# New Orleans Review

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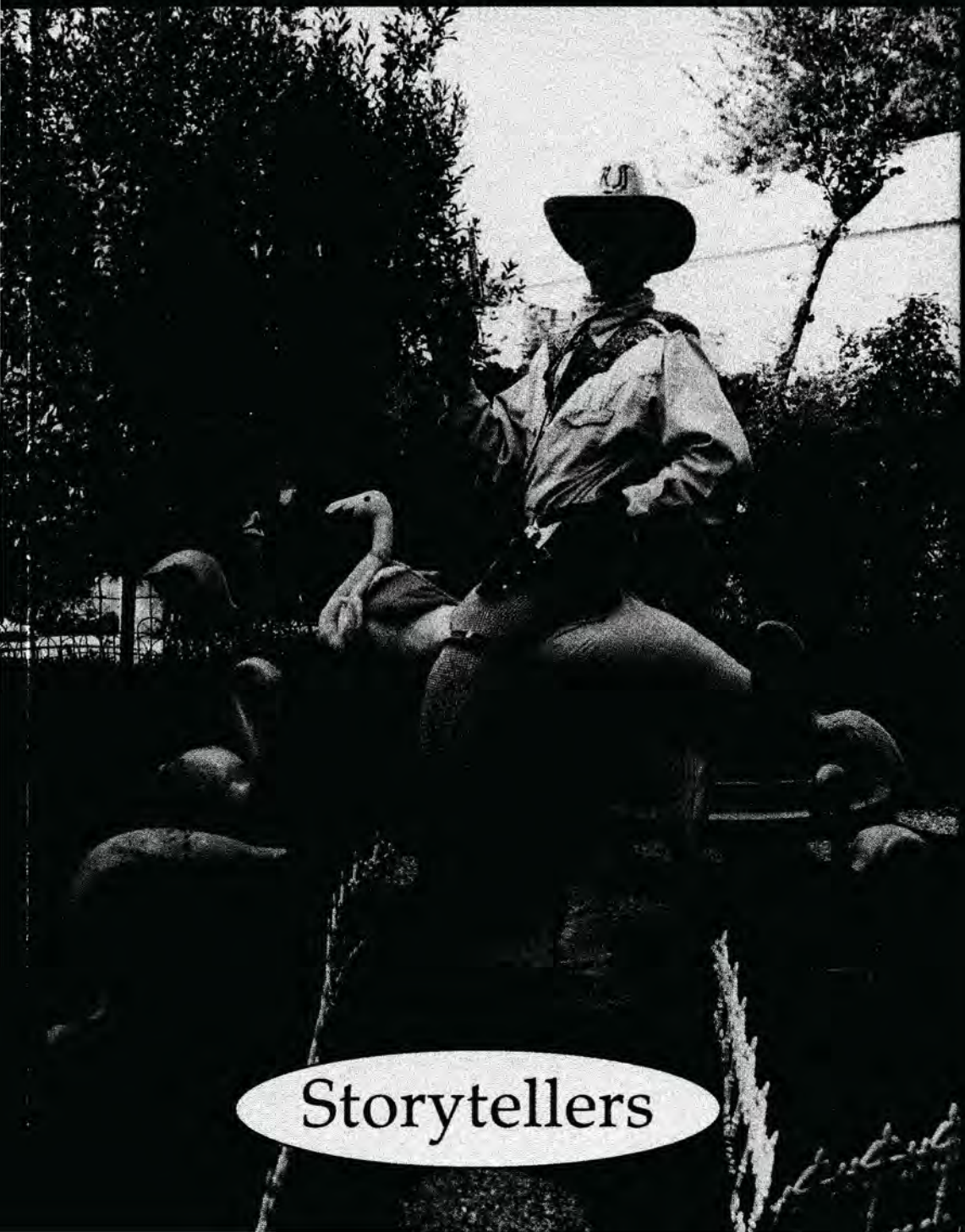

## Storytellers

# New Orleans Review

Spring 1995

IN MEMORIAM
KIMBERLY ST. GERMAIN
FORMER STAFF MEMBER
1960-1995

*Bist du noch da? In welcher Ecke bist du?—*
*Du hast so viel gewußt von alledem*
*und hast so viel gekonnt, da du so hingingst*
*für alles offen, wie ein Tag, der anbricht.*

*from "REQUIEM FÜR EINE FREUNDIN"*
*by Rainer Maria Rilke*

Are you still here? Are you standing in some corner?—
You understood so much of all of this
and could do so much; you passed here
open to all things, like a day, dawning.

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Mary A. McCay and Christine Wiltz

# AN INTERVIEW WITH VALERIE MARTIN

Valerie Martin was born in Sedalia, Missouri, grew up in New Orleans, and has taught at several universities, among them the University of New Orleans, Mount Holyoke, and the University of Massachusetts. She is currently living in Rome. Her novels include *Set in Motion, Alexandra, A Recent Martyr, Mary Reilly,* and *The Great Divorce*. She has also published a book of short stories, *The Consolation of Nature*. Martin was interviewed on December 27, 1994, at the home of Christine Wiltz, a long-time friend.

MM I would like to begin by asking you what is most important for you in the act of creating fiction? You often use other writers, historical events, or urban myths to center your writing. Why is that technique important for you?

VM I've spent a long time doing my version of other writers, of writers I liked. The stories in *The Consolation of Nature* are almost entirely the result of my reaction to writers and stories that I liked. There is a Hawthorne story, a Cheever story, and my version of James Joyce's "The Dead," which is called "The Freeze." I thought about these stories, and what it was about them that I admired, and I reworked them, very loosely touching on the original situation. There is some historical stuff, but it surprises me when people think of me as an historical writer. I don't think of my writing that way. It's just that old stories attract me. The only one that I ever had to do a whole lot of research for was *Mary Reilly*. In *The Great Divorce*, I used stories that I knew from my childhood. I don't think that it's necessary for me to have an historical component. *A Recent Martyr* moves into the future; *Set in Motion* doesn't really have an historical component. Strictly speaking, *Alexandra* doesn't, but it is a reverse gothic. In the gothic novel, a woman is taken away and imprisoned in a big house. In my novel a man is imprisoned by two women. I thought that was funny, but nobody else did.

MM So reactions to your reading are an important element in your fiction?

VM Yes, when I am thinking about writing, I often read and react to fiction, but when I begin to write, I cannot read fiction; I read non-fiction. When I was working on *The Great Divorce* I read about veterinary medicine, zoos, nature and about humanity's present situation vis-a-vis nature. When I was writing *Mary Reilly*, I read lots of diaries of working-class

people, Victorians. I read essays about Victorian life. I also read Dickens, but that was the only fiction I read.

MM It is impossible to read your fiction and not be struck by the abundance of animal life in your stories and novels. What do animals signify for you and how do they work as a part of your fiction?

VM I don't think I knew when I started writing how important animals were to me, but when I look back at all my work I see just how significant animals are to my stories. I think that's caused by two things. The first is that nature is ever-present; we can't get away from nature, especially in New Orleans. When I was a child, I used to love to be outdoors, in my treehouse. I just loved to hear birds and the buzzing world. I didn't even mind the mosquitoes. I just slapped them. Roaches are ever-present. That is one thing I love about New Orleans. You just can't get away from the encumbrance, the flourishing and oozing, of nature. I think that view was, from childhood, an unconscious sensibility that came into my work in a very natural way. Later, I began to understand the awful fate of nature in the contemporary world, and I began to see the contradiction in the idea of wanting to live in human society and wanting to care about nature. Then the animals began to move to the forefront. I noticed it especially in *The Consolation of Nature*, which I originally referred to as "Dead Animal Stories." I just wrote a few stories without thinking of putting them together; then I noticed there was a dead animal in each one, and so I began actively seeking dead animal stories, that is, asking people for stories. I asked Chris Wiltz what was the worst thing that happened to her and she gave me the story that became the title story.

MM Was the story about the enormous rat your story, Chris?

CW That was my story; I told Valerie that I wasn't going to use it, so she could have it. Now every time Valerie writes a story about a rat, one shows up at my house. It's terrible!

VM In most of my stories animals have the metaphorical value they have for everybody, but for me personally, they have a special value because I sense that the loss of them is so imminent and so personally sad. It makes me angry. I was talking to a man in Chicago who put together collections of stories about cats and dogs published by Doubleday, *The Company of Cats* and *The Company of Dogs*. The proceeds of the books go to animal shelters. When I was talking to him about *The Great Divorce*, he said, "What I like about your work is that you are inconsolable." I really do feel that way. The loss of the wild really is unbearable. Fiction is a way of dealing with loss, with loss so great we cannot be consoled. When I was a child I knew this unconsciously, and as I have gotten older, it has moved to the forefront of my notion of subject matter.



MM Certainly in *The Great Divorce* the loss of animals is central, and related to that menagerie of wild and domestic, living and dead animals and related to what you just said, you often focus on nature gone awry—the plague in *A Recent Martyr*, the siege of the rat in "The Consolation of Nature," the lost snakes in "The Woman Who Was Never Satisfied," and the strange killing virus attacking the great cats in the zoo in *The Great Divorce*. Yet your characters seem to crave the natural world to escape the ugliness of their lives and their built environment, so nature is really a consolation, isn't it?

VM Oh, yes. I think it is interesting that you speak of nature gone awry because it is not nature gone awry. A plague is a natural occurrence, and the rat's behavior is perfectly natural. In part that is what I am reacting to—the feeling that we are a part of nature, but we fail to sympathize with or understand the way nature operates. Also, there is the real pickle that we can't live in nature, but we can't live without it. Unfortunately, what we really want is to be comfortable and living in the natural world is hard and dangerous. It is one thing to weep for the loss of your pet dog, but to really weep for the extinction of a species, a toad or an owl, that is a different thing. If we could have a choice between owls and a comfortable life without owls, most people would take the comfortable choice, especially if having owls means you have to go without, or chase your dinner down with a knife.

CW I have a question about *The Great Divorce* that is related to that. Some people think that the message of the book is that we should go back to nature. Certainly what you are saying belies that. I think that is a very superficial reading, but a lot of people read the book that way. Could you talk about the ways in which that is not the message of the book.

VM There are several places in the book that practically I come right out and say "We can't go back to nature." I have a little spiel in the book about how going back to nature today consists of standing on a hill and saying, "I want to build my house here." The popular notion of going back to nature is very superficial, but it is also a part of our desire to find a way to cause less destruction as individuals and also as a species. A lot of people think that the book is about going back to nature. Even my editor thought that's what it was about. I think because there is a sort of recommendation in the book that the wild has something that we need, and people who want to go back to nature think that, too. People

want to think that if they could be more wild, more like the Indians, they would not require dishwashers, but in fact that is not the case. The Indians were just as destructive as we are. Given the time and the numbers, they probably would have wiped out the buffalo eventually.

CW Do you think that part of our desire to go back to nature has something to do with the fact that at one time we were a part of the wild?

VM That's the thing the book is about, and that's what puzzles me again and again, so I can't stop writing about it. I keep going back to it, and my new book is about it, too. Why do we have this memory of being at peace with nature when from everything we can discover, it has been a battle from the beginning? Ever since we came down out of the trees, things began to get bad, and it has been bad ever since. Yet we have this idea of a natural paradise. Where does this memory come from? Every civilization seems to have it—the Indians have it, the Chinese have it. Certainly Western culture is rooted in this notion. We were in paradise and we were thrown out. We have to get back to the garden. It's a crazy thing, a memory of something that never could have been.

CW When I was a kid I used to have these feelings, once when I was watching the Mississippi River, getting into the rhythm of the water, and feeling for the first time that I had become one with nature. It's a bit of a cliché, but do you think that feeling makes us long for a romantic notion of nature?

VM I think it does happen to children all the time, and it happened to me and happens to me even now when I am alone in the woods when no one else is around and everything is silent. Those are wonderful moments. That is part of the romance of the Indian. The Indian is seen as one who can read nature better than we can. He keeps his ears and eyes open in a visceral way, more like an animal. He can tell if it is going to be a cold winter, what animal has just gone by, where the deer are. He has a sensitivity to the natural world that we have lost. That sensitivity is a way to get back to nature, and that is a really important feeling. To me those are the happiest moments when I feel I am a part of something. But then I wake up and realize that what I'm part of is the destruction of that "something" I felt a part of.

CW And when you get struck with that notion, do the happy moments become rather melancholic?

VM Yes, they do. That's what romantic poetry is all about— about loss.



MM Then why, Valerie, do I find, and many others find that your novels and stories end with a burst of joy, or an almost unwarranted exultation, given the facts of the story? How do you account for that almost inexplicable sense of possibility in the world you have created?

VM I can't. Why do I have happy endings, happy moments? I just can't account for it—in spite of my recognition that there is realistically no out for us, no way to return to nature, and no way for us to escape nature either. It is not as if there is a real separation. Where can you go where you are not in nature? I can't account for the moments of joy, but I know that people do experience them. The fact that your heart beats, that the planet still moves, that you are still alive. I remember a friend who was stabbed and nearly died. She was staying at my house and I was taking care of her. I brought a flower into her room one day and then went away. When I came back, she was holding the flower, just looking at it, and she said that the flower had made her day. She couldn't even express how wonderful the flower was for her. I know that is true. Sometimes after great suffering and pain, we see the beauty of life, and that brings us real joy. To me, those moments are worth the pain.

CW I would like to speak to you as a writer, about your craft, from a writer's viewpoint. In *A Recent Martyr* you chose a rather difficult point of view in that Emma is your narrator, yet part of the story is the separate relationship between two other characters, Pascal and Claire. Why did you choose such a point of view, but more importantly, how did you make that work?

VM I think when I started I didn't really quite know what I was up against. I wanted to write a story about somebody who was watching somebody else. In a story of that kind the subject is always the watcher, the voyeur. This comes with the first person point of view. Whenever you have a first person narrator, such as in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," I always tell my students that the lawyer tries to tell the story of Bartleby, but the story he tells is really about his own terrific moral struggle. Bartleby is, in fact, a resistant, immovable object against which the narrator throws himself again and again, and in the process reveals himself. I wanted to do something like that. I wanted my narrator to be trying to observe another person; she is trying to observe Claire, but the problem is she is also describing her love affair and the triangle that develops, so she ends up having to describe the relationship between Claire and her lover. She hears various things that happen, she has to intuit a bit, and she has to make up the story of what happens between them. In fact, nothing happens between Claire and Pascal, and that just about drives Emma out of her mind. I liked that because it creates a lot

of tension and forces Emma to reveal herself, which is, from the first person point of view, what the writer is up to. I was trying to break the character down, to show how she operated, without having her say, "This is how I operate." I wanted her to reveal her motives without knowing what she was doing. I couldn't have done it any other way. I needed that point of view, and I didn't think it was really that original. I think I have seen other books that have done that sort of thing, but I ran into difficulty, and the book was turned down several times because of the point of view. One editor actually said he would be interested in buying the book if I would change the point of view. I was desperate for a sale, but I wouldn't do it because, to me, that point of view was, in a way, the subject of the book.

CW Well, I think you made the right decision because the book is about revelation through imagination.

VM That is what the book is about and the narrator does come to amazing revelations not only about her own character but about the nature of the ties that exist between people.

MM It is interesting that you had trouble selling the book about a triangle told from a woman's point of view because, in fact, there are countless stories of that sort told from the man's perspective. If it had been Pascal's point of view, you might not have had trouble selling the book. It would have been a very different book, but I wonder if you would have had trouble selling it.

CW That's really a good point.

MM Related to that idea of point of view is the way in which characters link up in your fiction. There is the Emma and Claire friendship in *A Recent Martyr*, and there is the relationship between Alexandra and Diana in your early novel, *Alexandra*, and there seems to be the hint that there could be a female friendship in *The Great Divorce* between Camille and Ellen.

VM Ellen turns her back on Camille. She has the opportunity to help, but she doesn't.

MM I'd like you to talk about those female friendships in terms of coping with the world and in terms of how the qualities of those friendships are important to you as a writer.



VM There is also one in *Set in Motion*, too. There are two women who should be fighting over a man, but they don't fight at all. They accept what he is and how they have been forced to relate to him. Finally they realize they are going to have to part because of him. Those friendships are really important to me. I don't think enough has been written about friendships between women. I think often those relationships are described as ones that could be smashed by the entrance of a man. I like to write about those that couldn't be. I think that has come up again and again. I also write a lot about mothers and daughters. I guess in a sense *Mary Reilly* is one of my only characters who is a friendless woman. Almost all my other women have a woman they can turn to talk to.

MM In "The Consolation of Nature," the mother combs the daughter's hair and a closeness is engendered between the two, and then, after the siege with the rat, the daughter wants to have her hair cut and the mother doesn't object. There is a kind of breaking there, too, isn't there?

VM Yes, but there is also a scene in that story that actually took place between me and my grandfather. The digging in the soil. That story is full of symbols, but the moment when the girl hands her mother the soil and they both experience its warmth is not a breaking, but a bonding. The mother is like the earth. It is in the mother's embrace that the child is safe. When my agent first read the story, she told me I should change the last line because the child would realize she's not safe, so I changed the ending from safe to not safe. Then, a few weeks later, I changed it back. I didn't know quite what I meant, but I knew the child was safe, safe in her femaleness.

MM Speaking of that story, there is a female friendship here between two writers, Valerie Martin and Chris Wiltz, who support each other and share stories. How does that affect you both as writers?

CW She's a lifeline.

VM I can't do without her. There are daily faxes.

MM Are there really daily faxes?

VM Sometimes, sometimes hourly faxes. When I see her faxes coming through, I love it when they are two pages.

MM But you live very far away from Chris and from the subject of much of your writing. Living in Rome, do you feel the strain of being an expatriate for the time being?

VM A little bit. I keep coming back. I don't know how long it will last. I don't think of myself as an expatriate. When I moved to Massachusetts, the local paper referred to me as an expatriate writer, and I'd only moved out of state.

CW You had the audacity to leave New Orleans.

VM I had the opportunity to take a look at the old world, and it is worth looking at, especially now. Europe is really interesting right now, but I am not writing very much, so it has been a little difficult.

CW When you're in Europe do you find that your view of the United States changes?

VM Very much so.

CW How does that happen; how does your view change?

VM I like the United States better. I think the thing I have come to appreciate is how well our government works. We are really the only democracy ever to understand the essential feature of democracy— that you have an election and live with the winner until the next election. Other countries have very little patience with unpopular leaders. They think if someone turns out to be a bad guy, you should just get rid of him.

MM That's interesting because that need for instant gratification would seem to be more an American trait. Europeans have been living with problems for so long, you would think there would be more resignation.

VM They don't have the checks and balances we have that make our government processes move very slowly. In Italy they have created an impossible version of democracy that requires a coalition of people at the top scrapping over every piece of legislation.

MM So in a way, as an "expatriate," you are more consciously an American. Are you more consciously a New Orleanian?

VM I don't think there was ever a time when I wasn't a New Orleanian. I am trying to work on a book that takes place in New England. This is the first time I have tried that; maybe that is why I am not getting very far.

CW To go back to living outside the U.S. You are seeing the political structures more clearly, so do you think that politics will figure more prominently in your fiction in the future?



VM The book I am working on now is about a Utopia—how could we live better? What would be a good society? The sad thing about this country is that while it is in some ways a smoothly operating democracy, it is a nightmare. It's a terrifically violent culture full of murderers and people who don't read. The Italians have no government to speak of, but most of them can quote Dante, and none of them have guns.

CW So this leads right into your own issues about freedom.

VM It does. That's why I am interested in Utopias.

MM That was a question that came up for me while I was reading your fiction. Character after character seeks freedom. The most obvious one is Paul in *The Great Divorce*, who struggles to be free then doesn't know what to do with his freedom. What constitutes freedom for you? What do you think of when you think of that word?

VM I agree with Ellen [in *The Great Divorce*]. It is a word that has no meaning. People have come to think it is desirable, that they must have it at all cost, and that they have a right to it, but my observation of what is going on in the world is that we don't. I would like to have a character say that we don't have a right to freedom, all we have left is obligations.

MM That sounds very New England. Your seven years in Massachusetts have had some impact on you.

VM There is something to be said for the way New Englanders view the world.

CW Walker Percy once said that he thought we were oppressed by freedom. Do you agree?

VM I don't think we are oppressed by freedom. We are oppressed by the idea of freedom. To say we are oppressed by freedom implies that we have it, but I don't think we have it. We just have a notion that we should have it. Americans associate freedom with happiness, and they think they have a right to both. It's written into the Declaration of Independence—Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. But pursuit is different from actually having it. The founding fathers may have observed that we can't have it, we can only pursue it.

MM Speaking of that freedom, with *Mary Reilly* you got freedom. What happened?

VM I like it. My highest expectations were simply to get a tenure track job and to stay in it until I retired. I never expected to be liberated from teaching. When I got the chance, I jumped at it. I can write all the time. *Mary Reilly* was the first book that made it possible to devote all my time to my next book, and *The Great Divorce* shows it. The amount of concentration I was able to put into that three-year project shows in the novel. I was never distracted from the book. I never had to pull myself out of my fantasy world and into my students'. I was able to work without having to change gears. I got all three stories in the novel started early and they worked together from the beginning. I was never distracted from the work at hand.

MM Speaking of students, do you think that you can teach students to be good writers or can you only teach them to appreciate good writing?

VM No, I don't think I can teach them to be good writers. Writing is essentially a gift. The movie, "Amadeus," about Mozart and Salieri, is a good description of teaching writing. You get a student who is obnoxious, but who has a gift. Then you have a hard worker who has no gift. You can't change that. You can only work with what each has. I once had a woman in my class who told me that I ruined reading romance novels for her because she began to realize how bad they were. I guess that is what I can do. I teach young writers to find better books to read. In the last ten years or so a lot of my students, even graduate students, have been coming into my classes without ever having read any European literature, or any early American literature. They have only read books published since the fifties. So getting them to read old books is, I feel, an obligation and sometimes an eye-opener for them.

CW I found that to be the case. I had a student who took a writing workshop from me who told me that many of the books I had the class read she never would have read on her own because they would have intimidated her. This leads me to the question about the difference in the way critics and scholars read and the way writers read.

VM Well, it is completely different. That is why I think teaching creative writing at university is, despite what some may say about it, really valuable. Of the people who want to write, most will figure out how anyway. Others may never write, but they also don't know how to read the way writers read. Writers can teach them that. They won't learn how to do that in a literature class. Critics read what's there for meaning. Writers read to find out how it got there, how it works. It's really so much more nuts and bolts kind of reading. A critic may pay attention to diction, but a writer has to look at a sentence over and over to see how it is put together, not what it means. In fact, when I teach writing students a story, I don't ever even fool with the meaning. I talk about point of view and how it operates. We don't even talk so much about the finished product but rather the construction of it. When I read, I read very slowly to see how the story is put together.

CW I think reading slowly is a writer's disease. Many writers I speak to tell me they read more and more slowly as they get older.

VM The other thing is liberating students from the idea that what they write has to mean anything. Of course it will, no matter how you try. Especially if you are a good writer, it will mean something. But starting out to mean something and filling a story full of meanings and clues is a very artificial way of writing. Students read something like *The Old Man and the Sea*, and they want to turn everything into a symbol. It is what young writers often do. As a writer, though, you can't work from outside and shove meaning into the story; it has to grow organically like a plant. I think you can learn that from reading if you read like a writer because, instead of noticing the fish as a symbol, you notice the scales, the size of the tail. It is an actual fish, not a symbolic one. You see how it arrived in the story, rather than how it looks once the story is over.

CW Execution rather than explication, as in *The Great Divorce*. When I first read that novel, I was impressed by the seamlessness of the three stories. You have three story lines, yet there is never a wrenching. How did that happen?

VM I had the notion of the three stories in my head early on, and even wrote a proposal for the book—it doesn't look anything like the finished novel, but from the beginning I had the idea for the three stories. I got all three stories underway very quickly. That was my goal in the beginning of the book. The scenes at the beginning of the book are short ones, but they get longer as the novel develops. Once I got all my characters set in the reader's mind, I was able to work on each for a time and then move on to another without any wrenching of the reader's concentration. The actual counterpoint of the stories came naturally. I worked every day until I came to a stopping place. Then the next day, I would move over to another story. They all fit together so naturally. There were three dinner parties, the grand dinner party at the antebellum mansion where Elizabeth met Hermann, followed by the annoying party at Ellen and Paul's house while he is still plotting his break for freedom, and then Camille's cheese sandwich with Eddie in the diner. Later the theme of imprisonment ran through all the stories. Elizabeth was locked up by her husband, Camille was always locked up, and the animals in the zoo

are locked up. I wrote the novel very slowly, about four pages a day, and always moved naturally from one story to the next. All that contributed to the seamlessness of the novel.

