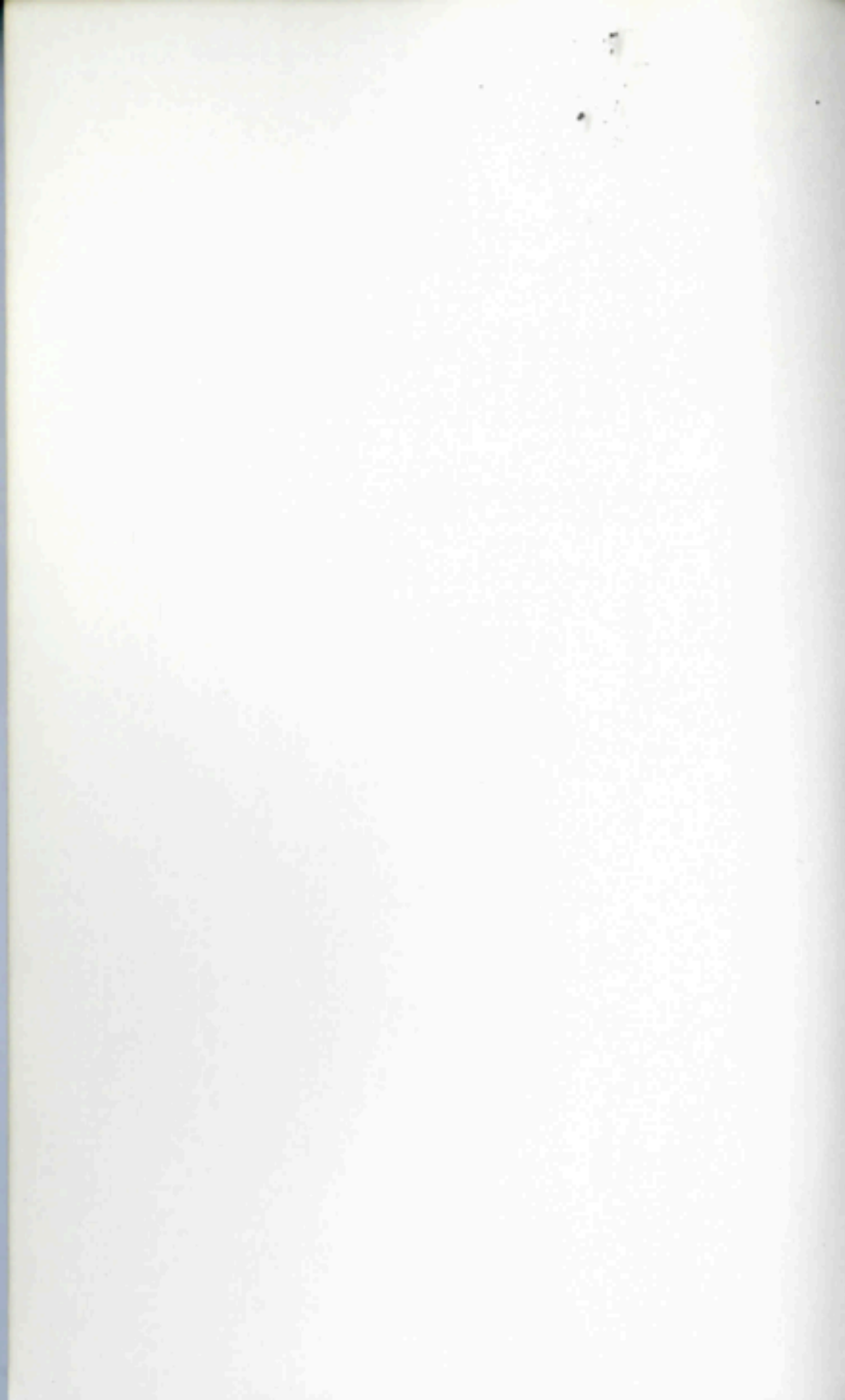


# CONDITIONS: 11/12

THE DOUBLE ISSUE







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*a feminist magazine of writing by women  
with an emphasis on writing by lesbians*

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*Conditions* was founded in 1976 by Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen Irena Klepfisz, and Rima Shore.

*Conditions Eleven/Twelve* was edited by Dorothy Allison, Cheryl Clarke, Nancy Clarke Otter, Debbi Schaubman

*Conditions Eleven/Twelve* was typeset by Diane Lubarsky.

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## TO OUR READERS:

For the first time in the history of *CONDITIONS*, the Collective has produced a double issue, *CONDITIONS: ELEVEN/TWELVE*. The process of compiling the issue has been exciting. Thirty-three contributors are presented herein. *CONDITIONS* reflects, in this issue, the Collective's long-standing commitment to diversity—of writing style and content and of backgrounds of contributors.

We are proud, once again, to bring you new writers whose work has never before been published; writers whose work has never appeared in *CONDITIONS*; new work by writers who are currently and formerly members of the Collective; and many of our old friends who continue to send us their most challenging work. We have tried to fulfill our promise to feature more work by visual artists.

As always, our Collective is changing. We are in the process of adding new members, as the three remaining editors become ever more aware of the difficulty of creating a publication of the magnitude and quality of *CONDITIONS* while each of us holds down a full-time job. Though we've continued to publish and are thankful to our various grantors, the magazine is hardly out of financial stress as resources continue to disappear.

With the publication of *CONDITIONS: TEN*, **Elly Bulkin**, one of the four founding editors, resigned from the Collective to devote full time to her own work. We miss her stamina, tenacity, and commitment. **Nancy Clarke Otter**, who was our anchor in the production of *TEN* and who selected and edited manuscripts for this issue, has taken a full-time job with a union and relocated outside of New York. We miss her. However, a new Collective member joined us last summer and worked on the production of *ELEVEN/TWELVE*. **Debbi Schaubman**, a Jewish lesbian feminist, born in Brooklyn, reared in Edison, and living in New Brunswick, N.J., works as a research assistant in the Sociology Department at Rutgers University and previously worked as a counselor to women who were victims of rape or domestic violence. After nearly eight years as our distribution manager, **Shelley Messing**, another of our anchors, will be leaving the magazine to do social work. We will miss her tremendously and wish her well.

On October 27, 1984, at P.S. 41 in Manhattan, the Collective organized a benefit poetry reading, which featured twelve of our past contributors: Paula Gunn Allen, Jan Clausen, Enid Dame, Toi Derricotte, Alexis DeVeaux, Judy Grahm, Marilyn Hacker, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, Irena Klepfisz, Judith McDaniel, Cherrie Moraga, and Luz Maria Umpierre. The readings were signed for the hearing impaired. Music and song were pre-

sented by Adrienne Waddy, Ubaka Hill, and Mujafi Johnson. We would like to thank all of the artists who made this event the great success it was.

In these politically and economically repressive times, the **CONDITIONS** Magazine Editorial Collective wishes to reaffirm our commitment to publishing the work of lesbians, women of color, working class women, and any women who consider commitments to women as integral parts of their lives. And, finally, **CONDITIONS** depends not just on your financial and moral support, but also on your responses, critical and otherwise. Write us!

Dorothy Allison

Cheryl Clarke

Debbi Schaubman



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**POETRY**

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POETRY

FICTION

ESSAYS





## A FAMILY AFFAIR

Candles burned when the women made Lindon  
upstairs, an attic loft with round windows.  
The juice came in a clean jar of Grey Poupon,  
half teaspoonful sucked into a glass  
eye dropper. Molly made the first squeeze.  
Marsha took it inside, cervix  
pink and waiting. They met him  
in a health food store, pleased  
with his bicyclist's body. He likes  
lavender, and won't charge.  
The clinic rate is a hundred dollars,  
an hour old. No candles.

Just an idea once, Lindon  
now wakes up each night. Runny nose,  
he splats his tiny hands on the television,  
smearing the six o'clock news.  
Grandmother won't hear half  
his story. She invents her own:  
a deserting husband, too young  
to be a proper father.  
Better that, than friends  
think her daughter did it  
unmarried. Ashamed to learn so late  
of the wedding, they send glass  
doves and swans, while Marsha picks  
a new family name.

Lindon does alright furtive aunts  
wait their turns, assuring him  
Daddy certainly was a handsome man,  
all that fine blond hair, strong thighs.  
They would strangle Daddy if they could, prefer  
to think him dead already, spare Marsha



painful details. As indulgent uncles  
talk to Lindon's toes, they marvel  
at how well she looks, not even showing  
grief.

Candles burned when the women made Lindon  
In an attic loft with round windows  
a little mustard goes a long way.

WAR DOG

You came looking for me on the hottest nights.  
Effie's Bar near the interchange, or the Powwow  
Club farther north. Watched for cops who patrolled  
the area heavily, I mean, you were not white. While  
the husband I stole you from roamed back the other way,  
looked for skinny blond girls to keep him hungry.

I took you to the club, and you were always ready.  
Your knife wrapped in leather on your hip; you knew  
it wasn't cool to be Cheyenne in America, let alone  
a southwestern city where even your name was open  
to question.

I say you earned it. Even now, five years later  
and I understand the rules much better, but still  
don't follow them. And know you wouldn't believe them  
if you had lived to tell their truths back.

War Dog. It wasn't just the whites either. Your  
husband hated you for being a contradiction, laughed  
at you for your nasty tongue, so fluent, it killed him.  
He blamed Oklahoma and the white blood, but you knew  
it was nothing, could even smile in a language  
foreign to your own.

Knew how to lose it all, in another language.

I always wondered why you left when you did, took  
your son and escaped to another edge of sundown.  
I forever loved you but knew there wasn't a season  
here you could believe in.

Hey War Dog. I don't forget. This fall there are  
green chilies roasting, and chickens are fat and greasy

in the yard you left behind. Tell your son the air  
is changing and we are not the only crazy ones.

And know that I look for you, long nights like this  
when the moon draws a yellow knife in danger. Know we  
are all lucky, and that you could return to it all  
as easily as you left.



## DANCER

I always like nights like this in the bar  
when I go alone and there's a drag show or  
other acts playing. Tonight it is Santa Fe  
but other nights it has been Tuscon, Nashville,  
or New York.

I know I am not the only one alone. Perhaps  
we all come together to observe, alone,  
together in our aloneness. Perhaps I come  
alone to these parades of drag queens, strip  
tease dancers to see who I might have become,  
without witness. I have thought about it often.

Tonight the entertainment is hot from Las Vegas.  
Carmen Cocoa and "her" review. The mirror light  
is spinning and the crowd parts as she glides  
onto the stage from near the bar. She loses  
feathers. Straight men come to the bar for this,  
pick them up and put them to their noses.  
With her they are safe.

She dances, is a better woman than I'll ever be.  
Goes through her acts: a latin number, a dramatic  
waltz, and disco acrobatic coup.

And it's usually more of the same. But tonight  
she introduces a treat, she says, for the women.  
The music starts up, a current number on the top  
forty charts, and out she comes.

A mulatto woman, beautiful, with green eyes. She  
dances halftime to the music. The women in the bar  
are yelling, stamping feet, ooohhhing. Yes,  
this woman knows how to dance, and is naked, just  
for them.

The mirror light circles and circles. She is not  
in her eyes. There is a place where space curves.  
It is there I touch her and know that even as her  
body dances her soul cannot be reached out there  
on the stage.

She is drowning. I dive into her pain. Her father  
is Black and she is haunted by what she feels is the  
mistake of her own whiteness. And it is the white ones  
she exposes herself to, the white ones she pretends  
to fuck.

I leave before the show is over, into  
the night where the air is a sucking wind.  
I did not stay to ask her for her name.  
I pour the final taste of my drink to the  
ground. It is not wasted, but a prayer,  
for the dancer I might have become.

## WEDDING RECEPTION

Now close your eyes  
I close my eyes  
I'm gonna go in the other room, she says  
and when I come back in . . . I'm gonna be the doctor  
don't open your eyes  
I close my eyes  
I hear her party shoes tipping across the wood floor  
the door opens  
the door closes  
the door opens  
I am trying not to laugh  
I feel her eight year old breath on my cheek  
she is feeling my pulse  
she is checking my reflexes  
listening with her invisible stethoscope  
to my heart  
my heart  
O.K. I'll be right back she says  
don't open your eyes  
through the slit between my eyelashes  
I see the blur of her blue tafetta party dress  
disappear through the door  
I close my eyes  
I hear the party downstairs  
family, friends, alcohol and cocaine  
a live band  
Philly rocks to the Planet Rock/ don't stop  
Detroit rocks to the Planet Rock/ don't stop

She comes back  
checks my pulse  
checks my reflexes  
fingers moving up my thigh  
I am smiling wondering how far she will take this



O.K. she says I'll be right back  
don't open your eyes  
tip tip tip out the door  
I close my eyes  
when she comes back in she tells me  
unbutton your top button  
I do what she tells me  
she slips her stethoscope into my blouse  
I feel her fingertip just above each breast  
she tells me  
unbutton the next one  
says don't open your eyes  
I'll be right back  
tip tip tip  
the door opening and closing  
I am scared  
my blouse is half open and I am waiting for her to come back  
I lean back in the rocking chair  
The Granny chair she calls it  
Now you sit in the Granny chair she told me  
when she brought me to this room  
I rock  
the door opens  
tip tip tip tip  
now take off your bra she says  
I say I'm not wearing a bra  
she falters for a moment

Oh she says . . .  
I'm going to unbutton the next two buttons  
O.K.? she says  
O.K. I answer  
I am the patient she is the doctor  
are you married? she asks me  
no I say  
too bad she says

you're pretty . . . somebody will want to marry you  
her hand is right above my nipple  
I'll be right back  
tip tip tip tip  
I hear my name from the hallway  
the door opens  
my eyes open  
my blouse is open  
Where have you been?  
What are you doing?  
Nothing I say relieved it's not the girl's mother  
I walk into the hall with my lover  
tell her I've been playing doctor  
tell her I don't know what to do  
I say should I stop?  
my lover just stares at me  
she says you know what to do  
she's a child  
I go back in the room  
sit back in the Granny chair  
the door opens  
tip tip tip tip  
eight year old breath  
I open my eyes  
don't open your eyes! she says  
I take her on my lap  
I've got to go now  
why? she says

will you come back?  
I say no  
she says close your eyes  
I say no  
she says just for a second  
I close my eyes  
she kisses me on the mouth

I say you're a very nice little girl but I have to go  
I walk out of the room down the stairs  
the party is in full swing  
L.A. rocks to the Planet Rock/ don't stop  
Chicago rocks to the Planet Rock/ don't stop

Half an hour later I go looking for her to say goodbye  
find her upstairs on the landing  
staring into another woman's eyes.



**in a house of wooden monkeys**

Summer rain, she sounded heavy on the new tin roof. Loud whispers run up and down the rough wooden pews. Father MacIntyre is getting impatient. He know Moses will not come and he can not perform the ceremony if Moses is not there.

"Yate, where is Moses? We have waited long enough," the father say.

"He soon come, father. He know we waiting for he," the young woman say, lowering her eyes to the fat brown baby she hold close to her heart. She doesn't seem to notice the impatience in the air, but her throat is tight as a witch drum and her spine tingle with tension. On this most important day she and Moses had fought over the ritual to baptize the baby in holy water to protect it. Moses raised his hand to slap her, a thing he never done, and left before he did. She is in misery, but can not show it before all who had come to witness.

The child in Yate arms is restless and cry. Yate carefully open her worn white cotton blouse and offer her breast, full with milk, to the child. She guide her tender nipple into her baby mouth. She suck it noisily. Clear brown eyes watch, full dark lips smile at her baby. The most happiness she ever had in her young life, because she got to keep this one. She lost two before this baby.

Hill folk say Widow took her babies. The first one Widow drown in a dream sack. Told folk she dream Yate baby would be born dead, and it was. The second time, Widow strangle her baby with the mother string. Everyone know Widow done it. Widow is a toothless young woman who come to Greenlove Mountain as a young girl to live with her grandmother, a rootwoman, in a wood shack by the road. Her grandmother die shortly after she come and as she was strange and thought to be blessed of evil, no one took her in. So she live in the hills. She get the name Widow by the birthmark shaped like a widow spider on her forehead and by her dark attitude and visions of death.

The third time Yate discover there is a child growing inside her, she begin to go to Greenlove Mountain Church on Sundays. The whiteman come from England to teach her people about his god, who he say is the all mighty and all powerful one. He is a rich god. He allow the priest to dress in fancy velvet robes and white satin hats, to perform grand rituals



with white candles set in heavy brass and drink french red wine he call blood from an inlaid gold chalice.

Yate burn offerings at the breaking of each day and go to church services every Sunday morning to pray to the whiteman god, hoping his prayer and her juju would be stronger than Widow's magic, this time. She pray with a desperate passion to Jesus and she pray to the Virgin Mary, who she pity, to save her baby. Baby Gillian was born in her Mama Etta house, arriving lungs filled with fear and clenched fists beating the air that smell so heavy with blood. Yate cry, praise the lord and her personal juju. She kiss the holy medal she wear round her neck. Moses, he laugh at her, shaking his locks from side to side at his woman's foolishness.

"It's Jah taking care of thee, woman. Forget this Jesus nonsense," he say, lighting a bowl of herb, smoke and scent of it rising in the air.

They fought because of her promise to the whiteman's god. Moses was pleased at the birth of a living child. For two years they had only stolen hours. Mama Etta keep a sharp eye on her daughter, sending her to town school, hoping to keep the young lovers apart. With the birth of Baby Gillian, even Mama Etta pour rum to the gods and goddesses and slit the throat of a baby goat.

For as long as Yate can remember there were babies in Mama Etta house. Soft, fat, warm, brown babies that cry when pinched and laugh when teased or tickled in tender spots. Mama Etta is a rich woman, because she always have someone to care for her. She have fifteen children to her credit. Her sons provide for her and carry the family name to another generation. Her daughters, when educated, would marry well and visit her often with many grandchildren to warm her lap. To Yate these things are important. To have someone to love you always. A man could leave you. To deliver a living, growing thing from her body is a miracle she want to bear. She know Mama Etta can not keep her from her man, even though he be rasta, if she bear his child. She love Moses enough, she feel it in her heart and blood and limbs whenever he watch her undress at the river or touch her body with a reverence and ritual she marvel at when they make love.

Yate promise Jesus she will go up the hill to the whiteman's church everyday if her baby allowed to be among the living, and so she did. When Baby Gillian was born alive and kicking, Yate invited all her friends and family, many who never been to the church, to come see her baby be blessed with holy water. Some came only for the spectacle. They suspicious of only one god.

Saint Julien came because she was Yate best girlfriend. They friends and lovers long before she met Moses. Saint Julien husband was at sea



for many months of the year. It is only natural that she long for hands and lips of passion on her breasts and between her thighs and warm arms to hold her through the many nights her husband away. So many men of the village love the sea. Anyway she could not have a baby by Yate to anger her husband. She often wish many things were not as they were, but when the men reutrn from the sea the women turn from each other in that way back to their men. It had always been that way. From her grandmother's time and long before.

The faithful of the congregation were waiting, hands pressed in respect for the ritual. This is to be the first christening in the church. Four families are present with new babies to be sprinkle with the priest holy water. Father MacIntyre blow his nose into a white lace handkerchief and clear his throat, as he does when he is about to speak on some important subject in his Sunday morning talks.

"I can wait no longer. Let us begin," the father say.

"But father, my Gillian, will you bless she?" Yate whisper, tears reaching for the edges of her eyes.

Then he turn away from her tears and to them who come for the ceremony. The man so cold his words chill like ice.

"A man who would allow his child to be punished for his sins is not a man. If a woman is loose and without moral responsibility, she is the devil's sin and so is her child. In good conscience, I can not perform the rites."

Angry looks fly above his words. Up to this point there was silence, but Mama Etta spill herself into the room and step like a queen to the altar, to her daughter's side.

"She is a daughter of the gods and she is loved not less. She ain't belongin' to no rastaman, to no devil, no other woman, just me. I give her life and breath from between these thighs, something you can never do because it is you who are evil and cannot bear a miracle. You are a no feeling wooden monkey. And so are the people of this house." She spit in the dust before him.

Taking her daughter arm they make their way down the aisle through the doors of the church. Father MacIntyre stand stiffly before the podium and watch helplessly as the pews empty behind Mama Etta, Yate, and Baby Gillian. The silent procession of those who lost faith wound down the dirt path to the village.

Widow stands grinning in the doorway after most all had gone but the father. She say a few words that make no sense to human ears, shake some feathers then squat to pee on the threshold. The rest of the congregation watch in surprise, the father seize his throat and choke hisself to the ground where he wallow like a dog. Widow watch him some, then turn to follow the others.



the last day of winter/first day of spring  
AN EXCERPT FROM A NOVEL IN PROGRESS

It was cold but cold as it was she could smell shit. The area behind the bench was full of years of it, a steep nasty hill that got green in the spring but was barren now cept for brown and tan wispy strands of grass, dk moist dirt, soda and beer cans, bottles, bottles, bottle caps, gum wrappers, popsickle sticks, newspapers in varying stages of disintegration and the greenish blk sludge of half decomposed garbage, foliage, cigarette butts and shit; dog shit she guessed but some people shit too probably. She sat on the bench, which was on the west side of St. Nicholas avenue facing east, her back to the steep incline of dirt, filth, granite and sometimes grass called St. Nicholas park. She sat staring at the car in which she would sleep tonight. Across the street from her there was a row of dilapidated buildings of beat up brownstone and grimy red brick. They were old, tired, waiting to die; the people inside of them holding them together long after they should have fallen. It was early evening a nasty winter day and while it was dull and damp it was not freezing and the wind was not blowing. It was the kind of weather that comes before snow sometime. She sat quietly grateful for the absence of fierce cold, ice and snow. She had on a big raggedy blk coat that flared out fortyish style, a large tear at the shoulder of the left sleeve revealed the gold lame jacket she had sewn on herself last week at the women's shelter.

Aside from the coat and jacket she had nothing else on the top part of her body. Her breasts folded neatly underneath the jacket on top of her stomach like deflated balloons. Her neck and face were coated with layers of dirt and grease. Scabs, dried blood and raw welts covered her neck where the jacket collar's metallic fabric had scraped her skin away. She was fully pleased with the jacket tho, its heavy golden cloth a shield of opulence over her stark, calm desperation. A blk felt skirt circled her waist, underneath it was a beige polyester skirt and a pair of turquoise bermuda shorts. The shorts were stiff with dried urine, menstrual blood and shit. (She had not shit in her pants. What had happened was, she had not always been able to find something to wipe her ass with when she did shit and the residue left on her behind ended up lining her shorts.) She

rested quietly on the bench every now and then patting her swollen feet, which were shod in thin-soled blk chinese slippers she'd stolen out of a bin on 14th St. to the Dell's "Stay in My Corner." It was all sunny for her now, one big brite west coast day. All the kids gathered around as she and Johnny Jones slow dragged like deep sea birds with warm wet wings. She was warm all over now, his penis hard and hot, constrained in tight pants, pressing against her abdomen as they clung to each other surrounded by the music, marijuana smoke and summer heat. The words to the song danced in her head — clear long indigo notes, sounds bathing her in such a warm rush she threw back her head singing: stay stay staaay in my mymymy corNER i luv you STAY.







THE DOE

Alone in the morning then  
I became a friend of the doe  
who would glide at dawn through the frozen garden  
pause under my window  
leap the fence flicker of white tail.

One moon bright night  
a dog's raised hackle drew me  
to the window to watch a mating dance  
playful shadows on the snow  
a movement and then no more  
at dawn the hoofprint memory.

Today at noon in full light  
the dog's hysterical baying  
I run to the window knowing  
it is the last day of hunting  
season and she is there  
*totentanz*  
running on three legs  
one foreleg shot off at the chest  
she rises pirouettes  
blood on the snow  
bloodshod I see  
her other front hoof shot off.  
She screams I scream my voice  
rising with the dog screaming  
until the state trooper comes  
and she is gratefully dead  
and he examines the licences  
of the two men who saunter  
out of the woods permitted  
to shoot doe permitted  
to gut the warm carcass  
and sling it in the pickup truck.

Alone in the morning then  
I look at the carmine ribbon  
stretching the length of the garden  
vivid as the heartbeat on snow.

## DEATHDANCE

Awake and in dreams  
they came to her  
the children of wars  
came peering  
through wire  
dancing in pain  
down napalmed  
streets no flesh  
to hide  
this awful  
nudity . . .  
maimed dying dead  
she saw them  
in news photos  
"live" on t.v.  
dying. A boy  
in Tripoli caught  
by shrapnel dead  
in the arms of a boy  
not more than ten  
called a red cross  
worker. A girl  
in New York  
dead in a blaze  
she could not flee  
caught by a dancing  
flame because her leg  
was chained to a ceiling  
beam by her father.

Awake and in dreams  
they come to her  
down the corridors  
of might have beens



since the morning  
she heard the news  
one hundred children  
rescued airlifted  
dead in a plane crash.  
And she knew then  
despair  
knew  
it was the same  
to act  
or not to act  
it ended the same  
and she did not know  
what to do.

She had no heart  
for the *totentanz*  
did not understand  
how in the plague years  
the few survivors  
joined hands and danced  
among the graves and back  
to the village.  
She saw only  
the wolves  
salivating  
on the hardpacked  
snow.

## THE FOG

I was confused that morning when I woke up because I looked out the window and couldn't see a thing. Just fog. All white. And I forgot what day it was. You know how sometimes you'll wake up and feel scared or anxious but you don't know why. That's the worst feeling. Not knowing. Like being a child again. For three or four minutes I looked out at the fog and I couldn't tell what time of year it was or even what time of day. Then I knew. I knew everything at once. It was the first of September and I had set the clock alarm early so I could jog before she came to move her things out of the house. I wanted to look once more at familiar things and then leave before she came to take what she thought was hers, leave what she thought was mine.

I was confused that morning because for nearly a year now I had been waking up without the fog. Some headaches at first, but no hangovers. No memory loss. No blackouts. No fog in the brain. I could wake up and know what day it was and where I was and what I was going to do and I could even remember what I had done the day before. A celebration. When I thought about it—waking up nearly three hundred mornings in a row without the fog—I couldn't help smiling. So what I wanted that day was a celebration but what I got was a funeral. She was leaving. She said it wasn't working for her anymore. For weeks I worried that the other fog had come back because I listened so hard to what she said, but still I didn't know why she was leaving.

So I put my coffee on the stove, laced my jogging shoes and let my feet find their own way up the road. Nothing clear. Not a single outline. Just a big mushy blur. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw something move.



Barely a warning and a huge dog looms out of the mist looking like he's all chest and head. I know him. He knows me. Nothing to be afraid of except how different it all is this morning. What if I run back down this road and the real world has moved ten years on while I'm out here in this fog? What if I run back and find the real me already there sitting on the porch having breakfast and nodding to the heifers in the pasture? There's the dog again. Silent sentinel. And now I'm glad I'm not a stranger coming down this pale and foggy road.

I sat on the back porch with my coffee. The hills were beginning to rise out of the mist now and next to me on the porch railing was a cobweb spun so spiderfine I almost touched it before I saw it. Would have if it hadn't been for the dew caught in pale silver drops along each thread. I reached out and touched a strand, the farthest one from where the spider sat, expecting she would scurry toward the pull on her thread, but she sat, unsurprised. She must have known it was only me. In such moments I had always been able to sink down to a place where there weren't any words. I knew that spider and she knew me. To be known that way felt like love. Who could tell what this other would be, this being alone without feeling the love.



## LEBENSTANZ

*Is there a lebenstanz? No no.  
That is the work we do every day.*

In a blizzard she climbed  
the hill wind sucking  
at her breath and the snow  
icing against her eyes  
as she bent her head to walk  
forward on instinct  
when she could not see  
the ground.

