HAYDEN'S FERRY REVIEW

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Arizona State University
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We had just passed a group of scattered adobe and frame houses when my husband turned to me and asked: "Well, my dear, what did you think of Phoenix?" When I realized this was Phoenix, and Hayden's Ferry must be even smaller and meaner, my heart fell clear to my toes.

Sallie Calvert Davis Hayden
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HAYDEN'S FERRY
R E V I E W

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Contents

FICTION

POETRY

The Whale

July storm: bullets of rain, clearing
wind. Unloving men and women
walk their criss-crossing ways, marking the X
where heat turned invisible and failed.

The weekend city fills with missed
chances while the roadbed flowers. Finches,
pigeons work their one fallible song,
rooting-on the prophesied death of commerce.

Traffic lines stay put. Chinese elms watch over their
sidewalk inheritances of earth. Underground,
dark stones shift, begin rolling, sparking
as they roll, and two great fins

ripple in that slow, heavy motion black
as the whale turning, pipe and cable straining.

Political Poem #3

Now that I've left the moon behind
for other scars, the heads of my
neighbors pop up like narcissi

at each window. All morning the
thwap and *thwap* as each breaks ground and
I lip-read their questions. They know

the silence they intrude on—
pleading is their duty. And I know I live
now to prune shadows of locust away

so they can glow. I
draw them upward to air, slow
as carrots. In the great outdoors

where snails pantomime and brick walls
register defeat, they beg cash
or put a jagged bottle to

my throat. I lip-read their questions.
I mow lawns for the rest of my
life for them. I feed the homeless,

pledging boulevard and gutter.

About Us

At the pulse rate of quiet,
deep as tree river, as night
giving in, the numb bones light
their dull fire. Simple as knives
we turn to the work gone right
this short eternity, time

the last thing that could hurt us
now, its blue gust just outside.

Summer Aubade

When the moon has risen a crescent
as the slim light on a dark hip
barely above the blackened hills
—and the sun is following her, you know
because the few clouds are rust-blood
in her trailing sheets, and you know
the bargain for sleep has been
worth it all this time. You have been married
only one night to her and already
she is distantly on her own, shining
without you, not for you in the least.
—but she is still moist there
as though across a room
or a city, may even know you see her
and love her still. You do not expect
to see her this way again, though
after a thousand such sleepless nights
you may.—Then the blinding sun follows her
up among the hills and you forget
at least a dozen times that day
and then forever, or nearly.

Les Femmes Creoles

The two old Miss Parkers lived in bed, for the Negroes had taken away all their clothes: they were nearly starved. This happened in 1923, a year before the occupation, which was meant to set everything right, ended. They lay together in an upper-story room at Derby Hill, in the ornate mahogany bed of their parents, its headboard decorated with ormolu. On the same prickly feather mattress too where they had been born, six years apart, in the estate house built by their father in another century, those days when musicians came from New Orleans to play in the ballroom on Boxing Day, the servants were rewarded with hams, and their mother wore dresses that were heavy to carry, absurdly unsuitable to the climate, and took a year or more to arrive from seamstresses in London.

Out any of the three banks of windows in the room where the sisters now reigned, the unpeaceful contours and eruptions of land daily grew more wild across the once-industrious plantation. They spent hours in a state of enraptured emptiness, watching shadows parade off the hills and stall in the destitute fields of guinea grass, muster along the horizon of mangrove to drown in the sea once filled with ships waiting to load coffee, syrup, and cotton.

Outside the south row of windows grew an immense gnip tree, laden with fruit. Birds would flock in it, over-crowding the branches, and make quite a disharmonious racket at the crack of dawn, and Mary Elizabeth—M.E., or Emmy since birth—who was afraid of birds, would throw the last of her costume jewelry to chase off grackles that landed on the sill. Margaret Gloriana prayed for the birds to cock their iridescent heads at her sister, to have the pleasure of seeing the hoard of cheap necklaces and embarrassing rings pitched out the window. Fare-thee-well to that whore's brooch, she would cheer—to herself, of course, since she didn't want to hurt Emmy's feelings. So much wretched tin and six-penny glass. There went that awful tiara, the tarnished pendants, the gilt-painted earrings—how they made Margaret Gloriana's hands tremble for the few real objects they had replaced, the treasures they had been forced to sell one

by one to the Syrian in his vile shop, inhaling his turpentine odor.

Yesterday, or perhaps the day before—the sisters were not at all interested in counting—Mary Elizabeth had stood in one of the south windows, her wizened body visible like a stick drawing underneath her muslin nightgown, and leaned out to pick a cluster of gnips for breakfast.

"Sir, sir," Margaret Gloriana had heard her sister calling matter-of-factly to someone below. Emmy had seen a barefoot old black man dodging behind the base of the tree. He was wearing dress pants, a white shirt that was too big, a black necktie that was too short, and a bowler hat with crescents cut through the dusty dome to keep his head from heating up. What's more, he had been sketching a *vévé* in the dirt with his walking stick.

"Sir," Emmy said, waving. "Behind the tree. I saw you." She implored him to gather her bird ammunition and toss it back into the room.

Margaret Gloriana sprang out of bed, forgetting both her age and her nakedness. Throughout her life she had preferred to sleep with nothing on against the cool linens, and so when all was lost she was left without even a nightshirt to cover herself. "Who could you be talking to?" she wondered out loud, wrapping herself in the single sheet they shared. Everyone they knew was dead or gone away. Everyone they didn't know was unkind. She came up behind her sister, who was flapping like a scarecrow, went to the next window over, and squinted her sharp blue eyes at the figure below, who had stepped halfway out from behind the gnip tree to marvel at them.

"Who are you?" she demanded to be told, and then decided since she was speaking to a man out in the yard, it was more practical to use outside language. "What you want, jack-o, snoopin' about? Who give you permission to draw *vévé* in we dirt?"

With a jolted expression, the man below looked at the two crones, from the ethereal Mary Elizabeth to the shroud-bound Margaret Gloriana, the long white braid of her hair dangling

over the sill like a hangman's rope. One spirit beckoned him forward, one scolded him like a fierce archangel—the windows of temptation and retribution. In the excitement, Margaret Gloriana forgot that she wore no clothes; she opened her hands to brace herself and the sheet slipped to the floor. The old man's eyes enlarged even with the brim of his hat, his knees had dog-shake, he took a nervous step backward to learn if this was what they were waiting for to kill him, and then he scuttered off into the bush, convinced he had seen twin harpies, a very ungodly apparition.

"White people ain' need no wanga magic," Margaret Gloriana shouted as he fled. "No carabee spells." He was the first soul to come poke around since the last family of servants had disappeared one rainy midnight, hauling what remained in the house, and the first man to have a good square wake-up-Maggie-it's-Christmas-morning look at her body, such as it was, since her days of childhood. Well, she felt giddily unashamed about it, and now that she was shouting, she had the impulse to shout more, to shout something scandalously satisfying.

"Backra bubbies on sale today!"

She felt the blood rising in her mossy cheeks, fermentation in her delicate stomach. She tried again, exhilarated by the advance she had willingly made toward shandyism and disgrace. She craned out the window, her emaciated backside thrust toward Emmy, her breasts like a mauga dog's swinging in the air.

"A fart fill your sail, you Guinee rogue!" she cried out, making a bony fist, and collapsed back into the room, alarmed at how extraordinarily good it felt to raise her voice, to say something nasty and speak in the rough island dialect she had heard all her life.

"Margaret Gloriana!" Emmy, blushed and tittering, had stooped for the sheet. She spread her arms, opened like linen wings to receive her sister. They promenaded side by side back to the bed. "Where are your principles! You sound like a *filibustier!*"

"Oh, get on," Margaret said, unconcerned. She propped herself with their one pillow, pulled out her braid, set it on her

chest, and began to unwind it. It was her favorite, most gratifying act, brushing the length of her pale brittle hair, blowing the broken strands off her fingertips to the floor. She had a desire for a glass of ginger wine, or sherry, which she had never tasted.

"I sound just like Father, that's who."

"Thank you, I don't need to be reminded," Emmy sniffed. "Still, it's very shocking to hear it from you."

"You will live your life," Margaret Gloriana sermonized, "and I will live mine."

Emmy slid down flat and wiggled her stiff toes, imagining she was a fish at the bottom of a mustard yellow lake, which was the color left in plaster patches on the walls of the room. She tried to remember her father ever saying anything nice or gallant or uplifting to anybody. He had once traded a young female servant for a sow, the price determined by matching the girl's weight against that of the pig's. Of course, the pig was worth more. She went through the ordeal of sitting back upright, weary from being at the bottom, the austere and lonely bottom, of a yellow lake.

"Do me now, Maggie dear," she said, touching the hawksbill shell of the brush which, with their enamel chamber pot and two cracked Worcester cups, was the extent of their common wealth.

"You have such pretty hair," Margaret Gloriana said, stroking her sister's silvery, ever-slackening curls.

"Oh, but it's not as pretty as yours." The two old Miss Parkers had been saying so to each other since the beginning of time.

After several hours of tying and untying two threads she had unraveled from the hem of the sheet, the younger sister, Mary Elizabeth, announced her momentous news.

"Don't be upset," she forewarned. "I have a lover."

"You do?" Margaret Gloriana, who had been staring at a blue beetle on the ceiling, sat straight up. "How can you?" Out of respect for her sister's sensitive circumstance, she looked merely

doubtful, although her reaction could have been far more dramatic.

"Why, yes, I do," said Emmy, intransigent, feeling revitalized with confidence now that her secret was out in the open. "He has a gold tooth."

The present vacancy of life expanded out of focus. Margaret Gloriana folded her weightless hands and thought for a minute before she spoke again. "You have given yourself back to Christ Our Lord," she concluded, famous at Derby Hill for her uninspired good sense. "I thought you'd gotten over that ages ago. When they burned the church."

"I did," Emmy agreed. "What good is it to love someone if you can't even go to his house and have lovely conversations with his guests? I don't see the point."

Margaret Gloriana shifted restlessly, her shoulder blades scraping against the headboard, and made a second guess. "Is it Papa? Didn't he have a gold tooth?"

"He had eight or nine, I think." Emmy shrugged with her awkward matchstick arms. "No, it isn't him. How could it be? I always, always hated Papa. Why should I love him now that he's dead? What is there to love about the dead, except that they're not in your way? What strange ideas you have."

"Well then," Margaret Gloriana snapped. "Who is it, who can it be? There's nobody."

"He's coming." Emmy's eyes had an unsettling starry luster to them, entirely inappropriate for a woman her age. "You'll see."

Margaret Gloriana looked incredulous, wheezed—she couldn't help it. The sound created a brassy vibration in the hollow expanse of the room. Her sister was a ninny, always had been, anyone could see, disrupting their fragile serenity, threatening their sistership with youthful fantasies.

"And when he comes, what will you do with him, you old moth?"

As much as they had seen of life, they had not seen much of men. They were not beauties, but they were not without their feminine merits either. Even so, year after year, they were condemned never to be more to any man's life than their father's

maiden daughters, and the island itself conspired with this destiny. Once, on the Queen's birthday, they had both danced the quadrille with a Captain Selcroft, ashore off one of the trading ships, but their father spoiled it by belligerently insisting he be told which one Selcroft intended to marry; and when the Captain balked, challenged him to an affair of honor; and when the Captain refused to raise a pistol on the grounds that the daughters, as fair as they may be, weren't ladies enough to die for—an opinion to which *pere* Parker brutally conceded—challenged him to a horserace, which Selcroft accepted, but finished the loser with a broken neck. Only a Napoleon was foolish enough to fetch away an island girl.

"When he comes, then I shall die . . . and happily," Emmy confessed. She crossed her forearms over the washboard of her ribs as though she were practicing to be stuffed in a hole. "Not a day sooner."

But how unfair, thought Margaret Gloriana, who by virtue of being the elder felt she had every right to die first. Besides, Mary Elizabeth would appreciate the upper hand, late as it was to come to her, and who in the world would tend to her corpse and save her spirit from wandering about if not Emmy.

"What shall you die of, then?"

"Is it at all true what they say, that you can die of love?" Emmy whispered in ghostly repose, her hands clasped over her flaccid bosom. "That would be the least I could do for love, after all this time. Wouldn't you think?"

Margaret Gloriana groused for a bit, unimpressed. "You always want everything perfect," she said.

They were without oil lamps or candles but it didn't matter. When the sun, only minutes from setting, dropped into the western windows in the late afternoon, the glare was a powerful soporific; it absorbed their reservoir of strength, disordered their thoughts, and put them almost instantly to sleep: the deepest, most forlorn, most uninhabited sleep they had ever experienced. They were also in the habit of waking hours later, simultaneously, like a pair of zombies, in the middle of the night. Then they would use the chamber pot and patter back to

bed, nestled together but trying not to move, listening to the gunfire in the mountains while they waited for their wistfulness to turn to a second, more benevolent sleep. For years (they didn't know how many exactly) the island had been occupied by foreign troops (they didn't know whose, really) and a resistance movement had organized against the outsiders (they weren't actually sure why) but they did know that the men only fought after dark, which the sisters thought cowardly and of a fiendish design. Eventually they would close their eyes again, the translucent lids lowering shut, and enjoy separate but identical dreams: the *vévé* the old black man had scratched in the dirt under the gnip tree, a cross-hatched heart pierced by two swords. Now it was being inscribed by Captain Selcroft.

Not the following day but not long after, perhaps a day or perhaps two, Mary Elizabeth was kneeling on the sill of a south window, her insubstantial waist encircled by Margaret Gloriana while she stretched as far as she could—not very far because she was characteristically timid and her sister was making her do it anyway, so her heart wasn't in it—stretching to reach a second group of ripe gnips, the first and closest already eaten in weeks past. Birds dashed from branch to branch with dizzying speed, mocking her. She leaned a few more inches, then for no apparent reason and without warning, Emmy blasted the fresh morning air with one of her girlish screams. Margaret Gloriana hugged tighter—all their lives they had been lean healthy women, not weak (though Maggie was tall), and now they each weighed no more than a basket of sorrel blossoms. She tried to pull Emmy back in but couldn't; her sister spread herself out like a cobweb in the window, opening her knees and grabbing hold of the shutters and vines. "Are you falling?" Margaret Gloriana asked. "You don't seem to be."

Emmy quit resisting and floated in her sister's arms. Margaret Gloriana helped her down quickly from the sill, afraid she was being stung to death by jack spaniars or assaulted by the birds. Once she was on her feet again, Emmy, her face feverish, her

jaw quivering, took one guilty glancing look at Margaret Gloriana and burst into tears. She gestured toward the south as if she were shooing mosquitoes.

"There's a man on horseback coming," she wailed miserably.

The older sister rushed to the window. "Where?" There was nothing much wrong with her sight, but she could see no man on horseback near or far.

"He's a white man," blubbered Emmy.

"Impossible," Margaret Gloriana clucked. "Inconceivable. You're making-believe again." She peered into the green-tangled distance where disciplined groves had once stood, as sweet to the eye as rose gardens. Nothing was out there anymore but a spiteful jungle re-creating itself. Not a chicken or peacock or guinea fowl, not a goat or black-bellied sheep, not an ox or cow, a donkey or a horse, and certainly not a backra man, which would be terribly disconcerting, for neither of them had seen or spoken to a white man in years, and they would sooner transform themselves into *crapauds* than prepare for a civilized visit. It was an indecent idea.

"Stop bawling," Margaret Gloriana said, leading her sister back to bed. "It's very tiresome to hear you go on like this. No one's coming." She cuddled her sister to her breast and rocked gently, as she had so many times in the past. Who would come this far into the abandoned countryside to gape at two old women with flesh like salt cod and not a stitch to wear? Who even knew they were alive, and why should anyone care, and if they cared, what business was it of theirs, she'd like to know.

"My lover," lamented Emmy, reading her sister's mind, a skill she had been explicitly forbidden to use long ago. "If only I had some violet water."

"Oh dear, let's not start up with that." Were they even alive? Maybe someone would come and tell them if they were one way or another.

"Or a gown. Or just a ribbon for my hair."

Not much was wrong with the old sisters' hearing either, and they were both startled by the muffled impish laugh of a whinny, still miles away on the serpentine path that traversed

down palisades, dipped into ravines, wove through vaulted tunnels of ceiba trees, vanished across irrigation canals grown solid with lily pads—yet close enough to make their hearts flutter. Emmy felt her sister's long nails dig into her shoulders and she squirmed to the other side of the bed.

"I told you," Emmy despaired. "Dear God Almighty Jesus, what shall I wear?" She begged her sister to go back to the window to see how near the rider had come.

"No, I can't bear it." Margaret Gloriana rasped her disavowal of whatever might happen next. She began to shudder and pulled the sheet up to her chin. "I don't want to see a white man. You go."

But Emmy herself was too distraught to move except to yank her own side of the sheet up to her face, so they lay there quaking, their dehydrated skin turned clammy. The horse whinnied again, much nearer, then after a while snorted, nearer still, and not a minute later the day—which had been like so many others and not worth complaining about, because what had been done was irreparable—was being praised in a booming voice that seemed to cause a rumble in the stone foundation of the house.

"Good day, good day, good day!"

"I'm fainting," said Emmy in a barely audible sigh.

"So am I," answered Margaret Gloriana. "He's your lover. Tell him to go away."

There was a knocking—though not at the door, for the servants had sprung its hinges and taken it too.

"Hello, halloo, *bonjour,* anybody home?"

"He has a powerful voice," noted Emmy.

"He sounds to me like a *cinquantaine,*" Margaret Gloriana replied, hissing. She had no precise idea of what a *cinquantaine* actually was, only that it was her father's most relished label for whomever he didn't like. He had been a man delighted with the abundance of his enemies—Irish rebels, Gallic Protestants and Papists, Scottish Covenanters, Quakers, Puritans, and all manner of psychotics, convicts, and deportees, not to mention the Dutch, the Portagee, Jacobin French, and barbarous Spaniards.

The intruder down below would likely be representing one or more of these diabolic traditions.

"A hairpin," murmured Emmy, "a teaspoon of scented powder."

"If he comes in the house he'll murder us," said Margaret Gloriana. "That's what kind of white men show their face these days."

He came in the house, stamping his boots on the fractured terrazzo, crunching a path through broken table legs and chicken bones and the busted machinery of clocks. They listened to him playing football with coconut husks, they heard the tintinnabulation of porcelain and pottery, shattered on a night of inscrutable liberation. What made them all the more apprehensive was his dreadful whistling, a low-pitched melody like none they had ever imagined, a sinister bold and bumpy rhythm. When he reached the wooden floorboards of the dining hall he became an earthquake, and when a foot thundered down on the first step of the main staircase, and then the second thundered down on the next step, and so on to the top of the landing, the two Miss Parkers whipped the sheet over their heads and lay petrified, immobile as plaster saints. Throughout the halls and passages the repercussing amplified to apocalyptic proportion; he clomped from room to room like a nosy Goliath until at last he clomped into theirs and halted at the foot of the bed. The whistling ceased, but the atmosphere still rang with his noise.

"Are you alive?" he inquired politely.

He repeated the question in Spanish, which confirmed Margaret Gloriana's cutthroat fears, and then in French, which made Emmy shiver imperceptibly in anticipation, because she had always known the French to wear such provocative hats. Receiving no response, the man began to pull ever so cautiously at the sheet, inching it down farther and farther until he saw one grizzled and one flossy mop of hair, pinkish scalps, the glossy crowns of two foreheads, liver-spotted and additionally marred by the scarlet dappling of sun-made cancers. He took a steadying breath and continued: a double set of eyebrows astonishing for

their coal-black thickness, and then, regrettably, the pure but lifeless eyes, wonder-stricken by the beyond. His face saddened, he drew his hand back from the sheet and crossed himself, muttering in a language neither sister could understand but which sounded groans and smacks. He went to a window and sagged against its peeling frame, staring out at the vast and savage terrain.

Contained within the slightest exhalation of breath, a sound not different from the natural silence of the house, Mary Elizabeth spoke to her sister.

"He's wonderful."

Margaret Gloriana puffed back, an insufflation as soft as blowing into a baby's ear. "He's much too young—and thin."

"He's very handsome."

"He has a nose like a Jew."

They did not think it odd or offensive that the young man had a carbine strapped across his back, for on the island men had always carried guns, even to the dinner table, and they did not perceive that his soiled gray blouse and stained flannel pants were in fact a uniform. But through the weave of the sheet, Margaret Gloriana, at least, could taste the bitterness of cordite that enveloped him, and smell the familiar sorrow of blood, and knew without having to ask that he had come fresh from battle. Emmy would have registered this evidence too, for her senses were equally refined by solitude as her sister's, but she was drifting, overwhelmed, pursuing vague memories of passion through the museum of her heart.

The young deserter went from window to window, surveying the dense panorama, and assured himself he had not been followed. He wished he had discovered the two old women alive and prosperous, quick to offer him a plate of lamb and pudding, and he would sit, assuming they owned a chair, and confess the peculiar fate that had befallen him and they, poor withered figs, saturated with long experience distilled to wisdom of the world, would advise him what to do. They would tell him

how to undo what history had done to him: how he, a Flemish village boy who aspired to play in the most renowned beer gardens and cabarets of Europe, lubricating the dreams of the masses with new and dangerous music, how he, who until yesterday had masqueraded as the heroic Charlie Andrews, might recross the ocean and repatriate himself to the ravaged continent as his civilian self, the Liege *savant* by the name of Josef Krunder, who since the age of three could play the *Marseillaise* or any of a dozen anthems on whatever instrument he was handed. He, Josef Krunder, who was Charlie Andrews risen to First Lieutenant's rank, a member of a great army that had been victorious in a great war, now doomed by an invisible momentum to tidy up jungles and deserts, islands with names no one ever heard.

On the other hand, he had participated in splendid adventures, and increased his repertoire of popular songs tenfold—but enough was enough.

Throughout the exotic diaspora of sinners where he had campaigned, he had viewed uncountable dead, the majority of them flayed and mutilated, and he had stumbled upon more than a few old women like these in the bed, but none so intimately. They were like forsaken goddesses who had outlasted their value, dispossessed by their celebrants and allowed to spoil, unworshipped, suspended in purgatory between a fallen world and one as yet unborn. He returned across the room to replace the sheet as he had found it, taking a last gaze into the soul of their eyes, inanimate as miniature pale-blue doll parasols. Swept by profound homesickness—what, after all, had become of his own mother—he marched out of the bedroom, downstairs, and then outside into the heat, from a cistern splashed water on his face and neck and began to police the grounds in search of a shovel, obligated by a Christian upbringing to bury the hags before he rode on to the sea.

After a time he gave up the hunt, having discovered nothing in the dilapidated outbuildings of any use save a hoe blade with its shaft broken and a cutlass filed as sleek as a rapier. Back to the house he went, through a rear entrance that passed him into a

library strewn with excreta and goose feathers, its remaining volumes flowering a slick vivid mold, and he thought to himself that he would say a prayer over the stiffs and leave it at that. Belated last rites. But the day had progressed too far for traveling hostile territory, and he reasoned he should stop the night until the moon rose, and then go on. His village superstitions, however, argued against such a plan: pass the evening with two dead women and get attached to whatever curse lingered over the violated estate. Yet to think of the world this way, so vulnerable to mystery, was no longer possible for Josef Krunder Charlie Andrews. His conscience chided him, he was taunted by the imperatives of manhood, and so he resolved to stay—and to quicken the time he would offer a requiem, so that the dead might look down from heaven and know they had not been, for once, forgotten.

In the final hour of daylight, the sisters as unconscious as logs, he ascended to the sun-swept upstairs room outfitted like a junk dealer. From the ubiquitous trash of devastation, he had combed three galvanized pails with their bottoms partially rusted out, a length of cedar planking hanging by its last nail from one of the sheds, a half-burnt spindle from a ladder-back chair, and from his saddle an army-issued wool blanket and a paraffin plug of candle. Near the foot of the bed he went to work, set the cedar plank spanning two of the pails, upturned the third as a stool cushioned by folding his blanket into a pad. Out the windows, the evening's stridulation of crickets and frogs began to saw at the tranquility of twilight. He lit the candle and took his seat, gripped the charred point of the spindle, and with it reproduced a crude outline of a keyboard upon the surface of the cedar plank, minus the highest and lowest scales for want of space. He flexed his hands, practiced several finger exercises, limbering the knuckles, and called the notes in his head but to his surprise they came as sterile letters, not tones, until he pictured the clefs like a charge of helmeted troops, advancing through the scales from bass to treble.

His countercharge, the requiem. He was ready to perform.

"Eternal rest grant upon them, O Lord," he sang in a tenor's

voice. His spidery hands crept along the board in a solemn cadence, the calluses tweaked by splinters, fingertips blackened by char. His amateurish preoccupation with striking the correct keys; a panic as the formal sequence of the mass temporarily faded from memory—these shortcomings slowly dissolved and he was transported by the literal resurrection, impoverished as it was, of music. As his instincts revived and intensified, he concentrated less on the act itself and more on abstract appreciation, oneness, union. He smiled mournfully upon his subjects, aware that they and they alone could hear the divine orchestration that resonated with such compassion within the chamber of his mind, but as he approached the *Dies Irae,* he was spontaneously delivered back to his youth into the slicing scrubbed hands of his choirmaster father, a bloody bastard he was, and he inhaled again the frankincense of suffocation of the church, and felt its smothering robes on his shoulders. His hands slammed clumsily on the plank, he glowered at the two desiccated crones and their whiffy mattress, his eyes raked their loathsome morbid shapes. And as he played on, his nails indenting the wood, he realized something was different—wrong—about the arrangement of the corpses. He squinted through the dim and shifting illumination, his voice rose until he was bellowing in Latin. The noise outside the windows churned like the engines of a mighty factory. Was he mad, or had the geometry of their bones been reformulated? Then he had it: When he had first looked down upon them earlier in the day, they were aligned in bed like two fallen fence posts in a snowy field. Now they had thaumaturgically branched. Now their parallel arms formed a chevron. They were holding hands.

"The hell with this, ladies," Charlie Josef sang, and with a flourish of vaudevillian chords, bridged over to a ragtime dirge, putting himself in a sweat. Then he gave the two possums love songs, folk songs, drinking songs, ballads from operettas, every music-hall ditty that came to mind, songs in Flemish and Celtic, Finnish and German, torch songs, war songs, minstrel songs and shanties, verse upon verse, chorus and refrain, one after another

on into the night until his mouth was paste and his throat nostalgically raw, the candle extinguished to a frozen puddle and the room flooded with satin mists of moonlight.

With throbbing fingers and stiffness in his knees, his thighs cramped from riding all last night down from the mountains, he got to his feet, refastened his rifle over his shoulder, and approached the head of the bed. Tenderly, he turned back the corner of the sheet, exposing Mary Elizabeth's smitten expression, and bent over.