CW As you were writing, did the notion of imprisonment that was organically growing out of the stories become clear to you, or did you see it after the fact?

VM I saw it as it was happening. In fact, I can remember the day I realized it. *The Great Divorce* was about imprisonment.

MM But all your novels are about imprisonment. In fact, another take on freedom is imprisonment, and in all your novels, that theme recurs. You focus on imprisonment in *A Recent Martyr*, in *Set in Motion*, in *Alexandra*, and in *Mary Reilly*. Mary Reilly is imprisoned by the secret of her past, and Dr. Jekyll makes a prison for himself that he cannot escape. The metaphor of imprisonment runs through every part of your work. How do you understand it? Why are you so drawn to it?

VM I guess I have grown into the metaphor. I have always thought of the body as a prison, and the subject matter of a lot of my books is about that—that imprisonment that we all share. I think that I didn't really understand how complex the notion of freedom and imprisonment was until recently. I think I believed there was a solution to this conundrum of the value of the wild, and our need for the wild to be imprisoned. I have come to see that this is an insoluble problem. As a young writer, I admired Camus; I went to his grave recently in France. It is quite a thing to see, very simple, very sad. As a young writer, I identified with outsiders. I was drawn to the notion of people who were anti-social, cut off from the rest of the world in some way. This is a romantic notion, and young writers are often romantics. My early heroines are cut off, and that is fine. It's like the young woman in "Why I Live at the P.O." who is finally driven to live in the P.O. and says, "Here I am and here I'll stay." As I have grown older, I have come to see that the romantic notion of the outsider in love with death doesn't solve a thing. It only makes life worse. We have to find ways to create communities. This is exactly the progression Camus makes. In *The Stranger*, the hero is the outsider, the murderer, but in *The Plague*, there is a sincere argument for the necessity of community. There is no God, but there is a need to hold on to what is good.

MM In your fiction, while you do not speak of God, there is certainly a hint of a real spiritual quest hiding behind the murder, death, and chaos of much of what you write.



VM That's another conflict for me. I really am attracted to the Christian ideal; however, no church has anything to do with that anymore, and maybe never did. While I was a non-Catholic in a Catholic high school, I read stories about the lives of the saints, many of whom did live entirely good lives, devoted to the teachings of Christ as they understood them. St. Francis of Assisi is my latest interest. Of all the saints, he grasped most completely the very simple dictum of Christ, which is simply this, you can't own property and be like Christ. So he resolved to be a beggar. He refused even the idea of community property, which was both his triumph and his ruination. Unfortunately, in spite of my fascination with saints and mysticism, I don't believe that Jesus was God, nor do I believe that there is a God up there directing our lives, determining whether so-and-so has a happy life or not. A lot of people lately are grabbing on to the notion of Gaia, the planet as a self-regulating goddess. It's just like people to do this, there has to be a goddess somewhere regulating things. The revenge of the rainforest is another recent fantasy. Really, it's so absurd and superstitious, it's touching in a way. I would love to believe it, but the rational part of me just rejects that out of hand. I really wish that I could believe in God, but I don't.

CW Yet you are perceived of as a Catholic writer. In fact, I understand you were once invited to a conference at Loyola to speak as a Catholic writer. Did you go?

VM No, I wrote a letter and told them that I was not now and had never been a Catholic. I got a letter from a priest who assured me that my Catholicity was not a problem; the group still wanted me to come and speak. He had read *A Recent Martyr* and was interested in my character, Claire, who may or may not be a saint. I like to think she would be accepted in the church as a saint and a martyr. I had conflicts—time and teaching—and couldn't speak, but I was very interested. There is a lot I like about Catholicism. I think it is possible to be a good person and a Catholic, though not all Catholics are good people. There are things that Catholicism teaches about spirituality and mysticism and about what good is that ring true for me still.

MM Is that why you have turned to St. Francis?

VM Yes, I think he may have been the last good man. I'm trying to fit him into my new novel.

MM You are writing about a New England Utopia, but how is St. Francis going to fit into that?

VM I know that's going to be tough. I don't know who my character is yet, whether he is St. Francis or knows about St. Francis. I would like to retell some of the stories that I know about St. Francis because he is a really interesting character, and I am fascinated by his belief that if you were going to be good, you had to give up property. Even the church did not want to do that. They did not want to charter his order in that way. As he was dying he knew he had lost his life-long battle, that the Franciscans would have community property. There is a story of how, when he learned that some of his monks had built a stone house to live in, he went up on the roof and began to throw down the tiles like Christ throwing the moneylenders out of the temple. He was betrayed in the end, as he was dying he knew that his order would not follow his rule and live as beggars.

MM Is this St. Francis the same man who communed with animals?

VM Yes, he did. In fact, he catechized the birds, and he spoke of Brother Sun and Sister Moon. The thing I like best about his naming is that he called his body Brother Ass. The communion with the birds is a bit overstated, though. He wasn't a vegetarian. He was definitely a 13th century Italian. He talked with the birds, then he cooked them.

MM I would like to ask you some more questions about *Mary Reilly* because it is the book by which you are most well known and when the movie comes out, it will bring you a lot of publicity. What is it that attracted you to the story of Dr. Jekyll?

VM Well, it is the obvious thing. In the novel, Dr. Jekyll writes that from an early age he found himself, in essence, living a lie. He was split. He wanted to have the respect of society, but he also had anti-social urges that caused him lots of trouble. He was imprisoned by the conflicting sides of his nature. I read a lot of Victorian essays while I was working on the book. Huxley, Darwin, and others, men of science and of letters—Hardy, for example—all understood that we were creating a world in which it would be impossible to live with a clear conscience. Such speculation is all over now. We are living in that world.

MM Dr. Jekyll is separating himself from the impulses he was afraid of by creating another person. He was trying to free himself from the responsibility for part of himself.

VM Yes, he thought that if he could get the bad impulses to go one way and he could go another, he could rest, but, of course, he couldn't.



MM I would like to ask you a bit about the movie, and I suppose several people have wanted your impressions of the movie. Chris and I have spent a good deal of time casting the movie, and I suppose you had your choices as well. If you could have chosen the cast, did you have people in mind?

VM Yes, John Malkovich was one, but I did want them to use two actors. A woman who wrote a screen play for *Mary Reilly*, and not a bad one at that, wanted me to get it in to the right hands, and she proposed Donald and Kiefer Sutherland, and I even suggested that to the powers that be, but the idea was overruled. John Malkovitch had worked with Stephen Frears, and he did an excellent job in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Many people who worked with Frears in *Les Liaisons* are in *Mary Reilly*.

MM Do you feel that the movie illustrates, because it is visual, some of the concerns that you had when you were writing the book?

VM A little, but at this point the movie has very little to do with the book. Right now, I am trying to have some impact on the ending of the movie. The book's ending all happens off stage, so I am working on an ending to bring it on stage.

MM How does the movie deal with Mary Reilly's psychic longing for a father, for somebody gentle and kind?

VM It doesn't really. And that is the thing about movies; they aren't the books they are taken from. Everything has to be more explicit. The subtleties of Mary's character are gone. I've actually lost touch with much of what is going on in the movie.

CW As long as we are talking about movies, we might as well talk about sex and violence. In your work there is a definite connection between sex and violence. How do sex and violence co-exist in such a way as to create a sense of peril and yet still give the reader a sexy scene?

VM Well, that just shows how *you* are. Some people don't find those scenes very sexy; they find them offensive.

CW Who might those people be?

VM People with an agenda. I think sex and violence are related and we don't have to stretch our imaginations to see how they are. I did not make it up. It's not new with me.

CW Some of your critics complain because they say that the way you connect sex and violence is rather repugnant and that your novels are demeaning to women.

VM I was not invited to read in Salem because the woman who scheduled the readers said that she was tired of the woman-as-victim theme, and I could just stay the hell out of Salem. I did eventually read in Salem, the first chapter from *Mary Reilly*, and someone in the audience told me that Mary would not have had kind feelings for her master. She said a working woman would not have had any respect for her master, who obviously doesn't really care for her. It was another instance of my turning women into victims.

MM I don't find many of your women to be victims, so the idea of the victimization of women doesn't really come up very often, except when women victimize themselves. There is one scene, however, that I do find particularly violent, but it isn't explicit violence. It is the scene between Paul and Ellen, in *The Great Divorce*, on his last night before he leaves to find his freedom. They have sex all night long, sleeping and waking, weeping and making love. I asked myself, What is he doing? Does he know what he is doing? I find that scene, in many respects, appalling. I think it is beautifully done, but it is truly chilling.

CW That scene is true for me. You are writing about real women. To speak of these women as victims is to not understand what is really going on.

VM The scene is just a natural response. They have been married for twenty years and they have always had a good sexual relationship. Ellen thought she could turn her back on this last night and go to sleep, but she can't. I think Paul gets a lot of bad press, but he is not a bad guy. He is weak, he is a romantic, and, in some ways he is me. He wants to make a leap. He wants to make a change. I know that is childish, but I understand it. I did it. I made enough money and I ran away. Of course, as Paul found out, you can't escape the prison of yourself. Paul just panics.

MM Ellen wants a community and Paul wants freedom and in some ways those two ideas are mutually exclusive. Ironically, his mistress is busy making him a little community as fast as she can.

VM We can't blame Paul for wanting a romantic life. Ellen is absorbed in science. She is in many ways unsympathetic to his need to be the center of his own romantic fantasies. He has been in academia for twenty years, and all his triumphs have been small, small pats, even the slaps are small. He wants something different.



CW It seems like he is having a fairly typical response to middle age.

VM Right. That is why I don't like to have my characters labeled as victims. I like all my characters. They are all trying, given the resources they have, to do the best they can. Even Camille, few as her resources are, makes her own choices. Another point is that I don't take sex that seriously. Nor do I see marriage as sacred in the way that some of my critics seem to. Ultimately those issues aren't important in the light of the big question, which is how are we going to die?

MM In *The Great Divorce*, you have Ellen speak of "the concentrated ugliness of contemporary life." Would you comment on that phrase.

VM It has come to me that the thing that is causing all the violence in America is the architecture. About 100 years ago people stopped caring about how our cities looked.

MM But Ellen isn't just referring to architecture, she is referring to everything.

VM Yes, the food, the garbage, everything. That is why we want to escape to the country. New Yorkers work all week and then run for the country on the week-ends. Melville was right. The ugliness of the cities had begun to drive us mad. Rome is still a beautiful city because of the Romans' resistance to change. They still believe that when people walk in their cities, they should experience beauty. I don't know when people stopped caring what their cities looked like. I don't know how anybody could want to live in most cities anymore.

MM I love cities. New York is a city I love. I like Washington, and Boston. Even though I write about nature writers, built environments don't bother me. While I don't find most American cities beautiful, I love parts of Boston, and Washington Square is really graceful.

VM But the hamburger places, the clown serving burgers, the awful colors, muzak, they all drive me crazy.

MM So, in a way, you write as a hedge against that concentrated ugliness. You create something beautiful.

VM That's a nice thing to say, but I think my books are depressing.

MM I don't find them depressing, partly because of the moments of exultation and joy when people are not defeated, when the little jaguar in *The Great Divorce* survives. Also, you are a beautiful stylist, and that mitigates what might seem a hopeless vision. Who do you look to as being stylists, people whose style you appreciate?

VM Edith Wharton. Elizabeth Taylor. Although she isn't a great stylist, she's fast and draws a clear picture with quick, sure strokes.

MM Do the two of you share tastes in novels?

CW Yes, we are always telling each other about good things we have read. We both loved *Brazzaville Beach* by William Boyd. It is well structured, fascinating story, a novel that is a fast read yet full of ideas.

VM I return again and again to books that taught me what style was—Flaubert, especially, which is odd because I read Flaubert in translation. Tanazaki is another example. I love his work and think of him as a great stylist, but perhaps I only admire the style of his translator. Chris and I both enjoyed a novel of his, *Naomi*, a wonderful story of obsession. I think it was Raymond Carver who observed that writers love stories of obsession because, in many ways, to be a writer you have to be obsessive. You have to be willing to sit down alone day after day, working out the details of your story, struggling to reconcile irreconcilable conflicts and trying to answer big unanswerable questions.



Stephen Gibson

# CLARA PETACCI'S HANDKERCHIEF

One afternoon in 1965 I was shown a piece of fascist Italy. It was a woman's white handkerchief that Cosenza's old man kept in the bottom drawer of his bureau in the bedroom, but when the old man brought it out to show it to me in the kitchen, the handkerchief didn't look like anything special. In fact, it just looked old. The cloth had yellowed, like pages do in paperbacks, and the creases had turned almost brown where the handkerchief had been folded. But the way the old man handled it, and held it away so I wouldn't touch, you would have thought the cloth was the Shroud of Turin or something, and that the pink initials stitched in the center were Christ's own monogram meant to authenticate it. The initials read "CP"—the P larger than the other letter and cutting through its center. The letters stood for Clara Petacci, the old man said, "Mussolini's mistress—shot with the Duce."

Minutes earlier, the three of us—me, Cosenza, and his father—had been sitting around the kitchen table, going through a bag of fortune cookies and reading what was inside. The old man would eat those cookies by the bagful; he got them from the Chinese restaurant next door to his barbershop. Cosenza's old man was a real piece of work: he hadn't gotten married until he was nearly fifty, so he must have been in his seventies and he was still cutting hair. The old guy always had on a blue or a white barber's shirt, and he always smelled of witch hazel or Wildroot—maybe to cover the smell of black shoe polish around his temples and ears.

Cosenza's old man was talking about Mussolini and what it was like living in Italy before the war. The old man had the opened bag of fortune cookies in front of him, and he passed out the bowtie-shaped cookies one at a time to me and his son, Ercole. The two of us broke them open, read what was on the tiny papers, then tossed the papers into a pile we each had in front, or else passed the papers across if one of the fortunes looked interesting. Cosenza's aunt Olympia, the father's older sister, had gone into the living room to lie down on the sofa. This was during the time when the aunt had come from Naples to live with them, but that only lasted a couple of months. The aunt didn't speak any English. Cosenza and I stopped eating after a few bowties, but continued opening the ones his old man passed across. As for the old man himself, he ate like he had a bottomless stomach. Cosenza's mother and his older sister weren't home from work yet.

To hear the old man talk about it, everything was beautiful. Italy under Mussolini before the war had been some kind of paradise. To have lived in Rome at the time, as he did, while his family was in Naples, you would have thought you had died and gone to heaven. It was only the Communists and the

"liberals" who ever started any trouble—especially the Communists. "The Communists had ideas," the old man said, and he touched an index finger to his temple. "Even the Pope shook the Duce's hand when he put an end to that—and the Pope didn't get along with the Duce, except when it came to *la famiglia*."

Cosenza laughed when he heard his father say that.

"So Mussolini had everyone shot," Cosenza said. He tossed a paper onto the pile in front of him. "Like Ciano."

His father gave him a look, then shrugged. "Ciano was a traitor," the old man said.

Cosenza laughed sarcastically.

"Who's Ciano?" I asked. I didn't know much about World War II, especially about Italy—just the big names: who fought who, and who won. My own father had fought against the Nazis, but I didn't know much about him. After the war, my old man was more in than out of VA psychiatric hospitals. He died somewhere in Florida.

"Ciano was only Mussolini's son-in-law," Cosenza said. "He was executed when he wanted to make peace with the Allies."

The sarcasm in Cosenza's voice made it seem like the execution was his old man's fault. His old man picked up on it too, because he gave Cosenza a look. But then, in the next moment, the old man didn't seem bothered.

"The Duce wanted to pardon Ciano," the old man said to me, "but he was overruled." The corners of the old man's mouth turned down, and he shrugged his shoulders. The execution had been of no importance.

Cosenza nearly fell out of his chair.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Cosenza stared at his old man, but his old man looked away. The old guy started sifting through his pile of papers, picked one up, looked at it, then picked up another. Cosenza threw a crumpled paper from his own pile that hit his father on the arm.

"Who overruled Mussolini?"

Cosenza was like that. Once, when his father wouldn't give him any money—it was a Friday night, and Cosenza and I were going to a dance at St. Catherine's—Cosenza took the money anyway. Right in front of his old man, Cosenza took his old man's wallet off the top of his bureau, opened the billfold, took the money out, then tossed the wallet onto the end table under the hallway mirror. "Shoot me," Cosenza said. Another time, when he called his old man at work and the two of them started arguing—Cosenza spoke in Italian and I didn't understand what was said—soon as Cosenza got off the phone, he went into his old man's bedroom, opened the bottom drawer of his old man's bureau, took out a cardboard shoe box that was full of papers and photographs, then dumped the contents onto his parents' bed. "Take a look," he said. The photographs were old ones, maybe from the thirties or forties—you could tell from the clothes and make-up and the hairstyles of the women. But it was this one group of photographs that Cosenza wanted me to look at—all these naked



women in a room with some soldiers. Some of the women were wearing only a soldier's jacket or pants or tie. In a couple of the photos, four or five women, all of them naked, were kneeling on either side of this one soldier, their arms over each other's shoulders, all of the women laughing for the camera on this unmade bed. The two closest women were pulling at the soldier's zipper. "Forget the tits," Cosenza said to me, "recognize anyone?" When I didn't, Cosenza immediately got angry and piled everything back into the shoe box. When I asked him who I was supposed to recognize (I found out later that the soldier was his father), all he said was, "Forget it."

"Who overruled Mussolini?" Cosenza repeated. "The Grand Council? They overruled him?"

Cosenza's old man just looked at him.

"Frankie, I never told you my father was a fascist," Cosenza said to me. "He invents history to suit himself."

Cosenza turned back to his old man and rattled off something in Italian. That made his old man's eyes widen.

"So don't give me that crap about a pardon," Cosenza said. "Mussolini had half of the Grand Council executed."

The old man looked quickly at me, then at his son. I didn't know if the old guy was going to say something, but I blurted out to Cosenza, "Maybe they did overrule Mussolini. Anything's possible."

Cosenza couldn't believe it. He looked hurt, offended—more offended when his old man looked at me with just the hint of a smile: his old man to an ally.

"Frankie," Cosenza said, "do you really believe that a criminal who invades Libya, who uses poison gas in Ethiopia—"

"That was General Badoglio," his old man interrupted.

"Jesus Christ," Cosenza answered. "Now what are you saying? That Badoglio didn't get his orders from the Duce?"

His old man made a face and shrugged. "People did a lot of things the Duce didn't know." The old man looked at me and smiled. "It's possible." I felt my face get red.

Cosenza exploded. "Maybe Mussolini didn't know about Spain either? The fascists and the Germans just bombed the hell out of everyone, but the Duce didn't know." His old man shook his head. "The Duce was too busy giving it to his mistress, Clara Petacci," Cosenza said. Cosenza pumped his fist in the air. "The Grand Provolone was too busy giving her the big salami." That made Cosenza's old man laugh. Cosenza came forward in his chair and said something in Italian, and his old man laughed again. Cosenza spread his fingers apart, palms up, in front of his face—he began sticking out his tongue and moaning. The old man laughed harder, enjoying it. "The Duce's mouth was too full of poontang—he couldn't give the orders," Cosenza said.

The old man looked back and forth from me to his son, laughing, his eyes going watery, nodding his head. "Maybe, maybe, it's possible," the old man kept saying.

Cosenza flung himself back in his chair, throwing his hands up in disgust. "Please, enough garbage," he shouted at him. Just as he said it, the chair slipped and Cosenza had to catch himself. He righted the chair, setting it down heavily on the linoleum floor. "Please, okay," he said again. Then Cosenza turned his back and stared out into the hallway.

For a minute, his old man just looked at him; then he turned to me.

"Ercole wants to know everything. He thinks he's a writer."

"Right," Cosenza answered. Then he turned around. "For *Il Popolo D'Italia*." Cosenza looked at me, "the fascist rag my father worked for." He looked back at his father. "Before you became a *squadristi*." I didn't know what the word meant but suddenly his old man wasn't laughing anymore.

"What'd you do then, big shot?" Cosenza said.

The old man just looked at him, hard. Then the old man came forward in his chair and said something, very slowly, in Italian. Cosenza answered, "Right." Cosenza's old man said something else, and Cosenza said, "Garbage." The old man looked quickly at me, then away, then started talking faster in Italian while Cosenza answered in English. His old man jabbed his finger in the air close to Cosenza's face. "Garbage," Cosenza answered, "that's garbage and you know it . . . I don't need to ask my mother. . . . Garbage. . . . She married you, didn't she? . . . Garbage. . . . That's garbage and you know it. . . . More garbage. . . . Right. . . . What about Albania and Ethiopia? . . . Garbage. . . . And Yugoslavia? . . . Garbage. . . . Right, right, all those photographs of Italian soldiers holding decapitated heads never happened . . . right, right, none of it happened . . . garbage. . . ."

Cosenza's old man shouted something and slammed his hand down on the table, scattering the fortune cookie papers.

Cosenza shouted back, "To hell General Roatta. And to hell Pavolini. It wasn't all Roatta and Pavolini."

His old man raised his right hand, about to hit him.

"Go ahead," Cosenza said, "you don't frighten me."

I sat there, expecting at any moment the old man's hand to come down across Cosenza's face. And you could see the old man wanted to, but he didn't. All the old guy did was sit back in his chair and just stare at his son.

"I told you he was a fascist," Cosenza said to me. Then he said to his father, "Fascists can't do anything without violence. Can they?"

At first, the old man didn't answer; then he did. "I don't know how you became my son," he said.

"Maybe you had syphilis," Cosenza answered.

The two of them sat there; then the old man pushed his chair away from the table and got up. The old man began picking up the broken fortune cookie halves from his side of the table and put them back into the cellophane bag. Then the old man put out his hand, and I handed him the cookies that were on my part of the table. He didn't look at Cosenza. The old man went over to the counter and set the bag down. Then he just stood there.



"I better be going home," I said to Cosenza.

"Wait."

Cosenza's mouth was set hard, tight. He looked at his father. "This is about the handkerchief, right? You wanted to show Frankie the handkerchief."

I didn't understand.

"Go ahead, show him," Cosenza said. He turned to me. "My father wanted to tell you about how he got Clara Petacci's handkerchief—but I ruined it for him."

I still didn't understand.

"She was Mussolini's mistress—she was shot with him at the end of the war." Cosenza looked at his father. "Go ahead, show Frankie the handkerchief."

When his father didn't answer, Cosenza turned to me. "Mussolini and Petacci were murdered at Dongo by the partisans. Their bodies were dumped in Milan the next morning. My father was there."

Cosenza picked up a piece of fortune cookie and began scraping his thumbnail along the edge. "Question—," he said, looking at his old man, "—what was the color of Clara Petacci's panties when the mob strung her up by the ankles beside the Duce? And what were you doing in Milan?"

Cosenza looked from his father to me. "They're not hard questions, Frankie—he knows the answers. Blue, and hiding out. Petacci had on blue panties, and my father was hiding out. Twenty years he's a *squadristi*, busting heads for the Duce, and on the day they string Mussolini up, my father's in the crowd pretending he's one of the partisans."

Cosenza leaned back in the chair. He was smiling, like something was funny, looking from his old man to me, but it wasn't any ha-ha funny. "Did I tell you my old man was best friends with Mussolini's chauffeur, Ercole Boratto?"

Cosenza gave his father that odd smile again. "Is that why you named me after Boratto, because he gave you Petacci's handkerchief?" Cosenza looked back at me. "Just kidding. He didn't name me after Boratto, at least I don't think he did. I made that part up about the handkerchief. I don't know how he got it. The story keeps changing."

Cosenza looked back to his old man. "It's better that way, right? Everything's a mystery. Or maybe one day Petacci and the Duce are coming out of his office and you and Boratto are waiting by the car, and when the Duce isn't looking, Petacci opens her pocketbook and drops the handkerchief so you can pick it up." Cosenza held up his hand, then opened his fingers as if he were dropping a handkerchief. "Maybe that's how you got it? Petacci wanted you to be her lover. She was tired of the Duce. Lovers, right?" Cosenza made a circle with the index finger and thumb of his left hand, and then inserted the index finger of his right hand into the circle. "Lovers, right?"

The old man just stared at him.

