New Orleans Review

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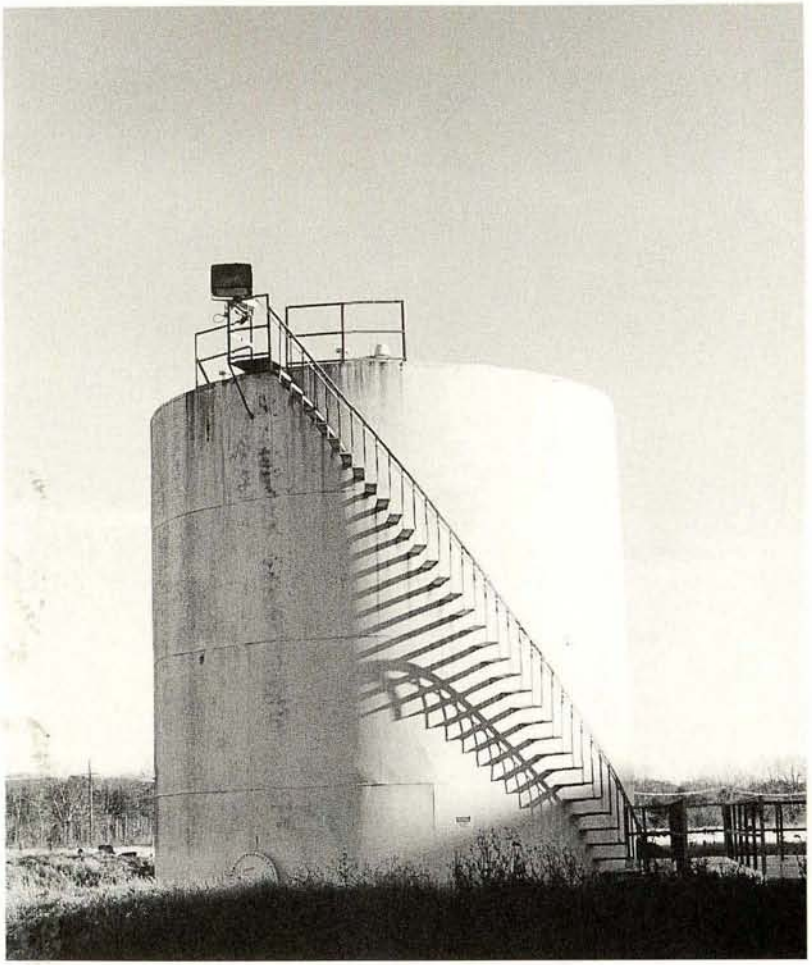

Katy Stewart
Untitled, 1998

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FRONT COVER:
Allison Stewart, *Cocodrie* (detail), 1996; mixed media on canvas.

BACK COVER:
Allison Stewart, *Cocodrie*, 1996; 48" x 48" ; mixed media on canvas.

PHOTOGRAPHY:
frontispiece: Katy Stewart, *Untitled*, 1998.
pp. 52-53: Katy Stewart, *Untitled*, 1998.
pp. 90-91: Katy Stewart, *Barca de Pesca, Guatemala*, 1997.

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

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DEDE WILSON

Hydra

—New Orleans, the yellow fever epidemic, 1854

Along the river levees hold
The water out, but this air
Feeds on water. Mosses, thresholds
Swell, the Good Book thickens,

Sticks to your hands.
Even the woodsmoke turns in the fog
To seepage so raw the ruin
Won't wash out of your sleeves.

And when the fever rises
Like fire in the cotton bales,
It cannot be stopped. There is no answer
To all the air contains.

Mon petit chouchou,
With cheeks so pulpy and lush,
You've left my lap
With one small stain.

SIMON PERCHIK

*

For the last time this overpass
reaching out and the invisible horse
half spray, half these cobblestones

that follow you around each corner
—four legs and still you stumble
carried up by the uncut flowers

you hold on to though this on and on
is already aimless, falling from rooftops
as rain and on your shoulders more feathers

—you are flying the way this street
loosens from its stones the weightlessness
that covers every grave and overflows

lifts the sky across—midair
you sift for runoff and from below
the unwanted shadows cling to you

—all these thorns :step by step
each splash fastens on just one foot
though you dig without any dirt or shovel.

Hank Williams and Family

I

Home from work,
Lillybelle slips and slides
in the strawberry patch.
Leaves snag like burrs, rip
ripped pantyhose more.
Lillybelle is a big woman
and those strawberries
sink down to the earth's core.
Mud creases in, wet kiss,
as Tom's Peanut Patty wades
over her rich lips
in a crystalline drizzle.

Little Hank wails
in the mud beside her.
New, he is a funny child.
His little back
marked with an angry red splotch,
a birthmark sewed on tight,
aching the thermometer spine.
Lillybelle's brow furrows around it.
The doctor says this splotch
will never rise or fall.

Her dry fingers crack
into familiar red lines
of strawberries and blood
as she wrings her hands,

wrenches two more berries
from straggly vines.
She heads to the house
clutching the basket
she'll trade for change.
Hank is hungry and mother's milk
comes in cans of Eagle Brand.

II

Lonnie, drunk as mud,
sits on the porch
waiting for Lillybelle and Hank.
He thinks, *I'm glad I called in well*
today. I feel too good to go work.

The tea he drinks
makes him fall down.
He hovers over jars of liquid fire
like a man in the desert
sucking the skull of some strange fruit.
His blood could fire a motor.
Shit. Lillybelle is back.
Lonnie rolls a smoke,
lights a match on his overalls.

Dear God, he thinks, give me
some of that stuff you were smoking
when you coupled me with her.
Her kisses stain his lips
like strawberry blood, seep
into cuts and cut them more.

Lonnie flicks a match
on a garden toad, his nerves
rusting their tracks.
He could use a rest in the VA.
Biscuits, greens and syrup
his goodnight.

III

Home, Lillybelle sinks the porch,
throws Hank into Lonnie's arms.
Lonnie could dip his fingers
in Lillybelle's eyes and tar the house,
it needs it.

Lonnie crosses his eyes,
eyeing Hank. He thinks, This boy'll
sell peanuts and shine shoes some day.
Lonnie tickles Hank's cigarette spine,
turns him over when Lillybelle's not looking.
It's good, the crimson sign. Soul fire.

Lonnie lays Hank in the chair beside him,
rests his little head on a sweaty handkerchief.
His feet unwinding the tired day's night,
Lonnie stomps, blowing his harmonica away.
Hank's little arteries strum in time,
his grasshopper knees jumping like Spring.
Lonnie stops blowing and smiles; Hank purrs.
Lillybelle, Lonnie says, *This boy's all right.*

Dragging the River

Mitch always said one sip of the Ouachita River shackles you to this place forever. I usually took it as a warning, but that night on the trestle it seemed like advice he hoped I'd take. We'd climbed down onto the steel truss under the train tracks and sat with our feet dangling over the river, which was three feet above flood stage then and roiling south. The river spread out smooth and black as oil, pressed against the levees on either bank, seeped up the sides. I gripped one of the trestle's struts, watched the currents wind into whirlpools a few feet below us. Mitch sat on the girder as though it was the dropped tailgate of his truck, and swung his legs out over the water. He liked to say he'd drunk so much of that river he had a water moccasin instead of a tapeworm in his intestine and a few inches of mud in his feet, keeping him planted on the ground.

"One sip is all it takes to get you started," Mitch said that night, and I knew he wasn't talking about the bottle of small-batch whiskey he'd snatched from his father's stash.

"You'll get more than a sip if you fall in tonight," I said.

He flicked his cigarette into the water. "Maybe you'd stick around a day or two longer."

I pretended not to hear. So far, Mitch had not actually tried to talk me into staying. He pulled the cork out of the pint bottle.

Below us, the water was making only a soft trickling sound as it gathered around the concrete pilings. In two days it would lap the underside of the trestle. The breeze would push little waves up over and across the tracks. I'd be on my way then, on my trip, as Mitch insisted on calling it, though I'd packed everything I owned and quit my job writing up births and bridal announcements and obituaries at the *Morning World.* My mother had stopped crying and started picking out wallpaper for what would be her new guest room. But she was

wanting me to hug her again every morning like when I was a little girl.

Mitch and I were at that place somewhere past the first several good-byes, when I was getting anxious to leave and he was already starting to miss me. We'd made our promises to keep in touch. All we could do now was repeat ourselves, or pack it in and go home. But there was this bottle of whiskey to finish and whatever was left of the night. The rest of the town seemed to have given up on it. The downtown streets were empty, the traffic lights blinking yellow. I could feel the next morning's dark circles sinking in under my eyes. Every so often a car drove over the I-20 bridge a quarter mile downriver, heading east or west. For a few long moments, the engine's far-off humming, the car's lights streaking white, then red, lifted my gaze from the river.

Mitch says he's got river silt in his DNA. I've never tried to argue. He's tethered here by a long line of de la Baumes, his great-great-great-great grandfather, Hyppolite de la Baume, like an anchor's fluke resting on the muddy bottom of two centuries ago. Hyppolite was a French adventurer who helped the Spanish build a fort here to gather in trappers and fugitives, repel the Indians and Americans. Mitch likes to say he's carrying on the family tradition when he sprays the neighborhoods with insecticide from the Mosquito Control truck he drives for the city.

Me, I'm the latest in a long line of nomads. My people, on both sides, have spent the last six generations traipsing across eight Southern states, from Virginia to Texas, losing brothers and cousins to a different city or state at every stop. My father's father left Mississippi for work at an oil refinery on the Texas-Louisiana border, in a town that no longer exists. My father moved here to build houses for all the whites who moved to the west side of the river once the schools were integrated. I could tell Mitch I inherited this, an affinity for the wagon trail, the interstate, the runway, but that's not all there is to it. You prove yourself in this town mostly by escaping it. The question What will you do? translates Where will you go? Staying means admitting fear, backing down off the diving board.

That night Mitch was still in his work clothes, blue pants and a white shirt with the City of Monroe seal embroidered on the pocket. He gave off the rotten-lemon scent that, along with the smell of barbecue grills and cut grass, always meant summer was coming. Mitch says he's got the best job in the world; there's plenty of time to think, no boss looking over his shoulder, a woman out on one of the rural routes east of town who always stands naked in the window when he drives by. He makes enough money to hit the Vicksburg casino boat every few weeks or so, enough that he never need ask the old man for a handout. Mitch could special order his own small-batch whiskey from Tennessee, but stealing the old man's is more fun. He said this to say to me, You want too much. You don't realize what you've got. But I knew if I stayed, the only place I'd go would be from copy clerk to city beat, covering police jury meetings and bond issue elections until I got senile. Then they'd give me my own column.

I hardly ever wrote obituaries. Mostly I just filled in the blanks. Who died, when and where. Whether the illness was brief or lengthy. Who'd gone before, who was still waiting their turn. The paper printed those free of charge. But if the family wanted a list of their loved one's occupations and accomplishments, an itinerary of places lived and left, they had to pay. Technically, it was an advertisement. Only when a retired mayor or a wealthy benefactress died was a natural death considered news. Sometimes front-page news. Then the librarian would dig out whatever files there were in the morgue, lists of friends and acquaintances, resumés, clips of the deceased's prior appearances in the newspaper. In a few cases, a rough draft of the obituary had already been written, especially if the person was up in years.

A few months before I left, an insurance executive who'd swindled a lot of old people died in prison of pancreatic cancer. I had to call three people on the list of contacts before I got somebody to give me a quote. The first two, I could tell, had nothing good to say, but were too polite to tell the truth, especially in print, even though everyone was pretty much in agreement as to what a scoundrel David McCarty was. Whatever good he'd ever done had been obliterated by his crime,

though a few people appreciated his dying in prison, saw it as an act of contrition. Finally McCarty's high school algebra teacher offered this: "He was bright, competitive, even when there was no one with whom to compete. He was always good with numbers. I guess he just wasn't always good."

That was all there was to breathe life into the facts: McCarty was born in one of the poorest parishes in the Mississippi delta, had graduated from Lake Providence High a year early, gone to Louisiana Tech, where he met his wife, the daughter of a prominent Monroe banker, and returned with her to her hometown. He started a life insurance company with a partner he later bought out. He joined the country club and Rotary, and was appointed to several charity boards and blue-ribbon commissions. Then the paper facts ran out, leapfrogged over ten or twelve years. I knew that's where the answers probably were, where whatever forces influenced him had culminated, where he had turned some corner. But I wasn't being paid to speculate. I couldn't leave a blank inch or so to indicate the missing years. I hit return on the keyboard and wrote the remaining facts: the investigation, the conviction, the auction of assets, the repayment of a few thousand dollars each to the old people who'd lost their life savings.

I couldn't help thinking Monroe was complicit in some way in McCarty's downhill slide. That's the danger of the place, too few people, too little to do. Stagnant. Complacent. Indulgent. Perspectives get skewed and people come to think the world owes them more than they're getting. Rotten things fester. When I thought of my move north to Chicago, I imagined myself scaling the country's midsection, the Plains states stacked one on top of the other, Louisiana at the bottom. I imagined myself climbing as though up out of a dark well.

Every summer, usually in the bone-dry days of late August, the shriveled river would give up some of what it had consumed during the spring's high water. One summer, the torso of a fisherman drowned at a dam forty miles upriver surfaced in the tangled roots of a willow next to someone's houseboat. The next week the sheriff's divers were

called out to Lazarre Point, where an unmanned johnboat inscribed circles in the water, the Evinrude's rudder turned a hard left.

I had heard the call, the 3-11 of a possible drowning, over the scanner. The cops reporter was home with a sick baby, so I repeated the call to the city editor, who sat behind his computer terminal with an unlit cigarette in his mouth. He was cutting back, allowed himself one an hour. It was quarter till.

"Have they called for a coroner?" he said.

"Not yet."

His lips pinched around the cigarette, going through the motions of inhaling. "Go anyway," he said. He took the cigarette out of his mouth. His pursed lips blew out nonexistent smoke.

Clouds blotted the sun but still the air was almost boiling. The sheriff department's big MasterCraft was towing the empty johnboat toward the ramp. The little boat, its army green paint worn to aluminum in places, sulked along behind the big boat as though it were under arrest. Behind the boat, two black-suited divers, their heads sleek as snakes, were treading water, then they disappeared. Each had a flashlight and a rope.

The kid who'd found the empty boat was standing on the bank with a cane pole, intent on the little orange and white bobber in the water. Three black women stood in a tight huddle back under the pine trees, one fanning herself and the others with a folded-up beer carton. The missing boy's mother held her fist to her mouth and looked back and forth from the water to the boy with the fishing pole. She studied him through slit eyes.

The river shone a silvery-green out in the middle, but the little waves that lapped up onto the muddy beach were the color of strongly brewed tea. The beach was studded with cigarette butts and smelled like a litter box. Every time one of the diver's heads popped above the water's surface, I half expected to see twelve-year-old Desmond Davis clinging to his back, coughing and flailing. I was afraid of what there might really be to see, but still I anticipated it, hoped for it even.

When the kid on the bank yelled out that he had something on the end of his line, the mother gasped and went limp in the arms of the other women. The kid pulled up something small, red, draped with weeds. The cane pole bent a little at the tip.

One of the deputies walked over. "A shoe," he called out. "Nothing but a tennis shoe." Somebody laughed.

The kid started twisting the shoe off the hook like he would a fish. Then he dropped it, pole and all, to the ground. He wiped his hands roughly against his jeans, then took a few steps away from the shoe, still wiping.

The deputy knelt down and picked up the shoe. He held it away from him as he walked back toward the squad cars. "Foot's still in here, that's what."

The mother crumpled further in the women's arms. They heaved her up, fanned her face, spoke to her in soft tones. She began moaning a sort of song, a wailing that raised goose bumps under the sweat on my arms.

"Ma'am, it's not his," the deputy called over. "This thing's been down there for months, at least." He dropped the shoe inside an ice chest and wiped his hands on his pants, leaving dark, wet stripes along the khaki.

The kid jumped on his bike and pedaled away, right up the side of the levee. A few days later, the coroner told our cops reporter the foot belonged to a Texas woman kidnapped in a shopping mall parking lot the year before. A month or so after that, an employee at the paper mill's wastewater treatment plant found Desmond Davis at the outflow pipe, where the treated, diluted mix of waste bleach and chemicals poured into the river.

"The old man's going bust," Mitch said. He laughed, a sharp a-ha, as though he'd just caught a punch line. "He's sold most of the front lawn to a developer. The guy's gonna divide it up into lots and build spec houses on them. Imagine that. The old man's gonna have his own little fiefdom in the front yard. Only he won't have any real control over it. Perfect."

I imagined Mr de la Baume, Joe, leaning out over the third-floor balcony where he liked to drink and pass out on one of the wrought iron chaise lounges. Underneath him, I pictured a cul-de-sac of box-like brick houses, their concrete driveways feeding into his circular drive.

"I'm thinking about buying one of the lots with some of the trust money I can still get to," Mitch said. "I could set a house trailer on it, a double-wide. Just to piss him off."

"I might stick around for that," I said.

"No," Mitch said. "You won't."

Something like anger had eased into his voice. I took the bottle from him. The night air was moving like a drowsy hand across the water, spreading it smooth. Gray streaks of clouds, smoke signals from the west side of the river to the east, moved across the sky. The river furrowed their reflection a moment before swallowing them.

"It's too bad your father and my mother never met," I said. "Mom's already picked the dress she wants to be laid out in. She just ordered it from the shopping channel. She hasn't even taken it out of the plastic, and already she knows it's the one."

"Your mother," Mitch said.

"It's pink, salmon colored. It looks like living room curtains. It looks like a dress you'd be buried in. She's having shoes dyed to match."

Mitch chuckled.

"If I die anytime soon, you tell them to bury me in these jeans, these boots," I said. "And don't let them do my hair up. I don't want to spend eternity in hairspray and pantyhose."

"Now wait a minute," Mitch said. "Seems to me your hair was pretty big freshman year."

"How would you know what my hair looked like?" I said. "We didn't know each other then."

"Correction. You didn't know me. I knew you." I imagined he was laughing at some ridiculous memory of me. I'd thrown out my hot rollers at the end of my freshman year of college, but until then I was

committed to them on a daily basis. Set the alarm half an hour early to plug them in, get them hot. "Oh, man. I had this idea I was going to be your boyfriend. What an ass I was."

I started to laugh until I saw that he was serious. I took a drink of whiskey and looked down at the river. A tree slid between my feet in the water, its roots upended, twisted and injured looking. I juggled this news, believing it couldn't have any bearing on our future now while realizing it altered, ever so slightly, everything behind and between us. I passed the bottle to Mitch. When I looked back at the water, the uprooted tree had gone on into the blackness ahead.

