



parting
gifts

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ways, it is possible that my name simply may not be necessary beyond the table of contents. One publisher of a fine poetry magazine told me that she recently gave a fresh copy to an older poet, a professor proud of his conservative prejudices, who upon flipping it open to poems without a name spontaneously exclaimed, "Oh, you publish Richard Kostelanetz." With enemies so sharp, who needs fans to tell you that one of the territories you have staked out for yourself in print does indeed belong to you! One ambition I have as a poet is, in truth, not to repeat my poetic discoveries for profit and prominence but to discover more alternative terrains than anyone before me. I am not done yet.



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whether these more populous poems are better/richer/more complex than the sparer ones.

Though scarcely finished with this last experiment with the geometric structuring of language, I recently tried several other tactics. The first involved putting two words adjacent to each other, so that they interact now only in terms of meaning but as simultaneous weights on the page, which is to say that they make a duet in which, as in music, adjacent notes may assume varying volumes. A second tactic involved the use of three words, likewise laid out horizontally (though vertical arrays are also feasible), functioning in the same way; to me these are trios. The last recent departure involved the form of the circle (which I had previously used for "Manifestoes," a personal favorite in my earliest work, and for *On Holography* (1978) my initial hologram, which contains syntactically circular statements about holography). In these new poems I set words only around the circle's circumference, all of their bottoms facing the center; and in some of them also cast progressively smaller second and third circles of words parallel to the outer circles. In all these circular poems, there is an abundance of individual words, all related to each other in various poetic ways, more harmonious than dissonant—all, as in the earlier geometric poems, ideally making more than the sum of their parts. One quality that these last poems share with their rectangular predecessors is that no word is more important to the whole than any other. A fourth category involves finding words within other words, arraying them vertically below their source. "Partitions" I called them for the videotape in which they first appeared (1981), but in print they seem to be solos that should appear before the verbally more populous poems. To my mind, all this is visual poetry, to cite a category I still find useful (while "concrete" has passed), in that the art very much depends upon how the words are displayed on the page and the poems must thus be read as paintings are read, not as lines or other units with beginnings or ends, but as fields.

When either Turfs or these newer poems are published, I prefer that my name not accompany them on their pages; nothing should distract attention from the poetry. However, since no one else is working in these

protrude into space from one side of the picture plane (that is suspended in space), while words connoting chilliness protrude from the other side. In a fifth departure, numbers were substituted for words, making a poetry that consisted entirely of numerals. A sixth departure involved extended, unbroken strings of letters, “long poems” so to speak, composed of continuously overlapping words, each new word incorporating at least three concluding letters of its predecessor. Six of these “Strings” exist so far—three in English, one in French, another in German, and one in Swedish. Typed out, each is over a hundred uninterrupted inches in length. Published in public spaces, such as, say, in four-inch-high letters along the edge of a train platform, they could be at least two hundred feet long. Related to this is a video poem revealing short words buried within longer words, within the sequential structure available in that time-based medium. There were no doubt other unusual moves in my poetry, some of them less conscious than others, some whose premises were forgotten, and some that were inadvertent byproducts of intentional departures; and should a subsequent critic define the departures of my poetry in different ways, or recognize discoveries unfamiliar to me, there is no reason to dispute his or her authority trust the tale, not the teller.

In the late seventies, I began working with visual forms that are not representational but geometric and thus rigorously abstract. In the cycle whose title poem is “Turfs/Arenas/Fields/Pitches,” I put individual words in the four corners of the page and expected poetry to arise from the relationship among them. As is typical with me, once I established a radical premise, I tried a variety of solutions, in part to discover the possibilities of the form. One departure within the form involved eight words, with four in the corners as before, and four others in the middle arrayed like points on a compass; and a step beyond that involved 16 words with the initial rectangle divided into identical quarters. One quality these poems have for me is that several years later I still do not know for sure which ones are better or why. (That is one way of my measuring their innovation; were qualitative distinctions more sure for me, perhaps such poems would not represent such a great departure.) One provocative question that still remains unanswered in my mind is

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Preface to Solos, Duets, Trios, & Choruses (Membrane/Future)

Richard Kostelanetz

Possibly what basically distinguished poetry from prose is its greater range of geometric devices: A whole series of arbitrary semantic resolutions can be replaced by a purely formal, geometric resolution.

—Victor Shklovsky

Poetry and Prose in Cinematography (1927)

One recurring theme of my poetry has been the search for unusual forms that would prompt, if not generate, discoveries in the poetic presentation of language—discoveries that must be poetic, because they are not prosaic, which is to say practical. The first move, in explorations that began over two decades ago, was visualizations of a single word—the "imaged word," as I called it at the time. Among the most reprinted poems of this kind were "Disintegration," "Nymphomania," and "Echo." The next development I called "worded images," because an image was made exclusively of words, or letters functioning as words, as in my most reprinted poem, "Tributes in Henry Ford," the triptych in which the capital letters A and T, in this case representing models of automobiles, are arrayed in three patterns typical of successively more complex automotive traffic. Some of these earliest poems were cast into silk screened prints, 40 by 26 inches, which have been exhibited, representing a form of alternative publication different from those of traditional poetry. Another kind of early visual poetry is the handwritten portrait, in which something is visually-verbally represented in the space of a page. My first poem in this vein is "The East Village (1970–71)," which was reprinted in *I Articulations* (1974); a second was "Portraits from Memory" (1974), which appeared as a book under that title (1975). A fourth early development involved synonyms visually arrayed, as in the pyramid and inverted pyramid of "Live-Die" that is likewise reprinted in *I Articulations*. A recent variation on this strategy is a two-sided hologram, *Antithesis* (1985), in which words suggesting warmth

Cinderella of the Sky

Wendy Dutton

Lynette

At night I feel their glowing fingertips tapping against me like warm spoons. I don't even have to open my eyes to know I am in space. I am floating past stars on a black velvet sky. I am lying on a steel table. And everywhere I look, it is me looking back.

They bump into each other as they gather around me, just two or three of them with their enormous black eyes and lightbulb bodies. They have a gentle look only because of those eyes. Otherwise you can tell that they don't have any feelings by the way they move around me and go tap tap tap.

Dr. Thi says, "Relax." I have to do it with every part of my body, starting with my eyebrows and including even my ankles and toes. That's step one. Step two is called visualization. Dr. Thi's voice goes hypnotic so that I can't understand what he is saying anymore. He is all accent. But I know from experience what the routine is. He wants me to think of a place. It could be real or imagined. A place where the sky is like a blank slate. Naturally, I think of space.

But when I get to the part where my waist goes numb and my scream comes out all golf balls and bubbles, and the doctor rushes out and the strong-arms rush in, I am screaming, "Please! Please! Let me feel this!"

In craft class I make houses out of Popsicle sticks and God's-eyes out of yarn. I send them home with Jack, pathetic gifts to my family. At night I pay the night nurse to write nice things about me in my chart. And old Mr. Hoover, stinking of medication, sneaks into my room to watch me lying in the moonlight. I've got my bed scooted under the window. I am lying with my arms out, eyes closed, like a beacon, like a come-for-me. Hoover's fingernails scratch the wall lovingly, and he whispers, "I believe you, Cinderella of the sky. I believe you."

Wrecks

Carol Ellison

I saw a lot of wrecks when I was a reporter. Usually the bodies were gone or under sheets by the time I got there. The worst I ever covered was one in which a carload of high school boys from a small Kentucky town left school at lunchtime and wrapped the car around an ancient elm. Cops were using acetylene torches to cut the car off the tree when I got there. The only survivor was the driver who received only a cut on the head. I had to interview him at his home where his drunken father kept pointing at the boy and screaming, "How do you think I feel when you were the only one who walked away?" I told him he should feel very lucky that his son was alive and he raised his hand to hit me. His wife yelled and he stopped and, oddly, offered me a glass of water. The boy and I talked in whispers while the father sat in a chair and loudly bemoaned his own bad luck at having such a son. When I left he pointed at a shotgun in the corner and said he'd come get me if I didn't write a good story. When I got back to the office, there was a call from the state police. The mother had called them to the house to take the boy to the hospital. He'd gone into a kind of trance, like shock. The cops also told me he looked like he'd been beaten around the face. The kid said the bruises were from the accident. He didn't have them when I was there.

Sunrise

Eva Shaderowfsky

There weren't any people on the beach. Five a.m. and it was already light. Vicki had brought a pot of tea, two cups and blueberry muffins in a big, striped beach bag. We had to climb up to the top of the steep dune to get to the place where she wanted to watch the sun rise. I was out of shape. It felt like I had hot coals in my legs. When we got to the top, the view was spectacular. The beach was about two hundred feet below and the ocean spread out in front of us. From here, the waves looked like a small, twisted string, rolling over and over. The sky and water were gray except for one spot where a pink-yellow color was spreading out from a point that seemed come from below the horizon. It was warm and damp, and getting warmer. The mist was moving away from us, inland. Burning off, they say.

I had my camera in my hands so I couldn't help her spread out the blanket. She said wanted to come here on our last day of shooting. She said it's a place she comes often to watch the day begin. She wanted to be undressed here, outside.

For four days I had taken pictures of her at her house. As she got more comfortable with me, and felt less shy about being naked in front of the camera, we talked less. Yesterday, she asked me to tell her about her body. I tried. I told her how beautiful she looked her hair, her curves, her smile, her ease in front of the camera. She said she felt tense. I suggested she try some yoga positions, the dead man's posture, the child's posture. I tried to talk her through them. My yoga teacher did the same with me. It took me years before I was able to do them without her instructions. Vicki said she did feel more relaxed. She said she liked the way she felt now and wouldn't I please touch her. She lay on her side on the bed that she used for a couch. I stood there feeling awkward. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to touch her.

"I can't," I said.

"We'd better go outside tomorrow," she said. "It's no good doing this indoors. Nakedness is connected with sex indoors, but not outside."

with."

Eve sees fear icing over her mother's eyes. Fear of blinking, missing something, a remnant of hope a seductive lie.

"What is it?" Eve asks. Her mother walks out of the living room.

Eve hears the click of ice cubes. Without a word her father hands her a drink. The scotch burns her throat. "This is good," she says, hoping it will shatter the vision of what will happen after she leaves. She sees her mother drifting through cool, dark halls, past closed doors, eyes straining forward, unblinking. She sees her father's hand quivering on the telephone. "Your mother and I are separating," she will say. And there will be nothing she can do. She will be gone, having left them to each other.

They're walking along the Seine, throwing bread crumbs to the big ducks. Mama brushes a crumb off Papa's cheek and laughs.

"Is that necessary?"

"What's necessary? It'll be fun."

Eve knows that if she touched her mother's cheek it would be soft, much softer than her own. Her mother's eyebrows are so natural you'd think they were real. Her lips are bright as a stoplight. Her eyes are gold, piercing, like a cat's in the dark. Telling her she's gone too far. Do you really enjoy hurting your mother? Is this how you pay me back? Eve recognizes the anger she is supposed to see and the fear she isn't.

A key turns in the lock downstairs. "Hello!" her father calls. "Eve, baby, where are you?"

Eve rifles through two suitcases, dumps their contents on the bed. The camera is in the third suitcase. She runs past her mother who is looking with dismay at the mess of clothes, books, toiletries heaped on the bed. Downstairs her father is throwing kindling into a sputtering fire and holding a half-empty glass of scotch.

"Dad, stand over here." She sets the camera on the glass coffee table. "I'm going to get Mom."

When her parents are standing by the fireplace, Eve adjusts the flash and focuses. They look like pop-up dolls. Erect, rigid, stiff-armed. Eyes dull, faded, and yellowed. Her mother is staring at the ceiling and her father is staring at the fire. Between them is an expanse of air, glaring, haunting, in the dusky living room.

"In a single-lens reflex camera, what you see is what you get," her father explained years ago.

"Relax," Eve whispers.

Neither moves. They seem frozen, stuck in time.

Her finger is arched above the shutter release. She wants a picture of the two of them in front of the fireplace. In more than twenty albums, there wasn't one photograph of her mother and father together. Not one. She'll make two copies; one she'll take to Cambridge, the other she'll enlarge, a gift for their 25th wedding anniversary in November.

"This is silly," says her mother, looking balefully at her husband.

He says, "Just take the picture."

She and her mother look at him. It's as if he'd said, "Let's get this over

Jesus, I thought. I'd feel sexual in both places, or uncomfortable I didn't know which. But then I am the camera, not the model.

She set the teacups and the pot on the blanket. The tea was still warm. That's the kind of special thing she does so well. Climb a steep dune with a full pot of tea, and not spill a drop. We each had a muffin. I was on my second cup of tea when she looked up.

"Oh, my God! Look who's here! I swear I didn't knowÉ"

I turned and there was Dave. He's one of her lovers, a married man. He was embarrassed. She laughed. One of her pleasures in life seems to be part of an I-know-and-you-know-but-he-doesn't-know-that-I-told-you kind of thing. She had told me and he didn't know that I knew about them. She offered him some tea.

"No, thanks." He stood there, smiling politely, with a rolled-up blanket wedged under his arm, hands deep in his jacket pockets. Polite talk. About the sunrise, the beauty of nature. I was uncomfortable for him. I was even more uncomfortable when she went over to him and stood, leaning against him, her chest to his. He grimaced a tight, toothy smile that showed all of his long, horsy teeth.

