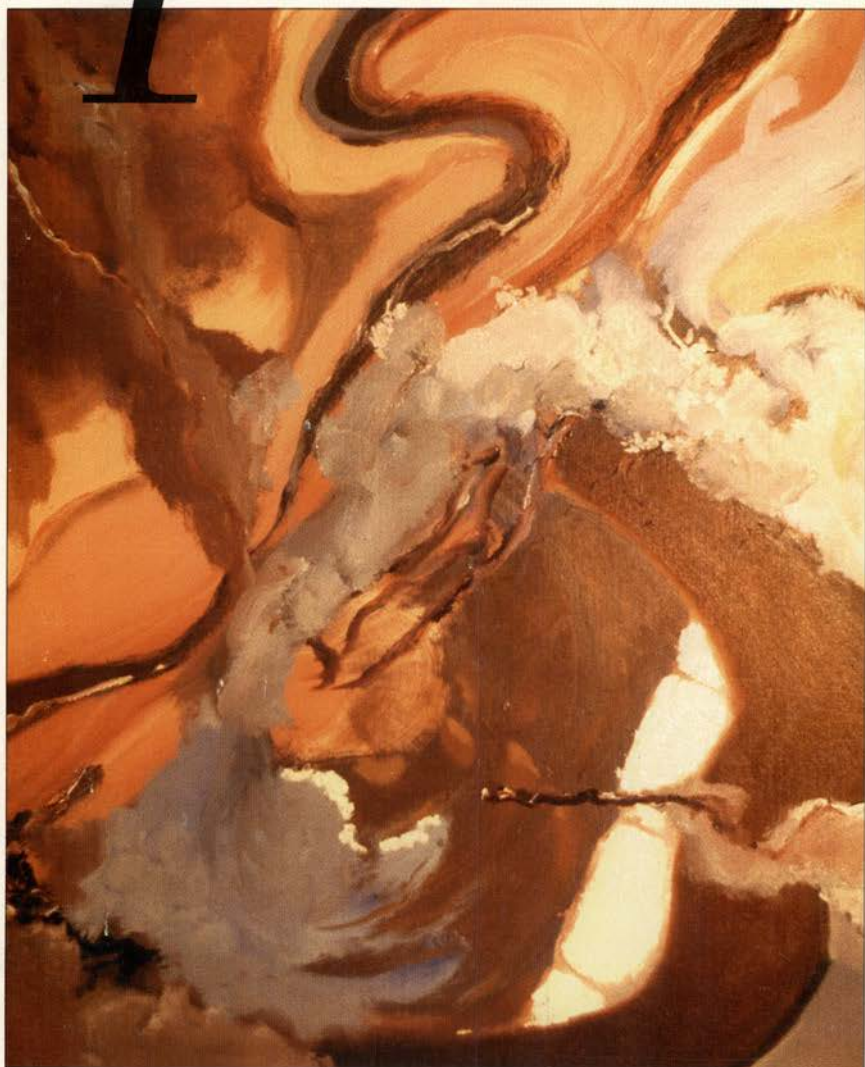


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Fugue



The University of Idaho Literary Digest

Fugue

The University of Idaho Literary Digest

Spring/Summer 1996

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Brenda Hillman

Sister Shirt

Because you weren't there
I slept in your shirt.
We talked about the sounds you do in the night,
talked about what it's like
being entered by you,
about having a cloth soul with black writing,
small white tag in back,
how the shirt looks dirty in the day,
dirty as the moon,
my my my! — shirt with
her would have beens and could have nots—
that would have been nice, said the shirt,
that would have been nice said the moon under white shade
to have him stay in me instead of traveling,
the moon loves light on this side of the world
and says to the day
I would have liked being covered by you.

Sister, sister shirt, sister shirt shirt,
I said what
do you think of him? with his beautiful face,
we lay like a saint without god, candle
without fire—
no translation for tomorrow, —
sister shirt, tell me, does he also
slip into you when he's half awake in the night,
then smooth down the rest of you
with his hand, she asked me, —no, I said, I asked you first—

I put my hand on the inside of the shirt
where he had just been,
it felt so handsome! like expensive hope
it felt like the inside of the body

with its soft cloth,
and for a moment, the body
felt almost lucky, missing him—

Sarah A. Odishoo

Return to Sender: Address Unknown

Dear One:

I woke up this morning thinking, I want a man who knows that I am the one he wants. I don't want a man who needs to take time to figure out whether I am the best choice, the prettiest flower, or the finest pebble on the beach. I want a man who has no choice—one who knows . . .

I'm waiting to hear—"I'm madly in love with you and no one else can take your place. You are my heart. You are what will complete me. You are my joy and my pain. I want you at any price because my life is not worth living if you are not in it."

I'm sending this card, but I know you won't get it.

Dear Two:

I'm madly in love with you. No one else. You are my heart. You are what will complete me. You are my joy, my pain. I want you now because my life is not worth living without you.

Dear One Too:

You always knew the right thing to say.

But I thought you had left. I saw them take your chairs, your desk, your armor. That day I knew I would never see you again. I was in despair. I thought I saw you everywhere—at the lake, by the river, along the Boulevard, in bars, walking

in my alley, driving the van in front of me. I cry every time I see your face change into a stranger's face. Where are you?

Dear Me Two:

That was me. They are all me. Look for me. It's the only time I come alive—when you see me and accidentally. Otherwise I lie in a coffin under the lion's cage at the zoo. I live at the edge of the city, the outskirts, outside of your skirts . . . I may be the edge, the hem, skirting you, so to speak, and that place in me where there's no turning back circles you . . . Don't look for me . . .

I live in the dark, where the lilies learn to grow. See me wherever you can.

Dear One Too—

Where are you when I don't see you? Don't scare me. Where are you when I'm reading a book, watching a movie? Where are you?

Dear Me And—

I don't know exactly. I suppose you could call it Deja-Vu, if there is such a country. Everything is a vague repetition I can barely recall—somewhere I've lived before, things I've done before. But here I don't know how to step into those shadowy figures. I'm always out of step, slightly forewarned and anxious.

But I sense when you think you see me, or when you think of me, or when you write those poems—you know the ones—the erotic ones with my cock in your cunt—then I come alive. Does that make me a Vampire? I don't know anymore. Something about your blood—being in your body—the time I

licked your blessed blood-soaked cunt my jaws and chin bloody as the lion's, and your flesh warm and smelling of yeast-laden unleavened bread, my only communion, and I, like the lions, have eaten my innocent redeemer unknowingly . . .

I know I'm a kind of shameful friend, but you know how I feel about desire and recklessness—my immoderate appetite. I can't see you, so I'll get into you, excessively, extravagantly.

Dear One Also—

How did you know I was writing erotic poetry? That's where I find you—in my erotic poetry. It's as if you're here, in my bed, in the box windows pressing me against the windows, urgent on the bathroom floor, where you've tackled me, against the bookcase, *Anna Karenina* and *Henry and June* behind my head and you pressing me against them, licking my eyelashes, pressing your legs between mine.

What am I supposed to get out of this? Tell me.

Just once, I want to see your face, your beautiful face, your eyes full of delight seeing me, your mouth slightly open, surprised by your own speechless response, your beard hiding some impenetrable joy—the only true reflection of myself I've ever seen.

I miss you.

Dearest Two and Some—

I don't know how I know you're writing hot stuff. At those times, I feel weak and as if I have just cum after straining for a long time to hold back. It's an overwhelming feeling—sometimes it's a joy, but mostly it's despair, loneliness, an agony I want to feel. It is sweet, so sweet. You're the one

with the words—I can't describe it. I know it when I feel it.

I left you because I had to. If I had stayed, I would have destroyed you. I have before. Remember when you were the Queen's Priest in Sumaria and I was her General, brothers we. You knew I would assassinate you. Then in Greece, Priestess of the Eleusian Mysteries and I your sister. Then in Rome, there was nothing I could do. I was the first to plunge the knife in, you were our sacred sacrifice. I've been turning you into food and martyr all our lives. I can't stand it anymore. I've given you up, this is passover. I will escape if I paint my door with my own blood.

But I can't sleep. You are my dreams.

My Dearest One—

I don't know if I'm writing to you or some god in myself, one not comfortable living here, one who keeps running—so each of us can use the other's absence to distract us from ourselves. I'm afraid . . .

My only business seems to be the reception of that god, but all my past lovers rise out of the crumbling soil of my memory and become you, and you are born again and again . . . How can I keep my soul from you . . . hidden in a place so deep, so remote, it doesn't sing whatever your depth sings—Yet all that touches us—you and me—moves us together at once, like some ancient instrument we're strung, played, my Love, into a single note . . . How many times do I have to play this tune having found the one man who will turn into the road and disappear.

Neither alive nor dead, I cry from this narrow in-between, this small cell called body I live between—the real rewinding . . . rewinding the reel . . .

My Dearest Too—

Rewind it, Love, rewind love. I know the pain it gives you, I feel it too. But I want you to be as unhappy as I am, suffer with me for love of you. I am greedy for you. I am haunted by you as if you were a ghost or a goddess or an unrequited pain . . . I ache for you. I am beginning to think real love is the reel of our senses opening the heart, losing the mind, and playing itself over and over again until the agonies and uncertainties of this too unbidden Soul crack us open . . . opener . . . openest . . . lions and lilies . . .

Dear One without Me—

You frighten me. Now I feel you everywhere. . .

Was the bum in the alley this morning, the one rummaging through the garbage cans, the short, bearded one, wearing the wraparound jacket the one who walked with his eyes down, starring at the littered roadway, the one who only glanced up once, the one who kept his hands in his pockets, the one whose eyes darkened when they darted up at me and then down, you?

Dear Two Two Two—

Yes. You were were wearing your black coat and carrying that red backpack. I couldn't look at you. I am wherever you are.

Dear One with Me

Why didn't you say something?

When you were here, I tried to keep away from you as long as I could. I was afraid I wanted too much . . . both from you and

from me . . . I wanted more. Back then, you called me to rebel and escape what the world required of me—all your seductive sayings—“my white-hot cock in your deliciously wet cunt,” “banging my rod in your drum,” “fucking and fingering, and licking and sucking, fucking and fucking until we fuck our brains dead,” you whispered in my ear, in my mouth, in my hand . . .

Words. Then deeds. Now words again . . . I want you—in deed. You could have spoken.

Dear Two-Zs—

What could I say?

You have me. Here. I write these words on the waves you see from your window printing my homecoming on the shore, the clouds paraphrasing my thoughts then editing them across the horizon, your window the only pane between us. I am the thought that warms your soup at night.

Turn me on. Please.

Dear One times Two . . .

I turn you on, then I burn . . . My body aches with loneliness for yours, and you are lost, playing another game in dead earnest. Call this body to be healed with your mouth, your words, eat me alive . . .

No passion moves me so deeply or with such shame. I told you before that I might want too much and that my appetite and extravagance would embarrass you—a lyrical excess, now that I think back. I think it was the vehemence of that immoderate love, my terrible pleasure that titillated the creature in you.

Then, you left me at the corner, saying, “I’ll call you. I care

about you." Call. We women are accustomed to regard suffering in our bodies as natural. You can call me . . . natural. We wear shame like a habit, one you gave me after you had promised "No more, Love." Then, you stole the comma. Now I weep comma-less.

Dear Two times One—Painful Sweetness . . .

You are dense so dense in me now—I'm weeping, crying in my room at the top of the stairs. My wife doesn't know about you; she never will. But each night I come up here and search for you, for your thoughts, your will, your lyrical heart. And when I feel it—sense may be the better word—I cry . . . no it's not crying, it's sobbing. I'm surprised she doesn't hear me.

I grow bitter afterwards. Why can't I see you? I've renounced food, drugs, alcohol, women. I live like a monk. But even those times when I binge, I'm still a monk. It's always you—food, drugs, women. I'm either eating you up from cunt to asshole and down or thinking about eating you. Maybe we're not supposed to have control. Any control—just the drama, the God-defying-drama. Empty rituals. Dry communions.

Think of me, metaphorically I am like you—I am you—You am I, You am like I. I want us to have the same verb.

Dear One flus Two—Sweetest Pain . . .

I had a dream last night You were sitting on the couch in my parents' living room. You are dark—dark hair, dark beard. I've never seen you dark. You've come home. You can't talk, but you are trying to let me know in other ways. You are sitting very properly on the couch. I hear you in my thoughts—

"I love you. I always have. Now I accept it. What can I do?"

You say, courting me.

"This is a new language," a voice says. "You must learn it before you can come home." Now, I think about you when I breathe. It reminds me of the hotels, the beds, in—out—in—out—Is this the first word—being conscious of every breath . . . hearing you in my head.

I don't know who I am anymore. I feel you in my mouth, in my eyes, in my blood . . . once I saw you in a desert town in Morocco passing a snake charmer, the snake's head slowly, hypnotically following you, and you thinking it as me, venomous . . .

Two do you think you are? God? Dess? or God? Damn?

I am not Two, I am One . . . I did not see a snake charmer in Morocco. Get out of my head! I left you because of this: You flooded me, yes, like a tidal wave, an earthquake, a cyclone. You fell on me like Dorothy's goddam prepubescent house fell on the Wicked Witch of the West, or is it East, I always forget, but it doesn't matter anyway. You are the witch of that dirty house from Kansas—No Thank You. I don't want your house in my head! No one's ever been in my head before. I was in theirs, no one in mine. GET IT! GODDAM GET IT. THEN GET OUT. GET OUT! GO!

Even when I say that I get sick. That offer is unrepeatable. If you are poison, bite me . . . I want your teeth in my neck . . . I want your tongue in my blood . . . then I'll feel alive . . . I feel dead when you are not in my soul. I thought when I left you that I would be rid of you, that I would save you from me. Is this what Antony would have done had he known the ending? Vronsky, the train tracks? I don't think we have choices. Unless they are impossible choices. My senses are so exquisitely tuned by the rising tenderness of this heart in accord with yours, I see what you see . . . feel your breath in my nostrils

...

Look for me in your in your nightmares . . .

One do you want from me?

Tell me what to be . . . what to do. I feel I have done something wrong, as if I'm in a dream—a child dragged out of bed sleepy and trying to breathe while being scolded for something she doesn't know she's done. What have I done? I loved you. I love you now more than then. Is that the crime? I have to know. Write . . .

Two-on-One—Love . . .

I wear my heart on my sleeve like a wet red stain, too. Soiled? Did you know that the original meaning of cunt is lily, and the original meaning of adultery is soiled. You are my soiled lily, the lily of my soul, cunt of my adultery, flower of my dirt, soiled lily of my soil, soil of my soil, lily of my lily, adultery of my adultery, cunt of my cunt . . .

You are my abyss . . . the hole in the afternoon, a cry of the blood, current of my most intimate desires, my most magical dreams, my terrifying despair. Falling, that suicidal tendency, in love may be the fatal cure for this soiled life where lilies are our only salvation . . . cunt, my christ . . .

I can't come home . . . I can't see you cry again . . . I can't see you turn away from me . . . I can't lose you. Even these words, the postcards I write I've written to you before. Shouldn't we know how to love by now—haven't all our lives, all our past loves, taught us our lines, gestures?

One on Two—*Lieb* . . .

You do understand. Without you, there is no meaning to my world—to me. I'm ashamed of living. I should die—without

you, I've lost life itself. I feel so alone in a world that makes no sense, whose beauty escapes me, the emptiness of this loss only the soul understands—the only reality, your absence. Your absence—the other god—works in the depth of this soul without the aid of these lustful senses, wounding me such as I am capable of receiving and enduring this substance that is you. Oh Love and I don't have the courage to die . . .

Then worse, I relive our times, recast them, see you unlove me, detach. You were never in love with me; it was a passing fancy, a random encounter with inevitable results, necessity making precious the vile, the vile making necessity precious. You were running away from the man in the long black coat, and I was a bus stop on the way.

I imagine you with other women. I imagine you with former lovers, and I'm jealous of your past—of the time you spent with them, the places you went, the attention you gave them. Like a burn victim close to the flame, I burn again thinking of them.

My fear . . . my terror . . . you never loved me . . . my Love unloving. I wait to hear from you . . .

Only One—I am You and You are It—

You are all there is in my life. You are IT. Remember playing Tag when you were a kid? When you are IT, everyone runs away from you. I was afraid of losing my heart; and now I know in my heart, as I know I will die, You are my heart—you are my death. I'm left with these dumb senses, everything an illusion, except you—and without you, all the good of the world and none . . .

You touched me, now I'm IT!

Love, wish you were here . . .

Mary Clearman Blew

Anchorage

"What was your turning point?" Jamie had asked. She was sitting cross-legged on the end of my bed, bleary-eyed and hoarse. All night she had been trying to keep me talking, trying to distract me from the edge of the black hole, to keep me safe in the circle of lamplight with her. "What happened out there, finally, that was so bad that you had to come home?"

Definitely Anchorage.

Even the thought of that first glimpse of Anchorage sets my heart pounding. We had flown out of Seattle in November, and after five or six hours of a darkness so intense that I cupped my hands against the window of the plane and tried to see through my own reflection to the hard black surface of the ocean or the white shoulders of the mountains, fading off into range after indistinct range, I looked down and saw the electric lights of Anchorage picking out the low-lying town, the harbor, and the airport. Runway lights stretched across mud flats and water, and the snowfields glowed back with an eerie yellow discoloration. Beyond the bulldozed concrete shelf of the airport and the lights of downtown Anchorage was nothing but the Alaska Range. Pull one plug, and Anchorage would vanish, I remember thinking.

"But the band had played in every dive in the west up to that point," said Jamie. "And the towns, you'd been in Salt Lake City and Denver, and even Great Falls, Montana, I think you told me, even Lethbridge and Calgary, so what was Anchorage but one more town in the west?"

What was Anchorage but a bad dream? In some ways it did remind me of Great Falls, Montana, with its mud and wide streets and the wind. It was just another raw town overgrown into a western city. Plenty of bars downtown, and very few trees, and nowhere farther to go. Our last stand on the rim of the world, with the ocean in front of us and the mountains closing in, I remember thinking. No wonder everybody

stayed high or drunk, though at the time it was the darkness that I thought was eating us. True, they said that even in December they had four or five hours a day of actual light, if overcast, but we were playing music at night, eating breakfast, and going to bed in the dark. Our gig was supposed to run all winter, and I don't think I saw daylight the whole time I was there.

"But you went to Anchorage because the band had already fallen on bad times, right?"