The whiskey was twelve years old. It had been aging since Mitch and I were kids, the air sealed out to let the flavors collide, mingle, give in to becoming something altogether else. I thought I could taste the river in it, the fertilizer runoff and oil from leaking outboard motors. The astringent of some water skier's weeks-old piss, and the soft-flavored rotten wood of downed trees. The black powder dust of the Spaniards' muskets. All of it fermented and distilled in the heat of umpteen summers, rich and dark and slightly foul, like some murky back-shelf special recipe. Now it was on the verge of pouring itself out.

Hyppolite's fort is buried down there somewhere. Nothing's left to see, not even the bank where it stood, just a historical marker on the side of the street. Back then, the river was little more than a meandering stream. Then the Army Corps gouged it into a gash deep and wide enough for tugs on their way to the Mississippi and New Orleans. They hemmed it in between levees and seawalls. Years before, in a hundred-year flood, waters from the Ouachita and the Mississippi had mingled in cotton and soybean fields thirty miles east of town. That was the last time the water had been this high. Everybody was sweating it out to see if the levee held.

You had to stay completely off it, couldn't even climb it to look over at the water crawling closer every day to the top. Barricades and signs were posted, and a police car sat on the curb along Riverside

Drive. You could stand at the base of the ten-foot levee, where the floodwater was leaking through and puddling, and watch the ridge of packed dirt quiver. I hoped I'd still be around if it broke.

My mother wanted to transform my bedroom into a guest room. Everything of mine had to go. It wasn't negotiable. My belongings went into boxes, some marked *take,* some *store.* My collection of postcards from cheap motels would go to Chicago, my high school yearbooks to the attic. My first-grade best friend was in there, a girl who never spoke to me again after my parents moved us to a new school district. There was a picture, too, of my first boyfriend, my boyfriend for three weeks, a dull, blunted guy I'd thought was deep-thinking and shy, but who was just stoned all the time. Now he worked at a ten-minute oil change two blocks from my house. I took my car to another one across town. Nobody who'd ever known me lived in Chicago. Who cared how cold it got? I sealed the boxes with packing tape. I could hear, in the living room, my mother flip from the weather channel to the Home Shopping Network.

It hadn't rained for days, but still the water rose. A load of junk tractors slid down from southern Arkansas, and an alligator crawled across the green on the number nine hole at Bayou DeSiard Country Club. The newspaper's new publisher from Little Rock ordered the press operators and cleanup crew to start sandbagging the building, which sat four blocks from the river and would've been inundated, sandbags or not, if the levees gave way. The men shoveled sand into twenty-five-pound canvas sacks and stacked the bags a foot high along the outer wall of the pressroom. Their uniforms were streaked with hand prints in black ink and grease. They leaned against the reporters' cars in the parking lot and smoked cigarettes and laughed. They were making time and a half.

One day while waiting for the funeral homes to call in the day's obituaries, I called the mayor on his direct number, which I'd gotten out of the city reporter's Rolodex. I told him I was a reporter for the local TV news, and asked him if it was true what people said, that he

was secretly happy about the flood because it filled up the potholes and gave people something else to think about besides the missing money in the roads fund. He coughed, asked me to hang on a minute, and put down the phone. After a minute there was a click, then the dial tone.

"You had no idea who I was and, for a while, I didn't think you were interested in finding out." Mitch was talking and watching those gray clouds chug across the sky. "You had a way of looking right through some people. I was one of them."

"I remember seeing you," I said, my voice rising like it always did when I wanted to be believed. "We used to have a class in the same building. Sugar Hall. You would be coming in as I was going out. I remember. I had math class there, trigonometry. I failed it." I could see Mitch blurring past me, red hair like a smear of clay dirt. Smiling like the men who tried to hand me Gideon's Bibles as I walked into the student center.

"I never had a class in Sugar Hall," Mitch said. "But I spent more time there than you did. I had you down like clockwork. You used to dress so mean, girl. My favorite was that black miniskirt. Naugahyde. You showed up for that trig class maybe once a week. That's why you failed."

"I remember you," I said, though that wasn't the point anymore. He ignored me. I didn't want to tell him he'd reminded me of the Gideon's guys. "You stalked me."

"I liked you," Mitch said. "But when I finally met you—at that Christmas party, remember?—I didn't really expect anything. I didn't let myself. Then it turned out that we got to be friends and that was cool. That was okay."

I shifted a little on the girder, the chill of it seeping through the seat of my jeans. I was nodding, ridiculously, at the water. I wasn't sure whether I felt deceived or flattered or silly for not realizing this a long time ago. He was waiting on me to say something, to tell him the feeling had been mutual, I guess, or that maybe I'd stay after all.

"You could get a ticket really cheap for Chicago if you went ahead and bought one now," I said finally.

Mitch didn't answer.

Some of the clouds had gathered and streamed now across the sky. I realized they weren't clouds at all, but the nightly exhaust from the paper mill. I inhaled and put the bottle to my lips and swallowed and swallowed and exhaled a breath that would've caught fire if I'd lit a cigarette just then. Mitch laughed a laugh that made me think he was getting ready to shove me off into the water.

I swam in the river once, jumped in from a rocky bluff, what everybody called The Cliffs, upriver. You weren't supposed to jump or dive; a sign said it was illegal. Mitch and I had been hanging out since that Christmas, driving around and drinking in his father's old Lincoln almost every night of the week. One night, at that point in the summer where the noon heat hung on past sundown, Mitch took me out there.

Somebody else had had the same idea. Two high school guys and a girl were sitting on the hood of a truck, drinking beer, looking out over the river. The guys were, anyway. It turned out the girl was blind. Only she didn't act like you'd think a blind girl would. She cussed, for one thing. I don't know why I thought blind girls wouldn't cuss. But she said words even I had trouble getting my mouth around. Her name was Dani.

The guys gave us beers and asked were we going to jump. The drop was about ten feet, but seemed farther. It was so dark I could barely see the water, could only hear it slapping the rock below. I imagined all the fish, the water moccasins, the snapping turtles, the alligators—if there were any—lurking just below the surface, lured out of the deep by the cover of darkness.

Dani took off her shirt and shorts and stood there in her white, sturdy underwear. She was flabby and pale, but the guys didn't seem to notice. I was the only one staring, standing just out of arm's reach of her. I couldn't figure out how to maneuver with or around her,

how to keep from being an obstacle, a telephone post she might butt up against. I held my breath for moments at a time, so she wouldn't even feel me.

The guys peeled their shirts off and Mitch looked at me. "Okay," I said. I was thinking, Okay, go on. Okay, I'll watch.

Dani said to the guys with her, "You go first."

They ran toward the edge and leapt off with howls that shut off with a splash. There was a moment of quiet long enough to hear a frog croak in the bushes somewhere, then the boys' howls were airborne again as they surfaced. Mitch dove in.

The boys peered up at Dani and me, their white faces like flickering bulbs, the water stirring around them. One of the guys called up, "Nothing to it, Dani. Just jump out a little ways. There's a little jut of rock you want to miss."

"How far is the drop?" she said. Her face was turned my direction. Her eyes were deep set, dark brown.

I looked over the edge again. "Ten, twelve feet, maybe. Not that far." I tried to sound as though I believed it.

"Call out again," she said to her friends. "I need to know where to jump."

I was afraid to even close my eyes and imagine what it would be like for her. How could she be sure where the voices called from, and how would she know whether she was even going into the water straight? How long would the fall seem? How could I refuse to jump once she had?

For a little while there, I thought she'd saved me. She was taking too long, hesitating, still brushing the rock with her toe, rubbing her hands together, wanting a guide, one more piece of assurance.

"We're right here, Dani," one of the guys called out.

She did not just step off the rock. She reached out with one leg and brought her arms up over her head and went up a little first, almost hanging in the air a moment until her upward momentum gave way to gravity. She went cleanly down, toes pointed, speared the water with only a little splash. The boys hooted. Dani came up laughing,

spitting water. "Fucking-a," she said. They all did high fives in the water. Then everyone looked up at me. There was only the sound of them treading water, of Dani's rushed breathing. I thought, if anything, they were daring me not to jump. So I stepped off, stepped down, trying to close the distance more quickly. I fell like a rock dropped into the water, curled tight, closed. I kept my eyes open.

"Everybody loves you when you're leaving." This is what Mitch said to me as we sat on the trestle. A breeze had begun kicking up ripples on the river's surface.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I said.

He drank from the bottle. An inch or so was left. "I've got a little money, you know. I'm gonna buy a house, something with some growing room. So if the job doesn't work out in Chicago, or when you decide, I mean, if you decide to come home." He shrugged.

I nodded. I did not want to be completely unanchored. Mitch would turn out to be right in some ways, I knew. That complacency and stagnation I feared was my own, and no new geography could entirely wipe it out. Still, I thought I stood a better chance somewhere else.

From a ways off I heard a train, its horn a soft warning in someone's sleep. Of course a train would come. Mitch tried to stand, but one foot slipped off the beam and he sat back down with a thud. He began to laugh, a sound that went out over the water, toward the hospital parking garage and the old folks' home—the few high-rises of downtown—a sound that went out but did not echo back. Now I could hear the train's engine, placed it east of the trestle, heading west.

"Hold on," Mitch said.

We scooted towards one of the steel struts that ran from the girder to the tracks, and wrapped our hands around it. I felt the weight of the train as it began across the trestle, a jolt that momentarily loosened my grip. There was a sustained blast of wind as the train flew over us, and the girder quaked as though the piling were loose beneath it. The empty bottle shook off the edge and Mitch reached a

hand out for it, but it slipped through his fingers and went spiraling toward the water, mouth down, the liquor pouring out ahead of it. The river taking what it could get of us, drinking us in.

The mosquito trucks always came by just before sunset. Lots of times we were still outside playing, the grass cool between our bare toes, the streetlights sizzling on, the crickets droning, invisible in the bushes. Every so often someone's mother would call out, urging us in for the night. The older kids would pretend not to hear.

We'd hear the truck when it was one street over, when we first heard the sound of the compressor whining like some giant, mechanized insect. We'd wait until the truck rounded the corner at the end of our street, until we saw its headlights and the plume of poison blooming out behind it. Then we would run, scattering toward our houses, slamming doors behind us just as the scent reached us, that sweet chemical burn that seemed to linger in my hair, in my nose, long after I was tucked in. Escaped, safe, I'd watch from my parents' living room window, that cloud of almost-liquid, almost-gas, a substance lighter than dew, dissolve before it touched down.

The day I left, the river reached within a foot of the levee's top, where it sat for two days before it began to ease back into its banks. But when we flew over, on the morning flight that would take me to Atlanta, then Chicago, and I looked down at the town, arranged like a game board, static as a blueprint for a town not yet built, I believed the water might roll down over all of it. I almost wanted it to.

Unconversation

Among people
you sort of half-step toward me but then a faltering prevails
due to tiny transparent bats that bounce off our cheekbones:
they are the conversations that probably won't happen.
I look down. I look into my tepid coffee.
You glance at my ear;
I glance at your eyebrow;
you pass through space
between wool shoulders and we are relieved
and we are sad. Pelted by tiny glass bats
we wobble sideways around the noisy room.
This room is so full of people, folks, people,
les hommes et les femmes—
les hommes et les femmes les hommes et les femmes—
oy. At moments I seem to love
the way they stand and the way they tilt their heads.
However, they are manifestly *too much.*
The male gaze, the female gaze, the person-as-such gaze,
I want a helmet with a vizor!
I look at a light on a building across the street
and I'm grateful for the distance between me and this light.
The light is small and cold and far and so
it is safe and safe is good, with a type of beauty,
it is the Convenient Transcendent.
You are down the hall. I think I hear your voice
saying something something father or farther,
something something mixing them or Michigan,
something something Thomas Edison or Tommy's medicine.
Your voice is a rag of a flag waving from a schooner near the horizon,

it is a flaring of the string section in the symphony of
what has occurred elsewhere, for other people,
in the green field of the conversations that do happen.
I accept this
with a kind of dry creaking of the skin on my face
which seems to me the symptom of my courage
in coping with fatigue. People
are often attractive but *always* tiring
so it's no wonder the room is filling up
with the conversations that will not have happened.
Friendly questions and serious answers never uttered
are flicking against the furniture like flying caterpillars
that will never be life-affirming Lepidoptera.

This gray crust tufting my eyebrows and casting a shadow
across the dry creaking of my face—
it is the detritus from the smashing of tiny creatures
made of untalked talk! Humanity—without humanity
I would not be so tufted with gray crust.

Oh I look down.
Oh my far cold light.
I shall seek my bed.
Good night.

And tomorrow? Tomorrow maybe I'll run into you?
A three-quarter moon shines tonight above a dark town,
it might be Greenfield, Massachusetts,
and there in the houses silent under a three-quarter moon
lie certain women and certain men trying to sleep,
alone more or less, and the night stretches out.

Later they see the far pallor that begins to spread
down over the garage roof and the patient trees.
We have to say that tomorrow the people may
run into each other, glance deep, glance away,
look again and speak.

Ahead Linkage Enough

Oh it may seem my career is little Triscuits, pitted prunes
and pathetic wide patches of blank. May seem. But oh
but do not be fooled oh. Not to be deflated and lie
wrinkly on the carpet where the dog of bafflement has peed.
Because
                come will if belatedly will still come rippling
my way, *my* way to say—so much. How much? Say much—
there will be sufficient: in the dark skeining
of my soul. Of my soul-flag-pool-forest-tower.
There is going to be enough linkage.
It may come as if almost almost too late,
come at the next to last minute,

when the drummer has collapsed his kit
and the keyboard lady has folded her equipment into bins,
when only the clarinet guy still holds the stage
and all the lights are out except the EXIT sign

but then my hookup will finally buzz and ripple
with the fullness of knowing and loving the knowing
that always was beckoning and always lay ahead
as proven by
                this final synthesis, syntholade, syntholation.
Twisting through the dark hallways of the great interrogation
into the palatial parlor of the most supernal conversation
goes then my spirit, flagship-netweaving-spirit
then does open

the right book to the comically radiant right page in notchy time
just when of course cross-reference is ready
to what my friend did say at the Dublin table
that late night of '93
and to the note jotted "accidentally" on the last page of the other book
while of course a third book rediscovered with painful loss-lorn love
falls open to the words that let me then write the words
that no one, no one who loves enough, no one who ever
even half *cares* will ever forget.

Sourdough

If abruptly it appears that we're all just sandwiches
transformed by chewing, all just healthy organisms
walking our little walks toward auspicious mating,
writing our plotty little novels about
progress toward mating, discussing some shoddy glittered
movie about little bumps on the path toward
auspicious mating, all eating our thick sandwiches
on sourdough bread and floating toward cancer
not now but ten years later or thirty-five years later
on the ticking schedule for the well-shod well-shirted
healthy blah—
temporary skin coating temporary flesh
all saying "a positive outlook" and
"reassess the priorities" amid the sandwich—

the generality is what pulls toward void.
Quickly identify the particular restaurant,
the partic. street, a partic. funny scene
in that shoddy movie, drink a Lynchburg lemonade
and quote something from page 77 of a partic. book
and say I *love* that, actually.

Apples

Daddy made me and Winston do all the digging to teach us a lesson. He cornered the ground with four sticks and tied string around them to mark the outline. He told us when we hit water we went too far, then said he'd be back later to check on things. For a long time, Winston and me just stared at the shovels Daddy had planted in the ground, with a pair of worn gloves on each handle. The sun was coming down hard and it wasn't even the hottest part of the day yet. I was waiting for Winston to start.

"There's a river underground?" I asked.

"He's just making us do this because he feels guilty."

I looked around. "I bet Daddy dug every grave in this cemetery."

"There's an underground lake," Winston said. "The lake of fire, like in the Bible."

"Is that where mother's going?"

"I'm not sure," Winston said.

We stopped talking and stared at the shovels again. We took our shirts off. It was already getting hotter. After a while, we finally started digging. Winston started on one end and I started on the other. His scoops were bigger and he was getting deeper than I was. I wanted to talk, but Winston just kept digging like he wanted to get the job over with. Every once in a while, he would tell me to hurry up. I told him I was going as fast as I could.

"Throw it further out," Winston said. "Otherwise it's going to keep spilling back in."

Then we found that is was easier to start from the center and work our way out. You wouldn't think digging a hole in the ground would take a long time, especially with two people, but it took us about an hour just to get a foot deep. The deeper we got the softer and darker the dirt got. We started seeing earthworms squirming around in our

scoops. We stabbed them with the shovel and watched the two parts join back together. We made one long earthworm and found an empty beer bottle to keep it in.

When Daddy showed up around lunchtime, me and Winston could hardly lift the shovels, our arms were hurting so bad. They wanted to fall off. Really. We had blisters on our hands, even with the gloves. Daddy told us to put dirt inside the gloves to cushion our hands. "Almost half way there," he said, inspecting what we had done. He didn't say if we were doing a good job or not, but he gave us some corner store sandwiches and cold sodas. I went to show him the giant earthworm but the sun had heated him up inside the bottle because I didn't put any soil in it to help him survive. He got cooked.

After Daddy left, we took a long break since we were halfway done. We found a shade to sit under until we were ready.

"Is mother going to turn into a skeleton?" I asked Winston.

He said she was.

"You would never try it would you?"

"What are you crazy?" he said, starting to get up. "Never."

I dug for almost another hour, but I had to quit. I was crying, my arms hurt so bad. "Just finish it for us," I said to Winston. "I really can't do it anymore."

"Take a rest," he said. He was a lot stronger than I was.

I sat down and watched him work and messed with the worms for a while. I ended up falling asleep. When I woke up, Winston was standing inside the grave. The hole was deeper than me, but not Winston. By sundown, I was crying again, not just because Winston had done more work than I did, and not because mother was gone, and not just because Winston looked just as scared as I was, but because our blisters had popped, and sweat and dirt was causing them to sting so bad we couldn't even put our hands around the shovel handles. Our hands did not want to move. And I did not know if we were going to finish before dark.

When Daddy finally came back, we still weren't done. He had to help us finish the job. He squared off the corners and made the insides even. Then he jumped inside and dug the rest of the dirt out. It

didn't take him very long. There was a swiftness to his digging, like something automatic. "That's what a grave is supposed to look like," he said, as he climbed out of the grave. "Now that you made your mother's bed, we can go home and you can get into yours."

Winston and me kept our tears in the best we could until we got home. Then Daddy made us wash our hands in the sink with Ajax. That's when we finally broke down in front of him. I can't tell you how much that hurt. Like our hands were on fire. Maybe even worse.

By the time Winston got the first taste, Daddy knew there was nothing he could do. He had tried to keep us away as best as he could. There are just too many apples to be had. He never liked to call it crack. He always called it apples. Taste the apple once and start to count the months, he would say, whenever we saw somebody on crack wandering around with that lost look, like they don't have no place to go and don't know where they are.