"Hey! What is this?" He looked over at me.

"I'm not taking pictures," I said and patted my camera at my side.

"We were planning to take pictures here," she said.

I knew then that she had told him about my project. She's the fourth woman. I've been taking pictures of "the older woman" since I saw a spread by the same name in Playboy. The oldest was thirty. Vicki and I are over forty. I think we look pretty good, maybe even better than we ever did. I feel pretty good about this project.

But I wasn't taking any pictures now. I was thinking about being uncomfortable. He was uncomfortable. Why should I be uncomfortable for him? Vicki was really doing a number now. She stepped away from him and took off her denim jumper. And then she stood there, naked.

"Shall I go?" Dave said to me.

Why was he asking me? "It's up to you two," I said with a shrug.

Vicki turned to him, sparkling, twinkling, teasing, and danced two steps closer. He held his blanket out in front of him like a frightened toreador,

and she turned her back into the blanket, so that his action looked as though he meant to wrap her against the slight chill. A graceful maneuver if I ever saw one.

The sun was up, a brilliant silvery yellow. There were some high clouds and a slight haze. The water was green with a slick on it here and there, like oil. It was low tide and the waves were long, rolling in slowly and evenly. A good surfing place. A gusty wind blew some sand at us. Since it was so much brighter now, I changed the meter reading and heard a grain of sand scraping inside. Damn! All for this. And I hadn't even taken a single picture. I cupped my hand over the lens and stood there, waiting.

Vicki was wrapped in Dave's blanket, looking up at him. His arms were resting on her shoulders. He looked at the sunrise, then at me, and down at her.

"I better go now," he said.

"I'm going swimming. You come, too," she said.

He grinned. "Really? Maybe we can have our picture taken together."

Then he laughed, looking at me.

"I won't take any pictures," I said, "if you're uncomfortable."

"I might be." He turned to me, smiling a challenge.

"You could pretend I was a doctor," I said, trying to think of something to say.

"How do you know that wouldn't turn me on?" he said, grinning broadly. Quickly, he laughed and said to her, "I really better go."

This whole drama seemed to be played out just for me. I knew that he was planning to leave, that it was just a matter of the right moment. I felt large and awkward, I didn't know where to look or what to say.

"I really better leave now," he said, looking down at her.

"Don't you want to go for a swim? Look how beautiful it is here.

There's no one here, but us," she smiled up at him.

I turned away from them.

The beach was an ashy beige and the dunes were yellow. The water was greener now and the sky brighter as the sun rose a couple of inches above the horizon. I shifted from foot to foot.

A long shadow falls over the suitcases lined up by the door. Her mother stands in the hallway outside Eve's bedroom, a figure made hazy by the fading sunlight. The smell of hairspray and chemicals is cloying. Eve presses the palm of her hand against the wall to steady herself.

"These old pictures," her mother says, walking into the room. She opens an album labeled Niagara Falls, 1963. She points to a photograph of Eve bundled up in a pink snowsuit trimmed with rabbit fur. "Do you remember this?"

Eve remembers the soft fur and her cousin Michael dangling her over the falls. Her screamshattering her nights, years after. Her mother holding the camera, laughing. "Michael won't drop you. He's strong and he loves you." The click of the shutter. Her father lunging forward, his fingers gripping her waist. Afterward, over hot chocolate, he said to her mother, "Are you crazy, Donna?"

Her mother angles the photograph against the light. "Do you remember Michael hanging you over the falls? How you screamed bloody murder?"

"How old was I?"

"Three, but you could read."

It wasn't long after that when her father read her a book about Madame Curie. "She's nice," Eve recalls telling him. Her father had looked puzzled. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe she was."

When Papa read her a story he always stopped at the last sentence. "Nous sommes prêts!" he'd shout, and Mama came running.

Her mother eyes the suitcases. "Why are you packing your ski clothes with your summer clothes?" Before Eve can answer, her mother says, "You are coming home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, aren't you?"

"I'll be home for Thanksgiving, but I may go skiing for a week at Christmas."

Leaving Thea Caplan

As Madame Curie's daughter in a past life, Eve had been encouraged by her mother (and her father, Pierre) to question, consider alternatives, make no hasty assumptions. Eve laughs whenever she says this, but she distinctly remembers learning the difference between volume and mass in her sandbox when she was three, in Paris, in the early 1900s. On Sunday she is going to M.I.T. as a freshman in biochemistry where she expects to be a junior research assistant in a genetics lab. She dreams of sitting on an Ethics Committee for she is keenly aware of the horrifying aspects of genetic engineering. Madame Curie has, after all, taught her sensitivity, morality, and unwittingly, something about long-term, unintended consequences.

Eve has always stayed up late, reading. When she thinks about sharing a room in residence, she can't breathe. Last night her father said, "You'll be fine. College life will be perfect for you." He handed her a set of contact lenses. "Backup. In case you rip your other pair. You don't want to wear glasses looking through a microscope."

Her mother said, "She'll be happy as a pig in shit."

Her father shot her mother a look. "She's just kidding. She doesn't mean it. You know your mother."

Eve's compiling a new photo album, Born in the Sixties. She's waded through twenty family albums and, even though her fingers are paper cut, she's driven to finish. She selects a photograph of herself holding up a sheet of cardboard with "f 5.6" written on it. Her father likes to experiment with aperture settings. Together they develop photographs in the laundry room in the basement. She likes the soft red glow of the safe light, losing track of time. She'll miss the blurring of her father's cologne with the photographic fumes. Her camera was the first thing she packed, wrapped in her white terrycloth bathrobe. She selects another photograph. Opening Christmas presents on the clay-tiled hearth when they used to celebrate both Chanukah and Christmas and she'd squeal, "He came! He came!" and everyone yelled, "Yes!"

"Looks like a long walk down," I said, looking at the beach below and thinking of the walk back up.

Vicki, suddenly business-like, said to him, "We really have to do this now. Are you sure you don't want to go for a swim with me?"

"Yes. I'm leaving."

Vicki gave him a quick kiss. We both said goodbye to him.

"Can I have my blanket back now?" he said to her.

"Get me mine from my car, will you?" she said to him.

"Okay." He tried to take his blanket from her.

"I'll just keep it till you bring me mine. To make sure you do come back," she said coyly.

Had she been anyone else, not a lover, he would have probably gotten angry and/or grabbed the blanket away from her. But he said, "Oh, okay. I'll get your blanket," and walked away down the steep slope to the parking lot below.

Vicki smiled at me. "We really didn't plan this, you know. I had no idea he was coming this morning."

"But you have met him here before."

"Yes. But I had no idea he'd be here today."

I thought of his wife, probably still in bed asleep. I thought of my husband in bed at 4 a.m.. "Have a good time," he managed and turned over to go back to sleep. It was dark. The roads were empty except for a couple of cars going the other way with their brights on. The trees leaned in darkly on both sides of the road. I shivered and put on the heater. Still cold, I turned on the rock station and sang all the way to Vicki's house. By the time I got there, the sky had turned a dull gray.

We stood at the water's edge. I had been up about three hours. Four rolls of Tri-X, 36 frames each, used up.

"Look at this reflection!" Vicki yelled to me. "And over here! Isn't it beautiful?"

She's not a photographer. She has no idea that the camera won't isolate what the eye does.

"I'm going in!" she yelled over the rumble of the surf.

She was a dot in the water and at this distance wouldn't even show

up on the film. I took off my sandals, rolled up my jeans and started to wade through the icy tidal pool to the sand bar.

"Isn't this lovely?" She ran through the tidal pool, against the current. The water was about knee deep. "Too shallow to swim here." Then she ran toward the ocean.

The running must be keeping her warm, I thought, as I shivered. She had a long way to run to get even thigh high in the water. She kept getting further and further away. No point in taking pictures from so far away. She looked back. I smiled apologetically and held my camera at ready. She swam for a while. When she came out of the water, long hair dripping, looking like Venus rising, I took some pictures and thought that they'll probably look set up, too romantic, unreal.

My feet were cold and wet. All the tea I'd had finally got to me. I sneezed, shivered, and yelled to her over the sound of the waves, "I've got to go!"

"Very soon!" she yelled back.

What did she mean, very soon? I looked around for a place to relieve myself, but couldn't imagine how to manage it with jeans and a short jacket. A skirt would have been perfect. "I really have to go!" I yelled again.

"Okay!" she yelled back and started to come toward me.

I put on my sandals. She put on her jumper. We started the steep climb back up to the top of the dune to get the blanket and teapot and the cups. I stopped to catch my breath. My heart was pounding. My legs ached. Vicki walked on ahead, up and up, fast, like a mountain goat.

She must have sensed that I wasn't right behind her, because she turned and said, "You go on ahead to the car. I'll get the things."

I was grateful for that. It saved me at least a quarter of the climb. Now all I wanted was to be back in my warm bed again. By the time I had plodded my way over the soft sand to the car, she was just about there, too.

"Would you like another muffin?"

"No, thanks."

I settled into the car. My face felt burned from the wind. My pulse

I don't know. I just don't know. It's all right, I say to Dane, who is asking if I'm allowed to have ice cream so close to dinner. Ice cream is definitely all right. The worst thing it can do at this point is make me fat, I say, and from what I've seen, fat isn't the worst thing that can happen to a person.

Untitled

Sesshu Foster

Little Joe was a vicious drunk. Like when he blew his hand off in Hazard Park with a bomb one Sunday when all the families were out there having their picnics. His older brother Ricardo raped a school girl in the parking garage at the corner apartments. Ricardo got convicted but we wondered where Little Joe was, since they were always together. Hanging, robbing all the houses in the neighborhood that didn't have wrought iron. Ripping the back doors off their hinges with crowbars. They were our neighbors. Their mother owned the house next to ours and one down the street. They burned that one down one night. Maybe that finally pissed her off, because she didn't give them the other place. Ricardo got sent to jail again, and then I was glad when they killed him in Texas. Little Joe lived on alone in the ruins of the burnt-out garage that was built into the hillside. It was lined with his bottles, a mattress, and weeds and bushes growing up over the foundation where the house had been. When he died, there was nothing under the blanket in there. Just a pile of trash spreading down the slope into the garage. And his mother finally put up both properties for sale.

Hearsay

Mo Williams

From "Dane Verdanlor," a work in progress

Verdanlor treats me to ice cream. Why not? My mother says. He has a good steady job and no kids. Why shouldn't he treat a neighbor kid to a little cream? Don't be so bitter, Mom, I want to say but I think I understand. Dad hasn't worked since they broke up. Mom thinks he's punishing us and she doesn't have any extra money. I don't think Verdanlor's what would you call him? Husband? He does all the heavy stuff in the yard. I don't think Mickey would ever leave Dane. You can see they matter to each other. Shit, Mom says. Those lucky bastards. Nothing to worry about. No kids, no possibility of kids, now what? I didn't mean I didn't want you, she says to me. I know that, too. Thank God I do, because I'd croak if I thought she didn't want me. The thing is, Dad wanted more. I heard her talking to Mickey one night. Dad wouldn't use a thing anymore. and he wouldn't let Mom use a thing either. He wanted a son. Thanks a lot, Dad, I felt like saying. But then he never actually said that in front of me. It's only hearsay, even if it's Mom I heard say it. You can't afford to be too sensitive, if you want to keep both of your parents. I can always go over to Dane and Mickey's if I get to feeling over-sensitive. Even if they don't have a television. I think Dane wants one but Mickey has this problem with them. He thinks they make you stupid. Only if you start out stupid, Dane says, but then Mickey says, Do you want Dove to think George Bush is the grandfather of the Western world? He is a grandfather, I say, not wanting to offend Dane or Mickey, but at the same time, I say, he doesn't look compactible enough with Barbara to, you know, have that many, you know, that much, enough, kids. Mickey laughs but Dane is nodding. Do you mean "compatible?" Mickey asks. Do I? I ask. I'm not sure. Barbara looks so fragile with those old lady dresses, even though she isn't exactly small; he just seems a whole lot bigger. He is the war president, I heard some older kids chanting last year, and it's true he shoots off bombs and shit stuff. So it stands to reason.

made my skin throb. As I relaxed, I realized that I had been gripping the camera, holding it by the lens. I put the camera in my lap and closed my eyes.

Vicki started to laugh. "Really, I had no idea he'd be here today."

Noon Sun, East Bay

Peter Fong

Winter's not over but it feels like heaven, like the day after someone has died warm when I expected cold, clear when clouds were due. East Bay is iced at least a mile from shore and I walk out to fish. Old men tend holes, their backs to the big lake that won't freeze. I go until I can see blood on the ice, sleek rows of trout stiffening in the skin of snow melt that mirrors the sky. Into a hole in the water I drop deep designs. Also my faith in things unseen, a week of bad work, my murderous thoughts. A skater strides easily from blade to blade. I watch her glide away, skirt the edge of open water; I tell myself I wouldn't feel a thing if she were gone. I would not run with a rope to the spot, so small has my life become. All I want is the old age these old men have, backs to the world, hope on the hook, fat trout dreaming, and no death less important than their own. Wouldn't that be heavengood ice over East Bay, noon sun in March, no God to judge? Into a hole in the water he drops eggshells and canned corn. He says the trout are attracted to the fall, tells about the time he spilled coffee on the ice and the warden asked, Who pissed here? It's illegal you know a fifty-dollar sin. He dipped two fingers in the stained snow and tasted it. He said, Not me.

