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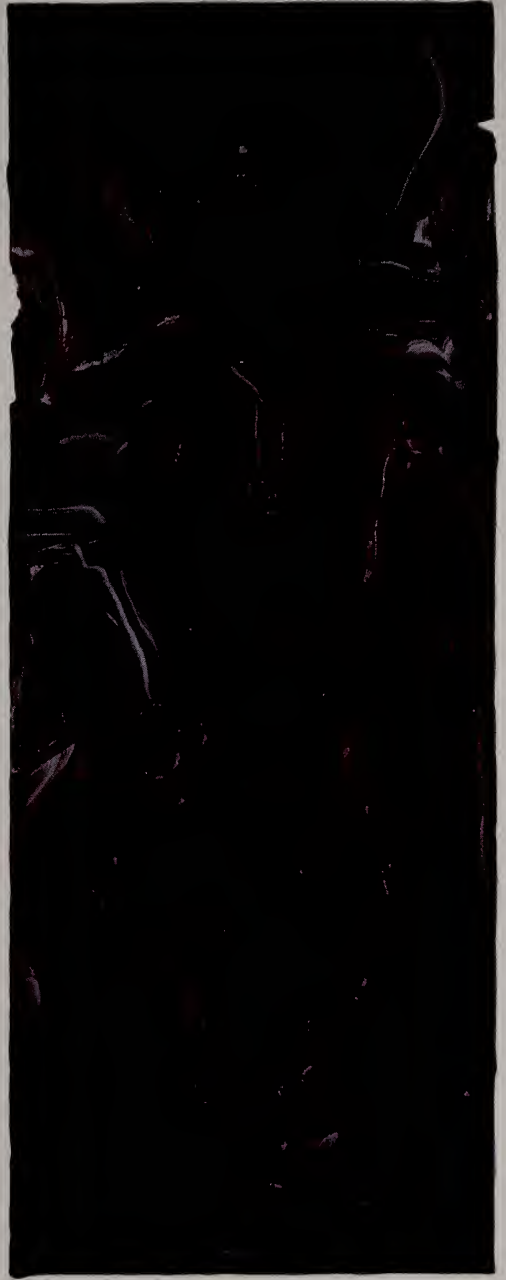
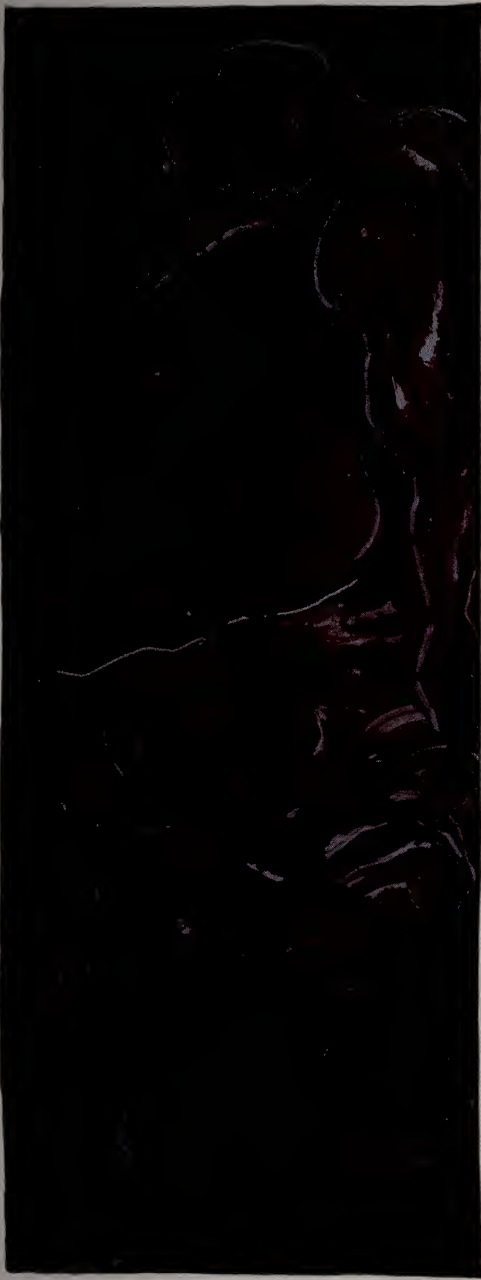
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Howth Castle
1990-1991



HOWTH CASTLE

A JOURNAL OF THE ARTS



University of Massachusetts
Boston

Volume 6

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HOWTH CASTLE

Editor's Note

Whether it is the finest student writing or the most creative and insightful student art, Howth Castle strives to publish a literary and arts journal which reflects the level of excellence and diversity that exists at UMass Boston.

Traditionally, student-run literary journals have failed to go beyond the boundaries of the university community, but the staff of Howth Castle is breaking those boundaries. We are engaged in efforts to expand Howth Castle's audience. For the first time, Howth Castle will be available to the public at libraries and bookstores across the greater Boston area. Also, Howth Castle is being sent to many major poets, writers, and directors of creative writing programs at area graduate schools.

Furthermore, Howth Castle is one of the founding members of a new inter-collegiate literary journal, created to showcase the best student writing of: UMass Boston, Boston College, Emerson, Harvard, Tufts, Northeastern, Simmons, Brandeis, and Boston University. We at Howth Castle are enthusiastic about the prospects of this venture.

Thank you to all the writers and artists who submitted work to this year's issue. And thank you to Donna Neal, David Loh, the Student Senate, Sherry Thomas, Linda Kenneally, CEG, Prisma, Yearbook, our friends at the Mass Media, and Beth & Chris.

Students who are interested in submitting to next year's issue should follow these guidelines:

Each work should include a cover letter showing the title of the piece, your name, address, phone number, and student ID number. Print your ID number and the title on each page of the piece, but nothing more—no name, phone number, etc.

All work must be typed, double-spaced, and no more than 4,500 words.

Art work (line drawings, paintings, etc.) must be submitted in slide form, since we cannot accept originals. If this is a problem, we can refer you to a competent photographer who can make slides of your work. If you are submitting slides of your art work, print your ID number and the title on the bottom of the slide, indicating which way the slide should be viewed.

The deadline for all poetry and prose is the last day of the Fall semester.

The deadline for all art work is around mid-term Spring semester.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to call us at 287-7980, or stop by our office on the first floor of the Wheatley Building, Room 076.

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FRONT COVER: Relationships (monoprint 1990)

BACK COVER: BASH I (monoprint 1990)

Tattoos

I remember when I was a city
you crawled through like a tourist;
happy to be there
slow and stupid.

You were a garden inside me
until I couldn't breathe
and I was grateful to choke
on your weeds.

My skin is very impressionable.
Fingerprints and dates remain.
Records kept like small tattoos
that glow in my dark.

Skin

I like it when my skin is being peeled away.
It's like striptease but better. It's real.
I hold my breath as I watch it fall
and then after a while I don't.
I could forget my own name
drinking oblivion from a mouth
cruel enough to eat a lover
and spit out plastic flowers;
a mouth that deadens
then devours so that
I hardly feel myself
being undressed
from outside in.

I think

he'll throw away his mother
and run to my house
truant from school
with a stolen present for me

he'll drink all my wine
crash on my couch
burp in his sleep
i'll hear my name in his murmuring

later he'll melt slowly
i'll watch his fingers open
as he is poured from himself
like milk on black tile

he'll smell blood and
earth in my belly
his rosary will dissolve
on top of the tv,
a light blue puddle

i think
he'll see this night
like his homework torn right in half.

*This issue of Howth Castle is dedicated
to Christopher Benedetto, 1966-1990.*

The Rip

It starts when you're busy turning,
tossing seeds into the wind.
Some blow back and catch in your hair,
winding like ivy around your head.
So caught up in watching, in feeling those
leaves creep against your neck, you don't see
the seed that's fallen into the dirt,
so you step on it, pushing it deeper in.

You keep walking until all the blossoms
have wandered off or fizzled down
to nothing, until your head aches
with the weight of your hair,
so tangled with ropes of green
that you can't move or stand naked
in the sun anymore, so you get out
your scissors and cut.

Sitting down, scooping up
handfuls of twisted hair, you see it:
the unexpected shoot sliding up
through the weeds. The petals
open, and you move closer,
looking for the center, which spreads
as you peer in, but it's not stamens
and yellow beads of pollen there,
instead you see a crack of sky
like a blue rip in the middle of the pistil,

a jagged doorway of air and sunlight,
smelling of Beach Heather and ocean,
and your hair, what's left of it, whips
out behind you. Thrown back on your hands
as if someone has slapped you,
you sit there reeling, digging
your fingers into the grass to hold on,
and you stare and stare at that rift
widening in your yard, wondering
how cool the air in it would be against
your skin, and how sweet, wondering
what you'd fall into if you stripped
down to nothing and jumped right in.

Best Friend

We met in the woods, remember?
You were shy behind a tree,
silvery-green stepping quietly,
looking down, or was it the basement,
blue-wet and gloomy, and I saved
a seat for you, the only girl I knew
at the party. We met in the spring,
the surprise of your eyes changing blue
to match the sky, but it was winter,
why were the buds growing pink
and green on the limbs?
Why did we always choose the black path
through the woods to go home,
instead of our mothers' cars or the well-lit road?
Even when there were whispers, when girls
started kicking me, when blood smudged the seat,
you still looked at me smiling— Why?
You still slept curved against me in the dark,
my steady glimmer, my flat-chested twin,
you still wandered the woods with me,
while dreams of kissing you
chased me into a sweaty spin.

A Familiar Guest

When I see Crisis this time, she is snapping
off the first lilac of the season, then tucks

its stem behind her ear. She never rings the bell.
Instead, she walks in throwing down her jacket,

fills the teakettle with water and lights the stove,
while I pull out two cups that are chipped

in the same spots. I used to think she was my
glamorous twin, the way my mother fawned

over her so. Whose clothes is she wearing today?
My sister's? The woman who always lived downstairs?

She'll weep her story backwards and forwards,
lift a pantleg to show us the dark bruises,

maybe she'll stare blank-eyed and uncomprehending,
as if some tragedy were playing on the screen behind

her eyes. That usually works. She waits for the right
moment, for the turn of my mother's tender gaze.

Here she is, flushed with upset, which the pale
lilac compliments just so, and as she shakes

her head, the day's rain jumps off the petals
onto her disheveled hair, sparkling like drops

on a spider's web. I marvel again at how she knows
exactly when to happen by: I was expecting my

mother when she sauntered in, languid
and confident; I had things to tell her myself,

not tragedy, but something harder to come by,
and I made us dinner. What now? Will I do

as I've done before, throw dinner out
while my mother puts her arms around this sweet-

smelling accident, as she rubs on the salve or
drives her home? Will I have to press my hands

against a hot pan to make Crisis recede into second
place, or can I do something different: slip

that flower out of her hair and put it in my own,
dance on the cool dusk lawn until my mother

gets here, when taking her by the elbow
and casting no backward glance, I'll turn her the other way.

Thirty Seconds at Broadway Station

Women with brown shoes and
plastic jackets sit

down, with pocket books
on their laps.

Their heads turn
down the aisle.

They look at me, but I
read the walls.

The train breathes.
The doors close.

We are jerked one way, then
the other.

Silly Games

The sun reflects off my Red Sox cap
and Paul's belly. Small and brown,
with a dusty film of dirt covering our bodies,
we stand next to the garage,
watching the sun peel the paint off.

I tell Paul if I focus my eyes
in a certain way
I can see spots growing,
shrinking, and falling.
He says those are atoms.

We decide to test our eyesight
by throwing a small nail straight up,
following it with our eyes
until it turns into a dot,
then returns.

We do this several times.
Each toss fuels our giddiness
as we throw it higher and higher,
straighter and straighter; and closer
and closer it lands to us.

It doesn't hurt very much but
it's bleeding. My mother screams
something about going blind. I go back outside.
My brother is sitting on the steps
looking for atoms.



Springtime
(monoprint, 1991)

The Patron Saint of Hojo's

R. B. FITZGERALD

It was Red Gilmore's last party. He was laid out to rest in his last clean shirt with two wooden drum sticks stuck into his hands. Sean, his only son, had brought the sticks along, a tribute to his father's former talent. He turned to look behind him and found that he was surrounded by a circle of friends, all long-time compadres of his. They had driven many miles to get there, some getting lost in the darkness on the back roads of the small isolated town. Some were dressed in coats and ties; most were in various stages of inebriation. The Klondike Zoomite Folk-Rock Band had arrived, itchy to start playing at the first sound of Sean's magic harmonica. Sean showed them to a lower room where Michael from Montreal was pounding away on a slightly deranged piano. Walking back up the stairs, Sean decided to go over to the casket and share a last moment with his Dad. His eyes scanned the polished grey enclosure, then focused on Red's weathered face. It was taut and deeply lined from battles with a world bereft of music. Below were the folded hands, born to whirl and swish the metronomes of the heart, stilled, now at rest but grasping to the sticks.

Sean remembered being under the vibraphone, hiding beneath the metal bars as the eleven foot man hammered away in a frenzy above him with bright blue lamps for eyes. In the corner was the wooden xylophone, the hollowed-out marimba and the set of flashy drums with gold metal trim and the hissing brushes that slipped along the snare.

Then something had happened with Big Red and whisky became the key that opened the doors to smiles and laughter and there was stumbling in the foyer stairs and bigger words that could not be spelled like, *electro-shock*, and *institution*, *spotlight*, *liquor store*, and *traveling*.

Plastic Jesus sat on the TV in the family's dark apartment and all the holy cards were tacked against the wall. They had the patron saints of trains and travelers looking down on them during meals. Someone had stolen the music up there in the hospital with their doctors and electric wires and needles full of drugs, but no holy angels came to breathe the rhythm back to Red Gilmore's shaking hands.

Sean went up with the Klondike band to play for him on visitor's night. Red's face had turned to dough and his hands would not unclinch. The shattered piano was in the key of Z. Bleepo in the corner

was growling and throwing chairs at the wall. Blinky did a Theolonius holiness dance across the rec room. He wheeled in slow motion Mingus manic fandango as Red laid down the rhythm on a metal ashtray. The Klondike boys launched into Tim Buckley's "Pleasant Street" as Sean wailed out his heart on the blues harp.

*You wheel, you steal, you feel,
you kneel down, down, down, down. . . .*

Red's foot was pounding on the floor and the veins in his neck stood out like blue highways. The beat was there, but what was lost could not be reclaimed. The years had fallen through the old man's fingers and his memories had slipped into the air like skyward red balloons.

The year they brought him home, Red had to sell his old marimba, the vibes, everything except his drums, which he kept locked up in a closet. Sean tried to look out for him and explain to the social workers when things got out of hand. Red had this habit of urinating on people's cars and would wander around late at night yelling at no one in particular. Sean didn't want them to put him back in the state hospital. He didn't want them messing around with Big Red's mind anymore. Whatever was left would just have to be protected.

Somewhere Red's musical compositions from the Big Band days were gathering dust in a cabinet in some copyright office. Sean had heard him speak of the lady trumpet player with the Al Olins Band. Ruby Williams, the one with the crystal tone, when Red was one of the hottest vibes players in town. Her trademark was a black spangled dress and her big number was "I Can't Get Started." It always was a big request when they played the Totem Pole Ballroom and they would save it for near the end of the evening. She had a sound that could fill up a room; it echoed outside across the water while the couples lingered to smooch awhile before going home.

There was a night back in the old apartment when Sean had the Klondike Band over to play some tunes and smoke some reefer. The old man sat drinking cans of beer in his strap undershirt, smoking Camels that he never shook the ashes off of.

"Sounds like electric mud," he said. "Why don't you guys take some lessons? You always play at the same time. You got to learn to listen. When the spotlight comes you got to be ready but you got to remember, only one guy can take the spotlight at a time. Don't be cuttin' in on other people's solos all the time. You understand?"

"Sure, Dad," said Sean as he stirred up a bowl of cajun refried gumbo for his guests. "Why don't you join in with us?"

"You got to know when *not* to play. That's the thing. That's what a good player needs to know," said Red, puffing through yellowed fingers.

That night they got him to bang out a rhythm on a frying pan with a spoon but his time was off and he knew it, so he didn't bother with it

anymore. His drums stayed in the closet except when he chanced to dream those big band dreams of Norumbega Park, Storyville, the High Hat Club, the railroad trips in dining cars to New York City and the golden glow of whiskey.

Outside the turn-off of the new suburban interstate, finned cars swooped in for burgers. Hidden in the back of Hojo's, Red was opening huge cans of chowder for sub-minimum wage. Dressed in a white paper hat and a soiled kitchen uniform, he appeared to Sean to be slumping over when he walked.

"We're beneath the underdog in this joint," he proclaimed to Sean that night. There were coffee grounds and stale hot dog relish spilled across his white apron. "Let's face it. The world ended in 1954 by the big nukes, just somebody else's bad dreams and broken promises since then. What I really need is a good metal detector. Need to find the underground railroad where they hide those nuke missile silos."

Sean walked over to him,

"Look, Dad, you don't need this job," he said. "You can just go back home. I'll look out for ya. I'm still working at the Gacko plant."

Red pointed down at the garbage that had splashed across his apron.

"It's come to this, son, it's all come down to this." Red picked up the can of garbage and took it out to the dumpster where he tossed bread and rolls out to the local skunks and squirrels. "All my trusted associates. . ."

Sean followed him out to the cold dark with his hands stuck in his pockets and watched as Red addressed an audience that had not yet arrived.

"All my comrades — squirreling away the last rations of the defeated Hojo nation — I request your strict attention. NO MORE WATER. NO MORE COAL. TOO NEAR THE H-BOMBS BULL'S EYE. LET THE INDIANS HAVE IT. Forwarding address. George T. Bromley, Greenwood, Arkansas. NO MORE WATER. NO MORE COAL . . ."

