The Painted Bride Quarterly is grateful for the support of The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and the City of Philadelphia. We are also thankful for the assistance of Gerard Givnish, Gil Ott, and the Painted Bride Arts Center. Also thanks to Bucks County Community College and the Community Women’s Education Project.

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Published four times a year. The Painted Bride Quarterly is available by subscription: $16 per year, $28, two years. Libraries and institutions: $20 per year. Subscriptions begin with the next quarterly issue. We cannot guarantee the continuation of your subscription if we are not informed of your new address before you move. Single issues are $5.
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FROM THE EDITORS

As you read through this issue of *PBQ*, you will notice both structural and ideological changes. Due to the current funding environment in the arts world (especially the discontinuation of the Philadelphia Class 500 grants program), there will be no artwork in this or the next issue. Beginning with issue #44, however, we are again planning to publish black and white photographs, drawings, etchings, lithographs, etc., though we usually receive few submissions in this category. We therefore encourage artwork submissions for issue #44 and beyond. In an effort to allot the maximum amount of space for original work, we have not published contributors' notes in this issue. We are interested in opening up a critical dialogue with our readers, and toward that goal we have increased the number of critical articles in the magazine. Beginning with this issue, we are introducing two of our regular columnists, Louis McKee and Chris Stroffolino, who may be joined by other regular columnists in future issues. Also, since past contributor Bob Gallagher is so adept at channeling the voices of "esemplastic agencies", as those who read *PBQ* #40/41 will know, we've asked him to draft the first contribution to our Dialogue section, rechanneling the various responses he received to his piece "Excerpts from Lingerman's Handoracle," which he then himself (?) has answered. Readers are encouraged to respond to the columnists, to other published work, or to any of the various changes in *PBQ* through the Dialogue section, a new feature dedicated to the interchange of ideas, however traditional or outré, hawkish or dovish they may be.

Announcing...

*A Poetry Reading at Borders Book Shop*

*featuring a representative selection of past & present PBQ authors*

7:30 p.m., Friday, April 19, 1991

Borders Book Shop • (215) 568-7400
1727 Walnut Street • Philadelphia, PA

*Free Admission*
Dear PBQ,

It seems to this reader that you have devoted an excessive number of pages in your last issue to a work of such impacted obscurantism and self-indulgent eccentricity that I'd fear, should this become a trend, for the very integrity and relevance of your journal. I refer to the prose composition—who knows what to call it!—entitled Lingerman's Handoracle.

Aside from having something to do with a writer's inhabitation by some verbose spook, purportedly in life a ventriloquist, this piece of writing seems deliberately, perversely obscure—one is confronted even by a passage of unglossed Egyptian hieroglyphs! Perhaps some bookbound polymath could make his way through such a thicket, but even so, I'm sure he'd find nothing whatsoever of contemporary relevance there.

And what about a story? There does appear to be some exceedingly limp and insouciant gesture in the direction of narrative—the dead ventriloquist seeks to be reunited with his palm reader wife, or some such pretext,—but this is quickly abandoned in favor of a verbal mulligan, of the most unspeakable density, in which everything is stirred up from Egyptian and alchemystical esoterica, to all sorts of pedantic logomachies and self-referential postmodernist high jinks—you name it, everything except plot, of course. Indeed, anything that might (ever so faintly) resonate with the reader's experience of common reality is skirted with the caution one uses in avoiding dog dirt!

I rail perhaps too heatedly, but PBQ has always, in my opinion, been very sensitive to the tenor of contemporary experience and thought, and has rarely allowed its pages to be thickened with such matter.

It is my sincere hope that the editorial staff will soon return to its senses.

Bob Gallagher
Philadelphia

IN DEFENSE OF HANDORACLES

The preceding denunciation, it seems to me, is a case of killing the messenger. The misunderstanding arises from taking the amanuensis for author, and from assuming that the handoracle is a contrivance of fiction. Once these assumptions are granted, then certainly some of the unfavorable characterizations found in the above letter might arguably apply.

But the handoracle, whatever ingenuous intentions may first have prompted its scribe, is surely no fiction. This is not to say, however, that it registers any array of "facts," either. It is a handoracle, of a kind unto itself (but as a textual phenomenon, not unprecedented: one thinks of Yeats's Vision, for example). How can I demonstrate that I am not just saying so? The handoracle is demonstration enough. Consider what is taking place there. Various claims are advanced, but a logic rules their deployment, a
logic which by divesting any claimant, including Lingerman himself, of “originary” rights over the text, gives play to each, so long as the voice in question does not belie itself as another’s. My critic should examine the point of origin of the “voice” informing his own interiors: he should try describing to himself the production of his own words. Most likely he has not run across Fa-teng’s verses:

A wisp of cloud appears in the valley at evening,
A lone stork descends from the distant sky.

When, however, I say that the handoracle is no fiction, this does not mean that one knows exactly what corresponds to the name “Lingerman.” Lingerman designates himself an “esemplastic agency” who no longer relies on empirical memory. My own suspicion is that he is a discarnate Tibetan _tulku_ exploiting the opportunity of a literary whim to expound Dharma—but that’s just my speculation—maybe it really is the ghost of Lingerman, a one-time Philadelphia ventriloquist: maybe it’s just as he says it is. In any case, the functioning of the handoracle depends, not so much on a suspension of disbelief, as on a suspension of the question of just who’s who. Yeats, in connection with his wife’s “automatic writing” and his reception of the symbolic system expounded in _A Vision_, has the following to say on this issue: “Sometimes the philosophic voices themselves have become vague and trivial or in some other way reminded me of dreams. Furthermore their doctrine supports the resemblance, for one said in the first month of communication, ‘We are often but created forms,’ and another, that spirits do not tell a man what is true but create such conditions, such a crisis of fate, that the man is compelled to listen to his Daimon. And again and again they have insisted that the whole system is the creation of my wife’s Daimon and of mine, and that it is as startling to them as to us. Mere ‘spirits,’ my teachers say, are the ‘objective,’ a reflection and distortion; reality itself is found by the Daimon in what they call, in commemoration of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Ghostly Self. The blessed spirits must be sought within the self which is common to all.” These remarks forestall objections that the material of _A Vision_ is all just “invented,” because even so....

A “person,” or that which is recognized as such by others, is the one bounded by his own skin. But what is it that takes upon itself and wears that mask, for “person” is from “persona,” which means, primarily, “mask.” The handoracle evinces that the true self is bottomless, and being so, it is an opening onto everything, including the innumerable congregation of the dead. Indeed, the monad in not “windowless,” as Liebnitz held. It is _all window_. What is to prevent a Lingerman, after all, from pressing his nose against its pane?

_Bob Gallagher_
Standing at attention...

Standing at attention
before the signpost with the sign
or the crossarm torn off,
whittled to an arrow and reset
to stick nowhere in where
someone believed a circle
had a chink in its perfection,
I accept Anselm’s proof of God

as guarantee this is no trick.
I would not be here if
life were not a journey
unless I’m here because I am.

Which is which or both
have hypnotized my head
with memories nobody has—
as though Gregorian

had a clock for an heir.
Everyone wakes up inside
the minute that he tells
himself he must.
Fast Forward: Nevada

Not another eight bars
of traveling music, yes and
slot machines right after dessert
then off to interstate nowhere else
traffic sparse as brittle scrub
ringing the salt flats whose white
summer widens. Long sags
of powerline under the sky’s
blue weight the mountains
rising as you speed ahead sinking
finally behind you. Sun beats
desert quirks into fossils you
follow the dotted white
line unzipping into the shimmer
of silvery risers light
on water that’s equally
not there with you become
the path you briefly darken.
A few trucks blow by
the other way full of goods
to feed all hungers. You are
following any lead past towns
their huge initials (I, N, G)
planted on hillsides for lost
pilots, past flats lasting
longer than radio symphonies, past
the same wind blowing in a new
bare place you hear the whistle
of air over glass and polished steel,
the kiss of grit on spinning
zig–zags of tread. Keep listening
to the border’s long lateral
vanishing point.
Cider

Which smelled first of cider —
your hair or the wind
that came in late like a boat
from the orchards?
One fall night the hard moon
was a mix of amber
& cinnamon. The stars were bees
slowed to sleep
& I smelled it there on our pillow:
damp shadow of apples aging,
a bushel of rusty hair.
The orchard floats all night
on a lake of fragrance —
a graced flood that comes
at a tangled time
when our dreams are bruised —
& saves us
the Cortlands

that bob in the deep trees
like buoys. We’ll pick them
from leaned—over hammocks
we’ll drag our hands
we needn’t row
your hair is ample
to fill sails
with red—brown light, & sails
know to come about
& flow toward the deepest
peace of the orchard
to wait till the moon gets there
& the slowest apples
drop like anchors.
Math and the Wart

It was a terrifying time. Martin, eight, was trapped, horribly trapped in a math class that was nothing like what he thought education ought to be: kindly old women he called momma when he felt particularly comfortable, pasting paper Oklahomas and Kentuckys onto a cardboard United States, earning a marshmallow egg for being seated in his chair when the teacher first walked into the room in the morning. This class was nothing like those things. This was hard and factual and insistent with no ease for those who could not apply themselves.

And he was sitting next to the most beautiful girl in school. It was almost too much to bear.

Suzy McKinney was not there to learn division. Her presence, he was sure, came merely out of kindness and respect for the instructions of her elders. Martin never noticed her when she did her problems or pulled her homework out of her folder to place on the teacher's desk before class. He only noticed her when she sat virtually motionless, her blonde hair straight down her back, her head held up, watching the blackboard in politeness, not fear, her hands together, fingers interlocked on the table, the hand closest to him with the wart on the index finger. That wart was the odd mark around which her beauty circled. She couldn't be beautiful without it.

For this month he sat next to her, so close, with so much math between them. He suffered through what he could, and when the numbers grew too overwhelming and he knew he would never understand but be condemned to stare into Mrs. Hedric's scowling face for the rest of his life. Martin looked at Suzy, the Snow Princess in the school's Christmas play when Martin
was only a tree, and he looked at her wart. How odd, that wart on her smooth finger. And without even knowing why, but feeling it was the only thing he could do to save himself from the wreckage of division, he reached over and touched her wart ever so lightly and quickly. The feeling it gave him left math and school in a wake of nonsensical debris. He smiled and turned his face toward the board.
The Cows

Cows walk slowly into the evening,
softly precise movements a tranquil confusion.
They disturb grasses with their soft lips.
Consider each stone as if the earth
edged them closer to a memory of glaciers.

I build a fire as the cold seeps through.
Flame weaves through its warm dance.
Cows crystalize into the circle of light
believing themselves to be mosaics pieced
together from bits of mineral and the past.

They are not ordinary.
Fire-eyed, they temper their existence
on the edge of darkness.
Make the moon rise by standing still
pretending they are dreamers.
An After Word

The Jill of my tale
Keeps no torrid message
Stuffed between her breasts,
No signal, beckoning,
Is sent by opulent
Thigh: after the fall,
She succumbed to
Busy-ness: a plague
Of latent common sense
That’s kept her fingers
Working to the bone.

Nor does this imply
That I evolved into
A less dull Jack.
We fell, I cursed,
Not thinking of her
Fate, but mine: –
The famous bruise
With nothing
FETCHED. Myself,
I settled down to wife,
Three kids, a steady job;
And haven’t seen Jill since.
"My singular and single heart"
—June Jordan

1
From where
words come from where
behind my lids
a hyena
pink wooden chairs
rain.

2
I open my eyes again on my desk, open
my round legs, sun on the drain,
turtles, pink walls
smell of the city where I was born.

3
Suppose bed is home; where we start, where we return.
still yellow light
side walk, street between yards
sun again.

4
knowing each distance,
knowing each door

5
here now,
to
from
flat, pulled back where I am
train rushing, feet standing

6
I wake in a city that is not home,
my breath begins and ends in me.
Cockeyed Oscars

Foundry men and bituminous women, tobacco–and–beer fed, drive cigarettes into the bar.

A woman stands at the piano; sawdust ashen skin. No one’s seen her here before. She wonders aloud if she’s gonna get laid tonight.

Everything is wood in Oscar’s except for piano wires, the taps and the glass mugs. She teases her hair, sticks her butt out.

Gets their heads turned, sits down to play jazz. Behind the piano, her eyes flare green, and her nipples press out against her t–shirt. Their hardness sketching letters and shapes in braille.

Inside of the patrons, taut, steel strings of muscle vibrate. They catch notes in their hands, notes drop in their beers.

If a bar can swoon, the bar swooned in the haze of the paycheck’s mixer of loss and loss clearing a solid smooth moment for music, smooth as polished oak. Bar stools turn towards her like screws tightening.
SIX-OH

“Marry a monkey later in life,” Lillian read out loud. “Avoid the dog.”

“I hope we’re avoiding the dog right now.” Carl pretended to hold his eggroll up to a magnifying glass.

“I’m reading my placemat, Carl, not commenting on lunch.”

“I was thinking of going on the Oprah Winfrey diet,” Carl said pinching his midriff.

“I tried the Richard Simmons diet years ago. I can’t say I was too impressed. You had to suffer. Besides, Oprah’s diet’s for people who need to lose half of themselves. You know that chef in New Orleans?”

“Paul Prudhomme?”

“Right. He could use her diet.” Lillian smoothed her hair and patted the bodice of her dress. It was a gesture she always used when she had finished speaking.

Carl guessed that Lillian had once been shy and still checked to see if speaking had dishevelled her. He watched her arms ripple in her short-sleeved dress and her silver bracelet depicting the Hawaiian Islands clank against a tea cup. He didn’t understand why he found her so entertaining at lunch. At the office she was a terror. Maybe Julius Caesar had merely been difficult in the Senate like Lillian was at work. Carl’s head swarmed with men in togas holding daggers.

Lillian reapplied her lipstick in the blade of her butter knife. She saw Carl watching her. “I learned this as a waitress years ago.” She smiled, revealing lipstick over the lipline. “Before I was born, Clara Bow’s mouth became the standard. Sweetheart lips.” She tossed Carl a demure kiss.

He pretended to catch it. “Isn’t it your birthday soon?”

“The big six-oh.”

“You don’t look a day over fifty-nine.”

“I keep worrying that they’ll find me dead and use one of those captions under my corpse on TV, sixty-year-old bookkeeper. Doesn’t sound too appetizing.”

“It could be worse. It could say sixty-year-old virgin.”

“I don’t have to impress you with my exploits, dear. I’m old enough to be your grandmother. Show some respect.”

“I do, Lillian,” Carl said taking the check from her hand.

“You must be drunk if you’re offering to pay. You know what
they call you at work? Carl McScrooge."

Carl feigned amazement.

"Why do you think they don’t ask you to contribute to the special occasions committee anymore?"

"Because there’s nothing too special about a bunch of ladies having their gall bladders out."

"I had my gall bladder out."