Work

Ray Miller

At five o'clock nobody left. Fred looked at me from the cubicle across the aisle and nodded. "Guess I'll do a little more work on the RGB conversion," he said. I smiled and nodded back at him. All around the third floor people hacked at keyboards, studied budget projections, and answered the telephones. Papers moved, messages got sent and filed, just like it was nine in the morning.

At quarter to six I walked to the men's room. The department secretary was on the phone when I passed her station, "Just put the hot dogs in the microwave, honey," she said. "Mommy's working late." I returned to my desk and finished the documentation from the Craigmeyer's project I'd left on the back burner. I felt satisfied when the FILE SAVED message appeared. I took my car keys out of my desk drawer and looked at them. I tried to remember where I'd parked.

At seven no one had left, and a few people stood around the snack machine in the coffee room, eating candy bars. Snickers and Milky Way. I walked over and punched 117 for peanuts, watched them drop to the bottom of the machine. "We should order pizzas in," the supervisor of the microfiche storage area said to no one. I tried to imagine walking down to the lobby to get the delivery. I couldn't imagine it, couldn't picture the open door behind the driver holding the stack of boxes.

I walked to the bulletin board next to the stairway and read the rules for occupational safety that were posted there. Mr. Tombaugh, the senior vice president of our division walked down from his seventh floor corner office. He looked confused to see the room full of people, but he gathered himself.

"Davis," he said to me. "Good to see everyone sticking in like this. The Japanese have nothing on our team, eh?"

"Right," I said and stood up straighter. Mr. Tombaugh nodded and went back into the stairwell. He paused there a moment with the door still open, deciding if he should go up or down.

At eight no one even pretended to work anymore. The phones rang and no one picked up, the messages were logged on the voice mail. The

At the B&I Bar in Millet and at Art's Bar

Ray Miller

I write in journals fairly often, but usually about football and eating or else conversations in bars. I was in the B&I Bar in Millet, Michigan. They serve food "Three Plain Dogs \$1.40," it says on a hand-lettered sign. The waitress brought Tupperware containers with relish and onions along with the mustard.

I asked the bartender if Jerry Fischer (an old acquaintance) still came in there. "He's about forty," I said. "Has a beard, bad teeth, and he flirts with every woman he sees."

"I don't know," she said. She looked up at the ceiling a second or two. "What does he drink?"

At Art's Bar there was a table of people getting a pizza on one of those metal stands. They were pretty blown away sampling the \$2.25 Happy Hour Super Shooters. This loud woman knocked the pizza off the rack onto her sister-in-law. People were jumping up, screaming, and grabbing at the pizza.

"You wear what you eat!" the woman says.

Maybe I'll send that to the Reader's Digest. "Life in These United States."

Her mother tried to get her to not order another drink and she said, "It's my party and I'll drink if I want to." Just like the song. Later she told this story. "Have you ever been to an AA meeting?" But she doesn't wait for an answer. "They're a fry, believe me. This one guy gets up and you know what he was doing? Drinking Zippo lighter fluid yeah his wife wouldn't allow him to have any liquor on the premises and he thought it smelled good and he drank it. They took part of his liver out and it was all his wife's fault." She shook her head and drank from her beer. Her family was listening and thinking.

If I'd started following that woman around with a tape recorder I'd be famous by now just telling her stories.

rhythmically. She's graceful. There's something about the way she doesn't make much noise when she runs, or skates, or even when she cries. In fact, I've only seen her cry once, and that was when her little brother fell off an eight-foot wall and she thought he was dead. She knew she would be blamed. But it turned out he was just knocked unconscious.

She's back from the bedroom and is holding something covetously. It is a toilet paper wad. She opens it carefully and picks out a tiny hand-rolled joint. Benita and I have only smoked pot once. I think it made her horny, because we ended up running around the front yard, barking at the neighborhood dogs, which was her idea. We tried to get them to bark back, and it worked. One of them was my golden retriever, barking madly from my back yard down the block. I could tell it was him by his hoarse, pitiful bark. Occasionally, he'd actually howl, and that sounded great, like it was finally coming out of the right part of his body.

We decide to only have one hit each. Afterwards, we race into the kitchen to put some ready-made brownie mix in the oven. Benita's mother is at her boyfriend's house, so there's no problem. As usual, we eat half of it raw. By the time we're in bed and ready to settle down, I have heartburn. I can't help thinking about Peter. I picture him blond and tan, with green eyes and big lips, like Benita's. I imagine them lying together, blending into one sound like the ocean.

I can hear Benita's breath becoming regular, and I turn away from her. I hate her so much, I can't wait for tomorrow.

accounting department stood at the windows on the west end of the building, watching the sun set. Jerry and Bev from Investments stood at the door of the Controller's conference room smoking, looking from side to side, daring anyone to challenge their defiance of our corporate wellness policy. I bought all the peanuts and fruit pies from the machine and locked them in my overhead file. I could be a hero tomorrow, bringing an armload of salted and sugared food to the hungry. I wondered where we'd sleep that night. I kept my eye on Betty from customer assistance. We'd had friendly words over coffee before, I thought that maybe we could set up housekeeping in the printer supply closet, clear off a shelf to sleep on. I wondered about head room. "Getting late, isn't it?" Fred asked me. His voice was hopeful and when I shrugged he was plainly disappointed.

By ten, most people were walking the aisle ways between the modular-design cubicles, weeping. The women had left their high heels behind and their stocking feet tiffed across the carpet. The men had removed their jackets and ties. I, too, felt the frustration and the hopelessness and I joined their march. The computerized lighting system had turned off the lights. The green glow of the terminals marked our steps and the red exit signs at the stairways were our only solace and our only guide.

Mr. Wood's Depression

Patrick Parks

Everyone could tell when one of Mr. Wood's moods of depression set in. Normally an impeccable man, he would emerge from his house in a rumpled suit with his hat crushed at the crown and his tie wrenched crookedly to one side. When he was not under a black cloud, his walks through town were linear, purposeful: a trip to the post office, a march to the church. But when his mind was darkened, he roamed without any apparent destination, weaving as he went, his hands clenched, his feet keeping no regular rhythm.

When Mr. Wood was having a fit of depression, he stuffed his pockets with objects from his past. In his suit, he carried a Japanese fan that had belonged to his wife before she died, a one-winged toy airplane, a jackknife, a wrist watch with only half a band, a boy's novel of adventure. His trouser pockets were crammed with old letters and dried flowers.

As he wandered around the town, he would take these objects out, one by one, and examine them, frowning as if he could not quite place where they had come from or what they meant. Sometimes, he would be overcome with emotion and begin to weep loudly.

By the time his mood had reached its lowest depth, Mr. Wood could be found standing quite still somewhere the location was never the same with his arms spread wide, his head tipped back, and his mouth opening and closing. He looked to many like a young bird waiting to be fed. Only those who passed close enough could hear the one word that he whispered over and over at the sky: "Please. Please. Please. Please."

The Dirty, Happy Smile

Meg Pokrass

On Saturday, my best friend, Benita, invites me to spend the night. I'm trying not to fall asleep on the couch watching *The Late Late Show* which unfortunately turns out to be some gray and predictable western when she finally lets me know the whole story. She'd been walking home alone from school on Thursday, as usual, right along Via Esperanza where we often walk home together. She hears a horn, turns, and this foxy guy is staring at her, asking her where is Las Palmas Drive. She points the other way, but he just keeps on smiling a dirty, happy smile.

He probably smiled because, although Benita is not even thirteen and a half, she's got lips as big as Karen Black's. She's around five foot four, and she always wears platform shoes. Her hair is the color of dirty lemons, thick and long, and just slightly wavy. Her eyes are piggy, but nobody seems to care. They are green, like certain marbles that are hard to part with.

"Jesus, so what happens then?" I ask, lighting up a cigarette from her mother's pack that has fallen onto the smelly carpet. The whole living room reeks of cat pee and the smell of smoke helps block it out. Lately, I've been getting used to Merit Ultra Lights, Benita's mother brand. I like the way they make my breath taste. Just this year I've decided that I don't like smelling clean.

"Well," Benita continues, with a thirty-second pause for dramatic effect, "then he says he'd give me a ride home." This she reports like a celebrity. Her lips seem swollen with victory. She seems to know more and it's waking me up, begging me to pull the rest out.

"So what's his name?" I ask. Whatever it is, I'm going to hate it. "Peter," she giggles. She obviously doesn't remember his last name. All she remembers is that he just turned sixteen and he's given her part of his birthday present. She runs to get her suede purse, which I love, from her bedroom. As she flies down the hall, her hair bounces off her butt falls.

remembered her from his childhood, from one of several schools and colleges, or from any of the various cities and towns where he had lived before he settled in New York. Finally, he realized that she was a television actress, fallen from the public eye, but popular when he was a child.

The memory of her on television threw the image of the suburban yard outside the window out of focus. She belonged to the indoors of the television screen and to a fast technology that had jerked him out of childhood and into a frenzy of solitary drifting that had dropped him in places so foreign to his memories of childhood that thereafter strangers seemed as real and viable as forgotten friends or distant relatives.

"Ummmmm," the actress had said in the restaurant, or so he recalled. Pasta had hung from her mouth and sauce had dripped down her chin. He remembered seeing her on television and hearing her utter the same guttural noise in a commercial for breakfast cereal.

He gazed out the window again. Clipped yews, a built-in gas fired grill and the outline of a swimming pool under a blanket of snow came into focus. Out of the city in a house cut off from his daily life, he was drawn to his window overlooking the landscape of his childhood. In each of the rooms of the house was a television attached to a cable that imported images of a larger world. He hadn't turned on any of the televisions. He stared into the back yard, his perceptions mingling with childhood memories of pool parties and black and white images of comedies and dramas played out on similar sets. He wished the phone would ring or someone would knock on the door. He needed some kind of interruption to anchor his thoughts in the present. He wondered if he had traveled so long and so far just to end up in the place where he started.

I Honestly Don't Remember

Peter Fong

Last night I met someone you know a woman with earnest eyes and a nose for conversation. She'd moved from your hometown to mine, seen my name on the place card. And you, of course, had told her about the beach house and the attic room, the kitten I fed with a kitchen spoon, ginger ice cream and our lost child, your sister's death and the wild lightning that tore the window screen, just missing our empty bed. Or maybe you hadn't she never let up long enough for me to find out. She was married last month, she said. She'd invited you to her wedding and you'd come. That's right you'd been here, although my phone never rang: no sign of remorse or even anger. She went on about your visit your new job, new life, your battle-scarred cat until my face betrayed that she'd gone beyond some limit. You do know her don't you? she asked. You are her friend? I told her no. Without shame. Friend seemed hardly the word for that long history which passes for our past. An hour later, after dessert, the guest of honor gone, I could not recall her name.

Meat

Tracy Miller

Each day it's the same thing. I look the boys straight in the eye, but they see right past me. All they see is my uniform and the dumb net I have to wear in my hair. Sometimes, when one of them smiles at me, I'll forget where I am and think he's being friendly because he wants to talk to me. But when he does say something, it's just to ask for another piece of meat. The ones I have met, out in bars or at parties, they act like they don't even know me the next time they come into the cafeteria. Even the ones who take me down by the river act like they never knew me.

My sister Charlene made me take this job. I'd always wanted to be a flight attendant. The day after I moved in with Charlene and her husband, Terry, she drove me to the airport, but they wouldn't even interview me when they found out I hadn't finished high school. The woman behind the desk said, "We actually prefer a college degree," and then she walked me out of her office like I'd been wasting her time. Charlene was just as disappointed as me because the night before, we'd talked about the places we'd visit if I got the job and we could all fly for free. I didn't care where I went as long as it was warm and sunny so I could sit by a pool and have people bring me drinks all day.

I got the job at the cafeteria because Terry's cousin works as a janitor for the college. They gave me a choice—the freshman dorm or the sophomores. I chose the freshmen because I thought they'd be friendlier. Other than that, I had no say in the job, but Terry did his best to make it seem like he and his cousin had done me some huge favor.

Maura is the only other girl my age who works in the cafeteria, but we're not friends. We argue all the time because she always gets to be the cashier and take the money. Says her makeup gets smeared and sweaty leaning over hot trays all day. I tell her she shouldn't wear so much then, and we go back and forth like that until Mrs. Kaplan tells me to shut up. "Denise, keep your trap closed," is how she puts it.

Once, when I was standing in the doorway, I heard Mrs. Kaplan tell

In Search of Lost Television

Geer Austin

It's too reminiscent of my childhood, he thought. He was staying in Larchmont for a few days, house sitting for a couple whom he didn't know very well. They had fled winter for a Caribbean vacation. His childhood was lived out not many miles away, in Connecticut. It often resurfaced in images that haunted his dreams.

Looking out the window onto a snowed-in suburban back yard, he missed the city, even the noises that ordinarily disturbed him in his apartment, traffic on the nearby avenue, men shouting back and forth at the trucking company across the street, the sound of children cursing each other while they played sidewalk games, different games than the ones he had played on abandoned farmland in a landscape that had been changing irretrievably from rural to suburban. The quiet and the bleakness of suburbia in midwinter frightened him. He understood why the couple who owned the house had left for the tropics.

