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Editor
Ralph Adamo

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William S. Maddox

Novelist and Poet

1949-1998

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ELYSIAN NIGHTS

The following is a second installment of a novel very-much-in-progress called "Elysian Nights"—which concerns the life and times of Malcolm, who grows up in a foundling house on Audubon Island in New Orleans in the middle of the twenty-second century. At this time, the majority of people in the United States have been genetically treated so that they do not age. Since he's been a child Malcolm has followed the dictates of his counselor-guardian Lazarus, who allowed Malcolm to be "rented out," as a child actor in the pageants called simulations which are a major entertainment for Treateds. Lazarus always counseled Malcolm to disregard his physical traumas on the theory that eventually, when he becomes treated, he'll have infinite time to work out any psychic scars. Lazarus is keeping a trust of all Malcolm's earnings, which he can use one day to be treated, a vastly expensive undertaking. The greatest portion of the resources of the economy go to the upkeep of the immortals.

In the action that follows Malcolm, having turned 21, has been sent out to the Replicate New Orleans (north of Lake Pontchartrain) to be interviewed and possibly trained for a job at an asylum for Treateds. It was the first time Malcolm had been on his own, and had to interact with Treateds without the benefit of Jeremy, a man who used to be his prompter and dresser in the simulations, who has lately been cast off, because he reached the age of forty-five without raising enough capital to become treated. A doctor named Lydia Greenmore has been interviewing Malcolm for a placement. Malcolm has not been educated because Treateds do not see the point of paying for education for persons without status like himself.

Other groups in the population include "Neats" the general term for anyone under forty who is "not yet treated." "Enclaves" are reservations set off from the Treated communities. In these, persons are still on the life cycle because of their beliefs or their general poverty. "Yeareds" are persons who for one reason or another are not members of an enclave and who are not Treated. Their fate is uncertain: they become nomads, or migrants, or outlaws.

As this scene opens, Malcolm has spent his first night at the Elysian Curing Towers. Malcolm's afraid he'll be sent back to the foundling house, where Lazarus has no more rental work for him. Camille is an enclave girl of about twenty who works as an orderly.

All night long, in that periwinkle room in the north tower, after Camille dropped me off, I couldn't sleep. I didn't believe Lydia was really going to train me. I would end up with no job and no future and my trust would sag and slow in the markets, and Lazarus would abandon it— all Treateds changed career sooner or later, even saints like Lazarus— and then, the rest: the leave taking, the unsayable, the solong-goodbye. I couldn't even rely on myself. I'd had those foolhardy thoughts out on the courtyard with Camille, that nonsense about wanting to go down some tunnel with her, going on the cycle, for crying out loud, procreating, cashing in my trust, traveling to some backward land, one still in the throes of fugue capitalism: Havana, Zanzibar. I wasn't at the home on my dirty little shelf. I was hopeless. That silken soft bed of theirs was a cage to me.

Somehow it was morning. Lydia Greenmore knocked on my door, then poked her head in. "Breakfast?" she asked. She had a white plate for me, and a clear one for herself. Four lumps of cake. I asked what they were. I didn't know it was possible for one universe so easily to fold into another.

"Donuts," she said. "Beignets, actually. Can you get dressed and washed? I'll meet you out in the courtyard at that bench..."

Mine glistened with the fat they were fried in. They were topped with glorious sweet powder. Hers were little balls of brown brosia, uniform and slightly gelatinous, painted with little white dots. It wasn't polite to comment upon the difference.

She looked over in the direction of the window beside my bed. Through it I could see a small courtyard like the one Camille had marched me across the night before, except this one was bordered by a colorful wall instead of defined by the buildings. There were tall palms and palmettos and bushes and even bamboo. "I'll meet you out there," Lydia said, leaving with the plates.

For a few seconds I stayed in bed, under a warm blue insulated sheet, and watched her through a slit in my curtain as she entered the courtyard. She walked in the most remarkable way, her knees bending a beat early, her hips rolling, her toes pointing out. Every step, how can I say it, was a production. I was so used to watching her kind from afar. I forgot I could join her. Eventually I put on the white shirt of pulp and fresh drawstring pants I'd been given. Brushing back my hair with water from the fountain in the hall, I rushed out to meet her.

She lifted up my plate on the bench beside her so I'd know where to sit, saying, "You seem so nervous. Please." Her huge eyes. Looking at me as if I were really there, not the way they usually looked at you. "Do you want to do the work? I'd like you to do it. You'll go through an inundation, with galcyon. I'll monitor you."

I nodded. I'd heard of galcyon. It was terribly expensive, the effects were quite intense. She took another "bite." I knew no matter what their chefs tried to do with broσίας, they never held up much resistance. My beignets, on the

other hand.

"What do you know about us? I mean our health, how we stay here. What we go through."

"That you—" I smiled. (I felt hysterical relief, an aftershock of relief.) "Are immortal. That's your health."

"How can you know that though?" she said. "Eternity is only something we infer."

"But none of you ever—"

"There are accidents."

I had heard—Ariel had told me—about Treateds who had gone down when a train turned over. The uproar was tremendous. In general, they were excessively careful about any injury—a cut, a bruise. Wounds, even the idea of a wound, being near a wound, a scar, or a scab, was the source of great alarm for some of them. Others, like the volunteers at the Foundling House, were shamelessly curious about our physical bodies, not just how we healed, but our eating, our growing, our changing voices. Jeremy tried to make me understand that these interests were innocent. Even that time when we were all taxed beyond our bearing in Audubon Park years ago Jeremy defended them, said Treateds were ignorant, not cruel. But now he'd become a radical. He'd taken it all back the last time I saw him. He'd been cast out. He was a Yeared now. "I know about accidents," I said, trying to remember to keep from talking with my mouth open.

"Have you heard of any other stories, about how we might go—"

"You mean feary tales?"

"What sort?" she said, biting down on her brosia in that way. She seemed an honest person. But she held onto this pretense. Ariel told me some of them just take four teaspoons of a solution in the morning, that's it: they didn't bother with the whole brosia production. It is just spun flax seed, everything made of it, once in the mouth, disintegrates like cotton candy, goes down like oatmeal, in little wet lumps. Regardless how impressive it is going in.

Thinking of Ariel made me think of a feary I'd never repeated before. But the way she looked at me was so cozy—as if she were already inside me—it was the easiest thing in the world to go ahead to tell her secrets. The feary was a wild rumor I'd heard from Ariel that he'd heard from some renegade Enclavers or the gaudy imposses he ran into with G. Imposses were Neats who tried to pass. They wore the stockings and the diaphanous layers and the uv lenses, had the headjobs, and tried to seem as rich and worldly as Treateds. Some of them succeeded for years. Actual Treateds would house them and clothe them, and support their disguises, give them papers, keep them from being cast out. Of course they lived in constant terror of being unmasked. The fines were considerable. The shame, worse. They knew they couldn't keep it up forever, even with plastic surgery and the rest. A count of fifty-five or sixty, that was the upper limit. Jeremy had a few offers from Treated women he'd worked on

simulations for, to come into their society and be an imposse, but he had turned by then. He told me he was too proud.

"Say it. Please." Lydia had moved perhaps an inch closer to me. "Sometimes there's a kernel of truth to these things..." I was afraid she was going to paw me the way they did when I was a boy: "Feel him, take a pinch. Touch the dimple. See the ball of the scalp, how the hair sprouts, you can watch it come out." I waited for this to happen. After a few minutes, I started to trust that she wouldn't. Unless I wanted her to.

"There are rumors, things that can't be true," I said.

"Such as, please. I don't know what worlds you have encountered. The version we put out isn't everything... What's in the holos..." she said. "You must know that, given your origins."

I think she thought of touching my knee, this time—her hand brushed close. I did not set up my border against it the way I had the day before. But she put her hand on her own knee. I told her that someone I knew (Ariel) knew an imposse named Primus who lived with a Treated named Thor who swore this happened to a woman in the Floridas. I asked her if she knew any imposses.

"You would probably be surprised," she said.

This seemed to have been a bad thing, asking her this. But then she said, "Go on." Nodding, the way Lazarus would do.

For some reason I thought of Yee. Yee was funny. If you told him a made-up story he'd throw back his head and laugh and say, "Now I'll tell you the one about Seeping Beauty," which was a silly story about a monster that wakes up one morning to find he's a beautiful woman, but not long after, things start to slip. Ariel told me Yee's feary tales were all corruptions of the stories in one disney or another.

She left her second beignet on the plate. That seemed an honest thing to do, given how they tasted. "How did this Primus say this woman in the Floridas disappeared?" she asked.

"Like this," I snapped my fingers.

She started to snap her fingers, which was hard for her to do. I could tell there was a little doubt in her eyes. Her stocking was silkier than skin. For finger-snapping, a certain amount of traction is needed. But she managed it. She seemed quite proud of herself. For a second she was one of my kind. She seemed to like this. "And did Primus say this woman in the Floridas left anything behind?"

I wasn't going to tell her that part. It was just too ugly. She could tell I was holding something back. She was smart. She made cures.

"Say it," she said.

"No trunk. No face. No eyes. No heart. But one hand, with a wrist watch still on it. One shoe, the sock and foot still in the shoe." The rest of her was gone (she was an early waver with the name Cleo, according to the version I heard) just ash and the blackest bone. As if these parts were the debris of being

who incinerated, lit up quite inside herself, and didn't completely succeed. Nothing else in the house had caught fire.

"And a greasy soot all round on the floor, on the chair?" as if she'd heard it too.

"I know it's a legend. Yee told me it was not the sort to repeat."

She nodded. "There are stories out there. It's okay," she said. But then I saw what I'd said made her sad. That placid flat-faced expression they have, that infinite patience expression they have. I felt guilty for telling the story. Not only about a solong-goodbye— but such a grisly one in which a Treated was the subject. Of course it upset her. But then she smiled, almost. "So don't look so worried. Your brows are very dark. They exaggerate your face. I'm not surprised you were such a good rental." She paused. I'd seen my face, of course, but never thought much of it. It is square and my hair is naturally black and it droops about my face, almost as if it is made of water. It curls, also. "There are things you need to learn. The basic things, also history and about medicine, and the facts." She offered me her brosia. This was meant to tell me something. Of course I had to take it.

I tried to chew, once or twice. Down it went. There was a decent pause before the copper taste got to the palate. She sat there, watching me eating. Then her eyes went away from me a little. Into her own concerns. I liked that. Perhaps the interviewing was done. I'd have relief. There were some pleasant notes to these encounters, but over all they were hard for me. When they were over I replayed every line by memory, every nuance, to try to decide what was really meant.

"The ones you saw last night on the concourse, between the towers? Our clients? They've come here because they are having irresolution episodes. You've heard of it, haven't you?"

That's what Camille was talking about the night before. Ariel had told me the slang for it, "topping out." Some of G.'s friends had bouts of it. They took pills to help themselves. Treateds with the problem were embarrassed by it.

"I am working with chronics. Some of them are the pioneers. Their counts are in the two hundreds here. It is really a phenomenon we don't have any good medical understanding of. I'm involved in basic scientific inquiry. There's very little of it now. It's considered old-fashioned," she said. "There's research on our basic treatment, on making it cheaper, but I'm working on something rather intangible." Up until now topping out had only been approached chemically. She asked me if I knew anything about how the minds of Treateds worked. Did I think they were any different than those of Neats like myself.

"Only Lazarus's mind," I said.

"The word on Lazarus is, he's a wonder," she said. "But I don't like what you told me yesterday. Did he keep you from forming attachments? Who are you close to," she asked, "among your own kind?"

Have I mentioned she was beautiful—such eyes, it wasn't just the headjob,

the stocking. "Ariel," I said, automatically, although I didn't want to bring Ariel into the conversation. "But really. We can love people later."

"Lazarus told you that?" She shook her head. "Tell me all about Ariel," she said. "He was your childhood friend?"

Please don't ask, I wanted to tell her. But she gave me that look, and I went on. I told her a few little anecdotes. Then I told her about that terrible calamity. That time in the park. I couldn't help it.

It was a rainy day, I'm not sure exactly how old I was, but I remember my feet were wide and chubby, in little brown shoes the like of which I have not seen since, and had never seen before. Jeremy told me I had wide feet when he put them on, said I must have come from peasants. Whatever they were. I knew nothing of where I came from then. There was a waxy little string that was woven back and forth along holes in the part of the shoe that wrapped over my instep, and this string was knotted to itself, and that was how the things stayed on. After about six hours my feet were blistered. There were hot little places at the heel, on the ball, on the edges of both pinky toes. I did not let these bother me deep.

I was playing "Innocent Weeping Son at Burial of Mother, Audubon Park," a racy little number, as the manager put it.

I had to weep. Jeremy gave me drugs to keep it up. A water jug, discreetly stuffed down my shirt, a little straw sticking up, so the tears would keep coming. I had to sip it over and over. Had to change the quarts every few hours. In the contract, it said that for four nights and five days, the entire duration of the simulations, I would have to weep. I was managing.

About twelve from my foundling house were rented that day. It was a huge production. I had even gotten Ariel in. The laws were well enforced on that set. Jeremy insisted upon it. Foundlings were granted ten to twelve minutes every eight hours on the job to eat and do other business. Yee, our cook, came with us. He set up a little truck with an awning over on the rim of the circle, outside of the audience. He tried to be discreet. But some of the Treateds sidled over and watched what he was doing, what we did with the food I mean. Yee started baking white bread like they used to have in France. Now nobody in France has a kitchen, he told me he'd heard. France was the only country on earth that was one hundred percent Treated. I had many primitive concepts then, I was small. I thought, if I had a mother she might have smelled as sweet as that bread Yee made from wheat, like bread from wheat and Yee, mixed together, possibly—this was the kind of thing. It was so magnificently rich, the scent fat and open, the taste like a whole hot sweet day.

The crowd demanded encores: we were still going strong the fifth day. By that time some of the Treateds had gone to our manager and said it was repulsive, what Yee was doing, he'd have to stop the baking—some of the same Treateds who had been watching him and smelling it. I remember thinking, when would I ever learn that refinement, that sense that bread was repulsive.

When would I ever come to understand the world as it really was, how Treateds saw it. And not be distracted by thoughts of mothers and squeezing people and the texture of skin like my own— moist and lubricated like the surfaces of stems or thick leaves, not dry and airy like the stockings they wore.

So the manager moved Yee's little truck half a mile from the site at the beginning of the sixth day. Also the facilities, of course, everything. When time came to eat we had to run and gobble it sloppily, spilling it on our lavish costumes. Standing was bad enough in my shoes. Running was worse. When we came back to our posts the Treateds— the audience, the hangers on— liked to point out the fact that we'd gotten dirty. Told our manager on us. They were beginning to get into everything. Who could blame them. They'd essentially been watching the same play over and over, with the same lines, for days and nights and days, now. I didn't know how they could stand it. But Yee had told me they have no sense of time. This sense goes slowly, but they all lose it when their count is in the one-thirties, and upwards of that, he said. Yee said that by observing the language they used, the styles of their headjobs, their attitude toward a regular hour, an afternoon, you could estimate a Treated's count. Jeremy told me Yee was terrible at his guesses. I didn't know whom to believe.

My place was beside the "coffin." My feet were getting worse. In such circumstances, when something like the feeling in my feet was impinging upon me, I was very still, and took the sensation and sent it off away from me and my duty. Lazarus had taught me the trick of doing this. I tried also to cry more. I thought if I cried enough I would be better: the water would empty my bladder, dry up the water in my blisters. That's how I got through the sixth day, by sending it off.

Then it was the seventh day. We were doing the whole play one more time. The lady Treated who had hired us lay there and occasionally I could see her infinitesimal breathing. In the story, various handsome "mourners" came by— one representing her older daughter, one representing her husband. There were lots of extra people in box-like opaque clothes, the way people dressed two hundred years ago. These were Neats and even Yeareds somebody had rounded up, and everything in between. A cast of hundreds. A few had long speaking parts, telling all about the lady in the coffin's fabulous generous life. This was actually, actually one of the lines: "Her leaving us is a tragedy beyond earthly compare."

Every few hours I saw Ariel. He was marching around the entire park, that was his part. He was hauling a big heavy puppet that was tied to crossed sticks. This puppet weighed too much. It was of a man. The face was blonde and unsmiling. The mysterious name of Ariel's role was "Walker, Religious procession."

Along about the seventh hour of the day shift, on the seventh day, during the seventh encore, I had to dwell with, actually, right inside, the pain in my feet. I had to abide with it, all the time keeping up the weeping, the weeping

not helping at all, though the boss encouraged me, gave me cues from the sidelines, calling out “Malcolm, Malcolm, concentrate!” Jeremy just gazed at me. He was aware of the pain. But this costume was required. There was nothing he could do. He’d stretched the shoes to the breaking point. They were rented, too, like me.

Eventually, much later, Lydia told me what religion was, or tried to— she said it had the same root as the word ligament. It had to do with being strung up, tied to something. That in the other ages people bound themselves to stories via mental concentration, willed themselves into the stories, and that was called faith. The purpose was to achieve immortality: which was why it was of course now obsolete. And when she was explaining all this to me I still thought of this day, the one where I felt such things upon seeing Ariel. I thought of that big doll with the loin cloth on, stretched out on the crossed wood, bound there with ropes, and at the same moment, of Ariel’s face, his tiny frame heaving up and down as he trudged through that hot sodden park under the trees, a one-boy religious procession.

By and by, it was not good with my body.

Finally the Treated lady in the coffin lifted her finger. The cue. I was to cry out even more loudly.

We’d already been through this climax. Each time the Treateds standing around chomping on their brosisias leaned forward in anticipation. There were apparently nuances, new senses of recognition, varied interpretations. Refined little differences that they would then go talk about for hours, as a preface to coming back and insisting on an encore. Their teeth all came out so you could see them, so shiny, perfect, parchment-like. “The poignancy, the poignancy, look at that little one, oh, look,” they would say, meaning me. They would pet me, come up and grab me. Touching me everywhere they might want to touch. Anything was allowable.

The demands coming from my feet now surrounded my body like a shrieking, glowing orb. The Treateds were moving towards me the way they did, two, three at a time, getting ready to watch the hostess, in the “coffin.”

And at that instant I saw Ariel up close.

He couldn’t escape, or dwell with things that impinged upon them the way I did. That was why he wasn’t considered “talented,” was never a successful rental the way I was. Of course when we were younger I held myself apart from him and felt myself superior and we would scrap and play tricks upon each other. But by this time I knew the differences between us would one day mean he wouldn’t be as lucky as me, that we wouldn’t share our lives one day because he would have to take another path, not mine. He hadn’t been given a strapping body like me. Or the capacity to ignore. Or whatever it was I had. His eyes insisted upon mine when he came round that time. He couldn’t help it. And then I couldn’t. For an instant I saw the gaps of absolute desperation at the sides of his smile. They grew worse, as long as our gazes were locked together.

Ariel fell.

He was on the ground, underneath his puppet, his mouth in the dirt.

It is the secret of pain: The borders of it are the worst. Inside, it is just like everything else. You have nothing to contrast it to. But at the borders—if you leave it for even an instant—this is where the monstrousness of it is. I cannot say now it if were Ariel's pain that overtook me.

