

# HAYDEN'S FERRY

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R E V I E W

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## **The Disturbing Image**

Ai, Gwen Akin and Allan Ludwig, Rick Bass,  
Peggy Shumaker, Joel-Peter Witkin

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Fall 1989, Issue 5

**HAYDEN'S FERRY**  
R E V I E W

Arizona State University  
Tempe, Arizona

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*Hayden's ferry boat, which we referred to a few weeks since as being securely moored at its proper landing is off on another picnic. The current a few days since released it from months of inactivity, and is now on an exploring expedition down the Salt River. Any information concerning its whereabouts will doubtless be gratefully received by old friends in Tempe.*



*The river is still very deep here. Judge Hayden found his ferry boat about a mile below here, had it hauled back, and is now doing a large business transferring passengers and freight.*

Phoenix Arizona Gazette and Herald  
February 8 and February 14, 1884

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# HAYDEN'S FERRY

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## Contents

### FICTION

<i>T. M. McNally</i>	Swans	32
<i>Nick Spruance</i>	Honeymoon at Sea	51
<i>Alison Baker</i>	The Retirement Community	72
<i>Stephen Dunning</i>	Polar Bear	84

### POETRY

<i>Ai</i>	General George Armstrong Custer: My Life In The Theater	7
<i>Tom Sexton</i>	June 22	38
	December 22	39
	Dark Hands Webbing Time	40
	Weather	41
<i>Anne Carroll Fowler</i>	From <i>Figure Ground</i>	44
<i>Morrie Warshawski</i>	Living in Vacationland	45
<i>Lisa Shannon</i>	Highway Rest Stop: Little Amsterdam	46
<i>Nancy Johnson</i>	The Bingo Bus	48
<i>Fran Adler</i>	Wood Floor Rising	49
<i>David Lee</i>	Broken Leg	58
	Deaf	61
<i>Stephen Joseph Jackson</i>	Black Dust	62
	This	63
<i>Naomi Clark</i>	The Sleeper	64
<i>Sharon Olinka</i>	Oyster House	66
<i>Douglas Myers</i>	In the Ruins of Fort Abraham Lincoln	79
<i>Robert Ward</i>	The Blue Mouse	80
<i>Denise Lichtig</i>	A Film Seen in an Easter Confection	81
	The Split Bow	82
<i>John Bradley</i>	The Admirers of Vasko Popa	96
<i>Gerald Barrax</i>	Eagle. Tiger. Whale.	97

---

<i>Peggy Shumaker</i>	Occupied Territory	99
	Hunting Scorpions	101

## **ART**

<i>Shomei Tomatsu</i>	Melted Down Beer Bottle, 1961	42
	Face	43
<i>Joel-Peter Witkin</i>	Portrait of a Dwarf, 1987	68
	Woman On a Table, 1987	69
	Harvest, 1984	70
	Woman In The Blue Hat, 1985	71
<i>Gwen Akin and Allan Ludwig</i>	Deer Head And Antlers	92
	White Pelican	93
	Sliced Head, #2	94
	Wistar Rat	95

## **ESSAY**

<i>Rick Bass</i>	Without Safety: Writing Nonfiction	103
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## **INTERVIEW**

<i>Catherine French</i>		
<i>Rebecca Ross</i>		
<i>Gary Short</i>	An Interview With Ai	11

<b>CONTRIBUTORS</b>		116
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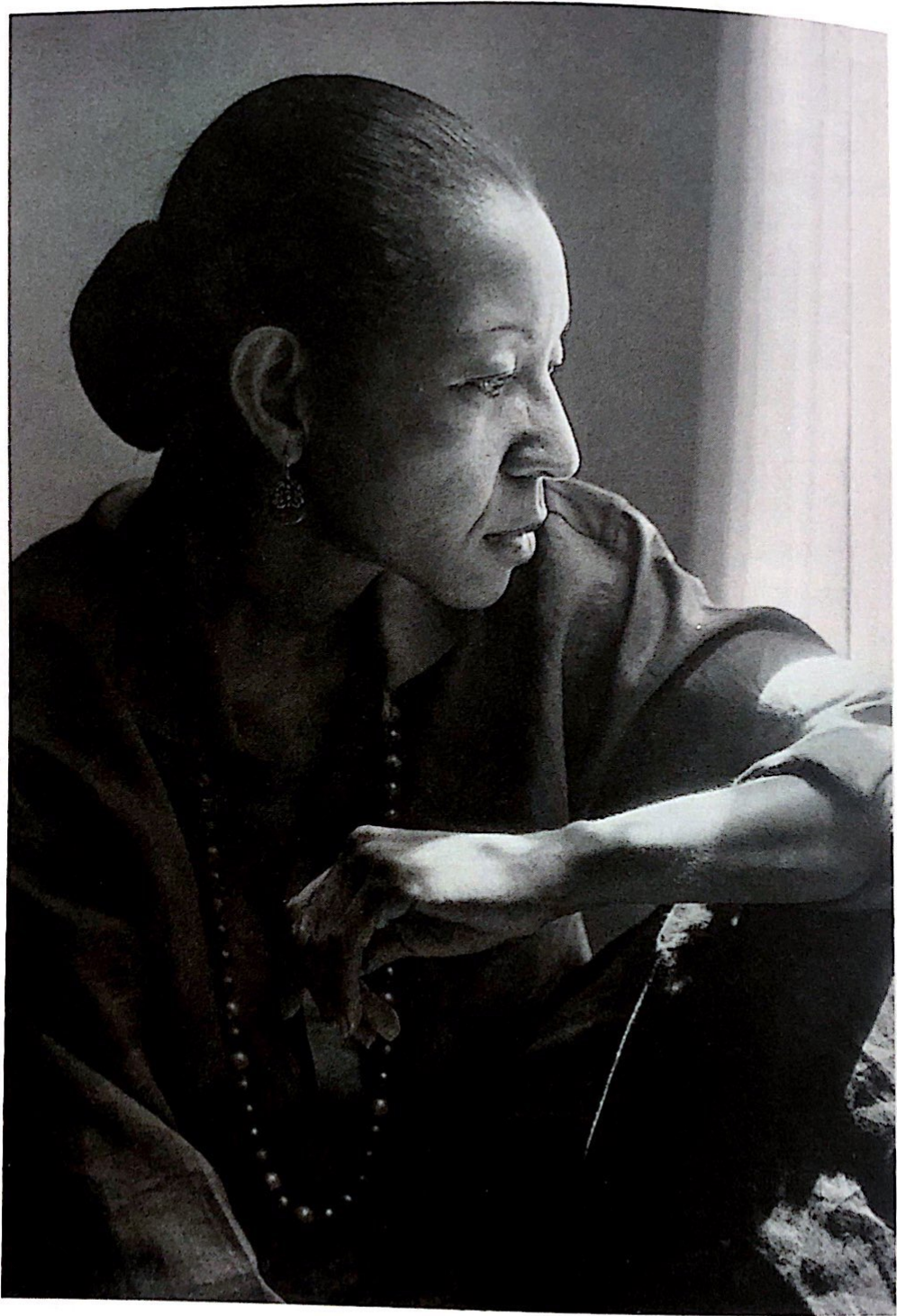
## **General George Armstrong Custer: My Life In The Theater**

After the blood wedding  
at Little Big Horn,  
I rose from death,  
a bride, loved past desire;  
yet unsatisfied  
and walked among the mutilated corpses.  
Skin stripped from them,  
they were as white as marble,  
their raw scalps like red bathing caps.  
Sometimes I bent to stroke the dying horses,  
as dew bathed my feet.  
When I tore the arrows from my genitals,  
I heard again the sound of the squaws.  
The trills on their tongues thrilled me.  
Those sounds were victory  
and I was victory's slave  
and she was a better lover than my wife,  
or the colored laundress  
I took under a wagon one night,  
when I was hot with my invincibility.  
Why eventually even Sitting Bull  
joined a wild west show.  
He rode a dancing pony  
and sold his autograph to anyone who'd pay  
and I might have become President,  
my buckskin suit, white hat,  
two guns and rifle  
flung in some closet,  
while I wore silk shirts  
and trousers made of cotton  
milled on my own shores  
and took my manly pleasures  
with more accomplished whores.  
Instead I dress in lies and contradictions  
and no one recognizes me.

All they see is the tall, skinny mercenary  
with yellow hair  
and blue, vacant eyes that stare,  
so while I chew the tips of my mustache,  
the cameras pass over me.  
The journalists interview that guy or that one  
and I want to shoot them down,  
but that's been done before  
by some back door assassin or other  
who kills publicly for sport,  
but I kill for  
the spectacle, the operatic pitch  
of the little civil wars  
that decimate from inside,  
as in Belfast, Beirut, or Los Angeles,  
where people know how it feels to be  
somebody's personal Indian,  
a few arrows, a few bullets short of home,  
then left behind to roam this afterlife.  
Once I knelt on one knee,  
firing from my circle of self-deceit,  
no thought but to extinguish thought,  
until I brought down each brave,  
but it was his red hand that wounded me,  
no matter how many times I shot,  
clubbed, clawed or bit him,  
my mouth overflowing with blood,  
the rubbery flesh I chewed  
that left no evidence of my savagery.  
When I raised the gun to my own head,  
I recalled the fields and fields of yellow flowers  
that lit my way, as I rode to battle.  
How beautiful they were,  
how often I stopped to pick them.  
I twined them in my horse's mane  
and in my hair,  
but they were useless amulets  
that could not stop my bullet,  
as it sizzled through flesh, then bone.  
Now misfortune's soldier,

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black armband on sleeve and hand on heart,  
I pledge no fear,  
as chance propels me  
into another breach  
from which there is no deliverance,  
only the tragicomedy of defeat acted out  
in the belly of the cosmic whale,  
where I swim against the dark, relentless tide.



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## Interview with Ai

Interview with Ai, conducted at Ai's home in Tempe, Arizona, May 13, 1989, by Catherine French, Rebecca Ross and Gary Short.

**HFR:** Your work encompasses an amazing variety of personalities—Robert Oppenheimer, Marilyn Monroe, Joe McCarthy, Robert Lowell, Salome. How do you find your subjects or do your subjects choose you?

**Ai:** I just sort of happen on stuff. With Oppenheimer, I was just watching that PBS program on him, and I went out and bought the book that accompanied the series. It had diagrams of how to make a bomb. I was amazed that I actually read that whole thing. In the end though, I feel I sort of made Oppenheimer up a little bit more in some respects than some of the others because he didn't seem to be there in some weird way. He's a more disembodied voice to me than some of my other characters. I really got into him through the opening of the poem. Oppenheimer as the bomb. From then on, it took off.

**HFR:** Do you sometimes use history books?

**Ai:** I always do when I am dealing with a historical figure. The only time I didn't is with the McCarthy poem, "Blue Suede Shoes." I saw this TV movie called *Tail Gunner Joe*, and I got excited about it and decided I wanted to write something about McCarthy, and that's how I did it. I fictionalized the brother who lives in Cleveland. I made that up. To me, it's my American dream poem, like Arthur Miller has his American dream play. After *Killing Floor*, I think it was the third poem I wrote, or something like that, about '79, but the beginning of those historical poems I guess really started in *Killing Floor* with the Trotsky poem, the title poem. People even asked me was I a communist. I said, what? I'm consumer number one! I was reading histories of the Mexican Revolution, and there was a part about Trotsky having been assassinated in Mexico. That's really how I ended up thinking Trotsky might be interesting to work with. And then I saw that movie, *Aguirre: Wrath of God*, and just

decided I wanted to do that. I told my ex I wanted to write my own Aguirre. And he said, I don't know; the movie was really good. So, I put it off, and I wrote the poem "Killing Floor," and then Galway (Kinnell) came to read in Detroit, and I showed him that, and he really liked it. And then one day I said, what the hell! I'm going to go ahead and write the Aguirre poem! Now I really do go and research them, and it has turned out to be for me a pleasurable thing. I actually enjoy it when I want to write a poem about a historical figure. History was my best subject in high school. I guess you could say I was gifted, if you can be gifted in history. I wanted a dynamic, living and flowing history, and I think that's the quality I bring to these monologues that deal with historical figures. I like to say, what would it have been like if this happened instead of that. I even have Oppenheimer say that in the poem, that all scientists start from the hypothesis, *what if?* That's something that my high school biology teacher told me.

**HR:** In your opinion, has there been a change in the dramatic monologue from Browning to Bidart? Are the voices in your poems different from each other or do you see them all as one voice? With Browning, even though he's supposed to be working in different voices, it seems like the same voice. With your poetry, it doesn't. This is a compliment, or meant to be; it seems that the voices are varied.

**Ai:** I see them as characters, personalities, and they're all different to me. I guess it doesn't always work, you know. And I'm sure the writer, the monologist, can't always keep his or her voice out. It probably slips through. But I try and keep my own opinions out. I'm not sure I actually feel that way about Browning, that all of them sound alike, specifically. You know the problem might be that he may have used irony just a bit too much, dramatic irony. It's like a tone of voice, and if you use that tone, then it does sound the same, over and over. And that stands out sometimes to me as a weakness. I mean, it can also be a strength, because I use it too. That's certainly a method of working with the monologue that I think is still viable today, but I try not to use it too much. Teaching this dramatic monologue course [at ASU], has been good for me because I haven't had to think about my work aesthetically before, just occasionally. It forced me to go back and try to trace the origins for me, and I did

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have to look at Browning again and think about his work. I think some of the critics basically imply he was a failed playwright. I don't think that necessarily. I know it's not true of me. I never had any real interests in writing plays. I think people in drama and people in poetry consider the poetic dramatic monologue a bastard form. I've been working toward broadening and expanding the boundaries of the monologue.

**HFR:** Can you comment on any other contemporary dramatic monologists?

**Ai:** I've always appreciated Norman's work [Norman Dubie]. There's a metaphysical quality to it. It's spiritual, I think you could call it. I always feel soothed by his work. I don't know why, because it isn't necessarily soothing at all. But I always feel consoled, and that's a rare thing.

**HFR:** Many of your poems have male voices. Do you take the male voice with any more hesitancy than you would a female voice?

**Ai:** No, I really don't. In fact, it's gotten to the point where I'm a little concerned that I've done the male voice so much, it's so easy now, that I'm worried I'll lose my female voice. Like I won't be as comfortable with it any more. One of the first things that reviewers or critics seemed to point out from *Cruelty* on is that I seem to have no difficulty in doing either voice. Men fascinate me as people, the workings of their minds, because they do seem somewhat different from women in a lot of ways. And also the situations in the poems...I set up this man/woman thing in *Cruelty*. I just needed to do male and female voices in that book. *Cruelty* is more female, and then *Killing Floor* is male and female, and *Sin* is mainly male. And that was conscious because this is my exploration of male power.

I enjoy doing the male voice, but I don't do it just to do it. I mean, there has to be some aspect of character that I want to explore. Also, I want to answer some moral questions for myself, but I'd like to think that it's always character first, because I don't want to have people thinking that I pick a concept. I really don't. It's always character. But a lot of the characters who appeal to me are in these moral dilemmas. If my poetry were fiction it would fall in the category of moral fiction. But then I hate to say that I'm

doing this or that, you know? It's like I don't want to restrict myself too much. I wouldn't want to say that I write moral poetry, so to speak. I write monologues, and they deal with characters who are often caught in some moral dilemma. They're still trying to work things out for themselves, or explain themselves or make justifications for their actions.

I don't go into a trance or anything. I'm not that kind of writer. It's really hard work. No automatic writing, and I don't think these are spirits who are dictating to me or anything like that. I'm just working with what I have, setting up and hypothesizing.

**HFR:** How about a particular example. Considering your background, was it strange or difficult to write a poem about Custer?

**Ai:** I just finished a poem on Custer. I started it over a year ago in March, and I couldn't quite get the voice. I thought it was a great idea to set it sometime during the Little Big Horn, but to bring him forward and make him a mercenary who fights all these useless battles, like in a line he mentions Belfast and Los Angeles, ". . . a few bullets, a few arrows short of home . . ." It wouldn't have worked for me—for some reason I didn't want to leave him in the past. I felt it would work if I could bring him forward to today. That was my dilemma. And I reached a point where it wasn't working, and I just got fed up with it. I said, ah, it's not going anywhere; I can't do it. And suddenly last month, I sat down and said, I'm going to finish it. Almost all of it is new, but what I kept is that basic stuff that he's a mercenary now. It opens after Little Big Horn, and everybody's been slaughtered, and he's walking around and looking at the mutilated corpses. He talks about his wife; apparently his wife white-washed him as a person. He was a womanizer and all this wild stuff.

One reason it didn't bother me to write about Custer, even though we have Choctaw blood, is because my mother's family comes out of that same American frontier. That was so wild, even wilder than you would think. I guess there weren't a lot of white women around, and I know from my own personal background that there was a lot going on between the sheets that was not written down. So when I read he had this black laundress, and maybe a baby by an Indian woman, I thought it was really interesting. I read this in *Son of the Morning Star* by Evan S. Connell

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and that supposedly is the definitive book on Custer. He talks about his laundress and his wife, and that Custer was actually addicted to victory. And then I thought it was wild how Sitting Bull joined the Wild West Show and rode a dancing pony and sold his autograph. I mean, there we are—it's America today.

**HFR:** "Give 'em Hollywood."

**Ai:** Are Americans weird or what? They were willing to pay to go to this wild west show and see the Indian who was in part responsible for the Little Big Horn. It's really interesting how we're so ravenous for the moment. It isn't just now; it's part of our entire history. People are always saying, oh, these bad old modern times, but actually you can trace it back to the beginning of the country. But I would say about the 1860s. That began our weird period, the penny novel, the myth of the West and manifest destiny all mixed together. So when I'm talking about that, that's my interest in history coming through. It all kind of meshes.

Custer wanted to be president, which I think is just great. If he had survived, he might have been. And now he says, ". . . instead I dress in lies and contradictions and no one recognizes me. All they see is the tall, skinny mercenary with yellow hair and blue, vacant eyes that stare." And he thinks he wants to shoot the journalists, but then he says, that's been done before . . . I solved the problem of bringing Custer forward in one word, "instead." But I couldn't figure that out a year ago. How do I do this? I hated the poem! I'd put it away, and then I'd bring it back out, and put it away. And that's the crazy process of writing. So simple, but it totally eluded me.

I brought him to the present, and in a way his future, because he's heading off to the next hopeless battle. The poem is called "General George Armstrong Custer: My Life in the Theater." [Laughter] In that book he says that Custer resembled an actor who was reading someone else's lines, and I thought that was really interesting. And that did seem like the theme of my new book, dealing with reality and illusion and acting.

