Painted Bride Quarterly

Double Issue 53/54
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Cover photograph: Ulvis Alberts
*Cricot 2/(Poland) The Dead Class* (1984)
Story of the Beggars

We were always begging:
spit polished alms bowls and cheap suits going door to door,
magazine subscriptions and Encyclopedia Brittanica replaced
with our own hollow hearts.
Being taken up on this offer was the last thing we wanted:
we were the lumpen, the dispossessed of feeling
and we had a certain secret satisfaction that it was our only
saving grace.

Maybe I should say it plainer:
We were pilgrims searching for the end of an illusion,
double amputees looking for someone to give us a soccer ball.
We thought at last, at last,
we will hold the ball on our laps and even hopelessly crippled
we will learn its ridged, supple surface.
We will burn for it
and we will act the soft flesh cupboard, always anticipatory,
yearning
for the whole players to come take from us,
relieve us of the burden of
everything we desire.
Adultery

There is a surplus of kindness.
In a town flooded behind the dam,
dying elms and swing-sets
sit placid and overwhelmed by water.

We are that way about consequences.
Deception is no more our intent than
the airport is the traveller's destination.
No one visits for terminals, kiosks,
or smoking areas for the petty larcenous,
rightly afraid at take-off or landing.
Living is suspended there, or exposed
as a selection of many minute increments.

We are replaying the stasis of childhood,
how it involves being taken places,
endless driving for reasons other than personal volition,
to the supermarket, but with the goal of pushing the cart.
We were unhappy in just the same way then,
with none of the imagined stolidity of trees,
maybe caring for the axe, maybe not.
Outline for a Romantic Narrative

My pompadour got smushed
in an ill-advised pillow fight

the night before the George
Chakiris look-alike contest.

Needless to say
I was devastated

but you,
with the know-how and selflessness

of a rodeo clown came and wet-
combed it. The horse of my hair

reared and stood an impossible moment
only (and this is what made it perfect)

a single strand fell athwart my forehead,
prompting the panel of judges to proclaim,

"Rejoice,
ye Kings of the Sun:

Chakiris's Bernardo lives!"
I won first prize.

I looked for you afterwards.
One of the chorus girls said she saw

you pack a satchel with your silver combs
and talcum powder and leave

by the backstage door.
I ran outside.
The alley was empty
ext except for a paparazzo who caught me

looking very un-Chakirislike
in my suit of lights that was flickering out

and my hair that stood still,
stood apart.

Later I learned the paparazzo was moved
to destroy the negative

and dedicate himself thenceforth exclusively
to portraiture

—gingerbread men a specialty—,
of whom he would write in his memoirs,

“Gingerbread men.
Pungent

crunchy
and inside themselves so open,

their arms and legs are spread in praise
even before that which consumes them.”
My Wife

My wife met me at the door dressed only in an apron, underwear, slacks and shirt, on top of which she wore her beekeeper’s outfit. Aroused almost beyond recognition, I broke the vow of silence we’d taken simultaneously with our wedding vows.

“This,” I said, “betokens some change in so distant a star that even the most imaginative, meticulous astronomer wouldn’t really care, would say it’s just too far, too rare a phenomenon to matter to us who are the children of the past, parents of the future, and runaway teenagers of the here and now.”

Then Ernesto, our next-door neighbor, came plunging through the hedge in full birdwatching gear. “With these binoculars,” he said, “I can see the future! I look through them at a bird, but the bird’s not there, only it will be, tomorrow.” “It is the bird of hope,” my wife said, and took us inside and served us honey and milk. She is a licensed beekeeper.
*Painted Bride Quarterly* is pleased to announce the winners of its First Annual Fiction Contest:

**First Place:** James G. Wolfensberger II
"Toss the Jar Skyward"

**Second Place:** Richard Krause
"Toothpaste"
Toss the Jar Skyward

Just a few days ago I might have sworn that this has been the first spring I’ve ever realized the trees and flowers blooming. Then yesterday my mother brought over several branches of fresh lilac, and my wife Virginia obligingly arranged them in a glass pitcher. Do you know the scent of lilac? If you were ever a boy, it’s the smell of playing chase on the lawn, or catching bees in a jar; it’s on the breeze cutting through the thickets that border your yard, that fragrant breeze cooling your skin wherever you sweat and snapping the sheets on your mother’s clothesline. All this is lilac, as I now recall.

Virginia and I are each twenty-four. With my face clean-shaven and her beside me in a trim skirt, holding my hand, you might think we were only twenty. I don’t remember being twenty and this seems silly, the source of nothing. When did I forget twenty? At twenty-one? I remember dating. I remember quitting college more than once. Sometimes I cannot even recall where Virginia and I went on vacation last year, or else I remember where but none of the details. Yet suddenly I seem to know the thrill of catching a bee in a jar. That thrill today seems hung in waning sunbeams, or growing tangled among the dandelions that drive my neighbor so crazy, or lingering in the scent of a pickle jar that has just been rinsed. Still smells like dill and vinegar. Toss the jar skyward, and do the bees suffer? I mean, did they? Honestly, I never knew.

Now Virginia, she becomes hysterical at the sight of insects, and she’s an expert at striking with anything flat and handy. Has she always been this way, I wonder?

“Ever since I was a little girl,” she says. “I’ve always been scared to death of spiders and bugs and, oh my god, cockroaches. But bees aren’t just creepy, they’re downright dangerous. I remember getting stung on Easter once. I think I was nine or ten and it made me sick for more than a day. I don’t care if the doctor says I’m not allergic. It made me sick, I remember.”
Does she remember lilacs?
"They smell like Victoria’s Secret," Virginia says.
Can’t she do better than that?
"Okay," she says, "they smell like rain after church."
I suspect she’s making that up, but I don’t bother to say so.

Oh, what a night we had last night. On top of it all we came home and found the goldfish dead. We had left at about seven to meet the Murchisons for dinner. On the way to the restaurant Virginia told me that her mother wasn’t coming to visit for another few weeks, maybe a month, and I was just a wee bit too pleased by the news, which wasn’t the problem at all: the problem was that I somehow let my satisfaction show. The mood was set.

Virginia works with Crystal Murchison and they call themselves best friends. If I merely tolerate Crystal, then I must actually hate her husband, who is two years older than me and has been going to school full time for the past two years. He talks incessantly about the academic forum — it’s never just plain old school with him, just like it’s never Greg, always Gregory. Crystal must earn about the same as Virginia, so I don’t know how the Murchisons afford everything. Their bill last night had to be close to a hundred dollars, because they each had the prime rib and Greg insisted on buying two carafes of wine. I noticed they paid with a credit card, and Virginia says they live beyond their means, but hell, don’t we, too? The thing is I never ask for a carafe. I say “bottle.”

What a night. In the restaurant Virginia couldn’t shake the quarrel about her mother, and we got the way we get toward each other sometimes, disguising our belligerence as whimsical kidding, our insults as sugary baby talk. She had the Murchisons on her side all night. One thing can be said for those two, Crystal and Gregory: they might be nauseating but they sure aren’t stupid. They knew what was going on and they loved it.
When Virginia and I came home we walked into the living-
room, turned on the light, and she saw the fish. “Poor Buster,”
she kept saying. “Poor Buster.”

“Did you see him swimming before we left?” I asked.

“Well, I didn’t see him floating like this,” Virginia said. She
had already gotten the net and a fistful of paper towels. She
kicked her shoes toward the wall.

I went into the bedroom and took off my shoes and belt.
I put my watch on the dresser, then I dropped my wedding band
into my sock drawer. I heard the toilet flush. I went into the
bathroom and found Virginia standing over the toilet, staring
into it with the little green net in her hand.

“That’s it?” I said. “You flushed him?”

“You didn’t think I’d let him rot in the garbage, did you?”

“He’s going to rot in the septic tank.”

“At least he’s in water like any normal fish that dies,” Virginia
said softly. She fights this way if we’re not putting on a show
for the Murchisons or whomever else.

“Water?” I said. “Sewage water, maybe.” I always do my part,
too.

She washed her hands without speaking again. I returned
to the living-room. I intended to empty the water from the
fishbowl and wash the rocks, thinking that I could get up early
the next day and go buy her a new fish to hopefully salvage
some of the weekend.

“Dale, what are you doing?” Virginia said. She was watching
me from the doorway.

“What do you think?” I said. “I’m taking the bowl to the
kitchen to clean it.”

“Now?”

I just looked at her, trying to suggest by my expression that
she was crazy and had spoiled something before it had a chance
to get good.

“That’s the way you are,” she said. “You can’t wait to wash
that bowl and put it away, can you?”

“You flushed the fish in two seconds flat!”
“Why can’t you let the bowl alone tonight?”
“I’m just going to clean it, Virginia.”
“Clean it then,” she said. “Put it away if you want. I don’t care.” She went into the bathroom again and shut the door. I heard her brushing her teeth. I turned out the living-room light, reclined on the sofa, and listened to the sounds my wife made, the jingling of her belt buckle, the rustling of her clothes, the smack of the hamper lid. Shortly, the whole house became dark and silent, and I lay awake just listening.

I woke on the sofa at almost ten this morning, hot and uncomfortable in my clothes. I rose and walked across the room to where the fishbowl stood. Beside it were the lilacs; between them, a note. The note said that Virginia had gone for groceries. I hovered there a moment and breathed the lilacs, then I noticed that the fishbowl had been cleaned. I touched the flowers and when some petals fell I gathered all the stems from the pitcher and carried them dripping to the wastebasket.

I showered, shaved, dressed for a warm, lazy day. I rummaged in my sock drawer, but it wasn’t my wedding band I found. I took out a gold link bracelet and fastened it to my wrist. I ate cereal at the kitchen sink and then went outside on the front porch, expecting to get the mail and read it, but the mail hadn’t come yet, so I sat on the steps to wait.

My neighbor was tossing fertilizer about his front yard, pulling it by hand from a fifty-pound bag he held under his arm, and his two daughters were following behind him. I clearly heard “please please” out of the oldest girl, then her father looked over at me, grinning and shaking his head as if he and I shared the same sort of vexing burdens in life, or I should at least understand. I smiled and waved.

“Go bother Dale,” I heard him say to his daughters. “Hey, Dale,” he called to me. “You want to buy a couple of knucklehead daughters, real cheap?”
What do you say to a stupid thing like that? I tried to laugh heartily. The youngest girl, Abby, spun on her heel and darted over to see me.

“What are you doing?” she said, breathing hard.

“Just sitting.”

“Me, too.” She dropped onto the grass. “Should Theresa be allowed to go to the mall with a boy who already drives a fancy car, do you think?”

“I take it your father says no,” I said.

“He says ask Mom, and Mom says ask him, and it just goes back and forth. They think it’s funny. I’m not gonna run and go tell if you say it’s okay. I know about that stuff, about other people not butting in. I’m just asking what you think.”

“I don’t know.”

“But Theresa’s almost as old as my Mom was when she got married,” Abby said. “She’s almost sixteen and already has her learner’s permit and everything. Dad won’t even teach her to drive or anything.”

“Shut up, Abby,” Theresa said. She had walked up quietly behind her little sister, stopping once on my lawn to pluck a buttercup or dandelion, which she immediately shredded and dusted from her hands. I saw her father disappear around the side of his house, shaking the last bit of fertilizer from his bag and apparently heading to get another.

“I’m just asking Dale what he thinks,” Abby told her sister.

Theresa frowned at Abby then to me sighed, “Hi.” She sat down beside me, crossed her bare legs, and buried her chin in her hands. She smelled like fresh make-up and was dressed to go the mall, I knew.

“Going somewhere?” I said.

“Not as long as I’m his daughter I’m not. You want to buy a daughter, cheap?”

“Two,” Abby said, “two!”

“Cheap?” I said. “Do either of you wash cars?”

Abby said, “I’ll wash your car. Adopt me and see if I won’t.”

Theresa looped her arms beneath her legs and looked at her
feet, or her sandals: I looked at her feet. Her toenails were painted an opaque white, and her skin was already beginning to tan.

“Don’t you know that the sun is bad for you?” I said.

“I’m too young to worry about that. I’m not old like you, Dale.” “Old?”

“Yeah, you’re an old man.”

“Me?”

“Just like my father,” Theresa said with a trace of a smile. Abby giggled.

I muttered to myself, “Huh, so she says I’m old,” just to make them laugh. Abby was tumbling, getting grass stains all over her knees, and I could imagine her mother’s reaction.

“Hey, nice bracelet,” Theresa said and touched my wrist.

“Like it?”

“Is it gold?”

“Sure.”

“Is it old?” Theresa said. Abby forced herself to giggle again.

“Yeah, ancient,” I said. “A priceless antique. Impressed?”

“Very nice, but a little feminine,” Theresa said.

“What’s that mean?” Abby said. “What’s feminine mean? Like a girl?” She stood up, came close to see better, and said quite seriously, “Oh, yeah, it does look feminine.”

“Shut up, Abby,” Theresa said.

“You said it first, Terry. You shut up.”

“The name is Theresa.”

“Then the name is Abigail.”

Theresa lifted the links of my bracelet away from my wrist with her fingernail, which was also shaped and painted perfectly, then she suddenly said, “I’ve got to go talk to Mom some more. David’s picking me up at three.”

“You already have a date without permission?” I said.

“I’ll get permission.” She stood up and looked down at me.

“Let me wear that bracelet.”

“Don’t be a bum, Theresa,” Abby said. “You’re always bumming stuff.”

Theresa was still looking down at me. “I’ll give it right back
as soon as you want it. Come on, Dale, I won’t lose it or anything.”

“Here.” I gave it to her.

“You’re crazy,” Abby said. “You can kiss that good-bye, Dale. Mom once gave her an expensive necklace and she lost it. You’re crazy, really.”

Theresa bent at the waist and fastened my bracelet around her ankle. “Shut up, Abby,” she said. “I still have that necklace.”

“No you don’t.”

“Hey,” I said, “don’t tell your father that I gave you that. He’ll wonder about me.”

“Don’t worry,” Theresa said, starting home. “You’re the last person he’d suspect.”

Abby put her hands on her hips. She came so close again that her nose almost touched mine, and she said in a sassy tone, “You’re the last person he’d suspect, because you’re the craziest person that ever moved into this neighborhood, I bet.”

Virginia came home at about six with one bag of groceries and two bags of new clothes. For a long time I stayed on the sofa, watching television and pretending not to notice her, but I finally had to say something. It was in the kitchen.

“Why’d you make such a big deal out of that fishbowl if you were going to wash it yourself anyway?”

She was standing at the window with her back to me. The bag of groceries still sat on the countertop.