In the wind and in the trees  
she could hear children's voices  
playing and she knew them  
as the hill knew the children  
who had played here summers  
for a hundred years and she heard  
their voices laughing in the sharp  
teeth of the wind.

The wind left no footprints  
but twisted the snow  
in wraiths of movement  
each dancing on the nothing  
below and the trees bent  
their voices sharp with pain  
and louder than it all  
she heard her own heart beating.

To act or not to act  
she climbed to find the answer  
and in the climbing knew  
the answer was to act as though  
there were no choice for if

she believed in the circle—  
that as the fossil sinks then  
it will rise again to the surface

so all energy comes around  
— she must act as though  
each day knew the circle knew  
the answer in the wind's sharp voice.  
Some days she could only half believe  
some days she would know it held no truth  
but on the best days she worked as though  
the question mattered not at all.







## I AM NOT ALWAYS NICE

She was not always nice. She had to admit it; it was true. When it first sunk in on her, the awareness brutal and unassailable as a fist against her belly, she had winced and recoiled. Shame had poisoned her food, her voice, her sleep. For weeks she couldn't look her children in the eye. Five pounds lighter and two dark circles later, she said it aloud and accepted. Said it to the compost heap out behind the rundown wooden garage. Told it she might not always be nice but that she'd bring home two bushels of dung if she didn't do anything else that day. Easier, that was, than getting up the courage to speak to Linda. Easier than going to see Dr. Phillips tomorrow was going to be.

Moose dung, camel dung, straw mixed in with shit from birds, lions, tigers, and even an orangutang puffed up the green garbage bags outside the zoo. She backed the station wagon up, left the door open, and heaved two of the big bags. Good compost, and the zoo was just throwing it away. At least they let people take it free. Community service. Yeah. Chalk herself up a star.

Strange, but it didn't smell bad. So long as it was in those plastic bags. After she stopped at Laesch's Dairy Barn for the gallon of chocolate chip ice cream and at the Kroger's for real food for her and the kids, and 25 lbs. of Jubilee kitty litter, the back seat was filled too.

At home she got out and unlatched the gate, drove up the pebbled driveway while Sam the Shepherd watched from the front porch. She got one bag in each hand and had started for the back door before he tried to knock her down.

"No, Sam! Down! Down!"

He backed off, as if by coincidence rather than command. Big sweet dog couldn't help but come up for some loving every time he had the chance. He'd never hurt anybody, but Linda was afraid of him, wouldn't step outside if he was anywhere in the yard. Made her lock him in the garage.

She fell through the door and into the kitchen, where she heaved the heavy bags onto a counter, pushing coffee mugs back to the wall. No sounds. No rustling of labored movement from the back bedroom. Clutching her crotch, she hobbled to the bathroom, ripped down her



jeans and panties. *Ah*. Never knew how bad it was till she got in the house. Must be some sort of bladder infection. She was fine right up until she got home, but the *minute* she got in—sometimes even before she got to the door—she just couldn't control it. And here came Puppydog, the rambunctious little cocker, seeing the door open and her pants down around her ankles, moving in for the kill. He nosed at the crotch of her panties. Catching herself just before she was about to scream at him, she reached down and pushed him away. *No*, she whispered, before standing up and pulling up her pants. She flushed reluctantly, knowing the sound would carry as far as the west side of the house, would disturb the hibernating one. She went back for the other groceries, put them all away, and cleaned up the kitchen. Quarts of milk and orange juice, empty, a dozen egg shells, the bone from last night's five pound roast, the leftover pound or so chewed off.

"Between the two of you, Puppydog, I don't know what I'm going to do." Time for a cigarette and for spreading the shit over the compost, before Eric and Lizzie would be home. The smell of coffee brewing was like a nice, long bath. She sat and smoked and sipped, listening for warnings. Linda wouldn't resist the groceries for long.

Leaving two butts in the ashtray, she went back out to the car, lugged one bag at a time over to the heap. The sky was overcast, and as far as she could see, the prairie stretched out dead white, soybean and corn fields dormant and undisturbed by melting snow. Maybe a spring storm was filling up its lungs to spray the checkerboard again. Already the muddy mess was a nuisance. With the good rake Milo (the Dork) left behind along with the other things when he ran off three years earlier with the skinny psych student, she spread the dark and light mixture of dung and straw over the heap, tilling gently. There were light brown areas and dark black areas, some moist, some hard, big turds and smeary paste. She had the curious sensation that she was being watched. Nausea rose in her chest, but she finished the spreading. Then went back inside to wash her hands and to drink another cup of coffee and to smoke another cigarette. The furtive rustling and the incongruously bold slamming of a door told her Linda had emerged and retreated again. In the kitchen the empty tub of ice cream lay tipped on its side in the sink, the cover, upside down and licked clean, on the counter. While she washed her hands she breathed deeply, exhaling slowly, counting each breath until ten. But the numbers kept turning into images of dollar bills, and inside she felt no calm. She poured coffee and went to the table for her cigarettes. The pack along with her lighter, was gone.

As she walked through the living room and toward the back bedroom, she heard the television set click on. Linda loved the soap operas.



When she wasn't napping during the day, she watched game shows and soap operas. In between or during the raids on the kitchen.

"Linda," she called, trying not to let the heavy constriction of her head, her hands, her chest, come through in her voice. "Please bring back my cigarettes."

No answer. The volume was increased. She knew Linda had heard her, though, and repeated the request, louder, two more times, with no response. Then she pounded on the door. "Linda, you bring them back *right now* or I'm coming in and getting them."

Finally a belligerent stirring. And the whining.

"I asked you to bring me some yesterday, and you didn't. So there. I get to keep these."

"No, you don't. Bring them back right now. You know you're not supposed to have them."

"Momma always lets me have them. *She* never tries to torture me the way you do. How do you think *she's* going to like it when I tell her you wouldn't share, huh? Or when I tell her about you and your little friend, what's her name? Huh? Huh? Go get your own fucking cigarettes, bitch."

It was blackmail, that's all there was to it. Again her blood rose up against her, and she was shaking all the way to the kitchen. Eric and Lizzie came running in. *Damn!* she muttered softly enough so that they wouldn't hear.

"Gr--oss! Look who's been eating again!"

"Never expect Fatso to save any for us! Look, Lizzie, it was chocolate chip this time! Mom buys chocolate chip for her and we don't get *any!*"

She stood in the doorway, glaring at him.

"Eric, your Aunt Linda eats whatever she wants without thinking about any of us. Remember when we talked about her problem?"

"But Mom," he whined, "why do you have to *let* her?" Embarrassed at his voice cracking, and probably ready to cry, he threw down his junior backpack and ran outside.

Lizzie poured herself a glass of milk. The reddish curly hair of her father. She nuzzled up against Marilyn's stomach, holding the glass in one hand and putting her other arm around Marilyn's back. Nothing Lizzie did should surprise her, she knew, but it always did, finding how needy the kid could be right after acting like a miniature gang leader.

"How was school today, Punkin'?"

"Okay. I made you a drawing in art class."

"Thank you. When can I see it?" Biopsy, smiopsy; the words rattled in her head. If it were negative, she'd be sure to thank the Great Spirit



every day for the rest of her life. To be around for this. Just for this.

"It's not quite finished. I'll finish it before dinner and give it to you then."

"I'm going out for dinner tonight, remember? You and Eric can pick out t.v.'s." Linda usually didn't bother with food she had to heat up and wait for, though she would eat it if somebody else fixed it for her.

Finally, taking her hot bath, her muddied jeans with undoubtedly a few shit smears mixed in, crumpled on the floor, she began to picture Mother. Why bother a seventy-three year old woman with news she couldn't live with, why let her lose an illusion, make her feel that not one, but both daughters were failures, reproaches, or, as she would more likely put it, Crosses To Bear. It was bad enough when Milo left. But if Linda told her the other, then. Then what?

She shook her head, soaped her arms and legs, scrubbed her feet with the loofah. This saggy body with its stretch marks did not have the right to break on old woman's heart.

"You don't have the right to do that to Eric and Lizzie, either," Alison told her at dinner. "Do you think it's fair to them to let that woman constantly nag at you and at them and put you down and eat you out of house and home?"

Marilyn couldn't help it then; even though they sat in full view of the other customers, even though the Chinese family that operated the restaurant would probably find it embarrassing, even though it was a small town that made her feel any expression of emotion was watched and judged as a public disgrace, she began to cry.

"That woman," she managed to say in broken syllables. "That woman is my sister."

"I know." Alison's hand reached across the table, between the stainless steel covers on the vegetables, and stopped just short of Marilyn's.

Marilyn watched Alison's long fingers and the hand with its veins in sharp relief from piano. Just watching it, despite knowing they could not touch here, was almost enough. The crying subsided. She wiped her face with a clean napkin.

At home, Eric was still up, doing his homework on the dining room table.

"Grandmom called, and Aunt Linda told her you were out with somebody you shouldn't probably be with. Who was that?"

"Just a friend, Nosy." She tousled his hair.

"Yeah, but who? One of those ladies that calls you on the phone? Mary? Alison? Patty?"

"Oh, never mind who, Mr. Busybody. I'll tell you about it sometime when I'm not so tired. Let's get to bed now, huh?"

She decided it wasn't too late to call.

"Yes, Mother. She's doing fine. No. I am *not* mistreating her. I don't have money to buy her cigarettes. She doesn't give me enough for her food as it is."

"Send me the bills," her mother said, "and if what you say is true, I'll pay the difference. I'm sure she's giving you all she can."

And Marilyn was sure her mother would.

"That's not the point. I won't take your money anyway."

"Well, I don't know why you can't just try to get along with her. You need the help with Lizzie and Eric and she needs to be of use. Now if there were some *reason* why you didn't need her—where were you, anyway, tonight, out on a date?"

"No, Mother. Yes, I was, actually. But not like you think." For Mother, the *only* justification for sending Linda away would be to re-marry.

"Oh, I guess I could let her move back in here, if I'm the *only* one willing to. But I know it isn't good for her. She needs to be around younger people. Can't you introduce her to your friends?"

Marilyn winced. She *had* introduced her, and even had a party, but Linda had just been cold and silent and withdrawn. Later she had stated in unambiguous terms her opinion of each of the persons there. And why she was ashamed of Marilyn.

"I did introduce her. She didn't approve of any of them." Like you, she refrained from saying.

"What do you mean, she didn't approve?"

"She found something wrong with all of them. I really don't care to discuss the details, Mother." The way they looked, dressed, talked, didn't shave their legs, wear makeup, or hide their intelligence. They discussed their children, their dogs, their cats, their husbands or lovers, their friends, each other, and the books or articles they had been reading. Unafraid to explore any of it with each other. They openly laughed and cried and hugged.

"Well, I don't know who you introduced her to, but they obviously just weren't the right people. Linda has a good personality."



"She just doesn't seem to *like* people very much, Mom."

"Now wait a minute. *There's* the pot calling the kettle black. She gets along a lot better than *you* ever did with Grandpa and Joe and everybody else."

Marilyn bit her tongue. She wanted to say, and why is that? Is that *my* fault, or did you have something to do with it? But she was losing interest in childish complaining. It was true. For some reason all the relatives liked Linda and found Marilyn difficult.

"All right. I've got to go now, Mother. Goodbye." Conversations with her mother invariably left noises, unspoken noises in Marilyn's head. No one else needed to say anything; she had her own. Voices and laughter still filtered through the walls from the television in Linda's room. Marilyn sat on the bed, smoking a cigarette. *Don't smoke in bed*, a voice in her head nagged at her. *Linda's room. Milo's wife. Milo's house. She gets along so well with everyone. She's good with the children.*

At last she opened her mouth and said "no" to the voice. Who are you? she asked. Let me tell you what I didn't tell mother. She's *awful* with the children. They hate her. And they hate me for making them be nice to her.

She set the alarm for five-thirty, embraced her pillow, shutting her eyes and willing her ears to stop hearing. Though the television faded, there was no silence, no peace. No way to shut off the voice inside her head.

In the morning she brewed coffee and ignored the evidence of Linda's late night bingeing. Wrappers from a box of cookies, individually wrapped cracker packages—intended for the kids' lunches—and God-knows-what residue in the sink and garbage disposal.

Puppydog leaped and tried to kiss her before she let him out. She watched the sunrise from the kitchen window as she listened to Sam and Puppydog barking at each other. On the late melting snow along the edge of the pebbled driveway she saw the first junkos hopping about like fiddler crabs. She'd have to tell Alison. Especially since Alison wouldn't come out and see for herself. Nothing more than dinners together anymore. It didn't feel right. But even Alison did not understand. Alison had never had a sister.

She sent Puppydog in to wake up Eric and Lizzie.

"Why are you dressed up like that, Mommy?" Marilyn supposed she would never get entirely used to wearing pantyhose and her tweed suit.

"You know I have important meetings at work today. Yesterday was my day off, remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Yeah. Stupid. You're not even awake yet." Eric grabbed at Lizzie's



milk glass.

"Mom!"

"All right, cut it out, both of you. Finish up and get your things. Don't forget your lunches."

"Don't forget your lunch," Eric mocked her. "If you do, that Fatso will get it for sure."

"Eric."

"What? It's the truth."

"Just go on and get out of here. I don't want to hear it right now. Look, did you notice who's back? The junkos."

They ran to the living room, where the window was low enough for them to see.

"The junkos are here! The junkos are here!"

Little, delicate things hopping and skittering like they were glad to be here. Behind them the chain link fence, and the neighbor's backyard looking like a cornfield gone to seed. Sam could jump the fence and go over there whenever he wanted. But he hardly ever did.

It was hard to stay awake during Clyde Eaton's pep talk for all the agents in the office. She took down his words in shorthand, changing them when he drifted into his hick vocabulary. "Y'all" became "brokers"; "call on myself or him" became "call on either of us." Looking around the paneled room with its formica-topped conference table and plastic ferns standing in the corners, Marilyn wondered how all of these escapees from institutions educational and familial had come to devote themselves to selling the illusion of security. Ed Maccabee, who owned three houses and two apartment complexes himself, sat in his lime green leisure suit, nodding eagerly and knowingly at every new point Eaton made. Mrs. Hines, the sweet but intellectually disadvantaged young widow, beamed like a child at the circus. They all worshipped the gods of real estate and insurance and tried to convert their clients as well. Marilyn kept her mouth shut, did what she was told, and took the paychecks home. She thought that Mrs. Hines ought to know better, understand from her experience that there was no such reassurance, monetary or human.

As Marilyn stared, Clyde Eaton's angular face lost its skin in layers of peeling flaps. His brown-gray hair turned white and disappeared as the clothes began to flap like sails around his bones. A talking skeleton with no lips but incisors strong and brutal as ever.

She shook her head violently to clear her mind. Only a biopsy, Stupid. Biopsy, smiopsy, it was nothing to be so morbid about.

"You look down in the dumps today, Marilyn. What's up?"



Annabel noticed too much. It would be so much easier if Marilyn didn't like her, didn't feel the discomfort of always staying on guard. Annabel talked about her boyfriend and shared her excitement after special holiday weekends. Marilyn never dared to talk about Alison. She felt stingy and dishonest, repaying Annabel's confidences with no more than sympathy and good humor. Even so, Annabel knew her better than Marilyn had realized, and she would have to come up with a decent answer this time.

"Oh, I guess that meeting was more boring than usual." She was typing the minutes when Annabel interrupted her. "And I've got a doctor's appointment this morning I'm not much looking forward to."

"Nothing serious, I hope." The tone said *tell me about it*.

"No, nothing serious." She turned back to the typewriter. "But thanks for asking." Annabel wouldn't pry. Maybe if they didn't work in the same place. Maybe then Marilyn could trust her, relax and share as much as Annabel did. But as it was, she doubted she ever would. Lately she had missed seeing her close friends too. It wasn't just Alison. She hadn't seen as much of anyone since Linda moved in. And any day now Linda would insist on using the air conditioner she'd brought along, driving up the electric bill. No need to tell Annabel about any of that, either.

Seven stoplights caught her on the way to Dr. Phillips, and at each one she cursed like a wild woman caged in a pen, screaming until her chest hurt, her throat felt raw. Why was she *always* late?

In the empty waiting room, enduring the muzak, she breathed easier. It would be "just a few moments" before the doctor would be with her. She sat on an orange vinyl-covered couch and browsed through magazines covered with headlines about diets and beauty treatments and "how to please your boyfriend" techniques. Soon a mother and son came in, the little towheaded boy so freckled and healthy no one would suspect any illness. He sat next to his matronly mother with his legs dangling. The mother smiled at Marilyn. What the heck? She smiled back. Another star. For whom to see, she wondered. For whom.

No one came out for the longest time. Marilyn read the same page, with the horoscopes, five or six times. Suddenly some commotion started at the front door. The boy ran over and pushed it open, his mouth gaping wide. In came a whirring wheelchair with the most elaborate motor and controls. The man sitting in it was emaciated, and his arms were folded back like wings. His legs lay limp on the seat, his feet splayed as if positioned carefully by someone else on the foot rests. Marilyn caught herself



staring at what seemed the sheer impossibility of it: the man controlling the wheelchair by pressing his high forehead against a padded lever attached to a circular bar around his head. The head itself was at nearly a 45 degree angle to his body, as though bent unnaturally by some accident. The hair was very short, as if he had recently had his head shaved. It was either brown or gray; she wasn't sure.

She looked away and saw the neatly dressed matron wince. She, too, was conscious of feeling suddenly hurt.

The little boy couldn't stop looking at the man, whose eyes seemed to roll around continually, involuntarily, scanning the ceiling and the walls. He stopped in front of the window and pressed the buzzer with the head harness. Marilyn looked away again. The man's entire body was contorted into a grotesque asymmetrical parody of itself.

The boy blurted out in a loud whisper, "What's he got, Mommy? Was he *born* that way?"

"Hush up!" The mother clutched his arm firmly.

Marilyn, too, wondered. Cerebral palsy? Some brain injury? Motorcycle accident? Car? He had obviously been disabled for some time, judging by the efficiency of his wheelchair operation. Efficient. Probably little trouble to anyone. Trying so hard to be nice, not to get in the way.

They took him in. Was he late for his appointment? Not by much, she guessed. She thought how it must have taken him all morning to get himself there, crawling along with people staring all the way. Some offering help awkwardly and needlessly, some ignoring him when he needed help. No one seemed to know when it was right to offer help or to refuse for it. Oh, Alison. Alison would have known, would have sensed when he needed someone, when he wanted to be left alone.

She avoided the other woman's eyes and felt her face burning with shame. Another patient came out the door and the man had just driven his wheelchair past, and then the little boy was called. She realized it no longer mattered how long it took before her own name was called. A few minutes the man in the wheelchair, who looked no older than thirty, came out again, drooling slightly, his useless arms and hands jerking when he turned the corner into the waiting room. He had fine, white teeth. She wondered how he kept them brushed. As he headed toward the door, she went to hold it open for him. The wheelchair never slowed as he went straight through it, almost gracefully. She tried not to look at him, but couldn't help but watch the way his forehead steered the machine. As he passed, he tilted his head even more sharply, causing a slight jerk in the wheelchair's motion. She didn't know if he was nodding in thanks or not. She held onto the metal bar of the glass door a long time, staring after him as he slowly disappeared down the sidewalk.



nurse had to call her name twice before she turned to go in. A simple procedure, Dr. Phillips had said. No problem.

When she arrived home the sun was already sending oblique rays over the fields, occasional pieces of farm machinery glinting like tiny metallic oases in the desert flatness of the prairie. The snow had melted entirely away. Mrs. Munson would be coming in just over an hour to take Eric and Lizzie to the movies with Tara, Lizzie's friend.

No one came to get the gate when she drove up, but she hardly noticed. After she opened it, drove the Toyota through, got out and pushed the metal over to the wood again, she noticed, too that Sam was not in sight. Unusual of him to be hiding under the house. She halfway hoped he'd come out and jump up on her as she left the car in the pebbled drive and entered through the back porch. No sign of Sam anywhere.

The house, too, was quiet. She ignored the dirty dishes and the plastic trash bin overflowing with candy wrappers and boxes of all shapes and sizes. On the toilet she listened for Puppydog's eager feet. But she was left undisurbed. Ahh. She stripped her pantyhose off all the way and threw them with her shoes into her bedroom, then found her cutoffs on the floor and changed into them, draping her synthetic work clothes over a chair. Tonight, there would be peace while the kids were at the new Spielberg movie. Tara's mother probably had fifteen perfect pair of designer underwear. The Munson's belonged to the Country Club and the Symphony Guild and owned, besides adopted Tara, one declawed Persian cat. As fourth generation local landowners all of *their* relatives lived in their own mansions. Tara's uncle had a law practice healthier than Marilyn's quantum-leap rubber plant. Tara's grandparents served on advisory boards and entered rose shows and caused no apparent harm to Tara's parents. One set often took Tara on weekends at their home even further in the country.

Too quiet. In the living room a musty, shut-up smell; even though she'd removed the storm windows a few weeks back, neither she nor the kids remembered to open windows often enough lately. The green plaid sofa cushions were scattered, some on the sofa, some on the floor. She hoped Lizzie and Eric had not been fighting again. Picking up the cushions and straightening them into place, she noticed how dirty the gold carpet was, how old. Kids and dogs, Alison's friend had said. What can you expect? The friend she was afraid Alison was already seeing more often, or would eventually be spending her evenings with. Well, the carpet had to go, anyway. She would throw it out and polish the wood



floors.

Even the noise of the television from the guest bedroom offered reassurance. She listened at the door of Eric's room, feeling like a thief. Before she knocked, something her mother never had done, she hesitated to be sure. Then tiny, irregular sounds hummed a song she didn't recognize. Where had he learned it? Then there was a cough and unmistakable sniffing, and she clenched her fists as she knocked.

No answer. Suddenly he was silent. If he suspected she'd heard him crying, he'd be even more resistant.

"Eric? May I come in?"

She waited.

"Mommy?"

"Yes. It's me, honey."

"What took you so long?"

"I had to work late, honey." To make up for the extra time at Dr. Phillips.

Silence again. Maybe he needed to sulk. Whatever it was, it wouldn't do to press so soon.

"You go ahead and get ready. I'm going to fix dinner, and then Tara and her mother will be here."

She went on to Lizzie's room, no bigger than a closet and filled like one with stuffed animals from Milo. No more dolls, though, unless Lizzie asked.

Again, no answer to her knock. What had gotten into them? She went in. No Lizzie in sight, but she heard breathing. Lizzie still breathed through her mouth, especially when she was trying to stop growing up. Her clothes were scattered everywhere; the hamper was open and overflowing with little jeans and shorts and cotton and knit tops.

"Lizzie, come on out now. Have you got Puppydog under there with you?"

At the sound of his name the cocker scrambled out from under the bed, dust caught in his golden fur, tail wagging, ears flapping. He jumped at her legs.

"Okay, Puppydog, calm down. Come on, Lizzie."

Finally she carefully got down on her knees; abrupt moves could pull out her stitches. She lifted the corded spread and found Lizzie's eyes. The child was curled up sucking her thumb, looking more frightened than Marilyn could remember seeing her.

"Honey, it's all right. I'm here now."

Lizzie let her reach in then and pull gently, her hands on the soft warm shoulders. She did not wince at the pain she felt. Lizzie slid out like a reluctant cat, and Marilyn held and rocked her.



"Tell me what happened, honey."

Finally the breathing quieted down.

"Where is she?"

"Where's who?"

"Aunt Linda."

Suddenly she knew, felt it throughout her body as if the blows had struck her. But she waited as if paralyzed, as Lizzie blurted out the story she did not want to hear. Eric had taken a bag of cookies from Linda's room and run outside, where he and Lizzie ate as many as they could before Eric hid the rest in the garbage. They had played with the dogs outside for awhile, and when Eric went back in, Linda caught him in the living room with a belt.

Lizzie was still clinging to her as she stir-fried vegetables and steamed rice and hunted for something special. There was nothing left of the treats she kept hidden for them in the high cabinet above the refrigerator, and she knew why. She dropped the spatula three times. Each time Lizzie picked it up and handed it to her, saying, "Dropped it, Mommy."

"Yes, darling, thank you." Lizzie would stay in the revert-to-infant stage until she felt secure again. Marilyn had no desire to bring her out of it.

When the doorbell rang, she started. "That's too early for Tara, honey. You just stay here while I get it." She removed the vegetables from the heat and left them covered, turned the burner off.

At the door she found a young, freckled teenaged boy. It took her a minute to remember who he was.

"How much this time?" She asked it before he had a chance to explain himself.

"A dollar-fifty for two weeks, ma'am."

"Well, tell me how much it would take to keep you from coming back? five dollars? Ten?" She went to get her purse and found a ten. "Here," she told him. "Take it! But don't come around to collect a lousy dollar-fifty every two weeks. Stay away and leave us alone!"

She was shaking as she closed the door.

Eric came, finally, when she called him to dinner. She wondered if he had welts under his jeans. How to find out without making it worse? She didn't have the heart to put him through it right now. She had washed Lizzie's face, and now worked hard to smile at both of them. But they hardly touched the food.

"I thought you liked stir-fry, Eric."

"I do, sometimes. Mom, I'm not very hungry."

She hoped it was only because he'd eaten too many cookies. Fear and more. His eyes were still red from crying, and his voice slightly hoarse.

"You're not eating either, Mommy," Lizzie said.

When Tara came to the door, she had made certain that both of them still wanted to go. All too eager.

"Now you both be sure to thank Tara and Mrs. Munson. And don't make too much noise or squirm in your seats. And *don't fight*, okay?"

"Okay, Mom."

"Okay, Mommy."

She kissed them both and stroked Eric's hair. But he didn't smile and he didn't wince. Just let her do it.

After the car had left the driveway and Eric had closed the gate, she got in with them, she saw again the face of the man in the wheelchair, the pain and exquisite contortion as he pressed his forehead against the door lever.

She leaned into the door, feeling lightheaded. Probably from not having eaten. *Has there been any pain?* he had asked when she saw him more than a month ago. No, not really. Never had felt much of anything there, in her breasts. Never felt much. Not when Milo went away, not when Alison—

She pushed away and stood up straight. Only one thing kept her from having Alison visit while the kids were gone, or while they were here, for that matter. But that had not been enough, because Alison, sisterless and ignorant, had not understood. Just now Marilyn wanted one, no one at all. She moved to the west window, watching the clouds dropping more quickly now, throwing telephone poles and wires into vivid silhouettes above the miles and miles of invisible corn, the rising beans. A single engine plane crawled across the sky with its steady hum.

Puppydog trotted after her as she opened the guest bedroom door as she grimaced at the greasy fingerprints on the white paint around the handle.

Linda was lying in her bed watching one of the early evening television shows. She squealed and clapped as a woman won a new refrigerator. Linda's dirty nightdress-combination-bathrobe had once been the property of a baby's skin.

"Linda!" she shouted. Then she stepped over the rank sock shoes and pushed the on-off button in. Puppydog barked at the sound.



silence, but Marilyn paid no attention.

Linda's heavy, blemished face turned, her mop of dark curls hanging over her forehead; she watched Marilyn with the eyes that always reminded her of black buttons.

"Get that dog out of here!" she ordered.

"What dog?"

Then, as she looked down at Puppydog, she knew exactly what to do. She folded her arms across her chest, conscious of touching her breast and the bandage. The room smelled of mildew and dust.

"Shut up, Linda," she said in a strange, animal voice she had never heard come from her throat before. "Shut up and listen carefully. You are going to do exactly as I say." She stared at the bed's top sheet, wrinkled and stained, dented in by its burdens of cookie and cracker wrappers, a bag of potato chips, an empty dish and spoon covered with a hardened white substance. And a long leather belt. Then she deliberately focussed narrowly on Linda's wart with the hair sticking out of it, just to the left of her loose, broad chin.