Sean reached up to loosen his tie. The room had filled up and had gotten warmer. He couldn't hear the murmuring voices of his friends and the clink of ice in glasses. Big Ed McKennedy grabbed him in a bar and offered a bottle of Krueger Pilsner. Ed led him down into the lower room where the Klondike Zoomite Army was getting ready to march. Michael from Montreal sat in front of a polished white piano that was covered with empty Brador bottles he'd brought down with him from Canada. At the sight of Sean approaching, he began to sing the invocation,

*Drunken Irishmen, caterwaul and fist fights,
their noses shine like porch lights. . .*

An old propeller plane could be heard flying low overhead, the kind they used to have in World War II. Sean sat down on the piano bench while Michael finished up the song.

"Sean, I've got a tune for us tonight," he said, "in honor of your father. It's called 'Mr. Gilmore Goes to Heaven'."

In dark ascending scales, the notes rang out from Michael's swirling fingers, a winding stair of icy hammers pounding out a river of falling light, a thousand jangling wires reharmonizing an ancient gospel air. The empty bottles shook as Michael thumped the pedals and the sound intensified and rolled across the room like a gathering storm. Dreams of Orpheus, a stately offering to the clouds slowly opening to the tone of a sparse Bill Evans voicing, circling arpeggios of flying gulls turning the key, opening the wall of death, riding the ferris wheel over Norumbega Park where the big bands used to play. And then, to the sound of calliope music, like performers from a lost circus, they walked slowly through a mist that had enveloped the room. All together, like a celluloid dream the Al Olin Swing Orchestra performed in full black-tie regalia. The saxophones, the shining trombones were playing Red's favorite theme and a spotlight played across the fleeting hands of the eleven foot shadow by the vibraphone. He played the melody to the lamplighter song that Sean remembered as a child and the lights slipped off all over the fading town, all over the dimming world.

Then Ruby Williams took a trumpet solo and she held the final note out long and clean, a shining trump to wake the world from its sleep, and Sean matched the note on his harmonica, a note charted by his father, now joined together in harmony in the spit of Time's sharp seconds where the father passed into the son. Then the Klondike Army stood up to play "The Saints" and they began to march with 7 crapshooters, 6 guitar strummers, 5 belated believers, 4 lawn chair ladies, 3 gypsy songmen, 2 low-down gamblers and one freewheelin' flutist and they spilled out into the night where the streets were paved with gold, where the stars began to fall, when the saints went marching in.

Sketches of Tessy

JOHN C. PICARDI

ALEX

I was four years old when my parents died in a nightclub fire in Mexico City. I have lived with my Grandfather since the day my parents burned to a crisp. That's how Grandfather put the news to me, burned to a crisp. Grandfather owns a hotel in Providence and that's where we live. Every Sunday when the chef puts the steamship-round on the buffet table, I look at the burning brown meat and think of mom and dad.

I do not have any real memories of my parents. However, I do remember a gift they gave me. It was a small wooden elephant with real ivory tusks. They bought it in Africa when they were on safari. I named the elephant Tessy. Tessy was my only friend for a long time. I would take her everywhere. When I ate in the dining room I would place Tessy at three o'clock on the side of my plate. I sometimes would pretend to feed Tessy. I would also talk to Tessy, and sleep with Tessy. One day Tessy disappeared, and I never saw her again. I loved Tessy. Grandfather hated Tessy. I hate Grandfather. When Tessy went away that's when my trouble started.

My parents traveled all the time. Grandfather told me that I went to China when I was a small boy. I don't remember of course. I was only two. I do have a faded photograph of my parents and me on the Great Wall of China. My parents are smiling in the picture, I look, well, rather upset. I was crying. Perhaps I had a bad eggroll the night before. Chinese food always gives me gas.

Grandfather and I share a large three room suite on the top floor directly across from the presidential suite. I wonder if the president will ever come to the hotel. If he does I'll video tape him having sex with the first lady. That's my hobby. I hide video cameras in people's rooms and watch them have sex or pick their noses. You know stuff nice people wouldn't do in public. Once Miss Simmons, she's one of the year round residents, put her whole foot in her mouth and started biting her toe nails. It was pretty funny, and I have the whole thing on tape. I've been video taping people for a few years now, ever since I went a little nutty. It makes me feel good. I still video tape guests but not as much as I used to. Grandfather would probably kill me if he knew.

The Hotel Persimmon has been in the family for many years even before my grandfather was born. Grandfather is always saying that his hotel is the best hotel in Providence. Actually, it's my hotel and it's the only hotel in Providence. Of course there is the Holiday Inn, but I'm talking about a grand hotel, like a mini Waldorf Astoria. Grandfather would not have the hotel if my parents didn't die. His father, my great-grandfather, willed it to my mother. Great-grandfather hated grandfather. He thought he was a bum. This hotel legally becomes mine when I turn twenty-one and become mentally stable. I'm twenty-four and still waiting for the mentally stable part to come. The courts gave the hotel to grandfather until I'm able. I don't want it. I hate this dreadful place.

I went to Brown. What a joke. Grandpa made a large contribution. The only reason he sent me to Brown was to make it look like he was taking good care of me, all for the courts.

I quit school. I'm not that bright and found the whole thing a waste of time. When I quit Brown, Grandfather was very upset. He put me to work as an assistant manager. He was, and still is, determined to make everything look good. But I know grandfather. He's happy I'm a little unstable. He wants to run this place as long as he can, even though the old fool has only a few years left in him. I guess that's when I went a little nutty, when I quit school. I started feeling real down and lonely. After all I have no family, no friends, and Tessy was gone. I felt like a first class loser. All I really have is a tacky grandfather who I hate. I pretend I like him, but truly he's slime.

Well, that's what I am still, assistant manager at the Hotel Persimmon. Pretty impressive you might think. Not really. I take care of the year round residents. I wear a beeper and all the residents have my beeper number. All I do is solve their stupid problems, all their spoiled rich-people problems. I sit in my suite all day and watch my homemade videos and re-runs of "Hazel" and wait for my beeper to beep. Most of the time I can count on a beep from old fat ass herself, Miss Simmons. She's been living in the hotel for many years, way before I was born. She's very demanding and wealthy.

"Alex, they forgot to put mustard on my sandwich."

"Alex, they forgot crackers for my chowder."

"Alex, I need cat food."

"Alex, take Lily for a walk."

I hate taking Lily for walks. You can only imagine what I look like walking a damn cat on a leash in downtown Providence. I hate that stupid cat. It reminds me of an over-sized rat.

I really hate Miss Simmons too, what a fat swine. Grandfather tells me, "Keep the old bitch happy. She's paying our bills." So, I keep her happy, only with food. Don't get any ideas, it's not that kind of place and I'm not that kind of guy. Maybe I'll kill her cat and videotape the event.

Then I'll send the video tape to her suite along with the tape of her biting her smelly toes.

Grandfather's main squeeze is Trudy, his girl from Boston. Trudy comes to visit twice a month. She's a frumpy old ex-stripper. Grandfather told me she was a stripper in Scollay Square, or something like that, I think that's what Grandfather calls that place. Trudy has money, lots of it, and Grandfather especially likes that. But it doesn't matter. Trudy is cheap. Real cheap. She's always bragging that she was the queen of burlesque. She says she knew Gypsy Rose something or other. Who cares? I certainly don't. Trudy's ok for an old whore, I guess. I just hate when she stays in the suite with me and grandfather. Trudy giggles like someone is shoving a pole up her ass. It's the most irritating laugh you'd ever want to hear. She ruins the pillow cases, they're all smudged with her scandalous makeup. When she's here, our three room suite is like a three-ring circus. Trudy and my grandfather, what a freak show! The way she snaps her gum to the wiggle of her skinny ass and Grandfather just lapping it up, with his fat belly sticking out of his polyester suit and that smelly cigar hanging out of his mouth. Why Grandfather looks like a horny old pimp and Trudy looks like a washed-up has-been stripper.

Let's see, that time I went nuts, right, I was saying that I was feeling down and I guess the best way to describe it is this. When I was a kid I would take the elevator to the top floor, 17, to be exact. I would walk down the stairs and all that could be heard was the echoing of my footsteps on the concrete stairs. As I got close to the bottom the sound of my echoing steps sounded like a time bomb waiting to explode, you know click, click, click. Then when I got to the bottom there was no sound, just silence, just me sitting on the bottom step with Tessy in the cold and silence. When I looked up and saw the top I would get dizzy and say the hell with it and take off through the bottom exit, and take the elevator to the top. Well, when I went nutty it was like when I reached the bottom step, it was still cold. However, that echoing, that click, click, click didn't stop and there was no silence, no exit to run out to, no elevator to catch, no Tessy. I felt trapped and I had to climb the stairs alone, one at a time. It took me a good year to make it back to the top. I don't ever want to walk down those stairs again.

DEDRA

There was a rain storm that night and Dedra forgot to close her bedroom window. From a small puddle that formed on her bedroom floor water crawled under her bed. It looked like a small river flowing freely as it headed for dust and a drawing pad that lay barren in the dark space. Dedra's dog Romeo, an oversized black Doberman, came slowly strutting into her bedroom. Romeo noticed the water on the floor and started lapping at the puddle. But it was too late. The nude sketches of Lenny in the drawing pad were destroyed by the water.

Dedra was still sleeping when the phone by her bed rang. She answered the phone quickly, feeling the shock to her body from the harsh ring. It woke her from her sleepy mode. It was nearly two in the afternoon and she dreaded this day all month. Usually she let the answering machine catch all the calls. But not today. Dedra didn't want the machine to answer the calls. For she couldn't hear the message on the machine anymore. She promised herself she would change the message and finally let it go. She was angry at herself for not changing the message the night before. She didn't want to deal with all the sympathy calls she would get from her mother and Hedy.

"Hello Mother," Dedra said.

"How ya doing dear ? I know this must be a difficult day for you."

"I'm ok, don't worry," said Dedra.

"Well honey, we are worried, and we've been talking. We feel it would be best if you moved to New York and lived with us for a while."

"Look, Mother, don't worry. I'll be fine."

Dedra held the phone away from her ear the minute she heard her mother's invitation to New York. She couldn't believe her mother would suggest such a thing. It made her angry. Dedra wanted to yell at her mother but she controlled herself. She knew the guilt trip that would follow. Living with her mother and Hedy would be like living with Maria Von Trapp and Emma Goldman. Her mother was like Miss Optimistic, almost like a robot programmed to be happy and positive all the time, not to mention lifeless as well. Her mother reminded Dedra of the women in the movie, "The Stepford Wives." And of course there was also the Hedy factor. Dedra couldn't understand the attraction her mother had for Hedy. Hedy was loud, bossy, and always had something irritating to say about the oppression of women. She always started arguments with Dedra, telling her that her dating habits were insulting to womanhood. Besides, Dedra hated that feminist crap. She liked men and felt secure with them.

"What's so wrong about that ?" Dedra would say to Hedy, and of course this would infuriate Hedy more, much to Dedra's delight. Besides, if she moved in with her mom and Hedy, she knew exactly what her days would entail. Prayer meetings everynight with her mom, and debates over her Cheerio's with Hedy in the morning. No thank you, Dedra thought.

"Mother, I'm fine, I have to go."

"Dedra Ann, please dear, don't hang up the phone, you must understand that things in life happen for a reason. We learn from these things. Pray, ask the Lord for guidance."

"Jesus, Mother. My boyfriend, who I was supposed to marry today, took off on me a month ago. He fucking moved out on me. What do you want me to do? Sing about my favorite things? God, Mother, sometimes."

"Sweetheart, all I'm saying is, all people must try and learn from life's misfortunes. One minute sweetheart, Hedy wants to speak to you." Not Hedy, Dedra thought. She couldn't handle pushy Hedy today. She made John Wayne look like Pee Wee Herman.

"Hey, Dee baby, how goes it?" Hedy's loud voice penetrated Dedra's ears.

"Fine Hedy, what's new?"

"New York, baby, New York. Did your mom tell ya? We want you here with us."

"I don't think so, Hedy," Dedra said wisely.

"Look here, babe. You still sad over this Lenny character? How many times must I tell you, it's a war out there. Men, they don't care about women, we're only a piece of ass to them. We gotta stick together, Dee. You continually let yourself get into these situations with fucking men. Do you even know who you are, for christsake? You're always with a man, you've never been alone. Look, Dee, come to New York. Stay with your mom and me. I can see you're really alienating yourself because of a man and that's no good. You have so much potential, you're a great artist. You're intelligent. So who cares, RISD wasn't for you? There are great schools in New York. What about Parsons? Dee, you still there?" Dedra was tempted to start singing "I am woman, hear me roar" but she was in no mood to get into a fight with Hedy.

"I'm still here, Head."

"Look Dee, sure it's a real bum deal, but it's just not worth it. Believe me, you know what it would be like married to that bozo? God, Dee he was such a typical male. If you married him you would have become unimportant and patient to the point of tears. Not to mention the alienation. You wouldn't be a person, you wouldn't belong to the world, you would belong to him. Your whole world would have been thoroughly disrupted all the time by that ding-a-ling. Is that what you want?"

"Hedy I have to go."

"Look. Think about New York, and get happy, girl. Get happy."

"Yeah, ok, I will. See ya." Dedra knew she could never live with that woman, she couldn't stand talking to her over the phone, never mind looking at that Ernest Borginine face everyday.

"Wait, Dee, your mom wants to say bye." Once again Dedra listened to the phone pass hands, and she began to feel tense. She couldn't stand being on the phone this long. She whispered "fuck" into the receiver.

"Dedra, take care. I love you. Things will get better. Oh, before I forget, your dad was asking for you."

"Dad? How's dad?" She'd remembered that her dad had called her three times last week, but she never got around to calling him back.

"He and Bernard left for Japan yesterday. The makeup company Bernard works for gave him a free trip to Tokyo. Isn't that wonderful?"

He's the number one salesperson in St. Paul. Honey, he said he tried calling you and there was never any answer, just your machine. He said he left messages."

"Shit, I forgot to call him back. He did call me. He left three messages."

"He'll understand."

"Mom, I have to go. I'm taking Romeo for a walk. I'll talk to you soon. Bye."

"Think about New York," Hedy yelled into the receiver as her mother said goodbye and Dedra hung up the phone.

She forced herself out of bed and noticed the puddle on the floor and saw Romeo licking. "Good girl good girl," she said, lightly touching her.

She stood in the puddle and looked out the window. From across the street she saw her neighbor, Miss Johnson. She was sitting on her bench in her tulip garden, singing loudly. But her voice was soft with a soothing tone which Dedra loved. Dedra smiled and waved at the old woman who was so proud of her tulip garden. Miss Johnson waved back at Dedra. She looked like a caretaker of a tiny kingdom, sitting there swatting the insects that threatened to destroy her colorful world. There were times Miss Johnson invited Dedra to her garden, but Dedra never went, though she would listen for hours on end to the old woman sing. She would curl herself in a ball on the hardwood floor below the window sill and listen to the sweet voice of the old woman as it floated through the window.

Once again Dedra felt the wheel of her life starting to spin. She was all too familiar with the feelings of loss and emptiness without a sense of who she was and where she was going. She didn't want any more boyfriends. She didn't want her mother or Hedy. She didn't want her dad. His life made her sad, and he was worse than her mother when it came to showing any emotion. She felt she was better alone or maybe even dead. For a while, Dedra's spinning wheel stopped on Lenny's name. She felt completeness and for the first time she felt she belonged to the world. She felt alive. But she knew Lenny was gone and the wheel inside that had started spinning again scared her, for she didn't think she could stop it this time.

She strolled down the barren hallway towards the bathroom running her fingers along the walls, remembering when she and Lenny had painted them.

When she stared into the bathroom mirror over the sink, she could see her skin was dry and her lips colorless, chapped, and bleeding. She'd bitten her lips while sleeping for the past month, ever since Lenny had left. She brushed her teeth sluggishly and when she was done she placed her toothbrush back next to Lenny's. She then picked up his toothbrush and examined it, staring at the bristles as if there were some remnant of him still there. She let it drop from her hand. She then went

over to the tub and turned on the faucet. The water rushed out with such force it woke her completely from her sleepiness. Dedra held out her hand feeling the water rush between her fingers.

As the tub was filling with warm water, she walked over to the window and opened it. A cool breeze and Miss Johnson's singing engulfed her. She used a twisted wire hanger to keep the window open. It was the same hanger Lenny put there months before. She touched the hanger with the tips of her fingers and wondered if his fingerprints were still somewhere on it. Dedra slipped out of her oversized t-shirt and with eyes closed she concentrated on Miss Johnson's singing as the slight breeze made her shiver. She imagined Lenny standing behind her. He was naked and strong. She felt his big hand cupping her breast and his lips kissing her neck. She wondered if Miss Johnson could see her.

The splashes in the tub woke her from her dreaming. She stared blankly at it. Then she shut off the faucet. She carefully placed her foot in the steaming water and slowly immersed herself. A gust of cool air from the window chilled the upper half of her body. She would be warm and safe now, she thought, as she sank into the water. Her hand hung over the tub, searching for the t-shirt. When she found it she rolled it into a ball and supported her head.

She and Lenny met at the Avon theatre one year ago. They were both at the midnight showing of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show." Dedra remembered when she first saw him. She thought he looked like Michelangelo's David. She wanted to sketch him. So she started throwing her toast way before she was supposed to, making sure some of it landed on his lap. And that same night they made love and Lenny moved in two weeks later.