That's true, the bad dream had already begun. Maybe it began that night in Ketchum. We were booked to open for Pure Prairie League, and the boys were excited. We'd rehearsed a lot of Roy Orbison, and a Gram Parsons tune, one that Gram had cut as a duet with Emmylou and that we'd given our own rough edges to. *Love Hurts*. I was singing with Sid. My voice is true, but not very big, and I was hanging in there as best I could, but oh God, Sid, that voice of his. He was a whiskey tenor, he could raise the flesh right off your spine with that ragged sound he tore out of his gut, which was the sound Buck had built the band around. Buck was in a great mood that night, I remember, adjusting the amps and joking about Austin City Limits, how that was going to be our next gig, and only his unguarded tone gave him away. Buck had hopes, which breaks my heart now to think about. We warmed up to an empty bar. Nine o'clock came, and the bar was still empty. *Nobody showed up that night, not a one.*

I remember packing up the show that night, taking down the amplifiers and winding up the cords, and the guy who owned the bar trying to laugh it off. The boys were so down that they couldn't even smile back, and later, in the motel, Sid was too jumpy to sleep. Finally he got out of bed and got dressed and left, and I didn't see him again for nearly three days. By then Buck had pulled himself together and made some phone calls. We needed a gig or we were back to sleeping in the van. And what Buck lined up for us was that truck stop, just over the Utah line.

Jamie had interrupted at that point. "You already told me about that truck stop gig. Tell me about Sid."

Oh Sid, Sid, you bastard. I can no longer shut my eyes and

see your face, although I could give a police description, six feet and slender, hair brown and eyes blue, and your identifying scars, the white circles the size of fingertips that were sunken into your forearms as if some other girl had grabbed you and tried to hang on. My fingers could count those scars, Sid, would know you in the dark. And my fingers would know the blue velour shirt you wore for gigs and washed until it faded along the seams and molded to the shape of your shoulders. A ghost shirt, and ghost Levis and boots. They hang suspended in the thin air of lost time, they hold your shape but not you.

Jamie's voice sounded like miles of empty wind, it was so hoarse. She was haggard by then from the struggle to hold me in that stale bedroom. She must have sensed how far I had gone.

"You lost him in Anchorage?"

"Anchorage, yes.

In the airport. *No, God no, don't think about the airport. Think about his concho belt.*

"But he's still alive?"

"Probably."

The tips of my fingers remember those conchos, how cool they were, and convex, almost the size of my palms, which ache with their absence. Oh Jamie, don't make me think about Sid.

When Buck told us about Anchorage, it sounded fine. A six months' stand, it would see us through the winter. The guy who owned the club up there also owned a mobile home which we could live in, which would be part of the deal. And so the next thing we knew, there we all were in Sea-Tac International Airport, trying to pack and ship our instruments and equipment. Buck and Sid and me and Calvin, the drummer, and the bass player whose name now that I come to think about it was Gary, although he tried to get everybody to call him Appaloosa. And of course Sharon what's-her-face who was sleeping with Gary and anybody else that Gary asked her to sleep with, as well as doing the boys' laundry and running their errands and seeing about flight times and

anything else that needed to be done, just so she wouldn't be left behind.

One thing I can't do is imagine myself back to the girl I was then, Ruby Red, who for all her runaways was more excited about the big airport than she wanted to let show. Sea-Tac I can remember, all lit up and ready to roll day or night, with the posters of the Pacific Northwest, the duty free shops, and a thousand Japanese scurrying for the international gates. We were headed for Alaska Airlines. In the middle of the concourse was a glass cage containing a real dogsled and a fur parka. Anchorage! We were a rebel country act on our way to Anchorage, and we were going to play music again, we were going to play our Roy Orbison tunes and Creedence Clearwater Revival and the Rolling Stones with our own twang, and people in Anchorage were going to come and hear us.

I was thinking *we*. I wasn't thinking about Sharon what's-her-face, or how I was sleeping with Sid and Buck and doing whatever they needed done, just so I wouldn't be left behind.

At first it was like any gig. It was always night in Anchorage, as I tried to explain to Jamie, although electric lights burned everywhere, in homes and shopping centers and overhead in long streams from the poles that hung over the freeway and the thoroughfares and were reflected back from the yellow-stained snow. Once in a while a moose would clatter across the pavement and stop traffic. I did not notice at first how the electric lights drained off colors until all cars were gray, all faces pasty. The six of us were living with all our gear in that mobile home, but the club we were booked into was downtown, and we spent a lot of time there. And we made it until March, which is when Sid fell apart.

Love hurts, love scars, I sang and Sid sang behind me, harsher and sweeter than Gram ever sounded. Love wounds and mars anyone not tough nor strong enough to take a lot of pain, take a lot of pain.

Buck's fat guitar chords slowed the rhythm to breaking point, and he and Calvin and Gary held it while we sang.

There weren't a lot of people in the club that night, but some of them clapped when we finished. When we took our break, Sharon what's-her-face was sitting at one of the shiny knotty-pine tables with a drink.

"Sounding good, Ruby Red," she said. She stabbed the maraschino cherry out of her drink and ate it.

"You're drinking vodka collinses? When did you come into cash?" I said.

"Appaloosa wants me to move out," she said.

"What are you talking about?" I said. I couldn't think at first who Appaloosa was, then remembered that she meant Gary.

"Where am I going to go?" she said, starting to cry. She put her head down on the table and cried into the sticky slop of spilled drinks.

"Does she want another drink?" asked the waitress, coming by with her tray and her little apron tied over her jeans. I knew and hated her. She and three other girls barely out of their teens lived in another of the club owner's mobile homes, just across from ours, and they kept a party going there constantly.

"No," I said.

"Yes I do too!" sobbed Sharon, raising a sticky red face from the table. She fumbled for her purse, spilling change and trying to count enough quarters and dimes to pay for another vodka collins. "Can't I put it on the band's tab?"

The cocktail waitress glanced over her shoulder and saw Buck and Sid coming through the cigarette haze from the men's room. She flaunted her little butt at them and smiled at Sharon and me, smug, the way only a really young girl can be smug when she believes that her pussy is solid gold. "No tab."

"Get her her goddamned drink!" I snarled, and the waitress tossed her dreadlocks and flounced off. I could hear Sid from across the lounge, arguing with Buck. From the pitch of his voice I knew he'd just taken another hit. I knew where he was getting it, too. Buck was going to be fit to be tied, and we had the second set coming up and a long night ahead.

"—and I realize I'm not supposed to know that you're fuck-

ing doing! I realize I'm not fucking supposed to know, but you're stirring up shit, Buck! You're stirring up the shit! Yes! You're telling us out of one side of your mouth that we've got a band, Buck! You're telling us that we've got a band, and all the time you're on the goddamn phone, telling *them* what shitheads you're playing with! Yes! And you think we don't know what you're up to! When are you going to dump us, Buck? Do you think we don't know you're getting ready to dump us? Do you think Calvin don't know that? Do you think Gary don't know?"

"Just shut the fuck up," said Buck. He sounded fairly calm.

"—I should shut the fuck up! I should shut the fuck up! I'm not supposed to know what's going on—"

Sid's eyes lit on me, like two vacant windows. I stared back, stunned. It was as though intelligence had been wiped off his face, and only craftiness remained. For just a beat, as he recognized me, his diatribe faltered. Then he was off on a new and feverish spin.

"Ruby! You've been singing the wrong goddamn tune! Yes! And sticking your big red ass up between me and the light! But you're finding out it ain't so easy. You think you can fuck, don't you, Ruby? Yes! You think so! You think you can fuck till the jism runs out of you! You think you can fuck with me! But you're about to find out you've been singing the wrong goddamn tune!"

The sick certainty of his repeated *Yes!* was battering me. I didn't know what I was hearing, although I was aware of the stir in the semi-dark, heads turning, and one man half-rising out of his chair. But now Buck was speaking, low and soothing. "Take it easy, pardner. It's all right. We got music to play."

Sid threw off Buck's hand, but he saw the set and the waiting guitars, and he climbed up there as though by rote and picked up his big Gibson. He looked like himself, his skinny legs, his dark blue velour shirt looking like velvet under the lights, his face looking washed out, but that also could have been an effect of the lights. Calvin glanced at him, went back to adjusting a screw on one of his drums. Gary was tuning his bass, and Buck and I took our places. I was wearing the

red fringed suede I'd bought in Jackson Hole and thinking *big red ass*. There was that hushed instant, and then Buck nodded and we all broke into *L.A. Woman* with a charged rhythm and a twang.

Into the blues! Into the blues!

One or two couples got up to dance. Sid stopped playing, belched into his mike. Then he started a riff that could have been counterpoint. The dancers stopped to listen.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Buck broke off singing and yelled and went back to singing, almost in the same breath. Behind me, Calvin and Gary were playing and singing *L.A. Woman*, and so I kept playing, trying to fill in with keyboard the hole left by the runaway lead guitar. Sid let out a long exultant giggle into the amplifiers and doubled the tempo of whatever it was he was playing. The dancers had given up, and now I gave up. I would never have believed anybody could play guitar as fast as Sid was playing. Calvin was hanging in there with a beat and making it just plausible that this was something we were doing on purpose. Calvin was doing more than that. He was coming in just a hair late with the drums, gradually dragging down the tempo and slowing down Sid.

Slowed, Sid could not sustain that wild riff. His fingers stumbled and lost their place, and into the empty space rose Calvin, with a rat-a-tat-tat and a brush to the cymbals in an improvised finale. My ears were ringing. In front of me the few heads in the darkened lounge were rigid with apprehension. I sensed movement in the silence behind me, a shifting of equipment, and turned my head. Buck, a burly shadow, was returning to his place on stage. "Let's play *Brown Sugar*," he said. Faltering, we began, all but Sid. Buck had unplugged him.

We got all the way through *Brown Sugar* and began our next tune. I was filling in more and more with keyboard, taking Sid's big passages, knowing I was giving him more reason to be paranoid. Sharon was still sitting at her front table, whether or not she ever got her fresh vodka collins. The lights from the stage reflected on her drenched face, and I saw her eyes widen, her mouth a soundless gap: *no!*

Something sailed over my head and fell in a heap on the floor. It was Sid's blue velour shirt. Then came the clank of his concho belt, sailing after his shirt, and then his empty Levis. I turned and saw Buck with his arms wrapped around Sid. Sid's thin bare arms and legs flailed. Out in the darkened half-circle of lounge sat the spectators, rigid with silence, while on the lighted stage Sid was writhing in Buck's armlock, jabbering, pouring out his frantic fulminations and obscenities in a hot river of voice without sense or connection.

The club owner bustled up. "Get him out of here. All of you clear out. Call it a night."

"Wrap a blanket around him," said Buck, tightening his grip as Sid fought and tried to bite him, "and we'll take him up to the emergency room."

From then on it was like looking into one of those revolving mirrored balls that spin overhead and reflect the light in brilliant fragments. Somebody brought a blanket, yes. The lights in the lounge had been turned up. "Nothing to worry about," the club owner was assuring folks. "This band is from the lower forty-eight, and one of them's just got a little substance problem." Calvin must have gone to bring our rented van around, because he was back on stage and helping Buck propel Sid toward the door. Sid turned his head and saw me, "Scavenging bitch," he said, and bared his teeth at me. Calvin pulled a corner of the blanket over his face, and out they staggered, two guys holding up the blanket-wrapped third, and I realized I was still standing behind my keyboard in my red fringed suede, as much a spectacle as though I were naked myself.

Sharon-what's-her-face was tugging at my hand. "Let's try to catch a ride home," she urged.

And that was that? whispers Jamie as distinctly as though she were as present in this haunted attic bedroom as she was that other night.

No, hell no, that wasn't that.

At the time of Janis Joplin's death, she had quieted down

considerably from her wilder days, although by then her liver was shot and her doctors had warned her that her next snort of Southern Comfort could kill her. On the night of her death, she was alone in a hotel room, and she had called room service for a club sandwich. When the sandwich came, she paid for it and tipped the server, and closed the door after him, and locked it and died. *And that was that.*

Somehow I always thought that that was how it would go for all of us. One minute the familiar trivia, the club sandwich and the tip, the next minute, *blink!* One minute I'm under the kitchen table and all I can see is my mother's feet, red toenails and sandals and ankle bracelet coming closer. The next minute, *blink!*

But no. Nothing is ever lost. It can all be recovered, says Dr. Mariash. Just relax. Focus on the light. Tell me what you see.

And I see the spin of the mirrored ball. The glitter of its multitudinous facets, the revolving fragments of light that it trails across the floor. Somewhere in those shards is Sid. If nothing is lost, if nothing comes to an end, then Sid is somewhere, being tumulted from fragment to fragment, reliving, remembering, howling in the void.

Sharon what's-her-face and I thought it was over that night, thought we were waiting for Buck and Gary and Calvin to come back from the emergency room and tell us it was over. Then the screams from across the street, one of the cocktail girls pounding on the door of our trailer, and Sid right behind her, grinning, teeth chattering, naked except for his shorts.

"He broke into our stash and took all we had! He's swallowed a hundred bennies!"

There is no sequence. Only spinning fragments. And noise. Sid's voice, venting his rackety invective into the cacophony of all sound ever cracked or thundered, thumped or sung, whistled or barked or boomed or whispered into the winds of all time and all space. He could not stand upright, he could not stand still, he ricocheted through that trailer like an escaped grenade while Sharon and I cowered in each other's arms as though we had been glued together, I remember

that. I think I remember headlights in the front window, the van screeching to a stop, the door bursting open, and the boys' faces.

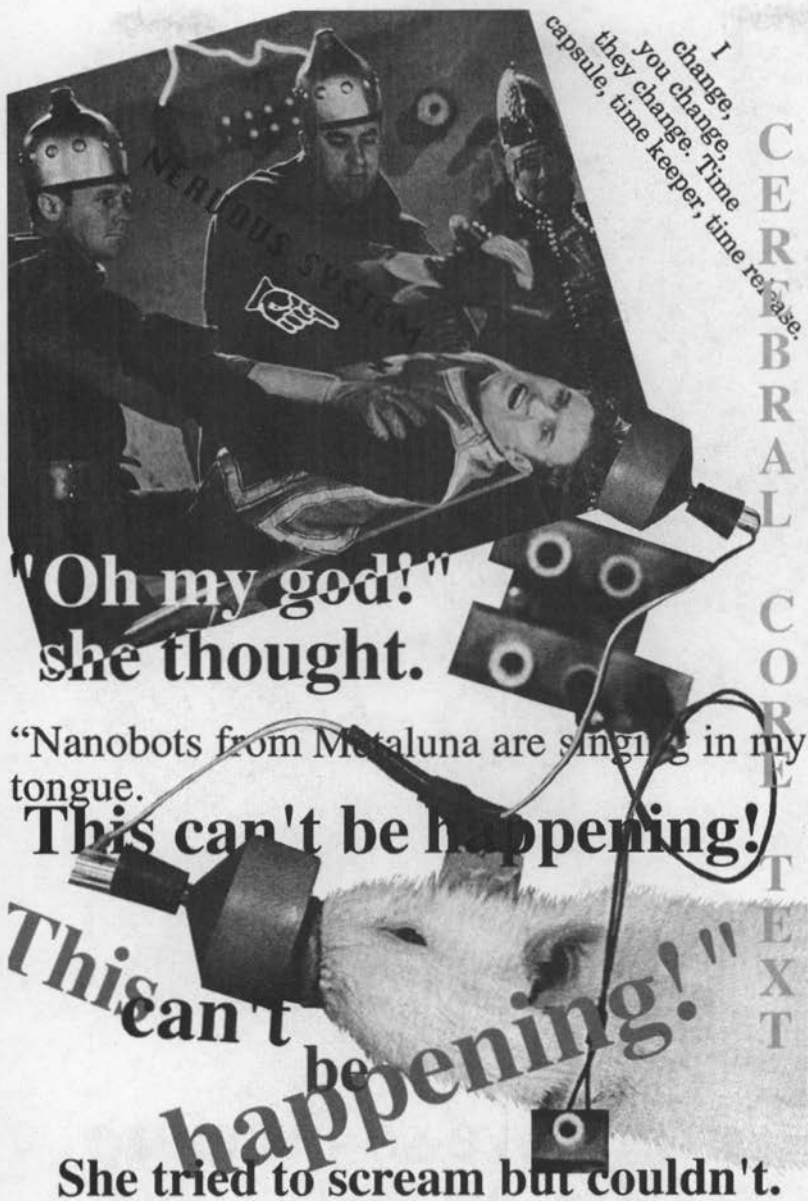
Buck's voice, like an overlay: *We got him as far as the emergency room, but he refused to be admitted, and they wouldn't take him, said we had no authority to commit him. When we tried to get him back to the van, he took off running. He must have run all the way back here, and I see what I could not have seen, the small naked figure streaking bare-foot through the gritty snow, clambering the chain-link fence to the four lanes of freeway, and caught for just an instant with bleached face and glowing eyes in some passing motorist's headlights, like a running moose.*

Then what happened, asks the ghost of Jamie inside my head.

Buck's version. *We don't want him, the police said. Send him back down to the lower forty-eight. So we bought him a one-way ticket to Boise. Wrestled him down, got some clothes on him. Actually got him to agree, yeah, best thing for you, Sid, we'll take you out to the airport, put you on the plane. He calmed down. We got him right up to the goddamn gate, saw him start to board, turned our backs. Next we see is Sid bounding past us down the concourse like he's on springs. Eyes on fire, jabbering away. He bounds up to this elderly couple, snatches their suitcases. Their mouths fall open, they're like, Help! But he's outta there, running across the parking lot with their suitcases. That's when the police finally stepped in.*

The next scene I really remember clearly is in Steelhead. I am walking across campus. It is April, and cherry blossoms are drifting down into my hair. The petals remind me of the shards of light. Flash, and the cocktail girl I hated the worst is running through the trailer court in the dark and bawling like a little kid, wah-wah-wah. Flash, and Sharon is holding me, patting me, repeating nevermind, nevermind, nevermind. Flash, and Buck is explaining, I never thought he cared if I balled you. Flash, and the scene I never saw, Sid frozen on the fourlane, his stunned eyes caught in headlights. I only saw the terminal at the Anchorage airport when

I came and then I left. I don't ever want to think about that airport again.



I
change,
you change,
they change. Time
capsule, time keeper, time release.