The Treateds were taken aback by my howling.

Then I could hear them applauding. About what a fantastic little one I was. "Marvelous. Simulous. Simulous," they went on, bubbling forth in their low voices. Crowding me, so I couldn't see what was happening to Ariel.

Probably to get their attention— she wanted a great deal of attention— the lady in the coffin decided to do her part. She had lines, but this time, unlike the other times, she didn't say them out loud. Instead she sat up, paused, then she mouthed them: "*Precious precious*," (precious was me.) "*Nobody goes. Nobody does. Nobody goes anymore.*"

The Treateds had learned the words; they said the lines themselves, along with her moving mouth, all the time clapping, cheering, jumping up and down, a chant, a chorus. In his interest at seeing the climax a Treated stumbled over Ariel— finally, somebody saw him—and shouted at him to sit up, where did he think he was. And Ariel did sit up, and for some reason then a new and even more agonizing wave came for me— my feet, which had been bleeding for sometime, now throbbed. I looked at Ariel's expression. I ran screaming from the set, first to help Ariel, then to call Jeremy, then to fling off my shoes.

They all thought this was improvisation on my part. More cheers. They were so focussed upon the star in the coffin, they didn't see quite where I went. I was so dramatic. I got the best notices of my life for that simulation.

That was the day I learned that pain could be pain, and sometimes, no matter what you do to dwell with it or to avoid it, it finds you. It is jealous, jealous. There is no making an ally of it.

If I count back I suppose we were eleven years then, Ariel and I. On the way home, in the van, after Jeremy had done what he could with my bleeding feet, Ariel was still moaning. Jeremy said I had blood poisoning, gave me something to drink. I held Ariel. I remember distinctly I thought myself lucky, but not in the simple way I had when I was younger and took easily the advantages I had over Ariel. He had stumbled, he had tried and had failed on account of his wandering sweetness. He had looked over and seen my crying, and in the second that our gazes locked, he lost his will, and fell. The world did not seem safe to me, to know that sweetness like Ariel's could come to such suffering. To know that pain can win. I stared out the foggy window on the short ride to the foundling house. I tried to tell myself I was lucky, supremely lucky, to have lived so long and only had pain come to really get me once. But I knew Ariel was not lucky as I was. In a way I think I knew already that the world wouldn't give him wounds that could be cleaned and bound with gauze like the ones on my feet,

the ones Jeremy so delicately dressed. And knowing what his wounds must be like, feeling them finally, I wept for him, and even for my luckiness.

I went on to Lydia of Ariel's fate. I have never spoken of it to anyone, except Lazarus and Yee.

What came to mind when I began to speak of G., who was Ariel's fate, was my first sight of the man, in his diaphanous organdy suit, an antique gold, with its thick lapels, its transparent drape, crisp and cagey around the buttocks, and his bright, self-indulgent heliotrope tie.

The first time I saw him, Ariel and I were in the attic of the house, among the rotting rafters, under the ancient moss-covered slate roof. Which leaked. It was a place where we hid, sometimes. Or we had silverfish races. Or we watched the rats in their nests. Ariel was my size then, we were still runty foundlings. And he had only just spent his first two weeks with G. Who'd sent him back, because Ariel had broken some rules. Ariel had talked to Lazarus about it, but Lazarus said he couldn't stop G: G. was a politician, from the South party, very powerful. A very early-waver. Dated from underground, the 1990's. Ancient. G. would have his way, whatever it was.

When I asked Ariel about his time with his holder, he wouldn't say too much. He was happy to be back, he told me. We had almost returned to our old routine. My feet had healed. The weeks of fever had subsided a month before. I could walk, I could play in the yard, I could go up on the Old River levee, wade in the muddy water with him, catch dragonflies.

Then one evening we heard G. was back. I saw him just as we got into our loft. He was standing by the high brick walls of the house pulling at the vines growing there, trying to crawl up on them, screaming at the top of his lungs. And tumbling down. Besotted. In those magnificent clothes I've described. It was six in the evening. The Foundling House was closed. Lazarus had told him to come back in the morning, during visiting hours. But G. had said he wouldn't go away without seeing "Sweet Ariel."

I had never seen a Treated so lacking in dignity.

At first, we were laughing at him from our perch where we could see him through the jalousies of the attic vent. We may have sensed, but had no way of knowing, the kind of risk he might be taking, standing out on a city street so well-dressed. Vehicles did come by, tours, etc. Some quirky Treateds still lived among the ruins of the old city, although almost all had gone across the lake to the Replicate New Orleans. Later I started seeing him in the holos. Then I knew better what risks he was taking.

As it was getting dark G. exploded into tears, his extraordinary suit all splattered with rain and torn. He finally gave up attempting to scale the wall and he fled to the gate, which was made of rusty but difficult iron bars. Pulling upon them he called out, so anybody could hear—"Forgive me Ariel PLEEEEEEEEESE!" Then the rain, running into his mouth. We got wet staying so near the windows, watching. It didn't matter. There was a wide copper gutter

along the roof line, between him and us, so he couldn't see us unless we really stuck our necks out. We watched him, safe. A Treated making a fool of himself over a little urchin one of us. It was great entertainment.

Ariel giggled, so did I. We were princes, then, little princes. We had riches. Didn't we, if a Treated were wailing like that. One who had the world and forever.

We fell asleep up in the attic. Missed the noodles Yee had promised for supper.

In the morning, G. was still there, a lump on the sidewalk in the steamy dawn light, still wailing Ariel's name. Ariel pushed open the shutter a little wider, letting in the light and air, and leaned out a little for a better look. "He's pitiful," he said, closing his eyes a little. (Everything else was secondary to the eyes in Ariel's face. His sort of face doesn't comprise standard beauty in this era, although I think it had more sway at another time.)

"Don't," I said, instinctively. I wanted Ariel to work for simulations the way I did, always knowing the ending, never having to stay away from the home so long. It was better work, much safer, there was our kind of food, there were costumes. I told him the injuries we'd had at the last one were unusual. That was mostly true. I told myself I could build him up, get him ready next time, get Jeremy to help him, coach him.

"He is pitiful, isn't he," Ariel said again, an excitement in the tone. "Look. Look at him."

"Don't," I said.

Ariel's round eyes, closing at the edges, even harder. "Who are you to say?" he asked.

This remark sailed toward me unexpectedly, splashed in my breast, for Ariel was saying he was more knowing than I— now that he'd spent two weeks among them. He was implying he could tell now, just by looking at them, what their hearts were like. Later he would try to show me that some of them were driven, especially to teach you their bad dreams. To bring you in and instruct you about some old, very deep stories from the days when everyone was a dier. Ariel had been made to understand, he tried to say. But that was later. Just then all I knew was he didn't want my advice. I couldn't save him: in his knowledge of them he held himself apart. This was the first time he raised up this new sense of difference— that somehow being with a holder, difficult as it was, had more of the texture of a "real" life, was superior to my life. He would raise up this difference always at some point after when the occasion came for him to run back to the home and seek my empathy. These returns became a constant refrain in his creaky, eventually endlessly repeated story with G. But I did not know that then. I was new then and I thought there were certain fates that could be escaped. In all the simulations where I was rented all bad things could be escaped, all endings were happy. At least for the audience.

Our foundling house was once a convent, Lydia told me later, a convent for

contemplatives, who gave their every word and work to a god, it was religion, and the ceilings were fifteen feet high on every floor except the top, under the roof, the fifth level where we were. We were very high up, is my point. The whole rotted sunken island city down around us. The contemplatives had been utterly secluded from the world, protected from the world. They prayed all day, all day. No one saw them. They made candy called divinity for money. The devout came and bought it, exchanging only money, never words. They were allowed to carry on that way, praying, instead of living.

Ariel did not have to do this: he opened the jalousie vent all the way and leaned out so far that G. caught sight of his entire lovely head, extended beyond the edge of the copper gutter.

Soon as he saw Ariel, it was same as last night, but more plaintive, "Come, I'm so sorry, come back, sorry, please forgive me, I am nothing, you darling, darling perfect boy, forgive me!"

And I saw Ariel's ribs start to fill up. My heart sank. Then Ariel, Ariel called out, "Never again! Out with you."

"Annnnnnythiiiiinnng!" G. answered, in the most spindly baritone, a typical Treated voice, raw from screaming all night: he wasn't besotted anymore. He had possession of himself again, crumpled and torn as he now was, his stocking, everything. It crossed my mind that someone could see G.'s bare heart, that he had one. Perhaps there was something wrong with me that I couldn't see it. Ever after this, Ariel insisted this was true.

Next, to my great sadness, I saw Ariel quicken again, his muzzle tighten, twitch. He put his round head all the way out a second time, to call, "Not on your life!"

"He's disgusting," I said. The kind of thing we never said about them.

But Ariel wasn't looking at me anymore. He was cooking something, inside behind those brown pools in his head. "They just have no timing-" he said, not as ridicule, but this turn with pity.

"I love you!" G. said, loud for the whole sunken city to hear. It was such an antique phrase. I had never heard it spoken, except in a simulation, as a line.

It was light enough now I could see the rats in the nest in the eave up there in the attic starting to stir. The little babies in a row, their mauve little mouths, their tiny tongues curled, making a trough, to pull upon their mother's teat. The mother a heap, still as a carcass. There was a rumor we all had mothers somewhere. Yee swore upon it. But I still could not believe it. No one explained these things to us, really.

Suddenly Ariel pressed his tiny body closer to the opening, so he could lean further out. He opened the shutters all the way, poked his whole trunk out so G. and the world could see it, shouted, "No brosia. Soba. Holos. BREAD!" I grabbed his legs. I was sure he would fall.

"Anything," G. said.

And I was hoping that it was light now and some Treated who had voted

for him would see him. See G. And discover he was crazy. (This was the first time I let myself think one of them was crazy.)

“Real cream!” Ariel, naming his price.

“Anything.”

“Swimming in a pool!”

“You could drown!”

“Lessons!”

They went on like that half an hour. I was desolate.

By nightfall Ariel had returned to him.

A dozen weeks later Ariel was back, with me, purplish welts on his back this time, his eyes thicker, duller. There was a glistening burgundy seam where the slice from a blow on his back had started to heal. Heliotrope, dun, taupe, aubergine— islands of these colors all over him. G. would do these things for the smallest infraction of the rules, for the tiniest refusal or stroke of inattention on Ariel’s part.

Ariel described his transgressions to me, and when he did this he would strike himself again, and again, carve little lines on his arms, on his calves with one of Yee’s knives, and show me how terrible his transgressions were, how he had messed up and would always mess up, and tell me how G. would love him if only he overcame his terrible mistakes, but he’d been sent away. And he deserved it, G was the one who loved him.

And then G. came for him, and there was another scene, and then Ariel went back. That was the pattern.

Whenever Ariel was returned to me, I sat up with him the first few nights, so that he wouldn’t cause himself to bleed too much, wouldn’t thrash in his shelf and call out the miserableness of his mistakes, the graveness of his imperfections. I did this over and over and over.

When the air turned, oftentimes after a hard scary rain, I would be able to feel he was coming. G. Sometimes I knew it before Ariel did.

When G. appeared at the gate, Ariel would stall and stall and stall— I hated to watch this, for I knew it was a game— and then finally name his price. The prices named became higher and higher. And—this was worse to me— more and more often Ariel’s price became the kinds of things the Treateds thought were luxuries- pineapple brosius (he’d learned to like them) long nights on the soft cruises, new genefabric clothes, the kind that were actually alive, the kind you had to hang in the sun so they could replenish themselves, jewels, parties of his own, a bed of silk to lie upon. I felt a betrayal when I first heard Ariel say those things were the desires of his heart. Those strange fancy things. Eventually Ariel became a disney buff, which G. was, the worst sort of snob. Towards the end, when it was hard for us to settle in at all to our old routine, I would just sit with him, shell of my old mate, and watch him talk himself into a cheerful mood by carrying on about disneys for hours, about how moving those ancient pictures were, how the disneys were so ahead of their time, as if they were

written for our age and not for their own. Things he swallowed whole from G. And he told me all his wild tales about the life he led with G., among imposables and Neats G. hired from the streets. I learned things about potions like galcyon, and hachol, and alba, and about eaters and hideous Yeareds and incineraters like Cleo— and tried to understand the islands on Ariel's skin, how G. had meant to crush him with blows the way Yee crushed the vermin in the kitchen. But, even though it was harder and harder to bear, Ariel was still with me and that was good. Even though he was always trying to get it through my thick head how the world actually worked, the dark world G. introduced him to, trying to make me feel inferior, I still wanted to feel happy for him. And in between, he'd have me humming these tunes— "Abracadabra," "When you Wish Upon a Star," "Bibbity Bobbity Boo."

I never understood the love of disneys. I tried. But you had to turn off the lights. They were flat. They were hundreds of years old. You couldn't walk around them, take a look at them up close. But I listened to Ariel when he sang me all the parts, trying to understand the whole story of Ariel and G., the way it lunged forward, the way it fell back. This was love, which was only practiced now on the edges of the world, in the old places. He told me that the people he knew were beings who had feelings who knew what they were. They had a gift I had not been given. A gift for getting to the depth where the breath comes from. Ariel would sometimes accuse me of having no sentiments, no feelings, and I concluded what Lazarus had already told me was true: feelings were very expensive things to have.

"You have them," Lydia said, interrupting my long story. "Where is he? Shall we find him?"

"Would you?" And at that moment I would do anything for her.

She had her rounds, she said. Her curing work. "But where can he be?" She touched. She touched my cheek. Then she got up and walked off the way she walked, like a wading bird.

•

That evening Camille came to my room with a potion, a blue drink.

"Your brain will be very fresh in the morning," she said.

It smelled like almonds. "What's in it?" I tried to be coy.

"Galcyon," she said. "The chemicals? I don't know the chemicals. Why don't you read the pharmacology disk tomorrow and tell me?"

"Read?" I said, doubtful.

"You see."

She told me not to drink it until right as I was dropping off. It should hit while I'm dreaming she said, "During REM." I sipped it, then I went into my normal, flat sort of sleep. Sometime in the middle of the night my dreams went from pastels to the most vivid startling crimsons and emeralds and ceruleans. And they took on so much detail— the spinning of metal fans in the corners,

the way curtains blew, the color of the toenails of women, G.'s face, the slightly yellowish stocking he usually wore, Ariel walking down to the end of the hall, something like green liquid flowing off behind him, the taste of that liquid, for I tasted it, sharp, acrid, somehow I knew it was his now artificial-blood. It had that copper taste.

The light, Camille. The morning. The bright courtyard behind the curtain I thought. But there was something else behind the curtain, in front of the courtyard window.

"You are going to learn a few things this morning," she said. Her huge, doll head. "You can go in any order you like. Do you mind?"

I realized there was a screen where the window had been. The pictures started. Jeremy taught me some sight words. I knew perhaps fifty. But today there were thousands of words, in order, lists. I still recall them in those groups. There were mouths on the screen saying them, telling me the meaning, at the same time as I saw them written, ten, twelve a second, then repeated. An enormous vocabulary. Tests, little ones, every fifteen minutes or so, called pathway trials. I recalled everything asked. A voice came on, said, "Good Malcolm Good For you." Blink.

After lunch, arithmetic. I couldn't close my eyes for long, I would miss something. Parts of my head actually hurt but I couldn't rest—I was too alert, my awareness was too crisp, too sharp. Division, around dusk. "Good boy, Malcolm. Good boy." Percents. What one hundred was, really, one thousand, how many years were meant by the number we were in: 2198. How many years from which year. A bundle of a thousand. A bundle of a hundred thousand—little orange squares.

I lost count of days and nights, but at some point there was my Lydia. With a meal. A pizza, she called it. Yee didn't believe in this white stuff. Which stretched like gum, but you swallowed it hot. She said she loved pizza when she was a Neat. "Well how are we?" She smiled at me. Watched me eat it with interest, as she always had. She sat beside me on the bed, and took my pulse. Shined a light into my eyes. A glass of water. She told me to drink it all.

"So is this pace all right?" she asked. "The galcyon?"

She was rather frightening to see in that state. I mean, in my state. Her rate of breathing, its awful threatening slowness, her fingertips, oval and circular underneath the beige stocking she wore. The noise, the noise her gauze dress (sage) made on the paper blanket of my bed. She pushed back the stocking so that her actual finger pad touched my wrist and she felt my heart's beating, as her eyes floated in their syrup over toward the upper left, then away then back up toward the upper left again where the slightest piece of dust, actually two fronds of a down feather, each about a centimeter in length, rested in her long lashes. My nail was sharper than hers and so I lifted it to her lid to help her with this bit of dust, and I let go the smallest little package of air from my cheeks through my mouth and blew, and it went away by drifting, swinging in the air

from left to right to left. I watched it float away, and she said, "Thank you Malcolm," and then she and I stared at each other for quite a while. "I think you can have a little more, your vitals are doing very well," she said, and at the same time she gave me some more to drink and so I drank it, it tasted like vanilla this time: I drank the whole glass. "You have to absorb all that," she said. "I'll give you about thirty-six hours. Sh, Malcolm, you are breathing so rapidly. Calm down, it's only basic information."

In complete darkness when she left I was supposed to sleep but instead I watched the story of the day jumble itself into the most exquisite designs that eventually had nothing to do with the day at all and then I sort of asked myself where I was, and the whole idea of "I" seemed bizarre— a little vessel I would have to go searching for, searching for "I" the Malcolm, as I was gloating, floating, in this sea of elementary details such as how many thousands in a million and water vapor making rain and cirrus and cumulus and crystals, and the meaning of the word "snow" and too and two and to, and to, and into, and forward, and toward and per and perpetual, and persuasion and perspective and persona, and person. And person. Lydia. Myself. Person Malcolm. The person Malcom the foundling from Audubon Island, which is capitalized, and here, Elysian Curing Towers, in building three, June, 2198. Then somehow drowsiness ambushed me with two huge brushes in his hands and my itchy eyes had to close so things mumbled into nimbuses and I knew I knew somewhere some things I'd never known and my head was ten times bigger than my little feet and hands and I thought I'd scream about this but I was asleep, and had to give over to it, it was so sweet, so delicious, to sleep, to have even pizza in my stomach, to know how to count and the word for the line around a square that delineates what is outside it and what is inside, like a fence or a border or a frame or a wall, or a skin, a skin is a perimeter.

And also the word to soak through, to fill, as a vapor or a perfume of a woman, for example, as in the scent of a person which permeates a space. Perforates.

History. It was days later, I'd finished elementary education. Perhaps 2 weeks. Some of the days, I do not remember the details of being alive. The information went in, with the "I" for hours, out of the picture entirely. My trials were all excellent. Now, a holo was standing there, giving me a lecture. I knew some of it already. I suppose I was coming down some, coming to my senses. He wore one of those old togas, what treateds were wearing fifty years ago. He was spectacularly dull, with his white fringe hair, and steel common eyes, slanted, as was the ideal of beauty once, and a certain rosy tint to his stocking making him seem garish, even gaudy..