Dedra lifted her leg out of the tub and examined her thigh. It was all silky and smooth from the soapy water. Then she heard the phone by her bed ringing, she listened to the clicking of the answering machine which reminded her of the clicking of a gun before a murderer shoots his victim. "Hello this is Lenny, Dedra and I can't come to the phone right now please leave a message after the beep" There was silence for a moment until Dedra heard the caller's voice. "Dee Dee you there? Pick up the phone, it's me, Hedy," Hedy's voice echoed throughout the apartment. A bullet first for the heart, then one straight for my ass, Dedra thought.

ALEX AND DEDRA

Miss Simmons called me early this morning. She wanted me to walk Lily around town. I look real silly walking that cat around Providence. So today I decided to go over to the Arcade and sit on the steps and watch people come and go. I tied Lily to the iron banister, ran into the Arcade, bought myself a slice of pineapple pizza from Zippy's and sat there. The Arcade is this big shopping plaza a few blocks from the hotel. The front entrance of the Arcade looks like a Greek Pantheon, marble

columns, detailed carvings, the works; it's quite effective.

So there I was minding my own business, and this huge dog—it looked like a pony for christsake—comes over to me and starts licking my pizza. The owner just stood there smiling and watching. I hate animals, never mind having this beast licking my pizza.

All of a sudden Lily starts getting real uptight, she's pulling the leash with her neck and making this big fuss, she was pretty scared. Then this beast starts barking real loud and goes over to Lily. I must have looked real odd, sitting there eating pineapple pizza and with this dog barking so loud all of Providence and probably Cranston could hear. People just stopped and stared. It was a real freak show, a real freak show. People were looking at me and laughing. God, I wanted to die. That's when I started getting really nervous. I don't like that kind of attention, I don't know how to handle it, I wanted to be alone. So I'm shaking and looking like a real fool, I thought this dog was going to swallow me. Then this woman, the owner of the dog calls the beast back to her, "Here Romeo, here Romeo" Romeo, I thought, who the hell would name a dog the size of a horse Romeo? Godzilla or Mr. Ed would be more fitting.

After the crowd left and my face went back to it's normal color, I untied Lily and WHAM she takes off. I couldn't believe it. If I returned to the Hotel without Lily, it would be the end for me, Grandfather would get all crazy on me and there's no telling what he would do, probably have me spend a weekend with Trudy, or something awful like that. I ran fast, bumping the dog's owner to the ground. I didn't even stop to help her. I just chased Lily down the alley of the China Garden restaurant.

The alley was smelly and echoed the city noises. It was like this little dark private world, dumpsters and junk everywhere. I must have been in there a good five minutes until I found Lily all cuddled up in a ball, She was shaking and covered with Sweet-n-Sour Chicken. I picked her up and held her tight, bracing her firmly in my arms. She was a mess, her white fur all slimy and filled with sticky balls. I stood there in the alley looking at her scared little eyes. She was trembling.

Suddenly a truck speeding with no mercy came honking towards me. I jumped, holding Lily in my arms, and stood against the alley wall as the truck passed me. It stopped short in the middle of the alley, right at the side entrance of the restaurant. A man, a rather grubby looking man, came out of the truck. He was short and stubby and looked like he hadn't shaved in weeks. He started banging on the door with his big hairy knuckles and with the other hand he picked at his seat. He then took the cigar from his mouth and flicked it over at me and said, "Hey buddy, whadya doing? Playing with your pussy?" I was still shaking from almost getting run over by the truck so I whimpered nervously, "She's not mine." He didn't hear me nor did he care. The truck driver started unloading vegetables from the back of the truck. A Chinese cook

came out from the restaurant and started opening the crates of vegetables. The cook was inspecting each crate carefully. The truck driver stood over the cook, watching annoyingly.

"This Bok Choy not fresh," said the cook.

"Hey, ah Chong Chong," he burped. "This here greens are fresh, whadaya want anyways, the shit comes from all de ways from Californiah."

"No, No, No. Me name not Chong Chong, asshole. You fuck off. We get someone else."

"Ok, Lee Hong, have it your way, but Joe is gettin real sick of this here shit you Chinks do every week."

"You tell Joe fuck off too, we go to another purveyor, you go fuck off."

"Fuck off, ya yella face gook, don't take it out on me that we blew up your fucking rice paddies." The truck driver then jumped in his truck and sped off.

Then the cook started screaming in Chinese. The other cooks all came running out of the restaurant, waving knives and chop-sticks. I stood there watching, not knowing what to do. I wanted to laugh but I didn't. They all looked over at me, I looked back. For a minute I thought they were eyeing Lily. Grandfather once told me Chinese restaurants use cat. "It's cheaper than chicken and with all the sweet saucy stuff no one can tell the difference." Remembering Grandfather's voice, I held on to Lily tightly. Soon all the cooks went back into the restaurant. I guess I was a bit relieved.

"Pretty funny, huh, Lily," I said out loud. Lily looked up at me and purred.

"Excuse me, but you knocked me down back there, and you didn't have the decency to help me up and I lost my damn contact." I turned around and saw this woman in a jogging suit. It was the woman I knocked down.

"Geez, I'm sorry. But I had to catch Lily, this cat. She's not mine. Are you ok?" I held Lily out to her to show her that I was telling the truth. She probably thought I was some kind of jerk. I was getting nervous again. She stared at me, breathing hard and dripping with sweat. She had a plain, pretty face; a thin, rail type of body. No shape. The dark roots of her blond hair were showing. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail that stood up on the top of her head and fell over her forehead like a waterfall.

"I'm ok, I guess. After you plowed me down, I was taking a short cut and that truck almost ran me down. Once is enough for one day," she said.

"Me too, that truck," I said trying to get her attention off the fact that I knocked her down. She was looking at me strangely as she huffed and puffed. She had this weird look about her. I looked into her eyes. I

think eyes in general are pretty. Even if you're ugly, your eyes won't fail you. But this girl she had one green eye and one blue eye. They fascinated me, but there was also something else about her I couldn't quite figure.

"Where do you get those eyes. Did your mom have a green eye and your dad have a blue?"

"When you knocked me down, I lost a contact lens."

"I'm really sorry."

"It's ok, I found it," she said holding out her hand and showing me a bright yellow contact lens. "See," she said, spitting in her hand, rubbing the lense in her spit, and putting it in her eye. "My blue eye is now green," she said, blinking like crazy. We both started laughing. She had a great laugh. It was deep and raspy. I noticed her lips. They were chapped and sore-looking but she had perfect white teeth and a smile that made her face sparkle like one of Trudy's oversized diamond rings.

"Well," she said gasping for more air, "can you believe that truck driver? What a nasty guy. He makes Archie Bunker look like Mother Theresa." After she spoke there was this strange uncomfortable silence between us. I looked in her eyes once again and they reflected something that was familiar to me. However, I couldn't quite place it.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Alex."

"I once had a guinea pig named Alex. Alex was something else." She seemed to be somewhere else for the moment.

"Your name?" I asked.

"Yup. Good old Alex. He sure helped me though a bad time," she mumbled.

"Excuse me."

"Oh, I'm sorry, where were we? My name, ok, yeah I'm Dedra MaCruder." She held out her bony hand and I shook it carefully. I was still balancing Lily.

"What is the sticky stuff on my hand?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Just tell me what it is. Oh my god, what is this shit."

"It's sauce, Lily got into some sauce, that's all."

"Thank God. For a minute I thought . . . well, never mind," she said, rubbing her hand on an empty box. She probably thought I was whacking off in the alley or something perverted like that. From darkening clouds a slight drizzle of rain fell upon us. We both ran into a doorway that was covered with a metal awning.

"I'm bushed" she said. She sat down on the little concrete step, and I joined her. The rain started to pour. As the rain hit the metal awning above us, it sounded like a jar of thumb tacks spilling on a tile floor. Once again there was silence between us. She seemed uptight as she just

stared at the falling rain. She continually wiped her forehead and tightened her waterfall hairdo by grabbing two separate bunches of hair and pulling them apart.

"Where's that dog?" I asked.

"What? Oh Romeo. She'll find me or find her way back to the East side, she always does."

"All the way from downtown?" I asked.

"No shit, the dog is unreal. Hedy gave her to me."

"If it's a female, why do you call it Romeo? Why not Juliet or Beatrice or something?"

"I did it to kinda piss Hedy off."

"Was she?"

"What?"

"Pissed."

"Yeah, she was pissed off but she got over it. She thinks she's my mother and I guess, in a way, she is. Both my parents are like lifeless robots."

"Wouldn't know," I said.

"What you have no parents?"

"They burned to a crisp in a nightclub." She looked at me again like I was some kind of weirdo.

"It's not so bad," I said. "I live with my Grandfather in the Hotel Persimmon. He owns it, we own it. Hey, I went to China once."

"Really? My dad is in Japan with his friend."

"Do you go to School?"

"RISD. I quit this fall, it sucked. How about you?"

"I went and quit. So who's this Hedy that you like pissing off?"

"Umh, my mom, well her life, it's kinda crazy. I grew up in San Antonio and my mom was a nun until she met my dad. My dad was a priest. She lived at the convent; he lived at the rectory. They fell in love; she got pregnant. They both quit, and I was born. And when I was fifteen my mom decided she was a lesbian and moved to New York with Hedy. Well, Hedy's name is really Brenda she was a nun too. She changed her name to Hedy after the movie actress Hedy Lamarr. You know, the first actress to show her tits."

"What about your dad?"

"He didn't move in with Hedy, he moved to St. Paul with Bernard. What about you Alex, what's your story?"

"Well if you really want to know, my parents are ashes, my Grandfather's a slime and dates a whore. I video tape people having sex and watch them do gross things. I walk this cat for a fat rich pig, and I was in love once. Her name was Tessy and I'm unstable."

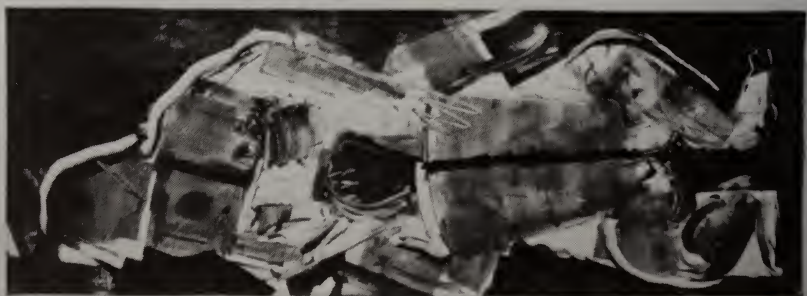
"I was suppose to get married today. I felt so safe with him, I still can't believe he took off on me. I haven't heard from him in three weeks." Then suddenly, this girl starts getting angry and she starts

yelling. I didn't know what to do, I mean it was like she was blaming me or something.

"That asshole called me once just to tell me that he was sending his friend over to pick up his CD player. That's all he had to say, that fucker and his god damn CD player." She wiped tears from her eyes.

"Tessy, I loved her too. Just the same, I know how you feel. Hey I have a great video camera. But I don't have a CD." She didn't seem to hear me. She crossed her arms and balanced them on her knees and hid her face in her arms and mumbled through sobs.

That familiar feeling I couldn't quite decipher about her became extraordinarily clear to me now. I tucked Lily under my coat and ran in the rain back to the Hotel Persimmon.



Triptych
(monoprint, 1990)

oh dad how an eggplant would

Flour the table.
After scouring the wood pale, flour it dry.
Build a mountain on the table.
Form a crater in the mountain.
Crack eggs into the crater. Knead the dough.
Volcano, lava, earthquake. Knead the dough.

This is a recipe for
 Oh dad how an eggplant would sing for you!
This is
 With your camera you planted that
 luxurious form on black & white,
This recipe
 then took a knife and sliced it, intense flesh whittled
 into parchment, fried in garlic and olive oil.
This recipe is for
 Oh the Gregorian chant of an eggplant pie!

We freed you into ashes, into air
the silent winter I was ten.
Now I have the eggplant
framed in my kitchen,
above the tin of olives
& the basil I picked at home.

I try winning you back, like Orpheus—
my pesto versus the gods!
I cook all day,
crushing garlic to wake your tongue,
beating basil and cilantro,
the throb pounding your heart and ears hungry again.
Walnut halves—lungs to take breath,
cheese as oily & sweet as your hot forehead bent over the pot.

I feel you sitting behind me at the table,
ravenous after years of bone & gravel stew.
I seem to hear you, turning quickly
I almost catch you, then
I am looking through you at
the eggplant, proudly hanging on my wall.

blues for eugene

I have closed my eyes to the smoke
and the guitar's blue-steel whinny.
I need no eyes to feel my way
along the walls, down the hall to the kitchen
where we made love on the floor
before we had any tables or chairs.

Especially with my eyes closed I can see
the blue tongue of the sky
lapping Icarus clean of his wings,
van Gogh's star-blue ecstasy,
Billie's blue "Do Nothing
Till You Hear From Me."

I can take a drag of that blue
and it will curl in the hollow
above my tongue before going deeper.
When I open my eyes, blue-lace agates roll out,
each stone with your name somewhere on it.

Diving for Pearls

A fisher of dishes,
I washed them
for bread,
scraping plates
from breakfast,
lunch and dinner,
loaded racks
to feed the machine,
pulled them gleaming
from its maw
in clouds of steam.

The stacks rose
and fell, I danced
to the clash of china,
bosses and busboys
crying for silver,
cups and saucers.
My clothes stank
but my hands
were always clean.

At the Names Project

(for Howard Segars)

Quilts cover the gymnasium floor,
hang flat from the walls like flags
sewn together with a common thread.
A pageant of patchwork celebrating
Bones, that old caricature
with a scythe you come across in books
or museums, and then go on
to the next picture.

People walk
up and down the aisles, gaze into
the open rooms of a wandering city
of the dead, decorated with medals,
toys, rings, teddybears, more
memorabilia than I could ever remember.
Attendants in white are handing out maps
next to the boxes of Kleenex
at the doors. Music drifts
down from the ceiling.

Confused, I wander looking for your place,
but your block's been stored: No vacancies
on the floor, they tell me as they take
your address to bring out, unfold,
and there's your face emerging
from your things laid at to last:

Red suspenders stitched in an arch
in two bright ties over the bluejean vest
inscribed with the Russian poem—trappings
of your gay and singular soul, the scholar
and communist holding out one
good hand for the good of all,

who never gave your dying self
away until someone called
us to your bedside. We spoke to you
as the machinery hummed and you lay
suspended from tubes and wires.
As if words could connect
the body you were leaving behind
with the spirit that harangued, inspired,
You blinked, spilling a tear, I think.

Years after we've sorted your affairs,
found new homes for your books,
you've become more public,
more private than ever.

i have a collection of thorns, some

cracked and dull
extracted from skin as tough
as uncured leather

others sharp and green
plucked from thin elegant stalks,
long before the wilting
of roses—

i wish i were walking on roses, thousands
of plush petals leading to
the “Ah” at the end of the search.

i think of my own search, the deliberate choices:
the obsession with my first horse
because he was the one who threw me
over the fence;
my breath knocked out on impact, tiny rocks
imbedded in my cheek. i first fell
in love that day,
needing to tame something wild, not recognizing
that something was myself.

i do not keep my collection behind glass,
i hold it in my hand, feel again the pricks
of pleasure as i fold and unfold my fist—

small specks of blood sprout like wild roses.

soul kitchen

I

soul kitchen assembly draws us in
every six thirty five
five worn bodies collected
smearing wet grime on the cold blistered floor
while we heat up our remnants
talking a lot

our discordant noises splash
five different sides
TV talk show radio
steam heat and telephone
boot tramp and dart stop
and a heavy weight laughter
rolls through it all
like desperate oil

and if silence creeps in
lock the doors
tip the keys
into the mouth
and swallowing hard
make a sound

II

each caught
collected here
to watch while
 the cold pipes turned on
 back stairs torn down
 shower window broken
 and all the handles stolen
from our dark kitchen where we wait the wrecker's ball

III

ten o'clock darts fly
 our world on a dart board
 simulated conversation
 a normal night's mantra

"if we were there, with beer in hand, I'd say"

dart hits refrigerator
 spins
 everyone ducks

"then I'd reply"

IV

five musicians a painter
 three writers two
 filmmakers two
 husbands three
 hunters a
 pale comedian
 and eight women

all photographed
 on postcards
 and physics tests
 on plaid
 rags and old
 black boots
 cheap toys and
 old
 phone
 notes

on Sunday morning weak
guitar litigation
sexposter sports
serial killer stats
old films at eleven
strong coffee breakfast
five penniless
spendthrifts

that mouse and
his old food
dusty sunlit air pockets
liquor waste products
and full spice cabinets
for September's gourmet
debauchee and
Halloween's candy in
November when Hunger
never listens
and

we
never
laughed
so loud



Getting Through
(monoprint, 1990)

Graceland Blues

PAUL PICARD

It was the first day of rain since I arrived in Tennessee, and the raw, January air, unlike the balmy weather all week, made me feel as if I were in the midst of despair even though there was celebration around me. Elvis would have been fifty-five that day. Across the street from the mansion, his flock waited in the Graceland reception lobby/ticket center and swayed in subconscious unison to their king's "Don't Be Cruel," piped in over the public address system. The women's and even some of the men's eyes were damp with tears as they all gazed up at the double-lifesized portrait of Elvis in his prime, when his tight black leather body suit caressed the slim hips that outraged Ed Sullivan and when his eyes still shone bright and unfettered by the amphetamine haze of his later years.

At nine years old, with my fingers poised over the "record" button of an old cassette player, I listened to the Jim Sands Oldies Show on WHDH Radio—before the Rolling Stones and Creedance Clearwater Revival were considered "oldies"—and prayed the next song would be "Hound Dog" or "Jail House Rock."

