

# ENGLISH 90M/FEMGEN 90M:

# Queer Stories

Fall 2018

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# Fiction



# LEAVING CIVVY STREET

ANNIE HOLMES

"Hey, Bev!" my brother Don called out when we got home from school. "Howzit, Elise?" he added when he saw her follow me in the front door. He was out on the verandah with his girlfriend Sherylee curled against him all kittenish. It was camouflage city out there, and a hell of a racket – a bunch of Don's friends drinking beer at Dad's bar, half of them in uniform, the others heading for the Rhodesian Light Infantry in the same intake as my brother the next morning. Same savage haircuts, same strips of untanned neck. From the kitchen I could smell mealie meal and hear the thump of a wooden spoon through a potful of porridge – Cornelius making *sadza* for the braai for Don's last night.

"Come and have a drink with us, man," Don yelled at us. "I'm gonna get donnered tomorrow."

I said, "Ja, okay, just now," and Elise and I headed for my room.

"Don't disappear, you girls," my mom yelled from the kitchen. "Don's last night, remember."

"Okay," we called back and closed the door of my room. Part of me wanted to be out there on a bar stool, laughing with Don and his gang – especially tonight – but Elise unspun my loyalties. Elise charged the air. My eyes had to follow her. Iron filings to the magnet, sunflower to the sun, me to Elise. When she was around, I could

hear barely anything else. "By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear," like in the Jaguar poem by Ted Hughes.

At school, they called Elise Kalahari, like the desert. Why? Long thin strip of fuck-all. Me they called *kafupi*, half-pint, the blonde dwarf. And the two of us together: Laurel and Hardly. Lanky Elise being Laurel, with me supposedly Hardly There at All. Typical pathetic school humour.

"Do you want to go sit in the bar with everyone?" Elise asked me. "I mean, he's going into the army tomorrow. It's significant."

"We could," I said. I stroked her arm. "He'd like it."

"Yeah, we could."

"For a bit at least."

We unlaced our brown school shoes and peeled off our short white school socks. Elise draw her green school uniform over her head, revealing her pale belly and her purple floral bra as her skinny ribcage reached up. Then she dug in the cupboard for the jeans she kept at my house. I lay on my side on the bed, watching her go through a pile of my t-shirts. Cornelius ironed them so flat, so regimental, that Elise called them slices off a t-shirt loaf.

"Come on, Psycho," she said, as I lay there in my uniform, "are you changing or not?"

"No, Spazz, I'm not changing, I'm constant as the northern star," I said. "I'm true blue."

The front door slammed. "Cornelius!" came my dad's voice. "My suitcase is in the car."

"Coming, Boss!" Cornelius called back.

Elise stood over me on the bed in her knickers and bra, one foot on either side of me, like Colossus or maybe Colossa. She jumped, bouncing me.

From down the passage, my dad yelled for my mom.

"We're out in the bar!" my mom yelled back.

I grabbed Elise's ankles and tumbled her down to the bed. She wriggled around onto her side facing me. Reached out. Ran her hand up my school skirt, between my thighs.

"Bevvy?" called my dad from the passage.

"We'll be out in a second, Dad," I bellowed.

He knocked on the door. "Can I come in?"

"No - we're changing!"

"Well, come out to the bar and say hello."

"Coming!" we chorused. Elise slid her fingers under the elastic of my regulation green cotton knickers. "When you see me looking at this uniform of yours," she said in my ear, "remember this, okay?" I nodded. "Think of my fingers." I swallowed. I touched her wrist to hold her hand there.

"Girls?" said my mom outside the door.

"We're changing, Mom!" I yelled indignantly.

"Well, don't take too long, Dad's putting the steak on the braai."

"Okay," we chorused, and then Elise slid her fingers further and I closed my eyes and turned slowly onto my back so I didn't lose her.

Just a few months before, we'd been distant friends in a loose confederacy of classmates, me on the hockey-playing side of things while Elise, on the opposite margins, came to school with a forbidden line of black Indian kajal traced round her eyes. She spoke a secret ironic language with the other freak girls and handed in notes to avoid sport: "Please excuse Elise van der Linde from games this week due to circumstances beyond her control." That was the euphemism for menstruating. "I'm on," we said to each other. "The curse?" mothers asked. "Circumstances," they wrote.

"Very long periods you have," observed the gym teacher, Miss Jenks. "Three weeks of the month, apparently."

Elise looked down at her feet. "Please don't mention it so loudly, ma'am," she said. "It's embarrassing."

Miss Jenks snorted. "You don't look embarrassed to me, Elise," she said.

"There I'd be, running with all the other sporty girls, or diving sprinting, serving and volleying, springing off the trampette and over the horse, while Elise would be talking, talking with the freak girls. When the three of them did actually change into their gym slips and join the PE class, they'd share an exercise mat and sit talking on it until Miss Jenks headed their way, at which point they'd turn as one onto their backs and lift their hips in shoulder stands. "Better than nothing, I suppose," said Miss Jenks and strode on, dimpled jelly legs quivering under her minuscule hockey skirt. A lesbo, for sure, we all said. We'd pull faces at each other if she happened to touch one of us when she helped us leap the horse or straightened our headstand. And we all apologised profusely if we touched each other, in case anyone thought we were "like that". Thursdays were queer days, we said, and what about girls who wore a single earring, or a different sock on each foot, or a different shoe? Lesbos for sure. "Oh God," we said if we saw naïve first form girls holding hands. "Lesbie friends and go homo!"

Gay men, though, that was different. Hairdressers. The TV news reader. That guy at the florist's. Our own classmate Chris, who left school in the middle of form four, everyone knew he was a moffie and, weirdly, even the other boys didn't seem to give him gyp about it. He was at Elise's one Thursday when I went over to work with her on a geography project.

"I can't live here one more day," Chris told us. "Salisbury, Rhodesia? Not me." He was trying on Elise's shoes, plum coloured platforms with ankle straps. Their feet were the same size.

"Maybe I should wear them to the club on Saturday," Chris said. "Excellent idea, Chris," I said. "Die young." Soldiers would beat a guy up for having hair slightly longer than military style. Never mind wearing girls' platform Mary Janes.

Chris was tempting the school haircut limits, like we did with the skirt lengths of our uniforms ("three inches above the floor when kneeling"). He ran his fingers through what there was of his hair, brown and hinting at curls to come. "I've been reading about Tangiers," he said.

Elise and I exchanged looks. Earth to Chris?

"You're moving to Durban," Elise reminded him. Lots of guys left the country right after school to avoid the army, but Chris' family were gapping it early. Just in case.

He flung himself backwards onto Elise's bed, pointing his feet up at the ceiling, admiring the arch of his instep under the ankle strap. "I know," he told Elise, "but Paris calls, you know? London ... Milano."

"Can you speak Spanish, Chris?"

"Italian, Beverley Milano is in Italia."

"I hope he'll be okay," Elise said when Chris left. "He's such a fearless little faggot."

"Moffie."

"Poofta."

"Homo."

"Fairy."

"Fearless Faggot Fairy."

"It's a miracle he hasn't been mashed to a pulp in the toilet somewhere. He puts mascara on before he goes to Club Tomorrow."

"God!"

"And he's such a dreamer. Milano, he says!"

"Tangiers!"

We snorted. But Elise liked him better than all the boys we knew. Those tedious shit-for-brains, she called them.

"But still, Elise, he, you know ..."

"What?"

"You know. He does it with other boys."

"Does it? Does it? Jesus, Bev, how old are you?"  
 "Okay, he has sex with other boys, with men."  
 "He fucks them, you mean."  
 "Or ..."  
 "Or they fuck him. Well, we don't know that, actually. Maybe he only dreams about it."  
 "Maybe he just wears the shoes."  
 "Yeah, and maybe he wears girls' underwear. We could ask him."  
 "But Elise ..."  
 "What?"  
 "Two boys ..."  
 "So?"  
 "Well, think about doing it with a girl."  
 "Use grown-up verbs, Beverley Richards, for godsake."  
 "Okay, 'screwing' then. If that's what girls do with each other. I mean, eww."

"Well."  
 "Well what?"

"Think of screwing Mr Driscoll." He was our Maths teacher and that was pretty gross, as a notion to consider. We ran through a whole list – hairy men, chaps with BO, gormless boys, guys with acne, just about every male we knew – screaming louder at each repulsive suggestion.

"So I don't know," Elise said at last, not looking at me. "I think about Mr Driscoll with his pants down and then I compare that with, I don't know, someone beautiful like Stevie Nicks in Fleetwood Mac – it wouldn't be so disgusting to sleep with her."

"Sleep with? Sleep with? How old are *your* verbs, Elise van der Linde?"

We avoided meeting each other's eyes or, God forbid, actually touching each other. But the idea was out there now, prowling. Stevie Nicks, or, you know, some beautiful girl.

Of course, after that we could barely speak to each other at school for weeks. It would've been way too much like an admission of something. I did replay our conversation, though, in my mind, and I'd look at Elise in class, or sitting by the school pool with the freak sisters. I watched her hand holding a pen or the way she settled her basher on the back of her head and it seemed inevitable: one day she would touch me. When would it happen? I didn't know how to wait, but I didn't know how to do anything else either.

Our English teacher made the move for us. He allocated us the same study space, a stock room, a closet really, behind his classroom. Highly prized, a reward for good essay writing. The first day in there, we sat at desks wedged between the shelves, facing *The Knight's Tale* in a set of twenty-four, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *A Town Like Alice*, *Troilus and Cressida*. All re-covered in marbled red vinyl by prisoners who'd stamped the titles on the spines in white caps, sometimes skew.

We sat still for a while, model schoolgirls, backs straight, delaying the moment. My hand on my desk, her hand on hers. We moved our innocent hands closer, until our little fingers lay beside each other on the line between the desks: my finger golden brown; hers long and slender, her skin a pale olive that would've tanned if once in a while she'd torn herself out of a book and into the sunshine.

I touched the skin on the top of her hand with one finger. "You're soft, like a dove."

"You've never touched a dove." She was laughing at me.  
 "But still, I know. Your cells are finer than other people's."

Her eyes went soft when I touched her. We couldn't turn away. She looked at me fiercely. I almost had to laugh because she scared me. Her long brown hair was parted down the middle and tied on either side of her face in bunches, like Pocahontas, and I wanted it loose so I could slip one hand through it, through the silk, and pull. With the other hand I would reach for her breast. I would. I longed to. I did.

Through the bedroom window, we could hear the sound of voices in the garden – my parents, Don and his friends, and my little brother Jeffrey, excited to be hanging out with the big guys. It was night time and I was still in my rumpled school uniform. Elise pulled her jeans on in the dark and then leaned over me. “Beverley Richards, put your clothes on,” she whispered in my ear.

Outside, they were gathered round the smoky braai, next to the pool and under the security light, Mom in her deckchair with a brandy and coke. Everyone was listening to Greg. He was older and he'd been in the army for at least a year already. “These guys were way out in the bundu, hell and gone,” Greg was saying when I went over to kiss my dad and say welcome home. “And they see this bunch of women with pots on their heads walking down this path, okay? Maybe quarter of a kay away.”

My mom stopped spraying mozzie repellent on my little brother Jeffrey's ankles to look up at Greg from under her eyebrows. Ready to interrupt him.

“And apparently this one guy had his FN trained on the women and the piccaninnies. The rest of them couldn't figure out why he was so interested in a bunch of women,” Greg took a slug of his beer. “Of course, ouens have to watch out, you check. There could be gooks behind those women.”

“Greg,” said my mom in a warning voice, but he was set on finishing the story.

“And then suddenly,” said Greg, “The guy fires! And there's a moer of a bloody explosion! Jesus! Those nannies had grenades and bullets and who knows what-all in those pots, man! And this guy knew, don't ask me how, but he knew.”

“Did they all die?” came Jeffrey's little-boy voice.

“Slotted, ek sê. One time.”

“It's just stories,” my mother told Jeffrey. “Don't listen.”

“Nooit, I swear Mrs Richards,” said Greg. “This guy from my platoon told me ...”

“Was he there?” Hands on hips, challenging him.

“No, but this other guy told him ...”

“I don't want kids listening to this kind of story,” my mother said.

Everyone went quiet. Then “Come on, Greg,” said Mom. “My glass is empty. Top me up and get yourself another beer.”

On the other side of the fire, standing on his own, Don looked to me, suddenly, like a little boy himself. One hand in his pocket, the other gripping the neck of his beer bottle. Barely any hair left on his mown head. Eighteen years old. I tried not to think of him training a rifle on a line of women with pots on their heads. Could Don actually kill someone? Would he? There'd be people trying to kill him, for sure. That song on TV said Rhodesians never die, but soldiers were dying on a regular basis. Farm owners died too, and so did villagers and, apparently, women carrying pots on their heads. Also, missionaries. And people driving in convoys got fired on or blown up. Even passengers on aircraft got shot down from the sky. What was to say your own brother wouldn't drive over a landmine? This was all a terrible mistake. Don should leave, like Chris the Moffie had.

My dad was turning meat over the heat. I went over to stand by him. “Dad,” I said softly. “I'm scared, Dad. Don might die.”

“Don't talk like that, Beverley,” he snapped.

He twisted the silver ring my mom had given him a couple of anniversaries ago. It was sleek and aerodynamic, like something you'd mount on the bonnet of a long black car, and it tangled in the sprout of ginger hairs at his knuckle. He took up the braai fork again, speared strings of blistering wors onto a plate and headed inside the house. I followed him into the kitchen, blinking in the bright neon light.

"No, really man, Beverley," he said angrily. "This is your brother you're talking about. Jesus!"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry."

"Here, Cornelius." Dad dropped the plate of sausages onto the kitchen counter. Cornelius picked it up and covered it with foil. "I just hope nothing does happen to him," Dad said to me in a clenched voice. "I just bloody hope you don't have to look back and remember talking like this." I watched Cornelius slide the plate into the warming drawer. He kept his back to us like he wasn't really listening, like he didn't know all our family secrets. Like he hadn't heard Greg's bush story.

Dad walked out.

Cornelius threw his dishrag over his shoulder. "You help me, Miss Bev," he said. He was getting old now, Cornelius, older even than Dad, with silver threads in his hair. He loaded a tray with paper napkins, chutney, tomato sauce. "Don't spill," he said, putting the tray in my hands.

Outside, Elise and Jeffrey were playing some leaping game on the trampoline, growling and roaring at each other, and that put Sherylee's friend Debbie in mind of a joke. She leaned close to Don's buddy Mark, the good looking one, as I walked by. "What's tall, and growls," Debbie asked Mark, "and fucks like a tiger?" Mark shrugged. "Rrrrowl!" said Debbie, raising faux claws. The guys laughed.

I laid out the paper napkins, twisting them into origami peacocks. Cornelius hurried in and out of the house, silent in his worn white takkies, carrying hamburger buns, mayonnaise, paper serviettes. When all the meat was cooked and the salads served, Elise and I carried our food over to the pool and sat on the diving board, dipping *sadza* and greasy wors into chutney. Stu came and stood over us, beer-bold. "So Bev," he said, "Wanna go to the movies with me sometime?" Everyone made fun of Stu, the runt of Don's gang, so Elise and I stuck up for him sometimes, but in the condescending way of

princesses. No reason for him to get drunk and stupid about me, though. "Go away, Stu."

"Ag, come on, Bev man, you're a big girl now." Stu made a move to sit between us on the sandpaper surface of the diving board, but we leaned our shoulders in to block him. "You can't stick around with Elise all the time," he said. "You need a boyfriend."

"And you think you're my only option, hey Stu?"

Held in the vee of my brother's arm, Sherylee was listening. Now, she reached over and smacked Stu across the arm with a long metal braai fork. "Leave Bev alone, Stu," she ordered.

"Dammit, Sherylee! You've put grease all over my clothes, man!"

"Don't swear at my girlfriend, Stu," said Don. "Anyone bloody swears at Sherylee, it should be me." Everyone laughed. Sherylee pouting, kissing my brother. The night before the army, the last night on civvy street. Frogs were starting up in the vlei, rawk rawk, and crickets too. Bugs zinged up against the security light.

My dad came over and patted my shoulder. "Okay, my girl," he said quietly, as the rest of them headed back into the bar.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I said.

"It's okay, Bevvy," he said. "It's okay."

Elise and I stayed outside on the diving board above the glow of the swimming pool. Elise hugged her knees, her long back rounded like the letter C. Most nights, I'd do anything for a chance like this to hold her hand secretly and say lines from our favourite poems, "Glory be to God for dappled things," like the lace shadows of the msasa trees on the swimming pool and because we loved "All things counter, original, spare, strange." But tonight, I wanted to curl into my family, like Sherylee curled into my brother's side.

We heard a crash, something breaking in the bar. A girl screamed – Sherylee or Debbie – and then everyone laughed. "Cornelius!" my mom yelled, and he came from the kitchen with a brush and dustpan.

"Let's go and live in Denmark when we finish school," Elise said. "There's no war there. And we could get married." I tried to picture Denmark, "the breakfast nation of Europe," our geography teacher had told us, "Lots of dairy products, and pig farming for bacon." Would my cousins wear turquoise satin bridesmaids' dresses at our wedding, mine and Elise's, in the breakfast nation of Europe?

"What about your mother?" I asked Elise. "Wouldn't she just die if we went to Denmark and got married?"

"We wouldn't tell her. We wouldn't tell anyone."

We'd have to steal away, anonymously, and never be heard of again. I felt our Danish loneliness in advance.

"Beverley?" called my mom from the bar.

"My mom wants me."

"Well, go then."

"Come with me."

"I'll come just now."

Elise had asked me to marry her, kind of, and I'd said nothing. It made me feel ill to think about it. Denmark. No return.

"Here she is!" Dad said when I walked into the bar. "Come and be sociable, Bevvy." Jeffrey had gone to bed and the rest of them were all drunk now or getting there. Stu climbed off his bar stool so I could sit next to my brother.

"You guys are plastered!" I told them and everyone roared like I was wit personified.

Cornelius came through from the kitchen with the big yellow plastic salt shaker and a bowl of lemon slices. "We going to down swizzingers, Bevvy," Sherylee told me. "Like you do with tequila, only with vodka instead. Say 'swizzinger' Stu."

"Schwizh, schwizhinzher." Stu's head jerked abruptly as he slurped. He didn't look like he'd be lasting long.

"No stamina, boet," said Mark, shaking his head. Debbie leaned up against Mark's stool but he ignored her.

Sherylee demonstrated a swizzinger. First, she made a fist, and licked the skin between her thumb and index finger so salt would stick there. Then, in quick succession, she knocked back a tot of chilled vodka, licked the salt from her fist and sucked on a lemon slice. A vehement shiver ran through her and she arched her neck like a horse, looking up at my brother from under her eyelashes. "Ooh baby," she purred and everyone applauded.

Then the whole gang started licking and salting their fists, reaching for the lemons, my dad sloshing vodka into tot glasses with golfing motifs. I was watching Don to see how he did it, but Mark got off his bar stool, abandoning Debbie, and stood behind me. "Like this, Bevvy," he said in my ear, putting both arms around me. The prickle of his shaved cheek rubbed against my cheek. This is a boy, I thought. This is not Denmark. Mark lifted my fist and licked the spot, slowly. My mother was watching and pretending not to watch and smiling a little to herself. The bar went quiet. Mark was the smoothie, the ladies' man. Him holding me like this was tribal, his friend-of-the-family duty. Don's mates thought I was boring and also a bit scary. Bevvy, the smart one with the weird friends, who reads a lot of books.

I leaned back against Mark and looked round the table. Everyone was watching. I threw back the vodka, licked the salt, sucked on the lemon and felt the same tremble ripple me. Mark nuzzled against my neck for a second and then tossed back his own tot. My dad refilled the glasses. Stu reached for one but Don stopped him. Greg put an LP on the stereo. *They'd been through the desert on a horse with no name. It felt good to be out of the rain.* I made myself forget about Elise on the diving board. I couldn't work out how to keep her in my mind at the same time as I felt Mark's tongue on my fist. There was no pause in Mark, no question. It was simple to lean back against him.

"That's enough for you, young lady," Mom said after my third or fourth swizzinger.

Mark ran his finger down my neck and then took his arms away, moving over to Debbie. My back was cold where he'd been behind me. Air was all around me and a kind of shame. I climbed off the stool and made myself walk slowly out of the bar and outside to find Elise, but she'd gone. No running, I told myself, as if I were a prefect on corridor duty.

She was in my bedroom. "I'm going home," she said. "I'm calling my mom to come and get me." She shook me off and I followed her to the telephone table by the front door.

"Elise," I said, keeping my panicked voice low. "Don't go. You hate your house."

"Not as much as I hate this house." She pushed my hand off the phone and glared at me, cold.

"Oh, don't go," I whispered, the sting of vodka and lemon on my tongue. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry."

I was. I could see her swallowing. I knew that her heart wanted to crack in her throat, just like mine did. I didn't understand how I could do this to her.

Stu came up, still more or less on his feet. "Bev," he said in the flat voice of the super-drunk.

"Bugger off, Stu," I said.

"Uh, come on, Bev," he said. He staggered and put a hand on the wall to steady himself. "You two," he said, some suspicion dawning in him, "you two girls ..."

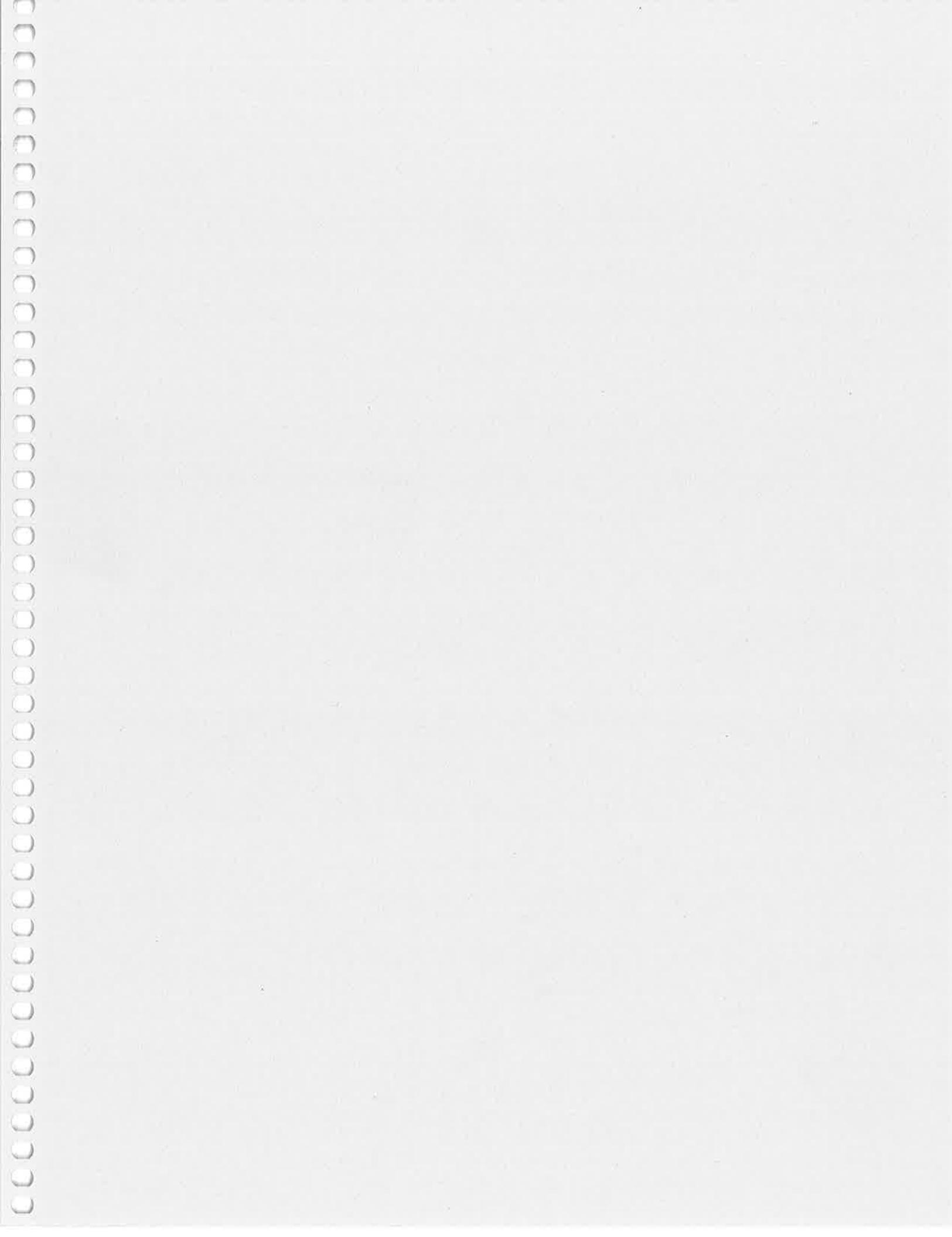
"Stu, you're pissed," I said. "You won't even remember this tomorrow." Elise pushed past him and I followed her back to my bedroom. I was going to lock Stu out and Elise in, but before I closed my door, Don came down the passage. My big brother, on his last night on civvy street. Distracted, drunk, not seeing Stu or me at all.

Cornelius heard him and looked out from the kitchen. He was wiping his hands on his apron. "Good night, Boss," he said. "I'm going off now."

"Okay," said Don. "Thanks hey, Cornelius."

Cornelius stood there a moment longer, watching Don sway. Don shook his head. "It's okay, Cornelius. I'm fine," he said. He didn't look fine.

"Okay, Boss," said Cornelius. He went back into the kitchen and closed the door.





# The Prussian Officer

D.H. Lawrence

(open source, from Project Gutenberg)

## I

They had marched more than thirty kilometres since dawn, along the white, hot road where occasional thickets of trees threw a moment of shade, then out into the glare again. On either hand, the valley, wide and shallow, glittered with heat; dark green patches of rye, pale young corn, fallow and meadow and black pine woods spread in a dull, hot diagram under a glistening sky. But right in front the mountains ranged across, pale blue and very still, snow gleaming gently out of the deep atmosphere. And towards the mountains, on and on, the regiment marched between the rye fields and the meadows, between the scraggy fruit trees set regularly on either side the high road. The burnished, dark green rye threw on a suffocating heat, the mountains drew gradually nearer and more distinct. While the feet of the soldiers grew hotter, sweat ran through their hair under their helmets, and their knapsacks could burn no more in contact with their shoulders, but seemed instead to give off a cold, prickly sensation.

He walked on and on in silence, staring at the mountains ahead, that rose sheer out of the land, and stood fold behind fold, half earth, half heaven, the heaven, the banner with slits of soft snow, in the pale, bluish peaks.

He could now walk almost without pain. At the start, he had determined not to limp. It had made him sick to take the first steps, and during the first mile or so, he had compressed his breath, and the cold drops of sweat had stood on his forehead. But he had walked it off. What were they after all but bruises! He had looked at them, as he was getting up: deep bruises on the backs of his thighs. And since he had made his first step in the morning, he had been conscious of them, till now he had a tight, hot place in his chest, with suppressing the pain, and holding himself in. There seemed no air when he breathed. But he walked almost lightly.

The Captain's hand had trembled at taking his coffee at dawn: his orderly saw it again. And he saw the fine figure of the Captain wheeling on horseback at the farm-house ahead, a handsome figure in pale blue uniform with facings of scarlet, and the metal gleaming on the black helmet and the sword-scabbard, and dark streaks of sweat coming on the silky bay horse. The orderly felt he was connected with that figure moving so suddenly on horseback: he followed it like a shadow, mute and inevitable and damned by it. And the officer was always aware of the tramp of the company behind, the march of his orderly among the men.

The Captain was a tall man of about forty, grey at the temples. He had a handsome, finely knit figure, and was one of the best horsemen in the West. His orderly, having to rub him down, admired the amazing riding-muscles of his loins.

For the rest, the orderly scarcely noticed the officer any more than he noticed himself. It was rarely he saw his master's face: he did not look at it. The Captain had reddish-brown, stilt hair, that he wore short upon his skull. His moustache was also cut short and bristly over a full, brutal mouth. His face was rather rugged, the cheeks thin. Perhaps the man was the more handsome for the deep lines in his face, the irritable tension of his brow, which gave him the look of a man who fights with life. His fair eyebrows stood bushy over light blue eyes that were always flashing with cold fire.

He was a Prussian aristocrat, haughty and overbearing. But his mother had been a Polish Countess. Having made too many gambling debts when he was young, he had ruined his prospects in the Army, and remained an infantry captain. He had never married: his position did not allow of it, and no woman had ever moved him to it. His time he spent riding—occasionally he rode one of his own horses at the races—and at the officers' club. Now and then he took himself a mistress. But after such an event, he returned to duty with his brow still more tense, his eyes still more hostile and irritable. With the men, however, he was merely impersonal, though a devil when roused; so that, on the whole, they feared him, but had no great aversion from him. They accepted him as the inevitable.

To his orderly he was at first cold and just and indifferent: he did not fuss over trifles. So that his servant knew practically nothing about him, except just what orders he would give, and how he wanted them obeyed. That was quite simple. Then the change gradually came.

The orderly was a youth of about twenty-two, of medium height, and well built. He had strong, heavy limbs, was swarthy, with a soft, black, young moustache. There was something altogether warm and young about him. He had firmly marked eyebrows over dark, expressionless eyes, that seemed never to have thought, only to have received life direct through his senses, and acted straight from instinct.

Gradually the officer had become aware of his servant's young, vigorous, unconscious presence about him. He could not get away from the sense of the youth's person, while he was in attendance. It was like a warm flame upon the older man's tense, rigid body, that had become almost unliving, fixed. There was something so free and self-contained about him, and something in the young fellow's movement, that made the officer aware of him. And this irritated the Prussian. He did not choose to be touched into life by his servant. He might easily have changed his man, but he did not. He now very rarely looked direct at his orderly, but kept his face averted, as if to avoid seeing him. And yet as the young soldier moved unthinking about the apartment, the elder watched him, and would notice the movement of his strong young shoulders under the blue cloth, the bend of his neck. And it irritated him. To see the soldier's young, brown, shapely peasant's hand grasp the loaf or the wine-bottle sent a flash of hate or of anger through the elder man's blood. It was not that the youth was clumsy: it was rather the blind, instinctive sureness of movement of an unhampered young animal that irritated the officer to such a degree.

Once, when a bottle of wine had gone over, and the red gushed out on to the tablecloth, the officer had started up with an oath, and his eyes, bluey like fire, had held those of the confused youth for a moment. It was a shock for the young soldier. He felt something sink deeper, deeper into his soul, where nothing had ever gone before. It left him rather blank and wondering. Some of his natural completeness in himself was gone, a little uneasiness took its place. And from that time an undiscovered feeling had held between the two men.

Henceforward the orderly was afraid of really meeting his master. His subconsciousness remembered those steely blue eyes and the harsh brows, and did not intend to meet them again. So he always stared past his master, and avoided him. Also, in a little anxiety, he waited for the three months to have gone, when his time would be up. He began to feel a constraint in the Captain's presence, and the soldier even more than the officer wanted to be left alone, in his neutrality as servant.

He had served the Captain for more than a year, and knew his duty. This he performed easily, as if it were natural to him. The officer and his commands he took for granted, as he took the sun and the rain, and he served as a matter of course. It did not implicate him personally.

But now if he were going to be forced into a personal interchange with his master he would be like a wild thing caught, he felt he must get away.

But the influence of the young soldier's being had penetrated through the officer's stiffened discipline, and perturbed the man in him. He, however, was a gentleman, with long, fine hands and cultivated movements, and was not going to allow such a thing as the stirring of his innate self. He was a man of passionate temper, who had always kept himself suppressed. Occasionally there had been a duel, an outburst before the soldiers. He knew himself to be always on the point of breaking out. But he kept himself hard to the idea of the Service. Whereas the young soldier seemed to live out his warm, full nature, to give it off in his very movements, which had a certain zest, such as wild animals have in free movement. And this irritated the officer more and more.

In spite of himself, the Captain could not regain his neutrality of feeling towards his orderly. Nor could he leave the man alone. In spite of himself, he watched him, gave him sharp orders, tried to take up as much of his time as possible. Sometimes he flew into a rage with the young soldier, and bullied him. Then the orderly shut himself off, as it were out of earshot, and waited, with sullen, flushed face, for the end of the noise. The words never pierced to his intelligence, he made himself, protectively, impervious to the feelings of his master.

He had a scar on his left thumb, a deep seam going across the knuckle. The officer had long suffered from it, and wanted to do something to it. Still it was there, ugly and brutal on the young, brown hand. At last the Captain's reserve gave way. One day, as the orderly was smoothing out the tablecloth, the officer pinned down his thumb with a pencil, asking,

"How did you come by that?"

The young man winced and drew back at attention.

"A wood axe, Herr Hauptmann," he answered.

The officer waited for further explanation. None came. The orderly went about his duties. The elder man was sullenly angry. His servant avoided him. And the next day he had to use all his willpower to avoid seeing the scarred thumb. He wanted to get hold of it and—— A hot flame ran in his blood.

He knew his servant would soon be free, and would be glad. As yet, the soldier had held himself off from the elder man. The Captain grew madly irritable. He could not rest when the soldier was away, and when he was present, he glared at him with tormented eyes. He hated those fine, black brows over the unmeaning, dark eyes, he was infuriated by the free movement of the handsome limbs, which no military discipline could make stiff. And he became harsh and cruelly bullying, using contempt and satire. The young soldier only grew more mute and expressionless.

What cattle were you bred by, that you can't keep straight eyes? Look me in the eyes when I speak to you.

And the soldier turned his dark eyes to the other's face, but there was no sight in them: he stared with the slightest possible cast, holding back his sight, perceiving the blue of his master's eyes, but receiving no look from them. And the elder man went pale, and his reddish eyebrows twitched. He gave his order, barrenly.

Once he flung a heavy military glove into the young soldier's face. Then he had the satisfaction of seeing the black eyes flare up into his own, like a blaze when straw is thrown on a fire. And he had laughed with a little tremor and a sneer.

But there were only two months more. The youth instinctively tried to keep himself intact: he tried to serve the officer as if the latter were an abstract authority and not a man. All his instinct was to avoid personal contact, even definite hate. But in spite of himself the hate grew, responsive to the officer's passion. However, he put it in the background. When he had left the Army he could dare acknowledge it. By nature he was active, and had many friends. He thought what amazing good fellows they were. But, without knowing it, he was alone. Now this solitariness was intensified. It would carry him through his term. But the officer seemed to be going irritably insane, and the youth was deeply frightened.

The soldier had a sweetheart, a girl from the mountains, independent and primitive. The two walked together, rather silently. He went with her, not to talk, but to have his arm round her, and for the physical contact. This eased him, made it easier for him to ignore the Captain; for he could rest with her held fast against his chest. And she, in some unspoken fashion, was there for him. They loved each other.

The Captain perceived it, and was mad with irritation. He kept the young man engaged all the evenings long, and took pleasure in the dark look that came on his face. Occasionally, the eyes of the two men met, those of the younger sullen and dark, doggedly unalterable, those of the elder sneering with restless contempt.

The officer tried hard not to admit the passion that had got hold of him. He would not know that his feeling for his orderly was anything but that of a man incensed by his stupid, perverse servant. So, keeping quite justified and conventional in his consciousness, he let the other thing run on. His nerves, however, were suffering. At last he slung the end of a belt in his servant's face. When he saw the youth start back, the pain-tears in his eyes and the blood on his mouth, he had felt at once a thrill of deep pleasure and of shame.

But this, he acknowledged to himself, was a thing he had never done before. The fellow was too exasperating. His own nerves must be going to pieces. He went away for some days with a woman.

It was a mockery of pleasure. He simply did not want the woman. But he stayed on for his time. At the end of it, he came back in an agony of irritation, torment, and misery. He rode all the evening, then came straight in to supper. His orderly was out. The officer sat with his long, fine hands lying on the table, perfectly still, and all his blood seemed to be corroding.

At last his servant entered. He watched the strong, easy young figure, the fine eyebrows, the thick black hair. In a week's time the youth had got back his old well-being. The hands of the officer twitched and seemed to be full of mad flame. The young man stood at attention, unmoving, shut on.

The meal went in silence. But the orderly seemed eager. He made a clatter with the dishes.

"Are you in a hurry?" asked the officer, watching the intent, warm face of his servant. The other did not reply.

"Will you answer my question?" said the Captain.

"Yes, sir," replied the orderly, standing with his pile of deep Army plates. The Captain waited, looked at him, then asked again:

"Are you in a hurry?

"Yes, sir," came the answer, that sent a flash through the listener.

"For what?"

"I was going out, sir."

"I want you this evening."

There was a moment's hesitation. The officer had a curious stiffness of countenance.

"Yes, sir," replied the servant, in his throat.

"I want you tomorrow evening also—in fact, you may consider your evenings occupied, unless I give you leave."

The mouth with the young moustache set close.

"Yes, sir," answered the orderly, loosening his lips for a moment.

He again turned to the door.

"And why have you a piece of pencil in your ear?"

The orderly hesitated, then continued on his way without answering. He set the plates in a pile outside the door, took the stump of pencil from his ear, and put it in his pocket. He had been copying a verse for his sweetheart's birthday card. He returned to finish clearing the table. The officer's eyes were dancing, he had a little, eager smile.

"Why have you a piece of pencil in your ear?" he asked.

The orderly took his hands full of dishes. His master was standing near the great green stove, a little smile on his face, his chin thrust forward. When the young soldier saw him his heart suddenly ran hot. He felt blind. Instead of answering, he turned dazedly to the door. As he was crouching to set down the dishes, he was pitched forward by a kick from behind. The pots went in a stream down the stairs, he clung to the pillar of the banisters. And as he was rising he was kicked heavily again, and again, so that he clung sickly to the post for some moments. His master had gone swiftly into the room and closed the door. The maid-servant downstairs looked up the staircase and made a mocking face at the crockery disaster.

The officer's heart was plunging. He poured himself a glass of wine, part of which he spilled on the floor, and gulped the remainder, leaning against the cool, green stove. He heard his man collecting the dishes from the stairs. Pale, as if intoxicated, he waited. The servant entered again. The Captain's heart gave a pang, as of pleasure, seeing the young fellow bewildered and uncertain on his feet, with pain.

"Schöner!" he said.

The soldier was a little slower in coming to attention.

"Yes, sir!"

The youth stood before him, with pathetic young moustache, and fine eyebrows very distinct on his forehead of dark marble.

"I asked you a question."

"Yes, sir."

The officer's tone bit like acid.

"Why had you a pencil in your ear?"

Again the servant's heart ran hot, and he could not breathe. With dark, strained eyes, he looked at the officer, as if fascinated. And he stood there sturdily planted, unconscious. The withering smile came into the Captain's eyes, and he lifted his foot.

"I—I forgot it—sir," panted the soldier, his dark eyes fixed on the other man's dancing blue ones.

"What was it doing there?"

He saw the young man's breast heaving as he made an effort for words.

"I had been writing."

"Writing what?"

Again the soldier looked him up and down. The officer could hear him panting. The smile came into the blue eyes. The soldier worked his dry throat, but could not speak. Suddenly the smile lit like a name on the officer's face, and a kick came heavily against the orderly's thigh. The youth moved a pace sideways. His face went dead, with two black, staring eyes.

"Well?" said the officer.

The orderly's mouth had gone dry, and his tongue rubbed in it as on dry brown-paper. He worked his throat. The officer raised his foot. The servant went stiff.

"Some poetry, sir," came the crackling, unrecognizable sound of his voice.

"Poetry, what poetry?" asked the Captain, with a sickly smile.

Again there was the working in the throat. The Captain's heart had suddenly gone down heavily, and he stood sick and tired.

"For my girl, sir," he heard the dry, inhuman sound.

"Oh!" he said, turning away. "Clear the table."

"Click!" went the soldier's throat; then again, "click!" and then the half-articulate:

"Yes, sir."

The young soldier was gone, looking old, and walking heavily.

The officer, left alone, held himself rigid, to prevent himself from thinking. His instinct warned him that he must not think. Deep inside him was the intense gratification of his passion, still working powerfully. Then there was a counter-action, a horrible breaking down of something inside him, a whole agony of reaction. He stood there for an hour motionless, a chaos of sensations, but rigid with a will to keep blank his consciousness, to prevent his mind grasping. And he held himself so until the worst of the stress had passed, when he began to drink, drank himself to an intoxication, till he slept obliterated. When he woke in the morning he was shaken to the base of his nature. But he had fought off the realization of what he had done. He had prevented his mind from taking it in, had suppressed it along with his instincts, and the conscious man had nothing to do with it. He felt only as after a bout of intoxication, weak, but the affair itself all dim and not to be recovered. Of the drunkenness of his passion he successfully refused remembrance. And when his orderly appeared with coffee, the officer assumed the same self he had had the morning before. He refused the event of the past night—denied it had ever been—and was successful in his denial. He had not done any such thing—not he himself. Whatever there might be lay at the door of a stupid, insubordinate servant.

The orderly had gone about in a stupor all the evening. He drank some beer because he was parched, but not much, the alcohol made his feeling come back, and he could not bear it. He was dulled, as if nine-tenths of the ordinary man in him were inert. He crawled about

disfigured. Still, when he thought of the kicks, he went sick, and when he thought of the threat of more kicking, in the room afterwards, his heart went hot and faint, and he panted, remembering the one that had come. He had been forced to say, "For my girl." He was much too done even to want to cry. His mouth hung slightly open, like an idiot's. He felt vacant, and wasted. So, he wandered at his work, painfully, and very slowly and clumsily, fumbling blindly with the brushes, and finding it difficult, when he sat down, to summon the energy to move again. His limbs, his jaw, were slack and nerveless. But he was very tired. He got to bed at last, and slept inert, relaxed, in a sleep that was rather stupor than slumber, a dead night of stupefaction shot through with gleams of anguish.

In the morning were the manœuvres. But he woke even before the bugle sounded. The painful ache in his chest, the dryness of his throat, the awful steady feeling of misery made his eyes come awake and dreary at once. He knew, without thinking, what had happened. And he knew that the day had come again, when he must go on with his round. The last bit of darkness was being pushed out of the room. He would have to move his inert body and go on. He was so young, and had known so little trouble, that he was bewildered. He only wished it would stay night, so that he could lie still, covered up by the darkness. And yet nothing would prevent the day from coming, nothing would save him from having to get up and saddle the Captain's horse, and make the Captain's coffee. It was there, inevitable. And then, he thought, it was impossible. Yet they would not leave him free. He must go and take the coffee to the Captain. He was too stunned to understand it. He only knew it was inevitable—inevitable however long he lay inert.

At last, after heaving at himself, for he seemed to be a mass of inertia, he got up. But he had to force every one of his movements from behind, with his will. He felt lost, and dazed, and helpless. Then he clutched hold of the bed, the pain was so keen. And looking at his thighs, he saw the darker bruises on his swarthy flesh and he knew that, if he pressed one of his fingers on one of the bruises, he should faint. But he did not want to faint—he did not want anybody to know. No one should ever know. It was between him and the Captain. There were only the two people in the world now—himself and the Captain.

Slowly, economically, he got dressed and forced himself to walk. Everything was obscure, except just what he had his hands on. But he managed to get through his work. The very pain revived his dull senses. The worst remained yet. He took the tray and went up to the Captain's room. The officer, pale and heavy, sat at the table. The orderly, as he saluted, felt himself put out of existence. He stood still for a moment submitting to his own nullification, then he gathered himself, seemed to regain himself, and then the Captain began to grow vague, unreal, and the younger soldier's heart beat up. He clung to this situation—that the Captain did not exist—so that he himself might live. But when he saw his officer's hand tremble as he took the coffee, he felt everything falling shattered. And he went away, feeling as if he himself were coming to pieces, disintegrated. And when the Captain was there on horseback, giving orders, while he himself stood, with rifle and knapsack, sick with pain, he felt as if he must shut his eyes—as if he must shut his eyes on everything. It was only the long agony of marching with a parched throat that filled him with one single, sleep-heavy intention: to save himself.

## II

He was getting used even to his parched throat. That the snowy peaks were radiant among the sky, that the whity-green glacier-river twisted through its pale shoals, in the valley below, seemed almost supernatural. But he was going mad with fever and thirst. He plodded on

uncomplaining. He did not want to speak, not to anybody. There were two gulls, like flakes of water and snow, over the river. The scent of green rye soaked in sunshine came like a sickness. And the march continued, monotonously, almost like a bad sleep.

At the next farm-house, which stood low and broad near the high road, tubs of water had been put out. The soldiers clustered round to drink. They took off their helmets, and the steam mounted from their wet hair. The Captain sat on horseback, watching. He needed to see his orderly. His hel-met threw a dark shadow over his light, fierce eyes, but his moustache and mouth and chin were distinct in the sunshine. The orderly must move under the presence of the figure of the horseman. It was not that he was afraid, or cowed. It was as if he was disembowelled, made empty, like an empty shell. He felt himself as nothing, a shadow creeping under the sunshine. And, thirsty as he was, he could scarcely drink, feeling the Captain near him. He would not take off his helmet to wipe his wet hair. He wanted to stay in shadow, not to be forced into consciousness. Starting, he saw the light heel of the officer prick the belly of the horse; the Captain cantered away, and he himself could relapse into vacancy.

Nothing, however, could give him back his living place in the hot, bright morning. He felt like a gap among it all. Whereas the Captain was prouder, overriding. A hot flash went through the young servant's body. The Captain was firmer and prouder with life, he himself was empty as a shadow. Again the flash went through him, dazing him out. But his heart ran a little firmer.

The company turned up the hill, to make a loop for the return. Below, from among the trees, the farm-bell clanged. He saw the labourers, mowing barefoot at the thick grass, leave off their work and go downhill, their scythes hanging over their shoulders, like long, bright claws curving down behind them. They seemed like dream-people, as if they had no relation to himself. He felt as in a blackish dream: as if all the other things were there and had form, but he himself was only a consciousness, a gap that could think and perceive.

The soldiers were tramping silently up the glaring hillside. Gradually his head began to revolve, slowly, rhythmically. Sometimes it was dark before his eyes, as if he saw this world through a smoked glass, frail shadows and unreal. It gave him a pain in his head to walk.

The air was too scented, it gave no breath. All the lush green-stuff seemed to be issuing its sap, till the air was deathly, sickly with the smell of greenness. There was the perfume of clover, like pure honey and bees. Then there grew a faint acrid tang—they were near the beeches; and then a queer clattering noise, and a suffocating, hideous smell; they were passing a flock of sheep, a shepherd in a black smock, holding his crook. Why should the sheep huddle together under this fierce sun. He felt that the shepherd would not see him, though he could see the shepherd.

At last there was the halt. They stacked rifles in a conical stack, put down their kit in a scattered circle around it, and dispersed a little, sitting on a small knoll high on the hillside. The chatter began. The soldiers were steaming with heat, but were lively. He sat still, seeing the blue mountains rising upon the land, twenty kilometres away. There was a blue fold in the ranges, then out of that, at the foot, the broad, pale bed of the river, stretches of whitish-green water between pinkish-grey shoals among the dark pine woods. There it was, spread out a long way off. And it seemed to come downhill, the river. There was a raft being steered, a mile away. It was a strange country. Nearer, a red-roofed, broad farm with white base and square dots of windows crouched beside the wall of beech foliage on the wood's edge. There were long strips of rye and clover and pale green corn. And just at his feet, below the knoll, was a darkish bog, where globe flowers stood breathless still on their slim stalks. And some

of the pale gold bubbles were burst, and a broken fragment hung in the air. He thought he was going to sleep.

Suddenly something moved into this coloured mirage before his eyes. The Captain, a small, light-blue and scarlet figure, was trotting evenly between the strips of corn, along the level brow of the hill. And the man making flag-signals was coming on. Proud and sure moved the horseman's figure, the quick, bright thing, in which was concentrated all the light of this morning, which for the rest lay a fragile, shining shadow. Submissive, apathetic, the young soldier sat and stared. But as the horse slowed to a walk, coming up the last steep path, the great flash flared over the body and soul of the orderly. He sat waiting. The back of his head felt as if it were weighted with a heavy piece of fire. He did not want to eat. His hands trembled slightly as he moved them. Meanwhile the officer on horseback was approaching slowly and proudly. The tension grew in the orderly's soul. Then again, seeing the Captain ease himself on the saddle, the flash blazed through him.

The Captain looked at the patch of light blue and scarlet, and dark head's, scattered closely on the hillside. It pleased him. The command pleased him. And he was feeling proud. His orderly was among them in common subjection. The officer rose a little on his stirrups to look. The young soldier sat with averted, dumb face. The Captain relaxed on his seat. His slim-legged, beautiful horse, brown as a beech nut, walked proudly uphill. The Captain passed into the zone of the company's atmosphere: a hot smell of men, of sweat, of leather. He knew it very well. After a word with the lieutenant, he went a few paces higher, and sat there, a dominant figure, his sweat-marked horse swishing its tail, while he looked down on his men, on his orderly, a nonentity among the crowd.

The young soldier's heart was like fire in his chest, and he breathed with difficulty. The officer, looking downhill, saw three of the young soldiers, two pails of water between them, staggering across a sunny green field. A table had been set up under a tree, and there the slim lieutenant stood, importantly busy. Then the Captain summoned himself to an act of courage. He called his orderly.

The name leapt into the young soldier's throat as he heard the command, and he rose blindly stifled. He saluted, standing below the officer. He did not look up. But there was the flicker in the Captain's voice.

"Go to the inn and fetch me..." the officer gave his commands. "Quick!" he added.

At the last word, the heart of the servant leapt with a flash, and he felt the strength come over his body. But he turned in mechanical obedience, and set on at a heavy run downhill, looking almost like a bear, his trousers bagging over his military boots. And the officer watched this blind, plunging run all the way.

But it was only the outside of the orderly's body that was obeying so humbly and mechanically. Inside had gradually accumulated a core into which all the energy of that young life was compact and concentrated. He executed his commission, and plodded quickly back uphill. There was a pain in his head, as he walked, that made him twist his features unknowingly. But hard there in the centre of his chest was himself, himself, firm, and not to be plucked to pieces.

The captain had gone up into the wood. The orderly plodded through the hot, powerfully smelling zone of the company's atmosphere. He had a curious mass of energy inside him now. The Captain was less real than himself. He approached the green entrance to the wood. There, in the half-shade, he saw the horse standing, the sunshine and the tuckering shadow of leaves dancing over his brown body. There was a clearing where timber had lately been

felled. Here, in the gold-green shade beside the brilliant cup of sunshine, stood two figures, blue and pink, the bits of pink showing out plainly. The Captain was talking to his lieutenant.

The orderly stood on the edge of the bright clearing, where great trunks of trees, stripped and glistening, lay stretched like naked, brown-skinned bodies. Chips of wood littered the trampled floor, like splashed light, and the bases of the felled trees stood here and there, with their raw, level tops. Beyond was the brilliant, sunlit green of a beech.

"Then I will ride forward," the orderly heard his Captain say. The lieutenant saluted and strode away. He himself went forward. A hot flash passed through his belly, as he tramped towards his officer.

The Captain watched the rather heavy figure of the young soldier stumble forward, and his veins, too, ran hot. This was to be man to man between them. He yielded before the solid, stumbling figure with bent head. The orderly stooped and put the food on a level-sawn tree-base. The Captain watched the glistening, sun-inflamed, naked hands. He wanted to speak to the young soldier, but could not. The servant propped a bottle against his thigh, pressed open the cork, and poured out the beer into the mug. He kept his head bent. The Captain accepted the mug.

"Hot!" he said, as if amiably.

The flame sprang out of the orderly's heart, nearly suffocating him.

"Yes, sir," he replied, between shut teeth.

And he heard the sound of the Captain's drinking, and he clenched his fists, such a strong torment came into his wrists. Then came the faint clang of the closing of the pot-lid. He looked up. The Captain was watching him. He glanced swiftly away. Then he saw the officer stoop and take a piece of bread from the tree-base. Again the flash of flame went through the young soldier, seeing the stiff body stoop beneath him, and his hands jerked. He looked away. He could feel the officer was nervous. The bread fell as it was being broken. The officer ate the other piece. The two men stood tense and still, the master laboriously chewing his bread, the servant staring with averted face, his fist clenched.

Then the young soldier started. The officer had pressed open the lid of the mug again. The orderly watched the lid of the mug, and the white hand that clenched the handle, as if he were fascinated. It was raised. The youth followed it with his eyes. And then he saw the thin, strong throat of the elder man moving up and down as he drank, the strong jaw working. And the instinct which had been jerking at the young man's wrists suddenly jerked free. He jumped, feeling as if it were rent in two by a strong flame.

The spur of the officer caught in a tree-root, he went down backwards with a crash, the middle of his back thudding sickeningly against a sharp-edged tree-base, the pot flying away. And in a second the orderly, with serious, earnest young face, and under-lip between his teeth, had got his knee in the officer's chest and was pressing the chin backward over the farther edge of the tree-stump, pressing, with all his heart behind in a passion of relief, the tension of his wrists exquisite with relief. And with the base of his palms he shoved at the chin, with all his might. And it was pleasant, too, to have that chin, that hard jaw already slightly rough with beard, in his hands. He did not relax one hair's breadth, but, all the force of all his blood exulting in his thrust, he shoved back the head of the other man, till there was a little cluck and a crunching sensation. Then he felt as if his head went to vapour. Heavy convulsions shook the body of the officer, frightening and horrifying the young soldier. Yet it pleased him, too, to repress them. It pleased him to keep his hands pressing back the chin, to feel the chest of the other man yield in expiration to the weight of his strong, young knees,

to feel the hard twitchings of the prostrate body jerking his own whole frame, which was pressed down on it.

But it went still. He could look into the nostrils of the other man, the eyes he could scarcely see. How curiously the mouth was pushed out, exaggerating the full lips, and the moustache bristling up from them. Then, with a start, he noticed the nostrils gradually filled with blood. The red brimmed, hesitated, ran over, and went in a thin trickle down the face to the eyes.

It shocked and distressed him. Slowly, he got up. The body twitched and sprawled there, inert. He stood and looked at it in silence. It was a pity it was broken. It represented more than the thing which had kicked and bullied him. He was afraid to look at the eyes. They were hideous now, only the whites showing, and the blood running to them. The face of the orderly was drawn with horror at the sight. Well, it was so. In his heart he was satisfied. He had hated the face of the Captain. It was extinguished now. There was a heavy relief in the orderly's soul. That was as it should be. But he could not bear to see the long, military body lying broken over the tree-base, the fine fingers crisped. He wanted to hide it away.

Quickly, busily, he gathered it up and pushed it under the felled tree-trunks, which rested their beautiful, smooth length either end on logs. The face was horrible with blood. He covered it with the helmet. Then he pushed the limbs straight and decent, and brushed the dead leaves off the fine cloth of the uniform. So, it lay quite still in the shadow under there. A little strip of sunshine ran along the breast, from a chink between the logs. The orderly sat by it for a few moments. Here his own life also ended.

Then, through his daze, he heard the lieutenant, in a loud voice, explaining to the men outside the wood, that they were to suppose the bridge on the river below was held by the enemy. Now they were to march to the attack in such and such a manner. The lieutenant had no gift of expression. The orderly, listening from habit, got muddled. And when the lieutenant began it all again he ceased to hear. He knew he must go. He stood up. It surprised him that the leaves were glittering in the sun, and the chips of wood reflecting white from the ground. For him a change had come over the world. But for the rest it had not—all seemed the same. Only he had left it. And he could not go back, It was his duty to return with the beer-pot and the bottle. He could not. He had left all that. The lieutenant was still hoarsely explaining. He must go, or they would, overtake him. And he could not bear contact with anyone now.

He drew his fingers over his eyes, trying to find out where he was. Then he turned away. He saw the horse standing in the path. He went up to it and mounted. It hurt him to sit in the saddle. The pain of keeping his seat occupied him as they cantered through the wood. He would not have minded anything, but he could not get away from the sense of being divided from the others. The path led out of the trees. On the edge of the wood he pulled up and stood watching. There in the spacious sunshine of the valley soldiers were moving in a little swarm. Every now and then, a man harrowing on a strip of fallow shouted to his oxen, at the turn. The village and the white-towered church was small in the sunshine. And he no longer belonged to it—he sat there, beyond, like a man outside in the dark. He had gone out from everyday life into the unknown, and he could not, he even did not want to go back.

Turning from the sun-blazing valley, he rode deep into the wood. Tree-trunks, like people standing grey and still, took no notice as he went. A doe, herself a moving bit of sunshine and shadow, went running through the flecked shade. There were bright green rents in the foliage. Then it was all pine wood, dark and cool. And he was sick with pain, he had an intolerable great pulse in his head, and he was sick. He had never been ill in his life, he felt lost, quite dazed with all this.

Trying to get down from the horse, he fell, astonished at the pain and his lack of balance. The horse shifted uneasily. He jerked its bridle and sent it cantering jerkily away. It was his last connection with the rest of things.

But he only wanted to lie down and not be disturbed. Stumbling through the trees, he came on a quiet place where beeches and pine trees grew on a slope. Immediately he had lain down and closed his eyes, his consciousness went racing on without him. A big pulse of sickness beat in him as if it throbbed through the whole earth. He was burning with dry heat. But he was too busy, too tearingly active in the incoherent race of delirium to observe.

### III

He came to with a start. His mouth was dry and hard, his heart beat heavily, but he had not the energy to get up. His heart beat heavily. Where was he?—the barracks—at home? There was something knocking. And, making an effort, he looked round—trees, and litter of greenery, and reddish, night, still pieces of sunshine on the floor. He did not believe he was himself, he did not believe what he saw. Something was knocking. He made a struggle towards consciousness, but relapsed. Then he struggled again. And gradually his surroundings fell into relationship with himself. He knew, and a great pang of fear went through his heart. Somebody was knocking. He could see the heavy, black rags of a fir tree overhead. Then everything went black. Yet he did not believe he had closed his eyes. He had not. Out of the blackness sight slowly emerged again. And someone was knocking. Quickly, he saw the blood-disfigured face of his Captain, which he hated. And he held himself still with horror. Yet, deep inside him, he knew that it was so, the Captain should be dead. But the physical delirium got hold of him. Someone was knocking. He lay perfectly still, as if dead, with fear. And he went unconscious.

When he opened his eyes again, he started, seeing something creeping swiftly up a tree-trunk. It was a little bird. And the bird was whistling overhead. Tap-tap-tap—it was the small, quick bird rapping the tree-trunk with its beak, as if its head were a little round hammer. He watched it curiously. It shifted sharply, in its creeping fashion. Then, like a mouse, it slid down the bare trunk. Its swift creeping sent a flash of revulsion through him. He raised his head. It felt a great weight. Then, the little bird ran out of the shadow across a still patch of sunshine, its little head bobbing swiftly, its white legs twinkling brightly for a moment. How neat it was in its build, so compact, with pieces of white on its wings. There were several of them. They were so pretty—but they crept like swift, erratic mice, running here and there among the beech-mast.

He lay down again exhausted, and his consciousness lapsed. He had a horror of the little creeping birds. All his blood seemed to be darting and creeping in his head. And yet he could not move.