His recollections of childhood could not precisely be described as painful, but rather as muddled. It had been much easier for him to reflect upon his childhood when it had been a fresher memory. During his adult years, so many people and places had been added on and spun off that the imagery that lingered from childhood fell in among a jumble of other memories like junk in an attic. These memories floated freely in and among themselves, confused.

In sleep, he dreamed about imaginary rooms in actual childhood houses. He rode in automobiles of a vanished era with members of his family who had aged far more than their cars. He saw faces of lost friends and spoke with them as though they had never been lost. Awake, he had the uncomfortable realization that most people look very much like some other person. Often he noticed the features of people from his past playing across the faces of complete strangers.

One day not long ago in a restaurant he had searched the face of a beautiful woman who sat at the next table. He wondered if he

performance and laughed. Then she moved closer and said, "Let me see." I watched her face. After awhile she said, "Neat," but there was a hesitation in her voice and she didn't say anything more until she left the room. Then all she said was that dinner was almost ready. We had been married thirteen years, and I suppose she thought she had known everything about me there was to know.

She was in for another surprise, too. The bill had been \$276. Our checking account was now overdrawn. I was fairly sure that FUN wouldn't reimburse me. Gardenia and I had been broke ever since we bought the fishing boat. Maybe we could hold a car wash or something.

My Parents

Janet Elizabeth Brown

He thought if he sold everything she ever touched, including everything I didn't take with me when I left town, she would stop haunting him.

I can tell you for a fact that she did not stop haunting him. Because it was her intention not to.

I think he saw her again when he died. I felt her with me and I was in the room next to his.

I hope they sang once. Maybe they gossiped about the kids.

Maybe they walked holding hands to where souls live and then let go.

They visit me sometimes, separately.

Maura that I was nothing better than a little tramp. When she saw me there, she pretended like she hadn't been talking about me, but I knew she had. I keep waiting for her to retire or at least take a sick day, but each morning there she is, arms folded across her starched white uniform, barking out orders.

I leaned away from the steaming trays, my arm stretched out to scoop up a slab of brown meat. I looked at Maura out of the corner of my eye. She had a magazine propped open on her lap and her hand moved lazily over the food on the tray offered to her, adding up the total. She stuck her tongue out at me and I dropped the meat on the tray before me. It splattered gravy on the boy's shirt and he looked hurt, like I did it on purpose.

I'd been dragging the whole day. Yesterday while I was waiting for Charlene to pick me up after work, a carload of juniors pulled up in front of the cafeteria and asked if I wanted to go for a ride. We drove down to the river and passed around a bottle of wine that tasted like apples. Nobody spoke until the sun went down. Then it was like they all got a shot of adrenaline and they started horsing around, punching each other in the shoulder and laughing real loud. All but one of them got out of the car. Me and him sat side by side in the back seat, watching the other boys running around in the woods. Soon it got too dark to see anything but their shadows, and the boy pulled a bottle of whiskey out from under the seat. He dared me to chug from the bottle, and though I knew he was trying to get his own nerve up more than mine, I took it from him and drank until I gagged a little. The other boys came back then and climbed into the car. The guy I'd been alone with looked mad but he slid over to make room for them. I was still holding onto the bottle so I drank from it again; long full gulps until someone grabbed it away from me and told me to slow down. The boy next to me made him give the bottle back to me and I took it and drank a little more.

By this time a few other cars had pulled up near us, mainly couples, and I started to relax. I felt someone's arm go around my shoulder and I closed my eyes and leaned back into the boy's chest. It got quiet again, and I could hear the sound of everyone breathing. I had just started kissing one of the boys when a cop car came out of nowhere. I'd heard the cops were

trying to keep kids off this road, but I'd never seen them there before. The driver started the car while we hid the bottles under the seat. The boys in the back moved away from me until we were no longer touching. When we pulled up to the cafeteria I saw Charlene waiting in her car. Her son, Nicky, was crying in his car seat in the back. They let me out and I tried to walk casually over to her, but my head was spinning so much I stumbled against her car.

"Friends of yours?" she asked sarcastically. She was so mad at me for being drunk and for making her wait that she told me she was going to kick me out and make me live with our father again if I wasn't careful.

"Denise, just because Nicky is only two years old doesn't mean I want him to see you like this," she said. "It sets a bad example." I told her I was sorry. When we got home I went right to bed, before Terry could come home and yell at me, too.

Sometime in the middle of the night, I dreamed about my father, about the way it was right before I told Charlene what was going on and she got custody of me. I must have been yelling something awful because I woke Charlene. She came running into my room and turned on the light. She didn't even ask me if I'd been dreaming, she just climbed into the bed next to me. She put her arms around me and said she'd never send me back to him. "Tell me you believe me," she pleaded.

"I believe you," I said, not sure if I did or not. I settled back down against my pillow and hid my hands under the covers so she wouldn't see they were shaking. After she left, I stayed awake all night, staring at the ceiling until my room started to grow light and I heard Nicky waking up in the next room.

In the morning, I was exhausted and my head ached, but Terry wouldn't let me call in sick to work. "What if the president of the country had to call in sick because of a hangover?" he said. He's told me before that no job is more important than any other job. Charlene thinks it's a noble idea, but I think he says it to make himself feel good about working in a garage. When he started talking about the president, I knew there was no point in arguing. So I went to work, and it was one of the longest days I've had. As soon as my shift was over, I pulled my apron up over my head

away like a painter at a canvas. It dawned on me that I was posed in a way I had seen female models pose in fashion magazines. This thought brought to mind a memory of when I was 19 and an Iranian intern had shaved me at another juncture of limbs in preparation for a hernia operation. At that time I was proud of having a girlfriend and made a callow show of concern that this shaving would be a big deal to us. As he worked, the intern considered this. "And to whom will it matter most?" he wondered mildly, "To you or her?"

The present physician gave my armpit a few last flicks and brushings and, after a critical glance, stepped on the pedal to the waste basket and tossed away the razor. His movements were quick and deft, and the can's lid popped open sharply to make the catch. Then he dabbed at my armpit with gauze and alcohol, and took a hypodermic syringe from a plastic case. "Just a pin prick," he murmured.

From another plastic case he took a set of sterilized hemostats. Then he plugged in the burning tool, which had a name like Immolator or Hyphenator, or something. When he turned around, he had a hemostat in one hand, the stylus in the other, and instantly applied them both to me. There was a quick, painless series of tiny buzzes, electric snappings. Then, in the hemostats, he carried to the trash can the little bulb of flesh that, even engorged with blood, was no bigger than a sphere of BB shot. The trash can's lid nipped like a snapping turtle, and another portion of me went the way of foreskin, tonsils, and wisdom teeth. The doctor turned briskly back to me for another look, retrieved the discarded razor from the trash, and gave me a few last barberings.

"Done," he said, and he was gone. It had not taken ten minutes.

By the time I got home that evening, my mind was on other things. As I changed clothes I suddenly remembered and decided to take a look in the bathroom mirror. My armpit was bare of the threatening little visitor, but it was something else that arrested my attention and caused an odd feeling of wonder: my armpit was a woman's armpit, smooth and pale. What had until then been darkly matted and virile was now a curved, graceful hollow. I compared it with my other armpit, raising both my arms and studying them together. Gardenia entered at this point in the

inexplicable tag of flesh hiding in my armpit. I knew I hadn't been born with the flaccid little flesh-colored growth. I poked it apprehensively. It felt globular and roly, and it stayed at the edge of my thoughts for a few weeks until the day I wrenched it or irritated it somehow, probably by scratching it in my sleep. Then it hurt to move my arm. The bathroom mirror showed the thing looking blood-engorged, angry, roused to violence. My wife Gardenia took a look and said, "That's not normal," in an unsettlingly serious tone.

Four hours later I was standing in a gloomily antiseptic examination room at the FUN center, shaking hands with a bustling old Eastern Indian man who clasped my hand in both of his and smiled warmly into my eyes in a most confidence-inspiring manner.

Taken slightly aback by his friendliness, I commenced a laborious, half-articulate account of the growth and its history up to its present throttled state. The doctor soon interrupted with the demand to see it for himself.

I took off my shirt and showed him. He scrutinized it, flicked it, and announced, "We will burn it off."

"Right now?" I said.

"Right now. Yes. It will take one minute. I will shave your armpit and we will burn it off." Then he was gone.

Tentatively, I sniffed at myself. In a moment a red-haired nurse came in tugging a wheeled device like an upright vacuum cleaner. It was equipped with a control board with five or six different sockets into which could be plugged a sort of stylus on a flexible cord. The nurse left and returned with a metal pan filled with needles and tweezers and gauze and a small, disposable razor.

"Now you'll have to see what we go through," she said, meaning women shaving their arm pits, something she seemed to think I had a hand in inventing. I chuckled weakly.

"Humph," she said.

The physician came back, all business now, no reassuring smile. I held my arm up, my left hand behind my back, and he wet the spot down with some solution and went to work with the razor, intently flicking

and gave Maura one last dirty look.

I was in the back, washing the day's grease off my hands when Charlene called from the hospital to say she couldn't pick me up. Nicky had been running outside and stepped on a nail, sliced his whole foot open. She told me Terry would swing by after he was done with work.

I headed over to the student union building and sat down in front of the TV in the lobby. A game show was on and everyone was calling out answers. The girl sitting across from me smelled like real perfume, the kind you can't find in a drugstore. The grease fans had been broken in the kitchen all day and I suddenly wished I'd washed my face before leaving the cafeteria. I was thinking about going to wait for Terry outside when someone sat down next to me on the couch. He smiled at me and there was something real familiar about his face. He looked too old to be a freshman, though, so I doubted I ever saw him in the cafeteria. He realized I was staring at him and he laughed.

"My name is Michael," he said. He asked if I was a freshman and I lied and said yes. He looked pleased and said he was a senior, pre-med. "You want to be a doctor?" I asked, picturing Nicky in the hospital at that very moment with his foot propped up, bleeding through his bandages. Michael asked my name and I told him, Denise. Then he smiled again, and I knew I'd seen him somewhere before.

"Want to go outside for a smoke?" he asked. He stood up without waiting for me to answer.

I followed him outside to the benches in front.

"Hardly anybody smokes anymore," he said as he handed me a cigarette. "Yeah, I should quit," I said, but in an offhand way so he'd know I didn't mean it. We sat side by side for a few minutes without talking. Sometimes when I meet someone my mind starts to work and that's what was happening now. I couldn't wait to tell Charlene I'd met someone who wanted to be a doctor. It doesn't take much to impress her she'd been thrilled when she met Terry because his garage works on foreign cars.

"So, Denise, what do you think of college?" Michael turned sideways on the bench and looked me in the eye. I told him I thought college was

okay, which I did, so it really wasn't much of a lie. I looked over to the cafeteria and saw Terry was parked in front. "Damn," I said. "There's my ride."

"You're a commuter?" Michael asked and I told him, sort of. I waved over at Terry but I couldn't tell if he saw me.

"Before you run off," Michael said, "how about your phone number?" He took a pen out of his pocket and handed it to me. I reached over and took it, then I held onto his hand and turned it over. I slowly wrote my number on his palm. I'd seen a girl do that in a movie once, and the guy had been so blown away he'd called her that very day.

We both stood up and then Michael looked at me funny. I thought he was going to kiss me but instead he reached over and tweaked my nipple, hard. I wasn't really mad but it wasn't the kind of thing I wanted Terry to see. I looked over at the car and he had his arm out the window and was waving me over.

"What'd you do that for?" I asked. He started laughing and held up his hand with my phone number on it.

"You gave me your number last time, too," he said, and his voice got real nasty. "Or don't you remember?"

And then I did remember him, from a party over the summer at the town beach. We'd gone back to his car where we sat in the back seat and smoked a few joints. He'd left his shirt on but I was naked and we screwed with my legs in the air for so long my feet made indentations in the car's vinyl ceiling.

Michael held his palm out open to me and with his other hand started rubbing the numbers away. I stood there watching him until there was nothing left but a black inky smudge. I couldn't move. It was like I was paralyzed or something. And then Terry started blasting away on the horn and I turned and ran to the car. It felt like I was running in slow motion, like in those dreams I have sometimes when I can't get away fast enough from whoever is chasing me. Terry opened the car door for me. As soon as I got in he waved his hand in front of his face.

"Were you serving burgers all day?" he asked. "You smell like meat."

Visitor

Andrew Brown

from the White Dog Stories

The company's new medical plan was called FUN. I forget what the acronym was supposed to mean. FUN provided care exclusive of regular checkups, prescriptions, catastrophic illness, or accident. In other words, it assured the payment of your medical treatment as long as whatever you had wasn't too serious. Catch something serious and you were out of luck. Go for a checkup and you paid for it yourself. An ounce of prevention wasn't exactly worth a pound of cure. It was worth \$75, and you better have it on you because if they had to send the bill to your home, they tacked on another \$25. No credit cards accepted.