"You have exactly one hour. You will pack up all of your things and be ready to leave. You will keep your mouth shut and put your things in the living room. Then we will put them in the car. If at any time," she interrupted the beginning protest, "you give me any trouble I will bring Sam right here into your room. He hasn't had his dinner yet and I'm sure he'll be hungry and very energetic."

She stopped then to watch. Linda's mouth still hung open. A howl began to emerge from that voluminous cavern spotted with gold and silver. The whole bed began to shake as the pink housecoat moved and the two feet rose up and down under the sheet. Things started to fall off the bed: the wrappers, the dirty underwear that even Puppydog wouldn't touch, finally, the belt. Then Linda picked up the dish and spoon and threw them, one right after the other, directly at Marilyn's head. Marilyn ducked, and the dish went through the door and thudded somewhere on the living room carpet. The spoon just missed falling on Puppydog.

"That's enough. I'm going to get Sam now."

By the time she found him under the house and brought him in, she saw that Linda was on the telephone. Entering the room with Sam on the leash, hearing Linda say, "you'll have to talk to her, Mother, she's really trying to kill me, I swear," Marilyn was ready to rip the receiver from her hands. Linda saw them and shrieked, dropping the receiver to the floor.

"No, no, please. Get him out! Out! I'll do anything!"

Marilyn told him to stay, sit, and Sam did. She grabbed the receiver



from the floor.

"Mother?" She waited for her stomach to flutter as it usually did, but it didn't this time.

"What on earth is going on, Marilyn? Linda says—"

"Mother," she interrupted, "I don't *care* what Linda says. And I don't have time to talk. If you're home in a couple of hours, fine. If not, fine. Goodbye." She hung up.

Terrified now, Linda was waddling around, throwing things into her big suitcase without checking to see what was clean and what wasn't. The clumsy, desperate way the big body stepped around laundry and trash almost made Marilyn want to laugh or cry. The phone began ringing immediately, and Marilyn unplugged it from the wall jack. The one in her own room kept ringing, muffled, through the walls, but she ignored it. As Sam wagged his tail and barked, enjoying the game, Linda jumped and moved even faster, and Marilyn suppressed a smile. He would do anything to get her attention and be petted. She stroked him and said, "Good Boy, Sam. Just sit still and be good."

When Linda had packed her two suitcases full to bursting, Marilyn made her carry them out and put them in the back of the station wagon, following her with Sam on the leash.

"Don't think I won't tell Mother everything. *Everything* you've done." And she huffed and puffed with the unaccustomed labor, and the phobic response Sam evoked.

"Shut up," Marilyn said.

Finally, Linda huffed and puffed the SearsBest 5,000 BTU unit to the back seat. She had put on a light raincoat over the housecoat.

"I'm your sister, you know."

Marilyn said nothing and nudged Sam with her knee. He jumped up toward Linda, and she screamed and drew back.

"Down, Sam. Now," staring at Linda, and practically growling herself, "get in the car."

She let Sam ride in the back seat, just for company. At the gas station just before the interstate, she remembered Eric and Lizzie. Resisting the impulse to dial Alison's number she hunted through her address book. Babysitters she had seldom used. The first line was busy; the second sitter was out tonight, her parents said. Meanwhile she glanced at Linda, huddled in the car, terrified of Sam, terrified of being visible, seen by others and persecuted for her ugliness. Sam grinned at Marilyn through the back window.

She would not call Alison, nor her other close friends. Yet she had to get someone to be there when Eric and Lizzie got home. With sudden amusement she turned the pages in the booth's ragged directory and



found an "A. Breckman."

"Annabel? This is Marilyn, from work."

All the way to mother's Linda tried, a frenzied, desperate creature.

"I'll tell her all about you and that little friend, what's her name, Alice? I'll tell her, and you'll never get Mother to help you ever again. You'll never forgive yourself for what you've done. You're darn lucky she's been as good to you as she has since you got divorced. What a disgrace! You sure drove some nails in her coffin with that one. What do you think this will do to her? You'll never forgive yourself."

Finally she gave up ordering Linda to shut up and let the threats go on and on. At mother's in Danville, the lights were on. She parked the Toyota in the short suburban driveway and got out.

"Come on, Sam." He leaped out with gratitude and immediately went to water the mailbox. Marilyn opened the back and carried one of the suitcases in her right hand, avoiding making any sudden moves in her left side. She left it at the front door. Then went back for the other one.

"Get out of the car, Linda," she said when she returned. "You carry the television and the air conditioner."

Linda did as she was told for once. Marilyn at last rang the bell and went back for the clock radio, the useless hair dryer. As her mother opened the door and called out, "What in the world do you think you're doing?!" Marilyn shrugged.

"Here she is, Mother," she said, coming to stand behind the great sulking body at the door. "She's never going to set foot in my house again. I don't care what you do with her."

Linda started bawling like a giant infant, and her mother, after closing her disbelieving jaw, cuddled her and said, "poor baby," in-between muttering to Marilyn, "well, I never! If this is how you treat your own family, well I—"

But Marilyn corralled Sam into the car and left them on the front porch of the anonymous modern ranch home, muttering their futile phrases, castigating her as the brutal bitch, and, yes, saying how she didn't deserve her own children.

Part of the way back she let the panic shake her. Every mother's fear: would they try to have her children taken away from her. Linda might. Might suggest using insinuations about Alison against her. But there was at least half a chance that their own dread of shame would keep them from doing it. And Milo wouldn't help them, that was certain. He liked things fine just the way they were. She took deep breaths, turned on the radio, and let the rock music Linda hated take over the

car. She would get an unlisted number. She would be firm. She would let Alison stay away permanently, if necessary. But no, they would not get her children. She drove into the pure, black night, enjoying the interstate, the absence of stoplights, of obstacles.

At home Annabel met her and offered her a glass of tea.

"I took the liberty of cleaning up a bit. The key was just where you said."

Marilyn thanked her.

"The kids got home about an hour ago. They were real good, honest."

She went to Lizzie's room first. Only pretending to be asleep, Lizzie asked, "Mommy? Is that you?"

"Yes, sweetheart."

"Where's Aunt Linda? That new lady is nice."

Marilyn wryly smiled. Yes, Annabel was nice. What her price was, only Annabel knew.

"Don't worry about Aunt Linda, honey. She's not going to be here any more. She went back to grandmother's."

Then it caught her. They would miss their grandmother. A lot.

"Not here any more?"

"No here."

"Ever?"

"Ever."

Lizzie could hardly believe it. The relief seemed to come like a huge sigh throughout her little body. She hugged Marilyn tightly, and then pulled away.

"Mommy?"

"Yes."

"Why were you so mean to the paperboy today?"

It seemed as if years had passed since then. A watershed, a dam burst. Now a new, fresh riverbed to wash through.

"I don't know, honey. I wasn't nice, was I? But don't you worry. I wasn't mad at *you*."

Eric was sound asleep. She knew there would have to be a real talk, a discussion. It would not be so easy for him to forget, or to admit what had happened. She sat on the bed and stroked his forehead, kissed his closed eyes. She knew there would be time, knew that they would talk. Soon. Not right now.

Out in the living room, Annabel stood, ready to leave. Marilyn fished for a five dollar bill.

"Oh, no, don't worry about that. It was no trouble, really. It was nice to see your place. I can tell how you must like living out here." It was hard for people to find nice things to say about the house. Annabel



did better than most. Marilyn nodded.

"We like it, yes. Sorry it's such a mess."

"Hey, don't worry. You should see my apartment. In fact you'll have to come over sometime."

Always so awkward to say these things. Go ahead.

"Well, if you won't let me pay you, will you let us have you out to dinner sometime? Lizzie seems to have taken a liking to you."

Annabel's pixie-like face shone.

"Okay. That would be just great." Then she frowned. "Oh, I almost forgot. You had a call. An Alison. She seemed real surprised when I answered the phone. Guess you don't use babysitters much, huh?"

Marilyn shook her head, barely able to disguise her intense curiosity.

"Anyway, she said for you to call, if you would, as soon as it was convenient. Sounded like a nice person."

"Yes," Marilyn nodded. "She's a good friend."

"Well, see you tomorrow."

"Yeah. Thanks, Annabel."

She did not call Alison that night. She took a bath examined her bandage carefully, and slept with the phone unplugged. The birds woke her in the morning. It had rained during the night, and the air smelled clean and fresh, just the way she liked it. She felt like singing too.

In the evening she asked Eric to help her, and they cleaned out Linda's room. Two trash bags full of old garbage, and a good vacuuming and scrubbing of dresser and table tops and corners. Eric fed the dogs, working the entire evening in his infrequent quiet and industrious way, showing his gratitude with every obedient gesture.

"Anything else, Mom? Want me to do the compost?"

"No, I'll get it."

For a moment she hesitated; since she had plugged the phone in again, her mother had called four times, and Marilyn had answered it and then said goodbye and hung up each time after the barrage of whining attacks started. Just before she was going to unplug it again, so Eric and Lizzie would not be tempted to answer it while she was outside, it rang again.

"Alison."

"You didn't call. Can we talk?"

Rehearsed reponses were in her head, but they flew out like a flock of caged birds.

"Listen, would you like to come out?"

"Tonight? What about Linda? You know she doesn't approve

of me."

"Just come on out, if you're free. I'll tell you all about it."

"Okay," Alison said, sounding like a cautious but hopeful adolescent. Yes, it would be a good thing to tell her about it; appeal to her sense of adventure. Of course she would still be wondering who Annabel was, but probably would never ask. That was Alison. A few years. A few people we are privileged to choose, to love, to be loved by.

The wind was picking up, a dry, almost warm wind. There would be no rain tonight. She put on her muddy duck waders and tromped out to the compost heap, to dump coffee grounds, lettuce and scraps of leftover stir-fry, soggy unfinished cereal, apple cores. Then she spread the manure from the zoo again, deep into the earth, where it would do the most good. She inhaled the aroma of manure, the pungent greenish smell of spring pollen and berries, incipient grass and weeds, announcement of life to come. The telephone poles off to her right across the prairie stood up like fence posts against the pink sky, a blanket behind a barbed wire fence, heaven behind bars. Tempting it was to dally here, where no human voices reached her, before Alison was to come, before she would go inside to wash her calloused hands.



## ANDREA FREUD LOEWENSTEIN

### HUNGRY LIKE A WOLF

"How come bus stations always the same?" Dede Robinson wonders. "Down South or here, don't even make no difference, jus ho's and junkies and weirdos and mothers with they sad sick little kids trying to get someplace they aint at?" Dede feels sick herself, her back is hurting her and she is afraid her friend may of come now of all times, but she tries not to think about it cause she doesn't want to go to the bathroom, she knows how it will be — dirty and no toilet paper or else it all un-wound on the wet floor. Across from her a young junky-looking white girl stares at one of them chained-down TV sets they got and laughs like she watching the greatest show on earth but that TV isn't even turnt on. "Girl probly live in this old bus station," Dede thinks. "At least I got me someplace to go."

In her head comes the voice of her Mama talking to her Aunt Carry in Boston on the phone.

"If you would take her, Carry, it would be such a load off me. I swear I don't know what to do with her. Don't know how Mama put up with her all that time, you know she never let us get away with nothing. Girl came back here so homey and old fashioned, off in a dream half the time. Couldn't make it in the Job Corps, and I honestly don't know where she can make it at this point, Carry, I just can't keep her with my myself the way she keeps her room and don't take care of herself you know I can't put up with that kind of mess now. Counselor from the Job Corps said the same thing, said the other girls complained about how she kept her room there. Her grooming. Sure don't take after me that way, and you wouldn't guess she mine to look at her, Carry. Wait till you see. Yeah, she grown alright."

It does feel like blood coming down inside of her leg now so Dede gets up to go to the bathroom lugging on her heavy bag. First she checks outside to see is the bus there yet, but it isn't, so she goes back in, passing two dudes, dressed and bad-looking in leather and silk shirts. Doesn't neither one speak to her or even look up. "Wouldn't of spoke to you anyway," she thinks. "You nasty-ass selfs."

*What if they would've come in the Job Corps dorm, try to get her*



room-mate Sandra. So pretty with her long self, and that way her eyes do when she smile. "Over my dead body you will take her," I'd say, and stand with my arm cross blocking the door. "I'm telling you just this one time, get away from my friend." One of them start moving in, not knowing bout my hidden strength, and Thwack! I get him with a karate chop right in the neck. When I come back in the room Sandra is crying she so relieved, and she throw her arms around my neck. "Dede I am your best friend for ever, can you forgive me for the way I treated you?"

Someone bumps on Dede. She is standing in the middle of the bus station in Harford and all over the room people are staring at her and shaking their heads. She shakes hers to try and get rid of where she been, and Sandra's voice comes in it, the way she used to do Dede when she wanted her to leave the room so she could have her boyfriend in.

"Get out of here, girl, aint you got nothing to do with yourself?" And the counselors on the Friday and Saturday nights she stayed in the door, with hey nasty, sorry-for-you selfs.

"Don't you have a book to read at least Dede? Instead of just sitting there for hours?"

In the Ladies all the booths are full. Two little girls are trying to wash theyselves in the faucet. "Mama said we gotta wash," the bigger one keeps saying, like she is scared. She's a light-skin little girl with a worried face like a grownup, and she keeps trying to hold her little sister up to the faucet, but it's the kind don't stay on by itself and every time the bigger girl gets her sister up there it turns off. Both of them are dirty, but the kind of dirt that needs a bath, not no restroom faucet. The little one thinks it's a game at first but then she looks at her sister and knows it aint no game.

*What if they mother would of left, just take and walk out on them. I'd have to take them home myself. Take good care of them like Grandma done me and never let no one laugh at them or hurt them or call them stupid. In a nice clean little house each one with they own room and color TV and me as thin as Sandra with some bad new clothes.*

"Are you waiting or what?" someone says, and Dede goes in the nasty toilet and finds out it's true, there is blood all inside of her leg and she aint got no pads or nothing and them machines don't never have nothing in it. She puts a few pieces of that scratchy brown toilet paper in her panties and reads what someone has wrote on the door, "Hungry like a Wolf." She likes the sound of that, it sound almost like a song.

*What if I turn it to a song and practice it up good, and then one day just be walking down the street not thinking bout nothing singing it to*



*myself and Patti Labelle happens to walking down that same street and hear me. "Girl, you got yourself a hit there! I aint heard nothing like that voice before either." First take me to cut a record, then take me home. Put her arm around me and say, "From now on you gonna live here and be one of us sisters. And pull me closer –*

Someone is knocking on the door, When Dede gets up she can feel the papers rubbing on her and getting ready to fall down her leg. Pants would be better, but she has on a yellow skirt that Mama bought her new for the trip cause she said Dede was too broad across for jeans. Of course the machine is empty, and the only ones in the bathroom is these two white broads. Dede can't stand to ask them, but the thought of getting to Aunt Carry's all messed up and with papers falling out of her drawers is even worse than asking. One of the two look like a bull dagger with that real short hair they got and a backpack, and the other one has fake blond hair and a fancy suit and boots with heels and is probly just a ho' dressed up good. Dede asks her anyways but the bitch just shakes her head and leaves out fast like she thinks Dede will ask for money next. "Aint no gold come out your pussy that time of month either." That's what Sandra would of said, but the broad is gone before Dede can think of it. It always like that.

"I know I have some tampax in here somewhere if you want one," the bull dagger says before Dede even speaks to her, and she starts going through that pack of hers, pulling out underwears and books and all kinds of shit Dede shakes her head no and then says "Thanks" out loud cause she don't want to be like that other bitch, but she has never put nothing up inside her and she never will. But at least the girl had the decency to ask.

By the time Dede gets back outside she can see the bus with "Boston" wrote on it pulling right out. The man says there is another one in an hour, but she almost cries anyway, cause she fucked up again and aint even got no pad out of it. She thinks of calling Aunt Carry to explain what happened but she is afraid to call and decides it will be better to just get there and act like she don't know what's going on. Ever since she came back North it seem like whatever she says just makes things worse, so now she tries to keep quiet. There is a bus with "Birmingham" wrote on it and she wants to get on that one so bad she almost cries again. But grandma is old now and wanted her to have her chance up North and anyways Dede aint got the money for a ticket.

*What if by the time I get to Boston Aunt Carry have gave up on me and went back home so there is no one there to meet me. And I am all alone in the bus station and then that girl from the bathroom came up*



*to me and ask do I need a place to stay. At first I say no, bu, if I stay in the station all night I could get killed so finally I say OK. Then the girl turn out to be a millionaire and take me home to this mansion with fur on the staircase and a big bed for us that take up the whole room and a special room for Grandma when she come live.*

When she runs outside the next bus is already loading up. Getting on right in front of her is them two little girls with their mother, one of them fat sloppy white ladies that you can see the blue veins popping out they legs and they dirty slip hanging down in back. Her hair is all stringy like she aint washed it for weeks and she is pushing the bigger girl up the stairs.

"Move, Goddamn it, Darlene," she says. "Oh you are making me lose my patience with you. Oh, I am gonna smack you so hard once we get on that bus."

*What if I was Wonder Woman I would just snatch up them two. Push the old broad down the steps of the bus to fall flat on her fat white ass—*

But then Dede watch the woman's legs trying to get up the stairs with them veins pushing out and her making a noise like she is hurting inside so she start again.

*What if the broad get up on the bus OK but then she get real real sick and they have to stop and call an ambulance. She is really rich but don't nobody know it yet but when they take her to the hospital they find out and she can have nurses to wait on her and any food she want to eat. And when she hear how I have took in her kids when no one else would, not even her blood kin, she call me to the hospital. "Dede Robinson, I know I am dying in a few hours, but I want you to have my house and my new car and all my live savings cause you were the only one to care for my two homeless girls.*

On the bus Dede sits down at a window seat halfway back. More people are still getting on but she wants the seat to herself so she sticks out her lower lip in the way that always made Grandma say, "Dede, you know God don't like ugly," and Mama say, "Girl, you don't need to try and look worse than He already made you!" Plus she is a big girl anyway and knows how to make herself bigger and so no one sits there. The bull dagger from the bathroom gets on and Dede gets smaller in case she wants to sit down, but behind her is what got to be a Black bull dagger only she don't look like one. She is big — not tub-shape like Dede — but curvy big, and she has on a soft green shirt all open down the neck so you can almost see the top of her soft round looking breasts. And a bad scarf tucked in there. And jeans and some leather boots that are alright and her hair in a short tight natural but the way she is touching on the



other one a little when they sit down in front of Dede show she have to be one too. Just as the bus starts to pull out a old sweaty white man with his shirt pulled up and his nasty white belly showing like a fish comes running and jumps on the bus and sit down next to Dede. He is much bigger than her and he spreads his self apart so she has to scrunch up small not to touch his nasty legs. She tries not to think about him and listens to the two in front.

"You know what someone wrote in the toilet?" the white one is saying. "Hungry like a wolf! I like the sound of that, don't you?"

"Yeah," Dede almost whispers, but the Black girl is saying it now.

"Hungry like a wolf." Her voice is low and nice, like a blues singer maybe. "Yeah I like it. And it fits right into that bus station, doesn't it. Those places always feel so lonely. I wonder if I could use it in a poem."

"Sweety, I'm sure you could." The other one is getting all excited now. "A bus stop poem! Shall I shut up so you can work on it now?"

"No, Sweety," the Black one says. "I want to talk to you. Was it too awful for you there? You can tell me now. The way they were all so damn polite —"

"And looked so pained all the time." The way they are talking now it is hard for Dede to tell which one.

"You mother tried anyway, she really tried —"

"Yeah well, I'll be glad to be home." They start talking at the same time now, like music.

"To get in our bed again —"

"Close and lock the door —"

"Phone off the hook —"

"I want to hold you in my arms all night —"

"All night long —"

*What if they go on talking and I make up the poem myself cause I saw it on the way just like they did and I thought the same thing, bout bus stations being lonely. I never wrote no poem before but now it come into my head. "Hungry like a wolf. Hungry for your love. Hungry like a wolf. Like the sky above." They just stand there with they mouth open they so surprise I done it and then the Black one tell me, "You the one I really want, this other girl here just a mistake. Want to hold you in my arms all night long, Dede Robinson," the girl is telling Dede as she falls asleep.*

*I am marching up the aisle. All in white and holding my bag but it light now and Mama walking beside me in her nurse uniform all white too with gold buttons. "She went down South, that why they getting married now," I hear one of the church ladies whisper. "They was apart*



for a long time but you can tell by just looking they belongs to each other."

"Them two can't get married," the preacher call out, only he a dude in leather and silk. "They both girls." But Grandma stand up in the front row and put her hand on my head. "That her mother so they spose to get married," she say. "This is my good girl, and don't no one say nothing about her."

Now I am about to cut the cake, but Grandma say, "Watch out for the babies!" A whole row of babies all round the cake top. All different colors. A dark black one and a medium brown. One gold, one red-skin, and a yellow one. Little feet with frosting on.

"Go on Dede," Grandma say. "I told you how to do this before now. You have to take them out and kiss them so they can get borned." I go around the cake kissing all the babies. On they little lips. The babies open they mouths and stretch and smile. Only one baby is left, the chocolate color one. I think that must be my baby and I kiss it lips. It taste good and I take that baby in my mouth.

"You spit that baby out right now!" It's a white lady, one of the counselors in the Job Corps. "I don't like your attitude young lady." Now all the babies crumpling up small and fall back in the cake. Sink in and start drowning. I try and get them but my mouth stick in the cake. Cake start to melt and drip on my new skirt. Brown stain all over. Sticky inside my legs.

Dede open her eyes up and that old white man reaching down between her legs. He grab his hand back quick when she look at him. Make a noise down in his throat like a dog and get up and move. Kick him in his balls, tell him, "Next time I cram them down your throat." That's what Sandra would of done. But he is gone now. Dede feels like she wants to cry or scream but her throat is all close up. There is blood all inside of her legs and on her skirt and the bus is going slow with lights all around. They are coming into Boston.

Aunt Carry is waiting for her at the bottom of the steps. She looks like Mama.

"Girl what is the matter with you are you sick? Where is your bag, aint you got no bag? Where is your bag I said?" Dede remembers her bag on the restroom floor back in Hartford. She don't say nothing. "Oh girl look at you blood all on your skirt and left your bag someplace. What is the matter with you I been here two hours now waiting. Buses aint running no more we got to get a cab home. Can't afford no cab I gotta get to work in the morning what you think you going to wear arriving here without no things. Wait till your mother hears about this girl."

Dede watches the mother and her two kids get off the bus. The little



girl is asleep and her mother is holding her and dragging the bigger one along. They look like they don't know where they are going.

"What you looking at girl?" Aunt Carry asks her. "What you got to say for yourself?"

Dede is watching for the other two to come out. "Hungry like a wolf," she whispers, and one of them papers starts to come down her leg.

"What's that? You hungry? Well you can eat soon as we get home. Come on now child, everything's gonna be alright." Aunt Carry's voice is softer now, and Dede follows her, blind, looking behind her to see them come down off the bus, the very last ones. The white girl is sleepy, and the sister has her arm around her, holding her till she wake up.

*"Come with us," they turn to tell me. "You will sleep in our bed, right between us. Come home with us. We keep a place for you."*

## ETYMOLOGY IS NOT DESTINY

"Pornography," she said  
is writing about whores,"  
is, she said  
taking in the word  
whore  
pushing out  
hatred, contempt, disgust  
the whole raw stink of sex.  
Her tongue swelled in her mouth  
and I could feel the heat  
rolling off her  
"Whores," she said"  
"Whores . . . writing."

*"You Whore,"* My lover whispers  
*"You sweet hungry whore."*  
And the smell rolls off her  
thick and strong and sweet.  
All the words I can not speak  
speak then  
write themselves across  
our bed  
the act . . . the image . . . the words

*Whores*  
writing our  
passion  
" pornos" on  
our skin  
our faces  
our mouths  
open



**whores**

not believing  
for a moment  
in the word

**whore**

## DIMINISHING

I meet my schedules  
go to work, head aching,  
the phone is cold against my ear.  
Far south, blond, blue-lipped  
and shivering, my nephew sits  
teeth pressing the pages of a book  
his blood thinned to warm  
jello in his veins  
diminishing.

I have become a wire frame  
delivering flesh to the subway track  
the elevator's whine, the steel traffic  
on the bridge, the lead weighted sky.  
Wire inside, chrome tooth and porcelain  
heart; everything grinds on  
diminishing.

South, far south  
it is hotter there, damp powder days  
salt marked sheets and my sister's slow madness  
everything smells of the flesh I no longer imagine.  
My sister's boy strokes the knots that crowd his skin.  
My sister's girl parades her jointless gait, the metal  
braces I can almost feel at elbow, hip and knee  
Death fattens while they refuse to scream  
and everything north of the belly  
diminishes.



## CROSSING THE RIVER

Every morning I cross the river, every night  
Some mornings the light is so pure  
the city is all white bones and ice mirrors  
I press my face to the train window and dream  
of the next century, the hope of poets and children.

Who could sin in all that light?  
Who could cry? Who walks, hands out  
up the gutters of the city calling  
"Children, Children!  
The light! The light!"

Every morning, crossing the river  
I press my face to my own desire  
my mother's face ruefully smiling  
expecting nothing, going on anyway,  
my sister's hand on her daughter's neck  
begging anything, anything better than the past  
shared and painful all our memories  
the blood that flushes our cheeks, our necks  
but wonderful too our hope for each other  
the light on the city, the voice that calls out  
"The light! The light!"

## whispers

he says we whisper  
he says we say  
things  
when he's not here

no Daddy

we stand frozen  
windup women  
waiting for the key  
put it in  
and shake it  
start us up

we don't whisper

Daddy

we scream



## AMERIKANKA

EXCERPT FROM *THE INFORMANT* A NOVEL, IN  
PROGRESS

At the edge of Moscow, just this side of the city limit, stands the Anna Ulyanova Maternity Home where on November 13, 1932, four days after the death of Nadezhda Alliluyeva Stalin, a son was born to Evgenia and Max Shvarts. They had just moved to the capital after months of trying unsuccessfully to get a transfer from the mines of Krasny Luch where Max was an interpreter for other American workers. Genia had been reluctant to have the baby anywhere but Moscow. It was finally the intercession of Gennady Brassov that made the difference. Genia had met Brassov when he visited New York in 1931. She had been working at Amtorg, and she'd made the arrangements for his stay and showed him the sights. Now he had gotten Max a post at the enormous optics plant where he headed the trade union organization. Brassov had arranged everything. He persuaded an engineer who was leaving the city to lease his room—narrow, but in the center—to the foreigners. He contacted the maternity home recommended by his sister-in-law and spoke personally with the head doctor. And when the time came, he even arranged Genia's transportation to the home, sending apologies for its out-of-the-way location.

Her water broke on the morning of the twelfth, a full week earlier than she anticipated. At least she thought the water broke, or was she just losing bladder control? She had expected something more definite. When she felt the first contractions two hours later, she threw some things into her valise—a nightgown, warm socks, two books (one English, one Russian), letters she had just received from Brooklyn via Krasny Luch, from Bird and Teddy, and two sections of an August edition of the Sunday New York Times that she had borrowed from Sam Krupnick, who got them from Milt Borenstein.

She started down the stairs, pausing on each landing. On the second she met her downstairs neighbor Nadia, a slight woman in the uniform of a streetcar conductor. Nadia was climbing the stairs slowly, dragging behind her a huge sackful of something.

"Time." Nadia said in an interrogatory monotone. She had the habit



of putting questions as if they were solemn declarations.

Genia said she thought it was and told her where she was heading. Nadia said she'd never get there on her own, everything was blocked in the center, the funeral for Nadezhda Sergeevna, may she rest in peace, was still underway, the crowds were impossible, no hope at all of getting on a streetcar. She'd be lucky to find a driver with a horse and cart to take her. Nadia said she would get her husband's cousin to come, she was an experienced midwife, she could manage it.