“Why’d you make such a big deal?” I demanded.

She turned and looked ready to cry. “Listen to you,” she said, “always harping on the little meaningless things. So what? So what if I cleaned the bowl?”

“But why—?”

“So what if I cleaned the bowl!” she cried.

My anger left me then. I felt only guilty and foolish, and I took her in my arms. She shook from sobbing. I held her tight,
but she wouldn’t hold me. She kept her arms folded and pinned against herself.

“What is it?” I said. “Sweetheart, what’s got you so upset?” She just cried and I could only hold her. “What, sweetheart, what?”

“Don’t you ever think?” she finally managed to say. “Don’t you ever think?”

“I’m sorry about last night, Virginia.”

“Don’t you ever think about people dying?” she went on. “My mother could die tomorrow. You never know. Or either one of us. Or your own mother. Anybody could. Don’t you ever think about that?”

“Are you upset because you really think that I don’t want your mother to visit?” I said. “That’s not true, Virginia. It isn’t true at all.”

“Just like the fish. Does that sound silly to you? Just like the fish. People die. It happens everyday.”

“Everything will be okay.” I said. “You’ll see your mother soon.”

“You,” she blurted in another fit of tears. “Your mother brings you flowers and what do you do?” Virginia tore herself from my arms. “You throw them away the next day!”

She hurried to the bathroom. When I knocked on the door she would only say, “I’m fine. I’m fine, now. Really, I’m fine.”

I went outside and sat on the steps again. I felt relieved to see Theresa come home. An immaculate Mercedes stopped in the middle of the road and she got out without looking back at the driver. I waved and she ignored me.


She looked at me and said, “I’ve got to go in.”

“Just come here a second.”

She walked over and melted into a listless pose, folding her arms once but then letting them fall. “What is it?” she said.
“I need my bracelet back now.”
“Already?”
“Afraid so.”
“I don’t have it with me.”
“Could you get it for me?”
“Maybe tomorrow. It’s not in the house.”
“Theresa, did you leave it in your boyfriend’s car? You didn’t give it to him, did you?”
“That pig?” she said, clasping her hands behind her head.
“Did you, Theresa? Theresa, did you?”
She pivoted at the waist, left then right, looking each way but not at me.
“Theresa, did you give my bracelet to some boy?”
“No, I said.” She turned away to leave. “You’ll get it back. I’ve got to go in now.”
I stood up and when she kept walking I reached for her hand. Her fingers slipped from mine and I seized her wrist. “Tell me if you gave my bracelet to that boy. You actually gave my bracelet away, didn’t you?”
“Let go,” she said, pulling.
“Where’s my damn bracelet, girl?”
“Let go!” She snatched her arm away and put distance between us. “I told you, you’ll get it back. Are you crazy, yanking on my arm like that?”
“I’m sorry,” I said.
“Don’t ever grab me like that. Are you nuts?”
“I’m sorry. Look, I’m sorry. Listen. Virginia gave me that bracelet a long time ago and I’ve got to have it back. I know you’ll return it. Just get it tomorrow, okay? I’m really sorry I grabbed you.”
“All right,” she said, still with an uneasy expression and backing away. “I have to go in now, Dale.”
Theresa left me standing on my front lawn. A merciful breeze cooled the back of my neck, and I took my seat on the porch step to watch the sun fall westward, trailing an orange and purple sky that would soon fade. All I’ve been able to think is that the fishbowl is empty and my wife has been crying for her mother;
now dusk has settled on one of the final days of spring, and until tomorrow the sun is on the other side of the world. If you were ever a boy, at times like these you would catch fireflies barehanded and marvel at the way they glowed and moved so gently over your skin. Then always, always some fierce instinct made you put them in jars.
Toothpaste

What is it that made him twist and press the toothpaste to get the last white ooze out of the metal container? Always at the end he had a crisis of plenty, as if his efforts then most earnestly eschewed the beckoning abundance around him and concentrated on the remainder of the toothpaste. Waste nothing, that was his motto, for when anything was wasted it hung on him, attached in its odor, its superfluity, as if portions of himself had darkened with the leaf of lettuce, browned with the celery gone bad, with the spotted fruit. So he had always kept on top of perishables, and the rest too. The soap she wanted to throw away, for she said she didn't like so many small cakes of dirty soap, he balked at that too. No, it can still clean; there is no reason not to use it, he said. He even recommended she go back one step in the process of making it and boil down the pieces in an old pan, then allow them to reharden. He thought that would work. But she paid him no mind, only walked away disgruntled.

Stingy, niggardly, parsimonious, were just some of the words she used to describe him. Yes, skinflint, he'd joke back, giving the toothpaste another firm squeeze. She always marveled at the ingenuity he used to get the last of the contents out of anything. The pencils he rolled the toothpaste up in, all the hammering and pressing on the bathroom floor, the differing angles he'd fold the container, as if it were a flag one time when he folded it in near triangles.

The toothpaste was a symbol, they both knew that, but what exactly of, neither could tell, beyond of course his hoarding, and the measured expenditure of everything. He considered her profligate, and perhaps by his standards she was. But there was a wasteful abandon about her that had early on attracted him. He saw in her the raw materials, something to shape, that broadened his nostrils, that dilated them like something in the wind that catches an animal's attention, something analogous to food, or a preoccupation so intense as to make one forgo meals altogether. He
never came out and told her straightaway how little toothpaste to use, for he didn’t like her epithets any more than the humorous pleasure she sometimes took in using them. In fact, he tried to influence her by example, by the tiny daubs of toothpaste he himself placed on the bristles ever so gently. And soft bristles so as not to impale the paste and break the contour of its shortened cylinder. Hard, uneven bristles broke the white cylinder, or at least allowed it to sink out of sight that way you didn’t know how much toothpaste you were wasting, he said. But just short, quick daubs on the softest bristles he showed her would do the job. And out of “Tom’s” toothpaste from Maine with nothing artificial, only cinnamon and seaweed and spearmint, only healthy ingredients to conjure up the Middle East, the Orient, and the herbalists in the heart of Europe where his ancestors came from. All of that went into the darkness of his mouth as magically as a floating Persian rug. He imagined she was transformed just looking at him. That overnight, or after one or two mornings worth of observation, she would become someone like himself who was aware of the toothpaste they were using, who was fastidious about waste, who didn’t spit out whole gobs of blue, like the ordinary brands chock-full of chemicals.

He had so much to teach her about the conservation of things that he didn’t know where to begin, about saving and using, about not wasting, that his own preoccupation with toothpaste became symbolic of something larger. Of their amorous life, of how he was vessel, a container she too squeezed when she held him by the hips, just like the tube of toothpaste. And rarely did she think about the waste, despite the fact that they were not ready for children, still he wanted her to be mindful that nothing was inexhaustible. That things and substances may look like they can be replaced, but prudence was called for. That brushing was essential he never argued, but they must linger over it if they were to do the paste justice, the whiteness of their teeth justice, the brightness of their smile justice. For it was more than simple brushing, it was the outlook they both had on life, the first impressions that constituted the basis of their interaction with people and each other. So it shouldn’t be wasted, he told her as he rolled the end of the
tube up, another fold each day. Finally when it was a heavy piece of metal he’d dig and gouge, press and pull at the top until like an accordion, or like the armor of a knight he imagined he was wearing on his own shoulders, the tube would be empty. A few perverse times she’d come along and get more out of it just to prove to him her own adequacy. But mostly she would just sigh and get out a new tube that he would on principle never touch, and though she felt they were on the brink of argument they never did argue, and she’d find herself adopting his conservative attitude toward the twisted metal that sometimes would hardly pass as even the remnant of a toothpaste tube. Then finally one morning, little different than those mornings when her own menstruation had started—something he was always jealous of—her good moods as much as the physical changes that he couldn’t participate in—one morning as if by magic the old tube would disappear and he’d have started the new tube and things would go well for another two of three months. Sometimes she suspected that he kept all the old tubes stashed away, that he wanted one day to present them to the Tom laboratories (as they were called) to indicate that not only was he a faithful customer, but perhaps he had a right to some stock in the company. But she never found any cache of Tom’s toothpaste, or any other evidence that he hoarded them. As he flashed a particularly bright smile on those mornings when a new tube was opened.

Finally one time as they were nearing the end of a tube, perhaps from a certain tension that always arose at such periods, —not unlike her own monthly changes—when he had been stripping the tube for days, and their communication was at a low point, though she still knew intuitively just how much spaghetti to put on his plate, and how hard it was to be, or the integrity of the rice, she knew exactly how he liked it, and what he had to have a clean spoon or fork for, and what knife he liked best, and when he could use his old plate and didn’t require a clean one, she knew all these things—and the tube of toothpaste too she thought she knew about that, until this one morning she went in and the bottom was cut with a scissors to press out the last bit of paste—the top had already
been dug into with the bristles of both their brushes and the tapering rubber tip of his, and the plastic cap hung open, as if it too was exhausted by all this cleaning. Neither bothered to close the cap, for pressure on the top made some of the contents leak out of the sides. Maybe it was frustration, she thought, over something incomunicado between them that had him twist the body of the tube around in three of four swirls and suddenly make a base with a semicircular shirt for the bottom. Maybe it was to get even more toothpaste out at first, but maybe, she speculated, it was for a figure, an effigy, that he found by surprise when midway through the twist it presented itself as the waist of a person, a representation, a kind of symbolic offspring. For the base naturally supported the twisted waist and suggested the contour of a body in agony, a body tormented by a problem greater than getting the last remnants of toothpaste out of the tube. It suggested too a mind frustrated by the whole cycle of using up toothpaste, sugar, butter, coffee, anything. The cycle of using it up, buying it and then what? There are and always will be giant companies like Nabisco Shredded Wheat, no matter how many bowls are eaten, or how many tubes of toothpaste used, and so many mornings for brushing—brushing the enamel away as he had down at the gumline that dentists had warned him, but how was he going to relieve the tension of childhood scoldings about not brushing his teeth, and how was he to keep his mind from wandering during the peripatetic brushings, for even the softest bristles abrade the enamel if you don’t pay attention. But he had heard too that some cavities, some curious discolorations, whole pockets of decay could be brushed away, as he mechanically went back and forth like the arm of some robot working a lathe in the anonymity of a large factory; maybe that is what he revolted against and so twisted the tube and found by accident the cavernous arc or curve at the bottom formed a base so sturdy that he could stand the figure, maybe then he got the idea to create the little man, and that is when the attached plastic became a cap. He looked in amazement that he had produced this figure out of his psyche, though his fingers knew intimately what they were doing. He immediately got tissue paper and tore up a long strip to make clothing,
a dresslike garment—he was always upset with the confining nature of pants anyway, how they never let a man's anatomy breathe. How the pant leg hugged his limbs uncomfortably. No pants for Tom, he said, and took the tissue and twisted it around the figure. He knotted the tissue paper and found he had two exceedingly long arms which he rolled up to make more shapely limbs. Then he raised one arm to touch the lid. But the soft tissue paper wouldn't stay so he wet it like papier mache and with a mittenlike grip it caught the hat. Then he went into the living room and got a scissors and cut a tiny piece of dried flowers, red with little star clusters. He placed the "bouquet" in the other arm and wrapped the hand around the stem and added water so it held the flowers, and unconsciously too so the flowers would last longer. The head had just a hole, so he took a wad of tissue paper and made it into a flat Indian head triangle, twisted the base and stuck it in the neck of the toothpaste. Then he went to his desk, got his fountain pen and pressed on the slightly wet tissue that he had moistened and shaped into a head, pressed two tiny eyes that expanded large and looking. Any two spots he discovered will make a face and compel people to view it.

He then stood back and observed his little man with the twisted waist, almost like a maiko dancer from Kyoto, or a dapper figure with his hat gentlemanly in one hand and a bouquet of red flowers in the crooked arm of the other, as if he were permanently about to take off his hat and present the flowers. Surely she would get the message. Through all this preoccupation with conservation, with recycling, was a genuine need to be a gentleman, to after all these years living together still win her over, to throw his preoccupation with having no waste at her feet with the innocence of a bow and the profusion of a bouquet of freshly cut flowers. She'd recognize deeper impulses than just wantage and excess, than even sexual desire that gathered and at night expended itself. She'd recognize his gesture as chivalrous and gentlemanly. This effigy of him bearing flowers and tipping his hat. And she was surprised, and called him Michelangelo; he took it as a compliment, not the half joke she probably intended.
And as the days passed—as they were already on the new tube—the little man in the bathroom stayed there and dried, was knocked over by accident a few times but was picked up, and his paper arms were remoistened, and the flowers were reattached to his little hand, stained red, and his elbow was recrooked, and his hat was pressed with a firmer grip one time after the little man had fallen all the way to the floor. The paper head over time yellowed and created a curious discoloration around the eyes, where indigo circles started to appear like bruises, or sleeplessness, and finally the arms dragged limply, and the bouquet lost two of its three flowers.

One morning he untied the old dress of paper clothing and two arms and tied another fresh strip of tissue and wet it, placed a new cutting of flowers in the figure's hand, and pressed the hand to the hat again, but the arms were too long, as if the tissue paper or his own will didn't have the strength to continue this charade of feelings that had passed into the little man. In fact lately she marvels less at his handiwork, and doesn't even call him Michelangelo any longer. It only remains for him to realize he hasn't the strength to tell her that his feelings too have changed, that their crispness that started with opening each tube of toothpaste with so much hope is now little different than the soggiest tissue paper arm, with the bouquet of flowers trailing behind, no longer having the strength to be lifted again and given.
The Cab Delivers Fox and Clown to Corporate Headquarters

Man’s manling’s manling, marmalade, Clown mourns, “Corpse in a corporate morgue, I limp like a flagellant begging for bread! Autopsy flayed alive, I’m”—and the lobby’s grade-A obsidian wallworks blunt him to tears. Shunt, whir, flash by: a great mobile made of circus wheels, ropes.

At the sheer abstraction, the mural, Bull and Woman Making a Monster’s Day of Birth, a splatter of blood and mere housepaint, Clown ooos, “It’s beautiful.” Fox teehees, knows not how she’ll slay.
In the Elevator, Clown and Fox Rise

"The whirligig
of time tornadoes away my
cap and bells, hurls me, litter by
the waysides where I bebop a jig
to woo this twig-
ripe, this girl, wind-friend, thigh
to Aphrodite for whom I'll try
to win work," he thinks.