"Shamer Alberts developed a system of anti-ageing treatments beginning in the early 1980's. In 2004, his laboratory announced to the scientific community that in the case of mice their three-level approach to the disease had led to extraordinary results. Mice who were supposed to have a life span of 36 months

had lived twelve years. Ten years later, they all were still alive. His discoveries were based upon the work of many before him including... names, names names, on the diseases characterized by premature ageing and also chance deterioration of the mitochondrial dna, and those in turn on the metabolic manipulation studies that went back seventy or eighty years— the simple observation that animals that were half-starved lived longer, burned slower. The free radical ‘rinse’ procedure, and the resetting of the mitochondrial code owed much to the work of... His great advance was the discovery of the cell division limitation code and the introduction of a viral correction of the limitation, thereby making normal cells like cancer cells, capable of reproducing forever—”

The door swung open, slicing right through the halo telling me all these boring things. My brain was Swiss cheese that day. “She’s in a hurry. Says give you the big one, it’s time,” Camille said, as she sat upon my bed in her strange little white stretch suit— pants and a top. She flicked off the talking toga man. Her midriff was showing. She seemed to be wanting to make some point about the idiopathic and idiosyncratic and indecent and individual distribution of her body’s flesh, how uncontrolled it was, how idol and indolent and attractively insular. If my brain were not so busy putting words and ideas away I might have touched her springy skin, for there was a way about it, we were still Neats with flawed perimeters, unwashed , exploding factories of cells, uncontained, that no one had turned down (the image of Yee cooking at the stove, bringing the flame from a rage to carefully controlled simmer, to the most invisible simmer, that danced between presence and absence, depending on the breath around it or the wind...) Camille and I— all these thoughts, the words to come with them, all in a second, the sort of thoughts I’d been able to manage before, but now—

“Are you all right Malcolm?” she asked. “You look funny.”

I nodded.

She put a cartridge in the slot by the door. On my screen came a huge exam. Not a pathway trial. I had to answer questions with my own ideas. I asked for some galcyon.

“Lydia said no,” she said. “It’s addictive. Knowledge of good and evil. You heard of that...?”

She was gone before I could grab her. I took the exam. I spoke the answers. I did have ideas. Words to dress them in. So someone else could see them. So I could see them. I was not the same Malcolm.

When I thought of my mind I felt it had a body now, a square, well-pillared, thoughtful structure, like an old building, with a thousand rooms. Hidden in one, all the words, lined up by alphabet, in another, all the stories, all the numbers, all the formulas, all the pictures of India and Cuba and the blue Nile, the mighty Niagara. I was extraordinarily proud of my mind. I was terrified that when the drug wore off this handsome new edifice would disintegrate somehow. I felt myself clinging to the columns by the door. Ionian columns.

But days later, when I was down, and sweating and tired and voraciously hungry, I would still know the things. They would not leave me. They have not.

Just as I started on the fifth hour of the exam, Lydia came on the screen, I mean her face, her headjob. “Malcolm. You are doing so well. Lazarus was right. You know you’ve been to college now? One year. Amazing. Do you know how long this takes the Enclavers? But I need you tonight. Can you come away? Remember when we talked before, when you first came?”

It had been three weeks. I’d been on galcyon three weeks.

“About what you might do for me here, my inquiry?”

I remembered.

“Are you going to work with me? You still want to stay?”

Of course I would stay. She brought me here. She gave me all these glorious rooms.

“We can continue later. Can you come help me now? I mean, tonight?”

“Why?”

“It’s happened.”

“What?”

“The squads have been here all day. They’ve come up with a thousand explanations. Told me to have my electricity redone. In that whole Tower. Said it was an electrical fire. The patient came here on his own, he’d been going through quite a bout— and then, like this.” She snapped her fingers again. I beamed at her. “Like that. At night in a sealed room.”

“What?”

“Lit up. Solong-goodbye. Took the light way.”

“He’s a dier?” I said.

“At two hundred one. Not even that much of a count. There’s something else.”

“What?”

She stared at me a second. “You know him.”

Gerry Cannon

A PORTFOLIO OF
RECENT WORK

"I've often been accused of being a writer," Gerald Cannon deadpans as he scrolls through a CD-ROM's worth of images. While working on the selection for the following, brief glimpse into his work, Cannon can't help but tell the story behind each piece: "This is the utility shed I pass every day on my way home," "This a hotel room in XXXXX**," "This is a forest where two little girls were murdered...."

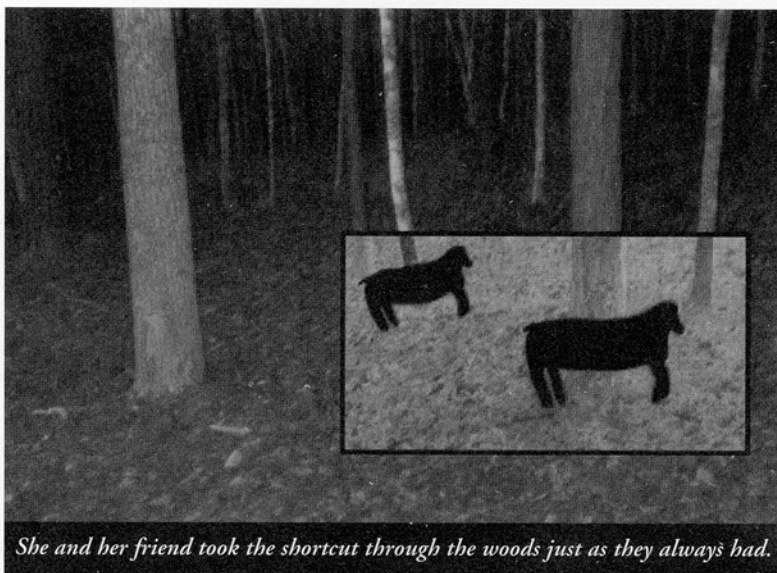
This collection of computer-altered images on paper comprises the bits and pieces of life that Cannon finds in his home, from his car, among the dusty, cluttered corners of mundane spaces.

"My work addresses issues of socialization," says Cannon. "I am concerned with the way in which we come to terms with the 'real world,' both as individuals and societies."

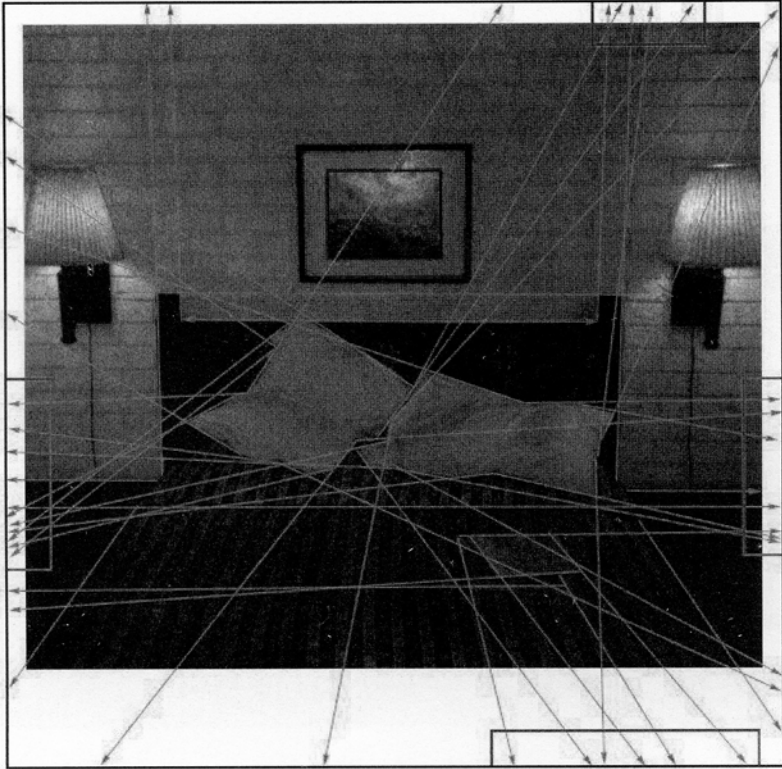
Cannon, who is an assistant professor of visual arts at Loyola University, has developed his vision for more than 20 years, through wood and plaster, acrylic paint and ink, metal and plastic, photographs and, now, electronic collage.

The following images serve as snapshots from Cannon's mind and each is, in his words, a "momentary categorical narrowing of perspective." These pieces, all composed in 1997–98, are funny, edgy, happy, sad. All at once. Like any good story.

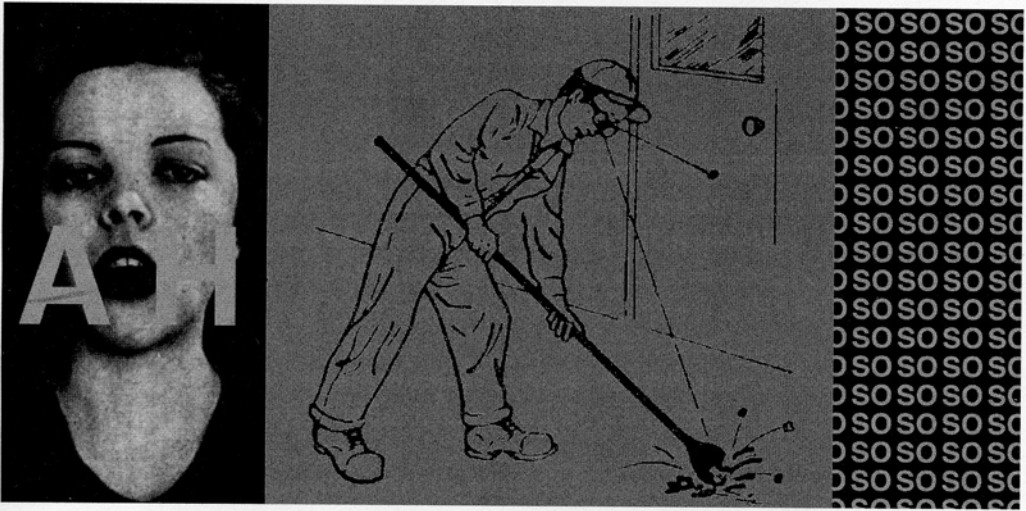
Nick Marinello

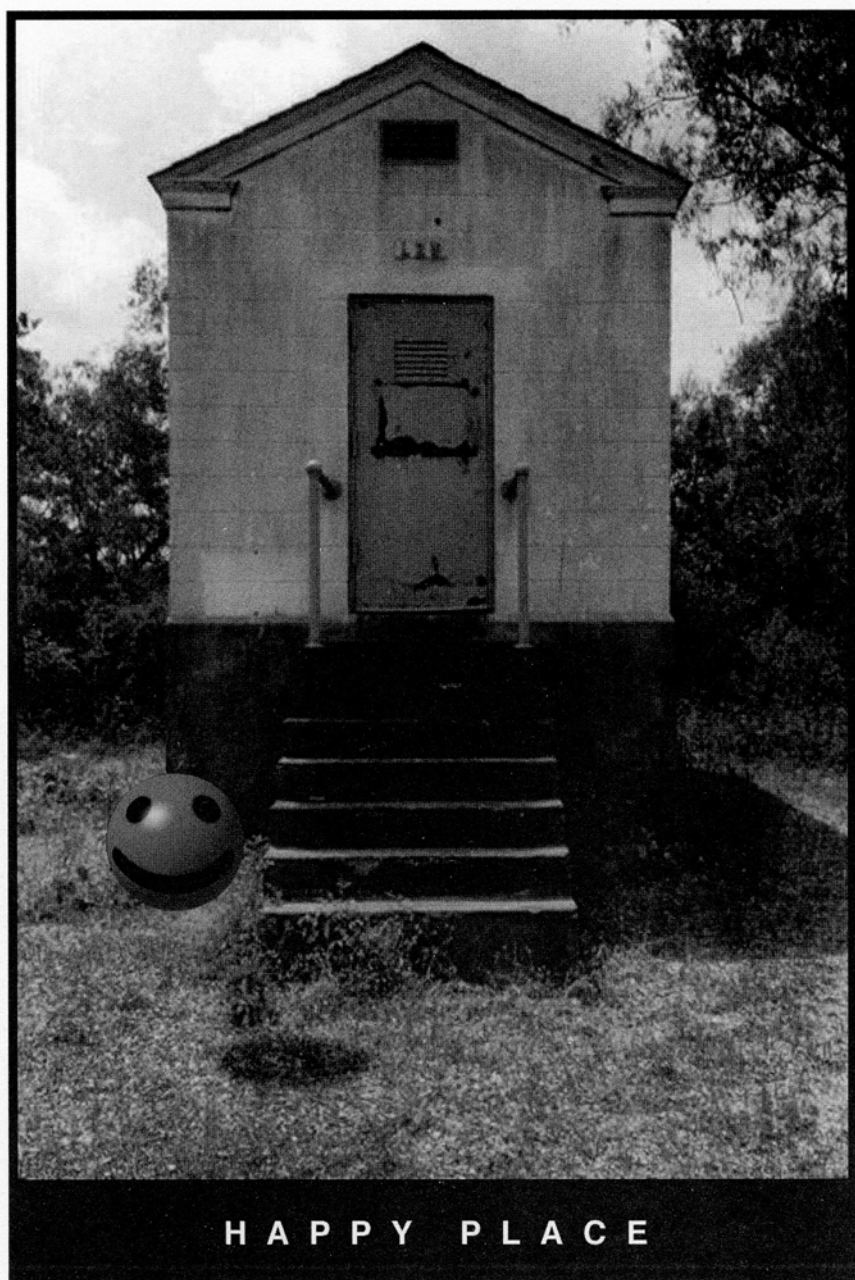


She and her friend took the shortcut through the woods just as they always had.