Elvis was my favorite. I saw the final concert before he died, and though he was overweight and didn't sound quite the same, he was still my favorite. With his death and my growing older, my interest faded, shifted to newer music, and waiting for Elvis became a memory until I found myself doing it again, years later, outside his home; as I waited, I remembered and found myself also staring at the portrait and swaying inside to the music. The double doors at the rear of the hall opened to let more fans in, and I was ushered out by the push of the crowd onto the sidewalk where busses loaded tourists to be shuttled across the street to the mansion. From under the bus stop awning, I could see the house and the pale grey aura of the tenements and slums that flanked it. This was the poorest section of Memphis, and unlike many of the remnants of our recent urban-American breakdown, this part of Memphis has been poor for a very long time. It was here and in other hopelessly under-nourished, southern slums that the blues were born, and thrived and became a staple of lyrics for Elvis Presley to record and popularize. Two streets from the Sun Records Building—from where he was made famous—the saloons and music halls of Beale Street still book strictly

blues and jazz as they have been for over seventy-five years alongside the muddy Mississippi.

Two nights before our Graceland trip we were at Alfred's in the heart of Beale Street listening to Pop Davis, and later, Booker T. Loury. They played blues that were rooted in the cotton fields and sharecropping and corrugated tin shacks that have been so familiar to poor, southern blacks since the emancipation of slaves. They played the same blues that Huddie Leadbetter—the famous "Leadbelly"—wrote while on a chain gang in the first quarter of this century. They still played the blues that, thirty years before, had been the corner stone for the building of modern rock and roll.

Pops Davis is the local legend in Memphis, a movie star. He had a bit part in *The Blues Brothers*, and when I recognized him, he was so happy, he hugged me. I could smell the bourbon on his breath. He played for drinks. The next morning, I saw him sleeping with his guitar in the doorway of a laundromat. Later that day, in a scene that looked like the tea party from *Alice in Wonderland*, Pops and other musicians were sitting under the gazebo in the park, playing and passing a jug of wine until they all were thoroughly drunk. They passed out, slumped over guitars, horns and drum kits under the spring-like Memphis sun. Up north we would call them vagrants, bums. In Baton Rouge and New Orleans and Memphis, however, they are heroes—remnants of a folk music that reveals life beneath the facade of the American Dream, beneath the economic boom of southern cities like Memphis, beneath the dreams of mansions and plantations and Graceland.

The musical-note gates opening to the estate were stained with red graffiti like the street art seen in most of urban America. As we rode the tour bus on the long circular drive, we were told of the doctor who built the house and named it for his wife, Grace, years before Elvis' birth. "The King" bought secondhand.

The mansion looked like any other house, only a little larger, and inside, the rooms were average, not spacious or open like the mansions I had seen in Newport, Rhode Island. The living room had a piano—I'd have been surprised if it didn't—but Elvis' piano, the piano of the king of rock and roll, was completely gold plated: a birthday gift from his wife. From the carved alligator furniture that took him half an hour to pick out and the carpeting on the ceiling of his pool room and the twenty-four televisions—three in one room—and the fully mirrored stairway to his game room, Elvis' taste was as tacky as the black velvet portraits selling in the Graceland gift shop. The top floor of the house, where he died, was forbidden to tourists; this was the only thing about the house that didn't strike me as somehow inappropriate. The barn in the back of the house, once Elvis' private recording studio, was converted into a display room for his multitude of gold and platinum albums. The tour guides talked of the rise of Elvis and the success of Elvis and the lifetime

achievement of Elvis; they never mentioned that on very few of his million-selling albums did his name appear in the songwriting credits. Elvis wrote none but a small handful of his own songs.

He built a career on the lyrics of the Beale Street musicians, performing their music—music unheard of in white America—to the same population that alienated it. He brought the blues of black America to the ear of the white middle class, and while some applaud his popularization of it, they forgot that those who wrote and lived his songs still exist in the slums around his lavish, tasteless mansion. Elvis, the white man with a black man's voice, built his career and his rise from the slums on the fact that he was white.

He was born in those same slums, poor, and he remained a poor boy, dropped into rich surroundings, spending his wealth like a sixteen-year-old lottery winner. The tour guide told us that when he died, he was bankrupt. Since then, his estate and museum have grossed almost five hundred million dollars. I moved on to the grave site of Elvis and his parents, between the pool and the horse stables on the east lawn of the mansion. I heard the music, once again, piped in over the public address. On the gravestones were plastic flowers that were faded and torn as if they had been there since his death. The music sounded empty now, lifeless; looking at the mansion and the unkempt graves and the slums beyond the stables, all under the cold rain, I felt a chill.

Perspective On The Wall 1967: Facade of Despair

JANET BURNE

The history of mankind might be studied in the remnants of the walls which have been built or torn away. Throughout centuries of trying to master the earth and each other, we have built a thousand-thousand walls for a thousand-thousand reasons. Walls have lived in tales and stories and in the newspapers and TV journals of our day. Our history is full of walls. Joshua knocked one down by blowing his horn. The Jews still kneel before theirs, bowing their heads to the Almighty, inserting prayers scratched on little pieces of paper into the ancient chinks. The disparaged veterans of the undeclared Vietnam War stand mute in front of theirs, the knot of years long, unarticulated grief welling in their throats and driving the tears out at last over stony cheeks, cracked with the bitterness of time.

We have been walled in, we have been walled out. Walls have buttressed our strongest fortresses and they have cleft our deepest humanity. Robert Frost chides us that we should ask what we are walling in or out when first we set to building a wall, but on the thirteenth of August, 1961, a barbed wire and concrete answer rose across the city of Berlin, Germany, without the benefit of a question's having been posed.

The world woke up that morning and was stunned. Overnight, the U.S.S.R. had marshalled its troops stationed in East Berlin, and in the darkness of the earliest hours they ringed the city with barbed wire sufficient to be laid the full circumference of the globe. Armed troops stood along the sidewalks, forbidding anyone to cross streets which, yesterday, had been the paths of casual strollers, shoppers, businessmen and families. Tanks blocked the path of anyone who would chance to step over the invisible line which had been marked only by colors on a map in Allied military offices until now. An abstract global power struggle that had been intensifying over the sixteen years since the end of the World War II was crystallized on the streets of Berlin this grey morning; the city which had been partitioned and passed into the custody of the four Allies, both East and West, found itself in a mortal showdown that would be locked into place for the next twenty-nine years. A wall which would only grow more impossible to penetrate now

severed a city in half, cutting through the sensibilities of its people, cutting through traditions and ties, cutting through the very hearts of those who lived here.

During the six years following that dismal early morning, the "first generation Wall" of barbed wire and human determination had been fortified by the addition of brick, metal, and concrete. A tailor's shop, a grocery, a row of houses, and even the portals of a solemn cathedral had given the stonemasons of the Eastern forces a ready-made facade to incorporate into the Wall. All but the front of these once bustling structures fell victim to the wrecker's ball, and each opening in every building was filled with concrete or brick. Windows from which Hausfrauen had hung their eiderdown mattresses for a weekly airing were closed forever to the cleansing spring breezes, blind forever to sights of daily living. Doors no longer opened onto the sidewalks, spilling the daily intercourse of the people onto the sunny cobblestones. They were solid now. Impenetrable. They stood mute along the streets throughout entire neighborhoods, like mouths stopped cold in the act of speaking, of living, a still and silent reminder of the cut-off life in this place.

On the opposite sides of the severed streets, the buildings still served their original purposes: daily pursuits still animated the windows and doors, and life proceeded as if nothing had happened. Almost. No one who walked along these streets could keep his eyes averted from the Wall entirely, from the mocking presence of the power which had yanked the store keeper and the family and the factory worker back away from their windows, and had slapped the mortar and brick into those spaces, and had sealed half a city into an island that was surrounded not by water but by stone.

Behind the bricked facade, a strip of land hundreds of yards wide had been razed to barren dust and planted with things that would never grow green with new life—under the dirt, invisible to the eye, land mines were set for the brave or the foolish who would try to dart their way across this "dead man's zone" in doomed attempts to escape. A deadly necklace of black metal anti-tank traps encircled the strip beyond the Wall. Fortified guard towers punctuated the expanse of dirt in regular intervals of 500 yards, an unbroken presence around the entire city, peopled always by two uniformed soldiers who never laid their weapons down, who never ceased to watch. A casual Sunday driver, having followed one or another of the beautiful, winding country roads that once led beyond the city limits, would come inevitably now to an abrupt dead-end, a twelve foot barrier of cinder block, topped perhaps with crushed glass imbedded in cement. If he stepped outside his car and ventured too close to that Wall, he would see the weapons of the soldiers slowly swing around to sight him in a silent, ominous warning, and he would gently ease away, reenter his car, and try another route.

Sunday was a day for pleasure driving through the twisted village lanes of the outer city, for strolling through the myriad of paths that crisscrossed the wooded areas within the inner city; it seemed that on Sunday, the whole of the population turned out to breathe the fresh air . . . the free air . . . of this imprisoned place. Those of us living there would go out just to get out; perhaps the act of wandering with no specific destination or schedule was an antidote for our real inability to go very far in any one direction. Yet, wrapped within the need to practice our right to walk wherever we wanted inside this Wall, we seemed drawn to walk along the sidewalks edged with dead buildings, our silent thoughts kept close within our hearts, to listen once again to the voiceless cry, "In Tyrannos," scrawled in paint across the entry to the church which nevermore would open its sanctuary to the faithful.

On one such Sunday pilgrimage, under a grey October sky appropriate to the gloom that always settled in our souls when we came upon another of the dead ends, we left our car parked next to the severed sidewalk and climbed the plank stairs to the observation deck which stared defiantly across the Wall to the East, in full sight of the ubiquitous guard towers. We were here as outsiders; we could go "home-home" from this place when the time came, but even so, we had come to know the island fever which seeped into the consciousness after only a few months behind this Wall. We had absorbed the anguish of the natives, rent from neighbors, friends, and family. We had become Berliners in our spirits, or so we thought.

The observation deck held many of us this day, only a few of us temporary residents. In the silence that the platform seemed to require, two elderly people leaned forward over the railing as far as they dared, and focused their bespeckled gazes unwaveringly at the deserted street across the zone. The guards in the tower looked at them. No one moved. The afternoon seemed frozen in a grey and silent suspension. Within a few minutes, a tiny group of four appeared on the sidewalk over there, walking briskly along the abandoned street of semi-bombed buildings and piles of rubble. Hollow windows of long-deserted shops and houses watched their progress in the East; a silent witness of Sunday observers stood motionless in the West. The small group hustled, one didn't want to linger, and stopped at the street corner nearest the empty space of dirt, hundreds of yards from the aching arms of the grandmother, hundreds of light years from the possibility of unity.

A hanky unfurled in the old woman's hand. Her arm made slow, gentle arcs overhead. Across the concrete barrier, past the barren "no man's land" that looked so innocent, she sent her sign to the family standing there. The children and their children . . . a Sunday stroll. Wave now, the younger couple seemed to urge the little ones. Float your hanky high. Wave to Grandma. Wave to Grandpa. It's one o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, and we will be here again next week, the week after

that, the week after that. We will wave, and all the unsaid words, the unknissed kisses, the uncountable, unfelt embraces will fly from the corner of our hankies and soar above the dirt and the concrete and the barbed wire into a future time perhaps, if we are lucky enough to see it in our lifetimes, when they will be real.

The silence cloaked the moment; it claimed the day. The silence carried the messages that the Wall would not allow. We descended to the ground without a word. There would never be words adequate to utter the rending of this city, the tearing of these hearts effected by this brick, metal, and concrete. This Wall would stain the history of our century, and only the future, moved by the faith of these Berliners, would hold the hope that we might someday know the rending of this terrible, terrible Wall.

Aliens and Alienation

GOLDIE OSURI

“‘They are coming!’ bawled a policeman, hammering at the door; the Martians are coming!’ and hurried to the next door”
(*War of the Worlds*, 110).

“‘They are coming!’ How often have we heard those words in the history of humankind? So must the Babylonians have shouted before the invasion of the Persians and so the French at the eve of Nazi occupation. In the context of war, such words strike terror in the heart of any would-be victim that something alien is about to take over. The concept of aliens, then, is an ancient one. Human beings have often viewed each other as aliens, and any person leaving a familiar and well-loved locality usually feels the pangs of alienation keenly. What then is the difference between the notion of aliens and alienation in the period before the nineteenth century and after?

The most obvious answer to this question is the devastating effect that Darwin’s theory of evolution had on the ordered world that we as human beings had envisioned for ourselves. The suggestion that we have mutated through a series of evolutionary processes like any other species (and like any other species we will someday become extinct without the protection of a God or many Gods) placed us in an alien light. Divorced thus from supernatural protection and alienated from an order that ruled humankind and nature, the nineteenth century saw a much deeper, more devastating meaning in the words alien and alienation. Mark Rose comments :

At one time, this sense of alienation did not exist. Then the cosmos itself was a sacrament, as manifestation of the imminent deity linked to the human world by love, by the great chain of plenitude of correspondences between the human and the natural spheres, both participating in the magic of the divine logos (50).

Thus Rose supposes that alienation did not exist because people felt safe within the great chain of being. Dogs, cats, rocks, and trees had their place as human beings did, and therefore nobody could have felt or

become alienated. He is right, of course, within this context; however, the “great chain of being” existed primarily within the consciousness of the Euro-Christian sphere. Granted that other cultures had similar connections to nature and gods, the notion of an ordered universe was not entirely world-wide. Europeans, for example, themselves viewed human beings on other continents as savage and alien. Therefore, Columbus brought back Indians from the Carib as slaves — slaves who perhaps felt as alienated in Spain as any Martian would on earth.

But Rose is accurate in suggesting that specific changes in the intellectual climate of the nineteenth century deepened the sense of alienation that humankind felt, initiated the genre of science-fiction and invited imagination to people in the universe with figures and forms never before imagined. Rose further hypothesizes:

In any case, the kind of alienation from the natural world that science fiction presupposes really only comes into being in the nineteenth century, and it is intimately associated with both industrialization and urbanization and with the Victorian crisis of faith, with the disappearance of God that marks the beginning of the modern sense of radical disconnection (52).

Through industrialization and urbanization, England’s population started moving to cities, drifting away from the close contact with nature that comes from tilling fields and raising cattle — the Cain and Abel professions. Instead, the squalor of working in factories and mines was the legacy of the working class who had moved to the cities. And all this still might have been bearable to a thinking person had not the doubt about the existence of God brought to vision a solitary planet hurtling through space while its inhabitants were born into a world of toil and died without a grand purpose or a sense of specialness.

And so evolves the literature of science-fiction with the possibility that other species (like us or different) perhaps inhabit other planets revolving in the darkness of the universe. H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* distinctly plays with this notion, weaving together the existence of a race of beings on another planet with the idea that those aliens (like ourselves) are subject to evolution. Humanity is then set up as but one possible species in contrast to others, and Wells raises disturbing questions about aliens and alienation in a complex and ambiguous manner.

Who, then, are the real aliens — “Martians” or the Humans? Who feels alienated from whom? Are “Martians” really aliens or are they frighteningly akin to us? Wells spins us at once into an alien as well as familiar world where we seem to watch our actions with skeptical detachment and an embarrassing sense of identification.

War of the Worlds opens with an alien situation: Martians are watching our nineteenth century world “closely.” Obviously, we immediately tend to categorize the Martians as aliens, and we are encouraged by the narrator who makes the contrast between Martians and humans simple at first: they are physically different, mentally superior, and technologically advanced. Therefore, the reader can distinguish between these beings and identify the alien without really scrutinizing the anthropomorphic qualities of the Martians. The first glimpse that the narrator has of the Martians, for instance is preceded by a day-long anticipation of a crowd of spectators who watch the foreign cylinder cooling and unscrewing. The crowd expects to see something human-like emerge from the cylinder half-buried in earth. At about sunset the crowd is rewarded by the movements of a being trying to come out:

I presently saw something stirring within the shadow: grey billowish movements one above another, and then two luminous disks like eyes. Then something resembling a little grey snake, about the thickness of a walking stick, coiled up out of the writhing middle, and wriggled in the air towards me—and another.

A sudden chill came over me (22-23).

This image of the alien is not exactly comforting. The seemingly objective descriptions of the narrator—“grey billowish movements” and “something resembling a little grey snake”—paint a picture of a being that is unlike any we have seen. Yet the word “billowish” suggesting the waves of the sea and the word “snake” suggesting something disagreeable and cold-blooded, define this creature in terms recognizable in human experience. Therefore the narrator does not have an objective eye; and, as a result, through his human eyes we see a hideous and repulsive being. The narrator is alienated from the Martian, at this point, purely through the sense of sight; and the Martian seems to be a true “alien.”

Secondly, the fact that the mental status of the aliens is on a much higher plane, immediately alienates them from human beings. Since the Martians live on a planet that is older than Earth, their evolution is in an advanced stage, and so they are much smarter. They are, however, dying of cold, and in their struggle for survival they plan to invade a warmer planet. And this they do in a systematic, logical manner. What is frightening about these rational beings is that they are “minds swaying vast mechanical bodies” (104). The Martian intellects are so far developed that they seem ruthless because of the loss of the emotional aspect of their beings that humans still possess. Love, mercy, pity, guilt,

and other emotional blessings are not readily visible in the Martians—of course the narrator is not privy to the emotions of the Martians. So the Martians are again “alien” because no human being is able to identify with their absolute “coolness of intellect.”