Last year, after the big budget crunch and the layoffs, our personnel director had jumped at the FUN plan. Since it covered almost nothing, management thought it would cut down on malingering. It did, too, sort of. People caught colds that, untreated, snowballed into pneumonia or pleurisy, tumors were allowed to flourish until they could have won first prize at a county fair, and employees with contagious illnesses brought them to work until everyone within sneezing distance was infected. After a year, no one looked very good and morale had bottomed out, but with the new right-to-work plan the board had instituted, you could either take it or leave it. Since there were no other jobs in town, leaving it meant starving. People tended to take it.

Miss more than three hours of work for a doctor visit and you were docked a day's pay. Even if you paid for them yourself, doctor visits weren't encouraged. The board thought that doctors just gave people fancy notions about health that cut into productivity. It had left a bad taste in management's mouth when Fitz Benignas took such an unconscionably long time to expire of lung cancer. Ted Fiercer, chief of finance, had muttered something about Fitz's "milking this for all it's worth." We had all liked Fitz, but, frankly, the way he had loafed his way to the grave just made things rougher on the rest of us.

But now I had to go see a doctor. I had discovered a small,

When Rocket Was Late to Schedule Bookings

Barbara Rosenthal

When Rocket went to her agency to pick up this week's topless bookings, it was already very late. She'd been held up first by her boyfriend's troublesome phone call, and then by her mother's letter, doubly troublesome, which she'd made the mistake of reading as soon as she'd pulled it from the mailbox on her way out of the house. Her boyfriend was pissed off at her for not spending more time with him, for putting her own interests above his and for her not liking one particularly revolting close buddy. Her mother was soon to have a breast removed.

The trouble with coming in late to the agency is that bookings are given out on a first-come basis if the dancer has any special requests as to clubs or scheduling, and Rocket had plenty of both. She was a class act. Rocket worked only on Thursday nights (when the better companies issued their paychecks and the clubs weren't crowded with rowdies), only the long shift (12 hours, but what's a couple of extra hours if you could get your whole week's work over with in one stint) and only the prettified clubs, the tourist clubs, the theme clubs, the clubs at the well-lighted intersections (the safe ones, the clean ones, the ones where she had her good-tipping regulars). But late, she discovered, everything she wanted or even would have settled for, had been booked.

Her agent looked at her sourly when she considered skipping the week. "Prima donnas might not get any bookings next week," he informed her, offering her a Winston, which she declined politely. She took a seat, though, to see what would happen next, then patiently waited out an uninterpretable phone call which he took in front of her.

"Lookit," he commenced again, lewdness unconcealed beneath his fat paternalism, "Whyn't ya try da noo place, Tahitia, on Sixt' Avenoo?"

The Advice of the Pleasingly Plump Mothers

Lori Negridge Allen

Five jelly donuts down, seven to go.

Jean hasn't eaten jelly donuts like thisno, never like this, she used to enjoy them since she was a kid and could handle the calories. Her taste buds have changed since then, or she's talked herself into thinking they've changed. At any rate, Jean no longer craves sweets. Or butter. Or gravy. Or anything that isn't good for her. It's salads that turn her on. Tofu. Sushi.

Like all her woman friends, she shuns alcohol, caffeine, sugar, artificial anything; embraces health food, workouts, latex tops, latexier bottomsÉall the better to lay Tex, or Bill, or Bob, or JohnÉincidentally to look layable to their own selvesthin, firm, no body fat anywhere but on breasts and bottoms, and not too much on the bottoms, please.

The fallacy surfaces when they get divorced from, or break up with, or never manage to ever meet their Tex, or Bill, or Bob, or John. Even Jean and Gene they were made for each other, how could they not be, with those names?even Jean and Gene may not be together much longer.

Nor would Jean have it any other way. Marriage sucks, at least this kind of marriage, at least after the first three years, when they were just living together, so it probably doesn't count. On most levels, Jean wants out just as much as Gene does. But not just out of the marriage.

Jean puts two jelly donuts on her plate. Side by side like that, they remind her of a human behind, liberally sprinkled with talcum. She giggles, tells herself it's adolescent humor, when is she going to grow up?

When Jean was growing up, Jean's mother and most of the mothers on their block were more or less what was called pleasingly plump. Plump from sharing coffee and jelly donuts during morning

breaks over which they hashed the one neighbor (never invited) who not only managed to keep her figure after three children, but dressed to show it off, and would therefore come to no good end. Pleasing, or at least pleased, because divorce was, at best, a Hollywood peccadillo; at worst, something that happened to other people. Not that the pleasingly plump mothers were happily married. Happiness was the deluded goal of childhood.

All the pleasingly plump mothers' lives for short-lived life was to get through the day without a major crisis. Wash a little, clean a little, maybe do some ironing, keep the kids in line, prepare the meals, a couple of snacks, be home when the workmen come, do a little gardening, pull up a weed or two, begin painting the spare room, watch an hour or so of soaps, get dressed, get undressed, get old, get through it, get to bed; if you can't dream well, dream pale. Stay soft. That's what it all came down to, stay soft, stay round, no hard edges, nothing to cut, or be cut by, nothing to harm, to abrade. Want not, weep not.

Husbands are human, the mothers could've told her; probably did tell her, but she wasn't listening. Look like a mother, you get respect; look like a working woman, you get what you deserve, until you come to feel inside like you look outside: a working woman, the oldest profession.

This one's Bavarian creme. Four hundred calories easy.

Husbands' what do you need them for when you have us?, the mothers would've asked. Have another donut, an extra inch for your thighs, a couple more for your waist. What do you need a waist for anyway? We get along fine without ours.

Jean's entered Sugar High. There's also Pot High and Liquor High, where you can cut classes, or drop out altogether, but here the rules are stricter. Here it's like being tickled, and the tickler's very strong, and you can't stop laughing because he's tickling you; only you don't want to be laughing, you want to be screaming; only you can't scream, you've got to keep making happy noises, and the more you want to scream the happier you sound, so he keeps tickling

barracuda. Others become heady in the blue and dive deeper. Some just freeze, unable to move up or down without help. The dive master sent his group to the surface, instructing them to signal the boat to pick them up. As they surfaced, the group watched him remain stationary below until the boat got them. As the last diver left the water, he looked down and through his mask saw the dive master turn to go for the body. The boat captain radioed for help. But when the nearest boat got there and its own dive master entered the water neither Charles nor the body were in sight. They disappeared into the abyss. When Charles saw that his group was safe, he went over the wall to retrieve a man who was probably already dead. He went without a buddy, something a diver should never do. But he went in the hope that the man was still alive. He knew the man would die if he waited for another dive master to come and accompany him. To take one of his group to that depth would have exposed his charge to the rapture and insured no real help for him if he suffered it himself. So he went alone.

Luis' voice softened as he told the story. Charles was Karen's husband and Luis said the for weeks after that she called over the marine radio, imploring divers from across the peninsula to watch for Charles. Luis said she cried into the radio, that her messages were so painful to listen to that dive masters had to turn them off to keep from crying in front of their dive groups. Neither body was ever found. It was a remarkable story. More remarkable is Karen who reports every morning to work at the dive shack by the sea and, every time she she lights a cigarette, she turns to shelter her match from the breeze and looks out at the watery horizon that covers the wall where her husband disappeared. Luis said he used to be the third best diver on the island. Now he is the second best. He and Karen rarely dive from boats anymore. They teach.

Luis

Carol Ellison

Luis was my SCUBA instructor, a proud Mayan as full of stories as he was of himself. One of Luis' stories had to do with the person he believes to be the only diver on the island better than him. That is his boss. A woman named Karen, a big, friendly, chain-smoker and one of the most remarkable people I've encountered.

On our second day in the island, an old man who was snorkeling suffered a heart attack in the water and one of Karen's divers pulled him onto their boat. She and Luis helped him into the waiting ambulance when the boat came to shore and that night we saw her in the lobby of our hotel. We asked how the old man was doing. He had died.

Karen said she was on her way to the widow's room to remain with her until arrangements could be made to get her and her husband's body back to the states. I thought it was a glorious thing, to have such compassion that Karen would take on a duty most people would race to avoid. She said she had to, that she'd lost her own husband four years ago and believed no one should be alone at such times. Then she excused herself and went upstairs.

At the end of the week, when Luis was yelling at me not to do anything dumb in the water he went on to talk about how dive masters lay their lives on the line for crazy tourists. Four years earlier, he said, a dive master named Charles took a group to the Santa Rosa Wall, a rock ledge that drops to 3,000 feet but the local divers say it's "bottomless." The wall is a popular site among dive groups which drop over its edge and swim along the wall at 80 feet but down drifts can pull divers to difficult depths. And at 80 feet, this group looked below and saw a body floating about 40 feet down. Nitrogen narcosis, rapture of the deep, sets in at 100 feet. Some divers get punch-drunk; some freak. Some have been known to take the air regulator from their mouth and hand it to an octopus or passing

because you're enjoying this, until something terrible happens, maybe you cry, or maybe he hits you and then you cry in relief; you don't want to be hurt but you don't want to be tickled either, and one might not be better than the other but at least it's different, another flavor; when lemon makes you sick, reach for kiwi.

She's had sugar highs like this before, with a lot less cause, and she's run them off. That option's not available now. It would negate her mission.

The next donut's apple cinnamon. Brown, like her eyes.

The last one's blueberry, about the shade of Gene's eyes. She peels off the outside, pops the jelly whole.

She reaches for the table, means to throw away the empty box, the evidence of her passion, her disgrace. Finds she can't get to it. Pulls her chair closer. Has trouble doing even that; her legs don't quite reach the floor. Brutalized by the sugar, her legs retreat into her body, her body sucks them in. Goodbye legs, goodbye jogging, goodbye running around trying to make it; who needs it, whatever it is. Whatever legs are good for, they're good for her no more. Her arms, they're going too, what will she do without them? But what has she ever done with them that really mattered? Put out a near-perfect fiscal report? Let the parade begin.

She's puffing out a bit, like those tiny sponges that swell to full size, only it's not water that's filling her, it's air. She's never felt so silly. Like breathing helium. What a waste, all that worrying about whatever it was she used to worry about. How much better to sit here like a lumpy lovely lumpy lump men drool over. Maybe after a while she'll roll around the kitchen and start supper—but why bother? She can't be hungry, and Gene can fend for himself. How much better to watch her waist disappear, feel her head sink into her chest, way, way in, into the wondrous smoothness of her crust, deeply fried.

Gene comes home. Eats the last donut. My, it's a large one. Licks her sugar from his fingers.

The Refrigerator

Hilary Sloin

Most people thought it was inevitable; she, herself, believed it began with the fast food. She never liked junk food, not since she'd moved out of her mother's house and sworn off Hawaiian Punch and yodels. Since then, it had been strictly tofu, green peppers, air-popped popcorn, the occasional can of tuna in water.

When she leased the apartment the landlord promised her a refrigerator within three days. Weeks passed. Her pleading phone calls deteriorated from reasonable threats of rent withholding and lawyer friends to violence: "I'll cut out your tongue and make you eat it after it's been left out overnight. Unrefrigerated."

At first she tried to treat it as a challenge. How many meals could she eat without wasting food? How many healthy foods could she find canned? How many times a week could she cook at home, and not have to run out to purchase last minute perishables? Later, it became nothing for breakfast, McDonald's for lunch, Taco Bell for dinner.

In her sleep she dreamt of refrigerators. The characters in her dreams lived in houses without them. They ran out for food all the time. The conflicts were all about food, whether to go Mexican or Chinese. What to do with the leftovers. In one dream a refrigerator arrived and when she opened the door, it wasn't a refrigerator at all, but one of those Port-O-Sans you see at parades and construction sites.

Eventually, she gave up on the landlord. She pretended refrigerators didn't exist. She focused on the spiritual advantages of deprivation, flipped past refrigerators on special in the Sunday Times, quickly switched channels when Archie Bunker reached for a cold beer. If friends inquired, she chuckled good-naturedly and said she'd rather not discuss it.

Her neighbor came over for herbal tea one day while she was cleaning out the garbage pail. There were half-eaten pieces of Kentucky

Thin Black Man with Wife and Child in the Polonia Restaurant, New York, 1970

Kelly Cherry

Hey, teach me your language. I know tsedakis, it means friend. How are you? Is that what tsedakis means? I'll be damned. Let me tell you something. I was twenty-two years in the American army, I soldiered with the Turks, I soldiered with the Australians, I'm guilty of the English. I learned Spanish, English, German. I was in Korea. You know where I learned tsedakis? On Pork Chop Hill. I learned a hell of a lot between battles just by being able to read. Hey, I'll tell you something, twenty-two years and a guy don't have a chance. That's me, I'm just a guy, just trying to learn something. Teach my kid here how to say son. I know Spanish, but Greek is hard. You guys got a whole different alphabet, I know. Alpha, beta, comes from the Celtic language or somewhere. Jesus, I must be the world's biggest ass, but I'll tell you something else, what I don't know would make a whole new world. Yeah, it's like that. It's like you go through life picking up a word here or there, and so I reckon I'm just dead gone on languages. Tsedakis.

Between washes I did prep work. I threw dozens of whole eggs into a cauldron and started the central beater, which slowly crushed the shells. The liquid part of the eggs passed through a strainer into a pitcher. The cooks would pour this liquid, called "breakers," onto the grill for scrambled orders. If the cooks for any reason did not like the breakers, they would throw whole eggs in my direction.