C
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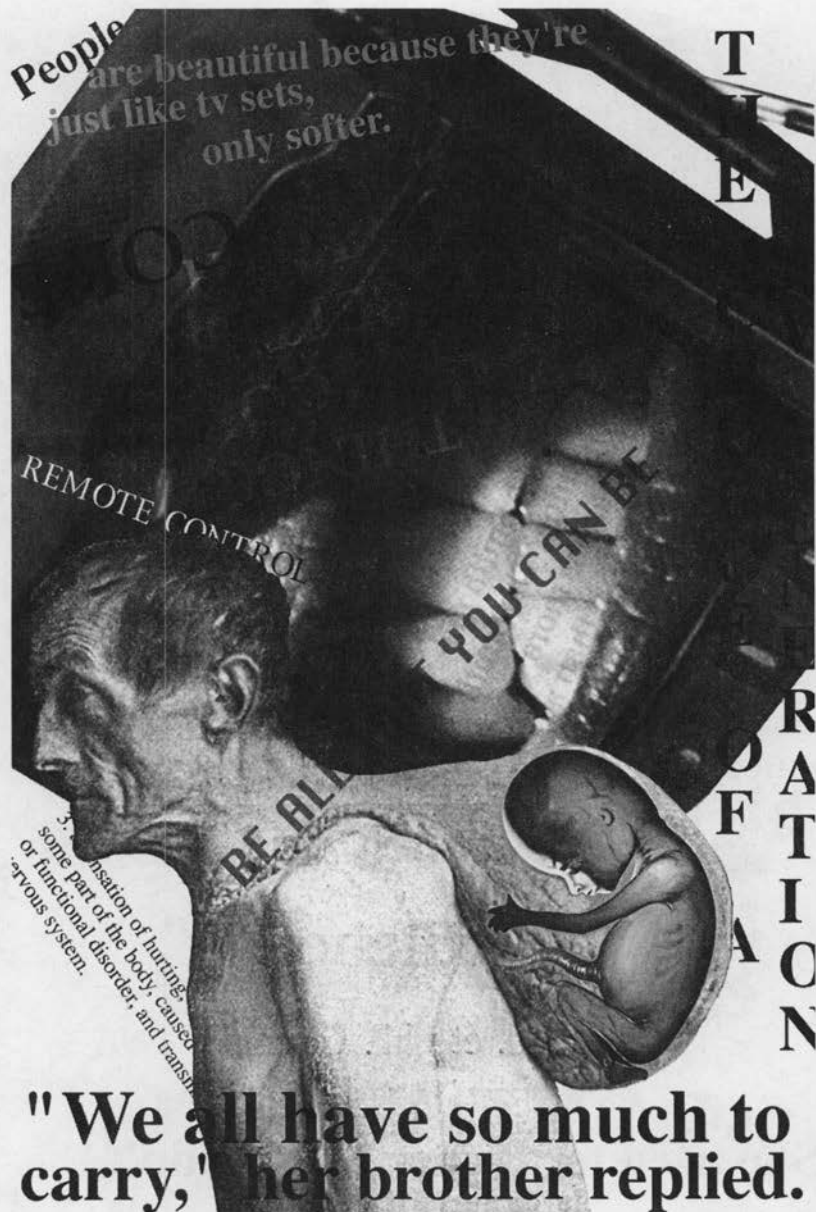
**"Oh my god!"
she thought.**

"Nanobots from Metaluna are singing in my
tongue.

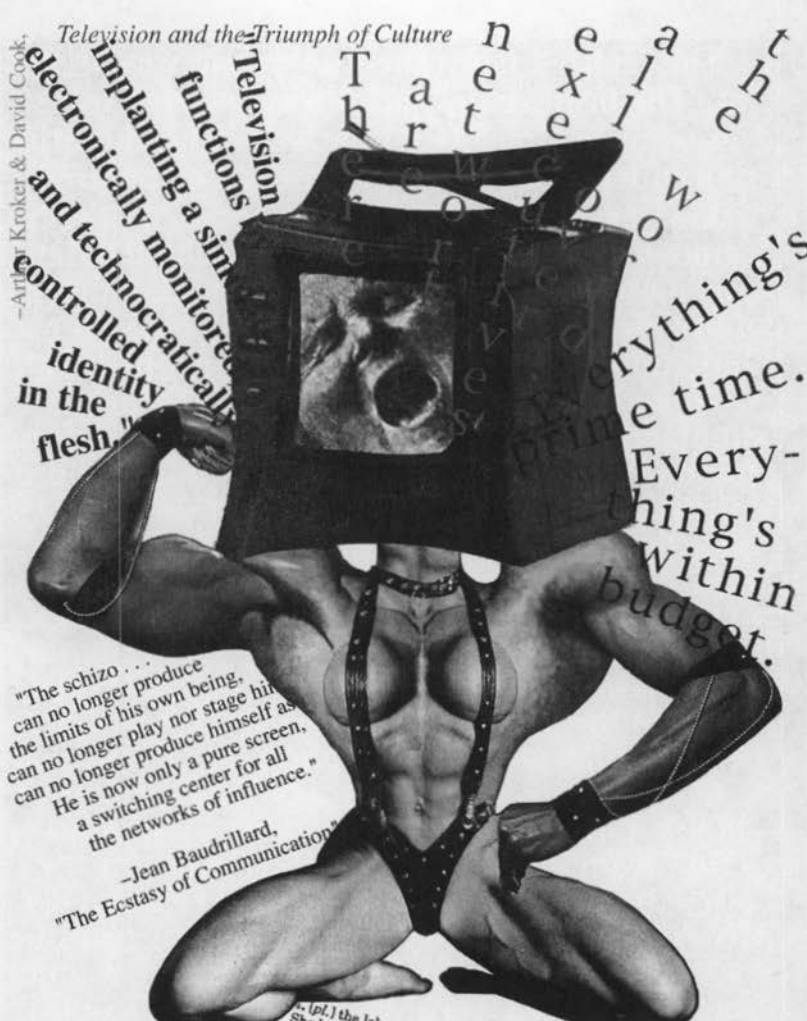
This can't be happening!

**This can't
be
happening!"**

She tried to scream but couldn't.



S She realized when she was six she was pregnant. The brother she had always wanted was growing ectopically on the wall of her intestines, product of an alien abduction. He matured slowly, several hundred thousand cells a year, among her waste. On her thirteenth birthday he became a miniature television set and began broadcasting to her through the voice-chip implanted in her tongue. "Kill dad," he said. "Show me you care." "The second-order simulacrum simplifies the problem by the absorption of appearances, or by the liquidation of the real," she replied. That night she drugged her father using chemicals found in the saliva of rare red South American tree frogs she slathered on his Big Mac. He realized what she had done, but it was too late. He collapsed at the table. It wasn't enough to kill him, though, so she rummaged through the kitchen and located a steak knife, which she inserted, once, one fourth-inch deep, into his right biceps, then ran from the house, hitchhiked into the country, and stood in the middle of a cornfield, waiting for the silver products of her imagination to beam her to a higher level of understanding. Instead she was attacked by a covey of wild cats (the wandering souls of electrocuted, hanged, and lethally injected serial killers) crazed by the scent of frog saliva, beef, and special sauce on her fingertips. She died a blind hiss-filled death. "You really love me," her brother whispered as she perished. "You love me, you love me, you love me . . ."

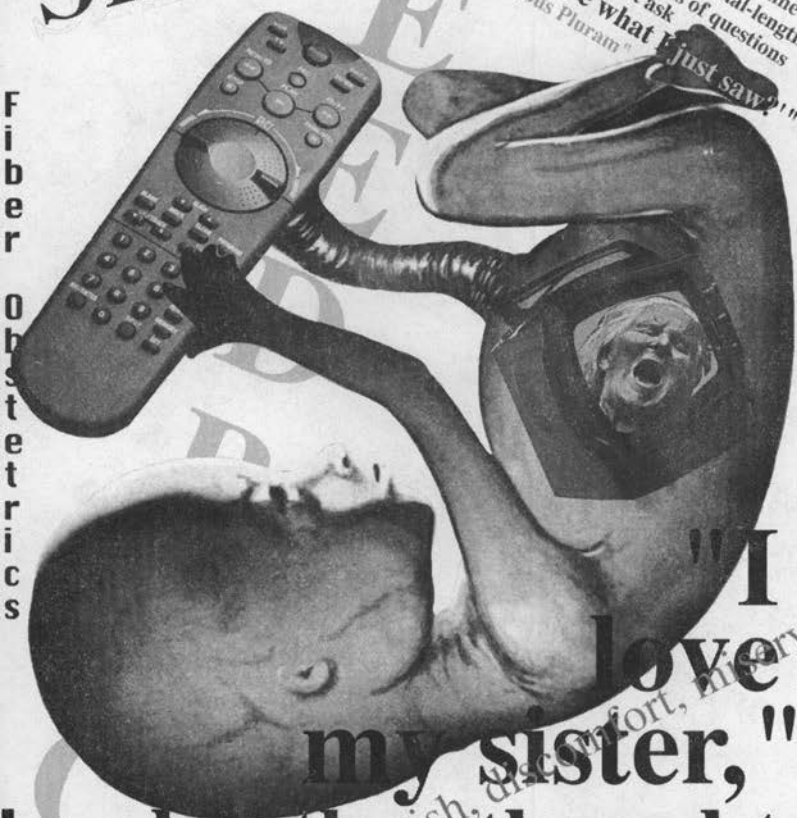


**"Let my baby live!"
she cried.**

What most of the people I know do is they all sit and face the same direction and stare at the same thing and then structure commercial-length conversations around the sorts of questions myopic car-crash witnesses might ask each other--
-David Koster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram"

STATIC

Fiber Optics



"I love my sister," her brother thought, flipping channels in her brain.

WE HAVE A PROBLEM HERE

NASA

INCIDENCE OF CANCER IN MEN:

skin.....	23%
sal.....	3%
.....	18%
colon & rectal.....	11%
other digestive.....	10%
prostate.....	10%
urinary.....	7%

CANCER IN WOMEN

.....	13%
.....	2%
.....	3%
.....	3%
colon & rectal.....	13%
other digestive.....	8%
uterine.....	15%
ovarian.....	3%

Freaky

"My mind is light. My mind is a cathode-ray tube. It's so beautiful I could die."

5. (pl.) great care of effort; to working; trouble wh...
pains to accomplish a work...
an (or upon, under) pain of; with the great...
specified requirement, order, etc. is fulfill...
to die in the pain; to die under tor...

Karney Hatch

part dust part me

i'm being pulled
back to the house
like my bellybutton
is a hungry troutmouth
that just swallowed
a hook i feel
the yanks down deep

the sun on the stubbley wheat
says that it's lunchtime
so i won't get yelled at
for not eating enough pancakes
my walking kicks up dust
which is part of the ground
and with the rain in springtime
it makes the wheat grow and
it's because of all that stuff
that my daddy sweats

i'm kinda mad at the dust
for taking my daddy away
even though this isn't the time
for sweating now's the time
for laying around in the shop
next to the stove to stay warm
with smells of daddy's engines
diesel and thin oil on his clothes
dark thick oil soaking up in kitty litter
and pretty soon mom'll cook a turkey

but right now daddy's not in the shop
he's in our trailerhouse which is moving
just a little bit first towards the barn
and then towards me and

as i get close i can hear my mommy
and daddy make
the sounds that made me

Brandon Hall

Unnamed

Jensen George shares his apartment with us, the dead. On weekdays he processes eviction appeals for the city. On Fridays, he stops at a kiosk and purchases the essentials: TV dinners, beer, and cigarettes. When he walks through our door he turns around immediately and chains it shut until 6:05 Monday morning. When he leaves for work he remembers to leave the television on and the window open. When he gets home he listens. He always listens and he always talks. There is nothing in him that compels our cohabitation. We simply find him interesting. We find it interesting that he does not find us interesting. He finds that interesting. We amuse each other. It amuses us that he does not care for human contact, considering the importance of what he has to say.

"Today is a shitty day," Jensen says.

"It will be over soon," we say, and roll him cigarettes.

"Tomorrow will be worse," he says, and there is nothing we can say against it, only smile and bring him a beer from the refrigerator.

Friday: we are in the hallway scaring cats, and we hear footsteps like cannons shooting wet meat at close range.

"SUSAN," we say, and our eyes glow electroviolent blue upset (like a mood ring; its a joke between us). He says nothing, but his neck shoots out wispily tensed electric hairs. They make us mad. We hiss, we spit. In the hallway, we see the woman stomping. We cringe. The door screams as she assaults it. *Everything* screams when she is done. We hide.

"Jensen!" she yells. "Jensen, I know you're in there! Come on you asshole, open the door!" Jensen drinks in silence, watching an *Incredible Hulk* rerun. SUSAN thinks she loves Jensen. She thinks he needs her. She thinks he is sick, and yells it every Friday. Jensen thinks nothing. Thinks that the matter is closed like the door. We whimper. She hurts

our ears. She confuses us because when she yells the bees and needles and stickpins fill our heads. "Jensen, goddamnit, come on!" We hate her, we hate her! We are in the hallway. We grab her legs and knock them out from under her. We drag her to the stairs, but we are tired. In the room Jensen says, "Don't hurt her," and we hear something strange in his voice, and see that he is crying. We howl, and Jensen's plant shrivels. In an upstairs apartment we blow the eardrums of THE DOG, and it howls with us.

Later: we are in the bedroom. Jensen is upset at us. He will not let us sleep with him. He says that we disgust him. That we are inhuman. We are inhuman.

Later: Jensen says that we must leave, that he needs some time alone to think. He does not realize that we are always with him, that we can always hear him think, always feel him feel, always love him. We do, we love him. He is desirable; he is more us than he knows. WE know.

Later: we are in the heating ducts. We are in the water pipes. We are in the wiring. We are in the furnace. We are in the shower. We will make him see how much we love him. He does not understand how much it hurts to be alone because he has always been alone. We have always been together. We act in unison because we have something deep in common. We accept him, we await him, we create him. We are in the thermostat. We are in love.

Joy Passanante

The Scent of Innocence

I lived the last of my university days alone in a room the size of a pantry; my nights, slouched over my cups, leaning on the bare wood table at the Garden Lounge in the Hotel Unita, whose advertising trump card was a hand-stenciled sign touting its "Steam Heated Rooms." My senior year, the wet upstate cold seeping up my coat sleeves and into the fleece lining of my mittens, I got tired of trudging down the road and across the soggy field, where the frat owned a converted farmhouse. So one night after the other guys had gone home, I bought the Garden manager a series of Southern Comforts to make his heart warm to my idea. I stuffed my clothes into a duffle bag and everything else into four or five cartons from the liquor store and moved them up the creaking stairway the next afternoon, before he had recovered from the Comfort. But the Garden was steamier than any of its rooms, and by the middle of the year, I was spending a good part of my days there, too.

When Helene walked into the Garden, I was engrossed in watching the fat flakes whiten the dark hats of townies on their way to the drug store next door. My biology text was spread open in front of me; I was using it as a coaster. I had, of course, seen her before. Everyone in town had seen everyone else before. The first time I remember taking notice of her, she was peering into the window of Lacey's, Main Street's bridal shop. I recall her contours; she was wearing a straight dark skirt, which gave her the illusion of being tall. I had slowed down, as I used to do at every snug skirt—and, besides, it was a weekday, and what else did I have to do?—and had followed the line of that skirt up her body until my gaze had shifted to her reflection in the plate glass. But what remains dearest is the invisible. For as she raised a finger to point to the nippleless chest of a pallid and oversatined mannequin, a dry, sweet odor had seemed to fly back

at my face. Its sudden and powerful presence almost distracted me from the knowledge that she had been pointing at my image.

Before she entered the room that first time, she stood outside for several minutes, facing its single window. Behind her the wool-cocooned passers-by hurrying to escape the cold made a fakey and incongruous backdrop as if a silent movie was projected on an invisible screen. Both hands in her coat pockets, her cheeks and nose blotchy, she seemed to be doing nothing but staring at us.

Since doing nothing was my only talent, I felt an ephemeral thaw in the frost encasing my heart; but by the time she turned, disappeared, then entered, I had already remembered myself. Mickey saw her coming and whispered, "That's Helene."

"I know," I said, though until that instant I had no notion what her name was, no thought that I might need to know it.

"You know her?" he asked, raising his eyebrows. The possibility that I might know an older woman must have elevated me a notch or two in Mickey's estimation.

I raised my glass in a mock toast, almost itching to find out what he knew. She didn't look much older than the co-eds we fooled around with or courted, but there was something different about the way she was unafraid to simply stand. And for a few moments she did just stand in the corner by the bar. I lifted my glass in front of my face, trying not to be conspicuous, and so, the first time I studied her, it was through a glass of beer. I could swear she was top to bottom the same color as the beer—the color of rich golden light, evening light—her skin, her coat, even her hair (which was so obviously dark the next time I looked, a few minutes later). Everything, of course, but her left glove, which looked like a purplish shadow, disturbingly well defined from that distance.

Then the distance disappeared. She was approaching our table, and I fought off an explosion of panic as if some huge, disembodied hand were about to aim a blowtorch at my heart. Her face impassive, she waited behind the waitress for her to take our order for a second or third pitcher. Mickey

stood and pulled up another chair, at which she simply glanced and said, "Maybe some other time, thank you," leaving him standing there, his hands poised on the chairback, waiting for her to sit. She placed her pocketbook on the edge of the table and remained standing.

She didn't have to lean down far to hear us. We were obstreperous; she was short. I don't remember what we talked about. Some asinine subject one of us brought up, no doubt: duck hunting or football. All I remember is that as she indicated an object, her hands sculpted the air to make us visualize her point, and with each gesture her scent rose anew. I eventually came to associate it with her small burgundy gloves. In a town where winter dictates dress codes, where no two people who passed on the street saw each other's hands from October to May, wearing gloves was anything but unusual. But her gloves sheathed her fingers in the finest of leathers, so sleek, so thin there were no wrinkles where the fingers should have bent, and they covered her hands even when they were wrapped around a glass; the leather muted the clink of the ice cubes.

Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of Hickey's elbow making contact with the leather pocketbook. It made a soft thud punctuated with the sound of a coin rolling on the bare planks, then spinning like a top to a stop. I bent to pick it up. She seemed not at all inclined to do so; at least I recall no movement on her part. As I tossed the coin, then a comb, a wallet, and a fountain pen back into the pocketbook, I spotted, just behind the table leg, a black pill-box, and when I grabbed it, small gusts of a sweet-smelling powder puffed out its metal seam. Baby powder, the source of her mysterious fragrance. I wondered if she always carried it with her in that black pill-box the way Mickey carried cocaine in a charge-card case in his shirt pocket. Just in case. Since all her other vanities, I would later discover, were intangible, I began to suspect she was hiding something; it seemed so incongruous, the scent of innocence.