"That’s different. I’d have gladly contributed to you. It’s just that I object to blanket charity. One’s participation should be discretionary."

"You can’t speak for ten seconds without showing off your vocabulary. No wonder you don’t get along with people your age."

"People my age don’t understand me."

Carl took the napkin from the empty place setting and pretended to weep.

"There, there," Lillian said patting his wrist. "Let’s get back to the office before the rumor mill starts churning."

Carl stood in the front room. He hoped the man across from him, the one he’d seen doing amazing shadow aerobics, was watching. That was the charm of old courtyard buildings. They brought out the best in shy people. Every night at eleven he stood in the same triangle of light and undressed. Even if the man wasn’t interested, he’d eventually have to notice Carl. If not that man, there were six other windows from which someone could observe him.

Before he went to bed, he read another chapter of the book on savants that Lillian had given him. He propped it up on his stomach and read one word at a time. He liked reading slowly before bed, becoming aware of the sounds of letters as sleep overtook him and he dropped off. He read a fact that amazed him, that savants don’t have good memories as much as they aren’t able to forget. He recalled a term he’d heard in college English, negative capability, and wondered if it had anything to do with the sentence he’d read. What it would be like to remember every sensation he’d experienced. It might lead to premature aging to be responsible for so much of one’s past. He did wish he could remember a few things more accurately. Gavin’s face, for instance, was receding from him. His brown eyes were simply gone. Why could he remember every crack and crag of Lillian’s chin and not be able to see Gavin’s nose anymore? He had a photo somewhere, but that was beside the point, and he was too tired to look for it. He closed his eyes and saw the house in the country where he’d met Gavin. The stairs were made of red brick. The sun was low in the sky. A carpet of bugs hovered over the pond near the barn where his uncle stored tools and a snowmobile.
On Lillian’s sixtieth birthday, Carl promised to obey her wish for a quiet evening. That meant seizing the plans for the celebration out of the hands of the special occasions committee head, Sheila Vincent, a secretary who looked like the young Barbara McNair. That morning on the way to work Carl had been thinking of changing his name. It was so gutteral, so oldfashioned. What were his parents thinking he’d amount to with a name like his? People spit it out of their mouths like phlegm. *Carl Carl Carl,* he said as the el train roared through the tunnel.

He should have been less abrupt, but it just came out in a flurry when he saw Sheila Vincent in line for a donut downstairs. “Whatever you’re planning for Lillian’s birthday, she won’t like it.”

“And who are you,” she asked, opening her eyes wide and articulating each word like she was making a political speech, “her lady-in-waiting?”

“Lillian told me to tell you people that she wants no party. She thinks that sixty should be a solemn occasion.”

“If I didn’t know you’d run and tell Lillian, I’d express my true feelings. As it is, let me speak in my official capacity. I wish to inform you and the Sea-Hag that we’re merely planning to have cake, coffee, and a gift at work. I couldn’t find enough employees to attend a social function for Lillian, unless, of course, it were a wake.”

Carl turned on his heels and took the elevator to eighteen. It was better this way. They’d go to dinner somewhere special and maybe see a play or hear music. He’d buy her a corsage.

“It was hard, but I convinced them, Lillian. They agreed to have cake and coffee at the office and leave us alone to our fantasies the night in question.”

“Who did you talk to, Sheila?”

“None other than Ms. Sheet Cake of 1987.”

“I hope she wasn’t too disappointed.”

“She took it like a woman.”

After dinner on Lillian’s birthday, Carl planned to take her to My Brother’s Keeper to hear a gay folksinger named Earl Shilott. Although they had never spoken about it, he was sure that Lillian knew he was gay, especially if Sheila Vincent, with her limited capacity, could guess. Lillian never asked him if he was seeing girls like his mother did or spoke about his private life. Every so often when he called his mother in Cleveland Heights, she still checked on his progress with women.
“Met any good-looking girls in Chicago?”

“Ouch! That’s one right now tearing out strands of my hair. Excuse me for a minute, Mom. ‘Judy, put my shoe back where you found it! Get your hands off my shaving mug! I’ll give you a souvenir at the door.’”

“Can’t you be serious for a minute, Carl?” his mother asked, but he could hear her amusement in the way she said his name.

He rarely spoke to his father since the summer before last. They had been riding in a golf cart at his father’s country club when Carl had simply said, “You know about me, Dad, right?”

His father had pretended not to hear, and then they were at the next green. Carl had felt the adrenaline drain out of his fingers and had never mentioned it again. Surely Uncle Dan knew with the way Carl and Gavin had carried on that weekend in the country. Looking back, though, Carl realized that he had been more discreet than he’d planned. He was less so with his mother on the phone or with Lillian at lunch, but he was most outrageous at home. Just last night standing in the window, he had taken his penis in his hand. He knew he could get arrested, but it was his own apartment, after all, and nobody had to look. Let them draw their damn drapes rather than see him double over with pleasure and effort.

Carl didn’t know Earl Shilott, but he’d seen him perform a few times and had made important eye contact with him the last time he was at the bar. Shilott was a lot older than Carl, perhaps fifty, and not as handsome as impressive. He was heavy set and barrel-chested, which made him look shorter standing up than he appeared to be sitting down. He had wavy hair that he combed straight back and small features for such a big man. Carl imagined he would look better dressed than naked. Shilott had recorded a few albums but was a well-kept secret from the general public. Carl wondered if he minded how limited his audience was. If he did mind, he could have changed a few pronouns and written different songs. Carl had read on a record jacket that Earl had been a forest ranger and a merchant marine. It was a definite liability for Carl to work in accounting. He’d change his profession to something more exotic. Maybe Greenpeace needed a good internal auditor. Then when someone at a bar asked what he did, he could say he saved whales, instead of changing the subject.

An hour before he was supposed to pick up Lillian for her birthday evening on the town, the phone rang. He was taking her orchid corsage out of the refrigerator and putting it with his coat so he wouldn’t forget it when he left.
“It’s me, Carl,” Lillian said. “If you don’t think it’s all right, I want you to tell me. Okay?”

“How can I say okay before I know what it is?”

“Well, listen then. Vance just dropped in. He used to be the doorman at our building. He wanted to drop over and give me a surprise for my birthday. I suggested that he join us for the evening, but if you don’t think so, he’ll understand.”

Carl felt outraged, but he put on his most pleasant voice and said, “Whatever will make you happy, Lillian. It’s your six-oh.”

“So you’ll pick us up at the same time?”

“Seven. Did you tell Vance about the music later?”

“He thinks that’ll be fine.”

“Okay then, see you in an hour.”

No wonder nobody likes her, Carl thought when he got off the phone. Such an opportunist! Planning an evening with him alone, making a commotion about her quiet birthday until someone better knocks on her door. He should cancel altogether and show her a thing or two. And who was this Vance, this doorman, anyway? Probably a doddering old fool. Carl would be left in the cold watching Lillian and Vance, the sick flesh duo, make goo-goo eyes at each other all evening. It would be like an Ivan Albright honeymoon, and he’d be the porter, the maître d’ and the sucker who’d pick up their check.

He took the corsage out of the box and shredded it into the garbage disposal. Then he turned it on for a minute and listened to it ingest the orchids. The bow would get caught in the mechanism and he’d have to dig it out later. Meanwhile, he felt better. He looked at himself in the mirror on the way out, pulled his hand through the hair he kept longer on top and short on the sides, put on his black overcoat, and waved good-bye to himself.

The car was parked a block away on Kenmore. He began walking and heard footsteps behind him. Two young women made a wide U onto the grass to avoid him as they passed. They were convulsed in laughter.

“That’s him for sure!” the shorter one gasped to her companion.

Carl blanched to think they’d been his audience all those evenings. Overcome with embarrassment, he collapsed into his car. Maybe he’d have to move out. He could always go back to Cleveland, where he had better friends than Lillian, or to New York, where no one knew him. Uncle Dan would have him for the summer. Dan liked when Carl was around if only because he was afraid to be alone in the country now that Aunt Lottie was dead.
Carl and Dan could take long drives through the Connecticut mountains and go into town for little things like nails and drill bits. Carl loved hardware stores with their metallic hum and impersonal smell. And Uncle Dan was at least interesting to talk to. He’d had a life, unlike most people he knew. Dan could show him the photos he’d taken in Kenya and the Philippines and Liberia. Dan understood him better than Lillian, that was for sure.

He had ten minutes before he was supposed to pick up Lillian and Vance, but he needed to buy a new corsage. He felt foolish having promised Lillian flowers to show up empty-handed, and he couldn’t tell her he’d annihilated them in the sink.

The little Korean flower store on Broadway was just closing. He ran in and asked for a corsage.

“All out,” the owner said looking at the clock.

“Can you make one?”

“Ten dollar.”

“Fine.”

He thought he’d fall asleep on his feet before the man twirled the last bow around the bent metal stem. When the man began to wrap it as a gift, Carl looked at his watch. He was already five minutes late.

“No bow, no bow!” He placed his money on the counter.

“Ten fifty-seven,” the clerk shouted before Carl reached the door.

He pulled a dollar out of his wallet, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it toward the owner.

“That was lovely,” Lillian said, wiping some whipped cream off her cheek. Flowers and champagne and strawberry shortcake.”

“Don’t slight the main course,” Vance said.

Vance wasn’t that bad. He was a little older than Carl would have liked and not exactly suave, but there was some innate charm about him. He was very kind to Lillian and interested in what Carl had to say. He was impressed that Carl was an accountant and asked the kind of questions about Carl’s work that meant he was listening closely. He followed Carl with serious eyes and tried to include Lillian as well. When Carl asked Vance what he did, he wasn’t embarrassed to say he cleaned apartments so that he could set his own hours and make a good salary working half-days.

“A good salary!” Lillian said. “His apartment looks like a rajah’s. Leather this and leather that and you should see his coffee table.”

When Vance didn’t offer to describe his coffee table, Carl said, “Well, what about it, Vance?”
"Black marble. It's very unusual. I bought it in Milan."

"See, he travels too. Carl thinks you have to go to college in the East to lead a refined life."

"I'm not a snob, Lillian." Turning to Vance he said, "How can someone from Cleveland be a snob?"

"That's where they're usually from," Lillian said.

"Because it's your birthday, Carl will allow that one to pass," Vance said and grinned at them both.

It occurred to Carl that Vance resembled a younger Lawrence Welk if Lawrence Welk were a redhead with black glasses.

"So Lillian tells me we're going to see Earl Shilott."

"Have you seen him?"

"I know Earl. You get to meet a lot of people in the doorman trade. Earl had a friend who lived in Lillian's building a while back. He'd come to see his friend now and then."

"Did you know him socially?"

"No, we just talked when he'd visit this man. You remember Mark Penney, don't you, Lillian?"

"Didn't he move away?"

"Yes," Vance said.

"And then?" Carl asked. He was becoming annoyed at Vance's reticence.

"There is no and-then. After he moved away, I didn't see him or Earl anymore."

They rode in silence to My Brother's Keeper. By the time they had arrived, Earl Shilott had finished his first set, and there were no seats at the side tables near the stage.

"Looks like we'll have to stand for now," Carl said.

"Carl, I'm exhausted. Standing doesn't sound like much fun for an old lady like me. Why don't I get a cab and you two stay on?"

Carl was perfectly happy to accept Lillian's offer when Vance said, "We can't desert the birthday girl. Why not come back to my place for some brandy? I'll play Earl's album, and Carl won't miss a thing."

"If it's fine with Carl, it's fine with me," Lillian shrugged.

"Okay," Carl said. He saw the back of Earl's head but couldn't see the rest of him from where they were standing. He'd sound ungracious if he insisted on staying but he lingered behind long enough to make it clear to Vance and Lillian that it hadn't been his idea to leave.
When they reached Vance’s building, just two doors away from Lillian’s, Lillian said, “You know, I’m going to sound like a party pooper, but the champagne has gone straight to my head and I need to lie down. You two can get along without me, no?”

“Just one drink?” Vance asked.

“I won’t be responsible for the damage at this point,” Lillian said and pretended to pass out.

Carl dropped her in front of her building. Vance walked her in and spent a few minutes talking to the current doorman, an elderly Jamaican.

Back in the car, Vance occupied the front seat Lillian had vacated. “To my place, then?”

“Whatever.” Carl felt warm and nervous. “Did Lillian set this up?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you just happen to stop by around six?”

“No, she invited me for dinner. We’re old friends, you know.”

“Are all of Lillian’s friends like us?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean does she have any women friends?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Does she have many gay friends?”

“Not that I know of.”

“We’re her only two friends?”

“Quite possibly. Plus a sister she sees on holidays.”

“You were her only friend before I began working at her office?”

“Exactly, but we can’t sit here all night, you know.”

Carl started driving toward Vance’s but he had no enthusiasm for finishing the evening as Lillian had ordained. He guessed it was nice of her to think of him, but he couldn’t go through with it.

“Can we get together some other time?” Carl asked Vance.

“That would be fine, Carl, if you want to make this an early evening.” Vance gave Carl one of his cards. It said Mr. Clean. Vance Erdray. 989-2241.

“How was Lillian’s birthday bash? Did you two have a cozy time?” Sheila asked.

“It was very nice.” Carl pushed past her off the elevator.

Next he would find Lillian. Her desk was behind a special partition toward the back of the office. He imagined that Lillian had
sat there for forty years in the same position inhaling her cigarettes and balancing the books that Mr. Feder kept on his two smaller enterprises.

"Top of the morning," Lillian said looking up from her calculator. She patted her forehead and winced. "How did it go last night?"

"How did what go?"

"You and Vance. He's a nice boy, isn't he?"

"He's not a boy anymore than you're a girl. He's a man and for your information, it didn't go."

"Was something wrong?"

"You were wrong, Lillian. Why did you think I'd appreciate meeting Vance?"

"You're new in the city. I thought he might introduce you to some people, you know, show you around."

"I'll thank you to stay out of it, Lillian."

She imitated his annoyed voice. He walked away.

"Ready for lunch?" she said at eleven-thirty.

"I have too much to do." Carl had computer printouts all over his desk. "Maybe tomorrow, Lillian," he said, guessing that she wouldn't ask again if he refused.

That night Carl pulled down his shades and undressed in the washroom. He was thinking of calling Uncle Dan and asking him about the prospects for summer when the phone rang.

"It's Vance. I was wondering if I might drop by. I have something I thought you'd be interested in seeing."

"It's kind of late," Carl said.

"It doesn't have to be right now. It can be tomorrow or the next day."

"Well, I'm awake. You'd might as well bring it over now."

Twenty minutes later Vance was standing in Carl's front room with a bag in his hand. Carl hadn't asked him to sit down or taken his coat. Carl had gotten dressed again and thrown his dirty clothes, unfolded laundry, and dishes behind the door that separated his front room from the efficiency kitchen.

"Nice place you have."

"Sure," Carl said. "It's temporary."

"I have an old album that Earl Shilott made. Want to hear it?"