She thinks, "Big-
wig or not, jobbed or not, bucks to
burn or bust to bum, my man will
romance me in a dark where no
light desecrate how we'll unglue
our masks, touch away the chill
and marry. Hymn. My fool, my beau."
In the Top Office, Fox Intuits Clown’s Disaster

A silver quaver, autumn leaf
along in her true knowing, Fox
doubts not he’ll fall, a broken box
of toys, spilt—their love a too brief
cicada wing touch, shriek
in August air. Shattered, she mocks
him with grins—tear smeared, she rocks
back, staggered by her belief
he’ll plummet

while he struts a butt
of matador pomp in the gob
of fluorescence! He’s burned to cry
“Bull” by her “Money dazzles but
don’t turkey-gawk at the chick job
Boss strews like feed at you! Flee! Fly!”
Towels

I remember first
that it began with my mother;
how after washing her hair
she’d turban a towel around her head.

How this ritual seemed to emphasize
her high cheeks and heavy eyebrows,
while the thick Turkish cotton
would neither budge nor unfold

but instead coil majestically
into a tapered meringued pile
and all that was missing, I joked,
were fruits.

This continued with my wife,
and then on to our daughter:
through stripes and solids,
the short-lived short-haired

babushka period, even, I imagine,
through our divorce.
Certainly it became
a fine art of cloth and tuck,

of balance between weave and walk.
And I’m remembering this
only because once, drunk, I tore
the towel from around her head,

as if it were a crown or clue,
and how sad and disappointed
she then looked at me, rewrapping
what her father thought he uncovered.
Barrows

There is a terrible vague din, a generalized thing, part of the time
There are certain hours of the day
When you are tautologically at one with this
Sweet wilting
Whiskeyhoisting man, shifting viscera
Away from him, & just as
Viscerally coming as near as you can,
Blurring his margins, allowing him to, on
Hisflagged knees; this is similar
If not identical
This is a scene you have been cast in
Before, parricide, slow motion
Wreckage, the dissolution
Of marrow too tremulous
To live, the Greek sin
Of arrogance recommitted by you
Who have no clear idea of who
He is at any time—
This highdomed chameleon
You have just these glimmerings, his image, the pause
The mind decrees between uncertainties
To get its breath
Champ

I do try to pray
Sometimes from the bed I look up & see
You marauding, still drunk enough through the high banana
   morning
To be unsteady navigating alien avenidas

You so want out from, along
Which you’ve jettisoned one by one almost all the titles
You ever had attained to — in my imagination
Or maybe by attrition you make it to the final

Office building balding blinding platinum
Morning peering here & where blinking jetglassed for some
Gone integument, the shining link
Which ought to still be me, there, cheering you on —
When I Saw Effie’s Mother

15 years after she gave me her bed in the dining room, stayed up all night making pizza, talking on the phone, smaller, grey as a statue, I lugged behind, placed to wait quietly, shuffled to restaurants after midnight, a wizened doll over 90 who’d chattered and laughed all night with friends mostly dead. She stopped speaking any English Effie says, with a shrug at her wrinkled baby, just wants to die. I can’t leave her alone unless I give her a sleeping pill. I think of my mother, even in her last months wanting to rub my back,
bring me a blanket
and how Effie
had never cooked,
not even made
tea and I ask her,
when she says she
is afraid to let
her mother near
the stove, about
food. We'd scooped
up the left over
dip and vegetables
for her mother's
lunch, the brownies
and Effie says
"you just do."
Then the i.v.
swirls back, the
rubber tubing,
needles and I
promise myself to
look for cards in
Greek, something
she can still
have that's for
her, is hers
still. Or, maybe
it's for Effie.
Or for me
Photographs of Mothers and Daughters

usually, the mother
is in the background,

the daughter in
front of her, a
mask of what she
could be or was
and isn’t, It’s as if
there’s something, a

hole she’s wild
to camouflage.
The daughter nests

against the mother,
some Daphne wild
to sew herself

back to where she
started or wriggles
from fingers that

hold her, more and
more lightly,
as if she’s not

sure she's real
Long Blue

Long blue, this is a long blue day, there across the water, at the end of the jetty, a crane hoists rocks white against the far blue sky, swings them around as if they were no more than papier-maché and perhaps they are, perhaps it is all engineered to deceive, perhaps the lake does not extend for miles but ends just beyond the pine-covered promontory, perhaps the sailboats waft to that farthest strip of land and then are dismantled the moment they disappear from sight. It is all a great design, designed to convince, cajole, but not impervious to the suspicious mind. A man and woman riding to the end of the jetty on too-small rental bicycles, silhouetted against the sinking sun dissolving into Lake Huron, a small slip and they would ride off into a moment of air and then the deep sinking down into the muddy waters of the bay. Now they are strolling through the Zona Rosa, no, through Coyoacan, the narrow streets, white walls, flowers, the way we would have lived yes and so he said, like the painter Frida Kahlo, deep wide life of sun colors, blood and burgeoning under voluminous white cotton dresses, womb-shaped pools, gardens with birds, cafe con leche, a table in the garden where you can write. Now they are sitting at the rickety white table over the passage written this morning in the bird light, penned amidst the gold sun glints of monstrous copper pans suspended over the blue tiles of the open-air kitchen, her hair blonde cropped, smooth dark shoulders bent over the manuscript, at least he could have found a painter, or better yet someone not of the artistic temperament, someone to remind him by negation, someone to make him feel an absence. Around the corner, not far away at all, where Trotsky came to a final resting place, spent his days writing against Stalin, then in a single long moment—a hatchet? was it true that his blood still remained on the wall?—the dream of permanent revolution rasped and bubbled to a close in a severed chord, a cleaved throat. A great design, designed to convince, cajole, but not impervious.... Because the murder
was never solved; somewhere someone knows, eats breakfast knowing. The same with that woman—why was it he liked to talk about her, tell her story over and over? An American woman, an American professor, found dead on the side of the road near a Mexican village, face smashed in. But that wasn’t his favorite part no he liked best to tell about how la profesora loved to screw Mexican guys, everyone, he would say, she wanted to screw everyone: waiters, hotel managers, policemen. Then someone put an end to her trysts, but with a woman like that.... No one ever apprehended. Faceless woman in a ditch under one-hundred-degree sun, somewhere someone knows, this very moment. What will come next.

"Don’t spit in the sand," says the boy to his little brother. "Why not?" asks the brother.

"Because you’re not allowed to, that’s why."

A sea gull, dragging one limp wing.

"Catch it, let’s catch it," says the little boy.

They run on skinny legs, it runs, falls to one side in the sand, anchored by its broken wing. The boys lose interest, the gulls gather their forces, form a circle around the fallen one, waiting, stalking the prey, one of their own. Wind across the sand, a gull swoops in, pecks at the neck of the fallen one, draws blood.

"Maybe we should get going?" he says.

Not just yet. Let’s stay a little longer. I like it here. It’s not often we’ll be able to lie in the sun and do nothing.

"I’d like to go back to the hotel and take a shower. Besides, I think I’m sunburned now." He presses two fingers against his upper arm and lifts them quickly. "See? White spots! I’m definitely getting sunburned."

Just a little longer let’s stay.

"But I guess we can stay a few more minutes. It is nice to just lie and do nothing for a change. And I know how much you like the beach." He strokes her red hair, combing it down to the small of her back with his fingers. Then he turns onto
his stomach and rests his head on his arms.

Yes the beach. But not as the grottoes of Chilpancingo, diving into underground pools, shimmying belly-down in sucking mud to the end of a dead-end passage just large enough to take one body, to hold at its farthest point a white crystal shining in flash light, otherwise only dark facets deep in the earth unable to shine alone, and too, urine stench permeating the passage, how could anyone have peed there they must have done it lying down and then only because there was no other choice that could be made or did they enjoy it? agreeing with this when he emerged from the passage then lips against muddy lips and under together through a murky pool, surfacing in forest of stalactites peopled with bats, cockroaches the size of a woman’s fist, not quite the size of his, look, he said, it is indecent, the nipples showing through, which one was it, the white blouse with flower embroidery, then him touching, don’t worry, the group has gone ahead. The group has gone ahead. He liked to say things like that. Does he say things like that to her? Let’s hang back here and let the group go ahead. Then him inside, us praying playing to an audience of furry winged beasts and it is no surprise then that there was an outgrowth for that was fertile ground, even it seems we did it twice maybe more before finding the group several caverns away somewhere around the solar plexus or could it have been the region of the heart.

“Find the fucking shovel and get into the car,” says the father to the older son.

“No Daddy, you don’t understand. I hid it for a reason.”

“You have thirty seconds to find that shovel. I’m counting, starting now. One two three four five....”

“Daddy, I promise I can’t remember exactly where it is,” the boy whines.

“You damn well better remember. That shovel belongs to your brother.”

The brother stands next to the father. His kneecaps tremble,
he pulls a blue beach towel tight around his shoulders. His teeth chatter.

"It doesn't matter, Daddy," he says. "I don't need the shovel."

"What do you mean you don't need it? We paid good money for that shovel. There's nothing wrong with it. That's it!" he shouts to his other son. "Time's up!"

The boy finds the shovel. He pulls it from the sand. Brings it to his father. The handle is broken.

The father turns to the brother. "Is this how it was? Is this the way your shovel was?"

The brother nods. His lips are blue.

"God, will you listen to that guy?" he exclaims. "How can people treat their children like that? Thank goodness we'll never do that." He reaches out and massages her thigh. "I don't understand how people get that way. What could have happened to him between the time he was a kid and now?"

On the marquee outside the motel on Main Street: Congratulations Bill and Susie. The two boys brushing sand from their feet outside the car, the sea gull hobbling along just beyond reach of water, alone, the other gulls no longer interested, Bill and Susie, now maybe, in late afternoon, after vowing and toasting, now slicing angel food, food for angels, not chocolate like ours with real camellias and ice cream at the bed and breakfast in the Heartland, near Lansing, the cicadas shrilling around the gazebo, the tiny butterflies of jasmine hovering in my long red hair and the dress turning my skin to filigree and the pale feverish beauty of his face and my mother's garnet necklace to say I do I will I promise. This is nothing really, nothing at all, a momentary lapse, a postcard in the mailbox just when the last of the bags had been packed in the car to head north to Michigan's Thumb, leave it who cares, but something in the sheer curling blue wave of the photograph, Manzanillo was it? soft contrast with a jade green boat and then to find, driving north past houses then fields, that they had chosen
virtually the same day, and even this, even this had not seemed the final flickerings, but then to drive it home, there it was, the one thing that made it impossible, the growing the burgeoning, in her of the cropped hair the smooth dark shoulders, but what difference should it make, now one year since, but still just the thought, now, today, was it this morning? this afternoon? the words had been said, in a church no doubt, in Manzanillo? en la iglesia, in the church, and outside in the cemetery crooked turquoise crosses, pensive alabaster angels, sprays of bougainvillaea, dry earth raked smooth, and even now part of that was blossoming, spreading inside her, she of the smooth dark shoulders and silver jewelry with abalone inlay, she with whom it was different, with whom the blossoming, the spreading could occur as the opening of a flower rather than the spreading stain of blood. Si las cosas fueron buenas, te casarias conmigo? If things had been good, yes, and the promises would have been the same, and instead of sand now there would be bougainvillaea in my hair, sun on a long white cotton dress embroidered with white flowers soft on pale skin. If things had been good, but now what did it matter. The words had been said, there, now, en la iglesia, the promises made, gathered up into the air. Irretrievable. Fixed like his solid white hands on the wheel as we drove past houses then fields, up into the Thumb, the tip, Ardith's Beauty Salon, Bunk & Breakfast, Surf and Sand Trailer Park, Fatima Shrine, High Seas—Stainless Fabrications, Custom Killing.

"I think it's going to storm," he says, sitting up. To the west, the sky is the grey eye of a cat. Above it is still clear. Lightning crackles. "Don't you think we should get going back to the hotel?"

No, I'd still like to stay. I'd like to be here on the sand in the rain. Better yet, in the water. Besides, the moment we leave, those gulls are going to peck the injured one to death.

"It'll break up," a man says, behind on the boardwalk.

"No way, Frank," says his friend. "It's going to pour. Too bad Pat and the kids went to play putt-putt."
They stop to light cigarettes; the first man pulls his baseball cap low over his eyes. They resume walking, their stomachs sagging over their bikini bathing suits, bare feet slapping onto the dry, splintery boards.

How tenuous, so tenuous, from this moment to the next, everyone toasting: to the future together, like it was some kind of fixed thing like future had properties that could be understood. Something, anything could happen. An accident, some kind of accident, anything. Or threats, someone could start threatening, become obsessed. What about obsession? Following, calling, stalking. Even now, to be thinking, remembering, creating greater risk because one had to pay for thinking like this. But still, and more, there was Veracruz, 

\[ \text{vera cruz} \]

, had he taken her there too, pure cross, gone walking by the sea the sailors her short hair rippling gold in the wind sun shining on her silver abalone jewelry, and then bought her a sailor cap to wear back into town and then sugary strawberry milk shakes at rickety tables near the plaza later sleeping in a sea-damp room with his mother because that is the way they do it there, head to foot never head to head, did she too wake to see his mother’s tiny feet red painted toenails beside her on a small pillow? A face like Jesus, his, dark brown beard longish hair drooping placid eyes and dark slender fingers, the first time \[ \text{que rico amor hicimos} \] he said and it was true rich magnificent lovemaking in front of the fire under a roof of snow next to a table of onions tortillas avocados from the market but later in the diesel fumes and depths of summer night \[ \text{nunca te han violado a las diez de la noche} \] he said or asked never have you been violated at ten o’clock in the evening, and that was the moment or not really but that became the moment, no never at ten o’clock in the evening and then he did and was gone but only for the night not forever and then it began the following the calling the stalking.

“Hey, did you feel that?” He props himself up on his elbows and looks at the sky. “I thought I felt a drop. You’re right—it’s fun to be on the beach in the rain. And the colors are so vivid,
don't you think? I always have a feeling of suspense too when it's about to pour. You can practically touch the energy in the air."

Could it have been a joke? Or was that just how things were down there? A matter of degree, of desire. Yes, of desire. For the sake of desire, anything was possible. The glow of the cigarette down in the street in a shadowed doorway the calling and calling and asking answering no not in that cafe in Coyoacan no not with him, none of your business, this conversation is over, is over, there is nothing more to say, the knocking the waiting for footsteps to fade but always only momentary a momentary fading then more. Notes (I will always be able to find you) calls (who were you with? I will not permit you to see other men). Women understand these things he insisted, women like this, what's wrong with you. Don't you understand what desire is.