"How far is the coast, madame?"

"Two leagues southwest," peeped Emmy to the relief of Margaret Gloriana, who was sure her sister had fulfilled her own premonition by dying hours ago when she had released her water into the mattress, and her hand had gone limp and cool. Still, she didn't think it necessary to converse with the man in French, like a *soubrette*. He leaned over and turned the opposite corner of the sheet, but Margaret Gloriana clung to inexpression, refuting any notion of her continued existence.

"Can I do something for you, *Gran-mere*?"

Emmy asked that he send her a pair of black crepe drawers, if he'd be so kind.

She remained in an ecstatic trance for days, effervescing upon occasion, uttering endearments at the birds, fragmented lyrics, frivolities about gold teeth (which she hadn't verified) and artistic temperament, until Margaret Gloriana was disgusted with her pretense, the latest of many perpetrated by her younger sister since they were children. She contrived a list of mortal sins the singer had most likely committed in his young life, but Emmy wouldn't listen, and so in frustration over losing her company, she fought fire with fire and declared that she too had a lover.

In Emmy's eyes, the cloudy bliss instantly clarified, her nostrils dilated with the restorative vapors of rivalry. "Why, I don't believe it," she protested. "I would be so happy for you, but I don't believe it at all."

"Yes," Margaret Gloriana held firm, although she herself didn't believe a word that rolled from her mouth, "and he will come very very soon."

"How do you know? Can't you tell him there's no hurry?"

Emmy felt her sister meant to punish her for luring the singer to Derby Hill with her yearning. Ever since his nocturnal concert, all Margaret could do was malign his innocent talents, point to the smudged board across the pails (which she dare not touch) as if it were a pagan altar, diminish the gift he had endowed to her memory. He sang such devilish things, Margaret Gloriana accused daily. Oh, they were so much fun, Emmy would defend. His intention was to rob all that was left in the house, and that could only be their eternal spirits, her older sister retorted. But that was fine with Emmy; she said he was welcome to hers.

"I know because the shooting has stopped at night." The end of the conflict seemed to have occurred the evening before the white man appeared to beguile them with evil crooning. "The war is over," Margaret Gloriana improvised. "He has done his duty valiantly. He is free. I won't say another word about it."

They lay together at a standstill for several more days, fatigued by the smallest exchange of civilities encouraged by this new tension. They sucked on the creamy orange pulp of gnips, sipped cistern water from cracked cups, and tried to speak of other less selfish things. Of their mother, for instance, who became ill when they were twelve and six and returned to her homeland for treatment. They could not remember the illness she suffered, but the treatment administered apparently had great healing power, for it cured her of being a colonist's wife.

"She sent for us and sent for us," recalled Emmy.

"But she died."

"Father wouldn't agree."

"But he did. We couldn't leave, though, unless she came to claim us."

"She never came."

"She couldn't. He would have hacked her to pieces."

"Would you have gone?"

Their remembrance of their mother consistently ended with this uncomfortable question, each of them shy to answer for fear of distressing the other, and they would move on to other events.

"The November hurricane was the worst day of my life."

"It killed Alexander Brumfield." Emmy threw a gnip seed at a trio of grackles on the sill.

"You were too young to remember."

"I remember. The servants picked cuttlefish out of the trees."

"Alexander was cut right in half. Something flew in the air and hit him, but it went so fast no one saw what it was."

"Alexander was going to marry you."

"You can't remember, you were only three."

"I was four. The fishermen never came home, but their boats did. I remember we made coffins from them."

The sisters conjured up the scouring stones along the river bank, the eddies of moss-green water. The stones were flipped like pancakes during an earthquake and ruined for laundering for a least another century, their smooth lye-bleached surfaces, burnished by so much cotton, replaced by slime-coated coarse undersides. The same catastrophe had rocked the Virgin Mary from her chapel pedestal, breaking the statue into three pieces and releasing an egg snake that had lived in the hollow of the casting. Their father had it caught, and kept in a grass basket on a table in the parlor, and only white men were permitted to look at it. The sisters saw the workers in the fields fanned out like a line of ragged infantry, bent to the ground in a torturous advance, as if searching all day for a dropped coin. And the painter from Italy who resembled, in their opinion, a Biblical shepherd. The servant women were rendered too merry and independent by his brush, with faces like voluptuous moons, and no one purchased the canvasses. They reminisced about the itinerant professor, his smokehouse pungency; his thin frock coat, his mustard shirt with too few buttons, the gray trousers with a black stripe down the outer seams; his green flat-sided carpenter's pencil; his purse a soda-cracker tin with a rope strap, stuffed with papers. He left them untutored except through

mimicry, scattered lines from *Othello* and *The Tempest*—"Hell is empty, and all the devils are here" and "Do that good mischief which may make this island thine own forever"—and schooled them in the details and habits of foreigners, a class that excluded no one. They remembered the dentist in the capital who repaired their teeth with caulking compound; the charcoal-makers who cooked entire trees like pigs in the soil; the vomit smell of grinding houses and the caramel smell of boiling houses; the taste of the baked spheres of cheeses, stuffed with prawns, sweetbreads, and pigeons; tamarind butter, sunbonnets, and whale oil lamps; the vulgar little monkeys that would shit on the veranda; the parrots, now extinct, and the carnival flamboyance of their plumage. The campfires of the laborers, the ululations of their legends. How many empty columns of time had passed since they had admired the handsomeness of their father's *paso finos*, the best of them raced in Jamaica? And before the instrument was outlawed by the last governor, the frantic seductive sound of the *tambu*, drumming from inside the mountains? Neither of them could say how many years it had been since the week-long poisoning epidemic, which first took their father's bulls, then his mastives, then the man himself; but they could remember the last drought because of the pink-and-black-petaled strawflowers that bloomed only during periods of exceptional dryness. And they could hear their mother teaching them the alphabet as if they had savored the queer vinegary edge of her breath—she drank red wine—only yesterday:

A is for Albion; B is for Berkshire and Buckingham; C is for the Crown and Cruelty; D is for Devonshire, Drake, Decadence, and the Damned; E is for Eternity, which is the length of any day under this roof.

But the alphabet failed to subvert the sisters. Their mother could not persuade her daughters that they were prisoners in a world confounded by an inexhaustible capacity for sin; she could not teach them not to call it home.

And so he came, as he must given the unwitting prescience of

the sisters, the thinning of the veil stretched across the future. He was one of the freedom fighters, a black man come out of the mountains after untold years of struggle. He hung with filthy rags; one leg bled from an undressed wound, and the flesh around his left eye was slack from an invisible injury. There were no more bullets for the rifle he carried, but he didn't need them anyway for he had triumphed over his enemies, over all adversity, and was now untouchable. He limped through the broad shadows of waning moonlight. With eyes most keen after sundown, he inspected the *vévé* at the base of the gnip tree; other signs throughout the yard—the skeleton of a land turtle, an erebus moth that flew against his cheek—warned him that Derby Hill was haunted. But he knew as well already, it was why he had come, and he praised the gods for this opportunity, this further evidence that he had been chosen, that his trials were divine, that now he must wage peace on the dead as successfully as he had waged war on the living. He had returned to his place of birth.

The two old sisters, in between their first and second sleep, heard the sawboning of the jungle cease and knew he had arrived, passing over the grounds and into the house with no more disturbance than a stray breeze rising off the sea. They listened carefully and for some time heard nothing, nothing distinct other than the tremulous presence of his breathing in the kitchen, until finally there was an anguished cry, and the house echoed with his grieving.

"Why does he weep?" Mary Elizabeth asked in a whisper.

"Oh how should I know?" Margaret Gloriana said, acutely agitated. She wanted this fellow to come up, present himself with expedience, then go about his business elsewhere. She was feeling especially old and frail tonight, weary of this recent plague of males, tipping the sublime calibration of the scales of sisterhood. Nevertheless, she felt compelled to defend him. "And why shouldn't he weep?" she said. "It's no worse than the other one's singing."

Yet it was worse, much worse, this tragic outpour, and it resounded through the ruin of the house and into the surrounding countryside like the mourning of a nation. "I wouldn't say he's terribly pleased to be here," Emmy observed.

"Quick to judge, quick to apologize." Her sister lowered herself off her elbows.

There was a natural rhythm to his baritone keening; before long the sisters had accustomed themselves to its aqueous surges, its failing ebbs, and were lulled back into their twin dreams of Captain Selcroft. They woke at dawn to the same sobs, which had lost none of their vigor. All through the day the man's marathon sorrow continued unabated, afflicting the two old Miss Parkers with its depth of wretchedness and preempting their sisterly discussions, but as the sun balled its light and simmered down toward the western windows, the crying stopped and Emmy, who was first to see him enter the bedroom, made a ravenous gasp for air as if she had been submerged underwater and had almost drowned. Thus alerted, Margaret Gloriana sat up in bed and, mortified by what she saw, just as quickly slumped back down.

"That's not who you think it is!" she blurted out.

"Mother of God," said Emmy, "you're in love with a darkie." So much of the time through the years there had been scant else to do but look in the opposite direction, not merely away from the tribulations of the blacks, but from the extravagances of the whites as well, and half the world was too full of wonder, the other half constricted by manners and taboos, to have extra room for temptation. And so Mary Elizabeth marveled at how impetuous her sister had become at the end of her life.

Margaret Glorina, however, was hardly capable of speaking. "Absolutely not," she croaked without her customary authority. "That's his servant." But she knew this was no more true than her original announcement, that this feral being poised inside the door was no more another man's servant than he was or could be her swain, real or imagined, if at all a man himself, and yet despite his lycanthropic eyes and beard, and the mien of a beast who feasted on human virtues, from the sound of it he had wept

as other men do, with a crushed heart, a long-suffering spirit, and a lust for the infancy of pain. In this regard his humanity was more outspokenly noble than their father's ever had been, their father who had lived a closet of avarice and moral certainty and had died roaring hatred for all peoples, including his own kind. Still, Margaret Gloriana surmised, she had stupidly, childishly, summoned a nemesis, the only lover that would ever come for either sister—the brilliant solitaire, their death.

As for the black maroon, whose name was Alvaro Toussaint Parker—no blood relation but the surname of a slave brand inherited from his ancestors—he took one freezing look at the sisters, the prominence of their yellowing teeth, the transparent skin varnished around their skulls, the witch's locks, the purpled eyepits, the beaks of nose, and addressed them as if they were indeed already dead, though of a more privileged caste of duppy than the other ghosts he had sought to communciate with during his time in the house. Falling to his knees at their bedside, he spoke to the spirits as a supplicant.

"I might ask you to ask my mother to forgive me," he said.

Straight off, the sisters were too amazed by the formality and dignified tone of his speech to reply. He had mastered their own language, the house language and empire's language, but emitted from so swollen a mouth it struck their ears as a masquerade, a subterfuge. It so spun around Emmy's thoughts that she changed roles and responded in the patois that was or should been his own, maintaining a most irregular social symmetry.

"Hear now, Moses, who you muddah?" she squeaked and, aghast, clapped her hand over her mouth.

Margaret Gloriana yawned, willing herself to remain composed, yet she began to feel drowsy. "Why don't you go on your way and ask her yourself?" she suggested. She blinked uncontrollably and yawned a second time.

"My mother was Lydalia Parker, laundress," Alvaro Toussaint Parker answered the first sister. Throughout the past infelicitous hours he had spent in the house, that's all he had done: asked his mother directly for forgiveness for betraying his eight brothers

and four cousins by conspiring with the occupation troops, because you can persuade yourself of many crimes when you know you cannot win, nor your cause prevail, and so he had led his comrades into ambush. All night and all day he had offered contrition, beseeched his mother for absolution. Instead of acknowledging him, she would not come away from her scouring stones at the river, where she slapped massa's wet linens against the whitened boulders, kneading them like dough with her muscular arms, singing hymns of resurrection. He felt he would go mad begging her to come to her feet and comfort him, her youngest son, in his grim passage of leadership.

"Lydalia Parker, laundress," he droned balefully, "Lydalia Parker, mother of her country."

Lydalia's family *was* big, I recall, thought Emmy as she sank into unconsciousness. He bowed his leaf-flecked head to wait for the dead to deliver his penance, craving pardon so that he might resume his self-appointed mission without malediction. He remained kneeling, full of remorse; the sisters fondly remembered the laundress Lydalia Parker but had ceded the power to speak; the western windows blazed like doors thrown open to a hellish furnace. Blood-red glorioles irradiated the phantoms in the bed; Alvaro raised his eyes and saw the spirits reduce glimmer by shrinking glimmer back into nothingness of inert flesh. In the deluded mind of Alvaro Toussaint Parker, their departure was a merciless disconnection. The *loas* had rejected his plea, they would not enter as his advocate into the netherworld and intervene on his behalf. He bounded to his feet, vowing this was the first and last time he would petition backra spirits for their charity. He noticed the cedar plank on its pails, deciphered its smudges, and Alvaro Toussaint Parker condemned himself for not foreseeing the full and malicious range of plots he was up against. He crawled from the house, on hands and knees, sideways at times like a crab, to search for his mother's grave.

They awakened at their habitual hour, in the middle of the

night, not to the distant pops of gunfire, or the chirring of the insects, but this time to the labor of muffled chopping, and they rose together, Ladies Lazarus, and went to stand in the northern windows. There was another, more fluid sound reaching them, like blankets being shaken out, and now they located its source, the high fire on the nearby hillside within the low stone walls of Derby Hill's cemetery. The shape of a man jerked between flame and shadow, lifting an arm, a skull balanced in its hand.

"It's the professor," Emmy said. He had been given to campfire reenactments of *Hamlet*, staged on the dirt between the cluster of servants' huts.

"What's he doing back, do you think?" Margaret Gloriana wondered—out loud or to herself, it no longer mattered.

"I suppose no one told him that everything's different now."

Hand in hand the sisters wobbled back to bed a last time.

Alvaro Toussaint Parker dropped the skull of his laundress mother into the conflagration, gathered the leathery scales of her skin, the kindling of her bones, and threw them in as well. He withdrew from the plot of his ancestors and slunk farther up the hill to its crest and renewed his digging, sinking the hoe blade with the broken shaft at a furious pace, as far into the rich ground as he could drive it. *Go on*, he heard the sisters urge in their transcended voices, and he struck open the old patriarch's coffin and cast his poison-twisted bones into the flames. *Go on*, the sisters urged through the night, *Go on*, as he persevered, emptying grave after grave, until by dawn he had spent his obsession, tarred by mud and ash and crumbs of dead peoples' clothes, and there was but one grave undisturbed in the cemetery, its marker carved with a sailing ship.

"*Go on*," exhorted Margaret Gloriana in the black man's ear. "That one too."

"Him especially," said Mary Elizabeth.

With all the strength of those before him who had been bonded to the land, Alvaro Toussaint Parker obeyed this ultimate command and hoed as long as it took to finish the job of enthrallment forever. Then, exhausted, he stumbled to the river, past the scouring stones with their dark sides turned up,

striped the abomination of rags from his body, and washed himself. Energy crackled back from his flesh and he returned to the grounds of the manor house and stood below the gnip tree, adorning himself with peddler's jewels. Naked but for these cast-off ornaments of his destiny, he reentered the shambles of the house and mounted the stairs, wrapped his waist with the threadbare sheet, tore the sleeves from the muslin nightgown and dropped it over his head like a vestment, and descended once more to the outside world to begin his long arduous pilgrimage across the island, to the capital where he would rule his people in the lunatic passions popular to this day, leaving the two old Miss Parkers curled on the mahogany bed of their parents, the windows filled with curious grackles, the *vévé* cleaned away by the advent of the rains, a graveyard readied for the future, the sisters hand in hand with expressions isolated from possibility but as if poised to fall faithfully under the influence of an irresistible attraction.

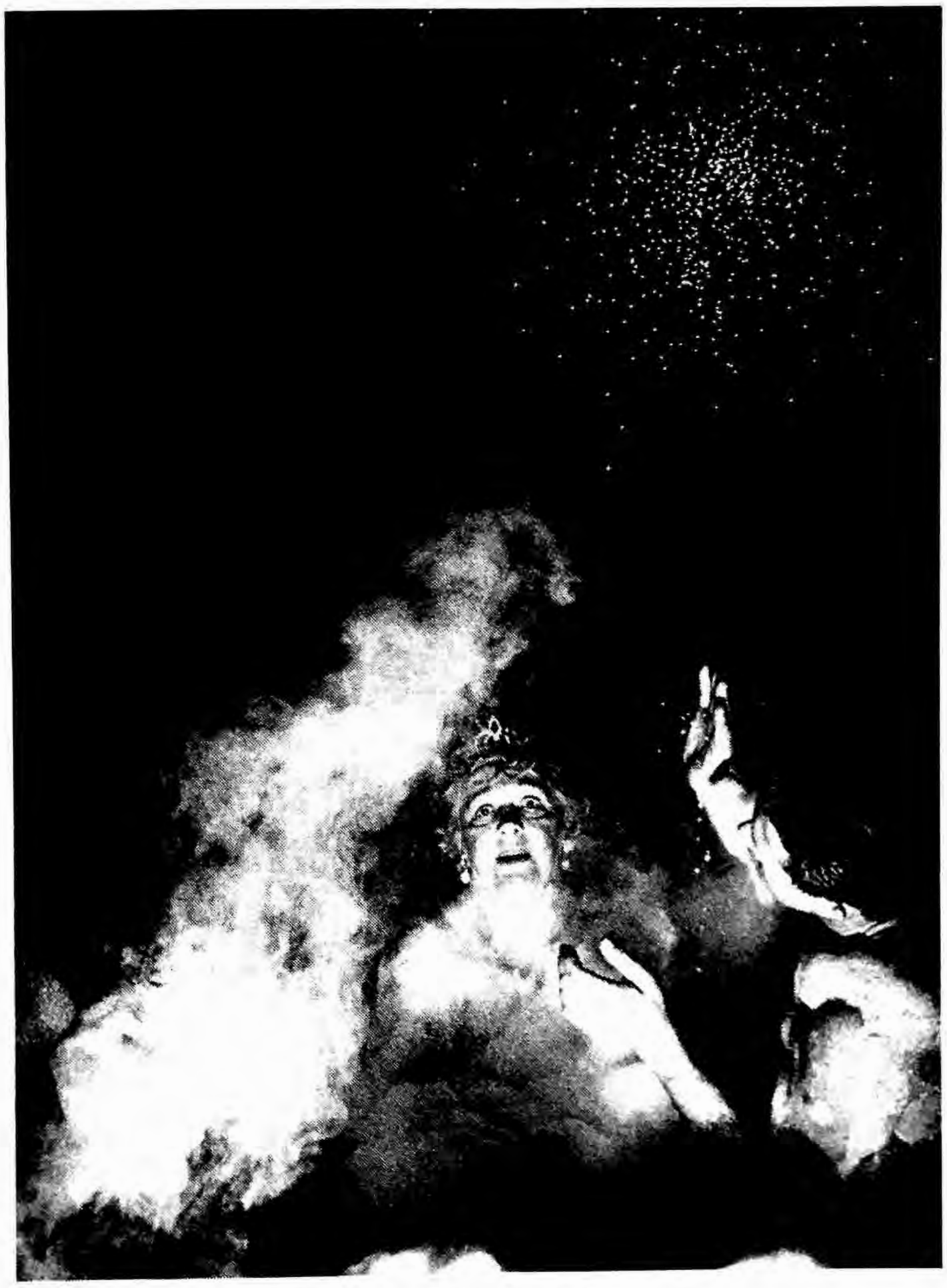
Red Hair

At dawn, a milk blue arm points out
a mass of flame on a pillow.
There is no need to fly away
from such a storm as this.
There is no need like seeing.
To the shadow, dark as smoke,
to the nightgown, white as soap,
to the coffee on the stove.
To the new day, the mockingbird,
a month closer to fall, and to all
the small fires the red leaves will supply.
Bless her eyes, she'll wake
and find me out. Surely,
I can water, throw feed at the stock,
and be back before this is all gone.
I hope she's dreaming about a good life,
a life with me in charge of mornings,
of smoke-filled days in fall when I can't
believe the fires. Of ordinary days,
after all, decorated by this need.

"Facelift, 1975"
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 14" x 17"

"Reminiscence: Portrait With My Sister, 1980"
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 14" x 17"

"From A Series: Recent Follies, Two of Us, 1985"
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 16" x 20"



"Stellar by Starlight #2, 1986"
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 20" x 16"

Traveling the Same Place

There is a mist here in the mornings.
The gulls hang like fruit in the grey air.

In my mind we are still where I left us—
in the center of the field. Frozen stalks
of jagged corn line the fence.
At the other end, a river that no longer moves.

I used to dream that inside all things there was
fire—at the back of the brain, in the belly
of the river, in a child's thumb.

I am learning new things here. I've a daughter.
At night I count the short, smooth, infant breaths
pushing in and out like wind through a sieve.

Her cry is abandonment pure. It shudders the night.
Like beauty it finds no comfort. In her sleep
I hear small mutterings of light.

You believed the best stories could only be
built of silence and that the words
were merely noise, trying to break in.

I listened and I listened but
your silence was twice silence.

That year winter came without a beginning.
Suddenly we were in the middle of it.
The grass was still green under the snow.

The Farewell

Everything clings: the dirt of time,
my lips thorned on your neck.

I stand against you and I'm falling.
We have ten days, then nine, then eight.
You are leaving. I lean here, staying

in my shadow. When I found you my gestures
broke and two chunks of the shot night

fell at my feet. I didn't think
but I tasted; quick with blood and light.
I'll lose you in the other parts I've lost.

I couldn't tell you to stay.
It would be vulgar, like asking

the wind to lie down, the foot stones
to open their wings, for love to be a grip
our hands could close on.

So I bid you farewell. My fingers
slip like water from your back.

(for Bruce)

The World Ends at Fairfax High School

When crows were walking on their black legs
through parking lots, enormous, their mouths open
in the drought,
I remembered the things we did not see
until the rains were cutting
through the face of the canyon:
her ragged tortoiseshell hair,
the tendons, tense wires behind her knees,
how the bones in her elbows
gleamed white when she cocked the bat over her shoulder.
Bruises that bloomed where the pitches that hit the ground
in front of her bounced into the sharp ridges of her shins.

Mostly we remembered Cameron against the batter's cage,
his arms raised, fingers threaded
through the chain links, watching her
while the brown air sank,
and the playground fence dissolved
in smog that cut through our lungs
like a stone knife.

We were not omens for each other that summer.
We could not have seen the crows gathering
in twos and threes in the broken branches.

Half Moon Bay

Winding around the hills toward Pescadero
we comment on the gray wash
of clouds turning lavender
over the ocean, the changing ocean.

Pigeon Point shows its light to travellers
even in the day, and cliffs
turn in and out from the shadows
as clay on a potter's wheel.

Together we feel the thickness of things.
Pumpkins shine in the fields a few miles
later than their sisters, the marigolds.
The ocean changes blue to clouded white.

Blue is a mood of concentration.
The goat at the pumpkin farm
concentrates on my fingers as they rub
his head and all care from my mind.

The mother pig covers herself with dirt,
blind to the motions of young ones,
to us holding our pumpkins as medallions
on our chests, our small reward.

A Few Words of Advice for Emma Bovary

When you decide to read and look
out the window, sometimes it's best
to keep the window closed.

Just because a man can mend
a broken leg doesn't mean
he can fix a broken bed.

And if he's been to college, got a degree,
it doesn't guarantee you can afford
new curtains for the window pane.

Not every white horse can bear up
armor in the parade. Someone
has to walk behind to sweep up dung.

Finally, If you think it's fun to take
piano lessons out of school, must you
take arsenic as well? Give us a break.

Go find some cliff to jump off or river
to drown in. Do it quick so we don't
get our stomachs turned by such detail.

Rough Slices

What I want, what I really, really want, is to break the cat's neck with my bare hands and toss its body into the woods somewhere behind the house. But I can't. Of course I can't and the reason I can't is not that I am afraid that the cat will claw me to shreds in the process, and it certainly isn't from any fear of Deb's wrath once she finds that the cat is missing, but simply because, if I did it, that whoring cat would haunt me.

If nothing else on this earth, I am well enough acquainted with *myself* to know for certain how it would end up. The memory of an act like that would grow to gothic proportions in my mind—widescreen, Dolby sound, 3-D, the works . . . I'd live it over and over again, bigger and louder each time. And then that lousy secret would weigh on me like armor until I either went mad from it or died, one or the other. So I can't do it, or *won't* is more like it. I mean, it's not worth killing myself over wanting to kill a cat. But it *is* the thing that I would really, really like to do.

The goddamn animal is pregnant again.

Here are the things that are happening: 1) in just less than four weeks, Deb will be moving out never to return according to her, not for good anyway, and we, as she puts it, can bet our lives on that, just as we could also bet that she isn't taking her shit-ass cat with her which means, essentially, that *I* will be having the kittens, and 2) Deb's younger brother, Bernard, is leaving as well, and at just about that same time; he is going to live, permanently, with some aunt somewhere in the West who is still in touch with his mother, which means that there will be just the two of us left here, namely Jake and me. Well . . . the two of us and, of course, all the animals.

And then there are these things: the house will have to be put up on the market; Jake and I will have to find another place to live and then we will have the grim process of moving itself to contend with. And, on top of all that, there's even more: I'm not certain that, without the stress inherent in what began as, and has remained, a very difficult situation, well, I'm not sure that Jake and I will have much to say to each other after the kids are gone and the distraction of the move is done with.

Worrying about all this crap is wearing me down.

I can actually feel my faculties failing me, my normal acuities rounding off, numbing. The constant grating of nerves and wills around here abrades my strength, takes little just-bearable layers at a time until, finally, I realize that all those small but rough slices have added up and I'm in real pain. It's like when you crawl around on your hands and knees on the rug, like when I was playing with that first litter of kittens for instance, and then after so much of it you find you just can't do it that way any more because all those little layers of skin that have been scraped off, a single, nearly unnoticeable layer at a time, have finally left you hurting like hell. Like rugburn. Anyway, I am no longer up to my former levels of patience. I sleep more now to get away from it all. And when I *am* awake, well, I blow easily, much more easily now that it is nearly over.