Cosenza looked back at me. "He couldn't have gotten the handkerchief in Milan. There's no blood. The partisans shot Petacci and Mussolini, their bodyguards—they were all disguised as Germans trying to get to Switzerland—then

their bodies were loaded onto trucks and dumped the next morning in the Piazalle Loreto in Milan. My old man was there. He saw it. He saw everything." Cosenza turned to him. "It's the past, right? So why not tell Frankie?" Cosenza came back to me. "You know what the mob did to the corpses before they strung them up? Women took turns pissing into Mussolini's mouth."

Cosenza leaned back again in his chair and smiled in that same way at his old man. Then he looked at me and laughed. "But Italians are modest. Before they strung up Petacci, the men tied a rope around her knees so her dress wouldn't hang down over her head. So her panties wouldn't show. But my father saw. He saw everything. Ask him."

Cosenza turned back to his old man. "Go ahead, show Frankie the handkerchief."

The old man's face was a blank. Then, suddenly, it changed. When I turned around, there was the aunt standing behind us.

"Zia Olympia," Cosenza said. From the surprise in his voice, Cosenza hadn't heard her come into the hallway either.

The aunt—she was an old lady, a tiny thing, she had all of these yellow teeth crowded together in the front of her mouth—she reminded me of a bird with a large, curved beak in front. The aunt had a look on her face that could have stopped a clock.

"We were just talking about the handkerchief," Cosenza said in English. Cosenza caught himself and broke into Italian. The old lady didn't say a word, but she had that same look on her face. Cosenza turned back to his old man. "Go ahead, show Frankie the handkerchief like you were going to."

The old man took his hand off the counter, but stopped when the old lady said something.

"Go ahead," Cosenza repeated.

The old man looked at his sister again—you could see something was being communicated between them—but if the look the old lady gave him meant that he should forget about the handkerchief, it didn't work. The old man shuffled around the back of my chair, which I had to move in closer to the table so he could get by—he didn't go around Cosenza's side. The old lady stepped aside as the old man went past her. The old lady gave Cosenza's father this hard look as he walked by.

Nobody said a word—not me, not Cosenza, not the aunt—while we all listened to drawers being opened and then closed in the bedroom. Then the aunt said something in a harsh voice to Cosenza. The aunt said something else and Cosenza's lips tightened. "The bottom drawer," Cosenza shouted toward the bedroom.

The old man reappeared in the hallway.

"Clara Petacci's handkerchief," Cosenza announced.

The old man looked weird—he was all stooped over, and he was holding out the handkerchief in his palm like he was a waiter presenting a bill. He walked around the table toward me and began unfolding the handkerchief by the corners. The old man stooped down even more as he held the handkerchief under my face. I don't know what I was expecting, but the handkerchief didn't look like anything special. It just looked old. It looked like it could have belonged to any woman—except that there were initials in the center of it, stitched in pink thread. I moved closer, and the old man moved the handkerchief away, not much, just a little, as if he was afraid I was going to touch it.

"Clara Petacci," the old man said, "shot with the Duce." He said it like he was presenting the body.

The aunt said something in that harsh voice again, and Cosenza's mouth tightened. He answered her in the same way. The old man continued holding the handkerchief there for me to look at. "It's nice," I said, or something else stupid like that—meaning that I had seen enough and that the old man didn't have to keep standing there over me.

The aunt said something else, and Cosenza answered her, and the aunt shouted at him, making a chopping movement with her hand.

"Okay, you've shown it," Cosenza said to his father. The aunt said something else. The old lady kept talking, and spit came out through her crowded teeth. "Okay, you've shown it," Cosenza repeated. The old lady kept it up behind Cosenza. "That's enough," Cosenza repeated to his old man. Suddenly, Cosenza spun around. "Why don't you just shut up," he shouted at the aunt.

That made Cosenza's old man straighten up. The old lady screamed something at him, but she pointed at Cosenza. As the old lady kept going on like that, she pulled out a handkerchief from the sleeve of her black dress and wiped her teeth.

"Right . . . tell me about it," Cosenza answered her—but he was looking at me. "Right . . . I won't let the dead rest in peace . . . right, it's all my fault. . . ."

Then, just like that, Cosenza's old man started walking out of the kitchen. He didn't say a thing. The handkerchief was sandwiched between his palms. The old lady went out after him and shouted something, then came back into the kitchen. She stood over Cosenza, who was sitting, looking up at her. The old lady said something in Italian—then smacked Cosenza, hard, across the face.

It sounded like a gunshot.

Cosenza's eyes watered.

"Are you through?" Cosenza said to her.

The old lady said something else, and then she smacked Cosenza across the other side of his face.

Cosenza looked at me. "I think you better go home, Frankie," he said.

"Go home," the aunt shouted at me.

I did. I got up from the kitchen table without saying a word and without looking at either of them—at least, not until I was in the hallway and had the door to the apartment open, when I did look back, once, just for a few seconds. Cosenza was still sitting in that chair, with the aunt behind him, both of them watching, waiting for me to go. In the hallway, the old man came out of the bedroom and just stood there, not saying anything. I didn't know it then, but I

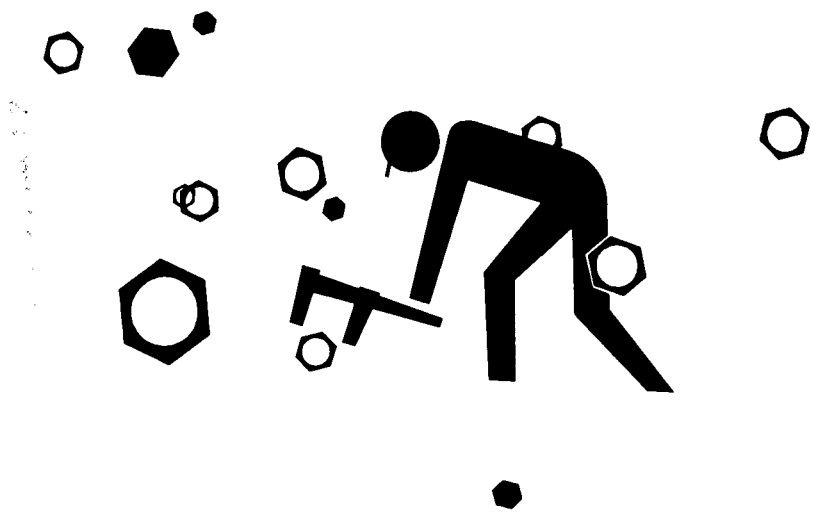
wouldn't have anything to do with Cosenza after that.

In a year Cosenza quit the Catholic high school we went to and went to public school. Whenever I thought about him, which wasn't often, all I thought of was him and his old man and that handkerchief—and about how screwed-up his family was. This was the Bronx: what did Mussolini, a handkerchief, or whose side his old man fought on have anything to do with anything?

In two years, I was protesting against the Vietnam War and getting tear gassed, when I wasn't getting laid and dropping acid.

Two months after I flunked out of college, I was reclassified 1-A by my draft board. A month later came my draft notice.

I didn't know squat about anything.





Joan Fay Cuccio

# MY MOTHER WORRIED ABOUT THE WORLD

At first we thought she was giving herself a home permanent. That peach-pit smell of poisonous fruit seeped around the bathroom door, a visible stink, until my friend Emily, playing in my room upstairs, said: *Ewe, I think I have to go home now.*

I put her out the front and went to listen at the door of the hall bathroom; the one wedged between the kitchen and the family room, three steps down; the one with the black-and-white checked wallpaper hemming and hawing into a squeegied pattern; the one with the zebra carpet. I pressed my ear to the door to hear the plink, plink of plastic rollers into the sink. I heard her humming a little song. I imagined her sitting on the lid of the john, scrunching her wet curls, the fumes from the permanent sauce pinching tears out of her eyes. She was probably unfurling the last small curlers kinking the hair on her neck and shaking freckles of pink-brown glop all over the place, flecking the wallpaper and taking the shine off the mirror over the sink.

My mother was a little chunky, yes, as she would say, but she didn't mind. She read those magazines at the checkout headlined: *Hide Your Figure Flaws* and *Lose Twenty Pounds the Liz Taylor Way.* She wasn't anything I had to be ashamed of on Parent-Teacher night. *Accessories,* she said, *were the key.*

I poked around in the kitchen awhile looking for something to eat. But then my father came home, and that's when we began to suspect something. *Hey, I'm home,* he said into the crack of the door. No answer. *Phyllis, are you in there? Phyllis?*

*I'm not coming out,* she called.

*What's the matter, honeybun?* he said. *Always a sucker,* I thought. He pinched his face up tight, thinking. He was not a tall man, nor a very broad one, and when he bent to the door it was with the angle of the old stovepipe on our roof, kinked with the years and wearing a little tin top hat to keep the birds out. *What can I do?* he asked, plaintive.

*I'm not coming out until the world's a better place,* she said. This gave us pause and we looked around, at the houndstooth couch and the red rug, at the fan turning lazily in the window. *Until this Cuba thing is settled.* As we lived in Kansas, this was somewhat of a surprise. I didn't know things had gone so far, with Cuba, and later I had to look up the little thumbnail of Guantanamo on the map. *Until the little children in Rwanda are fed. Until the Pope understands what it means to be a woman.* This last trailed off in a little wail.

*Why don't you come out and we'll talk about it, OK? Honey?* Silence. *We'll go out for dinner, OK?* Perhaps a few sobs. He turned his dismayed face on me, open-mouthed. *G'wan,* he said, *upstairs.*

I sat on the landing, and in a little while he took his nose out of the door frame. He had a newspaper cocked in his elbow, and he rolled the rubber band off, zzipppppppppp, and flapped it open with a crack.

*Says here,* he called through the door, *We've made a deal with Castro. We're going to take some refugees and we're sending them butter. How's that?* The hard click of the key turning in the lock.

He read some more but eventually he went to sit in the living room downstairs, every so often looking up from his paper to see whether progress had been made. In the background, the evening news groaned. Near dark I came down, uncertain, and he made some soup on the stove. In the next room, I could hear the television on low, as if it were for tonight the talking, laughing place where people go to live. The house was very quiet. We were somewhere with the sound turned down. We heard the drip of water in there. *Wouldn't you like some soup?* He called to the door. Later he sent me upstairs, but I lay in bed under the open window, eating Saltines and listening as the patio door slithered ajar, his slippers crunched pine needles underfoot. A rap on the bathroom glass. *Go away,* she said, her voice in the darkness muffled like she had the rollers in her mouth. *I'm not coming out.* He stood awhile and spoke to her through the open window, murmurs. All I could make out was: *Not until the president stops farting around with all those girls and pays some attention to Hillary. No.*

It was not as if my mother were very interested in these things. About the time Rwanda came on the news with all those big-bellied children with limbs like straws and enormous beautiful eyes, she would turn the sound down, sometimes click it off altogether, the pictures quick-sucked to a tiny white spark, although I felt we could still see them if we weren't so far away. So you can't blame us, we thought she'd come out.

But in the morning the door was still shut, hard and cool to the touch, and I pressed my face against it, whispering *Hi mom,* so as not to wake her if she had slept in. But where? *Slept in the tub,* was all I could think.

And at first we thought she would get hungry. Dad carried bowls of food to the door. *Campbell's Bean with Bacon,* he sang. And we tried cooking smelly things: Bacon and sausages. Rolls from the Pillsbury doughboy. Popcorn. Fish sticks. Fried onions.

It was the summer and I was home all day, alone but for the non-sounds behind the bathroom door. And one day she called me over: *Charla, get me something to eat,* she said, italicized suddenly with hunger. *Something flat* she said. I fetched some strawberry Pop Tarts. *Can I come in?*

*Under the door,* she said. In this way I fed her the whole box, her fingers catching them halfway and drawing them in.

At first she ate only flat food. Pop Tarts and tortillas with cheese (the cheese would catch on the unsanded ridge of the door, but I think she ate it splinters and all). Crackers with cheese and slices of bologna with mustard, although this last stained the rug. Banana bread sliced the long way. I worried about her getting enough. About this time, though, my Dad, began to act as if she didn't exist, and for him I guess that was about right. He sometimes called to her through the door, but mostly we just talked or he fell asleep in the chair by the television. Later, when he woke up he would drag upstairs to sleep alone in their wide bed. It bothered him, I think, because sometimes at night I could catch him lying on the mustard stains with his back against the door and snoring a little.

He did the laundry and helped me with my reading list. When I scraped my elbow he put a Band-Aid on it, very flat, slipped out from the other side. Although I heard murmurings of sympathy from behind the door, it was his kiss that made it feel better. He took me to the store once a week, or twice, where I would buy things for our meals, evidencing a new interest in shortcakes and fruit leather, slabs of chocolate, pita bread, sliced meat. I spent time in the freezer department, comparing the thicknesses of frozen dinners, anything I thought would fit that new measure of my life. I could imagine her in that tiny room, where everything was black and white, hard tile or soft towels, a sliver of sky meekly keeping an eye on her through the shaded window. In the middle of the night I would get up to shove some slices of pizza under the door for a midnight snack, pouring a Coke into a cookie sheet so she could slurp it up through a straw.

I spent long afternoons in the shady hallway, giving the play-by-play of the talk shows, talking about Dad, about my feelings, anything, that unanswering door an invitation to talk without restraint, because her soft voice said only: *No, no, not yet.*

She has to come out sometime, he said when she had been in there most of the summer. Although I could sometimes hear her breathing hard and the window often stayed open all through a hot day, I knew she wasn't getting *enough exercise, enough sunlight and fresh air,* as she used to say to me. We turned the news up loud in the evening, hoping Dan Rather would move her, give her some good news, but mostly it was bad, even though she couldn't see the pictures.

In time, Dad cut a slot in the bottom of the door with his keyhole saw so I could get a bowl through or a plate of dinner and we gradually went back to the usual meals, Mom hollering directions at me through the door. *Now add an egg, a little Parmesan, the pepper, meatloaf can't have too much good black pepper,* she called, almost wistful, I thought. When it came time to eat, though, she didn't come out. I slipped her plate into the slot and one dainty hand, now dimpled and white, snatched the plate inside, like the mouth of a baby bird, hungry and new.

In time she stopped talking about Rwanda and the big-bellied babies, and Cubans going blind because they didn't have carrots, and all that other stuff. She seemed to understand when my father read to her out of the *Times* the things about how Bill Clinton was doing everything wrong and the economy was in the toilet, how urban children were shot in the streets, or the border was crawling with illegals who only wanted a better life. She would give a little sigh. *Please, Phyllis. Have a heart,* he would say. And she would murmur only, *Not yet, not yet.*

In September I went back to school, and the first morning I cut out her Pop Tarts with a heart-shaped cookie cutter and lined them up under the door. I could hear her soft snores echoing on the tiled walls.

Everything went OK that day, I guess, until I was walking home from the bus stop. An ambulance passed me in the road, with its lights flashing like wild eyes, hanging onto the curve with two wheels.

Later, we had to move, of course, somewhere where the neighbors hadn't heard of the woman who stayed in the bathroom until she was too big to get through the door. My father had snuck home in the middle of the day and drilled the lock while she pleaded behind the door, *Only a little more time, please Al*, and he shouted grimly back over the grinding of the drill, *No, you have to face it sometime. Stand back, Phyllis, stand back.*

Well, once he busted that lock and got the door open a crack, that wall that had divided us, he shoved in hard and met smudgy, soft flesh. The door pushed her back with such force that she fell, wedged between the toilet and the wall, her legs too weak to stand, her hands grasping at the sill, stuck, face to the wall, blond hair long, wild with the failed perm and all of her naked, her huge soft behind pinched, pale and vulnerable, by the toilet rim. She looked for all the world like something that grew there, in the dark, as she practically was.

It was some time before 911 sent the crew, and when I rounded the corner, at last, the fire trucks had careened past me, one after another, the drivers grinning like the devil, and the rest of them hanging onto their lives and their helmets. The helicopters swarmed at the treetops, each of them marked in red-white-and-blue with names like *Action News*. Though they scarcely noticed when I arrived, I suppose they had all been waiting for me, so I wouldn't miss one minute of the drama, lights blaring and sirens crashing, their tires cutting brown gashes in the tight lawn, the wind from the helicopter blades mussing everything, and the noise, like beating wings and wailing dogs, the whole of it illuminated with artificial white-bright of the camera lights.

The neighbors strained at the police tape, warned in yellow and black not to cross: the Herman bullies on bicycles, Emily and Mrs. Kyle, Mrs. Bryant with her baby in a stroller, lots of men in work clothes and suits and other people I didn't know but had seen around, all of them, their faces tilted to watch the huge yellow crane crush my swingset to pick-up sticks and knock the big tree aside to make its way. Then it lifted its head, strung with taut cable, and carried the brick side of our house away, ever so gently toppling it in the neighbor's poolside and opening a huge window into our house. Once the wall was gone, my mother tipped and rolled free into the yard and the crowd sighed with relief and wonder at the spectacle.

I was glad to see she'd at least had the presence of mind to put on her face, so that she was wearing something other than a look of embarrassment and relief, even if her mascara had run.

My father draped a bedspread over her as eight sweaty firemen lifted her into the ambulance. I could see her mouth was open and moving, but I couldn't hear the words; the helicopters swooping suddenly near like so many June bugs at the light. And then the doors slammed, and the ambulance fired away, my father's awful grin, triumphant, through the back window, his hand pink-pressed to the glass.

The helicopters swirled away and the fire trucks roared on to some other emergency. It seemed to me almost like television, the shreds of police tape fluttering against the breeze, and I imagined my eyes were a camera, snapping the scene into digestible pieces. The crane backed out the way it came, the men in hard hats congratulating each other. And as the camera lights blinked off, our neighbors straggled back to their homes, to watch their own curious faces on the local news saying things like: *She DID eat two pieces of chicken at the neighborhood picnic* and *Honestly, I thought she was visiting her mother.*

I sat for a time, watching the whole thing unfold on the television and feeling the wind on my face from the open side of the house. After awhile I brought a chair out into the yard to get away from the pictures and the ringing phone and to watch the neighbors come out periodically, as if during the commercials, to see if it were true. An occasional shower of debris rattled down on the ruined lawn. Everywhere inside the furniture was tumbled over and the carpets pinched and pulled and papers flapped away like escaping birds. The potrack clattered and sang like a windchime. In my room upstairs, the bed teetered like a tightrope performer, one foot on air.

I sat for a long time under the streaky evening sky, trying to believe the world was a better place. But all I could do was hope it would rain.

B. D. Love

# THE MODEST PROPOSAL

Professor Cabeza was the biggest man that my cousin Heng and I had ever seen. He was not the tallest. We had seen the basketball players on television, and they stood much higher than the professor. Neither was he the thickest; we had seen, also on TV, the wrestlers hurling each other onto the mat in the fighting ring. But professor Cabeza towered over us from the moment he stepped into the classroom, and he seemed to grow with every moment that he spoke. That first day he entered quiet as a ghost, but left as solid as a great mountain. Heng and I were both impressed by this big man, and more than a little frightened.

Neither my cousin nor I was particularly excited to find ourselves in Professor Cabeza's freshman writing class. This was, for us, simply another general education course like Speech 100 which both Heng and I, being shy in a typically Chinese manner, had nearly failed. Our writing skills were not so good as the American students, and we did not want to compete with them. Still, a requirement was a requirement, and although we postponed it as long as the university registrar would allow, we finally, grumblingly, decided to get freshman writing out of the way. So, that first morning's sunny Thursday, the essence of Southern California as tourists and immigrants like to imagine it—Heng and I found ourselves sitting in the back of the classroom, awaiting the arrival of our professor, Fidel Cabeza.

Surely, Heng and I did not know quite what to expect. An English class taught by a professor with a Mexican name? How odd this was, yet this was, after all, America, the country of many races. Still, we could not conceive of it. Most of our exposure to Mexicans took place in the neighborhood. Their English was thick and accented, filled with Spanish words and bad language that made our ears burn. How was one of these to teach us to write correctly?

Professor Cabeza was nothing like the men on our street. He hurried through the door, slipped around the row of desks, and took his place at the podium. Reading from a prepared syllabus, he grew more solid with every word. His English was perfect—better than most of the Americans I knew. His hair was short, neatly groomed, and his wire-rim glasses rode slightly down his nose. He wore a three-piece suit and a tie, and spoke with some excitement about the glories of English language and literature. I was beginning to think I might enjoy this required class. I found myself beginning to smile my dumb grin that I cannot bear to see reflected in the mirror, because it makes me look simple. Heng, on the other hand, stared at the floor and grunted under his breath.



"So what do you think of Professor?" I asked Heng as we stepped out of the classroom building into the bright light that made me squint. "He seems very knowledgeable to me."

Heng grunted. Out of the corner of his eye he was sizing-up two Vietnamese girls coming our way. They giggled as they passed. Heng ran his hand through his hair, cut coarsely in the new style.

"What did you say, Cam?"

"Our professor—"

"What about him?"

We spoke now in Chiu Chou, the dialect of many Vietnamese-born Chinese.

"I think his class will be exciting."

"Wait until you see what he does to your first paper, cousin." Heng said dourly. "Then tell me how excited you feel."

Later, in the bookstore, Heng and I eyed the required book that sat on the metal shelf above the name of Fidel Cabeza. The price even of the used copies was extreme.

"Let's buy one copy and both share it," Heng suggested. "The damned thing is so heavy, it will take both of us to lift it. They must sell English by the pound."

My cousin Heng was like that, always joking around. Perhaps that was why he was so much more popular among the girls than I, who have always tended to be more studious, in the manner of my father. Heng's father, like Heng, was also a joker, except when he was drinking, or when he had lost money at the gambling table, or when he had fought with his mistress over money, which was often. Then he became surly, and he struck out at whomever was closest, usually his wife, my aunt, but sometimes his children as well. Uncle was not a good man, and I did not like him. Heng would spend much of his time at my house, where it was quiet. The only time my father would raise his voice was when he argued with Uncle over the telephone. How could two brothers have become so different? Father lectured Uncle, in English, about his bad ways, how he had brought shame to our family name. Uncle shouted back, in Chiu Chou, that his life was his own, and Father should keep his nose out of it. It would go on like that. Nothing would ever change.

Heng and I, equally different people, approached our first writing assignment in our own ways. Heng waited until the last night, scribbled a few lines, gave up and convinced a girl to give him a paper she had written for Professor Cabeza a year before, on the same topic. I spent every free moment of a week reading and rereading the "Araby" of James Joyce, which I think would be difficult even for Americans. When our papers came back drowning in red ink and comments I could not decipher and Heng did not attempt to, we had both failed. Heng cursed the girl. I felt as if all the air had been sucked out of my lungs.

That night, my face as red as professor Cabeza's ink, I sat across from my father.

"You must master the language if you are to succeed in America," he said in his limited English. "We must make ourselves as American as possible. That is our only way. That is why you attend university."

I understood. I would try harder. Heng slurped his soup, the thin noodles trailing down his chin and threatening to splatter broth on his new silk shirt.

I had expected, returning to class, that professor Cabeza would say something, make something of the bad job I had done in front of the class. I knew that there were teachers who did that sort of thing. But he said nothing about the writing, instead going on with his lecture from the moment class began to the ending. During those few moments he paused to ask a question, already knowing the answer, he called only on those whose hands were raised, usually Americans or Mexicans. It was as if we Asians were mere ghosts—a funny idea, a reversal, since my grandmother often spoke of our non-Asian neighbors in that way. It was a strange feeling, being invisible, but I had experienced it before, in the camp, where our families waited for sponsorship that would bring us to America, the land of our dreams.

Invisibility in professor Cabeza's class was not such a bad attribute to have, as it turned out. When the Americans were called upon to respond to a question, and answered, usually, in a way that the professor had not desired, he was curt and dismissive, although not cruel. Cruelty he reserved for the Mexicans. With them, he was critical to the point of more than once bringing a Latin girl to tears. His criticism was not reserved for incorrect interpretations of a story, either.

"Miss Gonzales," he spoke, iron-voiced.

"Yes?" She trembled.

"You will kindly leave that abomination of an accent back in the barrio, where it belongs."

"Sir?"

"Your accent. It is an atrocity against English"

I could see the tears filling her eyes.

"Well?" He snarled.

She shook all over.

"Am I making myself clear?"

The girl nodded.

The professor went on with his lecture.

After class, walking to the cafeteria, I spoke to Heng of my shock.

"I didn't think professors were allowed to speak that way," I said in confusion. I knew well the behavior of teachers in the Chinese schools, where any manner of physical or verbal punishment was possible. I had, however, believed that the American university was different.

"Professors can do whatever they want," Heng answered.

"But don't you think it's shocking that he saves his worst words for his own people."

