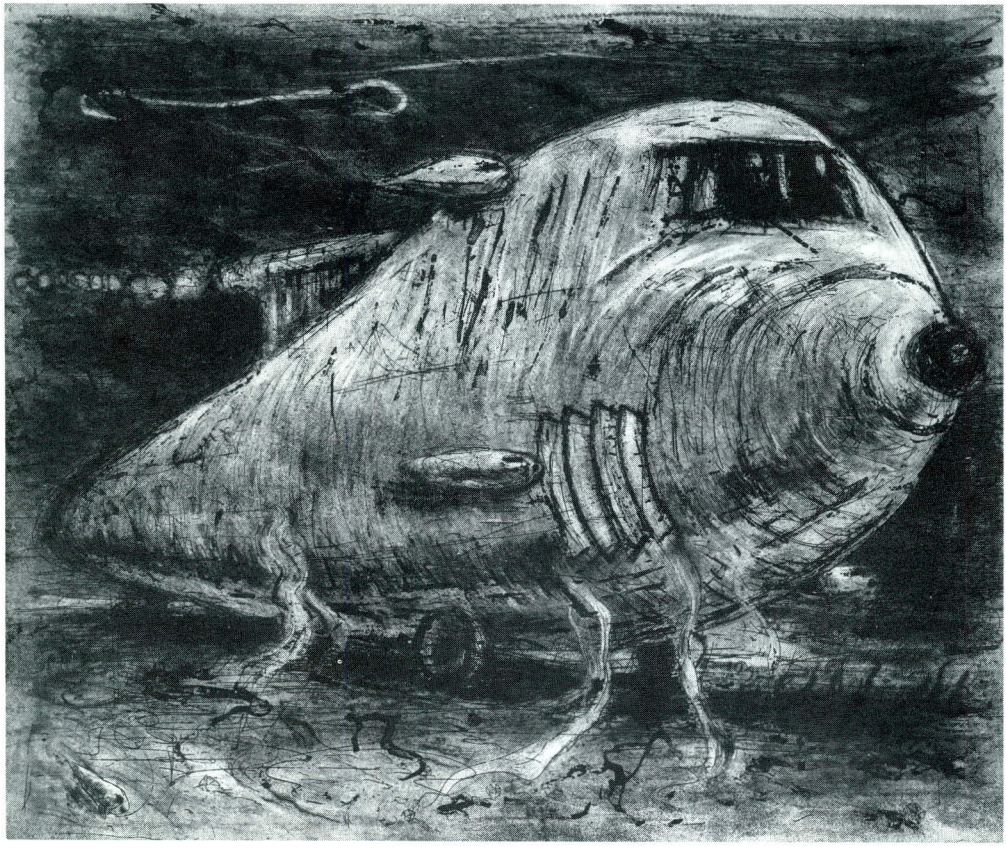
Cottonwood 45



Gerald Early

Cottonwood 45

Cottonwood magazine welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, graphics, photography, translation, reviews of small press literature, and literature by midwestern authors. We also welcome articles on the arts from both local and national writers and artists. Poetry submissions should be limited to the five best, fiction to one story. We cannot return submissions which do not include a stamped self-addressed envelope.

Since *Cottonwood* has no regular source of funding, we depend heavily on the interest and support of our subscribers. Issues appear tri-quarterly at $5.00 per issue or $12.00 for a three-issue subscription. Although issues are sometimes irregular, three issues are guaranteed per subscription. Subscriptions and submissions should be directed to:

Cottonwood Magazine
Box J, Kansas Union
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66045

Cottonwood MAGAZINE AND PRESS receives support from the Department of English of the University of Kansas. The project is funded in part by the Kansas Arts Commission, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

Cottonwood Magazine is indexed by the *American Humanities Index* and the *Annual Index to Poetry in Periodicals.*

This issue has been set in Baskerville typeface using Microsoft Word and Aldus PageMaker.

Cottonwood 45

Gerald Early Issue

Cottonwood Magazine and Press
Lawrence, KS

COTTONWOOD 45

EDITOR: George F. Wedge

GUEST EDITORS: Jane Garrett, Philip Wedge

FICTION EDITOR: Jane Garrett
POETRY EDITOR: Philip Wedge
REVIEW EDITOR: Dan Martin

LITERARY STAFF:

FICTION:
Ben Accardi
Laurie Carlson
Brian Daldorph
Carolyn Doty
Jim Elmborg
Chris Haven
Scott Heim
Greg Jackson
Alex Kolker
Tom Lorenz
Gail McNicholas
Dan Murtaugh

POETRY:
Tina Chapman
Lisa Cosmillo
Scott Heim
Jane Hoskinson
Mary Klayder

PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR: Jon Blumb
GRAPHICS EDITOR: Lois Greene
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Karen Hellekson
PRODUCTION STAFF: Tina Chapman, Jane Hoskinson, Lisa Martin
BUSINESS MANAGER: Brent Lamb
CIRCULATION MANAGER: Philip Wedge
DISTRIBUTION MANAGER: Tina Chapman
UNIVERSITY LIAISON: Michael Johnson

Contents

Poetry

Gerald Early

Fiction

Reviews

Graphics and Covers by George Renault

Editor's Note

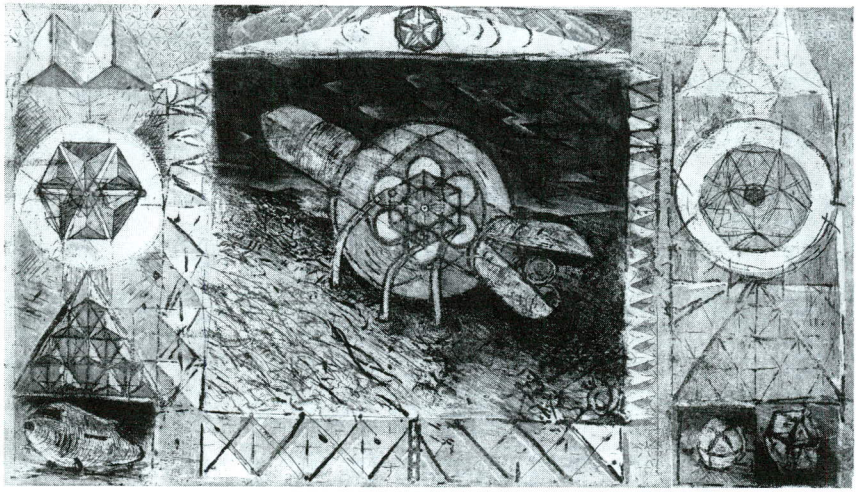
Since George Wedge is on sabbatical leave this semester to work on his book on alcoholic writers, *Writing Under the Influence*, Jane Garrett and I are the guest editors for this issue. It's a pleasure for me to edit the Gerald Early issue in particular because of the friendship we developed when he taught at KU and guest edited *Cottonwood's* Contemporary Black Writers Issue (#38/39). Gerald received two National Awards after his return to Washington University at St. Louis, including a G. E. Younger Writers Award for his essays published in *Cottonwood*. We're honored that he has shared his piece on Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* with us.

This issue, in fact, includes a number of *Cottonwood* alums. George Renault has provided graphics for us again, as he did in the first issue my father edited (#36). Denise Low, a former editor, Steven Hind, Patrick Stanhope, Kathleen Maher, all have contributed fine work for this issue as they have in various past issues.

Like so many small magazines and presses, we struggle with staff changeovers and funding, but our production is now in the competent hands of Karen Hellekson, and we feel confident *Cottonwood* will appear in a more timely manner than, sometimes, it has in the recent past.

Our next issue will feature poets such as Ron Schreiber, Anthony Oldknow, Barbara Horton, and Kevin Boyle and fiction writers such as Harry Voltanowski and John Morris. We will also be announcing the winners of the third Alice Carter Awards for the best fiction and poetry published in issues 43-45.

Phil Wedge



Poetry

Patrick Stanhope

Interlude

Two day rest on the beach, fifty cases of iced
beer,
a real beef cookout with the wild boys
and the Provost Marshal was keeping his distance.

Bucky and Ski wearing cutoff fatigues,
singing, dancing in the hot sand, a can of beer in
each hand,
38s holstered, riding low on their bony hips.

Straddling those outdated longboards, waiting to
jam
the next big wave, when I looked at you
I saw Laguna, Newport Beach in your hazel eyes.
You were thinking of your own waxed board and
brother,

I was just beginning to smile when I saw the big
wave
rising three swells out, Cobra gunships coming in
low
over the coastline, the big guns near Marble Mountain
heating up,
their dark muzzles flashing, roaring in the east.

Denise Low

Language of Aphasia

(after the tarot card The Hanged Man)

Since his stroke it is as though he hangs
upside down, gagged, his four limbs crucified

on the dimensions of time and space. He speaks
only simple syllables, beginning with mmmmm

and finishing with open vowels. He has
this survival-level language, a child's

first alphabet to reach for milk or mother—
and with these simple sounds he gropes

to describe the terrain he floats in.
When I promise he will speak again

he shakes his head no. He breathes sounds
through his lips, squeezes them flat

and open, and then stops. I tell him
he will heal and learn speech and one day

even rise from the weight of unmoveable flesh
where he flounders, struggles for air,

and invents a new vocabulary
as though his life depends on it.

Walter Griffin

The Bones of Montgomery Clift

Righted, they would form
a somnambulistic stance in the

stoop-shouldered dark; shuffling
in the absence of skin stretched

across those classic features,
the curve of lip disappeared, the nervous

eyes gone the way of rats.
Slack-jawed, his lines would fall

upon the fleshless air
then slide down the throats of trees,

their tops bent like his walk
slouching across the Late Show screen

with sockets full of a hollow dark
only that perfect corpse knows.

Walter Griffin

Nights Trains

The box cars are bones strung together,
rattling through the night, cracking and breaking
along the tracks past graves unraveling in moonlight.
The engine light wraps itself around trees
like a white bandanna in the dark, falling
across clotheslines hung out in the night,
their empty sleeved garments signaling

toward the hooded eyes of the engineer,
his knuckles pulled back at the throttle, racing
to be on time for those of us in our white
frame coffins, dreaming of Pullman cars and the deep,
carpeted rolling through steam-lit stations where
the faceless conductor in a black suit tells us to "board":
Trembling in our skin, losing watches and falling back

in the yellow light of fading platforms and terminal calls,
we looked for the flowered, cushioned seats and with
our faces pressed in darkness, rock
back into an old familiar sleep, dreaming
of a single hand made of straw, waving
from the empty field just outside the glass
that would make scarecrows of us all.

Barbara Van Noord

In Need of Lauren Bacall

The day I first entered
your parents' house,
(your first real girlfriend)
my hair was still childhood blonde.
I wore a hat with a wide brim.
I leaned an elbow on the mantle
to look at the fire
and seem at home.
Do you remember how your brother
bowed before the fireplace and said:
My god, Pete,
you've brought home Lauren Bacall!
I looked her up later.
But at the time I just took off my hat.
You carried our suitcases in,
up the stair, to separate rooms.
In the doorway, you laughed.
A flock of little sisters rose up
and winged out of the room.
That night, just before Christmas,
the house bursting with little girls—
do you remember how you came to my room?
Do you remember my nightdress slid
half off the shoulder? I thought
the word: languid.
I imagined someone named Lauren Bacall.
I tried looking at you
the way someone with that name
might look at a man.
It was difficult.
I felt, in that house, so young. And you!
Suddenly you'd become someone's son.

Gary Duehr

Streets

There are streets full of
hands
held just below eye-level,
and voices of the dead
just beneath
hearing, like the whispering of
a tree—
Their hats on the ground
in front of them,
open case of the violin, cane
for a phantom leg—

Everything that they can say
begins and ends
with money, money talks back
dropped into a
hand, case, hat.
There are streets full
of coins dropping
from one level to
another, a smooth silver escalator
taking them
down—

And no one walking by
can kneel, no one belonging to
a hand can rise up
or shout loud enough to be
heard—
Every day the dead and living exchange
tokens
inches from each other
on a street busy with sunlight.

Darrell Schramm

The Reinhardt Farm

For a long time the world had stopped there,
north of the Knife River,
west of the Mandan villages gone
since the last few buffalo. History.
Everyone knows more than people have died
for it, guarded its bones with words, mostly,
that have little to do with the human heart
though sometimes the words find their way to it.
Having found my way back, I stood
waist high in the prairie mallow, foxtail,
and other yellow grasses of summer
under the fluttering cottonwood
and saw the farm too was gone.
Mother had been born here, the year
two Lakota boys fled
St. Francis School in winter, 1921.
One froze to death; the other survived.
As a girl, she had shoveled manure,
shocked corn, fed pigs. Later,
as a child, I had romped among chickens
and rusty wheelbarrows in the barnyard,
barefoot had stepped on a nail once,
bled into its earth. An unspoken pact.

The house lay now on a pile of gray
rain-and-sun splintered wood.
I had been willing to be uneasy, sad
even, knowing memory something
easily confused with love. So many traps.
But that broken ribcage of lumber claimed
a wonder from me that opened
the funnel of my lungs like the wind
wooing through a hollow silo. I grew
strangely happy and thought how loss
makes up beauty, grows tall grass
that, going back, we wade through,
as I waded through now to where,
slouched and leaning, the old wash-house
still crouched, cultivating time. I stopped

inside, found cobwebs and rot, rubbed
a finger on the grime of a window and saw
a distant summer day when I dug up potatoes
in the garden, and one carrot which I ate,
dirt and all, loving the fresh earth.

Lynn Martin

Eighth Elegy

Don't ask why I tied a chair
together with string and sat in it
one winter. Don't ask why I wear
no shoes come summer. And don't

ask me to return from that place
whose only moons were yellow apples
hanging in the orchard. Ask how blades
of grass sing. Ask how an open poppy,

those black spoons in an orange bowl,
says everything about time. Tell me what
one hand says to the other. Ask for fields
of roses. Say what radiance outshines death.

Robert Cooperman

Sophia Starling Decides to Travel to Colorado, 1873

England so predictable in its lovely hills,
not a secret of landscape to break a heart
or lift it to heaven. So I left,
became what English gentlemen would call
a woman of the world, but never
anything less than a lady,
even if my countrywomen would gasp
at the adventures I could tell,
their faces pale with horror,
or envy, or both.

A lady who remembers she's a lady
can go anywhere, escorted by men,
who, with a less assured companion,
would think nothing of robbery, murder, worse.
So I saw the volcanoes and rain forests
of the Sandwich Islands, feted by their king,
who told me of perfect men and maidens hurled
down those awful, smoking holes—
to appease gods barbarous as his forebears.

Still, I couldn't return to England just yet,
I wanted to see the Rocky Mountains:
peaks to dwarf the Trossachs and Grampians
piled one atop the other;
nature too wild even to sing about,
a place apart from our pallid gentility.

I resolved to spend a season in that emptiness:
temples God had hewn with His breath,
sights to alleviate the tedious thought
of a future marriage and children,
and make me wonder if our small souls
can indeed reside in a heaven
only slightly more grandiose
than the one I visited.

R. Terashima

Poem

Twenty-three and six
feet four
roughly two

hundred thirty pounds
(the eyes
duller

for the double dose
of thorazine)
he's a good boy only

watch out
when the moon's full
we never go places

without him
anymore
he didn't like it

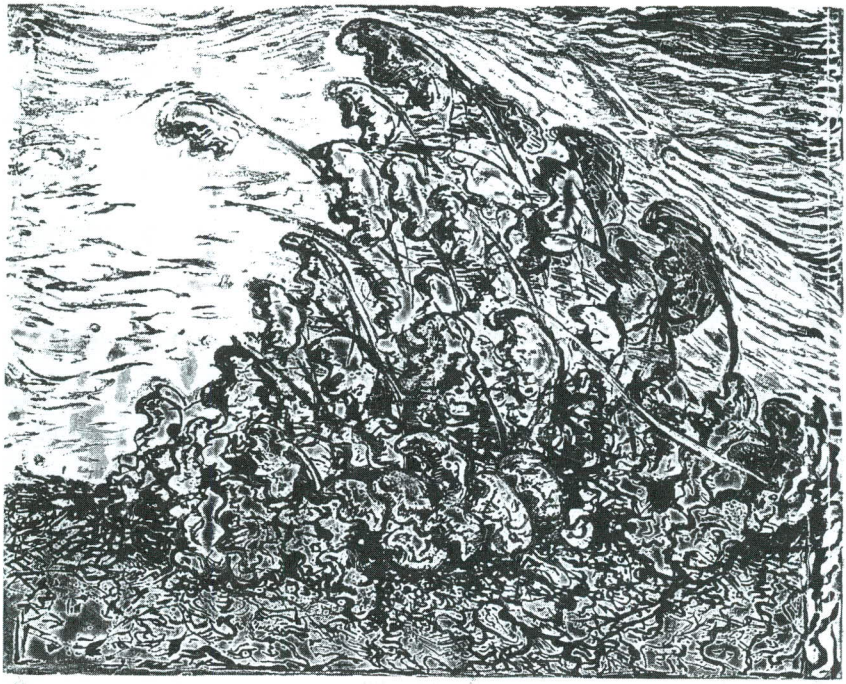
at the training school
fought hard
and about got away

they tried
a hammer-lock on him
broke his arm

Steven Hind

Finding the Calf

Wind breathes in the new
Leaves along the creek.
Mockingbird solos,
Every note improvised
And right. The mare prances
When the cow shows herself,
Swings round, broken rope
Of afterbirth swinging
Beneath her tail. She noses
Her black calf, wet and still
In the grass, new grass
Fat with spring. Welcome,
Welcome. Even with no name
You will always be the calf
Born on the finest day of April.
To see you will make me glad.



Gerald Early

Gerald Early

Among the Whites: A Remembrance and a Remonstrance

William Gass was right in his essay on Ford Maddox Ford: the word "impression" has been belittled in a bemusing way, having come to mean nowadays lack of precision, a vague consideration, something that seems superficial; and the term "impressionistic," often applied to writing rather than painting in modern critical discourse, has an even more pejorative denotation: undisciplined ramblings, thoughts coming off the top of one's head and the like. In music, for instance, we might refer to certain improving jazz players as "impressionistic." In letters, the autobiographer and the essayist are the chief purveyors of impressionism. But as Gass wrote about the original meaning of the word: " 'an impression' stood for something distinct, something involving a rather vigorous assault, a pressing of one substance upon another with such severity as to make a rather definite dent."

Having written an essay, a good portion of which is autobiographical, I might be accused of being doubly impressionistic. Yet I would like to think that this piece is an attempt to return to the idea of impression as true and blazing impact and not a kind of post-modernist whimsy locked in some bravura self-psychoanalytical performance. The two parts of this essay are meant to throw two very contrasting colors against one another to create a clarity where autobiography illuminates argument and argument illuminates autobiography until, in the realm of this contrast, the piece becomes, obviously, all autobiography and, simultaneously, all argument. So the essay is an exploration into the act an art of defining the impression as a total representation of the fictive necessity of, to borrow a phrase, *seeing as such*. The artifice of the essay is simple: here, I wish to see a neighborhood, some people, cuts of some consciousness that imagines it can reconstruct an entire segment of a culture through the willful reinvention of what he imagines to be his consciousness; there, I wish to see a film about a neighborhood, some people, about consciousness reinventing what the filmmaker imagines to be his consciousness.

To speak of impressionism here is appropriate as half of this essay is about a film and films (photography) are, perhaps, our last truly impressionistic art aside from dreams, both of which constitute seeing as such. But the paradox here is apparent and unavoidable: my own impressionism is undercut, betrayed really, by disillusionment. The severe contrasts are not meant to adhere as a whole but always to remain distinct and, curiously, incomplete. A fatherless black boy is disillusioned about his growing up in an Italian neighborhood where a black man was often somebody's boy. A black viewer is disillusioned with a black film. One black artist is disillusioned by the art of another. And these waves of disillusionment are a mirror of the disillusionment that is the theme of the film itself; for Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* is about black and white post-modern disillusion: the smashing of the black radio by white hands, the looking through the glass and to find on one side the mouthy Italian racist and on the other the stuttering black innocent, the breaking of the glass in the end so that, finally, the adversaries of the film face each other, Sal the white pizzeria owner, and Mookie, his delivery boy, and still, in the most despairing disillusionment of all, fail to see each other. Impressionism, you see, can be, at last, only the rendering of what it has come into being to deny: the disillusioned consciousness.

1. "If you can do it in real life . . ."

Growing in a neighborhood for such a long time
—Bunny Wailer's "Blackheart Man"

For more than a dozen years, at least, my mother worked as a school crossing guard at the St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi elementary school, an all-Italian Roman Catholic school located at the corner of 7th and Christian Streets in South Philadelphia. It is remarkable that my mother was able to work for such a length of time among people who were noted for not liking blacks or for not getting along with them very well. Yet I think my mother felt fairly comfortable among them. At least, over the years, a mutual respect grew between the nuns, lay teachers, and priests of the school and their black school crossing guard; although my mother, being the good Protestant that she was and still is, never had much very good to say about Catholicism: the Pope was a royal lord in a huge castle whom only fools would believe infallible; the nuns always smelled bad, especially in the summer when they combined the odors of menstruation with that of underarm sweat; Catholic schools were very bad educational institutions where all the children did all day was pray, leaving upon graduation as

dumb as doorknobs. These were some of the opinions my mother freely expressed to me at a quite vulnerable age, prejudicing me against Catholicism fairly thoroughly or, at least, as thoroughly as a high church Episcopalian can be prejudiced against not simply the source but the model of his beliefs. We too gave up meat on Fridays, wore our ashes on Ash Wednesday made from the burnt remains of the previous year's palms, said our Hail Marys, genuflected before entering a pew, made the sign of the cross, and recited the Nicene Creed. Indeed, my church was called St. Mary's, the oldest all-black Episcopal Church in the city, a fine tradition and heritage we had; and how many black Protestants were likely to go to a church called St. Mary's? On the whole, as black Episcopalians, we were undoubtedly more at ease, in a certain decidedly important aspect of temperament, in an Italian Catholic neighborhood than we would have been in a black Protestant one. In fact, I am sure being reared in this neighborhood intensified our religious piety as what we believed seemed to make us so like our neighbors.

The parents of the neighborhood, as well as the school children, all grew to know my mother and liked her and of course they grew to know my mother's children. I was known, even until I was a young man, as "Florence's boy" in the neighborhood and this quite often was meant as a term of endearment. My wife has commented to me as I have told her, by bits and pieces, about my childhood, that the Italians accepted the presence of my family because it was non-threatening and completely respectable: a black widow and her three children. "If your father had been living or if your mother had been on welfare and had illegitimate children, you couldn't have lived in that neighborhood peacefully," she says. Perhaps she is right, especially about the first point. For the Italians, black men were always "troublemakers." So, in many instances, were black boys. But I also remember that some of the worst racial encounters of my youth were between black girls and Italian shopkeepers over suspected thefts or between black girls and Italian girls whose paths crossed on some summer afternoon. Some of the most endearing and most liked blacks among the Italians were some of the black boys and men who worked in their businesses. Nothing is ever quite as simple as it seems or as we would like it to be or as we remember it.

I grew up about one block from St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi School which I could never attend because I was not a Catholic—although that is technically not a requirement for going to a Catholic school—and because I was not an Italian—which was certainly a requirement for attending this school; for a long time, as a boy, I thought only whites could be Catholic and attend Catholic school until I finally grew to know some black children who attended St. Peter Claver's at 12th and Lombard and St. Paul's School at 9th

and Christian. Eventually, by the time I reached high school, the school was integrated when an Italian girl became pregnant by a black man, quite a scandalous happening at the time. The girl never married the father, and the child, by virtue of having both an Italian mother and an Italian surname, was eligible to attend the school, which the girl and her parents apparently wanted very much. After much soul searching and many meetings, the boy was admitted to the school, although there was considerable protest, I was led to understand, by many of the Italian parents who thought the boy "would not fit in." Also, the issue of illegitimacy was raised, though it is hardly likely that this neighborhood would have taken this business more in stride if the woman had married the black father. (Moreover, at least a few Italian girls in the neighborhood had "accidental" pregnancies, as I remember.) The boy was the only black kid to attend the school during my years of living in the neighborhood. He was despised by the black children who lived in the community near "Little Italy," as the area I grew up in was called, and he was never permitted into their social circle despite being among them. He, in turn, hated the blacks just as vehemently and encircled himself with white friends. Doubtless an uncomfortable situation as, in fact, the boy's mother and her parents lived in the surrounding black neighborhood and not in "Little Italy" which partly explains how the daughter was knocked up by a black teenager and may explain why both she and her parents wanted her son to attend the Italian Catholic school, to reaffirm their links to both their ethnic identity and their religion, both of which, at times in this community, seemed inseparable. The only other black people I ever saw enter the small, beige-colored school were those who came to play Bingo every Tuesday night, a quite significant number, as I recall. "If my kids aren't good enough to go to school there, then I'm not good enough to play Bingo there," my mother would say with strong disapproval of the blacks as they entered the building.

St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi Church, about one block from the school, between Seventh and Eighth on Montrose Street, was the centerpiece of this Italian neighborhood; a magnificent looking structure it was too, clearly the most ornate, medieval-looking building for blocks around. During my days as a paper boy in the neighborhood, going to the rectory was one of my favorite stops, especially during the summer, because it was air-conditioned and quiet for the younger priests were always nice to me. The senior priest, Malzone I think his name was, frightened me quite a bit as he seemed very stern and when he walked down the street his bearing was very rigid yet cocky. When I saw a picture of Mussolini in a seventh-grade history book I thought "there is that priest at St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi, that Malzone." Also, I remember very well sitting on my front steps on an early summer Sunday morning and watching my Italian neighbors go to

mass, by the droves, by the hundreds. I would sometimes wave to them and they would sometimes wave back.

The earliest memory I have of an address is an apartment house located at 914 E. Passyunk Avenue which was about two blocks from both the church and the school. During the last year we lived here, I recall we were the only family in the building. Oddly, no whites ever lived in the building when it was fully occupied but only Italians lived on the block. When we were the only family in the building, my sisters and I were the lone black playmates of the Italian kids. I remember the overweight Andrew, whose mother, a red-headed woman with a heavy Italian accent which made her English, for me, at any rate, completely incomprehensible, once slapped my oldest sister for sitting on her front step, which resulted in my mother threatening Andrew's mother with bodily harm if she ever touched one of us again. Somehow the story has come down to me over the years that my mother pulled a knife on Andrew's mother but I doubt the veracity of this as I have seen my mother murderously angry on several occasions but have never known her to brandish a weapon. Besides, my mother was not arrested and she would have been, I would think, had she threatened the woman with a knife. I do know that my mother was as angry as I ever remember seeing her and I think she could have easily beaten the woman very severely, considering the depth of her rage. There were also the Barbera boys, Jimmy and Albert, whose mother, Rose, once comforted me when I was left alone by my mother for the first time, as well as Harriet Curci. As it turns out, the Curcis were to have some real impact on my life. At about the age of eight or nine, we moved to a house around the corner on a small dead-end street, some called it an alley, addressed 918 South Sheridan Street, a property owned by the Curcis who lived in the front house that abutted on Passyunk Avenue. I was to live in this house for the next 13 years. My mother was to live there even longer.