And, of course, we, Jake and I, haven't talked about it, but the tension is killing him too. It's obvious. It shows in his face. He looks worn out; grey shadows have settled beneath his eyes, shadows like carbon paper smudges or ash, and he's just not quite as sharp as he used to be. He doesn't seem to think quite as fast, or move. He's completely lost his earlier preoccupation with making love. And there are small things, little things like not shaving quite as well as he used to, and his shirts don't get thrown in the laundry like they did, and he never, ever washes the car anymore, never. Now his shirts lay scattered around on the floor, building up in the corners of the room like the paper cups that blow from the lawn into the angles of the cyclone fence at Paulie Park; sometimes, even, days later, he'll pick up one of the shirts from where they've gathered and he'll wear it again. It's not like him. And the Chevy, well, the Chevy looks like it's actually held together by the dirt. You can't see through the windows at all. But it'll all change again, I'm sure. It'll go away, be better for him once all this is over. It really is a crime, the toll all the dissention in this house has taken on him, but, after all, they *are* his kids.

I've been Jake's mistress for over a year now. I have lived in this house with him, this house his children have grown up in, are still growing up in for that matter, this house still half-owned

by his estranged wife, and God knows it has not been easy skating, though certainly I have no one to blame for my hanging around but myself. Heaven knows, no one forced me. I could have left at any time.

Nearly every day I am reminded of that.

At the height of every domestic squabble, every time I wanted to knock out the walls of this house with my bare fists, every time every single repetition of each nagging irritation forced me to see that it was more, more than simply going against the grain, I told myself, "It's a temporary situation." Each time I reminded myself that the nasty barb of Deb's and Bernard's resentment would disappear, bloodlessly, altogether, when they themselves finally did, that those plans were laid, that the ubiquitous essence of his wife, that nimble Ghost of Christmas Past who never shows her face here but who forever holds the key to the front door high above my head, would be exorcised when the divorce came through. I kept telling myself that all the ugliness and disappointment would evaporate, and that Jake and I would live idyllically beneath the oaks and maples forever and ever, and that our greatest burdens to bear, our worst afflictions, would be mosquito bites in the summer and shoveling snow in the winter.

Of course, this was nonsense. But at the time it gave me pleasure to believe it.

Now, though, there is no way to get around recognizing that that particular chapter of my life here has come to a close. The period of real striving is almost over; peace is near at hand.

It is a dangerous time.

The sureties change now, you see. The blacks and the whites, the all-too-soon-deciphered biases and moods, the bloated jealousies, the tantrums, both feigned and real, all those ugly green seethings, they turn foggy at the edges and blur, merge, then drift off, vaporous, steamy, and move away to nebulously point the way to a world of possibilities. All the myriad transmutations of Yes and No. It's staggering.

So, you see, nothing can be for certain any longer.

While before I could count on, depend on really, the staff of

distress from my lover's indignant children to support my grievances, not to mention the up-in-the-airness of the impending divorce, a rupture which, if only in the legal sense, I myself fomented, now I can count on nothing, none of the usual, not even the pain.

Then one day I open my eyes and I see another approach, a whole different side to it. Insight hands me, in clarifying brilliance, the perspective of balance, the Janus-faced, the twofold vision of what is within the realm of possibility: the kids will move off to their chosen worlds, worlds they enthusiastically deem better and brighter than Jake's and my own, or they will not; they will be happy, finally, or they will not; the house will sell, quickly or slowly, or not at all, and Jake will, assuming a sale, either salvage enough from the split to put a down payment on another, a smaller house I would imagine, or he will not. And, of course, it has been left unsaid, but we will make it together, Jake and I, or we will not.

It is these sorts of times, these topsy-turvy, slippery times, when absolutely nothing can be counted on but the not being able to count on anything at all. It's these times that really add the years to your face. There should be some sort of steps you could take to prevent it, but, really, there is no prevention.

Yet, to Jake's silent displeasure and my own vain chagrin, I check the mirror nightly, rigorously, objectively, for new lines around my eyes, creases at the corners of my mouth, new, subtle disfigurements in the name of Life itself. All too frequently I find them. And so each night in a great show of tedious regime, I cleanse my face, cleanse, cream and cream again, rubbing only upward at the neck, manipulating the skin, teasing it, persuading it to defy gravity, begging it not to betray me before I am ready. I stroke only upwards, upwards and out at the eyes, upwards and out to keep them from hanging down like the eyes of bloodhounds.

And so, anyway, now the fucking cat is pregnant.

Her name is Fedora. A hat. It is my studied opinion that Deb hasn't the slightest notion of what a *fedora* is, nor of the class the word entertains, but that's neither here nor there. It's the damn

cat's name. Jake and the kids had her when I got here, but she's still a relatively young cat, sleek when shes not pregnant, and other worldly looking. I can see now, after having learned all that I have in this last year or so, that Fedora was another of Jake's attempts, however misguided, to make up to his children for the fact that their mother had gone off and left them. There were even more of them back then. Three kids. The eldest boy was in a head-on collision somewhere near the western border of the state some time after she left. I don't think he was driving, but he was killed. His head was severed from his body. I heard it from a neighbor who thought I knew. But nobody talks about it here. Anyway, the wife went off before that ever happened, went off and left them all, left and established another whole sort of life, a life, all those years ago, without them. I guess Jake got the cat to fill some of that empty space.

Anyway, not too terribly long after I got here, Fedora had that first litter of kittens. She had a hell of a hard time, too; lost two of them. Three survived. But she would have lost those three as well if I hadn't been here, if I hadn't caught on quick and helped her. Damn cat. She didn't even know what was happening to her. She ran around the room trying to escape the pain like the Devil himself was after her and she was dropping kittens on the floor, fresh from the oven so to speak, as she ran. Even at the time I thought it was a mighty stupid cat that didn't even know what kittens were about . . . .

And then, well, as far as that particular batch of kittens went, I have to admit my own complicity. Kissy, kissy, huggy, fondle, you know. I was just as guilty as the rest of them. It's pretty obvious, I guess, that it's no secret around here that I'm a sucker for small, furry, helpless-looking things. And they kind of grew on you, those kittens. I literally spent whole days with those little ones, chasing them around on the carpet, unsticking their little soft claws when they got stuck in the nap of the rug, playing tickley-cat-feet games and rubbing their bulbous little tummies while they laid on their backs. But then there was the dog to be dealt with and I had to choose. And, of course, one tends to choose one's own. It's only natural.

See, when I came here, my dog came too. Webster and I are travelling companions, I guess you'd call it. Up to this last year, we'd moved around quite a bit. Anyway, Web is part something enormous, Irish Wolfhound maybe, who knows. But whatever he is, he is big. He is big *and* he chases Fedora. For sport only, but that doesn't seem to count much in his favor from the kids' point of view. Or the cat's. But it's not his fault; it's in his genes, you know. Anyway, since we have come to live here, the cat has taken to living in high places. Mostly it lives on top of Bernard's punching bag platform in the basement where Webster can see it but can't reach it, which is fine with me but it drives Web mad.

The damn cat, though, does all right for herself. She obviously gets down now and again because she was pregnant back then and she's obviously pregnant again now. That's a trick if she doesn't get down. And there's the mice. Periodically I find the generous offering of a dead mouse, a gift I'm sure, usually in my closet, mutilated on the wood floor beneath my best dresses, sometimes in the kitchen on the linoleum where I stand by the sink to fix dinner and wash dishes each night. And I have been singled out for the honor, it seems, because no one else in this house has dead mice in his closet or beneath his feet. Anyway, it just shows that she does get down more than we tend to think, so we shouldn't feel too sorry for her, because, quite obviously, the mice didn't commit suicide and Fedora didn't get pregnant twice by sitting on top of the punching bag platform. If nothing else in this life, I have learned how *that* part works.

The point is, though, that when the cat had that first bunch of kittens, mother and spindly mewling brood were sequestered in Deb's room in order to save them from Webster. Web never would have hurt the kittens, and, despite all the dramatics, he wouldn't have hurt Fedora either, not on purpose. But they stayed behind Deb's closed door anyway. Which was cool. It was Deb's protective streak, her idea, and wise I suppose, but I still felt, somehow, though I never said, that Webster had been unjustly accused and that he should have been, oh I don't know, recompensed somehow since he only wanted to *play* for

Chrissake's.

But then, in a very short while, the arguments began on another note anyway.

There was no way we could keep the kittens.

So, oh yes, Deb was going to see that the kittens were given away, and, oh yes, it was, after all, her cat, yes, and she knew that, and so, yes of course, they were her kittens and therefore it was, oh my, uniquely her responsibility to dispose of them, and she was going to, oh of course, going to, but she never really quite got around to it, you see, for the life of a popular young woman is busy, oh so busy, and quite ridiculously difficult, trying really, hard to the point of not having time, not having any time at all for anything that even vaguely resembled giving the kittens away.

It was really beginning to piss me off.

And in the meantime, the three of them were growing, rising rapidly above their kittenness, leaving behind their little plaintive squeaky mews for resonant, life-sized meows. In short, they were soon to be cats and no one in his right mind would take them off our hands once they *were* cats and we'd be stuck with them forever if something wasn't done quickly. Deb, obviously, had washed her hands of the problem by ignoring it. So Jake and I had to do something.

We boxed them up, gently, and sadly I must admit, just a bit sadly, especially since it wasn't supposed to be our job in the first place, and we drove them down to the A & P. We found ribbons, pink for the girl, who looked just like a miniature of her mom, and then blue ones for the boys, and we tied them loosely around their little kitten-almost-cat necks and settled the three of them, nestled snugly in their Heineken box with a bit of blanket, into one of the store's big chromed shopping carts. And then we stood outside the automatic doors of the store hawking our wares. Jake and I would take turns. We'd hold up one at a time, up near our faces where people could see it, and we'd cuddle it, nuzzle it, make the usual huggy-lovey-kitten-fuss over it.

People, of course, went ga-ga over them. All of those who showed interest, however, didn't necessarily want to take one

home with them, but they loved to pick them up and to pet them and coo little kitten endearments at them and then hand them back to us and go on their way, kittenless.

By dark, though, the box was empty except for the piece of blanket.

Each kitten had been kissed good-bye as we'd handed it over, reluctantly, one hand at its little shoulders, the other cupping its teensy little cat-bottom to support its weight. We'd given them to people who, while wandering into or out of the market with their supper on their minds or in their hands, promised soulfully, people who, at my insistence, *swore* that the kittens would get their shots and their flea collars and regular nutritious meals and that the folks themselves would be very careful not to step on them or to let toddlers pull their heads or legs off; I made each of them promise to be very, very careful not to run over them with his car. I did all of this, of course, so that I could tell Deb of their solemn vows in an effort to forestall the inevitable histrionics that would occur once she found they were gone. I went through it all in good faith. But, inevitability such as it is, the attempt was predestined to fail, and, of course, did.

And now, well, it's damned easy to see what we did wrong. We were fools not to have taken Fedora down in the box with those first kittens of hers. Now, because of that mistake, we've got to go through the whole crazy thing again.

And, of course, then all this other stuff is going on and, while it is, I'm still thinking about all this cat stuff and time is passing, passing and developing a funny way about it, and as all the impending changes get nearer and nearer, well, time and everything else sort of gets away from me.

I am braced for change, but, still, the magnitude of it scares the hell out of me.

All of a sudden everyone needs something done, everybody wants it done today and, of course, their entire future well-being depends solely on the alacrity with which I attend to their needs. No one else can do it. No matter what it is. And, of course, nobody is satisfied. Ever.

And, oh God, then it all starts accelerating with a vengeance,

whipping me around like I'm caught in the eye of some terrible eddy.

Time sort of speeds up even more then, and gets crazy, crazy, a bottomless pit, insatiable. Things around here get ugly, uglier than normal more often than not. Everyone is on edge; everyone is angry. We all act as though some fiat has been handed down, some imperative stating that vicious arguments must accompany each decision, a sort of rampant justification of whatever choice has been made. No single maneuver is exempt, and we all get cheap and mean from the heat of it. It becomes evident that we are *all* being changed here, moving *or* staying. It is both unpredictable sometimes, and, other times, all too pat. It is out of any single person's control. So we all eat and run. No one will face another. Nobody gets his phone messages. We seem to always be out of bread or milk, gin or dish soap. For a week now, we have needed cat litter. No one has clean clothes. Everyone is furious. And by the bottom half of the third weekend, no one is speaking. There is some relief in that.

And so time, like the rest of it, just speeds right on past without me. It slips by like it's greased.

On packing day the air conditioners are not working. It is a poor beginning. Early in the day, the disposition of the single working fan provokes so much spleen that Jake eliminates the problem by throwing the fan through the window and onto the rocks that lead to the driveway. Fedora is full to bursting with babies and is yowling in the heat. Web is prostrate on the cool cement of the laundry room floor. The kids are heavy with confusion. They do not know whether to burst out in song or to hang their heads. They do know well enough what it is they want; they just do not know how to play this particular game at this particular time. Perhaps years from now they will have figured it out. But now it is hot and terribly humid and we are all on the verge of exploding, from the heat, from the near-steam rising from our own sluggish bodies. The tension marks the air, ragged, between us, and voices rise and snap like needle lightning, like thin, splintery thunder, emotional and sharp. And the only silence comes during the moments when they look into

their father's eyes.

Deb's room is undergoing massive deconstruction. She is rolling all her clothes into compact balls and shoving them into an athletic bag. Sweat makes her hair stick to the skin at the side of her face, at the back of her neck. At seventeen, today she looks like an old, frantic washerwoman. Books dragged from her closet, from beneath her bed, from shelves, dog-eared, cracked-spined, paperback romances, old Judy Blumes, dog stories, mysteries, all are warped and darkened from moisture, from age; all are dropped mindlessly into boxes and set aside. She does not care at all for these. Jake will dispose of them, donate them somewhere, I am sure. Against her rear wall, beneath the high window, stuffed animals are in a heap. A Pepto-Bismal pink cat with feet like a bear's is peeking over the top through a single, huge rhinestone eye; an enormous green monkey with wire in its arms lies face down against a small brown bear and a plastic Winnie-the-Pooh on a stick whose arms and legs are free to jiggle when the stick is hoisted or dropped. Deb is past all this now. These are babies' toys, gifts from boys who no longer interest her, fair prizes, souvenir adolescents' baubles. They are kicked to the side. She cannot bear to throw them away, nor can she admit she wants to take them with her. It is hard on her. I can see that. I do understand. I watch her as she tears posters from her walls, rock stars and softly blurred photographic prints with sentimental, bad verse; they are literally ripped down, then crumpled like so much old newspaper and stuffed into the open mouth of the yard-sized green garbage bag she has begun to fill with the discards from this life. The bag sits on the floor, listing to one side, swollen, amorphous, a green molten monster. She is clearing out and is glad.

Bernard's approach is worlds away, another matter entirely. He is impassive and deliberate, quick. Five minutes after he has begun, he is ready to walk out the door. The clothes he recognizes as useful have been carefully folded and packed inside two open brown paper sacks that sit on the floor at the foot of his dresser. He has bent the tops of the bags over, twice, carefully creasing the double fold with his fingers. All this care

and yet, when he passes me in the hall, he is carrying the bags as though even they are meaningless, meaningless or empty. As he brushes past me, he tells me over his shoulder, "Throw the rest away." He is done here. He has another life. So, he walks out the door and he sits on the steps while he waits for Deb to finish and for his father to drive them down to the bus. And then, except for the order he has left behind, it is as if he has never been here. His room is silent and he is waiting to leave. It has always been like that with him.

I fantasize the way it will be once they have gotten on their busses: I will ransack the house for dried-up orange peels, for dirty dishes, single socks, and old homework. I will strip this house clean. Then I will vacuum, dust, wash the place down, disinfect it, a purge, erasing all traces, eliminating all evidence that they have ever been here at all. When the house goes up for sale, it will be immaculate, empty except for what little Jake and I will choose to live with, a lesson in minimalism. I will have painted, by then, where their dirty children's hands have left black trails like tire tracks on the walls.

After Jake and Deb go out, I walk to the door and look out. I press my face against the flimsy plastic mesh that passes for screen nowadays and I let what there is of the afternoon breeze be sieved through onto my forehead. I see Bernard stand and move towards the car while his sister and father come down the stairs. No one speaks as the three of them walk away. No one touches. The breeze is more than I had counted on and I can feel the skin across my brow contract. I pull my face away from the screen and brush blindly at the imaginary dirt that I am certain has stuck to my skin. As the Chevy pulls out of the driveway, I reach up to lift the hair from off the back of my neck where it is clinging to the sweat, clinging, in this heat, as though for its life, and then I sink down onto the cool slate of the foyer and I cry.

I am still like that when Jake pulls the car back into its space in front of the house.

When I hear him, I try to pull myself together; I can hear his keys jiggling, inadvertently, in his hand as he walks up the cement path to the door. He walks like a tired man. And, still,

by the time he reaches the steps I have not yet risen.

He opens the door and moves across my outstretched legs without even grazing me, without a word, without a glance, and then, when he gets to the edge of the living room, he turns and asks me, calmly, with just a hint of curiosity, of weariness, where I'll be going.

It makes me stop.

Then, I think I have misunderstood him. I cock my head, bend it to the left, in his direction, a pose like "His Master's Voice," but I cannot get my breath.

I stand quickly.

"What do you mean?" I ask him, slapping at the seat of my pants with my hands. Any trace of tears that was left in that moment has dried. I watch him intently. I wait.

His face is set and he is gaunt, angular. He is watching me watch him. When did he become so thin? When did his bones take on such a sharpness? Why haven't I noticed this before? Is he ill? The grey shadows beneath his eyes seem to have spread across all his features and down his thin, bristly, corded neck. He is a pewter sculpture, or stone. He makes no response. And when he finally speaks, his answer reaches my ears but it does not take hold. His tone, however, is unmistakable. There is no way to misconstrue the voice itself.

I look in his direction, but, really, I am no longer looking at the man who stands there. I am already somewhere else, that and I am thinking that I don't know what to say. My lips part without any direction from me.

"Jake? What do you mean?" My voice is soft now, hushed like water rolling over sand. My hands are still at my sides. By now the question is rhetorical.

Jake lifts his eyes, holds them steady, wide; they are egg-shaped now, elliptic, set deep into his face. He is slow to move but he does not falter. He looks weary, sick; unruffled, but leaden. He takes a single step in my direction and then he stops. Right then, I almost believe that he doesn't see that I am cut, cut deep, to the bone, and horrified.

There is going to be no way around this man.

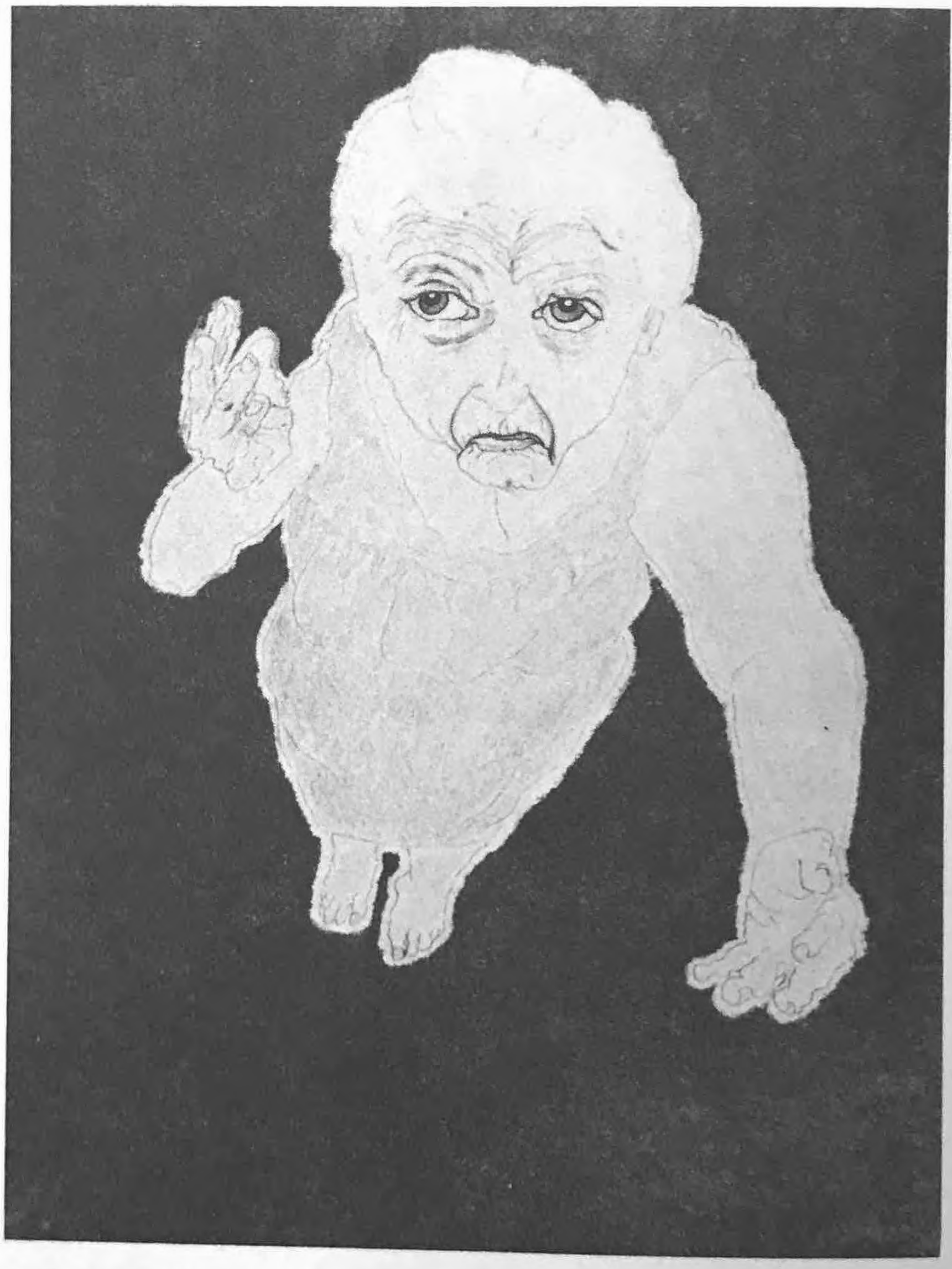
In an instant, I think of all I must do in order to leave. I must dig out my suitcases, pack, sort my things from his, decide, really, what is his and what is mine; I must collect my clothes from the cleaners, do laundry before I go; I must be certain to remember the winter clothes from the basement closet, the skis from the shed, the boots. I must gather Webster's leash, his blanket. I wonder where his brush is. A water bowl. And Fedora. What about Fedora? The kittens aren't even here yet. The thought leaves me short of breath, makes me angry. The last time she had trouble. She needed me. It could easily happen again. She might need me again. I really shouldn't go before the litter comes. It is only days, it can only be days before they are due. Last time she didn't even know what was happening to her.

I turn to Jake. I plead silently, with my eyes, with my posture, for him to tell me I can stay, that I am misunderstanding him or that he has changed his mind. My eyes smart, they burn as though I've gotten something in them, something poisonous; they bite and water, flush themselves clean, diluting, removing whatever it is that is causing the pain. I peer at Jake, turn my sorry eyes on him, refuse to turn away, to cry, not now.

He looks as though his eyes will close, as though he would sleep right this moment if he could, but he returns my gaze steadily. "Where will you go?" he asks simply. "What will you do?"

"Untitled, 1987"
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 6"x9"

"My Stepfather's Den"
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 11"x14"



Self-portrait, "Void"
Graphite, colored pencil and crayon, 22"x28"

I had this feeling that I was out in the middle of nowhere . . . absolutely nothing . . . and it was such a lost feeling. I was lit up by a white light, but I didn't light up the black.

Self-portrait, "Stroke"
Graphite, colored pencil and crayon, 22"x28"

This is an out-of-body experience at a time of stress.

"Time Portrait"
Oil, 20"x28"

"Tief Im Böhmerwald"
(Deep in the Bohemian Forest)
Mixed Media, 44"x28"

Primary Detail

I didn't know why he was falling.
From his hill, I'd decided, he could see
the beach. It would be small
and without grace. A few birds
dotting the sand. Maybe a ship
misty from distance. What puzzled me
most was the hill itself. How it figured
in with the scene. At one point
he was slipping with the sand, deliberate,
a sort of calculated fall. All the way
to the level beach. And where the beach
became wet. I even had him scooping
handfuls of sand. Picking out
the tiny crabs. But there was nowhere
for him to go. On his hill again
the wind sounded like boys
shaking apples from a tree. This time
he jumped. For real. Thinking about
his most serious love. Taking this beauty
with him. I've read Chekhov. If a gun
is seen propped against a wall
at the opening of a play, then it better
well be used. A man jumps from a hill
because he was once in love. Her name
was Louise. She liked to walk the beach.

The Bloated Goldfish

in the tank behind the bar used to start
every time a drink hit the counter. You'd think
it would have gotten used to it. Now it just floats
and a woman two stools from me stares at it
like she could will the thing to move again.
Or maybe she's like me and knows if she turns
her head, some motion just out of sight will
fool her into thinking the thing still lives—
she'll get off her stool and punch the numbers
of a familiar song on the jukebox, or simply
walk out. Instead, she stares, making sure.
And I watch her, a woman I've seen a hundred times
in this bar, and like all the times before,
I don't say a word. You never get used to it.

for Mike Hendershot

Effects of Gin and Childhood on My Sister

I heard your steps,
confused and heavy over my head,
and I rose to find you
lying in your bra and your blue sheets,
drunk and sweating and white,
and I thought it was so much sweat
that stained the sheets
down to your feet,
but it was so much vomit,
so much vomit on your skin and on
your teeth, and so much shame.

Your lovely crystal polluted eyes
rolled around and apart and
focused on me just long enough
for you to say, get out of here,
and so I did,
and cried myself to sleep.

there I wet a washcloth,
gently wiped you off,
and held you through the night.

Disassembling

One day you will walk into the kitchen
and find the dishes put away
and the refrigerator bare.
You will look for me in the bathroom
and find my toothbrush dry.
You will pull back my bedspread and see
that I don't even keep the sheets on anymore.
One day you'll want to borrow
the necklace with the blue beads,
and you'll remember
that I made it into earrings
years ago.

Bad Water Experiment

We had dry seaweed nailed to the wall.
Two blocks from the beach
and a backyard full of dead machinery.

I saw these young girls
riding down the Santa Monica freeway
in the back of a pickup truck.

There were postcards in the mail from Tucson
and Detroit. They mentioned pregnancies. Screwing
wasn't screwing anymore but something else. And
what else had there ever been to do? Gardening
had been a complete failure.

I opened a bottle of red wine and drove
to Hollywood. I saw these young girls
sitting in the back of a pickup truck
eating a rack of barbecued ribs.
One said: The keys are in the ignition.

Later, the police report
noted that, "the suspect had,
among his possessions, photographs
of young (possibly underage) girls
lying naked in the snow."

