When our dog was alive he would push his snout into the food we put on our tables, and we spent a good deal of our hearthside mealtimes shooing Bruno away. Then, provided we get the fire going in the first place – not always a certainty – after it is burning we decide that it is a good time to listen to a Mozart piano quartet or Fats Waller. But the speakers of our sound system are badly placed for hearing music from this part of the room. I consider moving them, but give it up; better to settle for an unbalanced rendition. And after we have eaten, stared at the flames, told each other how much we are enjoying all this, we decide that we want to linger for a bit and read. For that we must move a floor lamp closer. When we put out the fire at night we leave the flue open to be sure that any remaining sparks go up the chimney. In short, we will sacrifice our comfort to create this cozy atmosphere.

Having the chimney cleaned is an expensive, dirty job and fireplaces are downright dangerous. The last time our chimney sweep arrived he warned us that the creosote could catch fire if it built up sufficiently and we had to install a screen on top to keep rodents and birds out. For several hours he was up on the roof with an ear-splitting machine vacuuming the chimney; both the attic door to the second floor and the hatch from the attic to the roof stood open. It was two degrees above zero. At some point we had to get in a mason to rebrick the fireplace's innards.

We know that the wood we buy could be filled with the bark beetle that bears Dutch elm disease, yet we burn it to ward off something worse. Give up the use of the fireplace? Never.

Disastrous as the weather can be, I am still a fool for winter beauty. One Sunday last winter we drove fifteen miles to White Bear Lake in a

snowstorm, cursing the nuts who ran lights and wove in and out, making an already perilous drive worse; yet so easily are we seduced by the season's charms that five minutes after we had arrived at our son Andrew's house we admired a world made new by the fresh snowfall.

Outside of my study window crows move in perfect file, only occasionally having to flap a wing; otherwise all is still. Our aging and mutilated apple tree is much improved with its cover of cotton batting snow. The smoke from the neighbors' chimney adds another tone of whitish grey. Dark limbed trees score the sky, as intricate as a nervous system, and a cluster of ice daggers hangs outside of our living room window like a Norse god's weaponry. A few strands of dry grass poke through the snow in my wildflower patch and our senescent snow fence adds a rustic touch here in the city, feeding my sense of winter's romance. At the end of the day I watch the white sun turn to blood red in a fire and ice show. Sunrise brings smouldering promises in nursery pinks and blues, but bruise colored greeny yellows lurk there too. All is enhanced by the winding, hilly streets and a Renaissance-style water tower topping off our little park. Arising early, I am alone in the world; no one who has lived in this climate can ever forget the incredible quiet that comes with falling snow.

And nothing can equal snow in its power to suggest the veils of memory undefiled by the grit of reality, especially that time when everything was larger than it is later on – houses, yards, heroes, snowstorms. In his semiautobiographical film *Amarcord* Federico Fellini created a snowstorm that lasts for days, one that few Italians south of the Alps must have actually experienced. As the characters have a snowball fight amongst the topiary-style drifts we understand the poet Villon's query, "Where are the snows of yesteryear?"

Admittedly for a Minnesotan it is hard to maintain a Felliniesque vision for long. A sampling of my winter notes: "Today is one of the dirtiest, most sullen I've seen this winter. Not very cold for us, in the forties, but dark, like a house you can never get clean no matter how you scrub. There remain patches of snow that create filthy rivers in the streets, and their sides retain a shelf of grey ice, as if expecting a new onslaught, which we will probably have soon."

"Winter noises: The city plow seems to be scraping my soul as it grinds through our street. Like some trapped beast, a car whines furiously trying to start, to no avail. After weeks of bitter cold we have had a thaw of sorts, enough to bring on the drip drip drip from the icicles that decorate our house for months. Then an ominous racket as if the front of the house had dropped off. Even now I jump when one of those enormous daggers hits the ground."

"On the bus, eavesdropping on two chattering women, I am reminded of what is so often the case: after a few storms parking lots are framed in enormous mounds of dirty ice, so compact that they often stay until well into April or May. Dangerous because children are tempted to climb onto them."

Then there are trapeze-artist squirrels running up trees and along telephone poles. The squirrel being cute outside your window, sitting with

his sweet little tail all curled up on a tree limb that has just the right dusting of fresh snow. Biting off the taproot of an acorn, he spits it out and eats what is left. He seems to be regarding you with wise thoughts, this Squirrel Nutkin, but what Beatrix Potter never mentioned was how he and his associates love to invade attics. We have spent thousands of dollars to squirrel-proof our house. They gnaw through the apparently impregnable metal-covered soffit and fascia, and year after year they have torn down insulation up there. It is against the law to poison them, so for a time we set out cages intending to take them to a park in another part of the city before turning the captives loose, for they return to their nests in houses if they are let loose in the vicinity. Out of doors they may be ballet dancers, but inside their footsteps make them sound like Frankenstein's monsters. Once they leapt on an old bedspring all night. Constantly we scatter mothballs because camphor is supposed to repel them. Not for long. And not our squirrels. It's even possible that they are hooked on the stuff. Since when did wild animals get to be such sissies they have to come inside when it gets cold? I wonder where the other squirrels live in the winter.

In truth, those mornings when everything is transformed by a cobwebby hoarfrost are outweighed by the ones overlaid by dog-turd and urine-decorated snow. Add to them dangerously icy sidewalks and an Alberta clipper – the worst of our winds – and even the greatest enthusiast is challenged. But when we have a prolonged warm spell in autumn we become uneasy; we are suspicious of too much *dolce far niente*. In a recent December we were having gray, mild weather, and as Christmas approached we had had little snow. What did Minnesotans moan about? No white Christmas. The *Star Tribune*: "Weather wreaks holiday havoc" was subtitled, "Dream of white Christmas is slowly turning to mush." Havoc is a too-warm December, with outdoor ice rinks closed and no ski trails in the parks. These are people who know what it is to drive whiteknuckled on dangerously slippery roads, as did a friend who had just finished telling me about a bad journey the previous year at Thanksgiving time when she had driven one hundred and twenty five miles to make *lefse*, an annual ritual for the women in her family. Drivers had nearly forced her off the slippery roads, but she too was sorry that we might not have snow for Christmas.

Urban life has largely eliminated most of the rigors of winter. Our homes have central heating, many garages are heated, and even when it is necessary to park on the street we cope. "Please leave space so resident can plug in" reads the sign in front of a neighbor's house, our way to keep pet cars warm by running electrical cords from engines to outlets. In downtown St. Paul and Minneapolis skyways allow us to move from one building to another without going out of doors. City plows are out clearing streets as soon as the snow turns serious. Perhaps the endless talk about our extreme weather stems from the realization that, in solving the problems of living in a northern metropolis, we have lost something, that feeling we have when the first big snow of the season falls and the city seems almost rural. Where are the snows of yesteryear? We aren't having them like that any more. Actually we are, but what we really mean is that, except for the homeless, we aren't suffering like that any more.

As a monument to nordic folly every January St. Paul puts on a winter carnival, banking on the good-weather god to provide exactly the right

amount of ice, snow, and temperatures for making ice sculptures, skating, and running toboggan races. But invariably it is too cold, too warm, too dry for all of the planned events to take place. Every now and then the folk who run the carnival have a yen to build the home of the mythical King Boreas, and in January 1992 the largest ice palace ever built was erected. One hundred and sixty-five feet high, and with wings that spread two hundred and twenty feet. One million dollars and twenty thousand blocks of ice later, the finished product was a child's dream of turrets and towers glistening in the sunlight, bearing an uncanny resemblance to the palace of Ludwig, the mad Bavarian king. As the date for the carnival's torchlight parade approached, newspaper headlines told the sad tale: "Happiness Is Not a Warm Palace." We had had "unseasonably" warm weather and it was a lunatic's palace indeed, so dangerous that workers were standing ankle deep in water to remove lighting fixtures that had fallen. Ultimately our dream palazzo was reduced to rubble with a wrecking ball.

\* \* \*

For a lifelong northerner like myself winter is a time for dreaming, for pulling back from life, for a period of retreat. Winter is another country; we are not the same citizens that we are in warm weather. Unlike woodchucks, bats, and pocket mice we cannot hibernate, but humans have a similar need to withdraw. The arrival of the cold season gives us an excuse to shut out the world, to listen to the inner self.

'Tis pleasant through the loopholes of retreat  
To peep at such a world, to see the stir  
Of the great Babel; and not feel the crowd.

(William Cowper, "The Task")

Near the Mississippi River I brave icy winds, watch terrifying ice floes, and see the bare limbed witchy trees doing a wild dance. All along the river road and around Shadow Falls Park crows alight on trees, looking like black rags. How is it that, with their shrewish and raucous calls, such unlikable birds have been invested with so much significance by so many people? Germanic tribes, Celts, Siberians, and Native Americans all have regarded the crow as having spiritual strength. In Christian symbolism the crow is an allegory for solitude. Perhaps in some perverse way I am attracted to them for the same reason that I see poetry in harsh weather, for these menacing creatures provide a necessary astringency in my life. An imagination cannot subsist on the cake and candy warmth of balmy weather, nor on constant togetherness. I am not a hermit, but my need for solitude is nourished by these inward looking months.