I do not remember the first names of either of Harriet Curci's parents from whom my mother rented the small house. I suppose I do not remember them because I always called them Mr. and Mrs. Curci. They were, I imagine, a close couple; they reared several children and they were always together except for the occasions when Mr. Curci would return to see relatives in Italy. I do not recall Mrs. Curci going on any of these trips, or perhaps she went on a few of them, certainly not as many as her husband. Mr. Curci died from cancer quite suddenly when I was in college and his death seemed to snap all of the life from Mrs. Curci. She had always been an overweight woman. After her husband's death, she dropped down to a skinny remnant of herself. Eventually it was discovered that she had bladder cancer and she was forced to use a catheter which she found both uncomfortable and degrading. At any rate, before I had graduated, she too

had died but in that last year or so I found it painful to see her. She was a woman who had been very full of a kind of domestic life that, while her husband was alive, seemed to have made her extremely happy. As a boy, I thought the Curcis were the nicest people I had ever met. Sometimes their oldest son, Reynolds, who lived in New Jersey but would often visit with his wife and family, would buy me an ice cream from a Mr. Softee truck. This was the most generous act anyone had ever done for me at the right time, so I thought. I often ran errands for Mrs. Curci which largely consisted of going to the local grocery store, Lena's (a store run by a middle-aged Italian woman whose husband would sit and stare from the big front window; "shell-shocked" my mother told me as if to a boy that could or would explain anything), to buy bread, milk, flour and other items. Mrs. Curci never bought pasta from a store; she always made her own pasta and it was a fascinating thing to watch. She mixed the flour, water, and salt deftly; so effortlessly was this procedure performed that she could watch television while she cut the strips of noddles unerringly. I would suppose, in retrospect, that Mrs. Curci was not a very well-educated woman; she spent nearly all her time at home, in the kitchen, to be exact, cooking endlessly and watching soap operas. Even on the hottest summer days, pots would be boiling on the stove. I doubt if it ever occurred to her to do something else with her day or that there was anything else worth doing. She spoke with an accent and it was sometimes difficult for me to understand what she said and so it took a while before I was able to be a fairly trustworthy go-for. At first, I would often have to go back to the store and correct my mistakes. I hated this very much but I would usually get a nickel or even a dime for going to the store and nickels and dimes, in my youth when money was still worth something and it was not necessary to have barrels of it to buy something, were hard to come by. Mrs. Curci also played the numbers nearly every day and I would drop off her bets at Lena's as well. Sometimes when Mrs. Curci would "hit" she would give me a dollar or two, which to a boy growing up in the early sixties was a considerable sum of money.

I remember one particularly embarrassing incident concerning my acting as a go-for for Mrs. Curci's illegal gambling. One summer afternoon she had given me, as usual, the slip of paper with her bets and I stuffed it in my pocket and was ready to tramp off to Lena's when I ran into some friends of mine who wanted to play ball. As we were to play our game in a schoolyard right across the street from Lena's I felt there was no real urgency to get the bets in. It was about 12:30 and the bets had to be in before 2. The ball playing that day was a bit more involving and competitive than normal, I guess. I do not think I realized that I had not placed the bets until well after 3. I ran over to Lena's quickly to check the time when I realized how late it was. Confirmed that I was too late, I simply left the store without

saying anything although Lena looked at me oddly, probably wondering why I had no bets from Mrs. Curci that day, as she was an inveterate gambler and usually played the numbers every day. I looked at the betting slip closely, never having examined one before. There were long columns of numbers, some of them boxed, with various amounts of money attached to each one, from a penny to a dime. I did not know how Mrs. Curci picked her numbers but I know that she had dream books that she consulted and that she retained minute mental accounts of her dreams as each signified a number. Also, I know she combed the comic strips in the daily paper (she read only the local tabloid, the *Philadelphia Daily News*, which was, by far, the most popular paper in the neighborhood), looking for signs that indicated lucky numbers. The *Daily News* also ran a daily feature called "Numerology" which I never understood as it was only a list of three-digit numbers. But to Mrs. Curci the list had a great deal of meaning. Anyhow, I threw the betting slip away as I did not want to go back to Mrs. Curci and tell her that I had failed to turn in her bets. I knew that she diligently made a duplicate list of her bets, but I thought that would be of little importance. I thought she might not wish to use me again to go to the store for her and I needed the job. As money accompanied the bets (Mrs. Curci had what might be called a running account with Lena and often did not pay for her bets for a week or more but in this instance money accompanied the bets), and as the odds were in my favor that she would not hit, I kept the money and decided simply to pretend I had placed the bets as normal. Keeping the money posed a moral dilemma for me for I knew that it was stealing. I tried not to spend the money but simply to hold it so that the theft would seem less apparent to me. But temptation was too great. Eventually, I spent some of the money. Moral turpitude by easy stages, one might say. It did not take very long for the truth to be discovered. Much to my misfortune, one of the numbers Mrs. Curci played hit. I could not decide if it was an act of God or a perversity of the devil. The woman hit about a half-dozen times in the entire four years I regularly placed bets for her. Why, in heaven's name, did she have to strike pay dirt the very time I failed to place her bets? Soon, an intense argument between Lena and Mrs. Curci ensued as Mrs. Curci heard that the number she played hit but Lena refused to pay off because no bet had been entered.

"What do you mean, you not gonna pay 'cause I make no bet? I send Jerry with my bet everyday. I send him with a bet yesterday same as always."

"I tella you I ain't paying," Lena said. "Florence's boy no come yesterday with your bet. I didn't get no bet, so I can't pay."

What made matters worse was that I had already spent part of the money Mrs. Curci had given me to cover the bets. Confession became impossible. Inevitably, Mrs. Curci confronted me.

"Jerry, did you place my bets yesterday like you were supposed to?"

"Yes," I lied uncomfortably, "I took them right over."

"Well, Lena says she don't see you yesterday until late in the afternoon and you don't bring no bets."

"I thought I did," I said lamely. I knew I was caught but I was quite determined to confess nothing.

"I think you did a bad thing, Jerry. I think you go out playing and you forget about going to Lena's with the bets."

I held my head down and felt hot tears welling up in my eyes. I knew she was next going to ask about the money she used for the bets and then I would really be degraded in front of her, to be branded as irresponsible, then a liar, and then, at last, a thief. And my mother would surely be upset about all of this. Never before when I was with Mrs. Curci had I felt the blackness of my black skin which seemed to burn with a degradation and shame that was almost intolerable: I was everything I had heard the whites say a little colored boy is: lazy and irresponsible, a liar and a thief. And the whiteness of the portly middle-aged Italian woman's skin never seemed more unreal than at that moment; her superiority never seemed more unassailable and more unquestionable. I looked around the room, at the pots boiling on the stove, noticed the lingering smell of homemade wine that permeated not only this house but nearly every house in the neighborhood. What was there to say?

"I didn't do anything bad, Mrs. Curci," I said bravely. "I took the bets like you told me. Maybe Lena got confused or maybe it was crowded in the store and she doesn't remember."

"Did you give the slip to Lena or did you just leave it on the counter?" asked Mrs. Curci.

I brightened considerably at this as I saw a way out.

"Well, it was crowded so I just left it on the counter," I said, becoming more convinced by the lie at every moment, knowing that if I had taken the bets at 12:30, the lunch hour, that Lena's would be very crowded and it would be a good chance she never noticed me.

"I bet what happen, you leave the slip and somebody see the money and just take it. I know you very responsible boy, Jerry, but next time don't leave the slip like that. Always give to Lena in her hand. This is all right. We straighten out." She handed me a Stella Doro biscuit.

At any rate, circumstances permitted me to escape without detection or punishment. Mrs. Curci and Lena went around and around the mulberry bush about if I actually left the bets on the counter. Mrs. Curci's case was that if I had left the bets on the counter then she should get paid off for her hit. I do not think Lena was ever convinced that I ever left the bets (but she, like Mrs. Curci, was so convinced of my honesty and character

that I think she must have doubted that I could really be lying), although after a while, the two women never debated whether I had left them, only whether leaving them on the counter constituted sufficient good faith to be paid off. The two women knew each other well, and I believe the upshot was a sort of compromise and Mrs. Curci received a partial payoff. About the time of this controversy, Mr. Curci, who hated his wife's gambling, had heard that she was playing the numbers again (she went on reforms when confronted by her husband as often as many alcoholics take the pledge) and clamped down on her, so her attention was diverted from her aborted bets to hiding from her husband the fact that she had been playing. She did not play again for many weeks and by that time the whole business had been settled and I was further within the circle of her good graces because I never mentioned to Mr. Curci when asked that I had been doing anything for Mrs. Curci other than going to the store buying some groceries. As a boy, I went to the store for other Italian women in the neighborhood as well as Mrs. Curci. They all thought "Florence's boy" was the best-behaved, most well-mannered boy and I was, I suppose, their little colored darling. It is more than a little convenient for a male to have a good reputation, especially among women; just as it is equally important, so my mother stressed, for a black to have a good reputation among the whites. One never knows when it might be necessary to draw upon the account.

Shortly before Mrs. Curci died I went to the store for her one last time. By this time, Lena's was no longer open; in fact, Lena had died a few years earlier. I had to go to another store, one of the few remaining Italian Ma and Pa stores that would have the kinds of things Mrs. Curci would want. There were still pots boiling on the stove although her husband was no longer there and her children were scattered. Only her daughter Harriet was there now, with her husband, because Mrs. Curci's health was such that she could not be left alone. I towered over her shrunken form. She seemed hardly able to stand yet the soap operas were on, just as when I was a boy, and she laboriously made her pasta. The act seemed so difficult now and so pointless and there was really no one to eat the food she was making. She herself hardly ate at all anymore as elimination made consumption a dreadful and distressing experience. She had been a woman who had enjoyed eating a great deal. She also wanted to buy a lottery ticket; the old numbers game was dead now and everyone could now gamble openly by playing the state lottery. I do not think that her heart was into the lottery as it was with the numbers. Gambling now seemed simply a gesture of continuity; she wanted her life to have as much as possible the shape it had before her husband died. But the illegality of playing the numbers and her husband's opposition were largely what made placing the bets appealing for her. That was gone now. After I returned with the items she wanted,

she wanted to give me a tip for going to the store just as she did when I was a boy. Perhaps she gave me a dollar; I am not sure. My first inclination was to give it back as I certainly did not need it and I was happy to have gone to the store for her. I did not wish to take the money because I was, after all, no longer a little boy; indeed, I had a huge Afro and had something of a "militant" frame of mind. I did not want the old sick Italian woman to give me money. Then she said to me:

"I'm proud of you, Jerry. You grow up to be a fine young man. Goin' to college. And such a fine college too. Who woulda thought little Jerry goin' to the store for me would be in college now. It is a wonderful thing for me to see Florence's boy turn out good and not like a bum."

I kept the dollar. It was pleasing to know I had not disappointed her. Oddly, her pride meant something to me. In a world where things had changed so much for her, her little Jerry was still "Florence's boy," a nice kid. Perhaps it was not so bad; to be remembered by someone who felt that remembering you was, after all, of some significance in his or her life is no small thing. Sometimes you give tips back to people when you have outgrown both the people and the need for the tip; sometimes it is simply too expensive an act to tell people you have outgrown them.

The one thing my mother really hated about her job as a school crossing guard was that often during warm fall and spring days, Christian Street would become a battleground between the 5th and Carpenter Street and the 13th and Fitzwater Street gangs. Members of both gangs attended Bartlett Junior High School which is located at 11th and Catherine Streets, a place that was as successful a breeding ground for intraracial contempt as it was wretched as an institution of learning. (I shan't be too hard on the place; perhaps there is no such thing as a good junior high school, although degrees of squalor, like instances of incivility, ought to be noted, if only for the record.) Calling these encounters battles is a bit too grandiose a term. The 5th and South Street gang was a very sorry crew and the 13th Street was one of the most feared street gangs in South Philadelphia, so the battles were really nothing more than chases or hunts with the 13th Streeters being the pursuers and the 5th Streeters being the pursued. Around three in the afternoon, right at the time when St. Mary's School was being dismissed for the day, the "black cloud," as the Italians put it, would descend upon Christian Street with the 5th Streeters running for dear life and the 13th Streeters tossing bottles and rocks and in hot pursuit. Virtually the entire route down Christian Street from 10th to 6th was all-Italian, neat brick rowhouses that gave the neighborhood an undeniable Old World charm (to think that it was on this street that the great popular tenor Mario Lanza grew up, and where one can still see his picture in the window of his

relatives), and actually one could sit in the window of one of the Christian Street homes and, with an unobstructed view, watch a particularly puzzling example of social degeneracy or masculine ritual, take your pick. "Animals," the Italian parents would say when picking up their children from school and in righteous indignation fault the police for doing nothing. In order to stop this business from occurring on virtually every fair school day of the year, the police would have to form a veritable corridor of cars for about five blocks on Christian. Sometimes when complaints were really bad or a gang fight had been particularly vicious, the police would indeed do this.

It was how some of us in the neighborhood had first heard of Frank Rizzo, Philadelphia's notorious mayor in the 1970s, the Cisco Kid as he was called. He was the tough Italian cop, "the badass wop," who, it was said, whipped black heads with adventuresome abandon when he worked out of the third district whose headquarters when I was a boy was at 7th and Carpenter. It was a building that I enjoyed being in and I would go to often, accompanying my mother when she went to pick up her weekly or biweekly pay, for being a school crossing guard made her a sort of appendage of the police department. I liked going into the building to see the black policemen (my mother seemed to know them all); they looked very strong and lean and full of authority, and nothing, I suppose, would strike a fatherless black boy more poignantly than seeing black men who looked authoritarian. Before I finished elementary school the precinct moved and the old precinct house became a public library. (The library had been at 5th and Washington Avenue, a black neighborhood, and it was said by the blacks that the library moved so that whites would not have to go to a black neighborhood to check out books. This is probably true as whites complained how unsafe a location 5th and Washington was.) Of course, the police could not line the Christian Street corridor every day and it was when they were not there that the fights went on unimpeded. The Italian parents had every right to be concerned although an Italian school child was never injured in any of these encounters. No, that is not quite correct. An Italian child was injured once, struck down by the running black hordes or something; I do not remember clearly. I do not remember if the child was seriously injured. I know the child did not die nor was she (I believe it was a girl) critically maimed. Nonetheless, it was, surely, a painful and frightening experience for both the girl and her family. I remember that after that happened the neighborhood was very tense racially for many weeks. For several days after this happened, white policemen freely whipped and arrested black kids walking down Christian Street at the dismissal hours for no apparent reason other than these violent arrests seemed to appease the Italian parents. Generally, however, the Italians

were mostly annoyed that these black kids were running wild through their neighborhood. If the "colored" wished to kill themselves, they should go to their low-income, high-rise projects to do it. (Both of the gangs that fought on Christian Street were headquartered in housing projects.) The real danger was to the black children who had to go back and forth to Bartlett and who felt a kind of mortal terror when it was time to go home and they had to face the prospect of walking in a crowd (for protection, for in the glory days of Philadelphia gang war, one was very unwise to walk alone) which at any moment could be attacked by flying bottles. I always had the hair-raising fear of being struck from behind by a bottle (the hair on the back of my neck felt like antennae, anticipating a blow) or being trampled when the crowd broke into a mad run. Black kids were always the victims in these fracases. Black parents never said anything about the conditions under which their children went to school. As I grew older I assumed black parents felt that even if they did complain, little would come of it as black children being beaten either by other black children or by white policemen was considered the normal routine of life. "Niggers," my mother would say to herself when she came home from work after a gang war. I think she was ashamed of her race at just that moment for the way they looked, she looked, we looked in front of the whites. "They always got to act the fool in front of white folks," she would lament. "Niggers," our Italian neighbors would say, "but Florence's kids are different. They're not troublemakers like the other colored. They're nice kids and don't cause no trouble. How come the rest of them can't be like you?" This bit of exceptionalism was to plague me during my childhood and youth. When I went to Bartlett I was the only black kid who could take a chance of walking home alone. The major reason most black kids did not walk home through Montrose or down Carpenter Street instead of Christian Street was not only because of the possibility of being accosted by some remnant of the 13th street gang but because of the much more likely danger of being accosted by some Italian kids while walking through their neighborhood. Even walking down Christian Street in a crowd was no guarantee that the Italian would not maliciously sic their German Shepherds and Doberman Pinschers on the black school children as they went past 10th or 9th Street "to see how fast the niggers can run." Over the years, some black kids were severely injured this way. The white policemen never arrested any Italian kids for doing this. We black kids always, in some mysterious way, "provoked" these attacks. The worst encounters between Italians and black school kids always took place either at the intersection of 9th and Christian where a good many Italian kids could be found loitering or at the intersection of 7th and Christian where a venerable South Philadelphia institution was located, John's Italian Water Ice. John's had not simply the

best water ice in South Philly but the best water ice in the city. People from far and wide came to John's from May to September to buy his delicious water ices. The heavy-set Italian who ran the water ice stand also ran a heating fuel business in the winter (it was very common in my neighborhood for people to use either oil or coal for heating fuel) and he seemed particularly to dislike blacks. Almost every spring when John's would open for a new season, something, some incident, would occur with one of the black kids, just dismissed from school and buying a water ice, which would result in the owner, sometimes assisted by his employee, chasing some black kids down the street with a baseball bat or slapping some black kid around. I liked John's Water Ice and went there quite often although some of the blacks in the neighborhood said no blacks should buy there. Nothing ever happened to me; the owner was, in fact, always quite courteous to me and my sister. But no black ever forgot for an instant that he or she was strolling through an Italian neighborhood whenever we were dismissed from Bartlett.

"Hey, Blackie, what're you doing walking down here? You look kinda lost there, booger face. Maybe we can help you find your way back to the zoo."

Then, recognition from some in the group.

"O, he's all right. That's Jerry, Florence's kid. He's not like the other niggers. Leave him alone."

It made me wonder exactly what I was supposed to be since I was not like the other niggers but I was certainly not like them, as they themselves made clear in no uncertain terms. Until I was a teenager I was permitted to socialize with the Italian kids on fairly even terms. I listened to the white pop station, WIBG (or Wibbage), with them, I played softball and volleyball with them during the summer, I was permitted to enter their homes. With the Curcis, I was even permitted to eat with them. But I was still quite set apart, nonetheless, particularly whenever the topic of race came up and during the 1960s when I was growing up that topic came up more often than I could bear. Most of my Italian friends openly insulted and made fun of blacks right in my face as if I were almost but not quite a member of the party. These bouts of humiliation made me brood and I would stay away from my Italian friends for a while. But I did live in the neighborhood with them and my socializing with them had already made me suspect among blacks. "Why you always hanging out with them dagoes?" "Ain't nothing a white boy can do for me 'cept kiss my ass." I once watched a black childhood friend spit in the face of an Italian friend because the Italian boy had called him nigger after the black boy was caught cheating at a game we were playing. It made me shudder. I had no real answer to my black friends' intense dislike of the Italians. I liked the Italians, I suppose, as much as they

liked me. I enjoyed many of the same things they enjoyed. Their homes and their lives seemed less messy and disordered than the family lives of my black friends. Of course, I was to realize at a later age that disorder stalked the Italian homes in a more insidious form, in some respects, than it did the homes of the black ghetto. I could share certain interests I had with my Italian friends that I could not share with my black friends. But I was never so foolish as to think that I was really a part of the world of the whites. I liked the idea of passing through it at intervals when it pleased and served me to do so.

At the age of twelve I began to work for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as a delivery boy. My route was nearly evenly divided between the Italian neighborhood I lived in and the black community that surrounded it. One of my customers was an Italian barbershop on 8th Street near Cylmer. Going there to collect the bill on Saturday was an ordeal. Because it was a Saturday morning, the shop was always filled, four barbers, a woman manicurist, and a bootblack who happened to be a schoolmate, Freddie Brooks. This was around the time of the Martin Luther King's Chicago marches and my quite unprepossessing entrance seemed to inspire the barber who paid me:

"Well, well, well, here is our colored paperboy today. How's everything goin' in darktown these days?"

"You owe 48 cents for the paper," I would say, averting my eyes.

"Let's get the opinion of the colored boy off the street. How do you feel about Martin Luther Coon and all this integration business?"

The shop would suddenly become quiet, everyone directing his attention to me. I could feel myself squirming, wanting to get out of there, hating the fact that I had this shop as a customer. Despite my age, I was astute enough to know that I was simply being baited by a man who, in some respects, was not sure about how he felt about the changing status of blacks himself, expressing largely an aggressive mixture of feeling threatened and feeling guilty. I never said anything during these sessions of degradation where, of course, the oppressor was being degraded even more than the victim.

"Well, I know you're a hard-working boy and you look like you got better sense than follow that Martin Luther Coon and want to move into places where you ain't wanted or move into schools where you ain't wanted. 'Cause white people work hard for what they got and they don't want no lazy, watermelon-eating, relief-getting niggers moving in. You hear me, boy?"

What I remember most clearly about these encounters is that, first, I was a great deal more annoyed than I was afraid. In fact, I was not afraid at all. I knew that no one in the barber shop had any intention of harming

me physically. In fact, all the patrons and workers would be, by this point, sitting around laughing and thinking that they had made a good joke at my expense. I also remember Freddie Brooks's face during these encounters, which I would often turn to in mute appeal as a fellow black, thinking that because he worked there he had some influence with the barber and could make him stop. He simply squatted down, kneeling, and grinning, and telling me after, if I would see him later in the day, how my face looked utterly stupid and how I took the teasing too seriously. "Don't be jumpin' off the deep end about that stuff," he would say. (I had a sad face as a child, sad and serious, even when I was not unhappy. After a time, my black friends, in derision, gave me the nickname Happy, after a local children's television show hosted by a clown with a very happy face. I hated the nickname as much as I ever hated anything growing up. Perhaps I often sought out my Italian friends because they never called me "Happy." My face may have been black but its expression was never the source of jokes for them.)

"Here you go, boy, and keep the change," the barber would say, handing me some money, usually a generous tip, which I felt was guilt money, "And don't let me catch you with no white girls, 'cause nothing, not even Martin Luther Coon and all his civil rights niggers can save you then," he grinned. Then, as I walked out the door, "No hard feelings, kid. I'm just funning with you. Glad to see you're being industrious and trying to get ahead. That's the way to be."

"O, that kid's all right. Leave 'im alone," someone else would say to a renewed burst of laughter as I departed with as much dignity as I could muster under the circumstances. (Many years later I met this same barber at the Police Administration Building after he had been arrested on some minor charge, drunken driving, possibly, and was awaiting his arraignment. I was working there as a bail interviewer and I interviewed him before his court session. He stared at me closely as if he seemed to be trying to place me, trying to locate my face in his memory. I recognized him instantly. I never bothered to refresh his memory about me, although I was tempted to do so. I did not wish to embarrass him as I knew he would be if he knew the figure I was in the carpet of his past. He was nearly in tears about being arrested and, I think, felt particularly ill-at-ease that a black should see him in such a state as he was obviously sober enough to know he was drunk. Perhaps, in considering this anew, I did not reveal my identity to him, not from a magnanimous spirit. It was about 4 in the morning when I interviewed him. I was tired. Perhaps for me he was simply another drunken asshole I had to push through the system. Better to do that with dispatch.)

But the barber was right about the Italians in my neighborhood as I became quite clearly aware when I became a paper boy and could enter

many of their houses. They did work very hard to maintain their properties. Their homes were small but always very neat and clean; on Saturday mornings, the men were always washing their cars in good weather, the women cleaning windows or washing their front steps. Of course, many of them maintained their homes with the help of black women who came to clean and cook and care for children. Yet there was considerably less of this among the Italians than there was among middle-class WASPs and Jews. They took great pride in keeping their neighborhoods up and most of the men (the women, by and large, did not work), had blue-collar jobs. Some were well-paid skilled laborers, many were not. At Halloween, we black children went to all the Italian homes, of course, because they gave out the best treats. At Christmas, whole Italian blocks would be lighted in a lowbrow wonderland of symmetry and design, from Santas on rooftops to nativity scenes of the most garish detail. Many of the black homes I entered, on the other hand, smelled bad, were poorly maintained, poorly lighted. Yet I enjoyed entering these homes because they felt "homey," much like places I knew or places where I felt I belonged. The smell of the food was familiar; the food I had eaten and would eat: neckbones, spareribs, pig's feet, chicken and potato salad, boiled cabbage. Generally, both the blacks and the whites had the same aesthetic sense, buying cheap furniture from discount houses like Levitt's ("You'll love it at Levitt's," so the advertisement went) and swathing their sofas and chairs in plastic slip clovers that always made a crackling, crunching sound when you sat, as if one were sitting on rolls of parchment. Ugly shag carpet desecrated floors with their plush, unsightly sponginess. As for deadbeats on my route, they were evenly divided between blacks and whites. Yet it did seem the whites worked harder to keep up their properties. Perhaps it was because the whites owned their homes; the blacks rented theirs. And the blacks were paying more in rent than the whites were paying for mortgages. Moreover, for the blacks who did own their homes, banks would almost never lend them home-improvement money. I often heard the parents of some my black friends or some of my mother's friends speak bitterly about this. The Italian neighborhood I grew up in was very clean. There was always a great deal of swirling dirt in the black neighborhood. This was because city street cleaners swept the white streets every week; they swept the black streets only at Christmas when they knocked at your door wanting a tip.

"Hey, brother, where you been? I ain't seen you till just now and you asking for a tip?" the black would say to the street cleaner.

"We been here every week but we can't sweep the streets unless you move your cars."

"You sweeping 'em now, ain't you and ain't no cars stopping you. Tell you what. You come by in April or June and if you still sweeping like this,

then I'll give you a Christmas tip. We'll pretend Christmas come early next year."

Among the blacks and the Italians, there were strivers, those who wanted to escape the city and live in townships in New Jersey. For the blacks, the most popular middle-class Jersey community was Willingboro and for the Italians, Cherry Hill. And everybody in his or her respective neighborhood was always particularly happy when the news was abroad that some young couple bought a home in one of these Jersey communities. It was imagined that one could have a better life away from the crime and violence, dirt and bustle of the city, living, instead, in a new sub-division in wide-open Jersey. People crammed up in cities always think of the suburbs as something special, a better place to raise kids, people say. Fewer problems with neighbors who do not keep up their property, people say. Sometimes, some of the young couples who moved to Jersey had to return, after a few years, to Philadelphia because they found the long-distance commute to their city jobs to be too tiring or because they were subject to dual taxes because they worked in one state and lived in another. This return was always greeted with sadness by people of whatever neighborhood the migrating couple sprang, as if to return was a sign of defeat. But always the commiseration was accompanied with, "They're young. They'll be able to go back when they have a bit more money. The wife just needs to work for a while in order for them to save enough money to afford to live down there." Or the black folk would say, "These young people tryin' to get ahead and I'm glad to see it. They just bit off more than they could chew. But they gonna be all right. They got them college degrees. They gonna go far. They just jumped off too soon." These young couples almost never go back. They set their sights on living in Society Hill, the high-class South Philadelphia area where all the young professionals live. They no longer think about life in Jersey.