My editor called and asked whether I had anything. I said, well, I think I have a title, and I made myself settle on *Fate*. It really fits the poems. Fate again and again seems to intervene, like with Jimmy Hoffa. Well, he does mention "the tin wheel of fate." And

Custer. As I've said, I've entered my Greek period, in Arizona. The fates seem to be ruling my life here, too. So it all kind of fits in. I even have been rereading Aristotle's *Poetics*. I read it in a humanities course when I was a sophomore, and I really thought nothing had sunk in. But apparently, and this goes back to an earlier thing you asked me about monologues, I've been able to trace the dramatic monologues right back to Aristotle. A lot of things I'm doing actually fit under some of the chapters—they really do. So they can't accuse me of not being classically oriented.

The dramatic monologue form is indeed a legitimate form and should be respected as any other. I guess I'm actually separating the monologue form, aren't I, from poetry. Sometimes I despair that I am part of poetry. I feel that it limits what I'm doing somewhat, and I've only come to think that as I've gotten older, in the past four years or so. Cynically, I can say that I feel American poetry has always been accused of being very limited in that we are very self-directed—we don't care about the world—and that's certainly not true of me. One of the great things about the monologues is that it does give you a broader form to some extent, especially with the historical poems. I really feel that poetry is in a sad state right now. We're too cut off from the other forms. We've gotten so closed off in the way we're writing—I feel we may lose even more of our audience. That's what worries me. Even the *Times* is doing less poetry reviews; that is really scary. I know a whole bunch of it is because poetry is not valued and let's face it, the whole country is about money. We don't make much money, and people don't pay attention to us. It's really tragic. How can we make poetry as valuable to the outside world? I do blame us in part, and in part it's just the way of the world. But what happened? When was it that poetry ceased to be written in the language of the common man? I don't mean it literally especially, but when did we lose touch so much that when people hear the word "poetry" their brains shut down? Sometimes I feel like getting out.

And that was one reason I got so excited about theater. I really happened onto that. But I'm not in theater; it's not my career. I'm aggressive in poetry, but in another field . . . you get all excited and say, I'm going to do this and that, but then you say, well, I'll move to Tempe and teach at Arizona State University. So I've

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abandoned all that. I really do want more readers of my work. I guess I am very ambitious about my work in that sense. And I must say that *Sin* got a lot of publicity. I was on *All Things Considered*, and a whole bunch of people heard. I didn't know when it was going to be on, but then the host said, "The mind of a murderer through poetry," and I said, well who else could it be but Ai. My mother heard it, and a Catholic college in Ohio called up and offered me a thousand dollars to do a reading that next week. So that was great! You can't underestimate what the media, even radio, can do. And then I ended up doing three other programs that run on NPR. So I did with *Sin* manage to cross or extend some borders, so to speak, and that pleases me a lot.

I read for a theater group in April . . . there was a copy of *Sin* at a theater group barbecue, and the director of this group in Pennsylvania said, "I was so excited, I got barbecue sauce on it." And I thought, What a compliment! And then this week I got a call about this anthology of monologues for actors. It's coming out through Ballantine, and they're reprinting an excerpt from "The Priest's Confession." So something has happened. It's taken almost three years. Homer is in there—I'm in good company.

I don't know if I can talk about the rise of the monologue in theater. I don't know that I know enough about it, except to say that the reason I first went to see Spalding Gray is because I read reviews in the *New York Times*, and since he did monologues, I wanted to see what they were like. They're quite different. Well, they're not literature; they're theater. But if I had to say what the exact differences are, well they're not poetic by any means. They depend a lot on his anecdotes. If it didn't all mesh, say, if Gray's persona weren't the way it is, I don't know if his monologues would work. I really do feel you need his presence for that. And even though they're published, they seem written in prose form. I love *The Terrors of Pleasure*; that works for me as it is, but it isn't poetry. It's drama. You need the actor. So that's my theatrically unschooled opinion on that. Maybe people think they're easier to do; I don't know. There's something about his monologues that makes him better than some of the other people who do them. And then there are people who don't specialize who I'm sure can do a great monologue. I know poets who don't write them specifically who have monologues in their books that I admire. It's just the form I've chosen to work in. There's something

fascinating about individuals that makes that form attractive. Our wanting to listen in, our predilection for gossip. We all seem to be fascinated with it in this country.

**HFR:** Let's shift gears a little bit. James Wright was important to you. Was Lowell that important to you?

**Ai:** Not nearly as important; although I read and appreciated Lowell and Plath a lot, I preferred Kinnell and Wright and Merwin in those formative years as an undergraduate. Those were my favorite poets. It was sort of a magical time in 1968, 1969.

I'm my own inspiration. I hate to be so egotistical, but I inspire me. I really like Sharon Olds' work—I admire Sharon's ability to write passionately about personal things—and I like C. D. Wright, but I tend to admire women in other fields more—the Motown record exec who got *Lonesome Dove* made, Chanel, Whoopi Goldberg in performance, not films. She can be brilliant.

**HFR:** Your imagery is stunning, both in intensity and beauty. How important is the image in your writing process? Do you ever start with an image?

**Ai:** Yes, I think I used to. Well, I start with a character, but I also used to like to begin on an especially strong image, especially in *Cruelty*, I think. Even in *Sin*, the first line of "Two Brothers," "Night tightens its noose." That was one of my instructions from Dick Shelton—to grab the reader as soon as possible. I used to concentrate on endings. The blowout ending is my specialty in *Cruelty*. And then, as my poems became longer, I became less concerned. I still want a good strong ending, but I thought my middles were weak, so I tried to beef up my middles. And now I don't care. I don't worry about that anymore. I simply decide whether it's good or not.

**HFR:** Do some of your images begin in dreams?

**Ai:** No. I can't say that any ever have. I may have taken something once or twice. There's an erotic poem called "Capture" that I wrote last summer. I was looking at my favorite fantasy man's photo and watching *Lady Chatterley's Lover* on TV.

**HFR:** A one-two punch.

**Ai:** And I just looked up and said, oh! I do write poems in my

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sleep, in my dreams, but I never remember them. This time I remembered the entire poem basically. Old D. H. Lawrence came through! It was great. I got up that morning and set the poem down. That was wonderful, but that's only happened once. And the imagery, this woman and man . . . he's gardening and cuts the head off a dark red flower and says, ". . . It's like that with men." He's got no shirt on, and his pant legs are rolled up, and he tells her there's a lake they can swim in. It's kind of a seduction poem. He's going to swim nude, but she won't, and he calls her modesty and swims naked. He gets out and lies in the sun for her to look at him. And then there's this tension, and he's going to walk off, and then she just grabs his leg and kisses it, and they end up fucking, of course. It wouldn't work if they didn't. But he realizes as they're having orgasm that he thought he was tricking her, that he was seducing her, but she had actually seduced him. He didn't realize until the last possible moment that she actually captured him. He really thought he had her. This is the other theme of my new book. I don't know how it's going to work, the erotic, what is erotic to women, and the difference between what is erotic to men and woman.

**HFR:** It sounds great. You're a film buff, and the details in your poems—the weather, the silences between people, your judicious use of background—they all seem very cinematic. Do any particular films or directorial styles inspire you?

**Ai:** Well, when I'm working, I don't know that I'm thinking that way. I met this guy once at the University of Albuquerque. He was Chinese, and he had been in the beat scene in San Francisco. He said, oh, you're half Japanese. I should have realized. Your work is so visual. He thought it was because I was half Asian. I don't know. I just have that ability. And I don't know how much is influenced by film. One of my major influences as a kid was *Morte d'Arthur*, Arthurian legend, and Catholicism and the Bible, the lives of the saints, from about six to twelve. And then when I was fourteen—we were in Tucson—a Mormon spiritualist that my mother and grandma hooked up with gave me a tiny little leather-bound set of Shakespeare's plays. I read them that summer. I don't know how much I learned, but my favorites were the tragedies. I guess it might be boring now to hear how wonderful he is . . . but what a master. I really think I learned a lot

about character from him. He saw everything so long ago, all the twists and turns of character and fate. After the Greeks, to me, Shakespeare knew the most about fate.

I consider him one of the major teachers of my life, as a poet. I have a voracious appetite. I read a lot and go to a lot of films. What happens is it all gets shaken up in the hopper. Sometimes I can tell you a specific thing I read that might have inspired me, and other times I can't because it's all jumbled up. But my advice to any writer, which by graduate school you ought to know, is just to read. And I really do think that poets should not limit themselves only to poetry, and that may be one of the problems today. There's just so much going on out there. I know I've learned from drama; I've learned from fiction; I've learned from film. I must say the strong thing I may have learned from film is imagery. It's a great way to learn about how to draw a person in, if you can transfer it to literature. If it's dark and depressing, you can usually guarantee that Ai will really like it. I'd had Oriental studies as a major, so I'd already been introduced to Japanese literature. I'd read Japanese poetry, haiku, as a kid. I had two little books of haiku as a three-year-old. I read world history, and was introduced to Indian and Chinese literature, too. I love to read. But the life I led in high school was quite different. It was really stupid. I wasn't doing anything heavy in school that freshman/sophomore year. But I also was into Egyptology. The great thing for me about being a writer is that I can use all this stuff. I would never be an actor or anything, but I get to play a lot of roles.

**HFR:** Your poems are so visual. We had talked about the idea of whether you ever envisioned any of them being films.

**Ai:** No, but you know maybe it's because I can't imagine anybody ever buying a poem to film. I can envision the Jimmy Hoffa poem as theater. I was going to have to write some different parts for it, like an opening. I have a scene where . . . we might have a master of ceremonies, but then later I thought it was too much like *Cabaret*. But there's a big old cardboard painting of the head of Robert Kennedy. Well, first it opens with Hoffa, but then when the other action begins, the mouth opens, and Jimmy Hoffa slides down Robert Kennedy's tongue onto the stage. I thought it would be a great opening! [Laughter] But I'm really

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happy with my poetry. I don't want to do anything else necessarily. I have these fantasies about those big bucks that will be in the bank and pay for me to live and write poetry and not even have to teach if I don't want to. And I know the day is never going to come unless I win the American Family Publishers—ten million dollars. That's the only thing I could see happening where I could just sit and write if I wanted to. But then you go look in your checkbook, and that's the reality of being a poet. It really is. At least I don't have a family, except for the cats. I know a lot of poets who have kids and feel very dissatisfied having to teach. They can't get their work done. And there are people who have four courses and really do have a hard time, but they can't stop. A fellowship comes through . . . for some it never does.

**HFR:** What do you think of literary criticism in the second half of the twentieth century?

**Ai:** I don't think about it. Sometimes it's just too much for me to deal with. A facetious answer, I guess. Well, I think not enough is done by poets themselves, the practitioners of the art. I really wish I saw more criticism done by poets on poetry, and specifically more done by women. That would be so nice. The field really is pretty empty.

**HFR:** Certainly it used to be a tradition. You wonder what's happened.

**Ai:** I think a lot of poets just don't want to do it. They just want to write poetry, and so that leaves the field open. Edmund Wilson and people like that . . . well, they were rounded critics. That goes back to what I'm complaining about. People didn't just read; they were like Renaissance people. I don't know whether it's our educational system or what, but we just seem more limited in scope intellectually than a lot of writers going back to say D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, through the fifties. I would call that the high critical age in American poetry, maybe into the sixties. But the seventies . . . I don't consider myself critically that well-read in some respects. All you have to do is mention criticism, and Ai's little shutters go down. The very thing I'm damning other people for, it's like, "Ahhhhhh!" It's like mathematics. I can't deal with it. I mean, I read a lot of reviews, but I rarely make it through a book of criticism. I don't know what that says about me. I usually pick

parts of it.

I really don't feel that I can debate somebody about which critic is best. There are people whose work I respect more than others, but I feel on shaky ground that way, so I hate to get into it. I just don't feel really comfortable when it comes to criticism or talking about it. I'll talk to a friend about it . . . did you see that—that's bullshit! What's bad about the criticism going on now is that poetry has become so separated from the mainstream, from other art forms, that people can set themselves up as critics and can be spokespeople for the whole of poetry. I don't think that is legitimate. It's scary. When someone who doesn't know where to look goes to somebody for a critical opinion, they're going to go to one of those few critics, and they may not care for other people's work, or maybe have their favorites, and that's the scary thing about all artistic criticism. At some point you have to decide who sounds like they have opinions you can live with and read their stuff. I like Robert Pinsky's criticism, and maybe I trust him more because he is a practicing poet. I think Richard Howard is a very good critic. But there again, he's in the tradition of people like Edmund Wilson, who know so much. Their breadth of knowledge was so vast.

But compared to theater, I think we have it pretty easy actually. When it comes right down to it, my god, those are such personal attacks, and you can literally kill somebody's play. I've heard of instances where a critic hated the playwright and gave the play a bad review and basically shut it down. So, when you compare it to that, we're not doing that badly. I don't know what's going to come next. I don't know what the new graduate students will do with criticism. I have hope; I'm optimistic. But there's such a need for strong women critics in poetry. I think it could make a difference. I know it sounds sexist, but there's such a strong old boy network in poetry that sometimes one worries that someone who's good, who doesn't fit into the old boy school of thought is neglected. I'm sure it's true. I'm sure there's work out there that isn't being read or picked up that is really good and just hasn't gotten through. That's the danger.

**HFR:** Okay. To a different subject.

**Ai:** Yes, one less fraught with grenades and minefields.

**HFR:** Your work presents characters with broken or maimed

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hearts, couples who can't communicate, often brought to violence. It's a bleak landscape, and these individuals are often matter-of-fact in the results of their passion, frequently shocking acts of violence. Do you think this cool witnessing characterizes the 20th century, with its passion for the tools of witnessing—reporting, the camera, the tape recorder?

**Ai:** I guess I didn't in the beginning. I really hate that old violence question; I felt in the beginning it was like a woman couldn't write this. It was really funny, because when *Cruelty* came out, all of the reviews from everywhere except the South always mentioned violence, but the reviewers in the South never did. They did two things—they never mentioned race, and they never mentioned violence. I thought, wow . . . I must have some real kinship with the southern fiction writers whom I admire a lot, Flannery O'Connor and Faulkner. Richard Wright and Faulkner would be more akin to me than O'Connor. Anyway, after so many years of having that term applied to my work, I'm really kind of tired of it. But the thing is, to me it's a failure to accept the violence of the age. I mean all you've got to do is open a newspaper, for god's sake.

Now the voice who reports matter-of-factly, it came out of me, but I know it's part of our age. You watch the news now . . . but maybe I was ahead of my time in a weird way, and the rest of the world has just caught up with me. I really like Paul Bowles' work, and I didn't read it until about 1978 or 1979 . . . let's see, there's *Let It Come Down* and *The Sheltering Sky*. Anyway, the book of short stories I like best I think is *Let It Come Down*. I found there a kindred spirit. In a lot of stories, the voice is impersonal, matter-of-fact . . . and there's a lot of violence in the stories, which are set in Morocco. So somebody anticipated it long before I did, albeit in a foreign country. But there is real similarity there, and maybe it does come out of the 20th century. To me, the closest comparison might be Chandler, Hammett, that school, the hard-boiled detective. Those are my favorites. Now, they narrate . . . they say, she was such and such, hips like you know. Well, if you really stretch it, you can see the same narration of certain acts of violence in my work, coming out of that same voice, that letting-you-have-it voice that just sort of tells it. That I see as coming post-WWII.

**HFR:** This violence mixes with so many of the strong emotions, usually love and sex. In "Two Brothers," for example, Jack Kennedy likens his death to a sexual experience, "...all your cells coming almost to despair, it is so good." So you deal with violence as both repulsive and seductive.

**Ai:** Well, I think when you watch TV, that's what's blasted at us day after day, especially against women. You can always tell when it's sweeps week. There's usually a serial killer or hookers who are getting killed. I think Americans must find it seductive, otherwise there wouldn't be such a preponderance of violence in our films, on TV . . . I won't say in literature. I won't generalize. But just in TV movies and films, certainly movies. I think it all goes back to our frontier, our heritage . . . you can't take my gun away, our glorification of the individual, which in the end is a terrifying thing. The devil-may-care psychopaths that I used to write about come out of that, the man alone who goes out and takes care of business. We really glorify that, whether it's Ollie North or Richard Speck. It's truly frightening, and that's the dark side of it.

I have a great affection for our country and our trash culture—I really do. And I come out of it; we all do. But there's a really, really dark side, and I think sometimes that's the side that I'm touching. People used to try to make the poems be about me. In the early days, people automatically assumed they were confessional, no matter what. But no, my life isn't any more violent than any other American's, I don't think. In a way, all this inner city underclass stuff on the media . . . what I think happens sometimes is people, of course, stereotype. So, there might be a tendency for people to think, oh, that's the kind of life she had.

I told a poet I know something about my cousin having joined the army. My cousin was killed in Vietnam, and she said, oh, of course, to escape. I almost died laughing because—and this is from someone I respect—she's looking at the color of my skin, and right away all these flashcards have gone off, and my cousin had to escape his life. Well, we were working/lower middle class. We had apparently been wealthy in Oklahoma and Texas, and lost our money during the depression, like any other family. We fell on hard times and never quite recovered, but I was not from the underclass. In fact, there was a whole class structure among

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African Americans in Tucson. You earn so much less than white people that to white people you would be working or lower middle, but we were in the African-American upper classes, and that's actually what I come out of. Our family is out of the upper—it's generally heavily mixed blood—middle and upper-class African-American life. So you can't just compare to that. The closest comparison I can make is Creole life in New Orleans, except we were one family. So I said, oh my god. No, that's what a boy did to become a man in my family. He didn't have to leave the family. They owned a home. My uncle worked for the phone company.

When you're a writer and nonwhite, you're constantly working against these stereotypes, and I have dedicated my creative life to breaking the stereotypes, breaking through them if I can. In Tucson . . . well, Lena Horne's family is a similar family. They have a lot of Indian blood, and they were house slaves. I was always told that nobody in the family had ever picked cotton. Okay, so that's number one. But if they were slaves, I'm assuming they were house slaves, which meant most of them were children of the master. It was the master's children who were lighter-skinned and all that shit, and my mother's family comes out of that. It's a background that I'm really anxious to write about because my relatives are getting so old, and there is nobody to record it, and also because it's an aspect of American history that nobody is really dealing with. That's why I cling so to my multiethnicity; that's why I won't let myself be booked anywhere as a black writer, because people make all these assumptions. It's just another way to me of being stereotyped. If somebody wants to be a black writer, that's their business, but I think for me, I feel that a lot of people make assumptions—whites make assumptions about African Americans if you always go under that heading, which is not true to my family or to my experience necessarily. I feel in that sense like a historian. It's my history, and it's also part of the American frontier history, and it ought to be preserved. It's really important for Americans to know about. So, I'm hoping to write about that some day.

I've sort of deviated, but not quite because I've dealt with the violence a bit and why it worries me to have that thrown at me today. It gets so terrifying how stereotyped people are. You get to a certain level, and you think you're free of it, and then you just

find yourself trapped in it, and that's the terrible thing. But I also don't want to say there isn't violence in my work. There is. I have to admit it—there is. [Laughter] What can I say . . . but I think it comes out of our culture. I like to think it's not gratuitous, that it comes out of the situation. I wouldn't want to have somebody die just to do that. I'd like them to die because it is essential to the action of the poem, essential to the plot.