"What people?" Heng scoffed. "I heard some Mexicans talking. They called him a coconut."



A coconut, I would learn, was a kind of metaphor, a figure of speech that Professor Cabeza very much approved of, although I doubt if he would approve of this particular metaphor being applied in his case. It meant someone who, while being brown on the outside, was pure white within.

Whatever kind of man he might be, Fidel Cabeza was still my professor, and as such I owed him my respect. Perhaps he was especially hard on his own people because he wanted them to become better, like he was. At the least, Professor Cabeza was a dedicated lecturer. He taught us many great writers. He lectured to us about stories by Mr. Updike, who made the professor laugh, but not me. He read to us from the story by Mr. Melville called "Bartleby the Scrivener." I listened and I imagined the character to be rather like me, thin and shy, someone who felt alone in a world that he did not quite understand. I learned, instead, that the story was about the inscrutability of the human soul.

As the weeks went on, Professor Cabeza explained the complicated symbolism of Mr. Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," and when reflecting about guilt and buried feelings, I decided that the Puritans and the Chinese might find much in common between them. Professor Cabeza was especially fond of Ernest Hemingway, the great American. We read his hunting story, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." Professor was convinced that Mrs. Macomber had murdered Mr. Macomber because he had become a strong man, and she was afraid he would leave her. I thought the death was an accident, but was afraid to say so aloud, or to put my wrong opinion into my essay.

At the end of his lecture, he assigned the story for the final paper. It was to be "A Modest Proposal," by Jonathan Swift. Opening to the page where the story began, Professor Cabeza raised his hands above the lecturn.

"This, ladies and gentlemen," he said in his deep voice. "I would urge you to read carefully, and read correctly. This story—*This* is why I have devoted my life to literature. *This*," he continued, staring into space, "is why I have made literature my life's blood."

Although not yet ready to go so far as Professor Cabeza, I had all semester attempted to remain enthusiastic about stories, and only slightly less so about poems. I had worked hard. After several papers, I was inching my way up to D-pluses. I was certain I could, with the last paper, achieve a passing C. Heng continued to fail, but he was unconcerned.

"Three-quarters of the class is failing," he told me one afternoon as we ate *pho* in a restaurant near school. I sipped at a Coke. Heng sucked at his second beer.

"Are you sure?"

"I saw it in his grade book," Heng said with a mouth full of beef. "Three-quarters, at least."

Even though the restaurant was dark, Heng wore sunglasses. I knew, but remained too polite to mention it, that he was covering up a black eye given to him by his father. The blow was supposedly punishment for Heng's repeated

failures in English, but I suspected that it had more to do with Uncle's trying to impress my father with his, Uncle's, concern about Heng's education and future.

I gasped and wondered aloud how it could be.

"It doesn't mean anything," Heng said. "That's the way he always does it. Tuyet told me. She took his class last year. He fails everybody up until the end, and then he grades on a curve. Ten percent fail. Ten percent A's. The rest gets spread out in the middle somewhere. You know the way he treats the Mexicans. You think he's going to waste any of his three F's on some invisible Oriental?"

A grading curve. So. Professors did have to follow some rules, after all.

Regardless of the curve, I worked hard. The red ink diminished somewhat, and my father was pleased. His own English was improving, though more slowly. This was after all his third language, one learned late in his life. He had, at my age, learned Vietnamese when his family emigrated there from China. Now he was starting all over again, although much of his start would take place through his children.

With two weeks to go before the end of the semester, Heng's usual confidence was shattered. At the end of the typically corrosive red notes, Professor Cabeza had written, large and bold:

**MR TRAN:**
**PLEASE SEE ME IN MY OFFICE**
**DURING REGULAR OFFICE HOURS**

Heng looked as if a green chili had lodged in his throat. His eye, at least, looked normal.

"Cabeza's going to kill me," Heng lamented that night, as we sat together in the library, reading the final assignment, "A Modest Proposal" by Mr. Swift. It was written in very difficult language, although I was beginning to make sense of it. It had to do with the author suggesting that babies or small children could be raised like cattle for food. They would make a delicacy only the rich could afford, and since it would be mainly the poor people who sold off their babies in this manner, much would be done through this practice to alleviate the conditions of poverty in the country of Ireland.

I explained this to my cousin Heng, and for a moment he lost his worries about the class. We stared at each other in total shock that such a thing could be written, and that Professor Cabeza would require us to read it.

Heng, shaking, rose and disappeared toward the lavatory.

It was the next day that Heng was to meet with Professor Cabeza. He was nervous. I offered to go with him, and he accepted. Together, we climbed three flights of steps to the Department of English and walked down the musty halls with as much enthusiasm as if we were going to an execution. We found the professor's name on a card beside an office door, checked that the time was available for conference, and then knocked timidly.

"Enter," the professor called.



Heng opened the door and walked first into the office. The professor motioned us toward chairs. He sat across from us, separated by a huge metal desk. There were three piles of papers neatly arranged on it. To the side, against the wall, were green metal shelves with more books than I had ever seen. The office smelled of books and tobacco, but mostly of books. There was a space cleared out among the books on one of the shelves.

There were two framed photographs, one of the professor, looking a bit younger and a little bit less formal, sitting in a chair, very nearly smiling. On either side of him were girls that I guessed were his daughters. They had blonde hair and big white smiles. They were wearing the uniforms of a private school. I thought, how lucky these girls were to have a father who could afford to send them to academy. In the other picture, the professor was definitely smiling. He was in a uniform, a different kind of uniform, standing with a group of soldiers, all of whom were smiling, too. They were young and smiling and they all carried guns. Behind them the trees and vines tangled, a most brilliant green. Although raised in the city, I could still recognize the jungles of my home country, Vietnam.

"I've noted your performance in this course, and frankly, Mr. Tran, I am concerned."

The professor spoke to Heng, who stared nervously at the floor before him.

"Yes, sir," Heng muttered in response.

"You are aware, of course, that you stand to fail this course."

Heng nodded.

"However—"

In the minutes that followed, the professor seemed almost certainly to confirm Heng's earlier cynicism. Heng could save himself from failure, the professor said, if his final paper earned a solid—not a qualified—grade of C. I could nearly hear Heng snickering inside. The invisible Oriental could not fail. Only the poor barrio Mexican. The professor was doing Heng, and all his invisible people, a big American favor. Heng nodded and began to rise. The professor insisted he remain in his seat.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the professor reached for his copy of the huge textbook from which we read and composed, and opened it to "A Modest Proposal," by Mr. Swift. It was the professor's good intention to read through the work with Heng— in effect, to coach him through his final essay. Sitting in the corner chair, I must have been transparent, for not since the beginning of his speech had the professor even acknowledged me. This gave me the strange assurance that I must be passing the course. Otherwise, wouldn't I require coaching as well?

Slowly, articulating every syllable, professor Cabeza began reading aloud from "A Modest Proposal," stopping after what he called "key passages" to "highlight" them—I could almost see the words glowing on the page, as if they had been highlighted by a bright yellow felt marker. The professor made a point of explaining all the hard words. He paused frequently to ask Heng if he was

following, and to offer his interpretations, interpretations which Heng, it was understood, would return to the professor in the form of a final paper, which would then earn a solid, not qualified, passing grade.

All the while, as we listened to the many ways human flesh could be prepared and consumed, Heng and I remained silent. I stared out the window at the row of three maple trees that had turned bright red with the approach of the mild Los Angeles winter. On the window ledge, a pigeon paced and cooed. Heng stared at the large book clasped in the professor's larger hands, and nodded in understanding and mute agreement. His face was growing redder than the trees.

The professor is not to be blamed. He could not have known. What seemed like hours later, the professor gave us the sign that it was time to leave. He seemed very much delighted with us as an audience, and he reiterated at the close of his reading that "A Modest Proposal" had always been his favorite text.

"The irony," he said, licking his lips as if after a rich meal. "The irony."

Having finally come to understand metaphor—the coconut, for instance, as a derogatory metaphor for a certain type of human being, viewed from a certain perspective—I was a long way from fully comprehending irony, a much more complex literary device. I doubt Heng will ever understand it, at least as the professor had intended.

Heng never wrote the final paper. In fact, Heng never finished any of his courses that semester, or the next, or the ones to follow. I would see him at my home with decreasing frequency. He began to argue with my father, usually in Chiu Chou. Once, they had nearly come to blows. From then on, Heng was banished. I would hear word of him occasionally through acquaintances, people I would never deem friends. He had become involved with gangsters, the type of invisible Orientals who prey upon other invisible Orientals who fear the authorities more than the criminals. Some day soon I expect to receive news of his violent death.

Somehow, despite my deficient English, I passed Professor Cabeza's class with a B. My father was proud beyond words, although he of course grumbled that I had not earned an A. I was not particularly proud. I had been inadvertantly coached through the final paper by my professor, who had explained to me the nature of irony. Mr. Swift, it seemed, had not really intended his modest proposal to be taken seriously. He had, instead, meant to expose the barbarity of the way human beings often treat their brothers. The story was, then, *ironic*. I had put that in my final paper. Perhaps my professor considered that I had learned my lesson somewhat more than adequately and rewarded me appropriately. Perhaps not.

Never ungrateful, I accepted my fine grade, and went on toward my goal, a bachelor's degree in accounting. Although finished with English as a requirement, I took a few more literature courses as electives, and found them both challenging and rewarding. I did not, however, choose to study again with Professor Cabeza, although I would hear of him, and not in a positive manner.



One afternoon two years after that one during which Heng and I sat in the professor's office, listening to him highlight "A Modest Proposal" by Mr. Swift, Fidel Cabeza walked into a freshman writing classroom and began waving an automatic rifle in the air, ranting incoherently about "gooks," and threatening massacre. I learned this from a friend, who was present at the time. After twenty minutes, during which his students sat terrified and motionless, he stopped abruptly, put down the weapon, and began to lecture. One student slipped away unnoticed. Professor Cabeza was arrested by campus police as he left the room, the rifle still lying across his desk.

Whether Professor was disciplined by the university or not, I do not know, although I doubt it. There was probably no standard curve to measure such behavior. He returned to class during the next period as if nothing had happened. I was sitting in conference with another professor of the English Department several weeks later when Professor Cabeza walked by in the hallway. His shoulders pulling forward, he looked rather diminished. A third professor, taking advantage of my invisibility, poked his head into the office and made some sad commentary. Although much knowledge was presumed between him and my teacher, I was able to understand that one of Professor Cabeza's beautiful, golden-haired daughters had recently committed suicide. Rumors abounded. All in all, it was a dark business.

Later that night, around nine, I returned to the English Department in order to slip a paper under my teacher's door. She would find it first thing in the morning and, as we had agreed, this would save me from a penalty for lateness. My teacher's office was at the far end of the hall, distant from the elevator which I, exhausted, wished to ride down.

I passed Professor Cabeza's office. The door was closed, as always, but I had the distinct feeling that he was inside. I put my ear to the door and heard what I thought was sobbing, although I might have been hearing only the sound of a pigeon, pacing and cooing on the window ledge.

I thought about Professor Cabeza. I thought about my cousin Heng, now long gone. I could not blame the professor, whose hand in Heng's disappearance was minimal, if anything at all. How, after all, could he have known?

How could Professor Cabeza know the darkness of a strange boat adrift on a black ocean, the stench of fear and death reeking from a hundred bodies wrenched into a space meant for a few heads of livestock? Heng and I, our families, friends, and many countrymen, all of us longing for the freedom and dignity of America, had been lost at sea for days, stuck in the hold of that filthy boat, unfed and frightened. How could this man, for whom words on a page were the blood of his life, have even begun to guess what it might be like to be a child bent double by hunger, by the kind of hunger that gnaws at the stomach like a wild animal, refusing to be still? Could such a man ever dream our dream of a single bowl of rice, a strip of meat? Could he imagine how a strip of meat might taste to a starving boy, regardless of what animal it had been sliced from,

when it was that flesh alone that spelled the difference between life, however filled with shame, and a most miserable of deaths?

The meat that was offered to Heng and to me that night in the darkness of the filthy hold was, one might say with some irony, a kind of modest proposal. But, as I could assure Professor Cabeza, the flavor of this irony was not delicious, and none of us smacked our lips after we had chewed and swallowed it. Had Professor Cabeza ever tasted the bitter-sweet of human flesh? Would he? I could not know. I therefore would not judge.

I held my breath and listened closely. The hallway was dark, though not so dark as the ship that carries us from the home of our childhood. Standing back, I tapped once, then twice on the hard wood of the door.

I waited a long while, but my enquiry was answered only with silence.



Todd James Pierce

# DOWN

I have to smile. That's what I do. You know, what I do for a living. I smile just as pretty as can be and say, "Would you like a baked potato or rice?" and "Can I clear your plates for you?" Show lots of teeth, my manager tells me, because men like that. If it wasn't the Nineties, he'd say show lots of cleavage, too.

Sometimes I tell customers I wait tables because I'm in college, but that's not true. I graduated two years ago, a B+ average, double major. I wait tables because I can't find a better job. Customers tip you more if they think you're a student. They take pity, you see. Sometimes they leave twenty percent. I tell them thank you, and I mean it.

Tonight the restaurant is quiet, half of my tables empty. I have a honeymoon couple on table 14 and a business dinner on 9 and 10. But that's all. There will be nothing more. It's too late to get walk-ins. The honeymoon couple are downing champagne; the suits are sipping sauvignon. Wine sales always help your totals; I'm supposed to remember this. They can even make a bad night turn out okay.

Because the restaurant's empty I should give better service, but I don't. The emptiness depresses me. All those unused seats. All those votive candles flickering on starched white tablecloths. All those hand-polished forks still laid perfectly straight. All the extra hours I'll have to work to make rent. I just want to sit and wait for my shift to end, but I know I have to smile to make my money.

The food comes on trays stacked two plates high, each plate with its own silver hat. I carry all eight dinners at once, balancing the huge oval of a tray on my hand and shoulder. Chicken Dijon. Muscovy Duck. Tenderloin of Beef. Steamed Veggies with sauce on the side. Juan, my busboy, offers cracked pepper from a pepper mill. I pour wine with a thin napkin draped over my wrist. "Can I get you anything else?" I ask, trying my best to sound sincere, to sound tip-worthy.

No, they say. We're just fine, everything's wonderful.

After we've served our food, Juan and I sit on the back steps. We smoke Pall Malls even though we're both trying to quit. I tap my ashes into a coffee cup which still holds a dollop of decaf. Juan came to this country hoping to become a doctor; he's twenty-seven now and still going to community college, which makes me feel sorry for him.

From where we sit we can see the mall domed with stained glass. Its sides look like slats of sandstone. Juan once said the mall looked like a church, and I agreed. The dark buildings of Seattle rise behind it, and above them are pewtery clouds heavy with rain.

Juan puts his arm around me and says, "Maybe someday, you and me, we get married. What do you think?"

He proposes at least twice a week. I always say the same thing: "You'll have to talk to my boyfriend about it."

"Boyfriend no good," he says, "no bueno."

And I know he's right—at least half right.

I smoke a second cigarette—I smoke it like a poor woman, all the way down to its filter—then Juan says we should check our tables. I really should give better service—really work my customers—but sometimes it hurts too much.

At night I walk home alone. I used to take cabs, but I'm no longer afraid. I wear jeans and one of my boyfriend's buttondowns because I don't like looking like a waitress; they're easy targets. For muggers, I mean. Waitresses always carry cash. When I get to Spring Street, I put my hand in my pocket and clutch my tips, a roll of fives and ones, forty-two dollars in all. It's not much.

My boyfriend and I live on the hill near the hospital, in a building with fake brick-siding. Lots of people my age live there; it is a commune for the downwardly mobile. When I get to my building I walk around it twice. I walk under halogen lights that line the streets. I walk past cars, some without hubcaps. A light rain dampens my face and my clothes. I try to calm myself before I go in, before I see my boyfriend. I look for the part of me that is not a waitress. I like to leave my work at work.

Inside, my boyfriend is already in bed but not asleep. The lights are off, and he holds a pillow to his chest. Tonight will be a good night, I can tell. We are both sleepy and lonely and in need of love, which lately has been hard to find. Some days his patience is all used up in his cab, and my smiles are all spent at work.

I undress and fold my clothes over the chair. I will wear the same clothes in the morning; I usually wear things twice. Jeans then shirt then socks. In bed the covers are wonderfully warm; they are the temperature of my boyfriend. My hands, I notice, smell like gravy. Sauces get into your skin and stay there; it is just one curse of working in a restaurant.

We talk for a while, just the two of us, about work and friends, families we'd like to see. It is the talk of people who have lived together for a long time. We spoon our bodies together, and he puts an arm around me. I take his hand and hold it to my chest.

He tells me his brother called today, his favorite brother, the one who lives in Florida. "Maybe we could visit him," he says. "Maybe in January."

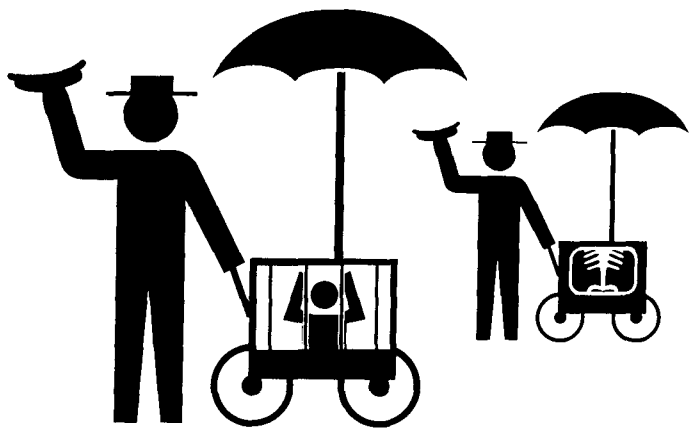
He misses his brother, I know. We both miss people. "Maybe," I say.

I don't tell him about my tips, only forty-two dollars, because this will make him sad, maybe a bit angry. Not necessarily at me, but at the world which keeps closing in on us. It will make us feel poor, and that is a terrible way to feel, especially late at night.

For a while more we talk about Florida, about his brother's children—two boys, identical twins, who are three years old—how the Florida sun is always baking hot and the way the Everglades must look this time of year, dense and humid and teaming with life I've never seen. Then our talk becomes sleep-talk, a few words, a few sounds, and I know he will be asleep soon. When we begin to sleep we will start out close, intimate, our bodies pressed together, but then we will slowly retreat to our own sides of the bed, abandoning the embrace for slumber.

Lying there, still close, still touching him, I listen to the sound of helicopters and cars cutting through puddles. Their tires lift and spin water. In the distance I hear the vapory sound of a jet above us. When I hear no other sounds, I listen to the industrial hum of tension lines carrying electricity to buildings around us.

"Sleep tight," he whispers and he takes my hand for a moment. This means he is ready to fall asleep. Already he's moving away. His fingers loosen, his body begins to roll. He says this to me every night, like a brief lullaby—" sleep tight"—but sometimes when I'm sleepy or aggravated it sounds like "we fight," which makes me wonder if we'd get along better if we had more money. Or jobs we liked. Or affairs. Or still believed our lives were adventures. It is an awful thing to think, I know, but every woman thinks this when her expectations are going down. You see, I was brought up to believe my life would be special but things just aren't turning out that way.



James M. Tierney

# ALLPLAY

His nerves made him twitch his left eye. It was sometimes a sustained twitch. A squint? A creeping twitch? Is this possible? This made Rio think things about him, imagine them up from nothing. Kurt, squinting one eye and looking at Rio, scared Rio because in this way Rio experienced what Kurt was experiencing. It was the experience that scared him, not Kurt. It was a phantom fear, descending like lightweight water, slow, a multitude approaching. Not something he could guard against.

When they were in school, in a classroom, at their small desks, Rio would scrutinize Kurt, he wanted to know who he was. Kurt would often not look at anything, he would stare into something or about something depending on his nerves, his energy, what he wanted. He wanted something. Sometimes twitching, squinting, one eye at a time. Seeing to figure out, not getting it. Not getting what he wanted. Was it there? Was it gone? Will it be back? Was it ever there? He could not think fast enough to know, to figure it out, he could only look to see.

A girl, Missy, liked Rio and she liked Kurt and at different times she kissed them both and both boys fell in love with this same girl and dreamt about her and imagined her present in their lives more than was practical at their age. Missy was in love with them both, at different times, at the same time, not at all. They were what she loved, more than cats, when she loved, loving these two boys at the paltry accumulation of years when you can't love.

At different times, Missy kissed both Kurt and Rio a second time, in a dark place.

They both dreamed of a third kiss as though the first two were not things they had ever done, as though this act was something that could never be realized, in fact, had not already been. In their dream it was as an appetite obstructed. It was as stiff teeth. The memory of what had actually taken place had become so elusive the boys had to reconstruct it as an insufficient moment: as though it were a single act, unaccompanied. As though it were nothing more than the word itself, spoken too often, an object to be held, to be passed around, to be turned over in the hand, studied, tossed in the trash, we can get another one of these. But that third kiss, they thought, they both thought, rubbing their hands together, the pernicious gesture, did not yet exist. It must still be conceived, born into its moment, a very short life. Is this what I want, thinks Rio, will I be happy with this? Will it be enough? Nevermind, I will take it, for now.

The two boys' parents spent time together, took trips together so the children were to be friends but they weren't. Their parents: Kurt's mother Holly and Rio's father Robert. They were as a family, as brothers that weren't, these boys that lived three sets of six similar houses from one another. Each avoiding the other. Robert was in distribution, Holly taught piano lessons to adolescent girls. The man was of good size, athletic, had deep-set eyes. A presence in any crowd. At one time he thought he might be an actor. He'd mentioned this to a few people. I thought I might be an actor.

It was between the second and the imagined third kiss that Kurt and Rio were taken away by Holly and Robert to a grandparent's house where they would spend some days, just the four of them and a grandparent. Away from Missy.

Robert longed for a return to his home in the country, the place where he grew up, where his father still lived. Holly had never spent time in the rural south and was eager for a warm vacation. She felt a small affection for Robert's father, though she had never met him. Robert's stories gave her visions she wanted fulfilled, played out for her in real time. Holly was a memorable woman, the single mother of Kurt, preoccupied with her life.

And Kurt and Rio rode in the back seat of the same car, absurd, torn from what they knew, scowling. They both felt very serious and would not speak with their respective parents. That they saw, touched, heard Missy each day was, to the boys, urgent. Otherwise she dissolved into the dreamscape, the land of ghostly nothings, into airy cotton, that feel that was nothing more. It was too much to be away, to be cut off from the possibility that fueled their playful anxieties. Kurt imagined they had turned the car around and were traveling toward home.

At the house of the grandparent, his mate deceased, the grandparent was happy to see the young boys and the young lovers. The young boys did not understand and they were not happy to see the grandparent, especially Kurt who had never met the older man. Kurt's mother Holly watched her son but didn't know what to say because it was true that she was doing this more for herself than for Kurt. She hoped Kurt could entertain himself, but this was not likely. Kurt was one for doing things.

In the kitchen, near the entrance of the house, standing in the loose circle of greeting, Kurt looked away, at nothing, his one evil slit: a sneer. Rio stuffed donuts into his mouth.

It was suggested by Robert, who knew the terrain, who grew up in these parts, that the two boys make their way to the fishpond where they might find something to interest them. It was his favorite place as a young man, Robert told the boys. The two boys obeyed, but Kurt followed behind Rio. They did not speak. They walked over that way, slowly, walking on delicate stuff, hoping something would happen. Rio was burdened, implicated in a slow-burning way. His heart fluttered and his instinct was to be away from here, suddenly in more comfortable surroundings. An irrational violence presented itself.

They passed through the heavy rusted fence into the area that was called the fish pond. This fence was not like the fences they had seen elsewhere; it was a

fence that was made by an independent group of men (perhaps a single man, two men, a man and a woman, laboring many hours) who made fences-to-order and it was made well before those other fences, the prototypes, the efficient ones, those of everyday dis-concern were ever first constructed. It was made many years ago. This fence had a latch like Rio and Kurt had never seen, it was heavy, difficult, made lots of noise.

They stopped walking so delicately because that required a concentration and self-awareness they were no longer able to maintain. They began to think about the fence and what other things suchlike might be beyond the fence. They did not think about their steps. They set their sights elsewhere, on othernesses not particular. For the two boys, a tiger walked across the horizon at the back end of the lake with grace and perfection, so much so that Rio wondered if a tiger had just crossed their view in the distance. Kurt did not wonder, he was already there, he was gone from here now. No one could say what his face was doing. He began to walk to the other side of the fishpond.