Winter's discomforts and dangers are like wolves standing just beyond the campfire: they heighten our awareness of the pleasures of the hearth, that domestic sun. The dangers lurking just beyond the firelight are like frightening tales of those creepy crawly things in our dreams that we cannot explain. We can no longer be frightened by the childhood stories that thrilled us – the green hand that might suddenly jut out of a wall – but

the footsteps in the attic, the unexplained noises in the cellar, the sudden slamming of a door can still alarm. Like the gothic element in literature winter feeds the dark side of the imagination, a need that we never outgrow. A haven when the world is too much with us, winter offers sanctuary to our innermost selves, and gives us an opportunity to regard the secret ministry of frost.

That search for the paradise around the next corner, a normal condition of youth, is simply a hyped-up version of the human condition generally. The need for change, for something to look forward to, is amply satisfied in this absurd theater of the seasons where we will never be subject to the "one goddamn more beautiful day" syndrome.

Right now I am looking at a soft powdery snowfall, billowing like the dancer Loie Fuller's veils. I have taken note of Squirrel Nutkin and Peter Rabbit being picturesque by the birdbath, capped by a white mushroom. I admire my neighbors' conifers which always seem to catch exactly the right amount of snow to set them off, but even as I allow myself to go all soft and mumsy over this scene I know that if the pile up is too great we will be out there for hours clearing our steep driveway and our extensive front sidewalk. For the next few months we will pour sand on the drive every time we leave the house so that our car won't skid into the concrete walls enclosing it. We will pray that while we are gone the city plows will not leave huge chunks of the frozen stuff blocking our drive. Before we go very far we will stop to test the brakes and find out just how icy the streets are today. Such harsh conditions should have honed us down to practical, no nonsense survivors. A northern winter would seem to be a time of comeuppance, a reality check, but instead we turn quixotic and skip rope, run on ice, and build castles that melt.

Manny's Piano Moving truck is parked in a driveway across the street. The delivery men unload their wares and, being Minnesotans, they are in shirtsleeves. As they push the piano up the steep incline in the falling snow I have a Felliniesque vision: the piano will never reach that house, it will stay in that dream-like state as one of the men brings a bench for the other and the pianist begins very softly to play "The Moon Got In My Eyes" with the snow falling around him.

## December

*Translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh*

December, herald of destruction,  
takes you on a long stroll  
through the black torsos of trees  
and leaves scorched in autumn's fire,

as if to say: so much then for  
your secrets and your treasures,  
the fervent trill of small birds,  
the promises of summer months.

Your dreams have been dissected,  
the blackbird's song now has a rationale,  
plants' corpses clutter the herbarium.  
Only the laboratory's hard stone remains.

Don't listen: they may take everything away,  
but they can't have your ignorance,  
they can't take your mysteries, strip you  
of your third homeland.

Don't listen: the holidays draw near  
and frozen January, snow's white paper.  
What you've waited for is being born.  
The one you're seeking will begin to sing.

---

J. MARK SMITH

## Ode

*(Horace: I, ix)*

Mt. Stephen stands up this autumn morning,  
whitened with a weight of snow  
the lodgepoles suffer under.  
The ache of cold holds every creek.

But we'll shake winter's grip, my friend,  
and stack the woodpile up around the fireplace.  
It's no time to be saving the home-brew!  
We'll let this change go by.

Savage winds rip down one valley  
while, in another, lifting airs  
flit among old firs, old spruce.  
Give up searching, take what comes,

whatever the days send us,  
we won't total the gains.  
And I won't look down on love,  
like a precocious old fool,

or dancing, not until  
my grey-haired strength  
is wasted from the fret.  
There is no other time:

now the rendezvous at twilight on the back road,  
now her low laughter guiding you to the spot  
where she'll tease her bracelet,  
a keepsake, from your grasp.

## Home Run

Somewhere still it's Salami Day,  
so my father is slicing and dicing  
with the precision of a Japanese chef,

the chunks of purple meat flecked  
with white fat piling higher and higher  
on the Formica counter in our kitchen.

If it's Tuesday, it's French Fry Day:  
my friends are hooking their mitts  
to their jeans, hopping onto their bikes.

It's 5 p.m., my father's been sighted,  
disgorged from the Dexter-Davison bus.  
His briefcase moves in pace with his stride,

up the street toward our first-floor flat.  
Already they can hear his chortle,  
can imagine the gurgle of hot oil

surging through the mesh strainer,  
already they're burning the roofs  
of their mouths, they'll never learn –

and the golden, hand-hewn fries, edges  
beveled like cut gems, taste so good.  
They see the tie loosened at his neck,

the sleeves of his white-on-white shirt  
rolled back, baring the lipomas  
that line the length of his dark forearms

like eroded hills. Sweat pearls on his scalp,  
a windshield's first drops of rain: wiped away,  
returning. It's the sweat of running the bases,

the ball rolling between left and center  
all the way to the fence, it's the good sweat  
of a good man: my father, headed home.

## Detroit Regression

*After Carlos Drummond de Andrade*

For many years I lived in Detroit.  
You could say, I come from Detroit.  
That's why I've learned to steel myself; am realistic.  
Ninety percent steel in the freeways.  
Ten percent steel in the soul.  
And both the desire and inability to solder my illusions.

This yearning for work that frustrates my love  
also comes from Detroit: from legend and labor divided, plant and line,  
five dollars a day and lay-offs. From lead-penciled,  
white-shirted men arced over slanted drafting tables  
to draw generations of car doors and windows,  
the most important parts.

Also, this bent for invention, reinvention that fuses, infuses me  
is a true Detroit inheritance.

Have a look at my *chatchkes* from Detroit:  
The steering column from a Wednesday car, a Shelby Mustang.  
A forgery of Berry Gordy's autograph.  
The pivotal bolt from the Ambassador Bridge.  
The "D" from burnt-down Darby's marquis.  
Not to mention this feigned nonchalance, this stolen shrug. . . .

I used to have a red-brick house, a father, twin magnolias.  
Today, postcards from Gilroy and Julian,  
the garlic and apple pie capitals of California.  
An avocado. A tremor. A coastal plain.  
And of course, my own fallibility. . . .  
Not even a picture of Detroit, hard and malleable, on my stucco wall.  
But how it remains!

## Brooch

Take this round blue enamel universe  
how complete with its jeweled moon and Milky Way  
affianced to the lapel of stylish Bernice at 90  
at 90 the firmament aligns on her bearing  
once trivial in the glitterati glass case *More stars* she bids  
*More stars* all blue as Blake's imagination wild  
in purity Bernice's Ford Falcon red as faith  
her hair white as waiting her gait stealthy  
as a Dakota girl's soprano devoted to prayer  
emanating from the vessel of her throat  
Beckoned she climbs a dream ladder sees  
Jacob's heels seventy elders beholding  
God's feet "a pavement of sapphire stone"  
her azure eyes gaze she chooses to leave behind  
what pins her to this world our token days

## In California

one either believes in God  
or believes one is  
God. Like the freeway, you can't drive on  
both sides at once.  
Medians themselves are horticultural  
phenomena. And from every direction there is  
vista, there is grande.  
There are places called  
Vista Grande.  
I have seen them myself,  
have the photos to prove it.  
I have stepped from my car in a glockenspiel  
shirtfront and conducted  
orchestras.  
I have held in my hand a baton of sky,  
while the hills looped gold  
green silver black,  
and the automatic tollbooths rang and rang,  
lifting and letting fall  
their braceleted arms.

In California there is more  
land than ocean; we will not  
discuss then, in this poem, the ocean.  
Let us place coins where its eyes used to be  
and insist instead,  
as wisteria insists –  
the insistent part of the wisteria – on  
architecture. Consider  
the bungalow, the overpass, the balcony  
balustrade as muscular as any Mister  
Atlas, tiny kites wound  
round his triceps. And the palms:  
it's not just headdresses with them  
but mufflers, full-length  
raccoon coats, that trailing  
perfume of fennel and sage, a dust  
that will not dust  
off. Not off the palm, not off the grape,

not off the live oak or  
the dead. Rolling the piers and streets and orchards,  
only the fog can slick it down.

I take it back  
about the kites. I see now the five points,  
the pentagons of morning  
glory choking the balcony,  
and potted nasturtiums on the landing  
gleaming. How our grandmothers favored them,  
the old flowers, old edible  
flowers. Like the old  
stories, they have it all:  
feet of clay, suits of mail,  
coats of brine, hoops of gold. . . .

*Red Aster, who made you?*  
The Sun made me.  
*And who, Red Aster, ringed you with gold?*  
You have, Maestro, who planted me here.

## Pasta Diva

### Act I

*"La mia voce tuonerà."*

*"My voice will be heard."*

Norma

For eight-year-old Antonella, life was as sour as an unripe fig. Chubby, spoiled, and friendless, she hung around the house.

"Antonella Papapedrettioni," her mother said, her voice going high and creaky, "go out and play in the streets before you drive me mad."

Outside, the girl squinted up into the fresco-blue sky, certain that a black cloud must be dogging her steps, making her unlovable. She kept to the quieter streets, creeping along the edges of yards, to avoid the taunts of the kids in the neighborhood who called her Parma's original piglet.

Instead, she made friends with the birds, singing back to them in their own filigreed language.