"Are you crying?" He looks closely at her face, rubs her head, smoothes her windblown hair from her cheek. "Maybe it's just the rain. Did you see that lightning a minute ago? Over there, on the horizon. It was really something."

Yes.
It was the postcard how had he found out how did he know. A year's time, enough to wash the colors to grey make everything at least neutral, neutralize desire the rushing of wind of his arms opening to me mine to him just once, at the end, before the flight north, the desire the sickness bursting forth the lust for one's captor. Now you understand he said what desire is it is next now always.

"I'm sort of hungry. You want to get a hot dog or something? I saw a little stand off Main Street. I wouldn't mind something to drink either."
Yes, in just a moment. I'm hungry too.

It was the postcard, just the postcard that was the only reason
for this, for knowing that now, this very day, en la iglesia, in the church...and just like him to write of her blonde hair her smooth dark skin, the growing the burgeoning, the bird light garden.

“See, what did I tell you Frank, the storm is passing us by.”
The paunchy men in bikinis stand on the boardwalk, contemplating the mass of black clouds and lightning off to the west.
“Yeah, but that storm could just as easily come this way,” replies the man with the baseball cap.
A few more drops of rain fall.
“Maybe we should head back,” says the first man. “Pat will probably want me to come pick them up.”
But the men do not move, only gaze at the sky, dark to the west, clear soft blue overhead, melting to purple dusk.

“Well I think it’s going to rain,” he says, with a sideways glance at the two men. “And I’m starving.” He rubs his head against her arm, kisses her on her freckled shoulder.
The injured gull falls to its side again. Five gulls form a line, watching, waiting. One suddenly runs forward and pecks at the downed gull’s bloody neck.
“I was thinking we should do something about that gull, like chase those other birds away, but the moment we leave, they’ll come back and get him. Just sort of the natural order of things, I guess.”
Yes.

His feet, something about his feet, knobby curled toes, so different from the slender smooth brown of his hands.

“Let’s get fries, too. We’ll feed them to each other, mouth to mouth.”
Yes, mouth to mouth.
He folds his towel and helps her up.
His lower lip, slightly protruding, unwavering, dry.
He shakes the sand from his book and puts it into the knapsack with the suntan lotion and towels. “I wonder if they have chili dogs. I could really go for a chili dog.”

He takes her hand.

The watchful unseeing eyes.

“You know, I hope you don’t get sick of my saying this, being as we’re going to be seeing each other every day for the rest of our lives, but I am so in love with you.” He wraps his arms tightly around her waist.

“And I with you.” Yes.

The tiny teeth.

Fat drops of rain splatter onto the boardwalk, stop, start again, stop, start. “Let’s leave the car here and walk,” he says. “There’s nothing that can’t get wet.”

And I with you.
An Anonymous Belgian Trio, 1920

Not the porch light, a moon
Dimly above the garden and salt marsh
Dressed in black skirts. You are
A room closed by simple neglect.
What is left of a gesture

As if musicians are playing
The *Ghost Trio* by the deaf composer.
Horse hair sings over steel, settles
At the base of the spine in the afternoon
Where the young pianist walks
His fingers in slow progression
Down the back of the pale cellist.

Your sister, the violinist,
Leans into her instrument like a lover.
She finishes a decanter of wine, and puts
A purple grape to her navel. As she sings,
It rolls like the bend in our lives
Off the white spread into dust
Linger ing under heavy furniture.
We’ve moved indoors like summer tourists
Retreating from rain.

You must have known mustard gas, the blessings
Before bed, and the mounted deer head on the wall.
We never knew one another.
Elegy

It is the slowness, heat
In grass tips and salt
Sluggish in the body that brings
Sleep every afternoon. No,
Not even the world would wake us.

We are done with loneliness,
The fetchings comfort can bring.
Sister told the neighbor that we
Are surrounded by men who pray at night
To the inhabitants of other dimensions.
His reply was simple: the world is filled
With disappointed barbers and milkmen.
And even daisies stand for danger.

I carry a little more fear in each day.
It seems we will all languish
Like those chalk circlets, in strange
Circus tents where Beauty is
A lackey riding trained elephants.

She believes, in a certain light, we are all children
Wearing lamp shades, a little anxious and more
In a country somewhere wanting
To exhale the odd sin of extinction.
We need enough passion to outlast us.

But I am old, Lovey. I have fallen
Into the lilac rows. There is a single
Sprig above me, beyond which the stars
Still and fade, like the memory
Of one born among us.
Still Life with the Tidal River Ouse

—for Virginia Woolf

It is the finger shadow of the lighthouse
Or a stain on the surface of the sea
As if something had boiled and bled beneath.

She believes the purple, wet line
Down her canvas is time
Moving vertically backwards:
The path between her and the sailboat
Just setting out from shore
Cuts the ocean. Against the blue

The painting is itself, and a window
From where we see her lover
Over the long course of the afternoon
Turn to the single dot of an eye
In an inkwell. Just a patch
of surface glare.

From farther out, the shore
Is a simple was of sand,
A few stiff moving figures, and the dory
Heft on its side like a large mammal.
It all recedes like tide
To a gray horizon with perpendicualrs,
And a minnow out of water—
Just the surface folding in
On itself. Then, the seam.
Five Definitions

These days, when it seems I can no longer live in just one body, it’s hard to remember being so crowded in I might have been the three rooms a widow stays in all winter to save on heat, farmhouse tougher and tougher to keep with taxes. Magnanimous does not mean the soul enlarging literally, swerving out and headed directions. I thought it did. I run circles around myself, and call that space the generous yard I might have grown up in. Someone, please, short hairs from around my temples have come undone and landed on this page you’ll read some further version of. By then, who knows, my wiry, alcoholic arms might lift a skinny window in my New Brunswick kitchen, sill a chopping block in the works, but no, nothing much bad will happen as I stick out my more bald head to check what day it’s turning into: Thursday and hurricane weather or Monday, stopped still in a warm spell. Climates shuffle around like that, fast, when one body’s not enough.
The Pool

This is what they say:
"Get dressed!"
"Honey, why don’t you let him make up his own mind."
"I’m not going." It’s the third time I’ve said it.
Dad glares at me, then turns to the window.
"If he doesn’t want to go, let’s not force him." Mom brushes one hand over the other in her lap as if she is trying to wipe something off of herself. "What difference does it really make, after all?" She sees me watching and stops. She picks up her drink, jingling the ice, and drinks.
Dad doesn’t watch her. He stands next to the radio cabinet, adjusting the outside power antenna. In-between tuning he listens to what he’s found, contemplating his freshly manicured nails.
Mom hmmphs, gets up, and stands staring out the window.
"Look, he just shouldn’t have to. If he really doesn’t want to go, hon, it’s better he just stays home. Maybe he can do some homework or something." She straightens her fake pearls and her hair.
Dad chokes on a laugh that never quite begins. He dials again and finds what he was looking for: the classical station. A weighty sadness fills the room like sour breath. The music seems to lift him as if someone has reached between his legs and slowly raised her hand.
"Chopin," he says when he sees me staring at him, as if he were correcting me.
Both of them straighten at the sound of the music, as if on cue. The music swells, and Dad waves his hands in the air as if he’s conducting. Mom puts her hands behind her back, and leans delicately against the glass. She runs her free hand through her blond curls and drinks. The late afternoon light silhouettes her. "I think it’s time we let him make up his own mind." She is staring at him, but the pained tone is for me. "So what do
you think, hon?"

He doesn’t answer, but I can tell he’s ready to say something nasty. It’s the familiar way his nose flares when he’s angry, the way his bushy, gray eyebrows close as if they were going to bang into one another.

I clear my throat. “I’d honestly rather not.” But neither of them even hears what I’ve said. In fact, it really doesn’t matter. Eventually when they tire of this, they’ll choose for me. He’ll blow up. I’ll storm out of the room. She’ll follow me into my bedroom, sympathizing, and pick out the things she expects me to wear to the pool party.

“I said I would really honestly rather not go.”

This time she looks. Green-eyed, tight-lipped, she impatiently clicks her subdued red nails on the glass.

“I said,” I start, but Mom comes over and whispers in my ear. “Mrs. Karefield told me her daughter would be there.”

I honestly can’t tell if it’s the truth or not. It’s a game we play with each other. She lies as easily as some people lick their lips.

Dad shakes his head so clearly that I know he wants me to see. “So, what are your big plans for the night anyway? You just going to sit here, get stoned, and waste another evening?”

“Honey!” she starts.

“Would you mind explaining why you don’t ever want to get out of this house anymore!”

“Anymore?” But I quit before I start.

“Yeah, anymore! You know there was a time when I thought you were going to make something of yourself. But now you just sit there all night and listen to that crappy music of yours. Your lousy grades, your mouth. I don’t know how many times I’ve told you that if you keep going the way you’re going, you’re going to wind up in some deadend job wasting your life.”

“Honey!” she says sternly.

“Well hell, if we don’t take us with him what is he going to but sit there stoned and stare out those goddamn windows?”

“Jesus H. Christ,” Mom says, “Would you two please just stop it!”
He's right. I would just sit here and stare. The view: far out across the valley are a flight of birds in formation. The afternoon sun brightens their dark, turning wings as I concede. For her. For her lie.

*****

Years later you ask me to go to the movies with you. You say, "There's a love story tonight playing at the Minor that I'd really love to see. And I'll pay if you go."

I'm easily lured out of the house by your offer. The weather has been awful for a week: hot and close as cooked snail skin. We nurse along the summer days waiting for fall and classes to recommence. My shrink, Dr. Wenner, tells me I'll absolutely be cured in another six months or so. She hypnotizes me by pressing the weight of her damp hand against my forehead, and says later, carefully squirreled behind her desk, that I told her all about the pool. She's got the basic story, but there's a number of mistakes she makes which I don't bother to correct. She seems to make a question out of story, but I don't exactly know what she's asking. At the end of the hour, as I rise to leave, she says she may have to reevaluate her earlier conclusions. I don't bother to ask for clarification of my prognosis.

You tug on my sleeve, "Well, do you want to or not?"
"Want what?" I say.

You flap your hands next to your head. "Movies, spacecase."
"And where, O starving one, are we going to get the money?"
You grin and run out of the room. A moment later you charge back into the room yelling, "Bus change!" You spill a mug of silver, nickel, and copper over the table and count in stacks of five down to the popcorn and drinks. A long sigh bubbles out of your mouth. "Not enough for drinks." I pour us both huge glasses of lemonade, which we gulp down, and we walk quickly to town with bulging pockets.

It's a slow weeknight: the theater is quiet and almost empty. The lights overhead flicker behind colored glass fixtures. Around
us I can hear people discussing the weather, the movie; one man
sits alone and reads a book; a woman knits next to her husband.

You explain to me the plot, but I'm already sinking beneath
the sound of your voice. My senses prowl the audience sniffing
at the fringes of other peoples' conversations.

You say, "I read about this in my film class. It was made in
1957 on a budget that you wouldn't believe. They shot it in
some remote part of Mexico where the people had never seen
gringos before. When they went over budget in the second month,
they paid half the crew in tequila and beer."

I want to say, sure, fine, but I'm hardly listening anymore.
My senses have woken up and walk out into the long rows of
red velour covered seats slipping between legs and gliding over
the sticky cement floor like a black cat. My senses finger the
crinkling of stiff cloth in the theater; the warm blend of perfume,
coffee, popcorn (but now fresh with wreaths of smoke like a
blind hand groping at our faces), and the light falling into the
haunting fragrance of whispers that cannot be undone. The
man with the book suddenly hurries to the lobby for ice water;
people sit, rubbing their eyes. The voices rise and recede like
leaden swells. Someone near me is counting down for the light
to fall. When the light is gone, the projector beam hangs in
the smoke so one can see words and faces in the air.

*****

At the party, I am surprised to find that my parents have forced
my brother to go too. The host allows each of us a gin and tonic.
"Light on the gin, heavy on the tonic," he jokes with his disapp
proving wife, but makes it the way he makes the ones for my
Dad and Mom.

My brother and I sit at the edge of the pool in the aluminum
and plastic garden furniture which every family there has bought
annually from Sears, or Montgomery Wards, Pennies, or some
place just the same. I loosen a broken strap of the yellow nylon
weave and wonder when they'll buy a new set. Probably by the
start of summer, I think, fingering the broken weave. And there'll
be a new Weber grill soon. And grocery bills with Ball Park Franks, sweet relish, Best Foods Mayonnaise, tubs of Haagan Daz, pounds of lean hamburger, tomatoes, lettuce, sesame seed buns, and cases of tallneck Budweiser. There'll be dry cleaning bills for the pool parties, bills for three levels of sunscreen, for inflatable pool toys, for new swimsuits and towels, bills for the chlorine, bills for the local liquor store, for the Valium at the pharmacist, and for his and her therapy sessions.

At the bottom of this stack of paper: the passports that have been expired for 10 years and wait to be opened to the verdict of a fading snapshot; an old, graying address book with only the names of men or women; and the details of an afternoon to be spent alone, hunting through the city, for a fragrance which still can only be remembered by the lingering scent of a stranger passing in the street.

******

You explain to me while the credits roll that the man is out of work. He is a scoundrel with a bent fedora. He meets the woman in a bar and takes her home with him. It is a simple affair that gradually becomes increasingly complex as she discovers the disturbing things that he helps her to see within herself.

That brings me back. "Like what?" I ask.

"The awful truth we all harbor," you say casually.

"You mean the type of underwear our girlfriends buy us on Valentine's Day."

"Even worse," you giggle, "The catalogue of ties and Old Spice kits we bought our Dads during our adolescence."

"Yes, but how can we atone?" I ask.

"We will be forced to admit these things before our friends and lovers," you say and kiss me.

I pay attention to the light while you get back to describing the film. No one around us seems to mind your talking.

"Watch this," you say excitedly. "Watch what Monica does." Monica is the woman in the film. They are in his house. The man doesn't yet have a name. Monica slaps the man's face when
he tries to unbutton her blouse. He gets up off the bed with the imprint of her hand on his cheek and unbuttons his own shirt. Then he takes off his pants. The woman gets out of bed and comes to him.

"This was the 50's, you've got to remember," you say shaking your head.

I don't tell you it's facts I'm concerned with. I want to remind you of these basic things, but you're too caught up with remembering what is about to happen.

I glance up at the projector beam. I slip into the sparkling bits of dust. I want to remind you of certain obvious details; for instance, when the light moves away from the lens at 186,000 miles per second it doesn't go directly to the screen. Some is lost into the air, some dissipates into the walls of the theater or sinks down among us and settles in our clothes, in our hands and eyes. The light silences us. Perhaps it is because what remains with us weighs us like an anchor so we can find our way back, perhaps it is because nothing can anchor us against the image the light takes us toward.