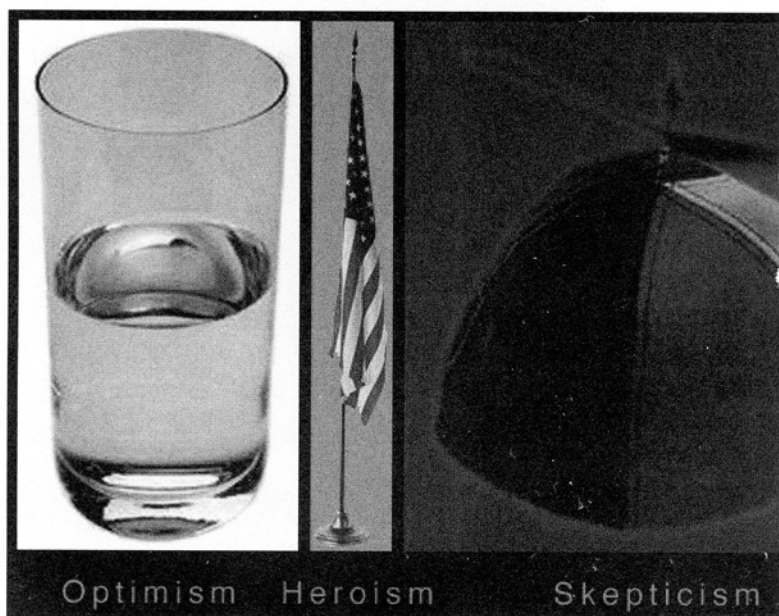


**Simple analysis revealed those taletale
patterns that are always associated
with jingoistic sleeping disorder.**





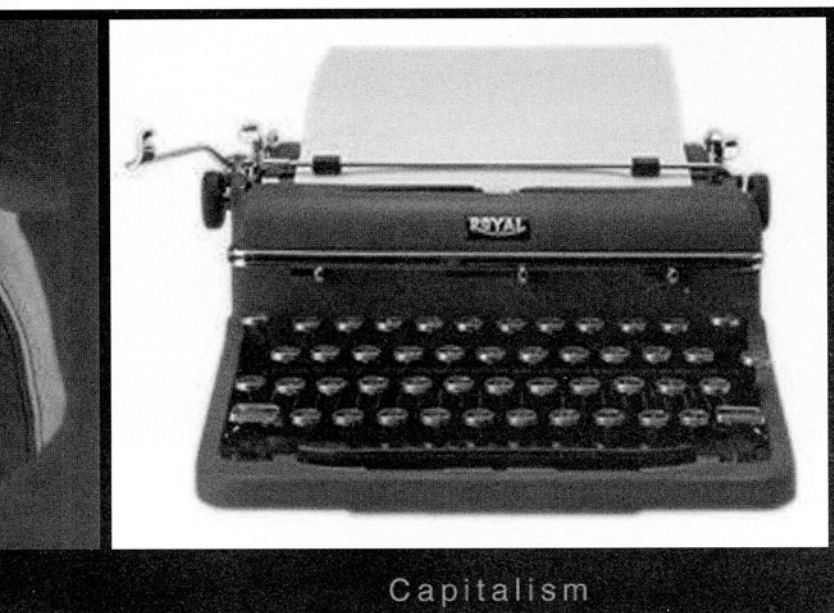
HAPPY PLACE



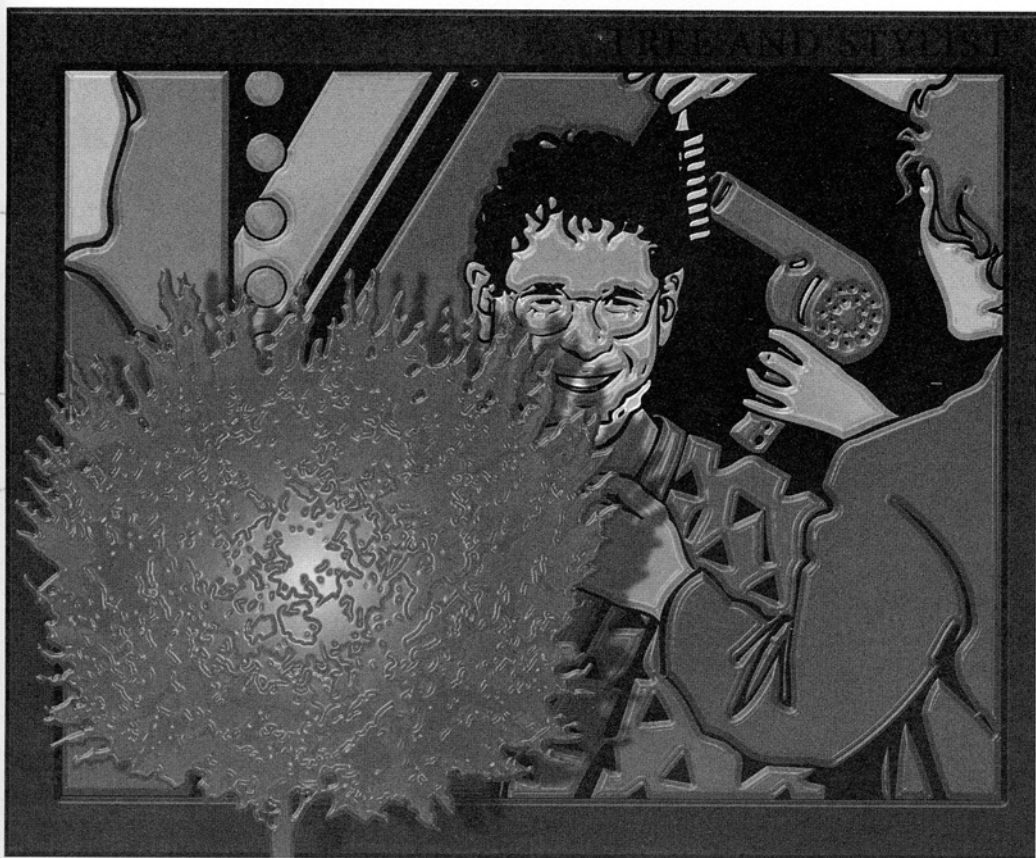
Optimism

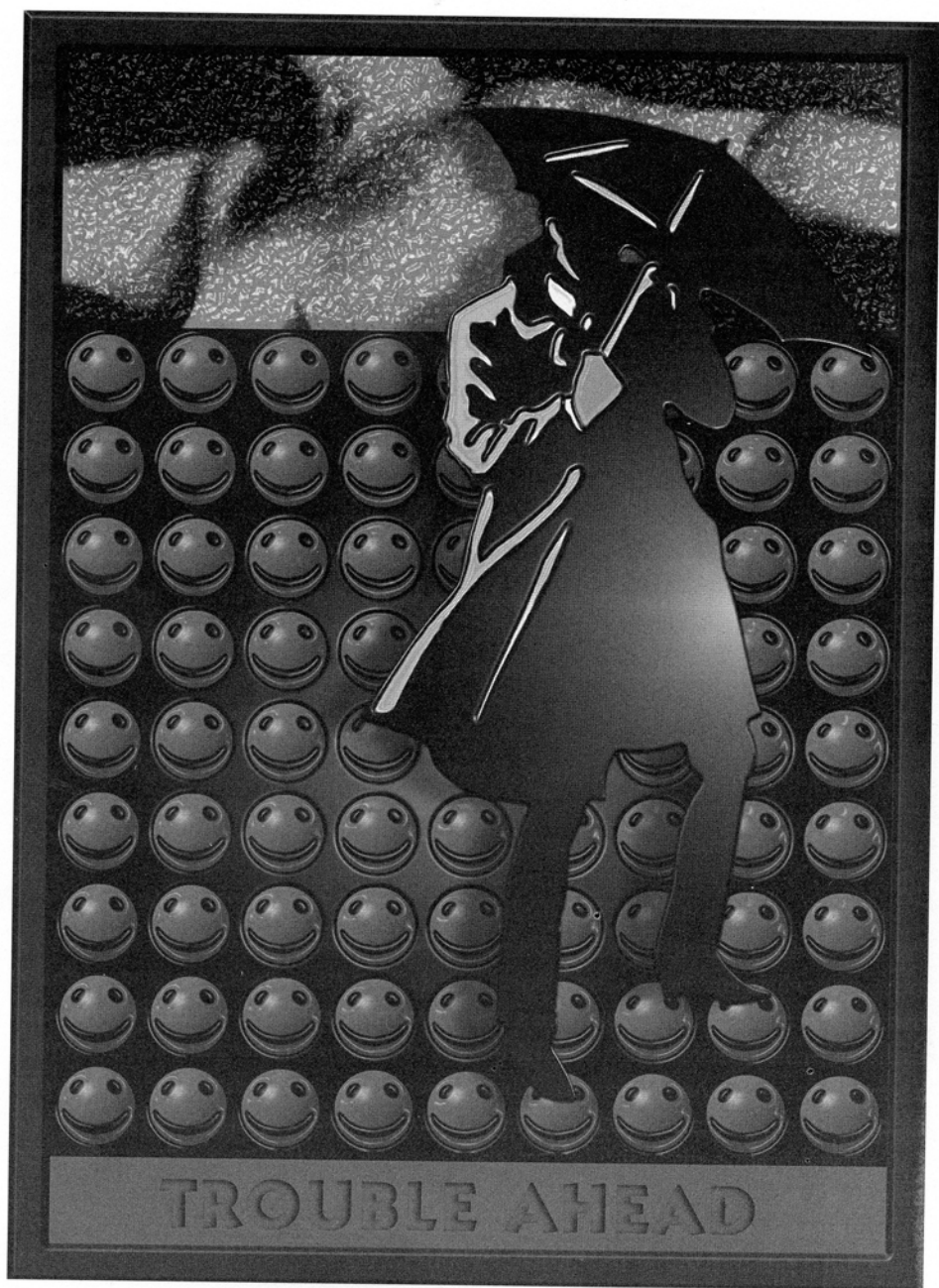
Heroism

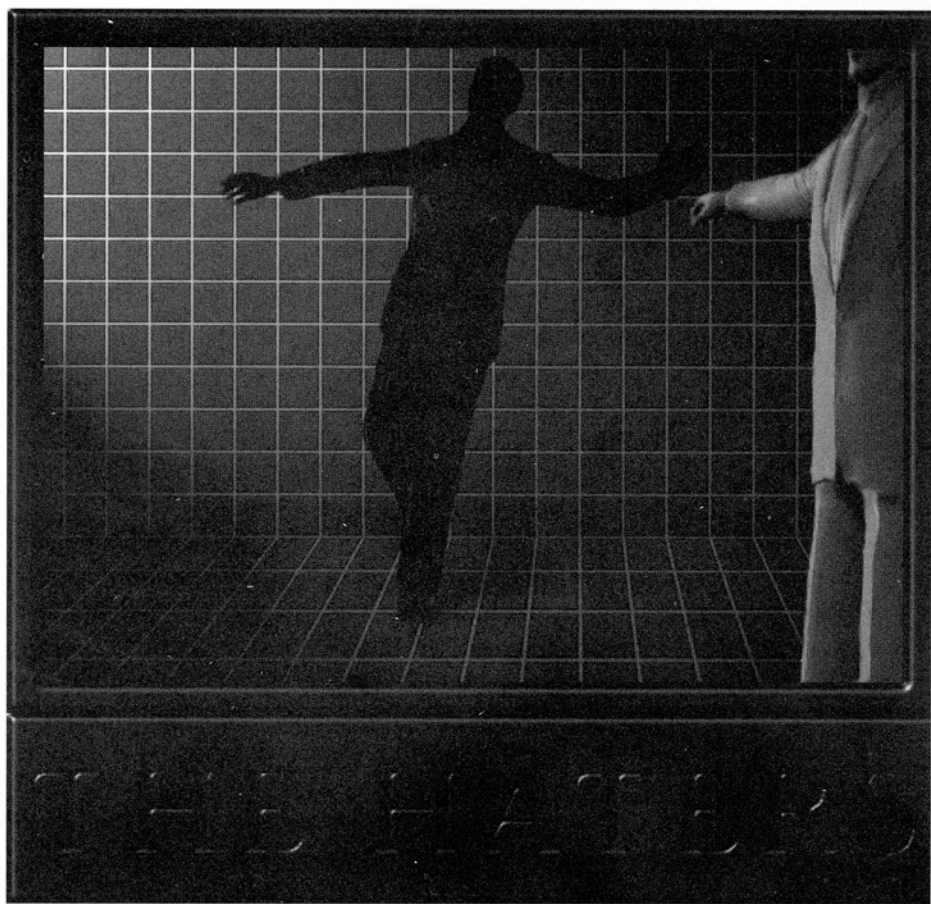
Skepticism



Capitalism







Andi Young

PHOTO OF THE 8'2" FIREMAN

He does not lean in the stoop
or buckle his joints slightly to be smaller.
Joe Sullivan stacks his frame firmly,
as a tall pile of wood rests its weight.
Dressed in solid black,
a dark specter in the threshold.
He does not announce death.
Rather, his figure recalls the weight
of living, the burden of the body
with its heaviness, its thickness of bone.
How the body wants sometimes to disappear:
the way I grow his face in the magnifier
until he is a series of dots, then air—

He lives in his own atmosphere,
people below staring up,
moving too far out of his way.
They forget how he rushed
to the burning house,
how he was able to hold the baby
in one hand, freeing the other
to grab the family cat by the scruff.
How he brought them both out
in the white air to hold them
until their lungs gasped clear.

He stares directly into the camera, as if to say:
I am my own cross to bear.
He knows how trees feel when the weight of snow
bears on limbs and they drop them to the ground.

Imagine it: when the big kettle drum
of his heart quit beating,
the other men could not lower him

down the spiral staircase of the firehouse.
There was too much of him, even in death.
And they could not break
the bones as in the time of Christ,
when limp bodies were taken from their crosses.
He was taken out through the window,
though he was so unlike a flighted bird.
He was lowered by plank, as if at sea.

ESCAPE VELOCITY

Shear the hair, shave the body.
Strip color from mammalian traces.

Peel the itching skin away.
It splits to fresh cells underneath.

Learn to stand stock-still
and watch it brighten.

Pull poison from blood.
Flush tubes with water.

Teach bony protrusions to be wings.

Stretch what is slaked
over fenceposts for drying.

Practice eliminating things.

Rip pictures from walls.
Break things you rest on.

Hush the swift giving of the mind.

Wedge open meridians with needles.
Smear drawing salve on the skin.

Do the asanas and panting breaths.

Shriek and scream and heave
your metaled waste into a bucket—

Drop, even, your throated message to the world.

Burn fields to char
for the planting of a new crop.

Blot the fat produce of the sun.

Kill, if you can, the slender parent of time.

Learn to touch the bare heart—

Burn memories to ash
and smear ashes on your skin.

Wander away, leaving a quake of blooms.

Colette Inez

THE BECKONING

From the garden
blue salvia and carmine celosia
beckon to me in hoarse voices:
listen, you, we're the ones, they say.
We've got the red and blue shboom.
Moles want front seats. Nothing but rave
reviews from the bees.
So what's with you and why the hurry?
I shrug as I zip past them.
Last night, blathering frogs
and cricket bravado.
Now jabbering flowers.

Hugh Fox

CADIZ

Sixty-five years of
winds and rain like
this, wanting it all
in reverse to blow
back into the bottle,
Hiroshima and Pearl
Harbor, Holocausts
and Reconquistas,
Neolithic reachings—
out to the Houses of
the sun, *over there*,
propelled by these
winds, me fifteen again,
Bardot back in my arms,
my mother still forty
years from death, my
kids still to be born or
five years ahead, me
and the still unborn
grandchildren in
the Prado looking
at Goya's Obras
Negras, Mars eating
the head of mankind,
idiot pilgrims on the
way to the shrine of
San Isidro.

THINGS I CRY ABOUT

A man about sixty comes into
the cafe, very elegant, reminds
me of my father, she's maybe
fifty, the usual perfect legs and
elegant Madrilena face, they
sit down and order and all
of a sudden it's like he takes
off a mask, starts kidding around,
I can't hear what he's saying but
he's five again, I can't see her
face, she's laughing, you never
see this kind of thing where I'm
from, no multiple personalities,
just one mask per person.

O ANJO DA MORTE/THE ANGEL OF DEATH

Past the purple, fizzing Tall Ironwood,
cruel Sedge, primped Pink Tobacco,
the old blonde dowager Cup Plant
and spidery Hill's Thistle, the dissolute
spread-legged Coneflowers and lazy-
crazy orange (not yellow) Yellow Cosmos,
the parliamentary Fuller's Teasel and
parasolled Princess Tree, slovely red-
purple Bee Balm and decadent Purple
Monkshood, Baneberry and Akebia,
Moonseed and Hop, the cabaret-lipped
Blood-Leaf and drooping Love Lies
Bleeding (*Amaranthus Candatus*),
storkish Virginia Mallow and geometric
Ambroma, its leaden wings brushing
through the trees and startling the
birds, humming bird hovering over me
drinking my life, whispering *Bald...*
einmal und nichts mehr /soon... once and
not more... nothing at all..."

KALI: A LOVE STORY

My old friend Rash gives us the idea, stopping by one night out of the blue, haven't seen him for years, he lies about where he's headed, the kind of obvious lie that says, Buddy, mind your own. He's always had a hand in this and a hand in that.

The teaching life, Rash says. That keeps you close to God.

He's kicked back, his boots are four hundred bucks easy, but he's wearing just jeans, no shirt, you can see the crud growing on his neck and collar bone that got him the nickname. It's hot for May, we're swilling beer and it comes out his pores soon as he drinks it.

God, no. Summers off, my wife says, but you can't really enjoy them. Still got to work. Teaching doesn't pay.

Rash likes my wife. He smiles at her and she smiles back. The three of us are coming together, comfortable-like, a single person joined at the heart.

You guys been married three years? Rash asks her.

Three years. She won't call him Rash, says its cruel.

Met at the teachers' college?

My wife nods.

She cool? Rash asks me when my wife goes to get more beers.

The coolest.

Good, Rash says, she's a babe, buddy-like he means it.

I say, Don't I know.

When she's back, Rash spins the plan. I'll front you the stuff, he says. Once you got it sold, then it's up to you. Take a trip, he says. Pay me when you get back. Think about it, he says, I mean it, who are you if you can't help your friends. He kisses my wife goodnight and he stays up late. We hear the channels changing and the occasional pop of beer.

My wife and I think about it. We think about it big-time: easy, weightless, a trial balloon, little coke never hurt no one. We could do it arms tied behind our backs, then no work all summer, just drive around the country, one last hurrah before we have kids of our own and our friends are too old to take us in for a spontaneous drop-by non-stop hoe-down.

Celebrate, my wife says, three years of loving marriage.

We got that, I say and kiss her, we got that.

In the morning, Rash is gone.

My wife bad-mouths him, saying, raise the dream then hit the road, no

note, just carried all his empties out to the trash, good houseguest, I guess, if you go for that kind of thing, did he sleep a wink?

But Rash calls us a couple days later. He says, You in?

I say, Yeah.

He says, You guys eat rice?

Eat rice? I say.

Put your wife on.

I do, and Rash tells her to look in the can on the shelf where she keeps the rice. Dig deep, he tells her.

Sure enough, there's a satchel buried. The white flake glistens.

He's crazy, my wife says.

I take the satchel from her hands, nod and say, Crazy, sure, but always crazy-generous, never crazy-mean.

Can you move it? Rash asks over the phone. I'll come back if it's too much.

I say, Yeah, like I mean, Of course. I have no idea. We've been in town only three years, different crowd, but I think, Just be subtle, let the word get around. The white finds its own friends. There's always someone reaching out.

I say, Yeah we can move it. Don't come back.

Kids in a sandbox. That's us. Shit, put some on your cereal, I say to my wife.

We're thinking, OK, we move this little pile and we got rent-a-car, this little pile for a cooler between us on the seat with nothing but ice and potato vodka, this little bit's for beach fees, sell this stuff to cover gambling.

I stash a couple satchels on my body, and say, Hey, come and get them, I say, see what you can find. My wife jumps at me, her hands familiar as my own running up and down my body, but fast, fleet as the junk in her veins. She has a hundred good hands. She whoops and displays what she finds.

But the junk shifts gears. You never remember when you been off it. You never do.

So all that fun? That's way, way back. A week, at least. The rent-a-car's shot, the potato vodka's shot, the beach's shot. We're down to the just-break-even. I spill a fold on the mirror.

Go on, my wife says.

We won't make the car payments, I warn, We won't make the rent. We won't pay Rash. But I want it like she does. I want it bad. My hands are fritter and clutch. I honk a couple, sniff, honk a couple more. Close to God, I snort, and there's a whole lot of bitter in me.

We're going no place, my wife says. She takes the rolled bill.

My ears pop. I make the empty beer cans nervous looking for something to take the edge off.

Babe, I plead, Gotta make some money. Let's not do the break-even.

What she says is ugly. She talks about Rash. She talks about his boots and his too-skinny belly and she tells me how he watched her when she got up to use the john that night, watched her half-naked, hand down his pants, glitter eyes, a beer cooling his chest, and he had wanted her. Rash is a buddy from way back, so my wife knows what she's saying hurts. I think maybe she can see my heart banging up on my chest, making it easy to take aim. She says sorry, but she'd rather say something else.

She deserves a slap. Or maybe just a kiss for being the only user I ever met who cannot tell a lie.

The taste of her makes me yack. It spills me over the lip, changes me from a fast God to a dangled nerve. If you're real tired and real determined, you can stop then, after the lip; you take the down where it hits you, push away the mirror — until you do it, you never really believe it's possible to honk rails all night, get every last flake, scrub up the mirror with a wet finger until it glistens, and still never catch sight of your own reflected face — you stretch miserably over the sheets. Theoretically, you want to be with someone, anyone—but not the one you're actually with, because no matter how much you love her, her breath is a gale, and her pores crash open all night like a dumpster, her teeth grind, and even if she sits like a statue to humor you, you can hear her dying.

We push the mirror away. In bed, I pull my wife close so we don't have to look at each other. Her skin is cold as porcelain. You didn't fuck Rash, did you?

My wife freezes. That's the down talking, she spits, and it's talking shit.

She's right. The down's like a second head cleaved off the first, sitting on my shoulder jabbering the uglies.

In the morning, I brush with water. We don't have the cake for paste. Every jarring scrub hurts my brain. My throat drips sweet and salty. I try to save rather than swallow, like a girl I think, shaking my head at what I've come to, but I hawk up a load of mucus and think, yes! there's a speedy trace left in the louie, yet, lucky me.

With a dirty washcloth, I slough off the top inch or two of skin and leave a clean grinning skull. The kids at school will love that, hear them talking in the halls, hear them say, Did you see Teacher today? He's got no face! — and they'll have to laugh when I say something funny, because when a skull laughs you better be in on the joke.

I look myself hard in the mirror. I could bring the junk with me, I know. Do it in the teachers' restrooms. But I don't, because if I brought it to work, it would mean something bigger than it does now. I knot a tie and pull on chinos and say to the mirror, Shit, you look like a high school teacher.

The minute hand falls like an ax. Bang! it cleaves another head apart.

Another minute passes. At the final bell I beat half the kids to the curb. Straight to my wife. Good old wife, looking good.

She guns the engine, her fingernails are raw, bitten. She turns downtown. To get an ice cream, my wife explains, I need an ice cream.

I frown. You go to work?

She doesn't answer. She screeches into a parking spot, runs up on the curb. Next to the ice cream shop, Jim and Ellen are fitting rings at the jeweler's. Shit, I didn't even know they'd got engaged.

Has it been that long? I say.

Jim is solid. We met going after our teaching certificates, he introduced me to my wife, the one I was born for — maybe even dated her before me, I think, staring at his tie. Jim bagged teaching for a job hustling cars, and he's raking it in. Ellen does real estate and everything works out just fine for her, too, got the cell phone, the Jackie O sunglasses, the works. They're our best friends, they say, still haven't seen us in three whole weeks. Hide nor hair, but it's obvious we wish we still hadn't been seen. We're not sure where we've been, what we've been up to, whether we've been in town, seen the Sox, caught Letterman, we just don't know! we cry, like brats. The last three weeks are lifetimes; since we hatched the deal, generations have come and watched and passed.

Jim grins, wary; not sure if I'm playing angry or the real McCoy.

Rough night? Jim asks.

My wife says truthfully, You don't know the half of it.

I turn to her, desperate, grateful she's holding up our end.