She vowed a hundred times to skip lunch, to walk home by another road that didn't pass by her uncle's pastry shop – to be slim like everyone else – but it was impossible!

Her only joy, besides the birds, was to eat.

The town of Parma is known for two things – its opera singers and its delicately marbled ham. As you walk down the streets, the air is perfumed with tomato sauce, sausage and onions, a counterpoint to the constant of smoke from thousands of curing pigs. And always the sounds of music – strains of Puccini, Verdi, Rossini – are lapping against your ears, enveloping your heart in a feeling of abundance.

One day Antonella left her house after an especially fine lunch, a sausage sandwich hidden in her pocket for later. But at the corner, she stopped, arrested by a sound like angels singing, coming from their neighbor's house. Perhaps it was a piece of music that had been played thousands of afternoons before, but for the first time it entered Antonella's ears and fell into her heart like the song of the birds.

Antonella walked through the yard and stood in the vegetable garden directly below the open window. Hot sun poured down. Crushed basil scented the air from beneath her feet as she sang along with the record. The house belonged to their neighbor, Giuditta, a single woman in her thirties – a fate to be dreaded – who sat around in her slip all day long drinking red wine. She had been a beauty and an aspiring singer, but her day was long past. Now she was childless and her teeth were stained purple from the grape.

As Antonella continued to sing, Giuditta appeared at the window. When she saw the fat neighbor girl, Giuditta's mascara-smears eyes widened.

"Quit trampling my vegetables and come up here!"

Giuditta picked up the player's needle and reset it on the outer edge of the record of Rossini arias.

"Sing!"

They sang together through the whole side, flipped it over, and sang the other side. As fast as Giuditta corrected, the girl mastered.

Early the next morning, it was a new Giuditta, sobered and severe as a widow in white shirt, black skirt, sensible flat shoes, who appeared at their door. She knocked resolutely on the frame of the always wide-open kitchen door and informed Antonella's mama that she had appointed herself the girl's singing teacher.

"How much?"

Antonella looked at the hard ball of her mama's stomach stretching the cotton of her housedress shiny. Her family obviously had no extra money with another mouth to feed on its way.

"Free."

"She's yours."

Giuditta spent every day with the girl. They lived, breathed music. Antonella sang everywhere around town – birthdays, engagements, marriages, anniversaries, funerals. People asked each other *Who is this girl?* and were satisfied that she had popped up inexplicably from their native soil.

Early on Antonella understood that this thing, this Voice, had nothing to do with her. She felt herself to be merely a body wrapped around these sounds. What these people were listening to was the sound of God, and her job was to stand, breathe properly, and not interfere. She stood chastely while old people with tears in their eyes kissed her hands, her cheeks, the hem of her dress.

But still, Antonella's longing for human love was not satisfied. She was invited by the boys of the village to sing privately. Not thinking twice, she stole into an abandoned house with a dozen boys. At dusk, they crept into the mildewed basement. Each boy pulled out a candle, and she sang *Salome* in the light of a dozen flames. As she performed an improvised "Dance of the Seven Veils," stripping down to her pink cotton slip, the boys, enraptured, threw foil-wrapped chocolates at her feet. Eventually, with a moan, each boy pinched out his candle and went home.

Johnny, their leader, walked her home. At the garden gate, he unwrapped a chocolate, softened from being in his pocket, and placed it on the tip of her tongue. Here began for Antonella the inextricable entanglement of music, love, and food.

At seventeen she made her debut as Dorabella at the *Teatro Reggino di Parma* before an audience that included her whole family, aunts and uncles, mama, Giuditta in a red satin dress in vogue twenty years before, Johnny, and the boys from the village.

Before the opening curtain Antonella was hunched over a toilet bowl, bringing up her dinner. The stage looked large and bare. Even the other

singers scared her in their heavy ill-fitting costumes. But when the opening chords of music were played, they shaped a boat that carried her out onto the stage. Antonella stepped out into the lights, blinded, screwing up her cheeks and lips, gulping air with the tension of a woman giving birth. A long, lovely string of notes unspooled themselves from her lips, and the rest of the evening was pure joy. Afterwards with flowers floating down around her, she knew she had reached safe harbor.

By the time she was twenty-one, Mama, Giuditta, and she had become warriors of the festival circuit moving continually between Parma, Verona, Padua, Florence, Bologna, and Ravenna. Giuditta took care of the Voice, exercising it in the morning with scales, fighting with the conductors if they pushed Antonella to rehearse too long.

At night, in yet another cheap room with faded wallpaper and sagging beds, Antonella got on her knees so Giuditta and Mama could examine her throat using a flashlight, making sure the vocal cords looked smooth and white, not swollen or red from strain.

Antonella met hundreds of people but got to know very few. She soon grew tired of living out of a suitcase, blinking from the flashing bulbs of cameras, answering the same questions in every local paper. The competition was fierce among the singers. The jealousy she drew upon her shoulders was proportionate to her gift. Sometimes she secretly longed for her lonely days singing with the birds.

The only pleasure she had left was mama's cooking.

## Act II

*"Mon coeur s'ouvre a ta voix."*

*"Softly awakes my heart."*

Samson & Dalila

Through a musician who knew the conductor who knew the Maestro, Giuditta arranged the longed-for but dreaded audition at La Scala. For two days before, Antonella couldn't eat. Her legs were like rubber as she wobbled across the stage, and her vocal cords felt tied into a pretzel. She squinted into the darkness, saw the Maestro nibbling his sandwich. She was ready to swoon.

Instead, without any preparation, she rushed into "Casta Diva." Before the song was finished Maestro had discarded his sandwich and come up on the stage to replace the accompanist. His breath smelled of tuna and basil. When Antonella finished, he said, "Something more?" So she sang Bellini's "Dolente immagine di figlia mia," Mama's favorite.

Maestro, a man of at least fifty, took her plump face between his long silken hands, wrinkled and knotted like panettone.

"Finally," he said, "you have come."

She blushed, asked, "May I have the rest of your sandwich?" and then fainted.

Mama, who considered her job done, packed to return to Parma.

"But Mama, can't you stay?"

"No. You are a woman now. You must grow into a Diva, and I can't help you."

Giuditta packed, too.

"But I need you!"

"I'm too old for this. You'll find a new teacher."

Raindrops seldom come in just ones or twos: Johnny wrote that he had waited long enough. It was time for her to come home and be his wife. Antonella turned for advice to Mama and Giuditta, but they turned their backs, refusing to be drawn in. In despair, she dissolved his letter in a tomato sauce she was simmering and ate it on top of her *al dente* penne. She divined no answer except heartburn.

Antonella lived in a boarding house a few blocks from the opera house, friendless except for her music. First thing each morning she worked with a coach on her technique, then came her acting coach, then rehearsals. She returned to her room in the dark, exhausted, sliced some of the ham Mama had left her, and ate it with bread. The huge smoked shank made her room smell like home. Most nights she cried herself to sleep.

But Mama was right – Antonella did learn. The roles piled up, and no sooner did she learn one than she was given another. Over the next four years, she performed Desdemona, Andrea Chenier, Fiordiligi, and Dorabella. She had become a star. She was considered to have a miraculous high range – high C was nothing – she easily could slide up to F.

She began cooking for the cast after performances. That won her a grudging place in their hearts despite Maestro's stealing the good parts in the repertory for her. Her most popular dish was fettuccini with Parma ham and peas in cream sauce, but she collected recipes everywhere she went: *pasta allo zafferano*, *spaghetti della Pina*, *lumachelle al turtufo*, *pasta con tonno fresco*, *orrecchiette con cavolfiore*, *lasagne verdi alla napoletana*, and from her hometown, *anolini al ragu di prosciutto*.

In the next five years as her fame expanded, so did her waistline. She climbed from 130 pounds to more than 180. Her last name, Papapedrettioni, was shortened – she became the Pasta Diva.

During this time, immersed in stories of foolish young love, unrequited love, and love to the death, Antonella realized she'd had no love of her own. Her adolescent gropings with Johnny were trivial. Her experience of different operas was like growing up in a bordello – you knew things you had no way of understanding. In reality she lived like a nun.

In her debut as Violetta in *La Traviata* in Naples, the tenor, Gian Carlo, was dark and handsome, quite the ladies' man. When she explained her predicament over champagne after the performance, his eyes moistened with sympathy.

In her dressing room, Gian Carlo bent her over the table and peeled back her ballgown and petticoats one panel at a time, like unfolding the petals of a rose, then sang an aria to her before making her his. They spent afternoons in her hotel room, both sprawled naked on the bed, he singing to Antonella while she fed him bits of cold pasta, noodles dripping in cream and cheese and ham. He licked the sauce from her fingertips.

She thought she now knew love.

But Gian Carlo's attentions promptly ended a few weeks later with the run of their performances over, and he left town with a violet-eyed mezzo

from the chorus.

He left her a note: "Dear Pasta Diva, Your voice will make you famous. Be sure to write of me in your memoirs."

She crumpled the paper and threw it into the trash.

Now she reread the scores of the operas, and of course there it was plain as day, but invisible to the virgin Antonella: the pain of love. Abandoned Butterfly.