Thirdly, the Martians are much more technologically advanced. On the surface, this fact does not really set them apart from human beings since human technology has also been rapidly evolving. But the sight of those machines—which are about a hundred feet tall, life-like and armed with the heat-ray gun and poison gasses—intimidates the humans like nothing else can; these aliens are the agents of death. And even though death is a familiar aspect of human life, death in the form of a sudden scorch by a Martian gun is completely unfamiliar and frightening.

But are the Martians true aliens? That is, do they have no resemblance at all to ourselves? Rose observes:

At one level, the Martians are signs that stand for the idea of alienness, the idea of the incomprehensible otherness of the universe in which man lives. At another level, however, they stand for ourselves. In the evolutionary fable, for example, the Martians with their hypertrophied brains and atrophied bodies suggest a possible human future (76).

Let us look at the facts. To begin with, Wells makes the Darwinian connection between the Martians and the humans obvious. The “intelligences” on Mars are “greater than man’s and yet as mortal as his own.” Scientifically, it is logical that Mars should cool before the Earth cools because Mars is older. Therefore, Martians are in danger—as we would be if the temperature of the earth were to become ultra-summer or ultra-winter. So the Martians are our future; or, to reverse that statement, they were once us. Any notion of alienness is therefore undercut by this recognition. Wells, however, takes this connection to a higher level. The very fact that the Martians invade the earth to find habitation out of an instinct for survival is not unlike the human will to survive. Wells comments: “The intellectual side of man already admits that life is an incessant struggle for existence” (4). For instance, is not the invasion of the Martians like the European colonization of Africa, Asia and the Americas, depriving the natives of their basic rights while preying incessantly on their resources?

The races on earth, then, have had long rehearsals in the school of survival. So the Martians are not as “alien” in reaching out for another planet and establishing a strong-hold therein. I may observe here that Wells’ Martians are in fact better beings; their invasion is strictly a matter of life and death whereas earthly colonial pursuits have been more out of greed rather than need. The narrator seems to echo this statement:

And before we judge of them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought. . . . The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years (4).

So Wells illustrates through the actions of this other form of being our role as destructive agents upon our planet. Perhaps we are not justified in condemning the Martians when our instincts are so much like theirs.

The most important similarity, however, between the Martians and humans is our mutual fragility in the face of death. However strongly the Martians encase themselves in their hundred foot fighting machines, they are vulnerable to our comparatively feeble weaponry. When one of the Martians is destroyed by a shell, the narrator, seeing the fallen being, describes it in a rather sympathetic tone:

The tentacles swayed and struck like living arms, and, save for the helpless purposelessness of these movements, it was as if some wounded thing were struggling for its life amid the waves (86).

The Martians, then, are just as mortal as any of us are and completely "unalien" in this respect. In fact, at the end of the novel, they are defeated by one of the smallest units of life: bacteria. They even seem to weep, howling "Ulla, Ulla, Ulla, Ulla" just as we sob for our dead.

If, then, the Martians are so similar to us, who is the "alien"? Who feels this alienation most keenly? Wells' rich and complex narrative seems to elude the specificity that one might wish to impose, namely calling the Martian an alien and the human a native. Literally, the Martians are aliens because they come from another planet; and we are native since we are products of the Earth. But these delineations seem to shift in the light of the occurring events.

The Martians send their cylinder "sunward" to the earth, and after a few hours they establish their stronghold by acting aggressively from the pit and defending themselves from attack as well. The humans who cannot face the Martians are thus alienated from their own territory. They have to run away and hide. This kind of alienation deepens even more as the Martians begin to change the face of the English countryside:

In one night the valley had become a valley of ashes. The fire had dwindled now. Where the flames had been there were now streamers of smoke; but the countless ruins of shattered and gutted houses . . . stood out now gaunt and terrible in the pitiless light of dawn (72).

Thus "human" habitation is destroyed and the homeless body of people move about searching for places to hide. In addition to destroying the landscape, the Martians plant their native red weed which starts growing and choking the rivers. The glow that emanates from the fires and the weed makes Earth look like Mars, and the narrator's desolation is complete. He feels a "sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer master, but an animal among the animals, under the Martian heel" (205). So the alienation of humans is almost complete, since they've had to leave everything familiar, and their earth begins to take the shape that the invaders create.

This alienation, however, brings to light another more embarrassing alienation: the pre-Martian alienation that exists within our communities. The humans in *War of the Worlds* are almost as alienated from each other as from the Martians. The narrator himself, watching the first Martian cylinder, "perceived a neighbor of mine, though I did not know his name" (27). Wells, then, seems to illustrate the remoteness of most human beings from each other. This ignorance about a neighbor is pushed to a horrifying level when the townspeople trample each other—the unknown human beings—in their hurry to flee:

After a fruitless struggle to get aboard a North-Western train, the engines of the trains . . . ploughed through shrieking people, and a dozen stalwart men fought to keep the crowd from crushing the driver against his furnace (128).

The ploughing engine is not unlike the Martian fighting machine ploughing through the countryside; and human instinct for survival becomes of paramount importance while concern for another is a lesser priority. The scenes of hysteria and mass stampede that Wells paints are rather grotesque when compared to the scene where the Martians pick their dead comrade from the boiling river. The Martian's behavior, therefore, serves to point out the alienation of human beings from one another.

Taking into consideration all the complexity and ambiguity surrounding the concepts of aliens and alienation, Wells ends the novel rather simply, perhaps cautioning rather than condemning. For, while the grand scheme of the novel prevents the presence of hope since the Martians show us our future—the erasure of our existence as a race—Wells restores the earth to human beings. The narrator, at the end, suffers from a "sense of doubt and insecurity." But he is still able "to hold my wife's hand again"; an echo perhaps of Milton's Adam and Eve holding hands after their expulsion from the Garden in *Paradise Lost*. If the Martians have basically failed in their struggle to find a place to survive, we still have time, our planet, and our loved ones. We are not completely alienated. The Martians visit becomes more of a vehicle for the narrator

to realize the fragility of our existence. While Wells does not really give us a moral lecture, he does seem to show us that instead of spending time and resources on destruction—alienating ourselves and other human beings—we can preserve our “morning star of hope, our own warmer planet, green with vegetation and grey with water” (3).

War of the Worlds, then, offers us a chance—a chance even against a soon-to-deteriorate Earth. So although we are but ants in the scheme of the Universe, we may still be special; unlike the Martians, we still have emotions, and even the ability to perceive the “alien” and feel alienation is special to us. And though Wells reflects us in the Martians—agents of destruction and insistent survivors—we are perhaps not as pathetic. We still have our hands to hold one another even if we are ultimately doomed.

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Self-conscious Interlude
(woodblock print, 1990)

The Small Music of Our Meeting

Today I am singing. I am trying
to keep a voice in the center
of my throat. And it is
because she smiled that the word
lonely began to sound like a joke
or a sexy whisper which is given
too much meaning, as if it is
the actual act. And that is
what this is about. This is
me trying to keep me from losing
myself and being dead. Mute.
But dying was when I put the first line
down here. Like this. She smiled.
We spoke. I did not catch her name.
She had to go somewhere. I might
see her again. Probably tomorrow.
Probably the next day. I'll ask her then.
Her name will be tranquil. She will
tell me not to be sorry. It won't work.
My eyes will wash the floor
by her feet. I think she will know
that I am only there and open.
I might. I might stretch out
in my clothes. I might speak
clearly. Looking at her.
I might try and hold her.
I might. *Pause.* Try and hold. *Pause.*
Her. *Refrain.*
I might try and hold her.
Cadence.

13 October

squirrels with hornbean pods
leave scant heaps like ripped tissue
flee beneath low boughs

hue of sour plums
three-point leaves of red maple
sheet the wilting grass

thick shawl of coarse weave
bold yellow of black maple
in mysterious shade

sparrows in rosebeds
blooms the color of deep wounds
raindrops pecking soil

waiting

waiting
at a sidewalk café
it seems I'm always en route
I look for the waiter
and try to avoid looking
at the seat on my left
empty
like all the other photos of me

Gulls

bellies on the cold
brick wall, scoop
and swallow, beaks full of snow

feathers blown
and eyes almost closed
against the grey wind

Traditions

Blackest of blacks. Pinprick stars
shine down on a clearing in the trees.
A tribe gathers around the fire;
the crone sings low and throws a log
onto the pyre, forging a light
so strong it draws back the sun.

Years pass. A god sends down his son,
proclaimed by the song of a star
so strong, others pale in its light,
drawing pilgrims close to the tree
of life. Finally, nailed across logs,
even his kindness dies by the fire.

Word spreads even faster than fire,
sparking hate in the sect of the sun.
Caught, bound, imprisoned and flogged,
murdered beneath the watchful stars;
they cut down Christians like trees
if they don't pick denial or flight.

Almost everyone has seen the light;
belief burns in their hearts like fire:
"There aren't any spirits in trees,
and God's Son alone controls the sun,
while evil breeds in the five-pointed star."
Witches are burning like so many logs.

Inside the parlor burns a Yule log,
each window shines with candlelight,
and the village twinkles like fallen stars.
The family gathers close to the fire,
singing praises to the birth of the Son;
gifts are piled around an evergreen tree.

Soldiers are sent to a land without trees,
follow as blindly and mindless as logs.
Planning death beneath a desert sun
to protect their newest god, the light
that guides and burns without fire,
driving our lives under Stripes and Stars.

What swung from the tree of knowledge? A blight
that clogs and chokes our dreamings of fire.
Burnt by too many Suns, blind eyes cry for the stars.

Country Song 1987

Certain Material. Bond-breaking
bone-bending. *But*-begging.
bridges barstools.

Tell it, girl.
Of the sapped and
sucking. Mapping
and map-mangling.

Tell it.
What you said I took
literally.
My mistake. Really.
I should have taken it
literarily.

or not.
Black crayon on wax paper.
And no beloved pubic here.
No relations.
Only material:
Life is huge and gettin huger.
My heart's blue
and gettin
Bluer.

cause you're you
and gettin
Youer.

Waiting for the Silence

Housecats,
know nothing mother-fucking
housecats
hot meals, daily showers
A.F.V.N. Johnny Winters
poker, pinochle
bored to tears
monsoon rains on PSP roofs
not tonight at my sandbag castle
two up one down
who's he shittin
that was months ago
quiet since I've been here
D. company TDY, up north of Quang Tri
that was some shit
INCOMING
rockets shrill
plunk of mortars
sappers from the north berm
what the fuck; over
cascading parachutes
night like day
movement along the wire
Van's on the 60
barrel glows like tracers
beside my castle, fumbling fingers
79 not hardly quick enough
minutes like hours

head down barrel up
over like it starts, quick quiet
two hours till sun up
eyes wide heart racing
nobody down the rest of this night
never happen
smell of fear still hangs in the air
or is it sulphur
morning's light
police brass, toys to strip
thirty nine within the wire, count em
breakfast



The Meeting
(intaglio print, 1990)

Eden

HOWARD POSNER

Nobody could really believe it, despite weeks of advertising in *The Eden's* monthly film circular, but now the grainy black and white images flickering in front of them like black magic in the appalled silence of the movie theater dispelled the last shadow of doubt.

Al and Edna had been going out steadily for the past year, discovering the foreign film haven of *The Eden* in the early euphoria of their relationship with an exuberance of marijuana-induced bliss one Friday night while cruising Greenwich Village in the back seat of a yellow cab. Anesthetized, they sensed the stale vomit-laced atmosphere of the cab like the slightly cloying sensation of guilt fraying the edges of conscience in a dream after all sorts of murder and incest are committed and only vaguely remembered later. Their serpentine embrace of tongues and mad grappling at throat, hair, breasts, and crotch were momentarily thwarted by the cab's demonic descent into an uncovered manhole erupting steam like a volcano. White billowy clouds engulfed them as they roared with laughter, and then the milky obfuscation dissolved into a vision of the Rococo theater and culture-coated Friday night dates happily ever after.

Edna was a graduate psychology student and Al worked part-time in a printing shop while free-lancing occasionally as an art critic for an avant-garde art magazine. They had met at a Psychopomp art exhibition down on the Lower East side, and Edna's penchant for ferreting out the slightest suggestion of Freudian symbolism at the exhibit had mesmerized Al, who in his turn waxed eloquently to Edna about the abstract values of each painting, pointing out how color contrast in one, shape family in another, dynamic versus static figures in yet another, reinforced Edna's contention that at the core of the Psychopomp movement lay a preponderate foundation of Oedipal impulses. One particular painting, in fact, seemed to encapsulate the motif behind the movement: a controversial rendition of the Madonna and Child, featuring the baby Jesus as an infant punker wearing a fluorescent pink mohawk, blue eye shadow, red lipstick, black leather diamond-studded vest and pants, and holding in his left hand a severed male head, and in his right, a bleeding scepter that dripped circlets of blood into the slightly exposed and wiry crotch of the Madonna. The Madonna, naked,

her nipples protruding like bullets from the dark plenitude of her breasts, had short cropped hair blown back ala David Bowie, and was black as night. The Mother and Child gazed at each other entranced, locked in a mutual embrace of eternal appetite. The Psychopompists viewed the painting as a brilliant masterpiece, interpreting the bloody scepter, the estranged baby Jesus, and the erotic Madonna as an extraordinary fusion of Christ's transcendental vision of the unity between matter and spirit, between the abominable and the beatific, and uncompromising mission to decapitate all hypocrisy in the world. But to Edna and Al, the Freudian implications of the painting were all too clear. The exaltation of their communion at the gallery, fueled by their rhapsodic wanderings of the city afterwards, and reaching an orgasmic crescendo with a candlelight dinner at Giacomo's in Little Italy that evening, led ineluctably to the promised land of bed that night.

Shortly thereafter they began to live with each other, and for the most part they got along, sinking unsuspectingly into the stale monotony of daily routine, tolerating each other's idiosyncratic neuroses as the inevitable baggage dragged along on the Greyhound bus trip of life. Edna hated Al, was absolute boiling bullshit, for the way he jammed deep inside his jeans pockets snot-soaked, ink-stained handkerchiefs for weeks on end, seemingly oblivious of the green-tinged mold she'd find growing on them when she finally caught up with his laundry. When confronted with the proof of his malodorous conduct, Edna waving the mucilaginous caked cloth in Al's face like a flag, Al would repeat jocosely, What do you want from me? I'm recycling. Buy me a case of handkerchiefs, then. So she did, but he continued to use only one, and this she took personally, thinking he did it on purpose just to vex her. To Edna, the handkerchiefs became a symbol for Al's incapacity to open himself up completely, the cankerous manifestation of his old childhood rage festering deep inside against his dictatorial mother, who would whip him as a child mercilessly with an odiferous old rag to clean up his mess, and about whom Al had difficulty speaking without breaking into a prodigious sweat, a rage Edna sensed he had begun to project onto her, the surrogate mother. And Al could throttle Edna for exploding his dreams in the middle of the night with the helicopter roar of her outrageous snoring, so he'd ask her the next day if she'd dreamt she had been flying, and Edna, puzzled, would say No, Why? and Al furious would shout, It Sure As Hell Sounded Like You Had, and they'd repeat this scene, despite Edna's futile attempts at opening her traffic-jammed sinuses with eucalyptus steam baths and Al's doomed refuge in earplugs that led to nightmares of being chased at night by headless ghouls flatulating like thunder, 'til finally Al couldn't take it any more, and observing Edna's napalm-blasting mouth with the bitter bile of his insomnia, the spittle oozing out the corner of her mouth and down her chin and onto her pillow in a sleepy glob of disgusting innocence, stuffed

her mouth with a rolled up pair of sweat socks, venting his pent-up rage with paroxysms of laughter that lulled him to sleep as Edna gagged and rolled over, silenced at last. That's not funny, Edna would wait the next morning, waking up with a terrific cotton mouth that had nothing to do with the pot they had smoked the previous night. To Al, Edna's snoring, sounding more and more like cannon fire, was the unconscious manifestation of her long repressed fury against her father, a tyrannical figure who sexually abused her as a child with his voyeuristic perversions, forcing her to watch pornographic super-8 movies and beating her afterward with the film strip, and about whom Edna could not speak of without bursting into tears, a fury Al sensed she had begun to project onto him, the surrogate father.

And then there were other issues, Al's perpetually unwashed dishes, the empty bottles of beer left all over the place with foul smelling cigarettes stuffed in and around them, God, the man was a slob, and his endless whining about being unrecognized, Why Don't You Spend More Time Writing And Making Contacts Instead of Drinking and Complaining? she'd bellow, and Edna's female crap splattered all over the apartment, the hair spray, the fingernail polish, the facial creams and ointments, and tampons, If I Hear Another Complaint About PMS I'm Going To Throw Up, the brushes and combs, the brassieres hanging like so many nooses on the gallows of the shower stall, the shoes, My God Where Do You Get All Those Fucking Shoes, Woman, You Have No Money For Rent, the hysteria of research papers due, Edna at the table entombed in her books, but no dinner ready after a hard day of ink and stroboscopic copying machines, and worst of all they rarely made love anymore, their libidos rapidly congealing in the vapid swamp of their middle-class ambitious, complacency and ennui. So there brewed beneath the surface of their outwardly civil but increasingly insipid relationship the lava flows of their suppressed frustration and rancor.