Jim laughs. He seems vague, a shadow of himself playing in some distant theater like a 1940's newsreel. Ellen waves her shiny new ring. Her hand leaves a trail behind it, as if he bought her a hundred rings, their loves so strong.

I blink, we start to pull away, try to grin. Jeezus! Skull-smiles all day at school, but can't rustle one up for my friend.

Jim doesn't let it get to him, good heart. Hey, he announces, an invitation. He insists, and there's something heavier behind this insistence, so my wife and I listen, clutching each other like we were born that way, because to run would be ridiculous and we've got enough in us still to care whether we look ridiculous in front of our friends.

Jim suggests a half-dozen joyless options, so we finally agree to go to dinner. Best of a bad situation.

We think of a thousand cancellations on the ride home. My wife throws the cone out the window after three licks.

Hey, it's not so bad, I say, Maybe Jim is getting a raise or Ellen's moving waterfront property, or they're both moving to Timbuktu. Maybe they have something to say.

Neither of us is hungry, but when the food comes, we eat it. We eat most of theirs, too. Jim and Ellen seem happy to give, they load our plates. So thin!

their gestures say.

They look at each other over the table. Their eyes meet. No one says a thing.

We listen to the brokers at the next table tell loud, dirty bachelor-party stories; they're bad stories, had to be there, and I know our friends are thinking, should we? (Shit, they might as well get out a fucking full page ad, they're so obvious).

Other couples waiting for reservations (our friends always pick the popular spots—they stay on top of these things) have blocked the entrance, pinned us in. The waiting couples are a chorus, urging Jim and Ellen: Say it, say it, tell them how you're worried about their health and sanity. Tell them!

Like she hears their shrieks, my wife excuses herself. I wonder if she's got some stashed, but she won't meet my eye.

Her leaving makes me talkative, I push away my food, I signal the waiter for a refill, I stack the plates, organize the silverware, refold the napkins. From the next table I spot the match to our pepper shaker and I explain it to the brokers and they trade good-naturedly, it's great to find people still like that.

A drink arrives. I cuddle it, talk a hundred unpunctuated things into it, I even drink from it, but I talk, oh, how I can talk! I throw a blanket of words over Jim and Ellen, light into them, one, two, three!

I pour their drinks, still talking, acutely aware that if I can just keep it up until my wife comes back I can pass the baton. If she comes back, my wife'll be on fire, she'll burn 'em up, and it will be better to have fun than to make waves and share worries, and I actually say that, 'better... worries,' though I'm talking about something else, and still it's the most honest thing I've said all day and that cheers me up enormously.

Suddenly life doesn't seem like such a big thing. I feel good, I think. Damn well don't deserve it, but that's how I feel.

I bum a knife from a passing tray, and Jim and I play bread-crumb hockey, the waiter has cleared the plates by that time almost as if he wants us to play, and I can't thank him enough, even knowing that if Jim and Ellen don't pick up the tab I'll have to stiff him on the tip. I'm indescribably, hilariously sorry. I score repeatedly on Jim's salt shaker goal, my hands are lightning quick.

My wife comes back and I'm so pleased to see her I jump up, overturn the hockey game. Crumbs everywhere, and we all laugh hysterically. Crumbs up your nose! Ellen shrieks. Jim and I freeze, but my wife is just stepping up to the table, she wants to know if we're laughing at her; she looks for toilet-tissue heel, covers her face, checks her slip.

All OK, but I can feel her suspicion like it was my own. She touches her nostrils then, only I see it, see me in her movement, up in front of my classroom grinning maniacally all day long. Bleeding is the chief worry, and I completely understand where my wife is coming from. I'm overwhelmed with caring, with the impulse to close her in a hundred arms, to reassure. I think I

have never loved her so much.

May I kiss you, wife? I ask formally, with a bow.

The suspicion lifts. She giggles and composes herself. She considers it a minute, lips pursed. Why, yes, she says, I believe you may.

And I kiss my wife and Jim kisses his fiancée and we all laugh and have more drinks and forget about the moment way-back-when when my friends had wanted to be concerned.

Jim realizes it's time to go home, and my wife and I cry, we're drunk, we part as if we're leaving for missionary work in the South Seas. You're such good friends to us, my wife and I say, such good, good people. We cry because we're so lucky and so evil, and we pair off and hug and pair off and hug and eventually locate the correct partner to take on home.

And my wife and I say in the car, how much fun it was, we need to do that more often. I put on Jimmy Buffet and we argue about how we met. She jokes about dating Jim, and about Ellen's rock, and about how the car is stifling. I squint at the oncoming headlights and my wife giggles when I pass over the double lines.

At home, we talk about turning in, but we agree that we're still young. Our dear, sweet friends seem quaint, Jim and Ellen home in bed so early, Friday night, and here we are the married ones.

We have a night cap; we think, hey, just a couple of lines. For the sex, we say and offer lusty smiles, determined it's finally going to happen. What a day! — the kind where you know you've found the partner God meant you for.

But the glee falls away to nothing compared to my lust for the not-even break-even. My hands palsied, I have to pass the fold to my wife to handle, but I crowd into the chair behind her, my legs wrapped around hers. I massage her shoulders and hold the mirror while she works. We make a great team with our four arms and single mind.

Look at our shadow on the wall, I order myself when I can't stand to watch. (My wife's so patient, she likes it fine. Me, I'd as soon shove a rock up my nose like a second-grader).

The light is just right, behind our heads, so our shadow on the wall is the eight-armed goddess Kali, a single thick body sporting two pair of mechanically moving arms, massage, massage, chop, chop, chop, pass the blade and dollar bill, watch the bangs, honk, honk.

I think I'm ready for sex, there's a little stirring in my crotch, but mostly my heart punching out. I set down the mirror, careful not to disturb our perfect shadow, and pull my wife into a mugger's hug, my arms locked around the front of her, her shoulder blade pressed into my chest to keep my heart from bursting. I squeeze until the tears start and because we're an eight-armed Indian goddess I'm not sure whose tears they are or which hand wipes them dry.

Kendall Tessmer

MITOCHONDRIAL EVE

Only the sperm's nucleus incorporates the egg;
most is casing

haggard, cast off.

Fuel and ambition come from maternal lines

so like cohosh or caraway
she takes him.

THE KISS

He walks in the door, face red with winter.
Takes off his hat,
leaves a balloon by the stair.

They say that women can restore life to a corpse
by placing a fruit in its parted mouth.

In this house, my clown sings
because we build the world with matched lips.

And skin.

James Magorian

SUN DOGS

1

The earth turns each day, we are told,
wanders annually around the sun,
part logic, part whim.
Continents rock in the surf.
Shorelines erode toward us.
Rivers flow past us,
emptying their suitcases in the sea.
The sky is filled with false suns.

2

What ordinations!
The salt of the year on our lips.
House on the twelfth hill.
In the high, thin clouds:
loyalty: light licking icy paws.
The rabbit renounces feeling, idea, time,
sits motionless beside the wind-shook leaf.
But the coyote also knows the purpose of stone.

3

Usually two, today there are four,
one on either side, one below, one above.
Ladled water and green wood afire.
By the edge of the deserted airfield:
slouched snowfence—faded red lipstick—
and beyond: the varied land, the myth
of geography: that in a different place
you will be a different person.

4

At the caved-in well
where ancient moonlight is kept
the abandoned dog digs for old instincts.
The stacking snow is the oracle,
prophecier with a dark wink.
Spruce trees move slightly,
as if nodding, swallowing hard.
The weakest elk falls in the willows.

5

The air is heavy with the dreams of day-sleepers,
shadows testifying against their origin,
the griefs of the body kept in gaudy rooms.
The sky is apparent through holes in the roof.
Above capering mice and crickets
the owl polishes a rafter.
And the golden-haired girl
is led into the barn by the older boys.

6

In the tide pool the starfish waits
like an envelope slipped under a door.
On the sky's line of light:
separate incandescences, still on haunches.
Beyond the wicks of sand
and rowers in an ashy boat, the drowning man
reads his mother's diary.
Of sleeps and awakenings, a satiety.

Michael Kimball

HOW WE BURNED MY LITTLE-BROTHER UP, HOW WE
TURNED MY LITTLE-BROTHER INTO SEE-THROUGH DIRT, AND
HOW WE BURIED MY LITTLE-BROTHER INSIDE A SEE-
THROUGH JAR AND EVEN FARTHER DOWN INTO THE GROUND
AND DIRT-WORLD

The fire-man was going to burn my little-brother up until the fire turned him into see-through dirt. But the toy-box burned up first. You could see my little-brother through the toy-box again but he was tired. He just laid there this time and burned up.

My little-brother's hair burned up and smoked his head. My little-brother reached his hands and arms up to touch on the hair-fire out but his fingers wouldn't unfist and he couldn't reach it all the way out anyway. My little-brother pulled his knees and legs up too but he couldn't walk or crawl anymore and the fire-man had burned him down on his back anyway.

My little-brother's clothes turned inside out to burn-colored and burned down into his skin. My little-brother's stomach got bigger and bigger until my little-brother was going to have a baby too but his stomach got too filled up and hot and blew up too. The baby inside my little-brother was already burned up but the fire-man was going to burn my little-brother up some more anyway.

My little-brother's skin broke open until you could see down to his bones. You could see through the holes inside my little-brother's face and down to the bone-color on his hands and feet and arms and legs and rib-bones. My little-brother and his bones split up and he broke. His hands and feet broke off from his arms and legs and his rib-bones split away from each other.

My little-brother glowed all the way down to his bones. But the fire-man was going to burn my little-brother up until we couldn't even make the shape of a baby up out of him anymore.

We couldn't put his insides back inside him.

We couldn't put his eyes back inside his head or his lips back on his face.

We couldn't pull his skin back over his hands and feet and arms and legs.

We couldn't pull his skin back over his rib-bones and everything else inside him or put his hair back on his skin or head.

My little-brother was only small-bones after when the fire-man smoked the fire out. But you could see how sun-colored his small-bones were. The fire-man can't burn the sun all the way back up out of you.

But the fire-man can pick all the small-bones of my little-brother up and not even burn his hands up on them. The fire-man can make you even smaller

than you were after when he pours your small-bones into an open bowl and pounds my little-brother down into bone-dirt with a fat-stick.

But the fire-man won't dig a baby-sized hole or bury my little-brother down inside it either. The fire-man gives you my little-brother back to us inside a see-through jar. The see-through jar is supposed to go down even farther away into the ground and dirt-world than my little-brother or us went away to before when when we went away from home and all the way up to Heaven.

We buried my little-brother all the farther way down to where you couldn't see him inside his see-through jar anymore. The sun couldn't burn him up anymore and the fire-man couldn't do it to him either.

We buried my little-brother all the way down inside the ground and dirt-world with dirt and rocks and everything bad else that happened to my little-brother and us too.

We covered my little-brother with dirt and rocks and everything else we had left over over him even after when it got so heavy all the way down on top of him. We jumped up and down on the dirt and rocks and everything bad else. We didn't want my little-brother to get back up and live with us inside the living-world anymore.

FORGIVING LYDIA

Lydia's new house was like her: small, exact, four rooms and a bath set around a short hallway. The furniture was modest and precisely arranged, a layout in which each inch mattered. The decorations—an abstract nude, a carved wooden horse—strove to be personal statements. Self-sufficient, Phil thought, as he set the cardboard box of books on the coffee table and glanced gingerly around. He felt out of place, a tall man with a long face and crew-cut gray hair, standing in his ex-wife's living room. A one-person house, that was it.

Lydia opened the box. "Why don't I sort these right now? Anything I don't want you can take straight to the store."

She wore a yellow stretch tank top and a calf-length, flowery skirt. Her clothes, Phil noticed, had gotten bolder. The outfit revealed muscular arms, round breasts flattened by the tight fit of the yellow fabric, a firm belly. Her long hair, wispy and coffee-brown, was dramatized by a red velvet headband. Lydia had never been a beautiful woman, but she was forward about herself, ready to talk about her likes, her dislikes, the first time she met you. Perhaps that was what had attracted him to her that summer seventeen years ago when they happened to be on the same cocktail circuit. No matter that he was married, twenty years her senior. Arrow-like, she'd projected herself at him, sure of her mark, and he was flattered because he was not a good-looking man. Nor was he wealthy—his position as vice president of a small Midwest publishing firm placed him squarely in the upper middle class. So she must have loved him—he still believed that. Now that she'd left, he wondered what type of man—men?—she aimed at in her new incarnation.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Lydia asked. "Wine? Juice? I have a nice sparkling water in the refrigerator."

"That's fine."

Phil waited until she'd stepped into the kitchen, then he settled weakly into a chair. The seat was low, and his knobby knees in his shorts poked up like two bald spots. Over the past year, the difference in their ages had become increasingly apparent. Lydia was forty-eight, Phil almost seventy, and merely saying the numbers to himself opened a gap, vast and hollow. Once they had both thought it sounded vital, enviable, chic.

He forced his thoughts elsewhere, to a series of framed prints on the wall, to an artless (and therefore, knowing Lydia, artful) collection of rocks on an end table. The objects were not familiar to him, not items he would have associated with her, yet they demanded to be noticed, and he felt again that she was reinventing herself, creating a new Lydia to present to the world, a woman with

no strings attached.

"I hope you like this."

She handed him a tumbler, and he sipped a cool, raspberry-flavored water.

"It's fine."

"How have you been? Are you still seeing those doctors?"

"Yes. But it's nothing serious."

"Tyler told me on the phone he's really enjoying basketball camp."

"The other boys are good company for him."

She had seated herself on the couch as they spoke. Now she sorted deftly through the top layer of paperbacks. They had agreed Phil should stop by whenever convenient to drop off the last few belongings he was storing for her. Lydia had left behind the sewing machine, most of the furniture, their son. Not abandoned the boy—no, that wasn't fair. There simply wasn't room for him here in this small rental house, and Tyler would have had to change school districts, leave his friends, his activities—too much to ask of a fourteen-year-old. Lydia was being unselfish, and so far Tyler's reaction to the divorce was to play it cool. Too cool—Phil could feel the deep-sunk well of hurt the boy capped with a shrug. Because Lydia hadn't fought for him, hadn't insisted Phil be the one to move out of their comfortable ranch home and provide enough alimony and child support to keep mother and son intact. Old-fashioned, Phil would have agreed to those terms. Certainly, when he divorced his first wife, Jane, there had been no question who would get the children, or who would pay.

"Look at these. I can't believe I used to read this stuff."

Lydia laughed, holding up a worn bestseller from a decade past. "Of course, they were just to pass the time when I took Tyler to the beach. I think some of them still smell of sun screen." She sniffed, then poked deeper into the box. "Although there are a few good titles in here. Set these on the bookcase for me, will you?"

She handed him several volumes, and Phil rose and crossed the room. The effort to appear brisk cost him, and he stood before the bookcase several moments to recover. When he lifted his head, his eyes caught a framed photograph on the top shelf: Lydia on a beach with a sandy-haired man. The man looked German or Scandinavian, handsome in a rugged way, and they stood before a thatched, Caribbean-style bar, Lydia in front, the man directly behind, his arms flung playfully across her chest in a bear hug. Cheek to cheek, they laughed and mugged for the camera. Aruba—Lydia and a girlfriend had gone there for a vacation in February, shortly after she'd moved out. Look, the photograph seemed to say, I can have fun; I can go places and have affairs. In the picture Lydia wore a hibiscus blossom in her hair, and Phil tried to recall from his early career as a travel magazine editor what it meant when a Hawaiian woman wore a flower over a particular ear, which side signalled she was married, which side that she was looking.

"By the way, did I tell you I painted the bedroom?" Her voice was bright behind him. "It used to be an awful pea-green color. Makes you wonder what kind of person lived here before. Go on, take a look."

Phil crossed into the bedroom, noting the double bed with brass headboard, the oak bureau, mauve armchair. A rich cream color blushed on the walls, cream—the color of Lydia's skin. And Lydia, too, was freshly painted, working in a glass-blowing shop she termed a "gallery," promoting herself as an emerging artist/sculptor/instructor—all the hobbies she'd dabbled in and now meant to take seriously, to mold into a fulfilling career. Phil observed the careful placement of each dish and bottle on the oak bureau. Was this what a woman wanted—a space entirely her own, every last item chosen for its relevance to her life, her sense of proportion, her needs? As though the mere act of being married to him and having a child—the child she'd insisted on as a condition of marriage—had usurped an identity she meant to reclaim. Phil shook his head, denying it. She'd always had time for herself, money. How had he stopped her from doing anything?

"How do you think the portrait looks above the bed?" she called.

"It's fine," he replied, though he'd barely glanced at the canvas, one of several around the walls. When he did, he felt disjointed. The picture was a large oil, a portrait of Lydia done by a young artist she'd known in her twenties. Phil had never liked it—the style was rough, it made her look old—and Lydia had sent it willingly to the attic when they set up house together. Its reappearance in this place of honor sent a stab of anger through his chest. Not a memento of himself, not a photo of Tyler anywhere, but above her bed this tribute to an old lover while some Scandinavian stranger merited a living room display. Damn her! This was not how he'd intended to end his life.

Last November the doctor had given him the diagnosis: prostate cancer, a year at best. This was July, and he could feel the battle for his body going against him. He hadn't told Lydia. Even before the illness, his age had begun to show—winded after a set of tennis, a habit of dozing off early in the evening, passion an effort, enjoyment rare. He would have been content to be friends then, but when he hinted, Lydia was unsympathetic. And she dropped deliberate clues of her own, remarks that let him know she was planning her freedom. If he'd told her about the cancer, would she have stayed—or moved out sooner? Would it bring her back now?

His gaze traveled back to the bed. Lydia was a vigorous lover, and he had been shocked and excited by some of her requests. He remembered what Jane had said when he'd announced his involvement with Lydia and desire for a divorce. "Sex? Is that what you want, more sex?" She shook her head in anguish and disbelief, a faithful wife of thirty years fired on two weeks' notice. He was so in love with Lydia, he'd expected Jane simply to go along, even to be happy for him. Lately, he'd thought of calling Jane to let her know how it was turning out, allow her to gloat if she liked, though that had never been her style. But he

wasn't sure where she lived or if she'd remarried, and as their three daughters reached womanhood each had severed all connection with him.

"I'm done," Lydia called sprightly.

"Yes, coming," he replied.

Lydia was repacking books into the cardboard box. Set to one side was the pile she intended to keep, and Phil pictured her slotting them into her bookshelf, one at time, obedient to her new sense of order. He didn't tell her he'd sold the bookstore, a part-time occupation since his retirement. He'd take the unwanted volumes and add them to the inventory to be passed to the new owner.

"The house is very nice," he said.

"Thank you. There are still one or two final touches I'm planning to make."

Lydia surveyed the room with pleasure. It was an adventure to her, Phil realized, and she had no idea how short-lived it would be. In four months or less he'd be dead, and she'd have to leave her self-defined space, move back to their old house with Tyler, work at a relationship the boy knew she'd betrayed. And though she might keep her job at the glass-blowing gallery and sculpt an occasional figure or two, it would be less easy to have affairs in Aruba, to shape her life according to no one's whim but her own.

"Here you go." Lydia smiled, handed him the box, offered to rise. "I'll get the door for you."