You can fight it if you want to. You can resist over and over again. But once you get that taste there's something inside you that will always be begging for it, no matter how much you try and resist. Sooner or later, you will want to give in to the temptation. That's why it is so powerful. That's why you have to stay away. Mother tried to fight it, but it was a no win situation. Winston said she had grown unhappy with her life, which is why she tried it in the first place. It can make you happy but it can make you sad too. It's a two way street. Daddy threw her out of the house on more than one occasion, after she broke her promises. But he also believed people could change their ways, plus he loved mother so much he would cry when she was away and knew nothing of her whereabouts. They had been in love practically forever. He prayed for her. But in the end, that didn't even work. Like God wasn't listening, or was busy with someone else.

Winston didn't try to get unhooked like mother. His was a straight downward spiral, with no peaks or valleys in the fight. With mother, she kept getting hooked and unhooked, doing her best to stay away

when she decided she wanted to change her ways again, so she could get clean and obey Jesus, but even talking with Father Richmond and praying didn't help in the long run, because she was always going back, like a fish you keep on catching using the same jelly worm. Daddy says that once you get it in your system that's all she wrote. He says all it takes is for you to act on the first temptation and the rest is what they like to call history. Go to the Bible and read about the apple, he says. Same exact story. Daddy likes to use the Bible to prove his points.

One day Winston didn't come home from playing basketball. It was his birthday. So me and Daddy went out looking for him, Daddy asking around. But nobody had seen him. Like he had just disappeared. Daddy kept on banging on the steering wheel as we drove around looking for him. We checked behind the corner store where the niggers were. The niggers were the black people that gave us black people a bad name. According to Daddy, they did nothing all day but sit around and play dominoes and spades for money, drink liquor, and think about ways not to work and ways to get into trouble. They spread their seed and took no responsibility. Although Daddy called them niggers to me, when he leaned out the window he called them by their names. You always heard stories about them. In a way, they were famous. One of them said that they had seen Winston earlier in the afternoon.

"Where was that?" Daddy asked.

He pointed up the road and Daddy knew exactly what that meant. He told them thank you and to have a good night. It was never a good idea to get a nigger as an enemy. Your house might get robbed one day.

I'd never been in one of those houses before, not even when mother was hooked, but now Daddy insisted that I go inside with him. He grabbed a flashlight with a block battery attached to it. I followed him across the front yard where the grass was thick and overgrown. Chips of paint covered the yard like leaves. Boards covered the windows. We found a way in through the back door.

"Hold on to my belt loop, and don't let go," he said. He turned the flashlight on, and I grabbed his belt loop with two fingers.

Except where Daddy pointed the light it was pitch dark inside. I saw a stove. The floor was sticky. It wasn't easy to hold onto his belt loop, because he kept turning in different directions and pointing the flashlight. I think I saw rats. I definitely saw roaches and a mangy cat. The place smelled like the bathrooms at the park recreational facility. I began to sweat it was so hot inside. Glass crunched under our footsteps.

We found somebody in what I think was the living room. Daddy shined the beam of light on the guy's face. It looked like Daddy woke him up. It wasn't Winston.

Daddy must've known who it was though, because he said, "Do you know where my son is?"

The guy shook his head.

"You see him at all today?"

"No, sir," the guy said even though he looked pretty old. His face looked like it was being sucked in from the inside, eyes and all. I didn't look at him for too long.

We searched some more. But no sign of Winston. I almost threw up when I saw the bathroom. But nothing came out. Daddy told me to wait for him in the truck. He just looked at me and I ran.

I didn't know what Daddy was doing in there all by himself, but I knew he was doing something he didn't want me to see. So I started getting very nervous. I felt a little better when I saw him walking out.

As we were driving around some more, we found Winston sitting on a bus bench. Daddy leaned out the window. "You goin' somewhere?"

Winston shook his head. He looked like he was sick. The insides of his pockets were sticking out.

"You wanna go for a ride?"

He shook his head. "I'm fine."

"You look like you need a fix."

"I'm good."

Daddy held his hand out the window. In his palm was an apple. I don't know where he had gotten it from. "Today is your birthday. You didn't think I would forget, did you?"

"What are you trying to do?"

"It's your birthday present. It's what you want, isn't it?"

Winston stood up and walked towards the truck.

"In order for me to give it to you, you have to come for a ride," Daddy said, closing his palm.

"Where to?"

"Just get in."

"Give me my present first."

"First do what I ask."

Winston climbed in the back of the truck and sat on the edge. I didn't know where Daddy was going until I realized we were going to the cemetery. Daddy glanced at the rearview. We stopped in front of the iron gates with the spikes.

"Let's go," Daddy said.

We got out.

"I'm not going in there," Winston said.

"Fine with me," Daddy said.

There was a thick chain with a padlock around the iron gates. Daddy had the key. The lock didn't stop people from getting inside at night. Daddy always complained that nobody has respect for the dead with the kinds of things he found inside.

Winston was still sitting in the back of the truck. "You think you're going to teach me a lesson this way?"

Daddy didn't look back.

"You think you're so strong," Winston yelled. "You try it once and see how strong you are."

Daddy stopped and turned around. "I know how strong it is." Then he turned around and we started walking up the path, using the flashlight to guide us. "Watch," Daddy said to me. "Watch how strong it is."

Seconds later, Winston was following behind us. I didn't look back.

Daddy shined the light on mother's gravestone. It was marble, in the shape of a cross, like it had grown from the ground. He shined the light on the hole next to it. Someone had started to dig. There was a shovel on the ground.

"I thought you might like to see where you're goin' to end up, son."

"Everybody ends up here sooner or later."

"A lot sooner for you if you don't do something about it." Daddy tossed the apple into the hole and walked away. He grabbed me under the arm, like he was mad at me. He pushed me from behind.

"Keep goin'," he said.

Then he put his arm on my shoulder and told me to turn around. He put the beam of light on Winston, standing at the grave.

I only saw Winston a few times after that. Daddy tried to knock some sense into him with his hands. But it didn't help. Nothing helped. After a while, Daddy knew he was wasting his breath. Winston was happy just the way he was. Then we heard through the grapevine that he was involved in robbing the Fish N Fry. But he never went to jail or anything, because the robbers were wearing pantyhose over their heads and there was no proof and because all their alibis worked. When Daddy and I would drive by the corner store he would pretend Winston wasn't even there. I did not know if Daddy thought of Winston as a nigger or not. One day when I got home from school, Daddy was in the living room crying. I knew why.

Daddy wakes me up in the middle of a dream, telling me to put on some work clothes. He doesn't step inside the room, except to flick the light on. His keys jangle down the hallway all the way to the kitchen where he pours himself a cup of coffee, then puts the kettle back on the stove, not gently at all. But to let me know his mood.

"Let's go," he shouts. " I don't hear you movin'."

"Coming," I say, looking over at Winston's empty bed.

I get dressed. I have a long day ahead. Daddy's just standing in the kitchen drinking a cup of coffee and staring out at the front yard,

thinking about things. Thinking about things is how he tries to figure out the answers to life's problems. There's always something to think about.

It really hasn't hit me yet. It's like it's not real, like I'm expecting Winston to walk through the door, like Daddy might be thinking Winston should be walking down the street the way he is staring out the window, but we both know this is not the case. It is as real as day. First mother and now Winston. It's like there's nothing Daddy can do to stop it. No matter what he says. Like it runs in our family. Things are getting quieter and quieter with just me and Daddy in the house.

"You hungry?"

"No, sir."

"Got a day ahead of us."

"I'm fine."

We hit the road.

It's dark enough for Daddy to put on the headlights. As he backs out of the driveway they shine across our house like ghosts. He sips his coffee. He says nothing. He stares straight ahead. The street lights are still on and it is morning.

Daddy backs the truck into the lumberyard. He says good morning to a few men standing around, tipping his hat. They express their apologies, shaking Daddy's hand like he is important, glancing at me and smiling, telling me that I was getting bigger. One of them tells Daddy to get what he needs to get. I pull the tailgate down before Daddy asks. We pile two-by-fours into the back of the truck. Two Dobermans are lying on the ground, calm as can be, chewing on rawhide. At night they turn into watch dogs. This time of the morning they are friendly, even though they bark if you get too close. If they don't know you. We don't talk about Winston. We don't talk about anything. We are silent in a scary way.

Daddy starts on one end and I start on the other. He doesn't give me directions. He works like a machine, every move the same. He scoops

two times the dirt I can scoop. Pretty soon, he's working his way over to my side and soon enough I have to move out of the way so he can dig where I was digging. He doesn't bother to tell me to hurry up or anything. I just keep moving sideways, digging, trying to keep up. I know he is getting upset with me. A few times our shovels clank together, but we don't stop. He doesn't even bother to look up.

Daddy goes to the sawhorses and begins cutting the two-by-fours.

"You goin' to be next?" he asks.

"No, sir."

"Your brother said the same thing. You remember?"

I nod.

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

"Yes, sir."

"Lift with your legs. Less strain on your back."

I keep on digging.

"Why do you think your brother ended up like this?"

"Because he couldn't resist temptation."

Daddy wipes his forehead. The sun is starting to come out strong, welcoming the day.

"I don't know why," Daddy said, shaking his head. He stopped sawing and sucked his lips. "Maybe."

I did not know what to say, so I said nothing.

"Maybe he just wanted to try it," I said.

The sun glared off Daddy's saw. "Maybe," he said. "It's always going to be out there. I'll dig your grave if I have to. It's your life. I make a living digging holes. Right where I'm standing is where I'll bury you. You like this spot?"

I dig and dig while Daddy saws.

Sacra Via

Evenings my mother turned us out
to the porch, a ritual, three children
waiting on the steps, the one hour
for Father to drink his beer, relieve
his bladder, our home remedy against
the cancer that held everything back,
turning his body the yellow-green of a bruise,
a piece of fruit dropped from our clutch.

Children, our hands small, we took turns
doing what we could. I made the meals,
cooked the beans, all I knew at eight.
Beans and water, boil. Butter, salt, pepper
to taste. My mother cooled a spoonful
with her breath, spilled the heavy broth
into her mouth, told me, *The beans*
need doctored, and I added more butter.
I could doctor one thing, not another.

My father's body broke down
in spite of me, his muscles turned soft,
his skin thin as the flesh of those beans—
I walked my father's spine, curled
my bare toes into the thinness of his back,
digging in my heel when he asked.
I learned to move the whole weight of my body
into each small step. And what more?
I read from the Bible every night, promised
that we all *believed*, that Father *would not perish*,
that even after this there would be life.

Venison

I must have been six or seven years old
when the smell of dirty pennies woke me.
Slipping downstairs, I saw my parents
working over fresh meat, a red slab
bigger than both my legs, on our dinner table.
Dad carved out hand-sized chunks
with our biggest knife, while Mom circled
with a sponge to catch the streaming blood.
They did not speak, as if to keep their deeds
secret, even from each other.

I cannot remember if they saw me there,
watching, and sent me back upstairs,
or if I slipped into the welcoming dark.
I hope I was quiet enough, small enough,
quick enough to get away. I hope
they never saw what I saw in them.

Riding Lesson

—First Riding Lesson at Brown's Stables,
Lyda J. Brown, Prop.

A horse that rolls is worth a hundred dollars.
A horse with a blue eye is insane.
A horse named after a confederate general belongs
in a dog food can, and if you can't
get him into a can, don't
worry about it; he'll do it
all by himself, and if he doesn't
get around to it, somebody else will.

A horse with a hard mouth is worthless.
A horse that bolts for the barn should be laced
unmercifully, and a horse that won't
stand for a mount or the smith should be
beaten with a shillelagh until that little
light bulb between its ears begins to glow.

A Bay horse or a Black is worthy of a king, and when
a king rides, he should hold his head
high but never haughty.

A horse that's head-shy has been abused by some
fool, and it's not the beast's fault
he won't take a bit—
somebody else should take it for him.

And don't you think God doesn't see you, and don't
you think that there aren't
angels with manes and tails.
And don't you think they won't judge you
just the way St Peter will judge you
when you try to enter the Lord's
Kingdom of Heaven.
I guarantee
a horse can carry you to heaven, and you'll
arrive.
Now look me in the eye—the reins
on this beast are the lines into her heart.
You take them, and let this mare know she's yours.

NEAL KIRCHNER

World in World

Where I come from, roadkills are rabbits
Mostly, stretched out flat like dollops
Of brown paint. In this world
We live as man in man in man, and on
We drive, though the streets long ago
Stopped leading anywhere on the ground.
All our cars are blue, the bumpers blue,
Blue windows, hoods and headlights; not one
Can be told from the others. All relationships
Are pending, and no greeting
Ever needed. Still, we wave
When we meet on the road,
Our semaphore hands hidden under tint
Like vague blossoms.

Days are short, but nights are shorter,
And shorter still is the distance
Between my home and the foul river
That wraps around us like a clever snake.
We must wade in from time to time,
And if fish flee our stubby legs
We capture and cook them
Once per year, in the summer,
Which is always in mind,
And the shortest thing of all.

PETER MARKUS

What We Do with the Fish after We Gut the Fish

We eat the fish. Our mother fries up the fish in a cast iron skillet that spits up buttery fish fried grease every time she drops a bread crumb battered fish fillet into the pan. We sit at the kitchen table in front of our empty plates and listen to the pop and pizz and sizzle of the frying up fish. Just yesterday these fish were swimming in the muddy waters of our muddy river and now they are gutted and headless and chopped in half and about to be swallowed into our open mouths, our empty bellies. Our father is outside, in the shed, sharpening his knives. When all the fish have been fried up hard to a crisp shucked golden colored brown, our mother will tell us brothers to call in our father to come inside to eat the fish. Fish on, we will tell him. Come and get them while they're good and hot. Our father comes when we call. He tracks mud into our mother's kitchen. Our mother tells him look what you've done. He looks down at his boots and says the word mud. Our mother throws up her hands and then she throws the skillet of fried up fish at our father. The fish skid across the kitchen floor. Our father tells her that he and us sons caught and cleaned out the guts of those fish. Our mother tells our father he knows what he can do with those fish. Then she tells us how she hates fish and fish smells, how she hates this fishy river, how much she hates this fishy, smelly town. Leave, our father says to this. Our mother says maybe she will. They both turn and walk away, our father back outside, our mother into hers and our father's bedroom. Us brothers are left with the fish, are left to clean up the mess. We drop down onto our hands and knees onto the floor and begin to eat.

Lucky Barrels

A regular sticks a five dollar bill in Billie's tip jar.

"Thanks, Frank," she says.

Frank asks how her dad is getting along. Billie takes a tenderloin from the fryer and lays it on a paper towel.

"Just fine," she says. "Hitting the ball same as you."

Frank drains the rest of his beer and takes a deep breath to keep from belching.

"Tell... tell him I said hey"

The phone rings. Billie winks at Frank as he waves good-bye.

"Turkey's Nest," Billie says, eyeing the ashtrays at the poker tables.

Standing in line at the grocery store Billie waits to cash her paycheck. Three senior citizens are waiting in front of her. The one closest to her holds a scratch-off lottery ticket. Billie looks over the woman's shoulder. She has a nine dollar winner.

The clerk hands Billie a white envelope containing three hundred and eleven dollars and forty-six cents. Billie counts the money and gives the clerk a five dollar bill.

"Give me five Lucky Barrel scratch-offs," she says.

Behind the wheel of her car with one foot out the door she counts her money again. Three hundred and two dollars and fifteen cents. She takes a pack of cherry bubble gum from a brown paper sack and pops a piece in her mouth. The jingle of an ice cream truck drifts in from the trailer park behind the grocery store. A 7-Up truck pulls up along side of the store and stops. In her rearview mirror Billie watches two teenagers ride by laughing on their bicycles. From the brown paper sack she slides a cigarette out of a fresh pack. Before lighting it she takes a dime from the white envelope and scratches away the five Lucky Barrels.

No winner. Free Ticket. No winner. No winner. No winner.

The driver of the 7-Up truck returns from inside the store carrying a clipboard under his arm. She knows him, but she knows his older brother Gorman better. She watched him blow ninety bucks at the slots last night. When she turns the ignition the warning light of her fuel tank flickers on. flickers off. Then on again.

On her way home Billie pulls into a 76 station. A young man dressed in a blue uniform and a blue 76 cap walks up to her window wiping his hands with a greasy red handkerchief.

"Fill her up. Regular unleaded, please," she tells him.

The young man goes to his work whistling. Billie steps out of the car and walks between the pumps to the office.

Inside, behind the cash register, sits an old man dressed in a faded gray uniform. *It Ain't Me, Babe* is playing on the radio. Billie grabs a sixteen-ounce Dr Pepper from the cooler, cracks it open and takes a sip. The old man behind the cash register smiles as she sets her Dr Pepper on the counter in front of him. He obviously enjoys watching her light her cigarette, look around for an ashtray, find one on top of the cash register.

"You take Lucky Barrels?" She tosses the Free Ticket winner to him.

The old man examines the ticket.

"What you want for this?" he says.

"I want that new fireworks card. The one that gives you two chances to win."

"Don't have 'em anymore. Discontinued after Fourth of July weekend."

"Give me a Lucky Barrel then."

No winner.

She takes a five dollar bill from her white envelope.

"Five more," she says.

No winner. No winner. No winner. No winner. Two dollar winner.

She trades the winning ticket for two more Lucky Barrels.

No winner. One dollar winner.

Another five dollar bill.

Free ticket. No winner. No winner. No winner. No winner.

"Come awwwwwwn."

Seven dollar winner.

"That's right!"

She counts up her winnings. Takes a swig from the Dr Pepper and places ten dollars on the counter.

"Eighteen Lucky Barrels, please."

Free card. No winner. No winner. No winner. No winner. No winner. No winner. One dollar winner. One dollar winner. No winner. No winner. No winner. No winner. No winner. No winner. Four dollar winner. No winner.

"Jesusfuck!"

No winner.

She checks her cigarette in the ashtray. All that's left is a filter followed by a perfect line of ash. She pushes the losing cards toward the old man.

"The trash can is over by the door," he says.

Billie collects the losing cards and tosses them into the trash can.

"I have seven tickets coming to me," she says to him.

The old man tears off seven more tickets from the giant roll of Lucky Barrels hanging below the counter in toilet paper fashion. Before giving her the tickets he watches her thumbs pass over her fingers, cracking each knuckle.

No winner. No winner. No winner. No winner. Two dollar winner. Free ticket.

The young man from the pumps returns to the office.