He came to with a further ache of exhaustion. There was the pain in his head, and the horrible sickness, and his inability to move. He had never been ill in his life. He did not know where he was or what he was. Probably he had got sunstroke. Or what else?—he had silenced the Captain for ever—some time ago—oh, a long time ago. There had been blood on his face, and his eyes had turned upwards. It was all right, somehow. It was peace. But now he had got beyond himself. He had never been here before. Was it life, or not life? He was by himself. They were in a big, bright place, those others, and he was outside. The town, all the country, a big bright place of light: and he was outside, here, in the darkened open beyond, where each thing existed alone. But they would all have to come out there sometime, those others. Little,

and left behind him, they all were. There had been father and mother and sweetheart. What did they all matter? This was the open land.

He sat up. Something scurried. It was a little, brown squirrel running in lovely, undulating bounds over the floor, its red tail completing the undulation of its body—and then, as it sat up, furling and unfurling. He watched it, pleased. It ran on friskily, enjoying itself. It flew wildly at another squirrel, and they were chasing each other, and making little scolding, chattering noises. The soldier wanted to speak to them. But only a hoarse sound came out of his throat. The squirrels burst away—they flew up the trees. And then he saw the one peeping round at him, half-way up a tree-trunk. A start of fear went through him, though, in so far as he was conscious, he was amused. It still stayed, its little, keen face staring at him halfway up the tree-trunk, its little ears pricked up, its clawey little hands clinging to the bark, its white breast reared. He started from it in panic.

Struggling to his feet, he lurched away. He went on walking, walking, looking for something for a drink. His brain felt hot and inflamed for want of water. He stumbled on. Then he did not know anything. He went unconscious as he walked. Yet he stumbled on, his mouth open.

When, to his dumb wonder, he opened his eyes on the world again, he no longer tried to remember what it was. There was thick, golden light behind golden-green glitterings, and tall, grey-purple shafts, and darknesses further off, surrounding him, growing deeper. He was conscious of a sense of arrival. He was amid the reality, on the real, dark bottom. But there was the thirst burning in his brain. He felt lighter, not so heavy. He supposed it was newness.

The air was muttering with thunder. He thought he was walking wonderfully swiftly and was coming straight to relief—or was it to water?

Suddenly he stood still with fear. There was a tremendous flare of gold, immense—just a few dark trunks like bars between him and it. All the young level wheat was burnished gold glaring on its silky green. A woman, full-skirted, a black cloth on her head for head-dress, was passing like a block of shadow through the glistening, green corn, into the full glare. There was a farm, too, pale blue in shadow, and the timber black. And there was a church spire, nearly fused away in the gold. The woman moved on, away from him. He had no language with which to speak to her. She was the bright, solid unreality. She would make a noise of words that would confuse him, and her eyes would look at him without seeing him. She was crossing there to the other side. He stood against a tree.

When at last he turned, looking down the long, bare grove whose flat bed was already filling dark, he saw the mountains in a wonder-light, not far away, and radiant. Behind the soft, grey ridge of the nearest range the further mountains stood golden and pale grey, the snow all radiant like pure, soft gold. So still, gleaming in the sky, fashioned pure out of the ore of the sky, they shone in their silence. He stood and looked at them, his face illuminated. And like the golden, lustrous gleaming of the snow he felt his own thirst bright in him. He stood and gazed, leaning against a tree. And then everything slid away into space.

During the night the lightning fluttered perpetually, making the whole sky white. He must have walked again. The world hung livid round him for moments, fields a level sheen of grey-green light, trees in dark bulk, and the range of clouds black across a white sky. Then the darkness fell like a shutter, and the night was whole. A faint mutter of a half-revealed world, that could not quite leap out of the darkness!—Then there again stood a sweep of pallor for the land, dark shapes looming, a range of clouds hanging overhead. The world was a ghostly

shadow, thrown for a moment upon the pure darkness, which returned ever whole and complete.

And the mere delirium of sickness and fever went on inside him—his brain opening and shutting like the night—then sometimes convulsions of terror from something with great eyes that stared round a tree—then the long agony of the march, and the sun decomposing his blood—then the pang of hate for the Captain, followed, by a pang of tenderness and ease. But everything was distorted, born of an ache and resolving into an ache.

In the morning he came definitely awake. Then his brain flamed with the sole horror of thirstiness! The sun was on his face, the dew was steaming from his wet clothes. Like one possessed, he got up. There, straight in front of him, blue and cool and tender, the mountains ranged across the pale edge of the morning sky. He wanted them—he wanted them alone—he wanted to leave himself and be identified with them. They did not move, they were still and soft, with white, gentle markings of snow. He stood still, mad with suffering, his hands crisping and clutching. Then he was twisting in a paroxysm on the grass.

He lay still, in a kind of dream of anguish. His thirst seemed to have separated itself from him, and to stand apart, a single demand. Then the pain he felt was another single self. Then there was the clog of his body, another separate thing. He was divided among all kinds of separate beings. There was some strange, agonized connection between them, but they were drawing further apart. Then they would all split. The sun, drilling down on him, was drilling through the bond. Then they would all fall, fall through the everlasting lapse of space. Then again, his consciousness reasserted itself. He roused on to his elbow and stared at the gleaming mountains. There they ranked, all still and wonderful between earth and heaven. He stared till his eyes went black, and the mountains, as they stood in their beauty, so clean and cool, seemed to have it, that which was lost in him.

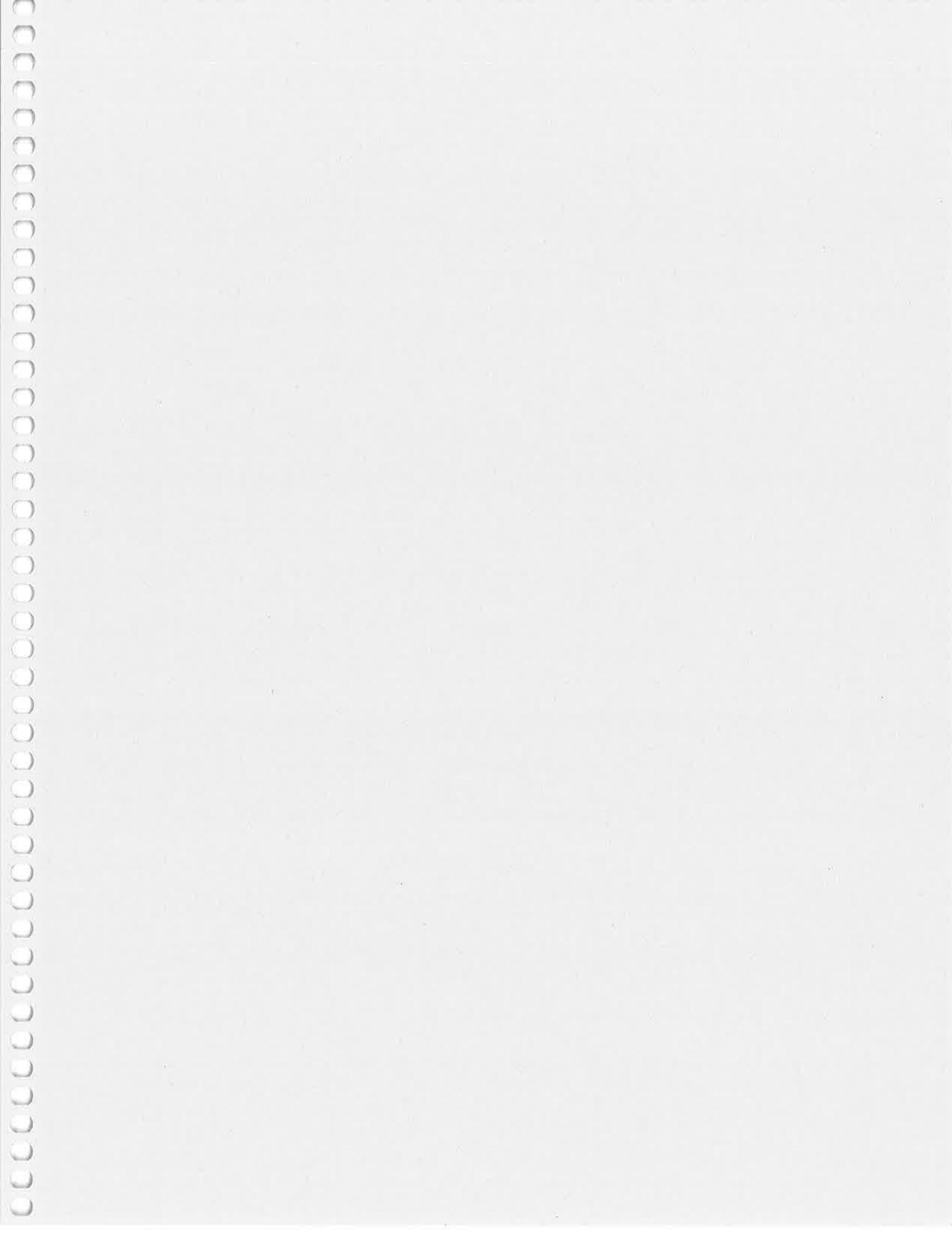
#### IV

When the soldiers found him, three hours later, he was lying with his face over his arm, his black hair giving off heat under the sun. But he was still alive. Seeing the open, black mouth the young soldiers dropped him in horror.

He died in the hospital at night, without having seen again.

The doctors saw the bruises on his legs, behind, and were silent.

The bodies of the two men lay together, side by side, in the mortuary, the one white and slender, but laid rigidly at rest, the other looking as if every moment it must rouse into life again, so young and unused, from a slumber.





## Gold Boy, Emerald Girl

*Yiyun Li from Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*



HE WAS RAISED by his mother alone, as she was by her father. She wondered if his mother, who had set up their date, had told him about that.

Siyu was thirty-eight, and the man, Hanfeng, was forty-four. Siyu's father, after supporting her through college, had remarried, choosing a woman thirty years his junior. The woman had a young son from her previous marriage, whom Siyu's father had taken on as his responsibility. The boy was now in his last year of high school, and Siyu, having told her father many times that he deserved peace and simplicity, maintained a respectful distance from his new family. Each year she spent New Year's Eve, and sometimes other holidays, with Hanfeng's mother, who had been her zoology professor in college. There was no way to predict when the older woman would be in the mood to invite Siyu, so she tried to keep herself uncommitted, which meant that most of the holidays she spent alone.

"Professor Dai must miss her students these days," Siyu said after she and Hanfeng had exchanged greetings, although she knew it was not the students that his mother missed but the white skulls of mammals and birds on her office shelves, the drawers filled with scalpels and clamps and tweezers that she had cleaned

and maintained with care, and the fact that she could mask her indifference to the human species with her devotion to animals. The first time Siyu had seen Professor Dai, on a campus tour during the opening week of college, the older woman had been following a strutting owl down a dimly lit hallway; she paid little attention to the group of new students, and stooped slightly the whole time, as if she were the mother of a toddler and had to watch out for minor accidents. When a boy stepped over to take a closer look at the owl, she scooped up the bird and glared at him before striding away.

"Retirement is a strange thing for her," Hanfeng said. His mother had always despised women who grabbed every opportunity to matchmaking, but within days of his return to China she had mentioned a former student she thought he should meet. His mother did not say much else, but he could sense that it was marriage she was thinking about. Twenty years of living away from her had not changed that in him: He always knew what was on her mind before she said it, and he wondered if she was ever aware of that.

The teahouse where Hanfeng and Siyu were meeting, at a hillside pavilion in the Summer Palace, had been chosen by his mother, and she had suggested that they also take a long stroll along the lakefront. It was early March. The day turned out overcast and windy, and secretly Hanfeng hoped that the wind would not die down, so they could forgo the romantic walk. He wondered if Siyu was wishing for a different scenario. He could not yet read much from her face. She smiled courteously as she gave him a few facts about White Peony, the tea she had ordered for them both, but the smile and the words seemed to come with effort, as if her interest in interacting with him could easily fade. Her body was slender, and her hair, black with noticeable strands

of gray, was kept straight and at shoulder length. He wondered why the woman, who was beautiful in an unassuming way, had never married.

"Do you find Beijing a different city now?" Siyu said. It must be a question that he was asked all the time, but it would not do anyone any harm, she thought. It was not the first time that Siyu had been set up with a stranger—since she had turned twenty, neighbors and acquaintances, pitying her for not having a mother to fuss over her future, had taken it as their responsibility to find a husband for her—but with those men she had known from the beginning that she would not bother trying to impress them. Over the years, she had developed a reputation as unmatchable, and nowadays only the most persistent of the matchmakers would mention a widower or a divorcé, in his fifties or sometimes sixties, as a possible solution. The first time such a prospect was presented in an enthusiastic speech, Siyu had the odd feeling that she was now expected to marry her father; only later did she realize that she was no longer a young woman.

Siyu worked as a librarian in a zoology institute, and her life had not changed much from that of a college student. In her mind, she might still be the eighteen-year-old who had set her alarm clock early so that by six o'clock she would be sitting on the bench under an ancient ginkgo tree in front of the biology building. At half past six, Professor Dai would arrive on her bicycle—a tall, rusty, heavy-built one that would have better suited a peasant or a street peddler—and she would nod at Siyu almost imperceptibly as she locked it up. It had taken two years for Professor Dai to cross the courtyard and ask Siyu about the thick volume she had been reading every day. Charles Dickens, Siyu replied, and then added that she was trying to memorize *Great Expectations*. Professor Dai nodded, expressing neither surprise

nor curiosity at the task that had already made Siyu an eccentric in the eyes of her classmates. Siyu did not explain to them that her grandfather—her mother's father, whom she had never met—had once memorized volumes of Dickens on the small balcony of a Shanghai flat, a feat that had eventually led him, before the liberation, to a high position in a bank run by Englishmen. It was Dickens who had in the end killed Siyu's mother: As a daughter of the British capitalists' loyal lapdog, she had hanged herself when her own daughter was four months of age, barely old enough to be weaned.

Hanfeng looked at Siyu's face, detecting a familiar absent-mindedness. His mother, too, asked him questions to which she seemed scarcely interested in knowing the answers. He wondered if this happened to women who lived by themselves. "Too many cars," he replied, nonetheless—the standard response he gave when asked about his impression of Beijing these days. "I miss the bicycles."

Hanfeng had returned from the States a month earlier. He had told his former colleagues in San Francisco about his intention to settle down in China, and they had joked about moving with him and becoming the forty-niners of the new gold rush. He went along with the joke, making up ambitious business plans that he knew he would not carry out. His mother was getting old, he explained to his friends; the thought that he, too, was no longer a young man in need of adventures he kept to himself. Semiretired was how he liked to think of his situation, but within days of returning to Beijing he realized that what he had made in the States at the tail end of the dot-com bubble would not be sufficient to support a life of idleness, as he had hoped. Still, he was not eager to go out and seek employment. He deposited half his money into his mother's account and told her that he would take a break; she

did not ask about his plans, in the same way that she had not questioned his decision to leave or to come home.

At seventy-one, his mother was as independent as ever, and she loathed most activities that a woman her age enjoyed: taking morning walks with a companion, gossiping and bargaining at the marketplace, watching soap operas in the afternoon. Hanfeng had never wondered how his mother spent her days in retirement until his return, when, all of a sudden, the three-bedroom flat that must have seemed empty to her became crowded. He had been the one to cook for the two of them when he was a boy, dividing the meals in half and eating his portion alone; his mother, her preoccupation with her research a ready excuse, had eaten at odd hours then. Since his return, he had taken over the cooking again, and now that neither of them was eager to go out into the world to fulfill any duty, they ate together.

The idea of renting a flat had occurred to Hanfeng, but as soon as the thought formed he dismissed it as a waste: He had left for America right after college, a move intended to claim a place for himself—a whole continent, in the end, as in twenty years he had drifted from New York to Montreal, then Vancouver, and later San Francisco—and a life that had to be lived away from a mother, but with the return to China he no longer felt the urgency to have his own place. Freedom is like restaurant food, he once told an old friend in the States, and one can lose one's appetite for even the best restaurants. Pure nonsense, replied his friend, who, unlike Hanfeng, had long ago settled down with a partner, a house, and two dogs, and talked of adopting a baby. Take a break, he said, urging Hanfeng to return to California after he refreshed himself with his homemade dumplings and noodles. Hanfeng, however, could envision himself living a bachelor's life in his mother's flat, reading the same newspapers and comparing notes

on the stories that interested them both, wandering freely through the flat when she went out for her piano lessons twice a week.

The piano was the only thing that kept his mother actively engaged with the world. Soon after Hanfeng's return, she had asked him to go to a recital she was playing in, at a local music school. It was attended by men and women Hanfeng's age, who seemed nervous when their well-trained and nicely dressed children took the stage. His mother was the only one who went up without a puppetlike show. She gazed at the sheets of music for a long moment, then started to pound on the keys with a seriousness that took Hanfeng by surprise. He had thought the piano was merely a retirement pastime for his mother, and had protested mildly when she mentioned that her goal was to be good enough one day to play four-hand with him. Hanfeng had not told her that he was no longer playing, even though a rented piano had always been the first piece of furniture to fill an empty flat in each city he moved to. Small children giggled in the audience, and a few older ones smirked, pitying the old woman for her stiff arthritic fingers, which would never again be as good and agile as theirs. Some parents shook their heads at their children disapprovingly, and it occurred to Hanfeng that he was becoming a parent for his mother, that he would be the one to protect her from the hostility of the world.

The thought baffled him. His mother had always been a headstrong woman, and with her grayish-white mane and unsmiling face, she appeared as regal and intimidating as she had ever been. Still, seeing her through other people's eyes, Hanfeng realized that all that made her who she was—the decades of solitude in her widowhood, her coldness to the prying eyes of people who tried to mask their nosiness with friendliness, and her faith in the

notion of living one's own life without having to go out of one's way for other people—could be deemed pointless and laughable. Perhaps the same could be said of any living creature: a caterpillar chewing on a leaf, unaware of the beak of an approaching bird; an egret mesmerized by its reflection in a pond, as if it were the master of the universe; or Hanfeng's own folly of repeating the same pattern of hope and heartbreak, hoping despite heartbreak.

Siyu asked a few more questions, and Hanfeng replied. When there was nothing much left to say, he curled his fingers around the teacup and studied its shape, and Siyu pictured him as a young boy, spreading his slender fingers on the cold keys of a piano. His mother must have told him, when he complained about the open windows in the winter, that playing would keep the blood circulating in his hands. Siyu did not know why she imagined that; it was as unfounded as all the other things she had made up about him. In Professor Dai's flat, there were framed snapshots of Hanfeng playing in piano contests at five, eight, ten, fifteen. There were snapshots of him when he had first arrived in America, with his bright-colored T-shirt, long and flying hair, and broad smile, as picturesque and unreal as the Statue of Liberty in the background.

Siyu had been eighteen when she first saw those photographs, when she was sent as a representative from her class to deliver a New Year's present to Professor Dai. No one had wanted that job; Professor Dai's coldness was known to be hurtful, and it made sense that Siyu, with her mild eccentricity, would be the one chosen. But that day, to Siyu's surprise, Professor Dai did not simply dismiss her from the doorway, even though she immediately placed the present, a framed painting of a golden carp, next to the

wastebasket. Instead, Professor Dai invited Siyu into the flat, moved the papers that covered the dining table onto the piano bench, and let Siyu sit while she went to the kitchen to make tea. Her son was the one who played the piano, Professor Dai answered when Siyu asked, and pointed out the pictures of Hanfeng. Very vaguely, Siyu had thought that he was the kind of boy she would like to have as a boyfriend, a prize badge that she could wear to make other girls jealous. Years later, she knew it was not the thought of the boy that had made her wait on the bench outside the biology building in the mornings during college; nor was he the reason she continued to befriend Professor Dai in a manner allowed by the older woman. Occasionally, Siyu would carefully study the pictures of Hanfeng in Professor Dai's flat, and when they ran out of things to say about animals she would ask about his life in America. When Professor Dai called and asked her to meet Hanfeng, Siyu wondered if the matchmaking had come as a result of a beguiling impression she had left of her interest in a good-looking bachelor.

The waitress came to offer a fresh pot of tea. Hanfeng turned to Siyu and asked her if she was ready to leave. They had spent almost an hour talking, and he had fulfilled his mother's wish without humiliating the woman with his lack of interest. Siyu looked out the window at the willow trees, their branches waving like unruly hair in the wind. Not a great day for a walk, Hanfeng said. Siyu agreed, then asked him if he needed a ride.

"I'll take a cab home," he said.

"I'm driving past your mother's place, in any case," Siyu said. Her own flat, a small studio that she rented from a retired couple, was only minutes from Professor Dai's flat, but Siyu thought she would appear too eager if she mentioned that.

Hanfeng wished that he had made up an excuse—a lunch with a friend in another district; an exhibition or a film to see—but it was too late to correct himself now.

A WEEK LATER, Hanfeng's mother asked him if he planned to see Siyu again. They had finished their breakfast and were reading that morning's newspapers, plates and bowls scattered on the table between them. Hanfeng's mother did not raise her eyes from the page as she asked, but he knew the question was not as haphazard as it seemed. Should he? he replied.

"Do you dislike her?"

It took more than an hour over tea for him to say that he disliked a woman, Hanfeng thought, but he just shook his head slightly. He was not surprised by his mother's question. *Do you dislike piano?* she had asked, when he wanted to give up the instrument at twelve for games that he could play with boys his age; *Do you dislike engineering?*, when he thought of pursuing a literature degree in college rather than the one she had chosen for him. Before he left China, she told him that she might not have been a good mother in the worldly sense, but she considered herself successful in having given him two things: practical skills with which to earn a living, and music as the only trustworthy companion and consolation for his soul. Twenty-three, and in love with a childhood friend who was dating a chirpy girl, Hanfeng did not believe that either of his mother's gifts would in any way contribute to his happiness. America, at first glance, seemed a happy enough place, and when his friend called with the news of his engagement, Hanfeng sought out companions. All he wanted was to have some fun, he replied when more was asked of him; "have fun"—wasn't that the phrase that replaced words of farewell in many Americans' lexicon? But eventually the reply

came back to taunt him: I thought we would have some fun and that's all, his last lover had said, a Chinese boy, a new immigrant, as Hanfeng himself had once been, whom Hanfeng had helped support through college.

He should ask Siyu out to a movie, his mother suggested, or a concert. When he showed a lukewarm reaction, she said, "Or ask her to have dinner with us here."

"Wouldn't that be too quick?" Hanfeng said. Even though Siyu had been introduced to him by his mother, a dinner invitation, after meeting only once, seemed to imply an approval of sorts from both him and his mother.

"She is not a stranger," his mother replied, and proceeded to check the calendar on the kitchen wall. Saturday was a good day, she said, and when Hanfeng questioned Siyu's availability at such short notice, his concerns were dismissed. "She'll rearrange her schedule if she has to," his mother said, and wrote down the date and Siyu's number on a piece of scrap paper.

Hanfeng wondered if Siyu had felt similar pressure from his mother. What would she have said to Siyu—*I would like you to date my son?* Knowing his mother, he wondered if she had simply mentioned that her son needed a wife and that she thought Siyu would be the right person for the role. "Why has she never married?" he asked.

"I imagine for the obvious reason of not having felt the need to get married."

"Does she want to get married now?" Hanfeng said. He had expected his mother to reply that Siyu had not met the right person—and then he could have questioned why his mother thought him a good choice for her.

"She didn't say no to the date last time, no?"

When Hanfeng called Siyu to invite her to dinner, the line was

quiet for a moment. He waited for her to find an excuse to turn down the invitation, or, better still, to tell him that she had obliged his mother with their last meeting and the sensible thing to do now was to make their mutual disinterest known to his mother. Instead, Siyu asked him if they could possibly meet once more before the dinner. Anytime after she got off from work would do, she said. He wondered why she needed to see him when all could be settled on the phone, but he agreed to a late-afternoon meeting that day.

There was a power outage at the coffee shop where Siyu had suggested they meet. Apart from the light of a few candles on the counter, the inside of the shop, a long, narrow rectangle, was almost pitch-black. Siyu, who had arrived a few minutes earlier and taken a seat by the only window, explained to Hanfeng that the place was always quiet, and more so today, as the coffee-makers were not hissing. A sulky young girl placed a pot of tea and two cups heavily on the table. Siyu apologized for the shop's unfriendliness after the girl returned to the counter. "I'm about their only regular customer, but for three years no one has acknowledged me," she said.

"Why do you still come here?"

"It's quiet. I can assure you it's not easy to find a quiet place like this in Beijing," Siyu said. "My theory is that the proprietress is a rich man's mistress. She does not want the shop to make money for him, and he cannot close it, because it was his present to her."

Hanfeng looked around, but no one was there besides the girl at the counter. "They seem to hire unhappy people," he said.

"The proprietress is a beautiful woman," Siyu said. Hanfeng nodded. He had no further questions, and she could see that he was one of those people who would not return to the place. She

wished she could tell him that, apart from the beauty of the woman who once in a while showed up at the coffee shop with an air of authority, there was little evidence to support her guess. Yet there had to be an explanation for the sad, lifeless appearance of the shop. She thought of telling him this, but he was part of the world that did not seek her explanations. The world had made up its mind about her oddity in her spinsterhood.

They sat in silence for a moment. In another place, a more romantic setting, lovers' murmurs would have been well masked by soft jazz coming from hidden speakers, their faces illuminated by candlelight, but here there was no music and the candles were lit out of necessity. The idea of getting to know Hanfeng better before having dinner with him and his mother seemed, like all the other ideas that had occurred to Siyu, a regrettable mistake. When he did not help find a harmless topic of discussion, she asked him if he was aware of his mother's wish to see him get married.

"I suppose all mothers worry about their children's marriage status," Hanfeng said vaguely. He had thought that his mother had long ago accepted who he was; when he had visited in the past, she had never pressed for any details of his American life, sparing him the pain of explaining himself. "Doesn't your mother?"

She had no right to feel let down, Siyu thought. Nevertheless, it disappointed her that Professor Dai had not told him much about her. That she had been raised by her father was, from a young age, the first thing people said of her. "I never met my mother," she said. "My father brought me up by himself."

Hanfeng looked up at her. Before he could form an apology, she said there was no need for one. She had grown up not knowing her loss, so there had not been any real loss. She wondered if that was how Hanfeng thought of his father. Professor Dai had

never mentioned her late husband, but Siyu had once had a summer job in the department office, and had heard other professors and the secretaries talk about how he had died in a snowstorm when his bicycle skidded in front of a bus. An accident that no one could be blamed for, but Siyu had sensed the others' disapproval of Professor Dai, as if she were partially responsible for the unfair fate that befell the man; the dead husband, by contrast, was always praised as the gentlest person.

"What was it like to grow up with only a father?" Hanfeng asked. He had little recollection of his father, but there were photographs, taken when Hanfeng had turned a hundred days, six months, one year, and then two years old. In all four pictures, he was flanked by his parents, who looked serious and attentive. They would have been called "gold boy" and "emerald girl" at their wedding, enviable for their matching good looks. It must have been his father's idea to have a family picture taken at every milestone of his life, since after his father's death Hanfeng had never been in the same photograph as his mother.

Siyu replied that she imagined it was not very different from growing up with only a mother. There was no other parent to whom they could compare the one they had, and love did not have to be balanced and divided between two people; the claiming of loyalty was unnecessary. Siyu did not say these things, but there was a gentleness in Hanfeng's eyes where before there had been only aloofness, and she knew that he understood.

Hanfeng turned away from Siyu's gaze and looked out the window. A woman in a heavy mud-colored coat was riding a bicycle and threading through the long line of cars in the street. A young child, bundled up in a gray shawl, so that its gender could not be determined, sat on a bamboo chair affixed to the back rack of the bicycle, as unfazed as the mother was by the impatient

honking of drivers around them. Hanfeng pointed out the child to Siyu, knowing that both of them had traveled the streets of Beijing in that way, he behind his mother, she her father.

After the woman and her child had disappeared from sight, Siyu said that when she started to ride her bicycle to school at twelve, her father would get up every morning and run after her until she reached the school gate. She used to be ashamed of being the only one escorted to school by a running father, but she could never say no to him.

"He must be the most loving father in the world," Hanfeng said.

Siyu nodded. A door behind the counter opened and then closed, and for a moment it seemed that the flickering candles would be extinguished. She had had to squeeze the hand brake often on the downhill ride to the school so that her father's panting would not be so loud that other people took notice, and only when she was much older did she realize that her father had insisted on running beside her so that she would not become one of the wild youngsters who sped and broke an arm or a skull in an accident. She had always been aware of his love for her and for her mother, even though he had not said much, but in the end she had been the one to make up grand excuses for her absence. You're still my only daughter, he said to her when she decided not to attend his wedding; you're part of the family, he said when she told him that she would not be coming home for the Lunar New Year. He did not need her to complicate his life, she replied, knowing that he would stoically accept her proposal of a monthly lunch as their only way of remaining father and daughter.

Ungrateful and coldhearted she must seem in the eyes of old neighbors and family friends, but how could she stay in his sight when she was going through her life with a reckless speed known

only to herself, all because of a love she could not explain and did not have the right to claim in the first place? I wonder if I made a mistake by bringing you up alone, her father had said to her at their most recent lunch, taking it as his failure that she had not found a husband. I was afraid of what a stepmother would do to a girl, but perhaps a woman would have made a difference, he said, less guarded and more talkative now in his old age. Siyu shook her head and denied that he had anything to regret. That she had grown up without a mother could be a ready explanation for anything—her oddness in her teenage years, her choice of an unremarkable job despite her excellence in schoolwork, her singleness. Were people to know her secret, they might easily conclude that she had spent her life looking for a mother in her love of an older woman, but Siyu did not believe that things would have turned out any differently had she had a mother.

A beautiful and sad woman, Hanfeng thought as he looked at Siyu's face. As beautiful and sad a woman, perhaps, as his mother had once been. Could this account for his mother's wish for a marriage between Siyu and him? Hanfeng had been surprised, at first, that a former student would remain close to his mother. She had not been the kind to pick favorites among her students; nor had she ever encouraged any personal interaction with them, as far as he knew, though he could see why Siyu, motherless and with a gentle and loving father, might seek out a professor despite, or perhaps because of, her sternness. But Siyu seemed to know his mother only in a peripheral way, as a pupil, and Hanfeng wondered if this was why his mother had allowed the younger woman to remain a friend. When Hanfeng was ten, a woman had come from a southern province to see his mother. An unannounced visit, he could tell, when his mother had returned home in the evening and found him shelling peas alongside the

guest, their knees almost touching, on two low stools. The woman, who had told Hanfeng that she was a very old friend of his mother's and was planning to stay with them for a week, left the next morning before he awoke. He was puzzled but intuitively knew not to ask his mother about it. Still, the image of the woman's face, pale at the sight of his mother, and her hands, which let the peas fall into the pile of shells, stayed with Hanfeng. He could not pinpoint when he understood that there had been betrayals between the two friends, but by the time he left home for college he knew that he would never learn the true story, his mother having long ago decided to live alone with the secret until her death.

AT THE DINNER, both Siyu and Hanfeng felt a shyness around each other, but Professor Dai did not let the awkwardness deter her. "When you are young, you marry for passion," she said, looking first at her son and then at her future daughter-in-law. "When you're older, you marry for companionship."

Hanfeng glanced down at his plate. One day she would die, his mother had said to him the night before, after he had listened to her stumble through a Chopin piece on the piano. There was nothing to grieve about in her death, but she would like to see that he did not repeat her fate. Repeat? Hanfeng asked, pretending that he did not understand and knowing that she could see through him. She would like him to marry Siyu, his mother had said. There were many ways to maintain a marriage, and she expected theirs to be far from the worst.

The same message had been conveyed to Siyu, when Hanfeng was sent to buy a bottle of wine for dinner. She was helping Professor Dai lay the table, and when she looked over, the older woman paired the chopsticks without meeting her eyes. Siyu had

never mentioned the strangers she had been matched up with over the years, but one New Year's Eve, Professor Dai had told Siyu that she shouldn't get married if it was not what she wanted. They had just finished dinner, and sitting across the table from Professor Dai, Siyu could see the prints of bamboo leaves on the curtain lit up by the fireworks outside. Professor Dai had opened a bottle of wine that year, an unusual addition to the holiday meal, as neither of them was the type to celebrate. You could feel trapped by the wrong man, Professor Dai said. Her voice, softened by the wine, was less steely and almost inaudible beneath the booming of the fireworks. You would have to wish for his death every day of your marriage, she said, but once the wish was granted by a miracle, you would never be free of your own cruelty. Siyu listened, knowing that the older woman was talking about herself, knowing also that both of them would pretend to have forgotten the conversation after that night. Other conversations, on other New Year's Eves, were never mentioned again. One year, Siyu told Professor Dai about her mother's suicide; another year, Professor Dai mentioned that her son had no interest in marriage. Professor Dai's acknowledgment of Siyu's decision to purchase a secondhand car so that the older woman could avoid taking a crowded bus or enduring a chatty cabdriver was hinted at but not directly stated, and so was her gratitude for Siyu's alertness, when she failed to answer Siyu's weekly phone call and Siyu discovered the older woman on the floor by the piano, having suffered a stroke.

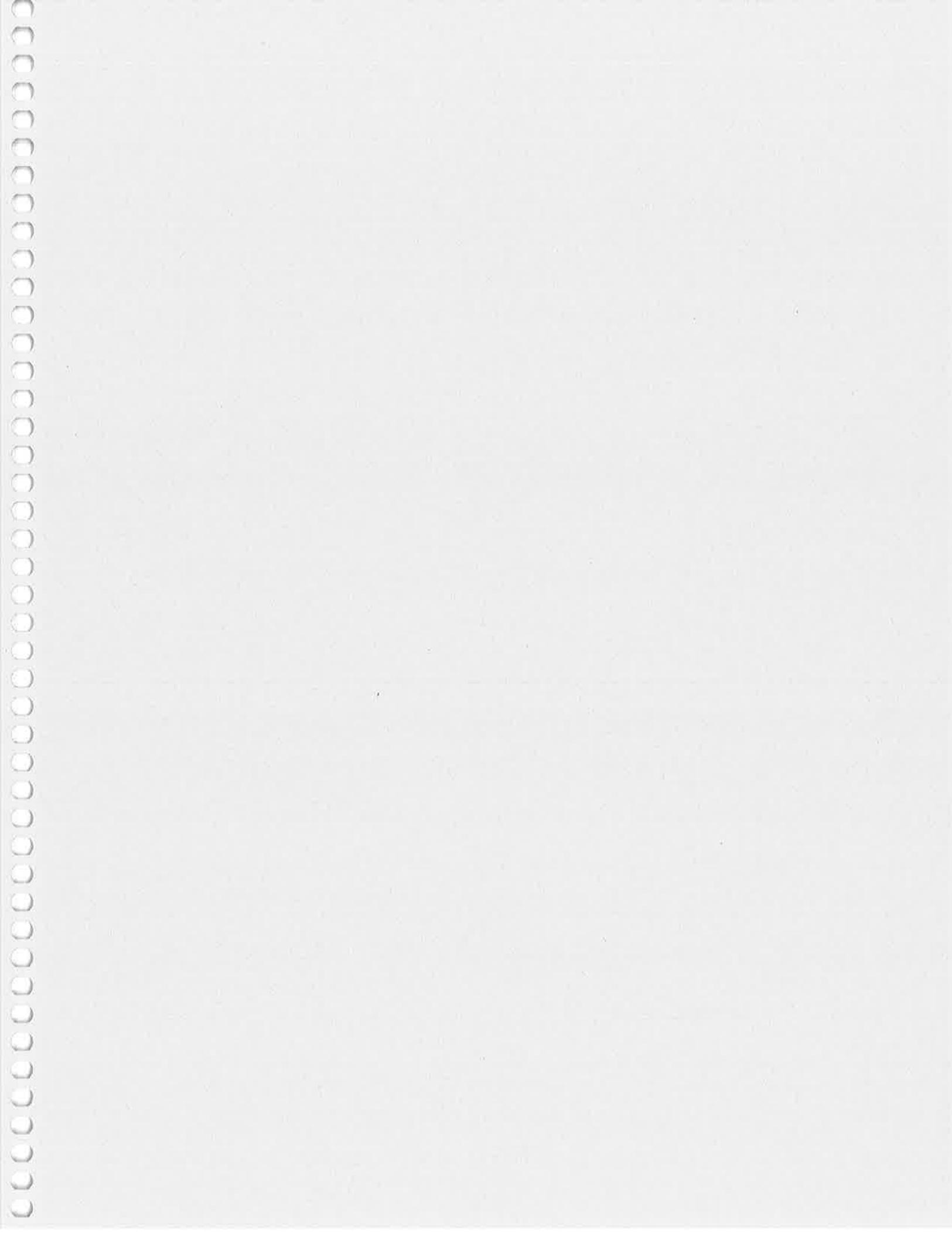
She had remained unmarried for Professor Dai, Siyu thought now, and she would, with her blessing, become a married woman. She would not wish for her husband's death, as his mother had, because the marriage, arranged as it was, would still be a love marriage. Siyu had wished to be a companion for Professor Dai in

her old age, and her wish would now be granted, an unexpected gift from a stingy life.

"So this is an engagement dinner, then?" Hanfeng said, feeling that it was his duty to say something to avoid silence among the three of them. He doubted that he would feel any deficiency in his life without a wife, he had said the night before, and his mother had replied that Siyu was not the kind of woman who would take much away from him.

"We don't need any formality among us," Professor Dai said now, and told Siyu that she should move in at her earliest convenience instead of wasting money on rent. Siyu looked down the hallway, knowing that the room which served as a piano studio for Professor Dai would be converted into the third bedroom, the piano relocated to the living room. She could see herself standing by the window and listening to Hanfeng and Professor Dai play four-hand, and she could see the day when she would replace Professor Dai on the piano bench, her husband patient with her inexperienced fingers. They were half orphans, and beyond that there was the love for his mother that they could share with no one else, he as a son who had once left but had now returned, she who had not left and would never leave. They were lonely and sad people, all three of them, and they would not make one another less sad, but they could, with great care, make a world that would accommodate their loneliness.









## CARNATION (1918)

By Katherine Mansfield

On those hot days Eve—curious Eve— always carried a flower. She snuffed it and snuffed it, twirled it in her fingers, laid it against her cheek, held it to her lips, tickled Katie's neck with it, and ended, finally, by pulling it to pieces and eating it, petal by petal.

"Roses are delicious, my dear Katie," she would say, standing in the dim cloak room, with a strange decoration of flowery hats on the hat pegs behind her—"but carnations are simply divine! They taste like—like—ah well!" And away her little thin laugh flew, fluttering among those huge, strange flower heads on the wall behind her. (But how cruel her little thin laugh was! It had a long sharp beak and claws and two bead eyes, thought fanciful Katie.)

To-day it was a carnation. She brought a carnation to the French class, a deep, deep red one, that looked as though it had been dipped in wine and left in the dark to dry. She held it on the desk before her, half shut her eyes and smiled.

"Isn't it a darling?" said she. But—

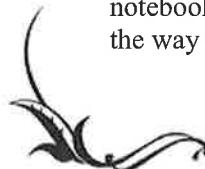
"*Un peu de silence, s'il vous plaît,*" came from M. Hugo.

Oh, bother! It was too hot! Frightfully hot! Grilling simply!

The two square windows of the French Room were open at the bottom and the dark blinds drawn half way down. Although no air came in, the blind cord swung out and back and the blind lifted. But really there was not a breath from the dazzle outside.

Even the girls, in the dusky room, in their pale blouses, with stiff butterfly-bow hair ribbons perched on their hair, seemed to give off a warm, weak light, and M. Hugo's white waistcoat gleamed like the belly of a shark.

Some of the girls were very red in the face and some were white. Vera Holland had pinned up her black curls *à la japonaise* with a penholder and a pink pencil; she looked charming. Francie Owen pushed her sleeves nearly up to the shoulders, and then she inked the little blue vein in her elbow, shut her arm together, and then looked to see the mark it made; she had a passion for inking herself; she always had a face drawn on her thumb nail, with black, forked hair. Sylvia Mann took off her collar and tie, took them off simply, and laid them on the desk beside her, as calm as if she were going to wash her hair in her bedroom at home. She *had* a nerve! Jennie Edwards tore a leaf out of her notebook and wrote "Shall we ask old Hugo-Wugo to shout us a thruppenny vanilla on the way home!!!" and passed it across to Connie Baker, who turned absolutely purple and



nearly burst out crying. All of them lolled and gaped, staring at the round clock, which seemed to have grown paler, too; the hands scarcely crawled.

“*Un peu de silence, s'il vous plaît,*” came from M. Hugo. He held up a puffy hand. “Ladies, as it is so ‘ot we will take no more notes to-day, but I will read you,” and he paused and smiled a broad, gentle smile, “a little French poetry.”

“Go—od God!” moaned Francie Owen.

M. Hugo's smile deepened. “Well, Mees Owen, you need not attend. You can paint yourself. You can 'ave my red ink as well as your black one.”

How well they knew the little blue book with red edges that he tugged out of his coat tail pocket! It had a green silk marker embroidered in forget-me-nots. They often giggled at it when he handed the book round. Poor old Hugo-Wugo! He adored reading poetry. He would begin, softly and calmly, and then gradually his voice would swell and vibrate and gather itself together, then it would be pleading and imploring and entreating, and then rising, rising triumphant, until it burst into light, as it were, and then—gradually again, it ebbed, it grew soft and warm and calm and died down into nothingness.

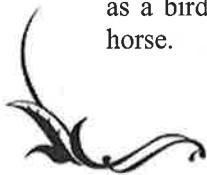
The great difficulty was, of course, if you felt at all feeble, not to get the most awful fit of the giggles. Not because it was funny, really, but because it made you feel uncomfortable, queer, silly, and somehow ashamed for old Hugo-Wugo. But—oh dear—if he was going to inflict it on them in this heat ...!

“Courage, my pet,” said Eve, kissing the languid carnation.

He began, and most of the girls fell forward, over the desks, their heads on their arms, dead at the first shot. Only Eve and Katie sat upright and still. Katie did not know enough French to understand, but Eve sat listening, her eyebrows raised, her eyes half veiled, and a smile that was like the shadow of her cruel little laugh, like the wing shadows of that cruel little laugh fluttering over her lips. She made a warm, white cup of her fingers—the carnation inside. Oh, the scent! It floated across to Katie. It was too much. Katie turned away to the dazzling light outside the window.

Down below, she knew, there was a cobbled courtyard with stable buildings round it. That was why the French Room always smelled faintly of ammonia. It wasn't unpleasant; it was even part of the French language for Katie—something sharp and vivid and—and—biting!

Now she could hear a man clatter over the cobbles and the jing-jang of the pails he carried. And now *Hoo-hor-her! Hoo-hor-her!* as he worked the pump, and a great gush of water followed. Now he was flinging the water over something, over the wheels of a carriage, perhaps. And she saw the wheel, propped up, clear of the ground, spinning round, flashing scarlet and black, with great drops glancing off it. And all the while he worked the man kept up a high bold whistling, that skimmed over the noise of the water as a bird skims over the sea. He went away—he came back again leading a cluttering horse.



*Hoo-hor-her! Hoo-hor-her!* came from the pump. Now he dashed the water over the horse's legs and then swooped down and began brushing.

She saw him simply—in a faded shirt, his sleeves rolled up, his chest bare, all splashed with water—and as he whistled, loud and free, and as he moved, swooping and bending, Hugo-Wugo's voice began to warm, to deepen, to gather together, to swing, to rise—somehow or other to keep time with the man outside (Oh, the scent of Eve's carnation!) until they became one great rushing, rising, triumphant thing, bursting into light, and then—

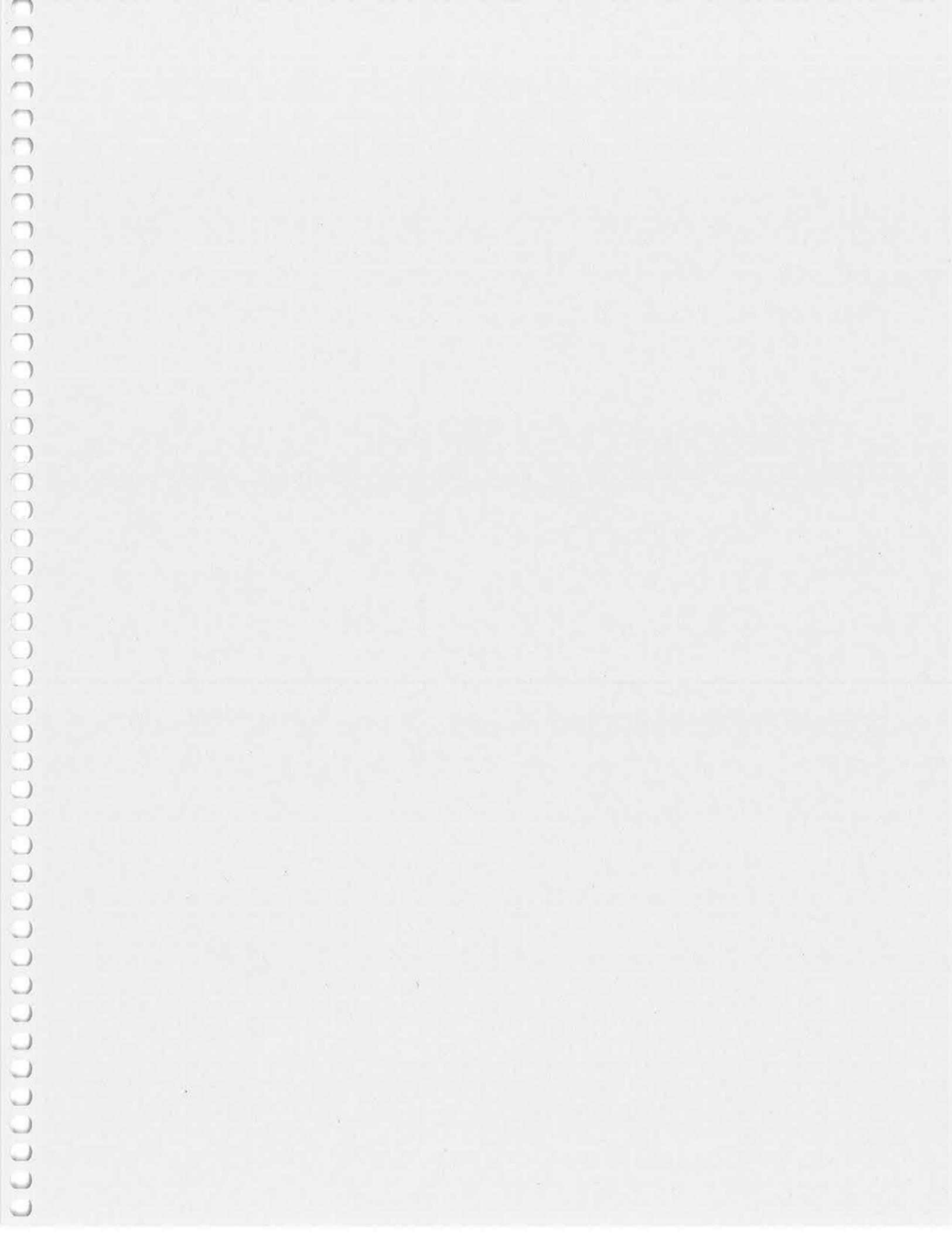
The whole room broke into pieces.

"Thank you, ladies," cried M. Hugo, bobbing at his high desk, over the wreckage.

And "Keep it, dearest," said Eve. "*Souvenir tendre,*" and she popped the carnation down the front of Katie's blouse.









## SAVE THE REAPER



THE game they played was almost the same one that Eve had played with Sophie, on long dull car trips when Sophie was a little girl. Then it was spies—now it was aliens. Sophie's children, Philip and Daisy, were sitting in the backseat. Daisy was barely three and could not understand what was going on. Philip was seven, and in control. He was the one who picked the car they were to follow, in which there were newly arrived space travellers on their way to the secret headquarters, the invaders' lair. They got their directions from the signals offered by plausible-looking people in other cars or from somebody standing by a mailbox or even riding a tractor in a field. Many aliens had already arrived on earth and been translated—this was Philip's word—so that anybody might be one. Gas station attendants or women pushing baby carriages or even the babies riding in the carriages. They could be giving signals.

Usually Eve and Sophie had played this game on a busy highway where there was enough traffic that they wouldn't be detected.

(Though once they had got carried away and ended up in a suburban drive.) On the country roads that Eve was taking today that wasn't so easy. She tried to solve the problem by saying that they might have to switch from following one vehicle to another because some were only decoys, not heading for the hideaway at all, but leading you astray.

"No, that isn't it," said Philip. "What they do, they suck the people out of one car into another car, just in case anybody is following. They can be like inside one body and then they go *schlup* through the air into another body in another car. They go into different people all the time and the people never know what was in them."

"Really?" Eve said. "So how do we know which car?"

"The code's on the license plate," said Philip. "It's changed by the electrical field they create in the car. So their trackers in space can follow them. It's just one simple little thing, but I can't tell you."

"Well no," said Eve. "I suppose very few people know it."

Philip said, "I am the only one right now in Ontario."

He sat as far forward as he could with his seat belt on, tapping his teeth sometimes in urgent concentration and making light whistling noises as he cautioned her.

"Unh-unh, watch out here," he said. "I think you're going to have to turn around. Yeah. Yeah. I think this may be it."

They had been following a white Mazda, and were now, apparently, to follow an old green pickup truck, a Ford. Eve said, "Are you sure?"

"Sure."

"You felt them sucked through the air?"

"They're translated simultaneously," Philip said. "I might have said 'sucked,' but that's just to help people understand it."

What Eve had originally planned was to have the headquarters turn out to be in the village store that sold ice cream, or in the

playground. It could be revealed that all the aliens were congregated there in the form of children, seduced by the pleasures of ice cream or slides and swings, their powers temporarily in abeyance. No fear they could abduct you—or get into you—unless you chose the one wrong flavor of ice cream or swung the exact wrong number of times on the designated swing. (There would have to be some remaining danger, or else Philip would feel let down, humiliated.) But Philip had taken charge so thoroughly that now it was hard to manage the outcome. The pickup truck was turning from the paved county road onto a gravelled side road. It was a decrepit truck with no topper, its body eaten by rust—it would not be going far. Home to some farm, most likely. They might not meet another vehicle to switch to before the destination was reached.

"You're positive this is it?" said Eve. "It's only one man by himself, you know. I thought they never travelled alone."

"The dog," said Philip.

For there was a dog riding in the open back of the truck, running back and forth from one side to the other as if there were events to be kept track of everywhere.

"The dog's one too," Philip said.

THAT morning, when Sophie was leaving to meet Ian at the Toronto airport, Philip had kept Daisy occupied in the children's bedroom. Daisy had settled down pretty well in the strange house—except for wetting her bed every night of the holiday—but this was the first time that her mother had gone off and left her behind. So Sophie had asked Philip to distract her, and he did so with enthusiasm (happy at the new turn events had taken?). He shot the toy cars across the floor with angry engine noises to cover up the sound of Sophie's starting the real rented car and driving away. Shortly after that he shouted to Eve, "Has the B.M. gone?"

Eve was in the kitchen, clearing up the remains of breakfast and disciplining herself. She walked into the living room. There was the boxed tape of the movie that she and Sophie had been watching last night.

*The Bridges of Madison County.*

"What does mean 'B.M.?' said Daisy.

The children's room opened off the living room. This was a cramped little house, fixed up on the cheap for summer rental. Eve's idea had been to get a lakeside cottage for the holiday—Sophie's and Philip's first visit with her in nearly five years and Daisy's first ever. She had picked this stretch of the Lake Huron shore because her parents used to bring her here with her brother when they were children. Things had changed—the cottages were all as substantial as suburban houses, and the rents were out of sight. This house half a mile inland from the rocky, unfavored north end of the usable beach had been the best she could manage. It stood in the middle of a cornfield. She had told the children what her father had once told her—that at night you could hear the corn growing.

Every day when Sophie took Daisy's hand-washed sheets off the line, she had to shake out the corn bugs.

"It means 'bowel movement,'" said Philip with a look of sly challenge at Eve.

Eve halted in the doorway. Last night she and Sophie had watched Meryl Streep sitting in the husband's truck, in the rain, pressing down on the door handle, choking with longing, as her lover drove away. Then they had turned and had seen each other's eyes full of tears and shook their heads and started laughing.

"Also it means 'Big Mama,'" Philip said in a more conciliatory tone. "Sometimes that's what Dad calls her."

"Well then," said Eve. "If that's your question, the answer to your question is yes."

She wondered if he thought of Ian as his real father. She hadn't asked Sophie what they'd told him. She wouldn't, of course. His real father had been an Irish boy who was travelling around North America trying to decide what to do now that he had decided not to be a priest. Eve had thought of him as a casual friend of Sophie's, and it seemed that Sophie had thought of him that way too, until she seduced him. ("He was so shy I never dreamed it would take," she said.) It wasn't until Eve saw Philip that Eve could really picture what the boy had looked like. Then she saw him faithfully reproduced—the bright-eyed, pedantic, sensitive, scornful, fault-finding, blushing, shrinking, arguing young Irishman. Something like Samuel Beckett, she said, even to the wrinkles. Of course as the baby got older, the wrinkles tended to disappear.

Sophie was a full-time archaeology student then. Eve took care of Philip while she was off at her classes. Eve was an actress—she still was, when she could get work. Even in those days there were times when she wasn't working, or if she had daytime rehearsals she could take Philip along. For a couple of years they all lived together—Eve and Sophie and Philip—in Eve's apartment in Toronto. It was Eve who wheeled Philip in his baby carriage—and, later on, in his stroller—along all the streets between Queen and College and Spadina and Ossington, and during these walks she would sometimes discover a perfect, though neglected, little house for sale in a previously unknown to her two-block-long, tree-shaded, dead-end street. She would send Sophie to look at it; they would go round with the real-estate agent, talk about a mortgage, discuss what renovations they would have to pay for, and which they could do themselves. Dithering and fantasizing until the house was sold to somebody else, or until Eve had one of her periodic but intense fits of financial prudence, or until somebody persuaded them that these charming little side streets were not half

so safe for women and children as the bright, ugly, brash, and noisy street that they continued to live on.

Ian was a person Eve took even less note of than she had of the Irish boy. He was a friend; he never came to the apartment except with others. Then he went to a job in California—he was an urban geographer—and Sophie ran up a phone bill which Eve had to speak to her about, and there was a change altogether in the atmosphere of the apartment. (Should Eve not have mentioned the bill?) Soon a visit was planned, and Sophie took Philip along, because Eve was doing a summer play in a regional theater.

Not long afterwards came the news from California. Sophie and Ian were going to get married.

"Wouldn't it be smarter to try living together for a while?" said Eve on the phone from her boarding house, and Sophie said, "Oh, no. He's weird. He doesn't believe in that."

"But I can't get off for a wedding," Eve said. "We run till the middle of September."

"That's okay," said Sophie. "It won't be a *wedding* wedding."

And until this summer, Eve had not seen her again. There was the lack of money at both ends, in the beginning. When Eve was working she had a steady commitment, and when she wasn't working she couldn't afford anything extra. Soon Sophie had a job, too—she was a receptionist in a doctor's office. Once Eve was just about to book a flight, when Sophie phoned to say that Ian's father had died and that he was flying to England for the funeral and bringing his mother back with him.

"And we only have the one room," she said.

"Perish the thought," said Eve. "Two mothers-in-law in one house, let alone in one room."

"Maybe after she's gone?" said Sophie.

But that mother stayed till after Daisy was born, stayed till they moved into the new house, stayed eight months in all. By then Ian

was starting to write his book, and it was difficult for him if there were visitors in the house. It was difficult enough anyway. The time passed during which Eve felt confident enough to invite her self. Sophie sent pictures of Daisy, the garden, all the rooms of the house.

Then she announced that they could come, she and Philip and Daisy could come back to Ontario this summer. They would spend three weeks with Eve while Ian worked alone in California. At the end of that time he would join them and they would fly from Toronto to England to spend a month with his mother.

"I'll get a cottage on the lake," said Eve. "Oh, it will be lovely."

"It will," said Sophie. "It's crazy that it's been so long."

And so it had been. Reasonably lovely, Eve had thought. Sophie hadn't seemed much bothered or surprised by Daisy's wetting the bed. Philip had been finicky and standoffish for a couple of days, responding coolly to Eve's report that she had known him as a baby, and whining about the mosquitoes that descended on them as they hurried through the shoreline woods to get to the beach. He wanted to be taken to Toronto to see the Science Centre. But then he settled down, swam in the lake without complaining that it was cold, and busied himself with solitary projects—such as boiling and scraping the meat off a dead turtle he'd luggered home, so he could keep its shell. The turtle's stomach contained an undigested crayfish, and its shell came off in strips, but none of this dismayed him.

Eve and Sophie, meanwhile, developed a pleasant, puttering routine of morning chores, afternoons on the beach, wine with supper, and late-evening movies. They were drawn into half-serious speculations about the house. What could be done about it? First strip off the living-room wallpaper, an imitation of imitation-wood panelling. Pull up the linoleum with its silly pattern of gold fleurs-de-lis turned brown by ground-in sand and

dirty scrub water. Sophie was so carried away that she loosened a bit of it that had rotted in front of the sink and discovered pine floorboards that surely could be sanded. They talked about the cost of renting a sander (supposing, that is, that the house was theirs) and what colors they would choose for the paint on the doors and woodwork, shutters on the windows, open shelves in the kitchen instead of the dingy plywood cupboards. What about a gas fireplace?

And who was going to live here? Eve. The snowmobilers who used the house for a winter clubhouse were building a place of their own, and the landlord might be happy to rent it year-round. Or maybe sell it very cheaply, considering its condition. It could be a retreat, if Eve got the job she was hoping for, next winter. And if she didn't, why not sublet the apartment and live here? There'd be the difference in the rents, and the old-age pension she started getting in October, and the money that still came in from a commercial she had made for a diet supplement. She could manage.

"And then if we came in the summers we could help with the rent," said Sophie.

Philip heard them. He said, "Every summer?"

"Well you like the lake now," Sophie said. "You like it here now."

"And the mosquitoes, you know they're not as bad every year," Eve said. "Usually they're just bad in the early summer. June, before you'd even get here. In the spring there are all these boggy places full of water, and they breed there, and then the boggy places dry up, and they don't breed again. But this year there was so much rain earlier, those places didn't dry up, so the mosquitoes got a second chance, and there's a whole new generation."

She had found out how much he respected information and preferred it to her opinions and reminiscences.

Sophie was not keen on reminiscence either. Whenever the past that she and Eve had shared was mentioned—even those months after Philip's birth that Eve thought of as some of the happiest, the hardest, the most purposeful and harmonious, in her life—Sophie's face took on a look of gravity and concealment, of patiently withheld judgments. The earlier time, Sophie's own childhood, was a positive minefield, as Eve discovered, when they were talking about Philip's school. Sophie thought it a little too rigorous, and Ian thought it just fine.

"What a switch from Blackbird," Eve said, and Sophie said at once, almost viciously, "Oh, Blackbird. What a farce. When I think that you paid for that. You *paid*."

Blackbird was an ungraded alternative school that Sophie had gone to (the name came from "Morning Has Broken"). It had cost Eve more than she could afford, but she thought it was better for a child whose mother was an actress and whose father was not in evidence. When Sophie was nine or ten, it had broken up because of disagreements among the parents.

"I learned Greek myths and I didn't know where Greece was," said Sophie. "I didn't know *what* it was. We had to spend art period making antinuke signs."