Carl pointed to the stereo and stared at the jacket cover. It must
have been from the sixties. Earl Shilott was young and much thinner. He wore a Nehru jacket. He had been a member of a rock group called The Abacus.

Vance sat on Carl’s one chair while Carl took up most of the couch.

“Most of it’s instrumental, but Earl’s voice is unmistakable.” When Earl began singing, Vance pointed his finger in the air. “Hear him?”

Carl listened as Earl sang about missing a girl who rode a horse over a cliff. “I can’t believe he’d sing that.”

“But his voice. How do you like his voice?”

“I don’t much care for it. I like his songs now. His voice was never great. That’s why he’s stuck at that bar forever.”

“Sorry,” Vance said. “I thought you’d like it.”

“I do. Thanks. I guess I’m just too opinionated.”

Vance took off the record and sat next to Carl on the couch. His hand was near Carl’s shoulder. “Would you like me to introduce you to Earl?”

“Not really.”

Carl wished Vance would go away. He closed his eyes and tried to think of Gavin’s face. He saw his Uncle Dan and the Korean florist. He saw his father and their old neighbors, the Igoes. Then he saw Gavin clearly. He opened his eyes and smiled in appreciation.

Vance’s face was over his. Taking off his glasses, Vance kissed him. Carl didn’t fight it, but he didn’t kiss back either. As soon as Vance was through with him, he’d call Uncle Dan and make summer plans. Maybe if he got all the details right, Gavin would sit with him on the red stairs and watch the sun disappear behind the hills.

“Want to go to bed?” Vance was asking.

“I have to make a phone call.” Carl thought it was the most stupid piece of truth he could have whispered.
Porch

When she died I believed that she was dead, but now
we meet each night in a world between ourselves
where she is more alive
than I have ever been.

On the front porch we talk
and rock in the wicker rockers
that ruined in the rain
even before she was gone.
   The dead we love enter
   the earth from here:
      It is night, the front porch
      of loss, between meteor storm
      and the new grass growing.

The yard is full of sweet-pea
and poison sumac, bittersweet
and brimstone.
   The summer before
   and all the summers since

are over and have never been.

In space the stars turn
to ash and incandescence,
   but it’s too much to try to understand.
   She says, Someday you’ll learn to see
   with all your eyes.

This amazes me.
My breath light is burning down but hers
has turned inward, become
truly lucent,
purely life.
She pulls her nightgown down
to show me the scars again
where they let death out of her.
I turn my head:
    too bright, too beautiful.

She laughs. She says,
You're still the weaksister, the one
who was meant to die.

She says, These dreams
are god's grace note.
    Something lovely added to the end.
    A tool, perhaps, like an eggtooth.
    Something to help you someday hack
    your own way out of this world.

When I wake up bathed in the sweat and ecstasy
of finding something lost
I need to believe —

Though — once I watched a swan die
of a fish hook caught in her throat.
In that still black river
she seemed to sing

    but it was pain that peeled
    the notes from her.

Maybe that's all it is
to dream about the dead.
Chiromancy

Yes, I’d trace my own dark palm
for you, stretch this lifeline half a century,
cut it short. A bandana tight on my head
like a tourniquet. Like a bandage bloodied from the
Revolution.
Like a blindfold on a witch burning:
stake up the back, skirt flame—bright as a banshee or
quicker, neck split on a stone,
gold hoop glittering, you
on the other side of the knife,
face shaped by a black cloak,
mouth tauter than rope, tightening.

Maybe, one finger at a time, I’d slice,
save only my palm: small, smooth,
this curve here the curve of your cheek,
these lines the red in your eyes.
Sky

My grandmother kissed me
and sucked the breath right out of my chest.
It seemed years before I could breathe
and get enough. And it was ten years
before I let her kiss me again like that on the lips.

Between shadow and darkness —
Between when a light goes out and eyes shut —
What there was that fell over my grandmother's face
when she mouthed the rosary,
when she kissed the cross as if it were alive, and
as if it loved her in return,
she closed her eyes, tight, serious and complete.

The street at night alone at thirteen,
when cats sang to the sky.
The houses stood high in impeccable rows,
closed off and cooled against the insistence of August.

I inhaled the everyday, naked air,
brazen with the fortieth night of summer.

And of course, the obscene, lucrative stars.
A sky full of wonderful sins.
And ahead, a whole lifetime to commit
each and every one.
Glen Echo Park

From the look of things,
a tarted-up carousel toppled in mid-spin,
trickling zinc rings over her macadam skirt.

Not razed, estimates too high,
so this structural souvenir was discarded,
much too bulky to cart along.

Off the beltway, massive empty houses
wear Indian cornstalks like loud ties.
Late autumn retains a trace of daylight
hours once peopled by mothers and
their unbridled children.

The UPS man seeks unburdening;
he staggers from door to door.
Newspapers pile up, and milk bottles.
The mailbox fills. Message tapes
whirr and click in hallways.

At Glen Echo, the asphalt cracks,
and grass goes brown
in honor of the season.

At evening drive time,
a garish canvas juggler
grins with the typical
stubbornness of objects.
Today’s cashcall word: calliope.
Old Old World

When I was thirteen, my mother claimed that my father was making a bar slut out of me. This wasn’t a very accurate way to worry about the Benz’s tavern and me, because neither one of us was a sexy operation in the least. The excesses in that close attic room above the pork store were chaste—smoke and ruinous card playing—and the only way to get a beer was to rap the floor and wait for Mrs. Benz to come huffing up from the icebox. Slow old Mrs. Benz took forever to make change for a beer out of her apron pocket, and she irritated me to distraction. All I cared about was the progress of my father’s cards. I was always at his elbow. I was his oldest child by a couple of years and while my mother was busy having five others, he took me with him wherever he went. For a long time we just ignored my mother’s tremors.

My father, who grew up in a German–speaking household, took some shrapnel in the head fighting for our side in WW I. This old injury never affected his reading or his manners or his brilliant hand at cards, but it did seem to sap his ambitions as a farmer. He kept some pigs, he kept some cows, he made sausage, and he rented a lot of our acreage to the neighbors. We lived. We generally hired a couple of boys to do most of the field work, so my father really lived. Five-thirty every evening, he took to the Benz’s, pushing his spectacles up on his long shrewd nose and smelling a bluff within an inch of its life.

Though my father was an advanced thinker who never minded my wearing trousers, and though he let me play chess with anybody at the Benz’s who was interested in losing, he absolutely forbade me to play cards. But poker was the most fascinating thing in life to me—all that money, all those tensely-sucked cigarettes and casual curses—so I just got there earlier in the afternoon than he did. The idlers who sat at the Benz’s in full daylight, slackers who couldn’t bother to button their flies all the way, never minded playing with me while they waited for someone with a few bucks to arrive. One summer afternoon, dead sure my father was still busy in the stalls, I looked up from a game to see him standing in the doorway.

I didn’t bother to distract myself from my hand until I noticed that he wasn’t rolling up his white fresh sleeves and sending that old huffer Mrs. Benz downstairs for a bottle. My father never veered from his path to discipline me. When he first caught me smoking in imitation of one of the field hands, he’d barely looked at
me reeling against the side of the barn, barely nodded over his shoulder and said, "That looks awfully loutish on you, Ingrid."

So I was thrown to see a positively bitter expression on his face. Obviously, he'd been looking hard for me this hot day. He gave his cronies a contemptuous look. "You think this is funny?" he said to them. Then he grabbed me by the ear, threw my cigarette to the floorboards, and spanked my pants.

His spanking me in front of my partners was outrageous. "What do you think you're doing?" I screamed.

No explanation. He just dragged me down the stairs and out to the street — I followed my ear — and the two of us made a silly angle of mutual resistance in the road. "Ow, Daddy!" I was screaming.

"Lousy girl," he said and spurred me with another slap to the seat of my pants.

"You're hurting me! What's the big deal?" My mother was the violent one, the one who lost her mind and sent the spatula flying at my head, not him.

"We were due at your Aunt Resl's an hour ago."

"So? Ow!"

"So shut up," he said and concentrated on his cigarette the whole way out of town and off the roads and through the Muellers' and O'Connells' fields. It wasn't until we were nearly at our door that he took out his handkerchief, mopped his face, and sounded like the dapper and civil man who loved me. "What kind of nonsense is this, your doing what I especially asked you not to?"

I shrugged. I saw a new development behind his glasses. He was worried about me, and this was the most insulting and disheartening thing I'd ever seen.

He mimicked my shrug with a resentment of his own and then stepped inside into the kitchen.

A rooster ran out between my legs as I stood in the open doorway, and as soon as that cow smell hit my nose — our house smelled as deeply of cow in the depths of winter as it did on this August day — I turned around and sat on the step. I would do anything to stay out. This time of year I even got up at daybreak and hunted tedious game like mushrooms just so I wouldn't have to help with breakfast and hear from my mother how I was responsible for the dismal nature of the world. Her furies looked puny in a place
that had a Revolutionary War colonel buried in the backyard. The house had been built a hundred years before either one of my grandfathers had heard of America. Its grand rooms were chilly and upsetting, and it stank like decline.

I’d learned about the colonel the year before when one of my teachers asked if he could come to see the place. My mother and I had a rip-roarer because she wouldn’t let me take a bath by myself. She scraped the dirt from under my fingernails, put on her good blue dress, and baked a streusel cake. Mr. Falk arrived and she wanted to show him her brand-new 1936 kitchen with its gleaming rocketish handles and he was interested in no such thing, and only went around mourning the chair-rails and mantelpieces that had been removed.

I picked at my toes and winced out at the hot gray afternoon waiting for my mother to fetch me. Sure enough, “Oh my God,” she said as soon as she laid eyes on me — I think the way I looked really offended her vanity. She was giving me a bald spot from braiding my hair so hard, and she always treated my muddy shoes as the most conclusive evidence that I was turning out badly. Now she stuck her nose into my face and slapped my cheek. “Cigarettes again? Get up. Go upstairs and put on your blue jumper before Resl and I both decide not to keep you.”

She generally said a lot of nonsense, and I didn’t bother to figure out what this meant. As I rounded the stairs, I could hear her downstairs rumbling into an argument with my father, so I knew the blue jumper wasn’t so pressing. I tossed myself onto the couch that sat at the end of the imperial back-to-front upstairs hallway. Even on an overcast day, the fancy Palladian windows at both ends flooded the hallway with light, and it was the only spot in the house where my mother’s kitchen rages took on the easy glow of entertainment.

“What was she doing?” my mother asked.

“Playing poker,” my father said.

“Playing poker!” my mother cried. You would have thought I’d stabbed one of the neighbors. “It just gets worse! You see what kind of filthy thing you’re making of her?”

I snickered into the cabbage rose slipcover.

“You’re exaggerating,” my father said.

“Oh, so you think she’s a perfect young lady, eh? So what did she say?”
“I didn’t discuss it,” my father said.

“Didn’t discuss it!” my mother yelled. “She’s going to Resl’s, away from your filthy Benz’s.”

Now I understood what she was up to. She wanted to get rid of me. I bit a cabbage rose underneath me, ground the fabric in my teeth, and grinned. I knew my father would never permit this. He’d miss me too sorely.

But then I heard my mother pull out those filthy sweet tones — it was the kind of rhetoric she possessed that softened my father’s brains. “And we won’t have to fight so much,” she said, and I knew that was that.

My father carried my suitcase and lagged politely behind with my short-legged mother, so I had a silent couple of miles until Resl’s to get over the shock. It was a shock, but not a displeasing one. The little girls at home were pesky and ugly, their mouths always open like baby birds squawking for a worm. Also, I was getting tired of my mother trying to change the shape of my nose by the power of suggestion. Besides, much as I loved my father, since I could tell that my days at Benz’s were over, he wasn’t as useful to me as my gloomy and childless uncle Gustav. Gustav took me hunting with him and once in a while he let me direct his shotgun at a squirrel.

My parents were taking so long behind me in that irritating, humid afternoon, that I flopped myself into the roadside grass. Outraged grasshoppers all around me stuck out their striped wings and whizzed off. After a minute, some of them folded themselves up and dropped back to the grass. I caught one that settled too close to my nose and held it in my closed fist, though the thing was throbbing mad. It shoved its head out between my thumb and forefinger and heaved itself up onto its straw legs to spit tobacco juice at my thumb. It spat and spat and spat. The thing was furious furious, but hell, it was my world.

I let it go before it apoplexed or I crushed it. I ran behind my parents and amused myself by scraping up my sandals on the road.

Resl met us at the door of her pretty house, where I was more at home than at home, and she kissed me on the top of my head. “Hello, Ingrid,” she said. She never talked to anybody without giving them a nod of respect. I liked her a lot, but she seemed fluttery and excited and the idea that this was due to acquiring me made me embarrassed.
My father and I sat at the table by the window. He took out a cigarette and swatted flies while my mother helped my aunt at the sink. The two ladies had things to whisper about. Whenever I told my father that I hated my mother, he'd tell me something romantic about her, about how the Schneider sisters were the nicest looking girls in the county, and he couldn't believe his luck when at some dance, my mother'd made it boldly clear that she'd rather coax him than fend off a crowd of eager partners. I thought my mother's sweet rosy face was a great scam. Even now, when her profile was animated and happy, I could only see the semi-circle made by the incensed hook of her nose and the scolding hook of her mouth.

Not that my father ever said this, but Resl, who was taller and slimmer, was supposed to have the better figure. Resl had red hair and a face that had too much going on in it to be really pretty. Still, despite inches and pigments and pounds, these two women putting meat and cheese on plates and licking their fingers were the most alike of any two women I knew. They had the same soft-handed competence at setting a table or swishing a rag in the sink, and they both got the same plump look around their chins when they worked. I liked Resl much better, but I remembered with sudden acuteness that when I'd tossed myself into Resl the day the fish hook got stuck in my face it was almost — but not quite — the same as tossing myself into my mother.

"Don't you want to give her one of the younger ones?" I piped up kindly, thinking they wouldn't be as much missed and Resl would get more of an experience of childrearing.

Resl put the coffee pot on the table and winked at me. I tried to hold my father's hand but he pulled his arm away, and stared straight into the center of the smoke rings he was blowing. He was always inscrutable to me when we were in mixed adult company.

"So how's life at the Benz's?" Resl teased as she brought a plate to the table. She had a wobbly, blushing way of teasing.

My father smiled his slow, smart smile. I thought he was going to tell her about me, but instead he said, "You'd lock Gustav in the attic before you'd let him play cards, eh?"

"Be serious. When have I ever kept him from anything? No," she lowered her head and whispered as she put a plate of smoked eel on the table, "he's too tight-fisted for cards."

I was sure this was the opening my mother would use to tell her sister that I had to be kept from becoming a bar slut, but my mother just smiled distractedly. She settled my braid on my shoulder and I
shrugged off her fussing hand as if it were a fly that had landed on me.