Genia reluctantly agreed to sit in Nadia's room where she tried to think of how to reach Max. She sent Nadia's daughter with a note to a pharmacy ten blocks away where another American, her friend Sam Krupnick, was working. He had a telephone there and could try to get through to Max.

A half hour later Sam himself appeared, and twenty minutes after that Max arrived in Brassov's roomy Zis sedan—he had insisted that Max take it, and had sent along his driver and a uniformed security guard from the plant. Genia settled into the back seat of the car. Nadia's daughter appeared at the last minute with a bundle of food her mother had thrown together—a fat bread, a jar of marinated mushrooms, two apples. The car glided off around the Sadovaya Ring and toward the city's northern rim.

The streets were full of official vehicles, big cars, Volgas and Zis sedans and Lincolns. At each major intersection the security guard said a few words to a policeman and they would be waved through the congested crossing, but even so, the trip took more than two hours. The driver was nervous, the security guard looked serious and determined, the sense of emergency heightened, and so Genia felt more than a little mortified when the contractions stopped as abruptly as they had started. She whispered to Max, who said that they might not get use of the car again, how long could it be now anyway, they would proceed. He gave her last-minute instructions. Oxygen was important for the baby and for her, she should remember to breathe.

Finally, after asking for directions from a number of contradictory sources, they turned onto a backstreet where tired lime trees leaned on a precarious wooden fence. Genia got out and knocked at the locked door. She knocked again. Max got out with the valise. They looked around. An unshaven old man sitting on a nearby bench, a straw broom propped up next to him, was eating a roll and drinking something from a metal cup.

"Come back tomorrow," he said. "They're closed for business."

"Not possible," Max said in his telegraphic Russian, and he stood banging on the door. Exasperated, he took off his shoe and started pounding with the heel, but its rubber bottom did little more than



his fist.

"It's supertime," the old man said to Genia. "Might as well sit down and wait, take a load off your feet, dearie. The baby don't come out as quick as you think anyway, in particular the first." He chuckled to himself. They ignored him. The driver and the skinny security guard joined them and the door shook.

"All right, all right," the old man muttered, picking up his broom and walking slowly toward them. He slid a ring of keys off his belt, played with the lock, and motioned them aside as the heavy door swung outward, opening abruptly onto a wide carved staircase with a rug of raspberry and gold. It led to a broad, dimly lit landing.

"Two flights up, if you please. These bottom floors are under renovation. Watch out for the plaster dust on your way up, it's slippery." He let out a noiseless laugh. "You wouldn't be the first young lady to take a tumble."

Genia and Max stepped inside.

"Only the lady, sir, only the lady. We can't have your germies flying about here, we have rules, you know. You can come back tomorrow to the little window there on the second floor, behind the scaffolding, you can apply yourself for results."

Max kept going anyway, valise in hand, and had followed Genia halfway up the first flight when a young woman, short-haired, bespectacled, grim for her years, appeared on the stairs and announced herself as the administrator. No men allowed, she confirmed. The husband could apply for information in person, and then could return ten days from the birth to collect his family. She looked suspiciously from Genia to the uniformed guard who held his position at the foot of the stairs, then out the open doorway to the Zis parked outside, and finally at Max.

"This woman is in labor?"

"Why else would she be here?" Max replied.

"Citizenship?" she asked, reacting visibly to his accent.

"American."

"Her too?"

"American," Genia said.

"Documents?"

"Yes," she answered with sudden horror at the thought that she might have left them behind. In her dreams, night after night, she found herself without documents—at a train station, on a bridge, in the lobby of a theater. With the palm of her hand she felt for them in the pocket of her long sweater. "Yes," she said again.

"Have we seen you before?" the administrator continued. "Our mothers report regularly for prophylactic treatment."



Max explained that they had just arrived in Moscow, that Comrade Brassov had telephoned the head doctor.

"Everything is in order, comrade," the security guard called in an oddly flirtatious tone from the foot of the stairs.

"Then come with me." And she turned and walked up the stairs. Max kissed Genia on the cheek.

"Don't let them send you home," he whispered, handing her the valise. "And remember, oxygen. Very important. So it's ten days, then."

Genia turned to watch the heavy door swing shut behind him, realizing only too late that the bread and mushrooms were still on the floor of the car. She followed the administrator up the stairs, praying for contractions with all her might, dreading them with all her being.

They didn't start in force for another seven hours, long after Genia had scratched answers to a dozen questions on an official form mimeographed on faded newsprint. Her belongings were checked by the administrator who assured her that they would be of no use here, everything would have to be disinfected anyway, sanitary regulations were rigorous. Genia managed to hold onto her glasses and her sweater, and then sat in the reception area on the third floor wondering what had gone on between the pastel walls of this old house. She followed the lines of the dado around the room and stopped at the largest of five doors on which a grille of carved wooden spirals was set over a square of red velvet, its center glossy with age. A radiator in the corner was covered with an elaborate metal grate over remnants of what must have also once been velvet. A long wooden table, its planks linked by ornamental keys, stood against one wall, jutting out into one of the doorways. Between the other doors were massive chairs whose triangular backs depicted carved birds adoring the tree of life.

Genia was starting to wonder whether she'd been forgotten and which of the doors might conceal a toilet when one of them slowly opened. Two young broad-faced women, one bigger and more fair than the other, walked arm-in-arm into the room. They walked slowly, shuffling in cloth slippers, laughing in each other's awkward gait. They wore drab sweaters over loose gowns. The taller had a colorful fringed kerchief around her head, the shorter a brown knitted one. Genia at first thought they were sisters, though the resemblance wasn't strong, but learned when she introduced herself that they had met only days before in the room which, until the renovation was complete, served as the institution's only operating theater and delivery room.

"You'll see it yourself," said the bigger woman, who said her name was Marfa. She had a nasal voice and strange, glistening green eyes that swam from one direction to another like guppies. "But they don't take



you there until you're half dead. You've got time."

"You Lithuanian?" her friend asked. Her name was Kira. Genia shook her head.

"A Yid," Marfa decided.

She said it in such a pleasant, neutral way that Genia smiled.

The two friends came from different villages north of the city, and they both said it was their first time in a regular birthing place, they'd always done it at home. Marfa said her husband had been dead set against it, his mother had managed their first three, why go to the capital now? But Marfa had a sister in town, she'd married a man with documents, a shock brigader at a brand new plant, a little America, modern, with new machines and lots of glass, right where they used to dump garbage. It was her sister's idea to have the baby in town, to make it scientific. And it had turned out fine—she'd had a boy, her first, four kilos. And she'd met Kira who had a girl a few hours later. They were already planning the courtship of their infants, whom they had named Kolia and Sashinka.

"Yours isn't in any hurry," Kira said, looking closely at Genia. "Might as well go back home before they send you. Your first?"

Genia said yes.

"Rub your belly," Marfa said, "until your hand gets hot. It'll help the pain."

"But there's no helping it," Kira added, with a smile that exposed her steel front tooth, "so just get it over with."

"And then you have ten days to rest. Just think, no work, no men, that's something."

They giggled and passed through another door, continuing their bow-legged stroll.

The contractions came again, stronger than before. It was dark now, and Genia still sat alone in the reception room feeling miserable and lonely. She pictured herself in her uncles' barbershop in Brooklyn. How did it happen, how could it be, she thought to herself, that I'd be all alone now, when everything is changing all at once. That no one would come. Suddenly she missed everyone at once, her mother and Aunt Luba and Bird and Teddy, especially Teddy. She remembered her first look at him, she was nine, he looked so squashed and wrinkled, and she could hardly believe that this tiny whole person had been the lump in Aunt Luba's belly. She stood up and opened one of the doors, finding herself in another empty room, this one mint green with ornamental white plaster molding. *Another contraction.* This room had a more medicinal look



about it, plain white glossy tables, enamel pots, thick jars with smudged labels. Genia found it reassuring and sat down, wondering if the administrator would know where to find her. She noticed in the corner a wide chair with a lid on its seat and a black bucket on a shelf underneath. She lifted the lid, reached under her skirt, lowered her underpants, and sat down. *Another contraction.* She doubled over, then sat up again, turning to look at the posters that hung on all four walls. Three of them looked bright and new, all dominated by the same shade of red. One showed Stalin surrounded by toddlers in white caps clutching flowers in pudgy fists. Another illustrated the building blocks of nutrition. Her urine against the bucket gave a hollow sound. A third showed cheerful young doctors proclaiming the drop in infant mortality. On the wall behind her, next to a glass instrument cabinet, was a fourth poster, no more faded, but in different casts. Genia stood up and turned to look at it. *Another.* The words YOUR FAMILY WAITS FOR YOU stretched across the bottom in bold, thick letters. The dreary group depicted below included an old man and a stooped, gray-haired woman, assorted children, and in the center, a worn young mother cradling an infant. Something about the poster wasn't right, but Genia couldn't fix on just what. The pain was sharper now, more sudden, assaulting her body with a violence she didn't understand. She cried out.

The administrator opened the door.

"*Amerikanka*, keep quiet," she ordered. "People are resting." And she sent in a stern, comforting woman of about sixty, a Natalia Vasilievna, to see how far along Genia was. She sat down with her and timed the contractions, watching with non-committal attention. Genia was deeply grateful. They didn't move her into the delivery room until midnight. By then, Natalia Vasilievna had helped her out of her clothes, which were wet and cold with perspiration, put her in a clean loose gown, and pulled off her glasses. Genia anticipated each contraction but somehow each one was a shock. She tried to remember to breathe. And suddenly she became aware of the baby, realizing that for hours she had been feeling the birth but not the baby. She rubbed her belly and imagined, almost involuntarily, being small, scrunched up, pushing out into existence, furious, impatient, greedy, then suddenly shrinking back again.

"*Amerikanka!*"

Genia opened her eyes slowly, felt a burning soreness between her legs, remembered everything, held onto a last bit of dream—a bridge, thick haze, the bridge swaying, a woman walking past her. She shut her



eyes again.

"*Amerikanka!*"

The whisper was more insistent and she recognized Marfa's sing-song voice. She opened her eyes again and turned her head. Marfa was in the next bed.

"You awake? *Amerikanka*, you awake?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"What kind is it?"

"A boy."

"But what kind? Is he ours?"

"Yours?"

"Russian."

"No."

"You man's not Russian?"

"He's like me."

"Can't be."

"Why not?"

"The baby's a tow-head. I saw him."

"So? Look at me."

"That's your own?"

"You think I'd make it this way?"

"This way you're more like us."

"Let me sleep."

"No use. She's coming around again." Genia looked up and saw Natalia Vasilievna coming toward her. "To make you piss."

No matter how Natalia Vasilievna coaxed, teased, scolded, Genia couldn't do it. She would try to tighten up, relax, push, let go, she tried to concentrate on making the urine come, but she had the peculiar sensation of not remembering how to do it. Another nurse brought the baby and she had a reprieve. He was tightly wrapped, the cuffs of his little sleeves sewn shut, a large square of gray cloth enfolding him snugly, knotted at his belly. Genia put his face to her breast, nudged his cheek with her thumb to get him to suck, wondered why this act, which she always supposed would be entirely natural, felt so awkward. He cried in rhythmic bursts until she moved him to a different position and he took the nipple. Her arm fell asleep. No matter how hard she looked at him, he was still a stranger, her own flesh and blood, as she kept telling herself, but a stranger all the same. After a time she decided to take a look at the rest of him. She realized that she hadn't yet seen his body, not for more than an instant. She started to unwrap him.

"*Amerikanka!* Better not. He'll hurt himself, he'll scratch his eyes out. We don't do that."

"I'm just taking a look at him."

"You going to cut it off?" Marfa whispered.

"What?"

"You know. What the Yids do."

Natalia Vasilievna came with tea, telling Genia that she needed liquids. She scowled with mild reproof when she saw the baby half unwrapped and took him from her quickly and smoothly, knotting the swaddling clothes with one hand as she walked away.

Genia got hungry and it occurred to her that no one had brought her anything to eat since she'd gotten there—how long had it been? She glanced over at Marfa and Kira who were sitting side by side on the next bed biting into bread and something that looked like cold vegetable pie.

"When do they feed us?"

"You've got to bring it with you or have it sent. Your man can bring it downstairs and they'll give it to you sooner or later, unless the janitor gets hold of it first."

Genia thought morosely of the neighbor's bundle. She felt hot tears starting to come, her throat closing up. Kira crossed the room and pulled a sack from under her bed. She cut a piece of stale black bread and some sausage and offered it to Genia, whose gratitude was so affecting that she went back and brought a jar of gooseberry jam, spooning some onto the bread.

Later that day Genia tried to phone Max at the plant to ask him to bring food. There was only one outgoing line, and she had to assure the administrator that it was an emergency, she would only need to make one call. First the line was busy for a half-hour. Then it rang but no one answered. She called and called, letting it ring forty times before hanging up and trying again. Then it seemed that after each dozen rings someone would pick up the receiver and then immediately slam it down again. She tried once more. This time a woman's remote voice answered and said that she had the wrong line. The administrator opened the door, saying that Genia had tied up the line long enough, undoubtedly her husband would send someone with food, he wasn't going to let her starve after all. And she sent Genia back to bed.

When she returned, someone new was on the bed to her right. She looked very small under the bedcovers, and she seemed more stupified than asleep.

"Scrawny, like a chicken neck," Kira said.

"And imagine," Marfa added, "she had a boy the size of a watermelon. The devil knows how they got him out of her. A real bruiser, and



all smooth, a china baby."

"He'd better be stronger than she is," Kira said. "Poor baby, alone in the world, with her for a mother and no papa. It's sinful."

They had learned something of her story and were anxious to tell it. Her name was Dora. She had been almost delirious when a bearded man and his wife—they said they were neighbors—brought her in on a cart. Kira had heard the neighbor woman talking to the administrator who was filling out the form. Year of birth, the administrator wanted to know. They had no idea. How could the administrator admit a patient without the year of birth? They shrugged their shoulders. The father? The girl had a husband, they said, but he had divorced her, then came back when he learned she was pregnant. He wouldn't marry her again, though. He wanted to live with her, but not marry. Then he got married to somebody else, said he had to be respectable. Probably it looked bad for business.

Genia looked again at Dora. She couldn't be more than sixteen, maybe seventeen, Bird's age when she'd last seen her. A Jewish face, it seemed to her, ivory skin, close-cropped hair. Natalia Vasilievna came again to get Genia to the toilet, this time threatening, but still nothing came.

They brought the babies in for feeding. Kira's was red-faced, with round gray eyes, no chin. They woke Dora out of her groggy sleep and propped up her placid bundle on the pillow next to her. And they brought Edik. Genia and Max had decided that a boy would be Vladimir, but now she settled on Eduard. It wasn't right, strictly speaking, to name the baby for Teddy, but she thought the family could live with it, and she knew she could get Max to agree.

They didn't bring Kolia and told Marfa she would have to wait, they were showing him to the doctor, they didn't like his color—a little pale, a little on the yellowish side, nothing to worry about—they would keep him in the nursery and she could come in to feed him a little later.

That night Genia had trouble falling asleep. Her breasts were sore, she couldn't get comfortable. She was restless, worried about Natalia Vasilievna's threats. What "measures" would they take if she still couldn't go in the morning? The more she worried about it the more impossible it seemed. She kept drinking water, tea, anything. She was finally getting drowsy, drifting off, trying to picture Edik, saying his name to herself, half-asleep, when she heard a voice.

"Amerikanka!"

"Not now, go to sleep."

"Your kid's too small. He's a goner, in my opinion . . . what is he, not even three kilos."



"Go to sleep."

"Maybe you should let me have him. You don't have enough milk anyway, you got those big titties but not the milk."

Genia didn't answer.

"He'll suck you dry," Marfa said, now louder.

Someone across the room rapped on the metal frame of a bed.

"Your man won't want you," Marfa whispered and turned over.

Dora was stronger the next day and ready to eat something. The neighbors had left food and she ate some kasha, offering a cupful to Genia. She looked at Genia closely.

"Speak Yiddish?"

"Sure."

And she told her how her husband had left her. They wanted to marry again but her husband was a Kohan. A Kohan who can't marry a divorced woman.

"Not even his own wife?"

Dora shook her head. "His brother was ashamed, he wanted to marry me, he's a bachelor. But he's a Kohan too. So I'm alone, like a stone."

"You stay with your parents?"

Her father was dead, her mother had a new husband, a lame man with five small children. Dora had taken a room with the neighbors. Her father-in-law was paying for it.

A few hours later Genia was finally successful. The hot urine burned her, ran down her leg, but the relief was enormous. She felt more relaxed, counted the days left. She got her glasses back from Natalia Vasilievna and convinced the administrator to give her back her newspapers. Nadia sent a bundle of food with another streetcar conductor whose line passed near the maternity home. Genia started to look forward to the moment they would bring Edik to her, when she could stare at his ears and eyes as much as she liked. She was getting used to him. And he was beginning to nurse, finding his way to her dark, sore nipples. He didn't seem to be particularly appreciative though, and she was worried that he wasn't getting enough.

She was nursing Edik, inspecting his right ear, when she heard a wail from the direction of the nursery. It was a fierce, awful sound, it resonated within her. She started and the baby lost hold of her. He started to cry, then began sucking again. The wailing went on, now like two



voices. There seemed to be words, but Genia couldn't make them out.

She and Dora looked at one another. When their eyes met, they knew instantly what had happened. Marfa's baby was dead.

The wailing went on for what seemed like hours, then stopped and started intermittently. Then it became more muffled. The administrator had taken Marfa into her office. She wanted to send someone for the husband, to tell him to take the baby, to make arrangements, but Marfa wouldn't hear of it and Kira said no. Marfa would have to stay a few more days to rest, Kira said, and then she would go home and tell her husband herself, it would be better that way. In the meantime Kira would send for her brother, he was closer by and he knew an undertaking official, he would take care of it.

For the next several days Marfa walked from room to room, sometimes leaning on Kira, sometimes wandering alone, talking wildly to herself. Genia could hardly bear to look at her, but most of all she dreaded the nights. Marfa would wake her, her nasal voice now hoarse and brittle.

"Give me your boy, give him to me," she would repeat in a rhythmic hiss. "He's ours, he looks more like me than you. You'll make a girl of him, you'll cut it off. Give him to me."

And in the morning she would swear to Natalia Vasilievna that Genia was unfit to be a mother, that she would let the baby sleep on his belly, she'd unwrap him, let him lie naked, keep him pale and scrawny, ruin his eyes.

One night Genia woke up wondering vaguely what time it was, when the nurse would bring Edik. She heard voices, the shuffle of footsteps, doors opening and closing. She turned her head. Dora was asleep, the cover pulled up over her face, her feet exposed. She could see her outline clearly. Suddenly Genia realized that it was nearly dawn, she had slept for hours. No one had brought the baby, and there had been no whispered reproaches from the next bed. She turned her head the other way. Marfa's bed was empty.

By daylight everyone knew what had happened. Marfa had run away and she had taken a baby with her. Genia felt sudden terror, and something else too, something like relief. Then again terror, bursts of excitement and anxiety in her chest. She swallowed hard, afraid she would choke on her own saliva. For a moment she couldn't catch her breath.

But it was Dora's baby that had been taken, the big bruiser, the china baby, Dora's beautiful boy. At first Dora wouldn't believe it, she was convinced that her baby was dead, that whatever contagion had



taken Marfa's baby had now struck hers, that they were all lying to her. Panic spread through the ward. But Natalia Vasilievna quickly took over, insisting that jaundice had killed Marfa's baby—no fever, no curse—and Dora's boy was no doubt perfectly healthy. Marfa had milk enough for five babies.

Genia waited for something to happen. She expected a commotion—police, investigators, local health officials—but by noon everything was oddly quiet. Natalia Vasilievna confided that the administrator was waiting. The situation was highly irregular, it would look bad if there were a scandal, and surely Marfa would come back when she recovered her wits. In the meantime she knew how to care for a baby, she had three girls of her own. The administrator talked of sending a workman to Marfa's village to look for her, but Kira swore she wouldn't have gone there. She didn't know where Marfa might be found, but it would do no good to look there.

Unnerved by the quiet, by Dora's alternating weeping and numb staring, Genia lost patience. She got out of bed and walked barefoot to the administrator's office, telling her that her husband was a Communist, a party member, she would have him look into it if something weren't done, surely there were measures to be taken, and without delay. Genia knew the administrator would remember the Zis that had delivered her, the uniformed escort. The administrator looked shaken. She picked up the telephone.

The police questioned everyone, one at a time, in the reception room which they assumed as headquarters for their investigation. They questioned the administrator who by now was pale and nervous and kept scratching her head. They questioned the calm Natalia Vasilievna and Kira. And they questioned Genia. First they offered tea and chatted congenially about the building, its architecture, its furnishings.

"Did you know that this was once a house of prostitution?" the senior investigator asked, turning up the corners of his thin lips. "You must have noticed the arrangement of the rooms, the separate entrances. . . ."

"You're an educated woman," he continued, "and we're hoping you can help us locate this Petrova woman. A tragic case."

"Tragic, but serious," his boyish assistant added. Genia was struck by his face, the yellowish cheeks, the small teeth. He had a raised birthmark beneath his right eye. "We can't have our women running about with other people's babies, like gypsies," he said.

Genia said she had no idea where Marfa might have gone, and then



recalled—it seemed ages ago now—their first conversation in that very room on the day she arrived. Marfa had a sister in town and a brother-in-law at a plant, a new one, at the site of a former dumping ground.

"Which one?" the senior investigator asked, leaning toward her until she could smell something sweet on his breath.

"I don't know. She said it was American, or had American machines. Something like that. She called it a little America."

"Ball bearings," the junior suggested.

His boss nodded. They thanked Genia courteously and put on their hats and coats.

Genia got no sleep that night. She sat up with Dora, talking to her quietly, telling her about New York, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Roxie, whatever she thought might distract her. Outside the moon was bright, and they watched wet snow collect on the window ledge. Where were Marfa and the baby? Genia felt lonely and hungry. No one else slept much either. Kira lay on the other side of the room, whispering to her neighbors, peering through the half-darkness at Genia and Dora. Early in the morning they heard a car door slam, then another, then footsteps on the stairs. At first they thought it was the plasterers arriving for an early shift. Then the administrator opened the door and came to Dora, telling her wearily that they had found her baby, he was in her office, he seemed to be well, they were calling in the head pediatrician to check him over. The administrator pulled her unwashed hair behind her ears and put a hand on Dora's shoulder. "We have to keep him in isolation until the doctor looks at him, but after that we'll bring him to you. Sleep now, then we'll bring him." The administrator walked away, passing Genia but avoiding her eyes.

Dora reached out from her bed, Genia from hers. Their fingertips barely touched.

"She's right, you should try to sleep," Genia said. She watched Dora for a few minutes, then got up to go to the toilet.

"Lousy squealer," Kira hissed as Genia passed her bed.

Genia stopped and turned. Who was she talking to?

"You as good as killed her."

"You're talking to me?"

"Her husband nearly beat her to death when she had another girl. And now she brings him his first son, home from this place, a goner. He'll beat her silly, he'll kill her for sure. You know nothing. Nothing."

"She took Dora's baby. What could you be thinking?"

"So you got him back. That's marvellous, now the baby can starve to death with that scrawny orphan for a mother. And no father. So now you'll have two deaths on your hands. You don't know us."



"I did what was right," said Genia, more to herself than to Kira, suddenly exhausted, holding onto the metal bar at the foot of Kira's bed.

"I spit on your rightness," Kira whispered and turned her back.

The next day the administrator brought Genia's clothes to her in her leather valise. She dressed quickly, sat with Dora for a few minutes, kissed her forehead, and walked past Kira who was also preparing to leave. She followed Natalia Vasilievna, who carried Edik down the stairs. Max was waiting on the landing where he had left her ten days before, drooping yellow flowers in his hand. Genia stared at him. He'd had a haircut for the occasion, but he looked exactly the same. The world had turned inside out, and he looked exactly the same. He kissed her, looked at the baby, and said the car was waiting outside.

"Be sure when you go home," Natalia Vasilievna said to them both, handing Edik to Genia, "to say that in our country it costs nothing to have a baby. It's free of charge."

Brassov himself was waiting in the car, reading a newspaper in the seat next to the driver. He got out to greet Genia, kissed her on the cheek, praised "young Vladimir Maximovich," and scolded the old janitor who got up from his bench and leaned over the baby to inspect his face. They started off, Brassov cautioning the driver to go slowly, to avoid ruts in the road. He unlatched his bulging briefcase and took out a bottle of vodka and three glasses. Edik fussed a little, then fell asleep. Genia started telling the story of Dora's baby and Marfa and Kira, looking more at Brassov than Max. Max threw her a stern look warning her not to push Brassov too far, but she was determined. She asked whether there was anything to be done, anything to protect Marfa.

Brassov listened, frowned, opened the bottle, waited for a smooth stretch of roadway so he could pour.

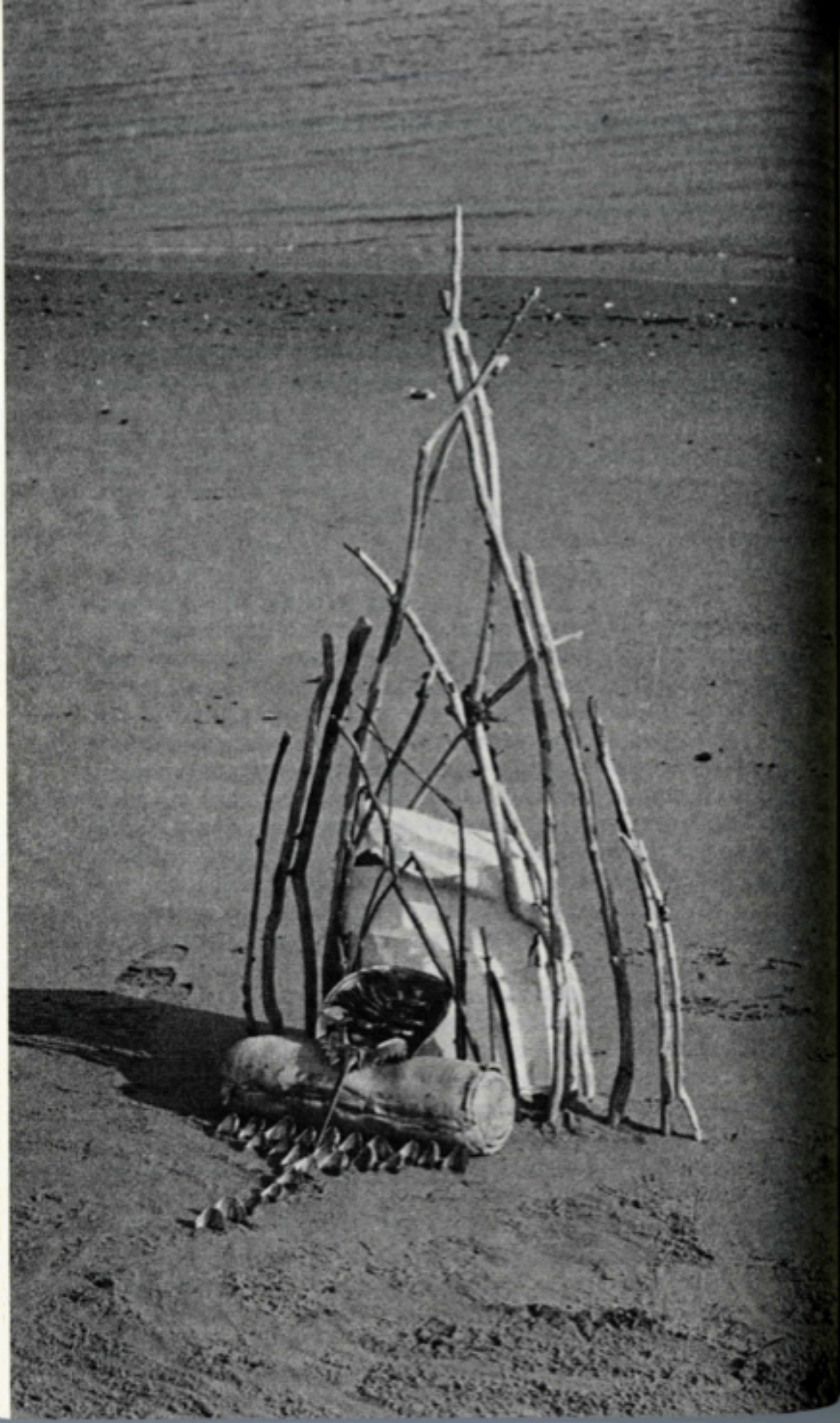
"So you've met our Russian women," he said, then smiled ironically, "... our awakening masses. An education, and free of charge." He filled a glass and handed it to Max. "Such things happen, he'll beat her, but she'll probably live through it. The local administration is dealing with these things now, but our men still have a lot to learn. Our peasants are still illiterate." He talked now with more spirit, more ease. "That's why our campaigns in the countryside are so important. Imagine, before the revolution only one in four of our people over the age of ten could read or write." He filled a second glass. "Give us time, Geniochka, the Revolution is young, like your little one. The work of upbringing is just beginning."