You point to the two of them, snuggled against one another in his bed the next morning as the rooster starts to crow, and nudge me softly, "They're already in love. That's his power over her."

*******

My brother drinks gin too, but faster. He is just nineteen and has had his heart broken for the first time.

"What does it feel like?" I ask.

"I don't want to talk about it." He tips his glass and drops of condensation trickle down his chin. He gets another from the willing host. When he returns with his drink, he silences my next question with his cold stare. I can't unravel the mystery of his pain. There's just no making sense of it for me; I haven't been in love yet, though I've fucked the requisite neighborhood girls, particularly Mrs. Karesfield's daughter. Still, love is different. I'd need a map to enter a country so strange. With a pencil I
could sketch for him the mountains he describes when he tells me she is done with him. Below those perpetually snow-locked peaks are a maze of glaciers through which he is forced to wander alone. Alone, he finally explains, because she won’t talk to him anymore in public, won’t return his phone calls, and worst of all, none of her friends (who had been his friends a week ago) will tell him who she is seeing.

The terrain runs to the edge of my map, a border of water. I couldn’t begin to tell him what I imagine exists there. It’s the geography of hell recreated in winter.

He chews on the ice as if it were the heat.

*****

You explain that the man and the woman are to meet downtown. It’s a celebration: her birthday. You describe her dress, the color of her hair, the elegant way she saunters into the bar and all the men turn to stare.

These things happen exactly the way you warn me.

I am watching the man. He looks familiar.

That’s when it hits me.

I tell you, “Of course! The screen is like the pool.”

You don’t seem to notice. But I do. The couples in the theater hold each other carefully, shivering as they run their fingers across the cool surface. They do not ask: what’s underneath the water? They let each other go. A man turns to his wife and nudges her: what the hell is this thing about? She knits furiously, but won’t answer. Her needles make a tiny symphony of notes, each one woven to the next by the clicks of the projector sprocket. She leans forward past him, into the light, and traces her name with her fingertip where it will not remain.

*****

I leave my brother. I walk around the edge of the pool toward the first clusters of guests: women. I just want to avoid them, but Mrs. Karefield stands in front of me with her lips drawn
into a hooklike smile. Her hands scour the air in greeting.

She stands behind the women whose talk is distinguished by the repeated mention of flowers. Their conversation is an amalgamation of delight. It is ‘wonderful’ lusciously slipped over the tongue with a falling rush of weight from the ‘won’ down to the liquid, tongued ‘L’ held behind the teeth like the savor of wine. But Mrs. Karefield steps away from them. The wrinkles roll into her dark green eyes as she smiles. “Hello,” she says.

“Hi, Mrs. Karefield.” I try to be suave with my bowed head and faint smile. She sweeps her pool-bleached blond hair back out of her eyes and won’t look quite at me.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” she says. She guides me slightly away from the clique behind us, without laying a finger on me. She cocks her head toward the flowers near the pool and with a sweep of her hand, whispers sarcastically, “Wonderful, delightful,” and then slowly, “Absolutely magnificent.” She laughs at her own sarcasm.

I look at my feet. “I heard your daughter might be here tonight?”

“No, why?”

I look up. She pulls her hair back severely with both hands. I try desperately to smile. “There’s no one to talk to.”

“You’re talking to me,” she says.

“My mom said your daughter would be here.”

She looks at me with a piercing stare, which sharpens the green of her eyes. She pinches her lips together. It is a stare made out of years of disappointment with liars: sad, terrible. She turns her head sharply away and catches the glance of her husband across the pool. They both smile as if they were young lovers. He stands at the center of a group of men in his flowered shirt, his Bermuda shorts and sandals. He is telling a dirty joke. All the men lean forward, grinning. He has one hand in his pocket, and with his left hand he thrusts the neck of his beer bottle obscenely and whistles. The men slap each other and howl.

She turns me back. “You think I don’t know about you and
her? Wait until I tell your parents. I know what you two do with each other when I'm out. Who do you think washes the dirty sheets at my house?"

I catch my breath and stare at her, sure she's about to call my mother over. But she doesn't. She just goes on talking.

"I could tell you all about desire. You think you've got the market cornered?" I look down, silent, scared as hell. She waits for my eyes.

"Well?" She sways like a dancer, back and forth so her pale, blue dress swirls and folds on itself. She turns to face her husband, smiles and leans against me. I can feel the warmth of her breath in my hair. "He's not the only one you know. He never has been."

I frown and stare at her husband, laughing amidst his friends. Does he know, I wonder; does he care? But it's not the question I ask: "Which one?"

She laughs. She lifts herself off my shoulder, turns, her wise smile wrinkling into her eyes, and whispers, "Guess!"

*****

"It gets sad now," you say.

"I don't wonder. They drank all night. They'll have heads the size of basketballs."

"More like old watermelons left out in the sun," you say.

After they wake, Monica and the unkempt man who refuses to tell her his name quarrel about going to California. It's her big plan. See the Promised Land. She wants to go right away, but he's dead set against it. "Look at all I've got here," he motions, but the woman just stares around the dilapidated kitchen with its peeling wallpaper and scowls.

He sits silently on the front porch, nursing a beer. He turns his face into the dust-laden wind and squints. She stands behind the screen door in the dark kitchen, afraid of flies for the first time. "He'll always blame her," you say softly.

Later, as the light starts to fail, he rises and puts on his coat. He walks to the dilapidated barn, gets to work on their '57
Chevy. But it’s no good. You know this by heart. In the middle of the night Monica comes to him with food and another beer. He has the engine torn to pieces, clutching a handful of tappets. “Give it up,” she says, “We’ll have to take the truck.”

He glances over to his Dad’s Ford, parked in one of the busted-up milking stalls. It hasn’t been driven in years, yet he knows that all he has to do is replace the battery and it’ll crank. He hates this, as if the old man were still telling them the right way to do things. He gathers the Chevy’s parts, throws them underneath the car, then pulls the battery and slams it in the truck. When the truck’s engine catches, he curses bitterly. Monica goes off cheerfully to pack; without washing his hands, he eats the food she’s brought him.

It doesn’t get light again until late the next morning with the rain. He drives as fast as the old truck will go, knowing that it isn’t fast enough. Even with the rain, the sun comes chasing behind them like a knife. He leans into the windshield and holds the Ford right to the line. He takes the turns on the wrong side. “Jesus,” Monica whispers as he drives, “Jesus.” But the man isn’t listening.

******

I stand at the edge of the steps and shiver. The water is warm, reflecting a pale, bony kid of seventeen in big, blue trunks that make his legs look thinner than they are. Both his arms are wrapped around his chest, and he rubs his palms against his sides.

“Here’s you towel, hon,” my Mom says. She puts it on the chair beside my brother.

“Don’t drown, sharkbait,” he laughs.

My Dad looks at me from amidst the crowd of men. Frowns. Both of us look away.

I stir one foot in the water, and my reflection dissolves in a dark blue swirl. The sky settles itself against the pool, purpling the edges near the guests. The host yells from the house, toasts
me with his drink, and flicks the pool light on. It’s a pale, yellow
eye with a chrome lid swaying in the ripples at the deep end.

The smell of the hamburgers burning on the barbecue is sharp
when I slide under. I imagine the smoke washing off my skin
as the water closes around me. Underneath, the chlorine burns
for a moment in my eyes and then I’m all right. I kick off gently
and glide to a stop. Motionless, cold, I hang with my arms
outstretched. The water holds me cradled. I close my eyes to
clear away the chlorine. I could stay down forever, I tell myself.

I let out the last of my breath and sink to the bottom. I fall
so slowly even after I’ve touched, I can barely hear the water
moving around me. I nestle there. I don’t want to go back up.
I feel exposed, and frogkick under the eye of the pool light.
The sky looks solid black. There is nothing else I can see against
the yellow glare. I’m quiet there on the bottom and I count
backwards to my heartbeats, starting from 100.

*****

The screen is almost dark now.
“What’s his name?” I ask you.
You bristle at the interruption. “He never tells.”
I want to ask you my own name, but the weight of the story
drops on me like the pressure of a hand lowering me into the
water. The man is alone in a garden, sitting next to a large pool.
He gets up and dives in.

“Where is the woman now?” I ask you, but you only stiffen.
The man is down a long time. I notice that he looks different
under the water. He looks as if he had slept in her arms after
their journey. His body though is thin and pale. What is he
doing there, staring at us from the bottom of this pool? “Come
up already!” I whisper fiercely.

“Hey, it’s just a movie,” you say and pull me back to you.
Below the eye of light he watches us, his face washed white.
My head is spinning with pieces of black which drop from above. They close at the edge of my vision. I tell myself it doesn’t matter. I try to think about the people standing over the edge of the pool. My Mom and Dad are there. In each one’s mouth is a lie, as cool and smooth as a piece of ice. Some swallow the lie in a single bite, some spit it in their drinks and try to drink it down covering the taste in gin.

I feel something try to take my hands and dance with me. They might say sorry. They might say we should’ve listened to him, we didn’t even know about this. We’re all so very, very sorry. I imagine them all standing with their heads bowed, the words that each of them would choose to express their eternal regret. Black clothes. A man reading from a book. Mom bent with her arm around my brother, comforting, wondering if it was only me. Scared because she knows but will not say that it’s within all of us. Dad would stand alone and not weep, no matter the cost.

I imagine the way I will come back to them after I’ve gone. What pieces of myself have I left for them to find? The smell buried in my clothes. Letters from people who don’t yet know. Letters which continue to arrive for me for weeks to come. Or something even more subtle? A few strands of hair that she finds when making up the guest bed.

"He’s not alone, really,” you say sneakily. “Look she’s there with him.”

The two are swimming together. They made it out to California after all, I suppose. Is it Monica, I want to ask, but don’t. You’re too absorbed to be disturbed. This woman has the green eyes of the woman in the country, only darker. She sits on the bottom of the pool, comforting him. Only her lips move. She holds him in her arms and whispers to him underwater.
"I love happy endings," you say.
I think, it is better that he is not alone, this way they will always be together.

*******

I imagine myself among them. Above. Right in the center of the men with a beer in my hand. Grey hair, beer gut. The wife, some little species of flower I’d found, across the pool amidst the women. How could I be any different?
I hold against the light. Sure for just a moment that I’m never going back. I let loose a stream of bubbles and they silver and disappear into the glassy water above me.
Someone whispers something in my ear.
“There he goes!” you say laughing.
You try to get me to talk all the way home, but I just can’t. The image has burnt a hole in my memory. Imagine it: in a moment he will rise toward the light. The bubbles will rise with him, dancing as he moves upward. His breath will be hot and stale in his mouth. Someone behind him will be calling to come back, but he won’t be able to hear the words. He will see figures gathered at the edge of the pool, looking down. They will be eating. It takes a long time to go back.
The surface will come up like a mirror, reflecting his face one last time, distorted from pain and lack of breath. In a moment now, he’ll stand shivering among them, wrapped in a white towel, breathing the cool, stinging air. Someone will hand him a drink and ask him how long it took to develop that wind. In the shadows, a woman across the pool will usher her daughter up the mossy stairs and out of the garden. Neither of them will look back.
Marjorie Maddox

Like any act of faith, writing a poem begins with a belief in the power words have to bring forth the miracle of ordinary experience. These mundane miracles are part of our daily lives, the streets we live on, the collective eye we keep to the future. It's the careful poet who takes seriously the responsibility of presenting these miracles accurately and with conviction, since accurate writing allows the reader to participate in the moment of the poem, the moment her own life crosses with and is influenced by other lives, objects, and experiences. Though the poet spends the life of the poem working with the boundaries of form, line, rhythm, and the everchanging meaning of words to create an experience that often defies such boundaries, the most important work comes before the poem is ever written.

In the poems that follow, Marjorie Maddox recognizes and explores the notion of poet as medium: how the writer must be in a constant state of openness to receive the gift of inspiration, to find the divine in the everyday, to internalize it, meditate on it, and finally transform the awe of it into words. Her poems spiritualize the writing process and enact the very thing they seek to define: with careful lines, reflection, endurance, and epiphanous endings, Maddox lets faith in the process guide the work. In the act of receiving and transforming her experience, we, too, are transformed.
How to Fit God into a Poem

Part I

Read him.
Break him into stanzas.
Give him a pet albatross
and a bon voyage party.
Glue archetypes on his wings with Elmers,
or watch as he soars past the Slough of Despond in a DC-10.

Draw wrinkles on his brow with eyeliner
until his beard turns as white as forgiven sin.
Explicate him.
Call him “Love.”
Translate him into Norwegian.
Examine original manuscripts
for proof of his kinship to Shakespeare.

Make him rhyme,
Cram him into iambic pentameter.
Let him read War and Peace ten times
and give a book report to third graders.
Edit out references to sin
and insert miracles.
Award him a Nobel Prize.

Then, after you’ve published him annually
in The New Yorker for thirty years,
crucify him. Proclaim it a suicide.
Part II

Let him whirl through your veins
like a hurricane
until your cells gyrate,
until you salivate at the sound of his breath.
Let him bristle your nerves like cat hairs
and laminate your limbs.
On All Saint’s Day, meditate
and wait patiently.
Then, he will come;
then, he will twist your tongue,
pucker your skin,
spew out his life on the page.
Body and Soul

Sundays, white covers
flesh; hands, those hungry graspers,
jut out, circle the silver
chalice. Once there, safe,
the spirit clasps them, lets the red
stream into the small and cupped—
glass or lips, funnels to the stomach.

Hearts in our knees, we stay
down till words evaporate. Once, I stood
on the other side, robed, pouring out
my skin before I poured. Faces buoyed
above the surface of rails,
my syllables bobbing. Like the others,
I swim and sink alternately,
gasping for blood.

What catches
on the bone and clings
can drown us, tug us down
to sand or into a current thick beyond
the creek, the river, the open sea to Christ
parading across liquid so stiff it keeps us up, makes us breathe. Finally,
wine calms winds easily. I reach
out my hand, pour and kneel
simultaneously.
God Trick-or-Treating

You dressed like a clown and surprised us all,
woobbling in your size-twelve shoes, across front lawns
toward Seventh Street and back.
Twice you snorted jokes through your Rudolph nose
(How many heathen does it take to screw in a lightbulb?...)
and set our stomachs twitching.
That night I liked you lots:
your cheeks puffing with popcorn balls,
your lips smacking on apples,
your fingers stiff from doorbell-poking.
Ten minutes 'til curfew, you collected our Woolco sacks
and multiplied them like fishes.
God Goes Fishing

Bamboo stick and he flicks his wrist,
swings the line across continents.
I can hear it swish, slice clouds.
It goes wherever there's water.
Its hook dangles from the slide at the city pool,
clawed at sewer caps, attacks a fireman's hose.
In the morning I find it
clipped to the soap dish in my shower:
question mark glistening steam.
I am too busy getting clean to answer.
God and the Tightrope

One pierced foot before the other,
you step from your ivory platform
curl your toes about the taut wire
as if walking on water.