Crushing. How could fame be compensation for the lack of a man? What distracted her from her sorrow over his departure was the arrival of her new Voice. Was it the extra fifty pounds padding her chest? The experiences of carnal pleasure? No longer a coloratura, she found herself thrust into dramatic soprano territory – the Leonora parts in *Il Traviatore* and *La Forza del Destino*, Mimi in *La Boheme*, *Madama Butterfly*.

### Act III

*"Fame e miseria! Il bisogno, il periglio..."*  
*"Hunger and misery! The need, the danger..."*

Andrea Chenier

During this low period Antonella lived only to sing and to eat. At the theater one day as she was unwrapping Baci chocolates and popping them into her mouth while the chorus rehearsed on stage, Maestro came up to her, crunching the foil wrappers underfoot like fallen leaves.

"So I have talked with Bayreuth. They want to know if you are ready."

"Germany?"

Wagner was the last great leap. It would cement her reputation as the most versatile soprano in the opera world, sprung from the same mold as the greats during the time of Rossini and Verdi. Her heart stopped, then began to race. The old excitement came back.

She agreed to play Elisabeth in *Tannhauser*.

Germany was cold and gray. The food was bad. The Germans looked stiff and glum as their potatoes. Although Antonella made enough money to afford a car, the huge black Mercedeses careening down the narrow streets made her afraid to drive, so she took the bus.

She considered canceling so she could return to Italy, but at a gathering for the cast, she met a handsome man named Klaus. He told her she sang like an angel.

When she cooked for him at his apartment on their first date, he sat in a chair in the middle of the room and made her stand in front of him and sing. He enjoyed nothing more than to gorge on the Voice in private.

Before she knew what was happening they were lovers. So all-consuming was his love for her, he explained, he quit his janitorial job to manage her career.

Her debut as Elisabeth was a great success, and the director asked her to stay and do Brunnhilde in the *Gotterdammerung*. During rehearsals, Klaus sat in the audience, taking copious notes on her performance. After one particularly strenuous rehearsal, he was uncharacteristically quiet as they took the bus home.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"Wagner's women are meant to be goddesses. They are the ideal woman. When I close my eyes, you are that in the voice. But when I look – well, I'm sorry, but you're fat."

It was true. The schnitzels and Sacher tortes had added another thirty pounds at least.

"Wagner's women are known for being hefty," she said.

"Not you. You should be svelte. I shall put you on a diet. Never mind Wagner. My ideal woman is statuesque, blonde, and has your voice."

Why didn't Antonella smash his pale blue-eyed face into the window? She supposed she was too grateful for his company, someone to slog through the endless days with her. Everyone was eager to hold your hand on opening night, but what about the days of drudgery spent in preparation?

With super-heroine strength, she did ten-hour rehearsals on nothing more than boiled eggs and sauerkraut. Klaus even forbade her to cook. But the sacrifice made her proud – she was Joan of Arc on the burning stake of love. By the time she was ready to sing the *Ring Cycle*, she had lost forty pounds and bleached her hair. She *was* Isolde, Elsa, Sieglinde.

Thin, she felt fluttery and nervous. She felt as if she would blow away. Walking down streets, she felt small and invisible.

Klaus was even contemplating blue contact lenses.

But the weight loss had taken its toll. During the performance, her high notes were shrill. She could feel the sound rising through her chest in the usual way, but instead of making smooth spirals, it ricocheted against her sharp new angles and came out as a squawk. The conductor dropped his baton. The audience gasped. At the end of one particularly draining aria, she waited an extra beat for the customary standing ovation, heard only polite clapping and the rustling of programs.

The word went out that the Pasta Diva's earlier virtuoso command of the stratosphere had been a mere flash in the pan. She had ruined her voice by pushing too far too fast.

Strangely enough, she didn't mind. Klaus remained devoted and affectionate. She even began to contemplate life without the Voice. It seemed like heaven to get up in the morning and not have to do scales, not have to avoid talking on performance day, not have to stay in seclusion to escape catching a cold. Suddenly the world opened out into shopping at the grocery, having babies, gossiping with other women over coffee. No traveling. She even could have a dog. A German shepherd.

When not asked to return the following season, she felt no anger. Klaus, on the other hand, turned purple with outrage and fought with management. Then he fell into a stony silence. Touched by his concern for her, she quickly assured him that he was more important to her than singing.

"I don't care if I never travel again. I'll spend the rest of my days in this city. So what if we have no running hot water and can only have meat every third day? We have love, Klaus."

All he had to do was get a job to support them and their future family.

That winter Antonella and Klaus went to see the new Norwegian Brunnhilde brought in to replace the great Pasta Diva. Antonella had to

admit that the woman was exceptional, all two hundred pounds of her. Her voice was strong and high, but Antonella was aware that this Brunnhilde skipped the highest notes, the ones she had formerly soared on.

Several weeks later, Antonella came home with her bags of groceries and found a size eighteen purple wool dress lying on the kitchen counter. Further on she found a bra on the dining room table, the cups so huge they could be worn as a helmet. Then she found a laundry-bag-sized pair of silk underwear dropped in the hallway.

When she went to the bedroom door, she heard Klaus grunting like a pig. She found him naked next to the gargantuan bare form of the new Brunnhilde. On the night table lay a plate of *pattzerlgugelhupf* cake Antonella had baked that morning, and he was feeding her rival a large piece.

"You can't even be original in your seduction!"

"Now stay calm," Klaus said. "Have a slice of cake."

"I thought you liked your goddesses slim!"

Brunnhilde headed for the bathroom, her white buttocks like mounds of yeast-risen dough.

"My tastes have changed. I like a little flesh on my women."

Antonella sat on the edge of the bed and nibbled a wedge of cake.

"You ruined me. I ruined myself."

"Sorry," he said. "Maybe if you gained fifty pounds...."

#### Act IV

*"Ist ein Traum, kann nicht wirklich sein."*

*"It's a dream, it can never come true."*

Der Rosenkavalier

Without another word, Antonella packed her bags and returned to Italy. Her heart opened again at the warmth of the sunlight on the earth, the musical sound of her native language on every tongue.

She stopped in a bakery and ordered a dozen cannoli to go. Sitting in the backseat of the cab, she ignored the driver's eyes in the rearview mirror as she slurped out cream from the shells. Antonella had subordinated her needs to a man for the last time. Her appetites came first.

A teacher began to practice with her. Antonella kept putting on weight until she felt strong in her sound – the original forty pounds, then another twenty for good measure.

The Voice returned, but it had changed. There was a veiled quality in the higher register. When she walked into La Scala, Maestro kissed her hand and led her on stage. After she sang, he bowed his head and said, "You have suffered."

She was ready for such mature roles as Norma, Anna Bolena, Tatyana, and the abandoned Manon Lescaut.

The first night back at La Scala, Antonella stood in the wings. She listened to the orchestra tuning up – the most wonderful moment of a performance, a time of limitless potential, like the moment before God created the earth. After the first note was sung, the performance was consigned to the banalities of history: the tenor was fine, but the soprano

had a cold.

Waiting for her entrance, she felt happier than ever in her life. This was her true destiny – fat and the Voice, as natural to her as marriage and children might be to another. She realized that music was the only love not capable of disappointing her. Her truest understanding of love had come not from the pitiful examples of Gian Carlo and Klaus. Her heart had been forged in the fires of the operas.

Mama wept; her daughter was a single woman at forty – a fate to be dreaded.

When Maestro's wife died, Antonella cooked for him, and they began to spend the evenings together.

She had no regrets.

What is the big deal in going to a movie and seeing a fifteen-year-old girl playing a fifteen-year-old girl? But in the opera you can be anything that you feel in your soul, anything you can convey on your breath.

In performance on stage, she was not a middle-aged 200-pound singer. She was transformed into a young girl, her heart beating with love, swaying her virginal hips back and forth wearing only a pink cotton slip, singing for a piece of chocolate. Because this girl lived in Antonella's past, she could sculpt the beauty and poignancy of that moment as only an artist can do.

When Antonella made her return in the title role of *Turandot*, she received a seventeen-minute standing ovation and roses rained on the stage. Tears were in her eyes; the taste of chocolate on her tongue. Huge and heavy, she stood in a jewel-encrusted gown, singing to the heavens that her love must be hard won, but in real life no one had won the singer's heart. Her audience shared this holy truth with her because of Puccini's genius and the magic of the Voice.

In the audience, Antonella sensed that the men with gray hair were reliving the scenes of their virile youth. Women with beautiful wrinkled faces were recalling long-ago nights of passion they had inspired. Her voice could transport them all to a magical place, and tonight would be a night of perfect love.

## *Vedute Da Tempo*

This time of year, even birds have stars  
in their eyes, traveling north  
by night; one true far place holds  
the dart of their gaze as we fly  
over Manhattan. Of all the fires  
that slowly turn below, a single lamp  
beside a bed is the only star  
to which we want to go, out of all  
the faces in the airport crowd,  
only one will do.