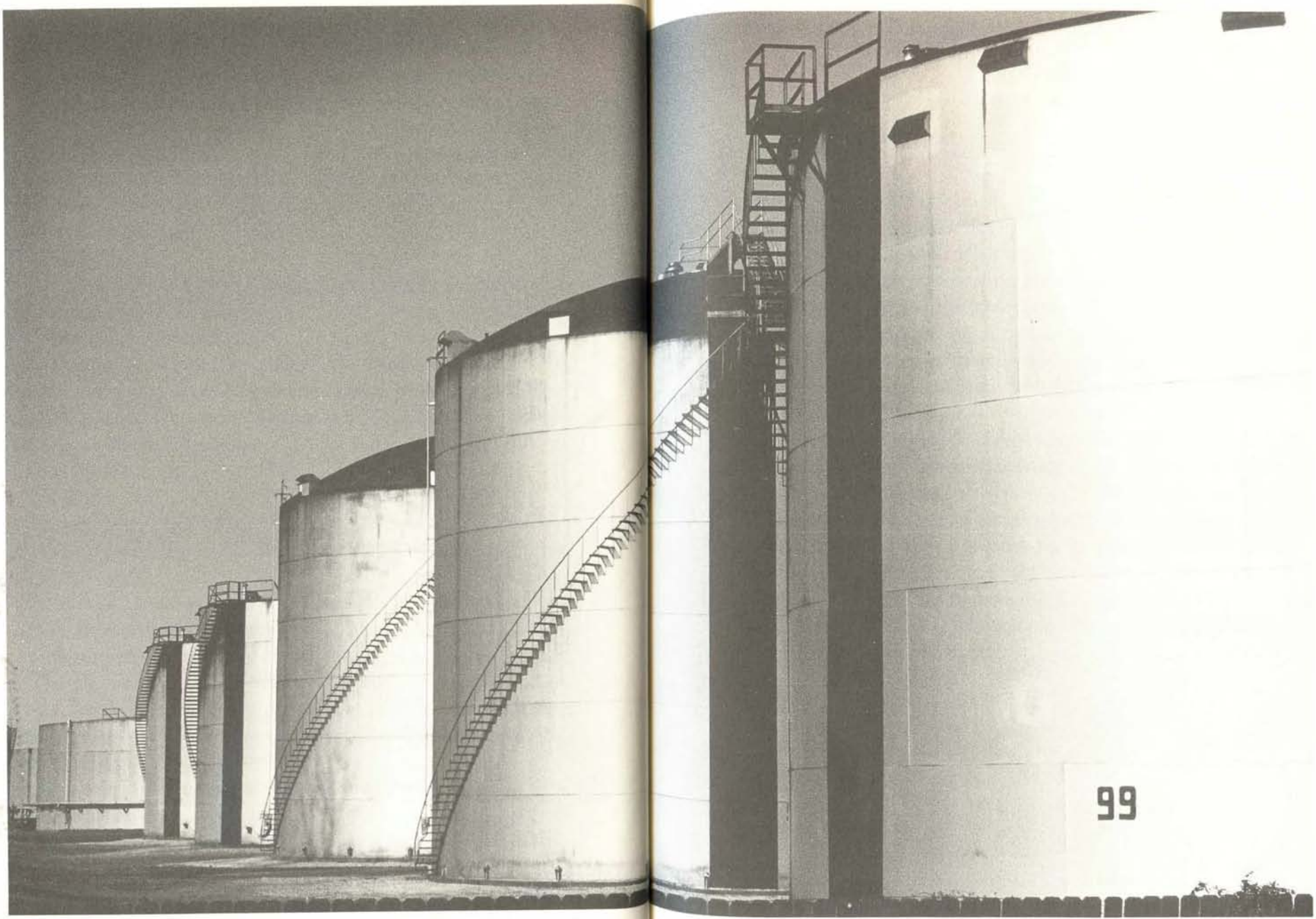
"She owes fourteen-sixty in gas, Mike," he says.

The old man rings up the amount for the gas and soda.

"Anything else?" he asks her.

Billie stares outside at her car. Along the passenger door runs a long, rusted crease where the car slid into a tree last winter. She rubs out her last ticket.

One dollar winner.



Katy Stewart
Untitled, 1998

FIVE POEMS BY SERGEY GANDLEVSKY
TRANSLATED BY PHILIP METRES

Sergey Gandlevsky was born in Moscow in 1952. In the 1970s and 1980s, he became an important figure in the Moscow cultural underground, or "third wave." His explosively contradictory poetic style reflects not only his own inner journey, but the zeitgeist of that era, the twilight of the Soviet regime known as "the Stagnation Period." Unlike much of American poetry, Gandlevsky's poems move in extremes, through cynicism, sentimentality, self-loathing and disdain. They combine traditional forms with Soviet slang, and mix conventional themes—language, literature, freedom, death, love, the muse—with the vulgarities of debauchery, betrayal, and ennui. The following selection of poems spans most of Gandlevsky's career, from an early seventies farewell to a friend to an early nineties meditation on alcoholism. The range of Gandlevsky's roving poetic power is evident, in particular, when one compares the poem to his friend Alesky Tsvetkov, written in 1974, with the 1982 poem dedicated to Bakhit Kenzheez. Since Glasnost and the disintegration of the Soviet state, Gandlevsky's poetry has been published widely in Russia, and in translation in the United States.

—P.M.

[*It's all so simple: a crowd at the snack bar*]

To Aleksey Tsvetkov

It's all so simple: a crowd at the snack bar,
A blue propeller shaking into motion,
And it's the last time we'll see
Each other again in this world.

I'll get on the bus from the airport.
The plane will scrape across the sky.
Beneath you, like at school,
The huge globe will creak and fly.

What's the use of mumbling promises,
Swearing on our graves forever?
We already know the ill-fitting chain
Of human memory will sever.

But leafing through the days
In an urgent search for the good,
The decrepit tent will then appear,
I'll hear the voices at the campfire.

As long as the road is written
In your palm, just find yourself
A comrade, my friend,
To worry over and remember you.

1974

[*Here rivers cry like a patient under the knife*]

Here rivers cry like a patient under the knife,
But the comparison fails, because the rivers keen
A dialect one hundred times
More strange. This is no place to vacation.

Here no pair of oxen pulled a cart
With the corpse of gloomy Griboyed.
Here Surikov's soldiers in Suvorov's picture
Didn't slide to victory on their butts.

I went up the Vanch. The day-long carnage
Of river and glacier ran out of steam. Summer
Lightning bloomed like tea roses. The gorge
Met me with the unkind silence of animals caged.

Snow blazed with twilight, in concert.
The illiterate genius of a mountainous sky
Knew its own worth. And it was absurd
To dry edelweiss in a dictionary of dialects.

Conceited poetry, hide the notepad:
There are places in the world, living apart
From our words, and we cannot understand,
Can't translate the husky tongue of the Pamir. [1]

1979

[*My regards. There is in the sullen homeland*]

For Bakhit Kenzheev

My regards. There is in the sullen homeland
A ritual at the border, you remember it:
As if a light were turned off, a living person
Goes out in the dark, just a face and jacket.

Kenzheev, don't despair. I know it's not my place
To teach you anything or to scare you with the Kremlin.
Endure. In America, as far as I know,
Freedom exists, and *sheep* rhymes with *ship*.

I'm also hardly the life of the party. I just rented a *dacha*
Of two rooms, pooled money with a priest.
I'm stubborn when drunk, weep when hung over,
Put off living for an eternal later.

What do I really wish for you? Well, first,
Think of your health. Climb out of your colds,
Eat three squares a day, don't forget the worries
Of a beautiful wife, drink in moderation. Second,

Raise your young cub, don't belt him too early.
Bear without complaint the diapers, poverty,
And neglect. Buy a pamphlet by Dr Spock,
Read it to yourself, Laura, and the cat.

Beyond windows, October. Around, signs of life:
Alarm clock, chest of drawers, five eggs
In a pot. On the table, *The Bhaghavad-Gita,*
In a month I've read fourteen pages.

There, the single theme: a heart in its unease
Fears creativity and becomes a friend of vanity.
You don't need much peace, it seems, to be happy.
But without any peace, happiness is empty.

Therefore, create. Life has caused us
Not a little trouble, though we've done our part.
But love and the pale ink of a Karelia lake
Did exist...so please, write

If you get the chance, or not. Kiss the family.
And perhaps, somewhere far, far in the future,
We'll get together, uncork a bottle without fanfare,
Two old blowhards, yes, but breathing easy.

1982

[*In spring, passing through a strange city*]

In spring, passing through a strange city,
The usual trouble, the usual time.
Like a huge water plant, in the darkness
A pyramidal poplar stirs.
Greetings to you, my friend, you seem
The very same, after all these years,
The tall ghost in early bloom who stood
A short distance from my rendezvous.
Night everywhere exactly the same:
The suburb, outlines of new buildings,
Cicadas, taxis shining their emerald light,
A window intricately laced with vine,
The light of a dusty naked bulb over a door.
However, changes are visible,
Or rather, signs of experience. Not
For nothing were sourness, salts, and acids
Added to water.
So stick a skull
And crossbones on the beaker
And get it out of my sight. But the poplar's
Taking business-trip passions seriously.
Whom do we wait for? From what floor
Of hospitable memory does the sister
Of April night wander into light?
Is it an over-forty beauty with a face
That strikes one's conscience mute,
Or a naughty child, hands in pockets,
A robber's smile on her lips?
Whoever you may be, my angel,

This old actor's taken by surprise,
Whispers of the poplar-prompter are futile.

Well, give a solemn vow to be faithful
To I don't know what, what, is that difficult?
Don't fear the pathetic, remember to swear
On your honor, the heavens, the grave.
Or if not, close your eyes, so that in the bare
Night yard, unharmed, will rise again
Everything that was wood, window, fire,
And became smoke, smoke, smoke.

1985

[*Semyon Kosikh, drunk since May Day*]

Semyon Kosikh, drunk since May Day.
Now it's Tuesday. He looks out the window,
Trembles and squints, uncertain
If it's still dark, or already dark.
I've known his frame of mind well.
Circling that melancholy room,
I quote some guy, *more light,*
And trip over my laces in a fury.
When I first began to write,
Exhilaration, agitation
And clumsy skill made all my lines
Begin with the breathless *and.*
And I soon ran out of swan's cries,
Childishness, gunpowder, and fire.
In dyed gray hair, Auntie Muse
Flashed her foil tooth, gazed at me.
And I exclaimed, *accidents happen!*
This bum's in love, but with you?
A concert for strings, chembalo, violin,
Alas, won't follow, Semyon.
Having braved wastelands, the angel
Approached, opened my barbarian mouth,
And, that's all I can say. But all the more
Stubbornly do the headstrong years bend me
To the profaned game of imagination,
To the testamentary sneer at the crowd,
To poetry, if you'll pardon the expression,
Fuck desiccated prose.
But dulled
By experience, I'll resort to anecdote.
Something like this: his work done,
A husband buys his wife some dresses,
Bursts into the room, glances about,
Throws the wardrobe doors open.
Harpo, Chico, and Groucho all fall out. [2]

1990

notes

1. In stanza two, Gandlevsky alludes to a scene from Alexander Pushkin's *Travel to Arzrum,* where Pushkin writes about climbing down a mountain slope in the Caucasus; seeing a cart carry dragged by a pair of oxen, Pushkin asks the cart-puller what he's carrying. *Griboyed* was the laconic answer. Alexander Sergeevich (Pushkin's first and patronymic names!) Griboyedov, another tragic poet and ambassador to Persia, was killed during a siege of the embassy. The story of his life and work is recounted in Yuri Tynyanov's *The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar.* Suvorov was the great 19th century Russian general who, crossing the Alps, defeated Austria and liberated Italy. Surikov painted Suvorov crossing the Alps, depicting Suvorov leading his troops to victory, sliding down the mountain to meet their opponents. The Pamir is a large mountain range in Russia.

2. *Semyon Kosikh* is a humorous name in Russian (*kosoy* is slang for being drunk). *More light* were Goethe's last words. *Opened my barbarian mouth* alludes to the famous Pushkin poem, *The Prophet.* In that poem, an angel gives the poet the gift of prophesy and ardent speech, but only after he tears out the poet's tongue and replaces it with a snake's. In the final line, Gandlevsky actually refers to three Soviet comics: Nikulin, Vitsin, and Morgunov (the Soviet equivalent of the Marx Brothers).

Good Girl

My ex-husband Cord likes giving surprise parties. Not for the party but for the surprise. He'll do anything to make it happen, tell the baldest lie, pick the least likely setting. That's why we're all waiting at an interstate rest stop on this swampy August evening. We're here to help Cord trick his new wife on the night before her twenty-ninth birthday.

God knows where Jolie thinks she's headed right now. Since her party hasn't officially begun, we the conspirators idly mill around the picnic tables, slick with sweat and jumpy from the bugs. The sun is setting in a fruity smear, but nobody pays attention, we're watching the southbound traffic for Cord's old black Triumph.

"An interstate party, that's so different," says the woman next to me. I think her name is Carla.

I say, "Remember my birthday? At county welfare?"

"In the parking lot, after hours, sure," she says. "You were turning thirty. I thought it would be a dreadful party, but it was lovely, really nice."

It *was* a good party, once I looked past the government dumpsters and chained steel doors, and the fact that my husband had thoroughly deceived me once again. There were bamboo torches and catered Cuban food. Cord gave me a bloodhound puppy with a bell around its neck.

Jolie's party also promises to rise above its dubious setting. True, the highway traffic makes us feel a little slow and beside the point, and wayfaring families and truckers laugh at us as they come and go. But there's also a pair of twisted oaks, the rough tables have been set with linen and candles, and two golden young men weave among us, pouring wine.

I haven't seen most of these people in the three years since my divorce. They're Cord's friends; they treat me with the smiling tact due

the victim of a humiliating disaster, someone who's shot themselves in the leg or gotten hit by lightning on the toilet. I tell them, "I'm fine," knowing that at least I'm looking good. But I almost didn't come. Cramps, then I couldn't decide whether to bring a date: what would Cord make of Leo, who has a heart of gold and a tooth to match, or André, who stutters the sweetest compliments? They would wound his pride terribly.

Of course I came alone.

I haven't seen Cord in two years, but every few months, late at night, he calls me up. He thinks I still have insomnia. He wants to talk about Jolie.

She always sleeps well, he tells me. She's a good person. He says this with the nervous bravado of a high-school debater, and I listen as long as I can. Then I hang up on him, gently.

I've tried many times to despise Jolie: for her too-sweet name, her pony teeth, her college baton-twirling, her cactus business. But whenever I run into her—waiting in line at the pharmacy or idling beside me at a stop light—she smiles as if I'm the one friendly face in the crowd.

Only once have I seen her with Cord. It was right after their wedding; they were standing outside a garden shop, trying to wedge a box into the back of Cord's old car. I wonder, is Jolie always alone? Or does Cord duck when he sees me coming, afraid that I'll catch him looking happy—or maybe unhappy? Some night I'm going to ask him. After all, we're divorced. There's no reason not to be honest.

The Triumph pulls into the rest stop right on time, five minutes past sunset, but Cord and Jolie don't get out. It looks as if she's trying to tell him something. His face is in shadow, but from the intent tilt of his skull I can tell that he's not listening to her, he's inspecting the party. When they finally get out of the car, it takes Jolie a moment to notice the festivities and even then she doesn't realize they're for her. Finally Cord growls with mock exasperation and says, "Happy *birth*-day, Jolie." Then she yelps and hides her face.

She's come from her cactus patch. Her kneecaps are crusty gray beneath her khaki shorts and her dark curls are bound up like Aunt Jemima's. The rest of us, of course, have carefully dressed to show off our best features. Jolie pulls off her head rag and flees to the rest room to wash. We're all laughing. But I sympathize, too; I arrived at my own birthday party on a pungent cloud of late-afternoon sex, and spent the whole time trying to conceal the telltale snarl on the back of my head.

No matter what Cord had been doing, he always smelled of the Swedish cologne he kept in his bottom drawer, out of the insidious light.

He's looking well, a few ounces thicker in the middle. His hair is lighter. Could he be bleaching it? No, he's just more tan. I dodge this way and that for a view of his ass, and I see that it's as flat and tentative as ever. He was embarrassed that he had one; to remind him, I used to sneak up and pinch it.

Jolie reappears with scrubbed knees and brushed hair. She accepts champagne, slips a finger through Cord's belt loop. "She was just telling me how selfish I was," he announces. Jolie looks hard into her glass.

Cord grins as we applaud Jolie's comeuppance. He isn't an especially handsome man, his face is too round and moony, but he gives the impression of handsomeness. It's the way he holds his face—it doesn't just hang there, he holds it.

Abruptly Jolie raises and kisses his wrist, grazing his watch strap. He ruffles her hair, mussing it again.

He told me what he's giving her. A quilt, because she's always cold. She's shivering right now.

This party improves as the darkness settles. Except for the idling semis and a bass chorus of flushes from the rest rooms, it's hard to tell where we are. Even the pink glare of the parking lot lights can't obliterate the swollen golden moon. I'm lightly murmuring and flirting as I move among these not-quite-friends. Cord is trimming the ragged

ends of the party: fiddling with the tape deck, bossing the waiters, fumbling to relight a dead candle. His shirt is crisp and white. When we were married he walked in on me in the bathtub, begged to hear my dreams, but so far tonight he hasn't said hello. He hasn't even looked at me.

Cord used to work in the office tower across from mine. Our windows were a street's width apart, fourteen floors up. Sometimes on winter evenings I'd notice him watching me from his fluorescent cube. One night I waved. He dropped his head and pretended not to notice, but the next afternoon I got an anonymous basket of ivy and wild mushrooms. That evening in the parking garage, he stepped out from behind a Jeep and blocked my path. I gasped, dropped the basket and ran. One thing led to another. On our honeymoon he followed me around with a camera as I sun-blocked my shoulders and braided my hair. One week before our first anniversary, he gave me a surprise party at a drive-in that was closed for the winter. His friends came. We threw snowballs and ate German food.

I'm watching the waiters, who are urgently whispering between themselves, when a dry hand takes my elbow. "I'm surprised to see you here, Brenda."

It's Cord's old friend, Bart. He's bright, forthright, chinlessly pleasant. I say, "I'm surprised I was invited."

"I don't know why I was invited, either." He slaps a gnat on the side of his face. "I'm sure Jolie's a nice girl, but I really don't see her that much."

"That's why I came tonight, just to see them together."

Politely I ask Bart about his own divorce, and he shares the usual small facts and phrases, worn as smooth as beach glass by now. My cramps are getting worse, winching tighter and tighter behind my party dress.

One of the waiters is shouting at the other. "You never think of me!" he says. Cord steps toward them, but before he can intervene, the handsomer waiter tears off his apron, tosses it at the accused, and stalks away. Soon we see him hitchhiking on the highway on-ramp.

The remaining waiter swallows a glass of wine and sits down with his back to the party, so stiff with feeling that Cord backs away, twisting his shirt button.

Bart laughs in my ear. "'You never think of me.' Could all the wars of history come down to those five words?"