Never

First thing, we asked if we had to go to church. My mother said no, but that we should say a good Act of Contrition. We kneeled on our bunk beds, myself on the bottom one and my brother above, and we had a race to see who could say it faster. My mother called down the hall and said it was no good. We started over, this time screaming each syllable until she finally told us to shut up. Then my brother and I ate cereal and my little sister did decoupage at the breakfast table. The smoke hung low and swirled as my parents talked about when they were young. After the dishes were cleared, we visited Nan and Pop in the garage. Nan gave us lady fingers and Pop played his wind-up drummer, Indian Joe, and tried to make us repeat curse words we had never heard before.

When we went outside, our father was on the roof. He called to us that he could see the ocean. He was over by the chimney, installing a t.v. antenna. "There's sharks out there today," he said. Just that morning, he had told us about a library in Kentucky that took up a whole mansion. There was no card catalogue, only two ancient blind women who knew where every book was. He had also shown us a rattle snake rattler and a set of tiny brass tools that fit in a box the size of a pack of matches.

My sister only played with Sally O'Mally and Sandy Grahm. They were fake friends who lived in her closet. We knew she was playing school with them in the corner of the backyard in the fort we had built from patio chairs and a piece of plywood, so we left our father and went back to ruin it for her. She cried and my mother called out to us from the kitchen window to stop. My brother felt bad, so he told her she could clean his room for a penny. Our friends came over then and we left her alone.

The leaves of the peach tree were poison. The juniper berries were blue and we knew no one could eat them. We mixed them together with the thorns of sticker bushes in a milk carton from the Kelty's garbage and added water and a can of Drano. To disguise the taste, my brother put in three honey suckle blossoms. We were going to give it to Coco Erhane after she

showed us her pussy. But we got word that the bug man was coming. We scattered to get our bikes so that we could ride through his blue mist. He came and we followed him for blocks; deep breathing. When he was gone we went back to the poison, but whatever it was we had mixed, it had eaten through the bottom of the carton. David Kelty suggested we dig a hole and bury the evidence. We did, in the thicket of trees near the back of his property. All the time, Coco spied on us through the broken down wire fence and forsythias.

In the afternoon, I discovered the presence of skeleton fish in the green barrel that Pop used to test outboards. They were less than a thumbnail and moved like stones. As small as they were though, I could make out the teeth, the empty eye sockets, the ribs and jagged fins. Like bubbles they would rise to the surface of the blackened rain water to see the sun once a day. If they didn't, we said they would die. On that first day though, to see if they were meat eaters, I got a giant ant off the oak tree and set it afloat atop a curled brown leaf. The raft slowly sank and the ant ran in circles. Then the leaf dropped away and the ant started swimming frantically. His movements warned them. They swarmed around and dragged him down to the bottom.

Up in the bedroom, my brother and I asked the Ouija board when we were going to die. Night came as the answer spelled itself out: N-E-V-E-R. "That means you'll live to be ninety-nine and I'll live to be a hundred," said my brother as he took the indicator under this control and spelled out my name and that I was an ass. When he was done, I tried to do the same to him, but he hit me a Fonseca pulverizer and paralyzed my left arm for ten minutes. By then he had put the Ouija board away and put the Tijuana Brass on the victrola. I was mad, so I thought about the time when our parents told us there was no Santa Claus. He sat in the livingroom, in the rocking chair, in the dark and rocked and cried for hours with his face in his hands.

We went to bed and the t.v. antenna sang in the wind. I dreamed of putting my finger in the wall socket and the taste of fire on my teeth woke me up. It was deep night; my father was snoring. I lay quietly in bed, listening to the creaking boards. A

memory of another dream I had had a few weeks before came back to me. I was looking out the bedroom window at night and there was the shadowy figure of a man, standing behind the lilac bush next to the house. "Who are you?" I called down. "I am the ghost of Long John Silver and I come in November," he said. The thought of it gave me a shiver, so I got out of bed and snuck down to the kitchen. There, I found the brown jar in which my sister was inventing peanutbutter. She had crushed peanuts and added sugar and water and salt. I dumped out her mess, took the real peanutbutter jar down from the shelf and replaced the old mixture with four spoons of peanutbutter.

Back in bed the secret protected me. I fell asleep and remembered that the Erhanes kept pet squirrels and that one had escaped and now lived within the walls of their house.

Sunflower

Large enough to capture light a physical wheat orange. Maybe functional or just a pool of useless in the yard. Curled petals veer from center flower padded like a sponge. Heat toughens everything about the fat weed with a face. Too large to touch. No longer pretty like a woman once. Slum jewel. Exempt that is to say from blades. Not lens or paintbrush.

Breath, emerging rainless life, collected

Souvenir

Forever frozen
in Sloppy Joe's,
Havana, 1936,
my parents sip Cuba Libres.
Pomaded and polished,
my father in white slacks,
navy-blue double-breasted blazer
blows smoke clouds with his cigar.
Beside him my mother,
mink wrap around her shoulders,
a velvet cloche hiding
her profile,
stares into the future
that never comes.
In the background,
a man caught by the camera,
hunches over the bar,
icecubes melting in his daiquiri.
I invent him
as go-between
for the gambling syndicate and
the Bureau of Internal Revenue,
my father as *el jefe*,
while my mother spills
her velvet words
from the frame.

Welcome to New Smyrna Beach

Beyond the Christian Science reading room,
the Salvation Army outlet and
Rexall drugs, there's a block
of beauty parlors that promise rejuvenation.
In front of the motel named after Ponce de Leon,
the highway's torn up.
Nothing sparkles but the water
beneath the causeway.

I stand in the sun for a moment,
head bowed,
thinking of Old Smyrna
where, some say, Homer was born.

Now there's a singing
in the distant palms,
a smell of fish and figs
and women carrying bread and vegetables from market,
a few white houses, morning glories climbing
each window.
I could live here, I think.

This time I'm not going to wait
for the songs to come.
I'll make a place for my Canon Typestar,
stack my Sylvia Plath
and Elizabeth Bishop beside it.
Already I'm humming a little tune,
I'm singing about the black spider
crawling up the bedroom wall.

Poison Pen

Now that his holiday is real. Now that Denise is safely gone, and on our wedding day. I guess now I can write it down.

You see, I killed Martin Luther King.

Not with a gun or anything, but I did kill him just the same. Then there was Bobby Kennedy, of course. Two of them in close order. I was quite a success that spring of '68. Things were looking up, they were.

At the time I thought it was just coincidence, but as the years passed and they started to add up, I began to understand. Sharon Tate. The Shah of Iran. John Lennon. Still I didn't really see it until the people closest to me, the people I love, began to fall. Until now, it's led to this: a lonely mountain grave, and silence.

Or as close as I can come.

My neighbor, old Tillie McCarter, she was actually the first, but I never saw that for years and years.

Miss Otilla McCarter lived below me in the Villa, and despite its fancy name, the Villa was a dump. A crumbling eight-plex with banging pipes and spotty heat next to the salt and pepper ghetto in Milwaukee. I was a student scraping by in a sixty-buck-a-month flat, spending most of my time dreaming alternately about becoming a great, Tolstoyan novelist, or about creeping into Denise Fuller's bedroom where her waiting hips would rock me into ecstasy.

Denise lived next door, and her behind was as beautiful a thing as Lake Michigan under a starlit night, with a high wind raising the waves to white. At the parties I threw, I always invited her. Once or twice when Denise came, and if she danced—rocking her hips slow and smooth as the Lake under a July moon, no matter what the beat—the whole room would stop to watch. Even Sam Cooke on the stereo seemed to pause. Men and women both were visibly shaken, admiring the miracle of that little shudder in her thighs at the end of each sway.

Denise was that kind of woman.

But back then she was untouchable, distant and beautiful, because she had a roommate. The lucky guy.

So I was left with *Anna Karenina* and my typewriter, and in

the fall of '65 I set to work. Knowing that *War and Peace* was beyond me yet, I began with stories. But every time I whistled, or did a two-step in the kitchen over a wonderful sentence, or even got the typewriter running better than twenty words a minute, the pipes would bang. And they kept banging louder, and out of rhythm, until I stopped.

It took me two weeks of frustration and writer's block before I realized the heat wasn't on. The fall that year was warm and golden, and actually Denise was the one who tipped me off.

I heard her step coming up the backstair. It wasn't exactly light, but it was different, more gently behind the beat than her boyfriend's.

By the way, I don't dare mention his name. So far as I know, he's still alive, and everyone else in these pages is safely dead now. Except me, of course.

But when I heard Denise, I stepped out on the landing. Just to see her bounce up the stairs like love-making in motion. Then, once I was out there, I needed to have a reason, or Ms. Fuller would be on to me, though I think now she was anyway.

So I said, "Pipes driving you crazy?"

She smiled and shrugged, and I would have killed to hold her. I guess maybe I did.

"Well, they're sure getting to me," I said. "It'll be a long winter with that banging going on."

"You can try to talk to her," Denise said, "but it won't do any good."

I had no idea what she was talking about, but cool on my feet, I just said, "Why not?"

Denise smiled. She leaned a heavy shoulder bag full of books on the railing. She was a paralegal at a law office downtown then, and she dreamt of a political career. A dream she'd never see. But at that moment, I'd have sold my soul to be the shoulder strap on her bag. I guess we can't all capture our dreams, at least not and hold onto them for long.

"I tried," Denise said, "I asked the old lady to stop it a couple times this summer."

That's when it finally struck me. The heat wasn't on, but the

pipes were banging anyway.

Denise pointed to the doorway at the bottom of the stairs. Then she raised her hand and twirled her finger beside her head. "She's screwy," Denise said. The light caught off the tiny yellow hairs on her wrist as she put the key in her lock. "Maybe you should try," she said.

"Yeah," I muttered. "Maybe I will try." But I only spoke to hold her a moment longer on the landing, while the afternoon light made the grey asphalt of the parking lot seem silver.

"Good luck," she said. Then she shrugged again, and you already know how I feel about that.

So I learned the problem with the pipes was really old lady McCarter and a hammer. Otilla the plumber. I never did talk to her, but every time Tillie heard a sound, she beat on her pipes until the noise went away. It was my writing that went away.

She was just the casualty of too many years of alone, of inside.

Old Tillie drove me so crazy finally that one day, in desperation, with the pipes banging until my apartment sounded like the inside of the bell tower of Notre Dame, I hunched over my typewriter and furiously pounded out a story in pure defiance. It centered on an old woman named McCarthy who grows so lonely and afraid of the blossoming city around her, and of her own shriveling decrepitude, that she crawls into her plumbing and refuses to come out. "Never," she cries, when her cats whine and beg to be fed. After a week her pets, in hunger, spring a screen and abandon her. With the cats gone, and Mrs. McCarthy in hiding, rats and mice war over the house in a mock-epic battle. The story ends with the old woman hysteric, swarmed by vermin as she starves amongst the pipes, with a rodent nibbling on her toenails.

I slipped the story into an envelope, still brimming over with my defiance, and mailed it across town to a friend. He in turn sent it to a friend of a friend who was starting a little artsy journal in Door County. And so, by desperate chance, I landed my first publication.

"Our Lady of the Drains" appeared in the first and only issue of *The DoorMat*, published early the next month.

The day I received it in the mail, that banging on the pipes stopped.

That was the beginning of Denise and me. She came to my door that evening and said, "Do you hear it?"

"What?"

I was on my toes, as usual.

"The banging." She smiled.

"What banging?" I said, before I finally noticed it. "She's stopped," I said.

Denise laughed then, the pure joy of peace and silence was behind it. "I wonder what happened?" she said.

Now I have to admit I slipped here, but after all, I'm a fiction writer. Lies come easily to me. Remember, too, I was holding my first publication in my hand; in fact, I'd been holding it in my hand gazing at my name in print all afternoon. And wallowing in the power of my pen. And really, I just shrugged and that's when her green eyes lit up.

"You talked to her," Denise said, and she stepped into my kitchen.

"Well," I said, "I don't know. I just sort of wished she'd . . ." Denise hugged me, and I knew I was dreaming. But there was no turning back now, not with that look resting in her eyes. "I guess I just laid down the law," I said, nodding my head and frowning, as if I marvelled at how long it had taken.

Denise still had her hands on my shoulders. "I can't believe it," she said.

"Well, I . . ."

"If only you'd gone down sooner. She never listened to me. I must've begged her a dozen times. What did you say?"

It was getting deep now, and I was worried. So I held up *The DoorMat*. "Look at this," I said, "I'm an author. Today."

Denise hugged me again, but this time I was prepared. I hugged back. Even now I can remember how soft and available she seemed around the waist as I held her.

That night the world was a fine place. I held her for a long while, and my hands slipped down near her miraculous hips and rested there, then I invited her in. We sat on the couch and I watched her read "Our Lady of the Drains." Over the years, this became our pattern. She was the first reader for everything I've written, and she never caught on either. I had to lose her before I learned to face the truth.

She loved the story and I think we spent that whole night talking. Well, almost the whole night. To be perfectly honest, after she read it she looked up at me, and for the first time that day I wasn't staring at my name on the page. I was staring at her. She said, "That's kind of, well, strange." And I kissed her.

One thing led to another and soon enough I discovered everything I'd dreamed about her rocking hips was true. Pure, unadulterated, absolute truth, they were, and truth is beauty.

Later on we did talk, and we walked all the way across town, and the city was perfectly silent, like it was trying to listen in. When the sun rose over the Lake, we were walking down there on the beach.

I don't think love has ever come any quicker or any harder to me than it did that night. I know it will never come like that again. At least it never will for me. And now, with the way I am, I don't dare.

Denise's boyfriend showed up later on, before the sun was high. He found us in Denise's favorite spot, a bluff that juts out and seems surrounded by the Lake. We were still holding one another, still talking, when he came up behind us. It was clear the way we touched what we had done.

I suppose you'd say it was an ugly scene then. But I was so in love, I don't remember much of it. There were some loud words, and some angry promises made. I remember staying silent, and I remember holding Denise's hand, which suddenly seemed dry and stiff. I remember my shirt was wet with dew and anticipation. But not much else is left in my memory.

Besides, all of that has been dimmed by the little thing he said, in the midst of their words. At the time, it seemed merely small, and sad for its smallness. But with the years now, it has grown

and swallowed my love and my life, and my art.

"You probably wouldn't even care," he said, a bit whiningly. Denise laughed at him then, pulled her dry hand out of mine and wrapped it behind my neck where it suddenly seemed soft and sensual. But he went on, ignoring me and glaring at her.

"The old lady downstairs. You probably don't even care. They carried her out today. She was still in a sitting position. Dead in her chair."

He didn't say this, but I believe Tillie McCarter probably died with that hammer still in her hand. They probably had to break her fingers to get it free. Or they buried her with it.

When Denise and I came home, she found her things heaped in front of my doorstep. Her key didn't work in the new lock to her old apartment. The lights were all off inside.

It seemed only natural that we haul her stuff next door into my apartment, since she had nowhere to go. Most of that night and the next day, Denise talked about apartment hunting and she even bought a morning paper. But then, just as naturally, the talk died and she stayed.

You can rest assured, I never brought it up.

By the end of the week two moving vans had come and gone. One hauled away the boyfriend's things, and the second took what was left of Tillie McCarter and auctioned her away in some little farm town to hungry antique dealers. Or so I guessed.

* * *

Over the next few years I kept writing away. I made notes for novels, but time after time they turned into stories. Usually, on a bus or a streetcorner, I would spot some lonely old outcast, and they became the sparks that flamed into my stories. One by one they were published in little magazines, each time a slightly better magazine, and I began to see myself as the poet and chronicler of the lost and lonely, the homeless and the aged. I started haunting around alleys in the evening, looking for subjects. There was the man who whistled to himself in the back of buses and carried a cassette full of applause he could play

between his "numbers." Then he'd introduce his next tune to the back of the bus seat in front of him, and whistle until the applause stopped him. He became "The Clap." And there was the giant, black body-builder who strutted up and down Wisconsin Avenue, anytime, day or night, and always taking the center of the walk so we honkies were forced to step aside, into the gutter. I called him Samson Jones, and he became the hero of "Delilah Street Strut." And the little man who wandered around in a raincoat and one of a dozen different ladies hats, always with the netting covering his eyes, he became Seymour Fisher in "The Man Whose Head Was His Wife." That story appeared in the *Kenyon Review* in the Fall of '66.

Heaven only knows how many innocent, confused drifters I sent to their doom. If only I'd seen. I would have surrendered then and sold insurance, and saved my Denise.

But I was blinded by my own success.

* * *

In the summer of '67, Denise and I moved out here to Livingston, Montana. Actually, it was to a ranch near a little town called Pray.

The first check from *Esquire* financed our move, and an NEA grant would keep us alive for a year. I'd proposed a novel, but again the stories kept coming. Luckily, for a while then they were purely fiction, based on no one I'd ever seen.

So the victims of my imagination were safe. Or at least I think they were.

But then I made that incredible turn, and the world hasn't been the same since. Never believe the poet when he says "poetry makes nothing happen."

It does.

Fall was short our first year in the mountain valleys north of Yellowstone. It's always short up here, of course, but it seemed only a day before the birches were bare and the first snows in the low country came on, and stayed.

I was sitting by a wood stove in a T-shirt when I did it. The

room was hot from the glowing stove. The radio and the papers had been full of civil rights and uncivil riots all summer, and the fall wasn't cooling anything down.

I found myself writing a story in the voice of a white Alabama child whose father ran the Birmingham jail. The boy's job is cleaning windows where his Papa worked, and where the "nigger" rioters are jailed. In the story, the child speaks down to Martin Luther King, using his Daddy's words. But even through the language of "niggers" and "coons," the kid begins to see this black preacher, locked in his father's jail. Then late one afternoon, when the boy is sent to sweep that "coon ass filth" out of the hall and into the cells, the black man speaks to him.

"What's your name, son?" the "niggrah" preacher asks him, and smiles at him. That night the boy runs all the way home, using the backstreets and the alleys, breathless when he reaches his front porch.

One morning, peeking out from behind his father's knees, hearing his Papa's flat, stifled laugh, as the jailers throw taunts at the crowded cells, the boy looks up at this black preacher's eyes. That black man sees this. But not daring to smile, the preacher man just gazes back at him, and there is only sadness and hurt in his eyes. Not hate.

And so despite Papa's orders, and knowing the jeers of his schoolmates will come, he delivers a letter for the tall, black man. Through those same backstreets at dusk, the kid carries it by hand to the town paper. An open letter, from a city jail.

When Denise read the story, she came and held me, and we made love on the floor. I remember, in the aftermath, with her thin blonde hair spread out on the Navajo rug, and with her hand touching the back of my neck, and with me still inside her wondrous hips, she said, "Don't send it any place small. A story like that. It should be noticed."

"The Birmingham Mail" was what they sometimes call a hot property. *Esquire* not only paid dearly for it, they rushed the story into print. You can find it now, if you want, and read the foul, bloody thing in that magazine. The April issue, 1968.

On the night of April 4, in that year, I was driving home alone from Livingston. In the back seat of my old Rambler I had ten copies of that April *Esquire*. Seven of them were going out in the mail to friends. One was for my father. The last two were going to sit on my bookshelf at home, and learn to collect my own dust on my own words. But none of them made it.

It was a proud night. Hell, I'd been proud for a couple of months over that story. The sky was starry with a sliver of a moon. The Absarokas were blue-black shadows against the deep violet night. "Just My Imagination" wavered in and out through those hills and came scratching through my AM radio. There were pops and crackles and long dead spots while the Rambler rounded a peak, and I didn't know the words, but I was singing along anyway.

Then, as I drove out of the shadow of silence some mountain cast, the Temptations were gone. Not done, just gone. Replaced by a disc jockey from Bozeman reading a bulletin, with only half the concern his voice would give to a winter storm.

"If you been following this story," he said, "then you should know. This just came in on the wire. It's been confirmed. The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King has died now. In Memphis. But there's no word here on the search for his assassin."

I pulled the Rambler over to the side of the road, driving on the gravel till the radio came clear, or as close as it would get. But that D.J. was done. "More later," was all he said, through the crackling. Then he played "Eve of Destruction," and to this day I don't think he knew what he'd done.

I sat for a while, wishing my feelings were stronger, or at least simpler. I held those ten copies of my *Esquire* in my lap and looked at the lights on my dash. Then I opened my window and tore them up into fist-sized chunks. A fistful at a time, I held them outside and let the wind take them out dancing across the still snowy fields.

But I stopped after nine. Six months later I sent the tenth copy of "The Birmingham Mail" to a prison in Tennessee. But even for a scum like that, I dare not mention a name.

But Dr. King wasn't my only victim in 1968. Oh no. I was way too prolific back in that Fall of '67 to leave off with just killing him. Just a few days after I'd written "The Birmingham Mail," by that same stove, with more early snow piling up outside, and with Denise cooking venison stew in a pot for supper, I picked up a legal pad and started another story.

I was only trying to escape the novel sketches sitting on my desk. These stories came to me the way most good writing comes, as if I was just the instrument of their fate, just a copy boy at that newspaper called Destiny. They came not from me, or even to me. They came through me. All the news fit to be printed, rolling off the tip of my pen. All of this, instead of a novel about life on another planet, totally divorced from any semblance of reality. Fairy tales. Fantasies about flying horses and talking pigs.

If only I'd seen.

But this new story was about a young businessman in the Midwest, trained in accounting and finance, straining to get ahead. In some big, corn-fed Midwestern metropolis, Wayne Longer finds himself with a small fortune stuck in real estate he's never seen. He's bought in with an associate, a slightly older, punchy insurance man named Jim Bob Verily, and they are making a killing.

But as the story opens, some redheaded girlfriend has talked him into going downtown to see RFK on campaign. The redhead is rattling on emptily about civil rights as they drive into the neighborhood where Bobby will speak. Wayne never lets on, but he's convinced the redhead is less interested in civil rights than in how sexy the crow's feet around Bobby's eyes are. But he knows if he says anything close to that, it will be a long lonely night for him, back at his place in the nice part of town. This part of town is black and impoverished and burned out, an ugly and dangerous mess.

It also belongs to Mr. Verily and our hero, Mr. Longer.

It's the first time Wayne has seen his property. But he recognizes the address and stands in the crowd wondering why he made such a large down payment on the wreck.

Bobby is charismatic and youthful, when they see him, and Kennedy laments the poverty and shame of white America. He points to Wayne's own little tenement, and belittles the absentee landlord.

As they drive back to Wayne's apartment uptown, the redhead is beautiful, her blue eyes bright and full of Kennedy and his outrage. "How could any human being own a hell-hole he's never seen?" she says.

Wayne looks at those sweet blue eyes and the freckles spangling her shoulders. "I don't know," he says.

This time *The Atlantic* bought the story, in December of '67. Then the arguing started. Some of the staff felt "Bobby's Baby Now" should wait until after the election. Others thought if the story waited, it might be irrelevant.

Blind man that I was, I remember arguing over the phone, "But Kennedy is just an icon. The real story's not there, not with him."

In the end, they listened to me.

You'll find "Bobby's Baby Now" on page 56, in the June *Atlantic*, 1968.

And I'll always be able to find that smiling, victorious face in my memory. The toothy grin, the flash of the victory sign, a boyish tuft of hair in his eyes, Roosevelt Grier at his side. And then the shots. And there he lay bleeding black blood on the concrete floor inside my black and white T.V. June, 1968.

I wasn't a Kennedy man that year, but I swear I didn't mean to kill Bobby. It's just I couldn't face the truth.

***

And so the coincidences mounted up. There were enough now they were too obvious to miss. It became a little inside joke between Denise and me. "Who will you get next?" she'd ask, as I sat down to the desk.

"If the mob calls," I'd say, "tell them I'm busy at the moment."

"Okay," Denise would laugh, "but I'll put the CIA on through to you."

I could go on for pages and list the victims. You probably

don't believe me yet, even through all this. I'm stumped. Tell me, what can I do to help you see?

Sharon Tate was on the screen inside a story of mine called "The Loner Lover." See *The Paris Review*, Number 38. Remember when the old Flying Walenda patriarch fell to his death on your T.V.? That one was in *Antaeus*, Spring of '79. I really don't have time to tell you all of them. I wrote a fun little piece called "The Egyptian's Mommy," a children's mystery story, to escape from all this. But even that one, innocent piece of fluff killed Anwar Sadat.

I began to think I was losing my mind. My head kept saying "It can't be, it's not possible." Part of me knew better, but I wouldn't face it. It just didn't stand to reason.

I'm sorry about them all, and about the way I went on and on with it. I guess my imagination was never pure enough to create people of my own. So I stole and stole, laying waste to whatever rose in my mind.

There was a period of about a year, late in the 70's, when I dried up. I called it writer's block, but the truth is I'd glimpsed through my own ego, and saw what I was doing. So I stopped.

For almost a year, I was silent. After a month or two, I took a job with Georgia Pacific. I became a hit man on pines. For eight, ten hours every day I walked the woods west of Pray and marked the trees that were ready for harvest. It seemed right for me then, hiking up the mountain sides in the early morning, hanging flags and ribbons on tree trunks, catching glimpses of goats in the bluffs and cutaways, deer in the meadows and parks, now and then a bear print in the mud beside a stream. Then each night, I'd ride down in the back of a yellow pickup, stopping for beers with the crew when we came to town. Always I was so weary at night I just came home and ate. Weekends I spent sleeping in, sipping coffee and reading old adventure books in bed, and making love to Denise.

It was a good life. I'd have the winters off, and I was learning my way around the mountains so Denise and I could cross-country until spring. Then I'd be off into the forest again with the snowmelt. We could have children every spring. I'd be

bearing fruit, instead of nursing murderous stories to their bloody ends.

I called it all my writer's block.

But Denise saw through me. It took her a time, but she noticed I was changed, something in me had closed up shop. On purpose.

So she began to leave collections of Hawthorne and Chekov around the house. I resisted. I knew if I began to read "The Lady with Lap Dog" or "The Minister's Black Veil," it would lead me to my desk, and the dying would begin again.

One Saturday morning I was sipping on a cup of coffee and she lay beside me, the sheet covering just one of her breasts. I watched her bare breast rise and fall with her breathing, and let the coffee sit luxuriously on my tongue, where the caffeine could reach quickly to my soul. Denise said, smiling, with her eyes still closed, "The FBI called yesterday."

"Oh?" I tried a chuckle, but it was forced and lame. And she knew it.

"They said they've got a job for you."

As I watched, her breast was beautiful enough to distract the morning sun. Round and rose hued, pointed and soft. But I knew she was not touchable. She was worried about my work.

"If they call back, tell them I'm retired," I said. "I only pick on trees, these days."

But Denise didn't laugh. She let out an involuntary sigh, and pulled the covers up to her neck. She even shivered as if it was cold, with that sunlight beating on her. It was near the end of July.