Kurt wanted to be nearer the tiger because he knew it was a tiger across the horizon. He might try to touch it, he might just get close enough to see clearly the pattern of its stripes. Kurt was a dangerous boy. Rio said what was that and stepped high over the grass behind Kurt who knew what he was doing, this not requiring any prior knowledge. Rio watched Kurt and he became fond of him, fond, also, of the thought of a tiger nearby. He saw like Kurt what Kurt saw, the tiger, move like a sudden tiger, and they advanced together toward the shadowy corner where the tiger had slipped away. They stopped some feet from where the dark began to overtake the green grass and, allowing their eyes to adjust, they saw dissimilar patterns through the leafy shadows and could trace the rise and fall of the presence of the breath of the body of the tiger whose right eye, turned to the boys, shone like a living thing and then was out and then shone again as though it had never left, as though it was the boys who had turned away for a second (although they hadn't), turned to no-time, no-space, had seen their own deaths, in the blink of the tiger.

Get it, get it, let's get it.

The grandparent, the parent, Robert's father asked Robert why he lied to the two boys. He knew Robert spent very little time at the fish pond in his younger years and the time he did spend there the old man knew Robert did not enjoy. Mostly Robert had complained about the maintenance chores he had become responsible for at a young age. The unwieldy grass; he raked the murky water. Robert replied that there had, too, been pleasant memories of the place. Does your memory always serve you so well, says his father.

This is my memory, Dad, says Robert. I am entitled. He is insisting. I have mine and you have yours. Robert chuckles, glancing at Holly. Turning back to his father he pleads. What can I say? It had its moments. Shoot, I remember things, very good things, times. We had very good times out there, me and you. Mom. And he looks down and away, into some middle distance, gesturing



emptily. Shrugging, he and Holly curl into their new room, Robert's old one, remodeled for guests.

The old man knew that Robert was lying, that the pleasant memories were not his own. The father had enjoyed the fish pond immensely for most of his life. Associated with it were the greatest memories of his own imagination and solitude. Its presence kept him alive, was life-giving, he thought, was one way he thought about it. A thing existing uncorrupted by the artifice of time apart, an eternal presence, present eternally in its single form. What it was and what he was within it sinuously bound. Aging, dry and tight. Essential. A place, here, in the South: a lush geographical space. Signifying. This was how he currently thought about the place, in these terms. The old man, now approaching eighty, perhaps now extending beyond eighty, moved through the familiar geometry of his home, out through his yard to a small shed that once housed a workshop but now was a holding place for antiquated objects not to be done away with so completely. He unpacked a shotgun that hadn't been fired in a number of decades, not since his squirrel problem was a problem, and fired it into his midsection where it might hurt the most.

It was something they had both secretly looked forward to for many days, this little indiscretion. Robert's nostalgia had romanced himself and Holly. His ideas on where his life had brought him, a line he traced from this very room, were wistful and contented, silky thin lines of chance and the wind; they looped and crossed and here I am. Outside of the presence of his father, these thoughts came easily. They were, in the end, arousing. Not three hours in the new place, Robert and Holly made love in the redecorated bedroom.

Kurt and Rio watched the still tiger for a very long time. Kurt poked at the leaves with a stick and said things, hoping to extract the tiger. Rio tried to keep his eyes on those of the tiger, but the tiger, an animal less sentient than Rio, would not play along and his eyes darted between the two harassing boys. Rio persisted, concentrating with an imagined pyretic force, generating heat to some critical point to spark the flame to burn out the holes to burn out the life to see what it had been. To make the present past for to see what was missed. To evaluate the living thing in the circumstances of its end, the death allowing for a closer inspection. To see what it could take, find its breaking point with the simplest method. Just a crude, irresponsible boyhood experiment.

Kurt knocked him silly. Stunned, in the grass, Rio did not retaliate. He was not even angry.

To be in the midst of a tiger, seen or unseen, awed the boys into a pleasurable fear, one they would later wish for often. A tiger, they thought. Here, at the fish pond. This was something to be wondered at. We should be afraid. They tossed clumps of mud to stir the hidden animal. Running close, letting fly, backing off to safety.

An anxiety toward the mythical tempered by the knowledge of their own existence is what it was.

It was play.

Robert and Holly, exalted by their afternoon activities, lay in bed thinking rapid thoughts concerning the aesthetic of their environment. Of course, the thoughts were different for each person. Holly thought the room fresh and bright, well choreographed for a Spring afternoon; a welcome contrast to the darker, heavier rooms of the aging home. It was exciting to have sex in unfamiliar settings.

Robert wondered where had it all gone? Why had his room been stripped to be re-invented by such a sterile assortment of mass-produced room decorations, some of which he had seen before, somewhere. But then, thought Robert, I am glad for it because here I am with Holly and I am not the boy I used to be. No, you are not, says his father, in fact you never were the boy you used to be. His father does not say this because he is in the shed with a rifle shot in his abdomen, but this is what occurred to Robert as he had conversations within his exalted mind. It was the sort of statement his father had been making lately. Robert did not know what to make of such ideas and smiled them off on old age and what that does to the thoughts of those who suffer it. Robert did briefly consider considering the insinuations and their existential consequences, he thought he might have the faculty to do so, but this, he thought, could send him hurtling towards the depths of his traditionally imagined Hell, a fundamental collapse from which he might not resurface for many years so it is not worth it, he thought, it is certainly not necessary. He did not want to visit Hell for any amount of time, no matter how brief. I am me, I will not change, there is nothing so wrong with me, he reasons and he thinks of his silly, wistful line with a self-satisfied amusement. What a picture I was painting there, he thinks. Pausing to consider solemnly, in all seriousness, clear-headed, folded arms, propping himself up on the pillows, Robert sees his line, broad and firm now, steadfast and true, as it always had been. The man suspects he is finished with this little argument he has stumbled upon. He smiles and imagines he is lazily smoking the post-coital cigarette. He is a charming, complacent man.

Recently, time spent with activities and events had become more precious to Robert. They were a measure, a way to gauge his day-to-day existence. Small dosages for visual accounting: estimations, ball-park figures. He would pause in the hallway, stand very still, eyes transfixed, mouth gaping, pretending to think, unable to execute the act; only, what am I doing, where am I going? This would happen.

The old man, about eighty years old, or so, lightly pressed his stomach together as he wrote out some notes in his own blood on a dated newspaper taken from a stack kept for wrapping fish that would later be put in a freezer. The newspaper was very old and crumbly. He wondered, would his request be valid? No matter, it was just so they would know what he wanted done with the tiger. He wanted it dead. This had occurred to him just as he had pulled the trigger and he was happy to have this opportunity to express his feelings. The man felt lucky. Without him, the tiger, an organic figure of contemplation, a



victim really, of fortuitous speculation would become something else for someone else, would not be the tiger, kill it. It was the last living thing for which he still felt a responsibility. With the animal he wanted poignant closure. A selfish excess, here at the end, though one he knew to be righteous. Yet at this point (and this was something the grandfather did not know) the tiger was gone far away, alive and traveling, perhaps eating the smaller people, perhaps the catalyst for spontaneous moments of reflection, pauses. Local news.

After documenting his final wishes, the grandfather delicately placed another shell in the barrel of the old shotgun and set the shotgun in the table vise on his workbench. This turned out to be very difficult for him and he sweat. It came out suddenly, a front of small cold drops, bursting forth simultaneous. He felt, to varying degrees, less human. With the gun secured in the iron clamp, the weak and dying man, an engineer by trade, ran a string from the trigger to his hand in a clever manner. He then knelt on a small footstool and positioned the back of his neck, at the bone, against the metal ring. He was so thin that the knob of his bone settled perfectly into the round opening of the barrel. This gave him greater stability for pulling the string. The man pulled hard on the string and pulled even harder the second time, more frantically, in a trembling frenzied spasm of I am leaving the world, let me go.

At the fish pond, Kurt and Rio were forced into the small rowboat by the bothered tiger who was unclear on their motives. Floating at a safe distance from the muddy bank, having had no time to get paddles, the boys sat silently rocking, their blood pumping in their temples and their throats, their eyes on the tiger.

Things were still, the day paused.

The animal paced back and forth on the bank and stopped, poised, its head at the grass then the boys then the grass again. In time, it turned and leapt over the fence and away through the smoldering cane fields. Elegant as a glass dream.

A tiger.

In the soft electrocution of the dusk, in the breeze of the chilling night, suspended in the dark water, the two boys watched through the opened space, watched the earth move slowly. It was turning over, thought Kurt. Flip. Flop. The plodding earth, plodding over the cane fields to the radiating orangeness of the sun was how Rio saw it. And Rio mentioned Missy, wished she could have seen the tiger. She would have liked the tiger, thought Kurt. They floated, hoping to hit land before sundown.

The sunset is the metaphor for the brilliant end, says Rio.

But this is not how things end, says Kurt. I hope this is not how things end. Things cannot end in desire.

Just a moment or two later, Kurt, bursting, thought to himself: Missy's my girl. Also, in the moment following this one, the boys got hungry.

Where's Pops, Robert wonders.

I don't like garlic, not at all, thinks Holly, shaking her head over the knife

and the onion. My mother never put garlic in her lasagna and we liked it just fine. She was making faces.

Robert stops stirring the ruffled strips of pasta, his hand with the spoon paused in mid-stirring action. It's getting dark. I wonder where the old man could have gone. Where are the boys? They are probably lost out there. Are they still at the fishpond? That could be, I suppose. Robert sips wine in moderation. Smiles at Holly who doesn't see him, intent on her chopping. Maybe he is out getting some dinner, picking up chicken and biscuits? I should have mentioned the lasagna idea. Robert stares into the rising mist of the boiling water, which disappears at a certain distance from the pot.

Holly thinks that she does not like the wine very much. She asks Robert if there will be a different bottle with the meal, since this one is no longer chilled as it should be. Robert says that he is sure there is another bottle somewhere.

I am curious if he has begun to work in his shop again. I would be more at ease if I knew how he spent his time. That would be good for him. Something to do, keep his mind busy, thinks Robert, nodding his head, and Robert swings through the screen door of the kitchen wielding, with graceful steps, a wine glass.

Holly asks where was the cheese put and she is alone with her onion, weeping.

Traveling through the yard, the taste of the wine, the slightly alcoholic feel of the imminent night, Robert was reminded of his college days. They flashed past in fleeting, unreadable textures. A current on the surface of things. Due to an intuitive anxiety Robert felt was unreasonable, he called out loudly ahead of him to those who might hear. Father, boys, we got dinner. Dad, son, Kurt? He walked on, confused by the lighting, his blood thin and reluctant, this psychosomatic, having nothing to do with the chemistry of the wine.

Kurt and Rio, nothing left to say, drifted in the boat, each thinking concentrated thoughts about Missy and the kiss they had yet to keep. Concentrating on something that wasn't there. Hopeful, longing, extending themselves toward. That kiss of oblivion. The natural bent of their drifting thoughts. The boat wandered to the land and the unexpected bump prompted the boys to get out of the boat and step back onto the muddy bank. They headed toward the house, the yellow lights in the distance, through the rusty fence, across the ample lawn, happy to be walking.

The shed was burned to the ground in a firefighter's contained chaos by neighbors and the further removed relatives living nearby. The idea was to leave the body right where it was, not to attempt any sort of evacuation or retrieval.

Kurt and Rio, coming upon the scene as they did, early in the drama, seeing things unlike others they had ever seen, reacted with a silence and a keen attentiveness that precluded the expected sentiments. At the shed there was Rio's father contorted and odd, moaning, looking beyond the grisly sum of the workbench, the shattered shotgun, and the dark stains in unlikely places and the body, the thing, Rio thought, that could not be called by its name, could not



be designated as was its former configuration and dynamic, the aging past aging of the parched tissue of the sloppy parts, grandfather. Who for Kurt and Rio as they stood together, alone, Robert apart, was not a man, was not someone they cared for, had remembrances of with which to construct a sympathy and a grief, a model for tactful speculation, with which to re-invent limb-by-limb, by mind, by voice, a man, the idea of a man. Because everybody dies, thought Rio.

Robert looked wildly at Rio and his son's face was unfamiliar, frightening. Rio made a half-step back and stumbled on a dark clumsy object loose on the floor of the shed and regained his balance, still intent on his father's disarming glare. The father, weakened in parts, at bends, from the unnatural contorting, the folding, would never be as stable as he once had been. He walked out of the shed onto the soft grass of the lawn. Kurt stepped over to the smeared newspaper and read to himself the last thoughts of an old man and why, he thought, overcome. The old fool. And Kurt looked across the shed at Rio who was already studying Kurt, and they saw each other, the boys' eyes in the uncertain light of the moonstreaked shed, they saw in the other's eyes the crude, enchanted elevation of the mind, the pleasurable fear of being disconnected, somehow apart, perhaps already somewhere else, telling the story. Nonbelievers, released to revel in the divinity of the moment, a divinity to which they are not subject, but which has revealed itself to them nonetheless.

The absolute terror of the reality tempered by the glory of the myth is what it was.

It was play. It was childish experimentation, irresponsible, irrevocable.

But there was a way out, a reprieve, there always is. It is later pieced together by the scheming mob that the tiger attacked, the man shot at the tiger, the old gun shattered, the tiger made a mess of the injured man and the tiger fled. Get that damn tiger, kill the bloody beast. So it was the tiger that killed the man and that was not so terrible. This was the story. They would tell it as they would have it told. And with the shed burned into oblivion, and the scene existing as nothing but a snapshot of memory, over time, most involved believed this was how it was. This made them feel better.

Kurt and Rio, who often reveled in their visions of what had happened that day in the country, would tell them to Missy, often not getting it quite right, struggling to remember it all. And Missy, at home with her cat, stroking the curve of its bowed spine, nuzzling its nuzzle, loving, would smile sadly when they told their stories because she knew she didn't love these boys anymore and while the stories were certainly entertaining she found that she just didn't care.

Bruce Henricksen

# I SIT HERE WRITING

Perched on a bar stool in Lenny's Lounge, whose neon-enscripted windows cast an orange glow across Joseph Street just off Tchoupitoulas, Professor Hermann, recently divorced from wife and daughter, punctuates his replay of the day's sightings, encounters, and skirmishes with sips of a dark Louisiana beer dubbed the Turbo Dog. "Sic another dog on me," he suggests, flashing a slick, engaging smile at the buxom Rebecca. Then, fresh dog in hand, an establishing shot forms in the mind's mollified and buoyant eye. Picture a youthful and athletic Doc Hermann leaning gracefully in a doorway as Debra Dufresne, ostensibly inquiring about her paper on *The Immoralist*, attempts, with the subtlety of a nineteen-year-old bred in Tickfaw, to steer the conversation toward country matters. Dissolve to a businesslike Professor Hermann striding toward the library, nodding shortly to the dumpy Martha Mahl, whose pathetic book on Chaucer—the University of Idaho Press, for Christ's sake—has in its first year, Hermann has checked on this, sold all of 68 copies. Cut to the faculty dining room where, seated next to What's-His-Name from Chemistry, an urbane James Hermann attracts, despite her unfortunate position down the table and among the drones of the Philosophy Department, the notice of Sandy Woodleaf, buxom like Rebecca the barmaid and, with a spanking new Ph.D. in French from Johns Hopkins, a damn sight more. . . .

**"Look at those assholes! These assholes are awful! See that? The white guy can't throw a fucking punch! These assholes are awful! See that? That nigger ain't any better—can't lay a glove on 'm! These bums are awful! Look at that!"**

Summary is the norm in narrative—we read in a matter of minutes or hours what took days, months or years in reality. Within the limits of our single lives, we vicariously experience, however elliptically, many lives, not to mention the longer reaches of historical and geological time. Accordingly, I will spare the reader the many repetitions of "these assholes are awful" that would constitute a more accurate if tedious chronicle.

Whose gratuitous review do I so ruthlessly edit? Slip back with me in time for a moment, and I'll clear it up in a jiffy, a sec. Two shakes. Our hero has made the tactical error of seating himself at the far end of the bar, near the television set and the popcorn, compounding his error by choosing a stool next to a vacant counterpart. Now it may seem odd to say that sitting next to a vacant stool is an error when one desires solitude, but the error resides in the failure to calculate the odds of the frequently drunken and always voluminous boombox known as Mike Pigman waddling in and placing a posterior that I would rather not describe—that, indeed, I regret to have mentioned—on that very hitherto vacant stool about which undulant folds of Pigman blubber now droop.

Have you noticed how, under certain conditions, a certain type of the human animal will repeat an observation ad nauseam? Of course you have. But in the case of Pigman, the reader must also supply an imagined construction of the nausea induced by excessive volume in service of a natural vulgarity of speech consisting not only of racial slurs but of frequent references to "pussy," "fags," and so forth. Further, the reader must visualize a guzzling, snorting obesity that has never failed to induce in each new acquaintance a dumbfounded awe at the uncanny appropriateness of the name Mike Pigman, in utter refutation of Saussure's notion of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.

Pigman's sports commentary, delivered to no one in particular, continues, shattering whatever narrative coherence was about to jell from our hero's dogdreams. But if you think James Hermann is dismayed at the turn taken by a previously serene evening of mellow dreams and friendly dogs, put yourself in my place. I sit here writing, hoisting the sails of action in Hermann's reverie ("When Henricksen writes, the action doesn't simply rise, it levitates!"), preparing to catch the winds of compelling conflict before tacking into the harbor of provocative closure, when in waddles Mike Pigman! What can I do, my point of view character rendered mindless, his thought-bubble busted and scattered by the sheer volume and presence of all that is sickening in human potentiality?

Regroup, that's what I can do. I suppose you've read Foucault's ideas about the death of the author? Of course you have. For too long we have invested cultural authority in the individual author—for too long has this arbitrary concept served a regulatory function. Blah blah, etcetera. Therefore, I relinquish whatever fame and fortune this narrative may spawn, and I invite your suggestions. Let's get this thing back on track together. Help! Write to the editors of this rag. They've agreed—I know where the bodies are buried—to toss your suggestions together and publish the result in a year. From one of you out there, who prides himself in doing moistened body parts, will come graphic descriptions of Doc's affair with Debra. From a sensitive soul in Boston will come the tragic results of Professor Hermann's haughty refusal to acknowledge Martha Mahl's sad humanity. A philosophy professor with dorky patches on his sleeves will . . . . But enough—I compromise your freedom.

One stipulation. Keep me out of your damn scribbles. Some of you are planning to turn this into a story about me, on the theory that every story is, in some displaced and over-determined way, about its own author. Lighten up! And I know one of you has already decided (it's called the biographical fallacy, stupid) that I too must be a semi-alcoholic university professor, divorced from wife and daughter, lusting after students and younger colleagues. Etc. Well, forget it! I jog, eat right, and am happily married—never touch a drop. So forget it! You think you know me? You got me pegged as an academic because I mentioned some bullshit from Saussure and Foucault? Never read 'em! Overheard it in a bar! Sell shoes for a living!

> As he writes, the author creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works. . . . Whether we call this implied author an 'official scribe', or adopt the term recently revived by Kathleen Tillotson—the author's 'second self'—it is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author's most important effects. However impersonal he may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe.

Well, I double-dog dare ya!

I sit here writing, perched upon my stool in the orange glow of my screen, my shadow box. And now, instead of Mike Pigman, I hear you, the vulgar reader, snorting and bellowing in the protective anonymity of your indeterminate position in space-time—in your elsewhere and elsewhen—snorting and bellowing, I say, your deeply offensive assumptions and inferences about me—me—your author, who sits here boxing shadows just for you! Have times so changed since author's addressed their "gentle readers," or was that address always merely a tattered scrap of desire thrown in the face of a cruel and tempestuous reality, or a bucket of slop tossed in the trough?

"Doesn't this bozo know," you respond, "that the literary code must evolve with our evolving social awareness? How can he signify a repulsive personality with a body type? How can he, in this day and age, entertain such blatant sizism? Furthermore, it is this author who snorts and bellows—Pigman is the creature from his id."

Awright—ya got me with the sizism thing. I'll take it back. A little discursive liposuction, and through this sentence, a magic tube, gallons of Pigman are flushed away. There! He's a normal lookin' guy. You're all normal lookin'. You never snorted in your life. Everyone may remain undisturbed by the least aesthetic doubt about her or his self-presentation. Now ain't that a barrel of monkeys?

In any case, don't touch me. Don't construct, reconstruct, or deconstruct me, and that goes double for my daughter. This is a warning. I'll get you. I have a list of the subscribers to this dumpy little mag. I have the wealth and the leisure to track down anyone of you on this list, and there ain't all that many. I haunt the reading rooms in libraries. I am creeping up behind you right now.

**Boo!**

Just kidding—relax, for Christ's sake. You're making a fool of yourself, as if anyone cared. But don't be sayin' Pigman is a creature from my id, okay? It sort of pisses me off. Let's be mature—we can iron this out, cut a deal. You drop that id shit, and I'll give you some autobiography to root around in. A list will do, sort of like a kit. You flesh out the scenes—choose a treatment, tone, and point of view—exercise your descriptive powers—purple up the prose. Be sure to have transitions. Don't forget symbols. Lotsa coffee and Camels help. This is going to be fun! Ready? Good.



Notes on the Life of a Scribe

(What seas what shores what gray rocks)

1. Father: Alcoholic bigamist. Dodges WW II. Smalltime con man, an oil slick in shoes. In the slammer for forging checks. Once threatened to O.J. Mom, grabbing hot GE iron from board and brandishing it aloft. Child, your scribe-to-be, face a blur of snot, casts pennies from pocket, blubbering how Dad could have them all would he but reconsider Mom's imminent demise. Years later—your scribe deeply, moistly into puberty—old man disappears for good.

2. Mother: Small town girl. Ph.D in Math. Impressed by Dad's good looks. Big mistake. Pregnant. Marriage quickly managed. Works hard. Does her best for her bundle of joy. She still kicks, a great old gal.

3. Scene and time of childhood: North Dakota—Carrington, Minot, Grand Forks. The forties and fifties. Summer, fall, winter, spring.

4. Young adulthood: Berkeley. Grad school. Freedom Now. We Shall Overcome. Married. Pass that joint, Mario. Picket Goldwater at the Cow Palace. Divorced. Play lead guitar for Janis at Monterey Jazz Fest. Vomit on—well, damn close to—Paul Butterfield. Low amatuer in U.S Open ('69). Fall, winter, spring, summer.

5. Subsequent life: Married again. Two kids. Quarterback for Saints. Fractured values. Spend half my pay on bimbos and booze, but squander the rest. Tell expensive shrink (declining Kleenex) shadowy memories of the melodrama by the ironing board (see above). Daughter, Kathy, grows up helter-skelter, meets wrong guy, whacks him, now doing time. Quit Saints and switch to baseball. Winter, spring, summer, fall.

6. The present: Mulligan marriage in the drink. Live alone. Dental practice doing well. Still temperate. Visit North Dakota, Mom. Smoke too much. Occasional letter from son, Sammy, in slammer (whacked wife). Believe daughter doing fine in shoe biz—unlisted number, never writes. Shadows. Join Senior Tour. Spring, summer, fall, winter.

There, now—you know me. Isn't that better—cozy? Have you been creative? Had a brush with truth? Not in your wildest, doggiest dreams. But be sure to write and tell me all about yourselves. Gosh, we'll be e-mail pals!

In the orange glow of my screen, I try to see beyond the words into the darkness like some loser cupping his hands to peer into the window of a bar. Anyone in there?

I'm scared to eat—down to 129. There are Big Mac containers everywhere, and Niagaras of blubber fall about my stool. Turbo Dog empties skulk in corners like death, but honest, I never touch a drop. I run 10K per day. Always smoked Luckies, like my dad. LSMFT. I teach math. I sell shoes. I loved my father, but have no kids. My daughter's in the can. I pick up babes. Drill teeth. I'm impotent. Hate fags. I'm out of the closet. Happily married. Hot as hell. All true. Nothing true. Thirty below.

Too late to explain. Forget about me.

Regrettably, it is also too late now to return to our fictional child (we are sort of married, you and I, although the divorce is imminent). My other child, Catherine, is doing time, but where is James Hermann, whom I needn't lose? We'll say he shuffled off—caught a cab. Honey, am I home? On the morrow, with sharpened tooth, the docile dogs of evening will growl and snap.