Until tonight at The Eden. The dust motes in the projector beam swirl ecstatically, illuminating the judgeless screen with the fantastic images of history for all time. There he stands, the thin angular rail of man, the cropped brown hair combed straight to one side, the savage rectangle of moustache, the bony chest with the isolated patch of hair like scrub brush in a desert, the sad inflated solitary testicle drooping down like an overripe fig, the sinewy legs taut with tension as though poised for combat, the burning unforgettable eyes blazing at his female consort, the harsh guttural sounds exploding from his mouth like bombs, commanding her... to do what? Fascinated, entranced, feeling the mosquito-like pinprick of shame concomitant with the mutual swelling in their loins resurrected by the sight of The Evil One, Al and Edna do not read the subtitles. Al unconsciously adjusts himself in his seat, and Edna crosses her legs and grips Al's arm half in fear, half in the fervor of her reawakened vitality as the images prevail of The Evil Genius

slapping her face, racking it back and forth, shouting at her, and she, the tears streaming down her cheeks not in agony, not in humiliation, but in ecstasy, falls, clutching his chest, hips, legs, down at his feet, the willing servant of his demented and rapine fantasy. He straddles her nude body, skeletal feet at either side of her hips, and plucks at the bloated worm of his penis. He urinates on the prostate corpse of his mistress stretched out beneath him like a crucifix, the lead colored stream striking the steeple tips of her nipples, her face, torso, vagina and legs, she arcing back with wild elation, reaching her hands up to embrace totally and unconditionally the ammoniac discharge of her master's passion. Groans erupt from the audience unprepared for the authentic, too too real record of The Butcher's sadistic sexuality, his ugly nakedness somehow more vile, more threatening, more terrifying than his goose-stepping legions, than the ovens and the mass graves and the death camps, but Edna, beside herself with yearning, opens her hand over Al's chest and reaches down inside his pants, caressing the pistol-grip of his penis. Al's groan melts into the collective groan of the crowd as he arches his hips upward gratefully to Edna. He puts his arm round her and brings her head to rest on his shoulder, then slips his hand over Edna's breasts and down into her pants and over the matted-down hairs of her vagina, reaching two fingers inside the already warm moist secret tissues. I love you, I have always loved you, they breathe into each other's souls. They are in the back row of the theater, Al has the aisle seat, each strokes the other in rhythmic synchronization to the machine-gun rattle of the projector behind them, and no one sees nor are there any secret SS cameras to record the Easter of their love.

It Comes in Threes

R. B. FITZGERALD

Never seen so much blood. Lucky young Domenic got the mop and bucket. Angela's gonna be alright. I know she is. Hope she is, poor sweet thing. Moxie took her to the hospital. I bet he's sorry he ever trained her on that god damned box machine. 700 a day they make her do, boxes all over the place. They tie them up in bundles and stack them near me. They ought to get rid of that machine. Could have been worse, could have lost the whole hand. She used to have apples in her cheeks when she first started down here. Then she married that hard guy from shipping — wore her out for Christ's sake. Now she's getting pale and grey like all the rest of us down here in the bowels of the underwear factory. No sunlight for us, just dust and bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling. Just stacks of empty boxes all tied-up with string, tied by Angela's machine. 7000 bundles a day she does.

Big John Dolikta says it comes in threes. Never seen so much blood since I fought Kind Conlon, that dumb Limey bastard in '51. He was a bleeder, a bleeder from the first bell. He had welts on him from from the gym. Bled right after I hit him with the first couple jabs. They wouldn't stop it neither, and me with no knockout punch. Battlin' Joe, they called me in those days, Battlin' Joe Mullin. That fight was the first time I thought about getting out of the business. Blood all over my trunks and gloves. They had to clean the ring after every round. I was a gentleman fighter. We didn't try to kill the guy, like these guys they got now. You see, I was ranked number eleven in the flyweight division after I beat that bleeder Conlon, but I kind of lost interest after that. My heart wasn't into it. Every time I hit the guy, blood would spray all over the place. It just wasn't sporting. My Rita kept telling me to get out of that business and I guess I started listening to her after that. I had some style, like that Sugar Ray Robinson; he was my kind of fighter. Stick, stick and move. Oh, that man could slide. He had a bit of class. I was like that, Battlin' Joe Mullin — never made the big money but I got on some of Rib Valente's cards at the Garden. Still in good shape, too. Just ten pounds over my fighting weight. Sometimes it helps to be a little guy; don't carry so much weight around. Not like Big John over there. Look at him dancing round to that Polka music on his radio. Look at him limping round with that big gold tooth sticking out of his mouth. He looks like

an old weight lifter hauling those heavy crates. I might outlast him yet. He's got too many muscles for a guy pushing 65. Me, I'm a lightweight; still could go a couple of rounds.

Well, Big John's been saying that they're dropping like flies around here. First there was Tommy Edmunson, Ruthie's kid. They said they found him in the garage with the exhaust pipe hooked up to a garden hose. Nobody really knows whether it was over some girl of his or what. That kid never said a word to nobody. He wasn't even twenty years old yet. Then there was old Henry last week with his heart attack and next we got who knows? Angela may have dodged it by jamming her fingers in the machine. They come in threes, says Big John, like maybe it's him that's be next. He's crazy cause he's half Injun, half Pollock.

That Henry Smith was a strange old bastard. Looked like a little old frog with a pencil-thin moustache. He must've known his ticker was shot. He didn't give a shit what happened around here for the last two years. He had that bottle in his drawer. He was a bullshit artist alright. A complete bullshitter, all that talk about his summer house on the Cape and his wife and two sons — all a pack of lies. We went down to the funeral and found out that all he had in the world was his sister, an old maid, and that's who he lived with all those years. What a shocker. Everybody left pretty quick. That's no way to go out, the whole damn place thinking you're a phoney.

Oh, they used to shit on Henry for years. The big boss, Eliot, Olson, would come down in his monkey suit, storm up to Henry's desk and try to scare him. Make him feel like he was gonna be fired. And Henry always took it; always so meek and quiet. He knew they had him by the balls. Where the hell could Henry go, sixty years old and a drinker to boot.

"Yes, sir, I'll take care of it," he'd say but Henry was pissed. He must've been a bitter old bastard inside. He just hated that Olson guy. I bet that time he let Olson have a piece of his mind was because he knew his time wasn't long. I remember Olson come down and tried to frighten Henry about a lost pallet of boxes — real petty crap as usual. Old Henry got all red in the face and told Olson he didn't know where the damn pallet was and frankly he didn't care. "Go find it yourself," he says, "Just get the hell out of my area." The boss was so stunned, he turned tail and run off back upstairs. We all went over and shook old Henry's hand. That must have been Henry's finest hour. After that they started giving him lousy reports. Probably a good thing he got out when he did.

The only people that make it out of here are the college kids when they finally graduate. Some of them have started a pot to see when the next person dies around here. I've heard them whispering about it, but so far nobody's asked me to play. Probably betting on me and Big John, figure we're old enough to kick off any minute. Morbid, they get morbid down here in the hole after awhile. Old Henry was morbid like that. He

used to say when people get too old they ought to just take 'em out in the woods and shoot 'em. That way, nobody gets to be a burden. Maybe people are just living too long these days. Old Henry was right to get out when he did. Lot of guys living too long. They got Domenic's grandad from the old country down here. Can't hardly even push a broom. Domenic puts in so many hours, I guess they did him a favor. But the old man he can't do nothing. He no cabeesa de English; maybe they let him paste a couple of stickers on a pack of underpants. I don't want to wind up like that, takes him five minutes just to shuffle across the room for Christ sake. He looks so tired and bent over. Hell, a guy like that should just give it all up. Give it all up, I say.

They'll be calling me over the damn speaker. I should start sweeping up by Angela's machine. Won't be the same without her around. She was the only bright spot in the whole dump. She was a sweet one a few years back I'll bet. Now all we got is these wise-guy college kids. They don't say too much to your face. They hang in the shadows behind the stacks of boxes. You always have to draw it out of them what they're thinking and then it's never worth listening to anyway. Education's bad for some people — takes the life right out of them. They don't know how to have fun. They'd just love to bet that old Joe Mullin's going to be next. That pisses me off, like guys who used to bet against me in the Arena. Nobody bets against Joe Mullin and gets away with it. I was never knocked off my feet. I won my share and lost a few on decisions but I never been knocked down. I don't want to work with people like that. Better finish cleaning up here before they see it. They're liable to start a pool on who's the next one to get hurt on the job. I ain't like Henry. I could go and pump gas somewhere. Be out in the sun for a change — might be tough in the winter but I could do it. I bet I could find another job. Maybe I wouldn't have to. Maybe I could retire early like they say on the T.V. I'm sixty-two. I could give it all up and stay home with Rita. Not much "doe rey me" in that scheme though. Maybe I'm just talking ragtime but maybe I could find a part-time job, train little kids how to fight and stick up for themselves, or work as one of those playground directors. Let's face it, who in the hell is gonna hire an old bastard like me for Christ's sake? At least I could retire and get out of here. I'm gonna talk to my Rita, She's been on me to quit this place for a long time. Must be getting tired of listening to me complain about it.

Well, this is how I ought to do it. One day, I walk in, see, and give them my two weeks notice — keep it real quiet. Tell them I want no good-byes, no big send-off, just go out and never see them again. I'd say good-bye to Big John and Angela, and just the few folks I care about. I'd tell them all to give it all up. Give it all up I'll say. They'll be calling my name over the microphone to fetch boxes but I won't be there. After all them years, Joe Mullin disappears. They won't know what to do the first

couple of days. I'll be with my Rita out in the sun. No more pushing brooms in the cellar. I'm gonna kick the dust off me. Nobody's gonna make any money off me, cause I'll be squawking for a damn long time. Hey, Johnny oh Johnny with that diamond smile. Turn up that polka music. I think I'm in the mood to dance.



Procession
(charcoal and pastel, 1990)

After the Children's Pool

Its walkways were faithless,
chiprusted guardrails giving in
to the wiles of the sea.
Inside the mussel-crusts walls
the current drifts in still-treachery.
We were the rhyming Octopi,
a dance of Anemones, songs
on the lips of Garibaldi.

Outside, your life screeched to a halt
at so many feet per second.
Did you feel descent?
Did the air taste of brine?

When we rolled you into the hearse
it was like surgery.
The rollers like hundreds
of hungry teeth knew the routine.
We rolled you out without a hitch,
carried you on sixteen legs.
I felt your weight shift
and I shifted.

If I could swim I could save you,
entangle myself in the eelgrass
and swim—swim to save you. I'd snatch
songs from the Garibaldi, rhythm
from the Anemones.

We knew no suture would be big enough,
no anaesthetic deadening enough,
so we just float, getting older,
and I wonder why your coffin's
so short, it's just so fucking short.

Fishing "The Gut"

They've come to fish "The Gut"
while the moon tide runs full-swollen easterly,
spilling down from Buzzard's Bay,
engorging Vineyard Sound
until it's squeezed
into this narrow passage
that separates Devil's Foot Island
from mainland Penzance Point.

The man, dressed in olive waders,
faded jeans, and an orange vest
perches on a white crumbly rock
bearded by blue-black mussels and brown seaweed.
He begins to cast toward
the flats on the other side,
where the big stripers lurk
waiting for stray menhaden.

The water there eddies
in the opposite direction
of the seven-knot current,
the undertow sending up plumes
that swirl and burst in big
roiling circles on the surface.

His first casts are clumsy,
the mackerel popper
splashing only halfway across the passage
into the white, frothy chop where it's
tossed about then carried uselessly downstream.
But soon he warms up
and each successive throw sends the lure
closer to the back water,
the monofilament
rainbowing behind it.

The boy, mesmerized
by the sun that shimmers on the water
with the rapidity of a strobe,
begins to wade in a tidal pool,
his hands palming the surface
trying to smooth and still the water long enough
to see the bottom where he hopes
to find treasures
among the bleached broken shells and hermit crabs.

Suddenly the man feels a hard
tug, the rod drawn forward until
he jerks it back to set the hook,
his hands flying up by his right ear.
For a second the line goes slack, then it
snaps taught, the rod bending in an arc,
almost to the surface
the tip shuddering and wagging—
as the line slashes through the water.

He grimaces, feeling the strain,
his biceps bunched-hard
like fists under his skin
as he sways back like a sax player,
trying to keep the rod tip up,
rocking forward just long enough
to reel in more line.
“Get the net,” he yells to the
boy, who slips over kelp-slimed
barnacle-barbed rocks,
cutting his feet as he runs.

They’re both in the water now,
it piles around their legs,
their calf muscles tensed against the current,
the boy poised still, net in the air,
hoping not to fail
both of them peering down
trying to glimpse the fish.

Then there's a flash
as the silver scales catch the sun,
the boy lunges
but just before he reaches it
the striped fish bares his white belly
and the monofilament snaps,
sending the frayed line
curling slowly back through the air.

The man looks down, sweat dropping from his chin,
his chest heaving.
He holds the rod, tip down in the water.
the boy looks back,
his head tilted slightly,
his small mouth forming an "O".

dedicated to Jennifer, for giving life back to me.

Southwest Equipment Co. Houston TX.

Gray-green acrid smoke
from acetylene torches
spills into the shafts of light
that leak into this tin shack
that stretches eighty Texas yards
from one end to the other.
Sparks pressed from the flash of white-hot metal
jitterbug across the floor.

The electric hum
and clanging of metal tools on steel
mixes with the prehistoric screech
of air wrenches and revving engines.

Bloody-knuckled black-nailed hands
hold crowbars that jimmy
engines up and
out of old rusting husks
onto chains
where they're strung up
hemorrhaging black oil and green coolant
onto the sawdusted cement floor.

Skeletal girders
climb to the ceiling
housing wooden pallets
that hold old parts
heaped like dead birds.

Black men, Latinos, and White Trash
in greasy cover-alls
swirl into an uneasy pool
of pissed-off labor,
everybody shouting to be heard,
everybody with a lump of Red Man
bulging in his cheek,
gobs of brown spit slime the floor.

Curses and threats fill the air,
everybody calls everybody else "boy."
Sometimes the heat overwhelms
and the men go to the
hot tar parking lot to fight.
Like kids at school
we all spill gleefully
out behind them to watch.

I work under Duprey
a barrel-chested, thick armed, tattooed man
who chews tobacco and fat cigars
simultaneously--
his mouth so full
his accent so strong
that I can barely
make out his words.
He loves it when I screw up,
He says, "Is that the way they
do things in MassaTUssets, boy?"

We slip out with liquid bones . . .

We slip out with liquid bones and bloody gills, our heads pressed into triangles or cones or oblong, squat putty eggs, and we squall with cold. The air dries the wet parchment that is our skin, our tiny veins hide, and with our first air breaths we begin starving, a state in which we remain for the rest of our lives—feed us feed us feed us, our bellies are empty! We suckle, then chew, then crawl, then walk up—we flower and are growth and life and striving and chlorophyll sunshine and all the other jumping playground, wavering golden wheatfield whatnot.

We become fertile, which is our second hunger that, like our crying, moving bellies, never stops shrieking within us, and we DO IT. With everyone, anyone, or just someone—and we make more of ourselves. Why? Because we can. Pat it, and roll it, and dot it with a 'B' put it in the oven for baby and me. Mom, Dad, look what we made, we say, and then someone is suddenly saying it to us and we feel the need to protect, which makes our third hunger, and we work and buy boats, and houses which we call homes, and we give them genteel arcing driveways, and stammering, sloping, genteel shrubbery to encase our mortgaged nests, which encase our finely styled clothes, which encase our ever-starving, sexy bodies.

We gather and protect our way to our pinnacles; we peak, then weaken and slip, then age a little, decline, lose an inch, lose a shoe size. A slow leak that takes our pillars, our posture, our oak-tree strength and willowy suppleness, shrinking us in all ways but for our yelling bellies, and noses and ears which rubber and grow fur in a way no one ever told us about. We lose a little hair, a little teeth, and what fertility once astounded us, what glaciers and diamonds, and carpet lawns that grew within us are taken back, and we are left with candle bodies that melt, chill, and break away into cold wax nubs.

The children whose dripping hot snotty noses we once held and said "blow" now feed us, and turn out our lights at night until finally we again are the infants, drooling, shitting thin gruel, wide eyed and surprised—rubbery fetal balls bed sore and rumbling, rocking, slipping our skinny bones into death, where our calcium supplemented dust breathes back into the earth and perpetuates the new growth, and in this way our lives are eternal and we are blessed.

the ride

things seem to stand still
in the back seat
of a crown vic doing 75
with a friend
joined to my wrist.

things get moving again
as we exchange smiles
when the radio plays
"I Shot the Sheriff."

slow death

the best way
is to grab it
by the neck
and squeeze

then take
a deep breath
and suck
the life out of it

chicken

with the courage
of two six-packs
he balanced on the rail
and braced himself
against the 140 tons
of steel
that soon would
take him away,
leaving many shaking
their heads
and me on my
tenth beer



Study of Mathias
(charcoal on grey paper, 1990)

You Must Remember This

KEVIN DOTSON

"Where is everyone? Today some kinda holiday or somethin'?" one of the Barton's cashiers called out to no one in particular, as she leaned over her counter and looked out into the virtually empty Hallmark store.

"Don't question it," her manager warned, continuing to restock the Leggs display. "Just be thankful for it. I get sick 'n tired of those friggin' yuppies, coming in here with their busier-than-thou attitudes and their Reeboks and their fancy, smelly aftershaves."

"Yeah, but Mr. Barton, they're your best customers," a stockboy in stationary interjected.

"I know, I know. . . but I'd rather do business with a couple 'a half-deaf, silver-haired dotards than with *fifty* of them snot-nosed Lexington Avenue brats," he answered, not stopping from his work, but now stocking the display with newfound passion. "I mean, they give me good business and all, but they come in here all rushed and huffy, push their way around each other to get their tampons or cough drops or cigarettes or whatever — as if there was a run on the stuff and then, they have the nerve to get upset when they gotta wait in line to pay for it. Like we owe it to them to make sure they get outta here in time for their goddam business lunch. . . too busy to smile, too busy to say 'please' or 'thank you' too busy to hold a door. . . just too goddam busy to be human." The Leggs rack was really taking a beating.