He seemed pleased with the analogy. He filled the third glass. Genia hesitated.

"Drink up, to the bottom, don't be timid. It won't hurt him, he'll sleep better tonight, you both will. To your health! Your son! The future!"

They drank up. That night Edik did sleep through most of the night, loosely wrapped in a large cloth and covered with Genia's raccoon coat. And Max slept soundly beside Genia on their iron cot, his arm across her middle. But Genia slept fitfully, seeing Marfa in her dreams, bruised, bleeding, crushed by the wheels of a huge Zis sedan, a baby's wail issuing from her cold body.





## COALFIELDS (TEXT 2) 30 SECONDS ON FRED CARTER

Blue first told me about Fred Carter—  
an old black retired miner,  
black lung victim, lay representative,  
who was up on some misdemeanors.  
He said the feds framed him  
for being effective  
and running for U.M.W. president.  
His running mate said  
they knew where me and Fred was coming from  
and we could organize  
every non-union mine in this country.  
His lawyer said  
Fred has the most impressive forearms  
I ever did see.  
And to tell you the truth  
I didn't believe much of it  
until I saw his three bedrooms  
filled with hats and suits.  
Files. Suitcases. Cases.  
And a second story.

## HER FIRST LANGUAGE

is not American  
so when she recites the poem  
the worlds are not as clear  
as the beautiful notes  
from her mouth.  
Teeth figure into not only this section  
but recollections of grandpa  
and the glass by his bed.  
You could cry for his plumeria  
and chickens.  
The other plantation hands  
brought his wife laundry  
and stalks of cane.  
The t-shirts  
glistened on the line.  
He couldn't speak to you  
though he said *iiko da ne*  
and patted you on the head  
like the German girl off stage  
saying  
the moon is writhing.  
It occurs to you  
only women and wounded soldiers  
writhe.



1975

she sits alone and wonders what to do  
 funny thing to go like that  
 she'd been in there washing the dishes  
 he was in the other room watching t.v.  
 some police program she'd thought as she scratched at the hardened patch  
 of mashed potato with her thumbnail  
 she could hear the siren  
 the inevitable scream that led up to a commercial  
 in the early days of her marriage he would sit at the kitchen table and  
 talk to her until she finished then they would go for a walk or maybe  
 straight to bed or sometimes she would sit down with him  
 and they would talk on into the night  
 she stared at the soap on her hands  
 she knew those things had happened that they had actually lived like that  
 but she couldn't remember what either one of them looked like or what they  
 had talked about  
 now 24 years later she sat at the same kitchen table in the same spot and he  
 sat in the other room dead  
 dead to the world  
 dead as a doornail  
 dead as a drowned rat  
 dead dead dead  
 she had gone in there as soon as she'd finished  
 she wanted to read an article in good housekeeping  
 about a couple that had adopted 17 children and  
 each one of the children was deformed in some way  
 she had glanced through the magazine earlier that day and had seen the picture  
 everybody smiling from their respective wheel chair crutch or brace  
 underneath the list of names the picture was captioned "one big happy bunch"  
 when she saw him his chin was resting on his chest  
 she thought he was asleep of course and went to turn off the t.v.  
 there was a woman in black sparkled tights twirling across a stage  
 and a row of men in straw hats swaying in back of her  
 the men were all smiling and humming and pointing little bamboo canes at her  
 she looked hard at the screen

she wanted to see what the woman looked like or if she was smiling  
but she couldn't tell she was twirling too fast she turned it off  
time passed  
she read her article plus hair tips consumer tips and a story about a man  
who was a drug addict but who now grew nasturtiums  
she turned off the light and went to bed  
when she awoke the next morning she saw he hadn't come in  
on her way to the kitchen she saw he was still sitting in the same position  
she cooked breakfast for them both and sat down to eat hers  
about half way through she tested his eggs and found they were getting cold  
fast  
she went in to wake him up she stood by the chair and said  
your breakfast is ready your eggs are getting cold  
there was no response of course  
she opened the drapes  
so much sun blue sky no clouds  
the kind of day you could go anywhere  
she returned to the kitchen and finished her breakfast  
she scraped his plate into a plastic bag that she kept for the neighbor's cat  
after the dishes she swept the floor  
after that she sat down at the table  
she was thinking about her sister in tucson  
she remembered all the snapshots and postcards her sister had sent her over  
the years  
everybody was always standing around in shortsleeves with a drink in their hand  
then there was the desert  
pictures of little reptiles comin out of their holes  
or rabbits standing next to cactus  
she went into the bedroom found the checkbook and put it in her purse  
she went back to the kitchen and called a taxi  
while she was waiting she decided to make herself a sandwich  
airplane food had a certain reputation and she was almost sure she wouldn't  
like it it was all instant and prepackaged and everybody got the same  
portion no matter how hungry they were  
she pulled out the ham the pickles the mayonnaise  
she'd decided on a ham sandwich  
she was real happy about that decision



## JAPANESE VASE

"You look good," he says, "Slim. Well."

The first words to his daughter in four years. As he collapses in the overstuffed chair, she notices that he is not well. Nor slim. Two-hundred-fifty pounds on five-foot-ten. All these years his weight has trailed her like Claudius. She is sad, repulsed, confused that she could ever be so fearful of her father.

He plops a packet of snapshots on the coffee table and surveys her apartment. She takes in Indian wall hangings, small Persian rug, gladiolas in the Japanese vase. Does he remember the vase, she wonders. Does he remember when he brought it back for her in high school? Or was it college? She does not remember. He regards the vase, puzzling, himself. When he notices her noticing him, he shifts his glance.

"An electric typewriter," he says, considering her neat desk from a distance. He will not go closer. He has never intruded. "But I guess you need it for your work."

Can he imagine the months it took to convince herself that she did need an electric typewriter to be a good union organizer? For surely she could organize on the falling-apart model from college with the semicolon missing. Easy enough to insert that extra dot over the comma. How many semicolons does a good union organizer need?

"Yes," she says, "it's useful." She sweeps her blondness back in the hairpin. Strawberry blond like his hair before baldness invaded. "Would you like an omelette or scrambled?" she asks, knowing already that omelette will be too effete and trying to recall how much milk to put in scrambled.

He follows her into the kitchen, with a cup of black coffee in his hands. He tells her how he is canning tomatoes. And cactus pickles. She cannot believe the soldier has retired to a farm. Now he lives in the desert with his dogs. Retrievers.

Glad he is talking because she could never cook and talk at the same time—how had Mama done it with five kids underfoot and always hot soup on the stove—she listens hopefully in between his words.

As she butters the muffins he watches, fascinated, like a caveman. Finally he says, "You use REAL butter."

She wants to explain that she bought it at the coop where it's almost as cheap as margarine. But a suspicious smell invades from behind and she makes a mad rescue of the scrambled eggs. Not enough milk after all.

"Good grub," he flatters from behind his loosely fitting false teeth that make her think, oddly, of a hen clucking. "Just like Mama's."

He is lying. For eggs like Mama's he should visit Carolyn or Ann Marie or Ellen. Even George cooks better eggs. But visiting George would expose him to more than electric typewriters and he could never admit that his own son was a faggot. Why was she the one he always chose to visit?

"English muffins," he says brightly.

She is touched by how hard he is trying to be pleasant, trying to make conversation.

Remember when we used to get raisin muffins at the day-old bakery?"

She nods, thinking about the brioches and croissants to which Kent has introduced her. She has made a special trip to the A & P for these muffins and she doesn't want to feel guilty that they are not day-old. She sips her coffee and tries not to cry.

Sensing her silence as boredom, he pulls out the snapshots. Two golden retrievers on the front lawn of his desert home. Frisky and Miranda. Both females. The photo of the back garden overflows with peppers and melons and—ah, yes, the cactus. How can he live in the desert? He is eating another muffin. His fifth. "Better to have too much," Mama would say. He carefully wipes the jam off his thumb before handing her a picture of the desert in winter.

She digs out photos of recent Christmases with Carolyn, Ann Marie, Ellen, their husbands and children. Brother George is off to the sidelines, a bow around his neck, clowning under the tree. Or pouring himself a drink in the corner. She notices that George is always alone. And she, being the family photographer, isn't in any of the pictures.

The family—so much family talk—perhaps this makes him miss Mama.

"My work," she offers, "is going well. We've organized three companies of office clerks this year."

He tells her how the union is screwing him out of a pension.

"I've more or less settled down," she says, glancing inadvertently at the Japanese vase. "After all those years of organizing around the country, I got tired of Motel Sixes."

"Yes, you can get dysentery from the water in those places," he says. "You know I had another bladder operation?"

Why does she want to smash that damn vase against the wall?



Who cares why? She'll do it when he leaves. No, perhaps she won't. For she doesn't own anything in which flowers fit so well.

He pulls out another snapshot. Frisky and Miranda by the flagpole. "1995", he says proudly, "at Sears."

Sears. One of her earliest memories is set at Sears, searching for her father lost among the long male legs at Sears in Hackensack.

He looks at his watch. "Gotta go," he says, suddenly. Does her face betray disappointment?

"You remember Bo Bo," he says unsurely, "stationed in Nam with me. Lives in Baldwin now. Old soldiers shooting bull this afternoon."

She nods to knock back the tears.

"Nice neighborhood," he says on the way down the stairs. He is much more talkative going down than coming up. "You get many colored around here?"

At this moment Juana emerges from the downstairs flat. He blushes and looks at his shoes, which, she notices, are the same old kind with perforations on the top. Very forties. He has always worn such shoes—from Sears.

"Will you take our picture, Juana?" she asks, handing her neighbor a small instamatic. "Will you shoot us together?"

IV.

Intimacy no luxury here.  
 Telephones cannot be left off the hook  
 or lines too long engaged  
 or conversations censored any longer.  
 No time to stare at our hands  
 afraid to extend them  
 or once held  
 afraid to let go.  
 We are here.  
 After years of separation  
 women take their time  
 dispose of old animosities.  
 Tribadism is an ancient panacea and cost-efficient  
 an ancient panacea and cost-efficient.



## LIVING AS A LESBIAN AT 35

in my car I am fishing in my pocketbook  
eyes on the road  
for my wallet.

in my mind I am fishing in your drawers  
eyes on the road  
for your pussy.

high speeds evoke fucking.  
depending on your mood you come.  
it goes on:

I do too from you  
over the wheel  
hand between my thighs  
eyes on the road  
and the end of all: sex.

my mind:  
a favored child has more freedom from her parents  
a hippocampus more freedom from the horse and dolphin  
a hippopotamus more freedom from her short legs  
and muzzle  
than my hypothalamus from lusting  
and the end of all: sex.

my age?  
the years I missed?  
the women I had no opportunity with?  
an old lover is sweet and good.  
an old friend surprising and familiar.  
all bodies possibilities.  
any bodies.  
lust: the cause of every tribute and transaction  
for the end of all: sex.

to work to the end of day  
to talk to the end of talk  
to run to the end of dark  
to have at the end of it all: sex.

the wish for forever  
for more often  
for more.

the promises  
the absurdity  
the histrionics  
the loss of pride  
the bargaining  
the sadness after.

in wakefulness wanting  
in wakefulness waiting



## KITTATINNY

*'I wanna love and treat you, love and treat you  
right.'*—Marley

Kittatinny Tunnel in that holy place you let me hit  
I push on toward your darker part.  
I'll take you there and mean it.

In my car, by the road, in a tent, in a pit  
stop, and practice a funkier art,  
Kittatinny Tunnel of that holy place you let me hit.

Shout, cry, promise, beg, cajole, go limp, or spit  
on me with dirty words to test my heart.  
I'll take you there and mean it.

Crawl from me, pitch a fit,  
stand, hug the wall, bend, and direct me part  
and penetrate Kittatinny, that holy place you let me hit.

And take it, take it, take it.  
Call it bitch, whore, slave, tart.  
I'll take you there and mean it.

Tribad, dildo, lick your clit-  
oris. Come, pee, shit, or fart,  
I'll take you there and mean it,  
Kittatinny Tunnel of that holy place you let me hit.

## nothing

nothing I wouldn't do for the woman I sleep with  
when nobody satisfy me the way so do

kiss her in public places  
win the lottery  
take her in the ass in a train lavatory  
sleep three in a single bed  
have a baby  
to keep her wanting me

wear leather underwear  
remember my dreams  
make plans and schemes  
go down on her in front of her other lover  
give my jewelry away  
to keep her wanting me

sell my car  
tie her to the bed post and spank her  
lie to my mother  
let her watch me fuck my other lover  
miss my only sister's wedding  
to keep her wanting me

buy her cocaine  
show her the pleasure in danger  
bargain  
let her dress me in colorful costumes of low  
cleavage and slit to the crotch  
giving easy access  
to keep her wanting me

nothing I wouldn't do for the woman I sleep with  
when nobody satisfy me the way she do

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## TAHOMA

I couldn't sleep. The wind outside the tent roared so loudly I couldn't even hear Sonia and Katy breathing. Forget the climb in the morning, I thought, convinced that a full-scale blizzard had blown in from the Pacific. We'll be lucky if we get off this mountain at all. Still, I switched on my flashlight to check the time: midnight. In one hour I would look outside the tent to assess the situation.

Wedged warmly between Sonia and Katy in the two-person tent, I closed my eyes happy in the thought that the climb would be cancelled and I would be relieved of my responsibility as the climb leader. Tomorrow we would simply trudge back down the benign Inter Glacier to my cabin at Sunrise and that would be the end of it. There we could cook a big pot of chicken noodle soup and maybe even bake some chocolate cookies. Sonia and Katy could get to know one another better, and we would all laugh over our aborted mountain climbing adventure. The End, I thought comfortably. But as I dozed off to sleep, new fears edged their way into my dreams.

Piles of pink clouds gathered on the Pacific horizon. Full and round, they swelled to give birth to new clouds until half the sky was filled. Then finally, one by one, single pink puffs broke loose and floated gently eastward until they rested at the foot of the mountain. Boisterous winds followed in quick pursuit, slamming against the base of the mountain and then sweeping upwards to the cold altitudes above.

I jerked awake just as the wind in my dreams had uprooted our blue taffeta tent and sent it sailing over the Cascade Mountain range. The sides of the tent were indeed flapping vigorously. I was sure it was going to collapse any minute. Yet Sonia and Katy slept soundly, unaware of the possible climb before them, unbothered by the apparent storm we were enduring at 11,000 feet, and certainly unconscious of the hefty sense of responsibility I felt lodged in my chest.

I could see the headlines already: "Three Women Die on Mt. Rainier's Emmons Glacier." Then the article: "Three women, ages 26, 24, and 26, died this week while attempting to climb Mt. Rainier in the state of Washington. Roberta Billings, leader of the climb, was working as a naturalist on the mountain this summer and . . ." I began to wonder how



I ever got roped into this climb in the first place. Sonia had come up with the idea.

"Take me up the mountain on your days off!" she had yelled into the phone from Yreka, California. "I'll come up and stay with you for a week." How could I say no to Sonia?

I could picture her perfectly in the downtown Yreka telephone booth. Unwilling to be shut in anywhere, Sonia probably left the booth open and leaned against the open edge of the folding door, feet braced against the opposite side. There she stood, her short sandy curls undoubtedly uncombed, laughing and shouting jokes into the telephone completely oblivious to the impression she might be making on the passing locals. Her enthusiasm easily swept me into the climb idea. And anyway, a climb with Sonia sounded perfect. She was the first friend I ever had had who could truly match my physical energy. Friends since high school, Sonia and I had run marathons, caroused all night, done anything to see how far we could push our bodies' limits. I hadn't seen her in six months.

"Yes, come on up to Washington. Let's climb Mt. Rainier!" I laughed into the phone.

Only now, perched against the side of the mountain after the first of a two-day climb, did I seriously consider what I was doing. Sonia had no climbing experience. Sure, she had bounded up the Inter Glacier yesterday, fearless and eager. But the Inter Glacier is just a strenuous hike. The climb today, if we continued, would test more than legs and lungs. Mountain climbing takes heart.

Katy, also a ranger on Rainier for the summer, was another story. She and I had only recently become friends. During the first weeks of the summer, both of us had stayed shut in our tiny apartments at night to read novels and avoid the fraternity-like social life of the Park Service. Recognizing each other's quiet existence amid the general brouhaha of the small community's party and gossip scene was difficult, and in fact we did not meet until nine weeks into the summer though we lived in the same cabin that housed four small apartments. Katy's expressionless, plain face and straight, shoulder-length brown hair reminded me of every other New Englander I had known. And the cotton frock with tiny brown flowers that she wore on hot days off reinforced my initial impression: boring.

But I was wrong. Quite by accident, one Sunday morning Katy and I were thrown together doing dishes after the weekly Park Service waffle feed. Our conversation was immediately fresh and even exciting. I felt as if I were drinking for the first time after hours in the desert.

Soon we were talking daily. Almost within hours of meeting Katy, I



never wanted to be away from her. The summer-long deprivation of friendship gave this one a rather frenzied and desperate dimension. Even the prospect of Sonia's visit did not divert my attention from Katy, and of course I would ask her to climb the mountain with us. After all, a third was a good idea.

Now as I lay in the tent, the sharp reality of the situation hit me like ice water in the face. I wasn't very experienced myself. I had climbed several major peaks, and Mr. Rainier once before. But what was I doing leading a climb? Right now I was lying uncomfortably between two women who had put their lives into my hands. They trusted my good judgment. I realized what the climb had meant to me so far: being with Sonia and Katy. I had thought so little about the mountain itself, the focus of any climb.

Katy had a little rock-climbing experience, and she had associated with a lot of climbers, heard the bravado and seen the ropes, ice axes, crampons and karabiners. Still, she was not an athlete, though she was constitutionally strong. A physical goal had rarely mattered to Katy. I worried about what climbing this mountain might mean to her today.

Finally the beep beep on my watch alerted us that it was one o'clock. I sat up deliberately and searched for my green wool army surplus pants. I gave my short hair a good ruffling before putting a rag wool hat on my head. Sonia slept on, but Katy lifted her head and looked at me incredulously. "You don't mean to say you are actually going out in that," she managed to mumble.

"C'mon. Get up," I stated bleakly unwilling to consider cancelling the climb before I verified the blizzard. But I wasn't getting out of the tent to check without knowing there was at least one other waking soul on the mountainside. "I'll go take a look at the weather. You wake up Sonia." I put on my red down parka and unzipped the tent. I thrust my head out the tent opening, plunked my mittened hands on the snow, and wiggled the rest of myself out. Standing up on shaky and stiff legs, I looked up at a set of sparkling stars and felt against my cheek the icy breeze that was causing such a roar within the tent. It was, in fact, a beautiful morning.

By the time Katy and Sonia pulled out of the tent, I had managed to boil water on the Svea stove. I handed each of them a spoon and we ate hot greyish oatmeal out of one small pot. Katy was silent, but Sonia cracked energetic jokes about the cold and the distance to the top. I wished Sonia would conserve her energy.

We quickly dismantled camp and left the tent and other things we wouldn't need on our way to the summit in a small hut left at the top of the Inter Glacier for that purpose. I tied each of us into the rope,



made sure Katy and Sonia each had her crampons on her boots and ice axe in hand, and our team headed out. I took up the rear.

The starlight bounced off the white glaciers and provided more than enough light to see. I was glad we were getting an early start. Later we would be crossing crevasses on ice bridges that would be solid early in the day, but would fall through once the sun had a chance to warm them. We needed to be up and back down again by then.

Despite my two layers of wool covered by one layer of down, I was bitterly cold at 2:00 a.m. at 11,000 feet on Mt. Ranier. Even the hard work of climbing steeply upward did not produce enough heat to be noticed by extremities such as the toes and nose. I wondered if my feet would ever thaw. Each booted step felt like one block of ice slamming into another. At least I was used to the altitude, having run daily at 6400 feet where I lived. I looked up to check on the progress of my two friends. In front, Katy's head was tucked down; she seemed to have already shut out the pain of cold and movement. As she placed each foot forward, she pushed with her hand against her knee to gain the few inches of altitude, and then lifted the next leg to push forward slowly. Katy seemed glad to have her back to the enthusiastic Sonia. But even Sonia's bounce was subdued within minutes of the climb's beginning. I could see her red face grim with exertion, and was surprised that the mountain could absorb her energies so quickly. Still, Sonia kept her head up, determined not to miss the mountainous sights. Her impatient bursts and then exhausted setbacks caused the lengths of rope separating us to sag and then tighten. But Katy in the lead settled into a slow pace, refusing to acknowledge Sonia's stops and starts, and I followed them both hoping my team would soon manage a pace to which we all could adapt.

Hours passed. My body became tired. Bit by bit the busy, relentless thoughts of work, family, and friends fell away, baring the meaty knowledge of myself. Mind and heart were united in heaving upward, stepping, moving, climbing to the demands of the mountain. One foot followed the other, knowing to step over this small crevasse, to go around another. There were no questions. I felt only the tingling knowledge of myself on Tahoma.

Eventually, I even forgot my comrades. Every thought superfluous to the mountain blurred and then easily drifted away; the mountain became my only focus. The enormous Emmons Glacier shimmered in the light of five billion stars. With each step I felt my crampons grip the ice and became intensely aware of the tininess of my warm body against the huge icy mother mountain. Lurching up the mountain's immense sides, I knew a kind of vulnerability that was completely secure. The Yakima



Indians, the first people to live near this mountain, had called it Tahoma, meaning The Mountain, before white men renamed it Rainier. The simplicity of the name Tahoma pointed to its supreme importance. The Mountain was the beginning and the end: the giver of life. For those living nearby, and for me now, Tahoma was a fact inseparable from any other thing in life. Sometimes a terrible unpredictable fact, Tahoma's eruptions, avalanches, rock slides, and blizzards are but a few of its moody shows. Still, these expressions are mere belches in comparison to the life-giving capacity of Tahoma. Reaching 14,410 feet into the heavens, the icy peak collects clouds and squeezes the rain out of them, providing rich forests full of deer, roots, berries and marmots for hundreds of miles around its base. Its glaciers have melted back over millions of years leaving lakes of trout. Rivers flow down the mountain's sides nourishing all forms of life. Without the top of the mountain none of this would be possible. And the beauty of *the* peak is the culminating gift, the gift of Tahoma. Climbing to the top was my way of paying homage to the Mountain, experiencing the inexpressible gratitude for the beauty, the livelihood, and the completeness offered. I felt compelled to participate.

My thoughts roamed uninterrupted until suddenly I faced a pair of boots. I hadn't even noticed that my team had stopped until I had practically stepped on Sonia who was seated on the ice.

"Robbie," Sonia gasped, her upper lip drawn in a grimace of pain. "Can we rest?" Katy was standing several yards from Sonia, as far as the rope would allow, hunched over, hand on knee, looking at a huge crevasse several feet above her. Stretching north and south, the glacier was severed to a depth of fifty yards in some places. The deep slit in the ice gleamed a pale blue; to me it looked like a sly glacial eye winking in complicity. Just as a slow smile spread across my face, I heard my name again.

"Robbie, what are we going to do?"

Do? I forced myself to face my responsibility. Sonia and Katy looked defeated and unhappy.

"Here, Son, don't sit on the ice. I'll get my space blanket. We should all have something to eat," I said.

I got the space blanket out of my backpack and spread it out on the ice. Katy and Sonia sank to their knees while I stood for a moment looking at my team. Sonia's head was in her arms and Katy's face was blank, almost angry. I had to bite my lip to keep from staging a pep talk. Pull yourselves together, I wanted to say. Let your body do the climbing, slip away, just slip away. Think only of the leg you are lifting, of the snow that fits snugly around your boots. You can always take one more



step . . . But I knew I would sound like a raving maniac at this point. We were a team; I could not control our direction. Katy's mental agony of fear and defeat and Sonia's realization of the newness of mountain climbing must combine with my own focus and commitment to reach the top. Our disparate feelings must blend soon, or the climb would have to end.

The blanket of stars had suddenly evaporated, save the northern star and the big dipper. The sky had turned a promising deep blue. To the east a gentle pink rose on the horizon. The faint twinkle of Seattle briefly reminded me of all the people tucked snugly in bed, soon to wake up to warm kitchens and coffee. How silly the city looked, so involved in its electric importance, as if it weren't cradled by mountains on every side. The Olympics to the city's west blocked my view of the Pacific Ocean. Mt. Baker and Glacier Peak represented the mighty Cascade Range to the east of Seattle. Seattle, the city that thrived on the rivers and forests of these mountains. Yet probably not one warm body down there was thinking about that at the moment.

As we ate hard-boiled eggs and candy bars, I wondered if we should turn back. The crevasse was several yards wide. I could not see that it narrowed in either direction. Would we be able to find an ice bridge over the crevasse? And even if we did, would it still be there on our way back down? It all depended on how long the climb took. The sun was soon to rise; it was probably around five o'clock. Ice that was solid now could fall beneath us by eleven, about the time we would be returning from the summit. But turning back seemed impossible to me. It would be unfinished forever, this climb, this bringing together of old and new friends.

I eyed Katy's face, wondering if she were resenting me for taking her on the climb, and for emitting such enthusiasm. Katy seemed to bristle at Sonia's every word. The tension between all of us was an extra burden that could be the defeating element. I remembered my first climb, the shock of the pain and fatigue, the stumbling unfamiliarity. Finally standing on the top of Mt. Hood, my sobbing had filled my goggles with steam and tears.

Warmth came at last as the eastern pink turned to rose, the blue of the sky lightened, and the first few rays of sun pinpointed us, the tired climbers on the flanks of Tahoma. The sun came just in time. Heartened by the warmth and energy from food in their stomachs, Sonia and Katy laughed together for the first time that day as we all stood up to shake our legs. Standing, we eagerly awaited the full solar display, and then turned our backs on the warmth to face the crevasse.

Taking the lead, I headed north along the huge crevasse where the glacial surface became choppy and choppy. I knew we should not

deviate much from the basic route up the Emmons Glacier, called The Corridor. Already we were stepping over small cracks and walking around chunks of ice that had tumbled from above. Soon I noticed that a small split in the ice on the right was becoming a larger crevasse as we headed farther north. This new crevasse, about one meter across, sidled up on our right, forcing the team to walk closer and closer to the edge of the huge one on our left. I stopped again. Putting my hand on my brow to shield my eyes, I looked ahead. Several meters beyond, the two crevasses converged. Our only hope lay in finding passage at that point. I hurriedly picked my way to that intersection, letting my team follow as well as it could. The wreck of ice looked as if the crevasses had collided at 100 miles an hour rather than at half an inch an hour. Gravity tugged at these glaciers slowly but steadily; the effect was a mass crushing of ice. At the meeting place of the two crevasses, however, was a possible bridge. Irregular blocks of ice piled on top of one another formed a passage wide enough to allow a person to slip to one side or the other without taking a plunge.