The wise men knew why we want  
to flee – first away from, then toward –  
whatever bright thing may wink  
in the sky. Like lazuli buntings,  
they offered up wings and found their way  
to *what remained of what used  
to be* – and other spent words  
for *home*: is that where they were  
in the north or the south, in winter  
or in spring? They knew, before Lacan,

the reason we travel: *one is the image of oneself  
with which one tries, like a perpetual child,  
to catch up*. And if misrecognition of some other  
in the mirror indeed produces a self,  
where better than Venice  
for *meconnaissance*: damask city  
of the milk-breasted goddess, coiffure  
plaited in gold, city of so many men found  
in female dress, a law had to be passed

against it, courtesans forbidden to parade

in boats, courting men while clothed  
in the clothing of men. Mirror held up  
to its own waving image, city that could lose  
the library of Petrarch and not even miss it  
for a hundred years, busy posing  
for another of Canaletto's views: Ca' d'Oro,

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Ca' Rezzonico, reflection of St. Mark's  
facade, all repeat the ancient Venetian motto,  
*Vedute da Tempo – reflect, refract,*

*and float.* To begin with, nothing  
of its own – but clever, adaptable, rising  
on piles driven into silt, tongue  
bobbing in the mouth like a boat. Now the black  
beaked gondola we've hired for the night  
strokes the water with its one pale wing,  
cleaving canals into left and right, light  
and shade, formless  
then made; like antlers pushing  
from the skull each May, the oar

touches something finally called *bottom*,  
cuts velvet, and takes us back  
the way we came. Stepping from the boat  
to the stones of the street, at what point  
can we say we have been  
to *Venice*? The word itself  
wears silk brocade – is flowing, loose,  
unnavigable – but stars still bloom  
across it each night, watch themselves lit  
by some dark lagoon.

## Split Shift

You don't know yes  
until you've said  
yes, yes, yes  
because your lover  
has offered oysters for lunch,  
and after, a room upstairs  
where you can hear car tires crunch  
leisurely over the shell lot,  
yesterday's degustation:  
you are quite naked,  
but, oh, yes, yes, yes  
you are wearing pearls.

## Katherine Mansfield to John Middleton Murray

My breath sours  
& the Chekhov drops  
from my lap  
onto the floor, then  
the tiring ritual –  
the white cloth  
marred by a flush  
of crimson from the mouth  
& the rampant damp  
of the hour  
washes forward.  
A shimmer at the door;  
Cook bringing a tray.  
Afternoon tea.  
She instructs me  
it is the feast day of  
the Assumption;  
Mary was consumed  
whole into heaven  
for she was without  
original sin &  
this was her reward,  
never to be free  
of the body.  
In the distance, the sea  
casting taut & loose,  
loose & taut like  
a seal being skinned.  
Even your skilled  
beautiful body, dear one,  
when we are together  
will lie to itself;  
as happens to  
all couples, eventually  
the feigned, necessary refusal  
we are for one another  
ever only of  
a temporary use.

## Poem

I remember  
eating  
blueberries  
from  
a dark  
purple  
ceramic  
bowl  
glare  
of  
August  
bearing  
down  
on  
eighth  
street  
Nina Simone  
singing  
on the radio  
do  
I  
move  
you?

Listen  
you said  
moving  
toward me  
you  
are reckless  
and forgetful  
I am tired  
of your  
body  
and its  
tedious  
rhythms  
your  
face  
is

an illness  
I want  
to forget.

After that  
we got undressed

the clenched room  
bright  
with this new  
poison.

## Mrs. Thorne

Mrs. Thorne frowned at the color plate in the field guide. She'd seen the bird: long pointy beak, spindly legs, small head. She'd seen it, but she didn't think a sandpiper would have flushed up in the dust in front of the truck like this bird had. She didn't think it would have shown up at all so far from water, even migrating. She sat there at her kitchen table, staring at the crumbs on her lunch plate. After a while she rose and set the dish in the sink and filled a large glass with tap water. She stood sipping the water, staring out the window at her front lawn.

She jumped when she heard the knock. It was a soft, exploratory sort of knock, but it alarmed Mrs. Thorne who was not accustomed to visitors. For a moment she was tempted to ignore it, but not answering the door when she was standing right there struck her as exactly the sort of thing she should guard against. Do it now, she thought, and it'll be easier to do next time and the time after that and the time after that. If you're not careful you'll end up wandering through town in your housecoat and slippers like poor Muriel Bennett.

As it was, a girl – fifteen, maybe – stood on the bottom step of the stoop. She wore an unbuttoned flannel shirt so large it hid her hands and, under it, stiff new overalls.

"Yes. . ." Mrs. Thorne said through the screen.

"Please pardon my appearance," the girl began, apparently having rehearsed the words. She touched her left thigh delicately and gestured toward the hill behind her. "I need to use the phone, I think I've hurt my ankle?"

Mrs. Thorne looked at the girl's feet. The laces of her high-tops were loose and caked in dried mud as were the sneakers themselves and the hem of the overalls. The left pant leg was caught under one heel. Mrs. Thorne was not a mother, but in that instant she felt an almost overwhelming desire to get the pant legs rolled up, the shoes tied. Mayhem of this sort made her skin itch. It made her peevish.

"See if my dad will pick me up," the girl continued, her gaze floating up to a treetop.

She'd have to let the girl in, of course, Mrs. Thorne realized this. But it was upsetting. She wanted to simply say, "No, no thank you, thank you very much," politely of course, as she might to someone trying to sell door-to-door steaks or skin care or Armageddon.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Thorne opened her door for the girl, and indicated the phone.

Once inside, the girl pulled a stack of plastic cards wrapped in a rubber band from a pocket. "I've got a calling card," she mumbled, shuffling

through the pack, to which Mrs. Thorne replied that a calling card was not necessary, she could certainly afford a toll call, even to Pittsfield if that were necessary. But the girl insisted. "It's a long way away," she said.

Mrs. Thorne turned back to the kitchen and her field guides. She didn't know what to think about how far away "a long way away" was, and she didn't want to. She didn't want to think about the girl at all.

She'd seen the bird on Saturday afternoon, on the way home from a concert at the Congregational Church in New Marlborough. It had flushed up right past the Cleary's on the old Hartsville road and lodged itself firmly in her memory: the beak, the dark unpatterned wing, the spotted nape and back, the long legs. The following Monday morning, Myrt Finn, Monterey town treasurer and fellow birder, had come into the post office while Mrs. Thorne was dividing her mail: junk into the trash, bills into the pocket of her bag, an invitation to a lecture at Bidwell House into her datebook. At mention of the word sandpiper, though, Myrt had frowned and asked about the bird's size.

Mrs. Thorne set two forefingers apart like goalposts. "Seven inches, give or take. Maybe eight."

"Probably a thrush," Myrt said. "Veery maybe, or hermit thrush." She turned and headed for her box. "Wouldn't you think?"

Mrs. Thorne snapped the rubber band around her datebook. "No, I wouldn't. It wasn't a thrush. It was larger than a thrush, and its beak was longer." She scooped up the three catalogues and dumped them into the recycling bin. "It looked like a sandpiper, Myrt, which is why I bring it up. I wouldn't carry on about a thrush."

"Well, then," Myrt said carefully. "There you have it." Whereupon she steered the subject to Lyn Mueller, a neighbor of Mrs. Thorne's who had just resigned as the town's representative to the district school committee in a hotly-worded letter to the select board. And after Lyn Mueller there was the issue of whether to support the seven thousand dollar appropriation for the fire company to buy a Lifepak defibrillator. Myrt, a little carelessly perhaps, let go that she thought the town should wait until the next fiscal year, but Mrs. Thorne disagreed. A Lifepak might have saved Ellery, she said, a little stiffly now, and certainly Maudine Dunlap too, had the ambulance squad found her in time.

Most mornings Mrs. Thorne liked to go next door to the general store for a cup of tea before collecting her mail. She liked a banana too, if they weren't too picked over. If the tables were empty, she didn't object to sitting alone. Mrs. Thorne liked being alone. Still, listening to the morning chat of other women – women of her place and of her age – and being companionably included from time to time, though not too often, did provide a palpable comfort. Yes, certainly she had friends, but no, she did not have a best friend, at least not in modern sense. Personal disclosure in the way it appeared to occur nowadays, all at once and all the way, she couldn't bring herself to entirely approve. It was embarrassing; it struck her as a faint form of social burlesque even. Not to mention her aversion to the telephone, that tool of female friendship, with its dead plastic bleeps and

buzzings. She didn't like the feel of it against her cheek.

Speaking of the phone, the girl had been on it far too long in Mrs. Thorne's opinion, more than enough time for ten calls to ten fathers. Whoever she was, she was taking freedoms, and Mrs. Thorne didn't appreciate ill-bred young people taking freedoms. Mrs. Thorne didn't believe freedoms were the sort of thing one should ever take, though since Ellery's death people in her circle certainly did seem to be taking them. How many had called over the past few months "just to say hello," talking of nothing, lingering on as if hoping for a pouring forth of some kind? It was awkward is what it was. Conversations of this sort were like trying to stroll with a duck – all false starts and meanderings, prolonged pecking at the random and irrelevant. Then, of course, there was the cheery youngish mother-person at Sunday meeting or in the grocery check-out who'd ask in that suddenly delicate way, with that significant deepening of the gaze, how she was getting along *now*. "Oh, just fine," Mrs. Thorne liked to say crisply. "Just fine. Making do."