I also made orange juice. I achieved satisfactory liquefaction by slicing oranges with a miniature guillotine and pressing the orange halves onto a spinning reamer. If I didn't hold the orange halves tightly enough, they would shoot from the juicer with great angular momentum and fly at tangents to the angry reamer.

I also made coffeaa comparatively simple task, save for the fact that the urns were on the dining floor, where there was always the danger of further gender misidentification.

Someone who was up late after a bad date might notice me and say, "I'd like to take her home for a pet."

At about 4:00 in the morning I was expected to clean the short-order floor. This was an arduous task, involving wire-brush work to loosen things like dropped bacon and tossed eggs. After I did the scraping, I used a squeegee to force sludge down the drain.

At dawn a colleague and I would carry huge containers of debris to a dumpster in the parking lot. There, we would pause for a few minutes to smoke cigarettes and reflect on the size of the waitresses' pussies.

My fellow dishwasher/busboy would hold up his hands, make an oval shape with his thumbs and forefingers, name a waitress and say, "I think hers is this big."

I would nod and say, "Yes, it must be."

We would go back inside, pick up our buckets and reconnoiter the dining floor.

At 7:00 a.m. I would take off my uniform, pull the rubber band off my ponytail, and clock out. On good days I would pick up a paycheck (I think I was making \$1.50 an hour). Then, feeling as if I had dough, but would never stop smelling of batter and fat, I would head home.

Fried Chicken stuck to the sides and the drippings of cheap cole slaw painted the brim of the new red basket. Her friend looked at her with astonishment and pity and offered to bring her down some left-over stirfry. She began to cry, jumping up and down, clapping her hands. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" she shouted, while the friend, who she knew only superficially, smiled nervously and edged toward the door, promising to return right away.

Eventually, no one came over. It was too bizarre. She had cartons from different fast food chains piled along the sides of the living room to remind her of her options. She did away with forks and napkins and roped off the kitchen entirely. She hardly left the living room except to pee and splash water on her face. Her skin changed color. Her hair grew stringy. She broke out in acne. She would have started drinking but she didn't have any liquor in the house.

She knew there was a problem. Her reaction, she sensed, was abnormal, extreme. She had to take charge, make a few phone calls, take a shower. She fell into a heavy sleep just thinking about it: a junk food sleep. Heavy, opaque colors, long gaseous hallways. Shortness of breath from trying to move.

Suddenly, she was working at the Taco Villa. Ah, at last. Some pleasant, familiar imagery. A man came in dressed in white. His hands were covered with grease.

"May I help you, sir?" she asked.

He looked at her, up and down, down and up. He said there was a delivery for her out in the truck. He wanted to know when she'd be home. He wanted to fuck her. She watched him shift his weight and pictured him on top of her, wondering if he'd wear a condom and whether he'd be willing to go down on her. "All right," she said, "come by at nine when I get off work."

Soon she was home, her bed next to the Burger King fryer. She made him a salad, picking the pre-cut vegetables from the tin bins, making whoppers and big macs. He was eating and eating. In his left hand, he held a suitcase.

"What's in it?" she wanted to know.

He opened the suitcase and thrust his hand inside. It got stuck. She grabbed his hand firmly by the wrist and began pulling and pulling, but it wouldn't come out. She wedged her foot behind the door and pulled harder.

Out came a tiny refrigerator. Hardly large enough for a grape or strawberry. She began fucking him, staring at the refrigerator, wanting to include it somehow, to make it feel welcome so it would grow. She pumped and moaned and groaned loud enough so that the little refrigerator trembled with the vibration. The man's hands slid like slime down the side of her body. The doorbell rang.

"Who is it?" she called, her fingers digging into the man's back, turning the skin white.

"Maytag," the man said.

"Maytag? Maytag who? I don't know any May Tag. I know a May Label but not a May Tag."

She laughed and thrust herself into the air, falling onto the floor, hitting her head against the arm of the couch. A container of old Chinese noodles spilled out around her, like dirty blonde hair.

The doorbell rang again.

"Delivery," said the Maytag man.

She couldn't get up. Her head was like iron inside, her limbs slow and thick with fatty meats and carbohydrates. The doorbell rang one last time, followed by an apathetic knock. She thought she said who is it; she heard someone say who is it, but maybe it hadn't really been her. Her eyes were heavy and stuck together. She began dreaming she was blind.

Wash-O-Rama Thaddeus Rutkowski

I got some valuable job experience one summer in a Midwestern state capital. A friend lured me to the city with the report that work was easy to find. So I went and canvassed mall stores, telephone sales firms, and restaurants. After a couple of weeks I landed a full-time position at a 24-hour pancake place.

I would arrive at work at 11:00 at night, clock in, wrap a rubber band around my hair, and put on a light-blue shirt and a white paper hat. Then I would go to the dining floor and greet the night manager.

He would say, "You need speed."

Then he would look to the short-order window and say, "Give him some speed."

My job was to clear dishes off tables, stack the dishes in buckets and carry the buckets to the kitchen. At my work station, between the short-order grill and the walk-in freezer, I threw the silverware into vats of disinfectant and scraped food off the plates. Per instructions I collected still-edible foods, like whole sausages, and stored them in the walk-in freezer for later use. Then I hosed the dishes with a sprinkler hanging from the ceiling, arranged plates, saucers, and glasses on racks, slid the racks into the wash cylinder, and engaged the main rotor.

When the rotor stopped churning, I ripped open the door and grabbed the steaming dishes. I stacked the plates and saucers in spring-loaded holders and packed the glasses in wire baskets. I took all of the items to the dining floor and set empty tables for the next wave of diners.

Occasionally a customer would ask for cigarettes. "Girl," he would say, "I need butts."

I would get the cigarettes from the dispenser, bring them to the customer, and receive a tip of, say, a quarter. Then I would go back to the kitchen, light a cigarette of my own, and fume over being called "girl."

Gail in New York

Joyce Odam

Gail is living in New York, stripping furniture for pay. Her first child sleeps in the playpen on the dark side of the room. She is creating soup from a Chinese recipe book. Her pots and pans are hanging on a string above the sink.

Art books are pressed between two boards before a window from which goes a long, wound wire for drying clothes.

The proper couch her father brought seems out of place. Upon it now, the wounded dog the car hit sleeps full-length and twitching in its dreams.

Outside the thrice-locked door, three flights of stairs go down to where the loud and quiet women sit on summer steps to watch the children and watch the men return from where they go and watch the sun go dark behind the sudden blot of buildings.

Gail is in love with time. Her face is full of it. She breaks a full-grown mirror and glues its pieces to a cloth that she hangs in some mosaic of herself. New finds are added to the walls which grow so high Art disappears or merges, as it must, with hoisted extra chairs and souvenirs.

Gail never seems to cry. Her face is young and full of love. Ritchie will come home soon to be adored. He will come through the subways to her from his job. Their son awakes. She holds him on a chair that rocks.

At Toshio's

Thaddeus Rutkowski

At Toshio's, I sat at the table and ate salted minnows while Toshio cooked a radish at the stove. Now and then I fed a minnow to Edith, Toshio's cat.

When the radish was soft, Toshio took it out of its pot with chopsticks and put it on a plate.

"The fox spirit is in the cat," he said.

"Her eyes are glowing green," I said.

"I think I'll start a Japanese-vegetable business," Toshio said. "I'll buy Japanese vegetables downtown and sell them to women uptown. Lots of women uptown don't want to go downtown to buy Japanese vegetables."

I practiced karate kicks by taking whacks at a plastic baseball hanging at eye level on a string.

"It makes you more observant," Toshio said.

"I want to shatter noses," I said. "I want to bend elbows the wrong way."

Toshio reached into a kitchen drawer and brought out a pistol. He pointed it at my head. "What are you saying?" he asked.

"I want to bend like a reed in the river," I said, "move like a leaf in the wind."

Toshio laughed very hard and pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked, and he put the gun down.

"Once," he said, "when I was in Okinawa, I wanted to start a fight. I was drunk, and there was a monsoon. I hit a metal pipe instead and broke two knuckles."

Edith leapt onto the table and clawed at the bag of minnows.

"I want my uptown-women customers to pay me in cash," Toshio said. "Then I want to open an account at a large commercial bank."

I picked up the gun and pointed it at his head. "What are you saying?" I asked.

"I don't want to work for anyone," he said. "I don't want to pay taxes. I don't want to agree to deductions."

I put the gun down.

"I have to leave," I said. "I want to continue my career. I want to have a clean record in the personnel office. I want to receive a promotion."

I picked up the bag of minnows.

"They belong to you," Toshio said.

"If I leave," I said, "will you shoot Edith?"

"My experience," Toshio said, "will be nothing like yours."

The Death Album

Joyce Odam

This one was the first, he said. I was afraid of it. Alone here at night, she sang to me, her teeth in the smile of my dreams. As if she knew me.

Later, this man. Huge as a father. Too big for a coffin. Kept wanting to fall off the table.

These children. I almost didn't keep them. Good for some pity, though.

And these old women. Grotesques. Undressed at last. Before all these eyes.

This one was a puzzle. Last name of Doe. Looked very familiar. Could have been my twin.

remember having done it that night. He stopped getting up to check. In the morning once in a while when he went out to the market for what he would eat, the door was unlocked.

Someone pounded up the stairs. In a brief fast moment Leon wondered if the door was locked and, faster than he wondered, saw that it didn't matter.

There was a woman downstairs who cleaned the restaurant in the mornings who if she was looking out the window when Leon came with his brown bag of groceries, waved a hand before turning away from the window.

She burst through the door he was sitting next to the plastic curtain and stopped in the open doorway and looked around the room for him and saw him in the dark room in the pink light through the window and didn't move and said, "I've won. The lottery. My number. Oh." Her gaze slipped, like a hand, down his chest so it was a motion like pushing him away. She turned and fled down the stairs, leaving the door open at the top of the stairs, and he heard her clashing on the stairs as she shut the downstairs door. He saw her in the parking lot, between the car that had just come in and another on the gravel, crossing out of the parking lot.

Leon left the door open and stayed by the window watching for her. He thought he should have cut the frayed ends off the curtains before this. He thought she must have seen them. But the curtains were hanging, still, inside the window sill. In the dusk perhaps they weren't noticeable. Before he went to bed and left the door open, Leon waited, with the touch of her hand on his chest, turning his head toward her. He didn't see Al leave. He didn't see the neighbor come to the ice machine.

to come back and tell them what the number was that came up and if anyone had won it.

He could picture them standing outside the kitchen where he went once a month in the morning to hand his month's rent in through the doorway to Thelma who would be in there working, though it was morning, getting ready to open for lunch. Leon would walk along the length of the bar and stand just outside the lighted kitchen until Thelma came over and took the envelope from him.

So he could picture how the waitresses would stand, saying a word or more as they looked over past the parking lot toward the road, watching for Al to come in the car, the big car that he drove, always alone. And then, when they saw it come, he pictured they would all remember they were standing still and move, change places or move into the dining room and be coming back when Al came through the door with their chits and the lucky number copied off the board, and then they would melt away from the bar, go back to laying out napkins or fixing salads or starting coffee, and those who weren't working would leave through the front door again and be gone into the night.

Below him Leon could hear the soft commotion of the evening serving. Later he would hear the louder intensity at the bar and in the kitchen. Then very late, Al's car would pull out last from the parking lot and the restaurant beneath him would be quiet. The man from across the driveway would water the ice machine.

Al's car coming in made dry summer noise on the gravel and stopped by the steps that went to the front door. No one was coming to Leon though. Al got out and crossed to the other set of stairs and climbed them to the front door of the restaurant beneath Leon and was gone under the overhang.

Leon didn't ever lock the downstairs door where the metal box with his name was on the door. He locked the door at the top of the stairs, if he remembered, when he went to bed. When he was in bed sometimes he tried to remember whether he had locked the door. Each time it seemed he had because he had done it so often. And each time he didn't

The Book with Tiny Blossoms

Jeanne Dickey

My mother encroaches upon me with secret knowledge, sneaking up behind me in darkened rooms in order to impart her wisdom.

One night I hear her call from her bedroom, "Come here a minute."

In her bedroom there is a rocking chair, a mirrored dresser, and a black wooden crucifix hanging over a double bed. She sits in the rocking chair, hands folded on her lap. I open the jewelry box and examine presents I received as an infant that she is keeping safe for me. There is a tiny locket that can hold pictures as keepsakes, but I cannot open it, and a sterling silver ring with turquoise and coral stones. I put the ring on my finger and watch in the mirror, and wait until she begins.

One time when I was about nine years old, she asked me, "Do you know what happens to girls every month when they start to become women?" I felt like a 50-pound package had been rested on my shoulders, and hot breaths were being forced into my lungs. And then before she could finish, I ran up to my room.

Thus the words come here a minute in my mother's particular accent have come to mean that I will be told things I do not want to know. I have learned so far that my arm pits will sweat and smell unless I rub scented cream in them every morning, that I am growing up too fast, and that people will laugh at me unless I wear a brassiere. When she says, "Come here a minute," I can hear dry, scraping sounds, like somebody opening a thick velvet curtain like the one in a confessional, and I smell the confessional's secret smells, like traces of perfume or after shave lotion, or moss and autumn leaves, or some peculiar incense burning.