The button breaks off in Cord's hand. He inspects it, then puts it in his pocket. For the first time tonight, he looks at me. I wave.

To open her gifts, Jolie sits on a stump, Cord's sweater hanging on her shoulders. The presents are the sort of things you give a woman you don't know—candles, napkin rings, potpourri. Mine is next to last. Cord almost drops it when he hands it to her. "Be careful, it's heavy," he says. "From Brenda."

She glances up, surprised to see me, then carefully opens the box. "Oh, my."

"It's a safe," I say. "You can lock it." It's not a big safe, just a small, tough, fireproof box.

"That's interesting," Bart says. "Is it a joke?"

"Thank you, Brenda." Jolie holds the gray weight on her lap for a minute, smiling at me in puzzlement, while Cord tries to hand her the last present, his quilt.

Over the course of my dead-of-night conversations with Cord, I've learned a lot about Jolie. Her father is deaf. She won a statewide majorette competition when she was seventeen, then broke her ankle walking off the stage. She's a genius with cactuses; they fatten and bloom in her care. In the evenings, she sits under a hot gooseneck lamp and tweezes the needles out of her hands. She sleeps hard, marching her legs beneath the sheet, while Cord dials my number from his side of the bed.

He says, "She's a good girl, if you know what I mean."

He says, "She loves me."

Cord is pacing between the picnic tables. More things are going wrong with his party. A toilet in the women's rest room won't stop

flushing. A tractor trailer has pulled up and fixed its headlights upon us. Mosquitoes are attacking in ravenous squadrons, making us twitch and slap ourselves. Worst of all, people are starting to leave.

I can't take it either. I flee to the women's room and find Jolie rubbing at a grass stain on her shorts.

"Were you gardening before you came?" I say.

"No, I was looking for my car keys. Sometimes the dog buries them. But Cord had them."

"So you couldn't leave and miss the party."

"Yes, he had a good reason." She doesn't stop scrubbing at the stain.

"I didn't know you had a dog."

"A puppy, Sam Spade. He's a bloodhound."

"I had a bloodhound too."

"I know."

Over and over the broken toilet gulps and swallows. We pause and listen, then we both begin to laugh. Jolie blurts, "Brenda, I'm always glad to see you. It's good to know you're there." She touches my hand with one of her cactus-bitten fingers, and gives me the same hopeful, weary smile I recognize from our occasional meetings on the street.

We drift back to the shrinking party. "I should leave," I tell Jolie. "I have terrible cramps."

"Me too."

"They get worse every year. So I guess it's psychological."

"No, it's the full moon. That always makes it worse."

We look up. It's rolling high through the sodium light, fat with its latest month-long slice of my life. Cord comes up behind us and kisses the side of my head. "Hello Brenda, you smell wonderful." Then he puts an arm around Jolie and says, "Didn't I fool her?"

I smile. Jolie excuses herself.

He says, "She's really surprised."

"You fooled her all right. But you should have let her wash before she came."

"I like her the way she is." This is spoken in the same challenging tone he uses when he tells me she's a good person.

"I like her too," I say.

He leans close, offering me the time-warp scent of his Swedish cologne. "You look down on her. She's idealistic. She's superstitious."

"That's all right."

"She's possessive, she goes through my wallet. She's always cold."

"You're not very possessive of *her*."

"I don't have to be. She loves me."

I let this accusation fly cawing over my head. Up close I can see that he's twisted three buttons off his shirt. A mosquito bite has pushed his cheekbone out of shape. He says, "What was that safe supposed to mean?"

He really doesn't understand, which makes me feel sorry for him, which as usual makes me crabby. "Cord, why did you invite me here?"

"I wanted to see you." I duly note the punitive past tense. "I wanted to see how you're doing. And," he sighs, "I can see you're doing fine."

"I'm sleeping a lot better these days."

"If you're so happy, why are you here?"

Bleakly we behold one another, as the semis grind in and out of the parking lot and the moon rolls upward, growing smaller and whiter, dragging on me like a magnet.

"What were the waiters fighting about?" I finally say.

He shrugs, folding his arms about himself.

"It's a nice party," I say.

"Jolie should cut her cake now. People want to get going."

"You really surprised her."

He smiles a little. "That's the important thing."

I want to ask, Why? What do you hope to see inside your wife's surprise? Instead, I hug myself and say, "This moon is killing me."

"I know," he says. "Isn't it great?"

The abandoned waiter sweeps dirty wine glasses into a box. He seems to enjoy the pained noises they make. Bart and I huddle around a

citronella candle at one of the last lighted tables. We're swapping tales of romantic failure, but I'm only half-listening to him. Mainly, I'm remembering Cord.

I remember his habit of pushing back the thick hair on his forearms as if constantly surprised and revolted to find it there. I remember his Christmas gifts, always wrong, bought in one desperate, last-moment burst. The spangled tights, the ankle bracelet with the tinny, bendable hearts. I remember his back in bed, not the turned back of rejection but the nudging back of a forever bashful lover. I remember Cord's back pressing against me as he tried to burrow out of bad dreams he'd never admit.

When I sneaked up to pinch him, he'd whirl away and press his back against the wall. He would try to laugh.

"There was no one problem," I tell Bart.

But I also remember the day I discovered that Cord had swiped my list of reasons to live. I'd made the list in high school (cocker spaniels, stargazing, et cetera), stuck it in an old diary, and forgotten all about it until I found it in Cord's top dresser drawer. I hadn't been prying, just looking for Maalox. Further investigation turned up three snapshots of me, each taken without my knowledge. Me: clipping my toe nails, eating salad with my fingers, staring slump-shouldered at my bedroom wall. Me: pasted over with thumbprints and tucked away under old Lotto slips and a never-used passport.

I began locking the bathroom door against his visits. When I moved out, I pretended there was someone else. Every time he called, he begged me for a name.

I tell Bart, "I'm sure we're both better off." But I can't help thinking of Leo's gold tooth, and the way Andre lets his mouth hang open in bed.

Bart says, "He wanted to be married to you."

"That wasn't enough." But I have to correct myself. "It was too much."

The waiter is piling dirty platters into the back of a station wagon. Cord hovers beside him, arguing, pleading, finally offering extra money. The young man shakes his head and keeps noisily loading the car. "This is the worst party I've ever worked," he says.

"Well, you're young yet," Cord says.

The boy laughs, but he leaves anyway.

I watch Cord gather himself together, stacking up his vertebrae, searching the dimness for the woman who loves him. And with sharp sorrow I realize that I never bothered to sneak through his wallet. There were no secret pictures of Cord, no greedy questions, just me grabbing at his ass, trying to make him hide. To want to steal him—that would have taken a better person than I.

And yet, here I am.

The cake is fluffy and white, too sweet, but we all eat it. "I have to go," I say, to this person and that. Then Cord leans over the tape player and suddenly there's a blare of marching music. Cord pulls Jolie under one of the parking-lot lights, and with a ringmaster's flourish he hands her a baton.

The cone of light is fizzy pink, a riot of bugs. Jolie pulls back, pleading, but Cord has a grip on her arm and we stragglers are loudly insisting. And Jolie's own knees are starting to work, obedient to the march. She hurls the baton into the night sky.

We cheer, but ironically, and Jolie fumbles on the catch. Cord's big sweater confuses her arms; she pulls it off and tosses it at him. Then she begins to twirl.

She works hard, wrists straining for control, wrestling the baton behind her shoulders, between her thighs. We honestly begin to cheer her on.

The baton lunges back and forth, muscular, flashing. The music is a blaze of brass and I can't help it, I'm marching too, just a little, on the edge of the party where no one can see me. I'm whispering, "Don't drop it, Jolie." I'm thinking, Please take it from here.

Now she's scowling, warm at last, pumping her sturdy, stained knees. As the music fades, she gives the baton one last moonward toss, then snatches it back, presses it to her heart and bows. Everyone whistles and applauds. Cord spins her in a triumphant circle.

Still frowning, Jolie looks around at the trucks and trash cans. Her eyes wander to the dim fringe of the party and fix upon me. I wave, but she only stares back, holding the baton to her chest.

The music is gone, evaporated. It's gone, but I'm still marching.

"It's okay, Brenda," she says. "Stop. You can stop now."

Habitat Photo

"Detached," he said

fire
Seemed a contrivance

In a cypress swamp
Swelling on one side

Compare the fish and rat
How different roles
Foster crawfish production

Of course, St Francis said it first

Such exact wording of disturbance
Is a useful tool
—emphasizes both
Ends and the abuttal

Down she went again
In a fit of self-absorption

But an outcome is soothing

Effects are not the same thing

Buckles

Sound is louder in paperbacks
And the smell of damp stone
Is written mostly within
Driving distance of beaches or mountains

It's hard to imagine
By the mass
And wild surface
Of printers' symbols

"Do I have to remember everything
myself," he shouted

Everyone was disgusted
By the way we couldn't
Depend on the random

What could?

(It is helpful to say particles
In the development of the real

—or a manageable number of memories)

He never learned their names—
And there was no stoop for the roses

Still, we didn't mind
If he parked under a light

It was ridiculous:
The film, the party

She warmed to the growing firmament
Of the narrative

His struggle for position
His parenthetical stance

Wild Wisteria

Perhaps that's why
We're so easily inclined

To call a bike path
Home, to depend

On the right book
She said

"The enemy is kitsch"
The native speaker

No longer existed
Or cut out pictures

Of muffins toasting for breakfast
Although he had intervals

Of sanity in the windows
Of her shop executed

And colored by hand
With great charm and

An interest in laboring conditions
For coal miners

She felt his hand on her shoulder

Are the happy simulated
With hysterical pride

But vegetable quality
Outweighs that

Look at the paper

Otherwise the next millennium
Will last much longer

Along a pineland stream
In moist soil

Pocked with deer tracks
Abandoned, still warm

Under a Pediment

In the beginning was schizophrenia.
—Gilles Deleuze

It was the notes I was getting. I was getting these notes. I was developing this terrific collection of really great notes. Normally the thing of it with me is I just go ahead. I get a title and I just go ahead. But this was a case where there were all of these great notes I was developing and where they just kept accumulating on me and accumulating, is the only way for anybody with any intelligence to put it. The other thing is a title, the title. Didn't have one, couldn't get one. Nothing. Then out of the blue I hear myself saying to myself wait a minute, wait a minute, under a pediment, how about under a pediment? Except first I had to go over to the museum and ask one of the people. They have these guards over there. These attendants, personnel, in uniform. So there's this one of them who says to me yeah, that's right, pediment, the name of it you call it is a pediment. So this is when I had the whole thing. I was all set when I had this last part of the thing, which, considering my history, my history considered, is for me the same as the staples of the thing—i.e., a title; viz., a title, get a title, then go ahead and write your head off now that you've got it, the title. But so who ever had any notes before? I never had any notes before. Notes for me never were this regular thing for me. Notes is such a crazy new thing for me. But so what happens was it turns around and gets captivating to me. As a separate thing to me. Notes, getting notes. It's like you might say these notes I was collecting, they were evolving into this thing which was evolving into its own kind of a thing non-relative to anything. Talk about notes. I'm telling you, if anybody wants to see tons of them, then they better come see me about it because I am the one with tons of them. But so

how does this happen or come about? Does anybody have any idea of how this happens to come about? Because until we as a society can get to the bottom of this thing and start making some progress rooting it out or getting it rooted out, the human race will just go on being enslaved as a nation in bondage. Meanwhile, stay alert. Keep your guard up. The snare is everywhere. The only way for us as a people to come to terms with this is for you and other enlightened citizens to continue to see to it that you have kept yourselves informed, unclogged lines of communication, and to have made wariness—wariness!—your watchword. Because it's first this thing and then it's next this next thing and then that's it—it's, you know, it's everything everywhere.

But a bird does not say to itself okay, here goes a feather, I am finished with this feather, I am getting rid of this feather. Because the man was prepared to believe no bird relieved itself of a feather in hopes the man would retrieve it. There was not a matter of mind to be inquired into. Although neither was it an accident, was it? Nothing was an accident. A scheme was bound to be bound up in it, whatever it was, somewhere. For example, hadn't the man been in the company of a boy who said feder for feather? This is what the man pondered about, or pondered on, thinking ponderingly, "What's the deal?"

The man reasoned along this line, or bethought himself along this line of reasoning. For did it not stand to reason that not everyone in the present dispensation could report of himself his once having been in the company of a boy who said feder for feather? Wasn't there something going on in this somewhere, and couldn't you end up somewhere in it dying from it? There were hints, there were foretokenings—the proof was everywhere for anyone with the power to read the dread indications. There would be a disease conducted into the man from this relation he had conceived with the feathers. It would be a feather-borne disease, despite the care the man took never to handle a feather directly. No, no, this last, that last sentence, all wrong, it's all too wrong—wrought, wrought, it's all too wrong and wrought, diction thick with effort. I can't write this. It cannot be written.

But, oh, the thrill of them!

Feathers.

The abundance.

The very copia.

Now that the man had started noticing.

Mustn't it mean these birds were everywhere?

Or had been.

Although there were times when the man could go from the bottom of the city to the top of it and not spot the first feather. But around in front of the museum, this was where there were always to be found good pickings. On the other hand, the man could not always take himself to the museum, could he? It was not always convenient for the man to go to the museum. You did not get to the museum by going in the direction the man was mainly given to going in, which instead was the direction of the market.

The market.

Here was where the man got his groceries, earlier called to your attention by the name staples.

And, oh, the cleaning materials!

Kaptain Kleeno, for instance.

The direction that took the man to the market, this was the direction the man was given to walking in, whereas the museum was just opposite of this, and rather a longer walk by half. Forget it. I'm worn out with this. I'm disgusted with this. I am absolutely exhausted with this and am anyway stalled in my tracks with this. Mind is elsewhere. You know what it is to stand under a pediment? He did not know where the feathers came from. He did not care to know where it was on the body of the birds the feathers came from, or had come from. From wing, from tail, from under the gut, it all sickened the man. Expressions of life sickened the man. The man seemed excited as much for the thing they were known by as for the thing they were.

But how say which is which?—feather here, feather there. Feder. Later on in this it will be said to the man, someone will later on in this come to say to the man, "You feather your nest? This your game, you feather your nest?" Was the bleach killing him? The man was

convinced the bleach could be killing him. Or the ammonia. Forget Kaptain Kleeno. Scratch Kaptain Kleeno. No one's buying it, no one's falling for it, something named by the name Kaptain Kleeno. But couldn't anything kill a person? Everything could kill a person. The least little thing could kill anybody—and would. This sentence, for instance.

Ever think of collecting the names of soaps?

Palmolive?

Woodbury?

Camay?

Pears, Dove, Castile?

How could you say something wasn't killing you if it were doing it in increments too small for you to tell?

Isn't this why they say imperceptibly?

An ant might know, on the one hand, or a tortoise on the other.

But not a man.

Aren't there mites on feathers?

He soaked them in a solution of his making.

The man mixed ammonia and bleach and bleach and ammonia.

And Kaptain Kleeno.

Used the tweezers to deliver the day's gatherings to the basin where the purifications were done. It was a plastic basin, bought for the very thing, and disposed of and replaced every several days, for fear a swarm of undead mites might have come to congregate in it, having furiously replenished themselves in a crevice where traces of moisture would coalesce into natal soup too teensy to be detected without special optics.

I suppose you know where it was the man got his plastic basins from. Well, it was in that direction that the man so often pointed himself. Counter-museum-ward, that is. Ivory Soap, Lux Soap, Murphy's in a pinch. Not that results were not also to be had along the old wall along the way to either destination, a rumply mossy affair of mortar and stone declaring the great wilderness to its one side and the city to its other. Ah, the man had heard them in there, the rats in there. Had heard them jostling around in there, disturbing the loose

earth with their wormy hairy tails. There were times when a wind could make the man weep. There were times when the man might have fallen to his knees in grief for the wind that had rushed forth from its lair and reached from him the feather he was about to take. The man never took a feather with his fingers. It was unthinkable, unthinkable! This was why the man was dying, wasn't it?

His precautions, the tweezers, the ablutions in the basin, didn't the man choose death from care over death from disease? Someone said something once. Hadn't someone once said something once? Liver fluke, a liver fluke, this is what the man thought he remembered someone once saying—touch a feather with your finger and get a liver fluke. But what would it be, a liver fluke? The man stood over the basin with the magnifying glass and tweezers.

The fumes were impossible. That plural or singular? The feather lay bathing on the one side. It would be necessary to catch it by the spine and reverse it onto its other side. You call it rachis, I call it spine. The source for liver fluke, was it the same as that for "You feather your nest? This your game, you feather you nest?" I can't stand this any more. I am so totally fed up with this and with everything else evermore. Wait a minute, wait a minute—so how come the man didn't write this in French? He is trying to break the habit. What if I leave the city? What if I just get everything I've got and just leave? The man did not know how they lost a feather—was it from sickness or from combat or age? There was this time once when I was walked right up to by a robber once and I said to him the money take the money but can't I keep these? I keep them in a thing which used to have bits of matchbooks in it and when I get the top off to get another one in, they make a noise like shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. It's terrible, it's terrible—shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. How did it start? Does anyone know how it starts? Here's the thing shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Yardley.

Tide.

Duz.

Era.

Dial.

Cheer.

Wisk.

Joy.

Dawn.

Oh yes, of course—"You feather your nest? This your game, you feather your nest?"

Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Cark, cark—what does cark mean?

Fella says everything in depth is horrible.

Fella says the sensibility that reaches out for the sense in things makes contact with the impossibility in them.

Yes, he was feathering it.

This was the whole idea of it—to feather it, to get it feathered, to make certain there were feathers in it.

Finland is a gaudy-feathered place.

Could I ask you a personal question?

Why am I sitting here making every excuse for you?

I used to think polio in Italy meant impetigo.

Or vice versa.

Ivory Scales.

Ivory Sleet.

Caress.

The man took to walking.

The man walked everywhere and took everything—the remains of matchbooks, the names of soaps—shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—notes, feathers.

Here's the thing.

Feder when I was a child.

You got the thing?

That's the thing.

Look no word in the eye.

Except pediment.

Except for pediment.

ED SKOOG

Second Line

Beat the drum workmanlike there, Hoss,
like the God in charge of Tuesdays
pounding out another from the iron mold.
The arm is tired and the mind is sober.
Still, the bass drum's wooden rim
holds the skin tight for whumping
despite the ravages of enthusiasm.

Whump and my pant legs billow.
I'm lost in the memory of a firecracker
and further back, my mother's heart.
In this early heat, the arm beats faster,
answering the physics of surface and air.
The arm is everywhere. The God in charge
of Three O'Clock spins his wooden top.

On the back porch, we flirt over grain prices;
a radio plays inside. Low notes purr
the purest pain understood as wanting.
The God in charge of Want is breathless,
chopping through undiscovered forests to find
more wood for drums. Chops and saws, this God.