Both stools are empty now, the t.v.'s off, and Lenny and Rebecca are closing out the register. At the end of the oak bar, in the orange glow of the window sign, Juan, whose English no one understands, has again drunk himself into Bolivia. "Motel time, Juan. See ya tomorrow," Lenny shouts. Some fool on the sidewalk, hands cupped about his eyes, unable to relinquish the night, tries to peer through the one-way glass, wondering—wishing he could always be in Plato's cave. Anyone in there?

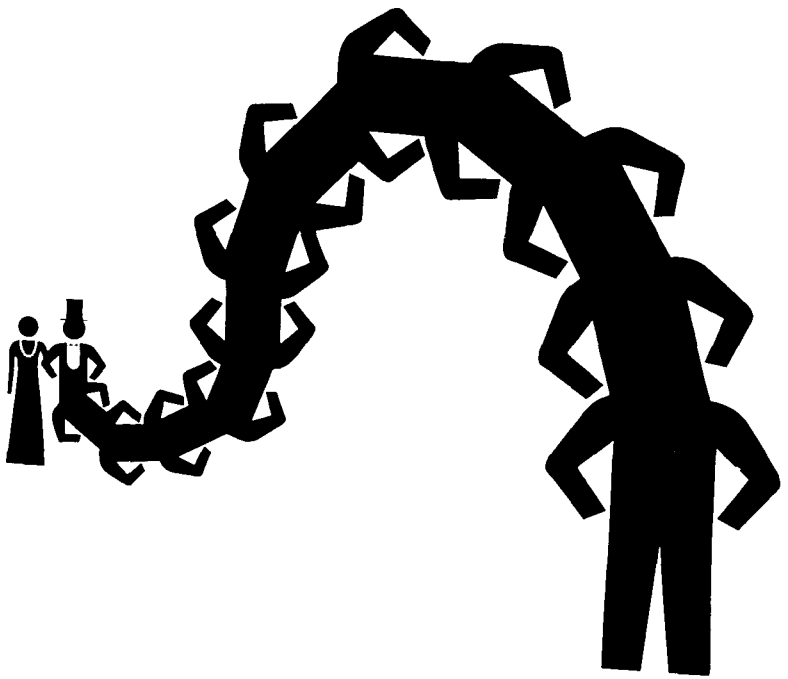
So whadya think, reader, did Hermann finish recomposing his day? Did the black guy finally land a punch? Which of Pigman's assholes, beyond t.v. screen and camera eye, lies in cold-cocked agony? And my old man, my shadow—I flung, and fling, my pennies to the old guy—has he lied himself to death by now?

I sit here writing, boxing shadows. Now a specter looms, and I mutter a thousand curses on my past concession. But since I'm an oily diplomat—a slick old griftin', conny-catchin' scribe—maybe I'll have some fun with you. Maybe some lipo-injection's due. Perchance I'll say that Mike Pigman in his sty swells again into shocking obesity, wallowing in come-stained sheets, snorting with another of his kind. It all happens through a phrase. Pisses you off—like it you don't? Well, maybe I'll say it, maybe I won't.

I know, you wonder if anyone's steering this thing, the rigging weak and the canvas rotten, or is it just monkeys at the helm? Hey, good buddy, light up a joint and pretend you're French. Yeah, you right—I spoze whatever story might've been in Hermann's mind or Lenny's bar has now been lost. We hitched a different, po-dunk byway, you 'n' me. If truth be told, I knew the Hermann dogdream thing would never play. I spoze that's why I wheeled Old Lardass in. Another mulligan. I'm a griftin', conny-catchin' guy—better watch me or I'll fix my lie. But ain't it strange? A little lipo-wrinkle in the plot—you right, a Pequodful—is all that's left for sure? Pigman in the pages and the sheets. Would that we could iron this out.

But no. Nothing coheres—the boxers, Hermann, Pigman—this writing, your dreams, my death. All a shambles, a shipwreck. Shall I eat a peach? Tomorrow and tomorrow. And you, why you still hangin' round like a barfly, bro? What elusive thrills, what quivering confessions, you think are left? Get outa here. Go ta bed. You're okay. I won't sneak up on you. You been a help, but please don't write—I's jus funnin' then. What's that? You're gettin' into being French? Too bad, mon frere. The screen is going dark. The cave is closed. Goodnight sweet reader, gentle reader, but I just gotta go, gotta grab me some felicity. Remember, it's all a con—don't believe a thing you've read. Brush your teeth.

Oh my daughter.



Randall Garrison

# THE TOMB

Before her mother died, she decided that she would preserve the body and keep it until she had made her peace with it.

She went to the library and read about the mummies. She found that they had been disassembled and dried all out with salt and had their parts put into separate jars. Except the brain which they drew out and threw away, knowing even then how useless it was.

Sitting at the round Formica library table in the corner by the mystery books, away from the kids studying and snickering and preening for each other, staring at the other empty padded plastic chairs, pulling at her knitted skirt where it had bunched under her seat, she thought that taking her mother apart was too personal an act and she would have to find another way. She rested her face in the palms of her hands, elbows spread on the table and stared into the book again.

Before she had to leave to go feed her mother lunch, she read that they buried them in the sand at first without special preparation and the bodies lay a hundred years without decomposing. It was too dry and the bacteria died. So when the wind moved the dune again, there they were, all crisp and hard, but not changed at all. And that was why they knew there was an afterlife.

But she had no sand, she thought irritably as she bought rice pudding at the open-always restaurant. Except what was left of the sandbox in the yard, quack-grass covered now, that her mother never let her play in because the cats had used it.

There wasn't enough in that. It probably wasn't even dry.

Her mother sat up in bed, fixed against the bed pillows, watching her with glittered eyes, moving her lower lip to rub her upper lip as if she was chewing up her face. Her mother was the only thing without color in the room. The pillows and sheets were printed with enormous flowers, poppies and violets and roses. The drapes were red striped, the rug orange, even the windowshades were printed with playroom animals.

She fed her mother the rice pudding and wiped her mouth. Her mother's eyes never turned away and had lost the ability to blink so that, after lunch was done, she tipped her mother's head back into the floral mass of pillows (it was hard to tip it back: the old lady still resisted) and dripped eyedrops into her unwavering eyes.

Back in the library, at a different table (hers had filled with bums, dozing into opened novels) she read that after the grave robbers dug up the bodies to take the things the owner needed to survive on the other side, the people buried them deeper, but deeper was no longer dry and the bodies rotted. Being clever, they found a salt to dry them and ways to keep them safer. But, she shook her close-cut hair and thought, I've no special salt and I refuse to tinker with her parts. Though sometimes, when she bathed her mother, she thought with disbelief, I came from there.

She switched to Chinese, and found the 2,500 year old lady who still had flexible skin and melon seeds in her tummy. She had been completely sealed away from air. She thought of wrapping her mother up in plastic wrap, but discarded it as less than perfect.

Then in the storefront beside the restaurant, she saw the cans of clear plastic paint that would dry to make an airtight seal, and she went inside the store to place an order and arrange for someone strong to bring them by.

Her mother refused the evening pudding, so she sat there and absentmindedly fed it to herself, using the same methodical strokes, stopping after each to wipe her mouth. She cleaned her mother up and turned the television off and turned out the lights to leave her mother's flickering eyes staring at the empty screen.

She set the paint in her mother's closet from which she had long since cleaned out and thrown away everything except a bright robe and a single Sunday dress. She brought the Chinese book back from the library and read it in the living room, her feet propped up on the sill of the front porch window, the skirt pulled carelessly back over her knees. She looked like her mother, pale, wirey, her skin just starting to crepe, brown spots spreading on her hands.

In the Chinese book she read about the six-thousand soldiers. Buried clay men in full-size ranks to guard the emperor in the next life and under his command to conquer heaven for himself. She pulled at her lip where a tooth behind it hurt, and thought.

The phone rang and she listened to her younger voice on the answering machine invite the caller to go away and not ever call again.

In the morning, she put on an old tweed coat and tied her gray hair under a bright blue scarf and went to a store that sold toys.

She was amazed at the sets of soldiers, some with weapons, some with band instruments, some walking, some on horseback, some lying down. She looked to see if any were cooking, but none were. And none were naked, they all had uniforms.

Men must be born with uniforms, she thought. She looked at the price of a set of toy soldiers and calculated in her head what six thousand would cost. Then she set the box back on the shelf with the others by the front window of the store and scratched her chin. No thank you, I'm just looking, she told the young woman with the wildly cut hair and the crazy, crazy clothes. Then she went to the doll department and stood transfixed for minutes in front of a doll so alive and set with human eyes that she knew eventually it would smile at her. But it didn't.

She stole a small set of soldiers in a necktie-sized box and held it inside the tweed coat under her arm while she bought a tiny plastic rabbit for her mother's

room. She carried the box of soldiers under her arm all the way home on the bus, though nobody would have thought anything if she'd just put them in her lap. They were a secret and she didn't want anyone to see them.

At home, she could smell her own scent on the box before she opened it and that pleased her. Then she opened the box and the oily smell of plastic spoiled her pleasure.

She lined them up on her mother's windowsill, but her mother didn't look at them, just at her and the pudding spoon. Then she lifted her mother into a chair and remade the bed. She was strong even though she hadn't wanted to bother with the paint. Once she had played hard hockey and had been as tough as oak though, whenever she knocked somebody down, the sports writers had always pointed out that she could also cook and have babies. They never said a thing about her strength. Or about her skill.

She unlocked the old garage and examined the old car that sat there on tires still filled with air. Her brother had stolen the car ten years before and hidden it away before he went out one night and vanished. She knew the keys were under the mat and she knew how to make an old car work again, so she put down her flashlight and lit a camp lantern and set to work.

At midnight, she drove it out the garage and down the street to the toystore. She backed it against the front window and it broke, the plate ripping across like fabric or the lake ice cracking under her brother when he skated with her on his shoulders. The glass became separate crystal continents that sheered and clawed at the car, but failed to cut the tires.

When the sound had stopped, she calmly climbed out and, opening the rear side doors, began to strip the shelves of soldier sets, tossing them quickly inside until the car was filled. Then she got back inside and drove away.

At home she carried piles of small boxes into the house and thought, it isn't six-thousand, but mother isn't the Queen of China.

She poured herself a glass of whiskey from her brother's bottle in the kitchen cupboard and sat cross-legged in the living room, opening the little boxes, unwiring each soldier from the cardboard back and setting them in groups and gangs as far as she could reach. When her mother wakened and she heard the coughing, she took a basketful of soldiers into her room and set them in proper rank and file in the corner by the tv set.

It took her most of the day to open the boxes and place the soldiers. When she was done, they were crowded but orderly. Not a mob, she thought proudly, not unruly. She took a bath and went out to get her mother's dinner.

Near the restaurant, on the other side from the paint store, was a drugstore and she bought her mother a little pink battery radio so she could have music in her grave. She walked slowly back home, thinking of all the things the kings had taken to their tombs and suddenly she felt very much ashamed of the little pink radio. Angry that her mother would have so little. At home, her mother's tv was rolling the picture, but her mother kept staring at it, so she left it that way.



That night she took the car to a record store and again backing in through the window, took a color tv and a CD player. She was picking through the discs to find sentimental favorites she remembered her mother playing and singing when she became aware of the burglar alarm horn hooting above the door of the store. So she picked the brightest covers she could see in her flashlight beam and hurried away. These she stored also in her mother's room.

On successive nights, she brought home a microwave and a blender, a small refrigerator and a weed whip. She ordered and paid for canned goods of fruit and spaghetti and soup. She ordered new dresses in her mother's size, from a mail-order catalog. Bright prints and florals which she hung in the closet.

She bought a steak from the butcher who asked how her mother was and said what a long time she had been ill at home. She bought cakes from the lady at the bakery. Deep white frosting although she herself would have chosen chocolate.

She froze the steak and the white cakes to preserve them. And sometimes she would open the freezer and run her hand over their stiff shapes, caught like photographs of themselves.

Her mother took no notice of this, but stared either at her or at the random images now appearing on the failing tv set. Still, the room was becoming crowded and she found it difficult to do even little things for her mother and there was certainly no more room for something new.

What she wanted was a private place.

She would fix it up and provision it and carry her mother there and arrange it all up comfortably. Even taking the red-striped drapes and the orange rug to make her mother like it there. But what if she was lonely, her mother? How could her mother be lonely with six-thousand soldiers there?

She sat on the side of her mother's bed, feeling the tufted balls of the counterpane beneath her. She took herself to the book on Egypt. Clay dolls in the tomb to come alive as servants later. She thought that might not work. And she didn't have the clay. She took herself to the book on China. Real people who went along. Dead servants or dead friends.

Who, she wondered. Who does my mother know? She liked the butcher. And the lady who ran the bakery. It wouldn't be much more bother to fix up three. I could invite them here. Or just drive out some night and bring them back.

But she didn't have a private place.

She stood that night naked in front of her upstairs bedroom window and stared down at the bungalow next door. She felt the cold coming through the open window and noticed that somehow it did not reach her feet. The warmth of her feet standing on the print linoleum, moved up her body like the red juice of a thermometer until she was the same temperature as the world.

Nobody lived in the house next door. She had watched it being built. It was on a flat concrete slab that had later been hollowed out underneath to make a storage room for auto parts with outside stairs and a big locked door.

She thought, if the house were gone, I could have the basement.

Still naked, she walked down the stairs from her bedroom and out the back door. She continued to feel the same temperature as the world. There was a waning crescent moon touched almost by three bright stars. She stood in the yard and stared at it.

There were several five gallon cans of gasoline in the old garage. She picked up four and carried them, two by the handle, two gripped under her arms feeling gritty against her body. She was carryng 120 pounds of gasoline with no effort at all.

The deserted house had broken windows. She lifted the cans inside and climbed in carefully. She noticed blood trickling down her leg from a splinter of glass in the windowframe, but wiped it off with her hand and then wiped her hand across her chest.

She toured the house and sat in the broken armchair in the living room. She took a calendar with a picture of a cat and tossed it outside into the back yard. She stopped to look at the bottoms of her feet, but the glass and trash on the floor was making no impression on them at all. She poured the contents of one can into the dry uphostery of the chair. Another into a mattress. The remaining two she tipped on their sides and stood mesmerized, listening to the gurgling of the gasoline like a stream over rocks, until the sharp smack of the smell hit her across the face and she fled.

Outside, because she had no clothes, she had no matches. So she went back to her kitchen for them and came back, stopping once more to stare at the moon. She could smell the gasoline all around the house as if the house had become a great flower. She lit a match, then lit the matchbook and threw it in the open window.

The explosion blew her across the yard, but she rolled and sprinted for her own door, her back suddenly alive with the heat from the house. Inside, she leaned against her door and heard sirens coming. The kitchen window was like a fireplace, full of dancing flame and heat. With its light, she saw that she had scraped herself raw on one side and that, mysteriously, in her hand was the calendar with the cat.

Her mother's room was on the other side of the house, so after listening at the door, she went upstairs and took a bath.

When the firemen knocked on her front door, she met them in her robe and told them about her sick mother and they said not to worry, that it was a small house, and the flames were going the other way, and oh yes had she seen anybody hanging around.

Which of course she hadn't.



Bonnie Arant Ertelt

# NUDE BECOMES NAKED

*There's a big ol' goofy guy*
*dancing with a big ol' goofy girl.*
*Oh. . . baby*
*It's a big ol' goofy world.*
--John Prine

Annalie is reading aloud from a lectern in the middle of the room as students, corraled in a circle, sketch her. Her breasts, once firm, sag now, still rounded at the fullest part. They echo the shape of her earrings, pendulous ovals with a red bead in the center of each dangling drop. She is wearing a hat with feathers and bones built up on one side, a cross between something a Comanche might wear in an old Western movie and the latest high fashion statement from a Paris designer. A conjurer's hat with panache. She wishes she could conjure in it. She would conjure herself right out of the room. The hat and the earrings are the only things she wears.

"'. . . Jelly focuses her dreamy gaze on the rooster,'" Annalie reads, as solemn as a priest daring an antiphonal response to the Song of Songs. "'Someday . . . if that Sissy Hankshaw ever shows up here again, I'm gonna teach her how to hypnotize a chicken. Chickens are the easiest critters on Earth to hypnotize. If you can look a chicken in the eyes for ten seconds, it's yours forever.'"

Annalie stops for a second to look at the boy seated directly across from her. The one with the large brown cow eyes and the full set of straightened molars. She can see his teeth clearly because his mouth is open, his jaw dropped. Judging from the slant of his teeth and the slight pattern left by his former braces, she figures he must be around nineteen. Annalie marvels at how good she is at guessing the age of these young aspiring artists. It's a trick she learned years ago from Earl McCaffrey, an old boyfriend from back home in Paris, Tennessee, who taught her how to judge the age of animals from wear and tear to the "mandibular bite shift" as he used to call it. She always suspected he made up that term to impress her.

This boy reminds her, vaguely, of Earl, the first boy who ever saw her naked. Or rather, nude. If there was anything Annalie had learned in twenty years of modeling for artists, it was that in art, naked became nude.

"What do you think about that?" she asks the boy, gazing directly into his mouth. "Never tried to hypnotize a chicken?"

"Could you stop talking for a minute, please. I'm working on your mouth," George says in a complaining whine from the corner. George has organized these life drawing sessions for the last ten years. He stole Annalie away from

Gordon Arnold's class at the university about seven years ago with a promise of more pay which he has never made good on. She has always been a damn good model—can hold a long pose well and is adept at coming up with interesting positions for the short, timed drawings. The short poses were what had finally decided George. After she started posing for him, she moved in with him as well. But it is now over between them. George has decided to keep her on because she has gained weight, making her a more valuable model. Fat models are a real challenge to draw, and it is hard to find fat models who know how to pose.

"Mr. King of the Conte Crayon," Annalie mutters under her breath.

"Did you say something?" George asks, preoccupied with the drawing in front of him.

"I said I don't know why you bother putting in a mouth; you use the broad side of the stick so much I usually look like some pre-Colombian fertility figure."

"I'm sure we'd all be thrilled to hear your critique, Annalie, *after* we finish the session." George's eyes are hard, like a brick wall thrown up to fence her in.

Annalie bites her lip and looks at the boy again. Every year they look younger and younger. Why do they sign up for life drawing, anyway? She wonders. How is this going to help them later in, say, banking? This one in front of her, she thinks, looks like a bank clerk. She can hear him now, counting back tens and twenties. "Thank you for banking with Third National," he would say. "Have a nice day." And he would mean it. He would be just as sincere as Earl always was at the Savings and Loan.

"So, have you ever hypnotized a chicken?" she says again, ignoring George.

"What are you reading to us this time," George says, "and where do you come up with these books."

"I'm reading *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, and since when did you not like what I selected to read? You liked *The Diary of Anais Nin* all right during last month's sessions."

"Anais Nin and *this* are hardly the same thing." George gives her a pained look from behind his easel. He likes to stand while he sketches. That way he has a better view of what everyone else is doing. "Besides, you don't have to read to us during the long sessions. I feel like I'm in a book-of-the-month club or something."

"I always wondered if you really could hypnotize an animal like Crocodile Dundee hypnotized that bull in that movie," says Adele, a tall blonde with a long neck whose voice floats on the air. Adele is a painter who has been sitting in on the sessions for the past year. Annalie thinks Adele's gesture drawings make her look like a Guernsey tangled in barbed wire.

"I thought it was a kangaroo he hypnotized," someone chirps from behind Annalie.

"It was a water buffalo, OK," says Annalie, exasperation tugging her mouth down and bringing the hat over to one side with it. "But we weren't talking about water buffalo; we were talking about chickens." She breaks her pose for a moment to readjust the hat. Grabbing a handful of feathers, she pushes the hat back gingerly to avoid mussing her hair.

"I thought we were talking about hypnotizing animals," says Adele, her eyes reduced to horizontal lines as she looks closely at Annalie's stomach, shading the paper with vine charcoal.

"Can the chatter! I didn't hire Annalie to discuss hypnotizing chickens or any other species. Now. Just pose, Annalie." George settles back into his corner, his brow furrowed, his eyes serious.

Annalie continues to pour her gaze into the boy's mouth. She expands to search his face, absorbing the lack of wrinkles around his mouth and eyes, the creaminess of his complexion, the cowlick that curves like a scythe over his arched brow. She is glad that orthodontia is an in thing these days. Something about his straight teeth makes her want to run her tongue right over those pearly whites. Just like in that old tooth polish commercial. Ummmmmmm.

Earl's teeth never were that straight, but she liked running her tongue over them anyway. In fact, Earl had a slight overbite that gave him an open gullible look. But you knew he wasn't gullible once he opened his mouth to speak. Earl knew how to express himself. He knew exactly what he thought about things, and he wouldn't change his mind at all. Annalie always loved to hear him go on and on, but she never took him too seriously. He was so stubborn, acting like he knew all there was to know about life in the big city. She can hear him now, just as if twenty years had never gone by.

"Annalie," he'd say. He always lingered over each syllable of her name, drawing it out until the *-lie* ended in a whisper. "What makes you think there's anything to see in a city that you couldn't have me bring to you on a silver platter right here in Paris?"

But that was never the point, Earl, Annalie thinks to herself as she looks at the pages of the book in front of her, remembering how the silver platter remark decided her as soon as Earl made it. Things were never that easy. And once she had made the break, it had been easier to stay in Nashville. The thought of seeing Earl again had acted as a barrier, a chain-link fence woven of his honesty and her hesitation and an amalgam of complex emotion and purpose that she could never quite straighten out.

"Barred Rock," says Adele, breaking everyone's concentration. The class turns to look at her, but she is still grappling with the shading on Annalie's stomach.

"What?" says George.

"Or maybe it was a Rhode Island Red."

"Is that a new pigment Winsor and Newton has out?" George asks, the look on his face one of hope that the conversation is turning to more appropriate matters for an art class.

"No. It was a type of rooster my father had once on our farm. He was a nasty bird. If I could have hypnotized any animal, he would have been the one."

"Oh God," George says, seeming almost to be praying. "Break time. Everybody take a break. And you, Annalie," George pulls her over to one side, "what's with you today?"

"What do you mean, what's with me?"

"I mean," he says, focusing on the red bead in her left earring. "I mean . . . couldn't you have picked something else to read? Now you have Adele started."

"You're right," Annalie says in a tired tone. "*War and Peace* might have been more appropriate." She pulls on her tattered chenille robe and turns away from him. George hesitantly tries to help her into it, but he is too late.

"So, when are you going?" George says, looking around the room, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"Going where?" Annalie answers in a boom that makes George flinch. He clinches his teeth and looks toward Adele, the only student left in the room. She is still looking intently at her drawing.

"Keep your voice down, will you? The whole world doesn't need to know about this. Now come on, Annalie, why the hell did you think I gave you that money?"

"And here I thought you were just making up for all those years when you promised me a raise. When was it you promised me that raise, George, about seven years ago?"

"Damn it, Annalie. You have to do *something* about this."

"What's the matter, George? Do you think people will figure it out? I don't think you should worry."

Annalie didn't worry that George would figure it out. She didn't know exactly what she had said that had left the impression with him that she was pregnant. Maybe it was right before they broke up when she had insisted that thirty-nine was not too old to become a mother. Maybe George had misunderstood. But since he had offered the money, she had decided that what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him too much and certainly wouldn't hurt her.

Annalie pads over the cold, paint-stained floor to where Adele is still working, leaving George to join the others who have gone to the bathroom or to get a soda from the machine in the basement. That is where the boy has gone, she figures. She can see him now, puzzling over what candy bar to get, his mouth probably still open, anticipating what he is about to bite into. Earl always brought her Zero bars. He loved to pamper her, "fatten her up" he would say. She loved the white chocolate on the outside.

She stops to look at the drawing the boy has in progress. In light, feathery lines he has traced her shape on the newsprint. She can barely make out where she starts and where she stops, for the boy has used only the hardest leads up till now, the ones so light they can hardly be seen. He is afraid to commit a line to the paper. He doesn't know yet, Annalie realizes, that he can erase if he needs to. Or just start over. That always takes a while to learn.

She ambles over to Adele, looking over Adele's shoulder while she continues to work on the shading.



"Oh, I like that," says Annalie, looking at herself from Adele's point of view. She searches Adele's depiction. Give me a clue, she thinks, tell me something I don't know already. Adele has captured her eyes, the intensity her face conveys when she is thinking seriously. At least, it is the way Annalie imagines that she looks. Except that she's not usually wearing a hat.