Resl sat, and I stared at the eel and the bread, the cheese and the fried dough. I was starving, but we were waiting for my uncle. Resl apologized and nodded toward the dark brown pieces of dough sitting on a blue and white towel by the sink. “I burned most of them chasing a crazy jay out of here.”

This was an unlikely bird and we talked about it half-heartedly while brushing flies off the untasted food. Finally Resl poured us coffee. We drank it with canned milk; we preferred the fancier canned stuff to the untouched cow product sitting in endless silver jugs outside the door.

My mother thought she’d fill the time with her favorite subject, the health of all the vacating or near-to-vacating old ladies in the county. I could barely sit still, I was suffering so seeing how morbid and stupid she was, leaning her arms on her dressfront with her rosy face bobbing. “I heard from the baker that Mrs. Seide is completely heartsick and may go any day now, but worries that it will be before her daughter returns from the hospital to take care of the grandchildren.”

“So,” my father said dryly, “Grandma Seide in love?”

“Oh,” my mother said and gave him a jolly shove. He knew full well that when my mother said “heartsick,” she meant something cardiac, not spiritual.

“And the pastor’s been looking awfully blue around the nose, don’t you think?”

Resl was anxiously watching the door. “Well,” she sighed, “I don’t know where Gustav is. We’d better begin.”

She refused to eat anything, only watched nervously and held her ribs. By the time Gustav stomped in with his boots shitty from the stalls (my father never came into the house in his boots), all the fried dough and most of the eel were gone.

Gustav, a bearish big man, sat at the table, not holding out his hand, just nodding at us. Without a word from Gustav, Resl ran and got a beer from the case on the cellar steps. He saw the last corner of fried dough on my plate.

“Give me a piece,” he said as Resl set the beer in front of him.

“All gone,” my mother chuckled.
Resl wrung her hands. "I burned most of it."

"Red-haired devil," he muttered as he opened his beer.

The malice of it made Resl take a step back. It was an old world superstition—red hair was bad luck. Gustav was forever growling his regrets about marrying into bad luck.

"Be civilized, Gustav," my father said and took a calm drag of his cigarette.

"Excuse me," Gustav said, looking straight at my mother and leaving Resl wounded where she was.

Gustav was a bearded mystery to me. He never said more to me than what kind of bait to dig or to hold my goddamn sneezing nose when I spotted a deer. I didn’t have to understand him to take advantage of our common pleasure in being kings of wood and stream. We spent some of the better hours of our lives together, those when the birds just reeled and shrieked out the happy lack of confines. Gustav, though, always set out with a brisk leg and then, unless he shot a buck, dragged home with the world on his back. He really knew how to read a stream and we always came in with fish flopping in our creel, but he was never satisfied. He had a long relationship with a low-lying old pike that had been playing the same bitter joke on him for ten years, taking his bait but never his hook.

Resl slid in next to my father and the two of them talked farm economy, real estate prices, and what hapless farmers the Irish were. Bored with their conversation, my mother patted my head and said, "We’re going to miss her." She was showing off in front of Gustav. She ordinarily never had those affectionate creases around her eyes for me.

"Oh, cut it out," I said, and Gustav gave me the back of his hand across my mouth.

This shocked me and I looked to my father, who only inhaled his cigarette more deeply. Resl blinked in dismay. Gustav hadn’t hit me since I was small. I wasn’t going to encourage him to do it again by giving him any kind of a show. I ignored him.

"She can come home whenever she likes," my father said to the smoke that hung above him.

"A little respect for her mother," Gustav said with his mouth full of bread. "So, how do you feel about deserting your family?" he said. My mother’s hand moved to my head again.
This was not how I wanted my move to be regarded. "I’m not deserting them. I’m doing you a favor because you have no kids."

Gustav tore off another hunk of bread with his teeth. He exposed the half-chewed mass as he raised his lip in contempt. "Wrong." He pointed to my mother. "I’m doing her the favor. Because you drive her crazy."

Resl clucked her tongue at her husband and said, "Gustav and I love you."

Which seemed to be true, but which in no way lessened the humiliation my unnatural if plump and traditional mother was causing me. She’d acted positively to get rid of me, and it smarted to have it openly discussed. I didn’t cry, though, I just buttered another piece of bread.

And I stared at Gustav through his meal. I watched him chaw the bread, I watched him gum the eel, I watched him slither the pancake soup Resl heated for him, and through it all he never took his eyes off my mother. I always knew that Gustav was nicer to my mother than to his wife. This seemed to be the natural way. My mother was never as concerned that her hair be in place when it was my father she was talking to. She talked with flirty birdish jerks of the head whenever any of the other farmers said hello. But as the conversation went on around us and Gustav couldn’t care for anything but my mother’s blooming face, I saw that he was a different case. The once or twice a season when he shot a buck, it was to her kitchen that he went straightaway, and it was with her that he had a triumphant glass of plum brandy. He threw his triumphs at my mother’s feet, all good news come to my mother first, and he brought her a quarter of venison before he even carried any from the barn into his own house. Resentment was giving me eyes. I was furious that Gustav would prefer my mother to Resl, who would have liked her eldest daughter had she had one, I was sure.

"Will you quit staring at her?" I shrieked, and everyone stopped what they were doing.

My father, whose only fault as far as I could see was that he’d back civilization over me, blew a menacing blade of smoke. "Young lady, if you don’t start minding your own business, you’re not going to live much longer."

I suppose this was the first time that anyone had remarked out loud that Gustav was in love with my mother. My big dour uncle stood up and brushed the crumbs off his knees with great finality.
“Now,” he said, “I’m going to take myself out to the barn and hang myself.” His boots shook the house as he left. Everyone else sat. My father smoked, my mother stared at the clock, and Resl sighed and began to pick up the dishes. I reached for another piece of bread. Two bites went down suavely enough, but the third balled up in my throat.

“You’re not going to do anything?” I wheezed when I got my air. The blood was on my hands and they were just sitting around.

Resl looked up from rinsing the dishes. “Franz,” she said softly, “maybe you’d better go check on him.”

You can bet I followed my father out through the yard, through the mess of irritated chickens, through the fallen plums, through the flapping clothes. He was moving at his usual even pace and I trotted on ahead and begged him to hurry.

It was a huge barn, stables on the ground floor, a full second floor that opened on one side to the top of a hill, and high overhead the grain loft. We found Gustav on the second floor. He was turning the crank to lower the pig hook when I came in. I repented my entire existence when I saw that hook.

“Nice evening, eh?” my father said, leaning himself against a beam and crossing his legs in front of him.

I ran up to Gustav. “Uncle Gustav, please don’t do this.”

“No, now you’ve done it,” he muttered.

When he got the ugly iron hook lowered to about a yard over his head, he went down to the stables, me at his heels, and took a dirty piece of rope off a nail.

“Uncle Gustav, please, I’m sorry,” I sobbed.

“Wipe your nose,” he said.

I followed his boots up the stairs, and there was my father smoking comfortably in the humid shadows. Gustav did some calm clever knotting with the filthy rope, pulled over a stool, stepped up on it and tied the rope to the hook. I stood there unmindful of the gnats and my running nose as I watched my character produce its destined end. I was filled with that dumb surprise the hero feels when his bad birthmark or evil birthstar finally enacts itself. I cried and cried.

It wasn’t until Gustav was wearing the rope that my father felt compelled to stamp out his cigarette with his shiny pointed shoes.
He went up to Gustav and put his hand on his elbow.

"Come on Gustav. Down."

From his superior height, my stolid and depressed uncle let fly a fist that caught my father on the chin and sent him to the hay-strewn boards. Absolutely certain that Gustav was going to kick the stool out from under himself while looking straight into my eyes, I started screaming.

This brought the women, who must have figured that the lifesaving was taking a little long anyway. Resl arrived at the top of the stairs wiping her hands on an apron. Her face had twisted into an unaccustomed determined form.

"Everybody out. You two go home. Leave Ingrid in the house."

My father rubbed his sore jaw. "We'll take Ingrid with us."

"No," she said. "You know how this goes. Everything's fine."

As the last shreds of daylight left, I sat myself in the dark kitchen. What did I care whether my parents were gone? There were worse punishments coming to me. I didn't allow myself a single twist on the hard bench to make myself more comfortable. I didn't turn on the lights or swing my legs or do anything to make myself less miserable.

After a half-hour or so, I heard Gustav's heavy feet move through the hall outside and up the stairs. A bargain had been struck, I guessed, and Gustav had decided to live. But I was still terrified of the red-eyed Resl who came into the kitchen and startled my eyes when she threw on the lights.

"You know," she said, sliding gracefully in beside me in her dirty blue apron and her clean print dress, "you made everyone ashamed of themselves today. Now," she said, lowering her voice, "I'll tell you something you have to keep to yourself. He does this whenever my dumplings are hard, takes himself out to the barn. The world was born, Ingrid, before you had anything to say about it."

I grabbed her soft veiny hand. This was such an unexpectedly forgiving portrait of the world that I heard myself offer not to be a cross, never to catch the pike before Gustav, and to stand quietly by her simmering pots lest they burned on the bottom. The sun came up inside my ribs.

Michele Owens
On Longing in Cinema

We carry favorite books around inside us, like Bibles of interiority, and they are as important to us as first memories, old beliefs and photographs of loved ones, because they delineate our conscious boundaries of self in ways we could not have scripted by ourselves. One such book for me is Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, a novel I first read in high school, at a time when I needed a short novel, a quick read, for a book report. I never wrote that book report, and *Nightwood* is still with me, still resonating inside.

I had never read a book so full of longing. Felix, obsessed with Judaism and History, was walking-dead with it. Matthew O'Connor, a disembodied voice of Catholic guilt and original sin, was drunk with it. And Nora Flood, walking the streets and looking for Robin, was both mad from it and pregnant with it. There was an epidemic of longing in *Nightwood*, and only the absent Robin, found with an animal in a church at the end, seemed immune to it. What I didn't realize fully at the time, of course, was how Robin's absence, more than the untamed Robin herself, occasioned such longing.

Longing at the level of that experienced by the characters in *Nightwood* exposes the incompleteness of the self. It presupposes a prioritization of the past over the present and a substitution, the felt lack for the real world with its referents. Obsessive by nature, longing reorders lived experience with remembered experience, which, because it still does not satisfy the pain, allows for fantasy experience as well, but perceived as lived, not as fantasy. It is repetitive, associative, self-referential and enduring. Disordered mental states — drunkenness, drug addiction, hysteria, madness, even amnesia — are both the outcome and the cure for excessive longing. Desire may be the vehicle, but the object of that desire, even when possessed, cannot satisfy such longing. The narrative process brings more solace than the encounter with the object of one's desire. To tell the longing, to name the longing to another, is the first step toward banalizing it, becoming bored with it, so that finally the self can be glimpsed as others see it.

In her book *On Longing* Susan Stewart has described the relationship of the narrative process to time distortion, and of nostalgia to longing.

By the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction the present is denied and the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only
through narrative.

Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack.¹

Stewart concludes that “this point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire”² and that “nostalgia is the desire for desire.”³

Cinema, then, is the domain of desire. It breeds desire, often erasing both referents and signifieds, leaving only excessive or exaggerated acts of signifying. Even with apparently “simple” stories, figural operations must be accounted for, as Dudley Andrew has pointed out in a note on Bresson.

In a film like Robert Bresson’s Pickpocket we have no trouble construing either the images or the story set before us; but Bresson’s importation of seventeenth century music and a literary voice–over narration, not to mention his formal camera movement and obsessive close–ups, halt our easy access to this film.⁴

And what of films where the subject, itself, is longing, films in which shifts in temporality and point of view are the whole story, so much so that there is no paraphrase possible, no simpler story to be told, no film at all, without the elaborate figural tropes of desire and longing, which begin as punctuation and then swallow the mother narrative whole? As Peter Wollen has pointed out, Citizen Kane cannot be imagined without flashbacks.⁵

I am interested here in films in which a literal absence, an excessive absence, generates the mechanism of desire, and in which the longing overwhelms the narration. The truth is long in telling and can never be authentic, and yet by the end the longing is lost, denied or surmounted in a labyrinth of counter–strategies, sound and voice counterpoints, and other overdetermined acts of signifying. Here the narrative process necessitates elaborate and formal structures, images of mirroring and denial, and figural operations, all to explain absence, account for desire and substitute for longing.

Case in point: Hiroshima mon amour (1959, written by Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais). Hiroshima mon amour is an
extended meditation on longing. A close look at the opening sequences of the film will show the dynamics of that longing.

The film opens with three dissolves on interlocked bodies, but only the arms and elbows are visible, and they are alternately sparkling with bubbles or matted with sand. None of the usual identifying marks for these lovers are there: no faces, for the first fifteen minutes of the film; no names throughout the film; no establishing shot to denote time or place. As Susan Stewart has pointed out, "apprehending the face's image becomes a mode of possession," but here the faces/identities of the lovers have been withheld, so that their discourse, not like anything we would expect from lovers in bed, is disembodied.

The woman's voice reconstructs Hiroshima, that past-event, the destruction of a city, through a litany. Her voice builds upon repetition, associative imagery, figurative language, even rhyme. The man's voice serves as punctuation, consistently denying her vision. The visuals, which seem at first to confirm her discourse, finally deny it, while the musical themes, at another remove, confirm and deny as well.

He says, "You saw nothing in Hiroshima," and she begins her litany of insistence, her own longing embedded in her discourse. She says she saw people in the hospitals, but the visual is of Japanese victims in their beds, turning their faces away and averting the gaze of the camera. "You saw nothing in Hiroshima," he repeats, and she switches tactics. Four times at the Museum of Hiroshima, she says, she saw people walking, pensive, but the visuals once again deny her discourse: the placards and displays cut off the bodies of the people in the museum, so that only the legs are visible. The musical soundtrack likewise capitulates, with an admixture of the themes of Hiroshima and forgetting. The constant in these various shots is the camera, which remains mobile, alternately moving forwardly down the hospital corridor and laterally along the backs of the placards in the museum.

The next shots, although they convey a literal fact, the mutilation of metals, also form a figure, a metaphor that foreshadows her personal explosion of longing at the end of this opening expository sequence. The figure is marked by repetition and recall, the personification of metal: burnt iron, tortured iron, iron become vulnerable as flesh.

The man continues to deny her assertions. Her next discourse,
even more stylized than the previous figure, resorts to rhyme: "Dix mille degrés sur la Place de la Paix. Je le sais. Le température du soleil sur la Place de la Paix..." The words express more than they function as communication. They designate a growing hysteria in her litany, which is refused by the man, the images and the musical soundtrack. "You saw nothing," he says. "The reconstructions were as authentic as possible," she says. "The films, too, were made as authentically as possible." Clearly, she has no first-hand witness of that particular horror that was Hiroshima, although she does have her experience in Nevers to parallel it. It is ironic that she resorts to film twice in her litany, first here to a fiction film and then later to newsreels, neither of which can help but falsify the lived experience.