Which is not to say there weren't moments. Only two weeks ago she'd been startled awake in the middle of the night by a bomb. It had been a dream, of course, but in the white seconds that followed the blast, she'd lost track of herself somehow. She'd sat bolt upright there in the dark, and for those few seconds Ellery had been alive again. Panicked, she called out to him and he answered from the next room, "It's alright, Mary, it's alright, *I'm coming!*" She heard his voice as clear as day. The odd thing was she knew him but nothing else: not her name, not the year, nothing about her life. It was as if her husband had returned, but at the cost of everything else.

She'd thought later that his death had been like that: like a bomb blast. Or rather, like the seconds immediately following, when the world, stretched to capacity, near to giving way, had gone pale and general as ash. It had been six months and things were back to normal, and yet of course they weren't and never would be again. She was sixty-seven and alone. Without him or her sister or her parents, without children, she didn't belong to anyone. She would not belong to anyone ever again.

But of course this is not the sort of thing you say. People don't want you to say this sort of thing, regardless how they knit up their eyebrows and let on. People want you to give them a problem they can solve.

Mrs. Thorne read on, listening for the sound of the receiver hitting the cradle, the call of "thank you" from the girl, the click of the storm door closing. She read on about thrushes and sandpipers, and then, for no reason, about flycatchers. Still, the receiver did not hit the cradle.

Something needed to be done. In the current parlance, a boundary had to be established. And so, after counting slowly to fifty, Mrs. Thorne marched into the mudroom and stood before the girl.

"I'm going to have to ask you to get off," she said.

The girl nodded in a confused way and then gazed at the floor again, trying to attend to the voice in her ear. Mrs. Thorne returned to the kitchen. She was not, she thought crossly, the sort of woman to sit about twiddling her thumbs in the middle of a perfectly good weekday.

She waited, but still the girl did not get off the phone.

Sitting there unable now to study her birds, Mrs. Thorne found herself doubting the girl's story entirely, doubting that she was talking with her father, doubting that she had hurt herself, doubting even that she needed a ride anywhere. It was a ruse, a teenager's facile lie designed to get a grown-up to turn over the use of a telephone for who knows what purpose, for calling a few friends in far-off places.

"Get off," Mrs. Thorne said to the girl now. She stood squarely before her, arms folded.

The girl put the receiver to her chest. "Please, just one more minute. . . ."

It was at this moment that Mrs. Thorne noticed the small gold ring in the girl's left eyebrow. How could she have missed such a thing? "No," she said. "Now!"

"I have to go," the girl whispered into the phone. "It's on Route 23, you'll see me in the front yard. Just *come*." Without listening for a reply, she hung up.

"Can I wait in your front yard?" she asked Mrs. Thorne

"Well, of course," Mrs. Thorne snapped, turning back to the kitchen. Really, the whole thing was too much.

The recent rain had softened the soil, so Mrs. Thorne was able to make quick work of the weeds in the back border before trimming. All in all, she was pleased with herself. Setting her foot down with the girl had been the thing. Teenagers require a clear mind and a firm hand; they require simple maturity, not all this guilt-ridden wishy-washy muckety-muck that fills up the magazines.

The girl had finished her call around three. At five, she was still out in the front yard. The father (assuming it *was* a father) was supposed to be coming north from Greenwich, Connecticut. That the child lived in Greenwich spoke for itself, but what she was doing so far from home was a question Mrs. Thorne did not ask, as she did not ask about the muddy shoes or the allegedly hurt leg or the marathon phone call. The more she knew, the more involved she was, and Mrs. Thorne did not want to be involved. What she wanted was the girl gone.

At five-thirty, Mrs. Thorne went in to dress the chicken. She still cooked for two. She did not understand how she was supposed to cook a decent meal for one. She watched the girl from the kitchen window. Six came and went and at six-fifteen, she felt obliged to carry Ellery's old Pendleton out. The girl slid it on but kept her eyes on the bend in the road beyond Mrs. Thorne's left thigh. She'd been crying, that much was obvious: her face was puffy and splotched, her eyes red-rimmed. A runaway, Mrs. Thorne decided. No more than fifteen.

"It's a quarter past six," she announced. "Even if your father drives as slowly as I do, he'd be here by now. If he's coming."

The girl said nothing.

"You spoke to him on the phone?"

The girl nodded.

"Well, did he actually say he was coming?"

The girl pulled the jacket around her and fingered a blade of grass.

She was not pretty. Her features were roundish and doughy and altogether unremarkable save a dark mole on one cheek and the gold ring through her eyebrow. It was the kind of bland, shocked teenage face one sees a thousand times in shopping malls. Her squirrel-colored hair, which had been loose before, was now braided down her back and tied with a piece of madras so that Mrs. Thorne was able to see that, besides the eyebrow, one ear was pierced in five different places with a tiny chain linking the holes. Dangling from the lowest was a tiny golden scarab.

"He'll come," the girl said finally.

"Maybe, maybe not. In the meantime, let's take a look at your foot."

The girl pulled up the left leg of her overalls, took off her shoe and sock, held her leg up under her knee.

Mrs. Thorne sucked in air. On the outside of the ankle was a large blackened swelling. The foot angled inward awkwardly.

She'd been wrong. The girl *had* hurt herself. She was hurt quite badly. She had tried reaching her father and the father had been unwilling to believe, as she herself had been. Mrs. Thorne looked across the lawn and clicked her tongue against the back of her front teeth as she did whenever she was upset.

She'd been wrong.

"It hurts then, doesn't it?" Mrs. Thorne said.

The girl nodded.

"There now," Mrs. Thorne said, hauling her up. "Keep the weight off. It needs some ice. Come on."

At the emergency room in Great Barrington, Mrs. Thorne ran into Lou Battaglia, a retired Bowdoin biology professor who happened to be a celebrated local naturalist.

"Lou!" Mrs. Thorne flagged him down as he was about to exit through the automatic doors. As it was, they were both tending to the afflictions of children: he to blood tests for his grandson. She'd forgotten all about Lou Battaglia. Mrs. Thorne described the bird she'd spotted, how it had flushed up in front of the truck. "It wasn't a thrush," she added, to get that out of the way.

"Pasture land or woodlands?" Professor Battaglia asked. His routine first question.

"Woodlands. Right past Hartsville on the way home. The back road."

Lou Battaglia pulled at one bushy eyebrow, spilling a few flakes of dandruff. "On the Konkapot side? No, it wouldn't have been. You were coming home, right?" He looked at Mrs. Thorne for confirmation.

"Yes. But it was a ways from the river. And I assumed the rushing water —"

"— You say it wasn't a thrush? You're sure?" he inquired solemnly, peering at Mrs. Thorne over the rim of his glasses. "Speckled breast?"

"Yes, but I'm positive. It had a long beak, long legs and a speckled back. Really, it didn't look like a thrush at all." Mrs. Thorne gazed at Professor Battaglia expectantly. "It might have been a sandpiper, I'm thinking, except that it was along side the road like that, and flushed up in front of the truck. But, I tell you, it looked like a sandpiper."

"It wasn't a killdeer?"

"No. Absolutely not. Not a killdeer."

The professor looked out at the parking lot. "Doesn't sound like a sandpiper if you ask me." He shrugged. "Now if you'd been near the lake, sure. But this one?" He shook his head. "I don't know, Mary, but I'd bet my clappers it wasn't a sandpiper. I'd just tend to doubt it, that's all."

It was too late for the chicken. She'd save the chicken for tomorrow and warm up the pot roast she'd made the night before and go ahead and steam the green beans and boil a few potatoes. That would be nice. "You'll stay at my house tonight and tomorrow I'll drive you home," Mrs. Thorne said.

She had made the decision to go ahead and take the girl to the emergency room. Perhaps it had not been the right thing to do, perhaps they should have waited there in the front yard, but the foot really did need to be tended to, and it hadn't looked as if the father was coming.

"You like to play Scrabble?" Mrs. Thorne asked. In the dark of the car, she felt the girl look at her, then away.

"Okay then, how's your foot?" Mrs. Thorne asked after a while.

"He called the school."

"What?"

"My father," Alison said. Her name, Mrs. Thorne had discovered, was Alison Rhodes. "He called the school – I know it. He does everything they say. They told him not to pick me up and so of course he didn't."

It might have been the Grafton School down in Southfield, or the larger, fancier one in Stockbridge; Mrs. Thorne couldn't remember the name. They were schools for wayward teens, places parents sent children no one could handle. "Why would they tell him not to come?" Mrs. Thorne asked, though she could imagine perfectly well why.

Alison laughed, bitterly. "Tough love. It's in all the books. Oh, it's amazing, let me tell you. It really works. Totally unbelievable. Really." She looked out window again and snorted.

Mrs. Thorne did not say what instantly occurred to her regarding the use of sarcasm by young people. For this she was grateful. "So. You ran away from your school, then."

"Yeah."

Nor did she comment on the use of "yeah." Instead, she spoke of food. Food always worked as a topic of conversation, especially when nothing else would do. It was like the weather in that way: always changing, always important. "It's pot roast for dinner tonight," she said cheerily. "You'll feel better after you eat."

As Mrs. Thorne watched the girl wander about her den, she stood at the kitchen counter stringing beans and wishing she'd tidied up. While strict and kempt in many ways, Mrs. Thorne had never been much of a housekeeper. Cleaning rankled her; she couldn't find the rhythm in it people talked about. In the early years of her marriage, violent cleaning frenzies had gripped her regularly, but these days she felt too old to be gripped. Now, when she ventured, housekeeping was a desultory exercise

which exhausted her. Most of the time, she didn't see the point.