The next day she walked directly to our table and stopped behind me. I looked at Mickey looking at her over my head as she asked, "Has anyone seen my glove?"

No description. What was the point? She knew we knew. I could see Mickey's leer coming in for a long-shot and was already thinking ahead to what I would say, when I felt her leather-sheathed fingertip run down the back of my neck and into my shirt. I glanced around furtively to see who had noticed, but no one showed any sign, and I fixed my gaze mid-table on the slice of lime in the ashtray.

As she pivoted to leave, Mickey made an unmistakable gesture with his thumb and forefinger and poured another brew.

I spent the rest of that evening—the night of the missing glove, the night of the ringer on the neck, the night I heard that voice for the first time—staring into the dark on the other side of the Garden window from a safe, boozy distance. Blurring out Mickey's hyped-up conquest stories and comments about one skirt or another unlucky enough to wander into his unreliable field of vision, I imagined her open face silhouetted against the light; but I had nothing to focus my gaze on except the illuminated clock on the First Methodist steeple. As the hands on the moon-faced clock bisected its glowing face, I wondered whether it was a quarter past nine or a quarter to three. Perhaps to get a more accurate view, I leaned my head to the left until my cheek rested on the table. While I contemplated the time, my hand, swaying slightly, hung to the floor, and my fingers grazed something soft. I picked it up, and by the time I had subjected it to my blood-shot vision its smell had told me what, and whose, it was.

The next time I saw her was in my room, and then I stopped counting.

How did I get her there that first time? It's up for grabs just who—or what—got whom there. Practiced thief that I am, it might have been relatively easy, even with a sophisticated woman like Helene, but I'll give the glove, dropped like a signal for the machinery of fate to start ticking, its due.

The night I found it I could have left it with the bartender, or even put it in plain sight on another table, except that at that instant I caught a glance of Mickey on his way back into the Garden, and I instinctively shoved it into my backpack.

Perhaps then I waited a night before I opened my pack, and after that I might have tossed the glove onto the pile of

games on the cement block and two-by-four table I called my living room. At any rate, I know I waited on purpose, carefully, as a boy holding a frog waits for it to croak before strangling it. "Why me?" I asked the night she came to retrieve the glove.

"It had been a long time since anyone watched me the way you did."

At the time that answer was enough for me, perhaps more than enough. My curiosity had already been dulled by cheap drink. I held her to me cautiously.

When she asked, "Why *me*?" I tensed, was caught off guard; and soaked in a stupor of self-importance, I replied, "It was that probing on my naked skin. I can't resist the touch of leather." I said it with all the bluff and veneer of an adolescent who is singled out for the favors of an older woman but whose most terrifying instincts tell him he's unworthy. She snapped back up, held my head at arm's length, and said, "What are you talking about?" It struck me that about her life she was a raw nerve.

As she rose and reached for her gloves, I felt an uncharacteristic instant's worth of high voltage in the veins, and to cover up I walked over to the already closed window as if to shut it. With my back to her I said, "Stay." I uttered it just loud enough for her to hear; I would not have been able to repeat it. Leaning on the window ledge, I heard myself add, "Please," and before I could pretend I hadn't said it, I heard the mattress springs and joined her on the bed. I reached toward the top button of her blouse, but she firmly cupped her hand over mine, then leaned over toward my face, and at first I thought she was moving in for the first kiss. But instead she cast a fleeting smile toward the window behind me and moved her mouth to my ear. It tickled, and made me nervous, and I laughed.

"My first love," she began, her breath engulfing my ear, her lips touching the rim, her mouth assuming its shape. "My first love," she said once more, "never laughed. He used to quote Nietzsche. He had thick lips and eyebrows, skin so thin it shone. His eyes were mud-brown, speckled with black. His mother was a docent of the Cleveland museum; his father, a

violinist. The summer we met he took me one Sunday to an orchard, barren, of course, and with brittle grass. His fingers trembled as they sifted through my hair and the fine dirt under it. I was so young, and amazed at our fever so moist in the dry heat, so confused at our stirrings in the dirt, at the late-summer dust the weight of our bodies puffed into small clouds around our shoulders."

She moved from my ear to laugh a laugh that was more than abandoned; it was driven. It matched her love-making. Then she returned to my ear to whisper, "It was New Year's. On New Year's day even the cold can't halt the stench. To find him the police follow it four flights up a carved banister and smash through etched French doors. The only furniture is a narrow mattress on the floor in the middle of the back room. By its head is an empty picture frame; all that's in it is smudged glass over grey cardboard."

Her glide into the present tense is only the way I remember it; I don't remember noticing it at the time. I only recall that, mesmerized as I was, I wanted her to leave.

"I spend hours wondering what happened to the face that was in it; whose it was. I still have two bruises where his pelvic bones ground into my belly."

My belly filled with fear that she could hear my heart.

After that night, I got busy with Mickey. We had serious drinking and hunting to do, though sometimes we'd go to the Bowl-A-Rama and make bets on the teams. My favorite was Dacey's Dolls, Dacey's being the local hardware store. They were a plastic-jacketed crew with butch haircuts and D-cups. We called them the 3-D's, and I won three pitchers off Mickey, who was always duped by the black and orange jackets and the promise they'd show the first few frames.

"Seen Helene lately?" he asked one night casually as the Dolls missed another spare.

I downed my beer and crushed the can. "I don't even know where she lives."

"Whatever you say," he grinned, and rose to go.

The next night Helene returned. She was standing at the window when I walked in. I took her hand, led her to the bed, and left the light on. It might have been a brazen gesture, or

I might have been searching for the bruises from her first love. But all I saw was lily white, so I took a relieved breath and imagined her belly a map, and in doing so discovered the shape of a river; my thumb followed it from the navel to its terminus in her dark hair.

"Hysterectomy?" I asked, mustering all my sophistication and then some.

Her abdomen contracted slightly; then she shifted onto her side, moved her hand to her hip.

"I have many secrets to tell you, but that's not one of them."

And before I knew what was happening, she leaned slowly, familiarly toward my ear, and when she began to speak, her breath was over-warm. "My sister," she said softly, the s's tickling my ear and her breath turning to vapor, "was as slender as a sunflower, and her eyes were the shade of the sunflower's eye. I sewed the pearls onto her bridal veil one by one. I've always been bad with my hands." I started to smile at what I was sure was titillating irony but thought better of it when I saw her face. "When the needle pricked my finger and a drop of blood stained the white, I ran with the lacey folds to the faucet. But she shut it off as soon as I turned it on. 'It's part of you, isn't it?' she said."

I was on the verge of changing the subject—to fly fishing?—both blood and weddings making my stomach twitch. But while I was considering this change, she made it herself. At first I didn't notice the shift. But I knew she would take us into the present tense, "The crocuses grow in white. The tulip in the center is no accident. It's the color of blood. I planted it myself, screaming my throat dry as I dug with my fingernails into her grave. They got her killer. A minister's son out on bail for rage. We don't know how many times he did it to her."

Her face was wet, her nose running. I reached for the bottle under my bed, then tossed the top onto the debris on my desk. "He steals my sister, takes her for three days, drives her around in the trunk of his blue Buick. I try not to think her thoughts. Up and down Broadway, left onto 5th, tapping in time to the radio, cursing the traffic, stopping at every red

light. When she escapes she is wearing just a shirt. Perhaps he promises to let her go—then changes his mind, shoves a gun into the part between her braids and squeezes the trigger. They find her a block from the meat packing plant, the stink of slaughter already seeping into the weave of the shirt, which comes down only to her waist. I still see our parents' masks, her son's curls standing still in the draft by the casket, closed and waxed."

As she left, I grabbed for the Comfort, gripped it around its neck, and pressed it to my chest. After a while I hardly remembered she had been there except for the powdery scent that lingered after the warm gust of her departure.

The next time it was daylight. I was hurrying to the drugstore to buy something cheap for a cold, and she was walking slowly toward me. The winter air neutralized her scent, I think. "I'm afraid Mickey's getting curious," I said. Even an imagination as circumscribed as mine could hear how Helene's stories would sound in Mickey's mouth.

Her brows merged. "Don't lie for me," she said.

"I've lied for you already," I could have said. But I lied about that, too; I just nodded. Mickey *had* asked, and when he got tired of my responses, he simply assumed he knew. I had spent some time and energy, as much as I agent on anything, avoiding him, diverting him. When he pounded on my door one night, I didn't answer at first; then I called the cops. I waited for him to stop, then yelled to get the hell away and listened to him stumble and swear down the hollow stairs. The next day he asked me point-blank. I answered that he was way out of line, that I hardly knew her, that she was, as it turns out, a friend of my older sister's. His knowing only the skeleton of the truth but not its flesh was both comforting and infuriating. After that when he would see us together, he'd make a point of chumming up, dropping names like "Betsy" and "Ann," and talking about the sorority girls at the skiing party on the slopes—all the time leering with those narrow, bloodshot eyes that glinted with that slight edge of hysteria induced by cocaine.

Before we got to the drugstore, I told Helene I'd see her next Saturday afternoon. I thought later that that would

have been our first and only real date.

On Saturday at dawn I found myself with Mickey, squatting in a bald patch on a snowy lakeshore, shotguns poised, waiting for the sound of movement, when Mickey said, "They say her husband beat her, y' know."

"Who? Beat who?"

I automatically cradled my finger around the trigger.

"C'mon. I thought you knew."

Something rustled; Mickey swerved and shot, while I remained staring down the barrel of my readied gun, my bent trigger finger turning white.

"Knew what?"

"They say he broke two of her fingers with a chisel."

I waited for more movement, then shot at what I was sure was the brilliant green markings of a Mallard's throat, a small emerald explosion in the neutral sky. Bunching behind the duckblind, Mickey took out a white packet from the card case, dug in with his pocketknife for a quick hit, and cursed the wind. On the way back to town we stopped at the Circle A for a six-pack as chasers.

I was supposed to meet her at two o'clock at the Slurp 'n Burp, an out-or-the-way place with a clientele of tractor straddlers and aging Avon ladies. But it was dark before Mickey and I entered the Garden, knocking over a bar stool and wheezing and snorting in hollow hilarity. Mud puckered my flannel shirt, and the brass bases of the plastic shells clinked together dully in my pocket. At our noises Ace, the bartender, noted for the bottle-shaped mole on his left thumb, stopped wiping a glass to call out, "Hey! Some lady been calling for you. Said not to bring you to the phone. Just wanted to know if you was here. Nobody's business if you ask me."

"So your mother's checking up on you," Mickey sneered.

I stayed, elbows to the bar, shoulder to my sidekick, until midnight.

The phone was ringing when I stumbled into the apartment, and after it stopped, with the back of my hand I tipped it off its cradle. I went to bed. I'm sure that's all I did.

It was time to get busy again. It takes a great deal more

energy than one would think for a smart person, one people generally like, to flunk out of school. After my psychology prof called to set up an appointment to talk about my problems, I gave my phone, cord and all, to Ace. I knew it was only a matter of time until Helene would blink back her pride and pretend to walk casually into the Garden again, and I was truly surprised when she didn't.

The day of the first real thaw I caught myself staring at the door instead of the window, and I thought of calling her, The Garden had begun to seem more deserted than empty, and even Mickey's attendance at my table was increasingly spotty. Outside, parallel to wet sidewalks, trickles of melted grey ice widened into rivers, gathered momentum, and shot like waterfalls down the piles of dirt and pine branches trapped in the sewers. The first hard-core signs of spring. Premature. False. This was my season, brief and aimless, and I let it come and go. I simply did nothing. Before I actually got around to looking up her number and getting change for the pay phone, the rivers in the street were already paralyzed once more by a winter that, having rested, returned with relentless vigor.

The rest might have been predictable. We went to my room. I sat on the bed and thought about mentioning that night, but didn't. She was huddled in a chair, her legs angled up towards her chest like a little girl's, and seemed to be studying the jigsaw puzzles and games I had piled in a corner: dominoes, Clue, Monopoly, Truth or Consequences. I can't remember what was said. By the time the afternoon darkened, I had had a beer or two, she had taken off her gloves, and we were lying together, though a foot or so apart, on the mattress. I was just thinking about running downstairs for another six-pack when she began.

"My lover," she said. I wasn't so sure I wanted to hear this one, so I pulled the pillow over my ears like a Football helmet. She removed it and repeated, "My lover."

"Which one?" I sneered, half in earnest, half in fear.

"My *only* lover," she continued, not missing a beat.

I froze.

". . . called me at midnight and sounded as if he were being

force fed oatmeal.”

“I have to see you,’ he said. I made him promise not to drink anymore until I got there, then watched the minute hand inch a full revolution of the mantle clock in my house.”

I stopped for a second to regain my sense of where I was. Mantle? House? Helene owns a house? Perhaps she was fabricating this after all. “Hey! Let’s get a pizza. We can—”

“The door flapped open into the hall of the hotel where he lives; the apartment was dark. He waited, snoring in a musty-smelling sleeping bag on a bare mattress. The burlap curtains ballooned at the cracked window. Icy air circulated the stench of stale beer and vomit. In a corner sheets and towels were crumpled, a 12-gauge shotgun resting on them, barrel up. By the driftwood lamp on the nightstand. . .”

I stared at that lamp, made in a voc ed class. The wood I had picked up on the Jersey shore that July I spent under the boardwalk with a girl named Tina, or Gina, looking up the slats at the soles of blistered feet and into narrow stripes of sun.

“. . . was a can of Geneses. I picked it up; it was almost full and so cold it hadn’t started to vaporize. As I turned to leave he said, ‘Don’t go. Come in here with me.’ I heard the bag unzip in the semi-dark and saw the shadow of his hand pat the material. It made a muted sound. I climbed in and he murmured, then lay still. He held me and seemed just about to drift back into sleep when his arm unwraps itself from around my back and reaches toward the nightstand. ‘You don’t need this stuff,’ I say, and block his arm.

“Why not?’ he asks.

“Because you have me,’ I tell him. He laughs, then tries to kiss me, but I tilt my head, so instead he mashes his wet mouth against my neck. His arm reaches back toward the nightstand. I snap up, grab the can before he does, and tilt it toward the floor. He knocks it from me and it thuds, then gurgles. I sit up on the side of the bed and put on my gloves slowly, using the forefinger to press between the fingers of the opposite hand.

“You . . .’ I say. ‘You are your own addiction. You deserve yourself.’ I throw out fragments of the truth as if they are the

first bits of straw on the floor of a virgin stable. I pivot to leave and then . . . then . . .”

I waited. Her nose was perspiring and the drops had a red cast, but her face had an otherwise impassive quality as if she were an actress mouthing the lines of a play after the curtain. The church clock chimed, but I was too distracted to count the hours. She stared past my left shoulder, and I noticed that the wallpaper was printed with lilies. Then she turned to me so that I could see her lips move deliberately.

“First he said he loves me; then he cried.”

That was it. Flat. No embellishments, no elaborate designing, no deft and riveting rhetoric. It struck me with the force of an ungloved hand, and I reeled. I jumped up and yanked the ceiling light on over my bed; it whirled in crazy 8's on its chain.

“You liar,” I yelled. “Get out.”

When the door shut, it made no sound, but the scent of innocence lingered all night.

They say the memory cells are the first to go. Still, I know I couldn't have said that, know what she saw was never there. Every time a woman sits on the edge of my bed, her mascara charting dirty creeks down the slope of her nose, I try not to think of Helene. In a dream I did cry once, but even there, in that cloudy context, the sobs were like dry heaves, all wasted effort, no returns.

Aloysha Sipp
Miss Avery

In one embarrassed rush she blurts it: she and her mother don't have the rent. His lips, full and red, slowly curve up. He makes a note; then lays the pen on the side of the desk where it rolls off and drops to the floor. As she stoops to retrieve it, he bends from his chair, and she catches his gaze roving her legs right up to the joining between them. Small explosions tickle her mouth. She straightens at once and hands him his pen. "Miss Avery," he murmurs, "you've no need to worry." He rises, and though she retreats, he catches her by the crook of the arm and stipples her skin with his fingers. "Danny!" she snaps—no "mister" for him—he's way too low. But "Danny" rings wrong, like a scrap from the street one mistakes for a coin; an intimacy unintended. When he opens the door, he draws close as she exits, brushing her with his heat. Then the door shuts—and there is that click. She swallows and touches her arm. He lives in her building, she knows, and soon he will start to pay visits.

Joseph M. O'Connell

Trestling

I feel cold, really cold. With my eyes still shut, I grip the blanket and pull up. It doesn't work. The harder I tug, the more of my body is stung by the air. I press my knees to my forehead, playing Mr. Fetal Guy In Boxer Shorts.

"Get your ass out of bed, John. We've got serious partying to do."

All I can manage is a weak moan. I bend the pillow around my face, postponing the inevitable. My teeth feel fuzzy, but a few things are clear: I made it through the last rush week of my life at the Epsilon Gamma Theta, or Egg House; I'm still writing 1979 on my checks even though we stumbled into the '80s three weeks ago; and my best friend Stan is an asshole.

"Did I ever tell you how much I truly adore those boxers, John? Do you think you can maybe get me some with little hearts all over them? Say, would you like a dip of Skoal, John? It's mighty tasty. Here, you can have a sip out of my cup."

I risk a peek in time to see Stan aim some brown slime into a Slurpee cup. Stan is a small-town guy from Yoakum, and we don't have a thing in common except we both are fifth-year seniors about to graduate from a small Texas college into adulthood, and we're fighting it every step of the way.

Stan and I met in the fall of 1975, our freshman year. I'd made it to campus on a slow train from Dallas, the scenery of Central Texas whipping by outside the window. Waco, Temple, Austin, Rockne College. I was the first to arrive at our assigned dorm room in Battle Hall. It was actually two rooms—tiny prison cells. The door opened into an area just big enough to fit in two desks, two chairs. That connected to another cell just large enough for bunk beds. I was in my Cosmic Cowboy phase then—snap-button western shirts, Nocona boots and Willie Nelson. This stranger walked in, and the first thing I noticed was a shock of brown cotton-candy

hair and his Alice Cooper T-shirt. He threw a pile of clothes into the bedroom, turned to me, and said, "Hey. I'm Stan. Where the hell are the women?"

We both pledged the Eggs later that semester. That was when Stan and I figured out The Plan. "You can't survive in this life until you realize there's a plan," Stan said one day as we hung out in our respective dorm-room bunks. "You're born, go to school, go to college, pledge a frat, party, meet chicks, graduate with a degree in business, get a job, get married, have kids, get rich, mow the yard every Sunday, retire, die." Stan leaned his face down from the top bunk and stared me in the eyes. "Get it while you can, man."