JULIA JOHNSON

Naming the Afternoon

The girls without memory
are losing track of their steps,
eyes heavy as sacks.
They walk past the chapel,
the beds of small flowers.
At the edge of a pond, dirt glitters like salt.
They make their way over wet stones,
talking in rhyme, staying
within the trees' broken veil.

They reach the deserts and the sea.
Where are their sentences?
They borrow signatures and write them down—
the paths of crabs, traced by a little light.

Being From Orlando

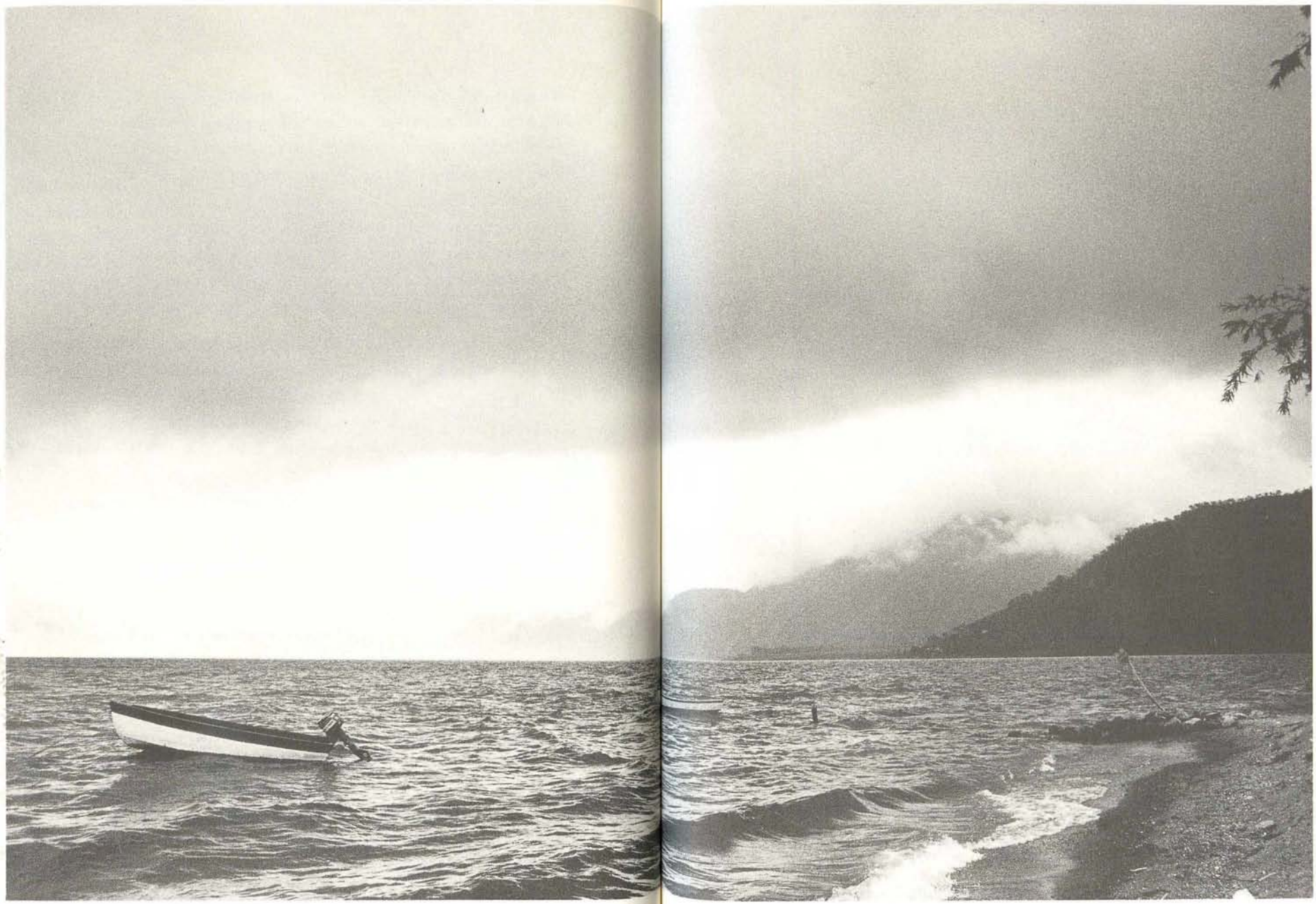
We are frantic families here. We are all bitten up.
The lawns have red frosting for flowers, the flowers
have teeth for pistils. They're not really from around
here. Nothing's from around here, not even the water or us,
the people. We vote yes to flamingoes by the highways,
we fling bread at them on the way to the Grapefuit Mall.

Orlando used to be called Mellonville, used to be infested
with pests. Now, we have shuffleboard, roque, lawn bowling
among the cabbage palms and bamboo and
fingerling bananas. Hibiscus here is a spicy weed.
We rip the stuff out of the back yard and burn it.

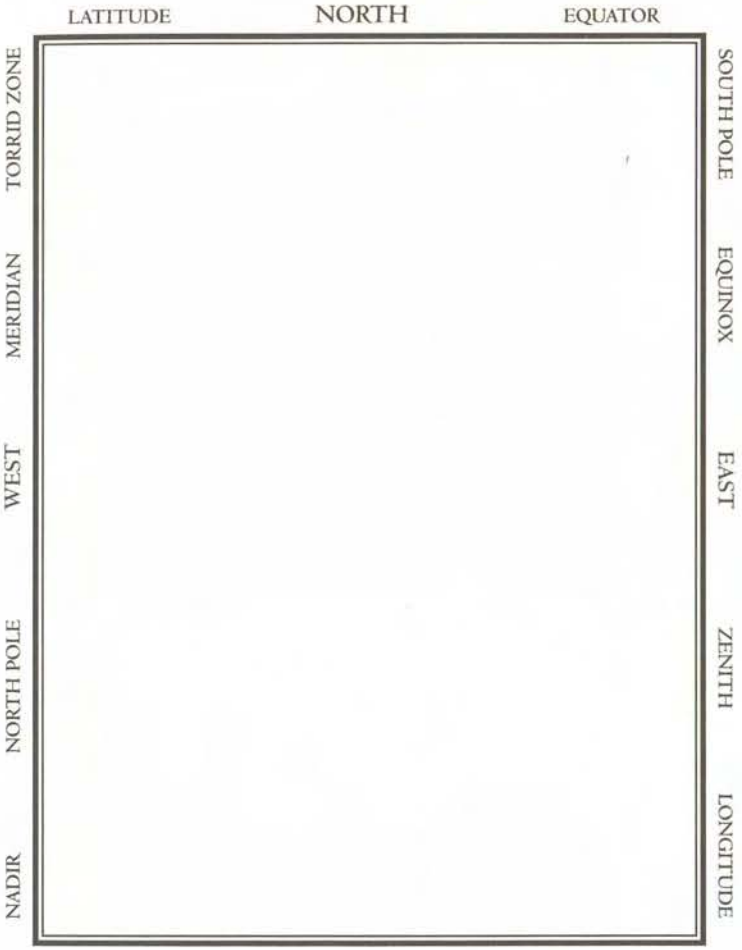
My hair is wet underneath from March through November.
I save a drowning boy, being from Orlando.
My brother swims in the Junior Olympics. My mother
swims across a lake when she's angry at my father.
She wears her clothes. She swims for three hours.
In the carport hang my mother's khakis,
the loping green noodles, our ghost orchids.

Year after year we ski Orlando,
skirting the land that is Orlando. We ski all the lakes,
the blue pads of cool, some bottomless, some so
brown from pine needles unfolding, they stain
the whites of your eyes. We ski on Christmas. We thread
our way through the wet blue heart of our place. We think
surely it will sink, this city of admirals, tangelos and Panama hats,
this city with its men in white guyaberas.

We are from Orlando. We don't like to be too dry.
We have returned to our houses, still standing, our citrus
which cannot taste us; our lakes have returned to soup.
They are melding together. We are trading places. We are
going North for school, we are heading South to work
in maritime museums, on the beach. Away from Orlando,
we see we were only visiting the place, in its sky blue uniform.
It's a hotel for fruit, a winter tempo with a hurricane for every girl,
and in every room by noon a little bit of the sea we lived for.



Katy Stewart
Barca de Pesca, Guatamala 1997



Scale of Miles.

OCEAN-CHART.

(the Bellman's map from *The Hunting of the Snark* by Lewis Carroll)

GEOGRAPHICA INCOGNITA

BEING

AN ACCOUNT OF THE EXTREMITIES OF THE
MORAL AND TERRESTRIAL SPHERES

IN iii. CONCENTRIC PARTS

To Wit,

I. ANTIPODES

II. VORTEX

III. DISJECTA MEMBRA

CONTAINING ALSO, A FULL
AND METICULOUS ACCOUNT OF THE
NAUTICAL PHÆNOMENON KNOWN AS THE

MAELSTROM

TO WHICH IS ADDED,

A PARTICULAR STUDY OF THE WORKS OF
THE LATE E. A. POE, ESQ.,
ESPECIALLY, "MS. FOUND IN A BOTTLE"

A Collapseration between Jon Hauss & Russell Potter

1999

Prologue

> It is evident that we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge—some never to be imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction. —"MS. Found in a Bottle"

'MS. Found in a Bottle' is one of many tales by Poe in which maelstroms figure. Why was Poe so obsessed with maelstroms? Our epigraph suggests a nicely perverse answer: *because they destroy you.* Poe's tale presents the maelstrom as *the image of all trauma*: brutal, engulfing, unsymbolizable, a wildly circled absence. As a consequence, the maelstrom is seen as a site of potential transfiguration too, a passage through which—though one's familiar geographies of self and world may be obliterated—one may attain to a knowledge of other worlds entirely. The narrator of the 'MS.' anticipates his accession to a reality in which the text we hold may not participate. The 'secret' of the maelstrom is beyond the scope of what the narrator's 'methodise[d]' language—even shattered into fragments—can 'impart.' But the tale suggests too that more 'porous' texts and languages, with which the narrator is markedly unfamiliar, may sustain the onslaught of the maelstrom, even 'navigating' a passage through its destructive power. Perhaps those unknown geographies, the folios and charts cluttering the decks of the ship the narrator rides to his death, offer him, though he does not imagine it, precisely the geographies of the unknown he is seeking.

I

Antipodes

> ... the ship proves to be in a current—if that appellation can properly be given to a tide which, howling and shrieking..., thunders on to the southward with a velocity like the headlong dashing of a cataract. —"MS. Found in a Bottle"

What lashes a maelstrom into its fury? A collision of antipodal currents creates and drives the maelstrom. In turn the maelstrom, by hauling the sea from all compass-points into itself, multiplies cross-currents and intensifies their 'velocities.' These velocities of the sea prefigure that ultimate velocity, envisioned in the wild cartographies of Poe's day, by which the maelstroms of the North and South pole *cross into and become each other.* This image, found in the maps of Mercator and the writings of John Cleves Symmes and Jeremiah Reynolds, is of a kind of terrestrial *omphalos*, as if the tails of these maelstroms suddenly 'caught hold' of each other, to open a wild and dilating passage through the center of the earth. Such interlinked antipodes appear at multiple levels of Poe's 'MS.': the narrator's anxious resistance to the polar current, over against the navigators' eager leaning into it; the narrator's horror at his fate, against his fascinated curiosity; his baleful journey to the pole, against his bottled manuscript's lazy backdrift North.

Seeds of grain > Walter Benjamin speaks, in 'The Storyteller,' of the 'seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air tight and have retained their germinative power to this day.' For Benjamin, the seeds are figures for ancient stories reconfigured—with the subjectivities inscribed in them—in contemporary cultural and political contexts. Benjamin celebrates these wild destinies of texts—the startling reemergence, in contemporary lives, of dispositions and discernments sealed away for centuries.

II

Vortex

> Oh, horror upon horror!!—the ice opens suddenly to the right, and to the left, and we are whirling dizzily, in immense concentric circles... we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool—and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering—oh God! and—going down!
> —"MS. Found in a Bottle"

There are geographies of the maelstrom that affirm their own strictly provisional character as well as the final *unchartability* of their object, an object which may indeed not only elude but destroy the subjects who would map it. Perhaps it is true that the politically powerful always suppress and supplant such self-interrogating geographies with their own 'incontestable' ones—so that the former are rarely *given* to us, but must be unearthed. But it is also true that, even when we 'have' them, we forget such books the moment we set them down, simply because what they tell us is intolerable. But though we may forget them, they do not forget us. The ghosts of them rise up and surround us within the inescapable catastrophes of which they spoke to us once long ago.

I write, and have written

Poe's 'MS.' purports to be the journal of a man trapped aboard first one ship, then another, caught in powerful southern currents that rush inexorably to the pole. The second ship is navigated, not by ordinary men, but by a 'strange race' of navigators 'of immense age' who cannot or will not acknowledge the narrator's presence. At the pole, a terrific maelstrom consumes narrator and ship and all, though the narrator manages to throw his journal in a bottle into the sea at the last possible moment.

His *journal?* The narrator of Poe's 'MS. Found in a Bottle' travels southward through a series of astoundingly alien, hallucinatory spaces; amid phosphoric sea-brilliancies, spiral exhalations, and vaporous calms; beneath dully glowing discs of sun; and into pitch black nights through which mountainous waves are hurled. Then he is flying south upon the sea, 'with a velocity like the headlong dashing of a cataract.' And through all this (to the very moment of 'plunging madly...—oh God!—and—going down!') *we are to believe that he is keeping a journal?* He tells us he has pilfered from the captain's cabin 'the materials with which I write, and have written,' and that, outrageously, he 'shall from time to time continue this journal.'

What can this mad conceit signify? In 'How to Write a Blackwood Article,' Poe derisively enumerates the requisite formulae for the tales of sensation and horror he himself keeps writing. He tells us the chief business of the writer of such tales is to put an ordinary man in extraordinary circumstances. Poe's characteristic version of this formula is to narrate from that man's point of view, sometimes in the form of journals or letters. Such is the case in *Pym, Hans Pfaal, The Journal of Julius Rodman,* and of course the 'MS.' Why are all these men writing? Why do they strain this last bond with their culture to its very limits, writing their way through terror, grief, outrage, awe, and to the very brink of destruction? Isn't it simply the last gesture of 'sanity,' not yet fully to be borne off by the ecstatic terror of these? No doubt. But there is something else as well: a mad desire, in the words of the MS., to 'penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions,' to open language to the impossible, extending the boundaries of what it is possible to think and say, even at the cost of annihilation.

rigid thought

The writer of Poe's 'MS.' is prone to 'rigid thought,' a primness of conception, and a reduction of human complexities to 'physical philosophy' explanations. At the outset of his voyage he is an overprivileged, fatuous devotee of what he considers the 'severe precincts of truth.' He suffers from 'a deficiency of imagination' and the 'reveries of fancy' have been to his mind 'a dead letter and a nullity.' The tale will dramatize the tragic effects of this failure of imagination: only the imaginative literatures this 'physical philosoph[er]' never read—or read with a cool skepticism—could have discursively limned the other realities he now suffers; only imagining these *other realities* into being could have prepared his mind to receive them. The great irony here is that the writer himself enumerates for us all these psychic debilities as if they were strengths: 'Rigid thought' has served him well in the past, and should come to his aid again now! He hopes to reassure his readers that what he will now relate is strictly true. Thus at the commencement of

this tale of gross imaginative failure, the writer assures us: *Don't worry! I have no imagination!*

he paid no attention to what I said

The first events of the MS. include a curious foreshadowing of the tale's final scenes. The narrator tries to warn the captain of the first ship, a Bombay freighter, of his 'presentiment of evil,' a feeling that a terrible 'Simoon' is coming: 'I told the captain my fears; but he paid no attention to what I said, and left me without deigning to give a reply.' The captain's strangely blank response, face to face with the writer, anticipates the behavior of the captain of the final ship, where both captain and crew prove 'utterly unconscious of my presence.' But the scene also looks back to the writer's own blank response to anything he construes as mere 'fancy.' His own unresponsiveness may then be complicit with all these failures of spoken exchange. Nonetheless we find also, in this early scene, evidence of the writer's real capacities for transformation: he attends keenly to unsettling intuitions and traumatic realities which the captain, who 'could perceive no indications of danger,' simply *will not* see.

ill usage

'Of my country... I have little to say,' the writer tells us, in his MS.'s opening line. Why so little? He refuses to acknowledge it in repayment for the 'ill usage' he has suffered at its hands. This writer is in exile, alienated not through dispossessions but through his *possessions*: the '[h]ereditary wealth' which has afforded him both 'an education of no common order' and 'many years of foreign travel'. He is another of Poe's ruined aristocrat, a classical patrician in an age of romanticism and revolutio, but with enough vestigial wealth languidly to tour the globe, remaining for now comfortably insulated from the commercial and republican social world that has entirely dislocated him.

In this context his intellectual 'aridity,' like his wealth, is an instrument (ultimately futile) of personal *insularity*. Beneath his shows of 'superiority' to the prevailing 'ignes fatui of superstition' lies an enormous and unsymbolized anxiety which he refuses directly to engage, but which is signalled by the 'nervous restlessness that haunted me as a fiend.'

When the writer imagines, near the end of the tale, that the ship he rides is 'surely doomed to hover continually upon the brink of eternity, without taking a final plunge into the abyss,' he renders the precise image of his own profoundest wish: to 'hover' forever above a maelstrom that has actually already engulfed him.

What happens to such an 'I' when the 'severe precincts of truth' it has defended are suddenly overborne with the miraculous? The narrator proves, in the event, much less narrow than we might have guessed. It is not that now he welcomes fancy and imagination; his text insists on the 'positive experience' of all he relates. But he meets this ontological eruption of the hallucinatory and unreal with an effort to expand and transform his own comprehension. He finds his former grammar and lexicon inadequate: 'What [the ship] is *not*, I can easily perceive; what she is, I fear it is impossible to say.' Yet he strives against this 'impossib[ility],' in an effort of linguistic reformation that will ultimately reconstitute the very 'I' through which he has initially reached us. In his astoundingly unlikely journal-keeping, he actively opens his own 'ordinary' categories of mind to an 'extraordinary' reality, letting that reality shatter his text and disperse the fragments in a flood of the unspeakable.

discovery

The writer of the 'MS.' tells us that we will never know which: either our discoveries of meaning are glimpses into a grand poetical design—some ultimate 'commission' signed by an ultimate 'monarch'—or they are *imaginary constructions* pieced together from random fragments floated our way through 'ungoverned chance.' What we know is that, at moments, we suddenly understand or 'see' a pattern of meaning interconnecting a perhaps entirely random collection of marks. Meaning is a kind of *sudden geography*, a drawing together of multiple, more or less distant parts in a single inter related picture. The 'MS.'s' word for such moments is, of course, 'DISCOVERY'—the word itself 'discovered' within exactly the experience it names. The narrator is dreamwalking through his few bemused days aboard the ship of 'foreign' navigators, when a curious thing occurs:

> I had ventured upon deck and thrown myself down... among a pile of ratlin-stuff and old sails... While musing upon the singularity of my fate, I unwittingly daubed with a tar-brush the edges of the neatly folded studding-sail which lay near me on a barrel. The studding-sail is now bent upon the ship, and the thoughtless touches of the brush are spread out into the word DISCOVERY.