Mrs. Thorne smiled to herself. You're a slovenly old hermit woman with no friends, she told herself. That's what you are. This girl from Greenwich staring straight into your mess is exactly what you need.

To Mrs. Thorne's surprise, however, Alison turned to her and smiled her first genuine smile. "It's so nice here."

"Dirty you mean," Mrs. Thorne said, pleased.

"No, it's nice. It feels like someone lives here."

"Really?" Mrs. Thorne had stopped snapping the beans and was staring hungrily at the girl.

"Totally."

Mrs. Thorne turned and leaned back against the counter. "Well, to tell the truth, I can't keep it up anymore, it's just too much, even this little scrap of a house. I need someone –"

But the girl had wandered off into the den again.

Mrs. Thorne watched her swing herself around the armchair to the mantle where the large wind-up clock stood ticking. The girl hung there on her crutches, first peering at the clock and then into the one photograph in the room. "Dirt," she called back to Mrs. Thorne. "Everyone's always talking about their dirt."

"Are they really?" Mrs. Thorne called back happily. "Their dirt? How interesting."

Alison stood straight and looked about again. "So where are all the pictures of your grandkids and stuff?"

Mrs. Thorne slipped the potatoes into the boiling water.

Alison swung herself back across the den: over the braided rugs, past the newspapers and magazines stacked on chairs and tabletops, past the occasional cold, half-empty teacup and saucer, past the single wilted sunflower in the vase on the dining table and the crossword puzzle and the toast crumbs. Past the packed bookcases, dusty and sagging. "My stepmother's house is full of pictures. Hundreds of them. All in these nice little frames. Everyone smiling. With my stepmother, if you're not smiling. . ." Alison drew a forefinger across her throat. "It can get kind of ugly."

"Ugly?"

Alison waved her hand through the air. "Axed. Into the drawer, no frame. If you can't at least act happy, you can't be decor. It's not allowed."

Mrs. Thorne laughed outright, and then for one delighted moment – the girl standing there, smiling with her – she let herself imagine another life.

"So where are all the pictures?"

Mrs. Thorne turned and peeked into the oven. "I don't have children," she said to the pot roast.

There was a pause. In the pause, they both heard a car passing. After the car, there was the sound of the kitchen radiator ticking. "You don't?"

"Nope," Mrs. Thorne said, reaching for two plates. "Not even one. I . . . Well. . . I don't imagine. . . Anyway, we just didn't. Couldn't, then didn't. So."

Washing the dishes, Mrs. Thorne saw Alison's father's car drive by, very slowly. It had to be his car. It drove – at least as far as she could see – the whole length of Main Street as if searching for something. Mrs. Thorne watched the reflection of herself there in the glass, her other self, the self that was not running out onto the lawn to flag the man down. There was her white clipped hair, the white shoulders of her apron, her bony, dissatisfied chin. She reached up and yanked the curtain closed, and in the same instant, she imagined herself walking into the den, shuffling the girl and her crutches into the closet under the stairs, and locking it. Then she saw herself walking out front and standing there under the eyes of Cassiopeia, listening to the worried father noises coming from the man's eyes.

Mrs. Thorne put one hand to her cheek and stood there in the middle of the kitchen, staring at the electric clock with its twelve little red roosters, its cord hoary with dust. Why don't you break down and wash the filthy damn clock, she thought angrily. She could do that, right now. And then she looked over at the curtain she'd just drawn. She turned around once, uncertainly.

Elley's bottle of Old Granddad was in the cabinet over the refrigerator, high up behind the fondue set and the shoebox of cold and flu medicines. She hadn't had an alcoholic drink since her sister Clare's funeral fifteen years before, and that had been a watered-down glass of whiskey someone had given her. She'd sipped it next to the burnt-out lambs' ears that had died along with her sister and the rest of the garden all that mean, white summer.

"Why on earth do you have that thing in your eyebrow anyway?" Mrs. Thorne asked. It was later, they were sitting in the den, she in the armchair, Alison slumped in the far corner of the couch, sipping noisily at a cup of tea. She had again called her father who had not been home.

Alison felt for the ring. "This? I don't know. I like it I guess."

"You like it."

Alison shrugged. "I promised my friend Amanda I'd do it if she did. But I probably would have done it anyway."

"Ah hah. That's more like it. And the scarab? What does that signify?"

"Scarab?"

"The thing in your ear, that beetle."

Alison frowned. "What does it signify? It doesn't *signify* anything."

"It doesn't represent death or destruction or something like that?"

"No."

"I was thinking it meant you belonged to some kind of group or something."

Alison frowned at the fire. "No. I bought it. I liked it. I still like it. I hope that's like okay with you and everything."

Mrs. Thorne rose and poked at the fire. She put another log on. After that, she picked up the bark chips off the hearth and threw them into the flames. Finally, she turned back to Alison. "Let's have some ice cream. With my nice raspberry sauce. It's so lovely and fresh."

"I know a girl who pierced her left nipple," Alison said, slurping her

tea. "Well actually her boyfriend did it for her."

"Good Lord," Mrs. Thorne sat down, took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

"She's nice, she's a friend of mine, she's this regular person."

"Oh, she sounds regular, Alison. She sounds like an all-round great gal."

"No, I mean it. She's done this thing everyone thinks is weird, I mean those who've seen it –"

"– Good God. . ."

"But she's *normal*. Meanwhile, there's the supposedly normal people in their regular houses, everything looks fine. They have jobs and gardens and dogs. They, you know –"

"– the Unpierced."

"Yeah."

"Me."

Alison hesitated. Up on the mantle, the clock gobbled up another few seconds. The fire caught something, blazed. "Okay, yeah, you. Underneath all your normalness, your sureness about everything, your sureness about my jewelry and piercing, I mean, I'm sorry, but what's under all that?"

"I'm not normal is what you're saying."

Alison was staring across the room now, out the window. "Why do grown-ups have to act like they've got everything all figured out all the time, just because a kid's around? I mean it's so obvious they don't. My dad and stepmother are a mess. It's ridiculous. If anything, they're worse off than me."

"Worse off than I."

Alison looked up at the ceiling and laughed. "There it is. You did it. That's it exactly! Meanwhile. . . ." She waved toward the lone photo of Mr. Thorne on the mantle.

Mrs. Thorne looked up at her husband's face, then at Alison's. "Meanwhile, what?"

"Meanwhile my dad's not happy, he's miserable, but I'm supposed to like hang on his every word like he's Siddhartha or something just because. . . you know. . . just because I'm the. . ." Alison leaned forward and stared out the window. "Oh my God, that's his car." She stood, limped quickly to the front door and began fumbling with the latch.

Mrs. Thorne set her tea down, felt for the coarse hairs on her chin, didn't move.

"It's him! That's his car. It's my dad!" She tore at the latch a moment longer, then hit it. "Damn, I can't open this!"

"Alison. . ." Mrs. Thorne rose and unlocked the door. "Wait. . ." But the girl flew past her across the lawn, limping, yelling.

Mrs. Thorne watched from her stoop. There had been something else she was going to say, something about happiness, though she could not name it. She could feel it like the bird rising up and circling within her. The girl was standing in the middle of Route 23 waving her arms about her head, screaming. In less than a minute, the car's headlights swung back into view, and then the car itself appeared. It swerved to the shoulder and a man jumped out. And then – Mrs. Thorne saw it very clearly – they ran to

each other and embraced right there under the town's one street light as if in a play enacted just for her.

*Tringa solitaria* or *solitary sandpiper*. As its name suggests, this bird is most often seen by itself – a single migrant foraging along the margin of a wooded pond or stream. It is rather shy, and when approached will spring quickly into the air, uttering its ringing call note. She would not have heard the bird, that much was clear. The windows of the truck had been up; the truck's engine had been loud. But there could have been a ringing call note. Mrs. Thorne stares at the dark-eyed sandpiper in the color plate as she eats her bowl of ice cream with raspberry sauce and sips her tea. Again and again she reads the passage from the Audubon field guide.

The house is quiet. The girl and her father and the fellow from the school have gone. The police officer has filled out his report. The wind outside has picked up, and she can hear the pipes ticking in the walls. From the dining room table Mrs. Thorne stares out at the stubble of her front garden in the moonlight: the stiff sticks of the English daisies, the asters. She recalls the sprawl of peonies, the tiny lungwort blossoms. It is the same square of land and sky that she has seen morning and evening for forty-four years, that she will continue to see until she sees it no more. She rinses out her bowl and walks into the den where she sits on the couch in the place where the girl had sat.

For a long while she sits there, the girl at her back.

She is thinking that she has let both the bird and the girl and a great deal else slip from her grasp. However it has happened. The fire stumbles, falters, but she stays up anyway. She looks down at her own red and spotted hands, the knuckles swollen with arthritis and work, the flesh loose on the bones. Everything has shrunk, she thinks, trying to smile. She looks up again at the photo of her husband on the mantle, the photo the girl had waved toward as evidence of something. He looks out at her with that hooded, skeptical expression. She looks down at her fingers that won't quite straighten, the yellowed nails. Claws, she thinks and smiles again. You and your birds, she thinks. You and your birds and your stray children. She rubs the back of one hand and laughs. You're an old witch is what you are.