You balance the air on your arms,
tent shadows on your shoulders.
Spotlights circle your brow like a crown.
In your star-spangled loincloth,
you hover over the multitude,
make the sign of the cross,
take a deep bow,
then dive toward our gaping mouths.
Cross

I dreamed it was a baby
just shriveled from the womb, eyes filmy,
a baby whose bird-like bones stretched
just beyond the crossbeam
and no further,
a baby who forgot to scream
at the hammer's thud,
thought the sharp nail a nipple,
sucked the world in.
Magnificat

I, too, chalked you with wings and horns
on my bathroom wall.
I pierced your left lobe with a halo
bent from the forked poker
of a neighbor's fire.
Even now, your eyes are like mine:
horrified and knowing.
What is there to see
but dust flicking into light?
My cells a kaleidoscope.
I'm tripping on veins,
am tied up by your tongue
that, yes, is connected to skull, breath, soul
buried somewhere beneath what's left
of the boiled and boned.
What is real tastes so
and smells
of everything in and out of living.
Your fingers let me suck salt;
your lungs lift the hush from my throat;
your feet take in the floor's splinters.
Here in my house, where I want you,
we tremble together.
Painted Bride Quarterly
1993 Chapbook Contest
Honorable Mention

Chris Semansky       What Goes Without Saying
Richard Chess        Two and One
Eva Heisler          The Autobiography of a Third Person
George Yatchisin     Stage Whispers
Dream

She dreams of the old man and they are in bed together and he says it's okay to kiss on the cheek but she says, *hey, how about my mouth*, and she kisses him and his whiskers are softer than she would have guessed. This dream has come before, like a big white moon on the highway. While she bathes, she notices that small place between her breasts holding the honeydew suds. She wants to offer it to the old man, and say, *here, come taste me. Your wife will steam a fish for dinner; she will remove its jelly eyes with a fork.* She wants to move away with the old man and just live and live and at night, as the stars collect along the roof, they will turn to each other in the bed they have never left and his face will belong to her, as her own face never has. When she wakes it's as though someone was born in that bed.
Dream II

She strips in the mirror and sees herself as though she were his dream. The smooth underside of her arm, shiny as an eel. Her perfect triangle of black hair. Her thighs. The old man lifts her into him with his long arms and kisses around her face, saying, *This is good,* into her long damp neck, then leaves her there on the grass, the sun rolling along her back.
Dream III

She eats three plums in an hour. She likes to curl her hands around its small flesh and take a piece with her front teeth. Its body is always more golden than she remembered. The old man reaches down to her with his delicate hand and strokes her face with blue light. *The sun has not moved in eight days*, she tells him, and he nods. *It just turns and turns in its own skin*, she says. She doesn’t remember what she asked for. All he gives her is his pale throat, and she tries to swallow his voice.
Dream IV

The sun wheels away. She notices she’s been awake for several days. The old man is sitting by the window looking out into the courtyard. *It is June and the ground is covered in white leaves*, he tells her, walking toward her, his hands wide as the moon. He lays her shoulders on the floor and opens her knees and climbs between them. She rocks against his belly and she rocks against his belly like stone. She arches her back into the wind.
Dream V

In the evening, she walks through town. She passes his house and notices the front steps crumbling beneath the porch. She feels him inside, rubbing the shoulders of his thin wife, bending down to feed the cat, sitting in his chair for dinner. The dark sky relaxes over the thick brown trees.
Sacrilege of Dream

In this poem my dreams stir
in another’s bed, & I can sleep
straight through the night.

It is she who watches the bright
blast furnace works blaze & fade
to wavering food bank lines. She hides
from wind along the path behind
her father’s staggering overcoat.
She paces hospital corridors,
his head wired for electro shock.
She worries about madness
slicing the air in currents
on hebephrenic tongues.

She is the one who stockpiles
canisters & bags of food enough
to survive some other holocaust.
The ants invade her cupboard store
in a cover of thick & black movement.

In her bed, it is she who fears
her own hand at her breast
passed on in maternal order,
sleepwalks radiation, wraps
thinning chemo hair, pulls
uselessly at wisps of bangs
to hide the creases in her brow.

In her bed she coughs up
her grandfather’s slow death
emphysema. It is her chest that tightens
at both sides of a family’s failed hearts.
It is she that breaks the promise
to quit smoking after 30 years.
She dreams her son
skidding the highway sideways,
tractor trailer broadsided crossing
blind across the lane in the first rain
after long drought. It is she who races
to him, shortcuts bad neighborhoods,
gets lost flying down deadend hills
with bad brakes & an empty
gas tank. She shuffles night alone,
not remembering where she was headed
with a dog tracking her heels,
bred not to loosen at the bite.

She endures the restlessness,
calls up & itemizes all the things
undone, done badly, afraid to do.
She stares wildly into night,
jolted awake by her own scream,
She trembles & weeps.

In her bed she rocks herself back
to sleep, then rides a veering trolley
screeching to a halt before the river edge.
She fears the sudden death, drowning
in another attempt to learn to swim
& float, swim & float.

In that other bed, she is the one who
wakes midnight hungover, knocks over
the loose loft rail & falls on the way
to a Valium. She lands to ply airflight
insurance machines with counterfeit
bills, missing the connection from there
to anywhere, there to anywhere.

She stares at the puffy bag of skin
swelling on her cheek, performs
penknife surgery in a public restroom,
is left with one butchered bulbous
eye. It is her teeth that loosen & are spit like so many spent dried shells of chewed seeds.

It is in her bed that she cradles a heating pad on her baby belly between hipbones carved from diet pills & skipping meals. Her bed goes up in flames as she dares sleep through night

In this dream, it is I who lives on past the night she dies. In this poem, I rise to write her epitaph.
Honey

A compost spoiling, spoiling
tomato, cabbage softening
in vegetable twilights
like tepid organs. Bees
nudge snouts pestering over
the mess, snubbing tomato,
then cabbage.
They are meditating on honey,
its sugary succor, a communion
wafer for the Queen of Heaven.
I sit nearby.

Nearby, like the still-life
from the Industrial Age
propped up, sick
wife next to frock-
jacket with man inside, iron
bed, window behind, all of it
illustrating the daily
work of dying.

The garden is frail.
A few baby green tomatoes stiffen
prematurely on the vine.
Here, near the play of light
on decay, the electric whisk
of bees, the heap of ashes
and splitting tomatoes,
the sour cabbage leaf,
the postures of all these
mortal industries endlessly conveys
the bees like bullets to the hive.
I'm sick, in a garden of bones,
steeled to the honey.
The Mantis

Early yellow flowers are deep
in the crooks of vines I've bound
to their stakes with leftover stockings
too hot and tight for this lush season
and mine. Already aphids are swarming,
growing, feeding on everything I've grown,
lighting on the skin-hued mesh
that holds the shape of ankles and thighs
among the ripening tomatoes.
Desperate measures are new to me;
I think to begin slowly, with one

small cocoon that comes in the mail,
the sac a pliant lump of mud. I tie it
to the largest stem, and wait.

The carnage, when I find the sac torn
open, has already started—
tiny green bugs with hands raised
in prayer have wrestled the aphids
from the sticky bottoms of leaves,
have held them up in insect
benediction, have stuffed them whole

into the minuscule gaping mouths,
fistful by fistful, and fearless.
Just ten of the quarter-inch monsters
can pick the leaves clean; the two-
hundred I've nurtured now own
the whole garden. They'll molt and grow
larger, darken and quicken and finally
move on, leaving unblemished fruit
and leaves still but for wind.
Till then I'll stand at the gate
and I'll watch, half hoping, half fearing
to see the next step in the cycle,
the terrible mating: female mounted,
male blindly moving against her.
As he deposits the prayers of next season
inside her, ecstatic she grasps him,
bites off his head, thoughtfully chews.
dearest lisa

i ate the crimson pomegranates
their bloody seeds bursting sweet and winter cold
all through the luscious days of childhood
these i recalled
as my right leg split like that ripened skin
when my plane hit the earth

i first felt the grating in my hip
then saw the broken tips
of protruding, slivered bone
two ribs, my forearm, collarbone
all snapped like the dry twigs
under my deer hunting boots in autumn
my skull fractured in delicate white porcelain glaze and still
i could see the blue of sky
mocking me above the rim of trees
i pulled at my worn belt of brown, scarred leather
somehow to brace this shredded leg
while two dead friends whispered
hurry
the fire spilled over me
a liquid, burning hunger yet i
felt the pull of our children’s hands
and so decided to live

outside on the ground
in my husk of charred flesh
i remembered
that i chased the north wind
and climbed to the top of the magnolia tree
its thick leaves a green leathery sea
with white raft blossoms
like loaves of bread
so high and yet i feared the coming down
until my father had to come up after me
angry he said why did you
climb so high
lisa i was dreaming
of flight

always, toby
Stockton burn center
1992
Surviving the Titanic

Darkness assembles itself in branches of
trees — a million hands

with nothing to hold. TV antennas, the extinct
ears of landscape, bow to the east. Black
and white photos suffocate in the closet.
I paint an orange dot between my eyes. Pray
to the furniture. Pray to the dawn noise of
a garbage truck. Pray to Canadian geese
flying through the window. My mother
stands on the deck of winter and crushes
snow, sends me the remains

in envelopes smothered with hearts. Thirteen
thousand feet below, fish do not have eyes.
They smell the Titanic. Its stench of final breath
cought on stairs and ladders. Six feet
from the drugged ship is a thick-soled
workmen's boot. Eyes filled with water. Disbelief
curled in the tongue. Could a man hold his breath
as a ship sinks that deep? Then, remove
his shoes, feel the mud between his toes and walk
to the unlit shore? The bloodshot eye of
sunset squints into the night. My mother writes
about a leaf surviving the frost. A man

who drinks beer for breakfast lives
across the street. Black and white
flannel shirt, steel wool beard, heavy
boots. He spits salt, climbs into a pickup truck
and drives to the Union Ice Company factory next
to railroad tracks that follow themselves
to the ocean. At night he returns,
boots soaked with cold water.
Oscar
(man overboard)

Tonight, over dinner with my girlfriend
at some trendy place, down by the waterfront,
I caught myself thinking about my old watch
partner from my first ship.
Ben, a wiry able-bodied from Queens.
I remember Ben for smashing a barstool over
the Chief Mate’s head in a bar in Glasgow and
(she’s reading the menu selection)
I remember Ben for asking me
“So, You want to be a waterboy?”
That Chief Mate’s skull cracked into three pieces;
they flew him home across the sea, alive,
but stupid and maybe wiser for his sake.
Even the Captain saw that Mate had it coming.
Ben taught me bowlines, sheepshanks and
monkey fists, how to use a knife,
a needle and palm to weave dog dicks
in the butt ends of manila rope.
There are Mates and there are men.

My very upstanding and handsomely dressed girlfriend
sipped white Zinfandel across an expanse of white
tablecloth and candles, my long neck bottle of beer
sat unaccustomed to an accompanying glass.
Nicely appointed, this scene, my girlfriend too,
with the queer tinkling of glass and pitter-
patter of other patrons mixed together
with some piped-in classical overtures
coming from everywhere, though nowhere exactly,
and she whispers, “It’s rude to drink it like that.”
So civil, she’s very real and with the living
I suppose, though, queer you know, knives and
forks, bottles and glasses.
I became a waterboy when my mate showed me how to mix paint.
"Pull up your sleeve and do it like a real seaman!"
To his elbow he mixed that paint, but I was smart,
I used a stick.

When dinner arrived she ate her mixed,
sauteed vegetables and medallions of veal
using delicate movements of her silverware,
daintily dabbing the corners of her mouth
with a clean, unwrinkled linen napkin.
Excuse me, hon, you missed a spot.
(here?)
No.
(here?)
To the left.
(here?)
Okay, it's gone.
We waste words, between women and men, don't we?

After dinner she wanted to visit the Botanical Gardens,
smell the tame, exotic, beautifully stunted flowers.
Their climate is controlled within the glass houses
and corridors, so warm that millions of tiny beads
of water conceal the glass from outside,
where the rest of life must bear the brattie winter.
In the North Sea in January we faced
thirty foot waves and gale force winds by
drinking to get drunk and singing
"It's a hell of a way to make a fucking living!"
and crazily thought it'd be a hell of a way to fucking die.
Every sailing ship in the world would talk about us.

Later, we drove back to her place, disrobed,
and made clean, sanitary, protected love
beneath her clean, sanitary, protective sheets,
quick and not so easy but,
by the book as if love were
a difficult lesson struggling to be learned.
You know for forty-five bucks in Singapore
you can buy a wife for a week and even
meet her mother, and by the time your ship leaves dry-dock chances are good they'll hang a photograph of you on their wall, and it will still be there if you ever come back. There are mates and there are lovers. There is love and then there is love.

I am lying in her bed now, looking out her window working on an excuse to leave without a fight, and finding that the moon hanging just outside her window like a brilliant brand new cue ball is a memory from Texas, where a strange black haired girl rescued me outside a cowboy bar in Port Arthur after Ben did another barstool trick on some redneck and was hauled off to jail somewhere.

I didn’t care where my ship was, where it was sailing, this strange girl just parked us in her car on some gravel lot beneath a bare streetlight and suddenly, like we were the only two people on Earth who understood great, complex things like where lightning is born, we removed our clothes to keep from getting caught in the process of attaching our skin to each other, and that same faraway moon watched us.