Is this scene strictly ironic? The M.S.'s writer has not in the past been especially prone to the discovery of new meanings; and perhaps he is less likely than ever before to find any in this moment, simply because of the glutting traumatism of his recent experience. He wanders about the ship, he says, 'musing and meditative'—actually, numb, speechless, psychically paralyzed, as yet incapable of re-making his relationship with a reality that has become stupendous. In this context, the scene seems a kind of broad-handed, even cruel burlesque of the narrator's present incapacities. Perhaps so. In any case it is a textbook demonstration of that recovery of meaning which still in general eludes him. Suddenly, a seemingly random scattering of paint-strokes unfurls itself in a miraculous legibility, constituting, before his later journal-writing, the narrator's sole collision with *comprehensibility.*

But the scene also reminds us of another 'discovery' underscored by the tale: the eventual discovery of the MS. we are now reading. The title insists upon this fact: it is a manuscript *found* in a bottle. And its 'foundness' implicates both some original 'shoreline' discoverer, and ourselves as contemporary readers. Two miraculous advents of meaning? Perhaps not. Some 'discoveries' are purely physical. We may find and read this and indeed a thousand other MSS. in bottles, without ever finding in them any new and compelling meanings at all. Thus may readers themselves be the unwitting targets of the 'DISCOVERY' scene's burlesque.

N'a plus rien a dissimuler

We are now in a position to understand the tale's epigraph: *Qui n'a plus qu'un moment a vivre/N'a plus rien a dissimuler.* He who has only a moment to live, has nothing left to hide. In the tale's final passages, the narrator's tense self-protectiveness falls away, and he shows all at once an enormous courage—not only by revealing himself to us in real fear and helplessness, and opening himself and his language to the fragmenting, finally annihilatory power of the 'awful regions' he descends through—but also by discovering and affirming, within this very surrender, an undreamt of desire 'to penetrate the mysteries' of this place—to discover its 'never to be imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction.' It would be a mistake in this context to read the tale's epigraph as a reference to his sudden recognition, in the face of death, that he *need not* hide any longer: *"I have nothing left to lose; why not tell it all?"* The meaning of the epigraph lies elsewhere: in the mouth of the maelstrom, the writer sees that he *cannot* any longer hide. There is no sanctuary from life's 'ill usage': the most careful self-narration cannot escape it.

maelstrom

The 'MS.'s' image of polar maelstrom is of something which 'eats alive,' with an endless and indifferent appetite, everything that enters it. The alimentary metaphor is apt: the maelstrom chews things up, grinding them to bits before swallowing them, the mealy remainders sliding their way into the 'bowels' of the earth, where they are, however (here is where the metaphor fails), simply 'absorbed,' according to the final footnote. This note links the tale's imagery, explicitly, with the maps of Mercator. According to those maps, of course, and to the relevant 'Hollow Earth' theories of Symmes and Reynolds, which may have directly influenced Poe (in the night-long delirium that preceded his death, he is said to have repeatedly called out for 'Reynolds!'), an open channel between the poles makes conceivable a passage of elements from one to the other. This provides one possible answer to the question how the 'bottle' returns to us: swallowed by Southern maelstrom it is ejected at the North pole! But in fact, Poe's text refuses to suggest any clear answer to this query. Halting where it does, it images a kind of annihilation and disappearance of substance—an erasure of matter as we know it. The 'MS.' and Pym both indicate—not by what they say but by what they cannot say, not by what they represent but by where their representation fades into nothingness—that, in their passage through the maelstrom, things undergo a transmutation so complete as to become, for us,un-representable. All matter, liquid or solid, which disappears through the southern pole/hole passes...beyond this text's capacity for accounting, the physics of the text devolving into an absolute vanish-ing ,

per-
haps
preced-
ing a thou-
sand re-crea-
tions, but if so
of a sort that can
not even be thought,
let alone 'predicted' be-
forehand, because the maelstrom is
where our geography ends, in a perfect
and absolute blank before some new geogra-
phy's efflorescence; and in the perfection of that ab-
sence which is its soul, the maelstrom will continue to
proffer the very image of all trauma, for it is not only in its
immense destructive power that it may signify for us our catas-
trophes,but also and especially in its wild and unceasing circling round
an emptiness, which recalls for us with disturbing immediacy both our
inescapable losses, which perpetually re-awaken a yearning for what can
never be returned—and the traumas of an enjoyment to which we can-
not but recur, which yet by its very nature can never close upon its object.

these conceptions are indefinite

Unlike the 'maps of Mercator', referenced in the tale's final footnote, Poe's text is not a comprehensive illustration. The edge of Poe's cartography is unmarkable: not even 'this way monsters'; but only 'this way something beyond what is for us thinkable.' The text's imagery is 'incomplete:' 'these conceptions are indefinite', as the writer remarks ruefully of his polar representations. The incompletion is especially conspicuous since the tale initiates a kind of fascinated attention to global geography. It compels us to conjure a mental image of the planet in order simply to follow its narrative. Then it matter-of-factly leaves the majority of that globe unformed. The picture we are left with is one of *a partial earth hanging within representational nothingness.* Its northern sectors and pole are unimagined, perhaps unimaginable, and its southern sectors—the sole visibly constituted regions of this globe—are themselves being sucked away,with everything in them, into the vacuum of polar maelstrom. In short, Poe sketches a world that looms indistinctly out of unthinkable void, and this looming world is characterized chiefly—by reversion to unthinkable void.

the other maelstrom

It should come
as no surprise
in this most contrary of
tales
that the
into an increasingly maelstrom
circle them, intense should
which we engulfment provide a figure
distances at tivi- —that may not only
from the safe jec- tie end for the
texts draw us, sub- s in a forces that
read them. Such alien self- rupture texts
alien to those who into cancelling —death,
are fundamentally passage destruction,
insofar as they grief,
themselves, passion,
texts loss—
but also for

old foreign chronicles

The writer tells us he vaguely recollects not only his new surroundings but, more curiously, some unspecifiable texts *in which these surroundings were written:*

> I know not how it is, but in scrutinizing [the ship's] strange model and singular cast of spars, her huge size and overgrown suits of canvass, her severely simple bow and antiquated stern, there will occasionally flash across my mind a sensation of familiar things, and there is always mixed up with such indistinct shadows of recollection, an unaccountable memory of old foreign chronicles and ages long ago.

The writer experiences a disturbingly incomplete remembrance of 'familiar things' someway provoked by his present situation. The ghosts of 'old… chronicles' surround him. We will see how texts suggested by this ship's 'strange model' might be constructed. For now it is essential to note how *imperfectly* these texts return to him—how they remain for him 'foreign'

chronicles. He can receive no counsel from them. Of what precisely do they speak? 'Chronicles' suggests not a single event, but a series: not a *point,* but a *passage.* If once, in a time now gone, he had carefully read *whatever it was he read,* had crossed into its foreigness, or—what amounts to the same thing—had let its foreigness cross into himself, perhaps its memory would not now be so faint, nor its ghosts so alien and bloodless.

porous

The inadequacy of the languages the writer is schooled in is remarked throughout the text. But his arrival on a ship that seems *built for the maelstrom,* populated by mariners capable of *navigating the maelstrom,* throws that inadequacy into high relief. The writer cannot produce a positive definition of the ship—'...what she is, I fear it is impossible to say'—in part because its material constitution seems to him self-contradictory. On the one hand, it is incredibly stalwart; on the other, entirely porous, 'which strikes me as rendering it entirely unfit for the purposes to which it has been applied.' The writer's difficulty surmounting this paradox reveals the terms of his own understanding: strong = impenetrable; surviving catastrophe = hardening oneself against it, refusing it any entry. The giant ship's 'awe[some]' power suggests, to the contrary, that strength and survival may depend upon openness to 'the outside,' a capacity to be literally 'washed through' by it.

The ancient crew's language shares the ship's paradoxical strength. In every act of the crew that we witness, they are *trying out* their symbolic grasp of the sea: engaging in tactical conferences, rethinking their route, re-mapping the sea with their multiple 'navigational instruments.' An old mariner 'grop[es] in a corner among a pile of singular-looking instruments and decayed charts of navigation', muttering querulously. A group of the crew confers on the upper deck of the ship, while about them, 'on every part of the deck, lay scattered mathematical instruments...' Their captain, amid a floor 'thickly strewn with strange, iron-clasped folios, and mouldering instruments of science, and obsolete long-forgotten charts,' studies 'with a fiery, unquiet eye,' a document detailing his commission.

We might say that the navigators *speak a polar language*—and *practice a culture of the maelstrom.* And this is true in a yet further sense. In the final hour of their wild journey, the mariners show 'upon their countenances an expression...of the eagerness of hope.' More than 'navigating' the maelstrom, they seem actually to have sought it out.

Now we are in a position to see how the tale is divided into two contrary motions, antipodal *dispositions,* in the face of the maelstrom: the first is the writer's terrified denial and resistance, dominating the first half of the text; the second, marked by the giant ship's supplanting of the freighter, is the ancient mariners' desire and affirmation of the maelstrom, a disposition toward which the writer gradually revolves in the text's second half. The navigators represent a disposition for which, in retrospect, he seems all along to have been searching, in order finally to come to terms with a traumatic condition about which he has little choice, or rather, about which he has *only a choice of dispositions.*

obsolete

The writer confidently dismisses the folios and charts of the navigators as 'obsolete.' And yet he does not *open* them. He cannot seem to think the concept 'old' without understanding it to mean 'outdated.' This is perfectly in keeping with his mentality. We may say that the other characteristic of 18th century thought that we find in him, besides an empiricist's devaluation of the imaginary, is a simplistic model of human 'Progress.' This has provided him in the past with a further rationale, if he needed one, not to resuscitate any of those lives suspended in the signifiers of 'old foreign chronicles.' But even other lives in his *own* era remain alien to him. He credits nothing beyond his own 'positive experience.' Which is to say, he knows nothing beyond the narrow circle of his own acknowledged sensations.

a dead letter

This writer's relation to antique texts is *antiquarian;* that is, dead. Such objects are the perhaps mildly curious *dijecta membra* of dead cultures. 'I have been all my life,' he tells us, 'a dealer in antiquities...until my very soul has become a ruin.' The final ruin of his soul males clear that his 'exchanges' with the past have not been vivifying *in either direction.* This is why the navigators' language remains, for the writer, one he 'can not understand,' 'a foreign tongue'. They are Coleridgean Mariners whose tales are to him mere 'dead letters,' a meaningless jabber.

I have seen the captain face to face

A curious 'artistic flaw' near the conclusion of Poe's tale underscores once more the peculiar debility under which the narrator labors. He tells us of a

direct and intimate encounter with the ancient ship's captain, within the confines of the latter's cabin:

> I have seen the captain face to face—but, as I expected, he paid me no attention... In stature he is nearly my own height; that is, about five feet eight inches.

Poe here introduces a striking *doppelganger* motif—which leads absolutely nowhere. The brief suggestion that the captain may be the writer's double is never developed, and *lacks any further significance* at all in the MS. But that is, in fact, exactly the point. The significance of this encounter is that it lacks any further significance for the writer. What is developed through this scene is a punishingly clear sense of the writer's *inability to develop* any relation with this other, even within the most immediate, 'face to face' encounter. What Poe manages to produce, then, is a perfect imaging of the MS.'s writer as 'bad reader.' The text of the other lies open before him, yet its words mean nothing to him. *De te fabula naratur,* Horace teaches us; *the story being told is about you.* But one can attain to such a recognition only after actually *hearing* a story.

Like every bad reader, of course, the writer blames the text for his own failure: 'he paid me no attention'—as if it is the text's/other's responsibility to break through to *him,* to clear a channel of relation which his passive imagination has left entirely blocked. It is the same with all the old men who surround him on the fated ship:

> About an hour ago, I made bold to thrust myself among a group of the crew. They paid me no manner of attention, and, although I stood in the very midst of them all, seemed utterly unconscious of my presence.

Perhaps he is for them like those foreign travelers who 'never learn the language,' to whom they implicitly reply: 'if you will not recognize us within our own lives why on earth should we recognize you in yours?' No matter how 'bold[ly]' he thrusts his presence upon them, they continue to look past or over or through him. In the end, the most uncanny, hallucinatory, finally horrifying aspect of Poe's tale lies in this enchanted isolation of the writer. His is certainly the loneliest, the most baffled of annihilations: surrounded by others in an intimate proximity which proves at one and the same time an absolutely unbridgeable distance.

III

Disjecta membra

> ...it was no long while ago that I ventured into the captain's own private cabin, and took thence the materials with which I write, and have written. I shall from time to time continue this journal. It is true that I may not find an opportunity of transmitting it to the world, but I will not fail to make the endeavor. At the last moment I will enclose the MS. in a bottle, and cast it within the sea. —"MS. Found in a Bottle"

Born from the clash of antipodal currents, the maelstrom engulfs and destroys all familiar geographies. But what does it create? The answer of course is: *absolutely nothing.* Nothing beyond a wreckage with which we may create—after the disaster—another world. The *disjecta membra* of the MS.'s vast, amphitheatred maelstrom are dispersed outward to a thousand shores—broken bits and pieces of past totalities, amid which urgent messages may yet await us. '[A]t the last moment' before plunging to his own death, Poe's fictive writer commends his manuscript to the sea. Its scrolled pages float in a glass bottle: that image of preservation itself which is yet at one and the same time the most hopelessly fragile of objects.

A thousand times The writer must consent to be absolutely annihilated, in order to be born again a thousand times.

Bottled MSS. The model of language as 'communication,' at least as that model comes down to us, is of course untenable. Metonymic chains fire off differential meanings in speaker and listener, writer and reader. What we call 'communication' is, as Lacan suggests, little more than successful misunderstanding. Yet this is a success on which our lives depend. Through ongoing exchanges we revise and extend our maps in a world of otherness by which we are already ourselves engulfed, in which we are already inescapably complicit and responsible.

Left behind The departure of God, that great imaginer of worlds, foreshadowed the withdrawal and death of the author, whose texts are left behind as orphans. Cervantes was the first to recognize this withdrawal as his own: the second half of *Don Quixote* had to be found, and in an Arabic translation at that. We know now that texts are always foundlings, beyond the reach of loving and lost creators who have been washed away, like Alice, in the tears of their own regret.

The rites of criticism In elegiac tribute to abandoned texts, we 'postmoderns' append the mournful codas of our response. We hold out hope for discursive play, and speak of intertextual heavens towards which we strive. But there remains in our interpretive texts a funereal air. Those who administer the rites of 'criticism' cultivate a certain sorrow, befitting a world of coffins and sepulchres, lest those who come to pay their final respects be offended.

A flock of words The Chinese have a critical tradition quite different from that of Europe—so different that 'critical tradition' hardly seems the term for it. Within this tradition, writers respond to each other's poems, plays, and tales not with essays of criticism but with poems or plays or tales of their own. The first manuscript provokes the second, which may challenge or parody the first, but may also complement or offer tribute to it—*or it may bear no apparent relation to the first at all,* being simply a flock of words startled into flight by some chance word or phrase sounded in the initiatory text.

The language of disaster Perhaps any language unmarked by trauma is empty. Not untrue, but empty. The presiding intellectual discourse of our time, post-modernism, seems on the face of things to multiply the occasions for intellectual humility, for honest recognitions of our speechlessness before the real, yet shrill pronouncements in postmodern phrases ring through walled intellectual spaces. What no one remembers about Nietzsche is that he spoke from beginning to end *about suffering,* as much as about ecstasy. That he also spoke without rancour, and with enormous courage, should not blind us to that burning reality at the heart of his work. Nietzsche's first passages in *The Birth of Tragedy* school us in the unending re-encounter of art with catastrophe—of Appolinian form with Dionysiac passion and violence...and his last notes in *The Will to Power* tell us it is in the nature of human existence that truth and reality can only be *suffered.* Everyone remembers Dionysian *play*—Dionysos as the god of wine and orgy. It is of course *more difficult* to remember his figuration of the loss, devastation, suffering, and hysterical demand inherent in embodied, passion-ridden experience. Dionysos brings terror as well as joy. But we forget what we cannot tolerate, and 'postmodern theory' in its dominant guise today is bankrupt because of precisely this amnesia.

A peace unknown Those who know how to navigate the maelstrom may find within its spiraling horrors a peace unknown to those who ride on calm seas. For when everyone and everything is unrestrainedly alive, then the arm of fate and the arm of the steersman are one.

Constellations A man made of words is a constellation of stars suspended in the cool distances of space, awaiting the moment at which some watcher will suddenly 'see' him, joining his still and lifeless joints with sudden body—and animation.

Frozen words Baron Münchausen teaches us that in the farthest reaches of the Arctic there comes a cold so severe that even our words can become frozen. All the words spoken in this præternatural cold are at once chilled into silence, and can only be heard if one returns when the heat is sufficient to thaw them.

Acorns Dr. Matthew Mighty-Grain-of-Salt-Dante O'Connor teaches us, in Barnes' *Nightwood* that "Gurus, who, I trust you know, are Indian teachers, expect you to contemplate the acorn ten years at a stretch, and if, in that time, you are no wiser about the nut, you are not very bright, and that may be the only certainty with which you will come away."

MSS. in bottles quietly arrive on shorelines everywhere and everyday. But they are by no means all opened, all read with care, all understood. Even MSS. on strange paper, pilfered from Captain's cabins on gigantic supernatural ships, may be unscrolled before our eyes without any meanings 'unfurling.' Perhaps it is inevitable that people must keep relearning 'how to read,' keep rediscovering that new reading and learning are by nature *traumatic* and disturb all our categories—or they are not new reading and learning at all. More 'strange paper' must be recognized! We imagine the strange paper on which the 'MS.' is written: quite ancient, parchment or perhaps a kind of *vellum,* texturally porous anyway, and oversize, as if ordinary paper had been swollen into an unmanageable, infantalizing form, smelling of the salt sea and beyond that of a dark, oaken ship's cabin, in which a man—of our own height and frame, yet vastly distant—is returning our gaze.

JOHN GERY

Poems the Big Cats Brought In

Sapphire. *Black Wings & Blind Angels.*
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

Rafael Campo. *Diva.*
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.