Despite the great chasms that separate the lives of the blacks from those of the Italians, there was always a great degree of neighborliness between them, especially in the summer. Few people had air-conditioning when I was a kid, not even among the whites (although the few who did own air-conditioners were white; I knew of no blacks as a child who had an air-conditioner), so, on a summer evening, everyone sat out on his or her front steps or relaxed in lawn chairs on the front pavement, trying "to catch a passing breeze," as they would say. There was always a great deal of talking among the adults about the high cost of living, about crime, about the government, about an impending marriage or a marriage that was not going too well, about the children and how they were growing up. While the adults talked, the children ran around, banging in and out of each other's homes. "Quit goin' in and out of the house; you're letting flies in," an adult would shout as a screen door banged. "Don't drink any more of

that Kool-Aid or you'll be getting sick." "You tell Mrs. Barbella thank you for letting you have that cake." "Calvin, you come on here in the house, it's getting dark out there and them mosquitoes gonna get you." "You children quit bouncing that ball around here. Go over to the schoolyard if you want to play ball." The House of Industry, the neighborhood settlement house, sponsored a two-week summer trip to Camp Linden and during the 1950s the fact that black and Italian children went together was not looked upon as untoward. In fact, Italian and black children, as well as Irish and Jewish kids, played together quite often at the House of Industry. I remember my days there fondly.

For a time I was very friendly with two Italian brothers, Charlie and Anthony Strano, who lived on 7th Street. At the time I was closest to them, Charlie was about six or seven and Anthony about five. I may have been about nine and so tended to play the big brother with them. I suppose that syndrome of behavior is inevitable with a youngest child as I was. I especially liked to take Charlie and Anthony among my black friends and serve as both protector and interpreter. I did this because, in some ways, it improved my status with my black friends to show that I had white friends. They were cute boys and everyone liked them. Charlie and Anthony probably found all of this amusing, even entertaining. Once I took them both to my barbershop, a black enterprise on Christian Street near 5th. It was quite a sight for the customers on a crowded Saturday to see a black boy enter the shop with two small shy white boys. The shop, normally a very raucous place, was suddenly so quiet that one could hear only the hum of the razors clipping hair. The head barber, Scottie, said hello to Charlie and Anthony and asked how they felt. This seemed to break the ice and people in the shop began to talk again, although they were much more subdued than usual. Once or twice, the discussion was quickly aborted when it veered toward race. And one customer nearly bit his tongue in two to prevent himself from saying the word "niggers" in jest. "That's the way colored folks are," he said euphemistically instead. Neither Anthony nor Charlie seemed nonplussed by the situation, staring at the near nude girl who was the pin-up in the old *Jet* magazine calendar taped over the giant mirror behind the barber's chairs and eventually getting lost in a book they had brought along. When I left the shop, some of the men looked at me strangely, and it was I, not the boys, who felt real discomfort in the end. I thought perhaps someone was going to say, "And don't bring no white boys in here again." But no one said anything. (The next time I went to the barbershop, Scottie asked innocently, "Where's your white friends?" I said they did not want to come this time. Scottie laughed, "Well, I cut white folk's hair, too, now. I don't discriminate. Next time you see them boys,

you tell 'em that.") After I had my hair cut both boys wanted to feel it for a while, mystified by its texture. I suppose I should have felt insulted by their curiosity but Charlie and Anthony were my "boys," as the expression went among the black children in the neighborhood. I was too flattered to be anything but awed and touched by their study.

As Charlie and I grew older, our relationship began to disintegrate. Part of this was natural and inevitable as, in childhood, people tend to drift from one set of friends to another. But part of it was clearly something which, even as a child, I found menacingly unique to our skin colors. Charlie became less interested and more uncomfortable being with me among my black friends and wanted to play with me only if I were alone. There were also other social strains as well. I was a few years older and at first it seemed fun to have two small brothers but after a bit Charlie and Anthony seemed like pests. Perhaps I was growing nervous as my black friends would keep referring to Charlie and Anthony as my "boys" in a way slyly venomous, slyly derisive. If I were playing ball poorly in the schoolyard I might hear:

"Cut Jerry some slack, man. You don't want him to look bad in front of his boys." Charlie and Anthony were becoming, I began to realize, a social liability in my black circle of friends. I did not want to drag them along any more but the fact that they, at this time, did not wish to be dragged wounded me a bit. Charlie began to pick up the attitude of the older Italian boys about blacks and innocence evaporated. It was not long before the idea of going to the barbershop with me was unthinkable. As he changed, he seemed to be almost smirking at me when we played. I think our friendship was completely ruptured when one day we had the following exchange when I noticed a birthmark on Anthony's arm:

"Wow," I said, "that's a funny brown mark on your arm, Anthony."

Charlie, who had seemed annoyed at me for some reason anyway, and who probably thought my exclamation was something of a signification of an insult, shot back viciously:

"Yeah, well that brown spot looks better on him than it does all over you."

I was so stung by the remark that I think for a long time I honestly hated Charlie. After a while, it all faded away and of course we went our separate ways, remaining cordial (through my college years and after we always spoke to each other and chatted a little) but never really friendly anymore. It was the normal, at least, acceptable course of a childhood friendship: people outgrow one another or boys always outgrow their big brothers.

A special treat was bestowed when I was allowed to go shopping with my mother at the 9th Street Italian Market, an open air corridor of produce stands and small stores and shops that ran from about 9th and Christian to

9th and Federal, about eight or nine blocks. It was always bustling on a Saturday morning, when we usually went, the sidewalks and streets choked with all sorts of shoppers, from middle-class whites to ghetto blacks, struggling with bags of purchases, the air filled with cries of various produce hawkers trying to entice you to buy, the chants of the shopping bag boys trying to outhustle each other, the odors of various fruits and vegetables as well as all types of poultry and seafood and sandwiches and baked goods from the shops and restaurants.

The first store my mother would go to would be Esposito's on the corner of 9th and Carpenter, a large meat emporium that had huge carcasses of steers and pigs in the window and what seemed to be twenty butchers running around with bloodied aprons waiting on people. The floor was covered with sawdust and there was a huge freezer stuffed with meat that ran the length of the store. I cannot precisely remember what meats my mother bought there as I know she split her meat buying between Esposito's and a Jewish butcher shop on 4th Street, another, much smaller, shopping district, largely populated by Jewish merchants. I know she always bought scrapple at Esposito's which, for a time, I enjoyed eating very much when I was young, a favorite Sunday breakfast being scrapple and grits. She may have bought other pork products there as well, pig's feet and pork chops. After Esposito's we would make the rounds of the produce stands, my mother always keeping a sharp eye for bargains and shopping comparatively. In those days, the 9th Street Market was not a place for a faint shopper; you had to bargain aggressively with the merchants or you were liable to come home with shoddy, overpriced goods. My mother always said that the Italian merchants tried particularly to pass off shoddy goods on blacks. There were incidents on occasion on 9th Street when blacks argued with Italian merchants after having purchased substandard merchandise. These disagreements were hardly ever resolved in favor of the black patron as the merchant was always quick to call a policeman. Sometimes, talk would generate among some blacks about boycotting the 9th Street Market, talk which fizzled out before ever reaching even a plan of action. (At times, as a child, I heard blacks talk about boycotting virtually every major business district in Philadelphia—from downtown department stores to the merchants on South Street when South Street was still a black neighborhood filled with white businesses. "Black folk got to learn how to spend their money *politically*," these militants would cry. "Aw, nigger, why don't you shut up," would be the disdainful reply. "Folks ain't learned to spend their money *economically* yet. Niggers still don't even know what money is.") My mother, sometimes because she thought a merchant insulted her or because of some encounter in the neighborhood between blacks and Italians, would occasionally conduct her own personal boycotts

and not shop on 9th Street for weeks or even months. My mother insisted that the merchants give her the proper respect. She did not wish to be treated rudely or condescendingly, the way she saw the Italian merchants treat many other black patrons.

One of the places my mother shopped was a poultry shop owned by a man named Addio. I cannot remember his first name. For a time I went to school with two of his sons, Robert and Steven, who wound up in public school because they were such behavior problems that no Catholic school wanted them anymore. I might add the public school did not tame them and I doubt if they ever finished school or at least that they ever finished it in the normally allotted time. I recall there were several Italian boys in my elementary school, which was probably about 90 percent black, who were severe behavior problems and who had been expelled from several Catholic schools. Some of these boys I was to encounter again when I worked at the Police Administration Building; they had become petty criminals and were constantly being arrested. My mother hated the fact that many unruly Italian Catholic children were sent to public school. She felt that public school should not be the dumping ground for Catholic school "rejects." "The only time they want to send their kids to school with blacks is when the kids are unfit to be in any school," my mother said. The Addios tried very hard to discipline their sons. They certainly did not spare the rod, although it may have been too generous an application of the strap that made the boys act so utterly deranged. I remember Mrs. Addio in particular with her very portly bearing, constantly wielding a strap to which the boys were oblivious. Mr. Addio, also very portly, seemed only to have yelled a lot at his sons.

When Addio did not talk about the trials and tribulations of rearing his two sons, he and my mother mostly talked about Ernest Evans, now known as Chubby Checker, inventor of the dance craze known as the Twist (he was not really its inventor; Hank Ballard was). Apparently, Addio, for whom Checker used to work before he became a famous singer, was upset that Checker never hired him as his manager. I have no idea if Addio had any experience as a manager or an agent or if, at one point in Checker's career, he really did manage the singer. I was never able to follow the conversations that closely or maybe I did follow them very closely but I am unable to remember them very well now. Anyhow, he liked to talk to my mother about all of this because she knew Checker very well before he became a pop star. (My oldest sister dated Checker's brother, Tracy, for a while). Once, while we were still living in the apartment house on Passyunk Avenue, we were locked out of our apartment and Checker jumped from the second floor hall bathroom window to our unlocked kitchen window in order to unlock our apartment. To my child's mind, I was sure if he had

fallen he would have been killed. In retrospect, if he had fallen he would have been injured, possibly severely, but certainly not killed unless he fell in a very freakish manner. In any case, he was always something of a hero for me after that. I would see him around with his pump of processed hair, and be absolutely dumbfounded. Addio talked constantly about how Checker's career was being mismanaged, how the singer was being taken for a ride, how the vultures in the business were not his friends but Johnny-Come-Lately opportunists.

"I know him," he would say. "He used to work for me. We had a good relationship. He knew he could trust me but he let other people talk against me. He got bad advice. He's all right. He's a good boy but he just got some bad advice." I remember when Checker worked on 9th Street; he could break the necks of chickens by simply wringing their necks with his hands. My mother would often chat with him while buying poultry and he called her, "Mrs. Early." At that time, I thought he was working at a huge poultry market on the corner of 9th and Washington, a place where a lot of black boys liked to work. (Most of the black boys I grew up with wanted jobs working for white merchants on 9th Street or 4th Street; some held these jobs for several years, dropping out of school and simply working fulltime in these stores. "It's good money," they would always tell me. Then, if they were lucky or luckier, as the case may be, they would become longshoremen or work for the meat packing plant at 5th and Carpenter. Jumpin' in, the old jazzman's term for leaping into a jam session and, to my mind as a youth, taking one of these shop boy jobs was exactly that, jumpin' in; suddenly you were taken seriously by your friends, you had folding money, you wore Banlon shirts and a full-length black leather coat with a belt in back in winter and perhaps could afford a cheap car and could buy Chinese food every Friday night and drink better grades of wine than the cornerboys and could go to the barbershop twice a month for haircuts and could buy Jade East and English Leather cologne and talk to girls. You had status. You had jumped in, jumped into life, jumped into a sort of life, jumped into the only life you thought there was.) I do not remember Checker at Addio's; maybe that was later. I was impressed for a number of years about the chicken neck-wringing stunt until I started working on 9th Street as shopping bag boy and realized that a lot of people could do that. A lot of people except me, that is. Holding the flapping squawking chicken in my hands while trying to break its neck frightened me and I always let go. I remember an Italian boy breaking the necks of chickens with his bare hands, one after another, and grinning at me boyishly.

When Checker married Miss Universe or Miss Netherlands (maybe she was both) or Miss Somebody, Addio was extremely upset. Undoubtedly the marriage hurt Checker's career as his white fans, I can speak quite

knowingly about the Italian kids in the neighborhood, dropped him as a result of his having a white wife. However, Checker, like Frankie Avalon, Fabian, Eddie Fisher and other nine-day singing wonders from South Philadelphia was destined not to have a long career as a teen idol by the sheer inadequacy of both his singing voice and his material. But Addio found a willing listener in my mother whose opinion of interracial marriage was and is, shall I say, low. "Why Chubby had to marry a white girl, all these black girls out here crazy about him," one of my aunts said. She seemed as heartbroken as when she learned on the grapevine that Johnny Mathis, another major pop heart throb of the period, was homosexual.

"Chubby didn't have the rat pack behind him like Sammy when he married Mai Britt," Addio argued. "He can't fight public sentiment. I like Chubby like my own son. I hate to see this happen to him. He's a good boy. He just got a lot of bad advice. If I been managing him, he would've never married no white girl. The public ain't ready for that yet. You know, Florence, the white public made Chubby and they can break him just as easy. I don't care if the girl is white. I ain't got nothing against no black marrying no white but the public ain't ready for that. You can't wreck your career for that. He coulda had her as a girlfriend and nobody'd be the wiser. But no, he's got to marry. No marry. That's bad between black and white."

To think that of all the black boys who came and went in his shop, Addio once had one who actually achieved fame and fortune, albeit briefly; it must have tormented him as much as the puppeteer who, after years of carving, finally makes a puppet that's alive only to watch someone else wind up with it. (Or perhaps watching Checker marry a white woman, prematurely ending his reign as King of Rock and Roll, put Addio in the mind of the Geppeto in the Bullwinkle Fractured Fairytale satire of *Pinocchio*, who, upon hearing his puppet's wish to become a real boy, reminded him to "Stay wood, stay wood.") To think he had Aladdin's lamp, rubbed for the genie but someone intercepted his wishes. For if it was Checker's dream that a singing career could free him from plucking chickens for a living, so it was the dream of his boss as well who no more wanted to pluck chickens than Checker did. I am sure he had a wonderfully paternalistic relationship with Checker that both men found fulfilling enough but it seemed to have hit Addio hard that Checker would not share his success with the man who probably felt he was Checker's best friend. "I treated him real well here. I lent him money. Helped him out. Treated him like my own son," Addio always said. Addio was disappointed because Checker was not loyal but Addio, I suppose, in his way, remained loyal to the end. He never spoke harshly against Checker. He only wanted the best for him. "He was all right. He was a good boy. He never caused no trouble."

II. ". . . then it's not animation"

Sometimes I got to give up right for wrong down here.
—The Swan Silvertones' "Near the Cross"

That Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* is a bad film should be apparent to anyone giving it even cursory attention; the fact that many have given the film more than cursory notice is, in some respects, more than the film deserves. In other ways it is good that a black filmmaker has all sorts of culture critics jumping off and jumping in. However, it is because some white film critics proclaimed Lee something of a genius after his first film, *She's Gotta Have It*, that, since then, they have desperately sought evidence of genius fulfilled. It goes without saying that Lee is talented. I question his intelligence. After all, talent without intelligence is, well, just talent which, after a certain period of display, can no longer even justify itself to itself much less to anyone else. And that is precisely the problem, for Lee continues to make films as if he were a talented schoolboy stuffed full of himself (director, producer, star, writer, and even editor at times, as if he were still making films for school or aspiring to be Jerry Lewis or Woody Allen or Sylvester Stallone, although, of course, we know he wished, as these other fellows do, to be Charlie Chaplin; it is the first sign of maturity to realize what you *cannot* do well, so that you can finally discontinue doing it in favor of what you can); yes, Lee is a schoolboy who writes themes for a teacher whose responses are always "suggestive," "full of potential," and "needs developing," but Lee has selected material for his films that require more than being merely suggestive; they require penetration and conclusion. He is simply being indulged, patronized even, if he is always to be seen as an angry black schoolboy.

There was no evidence of genius fulfilled or even of a general attainment of competence in *School Daze*, Lee's second film, a misbegotten venture if there ever was one. But *Do the Right Thing* has seemed, at least, to some people, including many white critics who should know better, to be the *real thing*, to be Lee's breakthrough film. (I especially wish to cite the white liberal critics who are, of course, reassured when a black makes a film about racism that says that the black is the emasculated victim and the hapless berserker because to be both emasculated and hapless, to be both psychotic and pathetic is the regressive romance of the black that is the fantasy of the white liberal's mind. But this is some more of the dim-witted "affirmative action" type of praise from the white critical establishment for which, in some quarters, it has become famous, especially in the performing and literary arts as any cursory examination of the careers of several successful black playwrights, actors, and novelists will attest; here is praise

that compromises the one upon whom it is bestowed while it insulates the one who bestows; for Lee is given credit here for a film which, had it been made by a white director, would have been roundly condemned by these same critics as being cliche-ridden and contrived. So Lee is not praised for having made an insightful political film about race but rather for having been a *black* who made a particular type of race film that liberal whites could afford to praise because a black made it. But the complex psycho-cultural epistemology of white critical praise for black artists is not *quite* the subject here.) An appraisal of this sort could not possibly be further from the truth, for both artistically and politically the film is a blatant failure. Whether Lee knows how to make films is very debatable; he, doubtless, knows how to market them. And successful marketing will convince at least nine-tenths of the public that you are indeed an artist because, after all, you seem to know what you are doing and you are, finally, a *personality* who is written up in slick magazines. We live in a culture where salesmanship is everything in the short run.

Lee comes closer to making something more like a very long music video than a film, something which he is certainly not alone in doing as a good many white film makers have decided that a 90-minute music video is, after all, giving people a great deal of what they already seemed to want, not films at all, but noisy montages that are nothing more than a bad mixture of cryptic and sentimental kitsch. To be sure, there are a number of white film makers who make bad films and reap enormous profits from them, but Lee's talents and his themes are such that he must be considered by the critical standards we use for the very best American filmmakers (besides, he himself has expressed that his films have an importance and political significance that places them a cut above the ordinary American movie); after all, his films are more than tripe like *Hardbodies* and other soft-core sex films designed to give white suburban teenagers a vicarious thrill or an excuse for the real thing or *Nightmare on Elm Street* and other slasher-type nonsense. Lee's films transcend in social importance the action genre or the romantic comedy. His films are of greater consequence than the blockbuster B-movies such as *Indiana Jones* and *Batman*, films that 30 or 40 years ago were the cheap second features of a double bill or the Saturday matinee special that are now major first-run, movie events, the triumph of vulgarity indeed. At least his films are not simply a string of stunts and special effects (although one could argue they are a string of cuts, cutesy camera angles, and loud music.) He is, undeniably, an important film-maker if only because he is black *and* he attempts serious films about blacks in a wonderland industry where, to any thinking black person, commercial films exist only to serve the greater glorification of white people. White films generally, to any black viewer, are about how wonderful and exciting

or problematic and ponderous it is to be white. (This is symbolized in Lee's latest film by Sal's Pizzeria's Italian Hall of Fame. As James Earl Jones once said in effect, we live in a white country, so we must expect white films. But as James Baldwin perceptively wrote, and as Lee's film makes clear in its best political moments, symbolized by the fight over the white pictures on Sal's wall, America is not a white country. Just as Sal's Pizzeria, located in a black neighborhood, is not a white restaurant.) But what is needed, if the black experience is to be portrayed powerfully on the screen, is more than characters who are nothing but stock types shouting at each other and using profane language in a vain attempt to convince the world that this is, really, professional acting; and this is all we have in *Do the Right Thing*, hammy acting by a lot of amateurs who seem to be trying to do in earnest what Robert Townsend satirized as the School of Black Acting in his comedy, *Hollywood Shuffle*. In viewing the film one feels as if one is drowning in a sea of black-faced Mickey Rooneys trying to pass off overacting as exuberance. "The Revolt of Ethnics," I suppose Lee's film could have been subtitled; better to have been called "The Revolting Ethnics."

It is regrettable that Lee has so absorbed the music video format, for his films can truly appeal only to people between the ages of 14 and 22; his works are simply too immature to be taken seriously by a large number of older people because he wishes to appeal to the immature. For instance, it is apparent in his films that he has no understanding, other than on the most superficial level, of the lives of blacks over the age of 25. We know we are confronting a vast and imposing vacuity of the imagination when the dialogue for a film sounds very much like an Eddie Murphy or Richard Pryor stand-up routine. (And the film is never really funny; it is the cheapest shot in the world to create comedy through the use of profanity. Anyone can make people laugh using "fuck," "motherfucker," "shit," and other taboo words in an endless string of ritualized insults. That is not comedy; that is simply playing with words the way a child plays with mudpies or the way some filmmakers give us playful peeks at pornography; in either instance, it is merely being "suggestive" in the way that American cinema and American advertising are. That is why one can hardly distinguish a difference between them.) All of this obscenity, this street language, is, to Lee's mind, realism or, what is worse, verisimilitude. Hollywood has been afflicted or mesmerized by profane dialogue since the mid-sixties or around the time of the neo-realistic artistic American cinema of bourgeois social commentary such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, Easy Rider, The Graduate, Midnight Cowboy*, and the like; now, cursing in films is simply a gimmick to appeal to the young who think that it signifies a discourse of "toughness" and "the real world." A recent ordinary action fantasy, *Die Hard*, starring Bruce Willis, has a tremendous amount of cursing, probably

to convince the audience of its "realism" while never allowing it to forget the film is an escapist fantasy. But realism or verisimilitude is the especial burden of the black artistic effort; black art has to be about "real" (i.e., political) things. If it is not, then it is condemned as a sell-out or fake. But no American films in recent memory have contained more profane dialogue than the Hollywood blaxploitation films of the late 60s and early 70s (e.g., *Shaft, Superfly, Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song, Across 110th Street, Cleopatra Jones, The Mack, Three the Hard Way, Black Caesar, Blacula,* and so forth) and no films, in retrospect, seem more unreal. Profanity is the way the lower classes talk, especially the black lower class, although I would think the pitch and tenor of the talk would be altered at times. But for Lee this profanity, much of which is nothing more than masculine posturing or street corner bravado that counts for little, is a sort of *realpolitik* (the pep talks of the dispossessed), because for Lee *realpolitik* is the materiality of the act of re-creation and mimicry upon which the social significance of his art rests; for the film is not about anything more than how it can titillate its audience with its artificial and stylized reality. In short, Lee is motivated to reproduce black speech in his films in this way for much the same reason that it was reproduced as profanity in the white blaxploitation films. The bad language here, instead of being a sign of inarticulation and ultimately of a cursed and degraded form of expression (which, in truth, such language is, as it is an amalgam of rage, oppression, and ignorance), becomes, in this film, secretly smug over its own hipness and relevance. Lee's film is a youth culture movie, pure and simple. And to paraphrase the women in the original *King Kong,* "Haven't we got enough of them already?" Using dialect is a dangerous thing, as Mark Twain knew; one fears that, finally, everyone is going to sound alike or is trying to. Moreover, the use of dialect creates an epistemological issue: to use Twain, for example, since he was mightily aware of this issue; does Roxy, in *Pudd'nhead Wilson,* speak in dialect because of what she is or is what she is determined by her speech? This issue leads us to the conundrum of dialect: is it authentication or is it imposture? In any case, without much shading, in Lee's film, with the exception of Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, everyone does sound alike, speaking the movie-Esperanto of New York urban patois. One fears greatly in the end that Lee will defend his film in much the way white directors (and the few black ones) of blaxploitation movies defended their films' dialogue: "That is the way blacks in the ghetto speak, isn't it?" Isn't it, indeed.

I suppose Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee are trapped in this nonsense in the stereotypical roles of mother and father wisdom to pay homage to them as old heads in the black acting business. They are surely by far better actors than the others. But they are, like many others in the film, superfluous. In fact, I shall list all the superfluous characters in the film: Sal's two sons (one

smirks and tries to be the typical "masculine" Italian, the other is amorphous), Mookie's sister (nepotism here as she is the director's sister; she does nothing in the film but buy a slice of pizza), Mookie's girl friend (who was one of the worst actresses I have ever seen; she has one mood, petulance, and does that poorly), and Korean shopkeepers (irrelevant to the plot of the film other than to provide New York "ethnic diversity"; Asians have had businesses in black neighborhoods for the last 40 years as Chinese food is very popular with many working-class blacks), the disc jockey (poor choice for narrative point of view, should have been someone closer to the action like Da Mayor or Mama Sister and he makes a very bad Greek chorus), the Hispanic boys (irrelevant, more "ethnic diversity"), the three black men who are commenting on the passing scene (simply an opportunity to sprout a lot of bad black barbershop jokes), Mikey, who stutters and sells pictures of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X (why does he stutter unless this is meant to be profound ironic commentary on speech as both King and Malcolm were great orators; stuttering seems to be just cheap comedy; the character is an irrelevant, very bad version of the innocent or the seer), and the black teenagers who entered into a discussion with Da Mayor (another instance of Lee deciding to narrate moral conflict when he cannot dramatize it). Having stripped the film of all these nonsensical black New York-movie types, we can proceed to strip it of all its New Yorkisms including most of its extremely intrusive soundtrack (some scenes such as the one when Sal's son chases away the stutterer were simply inappropriately scored; most were overscored), three-quarters of its profane dialogue (many lower-class people may curse as much as movies lead us to believe but many do not and they do not curse in all their social interactions), and nine-tenths of its interminable shouting (lower class people do not shout as much as Hollywood would have us believe); then it might have made a very good, hour-long character study on PBS. Unfortunately, directors who make films about New York must always remind us of that fact; some do a better job of it than others. The best Hollywood film of New York, by a large measure, is still *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) starring Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis.

The main concern of the film and its main setting is Sal's Pizzeria and this concentration on a small business is commendable for an American film as American cinema generally tends to see business as lurid fantasies about the Mafia or large corporations with powerful, demonic white men in huge offices with swivel chairs (in real life, they are simply greedy and prosaic white men) that have little to do with the lives of the majority of people who live in this country and especially those who live in working class and poor neighborhoods who tend to work for small businesses. However, we immediately discover that this film has no understanding of how a small

business operates or what the concerns of small businessmen are in such a neighborhood. The film is simply consumed with the idea of a small white business in a black community as a kind of fetish around which such words or concepts as independence, economic imperialism, entrepreneurialism, and exploitation can run riot without meaning. Surely, Lee has no understanding of a labor-intensive, small profit-margin business such as an independently owned pizzeria because he has the temerity of making a film where the workers hardly ever work. Mookie, another variation of Lee's black punk characters from his earlier films, is Sal's delivery man and he is indulged almost as if he were Sal's son and certainly a great deal more than Sal's sons are. This is Lee's feeble attempt at a trickster figure; one who is able to escape hard work while around him disorder swirls. (And speaking of Sal's sons, how likely would it be for Sal actually to desire that his sons work on the premises with the sole ambition being that one day they could be just like him? He may have wanted them to take over the business but more than likely only after having attended Harvard Law or having earned an MBA; while it is often true that Italian working-class males are not as appreciative of the power of bourgeois education as middle-class WASPs or Jews, they certainly want their children to exceed them in life.) Perhaps this indulgence was meant to make the meaning of Sal's paternalism more ambiguous or to soften the issue of exploitation or simply to show Sal as a nice guy. In other words, Sal was Lee's attempt to be fair in his portrayal of a white character; it being, of course, one of the biggest artistic sins in the culture when a black writer, filmmaker, or playwright is "unfair" in his or her depiction of whites.