There was a long silence then. For me it was dead and painful, but I think for Denise it was only one of those pregnant pauses.

After a moment or two, she looked me in the eye. "You don't really believe . . ." she said.

When she stopped, she sat up. Her full figure was there before me. But her lips curled in a mocking smile, then, and she said, "You do. Don't you. You really do." I dropped my eyes and examined the wrinkles in her stomach. There were two, those sweet brown lines that folded into her fullness, just above where

her hips disappeared into the sheets, and I wanted her badly. But it was obviously not the time.

When I said, "Do what?" Denise fell back on the bed laughing at me. I suppose I looked sheepish there, gazing at her naked form quivering with laughter on the bed. I know I felt foolish.

But Denise took me then. Still laughing, with faint tears in the corners of her eyes, she wrapped those miraculous hips around me, and rocked me into a place just south of heaven heading north. Then, just when I reached that place where I didn't even know where I was, she stopped.

Three or four times she did this.

Obviously, I wasn't counting. But each time, when I was completely lost in her body, and of course she knew it, she stopped, and sitting above me, holding me still deep inside her, she would say, "You're an artist. Art doesn't kill."

To be honest, I can't tell you her exact words. For reasons I don't need to explain, they're gone. The actual words. But her meaning was clear. It sank directly into my wide open, full-throttled unconscious. Her sweet, mistaken message. I was innocent, simply writing fables, and I must go on. Denise filled me with that lie; it swallowed me at the same instant that her love did, when I was as naked and naive as I ever have been, or ever will be.

And so. I found myself waking in the noonday sun, with Denise sleeping quietly on top of me, her cheek resting on my chest, her breasts flattened against my stomach, my hands still clutching her thighs, and my mind beginning to trail along the idea of a story in a way I hadn't allowed myself for nearly a year.

Sweet Denise, my hands touch your thighs now. I taste the salt of your love at the back of my throat as I put this down. The scent of your soft hair will live with me until I find my grave. Denise. If only we had known.

Dear reader, always, always, let well enough alone.

That afternoon I began "The Saxman's Lament." The story appeared in December of 1980, in *Vanity Fair*. I was paid

$16,000 for it. Blood money, I cast it on these Montana fields.

The story that was born in that noonday light, in Denise's embrace, began with the sentence "Sonny laid down his horn and swore he'd give up." It is set in 1967, and Sonny Bite is finishing one more barroom gig playing backup sax for some R & B band. He swears that night he's played his last "Soul Man." He would starve before he ever again plays the opening strains of "Try a Little Tenderness." He's had enough.

Sonny packs up his alto and walks home through the streets of St. Louis, remembering where he's been and how he wound up on the north side of this old river town playing riffs behind "Call Me Mr. Pitiful." There'd been a time in the early 50's, when Sonny Bite was going places. He'd played behind Monk and Montgomery; he'd sat up all one night in L.A. jamming with Gigi Gryce and the Bird. Clifford Brown knew him by name; Mingus had told him, after hours at the Five Spot, to keep on with his blowing. No, he was never a leader. Never would be. But he could stand a stage with Parker, maybe even with Trane, and Sonny Bite could hold his own.

All that was before the scene changed, of course. Before Elvis and Jerry Lee took the living away, till now there is nothing but giving lessons or playing rock n' roll.

So Sonny comes home to a basement room and switches on the radio, but there is nothing on the air. Even the old stations have gone over to rock. He twists the dial around until he finds a place where the music is gone. There is a man's voice, an interview with an Englishman running off his mouth about some new kind of music, something all different than what we had.

Sonny Bite finds himself listening to the Brit, and then, when the radio plays a part of this stuff, he sits up on the edge of his bed. It isn't the same old breaks. The rhythm is still plain, but at least it shifts now and then, and the changes are all different. Just when he thought he'd hear another tired out riff, they drag in some bit from the 40's, a hint of the Hawk. Some old torch song chord. Or something Sonny's never heard before.

He listens a long while, transfixed. Then, when "A Day in the Life" quavers out of his radio, he finds the horn in his hand. He

doesn't even remember picking it up, or even holding it. But as that last, long chord echoes out of a two-inch AM radio speaker, Sonny Bite stands in the middle of his one room and weaves free and bluesy notes around and around until the old man upstairs stomps his feet on the floor and yells at him to cease and desist. He does stop, finally, but it doesn't matter. He feels as if his ears are all new and complete in a way he doesn't understand yet.

John Lennon has saved his life.

You know what happened then, of course. *Vanity Fair* adorned my story with a gray, sad picture of an old Coleman Hawkins leaning into his tenor. In the squint of his eyes, I could almost hear the wail of his horn.

I can see that picture of the Hawk now, in my mind, almost as well as I saw it in my hand. In December of 1980.

This time we didn't find out until the morning after.

Denise and I were up early in the cold and snow, because we were working a horse. A beautiful appaloosa filly named Rose, bought with the money from *Vanity Fair*. You see, Denise and I had big plans then, plans to raise a herd of pure appaloosa. It would be a hobby, an act of love, a need made of desire. But our horses would be a going proposition, too. A way to use our land and our time together, and make a few dollars. To support my writing habit, you know.

So that was our crazy dream. I knew nothing about horses and Denise had only been around showpiece Drays in Wisconsin. She'd never even learned to ride.

But that didn't stop us from sinking the magazine money into Rose. She was the second loveliest creature I'd ever seen. So first thing every morning, we were out in the barn with her, doting on the filly, feeding and brushing and stroking her, talking about the herd we'd start in the Spring.

When we came in from the cold, I fed and stoked the fire, and Denise switched on the radio. We came in on the middle of "Norwegian Wood," and thought nothing of it. But after we'd heard "Imagine" and "In My Life," I found myself staring at my

copy of *Vanity Fair* on the kitchen table.

I told her then what had happened. Long before the AM disc jockey reported the news, I saw what had happened. "John Lennon is dead," I said to Denise.

She looked at me from across the room and said, "You didn't do it. Don't start thinking you did, because you didn't."

But she said that before we heard the news.

The offer came through then for a book. A collection of my stories. I signed the contract, knowing the collection would need work. I knew I'd want to rewrite and polish, go back over odd pieces, make corrections. But all of that seemed safe. I mean, who could I destroy in all these old pieces. They were smoking guns, at best. Some of them were ice cold, they'd been silent so long. So it seemed safe, even back then when I didn't really believe.

With the nice advance that came in, I got down on one knee and finally found the guts to do what I'd been meaning to do for a long, long while. I proposed to Denise.

She accepted.

Now comes the saddest part of my whole confession. I have countless regrets, but none reaches down into me as far as this. The nadir of my dark career. The moment when I became, truly, the Mr. Hyde of the little magazines. A bleak, dark sinner with a pen.

I remember digging through all the old manuscripts, editing and arranging, debating with myself about the order, about what to save and what to throw into the dustbin forever.

In the process I found the first story I ever wrote, way back when, in Milwaukee. As I read it over, I was surprised. I was prepared to laugh at myself, and blush a bit, probably breathe easy that I'd never let the thing get out of my hands.

But I was surprised. The story was wordy and awkward, there was a bit of forced symbolism that could be cut right out of the piece, and the ending was entirely wrong. But, by God, it was alive. The main character had a heart, and her heart really beat.

I guess you could say I couldn't resist. Besides, I really believed the story was safe. It was a fantasy set in old Italy, and the main character was a fiery, black-haired beauty locked in a convent. If I had based the story on anything, it was on the years my grandmother told me about saints and martyrs and so on. Even if it had to do with her, my grandmother died when I was thirteen. So it had to be safe.

I don't know that I ever fell so deeply into something I wrote. The story nearly took over my life. Now I believe it was the safety I saw in it; all the pent up energy of my urge to write—what I'd been holding in and trying to channel for years out of my fear—it came bursting out as I reworked that story. I labored and crafted and whittled at every word. It would be the finest work I'd ever done. Everything I'd learned about life and fiction and myself was crafted into each sentence. It would be true, and it would be beautiful.

I called it "The Stigmata of Sister Rose."

Only one thing drew me completely away from the story. The marriage preparations. When I worked in the garden or with the appaloosa, part of me was in a convent in medieval Italy. But in the afternoons, when Denise and I drove to Livingston and picked out flowers and music and the little hand drawn invitations that would go back East, then and only then, was I in the present, in Montana. In love.

In the evenings I'd hold her as we sat on the porch and we watched the sun set in the mountains, or maybe we'd hike into the foothills and listen for elk and bear, or we'd go riding horseback over to Chico Hot Springs and soak in the waters. Never would I mention the story, or even think of it. Not only was my mind on Denise then, but I didn't want to dissipate the energy that was driving that story. Because every morning I was at the desk, and I'd spend half the day on a paragraph, or even a sentence.

Life was good that summer. In fact, it had never been so good, except on that one kind night, that first night, the night I'd spent holding Denise on a bluff above Lake Michigan.

So that season went; the summer of my life. I almost dreaded

the end of "The Stigmata of Sister Rose." What could I do when it was finished? But in the end, it was only a story, and it formed its own conclusion. With it the summer ended, and our October wedding drew near.

Late in August a letter arrived from my old friend, the man who'd started me out years ago, publishing "Our Lady of the Drains" in his one-shot quarterly *The DoorMat*. He was at it again. This time he was starting a glossy at the University of Wisconsin, and he needed someone with a name, to launch the magazine.

I guess I was now a "name." But at this point, it was a magazine way beneath my reputation. My name would draw subscribers, and even submissions.

Here I was sitting on an unpublished manuscript. The finest thing I'd ever done, I knew. It was the secret punch I was saving for the book, the story the reviewers would notice and comment on, and love the way I did. But I owed my old friend a debt.

So I shoved "The Stigmata of Sister Rose" in an envelope and mailed it off to Wisconsin. It left my hands, and left me feeling empty and dry, in August of 1981.

In the late afternoon, on the fifth of October, I was at my desk. The manuscript of my collection sat in a box on the floor, ready and waiting to be mailed. I was struggling to find the right words for the introduction. I wanted it known how I had sweetly labored over that old story, and made it a work of art. The manuscript was titled *Stigmata and Other Signs of Life*. My great story would close the book.

Denise, to leave me free to struggle through this introduction, was out riding in the autumn winds. She'd taken a young appaloosa stud named Spit out to run him hard, wear him out, and maybe temper his fire. We'd rented him to breed with Rose, but without any luck yet. On the desk beside me lay the dedication page to *Stigmata*. "for Denise" was all it said.

While I made what must have been my tenth attempt at an introduction, trying to explain the labor and love that went into "Sister Rose" without sounding like a retiring pitcher weeping

over that almost perfect game ten years old, and in the minors, the mailman came. Old Henry McGuane pulled up out front in his red, white and blue jeep, stuffed a package in the box, and waved to me.

***

You realize I'm sure that I made Old Henry up entirely. For safety's sake, I had to invent him completely. I've got a real postman, of course, but Old Henry is the way a postman should be. Which means he bears no resemblance to reality.

I was standing on the porch by the time he waved, giving in to the temptation of going out to get the mail. Anything was better than sitting at the desk scribbling down one line of self-praise, then scratching it out and scribbling down another. The mail was a handy excuse.

"Finally ready for the big day," Old Henry yelled, when I waved back.

He was giving me a hard time about this marriage of mine years after I'd become a common-law husband. But it wasn't prurient squeamishness in Old Henry. No, he'd seen my Denise. There was a good, heavy strain of jealousy in his joshing.

"You bet," I yelled back, in the clipped Montanan I'd learned to speak out here in the Rockies, where it's often too cold for long conversations out of doors.

But this was one beautiful October afternoon with the sun beating warm on amber aspen groves and the first autumn snows making the peaks bright. So Henry yelled, "I'd say 'bout time," and he wheeled his red, white and blue around. I walked out to the mailbox in my shirtsleeves and watched Henry's all-American jeep negotiate the ruts, down toward where the Yellowstone runs through the valley.

"You bet," I said out loud again, to nobody in particular. In little more than a week I'd have my first book in the mail to a good New York publisher, and I'd be a married man. Married to Ms. Fuller, that untouchable lady next door, my dream girl. So I felt like saying "You bet" for the next twenty years. At least.

In the mailbox there was just a big manila envelope from

Madison, Wisconsin. Now, I'd been through this dozens of times, and often enough disappointed at the sloppy job the printers had done, misspelled words and page breaks muffed. Even whole paragraphs repeated. But I felt an old thrill run through me when I saw the postmark. I pulled the package out and nearly ran back to the house like a grade school kid with a poem in *The Weekly Reader*. After all, this was something special.

This was the inaugural of "Sister Rose."

On the kitchen table I sliced open the envelope and pulled out the magazine. It was almost like standing at the door on a blind date, thinking of all the wonderful things your chum said about her, but wondering one more time if you should knock. I looked at the contents page, at the title there next to my name, for a long while.

All the love I'd heaped on "Sister Rose" was about to stare me back in my face. So the doubts came rushing in. Did the story work? Was it too sentimental? All those careful details I'd heaped on her, would they bring the whole thing to a dead halt? Maybe I'd stopped the breath and heartbeat of this old story with all my craft and care.

I flipped a few pages in and found her. She was the lead story, page eight. There was Sister Rose. I ran my finger over the page like a blind man reading braille. But I could see, and she was beautiful. The print was crisp and black and the paper was as white and glossy as new melting snow in the Pintlars. The title was bold and 36 point, righteous in its simplicity. So I ran my fingers over the page, because I needed to believe it was real. And because I loved Sister Rose.

Then I saw what I'd done.

For a moment, I was frozen. I stood there with my fingers on the opening line, staring at the widening spaces between the words. I saw through the damned thing, dropped Sister Rose on the floor, and ran.

There was no time for the pickup, or for rounding up and saddling Rose, or even for thinking about what I should do. I didn't have the presence of mind to drive or ride, or even think.

All I could do was run.

As long as I last, I'll remember the feel of that run. The stretch in my thighs, the drought in my throat, the rack pulling my lungs, the heavy pound of my soles in the dust and gravel. The canyon yawning open in my heart. I remember the sky limitless and spotted with clouds, and out of the peaks a sweet breeze stirred through my hair and lifted me gently with each step. But I cursed each time one of my feet landed on the ground and my ankles screamed at me to stop.

I found the stud horse first. He stood beside a barbed wire fence, his head down, his sides still heaving. There was froth around the blanket where the saddle sat twisted on the appaloosa's side, hanging by the tie and strap. The broken cinch dangled in the grass.

For a second I watched the skittish horse dance back into the fence and threaten to rear every time I stepped toward it. Then I saw the trail. In the tall grass, where the stallion had dragged that saddle at full gallop, a broken path ran back along the fence.

So I sprinted again. A long half mile or so farther, over the top of a hill, I found her. She was draped into the wire; it wrapped around her neck, her shoulders, her hips. Her legs trailed off and disappeared into a yellow blanket of yarrow and sulphur flowers. A fence post was broken and leaning into the wire, bouncing with each slip of the breeze.

I cut Denise down slowly. The wire was vicious and sharp, but there was no reason to hurry. She was already gone. I took my time and carefully freed her of the wire. Only that wondrous body of hers was left me, still warm, but empty now. By some miracle, though my bare hands were sliced from handling the wire, and though she was cut and bleeding all over, Denise's face was untouched. So I smoothed her hair back and closed her frightened eyes. Blood from my thumb was on her cheek, and it seemed paler than hers. She never knew it was coming. It was just another ride to her, because she had no idea of what I had done. And I, I should have known, should have seen, but refused to see.

As I carried her back through the foothills, carrying my new

bride in my arms, I felt it all slip into place and lock in my mind. It came clear as the print on the pages of "Sister Rose" lying on the floor of our cabin. Simple now. Obvious. Under that blue mountain sky.

The love I poured into those words was my love for Denise. No, Sister Rose was not Denise Fuller. They bore no likeness at all to one another, an imaginary medieval nun and the deepest, profoundest lover I'd ever known. They were from different ages, from separate continents, from opposite worlds. But the love was the same.

The love was the same.

So the doctors in Bozeman say it was a broken neck, and the shock that resulted. The internal bleeding, they say. Maybe she drowned in her own blood. Only an autopsy would tell for sure, they say, and I will not have them violate her so.

Some of the neighbors in the valley even blamed Denise, though not to my face. I know they blamed me too, but that I never heard, not even secondhand. Riding alone on a horse that fiery and fresh, they say. And way back in the foothills where it's rough, they say. Besides, they say, she was never that good with a horse.

Then there's others blame the appaloosa. Ought to be taken care of, they say. A killer, they say. Put it to sleep; it's only fair. A stallion that wild shouldn't be ridden again.

But I'll have none of that. The stallion is out in the barn right now, and the vet down in Livingston will take it, when I'm not here anymore. I'll be sure of that. I'll have no more of this killing on my behalf.

Because I know better. Denise never had a chance.

Earlier this week a priest from town came out to see me. Father Roncalli, I'll call him. A little round man with a ready wit and an easy heart. But I dare not use his name. This one is all mine.

Father Roncalli came to talk, because he knew the strain I was

under. Some of the neighbors had seen me, he said, wandering the hills here at night. They've heard the music I've been playing clear down in the valley. Howlin' Wolf. Muddy Waters. Played till my speakers wander around the room on their own. They claim they heard guns firing too, and they're worried. They don't really know this writer on the hill, but they're worrying anyway.

So Father Roncalli comes to talk, and he's got the names of counselors and doctors.

"They're right about the music, Father," I told him. But he declined when I offered to show him how my speakers move.

"There's been no guns though," I told him. What I didn't say is that I have no need for a gun. I've got something with a much better, surer aim.

So I agreed to talk to someone. I've forgotten the name, but it doesn't matter, I couldn't use it if I knew. The appointment was made for our wedding day, though nobody noticed that but me. And of course, when it came, that Friday afternoon, I stayed right here at my desk. How could I go?

Instead I began to write.

I've done nothing but drink and play the blues on my mobile speakers and write since then. It's not been easy.

Everyone in this confession is dead, I believe. Except for an unnamed boyfriend, a made-up old friend for an editor, a misnamed priest—who may or may not be a priest; I won't say—and the ideal postman. So you editors, if you find anyone real and alive here, cut that passage right out. Please. Everyone here must be six feet under, at least. With everything I've eaten and drunk in the last few days while I wrote, don't trust me to be careful. Check me. Everyone here must be dead. Long dead. Long, long dead.

Except me, of course.

I'd like to say I'm sorry to all the widows I've left behind here. I wish I could mention you by name. But of course, I dare not. So I'll let one of my victims stand for all.

I'm sorry Denise. Sweet Denise.

* * *

The next part of my manuscript should probably be cut from my story. You can keep it if you want, of course. Or you can stop here. Whatever you wish.

Today I will mail out a dozen copies of this manuscript. Eleven addressed to editors who know my work, who've published me before. The twelfth goes to my agent, sealed with instructions for it to be opened and submitted if the first eleven copies are returned.

But I beg you all, do not waylay this story. Change or cut or trim or rewrite whatever you wish. But please, go to press as soon as possible. With whatever you like.

One other thing. Do not try to find me. Don't even think of it.

I have three cases of whiskey and a saddlebag full of pills packed on the appaloosa. When the mail has gone out, we will disappear into the hills. The mountains here are an endless place. I won't say which range, but don't bother to look. I will be hidden and as unconscious as I can stay until this sees print. That I promise you.

* * *

I guess it's only fitting, isn't it? My end, unconscious, in some endless wilderness, alone. Silent. Forever silent.

Or as close as I can come.

I've left some rum on my desk here. Please give a bottle to everybody on the Search and Rescue team who finds my body. And tell them, some winter night by the fire, to tilt one back for me.

Remember to check. Everyone in these pages must be dead. If you don't, dear editor, it's on your head.

She Counts on the Turtle's Tree-Ring Scutes

stakes her life on the age of terrapins
she escorts across highways. Poised
toreador-close to the lane, she flags traffic,
one hand tracking the waddle and plod,
the other waving cars around
or into a cautious straddle. She cringes
at the thought of carapace pounded
against plastron—olive and orange
mosaics pressed to pavement—the intimate
implosion of marrow. She knows how
odds shift with each near miss
to favor the one depraved
driver—his calculated swerve,
his fleer and glower and brake lights flared.
Hunkering deep, she eyes the turtle's trek
to centerline yellow
where it finds solace in the color of sun.

And as it claws its tenacious pace again—
glimpse and flicker behind wheels,
a nickelodeon picture show—she springs
from her cheek-to-gravel push-up,
waltzes across the charge of cars
and into the marsh. At water's edge
she holds the withdrawn turtle above her,
delights in the autumnal-colored
tessellations of breastplate,
lowers it, like binoculars
she's focused on the far shore,
then disappears to seal this rite
deep into cattails. I watch her poke
wet-footed down the shoulder to our car
where I have learned faith as a venture
from world to world—the cool-blooded
daring to grow so beautifully old.

Wondering Where the Blind Boy Goes at Night

To a virtuoso playing acoustic harp
in Guadalajara's *Camino Real*, we order gourmet
meals costing 80,000 pesos,
drink Margaritas among the jet set, and all
I can think about is the blind boy
above Lake Pátzcuaro. His eye sockets looked
as if they'd just stopped smoldering, black
slits I could see
only when he lifted his head to play
his beat-up concertina
on the steep cobblestone street. Maybe someone
placed him there out of love
each day in the rickety chair,
plastic butter tub squeezed
between his knees. He slumped, hanging on
to the music box like a buoy,
straining to hear, through fiesta
chatter from the plaza below,
the leather-soled music to his ears—so rare
in a world muted by sneakers. Tourists
trudging up his hill
arc around him to *artesanias* shops
where they'll pay top dollar
for colors that flare. He waits
for their footsteps, their murmur, the wheeze
of their pursiness—and he plays
in the time it takes to pass him by
the only tune he knows. He played it twice
as I scrimped from my pocket
five one-hundred peso coins, not enough
to tip the harpist for a single chord,
nor buy one bite of fine cuisine. To swallow
amid the cold silver and crystal,
I close my eyes, try to believe—
his cheek warmed by candle glow at home,
the blind boy feasts on dreams of light.

Excavations: The Pigs of Gardara/ The Bones In A Wall

Nothing's as naked as pigs—
God moved demons like thoughts
from the possessed men
into the swine

of Gardara. To brush dust off that city
is to reheap the hill
where that herd jumped

into the sea. Their sudden intelligence
recognized the soles
of Christ's feet

receding on water above them.
Such evolution
hangs in an aura on bones. Look

as far off as Rhode Island—a pig
stripped under teeth
was buried in the wall of a house.

Only forensics convinced you
you hadn't found bones
of a child.

The House Painting Deal

I'm sitting here stirring paint. Stirring paint in the house my mother built after the old man died. Built and lived in for twenty-nine years, but empty now, empty except for the pile of junk waiting by the door for the Salvation Army. It was Mother's junk, junk she has been hoarding since the last World War. Junk we cleaned out after her funeral. It's all good stuff, too good to throw away because it was Mother's, but junk all the same because it has no useful value to the rest of us.

So it is Mother's junk. It has all come down to this last pile, one last mountain range to be moved—plastic flowers stapled to wire mesh frames, a rooster wall plaque with half the beans missing, and one dusty bluebird sitting askew inside a fake coat-hanger cage. And rag-rug material. There is enough rag-rug material to cover the floor of George Washington's White House, rag-rug material rolled up into tight woolly balls, balancing precariously around the sides in garbage sacks. And don't forget the prehistoric dresses that I have never seen anybody wear.

All this stuff sits on the far side of the room between the door and the front window. It is the last of the loot, the last of the cleaning, the last of accumulation. We never thought that we would get to the end of it, to the bottom of everything. But there it is. The last of an unclaimed inheritance. And now I can finish painting this place, collect my money for passing Go, and get the hell out of here.

The situation is this. They have left me the refrigerator, a mattress and box springs, one chair, and the phone. In case the real estate agent calls. As if I had time to talk to a real estate agent with a paint roller in my hand. Why can't Murleen take care of that after I leave, after the paint has dried? As if they ever thought of me. Little sister. It would suit me fine if they would just leave me alone for two weeks, leave me alone instead of coming over here to "help." Every time Murleen comes over she expects to set the world straight inside of ten minutes. And every time she comes over she breaks something in less than five. She tightens a loose screw and breaks the storm window on the front door. Changes a light bulb and throws the circuit

breaker. Zaps over just in time to back into fresh paint. This is how she is helping me. I try to tell her I work best alone, but she pries off the old thermostat and leaves a gaping hole in the wallboard. And I have to fix that too.

So far, I have found it is difficult to work with a sister. I never knew that before. My brothers and sisters were all older. Another generation. Out to lunch. I never had to put up with them until now. It's a sad situation. Sad but true. I never knew I had brothers and sisters until it came down to dividing the loot.

Get this picture—my brother, Jarvis, closest to me but older, his wife, his seven kids, all going in different directions through my mother's house on a dead run. That's nine pairs of arms reaching into cupboards and pulling out popcorn poppers. That's eighteen individual feet padding down the stairs and dragging things up from the basement. And that's 90 fingers and opposable thumbs closing around Mother's animal knickknacks she and I bought at the San Diego Zoo. That's 90 digitals closing around our shared past and cramming it into overstuffed garbage bags. Do you get the picture now? The bedroom door slamming back, the sounds of "Hey look what I found," as someone, someone older, pulls the last of the extra bedding down from the top shelf of *our* bedroom closet.

You never do get used to it, the "sharing," sitting there in the kitchen where you thought you could be objective, sitting there cringing against the slam of the back screen door and bracing yourself against the steady rhythm of flailing arms and swinging keesters. It all goes by you and around you, and you can only marvel at what ten-year-old fingers want. There goes that kid of Jarvis's. Watch him blitz past and grab a potholder out of the hands of his kissing cousin. See her lash back verbally. That girl has feminist potential. See it all transpire. When you are objective you can marvel at yourself for marveling at what ten-year-old fingers want. That is, you can marvel until you've seen the family silver trotting out the back door. Then everything collapses around you because you know. You know that this kid of Jarvis's is a chip of a chip off the old block—the kid, my brother Jarvis, and our old man.

"Our old man," we always called him. Because after his heart attack when he was thirty, he was prematurely old. "The old man" to all of his children, but "Alton" to anybody who ever worked for him. And "son-of-a-bitch" to anybody who ever worked against him. That was our old man the time that hauler came down to the house to look at the books. "I got a right to see them books. I got a right to see the figures." He was worried about the old man's math, about how many log feet he'd actually hauled out of the mountains and about how many he'd actually been paid for. "He said it was all written down in his books, and I want to see them." The hauler stood there beside his empty rig, the sawdust and sweat sticking to his face like a beard. He'd come to the house knowing the old man wouldn't be there, knowing he'd still be in the woods. And he stood there in his rage saying, "I got a right to see them figures." But *we* didn't know what books he was talking about, "we" in the sense of our remembered family consciousness, in the sense that this was the story I was told. We didn't know the old man kept any books. We had never seen any. And the hauler had climbed into the rig thinking that we were all in on it together, in on the plot to skim the profits off the haulers.