Eve said, "Oh, no, surely."

"We did. And they literally badgered us—they badgered us—to talk about sex. It was verbal molestation. You *paid*."

"I didn't know it was as bad as all that."

"Oh well," said Sophie. "I survived."

"That's the main thing," Eve said shakily. "Survival."

SOPHIE's father was from Kerala, in the southern part of India. Eve had met him, and spent her whole time with him, on a train going from Vancouver to Toronto. He was a young doctor study-

ing in Canada on a fellowship. He had a wife already, and a baby daughter, at home in India.

The train trip took three days. There was a half-hour stop in Calgary. Eve and the doctor ran around looking for a drugstore where they could buy condoms. They didn't find one. By the time they got to Winnipeg, where the train stopped for a full hour, it was too late. In fact—said Eve, when she told their story—by the time they got to the Calgary city limits, it was probably too late.

He was travelling in the day coach—the fellowship was not generous. But Eve had splurged and got herself a roomette. It was this extravagance—a last-minute decision—it was the convenience and privacy of the roomette that were responsible, Eve said, for the existence of Sophie and the greatest change in her, Eve's, life. That, and the fact that you couldn't get condoms anywhere around the Calgary station, not for love or money.

In Toronto she waved goodbye to her lover from Kerala, as you would wave to any train acquaintance, because she was met there by the man who was at that time the serious interest and main trouble in her life. The whole three days had been underscored by the swaying and rocking of the train—the lovers' motions were never just what they contrived themselves, and perhaps for that reason seemed guiltless, irresistible. Their feelings and conversations must have been affected, too. Eve remembered these as sweet and generous, never solemn or desperate. It would have been hard to be solemn when you were dealing with the dimensions and the projections of the roomette.

She told Sophie his Christian name—Thomas, after the saint. Until she met him, Eve had never heard about the ancient Christians in southern India. For a while when she was in her teens Sophie had taken an interest in Kerala. She brought home books from the library and took to going to parties in a sari. She talked about looking her father up, when she got older. The fact that she

*Save the Reaper*

knew his first name and his special study—diseases of the blood, seemed to her possibly enough. Eve stressed to her the size of the population of India and the chance that he had not even stayed there. What she could not bring herself to explain was how incidental, how nearly unimaginable, the existence of Sophie would be, necessarily, in her father's life. Fortunately the idea faded, and Sophie gave up wearing the sari when all those dramatic, ethnic costumes became too commonplace. The only time she mentioned her father, later on, was when she was carrying Philip, and making jokes about keeping up the family tradition of flyby fathers.

No jokes like that now. Sophie had grown stately, womanly, graceful, and reserved. There had been a moment—they were getting through the woods to the beach, and Sophie had bent to scoop up Daisy, so that they might move more quickly out of range of the mosquitoes—when Eve had been amazed at the new, late manifestation of her daughter's beauty. A full-bodied, tranquil, classic beauty, achieved not by care and vanity but by self-forgetfulness and duty. She looked more Indian now, her creamed-coffee skin had darkened in the California sun, and she bore under her eyes the lilac crescents of a permanent mild fatigue.

But she was still a strong swimmer. Swimming was the only sport she had ever cared for, and she swam as well as ever, heading it seemed for the middle of the lake. The first day she had done it she said, "That was wonderful. I felt so free." She didn't say that it was because Eve was watching the children that she had felt that way, but Eve understood that it didn't need to be said. "I'm glad," she said—though in fact she had been frightened. Several times she had thought, Turn around now, and Sophie had swum right on, disregarding this urgent telepathic message. Her dark head

became a spot, then a speck, then an illusion tossed among the steady waves. What Eve feared, and could not think about, was not a failure of strength but of the desire to return. As if this new Sophie, this grown woman so tethered to life, could be actually more indifferent to it than the girl Eve used to know, the young Sophie with her plentiful risks and loves and dramas.

"WE have to get that movie back to the store," Eve said to Philip. "Maybe we should do it before we go to the beach."

Philip said, "I'm sick of the beach."

Eve didn't feel like arguing. With Sophie gone, with all plans altered, so that they were leaving, all of them leaving later in the day, she was sick of the beach, too. And sick of the house—all she could see now was the way this room would look tomorrow. The crayons, the toy cars, the large pieces of Daisy's simple jigsaw puzzle, all swept up and taken away. The storybooks gone that she knew by heart. No sheets drying outside the window. Eighteen more days to last, by herself, in this place.

"How about we go somewhere else today?" she said.

Philip said, "Where is there?"

"Let it be a surprise."

EVE had come home from the village the day before, laden with provisions. Fresh shrimp for Sophie—the village store was actually a classy supermarket these days, you could find almost anything—coffee, wine, rye bread without caraway seeds because Philip hated caraway, a ripe melon, the dark cherries they all loved, though Daisy had to be watched with the stones, a tub of mocha-fudge ice cream, and all the regular things to keep them going for another week.

Sophie was clearing up the children's lunch. "Oh," she cried. "Oh, what'll we do with all that stuff?"

Ian had phoned, she said. Ian had phoned and said he was flying into Toronto tomorrow. Work on his book had progressed more quickly than he had expected; he had changed his plans. Instead of waiting for the three weeks to be up, he was coming tomorrow to collect Sophie and the children and take them on a little trip. He wanted to go to Quebec City. He had never been there, and he thought the children should see the part of Canada where people spoke French.

"He got lonesome," Philip said.

Sophie laughed. She said, "Yes. He got lonesome for us."

Twelve days, Eve thought. Twelve days had passed of the three weeks. She had had to take the house for a month. She was letting her friend Dev use the apartment. He was another out-of-work actor, and was in such real or imagined financial peril that he answered the phone in various stage voices. She was fond of Dev, but she couldn't go back and share the apartment with him.

Sophie said that they would drive to Quebec in the rented car, then drive straight back to the Toronto airport, where the car was to be turned in. No mention of Eve's going along. There wasn't room in the rented car. But couldn't she have taken her own car? Philip riding with her, perhaps, for company. Or Sophie. Ian could take the children, if he was so lonesome for them, and give Sophie a rest. Eve and Sophie could ride together as they used to in the summer, travelling to some town they had never seen before, where Eve had got a job.

That was ridiculous. Eve's car was nine years old and in no condition to make a long trip. And it was Sophie Ian had got lonesome for—you could tell that by her warm averted face. Also, Eve hadn't been asked.

"Well that's wonderful," said Eve. "That he's got along so well with his book."

"It is," said Sophie. She always had an air of careful detachment when she spoke of Ian's book, and when Eve had asked what it was about she had said merely, "Urban geography." Perhaps this was the correct behavior for academic wives—Eve had never known any.

"Anyway you'll get some time by yourself," Sophie said. "After all this circus. You'll find out if you really would like to have a place in the country. A retreat."

Eve had to start talking about something else, anything else, so that she wouldn't bleat out a question about whether Sophie still thought of coming next summer.

"I had a friend who went on one of those real retreats," she said. "He's a Buddhist. No, maybe a Hindu. Not a real Indian." (At this mention of Indians Sophie smiled in a way that said this was another subject that need not be gone into.) "Anyway, you could not speak on this retreat for three months. There were other people around all the time, but you could not speak to them. And he said that one of the things that often happened and that they were warned about was that you fell in love with one of these people you'd never spoken to. You felt you were communicating in a special way with them when you couldn't talk. Of course it was a kind of spiritual love, and you couldn't do anything about it. They were strict about that kind of thing. Or so he said."

Sophie said, "So? When you were finally allowed to speak what happened?"

"It was a big letdown. Usually the person you thought you'd been communicating with hadn't been communicating with you at all. Maybe they thought they'd been communicating that way with somebody else, and they thought—"

there was to be no show of disappointment, no hurt feelings.

Maybe they had a tiff, thought Eve. This whole visit might have been tactical. Sophie might have taken the children off to show him something. Spent time with her mother, just to show him something. Planning future holidays without him, to prove to herself that she could do it. A diversion.

And the burning question was, Who did the phoning?

"Why don't you leave the children here?" she said. "Just while you drive to the airport? Then just drive back and pick them up and take off. You'd have a little time to yourself and a little time alone with Ian. It'll be hell with them in the airport."

Sophie said, "I'm tempted."

So in the end that was what she did.

Now Eve had to wonder if she herself had engineered that little change just so she could get to talk to Philip.

(*Wasn't it a big surprise when your dad phoned from California?*

*He didn't phone. My mom phoned him.*

*Did she? Oh I didn't know. What did she say?*

*She said, "I can't stand it here, I'm sick of it, let's figure out some plan to get me away."*)

EVE dropped her voice to a matter-of-fact level, to indicate an interruption of the game. She said, "Philip. Philip, listen. I think we've got to stop this. That truck just belongs to some farmer and it's going to turn in someplace and we can't go on following."

"Yes we can," Philip said.

"No we can't. They'd want to know what we were doing. They might be very mad."

"We'll call up our helicopters to come and shoot them."

"Don't be silly. You know this is just a game."

"They'll shoot them."

"I don't think they have any weapons," said Eve, trying another tack. "They haven't developed any weapons to destroy aliens."

Philip said, "You're wrong," and began a description of some kind of rockets, which she did not listen to.

WHEN she was a child staying in the village with her brother and her parents, Eve had sometimes gone for drives in the country with her mother. They didn't have a car—it was wartime, they had come here on the train. The woman who ran the hotel was friends with Eve's mother, and they would be invited along when she drove to the country to buy corn or raspberries or tomatoes. Sometimes they would stop to have tea and look at the old dishes and bits of furniture for sale in some enterprising farm woman's front parlor. Eve's father preferred to stay behind and play checkers with some other men on the beach. There was a big cement square with a checkerboard painted on it, a roof protecting it but no walls, and there, even in the rain, the men moved oversized checkers around in a deliberate way, with long poles. Eve's brother watched them or went swimming unsupervised—he was older. That was all gone now—the cement, even, was gone, or something had been built right on top of it. The hotel with its verandas extending over the sand was gone, and the railway station with its flower beds spelling out the name of the village. The railway tracks too. Instead there was a fake-old-fashioned mall with the satisfactory new supermarket and wineshop and boutiques for leisure wear and country crafts.

When she was quite small and wore a great hair bow on top of her head, Eve was fond of these country expeditions. She ate tiny jam tarts and cakes whose frosting was stiff on top and soft underneath, topped with a bleeding maraschino cherry. She was not

allowed to touch the dishes or the lace-and-satin pincushions or the sallow-looking old dolls, and the women's conversations passed over her head with a temporary and mildly depressing effect, like the inevitable clouds. But she enjoyed riding in the backseat imagining herself on horseback or in a royal coach. Later on she refused to go. She began to hate trailing along with her mother and being identified as her mother's daughter. My daughter, Eve. How richly condescending, how mistakenly possessive, that voice sounded in her ears. (She was to use it, or some version of it, for years as a staple in some of her broadest, least accomplished acting.) She detested also her mother's habit of dressing up, wearing large hats and gloves in the country, and sheer dresses on which there were raised flowers, like warts. The oxford shoes, on the other hand—they were worn to favor her mother's corns—appeared embarrassingly stout and shabby.

"What did you hate most about your mother?" was a game that Eve would play with her friends in her first years free of home.

"Corsets," one girl would say, and another would say, "Wet aprons."

Hair nets. Fat arms. Bible quotations. "Danny Boy."

Eve always said. "Her corns."

She had forgotten all about this game until recently. The thought of it now was like touching a bad tooth.

Ahead of them the truck slowed and without signalling turned into a long tree-lined lane. Eve said, "I can't follow them any farther, Philip," and drove on. But as she passed the lane she noticed the gateposts. They were unusual, being shaped something like crude minarets and decorated with whitewashed pebbles and bits of colored glass. Neither one of them was straight, and they were half hidden by goldenrod and wild carrot, so that they had lost all reality as gateposts and looked instead like lost stage props from some gaudy operetta. The minute she saw them Eve remembered

something else—a whitewashed outdoor wall in which there were pictures set. The pictures were stiff, fantastic, childish scenes. Churches with spires, castles with towers, square houses with square, lopsided, yellow windows. Triangular Christmas trees and tropical-colored birds half as big as the trees, a fat horse with dinky legs and burning red eyes, curly blue rivers, like lengths of ribbon, a moon and drunken stars and fat sunflowers nodding over the roofs of houses. All of this made of pieces of colored glass set into cement or plaster. She had seen it, and it wasn't in any public place. It was out in the country, and she had been with her mother. The shape of her mother loomed in front of the wall—she was talking to an old farmer. He might only have been her mother's age, of course, and looked old to Eve.

Her mother and the hotel woman did go to look at odd things on those trips; they didn't just look at antiques. They had gone to see a shrub cut to resemble a bear, and an orchard of dwarf apple trees.

Eve didn't remember the gateposts at all, but it seemed to her that they could not have belonged to any other place. She backed the car and swung around into the narrow track beneath the trees. The trees were heavy old Scotch pines, probably dangerous—you could see dangling half-dead branches, and branches that had already blown down or fallen down were lying in the grass and weeds on either side of the track. The car rocked back and forth in the ruts, and it seemed that Daisy approved of this motion. She began to make an accompanying noise. *Whoppy. Whoppy. Whoppy.*

This was something Daisy might remember—all she might remember—of this day. The arched trees, the sudden shadow, the interesting motion of the car. Maybe the white faces of the wild carrot that brushed at the windows. The sense of Philip beside her—his incomprehensible serious excitement, the tingling of his childish voice brought under unnatural control. A much vaguer

sense of Eve—bare, freckly, sun-wrinkled arms, gray-blond frizzy curls held back by a black hairband. Maybe a smell. Not of cigarettes anymore, or of the touted creams and cosmetics on which Eve once spent so much of her money. Old skin? Garlic? Wine? Mouthwash? Eve might be dead when Daisy remembered this. Daisy and Philip might be estranged. Eve had not spoken to her own brother for three years. Not since he said to her on the phone, "You shouldn't have become an actress if you weren't equipped to make a better go of it."

There wasn't any sign of a house ahead, but through a gap in the trees the skeleton of a barn rose up, walls gone, beams intact, roof whole but flopping to one side like a funny hat. There seemed to be pieces of machinery, old cars or trucks, scattered around it, in the sea of flowering weeds. Eve had not much leisure to look—she was busy controlling the car on this rough track. The green truck had disappeared ahead of her—how far could it have gone? Then she saw that the lane curved. It curved; they left the shade of the pines and were out in the sunlight. The same sea foam of wild carrot, the same impression of rusting junk strewed about. A high wild hedge to one side, and there was the house, finally, behind it. A big house, two stories of yellowish-gray brick, an attic story of wood, its dormer windows stuffed with dirty foam rubber. One of the lower windows shone with aluminum foil covering it on the inside.

She had come to the wrong place. She had no memory of this house. There was no wall here around mown grass. Saplings grew up at random in the weeds.

The truck was parked ahead of her. And ahead of that she could see a patch of cleared ground where gravel had been spread and where she could have turned the car around. But she couldn't get past the truck to do that. She had to stop, too. She wondered if the man in the truck had stopped where he did on

purpose, so that she would have to explain herself. He was now getting out of the truck in a leisurely way. Without looking at her, he released the dog, which had been running back and forth and barking with a great deal of angry spirit. Once on the ground, it continued to bark, but didn't leave the man's side. The man wore a cap that shaded his face, so that Eve could not see his expression. He stood by the truck looking at them, not yet deciding to come any closer.

Eve unbuckled her seat belt.

"Don't get out," said Philip. "Stay in the car. Turn around. Drive away."

"I can't," said Eve. "It's all right. That dog's just a yapper, he won't hurt me."

"Don't get out."

She should never have let that game get so far out of control. A child of Philip's age could get too carried away. "This isn't part of the game," she said. "He's just a man."

"I know," said Philip. "But *don't get out*."

"Stop that," said Eve, and got out and shut the door.

"Hi," she said. "I'm sorry. I made a mistake. I thought this was somewhere else."

The man said something like "Hey."

"I was actually looking for another place," said Eve. "It was a place where I came once when I was a little girl. There was a wall with pictures on it all made with pieces of broken glass. I think a cement wall, whitewashed. When I saw those pillars by the road, I thought this must be it. You must have thought we were following you. It sounds so silly."

She heard the car door open. Philip got out, dragging Daisy behind him. Eve thought he had come to be close to her, and she put out her arm to welcome him. But he detached himself from Daisy and circled round Eve and spoke to the man. He had

brought himself out of the alarm of a moment before and now he seemed steadier than Eve was.

"Is your dog friendly?" he said in a challenging way.

"She won't hurt you," the man said. "Long as I'm here, she's okay. She gets in a tear because she's not no more than a pup. She's still not no more than a pup."

He was a small man, no taller than Eve. He was wearing jeans and one of those open vests of colorful weave, made in Peru or Guatemala. Gold chains and medallions sparkled on his hairless, tanned, and muscular chest. When he spoke he threw his head back and Eve could see that his face was older than his body. Some front teeth were missing.

"We won't bother you anymore," she said. "Philip, I was just telling this man we drove down this road looking for a place I came when I was a little girl, and there were pictures made of colored glass set in a wall. But I made a mistake, this isn't the place."

"What's its name?" said Philip.

"Trixie," the man said, and on hearing her name the dog jumped up and bumped his arm. He swatted her down. "I don't know about no pictures. I don't live here. Harold, he's the one would know."

"It's all right," said Eve, and hoisted Daisy up on her hip. "If you could just move the truck ahead, then I could turn around."

"I don't know no pictures. See, if they was in the front part the house I never would've saw them because Harold, he's got the front part of the house shut off."

"No, they were outside," said Eve. "It doesn't matter. This was years and years ago."

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah," the man was saying, warming to the conversation. "You come in and get Harold to tell you about it. You know Harold? He's who owns it here. Mary, she owns it, but Harold he put her in the Home, so now he does. It wasn't his fault,

she had to go there." He reached into the truck and took out two cases of beer. "I just had to go to town, Harold sent me into town. You go on. You go in. Harold be glad to see you."

"Here Trixie," said Philip sternly.

The dog came yelping and bounding around them, Daisy squealed with fright and pleasure and somehow they were all on the route to the house, Eve carrying Daisy, and Philip and Trixie scrambling around her up some earthen bumps that had once been steps. The man came close behind them, smelling of the beer that he must have been drinking in the truck.

"Open it up, go ahead in," he said. "Make your way through. You don't mind it's got a little untidy here? Mary's in the Home, nobody to keep it tidied up like it used to be."

Massive disorder was what they had to make their way through—the kind that takes years to accumulate. The bottom layer of it made up of chairs and tables and couches and perhaps a stove or two, with old bedclothes and newspapers and window shades and dead potted plants and ends of lumber and empty bottles and broken lighting fixtures and curtain rods piled on top of that, up to the ceiling in some places, blocking nearly all the light from outside. To make up for that, a light was burning by the inside door.

The man shifted the beer and got that door open, and shouted for Harold. It was hard to tell what sort of room they were in now—there were kitchen cupboards with the doors off the hinges, some cans on the shelves, but there were also a couple of cots with bare mattresses and rumpled blankets. The windows were so successfully covered up with furniture or hanging quilts that you could not tell where they were, and the smell was that of a junk store, a plugged sink, or maybe a plugged toilet, cooking and grease and cigarettes and human sweat and dog mess and unremoved garbage.

Nobody answered the shouts. Eve turned around—there was room to turn around here, as there hadn't been in the porch—and said, "I don't think we should—" but Trixie got in her way and the man ducked round her to bang on another door.

"Here he is," he said—still at the top of his voice, though the door had opened. "Here's Harold in here." At the same time Trixie rushed forward, and another man's voice said, "Fuck. Get that dog out of here."

"Lady here wants to see some pictures," the little man said. Trixie whined in pain—somebody had kicked her. Eve had no choice but to go on into the room.

This was a dining room. There was the heavy old dining-room table and the substantial chairs. Three men were sitting down, playing cards. The fourth man had got up to kick the dog. The temperature in the room was about ninety degrees.

"Shut the door, there's a draft," said one of the men at the table.

The little man hauled Trixie out from under the table and threw her into the outer room, then closed the door behind Eve and the children.

"Christ. Fuck," said the man who had got up. His chest and arms were so heavily tattooed that he seemed to have purple or bluish skin. He shook one foot as if it hurt. Perhaps he had also kicked a table leg when he kicked Trixie.

Sitting with his back to the door was a young man with sharp narrow shoulders and a delicate neck. At least Eve assumed he was young, because he wore his hair in dyed golden spikes and had gold rings in his ears. He didn't turn around. The man across from him was as old as Eve herself, and had a shaved head, a tidy gray beard, and bloodshot blue eyes. He looked at Eve without any friendliness but with some intelligence or comprehension, and in this he was unlike the tattooed man, who had looked at her as if she was some kind of hallucination that he had decided to ignore.

At the end of the table, in the host's or the father's chair, sat the man who had given the order to close the door, but who hadn't looked up or otherwise paid any attention to the interruption. He was a large-boned, fat, pale man with sweaty brown curls, and as far as Eve could tell he was entirely naked. The tattooed man and the blond man were wearing jeans, and the gray-bearded man was wearing jeans and a checked shirt buttoned up to the neck and a string tie. There were glasses and bottles on the table. The man in the host's chair—he must be Harold—and the gray-bearded man were drinking whiskey. The other two were drinking beer.

"I told her maybe there was pictures in the front but she couldn't go in there you got that shut up," the little man said.

Harold said, "You shut up."

Eve said, "I'm really sorry." There seemed to be nothing to do but go into her spiel, enlarging it to include staying at the village hotel as a little girl, drives with her mother, the pictures in the wall, her memory of them today, the gateposts, her obvious mistake, her apologies. She spoke directly to the graybeard, since he seemed the only one willing to listen or capable of understanding her. Her arm and shoulder ached from the weight of Daisy and from the tension which had got hold of her entire body. Yet she was thinking how she would describe this—she'd say it was like finding yourself in the middle of a Pinter play. Or like all her nightmares of a stolid, silent, hostile audience.

The graybeard spoke when she could not think of any further charming or apologetic thing to say. He said, "I don't know. You'll have to ask Harold. Hey. Hey Harold. Do you know anything about some pictures made out of broken glass?"

"Tell her when she was riding around looking at pictures I wasn't even born yet," said Harold, without looking up.

"You're out of luck, lady," said the graybeard.

The tattooed man whistled. "Hey you," he said to Philip. "Hey kid. Can you play the piano?"

There was a piano in the room behind Harold's chair. There was no stool or bench—Harold himself taking up most of the room between the piano and the table—and inappropriate things, such as plates and overcoats, were piled on top of it, as they were on every surface in the house.

"No," said Eve quickly. "No he can't."

"I'm asking him," the tattooed man said. "Can you play a tune?"

The graybeard said, "Let him alone."

"Just asking if he can play a tune, what's the matter with that?"

"Let him alone."

"You see I can't move until somebody moves the truck," Eve said.

She thought, There is a smell of semen in this room.

Philip was mute, pressed against her side.

"If you could just move—" she said, turning and expecting to find the little man behind her. She stopped when she saw he wasn't there, he wasn't in the room at all, he had got out without her knowing when. What if he had locked the door?

She put her hand on the knob and it turned, the door opened with a little difficulty and a scramble on the other side of it. The little man had been crouched right there, listening.

Eve went out without speaking to him, out through the kitchen, Philip trotting along beside her like the most tractable little boy in the world. Along the narrow pathway on the porch, through the junk, and when they reached the open air she sucked it in, not having taken a real breath for a long time.

"You ought to go along down the road ask down at Harold's cousin's place," the little man's voice came after her. "They got a nice place. They got a new house, she keeps it beautiful. They'll show you pictures or anything you want, they'll make you welcome. They'll sit you down and feed you, they don't let nobody go away empty."

He couldn't have been crouched against the door all the time, because he had moved the truck. Or somebody had. It had disappeared altogether, been driven away to some shed or parking spot out of sight.

Eve ignored him. She got Daisy buckled in. Philip was buckling himself in, without having to be reminded. Trixie appeared from somewhere and walked around the car in a disconsolate way, sniffing at the tires.

Eve got in and closed the door, put her sweating hand on the key. The car started, she pulled ahead onto the gravel—a space that was surrounded by thick bushes, berry bushes she supposed, and old lilacs, as well as weeds. In places these bushes had been flattened by piles of old tires and bottles and tin cans. It was hard to think that things had been thrown out of that house, considering all that was left in it, but apparently they had. And as Eve swung the car around she saw, revealed by this flattening, some fragment of a wall, to which bits of whitewash still clung.

She thought she could see pieces of glass embedded there, glinting.

She didn't slow down to look. She hoped Philip hadn't noticed—he might want to stop. She got the car pointed towards the lane and drove past the dirt steps to the house. The little man stood there with both arms waving and Trixie was wagging her tail, roused from her scared docility sufficiently to bark farewell and chase them partway down the lane. The chase was only a formality; she could have caught up with them if she wanted to. Eve had had to slow down at once when she hit the ruts.

She was driving so slowly that it was possible, it was easy, for a figure to rise up out of the tall weeds on the passenger side of the car and open the door—which Eve had not thought of locking—and jump in.

It was the blond man who had been sitting at the table, the one whose face she had never seen.

"Don't be scared. Don't be scared anybody. I just wondered if I could hitch a ride with you guys, okay?"

It wasn't a man or a boy; it was a girl. A girl now wearing a dirty sort of undershirt.

Eve said, "Okay." She had just managed to hold the car in the track.

"I couldn't ask you back in the house," the girl said. "I went in the bathroom and got out the window and run out here. They probably don't even know I'm gone yet. They're boiled." She took hold of a handful of the undershirt which was much too large for her and sniffed at it. "Stinks," she said. "I just grabbed this of Harold's, was in the bathroom. Stinks."

Eve left the ruts, the darkness of the lane, and turned onto the ordinary road. "Jesus I'm glad to get out of there," the girl said. "I didn't know nothing about what I was getting into. I didn't know even how I got there, it was night. It wasn't no place for me. You know what I mean?"

"They seemed pretty drunk all right," said Eve.

"Yeah. Well. I'm sorry if I scared you."

"That's okay."

"If I hadn't've jumped in I thought you wouldn't stop for me. Would you?"

"I don't know," said Eve. "I guess I would have if it got through to me you were a girl. I didn't really get a look at you before."

"Yeah. I don't look like much now. I look like shit now. I'm not saying I don't like to party. I like to party. But there's party and there's party, you know what I mean?"

She turned in the seat and looked at Eve so steadily that Eve had to take her eyes from the road for a moment and look back. And what she saw was that this girl was much more drunk than she

sounded. Her dark-brown eyes were glazed but held wide open, rounded with effort, and they had the imploring yet distant expression that drunks' eyes get, a kind of last-ditch insistence on fooling you. Her skin was blotched in some places and ashy in others, her whole face crumpled with the effects of a mighty binging. She was a natural brunette—the gold spikes were intentionally and provocatively dark at the roots—and pretty enough, if you disregarded her present dinginess, to make you wonder how she had ever got mixed up with Harold and Harold's crew. Her way of living and the style of the times must have taken fifteen or twenty natural pounds off her—but she wasn't tall and she really wasn't boyish. Her true inclination was to be a cuddly chunky girl, a darling dumpling.

"Herb was crazy bringing you in there like that," she said. "He's got a screw loose, Herb."

Eve said, "I gathered that."

"I don't know what he does around there, I guess he works for Harold. I don't think Harold uses him too good, neither."

Eve had never believed herself to be attracted to women in a sexual way. And this girl in her soiled and crumpled state seemed unlikely to appeal to anybody. But perhaps the girl did not believe this possible—she must be so used to appealing to people. At any rate she slid her hand along Eve's bare thigh, just getting a little way beyond the hem of her shorts. It was a practiced move, drunk as she was. To spread the fingers, to grasp flesh on the first try, would have been too much. A practiced, automatically hopeful move, yet so lacking in any true, strong, squirmy, comradely lust that Eve felt that the hand might easily have fallen short and caressed the car upholstery.

"I'm okay," the girl said, and her voice, like the hand, struggled to put herself and Eve on a new level of intimacy. "You know what I mean? You understand me. Okay?"

"Of course," said Eve briskly, and the hand trailed away, tired whore's courtesy done with. But it had not failed—not altogether. Blatant and halfhearted as it was, it had been enough to set some old wires twitching.

And the fact that it could be effective in any way at all filled Eve with misgiving, flung a shadow backwards from this moment over all the rowdy and impulsive as well as all the hopeful and serious, the more or less unrepented-of, couplings of her life. Not a real flare-up of shame, a sense of sin—just a dirty shadow. What a joke on her, if she started to hanker now after a purer past and a cleaner slate.

But it could be just that still, and always, she hankered after love. She said, "Where is it you want to go?"

The girl jerked backwards, faced the road. She said, "Where you going? You live around here?" The blurred tone of seductiveness had changed, as no doubt it would change after sex, into a mean-sounding swagger.

"There's a bus goes through the village," Eve said. "It stops at the gas station. I've seen the sign."

"Yeah but just one thing," the girl said. "I got no money. See, I got away from there in such a hurry I never got to collect my money. So what use would it be me getting on a bus without no money?"

The thing to do was not to recognize a threat. Tell her that she could hitchhike, if she had no money. It wasn't likely that she had a gun in her jeans. She just wanted to sound as if she might have one.

But a knife?

The girl turned for the first time to look into the backseat.

"You kids okay back there?" she said.

No answer.

"They're cute," she said. "They shy with strangers?"

How stupid of Eve to think about sex, when the reality, the danger, were elsewhere.

Eve's purse was on the floor of the car in front of the girl's feet. She didn't know how much money was in it. Sixty, seventy dollars. Hardly more. If she offered money for a ticket the girl would name an expensive destination. Montreal. Or at least Toronto. If she said, "Just take what's there," the girl would see capitulation. She would sense Eve's fear and might try to push further. What was the best she could do? Steal the car? If she left Eve and the children beside the road, the police would be after her in a hurry. If she left them dead in some thicket, she might get farther. Or if she took them along while she needed them, a knife against Eve's side or a child's throat.

Such things happen. But not as regularly as on television or in the movies. Such things don't often happen.

Eve turned onto the county road, which was fairly busy. Why did that make her feel better? Safety there was an illusion. She could be driving along the highway in the midst of the day's traffic taking herself and the children to their deaths.

The girl said, "Where's this road go?"

"It goes out to the main highway."

"Let's drive out there."

"That's where I am driving," Eve said.

"Which way's the highway go?"

"It goes north to Owen Sound or up to Tobermory where you get the boat. Or south to—I don't know. But it joins another highway, you can get to Sarnia. Or London. Or Detroit or Toronto if you keep going."

Nothing more was said until they reached the highway. Eve turned onto it and said, "This is it."

"Which way you heading now?"

"I'm heading north," Eve said.

"That the way you live then?"

"I'm going to the village. I'm going to stop for gas."

"You got gas," the girl said. "You got over half a tank."

That was stupid. Eve should have said groceries.

Beside her the girl let out a long groan of decision, maybe of relinquishment.

"You know," she said, "you know. I might as well get out here if I'm going to hitch a ride. I could get a ride here as easy as anywhere."

Eve pulled over onto the gravel. Relief was turning into something like shame. It was probably true that the girl had run away without collecting any money, that she had nothing. What was it like to be drunk, wasted, with no money, at the side of the road?

"Which way you said we're going?"

"North," Eve told her again.

"Which way you said to Sarnia?"

"South. Just cross the road, the cars'll be headed south. Watch out for the traffic."

"Sure," the girl said. Her voice was already distant; she was calculating new chances. She was half out of the car as she said, "See you." And into the backseat, "See you guys. Be good."

"Wait," said Eve. She leaned over and felt in her purse for her wallet, got out a twenty-dollar bill. She got out of the car and came round to where the girl was waiting. "Here," she said. "This'll help you."

"Yeah. Thanks," the girl said, stuffing the bill in her pocket, her eyes on the road.

"Listen," said Eve. "If you're stranded I'll tell you where my house is. It's about two miles north of the village and the village is about half a mile north of here. North. This way. My family's there now, but they should be gone by evening, if that bothers

you. It's got the name Ford on the mailbox. That's not my name, I don't know why it's there. It's all by itself in the middle of a field. It's got one ordinary window on one side of the front door and a funny-looking little window on the other. That's where they put in the bathroom."

"Yeah," the girl said.

"It's just that I thought, if you don't get a ride—"

"Okay," the girl said. "Sure."

When they had started driving again, Philip said, "Yuck. She smelled like vomit."

A little farther on he said, "She didn't even know you should look at the sun to tell directions. She was stupid. Wasn't she?"

"I guess so," Eve said.

"Yuck. I never ever saw anybody so stupid."

As they went through the village he asked if they could stop for ice-cream cones. Eve said no.

"There's so many people stopping for ice cream it's hard to find a place to park," she said. "We've got enough ice cream at home."

"You shouldn't say 'home,'" said Philip. "It's just where we're staying. You should say 'the house.'"

The big hay rolls in a field to the east of the highway were facing ends-on into the sun, so tightly packed they looked like shields or gongs or faces of Aztec metal. Past that was a field of pale soft gold tails or feathers.

"That's called barley, that gold stuff with the tails on it," she said to Philip.

He said, "I know."

"The tails are called beards sometimes." She began to recite, "But the reapers, reaping early, in among the bearded barley—"

Daisy said, "What does mean 'pearly'?"

Philip said, "Barley."

*Save the Reaper*

"Only reapers, reaping early," Eve said. She tried to remember. "Save the reapers, reaping early—" "Save" was what sounded best. Save the reapers.

SOPHIE and Ian had bought corn at a roadside stand. It was for dinner. Plans had changed—they weren't leaving till morning. And they had bought a bottle of gin and some tonic and limes. Ian made the drinks while Eve and Sophie sat husking the corn. Eve said, "Two dozen. That's crazy."

"Wait and see," said Sophie. "Ian loves corn."

Ian bowed when he presented Eve with her drink, and after she had tasted it she said, "This is most heavenly."

Ian wasn't much as she had remembered or pictured him. He was not tall, Teutonic, humorless. He was a slim fair-haired man of medium height, quick moving, companionable. Sophie was less assured, more tentative in all she said and did, than she had seemed since she'd been here. But happier, too.

Eve told her story. She began with the checkerboard on the beach, the vanished hotel, the drives into the country. It included her mother's city-lady outfits, her sheer dresses and matching slips, but not the young Eve's feelings of repugnance. Then the things they went to see—the dwarf orchard, the shelf of old dolls, the marvellous pictures made of colored glass.

"They were a little like Chagall?" Eve said.

Ian said, "Yep. Even us urban geographers know about Chagall."

Eve said, "Sor-ry." Both laughed.

Now the gateposts, the sudden memory, the dark lane and ruined barn and rusted machinery, the house a shambles.

"The owner was in there playing cards with his friends," Eve said. "He didn't know anything about it. Didn't know or didn't

care. And my God, it could have been nearly sixty years ago I was there—think of that."

Sophie said, "Oh, Mom. What a shame." She was glowing with relief to see Ian and Eve getting on so well together.

"Are you sure it was even the right place?" she said.

"Maybe not," said Eve. "Maybe not."

She would not mention the fragment of wall she had seen beyond the bushes. Why bother, when there were so many things she thought best not to mention? First, the game that she had got Philip playing, overexciting him. And nearly everything about Harold and his companions. Everything, every single thing about the girl who had jumped into the car.

There are people who carry decency and optimism around with them, who seem to cleanse every atmosphere they settle in, and you can't tell such people things, it is too disruptive. Ian struck Eve as being one of those people, in spite of his present graciousness, and Sophie as being someone who thanked her lucky stars that she had found him. It used to be older people who claimed this protection from you, but now it seemed more and more to be younger people, and someone like Eve had to try not to reveal how she was stranded in between. Her whole life liable to be seen as some sort of unseemly thrashing around, a radical mistake.

She could say that the house smelled vile, and that the owner and his friends looked altogether boozy and disreputable, but not that Harold was naked and never that she herself was afraid. And never what she was afraid of.

Philip was in charge of gathering up the corn husks and carrying them outside to throw them along the edge of the field. Occasionally Daisy picked up a few on her own, and took them off to be distributed around the house. Philip had added nothing to Eve's story and had not seemed to be concerned with the telling of it. But once it was told, and Ian (interested in bringing this local

*Save the Reaper*

anecdote into line with his professional studies) was asking Eve what she knew about the breakup of older patterns of village and rural life, about the spread of what was called agribusiness, Philip did look up from his stooping and crawling work around the adults' feet. He looked at Eve. A flat look, a moment of conspiratorial blankness, a buried smile, that passed before there could be any need for recognition of it.

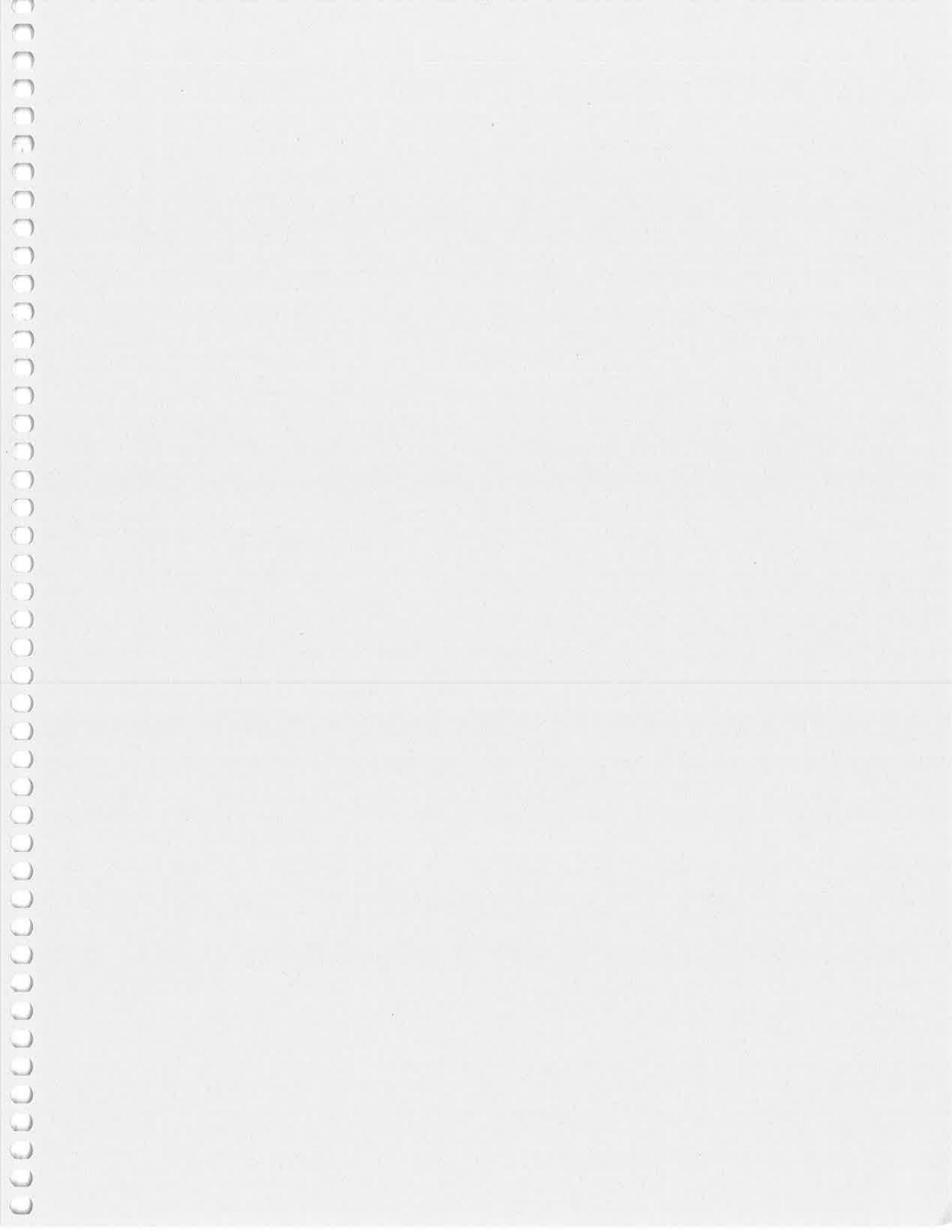
What did this mean? Only that he had begun the private work of storing and secreting, deciding on his own what should be preserved and how, and what these things were going to mean to him, in his unknown future.

If the girl came looking for her, they would all still be here. Then Eve's carefulness would go for nothing.

The girl wouldn't come. Much better offers would turn up before she'd stood ten minutes by the highway. More dangerous offers perhaps, but more interesting, likely to be more profitable.

The girl wouldn't come. Unless she found some homeless, heartless wastrel of her own age. (*I know where there's a place we can stay, if we can get rid of the old lady.*)

Not tonight but tomorrow night Eve would lie down in this hollowed-out house, its board walls like a paper shell around her, willing herself to grow light, relieved of consequence, with nothing in her head but the rustle of the deep tall corn which might have stopped growing now but still made its live noise after dark.





## Zigzagger

By six in the morning, the boy's convulsions have stopped. The light is graying in the window, allowing the boy's bedroom a shadowy calm—they can see without the lamp, and the father rises to turn it out. The boy's mother moves to stop him and the father realizes that she is still afraid, so he leaves it on. The sun seems slow to rise, and the room cannot brighten as quickly as they would like—it will be cloudy today.

The father is a bold man, but even he could not touch his teenage son several hours ago, when his jerking body was at its worst. The father makes the doorways in their house look narrow and small, his shoulders threatening to brush the jambs, yet even he had trouble controlling the boy and his violent sleep. And it was the father who first noticed how the room had become strangely cold to them, and they put on sweaters in the middle of July—the boy's body glistening, his legs kicking away the blankets as he moaned. The mother had been afraid to touch him at all and, even as the sun began rising, still made no move toward the boy.

In the morning light, the boy seems to have returned to health. He is sleeping peacefully now; he has not pushed away the quilts. His face has come back to a dark brown, the swelling around the eyes gone.

"I'll check his temperature," the father tells the mother, and she does not shake her head at the suggestion. She watches her husband closely as he moves to the bed and reaches for the edge of the quilt. She holds her breath. He pulls the quilt back slowly and reveals their son's brown legs, his bare feet. He puts out his hand to touch the boy's calf but doesn't pull away his fingers once he makes contact with the skin. The father turns to the mother, his fingers moving to the boy's hands and face. "I think he's okay now."

The mother sighs and, for the first time in hours, looks away from the bed. She remembers that today is Sunday and, with the encouragement of the coming morning, she rises from her chair to see for herself.

Saturdays in this town are for dancing. The churchgoers think it is a vile day, and when they drive by the fields on their way to morning services, they sometimes claim to see workers swaying their hips as they pick tomatoes or grapes. They say that nothing gets done on Saturday afternoons because the workers go home too early in order to prepare for a long night of dancing. It is not just evenings, but the stretch of day—a whole cycle of temptation—and the churchgoers feel thwarted in their pleadings to bring back the ones who have strayed. They see them in town at the dry cleaners or waxing their cars. They see them buying food that isn't necessary.

The churchgoers have war veterans among them, some of whom serve as administrators for the town's Veterans Hall. They argue with each other about the moral questions of renting out their hall for Saturday's recklessness. The war veterans tell them that theirs is a public building and that the banquet room, the ballroom, and the wing of tidy classrooms are for all sorts of uses. Sometimes the veterans toss out angry stories about Korea, and the more civil of the lot mention how they converted villagers while fighting. But others claim freedom, including their hall, and to mortify the churchgoers, they tell

tales of Korean girls spreading their legs for soldiers and the relief it brought. The churchgoers end the conversation there.

By Saturday afternoon, there is always a bus from Texas or Arizona parked in back of the Veterans Hall, and sometimes workers on their way home will catch a glimpse of the musicians descending from the vehicle with accordions and sequined suits and sombreros in tow. Some days it is simply a chartered bus. But other times, it is a bus with the band's name painted along the side—CONJUNTO ALVAREZ, BENNIE JIMÉNEZ Y FUEGO—and the rumor of a more popular group coming through town will start the weekend much earlier than usual. It means people from towns on the other side of the Valley will make the trek. It means new and eager faces.

The churchgoers smart at the sight of young girls walking downtown toward the hall, their arms crossed in front of their breasts and holding themselves, as if the July evening breeze were capable of giving them a chill. For some of them, these young girls with arm-crossed breasts remind them of their own daughters who no longer live in town. They have moved away with babies to live alone in Los Angeles. All over town, the churchgoers know, young girls sneak from their homes to visit the friends their parents already dislike. There, they know, the girls put on skirts that twirl and makeup that might glisten against the dull lights of the makeshift dance floor. These girls practice walking on high heels, dance with each other in their bedrooms to get the feel in case a man asks them to do a *cumbia*. The churchgoers remember when they were parents and listening to the closed doors and the girls too silent. Or their teenage boys, just as quiet, then leaving with their pockets full of things hidden craftily in their rooms.

And much of this starts early in the day: the general movement of the town, the activity in the streets and shops—women buying panty hose at the last minute, twisting lipsticks at the pharmacy in search of a plum color. Men carry cases of beer home to drink in their front

yards. Pumpkin seeds and beef jerky. Taking showers only minutes before it is time to go.

Saturdays in this town are for dancing, have always been. This town is only slightly bigger than the ones around it, but it is the only one with a Veterans Hall, big enough to hold hundreds. By evening, those other little towns are left with bare streets, their lone gas stations shutting down for the night, a stream of cars heading away to the bigger town. They leave only the churchgoers and the old people already in their beds. They leave parents awake, listening for the slide of a window or too many footsteps. They leave the slow blink atop the height of the water tower, a red glow that dulls and then brightens again as if it were any other day of the week.

For a moment, the mother does not know whether to go to the kitchen herself or to send her husband. She does not want to take her eyes away from her son and yet at the same time is afraid to be alone with him. She says to her husband, "*Una crema*," but doesn't move toward getting the items she needs to make a lotion for the boy. She needs crushed mint leaves from the kitchen. She needs oil and water, rose petals from the yard.

"Do you want me to go?" her husband asks her. On the bed, the boy is sound asleep, and the sight of him in such a peaceful state almost makes her say yes. But she resists.

"No," she tells her husband. "I'll go."

She is sore from so much sitting, and the tension of having stayed awake makes movement all the worse. The rest of the house seems strangely pleasant: the living room bright because it faces east, the large clock ticking contentedly. She wishes she could tell her husband what to do, but she knows they cannot call a doctor and have him witness this. She has considered a priest, but her husband does not go to church. In the face of this indecision, the calm rooms in the rest of the house frustrate her. She wants to make noise, even from simple activity. From the kitchen, she takes a large bowl and searches

her windowsill for a few sprigs of mint. She sets out a bottle of olive oil and a cup of cold water from the faucet.

In the front yard, where the roses line the skinny walkway to their door, the day is brighter than it appeared through the windows. It is overcast, but not a ceiling of low clouds, only large ones with spaces in between, and she can see how the sun will be able to shine through them. They appear to be fast-racing clouds, and, once the sun is high enough, they will plummet the town into gray before giving way to light again. Though slight, the day erases the fear in her.

She notices the skinny walkway and the open gate where their son stumbled home, the place where he vomited into the grass. She had watched from the living room window, his friends behind him at a far distance, dark forms in the street, and she had waited for them to go away as her son entered the house, cursing terribly. From her rose-bushes, she notices a gathering of flies buzzing around the mess, some of it on the gray stone of their walkway. There's a streak of red in it, she can see. She quickens her pace with the rose petals when the breeze comes up and the smell of the vomit in the grass lifts, reminding her of how ill her son was only hours ago. Dropping the petals into the bowl, she hurries back into the house, trying to get away from that smell.

She is crying in the kitchen, mixing the mint and the oil and the water, and to make it froth, she adds a bit of milk and egg. The concoction doesn't seem right to her anymore, doesn't match what she recalls as a young girl, her grandmother taking down everyday bottles from the cabinets and blessing their cuts and coughs. The mother does it without any knowledge, only guessing, but it makes her feel better despite feeling lost in her inability to remember. She takes the bowl into the bathroom and dumps half a bottle of hand lotion into the bowl, and the mix turns softer and creamy.

Back in the bedroom, her husband is still at their son's bedside, but the boy has not moved. The stale odor of the room reminds her again of outside and the earlier hours and her son's vile language and her hus-

band's frantic struggle to keep the boy in bed, wild as he was. The boy tore off his own clothes, his thin hands ripping through his shirt and even his pants, shredding them, and he stalked into his bedroom naked and growling and strong. Her husband came to tower over him, beat him for coming home this way. The fear crept into her when the boy fought back and challenged and then, only by exhaustion, collapsed on the bed. He was quiet. And then the odor came. The smell was of liquor at first, but then a heavy urine. Then of something rotting. Her husband had yelled at her to open the windows. Even now, the smell lingers in the air.

"He's still sleeping," her husband whispers. "What do you have there?"

"A cure my grandmother used to give us," she says, half expecting her husband to ignore her and the bowl.

"You want to put it on him?" he offers, and she knows that her husband is asking whether or not she is still afraid.

She does not answer him but moves to the bed, setting the bowl on the floor. With her fingertips, she dips into the concoction and then, resisting an impulse to hold her breath, rubs it on her son's bare legs. They are remarkably smooth, and she looks at her husband as if to have him reassure her that what she had seen last night had not been an illusion. Her son's legs are hairless and cool to the touch. There are no raised veins. They are not reddened with welts. They are not laced with deep scratches made with terrible fingers.

The boy spent the early part of Saturday evening with a group of friends, all of them drinking in the backyard at the house of a girl whose parents were visiting relatives in another town. Even before the sun had set, most of the boy's friends had already had enough to drink, and they tried to convince some of the older boys to go back out and buy beer. But by then, the girls put a stop to all of it, saying the hall wouldn't let them in if they smelled beer on them.

The boy liked being with these friends because he did not have to do

much. He laughed at other people when the joke was on them, and it made him feel more comfortable about himself. He smoked cigarettes and watched the orange tips get brighter and brighter as the sun went down. He looked at the girls coming in and out of the back door as they got ready for the dance. He did not drink, because he did not like the acrid taste of beer, yet he liked being here with them, knowing that every sip was what their own parents had done at their age. He did not mind seeing the others drunk—after a certain point, he knew that the drunker boys would sit next to him and talk. He would not respond except to smile, because he didn't know what else to do, what to make of their joking, their arms heavy around his shoulders.

They gathered themselves after the girls were ready and they walked to the hall, twos and threes along the sidewalk, some of them chewing big wads of hard pink gum and then spitting them into the grass. He was not as crass as the other boys, who waited to spit until they saw the dark figures of the churchgoers scowling from their porches. They divided mints between them when the hall came into view: the taillights of cars easing into the parking lot, women sitting in passenger seats waiting for their doors to be opened.

The boy got in line with the rest of them, watching as a pair of older women at the ticket table looked disapprovingly at the girls and motioned with their fingers for each of them to extend their arms. They fastened pink plastic bracelets around their wrists, ignoring the odor of alcohol. When the boy made it to them, he tried to move as close as possible, to show he was not like the rest of them, but one of the women only said, "No beer," strapping the pink bracelet tightly and taking his dollar bills.

Inside, his friends had already fractured. A flurry of kids their age milled around the edge of the dance floor while the older couples swayed gently to the band's ballad of horns and *bandoneón*. All he saw were bodies pressed together, light coming through in the spaces cleared for the dance steps of other couples, hips and fake jewelry catching. He saw the smoke blue in the air around the hanging lights;

the cigarettes, which he felt contributed to the heat; the men with unbuttoned shirt collars, their hands around the backs of laughing women.

When the song ended, with a long and mournful note on a single horn, the couples separated to applaud, and some of the women went back to their own tables. He saw that people of every situation were there—older, single women sitting at the circular tables, men his father's age with shiny belt buckles and boots. Of his own age, the boys were pestering some of the older men to buy them beer, hiding the telltale pink bands that showed their age, sneaking sips in the darker shadows of the hall's great room.

As the next song began—a wild, brash *ranchera* complete with accordion at full expansion—the milling began again, people alone, people together. He put his hands in his pockets while men removed their hats and cornered women for a dance. Couples with joined hands pushed their way to the floor that had only just settled its dust. Some alone, some together. The music roared its way through the hall, and the boy reasoned that everyone felt the way he did at the moment—lost and unnoticed, standing in place as he was.

The boy's mother spreads the concoction more vigorously, her son's legs giving way where the flesh is soft, reminding her that he is not fully grown, not a man yet. She believes her rubbing will wake him, and when he doesn't respond, she looks at her husband, who does nothing but look back.

She speaks to her son. "Are you awake?" she asks him, her hands grasping his legs quickly to shake him, but he only stirs, his head moving to one side and then stopping. "Are you in pain?"

Her husband stands up to look closely at their son's face and says to her, "His eyes are open." He waves his hand slowly in front of the boy, but still he will not speak. "I don't think he sees me."

"Are you awake?" she says again, rising to see for herself. His eyes are open, just as her husband said, but they don't seem to stare back

at her. She thinks for a moment that his open eyes will begin to water and she waits for him to blink, but he only closes his eyes once more.

"It's early still," the father says. "Don't worry."

The boy felt as if he had been the only person to notice the man with the plain silver buckle, a belt that shimmered against the glow of the yellow bulbs strung across the hall's high rafters. A plain silver buckle that gleamed like a cold eye, open and watching. Even from a distance, the boy knew it was plain, that it had no etchings, no tarnish, no scratches. He watched it tilt at the waist as the man put his boot up on the leg of a stool, leaning down to one of the girls who had come with the boy, whispering to her.

He felt as if he were the only one watching how the girl flicked her hair deliberately with her left wrist, as if to show the pink bracelet in a polite gesture to move on: she was too young.

The boy pictured himself with the same kind of arrogance, the posture that cocked the man's hips, the offering he suggested to this girl, and he wondered if he would ever grow into that kind of superiority, being capable of seducing and tempting. He watched the silver buckle blink at him, as if it watched back, as if it knew where the boy was looking.

The man finally left the girl alone, but the boy watched him, circling the dance floor, sometimes losing him between songs as the hall dimmed the lighting to invite a slow dance. Or losing him when one of the other boys distracted him with a stolen beer. But he would quickly find him again, the belt buckle gleaming and catching—a circle of silver light moving through the dark tables.

The girl from before came up to the boy and said, "That man kept bugging me," as if she expected the boy to do something about it. He turned to look at her—she was one of the girls who regularly went to church, didn't know how to behave at a dance, put up her hair because her girlfriends told her to. And now, with that strange man, she wanted trouble for its own sake, he thought. He could hear

in her voice that she wanted the attention in some form—his defense, or that man's proposal—so no one would look at her as the girl with the straight dark hair, a Sunday girl.

So the boy moved, without looking at the girl, keeping his eye on the silver buckle and followed the man, catching up to him toward the back of the hall, where only the couples who could not wait to get home were kissing, leaning against each other, backing into the wall. The man stood next to a woman, facing her and talking among all the bodies rubbing against each other, his silver buckle the only still thing, and the boy noticed that the man wore nothing but black, down to his boots. The man's teeth gleamed as he smiled, watching the boy approach. He smiled as if he expected him and ignored the woman, who disappeared into the dark bodies.

Before the boy could say anything about the girl, the man extended his hand, offering a beer. "My apologies," he said to the boy, his voice clear and strong, and the boy noticed his face—what a handsome man he was, his skin as dark as anyone's in town—but his voice not anchored by the heaviness of accent. He was not like them, the boy knew instantly.

The mother opens all the doors in the house, though the sky doesn't look as if it will break one way or the other. She draws more curtains, all the rooms filled with the muted daylight. Even the closet doors are open, flush against the walls, and she pushes the clothes apart to allow the light in the tight spaces. She thinks of the kitchen cabinets and the drawers, the small knobs that pull out of tables and nightstands, the blankets hiding the dust motes under the beds. The husband lets her do this and then says nothing as she sits in the living room all by herself with her head in her hands.

Because the front door is wide open, she hears the footsteps on the sidewalk long before they approach the house, and she looks to the porch to see a group of her son's friends coming. They walk so close together; they seem afraid and apologetic at the same time. All of

them have their heads bowed, the girls and the boys in fresh Sunday church clothes, and she knows they see the mess her son made on the front lawn.

It is odd for her to be sitting on her living room couch and seeing not the television but her own front yard, and she can do nothing but watch as the boys and girls stop at the porch, almost startled that they do not have to knock.

"What do you want?" she hears her husband say, and she turns to see him in the archway to the kitchen, where he must have heard them coming. "What did you give him last night?"

Her husband's voice is filled with rage, but she can see that her son's friends have come out of concern. And she knows they will tell her that her son had not been drinking, that they will deny that he took any drugs, and she will believe them. But she knots her fingers and her hands, trying to build up a false anger, because she is too ashamed and afraid to let them know what she and her husband saw on her boy's body, the things he said in a voice that was not his, how the house seemed to swell and breathe as if it were living itself, the whole space filling out in the same terrible way that her chest wanted to burst forth.

"We didn't give him anything," one of the boys says. "He wouldn't even take one beer."

"He's sick now!" her husband yells at them. "You understand that? *Entienden?*"

"Let them go home," the mother says. "They don't need to know anything."

The boys and girls still stand on the porch, because they see she has been talking to her husband and not them, waiting for him to order them away. But the husband does not say anything, and then one of the boys speaks up and says, "I brought him home because we found him sick. Outside the hall. He was just sick. We don't know how."

No one responds, no one asks questions. Not the husband, not the mother. And just when the mother is about to rise from the couch to

point her finger to the street, to show them away from the porch, they all know to look in the hall archway leading to the bedroom. There, clad only in his underwear, his skin pale and the dampness of the day swimming through the house, stands the boy.

He is aware of himself in a way that is unsettling, as if he has escaped his body once and for all and yet, exhausted as he feels, knows that his body is his own again. He is aware that the window to his bedroom is open and the day is overcast; the curtains move in a breeze that is chilly and has made the sheets underneath him cold. He shivers.

He hears the voices in the front of the house, the sound of his father's anger, the way only his father can sound, and his mother's hesitations. He hears the sounds of his friends but can't tell how many.

He feels the cold on his legs and he rises from the bed slowly, putting his feet on the floor, and the act of moving—like water, like the leaves outside his bedroom window today—startles him, the ease of it. Looking at his thin legs, the hollow of his own chest, he does not feel ashamed of himself as he once did.

The boy knows what he has done, what has happened, and yet, deep inside, he believes it could not have been. He thinks back to the man in the black clothes and the silver buckle, the offered beer, and the few words they spoke. The man had asked him if he spoke Spanish and when he had said no, the man had looked almost pleased. He does not remember what else they might have spoken of, only that the hall seemed to tilt and sway, the *ranchera* amplified to ten times as loud as he has ever heard, so that the man's voice came from within him. It came from the darkness when he closed his eyes to the hall's dipping and sinking, and when he opened them, it was still dark and he felt the nip of the outside air, the summer night cool compared to the pushed-together bodies of the dance inside. The cool of the sheets beneath him this morning makes him recall that outside air, how he had felt it not against his face but the bare skin of his chest, then his belly, and the metallic touch of the silver belt buckle pressing close.