Sal would have more likely demonstrated his kindness by giving Mookie a few extra dollars in his pay envelope or by lending him money on occasion or by permitting his family to eat in the restaurant for free but *not* by having him *not work*. But if one is to make a film essentially about the work day of a lower class black, then indeed, verisimilitude demands the depiction of work. Few American films have deeply explored the nature of working-class work which, after all, especially in the case of a master-and-man-duo like Mookie and Sal would constitute such a large portion of their day and their lives. If Mookie were to throw a trash can through Sal's window near the end of the film it would be more likely because he was working 12-hour days and that he was not only delivering pizzas but making them and sandwiches as well, taking phone orders, bussing and waiting tables, as well as sweeping the front sidewalk and for all of this Sal would pay him as little as he could, not because Sal is a mean exploiter nor because Sal is a racist but because Mookie is not in a union (and thus would not have medical insurance, sick leave, or paid vacations, so you see it should not be easy for the bourgeois to tell the unemployed lower-class to work at jobs they themselves would not accept) and because Mookie would not have

access to a labor relations court or to some grievance officer. Working purely at the mercy of Sal's paternalism and at the mercy of Sal's good intentions is the real neglected thrust and theme of the film. The real source of Mookie's politicalization should have been as a worker or as a black worker, if you will, but not simply as black from the neighborhood, whose revolt carries more a dose of falsified emotion, crass sentimental predictability and manipulativeness (nothing can win a black audience over more quickly than having a white policeman kill a black boy, which is understandable as the greatest secret fear of blacks is that the white state power will be used to wipe them out), than a dramatization of any telling issues of racial *realpolitik.* In effect, the film gives us a miniature of the black political 1960s: from the integration of eating places which characterized the civil rights sit-ins to the urban riot of the Black Panther-like confrontation with the police in an ahistorical cinema mixture that can best be called the deconstructive dramatization of a rap record fable. That we may know social protest by its young, hip face, and hip, young haircut, that we may know political consciousness by the fashions we select! This is postmodernist black nationalism, making up in frenzy what it lacks in discernment and ingenuity.

While growing up, I knew quite a few young black men who worked for the small white businesses which dot the black landscape (I myself did such work for a time), and the demands of the work are extremely high, largely because the owner is under a great deal of pressure to make a profit so that he can pay his workers and maintain both his business and his family. The relationship between the black worker and his white boss is often quite complex, although cordial enough, even deeply affectionate at times. The white boss often secretly thinks his black worker is inferior or not capable of running his own business. The black worker often secretly despises his white boss for being condescending or not treating him with full respect and often wishes he had the opportunity to run a business but knows he cannot get the bank loans or raise sufficient capital from his friends or relatives to get started. "Nigger, what you know about business," is what his friends are likely to tell him. Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun,* in its depiction of Walter Lee Younger's aspirations is quite correct in pointing out how persistent the dream of owning a business is among working-class blacks, especially black men who find themselves in a paternalistic relationship with a white store owner. All of this valuable and vital stuff is lost in Lee's film. Just some cliches from Mookie's sister and his girlfriend, both of whom signify by their stereotypical roles as harping Sapphires and delectable sex objects how insignificant women are in this film, to show Mookie being an irresponsible black man. (Lee's subsequent films have never delivered the good women's roles that his first film, *She's Gotta Have It,* promised so richly.) If the world of Mookie's work had been

more realistically and passionately examined, the viewer might have understood why Mookie was so irresponsible. In this case, one supposes irresponsibility to be a black man's curse inscrutably tied to a demonic social disorder called racism which, in this film, largely consists of white characters' looking grim or smirking and calling blacks niggers when they are made angry. This may be an improvement over the feminist suggestion that male irresponsibility is in the genes and can only be cured by praying to goddesses. Instead of the mystification of biology we have the mystification of gestures.

Despite the film's so-called realism, it is meant to be a highly stylized presentation. Some have mistaken this stylization as the imitation of Greek tragedy; but it is actually the stylization of the 1940s Hollywood musical. Lee's films always seem as if they secretly wish to be musicals. Although actually filmed on the streets of Brooklyn, the film has all the location realism of a studio lot and I assume Lee is striving for this effect on purpose, this reduction, this miniaturization. The film takes place on a weekend (which, as critic John Simon has pointed out, will not give the viewer an accurate impression of precisely what the neighborhood is like because the viewer has no idea who really is employed), a time compression Lee used much to poor effect in his previous film, *School Daze*, which takes place on a black college campus during homecoming weekend, largely giving the viewer the impression that black colleges are vast playgrounds where students do not study, professors do not exist, and no one worries about paying tuition or graduating. It is very instructive viewing, especially considering my earlier assertion that Lee really wants to make musicals, to watch *School Daze* in tandem with the 1943 musical *Girl Crazy*, starring Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland which, too, is about college life. One might be struck by the similarities. (Incidentally, Lee also horribly distorts the entire nature and mission of black fraternities and sororities by making them seem, well, like white Greeks on campus. The reality of black Greek organizations is not centered in undergraduate chapters. They are governed and completely controlled by their graduate chapters and they see themselves as service organizations—distributing scholarships, running literacy programs, assisting battered black women and the like—dedicated to, to borrow Lee's phrase, "uplifting the race." It is not that the undergraduate chapters do not do what Lee depicted in the film; it is that what these chapters do is almost irrelevant to what the Greeks are in the black community at large. The film would have been more interesting had Lee depicted the very real tension that exists between graduate chapters trying to govern and rein in wild undergraduate chapters. But this would have enlarged the film, not reduced it.)

Obviously, Lee likes encapsulating, despite the tremendously distorting effect it has upon the issues he wishes to dramatize. If the language of

Do the Right Thing is meant to give us lower-class realism, nothing else about the film does. The depiction of this lower-class black neighborhood lacks three vital elements that make up the true network of social dynamics among the black working class. First, there is absolutely no mention of crime in the film which takes place in a neighborhood where the topic would have been uppermost in the minds of everyone from Sal the white pizzeria owner, who would have had a constant fear of being robbed, to Mookie the delivery man for Sal, who would have had the same fear, to Ruby Dee, old Mama Sister, who on the hot summer day of the story would have been more likely to have been shut up in her home for fear of a break-in than luxuriating in the window. (It is a well-known fact here in St. Louis, for instance, that the death among the elderly poor, especially the black poor, during heat waves is quite high, largely because they shut themselves up in their houses out of fear.) That drugs are never mentioned is certainly surprising as they are the scourge of these neighborhoods. Second, there are no taverns or bars in the block depicted in the film, almost a geographical impossibility for a lower-class neighborhood; on an especially hot day, neighborhood bars are usually quite crowded as they are often the only places in the vicinity that are air-conditioned; also much important social interaction takes place in black neighborhood bars (virtually all mating rituals among adults take place there, for instance). But there are no other gathering places either, no pool halls, no recreation centers, no barbershops, no beauty parlors. Third, the uncanny absence of the black church. Once again, no store-front church in the block, which seems highly unlikely in such a neighborhood, and no significant presence of the believers. (I suppose the people who accost Mookie as he leaves for work are Jehovah's Witnesses.) Religion, or more precisely religious faith, is never broached as a real subject in the film. Blacks may live in a world without Christian piety but that does not mean that they have ceased to value piety or Christianity for that matter. The believers expect the world to be without piety and they expect to get to heaven because, in such a world, they themselves did not deny that the world cannot truly exist without piety. It is impossible to understand or to depict the black American community whether lower class or middle class without a serious appraisal of black religious faith. So, despite the verisimilitude, this black neighborhood is largely a geography in the bourgeois, immature mind of Spike Lee and has little or nothing to do with any complex reality of an actual black lower-class neighborhood. What is absent from Lee's film, including the much talked about, much despaired over, much vaunted black family, are the very elements of concern for the black bourgeoisie about the black community. Their absence signifies that Lee has not yet found a way to talk about or dramatize that which, epistemologically considered, is the black community. Among some blacks there will be a

sigh of relief that these elements were not dramatized as they constitute, in some instances, a social pathology or, more properly considered in some instances, a social paradox, which is a cause of bourgeois unease. Lee's characters never do anything that would have them called upon a moral carpet: the three black men look at girls passing by but do not sexually harass them; Mookie does not beat or abuse his girlfriend; Radio Raheem simply looks menacing but he does not beat smaller black kids and take their money; Da Mayor is a harmless, caring drunk not a brutal one; Mama Sister is kind, not vicious or bitter or a rumor monger. This is generally considered a strategy of presenting lower-class blacks as a "positive image" so that bourgeois blacks will not be offended. The characters must have some flaws so that we might all know that they are sufficiently "of the street." But nothing that would make them socially deranged or worthy of being incarcerated. Ultimately, Lee's film is what is known in some hip intellectual circles as deconstruction (admittedly, drama is, by its very nature, a kind of deconstruction but even here the film, which is trying to imitate in its structure something by Fugard or August Wilson, does not come close even to the deconstructive realism of Ed Bullins's lesser plays); it insists upon a social astigmatism, an artistically determined ahistoricism or an artistically determined pop historicism, which may amount to the same thing. I'm old fashioned. A lack of significant detail signifies a lack of knowledge. Either one does verisimilitude or one does something else but one cannot do half-assed realism. In its stagey stylistic manipulations of setting, Lee's film is very similar to the 1949 Humphrey Bogart-John Derek effort, *Knock on any Door*, a "social problem" movie set in a working-class neighborhood, similar to some of Tony Curtis's 1950s "problem" films (*Six Bridges to Cross, Mister Cory, The Square Jungle*), which were excellent examples of half-assed realism.

Despite the movie's appeal to youth and its rampant ahistoricism, much of its meaning is unravelled if one is familiar with a bit of pop music history: to wit, a hit song called "Fight the Power" by the Isley Brothers, released in 1975, and, I am sure, the artistic inspiration for the rap song of the same title in the film. Part of the lyrics of the Isleys' tune is : "I try to play my music / they say my music's too loud / I try talking about it / I get the big runaround / and when I roll with the punches I get knocked on the ground / by all this bullshit going down." The use of profanity in the record may have accounted for its popularity among the young. (I remember I was living in an apartment in West Philadelphia at the time and could hardly sleep at night because my neighbors, some young guys who kept strange hours, played the song at a frightful volume all night long.) The word "bullshit" gave the song, dare I say it, verisimilitude, a real sense of honesty and political engagement (just what Lee's film was trying to do). I recall the very first black song I heard with profanity was, too, a protest song, Nina

Simone's 1964 "Mississippi Goddam," the playing of which on the airwaves resulted in the firing of a black soul disc jockey. At any rate, the movie turns on the story of the refrain of the Isley Brothers' song and explains why the cursing is so important. It is all about the magical concern of the immature: self-expression or, more precisely put, freedom of expression which the bourgeois constantly think is *realpolitik* and which, in truth, is nothing more than an outgrowth of bourgeois egotism and has little to do with *realpolitik*. Ah, if only people can be free to express themselves, their innermost selves, then the world will be a better place! Ah, when everyone has democracy and can vote for the candidates of his or her choice! This is what mainline Christianity, at its most insipid, has become in this country: social work, liberal reformism, and a relentless desire to produce the comfort of positive self-esteem. These goals are also what passes for political thought in many circles. But what of self-expression? Most people have nothing to express, by their own admission, by their confession, at least, nothing that in most cases they are being prevented from expressing, and such concern over self-expression and self-esteem is largely misplaced. I do not say this from some urge to snobbery but in recognition of the dilemma of the human condition as the impotency of most human expression.

There are two things to consider here that are inextricably bound to the meaning of this film: first, how political is the music of black American popular culture. It has certainly been the conceit of Rap music, in some quarters, that it is indeed not simply a social protest music but a revolutionary art. It must be remembered that Rap as a stylization of black speech-making and as a variant of black singing is hardly new. Issac Hayes and Barry White would croon long, rich baritone love raps back in the early seventies. And James Brown did a number of raps himself in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., "Mind Power" on the 1973 album, "The Payback") and the artists who were most heavily influenced by Brown's funk in the seventies (and Brown was so influential that even Miles Davis showed strong funk overtones in his 1970s albums, especially, "On the Corner," "Miles Davis in Concert," and "Live-Evil"), notably Bootsy Collins and George Clinton, could hardly be called singers. They, in effect, really spoke their songs. It was from the Brown-funk school of black music, the segment of black popular music that is most brazenly opposed to Motown and the pop and Tin Pan Alley branch of black popular song (from Clyde McPhatter and Gene Chandler to Smokey Robinson and Curtis Mayfield to Marvin Gaye and Diana Ross to Roberta Flack and Peabo Bryson) that spawned Rap as an ultra black street music that could not be copied by whites. However, Rap has other associations as well: the term "rap" itself became quite current in the 1960s when militant blacks began to make speeches which were called "raps." (Remember H. "Rapp" Brown, the black militant speaker of the 1960s, as well as Stokeley Carmichael.) This led to the term itself becoming more

mainstream, being used in the late 1960s to signify a sort of meeting of the minds or a kind of candid exchange between parties ("Let's rap"). As a stylization of black vocals, the militant connotations and rhythms (largely black sermonic) of "rap" speeches led to the "rap" poetry of the late 1960s made famous largely by Gil Scott-Heron, Don L. Lee, and the Last Poets. But this "rap" poetry, which was just as much the progenitor of current rap music as the funk of James Brown, was the self-conscious politicizing of a male form of street poetry-cum-folk tale-cum-ritualized insult called toasts. These toasts are usually very pornographic, highly profane renditions of trickster tales, confidence games, or of the relationship between a whore and a pimp. Bruce Jackson's 1974 study, *"Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me:" Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition* contains a number of toasts:

> While sittin' here chattin' with you
> it brings back memories of a bitch I once knew,
> She was three-quarters Kelsey with mossy glossy hair,
> she was a stompdown mudkicker and her mug was fair.
> Now I met this broad while playin' short coin in the golden west,
> I brought the whore to the city to see if she could stand the test.
> And while we was sittin' down shootin' the bull and my ends was pretty low,
> she say, "Shit, I know more now, daddy, than you'll ever know."
> Say, "when I first met you, sweet papa, you tried to shoot me a line of bull,"
> say, "but you can't look up a she mule's ass and tell the load she'll pull."
> Say, "now, you handsome and everything and looks real nice in your clo's,
> but you ought to cop yourself a job, fool, 'cause you can't play ho's."
> Say, "I'm known from the Golden Gates of Frisco to the Frisco Bay,
> I'm known to beat you halfassed pimps at any game you try to play.
> I'm known to beat you chickenshit pimps at any game you try to rule, and buy clothes and furs with your money and play you for a goddamned fool."

Said, "So long, Pimping Sam, tell all your pimping friends
that you've met Wicked Nell from the banks of the Burnin'
Hell," say, "This pussy's good and it's gotta sell."
Say, "Hold on bitch, you travelin' too fast:
I'm supposed to be draggin' my foot out your motherfucken
ass."
Say, "Bitch, I'm also known from the golden Gates of Frisco
to the Eagle's Pass,
I'm known to play bigtime landlords, kick chickenshit whores
right in their motherfucken ass.
And if my luck continue to hold out in the future like it has
in the past,
I'm gonna continue to kick you chickenshit whores right on
your motherfucken ass."
Say, "Bitch, this is Pimping Sam, the world's wonder,
long-dick buck-bender, all-night grinder, womb-finder,
sheet-shaker, baby-maker, and money-taker."
Say, "here come a trick, bitch," say, "catch him, catch him,
and catch him quick,
catch him if you have to suck his motherfucken dick."
Say, "Catch him, whore, catch him and catch him fast,
catch him before I put this Stacey Adam in your motherfucken
ass."
Say, "and lay that money on Pimping Sam,"
say, "for this is Pimping Sam from Alabam',
and for one jive bitch like you I don't give a damn."

That Rap music is composed of these various elements of black vocalization, that it pulls together and signifies all the various politicized "raps" from speech-making to jokes to ritual insults would indicate that it is certainly a political music or at least a music with some significant elements of social protest; however, it is just this sheer fact that Rap is such a ultra stylization of a series of stylizations that poses the conundrum for it is, in the world of popular culture, nothing more than a kind of a dialect and in discussing its significance we return to our earlier discussion about dialect in Lee's film itself. Knowing how blacks have found self-expression to be an ambivalent venture, that dialect has been used both as a sign of selfhood and as a sign of degradation (we find this ambivalence about black vocal stylizations in both the 1845 and the 1855 editions of Frederick Douglass's autobiography, for instance); one can never be sure, in analyzing the popularity of Rap, whether it is truly a social protest minimalist music of some merit or whether it is, like the black dialects of popular culture which have preceded it, only the co-opted gesture of the ethnic being sold by

white record company owners as a diversion or as a way to sell both music and footwear. Since Rap is constricted to the point of view of black teenagers, hardly a fair or encompassing view of black reality in American social life, one is not likely to discover a really mature political expression in this music in any case. The music's detractors point out that Rap music concerts promote violence among members of the audience (this has, indeed, happened more than once at Rap concerts but there have been a few cases of violence at hard rock concerts too), so even if the music has political meaning and merit, its immature audience is only keyed to the music as a neurotically-absorbed sensation, a jolt to the nerves. In fact, this music is largely nothing more than a neurotically-fixated quest for sensation among the political know-nothings and nothing more than politics as sensation for the politically knowing. In that regard, Rap music is a perfect soundtrack for Lee's movie which also treats politics as an analogue for sensation and sensationalism.

The other relevant point to consider here in relation to self-expression as politics is that Lee's film is meant to be a counterstatement to a film like the 1949 Stanley Kramer drama *Home of the Brave*, starring James Edwards as a black soldier who has been overwhelmingly traumatized by racism while serving in the Pacific theater. In this film, the black male neurotic is placed on the couch and psychoanalyzed by a white doctor who finally breaks through the black's defenses and discovers that, for the victim, racism is a kind of repetitive compulsion: the same confrontation with whites and the same humiliation endlessly repeated. This allegory of psychoanalyzing the black in order to cure him of his neurotic fixation with his color is now superseded by Lee, who gives us the black male (Mookie and Radio Raheem) who can be cured only by becoming politicized, by becoming so traumatized by race that he becomes consciously what he has been subconsciously all along: a nationalist and an activist. But how far apart are the two films in the end: Kramer believes that the black is a child who suffers from a kind of autism and Lee believes that the black is an innocent suffering from repressed or flawed consciousness. The more things change the more we revel in only *seeming* difference.

Finally, in the realm of politicized self-expression Lee's film cheats very badly. We know that Radio Raheem would probably have been killed about the volume of his radio by another black man, either playing it too loud and annoying someone at the wrong moment or getting into a radio playing contest with a sore loser. Possibly, Radio Raheem may have been killed by white policemen, although I wonder if white cops often or even occasionally kill imposing black kids like Radio Raheem. Sonny Liston comes to mind as a very imposing black kid who had many confrontations, including several violent ones with white cops; one wonders why he was not killed before he was twenty if being killed by white policemen is a very likely fate

for a surly young black man. (Incidentally, he may have been killed by a pack of whites if he were trespassing in a white neighborhood but, of course, such an eventuality is impossible in this film.) Frankly, the whites do not care about the blacks' self-expression and this is why the entire issue of self-expression seems such a contrived one as presented in the film (naturally, one would think that having been in business all those years in a black neighborhood and having confronted more than his share of boom boxes, Sal would have been a great deal more skillful in handling Radio Raheem); the playing of radios is so much the better, for, in that, Radio Raheem's head is wired and his attention diverted from true political engagement.

No doubt, I will be accused by some of missing the point of the movie which is about the politicization of Radio Raheem whose radio is activated politically as expression when he defies Sal; the boom box becomes a radioactive radio, you see. And the movie is about the politicization of Mookie when he throws the trash can into Sal's window that starts the riot in retaliation for the death of Radio Raheem, although, significantly, this act occurs shortly after Sal, at the close of the day, makes his grandest paternalistic gesture by saying that he will call his pizzeria Sal and Sons, and that Mookie will "always have a place there." I shall grant the significance of all this as we see, momentarily, the black youth, the wired rebel without a cause, become something with an inchoate political consciousness. Nonetheless, inasmuch as the film denounces Sal's paternalism as wrong-headed even though well-intended, it is or it could have been more effective political commentary without the character of Radio Raheem. (The actor who does the role seems to be trying to imitate RUN-DMC, with the help of odd camera angles; I suppose many black boys wish to imitate the rappers. The actor's imitation seemed a parody that was trying very hard not to be a parody: the menacing black teenager of everyone's nightmare; this is what the black rappers often try to affect.) However, the problem is that the issue of Sal's paternalism is never made clear, probably because Lee himself is unsure about how he feels about the character. Sal is the most sympathetic character in the film, probably because he is the most expansive and his dilemma is the most complex and intriguing. Certainly the final scene of the film when Sal and Mookie confront each other does not completely capture the point about Sal's paternalism or Mookie's raised political consciousness, unless it is to say that in the end they were unable to transcend their roles as employer and employee, as master and man and all they can do is hurl money and insults at each other. But it is one of the superior scenes of the film and strongly underscores that Sal's paternalism was really the dramatic issue and that Radio Raheem and the idea of race unity were irrelevant. But race unity is the compulsion of the black bourgeois mind.

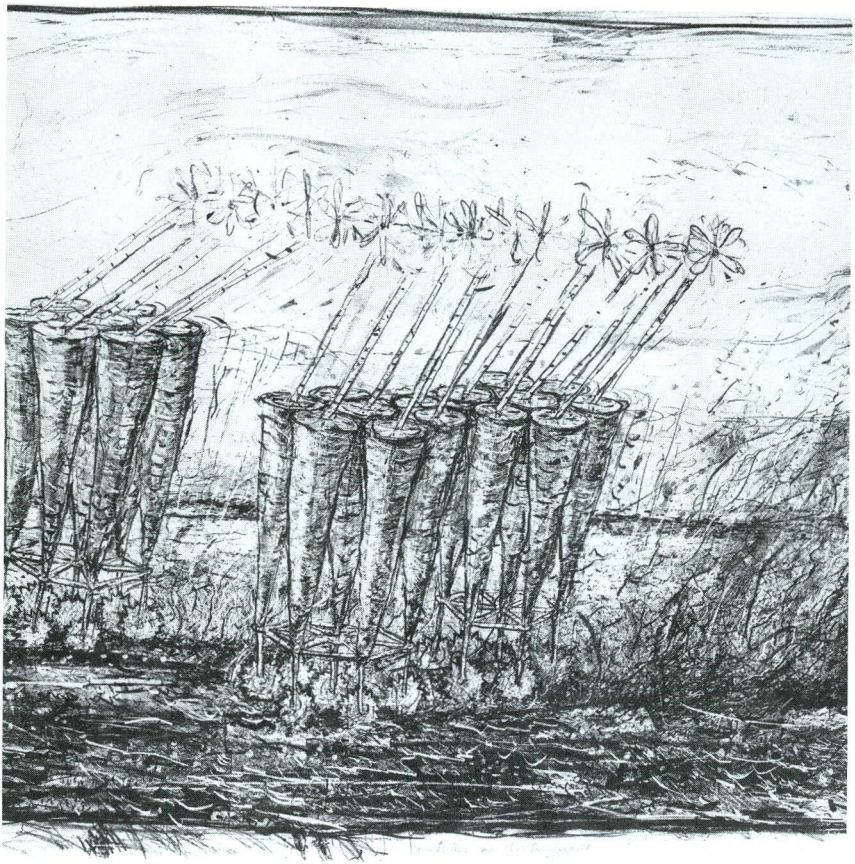
Presumably, this business of the development of political consciousness among the working classes is signified by the constant reference to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King in what is purported to be an attempt at blending two different black political views, which on a larger level symbolizes the reconciliation of classes among blacks when the bourgeois black Baptist minister and the jailbird, street-hustling Muslim lie down side-by-side in a nirvana of Race Unity. Lee yearns for this reconciliation in his films; thus the dining scenes with Nola and her competing lovers in *She's Gotta Have It*, and the extremely implausible and contrived hand shake between the campus militant and the frat brat at the end of *School Daze*. But Lee unfortunately is never able to achieve an organic unity, one that grows from the narrative machinations of his stories. His urge for unity is inserted like commercials and in both *School Daze* and *Do The Right Thing* usually preceded by some male character shouting prophetically for blacks to "Wake Up." So, in this morass of ahistoricism, the very attempt to depict or symbolize something historical through King and Malcolm merely emphasizes the thwarted narrativity that Lee cannot escape; for Lee relishes how ahistoricism solves the espistemological problem of his movies generating a moral through their thwarted narrative lines. Lee's resolution is not understanding black history as either a force, a story, or a collective mythic memoir of discontent but rather as a series of pictorial signs that signify nobility that somehow must be evoked so that blacks may magically be noble again. So, finally, Lee's films disintegrate into the typical black bourgeois complaint about a lack of racial unity that is holding down blacks, a complaint that is tiresome, disingenuous, and, in effect, is some nostalgic reflex, hopeful of capturing some grand era, a lost past, when blacks were unified (and presumably "great" as a result of this unification). The film, in truth, is nothing more than an outward sign of the inward dilemma of Lee's bourgeois consciousness; he is torn, like most blacks, between believing that segregation is good (nationalism, unified political consciousness, self-determination and all that) and that it is bad (degradation, oppression, and inferiority-breeding). It is not the job of a truly telling work of art that wishes to explore political consciousness among blacks to bring about a faked resolution, a false reconciliation of that which cannot be reconciled. What is needed is an exploration of the conundrum of that schism in black political consciousness; for blacks do not really wish to have it both ways, to be segregated and have a sense of peoplehood and to be integrated as part of their due as human beings in this society. The schism has occurred because, instead of having it both ways, blacks can have neither. They can neither be fully a part of the culture nor can they have a fully realized consciousness apart from it. If the major concern of most white Americans is to relive the past or to relive some vision of a past, then the preoccupation of American blacks is not to relive a past but to reinvent

the necessity to continue to live with dignity and meaning in an absurd present. I suppose if the presence of King and Malcolm is to have any real ideological impact, it is in the mythical signification of this juncture in the concept of black nationalism; for Malcolm, integrating Sal's Italian Hall of Fame would have been irrelevant. "Who ever heard of a revolution where the goal is a desegregated lunch counter, a desegrated theater, a desegregated park and a desegregated public toilet . . . you can sit down next to white folks on the toilet. That's no revolution. . . . No, *you* need a revolution," Malcolm told his black Detroit audience in analyzing the civil rights movement in 1963. But the idea of burning down Sal's store as a revolutionary act to rid the neighborhood of alien exploiters supported and protected by the white police power would have appealed to Malcolm greatly: "Revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise." For King, the political values would be reversed: he would endorse the idea of integrating Sal's Hall of Fame but would be opposed to burning his store. Simply read King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" or listen to his March on Washington speech. (Malcolm called that event the Farce on Washington.) In this respect, King and Malcolm allegorized the polarities of black political consciousness: segregation is good, segregation is bad. But black nationalism exists as a bourgeois invention largely because of the tension of this polarity. Who was a greater bourgeois black nationalist than W. E. B. DuBois who was intellectually consumed by the contradictions of nationalist ideology? Who was a more prominent bourgeois black nationalist than Jackie Robinson (old number 42 that Mookie wears in the film) who was physically consumed by those same contradictions? One became a Marxist who preached black unity and founded the discipline of black sociology, the other a Republican who preached black unity and founded a black bank. One helped to found the great integrationist political organization, the NAACP; the other integrated major league baseball . . . again (professional baseball was an integrated sport in the nineteenth century). Each has his white father figure, just as Mookie has with Sal. Finally, it is not bringing together King and Malcolm as nationalists that is really the point (nearly every black person in America is a nationalist, of a sort; the minority of exceptions freely admitted); it is precisely how blacks are divided *within* by the very paradox of striving for a political unity which has come to consume almost entirely the *meaning* of their lives that is the grand and heroic psychological drama of black American life.