Tonight she calls, "Come here a minute," in a voice that's slightly hoarse. Now that I know my body is rank with odors and blood, that it's out of control and must be restrained from growing, I don't know what is left to tell, and I think she will start to tell me the same things over again. But

tonight is something new. "The doctor found a lump in my breast. If it's benign, they'll send me right home"

At school in fourth grade they handed us books and we were told to quickly put them in our bags, and to ask our mothers any questions we might think of. Tonight for some reason I find solace in this book. On the cover is a girl with a tiny waist and long, delicate arms swinging on a swing. The rest of the pink space is blank except for the words, "You're a young lady now." The girl is also pink, as if she has no insides, having been rendered with some fine flowing lines of varying thickness, so that she is strong as well as delicate. "You will wake up one morning," it says, "with a stain on your panties. Or this might happen at school, or when you're playing. There's nothing to fear. Your body is changing. You're growing up! YOU'RE A YOUNG LADY NOW!" Everything the book says to do is illustrated by the young lady who is made of lines. In "Get Lots of Sleep" her head rests gently on a pillow, her long tapered fingers pressed into praying position beside it. "Eat Nourishing Foods" shows her biting a succulent, dimpled apple, and in "Get Plenty of Exercise" she is riding a bicycle in billowing jeans rolled up to her ankles, and "You're a Young Lady Now" repeated at the end shows her looking dreamily out of a window, tiny blossoms dropping from nowhere and falling around her.

I don't know why I forget what my mother tells me. I start to feel stupid and dazed like my Aunt Eugenie. My Aunt Eugenie is puffy and fat with rolls of yellow hair and an orange doll mouth. "Oh, I have water retention," she sometimes says, or "I get gas. I'm just full of air." "You could stick a pin in her then," says her son, my cousin Tim, "and watch her fly around the room." He puts his arms out the way kids do when they imitate airplanes. He runs around the room making a long, annoying noise that's supposed to be a plane, until she slaps him, and he falls into a corner like a deflated balloon.

"I should have been another person," she states, puckering her coral

Upstairs Lottery

Randeane Tetu

Upstairs. Behind the plastic curtains the green shade was worn out to yellow except where when Leon pulled it down he could see the cracked stiff green and tiny holes of light making stars on the shade.

Outside, the red and pink neon lit the brick wall. Kilroy was here, Leon remembered, on the brick wall of the building next door. He could see the ice machine, and the man next door come out to relieve himself against the arc of water pink and transparent, not looking wet, but looking neon like the light around.

Leon turned on the radio. It was an old radio. He could see the glow of the tubes against the wall behind it as the room got dark.

A light breeze moved the plastic curtains, and they made the stiff noise they made moving. The bottoms of them were frayed from dragging in and out over the window ledge. He would get the pair of shears and cut them off even. When he saw the frayed ends, he said he would find the shears, but every time he sat instead and looked out at the parking lot.

Leon was sitting in his pajamas before he went to bed. The radio was playing behind him. If he turned his head, he could see the light of the tubes reflected against the wall.

He saw Al go out from the restaurant on the first floor underneath him with the numbers. The girls who worked in the restaurant came in for their pay on Friday night and gave Al their lucky numbers, and Al took them downtown and played them. No one had told Leon this. He had watched it every Friday night and with the calling out the door of instructions and Al calling back in and then leaving and coming back, Leon had figured it out for himself.

After Al left, Leon could picture the girls all standing around, leaning against the station at the bar or against the player piano, standing, not faced away from each other, but all looking out the plate glass front for Al

Where I Found It First

Mary E. Rechner

I had it as a stupid girl, where is it now, I want it back, want to come with my jeans still on, it's more than that, but not much moresome gland or glance, word in the ear, kiss on the throat, I've lost it, a granny in a sweater, want to find it, hook into that rhythm like a wave of a beat and a motion, carry it, take it with me.

I found it in a car in a turtleneck sweater with the windows rolled up, dark outside, hot inside, water rolling down the windows, I'd never touched a penis before, never had one near my mouth, I wanted more hands on my vagina, I wanted to sit back as if I were alone but after the thumping in my body stopped I rolled down the windows, tucked in my shirt, zipped my zipper, felt bad, didn't want to talk, didn't want to listen why don't you touch me now, greedy, selfish, next time you have to, you are disgusting, coming like that so easy.

I get a wanting feeling when I wake up sometimes and my lover is right there beside me I get this stirring wanting feeling like longing more than anything, but sadness too it's full up in my body, it spreads out, so that the wrists are wanting and the ribcage wanting, all the forgotten spots are calling out, watching for a wave.

mouth, "a girl named Linda with a long black ponytail, who likes antiques and makes her own jewelry." I look at her and think this is true, for the shell of Aunt Eugenie is useless and abused by blubber. It only seems fit that she of all people should be granted the power to choose who and what she will be.

There's a story my mother likes to tell about our family and its Gypsy heritage. There's one in every brood, she says, who is dark. My cousin Kent is one. Long ago in New Orleans he was thrown out of school for being a Negro. His mother, Aunt Iris, who is blonde, took him back with Uncle Mike's picture. "We're his parents," she told the principal. "Prove it," he said, but Aunt Iris couldn't produce his birth certificate. He was born in Hawaii when Uncle Mike was in the army, his birth records have been lost. There were other schools there, my mother said, who would have taken him, but that wouldn't do for Cousin Kent. My aunt and uncle went to the principal together, pleaded, demanded, and threatened them to take Kent back. They didn't, and that night while everyone slept, Uncle Mike and Cousin Kent took gasoline and dumped it in the hallway. They lit a torch from a piece of rope and scrambled away in the pickup truck. They never got caught.

Every Sunday since they told her the lump was malignant my mother sits sadly in the back of the church, dark and foreign as Cousin Kent. And I want to know why.

Finally, one night she calls, "Come here a minute."

In her room she whispers, "I haven't been absolved," and I wonder what sin she's committed. Does she lie, does she covet, does she steal? Or has she ever killed anyone? I realize she has done none of these things. The sin concerns a tightlipped smile and a strange compact full of pills I found in her bedroom drawer.

Incubus

Stephen Qualiana

Carl can't fall asleep. He takes some pills, tries again. But no. He's not even drowsy.

He puts on a jacket, goes out for a walk. Several blocks past his apartment, he goes a way he's never gone before. The purple sky glows faintly.

Several young men are standing on the corner. Carl walks between them. One says something, but Carl continues. Another curses at him. He picks up his step. At the end of the block, Carl turns and he notices that the gang is walking in the same direction.

He jogs to an alley, turns quickly to the left, then right in another alley, before they have seen him. He looks below street level into an entrance with a green light above it. At first, when he goes in, he can't see because it is so dark. But his eyes adjust, and he finds he is in a crowded nightclub. He watches the door, but no one follows him in. People are looking him over, so he steps up to the bar and orders a whiskey from the bartender.

Carl pays the bartender and throws back the drink, which tightens his throat and stomach. This combination might aggravate his insomnia, he thinks.

As the bartender dries glasses, Carl senses that the man is somehow different: his fingers are longer, his trunk thinner, his head rounder. A man approaches him. Carl fears it's one of the gang members. "How did you get in here?" the man says. Carl glances at the door where several patrons are now standing. "Are you a member?"

"No," says Carl.

"Come with me," the man says, and he takes Carl's arm.

Alarmed, Carl breaks free and dodges through the crowd, losing the man. Against the back wall, he finds another door.

He goes in, closes the door. It is completely dark. He gropes in the pitch blackness but feels nothing. Disoriented, he falls to the floor. Its

goddess story, no one will ever know. While it remains here a secret with me, the othergoddamn fiction will be ignited off the ground and be seen streaking rocketlike and objective through the $\frac{3}{4}$ ther.

But what are these windows in this auctioned hotel? (I can hear the auctioneer's voice, like a stuck record, in the next room, #231. He says, "450/450/450/450/450?" The same number as my old street address!) There is the russet of California redwoods in this hall carpeting. ("There is certainly nothing wrong with that," I tell myself reassuringly. "Your hero could grow up there. Where? In the California redwoods. A good solid lumber camp, described thus: The soft knoll rose up to the rough-hewn buildings)

But what is this smoke at the end of the hall? Jesus, the oval window is faceted, just as I remember it when I had been abandoned here as a child. Like two fans of glass. There is no stopping it, as I walk up to the next floor, as the stuck voice of the auctioneer gets more and more emphatic, toward the source of the smoke. My steps are most steady, as I see the outline form itself at the next landing. I should create some deus ex machina to get me out of this, but nothing changes. I should turn and flee, into the second half of the sentence in that Olympian magnum opus, which does not come. I reach for other words, but I stand here rigid in the hiatus, hand on the polished russet banister, jade and flame and goddess now in view, coming straight at me.

eventually, after getting lost in many byways of avenues, reached my old neighborhood (marvelously shaded, with two mammoth shadow-rivers running through, catching everything debris, cars, gardens in their miraculously narrow but speedy floods). But the house had burned to the ground by the time I got there. The firemen had coiled up their hoses and gone. Only the reporters remained behind. And a slice of closet door.

And on that closet door:

Two faint scraps of charred illustration, perhaps, one resembling an eye corner, the other a fingernail toughing the faint outline of a curve.

Story) A poet, a world traveler and genius, builds a restaurant in the middle of desert miles outside a city. He finds a smoldering asteroid and has a Kwan Yin made out of it. As the thousands flock to this restaurant, they are greeted by a whole gallery of mirages, one succeeding the other, as in a courtyard of a palace. But the restaurant burns down.

Item) But even after I recorded this, I was awakened last night by a shooting star. It flashed across the curtain. What had I been dreaming of? Of a statue falling down in the snow. I got up in a sweat, a fever (104, I checked) and remembered that I had been dreaming of being sighted through someone's telescope, from the hills which had been visited by the mirage. The whole next day, I walked about, lightheaded in the hermetic room. Later, through a window on the bus, I saw a couple I had just met recently, strolling through the district, and just as they rounded the corner by the flower stand, the woman's long hair tilted.

In the afternoon, I went to an auction. Of everything inside a hotel. It's all right, I tell myself "reassuringly" (although the Editors detest that word, would chew me out saying, "self-indulgent cliché," or something equally impolite, but I can use it here). It's all right, I tell myself, climbing the stairs, I have written quite enough on the other project to be Olympian and noneditorial again; I have written and written and written so that everyone will believe there is nothing personal at all about this project, and as for the

surface is rough, but he can't tell what it is. The door doesn't open again. He wants to run, but he's afraid to.

For a moment he lies still on the floor, listening for noise, for movement. Then he notices the red points glowing intermittently somewhere in the distance. At first they seem like the warning lights on a radio tower, but as he stares, they seem more like the lighted tips of cigarettes from smokers sitting in bleachers. He moves around, cautiously, quietly, on his hands and knees, searching for an exit, but he doesn't even know where the walls are, if there are walls.

Someone takes his hand and guides him to the side of the red lights. He can't understand how this person can see him if he can't see anything. He hears a sliding noise and is pushed. He stumbles, falls, gets up. He is in a basement filled with bags of old cloth or clothing. The window he was pushed through has its panes painted black.

He is out in the street, the same street he ran down before turning into the alley. He tries to find something he recognizes, a marker to point him home. Two young men walk toward him on the sidewalk. When Carl is about to pass them, the one nearer him grabs him, and the other draws a knife. It looks like a kitchen knife resharpened into a stiletto. "Money," the one with the knife says. "We been looking for you," the other says. Carl reaches for his wallet, but it's gone. It's on the bar, where he left it.

He lurches forward, makes a break. Their hands grab but miss him. He runs harder than he ever has. But he can hear their footfalls close behind, how close he isn't sure. A quick right around a corner and another quick right into a dark parking ramp. Pain is shooting up the front of his legs, his lungs are burning. He's tired now, very tired. More than anything, he would like to be in bed, relaxed, his head on the pillow as he breathes easily.

The pursuers enter the garage just as Carl reaches a stairwell. His breathing is so loud he is afraid it will give him away. He climbs three flights of stairs to the roof as quietly as he can. He ducks behind a station wagon. "He's up here," one shouts, and Carl hears the reverberation of running in

the stairwell. Crablike he slips to the opposite side of the ramp, staying behind cars. Traffic noises from the street below grow more distinct as he approaches the guardrail.

Both of them, wielding knives, charge him into a corner. He vaults the rail. In his fall, he sees the sky, darker than black, but the moment before he strikes the pavement, sleep finds him.

Moving the Bed

Karla Horner

You tell her: Go on, move the bed
And she says, where? And why? And what for?
Like moving the bed is the issue, the goal for the evening.
And she says instead, why move the bed? Why not my heart?
My heart, she says. Why don't you move that?
And you say, here by the window,
Put the headboard so the spring sun hits our heads dead on,
So you can reach out, push it, slap it away.
And she says, silly, headposts don't go by windows,
Bedboards should head the ledge just so, push against their slants,
Hold out all that stupid light.
But you take her hand and you sit her down,
Not on the bed, mind you, not like that.
And you make her fingers form the words.
(She is deaf, after all)
And her fingers seem to point you out,
Clutch her heart,
Point back at you.
It is a gesture, after all.
Like moving the bed.