"I have always wept over the fate of Hiroshima," she says. "No," he says, "What would you have to weep over?" As explanation, she says she saw the newsreels, in which dogs were photographed for all time. The visual is of a dog, hobbling on three legs, in contrast with the cat that scurries across Peace Square in the "designated present" of 1959.

Her discourse shifts again, this time to all the flowers that were born of the bomb and the subsequent radiation: beauty born of horror, the "convulsive beauty," espoused by Breton and the Surrealists. She mentions cornflowers, wild iris, bearbine and day lilies, "which sprang from the earth with a vitality never before seen in flowers." But the visual continues from the archive footage, the newsreels, and, instead of showing flowers, the images depict baby victims of Hiroshima, born maimed from the bombing and radiation.

The transitional shift in her discourse enjoins two kinds of illusion and a simile: the horror of Hiroshima is likened to love and forgetting: "Just as in love there is the illusion that it can never be forgotten, so too with Hiroshima, I had the illusion that I would never forget...just as in love." Shifting from fiction films and newsreels, from burnt metal and brand-new flowers, from the artifacts external to one's experience to the interior world, to her longing proper, she both includes the Japanese (her lover of one night) and excludes him (for she is remembering her first love, contemporary with Hiroshima, whose death is still incomplete in her, so that she is remembering the illusion that that first love could never be forgotten).

But the image that accompanies her figurative language is the most violent denial of all: a victim, whose gouged-out eyeball is
being treated by a doctor with tweezers. This image is more haunting and painful to look at than the cutting of the eyeball in Un Chien andalou (Bunuel, 1929). It is the look that cannot be returned.

Other images of the body’s destruction follow: a woman in front of a mirror, her hair falling out (the same mirror, ironically, before which the French woman stands, after she has shared her past with the Japanese); an isolated image of a deformed, twisted hand, the configuration reminiscent of the earlier images of tortured metal and deformed dog.

She speaks of the anger of entire cities and populations, but the image is of a miniature, with the sign in English: Hiroshima Gift Shop.

Her exaggeration, oblivious to the mockery of the miniature in the images, leads to the subject of memory and forgetting. She says, “Like you I know forgetting” and “Like you, I am endowed with memory.” He contradicts both statements. She speaks of the “horror of no longer remembering,” and the image shows a bus, marked ATOMIC TOURS.

The horror of no longer remembering, as in the final statements of Night and Fog (1955), Resnais’ documentary on the concentration camps in Europe, leads to the recurrence of horror. Her voice pronounces the apocalypse. She says new plant forms will again emerge from the sand, but the accompanying visual is of a packet of PEACE cigarettes, surrounded by asphalt and weeds.

Lost now in a reverie of longing, she speaks of love, the body, the metaphor of an entire city in a man’s body, with words of passion that are like a cry for help: “destroy” and “devour”: “I met you here. Who are you? You destroy me. You are good for me. How could I know you were made to the measure of this city? How could I know you were made to the measure of my body? You destroy me. You are good for me. Devour me. Deform me to the point of ugliness....”

The forwardly mobile camera, mounted on the hood of a car, is moot (no natural sounds) and lyrical. Finally, it seems, the camera indulges the discourse, but then the car goes through a tunnel, the sky darkens, and the spectator is thrown into the present tense of the film with a jolt. Suddenly, there are only the lovers in bed, full–bodied and with faces. The woman rolls over on her back and says to the Japanese that “the art of seeing has to be learned.” The image answers with black frame.
Hiroshima mon amour is a film about a woman who once loved a German soldier, and who, after seeing her lover killed, was paraded through the town of Nevers, her head shaven, her family shamed. It is a film about a woman whose psyche and sexuality and memory were arrested in 1945 with the Liberation. Fourteen years later, while in Japan to act in a film about peace, she takes a Japanese lover, which, far from suppressing her previous longing, only augments it, to the point of engulfing her. This Prologue narration complicates rather than elucidates. But, while the images and musical soundtrack and Japanese lover all contradict and deny her discourse, the rest of the film, most of which is in flashback or interior monologue, serves to restore a progressive order to what had seemed at first an irrational discourse.

The hospital and museum are interchangeable constructs, metaphors for the cellar in which she spent her last year of shame before the Liberation. She, in fact, did see people walk by, pensively, with only their legs visible, from the cramped vantage point of her cellar window. She noticed dogs and cats and flowers, things closer to the ground where she was. She would emphasize deformed hands and hair falling out at Hiroshima, because she had her own hair taken from her and the last bit of life from her German lover came from the twitching hand. She would proclaim the authenticity of films, both fiction and newsreel, because they are her only access to what the rest of the world saw when she was deprived of vision in her banishment and because her chosen career became that of a film actress. Even the language chosen to describe her longing — destroy and devour and deform — is recuperated through the flashbacks, in which she relates inscribing her madness into stone, scoring her fingernails, sucking blood, lusting after the taste of blood.

What we learn of the fourteen years between 1945 and 1959 is next to nothing. She lives in Paris, she has a husband and children, she acts in films, she has taken other lovers. It is the absence — these fourteen years — that generates the desire that we witness in the film.

What happens to her longing, this longing that makes her think she caused her German lover’s death, that makes her think she caused her own father’s death from shame and bitterness, this longing that allows only for love affairs with men from enemy countries, the so-called Axis Powers? She is not automatically healed in the telling of her past. She is not an amnesiac, like Gregory Peck in Spellbound, who, once he remembers that he caused his
brother's death by impalement, is healed of that experience and can love Ingrid Bergman normally. Foucault has pointed out the absurdity of equating narration with cure in "Sexuality and Solitude." The madman, encouraged by the therapist to admit to madness, is no less mad.

What happens in *Hiroshima mon amour* is that the Japanese lover begins to insert himself in her flashbacks, to the point of becoming the German lover. "Was I already dead when you found me?" He rivals his rival and betters him, because he is still alive. He steals the part of her longing that was focused on the other, but, in so doing, he becomes infected with her longing. The first half of the film is filled with flashbacks, figural operations, longing, lyricism, living in the past. The second half, once the story is told, is about the boredom after longing. They have fourteen hours to kill before her plane. He follows her. He stops. She leaves him. He comes back. There are as many departures and returns as there were flashbacks. They fill the time with *ennui*, the boredom after longing.

Susan Stewart has noted this trajectory in her book *On Longing*: "The task of description inevitably leads to exhaustion...the transportation of vision into temporality and of simultaneity into narrative inevitably leads to boredom." *So it is with the French woman, who mocks herself in the mirror. She calls her memory "Thistoire de quatre sous." ("Exaggeration always reveals the cheap romance that is reality," Stewart, p. xiii). Description to exhaustion, vision into temporality, simultaneity into narrative, longing into the boredom after longing. The longing dissipates, because it is no longer attached to one character, but it does not disappear. Still unnamed at the end, the two lovers do not know whether they will part or stay together. No cure, no resolution, no contingency, no leap into transcendence.

They began the film as disembodied voices. They end it as mute faces, elliding their words as though they had never used them before, naming each other as whole cities, recuperated memories and metaphors for desire's desire: Hi-ro-shi-ma and Ne-vers en France.

*William F. Van Wert*
Notes


2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Dudley Andrew, “The Primacy of Figure in Cinematic Signification,” in Cinema and Language (Washington: The American Film Institute Monograph Series, 1983), p. 139.


6 Stewart, p. 125.


8 Stewart, Ibid.
BOOK REVIEW
Alexandra Grilikhes

*The Blue Scar & other poems.*
$6.95. ppbk. 72pp.
Folder Editions, Philadelphia
4343 Manayunk Avenue / Philadelphia, PA. 19128

How, in a fragmenting society like ours, does one become whole? Women artists in our century are trying to rediscover or to construct anew an integrated world view apart from that of the patriarchal institutions with which we've grown up.

Alexandra Grilikhes has, in her previous books (most recently, *On Women Artists*), dealt extensively with the meaning for our time of antique goddesses by re-evaluating the myths and using them in the search for particularly female sources of power.

In her new book, *The Blue Scar*, speaking in a voice that is uniquely her own, while partaking of older, incantatory tribal rhythms, she has effected a personal integration of the physical, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of life.

Even while this journey is mapping itself out
I'm dreaming the other

the one that makes whole...

you kill nothing

neither the small animal
nor the thoughts that are painful

(Voyage)

Grilikhes courageously faces down monsters (those of her own emotions, and the world at large), taming by transforming them. We come to understand that only by accepting and by dealing with our fears can we overcome them and use their power for our own creativity. The quest to find one's own voice/self in the cosmos is part of taking responsibility, of becoming a full person, and is the ultimate goal not only of the artist, but of women today who are trying to create themselves.

I send you the light
from here
where I am
in this bare room
alone
with nothing of my own
except the voice I carry with me
......
without the ecstasy there would have been no pain
without the pain there would have been no journey
......
it was you

who gave me the road, the time, the place to be what
I always wanted to be

(“Shaman Song”)

Here one of her major themes is introduced, the journey towards self. Grilikhes is only one of many women artists working toward a personal female mythology that is parallel in intent to Odysseus’s quest through the world to experience and become himself. But the female relates to the natural and social worlds in a way different from the male, one that is not adversarial, not by attempting to dominate or control, but to live in balance, harmoniously absorbing and integrating, working with—not against—external forces. For women, growth comes out of connection, out of embeddedness in a community and tradition. The self is not lost for being part of a larger movement, but as at flood, one may be carried higher and farther on it. And flood is the apt metaphor, for in all of Grilikhes’ poems, there is an undercurrent of lapping water, a lulling repetition, each phrase lapped by adjacent phrases, so that we, as readers, absorb on a subconscious level the sense of flow, which is also our experience of time, incremental but transient. Nothing is lost, only transmuted. Everything reverberates with meaning.

Between the sacred and the dry
always water.

...... It is said

the life force is strong where there is
water, and here, close to the ebb and flow and flow
of the river, I wish for the barriers between us to
become fluid, permeable, flesh, the human animal
living its life in its place.

(“Pittsburgh”)

The Blue Scar is divided into three sections, the first being “Travel Runes” which deals with an hermetic self and ways of opening out to a world that is perceived both as alien and as mirroring the self. One is
pulled out of oneself through the seductions of nature, but nature has also its fearful side, the enchantment of magic, one’s self being stolen away. The series of poems about Taos are particularly stark, although Grilikhes uses a long pliable phrasing that connects the facts of ordinary life with the rhythms of nature. Her poems do not so much describe what she means to tell us as embody it. And in this, she partakes also of traditional shaman’s songs — those poet/healers of other cultures — whose form informs (gives meaning to) daily acts, her purpose being the conferring of sacredness.

Going up
into the mountain
the slow drive at
twilight, winding, I
on my path, you on yours.
..... the high desert that had once been
water, seal fossils in their green beds
on the side of the road. We inch
upward our ears filling with height
... The word
sacred forms in my brain, keeps
returning, the sacred place, the sacred
time, the ritual.

(“The Ritual: Taos”)

“Divining”, the central section of the book both literally and metaphorically, is about spiritual travel between the worlds of self and nature: how one assimilates what is outside of oneself so that it becomes deeply yours; how self and world resonate in a way that gives meaning to experience.

With so many of these poems, you want to read slowly, to take in each word separately, each seeming utterly unchangeable, yet linked to every other word to form a meaning that is not totally explicable, but feels emotionally right.

In “Spirit Of The Bridge”, Grilikhes invokes a place, talking to it about a long-past event shared there with someone close to her. This technique is often used in primitive cultures as a way integrating past and present, by remembering where you came from, to know who you are. “Duende” shows us creating ourselves, setting up the questions, the challenges, and then learning to respond appropriately.

..... It
makes me sweat to
think of you, sweat
to sing of you, sweat
to follow you I
turn my face into the
path
..... I am
blood and body in the sacred
place, the mile-long dream
and it is I who beat the drum
and follow you.

(“Duende”)

Like a dream, a successful poem draws on a consciousness larger
than that of the individual. Its emblems are totemic, its logic
compressed; layered with meaning, and like an elegant mathematical
formula beautiful in its irreducibility, a fine poem satisfies a deep
emotional need.

In “Divining”, Grilikhes opens the self to the four directions. As if in
a myth, she writes from a tower, and this vantage point allows her to
look back into the past to the first flowering of self, and forward into the
future, to the scars/wounds and joy in fulfillment that experience
brings.

Both feet must be planted on the earth to open the
body to the four directions
You borrow the breath of the day you choose.

.....

you guided me
over the water
into the burnt-out house of my sowing
it was hard to walk with my bruises
I walked there anyway
we were returning
to the place where we were sown
I feared walking over the bridge

(“Divining”)

For Grilikhes, the bridge as image is always a connector between
worlds, between spirit and reality. It takes us over water, water seen
ambivalently both as the rushing supportive energy of life, and as
subconscious forces, always present but only sometimes recognized,
water as the allure of death, the final merging, harmony. Her poems are
a daring of the extreme, a means of flirting with danger, of pushing the
limits of her quest despite fear, and this way of dancing over the abyss
brings with it tremendous exhilaration, a way of experiencing life at its
fullest and most meaningful.
The woman approaches in the dream
when the blood tells it
she’s your guide
let the crystals be there in my hand,

.....
Let the days speak, the days of summer, let it be that day...
Let it be counted
If the blood speaks for that day
if it moves in the right hand
it has been grasped
before it was understood
it has been grasped

(“Divining”)

“Divining” brings together all the apparently disparate strands of Grilikhes’ work: journey myths, totemic images, incantatory song, even elements from our contemporary interest in psychic phenomena. Anything can be used to learn from, take a clue from, show a path. The person on a quest tries many ways, and keeps what works, what is right for herself.

Whatever you do, she said
will be right
for the length of time
that you do it.
For mastery. Finally.
Over myself.

The appearance the witnessing the guidance

over the bridge
the sweetness that comes to redeem
the darkness that doesn’t release you
after the agony
the sweetness that comes

.....
We get what we are
We get what we really want
That is the question

(“Divining”)

The final, titular, section of the book reveals the body as culmination of our adventures in the world. For Grilikhes, it is the gesture behind the words that is the real meaning both in life and in poetry. The poet embodies herself in words to be sent out into the world. Dance — about which
Grilikhes has written often, here also in “Body of White Wood” and “Dancetime" — like poetry, gives meaning through movement and form, and is a literal giving of one’s body to a responsive audience to penetrate another’s psyche. In this part of the book, the poet having been in the world, having suffered and absorbed what is meaningful for her, has fully realized her persona, and is ready to be in the world affecting others.

Blue Scar shows memory touching and wounding us, and these wounds becoming part of us, perhaps the unique part, so that we are, finally, our experiences embodied. The blue scar marks where we have been, as the tideline does at the ocean or footprints do on a path. By recording where we’ve been, we come to know where we are now, and who we are. In this looking back for roots, not for a personal genealogy, but for a place and an appropriate form for woman in the world, Grilikhes speaks to and for all of us.