The film proves conclusively, from its opening yoking of James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (The Black National Anthem) with the rap theme, "Fight the Power," that nationalism is, as every political scientist worth his or her salt knows, a bourgeois sentiment, a bourgeois political strategy, a bourgeois form of millennialsim among the oppressed,

the bourgeois will to power for the oppressed. That is why Radio Raheem is there on the ground, killed by the white cops, at last, because there must be some martyred body, some blood on the pavement, some huge symbol of emasculation and powerlessness upon which the figure of race unity can be shaped, from which the cry of empowerment can be uttered. It is that apocalypse that is the obsession of the black bourgeois mind.

The final thing to be said about Lee's movie is that it gives the typical Hollywood view of the ethnic, either white, black, or Asian. Lots of profane language, lots of yelling, lots of mannerisms and cliches that have become the stock gestures of these people in Hollywood films. The film is nothing more than a parade of the picturesque ethnics done up in as stylized a way as the "types" of the plantation romance. But this film, of course, is the postmodern urban romance, where simplistic hip cynicism passes itself off as enlightened social protest or as another strikingly rendered installment of one of the eight million stories in the Naked City. (I wonder when Hollywood might decide that a great deal more American ethnic realism exists in a place like Kansas City or Tulsa, Oklahoma than in New York, that New York does not, by a long shot, capture the mind and soul of this country.) There are stories to be told about the working-class African-American community; I shall name a few: the citizens who take to the street to protect themselves and others from the ravages of street crime; the middle-class black real estate developers who, aided by the working class of the neighborhood, entice a major supermarket chain to relocate in an inner city (where convenience and bargain shopping do not exist; the poor and working classes *do* pay more to get a great deal less); the tenants of a low-income housing project who take over and maintain the building themselves. *These* are the heroic stories of political organizing, of *realpolitik* that needs to be dramatized. Alas, Hollywood is not interested in those stories for they will not yield the screaming, stereotyped ethnics we have come to know and love, the simplistically neurotic types who serve both to symbolize and gratify our own racial neurosis. And to sell his films, Lee falls back on *those* cliches which he knows both his youthful black and his white audiences will accept. The long "Da Butt" dance scene in *School Daze* is a case in point of tastelessness and Hollywood racial typing passing it off as hip and authentic. Any rendering of the relationship between Italians and blacks, for instance, which the first part of this essay tried to do (written almost entirely in response to movieland's hideous masking and distortion of masses of people, written almost entirely against commercial film's immaculate deconstruction of the lives we live), deserves a great deal more in the telling than Lee was able to give. People, especially ethnics, if there are such things, deserve a better fate than Hollywood. Spike Lee must learn that, for the black artist in American culture, jumpin' off is not the same as jumpin' in.



Fiction

Dawn Newton

These Days

Last week my student Andrew told me that the sensuality of life has been licked away by the vultures. He said this in my office, sitting in the chair across from my desk, his long, thin-fingered hand resting on the Irish setter named Murphy that always accompanies him. He rubbed at the dog's deep red coat as if he were working his thoughts like liniment into the animal's skin. I tried not to cringe at the melodramatic nature of his statement. If he were another student I might surreptitiously roll my eyes and inwardly chuckle at the plaintive note in his voice. Artsy angst, a friend has called it. But I was sort of surprised at Andrew's statement; he is usually on the shy side, and not given to theatrical or wild pronouncements. He wears his hair short and blond, parted on the side. His face always carries the half-thoughtful, half-polite look of someone who has been taught to keep his reactions, volatile or innocuous, next to his undershirt, skin-side. Because of this look, I have always considered him to be the conservative type, unconcerned with sensuality, or sexuality, for that matter. These days, however, he is writing his final history paper on Oscar Wilde and the decadents of the late nineteenth century. I can see how a bit of Wilde could easily creep into one's perceptions. And to be truthful, I have to admit that what Andrew said makes some sense to me. If he put it in a thesis statement, I would give it serious consideration.

Even after he left my office, I sat there thinking. I envisioned Andrew with a beard, cloaked in a long white garment of many folds, wrestling with a vulture, like Jacob with an angel. Or seated at a table, head bent in sleep, producing mad, unreasonable, vulture-filled dreams—a subject in a Goya painting. I am usually not the fanciful type, or so my wife Anna tells me. My imagination is a clean white shirt with buttons firmly in place, none hanging by threads. At night, when I usually see white and black splotches in my sleep, she dreams of dead, bloated bodies in swimming pools, or of Ladies Night at the Sumo wrestling pit, where large, muscled women use their thighs, calves, and forearms to go at each other, with an itch to do damage. She has led such a calm, untroubled life, or so it seems to me, that

at times I blame myself for her nightmares. Something in my dire perspective must have trickled into her body by osmosis.

Anna finished packing her things a few days after Andrew and I discussed vultures and fading pleasures. I guess I have so thoroughly confused her that she wants to take a long vacation from me. When she told me, she tried at first not to make it sound too much my fault, but she's a psychologist so most of the time I don't trust her; she spends too much energy protecting my ego. I knew she was thinking about visiting her sister in Chicago, maybe doing some research at Northwestern for a little bit in the summer. But three months is a long time. And it was winter.

She told me when I was making tuna sandwiches for my lunch. I was draining the oil from the can of chunk light into the garbage disposal. She did not say, "I'm leaving you," or anything as trite as that. Instead, she said, "I need to go to Rhonda's. I'll be back in June."

I know that my hand jerked a bit; I could have cut myself on the lid of the can, but I didn't. I tried to be casual. "Why so long?" I asked her.

She was on her knees, stacking soup cans in our bottom cupboard. She had a can of generic cream of mushroom soup in her hand. "I think you need to solve some things; I want to give you lots of time." Anna didn't look at me as she said this. Maybe she didn't want to see how I would take this, half-afraid that I wouldn't mind.

"Oh." I could smell the freshness of tuna oil in the sink. In my head the sandwiches were already made, eaten; that would mean I didn't have to say any more. "And what do I need to solve?"

"Greg," she sighed. "Figure it out."

"No." I put the can down on the counter firmly. "You tell me."

"Your sarcasm, first of all." She began comfortably enough, but as she paused, I could hear her becoming tentative, less willful. "The way you put everything down—you have such a bad attitude about things that I'm afraid to say anything for fear you'll jump on it, make fun of it."

"Okay, so I need to be less sarcastic." The muscles in my shoulders felt crunched and hard, like someone had packed them in tightly above my arms to make me uncomfortable.

"That's not all." She sat back on her folded legs. Her voice sounded like it had been frozen to insure toughness but was getting chipped off at the edges as resolve left. "Your energy level seems to be low these days." Her eyes winced lightly when she said this.

I don't think she meant to be hurtful, but you can't help feeling a bit of a wimp when you're standing over a can of tuna fish and your wife tells you that you need to adjust your energy level. Makes you feel a little angry, and I couldn't let it pass. "Yes," I said loudly, and I know that my tone was mean and rattling. "I do seem to be low on energy these days. Maybe you should plug me into a recharge unit or something." I took the lid of the

tuna fish and flung it across the room at the garbage can. It teetered on the plastic before falling on the floor. I walked out of the kitchen and down the stairs to the outside door. In my car I could listen to the radio; there was a football game on. Maybe the Redskins would be ahead.

On the eve of Anna's departure, we watched the news before going out for steamed crabs. They were showing a story about a man in some state who had been waiting for years on death row. They had granted him several stays, but the last was overruled and he was finally getting his chance to die. The death was supposed to occur instantaneously, but there was a faulty mechanism—something blocking the electrical current—and instead he was in the chair for over fifteen minutes, his body twitching while his brain fumed. The newspeople try to describe these things as accurately and vividly as possible. Anna was furious. She thumped the armrest of her chair and stared at me, her brown eyes heavy. "Isn't it sick?" she said. I know she was angry to see my face so impassive. I used to argue with my father about capital punishment while Anna sat on the side of my chair, her body leaning forward, urging me to the final point that would cap the argument. My lack of fight and reaction these days discourages her. Scowling at me from deep in her chair, she said, "You should see your face; you don't even cringe anymore."

"So a thousand miles or so away another man's senses have been fried out of his head. What do you want me to say? I think you're asking for a little much. You want me to write to my congressman?"

Anna turned away, her hair falling forward to shield her face. "I hate it when you're like this." She stared at the television screen where they were describing a recent strike and analyzing workers' demands.

Her head was tilted at a downcast angle and her shoulders bent forward in resignation. I felt guilty about the distress that had crept into her limbs, so I reached down to pull her arms and body next to mine. I rubbed my hands against the soft silk of her blouse, feeling through the material for the smooth flesh of her back and the hard bones of her shoulder blades.

For a moment, she let her body rest against mine, relaxed and easy, but then she stiffened up and pulled away, moving to the bathroom. "No," she said, "it doesn't make any difference."

I stared at the imprint she had made in her chair; there were wrinkles in the folds of the slip cover, making the lines of plaid seem bent and unmatched. I thought of my student Andrew. I pictured him on the podium in our history classroom, lecturing on the negative sensuality of life, telling us all that the only sense experiences were painful ones. "We prick our fingers when we try to touch," he would say. "We prick our souls when we feel." He would lecture to thousands as his campaign eventually

gained momentum. I wouldn't vote for him, but I would probably keep listening.

It was really cold out when we left for hard-shell crabs. My '78 Cutlass didn't want to start, and we didn't want to take Anna's Renault since it was all packed and ready to travel. Finally my car sputtered up enough to get us to Glenmore Gardens. Because it was winter, the garden section was closed, so we had to eat indoors. No stars, no mosquitoes. Not at all festive, but nice anyway, with a dark, woody feel and a calm, familiar atmosphere. While they spread our table with brown wrapping paper and brought us a pitcher of beer and mallets for our crabs, I looked at Anna's thin arms, how they tapered to almost nothing as they emerged from the cuff of her blouse. I thought of how fragile her wrists were, and told her the best roads to take across the Midwest. The scenic route. The best mountain views on the turnpike and the quickest way into Chicago, avoiding the traffic, even though she's been there before and could probably drive it without any maps or directions.

She picked up the mallet, tapping it lightly on the table, and carefully ran her other hand over the waxed brown paper, making designs with her finger, like my brother used to do when he put suntan lotion on my back. Then she looked up, squinted at my face and my blond-gray hair. "The freezer needs defrosting," she said. "Sometime soon."

"Okay." Maybe I could get to it in a few weeks.

"And that one cupboard is a disaster. I got mad and sort of threw everything back in there the other day. If you open it too quickly, you're liable to get a bread pan sliding out at you." She smiled slightly at the thought of an aluminum pan hitting me in the face.

"Can I sue you if I'm injured?"

"No." Her lips barely moved, but I could tell that she was trying to swallow a grin. "It wouldn't be right." She closed her eyes in a posture of remembering all the details she needed to tell me. Then she opened them to say, "The house taxes are due soon."

"Okay. I'll take care of it."

She paused carefully and glanced around the room before making her next statement. "And if things don't get fixed, I'm not coming back." Anna's eyes fluttered for a minute, then she looked down at the table, her finger tracing more patterns on the paper. My feet felt wet in my shoes.

"I said I'd clean the cupboard. I'll even scour the bread pan." I watched her shoulders slowly rise and fall. The joke did not go over very well.

"Don't make me say it the hard way, Greg," Anna said. Looking at the softness of her cheeks, I was saddened by my inability to separate the pain from the love in her voice.

"These are high stakes." I started tapping my foot.

Anna's face was looking angry and sad at the same time. "I can't handle it anymore."

"And I'm not even sure of what it is you can't handle," I said. I reached over the table and touched her wrist. "Come on, Anna, give me a break."

She shook her head and tried to remove her wrist from my hand. "No."

"God, I don't know, Anna." I looked hard at the withered expression on her face, tried to figure out if she saw some sort of decay in my face, not shaven as carefully as it should be. Some sign of a deeper trouble or malaise within, one that I could not reckon with. "Maybe I'm just tired all of a sudden. Sometimes you just take in so much and then that's it."

She was biting her lip and looked like she was holding back a thousand things that psychologists would never say. I was sick of feeling pampered, sick of trying to figure things out.

The waitress brought the pitcher of beer then. I poured a mug for Anna and set it down heavily on her side of the table. Some of the foam sloshed over the side and spilled on to the table. "Here. Drink." I exhaled slowly. "Let's just eat, okay? Forget everything else. We'll have a last supper. Break the crabs, drink the beer. Get it?"

"Yeah," she said. "I get it."

"You always get it."

"Yeah," she said slowly. "It's contagious."

We both sat back in our chairs, looked at the ceiling and then around the room to avoid each other's face. What looked like a family was coming in the door—a man, woman, young boy, and young girl. They were loud taking their coats off, like they thought they were in a circus big top and needed to yell to be heard. Anna tensed at the high pitch of their voices. The little girl was cold and wanted to sit away from the door, but the boy wanted the same seat so that he'd be able to watch the people. Finally, the waitress, with a harried air if diplomacy, moved the two chairs to the same side of the table so that both of the children would be away from the draft yet able to watch the newcomers. Then the two settled in to play with their mallets, first twirling them like batons, their fingers chubby and clumsy around the thin handles, then banging them against the table trying to outdo one another in volume.

The man had a strong jawline, and a thin moustache stretched across his upper lip. The wife's fine and delicate fingers held a thin cigarette, and a wisp of smoke drifted from its tip. The boy was sticking the handle of his mallet into one of his nostrils. "No," said the little girl. "You can't have my mallet for your nose." She turned to the woman, waving at the air to brush away the smoke. "Mom, tell him he can't have my mallet."

"You can't have Tiffany's mallet," the woman said.

"See? You can't have my mallet." Tiffany held it high over her head. Her brother's hand was inching across the table, his body crouched and ready to jump up and grab for the wooden utensil.

"Mom." Tiffany tried to grab at her mother's arm with her free hand, keeping her eyes on her brother. "Mom, he still wants it. Tell him he can't have it." A strand of brown hair fell in her face and Tiffany blew at it to get it out of her eyes.

The woman turned away.

"Hey," I said to Anna, reaching across the table to nudge her arm. "Tell him he can't have it."

"Ssssssh," she said. "They'll hear you."

"Someone has to do something," I said mockingly.

Tiffany's hand must have been getting tired. She pulled it back down by her side, and turned to fix a stair at her brother. "Beat it," she said.

For a moment he was quiet, and his free hand stopped inching across the table. Then he narrowed his eyes, as if trying to fix his sister in an evil gaze, and picked up his own mallet, banging it loudly and rhythmically on the table.

"Freddy!" The man grabbed his son's arm to stop the noise. "What in the hell are you doing? Knock it off!"

Freddy looked at the man, his face long and expressionless. "She told me to beat it. I'm beating it." Slowly he turned to Tiffany, opened his eyes wide and raised his chin triumphantly.

As Anna watched them, I studied the lines of her profile. There were dark smudges under her eyes, made even heavier and more shadowy by the dim light. With her air of resignation, she seemed like a weary Indian woman, the kind of stoic survivor you read about in fourth grade history books. Her skin was taut over her cheeks; her lips were closed tightly. I imagined her in braids, with dark Cherokee skin. She would take two sticks and use her fine hands and thin arms to rub them together. She would light a pentecostal fire at the foot of our bed with young wood, and we would watch the silhouettes of the past that the flame cast on the wall, spellbound in some Platonic underworld. Our bedspread would be miraculously unscorched.

I don't think Anna understands to what extent the study of the world has permeated my life. I am no longer discriminating. This heritage that we dip into is a delicate and tenuous thing. It invites, compels, and asks for homage, but once we tap into the past, we are imbued with the collective sense of failure that accompanies the realization of men's frailties. A flame from Anna's pentecostal fire may lick at my feet and recall a warm and intense existence, but such a light and tickling pleasure can gain an aspect of ravage at a moment's notice. I love my wife, but these things have made me an unhappy man.

We pulled out the legs, sucked out the meat, and for an hour or so meticulously cleaned our crabs, breaking them in half and going over every inch of shell, looking for bits of meat. Anna and I could eat crabs once a week, maybe more, except for the smell. It saturates our house, and in the winter, the cold does not permit us to open the windows. My younger sister likes to tell the story of how she almost died from the smell of mincemeat one Christmas when she had the flu. I told Anna this once and she said, "Hard to imagine dying from dessert." But I don't think so—those heavy, cloying odors are capable of committing the worst sort of suffocation.

We leaned back as the waitress bunched the brown paper on our table into a ball and carried it away. Tiffany and Freddy had calmed down during dinner, probably because eating crabs is so much work. But they were finished, too, and had started up the battle over mallets again. Freddy still wanted one for each nostril, and Tiffany wasn't giving in. The man and woman weren't paying any attention to the argument and seemed to be involved in a rather serious discussion themselves; the woman kept fidgeting with her lighter as she lit up more cigarettes.

Anna raised her eyebrows at me as we both sat up in our chairs to better follow the events at the next table. I think it was almost a relief to be involved, however briefly, in the lives of others. There were no consequences to worry about and we could watch, laugh, and shake our heads freely without deep concern. Freddy had a crab leg in his hand and was shaking it at his sister. Tiffany was using her mallet as a shovel to push all of the crab refuse to his part of the table.

Raising his mallet-fisted hand over his head, Freddy tipped his chair back, balancing on the two back legs, looking as if he really were some circus performer who had his teetering and tottering act down pat. He was grinning wickedly at Tiffany as he prepared to lower his mallet and smash the pile of trash that she had built in front of him.

But Tiffany wasn't paying any attention, and as she prepared to push the last shovel of junk to Freddy's place, she jiggled against the table. Freddy was startled by the sudden movement. For a moment his face strained into several leers and starts as he tried to find his balance, and then his head disappeared as the laws of gravity took over.

There was a muffled crack when Freddy's head hit the cement floor. At the same moment Anna drew a quick breath and the woman wailed out "Freddy," leaning over to look at the floor. The little girl was already on her knees, peering at Freddy's face.

"God, there's blood," she said, and you could tell that she didn't know whether to cry or not.

The man crouched down beside the girl. "Freddy." His voice was muffled and thin. "Freddy, can you hear me?"

The place had been gradually getting empty, and our two tables were the only ones occupied. Anna jumped up and ran to where Freddy was stretched out on the floor. The woman sat at the table crying. I followed Anna over and stood above the three who were huddled around Freddy.

His face was calm and unanimated. There was a small pool of blood that was beginning to form under his head, but when I looked at his adam's apple, I could see the skin moving slightly. Staring down at him, I thought maybe this was all a part of the grand finale. Any moment Freddy would start up with a grin, waving a bottle of fake blood, telling us that our admission was free and he was glad that we had joined the show.

But the man was talking low and rough. "I need help," he said. Over and over he said, "I need help," while Anna was trying to take the boy's pulse, trying to tell the man not to move Freddy.

I felt entranced, mesmerized by the sequence of events. Anna looked up and said, "Greg, an ambulance?" And I really couldn't tell if she was asking me if I thought an ambulance was necessary or if she wondered whether or not I was capable of summoning one. As I hurried to the phone, a waitress came into the room and gasped when she saw the woman sweep everything off the table in a crazed gesture. Then she saw the boy.

We left after the ambulance drove off. In the cold of the night, the red light seemed like a painful slap, hitting the sides of buildings and store fronts as it traveled toward the hospital. On the way home in the car, we rolled down the windows. Anna sat with her gloved hands in her lap. I felt that I shouldn't talk, so I kept staring out the window, stopping at a corner.

The light was red, the car engine low. Outside the wind was picking up and blowing a little bit of snow across the road, clouding the visibility. Some of that restlessness crept in through the windows, and I had to say something. "Do you think he will be all right?" I said quietly.

Shivering, Anna leaned closer to the passenger door to roll up the window. "I don't know." Then, reaching her cold, leather-fingered hand to grab mine, "Do you really care?"

I winced at that. "I'm sorry," I said, and tried to think of some explanation, something else to say. At times like these, I drift to the past for an answer, then drag myself kicking and screaming back to the present, left with nothing to say. I have lost such light touches, my senses sheared as if by a high, mighty voltage.

I rolled up my own window and turned at last down our street. It was lined with oddly-parked cars whose owners had dodged blocks of snow and ice to situate their vehicles in dangerous and precarious positions, fenders vulnerable.

I woke up late that night to find Anna's lips and tongue on my fingers. She was licking them carefully, sucking them as if they were crab legs. I could feel the wet stickiness of her saliva on my fingers, but I couldn't feel her tongue—it was like another appendage I had grown that belonged with my nails and joints. Then she reached the finger where I'd scratched myself with one of the crab claws. The mixture of the salt of her saliva and the spice from the crabs made my finger burn where the slight cut was. I touched her bare shoulder. "Since when do you lick the platter clean?" She turned over and started crying. Her body was heavy on my arm.

A few days after Anna left, I was walking around in Fell's Point. The brick red cobblestones on Thames Street seem like black asphalt pavement in the dark, until you trip on a stone that's jutting a little above the rest, or see a patchwork of cobble lit up by the milky light that the tavern signs cast. Then you realize that the street dates back a little further than the modern black asphalt of today's pavements. It was cold again—the kind that makes your coat zipper talk back to you, and gives you earaches if you're prone to sinus trouble. I decided to stop by a local tavern and have one of the famous ales they carry. They have every sort of beer, ale, and stout you can think of: Guinness Bass Ale, Dortmunder-Union, Hofbrau Haus, Samuel Smith's Old Peculiar Ale, and Taddy Porter. The woman who owns the place knows my face and my liking for ale, though not my name, so she just nodded slightly and asked me what kind of ale I wanted. She is one of those solitary and noble figures that a community admires and embraces. Someone told me that long ago her husband died at an early age—worked himself to death—and left her to carry on the business at the age of twenty-one. Though on days her eyes looked weary and apathetic, she does a fine job of maintaining the tavern's easy atmosphere. There are no loud voices in this place, and no brawls. Only the slight clinking of ice in the glasses and an occasional low chuckle.

While she was bringing me a stein, I looked around and noticed some of my graduate students sitting in the corner. Classes were over for the term, they had only their final papers to hand in. I was hoping that they might elect to blur some of the boundaries that always seem to exist between teacher and student, and stop at my bar stool to say hello.

I felt I had been mute since Anna's departure. I had called her briefly to tell her that the boy Freddy was going to be okay; I had talked to his father. But after she breathed a loud sigh of relief, it wasn't much of a conversation. Neither of us had too much more to say.

As I sat there, I examined the labels on the fifty or so bottles of whiskey, scotch, gin, vermouth, ginger brandy, crème de noya, crème de menthe, crème de cassis, crème de cacao lining the back of the bar. Memorizing the

colors of the labels and the shapes of the bottles in front of the gold-veined mirror, I wondered what my student Andrew would make of the many curves and lines of glass, half-filled with amber, clear, emerald, and dark brown liquids, each absorbing the dim light of the bar lamp. If he would find them aesthetically pleasing, sensual.

Twenty minutes or so later, my students Elizabeth, Paul, and Stewart finally stopped on their way out. Elizabeth was wearing her khaki pants with big side pockets. She and Andrew are probably my best students, yet she is much more casual. A wild voice, almost, next to his usual conservatism. With her prose, she makes a moment of history seem like a Nat King Cole tune. Melodious, but tinged with a bit of anguish.

Elizabeth placed her hand on the black bar top, wiping nervously at the wet ring where my stein had been sitting. She told me that she had uncomfortable news. Looking down at the black tiled floor, she bit the right side of her top lip while Stewart and Paul stared at the labels on the ginger brandy and crème de cassis. Then she told me that Andrew's father had died, had in fact killed himself two days earlier.

Elizabeth had stopped biting her lip and was looking straight ahead, careful not to look in my eyes as she said, "His father said in the note that he cared for his family but it wasn't enough; he had not been happy for some time."

Paul and Stewart had changed their focus and were looking at something out the window. The sides of their faces were expressionless. I turned back to Elizabeth and tried to get my mouth moving to find words. "Andrew," I said carefully. "Is he—where—?"

"He's gone back to Florida. For the funeral." Elizabeth put her foot on the rung of the bar stool next to me and stared at the surface of the bar top, now dry.

She spoke in the subtle, calm tones that Anna would use, were she to deliver such troubling news. The words rolled around for a while, like loose marbles on a slick table top, before finally falling off the edge to settle in my head. Elizabeth remained motionless for a moment, then she placed her hand on the shoulder of my jacket. "We didn't know what to say, either," she whispered. After she gave me Andrew's address, she and Stewart and Paul backed out of the bar, nodding silently at me, conveying a certain solemnity. At the last minute, Elizabeth raised her hand and wiggled her fingers in a wave. My shoulder was still warm from where her hand had rested.

When I left my half-finished ale and the warmth of the small room to go outside and walk down by the pier, noting the ice-coated posts supporting the docks, I wondered how our thirteen-degree temperature compared with that in Florida. I imagined Andrew's father walking along a beach at

sunrise, decked out in bright yellow bermuda shorts, kicking at seashells and driftwood as he realized that a certain capacity to appreciate the sensual had been quickly and stealthily robbed from his life. I assigned to his face some of Andrew's features—the short, blond hair, the hairline probably receding on the father; the distinguished cheek bones, high yet flat at the same time; the half-wry, half-bewildered twist of the mouth. I pictured him squinting against the spray of the high ocean waves, pausing to note the skyline where it looked like someone had taken pale pink and lilac markers to highlight the horizon, as if the view were something to be studied for a test, a last attempt at art appreciation.

I reached the end of one of the piers and looked out at the water, which was dark and sluggish. In the spring I came down here to watch the boats. They moved effortlessly through the water, like sharp shears through a piece of deep blue satin. It is an acute sight, something I feel obligated to respond to with the best of my senses. It calls for a positive reaction or recognition, like the thought of my wife's breast, half-fallen out of her sleek nightgown and smooth yet cold to touch on a winter's night, calls for a sense of loss or anguish to overtake me, now that she is gone.

Yet nothing happens. What Anna has described as my increasingly dim view of life and my loss of enthusiasm—those things that have caused her to travel many miles away—are not ameliorated by a rough breath of cold air, some broken cobblestones and the promise of a boat-populated bay in the spring.

This evening, as I was grading the last of the final papers, Stewart stopped by to deliver Andrew's final essay. It was strange to see someone else holding Murphy's leash, but the dog seemed happy enough, at least for the moment. Stewart said that he was taking care of him until he could find some way to get him back to Andrew. Stewart reached into his brown backpack and pulled out Andrew's paper, still in the envelope it had been mailed in from Florida. It was called "The Sneering Vision of Oscar Wilde." Andrew had pencilled a sketch of Wilde on the front page, and the drawing bore a great resemblance to the man. There was a certain sardonic look about his nose and mouth—a real sneer—and Stewart and I stared at it for a moment, holding it up to examine the curl of the lip in the light.

"I wonder if this is pre- or post-imprisonment," Stewart said, zipping up his backpack.