**HFR:** Many times I find your poems are very seductive, and I wondered if you consciously used seductive language to bring your readers into these violent and tough poems.

**Ai:** Could you give me an example?

**HFR:** We were talking about your work, how you can be quiet and terrifying at the same time. "Hangman" from *Cruelty*, for example, has some beautiful lyric moments, but when you think about the subject, it's completely horrifying. You've got your reader in a balance.

**Ai:** Like a Venus' flytrap. I don't know if I do that consciously, but it may be—and I'm analyzing myself, I don't know—but maybe some things that seem so innocent, so harmless, are really not. When I was a kid, we had all these reversals in fortune. It was, I guess, Shakespearean. My last year in high school, mother married a third stepfather whom later she said she didn't love, and her punishment was that the marriage didn't work. He was just awful to her. One night he called her a "bitch," and I had it. You can't do that when kids get older. I went in and threw something at him. I was nineteen years old. He ran us out of the house. So we had to climb this wire fence in Tucson and run to my grandmother's house, barefooted. And while she was out of the house, getting a divorce, he moved all the furniture out. I went off on a foreign language fellowship that summer to Columbia, and when I came back we had no stove or refrigerator, no furniture. He put it in storage, and we couldn't afford to get it out. I had a little money left over from that fellowship, so I bought her a car and a stove. But for a long time, we only had a styrofoam chest, no refrigerator. We would have to leave stuff at my grandmother's. It was just so bizarre.

One day I was worried. There was this English teacher at U of A [University of Arizona], Byrd Granger, who became this

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folklorist, and she said, what's the matter with you? You're so low today. And I said, well, you know Christmas is coming, and we don't have anything to eat. I was on work study. So she said, I'm going to do something for you, and she called Catholic Social Services, and they came over Christmas Eve with two bags of groceries. Eventually I bought the refrigerator, and my mother went through this weird period when she wouldn't work. My stepsister and I thought she was going through this because of turning forty. She was a young mother, and she couldn't handle it. So, she was partying with this young man who was twenty. My stepsister and I were really pissed. We just couldn't believe that our forty-two-year-old mother was out with a twenty-year-old man. My stepsister was working, and I was working, and my mother . . . we took care of her, for about two years, my junior and senior years. And I think that that certainly gives you a bleak world view.

And yet I didn't come out of the underclass. This is still a lower-middle or middle-class existence for us. It was just a reversal in fortune. It wasn't the class we came out of. The difference between the way I grew up and I guess the underclass is that the distance between poverty and nonpoverty are so much greater. They realized they are living a depressed life; we didn't. That's an American-in-the-fifties attitude, which extended right into the sixties.

So there was a whole class in Tucson, this African-American structure—half African-American, half-Filipino people, half-Mexican and African-American, and a few Indian and African American, my own family, which was Indian and African American, Dutch Irish, and I was half Japanese. There were also some full-blooded African-Americans who were better off financially, and we comprised the African American upper class in Tucson. When all that stuff in *Mississippi Burning* was going on, the mothers in my neighborhood were going door-to-door to solicit girls for debutante ball. The uppermost thing in their minds was getting their daughters married, having them come out in society and marrying them off. And they asked me, too. That was one time my mother backed me up. I said, it's ridiculous . . . 1965, African-American debutantes. Most of the girls got pregnant and dropped out. I was the only one who graduated with my class, and a woman who was a doctor's daughter. And that was it for

my high school. We really thought things would change. Anyway, this is Ai's social past. I don't know what it has to do with poetry.

**HFR:** We have one more question dealing with violence, and then we're off it. Have you ever responded to violence in other people's work?

**Ai:** See, I don't know that I would call it "violence." There's a difference between gratuitous violence and violence that comes out of the plot, so I don't think I'd call it that in terms of reaction. I just think it's part of the story, and I don't separate them. So if I think it's well done, if it's inherent or integral, it doesn't bother me. I might get grossed out, but I still could accept that it was part of it. I don't like to see things where women are cut up. I don't watch stuff like that. It may be easier for me to read about it, because I read all these sleazy mysteries, but I don't read too many where violence is being done to women. I don't separate it; it's part of life. I just say, is it valuable to me or isn't it?

I had all the usual kiddie records . . . but one of my favorites was *The Lone Ranger*, wherein a wagon train is massacred. [Laughter] And I had capguns because I was into being a cowgirl. So I don't know whether that influenced me or not. It's all part of American culture, and maybe I had higher tolerance for dealing with it than others. But the point came in graduate school in 1970 where I went back to Laguna Beach to rent an apartment, and we went to see *Performance* with Mick Jagger, and my friends were upset. They said, all this violence . . . it's just too much. And it didn't bother me at all. I said, wow! I had been struggling with myself because I thought I needed to be able to deal with violence. I really hadn't until I went to that film; it was a kind of exorcism in a way. And I came home and remember sitting up almost all night and just getting more and more excited, and I wrote that poem "Hitchhiker" that's in *Cruelty*, which is loosely based on the Pied Piper of Tucson.

**HFR:** Your characters are often portrayed at both emotional and physical extremes, sometimes in a barren or desert landscape. It reminds us of some of the Old Testament figures and voices. How do you respond to this comparison? They, too, have moral choices to make.

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**Ai:** I feel that people are not making enough moral choices in the '80s, that this is the most unbelievable age. The only place in the early '80s I felt I was finding much to do with morality and moral questions was in the mystery novel, believe it or not. It is incredible to me that we have entered such an amoral age. It is just unbelievable. So, to me it doesn't come out of the Old Testament or the New Testament. It comes out of the kind of life that I would like to lead myself, that I like to think I'm leading. I've always tried to be honest and fair and just with my fellow human beings. It's the kind of life I want to lead, the moral life. It's really hard, though. I don't think it comes naturally to people. There are all sorts of levels to it, too, the large issues, and these everyday things that we go through. I like to think that a lot of the characters I write about have this dilemma.

**HFR:** You approach many spiritual matters through your characters. A few examples from *Sin*: Oppenheimer attains enlightenment by envisioning the bomb; in "They Shall Not Pass," "Jesus Christ is the bullet that makes everything right"; the Atlanta child murderer is "The Good Shepherd" and talks about God, that "Only God is never satisfied." Could you talk about the nature of God in this book?

**Ai:** Well, as David Wojahn put in that review, this is a kind of destroyer God, because God creates and God destroys. This is the paradox, if you will, and I am trying to work that out myself. And that was one of the questions . . . when I reached an age where I thought about these things, which was some time in high school when I was trying to deal with slavery and corruption in American government. I really thought there was no corrupt government in the history of the U.S. I was faced with all this stuff I didn't understand. And the Holocaust, trying to understand that. They were allowed, no matter how you put it . . . , We let the Jews die. People knew that was going on. We let them die; that's what is so terrifying. I think sometimes people think the Jews are paranoid, but I've read enough history to know that you can't really, truly ever let up your guard. That's the depressing, terrifying thing about it. I think the Pol Pot thing was a holocaust. And there's stuff going on now . . . from AIDS to international politics. A lot of people are being sold out. How can we live a moral life in a world in which we are constantly going to be

tormented and tortured by our inability to do anything about what's going on? It's a major question, and I like to think about it through some of those characters.

In "They Shall Not Pass," the character's saying he's been told that Jesus Christ is a bullet, but I'm not literally saying that Jesus Christ is a bullet. I do see God as both creator and destroyer. I don't understand it. Why does evil ascend? You think, why does it have so much power and allure? People don't talk about evil much any more, but it's out there. I said once I didn't know whether I believed in the Devil, but I believe in the force of evil, that there is a dark force out there. What makes it seductive, and what makes people weak enough to be drawn into it? It's certainly not a black-and-white world or a black-and-white issue either. It's all kinds of grays. My characters are saying, why did I fall, or why did I lie to myself about this or that thing. Why did we allow this to happen? Why didn't somebody go over and rescue the Jews or something? I know we were all caught up in the war, both oceans, but my god! In a way you could say we allowed Hitler to take over Germany. I mean where were we? So I'm always in terror.

I'm an avid news and information reader now—*The New York Times*, *The L.A. Times*, the local papers and all these magazines. I listen to the news, I listen to *All Things Considered*, I listen to Dan Rather, and it's like, oh my gosh! Some days I just have to tune that stuff out and read some fashion magazines. [Laughter] Well, I'm sure that's what a lot of people are doing. So I'm condemning, but at the same time I understand, because I'm doing the same thing. I mean, I can only deal with so much. We're only human—hey, it's the old excuse, but it's true. Your little brain starts smoking, and you have these anxiety attacks. You're lying in bed in the middle of the night . . . and I have these days when I'm worried about just earning my next dollar as a poet. That alone can make you close your mind to anything else. Where's my next job coming from? I don't have that fear as much any more, but I'm a spendthrift, and even when I'm working, I'll spend down to nothing, and then have to make it through the summer somehow. And then I have this existential dread these days where it's like, "Oh!!!" I don't even worry much about the bomb any more; now it's environmental stuff, the ozone layer . . . Days where it's just . . . and I'll say, well let me watch

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*L.A. Law* or something, something light.

**HFR:** You mentioned earlier that you're worried about the diminishing audience of poetry. Do you think that's one of the reasons, that people don't want to look at these huge issues that poets deal with?

**Ai:** I don't know. See, my feeling is that poets aren't dealing with it enough.

**HFR:** Okay. But you do.

**Ai:** Yes, I'm one who does, and, if I can judge by my book sales, there is an audience for that. There's a big audience out there for it. In fact, it will serve to increase your readership rather than decrease it. But I don't know if it does affect some writers who aren't dealing with it. I'd be the last one to say, go out there and live with the homeless. That's one of Ai's fears, Ai out there on the sidewalk. And since I did have those years when I was poor, and then became a poet of all things! [Laughter] It amazes me sometimes. But the thing is, I'm in it for love, for the art. It never occurred to me; I just did it. I got my MFA, and then I looked for a job. But it's a hell of a lot tougher out there now than when I started, and it wasn't that easy then.

## Swans

Beneath the roof of the porch we were safe. We watched the hard rain fall, long silver threads you could easily tangle yourself up in. Threads you could see only in the light from a street lamp or a lone, lit window across the street. Otherwise, the rain was invisible. You could only hear it or see the next day the shape of its drops etched in the paint of your car.

Brian played catch with Liz in the street. They stood apart and threw a football: Brian, twenty feet towards the dark: Liz, near my car, clapping, catching the ball once, twice. It was too slippery for her to always grab hold, too big and difficult to see. It dwarfed her hands which, in the light, looked like hopeful wings. She wore a sodden skirt and tank top and no shoes. She threw the ball like a girl.

In the rain Brian looked soft. He was in love. Before I knew him, his wife was killed on the Sawmill Parkway, the car squeezed to a box with his wife inside caught between a guardrail and overloaded fruit truck. It took a half-hour to cut through the steel and make a door to pull her out. The traffic, he said, was backed up even longer. The highway was full of peaches which people collected while they waited for the road to clear.

They had married young, fresh from college with separate careers which would only spiral up and give each enough money to do things together: weekends in Connecticut, afternoons at the Hyatt, theatre and tennis and occasional time to read aloud to one another, in the mornings, mostly, lying in bed reading the latest novel which had come in the mail. Storybook lives until the traffic killed her. He took a severe cut in pay to try again, here, in this average city on the edge of the Midwest where now he played catch with a girl in the rain—a recent psychology graduate from the university. In the light her brown arms shimmered like oil.

"He's so happy," Helen said. She reached for our wine, filled the glasses with a fine, heavy burgundy. "I mean, just look at him."

"All gone?" I asked.

She tipped the bottle. "All gone," she said, sliding under my arm; I could smell the musk from her neck, and she felt smooth and warm beneath my arm on this porch. Brian and I had bought

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the building to shelter our money. He took the bottom apartment; I, the second—we shared the porch and furnished it with this soft, weather-beaten sofa Helen and I sat on.

“Do you think she’s pretty?” Helen asked.

“Who?”

“Liz,” she said, laughing.

“She does,” I said. “Can’t you tell? She likes to watch herself in the mirror.”

At night I liked to drive, out of the city to places I’d never been before: I’d stop at a motel lounge for a beer, a truckstop for coffee, look at people I didn’t know and think about my return home: driving fast in the glow of the lights from the dash while I entered the Fort Pitt tunnel, driving through the quiet of the mountain until I came flying out over the city, its lights ablaze like creation itself—dazzling and bright and safely distant, a postcard with the name of an old lover on back. It made me happy until I’d have to park my car on the street. In time, I said, I would buy a house, which pleased Helen, this talk about my buying a house.

During the week, Helen and I would swim at the Y. Early evening, after work, before we would eat. Sometimes we would leave separately because we both needed for a while to be separate, but still we always swam. Laps. Long, hard laps. She had swum in college, developed the stroke of one who swam: smoothly muscled, sleek, fast. In the water with her suit sealing her skin, polished into her flesh so that if it were evening, or if the light were suddenly to shift, you would have seen only the shell of her body—the determined result of months of her life spent in the water. She left the slightest of wakes, an eclipse in the shape of a woman with whom I could swim.

In short, we kept ourselves built the way we wanted, with finely muscled chests and long, flexible tendons. Helen sipped her wine and grew warm. Brian threw badly and hit a car, its hood bending beneath the weight of the football and Liz laughing hysterically. Across the street a light flicked on, a window opened. An old man poked his head into the rain.

“Quiet down!” he yelled. “Or I’m calling the cops!”

“Go ahead,” Liz yelled back. “You go right ahead!”

The old man slammed his window, Brian and Liz came running up the steps laughing and dripping with rainwater. They disturbed Helen who, while not asleep, was content with the heat of her

wine, lying in the crotch of my arm, her glass held loosely between her fingers like a plant.

"Walt," Brian said, "wake up!"

"I am awake," I said.

"So's everyone else," Liz said.

At this hour, though, no one should have been awake, including the old man across the street. This was his neighborhood undergoing recent development, with a new nightclub only a block away, where the four of us had just been, dancing with one another until we were drenched with sweat and cool steam which rose from the floor to look like mist; with two pricey restaurants nearby whose patrons took up the space for our cars; where people sat up late in the building across the street and watched the bars close or played catch because one wanted so desperately to please the other—an inconsiderate girl with brown skin.

I couldn't help think that Brian had made a terrible mistake. Liz pulled at the fabric of her top and let it slap her skin. She sat on the rail and gathered her skirt to wring the water out. She looked so matriarchal doing that—her legs spread, her hands between wringing out the cloth of her skirt.

"You two need a towel," Helen said, rising. She left the porch and returned with two thick towels which read *Brian & Liz, 1988*. They dried one another with the towels we had given them, new towels which still smelled like cotton, while Helen resumed her place on the sofa and folded herself into my side. With practice, I suppose she had come to think she fit.

It's simple, really. The way things fit. Raised properly you learn to behave, to say "please" and "thank you," to learn the right language and wear a necktie young so that later, when it matters, you absorb the fabric into yourself the way cotton will rainwater. You learn to take asport—squash, lacrosse, it doesn't matter if you're good. Mine had been track, and our manner, our posture is all a result of our past and the way it made us grow: the way a tree in a forest will twist itself into a knot reaching for the sun; the way a man burdened with loss will allow himself to grow soft and damp in the rain; the way some women will let their hair fall into place, or curl into your side.

When the police came by, I walked out to the street. I stood in the rain which was slowing and talked with one of the cops, a black woman who seemed not to take this complaint too serious-

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ly. I apologized, said we were celebrating.

"What?" said the woman, smiling. She leaned with her arm on the door as if she were pleased with the coolness of the rain.

"My friend," I said, pointing. "He's engaged. We were a little loud."

"Well, that's nice," she said.

"Just move it inside," her partner said.

I left the cruiser in the street while the woman said *Congratulations!* as the car drove off, the tires hissing through the rainwater on the street. I returned to the sofa where now we all sat safely tucked, no longer a public disturbance—just two couples on the porch watching the night.

Liz said, "You know, this is just like the fair. The Tunnel of Love." She admired the stone on her finger, a brightly polished stone of medium weight.

After Brian began dating Liz, the four of us went to the amusement park. We walked in the sun on asphalt and watched people eat fried dough, pitch baseballs; where young boys in tight, sullied jeans gathered in groups to watch girls and smoke; where the four of us went through The Tunnel of Love, sat in pairs in big, plastic swans which floated down an artificial stream.

While waiting in line, Brian told us a story. "Once," he said, "my brother and I went down one of these. In New Jersey. We were too young for the big rides. Ben asked Dad why this was called the Tunnel of Love, and Dad said because this was where people kissed. When it got dark, he kissed me and I got off and told my dad next time he could go. Not me. I wasn't going to go anymore."

And Liz kissed him, hard, her body stretched tight against him while we stood waiting in line, while Helen took my hand and smiled and reminded me of how once, after we first met, I had wanted only briefly for her to do the same. For a moment she reminded me of a woman I once met at a bar. After the third drink, the woman slid her hand inside my sleeve and told me all about Monaco and Dublin, and then I realized that Helen was not this woman in any shape or form, and I wondered what it was about Helen that had made me remember something I'd just as soon well forget. Perhaps it was the sway of her hip, or the passing of some familiar cologne.

Liz was a big girl, busty with thick bones, thick skin and long,

straight hair which relied on the light for its color. Were Brian more lean, she'd squeeze the life right out of him, and here, beneath the yellow light of the porch, her hair looked like beer.

"Goodnight," Helen said, rising, taking my hand. She wanted me to follow. Near Brian and Liz, Helen would grow wanton and loose, watching them made her turn ripe like a pomegranate. She kissed them each, brushed my hand again, leaving, and I said, "In a while," because I needed to wait until I was ready: sleep, with the hum of the city behind my eyes and Helen nearby, breathing softly like a clock while I slept couched in the arms of a Soma, or Thorazine, a Halcion; sleep, like research or death, is something we each do alone. In the morning, Helen and I would wake early to lift, to apply our muscle groups differently. Her eyes would be foggy with wine, but they would clear as she began to focus. And I would watch her through the moves, strapped inside a machine with her limbs articulate and full of a sudden, hidden strength.

That night, however, in the twilight of Liz and Brian's celebration, I don't think I really thought about sleep. Instead, I thought if I'd ever been married, never would I be able to replace my wife, the way I knew my parents sitting in their soft, private rooms in strange, foreign cities would never be able to replace their son. Perhaps they thought about me as much as they thought about each other, or the time my father brought home his boyfriend, Steve, and my mother slashed his cheek with a broken water glass she had splintered against the rim of the swimming pool. I later left with my mother to be raised by her and dormitory proctors and my mother's lovers, one of whom had played football for the Colts. My father was scarred for life.

And now we were three—on the sofa, our feet on the rail. The night grew cool, Liz and Brian were happy for each other. I wondered when Liz would begin to change her style of dress and Brian would buy her a car.

"Goodnight," I said, wanting to sleep.