In the Middle of Things

Henry Alley

This story hangs between two words in the middle of a sentence in another story; as yet what I have to say has no form or plot, only an image a jade Chinese goddess which creates a field of force. While I am busy in the strands of the other, more continuous and far more ponderous fiction, there she is, the beautiful woman, resting in the backdrop of flames, which fan out and change, like the violet and emerald of a chameleon ring itself a piece of fire distracting my thoughts like a headache or a star. I see her in a hotel I had visited in childhood, a place where, I am now told, my parents deserted me and took off for parts unknown.

Item) I have felt distracted for weeks, and just when there is a radiant wafer of dawn through the transom of my bedroom, I fall asleep just below the light and dream of going up staircases and everywhere there is a fire and at each landing there the goddess Kwan Yin is, dressed in the red drapery of the flame before the burning oval mirror.

Item) For over three weeks our city has been tortured by a heat wave; temperatures have gone up to 104, and on the outskirts of this burning city, reports of a mirage have gone up of a colossal statue hovering above the hills.

Item) As a child, I had a picture of Kwan Yin. I would pay any amount of money for it now, if it would turn up. But in the first dream, I discovered what happened. The picture was taped to the inner side of my closet door for safety, and for years it hung there and no one ever saw. When my family moved out, the picture was left behind. Kwan Yin, Chinese goddess of mercy.

Years later (this year), the house burned down.

I was driving (my dream reminded me) and listening to my radio one late afternoon, when the announcement of the fire came on. My old street. My old address. I immediately turned around, got back on the freeway, and

language that we had once shared, a language that wasn't mine or hers, but happened in the places we overlapped.

With a start I looked up because this I couldn't deal with. this I hadn't prepared myself for. I had once made that language my master. I had always made that language my master. This was precisely what I'd been trying for so long to keep from happening that the world would unravel with me in it, that all the pieces would go flying apart and become something else too so that I wouldn't know what things were anymore, how they fitted together; that she would take my world so completely and make it hers so that there would be no space in it for me anymore no space that could make any sense to me, or that wouldn't at the same time make sense in so very many different kinds of ways that I wouldn't at the same time make sense in so very many different kinds of ways that I wouldn't know which one of them to cling to.

She wasn't speaking this language to me. She wasn't speaking it for me. And she certainly wasn't speaking it well. She was speaking it to show herself that she had no more need of me. She was her professional psychological social worker. She was her sexa woman. She was her nationalitya Dominican. She was a definition of herself: someone apart from me.

I was the place where she and I once touched. I lived in a world that had been raped. I lived in a world that had been laid waste. I always was afraid it was my own fault. I never would know the things I needed to know. I helped myself to my feet and led myself away, like a doddering old man who couldn't make much sense of the world anymore, who smoked a kind of cigar that couldn't be found in any of the stores these days.

That old man was the only one who could tell me the things I needed to know. But he couldn't speak. Someone had stolen his language. He still loves her. He always would.

He never forgother, or me. No, the two of us lived on in his memories, still young, forever younglike invisible presences haunting this world gone dry.

Sanctuary

Mark Fitzpatrick

10 p.m. news tells of Bosnia, of some black youths harassing a white motorist, of Kennedy's 75th birthday. With bowel cramps from food poisoning, I wait, wait between sojourns in the john, flushing a belated eulogy to JFK. I used to say all events are related, that hearing them one right after another gives you a hint as to how they're woven together. I am a great believer that everything is interconnected.

I am waiting for you, expected you after 8:30. I should have asked, "How long after?"

You were going to explain how you got hooked on cocaine, why you slipped back after treatment.

You were going to answer my question: why the fuck you got involved with this shit in the first place and turned all our lives crazy?

The couch holds my body's indent like a plaster cast.

I am too weak, too sick to do anything but wait.

Once you said, "It behooves us to know where we're going! I've given my life to the Lord, but I want to know where we're going!" And that sermon got you the job that led you to cocaine.

Kennedy's "Catholic" speech crackles on the airwaves. I doze a bit remembering another sermon, fire and brimstone; heaven and hell were so real to you.

Then Wagner's "Requiem" plays.

I cancel the hope of meeting you one last time; lock the door, draw the curtains, turn out the porch light.

My cramps drive me to tears as I climb the stairs to the bed, where I wanted to be hours ago but waited for you instead.

Cold Country Dreaming

Lisa Birnbaum

The first souvenir arrived by mail: a large manila envelope containing black and white, close-up photographs of me. In one, my eyes narrowed behind a flag of smoke. In another, I looked off to the left, with inexpressible sadness. I suddenly remembered when it was, and where, and the awful hangover I'd had all day. On the backs were cryptic messages in broken English. "Find your roots from where you came," one read. I was intrigued, but not as much by the sender as by my image, which suggested a regular girl. I was amazed that without having tried at all, I had shown up definable, fairly well arranged, and even pretty.

Somehow the man revealed himself. He might have approached me at the American Club, bought me a drink, told me he knew my father. I must have responded to his attention, and he must have sent me more messages. Once, I'm sure, he left me with a shirt. It was like many of the men's shirts I wore, only nicer and a beautiful blue, and I didn't avoid wearing it anywhere I went. I often wondered if his wife had noticed it was missing.

One night we went to his house when his wife was out of the country. I remember the maid seeing me but looking past or through me., careful not to offend even a temporary "lady of the house." He wanted to take more pictures, this time in his yard. In his wife's clothes. I'm certain I recoiled from her closed, but he persuaded me to let him put several things on me. There was a striped silk shirt, very long, very stunning, which framed one small white breast at the center of the photograph. And there was a yellow dress.

The wife was small. Her dress forced me to breathe out as he raised the zipper. He knew it was stuck even before we tried to take it off, but we took pictures first, and then worked on the zipper. I stood in their bedroom trapped in the atrocious yellow dress while he yanked at the sharp little tab, until it moved. The dress gaped, all the zipper's teeth suddenly bared, wide

cause to be embarrassed for things that I had done, like someone shedding possibilities. The mail I'd gone through as I was seated there at that table, in fact, was comprised of a lot of old clothes that I had taken off, mine and other people's and I was seated there with almost nothing on. I was who I was. I guess that had always been clear to her.

Some people don't know who you are. And so what they might or might not think about you or do to you doesn't really matter. But you come across someone to whom you can make yourself completely naked, to whom you can really reveal your soullike a little throbbing, breathing alien you've harbored within all these years without showing anyone. It's this person who can really hurt you. This woman seated at the next table was that person for me. When she turned her back on me I was relegated to living life in a place of strangers.

You do all the same things. You smile. You brush your teeth. You pick up the mail. But it's not the same. You are like a stranger circulating around in a world to which you don't really belong anymore. Someone has cut the root that attaches you to the world. The sense has gone out of things. Reason has gone out of being.

And now the love of my life was seated at the next table just another one of the strangers that circulated around me, another one of the emptinesses that inhabited the vicinity. But the emptiness that she comprised wasn't like the others. In it there had once been something. It was a space that I had once inhabited and called the world. I was apparently back now for some reason after a long time away. I couldn't understand why this was happening. I had done everything I possibly could to prevent this from happening.

I looked at her. I tried to make myself look at her like a stranger, to get completely aside from any weakness of my own toward her and to see her fully for the stranger that she had always been toward me. I think this was something I'd worked out over the years in my head in case I ever came across her again. But she began speaking a

Hungry Ghosts

William R. Stimson

I'd been gone a long time. The mail was piled up in the post office mailbox. People had written me. People had been writing me. Things had piled up things I hadn't attended to, like my love for a certain woman.

It was over now. Oh yes, it was long over. I acted like she wasn't there, by my side, as I went through my stack of mail. Because in a sense she wasn't there for me. The us that we had been the couple in love that was like some sort of novel that we both happened to have read and might allude to now and then or probably even just avoid mentioning entirely. It might not even have been the same book that we'd both read. Maybe that's why we rather tended to act as if nothing had happened at all.

I was seated there at the table going through my mail and she was there at the next table. It was a post office but it was also some sort of café, with tables and chairs and people seated around reading their mail. That's the way everything had been for me for so long now. Nothing was just what it was. Everything was something else also.

I guess I had cause to ask myself why I would care that she saw the pile of mail that I had gone through, for by some law of equivalences, it wasn't letters or envelopes that constituted this pile, but the panties of some woman from another country with whom I'd had casual sex while I was away. I'd done it just because it could be done. For no other reason. Because she'd been a woman and I'd been a man and it was a thing we could do. And now I didn't want this woman at the next table to get the wrong idea, this woman from a long time ago.

I guess I'd always wondered what would happen if I ever saw her again. I wondered if I would care, if I would hold up, if I would tell her how much I had loved her, whether I would find out that I still did. I guess I had

apart: I was out. I imagine he gave the maid strict instructions for repair of the dress after I'd gone, though it didn't occur to me at the time that there could be any way out of a full confession.

We were in the darkroom until quite late. He tried retaking a shot the best of the evening since he'd damaged the negative. I was in jeans with no shirt, looking into the camera with uizzical seriousness. The original had captured something innocent, in spite of the cigarette I held and the bright prominence of my breasts against a very dark tan. But every retake looked hard, sharp, and we stopped after it was too late to avoid seeing the evening in it.

There has to have been sex, but I have only one scene in my memory. I am watching him above me as he starts, reconsiders, and begins again in another rhythm. I take this as an unusually varied performance, making up in passion what it lacks in finesse, but I don't see until now that it is a married man's routine insidiously sliding into the moves he's trying to make new. We drink Chianti and smoke cigarettes once we're through, and he tells me about his dream of being an artist. And a gather, which he certainly would be if his wife could conceive.

Some time later, a friend of his wife's visited me. I was surprised she came without calling, since I didn't know her well. I saw her take in the Chianti bottle and a pack of matches from a ristorante somewhere in Italy. We chatted uneasily about her pretext for visiting. The man and I feigned shame after we were found out, probably more pleased with the idea of ourselves as worldly players than anything else.

One morning, a tape was delivered by his driver. It was just before he was to leave for Lisbon, where he'd said we could start a family, announcing it as though it were a business opportunity. He told a story, on the tape, of a man who dreams of a beautiful girl in a tropical country. I laughed at his hackneyed awakening, an old man in a cold country, all alone. It seemed absurd that he had thought ahead. I had been curious about what this man could make me feel, and then I'd known. I was twenty-one, it was 1975, this was Asia.

Waltz

Rosanna Staffa

This is a clear night. I dance from wall to wall. Hold the dishrag high above my head. I am Spanish, my back arches in dark desires.

This is an open. My cot, blankets, and sheets entangled in a twisted scrawl. Shiny of my sweat, like entrails. In ancient Rome, priests slept under the stars, visited by ghosts, learnt from sheep entrails whether the army would live or die, whose throat would be slashed, whose fingers, eyes.

This is my face. The right side is raw. I touch, here and there, tap, feel around. Mouth, nose, eyebrow. Like a child exploring a doll. My right side responds with pain, electric. I go back. Tap, feel. This is my face. They tied my hands behind my back, put a blindfold over my eyes, said: "Listen carefully." In the silence there was my voice, screaming as in a dream, in the night. I still said: this is my voice. It's mine. "Do you hear?" they asked. A jackal, a vulture. This is my voice, I said.

In Spain I have small dancing feet, hair flowing down my back. I dance moving my waist side to side and around. A small tugging at the ribs. I'm on my knees on the concrete floor. Shuffle wall to wall. Humming. I wrapped my ankles in the dishrag and a shirt, I am the little mermaid. My legs are broken. They said: "Listen to this." There was no sound of tearing, cracking, just my voice. My voice calling, calling. Tentative, at first. It was a name I didn't recognize.

This I remember: his voice. He said: Follow. He said: Here, follow me. He was whispering. He said: Shift your weight on the left foot, like this. The tiles were cracked, brown. My soles left a damp trail, like the one my index finger, wet with saliva, used to trace on windowpanes as a child: Secret messages to God, unreadable to the human eye. He said: This is a waltz. His feet folded like scissors blades across the tiles. He said: You are a hummingbird, I want to feed you in my palm.

I cannot eat. I stare at the tray of food. I make myself laugh, so that my mouth opens, like a bird's beak. Feed me with your hands.

I sleep sitting on the floor, my back against the wall. I fall on my side at each dream. I wake up. Start again.

I had a dream, I say to them while they pull my head up and back, it was a true dream.

I see the reflection of my face in the tub of water at my feet. They want me to float like a fish, seeking air, air. They hold my head down in the water, I am a goldfish blowing bubbles, dying. I am a child in a long summer afternoon, tapping with my fingers on the windowpanes. Opening and closing my mouth. Dying.

"This is a dream," they say. Their eyes are locked in mine. They want names, addresses, dates. A sleeper's abandon. "Dream with us."

They walk me down a dark hallway. Out in the courtyard. I fall. Get up. Again. They hold me up. I fall again. My shadow falls. I cannot walk, I say. They try to lock my shadow to their shadows. Upright. I cannot walk, I say.

He said: Dance with me. Will you? I said: I cannot dance. He said: Yes, yes. Just follow me. He said: Dance with me. Will you? I said: I cannot dance. He said: Yes, yes. Just follow me. He touched my cheek lightly, with his fingertips. Remember me, he said

I remember you. I remember.