The music was distant—they were away from the hall, away from the cars in the parking lot, where couples were leaving, the engines starting. He recalls now the rough edges of a tree against his back, the bark and the summer sap, the branches a canopy that hid the stars, because he looked up and saw nothing but the spaces between leaves, small stars peeking through to see him.

He had said nothing to this man, remembers how he allowed the man's hands to grab his waist, his entire arm wrapped around, lifting the boy's feet from the ground, the feeling of rising, almost levitating. He felt as if the man rose with him because he felt the hot press of the man's belly, the rough texture of hair, and now he remembers how he had let his hands run down the man's back, the knots on his spine, the fine-worked furrow, their feet on air. He kept looking up, searching for the stars between the branches.

The man, his back broad, grunted heavily. The sound frightens the boy now as he recalls it in broad daylight. The man's sound made him grow, pushing the boy up higher and higher, to where the boy could see himself in the arms of the man who glowed in the darkness of the canopy of branches, his skin a dull red, the pants and boots gone. And though he felt he was in air, he saw a flash of the man's feet entrenched fast in the ground—long, hard hooves digging into the soil, the height of horses when they charge—it was then that the boy remembers seeing and feeling at the same time—the hooves, then a piercing in the depth of his belly that made his eyes flash a whole battalion of stars, shooting and brilliant, more and more of them, until he had no choice but to scream out.

And now, at midmorning, his father and mother in the front of the house, his skin smelling of mint and roses, he knows enough to go forward and send his friends away. He wonders if he will sound different; he wonders if they will see how he carries himself now; he remembers how feeling the furrow of the man's back reminded him of the hard work of picking grapes in the summer months—his father will punish him with it. The hard work and the rattlers under the

vines, their forked tongues brushing the air, and the boy remembers that the man's tongue pushed into his with the same vigor, searching him with the same kind of terrible flick.

He rises from the bed and steps, with an unfamiliar grace, to the wide-open door of his bedroom and down the hall.

The mother sees him, the look in his eye, and she wants to say nothing at all. She believes, as she always has, that talking aloud brings moments to light, and she has refused to speak of her mother's death, of her husband's cheating, of the hatred of her brothers and sisters. She sees her son at the doorway and wants to tell him not to speak.

They all stand and wait for the boy to talk, the doors and windows open as wide as possible and every last secret of their home ready to make an easy break to the outside. The curtains swell with a passing breeze.

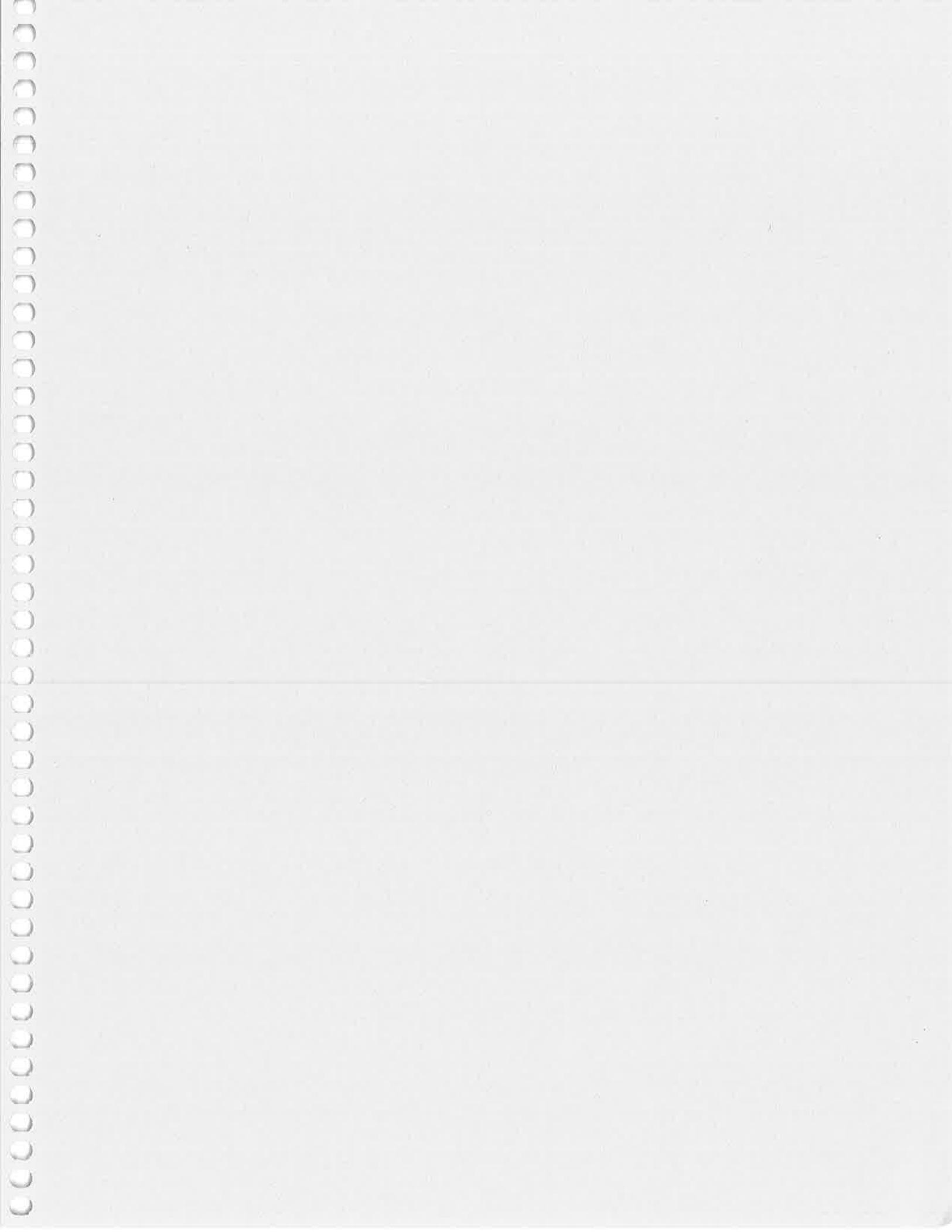
"You're awake," the father says, and walks toward the boy, and the mother hopes that he will not speak and reveal his voice. She wonders if her husband knows now, if he can tell how the side-to-side swivel of the dancers at the hall and the zigzag of their steps have invited an ancient trouble, if her husband knows the countless stories of midnight goings-on, of women with broken blood vessels streaming underneath their skin from the touch of every strange man.

She keeps wondering, even when her husband turns to the boy's friends and tells them, "See? He's fine. Now go home," and motions them away from the porch and they leave without asking her son anything at all. She wonders now if her husband has ever awakened at night, dreaming of dances where bags of church-blessed rattlesnakes have been opened in the darkness of the place, the mad slithering between feet and the screams, the rightness of that punishment, the snakes that spoke in human voices, the rushed side-to-side movement of the snakes before they coiled underneath tables to strike at ankles.

When her husband turns his back to walk to the porch, watching

the boy's friends walk off warily, she takes her chance and rushes to her underwear-clad son in the archway and grabs him by his arms—his flesh cold—and says, under her breath, "I know, I know," and then bravely, without waiting to hear what his voice might sound like, tries to pry open his mouth and check for herself.







## SOME OF THESE DAYS



hat my landlord's friends said about me was in a way the gospel truth, that is he was good to me and I was mean and ungrateful to him. All the two years I was in jail, nonetheless, I thought only of him, and I was filled with regret for the things I had done against him. I wanted him back. I didn't exactly wish to go back to live with him now, mind you, I had been too mean to him for that, but I wanted him for a friend again. After I got out of jail I would need friendship, for I didn't need to hold up even one hand to count my friends on, the only one I could even name was him. I didn't want anything to do with him physically again, I had kind of grown out of that somehow even more while in jail, and wished to try to make it with women again, but I did require my landlord's love and affection, for love was, as everybody was always saying, his special gift and talent.

He was at the time I lived with him a rather well-known singer, and he also composed songs, but even when I got into my bad trouble, he was beginning to go downhill, and not to be so in fashion. We often quarreled over his not succeeding way back then. Once I hit him when he told me how much he loved me, and knocked out one of his front teeth. But that was only after he had also criticized

me for not keeping the apartment tidy and clean and doing the dishes, and I threatened him with an old gun I kept. Of course I felt awful bad about his losing this front tooth when he needed good teeth for singing. I asked his forgiveness. We made up and I let him kiss me and hold me tight just for this one time.

I remember his white face and sad eyes at my trial for breaking and entering and possession of a dangerous weapon, and at the last his tears when the judge sentenced me. My landlord could cry and not be ashamed of crying, and so you didn't mind him shedding tears somehow. At first, then, he wrote me, for as the only person who could list himself as nearest of kin or closest tie, he was allowed by the authorities to communicate with me, and I also received little gifts from him from time to time. And then all upon a sudden the presents stopped, and shortly after that, the letters too, and then there was no word of any kind, just nothing. I realized then that I had this strong feeling for him which I had never had for anybody before, for my people had been dead from the time almost I was a toddler, and so they are shadowy and dim, whilst he is bright and clear. That is, you see, I had to admit to myself in jail (and I choked on my admission), but I had hit bottom, and could say a lot of things now to myself, I guess I was in love with him. I had really only loved women, I had always told myself, and I did not love this man so much physically, in fact he sort of made me sick to my stomach to think of him that way, though he was a good-looker with his neat black straight hair, and his robin's-egg-blue eyes, and cheery smile. . . . And so there in my cell I had to confess what did I have for him if it was not love, and yet I had treated him meaner than anybody I had ever knowed in my life, and once come close to killing him. Thinking about him all the time now, for who else was there to think about, I found I got to talking to myself more and more like an old geezer of advanced years, and in place of calling on anybody else or any higher power, since he was the only one I had ever met in my twenty years of life who said he cared. I would find myself saying like in church, *My landlord*, though that term for him

was just a joke for the both of us, for all he had was this one-room flat with two beds, and my bed was the little one, no more than a cot, and I never made enough to pay him no rent for it, he just said he would trust me. So there in my cell, especially at night, I would say *My landlord*, and finally, for my chest begin to trouble me about this time and I was short of breath often, I would just manage to get out *My lord*. That's what I would call him for short. When I got out, the first thing I made up my mind to do was find him, and I was going to put all my efforts behind the search.

And when there was no mail now at all, I would think over all the kind and good things he done for me, and the thought would come to me which was blacker than any punishment they had given me here in the big house that I had not paid him back for his good deeds. When I got out I would make it up to him. He had took me in off the street, as people say, and had tried to make a man of me, or at least a somebody out of me, and I had paid him back all in bad coin, first by threatening to kill him, and then by going bad and getting sent to jail. . . . But when I got out, I said, I will find him if I have to walk from one ocean shore to the other.

And so it did come about that way, for once out, that is all I did or found it in my heart to do, find the one who had tried to set me straight, find the one who had done for me, and shared and all.

One night after I got out of jail, I had got dead drunk and stopped a guy on Twelfth Street, and spoke, *Have you seen my lord?* This man motioned me to follow him into a dark little theater, which later I was to know all too well as one of the porno theaters, he paid for me, and brought me to a dim corner in the back, and then the same old thing started up again, he beginning to undo my clothes, and lower his head, and I jumped up and pushed him and ran out of the movie, but then stopped and looked back and waited there as it begin to give me an idea.

Now a terrible thing had happened to me in jail. I was beat on the head by another prisoner, and I lost some of the use of my right eye, so that I am always straining by pushing my neck around as if

to try to see better, and when the convict hit me that day and I was unconscious for several weeks and they despaired of my life, later on when I come to myself at last, I could remember everything that had ever happened in my whole twenty years of life except my landlord's name, and I couldn't think of it if I was to be alive. That is why I have been in the kind of difficulty I have been in. It is the hardest thing in the world to hunt for somebody if you don't know his name.

I finally thought got the idea to go back to the big building where he and I had lived together, but the building seemed to be under new management, with new super, new tenants, new everybody. Nobody anyhow remembered any singer, they said, nor any composer, and then after a time, it must have been though six months from the day I returned to New York, I realized that I had gone maybe to a building that just looked like the old building my landlord and I have lived in, and so I tore like a blue streak straight-away to this "correct" building to find out if any such person as him was living there, but as I walked around through the halls looking, I become somewhat confused all over again if this was the place either, for I had wanted so bad to find the old building where he and I had lived. I had maybe been overconfident of this one also being the correct place, and so as I walked the halls looking and peering about I become puzzled and unsure all over again, and after a few more turns, I give up and left.

That was an awesome fall, and then winter coming on and all, and no word from him, no trace, and then I remembered a thing from the day that man had beckoned me to come follow him into that theater, and I remembered something, I remembered that on account of my landlord being a gay or queer man, one of his few pleasures when he got an extra dollar was going to the porno movies in Third Avenue. My remembering this was like a light from heaven, if you can think of heaven throwing light on such a thing, for suddenly I knowed for sure that if I went to the porno movie I would find him.

The only drawback for me was these movies was somewhat expensive by now, for since I been in jail prices have surely marched upwards, and I have very little to keep me even in necessities. This was the beginning of me seriously begging, and sometimes I would be holding out my hand on the street for three-fourths of a day before I got me enough to pay my way into the porno theater. I would put down my three bucks, and enter the turnstile, and then inside wait until my eyes got used to the dark, which because of my prison illness took nearly all of ten minutes, and then I would go up to each aisle looking for my landlord. There was not a face I didn't examine carefully. . . . My interest in the spectators earned me several bawlings-out from the manager of the theater, who took me for somebody out to proposition the customers, but I paid him no mind. . . . But his fussing with me gave me an idea, too, for I am attractive to men, both young and old, me being not yet twenty-one, and so I began what was to become regular practice, letting the audience take any liberty they was in a mind to with me in the hopes that through this contact they would divulge the whereabouts of my landlord.

But here again my problem would surface, for I could not recall the very name of the person who was most dear to me, yes that was the real sore spot. But as the men in the movie theater took their liberties with me, which after a time I got sort of almost to enjoy, even though I could barely see their faces, only see enough to know they was not my landlord, I would then, I say, describe him in full to them, and I will give them this much credit, they kind of listened to me as they went about getting their kicks from me, they would bend an ear to my asking for this information, but in the end they never heard of him nor any other singer, and never knowed a man who wrote down notes for a living.

But strange as it might seem to anybody who will ever see these sheets of paper, this came to be my only connection with the world, my only life—sitting in the porno theater. Since my only purpose was to find him and from him find my own way back, this was the

only thoroughfare there was open for me to reach him. And yet I did not like it, though at the same time even disliking it as much as I did, it give me some little feeling of a resemblance to warmth and kindness as the unknown men touched me with their invisible faces and extracted from me all I had to offer, such as it was. And then when they had finished me, I would ask them if they knew my landlord (or as I whispered to myself, my lord). But none ever did.

Winter had come in earnest, was raw in the air. The last of the leaves in the park had long blown out to sea, and yet it was not to be thought of giving up the search and going to a warmer place. I would go on here until I had found him or I would know the reason why, yes, I must find him, and not give up. (I tried to keep the phrase *My lord* only for myself, for once or twice when it had slipped out to a stranger, it give him a start, and so I watched what I said from there on out.)

And then I was getting down to the last of the little money I had come out of jail with, and oh the porno theater was so dear, the admission was hiked another dollar just out of the blue, and the leads I got in that old dark hole was so few and far between. Toward the end one man sort of perked up when I mentioned my landlord, the singer, and said he thought he might have known such a fellow, but with no name to go on, he too soon give up, and said he guessed he didn't know after all.

And so I was stumped. Was I to go on patronizing the porno theater, I would have to give up food, for my panhandling did not bring in enough for both grub and movies, and yet there was something about bein' in that house, getting the warmth and attention from the stray men that meant more to me than food and drink. So I began to go without eating in earnest so as to keep up my regular attendance at the films. That was maybe, looking back on it now, a bad mistake, but what is one bad mistake in a lifetime of them.

As I did not eat now but only give my favors to the men in the porno, I grew pretty unsteady on my feet. After a while I could barely drag to the theater. Yet it was the only place I wanted to be,

especially in view of its being now full winter. But my worst fears was now realized, for I could no longer afford even the cheap lodging place I had been staying at, and all I had in the world was what was on my back, and the little in my pockets, so I had come at last to this, and yet I did not think about my plight so much as about him, for as I got weaker and weaker he seemed to stand over me as large as the figures of the film actors that raced across the screen, and at which I almost never looked, come to think of it. No, I never watched what went on on the screen itself. I watched the audience, for it was the living that would be able to give me the word.

"Oh come to me, come back and set me right!" I would whisper, hoping someone out of the audience might rise and tell me they knew where he was.

Then at last, but of course slow gradual-like, I no longer left the theater. I was too weak to go out, anyhow had no lodging now to call mine, knew if I got as far as a step beyond the entrance door of the theater, I would never get back inside to its warmth, and me still dressed in my summer clothes.

Then after a long drowsy time, days, weeks, who knows? my worse than worst fears was realized, for one—shall I say day?—for where I was now there was no day or night, and the theater never closed its doors—one time, then, I say, they *come* for me, they had been studying my condition, they told me later, and they come to take me away. I begged them with all the strength I had left not to do so, that I could still walk, that I would be gone and bother nobody again.

*When did you last sit down to a bite to eat?* A man spoke this direct into my ear, a man by whose kind of voice I knew did not belong to the porno world, but come from some outside authority.

I have lost all tract of time, I replied, closing my eyes.

*All right, buddy,* the man kept saying, and *Now, bud,* and then as I fought and kicked, they held me and put the straitjacket on me, though didn't they see I was too weak and dispirited to hurt one cruddy man jack of them.

Then as they was taking me finally away, for the first time in months, I raised my voice, as if to the whole city, and called, and shouted, and explained: "Tell him if he comes, how long I have waited and searched, that I have been hunting for him, and I cannot remember his name. I was hit in prison by another convict and the injury was small, but it destroyed my one needed memory, which is his name. That is all that is wrong with me. If you would cure me of this one little defect, I will never bother any of you again, never bother society again. I will go back to work and make a man of myself, but I have first to thank this former landlord for all he done for me."

*He is hovering between life and death.*

I repeated aloud the word *hovering* after the man who had pronounced this sentence somewhere in the vicinity of where I was lying in a bed that smelled strong of carbolic acid.

And as I said the word *hovering*, I knew his name. I raised up. Yes, my landlord's name had come back to me. . . . It had come back after all the wreck and ruin of these weeks and years.

But then one sorrow would follow upon another, as I believe my mother used to say, though that is so long ago I can't believe I had a mother, for when they saw that I was conscious and in my right mind, they come to me and begun asking questions, especially, *What was my name*. I stared at them then with the greatest puzzlement and sadness, for though I had fished up his name from so far down, I could no more remember my own name now when they asked me for it than I could have got out of my straitjacket and run a race, and I was holding on to the just-found landlord's name with the greatest difficulty, for it, too, was beginning to slip from my tongue and go disappear where it had been lost before.

As I hesitated, they begun to persecute me with their kindness, telling me how they would help me in my plight, but first of all they must have my name, and since they needed a name so bad, and was so insistent, and I could see their kindness beginning to go, and the cruelty I had known in jail coming fresh to mind, I said, "I am Sidney Fuller," giving them you see my landlord's name.

"And your age, Sidney?"

"Twenty, come next June."

"And how did you earn your living?"

"I have been without work now for some months."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"Hard labor."

"When were you last employed?"

"In prison."

There was a silence, and the papers was moved about, then: "Do you have a church or faith?"

I waited quite a while, repeating his name, and remembering I could not remember my own, and then I said, "I am of the same faith as my landlord."

There was an even longer silence then, like the questioner had been cut down by his own inquiry, anyhow they did not interrogate me any more after that, they went away and left me by myself.

After a long time, certainly days, maybe weeks, they announced the doctor was coming.

He set down on a sort of ice-cream chair beside me, and took off his glasses and wiped them. I barely saw his face.

"Sidney," he began, after it sounded like he had started to say something else first, and then changed his mind. "Sidney, I have some very serious news to impart to you, and I want you to try to be brave. It is hard for me to say what I am going to say. I will tell you what we have discovered. I want you, though, first, to swallow this tablet, and we will wait together for a few minutes, and then I will tell you."

I had swallowed the tablet it seemed a long time ago, and then all of a sudden I looked down at myself, and I saw I was not in the straitjacket, my arms was free.

"Was I bad, Doctor?" I said, and he seemed to be glad I had broke the ice, I guess.

"I believe, Sidney, that you know in part what I am going to say to you," he started up again. He was a dark man, I saw now, with

thick eyebrows, and strange, I thought, that for a doctor he seemed to have no wrinkles, his face was smooth as a sheet.

"We have done all we could to save you, you must believe us," he was going on as I struggled to hear his words through the growing drowsiness given me by the tablet. "You have a sickness, Sidney, for which unfortunately there is today no cure. . . ."

He said more, but I do not remember what, and was glad when he left, no, amend that, I was sad I guess when he left. Still, it didn't matter one way or another if anybody stayed or lit out.

But after a while, when I was a little less drowsy, a new man come in, with some white papers under his arm.

"You told us earlier when you were first admitted," he was saying, "that your immediate family is all dead. . . . Is there nobody to whom you wish to leave any word at all? . . . If there is such a person, we would appreciate your writing the name and address on each of these four sheets of papers, and add any instructions which you care to detail."

At that moment, I remembered my own name, as easily as if it had been written on the paper before me, and the sounds of it placed in my mouth and on my tongue, and since I could not give my landlord's name again and as the someone to whom I could bequeath my all, I give the inquirer with the paper my own real name:

## JAMES DE SALLES

"And his address?" the inquirer said.

I shook my head.

"Very well, then, Sidney," he said, rising from the same chair the doctor had sat in. He looked at me some time, then kind of sighed, and folded the sheaf of papers.

"Wait," I said to him then, "just a minute. . . . Could you get me writing paper, and fountain pen and ink to boot. . . ."

"Paper, yes. . . . We have only ball-point pens, though. . . ."

So then he brought the paper and the ball-point, and I have writ-

ten this down, asking another patient here from time to time how to say this, or spell that, but not showing him what I am about, and it is queer indeed isn't it, that I can only bequeath these papers to myself, for God only knows who would read them later, and it has come to me very clear in my sleep that my landlord is dead also, so there is no point in my telling my attendants that I have lied to them, that I am really James De Salles, and that my lord is or was Sidney Fuller.

But after I done wrote it all down, I was quiet in my mind and heart, and so with some effort I wrote my own name on the only thing I have to leave, and which they took from me a few moments ago with great puzzlement, for neither the person was known to them, and the address of course could not be given, and they only received it from me, I suppose, to make me feel I was being tended to.



# Poetry



QUEER

*Lie to yourself about this and you will  
forever lie about everything.*

Everybody already knows everything

so you can  
lie to them. That's what they want.

But lie to yourself, what you will

lose is yourself. Then you  
turn into them.

87

For each gay kid whose adolescence

was America in the forties or fifties  
the primary, the crucial

scenario

forever is coming out—  
or not. Or not. Or not. Or not.

*Involated velleities of self-erasure.*

Quickly after my parents  
died, I came out. Foundational narrative  
designed to confer existence.

If I had managed to come out to my  
mother, she would have blamed not  
me, but herself.

*The door through which you were shoved out  
into the light*

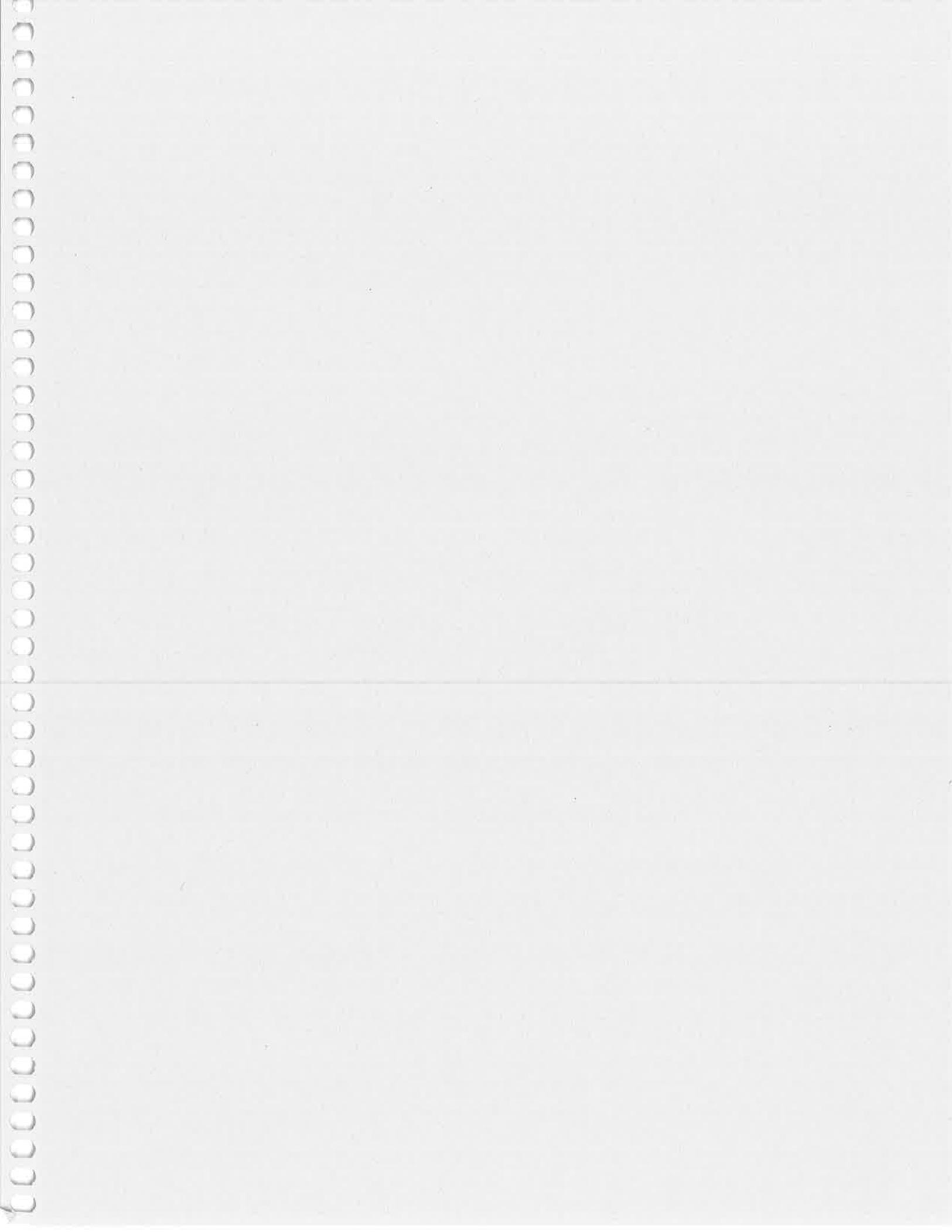
*was self-loathing and terror.*

Thank you, terror!

You learned early that adults' genteel  
fantasies about human life

were not, for you, life. You think sex  
is a knife  
driven into you to teach you that.







## I Watch Her Eat the Apple

She twirls it in her left hand,  
a small red merry-go-round.

According to the white oval sticker,  
she holds apple #4016.  
I've read in some book or other  
of four thousand fifteen fruits she held  
before this one, each equally dizzied  
by the heat in the tips of her fingers.

She twists the stem, pulls it  
like the pin of a grenade, and I just know  
somewhere someone is sitting alone on a porch,  
bruised, opened up to their wet white ribs,  
riddled by her teeth—  
lucky.

With her right hand, she lifts the sticker  
from the skin. Now,  
the apple is more naked than any apple has been  
since two bodies first touched the leaves  
of ache in the garden.

Maybe her apple is McIntosh, maybe Red Delicious.  
I only know it is the color of something I dreamed,  
some thing I gave to her after being away  
for ten thousand nights.

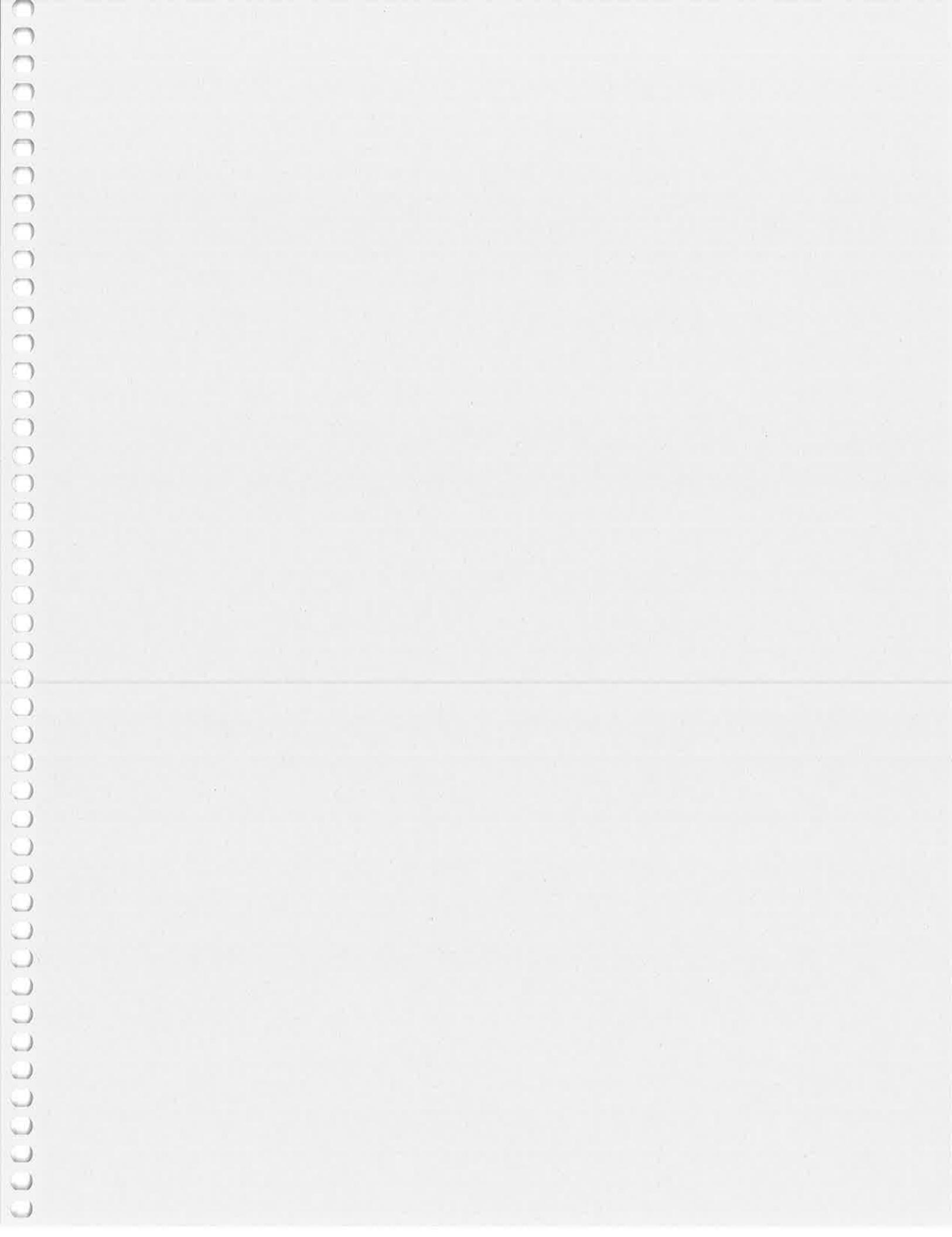
The apple pulses like a red bird in her hand—  
she is setting the red bird free,  
but the red bird will not go,  
so she pulls it to her face as if to tell it a secret.

She bites, cleaving away a red wing.  
The red bird sings. Yes,  
she bites the apple and there is music—  
a branch breaking, a ship undone by the shore,  
a knife making love to a wound, the sweet scrape  
of a match lighting the lamp of her mouth.

This blue world has never needed a woman  
to eat an apple so badly, to destroy an apple,  
to make the apple bone—  
and she does it.

I watch her eat the apple,  
carve it to the core, and set it, wobbling,  
on the table—  
a broken bell I beg to wrap my red skin around  
until there is no apple,  
there is only this woman  
who is a city of apples,  
there is only me licking the juice  
from the streets of her palm.

If there is a god of fruit or things devoured,  
and this is all it takes to be beautiful,  
then God, please,  
let her  
eat another apple  
tomorrow.





## Letter to Walt Whitman

Are you more than editions, or the grave's  
uncondition'd hair? (More likely, these days,  
perm'd and mowed to chemical perfection.)  
I hope this finds you. I know you've been bothered

all century, poets lining up  
to claim lineage. And not just poets—  
in a photobook, brand-new,  
handsome lads wrestle in sepia,

freshly laved by some historic stream:  
the roughs are models now, and pose  
in nothing on the opposite pages from stanzas  
of your verse: a twentieth-century

letter to you. As are the scrawls  
beneath the underpass, ruby and golden  
cuneiform reinscribed on train-car sides:  
songs of me and my troops, spray-painted

to our prophet, who enjoins us to follow  
—what else?—our own lights,  
intuitions glimmered in the body's  
liquid meshes, our own

and the bodies beside us . . .  
I am so far from you, Uncle, yet  
in this way emboldened:  
Last summer, in the year of our \_\_\_\_\_

16

nineteen hundred ninety-six, Paul and I  
drove to Camden, where your house still stands  
—modest, clapboard, dwarfed by the prison  
glowering across the street, where trucks shock

themselves percussively on outrageous  
potholes. Jail, detox, welfare: Camden  
accepts it all, Camden's the hole in which  
we throw anything, neighborhood so torched

it doesn't even have a restaurant.  
You dwelt here, honored, half-confined, hailed  
in your bed as a sage by a country  
you helped to misunderstand you.

I get ahead of myself, Walt; the docent  
unbolted the door to your manila rooms,  
honey of June sun through shades the tint  
of old newsprint: We loved the evidence of you,

fired by that filtering amber,  
even while the swoops of car alarms  
decibeled outside, and rips and crashes  
by the curb made us sure our car'd

been stripped to the chassis.  
Here your backpack, crumpled like a leather  
sigh; a bit of your handwriting, framed;  
a menu for a testimonial, and far too many

photos of your tomb: the stuff of image,  
useless pomp in which you readily  
partook—was this what we'd come to see?  
Then one thing made you seem alive:

your parrot, Walt, friend of the last years,  
a hand-span tall, lusters preserved  
by the taxidermist's wax, or the case  
in which he perched, or feathers' sheer

propensity to last. Your bird,  
who ate from your own hand! And sat astride  
your shoulder while you read the mail.  
On whose bright eye's skim (glass now,

liquid original long lost to time)  
curved this room, light through  
—could they have been?—these shades,  
while you crooked a finger to chuck

his ruffed neck. He's jaunty, brave,  
his painted jungle gloamed in darkening  
linseed, head crooked toward the future,  
ambiguous as a construction by Cornell . . .

I thought if I leaned near that glass I bent,  
patriarch, closer to you—he had  
had your ear, didn't he, and if I leaned  
toward his still-inquiring, precious eye . . .

I hardly heard the racket outside,  
diminishing tremolo of sirens, names  
the boys broke, laughing, as a bottle smashed:  
I bent toward your glassed companion

still these ninety years in his sealed vitrine;  
suddenly I seemed to see, tender, as if  
I could smell it, Walt, powdered, warm,  
the skin of your neck . . . Granted

this intimacy, I have some questions  
for you. Did you mean it?  
Democratic America joined by  
delight in the beauty of boys,

especially working-class ones? I joke.  
I know you meant adhesiveness,  
that bond of flesh to equal flesh,  
might be the bedrock of an order,

a compact founded on skin's durable,  
knowable flame. I've felt what I think  
you meant. I don't mean to romance this, Walt,  
but much of what I've known of fellowship

I've apprehended in the basest church,  
—where we're seldom dressed, and the affable  
equality among worshippers is  
sometimes like your democratic vista,

men held in common by our common skin.  
But it doesn't take sex to understand:  
once, in a beach side changing shed packed  
with men, all girths and degrees of furred

and smooth, firm and softened, fish-belly  
to warm rose to midnight's dimmest spaces  
between stars, sunburnt on my bench, waiting  
my turn in the mist of shower steam,

I thought, *We're all here, every one of us,*  
the men of the world in the men's house, nude,  
buffed with towels, young men and old  
and boys bathing together, so much flesh

in one place it seemed to be of the soul...  
As if I stood in that fogged, original room  
through which each individual enters  
the world, and each of us, nameless, already

in the body that would be ourselves,  
was awaiting his turn. So we stood  
in sympathy, since we understood  
our fellows would suffer, knew

we were entering upon our singular,  
shared lot... And I can understand  
how you might base on that a nation,  
Walt, though each of us left the warm

and darkened shed in separate clothes,  
in separate cars, which drained out  
of the parking lot onto the blacktop  
and the expressway back to the city,

headed home to the song of my self, self,  
self. That moment, unguarded,  
skin to skin, why didn't it make us change?

---

... I have been interrupted here

by two Jehovah's Witnesses—  
men in skinny neckwear with a boy in tow,  
his dad's blond miniature—knocking  
with millennial threats and promises.

I was not polite. Our poets fear  
the didactic, the sweeping claim; we let  
the televangelists and door-to-door  
preachers talk hope and apocalypse

while we tend more private gardens. You saw  
shattered soldier boys bound up in their beds,  
lost your day job for writing scandalous  
verse; you knew no one would base a word

upon what you believed: incendiary,  
peculiar, nothing a "good gray poet"  
could avow. Imagine being called that,  
imagine *liking* it... Your little parrot's

ghost tweaks my ear, cautionary note:  
How could I know the price you had to pay,  
what you had to say to get away with  
your astonishing news: no conflation,

you made it plain, to mistake the nipple  
for the soul, souse of ejaculate  
for the warm rain of heaven. It stops  
my breath, to think of what you said.

How? You answer as the dead do.

---

I write you now from Columbus,  
Ohio, the fourteenth floor, hotel tower  
attached to a convention center

bland as a tomb, though the simile  
lends a gravity actuality lacks:  
acres of carpet, humming fluorescent tubes,  
buoyed air, all of it waiting for someone

to sell somebody something. It's Sunday.  
I'm a visiting poet here, currently  
off duty. I'd like you to see my view:  
candescent sky, fueled with orange plumes

and smudgings of a darkling plum,  
one of Rothko's brooding visions  
of what Moses heard, all spread over  
the financial district of Columbus,

which just now I find strangely lovely.  
Down there in the nearly vacant civic  
plazas a few figures hurry against  
a vicious spring wind, random Ohioans,

black sparks from an original flame. *Men*  
*and women crowding fast in the streets, if*  
*they are not flashes and specks . . .*

---

And now I write from home, most of the day

gone. Paul's done the laundry, and downstairs  
on the couch reads Proust. Soon we'll go out  
for Vietnamese. We have what amounts  
to marriage—sexy, serviceable, pleasant,

plain. You might have lived like this  
awhile with Peter Doyle, who now can say?  
Of our company in your century,  
dust and silence almost all erase.

I wonder if you'd like those boys  
in underpants looming huge on billboards  
over Seventh Avenue? We're freer now,  
and move from ghetto to turbid mainstream.

And—explain this to a ghost!—our theorists  
question notions of identity: Are you who you love,  
or can you dwell in categorical ambiguity?  
Our numbers divide, merge and multiply;

shoulder to shoulder with our fellow folk,  
who's to say just who anyone is? You  
couldn't have imagined how many of us,  
—not just men who love men, I mean

all our uncountable specks and flares,  
powerless, uncertain . . . You would not  
like it here, despite the grassy persistence  
of your name: I've crossed the Walt Whitman Bridge,

PA to Jersey, past Walt Whitman High,  
even stopped on the Turnpike at  
(denigration of our brightest hopes)  
the Walt Whitman Service Area: shakes

and fries, the open freeway splitting what's left  
of your American night, red sparks thrown  
from semi windows arced in Independence Day  
contrails . . . What could it mean,

for a vision to come true? Not  
the child's-dream polychrome  
of those Jehovah's Witness tracts—  
happy people in sparkling nature,

a sparkling city welcoming. Poems  
are written on the back of time,  
inscriptions on the wrong side of a photograph:  
scribbled flourish of our possibility.

Is it true then, what your descendant said,  
that poetry makes nothing happen?  
Just yesterday we worked in the garden,  
earliest spring, brave sky, our apricot

newly burst into the first of seven  
burning days. (When I saw a comet  
from a plane, ancient tail a slurred flame,  
it trailed these petals' icy double

through the midnight air.) We took off our shirts,  
raked the dregs of leaves, glad for sun,  
Uncle, while slender bees worried the blooms  
in sun-buzzed endeavoring. We drove

to Fred Meyer, a sort of omnistore,  
for saline solution, gym shorts, a rake.  
In the big store's warmth and open embrace  
who could I think of but you? We were

Americans there—working, corporate,  
bikers, fancy wives, Hispanic ladies  
with seriously loaded shopping carts,  
one deftly accessorized crossdresser,

Indian kids in the ruins of their inheritance,  
loading up on Easter candy, all of us standing,  
khakis to jeans, in the bond of our common needs.  
You wrote the book against which we are read.

*Every one that sleeps is beautiful,*  
you said. Every one who shops is  
also lovely: we go out together  
to try on what the world is made of,

to accommodate all that bounty,  
to praise and appraise, to see what's new.  
As if to purchase were to celebrate.  
*I stand close with the other shoppers*

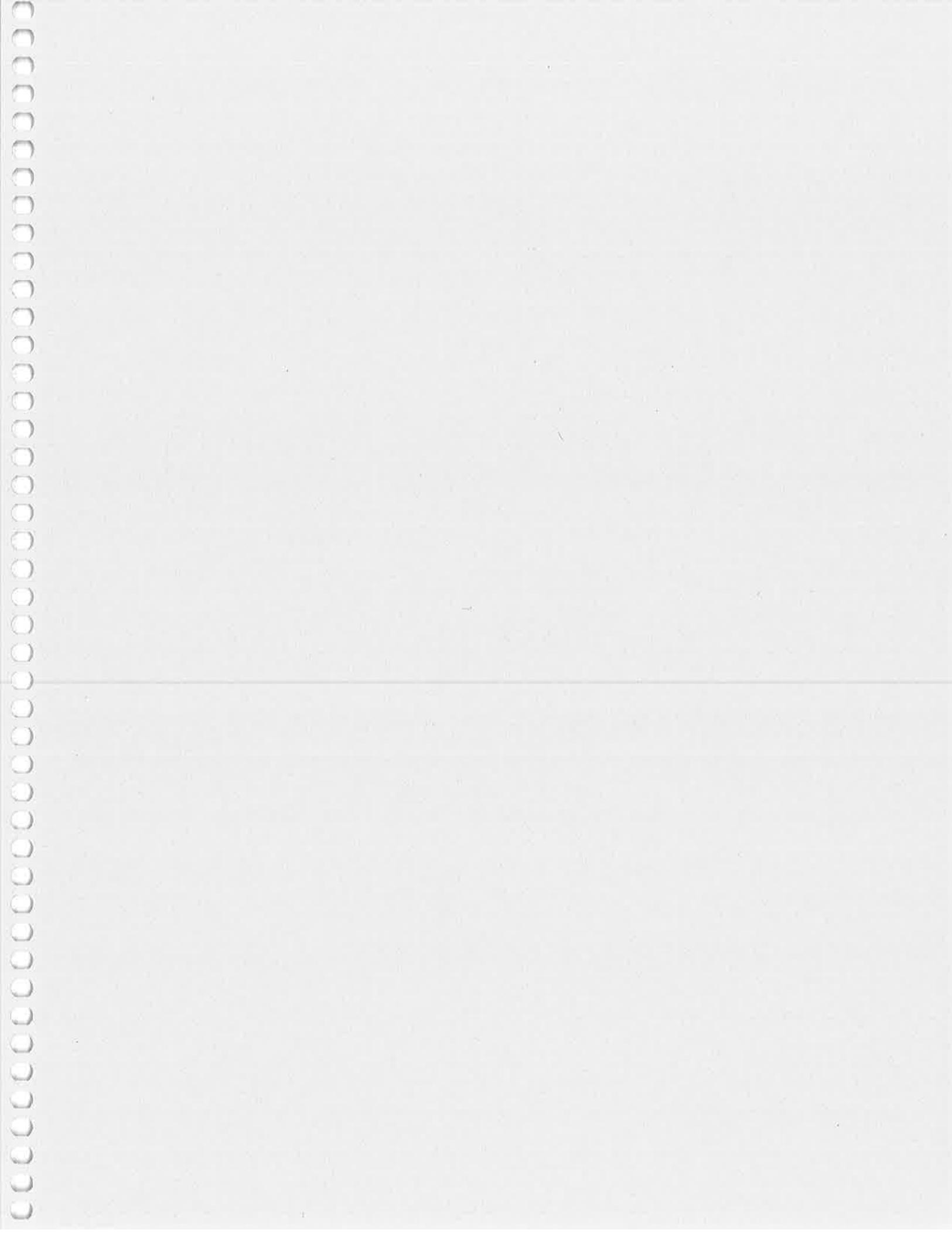
each in turn, I dream in my dream  
all the dreams . . . Who could be hopeful  
for the sheer ascending numbers of us,  
the poisoned sky and trees? Still I thought

of our apricot's upright, brandished flame,  
scintillation held to the face of heaven,  
new bees about their work  
as though there'd never been a winter.

You answer me as the dead do.  
And the poem stops here, Walt, while Paul  
and I load the car with more than we ever  
thought we'd need, white plastic bags flapping

in the breeze—the poem stops here,  
in the parking lot, waiting for you.







Deathless Aphrodite of the spangled mind,  
child of Zeus, who twists lures, I beg you  
do not break with hard pains,

O lady, my heart

but come here if ever before  
you caught my voice far off  
and listening left your father's  
golden house and came,

yoking your car. And fine birds brought you,  
quick sparrows over the black earth  
whipping their wings down the sky  
through midair—

they arrived. But you, O blessed one,  
smiled in your deathless face  
and asked what (now again) I have suffered and why  
(now again) I am calling out

and what I want to happen most of all  
in my crazy heart. Whom should I persuade (now again)  
to lead you back into her love? Who, O  
Sappho, is wronging you?

For if she flees, soon she will pursue.  
If she refuses gifts, rather will she give them.  
If she does not love, soon she will love  
even unwilling.

Come to me now: loose me from hard  
care and all my heart longs  
to accomplish, accomplish. You  
be my ally.

]

here to me from Krete to this holy temple  
where is your graceful grove  
of apple trees and altars smoking  
with frankincense.

And in it cold water makes a clear sound through  
apple branches and with roses the whole place  
is shadowed and down from radiant-shaking leaves  
sleep comes dropping.

And in it a horse meadow has come into bloom  
with spring flowers and breezes  
like honey are blowing

[ ]

In this place you Kypris taking up  
in gold cups delicately  
nectar mingled with festivities:  
pour.

]to give  
]yet of the glorious  
]of the beautiful and good, you  
    ]of pain           [me  
]blame  
]swollen  
]you take your fill. For [my thinking  
]not thus  
]is arranged  
]nor  
all night long] I am aware  
    ]of evildoing  
    ]  
    ]other  
    ]minds  
    ]blessed ones  
    ]  
    ]

]  
]**work**  
]**face**  
]  
]  
**if not, winter**  
]**no pain**  
]  
]**I bid you sing**  
**of Gongyla, Abanthis, taking up**  
**your lyre as (now again) longing**  
**floats around you,**

**you beauty. For her dress when you saw it**  
**stirred you. And I rejoice.**  
**In fact she herself once blamed me**

**Kyprogeneia**

**because I prayed**  
**this word:**  
**I want**

] of desire  
]  
] for when I look at you  
] such a Hermione  
] and to yellowhaired Helen I liken you  
]  
] among mortal women, know this  
] from every care  
] you could release me  
]  
] dewy riverbanks  
] to last all night long  
] [

**24A**

]  
]you will remember  
]for we in our youth  
did these things

yes many and beautiful things

]  
]  
]

**24C**

]  
]we live  
]  
the opposite  
]  
daring  
]  
]  
]

]  
]**quit**  
]  
]**luxurious woman**  
]  
]  
]

He seems to me equal to gods that man  
whoever he is who opposite you  
sits and listens close  
to your sweet speaking

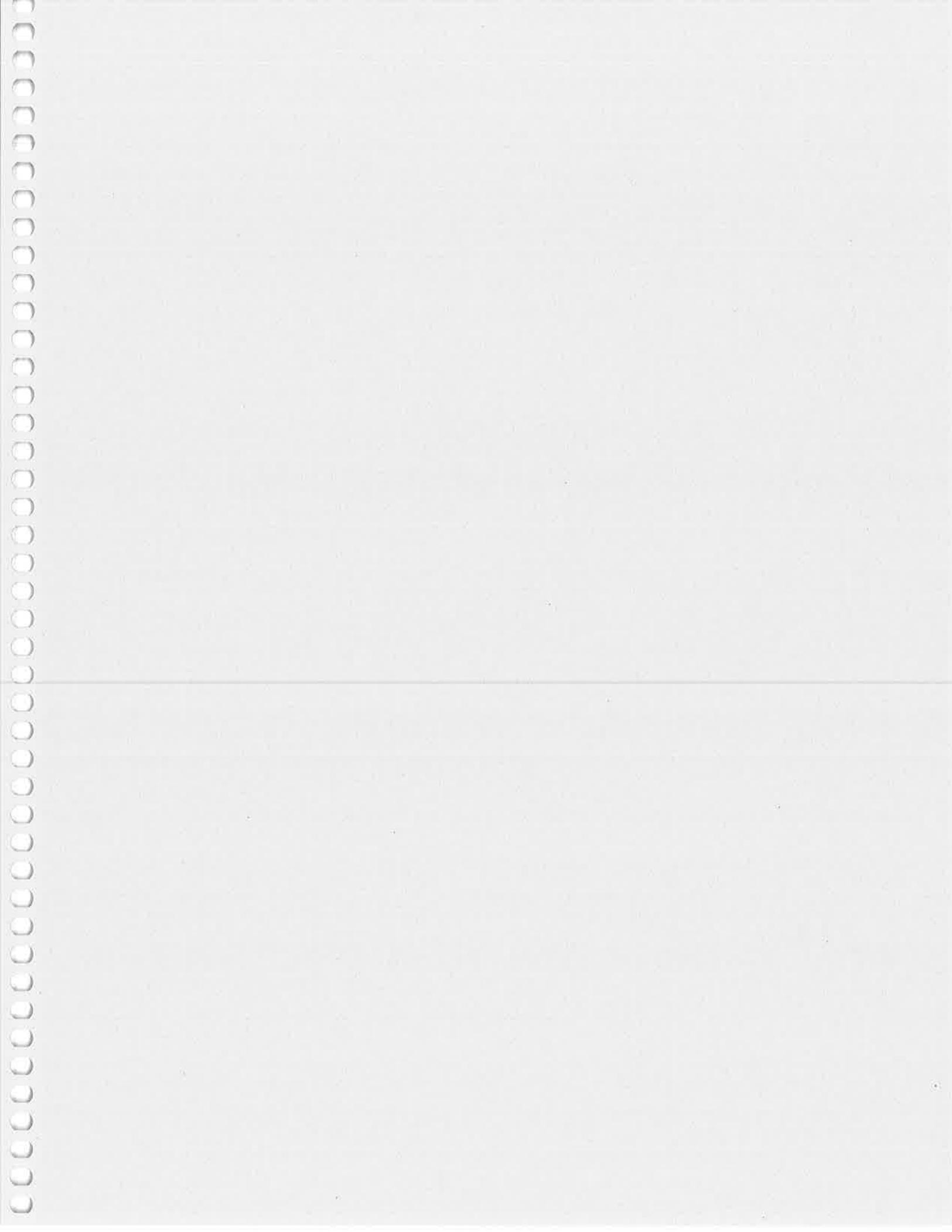
and lovely laughing—oh it  
puts the heart in my chest on wings  
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking  
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin  
fire is racing under skin  
and in eyes no sight and drumming  
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking  
grips me all, greener than grass  
I am and dead—or almost  
I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty

**who honored me  
by giving their works**





## *A Primer for the Small Weird Loves*

1

The blond boy in the red trunks is holding your head underwater  
because he is trying to kill you,

and you deserve it, you do, and you know this,

and you are ready to die in this swimming pool  
because you wanted to touch his hands and lips and this means  
your life is over anyway.

You're in the eighth grade. You know these things.

You know how to ride a dirt bike, and you know how to do  
long division,

and you know that a boy who likes boys is a dead boy, unless  
he keeps his mouth shut, which is what you  
didn't do,  
because you are weak and hollow and it doesn't matter anymore.

2

A dark-haired man in a rented bungalow is licking the whiskey  
from the back of your wrist.

He feels nothing,

keeps a knife in his pocket,

peels an apple right in front of you  
while you tramp around a mustard-colored room  
in your underwear

drinking Dutch beer from a green bottle.

After everything that was going to happen has happened  
you ask only for the cab fare home

and realize you should have asked for more  
because he couldn't care less, either way.

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22

3

The man on top of you is teaching you how to hate, sees you  
as a piece of real estate,  
just another fallow field lying underneath him  
like a sacrifice.

He's turning your back into a table so he doesn't have to  
eat off the floor, so he can get comfortable,  
pressing against you until he fits, until he's made a place for himself  
inside you.

The clock ticks from five to six. Kissing degenerates into biting.  
So you get a kidney punch, a little blood in your urine.  
It isn't over yet, it's just begun.

4

Says to himself

*The boy's no good. The boy is just no good.*

but he takes you in his arms and pushes your flesh around  
to see if you could ever be ugly to him.

You, the now familiar whipping boy, but you're beautiful,  
he can feel the dogs licking his heart.

Who gets the whip and who gets the hoops of flame?

He hits you and he hits you and he hits you.

Desire driving his hands right into your body.

*Hush, my sweet. These tornadoes are for you.*

You wanted to think of yourself as someone who did these kinds of things.

You wanted to be in love

and he happened to get in the way.

5

The green-eyed boy in the powder-blue t-shirt standing  
next to you in the supermarket recoils as if hit,  
repeatedly, by a lot of men, as if he has a history of it.

23

This is not your problem.

You have your own body to deal with.  
The lamp by the bed is broken.  
You are feeling things he's no longer in touch with.  
And everyone is speaking softly,  
so as not to wake one another.  
The wind knocks the heads of the flowers together.  
Steam rises from every cup at every table at once.  
Things happen all the time, things happen every minute  
that have nothing to do with us.

6

So you say you want a deathbed scene, the knowledge that comes  
before knowledge,  
and you want it dirty.  
And no one can ever figure out what you want,  
and you won't tell them,  
and you realize the one person in the world who loves you  
isn't the one you thought it would be,  
and you don't trust him to love you in a way  
you would enjoy.  
And the boy who loves you the wrong way is filthy.  
And the boy who loves you the wrong way keeps weakening.  
You thought if you handed over your body  
he'd do something interesting.

7

The stranger says there are no more couches and he will have to  
sleep in your bed. You try to warn him, you tell him  
you will want to get inside him, and ruin him,  
but he doesn't listen.  
You do this, you do. You take the things you love  
and tear them apart

24

or you pin them down with your body and pretend they're yours.  
So, you kiss him, and he doesn't move, he doesn't  
pull away, and you keep on kissing him. And he hasn't moved,  
he's frozen, and you've kissed him, and he'll never  
forgive you, and maybe now he'll leave you alone.

25

# Essay



# I AM YOUR CONSCIOUS, I AM LOVE

A paean 2 Prince  
By Hilton Als

## IF I WAS YOUR GIRLFRIEND

Dick jokes, ass jokes, black-women-versus-white-women jokes, Taliban jokes, Whitney Houston jokes, more sex jokes, and then, finally, the best joke of all, because it plays like a confession telegraphed directly out of the comedian's subconscious. From Jamie Foxx's 2002 television stand-up special, *I Might Need Security*: "Hollywood is freaky ... You get the chance to meet all your, you know, your favorite stars when you're in Hollywood. And I met Prince ... the man, you know what I'm sayin'?" Applause.

Jamie Foxx, dressed in a blue shirt with a satin sheen and dark trousers, traverses the stage, a pin spot following him as he follows his thoughts. "I'm not no fag," he continues, almost bashfully. "But uh. I mean, he's cute, he pretty ... I just ain't never seen no man that look like that. Just dainty and shit." Beat. Hangdog expression. "I couldn't look at him in his eyes." Because "this little pretty bitch ... came out with a little ice-skating outfit on, you know? With the boots sewn into the shit. And I'm like, That's nice ... I'm not gay. I'm just saying that's nice." More existential shrugging of the shoulders, turning away from the audience, embarrass-

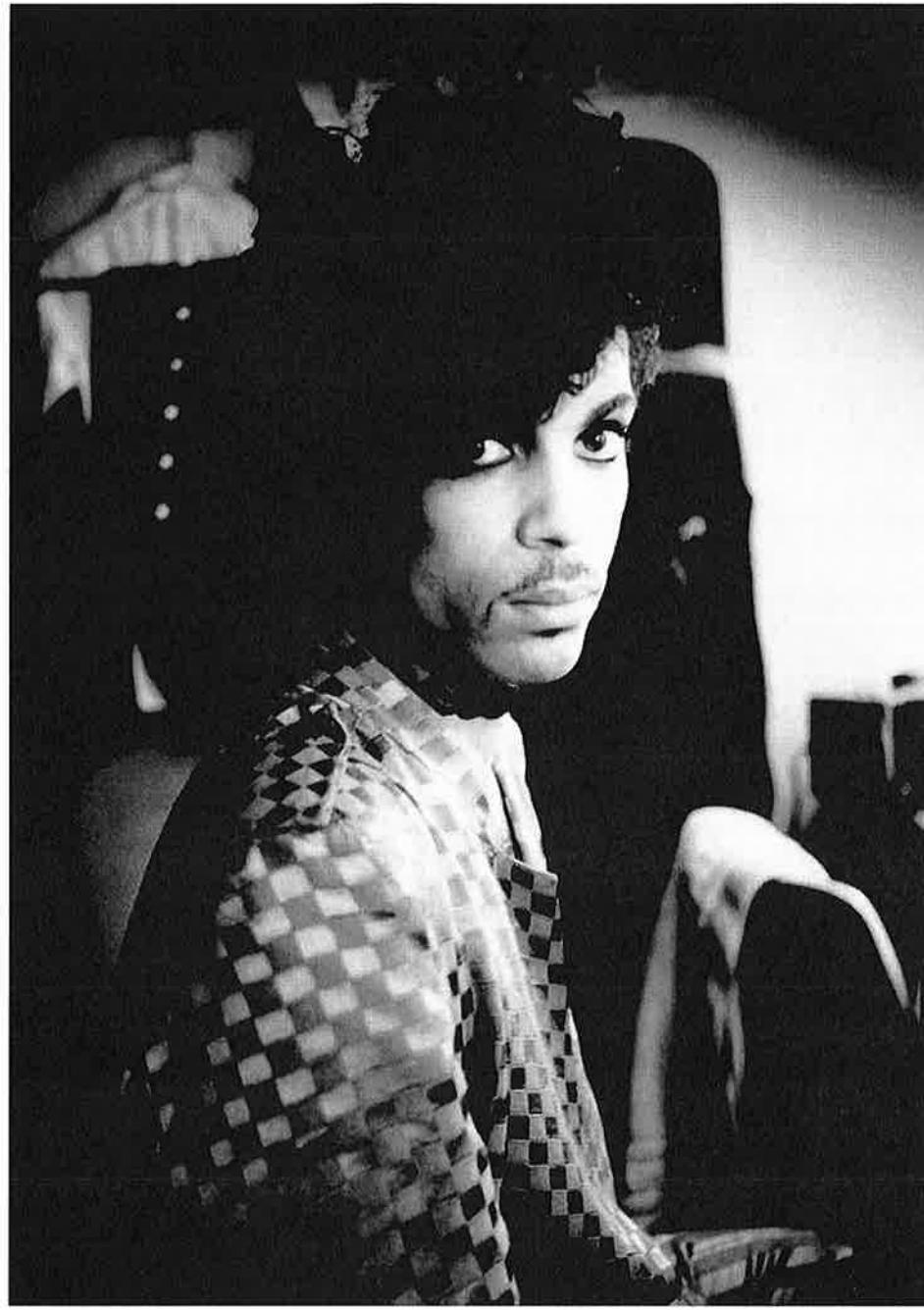
ment and confusion as Foxx's desire attaches itself to a different, or rather unexpected, form. This is America, after all, where for sex to be sex it needs to be shaming. He flashes his goofy overbite. "I know you thinking—you thinking I'm gay," Foxx says, more to his own heart and mind, perhaps, than to anyone in the audience. "I'm just saying I challenge any dude in here not to look in his eyes and feel some kind of shit ... 'Cause he was pretty. He looked like a deer or something, or a fawn ... I shouldn't even be telling you this shit." More laughter from the audience, more abashment from Foxx.