I wonder how that same moon that sees me here, passionless, lying in the bed of a passionless woman who now stands in the shower washing, and I remember that strange black-haired girl in Texas whispered in my ear:

Baby, let’s die now when we’re so fucking alive.
The Afternoon Our Guide Explained Where the Mountains Will Grow

his fingertip is so secure in its doubt
that the tentative becomes deliberate
the invisible convincing
the inexpressible there

and in the long slow sketch of stone mountains
he draws across the horizon
we discover a moment when all is so clear
that later we will not know what to say
On the Island, Thinking of Home

Everywhere I go, someone has died. Even the dying peer from windows deep as graves, their eyes as dark as Indian hair. They want, I know, to open my mouth with their open mouths. They want to move their greening tongues across the bones of my feet. The dying always know what has walked from the sea. But the living, turned inward, dream of better times I know are days as these. They close their curtains and silhouette through the chilly rooms of mountain homes. At night I've watched them cover their heads in blankets. As for me—I'd like to steal the living and carry them here. I want to sit them in the sand, that flesh of all seasons, and feed them leaping Blues. The living ought to know what wild heat flourishes here. They ought to know what the dying know.
十六岁

眼

月

张

与

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周腾川
A Sixteen Character Lyric

Sleep
Jade white coin moon shines through the
Window, a shadow
Silently inches across my pillow

Chou Ching Chuan (active c.1250)
Translated by Wang Hui-Ming
Water on My Back, Chicago

Out of respect
I leave off my raincoat
as buildings of concrete, brick,
and stone darken
like a plowed field in the rain.
The streets shimmer and shush traffic
while sidewalks become sudden gardens
of opened umbrellas.
Here at the corner of Lasalle and Adams
I leave off my raincoat
as water gathers into small streams
which disappear through streetside drains
into the sightless roots of the city.
People passing can see
my backbone like a mole’s trail
through my soaked shirt;
they can see me standing in the rain
like a spindly legged heron
shifting from foot to foot
and looking skyward now and then.
“Odd bird,” some say to themselves,
but I am remembering that this city
once was marsh and prairie
with wet grass rustling in a blowing rain.
Salaspils War Memorial
Riga, Latvia (1983)
Charles Bukowski
1920-1994

It's a common expression in the business world for a commu-
nication that can be modified or added to: "It's not carved in stone." But now there is a sad permanence to the work of Charles Bukowski: what we now have is all we'll have, save for the random piece that will undoubtedly turn up in the back of someone's desk drawer or the letter—with his iconic signature—found in the pages of someone's book. His many writings appeared in all manner of printed media—literary and otherwise, including PBQ—and it seemed to come from an inexhaustible supply. We should have known better, but of course we never do.

Bukowski got a major obit in the New York Times which, while accurate, will probably result in more rentals of "Barfly" than purchases of Love is a Dog from Hell. He was a poet "whose subject was excess," a "bard of the barroom and brothel," whose works, written in "tough, direct language" are "rooted in the experience of a loner and outcast with a keen eye for the absurd." All true, but only half the story (if that). Like many others, including many would-be imitators, the Times was misdirected by the "tough, direct language" and the down-and-out locations of so much of Bukowski's work, mistaking the topic for the subject. Bukowski's subject was not excess, but people—most usually those driven to the edge for one reason or another and who, thus marginalized, found some measure of comfort in excess. In one of the Kerouac books there is a Buddhist prayer that often comes to mind reading Bukowski, and it applies to him as well as his characters: "Equally ignorant, equally to be loved, equally a coming Buddha." Substitute "enlightened one" or "someone who has his or her shit together" for a coming Buddha and you'll get the picture Bukowski painted so often and so well.

Bukowski's work celebrates honesty, applauds courage, pities failure, and mourns defeat. The direct language—the style of no-
style—simply gets to the heart of the matter as quickly as possible. Yet Bukowski can tell a story, in a poem just as well as in a short story, play, or novel. He takes you places. Sometimes the trip is long, sometimes short, but it is definitely travel that changes.

I became acquainted with Bukowski briefly—by correspon-
dence—when I sent him a note apologizing for a typo in one of his poems we published (PBQ #43 for those who keep score). The computer software we use to scan typewritten copy (and save meager staff time from retyping text) is not only virtually but actually brainless, and it "read" a capital "I" as an exclamation point. The line appeared "I've asked this question before and/ all! ever get back is a gentle/ smile." His poems that issue were a late addition, and as the proofreader of last resort I missed it. He wrote back promptly and graciously: it was no big deal, don't worry about it, he was proud to be published in PBQ. And we were proud to be among the many small magazines to which he contributed, both before and certainly after his fame was nationalized as a result of "Barfly."

As Lou McKee pointed out in an essay in PBQ #45 ("Thirteen Ways of Looking at Bukowski"), the quality of Bukowski's later material has been uneven—which is not too surprising given the sheer volume of his body of work. The three poems in the issue you are holding—which was in production at the time of his death—may not be among his best (though I think one of them is); but in the sense that he gave many small magazines the benefit of the doubt, we can certainly do the same. Let's be honest as well: we won't be hearing more from this unusual voice; let's listen one more time.

I find myself in academia again, and recently I overheard two undergraduates discussing (not very deeply I'm afraid) an English assignment comparing Bukowski and Henry Miller. I felt a twinge of something I couldn't quite place, a realization that Bukowski is now a dead poet, a sadness that he had been consigned the fate of an assigned reading, the thought that perhaps Bukowski is not a poet to be "discussed." His is the poetry of discovery and experience. Bukowski was not a reflective "you" poet, but he was an "I" poet—not in the confessional sense, but in more of a Whitmanesque sense, though more content with himself than full of himself. It was a large "I"—perhaps more of an exclamation than a letter after all—and, thanks to the semi-permanence of the printed page, still is.

he makes
a little
of the darkness
retreat
here

pretentious pap smeared along the sanctified avenues
again and again
until almost everybody believes it is viable.
our history is a kick in the ass
to even the ungentle sensibility.
say
goodnight.
from the inward eye

notre, notre, no, dam, notre dame,
no more, no less, no hot, no cold,
nothing, just the firing of icy bliss,
the frog in the refrigerator.
don’t laugh, you can’t do better
than this.
you can do worse.
you have.
you have nothing to meet the
night with.
even hell teaches a man
nothing
and life, much less.
first poem back from hell

with more hell to come, of course,
dear friend.
but look, 64 days and nights in that
place, bags of chemotherapy, bags of
antibiotics, bags of blood running through
the catheter.
leukemia.
who, me?

at age 72 I had this foolish thought that
I’d just die peacefully in my sleep
some night.  but
the gods want it their way, they’ve never
been too easy on this
one.
I mean me, brother.
I mean, see me here now:
I sit at this machine, shattered and
battered, still seeking after the Muse.
I am back—for the moment,
and nothing seems stranger.
but I am not re-born, only
re-tossed.

into more days, more nights,
into you, reading
this.
White Blues

Big fat mama cloud
laughin’ at me.
Blowin’ a bluesy beat
‘cross the sky
like ocean foam in slo’ mo’.

Mello Mama you my queen.
Breasts of cumulus collision
pig and poodle drip from you lips
as cotton toes turn to dog.

Mello Mama you all mine.
Glance down upon you languid lover
as I spy and sigh a sly sigh
‘coz I know when wind blows
you back you white ass—SMASH!
right into Smog Daddy’s mouth.

Float free Mama.
He eat you up see.
Right down to the final
white cotton fluff.
My Black Mama Poem

if you could see
my mama standing
in Harlem at sunset
the wind threatening
in vain
to rearrange her hair
you'd know the woman was
a poem

a boogaloo-philly dance of
a poem
A Joe Tex, Al Green
listenin' poem
a sweet-potatoes, chitlins
grits & gravy type
poem

a my man's gone
but I'm still
standing poem

a whatever
don't kill me
makes me stronger
poem

a hand on her hip
"boy, don't you give no shit"
poem

a I used to be
a queen
& can't nobody tell
my spine
no different poem
if you could see
my black mama
standing erect
after the shit tide
this america's
dumped on her
you'd say, DAMN
if that ain't superwoman
she damn sho nuff be
a black & defiant

poem.
Schrader’s Sleeper

Good films come and go quickly these days, and if you miss them, you wait for their second coming on video. In my city Howard's End and Hear My Song are being held over for their umpteenth weeks, while Atom Egoyan’s The Adjuster and Brian De Palma’s Raising Cain have both come and gone without much fanfare, critical or otherwise. And now Paul Schrader’s Light Sleeper has also come and gone too quickly. Its disappearance is especially lamentable, because Light Sleeper to my mind is Schrader’s best work: not because it is his latest work nor because it is his most original work (the plot in fact devolves by film’s end to echoes of both Taxi Driver and An American Gigolo), but because it is his most mature work and, I know it sounds reactionary to say so, his most “spiritual” work. I want to elaborate on both the maturity of Schrader and the spirituality of Light Sleeper in this essay.

Much of what constitutes the spiritual in Schrader is the gradual absorption of plot by style, the slow metamorphosis of the mundane into something mythic, characters who are small and eccentric in their lifestyles and isolation who finally reach out and get communion with others, and a seedy damnation permeating every frame until a surprise salvation mutes everything by film’s end. Schrader still tracks obsession like no one else. Good still battles evil and loses every round but the last one. A hip and world-weary consciousness of sex, drugs and violence finally becomes morality play. Forgiveness for all past sins, transcendence and salvation are always lurking about, hovering over the lost souls, atmospheric, disembodied, waiting to be donned as clothing. These are what Schrader brings to every film he writes and directs.

Schrader at his best is always three parts mood, one part character/pplot. Nowhere is this more apparent than the opening shots of the film: nighttime in New York, New York during a garbage strike, a car’s headlights moving along a wet and dirty street, all pavement, no curbs or sidewalks or buildings or sky. This lush cinematography is by Ed Lachman who did the camera
work for most of Werner Herzog's films. The musical score is composed and performed by Michael Been, a rolling rock ballad, Bruce Springsteen soundalike, dirge for a dirty city. At various intervals throughout the film either the camera of Lachman or the score by Been "erupt" and suspend our narrative or steal its thunder. For example, in a moment of pain Willem Dafoe's John LeTour character takes a ring off his finger, the ring which is his last trace or "relic" of his relationship with Marianne (Dana Delany), and throws it out his apartment window. Lachman's camera immediately assumes a point of view shot from the window, looking down at a wide-angle alley of poeticized garbage, a sea of flotsam and jetsam, the view so overwhelming that it literally loses the ring and the character's gesture. As for the Been score, the words and notes are less important than the melancholy they convey. They are finally "palpable and mute," just as a poem should be. The same can be said for John's voice-over observations from the back seat of his chauffeur-driven drugmobile and the many entries in his diaries: observations about the drug culture then and now, about how the interdiction against putting anything down on paper only underscores his need to write, about the inevitability of change and the need for rebirth. The words are all very palpable and finally very mute. We wait for insights which never come. These private asides to the audience entertain but never educate. For all his lived experience, John is surprisingly naive, lacking in wiles and depth. But then he's on the same page as Robert De Niro's character in Taxi Driver and Richard Gere's character in An American Gigolo. All three are loners, creatures of procedural codes, easily betrayed. But because all three are not "bothered" by intellect and are in fact less clever than other characters around them and less clever than most spectators, they are worthy of salvation.

How, then, are we drawn in? At first glance, John seems not only less than exceptional but also slightly despicable, since he is, after all, a drug courier. The best that can be said for him is that he's loyal to his boss Ann (Susan Sarandon), he's clean and he has vague aspirations of doing something with music sometime. And Willem Dafoe's performance is quiet and subtle
for quite awhile into the film: he's both hyper and passive, full of wide eyes and goofy grins, a survivor of his own drug addiction. He wonders if Ann is really serious about getting out of the drug business and into cosmetics. He wonders if his luck will hold. Schrader resists the temptation to give us John's past in his voice-over observations and diary entries. Instead, we learn who he used to be (and have to guess at who he now is) almost exclusively from Marianne, his lover from the past, and Ann. He used to have rages, he used to be abusive, he used to go away for long stretches of time without checking in. He divulges none of this. It's as though he doesn't remember or doesn't know, was in a fog of substance abuse, cannot account for his past, has only selective memory of the good times. He is a first-class second-class citizen, in keeping with both the diary entries and musical score, which are first-rate at being of pulp or "B" caliber. Until he takes charge of his actions, he is severely co-dependent. He has no identity other than that given to him by the women, the one a former lover he worships to distraction, the other a boss he obeys and protects like a dog its master (he says of Ann: "She made me.").

In fact, it's because he has so little to recommend himself that Schrader can script a narrative in which appearances are deceiving and nothing and r.o one are as they appear to be, menacing in most thrillers, but more ironic and finally fatalistic here. And it's because John has so little to recommend himself that he can earn our interest and respect (in religious terms, the meeting of actual grace (good deeds) and sanctifying grace (divine fate)). After an apparently chance encounter with Marianne, he pursues her, stalks her, sits silent vigil at her mother's hospital death bed, without saying so much as a word to Ann or Robert, who is gay and seems to live with Ann as her second-in-command. Pressured by an addict named Eddie, who cannot hold his coke, John decides on his own to cut Eddie off, finally knocking him out and calling Eddie's brother to come to the rescue. Hounded by a homicide cop, John finds a way to give up someone (Tis, the "contact," who is slated to take over Ann's business when she goes into cosmetics, but who is guilty of three instances of abuse of women, involving prostitution, cocaine
overdose and violence), but never betrays Ann or Robert. And
told by a psychic named Theresa (Mary Beth Hurt) that he
will be betrayed by a woman close to him, he suspects Ann
for most of the rest of the film, not realizing until it’s too late
that it was Marianne who “betrayed” him by falsely representing
their past and falsely representing herself as cleaned up, when
in fact she’s a prostitute and a junkie.

He doesn’t see through people at all. In fact, he miscalculates
at every turn, scenes doubling and redoubling (the hospital,
the funeral parlor, Eddie’s apartment, etc.) without an eerie
coincidence ever being invoked. As street-smart as he supposedly
is, he doesn’t even know how to use a gun. But one good deed
after another, his small compassions begin to add up, until finally
he is a choir-boy courier, not unlike, in a twisted bit of ersatz
intertextuality, the Jesus that Dafoe portrayed in Martin Scorsese’s
The Last Temptation of Christ. In fact, given the religious under-
tones of Light Sleeper, I wonder if Dafoe wasn’t asked to play
the role of John in part because of his previous depiction of
Jesus. The press kit for the film informs us that the title of the
film comes from the New Testament, ostensibly from the passages
about the apostles being light sleepers around the Garden of
Gethsemane.

Susan Sarandon as Ann and Dana Delany as Marianne are
both extraordinary: Sarandon, who remains undefiled by all
her dealings in drugs, because her mind is on business and her
heart is in the right place; and Delany, who seems desperate
to be clean and do the right thing in avoiding John and staying
by her mother, but who finally literally “falls from Grace” (she
either jumps or is pushed to her death from Grace Towers).