Hand over hand
she worked the box
laying the pieces in their
crevices until it became

The Blue Scar
.....
there were many marks
on her skin, small pulses, memories
of falls and startings
.....
the scars
were hers; her face, her heart, her terror
and she would love them forever
whatever color they were. Her memory
of bridges and sunny windows
.....
and everything passing.
And it would never stop.

("The Blue Scar")

This book is a joyous addition to the short shelf of poetry books that speak to women in our language, and about our concerns, while pointing a path; yet Blue Scar is able to go beyond the personal to larger truths.
KISSING UP

I grew up kissing books and bread.

In our house, whenever anyone dropped a book or let fall a chapati or a 'slice,' which was our word for a triangle of buttered leavened bread, the fallen object was required not only to be picked up but also kissed, by way of apology for the act of clumsy disrespect. I was as careless and butterfingered as any child and, accordingly, during my childhood years, I kissed a large number of 'slices' and also my fair share of books....

All this happened before I had ever kissed a girl. In fact it would almost be true, true enough for a fiction writer, anyhow, to say that once I started kissing girls, my activities with regard to bread and books lost some of their special excitement. But one never forgets one's first loves.

Bread and books: food for the body and food for the soul—what could be more worthy of our respect, and even love?

—Salman Rushdie
Is Nothing Sacred?

A book is one of those phenomena: made up of paper and ink, of words, its whole is far greater than the sum of its parts. We either learn to love books or don't at an early age, and those of us who do are taken for life. Rushdie could not count on every new title showing up in the neighborhood bookstalls of Bombay; the same can be said of Philadelphia. "We kissed everything. We kissed dictionaries and atlases. We kissed Enid Blyton novels and Superman comics. If I'd ever dropped the telephone directory I'd probably have kissed that, too."

Clearly, there were things we all had to learn, wherever we lived: how to hold onto our books and how to get more of them. The first of these was not so difficult, but the latter seemed an enormous, unending task.

How many books came and were gone before we even knew of them, gone forever, some of them, especially the short runs and limited editions of small presses? This might help—the following books are new, and they are the types of things that all-too-often end up well-kept secrets.

*   *   *

Women have no wildness in them,
They are provident instead.

—Louise Bogan

Three new chapbooks would certainly give Bogan second thoughts. The first, Dreams as Erect as Nipples on Ice, is from Lynne Savitt. Savitt has been a mainstay of the small presses and little magazines for nearly twenty years, but lately she has been somewhat reclusive. From time to time her poems show up in select magazines, and now Hugh Fox and his
Ghost Dance Press have brought together this new work. It is fitting that Ghost Dance is behind these poems. Like Savitt, the press is a significant part of small press history, one of those little monsters that came out of the 60's and 70's nurtured on mimeo fluid and good intentions. Moreso, it is right that Ghost Dance wrap covers over these particular poems, conceived as they were in dreams, hot and cold and sweaty sleeps.

Savitt's battleground is the same, the politics of sex, of relationships, of mother-love. Out of the dark, quiet moments of night comes a soft-focused, busy, neon-bright life. In "Selfish Dream" the speaker is intent upon getting as much as she can from a wild sexual encounter:

where you go i do not
know it's my turn
& my hips reach up
somewhere we leave each
floating in dark dreams

In "Vietnam Dream" a husband of six months is dead in Southeast Asia, a name now on a wall in Washington, a name "in/black on one yellowed letter/i keep with my lingerie."

"Cop Dream" brings us into a bizarre triangle, the cop-lover and convict-ex. "The cop and i can now be/happy for you found a/new loving woman...". What is so wonderful about Savitt's poems is her daring diction, her free-wheeling use of puns, of sleight-of-hand, of misdirection. The line breaks are always unexpected, the syntax challenging:

you are now taken care of
my darling convicted me
of desertion we can both
be content with new partners
parole for the two of us...

Expectation and surprise are prime ingredients in this collection. In "Love's Choice Poem,"

my choice isn't don johnson
or william hurt but my dead
grandfather...

All dreams mean something; REM-time is to be valued. But what would Freud make of this? "i don't speak spanish/but everyone else does/cook & read & write/& play with tawny make-up." That one might throw him, but not this: "my roommate says it isn't/healthy to dream i have/a penis big & hard as an/eight foot salami."

(Dreams as Erect as Nipples on Ice by Lynne Savitt. Ghost Dance Press, 526 Forest, E. Lansing, MI 48823; no price shown.)
Surely it is the wildness, as much as providence, which allows for a City Girl to survive. Linda Lerner captures the city in her jumpy, driving poems — its mean streets, its heat and stone cold, its frustrations and anguish.

City of bartering hearts
that feeds me,
the down-comfort hunger
I snuggle into; city
I can’t find my way out of.

The city breeds such ambiguity, full as it is of both wonder and terror.

City that offers
a choice of deaths
on every subway ride
staves off death,
that orgasmic promise I fear
as much as any serial killer.

There is fear in every line of every one of these poems, but there is almost as much promise, hope:

more
than housewife survival
a pensioned afterlife
we sucked the juice of taboos,
fruit in your mouth words
you couldn’t get enough

There was a time ("Beatle scream time") when the music could keep you going — so much of this book is about music. It is a jumping, clacking city-rhythm that holds these poems together, a subway ride of song.

Riding out of turning Brooklyn
BMT, mostly safe class
pigeoning 9-5 wealth
behind newspapers hold back
hungry eyes, they...
we give, don’t even look up

Then, there were times of love—"love yanked me up/from my father’s death"—even love has a roughness to it, though. But that is not to deny its magic, its power:

I reached out to love
with more imagination, more woman
than someone knew what to do with.

These poems are full of the subway, the crowds, and the gritty streets, of backseat car rides with the wrong kind of boys "going somewhere/in
wild haired America," going fast. Everything is fast.

New York is fast, no time for
aging respectability...

There is hardly time enough to slow down and sort things out—and yet,

At not-quite-forty, (some women) have
a tantrum of regrets:
homeless motorcycle-driven years
through pension plans, around
housing lists, past dark-suited men
with clock setting habits,
to adventure naked out of sleep,
to bite into anything hot & spicy;

at not-quite-forty, they start
insuring themselves
against mortality, children & medical plans
a car race into white-washed marriages
and dull jobs...

(City Girl by Linda Lerner. Vergin Press, 10708 Gay Brewer Drive, El
Paso, TX 79935; $4.)

*

Ann Menebroker may just be the most providential of these three, and
yet there can be no denying the wildness. Her concerns in this new
collection are the chores, the routines, of everyday in and around her
alley-house home. Her garden is a recurring image. First it is the
geraniums—they demand attention, but more—

What I want to do
is water the geraniums
outside, then
come back in
and lie down
naked beside you, the
big song of the bed
drawing us
into its watery refuge

When the lilac bush flowers it seems a small miracle: "How anything
blooms,/ in any season/ in this alley, is a/mystery." Nonetheless, as the
temperature falls, the sweet scent of lilac fills the air.

But according to the book's title, this is about Routines That Will Kill
You. Tending to the flowers seems harmless enough. There are other
things though, things that when given a moment insinuate themselves
into the whole of life. Work, for example:

Load the blue truck
with cleaning equipment,
warm up the engine.
Same work as the day
before and the week
before that.
Feeling a sharp sting
on my arm, look down,
but nothing is ever there.
Just the feel of it,
without the bite.
Some pains are so small
it’s hard to imagine
teeth that little.

And even recreation, like running, cycling, eating, drinking—even
dancing—even watching dancers at the neighborhood go-go bar or
settled in your favorite chair with video-porn. Perhaps the most
dangerous routine of them all is loving:

We talk some, we cry some.
We’re afraid to tamper
with our old selves.

And what it all means, escapes us.

Most of these poems are about love and loving, though it would be
wrong to call them all Love Poems.

I still love you, she said.
He said he loved her, too.
He said it more than she did.
He had this perfect routine...

And still, there is something to be said for what’s routine, how it is as
comfortable as a favorite chair, as dependable as the morning paper and
the first cup of coffee.

What we were going to do
is be a couple in love, friends
and lovers, reading
books together, visiting friends,
all the perfect things
to do...

(Routines That Will Kill You by Ann Menebroker. Bogg Publications,
422 N. Cleveland Street, Arlington, VA 22201; free-for-the-postage.)

* * *

After witnessing the corner church rock like an earthquake
from eleven-thirty til one, I question the angles
of outstretched hands and outcoming hats that say
nobody’s soul was saved today.
The preacher, “an impresario of hats,” takes his text for the morning from the Book of Hats, and his congregation is ready to hear the word. Then there are “the street level people piled up on the corner/of each other’s lives”—they are not interested in having “their souls saved/at the Soul Saving Station this morning.”

Hats are in abundance in both crowds—they have purpose, style, and a price, all of which add layers to the wonderful metaphor Earl S. Braggs works with here. There is a classiness, maybe even a sense of regality, about the women in church, yet “what isn’t/right about a woman wearing a $50.00 hat strolling/down the aisle and putting 50¢ in the collection plate?”

Tally is the “Streetcorner Man,” one of the “streetpeople (who) rot under a streetlamp sun.” He had a hat, too, an old baseball cap with a Cincinnati “C” half torn off. He was fast, and smart, but that was before the Wild Irish Rose, before gun games, cheap thrills, and the hellfire of the streetcorner. “Those were the days when we lived halfway between the church/we never went to and the liquor store.” Now Tally thinks nothing of walking right up to the heavy front door of that church, “but their god don’t look like the man” he is looking for.

Downhome, death is a family reunion waiting
for the relatives living up north to come strolling home
dressed in Lennox-Avenue-blue-I’m-better-than-you
silk suits. Riding on wing tip shoes, strutting too cool
for a wind that blows only southern blues...

Braggs writes with passion and compassion, and while he documents the horror of the urban mess, he highlights the dignity and gentility of those who endure it. Long musical lines and a colorful precise diction make these poems sing—most notably in the lyrical “These Black Hands.”

Still, the powerful image here is the hats—and a cold time of youth remembering “the winter of hats”:

Felt tip fedoras and fox fur trimmed brims, red Paris tams
and deep navy blue berets, Yankee blue baseballs and orange Orioles,
flat top white sailorboys and dull colored Greek fishermen,
cold corduroy Texas cowboys and khaki green safaris,
sky caps, short nap caps and caution-yellow-light-hard-hats,
Sunday-go-to-meeting hats and dirty-leather-harley hats,
all going hurriedly in a thousand different ways
looking for a quiet lunch at noon.

So much for style, for the costs. But what of purpose? What is it with these hats?

“Mr. Braggs, please take your hat off,”
Monday school teacher says.
Perhaps she didn’t know that Mama gave us hats.
to protect our soft feelings while she made ends meet
that have never met before by selling liquor
in our dollar-shot glass house full of hats.

As rough and as honest as these poems are, the romantic taste of the
past cannot be overlooked. There was an innocence, — “we didn’t
care/about anything so long as everything fit into our small scheme/of
things.” All the grit and poverty, the ugly and the sad, cannot erase the
memories of good times, good hats.

...we felt as good as we could sliding across the floor
in our too-tight live wire orange pants that didn’t match
anything especially a gold and black checkerboard hat.
We didn’t care how we looked as long as we looked crazy.
The ghetto respects crazy people and ex-prisoners.
Everyone knows that.

(Hats by Earl S. Braggs. Wesupba Press, P.O. Box 1132, Wilmington,
NC 28401; $4.)

*    *    *

You have the accepted old titles
to please you with their fine
modalities. Why bother to unravel
the pages of this chapbook of mine
that’s crammed with trivialities
and empty attitudes all the way to its dainty
innards of naive delusion?

In the early 5th Century, the Vandals, a Germanic people, migrated to
North Africa, took control of the rich Roman Provinces, and established
the Vandal Empire. They held North Africa for approximately a hundred
years—a period which coincided with the erosion of the Western Roman
Empire. Luxorius was a provincial Roman who lived in Carthage during
the last years of Vandal rule.

About Luxorius himself, we know very little. Only 91 poems have
actually been attributed to him—poems of pimps and royalty, of lawyers,
prisoners, athletes and minor bureaucrats. They are fresh, funny, and at
times haunting. Simply To See, with 25 of these, (including the original
Latin versions) is a fine sampling of his work.

Maybe, by chance, you treasure
being instructed by verses
which say hardly anything in a labored
style avoiding elegance, subtlety,
meaning? Actually, you need to get
hold of and begin this little book
as if you were flitting off
to a theatre of jokes.
There is more than humor, more than wit, in Luxorius’ lines. There is also depth, intelligence and insight. At first you smile at the idea of convicts using their chains to overcome their captors, but long after the irony dims there is still the lesson. The same can be said of your first reading of “The Blind Man at the Brothel,” where the visitor uses his hands, his gentle touch, to determine the beauty of the women:

Skillful lust has given him
so many eyes, why should he want
two more, simply to see?

And then there’s this —

Decay is the price we pay
for preferring to cling to life.
The longer we have
what we can’t have forever, the sadder.

I’ve always been a cynic, one of those who never trusted translations. Like kissing through a veil, someone said. That’s not to say I do not read them, even enjoy them. I tend to think of them, though, more as the property of the translator. “Transcreations,” a teacher of mine used to call them. Enjoy them for what they are, ideas skimmed from the work of others, then redressed in English, stretched over its metric loom, and woven with its own blended sounds. Surely, the product of all this recreating is something new, original. And so, Art Beck is to be commended. He is completely aware of his limitations, of the obstacles that abound. He addresses all this in great detail in his introduction. And in the end, it is his dance we are dancing here, his noise, his voice. As he points out, “as in auto racing (or chariot racing in Luxorius’ time), a certain recklessness is a basic tool” of the translator’s trade. Still, “the race has to be run with Luxorius’ horses and in Luxorius’ own arena where he remains a tricky fellow to catch.”

This is one of those expensive fine press limited editions, and as such is beyond the means of most of us. That is too bad. With luck, a less expensive edition will one day be available. Meanwhile, for those who have it, these are for you.

About those little statues
of Cupid squirting water.
You know — Venus’s son —
the one who ignites all creation
with essential fire. See how
through the wonder of art
he wets it down.

As the poet says elsewhere, “Art — in this pathetic little scene — pisses on the wise.”

(Simply To See: Poems of Luxorius, translated by Art Beck. Poltroon Press, P.O. Box 5476, Berkeley, CA 94705; $80.)
As magazines go, Crazyhorse is well worth noting. It was born more than thirty years ago in a California white heat. Editor Tom McGrath (who just recently died) envisioned it as a brave and undeniable warrior, and in time he fashioned it into one of the 60's most articulate and persistent advocates of social and political change. At his hand it attacked American militarism and capitalism with much the same vehemence and daring with which its namesake, the great Sioux, attacked Custer at Little Big Horn.