"Maybe they all got too busy to go out for lunch, and they had to have their lunches faxed to them, eh, Mr. Barton?" chimed the cashier.

"Yeah, maybe. But I can do without their business for a day, thank you."

Alex had heard this exchange as he skimmed an issue of *Business Week* and buried his face deeper in the magazine; he was, after all, one of the "yuppies" they were lambasting. He pictured himself a soldier caught behind enemy lines, hiding behind a bush, just waiting to be captured and maimed. He hoped that someone else — preferably, a fellow over-worked, over-stressed professional — would enter the store so at least he wouldn't have to be lynched alone when he tried to leave.

"Hey, Harry! We got anymore o' those Papermate pens in back there? Black ones, with the flat tops. . . " Barton, now in Aisle E, Stationary, yelled to the stockroom in the rear of the store.

"Which ones? The ones with the erasers?" a voice came back from the stockroom. "They're already *out* there."

"No, with the flat tops, not the eraser ones."

"They're OUT there! I just restocked that shelf today," shouted Harry.

"There's only the ones with the *rounded* tops out here. . . and the eraser ones."

Alex could hear Barton fishing impatiently through the pen bins in the next aisle, and wondered who could make such a fuss over a pen.

Paula was feeling quite uncomfortable around now. All she came in for was a pen, a specific pen, yes, but a pen that could be (or at least should be) found in just about any store. But now, she was having problems getting even this. *One of those days I just should not have gotten out of bed*, she thought. "Look," she began, "It's really not that imp—"

"So what's the difference what kinda top it's got, so long as it writes?" Harry's voice wined from the stockroom.

"This lady wants the ones with the flat tops." Barton was getting annoyed and, standing to face the stockroom with his back to Paula, slammed the pens in his hands —ones with the round tops — back into their bin with force enough to raise a gust of wind that blew into Paula's face. Or was it just his anger that whooshed past her?

"Really," she said. "It's okay."

"Whadda ya mean 'flat top'?" Harry was also sounding a bit piqued himself. "A pen's a pen."

"I'll just take these," Paula said to Barton, as innocently as possible, as she reached for the round-top pens.

"Now WAIT a minute, lady," Barton spat, waving her off abruptly. "Harry, it don't matter to me if the pen gotta flat top or a *Mohawk*. . . but to this lady here it does, so don't gimme any lip!"

For a moment there was a terrible wrenching crash from the rear, as though the roof of the stockroom had collapsed on Harry. Then, amid a stiff second of silence, the door to the stockroom flew open wide. Harry appeared and filled the doorway with his huge form and enormous, heaving beerbelly, and walked out onto the shop floor, down Aisle E with flaring nostrils and a small black and white oblong box in his grip. Alex peered around his magazine to follow the man who, in slow, brooding steps, was approaching the shop owner. Barton himself seemed to consume the entire width of the aisle, standing with his legs apart and hands on his hips, as if to say in the most explicit of terms *I run this outfit*. Alex and Paula caught brief glimpses of each other and exchanged sympathizing shrugs before their attention was returned to the confrontation.

"Ah, shit Marty, they're at it again," a cashier whispered to another just when Harry took his final step to stand face-to-face, belly-to-belly with his boss.

They breathed heavily at each other, unmoving. Then, Harry slowly extended the box, on which was emblazoned the word "Papermate" in big black letters along with a graphic of a flat top pan, around Barton to Paula, sneering, "Here's ya pens. . . lady."

Paula accepted the box with the same care she'd use in disarming a thermonuclear bomb, but tensed herself for an explosion just the same. "Th-thanks. . .," she said.

"Ya welcome. . .," Harry said to her through Barton's face. "Have a good one."

"Yeah," Barton hissed to her, still facing Harry. "Come back *real* soon."

Paula rushed to the register at precisely the same time as Alex, with precisely the same thought in mind: to get the hell out of there and back to their offices, where at least they have some degree of control over the nuttiness.

Their near collision allowed them to get a closer look at each other. Alex had disheveled brown hair, stylishly faded yet professional. He wore brown wire-rims and a tan single-breasted fall suit which fit him well. This surprised Paula because, by and large, men of shallow build like Alex usually swam in tan single-breasted fall suits; but on Alex, as she observed him from behind, the suit fit perfectly. *Maybe he went to the boys' section of Sears*, she thought.

Paula was slim and very corporate chic: businessy, yes, with her Reeboks and briefcase; but she was also somewhat European, with her short Parisian haircut, modestly applied makeup and Norma Kamali suit. She was an attractive woman to Alex, but even more, he thought he knew her from somewhere. For a second, he had the urge to turn around and but only for a second. He decided it would just be too cliché for him to say, "Excuse me, but haven't we met somewhere before," especially for someone who was probably used to hearing that line. No, no, he thought. He wouldn't do that. After another second he decided that he probably didn't know her at all, that she was just one of the fifty to a hundred faces he saw on a daily basis in the streets of the city.

There was a jolting tap on his shoulder, which made him turn too sharply in response. Paula, already on guard from the pen incident and from what she was about to do, jumped back startled and embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, I just thought I — don't I know you from somewhere?" she asked. Then, as an afterthought, *God, why did I say that?*

Alex swallowed hard and decided to suspend his disbelief. "You know, I was just thinking the same thing," he began. "But I didn't want to come off like I was trying to—" *Leave it alone. . .* "Well anyway, *have* we met? You really do look familiar."

They were getting that hot, prickly feeling over their faces, the kind you get when you know you've just done something truly asshole-ic. They laughed uncomfortably, their faces still tingling in that dry, itchy

sweat of embarrassment, and stood there in line —the only ones in line — smiling tentatively at each other and contorting their faces stupidly to force their memories to kick in so this situation could be resolved before it got any more absurd. The cashier waited impatiently, snapping her gum.

Maybe we work in the same building. . .

"Where do you work?"

"The Guardian, down by Union Square. And you?"

"Marshall Leighton Advertising, on 25th and Lex."

Silence. Thought. Cluelessness.

Maybe we used to work together, or went to the same school . . .

"Did you ever work in Spring Valley at IBM?"

"Nope, been in the city since '81. Before that Rutgers. Did you—"

"No, Brown. How 'bout Houston? I was at a conference there not too long—"

"No, never been. . ."

They fell silent again as their minds raced to come up with some other possibility. The cashier smacked her gum loudly and sighed. Paula motioned to Alex, alerting him that he still hadn't paid for his magazine. Distractedly, he handed over the money. When he turned back to Paula, she had the same look of utter perplexity that he wore. She found a weird sense of fun in the unexpected as they tried to figure out where they had met before, even if she didn't have time for games just then.

"This is crazy. . ." Alex said finally. "I know I know you from. . . do you know Rob and Nancy?"

"Rob and Nancy who?"

"Rob and Nancy. . . you know, they have a little place in the Hamptons and—"

"Oh, Jesus," the cashier groaned in disgust this time. Alex stepped aside to allow Paula to pay for her pens.

"No, I don't think I know them," Paula replied. "But how about Frances, Frances Small? From White Plains?"

"You know Frances? My God! I haven't seen her in years!" A breakthrough. Alex was getting excited, even if he still couldn't place her. "She used to have a place on 21st near Gramercy Park, right across from Fat Tuesday's."

"I know, I used to go there all the time. We were roommates in college," Paula said.

"Then you must know Marc and Remi and all those guys who used to hang out with her," said Alex as they made their way for the door.

"I still see them occasionally. But wait," she stopped them in the doorway. "What's your name?"

"Alex, and yours?"

"Paula," she answered, then said, almost inaudibly, as her eyes

swept over his well-fitted tan suit, "Oh, my God. . . "

Just then, quite at the same time, it seemed by their mutual reactions of shock which threw them into a sudden gaping silence, Paula and Alex realized that they had once been lovers.

They stood petrified between the senso-strip detectors, as though they had been arrested in their magnetic grip. Their eyes fell to the floor or searched frantically for something to lock onto, something other than the person who faced them, the person each had shared one, but many moments of intimacy with, the person each could not remember just two seconds ago.

Something crashed in the stock room again, and Harry's voice boomed into the store, carrying the word *fuck!* down the aisles and high over each display, to the ears of the two people blocking the entrance, and jostled them out of their stupor. Paula and Alex looked at each other, neither really smiling now, but timidly raising a corner of a lip or an eyebrow, as if to say, "Well, what do we do now? Crawl away and die, *that's* what."

"My God, Paula. . . you really haven't changed a bit." Alex confessed, half-laughing at the irony of such a statement. "I can't, for the life of me, figure out why I didn't recognize you."

"No, I'm sorry," Paula shook her head, then laughed ironically. "I should've. . . I should've at least remembered that suit. I *only* helped you pick it out."

Alex looked down at his suit — an Armani and his most prized piece of clothing, on which he had gotten more compliments as he wore it — and was hit by another wave of disgrace. He moved his lips, barely mouthing the word *shit*; it was given voice, however, by Harry, who bellowed the word at the same moment from the rear of the card shop.

Paula and Alex looked about themselves, only to see that the cashier, Barton and the few other employees in the store, weren't even pretending to be working. They had stopped and were watching these two as though watching some poorly made brat-pack movie about young yups in lust. The cashier was still popping her gum, leaning over the counter; a few of the stockboys stood with crossed arms, grinning; Barton just shook his head.

The couple reached for the door simultaneously and slipped out of the store as though they had just been caught shoplifting a Tootsie Roll, but were allowed to go free with the condition that they never return.

"Friggin' corporate trash. . . " Barton said. "No time even to say 'Have a good day.'"

Foundation

LAURA LAWSON

He sat alone at the unfamiliar kitchen table, his arms resting on the cold metal frame which surrounded the formica top. The sun was setting outside and a thin blue ray forced its way through a small west window over the kitchen sink, casting the only light in the room. Staring thoughtfully at the floor, he spied a lone ant in a small pool of dying sunlight commencing to climb the pitted stainless steel leg of the table. Both the kitchen floor, a faded mustard color with a grey tinge, and the heavy, old steel-framed table bore signs of having been vigorously scrubbed and maintained. Dave detected an amateur spot-weld on one of the legs and a small patch in the floor near the stove where something had probably fallen and burned a whole on the linoleum. He followed the path of the ant up the steep incline as it wandered from side to side, at times straying downwards, but slowly gaining altitude.

As he watched its erratic movements, he reviewed the day's occurrences. Anna had unaffectedly commented on the kids being fine, explaining that they knew nothing of the divorce. She hadn't found the right moment to tell them.

"I haven't seen my kids in a week." he whispered vaguely in the direction of the ant. "The right moment?"

The house belonged to Archie Stable. Since his wife died four years ago, Archie lived alone. Neither Dave nor Archie had many friends, but they worked together putting up houses from time to time and had formed a silent bond. Dave broke the silence by telling Archie that he and Anna had split up, and as a result he drove two towns away to a boarding house. Without a second thought, Archie offered him the spare bedroom.

As Dave's gaze shifted from the ant to the green Army issue duffel bag by the door, tears started to well up in his eyes. The blue ray had faded, leaving the room almost completely dark. Winter days grew shorter quickly. Realizing Archie would soon be home, Dave composed himself and rose to find the spare room on the second floor.

He began to unpack, slowly and methodically, as if he were performing some ancient ritual. The task seemed to divert his thoughts from the emotions he could not understand. He carefully hung his pants and shirts in the closet and neatly lined up his socks in the drawer.

Removing the only suit he owned reminded him of the occasion his wife had chosen it for: his niece's wedding. The girls, ages three and five, had worn little matching jumpers Anna had made. They had been well-behaved most of the time, but managed to sneak away while the grownups poured down the cocktails. No one noticed they were missing for over an hour.

"I found them in the woods," he remarked almost audibly. "I thought we all loved the woods."

He hung up the suit carefully, and put on tan khaki work pants and an old flannel shirt, tucking it in neatly and slowly fastening his belt. It was an old belt, he noticed. The one hole he had used for years was stretched and worn, but it wasn't needed. He had lost weight and had to force the metal tongue into a smaller, never-used hole. A feeling of uneasiness quickly washed over him, but he couldn't identify it.

Archie had opened and closed the front door and taken off his boots, dropping them noisily on the rubber mat in the entrance way. Hearing him enter the house, Dave took a deep breath and descended the stairs to find Archie sitting by the door in the dark, still wearing his overcoat. Watching and feeling out of place, Dave stopped in mid-step, one foot on the floor, one on the last stair, holding the railing for balance. It struck him as strange that, with all his years of climbing around scaffolding, he should have to hold onto the banister to steady himself.

"I'm sorry, Dave." Archie said quietly. "You and Anna seemed like such nice kids."

"Hhmm," was all Dave could say at first. he hesitated briefly. "How was the job today? Did they get the foundation in over there?"

Archie, who had been staring at his thin wool socks, raised his eyes slowly as if finishing his own thoughts before addressing the question. He replied, "No. There's too much bedrock."

"Oh." Dave looked away briefly. "I built my house right over the rock. I cleared as much as I could and filled the concrete right around the rock. Couldn't get to a lot of the basement, and it was hard getting the stairs down. The kids liked climbing around in there when they were smaller. Couldn't store much, either, and the house settled kind of funny. I tried to compensate for it, but I never did get it quite right."

"It's hard finding the right spot to build. You have a good location up there. How'd you do when it snowed?"

"Once I plowed it out and sanded, it was no problem for the truck. Had to put chains on the old Ford for Anna, though, so she could get down this mountain."

"Is she still working down in Eastfield?" Archie asked.

"No. She got a better job in Oldmeadow. It's an hour's ride away, probably close to two hours when the weather's bad, but she likes it down there. Likes the town and the people."

Archie stood up and took the few steps to the closet slowly. The

effort of removing his plaid wool lumberjack coat seemed to take the last of his energy.

"Eat anything?" Archie inquired.

"I stopped at the luncheonette next to the courthouse after . . . for a ah . . . hot turkey sandwich and uh, french fries, too." Dave put his right foot down on the floor, hesitated, and let go the banister. "Yeah. I had french fries."

"How are the kids?" asked Archie.

"Anna says they're fine. Lisa had a stomach ache or something. Said she didn't want to go to school, but she went anyway. Anna says they're fine."

"Must be hard on 'em. What'd she say to them?"

"I don't know. She didn't say anything. She said she didn't have the right moment." Dave felt anger welling up inside of him. This was an emotion he understood.

"The right moment," Archie mumbled. "Hmmm."

Archie slipped a pair of worn leather slippers over his socks and shuffled to the kitchen. He looked old and tired to Dave, but comfortable. His anger subsided, and the numbness returned. As Archie turned on the light, a warm glow came over his face and his eyes seemed to brighten a little.

"Beth and I were very happy here," said Archie. He looked at Dave and smiled shyly. "I made a big pot of stew yesterday, so we can have that for dinner."

"Sure. That'd be fine," replied Dave.

Dave stood silently in the doorway as Archie moved slowly to the refrigerator and lifted out a heavy, covered wrought iron pot, placed it on the stove, and lit the pilot. Archie looked up to find Dave staring blankly at the kitchen table.

"Dave, sit down," commanded Archie. "Want a glass of beer?" Without waiting for an answer, Archie took down two pilsner glasses from the cabinet and reached into the refrigerator. As he poured from the quart of beer, Archie said, "Listen, Dave, I haven't talked about it much, but after Beth died, things were rough. My kids are grown up with families of their own and moved away. I've lived here all my life. I wouldn't know how to live anywhere else. You've still got a job. You'll find yourself someplace to live and go to work and come home just like me."

Silence filled the air. Dave thought about coming home to an empty house: no kids, no dog, no dinner on the table, no fighting. Quiet. Just blue light.

"You just do what you gotta do," stated Archie matter-of-factly.

As Dave sat staring at his feet, he felt something tickling his wrist. Lifting his left hand to scratch, he discovered the little ant.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. I still got a few acres of land on Oak

Hill Road. Maybe I'll build my own house in the spring. The land's good, not too much rock like the old house. Maybe I can put a decent foundation in there."

"Sure and you can have your kids over," added Archie.

"Yeah. I don't know what kind of visitation rights I have. I let Anna do whatever she wanted. I told her I didn't care, but I guess I do." Dave's eyes started to water again. "We never agreed to do anything, especially being so far from things up here. It started with that church to get married in. I don't know." Dave's voice trailed off.

"You want to take a look at this land of yours tomorrow?" asked Archie.

"I'll get another dog." mumbled Dave.

"Haven't had a dog in this house for years. Be nice to have a dog. You can stay as long as you want. It's good to have someone to talk to. I don't get many visitors. You could have your kids here, too." Archie's eyes brightened at the thought of kids and a dog.

"Yeah. Maybe I will. Things won't be too much different." replied Dave.

"Well, maybe not for you. I've been alone too long . . . Dave, I'm glad you're here."

"Thanks, Archie. It's good to have a friend."

Archie rose. With renewed energy he reached for the plates. Dave stood and searched for silverware. The two met at the table, both standing and looked into each other's eyes. They were uncomfortable, Dave with forks and Archie with a plate full of stew in each hand. A tear dropped from Dave's eye, and they both smiled.

The Liars

KAREN E. HART

It was afternoon in the summer and it was hot. The somber sky promised a rain that would never come. The dirt driveway was an inch of dust that drifted on the wind and then remained—a fine, thin, grimy layer on the hoods of cars, on the windows of the large, white house, on the painted wooden steps, and on the front porch.

Soph was bored and eleven. And eleven is a useless age. Too old to be a child, too young to be a lady. She looked up at the dull sky and wondered at the rain that wouldn't come—Never—and she sat on the porch steps and didn't move.