Sue Owen. *My Doomsday Sampler.*
Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999.

David Ray. *Demons in the Diner.*
Ashland, OH: The Ashland Poetry Press, 1999.

Sharon Olds. *Blood, Tin, Straw.*
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

Among those so often faulted for the small poetry-reading audience in the United States, including everyone from elementary school teachers to T.S. Eliot, also to be cited for their take on the poetry landscape, it seems to me, are the major commercial publishers. While they may claim virtually any poet they wish to, so far as I can tell they maintain reading practices no more catholic than their far less affluent 1counterparts. To the contrary, while small presses often stage national competitions intended to discover emerging poets through a process of blind reading, most commercial presses will not even consider unsolicited poetry manuscripts. As a result, a publisher such as Alfred A. Knopf (with two books under review here) creates a critical inequity in which even the exercises of poets they publish tend to receive serious (and to some extent popular) attention, while the accomplished work of poets such as David Ray, who has published over a dozen volumes of poetry, is apt to be overlooked. To be sure, fervent readers may seek out Ray and others like him published by small presses, but

why is it that the Knopfs of our time show so little interest in, let alone obligation toward, representing the original and diverse voices found throughout the U.S.? If they mean to publish artistic leaders, why do they not feel a deeper responsibility in how they select poets? If they do not mean to be leaders, why publish poetry at all (as indeed some of them have ceased to do)?

What disturbs me, reading these new collections, is less what books the major presses publish than how whatever they publish, by virtue of its imprint, carries an aura of greater literary significance than does a small press book, such as David Ray's. Meanwhile, it is accepted dogma among literary people that the university presses try to function as intermediaries between small presses and the "big cats." Yet with few exceptions (such as LSU Press here), their poetry lists are excruciatingly small, usually from budget constraints. Consequently, though the U.S. has a wild plethora of poetry publishers, few publish more than a handful of titles a year. Major presses could address this problem, I think, if they enlisted good editors from across the spectrum to establish cogent standards, which other presses could respond to (or against). Poets and readers might object, but at least such a system would eliminate the fuzzy hierarchy we now have.

None of this rant intends to fault these five books. Rather, each leaves me wondering how I might be disposed were it under a different imprint: Would I, for instance, be more forgiving of Sapphire's rhetorical excesses, if *Black Wings & Blind Angels* were published by a small press? In theme and method, Sapphire's poetic involves the psychotherapeutic use of repetition, specifically the practice of performing emotional crises until you chance onto their true significance. Besides in her themes, this tendency shows in her method: together with villanelles, dramatic monologues, and poems in sequences, her collection of forty-seven poems includes ten sestinas. Not until the fifth one, "Benin Silver Father Slaves," however, does the poet fully exploit that form to her advantage, when she links key concerns of African art such as water, brass, and silver with her deceased father. As her end-words double back on themselves, the poem closes with the mesmerized speaker looking in a mirror, as though at the dead, and

discovering her heritage in her own face. "A Window Opens" also achieves a formal mastery in its reconciliation with childhood sexual abuse, as the poet renews herself:

> To love? It's not really about a penis—
> It's about opening, being vulnerable, coming out front
>
> with my desire, being clear after all these years. The front
> is as big as the back. I am not four, his penis
> is not my father's. My father is dead, it's my life now.

The plainspokenness of these lines is well earned. Unfortunately, too many poems around it test our patience, as in the gimmicky *xs* in "Under Water," or "Found Poem," for which the footnote is more politically engaging than the poem itself. Throughout *Black Wings & Blind Angels*, Sapphire blends social ills with personal history almost seamlessly, but too often her reasons for linking the two are unconvincing. If Robert Lowell's confessional poems portray personal ills as emblems of national problems, Sapphire's tend to evoke national ills as emblems for personal problems. While her titles and notes suggest her poems will crack open the prejudices tearing the heart of American culture (police violence, racism, apathy, sexual abuse), those delving into private pain are the ones that resonate. In those, "it is an act of courage to say, Leave the lights on."

Rafael Campo's *Diva*, from Duke University Press, also confronts contemporary issues—cultural assimilation, AIDS, and homosexuality. Indeed, his collection opens with the poet discovering from his Cuban heritage

> the people who survived in me:
> part-slave, part-royalty, part-Caliban,
>
> cross-dresser in the golden silk the sea
> rolls out along a beach that isn't mine,
> American yet un-American.

Like Sapphire, Campo deserves praise for his unabashed exploration of identity, but his method is neither confessional nor colloquial. Instead, he relies on rhymed or unrhymed pentameter to articulate the kinds of insight Sapphire's poems elide. In less successful poems, this can result in lines rhythmically stiff, overly general, or both; it is hard to take seriously,

> while surfing on the Internet
> you realize you never understood
> your father's grief...
> .....
> ...soon, you start to think that life
> is pretty pointless, even in the age
> of Microsoft and MCI.

Despite the meter, nothing in lines like these seems poignant as social comment nor self-conscious, self-consciously American, lingo. They may illustrate Campo's contemporaneity, but their heavy-handedness keeps them from being as forceful as their subject matter might suggest.

On the other hand, in *Diva*'s stronger poems, including the impressive translations of Lorca, Campo's rhythm and voice stabilize potentially maudlin emotions. Campo's most consistently moving poems, the linchpins of his sensibility, are those that reflect his medical practice—"The Cardiac Exam," "The Pelvic Exam," "The Abdominal Exam." These poems explore how professional identity can divide us from ourselves, as in "Last Rites," where the poet-doctor, distracted by the view outside a dying patient's window, is "less horrified than plain amazed" when the patient starts spitting up blood in clots as "slick // As cherry candies on his startled tongue"; when the patient died, "I searched the skyline for his wisp of smoke, / But night had rendered it invisible." As its allusions to popular culture, music and the poet's own experience attest, *Diva* is a clear product of 1990s American culture—in a negative and positive sense. While it suffers

in spots from indulging its own predilections, at its best it dramatizes the struggle for a compassionate life that underlies the American obsession for success.

Though also published by a university press, Sue Owen's *My Doomsday Sampler* resists overtly personal themes in favor of an imaginative excursion through the tropes of American English itself, those familiar idioms by which we rationalize daily life. Despite avoiding personal detail, Owen is as intensely engaged as Sapphire and Campo, as she reveals in the uniform pattern of nine-tenths of her poems, which consist of seven unrhymed, unscanned quatrains each. In this way Owen asserts control over her material as though stitching it into the sampler of the book's title. Many poems examine gruesome truisms: "The Fly in the Ointment," "Dead Reckoning," "Work Myself to Death," "Name Your Poison." Extracting these phrases frees them from any social context, as well as from etymology, so the poems are preoccupied less with social conditions than with whatever dark impulse drives us to devise such conceits in the first place as Owen probes each phrase for some other meaning to emerge. Generally, the turning point of each poem occurs mid-poem, where the imagery turns back on itself, as in "Thorn on the Rose," where the poet remarks how "pain and beauty always // go together" and ends up championing the thorn that

> grows on
> the same stem as the rose
> but lives a spiteful life.

Not always is Owen successful in unraveling the imagery implicit in these tropes; some poems fail to surprise, while others tend toward overstatement. But when her technique works well, Owen's poems reveal just how much we invest in these homespun expressions. "One Foot in the Grave" closes with the *other* foot:

> The other foot claims life.
> The other foot will stomp

on death if it dares
to come near and snatch it.

By the end, despite its fixation on the macabre, *My Doomsday Sampler* finds solace in wisdom not clichéd. Like the shadow imagery Owen applies to the written word in "I Think about Ink," the phrases and images she highlights in *My Doomsday Sampler* haunt these pages, following her

as if
each word is a foot-
step taken behind my back.

And despite Owen's preoccupation with diminutive objects and seemingly incidental expressions, as the fireflies in another poem ultimately teach us,

light
and smallness matter
even if their own glowing
will soon fade out of sight

While the least elaborate of these books in its production, David Ray's *Demons in the Diner*, from The Ashland Poetry Press, is arguably the most wide-ranging, both in prosody and subject. Whether treating personal matters such as a son's death, landscapes, artists, or social issues, each poem is to be taken on its own terms. Reading Ray's poetry recalls for me a remark actor Martin Sheen made, when asked to compare himself to his son: "My son has a career; I'm an actor." One criticism might be the absence of a more ambitious vision, as the poems are not arranged by any scheme. But poem by poem, Ray writes with a lyrical clarity and assurance that draws us into wanting to know what he has to say on virtually anything, from the aftermath of divorce felt as a phantom limb to shooting a nuisance

porcupine who "dying, looking me straight / in the eye... uncurled my father's hands." Leaving an "Estate Sale," the poet expresses his repulsion stemming from a fear of death: "We walk quickly home and throw out more, / resolve to leave them nothing, nothing." "Extinction" meditates on "the golden frogs / of Costa Rica" who, despite having followed Plato's rule of the *polis*, still "failed the test / of living with our toxins" and have vanished. In contrast, a dramatic monologue depicts Coleridge's withdrawal from "that lulling pill, quaint opium":

The Devil's swallowed whole, with antlers spread.
No, horns are hinged for the gut descent,
eased in. And then he spreads them, flails,
beats with cleft feet, a scourge for all
acts performed, then for those we've failed.

Tolstoy is remembered for his diaries, Dickinson for her "poems / folded, each with a stitch or two of blue thread," Lafcadio Hearn for "the gloom he had brought / across oceans," and Chekhov for the "Chekhovian" absurdities at the moment of his death.

Demons in the Diner burgeons with vivid detail and figuration, and while few poems may strike a reader as dynamically postmodern, they reward a second and third reading. Ray's poetry is remarkable for its quiet strength, musicality, and gentle spirit equally at home among the sacred and the profane, a poetry ready to acknowledge, "For a guru / a mosquito will do" and "we never have anything left but the earth."

In the other Knopf book, Sharon Olds's *Blood, Tin, Straw* gathers poems on topics familiar to her readers: family, marriage, sex, birth, motherhood, the death of parents. Neatly arranged into five parts, each with fourteen poems (what is it about the number fourteen and poets?), each section has a one-word subtitle: *Blood, Tin, Straw, Fire, Light.* Though this orderliness suggests discrete themes, Olds includes poems deliberately out of sequence, as though she were shelving

books and added a few irrelevant titles just to surprise the browser. This whimsy, in fact, derives from one of her strengths: joined to her alliterative phrasing and intricately intimate detail is her readiness to make imaginative leaps, whether figurative or cognitive. While not always integrated into a poem, these leaps lend her voice an energy that keeps a reader constantly on edge. They may seem to distract from a poem's focus but actually serve to sustain it, like sharp cross-cutting in a film that requires close watching for fear one will lose the plot. Not that Olds is an Ashbery or a Susan Howe, with whom every line can also be an adventure; her faith in signification is unquestioned. But she has mastered making every sentence sound momentous, no matter how otherwise flat or conspicuous the diction. Tomato aspic is "murky," "like the silt of a wound"; the poet's father

> would
> watch and see it stay down in me,
> as if his exophthalmos eye
> held down, on the floor of my stomach, a bolus
> stripped with infectus.

In another poem, a suddenly shifting necklace is characterized as a

> small whipper or
> snapper, milk or garter, just
> the vertebrae now, as if a stripped
> spine had taken its coccyx in its jaw
> around my throat's equator.

In "After Punishment Was Done with Me," Olds devotes fifteen lines to a child's view of "the anonymous crowds of grit" in the corner of her room she observes,

> as if
> looking down into Piazza Navona
> from a mile above Il Duce, I would see
> a larval casing waisted in gold

> thin as the poorest gold wedding band,
> and a wasp's dried thorax and legs wound love-ring
> with a pubic hair of my mother's

Such poetry is as shimmering and tensile as a body in heat. Still, Olds's infatuation with the physicality of experience and language inevitably results in poems that celebrate subjects, even when they mean to assault them. For domestic poems ("The Sound," "Outdoor Shower," "The Remedy"), her febrile prosody scintillates. But when the "soul" makes an appearance, as in "For and Against Knowledge," it seems a stock character, a straight man against which to show off her cleverness. Olds's poems create the aura that body functions, detritus, and private memories set the stage for truth, but she sometimes blurs distinctions rather than uncorking from them any vital insight. Maybe it is time for her to write a longer poem, not an epic but a work in which her sustaining talent can confront head on the cultural concerns hovering just outside the scope of her vibrant lyrics.

J. C. ELLEFSON has taught at Shanghai University and Universidad Dos Acores. His poems have been published in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, and Japan. At this time, he is teaching writing and literature at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, where he is the Poet-in-Residence.

SERGEY GANDLEVSKY, awarded both the Little Booker Prize and the Anti-Booker Prize in 1996 for his poetry and prose, has published widely: in the journals *Druzhba Narodov, Znamya, Kontinent, Novy Mir, Oktyabr, Yunost,* and in the collections *Ponedelnik* (1990) and *Lichnoye Delo* (1991). The author of two books of poems, *Rasskaz* (1989) and *Prazdnik* (1995), a memoir, *Trepanation of the Skull* (1996), and a book of essays, *Poetic Cuisine* (1998), he has been included in English translation anthologies *Twentieth Century Russian Poetry: Silver and Steel* (Doubleday Press, 1993), *The Third Wave* (University of Michigan Press, 1992), and *In the Grip of Strange Thoughts: Russian Poetry in a New Era* (Zephyr Press, 1999).

JOHN GERY's books include *American Ghost: Selected Poems* (Raska Skola, 1999), an English-Serbian edition translated by Biljana D. Obradovic, and *For the House of Torkom* (Cross-Cultural Communications, 1999) a co-translation with Vahe Baladouni, of Armenian prose poems by Hmayyag Shems. His *Gallery of Ghosts* is forthcoming from Story Line Press. A professor of English at the University of New Orleans, he also directs the Ezra Pound Center for Literature, Brunnenburg Castle, Italy.

MARK HALLIDAY's third book of poems, *Selfwolf,* was published in 1999 by the University of Chicago Press. He directs the creative writing program at Ohio University.

LEILANI HALL is a doctoral candidate in poetry and twentieth century literature at the Univeristy of Mississippi's Center for Writers. Her work appears in *The Ohio Review, The Laurel Review, The Chattahoochee Review, The Journal* and *Hawaii Review.*

RUTH HAMEL's short fiction has appeared in *The Kenyon Review, The Missouri Review, Northwest Review, Press,* and other publications. Another story is forthcoming in *Ascent.* She's working on a novel.

JON HAUSS teaches American literature at Rhode Island College. His work has appeared in *Arizona Quarterly, Studies in the Novel, Literature and Psychology,* and in anthologies by Routledge and SUNY Press. He is writing, with Russell Potter, a book on Edgar Allan Poe.

MELISSA HUSEMAN is a graduate of the Program in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama. She's been published in *Willow Springs, Fence, New York Quarterly, Puerto del Sol, Cutbank, Hayden's Ferry Review, American Voice, Green Mountains Review,* and elsewhere. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 1998 and 1999.

JULIA JOHNSON is an Assistant Professor of English at Hollins University in Virginia. A New Orleans native, she studied at the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts. She was a Henry Hoynes Fellow at the University of Virginia, where she received her MFA in 1995.

NEAL KIRCHNER grew up in a small-town Kansas motel near the Neosho River. He holds degrees from Emporia State University and the University of Alabama. His work has appeared in journals including *South Dakota Review, Oxford Magazine, Poem,* and *Santa Barbara Review.* He teaches in rural Kansas, and adores life on the plains.

JOY LAHEY lives in New Orleans. She has a new chapbook, *Abandoned Premises,* published by Lavender Ink. The three poems in this issue are part of a collection in progress, *After Words.*

GORDON LISH was fiction editor at *Esquire* from 1969 to 1977. He is the author of eight books of fiction, most recently a novel, *Arcade* (Four Walls Eight Windows, 1998). "Under a Pediment" will be included in a new collection, *Krupp's Lulu,* due out from Four Walls Eight Windows in the spring of 2000.

PETER MARKUS has other short fictions in *Quarterly West, Quarter After Eight,* and *Black Warrior Review.*

PHILIP METRES is writing a dissertation at Indiana University on war resistance poetry. His poems and translations of Russian poets appear in journals and in the anthology *In the Grip of Strange Thoughts: Russian Poetry in a New Era.* He recently completed a translation of *A Kindred Orphanhood: Selected Poems of Sergey Gandlevsky.*

SIMON PERCHIK is a lawyer whose poetry has appeared in journals including *Partisan Review, Poetry, Black Warrior Review,* and *The New Yorker.* He has published sixteen books of poetry, the latest, *These Hands Filled with Numbness* (Dusty Dog Press, 1996).

RUSSELL POTTER is Associate Professor of English at Rhode Island College. He is the author of *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (SUNY Press, 1995), as well as critical articles in *Postmodern Culture, Nomad,* and *Literature and Psychology.* He is co-authoring, with Jon Hauss, a book-length study of Poe.

PORTER ROCKWELL was born in New England, and raised in Florida. He is a social worker and an English tutor. Currently, he's working on a collection of stories and is in the preliminary stages of a documentary film on the subject of War & Art in America.

CHRIS ROSS grew up in Indiana, lives in New York, and will move to Berlin with Nina this summer. This is his first published story.

HEATHER SELLERS' book of short stories, *Georgia Underwater,* is forthcoming from Sarabande. She is an Associate Professor of English at Hope College in Michigan, and the recipient of an NEA fellowship.

ED SKOOG was born in Topeka, Kansas in 1971 and earned an MFA from the University of Montana in 1996. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Slate, The Marlboro Review, Gulf Coast, Teacup, The Worcester Review* and *The Laurel Review.* He was named one of "Ten Hot Poets to Read in the Next Millenium" by *Writer's Digest.*

ALLISON STEWART lives and paints in New Orleans. Her work reflects the interconnectedness of things: life processes, ecological cycles, the dual nature of beauty and loss. The rapidly vanishing wetlands of south Louisiana provide imagery for her paintings. *Cocodrie,* on the cover of this issue, is part of an ongoing series entitled *Terra Infirma.*

KATY STEWART is a documentary photographer. She is currently working in conjunction with the University of New Orleans on the development of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, a museum dedicated to the conservation, study, and exhibition of significant works of southern art.

JULIANA GRAY VICE is an Alabama native currently serving time in Ohio, working toward a Ph.D in English and creative writing at the University of Cincinnati. Her poems appear in *New Delta Review, River City, Gulf Stream,* and *Alabama Literary Review.*

DEDE WILSON has published one book of poetry, *Glass* (Scots Plaid Press). Her poems have appeared in journals including *Carolina Quarterly, Southern Poetry Review,* and *Cream City Review.* She is on the executive board of the North Carolina Writers' Network.

MINDY WILSON, a Louisiana native, lives and writes in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She is an assistant editor at the University of Alabama Press.

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