Then Foxx recalls how Prince started "talking with that shit"—adding a little audio to his distinctive visuals. Prince's speaking voice—which Foxx's audience may or may not know from a thousand and one uncandid interviews on VH1 and the like, or an awards show, or something—betrays his slight frame: it's deep and steady with few inflections. In any case, Foxx is spot-on when he imitates it. Foxx as Prince, utterly cool: "So how's everything going?" Foxx as himself, his eyes downcast: "You know ..." As Prince: "I heard you and LL [Cool J, the rapper who co-starred with Foxx in Oliver Stone's *Any Given Sunday* (1999)] got into it ... What do you think Jesus would have done in that situation?" Foxx, again as himself: "I don't know. Knuckle up." Laughter. And then,

shaking off his Prince impersonation: "I glanced in his eyes once." After a while, defiantly: "Okay, yeah. Okay, I was a fag for two seconds. But I wasn't on the bottom of the shit, I was on top, don't get it twisted ... I'd have fucked the shit out of that motherfucker. That troubled me though, man ... When I left, the security guard knew something was wrong with me. He was like, 'What's up playa? ... You looked in his eyes, didn't you?'" Foxx admits, sheepishly, that he did. He is so confused. Freeing his mind—will his ass follow? And then what? Will he be a fag, forever desperate to stare up into Prince's slightly-lighter-than-the-color-of-Mercurochrome prettiness? Then Foxx asks the security guard if he's ever looked into Prince's eyes.

And one thinks, Looking into Prince's eyes must be like looking at the world. Or, more specifically, the world of one black man loving another. How freaky is that? And who's on top in that kind of mind fuck? (Probably Prince, given that he's capable of articulating this basic truth, as he does in his 1992 song "Sexy M.F.": "In a word or 2—it's u I wanna do/ No, not cha body, yo mind you fool.") In any case, as Foxx moves away from Prince's world, the maestro's security guard answers in the affirmative; he's looked into Prince's eyes as well. Foxx asks him what happened after that. And the guard—another brother in love,

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but, unlike Foxx, okay with it—says, as if the whole thing is the most natural exchange in the world:

"I've been fucking him for two years now."

**B**eing enthralled—or, more accurately, frightened and turned on by Prince and what his various looks said about an aspect of black male sexuality—was that something only comedians could talk about? And

when they did, did Prince's weirdness have to be the butt of the joke, so to speak, along with colored queerness? For the most part, I wasn't interested in the Prince who produced *1999* and *Purple Rain* and *Around the World in a Day* and at least half of Sign "O" the Times (all released between 1982 and 1987). Those felt like self-consciously "white" pop albums to me, a craven desire on The Artist's part to belong to the world outside the colored

queens I had known growing up, who called Prince "Miss." Why did he want to leave us for that non-world of convention he seemed to aspire to, where "she" got married to a woman who looked like her, then, to make matters worse, dressed as Miles Davis had while on tour promoting his rock-jazz fusion album *Bitches Brew*? Why did he want to betray the colored queer in himself?

At parties in New York, up-town and down, I stopped dancing when white frat boys pumped their fists in the air to "1999," or slid across the floor when "Kiss" came on, or grabbed their obliging girlfriends—girls unlike the fierce dykes who sang and played backup for Prince in his early years—and twirled them around to "Raspberry Beret." They didn't know what he meant by any of it, and I did, but I no longer mattered; what mattered was Prince's acquisition of a larger audience, those people who purchased records and filled concert halls, not the black queens who lip-synched to "Sister" while voguing near the Hudson River in the clear light of night. But in 1988, Prince redeemed himself—somewhat. That year, he released *Love-sexy*. It was as if Lazarus had risen from some strange frat-boy-populated cave. The cover told us everything: it was Prince, naked, his hair feathered. The album featured another female doppelgänger—Cat, a dancer and singer who looked like Prince insofar as anyone could look like Prince. She was spectacular in ways that Prince had toned down by then. You could see it in the music videos. He performed, but Cat worked. But he was still too much the showman and the Boss Man not to upstage her.

Cat was beautiful. She had a big ass. She posed on the Thunderbird that Prince and his cohort partied on at the end of the show. With her

long, curly hair and well-toned biceps, Cat was the girl Prince had been before he stopped being a girl: outrageous and demanding. She rapped to the audience. She got right in our collective face; you could see her eyeliner. Prince smiled behind his guitar, behind his own shimmering ass as Cat became him and sang his lyrics: a twinning for the ages. Cat was not only Prince, she was Cynthia and Rosie from Sly's Family Stone, Betty Davis without Miles. I longed for that twinning. I longed to be the Prince to someone's Cat, and the other way around, too. Like a figure in a Platonic dialogue, I had always longed to meet my other half, my Prince half. If Prince had his twin, why couldn't I? But twinship did not come easily. In time I would find my Prince, but when I did it was complicated. He wanted Dorothy Parker, and I was not Dorothy Parker.

“Sir?” the young black security guard said tentatively. There was a pause, followed by a barely audible response from the room beyond. All around, one could hear the grumblings of trunks being wheeled this way and that and of the gaffers and food-service people and sound engineers setting up for another show. The venue: St. Louis’s Savvis Center. The artist: Prince Rogers Nelson. The occasion: a 2004 tour for his album *Musicology*, his first to reach *Billboard*’s top five since ♀, in 1992.

St. Louis was the twenty-sixth stop on the American tour for *Musicology*, which a number of industry insiders were calling Prince’s comeback after years of hassles with his former record company, Warner Bros., and of artistic floundering as well. He was re-emerging from under all that as an artist of present-day significance and clout, without which significance and clout he could become—as less gifted and less tenacious musicians of his generation already had—(at best) a legend who worked occasionally or (at worst) a creepy novelty act.

Outside, the May air was thick. Inside, the air was thick, too, but with anticipation—over what Prince might demand or suddenly require

from the seclusion of his dressing room. His dressing room was located a floor below the auditorium proper, where, in just under two and a half hours, many, many people would converge with the happy expectation of demanding something from him.

**W**

hen I saw Prince at Madison Square Garden on the *Lovesexy* tour, in 1988, he wore a halter top and tight little pants. He danced, and his ass danced with him. In the colored world, a big ass is part of one’s physiology, one’s legacy. I could only show my ass with my mouth—that is, through language. Which felt distinctly different from the mouth and ass that fucked us up so beautifully in performance. Prince was showing his ass again, and everyone in the audience could taste it. He had the black-queen vote again: he was dressed in the height of trannywear.

But that didn’t last long. He wanted to be a boy and play in the world of corporate politics. He split with his record label, albums were released under other names, all that twisted righteousness forsaken so Prince could approximate being less a freak and more a man in the eyes of those white men he disparaged but must have admired for what they had that so few colored boys ever have: power. Maybe Prince was trying on power like he’d try on garters or fishnets. But he didn’t jettison the suits—or his suit—fast enough to win me back. And if it hadn’t been for the love of others, I might never have forgiven him. So until I met him, I saw Prince only through other people—when I saw him at all. He was like a bride who had left me at the altar of difference to embrace the normative. Could my queer heart ever forgive him?

I saw the *Lovesexy* show with a white boy I was very much taken with who was not as taken with me as he was with his fear. I made him a peach pie I thought we might like to eat during the performance, but the performance irked him: it took away from his drama, from the centrality of his maleness. He “loved” Prince but not his power. And that is what it must always have been like for

Prince: Black queen (if only in spirit), how dare you walk into the room and suck us all up in you? How dare you suggest, as you did in “Controversy,” that you were neither male nor female but possess the power of both? Can’t you see I’m here? A white queer (or straight) man sitting here, the natural custodian of the world’s attention? What gives you, Prince, the right to take that spotlight away from me and shine it on that fine ass of yours, which no flat-assed white man could ever hope to approximate, let alone compete with? The pie grew sticky in my lap. He refused to eat it.

No love is perfect. But in that relationship—as in every relationship I’ve had with someone outside my race—I focused on the cracks, or on the pie crust that was underdone and that I tried to eat anyway for a while, even though it looked and tasted white and nasty. During the time Prince was on his *Lovesexy* tour and Cat was being some version of him, New York was in the grip of its first real brush with political correctness. Prince showed his ass, and white liberals thought every other black person should, too, given their history of oppression—but at a distance, maybe from a stage: they didn’t want all that funk in their faces. I resented this well-meaning, condescending attitude even as I benefited from it by having a sensitive, “understanding” white boyfriend. But he wasn’t really my boyfriend. We did our share of heavy petting, but talking about the projects we were meant to do in the future was the point. (It is not beyond me now to face this fact: working with a black person in the arts then was considered the red badge of courage.) That worked out nicely for both of us. I had talent I could withhold at will, while he had a body he could withhold at will. I kicked him once, when I felt he was taking up too much room and he felt that he could, why couldn’t he? Another time, I went to a bar to kick his ass after I’d discovered that he’d set someone up with someone I was in love with because why not, why wouldn’t he? Still, no matter how often my attempts to be with him were thwarted by his need to be cool—very few in our set were actively in-

volved with black men; they'd sleep with them, sure, but they wouldn't take them out in the world; relationships didn't look like that—I couldn't get my heart around this act of love: I couldn't imagine sucking his dick. I didn't believe in that. The world sucked white men off. He didn't need me. But I needed to keep working for his love, which I didn't want anyway. Eventually our tension exploded—or, rather, I exploded. I stopped speaking to him once various aspects of his life—other boyfriends, other projects—kept inserting themselves into my separate relationships and projects. He didn't want to fuck me, but he loved inserting himself into my world. I paid him back for his insecurity and entitlement by denying him my language—the talk that got him excited over the phone and in person. With the pie man it was all rather like a Prince song, but I forget which.

## “S

Sir? Excuse me, but he's here." The young man's soft voice was in contrast to his great height. He was maybe thirty. And like Prince's three or four other bodyguards—all black men—he wore a dark suit. While contemporary in cut, the young man's suit was reminiscent of the neat haberdashery worn by the late Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam sentries in the 1960s. But Prince was a different kind of messianic presence: ecclesiastical-minded, to be sure, but still a perfect candidate to be left behind should the Rapture come. For, although some of his lyrics had a fundamentalist-by-way-of-Thessalonians cast ("Black day, stormy night/No love, no hope in sight/Don't cry, He is coming/Don't die without knowing the cross"), he had also written of the threat of Armageddon as being a second chance at life ("War is all around us/My mind says prepare 2 fight/So if I gotta die/I'm gonna listen 2 my body tonight").

This was not new. Prince's best songs, like those of a number of black artists before him (Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Stevie Wonder), have always been an admixture of the sacred (gospel) and the profane (sex). But what Prince has rewritten in his thirty-five-year career—more than thirty solo albums, five movie sound

tracks, three starring roles in as many films, appearances in dozens of music videos (some of which he directed himself), as well as production duties on a number of albums by other artists (Sheila E., Sheena Easton, Mavis Staples, Vanity, the Mary Jane Girls, the Time) and the building of Paisley Park, a recording studio in his hometown of Minneapolis, where he lived until recently—are the often racist and homophobic attitudes by which soul music was produced and marketed, not least by black artists themselves.

Unlike Franklin or Brown, however, Prince did not grow up in a predominantly black context, which is to say the Baptist church or its environs. Sandwiched between Wisconsin and the Dakotas, Minnesota is Laura Ingalls Wilder and Robert Bly territory, home to German and Scandinavian immigrants with a strong Lutheran bent and no black music scene to speak of. Until Prince.

In general, artists forge one of two career paths for themselves early on. Either they reject the world in order to become the romantic hero of their own imagining, or they embrace the real, transmuting what they find in the streets and in people's homes into tales an audience can readily identify with. Growing up, Prince did both. And he used urban black music and black gay attitude as it filtered through and got mixed up in his predominantly white Midwestern environment to express his quintessentially American self. And it was this self—which, visually, at least, he played as male and female, gay and straight, black and white—that Prince used to remake black music in his own image.

Before Prince, black popular music had been limited by its blackness, which is to say its fundamentally Christian, blues-inflected, conservative attitude toward everything pushed in Prince's early shows with his backing band, the Revolution, and in his records: girl-on-girl action, genuine female empowerment based not on suffering but on a love of the body, a racially and thus sonically mixed world. In the 1980s, he sometimes wrote and sang songs by and about "Camille," one of his fictional alter egos. Given Prince's DJ-like mixing of homosexualist and heterosexualist impulses in his early

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work, it is not overreaching to imagine that Prince thought of race as a similarly fluid component of life. Certainly he never positioned race as a problem, as Sly Stone—certainly the most counterculturally influenced black pop lyricist before Prince—did in his song “Don’t Call Me Nigger, Whitey.” Stone was writing in a different time, but the real difference was that Prince’s politics—again in his early work—were personal, self-referential. (There are exceptions to this, of course, as there are bound to be with any artist who has such a rich and varied catalogue. But of the hundreds of songs Prince has written and performed, only a handful come to mind as overtly political—for example, 1981’s “Ronnie, Talk to Russia,” about Reagan and Star Wars, and 1987’s “Sign ‘O’ the Times,” which deals with drug addiction and poverty, among other themes.)

And when Prince did sing about his personal politics, he did so with a knowing wink directed at those audience members who delighted—as Prince obviously did, too—in the confusion he generated among those blacks and whites in the early 1980s who could not get over his light skin, relaxed hair, tranny panties, and peep-show-creep raincoat. Unlike with Little Richard (Prince’s forebear in black American androgyny), it was impossible to imagine Prince becoming a preacher as a way of renouncing his love affair with eyeliner.

To enter Prince’s world, then, was to know that rules, racial or otherwise, were self-imposed and self-limiting. As Prince sang in his 1981 hit “Controversy”: “I just can’t believe/ All the things people say/ Controversy/ Am I black or white?/ Am I straight or gay?/ Controversy/ .... Some people wanna die/so they can be free.”

But all that gender and race was in the past. By the time Prince sat in his dressing room in St. Louis going over a few things with his security guard before I was allowed to enter, he had become someone else. Gone were the panties and the towering hairdos; they had been replaced, in recent years, by relatively tame suits, Borsalinos, and discreet pendants. Gone, too, was his nervous synthesis of black soul beats and white rock riffs; if *Musicology* was about anything at all, it was about the

nostalgia Prince—and his audience—had for those presampling days when soul was soul, not pasteurized rap, and when Prince had been a phenomenon. And it was either because his audience was older, or Prince was older, or the music industry itself had grown older—and more embattled and more segregated along the way—that Prince, once the most forward-looking of artists, had entered the Negro music ghetto he once disavowed. Now he even dressed the part. Maybe he stopped showing his ass because of God. For, in addition to the more conventional aspects of black music and style he now embraced, Prince had also taken the Lord as his personal savior. He was a Jehovah’s Witness. Maybe he wouldn’t be left behind after all.

“You want some water or something?” Prince asked. He was standing in front of a table stocked with bottles of juice, soda, and water. And I almost laughed out loud, remembering what Prince had done with water in his old songs: as a set piece between Wendy and Lisa in 1984’s *Purple Rain* (“Wendy?” “Yes, Lisa.” “Is the water warm enough?” “Yes, Lisa.” “Shall we begin?”) and as a womanist-identified element on the vastly underrated album *Lovesexy* (1988). It took me a moment to retrieve the bottle of water, which he extended to me without turning around. I saw his face on a computer monitor flickering in the room before I saw his actual face. The screen faded in and out of promotional material pertaining to *Musicology*. The security guard recused himself. He did not immediately close the door behind him, which was just as well: the dressing room was relatively small and dark, and the light from the hall fell on the computer monitor and a keyboard resting near it, and on the table laden with beverages, and also on another table stocked with fruit and cheese and crackers placed kitty-corner to the first.

Both tables had been draped in black and purple fabrics. There was a leather couch against the wall facing the two tables; on either side of it was a roomy leather chair. Candles flickered on various surfaces. And as if to complement the room—or have the room complement him—Prince was in black and purple, too. He was shoeless, dressed in dark tropical wool

trousers and a black vest with wide lapels. The vest was cinched tightly around his waist. Under the vest he wore a purple shirt.

Purple has played a significant role in Prince’s lexicon as a songwriter and haberdasher—his song (and album, and debut film) “Purple Rain,” for instance, as well as a slew of lyrics throughout the years (“All of my purple life, I’ve been looking for a dame/ That would wanna be my wife/ That was my intention, babe/ If we cannot make babies, maybe we can make some time”), to say nothing of his penchant for sporting purple footwear, guitars, and suits (the comedian Sandra Bernhard has referred to him, with reverence, as “The Purple Paisley God”). But as with so much about Prince, there has been no explanation for his fixation. However, the color is associated with royalty, spirituality, mystery—and mourning.

The darkness in the dressing room acted as a kind of veil that obscured his veil of shyness. I sat down in a corner of the sofa. Prince didn’t deign to join me at first. With his back to me still, he drifted over to the food table, as if in search of something he wasn’t sure he had asked for. And not finding it there, had no choice but to sit down. He positioned himself on one of the leather chairs to the left of the sofa, his posture a caricature of weariness. I was immediately transfixed by his slight frame; his straightened hair, cut relatively short, but curled, added an additional one or two inches. (Prince stands 5’4” tall.) There was more silence, and as it unfolded, I took in his face, which had the exact shape, and large eyes, of a beautiful turtle. I asked him about his film career, which had received relatively short shrift next to his music. Suddenly animated, he said: “With film, you have to sit around a table with a bunch of other folk, talking about when you’re doing the project, as opposed to doing the project. There are so many factors that don’t have anything to do with what you want to do—and they never stick to the original vision. If a movie could be made in a shorter period of time, who knows? But there are too many people involved in all that. So,” he trailed off, half-smiling at the memory, perhaps, of meetings and shoots and the rest.

"What I prefer to do now is focus on the kind of stuff you can do—music and videos and records—with the New Power Generation." He was referring not only to the name of his band (which had changed lineup countless times since its creation in the late 1970s) but to the entire constellation of Prince-generated products that went by the name, along with a website on which he sold albums from his back catalogue, a live boxed set that he had produced himself, and so on.

Since the termination of his contract with Warner Bros. in 1996, Prince set about—with the same Mephistophelian (or Faustian, depending on who you talked to) energy he had always been known for—building an industry unto himself, the better to protect his music and his image. "Once, I was standing around with Stevie Wonder—this was early on—and I was like, 'Stevie, do you own all your own masters? Does Sly?'" Recalling Wonder's response, Prince looked slightly pained. "And Stevie said he didn't. And none of the musicians I had grown up with—the guys who taught me—had any money, because they didn't own what they created. So how can you trust anyone in this business when they don't respect you even when it comes to . . . business?" He chuckled almost noiselessly, then went on: "Remember, your friends are never on your payroll. When I wrote the word SLAVE on my face, it wasn't because I felt I was a slave to the record company but because I had to earn back what I'd already earned—which was the music."

According to Michele Anthony, former president of Sony Music, *Musicology*'s distributor, Prince interviewed a number of record-company executives for the album, which was more or less finished and packaged by the time he came knocking. She told me that artists are not usually given a distribution deal without the record company having a say in all aspects of production—music videos, publicity, advertising—and retaining ownership of the masters. "Because when you own the masters, the music has a life past the CD. For instance, if people want to sample the music or use it in a commercial or whatever, they have to go through you and pay you for fair use—profits that you share with the artist."

Despite the blurring in today's music industry of the boundaries surrounding a piece of music's ownership—let alone its authorship—record companies still assist with the manufacturing and shipping of records to as many retailers as still exist. Even though Prince's Paisley Park studio produced a number of records by a number of artists—Chaka Khan, Larry Graham, and Mavis Staples among them—in those predigital days he simply didn't have the resources to advertise and distribute these records as widely as they should have been. They sank without a trace. But such is Prince's instinct for self-preservation in a business not inclined to preserve its artists after their moment has passed that he probably knew that if *Musicology* was going to do any business at all (and have the effect of a big, splashy comeback, which Prince needed after his manumission from Warner and the commercial and artistic failures of his previous nine albums), he needed a bigger machine behind him than Paisley Park could provide. So he went to Sony. And even though Sony would not own *Musicology*'s masters and this was a one-shot distribution deal, as Anthony put it to me, "Who wouldn't want to be in the Prince business?"

So Prince traded on his aura. But he gave Sony more than that. He devised a business plan that would make his aura pay. He proposed that each ticket-holder for the *Musicology* tour be given a "free" copy of the CD (which was, after all, not free: a percentage of all ticket sales covered Sony's distribution costs). By selling tickets, and thus copies of the CD, Prince and Sony were guaranteed a certain number of "sales." The album hit the charts, where it remained, with various fluctuations, through the six-month tour. Business-wise, this was completely unprecedented. The albums counted on charts overwhelmingly were sold in stores—but albums sold were albums sold, no matter the venue or the price (*Billboard* soon changed its rules to foil Prince's tactic). In short, Prince was selling the album the best way he knew how: by selling himself—his new, heterosexualized, Jesus-loving self. As befit the times.

"It's not as if they're willing to give it up to us because we're us," Prince said to me, rather conspiratorially. I took

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"us" to mean black people. "We've always had to work that way. The question is: Where's our forty acres and a mule?" We both laughed. I thought about a moment in James Baldwin's essay about Richard Wright:

He had a trick, when he greeted me, of saying "Hey, boy!" with a kind of pleased, surprised expression on his face. It was very friendly and it was also, faintly, mockingly conspiratorial—as though we were two black boys, in league against the world, and had just managed to spirit away several loads of watermelon.

Prince then said, even more conspiratorially, "Lauryn [Hill] called me." Hill, as almost everyone knew by then, had stalled after her 1998 Grammy-winning solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. (She had released a live follow-up album in 2002 that was scorned by critics.) Bad press and a number of lawsuits from collaborators who felt they had not been properly remunerated or credited for their work plagued her. The latter problem was one Prince had dealt with on a number of occasions. "And I told her she wouldn't have to deal with all of that if she came and recorded with us. She could record with us. And keep her masters."

"I don't think Joni Mitchell"—whose complex lyrics and chord progressions Prince has acknowledged as having influenced his—"owns her masters, either," I said. "Imagine if she did."

Prince said: "She'd be Oprah."

Just then, two members of Prince's current band—Renato Neto, a Hispanic keyboardist, and the legendary black horn player and James Brown alumnus Maceo Parker—entered the room. Prince smiled sweetly when he saw Maceo—a smile I saw him confer most often when older black men sought him out.

Maceo, courtly, said that he and Renato wanted to play an arrangement that they had worked on. Prince sat quietly, rapt. After the two men finished playing, there was a moment of silence. Then Prince said, "I liked it better the other way. When you played it the other way, I cried." After they departed, Prince turned to me, his large eyes suddenly growing larger, and he said: "I'm having an epiphany! What if

you called your office and say you're not writing the article, that you're writing a book with me instead?" In his enthusiasm, Prince bounded out of the chair he had been sitting in, seized by the hope he found in another potential collaboration. When I expressed some ambivalence, Prince smiled, undeterred, suddenly as demure as in Jamie Foxx's subconscious. I could not look at Prince. Nor could I look away. He said: "Why don't you come back after the show? There's some people I'd like you to meet." After I agreed, I asked Prince what his relationship was to the press in general, perhaps as a way of asking what his interest in me was in particular. And he said, growing contemplative, "The males are not so nice to me. Not as nice as the females." And after I asked him why he thought this was so, he said: "Afraid of their feminine side, I guess."

DOROTHY PARKER, PART II:  
LYRICS FOR A SONG PRINCE  
HAS YET TO WRITE

I wanted to live with him, Prince. I wanted him to ask if I might want to be his girlfriend. I wanted to be his Dorothy Parker. I wanted to make him scrambled eggs, and I did. I could not make a poem out of any of it. Dorothy Parker, dark-haired, helmet-haired, was never a waitress like in your song, Prince, but she wrote some poems—not like yours. You can't write everything. In any case, you got certain things about her right in your do-rag'd head, and then you put them in your song, lines like "(Dorothy Parker was cool)" and "Well, earlier I'd been talkin' stuff/In a violent room/Fighting with lovers past/I needed someone with a quicker wit than mine/Dorothy was fast." Those people in the violent room were phantoms, I know, Prince, the ghosts of fingers past on your back, your neck, pushing your head toward the paper, forcing you to remember their old love—it keeps them alive, as my old loves keep me alive by forcing my hand, which writes lines like these.

In 1994, six years after I met him and knew at once I wanted to live with him, and five years after I realized I wanted to be his Dorothy Parker, we went to see Jennifer Jason Leigh in *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*. I was

jealous of Jennifer Jason Leigh's fringe, largely because he loved it; he also loved the fact that Parker left her estate to the NAACP. Negroes like you, Prince, benefited from her funny business. I was not his Dorothy Parker. I did not have the language or enough distance from language to be sentimental or amusing or cruel in conversation, as Dorothy Parker was known to have been. Sometimes men enjoy that—a girl who turns on love like a dime. It means that girl has the control, can take them by the balls, mother them, or leave them brain-fried and dry. I could not be his girl. I did not have control. I did not write verse. I did not think there was any need: there was him. Wasn't that poem enough? I walked by his side. This was years ago. I did not speak. I told him everything, but not really. I saw his skin color. It was like yours, Prince. I saw his thinness. It was like yours, Prince. I saw his difference. It was like yours, Prince. Was I in love with him or with you when I met you backstage in St. Louis or saw you in Texas? Was he in you? He laughed so hard when those boys climbed on top of you in the video for "Gett Off." Did I look as laughable to him as I tried—clumsily—to climb on top of him? He looked so lonely! As lonely as you could and did look to me, Prince; I knew your false eyelashes weren't any company at all.

I met him when *Lovesexy* came out. We worked at the same advertising agency. I was drawn to him because he was irrefutably colored in a "professional" world where no one wanted to understand that, let alone translate it. The rings and head rags, understanding George Herriman, more than getting Zora Neale Hurston's style. I have always loved translating. When I was little my younger brother did not speak. I told the world—our mother—what he wanted, what he might be thinking, based on the permutations of his silence. Later, as a student, I translated what authors meant in their novels. What a lady's train meant in one chapter, what her tears meant in another. But to return to our story: Within weeks my Princelike friend and I were out in the clubs. Those clubs looked the way New York felt then: poor and dirty and permanently crepuscular as we all danced under

pain of death (AIDS) or smoked cigarettes dipped in brown junk. In those clubs the lights went down or were turned up bright; a siren blared and hands shot up. I inched closer to him as he danced to you, Prince. But already he was you, Prince, in my mind. He had the same coloring, and the same loneliness I wanted to ~~fill~~ with my admiration. I couldn't love him enough. We were colored boys together. There is not enough of that in the world, Prince—but you know that. Still, when other people see that kind of fraternity they want to kill it. But we were so committed to each other, we never could work out what that violence meant. There was so much love between us. Why didn't anyone want us to share it? We wanted to have a good time. Our good time: reading Adrienne Kennedy and Gertrude Stein, looking at pictures by people like Jean-Paul Goude, and walking around Manhattan (the lower half)—and sometimes people wanted to kill us for that. They tried to kill us separately. White girls, sometimes. They didn't like it. The white girls we knew said to us individually: Who is he? Aren't I enough? Who is he? We never asked each other that question; we were colored together. We wore spectators and hats, we knew how to dance, we loved our mothers. The more I knew him, the more I walked with him, the more I wanted him to ask me to be his girlfriend. He loved it when you asked, in "If I Was Your Girlfriend," "Would u let me dress u/~~fill~~ Would u run 2 me if somebody hurt u/ Even if that somebody was me?" But he only sang that song to white girls. Unless I just didn't hear him. Was he singing to me?

This was so long ago. Once, I heard this story about you, Prince: You liked a girl so much, but all you wanted to do was touch the shoes she wore and sleep at the foot of her bed. You treated your love for her like a dream other people wouldn't think was worth having. Did I do the same? Was my dream to be his girlfriend, his Dorothy Parker, a dream, or an appropriate response to love, pure and not so simple? There was the rub. I rubbed against him, but I moved away right quick: I was a sad bug crawling in the folds of his Prince-like harem pants, or the wrong light

combed through his "good" Princelike hair. In 2005 he moved away from me to spare me my love—perhaps. But it was too late. I was married to him, forever. In between meeting him and his leaving, I met you, Prince, but you were already gone as you talked to me because he was gone.

Where did you two go off to, Prince? In those years—the years he was my brother and I wanted him to ask if I might be his girlfriend—I introduced him to a woman who eventually became his Dorothy Parker, a woman who, in fact, had sometimes worked as a waitress and sometimes sported a fringe and didn't have enough distance from language to be a wit but was an observer. I introduced him to her because I knew he needed a woman, Prince, in the way maybe you need a woman, a Dorothy Parker. My female friend held fast to his love, Prince, and she held fast to me. She made him scrambled eggs, and he ate those too. He liked them better than my limp and rubbery eggs, but who knows. He ate all the eggs that were put before him. He took photographs of her because he did not want to misremember her in his love; she changed her mind, and thus her shape, all the time. His photographs of her were poems—Prince songs. She loved you too, Prince, but I don't know if she saw the Prince in him that I saw; nevertheless, that didn't preclude her loving you, Prince, or him. We were all colored boys together, and she loved, as a white girl, being outside what she felt about our difference from her and our not-difference from her; our coloredness and complicated boyness were what she loved looking at onstage. Then the curtain closed. The houselights came up. She died.

As she lay dying, her white skin took on a number of shades or different colors, as if she had absorbed those aspects of Prince's race or my race that belonged to her beloved's race too. Once, my colored friend sat at her feet as she sat up dying; he was applying a salve to her swollen legs. That salve was the exact color of the makeup Prince sometimes applied to his skin in the old days so that it would show up more vibrantly onstage as he stood stock-still in something larger than a pin spot.

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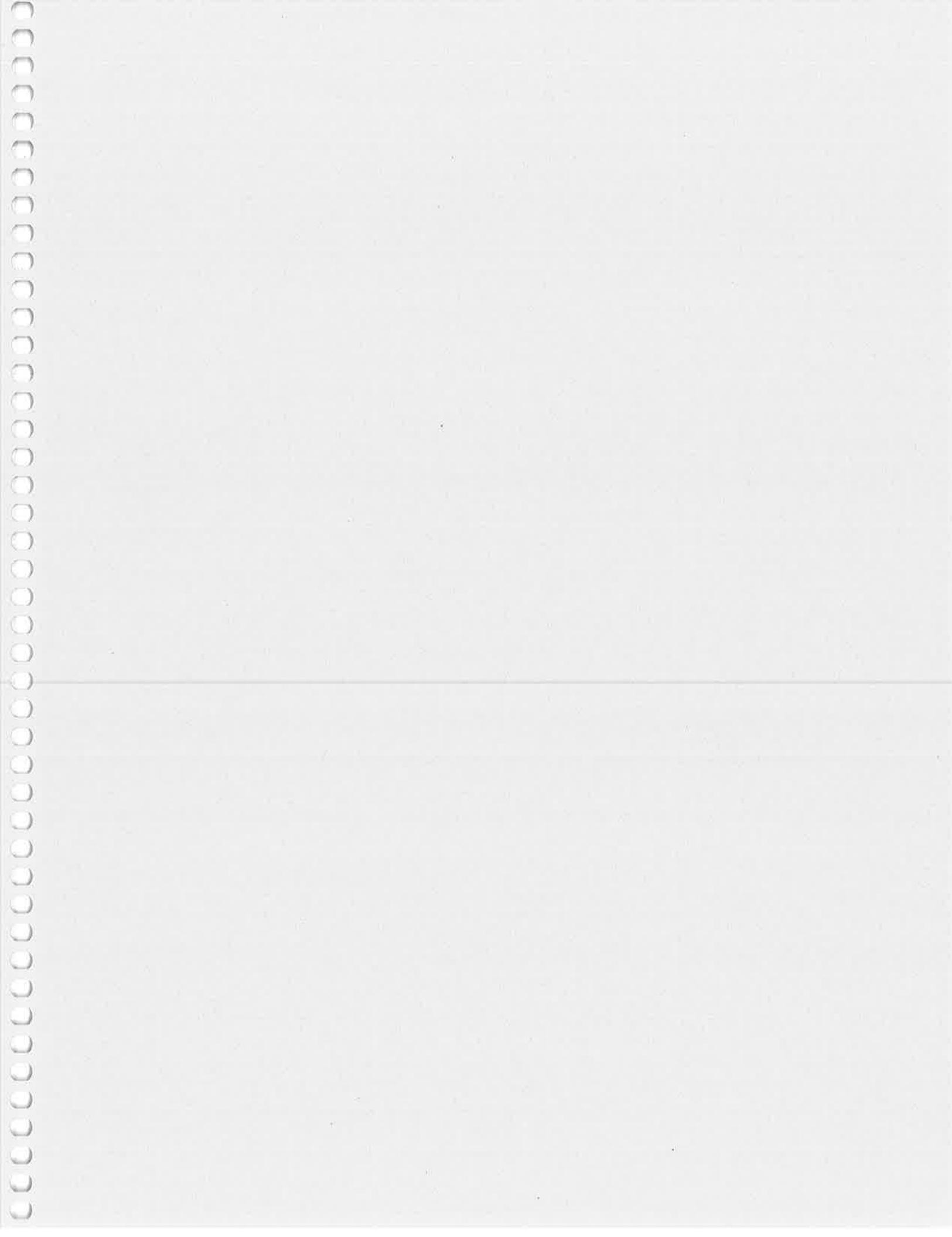
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REINALDO ARENAS

Eroticism (1992)  
(from *Before Night Falls*)

Sometimes our adventures did not end as we would have liked. I remember that traveling on a bus one day Tomasito La Goyesca grabbed at the fly of a very handsome young man. The young man had actually signaled Tomasito several times and had touched his own evidently erect penis. When Tomasito grabbed it, the man reacted violently, beat him up, and called him, and us, queers. The driver opened the door of the bus and we ran across Revolution Square while a crowd of "chaste" men and women followed, yelling insults. We took refuge in the National Library, through a back entrance, and hid in María Teresa Freyre de Andrade's office.

Tomasito's face was swollen, and Hiram Prado discovered that the wallet he was holding was someone else's. In the meleec, he had grabbed the wallet thinking it was his own; it actually belonged to the man who had beaten him, an official of the Ministry of the Interior, no less. Tomasito had lost his identification card, and now it was in the hands of the aroused man who had hit him. A few hours later, the man came to the National Library in a rage, looking for Tomasito. Since Tomasito did not want to come out of his hiding place, Hiram and I talked with him. He told us to bring the wallet to his home at midnight or he would have us all arrested.

At midnight the three of us arrived at his house, trembling. The young man had been taking a shower and came out naked and drying himself with a towel, which he then wrapped around his waist. He had drawn up a long and strange affidavit for us to sign, stating that we had returned all his documents and that he had returned ours. While we read and signed the affidavit, he was touching his penis, which again was giving signs of life. At the same time, he was insulting us, calling us immoral. In questioning us, he found out that Hiram had been in the Soviet Union, and he wondered how one could be gay after having been in that country. He also said that he would do everything in his power to have us expelled from the National Library. When

found out that I was a writer, he looked at me indignantly. But his penis was still erect, and every now and then he touched it.

He finally asked us to sit down and tell him about our lives. The towel gave us ever-increasing evidence of the man's excitement. We exchanged glances among ourselves, astonished, wishing to reach out and touch the promising bulge. We left at around four in the morning; the man dismissed us with his penis still in a state of arousal under the towel. We did not dare touch that wonderful area. We feared that it might be a trap, that the house could be full of cops to catch us in the act. But this was probably not the case. The man, who was persecuting us for being gay, probably wanted nothing more than for us to grab his penis, rub it, and suck it right then. Perhaps this kind of aberration exists in all repressive systems.

I remember another adventure with a young soldier. We met in front of UNEAC;<sup>1</sup> I gave him my address; he came by and sat on my only chair. There was no need for much talk; we both knew what we were after, because at the Coppelia urinals he had already given signs of urgent desire. We tangled in a pretty memorable sexual battle. After he had ejaculated and fucked me passionately, he dressed quietly, pulled out his Department of Public Order ID, and said, "Come with me. You are under arrest for being queer." We went to the police station. All the officers there were young, like the one who had fucked me. He declared that I was gay, that I had made a grab at his dick. I told them the truth, and that I still had his semen in my body. We were accusing each other face-to-face. Perhaps he thought that by being the active partner he had not done anything wrong. Or perhaps he saw himself as having lost his virginity to a sexually depraved person. The fact is that he had enjoyed himself like a real bastard and now wanted to put me in jail. The officers were amazed at the confession; the offense was too blatant. They ended up saying it was a shame that a member of the police force would engage in such acts, because I, after all, had my weakness, but for him, being a man, there was no excuse for getting involved with a queer. I believe a record of the proceedings was drawn up and he was expelled from the police, or at least transferred to another station.

I had other such problems with army officers. Once I went into the Barreto Woods in Miramar with a soldier. We were open with each other from the beginning. He was aroused and so was I. When we found a convenient place he said, "Kneel down and touch me here," and pointed to his belly. I tried to touch his penis, which he had taken out of his pants, but he moved my hand farther up to his waist, and what I touched was a pistol. He took the pistol out and said, "I'm going to kill you, you faggot." I bolted,

heard some shots, yelled out and threw myself into the bushes. I stayed there the whole day. I heard patrol cars; the police were looking for me. Evidently the soldier, once his sexual arousal was under control, was trying to hunt me down, fortunately to no avail.

At dawn I returned to my room in Miramar. There was a terrific-looking boy waiting for me, one of my many lovers at the time who would come back again and again. He had waited for me all night. We went up to my room and between his legs I found refuge, as I had done before among the bushes when the soldier was searching for me.

My friends also had disappointments in love and with their erotic counters. During a really dazzling carnival celebration in Havana, Tomás La Goyesca entered one of the portable urinals set up on Prado Boulevard. Nobody went there to pee, except perhaps those who had been drinking and needed to go. They then became excited and ended up entangled with other men; there were dozens of men standing around while others sucked their cocks; some were being fucked right there. At first you could not see anything; then you could make out the bright penises and the sucking mouths. When Tomásito walked in he felt someone caressing his buttocks and his legs; he felt hands rubbing and touching him all over. Finally, completely sated and unable to bear it any longer, he went out to the street, only then realizing that someone in the bathroom had picked up shit and smeared it all over his body. It was an incredible scene to watch; a queer, full of shit from head to toe, right on Prado Boulevard, in the midst of the carnival and surrounded by thousands of people. Actually, he had no trouble making his way through the crowd; the stench coming from him was so bad that as he ran, a breach opened up to make way for him. He got to the Malecón and plunged, fully clothed, into the ocean. He swam beyond El Morro and, following him closely, I lost sight of him and feared a shark might have finished him off. He swam for hours and did not come ashore until dark, when he no longer smelled of shit.

Walking back to Prado Boulevard, we made up for all this. We picked up two fabulous sailors and went to the house where Tomásito lived with his mother. She was a tolerant old lady who did not mind if he came home with men, provided he did it quietly. We enjoyed those young men as much as they enjoyed us.

Pepe Malas also had numerous tragic encounters when he tried to satisfy his erotic urges. Once he was infatuated with a great example of masculinity, a beauty who worked the night shift at the pharmacy. Pepe liked to stick his head through the small window that was left open at night, and then order

ten cents' worth of aspirin while he stared at the pharmacist's fly. One night the man, tired of this game, yelled that he did not have any aspirin and yanked the window down with such force that Pepe's head got caught as if in a guillotine that had jammed at the crucial moment. People walking by on the street were somewhat astonished to see a man stuck in the little window, while the pharmacist slept peacefully on the other side.

Another one of his adventures turned out to be a little more costly. He took a hoodlum to his room on Monserrate Street, which was on the fifth floor of an old building and had a balcony above the street. The hoodlum told Pepe to take his clothes off and then pushed him onto the balcony, locking him out. The hoodlum filled a suitcase with the queer's belongings and left. Pepe, naked on the balcony above the street, did not know what to do. It would have been ridiculous to call the police; there was no way Pepe could explain how that delightful hoodlum was able to walk away with all his clothes, including the ones he had been wearing.

Hiram Prado always got into trouble in theaters. He had been sent to the Soviet Union as a young communist student, but was expelled after he was caught sucking the cock of a young Russian during a Bolshoi Theater performance.

Some time later, on one of our literary and erotic excursions to the Isle of Pines, Hiram Prado met a young man who was part of a grapefruit picking brigade. At the height of their erotic encounter, while Hiram was sucking the young man's penis behind a theater curtain, the curtain was suddenly pulled open and there they were, on center stage. The response to their performance was not exactly applause; rather, it was a deafening roar. The young man was only sixteen years old. Hiram was arrested, shaved to the scalp, and jailed. For a week I roamed the Isle of Pines trying to find out which jail he had been taken to. When I was finally about to catch the boat back to Havana, I saw Hiram and behind him the beautiful boy, who had also been arrested, being led under guard to a ship. Hiram was deported from Havana and sent to a farm in Oriente, his place of birth. We kept writing to each other for quite some time.

Once in a while our lovers had criminal intentions or mental quirks that made them commit acts of unjustified violence. The case of Amando García is a good example. He met a beautiful young judoka and took him home. The young man told him to lie down, and then he looked at Amando García and said, "You have such a beautiful neck. Stretch it out a little more." Then the beautiful Adonis ordered, "Now, close your eyes." Amando, his neck outstretched and eyes closed like a swan in ecstasy, was desperately awaiting

the caress, when the young man gave out one of those terrifying judo pounces on Amando, and with open hand struck him on the neck. The young man was actually trying to break Amando's Adam's apple and kill him. Amando, a very strong queer, screamed so loud that his neighbors at the boardinghouse came to his assistance. They took him immediately to a hospital, spitting blood. The young man had disappeared, shouting insults.

Several of Amando's erotic adventures ended in the hospital. I recall one occasion when I introduced him to one of my regulars, a recruit. I had a group of special army; I would meet a recruit and the next day he would bring one or two of his friends, who in turn would bring one of his, so at times there were fifteen or twenty recruits in my room. This was too much of a surplus. And besides we were generous and would share our lovers with our friends, who would also feel stimulated by meeting new guys. So I took this recruit to Amando. The man was really beautiful but his penis was smaller than Amando expected. Unsatisfied, he asked the recruit to stick a baseball bat (which he kept for such purposes) up his anus. The recruit went too far and shoved almost the entire bat into Amando, causing intestinal perforation and peritonitis. For a long time he had to live with an artificial anus. (His nickname changed then from Glugú to "Double Ass.")

We would also become victims of the jealousies of those buggers, as they called themselves. Sometimes they were jealous of one another. Once I got a very good-looking youth into one of the changing booths at La Concha Beach, and another guy, apparently in love with him, called the police, saying that two men were fucking in the booth. Needless to say, all homosexual acts were illegal and punishable, and to be caught in the act could mean years in jail. But that malicious guy brought the cops right to the booth where we were, naked and sweaty. They demanded we open the door; from above they had already seen us coupled. It seemed there was absolutely no way of justifying this to the police. I quickly wrapped my belongings in my shirt, making a tight little bundle, then opened the door, and before the police could lay hands on me, gave out a yell and ran at top speed down the stairs at La Concha, jumped into the ocean, and started swimming away. That day nature was my ally; suddenly there was a tropical downpour. It was almost a miracle; I saw the police looking for me in a patrol boat along the shore, but the rain was so heavy they lost sight of me. I was able to swim naked, to Patricio Lumumba Beach, which was one or two miles from La Concha. It had stopped raining, and there were three boys jumping from the diving board. They were beautiful. In their full view I climbed up the diving

board and put on my bathing suit. Then I started talking with them. I don't know if they noticed something odd about me, but they did not ask any questions. We swam awhile, and a few minutes later they were already with me in my room, which luckily was a short walk from Patricio Lumumba Beach. They really made up for my distressing experience at La Concha. For several months I had to stop going to that beach; there were so many men wanting to fuck other men. But La Concha had been famous since the days of the Republic as a place where everybody went to fuck; you could lock yourself in those booths and do whatever you wanted. Besides, whether naked or in bathing suits, all those men were truly irresistible.

Men would go to the beach with their wives, and sit on the sand to relax; but sometimes they would go to the changing booths, have erotic adventures with other young men, and then return to their wives. I remember a particularly good-looking man playing with his son and wife in the sand. He would lie down, lift his legs, and I could see his beautiful testicles. I watched him playing with his son for a long time, lifting his legs and showing me his testicles. Finally he went to the changing booth building, took a shower, and went up to get dressed. I followed him; I think I asked him for a cigarette or a match, and he invited me in. For five minutes he was unfaithful to his wife in the most astonishing way. Later I saw him again with his wife on his arm and his son, a beautiful family picture. I think that image prompted the idea for my novel *Otra vez el mar* [The sea once again, published in the United States as *Farewell to the Sea*], because the sea really provided us with the greatest sexual excitement, that tropical sea full of extraordinary young men who swam either in the nude or in bikinis. To be by the ocean and look at the sea was always a wonderful feast; we knew that somewhere in those waves an anonymous lover would be waiting.

Once in a while we made love underwater. I became an expert at this. I managed to get a face mask and flippers. It was wonderful to dive and swim underwater and be able to feast my eyes on all those bodies. Sometimes I would make love underwater with someone who also had a face mask. Occasionally he was not alone, and while he was up to his neck in the water, I would suck his penis powerfully until he ejaculated, and would then swim away with the help of my flippers. The person he was talking to at a little distance would notice no more perhaps than a deep sigh at the moment of ejaculation.

We usually had to stand in long lines to get a booth at La Concha, but if we were unsuccessful, we would perhaps make love up in the almond trees that surrounded the beach. These were luxuriant tropical trees of dense

foliage; adolescents could easily climb them and then, up there amid warbling of birds, we would perform erotic maneuvers worthy of professional tightrope walkers.

Our greatest joy, though, was being able to rent a house at Guan Beach, always a difficult proposition. Nevertheless, during the sixties, friend or another would usually manage to get one. He would not rent house himself; it would have to be a woman or a married man. But sometimes we would get a house for the weekend or, at times, for the whole week. It was a great feast. We would all bring our notebooks and write poems, chapters of our books, and would have sex with armies of young men. The erotic and the literary went hand in hand.

I could never work in pure abstinence; the body needs to feel satisfied, give free reign to the spirit. In the afternoons I would lock myself in my room in Miramar, and sometimes write until late into the night. But during the day I roamed all the beaches, barefoot, and enjoyed unusual adventures with wonderful guys in the bushes, with ten, eleven, twelve of them at times; at other times with only one, who would be so extraordinary as to satisfy me as much as twelve.

Many of the guys would come back to me, but the problem was that house was not mine; I lived in the maid's room of my aunt Agata's home. She was, moreover, an informer for State Security, and therefore it was dangerous for those young men to pay me a visit, especially if I was home and they started pounding on the door. My aunt had many cats. I asked my lovers not to enter through the front door but through the patio, and to do this they had to jump a wall on the ocean side. Unfortunately, they would sometimes land on one of my aunt's numerous cats. The cat would let out an incredible howl and my aunt would scream louder. On many occasions, the youths were so terrified that they did not come to my room as we had agreed. Others were more daring and would climb in from the roof or the balcony on the street side. Sometimes there were four or five, and while one fucked one the others would masturbate, awaiting their turn. At times we had group sex, which was like having a party.

I would tell Lezama about my adventures. As soon as María Luisa left to prepare tea, he would ask me how I was doing and how my love life was going.<sup>2</sup> I was doing all right, although occasionally I suffered from the violence of some of my lovers, an experience shared by all of us.

I remember once, getting off the bus, I approached a muscular adolescent. We didn't waste words. One of the advantages of a pickup in Cuba was that not much talk was needed. Things were settled with a look, asking for

cigarette or saying you lived nearby and would he like to come with you. If he accepted, everything else was understood. The young man accepted, and once inside my home, surprisingly asked me to play the role of the man. Actually that gave me pleasure too, and the man went down on me. I fucked him and he enjoyed it like a convict. Then, still naked, he asked me, "And if anybody catches us here, who is the man?" He meant who fucked whom. I replied, perhaps a little cruelly, "Obviously, I am the man, since I stuck it into you." This enraged the young man, who was a judo expert, and he started to throw me against the low ceiling; thank God, he would catch me in his arms on the way down, but I was getting an awful beating. "Who? Who is the man here?" he repeated. And I, afraid to die on this one, replied, "You, because you are a judo expert."

Two blocks away from my aunt's house there was a huge school called INDER.<sup>3</sup> Thousands of young men on scholarship trained there in cycling, boxing, pole vault, and other sports. Almost all the students went through my room—sometimes a number of them, sometimes only one. Once a professor and a student met by coincidence; they looked at each other in surprise. The professor belonged to the Communist Youth Organization, and when he arrived and knocked at my door, I did not open it because I had the student in my room. He climbed onto the balcony, however, pushed the window open and came in, finding his naked student there. How could he explain to that student why, at three in the morning, he was bursting into a queer's room? The truth is, I don't know how he managed it. He left that night and returned the following day when, fortunately, the student was not there.

My erotic adventures were not limited to beaches and military camps; they also occurred in universities and university dorms where hundreds of students slept. Once I met a student whose name was Fortunato Granada. He was Colombian and had come to Cuba in the hope of studying medicine. In those years the Revolutionary government had invited many young people from all over Latin America to study at Cuban universities. Once enrolled at the universities, they were subjected to political indoctrination, and finally they were told that their country had to be liberated, that it was a victim of U.S. imperialism, that they had to return home as guerrillas.

Fortunato told me all this while we were making love on a bunk mattress in the dorm basement. He wanted to be a doctor—his reason for coming to Cuba—not to go back as a guerrilla. When he refused, his passport was taken away, and now they were threatening to expel him from the university. He was trying desperately to figure out what to do in Cuba after being expelled from the university and deprived of any ID.

We continued making love for a year; he finally had to enlist as a guerrilla fighter. I don't know if he got killed, because I never heard from him again. When I wrote *El palacio de las blanquissimas mofetas* [*The Palace of the White Skunks*], I wanted to pay tribute in a small way to this great lover of mine; the hero's name in my novel is Fortunato.

The guerrillas who were lucky returned to Cuba. One of them, Alfonso, had met Fortunato. One day Alfonso knocked at my aunt's door asking for me, and he identified himself as Fortunato's friend. I realized right away what he wanted. We became good friends and excellent lovers. He had belonged to the guerrillas and now worked for the Ministry of the Interior in Cuba. He had an official role at diplomatic affairs attended by Fidel Castro, as part of his security guard. Perhaps his homosexual inclination was forgiven because he was a foreigner; or perhaps the government didn't find out about it. He kept coming to me for years. Of course, he came only now and then and, frankly, behaved in a very masculine way. Then suddenly he disappeared; maybe he was transferred to another country on a special mission. God knows where he is now.

In addition to the pickups during the day, which generally took place at the beaches, there was another powerful homosexual scene in Havana, underground but very visible. There were pickups at night all over La Rampa, at Coppelia, on Prado Boulevard and along the Malecón Shore Drive, and at Coney Island in Marianao. These areas were full of recruits and students, single men who were locked up in barracks or schools and went out at night eager for sex. They were willing to settle for the first thing that came along. I always tried to be one of the first they met in these places. Hundreds of them ended up in my room. Sometimes they did not want to go that far, in which case we had to risk going downtown, to Old Havana, where we would walk up some stairway to the top floor and lower our pants. I think that in Cuba there was never more fucking going on than in those years, the decade of the sixties, which was precisely when all the new laws against homosexuals came into being, when the persecutions started and concentration camps were opened, when the sexual act became taboo while the "new man" was being proclaimed and masculinity exalted. Many of the young men who marched in Revolutionary Square applauding Fidel Castro, and many of the soldiers who marched, rifle in hand and with martial expressions, came to our rooms after the parades to cuddle up naked and show their real selves, sometimes revealing a tenderness and true enjoyment such as I have not been able to find again anywhere else in the world.

Perhaps deep down they realized they were breaking into the realm of the

forbidden, the dangerous, and the damned. Perhaps that is the reason why, when that moment came, they showed such fullness, such radiance, and enjoyed every instant in the awareness that it might be their last, that it could cost them many years in jail. There was, moreover, no prostitution. It was pleasure for pleasure's sake, the craving of one body for another, the need to find fulfillment. Sexual pleasure between two men was a conspiracy, something that happened in the shadows or in plain daylight, but always forbidden; a look, a wink, a gesture, a sign, was enough to start the sequence that resulted in such full enjoyment. The adventure in itself, even if fulfillment did not come with the desired body, was already a pleasure, a mystery, a surprise. To enter a movie theater was to figure out whom we would sit next to, and whether that young man over there would stretch out his leg toward us. To reach over slowly with one hand and touch his thigh, and then to dare a little more and feel the part of his pants where that penis wanted to break through the fabric; to masturbate him right then and there during an old American movie, to see how he would ejaculate, and then leave before the movie ended; and perhaps I would never see him again, after having seen his face only in profile. What does it matter, he was surely a wonderful guy.

People would really get sexually aroused on interstate trips. If you took one of those buses crowded with young men, you could be sure that some erotic games would take place during the trip. The driver would turn out the lights, and the bus would be moving on those highways full of potholes; with each lurch of the vehicle one had the opportunity for contact, for touching an erect penis, a young thigh, a strong chest; hands could move over a body, feel for the waist, unbuckle the belt, and then, cautious and eager, reach for the spot where that terrific member lay hidden. Those adventures, and the people with whom one had them, were great. Those men enjoyed their roles of active males; they wanted to be sucked and even to fuck right on the bus.

Later, in exile, I found that sexual relations can be tedious and unrewarding. There are categories or divisions in the homosexual world. The queer gets together with the queer and everybody does everything. One sucks first, and then they reverse roles. How can that bring any satisfaction? What we are really looking for is our opposite. The beauty of our relationships then was that we met our opposites. We would find that man, that powerful recruit who wanted desperately to fuck us. We were fucked under bridges, in the bushes, everywhere, by men who wanted satisfaction while they penetrated us. Either conditions here are different, or it is just difficult to duplicate what we had there. Everything here is so regulated that groups and

societies have been created in which it is very difficult for a homosexual to find a man, that is, the real object of his desire.

I do not know what to call the young Cuban men of those days, whether homosexuals who played the male role or bisexuals. The truth is that they had girlfriends or wives, but when they came to us they enjoyed themselves thoroughly, sometimes more than with their wives, who often would refuse to suck or had inhibitions that made lovemaking less pleasurable.

I remember an extraordinary mulatto, married and with several children who escaped his family once a week to fuck me on the iron chair in my room. I never saw a man enjoy sex so much. He was, nevertheless, an excellent father and exemplary husband.

I think that the sexual revolution in Cuba actually came about as a result of the existing sexual repression. Perhaps as a protest against the regime, homosexuality began to flourish with ever-increasing defiance. Moreover, since the dictatorship was considered evil, anything it proscribed was seen in a positive light by the nonconformists, who in the sixties were already almost the majority. I honestly believe that the concentration camps for homosexuals, and the police officers disguised as willing young men to entrap and arrest homosexuals, actually resulted in the promotion of homosexual activities.

In Cuba gays were not confined to a specific area of a club or beach. Everybody mingled and there was no division that would place the homosexual on the defensive. This has been lost in more advanced societies, where the homosexual has had to become a sort of sexual recluse and separate himself from the supposedly nonhomosexual society, which undoubtedly also excludes him. Since such divisions did not exist in Cuba, the interesting aspect of homosexuality there was that you did not have to be a homosexual to have a relationship with a man; a man could have intercourse with another man as an ordinary act. In the same way, a real gay who liked another gay could easily go out and live with him. But the gay who liked real macho men could also find one who wanted to live or be friends with him, without in any way interfering with the heterosexual life of that man. It was not the norm for one queer to go to bed with another queer; "she" would look for a man to fuck "her" who would feel as much pleasure as the homosexual being fucked.

Homosexual militancy has gained considerable rights for free-world gays. But what has been lost is the wonderful feeling of meeting heterosexual or bisexual men who would get pleasure from possessing another man and who would not, in turn, have to be possessed.

The ideal in any sexual relationship is finding one's opposite, and therefore the homosexual world is now something sinister and desolate; we almost never get what we most desire.

That world, of course, also had its dangers. Along with other homosexuals, I was robbed and blackmailed a number of times. Once, after I received my monthly pay from the National Library, just ninety pesos, which was not much but had to cover all of my expenses for the month, I was foolish enough to go straight to the beach. I met a marvelous youth who had caught a crab, tied it to a string, and was walking it on the sand as if it were his dog. I praised the crab while looking at the legs of the youth, who then quickly came with me to my booth. He was wearing a tiny bathing suit. I don't know how he did it, but during his sexual gymnastics, which he handled with practiced skill, he managed to steal all my money from my pants pocket and hide it in his small bathing suit. The truth is that after he left I realized that I had been cleaned out; I did not even have a nickel for the bus fare home. I looked for him all over La Concha Beach. In one of the open booths I found a smashed crab. He was evidently a violent person. The carapace was all that was left of the crab. The beautiful adolescent had disappeared without leaving a witness: not even a crab.

That afternoon I walked home. Once in my room, I continued writing a long poem. I entitled it "Morir en junio y con la lengua afuera" [To die in June, gasping for air]. A few days later I had to stop working on the poem, because somebody had entered my room through the window and stolen my typewriter. This was a serious theft; to me that typewriter was not only the one object of value in my possession but also the thing I treasured the most. To me, sitting down at the typewriter was, and still is, something extraordinary. I would be inspired (like a pianist) by the rhythm of those keys and they would carry me along. Paragraphs would follow one another like ocean waves, at times more intense, at others less so; sometimes like huge breakers that would engulf page after page, before the next paragraph. My typewriter was an old iron Underwood, but to me it was a magical instrument.