"Wait," Brian said. He followed me through the door, down the hall to the edge of the stairs.

I looked at him and smiled, put my arm around his shoulder the way we did at school, after a neighbor had made his girlfriend pregnant or performed marginally on an exam, and I said, "I'm happy for you, Brian. Really, I am." I thought of other things to say, but some things like marriages and timing, like glassware near

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a pool seem just too fragile, and when a friend of yours like Brian makes a mistake, there's never any real need to tell him.

As for my parents, they were neither monogamous nor beautiful. I think at times there's no reason they should have been. I stopped at the medicine chest, the kitchen, the window over the street, removing my clothes as I went. All the rain was gone now, the street outside smelled clean and humid. I stood and listened to the building shift, to the wind rustle a drape. I listened to the pitch of Helen's breath coming from the bedroom.

Inside, she lay on her back, loosely wrapped in a twisted, spiraling sheet with her hand slipped below, the other to her ear now sliding to the rim of her navel. She opened her eyes and seemed to find direction, a sudden undercurrent of flux. Her hips began to swell, in the light, rising slowly by degrees before falling equally slow to rise again while I stood by. In the light beneath the glow of the street, her shadow cast along the bedding, she grew buoyant, fluttering on the edge of flight. I watched her find her rhythm and watching her like that, so pleased with everything she could feel, so pleased with the very motion of herself, I felt as if we might never have to speak again.

## June 22nd

*Because light travels at such high speed, the sun rises eight and a half minutes before we see it at the horizon, but by then it is no longer there.*

—Freeman Patterson

No one crossed the long swamp to our cabin.  
We were sluggish as the snow-melt stream.  
You sat reading by the window,  
one hand questioning the shelled light  
that your book claimed was no more  
than the ash of its own demise  
and asked, "What of us?" Thinking of the lichen  
veined skull and antlers we had found that morning  
behind the cabin, I did not answer.  
Now the faint sound of splashing draws me  
to the window where I watch a moose  
and two calves feeding in the shallows.  
The calves have the color of raspberries  
and move with an awkwardness that would be love.

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## December 22nd

I don't know the name of the small  
fish that swam into the bucket  
I was filling at the spring.  
It's afraid of my shadow  
and sinks like a flat stone  
when I bend down to look at it.  
I should return it to its spring  
but I am so lonely. This is the longest  
night of the year. I remember  
someone saying man spends forty years on one  
riverbank, forty on the other. Tonight  
both seem too long.  
Across the stream, snow bends willows to  
the ice below a severed moon.

## Dark Hands Webbing Time

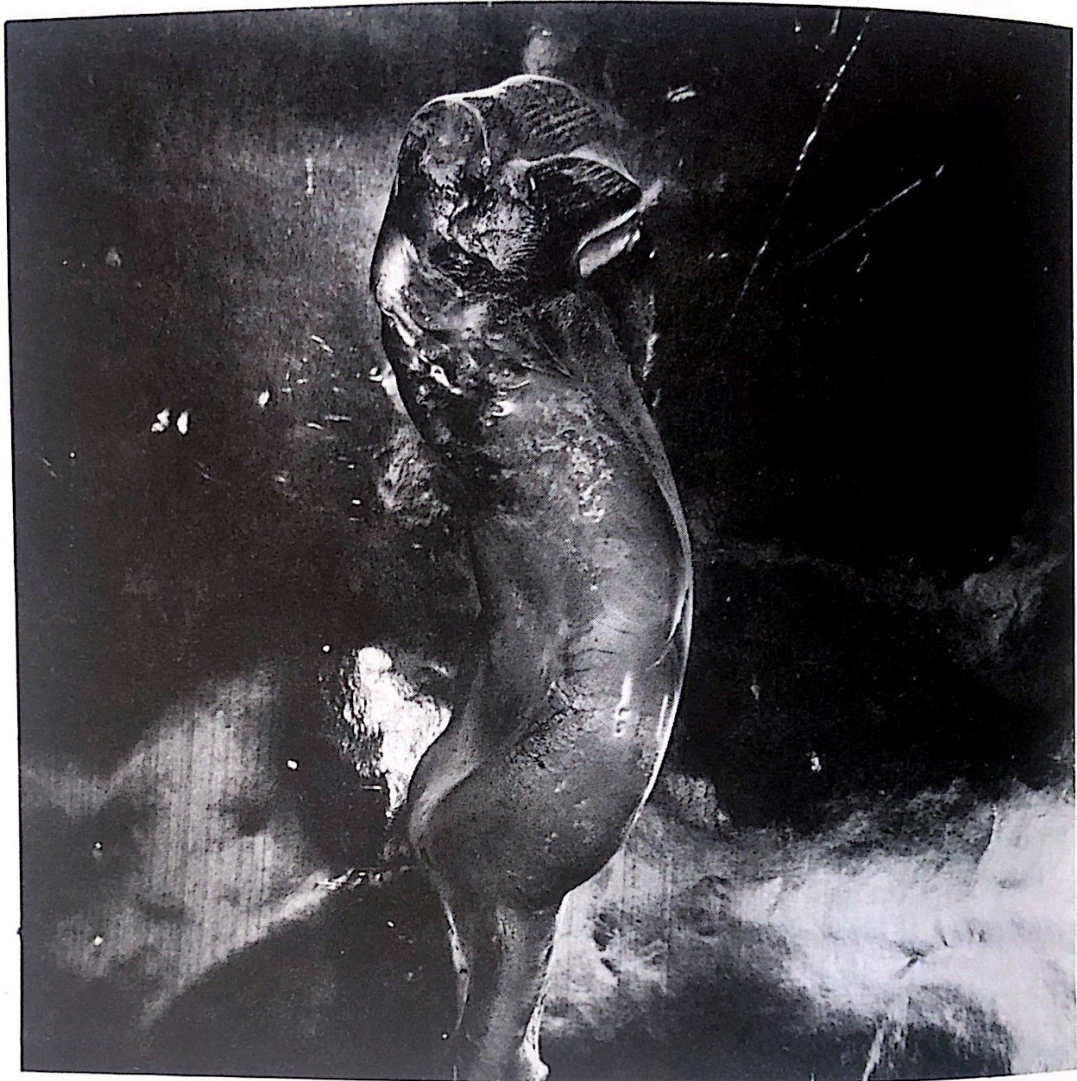
Dust coats the hotel lobby's Willard clock.  
Our church is now a shelter for the poor  
their muted voices wafting to the choir  
where cots are stacked for those who dare to sleep.  
What draws me to this place, once more a small  
boy running home, in tears, from church  
his First Communion shoes bleeding in the rain,  
so afraid his parents have abandoned him  
to sin and to the loneliness of love  
viewed through a darkened screen? In a park  
I used to haunt, I watch a baseball game.  
The youngest players speaking in a Latin tongue,  
their dark hands webbing time. I lope across  
greening grass, the new Spaulding white as snow.

## Weather

*in memory,  
the Reverend Richard Martin*

On Sunday, the doors  
to the Spaulding Rehabilitation Center  
freeze open. Snow whips through the lobby.  
The elevators don't come.  
In room 703 you are whispering  
mysteries, ruined fragments  
of prayer you once knew by heart.  
But then, clear, telegraphic,  
from that other country—  
*can you forgive me?* On Tuesday  
no spark, only the low  
captive moan, the aimless thrashing  
under your restraints. On Thursday  
snow begins at noon. I kneel  
beside the bed, boots dripping  
onto the linoleum, lips pressed  
against your ear, insistent.

I have to shovel out the Datsun.  
It plows through mounting  
drifts, past vehicles abandoned  
on every incline. A mile  
from home I leave the car  
in the Middle School yard, climb  
the Common Street hill. Inside  
I take my first swallow of whiskey  
stare out the blank window.  
It will always belong to you  
January, storm, this mix  
of death and weather.



"Melted Down Beer Bottle," 1961 from the series "Blowing in the Wind, The Atomization of Nagasaki"  
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 10"x10"



"Face" from the series, "Blowing in the Wind, The Atomization of Nagasaki"  
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 9"x6"

*Morrie Warshawski*

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## **From *Figure Ground***

We went from gallons to liters and back again. His eyes foreshadow a tree, I think. The rays of the sun and their apparent speed. It was a lesson in how to ride an elevator. We grab for it and tumble. The trick is to bite just when the trigger is pulled. Remembering the rules of basketball is a help. I latched on to a mnemonic device in lieu of a duck's back.

## Living in Vacationland

Everything looks charming 200 yards from shore;  
with a perfect manhattan and a pair of binoculars,  
grey piles of lobster traps—  
men sorting tackle near clapboard sheds  
are reduced to hazy miniatures.  
But tourists don't know what it's like  
to retire here. I have to stand  
only two feet from those  
sullen fish wives who ring up groceries,  
mumbling numbers, shoving my food,  
looking at my jewelry  
instead of my eyes.

We worked hard to live  
where the ocean would spread gently  
outside our living room window,  
but it churns and roars  
until guests stop talking, look up from cocktails,  
impressed by water that dumps  
rocks, seaweed, dead squid  
outside our door at high tide.  
Gelatinous arms snag in rake tines  
and bodies gather a grainy camouflage  
when I try to rake a front yard  
square of beach clean.

It's hard to manage  
anyone here. Even my daughter  
loses perspective. She stands on  
the beach at night, listening and staring  
into a wilderness of stars  
until I throw the floodlights  
which brighten a triangle of sand  
and the steps leading out of salt wind  
into my kitchen  
warm with the smells of pot roast and gin.

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## Highway Rest Stop: Little Amsterdam

Glazed wings keep the fly  
from gathering enough strength for suicide  
against thick glass;  
her sputters draw my eye away  
from blue and white delft  
hanging on cinder-block walls  
to the sugar-pourer that traps her.

The lid won't unscrew and I hesitate  
to disturb the waitress hunched over  
the grill, frying a sandwich  
for me, the only customer.  
Her indifference, though, gives me enough  
invisibility  
to get up and trace the music  
that revives memories of cousins  
long disappeared.

Through a cracked door  
I can see the next room is full.  
Young men shoot pool,  
shouting in slurred Spanish.  
They lean all their weight  
on pool cues, the bar or the jukebox  
shuddering with staccato horns of corridos.  
A fan blows sweaty hair cool and ruffles  
pictures of Jesus and the pyramids  
of Chichen Itza.

More men in straw  
cowboy hats crowd in  
through the back door,  
smoothing the ache  
between work and sleep with immersion  
in the familiar. By last call  
the floor will be a field  
of mud chunked off boot soles:

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Seated again I avoid the fly  
by reading about the owner  
who peers from the back cover  
of the menu. How he became so homesick  
he created his own version  
of Holland: a place to display  
his delft and paintings of harbors,  
this diner a vessel  
for his memory of home.

## The Bingo Bus

1960      Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Every Tuesday evening at six o'clock she makes her way slowly  
up the street to catch the bingo bus.

Red and green plastic buttons jingle in her bag as she climbs  
the steps to join the other players  
on their way to the Elks Club in Easton, to bingo heaven where  
fast numbers and fast talk clot memory.

At home her 40-year-old daughter waits until midnight to be sure  
her mother has a key.

This particular night, particularly in love with her mother,  
the daughter tries to justify anger,  
the anger she felt as a child, during the Depression,  
although as a child

she was too young to understand economic theory.

She understood one dress  
to wear and flour trucks to run behind  
with cups begging.

This night when she is particularly in love with her mother  
she remembers those years:

*I'm hungry, Mama, I'm hungry.* Her mother's hazel eyes looking  
beyond her, *Lick salt and you'll be thirsty.*

## Wood Floor Rising

It's the smell of rain, the mix of water  
and wood shutters, Stefano. Floor wax  
on our fingers, soup about done on the stove.  
You slip two days' beard down my neck,  
ask why I pause, retreat from photographs  
we've spread across our bed, our afternoon.  
You sense the photo not taken.

I was a kid, just a kid.  
My teachers couldn't understand  
why a sudden pool appeared beneath my desk.  
Years later, I still cringe, Stefano,  
the smell of urine wetting wood floor rising,  
there are some things so difficult to tell you.

I was old, in the fourth grade, how old  
are you in the fourth grade, nine?  
Nine years old, I was no kid.  
Beneath my desk the wet would stink,  
the stink would rise,  
and they would laugh.  
How could they know, how could I tell them,  
there are some things so difficult to say.

How could they know, I didn't know  
the bottles my father drank, bottles  
bloating him with rage he spit  
at me. I didn't know it was the beer.  
It was always something I did  
or didn't do. *Sit up straight, look at me,*  
*why is this wrong, what did I tell you*  
*to do, why is this not done, look at me,*  
*I said, look at me.* There are some things  
that are so difficult.

How could I know everyone was not like this.  
It seemed he had some right.

I would do just as I was told,  
then there would be no rage.  
How could I know the rage was endless,  
the bottles endless, no way to end the rage.  
I would have to end myself. I would disappear,  
make myself invisible, never  
call attention to myself, never  
put my hand up in class  
ask to leave the room, never  
thinking of the pool, why were they  
all looking at me *look at me*  
*I said, look at me.* There are some things.

There are some things I have to tell you, Stefano.  
How it has been years since I thought of this.  
How yesterday you came to me at dusk  
in the bathroom where I was sitting down to pee.  
Saying nothing you pulled my head to your belly,  
held me there. Saying nothing  
you stroked my head, my hair.  
Over and over you said nothing.  
And from some great dark place the urine came.

## Honeymoon at Sea

The wedding was a secret that the bride and groom kept locked behind their lips. Even their close friends suspected nothing more sinister than a vacation: nothing more enduring than snapshots or beach shells for the mantel. The bride and groom were careful to leave this impression and came almost to believe it themselves as they registered their intentions with the clerk in the town by the sea.

The ceremony was cast like a spell on the second day of their vacation when both were in clear mind after a sound night's sleep and a breakfast of blueberries and cream that left blue stains on the groom's fingers. They had walked to town. Rented a moped. Roared off to their wedding.

The spell was spoken in the swampy depths of the wildlife sanctuary by a fat lady in pink flip-flops to a chorus of mosquitos. The bride wore a steel-grey dress and sunglasses. In the shade the bride could barely see the groom who wore a white sweater and brown pants smudged blue at the thigh by nervous fingers. Still, she knew. He was the one to sit beside her in the breakfast nook of the house they would have in the depths of the country.

The sanctuary itself was on a small island some thirty miles out to sea and when all the vows were sealed the bride and groom walked down a sandy lane that led to a cliff overlooking the sea. From the cliff they could see just how small the island really was — an elbow of white sand lying crooked in blue water and reefs. The groom put his arm around his bride and said, "You can take your sunglasses off now." He wanted to see the eyes of the woman who would live with him in the forest some day.

She removed her mirror eyes and blinked.

"Is it over?" she asked. "Are we married?"

"I think so," he said.

They shared a dutiful kiss.

"You can do better than that," the lady in the pink flip-flops said. "Go on," she said, snapping them with her polaroid, "get closer."

The bride put her sunglasses back on. The groom paid the town clerk and she flopped away to her station wagon.

"Is she gone?" the bride asked.

"I think so," the groom said.

The silver moped waited at the side of the road. Helmets strapped on tightly, they took the hill slowly down, sniffing the sea and wondering when the change would start. The groom idly wondered why his bride had not taken off her sunglasses during the vows as they entered the small town by the sea.

The town wanted to stay old forever. Every brick had ancestors, every cobblestone had signed the Declaration, every store took all major credit cards. There were restaurants to accommodate every style of matrimony. Honeymooners strolled arm in arm down the ancient streets or took wine and long looks at the sidewalk cafes. They acted as if they were being rewarded for many years of hard work and dedication in the past and refreshed for the many years of toil that lay in the future. Hard as she tried, the bride could not summon that same feeling within herself and clung tightly to the groom as they rode their moped to a restaurant that they really could not afford.

Sigismund's Seafood House was on the lip of a cove and they ate on a porch facing the sea. Over lobster stuffed with lobster he asked her, "Why did you leave your sunglasses on?"

"I don't know," she said.

"I'll try to lose weight," he said, and dunked a piece of lobster into the butter.

"You're not heavy," she said. "I don't know...I never really thought I'd get married."

"I know," he said. "It doesn't seem like something we would do, does it?"

"No," she said. They looked out at the sailboats on the sea. Then, "At least promise me we'll never have children."

"Never," he said.

They ate quickly and in silence, waiting for the big change.

They had taken a small white cottage on the point. The beach facing it was raked clean by school boys at dawn and scuffed by the night's high tide. After dinner they went walking along the rocks as the sun set. The white sail of a yacht patched the sun and the groom slipped his hand into hers and said, "It doesn't have to be in the woods. We could live on one of those."

"No," she said. "We'd get seasick."

"I wasn't serious," he said. He took his hand back. They walked along in silence.

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He stopped and held his hand out palm up. "Tell my fortune," he said. She took his hand and looked at it. Then she wet her index finger and traced the lines on his hand. "I see us in a tall stone house by the bank of a river," she said. "The river runs through a tall forest and no one goes there but us."

The groom did not ask if she was serious. He took her sunglasses off and kissed her as the sun went down. The big change, he felt, was finally happening. She kissed him back and told him that she loved him.

They turned back towards the cottage, talking about the house by the river. It would have several fireplaces and a deck that led from the bedroom to the river. They had settled on the names of their cats by the time the cottage was in sight.

"I think I love you," the groom said.

The bride did not ask if he was serious.

The groom cupped his hands around a match and blew cigarette smoke out of his nose. The cottage was only a few yards away. "I'll make the coffee," the bride said. They sauntered towards the cottage when a large mongrel dog appeared on the beach and began running toward them uttering a low growl. Before they could react it thrust a malicious black muzzle in the groom's crotch. It growled deep in its throat at these *hors d'oeuvres*.

"Good dog," the groom said. "Nice puppy." The bride picked up a large seashell and tossed it far down the beach, saying, "Go fetch, go fetch, boy." The dog turned tail and chased the shell. The groom picked up a piece of driftwood in case the dog came back.

"Do you think," he asked, "there will be bears in our woods?"

The bride shrugged and put her sunglasses back on.

Back in the cottage they called the bride's parents and the groom's parents and bride's friends and the groom's friends and told them with great enthusiasm that everything was now legal. Then they turned in for the night. It had been a long day.

In the morning they packed lunches and rode the silver moped to a beach banked with high grassy dunes. They lay on the shoulder of the dunes while the groom drank champagne and watched the waves. The surf was rough and was knocking down an old man who stood knee-deep in the water. Each time the old man was knocked down he stood up again.

"Look at that," the groom said.

"What's he doing?" the bride asked.

"I don't know," the groom said. "I have no idea." They sat and watched and drank. After the first bottle of champagne he and the bride renewed their speculation about the house by the river that ran through the woods. It would be an old mill house, they decided, with the wheel still in operation and the lazy slap of the paddle hitting the water would be their only way of marking time.

"Is he still doing that?" the bride asked.