Right now Stan's wearing plaid Bermuda shorts with a baseball cap turned backward on his head. My blanket is wadded up under his arm. Like a bad case of the clap, he just won't go away. With incredible effort I lift my head to check the digital clock. My forehead connects with plaster. A line of pain creeps down my skull. It's 4:37 p.m.

"Low ceiling there, John. How many times does that make?"

"About 653, but I'm not counting," I whisper, rubbing the point of impact. It's already starting to swell. Stan and I have the great pleasure of being the sole occupants of the fraternity house's third floor in the two triangle rooms, so called because the ceiling slants down from about eight feet on one side to nothing on the other. For some stupid reason—it seemed like a good idea at the time—I put my mattress right on the floor pushed up against the low side of the room. I try to keep my feet to the wall but there's something unnatural about having my head hanging off the bed. And that position puts my nose too close to my wardrobe, which usually does double duty as carpeting.

"How many did we get?" I ask.

"Five. It's truly dubious," Stan says, punctuating the last word with a splash of spit in his cup.

A couple of hours after I got to sleep this morning, the brothers who could be dragged out of bed showed up to participate in the very unscientific process of deciding who joins the fraternity and upholds the traditions of debauchery we've

laid down for them. Basically, we go down the sign-in sheet from the week of parties, look for repeat offenders and try to figure out who the hell they are. "Is that the one who brought his toothbrush in case he got lucky? What a geek. Let's pledge him and blackball him the first day. Oh, I remember this guy, he's the one who wore the flared jeans. He went to my high school. I'm not sure who this sucker is. What a goofy name. He did show up a lot. Might as well give him a try."

Thus with hangovers hanging and drunken stupors stooping we set the future course of the Egg House. We dropped 57 bids, so that means one out of every 11.4 guys we asked to join accepted. The Egg House will survive for another year, but beyond remains precarious.

"Up, John. Up," Stan says. "I've got to convince the brothers to clean the house one last time before the new pledges take over as maids."

"Eat shit and die, Stan," I say, shading my eyes with a forearm.

"You have such a way with words, Mr. President" Stan says, spitting in his cup again on the way out the door. "Let's party."

Stan is so predictable in his unpredictability. Which is good, since I've decided lately that I don't like change even if it is inevitable. Stan revels in anything new. He and I have spent our whole lives with basically the same people. Since I was five I've been going to school with people the same age as I and with pretty much the same background and attitudes. All I ever really learned was how to go to school. Now, when I finally get that down, they want to dump me on the street with a piece of paper and say "good luck." That's bullshit.

Stan used to date this fashion merchandising major who predicted clothes would get weird soon. I'll believe it when I see it. I wear a pair of red, high-top sneakers and people are shaking their heads and smiling at me. They call me their token punk rocker.

President Carter—Stan calls him Mr. Peanut—keeps threatening to boycott the Olympics if the Soviet Union

doesn't pull its troops out of Afghanistan. Sounds like fatherly talk if ever I heard it: "Watch out for that Soviet boy and for God's sake tell him to keep those troops in his pants. If you're not careful, in six months your belly will be swelling with hostages, and I can guess who'll have to take care of the whole mess."

Anyway, if it leads to World War III, I figure they can send us all into battle clad in the new American uniform—a blue or white button-down shirt, semi-faded jeans and designer athletic footwear. Boots would be acceptable evening wear, particularly for those of us lucky enough to be from Texas. Even the women are wearing the uniform these days. Sometimes I have to check twice for cleavage to make sure I'm not hitting on a guy. The main personal fashion statement comes with the choice between all-cotton and cotton-polyester blends. The great wrinkles-versus-permanent-press debate.

Ricky Romero is the first of the new pledges to arrive to the party. He opts for 60-percent cotton, but in a trend-setting move chooses a pink button-down. Crab, our resident Cro-Magnon and unofficial leader of the intramural sports Nazi faction of the fraternity, instantly is convinced Ricky's a fag. But Crab thinks anyone with less than a twenty-inch neck is missing some testosterone. I can't wait until he finds out another pledge wears an earring.

Ricky's one of those guys whose jeans are baggy no matter how small of a size he buys. He probably gets them in the children's department. He unwittingly became my personal project during rush. It was like finding a wounded bird in your yard and taking it inside to protect it from the neighborhood cats. Crab is licking his chops in anticipation. Ricky's head bobs with the weight of his smile as he sticks out a tiny hand and tells Crab it'll be really neat to be his fraternity brother. Crab fills the hand with his empty beer cup.

"Pledges call me Mr. Lynch. Now get me a beer, pledge, and there better not be any head on it."

"I'll take care of it," Stan says and grabs the cup from Ricky. "Right after a pit stop in the bathroom," he adds with a wink. Crab snatches the cup back and stalks the keg like an ape in search of a banana tree. He's cussing under his

breath.

Stan Pagel is probably the only guy around here who could get away with that which is one of the reasons we chose him as pledge captain. For the next three months he's responsible for keeping these five guys alive and, hopefully, out of jail. Stan's eyes sparkle when he talks about the possibilities. "I got to make my mark before I 'die' and go out into the real world," he's told me over and over.

Ricky nervously watches Crab lean over the keg, but Stan says not to worry about it. "This is an acceptance party; pledging doesn't officially begin until midnight," Stan says. When Ricky asks what happens at midnight, Stan shrugs his shoulders and gets this I've-got-a-secret look. Now *I'm* worried.

The party is mellow and tense at the same time. A lot of standing around and talking. After a full week of swimming in a river of drunken freshmen, even Crab is ready to dry out or at least reduce the brain-cell loss.

The brothers are on the prowl, as always, but it's somehow different than it used to be. The fraternity of long hair and sandals that I joined five years ago has gone corporate. It's like the starch in their shirts has made the guys more vicious, more hungry. Sorority girls are everywhere. They move in flocks back and forth from the bathroom, checking the bows in their hair and talking about how slutty all the other women look. That's the thing about acceptance parties. We spend a week trying to get pledges; now we get rushed by the girls begging to join our little sister organization, the Bluebonnet Belles. They help us decorate for parties, cheer us on in intramural games and generally hang out with us. To be chosen they have to walk a fine line-somewhere between being friendly and promising to sleep with half the guys in the house. And they have to meet with the approval of the current crop of battle-scarred little sisters. No easy task. The Belles run things around here a lot more than we like to admit.

So I'm sipping my beer, breathing in a cloud of perfume and cigarette smoke, when this knockout blonde across the room turns, looks me up and down, and smiles. She's stand-

ing with Marge Bellows, the president of the Belles. Marge towers over this girl like a weather-beaten statue that somehow discovered the joys of hair spray. Marge pledged the semester after I did and is notorious for her quest for the perfect cowboy, a guy one cut above the Marlboro man. For a couple of months in our freshman year she thought Stan was it, but the disillusionment came quick. It's been the same disappointment for Marge over and over again ever since.

I wander over to the keg for a refill. The stereo cranks up and Joe Jackson urges me to "do the Instant Mash." I casually work my way back across the room only to find Arnulfo Sanchez, all 5 feet 4 inches of him, with one hand gripping the blonde's shoulder and the other one aiming a fortune cookie into her face. Marge is cracking another fortune cookie in half. Arnie carries those damn things everywhere he goes. It gets old quick if you ask me, but Arnie's one of those guys who believe it takes a good gimmick to get laid.

"Let's see, it says, 'Danger and contentment are family, but danger wears a prettier dress.'" Marge giggles and grabs my arm. "Now that's not fair, I'm wearing my Calvin Kleins. You think I'm dangerous, don't you, John?"

"You scare the hell out of me, Marge," I tell her and pull back real quick before she swats me. She misses, but manages to grab my ear and twist it hard. "See? You *are* a dangerous woman, but — oww—beautiful, truly beautiful."

One side of her mouth pulls up and she inspects me for a few seconds before letting go. "You're lucky I believe you, John Lerner. With all these youngsters around, it's getting hard to do. Besides, you're cute and I have a weakness for cute boys."

Marge is always putting herself down. "I also have a weakness," Arnulfo says, and turns toward Marge's blonde friend. "What does the future hold for us?" he asks her. She spits bits of cookie out and laughs convulsively. Covering her mouth, she hands the fortune to Arnie. He frowns, sticks the little strip of paper in my palm and walks off toward a circle of girls with Farah Fawcett hair and matching lip gloss.

The fortune reads, "When options are equally pleasant dance with the taller one." I take her hand and steer her to-

ward the thumping beat of some throbbing disco song.

We wedge our way into the middle of things. Her arms stretch over her head and her hips slowly swivel. She stares into my eyes for a moment, smiles, then scans the dance floor to see who else's eyes are on her. She's short and the makeup is a bit much, particularly around those beautiful green eyes, but all the right body parts are there and curving in all the right directions. Defying gravity. She's got to be a freshman.

I'm right. When the song ends Marge officially introduces us. Her name is Mandi Hedgecoe and she just pledged Marge's sorority, Zeta Upsilon.

"You want to get some fresh air?" I ask Mandi. She leans over to Marge with a grin and mock whispers, "Do you think I can trust him?"

"Not a bit," Marge says. Her words are starting to slur together. "Whatever you do, don't let him bring you up to the third floor. That's where he and Stan keep the whips and chains. I have scars to prove it." She winks at me and adds, "Just kidding. You know I love you, John." She leans over and bites my sore earlobe. "Be nice to her, John." Marge turns, finds Stan talking to a few pledges and plows her tongue down his throat.

Cool gray shadows hide Mandi's expression on the balcony. We look down and watch party stragglers weave around the lawn, almost to the beat of the muted music. Mandi and I sit on the railing with our feet dangling down and exchange bios. I tell her how I've finished all my classes for a business degree, but since I was stupid enough to go for a minor when they don't even require one, I have to take two psychology classes to close out my college career. "It's not that bad," I say, suddenly feeling very tired.

Mandi's from Garland, not too far from my home in Dallas. She didn't really want to pledge ZU, but her mother said it was the thing to do. Her mother also is pushing her to decide on a major, something practical like accounting. Dad thinks she should meet a nice young man and settle down. Mandi wants to party.

"I said, 'Mother; I'm only 19. Let me enjoy being young.' She's always saying these are the beet days of my life, but

then she starts dragging out all this shit—pardon my French—about preparing for the future. But that's what mothers do. I mean, it's their job to be annoying, right?"

I stare off two houses down where a guy is breaking into a car with a coathanger. When I called my parents in Dallas last week, my Dad kept asking what my plans were. "I've got a lot invested in you," he said, like I was a listing on the stock exchange. After he sarcastically asked "what are you going to do?" for the twentieth time, I started answering "be a game show host" or "manage a McDonald's, I've heard there's a real future in fast food." He wasn't amused.

"John, are you okay? Did I say something wrong?"

I turn and shake my head, no. I trace her cheek with my fingertips. Mandi's eyes sparkle. She swings around, straddles my lap and wraps her arms around my neck. She kisses me. The best days of my life.

I recognize the giggle. God, I hate that sound. I look up from the balcony floor and there's Marge using Stan as a crutch to keep from falling down. "Oh, they're so cute. I think he's a cradle robber, don't you, Stan?" she blurts out and giggles some more. Stan, the master of understatement, leans down to me and says, "John, I think Marge is slightly inebriated."

Mandi and I sort out our arms and legs. "I should probably drive Marge home since she brought me here," Mandi says as she rebuttons her shirt. Stan tosses Mandi the car keys. Mandi squeezes my hand and says to get her phone number from a more-sober Marge. "Call," she says and drags Marge downstairs.

I stare at Stan and let a breath out real slow. "Pagel your timing sucks. My night's shot, what's the big plan now?"

Stan's eyes get real wide. "Adventure," he says. He looks possessed. "Let's round the kiddies up."

Somewhere near the Caldwell County line Stan turns off on a dirt road. I look back to make sure the pledges are following our trail of dust. Stan still won't tell me where the hell we're going. He's leaning back into the vinyl seat of his blue

1970 Malibu SS, the hot rod of small-town guys, and smiling.

"Stan?" I say. He pushes out his lips and goes, "Choo, choo. Chug-achug-a-chug-a. Choo, choo. . ." So I'm thinking, prostitutes? Stan has a thing for prostitutes. Whenever we go to Austin he drags me over to the bad side of town and haggles with them. Fortunately, he never actually goes through with it. I think Stan just likes the thrill of it. Does he want to start our last semester in the boonies with a backwoods whore and a pledge class train? I decide I'm going stay in the car with my pants zipped tightly, but Stan pulls over to the side of the road and stops. The pledges pull up behind us in a Firebird and leave the engine revving.

"Stan, what the hell are you up to?" I demand, grabbing the keys out of the ignition and stuffing them in my pocket "Tell me. Now."

"I'm leaving my legacy, bud," Stan says, staring blankly out the windshield and getting real serious in a very un-Stan-like way. "No shit. When I come back 20 years from now there'll still be freshmen doing something I did first. Probably only you and I will remember, but that won't matter. I'll have been first. You can join me if you like, but you don't really have to."

"Huh?" I crinkle my face up and stare Stan in the eyes. "What are you *talking* about?" I realize he's got another wild hair up his ass.

"Trestling, John," Stan says, that grin creeping back on his face as he opens the door. "An old tradition."

Stan lines the pledges up along the side of the road. They're an odd assortment of guys who probably never would have spoken to each other if they didn't all happen to pledge the same fraternity at the same mediocre college in the same small Texas town. Ricky looks like he's in grade school next to the other pledges. I can almost see the adrenaline pumping through his tiny body as he shifts his weight from foot to tiny foot. I doubt he'll be much safer from his pledge brothers than he will from Crab in the wrong circumstances, and tonight looks like a bad start. The identical twin surfer brothers from Corpus Christi look at Ricky disdainfully from within their cancerous-looking tans. They're standing by a

high school football star from Midland with a bulging gut and that infamous earring. Last in line is a gold-chained preppy from Highland Park, my old alma mater in Dallas. He's wearing green Topsiders. It hits me that this is really Crab's pledge class; these are the guys who will look to him as a role model in the coming years. They'll measure everything by how well the fraternity does in intramural sports, how far they get ahead of everybody else.

Stan climbs on the hood of his car and stares down at them, leaving imprints in the metal. Lightning bolts snake across the car under his feet.

"Gentlemen," he says. He is part football coach, part frat God. "You are now officially pledges of Epsilon Gamma Omicron. You may have heard people on campus call us the Egos. There are no egos in Epsilon Gamma Omicron, only brothers." I'm thinking Stan memorized this from an old movie. He just keeps droning on. I stare at a shiny area on the back of his head where the scalp is beginning to show through. "You are not yet my brothers, but you will be if you survive. If you do, it will be because of the men standing next to you, not despite them. For now, they are your only brothers. Get to know them. Rely on them."

The pledges peer out of the corners of their eyes at each other. The preppy with the boat shoes looks like he's trying to spot daddy's yacht so he can sail out of here.

"Your pledge period will include traditions handed down from brother to brother. This is serious stuff, guys. The first test comes tonight. By the end of the evening I want you to know everything there is to know about your pledge brothers. Most important, I want you to trust them with your life. Now follow me," Stan says with a demonic grin. "And let's try to have fun."

I don't know what else to do but tail Stan as he leads these guys through the brush toward the sounds of crickets in heat. My breath comes out in a fog. It always seems colder outside of town. The heat of all the people compressed into a city somehow provides insulation from the elements. Out here, it's wide open. We're freezing our asses off.

We come to an opening by a pretty large creek or river, it's

hard to tell which. Either way, the water doesn't seem to interest Stan much. He marches us along the bank until we spy a railroad track up ahead and a trestle spanning the creek or river or whatever the hell it is. The main thing is I've got a funny feeling about what my rotund fraternity brother has in mind.

Ricky stumbles a little on the big chunks of gravel that line the railroad track, but I grab him under the arms and keep him from falling. His eyes are full of fear, but he wobbles to his feet. I suddenly feel very old; I can't remember ever being as young as Ricky. The heavy, tarry smell of creosote attacks our noses as we goose-step around the remains of beer bottles. Stan walks straight onto the trestle past signs that read PROHIBIDO CRUZAR and PROPIEDAD DEL FERROCARRIL M-K-T. Another sign closer in tries to get its point across in plain English: JUMPING AND DIVING FROM BRIDGE PROHIBITED.

Stan's got his arm propped on this railing that goes up about three feet on the right side of the trestle. He wriggles a finger, calling the pledges and me closer.

"Hell if I'm jumping off of there," the football star pledge mumbles loudly, his earring catching a glint of moonlight "You're not getting me in any water in winter. No fucking way." He gives me a hard stare. "You tell him I'm not doing it. Cause I can guarantee you I'm not."

I look at Stan and he just smiles that Stan smile, "Nobody has to swim if they don't want to, Ralph," Stan says to the football star. "Of course, if you decide to swim that's all right, too," Stan adds with a laugh. "All I ask is that you put your arms around your pledge brothers' shoulders and stand here with me while a train passes. No big deal. John and I have done this a bunch of times."

The pledges look to me for confirmation. I scope out the side of the trestle. Five boards are lined up between the track and the railing. You could stand two deep and hardly be near the track. I nod my head.

"If the other guys had to do it then I can do it," Ricky says with a toothy grin. "I'm going to be an Egg." The other pledges give him who-is-this-dork looks. The football player

spits toward Ricky's shoes.

"Shoot the tube," one of the surfer twins says with a sarcastic laugh. The others nod their heads in agreement.

It sounds like somebody's banging a fork against a metal pie pan off in the distance, then a low hum starts. Stan reaches down to his boot, pulls out a half pint of Wild Turkey, and tosses it to Ralph. Stan says, "Get ready," and the pledges line up about three feet from the track, hugging their backs against the railing and passing the bottle back and forth. Stan shakes his head at them and steps across the track. There's no railing on that side, and just one long plank that's about six inches wide and about a foot, maybe a foot and a half, out from the track.

"Move it!" Stan yells and the pledges hesitate but cross over, too. I get there last as the double bursts of train whistle exhale louder and louder. My heels dangle in the air behind the thick plank. I stupidly look back and see huge support beams jutting out in pairs beneath us in intervals of about six feet across the length of the trestle. The preppy pledge drops the empty Wild Turkey bottle. I can barely make out the water below and it's too loud to hear the bottle hit anyway. Stan sees me looking down and yells at the top of his lungs, competing with the train whistle, "JUMP IF YOU WANT TO, BUT JUMP OUT—JUMP WAY OUT, OR YOU'RE DEAD."