Its approach to literature was as gutsy as its approach to politics. In the first issue McGrath included a “manifesto,” and declared that Crazy Horse (as it was then called) was not interested “in either the shrunken trophies of the academic head hunters nor in those mammoth cod-pieces stuffed with falsies, the primitive inventions of the Nouveau Beat.” Instead, he called for “a poetry where the surrealist lions of Lorca and the classically magnetic lambs of Marvell and Crane fly up together,” as well as for “satire, jepery, extravagance, humor, Brecht, case histories, parody, practical jokes, Criticism”—in short, “everything to help blow up the system.”

The response was overwhelming: what followed was a long run of stories and poems from both established writers and new, pieces that were sometimes disturbing, sometimes outrageous, but always interesting, original and thought-provoking.

By the end of the 60's, the mag and McGrath had move from LA to NYC—then on to a number of small school towns throughout North Dakota and Minnesota. In 1970 it was located in Marshall, MN, where, after McGrath's departure, Philip Dacev took over. Although Dacev and the subsequent editors continued in the same irreverent vein, the emphasis began to shift away from politics—and from Surrealism and Deep Images—toward more mainstream literary values.

The editors kept changing and/or moving, and Crazyhorse made its way through Kentucky and finally Arkansas. This last stop was a blessing, for it is clearly the reason we now have The Best of Crazyhorse (University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, AR 72701; 472pp. $24.95/$14.95) edited by David Jauss.

First home of such classics as Robert Bly's “Counting Small-Boned Bodies” (“If we could only make the bodies smaller,/the size of skulls, /we could make a whole plain white with skulls in the moonlight,"), C.K. Williams' “Still Life,” and William Matthews' “An Elegy for Bob Marley,” this big volume boasts many more familiar and not so familiar gems by the likes of Ashbery, Bell, Carver, Dubie, Dunn, Forche, Hampl, Hugo — the list goes on. There is fiction from Abbott, Busch, Dubus, Hannah, Mason, and the rest. Crazyhorse brought them all together. And still does. Today, a typical Crazyhorse runs 145 pages with
fiction, poetry and criticism. (c/o English Department, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, AR 72204, 2/yr. $8.)

* * *

All this began with Salman Rushdie. You know his story: his nightmare began the way most do, with a few good steps. In August of 1988 Viking Press published his fifth novel, *The Satanic Verses*, and early indications were that the critics were pleased. Never one to rally tremendous sales, Rushdie has always been considered a solid, quality writer, one the critics and a significant and devout following could count on. Of course, things changed in September. The Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic spiritual leader, declared the book to be blasphemy. He issued a *fatwa*, a curse and sentence of death, on its author, and since then Rushdie has been living an eerie underground existence, like something out of Kafka or Camus.

*The Satanic Verses* has become a *cause celebre*, and sales of the hardbound edition have gone through the roof, despite the threats and times of chaos that followed. For his part, Rushdie has remained cautiously quiet, even to the point of preventing the planned paperback edition, a guaranteed financial windfall.

Lately it seems that Rushdie is going out of his way for reconciliation, making broad gestures of contrition. He maintains the innocence and rightmindedness of his intentions, but he bows a humble head toward Mecca. He is clearly tired and frustrated, but amazingly unbroken.

Rushdie has a new book—*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. It is one of those children’s books for adults. According to the author, it is a book he had promised his son. But more interesting than this are two small booklets that have recently appeared—*In Good Faith* and *Is Nothing Sacred?* The first is an essay, and the second is the text of a talk, both written by Rushdie since the incredible events surrounding *The Satanic Verses*. The booklets have been published by GRANTA, who, together with Viking, is credited with publishing *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.

GRANTA is one of those “International Reviews of Literature and Political Discussion” published in Britain but with addresses around the world (including New York: 250 West 57th Street, Suite 1316, NY, NY 10107; subscriptions are $20/year.) Primarily prose, fiction and otherwise, each glossy issue is thematic and boasts some of the finest English-speaking talent in the world.

(*In Good Faith* and *Is Nothing Sacred?* are $3 each, and available from the address above.)

The Confusion in Which We Find Ourselves: a Defense of Impressionistic Criticism

Some say it's bad etiquette to take lines from a poem out of context to use them for your own ends. I believe a critic is justified in taking a line of a poem or essay "out of context." This allows criticism a sort of parity with allegedly more "creative" writing. A poet may appropriate a line or phrase (or at least the feeling it expresses but can't contain). Even if a poet is not a devout reader of books, I don't think it can be otherwise. Language is a social phenomenon; we learn it from people. From childhood on, we learn expressions that suit our desires (and possibly desires that suit our expressions). Why conclude necessarily that the poet occupies a more privileged vantage point than the critic who is, as some would say, a vicarious sapsucker who merely reads poems? Presumably, the poet is far less estranged from the earth because, bypassing intellect, he "reads" life. Yet isn't there something of the critic in the poetry we enjoy most? Isn't it possible that a poet who writes about, say, 29 naked men bathing or talking to the sun on Fire Island is also taking a certain experience out of context and juxtaposing it along side other epiphanies to create a beautifully woven fabric of lies it's a thrill to envy?

I have more questions than answers. I can't pretend to offer any definite standards or measuring sticks, only tentative sightings. If I like a poem and you don't, can I convince you you're reading it wrong, or are we looking for different things? I am trying to discover what attracts me to the various poets and poems I enjoy reading, to show where I'm with them now and why I think I can "grow" with them. I intend to address as wide a range as possible of works I've read. This first installment for PBQ, you may notice, treats for the most part poems by poets who have at least three things in common: they are white, they are male, and they are dead. I'd like to think this is accidental, yet I am a white male (as is much of the canon). Future essays will restrict themselves to excerpts from contemporary writers...and there is a lot being written by men and women today worthy of discussion. Yet I wanted to start by discussing a constellation of masters whose standards, I believe, were very high, to set a tone here. I am not claiming that these poets are better than those omitted. I am simply confessing my prejudices, my experiences...and reading is nothing if not an experience.

In his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Wallace Stevens writes:

Yes: the all-commanding subject matter of poetry is life, the never ceasing source. But it is not a social obligation. One does not love and go back to one's ancient mother as a social obligation. One goes back out of a suasion not to be denied. Unquestionably, if a social movement moved one deeply enough, its moving poems would follow. No politician can
command the imagination, directing it to do this or that. Stalin might grind his teeth the whole of a Russian winter and yet: all the poets in the Soviets might remain silent the following spring. He might excite their imaginations by something he said or did. He would not command them.... The truth is that the social obligation so closely urged is a phase of the pressure of reality which a poet is bound to resist or evade today....Since that is the role most frequently urged, if that role is eliminated, and if a possible poet is left facing life without any categorical exactions upon him, what then? What is his function? Certainly it is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. Nor is it, I think, to comfort them while they follow their readers to and fro. I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the mind of others. His role in short is to help people live their lives. Time and time again it has been said that he may not address himself to an elite. I think he may. There is not a poet whom we prize living today that does not address himself to an elite. The poet will continue to do this: to address himself to an elite even in a classless society, unless, perhaps that exposes him to imprisonment, or exile.

(pages 28-29)

Stevens’ essay is both a defense of his own poetic stance as well as an exploration of a topic about which a reader may draw his own conclusions. His valorization of an amoral elitism that confuses the so-called common-sense distinction between reality and imagination, society and the self, may be upsetting to a poet who believes that poetry can change society and must be made accessible. But, on closer observation, one could say that Stevens’ poetry is as socially relevant and no more elitist than “yr. basic beatnik.”

At what seems to be an opposite pole from Stevens is Bertolt Brecht, who was said to believe that art should be a hammer rather than a mirror or lamp. In his “Song of the Cut-Priced Poet (during the first third of the twentieth century when poetry was no longer paid for),” Brecht uses a dramatic monologue form in which the poet lyrically complains to some unnamed ex-patron in hopes that doing so will reinstate his salary. In a way this is an earnest plea, an archetypal us vs. them poem:

Didn’t we always, when we had enough to live on
Sing of the things that gave you pleasure on earth?
So they might give you pleasure anew: the flesh of your women
Sadness of autumn, a stream, the moon shining above...

The sweetness of your fruit, the rustle of falling leaves
And again the flesh of your women. The eternity
Round you. All this we sang, sang too your beliefs
Your thoughts of the dust you become at the end of your journey.

(lines 21-28)
Yet there are many levels of irony here and I only have space to address a few. The speaker we’re at first tempted to identify with here is seen as an immoral whore:

What evil have we not done—for you! what evil!
And always contented ourselves with the scraps
from your board...

called your huge slaughteryards Fields of Honour
(35-36, 39)

And again:

On the forms you sent to us demanding taxes
We painted the most astonishing pictures for you.
(41-42)

Throughout, Brecht reveals (or constructs) a situation in which being disenfranchised leads a poet to question his role. The “we” of the poem might have historical validity, but for Brecht personally it is a fiction (just as Phil Ochs really didn’t “steal California from the Mexican land”—all his years at military school just enabled him to identify with the mind that did). Yet even a reader in the 1990s who never earned a living for a poem can get swept up in this poem, can understand the crisis presented here. Like the best of Brecht’s political verse, this is not didactic in the sense that it forces a conclusion down the reader’s throat. Rather, the reader (even if he’s not a poet) is left to wonder where he fits in. Perhaps he’ll think: “If poetry doesn’t pay, why then even try to kiss the feet of those that trample me?” Perhaps the poem will let the poet worry about which “side” he is on, or why is he on that side? Or how stupid sides are? If this poet is only starting to question his allegiances to the brutal thieves that run the society because he’s no longer being paid, how moral is he? Isn’t that just as amoral as Stevens?

All the best didactic poems, like the best aesthetic poems, work because they yield an affective response. Like Stevens, Brecht is moved to write this poem. Like Stevens, Brecht is writing for an elite. Though there is a further irony here.

The poem ends:

When I began what you’re reading now (but are you?)
I wanted each stanza to rhyme all through
Then thought! That’s too much work. Who’ll pay me for it?
And so regretfully left it. It’ll just have to do.
(61-64)

Of course, the poem does rhyme. Of course, the reader is reading it. But the reader’s not the person the poem’s being written to, or is he? The
poet becomes marginalized by an increasingly distant ruling class. His exaggerated complaints are not even heard, let alone dealt with, by the "you" of the poem, precisely who Brecht's probable reader is not. In a way, this poem is as much about the search for any audience as Stevens' statement. The true audience this poem assumes consists of other "cut-priced poets" and those "less lucky" to whom the poet is now admitting he lied on behalf of the men who wounded them.

Yet, this poem shows the limit's of Brecht's vision. Perhaps for Brecht, it was either a matter of wooing the upper class or of whoring oneself to the proletariat. If this poem shows Brecht siding with the latter should we applaud him? Or is he too concerned with where he fits in...is he siding himself with the proletarian because it was the 1920s and Marxism was in the European air? Even though such a stance wouldn't grant him the courtly riches Sir Thomas Wyatt knew, at least it wouldn't leave him beheaded like Louis XIV. Perhaps I am being over-cynical.

Nonetheless, this calls into question the role of the reader. In the provocative essay, "The Reader's Egotism," contemporary poet Paul Hoover writes:

It's obvious that no writing is created without the thought of some reader, even if the reader is only the writer blinking with miscomprehension at what he just typed....The reader always seeks a text that will be of use, as information, comfort or reassurance about the rightness of his own opinions. Even the most sophisticated reader does so.

But the reader comes into play even before he reads the text....In fact, "finding one's voice" is the act of finding one's proper reader, of being at ease with someone like you in the writing.

(3)

Hoover then goes on to cite specific examples of "identity groups" or "schools" in the contemporary poetry scene. "Imagine Charles Bukowski, the working class hero, addressing the middle-class reader of The American Poetry Review who holds 'sensitivity' rather than toughness as a value "(3). Of course, this is absurd, but it is no more absurd than a poem by John Ashbery sticking out like a sore thumb in a magazine (because the editors chose it, not because they understood or appreciated it, but because he has a "big name").

Hoover also writes that "only the bravest can range across social class with any confidence." This may be true, but it's important to note that some 15 years ago Ashbery was involved with giving an award to Bukowski for a poem of his that appeared in the New York Quarterly. This makes sense to me, just as it makes sense that Frank O'Hara could champion the poetry of both LeRoi Jones and Kenneth Koch and could wear a tuxedo to an opera as well as hang out at the 5-Spot in its heyday. This is another area where the impersonality of poetry overlaps with the impersonality of the poet. By mainstream standards, both Stevens and
Brecht were basically freaks at their freest.

Different as they are, yet united in their individuality (if not individualism), Stevens, Brecht, and Hoover are all dealing with the question of who to deal with. Who becomes what. It’s Hoover’s love for French and Marianne Moore that places him somewhere between Bohemia and the Avant-Garde. It’s Brecht’s passionate fascination with the role of poetry in society that enables him to deliciously satirize and question the poet’s values. It’s Stevens’ desire to find the role of society in poetry that begs him to reject the reality of the socially obligated poet. All are trying to piece together various influences to find a style, and as Hoover writes, “a change of style is often a change of politics” (3).

Allegedly, Symbolism was the first attempt to eschew cognitive poetry for a purely affective poetry. This means that it rejects argument and narrative for a nonrepresentational universe like that of music. There’s certainly some truth to that. “The Drunken Boat” is hardly “An Essay on Man.” Still, though it may have become increasingly difficult with the advent of Modernism to say what many poems are about except for something like “time” or “life” or “people,” this shapelessness of much of post-“Wasteland” poetry does not eschew argument or even narrative. Every device can now be used. Certainly a poet like Rilke, whose “Duino Elegies” in some way represents the 19th Century bursting at the seams, did not eschew argument while exploring symbolism. Rilke’s figure of the poet certainly has more in common with Stevens than with his fellow German, Brecht. Though the language is perhaps dated (in Mitchell’s translation at least), the discursiveness too earnest for the fashions of postmodernism, the drama Rilke evokes could be seen as constituting the quintessence of poetry.

In the third “Duino Elegy,” like Shelley at times (in “Alastor” and “Epipschydion” or in Frank O’Hara’s poems like “Sleeping on the Wing” and “There I Could Never Be a Boy”), Rilke grapples with the darkness of the soul. This subject matter, of course, is what Ezra Pound would satirize as ridiculously solipsistic in the second half of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” and Brecht would basically reduce to reading and smoking cigarettes. Yet who could doubt the power of the highly emotionalized meditation Rilke sets in motion from the poem’s first lines:

> It is one thing to sing the beloved. Another, alas, to invoke that hidden guilty river-god of the blood.

(1-2)

Perhaps “guilty river-god of the blood” comes off as tidy-bowl-man corny as Bly’s “inside the veins there are navies setting forth” (from “Waking from Sleep”), but the ambivalence with which Rilke greets his invoked world allows the dialectic taking place here a drama few poets can match.