## Bedrock Blues

Fred's pounding the door again, put out  
By his own cat, limestone fists a cartoon blur.  
Those mitts were just helpless, up in the air  
In Mr. Slate's office as Fred stomped out,

A transmuted Gleason with a wall  
Of frustration that goes back before  
The stone age started. At home, he hollers  
At Barney, who knows like we do that Fred's not

Mad at him, he's angry at the guy  
Inside who can't quite get a handle on  
The random blocks of life that blot out  
The sun and come straight at him, too big

To dodge. Later, he'll make up with Barney,  
Kiss Wilma and we'll know he means it. Well,  
Here's to you, Fred, a toast in your honor,  
Just one more insignificant gesture,

Like beating a door, like saying a prayer,  
Like falling in love and staying there.

## Then Again

To find me, try the street of Mahoney's Fruit  
and Furniture, street of the Software Barn  
and the Sacred Heart Federal Credit Union,  
street where opposites mix, where all the bliss  
and rancor I recall, all the cluttered details  
of the past, reach a happy ending, settling in  
at the same address. The sun has almost finished  
drying patches of last night's rain. A cat  
trapped in a crawl space squirms out  
through a crack in the apartment building's foundation,  
stretches, purrs, and cleans herself  
by the feet of a dog, dozing in the driveway.  
A vagrant sits like a sultan on a ruby sofa  
set out as trash near the curb. He waves.  
All of my friends wave, too, as they pass  
in their polished convertibles. High above the street,  
behind a shade, my father and mother sleep  
in their one bed, each spooling out a dream  
briskly-plotted and comical. No need to wake them.  
Soon they will rise and go down together  
to breakfast, to the glistening pitcher of milk  
that waits in the Frigidaire. I'm only riding  
my bike up the block and back again, balanced  
on memory's rickety wheel. No need to wake them.

## The Woods

I go green and wild  
in the branches

between river leaves bleaching  
the sky Hopper blue

and a quick cairn of stones  
you might walk forever

stupid glee of the sun  
a dog's grin you might

wait your turn  
I make room on my disk

we count bohemian  
waxwings while crows

stutter September  
you're waiting to tell me

it's true the nights  
get famous colder

the house settles its head  
I'll walk behind a little

with this bundle of sticks  
soup bones

black books I see you  
towering like pines

you epilepsy rimmed  
with white light

## Metamorphoses

Myrrha prays for deliverance from implacable  
earth and flesh. Upflung in island light  
her bitter almond arms, hot sticky tears. But the womb's skin  
keeps taut, the sun sets – her father's child kicking –  
and she will have to choose like the rest of us.

Daphne's cries unlistened for – the god  
a greedy weight in the shade of a golden grove,  
her torn nails furrowing in hard dirt.  
Mocked by the pregnant moon. Pale virgin cigarette.  
Sunglasses hide her bruised, opened eyes.

Zeus haunts the bars, wedding ring  
in his pocket. He chats up kings' daughters  
who turn away slate faces  
to study clear martinis. He slurs Let me  
show you something, but no one sleeps with thunder.

And Orpheus sings elemental dark –  
the dying fall of myth's sweetest tenor.  
Hades and his demons fold their arms  
in iron chords. Eurydice burns like glass,  
a blond swoon, repeating singsongs of decay –

What falls, however slow? The stony autumn of orbit?  
The sea tilts in its goblet – acorns tumble  
through sleeves of rain – while lovers perch  
forever. In skin that's skin, in bone that's bone,  
rinsed, translucent, godlit –

## The Hour Between Midnight and Midnight

Was it the radical insufficiency, the snow in the rooms and walking  
From one to the other? Was it the iced-over pantomime of sleeping

Under a false set of stars, interrogating angels and getting nowhere?  
Was it how, in the imperfect wind-ordered eye of a neighbor's lake,

The moonlit yard became a palindrome, a symmetry too still to allow us  
To enter, dancing as we were, away from our private lives? Was it

An unintended isomer, or cloudcover to an intimacy colored just beyond  
The view our window afforded? Was it coming down the stairs unseen

And was there no way to stop it from stopping, to slow its intricate slowing,  
Or was it what we thought we heard, calling to us from below the arclights

With us pretending to miss it? What else could it have been if not the hour  
Between midnight and midnight, a meridian of suspended acoustics and torque,

When you turned to me and, living it over, said these were the orchestrations  
Of two glaciers fretting, but it would take more than that to see in the dark.

## Desolation Wilderness

Everything I've done, each conversation,  
all the books, every body –  
especially the bodies – burnishes the bits  
and particles of me or takes  
some sheen away, and yet I am continuous  
and exactly the same. I know this,  
for I can come back to California, summer  
upon summer, and scramble up the landscape  
of my fundamental heart – childheart of the waves  
at Big Sur beach, adultheart hiking the switchback trails  
to Echo Lake – and wonder  
at how these elevations, mountains of no forgiveness  
for the uncertain foot, complete me.  
The wild outcroppings and sheer cliffs,  
the nubby plants that scratch  
my calves, and the dry pine heated air,  
correspond. Or don't quite,  
at least not in the way I wish to be made  
whole, otherwise, wouldn't I have stayed at home  
among the cottonwoods, the silvery grasses  
and infrequent riffs of flower  
that satisfy my need for color so thoroughly  
I hardly see them? Wouldn't I have continued to thrive  
where nothing but scrub rises above the fire line,  
where one time I woke up mid-day and found the sky  
charcoaled to night, the moon scarlet?

## Penumbra

Mother of my birth, how lonely  
it must be in the fierce  
aftermath of will,

and how I dither, here  
with my vocabulary of refusals  
and longing, as if

any word might burn us.  
Now I long to comfort you  
and be consoled by you,

and you –  
nothing softened  
but the durable, unendurable

body which betrays us  
all, and brings the spirit  
down with it.

The burden of our memories –  
what was once painful to endure –  
to what purpose

should I recall them to us?  
Yet they are what we have:  
what you said, where

you drove me, our plunge  
into the backyard river depths  
where Daddy saved me –

Clever mother of my birth,  
of oatmeal and x-ray vision,  
of moral lessons and the world

as enemy, who waited for me  
to love you,  
as I couldn't help loving,

when your cracked rages  
against me had no source  
we could acknowledge –

now I want to tell you,  
Don't speak, let me imagine  
your sweetness, my tender

devotion, not that harshness  
palpable  
as a stone curtain

no caress can reach through,  
not to us, not to you  
furious in your crank bed,

not to me, alight here  
on an orange armchair,  
while the television goes on and on,

loud, cacophonous,  
a million gaudy circuses,  
unfathomable circuitry.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

AGHA SHAHID ALI, a Kashmiri-American poet/translator/critic, is Director of the M.F. A. Creative Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. His seven collections of poetry include *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (Wesleyan University Press), *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (SUN/Gemini Press), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (W.W. Norton), *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (Viking Penguin), and *The Country Without a Post Office* (Norton). He has won fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Ingram-Merrill Foundation, the Breadloaf Writers' Conference, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

MARIA BLACK's stories have appeared in *The Sun*, *Indiana Review* and *Seattle Review*. Among other things, she is a Texan transplanted to rural New England, a recovering MBA, a mother of two young children, and a writer at work on her first novel.

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JOSHUA COREY won an Intro Award from the Associated Writing Programs and was a finalist for the Ruth Lilly Fellowship. His poems have appeared in *Puerto del Sol* and *The Nebraska Review* and a chapbook, *Planets of a Cold Spring*, was published under the auspices of the Merriam-Frontier Award by The University of Montana last fall. He lives in Missoula, Montana.

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PATRY FRANCIS' poems have previously appeared in numerous journals including *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry Northwest* and *The Beloit Poetry Journal*. A former recipient of a Poetry Fellowship from the Massachusetts Artists' Foundation, she is currently seeking a publisher for her first collection.

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DEBORAH LANDAU's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *New York Quarterly*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Mudfish*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Salamander* and *Midwest Quarterly*, and she has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She teaches at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

PAUL LISICKY's novel *Luzmbury* is forthcoming from Turtle Point in October 1999. His stories and essays have appeared in many magazines and anthologies, including *Mississippi Review*, *Flash Fiction* and *Men on Men* 6. His awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Michener/Copernicus Society and the Fine Arts Work Center.

WILLIAM LOGAN's most recent book of poems, *Vain Empires* (Penguin) was published in 1998. His new book of poems, *Night Battle* (Penguin), and a new book of essays and reviews, *Reputations of the Tongue* (Florida), will be published this fall. He teaches at the University of Florida.

GAIL MAZUR is the author of three books of poems, *Nightfire*, *The Pose of Happiness*, and *The Common*. Her fourth collection, *They Can't Take That Away From Me*, will be published in early 2001 by the University of Chicago Press. She lives in Provincetown and Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she teaches in the Graduate Program of Emerson College and is the founding director of the Blacksmith House Poetry Series.

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ANDREW ZAWACKI is co-editor of *Verse* and reviews for the TLS. His poems have appeared in *The New Republic*, *The Yale Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Boston Review*, *Agni*, *Fence* and elsewhere.

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