I scoot over a few feet to get out of the way of one of the beams. Stan wriggles sideways until he's stranded almost exactly in the center of the trestle where the plank bubbles up slightly. He looks back at me and winks. He eyes say: pay close attention, store this one in the memory banks, bud. The pledges follow him with their arms tightly gripping each other's shoulders. Their heads are bent down close together and I can see their mouths moving, but I can't hear a damn thing over the noise from that train. This clicking sound turns into a heartbeat thump. The train whistle moans deeper and deeper. I scoot down a little ways to join the other guys and that's when the light curves into view. It starts as a big dot and just grows bigger and bigger. We're caught in a huge spotlight.

I look down at Stan and he's rolling his head in easy circles with a big grin stretching across his face. The pledges look like a single piece of brick. They couldn't get any closer together. Brotherly love.

My ears begin to ache as the train hits the far side of the trestle about thirty feet away. The whole trestle comes alive with a jerk. I look closer and realize it's an Amtrak train, probably full of passengers. I imagine them staring out at us, their eyes wide with disbelief. Mothers holding their gurgling children protectively to their chests. Businessmen with stiff faces, concerned that this incident will slow their arrival and make them miss the big meeting. Lovers laughing at us with gleeful abandon. I can see their eyes clearly as they hurtle toward us on our precarious perch.

I can't decide whether the balance is better with my toes or my heels hanging off the worn plank. I try to switch to my toes and my whole body starts leaning. The train is ten feet away and bearing down. The trestle is jumping wildly beneath us. I lean in to get my balance back, but it doesn't work. I'm going down. I reach for the side of the plank and push hard with my feet—out.

The drop takes forever. It's like I'm moving in slow motion. The sound of the train grows faint. Then my butt and the backs of my thighs slap the surface of the water. My muscles instantly tighten on contact and I fight to breathe. My shoes sink into squishy muck. The light fades and I realize the engine has already crossed the length of the trestle.

I look up and see Stan outlined in the moonlight. His head is cocked back and his arms are stretched straight up toward the stars. The last few cars blur past his outthrust stomach.

All I can think of is how, until we graduate in less than four months, I'll have to listen to Stan tell this story every time he gets drunk. If I know Stan, I may hear this story for the rest of my life. The train will get bigger and grow steel spikes, and the trestle will get smaller and more brittle every time he tells it. Instead of a few pledges, there'll be fifty.

I can hear Stan now: "What a truly dubious night! That was the moment I *knew* the eighties would be a kick-ass decade. I mean, how can anything that starts off like that be

anything but?"

I shiver and wonder if I'll remember just how cold this water is.

Gregory Seth Harris

Victoria

It was not the mother I fell in love with but the daughter. There we were in the kitchen: Erma at the stove, Victoria and I seated at the table. Victoria was only four, but oh what a face. What eyes: large and light brown, with a playful glint that tells you she's two steps ahead of you at every turn. Here was sweetness and innocence wrapped in a perfect little body. Her thick, honey-colored hair, graceful in its disarray, tumbled freely about her alert, active face. I found myself resisting an impulse to reach over and tickle her little square-headed toes. Without saying a word she displayed more charm and intelligence than any woman I'd ever met.

By contrast, Erma was what department stores called a full-bodied woman. In the bright light of morning her hard, pockmarked face seemed to mock the tiny, up-turned nose I had found so attractive the night before when we had met at a party. As evening grew late we fell into conversation. I offered to drive her home and the rest, as they say, is history.

Erma was wearing the same black dress she wore last night, a dress probably chosen to display her considerable cleavage. In back, the zipper had broken and bits of white slip pushed through where the stitching had given way. She thumped about the kitchen in bare feet, every step rattling dishes that cluttered all available counterspace. As she cooked, she simply pushed aside dirty plates and glasses while precariously stacking candy wrappers, empty doughnut boxes and plastic bottles of Diet Seven-Up on top of an already overstuffed garbage pail. Each time our eyes met she smiled. Yet whenever she spoke to Victoria, her manner changed.

"Victoria, get that dirty doll off the table! How could you bring that filthy thing in here? . . . I wish you'd stop tapping your fork like that. It gets on my nerves . . . And don't be playing with your food, girl. I don't cook for you to be play-

ing.”

Victoria acquiesced to each demand, though something in her manner suggested . . . I don't know what it suggested. I suspected she put up with her mother the same way I used to tolerate my mother's boyfriends—boyfriends who talked down to me like I had landed on the planet yesterday; who would pat me on the head, play catch for ten minutes, then pontificate over how much they loved kids. My mother, normally a perceptive woman, was constantly fooled by these jerks, and annoyed when I didn't warm to each new lover immediately.

“So Victoria,” I said, “Is it Vicky or Victoria?”

“Victoria,” she said, her irritation unmistakable. I was probably already suspect in her mind. I could easily imagine Erma dragging home a series of unsavory men who, like myself, having failed to hit on half a dozen other women, ended up with the fat lady on the couch.

“Victoria is the name of a great queen, you know. Are you by any chance a queen?” She didn't answer. She studied my face, trying to decide what to make of me. “How old are you?” I asked.

Again she didn't answer, looking instead at her doll which was crammed among miscellaneous junk on a nearby radiator.

“She's four,” Erma said, joining us at the table. “She'll be five in September. Victoria, answer when grown-ups talk to you.”

Victoria shot me a look of annoyance. I had gotten her in trouble asking my stupid, irrelevant questions and her look told me she didn't appreciate it. Why couldn't I mind my own business?

Who was this girl? I thought. Where did she come from? How could Erma be mother to such a precocious angel? How could life be so unfair?

The other day I was watching Oprah Winfrey, or maybe it was Donahue, but this feminist psychiatrist was talking about single mothers of low self-esteem who pass their psychological hang-ups onto their children. Implicit in this claim is the assumption that kids with mothers like mine—well-

educated, independent, successful—kids of these mothers should grow into perfect members of society. “So what happened to me?” I shouted at the tv psychiatrist, her fingers laced and wrapped confidently around one knee. I even dialed the toll-free number displayed on the screen but all I got was a busy signal. I settled for tossing a beer can at her and flipping to the Smurfs, who made a hell of a lot more sense. There is something in kids’ shows, like kids themselves, that cuts through the bull and gets straight at what’s real. None of this endless hair splitting.

I was thinking this when I felt something wet on my knee. I squeezed the hand Erma had placed there, telling her what a wonderful cook she was. I told her how much I admired single mothers who worked full-time and yet were able to raise healthy, well-adjusted children. It wasn’t easy, I assured her. Erma sighed and nodded as she returned my squeeze and leaned toward me. I offered my lips for a quick peck. Erma, however, sought a wet passionate kiss. While our tongues sloshed around, I opened one eye, trying to get a glimpse of Victoria seated there watching us.

That’s when the phone rang. Dishes rattled and the floor shook as Erma rose and waddled into the livingroom. I watched her retreating buttocks quiver like jello. “There’s always room for Jello,” my mother used to say in a high lilting voice. My mother was head nurse at a psychiatric hospital. And a feminist long before the word was fashionable. She hated to cook, and her meals proved it, but she had her Jello down to a science, complete with fruit and walnuts suspended in the center. She crammed my life with educational toys, interviewed my babysitters extensively, bought me my first copy of *Playboy* after she caught me probing what she called my private parts. My teen years were filled with mother-to-son talks on things I thought trivial yet she was convinced were pivotal moments in my development. She knew better than I did what was best for me—or so she always insisted.

As Erma left the kitchen, Victoria’s doll doubled over like it had been shot by a sniper. It tumbled to the floor in a perfect somersault, the way stuntmen do in movies. I looked

over at Victoria and a voice inside dared me to reach over and put a hand on her knee.

"What's your doll's name?" I asked.

Victoria eyed me. "Jessica," she said, hesitantly.

"Jessica," I repeated. "What a pretty name. Did you name her that?"

She didn't answer.

"You're very pretty too, but I bet you already know that."

Her expression changed to one of almost fright and I wondered if maybe she had guessed my intention. I scratched the back of my neck, took a healthy gulp of coffee and finally stood up, walking over to retrieve her doll.

"Why Jessica," I said, "What are you doing lying on the floor? Are you hungry? You are! Well, come on over and have some breakfast." I carried the doll to my seat, in the back of my mind thinking that should Erma walk in I'd get yelled at just as Victoria had. I placed Jessica on my knee. "You know, Jessica, you're a very pretty doll. I was, ah, I was wondering if you're not doing anything tonight maybe you would, you know, go out with me." I winked at Victoria who, if not amused, was at least intrigued. "We could maybe have dinner and then go see a movie." Here Victoria giggled. "What? Ask your mother? I don't know. Do you think she'll say okay?" I heaved a deep sigh. "Okay, I'll ask her." I turned to Victoria. "Ah, um . . . Jessica wants to know if it's okay if she goes out with me tonight I, ah, I promise I won't keep her out too terribly late."

Victoria turned to face me. "No," she said with an air of authority no doubt modeled after her mother. "Jessica is too young. And besides, she's not allowed to go out with strange men!"

"Strange men!" I said. "Who are you calling strange?" As I said this I made sudden jerks of my neck as if seized by an uncontrollable tic. Victoria's laughter was like music. "I'm not strange!" I repeated, slipping into my best Igor imitation, dangling my tongue from the side of my mouth. I rose and limped around the table in the manner of a lopsided hunchback. "How dare you call me strange," I slobbered, moving closer, bending low as if getting ready to gobble her up.

Victoria cringed playfully and I settled for tickling her, my hands excited as they dug into her warm, accepting flesh. The smell of herbal shampoo filled my nostrils as her arms and legs flailed in a feeble attempt to escape tickling. She giggled uncontrollably. "I'm not strange," I kept saying. "Do you think I'm strange?"

"Yes, yes," she laughed. Every time she said yes I tickled her more.

"Hey, you two! Keep it down in there!" The voice came from the adjoining room. It could have come down from God the way we both cowered. We froze for a moment. Then I placed a finger to my lips. "Shh," I whispered. I tiptoed around the table and back to my chair in long, exaggerated steps. Victoria watched me in delight as I set Jessica back on my knee.

"Well, Jessica. Since your mom won't let me take you to dinner, at least have breakfast with me. Okay?" I began feeding Jessica, or pretending to, part of me sorry the doll couldn't actually chew. Erma seemed to have this thing for pepper. Even the coffee tasted like it was peppered.

"What kind of games does Jessica like to play?" I asked.

"She's not allowed to play today."

"Not allowed to play. Boy, what a mean mom you are! And what has my client done to deserve such cruel and unusual punishment?"

Victoria hesitated. Perhaps my slipping into lawyer jargon threw her off a second. Then she stood and leaned close to my ear, cupping her hands around her mouth. I bent lower as she stood on tiptoe, my face flushing when she wrapped her small, soft hands around my ear. "She wet the bed," Victoria whispered.

"Nooo!" I said in mock disbelief. "Why, you nasty little baby. Get off my lap!" and I suddenly rose, pretending to check my lap for wet spots. Victoria was not amused. A shadow of sadness passed over her face. I quickly changed tactics. "That's okay, Jessica," I said, returning the doll to my lap. "When I was little I used to wet the bed, too. In fact did you know there once was a great prince who used to wet his bed every night?"

Victoria's face was inches away and I fought off the urge to bend lower and kiss her. I strained to hear Erma's voice, to determine if she were still on the phone or possibly heading back to the kitchen. A thought flashed through my mind and I began to fear what might happen if I were left too long alone with this girl.

"This prince lived a long long time ago," I began, looking deep into Victoria's eyes, eyes hungry to hear more. I could see my reflection in her brown irises. "In a land of seven kingdoms that were always at war with each other," I went on. "Then one day a queen whose name was Victoria had a son. Now the night before, the king had this dream where a fairy angel with a wand with a star on the end of it told the king that he should name the prince Jerome and that one day Jerome would bring peace to all the land. Now the king didn't really believe the dream but he liked the name Jerome so that's what he named the prince. Only as Prince Jerome grew older he kept wetting his bed and all the servants used to laugh and giggle but only in secret, 'cause if the king caught them laughing he'd have had their heads cut off."

I continued the story, motioning to Victoria to climb in my lap. She did so, picking up Jessica and resting the doll in her own lap. Soon my sophisticated lady dissolved into a child, placing a thumb in her mouth and resting her head on my chest. I pressed my nose in her thick curly hair. I kissed her forehead and stroked her arm, lacing a few of my fingers between hers. She gripped them tightly. So intoxicated was I with her warm head wedged under my chin, I failed to note the rattle of dishes. I was unprepared for Erma's sudden voice booming out: "What the hell are you doing?"

I flushed, barely aware of Victoria's rapid retreat to her own chair. My face felt hot, my hands were shaking. I reached for my coffee cup to steady them but, nearly spilling what little coffee remained, I set the cup down and instead clutched the edge of the table.

Erma's angry glare challenged me. "What were you doing?"

"Nothing," I said. "I was just telling her a story." The words came out by themselves but once they were out I realized they were true. I hadn't done anything.

Erma's eyes fell on Victoria. "Victoria, are you done eating?"

"Yes." Victoria looked down, her hands clasped between her knees, her voice sounding as guilty as I felt.

"Then put on some shoes and go out and play."

Without looking at me, Victoria grabbed her doll and left the kitchen. Erma moved towards the table, her face still angry. "Don't ever put your hands on that child without asking my permission. I catch you touching her again and I'll break your knuckles and stuff them down your throat. Do you understand me?"

I apologized, swallowing some of my words as I explained I was simply telling Victoria a story and hadn't even realized she had climbed in my lap.

"You wouldn't be the first pervert who tried to slip his hands up her dress," Erma went on as she yanked dishes from the table and stuffed them in the sink.

I rose and stood behind her, wrapping my arms around her and nuzzling my nose against her ear as I apologized profusely. Soon she was apologizing to me. I took the opportunity to change the subject. "Who was that on the phone?" I asked.

"My friend, Gloria. You met her last night at the party."

I nodded though I remembered no one.

"Her boyfriend got in a fight. She was calling from the hospital."

Erma turned to face me as she began unfolding a soap opera scenario that could rival anything on daytime television. Gloria and her boyfriend Ron had this off-again on-again relationship which was mostly off-again, except it was kinda on-again last night till Ron pissed Gloria off and Gloria started flirting with some other guy. Ron tried to pick a fight with the guy but some people broke it up, so Ron jumped the guy later when the guy was going to his car. Only this guy had a blackbelt in some kind of karate and proceeded to kick the shit out of Gloria's boyfriend.

I let Erma ramble on, figuring the further her thoughts meandered from me and Victoria, the better. When she was done I pulled her closer, covering her face with kisses. She

responded in kind, suggesting we move to the bedroom.

A while later, I was on my back studying the cracks and cobwebs lining the bedroom ceiling. Erma cuddled close to me, one finger making figure 8's through my chest hair. Somewhere out there is Victoria, I thought—maybe in the house, but probably in the backyard. I alternately kissed Erma's sweaty forehead, thought of Victoria, and studied the cracks on the ceiling . . . till I heard Erma begin to snore. Slipping from under her, I began to dress. Shaking Erma to see if she would awaken, I then stood awhile looking around her room, which was as cluttered as her kitchen and smelled of sweat and dirty clothes. A leather purse lay in a corner chair. Cheap pictures like the kind they sell in Tijuana hung on the walls. Framed photos of Erma and Victoria rested on a night stand. In the corner of Victoria's photo were two smaller baby pictures. I moved closer, picking up the picture frame. She was a happy baby. And a gorgeous child. Too gorgeous to ever be safe. Even if she made it through adolescence untouched, some teenage hoodlum, long on looks but short on integrity would get her. My mother used to say it was a curse for a girl to be born beautiful. She said such things as she cried and blew her nose and cursed the male gender for being a bunch of libido-driven louses. "Present company excluded," she eventually added. "Promise me you'll never be like the rest of them." "Yes, mother. I promise."

I set the picture of Victoria down and turned away. I picked up Erma's purse and rifled through it. In her wallet was eighteen dollars, some department store credit cards, and more photos. I almost took a photo of Victoria but settled for the money before I tiptoed out the room.

As I made my way through the house, I kept a lookout for Victoria. I wasn't sure what I wanted most: to find her and say goodbye; or to avoid her and slip away before I did something I'd regret. I slipped out the front door, closing it behind me like a cat burglar making a silent getaway.

I was a few feet from my car when Victoria ran up from behind.

"Are you leaving?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm afraid so." I stared deeply into her pleading eyes

as I fumbled with the bangs of her hair.

"Will you be back?"

"Maybe. Would you like me to come back?"

"Yes. So does Jessica. We wanna hear what happened to Prince Jerome."

I crouched low, coming almost eye level to her. "I'll tell you what. I'll come back if you give me a big fat kiss."

"Like they do on tv?" she asked.

"Like they do on tv," I responded, hardly expecting the kiss she gave me. She threw her arms around my neck like an experienced seductress. She puckered her lips and pressed them hard against mine, holding them there for several seconds.

"Listen Victoria," I said, "How would you like to go for a ride with me?"

"Where?"

"Well, we can go to Dairy Queen. And I'll finish telling you about Prince Jerome."

"Can Jessica come?"

"Sure Jessica can come. It wouldn't be the same without Jessica."

"I'll go get her." Victoria ran before I could stop her.

"Don't wake your mom," I called, aware of my heart's sudden pounding. I scanned the neighborhood, wondering if anyone had seen us kiss. A few kids down the block were practicing on skateboards. Someone across the street was mowing his lawn, his head only slightly visible over the high hedges. I hurried to my car, keeping my head low and my face turned away, all the while thinking what was the point? Erma knew my name. I'd never get way with this. I'd have to leave the state. Change my identity.

I fingered the eighteen dollars in my breast pocket. She probably wouldn't call the cops over eighteen dollars, I thought. I had stolen more than that from women and always got away without too much hassle. But this was different. This was stupid. Just go, I thought. Turn on the ignition and peel out. Or I could return the money so I could come back. If I played it cool, I could see Victoria all I wanted.

In the rearview mirror I saw an orange Mustang pull up

behind me, the left headlight smashed in, making me think of an eye socket with the eyeball missing and a few nerve endings dangling out. A skinny blonde got out, her face looking like it had seen better days. Something about her looked familiar.

"Hi, Aunt Gloria!" Victoria called out. She waved the hand that held Jessica.

"Hi baby," the woman said. "Where's your mom?"

"Inside. I think she's sleeping."

I recognized the woman from last night's party.

"Hi, you must be Sam," the woman said, leaning in the window on the passenger side of my car. "I'm Gloria." She reached in to shake my hand.