Guillermo Rosales, then a good-looking young writer, lent me his typewriter and I finished the poem.

Some time later a mulatto police officer, rather handsome in fact, showed up at my home. He told me my typewriter was at the police station. The thief had been caught burglarizing another home, and his house had been searched. They found many stolen items, my typewriter among them. Apparently the thief himself told the police that the typewriter was mine. After

many bureaucratic formalities, it was returned and I had to carry it home on a bus full of people; it seemed to weigh a ton, but I got it back home where it belonged. I was afraid it would be stolen again, and my friend Aurelio, who had the bright idea of bolting it to its metal table.

A number of times hoodlums — that is, the boys with whom I had a love — entered my room and tried to steal the typewriter, but to no effect. It was impossible to carry both typewriter and metal table. From then on I was safer, better able to continue my love life without endangering the rhythm of my literary production. That rhythm has always been part of me, even during periods of the most intense lovemaking or of the greatest police persecution. Writing crowned or complemented all other pleasures as well as other calamities.

There were three marvelous things that I enjoyed in the sixties: my typewriter, at which I sat as a dedicated performer would sit at his piano; the unique youth of those days, when everybody wanted to break away from official government policies and be free and make love; and lastly, the full discovery of the sea.

As a child, I had already been in the town of Gibara for several weeks with my aunt Ozaida, whose husband, Florentino, worked there as a bricklayer. I was able to get into the water then but not to experience the magic of the sea as much as I could later, at twenty-something. During the sixties I became an expert swimmer. I would swim out into the open sea in those crystal-clear waters, look back at the beach as if it were something very remote, and enjoy being rocked by the ocean waves. It was marvelous to dive in and behold the underwater world. The views are incomparable, no matter how much you have traveled and how many other undoubtedly interesting places you have seen. The island platform surrounding Cuba is a world of rock and coral, white, golden, and unique. I would come up glistening, smooth, full of vitality, toward that dazzling sun and its immense reflection in the water.

The sea was then my most extraordinary source of pleasure and discovery; to see the raging waves in winter; to sit looking at the sea; to walk from my home to the beach and there to experience the sunset, the twilight. Those late afternoons by the sea are unique in Cuba, particularly in Havana, where the sun falls into the sea like a giant balloon; everything seems to change at dusk, cast under a brief and mysterious spell. There is the smell of brine, of life, of the tropics. The waves, almost reaching my feet, ebbed and left a golden reflection on the sand.

I could not live too far from the sea. Every morning when I woke up, I would go to my little balcony to look at the blue, scintillating expanse.

reaching to infinity, at the lavishness of that extraordinary glittering water. I could not feel despair, because no one can feel despair when facing such beauty and vitality.

Sometimes I would get up at night to look at the sea. If the night was dark, the thundering of the surf would comfort me; it was the best company I ever had, then and always. In me the sea reverberated with erotic resonance.

While sitting at Patricio Lumumba Beach one day, I watched a teenager walk toward the wall and then disappear behind it. I followed the youth; he had lowered his bathing suit and was masturbating, looking at the sea.

I was familiar with all the nooks and crannies of the seashore around Havana, the places where a sudden deepening would attract fish of unexpected colors, the areas covered with red coral, the big rocks, the huge sandbanks where one could stand to rest. After my swim I would return home and take a shower. I generally ate little and not well. Rationing was very severe, and besides, I was registered in my aunt's rationing book. She gave me only part of my share, and usually the worst part. I once heard her say to my uncle, "I told him the chicken was spoiled so that there would be more for us." Chicken was available once a month and my aunt had a husband and three children, in addition to various lovers; because of that, I suffered more than others under the rigorous rationing quotas imposed by Castro. But after taking a shower or, rather, after dumping a bucketful of water over me (there was not enough pressure for the water to rise to my shower), I would go to UNEAC feeling so alive that all those hours of bureaucratic work seemed bearable. I had to check galleys of horrendous publications like the UNEAC magazine, where I was supposed to be an editor but was actually only a proofreader, allowed to have neither an opinion nor the right to publish. But after my ocean swim I could imagine all of it was only a nightmare; real life started near the shore in the glittering sea that would be waiting for me the next day, and into which I could vanish, at least for a few hours.

Even to own a diving mask and flippers was a privilege in Cuba. I had them thanks to Olga, the French wife of a friend of mine. Those flippers and face mask were the envy of all the young men around me at that beach. Jorge Oliva trained with them many, many times, until one day he was able to swim to the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, and freedom. La Nica, Jorge Oliva's girlfriend, trained with my swim fins too and was also able to leave Cuba secretly, via the U.S. naval base.

One day an adolescent, a really splendid creature, asked to borrow my flippers. I saw no danger in this and gave them to him. I don't know how he

managed to disappear the way he did; he must have come out of the water several miles from there. The fact is that I never saw that young man or my beloved swim fins again.

Hiram Prado, who was with me and knew the youth, said that we could pay him a visit. I did not hesitate and ventured with Hiram into one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Havana. It was known as Coco Solo, and was not far from Marianao. When we knocked at the young man's door he was so confused that he asked us to wait for him at the corner, where he showed up with more than twenty-five hoodlums armed with sticks and stones. We had to retreat at top speed.

All we could hope for was that Olga would bring us a new pair of flip-flops on her next trip to France. Olga was an incredible woman; she liked gays and found it impossible to have sex with anyone else. I assume that her life was unfulfilled, but I have met many women with such a preference. Her husband was always on the prowl for gays; they had to be passive gays who would also want to possess Olga, indeed a beautiful woman. Many heterosexuals were eager to possess her, but to no avail; she wanted to go to bed only with passive and openly gay men. Miguel asked all of us to make love to Olga and I think we all made love to his wife, out of friendly loyalty.

Miguel, however, claimed to be heterosexual, although his friends were monuments of masculine beauty. One afternoon at the beach a fierce storm broke out and Miguel and two of his friends, José Dávila and a very handsome judo expert, who I think was a member of State Security, had to take shelter in my room. Night came and they stayed over. Around midnight the judoka had an enormous erection; I had never seen a man with such a powerful penis. Miguel and José Dávila were sleeping or pretending to be asleep. The judoka, who according to Miguel and José was one of the most womanizing men they had ever met, engaged me in a memorable encounter.

A few days later Miguel came to visit and could not believe it when I told him. In any case, he soon told me that he felt the need to be possessed and prodded me to do it; I had to comply. He came to my house several times with the same request, and I always obliged. After getting dressed, he would say, "I don't do it for the pleasure; I just need a prostatic massage, which is most important to maintain a healthy equilibrium."

This kind of thing happened quite often. I remember a tanned, charming young man, very masculine, who would come to my room wanting to get laid. I confess I enjoyed possessing the type of youth who appeared to be very masculine. Even if one eventually got bored, at the beginning it was an

adventure. That young man, after being possessed and enjoying himself more than I did, would get dressed, give me a strong handshake, and say, "I've got to go, I have to see my girlfriend." And I really don't think he lied; he was a handsome guy and his girlfriends were lovely too.

My friends and I always liked to get together by the sea. Hiram Prado would wait for me under some pines, near the surf. Whenever we could, our group would go to Guanabo, Santa Marfa, and Varadero Beach near the Bay of Matanzas, or to the most remote beaches in Pinar del Rio. But our destination was always by the sea. The sea was like a feast and forced us to be happy, even when we did not particularly want to be. Perhaps subconsciously we loved the sea as a way to escape from the land where we were repressed; perhaps in floating on the waves we escaped our cursed insularity.

An ocean voyage, practically impossible in Cuba, was a major pleasure. Just to cross Havana Bay on the ferry to Regla was a marvelous experience.

Those times spent near the ocean inspired my novel *Otra vez el mar*. Like ocean waves, the manuscripts of this novel, which I had to write three times, kept vanishing and later landing, for various reasons, in the hands of the police. I imagine all those lost versions of my novel must be taking up a lot of shelf space in the Department of State Security in Cuba. Bureaucrats are very systematic and for that very reason, I hope my manuscripts have not been destroyed.

By the year 1969 I was already being subjected to persistent harassment by State Security, and I feared for the manuscripts I was continually producing. I packed all my manuscripts and the poems I had written earlier—that is, everything I had not been able to smuggle out of Cuba—in an empty cement bag, and visited all my friends in order to find one who could hide them for me without arousing the suspicions of State Security. It was not that easy to find someone willing to risk having those manuscripts; anyone found with them could spend years in prison.

Nelly Felipe kept them for me. For months my manuscripts were hidden in her house. One day she started to read them and was very honest with me: "I do like the novel but my husband is a lieutenant in State Security, and I don't want him to find those manuscripts at home." Again I found myself walking along Fifth Avenue with my cement bag full of scribbled papers and no place to take them.

I finally took them back home. In my room there was a small closet, which I was able to camouflage by wallpapering it just like the rest of the room with pages from foreign magazines, surreptitiously obtained. The

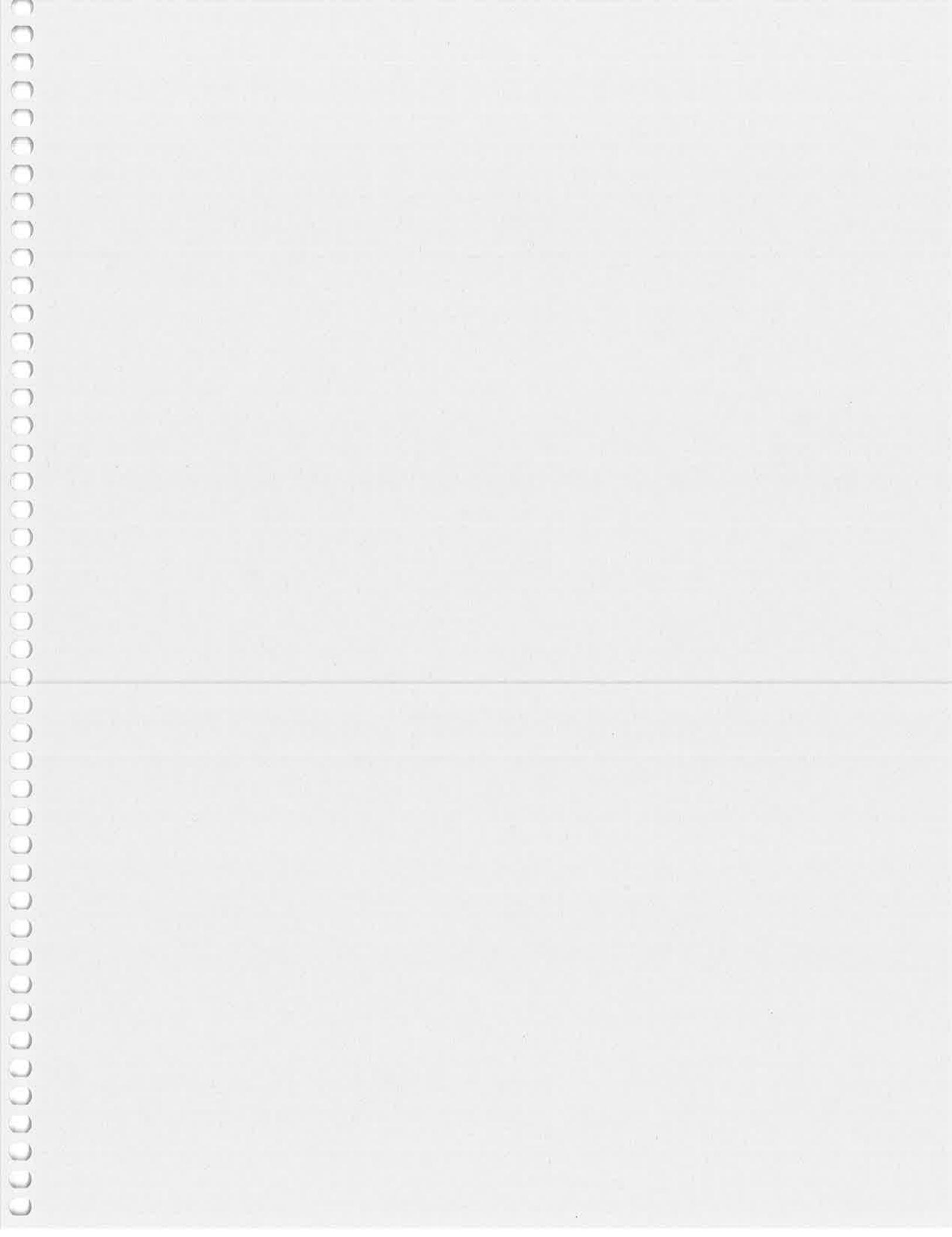
closet disappeared; it was now part of another wall in my room, and all those sheets of paper I had scribbled over the years were perfectly hidden.

*Translated by Dolores M. Koenig*

#### NOTES

- 1 Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (National Union of Writers and Artists)
- 2 Lezama is José Lezama Lima, the renowned Cuban novelist, who was also homosexual and an important mentor of Arenas's. Marfa Luisa Bautista was Lezama Lima's wife and a friend of his family.
- 3 Instituto Nacional de Deportes y Recreación [National Institute of Sports and Recreation] (author's note).







howl at fifty

Robert Haas  
from What Light Can Do  
Ecc; 2012.

howl at fifty

53

There aren't a lot of places in San Francisco that deserve the status of literary monuments—perhaps the house in the Tenderloin where Robert Frost was born; or the site of Jack London's birthplace on Third Street; or the alley off Bush Street where the police found the body of Miles Archer, Sam Spade's partner in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. Another of them ought to be the apartment house at 1010 Montgomery, just off Broadway, where a twenty-nine-year-old Jewish-American, gay, New Jersey-born, Ivy League-educated former marketing research drone and incipient visionary named Allen Ginsberg labored through the summer of 1955 writing a long poem that was published the following year by an enterprising North Beach bookstore called City Lights, read with interest by a San Francisco captain of police, prosecuted by the city's district attorney, and vindicated in the courts, and that has since altered the face of American poetry, influenced a generation of singer-composers who reshaped popular music, helped to launch a counterculture, made San Francisco a kind of world capital of poetry, sold well over six hundred thousand copies (unthinkable for a book of poems), been translated into twenty-one languages, and is, this year, twenty years older than its author was when he published the poem. Hard to believe, *Howl*, with its incandescent mad laughter and sadness and apocalyptic anger and immensely liberating sanity and power, is fifty years old.

Probably the best way for admirers of the poem to acknowledge this event, if they happened to live in or be visiting San Francisco, would be to put on a pair of walking shoes and make their way to Lawrence Ferlinghetti's bookstore at Columbus and Broadway. Once there, they should descend the narrow stairway in the back of the shop. It used to lead to the poetry section in the basement, where, until recently, they

would have found that small book in its stark black-and-white cover on a rack next to tables at which the young of the city have been poring over new writing for three generations. That would have been the place to sit down at a table and begin to revisit that remarkable poem. Now, however, visitors will find the book in a small room up, rather than down, a set of narrow stairs, to which the poetry section has been moved and set around by an arrangement of books that make a sort of shrine to the Beat generation.

If they don't want to read the poem there, they can take the extreme measure of buying it, so that they can stroll up Grant Avenue to Caffe Trieste, which will smell as pungently of deeply roasted and finely ground coffee beans as it must have done in 1955, when the Co-Existence Bagel Shop was just around the corner and the world had had only ten years to absorb in the deepest neural synapses of the brain the fact that two whole cities of men, women, and children, Japanese as it happened, could be tormented into ash in one shuddering fifteen-second blaze of light and heat dreamed into existence by human science. And there, in the smell of steam and coffee, without nostalgia (though it is permitted to let the ghosts of Senator Joseph McCarthy, John Foster Dulles, James Dean, Charlie Parker, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg hover just above the counter piled with crisp, palm-shaped, and un-American pastries), they can begin to let the language of one of the most bracing, nervy, and celebrated works of art made by an American in the postwar years begin to work on them.

The opening line of the poem is by now so famous in some circles that it has the quality of a quotation, like "Are you talking to me?" or "To be or not to be—that is the question." It had then, at the time of its publication, the surprise of one long bardic line, written to be read out loud in a single release of breath that the stomach muscles could feel:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,  
starving hysterical naked

Not actually a particularly promising start. It irritated some people because its author clearly meant the best minds among the intellectual desperados and bohemians he knew on New York's Upper West Side when he attended Columbia University; the writing seemed like East Coast chauvinism. It irritated others because of that battery of

unpunctuated adjectives, which looked, to a certain fastidious taste in a conservative decade, tacky and ragged. It is true that the line is a little hysterical and grandiloquent, but it is also true that it has the desire to be large and outrageous—and that behind the extremity of the language is the first glint of a cosmic sense of humor. “Am I freaking out?” the language seems to say. “All right then, I am freaking out.” And there is electricity in it: you can sense the cowed and obedient dogs of the silent generation about to bite through the leash of the conformist 1950s.

The second line of the poem is another long breath:

dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for  
an angry fix

This isn't so great either; it has about it a kind of pure, kitschy, period romanticism. Romantic about Harlem, romantic about substance abuse. Remember Negroes? This line was written one year after the Warren Court's decision on desegregation, just months before the Montgomery bus boycott. A daring and recently famous young novelist, Norman Mailer, would soon publish an essay entitled “The White Negro” about how the new generation, sickened by American glut, could only identify with the cool hipsters of the black underclass. That identification of whites with excluded blacks is in Ginsberg's line; it comes from the outlaw chic of jazz, and in a few years it was to issue in the participation of white college students in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Mississippi freedom rides (and the eventual dis-invitation of white student participation by SNCC).

The romanticism about drugs comes partly from the author's meeting with the older writer William Burroughs, who was in the process of writing that remarkable monster of a novel *Naked Lunch*. And the subject was in the air. Nelson Algren had published a novel about musicians and drugs, *The Man with the Golden Arm*—Frank Sinatra starred in the 1955 movie version. Ginsberg's attitude would be corny, or dangerous, if it were not for the word *angry*. It gets a snarling self-punishment into the stab of the needle, and it lets you know that you are in the presence of a writer of some quality, who is just getting warmed up.

The next line has more real fire. It is the one that particularly infuriated the assistant district attorney who led the prosecution of Lawrence Ferlinghetti for publishing and selling *Howl*. It goes:

angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to  
the starry dynamo in the machinery of night

When the book came to the attention of Captain William Hanrahan of the Juvenile Bureau, he dispatched two officers to City Lights to arrest Ferlinghetti and his clerk, the amiable friend of all North Beach's late-night browsers among books, Shig Murao. The trial of Ferlinghetti, in the court of Judge Clayton Horn, on the charge that he “did willfully and lewdly print, publish and sell obscene and indecent writings,” kept the city amused for a couple of weeks. The counsel and former counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union, Albert Bendich and Lawrence Speiser, defended Ferlinghetti, along with Jake Ehrlich, San Francisco's most glamorous criminal lawyer. The expert witnesses were a roll call of the city's literati: the novelist Walter Van Tilburg Clark, author of *The Ox-Bow Incident*; American Conservatory Theater director Herbert Blau; poet Kenneth Rexroth; UC Berkeley professor Mark Schorer; poet Mark Linenthal from San Francisco State; and Luther Nichols, the book editor of the San Francisco *Examiner*.

The assistant district attorney, Ralph McIntosh, an elderly man, cross-examined the suave and impeccable Schorer, one of the country's best-known literary critics. According to contemporary accounts, which can be found in the new annotated edition of *Howl* published by Harper & Row, McIntosh shook the book at Schorer. “I presume you understand the whole thing, is that right?”

Schorer: “I hope so. It's not always easy to know that one understands exactly what a contemporary poet is saying, but I think I do.”

McIntosh, who seemed more personally upset by the poem's obscurity than by its alleged obscenity, waved it wildly in the air. “Do you,” he demanded, “understand what *angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night* means?”

One thing it means is that its author was on a roll, and he continues to accelerate through several pages of these long, relentless lines that spin, twist, leap, and twitch with a combination of invention, rage, pathos, and

high comedy that had not been seen in American poetry since T. S. Eliot recovered from a nervous breakdown by writing *The Waste Land*.

who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in  
the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the  
tops of cities contemplating jazz,  
who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw  
    Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,  
who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating  
    Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war,  
who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing  
    obscene odes on the windows of the skull,  
who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money  
    in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall

Much of *Howl* is a kind of exploded, hallucinatory autobiography. Allen Ginsberg grew up in Paterson, New Jersey; his father, Louis, was a schoolteacher and a moderately well-known, quite conservative lyric poet. His mother, Naomi, a Russian-Jewish immigrant who grew up on Manhattan's Lower East Side and became the subject of her son's best poem, "Kaddish," was mad—afflicted, suddenly, in the middle of her life, with paranoid schizophrenia. Her son, in high school, visited her at the Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital near Morristown, New Jersey, where she was receiving electroshock therapy and insulin treatments. Later, she was hospitalized once again at Pilgrim State Hospital in Brentwood, New York. Her son was writing *Howl* only a few years after having signed papers giving permission for his mother's lobotomy, and she died not long after he finished the poem.

Sexual frankness was what got *Howl* in trouble, as well as the fact that the sexuality it was frank about was not necessarily heterosexual. The poem made it perfectly clear that its cast of saintly, crazy-sane, vision-hungry hipsters loved boys as well as girls. The knowledge of his own sexual preferences must have been dawning on the young Ginsberg at just the time that he was dealing with his mother's madness. It is a powerful combination. His mother as a misfit, himself as a misfit.

Her insulin injections, her shock therapy—set that against the public world of the late forties and early fifties. The Jewish-American leftist Rosenbergs burned in the electric chair for espionage. Whole

cities burned by a new kind of doom that had darkened the air above Japan. The revelation of the Nazi concentration camps. It is not hard to understand the sense of horror that erupts in *Howl*, especially in the middle sections in its vision of Moloch, Canaanite god of fire, terrible spirit of everything punitive, soulless and materialist in modern American life, and the spirit, of course, of Ginsberg's own guilt and self-hatred:

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and  
ate up their brains and imagination?  
Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars!  
Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in  
armies! Old men weeping in the parks!

The vision of Moloch came to Ginsberg, oddly enough, when he was living in an apartment on Nob Hill in the fall of 1954 and had a hallucinatory nocturnal glimpse of the illuminated Sutter-Powell façade of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel. It became for him suddenly the grinning face of the great beast itself.

It is not surprising that Ginsberg had a self-consciously bad-boy career at Columbia University—he was suspended in his sophomore year for writing a phrase that was, if taken seriously, and the cleaning woman who noticed it and reported him apparently did, both obscene and anti-Semitic on an unclean dormitory window with his finger, among other derelictions. By the time he was a senior, cultivating the style of an existential outlaw, he got himself into real trouble when a car he was in was discovered to be carrying stolen goods. He was arrested and stayed out of jail by pleading insanity, and thus was committed to New York State Psychiatric Institute, where he met Carl Solomon, the friend to whom *Howl* is dedicated, and where he got a firsthand look at what institutional America did with people like his mother.

It must have been a searing experience, and it is pretty clearly what is behind the furious energy of his poem. Carl Solomon came to stand for a whole generation of idealistic, crypto-mystic lost souls. In the private logic of the poem, all the angelheaded hipsters become Carl Solomon—recommitted to a mental hospital at the time when Ginsberg was writing the poem—and Solomon, in the most aston-

ishing and affecting moment in the poem, blurs into the figure of its secret subject, mad sad Naomi:

who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy

These were stunts of Carl Solomon's, hyperbolically described; the next lines refer to the period when he and Ginsberg were incarcerated together:

and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol  
electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy pingpong & amnesia,  
who in humorless protest overturned only one symbolic pingpong  
table resting briefly in catatonia,  
returning years later truly bald except for a wig of blood, and tears  
and fingers, to the visible madman doom of the wards of the  
madtowns of the East,

Pilgrim State's Rockland's and Greystone's foetid halls, bickering  
with the echoes of the soul, rocking and rolling in the  
midnight solitude-bench dolmen-realms of love, dream of life a  
nightmare, bodies turned to stone as heavy as the moon,  
with mother finally \*\*\*\*\*\*, and the last fantastic book flung out  
of the tenement window, and the last door closed at 4 a.m.  
and the last telephone slammed at the wall in reply and the  
last furnished room emptied down to the last piece of mental  
furniture, a yellow paper rose twisted on a wire hanger in the  
closet, and even that imaginary, nothing but a hopeful little bit  
of hallucination—

Ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really  
in the total animal soup of time—

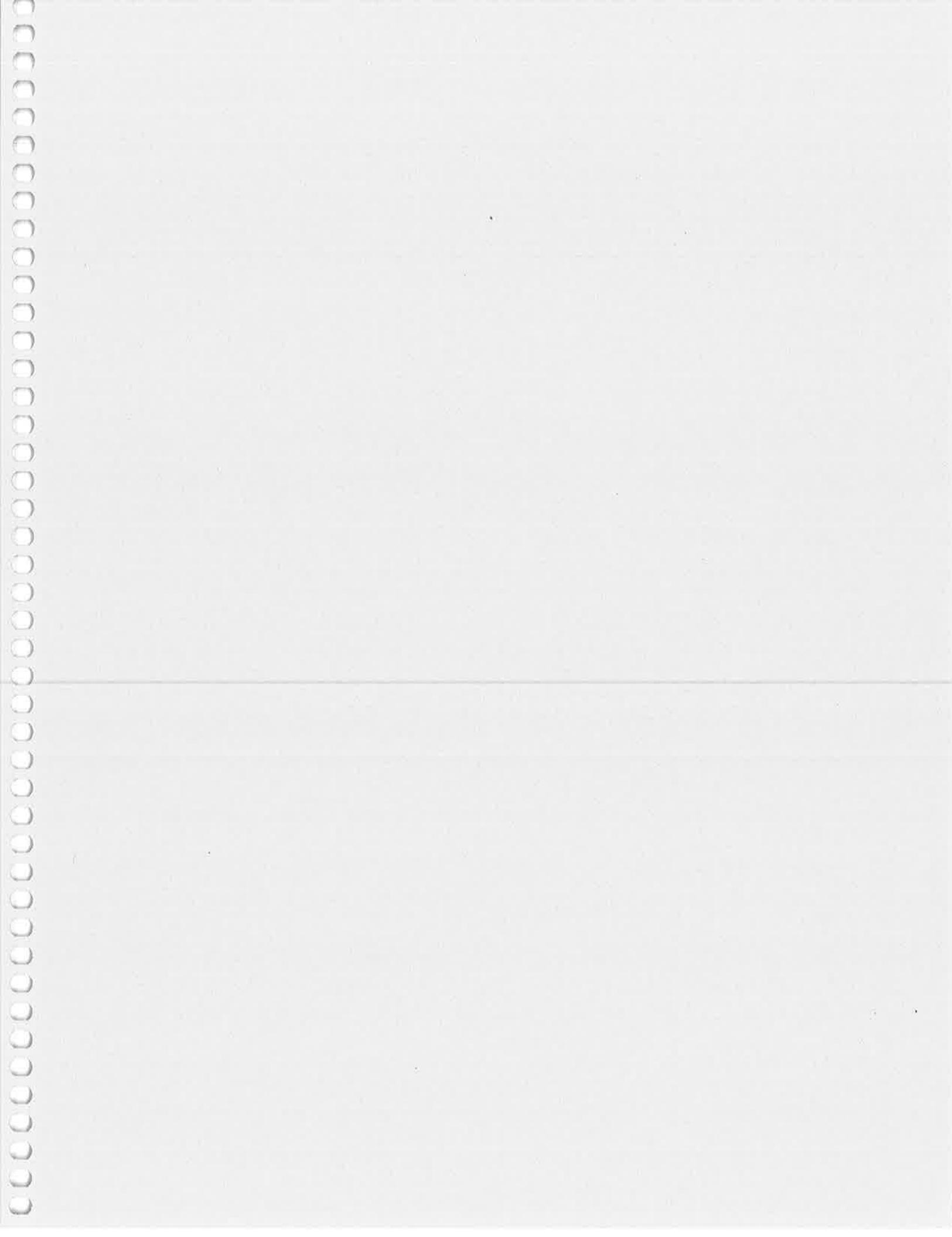
So, the reader of this poem in the café may reflect, working on a second espresso, it turns out that this wild text of a wild new generation is about a son's acceptance of his mother's madness and of the sadness of her life, like a yellowed paper rose on a coat hanger in an empty room. And about a man's acceptance of his own sexuality and about the shame of the punishing, warmongering, body-hating, and money-grubbing forces in

what is supposed to be a free and generous republic. And about the power of love and the way that suffering teaches us tenderness.

The Honorable Clayton W. J. Horn, who presided at the *Howl* trial, was an unknown quantity. No one on either side knew whether to be encouraged by the fact that he had recently taken the somewhat eccentric step of sentencing five female shoplifters to an afternoon spent viewing Cecil B. DeMille's recently released *The Ten Commandments* (Charlton Heston as Moses) and writing essays on the moral lessons it contained. As it turned out, he wrote a lucid opinion that is still an important part of California law affecting freedom of speech, and it contains an account of the poem that is as good as one might expect from literary criticism: "The first part of *Howl* presents a picture of a nightmare world; the second part is an indictment of those elements in modern society destructive of the best qualities in human nature; such elements are predominantly identified as materialism, conformity and mechanization leading to war. ... 'Footnote to Howl' seems to be a declamation that everything is holy, including parts of the body by name. It ends in a plea for holy living."

Judge Horn found the poem not obscene and Ferlinghetti not guilty. The result of the trial, of course, was that *Howl* became a national cause célèbre, and San Francisco got the reputation, curiously, of a place especially hospitable to poetry. And it also helped give definition to a new generation. When the verdict was announced, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported, it drew applause from a courtroom packed with "the most fantastic collection of beards, turtlenecked shirts and Italian hairdos ever to grace the grimy precincts of the Hall of Justice."

But *Howl* transcended its generation. Our Sunday readers, finished with their coffee and the poem, might very well step into the cool early winter afternoon reflecting that things have not changed very much. Though there is plenty of other evidence, the "Strategic Defense Initiative"—the fantasy that it is somehow rational to plant our most terrible weapons pointed back at ourselves among the starry dynamos in the machinery of night—is sufficient indication that Moloch has still got hold of a good chunk of the American soul. So our readers may also reflect that it is absolutely necessary, at least once in every generation, that someone get unhyphenated long enough to let the sense of the absurd crystallize and the grief and rage well up into a howl loud enough for the rest of us to hear.





## E. Patrick Johnson “In Search of My Queer Fathers (In Response to Bishop Eddie Long)”

**E. Patrick Johnson** is the author of *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South and Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. He is the Carlos Montezuma Professor of Performance Studies and African American Studies at Northwestern University. This article was written for an academic journal, and although it engages cultural theory, it is grounded in personal experience and storytelling. Johnson addresses the curious way that his gay friends embrace an antigay clergyman, who turns out to have a homoerotic secret of his own.

### Abstract

This poetic meditation engages homosexuality as pathology and inherited “disease” as propagated by some factions of the Black church. Reinterpreting the notion of genealogical “inheritance” the author pays tribute to his queer ancestors, tracing a legacy of racial and sexual struggle and how the two are imbricated. At the same time, the meditation points to the hypocrisy of Black clergy who always already carry within them a part of the Black queer.

### Keywords

homophobia, Black church, Eddie Long, queer ancestors

While visiting some friends during Labor Day weekend in Atlanta in 1995, I attended one of the worship services at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, an African American church led by pastor Bishop Eddie Long. I was not familiar with New Birth or Long, but my friends—all of whom are gay—absolutely loved this church and wanted me to attend with them. Long had served as pastor for 8 years and during that time had seen the church membership grow from 300 to 8,000. Over the next decade, the church membership would reach close to 30,000, becoming one of the largest African American churches in the South.

The day that my friends and I attended was a special Saturday evening service due to the holiday weekend. The title of Bishop Long’s sermon was “Paying for the Sins of Your Father.” He came into the pulpit with chains draped over his shoulders to represent the chains of sin that are binding us—sins that were not atoned for by our ancestors. After walking around the pulpit in silence with the chains, he finally steps up to the podium and says the following:

If you’re a smoker, that means somebody in your family back in the day was a smoker and didn’t take care of that, didn’t ask God to take away that craving. If you fat—come on now! I’m going somewhere. I’m going somewhere. That means somebody in your family back in the day was fat and didn’t take care of that. Sugar! High blood pressure. Gout! You wouldn’t be dealing with any of these ailments if your ancestors had stayed prayed up. How many of you are praying with me this evening? Now, I’m getting ready to step on some toes. If you a faggot, that means somebody in your family back in the day was a faggot and didn’t pray that sickness away.

Many of the congregants, including some of my gay friends went wild, running around the church dancing to their own damnation. All this was prompted when the queen on the organ, who had been doing a musical call/response with Long’s sermon all along, hit a high note on the keys before playing some “shout” music. Members of the dance troupe (also made up of several gay men) literally leaped to their feet, and leaped around the church “in the spirit.” Several women took to the aisle, heisted up their skirts and began to dance up and down the aisle toward the pulpit and back again, barely missing the leaping queens. The sanctuary buzzed with the whoops, hollers, and handclaps of those caught up in the trance of the

music. While my host seated to my immediate right sat motionless, sensing that I was annoyed, another one of his friends seated to his right, started waving his hands in the air, swaying back and forth to the music. Bishop Long stood in front of the pulpit surveying the scene, undoubtedly feeling a great sense of satisfaction that he has worked his church members into a holy frenzy. I, on the other hand, was dumbfounded by the absurdity of Long's sermon, lacking as it was in logic, and the self-hatred expressed by the gay members of the church. I knew, for example, that after church services, my friends and I were going to do some dancing of an "unholy" nature at a gay nightclub.

On the drive back from church to my friend's home where we were going to take a "disco nap," I said nothing about what I had just witnessed. Instead, I sat staring out the backseat window seething with anger. My silence spoke volumes. The others were going on and on about what a great service it was and how Bishop Long was on fire. I rolled my eyes and remembered what my mother had always told me: "If you don't have anything nice to say, then don't say anything at all." And then, I began to think about Long's sermon more closely. What if he was right and my being gay was because my ancestors did not "pray away" their sexuality, but rather embraced it? What if my debt is to my ancestors? How could I ever repay that debt?

For me this "aha" moment encouraged me to put pen to paper and write a poem in response to Bishop Long that would also honor my Black queer ancestors. The following is what I wrote:

Rocking won't conjure  
them  
the sway that lulls church  
babies into gospel comas  
the persistent  
moans/ums/and/yessuhns  
imprint on their young  
souls  
tools for survival/tools  
for the trials and tribulations  
that are sure to come/on  
rock them  
juju my Black ferries into  
being

name them that dare not  
speak  
lest the lash of kindred  
sear the flesh abominable

rock on through  
the womb of Esu  
Queen Fathers  
dance your way down  
his phallus

rock on in the bush  
where you'll find comfort  
hard  
Black limbs and lips  
long strokes  
man loving  
crouched in secret  
huddled for life  
the snare of the moon's  
candescence  
its life giving light  
glistening their jism  
creamy  
sweet  
tongues eclipsed in joyous  
rebellion

rock on over the Atlantic  
huddled  
coffled  
fearing the other place/no  
place like home  
grimaces code kisses  
under the bonzai  
what codes would unleash  
the queen in you  
hot with blessings

from the Orisha's orifice  
cradle my head  
lest the Fall spoil  
the queering/ashe

rock on under Rio  
Jamaica & c how  
seasoning was unspicy  
on the back  
that craved His caress  
creeping down/creeping up  
short of breath  
from the lash leaping over  
air/and  
sky/and  
blood tears roll  
down/under  
the gut wrenching pain

rock on over  
Charleston through auctions  
going/once/twice/sold  
sometimes you feel like a  
manless man along/along/along  
alone  
stiffened with hate  
on top of the Misses  
gouging her fearless hole  
piercing her fearful eyes  
spilling your seedless pride

rock on  
through the bondage of forced  
miscegenation to beget great/great  
great/great granddaddy Queer  
rock on Daddy  
like her back was  
his back/was

raised like weeping willows  
swishing nooses like  
panties in the flesh smoked  
breeze

rock on father  
in the bosom/of/memory/of  
mourning/morning/when  
evening crept silently to dawn  
to don the weight of cotton sacks  
where you slept in His arms

rock on  
seep your spirit way down  
by the river of my flesh  
to reap what you have sewn  
inside my heart/on  
down that path to righteousness  
nestled in/between the north star's  
light to freedom

rock father  
up the goody trail  
hand-in-hand with grandpapa  
running until weary  
but not tired/yet  
weary  
the violent light of flight  
carries you like a queen  
carrying her child to safety

rock on  
through swamp/and/stench/and  
sweat/and/funk/and/shit/and  
soon/I/will/be/soon/I/will/be

rock on  
emancipate/and/proclaimate

your lynching in the strange trees  
 low hanging fruit  
 swinging  
 marking/and/mock/ing/and/mark/ing/and/mock/ing  
 time  
 kill the black Queen

rock on with Billie  
 on holidays that you create  
 for your work is never done

rock/rock/rock  
 around the clock in segregated  
 tearooms  
 desegregated love  
 gathers  
 splays your blackness in two  
 doubling your consciousness in an ironic  
 pun on Dubois  
 poking the hole will bring you love  
 poking the hole will promise peace  
 poking the hole will kill you softly

rock on daddy  
 through sit-ins/and  
 shut-outs/and  
 lock me ups/and  
 hose me downs/and  
 ain't gonna let nobody  
 turn me around/and  
 around you go in Cleaver's bed  
 spinning on his bigoted  
 cock  
 fucking you out of  
 existence  
 rock on  
 like Bayard and Jimmy  
 civil rights fairies  
 literati fairies

drag fairies  
 fairy fairies  
 hold up/push back through  
 blackness  
 in the trenches where their blood  
 flows around their feet  
 inside me  
 so I say rock on  
 rock on honey  
 SNAP! that bastard in two  
 rock baby  
 fuck me into the here and now/rock  
 play that Hammond organ/rock  
 make that choir earn its keep/rock  
 soar your voice into the queerdom/rock  
 choke that preacher/rock  
 fill him with the holy seed/rock  
 rock him father  
 rock him  
 rock on  
 rock  
 rock Father  
 I'm coming/rock on  
 I'm/rock hard/I'm  
 here/standing on your word/I'm  
 standing Father on your love/I'm  
 leaning on your everlasting arms/I'm  
 rocking Father/rock  
 rocking  
 forgive them

for they know  
 not  
 what they  
 do

I took great satisfaction in writing this poem as my ode to my queer ancestors, using the medium to blur the line between spirituality and sexuality, between a Heavenly Father and a Queer Father. In other words, I have

been aware for some time that despite the church's disavowal of sexual expression and desire, that expression and desire has always already been a part of the service and the church space. From the pastor's lascivious gaze of a female churchgoer's body purposefully squeezed into a dress a size or two too small or of a male parishioner's swag as he saunters to his seat in the pew next to his unsuspecting wife, to the stereotypical choir director who swishes and twirls his robe to sign and signal his queerness, sexuality in the church cannot not be quelled. As an old church saying goes, "It's just like fire shut up in my bones." And yet, the holy trinity of shame, guilt, and denial still prevail in the church in a way that makes sexual expression of sins that are displeasing in the eyes of God—at least according to many Christians. As a Black gay Christian, then, I had to flip the script in a way that allowed me to be a sexually and spiritually whole person. The poem is my sermon—my conjuration of Black queer ancestors who stand in time and space alongside the orishas and angels, deities, and prophets who made my existence possible. It is my praise song that "worries the line" between the sacred and the secular, that makes my dance "holy" in the church, the club, down on my knees in prayer or something akin to it.

I truly believe in karma. While I wrote the poem the night after the sermon in 1995, 15 years later I would get real vindication. In September of 2010, four young men filed a lawsuit alleging that Bishop Eddie Long coerced them into having sexual relations with them when they were teenagers and participating in his youth ministry. While Bishop Long initially denied the allegations, 2 years later, he settled the suit for 25 million dollars. I guess somebody in his family back in the day did not take care of it.

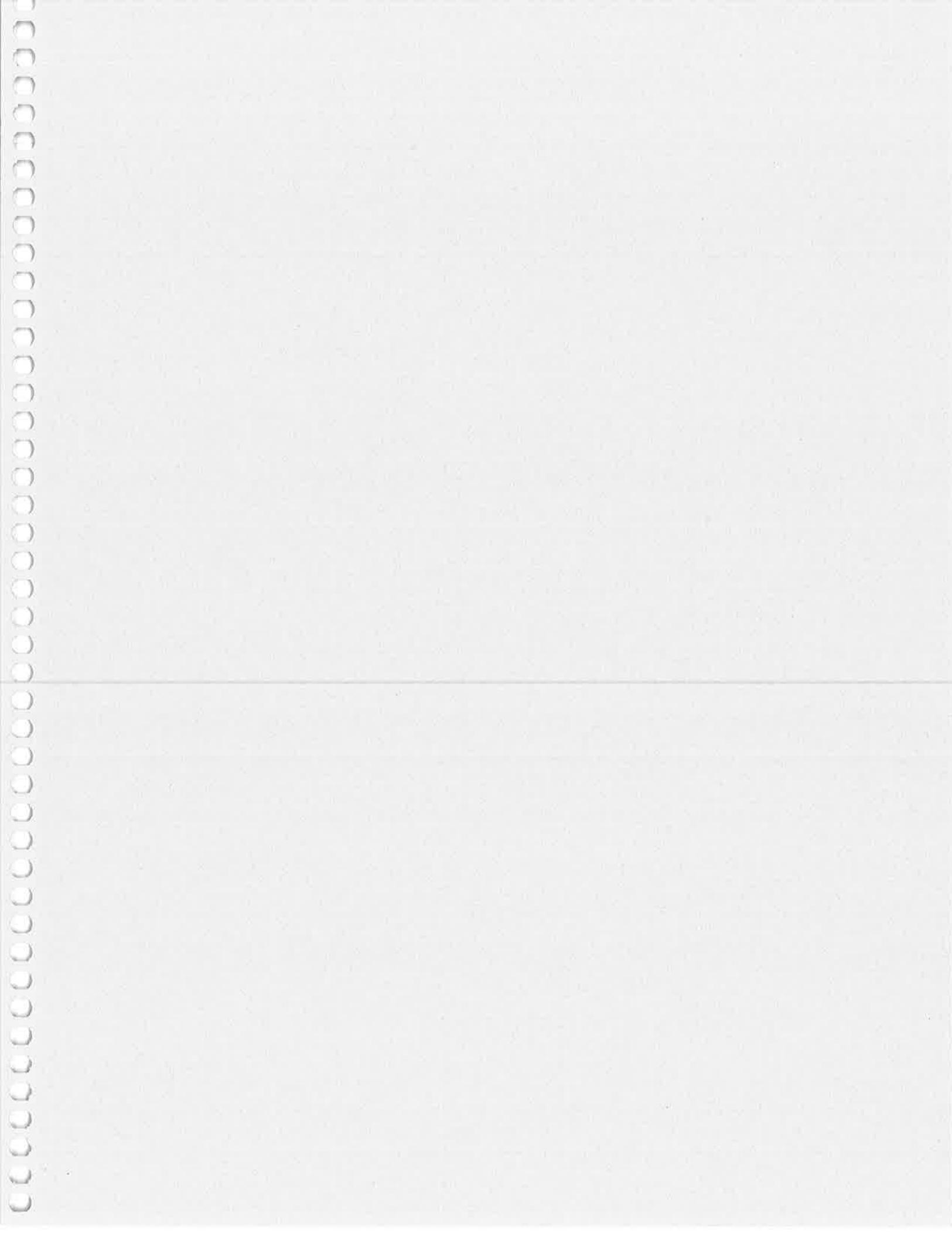
### Analyze

1. Who is Bishop Eddie Long?
2. How is Johnson able to identify the many queer people in the church?

### Explore

1. How does Johnson's poem respond to Long's sermon?
2. It is often the case that people who are extremely vocal about homosexuality being wrong turn out to be gay themselves, as in the case of Eddie Long. Why do you think that might be?







## **THE ARGONAUTS**

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October, 2007. The Santa Ana winds are shredding the bark off the eucalyptus trees in long white stripes. A friend and I risk the widowmakers by having lunch outside, during which she suggests I tattoo the words *HARD TO GET* across my knuckles, as a reminder of this pose's possible fruits. Instead the words *I love you* come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad. You had *Molloy* by your bedside and a stack of cocks in a shadowy unused shower stall. Does it get any better? *What's your pleasure?* you asked, then stuck around for an answer.

Before we met, I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed. This idea gets less air time than his more reverential *Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent*, but it is, I think, the deeper idea. Its paradox is, quite literally, *why I write*, or how I feel able to keep writing.

For it doesn't feed or exalt any angst one may feel about the incapacity to express, in words, that which eludes them. It doesn't punish what can be said for what, by definition, it cannot be. Nor does it ham it up by miming a constricted throat: *Lo, what I would say, were words good enough.* Words are good enough.

*It is idle to fault a net for having holes,* my encyclopedia notes.

In this way you can have your empty church with a dirt floor swept clean of dirt and your spectacular stained glass gleaming by the cathedral rafters, both. Because nothing you say can fuck up the space for God.

I've explained this elsewhere. But I'm trying to say something different now.

Before long I learned that you had spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are *not* good enough. Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow. We argued and argued on this account, full of fever, not malice. Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnameable falls away, gets lost, is murdered. You called this the cookie-cutter function of our minds. You said that you knew this not from shunning language but from immersion in it, on the screen, in conversation, onstage, on the page. I argued along the lines of Thomas Jefferson and the churches—for plethora, for kaleidoscopic shifting, for excess. I insisted that words did more than nominate. I read aloud to you the opening of *Philosophical Investigations*. *Slab*, I shouted, *slab!*

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For a time, I thought I had won. You conceded there might be an OK human, an OK human animal, even if that human animal used language, even if its use of language were somehow defining of its humanness—even if humanness itself meant trashing and torching the whole motley, precious planet, along with its, our, future.

But I changed too. I looked anew at unnameable things, or at least things whose essence is flicker, flow. I readmitted the sadness of our eventual extinction, and the injustice of our extinction of others. I stopped smugly repeating *Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly* and wondered anew, can everything be thought.

And you—whatever you argued, you never mimed a constricted throat. In fact you ran at least a lap ahead of me, words stream-

Ludwig  
Wittgenstein

ing in your wake. How could I ever catch up (by which I mean, *how could you want me?*).

A day or two after my love pronouncement, now feral with vulnerability, I sent you the passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in which Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase “I love you” is like “the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name.” Just as the *Argo*'s parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the *Argo*, whenever the lover utters the phrase “I love you,” its meaning must be renewed by each use, as “the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new.”

I thought the passage was romantic. You read it as a possible retraction. In retrospect, I guess it was both.

*You've punctured my solitude*, I told you. It had been a useful solitude, constructed, as it was, around a recent sobriety, long walks to and from the Y through the sordid, bougainvillea-strewn back streets of Hollywood, evening drives up and down Mulholland to kill the long nights, and, of course, maniacal bouts of writing, learning to address no one. But the time for its puncturing had come. *I feel I can give you everything without giving myself away*, I whispered in your basement bed. If one does one's solitude right, this is the prize.

A few months later, we spent Christmas together in a hotel in downtown San Francisco. I had booked the room for us online, in the hope that my booking of the room and our time in the room would make you love me forever. It turned out to be one of those hotels that booked for cheap because it was undergoing

an astonishingly rude renovation, and because it was smack in the middle of the cracked-out Tenderloin. No matter—we had other business to attend to. Sun filtered through the ratty venetian blinds just barely obscuring the construction workers hammering away outside as we attended to it. *Just don't kill me,* I said as you took off your leather belt, smiling.

After the Barthes, I tried again, this time with a fragment of a poem by Michael Ondaatje:

Kissing the stomach  
kissing your scarred  
skin boat. History  
is what you've travelled on  
and take with you

We've each had our stomachs  
kissed by strangers  
to the other

and as for me  
I bless everyone  
who kissed you here

I didn't send the fragment because I had in any way achieved its serenity. I sent it with the aspiration that one day I might—that one day my jealousy might recede, and I would be able to behold the names and images of others inked onto your skin without disjunct or distaste. (Early on we made a romantic visit to Dr. Tattoff on Wilshire Boulevard, both of us giddy at the prospect of clearing your slate. We left crestfallen at the price, the improbability of ever completely eradicating the ink.)

After lunch, my friend who suggested the HARD TO GET tattoo invites me to her office, where she offers to Google you on my behalf. She's going to see if the Internet reveals a preferred pronoun for you, since despite or due to the fact that we're spending every free moment in bed together and already talking about moving in, I can't bring myself to ask. Instead I've become a quick study in pronoun avoidance. The key is training your ear not to mind hearing a person's name over and over again. You must learn to take cover in grammatical cul-de-sacs, relax into an orgy of specificity. You must learn to tolerate an instance beyond the Two, precisely at the moment of attempting to represent a partnership—a nuptial, even. *Nuptials are the opposite of a couple. There are no longer binary machines: question-answer, masculine-feminine, man-animal, etc. This could be what a conversation is—simply the outline of a becoming.*

Expert as one may become at such a conversation, to this day it remains almost impossible for me to make an airline reservation or negotiate with my human resources department on our behalf without flashes of shame or befuddlement. It's not really my shame or befuddlement—it's more like I'm ashamed for (or simply pissed at) the person who keeps making all the wrong presumptions and has to be corrected, but who can't be corrected because the words are not good enough.

*How can the words not be good enough?*

Lovesick on the floor of my friend's office, I squint up at her as she scrolls through an onslaught of bright information I don't want to see. I want the you no one else can see, the you so close the third person never need apply. "Look, here's a quote from John Waters, saying, 'She's very handsome.' So maybe you should

Gilles Deloche/  
Claire Pernet

use 'she.' I mean, it's *John Waters*." *That was years ago*, I roll my eyes from the floor. *Things might have changed.*

When making your butch-buddy film, *By Hook or By Crook*, you and your cowriter, Silas Howard, decided that the butch characters would call each other "he" and "him," but in the outer world of grocery stores and authority figures, people would call them "she" and "her." The point wasn't that if the outer world were schooled appropriately re: the characters' preferred pronouns, everything would be right as rain. Because if the outsiders called the characters "he," it would be a different kind of he. Words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure. The answer isn't just to introduce new words (*boi, cis-gendered, andro-fag*) and then set out to reify their meanings (though obviously there is power and pragmatism here). One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly. Like when you whisper, *You're just a hole, letting me fill you up*. Like when I say *husband*.

Soon after we got together, we attended a dinner party at which a (presumably straight, or at least straight-married) woman who'd known Harry for some time turned to me and said, "So, have you been with other women, before Harry?" I was taken aback. Undeterred, she went on: "Straight ladies have always been hot for Harry." Was Harry a woman? Was I a straight lady? What did past relationships I'd had with "other women" have in common with this one? Why did I have to think about other "straight ladies" who were hot for my Harry? Was his sexual power, which I already felt to be immense, a kind of spell I'd fallen under, from which I would emerge abandoned, as

he moved on to seduce others? Why was this woman, whom I barely knew, talking to me like this? When would Harry come back from the bathroom?

There are people out there who get annoyed at the story that Djuna Barnes, rather than identify as a lesbian, preferred to say that she "just loved Thelma." Gertrude Stein reputedly made similar claims, albeit not in those exact terms, about Alice. I get why it's politically maddening, but I've also always thought it a little romantic—the romance of letting an individual experience of desire take precedence over a categorical one. The story brings to mind art historian T. J. Clark's defense of his interest in the eighteenth-century painter Nicolas Poussin from imaginary interlocutors: "Calling an interest in Poussin nostalgic or elitist is like calling the interest one has, say, in the person one cares for most deeply 'hetero- (or homo-) sexist,' or 'exclusive' or 'proprietorial.' Yes, that may be right: those may be roughly the parameters, and regrettable; but the interest itself may still be more complete and human—still carry more of human possibility and compassion—than interests uncontaminated by any such affect or compulsion." Here, as elsewhere, contamination makes deep rather than disqualifies.

Besides, everyone knows that Barnes and Stein had relationships with women besides Thelma and Alice. Alice knew, too: she was apparently so jealous upon finding out that Stein's early novel *Q. E. D.* told the coded story of a love triangle involving Stein and a certain May Bookstaver that Alice—who was also Stein's editor and typist—found all sorts of weasely ways to omit every appearance of the word *May* or *may* when she retyped Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, henceforth an unwitting collaboration.

By February I was driving around the city looking at apartment after apartment, trying to find one big enough for us and your son, whom I hadn't yet met. Eventually we found a house on a hill with gleaming dark wood floors and a view of a mountain and a too-high rent. The day we got the keys, we slept together in a fit of giddiness on a thin blanket spread out over the wood floor of what would become our first bedroom.

That view. It may have been a pile of rough scrub with a stagnant pond at its top, but for two years, it was our mountain.

And then, just like that, I was folding your son's laundry. He had just turned three. Such little socks! Such little underwear! I marveled at them, made him lukewarm cocoa each morning with as much powder as can fit in the rim of a fingernail, played Fallen Soldier with him for hours on end. In Fallen Soldier he would collapse with all his gear on—sequined chain mail hat, sword, sheath, a limb wounded from battle, tied up in a scarf. I was the good Blue Witch who had to sprinkle healing dust all over him to bring him back to life. I had a twin who was evil; the evil twin had felled him with her poisonous blue powder. But now I was here to heal him. He lay there motionless, eyes closed, the faintest smile on his face, while I recited my monologue: *But where could this soldier have come from? How did he get so far from home? Is he badly wounded? Will he be kind or fierce when he awakens? Will he know I am good, or will he mistake me for my evil twin? What can I say that will bring him back to life?*

Throughout that fall, yellow YES ON PROP 8 signs were sprouting up everywhere, most notably jabbed into an otherwise bald and beautiful mountain I passed each day on my way to work. The

sign depicted four stick figures raising their hands to the sky, in a paroxysm of joy—the joy, I suppose, of heteronormativity, here indicated by the fact that one of the stick figures sported a triangle skirt. (*What is that triangle, anyway? My twat?*) PROTECT CALIFORNIA CHILDREN! the stick figures cheered.

Eileen Myles

Each time I passed the sign stuck into the blameless mountain, I thought about Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Cutting* from 1993, in which Opie photographed her back with a drawing of a house and two stick-figure women holding hands (two triangle skirts!) carved into it, along with a sun, a cloud, and two birds. She took the photo while the drawing was still dripping with blood. "Opie, who had recently broken up with her partner, was longing at the time to start a family, and the image radiates all the painful contradictions inherent in that wish," *Art in America* explains.

I don't get it, I said to Harry. Who wants a version of the Prop 8 poster, but with two triangle skirts?

Maybe Cathy does, Harry shrugged.

Once I wrote a book about domesticity in the poetry of certain gay men (Ashbery, Schuyler) and some women (Mayer, Notley). I wrote this book when I was living in New York City in a teeny, too-hot attic apartment on a Brooklyn thoroughfare underlined by the F train. I had an unusable stove filled with petrified mouse droppings, an empty fridge save for a couple of beers and yogurt peanut honey Balance bars, a futon on a piece of plywood unevenly balanced on milk crates for a bed, and a floor through which I could hear *Stand clear the closing doors* morning, noon, and night. I spent approximately seven hours a day lying in bed in this apartment, if that. Mostly I slept elsewhere. I

wrote most everything I wrote and read most everything I read in public, just as I am writing this in public now.

I was so happy renting in New York City for so long because renting—or at least the way I rented, which involved never lifting a finger to better my surroundings—allows you to let things literally fall apart all around you. Then, when it gets to be too much, you just move on.

Susan Fraiman

Many feminists have argued for *the decline of the domestic as a separate, inherently female sphere and the vindication of domesticity as an ethic, an affect, an aesthetic, and a public*. I'm not sure what this vindication would mean, exactly, though I think in my book I was angling for something of the same. But even then I suspected that I was doing so because I didn't have a domestic, and I liked it that way.

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I liked Fallen Soldier because it gave me time to learn about your son's face in mute repose: big almond eyes, skin just starting to freckle. And clearly he found some novel, relaxing pleasure in just lying there, protected by imaginary armor, while a near stranger who was quickly becoming family picked up each limb and turned it over, trying to find the wound.

Not long ago, a friend came over to our house and pulled down a mug for coffee, a mug that was a gift from my mother. It's one of those mugs you can purchase online from Snapfish, with the photo of your choice emblazoned on it. I was horrified when I received it, but it's the biggest mug we own, so we keep it around, in case someone's in the mood for a trough of warm milk or something.

Wow, my friend said, filling it up. *I've never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life.*

The photo on the mug depicts my family and me, all dressed up to go to the *Nutcracker* at Christmastime—a ritual that was important to my mother when I was a little girl, and that we have revived with her now that there are children in my life. In the photo I'm seven months pregnant with what will become Iggy, wearing a high ponytail and leopard print dress; Harry and his son are wearing matching dark suits, looking dashing. We're standing in front of the mantel at my mother's house, which has monogrammed stockings hanging from it. We look happy.

But what about it is the essence of heteronormativity? That my mother made a mug on a boojie service like Snapfish? That we're clearly participating, or acquiescing into participating, in a long tradition of families being photographed at holiday time in their holiday best? That my mother made me the mug, in part to indicate that she recognizes and accepts my tribe as family? What about my pregnancy—is that inherently heteronormative? Or is the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation (or, to put a finer edge on it, maternity) more a reactionary embrace of how things have shaken down for queers than the mark of some ontological truth? As more queers have kids, will the presumed opposition simply wither away? Will you miss it?

Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's "normal" state, and occasions a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one's body? How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate

Judith Butler

conformity? Or is this just another disqualification of anything tied too closely to the female animal from the privileged term (in this case, nonconformity, or radicality)? What about the fact that Harry is neither male nor female? *I'm a special—a two for one*, his character Valentine explains in *By Hook or By Crook*.

When or how do *new kinship systems mime older nuclear family arrangements* and when or how do they *radically recontextualize them in a way that constitutes a rethinking of kinship*? How can you tell; or, rather, who's to tell? *Tell your girlfriend to find a different kid to play house with*, your ex would say, after we first moved in.

Jacques Lacan

To align oneself with the real while intimating that others are at play, approximate, or in imitation can feel good. But any fixed claim on realness, especially when it is tied to an identity, also has a finger in psychosis. *If a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so.*

Perhaps this is why psychologist D. W. Winnicott's notion of "feeling real" is so moving to me. One can aspire to feel real, one can help others to feel real, and one can oneself feel real—a feeling Winnicott describes as the collected, primary sensation of aliveness, "the aliveness of the body tissues and working of body-functions, including the heart's action and breathing," which makes spontaneous gesture possible. For Winnicott, feeling real is not reactive to external stimuli, nor is it an identity. It is a sensation—a sensation that spreads. Among other things, it makes one want to live.

Some people find pleasure in aligning themselves with an identity, as in *You make me feel like a natural woman*—made famous

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by Aretha Franklin and, later, by Judith Butler, who focused on the instability wrought by the simile. But there can also be a horror in doing so, not to mention an impossibility. *It's not possible to live twenty-four hours a day soaked in the immediate awareness of one's sex. Gendered selfconsciousness has, mercifully, a flickering nature.*

Denise Riley

A friend says he thinks of gender as a color. Gender does share with color a certain ontological indeterminacy: it isn't quite right to say that an object *is* a color, nor that the object *has* a color. Context also changes it: *all cats are gray*, etc. Nor is color *voluntary*, precisely. But none of these formulations means that the object in question is *colorless*.