The boy comes back to his drawing bench with a root beer. Annalie has the overwhelming desire to ask him if his name is Earl, but she knows better. No one is ever named Earl these days; she even remembers a guy on the radio talking about that once. She wants to ask the boy why he is taking life drawing. Doesn't he know how dangerous it is, learning to see? She wishes they could all see her the way Earl always did, not as nude or naked, but just her. She wants to warn this boy that scribbles can become gestures, naked can become nude, life can become nothing more than a pose taken on a model's pedestal.

"Hello," she says to him as she brushes by his bench to get back to her place in the middle of the circle.

The boy turns to face her as she swishes by, the old chenille robe letting fly with some stray lint from the collar. His freckles remind her of connect-the-dots that she once had in an old coloring book as a child. His eyes are wide, watery and deep. She feels as if she is falling into them.

"Ma'am?" he says, his cowlick bouncing as his jaw drops in what Annalie is beginning to believe is its natural position.

"Nothing," she says, slowly drawing herself out of his eyes. His "ma'am" has answered all her questions. He is such a nice polite boy, she thinks. His mother should be very proud.

"All right, everybody, let's get back to work." George busies himself with getting Annalie back on her marks. He avoids her eyes, but she watches as he moves her leg into place. She knows he hates taking breaks. It shoots his concentration, and he can never exactly recapture the pose.

"So, what happens next?" Adele asks. "I'm beginning to get curious."

George looks at her with growing alarm. "Curious about what?"

"Well, this whole chicken hypnotizing thing has piqued my interest. You *are* going to keep going, aren't you?" Adele asks Annalie, for the first time meeting her eyes with a clear blue gaze.

Annalie smiles at her and then takes her dreamy gaze to the boy as he picks up his hardest lead again. Her hat tips, eliciting a groan from George who complains that he has not finished drawing it yet. Her earrings shake as she refocuses her eyes on the page of the book, taking the class back to the Rubber Rose Ranch. Her mouth says the words printed there, but her ears do not hear them. She is not in the room. She is on the old church road in Paris, Tennessee, nineteen years old, waiting for Earl McCaffrey to come by in his pickup truck with his silver platter.

Jody Cordova

# EARTH DAY

The day is April 22nd. I'm living in New Orleans, working as a waiter at a twenty-four hour diner in the skid row section of St. Charles Street. I go to work at midnight and get off at nine A.M. By morning, I've served the last of drunken revelers staggering in from the French Quarter, half the cops and taxi drivers in the city, and breakfast to myriads of old and broken souls who stumble down like clockwork from the cheap rooms above the restaurant.

At nine o'clock, I sit down to a breakfast of scrambled eggs and grits with Mandy, the waitress who's shared the floor with me all night.

"So what are you doing today?" she asks me.

"I don't know," I say. "Maybe catch up on some sleep."

"You mean you're not doing anything special?" she says.

"Special?" I say. "Why would I do anything special?"

"But it's Earth Day," she says. "Aren't you doing anything for Earth Day?"

I have no idea what she's talking about. I just shrug my shoulders and look at her.

"Haven't you ever heard of Earth Day?" she says.

"No," I say.

"Wow, I can't believe it," she says. "Earth Day is cool."

"Yeah?" I say.

"Yeah," she says. "They celebrate it all over the country. People are doing things to become more aware. Here they're going to clean Lake Pontchartrain."

I take a bite of my eggs, get up, go over to the coffee pot, refill my empty cup. Mandy is a rich school girl from up North, taking a semester off college to live in New Orleans, to get some experience of "real life." It's easier to humor her a little than to tell her what I really think. When I sit back down, she is staring at me with big, hopeful, brown eyes.

"Listen," she says, "I'm going out to the lake later with Ray and Jessica. Why don't you come along? It'll be a giant party."

I decline, tell her what I really need is sleep, that it doesn't sound like my kind of thing anyway.

"But it's a good thing," she says. "They're trying to save the Earth."

On my way home, I duck into a local bar for a beer. There is no one in the place but the bartender, and now myself. The bartender is a plain-looking man with a dirty-white T-shirt over his small round belly, a bar towel slung over his shoulder, and a growth of grey stubble on his face. He stands in front of me and I ask him for a bottle of Budweiser. I have a book of Bukowski short stories with me and when I get my beer I take a good long drink, light up a cigarette, open to the first page.



The beer and the stories help me wind down from work, help take off the edge that comes from nine hours of catering to angry customers, keeping coffee cups full, balancing armfuls of plates, trying to remember too many things at once.

It's pushing noon, I've had four beers and finished more than half the book by the time the first customer comes in. I notice his shape slip through the crack of light when the door swings open, but don't bother to look until he sits down on the bar stool next to mine.

"Good morning," he says.

I look at him then—Sunday paper on his lap, blue baseball cap; he nods his head and smiles.

I look back down at my book, wonder, with all the empty seats in the place, why the hell he had to choose one right next to me.

"Well, let's see," he says, flipping through the large folded newspaper, finding the sports section, laying it across the bar.

When the bartender comes down to take his order, I order another beer for myself, try to refocus on what I'm reading.

"The Reds are sure off to a quick start," the man says.

I look over at his sports page, then back at my book.

"You follow baseball?" he says.

"No," I say.

"Basketball?"

"Don't have the time."

"Well, what are you into?" he says.

"Not a lot," I tell him.

The bartender comes back and sets down two opened bottles in front of us. I take a drink of mine. The man turns the page of his newspaper. I turn again to my book.

In another minute, he taps me on the shoulder, points across the room, asks me if I want to play a game of pool. Figuring he's never going to leave me alone if I don't, I say "Okay," gather my cigarettes, beer, book, and follow his lead.

The pool table is in a small room sectioned off from the bar. When I enter, I notice an old man sitting in a chair against the far wall, his head buried in his forearms on the square, brown table in front of him. He is big and very old, and despite being obviously wasted, has a certain look of strength to him. I think of Bukowski, how he followed drink down and came out the better for it. I look at this old man, arms and neck like worn red leather, so beaten, so devastated, so in hell, and I think how easy it is to get stuck here, wonder at the miracle of Bukowski making it through.

The man with the blue cap is busily assembling a rack of balls and tells me I can have the break. I grab a stick, put some power behind it and let it go. The balls scatter around the table, but nothing goes in. The man with the cap steps up, picks off two easy shots into the corner pocket before missing a long one

across the green. I overshoot an easy one to the side pocket and then he picks off three more. Before I know it, he's sinking the eight ball and standing in front of me, shaking my hand with a stupid grin.

"Again?" he says.

I nod.

"How 'bout playing for something this time?" he says. "Nothing big. Maybe three or four dollars?"

"Let's make it four," I say, put two quarters in the coin slot, start racking up the balls.

He stands at the other end of the table, eager, a picture of dumb confidence, strategically placing the cue ball on the faded green felt.

When he breaks, a striped ball goes in, and he drops one more before missing. I then shoot the four ball down the rail and miss, but it's close, and I feel my range coming on through the haze of my slight drunkenness.

Blue cap shoots in four more striped balls, but fails to set himself for the last one. Still, he gives me a brazen look and gestures towards the tabs as if to say I have one more shot before he does me in. But he's left me with the five and seven sitting pretty in the corner and that's all I need to find my eye and run out.

He is surprised, but tries not to show it. He doesn't know, and I don't tell him, that much of my youth has been spent in pool halls. He hurriedly racks the balls again, still thinking that he is hustling me, that the last game was a fluke. He finds out differently when I run the next rack without missing.

Too intent to be discouraged, he puts together another rack and I take him for two more games. After that, I'm bored and when I get to the eight, I carelessly put too much stroke on it and watch as the cue ball wildly darts around the table, finding an unfortunate home in the side pocket.

The man chuckles with a false sense of triumph, hands me twelve dollars, says he has to go. I go to the bar and order another beer for the road, then return to the pool table to get my book and cigarettes.

As I am leaving, the old man stirs and raises his head, incoherent and hung over. He looks at me, and I stop in front of him.

"Need some coffee?" I ask him.

He waves his arms in front of his face, warding off my offer as if I am a frightening apparition.

"No, no, nooooo," he says, and puts his head back down on the table.

I leave him alone, realize, as he does, that he is better off not coming out of it yet. I slip four dollars into his shirt pocket and head for the front door.

Outside, the sun is high and hard on the eyes. I light up a smoke, start the walk home, towards the French Quarter, where I live.

When I pass the River Walk, they are down there—handsome, well-groomed men and women with balloons and signs, cocktails and potato salad. The signs say things like: "The Earth Is Our Mother," "Save Lake Pontchartrain," "Be Gentle With Trees And Animals." There is a string band

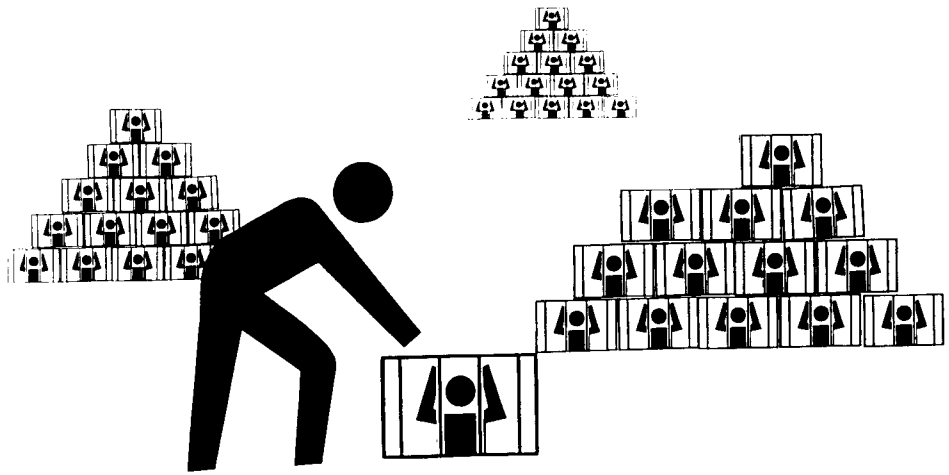


playing and people are standing around in small groups, talking, I imagine, about the future of the new administration, the latest environmental issues, astrology, last summer's trip to Yellowstone, macrobiotic cooking, their precious cars, houses, children, and whatever else they can drum up to brace themselves against the gaping cracks in their comfortable lives.

I dig my hands into my pockets, quicken my pace and don't look back. I make my way up Decatur Street, push and twist my way through congested crowds of weekend tourists, arrive, finally, at my thirty-five dollar a week room, where there is just a bed and no windows.

I step inside, turn on the light. The naked bulb hanging from the ceiling fills the room with dim, dusty light. I peel off my shirt and fall backwards across the mattress. A cockroach crawls across my chest.

I don't kill him. I forgive him. He's got nowhere else to go.



William F. Van Wert

# THE FALL OF SAIGON

Writers who are single parents cannot be expected to write long, descriptive paragraphs with lasting philosophical insights in rigid, reaching prose. Children interrupt. They do so with ease and elan. I am on the phone, discussing a possible raise in my salary with the Provost at the University, when Ian, who is nine, interrupts me. He wants to tell me a joke. I am paying bills, in the midst of writing a check for the rent, when David, who is seven, interrupts me. He wants to tell me about the latest action figure one of his friends brought to school. I am at the typewriter, tiptoeing through a piece of tricky dialogue in a story, when Daniel, who is five, interrupts me. He bends over and shows me his fanny. He wants to know if he has wiped himself thoroughly.

There are no great American novels left after these interruptions. I am reminded of the Phyllis Diller ditty:

"Cleaning house, while kids are still growing,
is like shoveling the walk, while it's still snowing."

I cannot even quote Shakespeare, Goethe, Roland Barthes or Lacan. I quote Phyllis Diller. Dr. Suess. Ranger Rick.

It is difficult to let go and flow, when the children overgrow like weeds all around me.

"Daddy," Ian asks me. "Did you hear the one about the mother who bought three socks for her son, because he told her he had grown another foot?"

I fall into the literalist trap. Tired, stretched like pregnancy scars, I do not get the joke immediately. I get stuck on the image of three socks.

I go to the bathroom. Action figures are cast about on the tiled floor like an obstacle course. They, too, have taken a bath tonight. But when I sit on the toilet and look up, there is the print of the red-headed nude on the train, by Gustav Klimt. I like this print, this woman curled up in dreams and on a journey, her broad thighs and buttocks dwarfing the entire bottom half of the compartment, her face slightly removed, more distant, more whimsical, wrapped in red hair. I have always thought about the woman as someone other: a person who escapes the everyday. Now I realize that she is an extension of my writing, a projection of another self, the me that travels, dreams, curls up to open-ended evenings and relaxed sensuality.

Reverie to reveille. The bugle call of screaming in the other room. I think of the rope around Peyton Farquhar's neck in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." I don't even have time to go to the bathroom.

Children do not exist in the harlequins. Children do not exist in the *nouveau roman*. There is no place for them in hermeneutics. Here and there, a postmodernist child is babysat or rips up *Goodnight Moon* or rides in a speeding car to an uncertain death.

And yet . . .

And yet they grow, outside of time, beyond the focus of my fictions. Elongated, they move with their lunch pails, ducks in a row, and I notice their ankles before I realize the pants on Ian must go to David, and Daniel wears the face David used to wear. They discover moods, they inhabit their moods, and they no longer know what they're thinking when I ask them. Ian wants to interpret his dreams. David wants to discuss his choices for a future career. Daniel wants to talk about death. Ian builds rockets and talks dreamily of the day when he is allowed to handle liquid nitrogen. David plays with pocket calculators, asks about Little League, turns down dessert for the first time in his life. Daniel discovers taboo words, talks about girls as sex objects, throws temper tantrums for no apparent reason. Even their ailments are tiered: Ian has strep throat, David contracts a bronchial cough, Daniel gets a touch of eczema on his stomach.

Cloning proceeds, by its own timetable. Ian begins to look like me: more subtle, more shaggy, more wisened, but still a facsimile. David begins to act like me. He puts his hands in his pockets when I do. And Daniel is like a volcano, emotional eruptions, an unexpected generosity, a sudden selfishness, he bubbles and bursts. He wears his soul upon his sleeve.

They ask about shaving. About writing checks instead of paying cash. About how the sewer system works. About how rivers used to look when I was a little boy.

They ask about my stories. Sometimes, I tell them the plot. Sometimes, I read a paragraph. They smile politely or else they shake their heads in disbelief. They wonder why people would want to read such stories.

And still . . .

And still they surprise me. Ian comes to give me a hug when I am on the phone with the Provost about my salary. David stares at me and winks at me when I look up from paying the bills. And Daniel listens while I type, and, in between the lines of dialogue, I look at him, and he mimes the words, "I love you," as though, if he said them aloud, he might break the typewriter.

Even rites of passage lose their familiarity. For his ninth birthday, Ian asks for a dress-up dinner at a restaurant. He could have gotten hot dogs, a floor show, and tokens for him and his brothers at Chuck E. Cheese, but instead he wants a seafood restaurant, with reservations, coat and tie attire, the two of us. I take him to Seafood Shanty. He orders a Shirley Temple. He is serious about his pound of Alaskan Kings. On his lips, the gloss of melted butter when he smiles.

"This grown-up thing," he says, "isn't so tough."

He pulls at his tie, the way athletes squirm on the talk-shows.

My friend Gail, a librarian, once told me that children are like books on loan to us. You can't keep them. They grow, they become more independent, they check themselves out to other borrowers, besides their parents.

"How are the salary negotiations coming along?" he asks me.

I have flashbacks when I look at him. I remember when he was two, bounding into a field of dandelions, rubbing an entire bouquet against his nose, an applique of yellow, then laughing, the flicking motion of his thumb like a guillotine, decapitating dandelions.

"Mommie had a baby and her head popped off."

Even these flashbacks are like books on loan to us. You can't keep them. You can never keep them intact. They grow as the child grows.

The fall of Saigon takes longer in my fiction than it did in life. Descriptions of that city in panic come, not in reveries, but in clocked images that I carry around with me, like pocket change, through my day, until I can sneak away from the children for a word, a phrase, maybe even a paragraph. The words have to fit the images, like ideograms. There's no time for expansion.

The fall of Saigon is compressed. Frightening compression. The panic. The eerie exhaust fumes of constant airlifts. Frantic mobs of people—GIs, ARVN and civilians—at Ton Son Nhut Airport. Starving rabid dogs off their leashes, running wild. The din of choppers in the air, mopeds on the ground. Women running with their children, offering their bodies to Americans, also running. Looting of shops on Tudo Street. The USO closed, the Black Market more wide open than ever. Indian and Korean tailors out on the streets, trying to sell all their cloth in a hurry. Spilled gasoline. Errant bread, clothes and other belongings, scattered at random, as though clues to a treasure hunt. Fires. Bonfires on every corner. Fights in the street, cruelties observed but unobstructed. French bread. Rancid flesh. Fever. Panic. All compressed.

The C130s come and go, their wide bellies painted in green and brown camouflage, as though, absurdly, something that big could be camouflaged. The Americans ignore the Vietnamese now. No pretense of civility. No more promises to fight for freedom. The Americans ignore the Vietnamese completely. They fear reprisals, sporadic riots from the South Vietnamese who feel betrayed and abandoned; they fear these reprisals now more than they fear the inevitable onslaught from the North.

If death is certain, there is less to fear. But these Americans have short-time fever, all those superstitions about being so close to going home. Amulets. Rabbit's feet. Pieces of clover or garlic. Scapulars. Lucky scarves. The Americans act like Australian aborigines: wild, savage, superstitious, tribal. Nobody takes any chances. They stay on base. They mull like refugees around the airport.

They turn on the juice around the perimeter. The fences are not only barbed now. They are electrified. Some Vietnamese have passed out on the fence, their fingers turned brittle like spider legs by shock, their fingers in a death-lock on the fence, the only thing still holding them up.

Some Vietnamese children crowd near the fence, waving miniature American flags and GI Joe Action Figures. The figures, themselves, are in exaggerated poses of flexed muscles and combat readiness. The children, on the other hand, are limp. Their parents are dead or have already abandoned them. Their homes



are burning. They have nowhere else to go. One of the children, more prophetic and adaptable than the others, waves a miniature North Vietnamese flag. He smiles absurdly. There are no reprisals.

Saigon fell like a protracted strike in bowling: the same crack on impact, the same echoes of felled trees. The Americans, then, were like pinsetters, who one day simply did not set them up again. The beleaguered on both sides, the whole lumbering machinery of war, had gone on automatic. We had a treaty to tell the lie. They had the city.

I remember taking the plane, so glad to be going, that feeling that I was walking faster to get on board than the plane would ever fly. I remember taking last looks, like photographs. They were snapshots of guilt, strung together like rosary beads, hardened views from a hardened heart. I remember the Vietnamese woman on the other side of the fence, wearing her blue L.A. Dodgers cap. She was yellow-brown and beautiful, as only Eurasians can be, haunting in a way statues can never be, fierce and pathetic at the same time. She stared at me. "It's you or me," her stare said, and I nodded, to tell her that I had understood.

I was going, she was staying, the roles were clear at last. No more Saigon tea. No more catcalls and curtsies. She kept her dignity. I was going, she was staying, and yet I was the one who had that feeling of decay in my mouth, the taste of spoiled fruit. And then it occurred to me that she might be taking her last looks as well, like photographs. Did she have a way out? Secret passage on a sampan? A ticket to Thailand with one of the foreign journalists?

I hoped so. I dared to hope for her. I felt like such a fool suddenly. I grinned and gave her the peace sign. And then I felt like a fool. I sat down in my seat, fastened the safety clip around my waist and closed my eyes, feeling like Hubert Humphrey, the way he gave the victory sign every time he lost a primary.

I came back to America, finished my Ph.D. and got married immediately, eager to start having children. In retrospect, I think it was the best attempt I could make at the time to put Vietnam behind me. The facsimile of a normal nuclear family was my one stab at forgetting, at defusing all those Vietnam flashbacks.

I could have kids, I could even write about having kids, but somehow everything I wrote was a metaphor for the war.

I wonder if I will ever survive that war. My ex-wife once blamed Vietnam for the collapse of our marriage. I could neither agree nor disagree. I think the haste with which we married, and the subsequent hurry to have children, were due to Vietnam. And, in a logic no more perverse than that which brought us into that war, if Vietnam were responsible for our marriage in the first place, then it could conceivably also be responsible for our divorce.

It's easy now, even fashionable, to blame Vietnam for everything.

And yet . . .

And yet the responsibility that I could not take for the fall of Saigon, as glad as I was to get out alive, I took for my sons, when my wife took the plane,

wearing a straw hat and carrying her self-portraits under one arm, while the boys and I stood at the window and waved, not knowing what else to do, because the invisible electrified fence was already between us.

She was dreaming of butterflies. Her name was Tram, and she was dreaming of butterflies as she watched the plane take off. She was twenty-two, the mother of three, two of which were dead. She pulled on the visor of the blue L.A. Dodgers baseball cap and walked away from the electrified fence. She had seen the French come and go. She had seen the Americans come and go. The Viet Cong were coming soon, and she was sure they wouldn't be going.

Her parents had died in the bombing of Hue in 1967. Her husband had died in the Tet offensive of 1972, near Da Nang. Her two Vietnamese children had been slaughtered by the VC in 1973. She had come to Saigon in late 1973. She worked in a bar, selling dances and Saigon tea to soldiers. There she met Daddy John, a fat Black sergeant, who became her lover and her patron, until he was killed on his R and R to Hong Kong in 1974. Now she had his baby. A woman without means and a Black American baby, facing the fall of Saigon.

Almost every day, she came to watch the planes take off. She hid her baby in the bushes and stood by the fence with her blue baseball cap on, hoping that the Americans would notice her and put her on a plane to the United States. She knew about John's family in North Carolina. They might sponsor her, if she brought them the baby.

But nobody noticed her. Once a guard walked by her, on the other side of the fence, and told her he was a San Francisco Giants fan and she should change caps. But that was all. Saigon had swelled to big-city proportions under the Americans, and now that they were leaving, the city felt vast and hollow.

As though by agreement, the VC waited to swarm the city. They didn't bomb the airport. They didn't burn the buildings. They had let the Americans build a modern, international city, and they wanted to inhabit a workable city.

But there wasn't any work in that city. The Communists came, and there were parades in the streets. Tram hid her baseball cap and waved like everyone else. The victors came, riding the spoils of war. VC smiled from American tanks. Others held M16s. And some others marched with burning American flags as torches.

There was slaughter, some public executions, the ritualistic demolition of offensive buildings, like the USO. The Black GIs from Soul Alley, who chose to stay, instead of going home, participated in some of the parades.

Tram waited for the inevitable death she knew would come with a knock on the door. But, when the soldiers came, they did not rape her, kill her or throw her into the prison camps. They merely took her Black baby for "reassignment." They would not tell her where. They said the baby had to be "purified" and raised correctly. She tried to stop them. Once, twice, three times and more, she threw herself at the officer, begging for her baby. Finally, she begged him to kill them both. He was apparently moved by her display of courage. He let her hold her baby one more time, before they took him away.

The officer was the last to go. He told Tram his name was Tuyen and said he would come back to see her. He bowed to her and then he left.

Tram was assigned to work in a textiles factory. Food and clothing were the major concerns of the new regime, and every civilian of working age was assigned to those two sectors. Tram was assigned to a factory in Long Binh. She worked in a long wooden building that was formerly an Army barracks for the Americans. Almost fourteen hours a day, with the bus ride to and from work. There wasn't much time for anything else.

She realized, then, that, by taking her baby, the new conquerors doomed her in the present and in the future. She had no baby to trade for an American sponsorship, if she ever got to the United States.

She became Tuyen's lover, and he provided for her apartment and brought her more food than she was legally allocated by rationing. From time to time, she asked him about her son, but he made little response. Apparently, it had been his job to deliver the boy, nothing else. He was unwilling to make inquiries, because he didn't want to bring suspicions upon himself.

By late 1976 Tuyen had risen in rank, and he began to show Tram in public as his woman. He got her working hours cut back to eleven a day, and he offered to get her into vocational classes, to train for another job.

Month by month, they did things to Ho Chi Minh City to make people forget that it had once been Saigon. They relocated the older families of Saigon to the North and brought in younger families, who had been made homeless by the war. But nothing worked. Here and there traces of Saigon persisted, reminded people, made them cry in public. The name "Saigon" had ceased to be, but still it lived. A certain aroma on a street corner, a resurgence here and there of the Black Market, a smuggled newspaper, a discarded shoe, an electrified fence. Saigon would not die, until two or three generations of memories had died.