How easy should he make it for her? She didn't want his money; she'd moved out to prove it. And she wouldn't accept guilt, just as he'd been immune to Jane's grief long ago. "Don't you understand what you're doing to my life?" Jane had sobbed. "Don't you realize how this feels?" No, he hadn't—until now. All he'd known when Lydia cast herself at him was that his life was taking a momentous turn, and he'd rushed to embrace it. Now Lydia's life was turning; she was flinging herself away from him. How could he blame her when what he wanted, above all, was to forgive himself?

"It's no trouble." He motioned her to stay seated. "I'll let myself out."

"All right. Thanks for stopping by."

She gave him a cheerful smile, and Phil made his way to the door. Over his shoulder he glimpsed Lydia drawing up her flowery skirt, shifting the strap of her yellow tank top, arranging herself on the couch, making each inch matter.

Dieter Weslowski

BON VOYAGE

I ate all
the unblessed
hosts
before I left

PASSING A ROADSIDE CRUCIFIX

I made the sign
of the leaf, the falling
leaf

IN GERMAN,

or has an odor, eggs
hatch ire, and poison is
a gift.

Rachel Barenblat

NOAH IS BREATHING LANGUAGE

Noah is breathing language inside
the sonnet's glass bulb. He likes
black and white, the fingerprints
of ink on paper.

He writes on mirrors with a finger
trailing curls through steam.
The door opens and brutal air erases
the meditations of his heart.

Noah has crafted poems about surgery,
about rain, about loss. In his sleep
his old poems stand up jerkily and move
around his bed like marionettes.

Today he wants to snap his pen
in half and smear a rorschach of ink
instead. No matter what he writes
the paper says, "No more words,

no more sleep, no more silence. From
now on all rivers will be dark with grackles."
Noah's handprints blur the page.
He reads the new words on his lifted palms.

Stephen Hales

BEFORE HER FUNERAL

We all agreed
She would have
Wanted this,
Her friends
Playing tennis
On the first
Cold day of fall,
Just before her funeral,
But then
The crows flew,
Flapped black against
The cold blue sky.
We stopped,
Watched,
And let the ball
Fall still.

Allan Peterson

ONE OF THE BITTER KEPT SECRETS

If *living it up* is accurate *living it down* is not
its opposite
So it happens Egyptians were not death-centered
but so happy breathing
they thought life might continue if they could
do it through limestone
Just today Ray goes fully dressed with a vodka
shined shoes and black socks
wading out to the Hobie in three feet of water
like a man drowning two ways at once
but dressed for it
convinced life lasts only as long as it can
no matter what you do
People will later say of every place
I remember when all this was woods
naming pleasures between the leaves
Like a thermos keeping hot things hot
and cold things longer till you forgot which was which
or dropped it and the inner glass shattered
the luke warm secrets escaped
in a feeling like stepping from the island to a boat
if they make it suddenly needing more lemon
more salt

SIGN

The sign could come in the form of a tap on the shoulder or a great lavender light or a speeding car or just an everyday object that will rise up and say very clearly what it is about me or about Tom or about me and Tom that keeps killing the babies. That sign is all I am looking for now and I am looking everywhere because that is where it may come from too.

Tom is a good man. Good, but bullheaded. Forever smoking his cigars, taking his nightly walks along the streets of our town which is 94 minutes from the city by commuter train and full of white Victorian houses with wide gleaming windows, protected from the world by a river and a crescent of woods. Everything a baby needs to be happy.

A cigar in the mouth makes a man look like an English lord in a smoking jacket or a card shark. It makes Tom look like a card shark, especially when he wears a dark shirt and slicks his hair back and always because of his eyes which narrow and dart about looking for luck.

Luck doesn't grow on trees, you've got to make your own sometimes. Tom says this a lot now, which is why we moved to this town five months ago and why he bought the dark blue Cadillac of a stroller from Reggie for twenty bucks on Thanksgiving night. *You can't ignore serendipity,* Tom said when he set down his prize stroller, which was like new, in the front hall and stared at it as though it was a lone star in the night sky. *Reggie's going to bring by a highchair too.*

Doesn't Tom know these things have nothing to do with why the babies don't live?

Right now the baby inside me is the size of a walnut the expecting book says, it may have eyes but they can't see. Tom can see her though. At night when I collapse on my back in the dark of the bed and the hard moonlight streams in on us, he kneels above me and lifts away the blue tulips growing up my flannel nightgown and stares right into my belly which is flat like always and sees a saucer-eyed girl with cheeks galore who will climb up on his lap and eat moo shu pork and fish-shaped almond cookies with him and say, daddy, you're the greatest.

I hope it works out for you that way, I tell him, though I don't think he should count on it.

When I look at my belly I don't see anything.

I did see Reggie walking up the street with the highchair. He was no older than me and tall, with a large face that was covered with a dark beard, there was nothing harsh about him though and he set the highchair down on the porch like it was a basket of eggs and rang the bell. I waited a moment and then

opened the front door.

Mornin Ma'am, he nodded. He was gentle in the way only big creatures, whales or elephants, can be.

What's your name? was all I could think to say, though I already knew.

It took him a minute but he looked me in the eye and told me his name and a few other things, that he used to live in the city, that's he's likely just passing through this town although he's been here four months now and that he collects cans and picks the trash and does odd jobs. There was a drawl to his speech and he spoke slowly as though nothing deep down was driving him to do one thing over another.

I bought the highchair and hired him to paint the baby's room.

Just like that? Tom said when I told him. Tom came home from work and took off his \$200 shoes and his Armani jacket which is what you have to wear when you're vice president of the Searle Corporation and you don't have a heart for it. His eyes shot around his Victorian kingdom, its mahogany wainscoting and stained glass windows that brooded and glimmered in the light, they sensed something out of place and fixed on me. So I told him about Reggie. *He'll be great*, I added.

Tom frowned. *I don't want this guy working here when you're all alone.*

We've had plenty of workmen here when you're at the office.

He's a drifter.

That's no crime, I wanted to say, no more than a log commits a crime when it lets the river take it. Though I simply said, *He can paint.*

I don't like it. We don't know this guy from Adam.

You don't have the time to do the painting. It has to get done. For the baby, I said.

I don't like it. Tom started to say something else, instead he just shook his head and went downstairs to his workshop.

When I want Reggie he could be one of three places, working at the used book shop or picking the trash or anywhere else. Reggie told me to ask the twins. They wash cars at the gas station on the next block and when I ask them they stand too close and stare into my face, bewildered as if I'm a wounded swallow that's just fallen from the sky. Then it's always the same thing. *Oh yeah, Donald Trump. We'll go get him.*

It just proves how industrious Reggie is, I tell Tom. *And he'll come in the evenings when you're here too.* What I don't tell Tom is when Reggie is late or when he stands us up.

It was Whopper Night at Burger King, Reggie will say.

Reggie. You know you'll get dinner here. Don't you like my cooking?

Sorry, Miss Emily.

No one has ever called me that, I'm not a spinster and I'm not from the South and I know I should ask him to stop, but I don't. When Reggie comes in

the door his eyes are puffy red as if he's been crying, or maybe it's because of the cold, it's even too cold to snow.

It's the kind of cold you want to smack back. I can only stay out a half hour, in the mornings I walk out from town over the high dirt road to the hills. Tom says don't go, it's too far for you to go now. You're right, dear, I say. Then I go.

There are no cars on the road and I stand for as long as I can before the fields and the wall of woods at the edge of town, the hills rise and fall like breath with a sugary glaze over them. When I do this I take the three babies that died inside me and the baby growing there now and flatten them up like sheets of cardboard and squish them up against the back of my mind so I can wait for the sign. And eventually I will see it, big and dark as a spot on the hills, the sign that will tell me why my babies don't live.

Only Reggie's first night gave me trouble. Reggie was early, Tom wasn't back from the city yet but his voice was, *I don't want him here with you alone* played in my head and made my stomach queasy though maybe the queasiness was the baby growing.

Reggie was in the baby's room above the kitchen where I was washing lettuce for dinner, supposedly he was working but if he were moving I could tell. It was quiet, just the trickle of water over the greens, no other sound in the house. My hands started to shake, I felt hot in the forehead, I hid the cleaver under the red-and-white checked dishtowels in the drawer and started upstairs, if the stairs were alive I would've killed them for creaking. The upstairs hall was dark and cold and it froze me to a spot so I couldn't flee if I had to, my ears strained to make something of the quiet and out of it came Reggie muttering to himself, then a transistor radio sputtering *O Come All Ye Faithful*, then Reggie again, singing over the radio's tinny words in a voice that was low and rich and heavy with prayer.

I am as bad as Tom.

It took Reggie a week but he smoothed and scraped and spackled the walls until you could slide a hand over them and mistake them for silk, he painted them the pink of peony petals and fixed the radiator, put on a new door, hung pictures of Cinderella and Snow White.

Even Tom had to admit a baby would be thrilled to sleep there. *You were right. The guy can paint*, Tom admitted when he came home from work early one night and handed me a bunch of daisies. After Tom gives me a hard time, he buys me daisies. That just makes it worse. I don't trust flowers that sprang from the mind of a greeting card designer, flowers are license to do more of the same anyway, so just don't bother I want to say. If you really knew me, you'd buy me cut amaryllis the color of raspberries and twist some ivy through them and stick them in a big-bellied clear vase and leave it in the sunlight on the kitchen table and never refer to it directly.

Sometimes I think the sign is about me and Tom, that there's only enough love between us to grow a baby to the size of a grapefruit.

When Reggie finished the nursery, I asked him to stay and replaster and paint the guest bedroom. He pawed the ground like a nervous horse. *I don't know, Miss Emily. I got to be moving on.* I told him I'd throw in dinner too, he pulled at his beard and looked around the room. *OK. But then I gotta be moving on.*

What I liked about Reggie was the noise. After the first night, whenever Reggie was working in the nursery, I stayed in the kitchen right below him, I put the oak rocking chair from the parlor right in the middle of the kitchen, I could hear every movement, the footsteps, sometimes padding along, sometimes creaking the floorboards, the cans dragging across the floor, drawers opening, bangs and bumps. If I folded my hands over my belly and rocked hard and closed my eyes tight enough, I could trick myself into feeling the movements were inside me, that it wasn't Reggie stomping across the floor, but tiny feet picking their way through the gray fluid, it wasn't some workman hammering the wall, it was my baby's fist punching its way to life. I thought I could feel those things, but maybe I was just glad there was someone else in the house.

When Reggie moved across the hall to work on the guest room, I followed underneath. More sounds. Dragging, dropping, thumps. The scraping away of the old plaster was the best, little bursts of sound that said, *I'm here, I'm here, I'm here...*

How'd the sonogram go today? Tom came rushing in the back door on one of those scraping afternoons and threw his briefcase on the kitchen counter. *I tried to call you but there was no answer.*

I had forgotten all about the appointment, I kept sitting in the rocking chair and didn't open my eyes. *Oh, fine. Everything's fine.* I believed it, so the lie was all right.

When I did open my eyes I saw Tom frowning, I thought he had read my mind but it was only because he noticed there were three places set at the table. *Now he's going to eat with us too?*

Soothing out walls is hard work, when Reggie came to dinner there was plaster dust all over him like he'd fallen in a vat of flour, he tracked filmy white footsteps over the parlor floor and into the kitchen.

Christ, Tom muttered and made a face.

The three of us ate dinner at the round oak table in the kitchen, I turned the overhead light off and lit the candles, it's easier to talk without all that light. Reggie always sat tall in his chair, his body twitching slightly like a dog wagging his tail cause he knows his bowl of food is coming soon, when I put Reggie's

plate before him he didn't lunge at it, only when I started eating would he dig in, his momma has taught him this I can tell, and he would never say there's too much ginger in the stirfry or the onions are overdone. I knew how he would kiss me too, he'd put his hand on my cheek or stroke my hair or look into my eyes, he'd do something gentle like that first I'm almost sure.

Thoughts like that are a sign I am an unfit mother.

I'm still playing Pick, too. When Tom and I are at a restaurant I am listening to him but in my head I am playing Pick with the men eating quietly with their own wives, which means pick the one you would go to bed with and say why, to yourself of course. And last year Tom's brother followed me into the kitchen at the lake house, everyone else was out on the lawn drinking beer and eating barbecued chicken, he took the platter of coleslaw from my hands and set it down on the counter and looked at me for a full minute and said, *I hear you're a great kisser*, and I showed him.

A baby shouldn't have a tart for a mother.

That's what I was thinking when Tom yelled up to me from his workshop. *Emily, where's my screwdriver? The big Phillips screwdriver with the red handle?*

Oh, I gave it to Reggie. He needed it to fix a table he found in the trash.

Damn it, Emily. Don't loan out my things. How many times do I have to tell you?

He'll bring it back tomorrow. I'm sure. I made my voice sound cheery, but I didn't tell Tom that I gave that screwdriver to Reggie a week ago and hadn't thought about it since.

Another thing I didn't tell Tom, I was walking the river path one afternoon thinking about signs but there were none, just gray water and leftover snow and bare black trees and a black road carved into the mountain across the way. Coming toward me was a man pushing a grocery cart, the cart was piled with bottles and plastic shopping bags full of something, sneakers dangled from the car bottom, the wheels went in all directions over the frozen rutty ground and the man was talking to himself, cursing. I had to pass him but as I came closer, the sight of him made me shrink back and run the other way: he didn't see me but I know it was Reggie.

Tom never got used to Reggie. During the 10 days he plastered and painted the guest room Reggie stayed for dinner each night, kale or buckwheat noodles or tofu stir fries was what I served. *Those Big Macs are junk, you shouldn't be eating junk, it makes you weak*, I did tell him that, I gave him second helpings of vegetables too. He always took them, though only after a long sigh. *I used to work in the city too*, Reggie said to Tom one night and named a big brokerage house. *Too much pressure, man*, Reggie took a big gulp of water. *Too much pressure.*

Right, he was probably the janitor, Tom said to me later, but I know that's why Tom kept sneaking looks at Reggie during dinner. He wanted to know if something had snapped in Reggie's mind and whether it could happen to him

too. There was no stopping Tom, his eyes kept darting around the room and lighting on Reggie so finally I cleared my throat and spoke up. *I know a dozen people around here who would hire you in a second*, I said to Reggie. *The women in the stone house at the end of the street...*

Tom didn't even let me finish the sentence. *Watch out, Reggie*, he said. *She'll have your whole life planned out for you*. He was laughing of course, and when Reggie squirmed in his chair and rested his fork on top of the tofu casserole and stared at his plate, Tom had to say, *It's a joke*.

I always packed up the leftovers for Reggie. One morning at the bottom of the driveway I found a little explosion of bulghur wheat and corn kernels and tofu chunks, it was no accident, I could see it came from a pure unpremeditated splat against the ground, it was brilliant in its way and complete, like a painting. So I walked around it and went on. I didn't tell Tom.

When the guest room was done I asked Reggie to stay and redo the floors in the extra bedroom that would be a den. He didn't say yes or no, but just went into the den and began moving the furniture out into the hall.

When is this going to stop? Tom said. *That room is fine as it is*.

It almost did stop because for four days I didn't see Reggie. When he came back he didn't look at me, he just grunted and when upstairs and closed the den door, and I didn't hear a sound but the vacuum sucking at the floor.

Reggie didn't stay for dinner that night, he had something to do he said, that made five nights in a row I thought he was coming for dinner and he didn't. Tom and I sat at the table in the kitchen by ourselves, there was too much food for just us, I left the overhead light on and I served everything on one plate, it's easier to clean up, everything ran together but I didn't care.

Tom reached over and took my hand. *I'm sorry you're disappointed about Reggie. But it's better this way, believe me*, Tom's voice was soft and low and he stroked my cheek, he kept stroking it and his fingers felt warm and familiar, I could feel the whorls on his fingertips and they calmed me. His hand slid over my shoulder and down my arm into my hand and he pulled me up and led me downstairs to his workshop. It was beautiful what he made, fit for a princess, a set of drawers in a butterscotch wood with dark swirls racing through it, it wasn't a wood I knew, it couldn't have come from a tree but from a dream of a tree and there were fluted columns at the sides and the whole thing gleamed like a light was shining on it from far away.

What makes you think it's going to be a girl? I couldn't help myself, I spat the words at him.

Tom bowed his head. *I hope it's a girl. If it's a girl I'll get to see what you were like from day one*.

I started to turn away but Tom pulled me back, my face landed below his neck, my nose jammed into his collarbone. *Come on Emily, we'll do it this time*.

Please try. His breathing was fast and jerky like he was crying, even though I knew it wouldn't do any good I whispered *OK.*

The next morning, which is today, Tom was at work in the city, I was upstairs folding the laundry, the doorbell rang as if it would explode unless I answered it. It was Reggie, his eyes were glazed like when Tom gives him beers, he had on an army coat and he was shivering and hopping from one foot to the other to keep warm. *Miss Emily. Goin' on your walk this morning?*

Yeah. Though I didn't know Reggie knew about my walks.

Come on. I'll go too.

Tom's Yankees jacket was on the coat rack by the door and I grabbed it and his yellow knit cap that said *Pizza* in red and we raced up Quill Street and over the high school track to get to the dirt road that led to the woods. We weren't talking, I had to trot to keep up with his stride, his eyes were straight ahead and our breaths were clouds of frost, one big, one little.

Slow down Reggie. What's the rush?

Reggie didn't say anything.

A snow had fallen, the sun was strong and it hit the snow and bounced back and around so everything was bright white, so bright the only place your eyes could look was the sky.

There, over there, Reggie pointed to the clearing at the edge of the woods. *That's where you go isn't it? Coming out here everyday to look at nothing.* He laughed a crazy laugh, the laugh of a loon on a Maine lake and it ripped a hole in the white silence and ran all over the field and in and out of the woods. Reggie's laugh was the only sound too, no car swooshing by on the road to relieve the silence, not a bird calling, not the thud of an icicle slipping from a branch onto the snow. There was nothing, nothing alive but me and Reggie standing knee deep in the snow and the laugh had made him someone else.

Reggie, stop it. You're scaring me.

Shut up. Bitch!

The shape of his face changed, I watched his mouth twist up and his eyes go somewhere else, I watched him reach inside his Army jacket. What he took out was the screwdriver, Tom's Phillips head screwdriver.

The sun is so bright it's even shining up the dull lead of the screwdriver. In my mind I can feel the pain already but when it comes it won't register immediately, then it will be in my stomach and my chest and maybe in my back, a sharpness so new I won't even recognize it as pain. The blood will come, beautiful against the white snow, vivid, blood warm enough to melt the snow and seep down into it and bleed into a wide pink lake.

I feel my belly for the last time now, my jacket is open and my belly is flatter than before, not even a hint of a curve, the walnut inside me has already begun to shrivel and die like they all did. The babies were smart not to come, with their little wisps of eyes they saw the sign even before it had been given a

shape.

Soon the sirens will scream and the red lights on top of the blue and white cars will flash. Detectives will swarm the hillside. One thing I'm happy for, when they find my body and roll it over, the whites of my eyes will be spotless as snow. Tom and the police and the townspeople will shake their heads and cover their faces. But if they look at me, they can take comfort in my eyes. If they can bring themselves to look at me they will see my eyes are amazingly clear and bright and if they look for more than a second they may even see it's the clarity and brightness that only come to the eyes when death makes sense.