And now it has come down to this—the coda to this logging scenario. When last week we were going through Mother's cedar chest, the place where she kept all the secret secrets—the birth certificates and yellowed report cards—we found our father's ledger. The one long green government account book that at one time had belonged to the Forest Service, but had become "Property of Alton J. Sanderson." And there it was, the official record at last, suddenly unearthed from the dust of the catacombs, and we sat there waiting, me and another brother Judd who happened by, sat there waiting while Murleen flipped through the pages, waiting to find out if after all these years the hauler had really been justified. "Well?" we said. "Is that the book or isn't it?"

She toyed with us for half a minute, this sister pushing fifty, but still the primal sister with our lives in the palms of her hands. She toyed with us for half a minute and then finally relented and

said, "No, I don't think so." And she half turned the green ledger around and fanned the pages in our faces. "So there," she said. "Just a blank." And as she said the words, had we felt the full weight of her vindication? Did we still know who the boss was around here? But then, as she flipped through the ledger, there really was something on one of the pages, something written under "S." Judd and I saw it at the same time. And we both paged back with her, fumbling at the yellow dog-eared pages that were completely blank but somehow worn. And then there it was. It was the old man's logging record after all. But such a record. Only one entry, one quickly scrawled entry that seemed to hesitate on the very page—"Sanderson Timber, April Logs, white pine 1040, spruce 22,610, tamarack 8800, fir 660." No remarks. No context. No incoming. No outgoing. Only the figures for April. And before that and after that—silence.

But what did this mean? Did this mean the old man was "gyppo logging" after all, and creaming his profits off the haulers? Is that what it meant when they called him "gyppo logger," when they said it in their back-slapping voices? Or did it merely indicate that "writing it down" was the devil's game and that any fool could keep the figures in his own head? Had he started to keep a record then changed his mind? Or had he just gotten lazy? But there were the figures for April? Big numbers for little heads. Why not write it all down? So that no one would forget? Where was the danger in that? What did he have to hide? And then, a kind of understanding passed between us, a kind of familial understanding that is only possible between siblings, between Murleen, and Judd, and myself. The old man *had* been keeping two sets of records. There was the proof on the blank page, except for the entry under "S." And all those phantom records, the incoming and the outgoing, accounts payable and accounts receivable, had been added in his head. And each of us, knowing our old man, knew what that added up to.

And that was the pattern before they threw away the mold. The old man before he died, the archetypal sinner. Subsequently, there has been a diminution of the gene pool, a

petty ante illustration of the type. Take ten parts old man, one part Mother, and there you have it—Jarvis!

Jarvis, trading you out of your air rifle, making you a real good deal, swapping you two things for one—his gas powered airplane and transistor radio for your air rifle. A real good deal. As long as you didn't try to run anything. "Needs some work," he said. Like a new engine and maybe a transitor or two. And there is Jarvis, after you've traded your air rifle, the one you gathered beer bottles all summer to buy, there is Jarvis out in the field shooting the gophers that should have been yours.

All this makes you wonder how you ever ended up on the wrong end of a deal like that. It's a lot like wondering how you ended up on the deal of painting the house. But let's not go into that. That's the way deals in this family go. It sounded like the right thing to do at the time, make peace with the past by scraping every board and laying down a fresh coat of paint. It was me they thought of first, knew I would fall for the sentimental pitch. So here I am stirring paint.

Stirring paint by hand is a delicate operation. You'd like to go fast to hurry the thing, but if you do you only slop it over the sides. You have to dig with your stick through the caked pigment on the bottom of the can, and then you have to swirl it in slow. It's the only way when nobody left you a bigger bucket, one of those five gallon soap buckets Mother used to have a million of. Yes, one of those soap buckets you saw stuffed full of cake mixes being lugged out the kitchen door. When you don't have one of those buckets, you have to do it this way. Dig on the bottom and swirl it in, letting the stick gently scrape the sides. It's a lost art, what else can I say? They are not paying me by the hour.

This place belonged to Mother. The ranch was the old man's, but this place in town was hers. A rib of the ranch, made out of lumber milled on our land, tamarack and doug fir skidded from the center of the earth, brought down from Rock Falls in small truck loads until it was all piled house-high and unshaven behind the barn. A place for catching grasshoppers, a sliver patch for bare palms.

It was the house she built after the old man died. Took the lumber to Spokane herself to have it planed, took it over in three loads on the International truck, the red truck before it was sold. But that was always the way it was when it came to caring about a house, when it came to being choosey about the place where you would live. She had to look out for the babies, think of rats climbing into the flour, but he had to look out for the money.

That's why they bought this place, because the price was right, because the old floors were eaten through with dryrot. A real bargain. And that's why she wanted to rebuild. She had him nearly convinced at one time, when the money was coming in, when the logging was at its peak, before the old man died. And after he was gone, she went ahead with her plans. But it was, by then, a metamorphosed plan. It was, "the way he would have wanted it." So she built her house. The house she had always been planning to build, after moving from one rat-trap rental to another, any available rat-trap rental that was big enough to fit so many kids.

So Mother built this house, tore down the dryrotted floors and walls, poured the cement, laid the brick, spackled every wall I run my roller over. The boys and my sister, Murleen, built this house, this house that the real estate agent says will be hard to sell. It is the worst kind, the kind where somebody did it themselves.

And my room, that's the worst of all. Turquoise paint. That's the worst kind. Nobody buys a house with a turquoise room. It took three coats of beige to paint over my old room. If the real estate lady only knew how I talked to get that blue room in the first place. "A blue room would be too cold," my mother said. That was before we added central heating. Too cold she said. So we compromised on olive green. I nearly got frost bite in olive green. The second time around I got turquoise blue. She was tired of my whining. And this time, the last time, it took three coats of all purpose beige to hide that blue, and still the tint bleeds through in a kind of compromise light green. And that's what the real estate lady said, that turquoise won't sell.

I've seen some do-it-yourselfers use a rotor on the end of a drill to mix the paint. But that's so messy. It's like using an egg beater when all you really need is a spoon. Then somebody's got to clean up. And with paint, it's not like you can lick the beaters. The point is, anything you put into the paint other than a stick you have to clean. And what, may I ask, have they left here for me to clean with? No, this is the best way—slow and steady.

So red paint! Now that was a story. When the old man bought red paint for the racks on his truck. He liked red. "What did you go and buy red paint for?" she said, as if she didn't know already that it wasn't for the house. Not one thing for the house since they had been married. Not one thing wherever they were living, southern Idaho, Bayview, Linfore, Pritchard. Not one thing to make a house more livable. No curtains, no carpets, no nothing.

"It's good paint," he said.

They were living at the ranch at the time, my brother Jarvis picking up slivers in his knees from the wood floors. "What did you buy red paint for, when we really needed linoleum?" speaking of it, then, already in the past tense, like she would never get another chance. "Didn't you think to get us a piece of linoleum?" It reminded them both of the time before, in a house in southern Idaho, when she had bought a piece of linoleum off the truck of a traveling linoleum man. Paid for it out of the food money. Bought just one scrap of linoleum to put on the floor because of one of the kids, bought just one piece of linoleum that the old man gave her hell for.

"Why did you buy a scrap like that, when I would have got you some better?" They both remembered. "It's good paint," the old man had said, "for my truck." And he put the can of paint on the shelf, and it stayed there for nearly a month before she came in one day and found him using it on the floor. Painted the kitchen floor enamel red and took care of the slivers. Pink diapers, but no slivers. She was madder than hell. A damned red floor that didn't go with anything. A red enamel floor that came out of his guilt for the past.

That was red paint, but this that I'm mixing is blue. A half full can I found under the stairs. It sticks in the bottom real good. You have to stir it a long time.

I have found all kinds of things in the basement like this, things that everyone else has passed up, things of little value. And I have found surprises. Like when I pulled the built-ins out, slid out the drawers so that I could paint behind. That's where I found the missing pool ball, the number five, and sent it along to Jarvis so that he could put it with his set. That's where I found the number five, where no one else had looked. It's been behind there a long time, since one of the grandkids "put" it there. How they managed that I'll never know.

But the grandkids are always losing pool balls. That's the name of the game. See who can shoot it across the table and get it to jump off. If you hit just right, on the corner by the pocket, they jump off and roll under something. It's all great fun. What else would you expect from the children of siblings? That missing five is the reason we had two sets, one set for kids and one for adults, hidden in the top drawer of the oak buffet, the one they used to shut a sock on to keep me out of. But later we got a key. Jarvis figured out how to make a key in junior high just so he could keep people out, have one drawer that his little sister wasn't poking her nose into. And after that we always had a key. Just like we always had two sets of pool balls.

Mother never had just one of anything. When she learned how to do something right, she always went into mass production. Let that rattle around in your head. Like those ski hats every grandkid knows how to make. When she started that project she had to make herself a frame, a circular frame with notched pegs. What she ended up doing was making everyone and their dog ski hats, one year, and everyone and their cat, ski-hat frames the next. And I have been getting knitted ski hats for Christmas ever since. But all that stuff's gone now. I saw some kid carrying the last frame out to the car weeks ago, some kid carrying a hoop around his neck like a winner's wreath.

Jarvis was the oldest unmarried brother that same summer our father had the stroke. He was the old man's arms and legs. "Jarvis

get me this. Jarvis get me that." And Jarvis in the old man's estimation was the laziest son-of-a-bitch he'd ever had. Out of all his sons. One rotten apple. Jarvis was fifteen, just beginning to grow out of his skin. And I remember the fight they had with the cane.

But who can remember how it started? Over what task or other Jarvis had failed to perform. "What you have to learn is how to take orders. Listen to me when I'm talking to you." I believe those are the universal lines. "Listen to me when I'm talking." And Jarvis never listened. He only talked back. "When you have something important to say, I'll listen." Just a little nine word sentence like that escalated the war by the nth degree. Just some little syntactical attack did that. And then the old man hit him with his cane, hit him when he had his back turned so that it came down across his shoulders and back. And Jarvis quick on his feet grabbed the cane out of his hands, so that the old man was pulled forward off balance before he let go. Pulled forward so that they almost touched faces before they backed away in surprise.

But then Jarvis broke the cane across his knee. Broke it in the second try and flung the pieces off into the weeds and left the old man to stagger back to the house in his rage. And that's where it didn't stop. That's where Jarvis thought that he had won and was finally free of tyranny. But he was wrong.

The first time Jarvis left home it was really only a trial run. He spent the night in the barn, and everybody thought that he had left for good but me. And I knew where he was because I followed him. When a person turns on their heel like that it always means business. So I followed him first to the neighbors, where he had squeezed himself in between two sheds, into a hollow alley of bull thistles. And I listened to him there, listened to his anger culminate in strategy, listened until another Jarvis voice came through, a voice that wanted to tell stories to his little sister as we both sat on the loose boards in the bull thistles and rocked in pain.

It was a Jarvis voice I had never known, and have not known since. It was a sibling voice almost human. Not like at the funeral

when he and his kids ransacked our mother's house. Not like then. But out in the bull thistles Jarvis sat there sweaty and cold, and told me stories, and I promised I would never tell about how he was going to live in our barn for six years so he could be free. But as it turned out he only stayed that one night. And the next day they were back at it again, the same old fight without an end.

The next time Jarvis ran away, it would be the real thing. And it would be because of me. Because I wasn't supposed to tell. Only I didn't tell. I would never tell. Only I can't remember exactly how it happened. I just know that when Jarvis lit out like before, I remembered the first time when we sat in the bull thistles telling stories, and I followed him there again, just like before. But this time when I slipped in between the sheds the old man was right behind me, and the way it came out was, I gave away the whole damn thing. And this was the start of my bad reputation. From that point on I couldn't be trusted.

I couldn't be trusted with any of the family secrets connected with Jarvis. I was just supposed to keep my mouth shut and mind my own business. But I found out about Jarvis moving pipes for Knudtsen. I couldn't help it. I always watched the boys in the fields moving pipe, and one day there was Jarvis. And I caught hell for just finding out. And again the matter was impressed upon my mind. You are never supposed to tell. And what the hell did I ever say about it? What did I ever do? But the old man found out about where Jarvis had run away to, and that's when the old man went after Jarvis with the gun. And that solidified my reputation and was the reason Jarvis had to move to southern Idaho to live with our uncle. That was the reason.

It was a mixed up mess.. Old paint blistered from the sun. I suspect that it has festered all these years. And was the reason why Jarvis took me down to the ground when he came back after high school, after the old man had died, and Jarvis thought he was the big man of the family then, and rubbed cow dung in my face. It was as good a reason as any.

So most of my brothers and sisters all think I grew up with the soft life. Coming along when I did and growing up after the old

man died, growing up without brothers and sisters I had to share things with. And they have all hated me for it, for not having had to go through the hard times, the hand-me-downs, the do-with-outs. Like because I was the last one to be born, I am somehow not entitled. Like I don't belong. But they have been wrong about that. They are the ones who don't belong. I was an only child out of ten. That's the way it always was. Just me and Mother. And they have their nerve coming here and taking our things, mine and Mother's. These people. These strangers who call themselves my brothers and sisters. They are the ones who are not entitled. They are the ones who moved out.

And they have already taken. All these years since the old man died, they have been coming back to take their share, coming back to borrow tools that never were returned, hammers and wrenches that just walked off. And they have come back for bigger things—all the saddles, all the cans, all the ladders, all the ropes. Everything that didn't belong to a woman, they took. And Mother had to engrave her name onto every screwdriver and wrench to prove that it was ours. And the oldest son complained, "All this should have been mine. I was the oldest son. It all should have come to me." All that male lineage crap. And older sisters, who think I came along too late and didn't have to do any work, didn't have to cook for the crew of brothers, they complain too. My sisters say that all old things, things that came before should go to them. The oak dressers, the brass beds, the antiques. It's only right. This is what they say, but none of them are brazen enough to do anything about it. All of my siblings are just too civilized. All of them, that is, except for Jarvis. He grew up somewhere else. He is not even related.

And Jarvis, from the outset, made it clear where he stands. "I don't care what I get. All I want is my fair share." As if someone was out to gyp him, like he had been cheated his whole life by the rest of us, like we hate him or something because he grew up with our uncle. Jarvis wants his fair share. They all want their fair share. They are all entitled.

My sisters want their fair share because they were here first. And I want my fair share because I was here last. And then

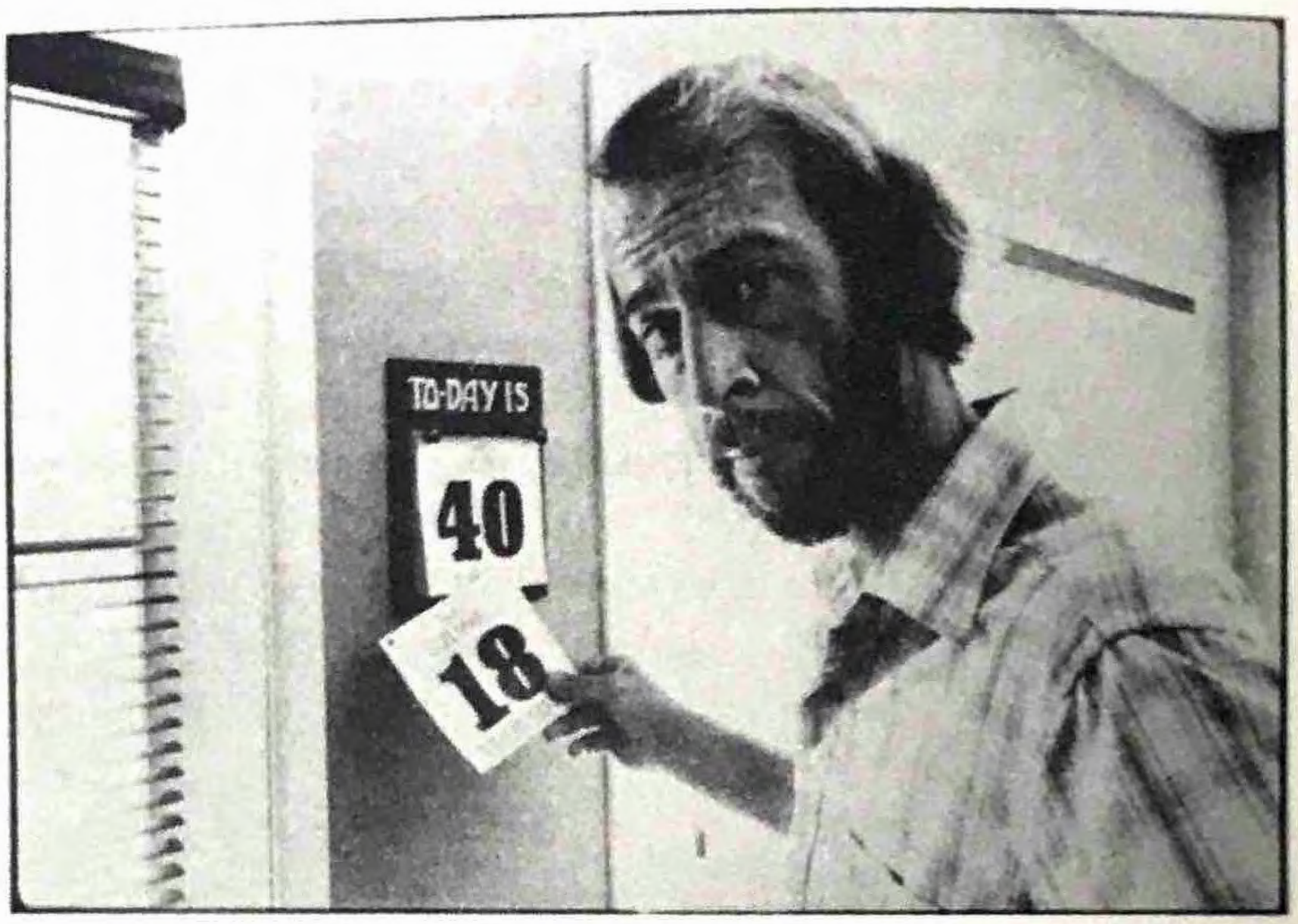
there's Jarvis. He wants his fair share for being the old man's arms and legs, for being the one who was made to work against his will. He wants his fair share for the broken cane, and for the gun. There is always the gun, the gun that tips the scales for Jarvis. How much inheritance will it take for us to pay for our father's gun? How much inheritance would it take if you were the one who had to take away the gun from your invalid father, the gun he was pointing at you?

But enough of relatives. I said I would paint the house. I mix the paint in slow. It is almost ready.

So I have discovered that when you make a deal to paint a house you find things that you didn't expect, things you have to fix before you can get on with your work. You pull back the curtain in the basement shower and find dryrot in the window casing. You run your hand along painted cement, and it chips off where the water has been running down. Or you look at the wall in the hallway where you were supposed to paint a mural, that time when you were taking art classes over at the lake. You were supposed to paint a mountain scene that would remind your mother of the ranch, and of the time when she lived there with the old man. You were supposed to paint a picture of the good times. Paint the fence standing up even though it had fallen down. And then you remember why it never got done. You remember you couldn't compromise your adolescent integrity, and you put it off until nobody cared whether you painted it or not. A mural you've formatted and painted a hundred times in your sleep.

And because things like that nag at the back of your mind, this is what you do. You find some old cans of paint under the stairs, old cans that are half full from painting the house before. And you've already got new paint, a five gallon can of beige, to paint the whole inside of the house with. But you remember that your mother always hated beige and white, and all light colors, because it got dirty so fast, so she always painted with darker shades, a darker pink, a darker green, a darker turquoise blue. And you find the cans, and you remember the wall, and you mix the paint, and you remember every piece of junk your

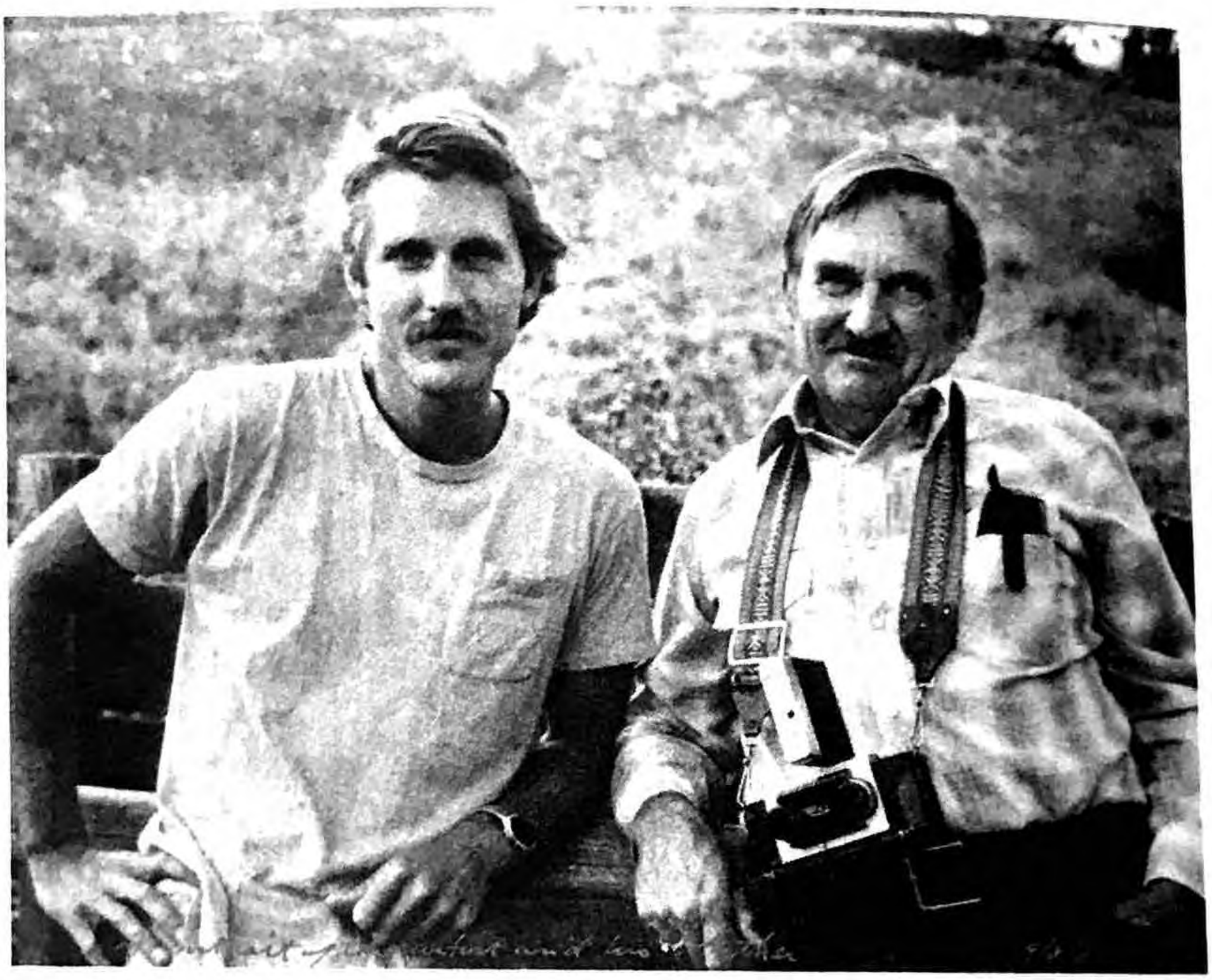
brothers and sisters carted off. And then you remember how your father used to yell at the last, "I'm going to have the say in this house. I'm going to have all the say. Listen to me when I'm talking." And all these things are together inside you mixed in and more. And this is the way it comes out. You decide to paint the wall. You decide to do it because you were told. And you roll on the paint from top to bottom, bold smooth strokes over the dark pink of the decade before. But this is the difference. You paint it blue. Bold, smooth, turquoise strokes, instead of the beige, because you remember one other thing, what the real estate lady said—that turquoise won't sell.



"Self-Portrait Turning 40"
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 11"x14"

For the most part I think I'm an autonomous, inner-directed person. But, sometimes when I'm visiting my brother, family dynamics act to make me just "the little brother" again. All independent thinking and assertiveness seem to go out the window as I unconsciously play the role expected of me.

untitled
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 14" x 11"



"A portrait of the artist and his father, 9/8/81"
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 16"x20"

"The Visit, #2," 1987
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 16"x20"

First Crazy

As if a rock threw itself down from a tree.
The stick took hold of the girl,
made her hush it hard in the soft dirt
of the bank. She crouched and wiped the line
away with her palm, as if the halved apple
grew back together. She would try
to walk away. But something had her.
And she'd rake the same line in the same
place. Crouch, heal with her hand.
Even at that age, we knew. We called
gently, *Barbara, Barbara*, coaxing her
from the canal's edge to the house which

spring grass tickled to itself like a magnet.
There, in the kitchen stood Barbara glowing
strange as a bulb left on in the daylight,
word after word shorting her, *Yes, no—*
wait—I have to—no—I—yes. Wait—
until my mother quietly closed a door
and dialed the phone and my father
drove her to her father alone, and she
disappeared from afternoons, school.
As if space flew the bird.

I thought at first it was because I'd told her
what I'd heard, how women bleed.
But later, years later, I heard she lived
in Cordes Junction married to a drummer
and glazing pottery, reds and blues dividing
from the cream of her hand. By then the world
loved only to happen: Grandmothers stickpinned
their shades to the sill and burned
birds' nests on the stove. Men emptied guns
into their televisions. The whole country yearned
to float bombs among the stars.

And somehow it all seemed normal until this
evening, sun fermenting low and peach hair shadows
along the street, a blonde girl
walking one foot on, one foot off
the curb beside her house. Losing and coming
back for, over and over, a loose pink ballet slipper
which flapped from her heel like a mouth.
As if speech were letting itself out
the back way, slowly, from our lives.