She could hear faint voices from inside, but because the parlor window was only open a crack she couldn't make out the words. She didn't try. One of the voices belonged to her sister, May, and May was uninteresting.

May was the oldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Mallory, a well-to-do businessman and his wife. May was pretty and sweet and sensible. Mrs. Mallory had often been heard to say that she'd never given her a minute's worth of worry her entire life. Soph was the Mallorys' second daughter. Named Sophia, she was always called Sophie by her parents. Soph, who had never been bored till this summer and her mother's mysterious decision to declare her no longer a child and therefore no longer able to play with her brothers and the neighbors' children, had never thought much about May.

May was nineteen and her life was full of laughing and dancing and flirting with dozens of young men and never an instant of boredom. Nineteen was not a useless age.

Soph noticed that it was quiet. The voices had stilled. A sharp creak intruded on the silence. The front door opened and May and three of her friends crowded out on to the porch. They were hoping for a cool breeze. May and Suzanne sat on the swing. Suzanne lifted her thin hand and fluffed out her pale blond curls. She was trying to draw attention to her new bobbed haircut. Prescott Groves leaned against one of the columns at the top of the stairs. The jacket to his brown suit, made by his father's tailor in New York, was draped over one arm. He was careful to face the two pretty girls. Prescott Groves was always careful. He did things in a calm, precise manner that made him appear older

than twenty-one. Jamie Bard chose to sit on the top step, one up from Soph, who turned her head and smiled at him. He grinned back at her like a conspirator.

Jamie had been a lieutenant in the Great War. He had run off and joined the Canadian Army two years before America had gotten involved. Home a year, he hadn't found a job or done any of the things he was expected to do. All he had done was spend most of the small inheritance his parents had left him on a plane. Most of his time was devoted to fixing it up and flying it. It was cause for much talk. He was only twenty-three but his blond hair had started to turn white. You couldn't see it always—only in strong sunlight. Before meeting Jamie, Soph hadn't known that a young man could get white hair. Even her mother didn't have white hair.

He said politely, "Good afternoon, Sophia."

She said, "Good afternoon, Lieutenant."

Behind and slightly above them the small group of May, Suzanne and Prescott talked of the jazz band they had heard the night before. They lowered their voices when they spoke of the speak-easy where they had heard it. Mrs. Mallory was an ardent supporter of the Prohibition.

Jamie asked, "I wonder why you're not down by the water on such a hot day?"

Soph just shrugged and turned away from him. She was oddly disappointed.

"Oh," he said, keeping his voice quiet, "What would you like to be doing today?" He paused half an instant and then confided in her, "I would rather be flying. It's a lot cooler up there." He pointed to the sky and laughed. "Cooler—it's downright cold. If I went up there today I'd come back soaked from those clouds." He stopped talking and looked at Soph. She looked back over her shoulder at his face.

She said, "I would rather be riding my pony, old Pete, on the beach."

Jamie was pleased that she had responded. "Why aren't—"

"Her pony had to be put down last year," said May, who had been listening.

"I killed him," broke in Soph, "I took Papa's shotgun and I killed him."

"Why!" May sounded shocked. "You know you did no such thing! The groom put him down," she explained. "Her pony broke his leg when she tried him at a jump that was too much for him." She directed her voice toward her sister, "I don't know why you lie so much, Sophie. It's so much easier to just tell the truth."

"You think the truth is easy?" asked Jamie.

"Of course," said May, "It's so much simpler."

"Lies are the refuge of those who will not take responsibility for their actions," said Prescott Groves.

"The truth is often unkind," said Jamie, tilting his head back to look

at the sky.

"Life," began Prescott Groves, "is often—"

Jamie seemed to take no notice of him. "I felt a raindrop on my face. I think it's beginning to rain."

The others immediately began to talk of the weather, Suzanne hoping that it would rain, Prescott hoping that it wouldn't. May said that she hoped it would rain but stop before the night.

And Soph met Jamie's cool, green eyes and she could see the lie in them, as her father had always claimed to be able to see in hers. But her father couldn't because he only said that when he already knew she was lying. It was uncanny how Jamie's eyes betrayed him, but only to her. And she laughed. And then the wind whispered through the leaves and the rain came. And she stood up, ready to dash up the stairs, and stopped to watch the surprise on his face and then he laughed too and they both stood laughing in a downpour.

The rain healed the summer to a green and a hazy yellow gold. Everything seemed fresh and new and beautiful. There was a night not long after when May had a party. Soph was glad of the party. It kept her mother occupied and kept the fact that Soph was outside a secret.

She was startled when Jamie came and sat down beside her. He struck a match to light a cigarette. The brief flair outlined his features. He inhaled the smoke and Soph smelled the sweet tobacco. He offered her a cigarette. Not as a joke, not trying to make her smoke to watch her cough, but graciously. As if it didn't occur to him to treat her as less than a person because she was a child. She shook her head no.

"I approve," he said, tucking the cigarette case back into his coat pocket. "I myself have grave doubts about the modern generation." He was half serious. He said, his voice softer, "Everything's changed since the war."

"You were in the war." She stated it. It wasn't quite a question.

"I was in the trenches. Then they found out I could fly."

He smiled and lifted up his hand and the little red light of his burning cigarette swooped into the air. "And I flew right out of the trenches." He took another drag on his cigarette and they were silent for a minute. Music and laughter and voices came out the open parlor windows.

"All the old ways are going away—the old music, the old dances. When I was your age my mother made me go to a dancing class every Tuesday evening at seven to learn to waltz. You'll probably never waltz. There are no more Waltzes. They probably burned all the sheet music or shot all the musicians." He crushed his cigarette out, stood and saw her staring at him with a wide-eyed gaze.

He stood still for a second, then he smiled down at her and helped her to her feet. "Miss Sophia," he asked formally, "would you care to

learn to waltz?"

Soph nodded.

He smiled again and poured out a list of instructions. Then he clasped her right hand in his and they began to dance. She stumbled over her own feet and stepped on his but he said, "You're doing splendidly, Miss Sophia." Quite suddenly it seemed as if she was.

For a minute they danced silently on the dark porch.

May opened the front door. "Jamie, what on earth?" She sounded amused.

"I'm teaching your sister how to waltz," he said.

"Waltzing to the Charleston? Oh Jamie, what a lark!"

Later that night, when she'd gone to bed and fallen to sleep and woken up again, Soph went to pull at the sash to open the window and saw him kissing May in the shadows and heard his smothered laughter and saw the light peck May gave him on the cheek before she opened the kitchen door and disappeared into the house.

Soph had never seen anyone in love before but she thought that Lieutenant Bard—Jamie—was in love with May. And she wondered if Prescott Groves was too and if May was in love with anyone.

The summer continued, green and golden, and days aged easy into weeks. One Sunday night Mr. and Mrs. Mallory had a dinner party. The community held them in great respect so there was a pleasantly large turnout. It included, deliberately, several of May's beaux. At the place of honor, by May's side, Mrs. Mallory seated Prescott Groves. He had earned Mrs. Mallory's favor by virtue of his father's large and successful munitions business, and his own polite and serious demeanor.

Soph was there, much embarrassed, speaking little, but seeing much.

Jamie glanced once at Prescott and didn't look that way again. But halfway through dinner he said too loudly to the woman wearing pearls beside him, "They like his father's money more than they like him. It's the only explanation. Look at him—he's such a sober fellow." His tone was light and bitter. There was a strained silence for a few seconds from the people immediately around him.

"At least someone's sober," the woman's husband muttered, looking pointedly at Jamie. There was some laughter. Then they ignored Jamie's comment. It was as if he had never said it.

A few weeks later at lunch, May and Prescott told their families of their engagement. Mr. and Mrs. Mallory were pleased. It was a pleasant lunch. Everyone smiled. Soph stared at the blue and white china. It was the best set. The news had not been unexpected.

It was a slow, lazy afternoon despite the excitement. The day seemed to linger on and on before finally drifting into evening. Time had a quality of softness. The cars pulling up, the voices. Both sounds

and emotions seemed muted.

Soph lay stomach-down on the white coverlet of her sister's bed. She watched May comb her long, dark gold hair.

"But what about the Lieutenant?" she asked her sister.

"Jamie? That wasn't serious. Jamie's never serious. He's just an outrageous flirt. It's not as if there had been any chance of me marrying him."

"Why not?"

"Well, he hasn't a job. Or a home. There's no way he could support a wife, a family. Besides, we're exact opposites."

"You mean," said Soph, "he's just not sensible?"

"Exactly," said her sister, contented with the word. She turned back to the mirror. "The last thing Jamie Bard is, is sensible."

Soph was careful to be there when Jamie was told the joyful news. She was afraid not to be. When she heard his car, she ran up from the beach, barefoot, with sand in her clothes, even though she knew her mother would scold her. May and Prescott were on the porch. May was standing near the steps, Prescott was seated in a chair that propped open the front door, to let a breeze into the house. Mrs. Mallory stood in the doorway. The three had been conversing when Jamie arrived. Jamie stood on the bottom of the steps, in front of one of the windows. He was greeting everyone. Soph's eye was caught by his reflection in the window. She expected them to talk about minor things for a few minutes. Instead, May blurted out the news of her engagement in a bright, excited voice. Soph looked at her sister. May laughed but she seemed pale. Soph looked at Jamie and tried to see his eyes, but he was looking at May and all Soph could see was his reflection.

Jamie smiled happily and wished them every joy and chided Prescott for stealing May away from him. He told them of his plans to fly his plane up to New York the following morning. He would be staying there a bit. And he asked her, not meeting her eyes, "Sophia, do you want a kitten? I've got a kitten that I've got to get rid of. Would you like her? That is," and he smiled at Mrs. Mallory, "if your mother approves."

Now that Jamie was no longer a threat to the pleasant reality of Prescott Groves becoming her son-in-law, Mrs. Mallory thought Jamie was charming. She approved. The following morning Jamie would drop off the kitten before going out to the airfield.

He handed her the cat and grinned to put a smile on her face and said goodbye. And May's voice stopped him (and for a second Soph hoped) but she only asked if he'd be back in time for the wedding. He said, "Yes, of course, wouldn't miss it for the world."

And a towheaded man with an arrogant walk and a painless smile and another lie in the beautiful green of his eyes got into his car and

drove away.

May returned to the house. And Soph sat on the porch steps stroking the orange-striped kitten. She stayed looking up at the somber sky and refusing to think. Not acknowledging the fear that crept into her soul.

Late in the afternoon, Prescott Groves drove up and disturbed the dust and she saw the sorrow shadowed on his face. "Is May home?" he asked her. He stood on the bottom step.

"In the parlor," she said, looking at his feet and the chips of paint which broke where he stepped. But she didn't go inside with him. The parlor window was open and she could hear voices distinctly. "There was an accident. Jamie crashed and the fire. . . He's dead."

Soph looked up at the gray rainclouds and felt wetness on her cheeks. She stood up slowly and entered the house. She aged years in each step. The parlor was on the right. Her mother and Prescott were comforting May. Soph stood and watched them from the doorway, and said, "I think it's raining. I felt rain on my face." There was no rain.

Late that night she got out of bed and walked down the narrow dark corridor to May's room. "It was an accident," Soph said, wanting to reassure her sister, knowing that May must have thought the same thing she did. "It was an accident," she repeated.

May got up and hugged her. "Of course it was, Sophie. It was a horrible, tragic accident." Sophia listened to her sister's voice and knew she had been wrong again. Her sister hadn't thought, hadn't understood, hadn't known with the deep and terrifying certainty that Sophia had. She just hadn't. May was too sensible for that.

Months later, in the fall, shortly before the wedding, Mrs. Mallory and May were informing a distant aunt about the accident. "It's so horrible that it happened to poor Jamie," said May. "I've never met anyone who loved life so much."

"Did it happen this summer?" inquired their visitor.

"Yes," Sophia said. "He was killed on the last day of summer."

"Sophie," cried her mother, "Not another lie! Fall was weeks away!"



Do You Like That?
(woodblock print, 1990)

At the Tone, Leave

today's luxuries become
tomorrow's necessities:
bought a new car, speaker
phone in the sun visor
called quite handily, often
from the road-blocked
by a screening machine
I again bought, years ago
on a cozy christmas you
loved us both, left
personalized messages
shamelessly
this one's generic:
boy loses girl

Sun Dial

wanting to cry at five
in the A.M. when it's over
money spent: the girls,
all the dope,
my watch—the dark one
thought it was cute—gone.

can't believe the sun
every day rising
garbage emptied
Sal warming the car
next door—so shiny

the alarm is ringing
bathe man—hot water
scald this pungency
watch or no watch
see what time it is

My Eyes for an Acting Brother

Sitting home at 2:18 in the afternoon
watching a soap opera on white
and black television straining
my eyes for an acting brother.

The picture's dim in my set;
Can't fix it—it's in the tubes

A black star might be a shadow
cast by mistake, or for effect,
like in the old horror flicks.

Either way, I look hard (like for work)
then wait for the credits to roll.

An American Dream

suppose I could be African
but
if I was to wake up
in Africa
see
I'd think I was still 'sleep
'cause
all I remember is this city
'an
ain't never been no where else
so
I figure
my roots
here, concrete

Freud

My brother and I had gone
fishing in the morning and we took
pails and sandwiches.
We walked through a field of poppies.
My brother thought they
smelled like holidays, gave me a slap.
I babbled, he got bored, said
if I didn't stop stupid talk he'd leave.
A bird cawed and that
made our silence.
Suddenly, I yelled. My brother snorted—
You stupid girl, can't even shut your mouth.
You'd never be as good as a man.
You've got no balls.
Lift up your dress.
And I did. You see you haven't even got
a dick. That night I masturbated when
I remembered my brother had ordered me.

You enjoyed his abuse of you and he extended his control.

No control—
even my breathing.
He played with my breasts
then my vagina. He forced me to suck on him.
I felt like his child. I would call
myself by his name, pretend I was his wife.

What makes you happy.

Very little. I know what makes me unhappy—the happy couples, in each other's arms. The taste of walnuts makes me happy and walking by myself in the winter. Dr. Freud, I wonder if we could go for a walk?

First walnuts, this contains the seed, the child you want to have. You feel as if you're about to give birth when you have a walnut in you. As to walking alone in the winter, the cold makes you feel more yourself. Your brother has taken away your identity by his abuse and the winter, by the tremendous force of the cold, puts you back in you.

When I was walking the boardwalk at our summer house I saw the moon and I was the moon. I floated up. Why can I never be happy? I'm compared to the moon, brighter yet smaller. My breasts are the most beautiful.

This competition is brought on by psychic pressure. You divided yourself into the good and bad. When I was younger I had a friend I admired very much and I could not see the truth about him, so I idolized him as you idolize your brother. Idols are death.

A knife is hanging over my head ready to cut to my heart, exposing me for the ugly person I am. I am the knife, I cut my girlfriends and my brother. They bleed white blood which I keep in little jars in my closet, showing them only to my mother.

The knife is your brother's penis, which you wanted to cut off to have control over your brother. The white blood is semen and you show it to your mother in the closet because you would like to feel in league with her. But you don't truly feel connected because you can only show her in the closet.

I want to live like I want to die.

How?

I'm walking on cliffs looking down
at my outstretched body. Oh,
I have dreams

Dreams?

I'm a little girl,
You meet me at the beach
hold me in your lap and caress me between my legs.
I suck on your lips.

I seem both your brother and your father.

Why do I want you?

It's the instinct.

The other day I wanted to rip a man's pants.
He was on the street and I could
barely restrain myself. I
went and masturbated. Will there ever be an end
to sex?

It's the repetition.

I'm a prostitute
having sex with a dead man.
Men put me in a coffin with him
and he wakes leering
drives inside me, till I bleed
and wake still bleeding.

*Feelings of degradation, a death wish and eroticism mixed
in one. You associate death and sex and your brother.
What is the opposite of the underworld but reality. What
happened that resembled this dream?*

I've been to a lighthouse.
When I was young I played there.
Just kid's games with my brother.

Think of the dark.

A coffin. I'm beginning to
be carried up the stairs of the lighthouse.

Go on.

I can't remember.

You can.

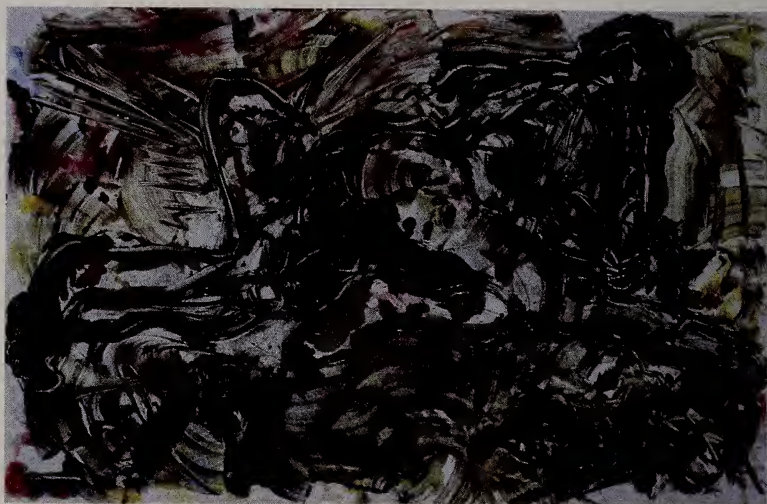
They open the casket
and they all rape me. All his friends.
They paint my breasts like lights
and my vagina like stairs, climb inside me
again, switch me on and off.

You found it erotic.

Erotic and terrible.

We've found your death buried in pleasure.

Will I be exhumed?



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