"Yes," the groom said. "He must have great thighs."

"Shouldn't we do something?" the bride asked. The groom took his bottle of champagne down to the water and offered it to the old man, saying, "We've just been married, you see."

The old man came out of the water and drank from the bottle. "Thank you," he said. "Congratulations and good luck." Then he walked back into the surf and let the waves push him down.

The groom went back to his bride and they tentatively talked about their house for the rest of the afternoon, waiting for the big change to take place.

That evening they went to dinner at a small restaurant on the crest of a hill. They ate clams and oysters and various other types of shellfish but it did not affect their appetites. On their way back to the cottage the groom said, "We really ought to have sex don't you think so?"

"I guess so," she said.

They stood for a moment trying to work up enthusiasm. "This place is too romantic," she said. "It scares me. I feel like I have to be on my company behavior all the time. I just can't relax. I keep waiting for something to happen."

"Well," the groom said, "it will be all right as soon as we leave paradise. Wait till you get back to someplace where you can hear the traffic at night. Wait until you have to go back to school. Then you'll feel better."

"And you'll feel better too," she said.

"Thank God," he said, "at least we understand each other." Still, inspired by the walk home, the bride suggested a midnight stroll on the beach, where the moon and the sea could be expected to have their effect or, as she put it, "take their toll."

It was too cold for the beach to be romantic. A southeasterly

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wind picked up before they had walked one hundred meters — too far to walk back just for sweaters — and blew them cold. It also began to blow sheets of sand down the beach, lancing their legs and backs. The groom led the bride to shelter behind a jetty, and they nestled in the wet rocks as the sand blew over their heads. The bride pointed down the beach in the direction that the wind was blowing. "Look," she said. "Look at that."

It was the man they had seen standing in the waves. He was absolutely naked, walking face first into the wind with his hands covering his eyes. He maintained a steady pace, and when he drew even with the jetty, he turned to the bride and groom and shouted over the wind.

"You see," he said, "I do this to get where I am going." Then he laughed and shook his head at himself and continued into the sand teeth.

The bride and groom looked at each other. They huddled in the rocks hoping the man would not return, and when the wind died down, they went home and locked all the doors and shut many of the windows. As they got into bed the groom asked, "How many days do we have left?"

"Two," the bride said. "Only two."

Both lay awake that night listening to the waves crash against the beach with irritating regularity.

When the sun was still an infant, the bride and groom sped off to the beach and lay in the dunes and swam in the sea. The old man did not show up until well into the afternoon and then was almost a quarter of a mile away from them, letting the sea knock him down. They decided to ignore him though neither of them really did. In fact the groom was so immersed in watching that he did not notice the live match he dropped on his towel until the small flame filled his nostrils with cotton smoke. He put it out with a handful of sand. The bride came back from the sea and they watched together. At length the old man dove into the waves and swam quickly out to a small sandbar to sit in a few inches of water and glare at them.

"For Christ sake," he yelled. "You're on your honeymoon. Don't you have anything better to do than watch me?"

The old man dove into the sea and swam a great distance underwater. The bride and groom saw his head pop up for air and were able to track his progress down to their position. He came

ashore right where the bride and groom had their towel.

"Oh Christ," the groom said. "I hope he doesn't talk to us."

"There is nothing," the bride said, "worse than an old romantic."

The old man dripped water on the edge of their towel. "Just taking a swim," he said. "Gotta keep fit," and went jogging off down the beach. The bride and groom sat on the dune and watched his figure fade off on the horizon.

That night they ate fish on credit and winced at the thought of the coming bill. The following purchases were made: a bottle of dark rum, a scented candle, and a vine of large red grapes. They walked through the scenic streets and saw honeymooners taking pictures and their mood came back a little. He put his arm around her. She leaned her head on his shoulder. They both began to grow optimistic that tonight, perhaps, it would work. They had planned to go directly out onto the beach and seclude themselves in the dunes and tell each other's fortunes by the lines in their hands.

"No sunglasses," the groom said as they walked on the beach. "You can't see right with sunglasses."

"There are no sunglasses in the future," the bride said. They settled in a cleft between two dunes, spread the towel, lit the candle and the incense, and the groom poured them a jolt of rum. They drank and then she asked for his hand. She held it in the candlelight and said, "There is a dog behind you."

The dog growled to confirm this.

"I don't care," the groom said. "Tell my fortune."

She looked into his hand as the dog came down the side of the dune. "Your fortune," the bride said, "is that the dog will go away."

The dog growled.

"And then what?" the groom asked. "What about the house in the woods?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know what will happen."

"Oh," the groom said.

The dog wheeled, sniffed something in the air, and ran in a circle trying to cut the scent again. He caught it and loped off over the dunes to the west.

"Now I will tell your fortune," the groom said. He took her hand in the candle light, kissed it, and asked her to close her eyes.

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When her lids were down, he took a pair of sunglasses from his shirt pocket and put them into her hands. She put them on. He saw his reflection in her shades, and she saw only the dim outline of his face. They began to kiss between the dunes.

They shook sand from their clothes and carried their shoes in their hands on the way home as they walked along the beach. They saw a house by the river in the country with a fire in every fireplace and a cat in every window. They were in love and it was a long walk home.

It was nearly dawn when they reached the cottage, and they gathered their baggage for the first ferry back to the mainland. "Are we married now?" the groom asked. She chewed on the stem of her sunglasses. "Oh yes," she said. They stood on the stern deck of the ferry and watched the island small into a low lie of sand on the horizon.

## Broken Leg

John I sed how'd you do that?  
It's none of your dam business  
if I fell off a loading chute  
and busted the little bone 2 inches  
from my ankle or I'd be crippled forever  
instead of just in a cast  
5 goddam weeks with 3d crop  
needing to be cut

you're posta ast if its anything  
you can do to hep out  
not stand there looking to see  
if its any blood showing  
go get on that swoker for me  
and cut Met Johnson's hay  
before he passes a conniption  
and has a spasm

it ain't that bad anyways  
back home this Landrum boy  
didn't have no luck with his leg  
run over it planting corn  
with a tractor 9 years old  
when he clumb off to see  
if the seeds was stringing out right  
i 3 places they sed  
and put a pin still there in it  
he busted it or the othern  
twicet more in the school  
on football and basedball  
one year and the next  
before he got in a car wreck  
with his daddy's pickup

calt his mama that night  
law sez your boy hes done hurt hissself  
she sed is he dead?

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law sez no but it cut his foot off almost  
a big piece off the side and toes  
she sed is it something he  
can bring home in a jar of pickled alcohol  
from the hospital?  
law sez no I don't think so  
I think its somewhars in that wreck  
we had to prize him loost  
that part stayed in  
she sed well thank the lard for that  
can he get home by hisself  
or do I have to come get him  
and start the car  
this late at night?

he's in a leg cast up to his knee  
for months on crutches  
so when it got bored  
he's shooting a waspnest with coaloil  
up in the shed eaves  
in a watergun  
here they come  
he forgot about that leg and foot  
took off running  
got half way crost the yard  
before his leg remembered  
the crutches by the shed door  
it all give out

his mama heard the kitchen screendoor  
turnt and he crawl in  
with a spraint ankle on the good leg  
and his knee out of socket on the othern dangling  
wasp bites all over his face  
and one up his nose swolt up  
like a pineapple  
she sed if its not one goddam thing  
its a dozen  
is it anything else busted?  
he said no maam I don't think so

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can you get to a chair by yourself  
she sed but not in here  
I'm snapping beans for supper  
go in the living room or somewhar  
you don't turn my stomach  
so he did

he didn't bust no more  
of his bones after that  
for a long time  
he got the faith and learnt his lesson

so before you go cut that hay  
would you look round  
brang me a fly swatter or clothes hanger  
unscrewed so I can get it down  
in my cast  
this sonofabitch has got a place  
if I don't itch I'll die  
I caint get to it  
I left the keys to the swoker  
on the kitchentable  
you can find them if you'll look  
on your way out  
because I sure do appreciate  
your offering to help out  
the sick and afflicted  
as your Christian duty.

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## Deaf

Clovis Walker had this uncle  
by marriage who went deaf  
when he was about 40  
they sed it was shooting firecrackers  
when he's a boy out of season  
but he sed they lied  
he only did it July too  
except for that one year  
when they fount them blasting caps  
it run in his family  
his daddy couldn't hear neither

when he's 52  
he was feeding this sow with pigs  
she whirlt round and bit  
half his hand off  
where he had a thumb  
and 2 fingers left  
she swallered the rest  
he sed he seen her smacking  
her lips on it  
couldn't hear a thang  
he always wondered  
if he could of heard  
mebbe he'd known she's gone  
bite them off like that  
grunting loud to scare him off  
but it wasn't no warning for him

so he was in his 60's  
forgot anybody else  
could hear either  
he'd set in his chair at night  
by the fireplace staring at it  
listening backwards to hissself  
rub that hand and say out loud  
that goddam sow. That goddam sow.

## **Black Dust**

He'd come up from a mile down,  
black dust,  
with just his eyes.  
He shot off six rounds every 4th of July.  
His name got changed  
two times from the other side  
to a southern general's.  
He was all crippled up,  
had the asthma.  
His boy walked out to the barn, and broke down.  
He saw the 50-foot chicken coop,  
the mules struck by lightning.

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## This

This is what I need to do:  
let my hands develop brains.  
Two extra hearts like an octopus.  
There's no failing.

## The Sleeper

Under his eyelid,  
a pale green Giant Anemone  
closes around one finger

the circular muscle of its tentacled vagina.  
Aunt Nancy tells back  
what he told her.

A jellyfish like a torn condom  
floats by, edges dissolving.  
His father—

hair silver in subsurface light,  
combed by the wash of deep upwellings—  
rides by, all in black

in his black Model T.  
Roustabouts throw in devils and Christs  
helter-skelter. Something

the sleeper can't see  
goes by. He tries  
to catch it. Its claw,

like a turquoise crab's, breaks off.  
He's left holding  
a pencil. Prophet drunk

in the pulpit hollers a sermon;  
drunk on a fossil hill  
above the drowned city,

the sleeper  
pushes graphite down a sea-turtle's  
carapace. A face—his mother's—

cleanly peeled off in autopsy,  
lifts in the groundswell. The tide  
like a crab backs out.

All the words  
follow the big fish to hide  
in kelp forest. Foam sinks

into sand. The mind dries,  
catches its breath, rises.  
He walks up the path

toward the beach cafe,  
the shops, an office so high in a swaying tower  
it's lost in smog's brown water.

## Oyster House

At the Jumawid Oyster House,  
shuckers came outside  
in their soiled  
leather aprons,  
stared at the Dream Palace  
bar with its open door  
and third-rate bands.  
A heat haze on the street.  
Rubbed-out cigarettes.  
Soon they went back,  
cracked  
each mudcrusted shell.  
The curled  
gray lip  
slipped out,  
bitter  
lump free  
in its wet  
contraction,  
then packed  
in hard ice.

I stood on my shadowy  
porch. Frenchmen Street.  
New Orleans.  
Watched their  
strong hands glisten.  
I was a wife  
with a prayer to Erzulie,  
goddess of oyster dirt,  
in my heart.

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Back in that city  
of mildewed air  
and gnarled tree trunks,  
there's a stone  
somewhere with a date,  
a time,  
and my name on it.  
A sequined heart  
pierced by an arrow.  
A few drops of blood.

*Joel-Peter Witkin*

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"Portrait of a Dwarf," 1987  
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 15"x15"



"Woman On a Table," 1987  
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 15"x15"



"Harvest," 1984  
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 15"x15"



"Woman In The Blue Hat," 1985  
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 15"x15"

## **The Retirement Community**

My husband is afraid of the dark. He says that when he goes out after dark the darkness swallows him, enveloping him. He says it is like the force of too many G's, and he feels pressure on all sides, a suction and a giant gravity, breaking his eardrums, trying to crush him and trying to lure him deeper in.

So he stays in at night. He says he is all right as long as he's in the house. He can even turn out the lights without fear of the dark, though turning out the lights brings on other fears. But he has to keep the darkness inside separate from the darkness outside. I have put curtains on all the windows, even the kitchen windows, and as night comes on he goes about the house closing them.

He loathes sunsets. He can't bear to watch dusk settle in. He says it drives him mad, that the light fades and every familiar object is drowned in darkness, even his own car standing in the yard under the trees.

We watch television, we play cards. We go to bed early. But if he gets a glimpse of the night—if a curtain blows open, or I thoughtlessly open the door too wide to let the dog in—if a patch of blackness assails his eyes, then he is overcome with shaking, and sometimes he weeps. Then I turn on every light and go with him into the smallest bedroom, that has just one window, and let him sit with his back against the wall and my arms around him. In time he recovers.

He is not the man I married.

He won't pass in front of a mirror without turning on a light. When I get up at night, I walk down the hall in the dark, finding my way to the bathroom with no trouble. I could get around this house if I were blind and never make a false step. But he turns on the bedside lamp; he flips on the light in the hall; and when he gets to the bathroom he reaches his hand inside to turn on the light, and only then goes in. It's because of the mirror; he won't look at a mirror in the dark.

When I was a girl, we played a party game with mirrors: you put something white on your head, a scarf, and held a lighted candle, and stood in front of a mirror. At exactly midnight, the face of your future husband would appear over your left shoulder. I

never tried it. There were never enough mirrors for more than a couple of girls, and I wasn't popular.

That doesn't explain my husband's fear, though the idea of someone else's face appearing beside yours in the glass *is* eery. Or of someone's face *not* appearing. My husband once told me that if a vampire came up behind you while you looked in a mirror, it wouldn't be reflected; you would never know it was there until you turned around.

Don't get me wrong, we live a normal life. Of course, we no longer walk the dog late at night, down the sandy road through the pines past the sleeping cottages to the sea. It used to be one of our favorite walks, the walk at night, when hardly anyone else was out; they were inside in front of televisions glowing blue against pine-panelled walls. Or if we did meet someone on the road, they passed swiftly, saying only "Hello" or "Nice night" and vanishing into the darkness. There was a sense of creatures in the woods, little furry things, raccoons with inquisitive fingers peering out at us; skunks on the verge of lifting their tails, if we ventured off our path. We kept the dog on a leash, and he felt it, too, that he was forbidden the woods at night; and down toward the beach we strolled, the dog and my husband and I, keeping to the middle of the sandy road and looking without longing into the bright windows of the houses we passed.

One still night, the crickets one steady drone so that you only heard them if you thought of them, a night with no wind; early autumn, still hot in the days but cool in the darkness under the pines at night; we walked down the road toward the sea and had rounded the final bend when the ocean's roar hit us, as if it were thundering up the road to meet us. "Oh, listen!" I said, thrilled, sure that a moon was rising out of the sea, and eager to stand with the cold sand under my feet and watch the waves gleam silver. But my husband stood still, and then said, "Well, dear, let's go back, it's a little too loud." And it was such a surprise that I turned at once and walked back with him, and I had to tug at the dog, who was surprised and expected to keep going.

We never did go down again at night, the three of us. Once or twice when we walked that way my husband stopped at the bend in the road and turned back, saying he was tired, he would meet us at home; and I went down to the beach and stood in the sand while the dog raced back and forth, sniffing, along the high water

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line. But it was not quite right for one, and the moon never seemed full or bright but rather wispy. I walked back up the road, past the houses of our neighbors, who were safe inside, and when I got to my house my husband had turned on every light and was standing in the doorway, waiting—he wasn't afraid of the dark then, not yet—and the sound of the TV poured out all around him. I felt sorry then, and after that I would turn around with him before we reached the bend in the road where the sound of the ocean came roaring up like a flesh-eating creature. The dog soon got used to the new routine, and would stop automatically, before we did, and never expected to go to the beach at night any more.

So for a long time we just had shorter walks, and I forgot how strange it had seemed that my husband no longer wanted to hear the ocean at night. Winter came on, and the beach would have been too cold; summer, and the dog was banned until Labor Day. I hardly thought of our changed pattern. I really hardly thought of my husband at all, except in the normal way: what he'd like for lunch, whether he'd like a shirt I'd found on sale in the village, whether he had a temperature when he lay sick in bed with the flu.

Then one evening as we walked down the sandy road he started talking about the houses. We live in a resort community, and while most of our neighbors are retirees, like us, who live here year round, many of the houses belong to summer people who come in July and leave by September, or come down for weekends into early fall and leave their cottages dark and empty all winter. One night my husband said it was a crime to leave houses empty. It got so cold inside, he said, and the windows were so blank and dark, like sunglasses with no eyes behind them, like eyes with no irises. Too dark, he said. Too cold and closed. Not even any smell to them, and they were unnaturally silent. He said he hated to pass them.

So then we only walked as far as the end of the paved part of the road, just a few houses down from us. It's on the paved road that most of the year round residents live, and the houses we passed were all bright inside, all with lamps lit and cars standing ready in the yards. Smoke came out of chimneys, the smell of burning pine and oak was in the air, and since people never close their curtains here we could look in and see what they were doing. The

widow would be reading in her favorite armchair; the one-armed man would be watching huge helmeted heads crashing around his television screen; the fat couple would be playing cards, or sitting together in front of the fire. I thought it was comforting to see through those lighted windows, our neighbors like little dioramas inside. It made me remember visiting a museum once, when I was young, and seeing a life-sized Victorian street with gas lights and cobblestones and a sweet shop, and a horse-drawn carriage forever coming around the corner, with a lady in it, and a big wax gentleman lifting his hat to her forever.

But my husband must have seen something else in those bright windows; before long I noticed that he never strolled past any more, gazing in from the darkness, but hurried by, looking down at his feet, or watching the white blur that was the dog just ahead of us at the end of the leash. Our evening walks became very rapid as we rushed past our neighbors to where the pavement ended and the sand began winding down through the woods, and we wheeled around and came racing back, hardly giving the poor dog time to sniff at the bushes along the way. And when my husband stopped one night at the house of the one-armed man I was afraid, so I stood very tense, waiting for him to move on. He stared at the one-armed man's house, at the sunporch, where in summer the man watched TV or played Chinese checkers with his grandsons. It was dark now in winter, and closed up, and the door from the porch into the rest of the house was closed and through it came the light from the television. He stood so long that the dog lay down in the road. I touched my husband's arm and he turned toward me and said, "Why do people have rooms they don't use?"

Just that was all he said, and we went on toward home, but I was made very afraid by the way he said it, standing with his hands hanging at his sides and looking at me in the dark and asking it, as if he hadn't a clue. And I didn't know. I gave him some foolish answer, or laughed, and held onto his arm as we hurried home, but all the way I was wondering why? and why didn't I know?

The next night I took the dog out myself, and I walked in the other direction, up toward the highway where there is an all-night store with a bright parking lot. Since then that is the walk I take at night, leaving my husband at home in front of the television, and

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I walk very quickly to the front of the road and back.