A. F. Thomas

THE CONVERSATION

No one follows you there, brown lips
working together, a dead-end of

sentences. That God listens

is the sense of the thing. The mechanics
of your hands gesturing to the windshield

as though out there, on road

the argument persists, doubling
its arms and ashen fingers, as though another man,

troubled to extinction, but never convinced

of you must be reckoned with. The grotesque
brass sculptures of his head: eyes sunken to the skull,

nose flaring. The definite pride

of a finely chiseled face. The wire wrapped
so tight, again and again, his finest details

are buried beneath sheet-metal cheeks,

in the smallest cracks of those woven lips
that seem to be saying: *God*. Your art

must be decided. The massive heads,

so many bronze men, stuck on the one thought.
Their tarnished crevices stain your fingers.

Their silences torment your solitary figure

in the front seat, eyes darting
like the traffic. An eternity in which you are lost
to yourself and what your hands
must put together.

ERASURE

I can't save the gray wings
molded to sand
like more of the same gritty tapestry.

No merciful dusting of the head,
or clearing the belly's burrow
of baby sand crabs.

I believe in the order of things,
what belongs on beaches—smooth shards
of bottle glass, torn jelly fish, stinging

in death—not this fat moth,
legs struggling out at the sky.
Even I belong to this salt spray,

crush of waves turning
over themselves, surfacing debris.
In the way my feet sink

for the sand's slow erasure. The moth
stays half-buried, done-in
by the tiny, transparent bodies tunneling

through its middle. The frenzy
if I could hear it
might sound of breaking bones

or see in its eyes—stars begin
as mere beads of determination. The body
will try to right itself. Someone brave,

or foolish puts the boot down.
I'm not sure quicker is better.
It's not my life I must justify

for its sake. I go gladly
toward the surf that would drown me.
I expect nothing less.

William Doreski

ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

All night as the wind trembles
about the house we lie apart
careful not to touch or even
breathe too expressively. A bright
but isolated moon presses

against a big invisible dome
and conforms to a curved dispassion.
How could we so decisively
quarrel in so short a time?
A word or two has distorted

hours alone with each other
in these private and chilly rooms,
unable to explain why the dark
has pooled about us like pudding,
unable to ease the transition

from brittle autumn daylight
to lamplight on an open book,
our faces too brief to mask the fear
we've generated by opening
our pores in anger. The wind

limbers up and howls so loudly
the whole neighborhood must be awake.
Yet no lights show, only ours
burning in protest. I should step out
on the back porch, my bathrobe

flapping, and let the surge of weather
represent a new resolve.

Then back in bed I'd shake my wife
awake and apologize
so deeply she'd understand

how we have to apologize
every day for being human—
the leafless trees, the moon and stars,
the cracked asphalt streets so innocent
we violate them merely by our

capacity for violation,
our books settled like birds of prey
on a road kill, our quarrels the voiced
acknowledgment of the distance
between ego and what it betrays.

Susan Fromberg Schaeffer

IMAGINING NICHOLAS

for Arnold Feinstein

It is not that he is mysterious, or exotic, or inscrutable, or even hard to understand. His nature is not unknowable. Above all it is not a question of opacity, denseness, of something unfathomable, because incontrovertibly it is true that we already know everything there is to know; it is in there somewhere, as in a vast attic where all the old things have gone and been preserved, and they themselves preserve all there was of the past, and so predict all there is of the present and everything there that is coming on, like a mad chariot, careening toward us over the horizon, but it is not yet over, has not yet risen, but is like the sun, still beneath the horizon, but it is felt to be there, in a minute it will be there, we know it will, because of the noise, the terrible noise of its wheels.

And where is this attic? Not in some mysterious place, oh, no. These attic rooms, like underground caverns, where understanding leaks through from one level, drip, drip, building up the fantastic ghost-shapes, this is simply the inside of everyone's mind, even the stupidest. No, no, real challenge is in not knowing, in knowing how not to know. People are very good at this. They meet this challenge easily. I don't know, they say. I am so confused. Tell me what it means, they say nervously, drumming with their fingers, their eyes darting like tadpoles. They are relying on you. They are counting on you to be wrong. They are counting on you not to know, just as you count on yourself to remain confounded, helpless in front of the facts.

Therefore we need strategies. If we would know, we need them.

What are the things that come to mind when I think of him? I think of the days we spent in Paris, walking through narrow, cobbled streets, grey stones, grey walls, the buildings leaning in, half drunk, about to topple. Of course, I noticed none of it then: the leaning buildings, the grey stones, the toppling, the nervous feeling, the way I walked, very fast, before the buildings had time to topple, the relief I felt when I came to the river's edge, when I was beyond the shadow of those buildings, those heavy buildings. And then I began to make up a story about cats. On all those walks through all those narrow streets, I never saw a cat. Not once. So I began to invent a story about Parisians. *Ou est tous le chattes de Paris?* Yes, it was clear: the Parisians had eaten their cats. Here and there, in the basement of a ruined building, a cat survived, found another cat in another basement, and bred. So there were a few cats, but they were shadow cats. And they knew they were endangered. They knew that if they were found, they would surely be eaten.

Then I needed an explanation of why the Parisians devoured their cats.

There was the obvious: those sleek Parisian women saw no need for cats. They were cat-like enough to dislike parodies of themselves, parodies in fur, four-footed with dirty tails. But because this explanation was obvious, I knew it was wrong. And then I understood: the truth was in the image, in the image of a Parisian woman, very slender, very elegant, her hair long and dark, sitting at a pine refectory table, her mouth covered in blood, her eyes blank as polished pewter coins, unminted coins, eyes the color of mercury in fever thermometers, big round eyes, pupiless.

Does this image tell you anything about Paris or the people who live there? Certainly not. But it tells you a great deal about *someone*, about what was happening to her, about what was the truth of her life. Oh, she felt sorry for herself as she walked those narrow, cobbled streets. She knew there was danger. She knew and she didn't know. Years later, when she thought of the Parisian women eating their cats, she knew how great the danger was. Of course, she knew it at the time. But if you had asked her then she would have said, I don't know. I don't know anything about that. And her eyes would have been blank, silvery and blank.

So I am to imagine him, this man who has caused me so much trouble.

Instead I imagine the city he came from.

There it is always hot. Flies multiply and swarm in the heat, so that is the noise, not the sound of traffic or the voices of crowds, merely the buzzing of the flies, black, small, hungry as vultures. There are no vultures there, not hovering over the city. The fumes of the cars below, rising up, have driven them off into the skies above the tangly gnarled green mountains.

It is always hot so the presence of the sun becomes the supreme presence. Yet there is not even one sun. Above the city, the fumes thicken and eddy and thin, eclipsing the sun, which often appears, like the moon, as a half or even a quarter of itself. Yet everywhere it is doubled. In the rivers it hangs over, it is reflected, pale and orange, the same sun, but smaller, the same sun, but more fragile, trembling with every disturbance of the water, with each splash of duck or turkey or fish. Here and there the sun is run through by a sharp stick protruding up out of the water. Look, I said to myself when I saw that image of the sun: a crucified sun. It may be crucified in rivers, but in the sky it is powerful.

Because it is so powerful, everything rots. The people—it is hard to tell one from another, it is hard to believe there are individuals here, they press so together they become as one solid being, speaking with the black voice of flies—have lost the art of cooking. It is too hot to cook. Here and there someone has gathered bits of wood, pieces of charcoal, and they build a small fire as a bird builds a nest. Then the people place their food on the fire. They singe one side and turn it; they singe another. This drives off the worms, the maggots, the invisible germs. It would be safer to cook the food properly but it is too hot. By the time the food is cooked it might rot. So they eat it at once.

Their mouths are always black with the whitish-grey ash of the fire. This ash coats their food. This ash they swallow. If their bodies were transparent, the ash would be there, floating through their esophagus, falling into their stomachs, sifting down, down, through their legs like a kind of grayish-black snow, the dirty snow we think of in cold cities far away, cold cities heated by wood furnaces and coal. This is how they eat, hurriedly, the food covered with ash, almost raw: but warm. Even uncooked, warm to the touch.

Is it because of this so many of them quickly sicken and die? Who can know? The coffee-color river is implicated in this, the only source of water except rain, and here it rarely rains. It is so hot that what little rain there is evaporates as it falls or turns to steam as it touches the hot surfaces of the streets. Yet there is always water in the river, which often floods. No one remembers seeing the river bed, even during the twenty year drought. Even then, the river flowed on and on, wide and marked by the pattern of waves which were not waves. The course of the river is steady, almost imperturbable. To outsiders, it is a disgusting river, but to the people of this hot city, it is not. Along the banks of the river, mothers bathe their children in its waters. Men who will labor on the roads during the day brush their teeth using the river's water. Further down the river people defecate into its waters. Travellers from other countries cover their mouths with their hands, cover their eyes with sunglasses, so that not a drop of this river water will touch their pure, unaccustomed skins. Travellers from afar regard this river with horror.

Just before the river leaves the hot city, it turns, almost back upon itself, and on the banks are huge, open wooden buildings: like warehouses. In front of these warehouses, long boats bob up and down. The boats are filled with caskets, polished wood, very dark, very rich. The lids of the caskets are decorated with fantastic metal grillwork, always in the shape of flowers. This is a base metal, grey, flat and unpleasant, reminiscent of the iron shovels that turn over earth, but this metal is painted to look like gold. When the sun hits the shining wood, the painted metal, it strikes golden daggers into the air. Everywhere is the smell of danger, which is partly the smell of dead bodies, not tangible, hidden by aromatic flowers, thick-fleshed white lilies with their yellow and gold staining tongues, but there, mingling with them, all the same.

They say young boys come here to see beautiful women. Of course they are dead women, but they are beautiful, washed carefully, perfumed, their hair combed and oiled, their eyes made up, their cheeks rouged, lying on their back in flowing garments of gorgeous fabrics, their hands folded across their breasts, each hand appearing to cup one breast, or, as is sometimes the case, their arms positioned beneath their heads, as if they had lain down in the sun, fallen asleep, and decided never to move again. Because the women in the city are not beautiful: they place their ashy meat over the fire, their mouths and cheeks are smeared with ash, ash falls from the folds of their clothes.

Who are the women in these coffins? How do they afford these final,

glorious homes for themselves? They have relatives who left the country, who send money back home from the strange places to which they have gone, places where the sun is only an ice chip in the sky and people cook their meals indoors.

Has the man I am imagining seen these women, bobbing and bobbing on the river as it rises and falls like the body of a great snake breathing in and out? If he has not seen them, he has heard about them. If he has not heard them or seen them, he will. Soon he will.

He has seen the tourists who come into the streets, thin people who grow thinner in their attempts to avoid touching the ash eaters. In his language, the word for tourist means life-givers. They bring money. They spend it. If you are lucky enough to have one of them stop at your stall and admire your stock of carved elephants and buy two or three to take back to his own country, then you have enough money to buy food and clothing for years. Then you must stay awake all night standing guard over that money, but it is worth it because you have it.

He tries not to notice how the tourists always cover their mouths with a white handkerchief. To them the very air is pollution. The doctors say this is not snobbery. A tourist who breathes in too deeply begins to cough or to vomit and then to die. So they breathe through their handkerchiefs which they press against mouth and nose with their open right hands and with their left they pick up and examine the goods for sale in the stalls. Sometimes they buy. It can happen. Everyone knows someone from whom a tourist has purchased something.

Because of these handkerchiefs, no one has a clear picture of what a tourist looks like but everyone thinks they are alarmingly white, like the white worms that live beneath the flat black rocks of the river bank. Their hands against their handkerchiefs are almost invisible, both are so white. Their eyes are disquieting. In the hot city, everyone has dark brown eyes. The eyes of the tourists are light brown, blue, green, even lavender. They are sensitive to sun. Who has seen a tourist who does not squint whenever he looks up toward the sky? Of the lands they come from not much is known. *It is not hot there*, say the people of the hot city. *It is not hot there and people cook indoors and wear many layers of clothes. There is such a thing as a grey sky.* Really they do not know what they are talking about.

No one can imagine how crowded it is in the hot city, how the stalls crowd out into the street, often stopping traffic which consists of a long stream of rusty, old-fashioned cars held together by wire and desperation. It is so crowded that one day he sees his hand raised above someone's head but doesn't understand: how did it get there? He feels both of his hands at his side. And then he understands that this hand is not his, but the hand—and arm—of the person standing next to him, so close to him that when that man raises his arm, he thinks he sees his own arm in the air. Or so I imagine him, looking at his hand

in the air, realizing it is not his hand.

But perhaps he is not part of this crowd that swells out of the stalls and in front of the cars. Perhaps he is not one of the people who steps over a dead body on the sidewalk (there are many of these dead bodies), taking care not to catch his shoe in the folds of the woman's dress or the crook of a man's arm. Why not assume he is one of the wealthy few who live in the ornate villas up in the hills where at night a cool breeze blows? In the hot city there are no breezes, just waves of heat, flowing from the crowd to the cars when the cooking fires flare up, or from the cars to the crowd when the engines overheat. But it is different up in the hills.

In the hills, the few people who own the villas have servants who prepare their meals, who scrub every vegetable in a strong green disinfecting solution and then rinse the vegetables in boiled water. There the buildings have thick walls to keep out the heat. The walls are covered with dense grass mats, as are the floors. Every morning the servants sprinkle these mats with water so that the inside of the buildings will be cool when the family comes in to sleep in the hottest part of the afternoon. They sleep in hammocks because in them they are safe from the snakes who come in, like them, trying to escape the heat. On the ceilings are spiders and scorpions and so the hammocks are covered with mosquito netting. When someone awakes, he waits for the servant to come and inspect the netting. If something is trapped in it, the servant will drive it off with a broom, and if that cannot be done, he will use the broom to kill the insect.

During the late afternoons, parties are organized to go further up into the hills. Then the people from the villas sit in the chairs their servants have carried up for them and watch the vultures lazily circling, or listen for birds screaming wildly and when they hear them and see them diving at the earth, they know something there is dead. They shake their heads, look at one another and smile. They do not need to know what is dead. Something is always dead. It is comforting to live in a predictable world.

The man I am imagining does not know he will die. He thinks he knows this, but he does not know it. He knows the people in the hot city will die; after all, they do it so often. He has seen so many of them do it so often. Yet the people in the hot city, he thinks, do not know they are alive, or if they do know, they know this in the same way a fly knows it is alive. They are, he thinks, not people. They are clouds of swarming matter held, momentarily, together. They are like constellations of flies. At any moment they may begin to swarm, disintegrate before his eyes in the heat.

There are times when he holds up his hand and the light begins to show through it and from his hand comes a buzzing sound.

Then he tells himself this is nothing, this happens to everyone.

Here in the hills the children eat mangoes and guavas the servants wash for them: one at a time, then another. Here children sneak off into the sheds

protecting the mangoes from the chewing sunshine, the softening and blackening sunshine, and eat mangoes until they are sick to their stomachs. *Oh, mangoes*, they sigh when their parents find them, their backs propped up against a hill of fruit, their stomachs swollen, their hands and mouth sticky, mango juice in their hair, on their shirts, oh, they are too disgusting to pick up. Let the servants carry them back. Let the servants wash them down outside, throwing buckets of water over them as if they were dogs.

Tomorrow the mangoes will be covered by bluish-white patches, mould, almost the color of ash. From a distance it might look like ash.

I came this far. I still cannot imagine him. Does he belong to the teeming hot city or does he belong to the cool water-sprinkled houses in the thickly forested hills? But I forget: it is because I am imagining him that both places have been conjured up. So it is evident that he knows both: the hot city, the cool houses, the children sleeping in hammocks above the swaying heads of black snakes, above their flicking, darting forked tongues.

What kind of animals live there? There are cows, of course, walking unmolested, strolling slowly, like ladies with parasols. He is not interested in the cows. He is used to seeing them. There are goats, always tethered, because otherwise they would eat everything. He has heard stories of goats standing over children half-dead in the heat, but asleep, goats who eat off their clothes leaving the child entirely naked. Then the goat disappears and when the child wakes, the mother beats him. *It was a dream, it was a dream!* the child cries to his mother, defending himself, but the mother says, *Even in dreams, hold on to what you have!* and beats the child until the heat inside her, which is the heat of loss, dies down, becomes nothing more than the boiling of her blood under the remorseless sun. *Well*, she says to herself, skewering something on a sharp stick, *this is how it is*. Even a sentence that long is a luxury, a sign of shock. The sun is absolute. It beats down. No one thinks to protest.

There are also sheep. They live in the hills owned by the people in the cool houses who have sufficient grazing land. They fence in their pastures and meadows. One sheep belongs to him in particular. For years, someone would drive up to the house and say, *That sheep is out again*, and there the sheep would be, standing on a rock, looking up at the sky, *Excalibur! Excalibur, and what do I do next?*

He is a breaker and he will lead the rest of the sheep out, his father says. Therefore we must shoot him. But the boy protests. He wants the sheep for himself and so now he has it. But a sheep will also eat anything in sight. The boy takes long walks with the sheep, who follows him like a dog. The rest of the time the sheep must be tied. After a while, the sheep learns to stop bleating for the boy who will not come for him until morning.

But was that really his father? Would someone like this boy, now a man, of course a man, so imperious, so temperamental, have a father at all, much less a strong one, one who says, Therefore the sheep must be shot? But if it is

imagined, it must be true. Still, even though we are imagining, we can make a mistake. Perhaps it was not his father at all but a servant in charge of the herds. Of course! He would say with authority, *Therefore we must shoot him*. Oh, it is all clear now, it was a glimpse through a streaked windowpane, a windowpane on which the rain and the dust have left their mineral residue, a pale grey coating over all of it: naturally you mistake one man for another. It is the easiest thing to do. It is the servant, not his father. His father is not there. Not there, but not dead, so he is somewhere. The father is the hardest thing to see, so he must be the most important. Later we will try to imagine him. He will not be imagined right now. When I try now, the sun sets, plunges through the sky like a shot bird, drops below the hot horizon, plunging everything into darkness. No, now is not the right time.

On the other hand, there is his mother, coming up over the hill, first the shining top of her head, her shining, oiled-black hair, then her face: what delicate features! Then her shoulders, her upper arms, her breasts, her waist, her belly, here come her thighs, her ankles, her sandaled feet: it is as if she has risen, not out of foam, but out of the cloud of dust her feet inevitably stir up. There she comes: the mother.