The duality in these two women is nothing new to Schrader:
De Niro’s taxi driver vacillates between the cold soul of the
politician’s aide and the lost soul of the child prostitute. The
former will not have him, while the latter cannot keep him
away. Travis’ aborted assassination attempt on the politician
leads both logically and irrationally to the violent purge of the
pimp and mobsters. Similarly, Richard Gere’s gigolo is betrayed
by Nina Van Pallandt, his madam-boss, but then he is redeemed
by the love of Lauren Hutton’s character, wife of a politician,
who gives up her riches, power and prestige to visit him in prison and let him know she will dutifully wait for his release.

These two endings are eerily conflated in *Light Sleeper*. John, like Travis, performs a ritualistic purge of Tis and his two bodyguards, but then he survives the wounds he receives to be visited in prison by Ann, who apparently will wait for his release. An irony here: in the career switch from drugs to cosmetics, she looks less made-up, more "natural." Whereas Travis affected his purge in a deranged and suicidal state, John goes into his purge with full lucidity, to revenge Marianne (and perhaps the two earlier victims) and to save Ann. And whereas the gigolo and politician’s wife have had ample and diverse sexual relations, John and Ann talk about a sexual relationship yet to be consummated.

A major part of any personal rehabilitation in Schrader is talk, a talking cure without a therapist. When John and Marianne make love, they kneel, knees to knees, on a bed and talk. They’re both amazed at the hardness of his erection. They don’t remember hardness or erections from before, because both were so drugged. There is a rite of passage to this talk, a conversational losing of virginity, since this is the first time they’ve been together without drugs. This conversation prepares the way for, and bookends with, the final conversation between John and Ann. He asks if they ever slept together. She says once. Did they have sex, he asks. We tried, she says. He says he’s been thinking about it (having sex with Ann), is looking forward to it. The film ends with him kissing her hand.

What saves this talk and content from schmaltz and sentimentality is the Schrader style: small characters in a lackluster drama, elevated to mythic proportions by high production values, interesting composition, a highly patterned montage. The characters do no more than conform to the visual strategies, which is to say that there is no conscious awareness of them in the narrative proper. I want to enumerate just a few of these strategies.

The production values in *Light Sleeper* remind me very much of Schrader’s previous effort, directing Harold Pinter’s script for *The Comfort of Strangers*: the same costuming by Armani, the same earth colors (ochers, ambers, browns) everywhere,
the same “malevolent vitality of inanimate objects” (Maya Deren’s phrase), even though The Comfort of Strangers is a study of two narcissists in the grip of the crazy Christopher Walken character in an Arab-inflected Venice. Still, the rich tapestries and many canals and winding streets of Venice have the same visual look as New York during a garbage strike in Light Sleeper. It’s like a surrealist metaphor, as disparate as these two locales are, the umbrella and the sewing machine enjoined by the dissection/editing table of Schrader.

The metaphor of containment runs rampant through Light Sleeper. The effectiveness of the metaphor lies in the fact that the characters are utterly unaware of its many configurations: two funeral viewings in the same week for mother and daughter, with John on the periphery of both. One of the most blatant examples of compositional containment is the prison-visit format, shot in profile, with blockage between two characters that we see more clearly than the characters, themselves, see. The actual prison visit between John and Ann at film’s end is preceded by the same camera positioning in the hospital cafeteria when John and Marianne are having coffee: in profile, looking into the end of the table, but this time John in the “visitor’s” position on the right and Marianne in the “inmate’s” position on the left. The compositional containment here speaks more clearly to the unworkability of their relationship than either of them can. Containment as imprisonment is further embellished by the various iron gates, elevator cages, bedposts and the like, which, taken by themselves, are innocent enough as objects, but as a cluster they complicate and elaborate the metaphor of containment.

A more dynamic use of the containment metaphor is that to be found in the many uses made of art objects and intertextual allusions, which take the form of miniatures or gigantesques. At one point in Ann’s apartment, John, Robert and Ann attend to business while on a small portable television set there appears a clip from Kenneth Anger’s Scorpio Rising, a landmark film of the American avant-garde, which mixes themes of astrology, biker culture, homosexuality and death to rock songs of the period. Oblivious to the film clip, the three characters in Light
Sleeper nevertheless emblematize the various themes from Scorpio Rising: Ann, the astrology; Robert, homosexuality; John, biker culture. On a deeper and more unsettling level, John represents all of these as well as death or death-wish: astrology in his worry about luck and going to a psychic; a latent homosexuality; and an overlay of drug culture fashion upon the earlier biker culture. The Kenneth Anger clip is an example of miniature: a small, boxed throwaway allusion to an earlier text, a mise-en-abîme of homage, one auteur to another. But the miniature contains an alternative narrative reading to the present narrative, one which problematizes and complicates it.

The most blatant example of gigantesque is the sex scene in Marianne's bedroom. Has anyone ever seen a more ill-placed or more enlarged Vermeer as the portrait of Vermeer's wife that dominates the frame, covering most of the wall behind the bed? The scene is Schrader at his most ritualistic and, therefore, most provocative. The two lovers are naked, but religiously so. They kneel on the bed, knees touching knees, discussing the novelty of having erections without drugs, while the Vermeer woman, bowed head and eyes to one side, seems to be a "sacred" presence, modest and forcibly voyeuristic. The background art so large that it finally must be seen as part of the foreground reminded me of the Franz Hals painting that so dominates the restaurant wall in Peter Greenaway's The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover. Just as an awareness of the fact that Franz Hals beat his wife to death and got away with it gives us more insight into the abusive character of Albert Spica in the Greenaway film, so too the Vermeer (bespeaking purity, precision of color tones and integrity vis-à-vis the later forgeries of Vermeer's works) sets the "spiritual tone" for John in this scene, if not for Marianne, whose bedroom it is, for she is no Vermeer ideal.

This gigantesque is itself a recycling of an intertextual miniature, for it is the same Vermeer painting that the woman is looking at in Luis Bunuel's Un chien andalou (Andalusian Dog), just before she is sexually "assaulted" by the man with ants in his hand and blood coming from his mouth.

Both of these examples of miniature and gigantesque expand and contract the parameters of containment, offering intertextual
allusions and alternative narratives, all the while shocking the text: demystifying the Anger by shrinking it, eroticizing the Vermeer (as Bunuel had done before him) by enacting ritual sex in front of it, as part of the canvas.

These are examples of architectural montage, just as Eisenstein delineated it: the small and meaningful ring tossed into a gigantic alley of meaningless garbage. Just so, in the rest of the film the miniatures and gigantesques proliferate, from the small Oriental figurines to the large bar murals. In this way, Schrader builds up a visual universe far stronger than the storyline or content narrative, a spiritual universe that is palpable (richly physical in Lachman's depth-of-field detail) and mute (there is no empirical reading of them).

This muteness speaks to part of the problem with audience reception of Light Sleeper, The Adjuster and Raising Cain, films alluded to at the beginning of this essay. There has been, for at least a decade now, an undeniable backlash against intellectual strategies and smart filmmakers. The New Yorker called Greenaway “an intellectual bully” in its review of The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover. Thoughtful studies of obsession in films have always made people a little uncomfortable, critics and general audiences alike. That Schrader raises the unsavory or morally questionable character or milieu to a sacramental level, a state of grace, is both silly and shocking, embarrassing on the surface and provocative in its depth. Look at the trajectory of character movement in the three Schrader films most discussed here: taxi driver to crackpot assassin to ironic hero in Taxi Driver; gigolo to framed victim to outcast to redeemed-by-love in An American Gigolo; drug courier to assassin to reborn in Light Sleeper. These are outrageous trajectories.

Par for the course in Hollywood is the action-excessive narrative, heavy on special effects, light on acting demands and bereft of good writing, especially in the immaturity of dialogue. Such films are characterized by lacunae in logic, a decrease in production values (for all the advances in special effects) and the many false codas, one ending after another, but always several beyond the satisfactory. In Aristotelian terms, there is an acceleration of rising action so as to have multiple moments of peripateia,
knee-jerk climaxes, jackhammer rhythms. This is true by the way for comedies as well as dramas.

I was one of those who has always liked Schrader as a writer. Only recently have I come to appreciate his directorial skills. I admire his persistence of vision over many years and many films, his refusal to take short-cuts in making his narratives more accessible, and his energized mania for style. And just when theory has all but obliterated such pre-theory auteurist notions like the spiritual in film, it seems appropriate in this case to revive it.
Contributors' Notes

Aaron Anstett's poems have appeared most recently in Shenandoah and Fine Madness. Other poems are forthcoming in Cream City Review, Porta Del Sol, and Sonora Review.


Charles Bukowski, a poet, novelist, and screenwriter with over forty books to his credit, died March 9, 1994. He will be missed.

Rick Bursky's poems have been published widely. New poems are forthcoming in The Brooklyn Review, Gulf Stream Magazine, and The Southern Poetry Review. He is the editor of The Herman Review.

The poems published here are from Scott Francis's new manuscript A Dunce Cap Gorged with Kyoto Quasi-Petrarchan Sonnets. Other poems have been published in numerous magazines including Pegasus, South Coast Poetry, Colorado North, and Folio. His original China poems and translations from the Chinese have appeared in numerous publications. Scott Francis teaches English as a Foreign Language at various local universities in Kyoto.

Jerry Hagins is production manager for Painted Bride Quarterly and is a former member of the editorial staff.

David Holper's short stories have appeared in Grand Street, The New Virginia Review, Quarterly West and other magazines. He is currently teaching at Sacramento City College, and is working on his first novel and a composition manual.

Wang Hui-Ming is a painter, woodcut print-maker, and a calligrapher in Chinese and Western calligraphies. He has published nine books, and has had more than forty one-man shows.

Stephanie Ivanoff is pursuing her MFA degree at the University
of Michigan, where she has won several Hopwood Awards and a Roy W. Cowden Memorial Fellowship. She has work forthcoming in *The American Voice*.

**Gary Juliano**'s poems have most recently appeared in *Dallas Review*. He is currently working as a carpenter in Vermont.

**Elliot Kaloidis**'s poetry and fiction has appeared in *The Howling Mantra* and *Asylum*. He and his wife live in an apartment filled with animals in Brooklyn, NY.

Poetry, prose and translations by **Susanne Kort** have appeared most recently in *Antioch Review*, *Graham House Review*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *The Salmon Review* (Ireland), and *Vigil* (U.K.). Born and raised in New York, she has lived and worked in Caracas for several years.

The work of **Richard Krause** has appeared in such magazines as *Portland Review*, *Prism*, *California Quarterly*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *American Poetry Review*, *Wind*, *Tsunami*, and *Onionhead*.

**Teresa Leo** is a former editor of *Painted Bride Quarterly*.

**Lyn Lifshin** is the author of many collections of poetry, including *Madonna Who Shifts for Herself* and *Kiss the Skin Off*. She recently edited *Tangled Vines: Poems to Celebrate and explore the Relationship Between mothers and Daughters*. A documentary by Mary Ann Lynch, *Lyn Lifshin: Not Made of Glass*, was recently made about the poet.

**Marjorie Maddox** has poems published or forthcoming in over 130 journals, including *Poetry*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Cutbank*, *Tamaqua*, *Kansas Quarterly*, and *Anthology of Magazine Verse* and *Yearbook of American Poetry*. Her fiction has appeared in *The Sonora Review* and *Great Stream Review*. She has been a semi-finalist, finalist, and the winner of numerous poetry competitions. Marjorie Maddox was awarded the Sage Graduate Fellowship in Creative Writing for her M.F.A. at Cornell. In 1989 she was awarded the Academy of American Poets Prize. In 1993 her poetry won *Seattle Review*’s Bentley Prize for Poetry.
and Fiction. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Literature and Writing at Lock Haven University.

**Chelsea Mauldin's** poems have been published in *The Berkeley Poetry Review* and *Byzantium*. She is an editor at *Fodor's Berkeley Guides*.

This is **Robert Miller's** first publication. He works at the art library at Princeton University and is studying toward a Master's degree in Library Service at Rutgers.

**Pamela Morley** attends college and lives with her husband, children, and dogs. Her work is inspired by the people and places of northern California, where she has spent her entire life.

**David Munro** is an ex-merchant marine, now employed as a construction laborer in Holland, PA. This is his first publication.

**Matthew Murrey's** poems have appeared in various journals, including *Kansas Quarterly*, *Poetry East*, *Clockwatch Review*, and *Zone 3*. He has work forthcoming in others such as *Poet and Critic* and *Wilderness*. He works as a mental health counselor in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois.

**Margaret Renkl's** first chapbook *The Marigold Poems* (Still Waters Press) was published in August, 1993; other poems have recently appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Manhattan Poetry Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Oregon Review*, among others. She lives and gardens in Nashville, Tennessee.

Over 70 magazines, journals, and anthologies have published the work of **Linwood M. Ross**, including *African American Review*, *Boulevard*, *Catalyst* and *Drew Blood Press*. He was a featured poet in *Haight Ashbury Literary Review*, and *In the Tradition*, an anthology of young black writers.

**Bethany Saltman** has been published in *Brooklyn Review*. New poems are forthcoming in two issues of *New York Quarterly*. She will receive her MFA from Brooklyn College in June, 1994.
Ann Tashi Slater has had a short story included in American Dragons, an anthology of fiction by Asian-American Writers. A translation from the Spanish by Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas was published by Grove Press in Old Rosa: A Novel in Two Stories. She received the Hopwood Prize for short fiction from the University of Michigan, where she received her MFA. She currently teaches at a university in Tokyo.

Tracy Trefethen’s work has appeared in Antioch Review, Quarry, Hayden’s Ferry Review and The New Virginia Review, among others. She currently teaches writing in experimental workshops mong various community groups, including Alzheimer’s residents and adolescents. This fall, she will co-facilitate a workshop with a dance therapist, combining aspects of writing and movement.


“White Blues” is Lynn Wagner’s first publication. She lives in Bethlehem, PA, where she frequents the open readings at Godfrey Daniel’s Coffeehouse.

J.G. Wolfensberger works nights as a computer programmer, and lives in Hagerstown, MD. He worked briefly as a staff writer for Warm Welcomes Magazine, and found non-fiction writing dispiriting. New work is forthcoming in Midnight Zoo.

Andrena Zawinski is a Pittsburgh Public Schools teacher and a teacher-consultant for the Western Pennsylvania Writer’s project. She is a Lambda award recipient for poetry workshops she is conducting for people living with AIDS. Her poems have appeared in Santa Clara Review, Kalliope Journal of Women’s Art, Eclectic Literary Forum, and many other journals. This poem is from her manuscript Traveling in Reflected Light. She is involved in a number of projects that make poetry accessible to the general public.
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