So that is how we live. We go out by day—my husband is up at dawn, the trees full of birds, and often the night animals still ambling through the yard after a night of rooting through damp dark soil for those things that live underground without eyes. My husband is up and out of his bed before the first rays of sun strike the mirror above my chest of drawers. He is listening to the Morning Concert on the radio, and he has had his tea, and he is walking around the yard filling the bird feeder or poking around the compost heap or the garden before I even throw off the blanket and put my feet over the side of the bed. He has no trouble with daylight.

We come inside before the sky has lost its color, like hermit crabs pulling their vulnerable appendages into their shells, and we close the curtains and avoid the dusk. There is nothing to worry about as long as I keep the darkness away from my husband. He is really fine, quite normal, as long as none of the curtains blows open in a breeze, as long as the dog comes in quickly from the yard. Night descends and we are quite cozy, the two of us, watching TV or playing cards or both, the card table pulled up in front of the television set and the sound turned up loud enough so we don't have to strain to hear it, and plenty of light to see by. We play cards, and talk, and laugh quite often; and then we go to bed early, so as to rise fresh in the morning when the sun first comes up.

We are happy, of course; but he is not the man I married. Fear of darkness, for heaven's sake! I wouldn't have thought *that*, so many years ago, when we made any excuse to stay out under the moon. Still, I suppose I am not the woman he married either, no matter how I seem to myself. Sometimes after we go to bed, and the lights are out, I listen to him snore, and I lie awake, it seems sometimes, all night. Here in this community where we live, far from any large city or even the lights of the nearby village, with our neighbors sleeping in the houses around us, I close my eyes, and open them, and see no difference. See nothing. I could be stone blind and never know it till the birds begin to sing. Even then it might seem just noises in the night: night birds, or crickets, or the whistles and shrills that ride and gather in my husband's snoring. I might never know which sounds are which, whether I heard them in this house in the bed next to mine, or outside in the

trees, or in my own blind head that would never see daylight again. And with one sense gone, would the others change? At night, in blackness, things do change shape, and I will think I am lying facing the space between my husband's bed and mine, and I move my hand and hit the wall and discover that all the time I have been facing the other direction, and the room spins and shifts while my mind fits itself properly into my body again.

For all I know, my husband sees more clearly than I do, and is right to draw the curtains against the darkness. There may be other things that the one-armed man, and the widow, do to keep from losing their senses, that I know nothing about. I suppose we all do things according to our own lights. When our neighbor died of cancer we all trooped down with casseroles and muffins, and talked to the daughters that came home, and we went to the church and then back to the house, where his wife, who is the widow now, broke down, and another woman and I sat with her while she wept. Now she sits alone where once someone sat near her. What happens to her at night, when everything is swallowed in darkness, and she turns out her reading lamp and lies in the dark, I don't know.

For myself, I lie waiting for sleep or light, whichever comes first. Last night something struck me as I waited, and that was that I should close the windows, in case a breeze might blow open a curtain and let in the darkness that my husband fears. And the thought grew, even though I said to myself that it was foolish, that in the dark, asleep, he'd never know. But then whether he knew or not didn't seem to be the point; and I thought perhaps it had fallen to me just to make sure; that that was one of my tasks. And I got up and went from room to room shutting windows, never bumping a lamp or table in the dark, I know this house so well. I thought that was proof, then, that I was doing the right thing, that nothing got in my way, or fell, or clattered; the only noise was the sound of window after window being lowered against a possible breeze in the night.

I lay satisfied and slept.

This morning I woke to sunlight, and went out into the kitchen, where my husband stood with his tea, looking out the window, his breakfast dishes washed and lying in the drainboard. The window he looked through was still closed, and as I opened it I saw him looking at me from behind his raised teacup.

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"I thought a breeze might come up in the night," I said, and he nodded, and smiled, and leaned forward to kiss me good morning. And I kissed him back, and went around the house opening the rest of the windows, for the days are still warm, and he had left them for me to open.

And though it seems a bit silly, this time of year, to sleep with every window down and not a breath of air in the house, still I think I will close them again tonight, for there's still the chance of a breeze, and I remember how last night it preyed on my mind, in the dark, until I got up and closed them all, and after that I slept.

And, after all, it is with a sense of power that I take my husband's hand and retreat, putting up the barricades, knowing what to do to keep the darkness at bay. We live well here, in this community. The house is very bright, warm, all the lamps lit.

## **In the Ruins of Fort Abraham Lincoln**

On clear winter afternoons near sunset  
as one walks the reconstructed catwalk  
the 7th Cavalry built on the bluff, the distance

becomes transparent, and it is easy  
to see all the world to the west  
as far as the sharply cut horizon.

The colors of life are simplified,  
the old cruelties and shame reduced  
to elegant fields of white

across the ice-glossed surface of the river.  
Still, not quite everything lies buried.  
A line of wooden fence posts stitches

the white brow of a ridge. A shelter belt  
and farm house, a twisting strand of smoke—  
there is a small clarity about

the little things. And when the last  
low sunlight lengthens across the fallow  
winter wheatfields and catches bunchgrass

leaning in a ditch, when the stems  
glow with a definite inner light  
and together with their shadows

scratch a thin gold and blue cyrillic  
on the drifts, it is possible  
to see how widely this life missed

the life it meant to be.

## The Blue Mouse

from *Premonitions of Death by Cancer—5 Dreams*

has been gnawing the interior  
of a kitchen wall for weeks.  
Your wife and yourself hear  
its claws scratching furiously  
across boards, raising tiny clouds  
of dust from the sheet rock,  
like a sculptor inscribing  
the inside of the house's skin  
with an invisible, endless  
frieze. Each time it begins,  
you joke about its "pea-brained"  
obsession, the attraction  
to light through wall cracks,  
stove smells. One morning  
you hear your wife scream,  
in the kitchen find her  
standing paralyzed, the mouse  
reared up on its hind legs  
in the center of the floor,  
fur glowing cerulean.  
"Whatever I shove down its mouth,  
it swallows," you're surprised  
to hear yourself explain.  
Your wife's eyes fixate  
upon you. You've never seen  
such horror in her face.

## Film Seen in an Easter Confection

The black crotch of trees limb out  
and fool their green watchers of light towards  
the campus bell atoning our deepest sins.  
An easter egg view that cracks open a kinder's bedroom story,  
warrants this bench beneath these trees.  
Each tree breaks by the fine line.  
A lady with a large dog brings a wolf into the scene  
and a forest ensues.  
A bicyclist carries an Asian parasol  
and the dog pursues, barking at wheel spokes.  
Out of all these trees that crack the ceiling, none  
penetrate the blue.  
I like the warm bath an egg can give.

In the center, a goethe-like pine tells,  
"This is what I do in the face of my century.  
On the left, my relative acacia is too big for giraffes,  
she fingers the library's north view. Lime-green  
she's tasteless to the construction crane  
and waves as ghosts wish their ephemera would take.  
Struck by lightning and split open, our half-an-uncle  
is a triad in limbs burnt black. His scar takes delight  
in thin, white-green branches splaying as bamboo feathers.  
We change, the eggs dividing."  
It must be an accident or a leap of faith  
that eggs are bought, broken,  
or hatched. I drop one  
and sugar cane mountains the floor.

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## The Split Bow

Strange storm these days.  
An early heat from way back has brought it on.  
I'm writing like it will save me  
from my days.

My heart echoes for a machine  
blood flow showing itself as color on a digital screen,  
jelly and electrode proof of this adult  
but I'm still sitting in the fields  
counting last seconds in vision.

Easter, the grasses went wild.  
What's involuntary I don't trust  
even as it moves over me, this thickness  
turning the world into an egg, crackable.

I'm told this is memory,  
a few years ago cloud-like, now gaining weight.  
The body forces me down  
and my will frightens open the chambers  
for the crows. There is no winning.  
I brought two children to this world,  
like a bow across the knee grief splits  
the heart, now I must get home.

Wednesday, which comfort to choose —  
to watch the pine tree tops  
or attend to the off-pink, fleshy stucco  
of the adjacent building. I wait  
until walking into the library  
is not a challenge but everyday action.

I think if I were at a microscope, my field of vision  
would be narrowed, the distance between  
the microscope world and the office telephone  
or kitchen table would accommodate transition.

But lack of focus  
or too large a focus  
gives way to lack of transition  
to this middle world where fear  
acts as gravity on this light body.  
How far back does memory go?

At last I'm gardening, planting purple flowers  
with my son. And the storm comes, lightning as arrow,  
cracks breaking the sky into sound, heart beats away.  
Life can be hallucination.  
The cat is out of the bag for good.

## Polar Bear

He woke at three-thirty, beaded with sweat. Something in the dream had frightened him awake. Hard to believe he'd actually slept.

He buried his face in the clammy pillow. Screw it. He needed a shower. He needed to think.

Mama said he always put things off. Well, yeah. He slid out of his jockeys and went into the bathroom, not looking directly at what was propped between the luggage caddy and wall. Even so he could see the ropes cinched at the top, like a duffle.

He got the water temperature right. The shower was new, strange considering the way The Waldorf was falling apart. He'd stayed here when it was nice. Sign in the lobby offered half-price weekends, free champagne. A card in the room advertised "Juice, Sweet Roll & Coffee, Only \$3.00 — Delivered to *Your Room*." Jesus.

He turned on the water and looked at the tub, shiny as ice. He scrunched his toes into the bathmat, flexed his knees and clenched his fists as if he was going to jump in. Crazy as a loon! he said aloud. He felt the water again. He closed the curtain and slipped around it into the tub.

He had to figure what to do with that bag.

He should have ordered breakfast and left before the waiter came. Let the waiter find the fucking sack. He soaped his armpits and held his arms up to rinse. He wouldn't run. People who ran irritated Willy. Somehow the bag connected with Willy.

Things had been wrong a couple of days. Iris had looked at him like he had AIDS. Big John and Looge were sounding funny. Willy'd said, Check in The Waldorf, I'll call you.

Not like Willy.

He'd checked in and then gone to St. Pat's. Father Mullin gave him the "Me bye, where've you been?" crap. But he saw Paul McCoy, he'd played ball with a couple of others.

One beer at Sorley's, back to the Waldorf by eleven. Found what he found. Like a mail sack. Jesus, somebody's terrific sense of humor.

He'd put DO NOT DISTURB on the knob. Unless they had someone coming to call no matter what, he had until morning.

Until the maid going "Knock knock knock, maid service, just checking." The goddamn maids loved it.

He twisted the shower head. He turned his back, moved his shoulders and neck into it. Then he stepped back and turned around and around. He twisted fast when the water stung into his groin.

Scrub-a-dub-dub. He changed the showerhead setting and tried to open the packet of shampoo. Jesus. He couldn't tear it open. He bit it with his teeth and tore it with his fingers. He shampooed, rinsed, then rinsed again.

Like Mama said, he put things off. Something lumpy he didn't want out there in the bedroom. A sack of the U.S. Mail. Or U.S. Female, probably. Anybody Willy'd let deliver it, Looge or Big John, 'd do it right. Like he always tried to do it Willy's way.

Probably it was Iris in the sack. He smiled. Well, she deserved it, in a way, horsing around with Willy watching. Her knowing Willy hated it. "Don't get mad, get even!" That was Willy.

He soaped his body again, then rinsed. He put his face in the spray and shook sideways, blowing into it. He turned the water temperature low, then lower, lower, lower until it was fucking freezing.

Jesus! he said, and got out. He remembered another shock of cold, being unable to breathe. When he was eight his real uncle, Ralph, who ran numbers and a couple girls, flew him to Duluth, Minnesota, to make him a Polar Bear. You jump in a hole in the ice. January thirty-one, in Lake Superior, for Christ's sake! Duck all the way under, you're a Polar Bear.

That was Uncle Ralph. Hear about something, say What the hell! and do it. He knew before he jumped it was going to be terrible. The men pulled him out after he ducked, dried him and wrapped him in blankets. The men drank peppermint schnaps in coffee. They offered him the coffee. He'd of drunk plain schnaps. Jesus, Uncle Ralph! It was his uncle introduced him to Willy. Gave him his goddamn start in life. Well, what are uncles for?

He toweled hard, starting under his arms. Get dry in the pits, his good grandmother said, you feel warm all over. He remembered the Polar Bears laughing and the smell of their schnaps.

So, nice shower, it's four a.m., what the fuck to do? He wished he were eight again. Maybe Ralph'd come up with another

brilliant idea. Go on, jump, Ralph had yelled. It'll make you a man!

Man! He wanted to be a kid, face big terrible problems like jumping into ice water. Not what to do with a body in a sack. The first thing you think is run. You run on Willy, he finds you anywhere on the fucking globe and punishes you extra.

It was Iris in the sack, for sure. She wasn't too old, and Willy wasn't much of a stickman any more. Willy'd sent Iris in the bag. Thinking it was him been sticking it to Iris. It probably was that.

Somebody'd been sticking Iris, but not him. Not his type, man. Too icy, too cool. No, he never had. Never would now, if what he knew was in the bag was in the bag. The bathroom light framed it. Something that sparkled last weekend, dead meat tonight. Willy'd had her diced. Thought it was Iris and him been screwing. Why Willy'd had him check in The Waldorf. "Check in, I'll call you."

He had to do something. Doing nothing would be the last thing he'd do. He crossed off out the window. Cops had that figured down to how many guys had thrown the body and how much drift to allow for wind.

Haul it to the service elevator, send it to the basement?

Jesus, there had to be a town some goddamn where where Willy wouldn't find him.

Or call the cops, he'd seen in a movie: Hello, fuzz? There's something might interest you at The Waldorf, room one-four-three-two?

What would it take, get Massialis to haul it away? Aaaah, Massialis wouldn't fart without cash up front.

Any deal with cops is worst. You're breaking the oath and Willy's people will do things to everyone you ever talked to.

Calling Willy and begging? Better: Sure, him and Iris had horsed around, nothing ever happened. Swear it on my Mama, Willy. Give you fingers, my hand, you think I lie. He almost made the call, but at four a.m. he wouldn't get through. Willy slept good. He might reach Willy at eight.

Jesus. He could be ruined forever by this, or dead from it. Jumping through a hole in the ice was a picnic compared to this.

The phone rang.

He beaded with sweat. Ring. Ring. He looked at his watch, blinking sweat: four-ten. Eight rings before it quit. Naked, he

pulled on his pants, grabbed the room key, went into the hall and walked left, then right to the service elevator. It was running, four-fucking-ten-a.m.!

He walked fast back to his room, went in, thinking for a second someone had stood the canvas bag taller.

He took off his pants, put on his jockeys and pulled his pants on again. He walked softly to the door, yanked it open. Anyone there, he would dive out into the hall where at least the guy might think twice. Nothing. He closed the door and slid the safety chain into its collar.

He'd hardly moved when he heard something outside. He ducked into a crouch and stepped into the hallway, half expecting a burn. But a guy would think about it, burning him out in the hall, even the Waldorf.

Twenty yards to the right some guy with his back to him pulling a suitcase on rollers. The guy turned. Too noisy? the guy whispered. I wake you? Sorry if I woke you, buddy, he said hoarsely, like it was a joke.

You some friend of Willy's?

The guy shook his head and looked at his key. 1428, he whispered. Right here. He opened the door, went in, and closed the door.

He listened, figuring the guy in 1428 was listening. Looked more like a dentist than a hit man. He stood still a minute, then slid the chain lock into place and turned back into his room.

He went to the phone, poked O. You just checked someone in on fourteen? he said, once the clerk said Desk.

Who are you looking for? the clerk said. The party's name?

Bear, he said. B-E-A-R. Just a guy I thought I knew.

We had a check-in on 14, but no Bear, the clerk said. A salesman stays with us almost every week.

Nobody checked in you don't know? he said.

Not since about two, the clerk said. Maybe a couple of girls going up to visit some boyfriend.

Someone knocked. His heart flopped.

You send someone here now? he whispered into the phone.

I what? the clerk said.

You send someone to 1432?

Not unless you called Room Service, the clerk said.

I called nobody, he said. He put the phone down.

---

He was pulling on his t-shirt when the knock came again. He went to the door and stood to the side. Who is it?

Room Service.

I don't have any room service.

This is an order from someone else. No voice he knew.

I'll bet, he thought. What you got there?

The Sweetheart Snack? Champagne, crackers, cheese.

Just put it there by the door, ok? I got no clothes on. What's your name, I'll catch you later on the tip.

It's ok.

He heard a little slosh of ice, a soft grunt. Then footsteps, fading down the hall. Elevator doors open and close. Nothing: you could be inside or out once it closed. He slid the chain and cracked the door. Nobody. The tray with a bucket, a plate of Ritz crackers in a circle, two cheeses and a spreader. He looked down the hall, knelt, pulled the tray inside and closed the door.

He caught the chain inside its collar. He was wet. Christ, he'd just showered. He put the tray on the desk and used the last towel to wipe his face, forearms and hands.

It wasn't like Willy to booby-trap champagne. But who knew what Willy'd do. He found the number and dialed Room Service.

A broad. You just send something to 1432? he said.

I took the order. What do you need?

You happen to know who ordered this?

The woman on the card, she said.

He said, Thanks. The woman on the card, for Christ's sake. That meant Iris. Maybe he should open the mail bag, check who's inside.

The card. Plain as a turd in vanilla, once you look. He pulled the card from the envelope. Golden print at the top said Congratulations! In ink someone had written, It's time we got together. P.S. Answer your phone.

He was dripping. Iris'd know he was here. It was Willy in the bag. He wiped his face and walked to the bag. He wrapped the tie cords around his right hand and lifted. The cords dug into his hand. Heavy enough. Let's say it's Willy, he thought. Iris gets Looge to bag him and deliver him.

Why, for Christ's sake?

The phone rang.

Why? he thought again. He answered on the third ring.

Yeah, he said.

You get some champagne?

Iris. She sounded a little out of it, but it was her. Yeah, champagne and crackers. And a real nice bag. You shouldn't have gone to the trouble.

I heard someone sent you a bag, Iris said. Don't worry about the bag.

Just don't worry about it, right?

Yeah. Just try the champagne. Listen, she whispered, I want to see you.

Maybe I'll just drink the champagne, he said.

It should be good, Iris said. It's the Sweetheart Special.

So what are we, Sweethearts?

Get over here for some breakfast, Iris said. You'll see what we are.

That like a order or a invitation? he said.

Hey, schmuck, read the card. It's the Sweetheart Special, Iris said.

Yeah, well I'm thinking about this bag?

Leave the goddam bag, Iris said. Somebody's sick joke.

You want to say who somebody is? He wiped his face. Iris didn't say anything. Well, I could eat some breakfast, but I won't enjoy it a lot with this bag, here. My name on the register? Prints all over the goddam room?

Oh baby, Iris said, don't worry, ok? The room clerk wants to work for us. The fucking maintenance man is married to Looge's first cousin.

He didn't say anything.

Listen, really, Jojo'll pick you up 8 sharp, outside. OK?

He didn't say anything.

Jojo, the spade drives my Caddy? Get over here. I really want to see you.

You know all about this bag here? he said.

He was an asshole, Iris said. Forget him.