I told him thanks, that it was good of him to drop if off, good of Andrew to finish it, though it wasn't necessary under the circumstances. I offered him a drink, but he said no, thanks, he had to go.

As he walked down the stairs to the main floor, I could hear the dog's toenails tapping on the uncarpeted hardwood stairs. It sounded like the

light, cracking noise that icicles on a house make when you take a stick and strike at a ridge of them, to watch them fall in the snow. I went to the window and wiped at the frosted pane, so that I could see Stewart walking back down the street, the setter leading the way. He stopped at the corner to wait for a walk signal, and Murphy, playful and restless, took the slack in his leash as an opportunity to jump up against a streetlight post. It took Stewart a few minutes to calm him down, and in the meantime Murphy kept pressing against the metal of the post. My vantage point behind the clouded window make the cold, snow-fogged air outside seem even thicker and denser. Under the thin, wavering glow of the streetlight, the dog seemed to be bending the post. With his long, stretched body and the angle of inclination, the setter looked like the man in the famous photo of Mt. Surabachi at Iwo Jima. Except that figure was a real man, raising the flag, not the illusion of a hound pushing something down. In the heat of the moment, it is sometimes hard to distinguish between that which is being forged and that which is being shattered. The walk signal finally flashed and Stewart pulled on the dog's leash, urging Murphy in front of him. For a moment I felt that the hound was mine.

One of the saddest tales that I learned as a child was that of Robert Browning's Pied Piper of Hamlin. As the story opens the town is squirming with rats. At the end, there are no rats, but no children either, save the crippled boy; the Piper spirits the rest of them away. When my wife left, I was standing at this same window. She hugged me from behind and made me keep looking out the pane of glass. Now, as I stand here, I worry that my wife will not be as kind to her breasts as I was. I worry that Andrew's vultures will grow tongues of greater size and length than he or I ever fathomed. I am angered on behalf of the crippled boy who was not quick enough to follow the other children with the Piper out of Hamlin. The music he heard so briefly was a fine tune; he grew up to be a bitter old man.

Tereze Gluck

On the Plain

My heart just hurt, flat out-like. This was a great calamity and I would not wish it upon any soul at all. I wanted just to swim in a cool stream where the water ran over the rocks as if there were comfort after all. I had lunch with a friend and she said to me: "I am nothing like you at all."

That was a lonely thing to hear.

I would like to be a stone lying at the bottom of a wide flat river, with the cool water running over my body until I grew smooth and quiet.

Failing that, I would like to be an animal, a lion, maybe, or a leopard or a panther, in the African night, on a wide plain in Africa. There I would sit beneath the stars, silent and brooding.

I had grown useless altogether.

There was a poem, and all I did was read it over and over.

This man, I could not help myself, he stood in a doorway in the place where I worked, and his face was sorrowful and sad, his eyes were deep and close together, and as he stood in the doorway, he gazed down upon me and my heart went right out to him; I could not help myself. When your heart goes right out to a man, like that, you believe that he must love you immediately and altogether, or it could not have happened as it has; and then, everything proceeds from there, and your heart feels broken right away from the sheer force of its going out of itself—like your heart broke right through the borders of your body, cracked your brittle ribs into slivers, and shattered your skin and your whole body; and so before even you have had the chance to have your heart broken by the man, it is broken by its own hand—breaks itself, bursting out of there.

I knew that this deep stir within me was an insurmountable thing.

I could see how a man might believe that he would lose himself right there inside my body, and soon all he can think of is, how can he save himself?

I thought of Africa, and the wide plains and the dark night full of the quiet.

The man lived in Nairobi so I thought always, ever since he stood in the doorway with his sad face, of Africa and days and nights there. In the days I sit with him beneath the white sun and the white sky. We sit alongside one another and are quiet for there is nothing that can be said.

At night we sit beneath the stars.

The woman I was having lunch with said to me: "I am a cautious person."

Then she said: "How can you love somebody when you don't know them?"

But, I said.

People do differ. This simple thing is a great and deep thing that none of us ever knows. Or we know and forget. She looked upon me, my friend, as though I were as strange and wrong as an animal beyond its home.

I tried to explain myself to her, a bad thing to do. Explaining anything is like digging a hole and burying yourself in it.

I gazed out the window into the skyline and the hot, glazed day.

I told her that if only I were like her—if only!

I said I lacked the self-protecting gene, and that there was nothing I could do about it but yield myself up.

But after all I kept at it, explaining myself right away.

I said no, she was wrong, I did know him, right down deep, but what I didn't know was *information* about him.

She was a good friend. She tried to tell me it was a good thing to be like me, better than to be cautious like her.

I have lived alone for seven years.

She says, my friend, that she could never bear to be alone like that. Once *I* couldn't bear it, I said. But now I can. And now I wish I had never set eyes upon that man standing in the doorway—never heard of Africa or dreamed of the plains around his house, and the equatorial stars that shine down upon him.

I believe he is a sad man, a man of deep sorrows.

I don't see, really, my friend said, how you can think you love somebody when you don't even know them.

She said it was *just attraction.*

I have never understood anything at all in the world.

I am more like that stone or the lion in the night—just a natural thing, itself.

It is true that we got together.

And it was him that did it; but it all did me no good, my heart was sheer broken.

When we got together, it was like my daydreams—quiet, nothing said; but it was all a mystery to me, and nobody said anything. I said a little something. I said: Have I alarmed you? He said no. Then he went back to Africa.

It would have been better if it had all never happened. If I had never laid my eyes upon him.

The night animals stalk in the night, on the plains, in the deep woods where the sunlight never comes, they walk and walk alone in the African night.

I dream I am the lion who sits upon the wide plain near the house where he lives.

Lauren Yaffe

The Magic Show

When I picture my father, I always start with the bump. He had a bump in the middle of his forehead. It was the kind of thing that would cause friends to ask, "What's that thing on your father's forehead?" To which I would reply, "He's just always been that way." For my father *not* to have a bump would have seemed abnormal. Sometimes his forehead would be flat and I'd say, "Daddy, where's your bump?" and it would swell and blush as if embarrassed.

The things you remember a person by define them, and they define places and situations you experienced with that person. When I think of Selma's apartment, her old apartment with the red curtains, I think of my father's bump. Perhaps this is because it has been active or latent during phases of his life, and when I first met Selma, it was at a time when the bump was menacing, bulging out at odd moments, remaining swollen for days at a time.

He took us to Selma's but Selma wasn't there. He had a key to her place, though, and he found it easily enough among all the keys on his key ring. He explained to us that his new apartment was upstairs but he hadn't unpacked yet and we were to stay at Selma's. I thought, he doesn't want us to see the boxes. He thinks the boxes will upset us.

We stood looking into her apartment from the doorway. My father said, "What's the matter, cat got your feet?" He crouched on his hands and knees like a cat and pawed our feet. Josh and I giggled and climbed on his back, trying to tickle him. This was his trick to get us into the apartment.

He was very good at tricks. This is another way I remember my father: the magician. He liked to play magic tricks on us. Making an egg stand upright or opening a box with a live, severed finger inside, which of course was his own finger pushed through a hole in the bottom of the box, that kind of thing. These tricks seem silly now, but then I was full of wonder. I was willing to believe anything.

Selma's apartment seemed familiar, rather, some of the things in it were familiar. For instance, the pasta machine that made four different sizes of pasta. My mother had always thought this an endearing quality in my father, that he made pasta. She used to say he had wormed his way into her heart that way.

Our blue sofa bed was in Selma's living room. There was a dark rectangular spot on that rug at home, where the sofa had been, revealing how worn and faded the rug had gradually become. I used to fall asleep on the sofa, the corduroy imprinting red stripes on my face, hoping my father would carry me upstairs to bed. I thought Selma must be keeping the sofa for him until his apartment was ready but she seemed not to have a sofa of her own. I worried she would keep it and replace the blue corduroy for a fabric that better matched her red curtains.

A key turned in the door and Selma came in. I remember thinking for a second that she was a man. She was wearing trousers with a bow tie and suspenders. She must have been wearing shoulder pads; her shoulders loomed enormous in my eyes. She kissed my father hello. As he looked over at me and Josh, grinning shyly, his bump swelled. Before she kissed him, I had thought he was my mother's to kiss. He was my mother's, then he was Selma's, there was no time in between.

Once, maybe it was a few weeks before Selma's, he took me out for breakfast—just the two of us. He said to order anything I wanted. I ordered eggs, not feeling the occasion to be particularly special. It seemed as if my father stared at me the entire time I ate. I was wondering how an egg yolk holds together. You can hold a raw yolk by its membrane and it will droop like a tear from your pinched fingers, but if you dab it just slightly with a fork it will break.

Finally my father said he and mother would be separating for a while. "Oh!" I said. "Is that all. Separating, that means temporary." For some reason I had fixed in my mind that separation took six months, which didn't seem too bad.

"Kids, you remember Selma, don't you?" father said.

Josh and I looked up at her. I remembered her from a dinner party at our house. Her husband had ear lobes that curled up instead of hanging down like most people's. She had said I had beautiful hair and had pulled me onto her lap. She stroked my hair and told me it had red and gold streaks. I had said I did not, that my hair was plain brown.

I was afraid I'd have to kiss Selma. At my parents' parties, my father would say, "Come out and kiss the guests goodnight, Carla," and I would

walk around the room in my pajamas and kiss all the men and women. I didn't know them but I kissed them. This is how adults make friends, I thought, they have their children kiss people. But I did not kiss Selma and father did not tell me to.

That night we went out for Chinese food. Josh and I became fascinated with Selma because her teeth squeaked when she chewed. This was because she had had all her teeth capped so they'd be perfect. She opened her mouth for Josh and I to see. Her teeth were clean ivory and set in a perfect row, each tooth backed with gold.

"Now you've seen Selma's hidden treasure," father said.

"I got as much metal as Selma does," Josh said. "See all my cavities!" He gaped his mouth open to show us.

"It's nothing to be so happy about," I said. "I wouldn't want all those fillings in my mouth."

"But Carla," Josh said, "you have to get a filling if there's a hole or it hurts."

"What would you want if all your teeth had cavities?" my father asked.

"What?" Josh and I asked.

"The tooth, the whole tooth, and nothing but the tooth."

"Oh, Dad!" we groaned, then broke into giggles.

Josh got so excited he dropped a chopstick. It balanced upright in a bowl of Lo Mein for a second before it fell. I thought, he is going to get it now, but my father had on his joke-telling expression. He said, "Josh, that's no way to hold chopsticks. Watch me." He made a drum roll on the table with his chopsticks, then flipped one stick in the air and caught it.

We all tried drumming the table and flipping our chopsticks like my father. My chopstick tipped Selma's tea cup over and some dribbled onto her lap.

"Carla!" Selma said. She started to say something else, but then she stopped and looked at my father and they both started laughing. We all laughed until the waiter came over to wipe up the spill, and even then we kept grinning.

It is an odd feeling to get away with something and to look into your father's eyes and see that he knows you are getting away with it. He lets you get away with it because he is also getting away with something. But at that age, when you get away with something you don't question why.

That night my father put on a magic show for us. He went into Selma's bedroom to prepare. Josh and I sat on either side of Selma on the blue sofa and plucked out her gray hairs. Selma said she'd pay two cents for every gray hair we found. I liked little things like this, sifting through someone's

hair, and I was happy to do it. But suddenly I felt awkward sitting next to Selma. The whole event seemed rather odd. I didn't know why then, but looking back, it was as if I'd entered a bad dream in which my house had suddenly become entirely different and my family unrecognizable, and I didn't know if I was in the wrong home, and if I was, where the right home would be.

At the time though, all I thought was how silly it was to pluck out someone's hair. Selma herself had told us that for every gray hair plucked two would grow in its place, so I wondered why she wanted us to pluck hers. I leaned my head against the corduroy of the sofa arm, letting Josh find the rest of the gray hairs, while I waited for the magic show to begin.

My father said he had prepared a special show just for us. He began by tipping his magician's hat to us and a live dove flew out. I was very impressed that he had actually gotten a live dove, and then had kept the dove hidden until the magic show. All this, just to amuse his children.

He placed the dove in a small box, just the right size, and proceeded to saw the box in half right on top of Selma's coffee table. Josh and I screamed, I think Selma screamed too. Or maybe we laughed. It was hard to believe that my father would kill a bird but he really seemed to be doing just that. He had a miniature saw and he cut right through the box with it. When he finished sawing, he asked me to examine the box. I wouldn't think of it. I had already buried my face into the sofa arm and would not look up for fear I would see the severed bird I had pictured in my mind. My father lifted my chin and made me look. He opened the box and the dove flew out, white and perfect.

"That's great, Dad!" Josh said.

"What did you do with the other bird?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" my father said.

"What happened to the one you cut up?"

"It's right here, Carla. See, it's perfectly all right."

I didn't believe him. I thought he must have purchased two doves and one of them was now cut up, dead, and who knows where he had put it. I avoided going near Selma's wastebaskets that night for fear of seeing the sawed-up bird.

Father set up the fold-out sofa for me and Josh. He said he was going up to his apartment to sleep and we should stay with Selma. I said there was room for him on the fold-out sofa with me and Josh, or I could sleep on the floor. He left anyway.

I couldn't sleep that night, thinking of him in the apartment upstairs. Did it have red curtains like Selma's? Would there be bedrooms for me and Josh? Once I heard a noise on the ceiling like someone dropping

something and I wondered if that was my father, right over my head, unpacking boxes.

After a while, the door opened and I suddenly thought, here is Selma's husband, the man with the curly ear lobes. I had assumed that Selma and her husband were also separated, as my parents were, and that maybe their six months of separation were now over, and he was returning home. But of course, this was not so. My father walked into Selma's bedroom and closed the door.

"Why is our sofa in her place?" Josh asked him at breakfast the next morning.

"Your mother gave it to me."

"So why is it here?"

"My apartment's not ready yet. I'll bring you there as soon as I'm all moved in."

"How come you're moving?" I asked. "You said you'd only be away for a while."

My father looked quite lost. His bump was deflated and the loose skin creased into his forehead. As I looked at him, the bump rose slowly, stretching the skin into a taut little mound. I remember mother saying he should have the bump surgically removed because there was a danger of his getting a blood clot. But he never did, never got around to it.

"Look," he said, "watch this trick." He picked up Selma's salt shaker and waved it in front of us, then he placed the shaker on the table at a tilt. He took his hand away but the shaker didn't fall; it balanced at an angle as if about to pour. "You try it, Carla," he said, but I shook my head. I told him I wasn't any good at magic.

After breakfast, I helped Selma clean up. She gave me the trash to take to the incinerator, propping a book in the door so I could get back in. The bag was like a dead weight in my small hands but I managed to drag it down the hall, leaving a trail of muddy drops behind me on the carpet. I hefted the bag into the incinerator and listened to it thunk against the walls of the chute as it fell. On my way back to Selma's, I noticed a staircase, so I decided to look upstairs.

The next floor mirrored the last one. The walls and carpet were the same red as Selma's curtains. There were several doors identical to hers and I looked on the nameplate of each one but I didn't see my father's name on any of them. A couple of doors didn't have nameplates so I thought he must live in one of those apartments. I knocked on one of the doors without a name and an old man opened it.

"Sorry," I said. "I was looking for my dad's apartment."

He eyed at me suspiciously, so I said, "I forgot which door it was." I started walking back to the stairs until I heard his door shut behind me.

I went to the other door with no name and put my ear up to it. There was a hum of silence, like listening to a seashell. I imagined the air humming around the boxes inside, boxes piled up all over and no one to open them and put everything away. I wanted to knock on the door just to hear how it would sound to knock on my father's door, to see if there was an echo. I thought, maybe if I knock my father will open the door and there will be Josh and my mother and all our furniture, just like home—no boxes at all. But I didn't knock. At the time I thought I was afraid the old man would come out and ask me why I was knocking on everyone's door, and why didn't I know where my father lived. Even at that age, I had learned some tricks. I walked back downstairs and found Selma's apartment with the book perched in the door, like a beacon, to mark my way.

Barbara Esstman

What Comes After Lasts Forever

The restaurant was big as a city with great vaulted ceilings, hundreds of tables, and pools of light as from streetlights in a dark alley. The heavy carpeting muffled our steps like snow. All those voices, all that movement strangely muffled except for the ping of metal hitting glass. My mother's two older, richer cousins visiting from Chicago, all three of the women in heels with straps around the ankles and swirling dresses with wide belts. They left their hats on as if they were in church, hats with tail feathers curling over the crowns of their heads, and they all smelled strongly of the perfume they wore only at night.

The three husbands also smelled, of shaving lotion never worn to work and the familiar dark brown of tobacco which made them seem less alien even in their suits, heavy and tweed, warm and rough against my bare legs wrapped around a waist, my white-gloved hand resting on a shoulder, though I don't remember which one of them carried me in and set me down. We followed the maitre d' with great white menus that seemed as big as me, tasseled cords swinging from their spines, wound our way around tables. I wanted to stop and look at what was laid out on them, their surface being the right height for me to stand and observe, wanted to lean against the arm of a diner and discuss what he was eating and why, but the others kept marching into the depths of the room, all the way to the far side and a red leather banquette fastened against a wall.

One of the tables was pulled out, its cloth swinging like a woman's skirt, I climbed up on the banquette, and the table was pushed in close. On one side of me, the elbow of jacket, on the other, a woman's silky sleeve, but I don't remember their heads. The bend of my legs not close to the curve of the seat, my feet sticking into space, the tablecloth covering my lap like a blanket not pulled to my chin. I must be good here, not wiggle or interrupt. Carefully I knelt on the seat and rested my hands on the edge of the table.

The lovely landscape of the table top—smaller plates set on larger ones, their concentric edges like roads circling up great hills; the collection

of stemware like groves of trees coated in ice; the knives and forks and spoons like the winter silver of streams across the great white field of the cloth. A miniature world like dollhouses or train sets. The adults talked and laughed but not to me. The women pulled off their gloves finger by finger and closed them in their purses. I laid the silverware end to end to make a river running between the hill and trees.

The cousin sitting to my left, the sloe-eyed, thin-lipped one called Gin, put her arm around me and leaned close. "Put them back. They don't belong there," she said.

Her lips seemed only half there as if they were being sucked back into her mouth, as if she were beginning to turn herself outside in, her lipstick so dark it reminded me more of black than red. Put her lips back fully on her face? I hadn't been the one to make them disappear and I turned to study the river.

One hand tightened around my shoulder, the other pulled the fork next to the plate and she went back into her space. I looked at the arrangement for a moment and pushed the fork back into the curve. Not her silverware—I was still being good. But Gin's hand descended again, returned the fork to its traditional place. Then she told me we didn't do that here. I sat with my hands in my lap until she ignored me, then nudged the fork out of line.

This time she pulled my feet out from under me so they dangled into space again and reset the place in front of me, setting each piece down with definite precision.

"Helen," Gin called to my mother, "she's not behaving."

My mother looked at me from across the table. Her evening make-up made her face a mask, the layer of powder, the spots of rouge wouldn't feel like skin if I touched them. The metal della robbia of her earrings, the hard and shrunken clusters of fruit clamped to her lobes, she only wore those when she was going out and leaving me. Be good, she told me and shook her head, her eyes closing and shutting me out.

"Why don't you spank her so she'll mind," Gin said. "If she were mine, I'd spank her."

Gin didn't have any children. Then they went back to talking over my head. When my drink came, all red and translucent, I picked it up and looked at them through it, saw their skin turn fire and the cherries in the bottom of the glass rise up and fall back like beads. Put it down before you spill, Gin told me. I set the drink on the crest of the hill, the tall glass, the taller straw soaring like a spire above my head. Right away I did this, as soon as she told me. Carefully, I eased my knees under me and rose above the drink. The red ascended the straw like mercury and down again, like fever rising and falling in time with my breathing, like magic. I kept sucking,

lifted the straw from the glass then breathed out, the red flying like roses shot from the sky.

"I told you to spank her."

This time Gin's fingers dug into my wrist and her diamond turned backwards on her finger pressed into my skin. I was being good. She couldn't have me. I pulled my arm away. She pulled it back. The glass tumbled and rolled down the hill, the red spreading out and flooding the cloth as my mother jumped up and aimed for the spot with her napkin and Gin flew away. I let myself fall back and slide, over the seat, under the cloth, down into the darkness under the table.

The under was dark and quiet. I tucked my legs up and crouched on the metal stand, my back against the pedestal. No hands grabbing, just the soft contours of knees and legs, the funny points of shoe tips poking under the cloth, the commotion above my head muted and far-away. Just me closing my eyes and imagining myself small enough to walk across the white field and stand under the crystal trees by the silver river. A rabbit, a deer wander out from cover. They are my size and I am by myself in the quiet world.

And then she lifted and the cloth and grabbed and pulled, her fingers like a band around my upper arm. Yanked sideways, nothing to hold on to, my head banging on the underside of the table, into the outside. I hurried sideways, my arm locked by the fingers leading the way through the diners, some turning, some eating, heads down, through the thousand tables and far into the hall by a phone booth at the end, its door sagging open into its empty space, somehow sad that no one was calling another. Then with the flat of her free hand, she hit me against the back of my bare legs and hit me again though I twisted in a circle trying to get away from her. My skin smarted and stung. The dark hall revolved around me. I couldn't see her face.

I am playing quietly in my room. The sun comes through the pale stripes on the curtains, tiny silver threads between the pink and blue and yellow, and hits the silver medallions on the rosy paper. It is the biggest room in the house except for the living room, and almost as big as that. It has a matching bedroom set, book cases that cost a lot, a couch, a chair, an antique desk, like a little house unto itself, an apartment of my own. In one corner the door to the attic over the front porch, but I never go in there—there is no ceiling, just the walls tilting together to form a point at the top, like walking into a triangle, so hot in summer I can't breathe, so cold in winter it feels like death. Though I don't like the door to that place so near, my room itself is bright and lovely and pink and mine.

Opposite the attic corner is the doll furniture: the chiffarobe I have to bend down to open; the bunk bed, its ladder rungs barely wide enough for my foot and not strong enough for my weight. Left-overs from my mother, I don't like to play with them. Nor her dolls with their bisque heads and delicate coloring, one with a wild chestnut wig made out of my great-aunt's hair, the one who died the month I was born. All three dolls are beautiful—the bald baby, the middle child with tiny teeth, the hairy oldest. The soft pink of their cheeks, the shining eyes, the painted lips, especially the hard, perfect skin. I sit them in a row and look at them. But they do not move or talk or change expression.

Instead there is the kitten. Gray-striped with round baby eyes in a round baby face. It has its own movement, makes its own warmth. I hold it between my knees, rub its nose the same color as a pencil eraser, stroke until it purrs and rubs my fingers with its chin. I reach for the bonnet on the bed behind me. When she was young but much older than I, my mother had knitted the bonnet with pink ribbons, the flat kind with no brim that makes babies look earless and ball-headed. It belongs to the smallest doll but I slip the bonnet over the kitten's head. It tries to back away, disappear between my knees, but there is only air under it and I close my legs together. Its hind legs dangle, just its head and front paws sticking up between my knees like a half-buried body.

Too young to know how to tie bows, I knot the ribbons tightly and the pink disappears into the white fur of the throat, the ears flatten into bumps under the stitches. The kitten's legs stiffen and brace themselves against my leg, the paws spread like fingered hands. I pull the dress over its head, a pale turquoise dress covered with turquoise net, pink roses on the bodice, and force a straightened leg into a sleeve. Then the other leg pinned down, pull it up under the chin and twist it into the sleeve, close the snaps down the back. The kitten struggles and mews. It's supposed to be quiet. That's the secret it doesn't know and I won't tell.

My hands barely fit over its back, but it's a small kitten. I dig my thumb and middle finger into the hollows under its front legs, dig and hold and lift. The kitten goes limp, its head lolls sideways and its hind legs tuck up the way babies do when their mothers carry them by the neck. When I shake it, its body swings back and forth. I lay it in my lap. It's still, except for one eye that looks up at me from under the bonnet. Slowly it turns and slides its legs under its body, all the while looking at me, its eye a muddy gold. Carefully it leans forward, testing the air. I grab it again.

And as it hangs limp in front of me, I bring my hand down on the flat of its head, the soft skin over the bone between its ears. Over and over. The more I hit, the quieter it becomes. It must not move.

To make sure, I beat its face, watch the eyes open to slits then close tightly each time my hand comes down until it gives up trying to see what is happening to it. All the while I keep telling it no, making my voice deep and gruff, the no's in time with hand pounding until the sound of the world alone is enough to make the eyes close and the legs tuck up. It lies curled on my lap, its tail wrapped tightly over the skirt of the dress.

I wonder at what I've done and lay my hand over its body, quiet as if it's holding its breath. Hold my hand gently over the kitten to protect it, not laying weight on it, but hovering above the net and tips of fur grazing my palm. I feel its warmth and slight movement, its careful breathing, the life that insists on itself in spite of force. We sit for a very long time in the room full of sun. We sit there forever.

Diana C. Ellis

Ancient Fruit

"Your father," my grandmother said to my mother, passing her a plate of overripe oranges, "your father, you should excuse me, never respected me."

"Ma, please, don't start." My mother bit into an orange, cupping her hand under her chin to catch the juice.

I went into the kitchen. I was always famished—I was six months pregnant at the time—but something about the way my mother had chewed the overripe orange had nauseated me. I checked the soup. It was still frozen; I broke the pieces up and turned the heat to high. I was visiting my parents in New Jersey for the weekend and, as always, my mother and I were spending our Saturday mid-afternoon, while my father worked, with my 84-year-old grandmother in Brooklyn. Over stale icewater and oranges she had already covered one of her favorite topics, the Paint Store, where six days a week she worked full-time as a bookkeeper for her eldest son, Morris. Morris, who was paralyzed on one side from a stroke, still came in and answered phones and ate the cottage cheese and tuna fish lunch my grandmother made especially for him and let her do his "rubbing exercises" that would restore his health; while crazy-Jacob-the-black was left to run the store, and was, according to my grandmother, such a stupid businessman he actually let customers pay with checks that had bounced before. Now she was about to go into her other favorite topic: my grandfather and their marriage, which everyone had once thought happy enough until he died and she began talking. The only things I remembered about my grandfather were that he taught me how to count to eleven in French and he had shingles once and I had been terrified that the scabs on his face would spread to me. I felt like a voyeur hearing private things about someone I never knew and who could never give me his side; but I always found myself listening to my grandmother's stories about him all the same.

I tasted some of the liquid in the pot but it was ice cold and I spit it back in before I realized what I had done.

"What are you doing in there, Alisa?" my mother shouted.

I shouted back that I was getting the food ready. The kitchen was only some ten feet from the dining area but because we couldn't see each other we shouted.

"Oy, oy, she's working and we're gabbing!" I could hear my grandmother theatrically clap her hands.

They both rushed in and for the next five minutes we bumped into each other in the tiny kitchen getting things ready and telling each other to sit down. I held up an aluminum foil tray of cold, overdone chicken. "Which plates should I use, grandma?" My grandmother kept kosher and I could never remember which drawer was for meat and which for dairy.

"Sit down! I'll get it." She stood on the tips of her mannish old-lady shoes and stretched her bony twisted hands up to the cabinet above the sink. As she reached, her ridiculous dress, which she had bragged to us she had made out of an old flowered bedspread, crept up her calf and exposed a bit of grayish flesh and loose blue veins hanging over her shoes. My grandmother would not wear short sleeves or short dresses anymore because her naked skin reminded her how old she really was; and I turned away for a moment, pained too as if I had seen something indecent. Even though I had felt young and the same age for a very long time she seemed to shrink and decay each year.