Butler

*Gender Trouble*

*The bad reading [of Gender Trouble] goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender: stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism. . . . When my whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, presupposes gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen and that "performativity" is not radical choice and it's not voluntarism. . . . Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in.*

*You should order a mug in response, my friend mused while drinking her coffee. Like, how about one that features Iggy's head crowning, in all its bloody glory? (I had told her earlier that day that I was vaguely hurt that my mother hadn't wanted to*

Deborah Hay

During our first forays out as a couple, I blushed a lot, felt dizzy with my luck, unable to contain the nearly exploding fact that I've so obviously gotten everything I'd ever wanted, everything there was to get. *Handsome, brilliant, quick-witted, articulate, forceful, you.* We spent hours and hours on the red couch, giggling, *The happiness police are going to come and arrest us if we go on this way. Arrest us for our luck.*

*What if where I am is what I need?* Before you, I had always thought of this mantra as a means of making peace with a bummer or even catastrophic situation. I never imagined it might apply to joy, too.

In *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde rails against the imperative to optimism and happiness that she found in the medical discourse surrounding breast cancer. "Was I really fighting the spread of radiation, racism, woman-slaughter, chemical inva-

look at my birth photos; Harry then reminded me that few people ever want to look at anyone's birth photos, at least not the graphic ones. And I was forced to admit that my past feelings about other people's birth photos bore out the truth of this statement. But in my postpartum haze, I felt as though giving birth to Iggy was such an achievement, and doesn't my mother like to be proud of my achievements? She laminated the page in the *New York Times* that listed me as a Guggenheim recipient, for God's sake. Unable to throw the Guggenheim placemat away (ingratitude), but not knowing what else to do with it, I've since placed it below Iggy's high chair, to catch the food that flows downward. Given that the fellowship essentially paid for his conception, each time I sponge tidbits of shredded wheat or broccoli florets off of it, I feel a loose sense of justice.)

sion of our food, pollution of our environment, the abuse and psychic destruction of our young, merely to avoid dealing with my first and greatest responsibility—to be happy?" Lorde writes. "Let us seek 'joy' rather than real food and clean air and a saner future on a liveable earth! As if happiness alone can protect us from the results of profit-madness."

Audre Lorde

Sara Ahmed

Happiness is no protection, and certainly it is not a responsibility. *The freedom to be happy restricts human freedom if you are not free to be not happy.* But one can make of either freedom a habit, and only you know which you've chosen.

The wedding story of Mary and George Oppen is one of the only straight-people stories I know in which the marriage is made more romantic by virtue of its being a sham. Here is their story: One night in 1926, Mary went out on a date with George, whom she knew just a little from a college poetry class. As Mary remembers it: "He came for me in his roommate's Model T Ford, and we drove out to the country, sat and talked, made love, and talked until morning. . . . We talked as we had never talked before, an outpouring." Upon returning to their dorms in the morning, Mary found herself expelled; George was suspended. They then took off together, hitchhiking on the open road.

Before meeting George, Mary had decided firmly against marriage, considering it to be a "disastrous trap." But she also knew that traveling together without being married put her and George at risk with the law, via the Mann Act—one of the many laws in U.S. history ostensibly passed to prosecute unequivocally bad things like sexual slavery, but which in actuality has been used to harass anyone whose relationships the state deems "immoral."

So in 1927, Mary got married. Here is her account of that day:

Although I had a strong conviction that my relationship with George was not an affair of the State, the threat of imprisonment on the road frightened us, so we went to be married in Dallas. A girl we met gave me her purple velvet dress, her boyfriend gave us a pint of gin. George wore his college roommate's baggy plus-fours, but we did not drink the gin. We bought a ten-cent ring and went to the ugly red sandstone courthouse that still stands in Dallas. We gave my name, Mary Colby, and the name George was using, "David Verdi," because he was fleeing from his father.

And so Mary Colby marries David Verdi, but she never precisely marries George Oppen. They give the state the slip, along with George's wealthy family (who by this point had hired a private eye to find them). That slip then becomes a sliver of light filtering into their house for the next fifty-seven years. Fifty-seven years of baffling the paradigm, with ardor.

Ahmed

I have long known about madmen and kings; I have long known about feeling real. I have long been lucky enough to *feel* real, no matter what diminishments or depressions have come my way. And I have long known that the *moment of queer pride is a refusal to be shamed by witnessing the other as being ashamed of you.*

So why did your ex's digs about playing house sting so bright?

Sometimes one has to know something many times over. Sometimes one forgets, and then remembers. And then forgets, and then remembers. And then forgets again.

As with knowledge, so too, with presence.

If the baby could speak to the mother, says Winnicott, here is what it might say:

I find you;  
You survive what I do to you as I come to recognize you as  
not-me;  
I use you;  
I forget you;  
But you remember me;  
I keep forgetting you;  
I lose you;  
I am sad.

Winnicott's concept of "good enough" mothering is in resurgence right now. You can find it everywhere from mommy blogs to Alison Bechdel's graphic novel *Are You My Mother?* to reams of critical theory. (One of this book's titles, in an alternate universe: *Why Winnicott Now?*)

Despite his popularity, however, you still can't procure an intimidating multivolume set titled *The Collected Works of D. W. Winnicott*. His work has to be encountered in little bits—bits that have been contaminated by their relationship to actual, blathering mothers, or by otherwise middlebrow venues, which prohibit any easy enshrinement of Winnicott as a psychological heavyweight. In the back of one collection, I note the following sources for the essays therein: a presentation to the Nursery School Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; BBC broadcasts to mothers; a Q&A for a BBC program titled *Woman's Hour*; conferences about breast-feeding; lectures given to midwives; and "letters to the editor."

Elizabeth Weed

Such humble, contaminated sources are surely part of the reason why, in Iggy's first year of life, Winnicott was the only child psychologist who retained any interest or relevance for me. Klein's morbid infant sadism and bad breast, Freud's blockbuster Oedipal saga and freighted *fort/da*, Lacan's heavy-handed Imaginary and Symbolic—suddenly none seemed irreverent enough to address the situation of being a baby, of caretaking a baby. *Do castration and the Phallus tell us the deep Truths of Western culture or just the truth of how things are and might not always be?* It astonishes and shames me to think that I spent years finding such questions not only comprehensible, but compelling.

Susan Sontag

In the face of such phallocentric gravitas, I find myself drifting into a delinquent, anti-interpretive mood. In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art. But even an erotics feels too heavy. I don't want an eros, or a hermeneutics, of my baby. Neither is dirty, neither is mirthful, enough.

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On one of the long afternoons that has since bled into the one long afternoon of Iggy's infancy, I watch him pause on all fours at the threshold to our backyard, as he contemplates which scraggly oak leaf to scrunch toward first with his dogged army crawl. His soft little tongue, always whitened in the center from milk, nudges out of his mouth in gentle anticipation, a turtle bobbing out of its shell. I want to pause here, maybe forever, and hail the brief moment before I have to jump into action, before I must become the one who eliminates the *inappropriate object*, or, if I'm too late, who must harvest it from his mouth.

You, reader, are alive today, reading this, because someone once adequately policed your mouth exploring. In the face of this fact, Winnicott holds the relatively unsentimental position that

we don't owe these people (often women, but by no means always) anything. But we do owe *ourselves* "an intellectual recognition of the fact that at first we were (psychologically) absolutely dependent, and that absolutely means absolutely. Luckily we were met by ordinary devotion."

By ordinary devotion, Winnicott means ordinary devotion. "It is a trite remark when I say that by devoted I simply mean devoted." Winnicott is a writer for whom ordinary words are good enough.

As soon as we moved in together, we were faced with the urgent task of setting up a home for your son that would feel abundant and containing—good enough—rather than broken or falling. (These poeticisms come from that classic of genderqueer kinship, *Mom's House, Dad's House*.) But that's not quite right—we knew about this task beforehand; it was, in fact, one of the reasons we moved so quickly. What became apparent was the urgent task specifically before me: that of learning how to be a stepparent. Talk about a potentially fraught identity! My step-father had his faults, but every word I have ever uttered against him has come back to haunt me, now that I understand what it is to hold the position, to be held by it.

When you are a stepparent, no matter how wonderful you are, no matter how much love you have to give, no matter how mature or wise or successful or smart or responsible you are, you are structurally vulnerable to being hated or resented, and there is precious little you can do about it, save endure, and commit to planting seeds of sanity and good spirit in the face of whatever shitstorms may come your way. And don't expect to get any kudos from the culture, either: parents are Hallmark-sacrosanct, but stepparents are interlopers, self-servers, poachers, pollutants, and child molesters.

Every time I see the word *stepchild* in an obituary, as in "X is survived by three children and two stepchildren," or whenever an adult acquaintance says something like, "Oh, sorry, I can't make it—I'm visiting my stepdad this weekend," or when, during the Olympics, the camera pans the audience and the voiceover says, "there's X's stepmother, cheering him on," my heart skips a beat, just to hear the sound of the bond made public, made positive.

When I try to discover what I resent my stepfather for most, it is never "he gave me too much love." No—I resent him for not reliably giving the impression that he was glad he lived with my sister and me (he may not have been), for not telling me often that he loved me (again, he may not have—as one of the step-parenting self-help books I ordered during our early days put it, love is preferred, but not required), for not being my father, and for leaving after over twenty years of marriage to our mother without saying a proper good-bye.

*I think you overestimate the maturity of adults,* he wrote me in his final letter, a letter he sent only after I'd broken down and written him first, after a year of silence.

Angry and hurt as I may have been by his departure, his observation was undeniably correct. This slice of truth, offered in the final hour, ended up beginning a new chapter of my adulthood, the one in which I realized that age doesn't necessarily bring anything with it, save itself. The rest is optional.

Bear Family: my stepson's other favorite toddler game, which took place in our morning bed. In this game he was Baby Bear, a little bear with a speech impediment that forced him to say B's at every turn (Cousin Evan is Bousin Bevan, and so on).

Sometimes Baby Bear played at home with his bear family, delighting in his recalcitrant mispronunciations; other times he ventured off on his own, to spear a tuna. On one of these mornings, Baby Bear christened me *Bombi*—a relative of Mommy, but with a difference. I admired Baby Bear's inventiveness, which persists.

We hadn't been planning on getting married per se. But when we woke up on the morning of November 3, 2008, and listened to the radio's day-before-the-election polling as we made our hot drinks, it suddenly seemed as though Prop 8 was going to pass. We were surprised at our shock, as it revealed a passive, naive trust that the arc of the moral universe, however long, tends toward justice. But really justice has no coordinates, no teleology. We Googled "how to get married in Los Angeles" and set out for Norwalk City Hall, where the oracle promised the deed could be done, dropping our small charge off at day care on our way.

As we approached Norwalk—*where the hell are we?*—we passed several churches with variations of "one man + one woman: how God wants it" on their marquees. We also passed dozens of suburban houses with YES ON PROP 8 signs hammered into their lawns, stick figures indefatigably rejoicing.

Poor marriage! Off we went to kill it (unforgivable). Or reinforce it (unforgivable).

At Norwalk City Hall there were a bunch of white tents set up outside and a fleet of blue Eyewitness News vans idling in the lot. We started getting cold feet—neither of us was in the mood to become a poster child for queers marrying in hostile territory just prior to Prop 8's passage. We didn't want to show up in tomorrow's paper next to a frothing lunatic in cargo shorts

waving a GOD HATES FAGS sign. Inside there was an epic line at the marriage counter, mostly fags and dykes of all ages, along with a slew of young straight couples, mostly Latino, who seemed bewildered by the nature of the day's crowd. The older men in front of us told us they got married a few months ago, but when their marriage certificate arrived in the mail, they noticed the signatures had been botched by their officiant. They were now desperately hoping for a re-do, so that they could stay officially married no matter what happened at the polls.

Contrary to what the Internet had promised, the chapel was all booked up, so all the couples in line were going to have to go elsewhere to get an official ceremony of some kind after finishing their paperwork. We struggled to understand how a contract with the so-called secular state could mandate some kind of spiritual ritual. People who already had officiants lined up to marry them later that day offered to make their ceremonies communal, to accommodate everyone who wanted to get married before midnight. The guys in front of us invited us to join their beach wedding in Malibu. We thanked them, but instead called 411 and asked for the name of a wedding chapel in West Hollywood—isn't that where the queers are? *I have a Hollywood Chapel on Santa Monica Boulevard*, the voice said.

The Hollywood Chapel turned out to be a hole in the wall at the end of the block where I lived for the loneliest three years of my life. Tacky maroon velvet curtains divided the waiting room from the chapel room; both spaces were decorated with cheap gothic candelabras, fake flowers, and a peach faux finish. A drag queen at the door did triple duty as a greeter, bouncer, and witness.

Reader, we married there, with the assistance of Reverend Lorelei Starbuck. Reverend Starbuck suggested we discuss the vows with her beforehand; we said they didn't really mat-

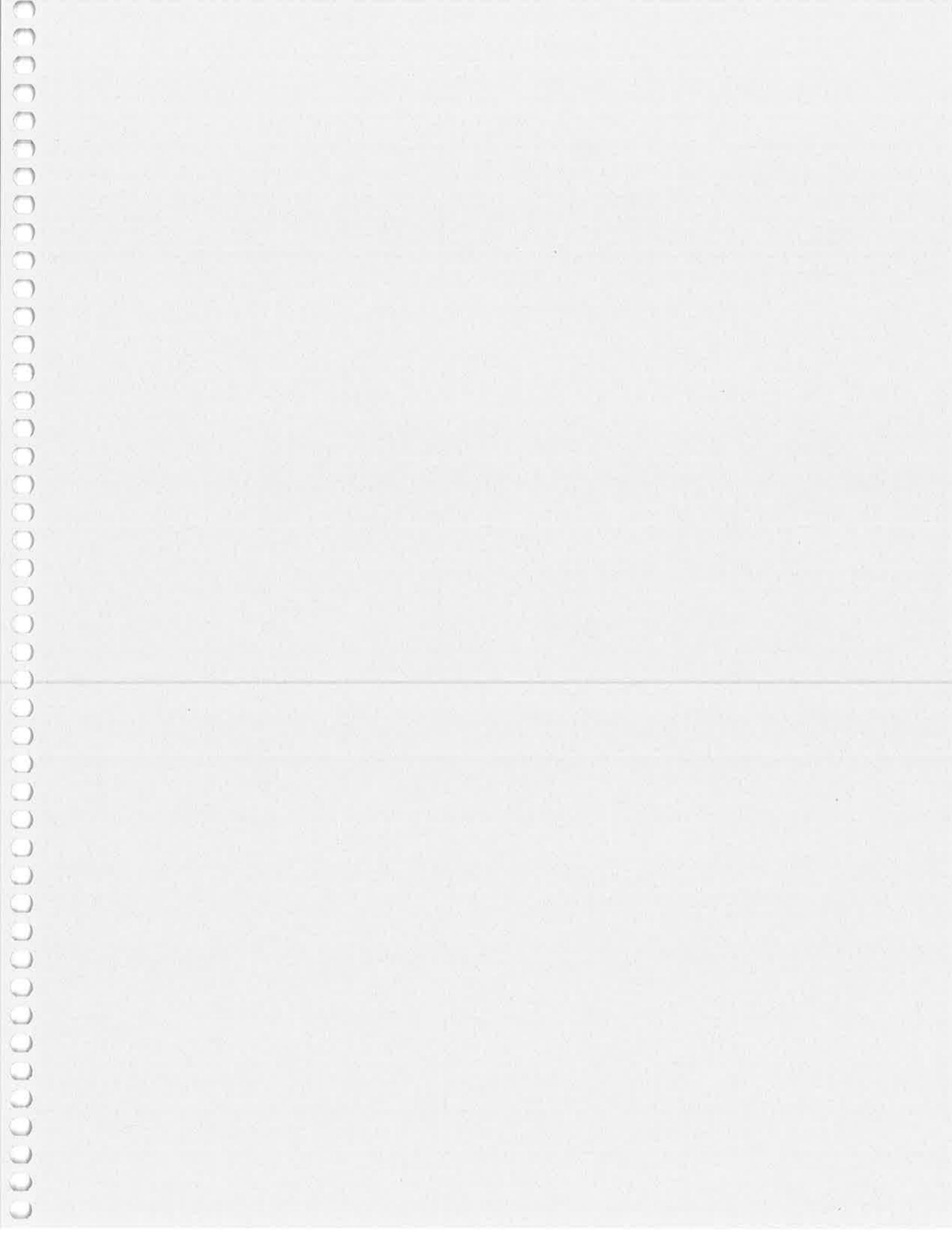
ter. She insisted. We let them stay standard, albeit stripped of pronouns. The ceremony was rushed, but as we said our vows, we were undone. We wept, besotted with our luck, then gratefully accepted two heart-shaped lollipops with THE HOLLYWOOD CHAPEL embossed on their wrappers, rushed to pick up the little guy at day care before closing, came home and ate chocolate pudding all together in sleeping bags on the porch, looking out over our mountain.

That evening, Reverend Starbuck—who listed her denomination as “Metaphysical” on our forms—rush-delivered our paperwork, along with that of hundreds of others, to whatever authorities had been authorized to deem our speech act felicitous. By the end of the day, 52 percent of California voters had voted to pass Prop 8, thus halting “same-sex” marriages across the state, reversing the conditions of our felicity. The Hollywood Chapel disappeared as quickly as it had sprung up, waiting, perhaps, to emerge another day.

One of the most annoying things about hearing the refrain “same-sex marriage” over and over again is that I don’t know many—if any—queers who think of their desire’s main feature as being “same-sex.” It’s true that a lot of lesbian sex writing from the ’70s was about being turned on, and even politically transformed, by an encounter with sameness. This encounter was, is, can be, important, as it has to do with seeing reflected that which has been reviled, with exchanging alienation or internalized revulsion for desire and care. To devote yourself to someone else’s pussy can be a means of devoting yourself to your own. But whatever sameness I’ve noted in my relationships with women is not the sameness of Woman, and certainly not the sameness of parts. Rather, it is the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy.

feminism  
of sameness







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By Richard Rodriguez

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# LATE VICTORIANS

San Francisco, AIDS, and the homosexual stereotype  
By Richard Rodriguez

**S**t. Augustine writes from his cope of dust that we are restless hearts, for earth is not our true home. Human unhappiness is evidence of our immortality. Intuition tells us we are meant for some other city.

Elizabeth Taylor, quoted in a magazine article of twenty years ago, spoke of cerulean Richard Burton days on her yacht, days that were nevertheless undermined by the elemental private reflection: This must end.

◆

On a Sunday in summer, ten years ago, I was walking home from the Latin Mass at St. Patrick's, the old Irish parish downtown, when I saw thousands of people on Market Street. It was San Francisco's Gay Freedom Day parade—not the first, but the first I ever saw. Private lives were becoming public. There were marching bands. There were floats. Banners blocked single lives thematically into a processional mass, not unlike the consortiums of the blessed in Renaissance paintings, each saint cherishing the apparatus of his martyrdom: GAY DENTISTS. BLACK AND WHITE LOVERS. GAYS FROM BAKERSFIELD. LATINA LESBIANS. From the foot of Market Street they marched, east to west, following the mythic American path toward optimism.

I followed the parade to Civic Center Plaza, where flags of routine nations yielded sovereignty to a multitude. Pastel billows flowed over all.

Five years later, another parade. Politicians waved from white convertibles. Dykes on Bikes revved up, thumbs upped. But now banners

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bore the acronyms of death. AIDS. ARC. Drums were muffled as passing, plum-spotted young men slid by on motorized cable cars.

Though I am alive now, I do not believe that an old man's pessimism is truer than a young man's optimism simply because it comes after. There are things a young man knows that are true and are not yet in the old man's power to recollect. Spring has its sappy wisdom. Lonely teenagers still arrive in San Francisco aboard Greyhound buses. The city can still seem, I imagine, by comparison to where they came from, paradise.

◆

Four years ago on a Sunday in winter—a brilliant spring afternoon—I was jogging near Fort Point while overhead a young woman was, with difficulty, climbing over the railing of the Golden Gate Bridge. Holding down her skirt with one hand, with the other she waved to a startled spectator (the newspaper next day quoted a workman who was painting the bridge) before she stepped onto the sky.

To land like a spilled purse at my feet.

Serendipity has an eschatological tang here. Always has. Few American cities have had the experience, as we have had, of watching the civic body burn even as we stood, out of body, on a hillside, in a movie theater. Jeanette MacDonald's loony scattering of "San Francisco" has become our go-to-hell anthem. San Francisco has taken some heightened pleasure from the circus of final things. To Atlantis, to Pompeii, to the Pillar of Salt, we add the Golden Gate Bridge, not golden at all but rust red. San Francisco toys with the tragic conclusion.

For most of its brief life, San Francisco has

Was "queer-bashing" as much a manifestation of homophobia as a reaction against gentrification?

entertained an idea of itself as heaven on earth, whether as Gold Town or City Beautiful or Treasure Island or Haight-Ashbury.

San Francisco can support both comic and tragic conclusions because the city is geographically in *extremis*, a metaphor for the farthest-flung possibility, a metaphor for the end of the line. Land's end.

To speak of San Francisco as land's end is to read the map from one direction only—as Europeans would read or as the East Coast has always read it. In my lifetime, San Francisco has become an Asian city. To speak, therefore, of San Francisco as land's end is to betray parochialism. Before my parents came to California from Mexico, they saw San Francisco as the North. The West was not west for them.

I cannot claim for myself the memory of a skyline such as the one César saw. César came to San Francisco in middle age; César came here as to some final place. He was born in South America; he had grown up in Paris; he had been everywhere, done everything; he assumed the world. Yet César was not condescending toward San Francisco, not at all. Here César saw revolution, and he embraced it.

Whereas I live here because I was born here. I grew up ninety miles away, in Sacramento. San Francisco was the nearest, the easiest, the inevitable city, since I needed a city. And yet I live here surrounded by people for whom San Francisco is a quest.

I have never looked for utopia on a map. Of course, I believe in human advancement. I believe in medicine, in astrophysics, in washing machines. But my compass takes its cardinal point from tragedy. If I respond to the metaphor of spring, I nevertheless learned, years ago, from my Mexican parents, from my Irish nuns, to count on winter. The point of Eden for me, for us, is not approach but expulsion.

After I met César in 1984, our friendly debate concerning the halcyon properties of San Francisco ranged from restaurant to restaurant. I spoke of limits. César boasted of freedoms.

It was César's conceit to add to the gates of Jerusalem, to add to the soccer fields of Tijuana, one other dreamscape hoped for the world over. It was the view from a hill, through a mesh of electrical tram wires, of an urban neighborhood in a valley. The vision took its name from the protruding wedge of a theater marquee. Here César raised his glass without discretion: To the Castro.

There were times, dear César, when you tried to switch sides if only to scorn American optimism, which, I remind you, had already become your own. At the high school where César

taught, teachers and parents had organized a campaign to keep kids from driving themselves to the junior prom in an attempt to forestall liquor and death. Such a scheme momentarily reawakened César's Latin skepticism.

Didn't the Americans know? (His tone exaggerated incredulity.) Teenagers will crash into lampposts on their way home from proms, and there is nothing to be done about it. You cannot forbid tragedy.



By California standards I live in an old house. But not haunted. There are too many tall windows, there is too much salty light, especially in winter, though the windows rattle, rattle in summer when the fog flies overhead, and the house creaks and prowls at night. I feel myself immune to any confidence it seeks to tell.

To grow up homosexual is to live with secrets and within secrets. In no other place are those secrets more closely guarded than within the family home. The grammar of the gay city borrows metaphors from the nineteenth-century house. "Coming out of the closet" is predicated upon family laundry, dirty linen, skeletons.

I live in a tall Victorian house that has been converted to four apartments; four single men.

Neighborhood streets are named to honor nineteenth-century men of action, men of distant fame. Clay. Jackson. Scott. Pierce. Many Victorians in the neighborhood date from before the 1906 earthquake and fire.

Architectural historians credit the gay movement of the 1970s with the urban restoration of San Francisco. Twenty years ago this was a borderline neighborhood. This room, like all the rooms of the house, was painted headache green, apple green, boardinghouse green. In the 1970s homosexuals moved into black and working-class parts of the city, where they were perceived as pioneers or as blockbusters, depending.

Two decades ago some of the least expensive sections of San Francisco were wooden Victorian sections. It was thus a coincidence of the market that gay men found themselves living with the architectural metaphor for family. No other architecture in the American imagination is more evocative of family than the Victorian house. In those same years—the 1970s—and within those same Victorian houses, homosexuals were living rebellious lives to challenge the foundations of domesticity.

Was "queer-bashing" as much a manifestation of homophobia as a reaction against gentrification? One heard the complaint, often enough, that gay men were as promiscuous with their capital as otherwise, buying, fixing up, then selling and moving on. Two incomes, no

children, described an unfair advantage. No sooner would flower boxes begin to appear than an anonymous reply was smeared on the sidewalk out front: KILL FAGGOTS.

The three- or four-story Victorian house, like the Victorian novel, was built to contain several generations and several classes under one roof, behind a single oaken door. What strikes me is the confidence of Victorian architecture. Stairs, connecting one story with another, describe the confidence that bound generations together through time—confidence that the family would inherit the earth.

If Victorian houses exude a sturdy optimism by day, they are also associated in our imaginations with the Gothic—with shadows and cobwebby gimcrack, long corridors. The nineteenth century was remarkable for escalating optimism even as it excavated the backstairs, the descending architecture of nightmare—Freud's labor and Engels's.

I live on the second story, in rooms that have been rendered as empty as Yorick's skull—gutted, unrattled, in various ways unlocked, added skylights and new windows, new doors. The hallway remains the darkest part of the house.

This winter the hallway and lobby are being repainted to resemble an eighteenth-century French foyer. Of late we had walls and carpet of Sienese red; a baroque mirror hung in an alcove by the stairwell. Now we are to have enlightened austerity of an expensive sort—black-and-white marble floors and faux masonry. A man comes in the afternoons to texture the walls with a sponge and a rag and to paint white mortar lines that create an illusion of permanence, of stone.

The renovation of Victorian San Francisco into dollhouses for libertines may have seemed, in the 1970s, an evasion of what the city was actually becoming. San Francisco's rows of storied houses proclaimed a multigenerational orthodoxy, all the while masking the city's unconventional soul. Elsewhere, meanwhile, domestic America was coming undone.

Suburban Los Angeles, the prototype for a new America, was characterized by a more apparently radical residential architecture. There was, for example, the work of Frank Gehry. In the 1970s Gehry exploded the nuclear-family house, turning it inside out intellectually and in fact. Though, in a way, Gehry merely completed the logic of the postwar suburban tract

house—with its one story, its sliding glass doors, Formica kitchen, two-car garage. The tract house exchanged privacy for mobility. Heterosexuals opted for the one-lifetime house, the freeway, the birth-control pill, minimalist fiction.

◆

Barren as  
Shakers and  
as concerned  
with the  
small effect,  
homosexuals  
have made  
a covenant  
against nature

The age-old description of homosexuality is of a sin against nature. Moralistic society has always judged emotion literally. The homosexual was sinful because he had no kosher place to stick it. In attempting to drape the architecture of sodomy with art, homosexuals have lived for thousands of years against the expectations of nature. Barren as Shakers and, interestingly, as



concerned with the small effect, homosexuals have made a covenant against nature. Homosexual survival lay in artifice, in plumage, in lampshades, sonnets, musical comedy, couture, syntax, religious ceremony, opera, lacquer, irony.

I once asked Enrique, an interior decorator, if he had many homosexual clients. "Mais non," said he, flexing his eyelids. "Queers don't need decorators. They were born knowing how. All this A.S.I.D. stuff—tests and regulations—as if you can confer a homosexual diploma on a suburban housewife by granting her a discount card."

A knack? The genius, we are beginning to fear in an age of AIDS, is irreplaceable—but does it exist? The question is whether the darling affinities are innate to homosexuality or whether they are compensatory. Why have so many homosexuals retired into the small effect,

*The impulse  
is not to  
create but to  
re-create,  
to sham,  
to convert,  
to sauce,  
to rouge,  
to prettify*



the ineffectual career, the stereotype, the card shop, the florist? Be gentle with me? Or do homosexuals know things others do not?

This way power lay: Once upon a time the homosexual appropriated to himself a mystical province, that of taste. Taste, which is, after all, the insecurity of the middle class, became the homosexual's licentiate to challenge the rule of nature. (The fairy in his blood, he intimated.)

Deciding how best to stick it may be only an architectural problem or a question of physics or of engineering or of cabinetry. Nevertheless, society's condemnation forced the homosexual to find his redemption outside nature. *We'll put a little skirt here.* The impulse is not to create but to re-create, to sham, to convert, to sauce, to rouge, to fragrance, to prettify. No effect is too small or too ephemeral to be snatched away from nature, to be ushered toward the perfection of artificiality. *We'll bring out the highlights there.* The homosexual has marshaled the architecture of the straight world to the very gates of Versailles—that great Vatican of fairyland—beyond which power is converted to leisure.

In San Francisco in the 1980s the highest form of art became interior decoration. The glory hole was thus converted to an eighteenth-century French foyer.

I live away from the street, in a back apartment, in two rooms. I use my bedroom as a visitor's room—the sleigh bed tricked up with shams into a sofa—whereas I rarely invite anyone into my library, the public room, where I write, the public gesture.

I read in my bedroom in the afternoon because the light is good there, especially now, in winter, when the sun recedes from the earth.

There is a door in the south wall that leads to a balcony. The door was once a window. Inside the door, inside my bedroom, are twin green shutters. They are false shutters, of no function beyond wit. The shutters open into the room; they have the effect of turning my apartment inside out.

A few months ago I hired a man to paint the shutters green. I wanted the green shutters of Manet—you know the ones I mean—I wanted a weathered look, as of verdigris. For several days the painter labored, rubbing his paints into the wood and then wiping them off again. In this way he rehearsed for me decades of the ravages of weather. Yellow enough? Black?

The painter left one afternoon, saying he would return the next day, leaving behind his

tubes, his brushes, his sponges and rags. He never returned. Someone told me he has AIDS.



Repainted facades extend now from Jackson Street south into what was once the heart of the black "Mo"—black Fillmore Street. Today there are watercress sandwiches at three o'clock where recently there had been loudmouthed kids, hole-in-the-wall bars, pimps. Now there are tweeds and perambulators, matrons and nannies. Yuppies. And gays.

The gay male revolution had greater influence on San Francisco in the 1970s than did the feminist revolution. Feminists, with whom I include lesbians—such was the inclusiveness of the feminist movement—were preoccupied with career, with escape from the house in order to create a sexually democratic city. Homosexual men sought to reclaim the house, the house that traditionally had been the reward for heterosexuality, with all its selfless tasks and burdens.

Leisure defined the gay male revolution. The gay political movement began, by most accounts, in 1969, with the Stonewall riots in New York City, whereby gay men fought to defend the nonconformity of their leisure.

It was no coincidence that homosexuals migrated to San Francisco in the 1970s, for the city was famed as a playful place, more Catholic than Protestant in its eschatological intuition. In 1975 the state of California legalized consensual homosexuality, and about that same time Castro Street, southwest of downtown, began to eclipse Polk Street as the homosexual address in San Francisco. Polk Street was a string of bars. The Castro was an entire district. The Castro had Victorian houses and churches, bookstores and restaurants, gyms, dry cleaners, supermarkets, and an elected member of the Board of Supervisors. The Castro supported baths and bars, but there was nothing furtive about them. On Castro Street the light of day penetrated gay life through clear plate-glass windows. The light of day discovered a new confidence, a new politics. Also a new look—a noncosmopolitan, Burt Reynolds, butch-kid style: beer, ball games, Levi's, short hair, muscles.

Gay men who lived elsewhere in the city, in Pacific Heights or in the Richmond, often spoke with derision of "Castro Street clones," describing the look, or scorned what they called the ghettoization of homosexuality. To an older generation of homosexuals, the blatancy of sexuality on Castro Street threatened the discreet compromise they had negotiated with a tolerant city.

As the Castro district thrived, Folsom Street, south of Market, also began to thrive, as if in

counterdistinction to the utopian Castro. The Folsom Street area was a warehouse district of puddled alleys and deserted streets. Folsom Street offered an assortment of leather bars, an evening's regress to the outlaw sexuality of the Fifties, the Forties, the nineteenth century, and so on—an eroticism of the dark, of the Reeperbahn, or of the guardsman's barracks.

The Castro district implied that sexuality was more crucial, that homosexuality was the central fact of identity. The Castro district, with its ice-cream parlors and hardware stores, was the revolutionary place.

Into which carloads of vacant-eyed teenagers from other districts or from middle-class suburbs would drive after dark, cruising the neighborhood for solitary victims.

The ultimate gay basher was a city supervisor named Dan White, ex-cop, ex-boxer, ex-fireman, ex-altar boy. Dan White had grown up in the Castro district; he recognized the Castro revolution for what it was. Gays had achieved power over him. He murdered the mayor and he murdered the homosexual member of the Board of Supervisors.



Katherine, a sophisticate if ever there was one, nevertheless dismisses the two men descending the aisle at the Opera House: "All so sleek and smooth-jowled and silver-haired—they don't seem real, poor darlings. It must be because they don't have children."

Lodged within Katherine's complaint is the perennial heterosexual annoyance with the homosexual's freedom from child-rearing, which places the homosexual not so much beyond the pale as it relegates the homosexual outside "responsible" life.

It was the glamour of gay life, after all, as much as it was the feminist call to career, that encouraged heterosexuals in the 1970s to excuse themselves from nature, to swallow the birth-control pill. Who needs children? The gay bar became the paradigm for the single's bar. The gay couple became the paradigm for the selfish couple—all dressed up and everywhere to go. And there was the example of the gay house in illustrated life-style magazines. At the same time that suburban housewives were looking outside the home for fulfillment, gay men were reintroducing a new generation in the city—heterosexual men and women—to the complacencies of the barren house.

Puritanical America dismissed gay camp followers as Yuppies; the term means to suggest infantility. Yuppies were obsessive and awkward in their materialism. Whereas gays arranged a decorative life against a barren state, Yuppies sought early returns—lives that were not to be all toil and spin. Yuppies, trained to careerism from the cradle, wavered in their pursuit of the northern European ethic—indeed, we might now call it the pan-Pacific ethic—in favor of the Mediterranean, the Latin, the Catholic, the Castro, the Gay.

The international architectural idioms of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, which defined the city's skyline in the 1970s, betrayed no awareness of any street-level debate concerning the primacy of play in San Francisco nor of any human dramas resulting from urban redevelopment. The repellent office tower was a fortress

*It was the glamour of gay life that encouraged heterosexuals in the 1970s to excuse themselves from nature, to swallow the birth-control pill*



raised against the sky, against the street, against the idea of a city. Offices were hives where money was made, and damn all.

In the 1970s San Francisco was divided between the interests of downtown and the pleasures of the neighborhoods. Neighborhoods asserted idiosyncrasy, human scale, light. San Francisco neighborhoods perceived downtown as working against their influence in determining what the city should be. Thus neighborhoods seceded from the idea of a city.

The gay movement rejected downtown as representing "straight" conformity. But was it possible that heterosexual Union Street was related to Castro Street? Was it possible that ei-

The gym is at once a closet of privacy and an exhibition gallery. All four walls are mirrored

ther was related to the Latino Mission district? Or to the Sino-Russian Richmond? San Francisco, though complimented worldwide for holding its center, was in fact without a vision of itself entire.

In the 1980s, in deference to the neighborhoods, City Hall would attempt a counter-reformation of downtown, forbidding "Manhattanization." Shadows were legislated away from parks and playgrounds. Height restrictions were lowered beneath an existing skyline. Design, too, fell under the retrojurisdiction of the city planner's office. The Victorian house was presented to architects as a model of what the city wanted to uphold and to become. In heterosexual neighborhoods, one saw newly built Victorians. Downtown, postmodernist prescriptions for playfulness advised skyscrapers to wear party hats, buttons, comic mustaches. Philip Johnson yielded to the dollhouse impulse to perch angels atop one of his skyscrapers.

In the 1970s, like a lot of men and women in this city, I joined a gym. My club, I've even caught myself calling it.

In the gay city of the 1970s, bodybuilding became an architectural preoccupation of the upper middle class. Bodybuilding is a parody of labor, a useless accumulation of the laborer's bulk and strength. No useful task is accomplished. And yet there is something businesslike about the habitués, and the gym is filled with the punch-clock logic of the workplace. Machines clank and hum. Needles on gauges toll spent calories.

The gym is at once a closet of privacy and an exhibition gallery. All four walls are mirrored.

I study my body in the mirror. Physical revelation—nakedness—is no longer possible, cannot be desired, for the body is shrouded in meat and wears itself.

The intent is some merciless press of body against a standard, perfect mold. Bodies are "cut" or "pumped" or "buffed" as on an assembly line in Turin. A body becomes so many extrovert parts. Deltoids, pecs, lats.

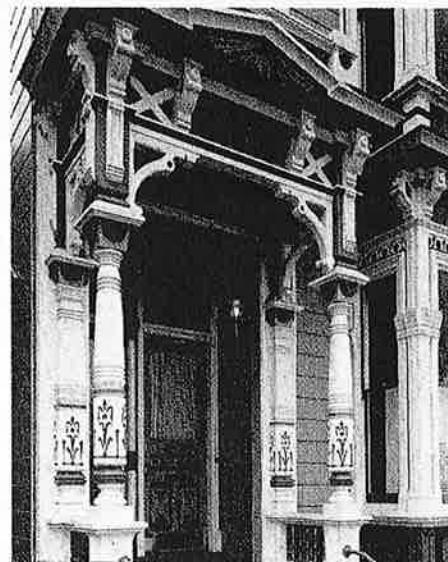
I harness myself in a Nautilus cage.

Lats become wings. For the gym is nothing if not the occasion for transcendence. From

homosexual to autosexual...

I lift weights over my head, baring my teeth like an animal with the strain.

...to nonsexual. The effect of the over-developed body is the miniaturization of the sexual organs—of no function beyond wit. Behold the ape become Blakean angel, revolving in an empyrean of mirrors.



The nineteenth-century mirror over the fireplace in my bedroom was purchased by a decorator from the estate of a man who died last year of AIDS. It is a top-heavy piece, confusing styles. Two ebony-painted columns support a frieze of painted glass above the mirror. The frieze depicts three bourgeois Graces and a couple of free-range cherubs. The lake of the mirror has formed a cataract, and at its edges it is beginning to corrode.

Thus the mirror that now draws upon my room owns some bright curse, maybe—some memory not mine.

As I regard this mirror, I imagine St. Augustine's meditation slowly hardening into syllogism, passing down through centuries to confound us: Evil is the absence of good.

We have become accustomed to figures disappearing from our landscape. Does this not lead us to interrogate the landscape?

With reason do we invest mirrors with the superstition of memory, for they, though glass, though liquid captured in a bay, are so often less fragile than we are. They—bright ovals or rectangles or rounds—bump down unscathed, unspilled through centuries, whereas we...

The man in the red baseball cap used to jog so religiously on Marina Green. By the time it occurs to me that I have not seen him for months, I realize he may be dead—not lapsed, not moved away. People come and go in the city, it's true. But in San Francisco in 1990, death has become as routine an explanation for disappearance as Allied Van Lines.

AIDS, it has been discovered, is a plague of absence. Absence opened in the blood. Absence condensed into the fluid of passing emotion. Absence shot through opalescent tugs of semen to deflower the city.

And then AIDS, it was discovered, is a non-

metaphorical disease, a disease like any other. Absence sprang from substance—a virus, a hairy bubble perched upon a needle, a platter of no intention served round: fever, blisters, a death sentence.



At first I heard only a few names—names connected, perhaps, with the right faces, perhaps not. People vaguely remembered, as through the cataract of this mirror, from dinner parties or from intermissions. A few articles in the press. The rumored celebrities. But within months the slow beating of the blood had found its bay.

One of San Francisco's gay newspapers, the *Bay Area Reporter*, began to accept advertisements from funeral parlors and casket makers, inserting them between the randy ads for leather bars and tanning salons. The *Reporter* invited homemade obituaries—lovers writing of lovers, friends remembering friends and the blessings of unexceptional life.

*Peter. Carlos. Gary. Asel. Perry. Nikos.*

Healthy snapshots accompany each annual. At the Russian River. By the Christmas tree. Lifting a beer. In uniform. A dinner jacket. A satin gown.

*He was born in Puerto La Libertad, El Salvador.*

*He attended Apple Valley High School, where he was their first male cheerleader.*

*From El Paso. From Medford. From Germany. From Long Island.*

I moved back to San Francisco in 1979. Oh, I had had some salad days elsewhere, but by 1979 I was a wintry man. I came here in order not to be distracted by the ambitions or, for that matter, the pleasures of others but to pursue my own ambition. Once here, though, I found the company of men who pursued an earthly paradise charming. Skepticism became my demeanor toward them—I was the dinner-party skeptic, a firm believer in Original Sin and in the limits of possibility.

*Which charmed them.*

*He was a dancer.*

*He settled into the interior-design department of Gump's, where he worked until his illness.*

*He was a teacher.*

*César, for example.*

César could shave the rind from any assertion to expose its pulp and jelly. But César was otherwise ruled by pulp. César loved everything that ripened in time. Freshmen, Bordeaux. César could fashion liturgy from an artichoke. Yesterday it was not ready (cocking his head, rotating the artichoke in his hand over a pot of cold water). Tomorrow will be too late (Yorick's skull). Today it is perfect (as he lit the fire beneath the pot). We will eat it now.

If he's lucky, he's got a year, a doctor told me. If not, he's got two.

The phone rang. AIDS had tagged a friend. And then the phone rang again. And then the phone rang again. Michael had tested positive. Adrian, well, what he had assumed were shingles... Paul was back in the hospital. And César, dammit, César, even César, especially César.

That winter before his death César traveled back to South America. On his return to San Francisco he described to me how he had walked with his mother in her garden—his mother chafing her hands as if she were cold. But it was not cold, he said. They moved slowly. Her summer garden was prolonging itself this year, she said. The cicadas will not stop singing.

When he lay on his deathbed, César said everyone else he knew might get AIDS and die. He said I would be the only one spared—"spared" was supposed to have been chased with irony, I knew, but his voice was too weak to do the job. "You are too circumspect," he said then, wagging his finger upon the coverlet.

So I was going to live to see that the garden of earthly delights was, after all, only wallpaper—was that it, César? Hadn't I always said so? It was then I saw that the greater sin against heaven was my unwillingness to embrace life.



It was not as in some Victorian novel—the curtains drawn, the pillows plumped, the streets strewn with sawdust. It was not to be a matter of custards in covered dishes, steaming possets, *Try a little of this, my dear.* Or gathering up the issues of *Architectural Digest* strewn about the bed. Closing the biography of Diana Cooper and marking its place. Or the unfolding of discretionary screens, morphine, parrots, pavilions.

César experienced agony.

Four of his high school students sawed through a Vivaldi quartet in the corridor outside his hospital room, prolonging the hideous garden.

*In the presence of his lover Gregory and friends, Scott passed from this life...*

*He died peacefully at home in his lover Ron's arms.*

*Immediately after a friend led a prayer for him to be taken home and while his dear mother was reciting the Twenty-third Psalm, Bill peacefully took his last breath.*

I stood aloof at César's memorial, the kind of party he would enjoy, everyone said. And so for a time César lay improperly buried, unconvincingly resurrected in the conditional: would enjoy. What else could they say? César had no religion beyond aesthetic bravery.

At first I heard only a few names—names connected, perhaps, with the right faces, perhaps not

Men who had sought the aesthetic ordering of existence were recalled to nature

Sunlight remains. Traffic remains. Nocturnal chic attaches to some discovered restaurant. A new novel is reviewed in the *New York Times*. And the mirror rasps on its hook. The mirror is lifted down.

A priest friend, a good friend, who out of naïveté plays the cynic, tells me—this is on a bright, billowy day; we are standing outside—“It’s not as sad as you may think. There is at least spectacle in the death of the young. Come to the funeral of an old lady sometime if you want to feel an empty church.”

I will grant my priest friend this much: that it is easier, easier on me, to sit with gay men in hospitals than with the staring old. Young men talk as much as they are able.

But those who gather around the young man’s bed do not see spectacle. This doll is Death. I have seen people caressing it, staring Death down. I have seen people wipe its tears, wipe its ass; I have seen people kiss Death on his lips, where once there were lips.

*Chris was inspired after his own diagnosis in July 1987 with the truth and reality of how such a terrible disease could bring out the love, warmth, and support of so many friends and family.*

Sometimes no family came. If there was family, it was usually mother. Mom. With her suitcase and with the torn flap of an envelope in her hand.

Brenda. Pat. Connie. Toni. Soledad.

Or parents came but then left without reconciliation, some preferring to say cancer.

But others came. Sissies were not, after all, afraid of Death. They walked his dog. They washed his dishes. They bought his groceries. They massaged his poor back. They changed his bandages. They emptied his bedpan.

Men who sought the aesthetic ordering of existence were recalled to nature. Men who aspired to the mock-angelic settled for the shirt of hair. The gay community of San Francisco, having found freedom, consented to necessity—to all that the proud world had for so long held up to them, withheld from them, as “real humanity.”

And if gays took care of their own, they were not alone. AIDS was a disease of the entire city; its victims were as often black, Hispanic, straight. Neither were Charity and Mercy only white, only male, only gay. Others came. There were nurses and nuns and the couple from next door, co-workers, strangers, teenagers, corporations, pensioners. A community was forming over the city.

*Cary and Rick’s friends and family wish to thank the many people who provided both small and great kindnesses.*

*He was attended to and lovingly cared for by the staff at Coming Home Hospice.*

And the saints of this city have names listed in the phone book, names I heard called through a microphone one cold Sunday in Advent as I sat in Most Holy Redeemer Church. It might have been any of the churches or community centers in the Castro district, but it happened at Most Holy Redeemer at a time in the history of the world when the Roman Catholic Church still pronounced the homosexual a sinner.

A woman at the microphone called upon volunteers from the AIDS Support Group to come forward. One by one, in twos and threes, throughout the church, people stood up, young men and women, and middle-aged and old, straight, gay, and all of them shy at being called. Yet they came forward and assembled in the sanctuary, facing the congregation, grinning self-consciously at one another, their hands hidden behind them.

I am preoccupied by the fussing of a man sitting in the pew directly in front of me—in his seventies, frail, his iodine-colored hair combed forward and pasted upon his forehead. Fingers of porcelain clutch the pearly beads of what must have been his mother’s rosary. He is not the sort of man any gay man would have chosen to become in the 1970s. He is probably not what he himself expected to become. Something of the old dear about him, wizened butterfly, powdered old pouf. Certainly he is what I fear becoming. And then he rises, this old monkey, with the most beatific dignity, in answer to the microphone, and he strides into the sanctuary to take his place in the company of the Blessed.

So this is it—this, what looks like a Christmas party in an insurance office and not as in Renaissance paintings, and not as we had always thought, not some flower-strewn, some sequined curtain call of grease-painted heroes gesturing to the stalls. A lady with a plastic candy cane pinned to her lapel. A Castro clone with a red bandanna exploding from his hip pocket. A perfume-counter lady with an Hermès scarf mantled upon her left shoulder. A black man in a checkered sports coat. The pink-haired punkess with a jewel in her nose. Here, too, is the gay couple in middle age, wearing interchangeable plaid shirts and corduroy pants. Blood and shit and Mr. Happy Face. These know the weight of bodies.

Bill died.

... Passed on to heaven.

... Turning over in his bed one night and then gone.

These learned to love what is corruptible, while I, barren skeptic, reader of St. Augustine, curator of the earthly paradise, inheritor of the empty mirror, I shift my tailbone upon the cold, hard pew. ■



# Miscellaneous



## 51 THE FON AND THE KINGDOM OF DAHOMEY

The kingdom of Dahomey developed inland from the coastal lagoons in the Bight of Benin, and its capital was Abomey. The Fon people practised agriculture and fishing; they were also a military power and supplied the Atlantic slave-trade with so many people that certain elements of their religious practices survived in the Caribbean in the form of vodun or voodoo. In the eighteenth century, Dahomey was conquered by the Yoruba of Oyo, who took from them some practices such as Ifa divination, which among the Fon is called Fa. Despite the British attempt to stop the slave-trade after 1807, it continued in Dahomey (particularly through the port of Ouidah or Whydah) towards Brazil until the end of the nineteenth century when the French conquered the territory. For nineteenth-century Europeans, Dahomey was marked by two striking images: the annual 'customs' in which criminals were put to death, and the king's bodyguard of 'Amazons', women warriors devoted to him. These stories are retold from versions collected by American anthropologists during the 1930s.

### THE CREATION

It is said that at the beginning of things, Mawu the creator travelled with Aido-Hwedo, the great serpent, and that the serpent's movements shaped the land: as it twisted its body it moved hills and laid river-beds, and its droppings formed mountains. Mawu made the world like a calabash, one of the large gourds used to make serving bowls. First she shaped the

lower bowl and then she shaped the sky as the lid. When she had finished, she found the world was sinking from the weight of the hills and the trees and other growth upon the surface, so she asked Aido-Hwedo to serve as a support, to coil himself at the base of the world and to hold it up. Aido-Hwedo coiled himself up – in the same way that women now coil a cloth to put on their heads when they are going to carry a burden – and so stabilized the world. Because Aido-Hwedo is a creature of the cold, Mawu created the sea around the world to keep the serpent cool.

Mawu and her consort Lisa form a dual deity, and the *vodun* are considered their children. Mawu and Lisa live in the sky; Mawu is associated with the moon, and Lisa with the sun. Most of their offspring live on earth. Their children take many forms. Gu, the god of iron, came as a headless body; where the head should be was a great blade. The last-born was Legba, who became Mawu's pet. Legba acquired other responsibilities as well. Mawu posed a test for her children, to see which of them, if any, could play several musical instruments at the same time: a flute and a drum, a bell and a gong. While playing, they should dance and sing as well. Only Legba could accomplish this feat, and so Mawu made Legba the go-between and messenger of the gods.

Mawu apportioned the earth among her children. To Sagbata, who had come into being as a couple, male and female, she gave rule over the earth. To Sogbo, who was born a hermaphrodite, she gave control of the sky. And she cautioned them not to quarrel, but to work as closely together as the lid of a calabash fits onto the bottom bowl. To Agbe and his consort she assigned the rule of the sea. To each she gave a different language, and Legba is the only one who can speak all languages.

## EARTH AND SKY

Sogbo had wished to go down to the earth and rule there, but Mawu denied him. Mawu said that the earth was further from her, and so the elder Sagbata should be sent down. Sogbo grumbled at this show of preference, and so was receptive when Legba came to him with a suggestion that perhaps this would be the occasion for a test of their respective powers.

When Sagbata had departed Mawu's residence in the skies for his new realm on earth, he took all sorts of wealth: the seeds of useful plants and crops, the tools and skills by which humans shape their world. But he did not have room for two items which therefore remained in the skies: water and fire (fire was eventually stolen and brought down to men). Legba's suggestion was that Sogbo should withhold the rains which water the earth and see what occurred. Sogbo readily agreed. At the same time, Legba went to Mawu and expressed concern that there might not be enough water in the heavens for the needs of its residents, and Mawu gave him a message for Sogbo, ordering her second child to stop the rains for a time.

When Sagbata descended to earth with all his seeds, he was welcomed by the humans who had been placed there, for his gifts promised to make their lives much easier. But the crops he had brought required rain, and the rain did not fall. Soon the humans began to curse Sagbata for the false hopes he had raised and the change in weather that had come about after his arrival.

After a time, Mawu sent Legba down to earth to see how the eldest was doing. Legba came down and found Sagbata in a miserable state, for the earth was parched and barren and the people were very hostile to him. Legba promised to intercede on his behalf with Mawu, and told Sagbata to watch for a messenger who would soon bring him instructions. Then he returned to Mawu's house and found the *wututu* bird. He sent the bird down to Sagbata with the message that all the people on earth should unite and light a great fire, so that the smoke would rise to heaven and signal their distress. The bird flew

down to Sagbata and gave him Legba's instructions. Ever since that time it is honoured as the messenger of Mawu.

Sagbata assembled the people and they built a great fire. All the vegetation on earth was so dry that it quickly ignited, and soon the flames were leaping high into the sky and the smoke of the burning rose out of sight into the heavens.

When he saw this, Legba went rushing to Mawu and told her that the earth was on fire, burning so strongly that it might even set off a fire in heaven. Mawu looked down and saw the flames and the smoke, and she ordered Legba to tell Sogbo to release the rains. Legba went to Sogbo, and Sogbo in turn released the rains which put out the flames and restored fertility to the earth.

After that, Mawu decided that while Sogbo controlled the rains in heaven, the people of earth should have the power to call down rains as well, for the perils of the earth might eventually have an effect above. The *wututu* bird was sent to live below, among people, to serve as a messenger who would inform the powers of the skies when rain was needed.

## THE ALLADA DYNASTY OF ABOMEY

People came down to earth from the sky at Adja, and Dada Segbo, the king of Adja at that time, appears in many stories about the early days. The rules of nature were not fixed then. Births, for instance, were entirely random. A woman might give birth to a goat; a goat might give birth to a human child. It was a woman from Adja named Hwandjele who changed this by bringing the *vodun* to humans and creating the medicines and magics which ensured that humans would give birth to humans and goats to goats. Other people brought humans the knowledge of Fa divination, which is called the writing of Mawu.

At this time, or perhaps under different circumstances, a female leopard took the shape of a human and became a wife of the king of Adja. She made him promise not to reveal the truth of her origin to anyone, but he did tell some of his other wives. The leopard-woman, named Agasu, bore him a son

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whom they named Adjahuto, and then some time later she died. But she promised her children that if ever they got into trouble and had to leave Adja, they should take her remains with them, and she would serve as their personal *vodun* to protect them.

The king of Adja died, and the people wished Adjahuto to rule over them. But the other wives, now widows, spoke against this and protested that they did not wish to be ruled by the son of a leopard. There was a fight, and Adjahuto killed some people of Adja. It is said that one of those he killed was a friend of his, named Kozoe, who had been induced to betray Adjahuto's whereabouts. Adjahuto took his mother's remains and fled from Adja into the bush. There he met a man named Tedo who helped him find a path.

The people from Adja pursued him, but Adjahuto put down his cloth upon the ground and prayed for a river to start flowing and cut off his pursuers; his prayer was fulfilled. Then he activated some of his magic and said a prayer over his spear, wishing that the spear would fall in a place where he would be safe. Then he threw it in the air. He followed its course, asking people if they had seen his spear, and finally he found its landing spot. There he established his town, and there also three *vodun* cults were established: that of Agasu, that of Tedo, and that of Adjahuto himself, the founder of the line. His wives were known as 'wives of the leopard', and his descendants were the *kpovi*, the children of the leopard.

### HWEGBADJA, THE FIRST KING

Among the descendants of Adjahuto were two brothers, Te Agbanli and Dako who later became known as Hwegbadja. Dako was a tremendous troublemaker, and eventually Te Agbanli arranged to have his brother thrown into the river during the night, in the hopes that he would drown or disappear. But a boatman found the child and pulled him out of the water, and raised him for a time as his own.

After six years Dako returned to his father's house. He revealed himself to his father and told how Te Agbanli had

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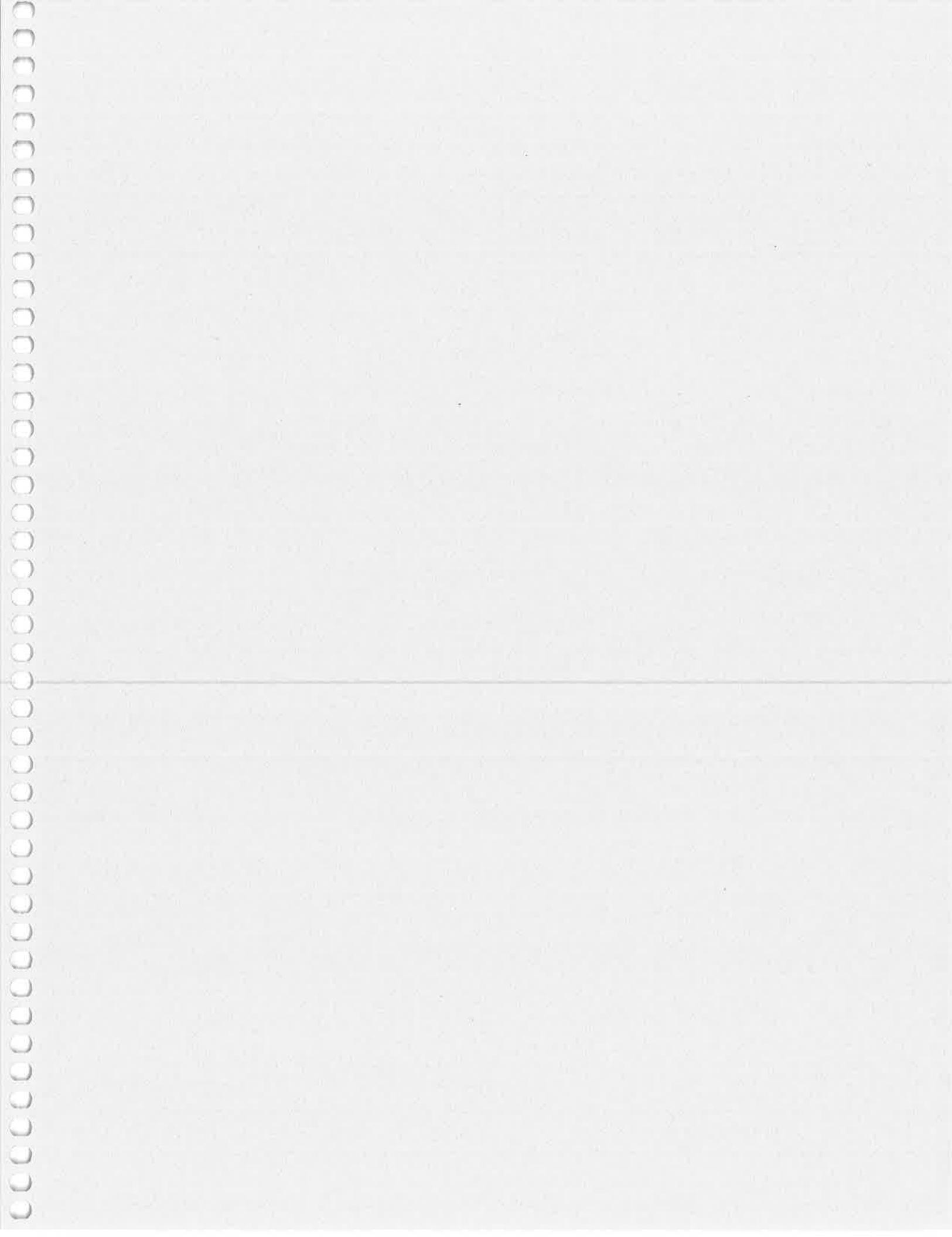
thrown him into the water to be rid of him. It was at this time that he took his new name, Hwegbadja. The father reproached Te Agbanli for having tried to murder his brother, and at Hwegbadja's request Te Agbanli went into exile, riding backwards on a horse. Eventually he settled in the town now known as Porto Novo.