The “alas” reveals the poet’s dissatisfaction. He’s upset that “singing the beloved” is not the same as “invoking.” It’s a mistake, I believe, to say
he prefers one to the other. What's important is that Rilke sees them as distinct. It would be interesting if he could try to see singing the beloved as invoking the river-god (just as it would be interesting if Frost would've taken both roads). But even if he doesn't here, this poem's power is not diminished by a reductionist metaphysics (just as Brecht's isn't). If the critic's job is to point out inconsistencies, that's only because the poet, like life itself, has articulated gaps. Let me quote a later segment of this poem:

Not you, his mother: alas, you were not the one
who bent the arch of his eyebrows into such expectation.
Nor for you, girl so aware of him, not for your mouth
did his lips curve themselves into a more fruitful expression.
Do you really think that your gentle steps could have shaken him with such violence, you who move like the morning breeze?
Yes, you did frighten his heart; but more ancient terrors plunged into him at the shock of that feeling. Call him...
but you can't quite call him away from those dark companions.
Of course, he wants to escape, and he does; relieved, he nestles into your sheltering heart, takes hold, and begins himself.
But did he ever begin himself, really?
Mother, you made him small, it was you who started him;
in your sight he was new, over his new eyes you arched the friendly world and warded off the world that was alien.
Ah, where are the years when you shielded him just by placing your slender form between him and the surging abyss?

(14-30)

The confusion in which we find ourselves here approaches a total experience. Rilke sweeps the reader up in a world wedged in between a poet and an other. One might say "things are blown out of proportion" while another might say "but this is how things really are." It might be remembered that in "Adagia" Stevens wrote, "Realism is a corruption of reality."

Like the sources that must remain secret in Shelley's "Mont Blanc," this surging abyss is as horrible as the guilty river-god of the blood. But it is a "depth of solitude" more "true," more alien, like "origin" and "fate" than what the mother (who's not the first cause) nor the girl (who's not his final end) could give. Of course, it also causes "his lips [to] curve themselves into a more fruitful expression" more than those women could. This admission (or fabrication) might be why terror winks "at him like an accomplice." A feminist reading of this poem would be very interesting. Perhaps it would show that Rilke invokes an abyss to separate him from his beloved just as his mother tried to hide him from the abyss (by explaining it away, etc.). Yet the abyss precedes even his mother.

Rilke goes on to say he loves the abyss. There's a kind of devious onanism here. Is he patronizing the girl when he writes, "Do you really think that your gentle steps could have shaken him with such violence,
you who move like the morning breeze?" Is he saying she's too beautiful to compete with the real terror or is this invocation done to disarm the genuine terror he feels from her into a relief? It is an interesting question. In another one of the "Duino Elegies," he writes "beauty is the beginning of terror," yet here he's obviously searching for some diastasis, some kind of pasteurization that will remove germs without removing nourishment. Is this the impetus to his invocation of the abstract sublime realm this poem flourishes in? Perhaps...and when he dramatically concludes the poem by asking his beloved to gently, gently perform some daily task and to restrain him, I can't help but think he's saying "Cook and sew bitch while I space out and be awesome!" But then again, these commands may be perceptions in drag, since the poem already shows that the girl and his mother can't help but not restrain him. Yet, the issue is certainly not resolved. The poem, like Donne's "Ecstasy," ends where it begins. None of the moral and metaphysical questions I'm left with serve to diminish the value of the experience of the poem.

In some respects, to turn from Rilke to D.H. Lawrence is to make as extreme a jump as going from Stevens to Brecht. Compared to most Lawrence poems, the "Duino Elegies" seem bulky. I doubt Lawrence would've liked them (but then again Stevens and Williams were friends despite the fact that many of their followers line up into mutually opposing camps). Speaking of his own verse, Lawrence wrote, "Before everything I like sincerity, and a quickening spontaneous emotion. I do not worship music or the 'half-said thing.'" Yet even though this shows that formally Lawrence is more like Brecht, in terms of subject matter, he has affinities with both Stevens and Rilke. Even in Lawrence's most blatant political verse though, there's usually a more personal or erotic element that distinguishes him.

In "STAND UP!" he writes:

Stand up, but not for Jesus!
It's a little late for that.

(1-2)

That could pass for Brecht. It's less plausible that Brecht could write this however:

If you want a revolution, make it for fun

("A Sane Revolution," 1)

Much less this:

If men only fought outwards into the world
Women might be devoted & gentle.
The fight's gotta go in some direction.

("Female Coercion," 1-3)

The issue of sexual politics is something that, of the poets discussed here so far, Lawrence is by far the most adept at. Brecht barely deals with
it. It is certainly not his forte. His fight is directed “outwards towards the world.” Rilke touches on it, but like Stevens, does it with “a shadow of deflection” that Lawrence prefers to avoid. Like Monk, Lawrence prefers it “straight, no chaser.” What’s interesting about the above passage is the idea is so similar to that in Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*, in which she blames problems between men and women for men going off to war. In the face of the Iraq crisis, this is very poignant today. Another reason I consider Lawrence a more *radical* poet than Pound is that Pound, like Brecht, was always off looking for economic causes. This is not to say that Lawrence does not write a lot of poems about money and the class structure, etc. He does, yet perhaps he only does so when he’s with a woman “devoted and gentle.” Lawrence is almost always very frank about his particular feelings at a particular time.

His later poems collected in the volume *Pansies* contains many of the clearest poetic statements. In “To Women, As Far As I’m Concerned” he writes:

The feelings I don’t have I don’t have.
The feelings I don’t have, I won’t say I have.
The feelings you say you have, you don’t have.
The feelings you would like us both to have, we neither of us have.
The feelings people ought to have, they never have.
If people say they’ve got feelings, you may be pretty sure
they haven’t got them.
So if you want either of us to feel anything at all
you’d better abandon all idea of feelings altogether.

(1-8)

The lack of “artifice” here may disturb some, but I think this poem can be distinguished by the following from R.D. Laing’s book *Knots*:

They are not having fun.
I can’t have fun if they don’t.
If I get them to have fun, then I can have fun with them.
Getting them to have fun, is not fun. It is hard work.
I might get fun out of finding out why they’re not.
I’m not supposed to get fun out of working out why
they’re not.
But there is even some fun in pretending to them I’m not
having fun finding out why they’re not.

A little girl comes along and says: let’s have fun.
But having fun is a waste of time, because it doesn’t
help to figure out why they’re not having fun.

(untitled, 1-12)

Laing’s poem is a Cordian knot, a tower of Babel, in which the speaker (who Laing presumably is satirizing) has lost sight of what he wants and is
more concerned with “they.” Lawrence, on the other hand, creates a superior poem because he points to a way out. More like Stevens’ perception, that a poet cannot be obligated to do anything, than Laing’s, Lawrence elsewhere writes:

Let them praise desire who will,
but only fulfillment will do,
real fulfillment, nothing short.
It is our ratification,
our heaven, as a matter of fact.
Immortality, the heaven, is only a projection of this strange
but actual fulfillment
here in the flesh.

(“Manifesto,” Section V, 12-18)

This stance could certainly call into question the already discussed Rilke poem in which the poet tries to convince himself that desire is at least as worthy of praise as fulfillment. Yet at the same time, Rilke’s poem could call Lawrence’s poem into question for “here in the flesh” is perhaps a fiction. Yet Lawrence does also have a mystical side, though perhaps vitalist is a more accurate word. In a poem like “We Are Transmitters” and in a line like “Not I, but the wind that blows through me” he manifests it. There are also affinities with visionaries like William Blake whose “Marriage of Heaven and Hell” is chock-full of such proverbial nuggets as “Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained.” Even a contemporary hard-ass, beer-guzzling figure like Charles Bukowski can at times rise to a Lawrentian kind of wisdom. In his “Wandering in the Cage” (which appeared in PBQ #36) he writes:

people who eat 3 meals a day throughout life
have never really
tasted
food...

when lonely people come around
I can soon understand why
other people leave them
alone

and that which would be a
blessing to
me

is a horror to them...

(46-49, 76-83)
Yet, though there are times when such poems are refreshingly clear and free and true and open, there are other times when man can’t live by meat (meaning) alone. It is times like these when I may reach for a gem-like hermetic poem. Stevens and Rilke are examples of that. So, often, are the French Surrealists. Take the following poem by Aime Cesaire, translated by Michael Benedikt:

Time will surely not be in the least evil anymore then
doors will collapse before the assaults of the waters
orchids will hold out their delicate heads crazed like those
of the tortured
through the latticework gateway where words are sent forth
two by two
the tendrils of vines will send out from the depths
of their restlessness a lucid army of leeches whose embracing will
evoke the irresistible power of perfumes
from every grain of sand a bird will be born
from every innocent bloom a scorpion will come
(everything on earth having been recreated)
the trumpets of venus-flytraps will flourish to announce the hour
of abdication of my thick lips pierced with needles in favor of
the more flexible armor of the bitter herbs of the future
and the gradual formation of naive flesh around the heart of
misery will be general
and far beyond any connection with the bivalvular incrustations
of tapeworms
while the swallows which pile out of my saliva pile up
together with seaweed carried along in the tidal waves
produced by you
the bleeding seething myth of an unannounced moment arriving
so that from every level of the towers of silence vultures
will take off
within their beaks scraps of our former flesh much too uncalm
for our skeletons.

(“Moment of Calm,” 1-17)

Explication of this poem would take too long here, yet its hermeticism is of a different sort than Stevens’ is. This poem is so wild. In fact, to many critics, the zany surface of much French Surrealism, as that of both New York School and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is viewed as sloppiness. Yet, I think Stevens may be a little too harsh when he writes:

The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover. The observation of the unconscious, so far as it can be observed, should reveal things of which we have previously been unconscious, not the familiar things of which we have been conscious plus imagination.

(“Adagia,” 177)
Yet I agree with Stevens more when he writes:

Not all objects are equal. The vice of imagism was that it did not recognize this.

And, again:

The bare image and the image as symbol are the contrast:
the image without meaning and the image as meaning.
When the image is used to suggest something else, it is secondary. Poetry as an imaginative thing consists of more than lies on the surface.

("Adagia," 161)

I take in these latter statements a criticism of Williams’ “Red Wheelbarrow” mode. This is another very complex issue I can’t investigate fully in this essay. Philadelphia poet Jim Cory told me a story once about getting in a cab driven by a man from Martinique. Cory was astonished that the cabbie said everybody knew Cesaire’s poetry (Cesaire was the head of the highly influential Progressive Party there for years), just as the cabbie was astonished that Cory, an American, knew about Cesaire. Cory told me it should be that way here. People should know Williams’ poetry—after all Williams was a populist. While I don’t disagree with Cory, I say why stop with Williams? Why not expose people to more difficult poetry than “Patterson” or “Asphodel: That Greeny Flower.” Cesaire’s poetry is certainly at least as complex as most of Williams’. This I believe relates to Stevens’ defense of elitism. I don’t believe he’s saying, “I don’t want the working class scum to read my poetry.” Stevens did fall out of favor with his dad to marry a girl on the wrong side of the tracks. But that’s appealing ad hominem. But, so are the people in Martinique. Cesaire’s poetry is no doubt popular because he’s popular. I am not saying this is the way it should be. Just as I believe that Stevens means that good poetry is complex poetry. It is said the Romantics are democratic. It takes immense discipline to read them just as it would take immense discipline to climb Mont Blanc, but everybody can do it. This elitism appeals to an elite part of the self. Or, as Shelley wrote:

True Love in this differs from gold and clay,
That to divide is not to take away.

("Epipsychidion," 160-161)

Thus, I believe that all the blather of speaking down to the masses won’t do any good. One must be moved. One must have some faith that the same kind of inspiration that moves a poet will move a reader. One must feel comfortable with what one’s saying and do it for itself. Of course, I don’t think that, in itself, will make you a good poet. Though I do feel so much mediocre verse is written because, as Stein would say, one is trying to serve Mannon and not God. “The Red Wheelbarrow,” for instance, seems too bent on trying to make a point about poetics. There’s nothing wrong with this, but I’d rather spend my time untangling Shakespeare’s knots. Sure, he’s British and official and canonized and all that, but there is
a fruitful difficulty to be found in him. Perhaps he's more popular than Williams because he's more difficult than Williams.

Looking at one line from one of Shakespeare's earlier comedies, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, I find an incredible use of metaphor. One of the characters, Julia, is praising the lover she doesn't yet know has left her for another woman. She says:

His heart as far from fraud as heaven from earth.

(Act II, Scene VII, 78)

Yet how far is heaven from earth? If it's as far as he (Proteus) is from fraud, then it's a lot closer than the intoxicated think it is. Religion is like opium, Marx said. Love is blind (a blind man said). So, because of the kind of metaphor Shakespeare uses here and the context in which the line plays where we, the audience, see the irony of her statement: more than she does, Shakespeare also gets us (well, me at least) thinking about the relation between heaven and earth. This might be the most subtle form of didacticism yet. It's certainly more subtle than (but says essentially the same thing as) Blake's "Thus men forgot that all dieties reside in the human breast" (from "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell").

If we need any more proof that Julia is blind, Shakespeare provides that as well. Lucetta, her waiting-woman (servant) warns her:

I do not seek to quench your love's hot fire
But qualify the fire's extreme rage,
Lest it should burn above the bounds of reason.

(Act II, Scene VII, 21-23)

To which Julia replies:

The more thou damm'st it up, the more it burns.
The current that with gentle murmur glides,
Thou know'st, being stopp'd, impatiently doth rage;
But when his fair course is not hindered,
He makes sweet music with the enamell'd stones,
Giving a gentle kiss to every sedge
He overtaketh in his pilgrimmage,...

(Act II, Scene VII, 24-30)

Julia seems to be taking Lucetta's advice. Yet, if her love isn't burning beyond the bounds of reason, why then would it overtake (rather than just pass by) the sedge it kisses?

So, although these make up some of my personal literary epiphanies, though these are examples of what I'm aware I'm enjoying when I read as of late, I still can't say that literature is only valuable insofar as it conveys knowledge or asserts truths that are general and universal as opposed to particular and historical. Yet I also don't believe you have to "number the streaks of the tulip" (i.e. convey a particular) in order to evoke an emotion. Brecht and Lawrence, for instance, arouse emotions through
argument. I believe that poetry is best appreciated by affective and aesthetic standards rather than by cognitive and didactic standards. You may think you like poetry because it's teaching you something, but you probably are really responding to the tone. I mean, if poetry's use can be achieved by self-help books, then it isn't its use that makes it worthwhile. Yet, this is an open question.

Delmore Schwartz writes in his long poem "Overture":

I knew the parable of trying to see
The truth behind the face, the mind behind
The surface, the radiance within
The radiance, within the shining radiance
And thus I missed matchless significance
So many times! Since, at times,
Appearance is reality and not a mask—

(page 69)

This, perhaps, is what Williams was trying to offer an antidote to. I can't stay mad at him for very long.

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