Ok, he said. I'll be out front. He wondered about her and her Jojo.

He tapped the O and left a call for 7:30. Sometime before the wake-up call, someone knocked. It's ok, the voice said. Looge. Let me in. Willy wants a word or two.

---

Willy wasn't in the bag? He opened the door a crack. Looge was alone. What time is it? he asked Looge. I thought it was Willy here in the bag.

Oh, that, Looge said. You noticed the bag.

What do you really want? he said. What the fuck's going on?

Willy wants to talk to you. He looked. Looge was serious.

Who's in the bag?

Get your shit on, Looge said. You can ask Willy.

I told Mama I'd come for breakfast, he said.

You better come, Looge said. You want to keep Willy waiting this early?

They went out through the lobby. Like standing at the edge of the big hole in the ice. Big John was driving, Willy in back, the door open.

Ok, kid, glad to see you, Willy said. Willy sure was alive.

You want to see me? he said, feeling stupid.

Ok, kid, the thing is I'm a jealous man.

I know that, Willy.

I pretty much hung around one broad eleven goddamn years, ok, so I figure she's pretty much my broad. Like we're married. How's that so far?

I know about you and Iris, he said.

So some guy fucks with my broad, you think I feel good, or what?

He wished he could see Big John's hands. I never did nothing, he said. I swear on my mother.

Now that may be true. You think it's true, Looge?

Looge stared.

Big John, what do you think? Willy was real calm.

It could be true, Willy. Big John shrugged.

But your family, kid. Your fucking uncle! Big John here has to pick your fucking uncle off my broad. How do you think I feel, I know your fucking uncle is fucking my broad.

It was Uncle Ralph in the bag.

Very angry, is how I feel.

That asshole uncle! Willy's face relaxed. Big John, give him the present.

He thought Big John would burn him then from the front. Big John picked up a package off the front seat, got out, walked

around the limo, and handed him a canvas sack tied with a red ribbon.

Maybe this don't run in the family, Willy said. But kid, I seen Iris and you horsing around. I don't want to see nothing like that again.

He had to jump or run. I never saw Iris except you were there, Willy. Actually —

Hey! Willy said softly. Don't tell me about my broad, ok? That bag there with the ribbon is yours. You fuck around you'll wear it.

Willy looked into his face. You think you can still work for me?

He looked at the folded bag, like the one upstairs. He was wet again, and cold. I understand this, Willy. I can work with you. Since Ralph —

Forget Ralph, kid, Willy said. I like you better'n him anyway. Iris's cream Caddy pulled alongside. Why's Jojo here? Looge asked.

Ask him, Willy said. Jojo lowered the window.

Jojo, what you doing? Looge asked.

Taking the kid to Iris's, Jojo said without hesitation.

He floated in the air over the hole.

No shit, Willy said. Well listen, Jojo, you get yourself a cup of coffee, take your time, we'll run him over.

That's cool, Jojo said, and pulled away.

His head all the way under water.



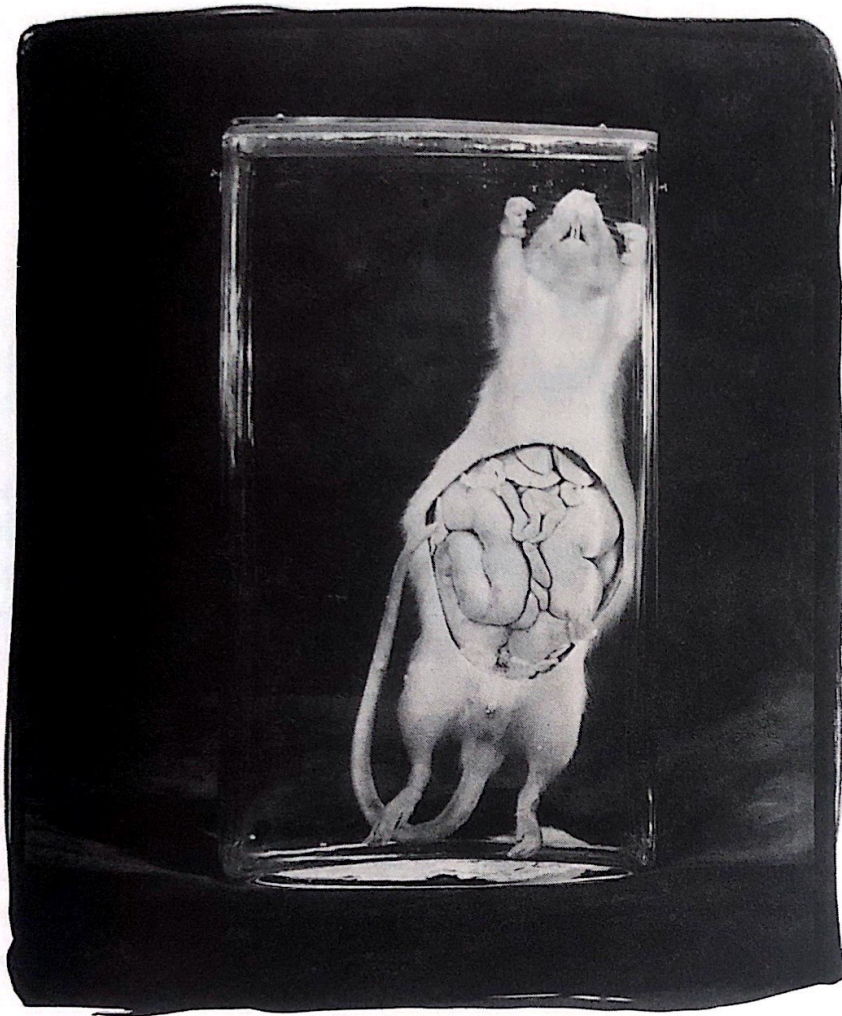
"Deer Head and Antlers," 1986  
Platinum Print, 20"x24"



"White Pelican," 1986  
Platinum Print, 20"x24"



"Sliced Head #2," 1986  
Platinum Print, 24"x20"



"Wistar Rat," 1986  
Platinum Print, 24"x20"

## **The Admirers of Vasko Popa**

The wolf on the street corner  
Reeking of salmon  
Playing Bach on an ocarina.

The artificial heart  
Placed in the dishwasher  
Beside the jelly jar.

The bald tire  
Rolling through the field  
Of land mines.

The blue pencil  
Tracing the bone where a tap  
Stops the heart.

**Eagle. Tiger. Whale.**

I'm old enough to stand,  
 a boy looking at himself  
 in the long mirror of a chifforobe,  
 Black child with sandy hair  
 tightly curled, hazel eyes.  
 I haven't learned the words,  
 I photograph everything into my cells:  
 my little yellow dress with puffed pleated shoulders  
 and my little pearl buttons;  
 my little high-topped white shoes with yellow socks;  
 my little blue ribbon somewhere.  
 The room behind me is dark,  
 nothing in the mirror but me  
 as in a spotlight, yet I feel her presence,  
 my 17-year-old mother, beautiful,  
 leaning somewhere behind me.

No one can explain what I've seen, a slim Black woman lying on her back, red geyser pumping from her open mouth, she stares into the ceiling's yellow eye. I see her from her right, the foot of the brass bed, my head three feet high. Somebody screams "Lord God Lord God he done shot the woman" while the soft splash, splash. I stand so calm, seeing, until somebody yells "Git that chile outta here." Who knows who knows how I got there from next door, visiting Aunt Annie over in Gadsden, for neither mother nor father is there to tell me "Forget it."

*don't tell don't*

*tell* James Albert's sister whispers in the dim coal shed.  
 She has hair everywhere,  
 the only subject, verb, object, adverb  
 I can put together.  
 It's my birthday, I come to her yard  
 to pick figs from their tree. James Albert's  
 daddy said I can, I pull a fig,  
 she whispers "don't tell, don't tell,"  
 I feel my hand disappear into the hot full-noon mouth

---

of Alabama's summer solstice,  
lips, lips, tongue curling around, probing  
the fruit from my paralyzed fist.  
She changes my hands from left to right,  
leaves me partially ambidextrous and stuttering  
to describe it.

Now that I've read a lot,  
I've learned boxes of "reflection," "homicide," "initiation"  
to put visions into,  
just as we have done with *eagle tiger whale god*  
with handles and edges to finger,  
perfect and seamless,  
not letting anything out, not trying to break in.  
But there is that boy who can still do this:  
In the Zaire rain forest a snow leopard like a ghost leaps  
and with its perfect knives  
slices open this box I've made.

---

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lips, lips, tongue curling around, probing  
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slices open this box I've made.

## Occupied Territory

He reaches to the end  
of his fingertips and touches  
the splintered side  
of an abandoned house.

No furniture, no drapes,  
just the unfaded patches  
pictures once covered:

infant, seashore,  
mother, warrior.

Two boards with nails pried loose  
boost him—a deep sill  
receives his elbows, his breath  
a circle of light. Inside

an unveiled woman  
dances to the strains of a green piano,  
its keyboard open and oiled.

Her lover peppers  
a choice delicacy, made from scratch:  
his padded mitts hold out

a hot covered dish.

                                He cautions  
his love not to lift the lid.  
When she does, the aroma  
of a fine wild stew steams  
her face.

---

In the dish  
not one hangnail mars  
his exquisite patchwork  
of hands, some calloused,  
some grasping,  
                    some still clenched,

longing to strike the muted chord  
of the dispossessed.

---

## Hunting Scorpions

My parents were both alive then,  
no divorce,  
so we spent cool November  
hunting scorpions in the Rincons

turning rocks with our sneaker toes, checking  
with twisted off greasewood switches  
first the darker upturned faces of stone,  
then the sandy rock shallows. We whisked

fuzzy seedpods over the moistness,  
hunting the striped or tan little hook  
of poison  
curled over.

We'd scoop them up into Dixie cups  
and walk them level back to camp,  
back to the circle of rock we'd set  
hemming in paper plates and dry mesquite

that gave us back  
our fingers, chilled to curls.  
The scorpions would scramble  
against the steep daffodils

waxing the sides of the cup,  
so we'd calm them with a glug  
or two of beer. Once Gin  
floated hers, damn near got stung

before it drowned. Mostly, we  
squished the sippy cup between two  
firepit rocks, and watched.  
Most of the beer left

---

in a huff. The scorpion  
caught a clawhold on the seam  
and clambered up.

For a moment, it wavered, twitching,

then the edge of the cup  
clenched in on itself, petals  
pressing back to the bulb,  
the trapped one ticking inside.

## Without Safety: Writing Nonfiction

This essay, "Without Safety: Writing Nonfiction," is taken from a talk given at the Sandhills Writers Conference in Augusta, Georgia, in the spring of 1989, where I read, before beginning the talk, Joy Williams' essay, "Save the Whales, Screw the Shrimp," to illustrate various points of the talk about nonfiction—about good, or great nonfiction—but because of space limitations, for this essay I have only excerpted from Williams' essay. "Save the Whales, Screw the Shrimp" appeared in the February 1989 issue of *Esquire*, and should be read in its entirety, must be read, please read it—February 1989, *Esquire*. It's a truly phenomenal essay, and shows brilliantly and heart-breakingly all that nonfiction can hope to do, all that it can achieve.

*I don't want to talk about me of course, writes Joy Williams, but it seems as though far too much attention has been lavished on you lately—that your greed and vanities and quest for self-fulfillment have been catered to far too much. You just want and want and want. You haven't had a mandala dream since the '80s began. To have a mandala dream you'd have to instinctively know that it was an attempt at self-healing on the part of Nature, and you don't believe in Nature anymore. It's too isolated from you. You've abstracted it. It's so messy and damaged and sad. Your eyes glaze as you travel life's highway past all the crushed animals and the Big Gulp cups. You don't even take pleasure in looking at nature photographs these days. Oh, they can be just as pretty, as always, but don't they make you feel increasingly . . . anxious? (I have to leave some of the essay out here, and then pick back up again, for reasons of space: but you must read this essay).*

*. . . Hidden from immediate view in the butterfly-bright meadow, in the dusky thicket, in the oak and holly wood, are the surveyors' stakes, for someone wants to build a mall exactly there—some gas stations and supermarkets, some pizza and video shops, a health club, maybe a bulimia treatment center. Those lovely pictures of leopards and herons and wild rivers, well, you just know they're going to be accompanied by a text that will*

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*serve only to bring you down. You don't want to think about it! It's all so uncool. And you don't want to feel guilty either. Guilt is uncool. Regret maybe you'll consider. Maybe. Regret is a possibility, but don't push me, you say. Nature photographs have become something of a problem, along with almost everything else. Even though they leave the bad stuff out—maybe because you know they're leaving all the bad stuff out—such pictures are making you increasingly aware that you're a little too late for Nature. Do you feel that? Twenty years too late, maybe only ten? Not way too late, just a little too late? Well, it appears that you are. And since you are, you've decided you're just not going to attend this particular party.*

As I think we can see wonderfully in this example, voice is the most important aspect of nonfiction: it's the controlling force of the writing. Do you want your piece to have the voice of a man's hollow shouts in an empty basketball gym? Or the call of a woman coming across an empty field at dusk, to her sister who has gone down to the creek for a walk? Voice is modulated almost entirely by distance: How close are you to this subject? And this one? And this one? And will this subject *let* you come closer? Is the subject affable, or stand-offish, or just plain loony?—or, as in the case of Joy Williams' essay, dangerous as hell? In all instances, there is one perfect and proper voice, and it's determined half by the subject—how close it lets you come—and half by your *feeling* for this subject. That's where the creativity of writing nonfiction can play its largest role. To find a good voice for your essay, you simply need to ask yourself those two questions: How do I feel about this subject, and how does this subject feel about me?

The release of information in nonfiction, I feel, must be more momentous. You can't be sly or subtle—and yet you can't (rarely, anyway) lay your heart out on the line, either. What you can do, though, is to control your release of information. Observation of detail—detail that will give characterization to your subject, or subjects—must be acute. There's almost no room for ambiguity. Observation of detail—what you choose to see, and more importantly, talk about—is the only way you have to sway the story, to show your beliefs, your hopes—which, though it may sound immoral, or unfair, I believe *is* fair—it's *your* article, you're writing it . . .

*This is the time of machines and models, hands-on management and master plans. Don't you ever wonder as you pass that billboard advertising another MASTER-PLANNED COMMUNITY just what master they are actually talking about? Not the Big Master, certainly. Something brought to you by one of the tiny masters, of which there are many. But you like these tiny masters and have even come to expect and require them. In Florida they've just started a ten-thousand-acre city in the Everglades. It's a megaproject, one of the largest ever in the state. Yes, they must have thought you wanted it. No, what you thought of as the Everglades, the Park, is only a little bitty part of the Everglades. Developers have been gnawing at this irreplaceable, strange land for years. It's like they just hate this ancient sea of grass. Maybe you could ask them about this sometime. Roy Rogers is the senior vice-president of strategic planning, and the old cowboy says that every tree and bush and inch of sidewalk in the project has been planned. Nevertheless, because the whole thing will take twenty-five years to complete, the plan is going to be constantly changed. You can understand this. The important thing is that there be a blueprint. You trust a blueprint. The tiny masters know what you like. You like a secure landscape and access to services. You like grass—that is, lawns. The ultimate lawn is the golf course, which you've been told has "some ecological value." You believe this!*

The essay gets fiercer, harsher and better, but we skip ahead:

*The Tiny Masters are willing to arrange Nature for you. They will compose it into a picture that you can look at at your leisure, when you're not doing work or something like that. Nature becomes a scenery, a prop. At some golf courses in the Southwest, the saguaro cacti are reported to be repaired with green paste when balls blast into their skin. The saguaro can attempt to heal themselves by growing over the balls, but this takes time, and the effect can be somewhat . . . baroque. It's better to get out the paste-pot. Nature has become simply a visual form of entertainment, and it had better look snappy.*

Green paste over errant golf balls? And the mangled, tortured attempts of the saguaro cacti to claim the golf balls? This is an amazingly vivid detail—and it serves perfectly the double purpose of marshalling our disgust in the direction that Williams wants it to go. She is in control.

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Humor goes farther in nonfiction than in fiction. I believe we're all a little afraid of the truth, the pure truth, in any form, and humor can be an alleviance, a relief, from the even subliminal dread of that approaching truth, a truth that is so inherent in the reading of any nonfiction piece. It's like being sent to the principal's office—you know that what's coming is for real, and so quite often, you're anxious about it. Humor can help dilute the truth. In reading fiction, on the other hand—no matter how riveted we are, or how wonderful the story is—we can rarely approach that level of belief that exists, inherently, in reading "nonfiction": and so we are willing—in fiction—to take risks, willing to commit a little harder, fall a little harder in love, to believe a little more fully that all will work out (or that nothing will work out), because there is that safety net below us: the safety net of fiction. Humor is nice, in fiction, but not as important, because we'll rush pell-mell (or plod diligently) to the end of fiction—but in nonfiction, I believe our hearts beat a little differently: always at least just a little bit, there's that echo of fear—fear of the truth, advancing. A little humor is a blessing, and goes a long way, in nonfiction.

The paradox, of course, is that if you force it, the piece falls apart, collapses.

But you can watch for humor, as you're interviewing your subject, or taking your trip: you can take notes, and when you see it, jot it down, and even plan parts of your article around that gem of humor, the way you would plan a dinner around a beautiful guest who was coming from a long way off.

*All right, you say, wow, lighten up will you? Relax. Tell about yourself.*

*Well, I say, I live in Florida . . .*

*Oh my God, you say. Florida! Florida is a joke! How do you expect us to take you seriously if you still live there! Florida is crazy, it's pink concrete. It's paved, it's over. And a little girl just got eaten by an alligator down there. It came out of some swamp next to a subdivision and just carried her off. That set your Endangered Species Act back fifty years, you can bet.*

*I . . .*

*Listen, we don't want to hear any more about Florida. We don't want to hear about Phoenix or Hilton Head or California's Central Valley. If our wetlands—our vanishing wetlands—are mentioned*

*one more time, we'll scream. And the talk about condors and grizzlies and wolves is becoming too de trop. We had just managed to get whales out of our minds when those three showed up under the ice in Alaska. They even had names. Bone is the dead one, right? It's almost the twenty-first century! Those last condors are pathetic. Can't we just get this over with?*

*Aristotle said that all living beings are ensouled and striving to participate in eternity.*

*Oh, I just bet he said that, you say. That doesn't sound like Aristotle. He was a humanist. We're all humanists here. This is the age of humanism. And it has been for a long time.*

There is so much that is important in nonfiction. You can be disproven at almost any step along the way—you're dealing almost entirely in the rather black-and-white, linear world of facts—and so you've got to keep punching home the theme, in almost every paragraph. Notice how in Joy Williams' essay there's an almost violent attention being paid to the theme—a relentlessness, to the theme of apathy.

If you drift or wander in fiction, it's called "moody," and "mystical." If you drift in nonfiction, it's called "unfocused." You shouldn't confuse the two: fiction and nonfiction.