As I studied the junction for the best route across, a loud yelp broke into my thoughts. I threw my ice axe firmly into the ice and flopped my body on top of it. My heart was racing. Securely in self-arrest, I felt no pull on the rope. I turned to see what had happened. Katy was moving as quickly as she could to the place where one booted leg, Sonia's, stuck out of the small crevasse on the right. Relieved that Katy and at least part of Sonia were both in sight, I hopped up and rushed to Sonia's rescue. Looking into the narrow, pale blue crevasse, I found Sonia cradled between the converging ice walls, one leg up and the other wedged beneath her. A little blood trickled down Sonia's face from a cut below her left eye where the ice axe had nicked her as she fell, but she smiled up at me, her blue eyes matching the color of the crevasse interior.

"Is this what you meant by snow bridges that fall through?" Sonia asked, laughing the old familiar laugh I had known since we were sixteen. Yuk! Yuk! Yuk! Even Katy laughed now. Sonia was not hurt. I lugged Sonia out of the crevasse while Katy used her ice axe to fish out Sonia's hat which had fallen off her head. We both helped brush the snow off Sonia.

"That was a good rest. Looks like we're about there. Shall we go on?" Sonia wasn't going to stop clowning now. Katy sunk back into silence now that the crisis was over.

Liberty Cap, the summit, loomed large against the brilliant blue sky. The smooth white dome did in fact look a short distance away. I didn't correct Sonia's illusion. The top always looks deceptively close.



Let it be inspiring, I thought somewhat guiltily.

Sonia and Katy each picked her way across the jagged ice bridge. For safety as each of us went across, the other two secured themselves in self-arrest. If one fell, the other two could hold her. Lying on the ice, gripping my ice axe, I wondered what it would be like to be suspended mid-air in a crevasse hanging by the waist on a rope. The rope was our life line. At the thought, I wiggled the length of my boot against the ice. I liked the feel of the cold seeping through my thick wool pants onto my thighs.

"Hey, Robbie! You coming or staying?" Sonia and Katy had already crossed and secured themselves waiting for me. I got up slowly and walked to the passage that extended about five meters across the crevasse. My eyes were drawn deep into the hole by the blue color that intensified with depth. I stepped out onto the first block of ice, my legs shaking. I was terrified of falling, even in my own safe, grassy front yard. The thought of an icy plunge here was unnerving. Still, I knew I had to remain calm and tough; Katy and Sonia depended on my being sure of myself. I crossed without a word.

The minutes passed quickly after the crevasse crossing. The tension between the three of us had finally dissolved and our bodies, no longer at odds with the mountain, carried us unthinkingly upward. The rope between us flowed easily as our paces finally blended to become one. I only knew that I was moving upwards; I could no longer physically feel it. I no longer questioned the validity of climbing, of achieving goal, either. I knew that wasn't the point at all. Now every cell in my body was aware of being on the side of this mountain that had participated in the formation of Earth. Sustaining all kinds of life at her feet, Tahoma's life was her own up here on her snowy peak. I laughed inwardly at my attempt to make a pilgrimage to the top; even as I trudged up, this massive slab of ice moved down Tahoma several feet a day. Beneath that ice Tahoma stored the very makings of Earth. Millions of years ago molten lava had shot up through her center and covered the Pacific edge of the American continent with rich volcanic ash. More of that molten stuff gurgled in her core today. Tahoma is Earth's creator.

I felt a bouyancy in my legs; my view of myself and the climbing team seemed distant, almost as if I were floating above. A tiny string of women climbed gently upward caressing the mountain with every step. The strength of Tahoma flowed into my feet imparting a secret. The Mountain released only to those who dared approach her lofty peak. The winds woofed past our heads. The warm mid-morning sun released whole chunks of ice from the Willis Wall and Russell Cliff one mile north of us. But the roar of these huge ice falls spilling down rock

faces with magnificent force caused our heads to turn only briefly. Our course was set: Tahoma was not a threat. Onward, our team eased upward, knowing only ice, wind, and roar.

The summit presented itself almost incidentally. We stood on Liberty Cap, the small white dome marking the highest peak in the Cascade Range, and silently whispered our prayers. I turned my back to Katy and Sonia and faced south. For miles I saw only icy peaks. Mount Adams, Mount Hood, Mount Jefferson, Mount St. Helens, and the Three Sisters, mothers of the North American land mass, all rested grandly. From this height there was no sign of people or city; this land belonged to the mountains alone. Hefted on the shoulders of Tahoma, I had a God's eye view of the world. I wanted it to last forever.

But the icy wind was freezing the sweat on my face and back. I turned to Katy and Sonia who were hugging already for warmth and happiness. I joined them. Our bodies, already shaking with cold and exhaustion, began heaving uncontrollably as we let loose wild laughter and shouts. After kisses all around, we headed for the crater's rim.

The volcano's crater, a perfectly circular bowl one mile in diameter and plugged with snow, was just several yards lower than the summit. We sat on the pumice gravel on the rim and welcomed the steam issuing from its interior; the heat was well worth bearing the strong sulphur smell. Now our celebration began in earnest. We pulled dried apricots, hard-boiled eggs, fresh apples and fig newtons from our packs and began a long, joyous feast. When our stomachs were full and our bodies warm, we would begin the long glissade down the mountain to home.



## PINK DIAPERS

During my Joe McCarthy childhood  
I was warned to "Never  
repeat what you hear in this house,"  
but I didn't know  
which parts of what were secrets. At home  
I was told to be proud of friends going to jail,  
at school I learned prisons  
are for criminals.  
The Pledge of Allegiance was so hard to say  
because I'm left-handed and got my sides mixed up.  
At age three  
I realized SP was salt and pepper  
but I never figured out  
what CP meant.

Still I vividly remember  
the man who had been Trotsky's secretary in Mexico  
grabbing my brother by the ears  
and lifting him three feet off the ground.  
He brought him straight  
up in the air saying, "Jesus,  
you're a carbon copy of your father.  
You poor bastard, you look  
just like him."

UNDER FRANCO

In Spain, you and I live in a hotel room while Franco is outside dying. Every morning I see his body floating near the balcony of the hotel and try to photograph it. You accuse me of being American. Sitting in the corner, your eyes heavy with centuries of grandmothers, your shoulders thin. When your mother comes in black and rattles the door of the hotel, I hold you against me. Roses slip down her dress and slide under the door. You pick them up and give them to me, they are red.

Outside, drunks lie on the sidewalk. We call them Franco and throw roses at them. When they die we write stories about them, their hands playing piano music. Sitting in the bathtub often we cover each other in languages and roses to keep out the cold. Cognac bottles roll under the bed belonging to some drunks from the night before.

When Franco dies, shouts stand up in the street and drunks gurgle like newborn babies. Downstairs, the hotel dueno uncovers his scars and sings Russian songs. We stay in the bathtub, trading languages. In your eyes, centuries of grandmothers lift their skirts and dance.



## OASIS

### I.

I was in that desert drive. She was hitchhiking. She wore red hair and a face I wanted to ask questions of. She was nineteen. I wasn't. Her legs were under her. She knew about them. She was wandering. The wind rode with us in my car. I wanted to be flesh. She thought I had some answers for her just because I knew about poker and had this kind of smile. There was this canyon between us. She thought that was exciting. She threw a tightrope over. I stepped out on it and walked over into her hair. It was a kind and familiar forest. Inside, I met someone who looked like I did before I learned about poker. I had some questions.

### II.

She thought it was exciting the way the wind had carved its name on the side of my face; it reminded her of literature. She ran her fingers along it and asked is this what happens to everybody. Yes, I said, and she wanted some of her own. All I could give her was this kind of smile that had poker in it. You're always playing, she said, her back to the wind. I said yes I can't help myself. I wanted to be the kind of flesh I wasn't. She said fine, have some of mine. You can teach me about poker. We drove. At night we stopped and played some cards. The wind was silent. She found out about that forest behind my mouth. We had some stars over us, so I showed her how to play poker with them. A familiar moon came out fat as an ace in the hole. We laughed.

### III.

In the morning she yawned and the desert pulled us into it. We drove so long it felt like climbing. The wind began to murmur over the horizon. She wanted to get her legs back under her, she said.

Isn't there an artists' colony or something around here, she said. Sure, I said. I knew about that. She was wandering. I let her off in a motel, gave her a pack of cards for the trip. Her legs moved under her. I turned away, drove off. The wind came up and tried to carve her name in me. I drove. The horizon wore red hair. There were no questions. I knew something about poker.



(to my father)

off Grenada you took me snorkeling  
leafy green water as clear as air  
everything visible  
I remember your body below the surface  
how you swam the way you walked  
there is stealth in it

you point out the tentacles of anemones  
swaying deadly  
your face behind the mask is all your eyes,  
crimped flesh  
your legs in flippers are ribbons  
winding over the white sand bottom  
you find a bed of sea urchins  
unable to keep your distance you flash too close  
spines graze your leg  
later the mark is red against you

later in darkness clear as air  
I know you by your milk smell  
by your single tentacle  
your face unmasked is a dot-matrix  
porous eyeless  
you do not keep your distance

**THE RAPE SCENE**

**EXCERPT FROM *GIVING UP THE GHOST*, A PLAY IN PROGRESS**

*CORKY, a Chicana in her late teens. The scene takes place in East Los Angeles, circa 1970.*

**CORKY**

*(Enters to downstage center.)*

Got raped once.

When I was a kid.

Taken me a long time to say that was exactly what happened,  
but that was exactly what happened.

Makes you more aware than ever that you are  
thoroughly one hunerd per cent female, just in case you had any doubts.  
One hunerd per cent female whether you act it or like it or not.

You see, I never ever really let myself think about it,  
the possibility of rape. Even after it happened.

Not like other girls, I didn't walk down the street  
like there were men lurking everywhere, every corner to devour me.

Yeah, the street was a war zone, but for different reasons.

For muggers, Mexicanos sucking their damn lips at you, gringo stupidity,  
drunks like old garbage sacks thrown around the street,  
and the rape of other women and the people I loved.

*They* were not safe and I worried each time they left the house.

But never never me.

I guess I never wanted to believe I was raped.

If it could happen to me, I'd rather think it was something else,  
like "unprovoked" sex or somet'ing. Hell, I dunno.

But if someone took me that bad, I wouldn't really want to think  
I was took, you follow me?

But the truth is, I was took. Dig it *(leaning in to THE PEOPLE)*  
So how did it happen?



Where do I begin?

At the point of penetration or the point, years later,  
when I wished I had knifed the mutherfucker in the school corridor?  
You want my pre-enlightened or post-enlightened version?

No, I'm no women's libber. Just smart.

Very very very smart when it comes to assholes.

*(Sits down on a crate.)*

Well, y' see I was 'bout thirteen.

Can even see my little body back then. I still see her.

Muchacha. Muchacha.

We wore these kind of jumpers, tú sabes, the kind  
they always have for cath-lic school.

They look purty shitty on the seventh n' eighth grade girls  
cuz these were the same style of uniform the little primary kids wore.

But here we was getting chi-chis n' all n' still tryin' to shove 'em  
into the tops of these jumpers.

I wasn't too big, tú sabes, pero the big girls looked te-rrí-ble!

Anyway, in the eighth grade I was tryin to mend my ways  
so would hang afterschool n' try n' be helpful n' all to the nuns.

I guess cuz my older cousin, Norma got straight A's  
n' was taking me into her bed by then, so I figured  
that was the way to go.

She'd get really pissed at me when I fucked up in school,  
threatened to "take it away" tú sabes, if I dint behave.

Can you get to that? ¡Qué fría! no?

Anyway, Norma was the only one I ever told 'bout the custodian  
doing it to me n' then she took it away for good.

I'd still like to whip her butt for that.

Her n' her goddamn hubby n' kids now, shi-it.

Puros gavachos.

Little blonde-haired, blue-eyed things.

The second one's a mariconito, if you ask me.

Sure, he's only 'bout four years old, but you can already tell,  
the way he goes around primping all over the place.

Pleases me to no end. What goes around come around.  
"Jason," they call him. No, not "Hasón," pero "Jay-sun."  
Bien gringo.

Anyway, so I was walking by Sister Patrice's classroom,  
"The Hawk" we called her cuz she had a nose n' attitude like one,  
when this man, a mexicano, motions to me to come on inside.  
The Hawk's room was way off in the Annex n' hardly any people  
were around there this late in the day, but like a pendeja,  
I'm looking for this girl, Rosie, who said she'd meet me  
cuz she had something "very important" to tell me.  
So this guy calls me, "Ven p'aca," he says.  
He's 'bout in his late thirties. I dint recognize him,  
but the parish was always hiring mexicanos to work  
around the grounds n' stuff, I guess cuz they dint need to know English  
n' the priests dint need to pay 'em much.  
They'd do it "por Dios," tu sabes.  
So, he asks me if I speak Spanish.  
"Señorita, ¿habla español?" Muy humilde y todo n' I answer,  
"Si, poquito," which I always say to strangers  
cuz I dunno how much will be expected of me.

"Ven p'aca," he says again n' I do outta respect for primo Enrique  
cuz he look a lot like him, real neatly dressed.  
He had work clothes on n' all, I remember, but they wernt dirty  
or wrinkled or nothin like they shoulda been if he'd been working all day.  
But he had this screwdriver in his hand so I figure he must be legit.  
But somet'ing was funny. And his Spanish . . .  
I couldn't quite make it out cuz he mumbled a lot  
which made me feel kinda bad 'bout myself, tu sabes,  
that I was Mexican, too, but couldn't understand him that good.  
So, I mostly jus' catch on by his body movements what he wants me to do.

He tells me he's tryin to fix this drawer that's loose in the Hawk's desk.  
I knew already 'bout the drawer cuz she was always bitchin n' moaning  
'bout it getting stuck when she tried to close it



cuz the bottom kept falling out.

So, he tells me he needs someone to hold the bottom of the drawer up n' in place so he can screw the sides in, which makes sense to me, but the problem is, I don' see no screws.

Looked to me like the whole damn thing was glued together  
¡Qué tonta soy! ¿no?

Yeah, this ese musta thought they raised pochas to be puras mensas  
n' I hope he gotta big kick outta the whole damn thing.

Bastard.

Cabrón.

Then this hijo de la chingada madre tells me to hold the drawer,  
n' so standing to the side, I do  
leaning over n' holding it up with both hands. *Así (Stands and demonstrates)*

Then he says all frustrated-like, "No, así, así."

It turns out he wants me to stand in front of the drawer  
with my hands holding each side up n' my legs apart. *Así. (Demonstrates)*  
N' believe it or not, I do.

N' believe it or not, this cabrón sits behind me on the floor  
n' reaches his arm up between my legs that I'm strainin' to keep closed  
even though he keeps saying all business-like,

"Ábrete más, por favor, las piernas. Ábrete poco más, señorita."

Still all polite n' like a pendeja, I do.

Little by little, he gets my legs open.

I feel my face getting hotter n' I hear him n' can kinda feel him  
jiggling the drawer pressed up against my crotch.

I'm staring straight ahead, don' wanna look at what's happening,  
then worry how someone would see us like this, this guy's arm up  
between my legs n' then it begins to kinda brush past the inside of  
my thigh, his arm. I can feel the hair on his arm, that first,  
then the heat of his skin n' I keep wishing n' dreading  
that my stupid friend Rosie with her stupid secret might come by.

The skin.  
The skin is so soft, I hafta admit.  
Young kinda, like a girl's, like . . . Norma's shoulder.  
I try to think 'bout Norma n' her shoulders to kinda pass the time,  
hoping to hurry t'ings along while he keeps saying,  
"Casi termino. Casi termino," n' I keep saying back,  
"Señor, me tengo que ir. Mi mamá me espera."  
Still all polite, como mensa.  
Until finally, I feel the screwdriver by my leg, like ice.  
Then suddenly, the tip of it, it feels like to me,  
is against the cotton of my chonas.

Don't move," he tells me. In English. His accent gone.  
N' I don'.

From then on, all I see in my mind's eye . . .  
*were my eyes shut?*  
Is this screwdriver he's got in his sweaty palm.  
yellow glass handle  
shiny metal, like the kind  
my father useta use to fix t'ings 'round the house.  
'membered how I'd help him, how he'd take me on his jobs with him.  
N' I kept getting him confused in my mind, this man n' his arm,  
with my father. Kept imagining him, my father, returned.  
Come back.  
His arm was so soft, but this other thing . . .  
hielo hielo ice  
I wanted to cry, "Papi, papi," n' then I started crying for real  
cuz I knew I musta done somet'ing real wrong to get myself in this mess

He begins to kinda tug at my chonas with the tip  
of the screwdriver, it feels like to me. I don' move.  
We're supposed to be pretending like this aint really happening.  
We have this understanding.  
I am stone stiff. Pura piedra.  
I figure he's gonna shove the damn t'ing up me, I know he's trying to get



my chonas down n' I jus' keep saying, "Por favor, señor, no. Please don'," but I can hear my voice through my own ears, not from the inside out, but the other way around n' I know I'm not fighting this one, I know I don't even sound convinced.

"¿Dónde 'stás, Papi?" I keep running through my mind.

"¿Dónde 'stas?"

N' finally, I imagine the man answering,

"Aquí 'stoy. Soy tu papá,"

n' this gives me permission to go 'head,  
to not hafta fight.

By the time he gets my chonas down to my knees,

I suddenly feel like I am walking on air.

I can't forget the feeling.

Like I been exposed to the air, like I have no kneecaps,  
my thing kinda not attached to no body, flapping in the wind  
like a bird, a wounded bird.

I'm relieved, finally, when I hear the metal drop to the floor.

I worry, *who will see me here, doing this?*

Get-this-over-with-get-this-over-with,

n' he does, gracias a Dios, bringing his hand up around my crotch,  
bringing me down to earth (*Falls to her knees*)

Linoleum floor. Cold.

The smell of wax polish.

Y ya 'stoy lista for what long ago I knew waited for me.

There was no surprise. There was no struggle.

"Open your legs," me dijo otra vez and I do cuz

I am not useta fighting what feels like resignation,  
what feels like the most natural thing in the world,  
to give in.

N' I open my legs wide wide open, for the angry animal  
that springs outta the opening in his pants  
n' all I wanna do is have it over so I can go back  
to bein' myself n' a kid again.

Then he hit me with it into what was supposed to be a hole  
that I remembered had to be cuz Norma had found it once  
wet n' forbidden n' showed me, too, how wide n' deep like a cueva  
hers got when she wanted it to, only with me, she said.  
"Only with you, Corky."

But with this one, there was no hole. He had to make it  
n' I imagined myself down there like a face with no opening,  
a face with no features  
no eyes no nose no mouth  
only little lines where they shoulda been.  
So I dint cry.

I never cried as he shoved the thing into what was  
supposed to be a mouth with no teeth, with no hate,  
with no voice.

Only a hole. A hole.

(*Gritando*)

He made me a hole!

(*Long Pause. CORKY rises, comes to the edge of the stage.*)

I don't regret it. I don't regret nuthin.  
He only convinced me of my own name.  
From an early age you learn to live with it,  
being a woman.  
I only got a headstart over some.

And then years later, after I got to be with other men,  
I admired so how their things had no opening,  
only a tiny tiny pinhole dot to pee from, to come from.  
I thought, how lucky they were  
that they could release all that stuff,  
all that pent-up shit from the day  
through a hole  
that nobody could get into.

*Black out.*



## LESBIAN AS OUTLAW: NEW FORMS AND FANTASIES IN WOMEN'S INDEPENDENT CINEMA

A woman is being harassed by a man on the subway. Two Lesbians see this and come over to confront the man. He leaves in fear and disgust.

—"Born in Flames"

A woman complains about her lover's unwillingness to come out publicly, and pressures her to make some crucial decisions between her commitment to her children and to their relationship.

—"On Guard"

A young woman escapes from a minimum security prison, not because she longs for freedom but so she will be caught and sent to one with tighter security, her only hope of being near the woman she loves.

—"Scrubbers"

Two women on a boat see a rare, beautiful plant in the water. One dives in to give it as a gift to the other, and as the plant turns out to be deadly, this gesture of love costs her her life.

—"Madame X"

How often do we see scenes like these in films that play at our local movie houses? If Hollywood had its way, lesbians would still be very infrequent visitors on the silver screen, invisibility being perhaps the most effective way to control uncontrollable women. In recent Hollywood films lesbians have surfaced rarely, and then to function in such ways as to make us wonder whether the film industry has felt the impact of the gay or women's movement<sup>1</sup>: e.g. the depiction of lesbians represents a backlash in such films as "The Hunger," a resurrection of the lesbian as evil vampire genre; or "Personal Best," in which a young athlete follows Freud's prescription and grows out of immature lesbian sexuality to a more fulfilling, adult heterosexuality; or "Manhattan," where Woody Allen's lesbian ex-wife is valid cause for his paranoia and miscellaneous neuroses. And yet, even these Hollywood films can be seen as breakthroughs not only in that lesbian characters are present, but that they

are attractive, intelligent, and don't commit suicide.

One factor contributing to this grim situation cannot be underestimated: women do not direct commercial films. The number of women directing in Hollywood can be counted on one hand. These few women seem to be caught in a classic double-bind; as both film directors and women, how much creative control do they really have, and what do they do with it? Claudia Weill's film, "Girlfriends," which was her stepping stone to Hollywood, featured a lesbian-menace character who represented "another one of the drawbacks for single women living alone in New York, like cockroaches and drunks on the street."<sup>2</sup> Although a somewhat gratuitous minor character, her portrayal does serve to undermine the film's potential feminist impact, and because of this it is reasonable to ask whether this element of the film eased Weill's transition into the commercial industry, or whether she would have stood a chance had her film been "Born in Flames."

Fortunately, outside of the male bastion of Hollywood, independent of the big production companies with their appeal to the lowest common denominator in the viewing public and their \$250,000 per car chase, women directors are making films, and some women directors are insisting on complex lesbian characters and themes. Although suffering an even worse fate than most independent films—not enough production money, a long gestation period due to ongoing fundraising, the non-existence of technical services on a sliding scale for noncommercial use, limited potential for exhibition and distribution—these films are becoming more numerous and more accomplished, and use a variety of styles and approaches to explore lesbian representation on the screen.

Lesbian filmmaking, used here to define independent films for, about, and usually directed by lesbians that project aspects of lesbian experience on the screen, is a relatively new phenomenon. It developed side by side with the lesbian/feminist movement over the past 15 years, not only inspired by the movement but serving as an oblique reflection of it as well. For example, lesbian films such as "Dyketactics" by Barbara Hammer (1974) and "Home Movie" by Jan Oxenberg (1973) were, stylistically and politically, rather simple affirmations of lesbian identity that shared the early movement's insistence on lesbian nirvana. What these films may have lacked technically or conceptually they made up for in sheer energy.

Feminist film theory, a sizeable body of work, that emerged in the 1970s to address questions of women and representation, has not adequately acknowledged the significant contributions of lesbian filmmaking, even though these contributions were central to the development of feminist film. Infusing feminist filmmaking with a new vitality



and sense of purpose, lesbian filmmakers celebrated sexuality and non-voyeuristic uses of the body (with filmmaker as participant in lesbian love-making scenes found in the early films of Barbara Hammer and in the 1974 film by Chantal Akerman, "Je Tu Il Elle"); a focus on themes connected with everyday personal experiences (Susana Blaustein's autobiographical "Susana"; Greta Schiller's a-day-in-the-life narrative, "Greta's Girls"); and most of all the filmmakers' strong identification with female audiences.

This last contribution of lesbian filmmakers, strong identification with female audiences, is no small claim when viewed in the context of a long cinematic tradition catering to the male viewer. From the fetishizing of Marilyn Monroe's image through distorting camera angles in "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.. (1953) to the obsessive "crotch-shots" (used within a narrative structure that ultimately confirms male supremacy) in the "breakthrough" film mentioned earlier, "Personal Best" (1982), the cinematic construction of pleasure for the male viewer, and of woman as spectacle, or as a projection of male fantasy, is found consistently in the dominant cinema. One of the feminist film theory's most persistent aims, in the mid and late 70's has been to analyze this construction, and yet little attention has been paid to the emerging body of work that instead speaks unequivocally to an audience of women. Thus the growing phenomenon of lesbian filmmaking persists without recognition, not only from the majority of programmers, distributors, and critics of independent film, but from feminist film critics and theorists as well, who could provide a vital forum for this work.

Representing a departure from the political and avant garde film traditions, the most interesting lesbian films tend to bring together aesthetic and political concerns rather than subjugate one to the other. These films involve more than simply the portrayal of lesbian lives; they embrace radical feminist values while exploring the cinematic possibilities for female desire and fantasy. Appearing in a variety of forms in recent lesbian films, and most significantly in the films to be discussed in this essay, is the metaphor of "outlaw," which merges lesbian fantasies of power with feminist analysis of our position as outside in the dominant culture and its cinema.

Lizzie Borden's "Born in Flames" (U.S., 1983), is an exemplary film in that it draws on debates within lesbian/feminist theory while it primarily functions on the level of lesbian fantasy. Set ten years after a social democratic revolution in the United States—with the rough, fast-paced street style of today rather than with the sleek sci-fi or futurist style—lesbians are still outsiders, the "other" in a revolutionary society that has left the basic fibres of patriarchy totally intact. Refusing to be



appeased any longer, a "Women's Army" becomes increasingly militant in its actions against the government.

The film appeals to a lesbian fantasy of women coming together both to build a protective community and to gain power in the larger society. Although not easily accomplished, women work to heal the divisions that continue to plague the feminist community in real life. Black women assume positions almost never portrayed on the screen—Flo Kennedy plays an articulate, ever-knowing mentor to the Women's Army; the character of Adelaide Norris represents the vanguard in terms of both political theory and action. Lesbians and straight women come to recognize each other's needs and see the necessity of joining forces. The transitions are not smooth or without conflict, but that they occur at all fuels the fantasy of women's power and potential liberation.

"Born in Flames" is also rooted directly in the political thinking of the radical feminist movement. By situating the plot in a social democratic society, the film critiques the male-supremacy and other oppressive values of the American Left in much the same way that the early radical feminist movement did as it recruited from the Left many of its foremost writers and thinkers. On the one hand it could be said that the long process of finding the \$40,000 needed to make the film (\$80,000 if you include bartering), and the stopping and starting over 5 years for financial and creative considerations have resulted in a 1983 film that reflects the political urgency of the mid 1970s. But the film has a sense of humor, an element of satire and self-reflection that we didn't have then, as evidenced in one scene where a new recruit in the Women's Army looks up from her knitting and says, perplexedly, "Why is it called the Women's Army? I thought the Army was for *men*."

The narrative of "Born in Flames" is disjunctive, cutting back and forth between several groups of women (representing the different political tendencies that eventually will unite) and between the various levels of visual representation. For example, Lizzie Borden presents her own, insider's view of the interaction between the women, and then cuts to a scene in which the representation of this interaction changes as it is being monitored by the government (police or FBI), is being debated and analyzed by other groups of women, or is being misinterpreted by the media.

In one scene, Adelaide Norris (played by Jean Satterfield), is embracing another woman. This is exactly the kind of personal, everyday, almost home-movie style lesbian image that never appears in the commercial or independent cinema. Suddenly, however, its meaning takes a 180° turn as the image is frozen and a male voice that we have come to recognize as an FBI agent is heard; the image now takes the form of a slide



projected in FBI headquarters. This shift in the level of representation serves as a reminder to those who would retreat completely into the fantasy of lesbian utopia that we are not safe as long as our personal lives come under political and legal scrutiny. The jarring freeze frame and the intrusion of the male voice further suggest our lack of control over our own images and our inability to protect them from distortion. This scene exemplifies the push and pull between fantasy and analysis that enables the film to both lure and challenge its viewers.