Bad Sleep

Everyone has a version. The sailing ship
becomes stranded in seaweed and holds
still for days. The passengers
drink up all the liquor, stare angles in the air
like cut glass. Probably, the woman says, they think
I've been captured by Spaniards. Probably,
says the fellow in beige, my wife's gone off
with the kid in leather underwear. At night
the mist opaques like a dead woman
in her honeymoon picture. Seaweed chokes
portholes, wood planks begin to sweat.
Their sleep is restless because they have told
all their secrets to kill time and still
they are here. The captain's hording rum.
Suddenly the seaweed twitters like skylarks.
Its pink fever flowers. Probably, the cigar man
says, this is the end of the world. He mourns
the brief beauty of television offers, the moustache,
the blue blazer, the man seated at the grand
piano in firelight offering excerpts
of every great symphony ever written
on a two record set. The spinster says,
Now my sister will be setting the table...
They stand on deck gazing where there's only
deep blue between the weeds like panes.
They have nothing to do.
It goes like this: Now my sister is laying
down the knives. My wife, sighs one, is watching
the well of his boot as he undresses. My father,
says the woman, is dialing the Spanish Embassy.
And so it pours. My son is shooting
snails with his BB gun in the garden, my lover
is changing the furniture, my cat is running off
with a pack to the dump, my mother is returning
from her honeymoon with blurred
snapshots, the snapshots loosening from
their dry glue and shuffling in the dark pages

the faces of lost twins and half-wits from
the other side, and the seaweed's saying, I'm wild
about everything, honey. You could wrap me around
your little finger. And on mantelpieces
the dead in their photographs echo this
and hang around on the shore holding still, each
with his tiny boat out there, suspended,
digging light like the demon spades of leaves.

Ruth Schwartz

Father, After The Divorce

Once I was your supermarket princess, choosing
anything I wanted, and on line you'd pop
the olives into my mouth, whole as jewels,
and I would suck the sweet pimento out,
hold it like a ribbon on my tongue.

But now my mouth is guilty, purple
lipstick stains my teeth, smudging the hair I chew.
You wait impatient in the car, silver, low-hipped,
a sportster for your other women. Mother's chin
is heavy on my shoulder, shoving me toward you.

Today it doesn't matter where you take me,
or that you'll refuse to bring me back,
citing the bridge, the late hour, the man
in Mother's bed. Home is just another place I've left
the lights on, chandelier bright as a hand on fire.

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Catfishing

is best hot July midnights,
stars catching on a ragged
horizon the willow-lined slough makes,

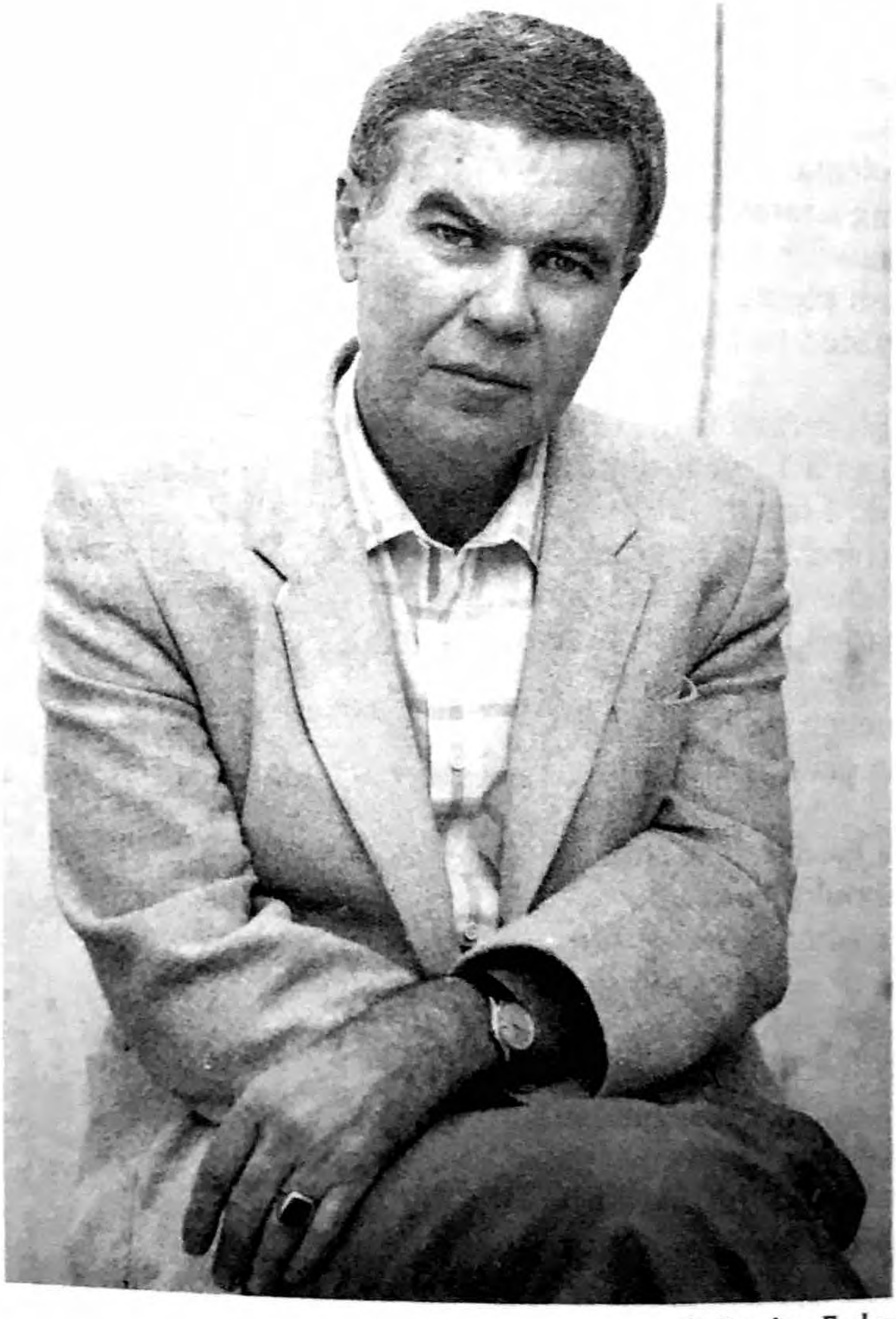
the Coleman light
coloring nearby berry canes green.
The crawfish traps dry out,
crawfish pieces
still crusted to the wire netting

crawfish consciousness fought through—
what can a 12-year-old know,
what do I teach
in teaching Paul to crack them
& pull the hook-barb against
the snarled little flesh & leave them
living to go again over
the uneven slough floor?
Catfish eat anything

with a hard-lipped smile—
Paul should learn all
I don't want to teach him,
should imagine crawfish pain & the steel

in him teaching him sideways
moves in the ooze he can't imagine
until I show him how
to handmold the local favorite
bait: deliberately dirtied blood

& meal, the chicken-guts
three days in a jar.
Mosquitoes knot along his arm;
he twitches the rod,
properly hoping to catch nothing.



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Secret Places: A Remembrance of Ray Carver

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Ray was a master story-teller — in the poems too. If you want to know what sort of person Ray was, read the poems. The short stories suggest his program as a writer, but in the poems he was able to say "I" more easily, was able to say how he felt. Ray's short stories and his poems were concurrent; the stories tell about his troubles in an objective way, but the poems, first-person, redeemed him. He could speak in a level voice, directly, in a conversational way that often rose to a tone of reverence, praise, wonderment.

Ray was a shy man with a low voice, a short, barking laugh which you heard as often as you heard mere words, his cigarette smoke curling around his eyes. He was a delight in the spun-out joke or story two people could build in conversation, a reminiscence, always interrupting the story with laughter. He was not a talker but a conversationalist. The stories and poems are that intimate, disarming. The horror tales of the bad jobs he had always turned in retrospect to foibles — though humans were never big enough for their dreams, the life that was given them was enough. That's why he loved Chekov short stories his whole writing life, and why it's appropriate that the story of Chekov's death (a parallel?) is the final story in his collected stories.

The bad jobs sometimes turned into good jobs. He was a graveyard-shift sweep-up man at Sacramento's Mercy Hospital during the years when I first knew Ray. We laughed then about how the job was a writer's sort of job. We laughed almost the same way about it in July — he wondered if he ever had such a wonderful job, writing by day, working so little by night. Bad jobs were good jobs if the writing you did meanwhile was good. The poem "The Autopsy" in *Ultramarine* shows the other side of that job and of his personal life.

Maryann, his first wife, selling encyclopedias door-to-door, working as a waitress, had bad jobs too, both she and Ray trying anything, even a short term as live-in managers of a Sacramento

apartment complex. Then there was the abortive student exchange situation for her in Tel Aviv (they came back midway through the term) — all the years of dead-ended dreaming from the time of their late-teen marriage. The small towns, seedy rentals, the piecemeal college study, the intermittent bursts of relative prosperity, through it all she was avid for Ray's work — they grew up together. They worked so hard for one another. Ray understood the characters in his stories who were knocked about by circumstance because he was one of them.

Eventually, Ray had teaching jobs which came as a result of the success of his early stories (many of them with Sacramento settings) collected in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* Meanwhile, he fought alcoholism and quit drinking. His subsequent life with Tess Gallagher changed him and his work. The stories and poems came richer, fuller, and there were more of them. He was happy — the ten years he speaks about in the poem "Gravy," years that he had earned, were the gift that Tess gave him. They shared their writing, probably pushed each other further than each could have reached alone. But he was never satisfied with grief — look at the later stories which transcend accommodation, and the poems, all of them, which tell you right out the richness and diversity of the lives one person has.

The last poem in *Ultramarine*, "The Gift," is one of the many thank-you poems to Tess; *tenderness*, the gift that the narrator speaks about, is the ability to give as much as to receive compassionate love. We should address and perhaps are able to address one another with tenderness because one really can't know what the other feels. Secret places.

Humans wrestle one another — it's one-to-one in the stories — and the wrestling sometimes turns into embracing. In the poems, Ray could turn to monologue, to the lyric, to a person embracing himself; he could show that he understood the ironies he turned on himself and not be hurt. The poems have renewal after renewal. "The Gift" contrasts the changes in spiritual states of the narrator's life by naming the places in which the changes occurred. Ray uses this device in other poems; the process gives

the poems grounding, locale. You verify something happened by saying where it happened, verifying memory by association but also allaying the power of bad events by putting them in context. Not that Ray was ever afraid to face what he had to, deny himself good or bad luck. "Glad to be here, and nowhere else," he says in "The Gift."

Ray never hid in his work; integrity was the stake even in the bad stretches of his life when he thought he had no integrity. You would have thought that because of the frankness of the early and middle period stories that he'd have no more secrets. But he kept discovering new things in himself; Tess made those places accessible. There are several versions of some of the stories when he felt he had not gone far enough.

Ray wanted to write for everyone, to be clear, and if you see the statistics about his popularity in the countries in which his work was translated (some 20 different languages), you understand that what he wrote was universal because familiar — he'd found the point of contact, the place where a person rubs up against another, living brand-name domesticity, often not having the words to talk to one another or name their condition but having the products to identify how they lived (the stories have a kind of sad K-Mart specificity in the listing of the signs of the culture).

When Loretta and I saw him the last time in July, I gave Ray back a Carver anecdote. There's a stretch of the Pacific coast between Jenner and Fort Ross where northbound Highway 1 climbs through switchbacks to maybe 900 feet. Below, I had discovered a pocket-sized rocky beach you could see only when you're coming south on the road through the last straightaway into the descent, a secret place.

Back in the late '60s, Gary Thompson, Ray and I spent a weekend there, talking, climbing, splashing around. I remember the event because I have the place — the driving is slow, maybe a little scary there; I pass it every trip thinking the same thing. We were young, we had literary causes, and we had fears which could be burned off in the sun or washed with small talk. We had a fire for cooking and telling late-night stories; we slept.

Ray's sleeping bag was empty the next morning. The way out was up. Finally, we saw where Ray had scrambled, slid back, climbed; in the half-dark, he'd hiked to the car and driven the miles to a place where he could get coffee, he later told us. Coffee, coffee. What was more amazing — Ray's push for the coffee, or the care he took not to disturb us for it? It wasn't much of a secret place, nor much of a quirk to reveal. The climb was hard, and he went up and away from us without our knowing.

Generally, most of us like the same things in poems that we like in human beings — if the contact is to be casual, we will forgive pushiness and some self-indulgence, but for the long run, we love the humans and poems that will show us our secrets; we welcome trust and what the Sunday supplements call vulnerability.

Ray was a noble and generous man; he never held back as a writer or as a person. Who had more life? But he died too soon for all of us who loved him and anticipated other secrets his writing would give us.

Editor's Note: The following are two unpublished poems by Raymond Carver with an introduction by Tess Gallagher.

These two poems are from Ray's last collection of poems, "A New Path to the Waterfall," which is forthcoming in May from Atlantic Monthly Press. I have just finished proofreading the galleys.

"Cherish" is a poem written three weeks after our wedding. "One More" reflects some of the frustrations any writer feels in trying to get down to the work of writing poems. These distractions were especially difficult for Ray during his illness, but he overcame these obstacles and many more to give us the poems in his last wonderful book.

—Tess Gallagher

Cherish

From the window I see her bend to the roses
holding close to the bloom so as not to
prick her fingers. With the other hand she clips, pauses and
clips, more alone in the world
than I had known. She won't
look up, not now. She's alone
with roses and with something else I can only think, not
say. I know the names of those bushes

given for our late wedding: Love, Honor, Cherish—
this last the rose she holds out to me suddenly, having
entered the house between glances. I press
my nose to it, draw the sweetness in, let it cling—scent
of promise, of treasure. My hand on her wrist to bring her close,
her
eyes green as river-moss. Saying it then, against
what comes: *wife*, while I can, while my breath, each hurried
petal
can still find her.

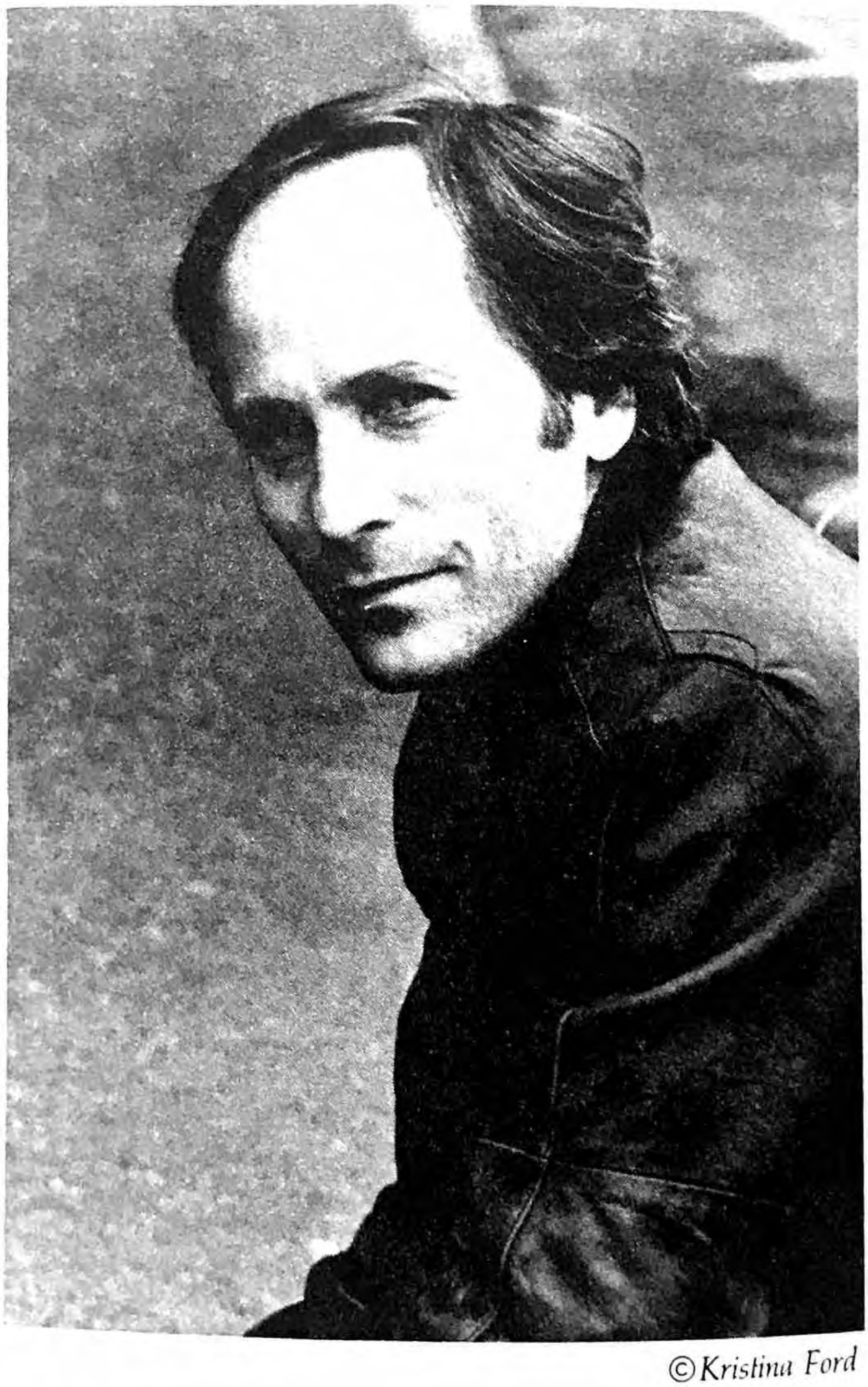
One More

He arose early, the morning tinged with excitement,
eager to be at his desk. He had toast and eggs, cigarettes
and coffee, musing all the while on the work ahead, the hard
path through the forest. The wind blew clouds across
the sky, rattling the leaves that remained on the branches
outside his window. Another few days for them and they'd
be gone, those leaves. There was a poem there, maybe;
he'd have to give it some thought. He went to
his desk, hesitated for a long moment, and then made
what proved to be the most important decision
he'd make all day, something his entire flawed life
had prepared him for. He pushed aside the folder of poems—
one poem in particular still held him in its grip after
a restless night's sleep. (But, really, what's one more, or
less? So what? The work would keep for a while yet,
wouldn't it?) He had the whole wide day opening before him.
Better to clear his decks first. He'd deal with a few items
of business, even some family matters he'd let go far
too long. So he got cracking. He worked hard all day—love
and hate getting into it, a little compassion (very little), some
fellow-feeling, even despair and joy.
There were occasional flashes of anger rising, then
subsiding, as he wrote letters, saying "yes" or "no" or "it
depends"—explaining why, or why not, to people out there
at the margin of his life or people he'd never seen and never
would see. Did they matter? Did they give a damn?
Some did. He took some calls too, and made some others, which
in turn created the need to make a few more. So and so, being
unable to talk now, promised to call back next day.

Toward evening, worn out and clearly (but mistakenly, of
course)
feeling he'd done something resembling an honest day's work,
he stopped to take inventory and note the couple of
phone calls he'd have to make next morning if
he wanted to stay abreast of things, if he didn't want to
write still more letters, which he didn't. By now,
it occurred to him, he was sick of all business, but he went on in
this
fashion, finishing one last letter that should have been
answered weeks ago. Then he looked up. It was nearly
dark outside.
The wind had laid. And the trees—they were still now, nearly
stripped of their leaves. But, finally, his desk was clear,
if he didn't count that folder of poems, he was
uneasy just to look at. He put the folder in a drawer, out
of sight. That was a good place for it, it was safe there and
he'd know just where to go to lay his hands on it when he
felt like it. Tomorrow! He'd done everything he could do
today. There were still those few calls he'd have to make,
and he forgot who was supposed to call him, and there were a
few notes he was required to send due to a few of the calls,
but he had it made now, didn't he? He was out of the woods.
He could call today a day. He'd done what he had to do.
What his duty told him he should do. He'd fulfilled his sense of
obligation and hadn't disappointed anybody.

But at that moment, sitting there in front of his tidy desk,
he was vaguely nagged by the memory of a poem he'd wanted
to write that morning, and there was that other poem
he hadn't gotten back to either.

So there it is. Nothing much else needs be said, really. What
can be said for a man who chooses to blab on the phone
all day, or else write stupid letters
while he lets his poems go unattended and uncared for,
abandoned—
or worse, unattempted. This man doesn't deserve poems
and they shouldn't be given to him in any form.
His poems, should he ever produce any more,
ought to be eaten by mice.



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An Interview With Richard Ford

Interview with Richard Ford, conducted at Squaw Valley Writers Conference, August 11, 1988, by Gary Short and Catherine French; special assistance from Jim Barbour.

HFR: Again and again you stress diligence. You're quoted in the *New York Times Magazine* as saying, "A lot of people could be novelists if they were willing to devote their lives to their own responses to things." Is it a big part of what you've called that "existential errand," a devotion to writing and writing your very best?

RF: I hope when I said "existential errand" I wasn't overdramatizing the issue. I just meant that it's a problem of one's existence—if your existence is being a writer—to try to close out of your life as much as you can that gets in the way of your work; so you can do your work as well as it could be done by you. One of the things that worried me when I was a kid, a kid writer, was that something of my own blind choosing would later become an excuse for not having done what I set out to do as well as I could. I don't know why that worried me so much. That I'd had a couple of false starts in figuring out what to do with myself, and maybe I'd heard my own excuses for those and didn't care for them. I'm sure I didn't feel I was as book-smart as I ought to be to become a writer, and that I'd have to do my work flat-out if I was to do it at all. That'd been the only way I'd ever done well at anything that involved "my intelligence." Later it dawned on me that that's the way *one should* be a writer—without excuses, abolishing impediments, as completely as one can be.

HFR: You have said in regards to your characters' actions, "If we are limited to just predictable responses, if we believe here is a guy who can think only this or that, that people live within their givens, then life's pretty well set for us. But human beings continue to surprise us." Is your remark about predictable responses relevant not only to your characters but to your philosophy of writing?

RF: I don't think I have a philosophy of writing I could codify. I simply observe that people are always capable of the unpredictable, and I would like characters I write to be capable in that way, too. I'm interested in what people do and think beneath the shelter of their apparent character. That's one place where drama is. Drama is, in one manifestation, the torque between people's chaotic interior lives, and the need to make life manageable, orderly. Character is in some ways a bothersome word to me, both as regards us humans and as regards those figures in literature that represent humans. In its usual use, *character* seems to be a set matter; whereas in my experience in making up characters in stories and novels, and in the experience of making up my own—if you'll excuse the expression—self, I recognize a lot of haphazard is involved, a lot of accident, half-truth, misapprehension, a great deal of the unreliable, changeability, *surprise*. The logic we make of all this and try to pass off as true and live by is said to be our *character*. But it doesn't always make a very predictable sum. Particularly it's true when one is called upon to find consolation in life, find some reason for hope, under circumstances of little hope. There, we have to surprise ourselves, go outside of our usually perceived characters. But we often do it—in spite of what our "characters" might seem to permit.

HFR: In talking about voice, the poet William Stafford says that he thinks his own voice originated from his mother's voice. Do you have any ideas about where your voice is coming from?

RF: No. And in any case, I don't think I have a single voice; at least not one that has consistent intonations of language, or choice of words, sentence habits. Maybe some writers do, although my own noticings make me think most writers are much more various—in those ways I've just mentioned—than their describers and even their adorers like to admit. Graham Greene says—and I can't quote him precisely—that to be a fiction writer one has to pretend to be other people. And that may mean quite a few voices. Actually, I hear that word used mostly

by poets, anyway, often expressing some mean territoriality, or to refer to something absent from work they don't like, or to detract by imputing influence. I've also heard it used to refer merely to a consistent array of concerns within a writer's work. Really, it's not a very appealing expression. It mostly ascribes rather unreliable limitations when it's used at all, and for that reason I don't ever use it.

HFR: You've been blessed with good teachers, Howard Babb and Oakley Hall for instance.

RF: Yes. And others. E.L. Doctorow.

HFR: And yet Frank Bascombe in *The Sportswriter* is critical of teachers for being anti-mystery. What are we to make of your attitude towards teachers?

RF: Whether that—which is intelligence I made up for that character, after all—precisely represents my own opinion is neither here no there. I'm not much of a generalizer. What Frank's trying to do is organize life more than it's lately been organized in his life; organize his day to day experience and represent it in language that is faithful both to his feeling about it and to what will please him more than he's been pleased. Some people have written, have told me, that they don't like him because he's such a categorizer. And my thought is...well, okay.

HFR: There is this quote that Frank said that fascinates me. Is this him just trying to generalize and categorize again when he says, "Vice implies virtue to me, even in landscape, and virtue, value"? I wasn't quite sure what that meant or how to explain it.

RF: Well, vice implies its opposite. And if you find something which you say is a vice or has vice in it, that implies to Frank—ever the optimist—that must also be in contact with virtue. And...how does it go again? "Virtue implies..."

HFR: "...even in landscape, and virtue, value."

RF: That's simple. If you say something is virtuous that means you assign a value to it, positive value. That's all it means.

HFR: Have any of your novels started out as short stories?

RF: No.

HFR: Have any of your short stories...

RF: No. (Laughter)

HFR: In retrospect, how do you view your first two novels, *A Piece of My Heart* and *The Ultimate Good Luck*, in relationship to more recent writing?

RF: One of the advantages of having written those books—any books—is that I don't have to view them later on. When I wrote them I tried the best I possibly could try, diligently, unstintingly, reverentially to write them about the things that I felt were the most important things in the world and to find a good form for those things in language. I didn't want and don't now want to be the man to say I should've done this or that, or I wish I'd known then what I do now. You have to consider the instant moment if you're a writer. That's when you make sentences. You can decide for yourself about those books I wrote. They're in print.

HFR: Are Frank Bascombe and most of the characters in the short stories collected in *Rock Springs* people who are essentially passive, or do they act aggressively in the world?

RF: First of all, I don't think they have to be either one or the other of those things. There's no dichotomous set that you or I or anybody or their characters has to choose or be. When I hear people *generally* describe books or characters in books as being this way or that, I often don't agree. Those off-hand descriptions

are never seen very faithful to the facts—all of which need to be entertained if the book's to be understood rightly. The urgency, the important claim of a good book has on its reader is that *all* of the book is necessary for the reader to understand what's important. That argues against general or off-hand judgments, of course. But it's a novelist's argument, too. Regarding both those books of mine—in which there are mostly first person narrators—I would say this: the speakers are *actively* telling the story you're reading. And in doing so they are, by virtue of the very telling, attempting to order their past lives satisfactorily, they're trying to find and tell themselves (and us) something of value, something from which consolation can be drawn, something to make life more livable. These assumptions are at the heart of each story: *listen to this. What I'm going to say is important to me. I want it to be important to you, too.* Is that active enough?

HFR: You've written many essays. Have you written reviews yourself or do you stay away from them?