I'm really getting out on a limb here, but I believe the nonfiction writer deals less with lyricism—with *poetry*—and more in concepts, ideas and scenes: almost literally, the hammering together of a house. You can't have any open doors, open breezes, blowing through a house, no rain blowing in. These things are fine and moody and okay for the safeties of fiction, but for the rock hard certainties of nonfiction—the If-I-catch-you-in-a-lie-you're-dead basis of nonfiction—you can't afford these things, and so you tend to be less daring with language. There is less room for ambiguity. And lyricism often tends to bring the voice in too close . . .

Instead, you make up for it—this loss of lyricism—with your scenes: you must hear the perfect dialogue, and feel the perfect feelings. Sometimes, if you have to, you, the narrator, must come into the picture, into the story—and don't be afraid to. Suppose you're writing a piece about a visit to a weight reduction center: and the manager tells you that the average weight loss, per patient, is forty-five pounds. You don't have to just sit there and take this rather interesting but still nonetheless mathematical and

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therefore potentially dry fact like a little mouse. Step in at the end of the paragraph—don't be shy—and say something like, "And I thought about how much weight forty-five pounds was. I pictured the noise forty-five pounds of *iron* would make, being thrown out a third-story window. I pictured the sound it would make, when it hit."

You do what you can, to keep fresh water moving over the gills of the story. Maybe only one story in your life will ever write itself. Chances are it is not the one you are working on. Chances are it's going to keep rolling over and dying, turning white belly up. Sometimes the best way to keep it alive, and keep it fresh, is to roll up your sleeves and enter the story—the nonfiction—yourself. Don't be afraid to. Do whatever it takes. ("Well, I say, I live in Florida . . .")

I like to think of novels as being about fate, while stories are about mystery. I think that nonfiction is more like a novel in this regard than even a novel: nonfiction is about nothing if not fate: again, you've got, all throughout your essay, or your article, the voice, the hammering home of the theme that things could not have turned out any differently than how you are reporting them—they may have *tried* to turn out differently, but there was no way—not a one-in-a-hundred chance—that it would, or could, occur differently. It's not just fate that you're writing about in nonfiction, but a sort of Super-fate. Beating home that theme.

You can, however, use many of the short story's devices. There are those you cannot use, should not use—foreshadowing, for instance, which is too cute in nonfiction, and even plot, which is too devious—even metaphors seem too cute for nonfiction, because in nonfiction you're a semi-god, bringing the truths down off the mountains (whereas in fiction, you're a peasant, toiling down in the dirt with the rest of the common people, just trying to figure things out, just trying to see things)—but one of the devices that you *can* take from short story writing is the idea of a final discovery, at the end—an epiphany, if you will.

Epiphanies in short stories are beginning to come under slight attack, and will continue to be increasingly critiqued, I predict—and not always without cause or reason, because it's true, we've just had so damn many of them, there really are more than enough to go around, and we're just getting too used to them, so that only do the very best ones pack any punch any

more—but an epiphany in nonfiction is a much more balanced and logical creation, and very often, should be the thing you are writing for.

*In the summer, particularly in the industrial Northeast, you did get a little excited. The filth cut into your fun time. Dead stuff floating around. Sludge and bloody vials. Hygienic devices—appearing not quite so hygienic out of context—all coming in on the tide. The air smelled funny, too. You tolerate a great deal, but the summer of '88 was truly creepy. It was even thought for a moment that the environment would become a political issue. But it didn't. You didn't want it to be, preferring instead to continue in your politics of subsidizing and advancing avarice. The issues were the same as always—jobs, defense, the economy, maintaining and improving the standard of living in this greedy, selfish, expansionistic, industrialized society.*

*You're getting a little shrill here, you say.*

*You're pretty well off. You expect to be better off soon. You do. What does this mean? More software, more scampi, more square footage? You have created an ecological crisis. The earth is infinitely variable and alive, and you are killing it. It seems safer this way. But you are not safe. You want to find wholeness and happiness in a land increasingly damaged and betrayed, and you never will. More than material matters. You must change your ways.*

*What is this? Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God?*

*The ecological crisis cannot be resolved by politics. It cannot be solved by science or technology. It is a crisis caused by culture and character, and a deep change in personal consciousness is needed. Your fundamental attitudes toward the earth have become twisted. You have made only brutal contact with Nature, you cannot comprehend its grace. You must change. Have few desires and simple pleasures. Honor nonhuman life. Control yourself, become more authentic. Live lightly upon the earth and treat it with respect. Redefine the word progress and dismiss the managers and masters. Grow inwardly and with knowledge become truly wiser. Make connections. Think differently, behave differently. For this is essentially a moral issue we face and moral decisions must be made.*

*A moral issue! Okay, this discussion is now toast. A moral issue . . . And who's this we now? Who are you is what I'd like to*

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*know. You're not me, anyway. I admit, someone's to blame and something should be done. But I've got to go. It's getting late. That's dusk out there. That is dusk, isn't it? It certainly doesn't look like any dawn I've ever seen. Well, take care.*

Think of it as a final proof, in nonfiction—this epiphany, even an unspoken one—a simple (or complex), visual epiphany. In the initial section of your essay or article, you sound the theme, for the first time—the initial theme of Joy Williams' essay being that you want and want and want, and yet you don't feel guilty—and as the essay progresses, you, the essayist, should sound that theme again and again, from various angles—always from new angles, to give the theme *dimension*, and therefore life—and finally, when the proof or discovery is created—when the picture takes shape, when it becomes indisputably evident that what you are saying is true—in Joy Williams' essay, for instance, the epiphany being discovered or revealed that this may not be so much the dawn of a new environmental consciousness, but rather, the dusk of an environment—then your essay or article has finished itself, and the end has been achieved.

Rather than the old (and entirely accurate) creative writing saw about the main character needing to have “felt consequences” by the story's action, a requirement of fiction, in nonfiction it is the *reader* who feels the consequences of the information the writer has revealed to us. Very often in nonfiction, the writer, and his or her voice, steps into the essay to take the place of the “main character” that would exist in a work of fiction.

The mental attitudes with which one approaches nonfiction are daunting to consider. It's why I can't write too much of it at one time. As I've mentioned, there's no safety net, in nonfiction, as you're writing it—and equally daunting, after the piece is finished, you may be tempted to wonder—if you're human—“Did I do this the best that could be done?—Did I do the subject justice?”—and even, “Could someone else have done this same story better?” I think once more this falls into the area of safety, or lack thereof—with a short story, your creation—something that comes from your heart—only you know it—but with the nonfiction—the profile of an ex-President, for instance—the whole world can see, in real life, what you're up to, what you're writing about—and they can judge you, and will.

Another problem with nonfiction is “How much fiction can I

put into it?" If it's journalism, precious little—though if it's an essay, the answer is as much as you need to, or as much as you can get away with. I don't believe I've ever been able to write a nonfiction piece entirely straight, with no untruths. I'll invent a quote, or see something that might not have happened—not on the same day, at any rate. It could be something as insignificant as a man clearing his throat when in reality he blew his nose. Who'll know the differences?—though sometimes I make up big lies, too, just to see how they look on paper; and sometimes, if I really like them, I cannot help but leave them in. No one will ever know.

I remember writing about a restaurant up in north Alabama, a backwoods place that served plenty of good hot coffee, and ham the size of license plates. I went into the bathroom to wash my hands, and I looked out the window and saw that there was a mule standing out in the field. In my essay, I had that mule come over to the window (which was open), and stick his head through it, and begin chewing on the roll of toilet paper that was on the spindle. Everyone, up until now, believed me.

The question may be raised, "Is this right, or is it wrong—to write nonfiction this way?" I think it's right—that's why I do it. I mean, I think the only true wrong there is aside from harming someone or speaking poorly of someone who has done nothing to deserve such, is to write a boring or unentertaining piece of nonfiction—because no reader deserves that.

What makes nonfiction be either boring or exciting? If you can't always rely on the old standbys of fiction—plot, metaphor, symbolism—pretty, in art, but a little too cute, a little too intrusive, in the rushed world of reality—then what *do* you have to rely on? What's the single best tool, the single best crutch, if you will, to get you across that narrow catwalk that spans the abyss of boredom?

I believe that, along with voice, the best tool you have in this regard is characterization. It's not just enough to have an interesting subject or situation: the people moving in or through that situation must rival, even exceed the strength of fictional characters (again, because there's no gauze, no fuzzy pastel mist, no safety—the edges of your nonfiction are hard, and will be judged hard, because life is hard)—and your nonfiction characters' hopes must be more tenuous, or desperate, or threatened, or secure—more *immediate*, more everything—than even in fiction.

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Speed is everything; you've got to get right to the story, right to the point in nonfiction, and every careless lift of a character's hand, every sentence uttered, must thunder toward the end of the article, helping to bring about—as soon as possible—that end. Every line of dialogue should have about it the illumination into that subject's character that a condemned man's last words would carry.

Even with such a wonderful nonfiction writer as Annie Dillard—in my opinion, the best—who *seems* to move in ellipses, and gauzes, toward the discovery—as does another great essayist, Barry Lopez—there is not so much the mystical, sometimes ambiguous wandering toward the subject and its end or discovery that characterizes great fiction as there is the feeling that a sheet has been pulled away from the subject, revealing it—the discovery—to have been there all along.

What I am saying is that you *can* use mysticism, and gauze, in nonfiction—lyricism, too—but you've got to be damned good, and plenty confident, because nothing would be worse than to circumlocate and circumlocate, chanting and digressing, musing, and then to pull away that sheet, and have there be nothing there.

The question was brought up to me once about covering an event, or a person, for the purpose of nonfiction: "How long do you stay out with the subject—or how long do you interview?" I think that you should stay out with your subject long enough to see the end of the story, and then—mentally, at least—you should make a note when you see that end, or what you hope will be the end. Sometimes you are lucky enough to see the end while you are still out in the field—though other times—the scary times—it is not until you're at your desk, poring over pages and pages of rapidly-cooling, increasingly-indecipherable notes—what to leave in, and what to take out—that you see the end: and at that point, you put the story down on paper, working toward that end in the manner we've described—with speed, or at least steadiness, and voice and characterization.

It's a kind of genius, a commonplace, to begin a short story, not quite knowing where you'll end up—but it's madness, and foolishness, to set out on such a journey in nonfiction.

I'm reminded of the quote in the front of Edward Abbey's novel, *Good News*, a quote by B. Traven: "This is the real world, muchachos, and you are in it." Nonfiction demands a greater

responsibility, a greater maturity, sometimes—more discipline—than any other form of writing—and, as in real life, it's easier to foul up.

This may be a typically and sadly male attitude, but I always view going out on a nonfiction assignment like, I suppose, going into battle, or at least into a high-stakes athletic event: I try to get psyched weeks beforehand, and get up for it, and to go sailing into it at full excitement, full sensitivity, full receptivity, or what-have-you—a heightened alertness, trying to notice everything, trying to put everything down on paper, trying to see everything (I'll sort it out back at home) because often there's only going to be that one chance, that one situation. You're going to see the world differently, on a different day, and so is your subject, or subjects. This is why the idea for the story sometimes gets flatter and flatter, upon return trips to pick up "loose ends." It's rarely as alive to you as that first time, and if you don't get it that first time, chances are you may not get it: *it* being the most lively, entertaining version of the story—the truth—that you can capture—and for that reason, I like to hit the story running at full tilt, with nothing else mattering in the world: a sort of do-or-die attitude.

Again, this contrasts markedly with the somewhat luxuriant practice, in fiction, of being able to pause, and let things ferment, waiting for lightning to strike, all the while building up your ideas and themes with the encrustations of time. In nonfiction, you've got to strike while the iron's hot. There's extra pressure, as a result, but there's also extra gratification, from having performed under that pressure, and performed well.

I had a wonderful nonfiction writing professor—the naturalist Tom Lyon—who inadvertantly nearly stopped me from writing anything one semester by saying, "Before you sit down to write anything, always remember that you are going to have to make what you are about to say be worth the life of the tree that was cut down in the forest to give you the paper you are writing on."

This is the same man who had this to say about writing nonfiction: "Before you start, sit alone in a dark room for a while, and listen to your heart beating, try to feel the blood moving through your body."

Perhaps he was, and is, a pantheist, a mystic. But nonfiction deserves this: on the one hand it can be viewed as being more mundane and ordinary—more *everyday* than fiction—but on the

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other hand, it can be viewed as being more *sacred*, because it deals with the here-and-now, without disguise, without safety. It can be about the brutalities and wonders of *real* lives—our lives, and our friends' lives, not just art-conjured lives—and to show these illuminations and wonders can be at least as challenging to the writer and as satisfying to the reader as any other medium. It's the easiest to fail at, I believe, and yet also—or perhaps therefore—can be the most important. I think we tend, as writers, to write fiction when we have time to dally—to look ahead, and muse, or to cast back, and reminisce, or to figure things out, secret things—mystery—but when the stakes are high, when the world's caving in and the food and air and water are being poisoned, we turn instinctively to the nonfiction: and for this reason, we need to learn how to be able to do it well. Sometimes there are not second chances to say the most important things.

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## Contributors

**Fran Adler** is the author of *Struggle To Be Borne*. Her poems have appeared in *Blood To Remember: American Poets On The Holocaust*, *Women and Politics*, *Bridges*, *Quarry*, *Pacific Review* and other magazines.

**Ai's** books, all from Houghton Mifflin, are *Cruelty*, *Killing Floor*, the Lamont Selection for 1978, *Sin*, and *Fate* (forthcoming). Her awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ingram Merrill Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation.

**Gwen Akin and Allan Ludwig** are New York artists who began collaborating in 1984. Their photographs have been exhibited recently at the International Center for Photography (NYC), The Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago), Museum fur Geologie und Minerologie (Holland), The Shaidai Gallery (Tokyo), The National Museum of Art (Washington, D.C.) and the Musee d'Art Histoire (Switzerland).

**Alison Baker** has published poems and stories in *New Letters*, *Interim*, *The Threepenny Review*, *The Mississippi Valley Review*, *Kennebec*, *Bitterroot*, and *The Northern Review*.

**Gerald Barrax** is the editor of *Obsidian II: Black Literature In Review* and the author of three books of poems. His most recent book is *The Deaths of Animals and Lesser Gods* (Callaloo Poetry Series).

**Rick Bass** is the author of a short story collection, *The Watch*, and three books of essays: *The Deer Pasture*, *Wild to the Heart*, and *Oil Notes*. A fourth essay collection, *Winter*, will be published late in 1990. He lives in Montana and is currently working on a novel.

**John Bradley** is the winner of the Word Works Annual Washington Prize for 1989. They will publish his book *Love-In-Idleness: The Poetry of Roberto Zingarello*. His poems have appeared in many magazines including *Ironwood*, *Puerto Del Sol*, and *Raccoon*.

**Naomi Clark's** second book of poems, *When I Kept Silence*, appeared in January 1989 from Cleveland State University Press. She held a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship during 1987-88. She has poems forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner* and *Poetry Northwest*.

**Stephen Dunning** has stories forthcoming in *Oxford Magazine* and *Albany Review*. He writes in Ann Arbor where he also practices tennis and four-string banjo. He is the winner of the James B. Hall Short Fiction Prize and the Pen Award.

**Anne Fowler** has received the Brigham Young Award for Poetry. Her poems have appeared in *The California Quarterly*, *Kansas Quarterly*, and *The Cumberland Poetry Review* among others. She lives with her daughter Elizabeth in Stoneham, Massachusetts.

**Catherine French** is in the M.F.A. program at Arizona State University. She has recent poems in *Poetry Northwest*, *River City*, and *Mankato Poetry Review*.

**Stephen Joseph Jackson** teaches English in a Paterson, New Jersey community college. He plays guitar, sings and composes music.

**Nancy Johnson's** poems have appeared in magazines such as *Antioch Review* and *Carolina Quarterly*. She is currently finishing a manuscript entitled *Persistence of Vision*.

**David Lee's** new manuscript *Day's Work* recently won the Utah Arts Council's Publication Prize and has been nominated for the Western States Book Award. His other books include *Shadow Weaver* and *The Porcine Canticles*.

**Denise Lichtig** lives and works in Davis, California.

**T.M. McNally's** stories have appeared in *Apalachee Quarterly*, *Other Voices*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *Quarterly West*, and others.

**Douglas Myers** is a faculty member at Pima Community College in Tucson, Arizona. He has an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Montana and has poems in or forthcoming in *Barnwood*, *Bellingham Review*, and *Shenandoah*.

**Sharon Olinka's** poems have recently appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Quarry West*, *Five Fingers Review*, and *Willow Springs*. Some poems will be published in forthcoming issues of *Painted Bride Quarterly* and *Apalachee Quarterly*.

**Rebecca Ross** lives in Tempe, Arizona. She has exhibited her photographs at the Society for Contemporary Photography (Kansas City), the Eye Gallery (San Francisco), and The Canon Photo Gallery (Holland).

**Tom Sexton** teaches English at the University of Alaska, Anchorage. His latest work appears in *Artful Dodge*, *Interim*, and *Zone 3*. He has work forthcoming in *Puerto Del Sol*, and *ZYZZYVA*.

**Lisa Shannon** lives with her husband and two small sons in Sacramento, California. Her poems have appeared in *Berkeley Poetry Review*, and *Revistas Mujeres*.

**Gary Short** is a former editor for *Hayden's Ferry Review*. His poems are forthcoming in *Chariton Review*, *5 AM*, *Permafrost*, *Poetry East*, and in the anthology *Seven Nevada Poets* (UNR/Rainshadow Editions).

**Peggy Shumaker** has published two books of poems: *Esperanza's Hair*, and *The Circle of Totems*. She teaches at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

**Nick Spruance** has had work previously published in *MSS*. He lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where he directs a GED/ABE program for blind and handicapped people.

**Shomei Tomatsu** lives in the mountains of Chiba Prefecture, Japan, and has been photographing the people and land of Japan for almost 40 years. His books of photography include *Glowing Wind - Okinawa*, *Kingdom of Mud*, and *The Pencil of the Sun*. *The Pencil of the Sun* received the Minister of Culture and Education Award for the Distinguished Artwork for 1976.

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**Robert Ward** lives in Seattle where he specializes in antique photographica as a profession. His work has appeared in numerous magazines including *The North American Review*, and *Kansas Quarterly*. His chapbook, *Camera Obscura*, was published by *Silverfish Review* in 1987.

**Morrie Warshawski** has had poems published in *Cutbank*, *Apalachee Quarterly*, *Mississippi Mud*, *Yellow Silk*, and a number of other small literary magazines.

**Joel-Peter Witkin** has received numerous awards for his photography including a CAPS grant, 1974; a Ford Foundation Grant, 1977; and National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, 1980, 1981, 1986. His work is held in many public and private collections including The Museum of Modern Art (NYC), Victoria & Albert Museum (London), National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.). His monograph, *Gods of Earth and Heaven* will be published October 1989 by Twelvetrees Press. Witkin lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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