"Darling, sit down, don't do that, your back," my mother drawled out. She was the tallest of us and reached over my grandmother's head and dragged out the plates. Her hands, like weak white claws, clutched and shook with the weight; every doctor had a different theory about what was wrong with them. The plates vibrated softly on the counter as she released them and the weak sound irritated me.

We sat down at last. The soup steamed up, a huge marrow bone crowned in each bowl, a treat only we three in the whole world liked. Actually my grandmother's false teeth had long ago made marrow bones impossible, but she served herself one anyway and we all pretended not to notice when it was taken away cold and unchewed. She never used salt or any flavoring, and I salted the soup, getting a look from both my grandmother and mother, and then gulped it down and sucked the bone, not looking up till I had finished all of it.

"Honey, slow down, you'll choke," my mother said.

"She should eat it in the best of health!" my grandmother screamed, to ward off any evil thing that might have been called up by my mother's foolish worlds.

I caressed my belly—the skin felt tight from my eating—and began on the chicken. "I had such an appetite when I was young, *keine hura*," my grandmother said abruptly. "Grandpa would watch me eat when we were

first married and laugh and laugh, 'Where does it go in such a tiny woman, please tell me that!'" She stirred her soup, still full, round and round, the metal spoon scraping against the ancient faded china. She was about to tell us the story about my grandfather. My mother gnawed and sucked on her marrow bone, her eyes already glazed over. She did not want to hear the story; she had been the youngest and the only girl in the family and still wanted to adore my grandfather. But as she got older my poor grandmother was compelled to tell more and more bitter stories, like pits that must be spit out; it is not right to swallow one.

"When I was pregnant for the fifth time I was thrilled," my grandmother began. "That was after you, Wendele." She nodded at my mother and waited for the nod back; but by this time my mother looked like she had achieved nirvana, and did not respond. The marrow bone floated from her hand in mid-air, her jaw gaped in a slight smile, her eyes stared at the blank TV screen behind me, her left hand stroked and stroked the silky gold strands of her cashmere sweater. My mother had always had this ability to turn herself off when she didn't want to hear something, which was convenient when my grandmother would call in the evenings and get to Morris's evil wife Esther and how she refused to make lunch for him or do his exercises, or Joe, the middle son, and how he spoiled his daughter Nancy rotten and that was why she wasn't married yet. My mother would go into her automatic, saying Yes, No, That's terrible, at roughly appropriate spots, meanwhile reading *People* or watching a sitcom on TV. Sometimes she would even fall asleep in the couch, but my grandmother, living alone for so long, simply needed to hear her own voice confiding to her daughter, and did not notice, or pretended not to. But recently my mother had become more and more abandoned in turning off, till now she had done it right in front of my grandmother, as she was speaking. Probably all the drugs and pain relievers she was taking helped; but even so I had this image of her ten years from now in a nursing home, senile and catatonic, always in bliss, and for an instant I was frightened.

"Wendy! What is wrong with you! . . . " My grandmother no doubt thought of the drugs too. "You used to talk, you used to be so lively!" She shook her twisted mottled fist to show how lively my mother used to be; why couldn't my mother ignore the pain like she did, the fist said.

My mother refocused. "No, darling," she said slowly, smiling in the way of a little girl who has been naughty but has liked it. "No, I'm fine." She began absently rubbing her knee, another mysterious ailment of hers.

"Honey, here, eat, have a piece of chicken. Please." She pushed the plate over as if it were a gigantic vitamin pill.

"I'm not hungry," my mother said automatically; then probably realizing that had not been a wise thing to say, took the chicken anyway, but still made no move to eat it.

My grandmother picked up her piece of chicken back and, focusing her bright watery eyes on my mother, nibbled it. "Mmm. Delicious!" She nodded and rapidly blinked some water out of her eyes.

My mother gave in and ate a tiny shred and my grandmother was satisfied.

"Yes. So every time I went to the doctor I prayed for twins. He said, 'You're crazy!' but I loved children, I always wanted six, even though, you can imagine, running the house and doing papa's bookkeeping and Morris, can you believe it, in kindergarten yet, even then such a strong-willed . . . "

The baby began kicking, like it always did after I started eating; I spread margarine on my third piece of packaged challah and glanced at my mother's soup, which she had not touched; a pasty skin was spreading on top and she was beginning to unfocus again. Her drugs had taken away her appetite—she had once been plump and indeed lively—and I wondered if I should take her soup; but I was afraid her ailments were in some way contagious and my baby would get them, though I knew that was silly. I decided against it.

"But when Papa found out," my grandmother was saying, "he said to me, We can't afford another one. I didn't know what he meant at first but then he told me he knew an Israeli friend at the hospital who could perform a little operation, it would be safe since this friend was a real doctor and no one would find out."

I stopped eating and looked at my grandmother, interested as usual in spite of myself. This was a new one. Her watery blue eyes glanced up at me, then dropped to her soup. "You mean he wanted you to have an *abortion*?" I asked.

She bobbed her head up and down, and kept on bobbing, loosely, like a toy, as if she lost power over it. "Only we didn't call it that then," she added, bobbing.

I was going to ask her what they did call it but my mother said, "But darling, that was a miscarriage, you always said that was a miscarriage." Her voice was high and tight, like a little girl lecturing her doll.

"Honey . . . " my grandmother said in a low voice, her head slowing down. She sipped some water and smacked her lips as if her throat were very dry; my mother, probably not to show the annoyed expression on her face, hunched over her soup and pushed the skin to one side. I leaned my chin on folded hands and fastened my eyes on my grandmother's, trying to look as sympathetic as possible to make up for my mother.

"We went to Dr. Greenburg, you remember him, Wendele." This time my mother nodded, still looking down. "That was the one that delivered you and Morris and Joe and the first one, the stillborn. He liked me because he knew me so long, since I was first married. He had to tell me where

babies come from, I didn't know, a married woman! So he told Leo, 'Leo, don't do it, if it's money that's the problem, I will take care of it for you.' He didn't have no children. 'What else should a rich man do with his money?' he said. A decent man."

"He said that to you? A *doctor*?" my mother asked, looking up. She considered herself an expert on doctors, no doubt for good reason.

My grandmother sighed and picked up the last piece of bread I had been coveting and let it dangle in her fingers. "Well I was so happy, I'm telling you, my heart was so light it almost flew away. I thought, My troubles are over. And then . . . well, you know Papa." She turned to me, forgetting he had died when I was eight. I nodded anyway.

"We were walking maybe 3 or 4 blocks, and then he stops short. 'I don't have to listen to no *doctor*!' he says. 'What's he telling us, the crook, the liar!' And there was no stopping him. I cried, I begged. 'Leo, please, for me . . . ' But no, there was no stopping him.

"I confided to one person, my best friend, Rosa, an Italian lady that lived downstairs. I don't think you remember her, Wendy, she moved, I don't know where she is now . . . But she had three children like me, we ran to each other all the time. And Rosa said, 'Run away!' Because she knew a girl who died from this operation, it was very dangerous then. Oy, did we make plans, we met 5:00 in the morning before our husbands were up . . . "

She paused and shook her head at the slice of bread in her hand, as if it were listening too. Then thoughtfully she ripped it in half, and half again, till it crumbled; and when she let the crumbs fall through her fingers to the plate she went on.

"But we always knew it was just plans. So the night before, I couldn't go to sleep. I cleaned the whole house spotless. Because I thought, If I die, I don't want no one to think I am a bad wife . . ."

I touched my belly out of a sort of loneliness; and then it came to me my baby had stopped moving and for an instant I was terrified it was dead. This was one of my secret fears, along with having an emergency Caesarian and dying under anesthesia, and accidentally dropping the newborn on its skull. But through the tight hard skin my fingers caught another smothered kick or punch, and I relaxed.

My mother stood up. "Oh ma, who would care about a clean house!" She took her bowl, the skeleton of a bone in a puddle of thickened soup, into the kitchen, and in this simple way succeeded in ending the story.

"Sit down, sit down!" my grandmother jumped up. "I'll take it." And she ran after her, the greasy aluminum tray and some bent spoons in her hand.

After tea and Stella Doro fudge cookies and stale sponge cake—which only I ate—my mother announced it was time to go. My grandmother tried pretending not to hear and went on with her story about Jacob-the-black-help and his crazy cult. "Can you believe, the trash he brings into the store!" She waved the pamphlet again with smiling children and tropical scenes.

But my mother was too experienced. "Honey, really, we have to go," she said calmly, reaching for her Gucci purse. "Stan will be home from work soon and he'd like to see a little of Alisa too."

My grandmother's eyes darted to me for a sign of weakness.

I looked down, feeling guilty at having to make her lonely again. "Really, grandma, I'm really only here for a day, I leave tomorrow morning," I said, by way of justification.

"Wait! Wait!" My grandmother popped up. "I have something to show you!" she shouted, wobbling off to the bedroom.

My mother and I looked at each other, then followed her in.

She already had her box out and was tossing jewelry pieces on the bed: strings of plastic pearls with the paint peeling off, gaudy glass pins with broken backs, clip-on earrings without clips or without pairs. These Last Attempts to keep us had been getting worse; lately, besides cookies or fruit, she would insist on giving us all her jewelry and clothes from the last 50 years. "Here! Take! Beautiful!" She held up a gigantic brooch with a huge fake chipped turquoise surrounded by purple, ruby and green glass pieces and spiked rusted metal, and looked at me hopefully.

I hesitated, then took it. "Thanks, grandma, it's very pretty." I put it in my dress pocket and told myself I could throw it away when I got home. In this way my bedroom at home had come to house a collection of flourescent crocheted pillows and dolls made out of rolls of toilet paper.

"And this!" She held out another piece, completely unappeased.

I went to the dresser to look at old photos, leaving my mother to deal with the next attempt, the 50-year-old clothes. Unlike me, my mother could say no over and over without the least feeling of guilt. "Look at this blouse, beautiful!" my grandmother began.

I pushed away the propped-up photos of weddings, bar mitzvahs, graduations, babies and children, till I got to my favorite picture, brownish and ripped in the corner: my grandmother, at 16 or so, plump and athletic-looking, arm-in-arm with other girls with caps and loose dresses, on a sunny day by a lake. A few of the girlfriends, but not my grandmother, have cigarettes in their mouths and look at the camera proudly. My grandmother looks like she is about to giggle.

"Honey," my mother was saying in a weary patient voice behind me, as if to a child. "These are things *I* threw out, why do you think we would want them now?"

On the wall above the pictures, darkened with dust, was my other favorite, a framed photo of my grandmother and grandfather when they had just eloped. My grandmother was nineteen at the time and her father would end up not speaking to her for two years because she had married before her two older sisters. She looks up at my grandfather, her new husband, with the same expression as at the lake, as if she is about to giggle. But my grandfather, above her, looks straight at the camera, serious and very handsome, with clear deep eyes just like mine and round self-confident lips. I thought, I can't help liking him; I'm part of him.

"Honey, really, just throw it out," my mother said behind me, her patience exhausted.

"Never! Never!" my grandmother shouted. I turned around, surprised. "No! Never!" she shouted again absurdly. She was clutching the clothes like a senile old lady, with a wild look, as if my mother had suggested throwing away her children. The thought suddenly came to me, She is going to die very soon, that's why—she is giving away her possessions.

I looked at my mother to see if she had seen it too. She was folding up a bulky red wool sweater with sailor buttons. "OK, this isn't bad, sweetheart," she said, as if my grandmother had not said a word. "Where did you get it?" In my mother's scheme of things the outburst had simply been a little example of my grandmother's natural senility, and was best ignored. "You can't find those kind of sweaters nowadays, they're so expensive," she went on, and headed back into the dining area; and my grandmother, still trembling, was too confused not to follow.

In the dining room my mother put on her jacket; I got mine.

"That was from when I was pregnant with Morris, they wore that then," my grandmother began, hoping against hope. "Papa was so nervous about Morris because of the stillborn, can you believe, when I felt the baby move *he* felt something move in his own stomach, and then he got nauseous, and—"

"Ma." My mother unlocked the bolts on the front door. "We're going." She opened the door; the stale chicken-soup moth-ball smell of ancient Jewish grandmothers floated in.

My grandmother dashed into the kitchen and came back with an entire bag of overripe and rotten oranges and some more challah. "Here. Take." She held up the bags to my mother.

"Ma, we have oranges in New Jersey," she said, her hand on the door.

My grandmother turned to me. "Here. Have an orange. For the baby," she added, when she saw me hesitate. She put the bags down and held an orange out to me.

I couldn't help it; I took it.

"You can eat it on the car ride home!" she said, overjoyed.

I nodded and to show her I would eat it gave it a sniff; a putrid oversweet scent came off from the warm brown skin, both pleasant and unpleasant, and my stomach growled. Maybe I would eat it.

Suddenly my grandmother seized her arms. For a moment she couldn't find the words she wanted and simply gazed up at us, her loose watery eyes shining. I thought of her on the morning of the abortion, not able to speak, hugging her children, just like now, the same eyes shining, the same arms trembling.

"I love you both! Dearly, dearly!" she said at last, as if these were the profound words she had been searching for. She shook our arms with each "dearly," squeezing my hand around the orange. "Dearly!"

"And I love you," my mother said. She half-shut her eyes in weariness.

I looked at our hands: my grandmother's mottled hand with the thumb so twisted it slanted across the palm and the absurd pink nailpolish; my mother's, wrinkling and looking just their age despite—and because of—the creams and vitamins and medicines and giant fake red fingernails and rings; and mine, with the bitten unpainted nails and long skinny fingers, and one plain ring, the skin still tight and young. We are eternal, the three of us together, I imagined for a moment.

I touched my grandmother's cheek and said I loved her too. It was delicate, like overworn parchment. I stroked it. The bones felt fragile beneath, as if they were about to crumble. I kissed the top of her waxy forehead, very lightly; I was afraid I might crush it.

My mother released herself and I followed. As always, my grandmother stood against the doorframe as if she weren't allowed past that point; and, as we walked down the aromatic ancient hallway, shouted after us, "Call me when you get home!" because she never said goodbye.

Kathleen Maher

Sin Etc.

The heat is terrible, having fallen like four impenetrable walls, so early, in May. Poison ivy blisters my legs. And since Curly arrived last night, it's spread, searing up past my knees.

Curly's awake downstairs. My husband, Lloyd, sleeps beside me, his thin hair plastered to his pallid head, sweat collecting in his ears. But it is my brother's breath I hear. I'm attuned to it, floating sweetly up the stairs.

Somewhere along the way, this idea of me and my brother's has taken the form of a bad anagram: of *sin etc.* My mind goes dyslexic here—so there's no need to rearrange the letters.

Curly and my husband have been best friends since grade school. The only problem as far as Lloyd's concerned is that I analyze my feelings too much. "Squish every feeling you have between your hands and of course you end up with mud."

If I ask him what he's referring to, Lloyd says, "Nothing! That's my point. Lots of things are apropos of nothing."

"Yeah, right," I say. "And Curly and I are like any brother and sister."

"Don't be so weird, Dee Dee. The key to survival is knowing when to look the other way."

After Curly visits us, when he's saying good-bye, he always manages a minute alone with me, to stroke my hair and touch my face. My brother traces the insides of my arms, and asks if everything's okay; am I happy? And when I say, "Hey, of course," a door seems to slam inside his head. The light in his eyes goes out.

Curly's thirty-two years old and doesn't have a home or a family or a special interest in anything.

At eight this morning, Curly was flipping pancakes in the ninety-degree kitchen. Lloyd was sweating in his electrician's uniform. I was taking a sick day. Barefoot with calamine lotion slathered up and down my legs, I was wearing the only clothes I can stand to wear, an oversize T-shirt with Jujyfruits printed across the chest. Curly ruffled my hair, then Lloyd's.

Humming "Good Morning Heartache," he poured us coffee. Lloyd asked Curly to come with him to work. "Earn some traveling money," he said.

After they left I wondered how Lloyd stands it. But I know what Lloyd would say: "Stand what?" Sunk to my neck in a baking soda bath, I realized that the more I try not to think about it, the more I end up thinking that Lloyd should be my brother.

And Curly—it wasn't always so unthinkable. It was once a pure sweet yearning. A constant ache linked to a sublime channel. Back when I was sixteen and Curly was twenty, we would listen to Betty Carter in the closed-in porch. We'd play her records and get all wrapped up in her voice, like a ribbon winding around us. The desire I felt then was an ecstatic hope. My brother and I swayed together on the cement floor at three or four in the morning, usually after he had gone to see Betty Carter at the Quiet Knight.

Once he came home so happy, he swung me up, spinning me in the air. "I talked to her, Dee Dee. I asked Betty Carter to have supper with me."

"Did she?"

"After the last set I noticed her white turban at the bar. Beautiful, transcendent, but still she's human, right? She let me buy her a drink. I said, 'What about dinner?' She put her hand near my face—not on it—and smiled. She said, thanks, it was sweet, but she couldn't." Curly smiled then, a sad, beautiful smile, probably like Betty Carter's smile to him.

That was the same summer he crept into my room before daylight to say good-bye. He had no idea where he was going, or how he would get there, but he was afraid if he stayed, he'd wake up one morning middle-aged, still landscaping for the village, still living with our parents. I clung to Curly's neck, which was wet from my tears, and kissed him.

"And you'll be better off, too, if I'm not living here," he said. "It's too close, Dee Dee. And too much."

A couple months later, when I was on the porch, dreaming on the cement floor, Curly called at two in the morning.

He was in Louisiana, working as a cook. When I told him how much I missed him, he said to call his friend Lloyd.

I called Lloyd, and without quite knowing what I was doing, lured him into sleeping with me.

Lloyd's blond, blunt-featured, and shy. We get along easily. We both love Curly. We both missed him and we already knew each other like old friends. I asked Lloyd to take me to see Betty Carter and at first he acted like a chaperone. He stared at his hands when he talked to me. When Betty Carter began to sing, tears rolled suddenly down my face. The sound of her voice made the tears slide down my neck, under the neckline, to collect between my breasts. Afterwards, Lloyd drove me around the lake and talked softly about transcendence. I stopped by his apartment a few days

later and when my hand accidentally brushed against his, he said, "What the hell. *I'm* not your brother."

When Curly and I were kids, we would pretend we were alien-mutants destined to take over the world. The game began at the incubation age. We curled ourselves up under a quilt and fed off the faint green light filtering through. We clung together, growing more powerful minute by minute. The steadily increasing sound of our hearts and the rhythm of our breath proved our strength.

Curly protected me at school. He defended me against his own big-boy friends and the two of us stalked endless invisible enemies, rooting them out of closets and crawl spaces.

Then when he was nineteen and drinking a lot, taking drugs in the afternoon with Lloyd, I remember him grabbing my wrist as I came home from volleyball practice. "Sit here, Dee Dee," he said. "And tell us whether you think innocence is a virtue or a vice."

"Virtue," I said. "Unless it's like ignorance, then it's not so cool."

"It's still fun, though, isn't it? I mean at your age, Dee Dee, you can feel all these incredible feelings and not worry about them, because you honestly don't know what they mean."

"I don't know what *you* mean," I said and gave him the finger. Lloyd nodded and grinned.

But Curly said, "Watch it, little sister. You didn't learn that from me. Because I'm Mr. Control. Self Control to you. I mean if I had to I could feel you up with my underwear on my head and nothing unto*ward* would happen. Not with me behind the wheel." He got up and yanked at the screen door.

"Curly, whatever I did, forget it. People flip other people the bird all the time."

He stuck his head out of the house. "Nice, Dee Dee."

Lloyd said, "Calm down."

"I am calm," Curly said. "And I'm definitely down." He inched back out on the porch and balanced himself carefully on the step above us. "I just want her to know I could lie on top of her for hours. I could shred the sheets with my teeth. Want to try me? Test me? You guys make me sick." He raced back inside.

Lloyd said, "He's puking his guts out."

So Lloyd and I never feel embarrassed for the other's sake and we rarely belittle each other. But in the last year, we've argued a lot. Deep down I know it's not only my idea here, it's Lloyd's too. Otherwise Curly would not keep coming back. Otherwise he might be able to get free.

When Curly arrived last night, he called me "Deirdre" for the first time in my life. He swung my arms and I threw myself at him, rash, salve, Jujyfruit T-shirt and all. He pulled free from the embrace and said, "Let me look at you." Curly looked older. His skin is darker than mine, and tawny. When he was younger it gave off a faint gold light. Now it's ordinary. His thick mouth still shines, but his cheeks have sunk in on his face.

Lloyd got Curly a beer and said, "Let's make a pact." He eyed me sharply. "And keep the conversation neutral."

"Fine with me," I said, "but none of that high school stuff, like you're the two guys and I'm the lone girl."

All afternoon I played a record called "Inside Betty Carter." Listening to "Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most," I fell into a restive, antihistamine-induced sleep.

When I woke, the stylus was bouncing off the record label; it was almost dark; and I could hear Curly and Lloyd in the living room. They sounded drunk. Making my itchy, logy way downstairs, I slid into the rocker. Curly and Lloyd sat together on the nubby gray couch.

Lloyd said, "You'd think to look at her, that poison ivy was the worst affliction known to humankind."

With this, I sprung on him, and pretended to choke him, which is something I do—in fun, of course, but Lloyd's still supposed to acknowledge my action is warranted.

Curly pried my fingers off of Lloyd's neck. I felt his chest pressing against my back side, soles of my feet and backs of my knees on fire. Curly grabbed my wrist, laughing, but my hands reached around his arm. He let go, but I turned and pinned him with all my strength against the couch. Lloyd got up. "Break it up, kids." He chopped the air in front of us. "You two can be so unwholesome."

"Only to the truly sick mind," Curly said.

"Got me there," Lloyd said. "I mean, look who's talking, right?" He slammed into the rocker, leaving the couch for me.

"Go ahead, Dee Dee," he said once I'd sunk against the cushions. "Sit next to your brother. It's not as if I haven't been swimming upstream as it is. Day in, day out."

"What does that mean?" I asked. "Nothing?" My knees and thighs embarrassed me, but any kind of covering only increased the itch. Curly dropped his head against the wall and turned off the lamp. "Any objections?" he asked. Pretty soon he was fooling with my hair. He used to do this when we would watch TV together, sweeping from the crown down my neck.

Lloyd slapped the arm of the rocker. "So, Curran," he said, "where are you off to next?"

"I—" Curly looked around, at the ceiling, and swallowed hard. "I don't know. I don't know if I can keep going anymore."

"Thinking of settling down?" Lloyd said.

"I'd like to," Curly said. "What I'd like more than anything is to just turn the sound down for a while. No questions asked. No questions *to* ask."

"Well, you've come to the right place for that," I said. "Lloyd and I never ask questions. We think questions are crass, gross, don't we, Lloyd?"

"Deirdre," Curly said. He tugged at the end of my hair like a wink. "Remember when we were kids?"

"You two take the cake," Lloyd said, shaking his head.

"Remember when we were kids, Deirdre? I can't get over that."

"Hear that?" Lloyd said, cocking his head. "Something's in our garbage again. Dogs or raccoons or something." The rocker tipped forward as Lloyd ducked into the kitchen and threw open the door. He stood on the back stoop where he could still hear us, and where if we wanted, if we edged forward into the light, we could see him.

"What's wrong, Curly?" I asked. "What's the matter with you?"

Curly dragged his fingers through is own hair and closed his eyes. "I don't know."

My eyes burned and I snapped the light back on and squinted. Curly kept his eyes closed, motionless. I moved away from him, to the rocker, and he came to life. He inched forward on the couch, his elbows resting on his knees. "I need you," he said. "That's what's the matter with me—I need you."

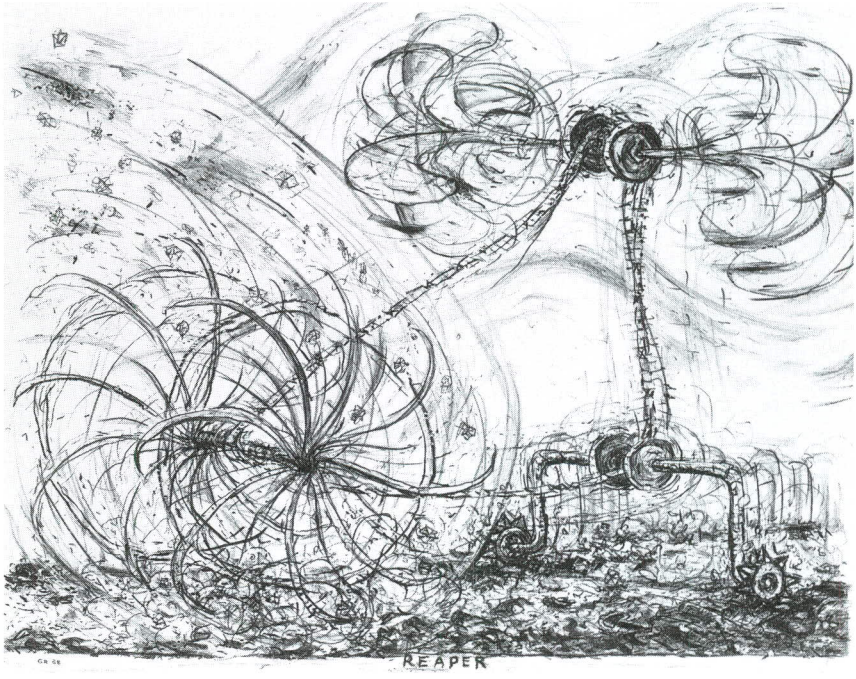
I heard those words, which I've felt for years like terrible ominous internal shadows, and suddenly I was furious. "No you don't, Curly," I said. "If you were hurt or confused, okay, I'm sorry for you. But then you came home and confused me. And the real hurt, the real hurt is just setting in. Remember the summers you took me to the north bluffs? We'd go swimming. You'd bring me music and we'd dance. '*You're the only one who really knows me, Dee Dee.*' And you played with my hair. You played with my arms and legs. You cupped my chin and pressed my ear against your heart—how am I supposed to get over that, Curly? How am I supposed to make a single conscious decision after that?"

Hunched over the floor, Curly was covering his face. His voice shook and his head weaved back and forth between his hands. But I steeled myself against him. I watched him as long as I could, and then I couldn't stand it. I got up and touched his wrist. He stood up, choking.

"I'd do anything to take it back," he said. "The last thing I ever wanted was to hurt you, and I *never* lied. You are the only one who really knows me. I was happy with you. I was happier playing with you than I can ever imagine being again. And then, too, Dee Dee, physically—physically—I never crossed the line. I killed myself to keep you from knowing what I felt."

Then Curly wrapped his arms around me and Lloyd stepped back into the living room, a pair of pliers dangling from his fingers. "Well," Lloyd said softly, seriously. "Well." He dropped the pliers on the table and rubbed his hands together. "Good night, Curran." Then he waited while Curly hugged me again, and whispered, "Dee Dee, you only saw the safest, smallest part of what I feel for you."

I apologize to Lloyd, who's not asleep after all. He slides next to me, gingerly trying to touch me as little as possible. It's still hot, and my legs itch unbearably. But I'm glad they itch; I want them to itch. Closing my eyes, I pull the sheet tight so it covers my legs. I roll up on top of Lloyd, still with the sheet around my legs. And against my will, I envision my brother. Against my will I envision us sharing memory, childhood, blood.