Hwegbadja moved around, and he is remembered for bringing cloth to people who till then had no woven clothing, but only used skins and leaves. It was Hwegbadja who encountered the great serpent Da and asked him for land on which to build a house; he came back a second time and asked for more land. The third time he came, Da asked if he wanted to build in his belly. At that, Hwegbadja seized Da and cut him in half so that he would indeed build on Da's belly. This is the origin of the name of the kingdom, Dahomey: the land of Da's belly.

Hwegbadja did not easily or quickly become king in the area of his new settlement, for Agwa-Gede, the local chief, had power over the earth. His ancestors had come from the sea. When Hwegbadja wished to assert his rule of the earth, Agwa-Gede prayed by his ancestry for the rains to stop falling, and they stopped. When the people acknowledged Agwa-Gede's authority, the rains fell again. He proved his powers with other tokens as well: he pulled up weeds and found peanuts among the roots, and he found cowrie-shells (used as money) under the earth.

Eventually, Agwa-Gede died and Hwegbadja began to rule. He then laid down laws concerning justice and punishment which remained in force until the time of King Behanzin, the last king to rule Dahomey from the royal palace in Abomey, who was sent into exile by the French to the West Indies.







# *The Absent One*

*absence / absence*

Any episode of language which stages the absence of the loved object—whatever its cause and its duration—and which tends to transform this absence into an ordeal of abandonment.

*Werther*

1. Many lieder, songs, and *mélodies* about the beloved's absence. And yet this classic figure is not to be found in *Werther*. The reason is simple: here the loved object (Charlotte) does not move; it is the amorous subject (Werther) who, at a certain moment, departs. Now, absence can exist only as a consequence of the other: it is the other who leaves, it is I who remain. The other is in a condition of perpetual departure, of journeying; the other is, by vocation, migrant, fugitive; I—I who love, by converse vocation, am sedentary, motionless, at hand, in expectation, nailed to the spot, *in suspense*—like a package in some forgotten corner of a railway station. Amorous absence functions in a single direction, expressed by the one who stays, never by the one who leaves: an always present *I* is constituted only by confrontation with an always absent *you*. To speak this absence is from the start to propose that the subject's place and the other's place cannot permute; it is to say: "I am loved less than I love."

2. Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman: Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, jour-

neys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so; she weaves and she sings; the Spinning Songs express both immobility (by the hum of the Wheel) and absence (far away, rhythms of travel, sea surges, cavalcades). It follows that in any man who utters the other's absence *something feminine* is declared: this man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized. A man is not feminized because he is inverted but because he is in love. (Myth and utopia: the origins have belonged, the future will belong to the subjects *in whom there is something feminine*.)

E.B.

3. Sometimes I have no difficulty enduring absence. Then I am "normal": I fall in with the way "everyone" endures the departure of a "beloved person"; I diligently obey the training by which I was very early accustomed to be separated from my mother—which nonetheless remained, at its source, a matter of suffering (not to say hysteria). I behave as a well-weaned subject; I can feed myself, meanwhile, on other things besides the maternal breast.

This endured absence is nothing more or less than forgetfulness. I am, intermittently, unfaithful. This is the condition of my survival; for if I did not forget, I should die. The lover who doesn't forget sometimes dies of excess, exhaustion, and tension of memory (like Werther).

Werther

(As a child, I didn't forget: interminable days, abandoned days, when the Mother was working far away; I would go, HUGO: "Woman, whom do you weep for? I would go, sent," a poem set to music by Fauré). E.B.: Letter.

one" ("L'Ab-

evenings, to wait for her at the U<sup>bis</sup> bus stop, Sèvres-Babylone; the buses would pass one after the other, she wasn't in any of them.)

Ruysbroeck  
Symposium  
Diderot

Greek

4. I waken out of this forgetfulness very quickly. In great haste, I reconstitute a memory, a confusion. A (classic) word comes from the body, which expresses the emotion of absence: *to sigh*: "to sigh for the bodily presence": the two halves of the androgyne sigh for each other, as if each breath, being incomplete, sought to mingle with the other: the image of the embrace, in that it melts the two images into a single one: in amorous absence, I am, sadly, an *unglued image* that dries, yellows, shrivels.

(But isn't desire always the same, whether the object is present or absent? Isn't the object always absent? —This isn't the same languor: there are two words: *Pothos*, desire for the absent being, and *Himéros*, the more burning desire for the present being.)

5. Endlessly I sustain the discourse of the beloved's absence; actually a preposterous situation; the other is absent as referent, present as allocutory. This singular distortion generates a kind of insupportable present; I am wedged between two tenses, that of the reference and that of the allocution: you have gone (which I lament), you are here (since I am addressing you). Whereupon I know what the present, that difficult tense, is: a pure portion of anxiety.

DIDEROT: "Bring your lips to mine/so that out of my mouth/my soul may pass into yours" (*Chanson dans le goût de la romance*).

Absence persists—I must endure it. Hence I will *manipulate* it: transform the distortion of time into oscillation, produce rhythm, make an entrance onto the stage of language (language is born of absence: the child has made himself a doll out of a spool, throws it away and picks it up again, miming the mother's departure and return: a paradigm is created). Absence becomes an active practice, a *business* (which keeps me from doing anything else); there is a creation of a fiction which has many roles (doubts, reproaches, desires, melancholies). This staging of language postpones the other's death: a very short interval, we are told, separates the time during which the child still believes his mother to be absent and the time during which he believes her to be already dead. To manipulate absence is to extend this interval, to delay as long as possible the moment when the other might topple sharply from absence into death.

Winnicott

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6. Frustration would have Presence as its figure (I see the other every day, yet I am not satisfied thereby: the object is actually there yet continues, in terms of my image-repertoire, to be absent for me). Whereas castration has Intermittence as its figure (I agree to leave the other for a while, "without tears," I assume the grief of the separation, I am able to *forget*). Absence is the figure of privation; simultaneously, I desire and I need. Desire is squashed against need: that is the obsessive phenomenon of all amorous sentiment.

Ruybroeck  
("Desire is present, ardent, eternal—but God is higher still, and the raised arms of Desire cannot attain to the two ideograms: there are the *raised arms of Desire*, and there are the *wide-open arms of Negation*. Desire, and I vacil-

late between the phallic image of the raised arms, and the babyish image of the wide-open arms.)

7. I take a seat, alone, in a café; people come over and speak to me; I feel that I am sought after, surrounded, flattered. But the other is absent; I invoke the other inwardly to keep me on the brink of this mundane complacency, a temptation. I appeal to the other's "truth" (the truth of which the other gives me the sensation) against the hysteria of seduction into which I feel myself slipping. I make the other's absence responsible for my worldliness: *I invoke* the other's protection, the other's return: let the other appear, take me away, like a mother who comes looking for her child, from this worldly brilliance, from this social infatuation, let the other restore to me "the religious intimacy, the gravity" of the lover's world. (X once told me that love had protected him against worldliness: coteries, ambitions, advancements, interferences, alliances, secessions, roles, powers: love had made him into a social catastrophe, to his delight.)

8. A Buddhist Koan says: "The master holds the disciple's head underwater for a long, long time; gradually the bubbles become fewer; at the last moment, the master pulls the disciple out and revives him: when you have craved truth as you crave air, then you will know what truth is."

The absence of the other holds my head underwater; gradually I drown, my air supply gives out: it is by this asphyxia that I reconstitute my "truth" and that I prepare what in love is Intractable.

s.s.: Koan reported by S.S.

# The Heart

coeur / heart

This word refers to all kinds of movements and desires, but what is constant is that the heart is constituted into a gift-object—whether ignored or rejected.

1. The heart is the organ of desire (the heart swells, weakens, etc., like the sexual organs), as it is held, enchanted, within the domain of the Image-repertoire. What will the world, what will the other do with my desire? That is the anxiety in which are gathered all the heart's movements, all the heart's "problems."

*Werther*

2. Werther complains of Prince von X: "He esteems my mind and my talents more than this heart of mine, which yet is my one pride . . . Ah, whatever I know, anyone may know—I alone have my heart."

You wait for me where I do not want to go: you love me where I do not exist. Or again: the world and I are not interested in the same thing; and to my misfortune, this divided thing is myself; I am not interested (Werther says) in my mind; you are not interested in my heart.

3. The heart is what I imagine I give. Each time this gift is returned to me, then it is little enough to say, with Werther, that the heart is what remains of me, once all the wit attributed to me and undesired by me is taken away:

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the heart is what remains to me, and this heart that lies heavy on my heart is heavy with the ebb which has filled it with itself (only the lover and the child have a heavy heart).

(X is about to leave for some weeks, and perhaps longer; at the last moment, he wants to buy a watch for his trip; the clerk simpers at him: "Would you like mine? You would have been a little boy when they cost what this one did," etc.; she doesn't know that *my heart is heavy within me*.)

# *The Other's Body*

*corps / body*

Any thought, any feeling, any interest aroused in  
the amorous subject by the loved body.

Proust

1. The other's body was divided: on one side, the body proper—skin, eyes—tender, warm; and on the other side, the voice—abrupt, reserved, subject to fits of remoteness, a voice which did not give what the body gave. Or further: on one side, the soft, warm, downy, adorable body, and on the other, the ringing, well-formed, worldly voice—always the voice.
  
2. Sometimes an idea occurs to me: I catch myself carefully scrutinizing the loved body (like the narrator watching Albertine asleep). *To scrutinize* means *to search*: I am searching the other's body, as if I wanted to see what was inside it, as if the mechanical cause of my desire were in the adverse body (I am like those children who take a clock apart in order to find out what time is). This operation is conducted in a cold and astonished fashion; I am calm, attentive, as if I were confronted by a strange insect of which I am suddenly *no longer afraid*. Certain parts of the body are particularly appropriate to this *observation*: eyelashes, nails, roots of the hair, the incomplete objects. It is obvious that I am then in the process of fetishizing a corpse. As is proved by the fact that if the body I am scrutinizing happens to emerge from its inertia, if it begins *doing something*, my desire changes;

if for instance I see the other *thinking*, my desire ceases to be perverse, it again becomes imaginary, I return to an Image, to a Whole: once again, I love.

(I was looking at everything in the other's face, the other's body, coldly: lashes, toenail, thin eyebrows, thin lips, the luster of the eyes, a mole, a way of holding a cigarette; I was fascinated—fascination being, after all, only the extreme of detachment—by a kind of colored ceramicized, vitrified figurine in which I could read, without understanding anything about it, *the cause of my desire*.)

# *Talking*

## *déclaration / declaration*

The amorous subject's propensity to talk copiously, with repressed feeling, to the loved being, about his love for that being, for himself, for them: the declaration does not bear upon the avowal of love, but upon the endlessly glossed form of the amorous relation.

1. Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire. The emotion derives from a double contact: on the one hand, a whole activity of discourse discreetly, indirectly focuses upon a single signified, which is "I desire you," and releases, nourishes, ramifies it to the point of explosion (language experiences orgasm upon touching itself); on the other hand, I enwrap the other in my words, I caress, brush against, talk up this contact, I extend myself to make the commentary to which I submit the relation endure.

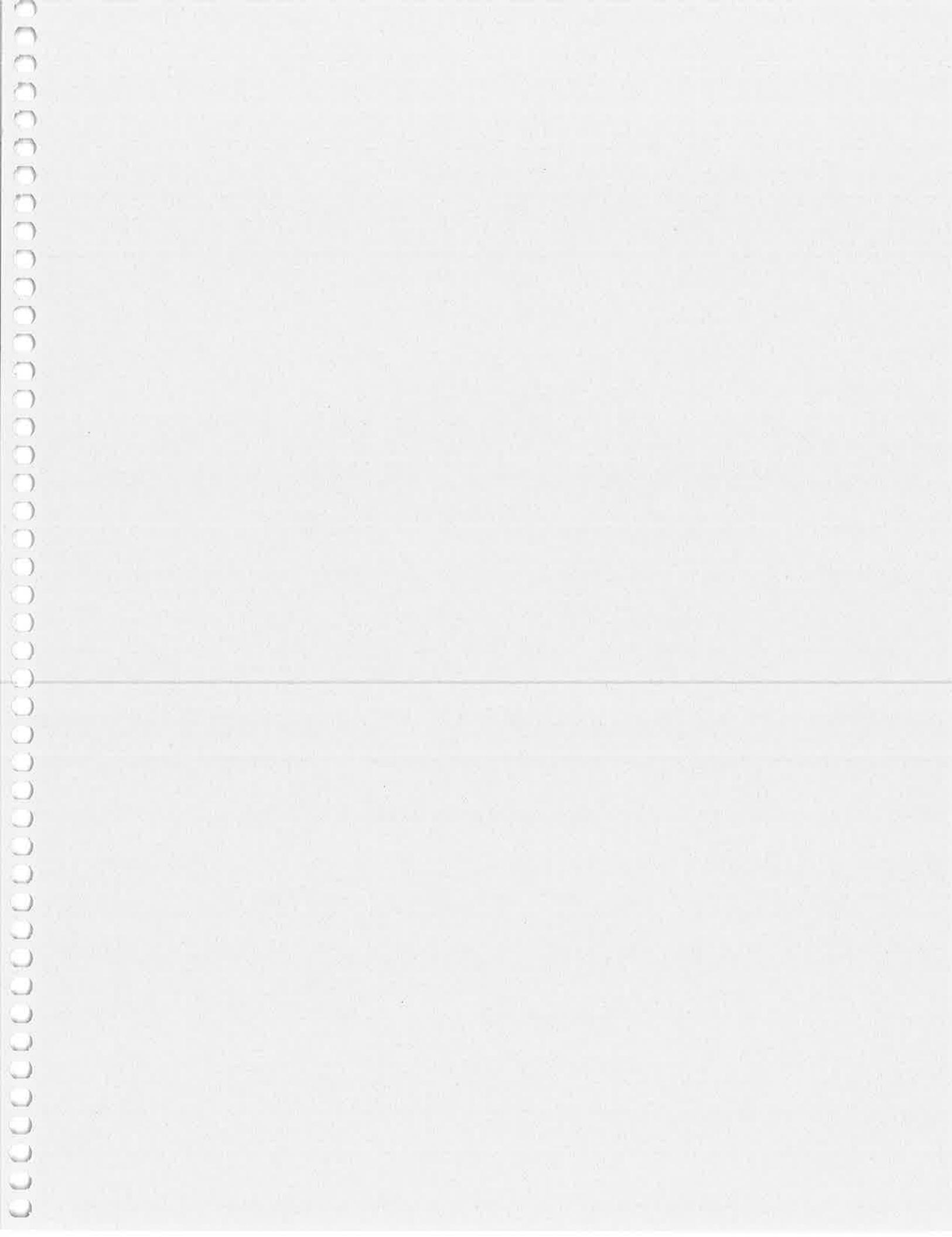
(To speak amorously is to expend without an end in sight, without a *crisis*; it is to practice a relation without orgasm. There may exist a literary form of this *coitus reservatus*: what we call Marivaudage.)

2. The energy of commentary shifts, follows the path of substitutions. Initially it is for the other that I discourse

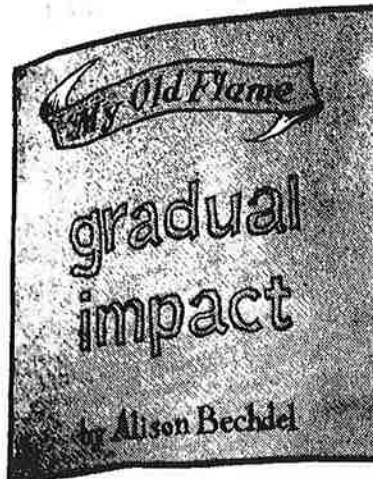
upon the relation; but this may also occur in the presence of my confidant: from *you* I shift to *he* or *she*. And then, from *he* or *she* I shift to *one*: I elaborate an abstract discourse about love, a philosophy of the thing, which would then in fact be nothing but a generalized suasion. Retracing our steps from here, one might say that every discussion of love (however detached its tonality) inevitably involves a secret allocution (I am addressing someone whom you do not know but who is there, at the end of my maxims). In the *Symposium*, we may find this allocution: it may well be Agathon whom Alcibiades is addressing and whom he desires, though he is being monitored by an analyst, Socrates.

Lacan

(Love's atopia, the characteristic which causes it to escape all dissertations, would be that *ultimately* it is possible to talk about love only *according to a strict allocutive determination*; whether philosophical, gnomic, lyric, or novelistic, there is always, in the discourse upon love, a person whom one addresses, though this person may have shifted to the condition of a phantom or a creature still to come. No one wants to speak of love unless it is *for* someone.)

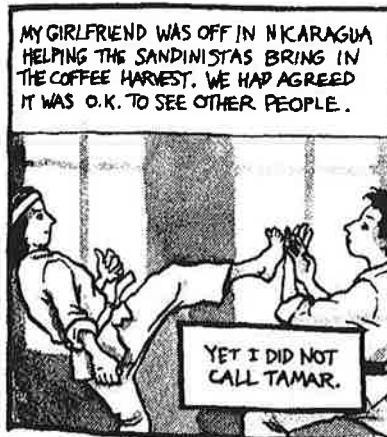
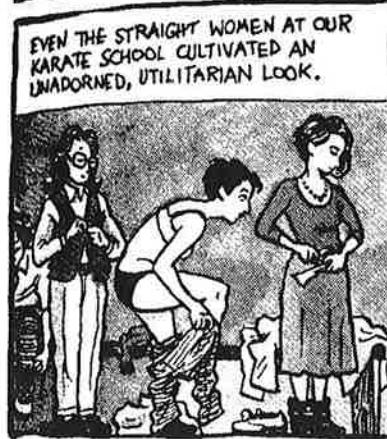
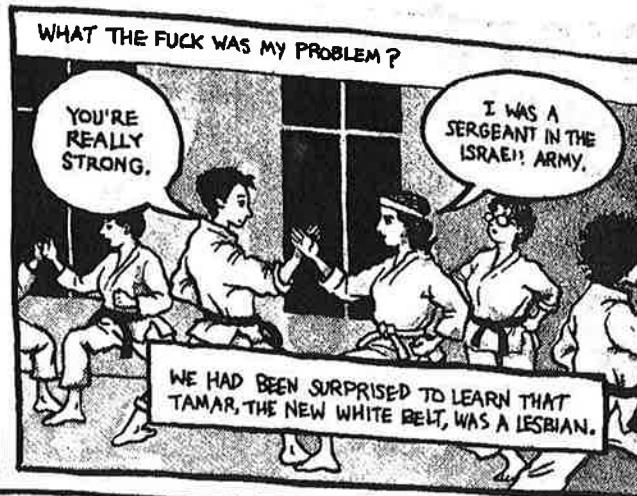




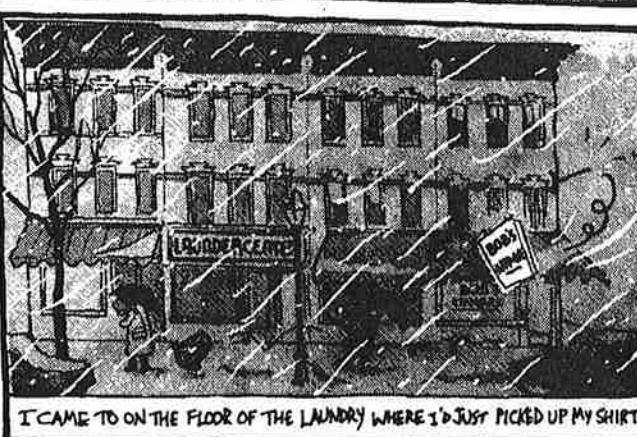


I ONCE HAD A LOVELY AFFAIR WITH SOMEONE WHO WAS KIND, BEAUTIFUL, SMART, INTERESTING, SAME, AND AVAILABLE.

I BROKE IT OFF AFTER A FEW WEEKS.



FINALLY, AT THE END OF MARCH, I RECEIVED A SIGN FROM ABOVE.

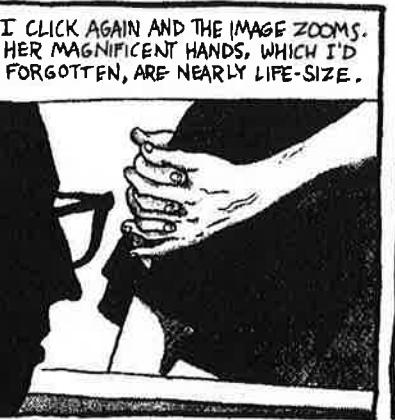
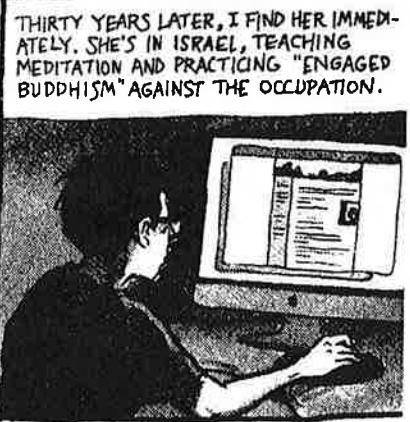
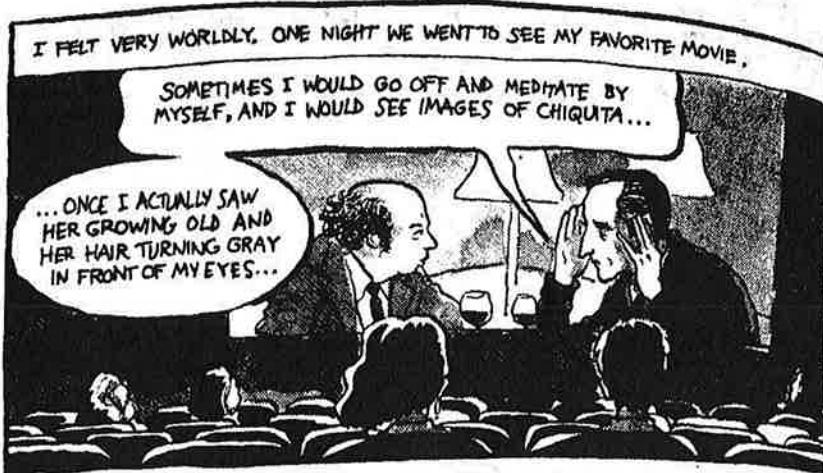


I CAME TO ON THE FLOOR OF THE LAUNDRY WHERE I'D JUST PICKED UP MY SHIRTS.

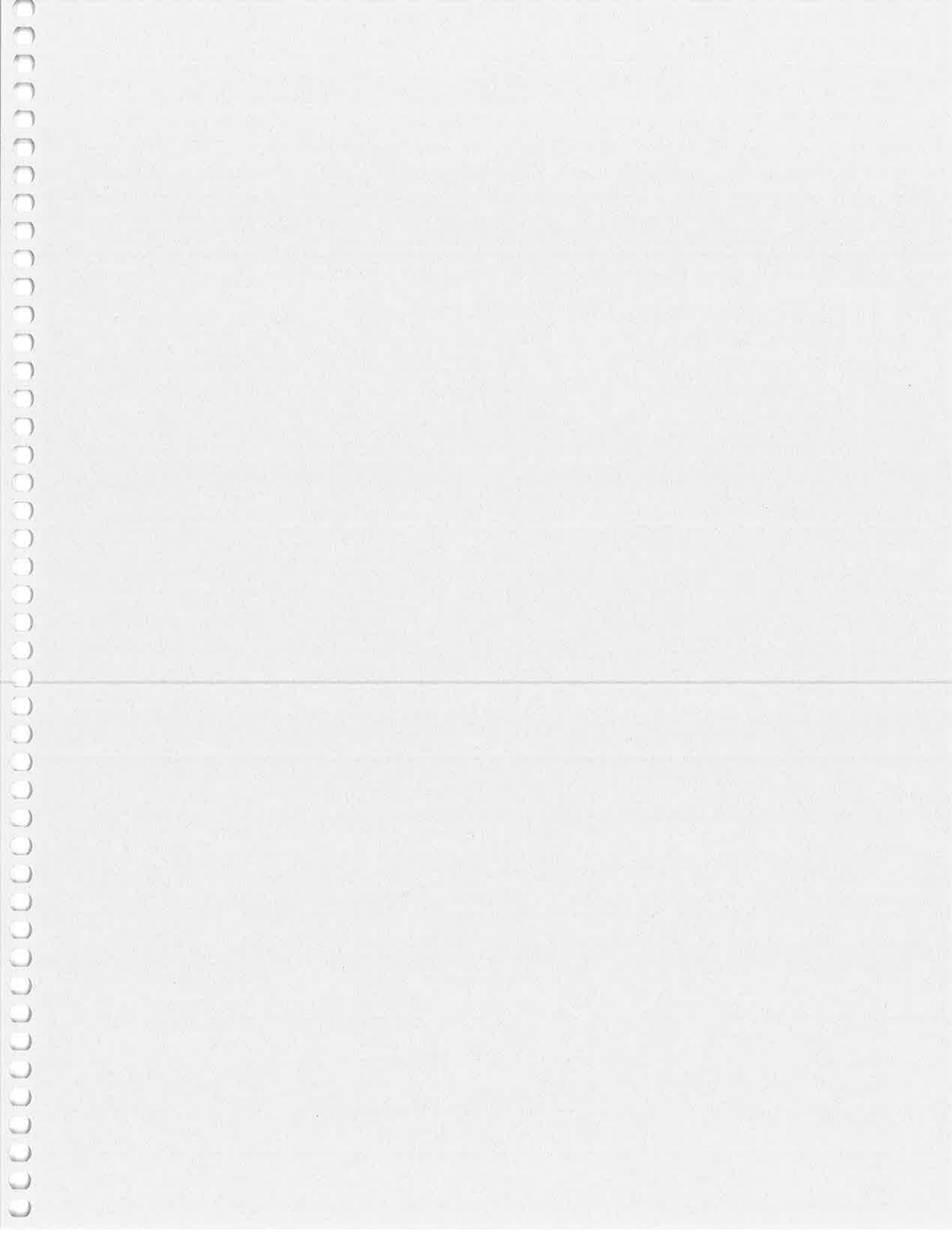


IN THIS WAY, ONE COLLISION SEEMED TO LEAD TO ANOTHER.

I DON'T DENY THAT PERSONAL VOLITION WAS INVOLVED, BUT SO WAS A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF MOMENTUM.



THE END





L\*

A gaggle of writers hurtling down the sloping streets of a town foreign to most of them, on the way to a restaurant where they will be fed between two feasts of discourse.

Lost in this cortege, busy chatting *boutique et politique*, was a little girl dragged along, from colloquia to readings to signings, by her stepmother, who was doing a worldwide promotional tour. Putting on a show of her affection.

How old was she? Ten or eleven perhaps. The age of lanky limbs, of a growing body's prolonged clumsiness. The awkward age. Awkwardly dressed by this stepmother. Shoes that did not make it easy for her to negotiate the slopes of the hill our little Parnassus was hurtling down, heedlessly, so much were they absorbed by their *boutique et politique*, paying no attention to the child. She had been celebrated enthusiastically at her arrival, her prettiness and kindness had been praised. The ladies had passed her from arm to arm to kiss her, then came the outpouring of customary compliments to the stepmother.

You went down the street without talking, looking at the river below, straight ahead. And the bank beyond, distant, and the horizon behind, proffered. You see that in your memory: the opening of the space from the point of view of your body pinned to the hillside, gaze delighted by the stretch of world revealing itself far away. You suspect, however, that another perspective has superimposed itself on that image of memory, the perspective you would have perceived on another day, but in an identical light, from the terrace of the hotel where you were staying. Still, the sensation

of the air lingers with you, the feeling of an open space, like a kingdom by the sea. You hang over it. You feel as though you could soar over it if you so desired.

The child was close to you, probably because you were the only silent ones. You noticed she was struggling to go down the hill, that the soles of her little girl shoes were sliding on the cobble-stone. That, desperately holding back, she was becoming paralyzed. She nearly slipped backwards. You kept her from falling. From that moment on, she didn't let go of your hand.

Sensing that she was still scared, you set about explaining to her how to adjust the balance of her step to the slope, how to relax, to resist, without rushing, the force of gravity that carried her body forward, to identify the vertical and hold herself without fear, using her arms to balance against the momentum of the slope, to set her eyes before her and embrace the landscape to steady her body in space. And to further reassure her, you told her that going back up would be less perilous than going down. That the descent, on mountains, in life, in cities, was always more dangerous than the climb, and that if ever she were to find herself one day on the top of a steep mountain confronting vertigo, all she would have to do is turn her back to the void and go down how she would have climbed, but reversing her steps, facing the slope. Or else, from the side, slanting, in such a manner as to resist the pull of the void and the fall.

This little girl didn't make a lot of noise at the lunches and dinners. She must have been even more insufferably bored than you were. They sent her to bed early, too, as one does. You believe you remember that one evening, as you showed up late for dinner, her

stepmother, \*\*\*, told you that she had been asking about you, had been looking for you, that she had recounted how you had explained to her the art of descending slopes and that she now no longer had any fear because she knew. \*\*\* complimented you on your pedagogical talents. You didn't discern any irony in this compliment.

The symposium wrapped up with a brunch where everyone showed up weighed down with their luggage. People moved between tables, swapping seats. You found yourself, not long before the hour of your departure, seated at the same table as \*\*\*. You chatted *boutique, politique*. You had resigned yourself to it, in order not to appear unsocial.

What you find in your memory when you probe it: there are memory-images that are like paintings defying the articulation of a single perspective. Their focal point is divided between your body as it fits into the remembered space, and the point of view of no one, as if your gaze had become detached from your body. The image of the memory that makes up the painting is thus paradoxically anchored and drifting. These memory-images are rare. You would have needed some sensation to strike your body in order for the memory to fasten itself there: a light, a worry, a numbness, an alarm...

And then, for the rest, for all that did not coalesce into a picture, there is a sort of stenographic scribbling of the past, eliding the repetitions, a sort of partial code, a compressed file, a hasty script, to be completed with all that we know too well, or believe we know too well, the blur of days, of things, of people, of words, of events, of landscapes. And which automatically, or nearly so, comes to supplement the traces, the outlines, following patterns

where you suspect our forms, our common habits of narration and description, of playing a part. These are prescribed, taught, indoctrinated by the vulgar and prevailing uses of representation that novels, serials, films, and conversations have forever ingrained in us.

Between the first memory-image that, at the beginning of that night, you considered and attempted to fix on the page... (A sketch, like a study that a painter would have gone to execute in a museum of an inaccessible painting that she can't otherwise obtain, a painting by another painter, that in seeking to copy she can't help but dissect, and onto which she inevitably imposes her own manner... If you can't understand this, go see the copies, the sketches, and the studies that were done over the centuries by all the painters, of paintings of their significant predecessors. In the order of personal memory, too, we succeed each other, aesthetic generation after aesthetic generation. And perhaps the cunning of memory, of fiction, and of life only ever amounts to this: to step into that spectral gallery of pictures we do not remember having painted, but that our senses and time have composed and conserved for us, that another painted for us, and to forever redo our apprenticeship by turning ourselves into copyists—critics, confectioners, kitschifiers, curators, disciples, disectors, engravers, iconoclasts, restorers, counterfeiters, high priests, translators...) Between the first memory-image and that which at present you will try to summarize, all your narration will have amounted to little beyond the stenographic buzzing laboriously deciphered, decompressed, and transcribed in the common language.

This second memory-image is bathed in an extraordinarily bright light. It comes from the right, entering through what must be

the large bay windows of a hotel dining room, intensified still more by the stretch of white tablecloths covering all the tables, perceptible although blurry in the image. Bright light, but you see your body before your eyes like a dark patch (you must have been dressed in black, and the other point of view, that which doubles the place of your gaze set apart from your body, lets you discern, hung on the back of your chair, a leather jacket). The little girl approached silently while you were chatting and stood behind your chair. When the conversation had ebbed back toward the other end of the table, feeling her presence, you turned around to face her. The back of your chair separates you from her. Her face is level with yours.

She has placed her forearm or her hand on your shoulder, as if to dance. The memory is of silence and stillness, of the weight of this child's arm on your left shoulder, of her sad eyes fixed on yours, of an infinite duration. But you also know that she spoke to you. You also know that behind your head, where the table is, where the light is coming from, also comes an ugly wave of whisperings and looks that you can't see but that tug at your gaze, which you strive not to turn away from the child who is speaking to you, so seriously, with a determination interspersed with silences, without seeming to pay attention to that which you do not see, behind your head, but that she can't avoid encompassing in her field of vision.

The child asks you timidly if she will see you again, if when you come to Paris she will see you, if you come there often, if New York is far. A cloud of wickedness envelops you both, saturating your perception. You strain not to turn your face away from the child and confront the gaze that you feel on your back, make it

## NOT ONE DAY

stop by dissolving that strange colloquium with the child. To not turn around. To listen to her, respond to her, pay her the necessary attention, possess her calm and patience.

When the child with the sad eyes will have let her arm slip from your shoulder after having gravely said goodbye to you and will have gone off as silently as she came, you will face the table once again. \*\*\*, with a little smile, a bittersweet voice, then offered out loud her interpretation of the scene. She had apparently not missed a word and meant to expose its meaning. Obviously, she said, you represented for the child, because of the ambiguity of your appearance, the figure of prince charming promised to little girls by fairy tales and whom at this age, unconsciously, etc. The girl awaited prince charming and had mistaken you—grotesque error—for him. \*\*\* had therefore seen very precisely, under the pretext of Perrault and Freud—or rather of Walt Disney and Bettelheim, those two counterfeiters—what she had wanted to see. And you had seen her see it; you had felt her drooling gaze on your back.

You shrugged your shoulders, refraining from making any comment. If, by some fluke, the story was indeed a fairy tale (for \*\*\* might have been mistaken about the genre of the story itself, rather than the child about your gender), in \*\*\*'s version, the stepmother, i.e. the witch, an obscene narcissist, a jealous caster of spells, transforming everyone she kisses into toads, had absconded. With her apple poisoned by the tree of tactless, lawless, and falsified knowledge.

[Night 5]

She had an incredible story to tell you. All her stories are incredible. \*\*\* has a passion for hyperbole, and her hyperboles always delight you. They let you play the part of sensible moderation. You act the angel.

The story was, truly, like something out of a novel. Back on campus (she was living in NY at the time, close by) to visit some friends in the graduating class just after hers (why hadn't she also visited you on that occasion? You must have been elsewhere, on a jaunt who knows where...), \*\*\* had found herself one night in a car with a half dozen students. And one among them had recounted that in a class at her gym, among the fifteen students, there was—a rare thing—a professor, and she was *incredibly cool, exciting, and French*. And who could it be among the faculty?... For she was enrolled in the same self-defense class as you, and thought you were really just the coolest, but just so *cool* and *French* and such a *professor* that you were totally out of her league. Exoticism incarnate... Wasn't it *wild*?

You poked fun at this declaration that had reached you by ricochet and by surprise. You asked the name of your admirer. \*\*\* didn't know; it was a chance meeting, a friend of a friend. It was all very remote. A description perhaps? But it was night and the car was dark and everyone had piled in after an outing. The incredible story was that a stranger was pining after you, probably ever since she had had the occasion to throw you on the tatami during your lessons, or even to fight back your fraternal attempts to strangle her.

*So, what are you gonna do?* \*\*\* offered to round up her friends from the fateful convoy and inquire, dig up a name for you. But to what end? Such affairs go against the professorial honor. \*\*\* objected that the student wasn't taking your courses, it just so happened that you were in the same self-defense class. In which case, no one would be able to accuse you of harassment or even of seduction. Weren't you the object of desire? Casuistry, my friend, casuistry. She's not one of your students but who says she won't become one? And anyway, it's not reasonable, really, in good conscience, to give in to a fleeting and mindless crush, a pure effect of the imaginary transgression of an institutional boundary. You were flattered, terribly, that a student found you so *cool* that she was falling for you, but as it stood, what would you gratify? Your vanity?

\*\*\* thought you were being rather severe. This unknown woman was silently burning up with passion! It's certainly cruel, but that never lasts... And then, what impression would it give? Right in the middle of an assault, possibly the pedagogical simulation of a rape attempt, whispering in her ear: "So you think I'm cool? Shall we do it for real?"

Ridiculous.

You were actually laughing quite a bit, seated on the parquet floor in the middle of your perfectly empty and zen living room where every day you practiced your katas and did some stretches, some push-ups. The telephone conversation shifted to other incredible stories and ended on your profession of disbelief.

You were, however, curious. That night in bed, before going to sleep, you mentally reviewed the participants in your Self-Defense for Women class. You tried to remember events that could have

retrospectively betrayed the feeling that had led to a confession so hyperbolic (but perhaps the hyperbole should be attributed to the narrator and not to the character of that incredible story) and so public, in a car full of strangers. It was comical: you were the last person to know, and by accident, about the desire you had sparked.

You didn't think about it again until the moment, two or three days later, when you were getting dressed to go to the gym. You always put on your gi in your office, thus shielding your modesty from the lack of privacy in the dressing rooms. You also liked to walk like that, in your uniform, under the trees of the campus. It allowed you to inhabit the place in a certain manner, rather than simply crossing it like one is condemned to pass through French universities, for example. You understood that night, stripping off your clothing and putting on your uniform, that this ritual also served the purpose of giving you the time for your metamorphosis from a professor who solemnly receives students during office hours into a student ready to indulge in hand-to-hand sparring. Knotting your belt, you thought again of the unknown woman who, despite your metamorphosis, always perceived the professor and the frog under the uniform of the student. And, walking under the trees, you promised yourself that you would pay strict attention tonight to all of your gestures and try, without betraying anything on your part, to detect the desire beneath the unknown woman's uniform.

This self-defense class was very interesting indeed. Students fought under the direction of a remarkable sensei: a short, not skinny, black woman born and raised in the Bronx, living in the Bronx, black belt in jiu-jitsu, and marvelously capable of inspiring combativeness and courage in the most timid of the young, well

brought-up girls who made up a good part of the class. Green haven of friendly feminism and pragmatic methods: there you would dissect all the situations of aggression one might encounter, whether the target be your purse, your virtue, or your life. Analyze them, invent ways to block them. Simulate the confrontation if it was the only feasible strategy. In turns, each woman played the victim or the aggressor. The hand-to-hand was firm but thoughtful and careful. So much so that at the end of the semester, to have her class confront more muscular situations and less considerate adversaries, the sensei invited the university's football team to come act as the aggressors.

So that's what you did three times per week. And after \*\*\* had blurted out the incredible story, you went to train with an added trepidation and a redoubled consciousness. Each woman who approached you (for partners were rotated to vary weights, tactics, and morphologies) to offer herself as a victim to your acts of violence or as a perpetrator, you saw as an adversary, a partner, but also as the possible unknown woman who perhaps would be betrayed by a gesture that was a bit too emphatic or a bit too soft. You gained a sharp, unprecedented consciousness of the weight of bodies, the proximity of faces, the pressure of hands, of limbs, of their abandon to your efforts, of their resistance.

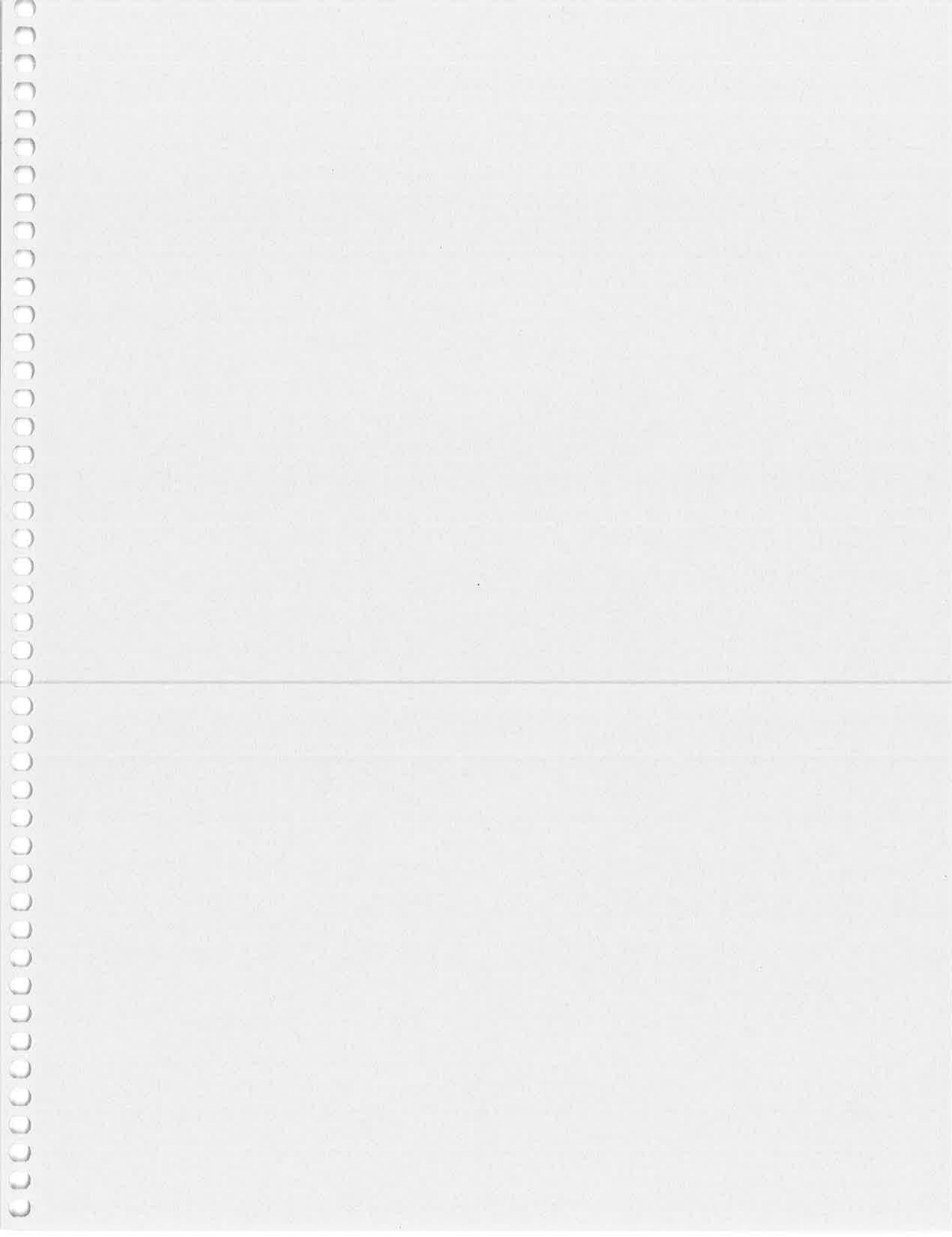
In your quest to discern, to guess which amongst these bodies was inhabited with desire for you, all their gestures, movements, contacts were eroticized. You assaulted these successive bodies with tenderness, you offered yourself to their endeavors with curiosity. You went to class as one goes on a date. A sensation of physical lightness, the prospect of vertigo. And yet, neither your suspicion

nor your vague desire ever managed to fasten onto any one body. The unknown woman did not give herself away. Or else, if you thought you discerned a sign, just as soon you were seized with doubt: in the state of erotic exaltation you were thrown into, who could testify to the validity of your interpretations? If one woman, aiming to grab hold of your head and slam your face against the tatami, had incredibly gently suspended the gesture, holding your skull firmly and cautiously before dealing it the fatal thrust, didn't another woman later on, while you tried your hardest to bear down on her with all your weight, didn't she, before turning you over like a pancake and pummeling you with frightening strikes that stopped, suspended, precisely a centimeter above your sternum or your pubis, didn't she dither and dally, prolonging your embrace?

You never discovered who the unknown woman was. No declaration of her desire was ever addressed to you. No certain sign. You are grateful to her for that. The mystery of her identity, the search for signs, the hermeneutic passion it inspired in you, made that semester of self-defense the most arousing erotic experience of your life. An eroticism that was all the more strange since it never managed to fasten itself or settle on any one body, but instead was bound to all of them, and because it was fluid, vacillating, drove you to pay to each of them an intense and infinite attention. The exercise, a delicate and secret asceticism to guess the enigmatic desire of the other, utterly enchanted the body. Your own, all of yours.

*[Night 2]*







## LETTER ELEVEN

MAY 20

Xu,

My soul is lonely, lonely in a lonely way that I'm unwilling to express to you. How can I describe the depth of my loneliness to someone who cast away my soul, cast away my life, brought me to the brink of death without a care in the world, someone who caused me such catastrophic suffering with hardly a care, and cruelly condemned me to live alone, in another country far from home. I hate you a little less now, but there is still this profound loneliness.

I've tried to reconcile the paradoxical forces of love and hate, so razor-sharp, that you've driven into my heart, and I have struggled silently, alone. While your hurting me, your cheating on me—your acting out in those ways—have lessened, understanding you, let alone trusting you, is still beyond me. You're used to being passive, comfortable hiding in silence. Even the effort of uttering a single word or really the effort of any action to ease my pain is too much for you, so that for you the most natural, the most "peaceful" solution is to let me waste away. I'll never understand how you became so cold and so cruel, as if you've convinced yourself that coldness and cruelty are part of your true nature. As if you're so self-righteous that you won't even allow me to return to my own country, so as to keep me from interfering with your life or "hurting you." Forgive me for being so open.

I often ask myself: Do I have the courage to let "tragedy" happen again? Qing Jin once said that life is full of *rupture* and that it is what

it is. But does it really have to be this way? Everyone I've ever loved has treated me poorly. And when I was younger I treated others poorly too. Why? Why do people have to act so mean and stupid toward the ones they love? Can't we be a little more introspective and reach a level of self-awareness to stop hurting the ones we love? It must be possible. Mutual meanness and stupidity cause human tragedy and *rupture* to keep recurring. But I suspect this wouldn't work in my life anyway: Someone should just insert a caesura into the score of my life. So that there'll be no more tragedy or *rupture*, or at least it would be contained to a lesser degree and lighten my burden.

Xu, my beloved Xu, I now understand how to treat the people closest to me, in relationships both past and present. I understand now, but it's been a slow process, taking ten years of work. Now when I meet people I can place them quite clearly into this framework. After three years I've finally balanced my accounts. I understand my mistakes, my character flaws, and how to treat you well. I hope the results of this accounting can be woven into the fabric of our future.... Does this realization mean I will die young? That I have suddenly come to grasp all this reasoning, does it mean I will die young?

I long to return to our former "intimacy." I constantly ask myself where in this whole process did we lose our "intimacy"....

I'd say our problems started when I moved to the Foyer International. We wouldn't share such a profound mutual understanding again. I was living my utter failure of a life in Paris. I had lost faith in life and in our relationship. (Glancing over at the goodbye letters I wrote you from the Foyer...oh pathetic, pathetic love.) I wavered between two extremes: I wanted so much to live with you, but I also wanted you to be far away so I could stop obsessing about you. This frustrated you and you didn't know how to deal with me in my confusion, while I felt hurt that you didn't understand the position I was in, and helpless because you couldn't make up your mind. I was

so vulnerable back then that I actually believed I couldn't survive the stasis between desire and loneliness....I remember visiting you in April and being so utterly disappointed with you. I thought you didn't love me, and that you prioritized your job, your family, and everything everything everything in the world over me. You weren't even willing to spend your vacations in Paris. You said that you were just humoring me when you talked about coming to Paris (granted, this was a long-standing tradition of yours); I was right all along about the thoughts behind your feelings. Back then, at least, you were willing to say you'd come see me. Not anymore—now you can't wait for me to disappear and leave you alone. Back then, I had limited resources in Paris; I didn't have as many friends as I do now, and my French wasn't good enough to ameliorate my loneliness, my frustration. I had "used up all my arrows and was out of provisions," and couldn't endure a life of solitude, of waiting and longing for you. The only choice I had was to cut you off, but in reality it was just an attempt to escape my desperate longing for you.

But there was no escape. I felt like a gorilla shackled in leg-irons, struggling to break out with all my might, head wounded, streaming blood, but to no avail. The pain erupted like molten lava, scorching and melting away all our "intimacy." You didn't make up your mind in time. You couldn't figure out how to be with me. So my furious fucking anger obliterated any childlike "faith" you had in me, and your uncompromising coldness toward me deepened. I believe you hated me, too, and this hatred was expressed as coldness. And here I've arrived at the crux of the matter. It was at this point your eros started to split into bits of love and desire. You still gave me some pieces of this "love" by taking care of me physically, but soon your hatred began to manifest itself as indifference, rejection, a shutting down. So my desire became unhinged and my pain excruciating. When you stop wanting me—withdrawing your eros—I go insane, truly insane. I've reached an apex of insanity (ha ha). Why am I laughing? Because I have a fatal, mortal, terminal passion for you. Ultimately I have no choice but death: an unconditional allegiance, an eternal bond to you. (The ultimate rule of desire/eros is this: At

their peak, "sexual desire" [erotic desire], "desire for love" [romantic longing], and "desire for death" [the death wish] are the same.) I'm a passionate person, and as you're someone I would die for, death seems inevitable, though it's still painful thinking about it. Just the words "not having your 'desire for love'" crushes my heart, really crushes it (not a mere injury).... I welcomed the care you showed me but whenever I sensed that deep down you didn't love me, I lost it. That's why my "desire for love" could grow even stronger while I also became suspicious of you, lashed out at you, and developed a neurosis and deteriorated.... As this happens, the hostile side of you that you've kept hidden began to be cruel, selfish, unfaithful, and declared relentlessly that you were leaving me and, most chilling words of all, that you didn't love me. I turned into a sniper, as we both became so entrenched in our adversarial relationship that the most negative qualities of our personalities were pushed to their extremes. The sad thing is that neither of us could stop the momentum of careening toward the abyss, though ironically we still yearned to treat (or "love") each other with kindness....

Having been through so much, and though my body is wracked with pain, I must point out two things of profound significance. These are the most painful and difficult realizations to articulate. First: I knew I had lost you the first time I hit you. I sobbed hard inside, silently aware that I had pushed you past the point of no return. I spent my days tortured by terrors and nightmares: terror of losing you, terror of being dumped, nightmares of your infidelity. Controlling the urge to hit you was so excruciating that I had to hurt myself in terrible ways. I still have dreams where I wake up crying. Second: Sexually, you completely rejected me in Paris. You didn't have the slightest sexual desire for me, the slightest wish to make love to me. This went on for nearly a month before I could admit it, and when I think about it I still weep. I can't believe we fucked up our relationship up to this extreme. It hurts so much I can barely speak. It hurts so much that whenever I'm about to remember

Clichy I feel a shock like I've just touched a live electric wire. It hurts. It hurts.

Then I decided to forget you, to transform myself into someone entirely different from my old self: a vital personality. Suddenly it seemed so easy, so entirely possible to imagine. It would be so easy to cast off the defining features of my old self that I couldn't rid myself of before....

Since returning from Tokyo, I can feel the nature of my sexuality changing, gradually changing, a tectonic change so mysterious and private that I initially wasn't sure what was happening or what triggered it. I could feel myself "becoming a woman" (according to some basic biological definition of "woman," anyway) or perhaps just becoming a Woman. My period became extremely regular. One morning I was dreaming about you and I suddenly woke up. I thought I had gotten my period, and in fact I had, precisely at the same time. It felt like a mysterious connection. I also dreamed I had long "feminine" hair, and in the dream I was aware that I was enjoying my appearance and that my face was becoming more beautiful (a "feminine" sort of beauty). Once, QingJin looked intently at my face and told me I was very beautiful in a way that could be attractive to both men and women. In the dream I could actually sense that my facial features and my behavior were becoming more feminine. My sexuality also began to take on a more "receptive" quality. I still fantasized about you, but the way I had loved you and made love to you now seemed more of a desire for you to love me and make love to me.... And I felt a sexual relationship with a man was possible (just the sex). Or perhaps I should say, I was starting to mis/understand that a perfect sexual relationship could be possible with a warm, sincere man (someone with a quality of "pure" masculinity, like Eric from the doctoral program). The possibilities multiplied so fast in such a short time that I couldn't grasp it. I frightened myself with the thought that an intellectual and spiritual man like Eric might materialize and find me attractive and then I'd really "become a woman." It was entirely possible; I had changed into another person. I was scared to death as it was a way, the perfect way, to escape from

my erotic and romantic desires for you. What frightened me wasn't the lure of lust or of betraying you but of leaving you. The lure of silently, with hardly a breath, taking leave of your life and disappearing forever in a kind of eternal self-cancellation, so that you could never find me again (I always seem to be looking for some sort of "absolute" way of loving you or being loved by you).

I think this question of escaping the unique despair and frustration of erotic desire is terrifying for you. I think it will be the cause of my death. Sooner or later I will die, and die again, because of this. I am frightened by this unresolved despair and frustration, I am frightened that I'll die, and die again, from it, this vague and ambiguous pain that is difficult for me to describe. Yong was right. When I was in Tokyo, she said that our relationship could kill me. I suspect that when I showed her your photograph in Taipei, she could tell what you meant to me and maybe she understood this sooner than I did. In Tokyo she just said that you still couldn't understand my passion for you, and that I would be lured to my death. I think she hoped I'd leave you and live in peace.

Sexual desire is both a perplexing and a critical part of love. In my prior relationships with Yong and Xiao Yao, the greatest obstacle was that I was under the mistaken impression that they didn't desire me. I thought that sexual desire would eventually drive the deeper desire for love upon which a relationship depended. Unsurprisingly, Xiao Yao broke up with me and I felt hurt. Yong accepted me, but she always gave the impression that she wanted to be with a man, though she would never say it. Until this year, when she wrote me a letter saying she now knew what it meant to have a "male" inside her. I cried the whole day. Her letter was proof that I had been right about her. I had suppressed any sexual desire due to the "male versus female bodies" problem.

But actually I was mistaken. In fact it was the opposite. Yong later clarified for me what she had meant by "male." In the end it wasn't a physical trait so much as a personality trait, a matter of will, a sort of spiritual "masculinity." What she meant by "male" was me.

It was precisely the strength of "maleness" in me and the others she loved that enabled her sexual desire, while simultaneously negating her desire for others. Her love for me had to mature for three years before she could fully understand it. Then we became in tune with each other, our love and our sex reciprocal, symmetrical. The depth of her passion was what I had been needing for so long. I'm sure it was her love and our fucking that sustained me.

It was different with Xiao Yao, who finally told me "the most important thing for me to know" after I demanded she tell me why she didn't want to be with me. The reason was sex. She said the summer I ran away, she could sense that I was afraid of my sexuality, and then she became convinced of it and thought about me every day until one night blood unexpectedly leaked from her vagina. After that night she started to hate me, and in hating me, renounced me. When she told me about this significant experience, I thought it was related to her first sexual sin and feeling unclean. Our story was a cliché of the guilt a woman feels after losing her virginity to her first love. I was the sacrificial lamb of Xiao Yao's lost "virginity." Seeing her later, I could tell that she and her new lover had a good sex life, but I also knew, without a doubt, Xiao Yao had loved me more and sincerely, and that she wanted me now. But it was too late—we had lost all intimacy and I knew I couldn't love her enough. She was a better fit for someone else; we could remain distant friends.

Sexuality itself has never been the issue for me in my relationships with women. I've always been attracted to women, and I need sex with the person I love. Ever since I was very young, it's been a 100 percent attraction to women. My desire for Xiao Yao was intense. As I've grown a little older I've only become more passionate about women. Yong was right when she said I possessed a strong "maleness." My passion for women is so innate that it doesn't matter if the one who falls in love with me is a lesbian or not. As long as she has no prejudices about genitals, love and sex come naturally. What matters in sexual relationships is the passionate coupling of "active," or "yang," with the "passive," or "yin." The women I long for most are

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always the gentlest, the most "passive" ones. I don't think there's a great difference between my desire for, and union with, a woman, and a "male's" desire for a "female."

I believe that sex and love at the height of passion are one and the same. I was lucky to meet you after Xiao Yao because my desire for both love and sex had matured by then, and you were a woman I truly wanted. My desire overflowed. Your "passive" energy instantly attracted my "active" energy. For three years, including the seven months in Paris, my feverish passion burned on and I longed for you with every fiber of my being. This was no ephemeral passion, no night-blooming cereus that each year only blooms for a single night. For me, you meant marriage or nothing. I could only belong to you. My passion was too strong for me to pledge fidelity to anyone else. If you were not the one in my life, I would tire quickly of another and live an unfulfilled life. Yes, there is no one else who can focus my sexuality and love with such intensity.

Another paradox: Often the one most plagued with lust is the one most capable of restraining it. The monk and the philanderer are likely to be the same person. I can remain chaste for you alone. I can give you everything you need. I love you by saving myself for you. It's my necessity to love you so deeply and so unconditionally. I don't know how to convince you that my longing for you means more than a wish to be loved and more than sexual gratification. What I long for is a whole life, the total convergence of body and soul. What I long for even more: "to find someone, and be theirs absolutely." That's something I wrote in an earlier letter, but now I see it even more clearly. This is exactly what I want.

Here in Paris you didn't desire my body, you took no pleasure in making love to me, maybe thinking I was too *heavy* for you, maybe it was even harder for you to stand me in Paris because I needed to be your lover every waking hour. Our different ideas of "passion" were the main reasons you couldn't live with me; in retrospect I can laugh about it, for what Yong said was so perfect, essentially that I

had used you up and so you ran away. That more or less sums it up. Even Yong can't stand the intensity of my passion sometimes, and she's a naturally passionate person. She said that she could feel the desire emanating from my body even when I didn't express it, and it was overwhelming. Ah, what she said is precisely my problem, and why you fled from me. You often said I was too serious, you said you wanted a lighthearted relationship. I hate myself when I think about this, hate my personality, hate that I'm too passionate and "active"; and I hate that I long for you and need you too much, hate that I feel so possessive of you, hate that I am too "male" (and I guess this hatred is driving me to become more "female"). I hate that my passion makes me sick and that it becomes so easy for me to injure myself, hate that I suffer so easily, hate that my excessive neediness causes you to worry causes you to suffocate causes you to feel oppressed. I hate anything about myself that makes you dislike me, unable to tolerate me, not want to come near me, causes our intimacy to die, causes you to abandon me, to betray me, and to be unable even to look at me. When you shouted "I can't live with you!" on the phone, tears streamed down my face. Talk about hatred—I hate myself most of all.

P.S. I'm not brave enough to face every detail of the past three years of beauty and pain (the main plot of the novel). The beauty was too blinding, the pain too cruel. Yesterday I went to see Angelopoulos's film *Landscape in the Mist* again. When the little boy witnessed the death of the donkey and kneeled on the ground, weeping pathetically in the center of the screen, I cried pitifully with him. I am that little boy, an innocent child who weeps over the death of an animal. Walking with White Whale out of the movie theater into the cool Parisian night's faint breeze, she said that the movie was so beautiful she could die right there. And I replied that with someone by my side with whom I could share the beauty of such a movie, I could die that night too. Movies are like that, life is like that, and love even more so, no?

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I'm putting this eleventh letter in my desk drawer. Details. I. Can. Not. Face. I've already conveyed the emotions and feelings that would make you understand. As for our love, we'll write a more perfect novel someday when there is more content, okay? I won't send this to you after all. *J'ARRIVE PAS!*