But what will she do when she sees him? He tries to imagine this in advance, quickly, before she reaches him, to prepare himself. But he is never successful. He knows what is likely—she will see him and begin to shriek and scold, or she will see him and burst into tears, or she will draw nearer and he will see she is already weeping, or she will approach him, her eyes sightless and walk past him as if he were a pebble in the road—but he does not know what he has to do with her. Is he the cause of her misery? If not, if it is true, as one of the servants says, that a person's tears belong only to him, that, when his mother weeps he is not at fault (he is too small to be at fault), then certainly it is true that her happiness, her strange gasping laughter, her transfigured face, has nothing to do with him. Nothing to do with him the ecstasy sending her twirling round and round under the blazing sun, twirling until she loses all sense of balance and falls laughing onto the green breast of the grass. Nothing to do with him the way she props herself up on one elbow and shakes her head as if she were just coming up from under water and wanted to clear her senses, her eyes, her ears, nothing to do with him, the violent storms of joy. Storms of sorrow, storms of joy. She is as impersonal as the weather. She talks to him as the wind talks, continuing a story it began continents ago. His appearance on the scene does not change the focus of her eyes, which in any case are focused inward. What she says to him has nothing to do with him.

After he has been with her for an hour, (even a half hour will do), he begins to wonder: does the sheep follow him? Is it his sheep? What is there about him that is constant, that will awaken with him the next morning? His father, after all, who is absent, is only a cloud. Yet she is the wind, and the wind puffs up the clouds and sends them sailing down the sky, sailing and shredding as they go.

The surface of the sky is rough like a cat's tongue and tears at everything. If the wind were kind it would not blow. Yet it is its nature to scatter everything, to tear it. It knows its own nature. For that the wind is to be envied.

Who can he talk to about this? The servant, who his mother will fire on some pretext, unexpectedly, when one least expects it.

She is a wonderful woman, say his relatives. She nurses the sick; she weeps for them. She gives them the lunch she has brought for herself. No wonder she is so thin!

At times, in the mornings when he awakens, he thinks, I am still myself! This house, this mother, they have not taken me over! I am still myself!

He is most himself when he rebels, when he refuses to eat until the worried servants call in his mother. Then she comes into the kitchen and looks at him. Who knows what she will do? Sometimes she upbraids him. Other times she picks up his plate and flings it against the wall while the fat kitchen servant sighs because now it is her job to scrape the rice and beans from the plaster, to take the pail of whitewash from the shed and paint over the stain of brown sauce. This happens frequently, but not always. At other times, she comes into the kitchen, her eyes flick over him as over something nauseating and probably dead, she stands staring out the window with blank, silvery eyes, then turns. Sometimes she stands in the doorway, sometimes she leaves the room.

Today, she stands in the doorway and for the first time he picks up his plate and hurls it against the wall. His mother moves suddenly as if a shock has passed through her body. She turns and looks at him and for the first time he is sure she sees him. Her eyes in her expressionless, neutral face rest on his, and in that second, her eyes say, I acknowledge you. I know who you are.

After this he will become more troublesome, more and more difficult to control.

Later he stands in the doorway and hears his mother talking to the cook. She says, "When he is gone, I imagine all kinds of things. I imagine his cart overturns on the road and he is thrown into the ravine. Or bandits behead him. I imagine walking along the road and finding his school books scattered here and there and I look for swarming flies. The fear is bigger than I am. I cannot stand it."

And the cook says, "Nothing will happen to him. You are dreaming up tortures."

"They will not come true?" asks his mother. "These prophecies will not come true?" Her voice is wistful, sad.

"Prophecies?" says the cook. "Wishes!"

His mother begins weeping, how well he knows the sound of that weeping, moving in and out with the rhythm of her breath.

This is the mother. So now we know her. All this is absolutely true of the mother. But the father refuses to be imagined, because he is absent, because there is nothing in him to imagine. Perhaps later, when he becomes vindictive,

then there will be something to imagine, but not now. Because he will become vindictive: he is alive, no one acknowledges his existence. They deny the very flesh and blood of him. There may not be much to him; there is not much to anybody. But to know there are people who refuse to imagine you! Refuse to let your shadow intervene between this thought and that! That you are less corporeal than a sheet of wax paper or a molecule of gas! Of course he will grow vindictive. This is understood. They will pay attention to him then. They will have to.

So we have the mother. We have the nightmare scenes of his world, the hot village, its grey ash, the jungly hills, their cool buildings sprinkled with water, the sun doubling itself in the rivers, the waterfalls splashing down from the high cliffs, after a great rain roaring down like unstoppable engines at the end of the world.

It is horrible, all this.

Last night, in this house I stay in, I got into my bed and the cat who lives here got in with me. She is a fully grown cat but the size of a kitten. Her bones are so thin one does not like to pet her. It was cold, but then it is always cold here, cold and damp. She made her way under the duvet and pressed herself into my side. She began to purr, a sound unlike any I had heard before. I slept and woke, slept and woke, and always she was there. When did it happen, that she took me over? When did I know that if anyone approached us, the small cat would attack the intruder in our lair? When did the boundaries of my own skin melt and take in this animal so that we became two animals together in a cave, half human, half not? I liked it, this lying on the bed as if lying along a branch. I was also frightened. I had not asked to be a cat! Where was the self that lay down on the bed? The cat did not mind. She purred and purred. She only minded when I got up. Then she looked at me and asked, "What? I must go back to being a cat?"

You can lose your mind imagining others.

Of course you know that he did not necessarily come from the hot city or the grand house on the hill. It is possible—anything is possible—that he came from the city, this one, with its bridges and skyscrapers and overcrowding and high murder rate, that he stepped over bodies of people sleeping on warm subway grates, that the only ash was the constant, polluting dust. But all the same, the hot city and the house on the hill are his. The mother is his, the absent father also.

He is becoming comprehensible, he is becoming boring. His appetite for danger: that is understood. Think of the mother and her fear for him when he is coming or going from school. His boredom: what can compare with such a mother, completely mad, of course she is mad, but not boring. No, she is never boring.

He dreads her old age, he dreads the time when weakness and illness will confine her to her bed, when like a fly caught in the hand, her path will change

from the eccentric spirals and s-shapes and become still, shaped like the period at the end of a sentence, shaped like a stone, a stone too heavy to move. This is what other people are to him: stationary, stone-like, too heavy to move.

He does not dread her possible senility, the wild wanderings of her mind. This is more of what he has always known. He looks forward to it, smiling secretly while others try to coax her back. *Can't you remember, Ama? It was not you who picked the lemon and bit into it. It was not you. Why must you say you bit into the lemon?* He likes to see her float through the door of one sealed-off year to another. He thinks: for her there was never time and space. He smiles with satisfaction when she addresses the fat old lady cook as Ashi, her husband, when she says, *We must go off together. Meet me late at night.* He is never so alive as he is when he watches the horror with which the others view his mother. So she seduced Ashi! It wasn't the other way around! All these years, lying to them, telling them stories, and now his father is dead, she is almost dead, the truth comes out! If we have not heard it for so long, why must we hear it now? He thinks: let her rave, let her show herself, let her show herself to them as she showed herself to me.

They say: how angelic he is, cleaning up after her. Look how he washes her, as if she were his own child.

What joy, what satisfaction, he takes in it! What vindictiveness! In this he is like his father. He is only sorry his father is not here to share this wonderful moment with him.

At night he eats highly spiced meals that burn the inside of his mouth, his tongue, his throat: this is the appropriate food for such a time. This is the time of burning, when what she is finally burns through into the light, as a lit cigarette held beneath a thick sheet of cardboard eventually burns its way through, first the whitening—the ash on the surface of the cardboard—then the round blackening border, then the tiny curls of smoke rising up, then the glowing mouth of the cigarette. Let her burn through! At last!

Now we can imagine his father. He is a man who holds his stomach after a meal. No food agrees with him. What he eats is bland. Before each meal, a ritual: the combing of his hair, the washing of his face, his hands. After each meal, a ritual: a cigarette-sized cigar smoked in a carved ivory holder. Then, if the night is cool, a walk.

He is short and has a pot belly, but all the same, he has a distinguished air. Why not? He has studied distinguished men, has worked with them, has imagined what it would be like to move as they move. He has never undertaken to imagine what it is they do, although he begins to imagine this all the same, and so he begins to advance.

He has a horror of unpredictability. When he wakes in the morning, he sees his wife's head on the pillow, beheaded by the sheet, and thinks, *Good, she is still asleep.* He is always up first. For him, this is the worst part of the day. When his wife comes in, what will she say? Will she weep? Will she acknowledge his

presence? Will she rave on about a man in the village who is plotting against them? Will she wordlessly extend her hand so that he may examine a blotch on the back of her hand, mutely asking, *Is this it? Is this fatal?* Will she begin to weep for herself, believing she has a fatal disease? Or will she nestle into his side, will she say she loves him, she has always loved him, how can he believe the terrible stories of what she does in the hot city?

He is a constant man. Why must he be the center of these storms? She should have a dose of her own medicine. Of course she should. Why hasn't he thought of it earlier? There are so many young women, so many weapons. Inevitably, one day he decides to use one. What delight he feels now! *See! How do you like it!* He imagines her pleading. He imagines her silent unhappiness as she lies on the bed beneath the thin sheet, always sleeping or appearing to sleep.

What he did not imagine was her indignation, her self-righteous fury, how it would feed on itself until she became violent, truly dangerous, really homicidal, how his family advised him, *for your own good*, leave that house. How even the servants would regard him with awe, as if he were already dead yet was still walking about as if nothing had happened, as if he were a ghost with a grievance who had come back to revenge himself and then lost himself in a reverie of silk pajamas and thin cigars.

What a laughable ghost, dead, yet deprived of the ceremonies of his own death, the grieving of others, the wonderful eulogies said over his body! Deprived of the sound of mourning servants, a wailing wife, a weeping child! The worst, the most unexpected disruption of his beloved routines! Of course he became vindictive, vindictive from afar, withholding funds, threatening law suits.

It is not precisely for this his son hated him, but for the surprising effect this malevolence had on his mother. A letter arrived from another country, a country which would not even believe in the existence of the hot city, and his mother would begin to weep and then to rave. What had never been predictable before now became expected. The arrival of an envelope with a foreign stamp meant tears, storming rages. Now for every mood there was an explanation. It was as if, in leaving, his father had finally bested his mother, had at least seized control, had put his mother in a strait-jacket of his own fantastic devising. Now it was his father whom no one could anticipate: would he send money or would he not? Would he agree to see the boy or would he refuse? When he refused, he never made excuses: *No, I will not take him. No, I will not take him now.* Refusals, unexplained. Yet he knew why his father would not take him: he resembled his mother. His son's appearance reminded him of the wife who had thrown him out.

He knew and his mother knew. She would sit, weeping, on a settee, examining his face, studying his face. How he hated it, her eyes burning into his flesh like two lit cigarettes! Then she would lean forward, her hands would curl into claws, she would put her hands to her own face as if she would tear it off,

she would look at him and he felt her nails ripping and ripping at his skin and he went cold. He knew he must stay far from her.

Eventually his father remarried. Men of routine always remarry. His mother did not remarry although there were tales of what she did in the hot city. The servants whispered in the kitchen. He knew what they whispered about.

All this is true of him. This is the life he led, this is the life he leads now, the same life going on behind the life we see him living, the life his eyes turn to when they turn from us. It is hard now to be angry at him, isn't it? This is not the sympathy borne of foolish liberal convictions. No, if you imagine someone properly, it is difficult to feel anger at them, or outrage, or perhaps any strong emotion. When you have imagined someone properly, you have gotten to the bottom of something. You understand it, or you think you understand it, which, in this provisional world, is the same thing. Suddenly the imagined person becomes boring, boring because he is known; he is comfortable now, like an old slipper the dog has chewed upon. How easily your foot slides into it, with what amusement and sympathy you look at the partially shredded fabric. Yes, he is boring, that's all he is. Not frightening, not maddening, none of those things: not any more.

And if it could be proven to you that the city of his childhood was built among mountain peaks, and that snow fell all the time there, and day and night people thought and thought about how to keep warm? That his parents were happily married, or at least no more unhappily married than anyone else?

It would make no difference. The imagination is always right. It is all there is. If you have it, you have everything. You have all you need.

There are strange groups that guide people back to health and happiness. They tell you to pray for your enemy. Pray for your enemy! Why? Because this is the best way to kill him.

To pray for him, you must ask, What does he want? What is he afraid of? What must I ask for that would suit him? And so you begin to imagine him. Dear God, you say, take away the things that frighten him. And then you ask: what are those things? And up springs the hot city, the mother rising up over the horizon, the father holding his stomach. You continue to imagine him, as you must if you are to pray for him. He loses in strangeness, his gains in strangeness, he becomes known, he is no longer an enemy.

Imagination is the best and truest form of prayer. It creates its own images, its own gods. It is, in the end, all sufficient.

You possess him, some version of him. You know how frightened he would be—as you would be—if he knew someone had a version of him in which they utterly believed. If you are still interested in frightening him, soon you will not be. Perhaps you had not counted on this, that now you will have him on your hands forever.

BOOKS

TWO NOBEL LADIES

Nadine Gordimer. *The House Gun*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1998. 294 pp.

Toni Morrison. *Paradise*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1998. 318 pp.

As we watch children shooting their classmates in schoolyards and see television reports of gun battles between the F.B.I and Aryan Nation militia, we certainly must despair for our society and our culture; our world is steeped in blood. We forget that humans have never been an irenic species, that we have always fought, tortured, killed, and maimed our own in religious, political, and sectarian wars. Our salvation is that we never cease to ask why we are so inclined to violence. Despite the evidence, we don't accept the conclusion that violence is a part of our nature, and we are always trying to understand and explain the random impulsive acts that leave a trail of death and destruction behind us.

Two Nobel Prize winning novelists, Nadine Gordimer and Toni Morrison, regard the question of violence as central in their fiction. They elevate their novels to the level of an ethical discourse on human behavior and on human responsibility, and in that they both confront the problem of violence, whether political or personal, in their fictional worlds.

Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun* tells the story of a young man who becomes, with one act, an entirely different person: a murderer. Duncan Lindgard is the grown son of a very successful professional couple. They have managed to negotiate the racial terrain of South Africa and remain somewhat true to the values they espouse and have taught their son. Their son, thanks to their efforts and money, has grown up in a world protected from the violence of apartheid. He spent his youth at private boarding schools away from riots and murders in the city, and now he lives in the newly desegregated society in harmony with blacks and whites. He seems to have escaped the worst of the old prejudices and hatreds. However, one evening, upon seeing his girlfriend making love to one of his housemates, he picks up a gun and kills the man.

That act causes a tectonic shift in the direction of everyone's life. The son is in jail; the parents must work closely with a black lawyer to get their son a lighter sentence; friends of the son become the go-betweens for parents and child; and no one really understands why Duncan has committed murder. None of the obvious reasons apply. However, soon all begin to feel that, "there is a labyrinth of violence not counter to the city but a form of communication within the city itself." No one is safe: not the poor, who have nothing for anyone to steal, not the rich who hide behind "security gates." Violence, for all their efforts, has "claimed them." The Lindgards soon learn that the worst thing is not being mugged or killed but being the parents of one who has killed, and they ask themselves, "what more could happen after something terrible has happened; what could measure against that fact?"

Like all households, Duncan's has a "house gun. If it hadn't been there how could you defend yourself, in this city, against losing your hi-fi equipment, your television set

and computer, your watch and rings, against being gagged, raped, knifed." On the other hand, "If it hadn't been there the man on the sofa would not be under the ground of the city." And therein lies the real issue of the novel. "The gun was lying around in the living-room, like a house cat But the accused bears no responsibility whatever for the prevalence of violence" that has set the stage for his one impulsive deed. So, how should he be judged? He quickly becomes "a test case for the most important moral tenet in human existence. That ancient edict. Thou shalt not kill."

Gordimer moves very quickly from the particular incidents of the murder to "the abstract larger question of a civilized nation's morality," and it is those very questions that test and tease the reader precisely because of the shifting nature of that morality. How can a nation that spent years imprisoning blacks and murdering those who spoke out against apartheid, claim any moral ground on which to judge the small moments of personal violence that necessarily result in a society whose method of law has historically been murder? That is not an easily answered question, but the troubling issues of character, personal responsibility, and freedom that surround that question resonate through the trial, color the tawdry revelations about Duncan's relationships, and underscore the quietly deteriorating control of his parents.

It is quite possible that Gordimer, while challenging us with the most important moral questions of our time, will never answer them for us. It is also true that her fiction, more than any other contemporary writer's, recognizes that "we're all people in trouble," and tries to get to the heart of the dislocation from our moral centers that makes violence "the common hell" we all share.

If we all share the "common hell" of violence, we all also dream of a better world, and that dream is at the heart of Toni Morrison's novel, *Paradise*. Morrison's world is also a violent one, but, in the past, the violence has been perpetrated upon people who wish to live in peace. Freed slaves from Louisiana, in search of a world where they can live without the violence they have experienced at the hands of whites, settle a town in the inhospitable wilderness of Oklahoma. There they struggle to build a world based on their ideas of self-reliance and self-respect. Ruby, the result of their efforts is "the one all-black town worth the pain." They maintain their dream by excluding all others from their paradise, and in doing so "make a hell of heaven."

Morrison carefully charts the almost Biblical building of the black community. First the nine black families wander in the wilderness being rebuffed not only by whites but also by other black towns because the wanderers are too black. They are "8 rock," black as the coal for which they are named, and that is first a stigma and then a source of pride. The 8 rock men set up a small town called Haven that lasts until after World War II when the families move again in search of better land and a more focused community. They find both in Ruby, and settle in to prove that their world is a kind of paradise on earth. However, there is a snake in the garden. The community can only be sustained by keeping everybody who is not a member of the nine clans, anyone who is not 8 rock, out, and that means violence.

"They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here. They are seventeen miles for a town which has ninety miles between it and any other." The women live at the Convent in a loose untrammelled community that seems to follow no laws, and the men of Ruby, tempted by the women of the Convent, decide to end the influence of the women vigilante-style. They try and convict them without due process because the founding fathers are the law, and the

women are guilty of being “women who choose themselves for company.” That, according to the men of Ruby, is a capital offense.

The men argue that they are protecting the sanctity of their world by destroying the women: “Before those heifers came to town this was a peaceable kingdom.... These here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in church.” But what the men really fear is the women’s independence. The convent is “permeated by blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters,” and the men are determined to destroy the affront to their dominance. The Morgan brothers, the Pooles, the DuPres: their goal is no longer freedom for themselves and their families; their goal now is control, and control is achieved through violence. It is the same violence they sought to escape from the guns and lynch mobs of whites. Sadly, “they think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him.”

Morrison does not let her passion for the wonderful idea of Ruby blunt the edge of her anger as she charts how the men of the town change from oppressed to oppressor. They have chosen violence, and in doing so they have destroyed not only the convent but their own dream of a “peaceable kingdom.” The people, who were despised because they were different, despise the women of the Convent because they did not conform to the town’s standards. The dream of Ruby becomes steeped in the blood of innocent women, and the men’s weakness and corruption almost destroys their souls as well as their town. “How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?”

Both Gordimer and Morrison clearly see the relationship between violence and the evasion of moral responsibility that both condones it and, in many cases causes it. Duncan Lindgard and the men of Ruby have picked up the gun, and when one picks up a gun, one changes the moral universe. *The House Gun* and *Paradise* accept that we humans are a violent species, but both novels also take the large view that once we accept that assessment we are doomed. Our salvation rests in the lie we tell ourselves that we can achieve a “peaceable kingdom.”

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