"Pleased to meet you," I lied.

"We're going to Dairy Queen," Victoria announced.

"Oh? Did your momma say it was okay?"

"No." Victoria's high spirits collapsed.

"I'll tell you what," I cut in, "let your Aunt Gloria take you." I pulled a couple of singles from my shirt pocket and handed them to Gloria. "I promised Erma I would take her while she slept," I explained, "but I really need to go, so it you wouldn't mind . . ." I shot Gloria a fake smile which she probably saw through, but what could she say?

I started the car, said goodbye to Victoria, said goodbye to Jessica, and told Gloria it was really nice to meet her. As I pulled away, I watched them in the mirror. Gloria was crouched low, apparently lecturing Victoria. Then she stood up, took Victoria's hand and led her toward the house. Victoria watched my car round a curve in the road.

I turned at the first corner even though it was out of my way. My heart continued to pound. I even took one hand off the steering wheel to see how hard I was shaking. I had barely escaped and knew it. Victoria had barely escaped. I wondered what Gloria had told her. I wondered if Victoria would pay heed. I wondered when the next son-of-a-bitch would try what I had almost gotten away with.

Maybe, I thought, when Erma wakes and finds her money missing, she might learn her lesson and swear off strange men. "Strange men," I mused, recalling Victoria in the

kitchen, doubled over as I tickled her, her flesh soft and pliant like baking dough. "I'm not strange," I had insisted then.

I repeated the phrase. I repeated the phrase several times before a cop pulled me over. All I could do was smile as he wrote out a ticket. According to him, I had just run a stop sign.

Edward Haworth Hoepfner

The Devil's Imp

There is blood in my daughter's hair
like this firelight where we kneel,
a crescent moon floating on the lake.

I've twisted a woodtick poorly from her scalp
and she brings her hand toward me as if it were
a word she cannot read or something rooted up.
Her finger's smeared. Melville's cook

preaching to the sharks shipside, she asks
why God made ticks, staring toward me
through the smoke. She's got the bug

in Western thought that tore through Europe
centuries ago in theologians' tracts.
A wasp they called the devil's imp,
it pumps its eggs in caterpillars, live,

so that tiny larvae eat from inside out,
and save the vital organs while the host lives
long enough to serve. An English cleric

caught the whole show in a jar.
and put to rest the whirlwind of denial:
the worm, he wrote, is surely cognizant
of pain. So the imp became a lesson.

Blake's tiger with a nasty twist.
Ecology has given us more sophistication,
and I tell her move your point of view,

we all dine together. But bite my tongue,
I cannot keep from moralizing. The stars

turn slowly, the fire snaps out planes
of light. What creatures will we imitate,

how mollify our sympathies? After this,
I only have a father's automatic flattery:
sweetheart, it's just that you taste good.

R. E. Alatee

Five Minutes in the Hypertext Hotel with Lance Olsen

Lance Olsen, cyberpoetprophetphile, Idaho's current Writer-In-Residence, prognosticator of four novels, five books of criticism, garbage trucks-full of articles, and a collection of poetry, ventured into Brown University's Hypertext Hotel (via the World Wide Web), a Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) where cannibals, thieves, and English professors gather to exploit art, anxiety, and, ultimately, themselves. I found him toying with an on-line version of *Jane Eyre* (boredom also reigns free here) before pulling him into chat . . .

R. E. ALATEE: Lancelot! Good to see you made it back from the grip of your satellite dish . . . what's on tonight?

LANCE OLSEN: There're 250 channels, R. E., and everything's on. That's what makes this moment so interesting as we careen toward the millennium. We've moved at every level—televisual, literary, theoretical, you name it—from a this-ism or that-ism toward an any-ism, an all-ism, a kaleidoscopic hypertext hotel, a high-tech garden of forking paths. Down one you might find gay fiction, down another neohumanist or regionalist or metafictionist or feminist or politically incorrect or Asian American or, better yet, all of them at some web-work once. Diversity, whether subatomic or cultural, may well be old news from an old front from an old war. We're moving toward a Unified Field Theory of culture, a gesture that open-armedly INCLUDES, gobbles up, termite along, without ever homogenizing. It's a multimedia moment, and really exciting to be a part of unless, I imagine, your name's Pat Buchanan, whose speeches always did sound better in the original German.

AL: Diversity(™) through Unity(©)? Are we really that close

to the Shining House on the Hill or has Reagan's 80s day-dreaming finally caught up with us and completely skewed the way we view the world? We all seem to suffer from a sort of selective Alzheimer's where the past becomes buried in a vault sealed with the capital T we lost from truth a long time ago.

LO: No, no. Unity through Diversity, sans trendy cynicism. One television with many channels. It's happening more and more. Emblematic of the impulse is a text like Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (1986), a graphic fiction, pomo's analog of the medieval illuminated manuscript, which, looking back to Max Ernst's collage-text *La Femme 100 Tetes* (1929), and others, welds magnificent drawings with fake autobiographies, a pseudo-history of superheroes, a novel within the novel, notes, police reports, ornithological articles, letters, reviews, interviews, toy brochures, photos, and more, while alluding to everything from Francis Bacon's paintings to William Burroughs's anti-novels. Or, a more recent example, David Foster Wallace's mega-opus, *Infinite Jest* (1996), which comes to us with a Pynchonesque plethora of plots and about a hundred pages of footnotes you have to read because most of the important narraturgical info is niched in them. Casting such terrific texts in maudlin metaphors involving shining houses and grassy hills misses the very real hope embodied in the act of said terrifically textured texts. But you're right, of course. We do live in the United States of Amnesia. Most Americans have virtually no sense of the past. Their attention spans are shorter than an MTV rotation schedule. Hence our tendency to blame the 90s on Clinton or the 80s on Reagan.

AL: Yeah, *Watchmen* is a nostalgia trip that takes your head off if you're not careful with it. The idea of stuffing text within text within text(s) really blurs the idea of what a novel should be, doesn't it? And if we're to believe Jacques Derrida or, better yet, Roland Barthes, this technique tends to unravel the Novel, Language, Realatee itself much like a narcissistic cat left alone with the world's largest ball of

twine.

LO: Here's a secret. Derrida & Co. didn't invent the deconstructed novel. The deconstructed novel invented Derrida & Co. If you look back at the history of the Novel with a capital N, you'll notice at least one twist in its genetic helix involves questioning exactly what it is, unraveling its perhaps slightly more conventional counterpart. Long before the idea of deconstruction, which in many ways raised its carbuncular (if kinda cute and cuddly) head in the mid-sixties, there was Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Confidence Man*, Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, Nabokov's *Lolita*. And as Vladimir Nabokov himself once pointed out, every novel except the most generic (pink-covered romances, let's say, or the copulation of clichés called pornography) is an experimental novel. And every novel carries a theoretical depth-charge of consciously crafted deconstruction in its narratological ocean. It just took most so-called hip theorists about two hundred years to catch on to what had always already been there, a space where language and what it might or might not reflect is troubled, pardon my passive.

AL: Okay, if what you're saying is true, that the deconstructed novel invented the school of Deconstruction, where does your own work seep into the mixture? You're dropping names like Burroughs, Pynchon, Joyce, Nabokov, Melville, Sterne. How have these writers in particular informed your cyberspace cowboy cutting-up that's at play in something like *Tonguing the Zeitgeist* or the new stuff, *Burnt* and *Time Famine*?

LO: Well, Melville and Sterne not at all, or only to the extent that every fiction you read informs your work in some ghostly way, perhaps in their case by reminding me that novels are all about taking chances, aesthetic and otherwise.

But Pynchon's a very strong influence on me. I remember reading *The Crying of Lot 49* for the first time back in college

and being transformed. I responded so deeply to Pynchon's tangled prose, paranoid vision, and avant-pop sensibility, where he could begin one sentence talking about the second law of thermodynamics and end it talking about Magilla Gorilla. His presence is all over *Tonguing the Zeitgeist* and its forthcoming companion novel, *Time Famine*. Ditto with William Burroughs, whom I came to relatively late in life. I instantly connected with his sense of hallucinatory plotlessness and critique of our culture as one comprised of various addictions, from drugs to television. *Time Famine* explores a distantly Burroughsian idea, in fact: America as atrocity theme park where cannibalism isn't just another ride. The Joyce of *Ulysses*, and his disciple, the Nabokov of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, taught me to care about every comma, as well as to understand that fiction can be an exciting allusive literary chess game at the very same moment it can be a moving exploration of what it means to be human. Some writers write chapter by chapter, or maybe paragraph by paragraph. Because of Joyce and Nabokov, I write clause by clause, often word by word, hence the frequent busyness of my sentences, which, unlike the glassy ones by those two, are extremely aware that in the late twentieth century they're competing against Sly Stallone's latest movie and Green Day's latest album.

I feel like a cultural switching station. Other influences: writers like Don DeLillo (who's all over *Burnt*, an academetic satire about a prof who kills a student because of his bad prose style) and books like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (*Tonguing the Zeitgeist* wouldn't exist without it) and movements like avant-pop (ditto) and genres like science fiction (double ditto). But my fiction wouldn't be what it is either without my few years coming to consciousness in Venezuela, my childhood among the shopping malls of northern New Jersey (I take a certain amount of unhinged reality for granted), my love of rock'n'roll (which forms the basic metaphor for *Tonguing's* investigation of the commodification of the arts in the late twentieth century), London (which forms the setting for the novel I'm now working on), and *Sci-*

entific American (no household should be without it), my simultaneous adoration and repugnance of various manifestations of pop culture, from television (recently I'm hooked on the *X-Files*) and film (*Twelve Monkeys* is the best I've seen in a long time) and cyberspace (where I spend a fairly large chunk of each day) to those neat little Batman mugs McDonald's was selling last summer (I have the whole set).

Like Barthes says, every writer (and, by implication, every artist) is a nexus where a huge number of previous texts come together and clash in seemingly original ways.

AL: Wow, it all seems to hit you at once, doesn't it? I get the sense that imagination and innovation (god knows we need it out here on the Net with Big Brother moving in next door) are crucial to any *ars poetica* you hold for yourself, that the only limits of terrain an artist can explore are the ones self-imposed, that everything is fully dilated and ready for the big sync.

LO: Exactly. In the workshops I teach here and elsewhere, diversity's the treasure. If you want to write a romance or *roman a clef*, I tell my students, well, that's great. The only rule I urge upon them is the rule of generosity: to take workshoped fiction on its own terms and ask whether or not it's succeeded in those terms. Fiction, I explain, is the Mall of America, and there are loads of shops to visit. We need to have space in our imaginations to enjoy each and every one.

When I sit down to my own word processor, though, I somehow find myself less intrigued in photographing what's outside my window than with what's inside the window of my imagination. That and with trying not to do the same narrative trick twice. I want my writing to wake us in the midst of our dreaming.

AL: God, it must be strange being Writer-in-Residence, because the entire notion of residency seems to contradict your hypertextual approach to the multiverse! What's that like?

LO: Oh, gosh, I love it. Part of the writer's job, it seems to me, is, at a certain stage in her or his career, to give back something to other writers who're just starting out. That's why I teach. And that's why I enjoy Writer-in-Residencing. Plus the WIR gives me an opportunity to explore the literary geography of a state that's in the middle of a manifold flourishing that's unprecedented in its history. (Idaho gets to boast of hosting Clay Morgan, Mary Blew, Robert Wrigley, Margaret Aho, John Rember, Kim Barnes, Diane Raptosh, Leslie Leek, Richard Ardinger, Joy Passanante, Ron McFarland, Neidy Messer, Maria Maggi, Lesa Luders, Claire Davis, Marti Mihalyi, Susan Baumgartner, Gary Gildner, Dennis Held, and Harald Wyndam, just to mention the first twenty talented writers who come to mind among many more, which ain't bad.) Plus I really do love experience the way cockroaches love spilled cereal, and the WIR gives me an excuse to meet all sorts of new people and visit all sorts of new places. What's not to adore, you know?

AL: Let's mine this teaching vein a little. I read an interview in *ZipZap* where you seemed a little burned out on academics as a whole and were considering stepping out of it at the time. First of all, was I reading that correctly, and second, if so, what's changed your mind?

LO: I really cherish teaching. I can't get enough of it. I cherish my students and their energy, sweetness, and talent. There's nothing like being part of a good classroom discussion, when all cylinders are firing. I really don't cherish administration. Pushing papers and talking departmental politics and attending dreary meetings high in verbiage and low in results—the stuff they never told you about in grad school—isn't my idea of a good time. And I'm less than fond of the University of Idaho's long and undistinguished tradition of underpaying its faculty for work done, success achieved. Let me hasten to add that impulse isn't particular to UI. It's part of a national embarrassment, a global joke, that includes the impulse to undervalue education generally, and it harmo-

nizes well with what all those pinheads in Washington are doing when they spend more on military marching bands than serious arts, forgetting those serious arts are the heart and soul of our culture, any culture. Britain spends the equivalent of five dollars per person per year on the arts, Germany twenty-seven, France over thirty . . . and there's the US gimping along somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty-eight cents, just a little more than a postage stamp. What a disgrace.

Anyway, so . . . there are lots of ways to be poor, and one of them is to teach, and another is to write, and I get more freedom and less hassle doing the latter, so I imagine, things continuing along their present trajectory, I'll be moving out of academia within the next couple of years, though hope always to visit for the sake of the teaching. In fact, my forthcoming sabbatical is a stab at leaving the mothership while still cozy in a spacesuit. Of course, Mick Jagger swore he'd never be singing "Satisfaction" when he was fifty, and, well, there he is. Things change. And sometimes they don't.

AL: Unfortunately, what you say is completely true, especially in terms of academics. I spent my fair share around a certain English department where the most important discussions concern where to get another toner cartridge for the decrepit copy machine. Education is just another business in the U.S. There's billions to be made off liberal arts majors who will be no better suited to find a job in a university than they would at the fry station at Mickey D's, where the pay is always better anyway. Isn't that sort of what your forthcoming novel, *Burnt*, is all about?

LO: You bet, and yet there's also so much to enjoy about many universities, including UI . . . the good feeling in the halls, the collegiality, the sometimes-sense of community, the ability to talk and think and write about what you want to, the summers and other vacations to focus on your own projects, and, again, those discussions (usually with students) when everything's right with the world. You'd have to

be pretty myopic not to see what a pleasant way to live that is. Except it's all a tradeoff, a risk-versus-benefit chart. And sometimes some people outlive the benefit column, never leave, just because they don't have anywhere else they can go, anything else they can do. I don't want to be one of them. When it's time to vamoose, and the wings have fallen off the 707 called academia, I don't want to find myself belted in without a parachute. Here's a theory: people who can't function well in society move into sanitariums and universities.

Burnt, in any case, is less about any English department in particular than about the university of the imagination. And while it certainly satirically kisses many of the points we've been making, it also uses academentia to explore various kinds of pollution—psychological, ethical, cultural, linguistic, environmental. In that sense, it's an eco-novel in which the academy is one more metaphorical oil spill among myriad others.

An idea, by the way, I also pick up at a much greater distance in forthcoming *Time Famine*, a science fiction which involves, on the one hand, the ill-fated nineteenth-century Donner Party, the infamous pioneer group that got snowed in near Lake Tahoe on their westward journey and ended up resorting to cannibalism among other unpleasant practices, and, on the other, the proliferation of twenty-first century theme parks dedicated to the great atrocities of history (BelsenLand, The Iron Curtain, you get the picture), while asking the question: How far have we really come as a culture in the last hundred or hundred and fifty years or so? The answer is an intricate Chinese design.

AL: In a lot of ways, we're still living in the wild wild west, only it's been commodified and sold abroad as the typical American experience. Obviously, brutality has to manifest itself somewhere when spaghetti westerns are taking home Academy Awards™.

This is completely off the subject, but I recently started read-

ing Samuel Delany's *Hogg*, which is the epitome of shock-talk with its brutal realism and coarse sexual explicitness. What books, films, art in general have outright disturbed you and brought the world, so to speak, to the foot of your bed?

LO: Most of the fiction, film, and art I find truly engaging these days has an element of the really disturbing in it, an element of trespass, that late-millennium twinge of disorientation. I find the renaissance of the warm fuzzies we're experiencing in the rediscovery of Jane Austen's fluffy stuff, eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century analog of *Friends* and *Frazier*, with a dash of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, thin and vapid and ultimately disappointing, if utterly understandable in terms of what our culture needs to repress as it spirals toward the twenty-first century through shockwave after shockwave: AIDS, the increasing fear of nuclear and biologic terrorism, genetic manipulation. Imagine how a farmer in 1165 lived his life in a village a hundred miles north of London. He was born, plowed, and was planted having experienced the same existence, the same beliefs, as his great-great-great-grandfather. Now imagine how most people in 1996 live their lives anywhere in the world. Everything is movement, change, data-overload, media links, global networking. Ecclesiastes was wrong. Everything's new under the sun. No wonder we need our Jane Austens and guardian angels and kooky crystals to tell us everything's going to be okay in the end.

But, again, what I respond to is art that tells us everything isn't going to be okay in the end, that we're living in a time of crisis, where everything from identity to political geography must remain fluid.

So the pseudo-documentary *Faces of Death*, which I'm embarrassed to admit I've seen, shook me to my core in a very ninja-kick-to-the-solar-plexis sort of way. In a more aesthetic vein, lately I'm rumbled and rumped by the performances of Survival Research Laboratories down in San Francisco, with their self-destructing robots and torn animal parts, Stephen

Wright's superb exploration of unbalance in a televisual culture in his unnerving novel *Going Native*, Hal Jaffe's sudden-fictional forays into cultural unspeakables in the *Straight Razor* collection, Irvine Welsh's uncovering of the Edinburgh most tourists never see in his head-bangingly powerful play (and soon-to-be film) *Trainspotting*, and Terry Gilliam's darkly imaginative investigation of what the failed future will be like if we're not careful in his moving movie *Twelve Monkeys*.

AL: Some would say that your adherence to this kind of art is exercising a sort of self-defeating nihilism, that the art we should be concerning ourselves with at the fin de millennium should be somehow more positive and uplifting—in essence, a transcendence.

LO: I'd disagree . . . mostly because they're wrong, at least from my myopia. Interesting art for me should remind us where we are—and where we're going if we don't watch ourselves. Hence my affinities for science fiction, which is a future-thinking mode.