In the summer of 1977 Tram became convinced that her baby was dead, and that conviction gave birth to a fantasy child that she would never give up. She heard the baby talking in his crib in the afternoons at work. She listened for him in the night. She kept his clothes in neat piles in her closet. Tuyen was now willing to marry her, which would "legitimatize" her in the new society. She hesitated. She made him wait for an answer. He brought her more food and clothing.

In the summer of 1977, she beheaded Tuyen as he slept in her bed. She brought a machete to her bed, and she held his head down with a brick in her left hand as she sawed at his neck with her right hand. He flinched and staggered from the blow of the brick, but he never got up. His neck gushed purple spurts of blood as she separated him.

That night, she left in the darkness and moved steadily to the harbor area, where she traded new clothes and a radio for passage on a boat. There were

three other women among the twenty-one people who jostled for positions. It was often the case, Tram later learned, that too many people showed up for the boat. They risked everything, bringing their belongings and being out after curfew. If they were sent back home, they might never return. So, the people who ran the boats often got to keep someone's clothing or other belongings. They accommodated as many people as they could, even if it meant that those people went without their belongings, and often even when it meant an uncertain journey, because too many people were in the boat. Entire boatloads had capsized at sea, without survivors. There was no guarantee of safety, no refund of money, no possible complaints to management. For one reason or another, the people who took the boats had to go. Political dissidents who knew their capture was imminent, high-ranking ARVN officers who had survived thus far in various disguises, murderers, thieves, lepers, incurables. There was even a Vietnamese woman with a Black baby, which astonished Tram.

There were no rules of conduct on the boat, except to stay healthy and remain silent. It was dangerous to know too much about each other. Some of these people were suspected spies, from assassin squads, whose job it was to infiltrate the boat people, and when the passenger list warranted it, to terminate the journey, even at the cost of their own lives.

Tram fell into line so that she could be near the woman with the Black baby.

"How do you still have your baby?" She asked.

"I hide my baby," the woman said. "But the neighbors find out. I no can do now. I must go or they kill my baby."

"Where is father? American GI?"

The woman didn't answer right away. Then she nodded to the man next to her.

"This is father of my baby."

The Vietnamese man in the white shirt and rolled-up sleeves nodded to Tram.

"You are lucky," Tram said. "I lose my baby."

"I am sorry," the woman said.

"But this night I kill the soldier who take my baby away."

They spoke in broken English to each other, so that the other passengers wouldn't understand. It was clear to Tram that the other woman had also been a bar-girl. Where before they would have been rivals in rival bars, all competing for GIs on leave and American script, now Tram felt a kinship with this woman, who had fared better than she.

Twenty-one people on a wooden boat that was about thirteen feet wide and seventeen feet long left little room for sitting and no room for sleeping. The men pissed over the side of the boat. The women went in their pants. Nobody dared to show any food, for fear of a fight.

The first night, the euphoria of getting away was enough to keep them awake and unified. But they were beset by storms on the second day, and people began to pray or moan. Some began to talk wildly of turning back.



Finally, near nightfall of that day, two men began fighting in the back of the boat, and the two Malaysian boatmen knocked them unconscious with their guns and threw them overboard. One revived and began swimming for the boat. One of the Malaysians shot him in the head and he sank.

Tram huddled closer to Boon and her husband, so close together that they straddled the baby between them. People said nothing about the two men who had just died. There was a Buddhist monk in orange robes who now sat where the two dead men had sat. His lips were moving, and Tram knew he was praying. On dry land, he might have set himself on fire in protest. But here he sat alone, like a flare at the end of the boat.

"Do you hope to go to America?" Tram whispered.

"Not necessarily," Boon said, still in English. "Australia would be nice. Maybe India. My husband worked for an Indian tailor, who will give us work if we can get to Calcutta."

"Do you think about it?"

"What?"

"Leaving? And never going back?"

"I try not to think about it."

On the third night Boon got sick. She had a fever. She became delirious and started wailing in the boat. She gagged several times, and then she started throwing up, on herself and the man across from her. Her husband grabbed her, to hide her sickness on his shirt, and suddenly Tram was holding the screaming baby all by herself.

The Malaysians were quick to intervene. They grabbed Boon, one by the head, the other by the feet, and they heaved her into the sea. When Boon's husband tried to stop them, they shot him and dumped him overboard as well. There were sharks in the water, and, even though everyone looked away, the screaming and the sounds of broken bones were audible. One shark even hit the boat, causing another man to fall over the side. His body distracted the sharks long enough for the boat to get free.

Tram had never expected such attrition. Five people dead.

And yet . . .

And yet, even though she cried for Boon and her husband, she was not completely sorry. She had the baby now, and she gave him her full attention. She put the baby to her breast, but, of course, there was no milk there, and the baby pulled away and began crying again. Then she stuck her finger in the baby's mouth. At first, it gagged and then it began to suck. The ferocity of his sucking bonded her to him. Once again, she had her Black baby and could dream of going to North Carolina.

When the baby was calm enough, she cleared her throat and dropped saliva into his mouth. His little eyes contorted with the strange tart taste, but soon he was sleeping on her shoulder.

# THE SOUL OF THE SERIAL KILLER

Caleb Carr, *The Alienist*. Random House, 1994.
William Trevor, *Felicia's Journey*. Viking, 1995.

Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy, The Boston Strangler, Son of Sam: serial killers all—they haunt our imagination and make us wonder what it is inside us that can go so horribly awry. Both Caleb Carr, in his historical novel, *The Alienist*, and William Trevor, in *Felicia's Journey*, focus on serial killers to unravel the workings of their psyches. In doing so, they create novels that, while addressing the same subject, vary widely in their approaches to the killers and their victims. That two so widely differing treatments could succeed is a tribute to the very different talents of the two novelists and to the endless variety of human psychosis. Each serial killer, like his fingerprints, is unique.

The *Alienist*, opening with an epigram from William James, highlights Carr's preoccupation with the damaged mind of the killer: "Whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes out of our own mind." From that beginning the book moves relentlessly to discover and understand the mind of a man who is systematically murdering young male prostitutes from New York's homosexual brothels.

The story opens in March, 1896, with the murder and mutilation of a young immigrant boy. The narrator, John Schuyler Moore, is enlisted, along with his friend and alienist, Dr. Laszlo Kreizler, to investigate this murder and several similar ones. Theodore Roosevelt, the Police Commissioner, not trusting the integrity of most in the New York police force, forms a small band of worthies, none of them law officers, to solve the crimes before stories about them threaten the fragile peace of the sprawling metropolis, always delicately balanced between both the competing demands of rival gangs, and the conflicting aspirations of the settled New York gentry and the new immigrants pouring into the city.

Carr offers a richly varied psychological portrait of New York at the turn of the century. But it is not just the city that undergoes analysis. The murderer himself, who has left no clues except the desecrated bodies of his victims, must be created as a psychological portrait before he can be caught. So Carr, through Dr. Kreizler and his forensic team, works from the outside in.

Proceeding only from clues left at the crime scenes, Carr's alienist constructs the murderer in vivid and precise detail. Almost Holmesian in his intuitive powers, Dr. Kreizler knows, after the first murder, that, before they can hope to apprehend their killer, the group must "truly understand what drives him."



Kreizler further cautions his associates not to "look for causes in this city. Nor in recent circumstances, nor in recent events. The creature you seek was created long ago. Perhaps in infancy—certainly in childhood." The novel, through the careful investigation of Roosevelt's special team, works slowly from the murders backwards to the childhood traumas of the murderer, and thus Kreizler is able to solve what the city has accepted as "an unsolvable mystery."

Carr, like many procedural mystery writers, paces the clues carefully, understands the workings of the nineteenth century New York police force and the city's political machine, and creates a compelling story that comes to life with historical immediacy.

William Trevor, faced with the idea of a serial killer in *Felicia's Journey*, works from the opposite point, from the inside out. We know the killer intimately before we are really aware of his crimes; and the novel, rather than solving the mystery of serial murders, seeks to delineate as fully as possible the loneliness that drives both the killer and his victims.

Felicia, Irish, Catholic, and pregnant, arrives in England seeking Johnny Lysaght, the young man who, home in Ireland for a holiday, has seduced her then left again, abandoning Felicia to her father's harangues against those Irish who betray their country and those "hooers" who disgrace their families. With no one to help her, Felicia goes to England hoping Johnny, at least, will take her in. She finds, instead, Mr. Joseph Ambrose Hilditch.

The portrait of Mr. Hilditch shows all the skill of Trevor's three decades of storytelling. A lonely man, Hilditch returns home each evening from his job as a catering manager to an empty house: "No pet is there to witness the homecoming of its single occupant, not a goldfish or a bird." Hilditch's peculiar habits are delineated from the inside out with care and sensitivity; his isolation surrounds him like a globe. The five women he has already murdered inhabit his imagination like living beings.

And the killings are never described. Trevor can create the *frisson* of fear without ever mentioning murder. Elise, Beth, Gaye, Sharon, and Jakki have all become a part of Mr. Hilditch's "Memory Lane" without the reader's ever knowing exactly what has happened to them. It is only in the character of the seemingly caring and reasonable Mr. Hilditch that there is ever the hint that something is terribly wrong and that Felicia herself is in grave danger.

Relentlessly, Hilditch destroys Felicia's independence until he has her helplessly trapped and then decides it is time to make her a part of "Memory Lane." At that moment, Felicia and the reader become starkly aware that "the girls are dead. There is something that states it in the room, in the hoarse breathing, in the sweat that for a moment touches the side of her face, in the way he talks. The dark is oppressive with their deaths, cloying, threatening to turn odorous."

Felicia loses a good deal more than her life through her association with Mr. Hilditch. "That innocence that once was hers is now, with time, a foolishness."

Mr. Hiditch's presence stunts any possibility of a future, and his own fate is so closely entwined with all his victims' that he cannot survive without them.

Like *The Alienist*, *Felicia's Journey* maps the journey of the soul in the landscape of the city; Trevor's late twentieth-century Midlands city demonstrates all the chaos, corruption, and moments of hope that Carr captures in late nineteenth-century New York. Both novels depend on the keen observer's eye to capture the "tall bleak chimneys. . . . Factories . . . like fortresses. . . . Terracotta everywhere [that] has blackened to the insistent local sheen. The lie of the land is lost beneath a weight of purpose, its natural idiosyncrasy stifled, contours pressed away." Cities, like the people who inhabit them, lose their individuality until there is only "charity and shelter and mercy and disdain; and always, and everywhere, the chance that separates the living from the dead."

Lionel Dahmer, father of Jeffrey Dahmer, our current most famous serial killer, ruminated about the path his son's life took that led him to kill seventeen young men: "By the time he was fifteen, his mind had begun to dissolve completely into a nightmare world . . ." More and more, as a teenager, his inability to speak about [his visions of murder and dismemberment] would sever his connections to the world outside himself." Indeed it is that nightmare world that Caleb Carr and William Trevor so chillingly construct, the awful world of the lost soul, utterly disengaged, who knows why, from the human community.

--Mary A. McCay



# EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR

William F. Allman, *The Stone Age Present*. Simon & Schuster, 1994.

David. M. Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*. Basic Books, 1994.

Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life*. Pantheon, 1994.

Traditionally, psychology has addressed an elusive object with problematic assumptions. Is there an unconscious? Are new "memories" of old abuses recovered or constructed? Does psychoanalysis help us discover actual truths about ourselves, or are the discoveries illusions born from our acceptance of an analyst's theories? By fusing psychology to biology and other sciences, evolutionary psychology seeks to move the investigation of human behavior away from the obscure negotiations of the psychiatric couch and thus to become a "harder" science. The enabling tenet of this emerging discipline is that much of our behavior, whether institutional or individual, is driven by strategies that evolved through thousands of years in the ancestral environment, strategies having the single purpose of propelling genes into the future. Since these strategies survive in each of us in a submerged way, that is to say, genetically, they become the new version of Freud's unconscious.

Unlike Freud's unconscious, however, adaptive strategies are verified not merely by case studies of individuals who have sought the analyst's help, but by data from a far broader field, including data on ancient life provided by paleontology and archeology, on existing nonhuman life provided by biology and zoology, and on past and present human cultures provided by cultural anthropology and sociology. What emerges from this imperialistically interdisciplinary enterprise is a tapestry of analogues and symmetries linking people of all cultures to one another, to nonhuman animals, and to our evolutionary past. Since all humans come from an essentially common ancestral environment, and since nonhuman animals have also evolved in response to the same environmental challenges that faced our human predecessors, evolutionary psychologists posit common behavioral and psychological patterns throughout the animal kingdom—which includes humans. A number of recent books and articles now argue for the far-reaching implications of this new paradigm.

A set of common questions governs these studies. To what extent can human behavior be accounted for in terms of cultural influences, and to what extent is it natural? Are gender differences cultural or natural? Why are humans so violent, and why are men so much more violent than women? What aspects of our mating habits do we share with other cultures, with other animals, and

with our predecessors in the ancestral environment? And given our genetic predisposition to fight for food, shelter, and sex, what accounts for the origins of human culture and particularly for art and morality? William Allman's *The Stone Age Present* deals with the entire range of these questions, as does Robert Wright's *The Moral Animal*. David M. Buss's *The Evolution of Desire* focuses exclusively on the question of mating habits. Allman has the most to say about the early evolutionary periods, citing archeological evidence pointing to the dawn of cooperative behavior, of agriculture, and of art.

Robert Wright offers a different approach to history. He juxtaposes chapters explaining the theory of evolutionary psychology with biographical chapters on Charles Darwin, neatly doubling the lesson as he turns the new Darwinism upon Darwin himself, using Darwin's life to illustrate the unconscious workings of inherited adaptive strategies. Darwin's marriage, for instance, affords an opportunity to discuss our adaptive mating habits. Evolutionary psychology dictates that it is natural—genetically encoded—for women to prefer slightly older men because they are likely to have more resources to invest in offspring. Similarly, men naturally prefer young and attractive women because these attributes signal reproductive health. It follows that men with wealth and power get the youngest, most beautiful women. Wright asks if Darwin's own courtship and marriage reveal these dynamics. Why did Darwin, particularly in view of his professional status, do something so maladaptive as to marry a woman one year older than himself? In other words, what accounts for the ways we override or adjust adaptive logic?

David Buss also explores the mysteries of courtship and mating, but he bases his discussion on statistical studies he has conducted in various parts of the world. The cross-cultural nature of Buss's data strengthens the argument that the forms of behavior that concern evolutionary psychologists are not culturally produced. Men and women around the world have the same reproductive unconscious; women unconsciously (of course they can also do it consciously) assess male resources, and men unconsciously assess female reproductive health, an assessment simplified by a surprisingly universal standard of feminine beauty. Furthermore, everywhere one looks, one finds that men are more promiscuous than women. This, too, follows from evolutionary logic. If the goal is to get one's genes into the future, a man will naturally be promiscuous. A woman, however, must carry the unborn child for nine months and nurse it thereafter. This fact limits the frequency with which she can reproduce, and it follows that she will select men who are likely to make long-term investments in the offspring. Both Wright and Buss make much of the fact that such behavioral patterns are also found in nonhuman animals, recent studies of monkeys providing particularly interesting data.

Homosexuality and female promiscuity seem to present problems for a theory that says our most basic drive is to get our genes into the future. Homosexuals apparently act counter to this drive, and promiscuous women are not concerned with the long-term investment of the men they mate with, a concern



necessary to the well-being of offspring. Suffice it to say that such aberrations, and such further anomalies as infanticide and suicide, can also be explained in terms of evolutionary logic. And the fact that male homosexuals are more promiscuous than lesbians underlines the argument that men and women are programmed to be promiscuous to different degrees. The genetic programming is at work in heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. Although none of the authors discussed above raises the issue of a homosexual gene, others are looking for it—see Dean Hamer and Peter Copeland, *The Science of Desire: The Search for the Gay Gene and the Biology of Behavior* (Simon & Schuster, 1995).

In any case, to argue that many people today enjoy recreational sex with a clear intention of avoiding pregnancy in no way refutes evolutionary psychology. The point is, sex is fun *because* the fun originally served an evolutionary purpose. Furthermore, behavioral tendencies described by evolutionary psychology operate below the level of conscious decisions, and they can be modified by conscious decisions and by cultural influences.

As Allman, Buss and Wright each suggest, we live with genetically inherited strategies that functioned in the ancestral environment but are not always perfectly suited to the conditions of the modern world; the world changes more rapidly than our adaptive strategies. For instance, if overpopulation and AIDS were somehow to prevail for centuries, they might eventually contribute to a reduction of the sex drives of young men. In the meantime, we are stuck with more evolved horniness than we really need.

On the other hand, although males have a genetic predisposition to promiscuity, monogamy may actually be the most rewarding and "adaptive" choice in today's world. We do not lack the capacity to make rational choices in response to the present environment, thereby overriding the evolutionary encoding. We are living fossils, but not *merely* living fossils. Furthermore, the fact that men and women have evolved with different desires does not mean that war between the sexes is inevitable. Instead, it provides the opportunity for happiness. As Buss says, "Fulfilling each other's evolved desires is the key to harmony between man and woman" (221).

It should be clear at this point that evolutionary psychology runs the risk of offending political correctness. Edward O. Wilson, a "sociobiologist" who was one of the immediate predecessors of today's evolutionary psychologists, had a pitcher of water dumped on his head at a symposium in 1978 by a young woman who apparently did not like hearing that male dominance of females is a basic primate trait and that noble instincts such as cooperation and altruism are genetic products of warfare. (Wilson's books *The Ants* and *On Human Nature* earned him the Pulitzer Prize, and his autobiography, *Naturalist*, has just appeared.) Wright, a senior editor of *The New Republic*, has written a diplomatic exploration of some of the implications of evolutionary psychology for feminism in that magazine (Nov. 28, '94).

Among other things, Wright argues that it may be a mistake for feminists to insist on "equality" under the law. He cites a recent case in which a court

awarded a woman a harassment settlement on the grounds that any normal *person* would have felt harassed in her position. Although Wright sides with the woman, he argues that the court applied faulty logic. Most men probably would not have felt harassed in a comparable situation, since many men are flattered by the "same" behavior that women experience as harassment. So it is in women's best interest that the law recognize gender differences rather than base its decisions on false notions of equality. This is just one example of the ways that evolutionary psychology seeks to influence thought about public policy.

Since evolutionary psychology does have implications for public policy, Wilson, Wright, and their colleagues must struggle for respectability within the leftist academic hegemony, where the notion of the socially-constructed self has been an article of faith for some time. According to this notion, men do not naturally seek to dominate one another, it is not natural for women to spend hours before the mirror making themselves attractive, and so on. Such manifestations of "power," to cite Michel Foucault's central concern, arise within arbitrary societal arrangements. By locating the evil in particular forms of nurture rather than in immutable nature, by blaming a decadent society for what makes us uncomfortable, this leftist world view allows for the possibility of social change (despite the logical question of how we can achieve the Archimedian position needed to create change if we are all socially constructed to begin with). While confronting the objections of today's cultural critics on the left, evolutionary psychology must simultaneously live down the legacy of social Darwinism and eugenics. Social Darwinism, arising in the latter half of the nineteenth century and usually but unfairly attributed to Herbert Spencer, supported *laissez faire* economics by arguing that it was natural and therefore justifiable for one group to dominate another—for the rich to exploit the poor. We hear echoes of it today in the argument that whatever the "free market" does is natural and therefore right. Eugenics, of course, refers to the study of genetic control that has been associated with the Nazis—a "science" that some claim has re-emerged in Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* (The Free Press, 1994), which argues that genetic factors influencing intelligence are distributed unequally among the races. Wright, in *The New Republic*, has attacked *The Bell Curve*, claiming among other things that Charles Murray, whose background is in political science, lacks a basic understanding of the biological concepts such as "heritability" that he attempts to manipulate in service of his conservative agenda (*TNR*, Jan. 2, '95: 6). Part of Wright's own agenda, clearly, is to demonstrate that evolutionary psychology is not refurbished social Darwinism, but instead is entirely compatible with leftist politics.

So Allman, Buss, and Wright are each careful to distinguish themselves from political abusers of Darwin, past or present. Wright, as his title might suggest, has the most to say about the moral implications of evolutionary psychology. The essential premise, which the social Darwinists failed to grasp, is that something is not morally right simply by virtue of its being natural—one cannot derive "ought" from "is." If it were natural or inevitable for the strong to vanquish the weak in the ancestral environment, that fact in no way sanctions exploitative behavior today. To argue otherwise is to commit the "naturalistic fallacy." According to Wright's analogy, nature gives us all some basic circuitry, but culture gives us knobs with which we can tune the circuitry in a vast variety of ways.

Furthermore, kinder and gentler impulses also evolved naturally in prehistory, such as the impulse to altruism. Originally, altruism may have been simply a protective attitude toward one's own genes—one's immediate family—and it remains true today that altruism seems to diminish with the distance of the would-be recipient. Be that as it may, altruism, at least in the form of a general predisposition to behave cooperatively, has been shown to be entirely consistent with adaptive logic.

A proof of this assertion is offered by game theory, which developed in the twenties and thirties to study decision-making. One hypothetical "game" that has received considerable attention is known as "the prisoner's dilemma" ("prisoners'" might be more appropriate). It goes like this: two prisoners who have conspired in a crime are isolated from one another. Each is told that if he rats on his chum and his chum remains silent, he will go free and the other will be imprisoned for ten years; but if his chum also talks, each will get three years. However, if both remain silent, there is only enough evidence to put each away for one year on a lesser charge. At first, self-interest seems to dictate betraying the other, but if both follow this logic they each do three years. "Altruistic" silence, and the one year sentence, may in fact be the most logical choice in terms of self-interest.

That cooperation is in one's self-interest was demonstrated in the seventies by Robert Axelrod, who invited computer experts to submit programs embodying strategies for winning a game involving repeated prisoner's dilemma encounters—programs for deciding when to remain silent and when to betray your counterpart. It turned out that the simplist program, TIT FOR TAT, won the contest. In TIT FOR TAT you begin with a predisposition to cooperate. If someone does not cooperate with you, you don't cooperate with her the next time around. But if she cooperates with you again later, you respond cooperatively. Although TIT FOR TAT forgoes the short term gains to be had through exploitation, it defeats all other systems over a long series of encounters. But the proviso concerning an extended series of encounters makes the analogy with many human situations problematical—is altruism in one's self-interest when the prospects of meeting the other again are slim?

Despite this reservation, most "games" that we play in real life are not zero-sum games like poker, where what is won exactly equals what is lost. In real-life games, previously nonexistent benefits are created through cooperation—winning can occur without anyone losing. Our ability to play these cooperative games is an aspect of our evolved adaptive mechanism as certainly as is our desire to defeat enemies.

Thus the argument of the new evolutionary psychologists is that morality is deeply engrained in human nature, along with less benevolent instincts. Wright points out that the new scientific paradigm he champions might well lend itself to morally conservative uses, since the sort of rigid moral code advocated by the Christian right could be one of the "knobs" by which we adjust the rest of the competitive circuitry. But Wright is quick to add that his paradigm need not correlate with political conservativism (or, for that matter, liberalism). Although he makes pointed efforts to reconcile his science with liberalism, Wright claims that evolutionary psychology is not an ideology.

Nonetheless, evolutionary psychologists are confident that their new science should legitimately influence discussions of public policy in the years to come. As the millenium ends, American society is dominated by its own *fin de siècle* moral ennui in the form of variations on the assumption that today's "decisions" are driven by yesterday's failings. Traditional psychology has been trotted out to excuse violent criminals on the grounds that they were once abused themselves. The abuse excuse is a version of the naturalistic fallacy that places us back in a pre-moral environment in which all accounts are settled by violence. On the larger stage, sociology has been deployed to support the demands of various groups for special privileges on the grounds of what we might call the history excuse: what happened to my predecessors exempts me from many of today's responsibilities while justifying compensatory unfairness to others.

If violence and domination became genetic in the ancestral past, it is a curious loop by which evolved scientific thought about the effects of yesterday upon today now underwrites identity politics, the new version of the old ancestral game of one-up-personship. The systems of compensatory unfairness encouraged by identity politics are social Darwinism reflected in a liberal mirror, and arguments that stress evolutionary psychology's "circuitry" might support such politics. On the other hand, evolutionary psychology's message that we have "knobs," with which we can each adjust our circuitry in an infinite variety of ways, might be a far more crucial contribution if we are to progress beyond contemporary liberalism, avoid the dismal rigidity of contemporary conservatism, and face the responsibilities of being morally free individuals. It will be interesting to keep tabs on the ideological affiliations of evolutionary psychology as we succeed or fail.

--Bruce Henricksen



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