RF: I did write reviews for a while. But finally...well, I shouldn't say finally...but I came to believe that it wasn't a completely worthwhile occupation for me, for a number of reasons. One is personally I don't believe writers should run down books of other writers in public; that they shouldn't be Monday morning quarterbacks on subject of other's efforts. There are enough other valuable and seemly things to occupy us and get our names into print. Most of the writers I know do their best with the books they write. And I've found—peculiarly enough—that my opinion of a book, particularly my dislike of a book is often not shared by everyone. And sometimes those people who disagree with me aren't actually stupid. So, I don't want to be the guy who causes one person not to read a book she or he might like and that might actually be wonderful. My "judgement," I mean to say, is not always reliable. I do now and then make a try at reviewing, but there again they're problems. I don't want to commit myself to reviewing a book unless I like it, and that

means I have to read it first. And that takes time. And time elapsed can put off the whole reviewing schedule of a book unless I like it, and that means I have to read it first. And that takes time. And time elapsed can put off the whole reviewing schedule of a book and cause harm. Most reviewing organs—such as *The New York Times* "Book Review" or the *Chicago Tribune* "Books" will actually give me the time I need to read a book before committing myself to writing about it. But it hasn't worked out for me in the last few years, and I frankly don't think it's entirely to the editors' satisfaction that I follow the rule I do. It doesn't make their lives any easier. Consequently people aren't beating down my door to write book reviews. There are plenty of other people, though, eager to do that—probably much better at it than I'd be.

HFR: The essays you write, ranging in subject matter anywhere from Bruce Springsteen to family reminiscences, are those usually your choice, or are you asked?

RF: Both. Either. The Bruce Springsteen essay was something that came from *Esquire*. I guess they thought of me because they knew I liked Springsteen. The other things, oh, growing up in a hotel in Little Rock or the essay about my mother—those things just came along naturally. I can't say one way is better than another. Sometimes with an assignment you discover you're interested in something you wouldn't have guessed you would be. I just try not to do "articles" anymore. Articles—to me—are pieces of writing for which the writer has to manufacture, often quite factitiously, an interest. Whereas, an essay implies a writer's attempt to make up in language a form which will express an already existing and reliable affinity. For me, the pronoun, *I* is a helpful measure of affinity. If I can't say *I* in relation to a subject, then maybe I'm not the right guy for it.

HFR: The locale in your fiction seems more than a backdrop. I'm thinking of chapter 3 in *Sportswriter* where there's a brief history of the suburb in which the sportswriter lives, and in

Rock Springs how the names of places and towns are like a litany. How does landscape or place affect the characters?

RF: I've always felt that the way in which individuals accommodate themselves to where they are, to *place*, is innately dramatic. People locating themselves, coming to feel at home, or not, coming to feel at peace, at rest, challenged, enlivened, al that—those all signal dramatic forces in human life—especially American life. Beyond this set of purely human concerns, the issue landscape as it's represented in literature is a pretty complex business, and practiced different from writer to writer. I'd like to write an essay about it.

HFR: You called regionalism in a 1983 *Esquire* article "that dark American literary peril." Is that one reason why your books have skipped about geographically? Are you perhaps a regionalist without a region?

RF: No. I'm not a regionalist at all. I think what I've always tried to do is something like what Updike said about William Dean Howells, in an essay in the *New Yorker*. He said Howells wanted to write a literature good enough for America, and that's all I'd be happy to do. Being a Southerner and knowing that Southerners are often plagued—as well as benighted and also restrained as writers—by the apparent restrictions of their regions; and knowing also how rare are such writers as Eudora Welty and Walker Percy and Barry Hannah, writers who have written wonderfully from within the South, I just wanted to get out. I wanted to find out things I didn't know so that I could write something over which I could make my own claim. And I did get out, and by now, years later, I don't even think seriously about *regional* anymore. Occasionally someone will call me up and ask me to comment on regionalism, and I'm just dismissive of the notion because to me it means can't-win; it means either you're only trying to appeal to an audience who appreciates that region, which is limiting; or else you're trying to write about things that are appropriate to that region, which strikes me also

as limiting. Somebody else could define the term more generously, I guess, but I define it to suit myself, in a way that lets me cast my little net more widely. Maybe someday I'll want to write about the South again, but if I do I hope I'll do it with a new appetite. I don't think writing about the South is bad. I just find a lot of it to be restricted in its reference. Smaller.

HFR: *Atlanta Magazine* described *The Ultimate Good Luck* as being about "dislocated people adrift in a dislocated age." Do you think this age is particularly more dislocated than other ages or that dislocation is a recurring theme in American literature?

RF: I didn't write that line. (Laughter) I tried to write a book which I thought was about affection and about the ways in which complicated life makes the expression of affection difficult. It was also about love and about love being locating—in the manner that geography or place can be locating. Somebody else might think it's about rootlessness, dislocation—things like that. But when it left the house it was about what *I* thought it was about.

HFR: And that possibly could have been said just because it was taking place in a foreign country or because people were...

RF: I don't know why it could be said. Maybe the writer wrote that because part of the book takes place in Michigan and part of it takes place in Louisiana and part of it takes place in Mexico and California. Maybe that's what rootlessness meant to that guy. I think he liked the book, as I remember.

HFR: Or the liner notes.

RF: Maybe. I just never think, though, and I've never been led to think that people who write about books haven't read them. Maybe I'm a fool for thinking that. But maybe some of the people who haven't reviewed my books kindly—maybe I should think they haven't read *all* the books. If that's true, though,

they're certainly wasting their time. They aren't being paid enough to make up opinions about books they haven't read. They ought to be novelists if they want to do that.

HFR: In your writing, particularly in *The Sportswriter*, in which we seem to know what make of car each character drives, and in *Rock Springs*, you establish specifics concerning a character's location, what he or she drives, and if that auto is owned, merely borrowed or sometimes stolen. What we're wondering is, is this emphasis on cars simply a by-product of modern life and mobility, or do cars in your work hold a greater significance?

RF: If you mean by that are they emblematic, no. I suppose I've just spent a lot of time in cars, that's all. My father was a traveling salesman, and we traveled quite a bit together. Kristina and I have also done our share of moving around. Beyond that, a lot of dramatic moments in my young life took place in cars—probably like a lot of Americans. As far as designating what kind of car someone was driving, that's something I just make up, of course. I enjoy that specificity—enjoy writing it. And I like it in large measure because the words themselves appeal to me, certainly as much as the mental picture of a Pontiac does, or the putative appropriateness of a particular brand of automobile to a particular moment or time or character within a story. This last seems mostly a matter of luck. Most of the signal choices I make within sentences I make at least in half measure because of the word itself. That, after all, is what the reader first encounters, well before she or he visualizes something (if readers still do that). If there's pleasure in a word—its appearance on the page, its sound in the mind, its syllabic rhythms, its stresses, its long and short vowels—and if the meaning itself is appropriate—then that makes for an interesting choice. If I write, "Chevrolet," or "Floweree," which happens to be the name of a town in Montana, I've been moved to it because of the word, and I try then just to accommodate the context to that word—which sometimes might mean I have to alter actual geography. Sometimes it also means the sense in the sentence

changes, too. That can be quite pleasing. Words, after all, mean, signify by more than just their denotations. Their other qualities comprise part of their meanings, too. We do it all the time in our daily speech words appeal to us spontaneously, we use and then we try seamlessly to make sense with that use. It makes, under the best circumstances, our own speech surprise us and give us pleasure. It's a bit like the old joke: how do I know what I mean 'til I hear what I say. You could use that as a generally applicable epitaph for all writers.

HFR: You've anticipated one of our questions. We are impressed with the poetry of the language. The writing is heard as well as seen, and that's one of the things you're shooting for?

RF: I always read everything aloud to myself just because I think it's a pleasurable way to resume work on what I've written. I certainly don't think there's anything wrong with language written primarily to be read silently being also tolerable when read aloud. I was never a star reader when I was a little boy. I was somewhat dyslexic, and even now I have a hard time reading silently to myself when I'm timed or put under some severe pressure. I read words one at a time—which is how I write them—and I suppose I sound them silently. Consequently words to me are something other than, more than signs that refer. Faulkner was a large force in my young life, and I'm sure it's partly because his sentences are so full, so rewarding to a reader tuned to language's non-referential features.

HFR: Well, we think you've succeeded, and we find lyricism, repetition of words and the way the lovely images are worked, such as the white geese in the story "Communist." There are many poetic passages, so much that we're tempted to break them into lines and type them out and see how they look as poems. So you've already answered what elements of poetics you consciously strive for.

RF: I don't really think in terms of poetics. I think in terms of the

potential within a sentence to offer the reader a wide experience. Poetics is a heady word to me. I love poetry. I'm sure I read many more poems than I do stories. And I'd love it if my sentences could do what lines in good poems do. But I'm a little reluctant to call them poetical sentences.

HFR: You've probably already figured you're being interviewed by poets.

RF: That's fine. I'm happy you're not obsessed with thematics and the structures of novels, what's autobiographical and what's not; and that you're interested in where all writers and readers spend the most time: with choice of words, with phrases, with listening to sounds. When people want to know if it's enjoyable to write—which it often isn't—I always remember that the greatest pleasure is having such intimacy with words.

HFR: And so you do read a lot of poetry. You're familiar with James Wright, Richard Hugo...

RF: James Wright and Richard Hugo. Elizabeth Bishop, Larkin, Kinnell. Ted Hughes. I read Louise Gluck, C.K. Williams, Stephen Dobyns, Michael Ryan, Robert Hass, Tess Gallagher—these last being people more or less my age whom I admire. It's a poor list for being so incomplete. It's not well known, but when story-writers get together, when Ray was alive for instance, or when I'm with my pals Dick Bausch and Alan Cheuse, what we do late at night is not talk about money but read poems aloud. I wonder how many poets ever grab down their Flannery O'Connor and read it aloud to their buddies. Maybe they all do. Who knows? God love them.

HFR: One of the things we're thinking about with Wright and Hugo, in their poetry it seems regret is one of the things they write about. We're thinking of the wonderful passage where Bascombe says, "...for your life to be worth anything you must sooner or later face the possibility of terrible, searing regret.

Though you must also manage to avoid it or your life will be ruined." And then in "Communist," the last story in *Rock Springs*, in the last line the speaker says, "...I think about that time without regret, though my mother and I never talked in that way again, and I have not heard her voice now in a long, long time." What is the place of regret in your fiction or more generally in modern literature?

RF: I certainly wouldn't want to generalize about modern literature. In *The Sportswriter*, though, one of the things I wanted to do was write a book about a man who was trying his best to be happy at what he was doing. He was trying to make a go of things. And since happiness in its conventional manifestations seemed fairly nondramatic to me then (though less so now, I should say) I went about finding a way to make it dramatic. And one of the ways that seemed obvious was to give it impediments, something to overcome. And I guess just in the process of thinking about that I came upon regret, and particularly I came upon the word "regret," somewhat without assuming I knew all the experience and life "regret" might shelter and seemingly describe. I wrote a book, then, part of whose intention was to itemize some of what regret might actually mean—things you might say you regret, things you think you should regret but don't, things that don't usually provoke the word *regret* but still provoke that feeling, and also the opposite of that. I'm attracted by the way in which conventional expression—when looked at closely, as literature can—shelters pretty diverse and actually unexpected human activity. I'm, for instance, always interested in how the word *love* is conventionally used, for instance, and correspondingly how it can be broadened so as to console more of life. In "Communist" I think I was just interested in the way in which a man might look back to a conversation he had with his mother which he might feel was embarrassing to him—this when he was a boy—and in so doing discover if he wishes he had never had the conversation. Just piecing out what a word might mean there. Regret. What he discovers, of course, is that

the conversation was very important to him, and that he doesn't regret it at all, and he is better for having said so.

HFR: When we started out researching this, just based on reading about the books rather than reading the books, we thought—and maybe this is a rhetorical question—we thought we were going to come after you as far as your treatment of women characters.

RF: Please do.

HFR: Well, now we don't sense that. I'm thinking of X, and the mother in "Communist," and Rae in *The Ultimate Good Luck*, who I think definitely come across as equals.

RF: That's good.

HFR: So we don't see it anymore; so it's a rhetorical question.

RF: Well, it's not a rhetorical question to me, because I don't much think about what's important in life in sexual terms. And I'm not trying to write about women in ways that the mind police will approve. I'm not trying to write about men as role models either, for that matter. To me, that's not what literature's for. Literature pursues truth, although not always delicately or by achieving a cheering consensus.

Human beings mostly operate on the same basic impulses, is my belief. Circumstantially, women and men are much more alike than they are categorically different. And circumstance is what I mostly write about. When I parcel out lines that I think are good lines in my stories, I'm aware that women get as many as men. That represents my basic feeling of parity between the sexes. My friend Joyce Carol Oates told me she thought I'd written out women very well. Although she can always retract that, of course. I still do, though, have people refer to me as macho, and insofar as I know what macho means, I don't like it because I think that's selling my work short, and I don't want it to be sold

short. What I really think is that the people who say I treat women badly or inequitably in what I write are just stupid.

HFR: The last two paragraphs of *The Sportswriter* and the endings in the *Rock Springs* collection are resonant and evocative. Are you conscious of muscling up on the endings?

RF: I don't much like stories that just stop, and I'm not interested in the argument which explains why stories *just stop* by saying that that's the way life is. I know that's the way life is. I don't have to go to literature to find that out all over again as an aesthetic issue. Neither do I believe that when a reader reads a story or a novel she or he doesn't continuously acknowledge and understand she's reading a story—something made, artificial in the broad sense. That is to say that from beginning to end a reader of a story—with or without a critical-aesthetic vocabulary or an aesthetic care in the world—does not confuse the story with fate or some other natural force. He or she actually surrenders himself to be worked on by the writer. And once that's conceded, a lot of possible *workings* can occur; a lot of possible endings, for instance.

I also think that people go to literature to get something, and if I can make a story have a shape I like, have a beginning and an ending that I completely authorize and take some pleasure in, then I think I have—given my fragile abilities—the greatest likelihood of giving somebody something. Now I don't think life very often comes equipped with closures. At least it's rare when that happens, with one possible exception. My own stories just essay to close with the acknowledgement—between writer and reader—that this is the end, now; this piece of work you've been reading is nearing completion. I want it and the story that's gone before to be understandable; I want by the story's end for the reader to have achieved something (and it could be several things) that he couldn't have achieved except by coming to that very end after reading that very story.

But this is only my way of writing stories, and maybe it'll change someday. I don't think other people's stories should do

that, and certainly they don't, yet still manage to be good. I just like the end of "Guests of the Nation," the Frank O'Connor story, which goes, "And anything that happened to me afterward I never felt the same about again." I wouldn't mind it if my stories could have that effect.

HFR: It seems, and I'm thinking of the second to last paragraph in *The Sportswriter* and to the last paragraph in *Rock Springs* where Earl is out in the parking lot asking questions, that the characters arrive at more questions than answers by the end of the stories.

RF: I certainly think that with regard to the questions Earl asks at the end of "Rock Springs" the reader has been equipped through the course of the story to answer: yes, yes, yes, yes. It doesn't seem an irresolute end to me. Would you think this was anyone like you? Yes. At least that's my hope.

Not that I expect *all* the bells to go off, and right then. In most of the great literature I've ever read—not that this story's great literature, although it wants to be—the full weight of the events and issues didn't come to me until later. I mean, it's asking a lot of a reader to understand a story as well as he will ever understand it at the arbitrary moment he or she happens to read it. It's worth trying, but a story has to get lucky for that to happen.

HFR: In the August, 1988 *Harper's*, you mention a period after getting out of school in 1970 when you took a sort of inventory regarding the world and your writing. If you were to take a similar accounting now, what questions would you ask yourself?

RF: I wouldn't take an accounting now because I feel like I know what I want to do next. I've tried to do my best up to now, and there isn't anything in my mind to make me think at this point that I can't try to go on that way. If I felt some kind of crisis, which is what I did feel in 1970, I hope I could jog myself into some intelligence that would get me out of it. I don't happen to feel myself at that critical point now. In 1970, I was trying to tie

off my interest in a number of enterprises I might've been pursuing and to firm up my resolve to do this work as much and as long as I could. Now I feel like I'm still living off of the finality of that decision in 1970.

HFR: So there's no crisis book to book?

RF: There's not a crisis. I do put myself into some artificially contrived situations—and I suppose you'd say—frames of mind to try to get myself back down to first principles; a feeling of hitting bottom. Up to now I haven't written one book that was stylistically much like the previous book I wrote. Different locations, different attitudes, different vocabularies. Over the short span of four books I think I've probably written about the same things, though, continued with the same concerns. I might try to write a book or a couple of books eventually—if I'm lucky—that will be a little more like books I've written before. I'd like to write a book and am now writing a book called *Wildlife*, which is about a crime of passion in northern Montana in the late fifties. And I think I still have language and plenty of curiosity for a book that might fall in line with *The Sportswriter*.

HFR: Would that be a return of Frank Bascombe?

RF: I might do that. Although the responsibility of writing such a book is that even though I feel that the source of language is the same as before, and maybe some of the characters are there, I need to write a completely new book. If I can't do that, I probably won't do it. Probably shouldn't do it.

HFR: I was thinking how Bascombe ends up in Florida at the end of *The Sportswriter*. Is it my imagination or does Florida end up as a final destination many times?

RF: I got a notion in my head a few years ago that the country was a big pitcher which had a drain at the bottom, and that where things really finally ended up was down there in Florida;

the country just generally drained in that direction. And even though it's a silly construction and open to fault—and means no harm, by the way—I couldn't get out of the humor of it. I liked it that that's where people go due to some unassuageable pull. I went there first when I was eleven with my grandparents. And it seemed that as we drove down the Tamiami Trail in 1955, in our big red Buick Super, heading toward the brand new Fountainbleu Hotel, we were just swirling down toward the bottom of the country. It's one of those constructions in your life which you just keep writing out of. I'm glad I have at least one of them.

HFR: You run into it every once in a while, and it's fun. Here's Florida again.

RF: Yeah. I wrote a little play set in Florida, too, called *American Tropical*, which the Louisville Actors Theater did years ago. I can't get it out of my mind. Happily, see, I don't have to get it out of my mind. (Laughter)

HFR: Well, now I'm going to try to remember the first paragraph of the *Harper's* article where you said this seemed to be a good period, at 44, where you've got some experience behind you and, I guess, some ahead.

RF: "...at my particular age, which is 44, it seems that most arguments seem to resolve themselves into a kind of existential equilibrium."

HFR: There you go. So this is a good place to be?

RF: Well, it's where I am! (laughter) I hope it's a good place. I'm not much at taking my own pulse, to tell you the truth. I'm much more accustomed to just going on, not stopping and assessing. That's why it was so necessary to make that serious dedication to trying to be a writer back in 1970. I knew if I would just get myself started doing something unassailably important, I'd be at my best advantage; whereas if I had to con-

stantly be saying to myself: "Are you doing the right thing?" "Is this the best decision?" I'd drive myself nuts and never have the chance to do anything worthwhile. Now some people are attuned to change. I think my wife, for instance, is very good at making new choices for large, new things to do, and completing something, and feeling like she's gotten all she can and turning to something new. She's about to go to law school next year. She has a Ph.D., and she's going to get a law degree. I couldn't do that. I'm more like a mule headed for the barn. I just have to keep on, keep on, keep on and hope that where I am is a good place because I don't know what I would do to get out of it.

HFR: I'm going to put you in your hunting gear again, just so...

RF: That's all right. I'll be in it myself in about two weeks.

HFR: We just want to blow up one more myth.

RF: Let's do it.

HFR: I wanted to take care of the people who criticize you for your treatment of women characters, and I read somewhere, I don't remember where...

RF: I wish they could all be consigned to a small island somewhere off Ceylon.

HFR: But I did read someone who criticized you for your treatment or lack of feeling for the animals, the geese, and then in "Going to the Dogs," the deer that are shot.

RF: Come over to my house and see how I treat my dogs. They're happy dogs. They'd tell you so if they could talk, although unfortunately they can't. I know that people treat *each other* in a lot of stories I read worse than I treat animals in stories I write. At least I don't subject animals to hours of existential dread and inquiry, making their little lives an unending hell until

they naturally die or wish they could. It's true that in some stories I've written animals are killed. But the fact that at the end of say, "Communist," a man can think back to a conversation he had with his mother long ago and think, "I don't regret that;" or that someone can say at the end of a story, "I love you,"—all that's more important to me than the fact that in those same stories geese or ducks are *said* to be killed. I want my animal-activist critics to take solace in these facts. Those geese did not die in vain. Right? I'm afraid I'm just stuck with the conviction that human beings are—on a one to one basis—more important than animals.

HFR: You're up here with what's called a community of writers. How important is it to have friends who are writers, or to talk to other writers?

RF: I don't know how important it is, frankly. Most of my friends are writers, and some good number of them aren't. I don't think for writers it's any more important that their friends be writers than it is for doctors to have friends who are doctors. There is a certain kind of resistance that writers don't put up to each other, and my experience is of course, with prose writers. Even the biggest assholes I know exhibit toward each other a high regard for the enterprise each of us practices. And that causes some potential discomforts to be allayable when we're in each other's companies. But it's much more important that I spend my time with Kristina than that I "commune" with people who do what I do. Where I live, in Missoula, I drive by Jim Welch's house every single day. And I have a very high regard for him and for what he's written. But we only see each other, I'd say, once a month. It's not Paris in the twenties up there. He's busy. He's working. I am too.

HFR: We're talking a few days after Raymond Carver's death. Would you like to say anything about him or his writing?

RF: Ray was my dearest friend for my entire writing life. And

he was a much-loved writer because of his work. It was loved, and he was loved. Many readers were taken by the stylistic uniqueness of Ray's work. And it was unique; it had a sound which really distinguished it from a lot of other work. You always perked your ear up when you heard a sentence of Ray's. But for me what was most important in Ray's work, and I'm happy to get to say it, is that Ray always, always, always tried his best. He was always trying to write about the most important things, trying to write as Norman Maclean says,"the best that was in him." And, of course, he did it splendidly. So, while his style was influential, I suppose, to a lot of young writers and certainly had its effect on me, what really affected me was that I saw in him a man and life of work that required no excuses. Try as hard as you can for as much as you can. That should be enough.

Personally, well, he was one of the few people I know—maybe the only one, actually, besides Kristina Ford—who was willing to take *me* on completely—good and bad. He just assumed he knew what kind of fellow I was and was willing to let that be, to like me withal. That was a huge generosity, a great freedom he conferred. He didn't ask you to live up to his standard—whatever his standard might've been. He was also a man—and I've found this is actually pretty rare—who loved to laugh. Ray and I always laughed. That's what we'd do when we talked to each other. I'd call him up just to get him to laugh sometimes. In the last year of his life, when there was a lot of unpromising news, he never renounced that. He loved to be pleased, loved to be happy. And he never gave up one ounce of seriousness because of it. It's hard to imagine ever meeting somebody else who has those qualities.

Contributors

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Raymond Carver's latest book is *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories* 1988, from Atlantic Monthly Press. His last collection of poems, *A New Path to the Waterfall,* is forthcoming in May from Atlantic Monthly Press.

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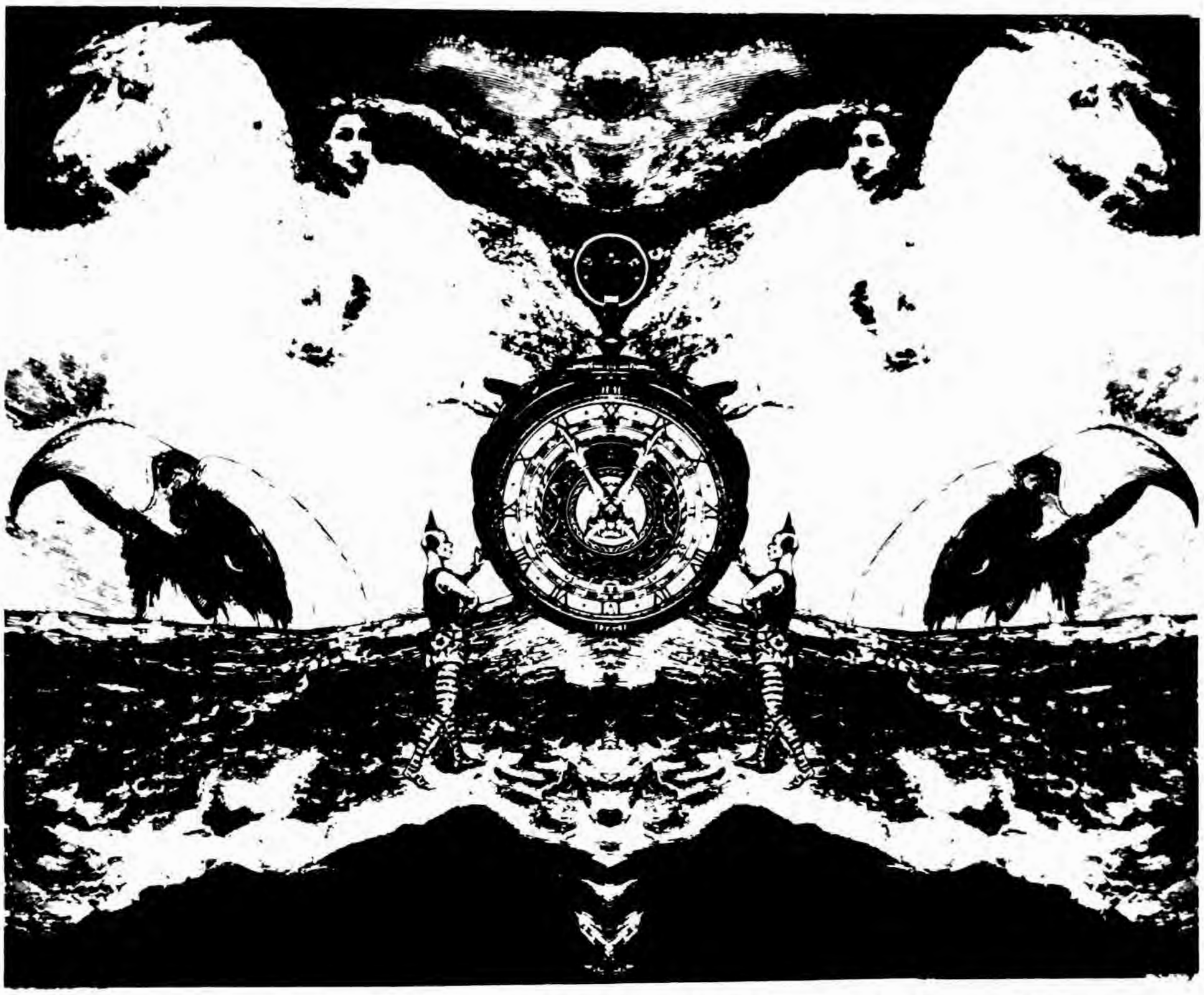

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