To read, or hear, or see nihilistic art isn't nihilistic, though. It's an invitation to contemplate what it means to be human at the cusp of a new century, a challenge to figure us though one way of seeing into others. Of course, that's granting that most of the artists I've mentioned are nihilists, and I don't grant that. Their relationship to the world is much more complex than such a simple label implies. Does Gibson embrace or eschew technology? Both and neither. Is Survival Research Laboratories just adolescent male blood and guts? Oh, puh-leese. Only to viewers who aren't really looking, who've judged before they've understood.

AL: Imagine yourself engaged in a panel discussion with Bob Dole, Pat Robertson, and Tipper Gore where you are presenting your views and tastes of art. What would you say in response to Dole's flaming criticism of something like *Natural Born Killers*? Robertson's condemnation of cyberporn? Gore's

advocacy of age restrictions on purchasing the latest Dr. Dre or Tupac Shakur CD?

LO: First I'd point out the irony of Bob's and Pat's position, since most of the really violent actors in American film today—Stallone, Schwarzenagger, Willis—are staunch Republican fundraisers. Hyeugh, hyeugh. I adore blatant hypocrisy.

Next I'd suggest that art is the product of the culture that produced it, and hence a reflection of that culture. Any anthropologist will tell you as much. The Venus of Willendorf didn't create the cult of the earth goddess. The cult of the earth goddess created the Venus of Willendorf. *Natural Born Killers*, a brilliant social satire, didn't create the commodification of violence and pain that's late-millennium reality. Late-millennium reality created *Natural Born Killers*, which in turn comments on its cultural creators. Ditto Dr. Dre, whom I find pretty interesting, and Tupac Shakur, whom I don't. Art doesn't change culture. (Though it probably can, in the right circumstances, very infrequently, change a few individuals in a culture, sometimes for the worse, usually I imagine for the better.) Only a bad reader could think otherwise. And, it goes without saying, the world is filled with bad readers, some of whom can't distinguish between a film or song and life in East LA, or their own censorial political agendas.

The cyberporn business is a different issue. I simply don't understand why Americans disregard the First Amendment in cyberspace but would die for it—have died for it—in the newsrack at the corner 7-11. The more captivating question, though, is what to do at a global level (the level cyberspace inhabits), where the First Amendment is just one local ordinance among many others.

The answer in dealing with violence in film, or porn on the Net, is simple: education. At the risk of the fife and drums starting up, we need to talk about why these things exist, what they tell about us as a culture, and what we're prepared

to do about that. Every age gets the art it deserves. Why do we deserve the art we're getting?

And then parents need to educate their kids about the implications of these discoveries. If parents don't want their kids seeing *Natural Born Killers* because those parents can't tell satire from seriousness, or can't explain the difference to their kids, fine. Let them prevent their kids from seeing it. And if those parents don't want their kids to surf porn on the Net, then let those parents install software, which is free and easy to use, that allows them to block said porn. But, um, let's remember the First Amendment is a fairly large cornerstone of the American construction. Are we all honestly willing to start picking up those German accents this late in the century?

AL: Free Speech has never really existed, though, Lance. See, that's where the problem is. People are acting as if they have something they never really had to begin with. It's a very Baudrillardian idea, actually. The government has always, is now, and will always censor speech, be it pooled news footage on CNN or Robert Maplethorpe's exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC. It's not a question of fighting for the First Amendment® because that very thing has always been qualified, enforced, and "guaranteed" by the government, of the government, and for the government.

To play devil's advocate, Pat Buchanan's views are, in a lot of ways, more realistic than yours and mine. To me, that's the Big Joke of living in Amerika. People aren't laughing because they take what they have to say too seriously, placing their faith in something that never was nor ever will be. Art can only reflect its society because governments won't allow it to work its magic. Serious art has to be discussed in dark basements or commodified and mass-marketed to the point that it's not dangerous anymore.

LO: I understand what you're saying, but I feel a little less Baudrillardian about it than you do. I mean, I certainly think

a sort of Chomskian manufactured consent exists here, a subtle manipulation of will, mind, and information. We're all, everywhere, constructed through and by the media. We speak—at least in certain ways—what the media wants us to speak. At the same time, there are various levels and intricacies to this notion. To suggest, for instance, that the lack of free speech in America is somehow equivalent to the lack of free speech in, say, Iraq or Iran, seems just plain preposterous to me. Just try writing a book attacking Saddam in Iraq, or one satirizing the Moslem faith in Iran, and see how far it gets you. Salman Rushdie knows all about these subtleties and differences, poor guy.

AL: This, I think, draws us into the realm of the so-called "avant-pop." Since I see that my connection timer's ticking on the modem, one last request. How do you see the "avant-pop" shaping Amerikan consciousness? Can it? How will authors like Kathy Acker, Mark Leyner; and Harold Jaffe, critics like yourself and Larry McCaffery, be ultimately remembered ten, twenty years from now?

LO: I still worry about the label "avant-pop," even though I'm often referred to as part of that gang. In the introduction to *In Memoriam to Postmodernism: Essays on the Avant-Pop*, which I edited with Mark Amerika, I make the point that if we define avant-pop as a frame of mind that evinces the avant-garde's impulse toward pushing the envelope of art fused and confused with a rabidly—if ambivalently—pop cultural sensibility, well, then, all we're doing is redefining postmodernism, trying to dust it off and make it look new, trying to remarket it. Leyner, when everything's said and done, looks back to Warhol, Acker to Burroughs, Wallace to Pynchon, and so forth. I'm not sure any of the former are producing anything so drastically different that it can't fall under the rubric of the postmodern, even with the telltale televisual consciousnesses, whose trademark Pynchon holds. That isn't, though, in any way to demean their (our?) projects. Leyner, Acker, Wallace, Wright, Jaffe—many of the people associated with the so-called avant-pop—are among my favorite writers

and are doing some of the most fascinating work around these days. Long live the A&P, if it actually exists.

To the second and final part of your question. I don't think any of us writers or critics are going to be remembered in twenty years, let alone a hundred. All right. Maybe Stephen King, Michael Crichton, and Danielle Steele, sad to say, though less because of craft or imagination (hardly: that trios' books ache for a good editor) than sheer pervasiveness. I mean, the first thing to appear after the Big One will be cockroaches; the next will be reprints of Stephen King novels. But the arts in the late twentieth century have become so commercialized, and so many artists have hustled onto the scene (an irony: everyone wants to be a writer, but fewer and fewer want to be good readers), that I can't imagine most of this decade's flavors, let alone most of the devilishly cholesterol-rich canonized offerings of the last couple hundred years, holding much sway over anyone's tastebuds except for some monkish scholars in future monesterial English departments who try to believe they're holding off the electronic barbarians.

But I doubt many of us write with such things in mind. I certainly don't. Who cares whether I'll be remembered in a century? Not me. After all, it's not going to do me a whole heck of a lot of good, is it?

What's important for me, now, what makes me happy, here, is knowing I've written some good-looking sentences this morning about stuff that interests me, and that some people in some places are reading some of my books some of the time. It's one of the most intense highs you can experience as a writer. That and realizing you possess the complete collection of Batman mugs from McDonald's. What could possibly rival such golden information?

J. Robert Daubs

A Mortal Arraignment of Holy Hypocrisy: And How Jesus Saw the Light.

I. Arrest

<My father?

God . . .

Arrested?

Where . . .

"It don't matter, your father's under *arrest*."

<I'm right in assuming . . . >

"No. You're not."

Your father assumed, and look where it got him."

<No, but . . . >

"Just forget this assumption bullshit."

The arrest has been made."

<So . . . no more?>

"No,

no more frolics in the sun,
no more grazing on the weak,
no more Sunday services,
no more fondling in the rectum,
er, rectory.

Either way, it's the dawning of a new age.

We've arrested your God,
in all of his petulant waste."

<God . . . >

"God,

father,

single powerful being of beings . . .

yeah.

We put him away for good.

Crimes against humanity,

defamation of character,
contributing to the delinquency of minors,
illicit use of controlled substances . . .

We're throwin' the book at 'im,
so to speak."

<So, what . . . >

"Look, just simmer down,
or we'll throw you in, too."

<No, really, I just wanted to know . . . >

"No, he sez. I just wanted to know, he sez.
yeah, well we wanna know, too,
but nobody gave ever gave us the answers.
So maybe we should haul your ass in, too.
Yeah, Son of God, let's see what you got to say
when you're up there in front of the judge
and you gotta explain this bullshit.
Yeah, let's see what you gotta say.

II. Interrogation

"Listen up, wise guy,
we've had it!
Spill yer guts or O'Brien's gonna
open you up."

Eye . . . swelled shut.

<I don't understand.>

"Of course you don't,
you haven't been taught to."

Lip . . . throbbing.

<No, it's not that, I . . . >

"Y'know there's lots
smarter
guys than you,
sez we gotta case."

<What?>

"Yeah.

We got
Voltaire, Twain, Whitman,
Longfellow, Madison, Jefferson,

Freud, Dickens, Beckett,
 Asimov, Burroughs,
 A couple Allens and a load of Adams."
 Eye . . . stings,
 Blood of Christ.
 <But what's he got to do with me?>
 "What's he got to do with me? he asks.
 Seems to us like yer
 what we like to call an
 accessory.
 Yer ass is in a sling,
 just like pops."
 <No, but . . . >
 "But what?"
 <But I didn't mean it.>
 Defiance.
 "Oh, yeah?"
 <I guess . . . >
 Resignation.
 "That's what we thought.
 We all were taken in,
 one time or another.
 It's why we gotta stop him.
 He's a maniac."
 <He's a killer.>
 Resolution.
 "Hauser, get the chief on the horn.
 He's ready to sing . . .
 we got our star witness."

III. Trial

"Place yer right hand
 here
 And repeat after me."
 <I swear to tell the truth,
 the whole truth,
 and nothing but the truth,
 so help me. . . >
 "God."

<Yeah. . . God.>

“Just a formality,
son.”

<Oh.>

So I spilled my guts,
everything.

The lies,
the abuse of power,
the abuse . . .

And the DA,
Well, he summed it up
real nice . . .

real tasty-like.

Real Ingersollian,
“When I speak of God,
I mean that god who prevented
man

from putting forth his hand
and taking also
the fruit of the tree of life
that he might live forever;
of that god who multiplied
the agonies of women,
increased the weary toil of man,
and in his anger drowned a world—

of that god whose altars reeked with human blood,
who butchered babes,

violated maidens,
enslaved men
and fined the earth with cruelty and crime;
of that god who made heaven for the few,
and who will gloat forever
and ever

upon the writhings
of the lost
and damned.”

And that was it.

The jury,
they found my father

guilty.
They threw the book at 'im,
so to speak.
Judge ordered him put to death.
I hid for a time,
witness protection.
Now I'm a
lieutenant detective,
with the easiest beat
ever,
seein's how I used to be
son of god and all.
There's lots of gods,
running around loose,
needin' a shake down
to get 'em off the streets.
There's lot's of gods.
They all gotta get
brought
down.

Jim Gardiner

P. Chem. of Literary Criticism

"If it isn't quantifiable, it isn't worth knowing."
 —Goeffrey Lord Esterbridge

It is not sufficient to speak of thus-and-such an author as a "literary great," or the exemplar of a particular school, style, or tradition. Not until we can say, at least in relative, but preferably in absolute, terms, precisely how great the author in question is, do we have any real grasp of the matter.

To take one example among many possible, von Lebensraum (1888) demonstrated that in the works of any given author, the use of onomotopeia (m) varies directly with alliteration (a), but inversely with irony (i) and the square of wordiness (w). The relationship of these variables is given in the von Lebensraum equation:

$$m = (aR / w^2i)(C\mu)$$

In which R is the gas constant, C is a constant unique to a particular author; and μ is left unexplained to confuse and irritate the reader.

The above equation is most useful for comparing the various works of a single author. If comparison is desired between diverse authors, however, or even between later and earlier works of the same author, the equation loses validity. This is principally because the value of C , the von Lebensraum constant, becomes problematical. The unfortunate fact is that C does not remain constant during the life of the author, but tends to increase with age. It is, on this account, often preferable to use the approach of Chang, Guzman, and Mukerjee (1948), who first defined a Literary Constant(λ):

$$\lambda = aR / w^2im$$

(Note: The μ in this equation should not be confused with the μ of the von Lebensraum equation.)

λ is, of course, equal to unity in the case of the Ideal Author. Actual authors may be evaluated according to the degree in which they depart from this ideal. To this end Chang et al. (1948) employed a Taylor expansion:

$$\lambda = R\mu(1 + \alpha(A/w^2im) + (A/w^2im)^2 + (A/w^2im)^3 + \dots + (A/w^2im)^n)$$

Much effort has been devoted to assigning numerical values to the coefficients of this expansion, and to giving them literary meaning. The first coefficient, α , is commonly called the "redundancy factor," and is sometimes designated R , r , ρ , or with the Cyrillic w . The second coefficient, β , has been identified by Aubergine and Pomme de Terre (1977) as the "facteur de bullshitisme," and assumes a magnitude of importance only in analyses of French works of the Romantic and Naturalist schools, e.g. and especially, "Le Grand Meaulnes."

Gamma, the third coefficient, is related to logical incoherence, and becomes significant when considering works of the Theatre of the Absurd. Fartov and Belcher (1961) showed that if the third coefficient is ignored, unacceptably high values are obtained for all the works of Samuel Beckett. They proposed defining the third coefficient as:

$$\gamma = RF \ln \mu_2 / \mu_1$$

(This μ should not be confused with the von Lebensraum μ , or the Chang-Guzman-Mukerjee μ .)

Here R is, once again, the gas constant, and F , the minimal force required to compel an author to produce. F is generally taken as 6.7 dickenses (1 d being equal to 1 literary atmosphere (AL) per Faulkner-squared per day), and is remarkably constant for all authors and literatures, an important exception being Dostoevsky, for whom F must be reckoned at 48.8 d, otherwise unacceptable λ values result.

Literary Entropy

Literary entropy (S) is defined by Sheikh and Alegg (1971) as:

$$\Delta S = \Delta H - \Delta G / T$$

Where G is García-Márquez free energy, H is the combined density of nouns and verbs per mole of words, and T is the mean annual temperature of the author's homeland. It can be seen, then, that entropy varies inversely with the use of modifiers, García-Márquez free energy, and meteorological warmth. Near maximal entropy is found in the Reykjavik telephone book, which is sometimes used as a standard (SR).

Empirical Verification

Stupanovich, Stevens, and Krishnaswamy (1988) employed the Sheikh-Alegg and Chang-Guzman-Mukerjee equations to analyze J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. They found this work to have an A-value of 1.087×10^{-16} poes, a pW ($pW = -\ln W$) of 9.4 conrads, and a complete absence of irony. By way of comparison, the Reykjavik phonebook has an A value of 6.8×10^{-3} poes, a pW of 0.88 conrads, and an I of 8.43 dickens-tolstoys/hugo⁻³ (dth⁻³). Evidently something is amiss. Stupanovich et al. (1988) further tested the Chechenko-Piarelli-Abdurrahman Model of Protagonist Validation (for a thorough discussion of this method see O'Reilly and Schwanz-tucker, 1982) and determined that Holden Caulfield should have been a 55-year old carpet installer with an extensive criminal record. The blame for the evident discrepancies lies squarely with the author. Most of our modern techniques for literary analysis had been developed by the time he was writing, but Salinger apparently did not trouble himself to learn about them.

The utility of the techniques discussed in this paper is most severely limited by the dearth of reliable values. Elucidation of values for various schools and authors would

greatly advance the science of literary criticism. Further research in this area is clearly called for.

Graffiti

Editorial Comments, Etc.

And welcome to the dance. Again. You hold in your hands the premier issue of *Fugue*. "Huh?" you say. "But this is issue #13." True. But it's a new, improved *Fugue*—better, stronger, thicker. Gone are the days of a mere 44 pages. Gone is the saddle stapling and minimal to no graphics. With a little help from the ASUI Senate and the Fine Arts Committee, *Fugue* is in its new format—one, if I have my way about it, which will stick around a while. I don't know what the future will bring this magazine still undergoing evolution, but I hope the change will be good; join us, won't you?

* * *

A warning. If you care for the arts in general and literature in particular, please be aware that there is a growing trend in politics (whether it be at the national, local, or university level) to cut funding for the arts. We are represented and judged as a society by our art; don't let narrow-minded bureaucrats continue our society's slow death. Make your concerns known to those who think they have the power to decide things for us.

* * *

Some thank yous. *Fugue's* second premier issue couldn't have succeeded without the tireless efforts of not a few people: the *Fugue* associate editors—in particular Trevor Dodge, Shawn Rider, Brandon Hall, and Matt Baldwin; student senators Annie Averitt and Jay Feldman; everyone who came to those senate meetings and spoke out or held signs; Kitra Isaacson; the faculty and staff of the UI English Department; the folks at Printing & Design; all the contributors; and you.

Eric P. Isaacson
Executive Editor

Contributors

R. E. ALATEE manages a sixteen-hour convenience store somewhere north-south of Normal, IL. Stop in for a squishy when you're passing through.

MARY CLEARMAN BLEW's story "Anchorage" is from her forthcoming novel, *Ruby Dreams of Janis Joplin*. She is the author of *All But the Waltz*.

J. ROBERT DAUBS spends most of his time striving to achieve the highest level of Slack. When he's not busy with that he writes poetry.

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KARNEY HATCH just received his B.A. in Creative Writing at the University of Idaho. He plans to move to Portland, OR, to begin the work of unlearning everything he was taught in the last five years.

BRENDA HILLMAN, author of *Bright Existence* and four other books of poetry, was the UI English Department's Distinguished Visiting Writer during the Fall. She teaches at St. Mary's College in Moraga, CA.

EDWARD HAWORTH HOEPPNER's poetry comes from an unfinished manuscript entitled *Surrender*. His works have appeared in *The North American Review*, *The Ohio Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*.

JOE M. O'CONNELL received the Louzelle Rose Barclay Award for his short fiction. Half of his family is staid Irish immigrants escaped to Texas, and half is errant Baptists from Louisiana; he's caught somewhere in between.

SARAH A. ODISHOO is a professor of English at Columbia College Chicago. Her story, "Notes From the Flat Earth Society," is forthcoming in *Berkeley Fiction Review*.

ANDI OLSEN's assemblages and computer-generated collages have appeared in shows and journals across the country, most recently in Los Angeles and *Fiction International*. Andi (<http://www.uidaho.edu/~lolsen/andi.html>) has collaborated with Lance Olsen on a number of projects.

LANCE OLSEN (<http://www.uidaho.edu/~lolsen/>) has published ten books of or about postmodern fiction, including *Tonguing the Zeitgeist*. His latest novels, *Burnt* and *Time Famine*, will see print this summer.

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