Reviews

Jane Anne Straw and Mary Swander. *Parsnips in the Snow: Talks with Midwestern Gardeners.* Iowa City: U of Iowa P, Bur Oak. 205 pp.

I have just come inside after pulling out my tomato and pepper plants. We have not had a freeze yet, but the tomatoes were looking ill and the peppers were beginning to go the same way. I have been thinking about pulling them out for a week or more and getting the beds ready for winter, but I never feel easy admitting that the season is over. Today, as I drove past my vet's house, I saw that he had mowed again and had six bags of grass on his curb. I loaded them into the car, and on the advice of Grant Cushinberry of Topeka, Kansas, spread the mixture of leafy grass over my now empty beds. Cushinberry uses hay, but this mixture of grass and shredded leaves will do the same job of protecting and enriching the soil. Later in the fall, I'll dig some of the mixture in, and early in the spring, I'll turn it all into the soil to catch and keep the spring rains. This and much more I've learned from the Midwestern gardeners who talk about their lives and their gardens.

Parsnips in the Snow is a delightful collection of garden-lore, folk-lore, herbal-lore and Midwest history from people from all walks of life. The authors gathered these stories (and they are stories) during the summer of 1986 as they drove a pickup truck through Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Nebraska, Missouri, and Kansas in search of gardens and gardeners. Some they found by chance; others they sought out because of gardening reputations that spread throughout a county or a state.

From a Chicago stockbroker, Karl Birkelbach, who escapes to his sanctuary garden in Wisconsin at weekends, to Bill Hatke, a Ph.D. in sociology who has given up every modern convenience to live on $120 a year and garden all over Lawrence, Kansas, we hear the same story of the joy of digging, cultivating, and watching plants grow. For the gardeners in this book, gardening is a celebration of life, and reading about them gives us a renewed hope in the human spirit. From Marti Roynon's garden on a vacant lot between buildings in Chicago to Larry and Marion Fischer's 10-acre farm site in Minnesota, we see the human spirit engaged in a struggle against elements (natural and man-made) as they attempt to coax the land into cooperation and establish their vision of beauty. From all of them, too, we learn that gardening is a spiritual as well as a practical, physical endeavor. Carl Birkelbach says that gardening "helps me be closer to God, to the God within myself."

Every garden has its own personality, as unique as the personality of the gardener. Floyd Brannon gardens for the love of it, leaving the picking and eating to his ex-wife and daughters. He keeps the critters away by putting

hair from the beauty parlor in the toe of an old pair of hose. He doesn't worry about watering even during a drought. "I just let the good Lord water," he says. While Floyd just throws out the seeds, Carl Klaus designs his vegetable garden for visual beauty, planting for color, texture, balance, and harvests to keep the balance for as long as possible. Ann Weir and her husband have constant arguments about their garden. While he likes orderly beds, she is more casual, planting flowers around the vegetables. Dixie Peterson literally gardens for her life. Because she suffers from an overexposure to herbicides and pesticides, she must grow and can her own food. Yet even though she does this out of necessity, her canning is an art form for her. She enters her canned goods in shows, and speaks with the same intensity about color, texture and balance as Carl Klaus does.

Each garden has its own story, rooted in the history of the gardener. As the gardeners show us their gardens, they share memories and stories about their lives and gardens, and their gardening mentors' lives and gardens. Joe Kantor tells about truck-farming in Omaha before the second World War, and mourns the passing of the old days. Marti Roynon tells us how she overcame her grief after the loss of her husband and son. "I just dug all the harder." For Larry and Marion Fischer, the things they plant provoke memories of family. The kale is for Larry's grandmother. Grant Cushinberry tells us about gardening with his father and stories about his home town, Nicodemus, the town where ex-slaves settled, as he shows us around "God's Little Half Acre" in Topeka which he plants for the needy to harvest. Eighty-year-old Edith Cone, who buys only light bulbs and paper towels from the store, and who still supplies family and friends with meat and vegetables, gives us a look at the life of farm people in Missouri—her father cut ice from the Missouri river in winter to keep their cellar cool all summer. Father James Henderson, a Trappist monk, who began gardening when he was eight, whistles wrens into his greenhouse to eat the tomato hornworms.

This is not just a book to find out that epsom salts help tomatoes grow, or that comfrey is a natural antibiotic, or that lion and tiger manure keeps dogs away, or that corn should be planted in the dark of the moon. It is a book to dip into during the gray days of January, to keep among the catalogs we gardeners sustain ourselves with during winter months. It is a book about memories and visions which takes readers back to their own gardens.

Elizabeth Campbell

My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance, ed. Gerald Early. New York: Doubleday, 1991. 618 pages. $14.95, paper.

Countee Cullen was one of "the most celebrated and probably the most famous" American black writers in 1925, during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. However, today Cullen's work has been sadly neglected while other more prominent black authors (ie. Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Zora Neale Hurston) hold the spotlight. Gerald Early attempts to put Cullen back in the spotlight that he so rightly deserves by offering us an anthology of Cullen's poetry, plays, fiction, and essays.

Early's introduction to *My Soul's High Song* colors the reading of Countee Cullen's work with a touch of magic. He briefly sketches Cullen's biography from his adoption by a stanch Christian family to his death in 1946. "The bond between Cullen and his adoptive parents was a very strong one," so strong that their Christian beliefs influenced Cullen in much of his works. Moreover, he was so devoted to them, particularly to his father, that they too figured frequently in his poetry. One such poem, "The Fruit of the Flower," explains how Cullen viewed these two most important people in his life:

> My father is a quiet man
> With sober, steady ways;
> For simile, a folded fan;
> His nights are like his days.
> My mother's life is puritan,
> No hint of cavalier,
> A pool so calm you're sure it can
> Have little depth to fear.

While it is important for the reading of his poetry to know that Cullen's natural parents and siblings are unknowable, Early does speculate some. He believes Cullen to have been one of eleven children born to slave parents. What is known is that at age fifteen, he was adopted by Reverend Frederick Cullen and his wife Carolyn. From that point in his life, he was forever grateful for the love, care, and opportunities they gave him.

Equally important are two of his lesser known poems, "Two Who Crossed A Line" ("He Crosses" and "She Crosses"), which deal with the identity problem of blacks who were of lighter complexion and attempted to pass for white. Cullen depicts their pain, which eventually causes them to return back to the black community, in the following way:

And we were hurt to see her go,
With her fair face and hair,
And veins too thin and blue to show
What mingled blood flowed there.
We envied her a while, who still
Pursued the hated track;
Then we forgot her name, until
One day her shade came back.

From "He Crosses," Cullen offers a male perspective of "passing":

He rode across like a cavalier,
Spurs clicking hard and loud;
And where he tarried dropped his tear
On head he left low-bowed.
.....
But long before the drug could tell,
He took his anodyne;
With scornful grace, he bowed farewell
And retraversed the line.

With simile and alliteration, Cullen writes about the tragic experience mulattoes had of being caught between two worlds. His message is that although such persons are able to assimilate physically into white society, they cannot assimilate psychologically and emotionally; therefore, they eventually choose a side: black.

Another interesting piece of Cullen's work is his translation of *The Medea* into a prose which can be easily read and understood by those who may have never had the opportunity to read Greek drama. When he made his translation, Cullen thought "in racial terms, a woman of color betrayed." Medea hates, lusts, and plots revenge against Jason, her adulterous husband. Cullen's Medea expresses her bitterness so contagiously that it is easy for readers to sympathize with her pain and almost hate Jason as she does. Her dramatic outbursts against Jason are perhaps a welcome purge for readers (particularly females) who may feel that Medea's actions are justified:

> Welcome Jason! It sickens me even to speak your name! I thought I had some skill in speech, but not enough to tell you how I despise a coward like you! You have done well to come. For it will ease my heart a little to curse you, and hurt you a little to hear it.

It is interesting that Cullen should choose *The Medea* to translate. Perhaps he thought Medea's way of thinking, her revengeful instincts against a man who has done her wrong, plus her dealings with witchcraft were common to women in the black community.

My Soul's High Song is a rich cultural experience that presents an insightful voice of the rich Harlem Renaissance experience. Cullen rightfully deserves his place at the top with other writers of that time for his emotional literary contributions. Readers of this anthology will appreciate Early's historically biographical introduction to Cullen, his interpretation of some of Cullen's works, and his brief footnoted anecdotes. *My Soul's High Song* is a must for those scholars who are studying literature of the Harlem Renaissance. *My Soul's High Song* is another must for those people who enjoy reading insightful poetry and prose.

Amber Reagan

Tuxedo Junction: Essays on American Culture by Gerald Early. New York: Ecco Press, 1989. 334 pages. $19.95, cloth.

For me one of greatest virtues of *Tuxedo Junction* is Gerald Early's ability to write about serious ideas without the sluggish and sterile prose that typically characterizes intellectual or academic writing. Not that Early is never difficult; he is. But he remembers to hook his reader. This mainstay of journalism he knows well. He explains that producing a weekly column for his college newspaper taught him how to write. He names three lessons about essay writing he has learned from journalism, lessons all critics would do well to learn. Speaking of essays, Early says that "the very best place to learn to write them is at a newspaper, where one learns the three virtues of the essay: to so intensify some aspect of life for someone whose attention is distracted (newspaper readers are always distracted and distractible) as to make that person read with intensified interest; to learn the right number of pages for the subject; and to write persistently." In short, Early is a writer and not simply a critic.

My praise for Early's stylistic accomplishment would be no praise at all if, in addition to engaging readers, he had not engaged important matters, such as the relationship between popular culture, African-American culture, and American culture, one of the most important and compelling subjects of our time, and a subject that draws a lot of safe and easy talk but not enough careful analysis. Early says he is "speaking about African-American culture within the wider contexts of both American intellectual/high-brow culture and American popular culture." Yet he also says that he takes up the "reverse proposition: namely, American culture within the

wider context of African-American culture." Which culture, American or African-American, represents the wider context? Which culture do we find within the other? I think my initial response was to see African-American culture as a subset of American culture, and, indeed, Early foregrounds this position in his introduction (placing the "reverse proposition" in parentheses), yet one important goal of the book, perhaps the most important, is to show the reader how African-American culture makes possible first, a broader context, and second, a more truthful history of American culture. Without being a history the book is historical in that it reaches back to understand the origins of current popular culture. In fact, the organization of the book roughly mimics a retracing of our cultural footsteps. Beginning with contemporary topics like Jesse Jackson, Miss America, Weight Watchers, the book moves on to prizefighting whose powerful current relevance depends upon years of historical development, both in Anglo-white and African-American cultures; then it moves on to black writing and black reading in America, also of immense current relevance but deeply historical; and finally it explores the world of jazz and blues, which, in their essentially improvisational forms, exist only in the past, according to Early. Unlike the boxers and writers, nearly all of the important musicians in this book are dead. So this process of venturing into the past tugs the reader along by first establishing current concerns and subtly looking to the past (sometimes Early's past) in order to understand our present.

The essays on prizefighting not only make up the middle of the book, but they also model the book's organizing principle, the present relevance of the past. "Hot Spicks Versus Cool Spades: Three Notes Toward a Cultural Definition of Prizefighting" opens the boxing section. In this essay Early explains that the drama boxing once derived from the racial tension of black versus white (remember "the great white hope"?) has changed to the drama of black versus Latin. While the situation saddens him, it still fascinates him. Deftly he describes the two fighters who typify the racial stereotypes and heat up the racial tension that the fans thrive on—"the monumental encounter between the hot and the cool," Roberto Duran against Sugar Ray Leonard:

> There was Duran, whose style, like that of a jazz musician, relies so much upon the inspiration of the moment that when he is uninterested in a fight he is worse than mediocre; and there was Leonard, so completely absorbed with the intricacies of his talents that with Joycean dispassion he seemed to watch the beautiful nuances his left jab made as it traveled its trajectory through the air.

> . . . One imagines that Leonard could overwhelm his opponents while not even realizing that they actually existed.

The fight fed into the established stereotypes of black and Latin fighters, which, as Early shows, are false even if they are part and parcel of professional boxing. Early emphasizes that "racial contrast is what the male politics of boxing is all about, and it has a long history." Overly simplified, bogus racial contrast is only one of many ways that professional boxing exploits the marginalized. The professional boxing establishment uses fighters as so many pieces of meat. As with white popular culture's appropriation of the great music of black jazz musicians, in boxing the white establishment makes a lot of capital out of a lot of disenfranchised people.

So, how can Early "call for boxing's demise" and then go on to write about professional boxing for another seventy pages? The contradiction denotes the issue's complexity, which he honors rather than glosses over to make a facile argument. Early's refusal of pat answers brings to my mind one of Theodor Adorno's statements about the essay form: "It thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over. . . . Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its concern is always a conflict brought to a standstill." Adorno gives us some insight into why Early can maintain conflicting positions. Early criticizes primarily the professional side of the sport and believes amateur boxing can give chances to young men who would otherwise have little hope of escaping a world of poverty, violence, and unemployment. He also maintains that professional boxing does not create boxers but that the conditions of the lower class create boxers. After calling for the demise of professional boxing in one essay, in the next essay he shows the shallowness of such a "moralistic rage" against boxing. "First," says Early, "to ban boxing would not prevent the creation of boxers since *that* process, *that* world would remain intact. And what are we to do with these men who know how to do nothing but fight?" Second, boxing would simply become a far more dangerous underground sport. "Finally," Early says, "I think it is fitting to have professional boxing in America as a moral eyesore: the sport and symbol of human waste in a culture that worships its ability to squander."

His relationship with boxing is intricate, having evolved from a youthful passion for the sport to a mature (but not dispassionate) contemplation of it. I have myself always been reluctant to watch anything but the most hyped-up prizefights, and I have had many a friendly disagreement with my father-in-law concerning his like and my dislike of boxing. To rile him up

I compare it to professional wrestling. But after reading these essays, I stumbled into a fight on TV one night, broadcast from Montana, and decided to watch it. I remembered Early's description of the hate fighters must develop for their opponents. Well, I saw it in one fighter's eyes, and his hate, together with his sixteen or so knockouts in nineteen fights, persuaded me that he would beat the fellow who had no malice in his eyes. For what it is worth, I guessed right, but when the end came and punches were going mainly one way, I found I could not enjoy the fight even as a text for study. But Early has moved me to try, and I may try again. More importantly, he keeps me from feeling self-righteous in my pity for the guy getting punched out. Early's boxing essays are quite fine because in them he combines, with virtuosity, his personal stake in the issue with a rigorous analysis one does not often see applied to popular culture, much less to sports.

Of course, only part of the book deals with prizefighting, and many of the other areas of popular culture into which Early delves also benefit from the blend of personal and critical. The description of him and his wife and children waiting in line at a St. Louis department store to meet Miss America produces a warm and gently critical humor. Actually he and his family go to see Miss America twice, initially in 1984 to see Vanessa Williams, the first black woman to be named Miss America, and a second time in 1988, the first time since 1984 a Miss America visited St. Louis, where Early lives. Waiting at a department store for Williams to arrive becomes an opportunity for rumination and hence an essay on the phenomenon of Miss America. He blends experience with analysis. At one point he uses the comments of people standing in line to launch into an exploration of both the significance and meaninglessness of a black Miss America. Then after being photographed with Miss America, he glides with deceptive ease from description of the event to interpretation:

> So the picture shows a smiling, demure, quite lovely Miss America with a blue and black suit, light brown hair, and green eyes as bright and brilliant as slightly moistened, clear glass beads; a young father smiling slightly with his two children on his knees—one faintly nonplussed and greatly surprised, the other faintly annoyed and greatly distressed. I suppose I am the most humorous figure in the photograph, looking like nothing so much as a candidate for Father of the Year. Miss America probably felt a bit of sympathy for the valiant young father and his uncooperative children—but not half as much as I felt for her, traveling to all the stores like Dolgin's all over the

> country, signing autographs by the hundreds of thousands, surrounded by more guards than the president, seeing the worst of America as a grotesque phantasmagoria of shopping malls, hotels, and airports. As she sat there in Dolgin's, smiling benignly as each person stepped forward to have his or her picture taken, I could not help but think of her as a courtesan receiving her clients with graceful indifference. All of this was surely immaculate enough; no one was allowed to touch her. But that seems only to have intensified the perversity of the service she was providing; for to maintain the purity of her presence, the public was, in some way, being reminded that it could only defile her, if it had its druthers. And perhaps we would have, since nothing brings out American bloodthirstiness more boldly than the victimization of the innocent.

A postscript to the essay recalls that just before the piece was published Williams was stripped of her crown for controversial photos in *Penthouse.* Rather than being distressed at how this turn of events might undermine his essay, I'm sure Early relished the beautiful irony of it.

Early brings the personal and critical together at other points in the book, remembering his youthful interest in Count Basie, his sisters playing the Shirelles on forty-fives, his aunt listening to Memphis Minnie, his gang-leader friend who managed to stay alive and make a fulfilling life for himself, an interview with Lawrence, Kansas, woman Audrey Jones, who used to dance and sing with Stewart's Darktown Strutters and the Jazz Babies, and Early's rather saddening experiences of going to see jazz greats such as Edward "Sonny" Stitt and Count Basie in their declining years. In his introduction, Early cautions the reader about the autobiographical sections of the book, which he cites as merely transitional elements or authenticating devices. Though I agree with him that he writes criticism, not autobiography, I do not go along with his downplaying of the autobiographical sections. They are authenticating indeed, and I would argue that they are absolutely essential to the way *Tuxedo Junction* comes across. It is criticism that develops earnestly from a particular man's being situated in the world and writing about it.

The weakest parts of the book are those in which Early's writing seems to move away from the personal. For example, the reprinted book reviews, though appearing as essays, still sound like reviews, written not so much as thoughts arising from a writer's living and thinking but as thoughts arising out of a need to write about a book. Yet I think they belong here. The

reviews are relevant to the book's driving energy, and Early can turn a book review into an occasion for discussing larger issues better than most anyone. The place in which Early sounds least like himself is the piece on Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno." He opens by apologizing for not sounding more like a Melville scholar, but my reaction runs in the opposite direction. I'm sorry he sounds so much like a scholar. Though the piece has a very academic turn, I wonder if he could have retained his voice.

What struck me most emphatically in his reading of "Benito Cereno" was Early's referring to himself as a "black reader." It then occurred to me how African-American culture is in fact a larger context than American culture. As a black reader he understands all of the white interpretations of the story. To be a "black reader" is not to hold a narrower point of view than "reader," but a broader one. Inasmuch as the ideology of being any reader in our culture is overwhelmingly white and Western, to be a black reader is to enlarge this Eurocentric, white, male point of view. Hence everyone, regardless of race, should be a black reader. In the same way, African-American cultural thinking embraces more of the world and heeds a more legitimate history than mere American cultural thinking. Early's essay writing brings himself and his readers into the larger context.

Plenty of people have said that the essay is a versatile genre. The essay traffics in autobiography, natural history, critical theory, travel, and politics. This "protean" form (to borrow from O. B. Hardison) is so variegated and open that what a particular essay or book of essays turns out to be depends on what the writer brings to it. In this sense, all essays are personal, even when they are not. With any book I hope what the writer has brought to it will enlarge my world; I hope to add some of the writer's concerns to my own. And with essays, I also hope that the writer will enrich the form, show it to be even more versatile than I had thought. I am pleased that Gerald Early both enlarges my world and enriches the form, and that he does it with singular grace.

Dan Martin

Contributors' Notes

Elizabeth Campbell (545 Ohio, Lawrence, KS 66044) is Assistant Professor of English at KU. Her work has appeared in *Vanderbilt Review, Nues Glas / New Gloss,* and *Cottonwood.*

Robert Cooperman (4116 Colby Rd., Pikesville, MD 21208) has worked in *Nimrod, Kansas Quarterly, Cimarron Review* and others, as well as previously in *Cottonwood.* His chapbooks are *Seeing the Elephant* (Panhandler) and *The Trial of Mary McCormick* (Slipstream).

Gary Duehr (Box 357, W. Somerville, MA 02144) is Assistant Editor of *BLuR* and also writes and directs for Theatre S. in Boston. He has recent work in *Bitterroot, Cincinnati Poetry Review, Wisconsin Review,* and *Western Humanities Review,* among others.

Gerald Early (African and Afro-American Studies, Washington University, Campus Box 1109, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130) teaches and edits a series on African-American writers for Ecco Press. His essays have appeared widely, including in *Kenyon Review, Antaeus, Cottonwood,* and *The Hudson Review.* His *Tuxedo Junction* (Ecco), a collection of essays, is reviewed in this issue.

Diana C. Ellis (1136 Morraine View Dr. Apt. #203, Madison, WI 53719) has her first published story in this issue.

Barbara Esstman (3413 Lyrac St., Oakton, VA 22124) is from St. Louis, Missouri and is currently working on a novel. Her stories have previously appeared in *Redbook, Union Street Review, Phoebe,* and *Sing Heavenly Muse,* among others.

Tereze Gluck (333 E. 69th St., New York, NY 10021) has published stories in such journals as *Fiction, Epoch, Antioch Review,* and *Chelsea.*

Walter Griffin (2518 Maple St., East Point, GA 30344), a previous *Cottonwood* contributor, has published poetry in *The Atlantic, The New Yorker, Paris Review, Poetry, Ploughshares* and many others. Collections of his work include *Port Authority* (Vanderbilt) and *Skull Dreamer* (Pale Horse).

Steven Hind (503 Monterey Pl., Hutchinson, KS 67402), whose *Familiar Ground* was published by Cottonwood Press in 1980, has several recent publications: *The Book of Contmporary Myth* (Caitlin), *As Far as I Can See* (Windflower), and *Ellipsis* (Westminster College).

Denise Low (1916 Stratford Rd., Lawrence, KS 66044), a former editor of *Cottonwood,* teaches creative writing at Haskell Indian Junior College and is on the editorial board of the Woodley Press, Washburn University. Her collection *Starwater* was published by Cottonwood Press in 1988. This year she received an Artist's Fellowship in Literature (Poetry) from the Kansas Arts Commission.

Kathleen Maher (45 Sheldon Ave., Tarrytown, NY 10591-6104), who received an Honorable Mention in *Cottonwood*'s first Alice Carter Awards for a story in *Cottonwood* #37, is working on a novel. Recent stories have appeared in *Passages North, Descant,* and *Confrontation.*

Dan Martin (English Dept., Wescoe Hall, K.U., Lawrence, KS 66045) is *Cottonwood*'s review editor. His essays have appeared in *Pitch, New Letters Review,* and *Literary Magazine Review.*

Lynn Martin (AppleShade, PO Box 2, Wauna, WA 98395), who completed an M.A. at the University of Washington, was awarded an NEH Fellowship to study in Italy in 1988. Her poetry has appeared in *The Antioch Review, Poetry Northwest, Tendril, Indiana Review,* and *The Southern Poetry Review,* among others.

Dawn Newton (1801 Kingswood Dr., Lansing, MI 48912) has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Gargoyle, The Bloomsbury Review,* and *Primavera,* among others.

Amber Reagan (2506 Redbud Lane, Apt. A, Lawrence, KS 66046) is a graduate student in English at KU and is Managing Editor of the new *Journal of African American Male Studies.*

George Renault (701 Maine, Lawrence, KS 66044) had his drawings featured previously in *Cottonwood* #36.

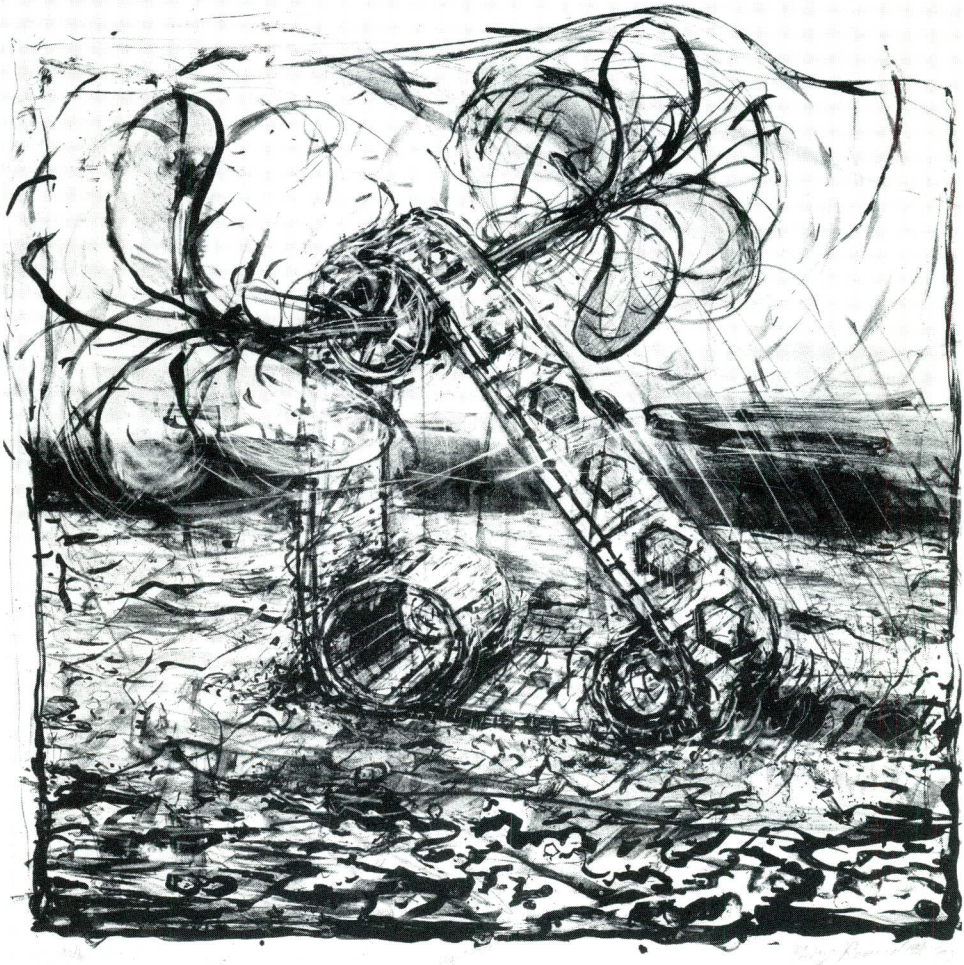
Darrell Schramm (473 28th Ave., San Francisco, CA 94121) has poetry published in *Midwest Quarterly, Laurel Review, Plains Poetry Journal* and others.

Patrick Stanhope (PO Box 297, Colwich, KS 67030), an Honorable Mention in poetry for the first Alice Carter Awards, has recent poetry in *Nebraska Review, Pigiron, Kansas Quarterly,* and *The Webster Review.* His first collection, *Blue Metro* (John Brown) is forthcoming.

Robert Terashima (2671 W. 9545 S., South Jordan, UT) has poetry in *Abraxas, Hanging Loose, The Greenfield Review,* and *Footwork.*

Barbara Van Noord (44 Ward St., Amherst, MA 01002) is a reader for *Peregrine.*

Lauren Yaffe (129 Eleventh St., Brooklyn, NY 11215) works in advertising for *The New York Times.* Her work has appeared in *Calliope, Sassy,* and *Alaska Quarterly Review.*



Cottonwood
ISSN 0147-149X
$5.00