The most striking example of the film's multi-layered narrative style can be seen in an incident that takes place early on yet has reverberations throughout. A woman is being attacked by men on a New York City street in broad daylight. Her screams dissolve into the sounds of shrill whistles approaching from all directions, and we see members of the Women's Army riding up on bicycles to ward off her attackers. The audience invariably cheers at this point, a measure of how the scene "works" as a fantasy, to meet our needs to prevail over victimization. Again, a man's voice comes up—this time a newscaster's—and in a parody of the news media he says:

Police have been puzzled in the past week by what they describe as well-organized bands of 15 to 20 women on bicycles attacking men on the street. While victims say that these incidents were unprovoked, eyewitness reports suggest that these men may themselves have been attempting to assault women. However, officials have condemned the lawlessness of such vigilante groups and ask for information leading to the arrest of the women involved. Maybe even their telephone numbers!

Another group of women, those from Radio Regazza, representing white, new-wave feminist, debates what has transpired. Isabel (Adele Bertel) doubts it could have been the Women's Army because "they're not aggressive enough . . . They're not terrorists." The criticism here is not of the Women's Army's actions but of their image. The exchange alludes to the political, class, sexual, and racial divisions existing among women; it also compounds the issue of how women are perceived, not only by the mainstream culture but by each other as well. Later, when Honey (played by Honey), the black announcer for another women's radio station, Phoenix Radio, tries to convince another black woman to join the Women's Army, she is met with resistance because of how this bicycle incident has been interpreted: "The Women's Army ain't mature enough to hang out with me!" This woman's perception has clearly been shaped by the media's report of the event on the evening news.

The carefully composed disjunctive style of "Born in Flames" serves to call into question the subjectivity of what is perceived as "reality,"



From *Born In Flames* by Lizzie Borden



From *Madame X* by Ulrike Ottinger



and also suggests how the media function to reproduce the patriarchal order, even under Democratic Socialism. As such, the narrative of "Born in Flames" is not merely a manifestation of the current trend among avant garde filmmakers toward non-linear uses of narrative form in filmic exercises but rather graphically visualizes one of the film's underlying themes: our need, as outsiders, to assume the role of "outlaws," to control the media, to shape our own images, appropriate the language, define our own representation.

"On Guard" by Susan Lambert (Australia, 1983) shares a similar fantasy of women taking control of their own destinies yet takes a very different aesthetic approach. Here, too, lesbian characters become revolutionaries; their target is a medical multinational corporation, named Utero, that is conducting research in biotechnology which would make motherhood obsolete. The women videotape their actions for broadcast so that they claim responsibility for the deed and also for how it will be represented by the media.

"On Guard" presents, in a standard adventure-story format (a la "Mission Impossible"), the interactions of four white, middle class women who have decided that women must no longer be victims of this frightening Utero enterprise and, so, must take power into their own hands. They ingeniously plan to destroy the company's computerized research data from the past 10 years. That the women are lesbians serves to open up new possibilities for lesbian characters to be presented on the screen without their sexuality becoming the central theme. In fact, very little attention is given to sexuality at all; their lesbianism is manifested in their lifestyles and daily interactions. But this is not to say that it is taken for granted, for within the film "lesbian" clearly stands for the woman who will not accept victimization, i.e., who is an "out-law" from a culture that proscribes women's power. Lesbians in "On Guard" represent the potential power of women who refuse to comply with the patriarchal ordering of the world.

"On Guard," like "Born in Flames," is a fantasy that is rooted in political theory. In both films, women live in a self-defined sub-culture whose values are in opposition to the dominant culture, and who assume a position of power in order to successfully affect change. But where, as in "Born in Flames," the fantasy is based on the coming together of women, in "On Guard" there is no such fantasy. In the former, even skeptics and critics of the Women's Army are eventually brought into the fold, charting the course for the audience's identification with the Women's Army as well. Not so in "On Guard," where efforts to interview a sympathetic woman doctor backfire when her allegiance is ultimately to her job security rather than to other women, and



where uniting with women of color and working class women is never even attempted. Because "On Guard" fails to appeal to our fantasy of community and a primary commitment to each other, we are finally left with only a belief in the politics behind their actions—not a strong enough pull to hold us on the edges of our seats—or with a possible interest in the characters of the four women, none of whom is sufficiently magnetic or intriguing. I'm sure it was a political choice to present such "ordinary" women as heroes, but here perhaps the choice should have been an aesthetic one instead.

Although "On Guard" wavers between an emphasis on a political adventure story and an emphasis on the "mundane" details of everyday lesbian life, the two never adequately merge or build on each other. This may be due to the conventional structure of the film, which, although accessible to a large audience of women, traditionally has trivialized women's lives and interactions in the home. Because images of women's domain and the work within it carry so little value in this culture, changing or enhancing their meaning requires presenting them in new ways—as in Lizzie Borden's vibrant intercutting of larger than life images of women's hands ritualistically engaged in a variety of everyday movements. Without working out how this focus on the dailiness of women's lives will hold up to the kind of action material we are used to viewing in the commercial cinema, "On Guard" finds itself lagging in those areas that instead could be providing the basis for a radical reinterpretation of the suspense/adventure genre and the possibilities it may hold for women. For a film politically concerned with countering the media representation of women and with challenging our role as victims, it is unfortunate that it never examines the patriarchal assumptions of its form.

If "Born in Flames" and "On Guard" appeal to our fantasies of the potential power of women, Mai Zetterling's "Scrubbers" (Sweden, 1983) embodies women's powerlessness and victimization. Set in a British borstal (prison) for women, "Scrubbers" breaks remarkably with the exploitative girls-behind-bars genre of male directors ("Caged Heat," "Concrete Jungle") by depicting its subjects realistically and compassionately, with an almost-documentary approach. Although the women daily endure horrors and obscenities disturbing to watch, their survival instincts are strong, as manifested in their humor, their spirit, and the (selective) love for one another.

Like the women themselves, the plot of "Scrubbers" is marginal. Two women escape from an "open" borstal, are captured, and are sent to a tight security, "closed" prison. One of them, Carol (Amanda York), had maneuvered this scheme in order to be reunited with her lover, but



because of it the second woman, Annetta (Chrissie Cotterill), has lost all chance of being reunited with her baby daughter. As it turns out, Carol doesn't experience a "happy ending" either; lover girl Doreen has someone else now and rather enjoys flaunting it. What follows is the development of these characters, their resourcefulness, loyalties, and courage against the grey-steel backdrop of powerlessness, and the hostility and violence that powerlessness provokes.

For me, this contrast between the director's compassion toward her characters (albeit they're not consistently sympathetically portrayed) and her indictment of the setting is basic to the film. Yet people tend to see what they're looking for. The *New York Post* interprets the film's non-voyeuristic depiction of lesbianism as just one more of the many evils expected of films on prisons and prisoners: "violence, lesbianism, filthy language, and human misery . . . the jealousies of lesbians who kill each other for affection . . ." <sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the *Daily News'* male reviewer was titillated by the "two sirenish glamor girl lowers." <sup>4</sup> Even the hip *New York Beat's* female critic enumerated her laundry list of the scenes she found most horrific: "running sores, broom-handle rape, lesbian love (not just sex), and bloated bodies that haven't seen the light of day in god knows how long." <sup>5</sup> The most appalling obscenity for this reviewer seems to be the lesbian love that dares to go beyond "just sex".

What we have here reflects the sheer inability of straight/establishment reviewers to comprehend a representation of lesbianism that is neither closeted nor pornographic. Instead, our expert critics file "lesbian" into the appropriate mental slot and come up with a standard response: titillation and seduction alternating with outrage and horror—the same line of thinking that built the borstal to begin with and that landed the women inside it.

Although the borstal setting is certainly grim, no one but Annetta considers escaping, and she does only because of her unrelenting anguish at being separated from her daughter. Escape is not their goal, for none of them has the sense that it is any better on the outside. The bars are metaphoric as well, suggesting the disempowerment and confinement historically characterizing women's lot.

And yet, these are strong women. They love and hate strongly; they are fiercely loyal, or disloyal, to each other. When Carol is snubbed by her old lover, Doreen, the butchy, leather-jacketed Eddie (Kate Ingram) steps in to console and protect her. Eddie takes brutal revenge on Carol's tormentors, and in turn Carol tattoos Eddie's name on her breast. But in keeping with the realism and the primarily sympathetic, non-sensationalized tone of the film, Eddie is not a prison dyke caricature. Like most women, she's strong and also vulnerable, which we see as



From *Scrubbers* by Mai Zetterling



she becomes uneasy upon her release into the unknown, the outside world.

"Scrubbers" would not really be considered a lesbian film in the way I've defined earlier; although it portrays complex and compelling lesbian characters it is not a film made primarily for a lesbian audience. Furthermore, Mai Zetterling is a well-established woman director who is not a lesbian and who has considerably greater access to the vast amount of money and other resources that filmmaking entails than does someone like Lizzie Borden or Susan Lambert. Zetterling has chosen to depict lesbians as outlaws, but this depiction is not by someone who fully identifies with that position. Perhaps as a result, "Scrubbers" is not a fantasy. While the women of "On Guard" and "Born in Flames" are allowed a power that would be denied them in the real world, "Scrubbers" outlaws are, instead, victims, representing the powerlessness which circumscribes our lives, inside the borstal and out.

A complex and bizarre film to have emerged within the New German Cinema is Ulrike Ottinger's "Madame X, An Absolute Ruler" (W. Germany, 1977). If "Scrubbers" aims for realistic representation, "Madame X" is pure outrageous fantasy. Incongruities and discontinuity abound throughout the plot, setting, and characters, giving the film a playful quality while reflecting on the illusory nature of the film medium, foiling audience expectation of narrative continuity, and testing the limits of cinematic convention regarding the suspension of disbelief. A distinctly post-War German sensibility of cultural openness to the point of defiance resonates in Ottinger's work, yet unlike her more well-known male compatriots her focus is unrelentingly on women as outsiders, and on role-playing and sexual ambiguity.

The first elaborate sequence of "Madame X" is at once a clever parody of traditionally male adventure stories and of the liberalism that has permitted women's entry into a greater number of dull and uninspired professions. We witness a glimpse of daily activities performed by the women who are casualties of this liberalism, as they respond to the promise of a brighter future. From her ship, the "Chinese Orlando," Madame X sends out a seductive appeal to all women asking them to give up their safe but boring existences in order to live the life of pirates:

"Chinese Orlando — stop — to all women — stop —  
offer world — stop — full of gold — stop —  
love — stop — adventure at sea — stop — call  
Chinese Orlando — stop!"

European artist Josephine de Collage (played by American avant garde filmmaker Yvonne Rainer) is bored to death by the art school



scene, and learns of the pirate ship when paper cuttings announcing it float down around her. On roller skates she heads to the port. Stopping when a man in a car asks for directions, her response—reading aloud from Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*—is a comment on Ottinger's disarming style of narrative discontinuity as it offers a humorous example of just that: "... I wish to escape from the expectation of the next logical step ..."

In the next vignette, Betty Brillo, a housewife from Oberlin, Ohio, can be seen opening a Brillo box in a freeze frame appropriate to her life in the kitchen. She says, "I loved him, and adored him, and wanted nothing more than to be the wife of him and mother of his children ...". The image begins to move as she uncovers the message from Madame X in her shopping bag.

In exaggerated parody of the roles women are permitted in society, five other women are shown being lured into a life of piracy. A psychologist, Karla Freud-Goldmund; a forest ranger, Flora Tannenbaum; and an Italian "cover-girl," Miss Blow-Up, are among those who join the ranks. Omega Centauri, an Australia bush pilot whose DC-3, we are told, is as familiar to her as a washing machine is to other women, hears the call over the plane's two-way radio. Noa-Noa from Tai-Pi island in the South Seas, who, in keeping with the film's irreverent spirit, infringes on a taboo and is promptly rejected by her husband, finds Madame X's announcement in a bottle drifting by her canoe. The women come immediately by various modes of transportation to the Chinese Junk, the parameters of which will define their new world.

Nothing in their lives previously could have prepared them for Madame X (played by Tabea Blumenschein), a mechanical goddess-figure whose idea of an isolated lesbian utopian society includes the women's subjugation to her absolute tyranny. It's never really clear whether Madame X is a person as well as a symbol; it appears as though her humanity died when she lost her lover Orlando and was driven to assume the life of a pirate. The ships' figurehead is Madame X's double, representing the power with which Madame X charts their course. Her mechanical movements and the behavior of the other women, once removed from the familiar context of society, become highly ritualized, heightened by the use of elaborate costumes.

By initially presenting the women in their places within the patriarchy, the film permits us not only to understand the attraction to piracy and to what at first hints to be a lesbian "matriarchy," but also to see how their patterns of powerless behavior will eventually manifest themselves again under Madame X's rule. Although the women respond to newly discovered lesbian passions, the lesbian fantasy of conquest by





From *On Guard* by Susan Lambert

women soon turns on itself as jealousy and the power relationships of domination and subordination that they supposedly left behind begin to reassert themselves. The psychologist, Karla Freud-Goldmund, interprets this development in a letter reflective of Ottinger's style of hyperbole and satire:

During the long cruise on the Orland my detailed observations have produced an analysis which my conscience obliges me to publish. These women, having left behind all psycho-social barriers of their daily lives, were prey to a hitherto repressed sensuality which now manifested itself with unsuspected force . . . The age-old oppression of Woman which had consolidated the habits of passivity and dependence in their character structure made them docile tools in the hands of Madame X, a charismatic personality consumed with narcissism and whose lust for power grew with the quasi-masochistic submission of the women beyond all bounds. Isolation in a very restricted space must be considered a further negative factor leading to conflicts while there is a total contradiction with the vast space women can attain by the force of their imaginations . . .

"Madame X" can be seen as a parable about freedom: the more one strives to grasp it, the further out of reach it drifts. Lush, colorful images of violence and sexual slavery are shockingly introduced, creating the impression of a dream. With perfect grace and ritual, Madame X slowly kills off all the women on board. Even after this experience, the fantasy of lesbian utopia is still irresistably strong: Chinese Orlando docks in a harbor so Madame X can collect a new crew, and the same women return for another try. In an ironic twist on heterosexual discourse and the clinched "happy ending," the film closes with the text: "All the discontent within them was unified into one over-riding power and they set sail one day with a favorable wind behind."

The whimsical quality of "Madame X" exposes lesbian feminist political analysis and subverts it into an absurd fantasy. On the Chinese Orlando, women anticipate a life of conquest and power, but instead they become the victims of conquest and power. They are outlaws by choice, in a way that "Scrubbers" inmates are not, yet both are victims—in "Scrubbers" of outside power structures, in "Madame X" of inner ones. This victimization is only one dimension, however, to a more complex analysis of the outlaw metaphor that also encompasses a strong element of fantasy. In "Madame X" the fantasy of power is set up to ultimately not fulfill its promise, as it is fulfilled in "Born in Flames" and, to a lesser extent, "On Guard." If the directions in recent lesbian filmmaking can offer us any perspective on our own lives, it might be that as outlaws in a hostile culture we have the potential to empower



ourselves, but also the potential to fuel our own victimization. The very existence of an emerging lesbian cinema that raises questions and constructs fantasies of who we are and might become is a promising sign for our moving out of victimization, toward empowerment.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Here the term "Hollywood" is used to refer to the genre of commercial film rather than to the specific locale of the production.

<sup>2</sup>Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 88.

<sup>3</sup>Rex Reed, "'Scrubbers' Won't Wash Down Easily," *New York Post* (February 1, 1984).

<sup>4</sup>Ernest Leongrande, "British Girls Behind Bars," *Daily News* (February 1, 1984).

<sup>5</sup>Katherine Dieckmann, "Scrubbers," *New York Beat* (January 1984).

The films discussed in this essay are available for rental from the following sources:

"Born in Flames" — First Run Features, 153 Waverly Place, N.Y., N.Y. 10014.

"On Guard" — Women Make Movies, PO Box 315, Franklin Lakes, N.J. 07417.

"Scrubbers" — Orion Pictures, Classics Division, 540 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022. (35mm prints only).

"Madame X" — Jackie Raynal, Center for Public Cinema, 144 Bleecker Street, N.Y., N.Y. 10012. (Subtitle print not available).

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- Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory*. P.O. Box 25899, Los Angeles, CA 90025.
- Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*. P.O. Box 766, Canal Street Station, New York, N.Y. 10013. See especially issues #3 (Lesbian Art and Artists) and #16 (Film, Video, Media).
- The Independent*, 625 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012.
- Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Cinema*. P.O. Box 865, Berkeley, CA 94701. See especially double issue #24/25 (March 1981), special section on Lesbians and Film.



## THE SHOWER

my voice is thin I stand in the shower what's that I ask I am at the level of that what is it? a penis he says men have them I stand there watching it I don't have one girls don't have one he holds it for me touch it can I touch it? long and skin thick over something hard thicker than all my fingers it moves under them it's not a part of him does he take it off when he puts on his clothes? we are taking a shower he is holding it to show me underneath this is the scrotum he says like two eggs what's all that raised over them? touch it veins he says hairy he is very black hairy there I am pink it feels like a lie what does it do? it's something men do my face is no taller I am pink and he is hairy black hair against the wall are knobs to make the water go hot and cold my back is against them he tells me not to be scared and rubs his fingers through my hair curly head he says it's just the difference between boys and girls he is not a boy he is my father boys are on t.v. a boy is a friend of Lassie and rescues things boys are me smooth like me he is still showing me the shower walls are there knobs like a gate I can't go through I have to stand in the middle I have to see him the water protects me falling between us like rain falls make it hotter I tell him scared makes me cold time to wash he says no I say first I'll wash you then you can wash me he says no I don't want to wash I want to sit down in the water the hot makes my heart beat too fast he has the wash cloth he is washing me anyway soaping my back the thing hangs down on me as he bends over to scrub it's sticking up brushing back and forth along my shoulder I pull away I'm almost done he says stand still and let me wash your legs I have to pee his legs are hairy too I've seen them before what's wrong? he tickles me in the ribs with the wash cloth it is rough and orange more will come if I pull away my serious little girl what's wrong? he tickles more I am laughing no I try to pull away be careful or you'll slip he holds me and tickles me all over I can't get past the water or the walls he drops the soap my feet lift off the ground he holds me by the shoulder I laugh and cry he can't tell if I am laughing or crying I am going to pee he pokes me in the stomach he is laughing that penis thing shaking as he laughs had enough? now let me



wash you I can't hold it I am peeing I bend down to get the soap to hide that I am peeing he doesn't notice the water runs too hard I hand him the soap I am done peeing he washes up my legs feet first up into my crotch washing me because I am dirty washing the pee away he washes me a long time moving the washcloth and soap back and forth I stand on my own staring at the dark tiles at the water beading and falling by its own weight far away I hear him whistling he echoes in the walls O.k. you're done he says it's my turn I tell him to turn the water hotter I'm getting cold it's not cold he says yes it is he turns the water hotter to please me he hands me the wash cloth and points to his stomach here first he says I wash his stomach reaching out and above the thing below good he says and pulls me to him my arms around him the thing is in my face my neck he tells me to wash his back he holds me there I am choking I can barely move my arms you have to wash harder than that to get me clean I try to wash harder his legs are shaking his knees around my own I am choking I try to say I'm done he calls down to me what? not letting go I drop the washcloth and grab his hips and push away the thing springs out after me it's following me I turn away and try to open the door handle I can't reach it I look at him I'm done I say again you're done? but I'm not half as clean as you he says I have to go I'm cold he stares at me and says I guess your daddy is just going to have to get clean himself there's a towel for you outside on the rack be careful and don't slip he opens the shower door for me and closes it when I'm out outside I am surprised the rest of the bathroom is still there it is white and steamy the mirror is covered with fog I pretend I am hidden in the steam I pull the towel to me and hold it to my belly it is tired from the pee being forced out of me I hear my daddy singing and look through the glass door of the shower to see his shadow washing himself he sounds happy he stops singing I can see the pink outline of his hands not hairy now washing the thing penis he washes and is silent it must take a long time to get clean then I hear his breath and suddenly he shouts like he has hurt himself his breath is fast like he is getting mad he will come after me I made him turn it up I throw the towel up over my head and run out of the room the water got too hot I made him turn it up



**TERRI L. JEWELL**

**HANT**

It was a full moon  
when Grandma sorted stones  
in the field that night  
and placed them around  
a heartwood statue of  
smooth knobs and singed grooves.  
She keened and swayed  
over drinking gourd, key  
seashell and herbs  
while touching semiprecious gems  
in shadowed air pressing  
out from her  
like callused thumbs.  
Her menses had long  
seeped into earth but  
I felt the power there  
and looked toward the space  
where her house once stood  
then knelt to dig  
to dig for the bones  
of her.

## UXORICIDE

She was chosen from all  
possible others.  
Stern discipline paid off.  
Gold chains delicately forged  
swung from wrists  
neck  
ankles and  
waist.

She performed well and gained  
many compliments.

He was so proud she belonged  
to him until

that morning  
when

he noticed her twitching in the  
bathroom and foaming at  
the mouth.

He threw a net over her and waited  
for her to look up at him

before shooting  
her  
in the head.



## RETURNING ANYMORE

There is mean breathing here  
groping inky corners sticky  
with okra left over  
where churches pinch clouds  
and squeeze stars into  
boiled screams  
where a man dies bed sore  
and dry while family  
watches without condolence  
and five bridges drag the river  
like black spiny caterpillars  
chewing fresh green secrets.  
There is parched sentiment here  
left behind in  
oiled palms of my best woman friend  
dabbed behind my momma's ear  
like cheap cologne.

## A GARDEN

Cynthia Welty and Mitchell Dodd rented a house off Harpeth Hills Road, about a half mile from the river, so they could live in the country. When they first moved back from California, they had stayed at his Uncle Rymer's house in Nashville. His uncle tried to get them to stay on with him; he had so much room since his wife died. He also tried to get Mitchell to cut his hair.

"You get your hair cut, bud, before you go out job hunting. This is 1977 and folks don't wear hair like that any more. I don't know what they do out in California, but here in Tennessee they'll just think you're on drugs. That is, if you kids are really going to settle down for once and make something of yourself."

They got in the car and drove out Highway 100 that day. On one of the side roads they discovered a little white frame house with an enormous black oak front. A blue pick-up truck was parked in the driveway. It said *Euston P. Taylor/Feed & Supplies/Franklin, Tenn.* on the side. There was a "FOR RENT" sign hanging from the mailbox and a roundish little man sitting in the swing on the front porch.

They parked their red VW bug behind the truck. Mitchell got out and walked up the loose stone walk to the porch. He was not a big man either. Cynthia watched him hold out his hand to the man on the porch. The man hesitated for a minute, looking him over before he reached his hand out too. She watched Mitchell keep talking until the man finally smiled at him. They talked for a few minutes more, then the man got up out of the swing and the two of them went off together into the house.

Cynthia got out of the car then walked around the side to the backyard. She didn't want to go in the house and talk to the man. She knew Mitch was telling him they were married. She stood looking at a tree with many low branches covered with white blossoms. A few high branches curved gracefully over the low ones, sprouting green leaves up on the top limbs.

Mitchell came around the side of the house calling her name. "Euston says we can have the house. It's \$200. That includes three acres. Don't you want to come inside and see it?"

Cynthia followed him in through the back door. It led past a work



area and into a small kitchen. A brand new two-oven stove and a very small old refrigerator flanked the far wall. She walked through four little rooms and upstairs into the attic. It had been finished off crudely so that it could be used as another room. Euston was telling her it was a three bedroom house.

She liked the old wood around the doors and windows although it had been painted over in the two bedrooms downstairs. There was a clawfoot bathtub and very old plumbing in the bathroom. The pipes shuddered and screeched when she turned on the hot water. There was an old coal fireplace in the livingroom.

"That fireplace works too," Euston said. "You have to cut your wood up real small, but it works. Don't find too many of those out here in the country. This house was built around 1928 I reckon."

They went back into the kitchen where Euston spread papers out on the counter. Cynthia saw a large round sealed-off hole high up on the wall where once there had been a wood stove. They signed a lease for one year.

When they got back into the VW, Mitchell said, "After he offered me the place, he said 'I told myself when I saw you drive up, if that one with the hair ain't a woman, then I ain't rentin' to 'em.'" Mitchell laughed softly. "But he said I won him over. He said I have an honest face."

Cynthia had never had a yard before. Since she left her parents' home in Atlanta nine years ago, she had lived with Mitchell in small second-floor flats or in square little apartments in concrete buildings that looked like motels and opened onto paved parking areas. She began digging up the ground, an area eight feet square in the back yard, using a big shovel she found leaning against the outside wall of the kitchen. Euston brought over a sod rake when he saw what she was doing. He told her the white-flowering tree was a plum.

"You won't get no good plums off it though. All it does is feed the birds. It ain't been pruned for years. The fruit's all tiny and don't really get sweet. What you going to plant here?"

"I don't know yet. I'm just getting ready."

She worked on the soil some everyday at first. She got a job working evenings at the Harpeth River Cafe twenty minutes up the highway, just outside of the city limits. She worked Wednesdays through Saturdays from 4 p.m. to midnight. With one car, it was the only job she could manage around Mitch's schedule.

He was hired on a crew building new houses in the subdivision ten



minutes away. He got up at 6 in the morning and didn't come home until 3:30, just before she had to leave. Cynthia usually didn't get home till after he was asleep. She went out to the garden every night and stood there in the dark, thinking of the work she'd do the next day. She would drift off to sleep seeing clumps of dirt with reddened stems branching out into blades of grass that tapered into bright green points.

On Saturday nights Mitchell went into town to see friends they still knew from three years before. On Sundays someone almost always came out. It began to feel to Cynthia too much like the life they left in California.

Euston dropped by several times a week at first. Cynthia saw that he still didn't trust them. Once they even found him peeking in the diningroom window while they were eating dinner. He waved when they saw him and then came around the house and in the front door.

"I dropped by to see how ya'll are gettin' along. You like to eat on the floor like that?" He looked at the low table with cushions around it where they were eating.

"It's all right," Mitch said.

"We made this table ourselves," Cynthia said.

"Oh. Well I guess everybody likes they own taste. I brought you a chicken from my own ones at home. You ain't vegetarian too, I hope." He held out a brown paper bundle.

Mitchell thanked him and took the chicken into the kitchen and put it in the old refrigerator. Euston stood around a few minutes and then left. Cynthia went into the kitchen and brought the chicken back with her, opening up the bundle.

"God, I hope he didn't bring anything with feathers on it."

Mitchell laughed softly, "Euston's country, but he's not that country, Cynthia."

"Well, it's all in one piece. And there's feet on it! You can cut it up."

Mitchell took the chicken back in to the refrigerator.

Euston began coming sometimes during the day to talk to Cynthia while she worked in the garden. "You know the Bible says a woman should never cut her hair. Her crowning glory, that's what it is." He watched her put bonemeal in the soil. Sometimes he brought her chicken manure.

"I'm planning to cut mine all off," she said. "I can't stand it on my neck in the summer when the heat's so bad."



"Yeah, well. It was hot enough over there in the Holy Land. None of them women cut theirs off."

"None of the men did either." She smiled at him.

Another time she was putting in pepper and squash plants when he came by. She had four little mounds prepared for crookneck squash and zucchini. He told her it was a sin for women to wear pants, it said so in the Bible. This annoyed Cynthia. She was raised on the Bible and didn't remember that one.

"Where does it say that?"

"Somewhere in the New Testament. I don't recollect just where, but I read that several times."

"I guess that's why I stopped reading the Bible, Euston."

After three months Euston didn't come by too often. They probably were as good as they were going to get, and he couldn't get them to church after inviting them over and over again. Besides, they were good tenants. He was impressed with Cynthia's garden.

By mid-May the garden was fully planted. She read books on vegetable gardening to learn what would grow best through the hot summer. She had cucumbers, squash, corn, bell peppers and chilis, cantaloupe and tomatoes. When it didn't rain for days she watered it and looked for insects. Otherwise there wasn't much to do. The tomato plants were magnificent, lush and green and beginning to blossom. Six of them were four and a half feet tall already. She hoped for ripe tomatoes by July.

Gramm showed up that month from California. He and Mitch were old friends, but Cynthia was irritated by him. He seemed to have nowhere to go. "I think we should let him stay," Mitch said. "He's at loose ends right now. You know how things are with his folks."

"He's always at loose ends. 'Things' are always bad with his family. What's new? He can't stand them because they're rich, he just likes the money."

"Can you blame him? I've never seen them when they weren't drunk."

"I've never seen him when he wasn't stoned. He hasn't worked in three years."

"It would be nice to have someone else around. I hardly ever see you."

"He's boring," was all she said in response, but in the end she didn't fight it. She felt their isolation too.

Gramm came back from town one day with a new color TV in his truck. He watched TV and smoked dope everyday after that. Cynthia



asked him to move it upstairs to the attic bedroom. He bought an air conditioner for the attic and settled in for good.

Cynthia's days went slowly now. She watched for little changes in the plants and picked up the first fallen plums from the overgrown tree. She dropped by to see Marietta Markle who worked with her at the cafe. Marietta was 43. Her two kids had already left home and her boyfriend had moved in with her. He was 36 and worked irregularly. Cynthia thought he was a drunk. Marietta thought Mitch was wonderful.

"He's good-looking and soft spoken. I like that, a man who doesn't have to be proving himself all the time."

"I guess." Cynthia said. She'd been with Mitch too long, she thought. She didn't remember that he was soft spoken or good-looking. She wondered if she'd ever thought so.

"He doesn't seem like the type to run around either. And God, it must be something to have a man that works steady."

Cynthia drank her coffee and watched Marietta smoke.

"Why do you stay with Harris?"

Marietta blew smoke out and looked up at the ceiling. "He's got to be a habit, I suppose. I like younger men. They're not so hard to be around. Harris used to come by the cafe five nights a week looking for me in the beginning."

Marietta had dark red hair and brown eyes. She was proud of her figure. She wore tight jeans to work even though Mr. Skinner, the owner, told her she looked indecent. There were five or six men who came by regularly, looking for her. She had some interest in each of them.

Cynthia began to ride to work with Marietta. She told Mitchell he could keep the car at night even though he didn't need it now that Gramm was there. She never asked what they did while she was working. Marietta's right, he sure is easy-going, Cynthia thought. He doesn't even notice that I don't pay him any attention any more.

One of her nights off they went to town and had dinner with his Uncle Rymer. On the way home Cynthia said, "God, what a hard man! I thought he'd be pleased to see your hair cut. You can't get a good word from that man no matter what you do, and he even likes you."

Mitchell didn't respond at first. Finally he said, "I've been thinking about taking some classes at night to see if I want to go back and finish. Al Hanks who works on the crew told me he's been doing it three years and he's graduating this summer. I've only got five quarters left. I might go into some kind of business them."

"You never were interested in business. I thought you liked to build things. I thought you wanted to build us our own house." She didn't want her own house though, she realized at that moment. But she did



want her own garden.

"I can still do that. I feel something changing in me is all. I don't want to rot like Gramm."

The first Wednesday in July, just before Cynthia was leaving for work, a woman named Laney arrived. She was a friend of a friend of Cynthia's in San Francisco and was travelling cross-country in her van. She had never been to the South before and wanted to stay in Tennessee for a few weeks. She asked if she could park her van in the back and share their kitchen and bathroom in exchange for work or money. Cynthia invited her to stay in the other bedroom downstairs.

She was immediately magnetized by Laney. Maybe she was envious of her independence. She'd never considered taking off on her own. Laney had just come from New Mexico where she'd been staying with friends outside of Santa Fe for a month. She was very tan and her short hair was grey, almost white.

When Cynthia went out to her garden the next morning, she found Laney sitting on a green and orange striped blanket, reading in the sun. She admired the blanket and Laney told her she got it in Guatemala. Laney admired the garden. Cynthia had begun to pick the first tomatoes. Laney picked up a silver flute lying next to her, gleaming in the sun, and played while Cynthia pulled weeds and checked the tomato plants for cutworms.

"What are you playing?"

"It's Bach. 'Sonata in E minor.'"

"You play awfully well."

"I was trained in classical music once. I'm not actually playing it correctly though. I'm just playing around."

"Oh I don't know anything about music." She waited a few minutes then asked, "Where are you from? I mean, where's your home?" She wanted to know anything at all about this woman.

Laney didn't answer.

That night she told Marietta about Laney, but Marietta was pre-occupied. Things weren't going well at home. There was never much business after 9:30, but Mr. Skinner expected them to stay until midnight anyway. Cynthia did her prep for the next morning then said she was sick and had to go home. She called Mitch for a ride.

When she got home Laney was out in her van. There was a light on inside so Cynthia knocked at the door. Laney invited her in. The interior was simple but looked comfortable. There was a raised bed, covered with a spread woven in reds and purples. Built-in cabinets lined one wall, an



enclosed bookcase hung over the bed on the opposite wall. It contained poetry and novels, Cynthia noticed, written mostly by women. In the roof was a large skylight, open to the stars and the warm night air.

"Don't you want the bedroom inside?" Cynthia asked.

"Yes. I'm coming in soon. I spend a lot of time by myself though, and this is where I like to spend it." Cynthia guessed that she wasn't welcome in the van.

"If you want to borrow any of my books, feel free to take them."

She was embarrassed that Laney had watched her eyeing the books. "Well, I'll leave you alone. See you in the morning. The bed's already made up inside."

"You don't have to go if you don't want to." She was matter-of-fact about it. Cynthia lingered at the door.

"How old are you, Laney?"

"I'm 38. I never got married and I don't have any children. Haven't had a permanent home in three years. Before that I lived in Connecticut for two years, which is also where I was born. And before that I was teaching at a state university in the Midwest. It doesn't matter which one. I taught American literature. Before that I don't remember. Fortunately. And yes, I have money of my own, that's how I manage this. Is there anything else you'd like to know?"

Cynthia stared at Laney. Laney looked back coldly. Then she looked away and shook her head. When she looked back again at Cynthia, she half-covered her mouth with her hand, but she was almost smiling.

"I'm sorry. I'm doing it again. I don't mean to be obnoxious, but I know I am. The worst part of travelling around is telling people over and over who I am. I don't like it at all. I'm not doing too well right now anyway. I've been lonely. I'm taking it out on you. . . . Well, what about you? How is it living in Tennessee?"

Cynthia was silent, still watching Laney's face. Then she looked away and said, "I like it. The South is my home. I imagine you think that's strange, that I like it. When I lived in California, I learned to expect that. It never failed." She looked back at Laney. "As soon as someone knew I was from the South, they changed how they saw me. I became stupid in their eyes.

"The South is like a child to people in the rest of the country. They think they're the parents. They're tolerant and condescending to us, or they're critical and condescending. It's all the same."

"I know. I'm sorry. Anyway I think I may like it here. I came to see for myself."

Cynthia climbed into the van for the first time and settled onto Laney's bed. They talked for several hours that night. Laney told her



she spent most of the winter in the desert or in Central America. She had spent last summer in the Canadian Rockies. She seemed to have friends everywhere. Cynthia guessed they were all women. She wondered if Laney were a lesbian.

Finally at one-thirty they went inside. They had made plans for the next day: Cynthia would take her to the old mill still operating thirty-five miles down the river. They could rent a canoe there and go further down river if they wanted. They said goodnight and Cynthia went to her room and got in bed with Mitch. She didn't sleep for hours.

Two days later Marietta called at 1 a.m. after dropping Cynthia off from work. She needed a place to stay. Harris was drunk and getting violent. Cynthia asked Laney if Marietta could share her room. Laney moved back out to her van instead and Marietta got the room. She asked if she could stay for a while.

Sunday night they were all home for dinner at the same time. Gramm had become the primary cook by default. He made Mexican food three times a week. There was always some left over in the old refrigerator, which was by now severely overcrowded. Gramm brought out his special hash and offered it before dinner. Everyone but Cynthia smoked. The combination of people made her nervous. She expected Laney to be quiet and Marietta to talk too much. She thought they would disapprove of each other.

Instead Marietta was quiet and Laney was charming. She talked about Mexico and Guatemala. Gramm asked her about trouble crossing the borders. Mitchell asked about the land and the roads. Laney talked mostly about the people she met and the ones she observed. She emphasized their poverty.

Marietta eyes Laney and Gramm alternately. They both fascinated her. She was too stoned however to talk much. She followed Cynthia back into the kitchen at one point.

"I think Laney's a dyke. Whaddya think? She's somethin' else, I know that. And what about this Gramm? You never told me he was so good-lookin'. Seems okay to me. I guess anybody looks good to me now though, after Harris."

Cynthia felt bad that she'd been too caught up lately with Laney's presence to pay much attention to Marietta's troubles. She had resented Marietta's timing, her arrival sending Laney back to the van. She put her arms around her now and held her. Marietta let her head fall on Cynthia's shoulder. Cynthia stroked her hair.

"You know you can stay here as long as you like. Move in. I'd love to have you."

They went back into dinner and sat down with the others. Halfway



through the meal, Euston knocked on the door. Cynthia panicked. The windows were open, but she was sure he'd smell the smoke anyway. She couldn't face a scene with Euston tonight. Without a word she got up from the table and disappeared into the bedroom that was Marietta's now. She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. She heard Mitchell let Euston in and invite him to sit down. He wouldn't sit on one of the cushions around the table. He dragged a chair in from the livingroom.

"Well, I see you got comp'ny for dinner. Am I interruptin' you?"

Mitchell said, "No, Euston. It's fine. Do you want to eat with us? We've got enough."

"No. I already ate too much. What's that ya'll are eatin' anyhow? Looks funny. Smells funny too."

Gramm shook hands with Euston and introduced himself, then Marietta and Laney. He said they were eating enchiladas and guacamole. Mitchell said these people were staying with them for a while.

"Oh. Is that it? I thought I'd seen some extry cars around here lately. Well, you got three good bedrooms here."

He was trying to figure out who was married to whom but when no one offered any explanations he asked where they came from.

Gramm and Laney both said California.

"Oh. You must have known Mitchell and his wife there then. Where is she anyhow?"

"She's lying down I think. She said she had a headache."

"Yep. Well, I went to California once. I didn't like it though. It's all brown out there."

Laney laughed out loud at this. "It is." She said. "It is."

Marietta recovered some. She joined the conversation, said she wanted to go out west now that one of her kids was in Oregon. Gramm said, "Oregon's real green."

Cynthia heard the conversation continue. Everything seemed okay, but she couldn't return. She lay there for a while listening, then Laney came in and closed the door behind her. She looked at Cynthia for a long time, then said. "I felt a little jealous when you were holding Marietta in the kitchen. I surprised myself." Then she leaned over and kissed Cynthia.

Cynthia spent her days with Laney now. She wondered if Mitch knew they were lovers, but she didn't really care. Some days Laney took off by herself, but the others, they spent riding round the countryside in Laney's van, or they walked the half-mile to the river so they could be alone. Laney read poems to Cynthia unlike any she'd heard before. Her



favorite lines she remembered over and over, "*this/ is the woman I woke from sleep, the woman that woke/ me sleeping.*"

They sat by the river for hours, Laney playing the flute, Cynthia reading. Cynthia watched the gentle current of the river carry occasional debris downstream from Mitch's construction site at the new subdivision. She didn't believe Laney would ever leave.

At work Marietta tried to get her to talk about Laney, but Cynthia was too dazed. She had little to say. Left alone with Gamm all day, Marietta had started sleeping with him.

"He really is too young for me. Thirteen years. So what? He turns me on. There's more to him than you think, Cynthia. You know what he's doing up there all day long with that TV on? He's writing a novel! I'm not kidding you, a science fiction novel! He's got four chapters done. The TV's just company for him. He's lonesome."

Marietta moved all her things over. She left most of the furniture for Harris but the rest she moved upstairs with Gramm. Laney moved back into the house. Cynthia slept with her one night, and Mitchell didn't say a word. He was already preparing for school, studying math every night. Still she couldn't understand how he stayed so friendly with Laney. She wondered if he liked the idea of them together. She wondered if he'd ever had another lover.

In early August Laney wanted Cynthia to go with her to the ocean. It was too hot to be bearable now. Even at the river where they swam naked, it was too hot. Cynthia was determined to go. She'd quit her job if necessary. She got two weeks off without pay, however, and told Marietta she was going.

"OK, hon. Do what you want to do. I think you're turning into a dyke too." She squeezed her arm. "Watch out. I don't really care though, you know. I can almost see why. Laney strikes me too—but not *that* way."

She told Mitchell and he didn't say anything at first. Later he asked, "How far are you going to go with her?"

"She wants to go to South Carolina, down below Myrtle Beach. She knows about some islands off the coast there."

"That's not what I meant."

"Yeah. I know. I don't know, Mitch. I don't know." She didn't look at him.

When they got back from the beach, Cynthia seemed transformed. She laughed all the time. Mitch had never seen her look so good.

Vegetables from the garden were coming in fast now, faster than



she could keep up with. She strung chili peppers over the kitchen window. She made pickles with the cucumbers. She made gallons of tomato sauce, using the green peppers too. She felt a sense of more abundance in her life than she had ever remembered.

On Labor Day, Laney wanted a private picnic at the river with her. The others were disappointed, they'd planned to do something all together. Cynthia went with Laney, but it was not private. There was a family about fifty feet away from them and four teenage boys on motorcycles who raced by, calling out things they couldn't hear.

"I need to move on, Cynthia. I'm going up north. I need to be alone for a while again. And I have friends up there to see."

"Friends" suddenly became a frightening word to Cynthia. She lay in the grass listening. She couldn't speak. There was nothing to say anyway. She was barely breathing. She felt a wave of nausea and cold chills in spite of the heat. She knew Laney had no idea of what this meant to her.

Finally she asked, "Will you come back?"

"Yes. I'll come back. I can't say when it will be though. I need to get to Canada before it's winter and I'm going to be in Joshua Tree from December to February. I'll stay in touch, Cynthia. You know that. You knew I'd leave some time." She paused. "You matter to me a lot."

Was that all she could say? Cynthia could say nothing. Laney couldn't stand goodbyes. She wanted to leave in the morning. Cynthia didn't talk most of the day or night. She was afraid she'd lose control. She didn't want to ruin the end.

She watched Laney say goodbye to Mitchell, Gramm, and Marietta. They were all caught off guard. No one knew what to say to Cynthia. Mitchell couldn't hide his relief. Marietta was worried for her.

Laney left the next morning at ten. They made love that morning and both of them cried, but they didn't talk. Laney gave her a turquoise ring she had been given in Mexico. Cynthia hated whatever it was in Laney that made her unable to stay.

After Laney drove away, Cynthia walked for hours at the river. She came home and found Gramm packing up his truck. He and Marietta were going to Oregon.

Marietta felt so guilty, horrible, she said, that she hadn't told Cynthia sooner, but Cynthia hadn't been around much. She offered to wait another week or ten days, till Cynthia got over Laney's departure. Cynthia laughed.

"You think I'm going to get over it?"

She had the night off work that night. Mitch stayed home with her. They lay together on the bed and he held her for hours. She didn't



cry, she just lay there letting the great weight of feeling move through her body. Mitchell fell asleep after a while.

She got up then and went outside to the garden. She took a bottle of wine with her and drank until she started crying. She lay on the ground under the plum tree and cried for a long time, looking up at the stars. Then she got up and went over to the garden. She started pulling up the tomato plants in a fury. They would still bear fruit for weeks. When she had pulled up three of them and thrown them in a pile, she stopped and looked at them. They looked pathetic, drooping like a child just whipped.

She stopped and picked all the tomatoes off of them, green ones as well as red. Then gradually, methodically, she uprooted the rest of the plants and stripped them of their fruit. She planned to be leaving soon. She didn't want anything to hold her when she was ready and had figured out where to go.

MY FEET HAVE ALL GONE FOR A WALK IN THE LIGHT

In my father's house  
the floor is the ceiling and  
the ceiling is the floor  
our hair grazes the carpet like  
a long gold mane  
we live like reflections  
on the surface of the bathtub  
the neighbors are poor  
my father is dead  
his footsteps can still be heard  
overhead and  
in muffled voices the townspeople say  
"It is our papa who passes in the sun!"  
and in my dreams he tells me  
"It was terribly terribly fun."

We're going home now.  
They warn me that  
dust clouds at distant stars  
may be forming new planets  
like round new houses  
I don't want to look;  
reflecting water, or a mirror  
the past might be recalled in soft focus  
I would go there as in a dream  
where my hands plow the sand  
at the floor of the ocean  
and my legs are so long  
that my feet have all gone for  
a walk in the light  
and then,  
I would never be young again.

Where the devil goes,  
hell goes with him



and where suburbans go,  
there go the suburbs  
and when ancient Egyptians left their country  
they departed the world of the living.

In my father's house  
we live in the land of overripe plums,  
bruised pears and white white peaches  
the boys wear makeup  
I try to keep my skirt down  
the light comes in through pictures on the walls  
the planets gather outside my window  
and secretly I would like to know  
who goes there.

## THE VISION

You lie in the bed  
 one curl always stands up  
 to tell me you love me  
 you are my sister  
 in a new body,  
 your hips curve down to long legs that cross  
 no man would ever possess you,  
 as you kiss me  
 I feed myself,  
 your head turns to sleep  
 the curl shakes  
 good-night you say  
     in a young boy's voice

we are the same color  
 black in black  
 I feel your underwear with my hand  
 my leg rubs across your rough toes  
 to be in your body  
 I would die  
 my hands dig in the pillow

this room is too hot  
 I hate my life  
 this is what I say  
 but why are you crying (the curl nods)  
 I don't know I don't know  
 I do know  
 your arms my arms  
 are not enough

I fall asleep to dream  
 our eyes are green with brown streaks  
 our legs long, but gentle  
 as we lay our body down  
 for the last time.



our legs long, but gentle  
as we lay our body down  
for the last time.

## A VIETNAMESE DOLL

Every morning until she heard Esther squeaking like a rat in the bedroom, Góril hoped that it was just a bad dream. The child hadn't arrived yet—in a while she'd go to town, choose some pretty dresses, small shoes, cuddly teddy bears, soft dolls, building bricks, eat lunch with Leif and plan everything for the new child: a musical kindergarten, trips to the zoo. . . .

Esther lay on her back in yellow crib. She stared at the ceiling; her eyes were expressionless.

The cheerful curtains with Donald Duck figures stirred in a light sea breeze. Góril could hear the waves smack the shore. It smelled of warm earth and cherry trees.

Everything she'd bought during the long waiting period stood untouched on the long, low shelf: a white and a Black doll, a red-painted dollhouse with tiny furniture, a candy-striped ball, alphabet blocks, a flute, a drum, a bucket and spade.

Each thing was chosen with care. She'd even tried to find a Vietnamese doll, but there weren't any. So she'd bought a black doll with curly hair, thinking it was more "homey" than a white one. But Esther's skin wasn't dark, it was very light. The dresses in the closet were also unused; the four-year-old could only wear baby clothes.

Lifting the child out of bed, Góril took in her strange smell, an acridness that reminded her of bark, and for a moment she felt complete aversion. Esther's hair was thin on the crown; little drops of sweat sprang out on her forehead. The narrow brown eyes stared past her, but the child stopped squeaking.

Already out at the airport, when she and Leif stood there together with eight other adoptive parents, she knew that something was wrong. The local paper took pictures: Leif lifting the child up, Góril giving her the black doll, the child stiff as an oriental ivory figure.

In the evening the family came to see "the new child." Esther sat where they'd placed her, on the blue sofa, and stared straight ahead; the pile of gifts in cheerful wrappings was left untouched.

"Take her right to the hospital before you get attached to her," said her mother-in-law. "It's sad, but I've had years of experience with



children, and this child isn't normal."

"Get attached to." Gøril felt only confusion when she picked up the child; feelings came over her almost too strongly—disgust, fear, compassion.

One of her friends had put it brutally: "You should have a right to a refund on a kid like that. When you're nice enough to take one, they shouldn't send an idiot."

But she was certain that the child wasn't an idiot. Inside she had the strange feeling that Esther was somehow sleeping; if she could only reach her, she could wake up.

"Maybe we should look for a child psychiatrist," Leif had said last night. He tried to talk to Esther, pointed at himself, said, "Papa," pointed at the doll and said, "Baby."

When he straightened up, she saw that his face was damp with perspiration, that he tried to hide his aversion.

She poured water in the bassinet, set the child in it. Unclad, Esther was a pitiful thing, with a swollen stomach and small baby limbs. She had bad balance, too, her head wobbled, her body moved in little jerks. It was like a weird dance.

Gøril was afraid to soap the small limbs, felt a disgust that crept through her whole body; her fingers twitched away when they came in contact with the tensed skin.

One morning when Esther lay there unmoving in a blue towel and she was drying her, a feeling of hopelessness rose in Gøril.

She called the nurse who'd brought the children to the country, expecting to get good advice, sympathy—or maybe she'd really been wishing that the nurse would come and fetch the child, that the days with Esther would lose themselves in memory like a bad dream.

The nurse had said angrily, "I thought you were mature people. Did you believe you'd get a doll baby when you got a child from a country that's been in a war so long?" She'd called forth terrors Gøril could hardly grasp, talked about napalm and death.

It was too awful to listen to.

"She doesn't even understand the language," the nurse had said. "Don't go dragging her around to specialists, give her time, have enough love..."

Gøril put the little boat she'd bought a few days ago down in the bathwater, pushed it back and forth while she cried, "Tututututut."

For a moment it was as if Esther followed the boat with her eyes—didn't she see the signs of a glimmer of joy in the slanted Asian eyes?



The water washed coolingly up towards her thighs. Esther sat there on the blanket and Gøril imagined that Esther was following her with her eyes, wanting to wave.

Gøril lay in the sea, floating. The sun was hot just over the sea and the shore. In the west dark clouds floated in over the skerries.

On the beach Esther sat like a statue, only her hair lifting in the slight breeze.

Water sprinkled the child as Gøril went ashore, knelt on the sand, filled the colorful buckets, turned them over, saying, "Sandcakes, sandcakes."

It was like talking to a stone.

Then a little finger came as if by accident near the sandcakes; Gøril took the thin hand in hers, led it over the bucket, the sandcakes.

A trembling went through the hand.

Esther slept and Gøril rigged up a kind of sunscreen, lay down and peered up at the drifting clouds. As a child she'd made up fairytales about such clouds, had seen how they took wonderful forms: elves, trolls, fairies from the stories. Now and then a complete pirate ship floated across the sky with filled sails and Captain Kidd at the helm.

Now the clouds floated together, casting somber shadows on the beach.

She herself must have slept as well, for when she looked up the sky was dark. Esther squeaked.

"Home, shall we go home?"

Gøril felt a numb tiredness, barely managed to push the stroller over the beach.

It would be that way at home, too. She would pace back and forth, looking at Esther while her dejection grew. Dust settled on bookshelves, the dishes piled up in the sink; she threw together pre-cooked food for dinner, no longer had morning coffee with her friends.

Lightning flashed across the sky.

Esther stirred, and suddenly Gøril's nerves crept to the fingertips of her hanking hands.

Esther got up, holding fast to the stroller frame, and stood there looking at her.

It was eerie, like a dead person walking. Gøril let go of her grip, took a step backwards.

Esther just looked at her, and Gøril thought there was hate in her



No, she stared straight ahead, without expression.

Gøril dressed her, carried her to the kitchen, brought out vitamins and cornflakes, boiled an egg.

Esther ate a couple of mouthfuls.

"Shall we go to the beach and swim, Esther? Swim?"

Did happiness glint in the dark eyes? Did Esther understand? How should she understand? The child hadn't uttered a sound in the three weeks that she'd been with them, not even in her own language.

To go to the beach took all Gøril's willpower. They were stared at on the road, chattered in the gardens: "That's the Vietnamese child they took in when they couldn't have one themselves—she's the one who can't have children—and then they got an idiot. Imagine.

Esther could walk, if she wanted; she took a few steps then sank down on her bottom. Her head wobbled back and forth, her body stiffened when Gøril pulled on her leg.

She'd brought a stroller for the four-year-old, and now Esther was sitting in it, stiff as a stick, staring straight ahead.

On the way to the beach Gøril prattled along automatically—"See the tree—the car's driving fast—seen the kitty—the dog—the flower."

Everyone they met stared at them, stared curiously at the foreign child. Gøril was ready to cry.

She'd dreamed in the months before the adoption came through how it would be, how they would run to the beach, play in the garden.

Had thought of how the child would rejoice with happiness to come to a home like this—live in a big house with a garden, have good food, real toys, her own room.

They'd called her Esther after Leif's grandmother. Now it went coldly through Gøril—she couldn't even keep her name—everything had to be alarmingly foreign.

Down at the beach she lifted Esther high in the air. A gull came towards them on wide wings; the child's fragile body shook.

"Bird—bird," said Gøril and pointed, but Esther didn't follow it with her eyes.

She set the child on a blanket, brought out the colorful buckets and shovels, built a castle, decorated it with shells and seaweed, made ramparts around it.

Far away down the beach some children laughed; they were playing with a polka-dot beach ball.

Suddenly Gøril wept.

"Mama's going swimming."

A sort of longing arose in her to swim far far out, to swim and swim until the water soothed this feeling of helplessness.

eyes.

Then the thunder sounded over the beach; the lightning zigzagged towards the waves.

Esther threw herself forward and Gøril caught her in the air, falling to the sand with the child. Esther had gone crazy, was trying to bury herself.

The lightning was so near that Gøril saw it strike; the sand scorched.

And suddenly she clasped the child, covered her completely with her own body, whispered consoling words in her ear, heard herself sob.

Ashamed, Gøril brushed them off, hoped no one had seen it all.

Esther was still sobbing.

And suddenly she understood that Esther believed it was a bombing attack, that she must have dug like that in the earth before, trying to hide herself.

Gøril felt a burning tenderness, held the child close to her, kissed her hair, her cheeks, her nose, whispered meaningless words, "My Esther, no bombs here—they're gulls, not planes—it's thunder and lightning."

For a moment Esther was a tense, shrieking bundle, then she looked right at Gøril.

A little hand stroked Gøril's chin cautiously; tiny fingers caressed her.

They sat there, both of them, and sobbed aloud.



OPAL

You hunch on the toilet  
with your muscles drooped  
around the seat. Ninety-eight  
pounds stooped  
forward and begging  
those little guys to show.  
When they don't, I pull  
you up, then your pants  
(all sagging)  
and so even, oh so slow  
we shuffle  
to your bed. You, with elegance,  
me, pressing each finger into the flesh  
where you once carried breasts.

Scotch and water. A cigarette.  
Sucked down in no time:  
the duet  
you brought to each bedtime  
when everybody preached  
you shouldn't. Now we don't  
say a thing, and tonight  
I cup my hand  
under your bleached  
knees. I don't  
use more than a polite  
touch to lift you up and  
onto the mattress  
that's to become your sour nest.

**LAST WEEK IN YOUR ROOM**

Last week in your room I saw  
your gloves, grease-black,  
the fingers curled.  
I thought of your hands  
digging and driving, the dirt  
worked into the etchings of your skin.  
The callous covering the palm.  
Across the room  
the pens and crayons waited  
for the artist's hands to roll and stroke them  
into roses.  
I waited too. I know your hands  
better than I know your face; they are  
gentleness moved by strength,  
hard in places  
where once something rubbed enough to hurt.